The Marks We Make
by wittyy_name

Summary

Lance McClain constantly dreams of the day he'll finally meet his mysterious soulmate. They don't say much, if anything at all, but they leave him with gorgeous paintings temporarily tattooing his skin. It's not exactly the situation he hoped for, but when he feels the connection between them, he can't bring himself to resent them. As much as he wishes his soulmate would just talk to him, he's resigned himself to being patient. In the meantime, he has a loving family and good friends to help him get by.

Keith Kogane dreads the day he'll finally meet his obnoxious soulmate. He's just an art student who's struggling to find his place in the world. There's so much he hasn't been able to control in his life, and the thought of having a soulmate, just another thing in his life which he also has no control over yet can't do anything about, is a little terrifying. So he ignores the words that occasionally appear on his skin. He has other things to focus on: like being a new student at a big university where his childhood friend and step-brother go.

Notes

Hey guys! Here we are again, this time with a soulmate/college au. This is a story that's been on my mind for a while, and I'm so excited to get it started.
One, I'm in love with this soulmate idea and I'm really excited to explore this idea and its implications/how it would affect characters in a modern setting. Two, I really wanted to do a college au that I can use as a way to relive my college days. Pretty much everything about the setting is inspired and drawn from my own experiences. And yes, they're going to play muggle quidditch, because that's what I played in college, so I can actually bring some realism and details to it. Plus it's fun, trust.

This fic is going to be a project I can work on when I need a brain break from my other fic, SUADWM. And if you've read any of my other fics, you know that I usually work with Sora, my artist trash partner. She's going to be using this fic as an excuse to practice animating, which is something she really wants to learn how to do more consistently.

The premise of this fic is based on this tumblr post. Hope you guys enjoy! Happy reading!
“Remind me again why we thought a nine am class was a good idea?” Lance asks. Despite being awake for nearly two hours by this point, his voice is still rough with sleep and his words sound sluggish.

“Because it was the only time they were offering this class, and we both needed a sociology class for gen ed.” Pidge sounds a lot better than Lance does, but their voice is still heavy and disgruntled. They look about as bad as Lance feels: shoulders hunched, heavy bags under their eyes, brows furrowed, and lips forming a permanent scowl.

“Wasn’t it offered at another time, too?” Lance lifts a hand, with some extreme amount of effort, and scratches his head. Even though he knows his hair isn’t greasy, he still feels gross. He didn’t have time to take a shower this morning after sleeping through the first three of his alarms: the ‘full routine’ alarm, the ‘only shower but no proper skin care routine’ alarm, and the ‘no shower but face care routine’ alarm. It was his fourth and final ‘you have no time to do anything but put clothes on’ alarm that finally woke him.

Pidge yawns, wide and long, covering their face with a hand. Their eyes shut, and their foot hits a groove in the sidewalk, causing them to stumble a few steps. Lance manages to grab hold of their arm to keep them standing. Pidge grunts out a thanks, and Lance grunts a wordless sound in response. “They offered later ones, but the seniors all got there before we did.”

Lance’s shoulders hunch as he slouches, grumbling under his breath, “Stupid seniors.”

“It was either nine o’clock or eight. And I don’t know about you, but I’m pretty sure I don’t exist before eight o’clock, so I was not about to wake up around seven.”

“Yeah, I’m with you on that one.” Lance mumbles, running a hand over his face, dragging his cheeks down. “I don’t know how Hunk does it.”

“He’s a morning person.”

“Seven am isn’t morning. It’s still in that weird limbo time between night and morning, where only old people, babies, all nighters, and ghosts exist.”

Pidge grunts an affirmative, and lifts both hands to rub their eyes, pushing their glasses to the top of their head. They groan. “My eyes burn.” Their fingers dig into their skin, pulling down the bottom of their eyelids as they spread their fingers, gazing straight ahead. Lance yawns, lifting a hand to stifle it. Pidge glares up at him through their fingers. “Stop that.” They say flatly.

“You started it.” He says through his yawn, shoving his hands back into the pockets of his jeans as he smacks his lips. “I’m pretty sure I’m sleep walking.”

“I’m pretty sure I never woke up.” Pidge adjusts their glasses back on their nose and moves to rest their hands on the straps of their backpack, hopping a little to hike it up further on their back. They hunch over heavily and fix a steady glare ahead of them.

“This is a shitty dream then.”
“Tell me about it. You’re here.”

Lance tilts his head to the side, not even bothering to look down at his friend. “You know what? I’m too tired to be offended. I’ll leave you with a simple ‘rude’.”

Pidge snorts, but says nothing. They continue in silence. He’s not entirely sure he can feel his legs, but they keep moving anyway, despite how much he’s dragging his feet. They both yawn at nearly the same time, and glare at each other for a moment before both making wordless grunts. Campus is busy at this time. They had just gotten out of their nine o’clock class, and it’s still during the ten minutes where people are swarming the sidewalks in an attempt to get to ten am classes. They occasionally swerve to avoid people, Lance at some point just falling into place behind Pidge to avoid foot traffic coming the other way.

Despite their short stature, people seem to peel away from Pidge, clearing the way for them both. Lance has a feeling it has a lot to do with the look on their face. He, for one, wouldn’t want to be on the receiving end of that look. A tired Pidge is a scary Pidge. Almost as scary as a mischievous Pidge, but not quite as scary as a hungry Pidge.

Lance doesn’t think the look on his face is nearly as scary. He does, however, think it probably makes him look as dead as he feels. In fact, his face feels kind of numb, like he’s not able to express anything. He’s barely able to keep his eyes open as it is.

The traffic fades out as they leave the main streets of campus, and Lance is able to walk alongside Pidge again. From there, it’s only a ten minute walk to Local Lion. Normally, if walking as his usually long strides and natural gait, he could make it there in five minutes. But both him and Pidge are struggling this morning and hurrying is out of the question.

Hunk is waiting for them in the parking lot when they get there, leaning back against the decorative metal railing that frames the outdoor patio. He’s got one arm crossed over his chest and the other is holding his phone. He’s dressed simply, in a t-shirt and shorts with a yellow and black hoodie on, sleeves pushed up to his elbows, and a familiar headband across his forehead that’s been part of his aesthetic for years.

He looks up when they both approach, eyebrows rocketing upward. They both stop in front of him, and he slowly lowers his phone. “Uh, rough morning?” He asks, eyes darting between the two of them.

They both grunt in response, staring blankly at Hunk while he quietly takes in both of their appearances. As Lance watches, Hunk’s eyes roam from his neck, over his shoulder, and down his arm to where his hand is shoved in his pocket. Then he switches to Pidge, gaze traveling over both of their arms, where their long sleeved shirt is rolled up to their elbows.

His eyebrows are still raised high, but his look turns amused, a smirk spreading his lips. “Up all night with the soulmates again?”

Pidge shrugs, shifting as they straighten to adjust the weight of their backpack and half stretch as their back arches with another yawn. “They needed help with some schematics they’re working on.” They say, settling back down into a slump with shoulders hunched and a bored look on their face. They hold out an arm, displaying the sketches and calculations and words and small diagrams scratched out in faded black on their arm. Pidge’s marks are easy to spot: they look like pen, while their soulmate’s look more deeply ingrained into their pale skin.

It looks like… a lot of math, and angles, and stuff that Lance would expect to see on someone’s physics or calculus homework. Pidge holds both arms out, turning them slightly while Hunk takes a
step forward, leaning over to examine them with a look of genuine curiosity on his face. “Fascinating. What’re they building?”

A small smirk tugs at the corner of Pidge’s lips, and a touch of pride enters their voice. It’s the only crack to their otherwise tired existence that Lance has seen all morning. “They’re working on a hover engine prototype.”

“What? Neat!” Hunk gapes, looking a little closer at the markings as Pidge lifts their sleeves a little higher.

They shrug, but the smug look stays. “They’re still in the theoretical stage, but we made some real headway last night… this morning? I’m not even sure anymore.”

Lance looks politely at his friend’s markings, but they honestly just don’t make any sense to him. They look a lot like all of the other markings he’s seen Pidge get from their soulmate. It’s always math and long discussions and diagrams with them, written out in tiny black chicken scratch to be able to use up as much space as possible. Pidge usually ends up walking around looking like a text book half of the time.

One time they walked around with binary code covering every inch of their skin. Just zeros and ones. Wouldn’t tell anyone what it meant. Hunk wouldn’t tell him either.

“Okay, okay, but enough about all that nerd stuff.” Lance waves waving a hand at Pidge and Hunk. They both look up at him, eyebrows raised. They both look amused. Even Pidge, but it’s buried under the persistent layers of utter exhaustion. They were used to not getting a lot of sleep, so their soulmate must have kept them up a lot later than usual. “Check out what my soulmate did last night.”

He turns to put his left side to them, holding out his arm straight and rotating it back and forth so they can see the full effect of it.

Unlike Pidge’s nerd soulmate, Lance’s is an artist. It’s mostly with paints, Lance thinks, though he’s not entirely sure without actually watching them do it. All he gets to see is the brilliant colors and patterns appear on his skin like magic, bursting to life stroke by stroke and line by line. It’s never in the same place, and it’s never the same pattern. He’s gotten them all over his body throughout the years, and each one has been so unique. The one thing they’ve all had in common is the fact that they’ve all been beautiful.

The colors on his arm are yellows and oranges and reds, swirling together like fire and flames, licking up his arm from the knuckles and rising all the way to the junction of his shoulder, sending spits of yellow flames up the side of his neck. Nearly his entire arm is covered, each color swirling and blending in such a way that they looked cohesive together but still stood out individually. He could see the twists and turns of the flames, coiling and curling as they lit up his arm.

As usual whenever he gets a new temporary tattoo from his soulmate, Lance is wearing an outfit to show it off: simple tight tank top with thin straps. It puts his entire arm on display and doesn’t take away from the brilliant colors that, honestly, look amazing with his skin tone. He’s lucky it’s still the tail end of summer before fall really kicks in, and it’s warm enough for him to get away with it.

He grins, feeling his face brighten for the first time this morning as he watches Hunk and Pidge look over his arm. He’s proud of it, and he’s proud of his soulmate. He loves showing off their work, and he’s got the pictures decorating his wall to prove it. Not to mention the scrapbooks under
his bed filled with pictures of all the drawings his soulmate has done throughout the years.

Pidge looks away first. They’ve had all morning to see Lance’s arm. They stifle a yawn before pushing up their glasses, and it causes Lance to yawn.

“Stop that, Pidge.” He tries to snap, but the words are muffled by his yawn. Hunk grabs hold of his wrist, lifting his arm this way and that to fully examine and appreciate his new sleeve.

“This is awesome…” He mutters, and Lance grins.

“I know.” He’s unable to keep the smugness out of his voice as he stands a little straighter.

“I don’t see why you’re so tired. You don’t even actually communicate with your soulmate.” Pidge says, adjusting their backpack again. They look like they might fall over at any moment now that they’re no longer moving. Lance feels himself bristle at Pidge’s words, but the edge is taken off when they lean against him, resting their head against his upper arm. “You could just sleep and see the finished product in the morning.”

Lance sniffs indignantly, lifting his chin as he looks away. “You know I like to watch them work.” He says, and he tries to sound offended, but even he can hear the fondness creeping into his tone.

It’s true he doesn’t really talk to his soulmate much. Not like Pidge and Hunk and Allura do. Even Coran talks to his soulmate more than Lance does, and they don’t even speak the same native language! And… he’s a little jealous of that. A lot jealous, truth be told.

As a kid, he always imagined having long, wonderful conversations with his soulmate in the years before he met them. And when the marks finally started appearing on his skin in his teenage years, he had tried to do just that. To his frustration, talking to them was like pulling teeth. Half the time he went ignored, and when they did reply, it was with short words. It didn’t take long for his soulmate to make it clear that they weren’t interested in conversation or getting to know each other.

He was, quite honestly and understandably, bummed about this. And he still felt a little pang of jealousy when he saw how the others had actual communication with their soulmates, even when they had never met.

But what his soulmate didn’t give him with words, they gave to him with art. They gave him beautiful markings that decorated his skin like a canvas. And while he never really got any words or explanations, Lance got to feel the emotions that came with those brush strokes.

So yeah, he could have slept through the whole thing and been bright eyed and bushy tailed for his morning class. But he didn’t. He liked staying up with his soulmate. He liked sitting on his bed, arm lit by only his phone screen so he didn’t wake up Hunk as the colors came to life on his skin. He liked feeling what his soulmate was feeling, good and bad. He liked to lay there, a silent audience as his soulmate worked through their emotions while painting their own skin, which, in turn, tattooed Lance’s.
It’s in those moments where Lance feels truly connected. He may not know all the details of his soulmate’s life, but he supposes he will eventually. For now, he’s perfectly content to simply watch them work, ride out their emotions with them, display their art proudly, and bathe in the calm serenity that comes with feeling the bond between soulmates.

He may not know his soulmate’s name or their favorite color or where they live. But he feels like he’s really gotten to know them over the years. He knows them deeply and intimately, and that’s a connection he wouldn’t give up for the world.

“Do you think they were excited last night?” Hunk asks, dropping Lance’s arm and taking a step back. “You know, all fired up and all that?” Hunk has always been genuinely interested in Lance’s soulmate’s art, and he’s always been down for talking through what they might mean. Lance isn’t sure if it’s just to humor him, or if he’s actually curious, but Lance appreciates it either way.

Pidge snorts, but Lance shakes his head, lifting his arm to gaze at the colors thoughtfully. “I think they were… anxious. Nervous, kind of. Like when you can’t sleep cause you’re all amped up on anticipation. But like… with more of a worried edge, you know?” And he knows he’s right.

He had felt that fluttering nervousness as he watched the flames swirl and coil, feeling the anxiety do the same in his heart. But beneath that anxiety was a sense of excitement. Nervousness, yes, but also… anticipation. With all that churning in his gut, foreign emotions that weren’t his but still familiar, he’s not sure he could have slept even if he had wanted to.
“Anxious about what?” Hunk asks, but Lance shrugs. He’s known Lance long enough to know that his soulmate never actually explains anything. “Well it is the start of the semester. Maybe they were anxious about classes starting.”

Lance lets his arm drop, brow furrowing slightly. “Maybe… but they’ve never been nervous like this around the start of the semester before.”

Pidge shrugs, pushing off of him and wobbling on their feet for a moment. “Maybe something big has happened.”

“Maybe…”

“Anyway, enough about soulmates.” Pidge says, already walking toward the doors to the coffeeshop. “I’m dying over here and I need some caffeine in my veins stat. So can we relocate inside and get some coffee before I pass out or murder someone?”

With the show and tell over, Lance feels his smug pride fade away, only to be quickly replaced by a bone deep weariness. “Yes, please.”

They push through the doors, and the familiar bells rattled against the glass as they’re surrounded by the smell of coffee and baked goods. Coran looks up, straightening from where he had been bent over, putting fresh donuts in the display case. He stands up so fast that Lance is certain he saw his ginger mustache bounce. “Greetings!” He sings cheerfully, grinning as the three of them shuffled over to the counter. His smile doesn’t fade as he looked them over. “Sleep well?”

Lance and Pidge groan together, and Hunk chuckles. “Well, I did.” He says, crossing his arms over his chest. “How’re you doing, Coran?”

“Just dandy, Hunk! Thanks for asking.” He tilts his chin, a mischievous glint entering his eyes as he leans to the side, pointing the metal tongs in his hands at Hunk. “I’ve got some new recipes I want to try later today.”

“Oh geez, here we go.” Hunk laughs, deep and hearty, and Lance loves him, he really does, but he can’t for the life of him figure out how Hunk can be so cheerful when he woke up at seven this morning. “I’ll take a look at them when I come in for my shift.”

Coran straightens, sniffing indignantly and lifting his chin as he turns his head away. “Well, if you insist, but I think I’ve really hit the nail on the head with these ones!”

“We’ll see about that.” Hunk says with a soft chuckle.

Pidge walks forward until their toes are pressed up against the bottom of the counter and lean their whole body against the display case. It rises just a little above their head, rounding over the top. Pidge leans forward until their forehead and nose are pressed to the glass. “Please tell me you have maple donuts?”

Coran nods, one hand on his hip as he clanked the tongs in his other hand together a few times. “There’s some on the cooling rack in the back right now. They’ll be ready in just a tick!”

“Coran, you’re my hero.” Pidge mumbles without lifting their head.

Lance stops when he reaches the front counter, and bends in half, laying his entire torso across the countertop next to the register. With great effort, he lifts one arm and flops it down next to him. His hand lands on the bell, sending an annoying ring throughout the cafe. “Alluraaaaaaa!” He whines loudly. “Alluraaaaaaa! I’m dying over here! S-O-S. Call life alert. I’m too young and too
beautiful to die.” As he whines, his hand lifts and falls on the ringer, over and over again.

“Lance, if you don’t cut that out, I’m going to make you spend the next week cleaning this place from top to bottom with a toothbrush.” Comes the sharp and annoyed reply. He likes to think there’s a fondness buried in there. Somewhere.

He tilts his head back far enough to see her come out of the backroom, tying an apron around her waist as she steps up to the register. She’s beautiful, as always. Tall, thick dyed white hair that’s a perfect contrast to her dark skin, amazingly sharp features and a no nonsense attitude existing alongside a generous compassion. What he wouldn’t give to have her be his soulmate. Sadly, they’re both destined for someone else.

Still, a little playful flirting between friends never hurt. Well… except for times that she actually hits him. But that’s beside the point.

“I must have already died and gone to heaven, because you’ve got the voice of an angel.”

He can practically hear her rolling her eyes, but it’s Pidge who groans loudly. “Lance, it’s too damn early to hear your gross attempts at flirting.”

Lance snorts. “It’s never too early to compliment a beautiful woman. Right, Allura?”

She crosses her arms over her chest and shakes her head. “No, I’m afraid I agree with Pidge. Not to mention I’m pretty sure you’ve given me that line at least a dozen times. Your attempts this morning are bordering on pitiful.”

“Ouch. Savage.” Lance mumbles, rolling his head so his face is pressed into the counter. “My poor heart can’t handle this kind of treatment. I think I’m dying.”

“We’re never that lucky.” Pidge grumbles.

“Rude.”

“Allura sighs, poking his head with two fingers.

“I don’t drool!”

“You do, Lance. I’ve shared a room with you for two years. You drool all over your pillow at night.”

“Hunk!”

“Come on, buddy.” Hunk says, stepping up beside him and rubbing a comforting hand on his back. If he keeps that up, Lance might actually fall asleep on the counter. But he won’t drool, because he doesn’t do that. “Don’t you want to order coffee?”

Lance groans, flipping his arm over so his wrist is facing upward. “I don’t think I have the strength to drink it. Just inject it straight into my veins.”

“I don’t think that’s safe, dude.”

“You’re not my doctor.”

“Allura sighs, poking his head with two fingers.

“Lance, if we don’t order coffee in the next thirty seconds, you’re going up to number one on my hit list.” Pidge says, but the affect is lessened by the fact that they still haven’t moved.
“Oooo, is this a new painting from the infamous soulmate?” Coran asks, cooing with genuine interest as he leans over Allura to get a better look at Lance’s arm.

Pidge groans loudly. “Why did you have to bring that up?” They mumble.

At the mention of his markings, Lance perks right the fuck up. He shoots up straight, regretting the decision instantly as his vision blurs and everything spins. He leans forward again, putting his hands on the counter to steady himself. Hunk’s hand is on his shoulder, offering him support. He closes his eyes for a moment, but when everything stops spinning he lifts his head, grinning at Coran and Allura.

“Yup! Look at this one of a kind masterpiece.” He says, thrusting his arm out and twisting it as he shows them.

Coran leans forward, scratching his chin as his eyes roam the markings. “What an impeccable use of technique…”

Allura still has her arms crossed over her chest, but her eyebrows are raised as she looks his arm over. “It’s quiet beautiful.”

Lance’s grin widens. “It always is.”

“Is this why you’re so tired?”

Lance pulls his arm back, running his fingers over the color swirls and eyes tracing the patterns as he says sheepishly, “Maybe…”

“Hunk, you’re supposed to make sure he doesn’t exhaust himself like this.” Allura says. “He’s going to be useless on his shift tonight.”

Hunk throws up his arms, shaking his head. “Oh, no, no no, don’t put his on me. You know I can’t control him if his soulmate is drawing. Dude will stay up until he legitimately passes out if his SM is drawing. I’ve had to feed him before because he forgets to eat.”

“For the record, he tried.” Lance adds.

Hunk nods quickly, pointing to lance with both pointer fingers, hands still up in the air. “It’s true. I tried. He started right as I was going to bed, and I said ‘Lance, you know you have an early class tomorrow,’ right, Lance? I said that. I warned you that you’d be tired.”

Lance shrugs. “No regrets.”

“I regret your existence.” Pidge mumbles, voice muffled by the glass.

“Oh yeah? Well, I regret your— your face!”

“Lance, that doesn’t even make sense.”

“Neither does your mom.”

Pidge groans, but Hunk snorts a short laugh. “Good one, Lance.”

Lance holds up a fist, and Hunk taps it with the back of his. “What can I say? I’m on…” He pauses dramatically, crossing his right arm over his chest, he lifts his left to his face, cradling his chin in his forefinger and thumb. The position puts his left arm on display. He tilts his chin down and lifts his eyes, smirking at them all.
“Lance, don’t.” Pidge whines, but he doesn’t listen.

“Fire”

His smirk widens as everyone groans. Everyone except for Coran, who laughs heartily, throwing his head back.

“I hate you.”

“Ooooo, gonna need some ice for that—“ He steps closer to them, grabbing their shoulders with both hands and pulling them off the display case. They flop backward, rolling back on their heels as Lance pulls them against his chest. Then he leans forward and waves his left arm in front of their face. “—Burn?”

They groan, rolling their head to look at Allura, who’s smiling and shaking her head. “Can’t you threaten to fire him?” They plead.

Allura tilts her head to the side, several curls falling loose from her ponytail to frame her face. She gave Pidge and sympathetic smile. “I would, but then I’m afraid he would just—“

Lance snorts loudly. “Pfff, fired, nice one, Pidge.” He turns to grin at Hunk, who’s returning his smile, even thought he can see he’s conflicted about it. “You can’t fire me, I’m too hot!” He turns his head to grin at Hunk, waggling his eyebrows. He sighs but smiles good naturally as he responds.

“Hot damn.”

“—Do that.” Allura finishes, waving a hand at Lance.

“Call the police and the fireman!”

Pidge sighs loudly. “Why am I friends with you?”

“Because I’m irresistibly charming and handsome?”

They snort. “Sure.”

“Did you guys want to order?” Allura asks, hand hovering over the register.

“Yes, please,” Pidge pushes away from Lance to stand in front of the counter. “Hit me up with a large dark roast with two shots of espresso.”

Both of her eyebrows go up. “Isn’t that a little… much?”

Pidge gives her a flat stare that could peel paint. “I have two more classes after this. Allura, if you don’t give me that coffee, I can’t be held responsible for my actions. I will probably kill Lance, and then you’ll be down an employee.”

“What? Why me?”

“I already told you I put you at the top of my hit list.”

“Hunk will protect me!”

“Sorry, buddy, but I’m not getting in the middle of that.”
“Will that be all, Pidge?” Allura asks, cutting them all off.

“And two of Coran’s maple donuts.” They say, pulling their wallet out of their pocket.

“Coming right up!” Coran says, disappearing into the back room.

Allura swipes Pidge’s card, hands it back, and fixes their coffee quickly before taking the rest of their orders. Lance doesn’t complain too much. He would, too, if he were in her position. Pidge looks like they’re about to keel over at any moment.

Pidge takes the drink, cradling it in both hands as they mutter thanks and shuffle away to take a seat. They watch them go before Allura turns to the two of them. “And the usuals?”

Hunk nods. “Yeah, thanks, Allura.”

“An extra shot of espresso in mine.” Lance adds.

She raises an eyebrow, but nods. “You look like you could use it.”

Lance crosses his arms over his chest and leans a hip on the display case. “Hey! I take offense to that.”

Allura just rolls her eyes, taking payment from both of them, fingers flying expertly across the register. “I just meant you look tired.”

“She’s got a point, dude. You have bags under your eyes.” Hunk says.

Lance gasps, both hands flying to his face, fingers probing the skin under his eyes. “I do not!”

Allura nods and hands back his card. “You do.”

Lance’s hands drop, and he scowls down at his arm. “This is all your fault.” He grumbles.

Hunk snorts, putting his wallet back in his pocket. “Like you’d ever really be mad at your SM.”

He feels a soft smile tugging at his lips, melting his scowl. “Yeah, you right.”

Allura hands them their drinks and their donut bags, and they go to join Pidge at their usual spot in the corner. The corner has a couch that is flanked by two armchairs with a coffee table between the three of them. Pidge is curled up in one of the chairs, knees pulled up, sitting sideways, coffee cradled in their hands, and head leaning back against the cushion. Lance drops their donut bag down on the table, causing them to lift their head, sharp brown eyes immediately focusing on it.

“Oh, hell yes.” They mutter, sitting up to dig into the bag.

Lance and Hunk sit on the couch, digging out their own donuts. Lance had gotten his favorite: the chocolate espresso donut. It’s Hunk’s creation and an absolute blessing. He closed his eyes as he bites into it, letting out loud noises as he chews.

“Dude, do you have to do that?” Hunk asks.

Lance leans back, letting himself get absorbed into the cushions and resting one ankle on his knee. “It’s a compliment, man.” He says, taking another bite with significantly less sound effects.

They’re quite for several moments as they all sip their coffee and eat their donuts. Local Lion has the best donuts in town, in Lance’s opinion. They’re all homemade daily, sometimes by Coran and
sometimes by Hunk, and sometimes by some of the other employees. The coffee is great, too, and the atmosphere of the place is even better. It’s decorated with a modern but earthy style, with plenty of indoor plants, art on the brick walls, and large windows for natural lighting. It’s located off campus, so there aren’t usually too many people flooding in, and overall it’s very cozy. At the moment there are only a few other customers scattered around the tables, and overhead Allura’s radio station plays softly.

“Club expo is in two days.” Hunk says, sipping his green tea latte.

“Ugh, don’t remind me.” Pidge says, curling deeper into the chair. One donut was down and they were on their second one. “I don’t have anything ready yet.”

Lance scoffs, resting his elbow on the arm of the couch and waving his hand in the air. “Pfff, what do you even need to get ready? We just gotta use the same posters as last year, wear our shirts, and then you just gotta answer questions when I reel ‘em in with the classic Lance McClain charm.” He sends Pidge a smoldering look with a confident smirk, but they just snort and roll their eyes.

“Do you have to come?”

“Of course! You need me!”

“No, we don’t.”

“Pidge, you know we need him. He’s the loudest person at the expo. He always draws in more people than we ever could on our own.”

“And then we end up with a lot of book nerds who don’t make it past the first practice.”

“Uh, Pidge,” Hunk says, raising a finger. “We are book nerds.”

Pidge rolls their eyes and waves their half eaten donut around in the air. “That’s beside the point!” They take a sip of their coffee and immediately make a face, lips curling and nose scrunching up.

“Pidge, how can you even drink that?” Lance asks, making a similar face as he eyes their cup.

“It’s better than the hot sugar water with syrup that you drink.”

“Excuse,” He huffs, cradling his drink to his chest with both hands. “It’s not my fault you killed your tastebuds.”

“So anyway,” Hunk says, pulling his laptop out of his backpack and putting it on his lap. He sets his drink on the coffee table so he can open his computer. “I was thinking we could use the same flier design that we did last year, but maybe with a few adjustments? If we figure this thing out today, I can go get them printed at the library tomorrow and Lance can help me cut them down to size.”

“Goodie.” Lance says dryly, hunching his shoulders and sinking further into the couch.

“What’d you have in mind?” Pidge asks, and Hunk pulls up the flier design, turning his computer to show her.

Lance tunes them out a little bit. It’s not that he doesn’t care about his team, he just really doesn’t care about these kind of housekeeping details. He’ll let Pidge and Hunk deal with those. They are the club presidents after all. He’s just one of the star players. So instead he sips his coffee and holds up his left arm, letting his eyes roam the patterns and swirls that he already knows so well.
His soulmate worked hard on it, so the least he can do is fully appreciate their work. And he does. He always does. He thinks back to the feelings that had come across when the marks were appearing on his skin. The anxiousness, the nervous energy, the almost nauseating excitement that clenched hard in his gut. He doesn’t know what it was about, but he hopes his soulmate has a good day, and that whatever had them feeling so anxious turns out alright. He’s willing to bet it goes fine. It didn’t feel like bad nerves. More like… something was going to happen and they couldn’t sleep because of it. Like trying to sleep on Christmas eve, or the night before a road trip, or in his case, the night before the first day of classes.

After the painting had finished, the connection between them had faded quickly. Lance had waited, hoping for more, but by then it had been three in the morning, and the color took up his whole arm, and he had known his soulmate was done. He couldn’t sleep for another hour. He never could after feeling his soulmate. He was too amped up, to hung up on thoughts of ‘what if’, still feeling the echoes of emotions that weren’t his but which touched his heart all the same.

Someone out there, someone destined for him, had left their mark on him, had shared a piece of themselves with him.

Speaking of his soulmate, it occurs to him that he has yet to do his daily soulmate exchange.

“Hey, Hunk.” He says, looking up suddenly. His friend turns from where he’s been gesturing at his computer to look at him with a raised brow. “Got a pen?”

“Yeah,” He says, already digging in his book bag. He pulls one out and hands it over.

Lance brightens, sitting up and leaning forward to set his coffee cup on the table. “Thanks, man!” He bites the cap of the pen, pulling it out and keeping the cap in his mouth as he positions the pen over his left hand. Then he stops, pulls back, and taps his chin with the back of the pen. What should he say today? Definitely something fire related. That much is obvious.

“Oh god, are you going to do the thing again?” Pidge asks, sounding pained.

Lance shoots them a smirk and winks. “Of course,” He says, words warped by the cap between his teeth. “Everyday, Pidge. Every. Day.”

“Why are you like this?” Pidge groans, rubbing their eyes and shaking their head.

“I think it’s sweet.” Hunk says, turning his computer back around to type something.

Lance gestures to Hunk. “See? Hunk thinks it’s sweet! And he should know. Him and his soulmate are like, cavity inducing.”

Hunk snorts, but doesn’t look up.

“It’s not sweet. It’s gross and embarrassing.”

“Says you. But my soulmate loves it.”

“Have they ever said so?”

“Well, no… but they’ve never told me to stop, and it’s obvious they love it. They’re my soulmate, Pidge.”

They roll their eyes, taking another sip from their cup and wincing. “I feel bad for your soulmate.”
“Hey! You just don’t know the first thing about romance.” Lance grumbles, leaning back against the couch to hide his palm from both of them. They pick up their conversation again as Lance idly taps his nose with the pen, brows scrunched up in thought. He turns his hand over, waggling his fingers as he admires the way the yellow tips of the flames lick up the digits.

Then a slow grin spreads his lips. He’s got it! Yes. Perfect. His soulmate is going to love this.

He sets the pen to his palm and scribbles out the words, grinning wildly.

Keith is in class when he feels the tingling sensation dancing across his palm.

He knows exactly what it is. It happens every morning. Rarely at the same time but always before noon. He’s sitting back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest and legs stretched out beneath the table in front of him. He wants to ignore it. He really does. But no matter how much he tries, he never can. There’s just an irresistible pull, a pleading for attention, whenever his soulmate writes. It’s a wordless whisper in the back of his mind, a tug at his heart, and he feels himself on a deep level reaching out for it, even while he tells himself not to.

The loss of control is… uncomfortable.

He’s worked very hard to get his life under control, to be able to control himself. And the fact that there’s still this… this strange anomaly attached to him, something that he’s drawn toward inexplicably, a faceless person attached to him, with control over him, is a little terrifying.

Still… when the feels the tingling on his palm, like the pressure of a phantom pen gliding across his skin, he knows it’s better to just let the experience wash over him rather than fight it. He’s found this is the best way. Just accept it, let the strange foreign feelings fade, and let it go.

So he closes his eyes, breathing deep as emotions that aren’t his start to drift through his mind, filling his chest. They’re a little all over the place, and he passes the time by trying to identify them.

What sticks out the most is pride, though Keith gets the feeling that it’s more of a self directed pride than anything. Almost like a cockiness. He gets that feeling most mornings when his soulmate writes on his hand. But there’s also that familiar fondness that makes his heart clench and warmth bubble inside him, just as it also makes his gut clench and his stomach roll.

There’s also a softer pride, one that’s directed more outward. More towards him.

It’s the same feeling he received when the words, “Absolutely amazing, good luck tomorrow!” appeared on his wrist in a familiar messy handwriting last night when he had gotten in the shower to wash the paint off his arm.

Or maybe he should say this morning.

He hadn’t been able to sleep. It was the night before the first day of classes, and he was feeling… anxious. He had given up sleeping around midnight and instead had sat in the middle of the floor of his studio apartment and started painting. He hadn’t finished until nearly three in the morning. He hadn’t expected his soulmate to still be up, but…. he was. He always managed to be awake.
whenever Keith wanted to paint. No matter what the time. And every time, when Keith was done, he’d get some short message scribbled across his hand or wrist.

They were always compliments, and sometimes, if Keith had something heavier on his mind, there were also words of encouragement.

Like this morning.

His wrist itched just thinking about the words. He finds them oddly comforting, but also unnerving. He isn’t sure if it was a lucky guess, random words of encouragement, or if his soulmate had managed to read between the lines of the chaotic emotions that tended to shine through their connection.

He hates to admit it, but his soulmate has gotten fairly good at reading him throughout the years. In a way, it’s nice to have someone who knows him so well. But at the same time…

He huffs out an exhale, feeling the hair on his forehead shift, and pushes those thoughts aside. He lets himself bask for a moment in a trickling of emotions that aren’t his. They’re a subtle jumble, flitting around and gone before he can firmly grasp anything other than the more predominate emotions.

He’s not sure how his soulmate manages to read him so well. Everything except for the smug pride and overlaying affection slips through his fingers like sand.

And then the tingling stops and the foreign emotions slip away like they were never there. And if there weren’t marks on his skin to prove their passing, he could swear the moment never happened at all.

He opens his eyes, attention fixing once again on his professor. Like most first classes, she’s just going over the syllabus and what to expect from the class. To be honest, he stopped listening a while ago.

He stares at his professor. He stares at the syllabus laying open on his table, reading the same lines over and over again without absorbing them. He lets his eyes trail around the room, to his classmates, to the posters on the walls, to the cabinets of art supplies. He even tries to look at the old analogue clock on the wall, watching the second hand tick.

He lasts approximately one hundred and thirty seven seconds before he gives into curiosity.

He doesn’t know why he bothers, honestly. He may not know exactly what’s written on his palm, but he sure as hell knows the gist of it. It’s the same every day.

Still, his curiosity is a demon he has yet to tame. Sighing, he unfolds his arms and holds his left hand out in front of him. He tugs on the velcro strap of his glove and starts to slip it off his hand.

The first thing he sees is the words from this morning.

Absolutely amazing, good luck tomorrow!

The words are written in blue, imprinted into his skin. They’re already starting to fade. The words rarely last longer than a couple of days. And given the late hour, he doubted his soulmate was able to concentrate hard enough to get it to last more than twenty four hours.

He stares at the words for only a moment, feeling a familiar and irritating flutter in his chest before he shakes it off, pushing his glove further up his hand. The words start at the meat of his thumb,
scribbled across the center of his palm and across diagonally. Being fresh, the black is deep and dark, a stark contrast on his pale skin.

*I better get some ice, because my heart’s on fire.*

Keith squeezes his eyes shut, sucking in a breath but pursing his lips tight to suppress his groan. He tugs his glove back down, covering up all the marks. He counts to five and lets his air out in a long exhale, opening his eyes.

Why does the universe think that an idiot is his perfect match?

He doesn’t respond. He never does. And yet the man never seems to give up hope. Every day, without fail, there’s a new terrible pick up line written on one of his hands.

Keith hates it, but he can’t bring himself to tell the man to fuck off. That just seems… cruel. And Keith isn’t that heartless. He doesn’t want to *hurt* the guy, he just… he doesn’t know what he wants, and that’s been a problem for years. A problem that he doesn’t think he’ll get a solution to anytime soon.

Better to focus on his present, and not some unknown future. Focus on what he can control. Focus on what he can do. Focus on himself.

His class ends thirty minutes early, and Keith grabs his backpack, throwing it over one shoulder as he trudges from the room. He pulls out his phone to check his schedule for the hundredth time that day. His next class is in the same building, but he still has forty minutes before it starts. Sighing, he goes to the vending machine at the end of the hall, gets a small bag of chips, and heads up the stairs to his next class. He settles down on the floor outside of his next class room, setting his bag next to him. Leaning against the wall, he pulls out his sketchbook and pulls up his knees, propping the book so no one can see as he opens it.

He puts his headphones on, starts up his music, and pulls out his colored pencils. His chips are done, and he’s idly recreating the flame pattern the had painted last night from memory when his phone vibrates.

He blinks, suddenly forced back into reality. The drawing is only halfway done, yellows, oranges, and reds swirling and crawling up the edge of the page. Propping the red pencil he’s been working with between his lips, he picks up his phone. He has several texts from Pidge and one from Shiro.

**Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)**

> Hey! Hope your first day of classes is going well! Dinner tonight? You can tell me all about it :)

**Keith**

> Shiro, are you aware that you’re twenty six years old?

**Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)**

> That’s what I’ve been lead to believe, yes.

**Keith**

> Then why the hell do you text like an old man?

**Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)**

> All I wanted to do was check in on my baby brother and make sure he’s having a good day, and I’m honestly feeling so attacked right now.
Keith
> Dear god please stop

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> So is that a yes for dinner?

Keith
> Will you be taking me off campus for non cafeteria food?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Will that get you to agree to a good old fashioned brother interrogation?

Keith
> As long as you’re paying

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Deal :) I’ll pick you up at seven.

People are starting to gather in the hallway, and with a glance at the time, Keith realizes that it’s nearly time for his class. He shuffles his colored pencils back into his pencil pouch and stuffs them in his bag along with his sketch book. Pushing himself to his feet, he throws his back over his shoulder. With his music still blaring in his ears, blocking out much of the general hallway chatter, he leans a hip against the wall, checking his other messages.

Tiny Evil Bird (Pidge)
> I’m dead
> I think I can count the hours of sleep I got on one hand
> Probably more like three fingers
> Point is I’m in zombie mode right now
> Pretty sure I know why zombies do that shuffle walk thing
> It’s hard to walk when you’re dead
> Anyway, I just wanted to tell you that I may be dead, but I’m still up for lunch

Keith
> We can cancel if you’d rather go sleep
> I don’t need you dying on the table
> I don’t want to explain why I’m talking to a corpse
> And I don’t want to deal with the body

Tiny Evil Bird (Pidge)
> First of all, I resent that
> Nearly thirteen years of friendship and you won’t even get rid of my dead body
> You insult me
> Second of all, I’m pretty sure my blood is 85% caffeine right now, I couldn’t sleep if I tried
> Blinking is getting hard, my hands are shaking, and I think I can see sounds
> Keith Kogane, we are going to lunch

Keith
> Sounds like I don’t have a choice

Tiny Evil Bird (Pidge)
> Damn straight you don’t
> Meet me outside the cafeteria at one
His next class passes just as quickly as the first. He’s honestly not even sure why he was so nervous last night. It might be his first day of classes at this university, but so far the classes followed the exact same pattern as those at his old community pattern. The first day is easy. Nothing. He’s feeling pretty good about it now that he’s got two classes out of the way. So far he hasn’t gotten lost. He hasn’t drawn attention to himself. He hasn’t forgotten anything. He can see the freshmen walking around, printed out schedules in their hands and looking like a strange mix of excited and terrified. He doesn’t think he looks like that.

So all in all, it’s not a bad day so far.

His fingers absently press against his left wrist as he makes his way out of the art building. Good luck tomorrow! His soulmate had sensed his anxiousness last night. Now he feels a little foolish for it. Now there’s someone out there, walking around with sleeve of flame tattoos that are the visual embodiment of his insecure nerves. And he’s not even nervous anymore.

He sighs, forcing himself to shove his hands in his pockets to keep from touching the words on his palm.

Oh well. It’s not like he asked to be connected to someone. It’s not like he asked for that person’s concern. He didn’t paint his arm for his soulmate, and he didn’t do it for sympathy. He had done it because it helped him clear his thoughts and calm himself. Painting on his body has always done that for him. It’s his favorite medium. He’s done it since he was a kid, and he didn’t really think about the consequences of it once he was connected to his soulmate.

He was a little nervous at first, but his soulmate has never complained about the drawings. Never complained that Keith made him walk around like a human painting several times a month. Sometimes a week. He never asked for praise or encouragement or validation for his chaotic emotions, but…

He can’t deny that they haven’t been appreciated over the years.

He was annoyed with him during their early years of being connected. He was talkative, and obnoxious, and asked way too many probing questions while offering up way too many mundane details of his life. Keith wasn’t ready to accept him. To an extent, he still isn’t. But when he was young, he really wasn’t ready for anything so serious and so committed as a soulmate is.

So he tried to brush him off. When that didn’t work, he started ignoring him. His soulmate never gave up though. He got quieter, resigning himself to the occasional message and the daily pick up line. Keith resumed his paintings, half expecting his soulmate to tell him to stop making him look like he got in a fight with a first grade arts and crafts center, but he didn’t. Always words of awe and encouragement.

As annoying and frustrating as his soulmate has been, and as terrifying as the concept of having a soulmate is, Keith can’t deny that his SM was a pivotal anchor for him after the car accident that took his parents and maimed Shiro. He was a grounding force when Keith thought he was drowning.

A grounding force that came in the form of simple encouraging words and the comforting warmth in his chest when they were being written. A grounding force that came in the form of a stupid pick up line that appeared on his palm every morning, the only thing that stayed constant and predictable when his life was changing so drastically. A grounding force that came in the form of
hilariously terrible doodles of stick figure comics and tyrannic impressions of his soulmate’s teachers doodled across his arms. A grounding force that came in the form of tic-tac-toe and games of hangman placed on their legs whenever Keith was feeling particularly close to a breakdown.

All it took was a small doodle on his skin to get his mind off the deafening emotions that threatened to choke him, and his soulmate would be there. Ready to distract him.

His soulmate got him through a very tough time in his life, and he’ll forever be grateful, but… He still holds him at a distance. He just can’t bring himself to be dependent on a man he doesn’t know. Maybe one day, but for now… for now Keith will just focus on the present. He has to. The future fills him with enough anxiety to clench his heart and steal his breath, and the past hangs heavy on his shoulders, threatening to crush him.

But the present? The present he can handle. Day by day. Patience yields focus.

He spends the next hour sitting in the grassy area between the art building and the music building, back against a tree. There are a few other students sitting around between classes, some with friends and some alone. He has his headphones on again and his sketchbook out. He finishes the drawing, trying to recreate a two demential rendition of the flame sleeve he had painted early this morning.

When he’s done, he checks the time. He still has fifteen minutes, but he has nothing else to do. He packs up his things and heads to the main cafeteria on campus. He leans a shoulder against the outside brick wall, one hand in his pocket and the other holding up his phone as he dicks around on some of his game apps.

He ignores everyone around him, the pass and press of bodies coming in and out of the cafeteria. The main thing, he finds, that’s different from his community college and this university, is that it’s so crowded. With so many people living on and around campus, the foot traffic is ridiculous, and he’s not used to it.

He’s so absorbed into his phone that he jumps when a foot is suddenly kicking his leg. He looks up to glare, only to be faced with an extremely disheveled looking Pidge.

He blinks, eyes going wide and brows shooting up. Pidge wasn’t kidding. They look like death. There’s heavy bags under their eyes, and although their eyelids are hanging half lidded, he watches with increasing discomfort as Pidge doesn’t blink. Their shoulders are slumped, hands on the straps of their bag like it’s the only thing keeping them balanced enough to stand. Their sleeves are pushed up to their elbows, and Keith can see diagrams and equations and notes scribbled across their skin, up their arms and up their neck. It’s honestly not a new look for Pidge.

“You,” Keith says, lowering his headphones to let them rest around his neck and turning his music off before shoving his phone in his pocket. He doesn’t look away from Pidge. He’s a little afraid they might keel over if he turns away for even a second. “Look like hell.”

A small smirk lifts one corner of their mouth. It’s a lazy effort, but it’s there. “Good to see you, too.” They practically fall forward, pressing their forehead to Keith’s chest in what he thinks is an attempt at a hug. The don’t move their arms though, and Keith awkwardly wraps his arms around their shoulders. “Keith, carry me to the food.”

At that, he chuckles. “Do you really want me to carry you through a cafeteria full of people?”

“Do I look like I give a fuck what these people think of me?” They mumbled into his shirt. “Come on, piggy back ride.”
“Do you even have the energy to jump onto my back?”

They’re quiet for several long seconds before they sigh. “You have a point.” They lean back, stumbling a few steps before catching themselves, one foot in the air. They lean forward, letting their momentum carry them through several quick steps. “Come on, I’m starving. I’ve only eaten two donuts today.”

Keith follows Pidge into the cafeteria. Despite being small and dead on their feet, people seem to part for them. Keith just follows in their wake. If he’s being honest, he’s feeling pretty beat, too. He didn’t exactly get a lot of sleep last night. But he thinks it’s the adrenaline of his first day at this school that’s been carrying him through. He’ll no doubt crash later.

The cafeteria lobby is a long hallway with doors at either end, and it splits to the left and to the right, with two separate areas to get food. Pidge takes a right, going up the five steps to the upper half of the cafeteria, mumbling that this side has more choices and better pizza. They grab a tray, and Keith follows suit. He’s never been to the cafeteria before, and so he half listens to Pidge’s vague explanations while his eyes roam over the different options. Pidge chooses pizza while he gets a wrap, and Pidge leads him through the line, showing him how to pay with his campus ID, using his prepaid meal plan.

They choose seats at a mostly empty table off to the side, setting their bags down on the chairs next to them.

“So…” Pidge says around a mouthful of pizza. They’re hunched over the table leaning on their elbows, like it’s the only thing keeping them from falling face first into their food. “How’s your first day of classes been?”

Keith eyes them, eyebrow raised. “Really, Pidge?”

“What?”

“Don’t go all Shiro on me.”

Pidge snorts, taking another bite. “Well excuse me for being curious over how my best friend’s day has been at his brand new school.”

Keith rolls his eyes. “It’s been fine. I’ve only had two classes and my professors have only gone over the syllabus… syllabi?”

Pidge shrugs. “Who knows. But man only two? I’ve had three classes. I’m surprised I made it through them. In the last one, I think I nearly fell asleep at the same time I couldn’t stop twitching. Probably looked like I was having a seizure.”

Keith snorts a short laugh. “Shouldn’t have let your SM keep you up all night.”

Pidge gives him a flat look. They haven’t exactly said they were up late because of their soulmate, but Keith thinks it’s pretty obvious. And they don’t deny it. “Some of us actually like to talk to those the universe has decided to stick us with.”

Keith ignores the dig. “You can at least do it at a more reasonable hour. When did you even get to sleep this morning?”

Pidge looks a little sheepish. “Um, around three?” He raises an eyebrow, and they sigh. “Okay, so it was probably closer to four, four-thirty.”
“What was it this time?”

Pidge holds out an arm, idly admiring a few diagrams drawn on the underside of their arm. A small smile plays across their lips. “They’re theorizing a hover engine prototype.”

Keith raises both eyebrows, nodding a little while letting out a low whistle. “You’ve both come a long way since calculating the proper force and angle it would take to hit your teacher with a spitball from the back of the room.”

Pidge scowls, but there’s an amused smirk there that ruins the affect. “Keith, we were thirteen.”

He nods. “You’ve come a long way.”

They talk about other things. Pidge asks is he’s settled into his apartment, and he says he has. They had helped him and Shiro move his things. Pidge asks if he’s actually unpacked everything, and Keith carefully avoids answering. He asks Pidge about their dorm. They live in the new honors dorm hall, and even managed to get a room to themselves. It’s a small room, they say, but worth it for the extra privacy. Keith hasn’t been by to see their place yet.

“Now that you’re here, I’m going to see you more often, right?” Pidge asks as they carry their trays to the drop off area. They give Keith a stern sideways glare. “No holing up in your apartment all the time. We’re actually going to the same school for the first time in years, and you’re going to hang out with me.”

Keith snorts, setting his tray next to Pidge’s on the conveyor belt that takes them back into the kitchen. “Sounds like I don’t have a choice.”

“You don’t. I’ll introduce you to my friends. You’ll like them. Well… you’ll like Hunk. Lance is… an acquired taste.”

“Can’t wait.” Keith says dryly.

“Speaking of my friends and hanging out with me like a best friend of thirteen years should, I believe you have a promise to fulfill.” Pidge says as they weave their way through the dining hall tables to get to the exit.

Keith meets their gaze when they look over their shoulder, one eyebrow raised. “I do?” He doesn’t remember making any promises. At least none that would make Pidge start a conversation like that.

They exit the dining hall, and Pidge is smirking as they step sideways to come up alongside him. “Saturday is our first quidditch practice of the year.”

Keith groans, shoulders slumping as he tilts his head back. Oh. That promise. “Pidge, really? You’re going to make me go through with this?”

They nod, smiling and looking a hell of a lot more awake than they had earlier. He’s not sure if it’s the food or the prospect of making him suffer that has them so lively. “You bet I am. You promised, Keith. You said when you made it Altea, you would give it a try.”

He sighs, loudly, letting it trail off into a groan. “Does it have to be the first practice?”

“No better time, honestly. At least there’ll be other people who have no idea what they’re doing.”

Keith’s shoulders slump. “I guess.” He grumbles.
“When’s your next class?”

Keith checks his phone. “In an hour.”

Pidge nods, grabbing ahold of his wrist to tow him toward the student union. “Good, then you can sit with me for a bit.” They pause in the main hallway, eyeing the coffee shop.

Keith shakes his head, dragging Pidge away. “Oh no, you’ve had way too much coffee for today.”

Pidge drags their feet but follows. “You’re not my mom.”

“I’m getting mixed signals, Pidge. Do you want me to care for your wellbeing or not?”

“I never told you to care for my wellbeing. I told you to take care of my dead body. There’s a difference.”

“Matt would kill me if I let you die.”

Pidge snorts. “You can take Matt in a fight. He weighs maybe 100 pounds while wet.”

“Yeah, but if I let you die and hurt Matt, then Shiro will kill me.”

“Fair point. You can tell them that I wouldn’t listen to you. They’ll believe that. I never listen to you.” They look over their shoulder, sighing wistfully. “Come on, Keith. It smells so good.”

“If you have a heart attack, I’m not going to your first quidditch meeting.”

Pidge sighs then. “Fiiine. But only because the team could really use you.”

They find seats in one of the lounges, far away from most of the crowd. Pidge collapses into a plush seat, letting their bag drop to the ground as they tilt their head back, closing their eyes with a content sigh.

“I don’t see why you want me there. I’m not even a big fan of the whole Harry Potter thing. I only read the books and watched the movies because you made me.”

Pidge waves a hand at him without lifting their head. “And I’m proud of that. But it doesn’t matter. You don’t need to be. You just need to be athletic, which you are.”

“I don’t even know the rules.”

“That’s why we teach you.”

“And if I don’t like it, I don’t have to come back?”

“Yeah, yeah, but you’ll like it.”

He leans back in his chair, pulling out his phone and opening one of his apps. “Oh yeah? And what makes you so sure?”

“Other than the fact that I’m there?”

Keith snorts. “Don’t get your hopes up.”

“I’m going to ignore that.” Pidge counts off on their fingers. “One, I’m there and we haven’t hung out regularly in forever. Two, it’s an interesting spot and you like new things to challenge you.
Three, it’s fun. Four, it gets you out of your apartment hidey-hole and forces you to be social, which will help get Shiro off your back.”

Keith makes a face. “You… have a good point.”

Pidge rolls their head to the side then, giving him a knowing smirk. “I know I do. So can I count on seeing you Saturday?”

Keith sighs, sinking lower into his chair and stretching his legs out in front of him. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Keith Kogane, if you don’t come, I will come to your place and drag you out by the ear, you hear me?”

Keith snorts. “Now who sounds like a mom?”

They hang around on their phones, talking idly about anything and everything. It’s been a while since he’s been with Pidge like this, and he misses it. He hasn’t seen them since he moved in a week ago, and before that, he hadn’t seen them in weeks. In high school he had seen them nearly every day. When they had gone off to Altea University and Keith had to stay home to attend community college, well, it had been hard on him.

If he’s being honest, he’s not going to protest too much if Pidge forces him to hang out. He only hopes their friends are decent people. They have to be, if Pidge has tolerated them for a couple years now.

When it’s fifteen minutes till his next class, in a building that’s five minutes away, Keith lets Pidge drag him to the smoothie place in the union. Pidge gets something that has ‘energy’ in the title, but he supposes it’s better than shooting up their system with more coffee. Plus it has fruit and shit in it. That’s healthy, right?

Keith gets one that’s something along the lines of ‘berrylicious’, which supposedly consists of a shit ton of different berries. It’s good, and he’s content as he sips his straw. Pidge gives him another hug, this time actually wrapping their arms around his waist.

“Send me your schedule so I know when it’s okay to bug you.” They say, pulling away from him.

Keith snorts a short laugh, shoving one hand in his pocket. “Like you would let something as trivial as classes stop you from bugging me.”

Pidge puts their free hand to their chest, gasping dramatically. “Keith! How dare you insinuate that I would ever disrupt your education!”

Keith just sips on his smoothie, giving Pidge a humorless, flat stare. “Do I have to remind you how many times you got me detention in school?”

Pidge scoffs, waving their hand at him, already walking backwards. “You gotta stop living in the past, Keith! I’m a responsible adult now. Have a little faith.”

“I don’t trust you as far as I can throw you.”

“I’m pretty light, and you lift. You can probably throw me pretty far.”

Keith rolls his eyes and turns on his heel, lifting a hand over his shoulder. “Bye, Pidge.”

“I better see your ass on Saturday!”
Keith makes a noncommittal noise that he’s not sure Pidge hears. The walk to his next building isn’t bad. There’s a steady stream of people that tends to increase in the ten minutes before the hour when everyone is either getting out of classes or walking to them, but he’s able to take some of the back pathways that are less crowded.

His last class of the day is his public speaking class. He didn’t want to take this class, but it’s part of the gen ed that he wasn’t able to get at his community college. He ends up getting there before most of the class. The room is set up with a podium and screen at the front corner, with three long curved, half-circle desk rows with chairs, each progressively getting wider and going up a step, so everyone could look down at the front of the room. Like a mini auditorium for roughly thirty people. Keith takes a seat at the end of the second row, close to the door. Easy in, easy out.

He has enough time, so he pulled out his sketchbook and his graphite pencil set, shoving his headphones away into the depths of his backpack. He opens it to a blank page, opens the pencil case, and selects one. Taking a sip of his smoothie, he sets it on the edge of the table in front of him before setting to work.

He’s not sure what he wants to draw. It’s just to pass the time anyway. He sets the pencil to the page and starts doodling patterns. He loves patterns and colors and shading and the aesthetic of it all. He doodles something with a lot of lines, geographic shapes and angles, that fit and flow together. He thinks he’s probably inspired by Pidge’s current soulmarks, but he doesn’t think too much about it. He just draws.

The room fills up around him, and he ignores everyone who comes through the door, letting himself zone out. When the room seems pretty full, he looks up at the clock on the wall, only to find that it’s three. Time for class to start, but the teacher isn’t there yet. He shrugs to himself and looks back down to his sketchbook, losing himself in the lines.

The door opens again, and he expects it to be the teacher, but when he glances up and to the side, it’s only a student. He pauses in the doorway, looking a little frazzled and out of breath. As he looks around, Keith sees the moment he realizes the professor isn’t there yet. A wide grin spreads his lips, revealing white teeth as he laughs. “I made it!”

A female voice from across the room snorts and says, “You’re still late.”

The guy’s grin never falters. Instead he looks up at the source of the voice and winks. “Before the professor doesn’t count as late.”

Keith rolls his eyes, already looking away. He can already tell he’s going to be one of those guys. The kind who’s loud and talkative and attention seeking. The complete opposite of Keith. It’s nothing new, though. There’s always a couple of them in every class. He can easily tune them out.

There’s movement at the corner of his vision, as the guy spies an empty seat across the room and starts to make his way there. He steps between the first and second rows, passing right in front of Keith. He keeps his eyes down, firmly ignoring him as he’s done with everyone else in the room.

Then there’s the sound of a foot catching on a bag. The guy in front of him makes an alarmed sound, and suddenly he’s falling to the side. His hand shoots out, intent on catching his balance on Keith’s desk. Instead he hits his smoothie, and as he looks up, time seems to slow. The smoothie falls toward him, toward his sketchbook. The guy might have let out a curse, but Keith doesn’t hear him. The guy fumbles, leaning against the table and reaching out with his other hand to try to grab the cup as it falls. He fumbles and misses. Without thinking, Keith swipes his sketchbook to the side, and it goes skittering off the table, onto the floor just as the smoothie crashes down where it had been. The lid pops off and purplish red smoothie goes splattering across the table and all over
Keith’s shirt, dripping off the table to land in his lap.

The two of them are frozen in place. The guy is standing there, both hands on the desk in his mad attempt to stop the smoothie. Keith thinks he might be staring, but he doesn’t look up. He’s sitting there, hands up in the air, staring down at the mess in front of him. He thinks his mouth is hanging open in surprise. The room is deathly quiet. So quiet that he can hear the clock ticking on the wall.

He counts four seconds before the guy’s backpack slides off his shoulder, down his arm, to crash onto the table, hitting his pencil case and scattering his pencils across the table and rolling to the floor.

That snaps him out of his stupor.

Keith pushes back his chair, letting the spilled smoothie drip onto the floor instead of his lap. “Oh my god,” He mutters, still in disbelief.

“Oh my god,” The guy in front of him echoes, in a similar state of shock. And then he seems to get kicked into overdrive. “Oh my god, oh my god, I am so sorry, holy shit. ohmygod fuck.” He scrambles backwards, letting his backpack drop to the floor and stumbling into the seat behind him. The person there grunts, and he whips around. “Sorry!” Then he seems to spy something, because he’s leaning over the front row and grabbing the roll of paper towels that’s sitting on desk with all the teacher’s supplies and computer for the projector. He whips back around, ripping off several paper towels, immediately setting them on the mess.

Keith has already stood up the now empty cup and is picking up the pencils that are still on the desk and setting them back into their case.

“Hoy shit, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to— I tripped— holy fuck.”

“Just— stop.” Keith snaps, grabbing the paper towels from his hands. “You’ve done enough, just — go away. Go sit down.”

The guy holds his hands up defensively. “Hey, man, I’m just trying to help.”

Keith glares up at him, lips pursed together as his teeth clench. “I wouldn’t need help, if you had watched where you were going.”

For the first time, Keith takes a good look at him. He’s tall, but Keith doesn’t think he’s that much taller than himself. He’s tan, with short brown hair and nice angles to his face. Objectively, he’s not that bad to look at, but Keith really doesn’t want to be looking at him any longer than he has to. He’s wearing a yellow and black hoodie that looks to be about three sizes too big for him. It swallows what Keith think is a lanky frame, sleeves bunching around his fingers.

The guy’s face is currently twisting up into a frown, eyes narrowing. All traces of apology are gone. “Hey! It’s not my fault!”

Keith snorts, rolling his eyes as he tries to mop up some of the spilled drink from his shirt. “Oh yeah, it was someone else who knocked my smoothie over like an asshole.”

“I didn’t meant to! And I apologized!” He grabs for a few pencils, shoving them at the pencil case with a little more force than necessary. “Maybe you shouldn’t have put your drink so close to the edge!”

“Maybe you should watch where you’re going. Stop touching those!” Keith says, snatching some pencils out of his hand and putting them carefully in their case.
“I’m just trying to help!”
“I don’t need your help!”
“Well, too bad, you’re getting it, buddy!”

Keith grunts, rolling his eyes again as he drops to his knees, reaching out to grab for some of the pencils that had fallen. The other guy drops to his knees, too, facing him under the table. He’s reaching for some of the pencils that Keith can’t reach.

“Stop touching them! Just go sit down!” Keith snaps, glaring at him.

The guy meets his glare with one of his own. His mouth is set stubbornly. “I told you, I’m helping.”

“This wouldn’t have happened if you were just on time to class.”

“I’m not late!”

“Just because the professor isn’t here doesn’t mean you’re not late.”

“It’s not my fault! My last class was all the way across campus, and I got lost trying to find this room cause the numbers here are weird as fuck, and my beloved, caring roommate insisted on giving me his hoodie because it’s fucking frigid in this building and I’m wearing a tank top. But seriously, why is the ac cranked so high? Do they want us to get sick?”

Keith is shaking his head, picking up the last of his pencils and going up on his knees, setting them in their case. “God, you’re an idiot.” He mumbles.

The guy hears him, scowling as he goes up on his knees to glare at Keith over the table. He slams the other pencils he picked up on the table top. “Well excuuuse me, princess.”

Keith snatches the pencils and puts them away, closing his case. He raises an eyebrow as he eyes the other boy, incredulous. “The old zelda cartoon? Really?”

The guy blinks at them, then snorts a short laugh. “I’m surprised you got that reference.”

“I don’t live under a rock.”

“Coulda fooled me. I mean, seriously, the 1980’s called, they want their hairstyle back.”

Keith gives him a flat look and deadpans, “Funny.”

The guy smirks, tilting his head to the side. “Glad you’re finally seeing things my way.”

Keith sighs, shaking his head as he pushes himself to his feet. “Just go sit down before you fuck up anyone else’s day.”

The guy glares up at him, and looks like he’s about to stand, but then something else catches his eye. He turns, face going blank for a moment as he says, “You forgot something.” Keith eyes him curiously, but then the guy stands up with Keith’s sketchbook in his hands and he blanks. “What’s this? It’s yours, right?”

“Give that back!” Keith snaps loudly, lunching across the table and snatching for the black, hardcover sketchbook. The guy reacts instantly, leaning away from him and holding the book in the air, out of his reach. He stares at Keith with wide, surprised eyes. Then, seeing the look on
Keith’s face, slowly smirks.

“Whoa, calm down, asshole. Touchy, are we?”

Keith puts both hands on the tabletop, leaning forward as he glares. “Give. That. Back.”

“Why? What is it?” He holds the book in front of him, turning it this way and that. “It doesn’t have a title or anything. Kinda fancy for a school notebook.”

“It’s personal.” Keith grits out, fingers curling into fists on the table. He really doesn’t like people looking at his sketchbooks. He doesn’t even let Shiro or Pidge look through them. They’re just… personal. He shows some of his art to people, but most are just for him.

Well… him and his soulmate, he guesses.

The guy’s lips curl into a devilish smirk, his eyes glinting. “Oh, ho ho ho. Personal, huh?” He holds the sketchbook in one hand, waving it in front of Keith as his other hand goes to his hip. “This is a diary, isn’t it?”

Keith doesn’t look away from his eyes, even as he sweeps the book back and forth in front of him. “What?” He deadpans.

“A diary! It’s totally your diary.”

“It is **not**.”

“Pfff, sure. Why else would you be so touchy about it?”

“It’s none of your business. Now give it back. It’s mine.” Keith says, trying his hardest to keep a cool head about this. He holds out a hand and waits. He’s pretty sure all of his patience stems from the fact that they’re in a classroom full of other students. If there weren’t so many eyes on him, he’s not sure he would be able to stop himself from lunging across the table and tackling the other boy to the ground.

Pidge isn’t the only reason he had detention a lot in high school.

The guy ignores him, turning to his side to lean a hip against Keith’s table. He shifts the book between both hands. “Hmmm, I wonder what’s inside. What secrets does your mullet hold?” He puts his hands on the front and back like he’s going to open it.

“**Don’t.**” Keith lunches for it again, but the boy just pulls it out of his reach.

He turns to face Keith. “Then apologize.”

“For what?” Keith practically shouts. He’s seething. He can feel his face flushing with warmth. The hand resting against the table is curled in a fist so tight that his nails bite into the leather of his gloves.

The guy glares at him, smirk fading. He puts a hand on his hip, leaning forward slightly. His lips are pursed into a frown that Keith thinks is half a pout. “For not accepting my apology!”

“That doesn’t make any sense!”

“Your **face** doesn’t make any sense!”

“Oh, my god, you’re an idiot.”
The boy crosses his arms over his chest. “I did not help you just so you could insult me.”

“You knocked all my shit over to begin with!”

“Well, maybe you should be more grateful I stopped to help at all! You’re being an ass about this!”

“I’d be grateful if I never have to look at you again!”

“Yeah, well same to you, buddy.”

Someone clears their throat. Loudly. And both of them jumped. Keith whipped around to see an older woman standing in the doorway, looking at them both with a raised brow. “Are you two done?” She asks dryly.

“Oh, yes!” The guy says, recovering first. He straightens and slaps Keith’s sketchbook on the table. “I was just returning this guy’s notebook! Now I’ll just, uh, go find a seat?” He’s already grabbing his backpack, voice trailing off in uncertainty as he steps a few steps back.

She looks at him. “And you are?”

“Name’s Lance.”

“Well then, please take your seat, Lance. And try not to disrupt the other students anymore.”

He laughs nervously, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yes, professor.” And then his back is to them as he scuttles along the row to the empty seat in the back, head hung low and shoulders raised.

“And your name?”

Keith turns to find her looking at him. She still looks unamused, but there seems to be a more… sympathetic softness about her when she addresses Keith.

“Keith Kogane.”

“Well, Keith, why don’t you go to the bathroom to clean up while I take role?”

He nods, looking down at himself and the wet stains across his shirt and the front of his pants. He shuffles out of the room, face on fire, and does his best to do damage control in the bathroom. It’s going to be impossible to hide the wet marks. He just hopes it doesn’t stain. He’ll have to change before going to dinner with Shiro. Sighing, he goes back to the room.

He spends the rest of the class time staring at the professor and pointedly ignoring the Lance kid. The entire time, he can practically feel a gaze boring into the back of his head, and it makes the hair on his neck stand on end. As soon as the professor dismisses them, he’s packed up and the first one out the door.

He pulls out his phone, shoving his headphones over his ears before blasting his music and heading for the parking lot where he’d parked his bike. He texts Shiro while he walks.

**Keith**

> This is the worst first day ever
> The worst, Shiro

**Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)**

> What happened?
Keith
> Some asshole spilled my smoothie all over me in class

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Aww, I’m sure it was an accident

Keith
> He was a dick about it

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Were you rude to him first?

Keith
> Why do you automatically assume it’s my fault??

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Because I’ve known you since you were eight years old
> Were you rude to him after he tried to apologize?

Keith
> I can’t believe this

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Are you still up for dinner?

Keith
> We’re stopping for smoothies after

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Alright, but you’re telling me all about it

Keith
> Ugh

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Big bro is here for you :)

Keith
> UGH

Chapter End Notes

PLEASE DO NOT REPOST THE ART FROM THIS FIC

Instead, hop on over here and reblog it from the artist herself HERE

Witty's Tumblr (author)
Sora's Tumblr (artist)
Bring Us Together

Chapter Summary

In which Keith plays quidditch for the first time, Lance isn't too happy to see him there, and the two of them have to play nice for Pidge's sake. Well, mostly, anyway.

Chapter Notes

Holy crow, the responses to this fic so far have been overwhelming and phenomenal. I'm so completely blown away. I was not expecting that kind of response at all. I'm so, so glad you guys are on board with this and are enjoying it. I'm very excited to write this fic, and I'm so happy that you're all along for the ride. I don't have words for how much every single one of your comments has meant to me. It's incredibly encouraging and validating. Thank you all so so much ;u;

This chapter has so much quidditch. Nearly every single thing about it was drawn from and inspired by my experiences and those of my friends. It was incredibly fun to write, so I hope you enjoy it! And don't worry, you don't need any quidditch experience to understand what's going on (Sora has none, and she enjoyed reading it, so there's that)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Lance, put your damn shoes back on.” Pidge says. They’re standing next to him, one hand on their hip and the other holding up their phone as they look through it.

“But Piiiidge!” Lance whines from his seat on the small grass hill that slopes up toward the student union. He throws himself backwards, sprawling out on his back with his arms splayed out above his head. With one foot digging into the ground, he lifts his hips up and points the toes of his other foot. He gets his leg as high into the air as he can and bends it as close to Pidge’s face as he can reach. Given the length of his legs and Pidge’s short stature, it’s not a bad attempt. “Pidge, look at it!”

Pidge makes a face and slaps his foot away without looking up from their phone. “Yes, I’ve seen your feet. We’ve all seen your feet. Now put your damn shoes on.”

He throws both feet up, legs straight and toes pointed, and throws his arms down, slamming his fists on the ground by his hips. “No!”

“Don’t be a child.”

“My feet are a masterpiece right now! It would be a crime to cover them up! A down right crime.”

And his feet are, in his opinion, a masterpiece. Though it has little to do with his feet and more to do with the soulmark paintings that decorate them. Rich browns that blend with his skin tone cover the bottoms of his feet and his toes, giving way to ropes and tangles of vines in several shades of green and yellow. They crawl up the tops of his feet to twine around his ankles, dotted with half
bloomed flower buds of white and red and purple. On the outer bone of his right ankle is a single fully bloomed flower, petals unfurled and curling along his skin.

It had happened yesterday, around eight o’clock. He and Hunk had been having roomie movie night, which Pidge crashed, per usual, as their unofficial roommate. They live in the same dorm building, two floors up. It’s the brand new honors dorm, and although Lance isn’t an honors student, he got in as Hunk’s roommate.

Lance had been sitting on one of their large beanbag chairs, popcorn bowl nestled in his lap, when he had felt the tell tale tingling of a phantom brush across his skin. He had wasted no time stripping off his socks and propping his feet up so he could watch his soulmate work.

He wasn’t sure what emotions to be expecting, not after he had heard nothing but silence from his SM after the chaotic anxiousness of his fire sleeve. He had held his breath, waiting with tight anticipation as the beginnings of another’s emotions trickled through him. They had surprisingly been… peaceful.

Peaceful and content and oddly… serene. Not that his soulmate has never been happy or at ease before, but it was such a quick turn around from the previous feelings he had gotten from them. He guessed whatever had them anxious had gone well.

Lance had found himself unable to contain his grin as he sat there, wiggling his toes and his feet as the warm contentment slid through him, wrapping him up in a cocoon of tranquility.

“Uuuuh, what’s up, Lance?” Hunk had asked, eyeing him from his seat at his desk.

Lance had hummed, holding a foot in the air so Hunk could see the color spreading across his skin. “They’re happy.” He had said simply, and Hunk had given him a soft, knowing smile.

Even Pidge had leaned closer from their nest in the other beanbag to watch the design spread up his foot to wrap around his ankle. Lance had practically glowed with pride at the look of awe on his friends’ faces. It wasn’t often they got to witness his SM’s work in action.

God fuck, he’s so damn proud of his soulmate.

When they had finished painting and the foreign feelings had faded, slipping out of his chest and leaving an echo of his own happiness in their wake, he had reached for a pen and per his usual routine, he scribbled a few words across the inside of his wrist.

Looking at his feet now, in the afternoon light and seeing all the colors really come to life, he wonders if his soulmate has ticklish feet. If they do, then they suffered a lot for their art. If they don’t… well, that’s just not fair.

“Lance,” Hunk says from Pidge’s other side. He’s standing with his hands on his hips, surveying the quad. They’re all there early. About forty minutes before practice is set to start. But Pidge and Hunk want to make sure they have time to set up before everyone shows up. Something about making a good impression and making everyone think they’re on top of these things. “Your feet are beautiful. Your soulmate is an artistic genius. Their newest creation is amazing. Now would you please put your shoes on?”

Lance crosses his arms over his chest, sticking his lip out in an exaggerated pout, but Hunk isn’t looking at him. He watches as his best friend’s face lights up with a bright smile and he points. “There they are!”

Lance props himself up on his elbows to follow Hunk’s gaze, and his face instantly brightens.
“Coran!” He can always count on Coran to earnestly praise his SM’s work.

“About time.” Pidge grumbles, shoving their phone back in their pocket. “We still need to make sure all the hoops are still functional, and the balls probably need to be inflated. I hope they remembered to wash the pinnies and the headbands—”

Lance stops listening to Pidge’s rambling as he leaps to his feet and starts off down the small hill and across the quad to where Coran and Allura are making their way toward him. “Coran! Allura!” He calls again. The two of them look up, grinning as they each lift a hand to wave. Allura’s carrying a collection of pvc pipes and hoops in her arms and a ball bag slung over her shoulder. Coran cradled an armful of plain, straight pvc pipes and with a large backpack behind him.

Their smiles falter when they realize Lance isn’t stopping. He sees the moment Coran realizes what’s about to happen. The man’s face drops and he hears him mutter a soft, “Oh, drat.” Before he unceremoniously drops his armload of pvc pipes. Lance doesn’t slow and, a little ungracefully, leaps at Coran.

He catches him, just as Lance knew he would. He’s used to Lance’s antics. They all are. He stumbles a bit, having to adjust his balance and bend his knees a bit to accommodate Lance’s weight.

“Hello to you, too, Lance.” He says, a little surprised but no less cheerful. “I’d say I missed you, too, but we just saw you yesterday at work.”

“Lance, what’re you doing?” Allura says, a little bit of a sigh in her voice but she’s smiling. They’re both dressed for physical activity, and Allura’s ridiculous mane is pulled back into a thick ass bun. He’s not sure how she does that. Magic, probably. How else can she pull all that back with only one hair tie?

“Look what my soulmate did!” He announces without preamble, thrusting his foot out toward Allura. He’s still held in Coran’s arms, princess style, which is fine by him because no shame in being carried by a bro.

Coran and Allura both lean over, eyes drawn to the masterpiece tattooed across Lance’s feet. They make all the appropriate sounds of awe and interest, and he grins, preening under the attention.

“This is what he’s talking about. This is the kind of attention his SM deserves.”

“It’s very beautiful, Lance.” Allura says.

“Impeccable work, as always. I’m particularly fond of the attention to detail in the shadows of the vines.”

Lance grins. “I know, right? And check out the flower!” He twists his leg so they can see the pedals unfurling on his ankle.

“Astounding.” Coran says in a way that isn’t the least bit condescending. He says it like he’s looking over a piece of art in a museum, taking it all in, appreciating it, analyzing it. And Lance is a damn proud canvas for his SM’s work. “It looks to be some sort of Asiatic lily. The cappuccino variety, if I’m not mistaken.”

Lance’s smile fades, and he eyes him with one eyebrow raised. “How do you even know that?”

Coran gives him a small, mysterious smile, eyes sparkling as they crinkle at the edges. “You know, just picking things up here and there.”
Lance’s eyes narrow slightly. “That sounds fake, but okay.”

Allura rolls her eyes, adjusting the poles in her arms. “Coran is basically a walking encyclopedia. I doubt he ever forgets any random fact he learns.”

“Nope!” Coran says brightly, lifting his chin. “I’m a damn fine addition to any trivia team.”

Lance gasps and throws a hand up in the air. “Trivia Tuesdays! We should do it!”

“Not to break up the party, but we’ve got a practice to get ready for.” Pidge says as they finally make it to where Lance has stopped Coran and Allura’s progress across the quad.

“Right-o!” Coran says before proceeding to drop Lance without a second thought. He yelps, but manages to catch himself before falling onto the pile of pvc pipes at their feet. He glares at Coran, but the man just grins back, hands on his hips.

“Lance, now that you’ve shown everyone, can you please put your shoes back on?” Hunk says, coming up to stand next to him. “This really isn’t something you should do barefoot. Your feet could get stepped on, and half of us wear cleats, and I really don’t want to have to take you to the hospital. What if you break your foot and have to walk around with crutches and a boot? Man, this campus is really hilly and that would not be fun. What if—“

“Hunk, buddy!” Lance says, cutting him off and slinging an arm around his shoulder. He gives him a confident smirk, one hand on his hip. “It’s no problem. I’ve totally played barefoot before.”

Hunk gives him a flat look and raises one finger. “Yeah, but that was before we got more serious. When only like, seven people showed up and we couldn’t even play a real scrimmage.”

Lance snorts, grinning. “Remember our first quaffle? The Dora the Explorer dodgeball?”

“That one only lasted a semester,” Pidge says, crossing their arms over their chest as they grin. “After that we had the blue Go, Diego, Go ball.”

“And our bludgers were different colors.” Coran adds, stroking his mustache, an amused glint to his eyes. “And the yellow one was smaller than the others.”

“I liked the yellow one,” Pidge says, holding up a hand and clenching open air. “It fit my hands better.”

“Remember our old hoops?” Allura asks.

Lance throws back his head to laugh, leaning heavily on Hunk’s shoulder. “Oh, man, how can we ever forget those janky things? The brooms inside traffic cones with hula hoops duct taped on!”

“Hey, for beginners with nearly no money or idea what we were doing, that was genius engineering.” Hunk says, grinning as he crosses his arms over his chest.

“We save so much time now that we don’t have to use half a roll of tape to get the hoops set up every time.”

“Sometimes I miss the traffic cones.” Coran says wistfully, tilting his head.

Allura nods. “We were well known for them. It was very… unique.”

“Yeah, no one else thought of using traffic cones to hold the poles up.” Lance says, holding up a fist for Hunk to bump. He does, of course, cause Hunk is his bro.
“No one probably thought of it because traffic cones can be expensive.” Allura points out, giving Pidge a knowing look, lips quirking at the corners.

“Yeah, but not everyone has a Pidge.” Lance says, and they all turn their gazes to the smallest member of their group.

With one arm crossed over their chest, Pidge idly inspects the nails of one hand. They glance up, looking around to meet everyone’s amused stares. “What? It’s not like we got caught.”

“That’s because *I*,” Lance lifts his chin, putting a hand to his chest. “Am an amazing get away driver.”

“If I remember correctly, you were screaming the entire time.” Pidge says, leaning forward to look up at him over the top of their glasses. “Something about ‘PIDGE HURRY UP OH MY GOD WE’RE GOING TO GET CAUGHT OH MY GOD GET BACK IN THE CAR HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO GRAB A TRAFFIC CONE ANYWAY’ and then a bunch of wordless screams as we drove away.”

Lance frowns, eyes narrowing as he points at them. “Hey! I don’t sound like that!”

“Sorry, dude, but you did.”

Lance turns his glare to Hunk. “Hunk, as my best friend and roommate, you’re supposed to keep these things secret.”

“Pidge was *there*, dude.”

“I wish we could have been.” Allura says, chuckling. “Sounds like a crazy night.”

“Indeed! The heist of a century!” Coran says, throwing up both hands and gesturing wildly as he continues in his best announcer voice, “Three freshman at Altea University wreak havoc in the night in their wild hit-and-run kidnapping of six helpless traffic cones! Coincidentally, Altea’s first quidditch club is started up within weeks of the incident with six quidditch hoops utilizing traffic cones of unknown origins.”

Lance sighs wistfully, crossing his arms over his chest and tilting his head to the side. “That was a fun night.”

“Lance’s driving was so crazy that Hunk nearly puked.” Pidge says, snickering at Lance’s glare.

“Hunk always gets carsick! Plus he was nervous! That’s not *my* fault! I think I did good seeing as my *look-out* was leaning out the passenger window the whole time.”

“But, in my defense,” Hunk says, holding up both hands, pointing both index fingers upward before pointing them at Lance and Pidge. “I didn’t *actually* end up puking that night. Crying, on the other hand? Crying, I did. But it was a very stressful situation and I had a lot of adrenaline and it’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

Lance pats his arm. “No shame, buddy. We even got away with it! Despite *someone* taking *forever* to actually get each cone.”

Pidge shrugs, adjusting their glasses and waving a hand vaguely. “Those things are heavy and like, half my size. Besides, like you said, we didn’t get caught.”

“Do you still have the first cone you stole?” Allura asks, and Pidge grins.
“What? Rover? Of course, I do. He’s in my room right now. I can’t get rid of Rover.”

“Yeah, he’s family.” Hunk says.

“We’ve got too much history.” Lance adds.

“I’m surprised you didn’t bring him.” Coran says, looking to Pidge. “You usually do to events like this.”

Pidge only shrugs, scratching their cheek. “I thought it might be best to leave him in my dorm for now. You know, gotta make sure the new kids don’t think we’re too weird right off the bat.”

“Yeah, gotta keep some surprises for later.” Lance steps to the side to throw an arm over Pidge’s shoulders, pulling them to him and rubbing his knuckles in their hair. “All the weird in this tiny body is too much to unleash at once.”

Pidge grunts, slapping his hand away and pushing him off of them. Lance just laughs, letting them go. Pidge doesn’t do much to smooth down their hair. It’s usually in disarray anyway. They glare at him. “Speaking of weirdos, go put your damn shoes on.”

He crosses his arms over his chest, protesting more out of principle than anything else. “You can’t make me.”

“Lance,” Hunk sighs.

“I would highly recommend it, Lance.” Coran adds, but at least he has the decency to sound sympathetic.

“Why’re you all ganging up on me? They’re my feet!”

“Lance,” Allura says flatly, using her manager voice. When he looks at her, she’s giving him the most unamused look imaginable. It’s one she uses a lot around him, now that he’s thinking about it. “Go put your shoes on.”

“Ugh!” He throws his hands up in the air, turning on his heel and stomping back to where he had left his things. “Fine, mom!”

He sits on the hill and pulls his bag toward him, digging out his socks and cleats and shoving his normal shoes inside. Saying a silent farewell to the SM’s art, he pulls on his knee high, bright yellow socks. They’re a great match to his official snitch shorts and shirt, both of which are a matching shade of bright ass yellow. The shorts only go halfway down his thigh and under them he’s wearing black legging shorts that cut off a little lower, peeking out from beneath them.

He’s not ashamed of his legs, and he used to wear his snitch shorts without the leggings, despite Pidge’s loud groans and protests. Unfortunately, when the shorts are fairly loose, and people are constantly grabbing at the snitch hanging off the back of his waistband, sometimes they grab his shorts. And sometimes they pull those shorts down, or at least far enough that parts of him can be exposed. That once happened at a tournament, and after the team got an eyeful of Lance’s bare ass, no matter how great that ass is, he was forced to agree to wear secondary shorts under his snitch shorts.

Honestly, his outfit is obnoxiously loud as hell, but that’s how snitches are supposed to be. And as the team’s only official, certified snitch, he wants to make a good first impression.

On the flat part of the quad below, the others are starting to set up the hoops. It’s a much easier
process than it used to be. They just have to slide the poles into the base, adjust to make sure it’s balanced, make sure the hoops aren’t bent, and done. Simple. Much easier than struggling with duct tape.

When he’s done tying his cleats, he jumps up and heads over to where the bags had been dropped in the middle of the field. He starts the process of pulling out the balls and making sure they were properly inflated, but still deflated just enough that they can get a grip on them.

They’ve upgraded since their days of using cheap, Dora the Explorer dodge balls. They now have proper red dodge balls for bludges and an actual volley ball for the quaffle. Just like they’re supposed to. They even have a spare set of snitch shorts for others who want to try out snitching.

Once he’s done, he stands, palming the quaffle in his hands.

The brooms are at his feet. And, yeah, okay, they’re not really brooms, but they serve the same function. Back when they started out, they all used actual brooms. It kind of added to the whole atmosphere. And some people still bring their own brooms. Everyone has preferences. But the team has upgraded to pvc pipes cut to the rulebook regulated length and capped at the ends. No bristles, no hassle. Easy, light weight, and just so much easier to work with than actual brooms.

He picks one up and pulls his arm back. “Hey, Hunk!” He calls, catching his roommate’s attention. He’s standing near the hoops on one end of the field, talking with Coran. They both turn to look at him, and he launches the broom towards them. He thinks that getting the thing halfway to them after practically lobbing a stick from half field is pretty good. Neither Hunk nor Coran look impressed though.

They look at the fallen broom, then back up to Lance, identical curious looks on their faces. Lance chooses to ignore that.

He holds up the quaffle, other hand resting on his hip as he cocks it to the side. “Let’s go, buddy. You and me! Let’s see how rusty you’ve gotten.”

Hunk laughs. “Oooh, you’re on!” He jogs forward a little to pick up the room and backtracks to stand in front of the hoops, broom held in his left hand between his legs and right hand up in the air. He smirks, game face on. He can always count on good old Hunk to goof off with him before practice starts.

And by goof off, he actually means warm up. This can totally count as warming up for practice. It’s legit.

“Toss me a broom, too, would you, Lance?” Coran calls, and Lance does just that, tossing him a bludger while he’s at it.

When the two of them are positioned in front of the hoops, Lance grabs a broom for himself and holds it between his legs with his left hand, quaffle held at his side with his right. He’s glad he has big enough hands that he can just palm the ball and keep a good grip on it. Poor Allura and Pidge have to resort to cradling it against them until they’re ready to throw.

Lance faces the two of them and smirks. “Ready or not, here I come.”

He takes off down the field, the familiar burst of energy sparking in his veins as he sprints on the balls of his feet. As awkward as running with a broom between his legs sounds, it’s surprisingly easy and not nearly as awkward as he had expected the first time he tried it. Now it’s become second nature and he barely feels it. It’s really not much more than something to keep his left hand
occupied, forcing him to play one handed, and something to make him a bigger target to beaters.

He slows as he nears the hoops, facing off against Coran as the other man steps forward, brandishing his bludger. Lance doesn’t stop as Coran comes toward him, and they go through a series of stutter steps and feints before Coran actually throws his bludger. He does so with a loud “Hyah!” and a lunge, throwing almost like he might throw a bowling ball and aiming low for Lance’s legs.

He jumps automatically, spreading his legs wide and thrusting the quaffle in his hand downward, deflecting the bludger between his legs to bounce harmlessly on the ground behind him.

“Blast it!” Coran snaps, and Lance flashes him a confident grin before turning his attention to Hunk.

Hunk is hunched over, free arm held up and out as he tries to make himself as big as possible. He watches Lance warily, eyes flickering between his face and the ball. Lance fakes left, then steps right. Hunk is right there with him. When his hand shoots out to block the edge hoop, Lance jumps, looping a shot at the taller, center hoop.

His face lights up and he let’s out a victorious, “Whoop!”

Then Hunk’s hand changes direction, and he easily snatches the ball right out of the air.

“Awww, come on!” Lance groans, shoulders slumping. “That was a perfect shot!”

Hunk laughs, straightening. “Sorry, man, but you go for that shot like, all the time. You’re going to need new moves if you want to get past me.”

“I am not that predictable!”

“With your first shot of every practice? Yeah, you are.”

“Just—! Give me the ball. Let’s go again.”

Hunk obligingly tosses him the quaffle and Lance jogs back to the center of the designated pitch.

They pass the time like that, warming up but mostly just having fun. Lance and Coran face off, each trying to psych the other out with a variety of dramatic poses, moves, and sounds. He manages to hit Lance half the time, but Lance manages to dodge or deflect the other half. He swears he’s mostly hit only because Coran cheats and makes him laugh. The times he doesn’t get hit, he continues on to face off against Hunk.

Now, Lance is a good chaser. A damn good chaser. Aside from Allura, he holds the record for the most points scored on the team. Yes, he’s been keeping track. And most of Allura’s points are earned through brilliant passes made by him anyway.

The problem is simple: Hunk knows him too well. Hunk can read him like a damn book. Which makes facing off against him like this very hard, but very entertaining. He tries to put Hunk with the same antics that work against Coran, but it has the same fifty-fifty result.

“Come on, Hunk! One-v-one me, bro!” Lance calls out after the fifth time in a row that Coran has tagged him out on his way to the hoops. He holds his arms out wide as he issues his challenge, quaffle held in one hand and legs crossed to hold the broom up between his thighs.

Hunk mirrors his stance, legs crossed and arms held out wide. “Come at me, bro!”
“Step aside, Coran!” Lance tries to wave him off.

Left hand on his broom and bludger wedged in the crook of his left arm against his body, Coran twists the edges of his mustache with his free hand. He tilts his chin down, grinning up and Lance. “No can do, my boy! A good defensive beater never leaves his keeper alone to defend the home soil!”

“Ugh!” Lance lets his head loll backwards dramatically as his arms sag to his sides. “Fine! But you asked for it! Get ready for the patented Lance McClain Charge!”

The Lance McClain Charge doesn’t work. He tries to run the ball straight into the hoop, but he’s tackled to the ground by Hunk.

“Oh god, dude, get off of me!” He says, but he’s laughing as he pushes on Hunk, who’s draped across his midsection.

“No can do, man. You tried to attack my hoops. This is my revenge.” Hunk doesn’t budge.

It’s then, while Hunk his fighting off Lance’s pushes with his own hands, that Lance notices the marks on his forearm. His lips curl into a wide grin. “Awww, did your soulmate wish you luck today? That’s so cute. Is that a doodle of you by quidditch hoops?” He coos, and Hunk’s face drops, a flush creeping through his dark complexion.

He slaps a hand over his forearm and sits up. “No! Maybe… yes. I told her it was our first practice today.”

Now freed, Lance sits up, leaning forward to lean into Hunk’s arm. “Adorable.”

Hunk shoves him, but he’s smiling. “Shut up, dude!”

“Is that a heart on your neck?” Lance reaches up to poke at the spot where the mark looks tattooed into his skin. It’s dark enough that it had to have been recent.

Hunk slaps his hand away and stands up, brushing off his legs. “I’m leaving.”

“Aw, come on, dude! Don’t tell me you’re embarrassed!”

“Leaving!” Hunk strides away, arms comically stiff at his sides. He refuses to look at Lance, but he knows he’s blushing.

Lance just grins after him. He thinks it’s adorable that Hunk and his soulmate are the epitome of nauseatingly sweet, and Hunk knows it, but the big guy gets incredibly flustered whenever his SM’s marks are pointed out. Usually it’s Lance pointing them out, seeing as most people find it impolite to just go around pointing out soulmarks, no matter how obvious they are. But they’re friends, and Lance is convinced that the main reason Hunk doesn’t mind is because he knows Lance isn’t actually making fun of him. Picking on him, yeah, but it’s all in good fun.

And he knows that beneath it all, Lance is just envious that he doesn’t have something like that with his own soulmate. If his soulmate is going to be stubbornly quiet until the day they meet, he’s just going to have to live out all his cute romantic fantasies vicariously through Hunk.

Once they do meet, however, Hunk is gonna see who the real cutest couple is!

Lance leans back on his hands and stretches his legs out in front of him, looking over the quad. People have started to gather, so he supposes it’s getting close to show time. The members from
last year are hanging around, talking to each other and messing with the equipment like they had been doing. The new people are easy to spot. They’re just hovering by the edges of the pitch, looking about as awkward as humanly possible.

He’s looking them over, trying to determine which ones he thinks will stay and which ones will give up, when he sees a face that he wishes isn’t so familiar.

“Oh, great, what’s he doing here?” Lance says aloud, though it’s mostly to himself. He’s surprised when someone actually answers.

“Who are you speaking of?”

Lance jumps as Coran comes to stand next to him, broom in one hand and bludger in the other.

“That guy! The one with the mullet!” Lance says, pointing.


Lance has spent a lot of time glaring at the back of his head and coming up with nicknames.

Coran follows his gesture, and his eyes narrow for a second before he brightens. He tries to snap his fingers, but it’s an awkward attempt when his hands are full. “Oh! That must be the old friend Pidge has been talking about.”

Lance straightens, head whipping around to look at him, mouth agape. “What?”

“And Lance follows his gesture, eyes finding Keith once again. Lance had been hoping that he would just pass by them entirely, just another student walking through the quad. But no, not only has he walked straight toward the quidditch pitch, but he’s bypassed the obligatory awkward newbie area in order to head straight for Pidge. He watches in growing horror as Pidge grins, jogging over to give his arch nemesis a hug. A hug!. Lance has never been more offended in his life.

“Pidge has been excited about him coming to this university for ages.” Coran is saying, but Lance can barely hear him over the sound of sirens that’re filling his head, leaving a ringing in his ears.

“They told me the other day that they had convinced him to attend our first practice! I, for one, am excited to finally meet the lad. The more the merrier, I say! What’d you think, Lance?”

Lance opens his mouth, but the only thing that comes out is a strangled noise that sounds like a cross between a whine, a scream, and a groan.
Don’t test me, Kogane
Come make an ass out of yourself with us
It’s fun I promise
I thought you liked having a stick between your legs

Keith
Wow
Just... wow
Calm down I just parked my bike and I’m on my way over
It’s at the quad right? Between the student union and the cafeteria?

Tiny Evil Bird (Pidge)
Yup, can’t miss us

Keith
How did you even manage to reserve half of the quad? Can you even do that?

Tiny Evil Bird (Pidge)
HA
You think we reserved it
We’ve just been doing this for three years now
People clear out when they see us setting up
It’s chill

Keith
I’m almost there

Keith clicks off his phone and shoves it into the pocket of the jacket draped over his arm. Probably not a good idea to keep it in the loose pockets of his shorts when he’s running around. As he rounds the English building, the quad comes into view and his eyes immediately zero in on the quidditch team.

It’s… kind of hard to miss them. Half of the flat part of the quad is taken up by them. There’s three hoops of three different sizes set up on either side of the makeshift quidditch pitch, and the sidelines are marked loosely by short orange sport cones. Several people are gathered on the pitch, standing in small groups. Some of them are running around with balls in their hands and sticks between their legs. Others are standing awkwardly at the sidelines, and Keith can tell right away that they’re new.

His pace slows as he nears the field, eyes scanning the people there. The fingers of his right hand curl, absently stroking his palm through the somewhat sticky material of his sports gloves. He had gotten them recently. Pidge told him some players prefer gloves when they play to get a better grip on the balls. Keith thought they would be a good investment. Probably better than his normal gloves anyway.

And he just... he doesn’t want to go around without any gloves at all. It makes him feel exposed and vulnerable, and that’s not a feeling he enjoys. Some people don’t think twice about showing their soulmarks. Some people even go so far as to show them off. Keith would much rather keep them hidden, even to go so far as pretending they don’t exist.

He knows so little about him, and yet his soulmate is his biggest secret and his biggest weakness. He prefers to keep their interactions to himself.

And that usually means hiding his hands.
He realizes what he’s doing, stroking this morning’s pick up line, and shoves his hand into his pocket to stop himself. It’s a nervous tick he has, but it’s not one he’s proud of, and it’s one he’s been trying to kick for years.

Which is hard when he gets flirtatious words written across his palm every morning accompanied with the general warmth of uninhibited affection that trickles into his chest and fills all the cracks before fading. He can’t deny that it’s comforting, and he hates that. And somehow, even when those feelings aren’t present, he finds himself reaching out to the marks to help settle his nerves.

*A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.*

It isn’t even a pick up line, strictly speaking, but his SM has gotten creative over years of doing this. “It isn’t even a rose…” He had muttered to himself, frowning as he had watched the words appear across his palm in a familiar messy handwriting. It’s only been a couple hours, and he knows if he removes his gloves, the words will still be there, sunken into his skin in blue ink. A slightly darker shade than the already fading words, *I love it! Glad you’re feeling better* that had appeared on his right wrist the night before when he had finished painting his feet.

It doesn’t take him long to spot Pidge. They’re standing on one end of the quidditch pitch, talking to a tall girl with dark skin and strikingly white hair. He changes course to start toward them, ignoring the curious looks he gets.

Pidge is looking around, hands on their hips, no doubt looking for him. They finally notice him just seconds after he steps through the crowd on the sidelines and onto the pitch. “Keith!” And suddenly they’re running.

He barely has time to brace himself before he has an arm full of Pidge and the air is being knocked out of his lungs. The hug is a lot more hug-like than the last couple times he’s seen them. They seem a lot more awake, too. There’s fewer soulmarks on their arms, and the bags under their eyes have receded to what he’s come to see as standard for Pidge.

“Hey.”

Pidge pulls out of the hug and smirks up at him, eyes practically dancing. “Hey, yourself.” They say before punching him in the arm. It’s not hard enough to hurt, but damn if their knuckles aren’t boney as hell. “You’re late.”

He rubs his arm, but he can’t bring himself to be mad. “I’m pretty sure I’m on time?”

“Actually, you’re five minutes early.” The woman with the white hair steps up to them, smiling brightly as she holds out a hand. “I’m Allura. Pidge has told me so much about you.”

Keith gives her a small smile and takes her hand. She has a firm but gentle handshake, and Keith can already tell he’s going to like her. “All terrible things, I’m sure.”

“Naturally,” She says, grinning as she releases his hand and they both look to Pidge.

They have their arms crossed over their chest as they tilt their head, smirking up at Keith. “I may have complained about you being late.”

He raises an eyebrow. “I thought we established that I was on time?”

“Early, even.” Allura adds.

Pidge shakes her head. “Nope, by quidditch time, you’re late.”
Allura crosses one arm over her chest, tapping her chin with one delicate finger as she tilts her head to the side. “Actually, by *quidditch* time, he’s very early.” She looks to Keith, a small smile casually in place on her lips. It looks so natural on her, and quite honestly, she’s beautiful. But there’s also something about her that just speaks of strength. He can see why Pidge is friends with her. “Quidditch is always notoriously late.” She explains. “I’m not sure how it’s such a wide occurring phenomenon, but you will never go to a quidditch practice or tournament anywhere and have it start on time. Even the World Cup always starts late.”

“Okay, then he’s late by Pidge time.” Pidge says, waving a hand to dismiss Allura’s argument.

“Pidge time is a cruel and unpredictable mistress.” Allura says solemnly, smile still in place.

Keith snorts. “You have no idea.”

“Okay, so now that you’ve met Allura, you need to meet the rest of the squad.” Pidge says, putting their hands on their hips as they turn around, looking over the field.

“Shouldn’t you be, I don’t know, setting up for practice?”

Pidge waves him off. “We’re practically ready anyway. And besides, we would have had more time to do introductions if *someone* had gotten here earlier.”

“Careful, Pidge, your salt is showing.”

“You make it sound like I was trying to hide it.”

“Over there.” Allura says, pointing across the field. “Hunk’s making his way over here now. Coran and Lance are still by the other hoops.”

Frowning, they cup their hands around their mouth and breathes in deep before shouting, “CORAN! LANCE! COME OVER HERE!”

Keith follows their gazes, eyes settling on a big guy headed across the pitch toward them. He’s built like a tank, and Keith finds his eyebrows raising. A bright green headband that seems a little out of place is wrapped around his forehead. He’s smiling wide, eyes lit up as he makes eye contact with Keith, and his attention is warm and welcoming. He lifts a hand to wave, and Keith automatically lifts one in response, feeling incredibly awkward.

His gaze slips past him to the two Pidge was yelling at across the field. A man with bright orange hair and a matching impressive mustache is waving at them. Keith can see his grin from here. He only makes it two steps before he’s turning to look at someone sitting on the ground. He’s wearing an all yellow outfit that, quite honestly, hurts Keith’s eyes. They seem to be arguing, the guy on the ground sitting with his shoulders pulled high and arms crossed over his chest. Keith watches curiously. There’s something strangely familiar about—

“LANCE, I SWEAR TO GOD, GET YOUR ASS OVER HERE!” Pidge yells, jerking Keith out of his thoughts. He winces, leaning away from Pidge a fraction and lifting a hand to rub his ear.

Allura smiles at him sympathetically and whispers, “You get used to it.”

Keith returns her smile before his eyes trail back across the field. The guy in yellow is looking up now, and it’s hard to tell from across the field, but Keith is pretty sure he’s looking right at him. He looks away, however, when the man with a mustache helps him to his feet. They start across the field then, the man, Coran, a little more enthusiastically than the one Pidge had called Lance. He’s still got his arms crossed over his chest, and as they get closer, Keith can make out his face
scrunched up in a scowl, and—

Oh, *fuck*, no. Pidge’s Lance is *that* Lance?

The same arrogant *asshole* who had spilled his smoothie all over him the first day of classes? The same *asshole* who wouldn’t take a goddamn hint and just *go away*? Why the ever living hell is Pidge friends with *him*?

Keith doesn’t have much time to dwell on it though, because the big guy is already standing in front of him, extending his hand and effectively blocking out the other two walking across the pitch. “Hey, you must be Keith. I’m Hunk. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

Keith gives him small smile because he honestly seems nice enough. The guy is practically *oozing* friendliness. And for the moment, he forgets about the clench in his gut at seeing *that* Lance *here*. And the implications of what that means.

It means he’s going to have to play *nice* with him. Or, at least, nice enough by Pidge’s book. Ugh.

“Nice to meet you, too.” Keith hears himself say, but he’s barely paying attention to his own words.

Hunk crosses his arms over his chest, beaming. “We’re glad you could come out and join us. It’s a lot of fun, especially with friends. And any friend of Pidge’s is a friend of ours.” He says, nodding toward Pidge.

Keith looks to them, and they’re beaming as well. He can see that they’re happy to finally introduce him to their friends.

“And who do we have here?” The man with the mustache says cheerfully, a dodgeball tucked under his arm as he lays a hand on Pidge’s shoulder.

“Coran, this is Keith. Keith, Coran.” Pidge says, gesturing between them.

Coran leans forward, holding out a hand. “Nice to meet you, Keith. Welcome to the team.”

Keith takes his hand, and he feels strange shaking so many hands in such a small amount of time. It *should* be something that feels overly formal, but it doesn’t. They all put off such a warm, welcoming atmosphere that puts him at ease.

Well… except for Lance, who’s now standing between Hunk and Coran, hands behind his heck and elbows in the air as he’s half turned away, pointedly ignoring him.

“I, uh, I’m… not sure if I’m going to be joining the team.” He says a little hesitantly, eyes darting between all of them. None of their smiles falter.

Coran just chuckles, dropping his hand. “Well, you’re here today aren’t you? So today you’re part of the team. Welcome aboard.”

Keith’s lips quirk up at that. “Thanks.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Hunk elbow Lance, who stumbles a step before turning to glare at him. His hands go to his hips. “What?”

At this point, everyone’s turned toward them, so Keith doesn’t feel awkward in staring. Hunk’s eyes flicker to him before going back to Lance. “Introduce yourself, man.”
Lance huffs, crossing his arms over his chest and turns his head away. “We’ve already met.” He says offhandedly, and Keith feels his smile drop. Is his eye twitching? He definitely feels like his eye is twitching.

He can see the confused looks around the group, but Keith keeps his eyes on Lance as he tilts his head to the side. “Have we?” He asks in the most innocent, confused voice he can muster.

That gets Lance to finally look at him. His head whips around so fast that Keith wouldn’t be surprised if he gets a kink in it later. His eyes are wide as they search his face, and his mouth hangs open a little bit. It’s a completely unattractive look, and Keith revels in his shock.

Then he collects himself, rearranging his expression into something that’s two parts cocky, one part indignant, and three parts annoyed. “Uh, the name’s Lance?” Keith just stares at him. Lance blinks. Multiple times. His brows furrow. “Lance McClain?” Keith just keeps staring, watching as he cracks. “You’ve got to be— we have public speaking together? Mondays and Wednesdays?”

Keith furrows his brows a little, shaking his head slightly. “Sorry, I don’t—“

He throws his hands into the air. “For fuck’s sake— I spilled a smoothie all over you and didn’t apologize? Come on, I basically ruined your first day of classes!”

Out of their own volition, Keith’s lips quirk up at the corners into an amused smirk. He crosses his arms over his chest. “So you admit you owe me an apology?”

He has the extreme satisfaction of watching Lance’s mouth drop open, eyes widening and eyebrows shooting upward. “You— You do remember me!”

Keith rolls his eyes. “Of course I do. You were an asshole. You kind of made yourself memorable.”

Lance’s mouth opens and closes a lot then, and a variety of sounds escape, but none of them end up forming coherent words, let alone sentences. His hands are flailing around wildly, and he looks around between his friends for support. He doesn’t find any. His eyes eventually settle on Hunk, pleading silently as he makes these pathetic offended sounds and gestures to Keith helplessly.

Hunk just shakes his head. “Dude.”

“Honestly, I was expecting a bad first impression from you Lance, but this honestly just tops anything I could have thought of.” Pidge says, not sounding the least bit accusatory or sympathetic. Lance spins around to glare at them, but they ignore him, clapping their hands together loudly. “Well, now that that’s settled. We have a quidditch practice to start.”

True to what Allura had said, practice doesn’t start on time. In fact, it doesn’t start until nearly twenty minutes past the hour. During that time, Pidge somehow manages to scale up Hunk’s body to sit on his shoulders and has produced a megaphone from one of the numerous bags of quidditch equipment.

Keith watches from the sidelines as Hunk walks around with Pidge perched on him like it’s the most natural thing in the world. Their ankles are locked and hanging down on his chest, and he doesn’t even have to hold onto them. Keith knows from experience that Pidge is a master of climbing and balancing on friends. While Pidge and Hunk attempt to organize everyone and direct old players into helping set up equipment, Keith idly chats with Allura and Coran. They’re both older than him, but he’s not sure by how much. Still, they’re both friendly and talk to him like they’ve been friends for years. He finds out that they co-own a local coffee stop that they started
after they graduated, and that they ran it for a couple years before deciding to return for grad
school.

Keith tries to carry on conversation with them, but he’s not used to so much small talk. Still, they
manage to somehow make it easy on him. They ask him direct questions instead of open ended
ones, and direct the conversation themselves. And they always seem to notice when it gets to be
too much because they redirect the topic to something more between themselves to give Keith a
break. The entire time, his attention is split between them, Pidge and Hunk, and Lance.

As soon as Pidge and Hunk had left their little group to start organizing practice, Lance had left,
too. Keith isn’t stupid enough to think it’s not entirely because he’s here. Trying to be subtle, he
watches Lance flit around the quad, slipping from group to group, talking to old and new players
alike with an easy going smile and confidence that obviously makes people comfortable around
him.

Keith doesn’t get it. The guy just gets on his nerves.

Finally, Pidge and Hunk manage to round everyone up at the center of the designated quidditch
pitch. Pidge has climbed down from Hunk’s shoulders, and everyone is standing in a wide circle.
Keith stands across the circle from them, and nearly a third of the way around from Lance. Not that
he’s looking. The old and new players seem to be scattered and mixed around. There has to be
somewhere upwards of thirty people there. Maybe forty? He doesn’t know if this is a good or bad
turn out.

Keith feels a prickling sensation at the back of his neck, and it’s very similar to the one he gets in
class when he just knows Lance is staring at him. So he pointedly fixes his gaze on Pidge as they
start to speak.

“Allright, welcome, everyone, to the first quidditch practice of the year!” They say, clasping their
hands together loudly. They’ve, thankfully, abandoned the megaphone in favor of just projecting
their voice around the circle. “How many of you have never played quidditch before?” They pause
as nearly half of the people raise their hands, including Keith. They nod, grinning. “Awesome.
Well, we’ll give you a quick overview. Don’t worry if you don’t get it, we’ll go over it in more
depth later. Has anyone here not seen the Harry Potter movies or read the books?” No one raised
their hands. “Alright, so it’s actually really similar to that quidditch, but with some…
accommodations for the fact that we can’t fly and our balls aren’t magic.” There’s a round of
snickers at this, and Pidge pauses like they were expecting it. They roll their eyes. “Anyway, I’m
Pidge. They/them pronouns, please. And this is Hunk. We’re the team’s co-commissioners.”

Hunk raises a hand, grinning around the group. “Hey, guys.”

“Allright, so like Pidge said, it’s actually very similar to quidditch in the books and movies. We
have four positions: chasers, beaters, keepers, and seekers.” He counts off the fingers of one hand,
then lifts his other hand to count on those fingers. “And then we have three types of balls: the
quaffle, bludgers, and the snitch. When the snitch is in play, there’s seven players from each team
on the field, and each team is designated by… well, in games against other teams, we have our
team shirts, but when we just play here we have pinnies to tell the teams apart.”

He pauses to gesture to Coran, who has a backpack at his feet. The man pulls out two sports
pinnies, one red and one blue.

“And positions are designated by colored headbands.” Hunk continues, pointing to his own
headband. “Keepers are green.” He points to Pidge, where they have a rolled up black bandana tied around their head like a headband. It makes their hair stick up even more than usual. “Beaters wear black.” He turns and points to Allura, who has a white rolled bandana tied around her head, keeping some of the fallen strands of equally white hair out of her face. She grins and waves as people turn to look at her. “Chasers wear white. And seekers wear yellow. Most of us who’ve played before have our own headbands. It’s easier to just have one to keep on rather than trade them off, but we have team headbands for people who don’t have their own. And don’t worry, we try to wash them after every practice, cause honestly, who wants to wear a headband that’s been passed from person to person when we’re all playing a sport, and they get sweaty, and—“

“Hunk,” Pidge says.

Hunk stops and looks at them, blinking. “Oh, right. Anyway, back on topic. This,” He points to the volley ball in Pidge’s hand. They hold it up high above their head to show everyone. “Is the quaffle. There are three chasers and one keeper on each side at all times, and only these two positions can touch the quaffle. Chasers use the quaffle to score points by throwing it through a hoop on the opponent’s side. Each goal is worth ten points.” Hunk goes through the information in a quick and organized way, words clipped and voice almost bored, like he’s done this a hundred times. And he probably has. “That position is pretty self explanatory. Keepers are the goalies who protect the hoops. Like a lot of sports, if the keeper has the quaffle within the keeper zone around the hoops, you can’t wrestle it from them. They also can’t be hit by a bludger while in the keeper zone. Immunity and all that. But if a keeper steps outside the keeper zone, they function as a normal chaser and have to abide by chaser rules.”

Allura leans closer to Keith, a smile playing across her lips as she keeps her eyes on Hunk. “Hunk is a great keeper.” She whispers. “He doesn’t do it often, because he’s not a big sprinter, but sometimes he charges down the field screaming.” She whispers, laughing under her breath as she glances at Keith. “It’s hilarious and usually scares the other team.”

Keith feels the corner of his lip twitch upward, pulled by the infectiousness of her smile. “I would be, too. He looks like a tank.”

“Just wait till you see him in action.”

Keith looks away from her, gaze trailing around the circle on it’s way back to Hunk. He doesn’t realize what he’s doing until his eyes land on Lance. He’s glaring at him, and immediately Keith feels his smile fade, pressing his lips together into a small frown as he turns back to Hunk. What’s the guy’s deal anyway?

This time, it’s Pidge who speaks up. “The dodgeballs,” They say, pointing to Coran, who holds up a dodgeball proudly. “Are our bludgers. Only beaters are allowed to handle the bludgers. We act as both offense and defense for our team, allowing our chasers to get through the opponent’s chasers and beaters to score points. If you get hit by a bludger, you’re temporarily out. You take your broom out from between your legs to indicate that you’re out of play, and while you’re out of play, you can’t interact with anything or anyone. If there’s a ball in your hands, you drop it. You have to run back to your own hoops, and once you touch them, you’re back in play. If a bludger hits another bludger or the quaffle, it doesn’t count. If a beater catches a bludger, the hit doesn’t count. Chasers can’t catch the bludger because it’s not their ball. There’s two beaters on each side at all times, but only three bludgers in play. This means, obviously, someone is going to be without a ball. Bludger control is very important, but we’ll get into details of that later.”

As if on cue, Hunk picks up right there, like the two of them have this whole thing memorized. “You’re probably all wondering how the snitch works.” He pauses for a moment to look around,
getting nods of accent. “Well, in muggle quidditch, the snitch is a person. Well, no, that’s not entirely correct. The snitch isn’t a person. The snitch itself is actually a ball. In a sock. Well, it used to be a sock tucked into someone’s pants, but we’ve gotten a little more high tech since then. But when we say snitch, we’re usually referring to the person carrying the snitch—“

“Hunk.” This time it’s Lance who speaks. Keith refuses to look at him. Hunk clears his throat before continuing.

“Right. Okay, so the snitch is a person, usually dressed in all yellow,” He gestures, and Keith already knows he’s gesturing to Lance. He doesn’t want to look. He honestly doesn’t, but he does anyway. It’s hard not to when Lance suddenly is doing a cartwheel into the center of the circle. He stops and puts one hand on his hip, flexing with his other arm before pointing finger guns around the circle. When his eyes hand on Keith’s, he winks, smirking in a way that’s infinitely infuriating. Keith stiffens, hands curling into fists as he crosses them over his chest. He glares at Lance, but he’s unfazed as he just keeps turning in a circle to grin at everyone.

Hunk sighs loudly, but he’s smiling. “This is Lance, and he’s our team’s only USQ certified snitch. But for the purpose of our practices, anyone is welcome to try snitching. Lance plays other positions, too. Anyway, he’s wearing official snitch pants, without the snitch though, Lance, where is—“

“Here we go!” Coran straightens from where he’s been digging in the bag at his feet and pulls out what looks like, honestly, a black sock with a ball inside. He tosses it toward Lance, who snatches it out of the air. One end of the sock is sewed shut and padded with velcro, and Lance attacks it to the velcro patch at the center of his back, on the waist band of his yellow shorts.

“Thanks, Coran.” He says, before spinning around, doing a little dance to make the snitch bounce on his ass. It looks ridiculous. Keith scowls at him.

“As I was saying,” Hunk says. “That’s the snitch. The snitch isn’t released into play until fifteen minutes into the game, or to whenever the head ref says. When the snitch is released, so are the seekers. The game ends when the snitch is caught, but unlike in Harry Potter, the snitch is only worth thirty points.”

“It would be a little ridiculous to have it be worth a hundred and fifty.” Pidge says. “Thirty is much more reasonable, and allows for much closer games. A snitch catch doesn’t always guarantee a win.”

Hunk nods. “Exactly. Seekers aren’t allowed to touch the snitch.” He starts ticking off on his fingers again. “So no tackling, no clothes grabbing, no arm or leg grabbing, no pushing, stuff like that.”

“But I,” Lance cuts in, hands on his hips as he crosses his legs to go in a smooth spin, turning in a small circle to grin at everyone. “Can do all of that to you.”

“Actually, Lance, you can only do that to the seekers.” Hunk adds, but Lance just waves him off.

“Yeah, yeah. Point is, I can do whatever I want to the seekers. As a snitch, I can do whatever I want within my power to keep you from grabbing the ball.”

“Within reason.”

Lance sighs. “Within reason.”

“And you’ll go easy on the new people because it’s only the start of the season.”
Lance sighs louder, letting his head loll backwards. “And I’ll go easy on everyone blah blah.”

“Now get back in the circle, Lance.” Pidge says. “It’s not about you anymore.”

Lance scoffs, but listens, reclaiming his spot.

“I think that’s about it.” Pidge turns to Hunk. “Are we missing anything?”

Hunk shrugs, “Just the brooms, I think.”

“Oh, right.” Pidge gestures to the pile of pvc pipes piled at the center of the circle. “And we do all of this on brooms.”

“They’re not actually brooms, though. We used to use brooms, but it’s not as practical.”

“These are what most teams are doing now. They’re cut to the smallest length required by the rulebook, and they’re lightweight.”

“And no bristles.” Hunk winces, rubbing his legs. “Those things can chaff.”

“We still call them brooms though. They serve the same purpose.”

“Without serving the actual purpose of a broom, which is to clean things, which they can’t do because they have no bristles.”

“It’s surprisingly easy to run with one between your legs, so don’t worry about it.”

“For the most part you just have to get used to playing with one hand.”

“And I think that’s it for the rundown of the rules.”

“Some of you are probably still really confused cause it’s like, a lot to take in. And it looks even crazier when you watch it cause there’s a bunch of stuff going on at once.”

“But you’ll pick up on it as we go. Experience is the best teacher. For now, though, we’re going to officially start our practice with a little ice breaker.” There are some groans around the circle from older members. Pidge scowls at them. “Come on, it’s tradition. And if we’re all going to play together, we might as well know each other’s names. We’re going to pass the quaffle around the circle until everyone’s had it once. When you catch it, tell us your name, your school year, if you’ve played quidditch before, and something about yourself that we can’t tell by looking at you.”

Pidge turns then, sending a glare at Lance. “And you’re not allowed to say anything about soulmate, because honestly, that’s so boring by now.”

Lance throws his arms up in the air. “I didn’t say anything!”

“No, but you always say something about your soulmate. The point of this is to learn about us, not the people we’re connected to.”

Lance doesn’t say anything, but he huffs loudly and crosses his arms over his chest, lips sticking out in a pout.

Keith snorts, rolling his eyes. Lance’s glare flickers to him, and he meets it, unflinching. Lance sticks out his tongue, and Keith can feel his eye twitching again. He feels the fingers of his right hand pressing into the palm of his glove where he knows there are words marking his skin. He wishes he could feel some of that warm, calm, peacefulness that comes over him whenever his soulmate marks him. He could use it right about now.
“Alright, so I’m going to start this thing off.” Pidge says, bringing his attention back to them. He’s grateful for the excuse to look away from Lance. “As I said earlier, I’m Pidge. I’m a junior. I’ve obviously played quidditch before, and I can solve a rubik’s cube behind my back in under a minute.” Their grin turns into a knowing smirk when they meet Keith’s eyes. He scowls at them.

That was going to be his fun fact! Well, he can’t do it behind his back, but he can solve one. What the hell is he supposed to say now? He doesn’t have any interesting hidden talents. At least not any he can think up on the spot. He’s drawing a blank.

For a moment he thinks Pidge is going to pass him the ball, but he’s given a few more moments to think when they instead throw it to Coran.

“Name’s Coran.” He says, holding the quaffle in one hand and tugging at his collar with the other. He stands straight, closing his eyes briefly as he lifts his chin proudly. “Grad student, quidditch veteran, and I can speak six languages fluently.”

There are a few murmurs around the circle, and Keith raises his eyebrows. He’s impressed. Then again, he can’t really imagine anything less from the eccentric man.

He tosses the ball to Hunk, who scrambles to catch it when it goes too wide.

Pidge snorts. “Nice pass, Coran.”

The man just shrugs, smiling. “It’s my job to hit my targets, not to pass the ball.”

“Uh, hi, I’m Hunk. I’m a junior, and I’ve played quidditch before, obviously, since I’m a co-commissioner. And I, uh, I knit. A lot.” He smiles sheepishly and lops the ball across the circle towards Keith. He’s about to catch it when Allura suddenly snatches it out of the air. He looks at her, brow pinched in confusion. She just smiles and winks, sticking out her tongue before turning to face the circle.

“I’m Allura, grad student, quidditch veteran, and I can lick my elbow.”

That… isn’t what he expected her to say. It seems like a… goofy sort of fact compared to what everyone else has been saying. But she says it with such good natured confidence that it doesn’t sound out of place at all. She looks to him, still smiling, and she reminds him so much of Shiro in that moment that he finds himself saying, “Prove it.”

She laughs, bending her arm and lifting her elbow, leaning forward, and— yup, she can lick her elbow. She even crosses her eyes in concentration as she does it. Keith isn’t sure he doubted her, but it’s funny enough that he finds himself laughing.

And he’s surprised when she practically drops the ball into his hands. His laugh cuts off, smile dropping as he stares at it. He looks up at her, but she just smiles, arms crossed over her chest.

“Your turn.”

He looks around the circle, suddenly finding himself at a loss for words. He doesn’t really like everyone’s attention on him, but he supposes he should just get this over with. He looks to Pidge for reassurance, and they give him small thumbs up. “I’m Keith. I’m, uh, technically a junior? But it’s my first year here. I’ve never played quidditch, and I—” He hesitates. He’s not sure what to say. Pidge stole his rubik’s cube idea, which is his usual go-to for questions like this. He thinks he should probably say something about his knife tricks or that he built his bike up from scratch, but he’s kind of still stuck on Allura’s goofy fun fact, and he finds himself saying something completely different than he planned. “I can tie a cherry stem into a knot with my mouth?”
Allura laughs, and there’s a few chuckles around the circle. Now that it’s over, he relief floods his system. He smiles. That is, until he hears Lance’s obnoxious voice speak up from across the circle.

“No way!”

He looks at him, and Lance is scowling at him.

“Oh, yes way?”

“No! No, no, no! That was going to be my secret talent!”

Keith rolls his eyes. “It can be yours, too.”

“No, no way, you already took it. I’m not copying you.” He crosses his arms over his chest, sticking his nose up into the air.

Keith frowns, holding the ball between his hands at his chest, elbows out. “Well, then you better think of something fast.” And he shoves the ball across the circle with all the force he can. It catches Lance off guard, and he yelps, leaping out of the way as the ball sails clips him and sails past.

He glares at Keith. “Not cool, man” Keith just shrugs, smirking as Lance turns and jogs over to pick up the ball before returning to the circle. He palm the quaffle, brows still furrowed. “So the name’s Lance, snitch extraordinaire, junior, obvious quidditch veteran, and, um…” He tilts his head back, tapping his chin.

“Oh my god, for the love of— Lance, just say something.” Pidge says, putting their forehead in their hand.

“I would have if someone hadn’t stole my idea!” He said, shooting Keith a look. He kept his smirk in place, raising one eyebrow. It seemed to just infuriate Lance more, which is exactly what he had been hoping for.

“Lance, just say that thing about your eye.” Hunk says. “That’s weird and unique enough for you.”

Lance blinks, looking away from Keith with a blank look on his face. Then he brightens. “Oh, right!” He puts one hand on his hip and spins the quaffle on one finger with his other hand. It wobbles almost immediately and nearly falls before he has to catch it. “I can move my right eye independently from my left, so I can do spot-the-difference puzzles really fast.”

Keith stares at him. That… isn’t what he had been expecting either. He had been expecting something much more obnoxious, and not… innocent, weird, and almost endearing? Maybe there’s more to Lance than—

“So take that, mullet!”

Nope. He’s still an asshole.

“So the name of the game is the Hunger Games, name and contraception courtesy of me.” Pidge announces, then gestures widely to the pile of balls at their feet. They’re stacked up as much as they can be, all the balls they have including the spares: five bludgers and two quaffles. “Behold!
The cornucopia! This is our favorite warm up game, and we thought it would be a good way to get you all used to throwing and dodging. This game is basically dodgeball, but you'll be working in pairs and there’s no boundaries. All the balls are gonna act like bludgers. Work with your partner to protect each other. You get hit? You’re out, and your partner is on their own. Only one ball per person and no camping bludgers. You catch it? You’re still in. We don’t have enough brooms for everyone, but this is a quidditch exercise, so we’re going to handicap everyone the old fashioned way: everyone has to keep one hand behind their backs at all times.”

There’s a lot of groans and giggles around the group. The rookies find the idea amusing, and he can see some of them putting their hands behind their backs to get a feel for it. The veterans aren’t too happy about it. It does keep them from using their hand, like a broom would, but it’s surprisingly more difficult to have it behind their backs rather than in front of them. It throws off balance in the weirdest ways. But Lance is used to it. He’s a damn fine snitch, and he’s proud of the fact that he usually ends up being handicapped, forced to put a hand behind his back and fight off seekers with only one hand. He’s even been double handicapped several times. That’s always fun.

“Alright, everyone pair up!” Pidge jogs to Keith, grabbing his arm. “Keith, you’re with me. Let’s kick their asses.”

He smirks, and Lance feels an itch under his skin. “You got it.”

“You two are going down!” Lance calls from across the pitch, hands cupping around his mouth as he leans forward. They both turn to look at him, Keith with annoyance and Pidge with amusement. “Right, Hunk?” He straightens and puts a hand on his hip, holding the other fist out.

Hunk bumps it. “Of course, dude.”

He and Hunk own this game. Well, he owns at this game. Hunk is average. But they still make a really good team, and he usually chooses Hunk as a partner because they’re bros for life. Of all the chasers, and beaters for that matter, on the team, Lance is known for his dodges. He’ll go so far as to drop to his knees or leaping out of the way if it means ducking a bludger throw. Sometimes he goes a little overboard, but hey, it’s all about showmanship. And it’s effective, so win-win.

Once everyone is paired up, they all position themselves in a wide circle around the pile of balls.

“Brooms down! On my whistle!” Pidge calls from across the circle. “Ready!”

Everyone takes a knee, hands on the ground like they would at the beginning of a quidditch match. Lance holds his weight like a runner’s start, preparing to throw himself forward.

“Are we gonna do the usual strategy?” Hunk whispers at his side. Lance tilts his head to look at him.

Seeing the uneasy expression there, Lance grins. “Yeah, man. Don’t worry, I got this.”

Hunk breathes a sigh of relief. Hunk isn’t one for sprinting. “Okay, good. I’ll be here, dude.”

“And I’ll be right back.”

Pidge waits, and a tense silence falls over the group. Everyone is tense, listening for the whistle, and Pidge milks it. Lance feels the familiar sense of excitement and anticipation flow through his veins, vibrating out through his limbs. He feels rigid, muscles coiled and ready to spring. He might be holding his breath.
He lifts his head and ends up making eye contact with Keith. A fire flares up inside him. Keith. He still can’t believe Pidge’s Keith is this Keith. The asshole Keith. Who’s proven that he’s an asshole by making a fool out of him twice! In less than an hour!

Lance narrows his eyes. He’s going to be the one to tag Keith out.

“Brooms up!” Pidge calls half a second before they blow the whistle.

Lance is already sprinting. He sees a flash of white hair somewhere to his right and knows Allura is diving for the pile, too. She’s going to make it there right after Lance, so he’s going to have to be quick. He sees Keith running for it, too, but he wasn’t as fast to get up.

Lance reaches the pile first. He immediately grabs the quaffle on top and throws it blindly over his shoulder before grabbing one of the bludgers. Then he’s backing up, hightailing it backwards, eyes locked on Allura, Keith, and a couple of the others as they reach the pile. He doesn’t look away until he’s a good distance away, and only when he sees Hunk come up to side side, ball in hand. They exchange grins.

Game on.

They travel around the pitch standing back to back to keep eyes out everywhere. Everyone is in similar positions, and everyone keeps moving. Some pairs, like them, have two balls, but some groups have none. Those groups are mostly rookies, and they look nervous. They’d be easy prey, but there’s no fun or honor in that. So he and Hunk hunt down the pairs with at least one ball, systematically weakening everyone by tagging one a member of their pairings.

When one of them loses their ball, the other takes the lead. Lance usually passes his ball to Hunk because he’s better at catching and more willing to dive out from Hunk’s safety to grab a spare ball on the ground before someone else can. They communicate constantly, calling out the positions of threats in hushed tones. Lance can see the inexperienced pairs separating, and some of the rookie’s flinching. He leaves those ones alone, preferring to give them a chance and going after the veteran players instead.

The exception to that is Keith, of course. As soon as they rotate closer to them, he’s going down.

He keeps an eye on Allura and Coran. Both of them paired up with rookies, but they’re still formidable on their own. It’s easy to tell where Coran is. He has a tendency to call out when he throws, whether it’s a word or just a shout of victory. It’s quirky, and Lance thinks it’s great. And in this case, it’s helpful, because he can always keep an ear out for Coran’s position. Allura, on the other hand, is silent and deadly, so he keeps her in his sights.

“Have you seen Pidge and Keith?” Lance says, keeping his back to Hunk. They’ve taken out five people so far, and dodged shots from several attacks. Not many pairs are still whole, but they are, and they have two balls. Now is the perfect time to strike.

“Dude, what’s your obsession with him?”

“It’s not an obsession! I just need to take him out.”

“Lance.”

“He deserves it!”

“Come on, man, play nice. He’s Pidge’s best friend.”
“Why don’t you tell him to play nice with me?”

“Lance, be the bigger— Oh—Oh! Over here!”

Lance reacts to the panic in his voice instantly, whipping around to look for the threat. There’s a pair coming at them from Hunk’s side. It’s an old player, Jackie, and some new guy that Lance doesn’t remember the name of. Jackie grins, rearing back and throwing at Hunk. He yelps, but manages to block the shot with his own ball. Unfortunately, it knocks the ball out of his grip. As he bends down to pick it up, Lance puts a hand on Hunk’s back, jumping up to chuck his ball over Hunk’s shoulder to peg Jackie in the arm.

“Ha, HA! You’re OUT!” Lance says, grinning.

Jackie groans, “Goddammit, Lance.”

“You should know better than to come after us!”

“Nice one, Lance!” Hunk says, straightening. Lance jog forward to pick up the ball Jackie had thrown. Her partner had already picked up Lance’s old ball and had run off while Jackie made her way to the sidelines, hands in the air to indicate she’s out.

“Thanks, buddy.” Lance picks up the ball, putting his free hand behind his back again as he turns to grin at Hunk. “We got this in the bag—“

Hunk’s eyes widen. “Lance! Look out—!”

Before he can say anything else, pain explodes on the back of his head. He jerks forward, stumbling a few steps. He can hear the ball bounce off the ground. Mouth screwed up in a frown, he whips around, searching for the source of—
His eyes instantly lock onto Keith. He’s standing not too far away, grinning at him and still leaning forward after his throw. As he straightens, he high fives Pidge, who’s doubled over laughing. Lance just gapes at him, his grip loosening and the ball in his hands falling to the ground to bounce and roll harmlessly away. Keith tilts his head to the side, giving Lance a small, two finger salute before Pidge is darting off and he’s following.

The pain from the blow is already fading as he makes his way to the sidelines. It’s nothing compared to the sting of his pride.

Despite his apprehension over the whole thing, Keith finds that quidditch isn’t so bad. With the exception of Lance, the people are great. Pidge’s friends especially. The Hunger Games exercise was actually a lot of fun, and he and Pidge were the last group pair standing along with a hand full of single players. And he got to tag Lance out. He hadn’t meant to hit him in the head, but he can’t exactly bring himself to regret it. Not after seeing the priceless look on his face.

He ended up getting tagged out by Coran. The hit was a gentle tap on the back, the ball merely bouncing off him and back into Coran’s hands. He whipped around, mouth agape and at a loss for
how the overly loud and excited man could possibly sneak up on him. His eyes had glinted as he winked before trotting off.

He had stood on the sidelines next to Lance, who had snickered at Keith’s defeat. He had ignored him in favor of watching Pidge and Allura face off as the last people standing. Allura won.

It was a relatively quick game, so they had played a couple times, each time with new partners. Lance had seemed to make it a point to tag out Keith, which only led him into trouble when he tunnel visioned so hard that he was an easy target for others.

Turns out the rest of quidditch isn’t so bad either. The exercise they’re doing now seems a lot more relevant to an actual game. They’re lined up in three lines at center field, facing one set of hoops. One line for beaters and two for chasers. There’s also two small lines by the side of the pitch for the keeper and the defensive beater. They go run after run where two chasers and a beater charge down the field to face off and try to score against a defensive beater and a keeper. Old and new players are mixed up in the lines, and Pidge and Hunk have encouraged everyone to try all the positions. The two of them are standing by the side, observing and encouraging. Pidge blows the whistle each time to signal the start of the exercise.

Keith thinks they just like to be in charge of the whistle.

Pidge also might’ve been onto something when they said that Keith would be good at this whole quidditch thing. So far, they haven’t been wrong. He was good at the first game, and he’s doing well on this one so far. He’s tried the beater position a couple times, but he doesn’t like it quite as much as he likes chasing. He hasn’t tried keeping, but he doesn’t really think he’s going to.

He’s standing in one of the chaser lines, arms loosely crossed over his chest as he watches Coran lead the charge. He shouts something that sounds suspiciously like, “Tally-ho!” And holds his bludger high above his head as he runs, leaving the chasers to follow in his wake. Keith smiles.

He barely has time to register someone leaning in before there’s suddenly a voice in his ear. “I bet I can score more goals than you.”

He stiffens, smile fading as he recognizes that voice. He turns his head, and sure enough, Lance is standing beside him in line. He’s watching Coran, a small smirk playing across his lips.

Keith’s eyes narrow a fraction. “You realize I’m three for three in goals, right?”

“Pffff, please, I’m four for four.” He tilts his head to the side, eyeing Keith sideways. His lips are still quirked in that frustrating smirk. “So you in?”

He really, really doesn’t want to rise to the bait. But when he opens his mouth to tell him to fuck off, he finds himself saying, “What’d I get when I win?”

Lance raises an eyebrow, smirk widening. “Cocky, huh? Must I remind you that you’re the rookie here?” Keith just stares at him, and Lance continues. “What’d you want then?”

He goes for the first thing he can think of that’ll annoy Lance. “If I win, you have to apologize for knocking my smoothie over.”

Lance stiffens, smirk dropping as he purses his lips together. He turns to face Keith more fully, opening and closing his mouth without saying a word. Keith raises an eyebrow, enjoying his struggle. “Fine! But when I win, you have to apologize for being rude when I tried to help!”

Keith narrows his eyes. “Fine.”
“Fine!”

“You’re on.”

“Bring it!”

Lance puts up a valiant effort, but he’s goaded Keith. Now that he’s taken the bait, he sure as hell isn’t about to let Lance win. Lance has this uncanny ability to annoy the ever living shit out of him, and Keith has a burning desire to wipe that smirk off his face. And seeing him struggle as he tries to apologize wouldn’t be so bad either. Shiro has always said he’s stubborn when he wants to be, and this is one of those situations. Luckily, his stubbornness usually helps him in the long run.

By the time Pidge and Hunk call an end to the exercise, Keith has scored eighteen goals, and Lance has only scored seventeen. As they regroup around Pidge and Hunk for the next set of instructions, Keith catches Lance’s eye. He smirks, and Lance pouts.

“You got lucky, mullet.”

“Say whatever you gotta say to make yourself feel better.”

Practice is a little slow, but that’s to be expected when it’s the first of the year and they’re accommodating new players. Still, Lance is having fun. He hasn’t played at all since the summer fantasy tournament, and he’s missed it. Good friends, a fun sport, what’s not to love? Even with Keith hanging around and throwing off his groove, he’s still managing to enjoy himself.

Especially now that it’s time for seeker practice. His time to shine.

“Remember to go easy on them.” Hunk says, clapping him on the shoulder as he walks by.

Lance gasps loudly, putting a hand to his chest in a show of offended innocence. “Hunk! What kind of guy do you think I am?”

“A show off.” He says, rolling his eyes, but his tone is good natured.

Lance smirks. “I can’t help it that I’m good.”

“Behave yourself, Lance!” Hunk calls over his shoulder as he makes his way to the hoops where all the keepers, and potential keepers, are gathered.

Lance laughs, putting his hands on his hips as he surveys the small group in front of him. He’s standing at the edge of the pitch, a little ways up the hill to make himself loom over them. There’s only four of them, and only one of them is an old player. To be fair, Greg isn’t even a seeker main. He’s mostly a chaser who can seek when they need him to, but Lance had asked him to join the seeker practice so he could demonstrate with someone who’s actually played the position before.

Their team doesn’t really have a main seeker. It’s been Lance for a couple years, with the occasional player who only comes for a couple months before never returning.

Lance thinks he’s a damn fine seeker. He’s a good snitch, after all. But… his team doesn’t always agree. So yeah, he doesn’t have the best track record when it comes to seeking, but he’s getting better!
“Alright,” Lance clasps his hands together, grinning at the four standing in front of him. “Welcome, you brave souls, to seeker practice.” He puts a hand to his hip and the other to his chest, lifting his chin. “I will be your glorious and handsome snitch and guide on this fine Saturday afternoon—“

“Lance,” Greg cuts in, giving him a flat look. “Just get on with it.”

Lance pouts. “You have no sense of showmanship.”

“And you have too much.”

“That’s just one of the many things that makes me a great snitch.” He says, face brightening as he winks.

Greg tilts his head to the side, eyebrows raised as he considers. “Well… you got me there.”

“As I was saying, welcome to seeker—“

“Keith!”

Lance looks up as Pidge jogs across the field, leaving a group of beater-lings under the care of Coran. Keith has been trailing after the group of chasers that are following Allura to the far end of the field, but at the sound of his name, he pauses mid step and turns. When Pidge reaches him, they speak in a lower voice that Lance can’t hear, but he watches the exchange through narrowed eyes.

Then suddenly Pidge is pointing to him, and Keith is looking up, a scowl on his face—

Greg clears his throat, whipping Lance’s attention back to him. “You were saying?”

“As I was saying!” He says, perhaps a little too loud. “Welcome to seeker practice!” Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Keith trudging toward them. He looks up, drawing attention to him. “Looks like we’ve got a straggler.” He says, grinning in the face of Keith’s scowl. “What’re you doing here?”

Keith steps up to the small semi-circle of potential seekers, arms cross over his chest. “Pidge told me to try out seeking.”

Lance snorts. “You think you can take me?”

Keith just shrugs and says nothing. Lance glares at him, and only looks away when Greg clears his throat again.

“Come on, Lance. We don’t have all day.”

“Right, as I was saying…”

Pointedly ignoring Keith, Lance goes over the rules of seeking and snitch play. Compared to the other positions, it’s relatively straight forward. After fifteen minutes, the snitch is released onto the field and into play. The seekers are then free to go after them. The seeker has to get a clean grab of the ball hanging off the back of the snitch’s pants. If the grab isn’t clean, the ball is put back and the play is reset. If they get hit by a bludger, they have to go back to their hoops. If their broom is taken out from between their legs, they have to go back to their hoops. If the snitch falls down, they have to give them a couple seconds to get back up.

They’re not allowed to touch the snitch, but the snitch damn well can touch them.
And that’s it. Simple. Easier said than done, but simple.

After he runs through the rules, he gets Greg to help him demonstrate what it looks like in real time, as well as some of the more common strategies. Despite the fact that Keith is there, Lance doesn’t let it ruin his mood. He’s in his element. He’s teaching something he’s good at, and he’s thriving in the attention given to him. Even if it’s only from five people.

After Greg gets tired of his shenanigans, because yeah, at this point he’s just showing off, he claps the guy on the shoulder and grins. “Alright, so how about we give poor Greg here a break. Who wants to try it first?”

Now that his part is over, Greg goes to join the chasers, leaving Lance alone with the new potential seekers. He runs through the exercises with the lot of them. And true to his word, he goes easy on them. They all take turns, running at him and attempting to grab the snitch. When he puts them out of commission, they pass the one broom they have to the next person in line.

At first, they’re obviously nervous and unsure of themselves. They all come at him with hesitant steps and tentative grabs that he easily sidesteps. He lets each of them make several grabs, gaining confidence with each one, and each time casually batting their arms away or stepping aside, before he pulls their broom out from them and forcing them back to the line.

Keith, on the other hand, he has fun with.

As soon as Keith steps up, Lance grins at him, raising both hand and twitching his fingers. “Come at me, bro.”

Keith just glares at him before darting forward, arm reaching out in a wide, obvious, and sloppy motion. Lance doesn’t give Keith a chance. He sidesteps Keith’s advance, grabbing the broom with both hands and pulling it out from between his legs. He’s too surprised and unprepared, and the broom comes out of his grip easily.

He gapes, staring as Lance grins at him, holding the broom up. “That’s… that’s cheating!”

Lance throws back his head, laughing. Oh man, the look on his face is priceless. Finally, Lance can have his time to shine, to make Keith look stupid. Oh man, he’s going to enjoy this. He should thank Pidge later. “Nothing’s cheating when you’re a snitch.” He says, cocking his head to the side, wide smile still in place. He gives Keith a small wink before he’s tossing the broom to the next person in line. What was her name again? Ugh, who knows. He’s barely been paying attention. If they come back again he’ll bother learning their names. “Back of the line, Keithy boy."

He laughs again as Keith stomps away. Oh yeah, he’s going to enjoy this.

He goes easy on the other three, letting them get the feel of what it’s like to seek. He talks them through it, giving them advice on the fly as he’s backing away. He tells them how snitches usually counter certain grabs even as he does them. This is, after all, his specialty, and he likes being able to show his knowledge. Each of them gets better every time they try. Still not game worthy, but they’re getting the hang of it. He doesn’t, however, let any of them actually catch him. A snitch has to have some pride.

Keith, on the other hand, he doesn’t go easy on. The first couple times it’s Keith’s turn, Lance does his best to get him out as quickly as possible. He can’t believe how many times Keith lets him pull his broom out. It’s easy. It’s like the guy is so focused on trying to grab the snitch that he just neglects to take the rest of himself into account. Even when he learns to keep a firmer grip on his
broom, all it takes is a well placed hand, a shove, and upward pull, and the broom is out.

During the others’ turns, Lance can feel Keith’s eyes on him. His gaze is hot on the back of his neck. So just to annoy him further, Lance takes extra care being helpful and patient with the others. He can’t help it. This is fun.

On Keith’s forth try, he catches Lance off guard. He lunges at him with a quickness that Lance hadn’t seen from him so far. He totally does not yelp as he scrambles backwards, hands shooting out to Keith’s shoulder’s to hold him back. When he looks up at Keith’s face, the asshole has the audacity to smirk at him! There’s a glint of something fiery in the depths of his eyes that has Lance’s gut tying itself in knots.

So that’s how they’re going to play it, huh? Fine. Lance can step it up.

He shoves Keith away, and they face off. Lance stands in the typical snitch stance: knees bent, ass out to keep the ball as far from Keith as possible, and arms held out to his sides, ready. Keith circles him slowly, eyes locked onto his. Lance turns with him, his own smile gone. Then Keith takes a step to the right, and Lance sees the moment his weight shifts and he lunges to the left. His hand on the broom switches, left hand reaching out and around him.

Lance has to admit, he’s impressed. That’s an advanced strategy that he isn’t expecting. But as he’s said before: he’s a damn good snitch. Reflexes kick in as he’s adjusting to defend and block Keith’s grab.

“Ambidextrous, huh? Not bad. Can’t say I was expecting it.” He says as he grabs Keith’s broom. Instead of pulling it out though, he uses it to spin Keith around, relishing the way his eyes widen in surprise. He then lifts a foot, plants it on Keith’s ass, and pushes him away. He goes stumbling, and Lance laughs. “You’re still sloppy though. I saw that coming a mile away.” Keith turns around to glare at him, and Lance takes up his defensive stance again, eyes glinting as he smirks and sways his hips from side to side to cause the snitch to sway tauntingly behind him. “Come on then, show me what you’ve got.”

Turns out, the only thing more fun than getting Keith out as quickly as possible is playing with him and taunting him.

Each time he fails a grab and Lance sends him reeling with a kick to the ass or a pat on the shoulder, Keith manages to look even more angry and even more frustrated. Lance wasn’t sure it was possible, but here he is, red faced and pinched scowl in all it’s constipated looking glory. And while he started out surprisingly good, he gets sloppier with every failed attempt and it gets easier and easier to make a fool out of him.

Lance is living.

In what has to be a last ditch effort, Keith charges him, reaching out and around to try to grab the snitch. Lance doesn’t have to think twice. He steps into it, catching Keith off guard as he wraps him up and uses his own momentum to flip him up and over. He lands on his back and stays there, staring up at the sky with his arms flopped out beside him. Lance leans over him, hands on his hips. Keith looks dazed.

“You have been weighed.” He says, feeling his lips curl into an amused smirk. “You have been measured.” Keith’s eyes flicker to his, brows pinching. “And you absolutely have been found wanting.”

Keith picks up his fallen broom and uses it swat at Lance. “Fuck off.”
Lance dances away, laughing.

“You’re going to catch him, right?”

Keith blinks, looking down to where Pidge has suddenly appeared at his elbow. “Uh, what?”

Pidge points a thumb over their shoulder. “That idiot. You’re gonna catch him, right? You’re gonna be the seeker on your team?”

Keith follows their gesture to where Lance is standing across the field talking to Hunk. Whatever their talking about, he’s gesturing wildly, face animated. Hunk says something and he doubles over laughing. Why is everything he does so… extra? Keith frowns and looks down, pulling the red pinnie over his head. “I don’t know, Pidge. I’m not sure I can.”

Pidge snorts, crossing their arms over their chest. “What’s this? Keith Kogane is turning down a challenge? What gives, man?”

He shrugs. “I’m not exactly good at the whole seeking thing. I think I’ll just stick to chasing.”

Pidge bumps his hip with their own. “Come ooooon, Keith. I saw you during seeker practice. You were good for someone who’s never played before.”

“He flipped me onto my back, Pidge.” He deadpans. “I didn’t get the snitch once.”

Pidge waves him off. “Yeah, yeah, but that’s just Lance. He’s a show off. Besides, in a game, he has to get caught. Otherwise the game won’t end. If it goes on for too long, we just handicap him and then it’ll be easy.”

“Why do you want me to do it? There were others who tried seeking. They did better than me.”

“Only because Lance let them do better. He actually had to try with you. He’s been insufferably cocky today, and he’s been an ass to you. So please, Keith. Put ‘em in the dirt.”

Keith raises an eyebrow, looking at them curiously. A small smirk tugs at his lips. “You’ve been bragging about me, haven’t you?”

“Heh, yeah, duh. I know you’d make a better seeker than anyone we have now. And you can prove it by catching Lance. He won’t go easy if it’s you because of his stupid vendetta or whatever.”

Keith hums, looking over their shoulder once again to where Lance is standing. He’s leaning on Hunk, gesturing wildly. He looks proud of himself, but Keith thinks that might just be his default setting.

“You can’t tell me you don’t want to wipe that smirk off his face.” Pidge says, glancing up at him with a knowing grin.

Keith lets his eyes roam over Lance’s face, all sharp lines and angles, softened by laugh lines and crinkled eyes. Objectively, he’s attractive. Extremely so. It’s a shame his personality is terribly obnoxious. Keith almost feels sorry for whoever gets stuck with him as a soulmate. He bets it would be exhausting.
“Yeah,” He says, eyes returning to Pidge. “Yeah, I do.”

“Good.” Pidge nods, handing him a broom.

“But how am I supposed to get past him? He’s actually good at this and I’ve never done it.”

Pidge pats him on the shoulder. “You’re creative and stubborn, and I have faith in you. Besides, like I said, he has to get caught. Just take advantage of his show off moments.”

As per what is apparently routine, they end the practice with a scrimmage. The experienced players played a short five minute game to show everyone how it looks before they split everyone into two teams. A lot of the veteran players are reffing the match to give the newer players a chance to try it. Allura and Coran are acting as team captains to give advice and keep their teams subbing out so everyone has a chance to play, and Lance, of course, is the snitch.

When he joins his team on their end of the sidelines, Allura hands him a white headband and offers him a smile. “I assume you’ll be playing chaser until the snitch is released?”

Keith nods, taking the headband and slipping it onto his head. “Yeah, thanks.”

“You’re also fast, so I’m having you start.”

“Wait, what?”

She gives him a shove. “To the hoops! Go!”

He looks back over his shoulder at her as she pushes him. “What’d I do?”

“When the whistle blows, just run as fast as you can, pick up the quaffle, and hopefully score before they have a chance to set up their defenses.”

She doesn’t really give him a chance to argue. She just shoves him off toward the hoops and goes back to the rest of the team gathered on the sidelines. He takes up his place in the line of players at the hoops, putting his broom on the ground between his legs and kneeling over it. The four balls are lined up along the center line, and he can see the beaters lining themselves up with the bludgers. He positions himself at the center, directly in line for the quaffle.

Pidge stands at the edge of the pitch opposite from the teams. Lance bounces on his toes next to Pidge, looking over the pitch. “Blue team, are you ready?” There’s a cheer from the other team, led mostly by Coran. “Red team, are you ready?” The people around him let out half hearted cheers, and Allura practically screams from the sidelines. “Brooms down!” Everyone settles into an eery silence, waiting for the whistle. “Ready!” Keith puts his weight on the balls of his feet, one hand gripping his broom. He feels the tension in his muscles, coiled like a spring. “Brooms up!”

The whistle blows and he’s sprinting, eyes locked on the quaffle at center field.

He gets there first, bending over to grab it as he sprints past. As soon as he’s picked it up, he has to leap over a chaser from the blue side who got there right after he did. The teams clash, beaters picking up what balls they can and immediately back tracking. He doesn’t take the time to see what team managed to get bludger control. He just sprints past the line of blue players, and before they have a chance to back track and recover, he’s one on one with the keeper.

He feels a little bad for him. He’s obviously new and wasn’t expecting to be face to face with a rampaging chaser less than a minute into the game. All it takes is an easy feint in one direction, a lunge to the other, a throw, and the quaffle sails through the shortest hoop. The goal ref throws up
her hands, and Pidge’s whistle blows.

Keith skids to a stop with a couple hops and turns back to his team, grinning. Allura is letting out loud whoop’s from the other end of the pitch. He only makes it a few more steps toward his side of the pitch when he’s hit by a bludger. Right. In all the adrenaline, he kind of forgot about the beaters. And the fact that they can still tag him out after he scores a goal.

He lifts the broom out from his legs and holds up his hands before jogging back to his hoops.

The game is, admittedly, very fun and surprisingly fast paced. There’s a lot going on. Sometimes Keith will get so focused on weaving past the other chasers that he’ll forget about the beaters. Sometimes he’s so focused on avoiding the beaters and dodging the bludgers that an opposing chaser will just take the quaffle from him. There’s a lot to pay attention to, but he finds himself having fun. He’s also surprisingly good at it. Naturally so. He can see he’s picking it up faster than some of the other new players who still fumble with passes and throws, and who hesitate, unsure what to do.

He’s always been good at sports, but they’ve always bored him. Quidditch, he thinks, might be the exception. And he’ll never tell Pidge, but the fact that they play is a good incentive to stick around.

He’s so into the game, focused on watching and waiting for his next turn to go in, that he’s surprised with Allura is suddenly handing him a yellow headband.

He blinks at it. Then looks up at Allura. She’s grinning. “It’s show time.” She says, giving him a small wink and a laugh.

He glances past her to where Lance is jumping up and down across the pitch. He’s standing next to Hunk, who’s watching the gameplay intensely. As the head ref, Pidge has been on the field, moving with the quaffle play. Lance is stretching when he notices Keith looking. He grins, cocking his head to the side and flexing for a moment before shooting him finger guns.

Keith frowns, snatching the headband from Allura and handing her the white one he had been wearing. “He’s going down.”

Allura grins, clapping him on the shoulder. “That’s the spirit! Remember: take advantage of his ego.”

Keith gives her a wry smile. “Pidge said something similar. Is that just a well known Lance thing?”

Allura shrugs. “It’s just a well known snitch thing. They’re notorious show offs.”

Keith snorts. “I can see how Lance fits in then.”

Allura laughs at that, clapping him on the shoulder again. “Too true! But just so you know, he’s actually not that bad once you get to know him.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“So you’re going to stick around?”

“I didn’t— that’s not—“

“I’ll be nice to have you around, Keith.” She says, eyes glinting. “Now get ready, Hunk’s about to release Lance.”
Keith grabs a broom, puts it between his legs, and narrows his gaze in on Hunk. He’s looking down at a stopwatch in his hand, other hand held up in the air. “The snitch will be released in five… four… three…” He counts down with his fingers, voice carrying across the pitch. A few of the players stop the game to watch, letting the blue team slip past them to score. As far as Keith can tell, the score is pretty even. “Two… one… The snitch is loose!” He throws his hand down.

Lance skips forward a few steps, stopping with his arms held out wide as he glances between Keith and the blue team’s seeker. Both of them are running toward him, weaving through the players on the field. Keith lets the other seeker get ahead of him, and he dives straight for Lance, who easily holds him aside and pulls his broom out. The guy grunts, holding up his hands as he runs back to his hoops and Lance turns to face Keith.

“So we meet again.” He goes up on one foot, bringing up his other knee and holding his hands high in the air in what Keith thinks is supposed to be a mockery of some martial arts form. “Come at me, mullet!”

And Keith does. Only to be thrown to the side and tagged out by a bludger. He signs, jogging back to his hoops before he gets on his broom and tries again.

His next few tries are just as unsuccessful. He thinks it might work to take advantage of the other seeker capturing Lance’s attention to sneak in a grab from behind, but Lance is too experienced fighting off two seekers at once and Keith has no idea what he’s doing. He’s just winging it as he goes. He dives for openings he sees, he tries to figure out what seems right in the moment, but Lance is always there to stop him. He dances away with his ass held out too far for Keith to reach around him. His hands are on Keith’s shoulders, his arms, holding him off. At one point he even grabs Keith’s broom and starts to spin him around, forcing Keith to hold onto it with both hands to keep from losing it. He just ends up being tagged out by a bludger.

So as he finds out, seeking with another seeker in play and beaters there to stop him is an entirely new level of difficult. Add to that mix Lance’s uncanny ability to just know exactly where he and the other seeker are at all times, not to mention the beaters that help him, and Keith just can’t sneak up on him. He can’t surprise him. And Lance knows a surprising amount of defensive maneuvers and flips and other things that makes it impossible for Keith to simply bully into him.

And just to top it off, Lance does it all with that infuriating smirk and constant stream of taunting comments.

When he starts getting tired and frustrated, Allura calls him back, putting in another seeker to give him a break. He argues that he doesn’t need a rest, but Allura is firm and leaves no room for argument. So Keith stands on the sidelines, pouting as he watches Lance easily bat away any and all advances.

“Normally he’d be handicapped by now.” Allura says, suddenly at his side. “But I think Pidge and Hunk want the game to continue a little longer to give everyone a better feel for it.”

Keith hums, only half paying attention as he watches Lance, looking for any sign of weakness. His arms are crossed over his chest, fingers tapping at his arm. He leans on one leg, other foot tapping. He really wants to go back in. He really wants to be the one to catch the snitch.

He gets his chance when the other seeker starts dragging her feet, face twisted in frustration as she breathes heavily and jogs back to the hoops for what feels like the hundredth time.

“Cassy! Come back in!” Allura calls, waving the seeker to the sidelines. As she runs over, Allura puts a hand on Keith’s shoulder. “I’m gonna put you back in. I know how frustrating Lance can be,
but he’s *trying* to goad you. He knows it’ll make you sloppy. Just try to be patient. The opportunity will present itself. Patience yields focus.”

Keith starts, jerking to look at her as Cassy hands him the yellow headband. He stares at her, brow pinched.

“What?” She asks, raising one delicate eyebrow.

“Where did you hear that?” He asks slowly, slipping the headband onto his head.

“Hear what?”

“Patience yields focus.”

Her confusion clears, and suddenly she’s smiling this soft, barely there smile. “A friend of mine says it a lot. I like it. It keeps me grounded.”

Keith nods. “Me, too. My brother tells me that sometimes.”

“It’s a good saying. More people should know it.”

“Yeah, I agree.” His eyes roam over her arms, but he doesn’t see any marks. Nothing overly obvious anyway. And he suddenly feels heat creeping up his neck. He’s invading her privacy by so obviously looking for her soulmarks, and he hopes she hadn’t noticed.

He wants to ask more questions. He’s never heard anyone besides Shiro say that, but that doesn’t mean people don’t. After all, Shiro had to have gotten it from somewhere. It’s probably just a coincidence. Besides, right now he has a snitch to catch.

His next few tries are about as successful as his first. Lance flips him onto his back. Lance spins him around so a beater can hit him. Lance takes his broom from him and tosses it a little ways away. All while he grins at him. Keith can feel an itch beneath his skin. His heart hammers in his chest, adrenaline pumping through his veins as his frustration threatens to choke him. He wants to think that he’d be this frustrated if it was any other snitch. But he can’t shake the feeling that it’s the fact that it’s *Lance*.

After he runs back to his hoops for the fifth time in a row, he stops to just close his eyes and breathe. Breathe and try to steady his heart rate, calm down the raging fire in his chest.

*Patience yields focus.*

The voice in his head that’s always sounded like Shiro now has the lighter, more feminine overtones of Allura’s voice mixed in.

He grips his right hand tight, letting his fingertips trail over his palm where his soulmate has marked him beneath his gloves. Just like he always marks him. Every day, no matter what. And it’s in those brief, daily moments, that Keith feels everything melt around him, his entire being paying attention to the feeling of those words melding into his flesh, foreign emotions fluttering through his chest, with a single minded focus unlike anything he’s ever experienced.

A strange calm settles over him, and he hates that he had to resort to thinking about his soulmate to calm him, but it always works. No matter what, it always works. He doesn’t want to dwell on that.

Instead, he opens his eyes and focuses on Lance. An odd sense of calm clarity tingles across his limbs as he watches him, watches for anything he can use, any opening, any opportunity. He sees
Lance’s mannerisms, thinks about the way he defends, thinks about his reactions to surprises, his ways of dodging…

Lance’s eyes are on the other seeker, who’s currently running back to him. He takes up his usual pose: ass out and hands reaching out to hold the other seeker’s shoulders to keep him at bay.

And suddenly Keith is sprinting. The idea is only half formed, but he doesn’t even care. He’s rolling with it.

Lance sees him coming, glancing over his shoulder at his approach. Keith isn’t sure how he always seems to be aware of where the seekers are even with his back turned, but he doesn’t care. He sees the moment Lance’s smile drops, the moment he realizes that Keith is charging at his back at full speed. A quick glance around tells him that the enemy beaters aren’t in a position to stop him.

Lance turns back to the blue team seeker, all playfulness gone as he quickly rips their broom out from them and throws it aside. The seeker backs away, and Lance is spinning around to face Keith. But Keith is already there, and he’s not stopping. He doesn’t slow his momentum at all.

Before he hits him, Keith drops down stretching out a leg to go into a sloppy but effective slide. Lance has barely managed to turn around, already starting to take up his defensive snitch position when Keith drops. His eyes widen further, mouth dropping open as he reacts exactly how Keith had hoped he would: he jumps and he jumps high, legs splaying out to the sides as Keith passes harmlessly under him.

As he goes, he reaches up and grabs hold of the snitch, hearing the satisfying rip of velcro.

As his slide comes to a stop, Keith lays down on his back, holding the snitch up in the air. The whistle blows three times, and Keith can’t help the laugh that bubbles up his throat. He can’t believe that worked.

He can hear Lance sputtering somewhere nearby. “Wha— How the— Hunk! Was that even legal?”

“Looked like a clean grab to me, buddy.”

“But he slide tackled me!”

“I didn’t actually touch you though.” Keith says, tilting his head back to look up at Lance.

He whips around to glare down at him. “I bet you just think you’re so cool, don’t you, mullet?”

Keith can’t help it. The grumpy saltiness in Lance’s voice is too much. His lips quirk into a wide grin, and he can feel it crinkling his eyes. “I’d say so, yeah.”

He didn’t think it was possible, but Lance’s expression pinches even more. His back straightens, lips pursing together, nose crinkling as a flush starts to spread across his cheeks. It’s hilarious and oddly adorable, and Keith laughs, hand with the snitch falling to lay across his stomach.

He can hear his team cheering somewhere across the pitch, but above that he hears Lance’s mumbled. “Whatever.” And then Lance is there, standing near his feet. He has one hand on his hip and he’s scowling, but his other hand is held outstretched toward him.

Keith stares at it, smile dropping to make way for bewilderment as he looks from the hand to Lance’s face. He raises a questioning eyebrow.

Lance rolls his eyes, scoffing softly. “I guess that was a good catch.”
Keith feels the ghost of a smile curving his lips, and he reaches out to take his hand. Lance pulls him roughly to his feet. His hand is warm in his own. Very warm. Which Keith supposes is to be expected when they’ve both been running around like they have. But there’s a strange… spark, a weird minor tingling where Keith’s fingertips make contact with Lance’s skin. The palm of his right hand burns even through the material of his sports gloves, echoing fire radiating from his inner wrist.

But then Lance lets go, and the feeling is instantly gone, leaving him to question whether it had ever been there at all. It was so strange, but so brief, and it had to have been his imagination. There’s no other explanation.

Adrenaline does weird things.

“But you just caught me off guard. Now that I know you’re a crafty little shit, don’t expect me to go easy on you.” Lance is smirking again, but it’s more good natured than anything he’s seen so far. He feels the tug at his own lips in response.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Lance isn’t upset because he got caught. It’s the snitches job to get caught. A snitch should make it as difficult as possible to get caught, but in the end, the game isn’t over until he is. It’s inevitable. It has to happen every game. Every time he’s snitched a game, he’s been caught eventually in one way or another. Fact of life. So that’s not why he’s upset.

He’s upset because Keith caught him.

Well… upset is a strong word. He’s not really upset. He can’t say he didn’t expect it. Despite his taunting, he could tell that Keith was the most impressive of the potential seekers. He kind of knew Keith would be the one to catch him, despite all his efforts to keep him at bay. Still… the guy could have at least waiting until he had been handicapped. Let him hold onto his pride a little bit.

And it doesn’t help that despite how much he wants to hate Keith for catching him, he can’t help but admit, if only to himself, that it was a good play. It was the exact kind of creative, sneaky, and reckless cheese play that he would have come up with himself. And he pulled it off probably better than Lance could have himself… Probably. He doesn’t want to be impressed, yet here he is. Impressed by none other than Keith. And it’s rude as fuck.

So no, he’s not really upset, per se. He’s just… salty.

And to rub more salt in that fresh wound, his friends invited Keith to eat dinner with them. Again, just another thing he should have expected. Keith is, after all, Pidge’s close friend. And all of his other friends seem to really like the guy. Even Hunk seems to like him. And Hunk is a great judge of character.

Still, Lance doesn’t have to concede to giving him a chance just yet. He’ll think about it… maybe.

And that’s how he finds himself in the dining hall with his closest friends. They’re sitting three on each side of the table, and he’s on the end. Unfortunately, across from Keith. He does his best to ignore him, refusing to make eye contact or talk to him unless he has to. Instead, he’s turned sideways, deep in conversation with Hunk about whether or not pineapple should be allowed on
pizza.

That is, until Allura leans forward, elbows on the table to look around Pidge to where Keith is sitting. “So, Keith,” She starts, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Since we just came from quidditch practice, I feel like we’re obligated to have the Hogwarts house conversation.”

Her sudden declaration has drawn Hunk’s attention, so Lance finds himself looking up, glancing sideways to Keith. The guy is sitting there, face blank, before turning to Pidge, one eyebrow raised.

Pidge shrugs. “The ‘what Hogwarts house are you in’ conversation.”

“You make it sound so serious.”

“Keith, it is serious.” Pidge deadpans, giving him a flat stare.

Keith just shrugs. “I haven’t really thought about it.”

“Well think about it now.”

Keith frowns, brow pinching and nose crinkling as he stares down at his food. Lance refuses to admit that it might be a little adorable. Okay, so maybe Keith can express something other than angry and grumpy. Who knew?

“I guess, if I had to choose… Gryffindor?”

Lance gasps maybe a little louder than he meant to, but he rolls with it, one hand clutched to his chest while the other grabs the table, holding him steady as he leans back.

Keith glares at him, a small put on his lips. “What?” He snaps, sounding wary and defensive.

Lance finds himself smirking. “I’m just surprised you have taste.”

Keith just looks confused.

Hunk sighs, patting Lance’s shoulder. “Lance is the only one of us who identifies as a Gryffindor.” He explains, sounding for all the world like an exasperated and disappointed mother. Rude.

Lance throws his hands up in the air. “That’s because Gryffindor is obviously the best house! I mean, hello, all the main characters of the series are Gryffindors!”

“Exactly,” Pidge says, adjusting their glasses as they grin at him. “Annoyingly reckless kids who decided to do everything themselves instead of asking for help when they’re up against the wizard equivalent of Hitler.”

“They did it tho!”

Pidge crosses their arms over their chest. “Everyone knows Gryffindors are just the loud, obnoxious jocks and frat boys of Hogwarts.”

“You’re just jealous cause we’re the brave ones!”

Pidge’s grin widens. “Thanks for proving my point.”

“Ugh!” He looks to Keith, gesturing to Pidge. “See what I have to deal with? Wait, you’ve dealt with them for longer. How the hell did you deal with that for so long?”
Keith shrugs, a small smile tugging at his lips as he leans back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest. “Do you really think I had a choice?”

Lance looks away from him, eyes narrowing as he looks Pidge over. They’re still grinning. “You have a point.”

“So what houses are you guys in then?” Keith asks.

Hunk straightens, lifting two fingers in a peace sign as he smiles, tilting his head to the side. “Hufflepuff all the way.”

“Allura says, and she and Hunk high five across the table.

“I’m a Ravenclaw.” Coran says, tugging on his collar with one hand while his other twirls the ends of his mustache. “Wit beyond measure is man’s greatest treasure, you know!”

“I’m a Ravenclaw, too.” Pidge says, and Lance snorts.

He leans forward, one hand flat on the table while the other points at them. He narrows his eyes. “I’m pretty sure you’re a Slytherin.”

Pidge just shrugs, grin turning mischievous. “It’s debatable. I’m fine with either, really.”

Keith snorts. “Nerds.”

At that, Lance starts, leaning back in his seat with his mouth hanging open. Keith looks at him, one eyebrow raised, and Lance can feel his face breaking out into a wide grin as he laughs. “Keith, my man! My dude!” He holds a fist out over the table.

Keith stares at it for a moment before looking up to meet his eyes. His face is mostly blank, but he can’t quite hide the small smile there. Lance can see it reflecting in his eyes. He lifts a hand and obligingly bumps their fists.

The conversation shifts, but Lance hasn’t forgotten or forgiven the slight on his honor and his house. He subtly shreds a napkin, rolling the pieces into tiny balls. He catches Keith’s eye and when the guy gives him a curious look, he just winks. He passes half of his stash across the table, and before Keith can question him, he’s started flicking the balls down the table. When he lands one in Coran’s cup, he throws up a hand. “Ten points to Gryffindor!”

A game starts then. They arrange three cups at both ends of their groups and improvise a ridiculous version of beer pong. Keith and Lance try to score on the cups on the other side of Allura and Coran, while they try to defend them while trying to score on the cups next to Keith and Lance. Hunk and Pidge referee and commentate in overly animated announcer voices. Every time they score, Lance and Keith high five, declaring points for their honor as Gryffindors.

Lance is surprised when he finds Keith smiling and laughing with him, at his jokes and his antics. Whenever he and Keith exchange looks, a mischievous glint in the other’s eyes and a smirk on his lips, Lance feels a weird clench in his chest. They argue and insult each other when they miss a throw or fail a block, but it lacks any real heat.

They end up winning the impromptu game, and as Lance watches Keith wrap an arm around Pidge’s neck, rubbing their hair with his knuckles and ignoring their screaming protests, Lance finds himself thinking that maybe, just maybe, Keith isn’t so bad after all.

Maybe.
It’s not until he’s back in his dorm and peeling off his snitch socks that he realizes that he hasn’t thought about his soulmarks all day. He blames Keith.

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> So how’d it go?

Keith
> Fine

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> ………

Keith
> What?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> That’s seriously all I get?

Keith
> What more do you want?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Tell me how it was. Did you have fun? Do you like Pidge’s friends?
> Give me something to go on or I’ll come over there and sit on you until you do

Keith
> Shiro I’m not ten anymore that shit doesn’t work

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Do you really want to risk that?

Keith
> I can lock the door

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> You gave me a key >:)

Keith
> ….
> Fair enough
> It was more fun than I thought it would be
> And most of Pidge’s friends are cool

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Most of them?

Keith
> Remember that one guy who spilled my smoothie on me on the first day of classes?
Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE) > Oh no

Keith > Yeah, he’s one of them

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE) > Keith. > Did you play nice?

Keith > WHY DO YOU ALWAYS ASSUME I WON’T??

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE) > Because I know you. > How did it go?

Keith > He’s just as insufferable as I thought he was

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE) > Was he an ass to you?

Keith > Yes?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE) > Why is that a question?

Keith > He was, but… I guess he’s not so bad > Not totally anyway > I guess I can give him a chance for Pidge’s sake

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE) > Awwww :) My baby bro is growing up and being mature

Keith > Stop

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE) > I’m proud of you :)

Keith > STOP

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE) > So do you think you’ll keep going?

Keith > …. Yeah I think I will > You should join us at some point
Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> I think that can be arranged :)
> If anything, I can go to cheer on my baby bro
> Do you think they sell airhorns and pompoms at Walmart?

Keith
> Why are you like this?

Chapter End Notes

There weren't too many soulmate shenanigans in this chapter, but never fear, it's still a soulmate au. I just think it's important to establish friendships, lives, and settings outside of just the soulmate interactions to create a well rounded story and characters. The soulmark hijinks will pick up in the next couple of chapters now that Lance and Keith have officially met and the gang's all coming together B)

Feel free to come by my tumblr if you have any questions regarding this au and the logistics of the soulmate stuff. Or to just scream at/with me. That's always fine, too. Follow me and Sora for updates on what we're working on ^_^

Also, we check the tags "fic: the marks we make" and "fic: tmwm" if you scream about us on tumblr!

PLEASE DO NOT REPOST THE ART FROM THIS FIC

Instead, hop on over here and reblog it from the artist herself HERE

Wittyy's Tumblr (author)
Wittyy's Twitter (author)
Sora's Tumblr (artist)
Take Our Breath Away

Chapter Summary

In which there's bro time, bonding, and a boy drowning in stars.

Chapter Notes

Sora and I put together a playlist for this fic, filled with songs that make us think of this au and altogether create the vibe that we associate with this fic. You can find it here, and a tumblr post for it here! I like to listen to this playlist while writing for this, so if you're into listening to music while you read, I recommend it.

Thank you guys so much for all your comments! They mean so much to us, and we read every one <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Why in all that is sweet and holy, do you have butter free popcorn?” Pidge asks, leaning back from where they are rummaging in Keith’s cupboards to hold the offending box out with two fingers, like it might somehow rear back and bite them

Keith glances up from where he’s scrolling through Netflix and gives a half hearted shrug. “It’s Shiro’s. He likes it plain so he can add whatever the fuck to it. It’s different every time.”

“He needs to stop reading so many food blogs.” Pidge grumbles, putting the box back.

Keith grunts his agreement and says, “There’s real popcorn further towards the back.”

“Found it. Good old movie theater butter. You’re a lie. You don’t taste like movie theater butter, but you’re good nonetheless.” Keith can hear Pidge rummaging around in his small corner kitchen, ripping open the plastic and throwing the popcorn bag into the microwave before turning it on. He’s already turned back to the tv, ps4 controller in hand as he scrolls Netflix. “Speaking of lies, what’re we gonna watch tonight?”

“Terrible movies or conspiracies?”

Pidge flops over the back of the couch, putting their elbows on Keith’s shoulders and letting their arms flop straight out in front of him. They rest their chin atop his head. They hum in thought. “I’m thinking conspiracies. It’s been a while.”

“It has been a while, so there’re also a lot of new terrible movies.”

“Truuuuue, but I stand by my decision.”

“Fair enough. Aliens or other conspiracies?”

“Aliens.”
“Classics, favorites, or something new?”

“Hmm… favorites that we haven’t seen in a while.”

“Unsealed: Alien Files?”

“Only if we agree to binge watch them until we either finish or pass out.”

“What time is it now?”

Pidge removes an arm from his shoulders to pull out their phone. “Almost seven.”

“How long will it take to watch it all?”

They tilt their head, calculating silently. “Somewhere in the ballpark of eight hours?”

Keith snorts. “You’re not gonna fall asleep before three am anyway.”

Pidge shrugs. “But you probably will, cause you stupidly signed up for an eight am class on Fridays, so you’ve been up all day.”

Keith’s chin tilts downward a fraction, lips pursing. “Mistakes were made.” He says grimly.

Pidge chuckles, standing up straight and playfully patting his head. “I warned you.”

Keith swats their hand away. “Shiro said it wouldn’t be that bad.”

“And who’re you gonna believe? Me? Or that robotic, cheerful morning person you call a brother?”

“Good point. I don’t know how he does it. Did you know he sometimes goes for a run at five in the morning? Five, Pidge.”

Pidge heaves a bone deep sigh, like the mere thought of Shiro’s morning habits is enough to leave them physically exhausted. “He’s an anomaly.”

“Tell me about it.” Keith mumbles. The microwave dings, and Pidge returns to the small kitchen to take it out and put in another bag. They busy themselves trying to find a bowl to dump the popcorn into while Keith gets the show set up. He settles back, shifting his feet up onto the couch and pulling his knees to his chest. He leans back against the corner of the couch to watch Pidge. “So are we gonna get real food or just snack all night?”

Pidge rolls their eyes, shuffling over to shove a bowl of popcorn into his lap before going to get the second bag out of the microwave. “I’m thinking popcorn now, pizza later. Not from the cafeteria, cause that pizza is balls, especially from the late shift. We’re ordering delivery from off campus.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Pidge settles on the other side of the couch with their own popcorn bowl, tucking their feet under them and setting the bowl aside to pull their laptop into their lap. He hits play and settles back onto the couch, pulling his phone out to idly scroll through his apps. They pass most of the first episode like that, each of them settling into their own spots and wrapped up in their own devices. Keith plays sudoku on his phone with one hand, using the other to lift the bowl to his face to snatch popcorn with his tongue, eyes occasionally darting to the tv. Pidge’s fingers fly away on their keyboard, and the rhythmic tap-tap-tap is familiar and soothing. They look up occasionally, making a face or a comment on the documentary, which Keith either responds to with an agreeable grunt or a short remark.
It’s cozy and it’s familiar. They haven’t gotten to hang out like this in what feels like forever. They used to do it for days on end whenever Pidge came home on breaks, but the months between while they had been at college had been hard. He had missed this. More than he had realized.

Even now that he’s going to the same university and living close to campus, they haven’t really gotten a chance to hang out one on one. Not between them both settling into the semester and general groove of class life, quidditch practice three times a week, and other general friend activities. Not that he hasn’t seen Pidge. He sees Pidge a lot, actually. Their friend group adopted him pretty quickly and he’s found himself hanging out with all or parts of them more often than not. But they haven’t gotten a chance to do this. To hang out one on one, in the comfort of one of their own homes and not on campus, and to just relax in each other’s company.

Pidge is the only one he can do this with, and he cherishes these moments. They helped calm him a lot when he was younger, and especially after his parents died. They gave him a place of peace when everything else in his life was unknown and hectic. Pidge managed to do what even Shiro struggled to do: make Keith feel normal again.

Pidge isn’t the person he goes to when he wants someone strong to ground him. That’s Shiro. Pidge isn’t the person he goes to when he’s feeling inexplicably weak and vulnerable and needs someone to provide unconditional emotional support and a few playful distractions. That’s his soulmate. He hates having to resort to that, to rely on someone he doesn’t know when he’s at his most vulnerable, but it’s true. Pidge isn’t any of those things.

Pidge is the person Keith goes to when he wants to feel like himself, the person who will gladly pretend like nothing’s wrong and give him a much needed distraction when everything is chaos around him. Pidge is the eye of the storm, calm, steady, and reliable. An anchor when the waves are crashing around him, tugging and pulling and threatening to drag him under. Pidge is a keystone in his life, and he loves them for that.

Sometimes he thinks life might be easier if Pidge was his soulmate. And that might be true, if he had ever actually been romantically or physically attracted to them. He hasn’t though. Pidge is family, and he doesn’t have a lot of that left, so he treasures what he has.

And like a true family member, sometimes Pidge resorts to casual smalltalk.

“So how’re your classes going?” They ask somewhere in the middle of episode three. Keith is nearly done with his popcorn, having snacked on it consistently, but Pidge has barely touched theirs. It’s a bad habit they have. They get so hyper focused on too many things at once that essentials like food, water, and sleep get pushed to the back burner.

Keith groans, slouching further onto the couch. “You’re doing it again.” He complains, stretching out a foot to gently nudge Pidge’s popcorn bowl.

Without a word, almost as if they subconsciously take the hint, they reach for the bowl and shove a handful of popcorn into their mouth. “Doing what?” They say, mouth full.

“Sounding like Shiro.”

Pidge snorts, rolling their eyes, finally looking away from the keyboard to give Keith a flat look. “Okay, for one, Shiro isn’t the only one who cares about how you’re doing. I’m offended.” They’ve started counting off on their fingers. “For two, I’m your best friend and honorary sibling, so I’m expected to bug you about your life. For three, this is college, Keith. Everyone always asks how classes are going, all the time always. Get used to it. And for four, real talk, I do care about how you’re doing here because I’m excited that you’re finally in school with me again.”
point at him, giving him a stern expression. “So humor me: how are your classes?”

Keith snorts a short laugh to signal that he’ll play along, but before he says anything else, he leans forward, taking Pidge’s computer off their lap.

“Hey!”

Despite their protest, they don’t try to stop him as he moves it to the coffee table. He then puts their popcorn bowl in their lap and leans back again. “I’ll talk, but only if you eat.”

Pidge rolls their eyes. “Fiiiine, geez, you’re worst than Matt.” They grumble, slouching down against the couch cushions.

Keith smirks, raising an eyebrow. “Matt would insist you eat a well balanced meal. At least I’m just using popcorn.”

“You have a fair point.” They said, munching thoughtfully. “Now talk.”

Keith shrugs. “There’s not much to say. Classes are classes. They’re not that much different from community college. Actually, they’re kind of easier.”

Pidge looks skeptical. “Really?”

Keith shrugs with one shoulder and waves around a few popcorn pieces, gesturing vaguely. “Yeah, like the teachers there feel like they have something to prove so they make their classes harder. I dunno.” Pidge hums thoughtfully, shoving their face with popcorn. They may often forget to eat, but if it’s the only thing they’re doing, boy do they eat fast. “But I’ve also got most of my gen ed classes out of the way, so I’m able to focus on my major, so thats nice.”

Pidge snorts. “I bet. I’m so done with gen ed. But you still have a few gen ed classes to take that you didn’t at your community college, right?”

“Unfortunately.”

“Like your public speaking class.”

“Like that one.”

“The same one you have with Lance.”

“That… is a fact.”

“How’s he doing?”

“I don’t know. You saw him more recently than me.”

“Keeeeith,” Pidge says, drawing out his name in the way they always do when they’re tired of him. They stretch out a foot to nudge his leg with their toes. “You know what I mean, you fuck nut. How’re you and Lance getting along?”

Keith stares at them flatly. “Pidge. You hang out with us both every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday between classes.”

Pidge rolls their eyes and nudges harder. “I know that, you tangled ball of yarn.” Keith raises both eyebrows questioningly, and Pidge waves him off. “I’ve been spending too much time with Hunk. He assures me tangled yarn is exceptionally annoying. Point is, I know the three of us hang out,
and you guys seem fine, despite your stupid little competitions—“

“They’re not stupid.” Keith grumbles.

“—but I want to know how you guys get along when I’m not there.”

Keith shrugs. “The same as when you are there.”

“Keith.”

“I’m serious, Pidge. It’s fine. He’s fine.”

Pidge looks him over for several long moment, and Keith meets their gaze unflinchingly. It’s a battle of wills until Pidge finally sighs, running a hand through their hair and… biting their bottom lip? Pidge looks down and away, and both of Keith’s eyebrows instinctively raise, curious and confused. Pidge almost never looks… nervous? Is that what this is? Nervous? Anxious? Perhaps a little sheepish?

“Alright, if you say it’s fine, I’ll believe you…” They mumble, using the tv as an excuse not to look at Keith, though he had a feeling they’re not really watching the episode. “I just… I know he can be a handful. Especially if he feels like he has something to prove or whatever. A lot of times he comes across as an arrogant dick. I know this. Hunk knows this. We all do. But he’s not actually like that. I wouldn’t be friends with him if that’s all there was to him. It’s just… this weird defensive thing he does.” Pidge glances sidelong at him, and Keith just stares. “It’s just… I know you guys didn’t exactly get off to a great start, and I know he’s embarrassed and defensive, and he can be a pain in the ass when he’s like that, and you don’t exactly have a high tolerance for people who are a pain in the ass, and I know you guys bicker a lot, and—“

“Pidge.”

“—it’s not a weird thing to bicker with Lance, I mean, that’s basically how we interact all the time, but I can’t tell if it’s friendly bickering or an excuse to fight—“

Pidge!”

“—and I wish I could talk some sense into him, but he can be so dense sometimes, and I dunno why he feels like he needs to prove whatever to you, but I know how easily you can be goaded, so it’s probably annoying to have him do that to you twenty-four-seven—“

“PIDGE!” Keith practically has to shout to get their attention and yank them out of their ramble. He also drives his point home by shoving his foot against their shoulder, pushing them over against the arm of the couch. But they finally stop talking in order to glare at him.

“You know, it’s entirely unfair that you’re not ticklish, so I can’t punish you for this.” They grumble, swatting his foot away.

He smirks, pulling his knee back to his chest. “Look, when I said everything is fine, I meant that it’s fine.”

“So… Lance?”

“Is annoying, but not any more so than you.”

“I’m not sure whether to be offended or not.” They say, cocking a wry smile. Keith finds himself smiling, too. Pidge sighs, shaking their head. “Sorry, I just… you’re both really important to me,
and I want you to get along.”

“We do,” Keith assures them, then smirks. “For the most part.”

“So… in class?”

“We sit next to each other, and he tries to talk to me and gets us both in trouble.”

Pidge’s lips curl into a small, knowing smile. “You talk to him, too, don’t you?”

Keith shrugs, idly biting into a couple pieces of popcorn as he looks at the tv. “He can be funny sometimes.”

Pidge laughs. “Don’t let him hear you say that. He’ll be insufferable.” Their grin is wide and bright, and all traces of the nervous Pidge from moments ago are gone. “I knew you guys would get along once you got past that stupid smoothie incident.”

“Uh, yeah. That’s… we moved past that.”

It had taken a couple weeks, but they had finally moved past it. Despite mostly getting along while they were in a group setting, they had all but ignored each other in their shared class. Neither of them wanted to bring up the embarrassing incident from the first day, and neither of them had really known how to act around each other without Pidge or the others as a buffer. Luckily, Keith has never been a patient one, and it only took two weeks of classes before he got fed up with the tension between them.

He had also realized, after calming down and looking at it in hindsight, that okay, so maaaybe Lance apologized after knocking over his smoothie. But he had been a dick after that with Keith’s sketchbook!… Still, Keith’s own behavior might have had something to do with that…

Yeah, okay, so he’s still not completely over the whole incident, but it’s more from personal embarrassment than actual anger at Lance. It took a long and stubborn talk with Shiro to get him to admit that he was just as much to blame for their terrible first meeting and for him to admit he should probably do something about it.

The method of apology had been Shiro’s idea.

He had asked Hunk what Lance’s favorite smoothie is and bought him one on the way to class. He had been fidgety and anxious, preparing to swallow his pride and apologize for being a dick. What he hadn’t been prepared for, however, was Lance bringing him a smoothie as well. They had stared at each other, smoothies in hand, both trying to talk over the other before stopping and then starting again at the same time, before they had both started laughing. Keith had been sure that his face was as red as Lance’s, and that the whole class was staring at them, but it didn’t matter. Lance sat next to him that day, and has been ever since.

Sometimes he has to admit that maybe Shiro knows what he’s talking about… Sometimes.

Since then, a lot of the tension between them has dissolved. They’re not best friends, and Keith would still be hesitant to hang out with him one on one, but that’s nothing new or shocking. He doesn’t make friends easily or often. He’d be hesitant to hang out with Hunk, and he’s the most genuine and kind person Keith knows. Still, while things aren’t perfect, they’re good enough that he can confidently say he doesn’t hate Lance, and that’s enough to satisfy Pidge.

They’re nearly done with episode four when Pidge sets their empty bowl aside and pulls their laptop back into their lap. It takes them no time at all to get back to typing. It’s quick and steady,
only with pauses when Pidge glances up at the tv. Their eyes are hard focused, nose slightly
scrunched, tip of their tongue pressed to their upper lip. He knows that look. Pidge only gets like
this when they’re hyper focused and super excited about a project.

After Pidge angrily pushes their bangs out of their face with a soft growl for perhaps the tenth time
in a row, Keith chuckles, earning him a small glare.

“Want a headband?”

The glare lessens into something akin to relief. “That would be great, actually.”

He nods and slides off the couch, scouring his small apartment for his wayward headbands. He
finds one on his nightstand, and another tossed haphazardly onto his dresser. He hands one to
Pidge, who takes it with a muttered thanks, before putting the other on himself, pushing his hair
out of his face. Normally his hair doesn’t bother him, but there are just somedays when it bothers
the ever living shit out of him to have it hanging in front of his eyes. Tonight is one of those nights.
It’s a relaxation night. He can’t be assed to bother with his hair. And apparently neither can Pidge.

As soon as their hair is secured away from their forehead, Pidge is hunched over again, fingers
flying. He doesn’t think they realize it, but when they get really focused, their keystrokes become
like music, rhythmic and precise, rising and falling as it sets a tempo to some song that only they
are privy to.

Keith eyes them for a moment before leaning over. “What’re you working on?”

It looks like they’re sending an email, but it’s filled with paragraphs and calculations and graphs
and a shit ton of things that Keith doesn’t really want to read.

Pidge pauses at that, shifting slightly so their back is more to the arm of the couch and their laptop
is turned a little away from them. Keith eyes them curiously, and Pidge looks away, lifting a finger
to scratch at their cheek.

“I, uh, had an epiphany recently about my SM’s hover engine theories. I realized some of the
mistakes we made in our late night calculations.”

Keith smirks. “Imagine that. Not being able to think properly at four in the morning.”

Pidge rolls their eyes, smiling slightly as they shove his shoulder. “Shut up. Anyway, I ran some of
the numbers again and gathered some data, and I’m really not going to get into the meat of it with
you cause you wouldn’t understand anyway.”

“I should probably be a little offended, but honestly, you’re probably right.” He leans back,
gesturing to his own arm. “So why don’t you just… you know?”

And that’s when Pidge turns sheepish. They look down at their computer, at the tv, at the coffee
table, across the room. They reach up to scratch the back of their neck. “Well, I, uh… It’s a lot to
just, write out on my skin, you know? And I’m not very big, so I don’t now if I’d have enough
room. It’s not like I can use my back or something. So I, uh… I asked for their email?”

Keith gapes at them, jaw gone slack and eyes wide. “You asked… for their email?”

“Yes! Okay, stop, before you get into it—“

“You said you weren’t going to ask for personal information until you either met naturally or you
were older—“
“—I know that! I know! And I still stand by it! I still don’t know their name—“

“—You asked for their email but not their name—“

“—Yes! Okay! Keith, hear me out—“

“—oh my god—“

“Keith!” Pidge somehow manages to shift their laptop aside and launch themselves across the couch to slap a hand over Keith’s mouth. “Just listen to me, okay?” He stares at them through slightly narrowed eyes, but obligingly nods. They sigh and lean back. “Okay, look, I’ve just been thinking about it, and I know we talked about how neither of us were going to ask for personal information about our SMs and just wait for the universe to naturally bring us together—“

“We had a pact, Pidge.”

“A pact we made when we were kids! Don’t get me wrong, the thought of meeting my SM right now is still terrifying, and I’m not ready to be with my forever-partner just yet, but it can’t hurt to just… know a little bit more about them? I want to know more about them. And besides, it’s not like I asked for their name, number, and location. Hell, I don’t even know their pronouns. I just asked for their email so I could send them some information I dug up for their project, since it’s easier than writing all this on myself.” They gesture to their computer before their hands settle in their lap.

They look down at them, fingers idly fidgeting with each other. They both look and sound small, and Keith doesn’t like that one bit.

“It was meant to be a practical solution, but it feels good, Keith. I feel like I’m actually helping them. It’s just their email, but I feel closer to them. When you just communicate through soulmarks, it’s easy to forget that they’re real. There’s a real person out there, destined for me. And I may not be ready to meet them yet, but I don’t regret taking this step.” They look up, giving him a wry, lopsided smile. “Don’t expect me to go all lovey dovey like Hunk is with his SM, but I think he might be onto something with the whole getting to know them and getting closer thing.”

Keith sighs, setting aside his empty bowl in order to scoot across the couch. He wraps an arm around Pidge’s shoulders and pulls them into his side. They lean in willingly, but they still feel stiff.

“Are you mad at me?” They ask quietly, uncertain, and Keith decides he doesn’t like that tone coming from Pidge. It doesn’t suit them.

He sighs loudly, slouching further into the couch and squeezing them against him. “No.” He says truthfully. “How can I be mad at you for wanting to feel closer to your SM? It’s a normal feeling.”

“One that you actively ignore.”

Keith just shrugs. “That’s my decision. I’m not mad at you, Pidge.” Pidge finally relaxes into him, and they sit in silence for a while, content to simply let the show play. It’s Keith who finally breaks the silence. “You know… with your skills, you could easily find them now that you have their email.”

He can’t see Pidge’s face in their current position, but he can hear it in their voice. “I know, but I’m not going to. I still want to meet them naturally, whenever we’re destined to. I just… like feeling closer. Having some kind of proof that whoever they are, where ever they are, they exist.”
Keith nods, but doesn’t say anything. They settle back into comfortable silence, which is broken by the occasional discussion sparked by the show they’re watching. Pidge doesn’t move to take back their laptop just yet, and Keith doesn’t push it.

He’s often so focused on what Pidge is and means to him, that he sometimes forgets what he might mean to Pidge. He never wants Pidge to feel like he’ll be mad regarding their decisions about their SM. Those are Pidge’s decisions to make, even if they’re not ones he would make for himself. He wants Pidge to know he’ll always be there for them, no matter what. He doesn’t know how to say it, however, so he shows it by letting them snuggle close. And he takes comfort from the fact that he knows Pidge will understand his meaning. Even without words.

They’ve already started the sixth episode and just ordered pizza when Pidge says, “You know…” And Keith knows that voice.

“Whatever you’re going to say, the answer is no.”

Pidge continues on like he hadn’t spoken. “Maybe you should consider talking to your SM.”

Keith tenses. He should have known this is where that was going. “I change my answer to definitely no.”

Pidge sighs, rolling their eyes. “Come on, Keith. Do you ever talk to him?”

Keith looks away, fingers curling to touch the palm of his left hand where his SM’s most recent pick-up line is marking his skin. The leather of his gloves is warm against his fingertips. He crosses his arms over his chest to hide the action. “Sometimes…”

“Really? Because you haven’t really talked about him, and I haven’t seen you talk to him since high school.”

“We talk sometimes.” Keith says defensively, glaring at Pidge. He crumbles a bit under the weight of their stare, so he amends his statement. “He talks to me sometimes.”

“And do you ever write back?”

“…No?”

He doesn’t think his paintings count, and he doesn’t really want to tell Pidge about them. It’s… private. He doesn’t know why he’s so secretive about his body paintings, but he is. It’s… it’s how he works through his own emotional baggage, the stuff he doesn’t want to bother his friends with. His SM being able to see it and feel it is just a side effect. And it’s just… he likes having his SM as his sole audience. It’s just between them. Pidge has seen some of his artwork throughout the years, but he’s never shown them any of the things he’s done on his body, and he’s never shown them the drawings of his recreated soulmarks.

“Jesus, Keith. I knew you were a little constipated when it came to your SM, but this is ridiculous.” Keith just sinks lower on the couch, knees pulled up and arms crossed over his chest. “What do they even say to you?”

His hands itch. Yesterday’s pick up line is faded on his right palm. There’s no way in hell he’s going to tell Pidge that his soulmate sends him a pick up line every morning. God, no. “It’s private.” He grumbles.

Pidge sighs. “Fine, don’t tell me, but don’t you think you’re being a little rude?”
Keith looks at them then, a scowl on his face. “Um, no? It’s my decision whether or not I want to talk to them.”

“Yeah, and I get why you’re so skeptical of soulmates and why you’re scared and all that—“

“I’m not scared.”

“—but you’re this guy’s soulmate, too. You talked to him when you were younger, but then go years ignoring him and he still tries to talk to you. He probably thinks about you all the time, and you ignore his existence. He’s too good for you.”

Keith glares at them. “Pidge…”

They shrug. “I’m just saying, it seems a little mean. Maybe you should try talking to him a little? Learn something about him. Give him a little piece of yourself so he doesn’t feel so alone.”

“You don’t know he feels alone.”

“I know I would, if my SM was like that.” They say softly, not looking at Keith. And god dammit, how is he supposed to fight Pidge when they’re looking like that? God fuck dammit. Pidge doesn’t play fair.

“I… draw to them… sometimes…” Keith says awkwardly, not willing to give out the extent of his paintings, but trying to give Pidge something so they’ll stop making him feel like a terrible person.

It doesn’t work.

“It’s not enough. You should say something to him. With words. Doesn’t matter what it is. It’ll mean a lot to him. Promise.”

Keith sighs loud and long, trailing off into a groan as he sinks so low that he’s practically lying on the couch. He knows he’s not going to win this. Pidge will keep bugging him until he does it. And if he continues to protest, he knows they’re just going to pull out the big, sappy guns and guilt him into it.

Why does he surround himself with people who guilt him into doing nice things? It just isn’t fair.

Pidge hands him a pen, which he takes reluctantly, staring at it like it might burst into flames. “What do I write?”

“I don’t know, anything.”

“Piiiidge.”

“Come on, Keith, I can’t hold your hand through life.”

“You’re making me do this, so you have to help me think of something. I’m not good at this.”

“Well, have you guys ever talked about anything related to your interests?”

 “…Not really.”

“Hmmm…” Pidge stares at the tv in thought, and Keith watches them. He sees the moment an idea light up their face. They snap their fingers, turning to him with a wide smile. “I got it! Ask him about Mothman!”
Keith deadpans. "Mothman?"

"Yeah!" Keith has sat up a little straight at this point, mostly to keep himself from falling onto the floor, and Pidge leans over to shake his shoulders. "Keith! Mothman!" They repeat, like that will somehow get him to understand. He just stares at them until they continue. "Think about it! It’s perfect! You love cryptids. We love them. It’s a crazy random ice breaker, and it’ll give him an incite to your interests while you get the same thing! He’ll be happy that you’re talking to him and sharing something about yourself. I’m a genius."

"Pidge, I don’t know…"

"Keith, just do it."

"Ugh…"

"I’ll pay for the pizza if you do it."

"Deal."

And with that, he bites the cap of the pen to pull it off and sets the tip to his forearm. Taking a deep breath and setting aside all his mixed feelings about this, promptly ignoring the ball of tight anxiety coiling in his gut, he takes the plunge and writes the first words he’s said to his SM in years.

_Do you believe in Mothman?_

---

"Hunk, don’t scratch!" Lance snaps, slapping Hunk’s hand away.

"But Laaance! It itches!" Hunk whines, holding his hand to his chest. He looks at him with big wide eyes and a pouty bottom lip, and it’s both hilarious and adorable while his hair is pushed straight upward by his headband and his face is covered in the green face mask.

Lance shakes a finger at him, fixing him with stern eyes. “That means it’s working. Now leave it alone and let it dry, dude.”

Hunk let’s his arms drop to his sides and falls over in the beanbag, flopping over the side of it while whining low in his throat and giving Lance a blank stare. At least he’s careful not to smear the mask everywhere. He lays there, boneless, and Lance settles back into his own beanbag, slouching down and wiggling until his nest is just right as he brings up his old Gameboy Color. He has to lie at just the right position in order to get the right light on the screen.

“How much longer?” Hunk asks after a moment.

“Like ten minutes, dude. I set a timer.” Hunk whines again, and lance reaches out to absently pat his hair. “You’ll be alright, buddy. It’s good for you.”

“I don’t know how you have the patience for this, Lance. It’s so itchy.” He scratches under his chin, like somehow scratching near the mask will alleviate some of it. Lance gives him a sideways glare to keep him from touching the mask itself.
“The cost of beauty, my friend. You get used to it.”

Hunk grunts and continues to stare at him for a few more moments. “Are you gonna play that game all night?” He asks, something cautiously neutral in his voice.

Lance looks up from his Gameboy, blinking for a moment before giving his roommate a small smile. “Just while we’re waiting on the masks. I promised to knit with you later, buddy. A deal’s a deal. I knit, you do the beauty routine.”

That brings a smile to his face, and damn, Hunk has the best smiles. “You also have to help me with the cookies later.”

“Pfff, like I would miss out on that.”

“Why’re you playing that old game anyway?”

“Uh, because it’s a classic?”

Hunk raises an eyebrow. “Dude, you bring that old thing to college every year, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen you play it.”

“Classic, Hunk. Classic.”

Hunk stares at him for a solid five seconds in silence, eyes narrowed just a fraction as he searches his face, and Lance tries his best not to fidget under that gaze. He fails miserably. “This has to do with Keith, doesn’t it?”

Lance sputters. “What?! No!”

Hunk nods, a small smile playing across his lips. “Yeah, I thought so. Pidge mentioned something about you two having a Pokemon contest. I didn’t realize it was the *old* old games though.”

“They’re classics, Hunk!”

“So what’s the contest? And how’d you even get into it? Pidge wasn’t big on details when they told me.”

Lance shrugs, turning back to his game. “Not a big surprise. Pidge mostly tunes us out. But… I don’t really remember. We were just hanging out like we always do in our break between classes, and somehow we got on the topic of childhood games, and we started talking about Pokemon Blue and Red, and I said I was a champ because I am, and told him how I used to race my siblings through the game, and I think he was doubting me, so naturally I challenged him.”

“Naturally.”

“So I’ve got Blue version and he’s got Red version, and we started at the same time, and winner is first person to beat the Elite Four and get a full pokedex. No cheating allowed, including the missingno glitch. All catches, trades, and leveling have to be natural.”

Hunk hums and nods. “So are you winning?”

Lance chews on the inside of his cheek. “I… don’t know….” Hunk gives him an incredulous look that has Lance scrambling to defend himself. “We don’t tell each other how far we are! He says he’s got his pokedex up to seventy, but I don’t know if that’s a bluff or not. I mean, I told him that I have six badges, but I just got to the sixth gym.”
Hunk rolls his eyes, flopping back on his beanbag to stare at the ceiling, but there’s a small smile on his lips. “You guys are ridiculous.”

Lance nudges his thigh with a toe. “Don’t be jealous, buddy.”

Hunk chuckles, swatting Lance’s foot away. “Oh, I’m not. I’m glad you have someone else to focus on with your competitive streak. And honestly? I’m just glad you guys are getting along. I know Pidge was worried…”

Lance looks up, eyebrows shooting skyward. “They were?”

Hunk nods solemnly. “They said Keith doesn’t really have a lot of friends, and they really wanted him to join our group. After all the tension at the first quidditch practice, they were a little worried that… you know, you guys wouldn’t get along.”

Lance snorts, hunching his shoulders and looking down at his game. And NO, he’s totally not pouting. “We get along fine…” He mumbles, feeling the heat creep up his neck. He chews on the inside of his lip. So yeah… he hadn’t exactly been nice to Keith, but Keith hadn’t exactly been nice to him either! At least in the beginning. Things are better now. After the whole mutual smoothie apology thing, which was awkward as hell, but also hilarious, and Keith’s blush and stammer had been endearing as all get out, so Lance decided… what the hell, right? Pidge has no tolerance for asshats, so if they kept Keith around for thirteen years, he must be somewhat decent, right?

Since then, they’ve been on good terms. There are still things about Keith that bother the hell out of him, like his attitude and stupid cocky smirk and stupid scowly face, but… they’re getting there. He’s not about to jump right into inviting the guy out for one on one bro bonding time, but they’re in a good place. A good friend making place.

He just… wishes they had gotten here sooner. If only for Pidge’s sake. He hadn’t meant to make them worry. Lance can be a nice guy when he wants to be! He’s nice as fuck! It was just… he and Keith got off to a rocky start, and Keith isn’t exactly a peach either, so they had butted heads for a while….

Who’s he kidding? They still butt heads, but at least now there’s no malice.

…Mostly, anyway.

His ass is suddenly vibrating with his alarm as the obnoxious preset xylophone ring blares. He jumps, Gameboy nearly falling out of his hands as he scrambles to get his phone.

“Finally!” Hunk jumps up, struggling only a little to get his balance after climbing up off a beanbag chair, and practically dashes for the dorm room door, towel in hand.

“Hunk! Wait up!” Lance practically falls on his face trying to get up and dashes out of the dorm after him, almost forgetting to grab his own towel. He has to double back for the moisturizer.

By the time he gets to the communal bathroom, Hunk is already bent over a sink and wiping off the mask. He sighs blissfully as he simultaneously uses the towel to scratch his face. When it’s all gone, he tosses his head back, sighing against. “Finally.”

“Alright, buddy, time to moisturize.” Lance says, setting the bottle down on the counter between them.
Hunk eyes it dubiously. “Do I have to?”

“Yes. You do.” Lance says firmly. “Get to it.”

Hunk is quick about it, and while he does that, Lance is a lot slower and systematic about wiping off the mask and rinsing his face. Hunk tells him that he’s going to go back and get the stuff ready for cookies, and Lance waves him off without a word. As far as he can tell, the bathroom is empty, and it’s kind of peaceful when it’s like this. It’s a pain in the ass to stand in here and do his full routine while there’s a bunch of dudes giving him funny looks. He’s taken to doing a lot of his routine in his room.

As it is though, he takes his time to wipe his face clean and apply moisturizer thoroughly, humming idly to himself. He examines his face closely in the mirror as he goes. He spies a few places where his skin is threatening to break out, but hopefully he’s getting to it before they can really form.

He’s wiping the last of the moisturizer down over his jaw and to his neck when he feels the first telltale prickling on his skin.

His breath hitches when he feels it, the strange yet familiar tingling of his soul connection. His left arm immediately shoots out, palm up as his eyes rake hungrily over his bare flesh. Excitement bubbles up inside him, and a smile is threatening the corners of his lips.

It’s been a little over a week since his soulmate has drawn anything. It’s not that he’s worried. His SM has gone longer periods of time without drawing anything before. And he knows that logically, they probably started school or something recently, and they were anxious about it, so it’s entirely possible that they’re just busy. Life gets in the way of things, sometimes.

So he’s not worried, exactly. He’s just… well, it gets lonely in the longer periods of silence. He never gets words from his soulmate. Hasn’t in years. So the paintings and drawings… they’re the only connection he has to the person he’s destined to be with. Without them… He just really likes it when they paint, okay? Even if he knows it’s not for him, he can’t help but feel like it’s a private moment between them, and he treasures that.

So as the singling starts up about halfway down his inner forearm, he finds himself holding his breath, eagerly awaiting the first stroke of color.

He ends up getting the last thing he’s expecting: words.

His breath hitches, stomach fluttering rapidly as his heart launches itself up his throat. Words. His soulmate is talking to him. And they’re the ones starting it! As the words appear, a fluttering of foreign anxiousness flutters through his chest, chased closely by doubt and the smallest trill of excitement.

But the feeling fades quickly, echoing away as if it never were there to begin with, and Lance is frozen, staring at the words on his arm. He reads them once… twice… several more times before they really start to sink in, and even then he has no idea what to think. He’s in shock, he’s confused, and he’s practically vibrating with the onslaught of adrenaline that pounds through his system.

So he does the only logical thing: he grabs his towel and moisturizer and sprints out of the bathroom.

“HUNK!” He practically screeches, voice echoing off the dorm halls. “Huuunk!” He rounds the
corner too fast and slams into the wall. He pushes off it, feet scrambling for traction as he flings himself toward his dorm. He throws the door open with a bang and stands in the doorway, leaning against the frame for support and practically panting. “HUNK!”

Hunk jumps, dropping the cookie sheet he had been holding, along with the mixing bowl full of bagged ingredients. He winces at everything clatters to the ground, and then shoots Lance a tired glare. “Lance—“

“What the hell is a Mothman?!”

Hunk completely blanks, face going slack as he blinks. “What?”

Lance throws out his arm, putting the words on display: Do you believe in Mothman?

“My soulmate just wrote to me—wrote to me, hunk—with actual WORDS! They wrote to me and asked me if I believe in Mothman, and I have no fucking clue who or what that is! How can I believe in something I’ve never heard of?! Is this a trick question? A joke? Is this a test? Oh god—Hunk, what if it’s a test? What if I fail and they never talk to me again? What’s the right answer, Hunk?!“

Then Hunk is there, warm hands on Lance’s shoulders, steadying him and grounding him. “Alright, shhh, shhh, no— stop that. Breathe with me, Lance. That’s right. In—out— in— good, keep going.” He says, voice low, calm, and soothing. Lance latches onto it, wild eyes focusing on Hunk’s warm, brown gaze and using it as an anchor. He follows Hunk’s instructions, breathes, and…

“Okay, but what do I do, Hunk?” He whines, shoulders sagging.

Then Hunk grins. “You answer them, of course.”

“But what if I—“

“You’re not going to answer wrong, Lance. It’s just a question.”

“But what does it mean?”

He shrugs. “Who knows? Maybe they’re just trying to start conversation with you?“

“But after years of silence? And they start with this? Why not a simple, ‘hello, how ya doing’?”

“I have no idea why they chose this, but there has to be a reason. Maybe it’s something important to them? Maybe they’re curious? We can’t know context clues, but I do think you should reply.”

Lance snorts. “Well, of course I’m going to reply. I just don’t know what to say.”

“Just answer truthfully. If you don’t know what a Mothman is, just ask him. Then they’ll explain, and next thing you know, you’re having a conversation with your soulmate!” Hunk sounds just as excited as Lance knows he should be, and he finds it infectious.

His lips split into a wide grin, and he breathes, “Yeah, okay.”

“There you go! There’s the Lance I know and love!” Hunk says with a quick shake of his shoulders. Lance chuckles as Hunk steps away and grabs a pen from his desk, handing it to Lance. “Now go get your woman… man… person? Soul person.”

Lance snorts. “Eloquent, Hunk.”
“Shut up and write something.”

Lance pauses, pen tip hovering an inch above his skin. His brow furrows, and he bites his bottom lip, glancing up at Hunk through his lashes. “Hunk, what if I fuck this up?” He asks quietly. “They’re so… distant and cautious. I feel like I’m only going to get one shot at this. What if I fuck up?”

Hunk’s smile softens then, eyes warm and knowing. He lays a comforting hand on Lance’s shoulder and gives it a small squeeze. “They’re your soulmate, Lance. You’re not going to fuck this up. You’ll have as many chances as it takes. They’re connected to you for a reason.”

He lets out a long, shaky breathe and smiles. “Thanks, Hunk.”

Hunk pats his back, practically bouncing from foot to foot. “No problem, buddy, but hurry up! I’ve got goosebumps over here, and they’re not even my soulmate!”

Lance laughs. “Okay, but can we hurry to the kitchen and get those cookies started? I’m going to be a nervous wreck until they reply, if they reply, and I’m going to need some comfort food in the form of warm, gooey, chocolate chip.”

Hunk grins. “I gotcha, buddy.”

Keith would be lying if he said he wasn’t nervous. He regretted the question almost as soon as he had finished writing the words on his skin. Oh god, why did he let Pidge talk him into these things? This was a terrible idea. What a stupid, random question to ask after literal years of radio silence? What the hell is his SM going to think? Fuck. He fucked up.

Yes, he thinks the subject of Mothman is a valid one and he’ll gladly discuss it with anyone. But as an opener? What the fuck was he thinking?

He blames Pidge.

He’s already hesitant about the whole soulmate thing, and he’s already more nervous about him than he wants to admit, and now he’s gone and made himself look like an idiot before they’ve even met.

What the hell is social edict anyway? He’s never been great in social situations, and talking with his soulmate is a hell of a lot more intimate and nerve wracking than making small talk with someone in a class that he’ll never see again. This actually matters. A hell of a lot more than he wishes it did.

Soulmates aren’t all sunshine and rainbows, contrary to what the media wants them to believe. It is possible to fuck up. That person doesn’t have to love you unconditionally if they don’t want to.

God fuck, he should have just stuck to paintings.

The episodes of their show are still playing, but even though he’s staring at the screen, he doesn’t really see it. It’s nothing more than background noise and a place to rest his eyes while his mind
spirals ever downward.

Pidge pats his arm, giving him a light shake. “Keith, it’ll be fiine.” They say, but he finds it hard to believe them. Not when he’s waiting on a response. How long has it been? Seconds? Minutes? Hours? It probably hasn’t been hours, but holy fuck, does it feel that way.

There’s a knock at the door, and he distantly realizes it’s probably the pizza guy, but he makes no move to get up. He’s not sure he can, to be honest. His stomach is twisted in a knot so tight he feels like he might puke. Has breathing always been this difficult?

“I’ll get it.” Pidge says, standing up. “I’m paying for it anyway.”

He nods, but doesn’t really respond. He can hear the door open and Pidge talking to whoever is delivering their pizza, but he’s not paying attention to their words. He’s rubbing his arm, wishing he could somehow erase what he had written.

What if—

There’s a tingling on his arm, a familiar telltale sensation of being connected to something beyond himself. It’s strange. Not like a twitch or an itch, but a light tingle that dances acutely across his skin. He keeps his hand on his arm, eyes closed as he tries to breathe and the sensation of a phantom pen press into his flesh.

His chest clenches, stomach fluttering with nervousness, excitement, doubt, and a strange sort of determined confidence— He realizes with a start that these aren’t his emotions. These are his soulmate’s. They’re so close to what he’s feeling that they dance through him like shadows of his own, twisting and writing together like mirror images. But there’s a sliver of excitement, a breath of hard confidence that definitely isn’t his.

And just like that, the feelings fade, leaving him with just his own thoughts. The tingling in his arm fades, leaving him feeling oddly empty. The familiar curiosity that always follows the making of a soulmark tugs at his mind, and he takes a deep breath, steeling himself and opening his eyes, and—

What’s a Mothman??

The words appear under his own in a familiar script, messy but legible. He gapes at it, the tension and anxiousness that had previously been coiling in his stomach relaxing, only to be replaced with a new sort of heat.

“Piiiidge,” He calls out slowly, voice rising a little at the end. He doesn’t look away from his arm, but he can hear Pidge saying goodbye to the delivery boy. “Piiiiidge!”

“What?”

“Pidge, he wrote back!”

“Keith, holy fuck!” They promptly slam the door shut. “What’d he say?” They ask, already hurrying over to the couch. They don’t bother going around. Instead, they step over the back of it and lower themselves to the cushions, practically tossing the pizza onto the table.

“Pidge, look!” Keith snaps, shoving his arm toward Pidge. “Pidge, what the fuck?”

Pidge grabs his arm and tugs it toward them, reading the words tattooed across Keith’s skin. They stare long and hard, and Keith alternates between watching them and rereading the words, heart
rate spiking. He’s not sure what face he’s making, but he doesn’t even care because *what the fuck?*

Finally, Pidge looks up at him, fingers curled around his wrist and eyebrows furrowed into one of their more serious expressions. “Keith,” They say, voice calm and even, but deadly serious. Their lips press into a thin line. “Dump your soulmate.”

Keith scowls down at them. “Pidge, I can’t just *dump* my soulmate.”

“Keith, he doesn’t know who Mothman is.” Pidge deadpans.

“Plenty of people don’t know who Mothman is.” He knows. He’s had to tell plenty of people about it. He’s trying to be reasonable here, but it’s hard.

“But Keith, he’s *your* soulmate! *And he doesn’t know who Mothman is.*”

“I *know,* Pidge.” He says, gesturing helplessly to his arm and says the only thing he can think to say. “*What the fuck?*”

“*Keith,*” Pidge says, letting go of his arm to get up on their knees and face him. They put their hands on his shoulders and shake him. “Mothman is a huge part of who you *are!* Remember when you were thirteen—“

“I *know,* Pidge.”
“—You had a shrine and everything!”

“I know, Pidge!”

“You wished your soulmate would end up being Mothman!”

“I know, Pidge!” Keith puts his hands over Pidge’s to stop them from shaking him. Lips pressed into a firm scowl, he meets Pidge’s eyes. “I’m going to educate him.”

“Good! He needs it if he’s going to be with you!”

Keith grabs his laptop and turns it on, bouncing his leg restlessly while it boots up. Ugh. Has it always been this slow? Pidge goes to the kitchen to get plates and paper towels, plopping down on the couch and opening the pizza box. Keith takes the plate of food offered to him as he types in his password with one hand. It takes another full minute for his browser to actually cooperate with the shitty apartment internet, and that’s a minute too long.

Pidge leans against his arm as he types into google. “What’re you doing?” They ask around a mouthful of pizza.

“I’m educating him.” Keith says, pulling up several webpages in different tabs. He then sets to work writing the webpage links on his arm.

Pidge snorts when they see what he’s doing. “How’d you know he’ll actually look at those links?”

“He better,” Is all Keith says, chewing on his bottom lip in concentration.

“Alright, but don’t forget to eat. I paid for this pizza so you better eat it.”

“Pizza can wait, Pidge. This is important.”

Lance, buddy, you’re dropping stitches.”

“What? I am not!”

“You are, dude.” Hunk says gently, nodding toward Lance’s work with his head. His own fingers never stop moving deftly with his needles and yarn. “Just look.”

“I’m totally not! I was counting—” He holds up the square he’s been working on that might one day turn into a scarf, but probably not because it’s just his practice square and honestly ugly as fuck. Sure enough, there’s the telltale holes caused by him dropping stitches. “Goddammit.” Lance groans, flopping back on the beanbag, head tilted back and limbs sprawled all out.

Hunk reaches out and gently pats his arm. “It’s alright, buddy. You’ll get it eventually. You’re just distracted tonight.”

A small, gentle smile curves his lips. “I am. I really am.” He lifts an arm, not really reading the words that are smattered around every open space on his skin, but just kind of enjoying the sight of their handwriting side by side.

The first couple minutes after Lance had responded had been torture. What if he fucked up? What
if he said the wrong thing? Hunk’s reassurances were helpful, and made sense, but since when does anxiety listen to logic? He had paced the dorm kitchen while Hunk worked. He had said he wanted Lance’s help baking cookies, but what that really means is he just wants Lance’s company while he works, because he can do it faster himself and it’s a secret family recipe anyway, but Lance is fine with that. He loves keeping Hunk company. It’s what BFFs are for.

Luckily, the dorm kitchen, located on the bottom floor, was empty and he was able to pace and ramble in peace. Hunk had listened to it all like the amazing person he is and responded when he needed to, keeping him calm for the most part.

He wasn’t sure what to expect from his soulmate, but he definitely hadn’t been expecting several webpage links to be scrawled out across his arm, followed by the words: Read them. Determined fire, shadowed by a subtle and chilling anxiety, had accompanied the words, dancing across his ribcage before fading.

He had laughed, mostly filled with relief, and had probably been insufferably excited after that, bouncing on his toes with word vomit just oozing out of his mouth. It’s a terrible habit when he’s worked up, and the worst part is he’s aware of it, but he can’t stop. Luckily, Hunk isn’t his best friend for nothing. He’s full of nothing but warmth, acceptance, and the pure essence of goodness, and he just laughed and offered distractions for him so he didn’t get too worked up while the cookies baked.

He even let Lance lick the bowl because he’s amazing like that. He did, however, have Lance do the dishes, but that was only fair.

Half an hour later they made it back to their dorm, plate of freshly baked cookies in hand. Lance had wasted no time throwing himself back down into his beanbag chair and pulling his laptop to him, opening up several tabs and typing in all the websites his SM had sent him with one hand.

Hunk, bless his soul, had been amazingly supportive and also dedicated to keeping their broomie night on track.

They had ended up sitting in their designated beanbags, Lance’s laptop in Hunk’s lap so he could read the webpages aloud while he knitted. He’s good enough to multitask like that. Meanwhile, Lance slouched in his seat, eyes and hands focused on his knitting while he listened to Hunk. The whole time, Hunk occasionally shoved a warm cookie in Lance’s mouth.

Lance got a few more rows done, though he still couldn’t figure out how to keep it consistent and some rows ended up too tight while others were too loose, and the two of them learned a lot about this thing called Mothman from the sixties.

Hunk nudges his leg with his foot and says sternly, “Come on, Lance, back to work.”

“But Huuuuunk…”

“No but’s, you’re never going to get any better if you don’t practice. You want to be able to make Christmas presents this year, don’t you?”

Lance sighs. That had been the goal. “Yeeees…”

“So get to it.” His voice is stern, leaving no room for argument, but it’s not unkind. He’s just used to keeping Lance on track, and Lance loves him for it. “I know this is a big deal and everything, but you can knit between messages from your SM.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay,” He picks up his knitting again and tries to get back to it. This time without
dropping stitches.

They’ve got a rom com playing on the tv in the background, but it’s more there for noise and something to occasionally look at. They’ve seen it a million times before. They’ve got a whole stack of rom coms they watch whenever they have bro time without Pidge. They’re happy and mushy and cliche, but they’re great, okay? They’re comfort movies.

“I can’t believe your soulmate is into cryptids.” Hunk says after a while with a little snort of amusement.

Lance smiles, eyes on his yarn work. “I think it’s cute.” He says softly.

“They would probably get along with Pidge.”

Lance’s head snaps up at that, eyes going wide and mouth dropping open. “Oh god, you’re right. Oh nooooo.” Lance whines dramatically, slouching so far down that his beanbag shifts and he’s practically ass over head.

Hunk is chuckling. “It wouldn’t be that bad.”

“Yes, it wouuuuld!” Hunk just laughs. With some (a lot of) struggle, Lance manages to prop himself up on his elbows and levels a glare at Hunk. “We cannot tell Pidge about this.”

Hunk is grinning. “Why not? You said it’s cute!”

“Pidge will never let me live it down. They’ll constantly send me cryptid stuff, I just know it. Please just let me have some peace before Pidge finds out my SM is into conspiracy shit.”

“When do you plan on telling them?”

“Never. They can find out when they meet them.”

“Aww, but Pidge—“

“Please, Hunk!” Lance gives him his best puppy dog look, wide eyes, pinched brows, trembling lip, and everything. He holds the look for so long he even starts to feel his eyes water. To be honest, it’s not that big of a deal if Pidge knows. But he knows there will be a lot of teasing that he doesn’t really want to put up with. Not when the whole talking to his SM this is still new and he’s still struggling to believe it’s real. He’s suddenly extremely glad Pidge decided to hang out with Keith tonight instead of them.

Hunk finally sighs, but he’s smiling a little and his eyes are lit up with amusement. “Alright, fine. I won’t tell them.”

“Thank you—“

“But you have to find a way to hide all those marks, or they’ll find out on their own.”

“Fuck!— no wait! Aren’t Pidge and Keith going to see Matt this weekend? With Keith’s brother or something?”

“Oh yeah, was that this weekend?”

“I think so.”

“Well, then it looks like you’re off the hook.”
“Thank god.”

“I know that look. Your soulmate is writing, aren’t they?”

Lance isn’t even aware he has a ‘my soulmate is writing to me’ look, but apparently he does, because Hunk is right. The telltale tingling starts up on his right arm, along with that passionate, determined fire that Lance is starting to get used to. The anxiousness has faded and been replaced with a defensive incredulousness that Lance finds incredibly adorable. He knows his SM is passionate. He’s always been able to feel that in their paintings. They feel things so strongly and deeply, and he admires that about them. But he never thought he’d feel that passion while they wrote about conspiracies, and it’s simultaneously adorable and hilarious.

He feels like he’s finally been given a new piece of the puzzle that makes up his SM, and he couldn’t be happier.

He loves his soulmate’s drawings. He loves and treasures them, and absolutely adores the closeness he feels when they’re working. But this… this is different. This is words and handwriting and undeniable proof that there’s a person at the other end of his connection. A real, breathing, living person with interests of their own. He hasn’t seen this person in years. They fell out of this kind of contact towards the end of high school, and he hasn’t gotten anything but drawings since.

He doesn’t know what’s changed to make them start using words again, but Lance isn’t going to question it.

His left arm is completely void of space, so it’s not much of a surprise that his SM starts writing on their right. What is surprising is that their handwriting is still just as neat and orderly and pretty as before. He really shouldn’t be surprised that his SM is ambidextrous, seeing as they’ve painted beautiful things on all parts of their body, clearly showing that they can use both hands, but a little thrill runs though Lance anyway. It’s a little thing, but it’s something they have in common.

What’s written on his arm, however, has him laughing.

What about Bigfoot?

Hunk doesn’t ask, but he’s leaning over so he can see. He’s naturally curious and nosey, but Lance doesn’t mind. He’s never malicious about it. Plus it’s nice to share his excitement with his best bro.

Lance grabs the pen he’s been keeping behind his ear, bites off the cap, and scribbles out under his SM’s words:

**Sorry, dude, but Bigfoot is a hoax**

At first, he had been a little nervous about blatantly disregarding his SM’s beliefs. He didn’t want to offend them in some irrevocable way. But he didn’t find any actual anger in the emotions that filtered through their connection, just an incredulousness and a desire to prove themselves right. It’s cute and fascinating, and Lance found himself answering honestly, purposefully provoking them a little just to get more of that response.

“I’m happy for you, bro.” Hunk says suddenly, drawing Lance out of his thoughts. He glances at his roommate, who’s staring at him with this gentle, earnest expression. His voice had been so soft, that for a moment Lance questions whether he had heard it at all. “I know you’ve been waiting forever for your soulmate to talk to you. This isn’t exactly what we expected, but I’m happy for you.”
Then he smiles, small and honest. “Thanks, bro.”

His arm tingles and he looks down.

*There’s proof!* The words are written quickly, the spark barely having time to flash through Lance’s chest before fading.

*Proof that can be easily faked*

So yeah, he’s goading his SM a little bit, but hey, he’s being true to himself. Like Hunk said, this *is* his soulmate, after all. If they can’t put up with his goading, then why are they connected to him in the first place?

*There has to be something you believe in*

Lance is busy thinking about that, trying to figure out if there *is* something he believes in within this topic. He’s coming up with nothing when his SM starts to write again.

*Aliens?*

He smiles. Bingo.

*Now that’s something I can get behind. I mean, space is so HUGE, there HAS to be something else out there. Being alone would be… kind of a drag, you know?*

*Yes! Exactly! We've barely even explored our own solar system. Who’s to say there isn’t intelligent life in the next galaxy over?*

He feels a whisper of satisfaction flit through him, a strange sort of pride and *happiness* chasing at its heels. Oh god, he made his SM happy. *He* did. And he can *feel* it. Holy shit. He hasn’t felt this… *relevant* since they were both younger and Lance used to comfort them whenever he felt the dark emotions filter through their bond.

“How’s Shay doing, by the way?” Lance asks, because this is their *bro* night, and it’s only fair that he asks about Hunk’s SM, too. And it’s not just to be polite. From what he knows, Lance likes Hunk’s SM, and he likes to live vicariously through their relationship.
Hunk’s face immediately softens, and he looks back down at his knitting to hide the blush that Lance knows is creeping under his dark complexion. “She’s fine— good. She’s good.” God, he always gets so flustered when he talks about her. It’s adorable. Lance loves it. “Did I tell you that she joined her school’s quidditch team?” He asks, glancing up to peer at Lance sideways.

Lance sits up straight, which is difficult given the misshapen form of his chair. “What?! No! Hunk, that’s great!” He’s grinning, and Hunk must find it infectious, because he’s sitting up straighter and his smile is widening.

“I know, right? She thinks she’d make a good keeper, but not because of me! That’s just what she thinks she’d be good at. She used to be a soccer goalie, you know? So she should be pretty good!”

Lance gasps loudly, slapping his hands down on his beanbag to help him sit up straighter as he turns to his roommate. “Hunk! Do you think we’ll end up playing against her?”

Hunk hunches his shoulders a big, tilting his head sheepishly as he scratches his cheek. “That’s… kind of a hope, yeah.”

“Oh my goooood, that’s adorable.”

Hunk groans, but it’s good natured when he says, “Lance, stoooop.”

“Not a chance, buddy. Do you think she goes to a university nearby?”

“I don’t really know. We’ve never talked about it.”

“You could ask her, you know.”

“I know, but… we like keeping some of the mystery, you know? Like… we know a lot about each other, and we’ve exchanged names, but we agreed not to look each other up online or to give away our locations or arrange a meet up or anything cause we still want to keep the surprise alive, you know? We don’t know when we’re destined to meet, but we kinda wanna find out the old fashioned way.”

Lance feels all warm and fuzzy inside because that’s absolutely adorable and so incredibly Hunk, and he can respect that kind of decision. “Yeah, I gotchu, buddy. You two are just a couple of saps.”

Hunk laughs at that, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah, I guess we are.”

“I bet she’s beautiful.”

Hunk looks down at his knitting project with half lidded eyes and a small smile. “I know she is.”

Lance looks away when there’s a familiar tingling on his arm, and he glances at it as the words form—

**What about the moon landing, real or fake?**

**Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold up, are you insinuating that the moon landing was FAKED? Because I’m going to have to stop you right there, you doubting heathen. I’m drawing the line**

And then, just to emphasize his point, he draws a line.
Keith unceremoniously stands, hooks his thumbs into the waistband of his sweat pants, and throws them to the floor.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Pidge nearly shrieks, clutching their laptop to them as they scramble as far back as they can against the arm of the couch.

Keith doesn’t even spare them a glance as he kicks off his pants and sits back down. He crosses his legs, takes his pen, and hunches over as he starts writing on the side of his calf. His leg hair gets in the way somewhat, but it’s fine enough that he can work with it. Besides, this pen was made to be able to easily write on skin. “It’s nothing you haven’t seen before.”

“Keith, oh my fu— just give a little warning next time you decide to randomly strip.” Pidge grumbles, settling back down and putting their laptop back on their crossed knees. “Just about gave me a heart attack.” They eye him curiously, and he can see them lean closer out of the corner of his eye. “What’re you doing anyway?”

“He’s defending the moon landing, Pidge.” Keith says gravely. “I’m going to change his mind.”

“Couldn’t you have just used your arm?”

“Not enough room.”

“Your SM is going to think you’re nuts.”

“I don’t care.”

And despite his earlier nerves, he can say this easily. Because he can feel his SM whenever he writes, and he knows that he’s not thinking Keith is crazy. Whenever he writes, this little fluttering of amusement and pure, uninhibited joy dances through his chest. There was doubt there, too, and some anxiety and wariness, but that’s mostly faded now. Now it’s mostly amusement. And even though Keith can’t believe his soulmate is practically mocking him for believing the things he does, he can tell it’s not with malicious intent and... and the little sliver of pride and happiness that comes in the wake of feeling his SM’s joy is all his own.

Pidge has gone back to writing up their email to their SM while Keith sets to work scribbling everything he knows about the faking of the moon landing on his leg. He has to climb up to his thigh at one point, but he gets it all down. When he’s done, he makes a small sound of satisfaction and caps his pen, leaning back against the couch.

“Let’s see him argue against that.” Keith says, glancing over at Pidge with an easy smile.

Pidge’s lips quirk into a small smile of their own. “This is cute.”

Keith immediately scowls and deadpans, “What?”

Pidge shrugs, vaguely gesturing to him while they turn back to their computer. “Just... you finally talking to your SM, even if it’s about nothing important—“

“It is important—“

“I know, but not in the grand scheme of soulmate conversations. It’s just... nice. Seeing you like this.”
“Like what?”

“Keith, you’ve been smiling.”

“I have not.”

“I almost never see you smile when your soulmate is the topic of conversation.”

“That’s not true.” He argues, but he knows it is. It’s been a… sensitive subject. One he doesn’t like to talk about. He doesn’t really like talking through his feelings, especially when he doesn’t really understand them himself.

“Keith…” Pidge’s voice is soft and… weirdly serious. He doesn’t hear that from them often. He looks at them, eyebrows raised. They’re not looking at him. Their eyes are on the tv screen, but they’re unfocused. “I know the whole soulmate thing is… complicated for you, especially after what happened with your mom, but… will you promise me something?”

He purses his lips, scowling but saying nothing. He’s not sure what to say. Something about Pidge’s voice is… it’s got his attention.

They look at him then, amber eyes intense and wide and framed by tight lids and pinched brows as they bore into him. If he didn’t know Pidge so well, he’d flinch away from that look. As it stands, he freezes under the weight of it. His heart is hammering and his breath is shallow.

“Keith, I’m not asking you to ask him about himself or to push the whole meeting thing, but… if the opportunity presents itself to learn more about him, to meet him… promise me you won’t run.” They hold up a hand when Keith opens his mouth to speak. He snaps it shut, glaring at them. “Just… promise me you’ll give him a chance, okay? The universe wants you two together for a reason, so don’t fight it if and when it happens. I don’t you to sabotage yourself because you’re scared of something that might never happen.”

Their voice is so small, so serious, and so earnest that Keith finds himself choked up and words dying in his throat when he opens his mouth. He finally sighs, looking away. “I promise, Pidge.”

“Thanks, Keith.” They said, reaching out and putting a hand on his arm. “I just want you to be happy, you know?”

He meets their gaze again, a small smile playing across his lips. “I know, Pidge.”

They nod, patting his arm. “Good, now how about some dessert?”

“We literally just finished dinner.” He says, gesturing to the empty pizza box on the coffee table. “Do I really need to repeat myself? So how about dessert?”

Keith laughs, pushing himself to his feet and padding across the apartment in his boxers, socks, and hoodie. “I’ve got some cookie dough in the fridge.”

“Now we’re talking.”

“Raw?”

“Duh.”

It’s one of those packages of sugar cookie dough that’s already cut into circles with little designs on it depending on the season. A childhood favorite. He and Pidge used to see who could sneak
more pieces before Shiro and Matt managed to put the rest in the oven. He grabs the package and
heads back to the couch, settling down and tossing it to Pidge to open while he grabs a blanket off
the back of the couch and pulling it over his legs.

Nearly a whole episode goes by and the cookies are nearly gone before he feels a tingle running
across the flesh of his calf. It’s the opposite leg than the one he wrote on earlier. A strange sort of
excitement bubbles up in him, and he’s not entirely sure if it’s his or his soulmate’s. But he pulls
back the blanket to look, reading the words that are tattooing their way across his flesh in quick,
messy handwriting, and—

“Pidge!” Keith says, sticking his leg out between Pidge and their laptop.

Pidge leans back, blinking in surprise before taking Keith’s leg and turning it so they can read the
words working their way across his skin, sternly defending the government and media’s claims
about the moon landing. They look up at him then, expression set into something serious. “He’s a
sheep.” They deadpan.

“He’s a gullible, close minded sheep.”

The rest of the evening is spent finishing the tv series, arguing over the logistics of what’s
explained, and occasionally broken up by Pidge scribbling on their arm to their SM and Keith
arguing with his about the moon landing on nearly every available patch of skin he can reach.

Pidge is right, and Keith ends up falling asleep first, wrapped up in a blanket and curled up on the
couch. He’s losing consciousness when he feels a soft tingle across the inside of his left wrist. The
warmth of soft affection and a gentle happiness fill his chest, spreading out through his limbs
before fading, and he falls asleep to the echoes of it without looking at the words.

goodnight, space cadet

__________________

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> How’re you holding up?

Keith
> I feel sick
> I might be sick
> why am I here?
> I’m leaving this is stupid

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Keith, don’t you dare >:(
> You’re not even meeting him, you’re just observing from afar
> It’ll be fine, I promise

Keith
> Shiro I’m not ready
> Why did I think getting coffee was a good idea?
> I’m already a wreck and now I have a caffeine high
> My hands won’t stop shaking
> Help

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
Keith
> THAT'S NOT HELPING

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> I can’t believe my baby bro is going to find his soulmate

Keith
> Before you, how does that make you feel?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Proud

Keith
> UGH
> I can’t do this

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> So you’ve said several times now
> But have you actually left?

Keith
> … That’s not the point

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> You’ll be fine, Keith
> You’re not even at the same place as him
> You’ll just observe him from afar, see who he is
> He doesn’t know you’re there, so there’s no pressure to actually meet him yet
> You can take your time with this
> Soulmates are a big deal, and no one is rushing you into this
> But I am proud of you for taking this step on your own
> I know how difficult this is for you

Keith
> Thanks, Shiro

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Anytime, baby bro
> Tell me if he’s cute ;)

Keith
> STOP

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Knock ‘em dead ;)

Keith
> OH MY GOD

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Sweep him of his feet ;)
Keith
> WHY ARE YOU LIKE THIS???

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Because I’m distracting you. Now it’s almost time for him to be there. You’re welcome.
> Look alive, space cadet ;)

Keith
> I regret telling you anything

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Goodluck!

Keith
> Thanks

Keith sighs, putting his phone face down on the table but keeping his hand on it, tapping at the case restlessly. His other elbow is on the table as he leans forward, chin resting in his palm. His eyes scan the street outside.

"If the opportunity presents itself to learn more about him, to meet him… promise me you won’t run."

When he made that promise almost two weeks ago, he had no idea that the opportunity would arise so quickly. He had been thinking that it wouldn’t happen for years. He didn’t think the universe would fit him together with his soulmate until much later in life. At least, he had hoped that would be the case.

He hadn’t expected the words “Los Arcoiris 6:30 Wednesday” to come scrawling across his arm in a familiar handwriting yesterday afternoon with barely a thought or emotion to tag along.

Had he not made that promise to Pidge, he probably would have thought nothing of it. It wasn’t uncommon for his SM to occasionally write reminders to himself, and for those reminders to transfer to Keith. He usually didn’t think about them beyond how to cover them up while they faded. But this time Pidge’s voice was in his mind, making him question whether or not he was missing opportunities, whether this was one of those opportunities they made him promise he wouldn’t ignore…

A quick google search told him that Los Arcoiris was a restaurant in town. He really shouldn’t have been surprised. It is his soulmate after all. He probably wouldn’t be his soulmate if he lived across the country. Odds were that he’s close. Still… that didn’t stop the confirmation from making him stare at his computer screen in frozen shock for a solid five minutes while his heart beat bruises into the underside of his ribs.

He very nearly did nothing about it. Nearly. But his promise to Pidge and his own sickeningly frustrating curiosity got to him. But he couldn’t… he couldn’t meet his soulmate. Not yet. He wasn’t ready. The idea of it very nearly sent him spiraling into a panic attack, and he’d had to call Shiro before his shallow, rapid breaths had gotten too bad.

The compromise had been Shiro’s idea: satisfy his nagging curiosity and his promise to Pidge by going there to see his SM, but staying safe and secret by not telling him he’d be there. It had seemed so simple, but while Keith had still be anxious about it, he’s impulsive by nature. It had seemed like a good solution. Then he’d know who his SM is, and would hopefully have a little more control over the whole thing. He won’t have to deal with the commitment until he’s ready.
He could maybe try to get to know his SM before they find out who he is.

Maybe he could get his SM to love him for *him* and not because they’re bound by whatever the fuck….

But he’s getting ahead of himself. He hasn’t even *seen* the guy yet.

The coffeeshop he’s sitting in isn’t one he normally would have chosen. It’s a lot more mainstream and crowded than he usually likes. If anything, he would have grabbed his coffee and split, but right now he’s here for the location: the coffeeshop is right across the street from Los Arcoiris. And he’s chosen a seat in front of the wall length window that gives him a clear view of the restaurant’s front doors.

So far, he hasn’t seen his soulmate. He’s not really sure what to expect. Some people have said they just *knew* when they saw their SM for the first time. Those same people like to say they felt something explode with light and they saw fireworks or some shit. But he’s heard other people say they saw nothing, and they didn’t even know it was their SM until they saw familiar writing on their skin. So… he’s not really sure what to expect.

But he *does* know what to look for.

He hadn’t been able to sleep last night. Not after his near panic attack, talk with Shiro, and anticipation running hot in his veins. So he had spent the better part of the late hours painting. He used dark colors: blacks and dark blues, purples, pinks. He moved up to lighters shades, overlying them in a space and galaxy motif spreading across his shoulder and half of his chest, crawling up the side of his neck to end just below his jaw. He’d finished it off with speckles of white for stars.

He’d admired it for nearly an hour, staring at it in the mirror and committing it to memory before finally taking a shower to wash the paint off.

Now he just has to look for the boy with stars tattooed on his skin.

He flips his phone over, screen up, and checks the time incessantly. His heart gives a little lurch when the numbers read 6:30, and his eyes snap up to the street. Nothing. The steady trickle of students into the restaurant has slowed to nothing. He feels something sink in his stomach, hard and heavy. He tries to tell himself that he’s not disappointed. This is probably for the best. He isn’t ready to meet his SM anyway. It’s probably some other restaurant of the same name in another city. Or it could mean something completely different. Keith didn’t exactly ask his SM what the message had meant.

He sighs, lifting his coffee cup to his lips. It’s luke warm at best, and it’s just as unsatisfying as he feels. His lip curls as he swallows, but he does it anyway because he might as well. It can’t exactly ruin this moment. The jitters in his hands have leveled out a little, and now he’s pretty sure his foot is just bouncing from caffeine high and not anticipation.

He’s still holding the cup, tapping it idly with one finger and hovering in front of his face as he watches an elderly couple shuffle along the sidewalk, arm in arm. The man releases her in order to get the door to the restaurant, holding it open and giving her as much of a bow as he can. The look on his face is fond, loving, and makes Keith’s heart squeeze. The old woman smiles. She has a painting of a bouquet of flowers tattooed over her forearm.

He’s wrapped up in watching them when there’s a bob of copper hair in his peripheral vision. The movement catches his eye, and it takes him a moment to realize that he’s staring at Pidge. What’re they doing here? They’re hurrying down the sidewalk, dressed in baggy shorts and their favorite
lime green and black hoodie. He’s so surprised that it takes him a moment to notice Lance right on their heels. His hands are in his pockets, hoodie open and sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He looks like he’s in significantly less of a hurry, but Keith has a suspicion that’s only because his legs and stride are longer. They’re talking, but Keith can’t hear them or read their lips. All he knows is that Pidge looks agitated and Lance is smiling easily.

Keith frowns as they reach the restaurant’s entrance. Lance jogs around Pidge, reaching for the door and holding it open for them much like the old man had done for his wife. Lance’s actions, are a lot more dramatic and have an edge of mockery when he half bows. Pidge just rolls their eyes and steps into the restaurant. Lance laughs, shoulders shaking as he follows after them. The door swings shut, and Keith can’t see them anymore.

It takes him approximately five seconds to realize that he’s dropped his coffee and that it hit the table before falling over. The lid stayed on, but it’s slowly leaking out, dripping off the edge and onto his lap.

He jumps, chair scooting back with a loud scrape. He fumbles for the napkin dispenser on the table, grabbing a few in a fist clenched way too tight and roughly rubbing his jeans. His gaze is flickering to the restaurant across the street. He can feel that his mouth is hanging open, eyes wide. His chest feels too tight, his breaths coming in rapid, shallow bursts. His mouth feels too dry, his throat like it’s clogged. Probably from where his heart has jumped up to choke him. It pulses in his neck, hard and dizzying.

When Lance had turned to open the door, Keith had seen the unmistakable colors of a galaxy crawling up his neck to drown him in starlight.

“No…” Keith finds himself whispering, his voice sounding shakey and foreign. “No, nonono…” He tosses the napkins aside, righting his coffeecup before forgetting about it to grab his phone. Maybe he had seen it wrong. Maybe his eyes were playing tricks on him. There’s no way that was Lance. Maybe that wasn’t even Pidge. His thumbs are trembling as he types out the message.

Keith
> Hey, are you in town right now? At some Mexican restaurant?

He hopes that sounds casual and normal enough. He clutches his phone with white knuckles as he waits, leg bouncing restlessly in time to his rapid heartbeat. He stares at the building across the street, like if he stares hard enough he might just able to see through it and the people inside and find out what the fuck is going on.

There’s no way. He had to have seen wrong. He’s known Lance for weeks now, and he’s never seen— He’s never talked about his— He’s never felt… it around Lance before, right? He doesn’t know what it he’s supposed to feel, but surely he would have noticed if he felt it around Lance? Infuriating, frustrating, cocky, smug— He frantically searches his memory, trying to remember all the paintings he’s done lately, and if he had any proof that they weren’t on Lance. He comes up with nothing. Fuck. Fuckfuckfuck—

“Fuck!” He says, perhaps a little too loudly, when his phone suddenly buzzes in his hand. He jumps and scrambles to unlock it and read the message. He feels his heart sink.

Tiny Evil Bird (Pidge)
> Yeah, Lance and I are at Los
> Why? How the hell do you know that?

Keith
I just thought I saw you a minute ago

**Tiny Evil Bird (Pidge)**
> Oh, yeah, probably?
> Sorry I didn’t notice you, we were late because SOMEONE takes 84 YEARS to get ready

**Keith**
> What’re you guys doing there?

**Tiny Evil Bird (Pidge)**
> The Spanish department likes to host these “Spanish only” dinners for the students
> Something about trying to get us to practice Spanish in a different setting and forcing us to socialize or something
> It’s extra credit tho, so worth
> I wasn’t going to go, but Lance dragged me here
> Tho I wouldn’t have agreed if I had known he was going to MAKE US LATE

**Keith**
> … He’s reading over your shoulder, isn’t he?

**Tiny Evil Bird (Pidge)**
> He was
> Someone asked about his most recent soulmark tho, so he’s distracted for the moment
> I mean, the whole galaxy painting thing IS really cool, but don’t tell him I said so
> You would probably like it tho
> I’ve officially heard him gush about it in English AND Spanish and I don’t know how much more I can take
> …
> Keith??
> Don’t leave me hanging
> I’m bored already and I don’t know any of these people
> And those I DO know I don’t want to talk to
> Lance is no help, he knows and talks to everyone
> ….Keith?

**Keith**
> Sorry, I was distracted

**Tiny Evil Bird (Pidge)**
> … you alright?

**Keith**
> Gotta go, I’ll talk to you later

**Tiny Evil Bird (Pidge)**
> …
> Alright, I’ll let it go for now
> But I’ve go my eye on you, Kogane

Keith has to leave. He feels like if he doesn’t get up and move he’s going to… he doesn’t know what. He’ll pass out? Throw up? He definitely feels like throwing up. He stands up too quickly, and gray dots dance around the edges of his vision as he stumbles toward the door, barely remembering to throw out his coffee cup as he passes the trash.
The fresh air helps. It hits him straight on, a welcoming rush of sun warmed air with the underlying edge that promises autumn. He has to pause once he’s outside. His vision has cleared, but his knees are shaking. His legs feel like jelly. There’s a ringing in his ears, and everything else sounds muted. His vision is hazy, like everything is too bright and out of focus. His stomach is rolling, gut clenching, chest tight, but he’s pretty sure he’s out of vomit territory now.

He stumbles to the side and leans up against the outside wall of the coffeeshop. Using it to prop himself up, he leans his head back against the bricks, closing his eyes as he focus on his breathing.

In... out... In... out... You got this, Kogane. It’s no big deal. It’s just... Lance. Oh god, it’s Lance. Fuck. Fuck— Shit— Cock— Damn— it’s okay, it’ll be okay— He’s part of your new friend group, you can’t avoid him— fuck I can’t avoid him— my soulmate is already in my life, I can’t avoid him — no, it’ll be okay. He doesn’t know. Pidge doesn’t know. Only you know. Only you...

His phone buzzes in his pocket, and he ignores it. That is, until it buzzes several more times. His eyes snap open in agitation and he digs it out. He’s ready to turn it off to ignore Pidge, but his breath hitches when it’s just Shiro.

He doesn’t want to tell anyone, but the knowledge is eating him up inside. He feels trapped. He had hoped finding out who his soulmate is would give him more control, but instead he feels like any control he had was an illusion that’s been cruelly and carelessly ripped away, leaving him raw and exposed and way, way too vulnerable to be standing out in public.

He’s a mess. He can’t— he can’t process this. He needs to tell someone, or else he fears he’ll just start screaming wordlessly here on the street, and that would draw way too much attention to him.

Or, god forbid, Lance’s attention.

Oh god, what’s he going to do when he sees him again?

He needs to get out of here. Out of here— he can’t go home. Home has his paints, his sketchbooks — If he’s alone, he’ll think about it— He doesn’t want to think about it. He can’t. He pushes off the wall, thumbs moving across the keyboard as he goes to where he parked his bike a couple of blocks over.

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> So???
> How’d it go???
> Keith???
> Keith, it’s 6:50. Surely you’ve seen him by now.
> Did you see him? Did you find your soulmate?

Keith
> Yes

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Aaaaaaand?
> Is he cute?

Keith
> No

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> That’s... unfortunate?
Keith
> You don’t know the half of it

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> I take it you’re not happy with your SM?

Keith
> Shiro, am I a bad person?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> No, you’re not, Keith. You know that. You’re a GOOD person. Why would you even question that?

Keith
> Because I’m trying to figure out what the FUCK I did to deserve LANCE as a SOULMATE

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> …
> Lance, as in…?

Keith
> Yes

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Pidge’s friend?

Keith
> Yes

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> The smoothie guy who’s kind of your friend now?

Keith
> “Friend” is a strong word

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Well… you know, so is “soulmate”

Keith
> When will life stop shitting on me?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Keith :/
> I’m sure it’s not that bad
> You’re just caught off guard because you already know him
> You just need time to adjust to the idea
> And you have time, he doesn’t know yet

Keith
> Don’t tell ANYONE
> NOT EVEN MATT

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
I won’t, Keith. Don’t worry. It’s not my secret to tell.
Have some faith in me

Keith
I’m coming over

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
I figured as much
Will you be staying the night?

Keith
Probably

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
I’m hiding the ice cream

Keith
That’s fine, I’ll make do

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
And the peanut butter

Keith
Why can’t you let me suffer in peace?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
As your big brother, I can’t in good conscious, let you do that to yourself

Keith
UGH

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
Please drive safe, you tend to speed more than usual when you’re upset

Keith
I promise nothing

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
If you don’t make it here in one peace, I’ll get Pidge to reanimate your corpse so I can kick your ass for eternity

Keith
Even when dead you won’t let me rest in peace

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
I’m your brother, it’s part of the job description

Keith
…Thanks, Shiro

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
Anytime, little bro
Just make sure you get here alright
Fun fact: Keith's handwriting is Sora's actual handwriting, and Lance's is mine.

If you have any questions regarding how this soulmate universe works, feel free to stop by and ask me on tumblr! And go give Sora some love on hers because she puts so much amazing effort into making her art.

Also! Sora did a drawing of Lance with his galaxy painting in one of her art streams that you can find over HERE!

PLEASE DO NOT REPOST THE ART FROM THIS FIC

Instead, hop on over here and reblog it from the artist herself HERE

Wittvy's Tumblr (author and co-creator) and Twitter
Sora's Tumblr (artist and co-creator)
Help Us Through

Chapter Summary

In which emotions are hard, acceptance is harder, but the sunset bring the peace of night and a promise of tomorrow.

Chapter Notes

For everyone who was surprised that Keith's discovery of his soulmate happened so soon in the fic, I'd just like to say that this story has always, from the start of it's creation in our minds, been about the journey Keith and Lance take through self discovery and the development of them as individuals and as soulmates. And it's always been planned to happen after Keith's discovery. I've felt like the first three chapters have been a long set up for the world and setting, and now we can truly start to get into the meat of this story. Strap in, guys! We've still got a long ride ahead of us.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“And you’re sure you can’t call off work to join us?” Pidge asks, eyeing him through narrowed eyes over the top of the counter. It’s nearly taller than they are. Their arms are resting on top of it, folded so their chin can rest on their crossed forearms. They can barely reach. He’s pretty sure they’re standing on their toes, but he’s not about to point it out.

He swivels a little in his tall chair, one leg folded up under him, other foot pushing against the side of the desk as leverage. His arms are crossed over his chest as he meets his friend’s gaze unflinchingly. “It doesn’t work that way, Pidge.” He says flatly. “I can’t call out of work when I’m already at work.”

Pidge huffs, blowing a few strands of their bangs upwards. “You’re no fun.”

He just shrugs. “Work isn’t meant to be fun.”

“The employees here are always wandering around making sure no one’s breaking anything. And there’s no one stationed on the third floor. Can’t you like… convince someone to take your place while you watch us?” Pidge asks, lifting their hands for just a moment to supply emphasizing quotation marks.

The movement displays their forearms, and he sees hints of writing peeking out from where their hoodie sleeves are rolled up. A lot of writing. Like paragraphs. Made from a combination of Pidge’s tiny chicken scratch and their soulmate’s bigger, looping script.

His stomach clenches painfully, and he’s not really sure if he’s lucky or unfortunate that he missed lunch. Keith looks away, pretending like he’s reading something on the computer screen in front of him. His palms itch, but he knows it’s one that won’t go away no matter how much he scratches, so he does his best to ignore it.
“Nope. Sorry, Pidge.” He says, moving the mouse around and absentely clicking on a couple of the programs open, just to make it sound like he’s actually doing something.

He’s lying. To be honest, he probably can find someone to cover the front desk, and he probably can convince his superior to let him watch the third floor while the quidditch team is up there. His work is usually pretty chill like that. He doesn’t know if he could get away with actually playing with them, but he knows Pidge just wants him there to hang out. Which is exactly what Keith doesn’t want to do. Specifically because that would mean spending an hour and a half staring at someone he definitely does not want to be staring at.

He can feel Pidge’s eyes on him, scrutinizing his face, so he does his best to keep his expression schooled into something bored and neutral. Luckily, they’ve never worked at the campus’s gyms, so they have no idea how it works or how chill his bosses are.

After what feels like forever, they finally sigh, and Keith tries not to visibly relax. “Fiiiine, but try not to make a habit of picking up shifts during practice times, okay?” They then slouch, resting their chin on the counter and splaying their arms out toward him. “I feel like I haven’t seen you all week.” They grumble, cheeks puffing out comically as they pout.

He’d laugh, if he didn’t feel so guilty.

“It’s just been a busy week.” He says by way of explanation, but nods. If only to put Pidge at ease. He already missed one quidditch practice on Saturday, claiming he was sick, and another on Tuesday, saying that he had work but actually binge watching Netflix and making an ass print on his couch. This time he had actually picked up a work shift when one of his co-workers had called out sick. It isn’t his fault that it’s right smack dab in the middle of their scheduled quidditch practice.

He ignores the look he knows Pidge is giving him. “Are you sure that you’re alright?” They ask after a few beats of silence.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” He asks, finally looking up from his computer to meet their eyes. He holds, grateful for his natural poker face, and raises an eyebrow.

Pidge’s eyes narrow. “You’ve been acting weird since this weekend.”

“I was sick.”

“Usually you complain to me the whole time you’re sick. In fact, you usually do so while denying that you’re sick in the first place.”

Well, shit. His eyes narrow slightly. “I’m not that predictable.”

“Yes, Keith. You are.” They glare at each other for a minute, several people trickling into the gym behind Pidge. The muffled sound of skidding shoes and shouts from the basket ball court behind them fills the silence. “Keith.” Pidge says finally, voice flat and even.

“Pidge.” He deadpans.

“I’m going to ask you something, and I want you to answer me honestly.” He doesn’t say anything, but holds their gaze, lips pursing into a thin line. Thank god he’s got practice keeping his face neutral because his heart is racing. How much does Pidge know? They’ve always been perceptive, especially when it comes to reading him. They’ve known each other for nearly thirteen years. Picking up on his subtle tells is like second nature to them.
He doesn’t quite trust his voice, so he just gives them a barely perceivable nod. They take that as his cue to continue.

“Do you hate quidditch?”

Keith blinks, lips going slack. His brows relax, only to pinch again. He opens his mouth, can’t find his voice, and promptly closes it. He blinks again, like that will somehow help him make sense of Pidge’s question. He finally comes up with a brilliant and eloquent: “What?”

Pidge’s frown deepens slightly as they repeat, “Do you hate quidditch?”

Alright, so he had heard them right, and it… certainly isn’t what he had been expecting. His brows furrow as his frown mirrors Pidge’s. “Uh, no?”

And he doesn’t. Really, he likes quidditch. He thinks it’s surprisingly fun and the people there are great. Most of them, anyway. Pidge must hear and see the sincerity of his confusion, because they sigh, posture and expression relaxing. It only lasts for a second before their face is scrunched up again in a similar confusion.

“Then why’re you avoiding quidditch?”

“I’m not!”

“You are! And I know you’re not avoiding me because you still hang out with me outside of quidditch, but you’ve missed three quidditch practices now, and that’s suspicious, Kogane.”

He rolls his eyes. “You’re looking too deep into this, Holt.”

“Is it the people?”

“No. I like your friends. I like the team.” He says honestly.

Unfortunately, Pidge’s just frowns. “Is it Lance?

Keith sighs, filling the sound with as much exasperation as he can. That much, at least, isn’t faked. “Why do you always assume it’s Lance?”

“Because he’s the only one on the team you’ve had a problem with.”

“And I told you that we’re cool now. We’re… sort of friends.”

They raise an eyebrow, frown still in place. “Sort of?”

Keith rolls his eyes, leaning back in his chair to cross his arms over his chest. “Well I’m not about to invite him out for drinks and go play pool in student union game room without you as a buffer.” He deadpans, then, a little softer, looking away and attempting to force his eyes to focus on the computer screen. “But… yeah, we’re sort of friends now. We’re getting there.”

Or at least they were.

Pidge is silent for a moment, and he can feel them searching his face. So he grabs the mouse again and clicks around, aimlessly scrolling the event schedule for the three campus gyms. “Then why’re you avoiding him?”

Keith looks back to them, startled. “I’m not?” He doesn’t mean for it to come out as a question, but it does more for his believability than a straight out denial, so he supposes it’s fine.
“You didn’t hang out with the two of us Monday and Wednesday between classes. And Friday you were there, but you looked… I don’t know. You were weird.”

“I wasn’t weird.”

“You were.”

Keith sighs, lifting a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose as he squeezes his eyes shut. “Pidge, this has nothing to do with Lance.” It does. “I’m not avoiding him.” He is. “We’re getting along.” Sort of. “I like your friends.” He does. “I like quidditch.” He does. He opens his eyes, meeting Pidge’s worried gaze and pointing at them with his hand. “I’m not avoiding you or your friends. As I said before, it’s just been a busy week.” Mostly true. “I’m not use to…” He waves his hand around vaguely. “All of this.”

They search his face for a moment longer before sighing, body slumping but much more relaxed. “Alright, I’ll believe you.”

“Thank you.”

“I just… I just want you to have fun here, you know? It’d be great if all my friends could hang out, and you could get in on our game nights, though you’d probably get your ass kicked. Probably literally. Lance and I get kinda rough when we play. But you know—“

“Pidge.” Keith says, cutting them off, lips curling into a small smile at the edges.

Pidge smiles ruefully. “I just don’t want you to be alone anymore, Keith.”

His small smirk widens, head tilting to the side. “I’m not. You’re making sure of that.”

Pidge is beaming, but before they can say anything else, a loud shout cuts them off.

“PIDGE!” His voice echoes off the high walls and vaulted ceiling of the gym lobby, causing them both to turn toward the noise. Lance is bounding across the lobby, weaving his way through the tables set around, and mostly doing a good job of avoiding bumping into them. Mostly. He’s carrying one of the quidditch backpacks over one shoulder.

At the sight of him, Keith’s heart definitely does not lodge itself in his throat, and his breath definitely does not hitch. He’s definitely not nervous because he has no reason to be.

“Speak of the devil…” Pidge mumbles.

“And the devil shall appear.” Keith finishes for them, and they exchange small smiles.

Hunk and Allura are pushing through the doors behind him, followed by several other people that Keith vaguely recognized from the team. They’re all wearing hoodies or rain jackets. Some only showing signs of drizzling, but others are soaked. It’s been raining all day, so Pidge and Hunk had made the call to have quidditch practice in the gym instead of outside. Not that the rain is too much of a problem, but it had been raining for a couple days and the fields they use are soaked and muddy. They had decided that practice outside wouldn’t be too productive.

“Pidge!” Lance repeats, slightly less loud as he approached them. He stops at the turnstiles, and digs around in his pockets for his student ID, declaring a soft “Ah-ha!” When he finds it. He scans the ID, but it takes several tries for it to work, then he somehow manages to get his pants, hoodie, and bag caught on various parts of the machine as he walks through.
He and Pidge watch the struggle with mildly amused expressions and raised brows. God, this guy’s an idiot. There’s no possible way that he’s— he can’t be Keith’s— He doesn’t even want to think it. Because it’s not true. It can’t be. It’s not.

“Pidge!” He says for the third time as he gets past the turnstiles and walks up to them. “Agree with me that since we’re inside, we should totally play dodgeball.”

“Lance,” Pidge says, crossing their arms over their chest. “This is quidditch practice.”

“Yeah, and you know dodging and throwing are like, most of the game! Come on, it’s fun and useful practice!”

Pidge sighs, but there’s a fond smile there that they’re trying to hide. “We’ll see, Lance.”

“Yes!” He thrusts a fist in the air in victory, and Keith can’t help but stare at him.

His hair is damp, sticking to his temples and flattened at the top. His hoodie is rolled up to his elbows, and there’s the telltale signs of rain darkening the fabric on his shoulders and chest. His face is lit up with a grin that raises his cheeks and gives his eyes this little squinty, crinkly look. His smile itself is blinding, white teeth a stark but beautiful contrast with his completion, and damn, his face is damn near flawless, with no blemishes or scars or anything. What the fuck is up with that? His long straight nose turns up a little at the end, and Keith will be damned before he admits that might be cute.

Okay, so objectively, Lance is attractive. But he already knew that, didn’t he? He’d already admitted that much. He never questioned Lance’s looks, just his personality. He’s loud, obnoxious, attention seeking, cocky, and confident in a way that grates on Keith’s nerves. How the fuck is someone like that supposed to be his soulmate? He’s not Keith’s type at all.

Not that he really has a type. He’s never really dated or fooled around with anyone, and he’s never really noticed a pattern in the people he’s found attractive, but that’s not the point. If he had a type, it sure as hell isn’t Lance.

Besides, Lance is nothing like his soulmate. His soulmate who writes kind, encouraging words on his wrists whenever he paints. His soulmate who sends him emotions that are so soft and so fond. His soulmate is someone who was a calm and sturdy anchor in the chaos of his young life. There’s no possible way that person is Lance.

The universe must have made a mistake. Or maybe he made a mistake? He had seen the painting from across the street through a window. He could have been mistaken. Pidge did say it was a galaxy, but that could’ve been someone else, right? Doesn’t mean it was Keith’s space painting tattooed on Lance’s skin. Life is full of coincidences, even ridiculous ones, and this has to be one of them.

Life has a cruel sense of humor.

Then Lance is suddenly turning to look at him, and he finds himself pinned by those dangerously blue eyes. Has he ever noticed they’re blue? He can’t remember. Doesn’t matter anyway. They’re blue now and they’re looking at him, squinting slightly as he raises one eyebrow, cocking his head to the side.

“Uh, Keith? You’re supposed to be on this side of the desk.” He says, crossing his arms over his chest.

Keith just stares at him. “I’m working.” He deadpans.
“Again?!”

“That’s what I said.” Pidge grumbles.

“Keith, buddy, my dude, you work too much.”

“For once, Lance is right.”

“I know there’s an insult in there, but I’m going to be gracious and say thank you.”

“Your modesty knows no bounds.”

“Anyway, back to Keith and why he’s not practicing with us.”

Keith eyed him, one eyebrow raised. “Didn’t know you cared.”

At that, Lance scowls, though it looks more like a pout as his shoulder’s hunch. “Uh, yeah, you’re part of the team, dude. Everyone likes you, and you’re good, and stuff, I guess.” He scratches the back of his neck, looking away as he puts his other hand on his hip. “Besides, you’re the only one who can catch me when I snitch, so it’s boring without you.”

“Aww, Lance.”

“Shut it, Pidge. I just like a challenge.”

“You even admitted Keith is good. I’m so proud of you.”

“I said shut it, Pidge.”

Keith just stares at him, blinking in surprise. He… doesn’t really know what to say to that. So instead he just shrugs awkwardly and looks to the computer. “Sorry, guys, I’ll try to make it next time.”

“You better!” Lance says, resting an elbow on the high counter between them and leaning on it. He’s grinning again, and Keith can’t quite bring himself to look at him.

“I’m holding you to that.” Pidge says, but their eyes are on the rest of the team filing through the turnstiles, Keith turns to watch as Hunk struggles with trying to walk through with an arm full of pvc pipe brooms. He ends up dropping most of them, and eventually settles on passing them over the machine to some of the other members before walking through himself.

Allura has several other bags hanging off her arms and shoulders, all of which Keith knows have various equipment things. She walks up to them, smiling widely as she shuffles the bags around. “Coran is parking the car, but he has the rest of the brooms.” She announces cheerfully, hair barely dampened by the rain.

They all gather around in front of the front desk and chat with Pidge and Lance, but Keith isn’t really listening. He’s looking back and forth between all the equipment bags, just sports bags and old backpacks. That, plus the brooms, makes it for an awkward experience to carry everything around, not to mention keeping track of it all.

“I probably have an old hockey bag you can use for all of that.” He says before he really thinks about it.

Everyone stops talking, turning to look at him. It doesn’t look like any of them really heard what he said. He probably mumbled. He squirms a little under all the attention. It’s Lance that speaks up,
raising an eyebrow. “What was that, dude?”

Keith vaguely gestures to everyone holding bags. “I, uh, probably have an old hockey bag you guys can use for, you know, all that.”

A lot more blank stares. Pidge is the first to get what he’s saying. Their face lights up, and they grin, bouncing on the balls of their feet. “Oh my god, seriously? That would be awesome!” Everyone’s attention has shifted to Pidge, who turns to look at them in return. “A hockey bag would be perfect for carrying around everything. Those suckers are huge.”

Allura turns to Keith, smiling brilliantly. “That would be amazing, Keith!” She says, shrugging a shoulder a little with a small laugh. “Heaven knows I’d be fine with not having to carry around all these bags anymore.”

Keith finds himself smiling. It’s small, but definitely there. This group just brings it out in him. He shrugs. “I’ll look for it when I get home. Pretty sure I used one when I moved up here.”

Pidge gives him a blank stare. “Keith, your apartment is the size of a tin can. How can you not know if you have it?”

His smile fades, replaced by a small scowl. “Shiro helped me pack, and there was a lot going on that day. I don’t know what’s here and what’s back home.”

“Allright, well text me if and when you find it.” Pidge says before turning back to the group and taking a few steps away to address them. While they give a little speech to explain how indoor practices work, Lance leans a little further onto the counter, body half turned to he can look like he’s somewhat listening to Pidge.

“So, hockey?” He asks, eyeing Keith sidelong with a light tilt to his lips.

“Yeah,” He says with a shrug, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back in his chair. He idly rotates it back and forth with a nudge of his toe. “My parents signed me up as a kid cause they thought it’d be good for me. I liked it, so I stuck with it.”

“Not anymore though?” He sounds… honestly curious, and Keith isn’t really sure how to feel about that. This is what friends do, right? Learn about each other? Ask innocent questions about interests? Lance is actually making an effort, and it’s one that doesn’t seem forced.

A knot of guilt twists in his gut.

Keith shrugs again. “I aged out of the rec leagues.”

“Ah,” He says, nodding. Then he turns his head more, giving Keith that cocky smirk that he hates so much. “I was a soccer man myself.” He says, putting his free hand to his chest, puffing it out slightly with an air that is just so full of himself and so incredibly Lance.

“That explains the ego and dramatics.” He deadpans.

Lance’s eyes snap open, face scrunching up as he straightens and stares at Keith. His eyes search Keith’s face like he’s trying to solve a puzzle, lis curving down into a frown as his eyes narrow slightly. “What’s that supposed to mean?” He asks slowly.

Keith just smirks, a slight tilt to the corner of his lips, and shrugs noncommittally.

Lance’s shoulder slump as he turns to sag more over the counter, lips pursed into a pout even as he
But then he’s jerked back and being dragged away, Pidge’s hand in a firm hold on the back of his hoodie. “Alright, Lance, let’s go.” They say with a short sigh.

“Pidge! I was in the middle of something!” He protests, walking backwards.

“You can bug Keith later. We have practice now.”

“Fiine!” He turns back around, lacing his fingers behind his head as he leans back while he walks. The whole gang starts up the stairs, and Keith turns so he doesn’t have to watch them go. He sighs loudly, slumping in his seat.

“They look like fun.”

He turns to see one of his co-workers plopping herself down into the seat beside him. She’s a year older than him, but she doesn’t really look it. Her hair is pulled back into the same ponytail it always is, she doesn’t wear makeup ever, and she’s nearly always dressed in simple jeans and their work t-shirt with “Student Recreation Center” printed across the back. Overall, her usual laid back look, coupled with the fact that she’s completely ridiculous, gives her a very youthful appearance. But he’s seen her stare down dudes in the weight room and shame people into obeying the rules. It’s… quite terrifying actually.

He shrugs. “They’re alright.”

She hums, half turned to watch them climb up the glass covered stairwell. “They’re going to the third floor?”

“Yup.” The third floor is nothing but an indoor soccer area, but it’s usually empty and it’s a wide open space perfect for an indoor quidditch practice.

“What’s all that equipment for?”

“Quidditch.”

Her eyebrows go up at that. “Like…”

“From Harry Potter, yeah.”

She lets out a low whistle, eyeing the stairs. “Wow, that’s cool. You on the team?”

“Yeah.”

“Why’d you pick up this shift then? If there’s practice.”

He shrugs. “Need the money.” He doesn’t, but she doesn’t need to know that.

She just nods. “Gotcha. Hey, since you’re here, mind settling a bet with me and my SM?” Then she’s leaning over the desk between them and shoving her forearm under his nose. Her arms are small, but there is clearly enough room for two dicks drawn in thick black marker. The more vibrant one is clearly drawn by herself, and the other has the slightly faded and tattooed look of a soulmark.

He raises both eyebrows, blinks, and slides his eyes to look at her. “Those are dicks.”

She grins, widely. “Why yes, they are. Thanks for noticing. Alright, so,” She points to hers. “This
is mine. You’ll notice I went for a more natural look of an uncircumcised dick.”

“It’s very… large.”

“Thank you,” She points to the other one. “And this is my SM’s.”

“It’s, uh… very… hairy? And veiny?”

She snorts, rolling her eyes. “Yeah, he tries to go for more of a impressive realism that way, but I go for the girth.” When Keith stares at her, completely at a lack of what to say. She just gives him a dark look, but there’s a smile playing across her lips as she whispers. “You can’t ignore my girth, Keith.”

He snorts, feeling his lips twitch upward. “So did you have a question, or was this just to showcase your… art?”

“Oh, right! Okay, so which one is better?”

“Seriously?”

“Dead serious.”

“You guys are having a dick drawing contest.”

“Yes.”

“On your arms.”

“Yes.”

“Is this… normal? For you?”

At that, she laughs. “Yeah, it happens more often than you’d think. He usually starts it.”

He shakes his head. “Your soulmate is a piece of work, Ginny.”

She sighs, a soft smile on her face as she gazes at the horrendously detailed dicks on her arm. “Yeah, he is.”

And there’s that weird twist in Keith’s chest again, the same one that happens whenever he sees other people being so unfathomably happy with their soulmates. He doesn’t get it. It’s like they have no doubts, no hesitation, like they just trust their SMs without a second thought. He knows Ginny’s SM also goes to their school, even works in the gyms, too. They met at a young age, only fifteen, and they’d been growing up together every since. Sharing their daily lives. All the while knowing that they’re with their forever partner.

He doesn’t know how they don’t see that as terrifying.

He thinks of Lance, and that twist in his chest is back.

He doesn’t want to think about Lance.

There’s no way Lance can be his soulmate. A soulmate is supposed to be someone who has the potential to be your perfect match, your forever partner, and Keith is definitely not ready for that. The universe wouldn’t pair him with someone he’d meet so soon, right? Whatever mystical forces are at work within the human race, it has to know Keith better than that. It has to know that he’s
not ready for this. He must have made a mistake. It's not Lance. It can't be Lance.

He pushes those thoughts aside and points to Ginny’s dick drawing. “This one is definitely better. Ten outta ten.”

“Ha! Suck it, Billy!” She says, reaching across the desk for a pen. He watches as she adds a tally mark under the ‘G’ written on her other arm. There’s also a ‘B’ with tallies under it. So far it looks like she’s winning.

He spends the rest of his shift discussing the technique of drawing realistic dicks with Ginny and actively avoiding pulling up the gym’s camera feed on his computer to watch the quidditch practice.

“Are the shorts really necessary?” Keith grumbles, knuckles of one hand digging into his cheek where his chin rests in his palm. He’s sitting on short hill on one side of the quad, overlooking the quidditch pitch. Both elbows are resting on his bent knees, free hand dangling between them.

“Hmm?” Allura hums from where she’s sitting next to him. Her long legs are stretched out in front of her, mostly bare and crossed at the ankles. She’s leaning back on her hands behind her, head tilted back and eyes closed against the sun, but at his words, she lifts her head to eye him, one delicate eyebrow raised.

He doesn’t look at her, and she follows his gaze to where he’s glaring holes into Lance’s back. Practice is set to start soon, and while all the equipment is out and the hoops are set up, he knows it’s still going to be a little bit longer before Pidge and Hunk manage to wrangle everyone up and start. Quidditch time and all that.

Meanwhile, Lance has decided to play some kind of game with Hunk and Coran down by one set of hoops, and despite everything, Keith finds himself unable to resist glaring at him. He’s just so loud and everything about him screams for attention. Keith hates having attention on him. How the fuck are they supposed to be soulmates?

“Oh, you mean Lance?” Allura asks, watching the three of them play. Coran pegs Lance with a bludger, causing him to yelp loudly and turn away from the hit. The bludger bounces off his lower back and back into Coran’s patiently waiting hand. Even at this distance, he can see the older man grinning and Lance’s pout.

“Yeah, Lance,” Keith says, unable to keep the scowl out of his voice or off of his face. “Are the—you know…” He waves his free hand around vaguely, lips twisting as he realizes he’s going to have to actually say the words. “Booty shorts really necessary?” He sounds pained, and he knows it, but he can’t help it. He is pained.

He’s forced to sit here, dealing with all of his own shit, watching his world get rearranged, meanwhile Lance is just prancing around in his fucking booty shorts and laughing like he’s having the time of his life, completely unaware that his soulmate is sitting right here.

He’d probably be just as disappointed that his supposedly amazing SM is just Keith. He thinks about all the tender feelings that filter through his chest, all the kind messages, all the fond emotions… and all of those came from Lance? He’s still having a hard time putting those two things together. They just don’t fit. How is he supposed to act normal around him again? How is he
supposed to fit into this friend group now? How is this fair?

It’s not fair. Every time Keith thinks he has something good in life, it’s taken away. He’s worked really hard to get where he is, fought tooth and nail to climb out of the pit life had put him in, and he thought that maybe he could finally just… live his life. But no. Now his goddamn soulmate is here.

Why can’t he just have this one thing for himself? Why can’t he just live? Why does he have to deal with this? Why him? What the fuck had he ever done to deserve this? Or was he just the universe’s favorite punching bag? He can’t even tell his best friend about his problems because they’re too close to the problem.

Nothing about this is fair.

Allura chuckles under her breath, leaning forward and pulling her knees up to wrap her arms around them. The movement draws him out of his thoughts, stopping his downward spiral from getting any worse. “Well, I suppose that’s my fault.”

Keith tears his eyes away from Lance to stare at her incredulously. “You got him those shorts?”

She laughs again, waving a hand at him. “Oh, no, those were a gift from Pidge. Though, I suppose I did help pick them out.” She says thoughtfully, tapping her chin with a finger. Then she shrugs, lowering her arms around her knees again and gently rocking in place. She looks peaceful, at ease, and thoughtful. A picture of content tranquility that is so completely opposite to how Keith is feeling. “The booty shorts in general are my fault though.” She continues as they both watch the three fuck around by the hoops. Lance is having to resort to being absolutely ridiculous in order to get past Coran and Hunk’s defenses.

“How?” He asks because she’s stopped talking and he doesn’t want silence. He doesn’t want to admit that he’s curious.

“Our first year playing quidditch, toward the end of the year, we went to play a tournament at a nearby school. Lance said if we made it to the finals, he would wear booty shorts. It was half a dare and half a joke, I think, but he called it his secret weapon. Supposedly the enemy team would be so distracted by his man legs that we’d have the upper hand. I encouraged him and let him borrow an old pair of shorts I had lying around. I never got them back.”

“Did it work?”

“Hmm?”

“The secret weapon?”

At that, Allura laughs, tossing her head back. The moment causes her to rock backwards, and she lets go of her legs to put her hands back behind her, leaning back on them. She grins at Keith, a sparkle in her eye. “Yeah, it surprisingly did. Afterwards we took a team picture with the trophy where we all pulled our shorts up as high as they could go in honor of Lance’s leg strategy.”

Keith can’t help the small, shadow of a smile that curves his lips. He can’t help it. Allura’s smile is infectious. He can vaguely remember Pidge telling him this story a couple years ago, and at the time he had found it funny. He had no idea at the time that the cause of that story would end up being his soulmate. It’s significantly less funny now.

Keith just hums his acknowledgement because he’s not sure what else to say. He’s trying not to let Allura see all his raging internal conflict. He thinks his poker face is helping him out a lot here, but
his incessant staring might be a problem. Especially since he can’t just look away, and the longer he looks, the angrier he feels. It’s deep seeded and simmering and burning in his chest, and he can’t quite shake it.

“To be fair, though,” Allura continues, oblivious to his internal struggles. Her eyes are on the quidditch pitch, looking over everyone gathered there. It’s a significantly smaller turn out from the first couple practices, but these ones seem to be willing to stick around. “The whole booty shorts thing is quite common among quidditch players.” She says, lifting up a leg and pointing her toe for emphasis. “It’s not just Lance. At least he wears the short leggings under them.”

Keith grunts in agreement. “And the knee high socks?” He asks, eyeing Lance’s socks. They’re blue and black striped, matching his blue booty shorts and the black legging shorts underneath. The white block letters stamped across his ass that read “JUICY” stand out in stark contrast. He… can fully believe Pidge bought them for him. Probably as a gag gift.

“Plenty of sports use knee high socks.” She says, humming thoughtfully. “Quidditch included. You should see some of the better teams that play at Worlds. They all have knee high socks as part of their uniform. We’ve been talking about getting some for our team as well…”

“He’s not just Lance. At least he wears the short leggings under them.”

“Please, don’t.” Keith groans, and Allura laughs.

The two of them are dragged off the hill about five minutes later when Hunk calls the practice to order. They all gather in a loose circle at the center of the pitch, and Keith avoids looking at Lance in favor of staring at Pidge and Hunk. Unfortunately, Lance is directly across the circle from him, and it’s hard to avoid his gaze completely. Keith can see him staring out of the corner of his eye. He crosses his arms over his chest and stubbornly refuses to give him the attention.

It’s Saturday, which means it’s a scrimmage day. So instead of drills, they’ll play at least one full game of quidditch, possibly two depending on how long it runs. Coran and Allura are chosen as team captains and take turns choosing people. Allura picks Lance, tossing him a blue pinnie when he skips up to her side. They high five, exchanging grins, and they’re both so bright that Keith has to look away.

Coran ends up choosing Keith for his team, and he’s not sure if it’s a good thing or a bad thing that he and Lance are on different teams. On one hand, he doesn’t have to work with Lance, on the other…

The end up facing off across the field, both lined up to get the quaffle in the first dash. He makes the mistake of making eye contact with Lance, only to have Lance shoot him a grin and a wink before kneeling above his broom. Keith internally groans, feeling the anger inside him stir as he lowers himself to the ground.

He lifts his head and meet’s Lance’s gaze again over the quaffle. Lance smirks, all cocky confidence, and Keith’s eyes narrow, lips tugging into a small frown. The simmering irritation and agitation that’s been boiling inside him all day rumbles, making his muscles tense as he sets up his runner’s stance.

Fuck Lance. Fuck soulmates. Fuck the universe. Why can’t he ever have any goddamn control over his own life? Fuck his pity party, Keith is mad. Inexplicably and overwhelmingly mad. He’s just so, so tired of everything, and he’s tired of not having a target to lash out at.

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Fuck the universe for putting them together. Fuck the university for accepting his application. Fuck Pidge for making him promise to take an opportunity to learn more about his SM. Fuck Shiro for not letting him back out of his decision. Fuck Lance for giving him the opportunity to begin with,
even if he had no idea that he had. Fuck himself for being this way.

FUCK the universe for taking his mom away and leaving him to deal with this alone.

And you know what? Fuck Lance and his cocky ass grin. Keith is tired of it. It pisses him off. He’s going to wipe that shit off his face.

“Brooms up!” Pidge blows the whistle, and Keith rockets off the starting line like a bullet. His broom is gripped hard in his left hand as he charges full speed ahead, toes of his cleats digging into the hard packed dirt. Across from him, Lance is doing the same. They’re sprinting straight for each other, for the ball, in some twisted game of chicken. It’s a challenge, Keith knows it is, and he’s not about to back down. And if they run into each other and he hits his head, hopefully he’ll pass out and won’t remember any of this SM business.

Lance is fast, but Keith is faster. With a flare of self satisfaction, he reaches the ball first. He’s already bent over in his effort to sprint, so he only needs to bend a little further to grab the ball, saying a silent thanks to the little bit of a sticky grip his sports gloves allow. He doesn’t slow, and Lance is right in front of him. Part of him wants to hit Lance. Give him an excuse to physically take out some of his frustration, even if it’s just mowing him down on the quidditch pitch.

He sees the moment Lance’s confident look turns to fear, realizing that Keith isn’t stopping. His eyes widen, mouth dropping open slightly, back straightening as he tries to slow. But Keith is right there. With a high pitched yelp, Lance instinctively drops to the ground. It’s a move that’s fluid and without hesitation, and if Keith had been in his right mind, he might have been impressed. Instead, he just seamlessly leaps over Lance’s fallen form and charges down the field to the hoops.

Hunk isn’t the keeper. It’s some new guy that stands frozen with wide eyes, obviously not expecting a chaser to come charging so quickly for a one v one. Keith easily scores, and the whistle blows to signal his goal.

When he turns to jog back down the field, Lance is still on the ground, scowling at him. Keith gives him a smirk, feeling smug satisfaction singing in his veins. He’s still pissed, but this is what he needed, a chance to physically get it all out and show up Lance in the process. Why had he been avoiding quidditch practice?

Unfortunately, the scrimmage only goes downhill from there.

The teams are relatively balanced with new and old players, but the blue team keeps pulling ahead. Keith wants to blame his fellow chasers for not carrying their weight. He wants to blame the beaters for not tagging Lance out when he skips down the field. He wants to blame the keeper for not blocking the shots. He wants to blame everyone else and ignore the fact that he’s not exactly playing at his best right now. He’s just charging down the field with a single minded intensity that’s easy to counter with everything else that happens in the game. If he’s not taken out by an enemy beater, he’s tackled by a chaser.

At one point, Hunk pulls him aside and suggests he tries passing the ball. He says it kindly, like a friendly suggestion and with no actual negativity. But Keith feels patronized anyway, and a little ashamed, which only fuels his anger. He does, however, try to make an effort to pass. It’s not his fault that his teammates suck at catching and they fall further behind.

Whenever Lance has the ball, that stupid, annoying, infuriating smirk graces his lips, complete with a playful intensity in his eyes that does things to Keith’s insides. He hates it. He wants it to stop. So whenever Lance has the ball, he charges him. Unlike the other new players, Keith isn’t afraid of tackling. It’s legal, as long as he doesn’t wrap, hit from behind, or go around the neck.
Other than that, most things are okay. He takes this to heart as he does everything in his power to get the ball away from Lance.

Unfortunately, the guy is slippery and way too practiced at this game. He can easily slip and twist out and away from Keith, laughing as he does so and holding the ball far out of his reach. Keith grits his teeth, chasing him down the field in an attempt to keep him from scoring. But then he just passes to someone else and they score, and Keith doesn’t have a reason to fight Lance anymore, so he’s left scowling at Lance’s stupid cocky face.

Despite his default smugness, Keith can see some other looks overcome his face when he thinks no one is looking. He can see the anger sparking beneath his calm exterior when Keith hits him particularly hard or needlessly shoves his shoulder with his own. He sees it in the way his brows furrow and lips purse into a small frown when Keith charges him. He can feel it in the way he shoves back against him. Good. Keith wants him mad. If he’s mad, it better justifies his own anger. If they’re both mad, they’ll fight, and if they fight, there’s no way they can be soulmates, right?

He pointedly ignores the other looks he catches on Lance’s face. The worried glances, the way he bites his bottom lip, brows furrowing in a way that’s definitely not anger. He ignores these softer looks and the guilt that churns beneath his frustration.

At some point, Coran pulls him off the field to take a break. While he’s drinking from a water bottle, the older man hands him a yellow headband. Keith eyes it for a moment before quirking a silent eyebrow at him. Coran only smiles. “It’s nearly time for the snitch to be released!”

“Who’s snitching—“ Keith glances past him, movement catching his eye. Lance is standing near the blue team. He’s removed his pinnie and is busy stepping into his bright yellow snitch shorts, pulling them up over his others. Keith’s brow furrows. “It’s it a little biased if he snitches?” He doesn’t mean for his voice to sound hostile, but there it is.

Coran’s grin dials back a fraction before glancing over his shoulder. “Ah, well, I suppose under normal circumstances it might be. It certainly isn’t orthodox in a tournament setting. Here, however, it’s perfectly fine. We’re all part of the same team in the grand scheme of things.” He looks back to him, that smile back in place. “Besides, a snitch is never truly on any one team. A snitch’s number one priority is to not be caught by anyone! It’s a matter of pride, you see.”

Keith snorts, taking the headband from him and pushing it on, letting his push his bangs back out of his face. They were just adding to his irritation anyway. “Yeah, I can see that.”

Keith takes a broom that’s handed to him and prepares himself to chase down Lance, again, once Pidge officially releases the snitch. Lance is bouncing next to them on the other side of the field, a grin plastered on his face as he obnoxiously stretches for show, waving and flexing and shooting finger guns to the audience that’s gathered to watch them pay. Keith grits his teeth.

Then a hand is on his shoulder, and Keith looks up to see Coran leaning over him, eyeing Lance with his free hand on his hip. “I know you’re eager to prove your stuff again, but we must think strategy if we’re to bring home victory.”

Keith blinks at him. “What?”

Coran gives him a small, mischievous smile. “If you catch him right away, we’ll lose. We’re too far down in points at the moment, and the snitch is only worth thirty.”

“So you want me… to not… catch him?” He says slowly. It sounds ridiculous.
Coran gives a small nod, tilting his head to the side thoughtfully. “Well, in a manner of speaking, yes! At least not yet. We need you to guard the snitch.”

“Guard him?” He deadpans.

“Yes! Hold off the other seeker so they can’t catch the snitch and end the game. It’ll give us a chance to catch up in points. Then, when I give you the signal, you turn on Lance and catch the snitch!” Keith grunts his acknowledgement. Coran pats his shoulder, nearly knocking Keith off balance with his enthusiasm, and steps away. “Good luck!”

When Pidge announces the snitch’s release, the blue team seeker charges Lance across the field. Keith is a lot slower, not very happy about being on guard duty. By the time he gets there, Lance has already ripped the other seeker’s broom out and forced him to go back to his hoops. Keith slows as he nears Lance, face twisted into a small frown.

Lance automatically takes up a defensive stance, but eyes Keith curiously when he doesn’t do anything. He slowly relaxes, still wary, but standing straight with his hands on his hips. He smirks, tilting his head to the side. “What’s the matter, mullet? Not going to charge me this time?” He says it like he’s teasing, but there’s a hard, accusatory edge there that makes Keith flinch.

He looks away, lips pursing into a thin line. The blue seeker has touched his hoops and is jogging back to them. “Coran put me on guard duty.” He grumbles by way of an explanation.

“Ah,” Lance says, fully relaxing now. “The good ol’ stall tactic. Too bad you couldn’t score more points.”

Keith grits his teeth, ignoring the jab as he turns to face the other seeker. He crouches down, lowering his center of gravity as he puts himself between the seeker and Lance. Keith fights him off, keeping a hand on his shoulder, arm stiff to keep him from pushing forward. It doesn’t stop him from trying, but every time he tries to lunge around him, Keith is there to block him. Lance happily hides behind him, teasing the other seeker and making commentary to the audience.

It’s a lot tougher than Keith was hoping it would be, physically having to push off someone else and be fast enough to block him, but for the most part he only has to put his body between them and Lance will do half of the work. He even goes so far as to grab Keith by the shoulders and move him around, actively using him as a body block. Keith just clenches his jaw and tries to ignore it. Luckily, he only has to hold off the other seeker for as long as it takes for his own teams beater to tag him out.

His team has bludger control at the moment, so they can afford to keep someone stationed on the seeker play while the other tries to stop the enemy chasers from scoring. The blue team only has one bludger, which is currently dedicated to the quaffle play. Their free beater is hovering over his team’s second beater, but they haven’t managed to snatch the ball from them yet. For the most part, Keith doesn’t have to worry about being tagged out.

When he is tagged out, Lance playfully slaps him on the shoulder and calls out after him, “Hurry back, meat shield!”

Keith just sends him a glare before stomping back to his hoops.

Overall, it’s an annoying process of being forced into close proximity to Lance and having to deal with him, but being unable to actually deal with him.

Why did he think quidditch was a good idea again?
Thankfully, his team is slowly catching up in points. He keeps a close eye on the score, ready for this to be done already.

“Psst, hey…”

Keith ignores him, watching the other seeker walk back to his hoops. It’s obvious that he’s getting tired and frustrated, and Keith wonders if they’ll swap him out or just let him continue.

“Psssst, Keith… hey! Keith!”

If he ignores him long enough, maybe he’ll stop talking. He wills the other seeker to hurry the fuck up and get back here so he has an excuse to keep quiet.

“Keith!” The voice is loud and right next to his ear.

Keith jumps, whirling around with a scowl on his face, slapping his hand over his ear. “What?” He snaps.

Lance takes a step back, hands up in an innocent, defensive gesture. “Whoa, dude, chill, I just—“

“We’re in the middle of a game, Lance.” He doesn’t mean to sound hostile, but there it is. He takes a deep breath and looks away, trying again and trying to keep his voice even. “What is it?” Pouty and grumpy, cause that’s better than angry. Great.

“Are you mad at me?” He can’t say he wasn’t expecting the question. What does catch him off guard, however, is just how small Lance sounds. It’s almost… shy, with layers of uncertainty and worry that is so vastly different from the typical Lance that he’s used to.

It’s such a one eighty from how he had been literally thirty seconds ago that Keith’s head whips around to face him, eye wide and brow pinched. Lance’s expression matches his voice and god dammit, that makes him feel like an ass. He feels his mouth open and close a couple times, unable to find words as Lance just continues to stare at him, chewing on his bottom lip. Fuck.

“Am I— What? No,” He finally manages to sputter, turning back around the increasingly uncomfortable eye contact. He focused on the other seeker approaching them, thankful for the distraction. “Why would I be mad at you?”

Unfortunately, the seeker is tagged out by his team’s beater before he can even get close. The guy groans, pulling his broom out and throwing up his hands in defeat as he turns around. Keith sighs, straightening. So much for that.

“I don’t know, man, you just… give off this feel, you know?”

Keith uses his free hand to pinch the bridge of his nose and briefly closes his eyes. “No, Lance, I don’t know. What the fuck feel are you talking about?” He really doesn’t want to have this conversation, especially not here and especially not now. But here he is, standing on the sidelines of the quidditch pitch, having it. He’s just grateful his team’s beater is too far away to hear them and currently distracted by the other beater wrestling them for the ball.

“The feel that you’ve been straight up avoiding me for days.” He says it like it’s no big deal, but Keith can hear the hurt beneath his words. It cuts straight through his frustration and aims straight for the guilt he’s been feeling beneath, twisting a knife in it.

“I haven’t been avoiding you.” He tries, but the lie feels heavy on his tongue.
“Do mullets do this to everyone?”

“What?” Keith turns to look at him then, incredulous.

“Block out your ability to hear because obviously you can’t hear the bullshit spewing from your mouth right now.” He says, brows pinching as he crosses his arms over his chest, leaning his weight to one leg.

“Lance…”

“Listen, I don’t know why you’ve been avoiding me—“ He breaks eye contact, gaze sweeping around the pitch without really focusing on anything.

“Lance—“

“But I wanna figure this out cause I thought—“ He’s gesturing now with vague and wild motions of his hands.

“Lance—” He snaps, louder this time, but Lance still doesn’t stop.

“We were like… you know, bonding or whatever. I thought were kinda getting into friendship territory and everything—“

“We ARE!” Keith nearly shouts, throwing up his free hand in his exasperation. He very nearly does the same with his other hand and drops his broom, but his fist is clenched too tight to really drop it.

“Then why have you been avoid—“

“I HAVEN’T BEEN AVOIDING YOU!” He doesn’t care who can overhear them now. He’s turned to face Lance. He doesn’t know where the other seeker is, or the enemy beaters for that matter, but he doesn’t care. Lance is looking at him with wide, skeptical eyes, searching his face as he chews on his goddamn lip again. He’s shoulders are hunched slightly, leaning away from Keith just a little. Keith groans loudly, the sound trailing off into a sigh as he runs his hand down his face. It flops down to his side, and he stares at Lance, forcing him to meet his gaze. “It’s just been a very busy week, okay?”

Lance searches his face for a moment longer before he ventures, a little hesitant and cautious. “Soooo… you’re not mad at me?”

Keith clenches his jaw, resisting the urge to sigh again. “No,” He grits out. “I’m not mad at you. I have no reason to be mad at you. I’m just… frustrated in general, okay?”

And he realizes just how true that statement is. He’s not mad at Lance. Lance just happens to be the easiest target to take his frustration out on because he’s at the heart of Keith’s emotional chaos. But Lance doesn’t know that, and it’s unfair of Keith to lash out at him.

God dammit, now he feels like a huge ass. What would Shiro say if he saw him now? The thought of that disappointment is enough to put out the fire that’s been burning beneath his skin. The guilt cuts through his frustration, sending ice through his veins to cool his anger. What would… what would his mom think of him if she could see him now?

If Lance really is his soulmate, he deserves someone better.

“Ohay,” Lance says after a moment, standing a little straighter. “Soooo… we’re friends?”
Keith sighs, shoulders slumping. “Yeah.”

A small, lopsided smile curves Lance’s lips, and his relief is almost palpable. “We’re cool?”

“Yes.”

“We’re coolio?”

“Lance!”

“Okay! Okay! Geez, don’t get your panties in a twist, I just—“

From across the field, he suddenly hears a loud, piercing whistle. Not like Pidge’s whistle, but the kind that’s made from putting two fingers in your mouth and working some sort of magic to make a sound that carries. His head snaps up as the whistle fades to see Coran cupping his hands over his mouth to shout a loud, “CAW CAW.” And even though they never actually talked about the signal Coran mentioned, Keith thinks it’s pretty clear.

Lance has half turned to look across the field, hands on his hips and a small frown on his lips, brows pinched just slightly. “What the hell is he— HEY!”

He sees Keith move at the last moment, but he’s not fast enough to stop him as Keith reaches around behind him and easily snatches the snitch, the velcro making a very satisfying rip as Keith yanks it off his shorts.

Lance jumps away, both hands going to his ass to cover up the velcro spot. He gapes at Keith, eyes wide as Pidge blows three long whistles to end the game. He sputters a few times before he can find his voice. “KEITH! That’s no FAIR! You BETRAYED ME!”

Keith just shrugs, tossing the snitch back to him, which he fumbles to catch.

“What’re you doooing?” Lance asks, prodding Keith’s knee with his foot. Keith ignores him, which proves to be a mistake because Lance just nudges harder, making him sway back and forth. “Keeeieith!”

“Stop.” Keith grunts, pushing Lance’s foot away from him and scooting out of his reach. Lance scowls at him, and he scowls back. “Homework.”

Pidge snorts, but doesn’t look up from their own computer screen. “Yeah, like I believe that.” Keith turns his glare to them and stares until they finally lift their eyes to meet his gaze. They’re sitting crosslegged, laptop on their lap, hunched over the keyboard like some kind of gremlin. Their expression is unamused, complete with bags under their eyes and a blank stare. He can tell they’ve been up late again, which would explain the large dark roast with a double espresso shot sitting next to them. “Keith. You’re an art major. What homework do you have on the computer?”

He bristles. “I have an art history class, too.”

“Are you doing art history homework?”
“No.” They just raise an eyebrow, but they do it in such a way that it implies it takes far too much effort to do so. He hunches a little bit, looking down at his own screen. “I’m doing research for a speech we have to do in public speaking. Something Lance should be doing.” He added, tossing a glare Lance’s way to get the attention off himself.

“But that’s booooring.” Lance rolls his eyes, flopping onto his back with his knees bent and arms holding his Gameboy Color above his head.

Keith continues to stare at him. “You’re just going to wait until the last minute and wing it, aren’t you?”

Lance sends him a lopsided grin. “Maybe.”

Pidge rolls their eyes, hunching a little more as they turn back to their computer screen. “One of these days those habits are going to bite you in the ass.”

Lance tilts his head up to look at Pidge, smile widening. “We’ll see, but for now, my ass it bite free.”

Keith groans, partially because he can’t believe this guy is supposedly his soulmate and partially because biting Lance’s ass is really something he doesn’t want to think about. Fuck no.

He slumps further against the wall, pulling his knees up and resting his laptop more on his stomach so he can properly hide behind the screen. After a week of avoiding Lance, he figured he couldn’t keep doing it without drawing suspicion to himself. So he’s forcing himself to get back to the patterns he established in the first couple weeks of school. That includes hanging out with Pidge and Lance Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at the student union coffeeshop between classes. Luckily, their version of hanging out doesn’t always consist of or require a lot of conversation. Usually Lance is the most talkative, but he’s currently too absorbed in his game. The couches in the corners of the coffee shop were taken, so instead of sitting at a table, they claimed the small stage on the far wall. It’s not usually used during the day, but sometimes they have open mic nights and other events. Keith carefully chose a position with his back to the wall and let the other two sit further out onto the stage until they formed a loose triangle. At this angle, neither of them can see his computer screen.

He stares at his browser for a moment, the one that actually has tabs up for his speech research, the same one that’s a complete cover right now, before swiping over to his secondary desktop. Here he has a browser up with so many tabs that he can’t really read the titles on them anymore. They all have to do with soulmates. Soulmate history, soulmate theories, soulmate psychology, soulmate superstitions. Anything and everything he can find about soulmates and soulbonds.

To be honest, most of it is stuff he already knows. It’s stuff that everyone knows. He’s shuffled through the surface level things that everyone learns when they’re young and has started diving deep into stories of anomalies and legends and theories. Anything that he can find that might give him a clue to whether or not he can, like… get a new soulmate?

Not that there’s anything wrong with Lance, it’s just… he’s not for him. He doesn’t really get how they can be a perfect match. They butt heads far too often, and the dude grates on his nerves way more than he ever thinks a soulmate should. Sure, they occasionally get along, and yeah, he can be a fun guy sometimes, but… there’s just so much… uncertainty surrounding their dynamic. It’s unstable, unreliable, spontaneities. How long would it take for them to crash and burn?

Soulmates have the potential to be a perfect match, but that doesn’t mean they’re guaranteed to be,
and his relationship with Lance is… rocky, to say the least.

He still thinks that maybe he made a mistake. He’s clinging to that hope like it’s the last breath of air before he’s pulled under. He would give anything to just… be wrong. For once in his life, he hopes he’s wrong. Maybe if he like, started calling his grandparents more? Did more for Shiro? Really showed Pidge how much he cares about them? Community service? Volunteer work? Maybe if he just… becomes a better person, he won’t have to deal with this?

Or maybe he can find a way to force amnesia so he doesn’t have to remember the day he saw his galaxy tattooed across Lance’s skin.

He’d give anything to just… forget, and continue to live in a blissful state of just not knowing.

It’s just too soon. He never wanted to meet his soulmate this early in life. He was kind of hoping for them to meet later in life, like in their thirties when they were both older and more mature. He doesn’t have any of his shit together yet. He’s still trying to get his life back on track. How the fuck is he supposed to balance a soulmate on top of that? He just wants to go back to when he didn’t know, when Lance was just one of Pidge’s friends, when he was learning to get along with him for Pidge’s sake, when he thought that yeah maybe they can be friends with time, when he was eager to fit into this new friend group, when he was starting to think that life might be fun and easy for him for once.

Now that friend group has the one person in life he was hoping to avoid for years to come.

Fuck. He’d give anything to just… forget that little detail. He’d give anything to have it just go away. Sever his connection to Lance and just be normal friends.

Hell, it’s not the first time he’s considered ways to sever his soulmate connection. He just has more motivation to do it now. Who the fuck did the universe think it is anyway? Thinking it knows what’s best for him, and that now and here and Lance are all good ideas? He’s just… so tired of all of the curveballs life likes to throw at him.

At least Lance doesn’t know, and he sure as fuck isn’t going to tell him anytime soon, so he still has time to figure things out. He’s just… not really sure what he needs to figure out. His head is a mess. Thoughts and emotions just kind of flying around without really sticking. He’s a mess, and he knows it, and he’s honestly surprised that no one has really noticed yet.

And just like that, his phone vibrates next to him, lighting up with Shiro’s name. He sighs. Speak of the fucking devil.

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> How’s it going?

Keith
> Fine

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> … Really?

Keith
> Uh, yeah?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> You’ve been ignoring my messages for a week
Keith
> And now I’m not

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Are you ready to talk about it?

Keith
> About what

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> You know what

Keith
> Nope, sorry

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> The SM Incident

Keith
> We already talked about that

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> No, we didn’t
> You came over, ate half a pizza, and created a blanket nest on the floor that you didn’t leave for the rest of the night

Keith
> Your point?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Every time I tried to talk to you about it, you groaned loudly and buried your face in a pillow

Keith
> I talked

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Shouting and groaning about how “this isn’t fair” and “why him, why now” and “I want to punch him in the face, Shiro” doesn’t count

Keith
> I don’t see the problem here

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Keith.
> You’re going to need to face it eventually.

Keith
> Nope
> So I have a completely unrelated question
> Have you ever heard of an instance where someone like… broke their soul connection?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> No, not without… you know… one of them dying
Keith
> I was afraid you’d say that

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Keith, please don’t kill Lance

Keith
> No promises

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Come on, he can’t be that bad. The universe DID pair you guys up, after all. Surely there’s something there
> Even if it’s buried deep, deep down

Keith
> You don’t know him, Shiro

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Yeah, you’re right
> You should introduce us

Keith
> Oh fuck no

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> I promise I won’t tell him, Keith. That’s for you to do, not me

Keith
> He’s probably not even my sm
> I probably saw it wrong and jumped to conclusions
> False alarm

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Have you tested it?

Keith
> …No

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Keith.

Keith looks up from his phone, eyeing Lance over the top of his laptop. He’s still lying on the stage, tip of his tongue poking out as he stares at his gameboy. His eyes drift to his forearms, holding the game up above his head. It would be so easy to just… take a pen and subtly write something, even just a line, and see if it appeared on him. It would be so easy, and then he would know for sure.

His fingers tighten on his phone, throat constricting as his breaths suddenly become shallow. His palms itch with this deep burn that he knows is entirely in his head. He has his SM’s daily pick up lines there, but soulmarks haven’t been known to burn just by being close to a soulmate. Yet here he is, skin burning like a brand as he stares at Lance. None of it’s real, but it doesn’t stop him from wanting to scratch, to rub his palms until the feeling fades. He ignores it though. Maybe if he just ignores it, it’ll go away. Maybe if he ignores his bond to Lance entirely, it’ll eventually go away.
His mind is whirling, and his chest feels tight, and he suddenly feels a little too light headed. His vision dots at the edges, and the skin of his arms and legs prickle, feeling distant and not quite attached. He recognizes what’s happening, and that just makes it worse because this is not the place to have a break down, not in public, not in front of—

Then Lance’s grip on the gameboy loosens enough for it come crashing down onto his face. It happens suddenly, but Keith is staring, so he watches it all happen: the loosening grip, the fall, the panic and realization spreading across his features before he lets out a strangled yelp, hands scrambling. He turns his head at the last second, and the gameboy hits him square on the cheek, cutting off his yelp and making a loud smack before clattering to the stage.

He’s frozen, hands up in the air, face tilted to the side and eyes wide. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Pidge is staring, too. Lance makes slow eye contact with both of them.

And then all at once, the moment is shattered and he and Pidge are laughing. It bubbles up out of his throat unbidden, shaking his frame so much that he has to grab his laptop to keep it from sliding off. He throws a hand over his face, eyes squeezed shut as he feels moisture gathering there. He laughs until his stomach hurts, and he can hear Pidge echoing him throughout it all.

By the time their laughter dies down, Lance has rolled onto his stomach, pouting as he grumbles under his breath and tilting his gameboy just right to catch the light. He refuses to look at either of them. He and Pidge share amused looks and wide grins, and it takes him a moment to realize that the tight feeling in his chest is gone and he feels solidly back in his own body and his right mind.

When Pidge looks back to their computer, he turns back to his phone, smile fading as he looks at his conversation with Shiro. He slouches further down against the wall.

Keith
> I’m just…
> I’m not ready, Shiro
> Don’t push me to do it

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Alright, alright, I get it, you need time
> But at least let me meet him
> I promise I’ll be on my best behavior

Keith
> Jfc you sound like a dad trying to meet his kid’s sm
> Can you not?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Well I AM family
> It’s my duty and my right
> Sooo

Keith
> Shiro, no, that would be way too obvious
> Wtf

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Just invite him over sometime when I’m there

Keith
> Did you hit your head recently?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> I can pick you up from your class with him?

Keith
> Fuck no

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> ....

Keith
> ....

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> I could come to quidditch practice?
> I DID promise to come with pompoms and airhorns

Keith
> So you can embarrass me? Let me repeat: fuck no

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> What if I just come to play?

Keith
> As hilarious as that would be to watch, no, I’m not introducing you to Lance

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Fine, I won’t meddle

Keith
> Thank god

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Too much

Keith
> I hate you

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> <3

Keith
> Don’t

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> :*

Keith
> Stop

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> I love you, baby bro
Keith
> Why are you like this?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Seriously though, Keith, I still don’t see the problem here

Keith
> I’m not explaining it again

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> You didn’t really explain it a first time

Keith
> Question

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Shoot

Keith
> If I change my personality and interests enough, would it make a difference? If I become a completely new person, there’s not way we can be “chosen for each other” right?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> I’m pretty sure it doesn’t work that way

Keith
> What if I move out to the desert and never write on my skin again?
> Problem solved

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Keith.

Keith
> Too drastic?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> A little

Keith
> I’ll think of something

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> How about you take a breather and come over for a movie night?
> Brotherly bonding and all that
> Like old times

Keith
> So you can trap me and grill me with questions?
> Thanks, but no thanks

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> :(  
> Keith, I would never take advantage of you like that
Keith
> Yeah, sure
> Besides, I told Pidge I’d go with them to this coffeeshop later after classes

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Coffeeshop?

Keith
> Yeah, it’s called Local Lion or something
> Apparently it’s co-owned by two of the quidditch members
> Hunk and Lance work there too
> Pidge said we can get discounts and Hunk wants me to try his donuts

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Lance works there?

Keith
> Uhh yeah?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> At a public coffeeshop where people go to casually sit and drink coffee?
> A place where it would be totally normal for you to take your older brother without suspicion?

Keith
> … no

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> :)

Keith
> Don’t

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> :)))))

Keith
> Disowned

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> You can’t disown me

Keith
> I just did

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Keith look… I really don’t believe he can be that bad of a guy. You were even getting along with him before you learned about the whole SM thing, right?

Keith
> I guess

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> So there’s been progress, right? Look, I don’t have to meet him yet, but maybe I could help you
find some peace with all of this? Like maybe if someone else knew him AND knew he’s your SM it would help take some of the weight off your shoulders? Give you someone to talk or rant to when you need it?

**Keith**
> …
> Fine
> But not yet

**Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)**
> I can live with that
> Just try to calm down and not stress yourself too much about this, okay?

**Keith**
> Okay

**Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)**
> Remember, patience…?

**Keith**
> …
> You’re seriously going to make me do this over text?

**Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)**
> :)
> Come on, Keith. Patience…?

**Keith**
> Yields focus

**Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)**
> Thank you
> Now take that to heart, yeah?

**Keith**
> Yeah

---

He’s about halfway through season seven of the X-Files and attempting to make scrambled eggs when he feels the telltale tingle on his arm.

Keith squeezes his eyes shut, letting out a stuttering breath as he puts the spatula down with shaking hands. He turns then, sinking down to the floor and resting his back against the cupboards while he pulls his knees to his chest. Arms hanging loose at his sides, head tilted back against the cupboard door, and eyes shut, he lets the feeling of his soul connection wash over him.

The emotions he gets from his soulmate are exactly what he was expecting, but that doesn’t make it any easier. He’s not great at putting names to the emotions that come through his soul connection, but if he had to, he’d say that worry is the most prominent thing he’s feeling. A thin chaos of sickeningly worried emotions with an underlying fondness and helplessness come filtering...
through his chest, wrapping around his heart and constricting, making his lungs feel heavy. His limbs feel like lead. There’s nothing pleasant about the emotions that slither through his chest, leaving a cold train behind them, but they do mirror his own so closely that it’s hard to tell the two apart. He’s not sure what’s his and what’s his soulmate’s. Together they combine into something far more powerful and far harder to ignore than when he had just been on his own.

They mix and churn and ooze through him, leaving him short of breath and feeling nauseous. All the while, the tingle in his arm traces whatever words his soulmate is writing, a touch that’s not quite painful and not quite ticklish, just something that’s foreign and strange, but at at this point so familiar. A phantom pen scrawling across his skin.

It couldn’t have lasted more than a few seconds, but it feels like hours. Then the tingling fades and the foreign emotions slip from him, leaving him feeling oddly empty.

The overwhelming guilt that remains, twisting and coiling in his gut and constricting his throat? Yeah, that’s all his.

He spends several more minutes on the floor, eyes closed, trying to regulate his breathing and heart beat into something that might be considered normal. He can’t fight off his curiosity for long, though. It gnaws at his mind, even as the dread claws up up his spine. He knows he has to look. He always has to look. It’s some kind of primal instinct to look at soulmarks, and it’s one he’s never been able to fight. He might as well get it over with. Like ripping off a band-aid.

He lifts his left arm, holding it in front of him while he takes a deep breath. Then he opens his eyes, gaze instantly fixing on the words tattooed there in a familiar handwriting.

*Lance’s handwriting.*

**You okay, space cadet?**

Yup. There’s that guilt again. Solidifying into something tangible that settles heavily in his stomach. He had known it would only be a matter of time before his soulmate, before Lance realized something was wrong. He had been hoping that if he just ignored the problem, it would go away. He should have known. On some level, he did know. His sm has always been the one to question whenever he had been silent for too long.

*Lance* has always noticed when he’s been quiet for too long.

He’s still trying to wrap his head around that. Around the fact that the guy he’s been connected to for years is *Lance*. The guy with a cocky smile and self assured attitude just doesn’t click well with the guy with the soft, fond emotions who’s given him years of encouragement and support. He just can’t… force them to be one person in his mind. There’s a disconnect there, between the images he has of the two, and he can’t quite get them to line up properly.

Which makes this so much harder to accept. Part of him is still hoping beyond hope that this has all been some sort of crazy misunderstanding. He knows deep in his gut that it isn’t true, but that doesn’t stop the ember of hope from burning.

And it’s not that he has anything against *Lance*. Lance is fine. He just… There have been so many things he hasn’t had control over in his life, and being connected to his soulmate is a huge factor in his life that he never asked for. He always took solace in the fact that he didn’t have to pursue his soulmate if he didn’t want to. He could hang back, wait for them to meet naturally, not rush into things. He was ready to wait. He wanted to wait. He wanted to wait until he had a firm grasp on his life, until he felt like he actually had his shit together. And he had kind of been banking on the fact
that the universe would know this about him, grant him this one thing, and give him a soulmate he wouldn’t meet until later in life.

And yeah, he had made the decision to see the guy, to discover who he is. And he still blames Pidge and Shiro for that. But he had thought that by doing so in secret, he would have the upper hand. He had thought that if he knew who his soulmate is, he could take the whole thing at his own pace. He could avoid him when he needed to, and maybe slowly learn more about him, see what kind of guy he was before he ever knew who Keith is.

The easiness of that plan had been shattered the moment he realized his soulmate is Lance McClain.

He can’t run from his soulmate, he can’t hide when he needs space, if his soulmate is part of his new group of friends. A group of friends that he’s really started to like. A group of friends that he really wants to call his own. He had thought learning about his soulmate would give him the upper hand. Instead, he feels like he’s had more control ripped from his grasp, leaving him staggering and unbalanced, perched on an edge and ready to fall.

His only saving grace is that Lance doesn’t know. He knows he technically still does have the upper hand. He knows this, but it sure as hell doesn’t feel like it. He’s going to be forced to hang out with his soulmate and pretend like nothing is wrong, like nothing is bothering him, like he doesn’t know that the universe decided he and Lance would be a good match.

It doesn’t help that he doesn’t... feel anything for Lance. He knows that not all soulmates experience love at first sight. In fact, he’s always believed the whole idea is a myth. Something that people think they experience because they love the idea of it. He’s never thought he’d feel it. He always assumed he wouldn’t. But... that doesn’t stop the disappointment he feels that he hadn’t.

He barely gets a warning before the tingle is back and more words start to scrawl out beneath the previous ones. He tenses, eyes wide as he stares at his arm, bracing himself for the same swirling cocktail of worried emotions that hit him, swelling in his chest with renewed vigor and enhancing his own.

You haven’t painted in a while, and I’m just worried

There’s a pause, and Keith thinks he has time to breathe. But the feelings have barely fled before they swell once more, briefly, as a few more words appear.

I’m here if you need me

Keith groans loudly, dropping his arms to his knees and forehead dropping to bury his face on them. He squeezes his eyes shut, willing the chaos inside him to just settle. He never asked for this. He never wanted it to be this way. It would be so much easier if he was just different. If he just felt differently. He’s making such a big problem out of nothing. But the fact remains that he is like this, and he does feel like this, and that just makes him feel guiltier.

Life isn’t fair. Life has never been fair to him. But life isn’t fair to Lance either. Because if Lance really is his soulmate, the kind, caring, patient person Keith’s been connected to since he was thirteen, then well... Lance McClain deserves someone better. Someone to appreciate him in a way Keith isn’t sure he can.

God fuck, why is he like this?
He stays like that, wallowing in self pity and hatred, until he smells burning.

Leaping to his feet, he quickly grabs the handle of the pan and pulls his burning eggs off the burner. He stares down at them for a moment, decides he’s not really hungry anyway, and tosses the pan into the sink. He’ll eat later. Maybe. If the knot in his stomach ever loosens. He turns off the burner as he leaves the kitchen. He grabs a hoodie and pulls it on, if only to hide his arm and the worried words that are tattooed there, before flopping face first onto the couch.

He’s somewhere in season eight when he hears a knock at the door. He ignores it, but it doesn’t go away. It only gets louder and more incessant. Keith turns his head so his face is buried in the couch cushion and groans loudly.

“Keith?” Shiro’s voice comes muffled through the door. Keith groans again. Of course it’s Shiro. He’s been ignoring his texts and calls for the past couple of days. Even now, his phone is somewhere on his bed where he had tossed it after Shiro’s third call since he woke up. “Keith, I know you’re in there.”

“No, I’m not.” He says, loud enough to be heard despite being muffled by the couch.

“Keith.”

“Go away, Shiro.”

“No. Open the door.”

Maybe if he just… continues to lay here, face down on the couch, he’ll eventually be absorbed by it. If he’s one with the couch, he can’t be expected to do things, like hang out with his friends, or talk to his brother, or have a soulmate.

It doesn’t take long after that for him to hear the telltale rattle of a key being inserted into the lock. Why did he ever think it was a good idea to give Shiro a key to his apartment? The door swings open, but Keith doesn’t lift his head. Instead he rolls it to the side so he can stare at the TV again. The door closes, there’s shuffling, and soon Shiro is blocking his view of the TV, standing in front of it with his arms over his chest. Keith doesn’t look up at him. He just stares blankly, like maybe if he tries hard enough he can see right through his abdomen and continue to watch his show.

“It doesn’t matter how much you ignore me. I’m not going to disappear.”

“Here’s to hoping…” He mumbles.

He sighs again, shoulders slumping. “Why aren’t you wearing pants?”

Keith just shrugs.

“You haven’t even gotten dressed today.” It’s not a question.

Keith folds his arms under his head, all the better to bury his face in the folds of his sleeves. “I put on a hoodie.” He mumbles.

“That doesn’t count when you’re not wearing pants.”

“I don’t need pants if I don’t plan on going out.”

“That’s kind of what I’m here about—“

“No.”
“When was the last time you left your apartment?”

He has to think about that one. “Two days ago.”

Shiro raises an eyebrow in that surprised and gently judging way, and Keith scowls. “You haven’t been to class in two days?”

“Maybe…”

“Keith.”

“Don’t—“

“You worked really hard to get here. Don’t throw it away by missing classes.”

He groans loudly because he knows, and he knows he’s being ridiculous, but goddammit sometimes he just needs some time to himself. It’s not like he’s been able to work through his shit like he normally does. Just the thought of seeing Lance with his paintings… well it’s the root of his problems so painting doesn’t really seem like a good outlet. He’s shoved his paints and markers away for the time being. Out of sight, out of mind, right? Too bad he can’t get his thoughts and emotions in order because he can’t paint. “Leave me alone, Shiro.” He grumbles, burying his face in his arms.

He hears Shiro moving, and then suddenly he’s sitting on him. He lets out a grunt of annoyance, but doesn’t move otherwise.

“You’re fat.” He grumbles into his sleeves. Shiro’s heavy, and it’s uncomfortable, but he can’t quite bring himself to care.

Shiro hums, but doesn’t reply right away. Keith can practically feel him looking around his apartment, taking in the mess that’s built up over the past couple of weeks. He hasn’t done the dishes in a while, or taken out the trash, or done laundry, or really picked up after himself at all.

“When was the last time you made food?”

“An hour or two ago.”

“Why does it smell burn in here?”

“…Because I burned it.”

“…Did you eat it?”

“No?”

Another sigh. “When was the last time you ate something that wasn’t junk food?”

“Yesterday?”

“When yesterday?”

“Morning…”

“Goddammit, Keith.” There’s movement, and he’s willing to bed Shiro is pinching the bridge of his nose the way he does when he’s tired of his shit. It’s a gesture he’s seen a lot over the years. “Last time you showered?”
“Last night,” He grunts. “I’m not completely hopeless, you know.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“I don’t need your sass, Shiro.”

“Look, you know I don’t like to tell you what to do—“

“Could’ve fooled me.”

Shiro snorts. “Now who’s the sassy one? My point is, the sooner you stop moping around, the better.”

“’M not moping…”

“After years of knowing you, I’m pretty sure I can tell when you’re moping.”

“It’s cause you’re nosey.”

“It’s because I care.”

“Can you go care somewhere else?”

“Nope.” He says, popping the ‘P’. Then there’s sudden movement, and Shiro shifts off of him, wedging his ass in the space between Keith and the back of the couch. Then he starts shoving. When he realizes what he’s doing, he tries to fight back, but Shiro is stronger and has the upper hand. He manages to get his feet on Keith’s side and promptly shoves him off the couch and onto the floor.

“Shiro,” He whines, lying on his back on the floor, staring at the ceiling.

Shiro sits cross legged on the couch, arms crossed over his chest, and leans over the edge into Keith’s vision. He glares at him, but Shiro only smiles in his small victory. “Up you go. I’m getting you out of your apartment.”

“No.”

“Yes, now go shower and put some pants on.”

“Why’re you doing this?” He groans, sitting up and running a hand through his hair. He had said he had taken a shower last night, but it might have been a little longer than that. Like… maybe a couple of days. But his hair isn’t that bad. He can probably wait till tonight or tomorrow.

“You weren’t responding to me, so I had to go to Pidge.” Keith sighs loudly, but Shiro continues. “They told me you haven’t been to your classes in a few days—“

“Just two!”

“And honestly, I’m tired of you moping around— No, you are moping around. This isn’t the end of the world, Keith.” Keith makes a loud whine, but Shiro ignores him. “Plenty of people would love to know who their soulmate is, and I know you’re not ready to tell him, but the beauty of it is that you don’t need to. You can keep this secret as long as you feel you need to, but I’m not going to let you mope about it anymore. You’re going to have to learn to live with it.” Shiro puts a foot to his shoulder and nudges him. When he speaks again, his voice is a lot softer and kinder. “Now get up, go take a shower, and put pants on. We’re going out.”
“I don’t need a shower.” Keith grumbles, but gets to his feet anyway, Shiro watches him as he shuffles across the room to where his clothes are piled up and starts digging through them, looking for a decently clean pair of pants. Maybe Shiro is right. He wouldn’t mind getting some fresh air. He doesn’t think it’ll help all that much, but he’s willing to give it a try. He just wants to feel like himself again. “Where’re we going?”

“We’re going to that coffeeshop Lance works at.”

Keith freezes, heart suddenly in his throat as he whips around so fast he nearly looses his balance when his foot slips on the pile of laundry. His hand shoots out to catch himself on the bed. He stares at Shiro, eyes wide. “What?!"

Shiro holds his gaze steadily, a small, innocent smile on his face. “We’re going to the coffeeshop, and I’m going to meet Lance.”

Keith’s brows pinch, lips pursing into a small frown as he straightens. “Go by yourself.”

“You’re coming with me. You need to get out of your apartment and learn how to be normal around him anyway. The sooner you face it and accept it, the sooner you can move on.”

Keith glares at him. He knows Shiro well enough to know he’s fighting a losing battle. Still, he can’t help but try. “You said you wouldn’t push me.”

“I know, but I think you need a little push right about now.”

“He might not even be working.”

Shiro shrugs, sitting back on the couch and making a show of getting comfortable. “If he’s not, then you’ll have nothing to worry about.”

Keith glares at him, but Shiro just stares back steadily. “I’m not getting out of this, am I?”

“Nope,” He says, sounding way too happy about it. “I’ll drag you there kicking and screaming if I have to.”

Keith sighs and shuffles over to his dresser to dig out a pair of clean black jeans and a clean shirt. Shiro watches him with a raised eyebrow as he heads across the room. “Where’re you going?”

“To take a shower…”

Shiro snickers, and Keith slaps the back of his head as he passes. “Shut up.”

“Lance,” Hunk says, sounding reproachful. “I know I just like, cleaned the floors and everything, but I really don’t think you should be lying on them.”

Lance’s only reply is a wordless grunt.

“Come, now, Hunk. Think of it as an obstacle course!” Coran says, making a show of stepping over Lance’s sprawling limbs. “Step over a leg here, a noodle arm there—"
“I do not have noodle arms!”

“And voilà!” He says, sliding a pan of donuts into the oven and closing the door with a bang. “No problem.” He says, stroking his mustache.

“Ooooh, but what if I step on him? Oh man, oh, Lance, I’m sorry if I step on you, dude.” Hunk says, skirting along the edges of the kitchen to avoid stepping on him. To be fair, Lance is lying in the middle of the floor. It’s pretty hard to avoid him.

He lifts his head, shooting Hunk twin finger guns and a wink. “You can step on me any day, big guy.”

“Uh, I’d really rather not. Besides, weren’t you wallowing?”

“Oh, right.” And then he flops back down with a long, drawn out groan.

“Allura calls from the front. She doesn’t sound upset. If anything, the reprimand is only half-hearted and distracted. He supposes that’s fair. She does it a lot. “Stop disrupting Hunk and Coran!”

“I’m wallowing, Allura!”

“Come wallow while you clean the lobby!”

“Why don’t you clean the lobby!”

“I’m manning the register.”

“We have no customers!”

“I’m your boss.”

Lance snorts, but rolls onto his stomach anyway, pushing himself to his feet. “Oh, suuuure, use the boss card.” He grumbles loud enough to be heard as he trudges out from the kitchen. Sure enough, they have no customers. There are a few people sitting out on the patio, but the inside of the shop is dead. And sure enough, Allura is sitting at a stool she’s pulled up behind the register, idly working on a crossword puzzle on the back of the local newspaper. She doesn’t look up as he passes behind her. “I hope you know I’m only doing this because I love you.”

She snorts a short laugh. “And it has nothing to do with the fact that I pay you.”

“None at all.”

He drags his feet around the stop, picking up stray napkins and other garbage, tossing them in the trash. He sets to work wiping the tables and straightening chairs. He’s working at half speed, and he knows it. He also doesn’t care. He gets to the donut display case, and starts wiping the outside down, ridding the glass of all the fingerprints from customers leaning against it and pointing at their choices.

“What was the name of Aladdin’s prince persona?” Allura asks without looking up.

“Ali.” He says without hesitation, and she nods before scribbling it down. He manages to hum a few bars of the Prince Ali song before he’s just not feeling it anymore. With a heavy sigh, he flops forward, resting his whole body against the display case, face pressed against the curved top, arms hanging loosely at his sides.
Allura sighs. Resting an elbow on the counter and propping her chin up with her knuckles, she looks up at him. “Alright, I’ll bite. What’s wrong?”

That’s all the opening he needs. “Having a soulmate is haaaard.”

Her face immediately softens. “What happened? I thought you two were finally starting to talk more?”

“We did that once, and I thought maybe it was going to be a regular thing, but…”

She tilts her head slightly, and her smile is soft and pitying, but not the kind that makes him feel looked down on. It’s the kind of pity he gets when his friends honestly care about him, but aren’t sure how to help. “It’ll be alright, Lance. You just can’t rush these sorts of things. I’m sure they’ll come around.”

“I hope so…” He mumbles, eyes drifting down to look through the glass into the display case. If he’s extra pitiful, maybe Allura will let him have a donut.

“It’s more than that, isn’t it?”

“Hmm?” He glances back at her.

She nods toward him. “I saw you writing on your arm earlier. They’re not responding to your more… direct messages?”

“Yeah, but what else is new.” He grumbles, brow pinching.

Her smile widens just a fraction. “Well, I think it’s understandable that they don’t respond to your daily pick up lines. I’m sure after a couple years, that gets old.”

Lance gasps, pushing himself off the display case. “Excuse! For your information, my pick up lines are the best, and I know my soulmate appreciates them! Besides, I’ve been doing it for so long, it’s just part of our thing, Allura. It’s our thing!”

“Mm-hmm…” She hums, still smiling. It dials down a fraction after a moment. “What’d you say to them? If you don’t mind me asking.”

He sighs, turning around to lean his back against the display case, right hand going to idly rub his left arm where the words are. He stares at the tiles of the floor, eyes idly tracing the patterns between them. “I, uh… I just asked if they were alright. And… let them know I was here. You know… if they need me.”

“That sounds really sweet of you, Lance.” Allura says, voice all soft and kind, which simultaneously makes him feel better and worse.

All of his friends know about his soulmate situation. He talks about them too much for them not to. But… that doesn’t stop him from feeling a little self conscious about the whole thing. Yeah, he loves his soulmate’s paintings, and he’ll show them off to anyone who’ll listen, but… when it comes right down to it, he’s not as close to his SM as the others are to theirs. And he can’t help but feel a little… jealous? And that just makes him feel worse because he loves his SM, he really does. They’re perfect for him. But… yeah, it can be a little hard sometimes.

“I’m sure they appreciate it.” She continues, “Even if they don’t say anything.”

“I hope so…” He continues to rub his arm, like he can somehow reach through their connection if
he touches it enough. He knows he can’t, but, you know, doesn’t stop him from trying. The longer
he goes without a reply, the more he starts to worry that maybe, just maybe, he crossed a line. He’s
given his SM space for years, and even when he’s gone a while without receiving any marks, he
just… silently stewed in his worry. He just thought that now that they’ve had their bonding
moment that maybe that wall was starting to break down. That maybe it’s okay for him to ask him
more direct questions. Like maybe it’s okay for him to start reaching out.

Now he’s starting to worry that he had been wrong. The last thing he wants to do is scare his SM
away.

“I’m just… I’m worried about them.” He says, forcing his hand away from the words on his arm
and running his fingers through his hair.

“Have they given you reason to worry?” She asks, sounding surprised and curious.

“They haven’t painted or drawn anything in two weeks, Allura!”

“Haven’t they gone a while without drawing before?”

“Well, yeah, but never this long, and, I dunno… this feels different.” He hasn’t gotten anything
from his soulmate since the space painting on his shoulder and neck. It’s unusual. He usually at
least gets some sort of doodle. He’s been thinking back to that galaxy painting, trying to remember
and analyze the emotions that had filtered through then, looking for some sort of clue as to what
might be wrong. He remembers feeling anxiousness squeeze at his heart, nervousness gnaw at his
gut, but also excitement buzzing through his veins. Nothing about that was particularly bad. He
just wants to know what happened. And while he knows that, logically, it can’t have anything to do
with him because he didn’t do anything, he can’t help but wonder if it’s somehow his fault. “I
just… I want to know they’re okay.”

“I’m sure they are, Lance. No use getting yourself worked up over nothing. They’ll come around in
their own time.”

He looks at her then, a small smile on his lips. “Thanks, Allura.”

“Any time, Lance.”

He then throws himself toward the counter and laying his torso across it, arms stretched out to
dangle off the other side. “Now tell me about your soulmaaate!”

His head is tilted up to look at her, so he sees the moment her soft smile drops, her eyes widen, and
her cheeks start to darken. She blinks, clearing her throat and tugging the newspaper out from
under him. “What about him?” She says, trying to fake nonchalance, but Lance can practically see
her heartbeat speed up like it always does when her SM is brought up.

Honestly, if Hunk is the front runner for cutest blush when his soulmate is brought up, Allura is a
close second. Lance grins. “Alluraaaaaaa!” He draws out her name, lifting his head and flopping his
hands at her, lightly slapping at her arm. She leans away from him, setting the newspaper on the
other side of the register and smoothing it out. “Come oooon, I’m sad, tell me about your soulmate
to cheer me up! Let me live vicariously through you!”

She huffs, brows pinched slightly and lips tugging downward. It doesn’t do much to hide her blush
tho. “I don’t know why hearing about him would cheer you up.” She grumbles.

“Because you guys are the sweetest.”
She rolls her eyes. “Lance, that’s a bit of an exaggeration, don’t you think?”

“Uh, no,” He says, resting an elbow on the counter and propping his cheek up against his hand. He’s still bent over the counter, stretched out and waggling his eyebrows at her. “Allura, you’re left handed.”

“And?”

“You taught yourself how to write with your right hand for him!”

She stiffens a little. “So? Anyone would have done the same.”

Lance chuckles. “Yeah, but I’ve seen you write with your right hand. Your handwriting is terrible, but he still sends you patient words and little hearts.”

She’s definitely blushing now, lips pursed lightly as she keeps her eyes fixed on the crossword puzzle in front of her.

Lance hadn’t known Allura when the accident had happened. He’d still been in high school. But he’d heard about it. He asked a couple years ago when he noticed she was writing on her left arm in a barely legible handwriting instead of just using her dominate hand. She had been twenty at the time her soulmate lost his right arm in a car accident. Even at that time, they were close. She spent weeks trying to figure out why he wasn’t responding to her messages, and when he did, he was acting strangely reserved. It took him a while to tell her about the accident and admit that he had lost his right arm. She said he was ashamed and embarrassed about it, as if it might make her change her mind about him. She scolded him for that, for keeping it a secret and making her believe there was something wrong with their connection when her marks didn’t go through. She immediately started teaching herself to write with her right hand.

It’s been five years since then, and she’s gotten a lot faster with it, but her handwriting is still terrible. Her SM never seems to care though, and Lance’s heart aches just thinking about it.

“She doesn’t always send me hearts.” She mumbles, tapping her pen on the counter.

“He looooves you!” He sings, and he gets the pleasure of seeing a wonderful mix of mortification and embarrassment on her beautiful features.

“Lance!”

“Come on, Allura, you guys are like, goals.”

“I don’t know why you’d think that.”

Lance props himself up on both elbows so he can count off on his fingers. “One, you guys support each other all the time. Two, you’re super sweet. Three, you send each other recipes to try every weekend, like you’re making dinner together or something, it’s adorable. Four, he writes good morning to you every day. Five, he calls you princess. Six—“

“Alright! I get it!” She says, swatting at his hands, lips pursed and brows pinched in adorable embarrassment.

Lance laughs, straightening off the counter so she can’t reach him. “Six, you both agreed to meet each other naturally because it’s romantic, but you have that adorable little agreement.” His lips curve into a wicked grin as her blush reaches her ears. “What is it again?” He coos. “Every time he comes into a coffeeshop, he orders your recommended drink of the month, like an adorable little
codeword so you’ll know it’s him. What’s it this month, princess?”

She rolls up her newspaper, stands up, and reaches across the counter to swat at him. He laughs, dancing away from her reach. “It’s none of your business!” She snaps, face flaming.

“It’s a marble mocha macchiato, I believe!” Coran says, pushing through the kitchen doors with his back and a tray full of fresh donuts in his hands. “Brilliant alliteration on my part, if I do say so myself.”

“Coran!” Allura shouts, spinning on her heel and glaring at the man, though he notes it looks a little more like a pout.

Coran stops mid step, blinking at her before his gaze slides to Lance, then back again. “Was I not supposed to say that? You asked me to help you come up with something for this month.”

“It’s private!” She tries again, but it sounds like a defeated whine.

“I’d like to point out that when it comes to your secret soulmate special orders, they’re not really a secret.” Hunk says, poking his head out of the kitchen doors. “You always tell us to keep an eye out for those specific orders.”

Allura just groans, sits back down, and puts her head to the counter. “Don’t you all have jobs to do?”

“As your friends, it’s our job to make sure you’re properly embarrassed when we tease you about your soulmate.” Lance says, grinning widely as he crosses his arms over his chest.

Coran hums thoughtfully as he bends down to restock the display case. “He has a point.”

“It’s alright, Allura.” Hunk says stepping up behind her to put a hand on her shoulder. “He teases me all the time about mine.”

She tilts her head to look up at him, a small smile on her face. “Thanks, Hunk.”

He nods. “Anytime.” And then he smiles. “By the way, Lance forgot to mention how he does your eyeliner for you most days. Which is, might I add, incredible and adorable.”

Lance snaps his fingers. “Oh, right! That shit is always on point!”

Allura groans again, rolling her forehead back and forth on the countertop, which is only drowned out by their laughter.

They’re interrupted, however, by a jingling of the chimes as the door opens. They all turn together, Allura lifting her head off the counter and Coran popping up from behind the display case.

Keith is standing in the doorway to the coffeeshop, wearing a hoodie that swallows him despite the fact that it’s pretty warm outside today. His hair looks like it’s wet, and it’s pulled back into a loose ponytail. He’s not looking at any of them. His lips are pursed into small frown, brows pinched, and eyes on the floor across the room. It’s… oddly adorable and strangely endearing.

Something briefly flutters in Lance’s chest, and he blames it on the fact that he hasn’t seen Keith in a few days. If he’s being honest, he’s been a little worried about the guy. He’s been… off for a few days. Or, more accurately, a little over a week. Lance noticed it, but he didn’t think it was any of his business. Until his worries got the better of him and it seemed like Keith was avoiding him. His confrontation with Keith eased his mind, but he was still worried about him. He’s Pidge’s best
friend, after all. And, Lance likes to think, his new friend.

But despite looking like a cat that was just dragged out of a nap, Keith looks good.

For a moment, Lance is too overwhelmed with Keith to notice the guy standing next to him. But then he does, and he kinda wonders how the *fuck* he didn’t see him to begin with. Yeah, Keith might be endearing with the whole disgruntled puppy look, but this guy is fucking *gorgeous*. And the scar across his face and white stock of hair at the front of his head do nothing to detract from it. If anything, they give him this handsome, rugged look. And he’s built, practical dwarfing Keith next to him.

And to top it all off, he has the brightest, warmest smile on his face Lance thinks he’s ever seen.

“Hey, Keith!” Hunk says, breaking the brief silence. He lifts a hand in greeting as Keith looks up.

His frown eases a little bit into a small smile. “Hey, Hunk.”

“Keith! How are you today?” Coran says, grinning from ear to ear as he slides the donut case door shut.

“Uh, fine. Good.” The guy next to Keith nudges him lightly with an elbow, and Keith shoves back at him. “Thanks for asking.”

The two of them step into the shop, and the door swings shut behind them.

“Hey, Keith,” Lance says, grinning brightly as he leans back against the counter, arms crossed over his chest. “Good to see you’re okay.”

Keith glances at him, but his gaze flits away quickly before he mutters. “Hey, Lance…” And he glances up in time for him and the other guy to share a look, and yeah, okay, that’s weird. But whatever. When he looks back at Lance, his brows are pinched, a small smile on his lips. He looks incredibly confused and just a little wary. “Why wouldn’t I be okay?” They come to a stop in front of Lance and in front of the register.

Lance shrugs, smile never faltering. “You haven’t been around for a couple days, so I assumed you were sick or something. Good to see you’re feeling better.”

“Uh, yeah, thanks,” He mumbles, looking away. Lance tries not to let that get to him. He and Keith are *fine*. New friends just get awkward sometimes. It’s nothing to be worried about. But speaking of fine…

“So who’s this?” He asks, looking to the new guy and giving him a winning smile.

Keith glances up at his companion, and something silent is exchanged between them before Keith’s gaze glances between the rest of them. “Um, guys, this is my brother, *Takashi*.”

The man’s smile disappears for a second as he sends a small scowl at Keith before putting a hand on his head and roughly ruffling his hair. Keith ducks his head and steps away, glaring at him as he attempts to smooth his hair back down. “Please, call me Shiro.” He says, smiling again as he looks between them all. “Keith’s told me a lot about you guys and quidditch.”

“Has he?” Allura says, sitting up straight on her stool and brightening. Her eyes shift between the two of them, smiling brightly. “I’ll take that as a sign that he’s having fun.” She says, and Keith crosses his arms over his chest, pouting.
“He’s a brilliant addition to the team!” Coran says, holding the empty tray behind him as he reaches over the counter with his other hand. “Name’s Coran.”

Shiro wastes no time taking his hand, and in the process, Lance notices the gleam of metal from the guy’s prosthetic arm. Huh, he hadn’t even noticed. He had assumed it was some sort of soulmark painting.

“I’m Hunk,” He says, lifting a hand in greeting.

“Allura,” She says, smiling.

Then it’s Lance’s turn. He slides forward a step, holding out a hand. “Name’s Lance.” He says, holding Shiro’s hand a little longer than necessary as he looks up at him, tilts his head, and gives him his best charming smile. “But you can call me anytime.” He adds with a wink.

Everyone groans. Keith looks mortified before he slaps a hand over his face, and Lance lets go of Shiro’s hand, throwing back his head and laughing.

“Please, ignore him. He does this far too often.” Allura says, sounding exasperated and far too tired.

He spins on his heel, shooting her an innocent smile. “Only to pretty people.”

She gives him a flat stare, one eyebrow raising slowly. “Lance.”

“Yeah?”

“Go clean the bathrooms.”

“But, Allura—!”

“Now.”

He throws up his hands and stomps away, ignoring the unreadable look on Keith’s face when he catches him watching. He doesn’t go far though, instead stopping at the station where customers can add things to their coffee. He takes a moment to clean and organize everything, checking the milk levels, swiping up spilled sugar, organizing the straws, restocking napkins. He really doesn’t want to go clean the bathrooms, and he’s kind of hoping if he puts it off long enough, Allura will forget she asked him to.

Coran and Hunk disappear back into the kitchen, and Allura sighs again before turning back to the two of them. “So what can we get for the two of you?”

Keith shifts from foot to foot, glancing up at the menu, frowning, then gives a one shouldered shrug. “Just a medium drip coffee.”

Allura taps the screen and pulls out a cup that she pushes across the counter to him. “And will this be together or…?”

“I’ll be paying for us both.” Shiro says, patting Keith’s shoulder.

Keith mutters what Lance thinks might have been a thanks, and takes his cup before ducking out of his brother’s reach. He trudges over to where the coffee urns are, which is right next to where Lance is procrastinating. He leans a hip against the counter, crossing his arms over his chest, grinning at him.
“I can’t believe you hit on my brother.” Keith grumbles as he looks over the coffee options.

Lance shrugs. “It’s all in good fun. Everyone knows I don’t mean it.” Keith still looks disgruntled though, and still won’t look at him. So Lance leans over, nudging Keith’s shoulder with his own. “What’s the matter, Keith? Want me to hit on you instead?”

Keith’s head whips around to gape at him, eyes wide and a little panicked. It’s cute. Lance’s grin just widens, eyebrows waggling. “W-what?” He sputters, and Lance feels a sense of pride. He doesn’t think he’s ever seen Mr. Stoic and Broody this undone. “No.”

Lance laughs, nudging him again and not at all deterred by Keith’s scowl. “Keith, buddy, chill. I’m messing with you.” He chuckles and reaches out a hand, tapping the middle urn. “By the way, I recommend this one. It’s the most popular one we have.”

Keith blinks, following his gesture and reading the name of the coffee. He looks a little thrown by the sudden topic change. “Uh, thanks.”

Lance shrugs, “No problem.” And finds a little satisfaction when Keith takes his suggestion.

“I’ll have a…” Shiro trails off, and Lance looks up curiously to see his face scrunched up in thought. “Hold on, I have it written down somewhere…” He pulls out his phone, taps the screen a few times, and then reads off of it. “A marbled mocha macchiato.”

Lance freezes, breath hitching in his throat. He thinks his mouth might have dropped open, but he’s not entirely sure. His eyes snap to Allura. She’s staring at Shiro, back straight, eyes wide, lips parted. She looks as completely shell shocked as he feels, but he knows it has to be ten times stronger for her. If she wasn’t already sitting down, he would have rushed behind the counter in fear of her falling over. Instead, he just freezes, watching everything from a distance.

He can barely breathe, anticipation threatening to strangle him as he silently urges Allura to pull herself together and say the next part of the planned exchange. She’s told him about it before. She gives her soulmate a new drink to order every month at whatever coffeeshops he goes to on the playful offhanded chance that he’ll walk into hers. If she hears the drink order, she’s supposed to say—

“Would…” Her voice is so soft he can barely hear her, and he ends up leaning forward a little bit subconsciously. She clears her throat, sits up straighter, tucks a stray strand of hair behind her hair in the way she does when she’s nervous, looks up at him through her lashes in a shy way that Lance is not used to seeing on her—“Would you like some juniberries with that?”

He can hear her voice shaking just slightly, a hesitance that she tries to cover up. She’s done this before when people order her chosen drink of the month, and she’s always been disappointed.

But Shiro is gawking at her now, his head having shot up far too quickly. His eyes are wide and his mouth is definitely hanging open, and Lance would have to be blind to miss the bright red that’s coloring his cheeks, making his scar stand out.

“Oh, man…” Lance breaths. “Ooooh man, oh manohmanohman.” He grabs Keith’s sleeve, tugging at it in his excitement.

Keith glares at his hand, setting down his coffee cup before he spills it everywhere. “Lance, what are you—“ He cuts himself off when he gets a look at Lance’s face.

Lance wastes no time, grabbing his shoulder and spinning him around. “Dude, look.” He leans forward to hiss in Keith’s ear, barely able to keep his voice down in his excitement. Oooh man,
he’s never witnessed a first meeting before, let alone one of his friends, let alone literally the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen meeting her soulmate, who is the most beautiful man he’s ever seen.

Shiro blinks once, twice. His mouth opens and closes, and a strangled whine comes out like he’s trying to talk but nothing is working properly. Then his phone slips from his grip and he has to break his gaze away as he fumbles to catch it. When he straightens, he clears his throat and— “Aren’t those flowers?”

Lance is bouncing on the balls of his feet, chest fluttering with excitement as he watches as they stare at each other. Slowly, so slowly that it’s like watching the sun rise or fog dissipate, they smile at each other. Small, shy smiles that reach their eyes, and—

The door to the kitchen slams open, bounces off the doorstop and slams back into Coran, who was in the middle of stepping through the doorway. There’s a muffled curse as he stumbles back into the kitchen, but the suddenness of it is enough to catch everyone’s attention. They all turn to stare at the door as it slams open again, Coran strides out, and— “ALLURA, HOLY QUIZNAK!”

“Coran, that’s not a word!” He can hear Hunk shout from the kitchen.

“It was when we made it up at the tender age of twelve, and it’s applicable now!” Coran shouts, then points over the counter at Shiro. “Allura! Did I hear correctly? Is this—?”

Allura giggles, and she looks startled by it because she slaps a hand over her mouth to hide her smile. Her cheeks are stained dark pink. “I, uh… I think he might be— yes…” She looks back at Shiro, shyness taking over again, and it’s such a strange yet endearing look on her, and god he’s so happy for her.

Shiro smiles then, a slow, small smile that radiates warmth. He stares at her like they’re the only ones in the room, and when he speaks, his voice is low, soft, and filled with such tender fondness that Lance feels like he’s intruding on a private moment. “It’s nice to finally meet you, princess.”

“Pretty amazing, isn’t it?” Lance asks, leaning forward to whisper into Keith’s ear. He jumps and turns, staring at Lance with wide, surprised eyes. Lance spares him an amused smile before turning his attention back to the others. He nods toward them. “Seeing a first meeting like this? Kinda awesome, right?”

Keith turns away, shuffling a few inches away from him and crossing his arms over his chest. “I… kinda feel like I’m intruding…” He mumbles.

Lance chuckles softly. “Yeah, me, too. But… it’s kinda a magical moment, and I’m glad I got to see it.” There’s a familiar warm feeling in his chest. It’s the same feeling he gets when he hears his parents talk about how they met, the same feeling he got when his siblings met their soulmates. It’s an overwhelming fondness for his friends, his family, for his soulmate, for love. It’s tinged with a bitter sadness, a desire to have that for himself. He wants it, desperately so, but he knows he has to wait. And he knows his soulmate will be worth the wait. He’s happy for them, he really is. He feels giddy right down to his bones. But there’s an ache there, too. An ache and a need to have what they have, to meet his own special person and have his own fairytale. “I hope when I meet my soulmate, they’ll look at me the way your brother is looking at Allura.” He says softly, wistful, and mostly to himself.

There’s suddenly movement as Keith turns to grab his coffee cup, shoves a lid on it, and steps away. His face is scrunched up and scowling, but it’s less disgruntled than it was earlier and more… just more. Like there’s a war going on behind the scenes that Lance can’t quite figure out.
He’s also turning his face away to hide his conflicted expression from Lance.

Without thinking, his hand shots out and he grabs Keith’s arm. “Hey, where’re you going?” Keith freezes for a moment, then glances over his shoulder at Lance. His face is carefully blank, but there’s something in his eyes and a small frown on his lips. Lance’s brows furrow, lips pursing into a thin line. “Seriously, dude, you alright?”

“Yeah, I just—“ He cuts himself off, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. “I’m fine. I just need to… work on somethings.” He opens his eyes, and when he does, it’s like he’s a completely different person. His eyes are clearer, sharper, his face more relaxed, lips set into a determined line. “When Shiro snaps out of his trance, tell him I went to work in the studio, okay?”

And before Lance can respond, Keith has pulled out of his grip and slipped out the front door. Lance watches him walk away through the windows, brows pinched in confusion and worry.

He doesn’t really have time to dwell on it, however, because Coran is currently in the process of excitedly interviewing Shiro, and Lance needs to run interference. He manages to push Coran back to the kitchen with Hunk’s help, and convinces Allura to take a break to talk with Shiro while he covers the register. It doesn’t take much to convince her. She looks starstruck, dazed, and it just takes a gentle nudge and reassurances that he’ll be fine.

She ends up taking off the rest of her shift, and Lance can’t say that he blames her. Besides, he’s got everything covered. It’s a weekday, so they’re not particularly busy, and Coran helps him when they have a brief rush later that evening. It’s not a bad day, but he’s still feeling drained by the time his shift is over.

He and Hunk walk back to their dorm together, excited and animately talking about Allura and Shiro. When they get back, Hunk gathers up his things before ducking out to go meet Pidge at the library. He asks Lance if he wants to come, but he declines. Hunk gives him a look and tells him to make sure he does his homework, but Lance just smiles and waves him off.

Once he’s alone, he collapses on his bed, one leg hanging off it and one arm thrown over his stomach while the other lies on the pillow above his head. He stares at the ceiling and heaves a heavy sigh. With all the happiness and excitement surrounded Allura’s first meeting, he had nearly forgotten his current struggle with his own soulmate. Now it just weighs heavier on his heart. They had never responded to him, and he still has no idea if they’re okay. They probably are. He’s probably just overreacting, but… He wishes they were closer. He wishes they had secret codewords for their first meeting and little inside jokes.

He turns his head, eyes roaming over the pictures taped to his wall. There’s dozens of them, covering up all the available space on the wall next to his bed. They’re of all different sizes, some of them with smudges in the glossy finish from where he’d touched them too often. Each one is a different picture of one of his soulmate’s paintings. He takes pictures of all of them, and prints all of them out, but his favorites make it to his wall. His walls back home were a lot more covered, but he has limited space here in his dorm, so he had to make some cuts. The rest of his pictures are in photo albums, stacked in a tub and shoved under his bed.

He reaches a hand up, touching the closest ones. He has pictures here spanning over several years. The most recent addition is the galaxy painting on his neck. It’s the last thing he’s gotten from them. The last time he heard from them. He really hopes they’re alright.

He closes his eyes, letting his arm fall over his face as he takes several deep breaths. He doesn’t like being jealous of other people’s soulmates. He knows his soulmate is perfect for him. He loves his soulmate, it’s just… it’s just hard when he can’t express it. And it’s hard when he sees what
other people have. He knows he’ll get there eventually, it’s just… hard.

But he’ll get through this. He always does. He tilts his arm back, peering out at his wall of paintings again. His eyes immediately find the most recent galaxy, and a small smile finds its way to his lips.

“One day, space cadet. One day…”

He’s not sure how long he’s been dozing for when he feels it, but he’s deep enough into sleep that at first, he thinks it’s a dream. But the tingling continues, foreign emotions filtering and flitting through his chest, slowly drawing him back to consciousness. He blinks back sleep, feeling drowsy and disoriented, trying to figure out what the hell is going on and why he feels so strange—

Then the realization hits him all at once and he sits up straight, making himself dizzy in the process. Eyes wide, lips parted, he lifts up his arm. There are colors there, spreading out across his skin in smooth strokes from an invisible brush. His lips curve then, forming a smile so wide his cheeks ache. But he doesn’t care. His soulmate is painting again!

His flash of excitement is immediately dampened by the somber feelings swelling in his chest. They’re not strong or passionate in their negativity, nor can he really call it sorrow. They’re just… somber, hollow, sad and distressed in such a way that almost feels numb. There’s no sharpness, no heat. It feels… thoughtful, introspective, which is oddly solemn when he doesn’t know the thoughts that are there to cause the emotions.

It sobers him up real quick, and he lays back on his bed, holding his arm above his head to watch his soulmate work. At first he thinks that maybe the painting is fire again, but no, it’s not. If he’s learned anything, it’s that his soulmate usually paints something that mirrors their state of mind, and fire definitely doesn’t fit them right now. No, the colors are the same: yellows and oranges, but it’s not fire.

As he watches, he tries to sort through the emotions filling his chest, but despite their lack of intensity, they’re still chaotic. They swirl and clash, feeling heavy and choking, but when he reaches for them, they shy away, slipping through his fingers like smoke. A chaos, but a calm chaos where nothing sticks and nothing makes sense. And beneath it all, a constant that Lance can’t quite shake, so subtle that at first he hadn’t noticed it at all, is a self hatred. It’s so familiar, but he hasn’t felt that from his soulmate in years.

It twists his heart in a bone deep ache as a frown finds it’s way to his lips. He wants to hold them. He wants to tell them it’ll be okay. He wants them to know that he’s here. But right now, all he can do is sit and watch and witness, a silent support that his SM will know is there. He’s always been here. He always will be

The colors spread, bright yellows, brilliant oranges, fading to shades of reds and purples. There’s no defining shapes, but the center is yellow and the colors spread out from it. There’s undefinable blurs that obscure and reflect, catching the colors spread around his arm. When his arm is nearly completely covered, he knows it’s coming to an end. He doesn’t want it to end. He doesn’t want their connection to fade. He wants to cling to it and treasure it, but he knows it’ll come again. It always fades, and it always comes again. His soulmate will always continue to paint. As long as they’re both alive, they’ll be connected.

Then something shifts in the foreign feelings in his chest. It’s subtle at first, but grows stronger, a balm spreading out and soothing the negativity buzzing in his limbs. Where it touches, the storm quells, the shifting storm clouds dissipating and calming. It’s slow, oozing out and leaving a tired, wary, somber contentment in it’s wake. And from that stillness rises a strength, a determination
that he knows and loves. It’s not as strong or loud as it usually is, but it’s there. It’s a desire to persever, something he’s felt many times before through their soul connection, and one that he admires.

Lance struggles to find a name for the calming feeling, but when he does, he can’t quite shake it: acceptance.

The tingling stops and their connection fades, the foreign emotions slipping from him until he’s left feeling oddly empty and hollow.

He sits up, looking down at his arm to admire their work. He hasn’t noticed the shifting in lighting in his room, but it seems oddly familiar. He lifts his head, eyes going to the window. Feeling like he’s being tugged forward, he gets to his feet and shuffles across the room, reaching out to pull the blinds. Outside his dorm window, he has a fantastic view of the sunset.

He stares at it a moment, then lifts his arm. The colors match almost exactly, and his breath catches. He sees it now: a sunset, clouds catching and shifting the coloring, the sun bright at the center. A small, ghost of a smile tugs at the corners of his lips as he looks out the window.

He wonders if his soulmate is looking at the same sunset, and a familiar warmth fills his chest.

“One day, space cadet...”
Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Hey, sorry about ditching you like that
> I wasn’t… that was unexpected
> But
> God, Keith, she’s perfect, she’s amazing, I can’t believe
> I can’t believe she’s mine???
> I’m still trying to wrap my mind around that
> Anyway, how’re you doing? Are you okay?

Keith
> No, but I’m getting there

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> I’m glad
> I’m here if you need me, little bro

Keith
> Thanks, and Shiro?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Yeah?

Keith
> I’m happy for you, really. Allura’s great

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Thanks, Keith
> She is
> But I’ve known that for years

Chapter End Notes

The entire gif, scene, and emotion of Keith working through his emotions to come to acceptance was heavily inspired by Sora and her interpretation of this song

I also highly recommend that playlist, which we put together for this fic specifically. Every song was picked because it has an emotion, vibe, or theme that we heavily associate with this au, our plans for the story, and the character's histories. It's also a playlist that I personally enjoy writing to.

Also! I've been slowly answering a lot of world building, history, and lore asks about this au on my tumblr, and I made a master list of it HERE. There's also a link to it on the sidebar of my tumblr page. I have a lot of asks that I have saved that I haven't answered yet, but I plan on getting to them. So check it out if you're curious about this soulmate world!

PLEASE DO NOT REPOST THE ART FROM THIS FIC

Instead, hop on over here and reblog it from the artist herself HERE
Wittyw's Tumblr (author and co-creator) and Twitter
Sora's Tumblr (artist and co-creator)
**Calm The Storm Within Us**

Chapter Summary

In which friendship grows on rocky slopes, they learn what paths to tread, and solace can be found in the eye of the storm.

Chapter Notes

Alright, guys. I'm NOT going to apologize for how long this update took, because in all actuality, I'm not sorry at all. Please read the end notes for some real talk.

For now, happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keith has always been good at blocking everything out.

When his hands are busy, he finds it really easy to simply ignore his surroundings and let his mind process the things that he doesn’t really want to think about. It’s how he comes to terms with things, how he finds peace with the things he can’t control, and how he calms down when it feels like everything is falling apart around him. Sometimes it’s working on one of his bikes, something physical and labor intensive. Sometimes it’s puzzle games, the hands-on ones with wood and string and rings, and more recently, rubix cubes. Sometimes it’s a long, scenic drive on his bike. Sometimes it’s the gym or a hard run. And more often than not, it’s his art.

So while he’s sitting on the floor of the hallway, leaning up against the wall near his public speaking classroom, headphones on and music drowning out the shuffle of footsteps and muted conversations around him, hunched over his sketchbook and hand scribbling fiercely with a fever that borders on desperate, it’s no real surprise that he doesn’t notice anyone approach him.

That is, until his headphones are suddenly being pulled away from one ear and a voice startles him out of his thoughts.

“If you keep glaring like that, you’re gonna burn a hole through the paper.”

Keith jumps, and a surprised, strangled yelp escapes him before he can stop it. The voice is close and way, way too familiar. He slams his sketchbook closed with far more force than necessary, his pencil slipping out of his grasp as he does so and clattering to the floor. He leans away, whipping his head up to gaze up at a stunningly bright grin.

“Lance!” He gapes, internally cringing a bit at how high his voice sounds. What is wrong with him? He lowers his headphones until they’re resting around his neck.

Lance’s eyes are alight with amusement, and that’s enough to get him to snap his mouth shut, pursing into a small frown. “That’s my name, don’t wear it out.” He says easily, stopping Keith’s runaway pencil with the toe of his shoe and pushing it back towards him. Keith takes it and shoves
it back into his pencil pouch, zipping it up. While he does so, Lance slides down the wall, sitting next to him with one leg outstretched and one knee pulled up. “I don’t know why you’re so surprised. You know I have this next class with you.” He says, voice teasingly light.

Keith busies himself with putting his pencil pouch away. “I know, I just… wasn’t expecting you so early.” And it is early. At least for Lance. There’s still twenty-five minutes before their class starts, which is a whole ten before the previous class even lets out. Usually on these days, they have lunch with Pidge before hanging out in the campus coffeeshop. Lance usually doesn’t let them leave for class until the last possible second. So Keith really hadn’t expected him for another twenty-three minutes at least.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Lance shrug. “Pidge had to leave for class early, and I didn’t want to hang out at the coffeeshop by myself, soooo here I am.” He holds out an extra cup Keith hadn’t noticed he was carrying, bumping his arm against Keith’s to get his attention. “Speaking of which, I brought you some of that devil juice you like to drink.”

Keith just stares at it for a moment before his gaze slides to Lance’s. He blinks. “What?”

Lance rolls his eyes, pushing the cup into his hands. “Just take it.”

Keith does, and hesitantly lifts it to his face, sniffing it for a moment before taking a small, cautionary sip. His brows furrow, lips pursing as he looks back to Lance. “This is just coffee?” Just plain, black coffee from what he can tell.

Lance grins, eyes crinkling at the edges with the effort of holding back a laugh. “Yeah,” He says,
voice almost even but his laugh is definitely there. “Like I said: devil juice.”

Keith breathes out a sharp, short amused laugh. “Not all of us like drinks that are eighty-five percent sugar and syrup.” He says dryly.

Lance gasps loudly, leaning away as he puts his free hand to his chest. “Keith! What kind of heathen do you think I am?” He lifts his own coffee cup into view. “This is clearly ninety-five percent sugar and syrup.”

Keith can’t help the way his lips twitch at the corners, but he manages to hold his voice at an even deadpan. “Clearly.”

Lance just shrugs, easy smile in place as he leans back against the wall. “It’s called flavor, Keith.”

“Whatever you say, Lance.”

They’re silent for several moments. Keith idly sips his drink, relaxing against the wall. His fingers idly trace the spine of his sketchbook while his eyes follow several people as they leave the nearby stairwell.

“So why weren’t you there today?” Lance says after a moment. His voice is casual, but there’s an odd note there that Keith can’t quite place. He glances sideways at him, but he’s not looking at him.

“Huh?”

“At lunch and stuff. Pidge just said you were busy.” He asks, turning his head to smirk at him, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “You ditching us again?”

Guilt rolls hard and heavy in his stomach as he looks down at the cup in his hand. “Uh, no, I…” He clears his throat and tries again with more conviction. He has nothing to feel guilty about. Not this time, anyway. “I’ve been in the studio. Since I skipped two days, I’ve had some work to catch up on.” He scratches his cheek. “I think I finished it all though, so… yeah.”

He’s not sure how to explain it, but Lance seems to visibly relax at his side. “Well, that’s good at least. I’m glad you’re back.”

Keith eyes him, one eyebrow raised in his surprise. “You are?”

Lance looks away, shrugging. “Well, yeah. Classes are boring without you, dude.”

“Lance, we only have one class together.”

“Uh, yeah, and that one class is boring without you. My point still stands.”

Keith rolls his eyes, but there’s a small smile he can’t quite help. He hides it behind his coffee cup. That is, until Lance absently gestures to the sketchbook resting in his lap. “So what were you doing?”

“Nothing,” He says a little too quickly, spreading his free hand across the cover, like that might somehow hide the book from view. It doesn’t.

Lance eyes him, one eyebrow raised, then his gaze lowers to the book. His face lights up. “Oh! Is that the journal you were writing in before?” He asks, sitting up a little straighter. Keith knows what he’s referring to. He’s referring to the first day they met. The first day he met his soulmate,
and they were both assholes. He bristles a little at the memory.

It’s not exactly the First Meeting they write about in romance novels, nor is it the First Meeting Lance has no doubt been dreaming of.

“Uh, yeah…”

“You never did show me what’s in it.” He’s already reaching for the sketchbook, long, dark fingers brushing over the plain black cover. Keith tenses. “Can I see—“

“No!” He snaps, pulling the book away abruptly and half twisting away from him. He scowls, everything about his posture defensive.

Lance just freezes, eyes wide as he blinks, mouth hanging open in shock. Then, as Keith watches, something terrible happens: hurt flashes in the depths of those blue eyes, his lips pursing as his entire expression hardens. His fingers curl into a loose fist as he pulls his hand back. “Oh,” He says, voice sounded way too cold and oddly empty. “Okay. Sorry.”

Keith sighs, forcing himself to relax. That knot of guilt is back. He can’t tell if he feels it because this is his soulmate or if it’s because that look does not suit Lance in the slightest. “Look, Lance—“

“No, it’s okay, dude.” He says in a way that makes Keith feel like it’s really not fine at all. “I mean, I know I was an ass back when I teased you about it, and I’m sorry about that, okay?”

“Lance—“

“I just, I don’t know…” He’s fidgeting now, scratching the back of his neck and refusing to look at Keith. “I thought maybe we were past that?”

“Lance—“

“Never mind, it’s stupid, just forget about it—“

“Lance,” Keith says, loud and exasperated. He sighs, running a hand down his face. “It’s not you, alright?” He doesn’t know why Lance always jumps to the conclusion that it is him, and he feels like normally he would brush it off and move on. But he just… doesn’t like the idea of Lance stewing in the idea that he’s somehow done something wrong. Or that Keith doesn’t trust him. Despite how annoying he can be, Lance is a good guy. Maybe not someone Keith wants as a soulmate, but he is a good person.

Lance remains quiet, and Keith huffs, realizing that he’s going to have to keep talking. He traces his fingers along the edge of the sketchbook, feeling the texture of the pages. “It’s not just you, okay?” He repeats, softer this time. “I don’t… I don’t usually like showing people my art. Even Pidge and Shiro, and I’m closer to them than anyone. And especially this one.” He taps the cover of the sketchbook, feeling his insides twist. “This one is… private.”

It’s his soulmark sketchbook, where he recreates all the designs he paints on himself. He could just take pictures, sure, but he just… he likes drawing them out. He paints in the moment, with little thought about what he’s doing other than just going with the feeling. And then he recreates it from memory later. It’s just always how he’s done things, and he finds comfort in it. It’s always been his private sketchbook. He’s never shown anyone besides his mother, and she’s been gone for several years now.

And he especially can’t show Lance. There’s too much of a risk that Lance would recognize the drawings, even if they were just on a page instead of twisting along his body. And if Lance
realized their connection…

Keith has to suppress the shiver of dread that wracks down his spine. He may have come to accept that Lance is his soulmate, but he’s really not ready to face that reality just yet. He’d rather just… ignore it for now. Put it in a box and save it for another day. Let that be future Keith’s problem, cause present Keith isn’t fucking ready for that.

“Sooot I was right.”

Keith glances up, confusion coloring his features. Lance’s lips quirk into a small, wry smile. The hurt has faded from his expression.

“What?”

Lance’s smile widens. “It is like your diary.”

Keith rolls his eyes, shoving Lance’s arm hard enough to make him tip over. He laughs as he goes down, holding his coffee cup up at an angle so it doesn’t spill. When he rocks back up, he’s grinning, and Keith ignores him as he puts his sketchbook away.

Then movement catches his eye.

He tilts his head in time to see Lance pushing his sleeves to his elbows, revealing the colors of a sunset imprinted onto the skin of his left forearm. Keith freezes, and he’s pretty sure he makes a sound as his breath hitches when his heart lodges itself firmly in his throat. The sound seems to catch Lance’s attention, and he must have noticed where Keith was staring, cause suddenly he’s smiling, holding up his arm for Keith to see better, slowly twisting it to give him a well rounded view.

But Keith already knows what it looks like. He witnessed that sunset from the wall length window in the studio. He captured that sunset onto his arm with paint. And he’s been trying to feverishly recreate that sunset in his sketchbook with colored pencils. And now here it is, a little faded but colors still bright as they appear deeply ingrained onto Lance’s arm.

He’s… never seen one of his own soulmarks this close before. He’d only seen the galaxy tattooed on lance’s neck from afar, and only for a moment. Here, now, he can see his work up close, mesmerizingly beautiful and yet horrifically taunting. Here it is. His marks. On Lance’s skin. He did that. Lance is carrying his marks. He already knew he would. He already came to terms with that. But it was one thing to know it, and an entirely different matter to see the proof shoved so clearly into his face. Any small hope in his chest that he was wrong, any small defiant spark of denial buried in his heart dies.

His mouth feels dry. There’s a strange buzzing in his ears. His heart sounds way too loud, and he’s not entirely certain that he’s breathing. His eyes are fixed on Lance’s arm, fascinated by the way his muscles and tendons roll beneath the colored skin. It’s like a train wreck inside his chest, mind blaring alarms, but he can’t look away. He’s stuck, frozen—

“—an artist!”

It takes him a moment to realize Lance is speaking to him, and that’s enough to tear him out of his daze. He shakes his head, forcing his eyes up to Lance’s face. “What?” He croaks, voice on the verge of cracking. Luckily, Lance doesn’t seem to notice.

He’s grinning, eyes staring down at his own arm as he twists it under the florescent hallway lights. “I said, my soulmate is an artist.” The fondness in his voice and the soft look in his eyes is too
much. Keith’s gut clenches, hard and nauseating. He tastes bile on his tongue. “They’re amazingly talented—“ *Stop.* “And I always get these really cool painting tattoos—“ *Stop* *stop* *stop.* “I mean, not to brag, but I’m pretty sure I won the fucking lottery when it comes to—“

“That’s great,” Keith snaps, unable to keep the hardness from his voice. He stands abruptly, grabbing his backpack and throwing the strap over his shoulder. He walks away, leaving Lance gaping at him, a frown on his lips and a furrow to his brows. He ignores him, going to stand by the classroom door as the previous class filters out. His heart is hammering in his chest, and it’s all he can do to keep the nauseous guilt at bay. Lance comes up behind him, but neither of them say anything, and as soon as the wave of students is clear, Keith ducks into the room, taking his usual seat at the end of the row.

Lance sits next to him, and Keith tries to ignore him, but he’s all too aware of the slouch in his shoulders, of the way he crosses his arms over his chest, of the way he pouts and refuses to look at Keith. Keith really knows he fucked up when he realizes that Lance isn’t talking to him. Lance *always* talks to him before class. The guy is a fucking chatterbox, even if Keith rarely gives him anything to go off of. But right now he’s pointedly not talking to him, and that just makes the guilt solidify a little more.

That, and the fact that that Lance has pushed his sleeves back down to his wrists.

Keith tries not to let it get to him. It’s for the best, after all. He doesn’t want Lance to think it’s okay to just ramble about his soulmate in front of him. That’s *not* what Keith wants. That would just make it harder to ignore the whole situation. So he forces himself to breathe, to let his muscles relax, and slowly, that ball of tension eases.

Unfortunately, his plan of ignoring Lance for the rest of the class doesn’t really go over well when their teacher announces that they’re going to be doing impromptu speeches. That, in and of itself, isn’t too strange. They’ve done a couple of exercises so far where they’ve had ten minutes to come up with a short speech about themselves or some other given topic. What’s different about this one is that they’re apparently doing it pairs.

“This speech is going to be more of a sales pitch.” Their teacher says, “You’re going to get into pairs, find a random item you have with you, and you’ll have ten minutes to outline a two to five minute speech, in which you and your partner will attempt to sell the item to the class. None of this has to be too serious. It’s just an exercise on creativity, working under pressure, and working with a partner.”

When she dismisses them to find partners, he’s not all that surprised to hear the loud, dramatic sigh from his side. “Guess that makes us partners.” Lance says, turning his head to glance at Keith. There’s a small smile tugging at his lips, and Keith knows that his rudeness earlier has been mostly forgiven.

He humors Lance with a wry smile. “Do I have much of a choice?”

Lance’s smile widens at that. “That you do not, mullet.”

Unfortunately, working with Lance is a lot harder than Keith anticipated. He would rather work with Lance than someone he doesn’t know, but *damn* does Lance make it hard for him to stick to that mentality. He’s there to rebuff Keith every time he makes a suggestion, but then only proceeds to make an even *more* ridiculous suggestion instead. They spend the entire ten minutes of prep time arguing over what item to sell, and absolutely none of it on actually outlining a sales pitch.

“We are *not* going to use my hair tie, Lance.” He says for what feels like the hundredth time.
“Why not?” He says, already reaching for his ponytail to make a grab for it. Keith leans away, and Lance pouts. “It’s perfect.”

Keith resists the urge to roll his eyes. “It’s too simple. Besides, what can we say about a hair tie? It ties your hair. That’s it. That’s the only use.”

Lance clicks his tongue. “Ye of little faith and even littler creativity. We can come up with a bunch of uses! She said it doesn’t have to be serious! Think outside the box, Keith.”

“There’s a difference between thinking outside the box and being stupid.”

“You’re being stupid!”

“Just pick something else!”

“Your sketch book—”

“No.” He says quickly, and thankfully Lance drops it. “What about our coffee cups?”

Lance waves him off. “Boring.”

“A pencil—”

“Next!”

“Your shoe,” Keith says, sarcasm leaking into his voice.

Lance straightens, eyebrows raising. “Now there’s an idea…” Keith rolls his eyes. “But I can think of something better.” He reaches out, lightning fast, and his fingers curl around Keith’s wrist, dragging his arm between them. He’s grinning brightly as he holds up Keith’s hand. “Your gloves!”

Keith scowls. “No.”

Lance’s face drops. “Why not?” He shakes Keith’s wrist a little, and Keith curls his hand into a fist to keep it from flopping around. “This is perfect! Let’s do your stupid emo gloves!”

“No,” Keith repeats, feeling a familiar itch act up. The words tattooed onto his palms, pick up lines new and faded, the words I’m glad you’re okay, I missed you etched into the thin skin on his inner wrist, just barely covered by the leather of his gloves. They burn. And he knows it’s irrational, and that they’re not actually burning, but damn if it doesn’t feel that way. He tries to tug his hand away, but Lance latches on tight. “Let go.”

“Come on, Keith! No one else here has gloves. It’s perfect!”

Keith groans, letting his shoulder droop as he rolls his whole head along with his eyes. “Fine,” He says, making damn certain that his exasperation is clear. “But I’m not taking them off.”

At that, Lance frowns, brows furrowing and eyes looking over Keith’s hand like it was somehow diseased without him knowing. His gaze then slides up to meet Keith’s, curious but baffled. “Why not?”

“I don’t like taking them off.” He says, trying to sound casual over the sound of his heart racing. He is not about to take them off in front of Lance. No fucking way. He finally manages to pull his wrist out of Lance’s grip, and puts it in his lap, trying to subtly rub away the feeling of Lance’s touch.
Lance’s frown deepens. “Keith, they’re just gloves.”

“Yeah, and I don’t like taking them off.” He repeats, voice hard.

“Like, ever? Do you shower with them on?”

He knows Lance is teasing him, but he bristles anyway. “Drop it, Lance.”

He puts up his hands in surrender. One thing Keith has come to appreciate about Lance is his ability to recognize a sensitive subject when he stumbles across it, and then promptly drop it when the situation calls for it. Despite his avid curiosity, and despite his remarkable ability to stick his foot in his mouth, Lance is actually pretty good at judging when he shouldn’t push someone, and he very rarely ever wants to make someone uncomfortable.

It’s times like that when Keith can actually see how he’s managed to make friends with such amazing and chill people like Hunk and Pidge, and why they appreciate his friendship.

Unfortunately, he can’t drop subjects without just a little more needling. At least when Keith is involved.

“Fine, fine, you can keep your gloves on and the truth behind your hands will remain a mystery to the ages.” Keith glares at him, but Lance just smiles. “We can work with it anyway.”

Keith sighs, pushing the notecard their teacher had given them for outlining their speech between them. “Whatever, so now we just have to—”

The sound of an iphone xylophone cuts him off. He looks up as his teacher turns off her alarm, smiling around the room. “And that’s time. Who wants to go first?”

Keith stifles a groan, and Lance nudges him to get his attention. He scowls at him, but it doesn’t affect Lance’s good natured ease in the slightest as he leans into him and whispers. “Guess we’re winging it, right, buddy?”

They don’t go first, nor do they go second or third, forth or fifth. They have plenty of time to scribble down a brief outline of what they’re going to talk about, but Lance just sits there, leaning back in his seat with his arms crossed over his chest. He gives no indication of being worried about the whole winging it plan, and if he’s not going to make an outline, neither is Keith. So the notecard just sits glaringly empty between them, a reminder that once they’re in front of the room, they’re on their own.

He’s not necessarily nervous about public speaking. Not like some people. That, however, doesn’t mean he’s good at it. He’s not a huge face of all the attention on him, but he can deal with it. He’s just not very good at speeches. Still, as much as it sucks, he’s gotten pretty good at just… accepting his fate and dealing with it whenever he’s had to give presentations.

That, unfortunately, doesn’t stop his stomach from rolling with nerves when he and Lance are called to the front of the room for their turn.

Lance, on the other hand, doesn’t seem nervous at all. He grins, standing and leaning close to Keith to whisper in his ear as he passes, “Just follow my lead. We got this.”

And so he begrudgingly follows Lance to the front of the room and stands awkwardly beside him as Lance leans his elbows and forearms on the podium. He leans over it, clasping his hands loosely together as he surveys the room, waiting for them to settle down with an easy grin on his lips. Keith crosses his arms over his chest, leaning his weight to one leg and doing his damnedest not to
Despite the teacher’s nod to go ahead, Lance doesn’t start until there’s absolute silence in the room. When he’s certain he has everyone’s attention, he straightens, slapping his hands down on the podium suddenly enough to make Keith, and several other students, jump.

“Hey, Keith!” He says, boisterous and loud, with an odd inflection to his voice that makes Keith think of an infomercial. He supposes that’s the point. Before he can dwell on how easily Lance adapted to his role, he’s looking at him, and Keith is left grasping for straws. Lance raises an eyebrow, giving Keith a subtle nod of encouragement.

“Hey, Lance?” He says, cautious and a little wary. He doesn’t know where Lance is going with this.

“Have you ever found yourself wanting to be the best damn emo you can be?” He’s still using that voice that is so over the top and specifically geared to sound like something terribly scripted.

Keith gives him a flat look, but Lance just looks patient and encouraging. He internally sighs, deciding to humor Lance, if only for the sake of his grade. Besides, he has no better ideas. “Boy, have I.” He deadpans, earning a few snickers from the class.

This only seems to encourage Lance as he leans over the podium, putting one elbow on it while he gestures with his other hand, one finger extended toward the ceiling as he turns back to face the class. “Then have I got the solution for you!”

Lance is getting so into character, so into the show, the Keith finds a smile struggling to curve his lips. He fights to keep it down and his voice even and bland. “What’s that, Lance?”

As if on cue, he straightens, flaring out his hands to the side, fingers spread as he shakes them like jazz hands. “Fingerless gloves!”

A beat. A pause.

“But Lance…” Keith says, drawing out the silence as he turns to stare blankly out at the class while he deadpans. “I already have those.” He lifts up both hands for emphasis in a mimicry of Lance’s own jazz hand gesture.

Lance turns to him, putting his hands to his mouth as he gasps loudly and far too drastically to be real. He then turns back to their audience, gesturing to Keith. “It’s like magic!” He says in a voice that somehow manages to be both dry and awed. Keith really has to struggle to hold back his smile. He can feel it twitching at the edges of his lips. And with that amusement bubbling warm inside him, he doesn’t even hesitate when Lance says, “Model for us, Keith.”

Without missing a beat, like this had been a planned thing all along, Keith starts to model his gloves. He holds out his hands, flipping them to all angles, holding them high before bringing them low. And then, just for the hell of it, he starts to frame his face, voguing with vague gestures that he vaguely remembers seeing models do. The whole time he keeps his face as blank as possible and made unflinching eye contact around the room.

Meanwhile, Lance is beside him, gesturing to him and addressing the class. “Now as you can see, gloves such as these really pull together the modern, college aged emo look. The color, as you can see, is a rich midnight black, which pairs well with nearly anything from an aspiring emo’s wardrobe. Here, the black matches that of Keith’s jeans, tying together the lower half with the upper half. The black also goes well with the subtle, dark colors of his gray hoodie and maroon t-
shirt. Without the gloves, seen from the waist up, he might look like just an ordinary boy with a bad hair cut. But we don’t want that, do we, Keith?”

“No, we do not.” He says, striking another pose, letting the dryness seep into his voice.

“Exactly! And the gloves bring to everyone’s attention that, hey, you are an emo, but you’re subtle about it!”

“My wildest dreams come true.”

“The material of these gloves is a soft leather,” Lance says, grabbing one of Keith’s wrists and holding it in front of him for the class to see. Keith freezes for a moment, having a split second of panic with Lance so close to his soulmarks. But no, Lance can’t see them. They’re hidden. And he forces himself to relax, Lance uses his freehand to gesture to Keith’s glove. “This allows the emo on the go to still be able to engage in all necessary activities without hampering movement. Stylish and practical! How do they feel, Keith?”

“I don’t know, Lance.” Keith says, fixing one girl in the front row with a blank stare as he pushes his hand out of Lance’s grip and slaps his hand to the side of his face. “You tell me.” The girl has to hold a hand in front of her mouth to hide her smile.

“It’s like a dark emo cloud is caressing my face.” He says, voice muffled as Keith pushes against his cheek, his nose, the edges of his mouth. He has to twist away, pulling at Keith’s wrist to get him to stop. His own smile is breaking through the mask. Still holding Keith’s wrist, he uses his free hand to pinch the tips of Keith’s fingers, perhaps a little harder than necessary. “Not to mention, the lack of fingers on these gloves tells people, hey! I don’t care about weather! These gloves are for fashion! So everyone can see your chosen nail polish color of choice.” He holds Keith’s hand back a fraction, eyes focusing in on Keith’s nails, which are clear of any nail polish whatsoever. One eyebrow quirks. “Or bad cuticles. Whatever floats your emo boat! And here,” He says, turning the back of Keith’s hand to the audience and pointing to the small area of bared skin. “You will find these bad boys have a window to show people that, yes, you do have skin and a heart beneath that toughened, dark exterior, but it also doubles as a convenient window to allow air flow for when you’re wearing them in the middle of summer. Do you wear them in the dead of summer, Keith?”

“All the time, Lance. I don’t think I even take them off to shower.”

“That’s dedication right there!” He finally lets go of Keith’s hand to lean both forearms on the podium, clasping his hands together and leaning forward like he’s having a personal chat with the class. “So, Keith, how much would you expect to pay for such essentials as these?”

“Money has no value when we’re all doomed to die.” He says, laying it on thick. He’s rewarded when the edges of Lance’s lips quirk just a little higher, and he chuckles softly.

“That is true, my dear fellow, but while we’re living, it sure does help pay the rent. Now you may be thinking that this sort of priceless addition to your modern emo wardrobe is just that: priceless, but what would you say if I told you that you can get a pair of these fine dark beauties for one easy payment of nineteen, ninety-nine?”

“I would say,” He pauses, letting his gaze sweep slowly and unblinkingly across the class. “Wow.”

“Wow, indeed! And if you call now, we’ll add in a second pair of red leather gloves for free. Just for those nights when you’re feeling feisty.”
“Or you want to match the blood of your enemies.”

“Whoa, there, Keith.” Lance says with a dramatic chuckle. “Those gloves are really helping you reach maximum emo-ness!”

“A worthy purchase.”

“And wait, there’s more. If you call now and give the promo code Keith’s Mullet, you’ll get five dollars off your purchase!”

“Five dollars?”

“Five dollars!”

“But Lance, what number do they call?”

“Good question, Keith. If you’re feeling life in that cold, dead heart, and you need these gloves to bring your emo potential together, please call 1-800-EMO-LORD. That number again is 1-800-EMO-LORD. Thank you.”

He takes Keith’s hand again and holds it high before pulling Keith down into a dramatic sweep of a bow as the class claps loudly, laughter mixed in there. Lance slides him a look, lips curled into a cocky grin. Keith can’t help but smirk back.

They end up getting full credit for that assignment.

Lance isn’t about to admit he was worried, but he’d have been lying if he said he wasn’t. His friendship with Keith has always been rocky at best, and it always feels like it’s two steps forward and one step back. One moment they’re fine, the next they’re fighting. One moment it’s all friendly conversation, the next Keith is closing up and walking away. One moment it’s all competition, and the next it’s a heated rivalry. They get along for the most part, but Keith just has these buttons that always manage to get pressed, and the problem is that Lance doesn’t know what those buttons are. Though he supposes he’s not much better. Keith has this incredible knack for pressing his buttons as well.

He’s not stupid, contrary to what he knows a lot of people think about him. They think he’s not very observant, but he is. He likes to think he’s pretty damn good at reading people and situations. How the hell else is he supposed to be able to blend into all kinds of social situations? Unfortunately, Keith seems to be one of the rare people he has a hard time reading. It just doesn’t get it. He doesn’t get Keith.

But he’s willing to try. He really is. For Pidge’s sake. He’s their best friend, and he knows that it’s very important to them that all their friends get a long. He also gets the impression that they’re worried about him. He doesn’t blame them. Keith definitely seems like the kind to lock himself away from others if given the chance, and Pidge doesn’t give him that chance.

But it’s also more than that. Lance likes Keith. He really does. Despite everything, he does seem like a pretty cool guy. Maybe not cool like him, or kind and welcoming like Hunk, or smart and
fierce like Pidge. But he has his own fire. This weirdly distant and mysterious, but shy and awkward fire that just fits so seamlessly into their group of friends. Like he was always meant to be there. He supposes it makes sense. He’s been friends with Pidge for years, so odds of Lance liking him too is pretty high. So he thinks, given the chance, they have the potential to really get along. He just wishes he could get along with him a hundred percent of the time instead of a rocky seventy-five. 

After the last week or so, when Keith was being especially distant, Lance was starting to wonder if he had something to fuck up their budding friendship for good. Despite Keith’s assurances that it wasn’t him, Lance isn’t stupid. He can’t really explain it other than it was just this feeling. This intuition that told him that Keith wasn’t telling the whole truth, that there was more to it. The problem was, he wasn’t sure if it was just Keith being Keith, or if he had actually done something. Pidge had assured him numerous times that it was just Keith and that he gets into these funks sometimes, but… well, paranoia and anxiety is a hard thing to just ignore.

It didn’t help that Lance had his own problems with the whole soulmate thing weighing heavily on his mind.

But once his soulmate started painting again, and Lance felt reassured that they were okay at least for the moment, he was feeling motivated to start finding out ways to reconnect with Keith.

But… turns out he didn’t need to. Keith’s mood took a turn for the better. He started hanging out with them more, started coming to practice again, and stopped looking like he had a major stick up his ass. He was back to just having the regular old tiny stick up his ass instead. Things are still strained and awkward at times, but more in the we’re new friends kinda way and less in the… whatever had been happening before.

This is good. This is fine. Lance can deal with this. He’s great at making friends, and it’s only a matter of time before Keith realizes that he’s the best friend he could ever want. Hell, he might even replace Pidge’s position. He’s a damn good friend when he wants to be, and right now, he wants to be. Keith won’t know what hit him.

It’s at this time that Keith slaps down his Gameboy Color and slides it across the table. It doesn’t slide very well, however, and only stops about halfway, sitting in the center of their small round table in the coffeeshop while he and Pidge just kind of stare. Lance blinks in surprise, eyes lifting to Keith. He’s sitting in his chair, leaning back with his arms crossed over his chest. One foot is propped up on his other knee, and there’s a cocky smirk on his lips that does things to his insides. Like irritation. Definitely irritation.

Lance frowns. “What’s with the smug look, mullet?”

Keith nods toward his Gameboy. “I just won.”

Lance gapes, and it takes him a moment for that to register, and a moment longer to find his voice. “What?” He barely registers Keith’s widening smile as he launches himself forward, dropping his own Gameboy on the table in favor of scrambling to pick up Keith’s. Tilting it to catch the light better, he looks over the game. Sure enough, he has a full pokedex and has beaten the Elite Four. He looks up, gaping. “Wha— how?”

Keith shrugs, but his smirk remains in place. “Guess I’m just a better pokemon master.”

He changes his mind. He does not want to be friends with Keith!

Lance’s face twists as he frowns. “Bullshit!”
Pidge snorts from their seat. They’ve already lost interest and looked back to their computer screen, but it’s clear that they’re still listening. “Wrecked.”

“Pidge, you stay out of this!”

“Nope, you deemed me the referee of this challenge, remember?” They hold out their hand, making grabby motions with their fingers. “Hand it over.” Lance does, and he pouts while Pidge looks over the game. The table is in terse silence until— “Everything seems to check out. Keith is the winner.”

“He cheated!”

“I did not!”

Pidge is already shaking their head, sliding the Gameboy back to Keith. “Nah, you guys agreed on no cheats, and Keith takes challenges like that very seriously. He wouldn’t cheat.”

“I don’t take them that seriously…” Keith mumbles, glaring at them.

Pidge gives him a flat look. “You do.”

He grumbles something else and looks away, sinking a little lower in his chair.

“I can’t believe this!” Lance says, throwing his hands up in the air before falling back into his chair, hunching his shoulders and crossing his arms over his chest. “I was so close! I’m fighting the Elite Four right now!”

Keith shrugs again. “Snooze, you lose.”

Lance narrows his eyes. “You. Are the worst.”

Keith’s smug smirk is still fixed firmly in place. Lance wants to smack it right off of him. “Looks like you’re gonna be buying me another coffee.” He says, voice teasing and light. And Lance is torn between enjoying the fact that Keith apparently still likes him enough to tease him, but hating it all the same.

He slaps his hands on the table and stands, wishing the coffeeshop had tile floors cause a dramatic scraping of his chair is really what he was going for and the silent movement on carpet really isn’t cutting it. “Fine,” He says, pointing a finger at Keith from across the table. “But I regret buying you a coffee last week.”

“You bought him a coffee?” Pidge asks, and when Lance looks at them, their head is up, tilted a little in their curiosity, eyes owlishly wide as they examine his face. He feels bare and exposed under that gaze and he doesn’t like it.

He waves them off. “Yeah, that day Keith didn’t come here cause he was catching up on work or whatever.” He says, proud of how nonchalant he sounds. But Pidge just keeps staring at him, lips pursing into a small frown. “What?” He says, because even though they’re not saying anything, he knows them well enough to know what that look means. “I can buy coffee for my friends.” And yup, there goes his nonchalance as it slides down the steep slope to defensiveness.

“You never buy me coffee.” Pidge says with a very clear pout.

Lance rolls his eyes. “I used to buy you coffee all the time when we first met.”

“That was Hunk.”
He waves them off. “Details.” He risks a glance toward Keith, a little surprised to see that his smirk has finally fallen into his signature scowl, directed at Pidge. “Devil juice, right?”

Keith looks at him, scowl relaxing for a moment before he nods. “With a shot of espresso.”

Lance’s lip curls. “You’re just as much of an abomination as Pidge. No wonder you two get along.” He turns then and walks away from their table, towards the counter.

“And a muffin!” He hears called out behind him.

He just flips him off over his shoulder and smiles when he hears Pidge snicker.

He gets a drink for himself, too, because he has to wallow in self pity somehow. He heads back to the table with everything balanced in his arms and manages to set it all down without dropping anything. Score a point for Lance. When he sets the muffin down in front of Keith, he barely looks at it before sliding it over to Pidge. Who happily picks it up before taking a big bite.

Lance’s eyes narrow on them, then slides to Keith. “You’re evil.”

He shrugs, lifting his coffee. “It’s my victory prize. I can do with it what I want.”

“I didn’t even have to buy you a muffin. I did that out of the kindness of my heart and because I’m such a benevolent loser.”

“Well from the bottom of my stomach, I thank the kindness of your heart.” Pidge says around a mouthful of muffin.

Keith snickers and lifts the cup to his lips, only to jerk it away and make a face, clearly rubbing his tongue on the roof of his mouth as his lip and rose crinkles. He glares at the offending coffee cup, and Lance laughs. “Serves you right!”

Keith glares at him, thought there’s an edge of a pout to it that kind of ruins the effect. “You did that on purpose.”

“Did what on purpose? Make your coffee hot? Hate to break it to ya, Keith, but coffee is gonna be hot when you order it. Not my fault you burnt yourself with it.”

Keith just grumbles and puts his Gameboy back in his bag.

“I want a rematch, by the way.”

Keith looks up, eyebrow raised. “What?”

“A rematch! I was so close to winning, and this was obviously a fluke.”

“Obviously.” Keith deadpans, but Lance likes to think there’s some amusement in his eyes. “What did you have in mind.”

“Do you have a gen two game?”

“I have gold.”

“Great! I have silver.”

Pidge snorts, closing their laptop and giving the muffin their full attention. “Are you guys just gonna end up going through all the generations like this?”
“Yes,” Lance says, at the same time Keith says, “Probably.”

Pidge rolls their eyes, but the tilt to their lips is that of a smile. “At least this time you’re playing the superior generation.”

Lance’s eyes narrow. “What the hell you talkin’ about, Pidge.”

Pidge gives him a look, peeling paper back from their muffin. “Gold and Silver? Obviously the best pokemon generation.”

Lance scoffs, leaning back in his chair. “Um, no? Red and Blue are obviously the best.”

“In what universe?”

“They were the first, Pidge! Classics!”

“Doesn’t mean they’re the best.”

“Keith!” Lance says, and the boy jumps at the sudden attention. Lance just plows right on. “Which generation is better? One or two?”

Keith looks down at the table, at his coffee cup, at the far wall. He shifts in his seat, and when he speaks, his voice is oddly quiet. “Actually, I kinda liked the third generation.” Pidge and Lance look at him like he’s grown a second head. Silence drops, hard and heavy over the table. Keith looks between them, expression hardening. “What?”

“Ruby and Sapphire?” Pidge says, incredulous.

“What is wrong with you?” Lance asks.

Keith visibly bristles. “It’s the first generation with running shoes! It made gameplay more enjoyable!”

Lance considers that. “Okay, you have a point, but you’re still wrong.”

Lance loses track of how long they argue about it, but it gets heated enough that they’re starting to draw looks from those around them, ranging from amused to annoyed. They even ask a few people who pass by, and a few others offer their opinion when they realize what they’re arguing about. So far, Lance and Pidge are tied, and Keith is way far behind because third gen? Really, Keith? And he refuses to pick a side between them to break the tie breaker.

“Keith, buddy, pal, come on. We’ve bonded, right?” He tries, putting on his best smile and the voice he knows gets to Hunk. It doesn’t seem to be working. Keith just gives him this deadpan stare, one eyebrow raised.

“Keith, I swear to god, if you don’t pick my side, I’m going to—“

“You can’t threaten him into choosing your side!” Lance says, voice rising in pitch.

“I can and I will.”

“Keith, don’t listen to them. Whatever they threaten you with, I’ll protect you. Scout’s honor.”

“You were the worst boy scout.”

“Boy scouts don’t even have cookies!”
“You know what? Screw this.” Pidge says, immediately bending over to rummage around in their bag.

Lance eyes them warily. “What’re you doing?”

“I’m just— looking— aha! There it is.” They say, sitting back up and holding up a pen triumphantly. It’s one of the pens specifically designed to write well on skin.

Lance’s eyes narrow. “Pidge, that’s not fair.”

They shrug, already pushing up a sleeve to expose their forearm. “All’s fair in love and war. And this,” They say, lifting their gaze to meet his through their eyelashes. This lips curve into a self confident smirk. “Is most definitely war.”

Lance tries to make a grab for the pen, but Pidge twists away. “That’s not—! Pidge! They’re your soulmate!” He has both hands into it, leaning across the table to get to them, but they lean far away, putting a foot on his chair to hold him off as they arch over the back of their chair, writing on their arm above their face. “Of course they’re going to agree with you!”

Pidge snorts a short laugh. “They better.”

“It’s not fair! It doesn’t count!”

“You can ask your soulmate.” Pidge points out, and there’s a sharp pain in Lance’s gut as it twists. His lips press into a tight frown as he scowls. “Pidge, you know my SM doesn’t like to talk to me!”

“Then I guess I’m going to win.” They say it triumphantly, holding the pen out to Lance. He glares at it, and then glares at Pidge. If it had been literally anyone else, he would have been mad. He’s still a little mad. But he knows that Pidge doesn’t mean it, and that they have a tendency of being insensitive sometimes without realizing it. He loves them anyway.

“You are a cruel, cruel little gremlin.” He hisses, giving them the sternest glare he can muster.

Pidge’s smirk softens, and they wiggle the pen in front of his face. “Think of this as incentive to actually try talking to your soulmate again.” Ah, and there’s the mischievous glint in her eyes that he knows so well.

He sighs, rolling his eyes and getting his whole upper body into it, flopping down onto the table as he continues to scowl up at her. “I’ve already tried! They don’t want to talk to me right now, and I don’t want to annoy them!”

Pidge leans forward, gently prodding his cheek with the butt of the pen. Their voice softens. “Come on, Lance. You told me you guys had an actual conversation a few weeks ago.”

There’s a strange sound from across the table, something like a sharp intake of breath. He looks up to see Keith, sitting far too straight in his seat, coffee cup poised near his mouth, and face contorted into something akin to… terror? Fear? His face is really pale, eyes wide as he stares at Pidge. Lance has no idea why he’d be making that face, but he thinks the coffee cup is pretty telling.

“Burn yourself again, mullet?” He asks, eyebrow raising.

Keith’s gaze snaps to him, wide eyes narrowing as he hunches deep in his seat, putting the cup back to his lips as he turns his head away and mumbles, “No…”
Lance eyes him curiously, but his attention is brought back to Pidge when they speak again. “Are you ever going to tell me what you guys talked about?”

Keith seems to stiffen, and Lance is starting to wonder if he got him the wrong coffee? He’s certainly acting like he doesn’t like the taste of it. Maybe it’s already room temp? That’s the worst.

“Nope, never.” Lance says, turning back to Pidge. He sits up, slapping his hands against the table in finality.

“Oh, come on! Hunk knows!”

Lance nods. “And that is between me, Hunk, and my SM.”

Pidge rolls their eyes, but drops it. Instead, they poke his arm with the pen. “Come on, Lance. It doesn’t hurt to try again.”

“I already have, Pidge. It’s fine. They’ll talk to me again when they want to.” He mumbles, fingers tracing the scratches and mars on the table’s surface.

“Just… try.” They say, voice so low and soft and encouraging that Lance gives in. But not without a loud, exasperated sigh.

“Fine,” He grumbles, grabbing the pen from them. “But when they don’t respond, I get to say I told you so.”

“Deal.”

He lays his forearm on the table, palm up, and hovers the pen tip above his skin. He hesitates, and has to close his eyes, breathing in deep, holding it, and letting it go in a long, slow exhale. He can do this. It’s just an innocent question. His soulmate asked him about Mothman for fucks sake. He can ask them randomly about Pokemon. It’s only fair. And Pidge is right. He can’t give up hope. They’re his soulmate. They’ll come around eventually. They’re probably just shy, and the more he tries to talk to them, the odds of them reciprocating will be high, right? Right.

Besides, they were the ones that opened up that whole communication thing again after years of silence.

He… doesn’t want to admit the real reason why he’s afraid to reach out to his soulmate is that he’s afraid they won’t answer.

He opens his eyes, and puts the pen to his skin. Out of the corner of his eyes, he can see Pidge’s fingers tapping the table, practically bouncing in excited agitation, and Keith rolls the sleeves of his sweater down and crosses his arms over his chest to ward off the chill of the coffeeshop’s AC.

He scribbles quickly, before he loses his nerve. Which Pokemon generation is the best? first or second?

He slaps the pen down with some flair. “There! Done.”

“And now we wait.” Pidge says with a grin. They lean back, crossing their arms over their chest. They turn their self satisfied grin on Keith. “What about you, Keith? Wanna get your SM to weigh in?”

“No.” Keith snaps. His glare is instant, and full of a lot more heat than Lance was expecting. Even Pidge falters, which is something new.
Their brows furrow, lips pursing into a concerned frown. “Keith—“

“I said no, Pidge. Drop it.” He says, words sharp and tone harsh. He stands abruptly, throwing the strap of his bag over his shoulder and grabbing his coffee. “I have something to do before class.” He says, and sweeps out of the coffeeshop without another word.

Lance and Pidge are left in stunned silence, staring after him.

See? See? This is why Lance is having a hard time getting a read on Keith! One moment they’re fine, he’s smug and happy, they’re having a friendly debate, and then the next, bam! He’s pissy and storming off for no reason!

“What the hell was that about?” Lance says when he finds his voice. He’s trying really hard not to be angry, but god damn does Keith make it hard! That was rude as fuck. And most of it was directed at Pidge this time.

He looks at them, and his stomach instantly drops. They’re looking down at the table, fingers idly playing with their pen. Their brows are furrowed, lips twisted into a half frown, half pout. They look hurt, but they also look guilty. It’s an odd combination, and it’s one he’s definitely not used to seeing on Pidge of all people.

They sigh, sinking lower in their seat. “It’s nothing.”

Lance levels a look at them. “Pidge, that definitely didn’t look like nothing.”

They pick at the skin around their fingernails. “It’s my fault… I shouldn’t have pushed him like that. Not in public.”

Lance’s frown deepens. “You pushed me, and you know my soulmate is a sensitive subject. And I didn’t get all mad and storm out of the damn coffeeshop.”

“Keith is… he’s different, Lance.” Pidge says, shifting in their seat. “I can’t tell you everything, cause that’s his business, but just… soulmates are a really sensitive subject for him. He doesn’t like to talk about it, at all.”

Lance blinks, turning to look at the doorway where Keith disappeared. “You know…” He says slowly. “That… actually makes a lot of sense. I brought up my soulmate last week, and he kinda… did the same thing?”

Pidge just nods. “I know how he feels about soulmates, and he’s usually okay with it when others talk about theirs, and I know he hates talking about his, but I still brought it up because I’m worried about him and I just want him to be happy but he’s stubborn and I should have known better and —” He can see the guilt swirling in their eyes, and he hates the sight of it.

He leans over, putting a hand on their arm. Their rambling cuts off instantly, and they blink owlishly at his hand on their arm before looking up to meet his eyes. He gives them a small smile. “Hey, calm down, you didn’t mean to, right?” They nod. “And I’m sure Keith will be fine. He just needs some space. We all get carried away sometimes. I would know.”

Pidge snorts at that, a smile finally starting to break through. “Yeah, you would.”

He pats her arm, nodding. “And I’m ignoring that jab because I’m trying to comfort you.”

“Such a gentleman.”
“You know it.”

Keith doesn’t come back, but by the time Lance sees him in class, he seems to have calmed down and asks about Pidge in a shy, sheepish way that lets Lance know that he’s feeling just as guilty about blowing up as Pidge is about pushing his buttons. He knows they’ll be just fine. Then, in the awkward silence that follows before class starts, he hesitantly asks Lance what the outcome of their argument was. Lance tells him with a bright grin that Pidge’s soulmate agreed with him, thus breaking their tie in his favor.

He leaves out the part where his own soulmate never ended up writing back to him.

Blues, light and dark, shades of the storm, colors of the ocean, swirling, chaotic, clashing and melding, separating and coming together, crashing together, breathing apart, frozen in a dance of passion, of high emotion, of confusion, lines of sky and sea melting together to form one turbulent scene scape. Blacks and charcoal, shadows creeping along his mind, fears and anxieties, ghosts of the past rising to haunt him, to taunt him, darkness creeping, always there, always waiting. Whites and grays, highlighting the happiness, the contentment, the flutter of hope that sings of the future, that lightens his present, the faint sparks that are always there, unable to be snuffed out, chasing the shadows and hiding the ghosts.

Blues.

Blues, blues, blues.

Blues of sky and storm and sea.


Blues, and blacks, and whites, and grays.

His fingers are covered in paint, something about painting without a brush, by really feeling the mix of colors, is more soothing in his erratic state of mind. He feels like his state of mind is always erratic nowadays. One moment he’s fine, the next he feels anxiety clawing up his throat, threatening to choke him. All he wanted was a quiet college life. Instead he finds his soulmate and everything goes to shit. That isn’t how things are supposed to be, yet here he is.

His neck aches a little from where it’s craned down to see his stomach. His stomach and chest, which are currently covered in paint that has yet to fully dry. He probably could have been done with the painting a while ago, but he can’t seem to get himself to stop. He just keeps creating more waves, more storm clouds, keeps mixing and combining them in swirls of color, shadows, and highlights. It’s soothing, at least. Which, he supposes, is the whole reason he’s doing this.

He had come to the studio in an attempt to get himself to work on his projects for class. He hadn’t exactly been on top of things lately, and there were still a lot of things he needed to catch up on. He
had hoped that being in the studio instead of his apartment would help him focus. Which might have worked, if anything he had been trying to do managed to come out right. Instead, nothing seemed to be working. It was frustrating, and frustration didn’t exactly help his problem.

So sitting alone in one of the many studio rooms, he eyed the array of paints strew along the shelves.

And that’s how he ended up sitting on the floor of the studio, back against the wall as he slouches low, shirt wedged in his teeth to hold it up and away from his chest, hands and torso covered in paint. His arms would have been a much easier canvas, but these aren’t his paints, which were slightly more expensive but designed to peel off skin easily without a trace. These are paints that could possibly stain and leave evidence.

Besides, seeing his paintings on Lance’s skin isn’t exactly something he wants to see again so soon. He had known his sunset painting would be on Lance’s arm, and yet it had still shaken him far more than he had anticipated. He isn’t quite ready for that. He’s not sure he’ll ever be. So better to paint on parts of his body that will be covered up, like his stomach and chest. It’s safer this way. He’s safer this way.

Because he knows that he can’t just stop. Painting on himself has been apart of him for as long as he can remember. It started with his mom. They had done it together, and at the time, he hadn’t really understood why. As a kid, it had just been fun. As he got older, it became habit. Once he lost her, it became a coping mechanism. Now it’s a way for him to calm himself, to focus himself, to feel at peace.

To be at the eye of the storm.

The weeks where he had refrained from painting at all in and effort to avoid imagining his colors on Lance had been hard. It had chipped away at him, felt like bile in his throat. His fingers had itched with the need, and his stomach had rolled at the thought of doing it. Even painting on a canvas had been hard, giving him that overwhelming desire to feel the paint on his skin.

He’s past that now. He’s accepted this is the way things are. But he’s not happy about it, nor is he completely okay with it. But… he’s working on it.

What had started out as an just a few wavy lines on his stomach eventually creeped up his chest, blown out to his sides, covering his pale skin in blues and grays.

He wonders what it would look like against Lance’s darker complexion. He wonders how Lance’s muscles would feel coiling and twitching beneath his fingertips, rolling beneath the colors—

He shakes his head, clenching his teeth tighter on the fabric of his shirt. Nope. Not the thoughts he wants to have. That’s a dangerous road to go down, and one hell of a slippery slope. Best to avoid that hill altogether, lest he trip and fall.

A flash catches his eye, and he looks to the side in time to see his phone screen light up. It’s a text from Pidge. He frowns at it, then eyes his torso and the paint that has yet to really dry, then to his hands, coated in a mix of blues and grays. He looks back at the phone and sighs. Leaning over, after several failed attempts, he manages to swipe it open using his elbow, only to be faced with the keypad for his password. Fuck.

It takes him several more very careful tries to get his passcode typed in using just the tip of his elbow.
Tiny Evil Bird (Pidge)
> Hey I’m almost to the studio, ready to head out?
> What room do you like to work in again?
> Nvm I’ll just find you

Footsteps sound in the hallway outside the door, and his head snaps up, wide eyed as he stares at it, then his gaze whips down to his hands. *Fuck.* He had *completely* forgotten Shiro had invited him and Pidge over for dinner. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

He’s on his feet in seconds, darts across the room to the sink. Hitting the faucet with an elbow, he shoves his hands under the warming spray. He scrubs frantically, pleased to find that despite being a pain in the ass to peel off, the paint doesn’t stain his skin. That’s something at least. Too bad it’s *not coming off.* God fuck, he misses his own paints. They’re specifically designed to wash right off. This is what he gets for using canvas paints on his skin.

He manages to get most of it off by the time he hears the door opening, but he doesn’t have nearly enough time to clean off his chest. With a silent groan of frustration, he loosens his jaw and lets his shirt fall back down, covering his work.

“Oh, thank god.” Pidge says as they step into the room, and he glances over his shoulder in time to see their shoulders slump with relief. “I cannot *tell* you how many occupied studios I just busted in on. You really need to learn to answer your phone.”

He twists his lips into a small frown in an attempt to hide his cringe as the tacky paint starts to cling to his shirt. Great. Just great. “I was busy.” He says, turning back around and scrubbing at the remaining paint with his nails.

“You lost track of time again, didn’t you?”

“Maybe…”

They don’t even try to hide their amusement as they plop down in a seat and lean over a table, pulling out their phone. “Yeah, well hurry up, I’m starving.”

“Do you know what he’s making?” He asks, arching his back a little over the sink to get his shirt to hang away from his skin.

“No idea. He told me, but I don’t remember. Something that sounded complicated and is probably good as hell. Allura’s helping him make it.”

Keith stiffens. “Oh,” He says, wincing a little at how his voice comes out.

Pidge pauses, and he purposefully avoids looking at them because he *knows* the look they’re giving him. “You… knew that, right? That Allura would be over, too?”

He had, but he had forgotten. “Yeah, I knew that.”

“Are you… okay with it?” Pidge hedges carefully.

Keith shrugs. “I don’t really have much of a choice.”

“Keith—“

“Pidge, it’s fine. Really.” He says, grabbing a few paper towels to dry off his hands. He got most of it off, thank god. He uses the paper towels to obscure his hands as he walks back to where he
left his gloves and slips them on, breathing a small sigh of relief when his soulmarks are once again covered.

His soulmarks that consist of mostly pick up lines, because of course Lance would send him pick up lines. Of all the craziness and disjointed emotions about Lance being his soulmate, that, at least, makes sense.

“I’ve heard Shiro talk about his soulmate for years.” He says when Pidge just keeps staring at him. He avoids looking at them by shuffling his things back into his bag and putting away all the materials he used. He hopes they don’t notice that he has all this paint out but no painting on any of the canvasses. “His soulmate— Allura— helped him through a really rough part of our lives when I— when I couldn’t do anything…” He says, feeling the lump forming. He clears his throat. “I’m grateful to her for that. And besides, they’ve been disgustingly cute since day one. I’m used to it by now.”

Pidge lets out a small snort of amusement. “You’ve got that right. Remember after their First Connection, how Shiro used to just sing things around the house? Like some kind of demented fairy tale princess?”

Keith groans, but there’s a laugh in there. “Good god, don’t remind me. At least you could go home to escape it.”

“If I remember correctly, you ended up sleeping over at my place for like a week.”

He smiles, pausing in his clean up at the memory. “Yeah, I refused to go home until Matt threatened to gag Shiro next time he started singing.”

When he risks a glance at Pidge, they’re grinning, mischief plain on their features. “Let’s bring this up at dinner tonight.”

And he finds their grin to be infectious. “Fuck yes.”

When he’s finished cleaning up, he pulls his hoodie on, zipping it up in hopes of hiding any evidence of the paint on his torso leaking through his shit. Fuck it’s uncomfortable, and he hunches his shoulders as much as he can to keep his shirt away from his skin, but it’s just not working.

“Can we stop by my place?” He asks as they walk out of the studio and into the hallway. “I need a shower.”

Pidge eyes him curiously, but shrugs. “Yeah, sure. You’re the one driving anyway. Just know that every second you keep me away from food, the more likely I am to eat you.”

“Noted.”

“So you sure this is okay?” They ask after a moment, voice suddenly hesitant, cautious, like they’re approaching a wild animal.

He sighs. “Yes, Pidge. It is.”

“I just mean, you’ve been really touchy around the subject of soulmates lately. I thought you were getting better after the whole Mothman convo you had with him, but then you seemed to take several steps back and I was worried that maybe I had pushed you too far. And then the other day in the coffeeshop with the whole pokemon thing—“

“That was different.” He says, defensive.
Pidge raises an eyebrow, curiosity sparked. “Different, how?”

He shrugs, shoving his hands into his pockets. “It just… it just was. I wasn’t really having a great day, and I’ve had a lot on my mind, and I took it out on you. I’m sorry…” He mumbles.

Pidge smiles, small and comforting as they bump their hip against Keith’s. “I’m sorry, too. I shouldn’t have pushed you. Especially not in public, and especially not around Lance. Dude is like, the complete opposite of you when it comes to soulmates.”

Keith manages to croak out a short, dry laugh. “Yeah… yeah, he is…”

“So you ready to go suffer while Shiro and Allura be disgustingly cute?”

“Nope.”

“Well, then let’s hope the food is worth it.”

“As a poor college student, I can tell you that it usually is.”

As they leave the studio and walk toward the parking lot where Keith has parking his bike, Pidge tries one last time, voice quiet and serious. “So really, Keith… you’re okay? You know you can talk to me about these things.”

“Yeah,” He says, giving them a small reassuring smile and putting more confidence into it than he feels. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

He’s not. But he’s getting there.

“Lance, you can’t be serious.” Hunk says, sounding infinitely tired. He leans over the back of his desk chair, one arm slung over the back as he twists to give Lance a flat stare.

Lance just grins. “Sorry, buddy. I can’t hear you over the sound of how awesome I look. Oh, that and Shakira’s sick beats.” He says, slipping one earbud into his ear and letting the other dangle for now.

“I thought you’d given this up?”

Lance scoffs, bending over to dig in his bag and swap out the text books and notebooks with those he’ll need for his afternoon classes. “What makes you think that?”

“Well, you kinda gave up about halfway through last semester, and you haven’t done it yet this semester, so I just kinda assumed…”

Lance waves him off, straightening as he throws one of the straps of his bag over his shoulder. “That was last semester, Hunk. This is a new semester with new possibilities. Besides, I’ve only gotten a few soul paintings since the semester started. This is my first real opportunity. Plus, it gives me a reason to actually wear this.” He says, striking and pose with his arms up in the air and one leg straight out, toe pointed. It clearly puts his midriff on display, and he makes a dramatic duck face to top it off.

Hunk scratches the stubble on his chin, tilting his head to the side as he eyes Lance’s outfit.
“Yeaaaah, about that…”

Lance’s duck face turns into more of a pout, his hands lowering to land on his hips. “What? You don’t think it looks good?” He has to resist the urge to pick at the high hem of his shirt.

“No! No, no, that’s not it.” Hunk says, scrambling a little bit and putting up his hands defensively. Lance relaxes a little bit. “I was just wondering where you even got it? I’ve never seen you wear it before.”

He shrugs, smile returning. “I stole it from my sister before I left.”

His lips drop open into a small O. “Oh, she is not gonna like that. You know she hates it when you steal her clothes.”

He makes a vague waving gesture, making a dismissive sound. “It’ll be fine. She never wears it anyway. I’m sure she hasn’t even realized it’s missing.”

“Whatever you say, buddy.” Hunk doesn’t sound convinced.

“But… you think it looks alright?” He asks, a little hesitant.

Hunk’s smile softens. “Yeah, man. You know you look good in pretty much everything.”

He puts a hand to his chest. “Aww, bro.”

“I mean, it’s not something I see a lot of dudes wear? Not that it’s a bad thing. And you definitely pull it off.”

“Startin’ fashion trends all up in here.” Lance says, grinning. “Honestly, more dudes should wear them. They make me feel powerful.”

“I dunno, man.” Hunk leans back, putting both hands on his stomach. “I’m not sure I’d be able to pull it off.”

“Nonsense!” He says, taking a few steps forward to pat Hunk’s shoulder. “You would look awesome in a crop top, dude. Don’t let the media put you down.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” He says, but he’s smiling this fond amused smile that Lance is used to seeing from his best friend and roommate. He then waves Lance’s off, shoving him playfully with his foot. “Now get out of here and let me finish my homework before class.”

Lance laughs, stumbling toward the door. “Alright, alright. I’ll see you later.”

“Later, Lance. And good luck!”

“Thanks, Hunk!” He says as he steps out the door, leaving Hunk alone for his last minute homework session. Lance doesn’t have class for another few hours, but he does have places to be.

The weather outside is perfect. He takes a moment to simply breathe, sliding his sunglasses down from their perch atop his head to his nose.

The sun is bright, with just a few clouds dotting the sky but not enough to block out the rays. It’s warm, but the gentle breeze that drifts through campus had a chilled edge that speaks promises of fall. It feels good, and it lifts his spirits as he walks through campus, head held high and easy smile on his lips. He can see people looking at him and trying to be subtle about it. Good. He wants them to stare. Let them get a good eyeful of his soulmate’s talent and let them be envious of him.
The walk is usually only about ten minutes, but he stops to chat with a couple classmates on the way. It’s nothing but small talk, but he’s in a good mood, so he doesn’t mind. They also take the time to compliment his soulmarks, and he preens under the praise. He excuses himself when he realizes the time and picks up his pace across campus.

When he reaches his destination, he’s in high spirits, and he has a few extra minutes to spare, so he takes his time finding a place to sit. There are people everywhere, sitting around on the grassy hill between buildings, lounging in hammocks strung up between trees, and sitting on the benches and half-walls that line the area. He eventually chooses to sit on one of the several large rocks that are line one of the main walking paths. This particular rock is his favorite. It has a good vantage point, right out in the open, and it’s relatively flat.

He drops his backpack on the ground next to him and takes a seat. He stretches his legs out in front of him, crossing them at the knees and letting them dangle off the edge of the rock. His dark blue button down is open, sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His pants are dark and tight, rolled up to show his ankles. But his crop top is the real star of the show. Or rather, what the crop top reveals. The shirt itself isn’t too tight, nor is it too loose. It’s plain black with white print of a cat face. He thinks it’s cute, which is exactly why he had stolen from his sister to begin with.

What’s even better though, is the painting tattooed on his torso. The blues and grays, shadows and highlights, of a storm. Or a sea? He’s not really sure. The colors mix and swirl, clashing without really combining, dancing together and frozen in a twisted embrace. It’s beautiful in its chaos, and it’s even more beautiful because it was his soulmate who made it. And he knows they made it with their own hands, because the same colors stain his hands, smudging all the way past his wrist in places.

There’s something strangely intimate about that, of watching and feeling his soulmate paint like that. Like the paint is the only thing between them.

Well… that and the distance.

Nope. Stop right there. No negative thoughts. Not today.

He leans back on his hands, letting his shirt fall open wider and really stretching out his torso to showcase the tattoos that cover his exposed midriff. His headphones are in. He has his pumped playlist playing. And now?

Now the waiting game.

Ten minutes to the hour, the paths start flooding with students. Both students going to their next classes, and the students pouring out of the buildings. His perch is halfway between the music and art building, strategically located on the main path to and from the art building. There are other directions students come and go, but here he has a large majority.

And here is where he waits, his tattoos on display. Like some kind of preening peacock. That’s what Pidge has called him anyway. He doesn’t even bother denying it anymore.
While he waits, he watches. His sunglasses make it less obvious who he’s looking at, allowing him to look like he’s just chilling and not analyzing everyone’s faces for any sign of recognition when they see him. If they even look at him. Most give him only a curious glance, if anything. And a few give him second looks when they notice his soulmarks. Most look away quickly, either from the awkwardness of being caught staring at a stranger or from not wanting to seem impolite by staring at someone’s soulmarks.

Luckily, Lance doesn’t have that problem. His shades cover his eyes enough to let him stare. He eyes people who pass, zoning in a little too hard on people he finds attractive. He wouldn’t have a soulmate he doesn’t find attractive, right? He idly searches people for soulmarks, the little tell tale marking on their arms and legs, some of them faded and others fresh. A couple have markings on their face and neck, and he tries not to snicker at those ones.

He tries to quell the familiar twist in his gut, the sour taste on his tongue that speaks of jealousy. He has nothing to be jealous of. He obviously has the best soulmark of anyone here. He arches his back just a little more, letting his shirt fall open just so… Yeah, he’s the lucky one here. Now if
only his soulmate would find him…

He’s dragged out of his thoughts when one of his earbuds is suddenly pulled from his ear.

“What’re you doing?”

The voice is surprisingly close, and he totally does not make a startled yelping sound as he sits up straight and whips around.

Keith is standing beside the rock, hair tied back in a loose ponytail, several dark strands falling free to frame his face and curl by his neck. He’s wearing black jeans, a black t-shirt that reads *They Truth Is Out There* in white letters, which is hilarious and totally not cute. There’s a red flannel tied around his waist, and those stupid fucking gloves that he always wears and Lance hates to admit suits his look.

“What’re *you* doing here?” He snaps back more out of reflex and habit than anything. He was caught off guard, and what’s he supposed to do? Answer honestly?

Keith’s brows furrow as he straightens, dropping Lance’s earbud to let it dangle by his chest. He shrugs one shoulder, gesturing to and bringing Lance’s attention to the large as fuck thin, rectangular bag hanging at his side. “I just got out of class.”

“You have art classes?” He asks without really thinking, and then cringing a little in the aftermath. Of course he has art classes. There’s really no other reason for him to have that bag.

Keith only raises one eyebrow, face exceptionally blank as he blinks in what Lance thinks might be confusion. He tilts his head just a little to the side, and it gives him this little lost puppy look that Lance refuses to admit is cute. “I’m an art major.” He says blankly, and Lance gaps at him, jaw slack and everything. Keith’s confusion only seems to increase tenfold as his brows furrow more. “You… didn’t know that?”

“No!” He says, incredulous as he throws his arms up in the air for emphasis. He’s seen Keith drawing before. He’s admitted as much when he said he doesn’t like to show others his drawings, but with how secretive he is about his sketchbook, Lance had thought it was a similar situation to how he is with music: a hobby. One that he’s really good at, but a hobby nonetheless. Not something he’d major in. He eyes Keith curiously, eyes narrowing as his lips twist into a small, thoughtful frown. “I don’t… really know much about you, actually.”

And he’s surprised about how sad this revelation makes him.

He’s watching Keith closely, so he sees the change in expression, but he’s not entirely sure how to interpret it. His brows pinch, lips pressing into a thin line, “I don’t know much about you either.” He says, a little defensive but mostly unreadable. It’s definitely softer than Lance anticipated. He then gestures to the rock, changing the subject with a simple repetition of, “So what’re you doing here?”

He blinks, then looks away, scratching the back of his neck. “I was, uh…” He doesn’t know *why* he’s so nervous all of a sudden. He’s usually not shy about his SM, nor does he hesitate to talk about them. But this just feels different. This isn’t him gushing about his SM. This is him explaining himself, his own actions, and this is… not something he usually explains to people. Just his friends. People might see him as desperate. Maybe even pathetic. But his friends know him, and if anything, they see it as endearing.

But… Keith is a friend, right? Granted, a friend he doesn’t know all that well, but still a friend. It’s
not like he’s ashamed of himself either, so he doesn’t know what the big deal is. He’s making something out of nothing.

He blames it on Pidge’s words, still ringing heavy with him.

If Keith is that sensitive to soulmate things, he wouldn’t want to hear it, right? Still… he did ask. Lance can’t be blamed for that.

“I’m, uh…” He sighs, resisting the urge to close his hoodie, to hide the evidence. His fingers twitch with the need, and that’s an odd feeling. Despite the sunglasses hiding his eyes, he can’t bring himself to look directly at Keith. He breathes in deeply through his nose, and let’s it out, bracing himself. “Okay, I’ll tell you.” He turns then, pointing a threatening finger at Keith. His lips form a hard, straight line. “But you have to promise not to make fun of me, okay?”

Keith looks from his finger to his face, clearly surprised, but nods anyway. Good enough.

“My soulmate paints.” He says it in a rush, like he’s admitting to something that he’s been keeping bottled up, which he hasn’t, so it’s weird. It feels weird. It shouldn’t feel weird. But it feels good to talk about his SM, like it always does, so he feels the weirdness melting, being replaced by a fluttering in his stomach and a familiar warmth in his chest. “They paint a lot, and they did this.” He says, moving back his open shirt so Keith can see his exposed midriff. He twists on the rock to face him, to really give him a good view. He holds up his hands, palms up, to show more of the marks his soulmate has given him.

He tries to read Keith’s face, tries to judge how he’s feeling about the topic, but Keith is… he’s hard to read. Mostly, he just looks constipated. Eyes hard but wide as they lock onto the colors swirling on his stomach, and Lance has to resist the urge not to squirm under that gaze. He feels more exposed than he thought he would. Especially since Keith isn’t saying anything. He laughs awkwardly into the silence, running his hands through his hair to scratch the back of his neck. “Heh, and this is gonna sound stupid, but I, uh… back during my freshman year, I started hanging out here whenever I got a soulmark painting. They’re clearly an artist, so… I guess I’ve just been hoping that maybe they’ll see me, you know?”

Keith’s mouth twists, lips pursing and brows pinching. He tries a couple times to say something, but no words come out, which only seems to frustrate him more. Lance waits, trying not to fidget. “How do you know they’re an art major?” He finally manages to ask, voice just bordering on harsh. “Or that they even go to this school?”

Lance winces a little, leaning away from him just a fraction, hangs tugging at the fabric of his shirt. “I, uh, don’t… It’s just… wishful thinking on my part, I guess.” He hates how vulnerable he sounds. He hates how this is something he’s usually proud of, and yet here Keith is, making him feel stupid by doing nothing but just staring. He hates how his high spirits just took a fucking nose dive.

The silence between them is thick and heavy, and he feels like he’s choking. He clears his throat, forcing out a laugh that sounds awkward even to his own ears. He can’t bring himself to look at Keith. “Sorry, Pidge told me that soulmate things make you uncomfortable.” He’s infinitely curious as to why, but he knows it’s not his place to ask. He knows they’re not that close yet. Maybe someday, but until then… he’ll just have to wait.

“It’s fine.” Keith says, a little too quickly, voice sounding strained. He takes a step backward, putting space between them. He’s turned away, eyes on the thinning crowd of students passing by as he idly scratches at his wrist, fingers digging under the leather of his gloves. His other fingers clench into fists, pressing against his palm like it’s some kind of nervous tick. He clears his throat,
loudly, and when he speaks, his voice is still oddly strained. “It’s… nice— what you’re doing— I think…”

Lance perks up a little at that. “Really?”

Keith nods, still not looking at him. “Yeah, it’s… sweet…” He shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans, rocking back on his heels with his eyes still turned away. “So, uh… do you wanna… go grab lunch? Or something?” He asks, risking a glance at Lance before quickly looking away.

Lance turns away, gaze sweeping out over the milling students on the path. He bites at his bottom lip. He had meant to stay out here until his class later, just to maximize the possibility of meeting his soulmate. But… Keith is clearly extending an olive branch here, and after all the odd strain their budding friendship has gone through…

“Sure,” He says, turning back to Keith with a winning smile and sending a silent apology to his soulmate.

There’s no guarantee his SM even goes to this school, let alone will be here, on this path, in time to see him posing on a rock. It’s just wishful thinking, right? Wishful thinking that might get him nowhere. And as much as that thought makes his stomach sink and the bitter taste of bile burn at the back of his throat, it’s relieved somewhat by Keith. Keith his new friend. Keith who is asking to hang out with him. Keith who clearly wants to be friends with him, just as much as Lance does.

His soulmate can wait for now.

He hops off the rock, stretching his hands high over his head and arching his back until it pops. He doesn’t miss the way Keith stares at the soulmark painting decorating his bare stomach, but the way he stares makes him feel less self conscious, and instead gives him that proud, preening feeling he’s used to when people admire him. Or, uh, his soulmarks.

“I could always go for more caff food.” He says teasingly as he puts his hands on his hips, grinning at him.

His gaze flickers up, and he catches Lance’s eye. Lance raises an amused eyebrow, and Keith looks away quickly. He spins on one heel, walking away stiffly with his hands shoved into his pockets and his back straight. He doesn’t turn around fast enough, however, and Lance clearly caught sight of the flush reddening his cheeks.

“Actually, I was gonna go off campus.” Keith says, sounding more casual than Lance would have thought possible with that blush creeping up his complexion.

Lance’s smile dims a fraction. “Oh, I, uh, I have class in a couple hours?”

He sees Keith’s shoulders rise and fall. “It’s fine.” He says, still walking away but raising his voice so Lance can still hear. “We can take my bike.”

Lance freezes. “Wait… A bike or a bike?” Instead of answering, Keith just glances over his shoulder, one eyebrow raised and a small smirk playing across his lips. That look is devious.

“Keith?” Lance says, voice rising. “Keith? Do you drive a bike?” Keith just turns away, but his shoulders are shaking with silent laughter. Lance grins, bending down to scoop up his bag and rush after him. “Keith! Wait up! Keith!”
“Please don’t tell me that bag has what I think it has.” Keith says as he watches Shiro pull one of those draw string sports bags from the backseat of his car and sling it over his shoulder.

He meets Shiro’s eyes over the top of the car, giving him a flat look. Shiro just smiles. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He says far too innocently, closing the door and locking it up.

Keith rolls his eyes as they start up the hill toward center campus, shifting a little to adjust the strap of his hockey bag on his shoulder. “Shiro, I swear to god—“

“It’s amazing what you can find at your local walmart.” He says, cheerful as ever but with this mischievous edge that Keith has come to know and fear throughout the years.

Keith groans, shoving his hands in his pockets and hunching a little. “Why are you like this?

“It’s my duty as your older brother.”

“I think it’s time you retired.”

“It’s a job for life.”

“I hate you.”

“Love you, too.”

The walk through campus is a short one. Shiro had managed to find a parking spot in one of the closest parking lots. Keith gets a few strange looks, but it’s nothing too curious. A guy walking around campus with a giant, empty hockey bag is, in the grand scheme of things, pretty uninteresting considering some of the things he’s seen around campus. Just the other day, there was a guy in one of his classes wearing a hotdog suit.

“You realized Allura is probably going to make you play, right?” He says as the quad comes into view, and with it, the sight of hoops being set up and people running around, gathered with brooms. Keith hates how quickly his focus zeros in on Lance. He’s standing near Hunk as the big guy sets up some hoops on one side of the pitch. Even from this distance, Keith can see how bright his smile is. He frowns before he really realizes he’s doing it, but his attention is torn away when Shiro speaks.

“I know,” He says, voice oddly quiet and losing that teasing lightness it had earlier. When Keith looks at him, he’s looking down, prosthetic hand held up and metal pieces glinting in the sunlight. “I just… don’t know if I should. I don’t know how well that would work.”

Something painful sinks in his gut. He doesn’t like that voice. He rarely hears that voice from Shiro anymore, but he heard it a lot in the years that followed the accident. It’s full of a vulnerable self consciousness, and the weak attempt to laugh it off. He hates it.

“Is your left hand a fully functional dominant hand now?” He asks, even though he already knows the answer. He had been there when Shiro had struggled to learn how to use his left hand after he had lost the right. He had helped him through it, ignored all the mistakes and broken classes, all the frustrated sounds and silent tears.

“Well, yes, but—“

“Then it’s no problem. Just hold your broom with your prosthetic. Your broom hand doesn’t really
do anything anyway. It’s just there to hold it there. Then just play with your left hand. You’ll be fine, unless your hand eye coordination with your left hand sucks.”

Shiro’s lips tilt upward into a small smile, the shadows in his eyes recede to make way for amusement. “I guess we’ll find out.”

“No matter how bad you are, I promise I’ve seen worse.”

“Thanks, Keith,” He says, voice soft, but laughter there evident.

Lance spots them first, because of course he does. Keith sees the moment Lance perks up, head whipping around to face them. He sees the moment he says something, causing Hunk to turn as well. He sees the big, bright grin that spreads across his lips and the big, boisterous wave as he practically shouts, “Keith!” It causes a lot of the others to turn and look, and he does his best to ignore the sudden attention as he hesitantly lifts a hand to wave back.

“Don’t be nervous.” Shiro says, voice pitched low as he bumps Keith’s hip with his own.

Keith stumbles a few steps and turns to glare at him. “I’m not nervous.” He grumbles.

“Mhmm… Sure, you’re not.”

“Shiro!” Allura’s voice calls out across the quad, and Shiro instantly straightens, head whipping around to look at her as she waves at them from Lance’s side. Keith’s lips curl into a smirk as he watches his brother’s face adopt a lovely shade of red.

“Don’t be nervous.” He says, nudging Shiro with his elbow.

“Shut up.” Shiro grumbles, putting a hand on his shoulder and shoving him. Keith stumbles away, snickering the whole time.

Allura is the first to break away from the ground as they get close to the pitch. She jogs up to them, a bounce in her step and face lit with excitement, like she physically couldn’t keep still any longer. Her hair is pulled back into a pony tail, and it sways behind her as she comes to a stop in front of them. She clasps her hands behind her back, but not before Keith sees the subtle shake in them.

She smiles up at Shiro, and Keith can see how everything else melts away for her. He can see it in the way she smiles, in the way her focus is so wholesome and complete, in the way her eyes soften, in how gentle her voice is when she mumbles a quiet, “Hi.”

He can see his brother is in much the same state, a subtle flush bringing color to his cheeks as he grins that goofy grin that Keith remembers from the months that followed their First Connection. “Hi.”

Keith watches them, hands curled into fists in his pockets. His chest feels full, even as his stomach is sinking. He’s happy for his brother. He really is. Shiro has been through so much in his lifetime, and his soulmate—Allura— has helped him through it in ways that Keith never could. And it’s hard not to be happy for them when they’re both gazing at each other with these stupid lovestruck gazes. He could probably slip a bug into Shiro’s pocket like he used to, and he wouldn’t even notice.

Still… he can’t help the clench in his gut, the twisting of his stomach, the vague taste of bile on his tongue. It tastes of guilt, of fear, the sourness of uncertainty. He stares at them because he can’t
look away, words repeating in his mind like a mantra— *don’t think of Lance, don’t think of Lance, don’t think of Lance*—

The sound of a camera shutter pulls him out of his thoughts, and he turns his head to see, of course, Lance. The guy is standing next to him, holding his phone up and trained on the oblivious couple. When Lance realizes he’s staring, he turns to look at him, a small smile playing across his lips. “They’re gross, aren’t they? It’s adorable.”

Keith gives him a flat, unimpressed look, one eyebrow raised. “What are you doing?”

Lance gives him a wink, and Keith doesn’t know how to feel. He’s going to go with annoyed, but he know that’s not entirely true. “Never miss an opportunity to get photographic evidence to embarrass your friends, Keith.”

Keith’s eyes narrow just a fraction. “I can tell you’ve spent a lot of time with Pidge.”

At that, Lance throws back his head and laughs, and there’s an odd fluttering in Keith’s gut. He hates it. He tries to turn his attention away from Lance, turning it back to Shiro and Allura, but they’re just as painful to watch for entirely different reasons. Shiro is scratching the back of his neck. Allura is rocking on her heels. Both of them can barely make eye contact, and yet they can’t look away. Keith is trying his best not to cringe, but it’s hard not to. They’re both just so goddamn embarrassing.

“Hey, what’s this?” Lance says, bringing his attention back. He’s already stepping closer to him, hands reaching for the bag on his back. He grabs it, stretching out the material, and Keith lets him. He turns to look over his shoulder, seeing the moment Lance’s eyes blow wide. “Oh, dude! Is this the hockey bag you were talking about?”

Keith frowns. It’s been weeks since he first brought it up. “You remember that?”

Lance scoffs, hands still grabbing and pulling at the bag as he moves behind Keith. “Uh, yeah. Pidge hasn’t shut up about it. They’ll be so excited— Hey, Pidge!” He calls out, and Keith winces at the sudden raise in volume. “*Come over here! Keith brought the bag!*”

Keith looks up in time to see Pidge jogging across the pitch toward them. “Keith!” They say as they near. “You found it!”

“Yeah,” He says, shrugging it off his shoulder as Pidge makes grabby hands. The whole thing dwarfs her, but at least it’s empty so it doesn’t weigh much. “Turns out it was in Shiro’s apartment. He said I didn’t have room in mine when we were unpacking.” He purposefully leaves out the part where it took them nearly an hour of tearing apart his and Shiro’s apartment to find it.

“Lemme see,” Pidge breathes.

Lance squats beside the bag, letting out a low whistle as he reaches out, fingers brushing reverently over the paintings. Fingers, Keith is pleased to note, that no longer have blues tattooed across them. He was a little worried that not enough time would have passed for his soulmarks to fade. After all, he doesn’t really *know* how long his paintings stay on Lance. But luckily, the stormy blues have faded from his fingers, and though his stomach and chest are covered, he’s willing to
bet it’s gone from there, too.

Thank fucking god. Keith is pretty sure he would have had an aneurism if he had been forced to watch Lance run around playing quidditch in shorts and a fucking crop top.

He shakes his head, purposefully expelling that particular thought from his mine. That is not something he wants to think about. Nope. He’d already dealt with it enough in person. He doesn’t need his mind coming up with more scenarios, recalling the way Lance’s toned stomach had twisted and moved as he walked, as he laughed. Keith hadn’t really realized until then just how much Lance uses his entire body to talk. He hadn’t really wanted to stare, but it was hard not to. It was like the same kind of compelling force that urged him to look at the soulmarks that appeared on his own body. Only this time, it was keeping him transfixed on how Lance’s muscles moved beneath the beautiful blue hues.

“—do this?”

Keith blinks, eyes drawn down to where Lance is looking up at him. “What?”

“I said, did you do this?” He says, gesturing to the paintings on the side of the bag.

“Oh, uh, yeah… I— I did.”

“Wow,” Lance says, voice soft in his awe. It does something to Keith’s insides. “I didn’t realize you were this talented.”

And there’s the spark of annoyance. “Uh, thanks?” He says dryly.

“Keith, it’s awesome!” Pidge says, moving around the bag to get a view of all sides.

Keith shrugs, shifting his weight and idly scratching the toe of his cleat against the grass. “It’s nothing.”

“Keith, that’s amazing!” Suddenly Allura is there, having broken away from Shiro. She squats down next to Lance to admire his work. She grins up at him. “You’re really quite talented!”

It had been an impulse. After they had found the bag, Keith had asked Shiro to take him to the store to buy appropriate paints. He had spent the night with Netflix as background noise as he worked. He painted a landscape along the sides, mountains in blues, like they were seen from a distance. Each side had a set of gold hoops, with small silhouettes of people flying on brooms. Somewhere on it was a small, golden snitch, and on one side he had written “Altea University Quidditch” in big looping script.

He scratches the back of his neck, where several shorter strands of hair have escaped from his messy bun and curl against his nape. “Thanks…” He mumbles, glancing at Shiro, who’s only beaming at him with pride. Keith clears his throat, turning and taking a few awkward steps toward the pitch. “I hope it, uh, works, and stuff…” He mumbles. “I’m just gonna…”

“So Shiro, what was Keith like when he played hockey?” Lance asks.

Keith, who had been taking a few awkward steps toward the pitch, immediately spins around, fixing Shiro with a wide eyed, panicked stare.

Shiro is grinning at him, then looks down to where Lance and Allura are gazing up at him. “Oh, he was adorable.” He says easily, crossing his arms over his chest.
“Shiro, don’t.” Keith hisses, glaring at his brother.

Shiro ignores him. “He was the smallest on his team until he was… what was it, Keith? Seventeen?”

Keith just groans, and Pidge laughs. “It was seventeen, cause that’s when he suddenly hit his growth spurt and we were no longer the same height.”

Lance is grinning from ear to ear. “That is amazing.” He says, clearly trying to hold back his laughter. “Tell me more.”

“Shiro.”

“Well he was so small, about this tall,” He says, holding out a hand, then raising it a few feet higher. “And everyone else was around here when they got old enough to start checking.”

“Checking?” Allura questions, looking up at him.

“Like… tackling?” Pidge supplies. “Hockey tackling. There were several times when Keith just bounced off people.”

Keith groans loudly, running a hand down his face.

“That never stopped him though,” Shiro says, his smile turning fond as that familiar older brother voice kicks in. “He was never afraid to check people twice his size, and he would bully people up against the boards to keep them off the puck.”

“They were always so surprised to see him coming at them full speed and ramming right into him!” Pidge says, laughing. “I swear, half the time they didn’t react cause they were so shocked.”

“He was fast, too,” Shiro continues. “Fastest player in the league. Small and quick. He used to skate circles around everyone.”

“Weaving little circles between their legs. He was a vicious little ankle biter.” Keith shoves Pidge hard enough to make them stumble. They just laugh. “Tiny, angry Keith was hilarious. Always picking fights.”

“Even when fighting wasn’t allowed in the league.” Shiro says with a pointed stare.

Keith just shrugs, shoving his hands deeper into his pockets and hunching his shoulders. He kept his glare on him as he mumbles, “They deserved it.”

“And then,” Pidge says, eyes going bright with the memory. “He finally hit his growth spurt, and he was still super fast, but wasn’t used to his bigger momentum, so he would fucking lay people out.”

“He got a few cards for that,” Shiro says, trying to sound disappointed, but it’s ruined by his laugh.

“Incredible,” Lance says, eyes bright with laughter as he turns that grin on Keith. There’s amusement there, but also something softer, something almost fond. It’s too much, and Keith looks away, crossing his arms over his chest and pursing his lips together to keep his face blank.

“I’m pretty sure I can find his team pictures.” Pidge says, wearing a mischievous grin.

His glare snaps to them. “Pidge, don’t you dare.”
Their eyes spark with challenge. “Oh, I dare.”

He takes a sudden, threatening step towards them, and they instantly yelp, diving behind Allura, who’s trying to politely hide her smile behind her hand.

“There was this one time—“ Shiro starts, and Keith knows that tone of voice.

“I’m leaving.” He says, turning on his heel and stalking toward the pitch, the sounds of their snickering fading behind him.

It’s the most eventful quidditch practice Keith has ever experienced, if only because Shiro’s presence presents an unknown but curious variable. Despite some prodding, he waves everyone attempt to get him to join them off and takes a seat on the hillside next to the pitch while Coran runs everyone through warm ups.

While they’re running a few warm up laps, which are supposed to be nothing more strenuous than jogging, Lance comes up next to Keith and winks once he makes eye contact, then he sprints ahead. The challenge is clear, the bait has been danged, and Keith hates how much it works, how quickly that annoyed fire lights inside him, how he feels himself speed up automatically, determined to wipe that smug grin off Lance’s face. They end up finishing the three required laps neck and neck, though Lance insists that he was just a hair ahead.

Pidge and Hunk run them through some drills. They start out with the hunger games drill, which is probably the most fun and easily Keith’s favorite. He tries to default to Pidge as a partner only to find she’s already paired up with Coran. It’s then that he feels a tap on his shoulder, and he turns to see Lance smiling sheepishly at him. He spies Hunk over his shoulder, paired up and chatting with one of the freshmen. So he teams up with Lance, and they’re surprised to find they… actually make a really good team.

As soon as the whistle blows, Keith darts toward the ball pile while Lance stays behind. He gets there first, unsurprisingly, and immediately tosses a ball over his shoulder for Lance to catch. He grabs another and then they’re both running off. Without really having to speak, they have good synergy. Lance, as it turns out, is a really good shot, especially from a long distance, and Keith is better at catching or blocking balls thrown at them. So they stalk the field, Lance picking off targets while Keith defends them.

At one point Keith is facing off against Pidge, but they’re at a standstill, neither quite wanting to be the first to throw. Then Lance puts a hand on Keith’s shoulder, jumping in the air behind him and throwing the ball over his shoulder. Pidge is so surprised that the ball pegs them in the knees with no resistance.

Keith and Lance end up winning that first round after a merciless slaughter. Everyone agrees that they’re not allowed to team up in that drill anymore.

They do a few more drills where Pidge and Coran take the beats to one side of the field, and Hunk and Allura take the chasers and keepers to the other. Lance tries to sweep up the seekers, but Pidge shuts him down pretty quickly, saying that seekers need to have a secondary role anyway, so no snitch practice for the day. This must happen often because Lance doesn’t fight it too much. Instead, he just crosses his arms over his chest and trudges after the chasers, pouting the whole way.

It’s about halfway through these drills, where they’re taking turns trying to score against the keeper and defending chasers, that Allura finally manages to convince Shiro to join them. It takes some pestering from all of them, teasing from Keith, goading from Lance, encouraging words from
Hunk, and puppy dog eyes from Allura, but he finally gives in. Allura takes him by the hand and practically drags him down the hill to the pitch, and Keith grins at the flush darkening his cheeks. When Shiro notices, he glares at Keith and points at him threateningly, which only makes Keith’s grin widen.

After some hesitation, getting used to the broom, and figuring out the best way to hold it with his prosthetic, it turns out Shiro is good. Like, really good. Keith really shouldn’t be surprised. His brother has always been the star of whatever sport he decided to pick up. He just excelled at physical disciplines, and team sports is where he excels the most. He’s just never really cared enough about one to stick with it, despite being good. The longest sport he played was in a dodgeball league with Matt when they were in undergrad. The pattern seems to be that he’s only interested in playing with his friends.

Keith has a feeling Shiro might get attached to quidditch.

They end the practice with a scrimmage. They don’t have nearly as many people as they did the first day. Several of them have dropped out since then, and half the time, practices conflict with people schedules. So it’s never guaranteed how many people will show. They do, however, have enough people for two teams and a few subs.

Allura naturally convinces Shiro to play. He looks a little overwhelmed while she goes over the rules, and when she wanders away, he Keith a desperate and confused look. Keith just smirks and pats his shoulder, telling him he’ll get the hang of it.

They let two of the new players be team captains, and by complete happenstance, or maybe good planning on the freshman’s part, Keith and Lance end up on the same team. Due to the lack of people, and the fact that they hadn’t had seeker practice that day, Pidge makes the executive decision that they won’t be playing with a snitch. First team to seventy points wins. Lance predictably pouts at this, but Keith doesn’t mind. Playing solely as chaser is a nice change of pace, and it means he can spend more time watching Shiro struggle. And kicking his ass. Because they ended up on different teams.

The game starts with Lance betting he can get more goals than Keith, but after Shiro starts to steadily pull the other team ahead, he and Lance begrudgingly agree to work together. Shiro is a formidable opponent. Not only is his physically fit and able to easily score goals, his presence has an incredible affect on making that team work together, pulling them together with encouragement and communication. Their only saving grace is the fact that he’s still not used to having to pay attention to multiple things at once, and Coran can usually easily tag him out with a bludger.

After a few mishaps (“Catch the ball, mullet!” “I can’t catch it if you don’t throw it toward me.” “I did!” “That pass was no where near me!”), he and Lance finally develop some form of synergy. It’s faulty, and they aren’t always on the same page, but they find a rhythm that wins them the game. It’s close though, and they nearly lose when the teams are tied sixty-sixty and Allura gets a break away with the quaffle. Keith is able to block her shot and passes to Lance, and he manages to score a long shot from mid field.

Keith hates to admit that he’s impressed, but Lance’s grin is far too bright and proud for him to resist.

“Nice, shot.” He says, clasping Lance on the shoulder as he comes up beside him.

Lance smirks, slanting him a cocky leer. “Now you know why they call me the sharpshooter of the team.”
Keith just rolls his eyes. “Literally no one calls you that.” He says as he walks away.

“Doesn’t stop it from being true!” Lance calls after him. “Keith? Keith! Don’t ignore me when I’m bragging! Keith, get back here.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t hear you.” He says, turning around to walk backwards as he holds up a hand to his ear and shrugs.

“Keith!” He takes a step like he’s about to chase him down, but then Coran is there, sweeping him up into a tight hug and spinning him around. Keith can’t hear what the guy is saying, but judging from the preening look on Lance’s face, he’s willing to bet it’s praises. Keith just turns back around, chuckling silently as he goes to find Shiro.

Turns out, all the equipment, including the brooms but only part of the hoops, fits in Keith’s old hockey bag. Pidge is practically vibrating with energy at the discovery, and is determined to pick it up. As soon as they get it off the ground and the strap over their shoulder, they fall over backwards, landing on the bag. They’re determined to try again, but after a few hilarious attempts where they got several feet while walking hunched over, Coran finally relieves them of the burden. They pout, but he says the bag will no doubt be kept in his apartment anyway.

When Allura invites the two of them to eat dinner with them in the dining hall, Shiro doesn’t hesitate before saying yes. And, being Keith’s ride, he can’t really say no. Well, he could walk home, but he doesn’t really see a need to. He’s in a good mood for once, and he likes these people. Even despite the whole soulmate thing with Lance. Besides, Lance hasn’t really gotten on his nerves yet today, so maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to spend more time with all of them.

“Sooooo…” Pidge says once they’ve all gotten food and claimed a spot on one of the long tables that line the dining hall. They plant their elbows on the table, interlacing their fingers and leaning forward to peer around Keith at Shiro. “How’d you like quidditch so far?”

Shiro raises an eyebrow, but smiles. “It’s… not quite what I expected.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” Allura asks, smiling at his other side.

“Definitely a good thing.” He says softly.

Keith turns to Pidge and makes a silent gagging motion. They snicker, and the sound is echoed across the table. He glances up to see Lance grinning at him, eyes crinkled with amusement.

“Alright, lads,” Coran says, loud like he’s about to make an announcement. It draws in everyone’s attention immediately. He’s sitting in his seat across from Allura, one arm crossed over his chest and the other twirling his mustache. There’s a twinkle in his eyes and a tilt to his smile. “If Shiro is going to be apart of our little family, I believe it’s time we had The Talk.”

Keith glances at Shiro and snickers when the man blanches immediately, complexion going pale and eyes wide as he gapes at Coran. “The, um… what?” He says, clearly trying to be polite but hilariously confused.

Everyone is staring at Coran with their own levels of confusion. He tilts his head to look at Hunk next to him, and then Lance on Hunk’s other side. Lance is the first to get it. Either that, or he plays along. Either is likely.

“Ah, yes! The Talk.” He says, leaning forward to put both elbows on the table, tiling his head down to gaze up at Shiro and waggle his eyebrows.
“What talk?” Hunk says, eyeing them both with equal parts confusion and curiosity.

“You know, Hunk.” Lance says, waving a hand in the air. “The Talk. The same one we had with Keith the first time he ate with us.”

“Oh!” Hunk says a beat later, eyes lighting up. “That talk.”

Pidge is snickering, and Keith is doing nothing to hide his amusement as he sits back, arms crossed over his chest. Shiro looks helplessly at Allura, but she just grins, holding up her hands defensively. “It’s out of my hands.”

“Alright, Shrio,” Hunk says, sitting up straight and slapping his hands together, flat and palm-to-palm. He makes eye contact with Shiro, who raises an eyebrow, lips pursed into a small frown, but says nothing. “What…” He pauses for dramatic effect, and Keith can’t help but wonder if it’s a trait everyone gets after spending time with Lance. He then points his hands at Shiro. “Hogwarts house are you in?”

There’s silence as everyone holds their breath, grins wide.

Shiro blinks. Frown deepening and brows pinching as he fully digests what was just asked of him. He looks around between the six of them. “That’s… that’s it?”

They all start laughing so simultaneously that Keith isn’t able to pin point who starts it. “It’s a very serious question.” Pidge says as they start to calm down.

“Very.” Hunk agrees.

Shiro looks sheepish as he scratches the back of his neck, not quite making eye contact with anyone. “Well… back when Matt and I used to talk about it all the time, he was very insistent that I’m a Hufflepuff.”

“Really?” Allura says, straightening as she leans forward on her elbows, giving him a mega watt smile.

“Yeah, are.. you a Hufflepuff, too?” He asks, almost shyly. This time Keith can hear Pidge making gagging noises beside him.

“Yup,” She says, then nods at Hunk. “So is Hunk.”

“Right on, dude.” Hunk says, offering a fist across the table that Shiro bumps.

“Boooo!” Lance says, cutting though the moment. “Hufflepuffs suck! Gryffindor rules!” He immediately sticks out a fist toward Keith, who just stares at it and then him, one eyebrow raise. Lance’s posture slouches, lips pursing into a pout. “Oh, come on, Keith! Don’t leave me hangin’!”

Keith rolls his eyes and lightly bumps his fist to Lance’s, who pulls his back with a flair and explosion sounds.

“So now the Hufflepuffs officially have the lead.” Hunk says, grinning.

Lance frowns. “That’s not fair! Shiro is Allura’s soulmate! Of course he’s in the same house as her!”

“Now that’s an interesting idea.” Coran says with half a mouth full, pointing his fork at Lance. He swallows before elaborating. “Do you think it’s possible that all soulmate pairing identify with the
same Hogwarts houses?"

“That’s an fascinating thought,” Allura says, then sneaks a sideways glance at Shiro. “Obviously it holds true for us.”

“Not for me.” Pidge says, shoveling pasta into their mouth and not even mothering to chew first. “I asked my SM once, and they’re a Ravenclaw.”

Keith eyes them, one eyebrow raised. “I thought you said you were a Ravenclaw.”

They shrug. “After some deliberation and soul searching, I’ve come to embrace my snake like qualities.”

Keith snorts, but turns back to his burrito.

“My soulmate and I had an intensive discussion about this very subject.” Coran says. “Turns out they are also a Ravenclaw.”

“So that’s two to one.” Allura says.

“Hold on, does anyone have a pen?”

“Right-o!” Coran says, pulling a pen from the backpack he still carried, having come right from the library to practice. He presents it to Hunk, who takes it from him and clicks it before pressing it to his arm.

“Thanks, I’m gonna ask Shay. I think we had this conversation once? But I don’t remember…”

Lance leans over him, watching Hunk write. “Hey, Hunk, can I borrow that when you’re done?”

Keith’s stomach drops as his heart lodges itself in his throat. His breath hitches, and out of the corner of his eye, he can see Shiro is glancing sideways at him. He glances at Shiro, eyes widening. Shiro’s brows are pinched in worry.

“No problem, dude. Here.”

No…

“Thanks, man.”

No, no, no…

He watches in horror as time seems to slow down. Lance takes the pen from Hunk. He’s smiling. He puts an arm on the table, pen aimed right for it.

Adrenaline floods Keith’s system, making his face heat and his hands shake. His ears are ringing, and everything around him sounds muted. Everything except for his own heartbeat and the sound of his own ragged breaths, which are way too loud.

“I have to go.” He hears the words before he’s even aware that his mouth is moving. They sound automated and rushed, but he doesn’t care. Panic is flooding his system, fight or flight instincts kicking in and right now, it’s time to run. Go. Get out. Escape. Can’t let them know. Can’t let HIM know. Not yet. Too soon. Run.

He’s suddenly standing and turning, already walking away from their table with stiff, hurried steps. The last thing he sees before he turns away completely is the vague expressions on his friends’
faces, all sorts of combinations of shocked and confused. He sees worry creasing Pidge’s brow and in the lines around Lance’s mouth and wrinkling Shiro’s forehead. He sees it in Allura’s small frown and in the way Hunk gapes at him. He sees it in the calculating and sympathetic look Coran gives him.

He can’t worry about that right now. He *can’t*. He just has to get away. He knows Shiro will make up an excuse for him. For now, he just has to move.

The cafeteria is suddenly too crowded, too *loud*, too *warm*. Everything is too much, and the faces and colors around him seem to blur into something otherworldly, movement slowing and speeding up at odd intervals. It’s a surreal experience, but he focuses on one thing: getting out.

Even as he feels the telltale prickle on his skin.

Even as he feels the phantom pen start to drag across his skin.

Even as he feels the letters forming.

He bursts through the doors and out into the open air. He manages to make it several more steps before putting his back to the brick wall, clinging to the rough texture at his back as he slides down into a crouch. He rests his elbows on his knees, head resting in one palm as his fingers curl into his hair. His other arm is held out in front of him, watching the words take shape.

Foreign feelings flood into his chest, starting small and swelling until they wrap him in warmth, tingling out to his fingertips and toes.

He feels the fondness, the softness, the excitement, the honest curiosity. That’s not the part that worries him. Those are all familiar emotions he gets from his soulmate. The happiness and warmth that seeps through their connection is all familiar to him.

It’s what he feels beneath it that worries him.

The hesitancy, the worry, the tense feeling, like approaching a wild animal, like reaching for someone but not quite trusting, like you’re expecting to fall at any moment to you hold back, grounding yourself where you are.

And beneath all that, covering it all and wrapping it in a sobering cocoon, is what feels almost like an apology.

Guilt hits him hard as the connection fades, swirling in his gut and making him nauseous. It solidifies into something heavy and leaden, sinking low. His heart aches, clenching painfully in his chest. He thinks about all the things Shiro and Pidge have said to him over the years. He thinks about the talk he had with Pidge before the Mothman incident. He thinks about Lance poised out on a rock by the art building, proudly putting his art on display in hopes of meeting him.

The guilt is normally something he can deal with, but the silent apology that is still echoing despite their closed connection hits him hard. No one should have to apologize for reaching out to their soulmate, especially with something so innocent and filled with almost a childlike wonder.

On an impulse decision, he stands and stops the closest person to him on their way to the dining hall to ask to borrow a pen. They look at him like he’s crazy, but he insists that it’ll just be for a moment. It’s clear what he wants to do. There’s no other reason for him to as a strange he’s passing for a pen. So they’re not even surprised when Keith takes it and immediately sets it to his arm.

*Hey, space cadet, what Hogwarts house are you in?*
He wonders what Lance’s face will look like when he reads it. He’s not sure he wants to know.

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Hey, you doing alright?

Keith
> Kill me

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> I’ll take that as a no
> Will you be coming back? Everyone is worried about you

Keith
> No
> I can’t
> I can’t face him right now and I don’t have anything to hide the marks

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> I understand
> What’d you want me to tell them?

Keith
> I don’t care

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Alright, I’ll think of something
> Pidge is going to think it’s because soulmates were brought up

Keith
> I know
> Can you wrap up the rest of my burrito when you leave?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Yeah, no problem

Keith
> Thanks, Shiro

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Anytime
> Meet me by the car?

Keith
> Okay
> Btw you forgot to use your pompoms and the airhorns

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Uh, yeah
> Another time perhaps

**Keith**
> Let me guess
> You didn’t want to embarrass yourself in front of Allura?

**Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)**
> …. Perhaps
> And Keith?

**Keith**
> Yeah?

**Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)**
> Lance looks really happy

**Keith**
> ……
> Fuck

Chapter End Notes

So here's the deal. For any of you who follow me on social media, you'll know that in the last two months: Sora worked on her portfolio for animation school (which she got a call back for, and I'm so proud of her), I went on vacation for two and a half weeks with my family to New Zealand, I spent the two weeks after I got home from that to write a [46k word oneshot](https://example.com) based off of those experiences, I then spent the next few weeks catching up on work that had been put off for that time. Not to mention, I have THREE ongoing fics right now, a JOB, and a LIFE. I cannot write 24/7, as much as I'd like to. I don't have the focus for that.

The heart of this real talk is this: **PLEASE STOP ASKING ME FOR UPDATES.**

I said in the notes of the first chapter that TMWM is my BACK BURNER fic. It is not my priority. This fic started and is at it's core, my self indulgent "write when I'm inspired to take a break from everything else" fic. I ADORE how much you guys like it, and I LOVE how pumped you guys are for this ride. However, how I approach this fic isn't going to change. This fic has a certain vibe to it when I write to it, and I'm not going to change that or suddenly switch it to my priority just because it suddenly became more popular than my other fics. I feel like the story and the writing would suffer for that.

I understand that you're eager for more, but please, be patient. The comments I get on this fic and the asks that fill up my inbox "when will you update??" "update please!" "don't abandon!" "I need an update or I will die!" I dig your enthusiasm, but guys, real talk, these things put SO MUCH pressure on me. That pressure is tiring. It frustrates me. It annoys me. And this really, really stifles my creativity and motivation to write this fic. There is a HUGE difference between saying "I can't wait to see where this goes!" and "I look forward to the next chapter!" and "update please!". The difference
is one sounds polite and excited, and the second sounds demanding. I struggled SO. HARD. with this chapter because I was so drained from these types of questions/comments. Please don't. Don't take the fun out of this for me. I love this au and this story, and I don't want it ruined for me. It doesn't matter how often you say "I don't mean to sound rude", too late, it already does. Just... please think before ever demanding an update from a creator.

**TL;DR: This fic is not abandoned. IT WON'T be abandoned. Have a little faith in me as a writer. Don't demand for updates. They make it harder for me to motivate myself to write. No part of this update was because people asked for updates. Please read my FAQ on my tumblr if you have questions about updates. Also, I have a "Currently Working On" section in my tumblr blog description now (which can be seen from mobile) so you can see what fic you can expect to update next.**

Thank you for your understanding, guys!

_________________________________________________

PLEASE DO NOT REPOST THE ART FROM THIS FIC

Instead, hop on over here and reblog it from the artist herself [HERE](#) and [HERE](#)

Wittvy's Tumblr (author and co-creator) and Twitter
Sora's Tumblr (artist and co-creator) and Twitter
TMWM World Building and Lore Master Post
TMWM Playlist
Leave Us Wanting More

Chapter Summary

In which people are brought together, others feel miles apart, and sometimes you just have to live for the moment and take life one step at a time.

Chapter Notes

A special thanks to everyone who took the time to read the author’s note at the end of the last chapter! Most of you were very understanding and very encouraging, and I appreciate all of you so, so much.

Sora worked extremely hard on the gif for this chapter and it’s BEAUTIFUL. I’m so, so proud of her and her progress.

*Important Note: there is drinking and alcohol in this chapter, so if that’s not your thing, take care while reading.*

This chapter is a nearly 28k word monster, so please take your time! And if you're into atmosphere, or just like to suffer after reading, I highly recommend [The Marks We Make Playlist](#). As always, happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s a bit like watching the titanic sink, if he’s being honest. Fascinating and terrible all at once.

Shiro has always been far better at this whole soulmate thing than Keith. Always been confident in it. Never had a doubt or worry. From the moment his First Connection came through, he’s been a lovesick fool. Things have calmed somewhat as he’s grown older, grown patient, grown quieter, steadier. Circumstances shaped him. He’s no less caring, but he pulled it into private instead of wearing it on his sleeve.

He went through life knowing one day he would meet the woman of his dreams, and he would be happy.

Keith wishes he had grown up with that kind of certainty, that kind of conviction. Sometimes he envied Shiro for it, but other times, like now, he’s glad that he’s different.

Because he’s always known that Shiro would be gross after meeting his soulmate, but he hadn’t really grasped the reality of it until it’s staring him in the face.

He watches from across the room, perched crosslegged on the couch with a textbook open in his lap, as Shiro leans over the counter of the cozy little coffeeshop, weight on his elbows. Allura sits behind the register, mirroring his posture, putting them face to face. He can’t hear what they’re saying, and he’s pretty damn grateful for it. Every once in a while, however, they giggle, and he sure as hell can hear that.
Both of them giggle. Giggle. Shiro giggles. He doesn’t think he’s heard his brother giggle since he had his wisdom teeth removed and was still delirious from the anesthesia. And even then, his giggles had been muffled by the wads of cotton in his mouth.

While they talk, heads bowed close together, Allura idly plays with the fingers of his hand, tracing the knuckles, running her fingertips over his palm. It’s close and intimate, but the big fucking goofy smile on Shiro’s face is enough to turn the situation almost comical.

Almost.

As he watches, Shiro leans back, lifting his coffee cup to his lips. But as he goes to drink, Allura says something and Shiro laughs, causing the coffee to dribble down his chin and onto his shirt. He slaps his hand to his face, but the damage is already done. He lights up like a beacon that Keith can see from across the room, eyes wide in horror.

Sure. Now he’s embarrassed.

But Allura only laughs, eyes crinkling as she reaches for napkins and stands, leaning over the counter to help him clean up the mess.

He can feel his lip curling and his eye twitching. He wants to look away. He really does. But what else is there to look at? An empty parking lot through the window? The walls? His art history notes? Lance?

Yeah, he’d rather keep staring at his train wreck of a brother.

Shiro catches Allura’s hand and just holds it. They’re smiling and staring, but neither of them is saying anything. It’s soft and sweet and... actually kind of creepy.

He really hopes he never gets like that with—

A coffee cup comes down on the table in front of him with probably more force than necessary. It does the trick, however, snapping him out of his thoughts.

His eyes shoot down to the table, staring at the coffee cup. It’s branded with the simple lion design of their establishment, and his name is scribbled across it in permanent marker, accented by a winking face.

When he looks up, Lance is standing next to the couch, staring down at him with a smug smile and mischief in his eyes, arms crossed loosely and hip cocked out to the side. There’s a smattering of flour on his apron and a small smear of syrup on his cheek.

He has the ridiculous urge to wipe it off.

He looks back at the coffee cup before that thought goes too far, brows pinching. “I didn’t... order anything?”

He glances back up in time to see Lance roll his eyes. “Yeah, I know. It’s on the house.”

Something odd bubbles in Keith’s chest, and he quickly stamps it out. Instead he raises a brow, small frown pursing his lips. “Did Allura agree to this?” She has a friends and family discount, but from his experience, she very rarely gives drinks out for free. He can’t blame her for that. Their business is thriving but small.

Lance’s grin widens. “She didn’t even notice.” He says, a laugh in his voice as he steps over and
plops down onto the couch next to him. It jostles Keith, and he puts a hand down to his book to keep it from falling out of his lap. He’s far too aware of the fact that his knee brushes against Lance’s thigh, but Lance doesn’t seem to notice at all. “Besides, she owes you after subjecting you to...” He gestures to Shiro and Allura across the room. “This.”

Glancing back to where the others are standing, he bites back a grimace as Shiro gestures with his prosthetic while leaning against the counter with his hip, elegantly knocking over several things in the process and scrambling to righten them.

Yeah, he can’t really argue with Lance’s logic.

He reaches for the coffee cup, cradling it in his hands and enjoying the warmth as it seeps through his gloves. The entire time, he can feel Lance’s eyes on him. It’s uncomfortable, and he’s about two seconds away from snapping at him when he gets a whiff of his drink. And then he understands why he’s staring.

Keith slides his gaze to Lance’s slowly, taking in Lance’s attempt at nonchalance and the faults in it: the playful gleam in his eyes, the slight tilt to his lips, the bounce in his leg, the tap of his fingers on biceps where his arms cross over his chest.

Keith’s eyes narrow. “What is this?”

He shrugs, and the attempt at casual is lost as he smiles. “Keith, it’s coffee.”

“This isn’t coffee.”

“No, Keith.”

“It smells like caramel.”

“Just drink it.”

“I’m lactose—“

“Oh my god, I know. There’s no milk in it.” Keith just continues to glare, and Lance rolls his eyes. “Or whipped cream. Jesus, give a guy a little credit, will you?”

Keith just stares at him, lips pursing, before turning his eyes back to the cup. He holds it a little further away from him, head pulled back slightly. He can smell the caramel clear as day, and while he’s not opposed to caramel in and of itself, he’s not really sure he trusts it in a drink. Let alone a drink made by Lance, who’s notorious for his disgustingly sweet creations.

“It’s not poisoned.” He says with a sigh, edge of amusement fraying slightly.

“I don’t like sweet coffee...” He mumbles to the cup in his hands. He’s knows that he’s going to try it eventually. He knows he is. Because Lance made it, and Lance wants him to try it. And when Lance’s playful poking and prodding starts to fade into disappointment and worry... well, Keith’s resolve crumbles.

“I know you don’t. Just trust me and try it?”

Keith just huffs, feeling the pout starting to form on his face and refusing to look at Lance because of it.

“Dude, it’s free coffee.”
Well. He has a point.

Keith finally brings the cup to his lips, taking a sip—

And recoils quickly, lip curled. He hears a choked laugh, and turns to glare at Lance. He has a hand pressed to his mouth, eyes crinkled and dancing. “Dude, why do you burn yourself every time?”

Keith rolls his eyes, rubbing his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “It doesn’t happen every time…” He grumbles.

Lance exhales a short laugh. “Often enough. Try it again, but slower. Actually try to taste it this time.”

Shooting him another quick glare, Keith tries again, taking a moment to blow through the tiny opening in his cup. He’s not sure if it does anything, but it makes him feel better. He sips tentatively, and he’s... pleasantly surprised. He blinks, staring at the cup for a second like it might be a trick. Then goes for another sip.

“Well?” Lance asks, expectant and eager.

Keith hates to admit it, but— “It’s... not that bad?”

“Really?” His smile is far too bright. Keith can hear it in his voice.

He keeps his eyes turned away, shrugging lightly. “What is it?”

“Caramel Americano.” He says it with pride, like there’s actually an accomplishment in finding something other than drip coffee that Keith likes and not some ridiculous self-proclaimed challenge that he started a couple weeks ago.

Keith lets him have his victory, silently sipping his free drink. They both win this round.

Allura’s loud laugh draws both of their attention, followed almost immediately by a sudden snort. Her laughter trails off instantly, muffled by her hand as she stares at Shiro with wide, panicked eyes. Shiro, on the other hand, is just smiling like he’s won the lottery.

“How long do you think until that wears off?” He asks, aiming for casual and landing firmly in grumpy territory. It’s not that he’s not happy for Shiro. He is. Both he and Allura have been through a lot more than their twenty-some years warrant, and they both deserve some unbridled happiness, but...

Watching them is bitter sweet. He’s happy for his brother. He’s happy for his new friend. He’s happy that some soulmates actually do seem genuinely happy together. But it leaves a bitter taste in his mouth. Leaves a small, dark knot twisted up in his gut. He’s never wanted what they have, but...

Shiro makes him wish that he did.

Lance, on the other hand, doesn’t seem to have the same dilemma. He just watches them, lounging into the couch, a small smile playing across his lips like he’s not fully aware that it’s there. “Hmmm?” He hums, turning to Keith with one eyebrow raised. “What wears off?”

“You know...” Keith frowns, waving a hand vaguely at the two across the room. “That.”

It’s not a clear explanation, but Lance seems to get what he means anyway. He tilts his head to the side, gaze thoughtful. “I think it’s kinda cute.”
“It’s painful to watch.” He says flatly.

Lance laughs at that, light and airy. “Honestly, the longer it goes on, the more blackmail I have.” Keith grunts, displeased but understanding. Shiro’s definitely not going to hear the end of this anytime soon. “But if they’re anything like my parents, it’ll never stop. Not really.”

Keith feels himself tense, ice trickling into his veins as his stomach coils itself into a tight knot. Lance’s voice is soft and fond when he speaks of his parents. It’s an affection that runs deep, an admiration that goes down to his core. Light and airy, dreamy and distant.

Keith glances sideways at him, breath catching in his throat at the soft expression he finds there, at the far away look in his eyes.

The sweet taste of caramel sours on his tongue, the heat from the cup burning through the leather of his gloves.

It was such an offhanded statement, something that was nearly made more for himself than for Keith. And Keith knows he can just ignore it. There was nothing fishing in Lance’s tone. Nothing to indicate that Keith should inquire further. Nothing to say he’s supposed to ask. But... he feels like he should. Feels it like a knot of lead in his stomach, tastes it in the bile that threatens to rise up his throat.

He should ask. He knows he should. Social conventions deem it so. And even though Lance leaves the comment loose enough that Keith can easily let it go, ignore it with no harm no foul. He... kind of wants to ask? And that’s what makes it worse. That’s what really twists him up.

He wants to know. Curiosity is a powerful thing. And not even the dread that rises, threatening to choke him, can keep it at bay.

This is... his soulmate. His soulmate’s parents. And while he’s been avoiding thinking of them together at all, he knows that somewhere, in the future, he’ll probably meet Lance’s family. They’ll... they might be his family.

Oh god, that’s a terrifying thought.

He clears his throat, holding his coffee cup on top of the book in his lap. He stares at the words, but they all blur together. Art history is dull anyway, and he’s not absorbing any of it when his heartbeat is in overtime and his nerves are standing on end. “What’re they like?” He asks, quiet and hesitant.

“Hmmm?” Lance hums, turning to look at him, eyebrow raised. He looks like the picture of ease, arms crossed loosely, legs crossed, foot bouncing idly, lounging back against the couch.

Keith’s mouth feels dry. He glances sideways for only a moment before it becomes too much and returns his eyes to the book in his lap. His hair falls, blocking Lance from view, and he doesn’t move to fix it. “Your parents...” He tries again, voice stronger this time. “What’re they like?”

“They’re...” Lance pauses, and the silence feels soft and thoughtful. When he continues, his voice is incredibly fond. That unbridge admiration clear as day. “They’re in love.” He says it so simply, so matter-of-factly, like he would say the sky is blue and water is wet. It’s not a question and never has been. “Even before their First Connection, they were best friends, back when mom still lived in Cuba.” He pauses, chuckling to himself. “They even did the same thing those two did. Well... sorta.”

“What’d you mean?” Keith risks a glance sideways, catching his small smile as he cocks his head
to the side, still watching Shiro and Allura.

Lance lets one shoulder rise and fall in a small shrug. “They had a word. They were best friends as kids, and when mom moved away, they promised each other that they’d write a word on their hand after they had their First Connections. Just to see if it was each other, you know?” His smile widens, chuckle low and soft. It makes Keith’s heartbeat erratic. “It was a one in a million chance, really. But... it worked out. They’re soulmates, and they love each other, and they’ve never stopped showing it.”

Keith can deal with the fondness in his voice, with the soft adoration for his family. What makes his chest tight and his stomach nauseous with guilt is the clear note of longing that rings out beneath it all. The clear want of that. Of what his parents have. Of what Shiro and Allura have.

What Keith isn’t sure he’s capable of giving him.

What is so completely opposite of what his own parents were like.

“Oh...” He says, soft and uncertain, simply because he feels like he has to fill the silence. “That... sounds nice.”

And it does. Nice, if not unrealistic. Nice in the way that fairy tales and happily ever afters are nice. Nice in the way that storybooks depict soulmates. Nice in the way that romance novels and movies are nice.

But just because everyone is guaranteed a soulmate doesn’t mean that their stories are guaranteed to be nice.

Nice is one in a million.

“Yeah,” Lance says, a small sigh in his voice. The longing there, the resignation, the hope. It’s like a thousand pinprick stabs to his heart, makes his bones heavy and leaden with guilt. “It is.”

They’re quiet then. He’s run out of things to say, and he’s afraid of what his voice might sound like if he tries. Across the room, he can still hear Allura and Shiro’s hushed voices, but his eyes are on the book in his lap.

Lance is quiet at his side, thankfully letting the subject go. He doesn’t push it, and he doesn’t keep talking, for which Keith is glad. But instead they’re left in this silence that stretches, every second adding a brick to the wall between them.

He’s read the same paragraph about fifteen times before Lance finally speaks. “What’re you working on anyway?”

He sighs, letting his relief at the subject change come out in a rush. “Art history.”

“Oh, really?” He leans over, getting into Keith’s personal space to look at the book in his lap. Keith ignores the brush of their shoulders, of Lance’s thigh pressing into his knee. “You any good at it?”

He turns his head then, glaring at Lance with lips pursed. He just blinks back, meeting his eyes, unperturbed by their proximity.

Then, finally, he leans back, eyebrow cocked. “What?

“I’m an art major.”
“Yeah? So? Doesn’t mean you’re good at the history side of things.” He has a fair point, but that doesn’t mean Keith is willing to give it to him. He just stares, lips pursing into a deeper frown. Lance puts his hands up in a defensive gesture. “Hey, I was just asking! I’m actually in an art history class right now and it’s killing me.”

Keith’s expression relaxes a fraction, eyebrow raising. “Why’re you in an art history class?”

He shrugs, arms going back across his chest. “Needed some humanities courses for gen ed. Thought it would be easy, but I was wrong.”

“Clearly.” Keith says flatly, amusement playing with the edges of his tone, easing away his frown.

Lance glares at him, letting it go with a small huff. “Anyway, I was just going to ask if you’re good at it, maybe you could help me sometime?”

“Like... tutor you?”

Lance shrugs, eyes across the room. “Tutor me. Help me study. Kick my ass when I inevitably give up. Whatever works.” His voice is light and hopeful, playful but serious.

Keith finds the corners of his lips tilting into the ghost of a smile. “You’re giving me permission to kick your ass?”

He shrugs again, eyes sliding to Keith’s, smirk playing at his lips. “You do what you gotta for the grades, man.”

“I suppose I can help.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool.”

His smile is so genuine that it eases the tension in Keith’s chest, and he looks away, lifting the coffee cup to his lips to hide his own smile.

Keith’s apartment is small and simple.

Just one room, a bathroom, and a kitchen nook off to the side. His bed occupies one corner, just a double wide mattress on the ground without a frame. A couch occupies the center of the room, old and faded and found for cheap at their local thrift store. It faces the wall, where Keith’s decent sized tv sits upon a stand. It isn’t something he thinks he needs, and it isn’t something that he necessarily wanted, but it was Shiro’s old tv, and his brother had practically pushed it on him.

The rest of the space has other bits of furniture, hand-me-downs and things found at thrift stores. Dressers, a desk, a few shelves, a nightstand, plastic drawers for his art supplies. Together, they essentially cover all the walls, blocking in his space effectively, leaving no open spaces that would make his apartment feel empty.

His walls, however, are effectively bare. Shiro says it’s odd for an artist, but Keith’s never really
thought about it. All his art is in his sketchbooks. He doesn’t need to put it on his walls. Besides, something about putting his own work on display in his own home feels... odd. Egotistical? Weird. His room back home at his grandparents’ place is covered in posters he’s collected throughout the years, but he didn’t really feel the need to bring any of them with him.

The only thing hanging on his walls is a large canvas depicting and painted scene of rugged desert mountains. Oranges, reds, and browns. A sunset to cast the lighting in purples and pinks. Landscape dotted with green shrubs and scattered trees, flowers the color of lilac and blue.

Keith’s apartment is small and simple, neatly cluttered and obviously lived in, but he’s never considered it cozy.

Not until he has three friends scattered around his space.

“Pidge, look!” Lance says, waving the rubix cube around in front of them, between their face and their laptop screen.

Pidge blinks, pulling their head back a bit to focus on what’s being presented to them. “What am I looking at?”

Lance scoffs, rolling his eyes as he points to one of the cube’s sides. “Look! I did it! I got a whole side the same color.” He says, beaming with pride. Pidge is sitting cross-legged on the couch, and Lance sits so he’s leaning up against their side, legs propped up on the arm of the couch. Keith expected them to push him away, but it’s been nearly an hour and he’s still using them like a prop.

They reach up, adjusting their glasses as they finally seem to focus on the cube. “Did you get all the centers lined up? All the corners in the right places?”

“Yup, check it out.”

They take the cube from him, turning it around and nodding. “Good job, Lance. That didn’t take as long as I expected.”

He’s beaming, practically preening at the praise. “Ye of little faith—Pidge, what the fuck?” His screeches, sitting up straight and gaping in horror as Pidge quickly and easily mixes up the cube, erasing all his hard work.

They just smirk, holding it up, eyes already back on their screen. “Do it again.”

“Why would you do that?” He whines, taking the cube back, shoulders slumping as he frowns at it.

They shrug. “You learn by doing it again and again. If you do it once and put it away, you don’t learn anything. I’m helping you.”

“You’re evil is what you are.” He mutters, slouching back against their side and fiddling with the cube once more.

Keith snorts from across the room, and Lance glances up to catch his eye. “What’s so funny over there, Keith?” He says, frown deepening.

“Nothing,” He says simply, giving a small shrug before slouching a little further against the wall, propping his sketchbook up a little higher on his bent knees to hide his small smirk.

“He’s probably just enjoying your pain,” Pidge says matter-of-factly. “I did the same thing to him when he learned.”
“You were merciless.” Keith says flatly.

Pidge’s smirk is small, eyes glinting as they glance over the top of their laptop to where Keith is lounging on his bed. “You learned, didn’t you?”

“Evil,” Lance says in a loud hiss, and Keith’s smirk widens.

They lapse back into a comfortable silence, his small apartment filled with the sound of the cube turning and both Pidge and Hunk typing. Pidge’s is more intermittent, while Hunk’s is a near constant. He pauses occasionally, eyes lifting from the screen of his laptop to stare blankly at the wall before going back to it. He had said he needed to finish an essay before their quidditch tournament this weekend, and from the sound of it, he’s doing it faster than Keith has ever been able to write a paper.

Either he knows what he’s talking about or he’s just spewing out bullshit.

“Okay,” Pidge says, drawing all of their attention. They sit up straighter, crackling their knuckles as they stare at their screen. “We have... seventeen people going to the tournament.”

Hunk nods, scratching his chin. “Not bad. Gives everyone plenty of subs.”

“That means I can snitch other games, right?” Lance asks, bright and hopeful, twisting around and swinging his feet to the floor to sit up.

Pidge fixes him with a firm look, pointing a threatening finger at his nose. He goes cross-eyed trying to look at it. “Yes, but I want you back whenever we play.”

His smile falls into a little pout, brows pinching. “I’m not going to abandon the team, Pidge.”

“Not on purpose, you won’t. But you get really caught up with the snitching thing and lose track of time. No snitching for games that might overlap our playtime.”

He huffs, sinking a little lower on the couch and going back to fiddling with the cube. “Fiiiiine.”

“It’s for the best, buddy.” Hunk says from where he’s sitting on the floor, back to the couch. He reaches over Pidge to pat Lance on the leg. “We need you, dude. You’re like... our best long shot.”

“I know, but snitching is the best part.”

“I thought winning was the best part.” Keith says, glancing up to see Lance’s thoughtful smile.

“You have a point.”

“Anyway,” Pidge says, pushing their glasses higher up their nose as they check their phone. “We have seventeen people, including the four of us. Hunk has a car that’ll fit five. Shiro and Allura offered to drive, so that’s nine more spots. And Coran said we can call him in for another car if we need it, which we do, since most of our players going don’t have cars on campus or don’t want to drive. Not that I can blame them. So, that’s plenty of spots for everyone.” They finish tapping out a message before putting their phone away, turning back to their computer. “So it’s a four and a half hour drive. We’ll meet up tomorrow around seven, when everyone’s out of class as has time to pack, drive to my parents house, sleep there, go to the tournament at ten in the morning, it ends around five or six, we have dinner, stay the night at my place again, and drive back Sunday. Am I missing anything?”

Hunk shrugs, turning back to his laptop, fingers moving as soon as they settle over the keys.
“Nope. Sounds about right to me.”

Pidge nods, looking over whatever’s on their screen. “Cool, great. I’m still waiting to hear back from them about whether or not they want us to bring our own hoops.”

“What about uniforms?”

“The shirts should be ready for pick up tomorrow morning. I can go after my morning classes.”

“Awesome.”

Their conversation falls more into the administrative side of thing, and Keith starts to tune them out. As exciting as it is to listen in on who has and who hasn’t paid for their quidditch shirts, it’s... really not. Unfortunately, neither is his art assignment. It’s on the previous page of his big sketchbook, hidden away and half finished. The page in front of him is filled with hundred of small lines, creating a stain glass like grid made up of small pieces. He’s not entirely sure what it’s supposed to be yet, or if it’s supposed to be anything at all, but he’ll figure it out eventually.

“Piiidge,” Lance whines, and Keith’s gaze lifts over his knees and back to the couch. “I forgot what to do next.”

“I gave you the algorithms for a reason.”

“I know that. Those are easy. I just... don’t know when to use them, or how to hold the cube? Or what to look for...” He trails off, brows pinching in his confusion as he turns the cube over in his hands. “Run it by me again.”

“No, I’m busy.”

“Piiidge!”

“Ask Keith to help you.”

“What? Him?” He asks, incredulous as he glances quickly to Keith before turning back to Pidge, lip curling slightly.

Pidge gives him a flat look. “I taught him years before I taught you. Keith knows it as well as I do.”

“Doubtful.”

“When we race, it’s usually a fifty-fifty for who wins.” That makes his mouth drop open, and his wide eyes slide to Keith, who just smirks at him silently while tapping his pencil on his sketchbook. “Think of it this way,” Pidge continues, turning a bright grin from Lance to Keith, fluttering their eyes innocently. “Who do you have a better chance of cracking? Me or Keith?”

“You...” Lance says, giving them a thoughtful look. “Have a very good point. Keith!”

“What?” Keith says, voice rising in volume and pitch as Lance jumps up from the couch, takes a few steps around the coffee table, and launches himself onto Keith’s bed. It bounces, just slightly, and Keith pulls his knees a little closer to his chest. “What’s that supposed to mean?” He demands, glaring between them.

Pidge just smirks from their place on the couch. Lance lies on his stomach on the bed, propping himself up on his elbows and shrugging. “Sorry, buddy, but when Pidge gets like this, they’re a tiny but immovable rock. I have a much better chance of getting you to help me.” From the smile
on his face, he doesn’t seem very sorry at all.

“I’m not helping you.”

“Please!”

“No.”

“Keith.”

“No.”

“Keeeeeith.”

He ignores him, turning his eyes back to the sketchbook and adding a few more haphazard lines—

“Keeeeeith!” Lance reaches out to grab Keith’s knee, rocking it back and forth. “Please? Pretty please? Pretty please with sugar on top? Please, please, please, please, plea—”

“Oh my god, fine! Just stop shaking me, Jesus fucking Christ.” Keith snaps, swatting his hand away. He gives him a heavy glare, lips pursed into a frown, but Lance just beams. He sighs, setting his sketchbook on the floor and stretching his legs out in front of him and reaching towards him. “Hand it over.”

Lance scrambles to his hands and knees, crawling over to situate himself on the bed next to Keith and handing over the cube. He takes it, hating the way their fingers brush simply because he notices that their fingers brush. It’s such a simple touch, and it shouldn’t mean anything. He shouldn’t even have realized it happened, and he sure as hell shouldn’t be dwelling on it now.

He turns the cube over in his hands. Lance has solved the blue side, lined up all the middle pieces and the corners right. “So, uh, next is the second row.”

He feels Lance’s movement when their shoulders bump, which leaves him wondering when they got so close, and hears the roll of Lance’s eyes in his voice. “Yeah, no shit, Sherlock. I just... don’t remember how to set up for it.” His tone gets a little most pinched with frustration. “Or what algorithm to use...”

Keith feels his lips tilt into a small frown. “To be honest, I don’t really remember the algorithm that Pidge taught me...”

“Wow,” Lance deadpans. “You are so much help.”

Keith shoots him a glare, which Lance returns with an unamused frown, before turning back to the cube and mixing it up again.

“Hey!” Lance snaps, reaching for it.

Keith twists, holding it out to the side and out of his reach. He stares hard at the colors, eyes searching for the red pieces and firmly ignoring the heat of Lance’s body against his own and the way he can feel his pulse quickening. “Just— I don’t remember their algorithm cause I do it differently. Just let me show you.”

“Fine,” He says, wary as he leans back against the wall, giving Keith his space back.

He feels like he can breathe again.
Bringing the cube back to his lap, he gets the red side middle pieces in place quickly before holding it up. “So, I— uh— I usually solve the red side first, so it might look a little weird to you, but... Okay. So when Pidge teaches this, they give us algorithms for each step. One row, then the second, then the third. But when I was doing it, I figured out a way to solve the first and second together.”

“Sounds... complicated.” Lance says, sounding doubtful.

“It’s easy.”

“Sure thing, Kogane. Whatever you say.”

“Even you can figure it out.”

“Wow.”

Keith gives him a sideways glance, a small smirk curving his lips. His heart does this stupid fluttering number when Lance returns it.

He takes his time trying to explain his process. It’s difficult, and he keeps tripping over his words, having to go back and try to explain it again when Lance doesn’t get it right away.

His way isn’t like Pidge’s. While the method they teach people is straight forward, with an algorithm to guide, his is... not. He doesn’t have an algorithm. He just sees the patterns. He knows where he needs to put a piece, and he’s figured out the pattern of movements to get it there. It’s all visual and muscle memory at this point.

And surprisingly... Lance gets it. When he realizes that Keith is going to show him a pattern instead of telling him a pattern, he leans a little closer, pays close attention. He tells Keith to do it again, and again, and Keith obliges until Lance is snatching it out of his hands saying it’s his turn.

Keith watches him then, gaze intense as he stares at the cube, teeth nibbling lightly at his bottom lip, brows furrowed just slightly, long fingers hesitant as he turns the cube. It’s quiet in the apartment. He hadn’t realized Pidge and Hunk had stopped talking, but apparently they were back to working silently. He knows he should probably pick his sketchbook back up, knows he should probably get some work done.

But... instead he just watches Lance.

Every once in a while, when Lance falters, he reaches over to point something out, show him what to look for, tell him what turns to make. Then Lance is swatting his hand away, and Keith pulls back, smiling.

“I did it!” He declares, holding the cube up for inspection, grinning proudly.

“You did,” Keith says with a small nod, a slight tilt to his lips.

“You’re actually a better teacher than our resident nerd over there.”

“Thanks,” He says, reaching over and plucking the cube from Lance’s grip. He turns it over slowly, nodding a little as he makes a show of inspecting the cube. Then he mixes it up with several quick, rapid succession movements. Lance gasps next to him, trailing off into several creative strangled sounds. Keith’s smirk is wide as he turns to him, offering the mixed-up cube. “Now do it again.”
Lance glares, snatching it out of his hand and turning away from him, hunching his shoulder a little as if to shield the cube from his view. “I change my mind. You’re both terrible and cruel.”

Keith chuckles, turning to catch Pidge’s gaze across the room. “You’re right. It is fun to do that.”

Their smirk mirrors his, lopsided and crinkling their eyes. “I know. It’s the only reason I like teaching people.”

When Hunk finishes his essay, they launch into a twenty minute debate about dinner. They can use their meal plans at the cafeteria, but they’re tired of the food. Fast food is easier, greasy, and delicious, but has a tendency of being more expensive. Hunk finally convinces them to let him cook. Keith tries to warn him that his kitchen accommodations are severely lacking, but Hunk just waves him off, telling him that if he can cook in a dorm, he can cook anywhere.

They all trudge out to the grocery store a couple blocks away and follow Hunk around while he picks through the aisles, occasionally tossing things at one of them to carry. Lance occasionally bumps into Keith, which only leads to him lightly shoving back. It turns into a playful push fest that only breaks up when Hunk gives them each a task of finding something on opposite sides of the store. They decide to race. Lance ends up winning, but it’s just slightly off from what Hunk asked for. They decide to call it a tie.

They split everything up at the register, pay, and trudge back to Keith’s apartment. The kitchen is far too small for any of them to help Hunk with dinner, but he doesn’t seem to mind.

They’ve finished dinner, dirty dishes piled on the coffee table and halfway through a movie when Hunk’s soul connection opens up.

Lance is the first to notice. Maybe because they’ve been friends for so long, maybe because they’re roommates, or maybe he’s just weird attuned to the subtle differences in those around him.

Either way, Lance leans up from where he’s laid out across their laps, eyes fixed on Hunk. “You alright, there, buddy?” He says, catching Keith’s attention.

When he looks to the other end of the couch, he sees that Hunk has stiffened, sitting ramrod straight, eyes dazed and unfocused, lips gone slack. Keith eyes him curiously, one eyebrow raised. Keith’s couch is only big enough for three of them to sit comfortably, and as such, Lance had taken it upon himself to stretch out over top them. He had started with his head on Hunk’s end of the couch, poking and prodding Keith with his feet while digging his ass into Pidge’s lap. That quickly changed when Keith learned that Lance is actually very ticklish, and it was all too easy to enact revenge. So he settled with his head on the arm rest on Keith’s side, feet propped up by Hunk.

As such, the three of them are able to lean close and whisper loudly, all eyes on Hunk.

“Is he okay?” Keith asks as Hunk lets out a sound that sounds like a cross between a low whine and a sigh.

Pidge leans into his side, lip curling slightly as she shakes her head, eyes on Hunk. “Yeah, he’s fine. He gets like this whenever his SM writes to him.”

“Looks... like it’s overwhelming...” He says, uncertain.

Pidge shrugs. “Maybe it is. I think he’s just a big softy.”

“I think it’s cute.” Lance says, giving them each a half-hearted disapproving glare before turning
back to Hunk and smiling. “He looks dreamy when the connection is open because he loves her.”

Keith eyes him warily, one eyebrow raised. “He’s never met her though... right?”

Lance’s brows furrow, head turning as he leans a little off Keith’s lap to look at him fully. His lips are pursed into a little frown. “So?”

Keith just raises his eyebrows in silent question. He feels like his point is pretty obvious, but he’s getting the feeling that pushing his point is a bad move.

Lance cracks first. “They’re soulmates.” He huffs, crossing his arms and lounging back against the armrest as he turns his eyes back to Hunk. Then, softer, mostly to himself, “They’re soulmates, and he loves her.”

Keith feels an unpleasant knot forming in his stomach, and he distantly realizes he’s staring. With a jerk of his head, he turns back to Hunk, surprised to find marks appearing on his face. Hunk giggle, voice soft and breathy, eyes squinting shut as it tapers off into a sigh.

It’s... odd to watch. Keith has never really seen someone’s soulmarks appear before. He’s always seen it as something deeply personal, and in most cases, it is. Combined with the fact that he doesn’t really like thinking about it leaves him looking away whenever Shiro or Pidge would start with their soulmates. But everyone else is watching like it’s normal, and it’s not like he can really go anywhere... so he watches, too.

They know it’s done when Hunk blinks rapidly, focus coming back to him and pulling into himself like he’s awakening from a dream. When he turns to look at them, his grin is wide. There’s simple warpaint like tattoos on his face in classic black and highlighted with green, and Keith isn’t sure why green is the color of choice until Hunk holds up his arm to show the words you’re a keeper! ;) Good luck at the tournament! scrawled out in a looping script.

Keeper. Green. She gave him face paint for the tournament. And because they were soulmarks, they’d be sure to last through the weekend.

That’s... kind of cute. He supposes.

“Dude!” Lance says, sitting up quickly and putting all of his weight onto Pidge, who makes a pained noise and huffs their annoyance. Lance ignores them, instead reaching for Hunk and grabbing his face, tilting it for inspection. “This is awesome! Holy crow.”

“Really? Move, I wanna see!” He shoves Lance’s legs off of him and stands, hurrying to the bathroom.

Lance is left solely on Pidge’s lap and makes no effort to move until they dig their fingers into his side. He yelps, jumps, and they push, shoving him down to the floor. “Rude!”

“Your ass is boney as fuck.”

“Guys! This is so cool! She has some games this weekend, too. Do you think I should do the same for her?” Hunk says from the bathroom, and when Keith looks over his shoulder, he can see Hunk poking at his cheeks from the open doorway.

“I think Keith has some soulmark markers.”

Keith whips around fast enough that he feels the muscle being pulled in his neck. He rubs it, frowning at Pidge. “What?”
They raise an eyebrow. “Didn’t Shiro buy you soulmark markers a while ago? The kind that wash off easily?”

“Oh, yeah, he did...” He mutters, glancing away. The movie is still playing, but none of them pay attention.

“Why do they call them soulmark markers?” Lance says from where he’s sitting on the floor. He props his arms up on the spot that Hunk vacated. “They should call them soulmakers.”

“That’s what I’ve always thought!” Hunk calls from the bathroom.

“Same wavelength!”

Pidge shoves Lance off the couch with their foot. “Anyway,” They say, turning back to Keith. “Do you have them here? Then Hunk can make his SM similar marks without ruining what she did for him.”

“Oh! That would be awesome!” Hunk says, coming out of the bathroom and putting his hands on the back of the couch.

“Oh, yeah,” Keith says, pushing himself to his feet and shuffling across the room to his drawers of art supplies. “Shiro made me pack them.”

He hopes his voice stays level and bored and doesn’t betray the rapid beating in his chest. He’d made sure to put away all his soulmark paints and supplies before they all came over. All of them know that Lance’s soulmate paints, and Keith really doesn’t want them asking questions.

“Man, this is so sweet.” He hears Lance say as he digs around in the drawers. He knows exactly where the markers are, but he makes a show of searching anyway. “I wish my soulmate would do that for me. I would have killer warpaint.”

Keith snorts lightly, opening up the drawer where he knows the markers are and digging through them for black and green. Hunk had said his SM is a keeper, too, right? “Have you ever tried asking them?”

The words are out of his mouth before he really realizes it, and he doesn’t realize it might be an awkward thing to say until he realizes the apartment has gone quiet. Nothing but the movie plays, and the hair on the back of his neck stands on end.

He turns slightly, glancing over his shoulder, and sure enough, they’re all staring. He blinks, brow pinching as he frowns. “What?”

Pidge and Hunk exchange a look before their eyes slide to Lance, who’s made his way onto the couch. He’s staring at Keith, lips pursed and brows furrowed. Not angry, and not really confused. Surprised, maybe? Thoughtful? Considering?

“What’d you mean?” He asks slowly, like he’s testing out each of the words on his tongue.

Keith feels heat rising up his neck, and turns back to the drawer, grabbing for a couple markers and pushing the drawer closed. “I’m just saying, if you want soulmark warpaint or whatever, maybe you should just ask your soulmate.”

He turns, holding the markers out to Hunk, who takes them with a grateful smile and a muttered thanks. His grin widens as he hurries to the bathroom, and Keith plops back down in his seat.
Both Pidge and Lance are still staring at him, and he schools his face into a flat expression as he stares back. “What? It’s not like they can read your mind.” He raises an eyebrow when they exchange an odd look. “Have you never asked for a soulmark before?” He aims for nonchalance, with a dash of curiosity and mild disbelief. He thinks he hits it pretty spot on.

The question, however, is entirely for formality’s sake. He knows Lance has never asked anything of him. Even the games they used to play, every conversation they’ve ever had, it was all suggestions, a poke and a prod, an open ended request for him to join in.

And every drawing Keith has ever done has been because he felt like it. They’ve all been for himself, and Lance has just been an unintended side effect. He’s... never even considered the possibility of Lance asking him for a painting. It’s never crossed his mind. It just hasn’t been how they work. Had it happened several months ago, he probably wouldn’t have done it. If his SM had just randomly wrote to him and asked for a specific painting, he no doubt would have felt irritated, bothered, hidden the request until it faded.

But that was several months ago, and this is now.

Then, his soulmate was just a faceless person that he dreaded meeting, feared seeing, wanted to pretend didn’t exist. He tried not to imagine how his paintings looked on anyone other than himself.

Now he knows what his art looks like on Lance’s skin.

Now his soulmate has Lance’s face, Lance’s voice, Lance’s smile.

If Lance asked, he doesn’t think he could say no. Wouldn’t want to deal with the guilt of seeing his disappointment in person...

Maybe suggesting this hadn’t been a good idea.

“You... might be onto something, mullet...” Lance says, voice soft and thoughtful, gaze fixed on the tv screen but eyes distant. There’s a soft smile playing at the edges of his lips, and even as dread trickles ice through his veins, a shiver of excitement runs hot down his spine.

He ends up going to the bathroom to help Hunk come up with face paint ideas, and he sits on the toilet while Hunk stands in front of the sink, gazing into the mirror while they talk. He ends up doing something similar to the ones on his own face, but with a dramatic flare that Keith suggests and walks him through. Hunk doesn’t have nearly as steady of a hand as his SM, but Keith thinks it’ll look fine nonetheless.

They end up leaving close to midnight, which is probably far too late when they all have early morning classes. But he knows they’ll all probably stay up later once they get back to their dorms. Hunk ends up leaving the leftovers, which Keith appreciates, and they all shuffle out the door with awkward but genuine waves and fist bumps.

It’s thirty minutes later, when he’s in his pajamas, nestled under his blankets, slouched down on his bed with his laptop propped up on his knees, scrolling through wikipedia articles, when he feels it.

He feels the connection open like a soft breeze through a window he hadn’t realized was open, a light draft to announce his presence. He stiffens, feeling the breath leave him in a rush.

He feels the tingling on the inside of his forearm, feels the breeze of emotion stem from it, crawling up his arm and settling in his chest. Feels the question, light and hesitant. Feels the doubt, the instant regret souring, sinking low. Feels the solid determination, the carefree bravado
attempting to cover it up, feels it lifting everything else, as if he can somehow hide the faint taste of bile and creeping shadows from Keith.

It’s gone almost as soon as it starts, and the words on his arm are scribbled quick, as if to get them done before he can stop himself.

As if to get them over with before Keith can feel too deeply through their connection.

It’s too late, though. Lance has always felt deeply and openly, and whenever their connection opens, it’s like a rush and a flood, filling Keith and drowning before rushing away, leaving him reeling and unable to grasp more than vague impressions.

*So this is random and out of the blue, but I play quidditch. Like from Harry Potter? And we have a tournament this weekend, and I also snitch for other teams, and I thought it would be cool to have snitch like marks?*

Keith gives a little exhale of a laugh, corners of his lips quirking despite himself. Now that he knows it’s Lance, he can practically read the words in his voice, can practically hear the awkward rambling. What a fucking dork.

Keith is already out of bed, padding across his room when he feels it again.

This time it’s quick and airy, a breath instead of a breeze. Emotions oddly muted and dull, but lingering and creeping up his spine, curling into his chest as if trying to hide. Even after the connection closes, they’re slow to fade, giving him time to pick them apart.

Self conscious doubt. Irritation, but not at Keith. It’s turned inward. At himself. A sigh that feels real enough that a similar one escapes Keith’s lungs. A rumble that feels like amusement, but it’s tinged with a quiver of bitterness that doesn’t belong there.

Keith frowns, pausing as he looks down at his arm. The new words are scribbled beneath the first, smaller and messier.

*Never mind, don’t worry about it, you’re probably busy and this is stupid, lol*

Keith’s frown deepens, an odd heat rising his his chest, chasing away the feelings that Lance had left there.

He strides across the room with more purpose, practically ripping open the drawers and pulling out the paint that he needs, ideas already forming.

He’s never painted like this for anyone except himself, but he thinks this is a good place to start.

Lance stands near the center line of the field. It’s his usual position. Better to stand in the middle, or else be accused of favoring one team over the other. Fuck that. He’s an equal opportunity snitch.

Both hands on his hips, weight cocked to the side, the looks like the picture of ease. Not a care in the world as the game unfolds in front of him, chaos with everyone running around, balls being thrown, teams shouting, referee whistles. It all fades to the background. The game is there, but he only pays attention to it enough to avoid hitting anyone.
His attention is reserved solely for the two seekers. Always aware of them. Always figuring out who’s going to get to him first. Watching them for signs of how they’ll attack next. These two are easy. Their faces broadcast every move they’re about to make, which makes it incredibly easy for him to counter.

They’re nothing like Keith, who has that spark of challenge in his eyes, that fire that burns bright, the way he stalks Lance around the field, body rippling and rolling fluidly, waiting for an opening, striking fast before Lance can figure out what he’ll do.

Yeah, Keith is a good seeker. These two are mediocre.

Both of the seekers are slow as they approach, mouths open slightly and chests heaving. They’re getting tired, but they haven’t been subbed yet, and Lance is starting to think that these teams don’t really have seeker subs. A shame really. There’s no challenge in this.

One charges first, followed quickly by the other. Lance is in motion just as quickly.

He moves toward the first one, grabbing them around their upper arms to keep them from swiping at him and sticking his ass out to get the snitch as far from them as possible. The seeker pushes against his hold, no doubt trying to bulldoze out of it. It’s not going to work. Instead, Lance uses their momentum to swing the two of them around, putting the seeker’s back to the other one, effectively using them as a shield.

They spin around like that for several long moments, one seeker trying to get out of his hold and the other one trying to get around the first. Lance keeps in motion, constantly moving them so his shield is always in place. He can see them gritting their teeth, sees their frustration. Good. He feeds off of it.

It doesn’t take too long before a beat tags out the second seeker, which just makes the one in his arms struggle a little more.

They pull back, and Lance lets them go, keeping up his defensive position as the seeker attempt to circle him. He keeps one eye on the seeker going back to their hoops.

The seeker in front of him looks like they’re bordering on desperate. He smirks, exuding that cocky confidence that snitches are known for and honestly isn’t that hard to conjure up.

“Beater to your left.” He says, and the seeker flinches, turning automatically to look over their left shoulder just as a bludger hits their right side. They gape, turning to frown at the ball as they pull the broom from between their legs. Lance straightens, smirk widening as he feigns innocence. “Did I say your left? I meant my left.”

They send Lance a dirty look before jogging back towards their hoops, and Lance just chuckles.

It’s not much longer before the snitch ref approaches him and says the head ref as decided to handicap him. Lance grins brightly, putting a hand behind him to rest at his lower back. As the seekers approach again, he feels his grin curl into something more cocky, something more determined, eyes glinting dangerously.

The snitch is designed to be caught. A snitch has to be caught for the game to end. It’s their purpose. But that doesn’t mean he’s going to make it easy for them. The snitch is considered a winner if they hold out long enough to be double handicapped, but even being handicapped once is a victory in and of itself.

So Lance is going to milk it.
He lasts quite a while. The seekers are winded and predictable, and when they switch out, it’s with chasers who don’t seem to know what they’re doing any better than the designated seekers. He does get caught eventually, but he’s not too upset about it. It was bound to happen eventually, especially when he can only use one hand.

When the ref blows the whistle to end the game, he shakes hands with the seekers, patting them on the back.

“Nice catch, dude.” He says, friendly and smiling and breathing a little heavy himself as he shakes the winner’s hand.

“Thanks,” The guy huffs, a proud smile of his own despite the weariness around it. He hands Lance the ball back, which he automatically moves to reattach to the velcro on the back of his waistband. “Nice marks, by the way.” He says, then pauses, nose scrunching up. “Is that weird to say? Sorry if it is, but they look really awesome.”

Lance just grins, waving him off. “Not at all, man! Thanks!” He holds out his arms, twisting them to show off the marks. He can feel his face softening as he gazes down at them.

Instead of his usual snitch t-shirt, he went for a loose, sleeveless, yellow muscle tank to show off as much of his arms as possible.

The soulmarks are gold and yellow, two distinct shades, and they stand out against his skin in beautiful contrast. Slightly faded with time, making it look apart of him, but still vibrant. The strands coil down from his shoulders, weaving around his arms, curling off in places, running down the length of his limbs, swirling and weaving together in beautifully elegant patterns to coil playfully around his wrists before stretching out on the back of his hands, breaking apart to bend down the length of each finger, stopping at his nails.

The marks run high, too, moving over his shoulders, dipping under his collarbones before climbing up his neck, weaving up to and swirl over the edge of his jaw, curl at his cheek bones in a way that’s both fancy yet fierce, framing beneath his eyes.

They run low, as well. Yellow and gold lines weaving flawlessly down his sides to make similar patterns on his legs, which can be seen on the patch of skin between where his shorts end and his tall socks begin.

He never did get a response to the question he had asked Thursday night. It had taken a long talk with Hunk and a lot of internal debate to even put a pen to his arm, and he had regretted it almost instantly. After scribbling a sloppy apology, he had curled beneath his blankets and groaned loudly enough that Hunk pulled out the ice cream they had in their mini fridge.

He had just taken a bowl from Hunk when the marks started appearing, and he nearly dropped it all over his bed in his surprise.

He hadn’t gotten a written response, but he had gotten a painting.

But it was the emotions that filtered through their connection that really took his breath away. He’s never felt his soulmate be so... soft before. They’ve been soft, but it’s always been this introspective stillness, a calmness, tranquil and at peace. He’s never felt them be soft towards him before. Not openly, and not like that.

And he knows it was toward him. He could feel it. Could feel the spark and fire of determination that chased away his own fears and doubts, warming his chest from the inside out. Could feel it
with ever stroke of their paint brush, every inch of yellow and gold that appeared on his skin. It’s hard to explain how he knows, but... he does. He’s spent long enough listening to his soulmate’s emotions to know it.

This was the first time his soulmate has ever made something for him, something that wasn’t just done for the sake of it, and it was... intense.

Having all of that directed at him. Feeling the single minded focus. Feeling a softness as the initial fire faded. Feeling a mild amusement tingling along his fingertips. Feeling a dash of pride as swirls came to life. Feeling a foreign feeling that was warm in his chest, tingling at his heart, and feeling so oddly fond in a way that was so light and playful...

There were several times when Hunk had to remind him to breathe.

He’s never felt anything like that before, and it was amazing.

That’s not to say it was entirely without faults. There were shadows of doubt there, too, once the first fire faded. Uncertainty hanging in the wings. A hesitance sometimes that reared its ugly head. And overall, there was that odd distance he always seems to feel with his soulmate. A distance and reserved feeling.

They reached out to him, granted his ridiculous request, and while they seemed happy to do it, there was still an uncertainty and unreadable shadows he could feel lurking beneath it all.

But it’s enough that it gives him a spark of hope.

He hadn’t known what words to conjure up after the painting was done and their connection closed. So he had settled for something simple, throwing as much gratitude as he could into his heart as he wrote Thanks <3 across the inside of his wrist.

“Your soulmate is crazy talented.” The seeker says, drawing him out of his thoughts.

“Yeah,” Lance says, hands dropping to his sides, head cocked to the side and a small smile on his lips. “They are.”

“Lance!” He whips his head around, eyes scanning the fields until he sees Pidge. They’re on the opposite side of the pitch, waving him over. “Let’s go! We have a game!”

He waves goodbye to the seekers, stops by to thank the refs, and hurries over to where Pidge is waiting. As soon as he nears, they turn on their heel, jogging off across the fields to where the team is gathered a couple pitches over. He jogs after them, easily keeping pace.

“Who’re we against now?”

“Balmera University. From what I’ve seen, they’re pretty good. They have a lot of bigger players, and they hit hard.”

“So keep fast and light and avoid being tackled. Got it.”

Pidge quirks him a lopsided smirk, mischief sparkling in their eyes. “From what Allura tells me, they don’t let people get close to the hoops, so we’re going to need your throwing arm.”

He cracks a grin, giving them a little mock salute. “The sharpshooter is on the case.”

“If you win us this game, I might actually start calling you that.”
He laughs. “I’m holding you to that, Pidgeon.”

The tournament is a big one. The biggest one so far into the school year. The school hosting it is pretty big, too, and they have quidditch pitches set up all along a field. Schools from all over the state, and a few in the neighboring states, are attending, and Lance can’t even begin to imagine the administrative headache, but they’re doing a great job keeping it organized.

So far, they’ve been winning most of their games, but it’s only halfway through the day, and there’s still a lot that can go wrong.

They slow as they reach the pitch, and Pidge shoves him toward the sidelines where their stuff is gathered. “Hurry up and get changed so you can warm up with the team.”

“I’m already warmed up! I just snitched a game.” He says, giving them a pout.

It’s completely ineffective. They just give him a flat look and a pointed finger. “I don’t care. You’re warming up with the team. Now go!”

“Fiine!” He says before jogging away. As he sifts through the pile for his bag, he glances up at his team. They’re gathered on their end of the pitch, standing around in a circle while they stretch together, following Coran as he leads them through the routine.

He’s been in and out of games and snitching all day, and that doesn’t really leave time for him to fully change. So he’s gotten in the habit of just wearing his snitch things over his uniform. Slipping out of his snitch shorts is easy, leaving him in his regular athletic shorts. He reaches behind him, grabbing the back of his tank and pulling it over his head before stuffing it into his bag.

As he stands, Altean Quidditch shirt in hand, he looks up and catches Keith’s eye from across the pitch. He has his arm pulled over his chest almost lazily as he follows the group stretch. Lance knows he’s looking at him, but he might not have realized that Keith was staring at his chest had the snap back to his face not been so clean cut. It gives him away in a heartbeat.

He smirks wide, shooting Keith finger guns and chuckling when he looks away, shoulders rising to his ears and lips pursed into a frown.

He doesn’t know what Keith has to be embarrassed about or jealous of. Yeah, Lance is pretty damn proud of his body, but he saw Keith change last night at Pidge’s parent’s place and damn.

He pulls his shirt over his head, grabs his white bandana, and ties it across his forehead as he starts across the field, slipping seamlessly into the circle.

Keith avoids eye contact with him across the circle, but Lance manages to catch his eye a couple times, making faces until Keith looks away with that little frown he does when Lance knows he’s trying to hide a smile. He can see the slight crinkle in his eyes.

They go through warm ups, a few practice drills, and then Pidge is calling them over to the sideline.

“Alright,” They say when the team huddles close. “This team looks intimidating, but they’re only been around about as long as we have. We’re pretty evenly matched, as far as I can tell. Pass quick, move quick, score and reset, yadda yadda, the usual. You guys got this. Lance,” They say, pointing at him. He straightens automatically. “You feeling fresh?”

He grins, giving them a little salute and a wink. “As a daisy, coach.”
They give a little huff and a roll of their eyes, but they’re smiling. “Good. Our usual starting line up, then. You know the drill.”

“Aye, aye, capitan!”

He feels a tap on his arm as the team starts to disperse, and he glances over to find Keith holding out one of the pvc pipe brooms. He grins, taking it. “Thanks, dude.”

Keith just gives him a small shadow of a smile before turning toward the hoops, and Lance follows him out.

Their beginning strategy is simple, but highly effective. Keith is easily the fastest sprinter they have, and definitely the fastest from a stand still. He positions himself at the centered, lined up perfectly with the quaffle in the middle of the pitch. Meanwhile, Allura and Lance line up on the far ends, one on each side. When the whistle blows, they’ll all run forward: Keith for the quaffle and Lance and Allura past the center line and onto the other side of the pitch to set up for a pass.

Usually they can manage to get the first point before either team really has a chance to set up defenses.

And this time is no different.

The whistle blows, and Keith smirks that proud little smirk that used to make him write with irritation. It doesn’t anymore. Now it just makes him feel oddly warm.

“Nice shot,” Lance says, jogging up past him as the head back to their side of the field to reset.

He holds up a fist, and Keith bumps it. “Nice pass.”

Lance wants to say more. Want to keep the banter going. But the game is on. “Heads up, they’re coming back.” He says instead, turning around and facing the on coming chasers.

As Pidge had predicted, their teams are closely matched. They sub out constantly and quickly to keep everyone fresh, and there’s not much room for conversation. Lance quickly falls into the game, giving it his complete focus. He’s proud of his team. They’ve come so far in just a couple of months.

Shiro and Allura, as it turns out, are an incredible team. They’re fantastic defensive chasers, just as Keith and Lance make a great offensive team. Pidge and Coran make an insanely unstoppable beater team, to the point where they’ve started calling them the Weasley twins. There are a few older players with them that fit into the line ups easily, quickly adjusting to each team they play, and there are a few new players who are still rough around the edges.

But it’s fine, because when it comes down to it, they’re having fun.

“How’s the arm doing?” Lance says, holding out a water bottle to Keith as he comes off the field.

He takes it gratefully, drinking it quickly and spilling some down his chin. “My arm?” He asks, one brow raised as he lifts the hem of his shirt to wipe off his mouth. Lance tries his best not to stare, but god damn, how are those abs even legal?

He doesn’t trust his voice at the moment, so he just gestures to Keith’s arm, where the compression sleeve rests along the length of his forearm, from elbow to wrist. There’s barely a strip of skin showing between that and Keith’s athletic gloves.
Keith drops his shirt, blinks in confusion, and then looks at his arm like he had completely forgotten it was there. “Oh,” He says, something oddly blank in his voice. “Right. That. Uh, yeah, it’s fine.”

It’s a little weird, but before Lance can question further, Pidge is shoving a broom into his hands and pushing him out onto the field.

Now Lance loves Hunk with all his heart, but he knows the guy isn’t a good runner. It’s half the reason he’s their keeper. It turns out he’s a damn good beater as well, with a heavy hitting arm that can peg people across the field, but he loses the advantage when he has to run after the ball. It’s not that he can’t run. It’s just that he gets winded easily and quickly. Not a lot of endurance.

But he doesn’t need that to be a good keeper. And he’s a damn good keeper. He’s tall and has a wide reach, and while he’s not a good runner, he’s quick to move around the hoops, guarding each one as needed. His hands a huge, allowing him to easily palm the ball, snatch it out of the air, or just whack it away when someone takes a shot.

Not to mention his size makes him incredibly intimidating.

Lance has seen chasers actually hesitate when they charge toward the hoops just from having Hunk drop down into a defensive stance, holding his arm out wide. It’s that moment of hesitance that allows him to swat away the ball, or for a chaser to swoop in and pluck it away.

But just because Hunk doesn’t like to run, doesn’t mean he can’t. And just because he gets winded quickly, doesn’t mean he’s not fast.

Because as it turns out, Hunk is a surprisingly good sprinter.

And when he does it, it’s usually very surprising.

For the other team.

There’s a reason they call Hunk their tank.

The other team charges their side of the field, putting them on defense. Bludgers fly, beaters scrambling to claim them. The chasers shoot, but its a long shot. Hunk easily jumps, snatch it out of the air before it makes it to the center hoop. Lance sees the glint in Hunk’s eyes before his feet even hit the ground, and he grins wide, knowing exactly what’s coming.

Hunk lands, digs his cleats into the dirt, and takes off.

The thing about Hunk sprinting is this: he runs straight, fast, unyielding and unstopping, and if you’re in the way, it’s terrifying.

A laugh bubbles out of his throat as Hunk shoves through the mass of people, whoops a loud “Go, Hunk, go!” as he breaks out of the chaos. Neither team has had time to reset or to really even process it before it happens. All the chasers turn to gape, an opposing chaser yelps in surprise as Hunk charges past them while they head back to their hoops after being tagged out.

He’s on a break away. Just him, the opposing keeper, and the hoops. The enemy beaters are charging after him, but Lance knows they won’t make it in time. The only thing that can stop him is the opposing keeper, and usually, typically, that doesn’t happen. Not when they have the full force of Hunk charging down the field at them.

This keeper, however, isn’t moving. They brace themselves, planting their feet and bending their
knees, arm held out and alert. It’s only then that Lance realizes that their keeper is just as big as Hunk is, and they’re standing unafraid, unflinching, solid.

An immovable object in the face of an unstoppable force.

And as Lance watches, they collide.

He knows it’s not entirely logical for there to be sound, but Lance swears he can hear the moment they hit. The opposing keeper steps forward, catching Hunk and stopping his forward momentum. There’s a moment where it seems like time slows, a moment frozen, then Hunk’s momentum shifts, and he’s falling backwards.

He falls hard, no doubt caught completely off guard. It’s understandable. The entire field is in shock. Lance distantly realizes that the whole pitch, both teams, are completely silent and still, simply staring. No one had ever seen someone completely fucking lay Hunk out like that.

Lance isn’t even entirely sure what happened. It was so fast. One moment Hunk was running, then they met, and Hunk was suddenly laid out on his back, arms spread wide as the quaffle rolls innocently away from his hand.

The moment stretches, the pitch feeling muted and unmoving, movement happening on the field around them, sounds from other games trickling in, but their own game frozen in time.

And then all at once it snaps.

There’s a flurry of sound, shouts, a collective groan of ouch, worried whispers. Lance is already darting across the field to where his best friend is still lying on the ground. The opposing keeper is leaning over him, holding out their hand. Hunk takes it, and they heave him to his feet. He staggers, and they put their other hand on his arm to steady him.

And then they just... stare?

Lance slows as he nears them, frowning a little in his confusion. They’re not talking, just staring at each other, neither of them moving, and neither of them dropping their hands.

“Hunk!” He calls out, putting a hand on Hunk’s shoulder. When he turns to look at him, his mouth is hanging open, eyes wide with shock but the look in them looking distant and dazed.

Oh man, he really hopes he didn’t crack his head on the ground. Concussions are no fun.

With a little firmer of a hold, he turns Hunk to face him. He moves easily enough, hand dropping away from the other keeper. “Hey, buddy, you okay? Hit your head?”

He looks out of breath, eyes darting around Lance’s face, like he’s trying desperately to come back to reality but it’s hard for him. He can’t seem to focus. His mouth moves, but nothing besides strangled sounds come out. His eyes look a little glassy, but Lance is willing to bet that’s just from the body’s reaction to physical shock rather than actual pain.

“Hunk? Come on, buddy. Speak to me?” He says, putting both hands on his shoulders, giving him a little squeeze.

“Shay!” The other team’s captain calls out, waving their keeper to the side lines. Lance doesn’t pay much attention to it, even as something nags at the edges of his memory. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees the keeper hesitate before turning and jogging away.
“Lance,” Hunk finally says, mouth forming words slowly and voice sounding just as dazed as he looks.

“Yes, buddy?”

His lips curl then, this slow progress upward, upward, upward, until it’s the biggest fucking grin he thinks he’s ever seen. His eyes, however, remain distant, even as they crinkle at the edges. “I think I’m in love.”

Lance quirks an eyebrow, a frown pursing his lips. “Come again?”

All at once, Hunk’s eyes snap back to focus, sharp and excited. He grabs Lance, wraps him up in a hug and pins his arms to his sides as he picks him up, twisting back and forth and making his legs dangle beneath him. The air rushes out of him as he’s squeezed.

“Dude! It’s her!”

“Her?” Lance manages to squeak out, sounding breathless and strained.

“Her, dude! Her! My soulma— Holy shit— Lance! My soulmate! My soulmate. It’s happening! It’s actually happening.”

Realization sets in, and Lance looks over Hunk’s shoulder. The keeper is standing by her team, but she’s half turned, eyes looking just as dazed, glistening in the afternoon sun, lips lax and parted as she gazes at Hunk.

The soulmarks on her cheeks match those on Hunk’s.

Shay. Hunk’s soulmate. Their First Meeting.

His heart flutters, excitement bubbling up in his chest as Hunk babbles. His breath catches, a smile on his lips, just as the happiness in his veins sours. Bile on the back of his tongue. His smile stays fixed firmly in place, but he knows it doesn’t reach his eyes. His gut twists uncomfortably, a wave of nausea rolling through him. His limbs buzz, feeling numb and detached.

He feels like his own soulmarks are burning away at his flesh.

Another First Meeting. Another friend meeting their soulmate. Another happy couple. Just like his parents. Just like his siblings.

And he can’t help the sinking feeling racing through him, dragging him down into a pit of despair that he’s tried so hard to stay out of, feels the shadows tugging at his skin, nipping at his ankles.

Because he has this terrifyingly numb feeling that his own First Meeting is still far, far away.

His own soulmate is far, far out of his reach.

He’s happy for Hunk, he really is. He’s ecstatic, and his best friend deserves the world.

But happiness for Hunk doesn’t entirely ease the loneliness that tugs at his heart.
He’s happy for Hunk. He really is. But that doesn’t stop the jealousy.

It’s not an ugly kind of jealousy. The kind that rots and festers and leads to anger and resentment. It’s a quieter kind. The kind that aches bone deep, making him wish he had what Hunk has and feeling emptier because he doesn’t.

He sits on the little hill that borders the wide field, leading up to the parking lot. His knees are bent, arms crossed overtop them, leaning forward to rest his chin on them. their team has finished all their scheduled games, and they’re just waiting for everyone else to finish up so the bracket can be completed and posted. Only two of the pitches are occupied with games, and the rest of the field is just quidditch players milling around, waiting. His own team is scattered around, but it’s pretty easy to spot them with their Altean Quidditch shirts.

His eyes are on Hunk, sitting with Shay on the sidelines of one of the active pitches. Neither of them are actually watching the game. They’re turned toward each other, neither of them touching but close enough that they don’t need to. He can’t see the details of his friend’s face at this distance, but that doesn’t stop his smile from being a beacon of happiness.

It warms his chest even as it stings.

They won their game against Balmera University, but it hadn’t been by much. Needless to say, both teams had been shaken by the First Meeting that had taken place on the pitch. The game carried on once they were certain that Hunk was okay after his fall, but news of the soulmates spread like a wildfire of whispers.

It became very clear, very quickly that neither Hunk nor Shay were going to be able to focus much on the game. Even after Pidge gave Hunk a pep talk, dragged him down to their level, and went so far as to slap him across the face. So both teams ended up using their keeper subs. The difference was that their keeper sub was still a rookie, and the Balmerian’s keeper sub knew what he was doing.

So the chasers had their work cut out for them trying to keep the opposing chasers from scoring and scoring enough points in return to keep them in the game.

Keith ended up having to play defense for a while, keeping the other seeker from getting near the snitch. He kept a close eye on the game though, and he switched gears as soon as Lance called out to him, giving him the signal to catch the snitch. It didn’t take too long, and Lance made a hard effort to keep the other team from scoring to give Keith time.

It was a close game, a good game, and everyone was more focused on grinning at Hunk and Shay anyway. The Balmerian players patted Hunk on the shoulder and congratulated him as they passed, and Lance was the first to bound across the field and officially introduce himself to Shay as Hunk’s best friend. The others had followed, and Hunk had chastised them for being too overwhelming.

Lance had been the loudest, smiled the brightest, shown the most interest in Shay, wrapped his best friend up in hugs, talked him up, laughed the longest and loudest.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he had known he was overdoing it. He had known, could see himself doing it, but he couldn’t stop it. It was like word vomit, and his volume control was broken. He knew why he had done it, too. It was overcompensation for the ugly feelings he was trying to keep buried deep down inside.

So he showed his excitement, amp it up, and hoped no one could see the shadows in his eyes.
It had worked. No one had questioned him. No one had given him strange looks. No one thought anything of it. Despite how embarrassingly overboard he was being.

And now, alone and off to the side, away from his team and his friends, he’s finally able to let himself stop smiling. To loosen that vice-like grip on his heart, let those feelings bleed out a little before they choke him.

He allows himself to watch Hunk and Shay from across the field, allows himself to stretch his arms out in front of him, eyes locked on his yellow and gold soulmarks, and allows himself to wish that it had been him.

That is, until something cold and wet presses to the back of his neck.

He yelps, lurching forward, one hand flying to his neck as he half turns to stares, eyes narrowed and lips parted in surprise.

Keith stands above him, lips quirked into a small, lopsided smirk, a gatorade bottle held out to him. “We just got back from the nearby gas station.” He says when Lance continues to glare. He gives the bottle a little encouraging shake. “Allura said the red kind is your favorite, so...”

And hey, free drinks? How can he stay mad? “Thanks,” He mumbles, taking the offered bottle with enough huff to let Keith know he doesn’t appreciate the rude awakening, even if he is forgiven.

Keith sits next to him on the hill, and they both crack open their drinks, taking a sip and simply enjoying the silence. It’s not awkward, nor is it uncomfortable. Lance has always been someone who enjoys the noise and din, who thrives on conversation, but he’s quickly finding out that he can enjoy Keith’s company without it. That with Keith, he can appreciate the silence without feeling a needling pressure to fill it.

But right now, silence means thinking about things he’d rather not think about.

“What flavor did you get?” He asks, glancing over as Keith twists the cap back on.

He pauses mid-twist, glancing down at the bottle before looking to Lance. “Blue.”

Lance snorts, feeling his eyes crinkle as he fights down a smile. “Yeah, no shit. What flavor, Keith. Not what color.”

Keith glances back at his bottle, lifting it a little as he turns it over in his hands. His brows pinch, lips pressing together into this small frown. It’s an expression Lance is becoming increasingly familiar with, and one he’s becoming increasingly more fond of. He holds out the bottle for Lance to see. “It just says Cool Blue.”

“What does that even mean?” He muses, then leans over to nudge Keith’s shoulder with his own. He hadn’t realized until they made contact just how close they’ve been sitting. “What does it taste like, dude?”

Keith shrugs at that, pulling up his knees and resting his arms on them, letting the bottle dangle between them, held loosely in his fingertips. “Tastes like blue.”

“Enlightening.” He deadpans, but the smile on his lips ruins the affect.

Keith just hums his acknowledgement, and they lapse back into silence. His eyes drift over the field, but they inevitably drift back to Hunk. It’s hard to tell from this distance, but it looks like he and Shay have started holding hands. The kind of shy way of holding hands when both people want
it but neither acknowledges it, leaving their touches hesitant and innocent and exhilarating.

He feels his sigh more than hears it. Feels it leave his lungs. Feels the droop in his shoulders. Feels the longing in his heart. Feels the burn of his soulmarks. What he’d been so proud of just earlier that day, what had filled him with excitement and hope, now just acts as a grim reminder that this is all he has. His soulmate is a person of few words, and the words they do share are rarely personal.

Hunk and Shay, even Allura and Shiro. They had been close even before their First Meeting. They had been loving and fond and talked. Lance is coming to the conclusion that even if he and his soulmate do meet soon, it’ll be nothing like what his friends have. Nothing like that close, personal bond that sparks and ignites. Nothing like the sweet young love that they have. Like his parents have. Like his sibling have.

It’s a notion that festers. Shadows that nibble at his heart, eating away at the fraying edges of his hope.

He’s not stupid. He knows that not all soulmates have fairy tale stories. But... he had always assumed he would.

The realization that he might not makes his heart sink into his stomach like a stone, feeling like the weight of a hundred bricks are pressing in on his chest, making his blood feel cold.

He hates it. He hates feeling this way. He hates losing hope in his soulmate, in them, together, as a pair. Makes him feel like he’s somehow betraying them already before they’ve even met.

He wants to be happy for his friends. Wants their happiness to somehow ignite his own hope. Wants to remain firm and strong. His soulmate deserves that, at least.

But... who’s going to stay strong for him?

“You okay?”

The question catches him off guard. Breaks through his mental lament like a stone dropped into a still pond. Spoken in a voice that’s soft and low, soothing in pitch and bordering on indifferent in tone, but the simple act of it alone speaks of worry. He’s familiar with that tone. Has heard it from others and used it himself. It’s just not often he hears that particular tone from Keith, and that’s more concerning than anything.

Has he been that obvious?

So, naturally, he plasters a smile on his face, hoping it chases the shadows from his eyes, squishes down those writhing negative emotions and shrugs it off. “Of course,” He says, nonchalant and the picture of ease. It’s familiar, like slipping on an old and worn pair of jeans. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

When Keith doesn’t say anything right away, he risks a glance. He’s staring at him, brows furrowed and lips quirked downward. His eyes search Lance’s face in a way that makes him feel far too exposed, yet unable to look away, left on display for Keith to examine.

Whatever he finds just makes that frown deepen a little further.

Keith looks away first, turning his gaze back to the field stretched out before them. He looks calm, at ease, but Lance is wary.

“I saw you earlier.” He says simply, matter-of-fact. It wouldn’t be so concerning if his voice
wasn’t pitched low, like he were breathing a secret between them.

“Earlier?” He asks, wary.

Keith glances sideways at him before his eyes flicker away. “After the thing with Hunk... when you thought no one was looking.” He squirms a little, scratching the back of his neck and refusing to look at Lance. “You didn’t look... happy.”

“I’m happy for him.” He says, voice rising a little, feeling his back straighten a little. Keith gives him an unimpressed look, raising one eyebrow. Lance frowns. “I am!”

Keith hums, monotone and blank, looking away across the field.

Lance feels himself deflate. He could keep fighting it. He knows he could. He could keep insisting he’s fine. But... Keith has noticed something that he tried so hard to hide. Something that he barely wanted to acknowledge to himself. He doesn’t know if Keith’s the only one who noticed, but he’s the only one who’s approached him about it.

And there’s something about Keith. Something about the way he doesn’t push. About how matter-of-fact he is. About how calm he is. About how he doesn’t seem to blame Lance at all for what he’s feeling. Doesn’t try to shame him or fix it. Just content to let Lance feel whatever he’s feeling. All Keith does is acknowledge it, and then leave it alone. Like he’s opening the door, but he’s not pushing Lance through. He’s waiting patiently, letting Lance make his own decision.

And there’s something about it that makes Lance want to open up to him. If only a little.

He signs, defeat deflating the last of his bravado. “I really am happy for him. I just...” He leans forward, crossing his arms over his knees and resting his chin on them. “I just kinda wish that were me, you know?”

Keith hums, thoughtful and distant. “I don’t,” He says after a long moment. “But... I think it’s understandable to feel that way.”

He says nothing more, and neither does Lance. He doesn’t feel like he needs to say anything more. Without really saying much at all, Keith gives him the impression that he understands. That Lance doesn’t need to explain himself or to ramble. Keith just... gets it. Even if he doesn’t feel the same way. And there’s no sense of judgement or disappointment.

Just... companionable silence.

“What about you?” He asks, quiet and tentative. If Keith has gone through the extra effort to check on him, the least he can do it return the favor.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Keith glance at him. “What about me?” He asks slowly, cautious and confused.

Lance tilts his head, resting his cheek on his arms and fixing his eyes on Keith. On the way his yellow headband pushes his hair up at odd angles. On how his pony tail is a mess, loose hairs curling around his nape. On how his cheeks and nose are just a little pink from the beginnings of a sunburn.

“Pidge told me you don’t like talking about soulmates.” He says softly.

He watches as Keith visible bristles before looking away, eyes on the ground and lips pursed. “I don’t.”
“Then why did you come to talk to me about it?”

“Because you looked like you needed it.” He says simply, with a careless shrug of his shoulders.

And that, in and of itself, makes Lance’s chest feel warm, makes his stomach flutter with a feeling of surprised contentment. It’s a feeling he’s familiar with. A feeling he gets a lot around Hunk and Pidge, Allura and Coran. The feeling of being cared about by someone he holds dear.

When had Keith managed to worm his way into Lance’s life like this? It had happened so slowly, so subtly, that Lance hadn’t realized how much he cares until it’s a warmth that’s spreading through his veins like wildfire, tingling his fingertips and curling his toes.

He doesn’t know what to say, so he props his chin up and gazes out over the fields, mindlessly settling his eyes on one of the games without really watching it, letting the warm bubbling feeling in his chest chase away his doubts and his fears.

The game that Hunk and Shay have been watching ends, and the teams disperse from the field, but neither of them move. A few others have joined them. A few from Balmera U, as well as Pidge and Allura. They all look happy, smiling and laughing, talking with their hands and playfully shoving one another.

It’s an odd feeling to realize that he doesn’t actually mind that he’s not apart of it. That he doesn’t mind sitting on this hill next to Keith, enjoying the warmth of the fall sun warming his skin.

“So...” Keith starts, poking at the silence before trailing off. Lance turns to look at him, one eyebrow raised. Keith mirrors his look, expression and voice deadpan. “Are the booty shorts really necessary?”

Lance blinks, confusion quickly giving way to indignation. He sits up straighter, turning to more fully face Keith, frown on his face. “What's wrong with my shorts?”

Keith shrugs, the shadow of a shirk tugging at the corner of his lips. “Aren’t they a little...” He glances down at the shorts in question before lifting his gaze again, cocking an eyebrow. “Much?”

Lance huffs, leaning back to cross his arms over his chest. “I’ll have you know that this is a tradition.”

He’s definitely smirking now, amusement sparkling in his eyes. His voice, however, remains incredibly blank. Though Lance is certain he can hear a small waver there. “I know. Allura told me.”

“So you know it’s expected of me!”

His smile starts to crinkle the edges of his eyes. “Is it though?”

“It is!” Lance rolls backward, turning onto his side as he lays down, propping himself up on an elbow. He stretches one leg up in the air, putting it clearly on display. He’s not wearing his snitch shorts, just his usual ones, revealing plenty of smooth thigh and the marks the twist around it. “These beauties are our secret weapon, Keith!”

He rests an elbow on his knees, lifting a hand to rest his chin in it, effectively using his hand to hide his smile. But Lance can see it in his eyes. “If you do it every time, is it really a secret?”

“What’d you have against my legs, Keith?” He says, doing his best to sound indignant and outraged.
“Nothing.”

“Appreciate them!” He says, sticking his leg out in front of Keith, nearly hitting him in the face.

“Oh my god—“

“Appreciate them!” He repeats, louder, laughter finally breaking through.

Keith laughs, too, spewing out half formed curses as he swats Lance’s legs away. He’s not one to be detoured, however, and keeps at it, enjoying the sound of Keith’s laughter breaking through his frustration.

And just like that, he feels lighter. The heaviness that had been pressing in on his chest is gone. It’s still there, lurking in the back of his mind, but it’s not haunting him, not dragging him down. In this moment, he feels like he can actually go hang out with Hunk and get to know Shay without feeling like he’s forcing his smile.

For one brief, fleeting moment, Lance thinks that life would be a lot simpler if Keith were his soulmate.

And that thought is like a punch to his gut, making him feel far too many things to decipher, so when Keith shoves him hard, he lets himself roll down the hill away from him.

Keith laughs from his spot on the hill as Lance comes to a stop at the bottom, limbs spread wide and feeling dazed as he stares at the sky.

Only one thought keeps repeating in his mind. One solid and resounding what the fuck?

“Guys, we really don’t have to do this...” Hunk says, pushing his index fingers together as he shifts his weight from foot to foot.

“Too late,” Pidge says offhandedly, helping unbag all the bottles and spread them out over the counter. “We’re doing this.”

“But... your parents—“

“They won’t be back until tomorrow. We’ll have this place cleaned up and be out by then anyway.”

“But we’re all pretty tired—“

“Hunk, buddy ol’ pal, homio bromio, my dude,” Lance says, throwing an arm over Hunk’s shoulders and leaning heavily into his side. “How often do you have a First Meeting?”

“Well, technically only once—“

“Exactly!” He says, slapping his free hand on Hunk’s chest. “And so we’re going to celebrate!”

“We could have just waited until we got back—“

“No time like the present!” Coran says, dropping the last of the bags on the counter with a loud clank.
“Aren’t you supposed to be like... older and more mature?” Hunk says, lip pressing out in a small pout.

Coran just grins, stroking his mustache and leaning back against the counter while Allura helps Pidge unbag everything. “Oh yes, quite true. And I am **maturely** enabling you all to have a fun time in celebration of your First Meeting.”

“Come on, buddy, live a little!” Lance says, then leans in close to loudly whisper. “How often do we get free booze? And **fancy** booze at that.”

Hunk eyes the bottles warily before his eyes flicker to Coran. “At least let us help pay for it all.” He says, ignoring Lance’s squeak of indignant protest.

But Coran just waves him off. “Nonsense. Consider this my congratulations to you as well as a celebration to our team for our first tournament. Besides, I’ve been meaning to stock up my personal collection, so anything we don’t drink will be coming home with me.”

Hunk’s shoulders droop, his resolve crumbling with a loud sigh. “Fine.”

“Yes!” Lance jumps off him, fist shooting into the air as he dances around in a circle. “**Shots! Shots! Shots!**”

Hey team! Get in here! Team meeting in the kitchen!” Pidge calls out, standing on their toes to reach the shot glasses from one of the cabinets, pulling them all down. After watching them struggle for a moment, Allura helps, chuckling at Pidge’s sullen glare. They then sigh, letting Allura get the rest.

“Your parents have one hell of a shot glass collection.” She mumbles.

Pidge shrugs, leaning back against the counter and crossing their arms over their chest. “They like souvenirs.”

“Clearly.”

The team slowly filters into the kitchen, sticking and crowding to the outside of the room, pressed up against the counters to create a wide circle. Lance hovers close to Pidge, Allura, and the booze, leaned up against Hunk’s side.

“Allright, so if we’re gonna do this, we’re gonna do it right. House rules. Watch yourself. We wanna have fun, not get black out drunk. You make a mess, you clean it up. If you feel puke coming on, you get your ass to the bathroom or the backyard. Don’t break shit. Drink water. We’re all hella dehydrated after playing all day, and hang overs are a bitch. And you can snack on whatever food you find in the house.” They clap their hands together, pushing off the counter and gesturing to where Allura is neatly lining up the shot glasses. “Coran provided us with everything, so make sure you thank him.”

Collectively, as if on cue, the entire team does a chorus of a very monotoned **thanks Coran**.

He grins, waving off the thanks. “Thank **you**, everyone, for your hard work today. There are many things here, and I have quite a few recipes up my sleeve, so I will gladly make any of you whatever drinks you desire. And perhaps surprise you with some you’ve never had!”

“Ready!” Allura says, stepping back and making a sweeping gesture to the counter.

“Allright, so we’re gonna start off with a group shot to toast to Hunk and his First Connection.”
There’s a few whoops and scattered applause, to which Hunk just smiles, scratching the back of his neck, cheeks reddening. “So everyone come up and pick your poison. If you don’t wanna drink, you don’t have to. No shame, no judgement. But let’s get this show on the road.”

Lance steps up to an edge, swiping a few shot glasses and the bottle of tequilla. He pours one for himself and one for Hunk, handing it to him before calling out. “Tequilla over here! Come and get it!”

He glances over the crowd in the kitchen, eyes flicking over Keith before snapping back. Keith is staring at him, arms crossed loosely over his chest while he waits for others to get their shots. Lance cocks an eyebrow, smiling as he lifts the bottle in silence question. Keith’s smirk is small but definitely there as he nods.

Lance pours, and holds it out to him as Keith steps up. Before he can take it, however, Shiro swoops in. He slides in with far more grace and fluidity than a man his size has any right to have and snatches the shot right out of Lance’s hand, holding it above his head. “Ooooh, no you don’t.”

Keith stands there, hand poised in the air to take a shot glass that’s no longer there. He blinks, then narrows his eyes at Shiro, frown forming a small pout.

Shiro just shakes his head, chuckling as he steps back, carefully lowering the shot glass back to a reasonable height. “Glare at me all you want. We’re not having another Tila Tekeithla incident.”

Lance quirks an eyebrow. “Tila Te-what-now?”

Shiro gives him a flat look that’s somewhat ruined by the ghost of a smile threatening the corners of his lips. “Let’s just say Keith doesn’t handle tequila very well.”

“I handle it just fine.” He huffs, crossing his arms over his chest.

Shiro raises an eyebrow, shrugging with one shoulder. “You keep telling yourself that. But you’re not drinking tequila tonight.”

Keith huffs a sigh, looking away and muttering, “Fine,” Before turning to where Pidge is pouring out rum.

Once he’s gone, Lance turns to Shiro. “So...” He says, slowly, conversationally. “Tila Tekeithla, huh?”

Shiro shakes his head, small smile on his face. “My lips are sealed.”

Lance’s smile drops, lips pursing into a small pout. “You are no fun.”

Shiro just laughs, patting him on the shoulder before walking away.

They had ended up staying until the end of the tournament. They made it through most of the bracket but lost in the semi finals. Balmera U made it to the last game. They stayed to watch the final. Sun lowering in the late afternoon sky, casting the field in warmer tones. They weren’t the only team that had stayed. The final pitched was lined with people. Their team crowded together.

Lance sat with Hunk as close to the sidelines as they dared, nudging him and talking to him about Shay. With just the two of them, he felt lighter, less like he had to pretend. He wasn’t sure if it was because they were more or less alone or if it had to do with his talk with Keith. He didn’t dwell on it too much. The fact remained that he could gush with his best friend about his soulmate without his own heart breaking.
Keith sat with Pidge further back in the crowd, huddled under the blanket that Pidge always brought to every quidditch event. They spoke in hushed tones, watching something on Pidge’s phone. Both of their hair was a mess, stuck up at odd angles from dried sweat and their headbands. Lance hadn’t he was staring until Keith met his gaze, surprise in his eyes at whatever expression was adorning Lance’s face.

He had turned back around quickly and made a point not to look at them again until the game was over.

Balmera U had lost in the finals, but they had come out of it in good spirits. After some messy organizing, they managed to find a pizza place to accommodate both teams for dinner. It was a mess. It was loud. It was crowded. But it was in good company, cozy, and they tipped their servers well for putting up with them.

Lance had ended up on the opposite side of the table from Keith, who was pressed between Pidge and Shiro, and he tried not to dwell on the odd sense of disappointment that nagged at his chest. Instead, he focused on the Bamerian players around him, getting to know them and Shay in a tag team socialization that he and Hunk had perfected over the years.

Afterwards, they had all headed back to Pidge’s parent’s house to celebrate.

“To Hunk!” Pidge says once everyone who wants to drink has a shot in hand. They raise their glass, using the voice they’ve cultivated to gather and demand attention.

Everyone lifts their glasses at once, shouting out a chorus of To Hunk!

They all down their shots with various degrees of success, and after the coughing and laughter has subsided, Lance slams his glass onto the counter to get their attention. “Alright, so who’s up for some Circle of Death?”

It takes them a lot longer than expected to get everyone gathered in the living room, sitting in a large, loose circle.

That, mostly, has to do with the fact that Coran has insisted on mixing everyone’s first drink of the evening himself. Add to that the fact that organizing any group of people larger than five easily turns into chaos.

So, nearly forty-five minutes later, they’re finally ready, everyone sitting around while Pidge rambles through the rules, fancy mixed drinks in their hands. Lance’s is already halfway gone.

Circle of Death is and always has been a quidditch party tradition at Altea University. Mostly because they’re the ones who started the team, and it’s always been a favorite among them, so they’ve spread the influence. In his opinion, it’s a good game to get parties started, get the buzzes going, and get everyone together. They’ve done it so often that it feels odd to have a quidditch party without it.

Their main rule is simple: you don’t have to drink, but it’s highly encouraged you play. Even if it’s just with water or soda or juice.

Lance sits on the crowded floor, pressed tight between Hunk and Keith, ignoring the fact that he’s
far more aware of one side than the other. But this is fine. It’s only because he’s not as used to Keith and being close to Keith as he is with Hunk. And if his hair stands on end every time Keith’s arm brushes against his?

Yeah, that’s... totally normal.

Totally. Normal.

When they’re done with the rule spiel, something Lance has heard a thousand and one times, to the point where he can’t even think about them without hearing them in Pidge’s voice, Pidge leans forward to the circle of face down cards in the center of the room and flips one.

It’s a four.

There’s half a second while everyone absorbs that information before the room is a flurry of movement and filled with dull thunks as everyone slaps a hand to the floor.

Everyone except for Keith.

Lance turns to grin at him, eyes crinkling as he takes in Keith’s obvious confusion: the raised brows, lips parted and slack, blinking as he takes in everyone’s current position, back straight from where he had jumped. There’s a chorus of his name as everyone calls him out, and he turns to Lance for clarification.

“Four is floor.” He says, grin fixed in place as he leans to the side to nudge him with his shoulder. “Last one to touch the floor has to drink. So bottom’s up, dude.”

He makes that face that he no doubt thinks is a scowl, but comes across as a pout, and takes a drink.

And the game goes on.

After that, Keith picks it up pretty quickly. He’s never the last when four or seven is drawn, but Lance is once or twice when he’s caught up in conversation. What can he say? Keith is distracting.

Cards are drawn. People are chosen to drink. Sometimes they drink simply because there’s a glass in their hands and doing so is almost an subconscious gesture.

Pidge pulls a king and declares the little man rule, which Lance hates and they know it. And he knows they know it because they give him this little amused smirk and salute him with their glass. Mostly, Lance just hates the little man rule because he always fucking forgets, which just leads him to getting called out and forced to drink again. This time is no exception.

A group waterfall has him and several others emptying their drinks. He wordlessly takes Keith’s empty glass, and he’s a little surprised when Keith lets him without complaint, instead just giving him a small, shy smile. And if it’s cute and does weird things to Lance’s heart? Well... he doesn’t have to think about that.

The game is paused while people get refills, and Lance stumbles back, glasses held high as he picks his way through the people on the floor. He sits heavily, still pressed close to Keith despite the fact that Hunk is gone and he has no reason to. He leans in close to talk to Keith in muted whispers, not entirely sure what he’s saying, just knowing that he wants to talk to him.

When Hunk comes back and fills his space again, pressed up to Lance’s other side, he feels a little better.
Coran draws a king and abolishes the little man rule, *thank fuck*, and declares his favorite and go-to rule: accents. Everyone has to speak in an accent that isn’t their own. It’s usually hilarious and chaotic. This time is no exception. Coran declares the rule in a thick Russian accent, and Allura responds in a thick cockney.

Lance immediately slips into a terribly over dramatized Spanish accent. It’s not from any particular place, and he knows it, and it would no doubt make all of his ancestors cringe. Hell, it even makes *him* cringe a little bit. But it gets laughs out of his friends, so he calls it a win. His use of choppy and random Spanish words and phrases completes the charade.

He’s not sure what to expect from Keith, but when he turns to him, sees that cocky little smirk and hears a low, southern drawl roll off his tongue, Lance feels his own voice die in his throat. That should *not* be as attractive as it is, and it should *not* affect him like it does.

The point of this game is to sound ridiculous and go overboard! Not do... whatever it is that Keith is doing!

Eventually the game ends, the last card being a jack and putting them in a game of never-have-I-ever. And when that’s said and done, they keep going. People start to trickle away, for refills and grouping up to talk or play other games around the house. Lance stays. They have new people, after all, and never-have-I-ever is always more fun with new people.

And maybe he’s a little curious about Keith.

He learns some interesting things.

He learns that one of their freshman beaters has broken her collar bone and now it can makes a weird squeaking sound. He learns that one of their chasers has never left the state. He learns that their new keeper was born in Canada. He learns that Pidge can’t spread their toes, and he learns that Coran is surprisingly flexible.

He learns that Shiro and Allura have masturbated while their soul connection was open, which they both drink to sheepishly, cheeks darkening as they refuse to make eye contact with anyone. He learns that Coran is not a virgin. He learns that Pidge has never touched themselves. He learns that Keith has never kissed anyone.

While they play, Lance stretches his legs out in front of him, leaning back on his free hand. He’s surprised when he finds Keith’s hand there, when their fingers brush. He hadn’t realized it was there at all, let alone that they were that close. But he doesn’t pull away, and neither does Keith. And if they lean in a little closer, shoulders bumping to hide the fact that their fingers overlap a little...

Well, no one has to know.

Lance just enjoys playing the game, learning about his friends, new and old, in a home that’s filled with the voices and laughter of his team.

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He’s well passed buzzed and chilling happily in the land of deeply tipsy. He doesn’t know what
Coran puts in these drinks, but they’re good. Like top notch at a bar, paying out your ass good. Can barely taste the alcohol in them. Just enough so you know it’s there but not enough to make it gross. Sweet. Pleasant. Delicious. He’s had a few by now. How many? Probably... Two? Three? Three and a haaaalf?

Who knows. Point is, he’s feeling good.

His limbs are all tingly in that way they get, skin feeling alive and numb at the same time, but not entirely detached. His face feels warm but distant. The room takes a second to catch up to him, and his focus is all over the place. He thinks he might be a little too loud, but it’s not something he thinks he can help.

He sits at the dining room table next to Pidge, their laptop open in front of them and a vine compilation playing on youtube. Pidge is leaning back in their chair, sitting crosslegged with their knees propped up on the table. Lance stretches his legs out, elbow on the table and leaning heavily into it. There are others around them, but he’s lost track of who. The party has gotten to full swing, and everyone just kind of roams from room to room and from group to group.

He’s in the middle of quoting vines with Pidge when someone kicks his foot.

He turns his head, focus settling on the feet next to his. Cat socks. Cute. His eyes slide up loose black track pants. Nice hips. Up higher, a slim chest, broad shoulders. Nice arms. Keith’s face.

“Heeeeey, Keith,” He drawls, head lolling to the side as his lips curve into a lopsided smile.

He’s pouting. Looking for the world like a disgruntled cat. All fluffy and everything. Where does he get off looking that cute? Not fair. Not fair at all. “You’re in my seat.” He says, poking at Lance’s foot with his own, a little more insistently.

Now that he thinks about it, he does vaguely remember slipping into this seat when Keith had stood up. He hums thoughtfully, shrugging. “You leave, you lose, dude. I don’t make the rules.”

“I was sitting there.” He insists, crossing his arms over his chest. His cheeks are pink and so is his nose. His eyes have this little distant, glassy look to them that lets Lance know that he’s feeling the effects of the alcohol, too. His glare isn’t nearly as intensive when he’s drunk, and Lance giggles, which only makes his pout more prominent.

Lance sits up straight, patting his thighs twice before holding his arms out. Keith just stares at him, eyes flickering to his lap to his face. He bites at his bottom lip, just a little, just a little tiny bit being sucked between his teeth.

Lance pats his thighs again. “You want your seat? Here it is.” He’s grinning now, voice teasing. He’s baiting Keith. He knows he is. And to be honest, he doesn’t think he’ll actually bite.

But then Keith’s nose is crinkling, brows furrowing, and he huffs a muttered, “Fine,” Before turning and sitting on Lance’s lap.

And... wow. Okay. He wasn’t expecting that to work, but now he has a lap full of Keith, and he’s not really sure what to do about it.

Keith turns to Pidge’s computer, and Lance is distantly aware of the fact that they’re talking, but their words are lost on him as his brain continues to short circuit.

He’s not sure how long he sits there, arms hovering awkwardly beside him. It could have been minutes and it could have been seconds. Time is strange and fuzzy and blurred. But eventually, he
does manage to restart his brain. Or maybe his brain just shuts down altogether and he runs on instinct alone.

Either way, his arms wrap around Keith’s middle, shifting so he can see Pidge’s computer and leaning forward to hook his chin over Keith’s shoulder.

Keith stiffens, and Lance can feel how he holds his breath. He starts to worry that maybe he’s gone too far, but before he can pull away, Keith relaxes. Lets his hair out in a huff and relaxes back against him. Lance smiles, hiding it in Keith’s shoulder. He’s warm and solid and despite running around all day, he smells good. Smells like Keith. Or maybe he just smells bad and Lance just likes it. He’s not sure.

All he knows is that this is comfortable. He relaxes into it. Revels in it. Tries to memorize it. Keith and Pidge are still talking. He can feel Keith’s voice where he’s pressed into his back. Can feel his laugh where his arms wrap around his stomach. There are other voices, but he doesn’t pay attention to any of them. They drift away into a background hum, surrounding him in a comforting cocoon of noise.

It’s not long before his legs start to go numb, and he knows it’s not because of the alcohol, but he doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t want Keith to move. He’s comfortable like this.

He’s not his soulmate, but it’s nice nonetheless.

And deep down, beneath the muted fuzziness of his tipsy state, in a part of him that’s reserved for deal when when sober, that’s a thought that terrifies him.

He’s not feeling sick exactly. Not physically anyway. His heart just feels heavy. He really just wants to let it all go and just relax, have fun with his friends, but dwelling on things seems to be what his mind loves focusing on at the moment.

As such, he’s spent the last five minutes in the bathroom. Maybe ten minutes? Who’s counting. Just... splashing cold water on his face and letting himself breathe for a moment.

He walks past the kitchen on his way back to the living room, only to stumble back to the doorway.

“Hey, Coran,” He says, leaning against the wall. Coran’s the only one in the kitchen at the moment, and while the counters are a mess, his own station has some sort of organized chaos to it.

He glances up when Lance speaks, a smile brightening his face. “Hello, Lance!” He greets, turning back to his word. His hands haven’t even stopped moving. Lance is memorized by it. “Need a drink?”

“Nah,” He says, pushing off the doorway and stepping into the kitchen. “I have a drink… I think…” He waves a hand around vaguely, gesturing to the general direction of the living room. “Somewhere, probably.” He finds a dry spot of counter, pushes bottles out of the way, and pushes himself up onto it, feet swinging as he watches Coran. “Whatcha doing?”

“Just making a few drinks,” He says cheerfully, setting a filled glass of something pink up on the bar in front of the sink that opens up to a window archway that faces the living room. He taps his hands down on a little bell sitting there, chiming out that the order was read. When and where the
fuck did they even get that?

He slips back into the spot he occupied before, hands already reaching for more bottles, glasses, shakers, and instruments that Lance hasn’t ever seen before, let alone knows what they’re for. “Were you ever a bartender?”

Coran laughs at that, eyes crinkling as he puts the lid on the shaker and shakes it heartily. “Not officially. Just somewhat of a home study.” He says with a wink, pouring out the drink and serving it up with the ring of the bell.

Lance watches him work, heels lightly tapping against the cabinets beneath him, hands fiddling with each other, picking at nails and crackling his knuckles.

“Something on your mind?” Coran asks, voice softer. It’s lighthearted and casual, but there are notes of concern that don’t go unnoticed.

He’s not in the mindset to keep things in. Alcohol has always loosened his tongue and fizzled out his filter. And Coran has always been someone he feels he can confide in. So when he opens his mouth, he finds himself saying exactly what’s been on his mind. “You haven’t met your soulmate yet, right?”

Coran stills, eyeing him curiously, and Lance bites his lip, worrying that perhaps he had overstepped a boundary. But then Coran is smiling, mustache swaying as he shakes his head. “Nope!”

“And you’re…” Lance pushes, waving a hand around in the air. “Like… twenty—“

“Twenty-eight!”

“Right.” Lance picks at a hangnail, biting the inside of his cheek as he pulls at the skin and it cuts a little too deep. “Right… And does that ever, I don’t know, bother you? Or something?”

He can see Coran looking at him out of the corner of his eye, but he keeps his head down, gaze on his hands, blood welling up at the edge of his nail bed. Damn.

Coran has been holding a glass, but he slowly sets it down, pushing it aside. “Is this about Hunk?” He asks softly, not unkindly. There’s something understanding in his voice, something that isn’t judgmental or guilting.

“No, not… not really? Just thinking about soulmates and stuff…” He trails off, slipping his finger into his mouth to lick the bit of blood away before wiping it on his pants. It stings, but the small sharp pain keeps him grounded. Gives him something besides this conversation to focus on. Something physical and real.

Coran hums thoughtfully, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back against the counter so they’re side-by-side. He gazes idly across the kitchen, and Lance feels lighter already knowing it’s not on him. “Truth be told, it doesn’t bother me at all.” He says after a moment.

It startles Lance. The matter-of-factness of it. The simplicity of it. “At all?” Lance echoes, like the words don’t quite fit right on his tongue because he can’t quite comprehend them.

“Nope,” He says, bits of his usual cheer returning. He gives a small, offhanded shrug. “I know most soulmates have met by now, but that doesn’t mean I’m broken. It merely means I have to be little more patient for the perfect person.”
“Does it ever get, I don’t know… lonely?”

He risks a glance at Coran, and finds that his smile is small and understanding. He shrugs again. “Sometimes, but I have my now hobbies, and my education, and the coffeeshop, and my friends. Loneliness is only created when we think we should have something that isn’t there.”

He starts picking at another hangnail and shoves his hands under his thighs to save himself from causing more damage. He swings his legs a little more. “During never-have-I-ever, you said you weren’t a, uh…” Coran glances sideways at him, quirking an eyebrow. Fuck. He’s actually going to make him say it, isn’t he? Jesus fucking Christ… “A—“ He feels like choking on the word. Fuck, this is awkward. Like talking to his dad or some shit. “—Virgin?”

Coran’s eyes widen as he blinks in surprise, mouth forming a small oh. He blinks once, twice, and then throws back his head and laughs. Lance feels his face heating up. Great. “Oh, no. No, my boy, I most certainly am not.”

“But it wasn’t with… your soulmate?”

Coran’s expression softens, and he heaves a heavy sigh. “I realized long ago that there was a high possibility that I wouldn’t meet my soulmate for some time. And I’m not of a mindset to let myself miss out on experiences while I wait for them. Nor do I expect my soulmate to wait for me. Life is full of experiences, and it seems a shame to waste time waiting for something that isn’t certain.”

“But soulmates are certain.” He protests, brows pinching and lips pursing. He distantly realizes he might sound like a child, but it can’t be helped. It’s what he’s been raised to believe, and to think that his soulmate isn’t certain is just… heart breaking.

“The only thing we know to be guaranteed is that we will meet our perfect match. For how long or what happens after that is completely unknown.” Coran says, all logic and matter-of-fact in the way he tends to be, but not unkind in his delivery. “I look forward to the day we meet, sure enough, but I won’t sit idly by, twiddling my thumbs while I wait.”

“Have you ever thought of organizing a meeting?”

“Of course,” He says, turning back around and grabbing for one of the shakers, rinsing it out in the sink before grabbing for several bottles. “Most people have. But we decided to let it happen naturally and without our forward influence. The old fashioned way, if you will. Keeps the mystery alive.”

“Do you love them?” He blurts out, regretting the question as soon as it leaves his lips but unable to take it back.

Thankfully, Coran doesn’t seem phased or offended. “Of course, I do.” He says, firm and solid in his conviction, grounding Lance with his tone. “they understand me like no one else does, and they occupy a very special place in my heart.” He pauses in his work, lifting his head and gazing thoughtfully at the wall, eyes distant, crinkling at the edges as he smiles. “I imagine when we do meet, we’ll both have many stories to tell, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.” He grins then, spell broken as he turns toward Lance. “It’s like they say, isn’t it? You only live once.”

Lance’s grin is slow and genuine. “Coran,” He says, struggling to deadpan his voice like Keith does but laughter threatening to bubble up despite his efforts. “Did you just encourage me to yolo?”

There’s a gleam of mischief in his eyes. “Only if it turns out well. If things go sour, then I most
certainly did not.” Lance laughs, and Coran chuckles, lining up several empty shot glasses on the counter. “Does that help calm whatever storm you have brewing in there?” He asks once the laughter subsides.

“I— yeah… Yeah, I think it does.” He says, already feeling lighter. “Thanks, Coran.”

“Anytime, lad.” He says, picking up the shaker and pouring it across the glasses. Lance’s jaw drops as a rainbow emerges across the line. “Now then,” Coran says, setting the shaker aside. “How about some shots?”

“Oh, hell yeah,” Lance says, grinning as he hops off the counter. He moves to the sink and leans over the open bar area to peer out into the living room. “Hey, Hunk! Get in here and take some gay ass shots with me!”

He finds Keith outside.

He hadn’t even been aware of the fact that he’d been looking for Keith until he found himself wandering through the Holt household, searching for a familiar mop of dark hair, slipping into conversations at random until the question have you seen, Keith? drops from his lips. No one had. Not recently anyway. Not until he stumbled across Shiro and Allura sitting on the front porch, and Shiro directed him to the backyard.

And that’s how he finds himself stepping out in the cool, autumn night, sliding the backdoor shut as quietly as he can.

Keith is in the center of the yard, arms lying loosely over his middle as he stares up at the night sky.

The breeze is heaven against Lance’s heated skin, and he finds it clearing his foggy mind, calming his nerves, even if his heartbeat is still rapid and erratic. He steps into the yard and almost immediately falls to his hands and knees, idly enjoying the cool touch of the grass as he crawls over to where Keith is.

He flops down next to him, stretching out on his stomach and crossing his arms in front of him, resting his cheek on them. Keith doesn’t look at him. Just keeps his eyes on the stars. It leaves Lance free to enjoy the sight of his profile, the shape of his nose, the curve of his jaw, the dip of his neck. Those dark eyes reflecting the night sky itself.

He’s beautiful.

It’s a fact that drifts through his mind unbidden, sinking into his chest with the airiness of acceptance. There’s nothing debatable about it. Keith is beautiful. Especially when he’s like this. Calm and relaxed. At ease with the world and without the familiar pinch to his brows.

The only acknowledgement of Lance’s presence is this little tilt to his lips, the barest of smiles that he might have missed altogether if he hadn’t been watching so closely.

And that, too, is beautiful.

“Watcha doin’ out here by yourself, edge lord?” He mumbles, words slurring a little and muffled
where his face is pressed onto his arms. He kicks out a leg, nudging Keith’s calf with his foot.

Keith hums, nudging back. They both give up the struggle before it really starts, leaving their legs touching, feet overlapping. “Got too loud. Wanted a break.” He says, voice soft, lips barely moving. They look soft. Even from this angle.

Lance hums his understanding, and Keith turns to look at him. He hadn’t realized just how close they were until they’re facing each other, faces just inches apart. This seems to be happening a lot lately. Keith doesn’t flinch away, though, and neither does he. He just lays there, melting into the grass, smell of dirt and the night fresh in his nose. Feels light hearted and at ease, worried buried and locked deep inside, key thrown away to find another day. Feels the alcohol like a pleasant, warm hum in his veins, weighing him down while simultaneously lifting him up. Small smile curving his lips as Keith’s eyes look over his face.

“What’re you doing out there?” He asks, voice lazy and slurred with as much exhaustion as alcohol.

Lance shrugs, shoulders brushing his ears. “Came to find you.”

Ah, there’s that familiar pinch in his thick brows. Lance wants to reach out to put his thumb to them, smooth them out. But he doesn’t. Keeps his hands beneath him, fingers curling into the grass.

“Why?”

Lance shrugs again because really, he doesn’t have an answer. Doesn’t want to think about it. Just knows he noticed Keith was missing and wanted to find him. And now that he’s here, he doesn’t want to leave.

Keith lets it go. Takes his answer at face value and turns his eyes back to the stars. Normally, Lance would, too. He likes the stars. Loves them. Is mildly obsessed with them. Knows a ton of constellations. Spent years and years going out at night and stargazing with his family. Feels at peace when he stares at them. Feels everything clicks into perspective. Like all his problems aren’t actually that big of a deal.

When he looks at the stars, he feels comforted knowing there’s someone out there, his perfect match, his soulmate, who can see them, too.

But right now, he doesn’t feel compelled to look at the stars. Doesn’t feel the urge to roll over and see what constellations are gracing the sky this evening. Feels completely content to just keep staring at Keith. He wonders if Keith has freckles, and if he does, what kind of constellations they’d make.

“You’ve never kissed anyone.”

He doesn’t know why he says it. Maybe it’s because he’s been thinking about it since they played never-have-I-ever. Maybe it’s because he keeps thinking about what Coran had said. Maybe it’s because his eyes keep drifting back to Keith’s lips and he idly wonders what they’d feel like.

Doesn’t know why he says it, but it’s said. Drifts out of his mouth and into the open air between them. Dissipates into the night. A statement. A fact. Light and indifferent. Opening a door for conversation that Keith can step through if he chooses, but also offhanded enough to close the door, too.

Keith hums, low and thoughtful. “ Nope.”
“Me neither,” he says, offering up the information even though he knows that Keith probably
knows. He played never-have-I-ever, too, after all. There are probably a lot of random things Keith
knows about him now. “Are you waiting for your soulmate?”

There’s a strange twist to those soft looking lips that Lance doesn’t know how to interpret, nose
crinking. “Not... exactly...” He turns his head then, and Lance’s breath catches at the intensity of
his gaze. No longer distant and dreamy, now with an edge of sharp clarity. The pinch in his brows
is back, along with a slight purse to his lips. When he speaks, however, his voice is soft and
hesitant, drifting like a breath through the space between them. “What about you?”

He wants to say yes. Because truthfully, he always has been. But when he opens his mouth, that’s
not what comes out. “I don’t know.” It’s a whisper, surprised more than confused or uncertain.

Keith turns onto his side, fully facing Lance, giving him his full attention. One hand rests on the
grass between them, and Lance idly watches as he picks at it. “What’d you mean?” He asks, all
breathless and hesitant.

Lance doesn’t know why that sets off his erratic heartbeat.

He shrugs. “I used to think I was, but... I don’t know anymore.” It’s a lot easier to admit than he
thought it would be. And maybe it’s the alcohol in his system making it easy, and maybe it’s how
Keith looks in the moonlight, highlighted by shadows. Who’s to say for sure?

When he meets Keith’s face again, his expression is relaxed and open, lips loosely parted and eyes
lidded. He turns onto his side without really thinking about it, facing Keith, hand reaching out to
idly play with the fingers of his hand.

“What do you know, then?” Keith asks, and it’s so soft that at first, Lance isn’t sure he said it at
all. But then the words sink in, bounce around in his mind until they gather a meaning.

And really... what does he know?

He knows he wants his soulmate. That much is a given. But he also knows he can’t have that. Not
right now. Now right here in this moment, lying in Pidge’s back yard beneath the night sky. He
can’t have that right now, and he knows that, so what does he want?

He wants Keith’s warmth. Wants how sturdy he feels. Wants his certainty and his stability. Wants
his smile and the little crinkle in his eyes. Doesn’t want this moment to end.

He lifts his gaze from their hands, settles on Keith’s face, look down to his lips. “I know I want to
kiss you.” He says, and is surprised by how much he means it. Surprised by how the intensity of it
grows as soon as he says it aloud. Surprised by how strong the urge is now that he’s acknowledged
it.

He’s leaning in before he really realizes it, eyes drifting shut as he closes the distance between
them.

Keith’s lips are chapped but warm. Their noses bump together, and he smells like fruit and rum.
Keith stiffens, breath catching audibly. Lance leans into him, pressing firm but unsure what to do
now that he’s here, now that Keith is frozen against him. He pulls back almost instantly, breaks the
contact but stays close enough that he can feel Keith’s shallow breaths against his skin.

His heartbeat is in his ears, bruising the inside of his ribs.

Then Keith leans forward, tilts his head, and slots their lips together again, and Lance melts into
him. His fingers find their way into Keith’s hair without remembering moving them. Their teeth clack, and he pulls away in surprise, only to have Keith chase after him, claiming his lips again.

When they finally pull apart and he opens his eyes, their gazes meet, and he feels like he’s falling into the stars.

The panic comes the next day as he wake up groggy, head pounding, eyes heavy and crusted, curled up in a blanket among everyone else in the odd nest they’ve created on the living room floor.

In the sobering light of day, he stares at Keith lying next to him, curled in his own blanket cocoon, mouth hidden in the blanket, hair a mess across his pillow, face relaxed in sleep. He stares at the spot where their fingers are tangled between them, Keith’s glove soft against this palm. He sees the yellow and gold soulmarks curling innocently around his forearm, weaving down the fingers that are intertwined with Keith’s, and tastes bile on his tongue.

Biting his tongue, he manages to shove his way out of his nest and tip toe around the bodies on the floor before rushing to the bathroom, body breaking out in a cold sweat. He makes it in time, falling to his knees and emptying his stomach.

It’s quick and relatively painless, all things considered, but he groans when it’s done, rinsing his mouth out before collapsing to the floor. He stares at the marks on his arms, stomach rolling, head pounding, heart sinking.

*He kissed Keith. He kissed Keith. He kissed Keith.*

And the worst part is that he had *liked* it.

He learns pretty quickly that guilt and hangovers don’t mix well. Thankfully, he can hide one behind the other.

Doesn’t seem to fool Keith, however, if the worried looks he sends him is anything to go on.

Lance can’t help it though. He can’t deal with this right now. Can’t even begin to process it, let alone sort through the emotional tangle he’s got brewing in his chest. Not when his body feels wrecked, both from the hangover and from the tournament yesterday. Now isn’t the time. He doesn’t know if there ever will be a time to address it, but it definitely isn’t *now*.

Actually, he’d be pretty happy if they never addressed this.

Let it fade into forgotten memories. Kisses exchanged beneath the stars, wrapped in the shadows of the night. Let it drift away and forget about it.

He wants it to go away so he doesn’t have to deal about it, but the thought of forgetting makes his chest hurt, makes him nauseous all over again.

Oh god, he’s a wreck.

He just wants to go home, curl up in his bed, and sleep forever.

And he wants to do all of this without thinking about Keith or his soulmate, because he can’t do
either without guilt curling hard in his gut, making his blood run cold and his throat close up.

So when they start to pile into cars to head back to Altea, he makes sure to climb into Hunk’s car, claiming the last spot and ensuring that he’ll go the entire four and half hours without being in an enclosed space with Keith.

He keeps his head down so he doesn’t have to see the hurt look on Keith’s face as he passes by the car.

At this point, Keith is used to avoiding Lance.

What he isn’t used to, though, is Lance avoiding him.

And he’s quickly coming to the conclusion that he doesn’t like it.

It’s been nearly a week since the quidditch tournament. Since the party. Since their kiss. Since the awkward morning after.

Keith had woken up with mild panic twisting his stomach, but an oddly pleasant feeling fluttering in his chest. That had faded once he found his hand cold and Lance missing. It had completely tanked once he realized Lance could barely look him in the eye without grimacing.

So... yeah. So much for that pleasantness.

Nearly a week, and Lance is still avoiding him. And he’s not subtle about it. He tries. Keith knows he’s trying. But his excuses are weak, laughter disjointed, shoulders hunched up to his ears as he walks away from him. The others notice, too. Hunk watches Lance with pity in his eyes, lips pressed into an understanding frown. Pidge just narrows their eyes, curiosity piqued as the gears turn in their mind. Allura watches him with worried frowns and smiles that are a hair too bright. Coran speaks to him with soft voices and half hearted jokes.

Everyone can tell Lance is feeling off, and everyone can tell that he’s avoiding Keith, but Keith doesn’t know how much they know.

He hopes they don’t know, but one shared look with Hunk tells him that at least Lance’s roommates knows.

Keith looks away quickly, guilt and shame rolling in his gut.

Even when Lance does talk to him, it’s oddly stiff and rambling. There’s a tenseness in his body that never really fades. Keith hasn’t realized just how used to the relaxed atmosphere that’s grown between them until it’s gone. And he wants it back.

They were finally friends, and he fucked it up. Lance fucked it up? They both fucked it up. Honestly, he can’t even remember who kissed who first. One moment it wasn’t happening, and the next it was. But he does know that they both kept it going.

So they both fucked up.

The difference is that Keith should have known better.
He knows how Lance feels about his soulmate. He’s heard it from Pidge. He’s seen it. He’s felt it. He knows how Lance feels, and he knows he’s not ready to face that head on. But he went ahead and let himself kiss him anyway. Because he was soft and beautiful and he’d had far too many drinks that were making him feel all warm and open.


And now he’s caught between wanting to hang out with his new friends to regain normalcy and wait for Lance to come around, and hiding away in his apartment to avoid the awkwardness altogether.

Ugh. He never wanted this. He just... wants things to be easy. But things are never easy.

He knows what the easy way would be. The easiest thing to do, perhaps the best thing to do, would be to just tell Lance. To come clean. Claim to be his soulmate and get it over with. Get it out in the open.

That would be the reasonable thing to do, he thinks, but... he can’t.

Because it’s not easy. Not like everyone thinks it is.

He’s not ready for that. Soulmates are a big commitment. Soulmates are a huge step. And it’s not like he has distance between them as an excuse to have some space. Lance is here, at his university, friends with his friends. And Lance is... a lot. He’s a lot, especially when it comes to the whole soulmates thing. They just started getting close as friends, and Keith doesn’t want to ruin that.

He’s afraid.

He’s scared. He’s scared that telling Lance will change everything. Lance will no doubt be mad that Keith didn’t say anything sooner, but it’s more than that. Their whole relationship will change. Lance will start to see him as his soulmate and stop seeing him as just... Keith. Their rocky friendship will get rockier as they try to figure out how soulmates fits into it, too. Then Lance will no doubt expect them to be in a relationship, and Keith has no idea how to balance boyfriend on top of that. Not just boyfriend, but forever boyfriend. Soulmate. A life long commitment. A lifetime of possibilities to fuck up.

He knows how Lance is with the whole soulmate thing, and he knows Lance will want to skip straight to their happily ever after.

But... Keith has seen first hand what happens when the leap is made too fast, what happens after the storybook ends, what happens when the movie’s credits roll.

Violent delights meet violent ends.

And... he also knows what happens when things go slow. He knows what happens, what can happen, when relationships are left to grow naturally. He’s seen it, from the outside, and it looks incredibly more stable and lasting than marks that appear on your skin.

So, when it comes down to it, he doesn’t know what to do.

He knows he doesn’t want to, he can’t, tell Lance. He’s not ready. That kind of knowledge would warp whatever rocky relationship they already have. It would put pressure on both of them, and he doesn’t think they’re strong enough not to buckle under that weight. He’s not a huge fan of the concept of soulmates, but he also doesn’t want to ruin the chance they have. And he knows, he
knows, that in this moment, telling Lance would ruin things. Make their future incredibly unstable and uncertain.

He doesn’t want that for himself. Doesn’t want to go through what his parents did. But more than that, he doesn’t want to ruin it for Lance.

Lance, who sees his soulmate as perfect. Lance, who idolizes the mere concept. Lance, who’s so stupidly, ignorantly innocent, but in a way that’s as endearing as it is obnoxious.

He doesn’t deserve that, so Keith won’t ruin it for him.

He doesn’t know what to do, but he knows he needs to do something.

Sitting around idle is slowly driving him insane. Too many thoughts. Too many emotions. Too many things that he didn’t fucking sign up for but has to deal with anyway. He doesn’t paint on himself because he feels like that would somehow be counterproductive, but his sketchbooks and canvases aren’t doing shit for him.

His friends all tell him that Lance will come around, even though they don’t know why he’s avoiding Keith in the first place.

They all tell him to just wait it out, that Lance gets like this sometimes.

They all give him kind smiles and pat his shoulder, telling him everything will be okay.

But Keith is restless. He’s restless and feels his irritation growing with each passing day. He hates this. Hates the shame and guilt that threatens to choke him every time he sees the droop in Lance’s shoulders, the forced smile, the conflicted shadows in his eyes.

He hates that Lance has stopped writing pick-up lines on his palms every morning.

It’s been years since he’s been completely soulmark free. He doesn’t realize just how strange it is to see his hands completely blank and bare until he’s faced with it.

And he hates it more than he thought he would.

He doesn’t know what to do, but he knows he has to do something.

He finds Lance exactly where Hunk told him he’d be.

Their local humane society is located off a side road, nestled up on a hill, far away from the main highways and the town itself. It gives them plenty of room, but Keith had gotten lost several times trying to find it, missing turns and having to backtrack. It isn’t exactly easy using google maps while riding his bike.

He’s never really been to a place like this before, but the woman at the front desk was helpful and friendly as she pointed him in the right direction.

And that’s how he finds himself standing outside the large glass wall that looks into the cat room, hands in his pockets, a small smile on his face as he watches Lance.
He’s sitting up against one of the walls, and the cats are flocking to him. There are a few other people in the room, scattered about, with their own little groups of cats curiously circling them. His eyes, however, are solely on Lance. There are several cats curled up and stepping over his lap, a few pawing at his shoes, and one rubbing up along his side.

His smile is soft and genuine, and it’s the most relaxed and at peace Keith has seen him in a week. He dangles a toy in the air and laughs as one of the cats dives for his hand. Keith’s heart squeezes.

He doesn’t know how long he’s standing there before Lance notices him, but he has a feeling it’s bordering on creepy.

When Lance does notice him, he has to do a double take. He freezes, eyes widening and mouth dropping open. He looks like he’s on the verge of panic before one of the cats leaps at his hand again, wrapping up his arm and playfully gnawing on his knuckles. He yelps in surprise, turning his attention to disentangling the cat before looking back at Keith, shier this time.

Keith does his best to smile, lifting a hand from his pocket to wave awkwardly.

They stay like that for a moment, awkward and stiff. Lance not sure where to put his attention and Keith shifting uncomfortably on the other side of the glass.

Finally, Keith bites the bullet. Huffs a sigh and heads toward the door. Washes his hands and slips into the cat room, making a beeline for where Lance is.

Some of the cats scatter as he approaches, but some of them stay, eyeing him curiously and warily. He ignores them for the most part and slides down the wall to sit next to Lance, close enough to keep their conversation private but far enough away that they’re not touching.

He crosses his legs, hands in his lap, fiddling with the hem of his gloves, eyes downcast even though he can feel Lance’s gaze on him. He clears his throat. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Lance echoes, sounding much like a wary cat himself. “How did you, uh... find me?”

Keith shrugs. “Hunk told me where you were.”

“Ah...” He says, like he expected as much but is displeased nonetheless. “I, uh... come here to think sometimes.”

Keith quirs a small smirk, risking a sideways glance at him as he gestures to the pile surrounding him. “They like you.”

Lance’s smile is small and soft as he gazes down at them, reaching out to pet as many as he can reach. “Yeah... I just wish I could take them all back with me.”

“I don’t think you’re allowed to have cats in the dorms.”

Lance huffs a small, dry laugh. “We’re not, but Hunk and I have already devised the perfect system for keeping it a secret. Pidge is in on it, too.”

Keith feels his smile widen. “Of course you have.” He says flatly, poorly hiding his amusement.

They lapse into silence, and Keith is feeling increasingly awkward. Fiddling with his fingers. Cracking his knuckles. Now that he’s here and Lance is here, he’s not sure what to do. He wasn’t sure what to do to begin with. Just assumed he’d wing it. Now winging it seems like a bad plan.
An orange tabby with a white muzzle struts over to him, past the line of curious feline eyes that have just been watching him. She takes a moment to sniff his knee before stepping right into his lap, curling up and plopping herself down like she owns it, stretches out like it’s her throne.

He stares down at her, hands hovering uncertain in the air, and he hears Lance snicker beside him. “I think she likes you, dude.”

“I don’t know what I did.” He says, finally reaching down to scratch beneath her chin, her ears, her back. She purrs, eyes drooping as she nuzzles into the touch.

“Cats have good judgement in people.” Lance says, voice soft, but when Keith glances at him, he keeps his eyes down.

After the orange tabby’s declaration, a few of the other cats approach Keith. Some of them skitter away from his touch, but others stay. It’s... a lot more peaceful than he expected it to be. Despite the nausea gnawing at his nerves, he feels light, relaxed. He’s always been fond of cats, and he doesn’t know why he never thought to come here before. He can understand why Lance likes to.

“Why’re you here?”

He knew the question was coming, has been waiting for it, but that doesn’t stop the spike in his heart rate when it’s finally asked. Doesn’t stop his palms from sweating and his lips from pursing. He manages a weak shrug and mumbles, “I came to find you.”

“I got that much,” Lance says, and Keith is certain he’s rolling his eyes. “I meant why.”

Another shrug, eyes on the tabby in his lap. “You’ve been avoiding me, so obviously I had to come find you.”

“I haven’t been—“

“Lance,” Keith says sharply, cutting him off. He lifts his eyes, meeting Lance’s. He looks surprised, but snaps his mouth shut anyway, pursing his lips as his expression sours into a pout. Keith sighs, running his fingers through his hair as he looks away. “Look, I know you’re avoiding me, and I know it’s because of what happened last weekend.” Lance stays silent, and it’s all the confirmation Keith needs. “Can we just... talk?”

Lance sighs. His whole body goes into it. Slumping forward, expression twisting into something wry and unamused. He sounds defeated when he speaks. Maybe he had been expecting this, too. Maybe they had both known it would only be a matter of time before they had this conversation. And that makes Keith feel a little braver.

“Yeah, okay... but not here.” He glances around, frowning a little as his gaze settles on the people across the room.

Keith nods, gently pushing the cat out of his lap so he can stand. She protests, loudly and pathetically. He silently promises to come visit her again. He turns to Lance, holding his hand out to help pull him up. “I drove my bike here, so...”

So he can take them somewhere private.

So they can get this over with quickly.

So they don’t have to talk while they travel.
Lance eyes him for a moment, then sighs, gently pushing the cats off of him and taking Keith’s hand.

He’s had a lot of passengers on his bike throughout the years. His grandparents. Shiro. Pidge. A couple of classmates. Even Matt once when Shiro had goaded him into trying it.

It’s never felt as intimate to have a passenger as it does with Lance. And Keith knows it has nothing to do with them being soulmates, and everything to do with the fact that he’s just so goddamn aware of him twenty-four-seven.

He’s aware of where Lance leans into his back. Aware of the firmness of his chest. Aware of how solid he feels. Aware of his warmth bleeding through his jacket. Aware of his thighs pressed to Keith’s. Aware of the arms locked around his waist.

Aware of the fact that the faster he goes, the tighter Lance holds on.

When they left the humane society, Keith hadn’t really thought about where he was going. He had only known they needed somewhere private. His apartment wouldn’t cut it, and neither would Lance’s dorm. Too intimate. Too much of an enclosed space. He had turned his bike down the road and just drove.

It takes him about ten minutes to realize where he’s going, and when he does, he speeds up a little more.

The humane society is already out of town, so it doesn’t take long to get to the back roads, to find the parkway, to ride up the hills, to let the buildings fade away and be replaced by trees. He slows, obeying the speed limit for once. Gives him time to think, time to figure out what the hell he’s going to say.

Unfortunately, when he pulls off onto the overlook, stops his bike right at the curb and uses his heel to put the kickstand down, he still has no idea what he’s going to say.

Lance is already leaning away from him, pulling off his helmet. Keith does the same, picks a leg up over his bike and sets both feet on the ground, hangs his helmet on the handlebars and half sits, half leans against the bike. Lance’s knee presses against his thigh, and it’s as much a comfort as it is an uncomfortable reminder.

He crosses his arms over his chest, eyes staring straight ahead rather than at the boy next to him. The overlook drops steeply, swooping down and out to rolling mountain scenery. The trees are starting to change color, a world in colors of autumn. The sun hangs low in the sky, not quite sunset, but casting the sky in dim sepia shades nonetheless.

“This is my favorite overlook.” He says softly, an offering into the silence, mouth feeling dry and throat feeling thick. He clears his throat, shifting his weight.

“It’s pretty,” Lance mumbles, and while Keith is sure he means it, he sounds distracted. He hasn’t moved, still straddling his bike next to him, helmet cradled on his lap, fingertips tapping at the hard surface.

Keith just hums, mind already whirling. He doesn’t know what to say, but whatever it’s going to
be, it should probably be now. He should probably start with an apology. That’s how these things go, right? Tell Lance he’s sorry, that he doesn’t expect anything from him, that their friendship doesn’t have to change.

He opens his mouth, words on the tip of his tongue—

“I’m sorry.”

—His mouth snaps shut, brows furrowing as he turns to look at Lance. His head is bowed, eyes on the helmet in his lap. Keith isn’t sure what’s happening, mind going blank, so he responds with a very intelligible, “What?”

Lance heaves a heavy sigh. One that makes his whole frame rise and fall. He looks up, lips pursed into a sad little frown and eyes way too expressive. He looks away quickly, out over the edge of the overlook. “I’m sorry,” He repeats, voice soft. “I’m sorry I kissed you. I know you said you weren’t waiting for your soulmate, but... you still have one, and I disrespected that. I shouldn’t have— That isn’t what— Not without at least asking—“

“I’m sorry, too.”

Lance’s ramble cuts off abruptly. All the frustration that had been building seeps out of him instantly, and he visibly deflates. When Keith glances at him, he looks utterly bewildered. Like Keith apologizing is the last thing he expected. His mouth opens and closes a couple times, brows furrowing as he frowns. “Why are you sorry?”

Keith can’t help the wry smirk that tugs at the corner of his lips. “I kissed you, too.”

Lance’s face goes through a variety of expressions in a short amount of time. Keith manages to catch a few of them. Surprise. Confusion. Understanding. Embarrassment. Amusement. Guilt. “Oh...” He finally says, light and airy, like the thought honestly hadn’t occurred to him.

What an idiot. What a fucking innocent idiot. This isn’t his burden to bear. Not alone. He’s not the only one that should feel guilty about this whole thing. Keith has his fair share, too.

His smile fades, and he turns to stare at his boots, roaming over the scuff marks on the old leather. “Look, I...” He huffs a sigh, running his fingers through his hair. “I know I shouldn’t have kissed you. I know how you feel about your soulmate, and it wasn’t my place to—“

“I didn’t mind.” It comes out fast and rushed, interrupting him before he can really get going.

Keith cuts off, mouth snapping shut hard enough to hurt and throat feeling tight as he turns slowly. Lance is staring at him, hands clasped over his mouth, eyes wide over top them, gazing at Keith with just as much panic as surprise.

That... isn’t what he expected to hear.

He blinks, licking his lips. When he manages to find his voice, it sounds rough, hoarse, and a little too breathy in his disbelief. “What?”

Lance lowers his hands, resting them on the helmet as he straightens, closing his eyes. He takes in a deep breath, holds it, and lets it out in a long, shuddering exhale, shoulders relaxing somewhat. When he opens his eyes again, there’s a spark there, a determination and strength that he’s been lacking for a week. It’s as familiar as it is exhilarating, and Keith hadn’t realized just how much he missed it.
It sends a shiver down his spine, warmth coiling in his gut, blood pulsing in his ears.

“I didn’t mind.” He repeats, voice stronger, barely wavering at the edges as he holds Keith’s gaze. “I... I kinda... liked it? And if you’re— if you’re not mad, then I definitely don’t regret it. So...”

He’s running out of steam fast, slouching inch by inch, eyes flickering away from Keith’s. So he decides to give him a lifeline. “I didn’t mind it either.” He says, voice soft and genuine, raw in his honesty.

Lance perks up a little at that, breathless as he says, “Really?”

Keith shrugs, gaze moving out to the overlook because it’s safer than staring into those startling blue eyes, sparkling with awe and hope and something deeper. He feels heat crawling up his neck, creeping to his face. He hopes it’s not visible, but he knows it probably is.

“So...” This time when Lance speaks into the silence, it’s hesitant but strong, a sly edge to it that Keith is both knows and is surprised by. It’s similar to the voice he uses when he’s about to suggest something, but there’s an uncertain edge to it, making it softer, calmer, tentative. “I’ve been thinking...” He continues, fingers restlessly tapping on the helmet to a pattern that Keith doesn’t recognize. “Neither of us have met our soulmates yet, and who knows how long that will take. So like... if we’re both okay with it, I don’t see any reason why we can’t just like... do stuff, like that, sometimes?”

He’s trying desperately to sound casual and indifferent, confident and smooth. Keith knows he is. But Lance can’t completely hide his uncertainty, his worry, his hesitancy, his fear of what Keith might say. Honestly, he shouldn’t have worried so much because Keith is currently having a hard time processing any of it.

It takes longer than he’d like to admit for his brain to restart, properly take it all in, process it, and come up with an intelligible reply. Long enough that Lance has started squirming in his seat, shifting restlessly, finger tapping more insistent.

“Like... no strings attached?” He manages to say, pleased when his voice comes out a lot calmer than he feels.

Without the immediate rejection, Lance looks stronger, sits a little taller, a smirk actually managing to make it’s way to the surface as he shrugs. “Yeah, I mean... we both liked it, right? And it seems a shame to lose out on experiences just because Keith is currently having a hard time processing any of it.

He falters then. It’s so subtle and so quick that Keith might not have noticed if he hadn’t been watching him carefully. A flicker in his eyes, a pinch to his brows, a drooping of his smirk. But then it’s gone, and Lance is back. Cocky, confident, and far too unaware of the things he does to Keith.

“Just... friends enjoying each other’s company until we find our soulmates, yeah? Doesn’t have to be anything more.” He shrugs again, and Keith starts to see minor cracks in his facade. But despite the cracks, despite the shadows, there’s something more. A fire in his eyes. A longing in his voice. And it’s all directed at him. “People do it all the time, right? It’s not that weird.”

Keith regards him carefully. This isn’t anything like what he expected, but he’s not... opposed to it. And Lance seems to be honest in his proposal. It isn’t a trick. It isn’t him brushing this aside. He’s... he’s rolling with it. In a way that surprises him and sends a thrill of excitement through his entire body.
“And you’d... be okay with that?” He asks, one eyebrow raised, careful. Careful because he knows Lance. Knows how he feels about his soulmate. Has known for years. But this Lance, looking at him right now, is a Lance that has no doubts about what he’s saying. Some reservations, yes, but no doubts.

Lance’s shrug is half hearted, smirk falling into a soft smile, eyes lidded. There’s a fondness there that has his breath catching in his throat. It’s the same look he had giving him a week ago, bathed in the light spilling out from Pidge’s house and into the yard, a look that had twisted Keith’s heart and melted his insides.

It’s a look he’s finding himself increasingly weak for.

He quirks a brow, smile twitching at the edges. “Yolo?”

Keith’s face falls into a blank mask as he deadpans, “Did you just use yolo on me?”

Lance’s smile widens to a full on grin, crinkling his eyes. “I can keep saying it until you shut me —“

Keith reaches out, fingers wrapping around his neck and pulling him forward, leaning in until their lips meet. It’s rough and rushed, and they both stiffen at the contact. A second ticks by. Then two.
The kiss is soft and hesitant, cautious but eager.

One leads to another. Which leads to another. Another. Again and again.

Part of him is worried he’s making a mistake. Part of him whispers that this is a bad idea. But that part is pushed to the wayside, forgotten as he loses himself in the feeling of Lance’s lips, warm against his own. Of his face and neck, smooth and soft beneath his fingertips.

All reservations. All worried and doubts. They were all tossed aside, shoved away to deal with later. Because Lance had asked. Looked at him with those blue eyes, dark with longing. Bit at his lip like he was scared of rejection, of overstepping boundaries. Looked at him. Looked at Keith. Not as his soulmate but just as Keith.

And really, how can he say no?

---

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Are you dead?
> Pidge says they haven’t heard from you all day
> And you said you’d be over for dinner tonight

Keith
> Oh, yeah
> I forgot
> Raincheck?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Sure, but what’s up? Where’ve you been?
> Please tell me you’re actually going to eat and you’re not going to mope around your apartment
> You know the rules
> You can mope but you can’t starve

Keith
> I actually already ate

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Oh?

Keith
> Yeah, I’m out with Lance

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> ....

Keith
> Shiro, don’t make this weird

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> I’m just surprised
> Did you actually go and make up without me having to push you?
Keith
> I can be mature sometimes

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> That’s still up for debate

Keith
> Fuck off

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> So does this mean everything is okay between you two?

Keith
> Yeah
> Yeah, I think it is

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> I’m glad

Keith
> Me too

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> So when are you going to tell him?

Keith
> ....

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> I’m not pushing you
> You know that

Keith
> I don’t know

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> That’s fine
> One step at a time

Keith
> Yeah
> One step at a time

Chapter End Notes

TMWM was always intended to start as a friends-with-benefits story and the growth they undergo during that time before accepting they're soulmates, I just didn’t anticipate it taking 120k words to get this far, lol.

There have also been a lot of body art done as tribute to this fic, which is honestly a
form of fanart I never anticipated but really should have. I’ve created a tumblr blog dedicated to reblogging them all in one place, and you can find the link to that below! HOWEVER, everyone should do research and make sure you’re using body safe paints before using them on yourself, please.

Check out my tumblr or twitter to learn more about me and my writing.

Until next time, my dudes. Peace out.

_______________________________________________

DO NOT REPOST THE ART FROM THIS FIC. This includes platforms such as instagram and pinterest.

Reblog it from the artist: tumblr and twitter

Wittyy's Tumblr (author and co-creator) and Twitter
Sora's Tumblr (artist and co-creator) and Twitter
TMWM World Building and Lore Master Post
TMWM Playlist
TMWM Body Art Fanart Tumblr
Linger in Our Hearts

Chapter Summary

In which the past is muddled with memories that still feel raw, the future promises nothing and looks murky and terrifyingly uncertain, and there are days when you just have to live in the moment.

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone for being patient while waiting for this update! And a special thanks to everyone who's left kind comments and kudos. You guys are so encouraging, and your love is appreciated. If you're familiar with my work, you'll know that Shut Up and Dance With Me is now complete, which means this fic is going to be getting a lot more consistent love.

Important Warnings: This chapter contains mentions and talk of previous minor character death. If you're particularly sensitive to the subject of car accidents and parental death, please tread carefully. This chapter also involves alcohol use in one bar scene. This chapter also contains mild smut. It's near the end and very obvious when that is building, so when you see it coming, skip down to the next line break if that's not your thing.

Special Request From Me: I know a lot of you tend to drop everything to devour content as soon as it posts, but this chapter is roughly 23k words and that can take some time. Please don't drop your homework or studying or responsibilities to read this asap. Please don't stay up late when you have to wake up early. It'll be here when you have time. It'll be here when you're free to snuggle up with a beverage of choice and chill. Treat yourself right, yo.

Happy reading, y'all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lance isn’t entirely sure when the whole pick-up line thing started. Sixteen? Seventeen? Late high school, for sure.

His soulmate had never been particularly talkative. He remembers getting notes of hesitancy and shyness even from the beginning. Lance, being Lance, had tried to jump right into it. Dive right in. Both feet first. Take the plunge. All of his family members had amazing stories. Amazing, heartfelt stories worthy of fairy tales and romance novels. He just had to know if his soulmate was someone he already knew.

So he had jumped right in. Or at least tried.

He learned pretty quickly that his soulmate stopped responding the instant he started bringing up personal details. Never answered any questions about themselves. Never offered any details either.
But they did respond when Lance’s messages were innocent and benign. Doodles of his teachers and friends and favorite super heroes. Pleas for tic-tac-toe games and hang man. Talking about how he loved the snow but hated the cold. Talking about his favorite shows and books. Talking about his favorite foods.

Those kind of details his soulmate responded to. Easy things. Things that weren’t entirely personal. They talked about movies and complained about school. They didn’t talk often, nor did they talk in depth, but Lance cherished each word that appeared on his skin.

So he stopped asking personal questions. Stopped telling personal things about himself. Stopped bothering to find out a name, age, location, gender. Those things didn’t matter anyway. As much as he wanted to know, desperately needed to know, those details could wait.

So he stopped asking the questions that burned the tip of his tongue and buzzed around in his mind like a hive of angry hornets. He learned not to bring certain subjects up. He learned the things he could and couldn’t say. He learned because he didn’t want his soulmate to stop talking to him.

He was young, in love, and under the delusion that one day his soulmate would show up at his doorstep and sweep him off his feet.

Unfortunately, life isn’t a fairy tale, and things don’t always go the way you imagine they will.

Then the words suddenly stopped about halfway through high school.


He remembers how he had cried, imagining the worst. He remembers curling up on his mama’s lap while she rocked him and whispered reassuring words.

He had clung to the fact that he hadn’t felt the Last Connection. He hadn’t felt it break. That meant his soulmate was alive, at least, but he feared they were hurt. He was worried they rejected him. He worried. He feared. Thoughts and scenarios colliding and morphing and forming a chaos of negativity that spiraled downward in a dark abyss, making his stomach twist and his heart feel heavy.

A whole month of silence.

He remembers how his family had to practically force feed him that month.

When their connection opened up again, it wasn’t with words, but with paint.

His soulmate had painted before, but not like this.


It came out of no where. From a calm to a storm. The connection remained open for an hour, paint relentlessly appearing on his skin. Taking over his body. He remembers locking himself in his room. Stripping off his clothes. Staring down at his body.

The relief of having contact with his soulmate again was so, so brief.
Because he was instantly overwhelmed by emotions that weren’t his, but crashed into his chest, bounced around his rip cage, and tore him apart nonetheless.

A sorrow so deep that it cut his heart to ribbons. A despair so dark that it clouded his vision. An anger so fierce that it burned his lungs. A loss so thorough that it opened up a hole in his gut, muscles clenching around it. A heaviness so crushing that it brought him to his knees.

He had sat there on his floor, vision blurred by tears that he wasn’t sure were his own, as a whirlwind of emotions raged through him, tearing him apart and leaving him numb.

He didn’t know what had happened. Could barely function enough to piece through the emotions as they flooded through him, crashing and cascading and blending one into the next.

It was the most intensely he had felt anything through their connection, and he felt like his heart was ripping in two.

Words didn’t filter through soul connections. They simply didn’t. While the connection was open, feelings came through. Thoughts were translated into emotions. Those could then be deciphered by the one on the other end. Some people were better at pushing specific emotions to get specific messages across, just as some were better at picking apart emotions and drawing conclusions.

But in that moment, Lance could have sworn he heard words.

No, not heard. Felt.

He felt the words. Felt them throb in his chest, pulsing with each heavy beat of his chest. Felt them in the way you feel a silent scream tear from your throat. Felt them in the way the emotions lingered, seemed to swirl and frame one message, one thought, one idea so strongly that Lance knew. He felt it. He heard it. He knew there was nothing else that it could be because the pain of the thought was just that strong.

Come back.

Stop changing.

Pain. Loneliness. Despair. It gave way to sorrow. Which gave way to reluctant acceptance. Which gave way to a numbness that left him feeling hollow.

The paint marks slowed gradually, lazy strokes until they stopped altogether.

Their connection closed, emotions ebbing away, leaving only echoes in their wake.

Lance still isn’t sure how long he had sat there. Feeling hollowed out and numb. Unable to think. Barely able to breathe. Staring down at his soulmate’s pain in twisted dark colors across his skin. So bright. So vibrant.

They would last for days given the intensity of his SM’s emotions.

Lance had tried to reach out to them a few times after that. Probing questions. Are you alright? What happened? Reassurances and comforting statements. I was worried about you. I’m glad you’re okay. I’m always here if you need me.

No response.

Stop changing. The words echoed in Lance’s dreams. Haunted his thoughts. Changes were
happening. His soulmate was in pain. And there was nothing he could do about it.

Nothing he could do to help.

Nothing he could do to comfort.

Nothing... except give his soulmate something that wouldn’t change.

He still isn’t sure how he came up with the idea. It just came to him one day. It wasn’t the first time he had written pick-up lines to his soulmate either. It had been something he had jokingly been doing for a while. On and off. Sporadically. Whenever he heard a good one.

But one day he started writing one on his hand, and he never stopped.

His SM never told him not to. Never said anything about it. And he never got an annoyed vibe from them. So he kept going. Kept doing it.

His SM never liked serious things, so Lance gave him something light hearted and playful. Something every day. Something he promised he would keep doing every day. Something that would never change, no matter how turbulent the rest of his soulmate’s life was.

And he kept at it for *years*.

Until he kissed Keith for the first time and broke his silent promise for a week.

A week of no pick-up lines.

A week of silence.

A week of picking up a pen out of habit before gently setting it aside, throwing it across the room, shoving it back in his bag.

And now that week is over, his guilt over kissing Keith having subsided. He sits on the edge of his bed, pen hovering over the blank skin of his palm and trepidation buzzing through his veins.

He hesitates, uncertain whether or not he should explain himself or apologize. Despite there never being an explicit agreement, he feels like he’s betrayed his soulmate with his silence. Still... they never bothered to reach out to *him* either. So perhaps he doesn’t owe an explanation unless asked.

Taking a deep breath, he puts the felt tip to his skin and writes.

*You are the light in the darkness.*

Not cheesy. Not a pun. But true all the same. He focuses on the feeling of confidence, of affection, of fondness, but it’s a cheap mask for the guilt and shy hesitancy he feels churning in his gut. He finishes off with a silent apology on the tip of his mind.

He leans back, staring at the words and letting his breath out in a rush. There. Done. Back to normal. He’ll do it again tomorrow. And again the next day. Because he is Lance, and this is his soulmate, and this is just who they are. A piece of their puzzle. A page of their story.

He’s showering when he feels the tingling sensation of his soul connection opening up. Holds his hand out in front of him, ignoring the shampoo bubbles that slide down his hand, his wrist, his arm, dripping off his elbow. Ignores the foam sliding down his temples.

He stares as the words appear on his arm, written in simple black ink, thick, like a marker or a felt
tipped pen.

They appear with the wisp of relief. They appear with the sensation of relaxation. The ease of muscles. The breath of a sign. Of tension leaking away. They appear with a breeze of distant amusement. With a vague air of fond affection, gone before Lance can really get a grasp on it, to make sure that’s what he really felt and not a trick of his imagination.

*Good to have you back, Sunshine*

Rugged desert mountains. Oranges, reds, and browns. A sunset to cast the lighting in purples and pinks. Landscape dotted with green shrubs and scattered trees, flowers the color of lilac and blue.


Lance feels at peace staring up at the painting. It’s big, spanning across most of the wall next to Keith’s bed. He’s lying on his back, ass against the wall, legs crossed and popped up just below the bottom of the canvas. He stares up at it, eyes flickering across the landscape, taking everything in. He swears every time he makes another sweep he finds something else to appreciate. Another detail. Another thing that makes it unique. He never really considered himself to have an eye for art, but he thinks that after years of staring at his soulmate’s paintings, he’s at least learned how to appreciate it.

His art history book lays open and forgotten across his stomach, hands resting idly on the pages.

He’s getting lost in the detailed petals of lilac and blue, adding a splash of cool colors to the otherwise warm scene, when a foot is suddenly pressing sharply into his side.

“Heads!” He yelps, jerking away from the touch, head falling to the side to glare at Keith.

He sits with his back to the headboard, one knee pulled up with a notebook propped up against it, other leg outstretched and hovering nearby, ready to attack him again.

Lance glares at it pointedly before turning his narrowed gaze back to Keith, bottom lip pursed outward.

Keith’s face remains impassive as ever, unimpressed, but Lance can swear he saw a twitch at the corner of his lips. “That’s not studying.”

Lance huffs, a sharp exhale through his nose, and rolls his eyes. “Sure, it is.” He rolls his head back to stare up at the painting, throwing a hand up to gesture to it grandly. “I’m studying art.”

Another poke in his side. Another squeal escaping his lips. Lance closes his text book and playfully swats at Keith’s foot, which wisely retracts, pulling up to join his other leg.

“Doesn’t count.” He says, and this time there’s definitely a small smirk hiding on his face. “Do your actual work, Lance.”

Lance groans, opening the book once more. He flips to the chapter he’s supposed to be reviewing and holds it above his head. Blah, blah, old dudes. Blah, blah, their art reflected the political and
He barely gets halfway down the page before he’s groaning again. He lays the book over his face and lets his arms flop out to the side, stretched over his head, wrists and hands dangling over the edge of the bed.

“Lance.”

He groans.

“You need to study.”

His groan gets slightly higher pitch.

“You have a test on Friday.”

Even higher. Entering whine territory.

A foot prods at his hip. He blindly swats at it.

“Stop that!”

“You told me to kick your ass if you didn’t study.”

Lance snorts a laugh, half choking as he sucks in air wrong, giggles sounding loud in the little nook of the book on his face. “Oh my god, Keith, I didn’t mean literally.”

“If I thought you meant literally, I’d be kicking much harder.”

“Keeeeeith.”

“You told me not to have mercy.”

“I know, but-- ugh.” He slaps his hands over the hard cover of the book, pleased with the loud slap and ignoring the way the weight digs uncomfortably into his cheek bones. “We’ve been at this for hours. I can’t focus anymore, you know?”

There’s a pause. One that’s just long enough for it to be strange. Just long enough for him to notice.

“Actually,” Keith trails off, sounding his usual flavor of blank and indifferent, but with a strange note of innocent confusion that reminds Lance too much like a puppy. “I don’t.”

He pulls the book down to his chest, turning his head to glance at Keith. He’s regarding him with curious eyes, face open and expression relaxed. Lance’s heart does this annoying little squeeze. He ignores it. Instead focusing on making his face as blank and incredulous as possible. He raises one eyebrow. “Seriously?”

Keith shrugs, eyes turning down toward his notebook, pen idly tapping against the pages. Lance gets a little caught up in how his hair falls over his forehead, which is a stupid thing to notice. Focus, Lance.

“When I decide to do something, I kinda just... get really stuck in it. Like, if I tell myself to do it, and I start, I can’t stop until it’s finished.” He says it offhandedly as he can, but there’s that slight pout to his lips, that weird note in his voice that Lance has trouble explaining but knows it means that Keith is getting self conscious.
Lance nods, slow and understanding, blink slowly and turns his head back to stare up at the painting. “Hyper focusing.”

“What?”

“Hyper focusing. I can do that sometimes, but it’s gonna be something I’m really into. And it’s definitely never been school work.” He folds one arm, resting his hand beneath his head. “Man, that sounds great though. I bet it makes school super easy.”

“I guess.”

Lance glances sideways at him, at the way Keith’s pen is scratching aimlessly on the page, eyes glued to the spot, slight pinch to his brows. “There’s a story there somewhere, Kogane.”

Keith looks up at him without lifting his chin, effectively glaring through his lashes and the curtain of his fringe. Lance hates how it makes his stomach go all bubbly. He holds Keith gaze until Keith sighs. He straightens, leaning his head back against the headboard. “There’s a reason I went to community college before this.”

“And that reason is...?”

Keith shrugs. “Like I said, when I decide to do something, I’ll do it until I’m finished. But... I didn’t always decide I wanted to do school work.”

Lance nods. “High school problems?”

Keith laughs, abrupt and bitter, wry with dry amusement. “You could say that.”

“We’ve all been there. High school sucked. But that doesn’t matter because you’re here now.” He flashes a grin, watching as Keith’s eyes drift down to him, as his lips slowly tug up into a mirrored smile.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Anyway,” He says, picking up his book and closing it with a resounding thwump. “Point is, my brain can’t focus on one thing like this for too long. Like, words stop making sense kinda being unable to focus. So,” He sets his book aside, grinning as he pats the space next to him. “We should take a short break.”

He doesn’t question it. Doesn’t complain that Lance is forcing him to take a break, too. Doesn’t contradict Lance’s logic and doesn’t try to argue with him. Keith just rolls his eyes, a small smile tugging playfully at his lips as he sets his notebook aside. He moves then, scooting and shifting until he’s lying on his back next to Lance, toes near the wall, knees pulled up, hands resting loosely over his stomach.

He turns his head to look at Lance, and this little traitorous thrill shoots through him. Just as it always does when Keith ends up close to him. When he can feel Keith’s breath vaguely brush his cheeks. Their shoulders are pressed together, just lightly, just barely, but it feels like his entire arm is on fire.

“So what now?” He asks, voice low, oddly breathless, just an edge of husky. His eyes look shy, even as his smirk is playful.

This boy is going to be the fucking death of him.
Lance knows he can kiss him. That’s a reality. They agreed that they can kiss each other. That they both want it.

But it still feels like a dream. They haven’t done so since their conversation and brief make out session at the parkway overlook a week ago. Sometimes Lance can barely believe that it was real. That it happened. That Keith actually agreed to have a weird friends-with-benefits-pre-soulmates relationship with him. That he agreed to have one with Keith.

They haven’t talked about it since. Haven’t kissed. Just shy touches and glances and standing or sitting a little closer than what was strictly called for.

Lance knows he can kiss Keith. And truth be told, he really fucking wants to.

But when faced with Keith, eyes lidded, gazing at him through his lashes, hair falling messily over his forehead, lips looking relaxed and soft and oh so inviting-- Lance panics.

He turns his head away, already regretting it as he does so. His eyes settle on the painting, and suddenly he’s blurtng out, “Now you should tell me about this painting!” Complete with wide hand gestures. Great. Smooth. Good job, Lance.

“Why?” Keith sounds disgruntled, surprised. Lance glances sideways, and-- yup, that’s not a happy Keith face. That’s a pouty Keith face. Which is, admittedly, just as cute, but that’s not the point.

Lance shrugs, using the motion to playfully bump Keith’s arm. He’s already started this, so he might as well carry on through. “Come on, dude. It’s the only thing you have on your walls. There’s gotta be some reason for that. Did you paint it?”

“No.” There’s something in Keith’s voice that he can’t identify. Something... different. Lance turns to look at him, only to find his eyes on the painting. There’s a softness around his mouth, the ghost of a smile that he doesn’t seem to realize is there. It contradicts the lines and shadows around his eyes. “My mom did.”

“Is she an artist?”

Keith nods, just barely. Expression unwavering. “She was.”

Oh. Oh.

“Oh...”

“This is the last painting she did.”

“It’s beautiful,” He says, voice dropping low, soft, sincere. Keith hums. “What’s it of?”

“Texas.”

Lance can’t help the small snort of amusement. Keith looks at him then, one eyebrow quirked. Lance tries to hide his small smile. He really does. “Why Texas?”

“I was born there.”

He promptly loses the fight with his smile. “You were raised in Texas?”

Keith’s smile widens by just a fraction. Lance can see it in his eyes, chasing away the shadows. “Not raised. Just born.” He turns back to the painting, eyes softening further. “She always said that the desert mountains were beautiful.”
Lance hums, not feeling the need to add a vocal affirmative. Keith doesn’t seem to mind. They lay there in silence for several moments more, both of their eyes on the painting, both of their thoughts elsewhere.

But eventually Lance’s curiosity gets the best of him. This is the most open Keith has ever been about his family and, well, Lance wants to know more. Wants to know more about Keith. His life. Where he came from. He chalks it up to being curious about all his friends and leave it at that.

“So...” He trails all, leaning to the side to push into Keith’s arm. He keeps his voice low, soft, careful. “How did she...?”

He doesn’t know if he should ask it, but there it is. Out in the open, but incomplete. An open door. An opportunity. He doesn’t push. Just leaves it there for Keith to pick up if he wants to.

He sighs, legs tilting to the side until they fall, landing atop Lance’s. Half twisted, he tilts his head to rest it against Lance’s shoulder. When he speaks, it’s in a mumble. “Car accident.”

Lance hums, tilting his head to rest his cheek atop Keith’s. His hair is stupidly soft for someone who doesn’t do shit with it. Lance would be jealous, but hey, he gets to enjoy it, so...

“Was that the same accident-- with Shiro?” He asks it hesitantly, fitting pieces of the puzzle together.

Keith nods, effectively rubbing his cheek against Lance’s shoulder. It’s fucking adorable. “Yeah. We lost both of our parents.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.”

“Must’ve been hard.” There’s no patronizing in his tone. No pity. Just sympathy. Just a soft sorrow for what Keith had to go through. He reaches out a hand, and Keith meets him halfway, loosely curling their fingers together.

“It was,” Keith says softly. There’s an ache in his voice, a strain that tugs at Lance’s heart. “I had to live with my grandparents. Shiro was already a legal adult and on his own, but my grandparents kept a room for him anyway. Treated him like family even after our parents were gone.”

“Your grandparents? Not Shiro’s?”

“We’re step brothers. My mom married his dad, but Shiro’s still family. He’ll always be family.” There’s a vulnerable conviction there. Something deep and emotional that’s being covered by a desperate attempt at nonchalance. It’s a mask so close to breaking, showing signs of fissures, but holding firm.

If he goes off of what he’s heard from Allura, Shiro’s car accident was a while ago. Six years? Seven? Eight? It’s been a while. Keith’s had plenty of time to move on. But wounds like that don’t heal completely. Not really. They’ll always be a little raw. There’ll always be times when the scars ache. Moving on doesn’t mean forgetting.

“Were they soulmates?” He’s not sure why he asks it. Just goes with his gut. Follows the train of thought before it escapes him. Keith’s life seems confusing. Mismatched. He just wants to understand.

There’s a hesitation, but then a soft, whispered, and oddly fond, “Yeah. Yeah, they were.”
“Well... I dunno if this is rude to say or overstepping my bounds or whatever, but... I’m glad she got to find her soulmate, and they got to be together, and they brought you and Shiro together before-- you know.”

“Yeah,” He says, and it’s oddly wistful as it is sad. It’s a strange thing on Keith. One Lance has never heard. “Me, too.”

Keith lifts his head then, props himself up on an elbow and turns to face him more fully. Lance just lays there as Keith hovers over him. As that dark hair falls around his face, slipping out of a messy bun that’s barely holding on.

Without really thinking about it, Lance reaches up, runs his fingers through his hair and pulling the hair tie out. He lets his hand rest at the back of Keith’s neck, fingers tangled in his hair, thumb brushing his jaw.

Keith watches him, dark eyes lidded, shadowed but not from sorrow. This close, in the light of Keith’s room, Lance can see that he does have freckles. Small and light. Barely noticeable. He has the strange urge to trace them. Make constellations out of them. See what kind of star patterns make up Keith.

Then Keith is leaning down, lips going slack, eyes falling closed. Lance feels his own eyes closing, head tilting, lips parting, ready to catch him at just the right angle--

The loud vibration of Keith’s phone on the nightstand makes them both jerk apart, eyes wide with a panic that they shouldn’t have to feel but do anyway.

Brows pinched, lips pursing into a small pout, Keith rolls away from him, grabbing the phone and sliding it to answer. “What?” He says, disgruntled and clipped as he puts the phone to his ear.

Lance just lays there watching him, heart hammering, disappointment twisting in his gut even as butterflies twist their way around his chest.

“Yeah, yeah, we’re still here. Sounds good. Bye.” He ends the call with a sigh, tossing his phone to the side. “Pidge is almost here.”

Lance props himself up on an elbow, smirk growing on his lips. “At least they were courteous enough to call ahead of time.”

Keith snorts, sitting up and stretching his arms high over his head. Lance is not ashamed to admit that his eyes wandered to the exposed hipbones and slip of skin above his waistline. “They just wanted to make sure we were still here before walking all the way out here.”

Lance looks back up, raising an eyebrow. “It’s a ten minute walk.”

Keith lets his arms fall, shooting Lance a small smirk. “This is Pidge we’re talking about.”

“True.”

Then Keith is taking up his position at the headboard again, picking up his notebook and prodding Lance with his toes once more. “Now get back to work.”

Lance flops back down and groans.
The evening air is sharp and fresh, filling his lungs and brushing a chill across his cheeks. Not enough to sink in, but enough to brush the surface, to put an edge to every breath he takes. It’s a whisper of promise, a subtle declaration that fall is here. It’s here and winter is just around the corner, hiding and waiting in the bite of the wind.

Keith’s eyes are closed as he leans back against the brick wall, arms crossed loosely over his chest. His leather jacket hangs open, allowing the breeze to slip past his outer layer and settle against his chest, seeping through the cotton of his t-shirt. He can feel it wisp against his exposed throat, tangle in his hair, brush up his cheeks to cradle them with invisible, chilled fingers.

It feels good. It feels nice. The heat of summer has been slipping away for weeks now, but now it’s finally gone for good. Chased away by colder nights, crisper air, the crunch of leaves beneath his boots, the weight of jackets and hoodies on his shoulders, the smell of coffee and the comforting warmth of it in his hand.

The sound of the occasional car down the main road of campus is distant enough to blend into the background, fading into white noise. Familiar, distant noise. There’s a few voices as people pass, conversations muted and meaningless. A general hum of electricity surrounds the engineering building, as well as the vague and muted sounds of machinery.


“Ooooh, my god, it’s so cold.”

Well, almost peaceful.

Keith cracks his eyes open, keeping his head tilted back against the brick behind him. Lance stands in front of him, jacket sipped up to his throat, chin and mouth buried in the scarf wrapped tightly around his neck. His hands are shoved deep in his pockets, shoulders hiked up to his ears as he stands stiff, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

Cute.

“Are you really that cold?” Keith asks, voice a lazy drawl. He can feel a smirk tugging up at the edges of his lips.

Lance turns to look at him then, eyes narrowed and nose poking out from atop his scarf. “How’re you not cold?” He asks, voice muffled. Keith just shrugs, leather scrapping against the rough brick. “Didn’t you live in the desert for a while?”

Keith shrugs again. “Deserts are cold at night.”

Lance scoffs, shuffling his feet and shifting from side to side. His nose ends up buried a little deeper in his scarf. Keith feels his smirk widen just a fraction. Lance sees it, eyes narrowing in response. “Yeah, well, Cuba is not.”

“You didn’t grow up in Cuba.”

“I’m still Cuban. I don’t have cold resistance in my blood.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works.”

“Shut up, fine arts major. Leave this to the scientists.”
Keith lets out a short huff of a laugh, a small snort, but doesn’t argue further. Instead, he watches silently as Lance bounces around, humming nonsensical sounds under his breath, sounding increasingly more annoyed. He checks his phone several times, quick and short, before shoving his hands back in his pocket.

“Come oooon, Hunk,” He mumbles, voice muffled by his scarf. He dances from foot to foot, side to side, taking up all of the space on the sidewalk in front of him. While Keith is still and serene, Lance is a swirling tide, unable to stop, unable to stop, constant motion.

He kicks a few rocks, twists and moves as his eyes dart around, looking for anything to distract him. The building. The sidewalk. The nearby statue pieces. The nearby road. People passing by. All the while, he hums. Clicks his tongue. Makes sounds that don’t seem to have any particular rhythm.

“Are the sound effects necessary?” Keith asks, trying to keep his voice flat and dry as he cocks an eyebrow. Truth be told, it doesn’t bother him. Not in the slightest. It’s just... so wholly Lance. But that doesn’t mean he won’t tease him for it.

Lance looks at him then, pout clear on his face despite the fact that his mouth is hidden. But as his eyes roam over Keith’s face, he seems to loosen up. Seems to read the light in Keith’s eyes. Sees the shadow of a smirk at the edges of his lips.

Honestly, the way Lance manages to read him is dangerous, just as it is thrilling.

“You want sound effects?” Lance says, straightening a little, chin lifting from his scarf to reveal a sly grin that reaches the corners of his eyes. “What about... boots-n-cats-boots-n-cats-boots-n-cats-- boots-n-cats--” His bouncing gets more rhythmic, more vibrant, just more.

Keith can’t help it. He laughs. A laugh that bubbles up out of him unbidden, sounding choked and genuine. “Oh my god, stop.”

“What’d you got against my beat boxing, Keith? Huh?” Lance says, grin widening as he shuffles closer to him, leans forward into Keith’s space. “Boots-n-cats-boots-n-cats-boots-n-”

Keith shoves at his shoulder, laughter in his voice. “Lance, stop-- that’s so bad.”

He moves back with Keith’s shove, only to swing back forward. He leans forward, peering up at Keith through lidded eyes, smirk tugging playfully at his lips, a dangerous glint in his eyes. “If you want me to stop, maybe you should make me.”

His voice is low, husky, smooth and dark. Suggestive in all the right places, seeping through a charade of playfulness. It sends a shiver rushing down Keith’s spine. Sends heat coiling low in his gut. Makes his chest feel tight as his heart lodges itself in his throat. His skin feels alive, buzzing with energy and anticipation.

Lance is dangerous.

Somehow he manages to swallow his heart down. Somehow he remembers how to breathe. His skin still feels like a live wire, flaring up where he can feel Lance’s breath warm against the chill on his cheeks. Yet when he speaks, he’s pleased that his voice remains level.

“I get the feeling you want to kiss me.” It’s a low whisper, light, fleeting, teasing.

He’s not always one to pat himself on the back, but... yeah, he definitely thought his voice would crack, so he’s proud of himself. It’s not always easy to keep his composure around Lance these
Another thrill runs through him at the way Lance’s eyes widen for just a moment before going lidded, darkening as his lips tug up a little further. “And if I do?”

Please.

“If you wanna kiss me, McClain, just do it.” He aims for snarky. He thinks he hits a little too close to breathless.

He wants it. He’s surprised by how much he wants it. It’s been a while since they kissed. Since they agreed it would be okay to kiss more. They’ve come close. Way too close. Not close enough.

He tries to hold Lance’s gaze, he really does. Tries to hold onto that darkened, lidded gaze, staring at him with a spark, a hunger, a challenge. But his eyes flicker down, settle on those soft lips. Lips he knows are soft as hell and feel so, so good against his own.

When his eyes flicker back upward, Lance’s grin is knowing, preening, goddamn infuriating.

Fuck.

Then he’s leaning in, the space between them slowly losing ground.

Keith can feel his heart bruising his ribs, his blood pumping loud in his ears, his breath coming short. Everything that was pleasantly chilled only moments ago is now unpleasantly warm and hot and he can feel Lance’s breath against his lips and--

“Hey, guys! Sorry you had to wait-- oh my god, you’re not fighting again, are you?”

Fuck.

Hunk’s voice sends them both reeling. Keith jerks back, cracking his head against the wall, while Lance stumbles backward, nearly tripping over his own feet. Keith winces, rubbing the back of his head while Lance scrambles to compose himself. He ends up settling on something that looks like a guilty pout with an edge of offended indignation. It’s subtle, but if Keith looks closely, he can see the flush creeping up his neck, settling on his cheeks. If he didn’t know any better, he would think it was just because of the cold.

“Why do you think we’re fighting?” He asks, voice too loud, too defensive.

Hunk takes it as guilt.

He sighs, shoulders slumping as he hikes his bag higher up on his back, fixing Lance with a tired look. “You guys always get all up in each other’s faces when you’re fighting. Like, the literal definition of butting heads.”

Lance straightens, true offense creeping into his tone. “We do not.”

Hunk gives him an unamused stare. “You do. Pidge has video proof.” He sighs, shaking his head. By the end of it, his easy going smile is back. “Anyway, sorry for the wait, you guys ready to go?”

“We’ve been ready,” Lance says, already hiding his chin back in his scarf. “I’m freezing.”

Hunk rolls his eyes. “It’s not that cold.” He shares a look with Keith, one that’s amused at Lance’s expense. Keith returns it with a small smile, hoping the warmth on his cheeks will also be attributed to the chill. He’s grateful for the wall behind him because his knees are shaking.
Hunk leads the way through campus, Lance at his side as they talk about Hunk’s newest project. Keith lags behind. There’s not much room on the walkway, but he doesn’t mind. He trails along behind them, hands in his pockets, simply enjoying the night and the idle conversation of his friends.

All the while trying to compose his damn self.

Jesus. He knew this was getting bad, but he didn’t think it was this bad.

Soulmate or not, Lance is dangerous.

The flush finally leaks out of face, leaving his cheeks pleasantly chilled once more by the night air. His legs no longer feel like jelly, and his heart rate has settled into something far more normal.

Then Hunk’s phone is ringing, and he puts it to his ear to answer. He turns a corner, and Lance lags behind.

Keith doesn’t realize what’s happening until Lance is suddenly there, hands on his hips, pushing him back into the shadows and out of sight.

Lips on his, soft and warm and wet and moving slowly, sensually, stealing his breath away. Warm hands on his hips, grip gentle but firm, thumbs pushing past the hem of his shirt to brush against his hip bones.

Keith is stiff for a second. Just a second. Then he melts into him, hands finding and resting on Lance’s arms, body pushing into him, lips working against his, head tilting to better slot them together--

Then cold air as Lance leans back, eyes dark, smirk dangerous, cheeks flushed and breath as ragged as Keith’s.

“Guys?” Hunk’s voice comes from around the corner.

“Coming!” Lance calls, pulling away from him.

He walks backwards several paces, shoving his hands back in his pockets, shooting Keith a wink before spinning on his heel to hurry around the corner after Hunk.

Heart in his throat, heat coiling low in his gut, electricity raging through his veins.

Lance McClain is dangerous.

Shrio’s apartment is arguably nicer than Keith’s, but there are bits and pieces around that reveal him as the tired grad student that he is.

Nice countertops are scuffed, dented, and covered in loose papers. Dishes sit unwashed in the sink. The nice dining room table is cluttered with books and journals and papers, as well as a strange cacophony of objects: an open oreo pack, the charger for a 3DS, the instruction manual for a blender, empty beer bottles, a DND handbook.

The couch, while nice and leather, has mismatched pillows and an unfolded blanket tossed over the
back of it. The coffee table is littered with empty cups on top of nicely made coasters. The TV is large, fancy, and covered across the top in a fine layer of dust. There are several paintings hung around the apartment, some done by Keith and some done by his mom. Alongside the paintings are old posters, courtesy of his time rooming with Matt in undergrad.

Overall, it looks like he made an effort to make his space look like that of an adult, but gave up halfway through.

But Keith likes it. It’s far more homey and familiar than it would be if he had stainless steel appliances and modern art. If the furniture was stiff, new leather and all the tables were elegantly carved oak instead of cheap things found in a thrift shop and touched up.

While there are touched up, mature elements to the apartment, it’s mostly a smattering of Shiro. Bits and pieces of his life. Scattered around. Molding together perfectly. It’s Shiro’s space, and it’s always felt like a safe place for Keith.

But despite that, he made the firm decision to have his own place when he came out here for college. Shiro had offered his spare room, but Keith didn’t want it. He wanted his own space. Not to intrude on Shiro’s.

Besides, he needs Shiro’s place to be a place of sanctity when his life becomes overwhelming.

The door is locked when he arrives, but he has his own key. Shiro was very firm on that point. Just as Shiro has a key to Keith’s place.

“I’m here!” He calls out after letting himself in, pausing for only a moment to kick off his shoes, slamming the door shut behind him.

He trudges out from the short entry hall, past the kitchen, and to the living room, where he promptly drops his bag to the floor and throws himself down over the couch. The old, worn leather groans under his weight, and he sinks into it, limbs going lax and head falling back.

“You’re here early,” Shiro says, coming around the corner from his room. He’s dressed in the old sweat pants he has with a hole in the knee and a loose tank top. He holds a towel to his head, rubbing it idly against his hair while he stares down at the phone in his other hand.

Keith shrugs, hating the way the leather of his jacket rubs against the leather of the couch. He sits up to shrug it off, throwing it over his bag. “Class let out early.”

Shiro’s already turning, padding toward the kitchen on bare feet. “Help with dinner?”

Keith grunts a wordless affirmative and slides off the couch, stretching his arms high above his head before following after Shiro.

While reconnecting with Pidge has been great, and meeting new friends has been nice, and getting to know Lance has been both thrilling and terrifying, it’s nice being able to spend time with Shiro alone. Just the two of them. The way it used to be. It gives him a chance to simply breathe that he hadn’t realized he’s been needing. Amongst the chaos of starting at a new school, settling into his new apartment, meeting friends, starting quidditch, and dealing with his soulmate problems, he’s started to feel like he’s drowning.

Shiro is like a breath of fresh air.

It’s mostly quiet as they easily fall back into the groove of cooking together. There’s a rhythm and pattern to which they move around the kitchen. Be it their kitchen back in their old house, or the
kitchen at his grandparents’, or Shiro’s kitchen here, they’ve always had a way of moving around each other. Both of them just instinctively aware of each other, being able to move wordlessly and gracefully around each other. Two gears moving in perfect sync as they gather ingredients, pots and pans, knives, cutting boards.

It’s familiar, and Keith finds comfort and peace in that familiarity.

They decided to make curry before Keith even arrived. Not that it was much of a choice. It’s been a while since they got together like this, had a proper night together, and they always end up making curry when that happens. It’s a comfort dish. One of the first they learned to make. Their parents’ favorite. And a tradition they cling to even now.

While they go through the motions, they talk about classes and projects and work. They talk about Keith’s stories from the gym and Shiro’s stories about his professors. They talk about quidditch, upcoming matches, things they want to improve on. They talk about how Shiro found a giant spider in his bathtub and nearly fell out of the shower in his panic. They talk about how Keith wasn’t paying attention on his way to class and nearly tripped over someone before losing his balance and falling down a short hill.

Nothing heavy. No forbidden subjects. Nothing that would bring tension and lose the easy aura between them. Keith doesn’t ask about Allura, and Shiro doesn’t ask about Lance.

No soulmate talk. That’s the golden rule. Always has been.

That is, until Keith finds himself face to face with a picture on the fridge, and for the first time, he’s unable to look away.

It’s a simple picture. An old one. Keith’s mom. Shiro’s dad. Keith. Shiro. He’s young, hair just freshly cut far too short. Shiro’s in his graduation robes. Right after his high school graduation. They’re all smiling. All of them. Squinting against the glare of the sun.

A family. Perfect. Whole.

Happy.

The question comes to his lips unbidden, slips past his defenses quickly, quietly, escaping before he can hold it back. “Do you think they were happy?” He barely hears his own voice. There’s a lot in there that he hates hearing. Makes his own voice sound foreign.

Shiro doesn’t answer right away, and Keith doesn’t look away from the picture. He hears a pause. Hears a shuffling. Hears the question what die in Shiro’s throat as he must have turned around to see what Keith means. Sees his eyes glued to the fridge.

Soft, padding footsteps. A heavy hand on his shoulder. Warm. Familiar. Comforting. A slight squeeze. “You know they were.” He says, voice soft and kind.
“What about your parents?” He doesn’t know where the question comes from. Just knows it’s been bouncing around in his head for a while and he always buries it before he can dwell on it too much. He thinks Lance might have been the catalyst for it, but he can’t say for sure.

And now it’s out in the open before he can pull it back.

“Hmm?”

He shouldn’t push. He should let the subject drop. They never talk about this. It’s a silently forbidden topic. By Keith’s own rules. He knows that. He knows. Just drop the subject. Let it go.

Instead, he pushes.

“Dad and... your mom.” He pauses, short and brief as understanding sinks in for Shiro. “They were soulmates?” He says it like a question, but it’s not. They both know it. Keith knows that Shiro’s parents were soulmates. Just as his own were. It’s never been a question, but here he is, framing it like one.

“Yeah,” Shiro’s voice trails off, still soft, but gaining fonder notes. Nostalgia. A sorrow that’s long since healed and all that remains are the good things. Fond memories. A vain wish to go back but knowing you can’t. He sounds distant. “Yeah, they were.”

He should drop this subject. He should. His gut is twisting itself into knots. He feels nauseous, like his stomach has dropped. His chest feels strained, but he breathes through it. Breathes heavily through his nose in controlled breaths.
And keeps going.

He doesn’t know why.

“Were they happy?”

A pause. “Why the sudden interest?”

He can practically hear the curiosity in his voice. Shiro denies it, but he has an eyebrow raise voice. Keith knows it. Pidge knows it. Matt knows it. They like to tease him about it. So Keith knows without having to look at him. And definitely doesn’t want to meet his eyes right now. Not when he’s feeling... something. Some mess of a knot of emotions that he doesn’t even know how to process himself.

He doesn’t know how to answer the question. Not when he doesn’t even understand his own thought process. Not when all of this comes bouncing around and he’s suddenly thinking more about soulmates than he ever has before, and he’s pretty sure it has to do with how soft Lance’s lips are and the little sounds he makes when they kiss.

So instead of answering, he just shrugs, feeling the rise and fall of the weight of Shiro’s hand as it rests there.

“I don’t know for sure,” Shiro admits, voice soft in the quiet of the kitchen, but remaining casual. An odd bit of indifference that comes with time and age. “There’re some things parents won’t tell their kids, but... yeah, I like to think they were happy. Not so much at the end, but that had more to do with... you know.”

He knows. The cancer. The declining health. The slow ebbing of her life until she was just a shell of the person she had once been. Until she was gone.

There’s a silence. One that Keith doesn’t know how to fill. He can hear the curry simmering. The vague hum of the air circulating through the vents. His heartbeat sounds too loud.

“Dad wasn’t happy for a long time,” Shiro says, and there’s more a raw pain there. One that’s not as distant or accepted. Soft. Sad. “He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. I tried to cheer him up, but I think was lonely. And it was a loneliness that I couldn’t fill. Then he met your mom, and he started smiling again.” An edge of fond happiness, a lighter tone. “I’ll always be grateful to her for that.”

Keith hadn’t meant to bring this into their cozy little family night. But here it was. A big, ugly elephant in the room, permeating their safe space with memories that he would prefer to keep buried. He feels bad for dragging Shiro down into this, but Shiro has never been as closed off as he has. Shiro has always wanted to talk about things like this. Keith has just never given him a chance.

He should have known better than to bring it up, knowing the Shiro wouldn’t drop it once it was dragged into the open.

Or maybe that’s exactly why he brought it up to begin with.

To have a talk he’s always wanted to have, deep down, but was too scared to.

All he fucking knows is that he’s already having regrets, but he does nothing to stop the flow of conversation.

“I know what happened with your parents, Keith.” It’s said gently, with a light squeeze at his
shoulder. It’s reassuring, soothing, despite the fact that the words open up something raw and hollow inside him.

“They weren’t happy.” He manages to say, voice sounding choked, hoarse. His mouth feels dry, and his tongue feels thick.

“I know.”

“Soulmates doesn’t mean you end up happy.” The words feel like they’re choking him, but he gets them out, voice only cracking once.

“But that’s the great thing about them, don’t you think?”

Keith looks at him then, turning and leaning away slightly, gazing up at him through narrowed eyes and beneath a furrowed brow. He can feel his lip curling slightly, nose crinkling.

Shiro takes one look at him and laughs. The sound is oddly disjointed with their conversation, but pleasant nonetheless. “I know it sounds crazy,” Keith interrupts him with a short snort, but Shiro just squeezes his shoulder and continues, eyes drifting back to the photo of their family. “But... I’m comforted by it-- Just, hear me out.”

He holds up a finger, cutting off Keith’s protest. He closes his mouth, huffing as he crosses his arms over his chest, shoulders hunching.

“The universe has given me a gift. A link and promise of my perfect match. Someone who has the potential to just... complete me. But it’s not guaranteed. Nothing in life is set in stone, and soulmates are no exception. How the relationship turns out is entirely up to me. I still have a choice. My decisions matter. I have the power to build my own happiness.”

“You also have the power to fuck it up.” Keith grumbles.

Shiro chuckles, patting Keith’s shoulder before reaching around him to the other side, pulling him into his side in a half hug. “Yeah, that, too.” He doesn’t sound put off by that fact.

Keith leans into him, breathing in the familiar smell of his soap and shampoo, the vague scent of laundry detergent that clings to his shirt. The combination is spicy and soft, wrapping Keith up in a cocoon of familiarity.

“ Aren’t you afraid of messing everything up?” He mumbles, eyes roaming over the features of the Shiro on the picture in front of them. Without the scar or stock of white hair, he looks so young.

Shiro hums, and Keith can hear the thoughtful rumble deep in his chest. “Yeah, sometimes. But I prefer to believe in my ability to fix it if I do.” His arms tightens around Keith, and without really thinking about it, Keith turns into him. Wraps his arms around Shiro’s waist, fingers digging into the back of his shirt. He buries his face in Shiro’s chest, feeling the press of his cheek atop his head, relaxing as his arms settle around him. “It can be scary that our choices have consequences, but I prefer to find comfort in the fact that we do have choices. The universe has given you a gift, and it’s up to you what you do with it. But it’s a shame to let it go to waste without trying, don’t you think?”

Keith sighs, feeling his body slump. He squeezes his eyes shut. Ignoring the burn he feels there and focusing on taking deep breaths of Shiro’s scent, letting it settle him.

“Besides, Lance isn’t so bad, is he?” It’s lighter, teasing, a unspoken chuckle rumbling in his chest.
“No,” Keith mumbles, begrudging and reluctant. “But he’s a lot like mom.”

It’s a thought that’s been nagging at him for weeks, nibbling at the edges of his mind where he refused to acknowledge it. But he does now. Lets it out into the open. A simple fact, a simple comparison, but one that fueled the fire of his fear. One that he didn’t like to admit.

Brash. Eager. Headstrong. Hopeful. Convinced of a fantasy. Rushing headlong into the future. Running straight for the happily ever after without bothering to live the story. A dreamer, until she was forced to wake up.

Lance is a lot like his mom was, and it terrifies him.

“Good thing he has you to level him out then, huh?” Shiro pulls away, forcing Keith out of the safety of his chest. He looked up at him, meeting his gaze with pursed lips and a pinch between his brows. Shiro just smiles, small and gentle. “You have choices Keith. And you can choose to make it work with Lance.”

The weight on his shoulders doesn’t lift, but it feels a hell of a lot more manageable.

“Thanks, Shiro.” He says, and he means it. Offers a small smile that Shiro returns. Out of the sanctity of Shiro’s chest, nose clear of his body wash and deodorant, Keith’s nose curls. He sniffs. Once. Twice. “Is... is the rice burning?”

Shiro’s face falls instantly, practically shoving Keith aside to get to the stove. “Fuck!”

They try to salvage the rice, but it’s a lost cause. They both decide to give up on it completely and order take out simply to get the rice to eat with their curry. They end up spending the evening sinking into the worn leather of Shiro’s couch, eating their body weight in curry and popcorn, idly scraping the bottom of netflix for terrible movie selections.

He doesn’t think about soulmates for the rest of the evening, feeling lighter than he has in months. Perhaps even years. Definitely years.

The smell of ink is sharp, poignant, and fills his senses with a sense of acidic familiarity. They make scented markers these days, but Keith has never liked them. They’re too falselgely floral or fruity. Fake delights that smell like chemicals and barely conceal the true smell of ink beneath them.

Keith prefers the raw scent of paint and ink. Makes it feel more real. Doesn’t try to dress up what it is. Reminds him of days and nights spent in his mom’s studio. Reminds him of playing in paint when she wasn’t looking. Reminds him of helping her on projects. Reminds him of the two of them sitting in the middle of a tarp on the floor as she shows him the strategies of utilizing himself as a canvas.

Reminds him of the days when it was just the two of them, alone but strong together, both finding purpose and solace among paint splatters and messy brush strokes.

Reminds him of the days when they were made whole, both of them coming out of the studio with paint dried beneath their nails and hair falling out of messy buns, splatters on their clothes as they laugh, coming into a warm kitchen to Shiro and his dad, smiling fondly and telling them to wash
Reminds him of the days following the accident. Days of grief hanging heavy on his shoulders. Days of feeling gutted and hollowed out. Days where nothing seemed to matter and everything was numb. Days where he painted through those emotions just to feel again, to remember, to hold onto a piece of the family he lost.

Reminds him of days spent with his grandma, setting up a new studio in their home, her hands gnarled and movements slow, but her passion for colors and paints shining through, giving him a glimpse of where his mom had gotten it from.

Reminds him of painting with his grandma to mourn the loss of a mother and a daughter.

The accident.

He hadn’t been able to sleep. Too many thoughts. Bouncing around in his head, colliding, forming new thoughts, new tangents, never full forming but never really going away. Creating chaos. Creating a web that held him trapped, refusing to let him fall into unconsciousness.

So he had done what he always does when his thoughts won’t let him sleep: he had gotten out of bed to paint. To channel those thoughts out of himself so the emotions could settle and he could finally rest.

He sits on the edge of his couch, leg propped up on his coffee table, wearing nothing but his boxer briefs and a t-shirt. The surface is littered with open paint jars, colors of blacks, whites, grays, and reds. A palette sits nearby, splattered with his various mixes. A thick brush is held loosely between his teeth, all but forgotten as he uses a smaller brush to paint details.

His entire leg is covered, and he ignores the mess his leg hair has become, focusing instead on the colors and the design.

The accident.

One adult female, dead upon impact. One adult male, died before the ambulance could get there. A young man, injured, heavy bleeding, facial injury, arm pinched in the wreckage of the car. Emergency amputation.

Keith hadn’t been in the car.

But he could have been.

When he had been in a dark place, when the grief had been thick and the wound had been fresh, Keith had wished he had been in the car. At least then he could have suffered with his family, instead of miraculously being unharmed and whole. He felt guilty. Guilty for not somehow changing it. For not being with them in their final moments. Guilty simply because he was alive.

He’s moved past that, but it doesn’t stop the what-if’s from creeping up at him in the late hours when his barriers are down and shadows creep in from the windows.

What if he had been in the car.

He would have rather been in the car than Shiro. Even to this day. He wishes he could have switched places with Shiro. He’s seen everything his brother has gone through since the accident, and he wishes he could take that away. Bear it so Shiro wouldn’t have to. He’s the kind one. The understanding one. The gentle one. He didn’t deserve what he had happened.
But at least he had Allura.

Then Keith wonders how Lance would have handled the same situation, in Allura’s place. Would he have noticed? Would Keith have reached out to him? Told him? Or would he have pulled away all the same?

If he had been in that car instead of Shiro, how many things would be different? Would he still have pulled away from his soulmate, or would he have reached out? Connected? And if he had, would that have changed how he felt about the whole thing? Would his reaction to Lance have been different?


In another world. Another life. Another universe.

What would have happened if he had been in the car?

He always sat on the opposite side of the car from Shiro. Would his injuries have been different? What if he lost a limb? A different limb?

He had known what he wanted to paint before he had even sat down. He’s rushing through it, but he needs to get it out. Paint strokes rapid and messy, uncoordinated, slathering paint on his skin. He gets the base down quickly, distantly pleased how the chaotic strokes can be seen. Then he starts on the details, blacks, reds, whites, fitting into the grooves of his knee, near his ankle, at where the base cuts off mid thigh.

He paints himself a metal leg reminiscent of Shiro’s prosthetic arm.

If he had reached out to Lance then, would things have been different?

Would they have a romance more like Shiro and Allura?

Does he even want that?

He doesn’t know.

He doesn’t know.

He doesn’t know.

He’s not a huge fan of working the weight room desk. It’s smaller desk than the front, and he actually has to pay attention to what people are doing instead of just mindlessly answering simple questions and passing out occasional equipment. The chair here is also significantly less comfortable, his knees hitting the bottom of the desk and leaving very little leg room. Not to mention the computer here is slow as hell.

The work itself is pretty easy. He just has to sit here for the most part and make sure none of the dude bros hurt themselves. Make sure they’re not throwing weights around, dropping them, or misusing the equipment. He barely thinks as he spouts off reprimands.
No running in the weight room.

Don’t drop the weights.

If you’re not going to do anything, please move so others can use the equipment.

Under most circumstances, he hates being cooped up here. At the front desk, he occasionally gets to walk around the gym, making sure everything is in order. Here, the most movement he gets is occasionally getting up to clear the mirror or the seats or organize the weights because people can’t put them back in number order.

Today, however, he appreciates the fact that he’s not expected to move much. He also appreciates the fact that he’s alone at this desk and isn’t expected to make idle conversation with a coworker. He likes Ginny. He really does. But he’s just tired. So. Damn. Tired.

Getting up to paint his leg had seemed like a good idea until it was four in the morning, he still needed to take a shower to wash it off, and he had to get up early for classes.

He can practically feel the bags under his eyes.

When someone comes up to ask him to show them how to explain how to use one of the machines, it takes him a solid three seconds to react, looking up from his phone and blinking slowly as he tries to focus on the guy in front of the desk. Tall. Short cut hair. Strong jaw. Conventionally attractive. Typical dude bro he sees up here.

Keith grunts his response and slips out from behind his circle platform of a desk. He trudges over to the machine in question and goes through the basics, voice flat, monotoned, and gestures vague. He’s been through this a million times. Has used this machine a million times. Well, maybe not this one. But ones like it.

He really needs to get back into a gym routine. Especially now that he has a free access to the gyms on campus.

The guy thanks him. Says something nondescript and vague and cliche. He misses the words, but it’s the tone that catches Keith’s attention. It’s just a fraction beyond casual, and it rubs him the wrong way. He looks up, catches the guy’s eyes, sees the glint there.

It’s an expression that Keith is very familiar with.

Lance looks at him like that all the time.

In fact, no one should look at him like that besides Lance. Ever.

Face blank and expression flat, he gives the guy a very obvious once over. One eyebrow raised. Eyes as dead as he feels. Barely visible soulmarks are faded on the guy’s arm. He doesn’t look like he’s trying to hide them. So he must be in a position where casual flings don’t really matter much to him. It’s pretty common, but Keith isn’t interested.

Not at all.

He scoffs, rolling his eyes as he turns away. It’s rude. He knows it is. But he also doesn’t care. He’s not paid to be polite, and he’s way too fucking tired for this.
Besides, that guy has *nothing* on Lance.


Because yes, Keith has looked. How could he *not*?

He hasn’t gotten brave enough to cop a feel yet, but fuck if he doesn’t want to.

Lance with his beautiful blue eyes, and his slightly upturned nose, and soft, thin lips, and his voice-

“Damn, Kogane, you look like shit.”

He blinks, familiar voice sinking in, making something in his chest react before his mind fully catches up. He lifts his head from where it had been resting in his palm, spinning his chair a little until he’s face to face with none other than Lance. He stands on the other side of the desk, elbow and forearm resting on the chest high counter top, eyeing Keith with one eyebrow raised and amusement tugging at the lines of his face.

“Lance?” Great. Intelligible.

His smile widens enough to show teeth. “The one and only.”

Keith’s brows pinch, lips pursing just a fraction. “What’re you doing here?”

Lance rolls his eyes, half shrugging a shoulder. His smirk remains in place. “I’m here to work out, obviously.”

Keith cocks an eyebrow, gaze straying from Lance to pointedly sweep across the weight room before returning. “Here?”

“Ouch, dude. That hurts.” He says in mock offense, but he can’t quiet turn off his smirk. “Yeah, here. Hunk and I decided we need to work out more.” He lifts his free hand, putting up one finger. “Mondays are cardio.” Another finger. “Wednesdays are weight training.” A third finger. “And Fridays I teach Hunk how to swim.”

“Do you even know *how* to weight train?”

“You hurt me, Keith. You really do.” He doesn’t sound offended.

“Your arms are noodles, Lance.” Keith deadpans.

“*Excuse* you, I have some muscle there.” He emphasizes this by lifting his free arm, flexing. His muscle tank leaves his arms bare. And while it’s not a *huge* difference, there’s definitely some definition there. Not huge bulging muscles, but long lean ones.

Keith stares a moment longer than necessary, but then he feels his lips tugging up into a small smile. “Sure.”

“Can’t you humor me?”

“Nope.”

“You’re mean when you’re tired.”
“Many would argue that it’s my default state.”

“I would probably be one of those people.”

Keith doesn’t even know when he started smiling, but he knows he is. It’s an effect that Lance has on him, and he doesn’t know how he feels about it. “Really though, do you know what you’re doing here?”

He doesn’t know where he’s going with that. What’s he going to do, spend his shift showing Lance how to work out?

Maybe.

He could?

No.

“Nope,” Lance shrugs. “That’s why I have Hunk to show me. He leads us through weight training, and I lead us through swimming. It’s our system.”

“She?” Keith glances around then, but he doesn’t see any sign of him. Not in the weight room, or the open hallway, or the indoor track he can see through the glass window wall, or the stairs that lead down to the first floor.

Lance waves him off. “He’s getting changed. He’ll be up here soon. So...” He trails off, face turned away, casual, but his eyes are on Keith, sidelong and almost shy. “Wanna show me around?”

“Sure,” He says, and he’s moving out from behind his desk before he really realizes it. As he comes around the corner, he can take Lance in fully. A muscle tank, open at the sides to reveal far more of his ribs and chest than necessary. Loose, baggy gym shorts that cut off right above his knee. And--

Keith’s painting. He had almost forgotten about it. Or rather, he had almost forgotten that he’d see it again. Tattooed on Lance’s skin.

It clearly looks like a robotic leg, details standing out against the gray of the base. But it doesn’t look metal. He can clearly see the swipes and streaks of his brush strokes. Giving the whole thing a more artistic edge.

He’s... kind of proud of it, actually.

But then Lance is shifting his weight to his other foot, moving his painted leg slightly behind the other, toe touching the ground, rubbing against the back of his other heel.

Keith looks up at him, eyebrows raised, confusion coiling uncertain in his chest because-- Lance looks-- embarrassed?

He looks away, still half leaning on the desk, free hand rubbing the back of his neck, bottom lip caught between his teeth, brows pinched.

“Sorry, I-- uh--“

“What?”

“Sorry, about-- you know.” He gestures vaguely downward, toward his painted leg.
Keith’s frown deepens, feels his brows furrow. His throat feels oddly tight. His stomach strangely suspended, waiting to drop at any moment. Adrenaline makes his limbs feel uncomfortably light, tingly, sickly.

Does Lance... not like it?

He’s... never considered that. His soulmate has always been ecstatic to get paintings. Has always praised him. Has never given any indication that they disliked anything that Keith has ever done artistically.

But... maybe he had just been saying that?

Keith isn’t soulmate. Lance wouldn’t have to lie to him.

“Why’re you sorry?” Keith asks, and he can’t tell if his voice sounds as strange to Lance as it does to himself.

“I dunno...” Lance still won’t look at him. His eyes roam the desk, the room, the ceiling, the walls, the other students, the floor. They avoid Keith completely.

“Are you... embarrassed about your soulmark?”

Lance’s eyes snap to him then, eyes wide and far, far too guilty. “Wha-- no!”

“You always show off your soulmarks. The paintings. It’s what you do.” It comes out as an accusation, with an edge of harshness that Keith hadn’t intended.

Lance flinches, and Keith has the decency to feel bad about it. But that doesn’t change the fact that Lance is acting strange, and Keith needs to know if he’s done something wrong. “I know, I know,” He says, arm dropping from the desk as he shifts his weight, free hand rubbing his upper arm. He stares down at his does, scuffing them against the floor. “But it’s... It’s weird now... isn’t it?”

He looks up at Keith through his lashes. Bashful. Shy. Pleading.

Keith is too tired for this.

He sighs, crossing his arms over his chest, shifting his weight to one foot. “Lance, what are you talking about?”

“Well, you know, with us being-- well, us.” He moves his hands, gesturing between them vaguely, tilting his head to the side. His lips are pursed into a small frown, brows furrowed. “It’s weird to like... talk about our soulmates when we’re... you know... isn’t it?”

Oh. Oh. That’s what’s bothering him.

Keith relaxes. Feels his shoulders slump and the knot in his gut loosen. He feels like he can breathe again, and he lets it out in a long exhale. A relieved sigh wrapped up with one of exasperated fondness. “Lance, it’s only weird if you make it weird.”

He blinks, an edge of wariness creeping into his features. “What’d you mean?” He asks, words slow and careful.

“Look, just because we’re... doing stuff,” Oh god, why is it so hard to just say it aloud? Guess they’re just going to dance around that bush forever. His fingers rub together where they rest against his bicep. “That doesn’t mean you can’t talk about your soulmate. I know you have a
soulmate. I know how you feel about them. I don’t expect that to change. So like... don’t feel like you have to change. It’s not weird.”

He perks up at that, standing a little straighter, brows finally relaxing. “Really?” He asks, eyes far too bright.

Keith nods. “Really.”

“But... You don’t like talking about soulmates.”

“Yeah, well, you do.” The rest goes unspoken, but he can tell Lance gets it from the way the remaining tension leaks out of him, from the way his eyes go all lidded and soft, and from that small smile that curls the edges of his lips.

“Thanks, Keith.” His voice is way, way too soft. And Keith is far, far too tired for this.

He clears his throat, feeling heat creeping up his neck as he turns away with a shrug. “No problem.”

“So...” There’s an edge to his voice, a playful one, a leading one. “Since you don’t have a problem with it.” And suddenly Lance is moving, stepping back and swinging his foot up to prop it up on the side of the desk, putting his leg painting on display. “Just look at this, dude! It’s awesome!”

Keith looks it over, allowing himself to really appreciate his work on Lance’s skin for the first time.

And for once, it doesn’t cause a clench in his gut. Rather, he feels a strange, warm bubbling.

“Yeah,” He says. “I suppose it is.”

As much as he loves spending time with friends, and doing things, and going out, Lance has always loved having quiet alone time.

He’s always enjoyed being able to be by himself, without the pressure of another’s presence, without the expectancy of conversation, without the noise. Being free to just sit back, relax, and give himself a little TLC.

TLC usually starts with spa night, and spa night always puts him in a good place.

So after he’s taken a long, hot shower, in which he washed himself thoroughly, and wrapped himself up in his favorite silky bathrobe, his favorite and more expensive face mask in place and healing his skin, Lance is annoyed that he still feels overly restless.

He just can’t settle down.

Can’t just let things go and be at peace with the universe or whatever.

He misses Hunk. Which is stupid. He just saw Hunk yesterday. He sees Hunk every day. They live together in the dorms. They see far more of each other than is probably healthy. He should be ecstatic for this opportunity to have a weekend alone and the room to himself.
He should be laid back, watching a movie marathon while idly scrolling the internet and eating a whole pizza for himself.

What he shouldn’t be doing is sitting tense and uncomfortable in one of their beanbags, foot bouncing restlessly, unable to find anything to occupy or distract him.

Unfortunately, that’s exactly what he’s doing.

It’s just... nothing is right. Nothing is interesting enough to catch his attention. He’s restless. Bored. Agitated. By all rights, he should be sinking into his blankets and turning off his phone and losing himself to cheesy movies. Instead, he’s buzzing with obnoxious energy and thoughts that go a mile a minute, gone before he has a chance to dwell on them.

_Ugh._ He hates this. He hates this even more because if he’s honest with himself, he knows exactly why he’s feeling this way. And he hates that, too.

Usually, when he starts thinking too much, when he starts spiraling down the pit of soulmates, when he starts to doubt himself, doubt his soulmate, wish he were anyone else, wish he were like his parents, like his siblings, like his fucking grandparents-- Hunk is there. Hunk is there to pull him out of the shadows. Stop his spiral. Anchor him in the eye of the storm and keep him from being swept away. Keeps him afloat until the storm passes and he’s strong enough to sail on his own again.

But now Hunk isn’t here.

Hunk is gone for the weekend visiting Shay.

And that’s part of the problem.

Wait. No. No, no, no. Hunk and his soulmate aren’t a problem. He’s happy for Hunk. He is. He really, really, is. But... god, he’s a mess. He’s jealous of Hunk. Envious of what he has. He shouldn’t be, and he hates that he is, but it’s a feeling that hasn’t gone away. One he doubts will ever go away. Not until he finally meets his own soulmate.

Hunk is living the dream. He had a loving relationship with his soulmate before their First Meeting. They weren’t super close, but they were cute and sweet and god, if he doesn’t want that. Then they met in a super hilarious way. A way that makes a great story. And now they visit each other occasionally and talk on the phone and skype and Lance-- he wants it. He wants that life. And he feels bad for wanting it.

He should be grateful for what he has, but it’s so, so hard when what he’s always wanted is still so far from his grasp. So far away that it seems like an impossibility at this point.

He just... watching his friends connect with their soulmates is bitter sweet. He’s happy for them. Loves watching love happen. Loves seeing the beauty of soulmates blossom right in front of his eyes. Makes him all soft and warm because yeah, he’s a romantic at heart.

But there’s an edge to his happiness. A bitter edge in his heart. A sour taste left in his mouth. Because he wants it, and he can’t have it.

He doesn’t blame his friends. He would never. It’s not their fault. He wants them to be happy. He doesn’t want them to have to censor themselves around him. He’ll meet his own soulmate one day, and it’ll be amazing. Until then, he just has to wait. Like he always has. Patient. Like he always has been.
He loves his soulmate. He really does. Loves them more than anything. He just... wishes they were here.

He should write to them.

No, no, he shouldn’t. They’ve been responding to him more often, but he shouldn’t push it. He doesn’t want to scare them away. Not when things are finally starting to look up. Even if it’s just an ember in the darkness, it’s better than nothing.

And with how he’s feeling now, he doesn’t quite trust himself to write to his soulmate without somehow fucking it up.

He should text Keith.

No. Nope. Nu-uh. Bad idea. Bad, bad idea. He should definitely not text Keith. Keith is not a replacement for his soulmate, and he’s not a placeholder. He’s just... a friend. A really good friend. Whom Lance is very attracted to and very much likes to kiss. And touch. And wouldn’t mind doing more. Because he’s fucking human, and he doesn’t know how long it’ll take to actually meet his soulmate, so he might as well have fun while he waits, right?

Right.

But that doesn’t mean he should reach out to Keith when he’s aching for his soulmate.

That wouldn’t be okay.

Right? Right.

But Keith is still his friend. And he reaches out to friends when he’s upset and needs distractions. And Keith is a damn good distraction-- No. Bad Lance. But it would be effective. Why spend his time moping when he could spend his time living?

Besides, Keith likes kissing him, too. He’s seen the way Keith looks at him. He’s not that obvious. Keith is just as attracted to him as he is to Keith.

Why is he overthinking this? They literally agreed to this whole thing because they didn’t want to wait for their soulmates to live their damn lives. And right now, Lance is tired of sitting still. He wants to live. He doesn’t want to wait forever.

Yeah, mope later when Hunk is here to help him. Distract himself now with Keith and his stupid deadpan snark and pretty eyes and soft pouty lips.

And he has no reason to feel bad about it because this is his life. His soulmate didn’t want to connect. That’s fine. They’ll have plenty of time to do that after they meet. He doesn’t have to live on pause until then. For now, Lance is going to live his life and spend time with a pretty boy with long dark hair and eyes like the midnight sky and hands that are firm and focused and determined but oh so gentle when they touch him.

All he has to do is get his phone and text--

Oh, Keith texted him.

Sass Master Keith
> How’d your art history exam go?
Lance
> Like on a scale from one to ten?
> Or I suppose on a scale from one to one hundred
> I won’t know that until next week
> But hey, I didn’t walk out of there looking as devastated as some of the others, so I suppose that’s a good sign
> Still hoping for a grading curve tho

Sass Master Keith
> How’d you feel about it?

Lance
> I feel like I regret taking this class

Sass Master Keith
> That’s not a new feeling

Lance
> Tru
> How about next time you just take the test for me?

Sass Master Keith
> Fuck no

Lance
> GASP
> Such profanity
> You kiss me with that mouth?

Sass Master Keith
> I’d like to

Lance
> Oooh ho ho
> Forward tonight, aren’t we?

Sass Master Keith
> Shrug emoji

Lance
> Did you just
> Keith
> Did you just fucking type out SHRUG EMOJI??

Sass Master Keith
> Couldn’t be assed to find the actual emoji

Lance
> Unbelievable

Sass Master Keith
> Thanks
Lance
> So...
> What’re you doing tonight?

Sass Master Keith
> Homework and laundry

Lance
> ON A SATURDAY????

Sass Master Keith
> Yeah?

Lance
> Oh, oh no, Keith, no
> How about instead of doing literally any of that, you come over, we go get cheap food, and then go get some drinks and I kick your ass at pool

Sass Master Keith
> That’s funny

Lance
> Is that a no?

Sass Master Keith
> It’s definitely a yes
> I just think it’s funny that you think you can beat me at pool

Lance
> Your tight ass is going down

Sass Master Keith
> Now who’s being forward?

Lance
> Not a proposal
> Just an observation

Sass Master Keith
> Mhmm

Lance
> Just get over here

Sass Master Keith
> K

The bar Lance takes him to is one of his favorites. There are several in town. One is good for dancing. Another is great for food. A third is good for trivia and sitting with friends. A couple
others play live music most weekends. This one, however, is his favorite because it has a game room.

Nothing fancy or extravagant. A section for dart boards, a few foosball tables, some pinball machines, and some pool tables in the center of the room.

The patrons of this particular bar tend to be older as well. Less crazy. Much more chill. Makes for a relaxed night out as opposed to one with screaming drunks and dim bar lights.

Being a Saturday night, the bar is getting crowded. Thankfully, they arrive before the party crowd, and this particular bar is usually the last to fill up anyway. Unfortunately, the pool tables are the first to be occupied, and they’re in use when Keith and Lance get there.

So they cheap drinks, bottom of the barrel, poor quality but affordable for college students. Keith gets a rum and coke, and Lance gets a vodka cranberry. The cranberry is just tart enough to cut the sharp edge of the cheap vodka. They pick seats at the bar that runs along the edge of the game room, sitting on stools with their back to the bar, eyeing the pool tables like a pair of vultures.

They lean in close, knees knocking together but neither of them acknowledging it. Their heads tilt together, and Lance can occasionally feel Keith’s hair brush across his forehead, his temple, his cheek. Neither of them look at each other. Like if they don’t make eye contact, they don’t have to acknowledge how close they are. Their gazes sweep the room, whispering under their breaths about the things they see.

Look at that guy trying to impress that cluster of drunk chicks. He sucks at darts.

What’s the point of foosball? Those dudes are going hard, but it’s just... boring.

Check out these two dudes eye fucking across the room. Wanna take bets on how long it takes for them to talk to each other?

Mostly, they watch the games of pool going on at the tables, looking for any sign that the players might be done any time soon.

“And as you can see, Ricky McSnapback is going the route of intimidation,” Lance says, leaning over into Keith’s space, knee pressing into his thigh. He holds a hand up over his mouth, speaking in a voice that’s primed, polished, and dry enough to mimic the most basic of newscasters. “Look at those biceps, Keith. Perfectly sculpted for this purpose alone. His look of unimpressed nonchalance completes the facade.”

Keith snorts, dissolving into soft chuckles that smell like rum and sound like heaven. “Ricky?” He asks, eyes crinkling at the corners.

Lance shrugs. “He looks like a Ricky. Just roll with it.” Lance grins, poking Keith’s shoulder to silently encourage him.

Keith clears his throat, sitting up a little straighter, leaning back against the bar with one elbow propped up on the worn wood. He tilts his head, bringing his lips close to Lance’s ear. “It seems, however, that his efforts are in vain.” Keith says, voice a mimicry of Lance’s.

He had encouraged Keith to join him, but he had been expecting the typical dry, monotone. Instead, what he gets is so completely different from anything that he’s expecting of Keith that he snorts loudly, jerking as laughter shakes out of him. He slaps a hand over his mouth, hunching forward to stifle his giggles.
Keith smirks and leans forward with him, keeping close, and continues. But this time, he slips an accent into it. Slipping into a southern drawl with all the right inflections to make a reporter proud. “Samuel Popped-Collar McGee seems completely unaffected, and the attempt at intimidation falls flat. Unfortunately, Samuel isn’t great at this game to begin with and fumbles his hit, sending the balls scattering but pockets none of them-- Ooo, except the cue ball. Better luck next time, Samuel.”

Lance snorts again, giggles slipping from between his fingertips. He rests his forehead on Keith’s shoulder, turning his laughter into his neck. He doesn’t need to look to know that Keith is grinning.

Then Keith is poking his side, making him jump away. “Table’s free.” He says before Lance can protest, and the beginnings of a pout disappear immediately.

His head whips up, locking onto a table that was just vacated. He grins, turning back to Keith. “You claim the table while I get another round of drinks?”

Lance slips back into the other room while Keith moves toward the pool table. He wedges his way through the people sitting at the bar and waits to catch the bartender’s attention.

He glances around as he waits, at the bartenders, at the patrons around him. He catches sight of a few soulmarks. A few scribbles of faded and fresh ink alike on their arms.

And... for once he doesn’t feel jealous. Or an aching pang of longing. Or anything like that.

He’s actually having fun, and Keith is a great distraction. He makes Lance feel alive. Takes up all of Lance’s attention so his thoughts don’t have a chance to wander. Makes him feel good by doing nothing but sitting there and looking surly as Lance pokes fun at him.

When he’s with Keith, he’s able to just... be. To just exist in the moment without the lingering thought of his soulmate hanging over him. And it’s mostly because he feels slightly guilty thinking about his soulmate when he’s with Keith, but it’s still a freeing feeling nonetheless.

He still loves his soulmate. Always will. Would give anything to meet them right here and right now. But he knows that’s not a possibility. And Keith lets him enjoy the present for once without aching for the future.

It’s freeing.

It’s exhilarating.

It’s addicting.

It’s a little terrifying.

He orders the same cheap drinks as before, cause why change what works, and heads back to the game room, weaving expertly between clusters of drunk people.

Keith already has the table set up by the time he gets there. He looks good, and Lance both hates and revels in the little warm thrill that shoots straight through his chest at the sight of him, settling low and sensual in his gut. Because Keith, for lack of a better term, is fucking hot. Like... really fucking hot. And the worst part? He’s not wearing anything special. Just tight black jeans that hug his thighs and ass, tall boots that Lance wants him to curl stomp him with, a black v-neck t-shirt that’s just tight enough to show the shape of his chest without clinging, and a simple red plaid shirt that hangs unbuttoned and rolled up to his elbows, showing off forearms that have Lance weak at the knees.
He shouldn’t be weak to forearms, yet here he is.

When Keith had shown up at his door, a leather jacket thrown over the whole ensemble, hair wind swept and messy, Lance had felt light headed just looking at him.

Ever since he’s acknowledged his attraction to Keith, he feels like it’s gotten worse. Harder to ignore. Affects him more. But... that’s okay, right? They agreed it was okay.

Besides, he saw the way Keith’s eyes moved slowly down his own body, a shade darker and hungrier by the time his gaze returned to his face.

“Ready to get your ass kicked?” He asks, handing Keith his drink.

He holds a pool cue with one hand, propped against the ground and leaning slightly into it as he sips his drink. His eyes glint dangerously at Lance over the lip of the plastic cup. “When I win, you’re buying me another drink.”

Lance lifts an eyebrow. “And when I win?”

“Won’t happen.”

“Cocky. I like it.”

Keith flashes him a smirk that has Lance’s insides threatening to liquify before he turns to set his drink aside.

They rock-paper-scissors for who gets to break. Lance wins, and he’s proud of it. He’s done rock-paper-scissors enough with his siblings over the years that he prides himself on being able to read his opponent. Keith calls it dumb luck. Lance just lifts his nose and takes up his position.

Keith is watching him intently, and he’s proud when he manages a good break and even sinks one of the balls.

A good start.

It goes downhill from there.

It’s not that Lance is bad at pool. Actually, he’s pretty damn good. His neighbors had one growing up, and him and his siblings used to go over there and have tournaments with the other neighborhood kids. He won a few candy bars in his time.

He’s pretty good at aiming. At seeing the angles and coming with creative shots that are so outlandish that they’re impressive as hell when they work.

Unfortunately, Keith is just better.

When he sinks the eight ball and Lance only has half of his own balls down, he straightens, plants the bottom of his cue on the floor, and smirks across the table at Lance. He glares, lips pursing dangerously into pout territory.

“Rematch.”

“You’re on.”

This time Keith breaks, and yeah, it’s a good break, but nothing sinks. Lance is determined to win. Or at least keep up. His pride is on the line. So he’s not above playing dirty. He gets his
opportunity when he notices a very tiny little detail: Keith staring at his ass whenever he bends over the table.

He’s subtle about it. Lance’ll give him that. Just a casual flicker of the eyes whenever Lance goes to line up a shot. Just *happens* to position himself to Lance’s side or slightly behind him. Lance might not have noticed at all if it hadn’t been for the very obvious snap of his eyes back to Lance’s face whenever he turned to look at him.

Or the slight darkening of his cheeks.

Keith is blushy. Cute.

And Lance milks it.

He bends a little more over the table and takes a little longer to line up his shots, pops his ass in just the right way, silently thanking past Lance for deciding to wear his ass hugging jeans. He takes to straightening slowly, with a subtle body roll that’s entirely unnecessary, and shooting Keith sly smirks over his shoulder.

Keith lights up like a fire engine, and it’s the best goddamn thing ever.

He starts taking more complicated shots. The ones that require him to sit on the table, shoot behind his back, stretch his long legs out for balance. He’s flexible, and he knows it. Now Keith knows it, too.

He also knows that he’s probably gaining some extra attention around the bar, but he can’t bring himself to care. He has Keith’s attention, and that’s all that matters, really.

It doesn’t take long for Keith to catch onto his game. He gets his revenge. Turns out, Keith’s ass looks great when he bends over, too. But it’s more than that. There’s a glint of determined fire in his eyes. The way he looks over the table to choose his shot, the way he stares when he’s lining it up, the cute way his tongue peeks out to press against his bottom lip. The sharp perfection of his hit. The smirk that curls his lips when the shot goes well. The way his body seems to fucking *roll* when he straightens, a coil of muscles, a predatory shifting that seems so completely unintentional. It has Lance feeling weak at the knees, and if he sits on the table a little more often to keep them from buckling and throwing his ass to the ground, well... that’s that.

Lance isn’t sure that Keith entirely *knows* what he does to him, and he’s kind of grateful for that.

Keith ends up winning, and this time Lance isn’t even surprised. He isn’t, however, ready to be done. So he gets another round of drinks while Keith sets up for a third game.

This time Keith gets bolder, confidence running on a high. Or perhaps it’s the rum that’s giving him some liquid courage. Either way, he gets touchier. It’s subtle. Nothing big. Gentle pushes when others are trying to walk past Lance. A touch at his shoulder or lower back whenever he maneuvers around him. But the touches linger just a moment longer than they should, fingers brushing across him as Keith pulls away.

He might not have noticed if he wasn’t so fully *aware* of him. If he wasn’t so wholly tuned into where Keith is at all times and where he moves in the crowded room. If his skin didn’t buzz and crackle when energy every time Keith comes close.

Oh god, he’s got it back.

He’s fucked. He’s so fucking.
Oh, that’s an interesting idea-- No. Not yet. Wait, maybe.

Keith straightens after sinking the eight ball, and Lance tries not to dwell on the roll of his shoulders or the flex of his arms as he leans against his cue, shooting Lance a dangerous smirk.

“Not a word, Kogane.” He says, holding out a finger, fixing him with a stern frown.

Keith’s whole bad boy demeanor crumbles as he giggles, ducking his head to hide his smile, holding onto the cue a little harder and leaning into it to hold his balance.

*Cute as fuck.*

“Okay, new game plan.” Lance says, moving to take Keith’s pool cue and put them back on the rack, stepping aside as another group swarms the table to claim it. “We’re going to play darts.”

Keith blinks, eyes wide and face adorably blank. “Darts?”

“Youp,” He takes Keith’s hand, heart jamming up into his throat as Keith reflexively intertwines their fingers.

“Why?”

Lance tugs him through the room, weaving between groups to the dart boards. He sets Keith up in front of one. “Because my pride is hurt, and I need to impress you.”

“You don’t need to impress me.” He says it so casually, so innocently, a reactionary thought instead of one that’s intentional. Looking up at him with an expression that’s far too open and relaxed. Lance is learning that drunk Keith has far too few walls.

God, this boy is going to be the death of him.

“Yes, I do. Now you make sure no one uses this dart board, I’m gonna go get darts.” He pauses, eyeing the empty plastic cups that they had left across the room. “And more drinks.”

“I can buy them this time.”

“Nope, I got this.” He pats Keith on the head, a ruffle of his hair that’s meant to be friendly. He blames the vodka for his hand trails down, fingers trailing down his face, across his cheek, before hooking under his chin. He swears he’s not in complete control of his body as he winks. “Besides, you can pay me back later.”

He tells himself that he doesn’t know what he means by that. Tells himself that he’s just being playful. Just joking. But Keith’s cheeks flush all the same.

Lance slips away from him before he can give into the urge to kiss him.

He gets darts from the bar, as well as two more drinks, and makes his way back to Keith, feeling only slightly more wobbly than he had an hour ago. His limbs feel tingly and lighter, but he’s still in control as the alcohol starts to set in. He’s not fully drunk yet, but he’s well on his way and feeling good.

As he enters the game room, his eyes immediately find Keith, still standing where he had left him, but this time surrounded by a small crowd of drunk girls. All the walls Lance had seen down moments ago are up again. He stands, aloof and indifferent, arms crossed over his chest and eyes bored and slightly glazed as he idly turns toward them.
They’re talking, leaning far too close, but he doesn’t look like he’s listening. He looks distinctly uncomfortable, and Lance might have found it funny. But then one of them is reaching out, laying a hand on Keith’s arm in a way that’s far from innocent, and something ugly twists in Lance’s gut.

Something dark, and sickening, and far, far more volatile than what he feels when Hunk talks about Shay.

“Hey, babe,” He says, words slipping from him as he slides in behind Keith, holds a drink in each hand, spread wide on either side of him like a shield, forcing the girl’s hand to retract. “I’m back,” He says as he leans forward, pressing a over exaggerated kiss to Keith’s cheek.

He freezes, entire body stiffening. Lance can see his eyes go wide, can feel the heat on his cheeks, but he doesn’t pull away.

“You’re drink,” He says, curving a hand around Keith to hand him the plastic cup of rum and coke. Keith takes it robotically, pulling it in to nearly cradle it to his chest. Hand now free, Lance lets it settle onto Keith’s waist, stepping a little to his side so his arm wraps around his back. Keith doesn’t pull away. In fact, Lance swears he feels him leaning in just a little as he sips his drink. He holds up his other hand, brandishing his own cup as well as the darts clutched in his fingers. “Ready to play?”

Keith nods, and they turn toward the board. Lance spares a glance toward the girls. Some are sending him disappointed looks, but most look like they’ve already forgotten the encounter, already moving back to their own dart board and their own table like nothing had happened.

They back off with such little resistance that Lance thinks they probably assume Lance is Keith’s soulmate or something.

That lights up something strange and foreign in his chest, and he quickly stamps it out.


“Thanks,” Keith says as they turn around, setting his drink on the tall table next to them.

Lance shrugs, removing his hand from Keith’s waist to set his own drink aside, lining himself up at the line in front of their dart board and lifting a dart. “No problem. You looked like you could use some help.” He glances over his shoulder, small smirk on his lips. “Sorry about ruining your chances with them.”

He’s not, but he says it anyway.

Keith just shrugs. “Not interested in girls.” Then his eyes catch Lance’s, looking up through his lashes. There’s the ghost of a smirk on his lips. Playful. Shy. “I’d rather keep you company anyway.”

His voice is a low drawl, and it sends a shiver straight down Lance’s spine.

Lance turns back around and throws the dart.

Bullseye.
The night is cold, but for once, Lance doesn’t care. Can barely feel it. His cheeks are flushed, body warm, vodka creating a heat in his veins that keeps him going. The night air is a chill that he notices, but doesn’t truly sink in. It feels good. Feels right.

Just like Keith’s hand in his feels right.

Just like Keith’s laugh mingling with his own sounds right.

Just like how the way Keith’s face catches the streetlights, pale, cheeks flushed, eyes glistening, expression lifted with his smile, looks right.

They stumble through campus, tripping over their own feet and each other. They have to stop several times from laughing so hard, bent over and arms clutched around their middles. They hold each other up, lean on each other to keep from falling over, cling to one another despite the fact that it only makes their sense of balance worse.

He doesn’t even know what they’re laughing at or how it started. He doesn’t care, and he can’t stop. Doesn’t want to stop.

They only had a few more drinks over the past couple hours. He’s drunk, but only just so. Just barely over that line from tipsy to drunk. Enough that motor functions are lacking, keeping a steady thought process is hard, and he doesn’t have complete control over his facial expressions.

Despite his intoxication, he had kicked Keith’s ass at darts. Which hadn’t been too hard. Keith is actually pretty bad at darts, and he looked hilariously offended when he realized this. Stared at the darts in his hands like they had personally insulted him. Lance didn’t mind. It was good for a laugh. And it meant he got to get all up close and personal, touch Keith with gentle and lingering fingers as he maneuvered him into the best position, posture, where to put his arms.

“You live in the same dorm as Pidge, right?” Keith asks, arm wrapping around Lance’s waist to help him straighten up.

“Mhmm,” Lance hums, lifting a head and turning it a little too fast. “That once!” He points, realizing a second later that he overshot and ended up pointing to his neighboring dorm building. His finger wilts and he frowns. “Wait, no. Fuck that dorm. That one!”

Keith snorts. “What’s wrong with that one?”

“They have tiny room and never enough hot water. Now carry me.”

“Wha--“

He doesn’t get to finish before Lance is moving away from him, stepping behind and putting his hands on Keith’s shoulders. Before he has a chance to consider whether or not this is really a good idea, he’s jumping.

Thankfully, Keith is a lot more sturdy than he would be, though he does stumble several steps before regaining his balance. “Lance, what the fuck?” But he’s laughing, hands moving automatically to hold onto Lance’s thighs. They’re warm through his jeans.

Lance hums, wrapping his arms around Keith’s shoulder and putting his head next to Keith’s, nuzzling into the side of his head. “My legs don’t wanna work and ‘m tired. Carry me up to my room.”

“You’re ridiculous,” He says, but he’s already walking. The first few steps are a little wobbly.
before he adjusts to the added weight, and the rest are just fine, if not a little slow.

“You like me anyway,” Lance hums against his hair.

“You have no proof.”

“The proof is in the fact that you’re carrying me.”

Keith hums. Lance can feel it rumble in his throat against his arm. It’s nice. Keith is nice. Keith also smells nice. All spicy and earthy and just, well, Keith.

When they reach the doors to his dorm, it’s a struggle for Lance to scan his card and for them to reach the door before it locks again. It takes them a couple tries, and Lance nearly falls off Keith’s back twice. But he’s determined to stay on, and Keith doesn’t try to let him go.

When they get through, they earn a small amused smirk from the RA on duty at the front desk, Lance saluting him from his perch on Keith’s back as they wait for the elevator.

“To the left,” He says as they step out onto his floor, directing Keith to his door. It’s pretty obvious which one is his. There are handmade names on their door courtesy of their RA. Beneath them is a whiteboard with a doodle of Lance and Hunk, courtesy of himself. Keith snorts a short laugh at it while Lance attempts to unlock the door from his spot on Keith’s back.

It’s a struggle, but he finally gets it.

Keith pushes the door open with a foot, stepping into Lance’s space. Well, his and Hunk’s space, technically. He takes a quick look around, sees the beanbags on the floor, and steps over to them before turning and promptly dropping Lance onto one of them.

Lance falls with a squeal, landing with limbs spread every which way, and glares up at Keith with a pout. He laughs, and Lance can’t really bring himself to be mad.

He ignores Keith’s chuckles as he struggles out of the beanbag, body and limbs not quite working with him as smoothly as they should. When he finally manages to get to his feet, he stumbles to the door, tripping on a discarded shoe and falling into the door to close it. He eyes the light switch for a moment, lips pursed and brows furrowed, before deciding against it. Florescent lights? No thanks.

Instead, he turns, carefully but not quite gracefully picking his way across the room to his desk. He probably should have picked up somewhat, but he hadn’t really had time. He had been more concerned about getting himself presentable and the room didn’t get much attention before Keith arrived.

When he reaches his desk, he fumbles the switch for a second before his lamp turns on. He blinks against the sudden light, looking away and waiting for the gray dots to disappear. He turns, leaning back against his desk, hands propped up on it on either side of him.

With just his desk lamp, the room is bathed in a soft yellow light, just bright enough to give everything definition and an aura of warmth without being too much and too blinding. It sends shadows stretching in the corners. Not so much erasing the night but embracing it.

His room isn’t big, but it’s definitely not bad for a dorm room. They have their wardrobes lined up on one wall, mostly out of the way. Sizable desks. A smaller set of drawers each that they use as tables of sorts. One of which holds up their TV and assorted game consoles. Beanbags in the center of the floor.
Their beds are against another wall, bunked up to give them more space and because Hunk always wanted bunk beds growing up, and hey, Lance isn’t gonna say no to bunk beds. With his siblings, he fights over the top bunk, but he let Hunk have it easily. The way his face lit up when Lance said he could sleep up top was heart warming and worth it.

Keith stands in the middle of his room, turning slowly to take it all in. He looks at peace here, in the dim lighting of Lance’s space. Shoulders relaxed. Expression open. Eyes wide and slightly glazed. Lips relaxed enough to part just slightly. Cheeks still flushed.

He stands out. Dressed in black and leather. Doesn’t quite fit into the combined style and vibe of Hunk and Lance’s room. Looks like he belongs more in a bar, or a high class apartment, or an art exhibit late at night just before they close. More at home in a coffee shop, surrounded by dim lighting and sunken into a worn leather couch. Or a concert hall, with flashes of colored light briefly lighting his face and casting shadows, smoke curling around him. Or on the back of his bike, wind in his hair and a wild freedom singing in his veins.

Not here, in Lance’s room, where he puts on face masks and tries to learn to knit with Hunk and plays games and complains about homework. Not where he wakes up with killer bedhead and makes Hunk laugh until ramen comes out his nose.

Yet at the same time, he fits perfectly. A puzzle piece Lance hadn’t realized he’s been missing. As he shrugs off his jacket and tosses it to one of the beanbags, it looks incredibly natural. Adding to their mess. Jumping right into it instead of standing above it. As he rolls his shoulders while he looks around, he looks at ease here. At ease and pristine. A breathing piece of art. Strange enough to seem out of place but complimenting the shitty college aesthetic in a way that’s stranger.

Lance doesn’t know how to feel about it, but his heart is already a step ahead of him, fluttering uncomfortably in a sharp staccato. Lodging itself in his throat and making his breaths come shallow. His fingers curl into the edge of his desk, blunt nails biting at the polished wood in an attempt to avoid reaching out to Keith.

Touching him.

Drawing him closer and out of that strange veil of otherworldliness until he’s firmly planted in Lance’s reality, tangible, and fully immersed in the physical plane of Lance’s room.

Had Lance not been so intently watching him, appreciating the way the light warmed his pale complexion and shadows accented the sharp features of his face, he might not have noticed the moment Keith freezes.

He tenses, entire body going stiff, shoulders rising just a fraction. Lance can’t see his face, but his body language is enough.

His gaze follows Keith’s line of sight and--

Oh. Oh.

“Oh.”

Their bunk beds are tall. Tall enough that Lance isn’t cramped into a tiny little space on his bottom bunk. He has plenty of room to sit up and stretch, and it’s all around pretty comfortable. As such, however, the wall of his little bottom bunk cave is full visible.

And it’s covered with photos.
Some printed on glossy photo paper. Some on polaroids. Some printed on printer paper. They’re stuck to the painted cinderblock wall with tape and tack, overlapping at the corners and with no actual rhyme or reason to them. They’re not in neat lines and rows. They’re not ordered from biggest to smallest. It’s chaos. A mismatched collage. A cacophony of images. Beautiful in the simplicity and cozy in the disarray.

They’re all pictures of himself, technically. But his face is rarely in any of them. He’s not actually the focus or the point of the photos. The close ups focus in on the soulmark paintings decorating his skin. Paintings throughout the years. On his legs, arms, chest, neck. All of his favorites, and there are a lot of them. Some dating all the way back to high school, picture papers worn on the edges and sporting small holes from the thumbtacks that used to hold them to a bulletin board. The dim lighting of his desk lamp doesn’t really do the colors justice. It casts them all in warm hues, mixed with the shadow of the top bunk. But he knows the colors are there. Bright and vibrant as new tattoos. Some might say that it’s egotistical to have dozens of pictures of himself next to his bed, but honestly, he barely notices himself in the photos. The focus has always been the paintings. His soulmate’s paintings. His soulmate’s work. He just happens to be the canvas.

Near the head of his bed are a few newer ones, printed on simple paper from the library printers, cut haphazardly and stuck into the collage of older works.

A sleeve of fire and flame licking artistically up his arm.

A galaxy creeping up his neck, colors dark in the lighting, creating a void on the image of his shoulder and neck.

Bright and vibrant hues of the setting sun on his forearm.

A storm and sky, chaos of blues on his stomach, hands held nearby to display the chaos of paint there as well.

Lance standing proudly with his hands on his hips, wearing short black athletic shorts and a blank tank top, grinning at the camera as yellow and gold ribbons decorate his limbs, neck, and face. His leg propped up and bent, displaying the artistic strokes and design of metal.

“Um...” Lance steps forward, balance wobbling as he does so, mind reeling as he tries to settle it quickly. His vision is a little unfocused still, making everything look not quite sharp, not quite still. He stops next to Keith in the middle of the room, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand. “It’s kinda cheesy, but I, uh, like to take pictures of all the paintings my soulmate does. And--” He waves a hand at his bed. “Put them on my wall?”

He doesn’t know why he says it like a question. Doesn’t know why he feels so goddamn nervous about it. Keith had said that he doesn’t mind. It’s not like they’re pretending they don’t have soulmates. They’re both well aware of that fact. They never tried to pretend otherwise. So Lance has no reason to worry about the fact that his friend-with-benefits is looking at the work of his universe selected soulmate.

But he is.

He really fucking is.

They’ve been having such a good night, and Lance doesn’t want the mood ruined.

But more than that, he hates that he’s feeling self conscious and guilty over something that’s
brought him so much comfort over the years.

He sneaks a sideways glance, stomach twisting into knots as anticipation runs sour through his veins.

But Keith...

Keith isn’t looking at him. He’s staring at the collage on the wall, eyes wide, brows relaxed and raised just a fraction. His lips are parted, lax and soft. For how tense his body is, his face holds not a single wrinkle, not a single tense muscle.

He looks... beautiful.

The lamp light throws most of his face into shadow, but Lance can see the flush on his cheeks, though he’s unsure if it’s the alcohol or the cold. His skin is smooth and perfect, freckles tiny dots of shadow on the bridge of his nose. But it’s his eyes that catch Lance’s attention.


He must sense Lance watching him because he turns, a distant glaze over those beautifully dark irises, pupils blown wide. Framed so beautifully by elegant black lashes. Dark hair falling haphazardly over his forehead, windblown and crazed as it frames his face.

Beautiful. Wild.

His eyes dart around Lance’s face as he turns to face him more fully, encouraged by the lack of an actual negative reaction.

All he does is stare, eyes searching Lance’s.

Lance risks a smile, small and shy, feeling his own expression soften as his body relaxes, relief surging through him.

Keith’s eyes flicker down to the movement, hover there for just a moment, the pink tip of his tongue darting out to lick his own lips. Then his eyes are on Lance’s again, and Lance feels his breath catch in his throat. The distant haze is gone from Keith’s gaze, leaving only sharp, focused clarity. Determined fire sparking deep within those dark pools, pulling Lance in, leaving him transfixed, caught, drawn in.

Keith surges forward, gloved hands coming up to grab hold of his face, fingertips digging into his hair, holding tight to his jaw, thumbs on his cheeks. Then Lance is being yanked forward, lips crashing to Keith’s, warm, soft, wet, pliant but eager, pushing back against him, head tilting, searching.

Both of them stumble, thrown off balance by the sudden movement, but neither of them willing to break apart.

Lance’s hands come up, grabbing hold of Keith’s. They slip up his arms as their balance rightens, moving around his sides to wrap around his back, pulling him close.

Keith makes a noise, high pitched and needy and desperate, and it sends heat spiraling straight through him. He tilts his head, taking control of the kiss, tongue sweeping out across Keith’s lips, plunging in when he lets him in. One gloved hand wraps around his neck, fingers digging into the short strands of his hair and holding on tight, making Lance gasp. The other slides lower, over his collarbone, clutching at the fabric of his shirt.
Then Keith is moving them, pushing at Lance, legs stepping against his own, forcing him to stumble backwards, lips locked and eagerly moving against one another.

When the back of his knees hit the bed, he falls, retaining just enough presence of mind to duck in a practiced manner to avoid hitting his head on the top bunk. His grip on Keith maneuvers him, turning his fall, keeping both of them safe as they fall without grace to his school sanctioned mattress, into his messy disarray of blankets and pillows.

They shift, getting comfortable, ignoring the elbows in ribs and the knees digging into thighs. Never once letting the other move far enough away to break their kiss. When Keith straightens for a moment, pushing himself up to adjust, Lance leans up with him, chasing after him, unwilling to let him go.

Then they’re sinking back together, two pieces falling softening into place, a sigh escaping them both as Keith settles over him, straddling one of his legs, elbows framing his face as they kiss. Lance’s hands roam freely, fearless with the alcohol still humming pleasantly in his veins and encouraged by the small, soft sounds that escape Keith’s lips.

Hands slipping beneath the hem of his shirt, rising up to trail over his back, splaying wide to feel the dip of his spine and the ridges of his ribs. Moving to the front to let fingertips trace lean, defined muscles, thumbs experimentally trailing over nipples and smiling into the kiss as Keith jerks. Keith bites his bottom lip in retaliation and Lance lets out an embarrassingly loud groan, feeling Keith’s smile pressed against him.

He digs his fingers into Keith’s hair and presses their mouths together hard, locking a leg over Keith’s hip to roll them over, both on their sides, facing each other.

With his arms no longer needed to hold him up, Keith’s hands explore, pushing up Lance’s shirt. Fingertips and leather clad palms moving over the heated, sensitive skin of his chest, his side, his stomach, skidding teasingly past the hair trailing down from his navel.

He gasps, muscles twitching and jerking beneath Keith’s touch. He leans into him, and Keith’s hands slide to his back as their bodies begin to roll together. A jerk of the hips. Both of them wedging thighs between the other’s, hips moving is chaotic tandem, trying frantically to find a rhythm and pace together, both of them chasing what feels good. Both of them desperately trying to pull the same from the other.

They pause long enough to wrestle shirts off, Keith growling at the fabric as Lance struggles, tugging it roughly over his head before diving back into reclaim his lips.

Pleasure coils low in his gut as their hips continue to rut, helpless and frantic, desperate and needy. He’s never done this with someone else, but holy shit does it feel good. He can feel Keith hard against his thigh, hear the soft gasps shared between their lips.

He can’t think. Doesn’t want to think. Just wants to feel. Feel Keith rutting against him, just as much a slave to it as Lance is as they chase the heat. Just wants to feel Keith’s hands on him, tight gripped and needy, nails carving lines into his back and arms. Wants to feel Keith’s skin, hot beneath his fingertips and lips.

Want to hear the sounds Keith is making. Never wants them to stop. Wants to swallow them down. Wants to hear them louder.

He doesn’t know who moves first. Maybe they move at the same time. Suddenly there are just hands between them, fingers fumbling over the buttons on their jeans and zippers that get caught.
Heels of hands pushing their pants down, shoving the waistband of boxers out of the way. He presses his forehead to Keith’s, feeling the sweat there, the way their hair sticks together. Their noses touch, brushing together in a way that’s far more intimate than it should be. Their lips don’t touch, merely hover, barely brushing, breathing mingling, gasps and soft whines shared in the space between them.

When Keith’s hands touch him, hesitant at first, fingers light and grazing, Lance’s breath hitches in his throat. He freezes as Keith pulls back, resists the urge to lean after him as he leans away.

But then Keith’s teeth are biting into the leather of his glove, pulling it off roughly, eyes locked on his.

He’s not proud of the high pitched whine he makes, but it makes Keith smirk as he tosses the glove aside, dark irises smoldering as he leans back in, foreheads sticky and slick as they press together, the close brush of their noses making shivers run down his spine.

Then Keith’s hand is on him, pulling him out of his boxers, fingers skilled and deft and barely hesitating before wrapping around him, palm hot against his sensitive flesh.

His breath hitches again before the air leaves his lungs in a rush, rumbling past his vocal chords to make a deep groan. He presses forward, nuzzling into Keith, catching his lips in a few tugging, lazy kisses.

He wasted no time reaching for Keith, pushing the waistband of his boxer brief down to free him, wrapping his fingers around him and-- Keith’s resounding moan shoots straight through him. His eyes roll into his head, eyes squeezed shut, lips parted as he pants. Lance keeps his eyes lidded but open, unable to look away, unwilling to let a single moment of Keith’s expression go to waste, wanting to see it all.

Their hips jerk, bodies moving together in a relentless rhythm, uncoordinated and desperate. Their hands move together, struggling to keep time with each other. He’s never touched someone else like this before, so he goes with what’s familiar, what he knows from touching himself. Turns out, it works. Fingers deft and quick on Keith, thumb brushing across his head.

Heat coils in his gut, tight and thrilling, building, building, tense, pressure, pushing more and more. His movements get sporadic, breath coming in sharp pants, mixing with Keith’s.

Then his hips are jerking, spilling out over Keith’s hand, body shuddering and long, low groan escaping his lips before he surges forward, cutting it off by capturing Keith’s lips.

A moment later, Keith is following him over the edge, kiss uncoordinated and sloppy as their bodies shudder against one another, coming slowly down from their high, relaxing with signs into Lance’s bed, slumping together on the blankets, heads falling away far enough to see each other but still close enough to feel each other’s breaths fanning out across their cheeks.

Lance doesn’t want to move, and Keith doesn’t seem to be in a big hurry to do so either.

His eyes search Keith’s face, taking in the sheen of sweat, the way his wild hair sticks to his skin, the way his collarbones and chest heave with every breath, dark eyes lidded and pupils blown, cheeks flushed and lips wet, swollen, and red. His skin cast half in shadow and half glowing with the warm light from his desk lamp.

Lance has art strewn across his wall, but in that moment, he thinks Keith is the most beautiful thing in his room.
And while still bathing in the afterglow, body warm and veins humming with endorphins, limbs tingling and muscles lax with the echoes of pleasure that still linger, he can’t bring himself to feel guilty for that thought.

Keith has never lived in dorms, but he learns pretty quickly that they’re actually a terrible place to get a good nights sleep.

His apartment isn’t as quiet as his grandparent’s house, but the occasional bump and voice and music and door opening from his neighbors isn’t that bad. Lance’s dorm, however, is busy.


He ended up waking up around five in the morning needing to pee. He got halfway out of bed before he remembered that he had never put his glove back on, and had a moment of brief panic while he tried to remember if Lance had seen the faint words on his palm.

He was fairly sure he hadn’t. It had been dark, and they had been... distracted.

He found his glove with minimal struggle and stumbled out into the brightly lit hallway, still feeling the effects of the tail end of his buzz and the heavy blanket of sleep weighing him down. He managed to find the hall bathroom without much trouble, but ended up staring in bewildered confusion as a guy in a hotdog costume came out of a stall, gave him a small salute, and left.

College is weird.

Lance ended up following him into the bathroom with his toothbrush and toothpaste in hand. He caught Keith as he was leaving, and forced him to brush his teeth. When he tried to protest, Lance gave him a deadpan look and said, “Keith, we’ve already swapped saliva. Now you use my damn toothbrush because I am not waking up to you having morning breath and rum breath.”

So Keith ended up sharing a toothbrush with Lance in his floor’s shared bathroom, both in nothing but their boxers, at five in the morning, half asleep, still slightly drunk, and unintentionally making Lance laugh as toothpaste dribbled down his chin.

When they got back to his room, they both crawled back into Lance’s bed, kicking off nearly half of the cluster of blankets and pillows when their combined body heat became too much. Lance teased him heavily about being too emo to take his gloves off even in bed, but Keith didn’t budge.

Sleep took him quickly after that.

Sleep didn’t last.

Being a light sleeper in a dorm isn’t a great experience. He hears doors start to open and close far too loudly, echoing through the halls. He notices it distantly, pulling him out of his sleep just barely before he drops back in, curling tighter around Lance and burying his face between his shoulder blades.

He hears voices that intrude in on his fuzzy, disjointed dreams, not quite making sense but piercing through anyway.
Why people are so active on a Sunday morning, he’ll never know.

It’s nearly one in the afternoon by the time he gives up trying to sleep. He lies on his back in Lance’s bed, light peeking through the blinds on the dorm window, lighting the room in a hazy shade of daylight. His phone sits by his pillow, useless and dead, having gone black screen shortly after Keith checked the time.

Lance curls into his side, one leg thrown over Keith’s, one arm curled to his chest and the other tossed lazily over Keith’s stomach. His head rests on Keith’s shoulder, mouth open as he drools onto his chest. Keith can’t bring himself to care. He has one arm wrapped around him, fingers idly running through the short strands of his hair, scratching idly at his scalp and loving the way Lance curls into him just a fraction more.

Something strange runs through him as he looks at the wall next to Lance’s bed. Something warm and tingly and... uncomfortable. Not unpleasantly uncomfortable, just foreign and odd. Like his insides are shifting and tightening, unable to be still, clenching in a way that makes his stomach flip and his lungs squeeze.

He hasn’t thought about what his paintings look like on Lance until recently, and this... this is a lot. Some of these he recognizes from high school. Some of them are from last year, from a couple months ago, from the summer before he moved out here for school. Just fractions of Lance’s body, decorated with Keith’s paint, appearing on his skin like the color was made to be there, fresh and vibrant.

In the few where Keith can see Lance’s face, he’s smiling. Bright and brilliant. Small and fond. Distant and awed.

He recognizes all of them. Each of these paintings has a place in his own notebooks, copied and drawn after he’s put them on his skin. A poor duplicate done on paper so he doesn’t forget, so he can remember the art that he’s done, so he has a version of it after he’s washed it from his skin.

He’s never thought to take pictures like this. He never even imagined his soulmate would. He never expected to find them displayed proudly on Lance’s wall, let alone in the safe, intimate space that watches over his bed.

He... doesn’t know how he feels about it. He’s feeling a lot of things, and very few of them make sense. His hearts a mess, and his head is worse.

Seeing Lance’s soulmark wall is very... overwhelming. But he can’t look away.

He thinks he likes it, but that doesn’t stop it from being a little too much right now.

So he tries not to think about it. Tries not to think about a lot of things. Instead he just focuses on the feeling of Lance pressed up against him and how he feels right now, in this very moment, where they’re not soulmates, they’re just... Keith and Lance. Lance and Keith.

Before he can spiral too much, Lance stirs, drawing him out of his thoughts. He shifts, lifting a hand to rub his eyes as he leans back, shifting away from Keith to lean into the pillow. When he opens his eyes and blinks, his eyes are lidded and hazy.

His gaze settles on Keith, searching his face. He doesn’t look surprised to find him there, so that’s a good sign. He doesn’t, however, look like he’s entirely awake. Which is only accented by the soft, dopey smile that curves his lips.

He reaches out, touching Keith’s cheek with a gentle, uncoordinated hand, fingers running lightly
over his cheeks, his jaw, trailing down his neck and over his collarbones to rest his hand on Keith’s chest. “You’re soft,” He says, words slurred with sleep and lips barely moving, voice low and hoarse. Keith finds that he likes it. He likes it a lot. Lance tilts his head further into the pillow, short hair a mess, sticking up everywhere and feathering out across the pillow. He grins, eyes half closing. “Soft like eggs.”

Keith snorts, entire body jerking with the sudden, short laugh. He has to fight the smirk crawling onto his lips, but it’s a losing battle. “Soft like eggs?”

“Mhm,” Lance hums, eyes closed. Then they open again, brows furrowing. His grin fades, replaced by a small frown. “Wait...”

Keith laughs. It bubbles out of him and he tries to cut it off, resulting in a small burst of chuckles, soft and under his breath.

Lance’s frown presses into a pout, and he leans forward again, burying his face in Keith’s shoulder. His hand weakly slaps at Keith’s chest. “Shut up, I’m tired and it’s early.”

“It’s one in the afternoon.”

“Early.”

The sound of a key fumbling with the lock has them both freezing. Lance shoots up onto his elbow, eyes wide, body tense. Keith freezes next to him, eyes darting across the room to their door. There’s a shadow of feet blocking part of the light coming from under the door.

The key slides into place.

Their eyes meet, wide and panicked.

The lock tumbles, door handle turning.

Suddenly Lance is grabbing him, rolling over him so he’s on the side nearer the room and shoving Keith against the wall, throwing blankets and pillows over him. As the door opens, Keith stills. Lance lays down, half leaning against him, half sprawled out. Keith can’t see him, but he’s willing to bet he’s laying the nonchalance on too thick.

“Hunk!” Keith cringes as Lance’s voice comes out just a hair too high. “What’re you doing back so soon, buddy?”

“Dude, are you still in bed?”

“Went out drinking with Keith last night. Don’t wanna get up.”

There’s a hum of understanding. “Hungover?”

“Nah, just tired. How was Shay?”

There’s a dreamy sigh, and Hunk’s voice takes on a wistful tone. “Amazing. She’s so amazing, dude.”

“I’m glad you had fun, buddy.” Lance says, soft and sincere. There’s a note to it that makes Keith’s chest ache.

There’s shuffling in the room. A bag dropping to the floor, the sound of papers and books being moved. A zipper opening. More rustling. He sounds like he’s in a hurry. Keith hopes he’s in too
much of a hurry to notice his clothes on the floor. Or that maybe his clothes blend into the messy state of their room. “Anyway, I’ll tell you about it later. I’m going to meet Pidge in the library.”

“Homework already?”

“Yeah, we’ve got a project due tomorrow.”

“Ouch.”

Hunk laughs. “Tell me about it. Wanna come? Get some coffee and bagels on the way?”

“Nah, I’m good. I’ve got, uh-- stuff to do here. Yup. Stuff. Just... things and... stuff.” He chuckles, but it sounds far too strained to be natural.

Keith reaches out to him, moving slowly beneath the blankets. Lance jerks at his touch, but relaxes as Keith’s hand slides up and down his back, soothing and calm.

“Uh, okay then.” Hunk doesn’t even sound bothered by it. Confused, but unbothered. He supposes living with Lance makes you used to occasional weirdness. Keith hears him lift his bag, the sound of it slinging over his shoulder to bounce over his back. “Well, text me if you wanna come by and I’ll tell you where we are.”

“Yeah, will do, buddy.”

“Later, man.”

Footsteps. The door opening. Closing. Footsteps getting fainter down the hall.

Lance heaves a sigh, making the entire bed shift with it. Then he rolls over, lifting the blankets just enough to peek beneath. Keith glares up at him, lips pursed into a small frown. He can feel the way his hair is sticking everywhere, mused and staticky.

Lance grins, small giggle escaping him.

Keith scowls.

“Sorry, you’re just... oh my god, Keith, your hair is a mess.” He giggles again, and Keith ignores him as he pushes the blankets back, finally able to breathe fresh air. He sits up, letting the blanket pool at his waist, running his fingers through his hair in a poor attempt to fix the mess. He cringes at the spark of static.

Lance sits up next to him, arms slipping around his waist as his chin comes to rest on his shoulder. Keith tilts his head to look down at him, but Lance keeps his head turned down.

“Hey, uh... sorry about that.” He sounds shy all of a sudden, bashful, and it’s such a strange one-eighty.

“Sorry about what?” Keith asks, and when Lance risks a glance up at him, Keith stares at him blankly.

Lance’s brows furrow. “You know, the whole thing with Hunk? Hiding you?”

“Oh.”

Before he really gets a chance to say much more, Lance is already rambling. “Cause, you know, we haven’t really talked about whether or not we’re going to let our friends know about our, uh,

“Yes?” Lance glances up, through his lashes, looking too damn cute for his own damn good.

“Yes,” Keith says, voice pitched low, loving the way he can feel Lance shiver against him. He turns then, leaning into Lance, and Lance follows his lead, laying back on the bed while Keith comes down next to him, at his side but half hovering over him. “I’m okay keeping this just between us.”

He lowers his head, hovering over Lance, close enough that his hair brushes against Lance’s cheeks. Lance stares at him, eyes lidded and pupils blown. Keith lifts a hand, casually trailing his fingertips along Lance’s collarbone, tracing it for a moment before moving his fingers lower, lower, drawing lazy circles as he goes.

Lance’s back arches, breath hitching softly. He lifts his chin, just a fraction, just enough that it puts their mouths that much closer. He can feel Lance’s breath on his lips.

“Yes?” A question.

“Yes,” A promise.

Keith leans down, closing that short distance between them.

Chapter End Notes

Check out my tumblr or twitter to learn more about me and my writing.

Reminder: you're welcome to come to my tumblr to ask any questions you have about how things work in this universe, but please read through the TMWM Worldbuilding and Lore Master Post (linked below) beforehand. I won't answer repeat questions.

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TMWM World Building and Lore Master Post
TMWM Playlist
TMWM Body Art Fanart Tumblr
Soothe Old Scars

Chapter Summary

In which the past leaves scars that refuse to fade, uncertainty and doubt cast shadows that linger on the future, but a solace can be found in each other that eases the ache.

Chapter Notes

Important Warnings: This chapter contains mentions and talk of previous minor character death. If you're particularly sensitive to the subject of parental death, please tread carefully. This chapter also contains mild and brief NSFW. It's very clear when it's building, and if that's not your thing, skip to the next line break.

As usual, it's a long one, so take your time. Happy reading!

Grease on his hands. The smell of oil in the air. Sharp and pungent. Acrid and thick. It mixes with the smell of concrete. The smell of gasoline. Of salt and sweat and the struggle of his deodorant, sharp and spicy, withering on in a losing fight. His hair is pulled back, tight into a messy bun, but he can feel it’s loosened, wayward strands stuck and plastered to the sweat drying on his skin.

It’s a hot day for October. Clouds hover in the crystalline sky, but the sun shines through. Beats down on his back, warming him through and through. The back of his neck and his shoulders burn, but he doesn’t mind the itch. He can barely tell it apart from the restlessness that crawls beneath his skin.

Despite the heat of the day, the breeze is crisp and cold. A momentary reprieve that brings with it much needed relief. He knows if he goes into the shadows it’ll be much cooler. Knows that come nightfall, it’ll be chillier. Near cold. Fall is here, after all. But for now, he bakes in the sun, and he welcomes it.

He wonders if it was also a warm day seventeen years ago, or if it was one of those autumn days where you can feel winter’s creeping touch in the air. He wonders if the sun was shining or if it was raining. He wonders if the sunlight warmed his father’s passing or if the calm of night had been there when he slipped away.

His mom had never told him what time it had been.

He had never asked.

Now he’d never know.

"Fuck," He hisses, pulling his hand back sharply, waving it in the air as the sting fades into a dull ache. He sits back on his heels to look at the damage. Just a small cut. Right at the curve of his wrist, just below the protective gloves he wears. Fucking figures.
He puts the skin to his mouth, sucking away the beading blood. His skin tastes of salt and of metal. There’s the vague undertones of oil and grease, bitter and sharp on his tongue. By the time he pulls away, the cut has already clotted, leaving nothing but a long red line across his skin.

He’s had worse, but it shouldn’t have happened at all. He’s usually meticulous when he works on his bike. It puts him at ease. It clears his head. His thoughts drift away while his hands work, centering him, giving him something real and constructive to put his energy toward. He’s careful and precise and handles every piece with care.

He rarely ever hurts himself when he works on his bike, but somehow he manages to do it every year on October eighteenth.

His bike doesn’t even need maintenance. He hasn’t been using it often now that he’s within walking distance of his classes. He’s been having no problems with the way she runs, and she isn’t due for a tune up for a while. But he had woken with the same itch under his skin that he wakes up with every year.

It’s a living thing. A burn at the back of his throat. A crawling beneath his skin. Restless hands that need focus, need a task, need to do something. It’s a need to move, to construct, to work. It’s a churning in his gut and a vague sense of nausea that he can never really rid himself of. It’s the feeling of suspension, of hanging on the edge, balance precarious and feeling as if he might fall with every passing breeze. It’s a restless mind that refuses to focus or settle on anything.

So he has to work. Has to keep his hands busy so his mind can stop buzzing. Has to satisfy the twitch in his fingers and busy himself to ignore the twisting of his stomach and the feeling of not quite being able to breathe.

So even though his bike doesn’t need maintenance, he works on her anyway. Just like he does every year on October eighteenth. Rain or shine. Hot or cold.

He woke up unable to focus on much else. He had crawled out of bed with a restless energy brimming beneath his skin. Skipped breakfast, knowing his churning stomach wouldn’t be able to hold it down. Had relentlessly cleaned up his apartment before grabbing his tools, stuffing them in the compartment beneath his bike’s seat, and drove over to Shiro’s.

Shiro had greeted him with a silent smile, sympathy and understanding in his eyes, and a whole pot of coffee.

He’s spent every other October eighteenth in his grandpa’s garage. Surrounded by tools and the smells of sawdust, leather, and metal. Oil and gasoline. This time he doesn’t have that, so he makes due with what he has. His own apartment’s parking lot is too small and far too open, subject to a lot of the foot traffic from students walking by too and from their classes. Shiro’s apartment is much more remote, on it’s own, away from the hustle and bustle of campus. It’s bigger, too, giving him plenty of privacy as he parks his bike in an empty corner and sets to work.

He doesn’t know how long he’s been at it. Hours, probably. Judging from the ache in his arms and shoulders. The stiffness of his back and neck. The sun seems to be getting lower. Shadows stretching longer and the light getting that warmer hue that comes with late afternoon. His phone sits next to him, playing through his October eighteenth playlist, but he doesn’t bother looking at the time.

He’s hungry, but he can wait. Shiro comes out every once in a while to check on him. Brings him a new water bottle when he sees Keith has gone through the one he’s had. Asks him what he wants for dinner, even though they both know it’s gonna be greasy fast food burgers.
On surface level, he’s annoyed by Shiro’s hovering. Feels his presence like a pressure against the back of his neck. Doesn’t like being watched when he feels this precariously vulnerable. But he doesn’t mind. Not really. Shiro’s parking lot isn’t the only reason he’s here. He also just wants to be near family. Even if he doesn’t want to interact, just... having them close. Having them be there when he’s done. It’s enough. He just wants them close.

He’s picked his bike apart in segments. Pulling parts out, cleaning them, putting them back. He’s changed the oil and checked all the fluids. With the sun starting to fall and a queasiness that comes with hunger twisting in his gut, he knows it’s time to wrap things up. He could use a shower. Fresh clothes.

He feels sticky and warm and covered in grime, but it goes hand in hand with the burn of his muscles and a sense of pride. A sense of accomplishment. A sense that... if his father was still alive, if he had known Keith, that he might be proud.

He’s in the process of putting the last pieces back onto his bike, shiny and pristine in the early evening light, when his phone rings. It interrupts his music, phone buzzing noisily on the concrete beside him. He looks to it with a frown, knowing that it’s too early for his grandparents to call. He knows they will, but they also know he likes to spend the daylight hours working and wouldn’t contact him until evening.

He’s convinced that anyone else calling right now, today of all days, would be an annoyance.

He’s proved wrong when he sees Lance’s name across his screen, accompanied by a selfie of him making a face with over exaggerated pouty lips and smoldering eyes. He had stolen Keith’s phone one day and set it as his contact photo. Keith had never changed it.

All at once, the irritation rising up his throat vanishes, leaving a strange tingling sensation in its wake.

He grabs for his phone before he can think twice. Because it feels right. Because despite how off kilter he feels today, he feels a strange sense of breathless anticipation at the thought of talking to Lance. It might be a bad idea, but he doesn’t care. It feels right.

After a few failed attempts to unlock his phone, he bites the tip of his glove between his teeth. Ignoring the acidic taste and smell of oil and grease, he pulls his work glove off, letting it drop before he swipes across his phone with a thumb and holds it to his ear.

“Hello?” He hopes he doesn’t sound as breathless as he feels.

“Keith?”

A tight knot unwinds in his chest. One he hadn’t even realized was there. His shoulders slump, air rushing out of him as the release of tension causes his lips to threaten a smile. “Hey, Lance.”

“Hey, man.” There’s a strange relief in his voice. His own oozing of tension. But there’s also an edge of worry. One that has the smile fading from Keith before it can really form. “You okay?”

It’s not a question he wants to hear, nor one that he wants to answer. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You weren’t in class, dude. And Pidge was being super dodgy about it when you didn’t meet us at the coffeeshop. And you haven’t been answering any of my texts.”

He lets out a breath. “Oh...”
“So I just... wanted to know if you’re alright?”

Truthfully? “No.”

He doesn’t know why he says it. Doesn’t know why he doesn’t just brush off the question. Tell Lance’s he’s fine. This isn’t something he likes to talk about. It isn’t something he shares with people. This is an *I’m fine* situation, through and through, yet as he hears the genuine worry in Lance’s voice, he finds himself being honest.

Lance has a way of making him face himself, and he’s not sure he likes it.

“Oh... Well, you don’t have to like, talk about it if you don’t want to. But I’m here to listen if you do. I know you’ve got the whole emo thing going on, and sometimes you gotta go do your brooding and all that, but... I’m here, dude.”

Keith leans against his bike, resting his free arm against the seat and over the red and black body of it. He leans his head against his forearm, eyes drifting closed. Everything smells strongly of leather and metal. The chemicals he uses to clean them. Oil and gasoline. Grease and fluids. Sweat and concrete and the fading edge of his deodorant.

It’s sour and bitter and acrid... but it smells like home. It smells like his grandpa’s garage. Where he taught Keith about engines and tools and cars. Reminds him of hands, rough and calloused through years of a passion for physical labor. Reminds him of the days spent learning how to work on bikes together. Where he spent years fixing up his dad’s old bike. The one thing he had left of a man he’s never known.

His mom gave him paints and colors. An eye for details and the abstract. An appreciation for creation. An outlet for when he feels too much and his mind is too busy.

His dad gave him tools and bikes. A love of hard won labor and appreciation for building with his hands. An outlet for when he needs to calm his mind and release pent up restlessness.

And his grandparents helped him cultivate these outlets when the figures in his life were gone. Gave him a studio and a garage. Gave him paints and tools. Painted with him. Worked with him. The oil in paints. The oil in an engine. They both bring him comfort.

He can hear Lance’s breathing over the phone. The sound of cars driving past and muted voices. He must have called on his way back from class.

Suddenly aware of how long he’s been sitting there in silence, and how long Lance has been waiting patiently, giving him time to collect himself, he licks his lips. His mouth is dry. Swallowing past the lump in his throat is hard. “It’s October eighteenth.”

There’s a pause. Just long enough for him to really analyze just how scratching and hoarse his voice had been, and how much he hates it. “Yeah, not gonna lie, buddy, but I dunno what that means.”

He’s never had to explain what October eighteenth meant. Everyone important has always known. Even Pidge knows, and he’s fairly certain it’s because Shiro told them.

“It’s, uh...” He’s already come this far. He can’t brush it off now. And it’s a strange realization that he doesn’t *want* to brush it off. He *wants* Lance to know. It’s a realization that feels like a buzzing in his chest, threatening to choke him. “It’s the anniversary of my dad’s... passing.”
“Oh— Oh, shit, dude, I’m sorry—“ Panic. Keith doesn’t need panic.

“Lance. It’s okay. It was a long time ago. I just... like to take this day to myself.”

“Yeah, I get that. You at Shiro’s?”

“Yeah. I’ve been here all day.”

“That’s good. I’m glad you have each other.”

“It’s not—not Shiro’s dad.” He lets out a shuddering breath. “My dad. My biological dad.”

“Oh.”

“I never really knew him.” He doesn’t know why he’s saying this. “And he died when I was really young.” He should stop. Lance didn’t ask. Lance doesn’t need him to dump this on him. “So it’s pretty stupid to mourn for a guy I never knew and never raised me.” He feels the telltale burning behind his eyes, and he squeezes them shut tighter, swallowing past the lump in his throat. “But if things had been different— he might have— he could have—”

“Keith, Keith, hey, it’s okay.” There’s genuine worry in his voice, panic and social embarrassment giving way to something much deeper. Much fonder. An instinctual need to comfort that’s just so entirely Lance. What a selfless asshole. “There’s nothing stupid about that, dude. He was your dad. And if you gotta mourn him, you gotta mourn him. There’s nothing wrong with honoring his memory. He’s apart of you.”

“Thanks, Lance.” He whispers, afraid that speaking too loudly will cause his voice to crack.

“And, you know, he must’ve been super hot to have a kid like you—“

“Lance!”

“I’m just saying!”

A surprised laugh bubbles out of him, shoving past the lump in his throat and bursting from his lips. It’s cracked and hoarse. It almost hurts with the way it shudders in his lungs, squeezing his chest and shaking his body. He can hear the unshed tears in it. The watery and thick quality of it. It’s not a pretty laugh, but it’s a genuine one.

And just like that, the tension drains away. Lance babbles on, and Keith can practically hear the skip in his step. He tells Keith about how boring their public speaking class is without him. Tells him how Pidge fell asleep in their nine am class and he drew a heart on their cheek before they woke up. Tells him how the coffeeshop on campus always gets his order wrong.

He talks about everything. The weather. How he stained his favorite shirt. How Hunk has been up late playing games with Shay. How he saw someone in the bathroom brushing their teeth with the wrong end of the toothbrush at eight am. He talks about nothing. Nothing of consequence, anyway. Random thoughts. Random reports from his day.

And Keith listens. He hums occasionally. He adds input when needed and prompted. He laughs, chuckling breathlessly when Lance gets worked up over nothing.

Phone pinched between his cheek and his shoulder, he listens while his hands finish putting his bike back together. And when he’s done, he sits on the hard concrete, back to his bike, and watches the sunset while he tries to explain to Lance the intricacies of art in the middle ages from memory
in an attempt to help him study.

He stays there until Shiro comes out to find him, car keys twirling on his finger as he smiles that infuriatingly knowing smile.

It’s not until he hangs up that he realizes that they’ve been talking for three hours.

And it’s not until he’s elbows deep in burger grease and fries that he realizes this is the lightest he’s ever felt on October eighteen

“Hey, Keith, what’d you think?” He lifts his head, tearing his eyes away from the two packages in his hand. Pidge stands not too far away, holding up a palette of cheap halloween make-up to their face. “Am I more of a graveyard glamor—“ They lift up another palette to their other cheek, fluttering their eyelashes. “Or an undead temptation.”

The two grayscale palettes look almost exactly the same. The corner of his lips lift into a small smirk. “I’d say go with soulless seductress.”

Pidge snorts, lowering the packages from their face. “Good choice.” They toss them both into the cart next to Keith, leaning heavily on the handlebar, arms crossed and chin resting on top. “How many more we need?”

Keith raises an eyebrow, eyes idly scanning over the array of face paint packages littering the bottom of the cart. “Enough for seven people?”

Another snort. An eye roll. “Brilliant deduction, Keith.”

“How am I supposed to know?”

“You’re the artist.”

“Doesn’t mean I go around painting my face.” His other limbs and body parts, maybe. But very rarely his face. “Which one do you think?” He holds up the two bottles of fake blood.

Pidge cocks an eyebrow. “What’s the difference?”

He shrugs. “Different brands?”

“Same size?”

“Yeah.”

“Get the cheaper one.”

He hums his acknowledgement, tossing the bottle into the cart and setting the other back on the shelf. He grabs a few more kits with brushes and liquid latex and dumps them into the cart as well.

Pidge watches him, one foot propped up on the bottom rung of the cart, chin on their arms. “Is it enough now?”

He glances into the cart once more, lips pursing. “I don’t know. Probably?”
“Use your artist eye, Keith.”

“I don’t usually work with cheap halloween make-up, Pidge. I don’t know how much of this stuff we need to use, or how well it spreads, or if it even layers properly—“

“Okay, okay, I get it.” They reach out and grab a handful more of various zombie make up palettes, dropping them into the cart with a clatter. When he raises a silent eyebrow, they just shrug. “They’re cheap. Might as well. Do we need any of that?”

He looks to what they’re pointing at, eyes falling on the line of base sealers. Their logos look campy and the fonts of their brands far too costumey. His lip curls. “No, Allura said she has plenty for us to use. The good kind. Not the kind that goes on like paste.”

Pidge lets out a brief sigh. “Thank god. I was not looking forward to scrubbing that shit outta my pores for a week.” Keith gives them a blank look, one eyebrow cocked. They just shrug. “If you’re friends with Lance long enough, you start thinking about these sorta things.”

“He does have that affect on people,” Keith hums, arms crossing over his chest as his gaze sweeps over the shelves of zombie themed halloween accessories. “He wouldn’t leave me alone until I stopped buying two-in-one shampoo and conditioner. Now I have one of each.”

He can hear the lip curl in Pidge’s voice. “Yeah, he did that to me, too. I can’t feel the difference.”

“Me neither.”

“But he’s drilled the habit into me, and now I can’t go back.”

“Same.”

“What a pain.”

“But he’s our pain.”

“Yeah,” Pidge’s voice softens, a fondness creeping around the edges. “I suppose he is.”

Something in Keith flutters at the sentiment, replying in kind. He doesn’t know how to voice it, however, so instead he drops into a crouch, running his fingers over a few of the more expensive zombie kits. They don’t need them, but maybe he’ll get a few ideas by looking at the packaging. His friends made it no secret that they fully expect him and Coran to take charge of everyone’s zombie make-up.

The zombie march is somewhat of a tradition. Or so Pidge and Lance insist. This is only the second year their school has hosted one. Seems a little sketchy to Keith. A bunch of social media invites and a page hosted by one of the school’s clubs on the website. A bunch of students dressing up as zombies to go meandering through town and scaring innocent bystanders. What could possibly go wrong?

Sounds fun, though. So he’s in. Not that his friends would let him back out of it.

“I’m glad you guys are getting along now.” He glances up, finding that Pidge is watching him, eyes content and small smile genuine.

“Me, too.” He feels a lump in his throat, a twist of guilt in his gut even as a strange fluttering rises up in his chest.
“For a while there, I didn’t think you guys would get along.”

He looks away, pushing himself to his feet. “He’s a lot, but... he’s a good guy.”

“Yeah,” Pidge fidgets, eyes on the contents of the cart, teeth biting at their bottom lip. “I just... it would’ve been really hard if two of my best friends didn’t get along, you know?”

The guilt feels sour on the back of his tongue. He hates that he made Pidge worry. Hates that he made them feel like they might have to choose between friends. Hates that he ever made them feel guilty for trying to combine their friend groups. He had been so caught up in his own shit that he hadn’t considered what distress his treatment of Lance might have caused one of his oldest friends.

He’s a fucking asshole.

He walks past them, heading down the aisle, and ruffles their hair as he passes. “You’re a good judge of people. If you liked us both, odds were that we’d get along eventually.”

Pidge huffs a short laugh, turning the cart around to follow him. “Yeah, but you guys sure as hell fought it for a while.”

He hums, unable to really argue that point. He had fought it. He had fought it in ways Pidge isn’t even aware of. And still he lost the fight. Because when it comes down to it, he’s weak to Lance. He doesn’t know how much of that has to do with being soulmates, and how much of it is simply who they are, but Keith finds it near impossible to resist him.

Not that he tries much anymore.

“Keith.”

“Hmm?”

“You know it’s a zombie march, right?” They deadpan, almost sounding bored. “Not a vampire march.”

He purses his lips, a slight furrow to his brows as he stubbornly keeps his gaze fixed on the rows of vampire teeth. The fancy ones that he can mold to his own teeth for a better fit. “I’m just looking.”

“Mhmm, sure.”

“If you get to be zombie Dumbledore, then I should be able to be a zombie vampire.”

“That’s like... two completely different things. I’m talking about bringing back a beloved character from the dead with a craving for brains. You’re talking about crossing the streams of the undead.”

“Didn’t know you were the graveyard police.”

Their mouth tugs up into a devilish grin, crinkling the corners of their eyes. “You have the right to remain silent as the grave.” Keith huffs a short laugh, lips pulling up at the edges. Still holding onto the handlebar of the car, Pidge leans over toward him, pressing their shoulder into his.

“Anything you say can and will be used to bury you. You have the right to a headstone. If you cannot afford a headstone, one will be provided for you, along with a hilarious eulogy.”

He hears the telltale squeak of a shoe on cheap linoleum floors. Not too out of place in a public store, save for the fact that it’s right behind him. That, coupled with the soft footfalls and the heavy breathing, clues him in.
Pidge doesn’t seem to notice.

He presses his lips tight to hide the smile that threatens to give them away.

“Do you understand your rights? If yes, groan loudly. If no, ask for braaains—“

It all happens at once. Lance and Hunk jump out at them, feet slapping loudly on the linoleum as they land. Lance is right at Pidge’s side, hands in the air. Hunk is directly behind them, hands landing heavily on Pidge’s shoulders. They shout, something garbled between them that sounds like a mix between a roar and boo. Pidge’s words cut off, trailing into a high pitched scream as they jump.

Keith doubles over, surprised laughter bubbling up his throat before he can stop it. It’s echoed by Hunk’s soft chuckles and Lance’s full bellied laugh.

“Pidge! Oh my god—“ Lance steps back, pulling off the werewolf mask. It’s ugly as hell, matted fur and stained rubber twisted into the mockery of a snarl. “Oh man, you should’ve seen your face— OH FUCK!”

He stumbles backwards, tripping over his own feet and nearly losing his balance before he manages to turn, taking off down the aisle with Pidge hot on his heels. As they round the corner, he can hear Pidge’s profanities and Lance’s laughter trail off through the store.

“Oh man, Pidge is gonna kill him.” Hunk says, laughter still hedging his voice as he pulls off his own mask. It’s the same grotesque werewolf one.

Keith turns to him, arms crossed over his chest and an easy smirk on his face. “What makes you think you’re safe?”

Hunk just grins. “Because they’ll take their anger out on Lance first. Hey, why didn’t you jump?”

Keith just shrugs, easy smile in place. He finds he’s been smiling a lot these days, and it doesn’t entirely have to do with Lance. “I heard you coming.”

“Dang, and here I was thinking we were being sneaky.”

“Well, we tried. At least we got Pidge.” They both wince as they hear the telltale sound of something clattering to the ground, simultaneous with several loud profanities. They exchange wry glances, and Hunk offers him a small smile. “If they get in trouble, wanna we pretend we don’t know them?”

“Definitely.” With one last longing glance at the shelf, he decides fuck it, his zombie is gonna have teeth, and tosses one of the boxes into the cart.

Hunk falls into step beside him as he starts pushing the cart down the aisle, eyes on the grotesque mask in his hands. “I kinda wanna be a werewolf. Do you think they’d let werewolves join the zombie march? Like, they could probably put their differences aside and work together to eat people, right?” He looks up thoughtfully, head tilting to the side as his voice trails off. “Or would the zombies just eat werewolf brains? I bet those are better than human brains. A delicacy or something.”

Keith hums thoughtfully. “I can make you a werewolf zombie.”
Hunk turns to look at him, eyes widening. “Really?”

Keith glances sideways at him, smile falling as his gaze drops to the mask in his hand. “Yeah, but not with the mask.”

Hunk is nodding, mask already falling to his side. His other hand moves to his face, scratching a day’s worth of stubble. “So like... we could get fake ears and fake hair and stuff?”

Keith nods. “Yeah, that should work. The rest is just zombie make up.”

“Oh man, this is gonna be so cool.”

Their conversation is cut short as Lance comes sprinting around the corner, nearly crashing into the shelves. He dives behind Keith, hands grabbing his arms to pull him away from the cart, putting him between himself and Pidge who comes barreling down the aisle.

“Keith! Save me!”

“He won’t protect you!”

“Keith is my knight in shining armor. Go! Defeat the foul gremlin!”

“Nope,” Keith is already peeling Lance’s fingers off his arms, slipping off to the side. “Not getting in the middle of this.”

“Keith—” His protest cuts off in a yelp as Pidge lunges for him. Keith watches, arms crossed over his chest and eyebrows raised, as Pidge manages to scale the lanky, writhing form of Lance. Someone they barely get deterred by an elbow to the gut, flailing limbs, and the fact that Lance is wiggling something fierce.

Finally the fight leaks out of him as Pidge settles onto his back, and he accepts defeat graciously as his hands move to grab her legs. With one arm wrapped tight around his neck, head hovering over his shoulder, they point forward. “Onward!”

“When did you get so heavy—“

Pidge smacks him blindly, hand sprawling out over his face. “No back sass. Only carry.”

Lance grumbles, but leads the way out of the aisle, muttering a soft *betrayal* at Keith as he passes. Keith just smiles, following with Hunk and the cart. They weave through the store, away from the seasonal halloween section and towards the front registers. As they go, they pass by the grocery section, including tables in the aisles with small cakes and cookies put out on display.

He has the thought just a second before Pidge voices it.

“Hey, Keith, we should pick up a cake while we’re here.”

Lance turns, walking backwards with Pidge still on his back so he can face Keith. “Why’d you guys need a cake?”

Keith is about to brush it off before Pidge answers for him. “It’s Keith’s birthday tomorrow.”

“What?” Lance says, loud enough that Keith flinches at the volume. He stops, foot shooting out to catch the bottom of the cart and bring it to an abrupt halt. His brows are furrowed, lips twisted into a little frown. He almost looks concerned. “It’s your *birthday* tomorrow?”
“Uh, yeah?”

“Dude, why didn’t you tell us?”

He turns and regrets it immediately when he sees the hurt written all over Hunk’s face, coloring his surprise. He frowns, straightening a little under the scrutiny. “It’s not a big deal.”

“It’s your birthday.”

Keith lets one shoulder rise and fall in a halfhearted shrug. “I don’t like making a big deal about it.”

“Keith and I usually just have a movie marathon and make ourselves sick on cake.” Pidge says. “We should have a party!”

Keith looks at Lance sharply, scowl deepening. “I don’t want a party.”

Pidge perches their chin atop Lance’s head, arms handing lazily over his shoulders. “Keith doesn’t like parties.”

He sighs, rubbing an eye harshly before dragging the hand down his face with a sigh. “Look, it’s not a big deal. I don’t want it to be a big deal.”

“But it is a big deal.” Lance says, indignation softening as his shoulders droop slightly. “No parties.” He insists.

Lance huffs. “Fine.” Keith’s eyes narrow. “Scout’s honor.”

“Why don’t I believe you?”

Hunk’s hand comes down on his shoulder, tearing his attention away from Lance. His smile is genuine, eyes pleading. “No parties, but at least let me make you a real cake. No friend of mine gets store bought on their birthday.”

And when he looks around at their expectant faces, smiles soft and eyes alight with genuine fondness and excitement, Keith knows he’s lost. He sighs, feeling the fight leak out of him. “Fine.”

“Keith.”

“Hmmm?”

“Earth to Keith.”

“Allura—“

“Come in, Keith!”

“I can hear you.”
“You’re staring.”

“What?”

“You’re staring at Lance.”

That gets his attention, especially since it’s spot on. He tears his eyes away from where Lance and Hunk are attempting to balance the pvc pipe brooms on their foreheads. Neither of them are particularly successful, but it’s amusing to watch them try anyway, limbs spread wide and wobbling around to keep it balanced.

Allura stands next to him on the other side of the field, near one set of hoops. Hunk and Lance are on the other side, with nearly the whole team mingling in the field in between. Practice was winding down, and Pidge had issued a water break between drills, though he’s fairly certain practice should be over soon.

“I was just staring out over the team.” He says, lips pursing into a small frown.

One end of her pvc pipe broom is set on the ground, both of her hands clasped over the other end of it. She leans over, lazily bending over as she rests her cheek atop her hands, grinning up at Keith. He really doesn’t like that gleam in her eyes. “Yeah, over all of them and right at Lance.”

He feels heat crawl up the back of his neck. His own broom his slung over his shoulders, arms held up a looped lazily over the top so his wrists hang over the other side. “I was watching both of them.”

Allura hums, but she doesn’t sound convinced.

His eyes narrow, brows pinching as he scowls. “What?”

“Nothing,” She shrugs, nonchalant and casual, but the calculating look in her eyes is anything but. The way her lips curl at the edges is mischievous. A predator stalking its prey. He knows that look because he’s seen it far too many times mirrored on Shiro’s face, right before he calls attention to something Keith would rather remain unsaid.

It was like the universe put them together to make Keith’s life miserable.

“You’ve just been staring at Lance a lot lately.” There it is. That casual tone that’s definitely not casual.

“No, I haven’t.” He looks away, unable to hold her gaze anymore. He hopes the gesture looks irritated and exasperated, and not guilty and embarrassed. He half turns, letting his eyes sweep out over the field and pointedly not letting his attention settle on Lance.

Instead his gaze lands on Pidge. They’re standing off to the side with the pile of bags the team has left, alongside the large quidditch bag. They’re crouched down, their phone in hand, brows pinched in concentration.

“You totally have.” Allura insists. “I’ve seen it. You’ve been staring at Lance.”

“Have not.”

“Have to.”

“Have not.”
“Have to.”

“Allura—“

“I can go on like this all day, Keith.” His sharp glare is met by a toothy grin that reminds him too much of Shiro and too much of Lance. He hadn’t realized how terrible that combination would be until he sees it in Allura, and he feels his chest constrict before his heart beats into overtime.

Fuck. He’s so fucked.

She takes his silence as a cue to continue. “I asked Shiro about it.” She says it off-handedly as she straightens, keeping her hands on the end of her broom but standing up tall. Her gaze shifts from him to across the field, and he knows without looking that it’s settled on Lance. Somehow, not being the target of her gaze doesn’t make him feel anymore at ease. Her grin shifts to something a fraction more sly and a hair too innocent. “Did you know Shiro is a terrible liar?”

She looks at him sideways, full lips curling.

He’s going to kill Shiro.

His stomach feels like it’s dropped straight into his gut, and his heart is pounding so loud he’s certain it’s trying to break out of his ribs. The buzz of anxiousness flits through his veins, making everything fuzzy and light, but he gives her a scowl that could peel paint.

She’s not in the least bit affected.

She merely rolls her eyes, waving him off with a placating hand gesture. “Calm down, he didn’t tell me anything specific.” She sounds a little put off by that. “But his awkward fumbling was enough to let me know that there is something going on.”

“Allura.” He means for it to sound stern. Like a warning and a threat all wrapped into one. It comes out sounding far more desperate, an edge of pleading and fear that he really didn’t want to show.

At least she takes pity on him then, smile softening as she turns to him. “It’s not a big deal, you know. You’re allowed to look. Hell, you’re allowed to touch, if it’s mutual. Which, given the way he’s been staring at you, it probably is.” He doesn’t like how close to the truth she’s gotten. Not at all, and not one bit. Have they really been that obvious?

She picks up her broom and steps toward him, playfully nudging him with her shoulder. “I just want you two to be happy, okay? Things aren’t as traditional as they used to be. You guys are allowed to find your own happiness.”

He sighs, feeling a fraction of the weight lift from his chest, his heart rate calming down.

She chuckles, soft and under her breath, tapping his shins with her broom. “Geez, lighten up. Just because we have soulmates doesn’t mean we have to be prudes, and it definitely doesn’t mean we can’t find others attractive. We’re only human.”

Something about the way she said that has him turning, giving her a curious once over. “Did you do anything with anyone before Shiro?”

She hums lightly, lifting her chin as she slings her broom over her shoulders to mirror Keith’s stance. “If I did, would you think any less of me?”

“No.”
“Then yeah, I definitely did. And I don’t regret it.” She shrugs. “Besides, none of them even compare to Shiro, and I doubt that has anything to do with being soulmates. Your brother is fine.”

His lip curls. “Gross.”

She laughs, and just like that, the tension between them dissipates. She has suspicions, but she doesn’t know. More than that, she doesn’t know the secret Keith keeps. Shiro might be a bad liar, but at least Allura isn’t as good at reading him as she thinks she is.

“Keeith!” They both look up as Lance jogs up to them, and Keith lowers his broom in time for Lance to sling an arm around his shoulders, pulling him roughly to his side. “Heeey, buddy.”

Keith’s eyes narrow. “What’re you up to?”

“Me? Nothing! Sorry to interrupt, Allura. I just wanna pull birthday boy here aside for a moment.”

Allura’s shark-like grin is back. “He’s all yours.”

Keith glares at her as Lance drags him away. “Lance, what’d I say about making it a big deal?”

“What? Keith, I said I wouldn’t. Have a little faith in me.”

“You sound suspicious.”

“I do not.”

“Your voice gets all high pitched when you’re plotting something, and you start to sound like a cartoon villain trying to sound innocent right before he unveils his plans.”

“I take offense to that.”

Keith cocks an eyebrow, a smile tugging at his lips despite himself. “Do you, though?”

“I will as long as it keeps you distracted.”

“So you are plotting something—”

“Hunk, now!”

His protest is cut off with a strangled sound as his feet are suddenly lifted out from under him. The world seems to spin for a moment, balance thrown completely as he loses control. Then when everything rightens again and he can process what’s happened, he’s perched on Hunk’s shoulder, legs dangling over his chest and one thick arm wrapped around him like a seatbelt.

If he’s honest, he’s not even sure how they pulled it off, and it’s actually rather impressive. Allura and Lance stand around Hunk, hands hovering in the air and prepared to steady him or catch him if things go wrong. They don’t, though. Hunk is extremely sturdy.

“What are you—“

“Haaaaaa—”

“Oh god, please don’t—“

”—ppy birthday, to you!”
“I hate all of you.”

"Happy birthday, to you!"

They parade him around the quidditch pitch, perched and trapped on Hunk’s shoulder with Allura and Lance standing close by. The three of them lead the song, loud and boisterous. Lance is by far the loudest, and Keith can hear the laughter in his voice. The whole team joins in, clapping and grinning and singing off key. Students walking by stare or pause to view the spectacle. A few even join in.

Keith looks to the sidelines, desperately searching for Pidge to help him. Not that he thinks they would do much, but it’s the best shot he has. Pidge, however, is nowhere to be seen.

He groans, but the sound is easily drowned out by the singing, so he buries his face in his hands instead.

“I hate all of you,” He repeats when the song ends, voice muffled through his hands.

“What was that? We can’t hear you.” He can hear the smile in Allura’s voice.

“He said he loves us,” Lance says, and Keith feels a hand pat his leg. “It just sounds weird because he’s covering his mouth.”

“Sorry, Keith,” Hunk’s voice is edged with a laugh. “But it’s tradition to embarrass each other on our birthdays.”

“I want out of his friend group.” He grumbles, inciting a few more chuckles.

“Sorry, buddy, you’re stuck with us.”

“You should be grateful. Usually we do this in the middle of the cafeteria.” He spreads his fingers to glare at Allura between them. She just grins, one hand on her hips as she uses the other to poke at Lance with her broom. “Lance suggested we do it here instead.”

His gaze flickers to Lance, and he’d be blind to miss the way his expression turns sheepish as he scratches the back of his neck, smile softening and eyes looking away, but not before Keith can see the fondness in them. No fucking wonder Allura can sense there’s something going on between them. “I just thought this would be a little less embarrassing for your first time.”

“Barely,” Keith deadpans, letting his hands drop, tapping Hunk lighting on the arm caging him in. “Can I get down now?”

“Do you promise not to run away?”

“No.”

“Then nope. You’re trapped up there until— Oh! There they are!” He turns, and Keith grips his arm as everything spins for a moment, his balance wobbling on his high perch. Hunk waves with his free arm, and Keith’s chest tightens as his balance wavers again. It’s not that he’s afraid of heights, and it’s not that he doesn’t trust Hunk. He just doesn’t like having absolutely no control over his own balance.

He spots Pidge in the distance, walking along the path back to the field with Shiro at their side. Both of them are carrying several pizza boxes. “I thought Shiro had work to do.”
“He did.” Allura says. “But he agreed to pick up pizza and meet up at the end of practice.”

“Totally just a random pizza party lunch for the team.” Lance says, rocking back and forth on his heels, hands clasped on his broom behind his back. “Absolutely nothing to do with your birthday.”

“Nope,” Hunk says with a little bounce.

“No connection whatsoever.” Allura calls over her shoulder, already moving forward to greet Shiro and Pidge.

“You guys are the worst.” Keith grumbles, but when he catches Lance’s eye, he can feel that he’s smiling.

His traditional birthday movie night with close friends (Pidge, sometimes Matt) and family (Shiro), turns into a movie night with all his friends, who have somehow become his own patchwork family.

They gather that night at Shiro’s apartment for his bigger living room and bigger TV. They had eaten far too much pizza earlier, stuffing themselves just to make sure none of it went to waste. It was a late lunch, and most of them were still feeling the effects from it. So their dinner consists of snacks and junk food that they picked up on the way to Shiro’s.

“Alright, birthday boy, what’ll it be this year?” Shiro asks, lifting his remote to turn on the TV. He’s wedged onto his large, cushioned chair, Allura at his side and half sprawled on top of him.

Pidge speaks up before he can, straightening a little from the small nest they’ve built on the floor out of pillows and blankets. “Paranormal Activity.”

Keith nods. “Yeah, that.”

“What?” Lance’s voice is a fraction too high, and way too close to his ear. Keith frowns, rubbing his ear, but Lance just gapes at him, eyes wide and mouth hanging open.

“What?”

“Seriously?”

“Yes?”

“We already decided on this.” Pidge cuts in, wrapping a blanket around themself and burying their chin in it as they hunch down against the couch. “You can’t change our mind now.”

“They always choose scary movies.” Shiro says, already searching for it. “That, or terrible movies.”

Pidge snorts. “Scary movies are terrible movies.”

Hunk leans forward to grin at Keith from around Lance. “Lance is scared of scary movies.”

Lance’s look of surprised alarm morphs instantly into indignation as he glares at his roommate. “I’m not scared of them. I just... don’t like them.”
“Birthday boy’s choice.” Pidge sing-songs from the floor.

Lance nudges them with his foot. “I never said we couldn’t watch it!”

“I am personally a fan of the horror genre.” Coran says from the other side of the couch. “It’s fascinating to see what kind of things force the human mind into paranoia and fear.” With a thoughtful hum, he reaches into his pocket, producing a pen. Pulling the cap off with his teeth, he puts the pen tip to his arm, already lost in the beginnings of a correspondence with his soulmate.

No one seems to notice or think much of it, but Keith’s gaze lingers, something unpleasant flipping in his gut before he looks away.

He then leans into Lance. He doesn’t have to go far. They’re already pressed up close with four people wedged onto Shiro’s couch. Truth be told, they’ve already been touching since they sat down, thighs and arms pressed tight as casually as they could manage. But he leans more firmly into Lance, feeling his warmth like a buzz in his veins.

He props his chin up on Lance’s shoulder, and Lance turns to meet his gaze, eyebrows raised. “Pidge and I like to pick apart horror movies. It’ll make it less scary for you.”

Lance huffs, crossing his arms over his chest, but when he slouches further down on the couch, he sinks into Keith’s side. “I’m not scared.”

Hunk leans over from the other side, resting his chin on Lance’s other shoulder. Lance is so slumped that it’s an awkward angle for Hunk to be at, but he makes it work for the sake of mirroring Keith. “Don’t worry, buddy, Keith and I will be here to hold your hands when you get scared.”

“I’m not scared!” Keith and Hunk both laugh as Lance shoves them off his shoulders.

Contrary to his protests, he spends most of the movie with his face hidden either behind his hands or in Hunk’s arm. Hunk, contrary to his teasing, is right there with him. The two of them curl into each other, peeking from between fingers and jumping occasion.

About halfway through the film, Lance reaches for Keith’s hand, clutching it tightly. Keith weaves their fingers together, letting them rest on his thigh, thumb idly brushing along his knuckles. And when he pulls his knees up onto the couch, he opts to lean his weight more toward Lance than the arm of the couch.

If anyone notices, no one says anything. It’s hard to find even the handholding strange when Lance’s other hand is clutched in Hunk’s and his face is buried in his shoulder.

Still, it’s a subtle closeness that Keith appreciates, and judging from the way Lance lightly squeezes his hand in moments that aren’t particularly scary, he knows Lance does, too.

After the movie, they decide to watch something a little lighter before calling it a night, but not before they take a break for Hunk to distribute cupcakes and for them to sing happy birthday again.

Keith is in the kitchen, refilling his glass, when Lance wanders in, hands full of cupcake wrappers to dump into the trash. By the time Keith has filled his glass, turning around to face him, Lance has already sauntered over, hands coming down on the counter on either side of him, caging him against it.

“Enjoying your birthday so far?” He asks, voice far too low and far too sly to be anything innocent. Keith hums lightly, taking a sip of his water. He doesn’t miss the way Lance’s gaze drifts down to
his mouth before sliding lower to linger on his throat. “I have a present for you later...”

Keith cocks an eyebrow. “Why can’t you give it to me now?”

Lance’s eyes slide back up to his, a mischievous smile on his lips. “I really don’t think you want me to give it to you now.”

A fluttering in his chest at Lance’s smile. A shuddering down his spine at the wicked look in his lidded eyes. A warmth flooding his gut at the low rumble of his voice. Before he can really think about it, he’s setting his glass aside, reaching forward with his other hand and letting it drift up Lance’s chest.

Lance’s expression morphs into one of surprise as Keith’s hand clutches the fabric of his shirt, pulling him forward roughly. Keith lets his mouth hover over Lance’s for just a moment, head tilted at the perfect angle. He can feel Lance’s shallow breath fanning out across his lips. They’re alone for the moment, kitchen hidden from view of those in the living room.

“You have some frosting on your face.” Keith says, voice pitched low and private.

He can feel the curl of Lance’s lips as much as he can see it. “Maybe you could clean that up for me.”

Keith smiles. A slow, sly curl of his lips. He turns his head a fraction, tongue peeking out to playfully trail across Lance’s bottom lip. Then he flattens his tongue and licks a wide, wet stripe up the side of Lance’s face.

Lance’s soft hitch of breath quickly turns into a yelp, shoving Keith’s shoulders as he scrambles backwards. “Oh, gross, Keith! Oh my god.”

Keith wraps one arm around his stomach, bending in half while the other keeps him propped up against the counter as he laughs. He laughs until he feels tears pricking at the corners of his eyes, all the while Lance scrubs roughly at his face, muttering obscenities under his breath.

They end up cutting the movie night after two movies. Allura, Shiro, and Coran practically falling asleep where they sat, and the others yawning heavily. Birthday or not, it’s still a weekday, and they still have classes tomorrow. Keith is lucky enough to not have anything until eleven, but the other’s aren’t so fortunate.

He returns to his apartment with a strange sense of stillness settling over him. After spending nearly all day with his friends, his apartment feels oddly empty. He lets his bag drop to the floor, keys falling into the bowl on his dresser, and stands there for a moment.

There’s a buzz of energy in his veins, making his body feel like a live wire when he stands still. It’s a vibration in his bones. A need to move and act. Left over from the build up of doing things all day. But there’s also an exhaustion that comes from excessive socializing. A heaviness in his shoulders and an ache in his muscles.

The quiet stillness of his apartment is as much of a relief as it is unwelcome. It’s a strange realization for someone who cherishes silence and solitude. But the more he thinks on it, the more he realizes it’s not complete socializing he misses. It’s not the entire company of his friends he
wishes he still had with him. It’s just one. Just Lance.

He’s certain that Lance would fit and feel right at home in his space, filling it with just enough noise and just enough movement. A warm presence to thaw the numbing solitude. And Keith knows with the chill of crystal clear clarity that Lance’s presence wouldn’t drain him in the slightest. It would ease him down from too social into just right without the heavy drop of empty lethargy that happens when he goes from big groups to solitude too quickly.

And he hates how much that realization thrills him as much as it terrifies him.

He hates how the more he learns about Lance, the more they learn how to fit. Jagged little puzzle pieces that take time to find the right way to connect, but then clicking seamlessly into place. Just like a soulmate should.

He shakes his head, kicking off his shoes and heading for the bathroom, stripping his clothes off as he goes and leaving them in a trail on the floor. He takes a long hot shower where he decidedly thinks about nothing. Nothing doesn’t exactly work, as nothing turns quickly into something as soon as he has to use both shampoo and conditioner. Then he thinks of Lance.

Memories of Lance throughout the day start to edge into his mind. Not just Lance. All his friends, and the fact that this is the best birthday he’s had in a long, long time. But he’d be lying if he said Lance isn’t a centerpiece.

Would Lance be around for many more of his birthdays?

Would be be around for Lance’s?

When thinking about nothing doesn’t quite pan out, he pointedly fixates on his school projects due soon, mentally organizing what he needs to do and when.

He’s out of the shower, pajama pants riding low on his hips and towel around his shoulders, when his phone buzzes. He looks up from where he’s been pouring himself a glass of water, brow furrowed as he tries to mentally locate where he’d last seen his phone.

He finds it in the jeans he had discarded on the floor, and he isn’t at all surprised to find a text from Lance waiting for him. Along with the terrible name he had put in with his contact photo that Keith finds far too amusing to change.

Lancey Lance ;)))
> I have your birthday present ready for you

Keith
> It wasn’t ready literally 30 mins ago when I last saw you?

Lancey Lance ;)))
> No
> I couldn’t do it then
> I can give it to you now ;)

Keith
> That smilie is mighty suspicious
Lancey Lance ;)))
> idk what you’re talking about ;)))

Keith
> I’m not sure if I should be worried or intrigued

Lancey Lance ;)))
> Probably a healthy mix of both tbh
> It’s a good way to approach most things in life
> Like eating alligator for the first time
> Worried bc wtf alligator but intrigued bc wtf alligator

Keith
> I feel like you’re stalling

Lancey Lance ;)))
> Shut up, I’m not STALLING, I’m just gathering courage to send this

Keith
> What kind of present needs courage?

Lancey Lance ;)))
> This kind
[ Image Received ]
> Ta-da! Happy birthday!

Okay, so I realize I kinda sprung this on you suddenly, bc I convinced myself the surprise factor would be great, but you’re givin me a lot of silence here dude
> Silence has like a 50/50 of being good or bad
> And the longer this goes on the more I’m leaning towards bad
> Pls give me a sign I didn’t just fuck up

Keith can see the texts coming in, but he can’t bring himself to look away from the picture. Lance, sprawled out on his bed. Jeans unbuttoned and unzipped, pushed low on his hips to reveal his boxers. One arm holding his phone high while the other lays beside him, elbow bent and hand causally relaxed by his head. His shirt is hiked up high, bunching at his collarbones, revealing a long and lean torso, stretched and on display as he arches his back.

Light brown skin made near golden in the lamplight of his dorm, warm and inviting, casting shadows to emphasis the curves and dips of his body. Abs slightly defined. Nipples dusky and peaked. Dip of his bellybutton leading into a thick trail of hair that disappears beneath his boxers. Hip bones sharp and defined.

Along his left side is his soulmark. Keith’s most recent painting. Crawling down from his bunched up shirt to sprawl and wind and curl around his ribs to his chest, down to his hip bone. Purple spirals and curls. Lilac vines. Swirling like paint in water. Adding a color that looks beautiful in contrast to his skin.

Keith’s handiwork. His painting. Scrawled out and tattooed across Lance’s body. Put on display in a way that’s far from innocent and has Keith’s hard pounding far too painfully.

He can’t stop staring. He can’t stop tracing the swirls of purple with his eyes, how it interacts with the dips and curves and shadows on his body. Then he can’t stop staring at his body because
honestly... *fuck.*

His face is mostly cut off at the top of the image, letting his bare chest be the center piece, but Keith can see he smirk hovering on his lips.

Keith’s mouth feels dry, and there’s a noticeable lump in his throat that’s making it very hard to breathe as he exits the image and types a response with shaking fingers.

**Keith**

> Wow

**Lancey Lance ;)))**

> Alright, that’s a response
> Is that like, a good wow or a bad wow?

**Keith**

> A good wow
> Definitely a good wow

**Lancey Lance ;)))**

> Alright, I can work with that

**Keith**

> Just... wow

**Lancey Lance ;)))**

> Damn, Keith, you have such a way with words
> Know how to make a boy feel special ;)

**Keith**

> Shut up

**Lancey Lance ;)))**

> Why don’t you make me?

**Keith**

> I wish I could
> Jesus Lance
> You were planning this?

**Lancey Lance ;)))**

> Yeah, wasn’t sure if you’d like it tho

**Keith**

> I like it. A lot

**Lancey Lance ;)))**

> Wanna know how you can show your appreciation? ;)

Keith has a pretty good idea of what he’s getting at, and decides to beat him to the punch. Running the towel along his hair one more time, he tosses it over the back of the couch before throwing himself down on his bed. He shuffles around with his front camera open on his phone, trying to get a somewhat decent angle. Lance’s picture had looked so effortlessly flawless, but holy *shit* this is hard and awkward as hell.
Half propped up on his pillows, and damn near thirty pictures later, he finally manages to get a decent one. He’s shirtless, wet hair a mess around his shoulders, shadow of a shy smirk at the edge of the frame. He has one thumb hooked into the waistband of his pajama pants and boxers, pushing them down enough to give an inkling of where his own happy trail leads and a good view of the V that angles down from his hipbones.

It’s not the greatest picture, and the more he stares at it, the more he sees flaws in it. But he sends it anyway before the doubt can get the better of him.

Keith
> Like this?
[ Image Sent ]

Lancey Lance ;)))
> Holy
> a:dkfja:fa;lkd
> I was going to say call me but holy fuck
> This is so much better
> Jfc

Keith
> Oh... I can still call you?

Lancey Lance ;)))
> Hold on, I’m not done staring
> Jesus fuck, Keith, who the fuck gave you permission to be so hot
> I’d be mad if I wasn’t tapping that

Keith
> It’s okay
> I’ll just look at the picture you sent while I wait

Lancey Lance ;)))
> Fuuuuuuck
> Okay call me
> But you don’t have to if you don’t want to
> If you’re uncomfortable with this
> I mean it’s pretty obvious where I’m going with this, and I get it if you don’t wanna
> It might be kinda weird, is it weird?
> Only if you want to

Keith can still see him typing, but he doesn’t bother waiting for the flood of messages. He hits the call button, putting the phone to his ear before he loses his nerve. Lance picks up on the first ring.

“Hey.” Sheepishness.

“Hey.” Breathlessness.

“Not to like, rush things, but Hunk’s in the shower, and I only have a limited amount of time.” It babbles out of him, quick and rushed, words stumbling over each other and half formed.

Keith feels a smile tug at his lips as he stares at the ceiling. “Did you seriously just open up this conversation with Hunk being in the shower?”
“Oh my god, shut up.” He says it with a groan, but it doesn’t sound like it’s entirely from frustration.

“Are you...” He pauses when he feels his voice threaten to crack. He licks his lips, speaking again lowly to compensate. He doesn’t know why he feels the need to whisper. Like talking too loudly might break the moment. “Are you touching yourself?”

There’s a soft, low chuckle, followed by a voice with an airy breathlessness about it. “I just got a picture of you looking hot as fuck and sprawled out on your bed. Of fucking course, I’m touching myself.”

Keith feels his breath catch in his throat. He doesn’t know if it’s audible, but then Lance sighs, the sound trailing off into a whine. He can imagine him, back arched, pants at his thighs while he lazily strokes himself.

“I wish I had gone home with you. If it wasn’t so obvious, I would’ve. Would’ve given you a birthday present in person.”

“Yeah?” He hates how he sounds like the air has been punched from his lungs and the low, gravely quality of his voice. But Lance doesn’t seem to mind.

“Yeah. Wanna know what I would do if I was there with you right now?” There’s that sly edge. The mischievous undertones mixed with the breathlessness of his voice and the way a moan seems to rumble beneath his words. And fuck if Keith isn’t weak for it.

His hand has made it down his chest without his permission, lazily and lightly dragging his fingertips along his hip bones and stomach before following the trail of hair down. His eyes flutter closed, letting himself be lost in darkness and Lance’s voice as he lets out a shaking breath. “Yeah.”

“I would get on my knees for you. I’ve never done it before, but I want to. For you. With you. Wanna know what you feel like in my mouth.” His words are getting quicker now, voice more ragged at the edges. Keith can barely make out a soft rustling and imagines him writhing on his bed, smooth body sliding over the sheets. “I wanna see your face when I do it. Wanna watch you come undone. Wanna drive you crazy.”

“Fuck,” Keith’s breath shudders out of him. He can feel heat coiling in his gut, building low buzzing beneath his skin. He aches. God, it’s taken no time at all and he’s already aching. “Lance —”

“Are you touching yourself?” The question is a low rumble, sending shivers down his spine.

“No— Not yet—”

“Touch yourself, Keith.” It’s a plea, tailed by a soft whine. Desperate and needy. “Please. I wanna hear you.”

His hand pushes beneath his waistband without preamble, unable to deny Lance when he sounds like that. He hisses as his fingers curl around sensitive skin, already swollen and getting hard. He sighs shakily as he gives himself several slow pumps, relieving some of the ache. “Fuck.”

“That’s it. Fuck, Keith, you sound so good.”

“I don’t—” He cuts himself off with a groan, half from frustration and half from pleasure. “I don’t know what to say.”
“It’s okay. This is awkward as shit.” Then comes the laugh, low and breathless and somehow managing to wipe away any insecurities and reservations that have been knotting up in his chest. “But... god fuck, Keith, I just want to hear you. I don’t care what you say. I just want to hear you.”

He bites his lip, stifling another groan, this time with frustrated pleasure. It’s a combination he’s not even surprised he feels around Lance. “Lance.”

“That’s it. Please. Holy shit, Keith, just say my name like that.”

He twists his wrist as he pumps himself, thumb rolling over his head and smearing precum. His body seizes for a moment, a gasp making his back arch. “Lance.”

“Yes, fuck. I wish I was there. I wanna touch you. Wanna kiss you. You’re so goddamn kissable. It’s not even fair. I’m gonna slip up one of these days cause fuck.” His words are coming quicker now, sly mischief seeping away in the wake of desperation and need.

“I’m not even sorry.” Keith says with a chuckle, sound hiccuping as his own strokes pick up speed.

“I know you’re not, you asshole. Jesus, I wanna be there to kiss that smug ass smirk off your face.”

Keith hums. “I can think of a better use of your mouth.”

“Fuck, Keith. You can’t just say shit like that.”

He chuckles. “I thought that was the point of this call?”

“Yeah, but, fuck, my heart can’t take it.”

“I bet you’d look real good on your knees, Lance.” His heart beats hard in his chest, anxiousness crawling tight beneath his ribs. This feels so awkward to say. Does it sound as weird as he feels it does? He can’t say for sure, but his hand on his dick and the sound of Lance’s breath hitching is enough encouragement to continue. “I wanna see you with your lips around my cock.” Another gasp, air released in a breathy moan that’s just audible enough to send shivers down his spine. “You’d take it all for me, wouldn’t you, Lance?”

“Yeah, Keith, fuck. Yes— I’d take all of it— As much as I can—“ He can hear the rustling, how quick Lance’s breath comes, how rushed and hoarse his voice sounds.

He can imagine Lance writhing on his sheets, phone pressed between his ear and his shoulder, one hand holding his pants down while he fucks into the other. Can imagine how his beautiful face would scrunch up, lips parted and swollen and red, wet and inviting. The way his brows would bunch up, eyes squeezed shut as he panted.

His own grip on himself tightens, pace speeding up to match the rhythm of the Lance in his mind, hips fucking into his fist. He licks his lips, a smirk tugging at the edges, imagining Lance wrecking himself to the sound of Keith’s voice. “Good boy.”

There’s a sharp gasp, followed by a low moaning, “Fuck,” And then silence. The rustling has stilled, and Keith can hear nothing but the soft, heavy breathing. Only a few seconds pass before there’s a much louder, much sharper, and far more panicked. “Fuck!” Before the call suddenly ends.

He has no idea what happened, but there’s a pressing matter to attend to.

Phone falling off to the side, he squeezes his eyes shut and loses himself in the fantasy. In the
echoes of Lance’s voice. In the way he had said Keith’s name, breathless and rumbling, a plea and a demand. He imagines Lance writing on his bed, Keith’s soulmark tattooed along his ribs, the way the colored skin would shift and stretch over muscles and bone as Lance squirmed in pleasure.

He imagines following the trail of those soulmarks with his hands. With his mouth. With his tongue. Leaving darker marks with teeth and lips. He imagines Lance writing beneath his hands, fingers tugging at his hair and his shoulders.

It doesn’t take long before he’s spilling out over his hand, a mess shooting out over his stomach in spurts, goes so far as to dot his ribs. He looks down at it and sighs, letting his head drop back to his pillow. He act is fun and all, but he hates the mess.

Still, the thought of Lance being made a mess, proof of his own orgasm strewn out over his ribs and the marks Keith has put there, does something to Keith’s insides. Something fluttering and warm. He wonders if Lance would feel the same about seeing him. Maybe he should…

He rolls his head to the side, where his phone is buzzing and the screen is lighting up with texts.

**Lancey Lance ;)))**
> I am SO SORRY
> I REALLY DIDN’T MEAN TO BE A DICK AND CUM AND GO LIKE THAT
> I heard Hunk unlocking the door and I panicked
> I had to pull my clothes back on and waddle to the bathroom
> IT WAS SO GROSS
> I think Hunk knows what I did, but he’s not gonna say anything. When you live together in a dorm, you learn to expect and respect each other’s fap time
> He didn’t hear me on the phone tho so THANK GOD
> Btw that was amazing and your voice is 200% not fair and I hope you had a good time too

**Keith**
> I definitely had a good time
> Thanks for my present

**Lancey Lance ;)))**
> Happy birthday dude
> Did you, uh... manage to get off? I kinda had to leave in a hurry and I’m really sorry I couldn’t stick around to finish the job

**Keith**
> It’s fine
> I managed
> [ Image Sent ]

**Lancey Lance ;)))**
> I
> GIVE A MAN SOME WARNING JESUS FUCKING CHRIST

**Keith**
> Sorry?

**Lancey Lance ;)))**
> No no just
> God DAMN
> Wow

**Keith**
> Eloquent. You have such a way with words. Way to make a boy feel special

**Lancey Lance ;)))**
> Stfu, Keith
> This isn’t fair though. It’s YOUR birthday, and I got two pictures for the spank bank and you only got one

**Keith**
> Guess you’ll just have to make it up to me later

**Lancey Lance ;)))**
> I can definitely do that

---

“Lance.”

“Hmm?”

“Earth to Lance.”

“Pidge—“

“Come in, Lance.”

“I can hear you.”

“You’re staring.”

“What?” He turns sharply, blinking as his brows furrow.

Pidge stands next to him, one hand in their pocket and the other holding their coffee cup. Honestly, he expected them to go back to the table after getting their drink. He hadn’t noticed that they had stuck around. That... is probably due to the fact that he was staring.

Pidge gives him a flat look, slowly arching one eyebrow as they sip their drink. His shoulders rise, hands jamming into his pockets. He tells himself that the slouch in his posture looks casual. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Lance, please. You were staring at that poor girl with that dopey look on your face. Give her some privacy, dude.”

He slumps a little more, and this time it’s definitely not casual. He stares at the ground, scuffing the toe of his shoe on the carpet. “I wasn’t staring.”

Pidge pats his arm. A placating gesture that he knows is the best kind of comfort he’ll get while they’re in a public space. “It’s okay. I know you weren’t trying to be rude. You’re just a love sick moron.”

“I think I should take offense to that.” He says wryly.
Pidge shrugs, hand dropping back to sink into their pocket. “Maybe, but you know it’s true. You’re a hopeless romantic.”

“I know, but just... look at her, Pidge.” He mutters, eyes flickering back to the girl in question.

She’s nestled in one of the comfortable armchairs that fill the large alcove to the left of the counter. Knees pulled up onto the chair. She wears a dress that’s probably a little too little for the dropping temperatures of fall, but there’s a sweater draped over the arm of the chair. Her arms are bare and absolutely covered with scribbled correspondence, scrawling where ever there happens to be space, with no specific organization. Some of them look brighter and fresher, smudged a little. Others look somewhat more muted, faded deep into the skin. He can’t read anything on her arms, but he doesn’t need to.

She’s currently hunched over, skirt hiked up far enough to reveal the shorts she wears underneath, scribbling quickly on her knees and upper thigh. He’s been watching her long enough to see the pattern. The quick scribbling, followed by a brief waiting where he can practically see her holding her breath, ink appearing on her skin, and then she’s off writing again.

It’s rude to stare. He knows that. It’s rude as hell to stare at someone’s soulmarks, especially while they’re actively appearing. It’s even more rude when he doesn’t even know her. Still, he can’t help but be transfixed by her face. The way her eyes light up with excitement. The soft fondness that softens her features. The smile that’s barely there, as if she’s unaware she’s smiling at all.

“She looks so happy...” Lance finishes, unable to articulate the fluttering in his chest much more than that. She looks happy. Perfectly content and perfectly happy as she revels in her soul connection.

Pidge is right. He is a hopeless romantic. But he can’t quite help it when he grew up on stuff like this. Fairy tales made real. It’s everything he’s always expected for himself, and everything he’s always wanted. Seeing that happiness on others fills him with a wistful, aching longing, but it also fills him with a weightless contentment that springs from hope. Hope that love and perfect soulmate stories are still around. Even if they’re not his own.

Pidge hums noncommittally. More acknowledgement than anything.

“Lance?” He snaps to attention as the barista calls his name, and he hurries forward to take the two cups she offers, muttering a quick thanks and offering a smile. He steps out of the way as she calls the next person’s name, and moves over to the side table to get cardboard sleeves for the two drinks.

“You know, you could just write to them.” Pidge says, leaning their hip against the counter. He eyes them warily, movements slowing. Pidge catches the look in his eyes and sighs. “Your soulmate, Lance. You can just write to them. There’s nothing that says you can’t.”

His lips purse, eyes going down to the cups as he presses lids to them. “You don’t understand, Pidge.”

“I do because I’ve been your friend for years now. Have they ever told you not to write to them?”

“Well... no.”

“And you said things have been getting better lately? Like they’ve actually talked to you a few times, and they’ve answered a few of your random questions?”

“Well, yeah, but—“
“No but’s.”

He glares at them, irritation and hope and frustration colliding in his chest, swirling at biting. “It’s not that simple, Pidge. I annoyed them into a silence that lasted for years. I’m not gonna do that again.”

Pidge sighs, pushing off the counter to follow him back to their table. “I’m just saying, if they’re talking to you now, then things have probably gotten better for them. I can’t begin to tell you what their problem is, but the fact that they’ve been actually responsive has to be a good sign.”

“What if they ignore me?” He asks, voice far too soft and far too vulnerable for his liking.

Pidge touches his arm again, voice lowering to something soft to match. “Then they don’t answer you. Maybe they’re busy. Maybe it’s overwhelming for them in that moment. Just fucking say something, Lance. You can’t sit around waiting forever.”

He purses his lips, grumbling a dull thanks under his breath as they reach the table. The problem is that he has resigned himself to just waiting. He resigned himself to that years ago. It’s hard to break that habit and push boundaries that he’s hidden safely behind for so long.

He’s safe here. His heart and his future with his soulmate are guarded here. Stepping over those boundaries is stepping into the unknown.

Still... Pidge does have a point. His soulmate has been more responsive lately. Maybe just one, small thing...

“What would I even ask?” He says as they reach the table. Pidge throws themself into their seat, already pulling out their phone and leaning over the table top. Lance slides Keith his drink before sitting in his own seat.

“Hell if I know.”

“Piiiidge.” He whines, shoulder drooping as he lifts his chin, tilting his head to give them the best sad eyes he can muster. “You can’t encourage me to do this and then not help me.”

“Help you with what?” Keith takes the cup with a small grateful smile. It’s a thing they’ve been doing lately. One day Keith will get their drinks, and the next Lance does it. It evens out in the end. Pidge doesn’t understand, but they’ve stopped questioning it, taking his insistence that it’s easier at face value.

Truthfully, it would be just as easy for them to get their own coffee, but this way someone is left to watch and claim a table while the other goes for drinks. And maybe, just maybe, Lance feels a little thrill whenever he sees Keith’s grateful little smile and their fingers brush along the coffee cup. Or the little flip in his stomach whenever Keith manages to get his complicated orders right.

Yeah, okay, he has problems. The main one being all the weird things Keith does to him. But no one’s perfect. And the gratification he feels in the moment is enough to keep him from thinking too hard about how fucking gone he is for this boy.

Problems for Future Lance. Good luck, buddy.

He leans forward, resting an elbow on the table and resting his chin in his palm, fingers of his other hand playing with the lid of his cup. As Keith lifts his own cup to his lips, Lance kicks him lightly under the table. “Give it a second, mulletman. You’re gonna burn yourself again.”
Keith gives him a small pout of a scowl but lowers his cup anyway.

“I’m trying to convince Lance to write to his soulmate.” Pidge says, answering Keith’s question. They don’t look up from where they’re slumped over the table, scrolling through their phone.

“Oh?” Keith says, and it’s a little too blank for Lance’s liking. Blank and carefully constructed as his face falls into a perfectly neutral expression. Lance’s insides twist around the sour pit of anxiety as Keith raises one brow.

“He was staring at this girl writing to her soulmate over there with this dopey look on his face. I told him to just fucking write to them. What’s the worst that can happen? They don’t reply?”

Lance shoots them a little glare that they don’t bother to look up at. “Well, yeah.”

Pidge shrugs, sipping their drink. “Never know until you try.”

“Which brings us back to my previous question: what do I even say?”

Another shrug, more lazy than the first.

“Piiidge, put your kid genius brain to work and help me.”

They huff, and while they try to project irritation, Lance knows them better than that. They look up from their phone, eyes darting around the campus coffee shop. “Ask them what kinda coffee they like? Something simple and easy.”

He blinks, straightening a little. “That’s... not a bad idea.”

Pidge flashes them a little grin. “I know. I’m a genius.”

“And so very modest.” He says dryly as he bends over to reach into his bag, digging around for a pen. By the time he straightens, Keith has already lost interest in their conversation. He’s hunkered down in his seat, hoodie swallowing his arms all the way to his fingers. He has a text book open and on his lap, propped up on the edge of the table, ignoring them in favor of reading.

Lance feels a moment of guilt. A twisting in his gut that lends a sharp pain to his heart. But... Keith doesn’t look mad. Just... carefully blank. Indifferent. Uninterested. That should probably be for the better, but it doesn’t ease the queasy feeling taking root in Lance’s gut. Still, Keith did say that he doesn’t expect Lance to change just because they’re more involved now. And he’s never reacted badly to Lance’s soulmark paintings. So maybe he’s just imagining things.

He puts the pen to his inner forearm, tip hovering just over his skin as he hesitates. Do it quick. Before he can overthink it. Like a bandaid. Rip it and go. He writes quickly, practically slamming the pen to the tabletop when he’s done.

Hey, space cadet, what kinda coffee do you like? Or are you a tea person?

Time ticks by slowly. He has homework he should be doing, and he’s got everything strewn out across the table just waiting for him to start, but none of the words on the pages make any sense. He can’t focus on them for shit. His brain won’t cooperate. All he can think about are the words on his arm and how they seem to burn against his flesh.

Not a literal burn, but a burn of awareness. The memory of how the pen felt pressing into his skin is at the forefront of his mind. His feels like he’s floating in a limbo where it’s hard to breathe and hard to sit still, limbs feeling light and airy but weighed down with a precarious nervousness that
threatens to drag him to the ground. He feels like he’s caught, suspended, and just waiting. Waiting and over attentive for any sigh of his soul connection opening up and for the telltale prickles against his skin. He’s aware. Far, far too aware. And it leads him to fidgeting.

His leg bounces, pen tapping restlessly against the blank page on his notebook. He rests his chin in his hand, fingers absently picking at his face, and god, he’s gonna regret that later, but right now he can’t stop.

He drinks his coffee way too fast, lifting the cup simply giving him something to do with his hands. It’s not even good. They got the proportions wrong again. He should honestly start ordering something else here, because no one makes it right save for himself, Allura, and Coran.

He ends up excusing himself to the bathroom, and taking a moment to just splash water on his face. He takes a moment to simply stare down at the writing on his arm, and... he can’t help but feel like he’s made a mistake.

He knows, logically, he’s done nothing wrong. He also knows, logically, that only about forty minutes have passed. His soulmate could be busy and unable to reply. They might be waiting until later to reply. They may not reply at all, and that’s fine. Totally fine. They have no obligation to him. He’s just being a burden. Bothering them when they don’t want it in hopes of what? A one word answer about coffee?

An incredulous laugh bubbles up his throat, sounding just a hair too hysterical as anxiety and doubt and worry churn in his gut. It squeezes his heart, pulsing out through his veins, making him feel lightheaded and queasy.

Fuck. He fucked up. He finally reaches out to his soulmate again, and it’s about coffee. He’s an idiot. He shouldn’t have listened to Pidge. He needs to erase it. Get rid of it.

He’s out the door, nearly tripping over someone in the process of scrambling out into the hallway, shouting an apology over his shoulder. He hurries through the wide halls of the student union, weaving through the flood of students until he can dip into the coffeeshop.

“Where’s Pidge?” He asks when he reaches their table, finding no sign of the little gremlin or their belongings.

Keith just shrugs, not even bothering to look up from his text book. “They said they had to go get something from their room before their next class, so they left early.”

“Oh, cool.” He says absently, dropping into his seat and reaching for his pen. He has it pressed to his skin, his question mostly obscured with quick and fast scribbled lines, blackening out the words, when Keith is suddenly there.

He lunges across the table, slapping his sleeve covered hand over his arm and blocking him from continuing to scratch out the message. Lance has the fleeting thought that his sweater paws are cute before his face scrunches up with a scowl, irritation tugging at his chest as he lifts his head to glare at Keith.

“What are you doing?” Incredulous. A hiss that’s far too loud. Almost a hint of anger. Matching Lance’s scowl with one of his own.

It makes Lance bristle, shoulders squaring defensively. “Nothing. It’s none of your business, Keith.”

He tries to tug his arm out of Keith’s grip, but his fingers curl tighter, nails biting into his arm hard
enough to make him wince. “You’re trying to erase your soulmark.” It’s definitely a statement, but it’s said almost like a question.

Lance can’t really deny it, and Keith isn’t letting his arm go. He looks down at the table, glaring at the black scribbles peeking out from beneath Keith’s hand. “I just... don’t want to bother them.”

“But you want to talk to them.” He says it like he doesn’t understand. And he doesn’t. He doesn’t understand. He doesn’t get it.

Lance’s brows furrow, and he finally manages to rip his arm away from Keith’s grasp. “It doesn’t matter what I want.” He mutters, the bitter taste of bile on the back of his tongue as he pulls on his hoodie, pushing the sleeves down to hide the mangled mess his attempt at communication has become.

He crosses his arms over his chest, slouching down in his seat. Keith glares at him from where he’s still leaning over the table, hands curled into fists. “It does matter what you want.”

“No, it really fucking doesn’t. So just drop it.”

“Lance, this is your soul connection, too—“

“Keith,” He snaps, far louder and far sharper than he had intended. But it makes mouth snap shut, jaw clenching tight. He can see the muscles twitching at his temples, eyes narrowed and an anger that Lance really doesn’t want to deal with burning in his eyes. He sighs, dropping his eyes to the table and letting himself slip further down in his chair. “Just... drop it, okay?”

“Fine.” It doesn’t sound fine, but Keith backs off anyway, pulling off the table and sinking back into the bubble of his own space. His eyes are back on his textbook, but his brows are still pinched and his jaw moves like he’s grinding his teeth.

Great. Now Keith’s mad at him. He just... can’t do anything right, can he?

He sighs a long exhale through his nose, picking up his pen again and letting his arm rest on the table, hovering over his notebook. He wiggles the pen back and forth in the air, but refrains from tapping the paper. No need to make himself any more of a nuisance.

Ten minutes of silence. He knows because he’s watching the clock on the wall intensely, praying for that second hand to tick faster so at least they can have the excuse of going to class to pull them out of this funk.

He likes silences with Keith. Keith has taught him how to appreciate it. Usually silences with Keith are peaceful and grounding. Because when he’s with Keith, he doesn’t feel like he needs to fill that silence. That they can contently occupy the same space without words.

This, however, is different. This is tense and bitter. This has each tick of the second hand crawling beneath his skin and his stomach rolling. He can’t stop sneaking glances at Keith, wilting a little more when he sees the tension in his shoulders and the grinding of his jaw.

He doesn’t like this. Not one bit. But he doesn’t know how to break it.

Fortunately, Keith does it for him.

Unfortunately, it’s not how he expects.

“Do you love them?”
He looks up, blinking blankly in his confusion. Keith just stares at him, jaw set and brows pinched. There’s a steeliness in his eyes, but his voice is carefully neutral and hard to read.

When Lance raises a brow, Keith sighs, eyes dropping back down to the book in his lap. Lance knows he’s not actually reading it. “Your soulmate. Do you love them?”

The question is as absurd as it is surprising. “Of course, I do.”


He feels himself bristle. Back straightening and shoulders squaring just slightly. He lifts his chin, defiance and defensiveness blazing in his chest. “They’re my soulmate, Keith.” He says dryly.

He looks up then, but barely lifts his head. Gazing out at Lance through his lashes, hair a mess as it swoops over his forehead. His gaze is no less intense for it. In fact, it feels like a cut straight through his ribs, leaving his heart bare as he picks away at it. “But you don’t know them.”

Lance crosses his arms over his chest, as if that might help the gaping wound close. “So?”

Keith lifts his chin a little higher, eyes narrowing just a fraction. Looking Lance over like a puzzle he’s trying to figure out. “They don’t talk to you.”

“So?” He repeats. Sharper.

Keith frowns, the furrow in his brows making him look more confused than angry. But there’s definitely something else there. Perhaps not anger, but something close. Something Lance is having a hard time reading. “How can you love someone you don’t know?”

Lance shrugs, offhanded and indifferent. He’s struggling to come up with what to say back because it’s... it’s obvious, isn’t it? He loves them because they’re his soulmate. Why wouldn’t he love them? But Keith isn’t taking that for an answer, and Lance is having trouble articulating how he feels because it should be obvious, but Keith is so dense.

Keith sighs, and there’s an exasperation in there that Lance doesn’t like. Not one bit. Keith doesn’t get to judge him for loving his soulmate. “None of that matters, anyway.” He says, and Keith looks up sharply, giving him an incredulous look. “I’ll get to know them later. After we meet. Just because I don’t know them yet doesn’t mean I can’t love them.”

Keith watches him for a moment, gaze searching his face. He steels himself against the scrutiny, refusing to look away. If he hadn’t become so apt at reading the subtleties in Keith’s expression, he might have missed it. The way the lines around his lips deepen even as the furrow to his brows softens. The tension around his eyes eases, and for a brief moment, he just looks tired. “What if you don’t like them?”

Lance snorts, a smile creeping at the edges of his lips as he says with absolute certainty. “I will. They’re my soulmate.”

Keith sighs, long and deep. The exasperation is back, but it’s edged with exhaustion. The lines still cut deep around his lips, forming tension around his eyes as he looks down. He busies himself with putting his books away, slipping them into his backpack.

“But you’re impossible.” He mutters under his breath, but Lance can hear him loud and clear.

He huffs softly, lifting his chin as he packs up his own things. “Some of us like to be optimistic instead of making ourselves miserable, edge lord.”
Keith stands, swinging the strap of his backpack over his shoulder. He still looks frustrated, but the sharpness and whatever had been fueling his anger before has vanished. “I’m just being realistic.”

Lance snorts, standing up and slipping his arms through the straps of his backpack. “Sounds to me like you’re jealous.”

He regrets it as soon as he says it. Feels the cold, numbing chill of ice in his veins as the words leave his mouth. Feels the way his ribs squeeze the air from his lungs, and the way his stomach twists into a tight knot. He didn’t mean it—not like that—Keith is special to him, too—way, way too special for his own good, but—

It doesn’t matter. He looks up sharply to see the look of bewildered surprise on Keith’s face before it morphs quickly to hurt. And that’s just like a knife to his gut, twisting and tearing. Then just as quickly as it had come, it’s locked away. Indifference and anger a mask that closes Lance out in a way that leaves him reeling.

“Fuck you, Lance.” He mutters, snatching his coffee cup off the table before turning on his heel and storming out of the coffeeshop.

Lance watches him go, wishing for all the world that a hole would open up in the earth and swallow him whole. Or perhaps a bolt of lightning would come down and smite him where he stands. Or he could just turn into stone and shatter into dust on the carpet.

None of those things happen, though. And in the end, he has no choice but to drag his feet and trudge after Keith with his shoulders hunched and a weight on his chest as they walk to their public
Saying class is awkward is a huge understatement, but he’s not really sure what else to call it.

It’s the worst kind of tension. The kind that leaves him restless and agitated, caught between feeling like he can’t breathe and like he might throw up. More than once his heart rate gets a little too loud and a little too painful. His foot bounces incessantly. His nails are torn to shit, and his lip is well on its way. He was tapping his pencil, but he earned a few pointed looks from classmates.

He and Keith are still in their usual seats at the back of the room. But unlike usual, where they’d be kicking each other under the table and writing notes and whispering commentary, they’re silent. Uncomfortably so. Keith sits rigid next to him, body tense and jaw set. The few times Lance manages to sneak a glance, he can see the furrow to his brows and the frown on his lips. He stares a hole straight through their professor, but Lance knows it’s a very pointed way of staring. Pointedly not looking at him.

Keith almost pays too much attention in class, just to spite him.

This is the worst kind of tension because Lance knows it’s all his fault. Mostly his fault. Sorta his fault? Okay, Keith’s to blame, too, but Lance didn’t exactly make it better. They’re both at fault, but that doesn’t stop the doubt and the regret and the over analyzing from swirling and spiraling.

If only he hadn’t written to his soulmate. If only he hadn’t tried to scribble it out. If only Keith hadn’t pushed. If only he hadn’t snapped back. If only he hadn’t gotten defensive. If only he hadn’t said that.

He knows, knows, that Keith is weird about soulmates. He knows their views on it differ. He wishes he had just let the topic go before they butted heads. He wishes he could just rewind. Do over. Erase.

The worst part is, he doesn’t know what Keith is thinking. He doesn’t know enough about Keith and his soulmate situation to begin to guess. All he knows is Keith doesn’t like talking about it. He doesn’t know why Keith was so pushy. Why he argued. Why he can’t understand that Lance loves his soulmate.

It hurts. It hurts because as much as he knows Keith, as much as he prides himself on being able to read Keith, he’s learning that there are some part of him, some very important parts, that Lance just... doesn’t know.

And he doesn’t want to fuck this up. Not just the whole physical relationship thing they’ve got going on, but their friendship. Keith is important to him, and he doesn’t want to lose that piece of his life because the two of them couldn’t see eye-to-eye. He doesn’t want this to get in the way of them. Doesn’t want it to drive a wedge between them.

So when class ends and Keith picks up his bag, darting quickly out of the class and hurrying down the hall, Lance charges after him. Not to yell at him. Not to demand answers. But... to swallow his pride and apologize.

He doesn’t know what happened, but it’s clear that there are things he doesn’t understand about Keith, and there are things Keith doesn’t understand about him. And with their tempers, it’s a
volatile combination. He doesn’t want to leave this as it is, his fucking anxiety won’t let him, so he’ll do what he can. And what he can do is apologize. Not for the whole thing, but for his own part in it.

Maybe if he can make Keith understand Lance, Keith will help Lance understand him.

He catches up to Keith right before he reaches the stairwell. He reaches out, catching Keith’s wrist and distantly reveling in how small it feels beneath the swallowing material of his hoodie sleeve. “Keith, just... hold up a second.”

Keith stops the moment Lance grabs him, turning to look at him sidelong. His lips are pursed, but they’re just shy of a real frown. He goes for a glare, but it’s halfhearted. There’s a hurt and guilt in his eyes that makes Lance’s stomach twist. With a gentle tug at his wrist, he pulls Keith out of the main flow of students going to and from class. Keith moves with him easily, and Lance pulls them over into a far corner, sitting them on a bench.

As soon as they’re sitting, he pulls his hand away. He leans forward, resting his elbows on his thighs and clasping his hands tight, weaving his fingers and idly attempting to crack his knuckles as he fidgets. He breathes in deep, straightening a little with it and closing his eyes briefly. He can feel Keith watching him. Can feel the heat of his gaze.

He breathes out. “I’m sorry.” He opens his eyes, shoulders sagging as he turns to look at Keith. Catches his gaze and holds it. Intense and unyielding. He wants— no. He needs Keith to see how genuine he is. How much this fucking hurts to be this vulnerable. Keith doesn’t look away. Looks surprised, a little conflicted, but doesn’t look away.

“Soulmate things are...” Lance lets out a shaking breath, keeping his voice low and soft enough that their conversation is private in their little corner. A bubble beside the flow of students. A swirling pool separated from the rest. “Complicated. Crazy complicated. And it’s... honestly, a bit of a sore spot for both of us. I don’t like...” He closes his eyes. Keith’s gaze is just a hair too intense, and he’s feeling just a hair too vulnerable. This isn’t something he’s used to saying aloud. Hell, it’s barely something he likes to admit to himself. “I don’t like the idea that I’m gonna fuck it up with my soulmate, or that we won’t get along, or that, I dunno, things’ll go bad somehow.”

He sighs heavily, letting frustration and exasperation tug at his vocal chords as he drops his head into his hands. His fingers tug at his hair, sharp and dull pain grounding him, nails digging into his scalp—

Then Keith’s hand is on his shoulder, warm and firm and comforting. It slides across to his back, rubbing slow and soothing circles along his spine. He sighs again, but this time it’s more in relief. “My family all have amazing soulmates and amazing stories.” His voice is muffled by his hands, low and soft. He can feel Keith lean closer to hear him better. “And the longer mine goes without talking to me— the longer I go without meeting them— I just... I’ve always assumed I would have a story like my parents, you know? And it... it hurts to realize I probably won’t...”

He stares at the floor from between his fingers. The worn linoleum is scuffed with dirt and shoe prints. Tarnished from years of wear and tear and hundreds upon thousands of students. He focuses on the patterns the dried stains make on the once pristine tiles.

He loses himself in the dirt and grim, letting the swirls and lines drag him away as the words slip from his lips. “If my soulmate doesn’t even like me, what good am I?”

The hand on his back stills. The sound of footsteps and muted voices and fractions of conversations are loud, but not nearly as loud as his own heartbeat. He couldn’t hear Keith’s breath to begin with,
but now he gets the distinct impression that he’s holding it.


He breathes in deep and lets out a shaky breath, lifting his head and sitting up straight. He slaps his hands down on his knees. “Anyway, I just wanted to say that I’m sorry. I know you’re different about soulmates than I am, and I didn’t mean to argue with you about it, and I definitely didn’t mean the whole jealous thing, so— I’m sorry.”

He’s not sure what he’s expecting, but it’s definitely not Keith’s head to land on his shoulder. Not the sigh that he can hear as well as feel against his side. Not the soft hair that tickles his collarbones. Not the hand that slips down his back to rest at the curve of his waist. “I’m sorry, too.”

Neither of them speak for several long moments. Lance can see the passage of time in the way the flood of students thins to a trickle, nearly stopping as they slip into classrooms down the hall. Still, he doesn’t move. He doesn’t really want to move. He’s comfortable like this, with Keith pressed to his side, and Keith doesn’t seem in a hurry to move either.

The tension that had been tight and suffocating dissipates slowly, leaking away and leaving his bones feeling like jelly with relief.

When he finally feels Keith shift, he feels a distinct ripple of disappointment that he has to quickly snuff out. Keith sits up beside him, hand moving from his waist to the center of his back, but not quite pulling away. Lance looks over at him, finding Keith staring hard at the floor. His brows are furrowed, lips pursed into a small frown. It’s clear he wants to say something but is having trouble finding the words. It’s fine. Lance will wait. And he’ll idly muse at the cute curve of Keith’s nose as he does so.

“If you...” He starts, but trails off, nose wrinkling. Lance leans over, silently bumping his shoulder against Keith’s. Keith sighs. “If you met your soulmate right now, what would you?”

Lance tenses, brows immediately pinching. He opens his mouth to respond, but closes it quickly after. What... what would he do? If his First Meeting was right now, he would... oh god, what would he do? Have a heart attack probably. Then be revived and have another one all over again.

He imagines it a million different ways in the span of a couple seconds. A million different First Meetings with a faceless, nameless person. A million different outcomes. He’ll shoot himself in the foot before he admits that a couple of those fantasies are wishful musings of Keith that are quickly stamped out.

“Would you give up everything for them? To meet them right now?” He looks at Keith then, but Keith is still staring at the floor. The hand on his back has gone stiff, and his other hand is curled into a fist on his thigh. He can see the tension in Keith’s jaw. “Drop out of school? Fly across the country? To another country? Leave everyone you know behind just to meet them? To be with them?”

Lance doesn’t answer. He knows what his answer is without having to think about it, and he knows that it’s not the answer Keith wants to hear.

His silence, however, is answer enough.

Keith sighs again, pushing himself to his feet, hand dragging along Lance’s back before
disappearing. Lance looks up at him, bottom lip caught between his teeth. Keith looks defeated. There’s a slump in his shoulders and shadows behind his eyes.

Before Lance can get too far on the *I fucked up again* train, though, Keith turns to him, holding out his hand. Lance stares at it for a moment, completely baffled. “Come on. I want to take you somewhere.”

There’s no excitement or lightness in his voice. Just dull, monotonated, defeat. But a firm determination and steely resolve. Lance’s curiosity is piqued, but even if it wasn’t, he knows he would follow Keith anywhere. It’s a scary truth that he doesn’t like to admit to himself.

So he takes Keith’s hand and lets him pull him to his feet. Let’s Keith hold his hand as he leads him to the stairwell, down the steps, and out into the fresh air. Let’s Keith guide him back towards his apartment and to his bike parked out front. Stays silent the whole time because it looks like Keith is lost in his own thoughts, and if letting him think through it means learning a little more about Keith. Well... it’s worth the awkward silence.

And when he sees that familiar flicker of doubt in Keith’s eyes, all it takes is a gentle squeeze of his hand to turn it back into steely resolve.

Keith has taken him for rides several times, and it never seems to lose its thrill. Lance loves the feeling of it. Of having the powerful machine between his thighs. Of being pressed tight to Keith’s back, arms around his waist, leaning into him. Of the wind tugging at his clothes, reminding him just how fast they’re going. Of feeling the world tilt as they lean into turns. Of seeing the world fly past with dizzying speed.

It’s freeing. It’s exhilarating. The air is cold but Keith is warm. There’s no need for conversation. At the heart of the adrenaline is a tranquil peace. A freedom that’s hard to find anywhere else.

Keith takes him out to the parkway. It isn’t the first time, and it probably won’t be the last. They can’t go as fast on the winding roads, but it’s beautiful. Away from people and the town. Breathtaking and wild. It feels like they could go forever, leave everything behind, and maybe enter a reality where nothing like soulmates matter.

Instead of taking him to an overlook, Keith takes him to a hiking trail. But when Lance gives him a raised eyebrow in question, Keith just offers a tiny smile and heads toward the trail. And really, what can Lance do besides follow?

The trail isn’t so bad. He doesn’t need hiking boots for it, and he’s fine in his jeans. It curves ever upwards, zigzagging at a steady incline. Rocks make stone steps at several points, roots and dirt at other spots. They pass a few people headed down, but very few headed up. Turns out the middle of the day on a week day isn’t a popular hiking day.

Keith doesn’t talk as he leads the way up the mountain trail, and Lance doesn’t push it. They pass a few giant boulders that hang out over the mountainside, giving perfect places to climb onto a rest, and had this been any other time, he would insist on doing just that. But Keith isn’t stopping, and Lance doesn’t want to interrupt whatever is going on inside his head.

So they walk. They climb upwards. Lance keeps an eye on his feet so he doesn’t trip. Up. Up. Right. Left. Right. The path curves and zigs. Then it rounds out, curving in a wide arc to the
At the top of the trail, they find themselves atop a rolling mountain top. Keith leads them straight of the head of the trail, where an incredibly large rock juts out over a cliffside. He doesn’t hesitate before climbing up it, perching himself at the top. Lance watches him go, and when he settles, he finally looks down at Lance. With a small smile, he pats the rock next to him, and Lance sighs, scrambling up after him.

There they sit, side by side, silent as they take in the view. It’s incredible. Rolling mountains and hills. Forests an array of colors as fall changes the leaves. A warm spattering of colors decorating the rolling wilderness. The parkway cuts through it below, weaving along the mountainsides. They can see far out into the distance, rolling forever onward.

Up here the wind is sharp and cold, tugging at them harshly and cutting through their jackets. He leans into Keith’s side, and feels the warm pressure as he leans back.

“This is my favorite spot on the parkway.” He offers into the silence. The first thing said since they left.

Lance hums. “It’s beautiful.”

“My parents were soulmates.”

Lance looks at him then, eyes sharp and brow furrowed. But Keith’s gaze is still out on the horizon. While there’s a hesitancy in his voice and shadows in his eyes, his expression is relaxed and strangely at ease. There’s a sad acceptance to it that makes Lance’s chest ache.

He’s silent. As if waiting for something. So Lance offers something gentle and neutral. “I didn’t know that.”

He shrugs. “I don’t talk about it. It’s... not a happy story.” He hesitates again, and Lance fills the space.

“I thought you said your mom and Shiro’s dad...?”

A small, sad smile. “We like to say they were soulmates. They were happy, but that’s... another story. My dad... he was mom’s first soulmate.” Lance hums encouragingly, leaning over to put his head on Keith’s shoulder. He can feel the shuddering exhale. “They shared who they were really young. As soon as my mom turned eighteen, she left everything behind, gave up everything to move to Texas with nothing but a suitcase full of clothes. She told me they were happy for a while. When it was still new. But... they rushed things. They went into it too fast, didn’t bother to learn about each other or about themselves, and when they whole we’re soulmates excitement wore off... they weren’t happy anymore.”

His voice is barely a whisper, barely audible over the roar of the wind rushing up the mountain. Lance finds his own breathing to be shallow, and his heartbeat loud. Still, he can feel Keith’s voice rumble in his chest. Feels it vibrate into his side and to the heart of him.

And... he’s starting to see where this is going.

“They thought having a kid would make things better, so they had me. Mom never said so, but I think it made things worse. She was lonely and miserable and never really got a chance to be herself or figure herself out, and suddenly she had a soulmate and a son and a lot of responsibility. I never got to hear his side of things, but I think my dad wasn’t much better.”
He sees movement out of the corner of his eyes, and spots Keith picking at the skin around his nails. Without thinking, Lance reaches out and snatches up one of Keith’s hands. Weaves their fingers together. Squeezes it gentle just to feel Keith squeeze back. He runs his thumb over Keith’s knuckles as he continues.

What had started with hesitancy is now a flood. A rush of words and confessions that have started to crack the dam and now can’t be held back.

“When I was two, they admitted it wasn’t working anymore. She told me she was far too miserable to stay there. She moved back home to my grandparent’s place with me. My dad died two years later, and I still have memories of her feeling the Last Connection.”

“Oh, Keith...”

He shakes his head, and Lance pretends not to notice the glassy quality of his eyes. “She said my dad wasn’t a bad person. She made sure to let me know that he was a good guy, and I should be proud to have him as my dad, but... they just rushed into things. They fucked up. And they were miserable because of it. Just... just because you’re soulmates doesn’t mean you’re guaranteed to be happy.”

He sounds choked up, voice thick as he cuts himself off. Lance hums, squeezing his hand. He’s not sure he can speak around the lump in his own throat. His stomach is twisting and rolling. His own heartbeat is bruising, chest tightening with emotions that are hard to place. Sympathy. Empathy. Understanding.

Understanding that strikes right into the heart of Keith. An understanding that makes so many pieces of the puzzle click seamlessly into place. Forming a picture that’s far deeper and far sadder than Lance had been anticipating. This is... something really heavy to have been holding on his shoulders for so long. He grew up worrying about his soulmate, worrying and fearing and... the exact opposite of Lance.

And with understanding comes a shade of guilt. Because he now understands why his own outlook might make Keith uncomfortable.

Keith isn’t just telling Lance a story about his parents. He’s opening himself up. He’s ripping his chest open and exposing the hidden parts of himself in a moment of extreme vulnerability. Putting out the pieces for Lance to see, to put together, to draw conclusions from without having to do so pointedly.

He’s offering a vulnerable and private part of himself to Lance in an attempt to caution him gently.

And Lance... god, he doesn’t know how to feel about that. Doesn’t think he can sort through the twisting chaos that’s storming inside him right now.

Keith clears his throat, shifting as he finds his voice. “I just... don’t want you to lose yourself and who you are because of someone you’ve never met. I don’t want you to throw your life away for an idea of someone.”

And that nauseating feeling, jagged and sharp, is one that Lance is all too familiar with. The guilt of truth. Because as much as he wants to deny it. As much as he wants to puff out his chest and declare that he’d always be himself, no matter what... the truth is far, far uglier and a far harder pill to swallow. He knows, deep down, in the shadows of himself where the truths lie that he doesn’t like to face, that if given the opportunity, he would be just like Keith’s mom.
He heaves a heavy breath, feels it shudder out of his lungs in a shaky exhale, and curls more into Keith’s side. Nuzzles deeper into his shoulder and feels a warmth of relief as Keith’s arm slips around his back.

“Thanks, Keith.” He says, and he means it. Feels it like a sigh of relief that is somehow centering in the eye of the storm inside him. He breathes it into the roar of the wind, as the sun begins to set and paints the sky in the same warm hues as the trees below.

Keith just hums, arm around him tightening just a fraction as his cheek falls to rest atop Lance’s head.

He had wanted understanding. He just hadn’t realized just how sobering understanding could be.

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“Lance, hold still.”

“I am holding still.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Am too.” He waggles his eyebrows for good measure, lips curling into a small smirk.

Keith pulls the brush away from his face, giving him a flat stare. His scowl, however, is ruined by the quirk at the corner of his lips and the way his cheeks rise just a fraction. “If you don’t stay still, I’m passing you over to Coran.”

“No, can do!” Coran calls from across the room where he’s hovering over Allura. She’s sitting nice and still in a chair, like she should, patiently letting Coran apply the layers upon layers of zombie make up. “We battled righteously in rock-paper-scissors for it, and you lost. It is your duty to prepare Lance’s make-up.”

“Why’d you guys act like it’s a punishment to do my make-up?” He grumbles, a pout forming on his lips.

“Because you squirm too much.” Keith says simply, dipping the brush back into the palette.

“I can’t help it.”

“I know.” Keith lightly taps the back of the brush handle against Lance’s bottom lip, playful and light as his smile starts to break through. Small and secret. “Just try, okay? I’m almost done.”

“What about the blood?”

“We’ll do that when everyone’s base paint is done.”

Lance hums, pulling his legs up onto his seat and crossing them, hands in his lap as he closes his eyes, leaning forward. “Make me pretty, Keith.”

“I thought the point of this was to make you ugly.”

“Zombies can be pretty, too. Don’t discriminate.”
The process of getting them all ready for the zombie march takes a couple hours.

Allura helps by applying a thin coating of base sealer to everyone’s face and neck. The thin, clear coating is supposed to keep anything from having direct contact with the skin, and was developed to keep make-up from transferring from soulmate to soulmate. They won’t have that much of a problem with that, seeing as Coran and Keith are doing everyone’s make-up, and none of them are doing it for themselves.

Still, the most important reason for the base sealer is the easy clean up afterwards. All the caked on layers of cheap halloween paint will peel right off, and Lance won’t have to worry about his pores being clogged for weeks.

He sits as still as he can as Keith applies the base layers of cheap paint to make him look dead. It doesn’t help that for one, sitting still is difficult. And for two, he feels like squirming under the intensity of Keith’s gaze. His skin buzzes whenever Keith’s hands brush against him. His heartbeat gets far too erratic whenever their knees bump together. His breath catching in his throat whenever Keith brushes hair gently away from his forehead.

God fucking dammit, he’s got it bad. Really bad. Ever since the talk he had with Keith about soulmates, things have only gotten worse. He’s seen Keith at his most vulnerable. He feels like he knows Keith now. Knows him in a way that takes those carefully crafted walls that had been between them and smashes them to bits.

Now he not only likes Keith, gets alone with Keith, finds the guy incredibly attractive, but he also understands Keith on a level that is far too personal and far too intimate and in a way that so few know him.

It’s an extremely dangerous combination, and Lance can feel himself teetering on the edge of a line he told himself he wouldn’t cross. One that he can’t cross. But one that’s so tempting none the less. Big nope. Big no-no. Bad Lance. Don’t even consider it. Turn around. Do not pass go. Do not collect two hundred.

But then Keith says he’s done and accents it with pressing the brush tip to Lance’s nose in a light little touch, and he opens his eyes to find Keith gazing at him with this amused fond gentleness in his eyes that makes Lance’s insides go all mushy, and god damn it’s hard not to cross that line.

He only hopes it’s not as fucking obvious as it feels.

He’s forced out of his seat by Pidge, who sits down and adjusts the fake beard as best they can. It swallows half their face, falling well past their waist. As he starts to walk away, Keith grabs his wrist, yanking him hard until he’s bent at the waist and at eye level.

Close. Waaaaay too fucking close. Keith smiles, reaching up to dab a little on his cheek with the brush.

“Missed a spot.” Keith says softly, and Lance fixates waaaaay too much on the feeling of his breath against his lips. His lips are covered in nasty zombie paint. He should not feel it that intimately.

“Thanks,” Lance manages, and judging from the smirk on Keith’s lips, it was a little too breathless. Thankfully, no one else seems to notice.

He idly chats with his friends as they take turns getting painted. While Coran and Keith work, Lance helps the others with their costumes, smattering paint on their clothes, ripping them, adding streaks of fake blood in all the right places.
In the end, they look pretty damn good. Keith and Coran are surprisingly good at face paint, and Lance’s eyes for detail in the costumes make the perfect final touch. When they’re all done, he makes them line up, and he takes a step back, hands on his hips as he looks them over one last time.

Pidge, small as they are, makes a great zombie Dumbledore. Complete with a tangled, bloody beard, a dropping pointed hat, ripped wizard robes, and broken half moon spectacles.

He wasn’t sure how Hunk’s werewolf zombie would turn out, but him and Keith managed to make it look pretty cool. Messy hair. Fake mutton chops. Fake ears, one of which they tore a bite chunk out of. True to his word, Keith made him look like an undead wolf.

Allura’s zombie theme is a little more subtle. With a suit found at a local thrift store, torn and bloodied and tattered, hair piled into a messy and falling bun, one shoe with a broken heel, she makes a dashing corporate zombie. Office worker turned undead.

Coran’s is far simpler. Classic as he liked to call it. Nothing beats the classics. Dressed in simple clothes found at a thrift store, zombie make-up impeccable. He chose to go all out with the make wounds and liquid latex. Between himself and Keith, they did an amazing job.

Shiro’s is, arguably, the best. Like Coran, he went with something more classic. Cheap clothes bought to tear and bloody. Classic zombie make up. Messy hair. The pièce de résistance, however, was the fact that he had decided to leave his prosthetic arm behind. The sleeve hanging over his stump was ripped to shreds and bloodied.

Now Keith… okay, so he said that zombies could be pretty, but he had been joking. He lives in the modern age. He’s played plenty of zombie games and watched plenty of zombie movies. He knows zombies aren’t supposed to be pretty. What with their undead status, and rotting bodies, and the blood everywhere. So really, Keith has no damn business being as fucking adorable as he is.

He’d bought teeth. The kind that you can mold to fit your mouth and fit like little caps over your canine teeth. He’d bought them to try for a vampire zombie, but Pidge had nixed that idea pretty hard. Something about crossing undead streams or whatever. Point is, Keith is stubborn. Keith wanted to wear his little teeth. So Keith came up with another idea.

A cat.

An honest to god undead zombie cat.

Wearing all black, complete with messy hair that Allura had fun teasing with hair spray, a little black nose and whiskers mixed into his zombie make up. Heavy dark bags under his eyes. Smears of blood and scratches down his neck and jaw. A little dribble of blood down from the corner of his lip. Black cat ears are clipped to his hair atop his head amongst his messy hair.

The ears and the teeth really shouldn’t be as cute as they are.

Lance goes through everyone, tugging here at costumes here, adjusting there. He spends a little extra time with Keith, just to play with those ears and see Keith’s pout. Once he’s had enough, he swats at Lance’s hand, and Lance grins.

“Getting into character already. I like it.”

“Fuck off,” He says, but there’s a smile in there. “You’re going to freeze.”

He scoffs, waving off Keith’s concern. “Am not. This under armor is thermal or whatever. It’s
meant to keep me warm.”

His smirk stretches just a little wider. “You have to produce body heat for it to hold in body heat.”

Lance shoves him lightly at the shoulder, and Keith takes a good natured step back. “Don’t sass me, kitten.”

At that, Keith’s smirk drops. Lips pursing as his eyes widen. And Lance knows that look. That’s his embarrassed blushy face. He wishes for all the world Keith didn’t have face paint on, because he would bet his life on Keith’s face being bright red right now.

Interesting. Very interesting.

His lips curl into a slow, mischievous smile, and Keith scowls. “Not a word.”

He drops his voice, leaning in and tilting his chin down, giving Keith a very pointed once over. “What if that word is... kitten?” He sees the flash of something in Keith’s eyes, but he doesn’t get to revel in it before Hunk is there.

“I think Keith’s right. You’re going to freeze.”

He leans back, out of Keith’s space and grinning as he watches the boy take a deep, shuddering breath. “Hunk, buddy, my man, don’t worry about it. I’ll be fine.”

He looks dubious at best. “If you say so.”

“Besides, even if I do freeze, it’ll be worth it. I mean, look at me.” He steps back and strikes a pose.

His own zombie outfit is one of his own design. He wears tight black under armor leggings and long sleeved shirt, meant to look like a wetsuit. Over that, he wears obnoxiously bright swim trunks that are torn and bloodied. Attached to his thigh is a stuffed shark, sewn in by the mouth to look like it’s biting him. The shark itself is also torn and stained to look like a zombie shark.

His hair is a carefully constructed mess with a bloody snorkel and goggles perched haphazardly atop.

As if on cue, Pidge, Hunk, and Allura all chant “Shark bait, oo-ha-ha,” while pounding fists on the closest solid surfaces.

“Sorry to break up the party,” Coran says, phone in his hand. “But we’ll need to leave soon if we’re going to make it there on time. We still have to walk across campus.”

They had been getting ready in the lobby of Local Lion, and they shuffle out of the closed coffeeshop while Coran and Allura lock up. As they shuffle along the streets and wave through the buildings of campus, they pass plenty of other people also dressed as zombies, all headed in the same direction.

None of them find it strange when he puts himself next to Keith, playfully bumping his hip and trying to trip his feet. Keith just smiles, shoving him lightly and playfully hissing just to make Lance laugh.

The students gather by the hundreds outside the student union. All of them dressed in a wide variety of zombie costumes, all with painted faces and fake blood. Lance is inclined to say that his friends looked the best, but he might be a little biased. As the time neared eight, the crowd
thickened. Shifting and writhing with a mass of zombies.

And when the campus bell tower tolled, the zombie march began.

A thick mass of people, all in costume, shambling through campus. They move between buildings, along the pathways, and out onto the streets. They’re stuck firmly in the middle of the crowd, impossible to see the front or the back as the mass thins and stretches to fit everyone on the sidewalk.

They shamble, dragging their feet, and groan. A chorus of brains and other wordless mumbles. They snap and snarl at pedestrians and claw at the open air toward cars. Students who aren’t apart of the march grin and take pictures. Poor, unaware townsfolk either laugh, look terrified, or ignore them altogether.

As they shuffle through the streets of downtown, they snarl in the windows of restaurants and shops. Some of them actually have their waitresses hold the doors shut, a fearful look on their eyes, like the several hundred zombie students would actually enter their establishments. Please. They’re far more respectful than that.

The mass of the march stretches and bunches, a constantly writhing shape of far too many students for the simple city streets. Lance has his fun. Laughs with other zombies. Lashes out at pedestrians and cars. Makes sure his little zombie shark is visible. Poses for a few pictures. All the while, he makes sure he’s still loosely grouped with his friends.

They seem to be having fun, too. Hunk howls and growls. Allura moans off cliche corporate phrases and statements. Shiro and Coran groan. Pidge holds their arms straight in front of them, stumbling on their feet as they groan out classic Dumbledore lines. Keith growls and hisses, getting into character like the rest of them, but having the scowl to suit the whole zombie theme.

Lance catches himself smiling far too often and has to school his features back into something far more undead.

It takes a couple hours for them to make it through the predetermined route. It’s a big loop through campus and around town that eventually drops them back off in front of the student union and at the quad where they started. As the marchers start to fill into the space, they group up, clump, take pictures, and it takes a while for the whole mass to make it back with how stretched they had been.

As they file into the quad, his group of friends starts to separate. They’re bumped around and segmented as they try to weave through the masses of people, both moving and stationary.

Lance takes this opportunity to grab Keith’s arm, pulling him suddenly to the side when the rest of their friends have their backs turned. Keith makes a noise of surprise that’s lost in the general clamor around them, and once he realizes it’s Lance, he gives in easily.

Lance drags him deep into the crowd, weaving through standing groups until they find a pocket of their own with little traffic. Out of sight of their friends, Lance turns to him, only to find Keith already watching him. There’s a slight tilt to his head, a small tug of a smile at the corner of his lips, and amusement crinkling the edges of his eyes as he lifts an eyebrow.

Lance just grins, using the hand he’s holding to spin Keith around. He presses into his back, wrapping his arms around his waist and hooking his chin over his shoulder. “I’m cold.”

It’s not a lie. His friends were right when they said he wasn’t wearing enough layers, but the excitement and movement of the march had kept the worst of it at bay. Keith, however, is warm.
Really warm. Lance plasters himself to his back without shame, nuzzling into the warmth of him as best he can without smearing his face paint.

He feels Keith’s chuckle rumble through his chest, and arms come down gently over his own. “I warned you.”

“Yeah, yeah. You were right. You’re sooo smart. Now shut up and warm me up.”

There’s that chuckle again, and hands start moving along his forearms where they’re wrapped loosely around Keith’s waist. They stay like that for several long moments, swaying gently just for the movement of it. They speak together in low, hushed tones, talking about the different costumes they see around them.

“I saw another cat zombie.”

Keith hums, tilting his head back to rest it on Lance’s shoulder. “Did you?”

“Yeah, during the march. She didn’t look as good as you, though.” Keith grins, and it puts those teeth on display. They fit perfectly, and in the dim lighting from street lights around the quad, they almost look real. Lance hums lightly, gazing down at him. “I think it’s the teeth. She didn’t have any, and they’re definitely cute on you. You should wear them again sometime.”

There’s a low, rough quality to his voice. One that kinda slipping in unintentionally, but he rolls with anyway. Something sly and playful in a way that’s definitely not innocent. And judging from the way Keith’s eyes go lidded and his smile curls a little, he can tell Keith hears it, too.

He straightens, turning around in Lance’s arms and slipping his own to rest lazily on lance’s shoulders. A shiver wracks down his spine as Keith’s fingers lightly play with the hair at the nape of his neck.

Keith’s eyes look him over curiously, that amused smile fixed firmly in place. “Are you... turned on by my fake teeth?”

And yeah, there’s really no reason to hide it if Keith is gonna be all blunt about it. One hand slips around to his lower back, pressing him forward and more firmly against him as he flashes Keith a cheeky grin. “I’m turned on by the idea of your teeth.”

Keith snorts a short laugh. “Furry.”

“For you? Definitely.” Lance’s grin only widens as he ducks his head down, gently bumping his nose against Keith’s. “How gross do you think it would be to kiss with all this zombie make-up?”

“Pretty fucking gross.”

“I kinda wanna do it anyway.”

Keith tilts his head, small smile still in place as he tilts his chin up. Perfect and ready and waiting. All Lance has to do is close the distance. “Me, too.”

It’s not a pleasant experience. The paint, though cracked and thin around their lips, is still enough that Lance can taste it. The fake blood is dried and gross. The texture isn’t one he wants to associate with kissing.

But he does it anyway, and so does Keith. They press into each other, chuckling against each other’s lips at the wholly awful experience, but neither of them willing to pull away. Beyond the
smell of cheap paint and latex, he can smell a hint of the coffee he had before the march.

He playfully licks into Keith’s mouth, and revels in the way the boy melts against him, into him. The way Keith sighs into his mouth has shivers running down his spine and his stomach doing these little flips.

Unfortunately, he doesn’t get to enjoy it for long before there’s a loud gasp and a high pitched squeal that he knows.

He pulls away from Keith, head snapping back as his hands grab onto his hips and push, putting a good solid amount of space between them. He barely has time to register the surprised look on Keith’s face before his head is whipping to the side, and—

“Allura!”

She’s standing there, in a space that had parted between two groups of people. A wide grin on her lips and eyes crinkling, practically blazing like stars as they light up. She’s up on her toes, bouncing, with her hands loosely fisted, pulled up to her chest. “I knew it!”

At the sound of her voice, Keith’s head whips around, and Lance glances sideways in time to see it morph into a look of horror.

“I knew it!”

They look at each other, mouths agape and eyes wide.

“I knew it!”

They snap their attention to her, both of them too frozen to do or say much.

“I fucking knew it—“

Her words are cut off as Shiro’s hand comes down over the lower half of her face. She doesn’t seem at all surprised, but she does send him a quick glares before looking back to them. “I’ll just—uh...” The shirt sleeve without an arm moves, giving the impression that he had been trying to gesture with it before a sheepish look comes over his face and he coughs. “Get her out of here. Uh, carry on.”

“Shiro, look! I told you! I knew something was—“ She has her hands on his, pulling it down from her mouth.

“Allura.” The firmness of his tone and the graveness of his frown has her stopping in her tracks, and she wilts a little under his gaze. Going from excited to abashed in no time flat. He sighs, already turning her around and wrapping his arm around her shoulders, leading her away. “Give them a little privacy, okay?”

They hear her mumbled. “Okay,” Before the two of them are swallowed up again by the crowd.

“Oh my god,” Lance says as the breath he had been holding rushes out of him. He pulls Keith back to him and drops his forehead to his shoulder. Rolling it back and forth, not caring if he stains Keith’s shirt, he groans, “Oh my god.”

“Shiro can convince her to keep it quiet.”

“You don’t know Allura very well if you think it’ll be that easy.” He pauses, then lifts his head,
eyes narrowing at Keith. “Wait... Shiro didn’t look surprised at all.”

Keith’s eyes widen just a fraction before he looks away, shifting his weight under Lance’s scrutiny. “He, uh... figured it out.”

“Wow, Keith. You are terrible at keeping secrets.” He deadpans, but he’s grinning when Keith looks back up at him. And he totally deserves it when Keith punches him in the shoulder.

“You’re the own who dragged me away to make out when our friends are right there.”

He just shrugs, head lolling to the side. “What can I say? I’m a weak man. Wanna slip away and go back to your apartment? I don’t think I can face Allura right now.”

Keith’s body sags with relief, a wicked smile creeping across his lips. “Fuck, yes.”

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Keith
> How bad is it?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> She hasn’t told the others, but she’s got that “I have a secret” grin on her face that’s making the others suspicious

Keith
> Great
> Fantastic
> Can you make sure she stays quiet about it?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> I can, but it’ll cost you

Keith
> Anything

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> You’re lucky I love you

Keith
> I know

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Are you sure you WANT to keep this a secret?
> She only knows that you guys are at the minimum making out
> She doesn’t know about the whole soulmate thing

Keith
> She better not be reading over your shoulder rn
> And you better delete that later

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Don’t worry, she’s helping Pidge clean off their face paint
> And I will
> But my point? Does it matter if they know you guys are fooling around? It’s the twenty first century. It’s not like that’s taboo anymore. Especially with our generation

**Keith**
> Lance doesn’t want them to know, and neither do I
> What we have rn is... special
> I like how things are rn, and I don’t want to ruin it. We want our private lives to stay private

**Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)**
> As your older brother, I feel like I need to be honest and tell you that you’re making a huge mess of this
> But as your oldest friend, I feel like I also need to let you know that I know why you’re doing this, and I understand, even if I don’t agree with it

**Keith**
> Thanks
> And I know, I just
> Don’t know what to do anymore
> Why is this shit so complicated?

**Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)**
> Life likes to throw you curve balls to see how you deal with them. They make you grow as a person and you learn from them. Life was never meant to be easy

**Keith**
> You sound like dad

**Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)**
> As long as you own up to your choices and deal with the consequences of them, you can make as big a mess as you want

**Keith**
> Now you sound like mom
> She used to tell me that so I would clean up the studio after I spilled paint everywhere

**Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)**
> You always cleaned up your mess then, and I have faith that you’ll clean up this mess too
> When you’re ready

**Keith**
> Thanks, Shiro

**Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)**
> No problem. That was my brotherly wisdom for the week
> Now if you’ll excuse me, Pidge bet Hunk could eat more habanero peppers than me, and I intend to prove them wrong

**Keith**
> You’re gonna eat till you puke, aren’t you?

**Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)**
> If that's what it takes, Keith. If that’s what it takes.

**Keith**

> Tell Pidge I put ten bucks on Hunk. Lance says twenty on Hunk

**Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)**

> >:((((((((

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Chapter End Notes

Shoutout to all of my readers who go to or went to Appstate in NC. Though I know a lot of you have already figured it out, this story doesn't *take place* there, but the campus and surrounding area is very heavily inspired by it. Because it's very heavily influenced by my own experiences. In the scene where Keith takes Lance hiking to talk, it's based on the Rough Ridge Trail on the Blue Ridge Parkway. Aka, my favorite trail from college.

Anyway, we're starting to get deeper into Keith and Lance's emotional histories, why they see soulmates the way they do, and how each of them helps the other with that outlook. Important stuff. This fic is looking at twelve chapters total, so we're moving toward the breaking point. Who knows when it'll happen though? Who knows.

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Heal Each Other

Chapter Summary

In which understanding paves the road for fondness. Fondness builds the foundations of trust. And trust clears the way for change, of heart and perspective.

Chapter Notes

I like to fondly call this chapter, the final calm before the storm.

Quick Note: guys, I discuss how soulmarks work in this universe several times, AND there's a masterpost linked in the end notes for how this universe functions. Every chapter, I get so many asks about "what if someone else writes on your skin." Only things you write appear on your soulmate. It has to be you.

NSFW Warning: There is MILD nsfw toward the end of the fic. As usual, it's very obvious when it's gonna happen. It's not too detailed, but if that's not your thing, go on and skip to the next line break. You won't miss any plot information.

Another Important Note About This Chapter: I wrote the background for this before it was revealed Lance is the youngest sibling. So in this story, he's the middle child.

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The more Keith watches Lance play quidditch, the more he understands him as a person.

Which, he admits, sounds stupid. After all, it's a made up sport featured in a beloved novel series, and they run around a field with four balls, a human snitch, and a stick between their legs. If anything, watching Lance play should reveal just how ridiculous, and endearing, he can be.

But... it's more than that.

Because although it was hard for him to wrap his mind around before, he's accepted that in this setting, Lance truly shines.

Here, in his quidditch uniform or dressed as a snitch, he radiates confidence. Nothing false or half-hearted. Not a mask of who he wants to be, hiding the cracked and crumbling pieces inside. True and uninhibited confidence. He knows he can do this, and he knows he can do it well. His smiles are freeing. His grins are magnanimous. The look in his eyes is transfixing, a sky lit by sunshine that never fades.

His confidence radiates from him, giving him an ethereal glow that's hard to see but not to feel. It draws people toward him. Keith can see it in those around him. How Lance can say nothing of consequence, but people feel apt to smile. Like they can't help it when they're caught up in his
orbit. He draws it out of them. The light of him dissipating the clouds and reaching into the heart of them, pulling out an ember of happiness and building it to a flame.

Technically, Pidge and Hunk run their team. They do all the organization and leadership outside of the game. On the field, however, the team has started to look to Keith and Shiro for guidance. Whenever either of them are in as chasers, the team looks to them for leadership. For what to do next. For how to react. He's not sure how or when it happened, and he's not sure whether or not they realize they do it, but they always form up around the two of them.

But while Keith and Shiro are the unofficial team captains on the field, Lance is no less important.

He once called Allura the team's heart, but Keith thinks that Lance is the team's spirit.

Everything feels noticeably lighter whenever he's around. Everything feels brighter. Anything feels possible. He doesn't even have to do anything. He simply has to... be there. It's like he carries a sun inside him, radiating warmth and light that pulls others into his orbit, gives them life and a reason to smile.

He talks to everyone. He makes sure everyone feels welcome. His enthusiasm and cheer is contagious, fighting away the heaviest of clouds that cling to people. Until the outside world no longer exists, and they're able to simply enjoy themselves here and now, in a game with friends.

His presence and his existence creates a camaraderie. A glue that holds the team together. A light that binds them and lifts them far higher than they believe is capable. There's a noticeable difference on the days Lance can't make it to practice. A noticeable lull in energy and a slight dip in moral. He's not sure anyone has noticed it, or if they realize the connection is Lance's presence. But Keith sees it. He feels it.

Their team rarely loses hope because Lance is that hope.

Pidge and Hunk may organize their team. He and Shiro may lead them on the field. Allura may be the heart that keeps them looking forward. But Lance is the energy that binds them and fuels them forward.

It's something that Keith has always known about him, but found it hard to put into words. Something that he's felt about Lance, but had a hard time understanding. It's not until he sees Lance in a quidditch setting, sees him interact with not just their team but other teams, that Keith can truly see, understand, and appreciate the effect Lance has on people.

And the strangest part is that he doesn't think Lance even realizes it himself.

He and Lance have also become a somewhat unstoppable duo on the field. When they both play chaser, Keith's quick decision making, quicker reflexes, and ability to weave between opponents pairs perfectly with Lance's inherent ability to always be in the right place at the right time and his impeccable long shot. When Lance is at his back, he feels unstoppable, and it's a feeling that has his heart hammering and a buzz in his veins from far more than just adrenaline.

They've been practicing a lot as a seeker and snitch as well, but not always in their designated rolls. Sometimes they switch, with Keith trying to snitch and Lance walking him through the strategies of that, meanwhile Keith walks Lance through his own strategies of snitching. Together, they learn each other's roles, and through getting a better understanding of how the opposing role operates, they learn how to better counteract it.

He feels a vibration beneath his skin and a simmering warmth that he's the one able to help Lance
improve. That his presence makes Lance stronger, just as Lance does with him.

Lance is easily the most versatile player on the team. His main role is a chaser, but he never hesitates to sub in for keeper when they need him to, and he's not bad at it either. His quick reflexes and long limbs make him surprisingly apt at protecting the hoops. It's not often, but he'll easily play beater as well, and he plays off of Coran and Pidge's beating style easily.

He learns quickly and is incredibly adaptable to all positions and all play styles. He just... absorbs the flow of the game and adjusts accordingly. It's fascinating to watch, and it's incredibly inspiring.

And once Keith realized how he is on the quidditch pitch, he's started to see how it carries over to other aspects of Lance's life.

Adjustable. Adaptable. Insanely observant. Rarely changing who he is, but easily shifting to match the vibe of those around him.

At first Keith had thought it was Lance changing himself, but now he realizes that it's just who Lance is. The heart of him never changes, but his interaction with the world around him adjusts the way it needs to. He's never awkward or uncertain like Keith is. He never struggles to adapt to new situations. He moves through life and through the world like a coursing river, shifting and curving to match the landscape. Always flowing. Always moving. Confident in the push and never one to shy away.

The only time Keith has ever seen him falter is with his soulmate, and that cuts him far deeper than he'd like to admit.

Unfortunately, he's still not certain how to fix it. Simply telling Lance in and of itself could make Lance change. Could make him see Keith differently. He likes how they are.

Lance and Keith. Keith and Lance.

And as much as the thought of being soulmates is one that he's warming up to and one that now gives him butterflies and heart palpitations, the thought that Lance will no doubt see and treat him differently is a sobering one.

He knows he has to tell him, and he will. He just... hasn't come up with the best way yet. A way where Lance can seamlessly add the title of soulmate onto Keith's name without it changing everything.

Without him becoming hesitant and full of doubt in Keith's presence.

Without him trying to change who he is to fit what he thinks Keith wants.

Without him being mad that Keith is the one who's ignored him for all these years.

He thinks that by opening up, by telling Lance about his parents, that Lance has started to see things in a new light. That the fantasy he's built around the idea of soulmates has not so much shattered, but started to change. Has stopped becoming something fanciful and unrealistic, and started to shift into something attainable.

He certainly seems more confident in himself, and less bothered whenever soulmates are brought up. But every once in a while, he catches Lance staring at someone's soulmarks. Sees the shadows that haunt his eyes and the small frown that tears at his heart and twists his stomach.

And he knows that while Lance is starting to change, he's still mourning the loss of the fantasy he's
always carried with him.

Time, he thinks, is what Lance needs. What they both need.

Time to learn together.

Time to grow together.

Time to be together without the lifelong weight of soulmates looming in their shadows.

He doesn't know what it'll mean for them in the future, to drag it out this long. He doesn't know how he'll tell Lance, or how Lance will take that news. He doesn't know, and quite frankly, he doesn't like to think about it. The future is uncertain enough, and right here, right now, he's content to take things as they come. To live life by the day, to live in the present, and to do the things that make him happy. To be with Lance in a way that makes him happy. Without worrying about what might go wrong in the future.

"Now he's just showing off." Hunk leans forward, wrapping one arm around his bent knee, resting his other elbow on it to prop up his chin in his palm.

Keith watches as Lance, dressed in his bright yellow snitch gear, wrestles a seeker’s broom away from her, brandishing it with a flourish. "When doesn't he?"

"True. At least he's humble about it," Hunk says dryly as Lance gives an exaggerated bow while handing the broom back so the seeker can run back to her hoops.

Keith snorts a short laugh, smile hovering on his lips. He sits next to Hunk on the sidelines of the pitch, legs stretched out in front of him and crossed at the ankles. He leans back on his hands, watching the game.

Balmera University is playing, and he knows for a fact that Hunk's eyes are on the tall keeper guarding the hoops. He's grateful for it. He can watch Lance as openly as he wants without having to worry about Hunk noticing.

The other seeker charges Lance, going in at full throttle, and Lance squares up. Keith sees the drop of his cocky grin. Eyes flashing and narrowing. Concentration twisting his features into something far more intense that does embarrassing things to Keith's insides.

They watch as Lance grabs the oncoming seeker, taking him and flipping him in one fluid motion, using his momentum to carry it through, and dropping him elegantly on his back in the grass. The seeker lays dazed, staring up at the sky, and there's a collective intake of surprise and exhale of sympathy, right before there's a unanimous cheer.

Lance's grin is back in place, pristine and bright, basking in the praise.

Hunk winces. "Ouch. Do you think that hurts? It looks like it hurts."

"It does, but I taught him how to do it without seriously injuring anyone." There's a lull in conversation, and Keith thinks little of it, eyes locked on where Lance is fighting off the seekers. But after a few moments, he feels the weight of Hunk's stare. He turns, and sure enough, Hunk is watching him, eyes narrowed and lips pursed. "What?"

Hunk lifts his chin just a fraction, side-eyeing Keith. "Sometimes I worry about the combo you two make."
Keith just smiles, turning back to the game. His heart fluttering in his chest and his limbs feeling light.

Lance gets caught not long after that. The seeker from Balmera U makes a reckless dive and manages to snatch the snitch off of the back of Lance's pants before he can turn and before she hits the ground. The whistle is blown, the head ref talks to Lance and the snitch ref, and the game is called with Balmeria University pulling ahead by forty points.

He and Hunk wait while the end game hype dies down, sitting off to the side of the pitch and well out of the way of the main crowd of spectators. The teams gather, each of them doing their own cheers before shaking hands with each other.

Keith watches as several of the players go to talk to Lance, no doubt congratulating him on his performance. His grin is infectious, having the perfect balance of confidence, pride, and appreciation to come off as genuine. He shakes hands with the refs, talking to them and laughing along with them. The cockiness about him has died down since the match ended, leaving him merely enthusiastic and content.

Keith knows that there's a small smile on his lips. He can feel it. He just hopes Hunk is too distracted to notice.

As he watches, a group of girls catch Lance's attention from the sidelines, stepping up to talk to him. He removes himself from the circle of refs with a smile and a wave, moving over to the group that hailed him. They're from a team that Keith can't pinpoint despite recognizing their uniforms.

He knows the looks they're giving him. The fawning, coy looks. The bright eyes desperate to lock eye contact with him. The smiles and bubbling laughter.

He's also not surprised when Lance's cockiness rises again, a flair adding to the edge of his smile and a mischief in his eyes. His hips shift, a confidence and ease exuding from his posture. A languid quality to his gestures and the tilt of his head.

He's also not surprised when Lance starts flexing.

Keith rolls his eyes, letting the movement tilt his head to the side. "Is he always like this?"

"Hmm?" Hunk turns to look at him, eyes wide and blinking, pulled from a daze and back to reality. Keith nods in Lance's direction. "Has he always been like this?"

Hunk follows Keith's gaze, brow furrowing as he tilts his head. "Like what exactly?"

"A flirt."

"Oh," Hunk laughs, a surprised bubble that rumbles out of him, coming out strong before it settles into a fond, rolling chuckle. "Yeah, pretty much. Wait! No, not always. Actually..." He rubs his chin, eyes distant as they gaze out over the field. Then he gives a decisive nod. "Yeah, pretty much always."

"I'm not even surprised..." He mumbles, raising a brow incredulously when Lance strikes a ridiculous pose. One that is, admittedly, adorable, and has the girls around him giggling.

"It's not that bad," Hunk says, pulling out his phone. "He comes off as a flirt a lot of times, but it's not really... flirty? I know that doesn't really make sense. But it's more like... charming. He's personable and sociable, and he likes making other people smile. So yeah, I guess it's kinda flirty,
but not... really? Oh man, I know I'm not making any sense, but trust me when I say it's nothing serious. He's not even trying to toy with them or anything. He just likes talking to people and he's charming, and that comes off as flirty a lot of times. Really, the guy is the biggest hopeless romantic I know, and he'd never do anything with anyone besides his soulmate."

Keith feels his heart stutter before firmly lodging itself in his throat. A buzz flits across his skin as he tries to swallow past the lump, holding his voice carefully level as he says, "Yeah?"

"Oh yeah. Lance is like, obsessed with his soulmate. Like, I know they don't talk much now, but they used to talk more in the beginning, and Lance just... He's always been in love with them, you know? Or like... obsessed with the idea of them..." Hunk trails off, voice getting more somber as his lips purse into a small frown. "I worry about him sometimes..."

"I..." Keith swallows, fingers picking at the grass beneath his hands. "I get it. I... I'm worried about him being obsessed with someone he doesn't know."

"Yeah, it's... hard. He gets really defensive about it and changes the subject whenever I try to talk to him about it, but... he'll be fine. He's smart, and I don't think his soulmate is a bad person. They're probably just not super talkative or overwhelmed by stuff. I mean, they give Lance these amazing paintings, so they can't be all bad. I think they just express themself differently."

Keith shifts, fingers curling into the grass and breath coming shorter. He can't look at Hunk. Can't let him know that he's never really given Lance those paintings. They were for himself, and Lance's reception of them was just a consequence of their soul connection.

"I can't really blame him either," Hunk continues with a shrug. "Not with the way he was raised."

Keith frowns, turning to watch as Hunk raises his phone, pointing the back of it across the field at Lance. "What'd you mean?"

"Oh man, has he not rambled to you about his family's soul connections?" When Keith shakes his head, Hunk smiles. "Dude, ask him about that, and you'll start to understand why he is the way he is."

Something trickles through him. Something difficult to pin point. Anticipation? Dread? Hesitant excitement? A strange thrill of hope at understanding Lance just a little more. It's a chaotic mix of conflicting emotions, and it shivers down his spine, settling low in his gut, twisting and bubbling.

Pushing that aside, he leans over, glancing at Hunk's phone where the camera is pulled up. "What're you doing?"

Hunk grins, zooming in on where Lance laughs a little too loudly, hands on his hips. "Recording this on snapchat. Pidge and I like to record Lance whenever he goes off like this and send it to him. He gets all flustered and embarrassed because half the time he doesn't even realize he's doing it."

Amusement tilts his lips, and he joins in with Hunk as the two of them narrate Lance's attempt at flirtation like a couple of sports announcers.

They record for a full minute before the feed cuts out, and Hunk sends it to their group of friends before shoving his phone back in his pocket. "Well, I'm gonna go say hi to Shay." He pushes himself to his feet, brushing off his shorts. "You good?"

Keith nods. "Yeah, I'll just wait here for Lance."

"Cool. See you in... when's our next game?"
Keith smirks, head tilted back. "Aren't you supposed to be the one who knows that?" Hunk pouts, cheeks darkening, and Keith chuckles. "We play again in forty minutes."

"Cool, see ya then."

"See ya."

He watches Hunk jog up to where the Balmera team are packing up their things, awkward but clearly excited as he hovers near Shay in an attempt to get her attention. And when she turns around to spot him, her face lights up, putting the afternoon sun to shame.

It makes something twist in Keith's chest. Something he knows would have made him feel nauseous with guilt just a few mere months ago, but now feels different. Now it feels lighter. Still twisting and nauseating, but... almost pleasantly so. A squirming before the butterflies break loose.

It feels like the echo of hope, and that's something he's not used to feeling.

Maybe Lance is affecting his outlook just as much as he's changing Lance's.

"You look like a loner sitting here all by yourself." Lance drops to the ground next to him, rocking into Keith's space and bumping their shoulders together. He leans back on his hands, legs stretched in front of him and knees bent. Keith turns to look at him, taking in his smirk and messy hair, sticking up at odd angles from fingers running through it.

His fingers twitch with the urge to do just that.

"You're the one who begged me to come watch you snitch." His eyes slide down from Lance's hair just in time to watch him scoff and roll his eyes.

"I did not beg."

"You did. You even tried to bribe me with a handjob."

"Which, might I add, you took readily."

Keith shrugs, a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. "You drive a hard bargain."

Lance chuckles, and it's in that moment that Keith realizes how close they've gotten. Feeling the puff of Lance's breath against his lips. He hadn't noticed himself leaning in, nor Lance mirroring him. But they they're here now. Leaning in close with their heads tilted just right.

He leans back, putting space between them before someone else notices. "You just wanted to show off."

He can't tell if he saw the flicker of disappointment in Lance's eyes, or if that was just wishful thinking. Either way, it's gone quickly, replaced by a mischievous gleam and an amused smile. "Did it work?"

Keith looks out over the field, humming thoughtfully. The teams are packing up, clearing out for the next game. One of the new teams is already warming up by the far hoops.

It's a descent sized tournament with four quidditch pitches set up and in play. They're nearly done with the general pool play games, and they'll be moving into brackets soon. Their team has one more game coming up before then, and in the down time, they've claimed a section of the field on the far end, nestled in the shade of some trees.
Keith and Hunk had been the only ones to watch this game, and strangely enough, it was for the exact same reason. An amusement that only Keith can revel in.

"Maybe," He finally says, drawing out the word and leaving his voice lilting and light. Lance nudges him roughly, shoulder to shoulder, and Keith's smile cracks wider. "Yeah, okay, it was impressive. You nailed the throw you've been working on."

He doesn't have to look at Lance to know he's grinning. He can hear it in his voice. "Thanks. I was a little worried I wouldn't be able to put him down gently, but he didn't seem *that* injured so..." When Lance shrugs, Keith can feel it brush against his arm.

He leans into the touch. "He's fine. Dazed, but fine." He tilts his head, subtly nodding across the pitch where the group of girls Lance had previously been talking to still linger. He doesn't miss the way they glance at them. "Looks like I'm not the only one who was impressed."

"I mean, who *wouldn't* be?" Lance follows his gaze. He's expecting a cocky grin. Maybe to throw a wave in their direction, finger guns, or even a wink. He expects Lance to stretch out a little, putting himself on display. What he's not expecting is for Lance to snort softly. "Oh, you mean them."

Keith glances at him, one eyebrow raised. "You seemed pretty happy about their enthusiasm a few minutes ago."

Lance's smile is small, amusement crinkling at the edges of his eyes even as his voice is casual bordering on indifference, with a lingering wistful edge. "Was I?"

"You were flirting with them."

Lance scoffs, rolling his eyes. His head lolls to the side with it, one eyebrow cocked as he gives Keith a flat look. *That* was not flirting. That was being *charming.*

Keith huffs a short exhale, but his smile never fades. "Looked like flirting from here."

"Wasn't intended to be..." Lance trails off, voice descending into a mumble. He looks away, a gesture meant to be casual, but he's not quick enough. Or maybe Keith has just learned to read him.

He sees the pieces of Lance's smile begin to crumble. Confidence giving way to uncertainty. Eyes darkening with the beginnings of a spiral that Keith desperately wants to drag him out of. Because here, in his element, Lance should shine.

He watches Lance's lips purse, brow pinching despite his clear effort to keep his expression neutral. And when he speaks, his voice is far too soft to be as indifferent as he clearly wants to be. "Does it... bother you?"

Keith frowns. "What?"

Lance shrugs, a gentle lift and fall of one shoulder. It rubs against Keith's arm where they lean into each other. "The whole... flirting thing? I wasn't *trying* to, but I can see how it would come off that way. Does it, like... bother you?" He sounds uncertain, words coming quicker in a poor attempt to hide his worries, to seem more casual. But Keith can hear it. The strain in his voice. He can feel the tension in his arm.

And... Keith thinks about that for a moment. Lets his gaze drift back across the field. The girls are gone now, wandered off to do something else. He watches the two new teams warm up, stretching and running drills before their game starts.
Does it bother him?

He doesn't like the idea of Lance flirting with someone else. Of having the same arrangement they have with others. Of him finding his temporary enjoyment outside of whatever they have together. Of other people seeing Lance's lips parted and eyes hazy and dark. Of other people being on the receiving end of his gentle looks and fond smiles. Of others receiving those innocent touches that are light and fleeting, but which come across like he's powerless against the urge to reach out and close the gap.

He doesn't like the thought of sharing Lance like that.

But... it's never really occurred to him that it might happen. Even now, considering the possibility, Keith recognizes that he has all the potential to feel jealous or bothered by Lance's harmless flirting. But as he sits there, waiting for the feelings to come... they don't.

He thinks about the way Lance looks at him. Thinks about the moments they've shared. Thinks about just... Lance.

His smile.

His voice.

The tremble in his lips when he's vulnerable. The pinch in his brows when he's worried. The lift of his cheeks when he grins. The gentle tilt of his head when Keith catches his eyes from across a room.

He feels incredibly light. A bubbling in his stomach that's difficult to ignore. Rising and popping in his chest with little bursts of a foreign kind of giddiness that seeps into his veins and leaves him warm. Warm and content.

"No," He says, surprised by the lightness of the confession. Of how certain he feels. "No, it doesn't bother me."

He feels Lance's eyes on him. Hears the breathless way he says, "Really?"

Keith tilts his head, gazing at Lance sidelong, the ghost of a smirk on his lips. "Should I be?"

Lance is staring at him. Eyes wide, blinking owlishly. There's something in those eyes. A wonderment mingled with confusion and tinted with surprise. Then slowly, beautifully, his face lifts back into a smile. "Nope." He drops an arm over Keith's shoulders, pulling him in tight. It's a friendly gesture, not too out of the ordinary for Lance. But Keith's body feels like fire where they touch. "I have you and my soulmate, and that's all I need." A stillness settles about him, and while his smile doesn't falter, it fades from his eyes. "And you at least talk to me, so you've already got an edge."

He trails off, and silence surges in. Thick and oppressive. It clings to them, heavy and sobering. Until Keith thinks he might choke on it. Lance's smile fades slowly, easing away and leaving just the barest of frowns on his lips. Eyes vacant and distant as he stares across the field.

Keith's stomach rolls, twisting and churning with a nauseous mix of guilt and worry.

This is his fault. That look on Lance's face is all his fault, and Lance doesn't even know. He hates it. Hates seeing him like this. Hates knowing that he's the one who caused it. And knowing that if he could go back, he's not sure he would change a damn thing he's done. Or what he hasn't done.
His silence put that frown on Lance's lips and the ghosts in his eyes.

Keith knows he could say something to pull Lance out of it. To pull him back into the moment and push his thoughts away. Edge him away from the spiral that he gravitates towards far too often.

But that's only a temporary fix, and if Keith wants this to work out with Lance, he knows he needs to start working toward their future.

It's not Keith's voice Lance needs. It's his soulmate's.

But Keith is only human, and his heart squeezes painfully at the thought of initiating the first contact. Of answering all of Lance's probing questions that sprawl out across his skin whenever courage strikes.

He misses... he misses the old Lance. Before he knew it was Lance. The soulmate from his teenage years. The soulmate who would play tic-tac-toe on his arm and hang man on their thighs. The soulmate who doodled comics of his teachers and friends and who built on Keith's doodles until the two of them had a cacophony of a world inked across their skin.

He misses the innocence and thrill of that connection, without the pressure of revealing personal details like he's filling out a questioner.

He misses that soulmate.

The soulmate that he stifled and suffocated and cut off, until he became someone else entirely.

It's with a start that he realizes just how much that connection meant to him. Just how much he wants that back. Of how much he hurt himself by letting it go to begin with.

And he knows he's not going to get it without a little prompting. Without a little damage control to get them back on the track he tore them from so long ago.

"When you talk to your soulmate," He starts, speaking slowly and carefully. He pauses, licking his lips as he gathers his thoughts, still jumbled in the wake of his own realization. He can feel Lance's eyes, and wonders if he can feel the pound of his heartbeat where they touch. "How do you do it?"

"How do I... talk to my soulmate?" It sounds incredulous and incredibly confused. "I... write on myself?"

"No," Keith shakes his head, letting his hair fall from his loosened ponytail to better hide his face. Seeking security in it. "Like... how do you talk to them? What kinda stuff do you say?"

"Oh," Lance is silent for a moment, but Keith can't bring himself to look at him. "Usually I ask questions, I guess. Try to get them to answer me."

Keith takes a breath. A vain attempt to steady his heart as he says, "Maybe instead of trying to force a conversation, you can just like... share stuff about yourself?"

A pause. Then slowly, "Like what?" Cautious, wary, but not dismissive. A good sign.

Keith shrugs, enjoying the grounding weight of Lance's arm. "Anything, really. Just... instead of trying to coerce them into conversation with you, talk about yourself. Random stuff about your day? Doodles? You know some of the things they like. You can work with that. Maybe instead of trying to take stuff from them, offer stuff about yourself."
"Like, instead of trying to knock on their door, open mine and let them come through on their own?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Do you realize you're basically comparing my soulmate to a cat?"

Keith snorts, an unexpected bubble of laughter escaping his lips. "I hadn't, but... I guess so."

"Do you... Do you really think that would work?" The uncertainty is back, voice soft and far too vulnerable. But there's an edge that wasn't there before. Something that lifts the edges and softens the roughness. Hope.

Keith shrugs again, fingers picking at the grass as he looks away. "I don't know. But... it's worth a shot?"

There's a pause, and then with far too much distant fondness, so vague Keith isn't sure if it's meant for him or the person Lance believes to be connected to his soul, "Yeah, it is."

They end up getting first place in the tournament. A victory that was just as much luck as it was skill, and one that rested solely on the shoulders of good teamwork.

Hunk guarded the hoops with a vengeance, grinning with manic delight whenever he caught the ball, glancing to the side to where Shay watched the game. Shiro rallied them all on the field, shifting and changing their strategies to fit against their opponents. They had a good defense, which was easily thwarted by Lance's impeccable long shot aim. Pidge and Coran worked overtime with bludger control, keeping their own defense on lockdown. Allura was good at breaking defensive lines, quick and agile and deceptively strong.

Together they all carried the rest of the team. Keystones that drove the rest further. Kept them all going. Rising them up to a level where they were competitive, driven, and most importantly, having fun.

The snitch was good, but Keith is used to practicing against good snitches. It took him a while, a lot of failed attempts that left him running back to his hoops. But with each attempt, he wore down the snitch's defenses. And with each failed attempt, he learned about his snitching style. At one point, Lance subbed in for him to give him a break. And while Lance didn't get any closer to catching the snitch, watching him did give Keith new ideas.

It was a tough game. Neck and neck. One team pulls again, then the other right behind them. Keith ended up catching the snitch when they were ten point behind, allowing them to win by twenty overall.

It was a long and grueling game, but it kept them on the edge of anticipation, working hard, and was extremely rewarding.

They ended up going out with the other team for dinner at a local pizza joint. All thirty some of them crowded around long bunching of tables pushed together. Mixed and mingled between teams. Keith found himself next to Lance, which wasn't too surprising. Not when Lance was the one who remained glued to his side.
It's been like that a lot lately. Not so much attached, but that they were constantly caught in each other's orbit. Drifting away but always coming back. Always aware of where the other is.

Allura sat across the table from them and made faces whenever she caught their eye. Grinning in a way that was too bright and too curled on the edges, crinkling her eyes with knowing mischief. She wagged her eyebrows and winked, resting her chin on her interlaced fingers while she pointedly looked at the poor excuse for space between them.

Keith just glared at her, then ignored her when it proved to be ineffective. Lance ended up throwing rolled up balls of shredded napkin across the table, complexion a shade pinker than usual but in a way that could be easily attributed to a result of too much sun.

Keith could see the tension in his jaw, though. The way he nervously glanced at their teammates. At Pidge and Hunk and Coran. His foot bounced restlessly beneath the table.

But Keith hooked his foot around Lance's, resting their calves against one another where no one could see. He could feel Lance's eyes on him, but focused on the conversation happening across the table. He could feel the moment Lance relaxed. Felt a hand rest on his thigh, warm against the flesh where his shorts ended just above the knee. A gentle squeeze as Lance leaned into his side, using the excuse of trying to talk over Keith to hide the gesture.

Now they've piled back into their cars, crammed in, bundled up, and heading back toward campus. It's late, but not overly so. It'll be close to midnight by the time they get back, but thankfully tomorrow is Sunday.

Keith sits in the back of Shiro's car, behind the passenger's seat and lounging against the door. Lance sits next to him in the middle seat, and Romelle, one of the team's beaters, sits on the other side of him. Allura sits in the front seat, and while she had given him a teasing look when he slid into place next to Lance, she hadn't said anything.

An hour into the drive, the car is quiet. The radio plays, but it's a low drone on a classic rock station. More of a white noise buzz than an actual interactive sound. The rumble of the car weaves through the notes, bumps of the wheels sliding between the lyrics, and the hum of the engine adds to the harmonies.

From his seat, he can see Shiro, staring out the windshield. His lips move slightly, forming words in time with the lyrics. His hands lightly tap on the steering wheel. The ghost of a rhythm, echoing with the radio.

Allura lounges in the front seat, slouched with her knees pulled up and resting against the door. Her elbow rests on the center console, and her head tilts back against the headrest. He can vaguely hear her humming, a soft and gentle undertone that adds another depth to the hauntingly muted echo of sound. The two of them had been talking, but conversation has trailed off, leaving them both in content silence as the lull in conversation persists.

Romelle had been talking with them, but glancing over now, he can see that she's asleep. Legs pulled up and body leaning against the car door, wrapped up in a blanket she had brought with her. Her face is lax in sleep, lips parted and expression soft. Her gentle breathing adds to the white noise hum.

Lance is asleep next to him, legs sprawled as much as they can be in the limited space and leaning heavily against Keith's side. His head rests on his shoulder, and Keith has adjusted so the weight of it settles comfortably in the crook of his shoulder and neck, twisting in his seat, back to the car door, so Lance can lean more comfortably against his chest.
Lance's jacket is spread out over him like a blanket, and in the privacy that the shadows provide, Keith's arm rests under the jacket, fingers curled loosely with Lance's, resting on his thigh.

He can hear Lance's steady breaths, feel the rise and fall of each of them, feel the puff of air against his collarbones.

The drive is peaceful. A bubble of tranquility in the night. With the starry sky looming above them and the mountains rising above them in their steady climb upward. Fields surround them, blanketed in darkness, barely a light to be seen. The moon is bright, giving a splash of color that cuts through the dark car.

Illuminating Allura's hair. Shiro's profile. Romelle's eyelashes. The curve of Lance's ear.

The rumble of old rock, steady and driving, is distant and muted. Half overrun by the rumble of the engine and the steady vibration of wheels on pavement.

A calmness blankets Keith. A tingling in his skin that makes him feel light as air, distant and drifting. A contentment settles in his chest. Warm and filling. The smooth stillness of a pond at night. Glassy surface reflecting the world around it. With the occasional ripple that bubbles across the surface before fading gradually back into its tranquil state.

Here, with family found. Here, with Lance. A friend and a soulmate who's made him start to believe there might actually be something to their connection. Something worth exploring. Something worth treasuring.

Here, in a car, gentle vibrations running through him, nestled in a blanket of the night. With the echo of adrenaline and thrill from the day leaving him with the burn of happiness deep in his bones. With the memory of the sun warm on his skin and the bite of the wind fresh on his mind. With the dull, aching reminder in his body of the exercise he put it through.

Here, with the strange, settling contentment that comes after the happiness and excitement has worn away. When your heart is too full and protected, and the shadows and ghosts can't find a way to creep back in.

The exhaustion that comes at the price of feeling truly and wholly at ease.

It's a feeling he's not sure he's ever really had. Not like this. And it's a feeling he never thought he would know.

He's lost in a void of thoughts. Flashes of memory and conversation from the day. Thoughts and musings that drift into the ether before they get the chance to fully form. Drifting along without reason and consequence. Unable to sleep, but unwilling to be fully awake.

He blinks as they pull up to a gas station, bright florescent lights harsh as they cut into the tranquility of the car. And as Shiro pulls to a stop and cuts the engine, everything is suddenly far too quiet. With the radio off, the gentle hum of the engine gone, and without the constant vibration of wheels on pavement, the world seems far too quiet and far too still. His ears ring faintly and his skin tingles with the phantom vibrations.

Slowly, pulling out of their daze and back into reality, everyone rouses.

Allura stretches, groan leaving her lips as her back audibly pops. Romelle sits up, hair falling to frame her face as she blinks, dazed and confused as she wipes off the corner of her mouth. Lance stirs, lifting his head and squinting against the light as he looks around.
"I need gas," Shiro explains, an apologetic smile on his lips as he opens his door. "If you need
anything or need to use the restroom, now's the time."

Allura sighs, body slumping as she pushes the car door open, sliding out of it. Romelle isn't too far
behind, after a brief struggle of trying to get her shoes back on. And then he and Lance are left
alone. Surrounded by light and bodies moving around the gas station, but locked away in a bubbled
space within the car itself. A small semblance of privacy.

"Morning," Keith says, voice low and teasing as Lance glances up at him, eyelids still drooping.

His lips purse into the barest of pouts as he rubs one eye with the heel of his hand. The hand still
lays with Keith's beneath his jacket squeezes lightly, more firmly twining their fingers together. "I
wasn't sleeping."

"Sure you weren't," Keith says with a soft huff of amusement. At Lance's weak glare, Keith's smirk
widens. Just a fraction. Just enough that he feels it in his cheeks.

"I wasn't." He sighs, body settling back down against Keith's. His thumb idly moves over Keith's
knuckles, tracing and memorizing the ridges. "I was thinking..."

"About what?" He doesn't know why they're speaking in hushed tones. Despite the fact that no one
can hear them, it feels like speaking any louder would break the hazy bubble of contentment the
inside of the car embodies.

"About what you said earlier."

Keith raises an eyebrow, despite the fact that Lance can't see it. He tilts his head, resting his chin
atop Lance's head as he gazes out the window. Shiro stands there, leaning against the side of the
car while he watches the numbers on the screen rise, one hand on the gas pump. "I said a lot of
things earlier."

"About... my soulmate. About opening the door and like... offering a chance but not pushing them
to take it. Creating opportunities for them to come to me. Like a cat."

Keith snorts lightly. A soft semblance of a laugh. He wonders if Lance can hear the way his heart
speeds up, and he longs for the hum of white noise from the open road to drown it out. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." His thumb stills, head tilting as he glances up at Keith. His lip is caught between his teeth,
brow pinched as he looks wholly uncertain. "Do you... have a pen?"

He blinks, slowly realizing the implications of the question. "No, but Shiro probably does
somewhere."

They both sit up, rummaging through the car until they find what they're looking for. They settle
back, no longer leaning on each other, but still sitting closer than strictly necessary. Lance's jacket
pools on his lap, and he rests his left arm over it, fingers of his right hand fiddling with the pen.
Shiro finishes pumping gas and disappears into the gas station, leaving them even more secluded.

Sensing Lance's hesitation, Keith leans over, hooking his chin over Lance's shoulder. He feels
Lance immediately relax, and he feels the ghost of a smile in the wake of bubbling giddiness at the
implications of that. "What're you gonna write?"

Lance's face scrunches up, lips pursing and brows furrowing. He stares at his exposed arm as if it
were a live cobra, staring him down and threatening harm. "I don't know..."
"You could write about quidditch? About how we won today?"

"Yeah, maybe... I dunno, I feel like doodling or something. I just don't know what."

"What kinda things do you know your soulmate likes?"

Lance hums thoughtfully, a wistful edge to his words. "Art. Painting. Mechanics, I think? Just judging on some of their paintings. Nature. They used to be really into comics and stuff, but that was a long time ago and I barely remember. Space? Cryptids. Mothman."

Keith snorts softly, amusement leaking into his voice and a smirk threatens the edges of his lips. "Please draw Mothman."

He feels Lance turn his head, but he doesn't look up. "You know about Mothman?"

He shrugs. "Pidge has told me about it." Not a complete lie. Not a whole truth.

"I don't even know what Mothman looks like."

Keith's smile finally breaks through. "That's the best part."

"You just want me to embarrass myself in front of my soulmate." It's an accusation, but not a serious one. One lined with amusement and cut through with teasing undertones.

"They're your soulmate, Lance," He says, aiming for dry but unable to hide his lilting amusement. Nor can he completely hide the edge of fondness, trailing in the wake of his words. "They'll find it endearing."

A truth. A whole truth.

"I hope so," Lance mumbles, but the pen is already being pressed to his arm.

Keith feels the connection open up. A tingle and buzz across his skin. The wistful breath of fresh air rolling into him. Feeling like an ocean breeze brushing through his limbs, filling his chest, settling with a quivering and amorphous energy. Light and fleeting. Hope nibbling at his heart, but nervousness pushing at his lungs. A wild giddiness burrowing across his skin.

He shifts, tugging his hoodie sleeves down over his hands, grateful for the cold nights.

"Is it weird that I'm doing this in front of you?" Lance mumbles, and the pen lifts from his arm, but not before a new kind of nervousness starts to trickle through their connection. It's fading and gone before Keith can pin point it, but he has the context to know what it means.

He shakes his head, cheek rubbing against Lance's shoulder. "No. Keep going. I wanna see how you draw Mothman."

A faint smile on Lance's lips, highlighted by the florescent lights of the gas station, cut through with the private shadows of the car.

The others come back, but by then Lance's jacket is already around him again, a blanket of privacy to hide himself away. He shoves at Keith until he rearranges himself back against the car door, taking his place once again on Keith's shoulder. Romelle kicks off her shoes and curls up, leaning against Lance's back as a pillow. Keith closes his eyes, heart hammering in his chest as the echo of Lance's excitement fades from his veins.

He hears the soft chuckle from Shiro. A soft coo from Allura. The shutter sound of a camera, no
doubt aimed at the three of them sleeping on each other in the back seat.

Lance's hand finds Keith's once more beneath the canopy of his Jacket. Squeezing gently and twining their fingers.

Keith's arm still feels the phantom prickles of the poorly executed cartoon Mothman on his arm. Complete with an arrow pointing to it and the caption:

**Is this a Mothman??**

They get back to campus just before midnight, and their caravan of cars splits off as the drivers drop off everyone as close to their dorms and apartments as they can.

Shiro stops by Keith's apartment first, and he squeezes Lance's hand before pulling away from him, grabbing his things, and sliding out the door. Lance's gaze is groggy, his hair a mess, but his smile dopily endearing as he offers a small, shy wave.

He can hear the low bass and chattering din of a party nearby, of drunk people spilling out of apartments to talk and smoke. But inside his apartment, it's blissfully quiet.

He can still hear the hum of activity in the apartment complex around him. The sound of cars as they drive past. But it's all removed. Distant. A white noise that's easy to filter out. It's quiet enough otherwise that his ears ring with it. Skin buzzing with a faint tingle of inactivity after a day filled with adrenaline.

He drops his things to the floor, locks the door, and trudges toward his bed. Kicking off his shoes as he goes. Stripping his clothes in his wake. He pauses at the edge of his bed. In nothing but his boxers. Gazing down at the pale expanse of his left forearm.

The doodle of Mothman on his skin isn't fully black. A faded charcoal gray. It'll no doubt fade in only a day. The doodle itself is comedic. A bubbled body. A round head. Round eyes. Fuzzy antennae. Stick legs with pointed feet. And hilariously detailed moth wings.

It takes Keith a moment to realize he's smiling.

It's only a moment more before he's walking across the room to dig out one of his washable soulmark markers.

A moment after that, he's collapsing on his bed. Softness of his blankets a soothing balm against his skin. Heavenly and comforting as he puts the pen tip to his arm.

He focuses on indignation, but lets a healthy dose of amusement shine through. It vibrates through him, strangely giddy and riding the high of his day. Exhaustion and endorphins refusing to let any of his doubt creep into the mix.

Not tonight.

Tonight, the shadows can't touch him.

**Not even close**
He spends his time drawing a far more accurate likeness of Mothman, dwarfing Lance's more bug-like doodle.

He's in the middle of brushing his teeth when he gets a response. When their connection opens up with that same feeling of a rolling ocean breeze. Sweeping up inside him and swirling in his chest. He's not certain if the strange, buzzing excitement belongs to himself or Lance.

He watches the words appear beneath his own, sketched out sloppily and quickly.

**No way, he's called MOTH man, not Weird Looking Bird Man**

The statement is followed by a doodled diagram of the wings that Lance drew followed by a doodle of the wings that Keith drew. He crosses out his iteration of Keith's wings and circles his own, putting a checkmark by it.

Keith snorts, toothpaste dribbling down his chin.

He stays up for an hour longer, curled up on his bed and drawing on his skin by lamplight. Their argument over Mothman devolves into a doodled adventure between their two renditions that spans across his entire arm, his left leg, and the thigh of his right.

The Mothmen dancing.
The Mothmen fighting.
The Mothmen surfing.
The Mothmen eating ice cream.
The Mothmen with sunglasses on
The Mothmen chasing stick figure people.

It goes on. Each doodle progressively worsening as the exhaustion from the day begins to weigh on them both, making the motions of their pens sloppy and uncoordinated. He laughs at it, knowing that amusement filters through their connection. He can feel Lance's giddiness mingling with his own. His relief, cool and soothing against Keith's frazzled excitement, chasing away any uncertainty as it begins to rise.

He can feel the echo of Lance's laugh fill his chest, bubbling his lungs as if it were his own. He can hear the echo of it in his memories, and it brings the ghost of a smile to his lips.

It's the first time they've communicated for this long without the interference of others in a very, very long time. No Pidge to push him. No Shiro. No Hunk. No probing questions and no pressure.

Just him and Lance.

He falls asleep with the words, **goodnight, space cadet**, fresh on his skin.

He dreams of glowing red eyes, black wings, a laugh like an ocean breeze, and the echo of a touch across his knuckles beneath the glimmer of stars.
Lance's pull from sleep is gentle.

He's in a dream, an adventure of some sort with purple aliens, a blaster in his hand, and he's shooting them down like one of those carnival games where the targets shift and move at the back of a booth. Each time he hits one, a deep and rumbling *hum* starts up. Short and aggressive before it fades. He shoots again. *Hum*. Spins and shoots. *Hum*.

It's only when he's out of targets and the humming continues that he realizes that maybe the sound has nothing to do with the targets after all.

It's as soon as that realization hits that he starts to get pulled out of his dream. Awareness melting his surroundings and tugging him to consciousness. He struggles against it, but it's a losing battle.

And still the humming persists.


The more his dream melts around him, the more he focuses on the sound, the louder it gets. It fills his awareness. He can practically feel it across his skin. Echo in his bones. But it still remains strangely far away. In his body and yet at the end of a tunnel. The distant rumble of thunder.

He slips back into consciousness seamlessly. One moment he's asleep, and in the next, he's slowly becoming aware of his body. Mind still distant, struggling to keep up, he starts to pick up sensory input.

It's warm. Far warmer than it should be because his dorm gets surprisingly cold at night, especially now that they're halfway through November. He's not wearing his eye mask, which, okay, he forgets sometimes. But a brief wrinkle of his nose tells him that he's not wearing an overnight face mask either. Not the end of the world. He only does that a couple nights a week.

His chest feels heavy. Pressing into the mattress far more than it should. His leg is pinned, tangled up in a warm solid weight that's definitely not blankets. His arm isn't numb, but it's well on its way, the tips of his fingers starting to feel that distant tingling sensation. There's another weight on his shoulder. A tickling wisp of sensation along his neck and jaw.

The bed beneath him is definitely more comfortable than his dorm bed, and for a moment he wonders if he's home. But no, it's too quiet for that and the faint hint of spices don't fill the air.

The air does, however, smell... different. It's so hard to pin point, but it definitely smells different than his dorm, but at the same time... familiar. He just can't place it. Not when his mind is struggling to return to his senses. To take the offered pieces of the puzzle and fit them together.

He's not sure how long it takes, nor is he really aware of the process it takes to get there. But eventually he finds himself lying on his back, staring up at a ceiling that is definitely a ceiling and not the bottom of Hunk's bunk, and with a body pressed up against his side.

That's when he recognizes that smell. It's faint. Obscure. Smells like a vague combination of his cheap shampoo, the spice of his deodorant, and the burnt popcorn they made last night. Wrapped up in the general indescribable but familiar smell of Keith's apartment.

Right. He stayed the night with Keith.

A strange jittery excitement trickles through him, running down his spine, vibrating through his core, and spreading out to his limbs.
He stayed the night with Keith.

And it wasn't even anything sexual. He came over with a backpack full of textbooks, notebooks, and his laptop, and a large pizza in his hand. The two of them had spread their work out over Keith's coffee table, curling up on his couch in their pajamas, and worked deep into the night.

Keith had a paper he needed to write that had been saved until the last minute, and Lance had a mini-essay and lab reports due. So instead of confining themselves to the library, they had turned Keith's apartment into their study den.

Keith had finished first and had curled up next to Lance, resting his head in his lap as he helped him with the last of his art history homework, half asleep and drowsily rattling off fun facts about art in the renaissance era before he ended on a tangent about the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

Lance had smiled, chuckling through it while he lazily ran his fingers through Keith's hair.

By the end of it, it was nearly two in the morning, and he had no desire to walk back to his dorm. The decision to stay with Keith had been an easy one, and one that barely needed to be discussed aloud.

He had texted Hunk that he wouldn't be back that night, barely managed to brush his teeth with the cheap toothbrush he had bought to keep at Keith's place, and slipped into the bed to curl around an already half-asleep Keith.

It's strange how easily and seamlessly they seem to fit together now. How he had bought a toothbrush to leave in Keith's bathroom without thinking. How he automatically brings a change of clothes with him when he visits. How he just slips into bed with Keith, and Keith just assumes that he will.

And the strangest part is the complete lack of awkwardness.

He's not sure when they lost the bashful part of their deepening interactions. When they went from uncertain and shy and hesitant to calm and easy and sure. He thinks it must've happened gradually. So gradually that it's hard to pin point an exact moment. But he does think that the talk he had with Keith was a big turning point.

A point of understanding.

A point of tearing down walls and exposing the parts of them that are vulnerable and broken.

A point where they reached out with soothing hands to cradle those broken parks. Not fixing them, but treasuring them as they are.

It's a step he hadn't realized they'd taken until they were already past it. Until the effects of that understanding really start to come into the light.

He always thought this is what falling in love would feel like, but he never thought it would be with anyone other than his soulmate.

And that awakens something in him. A spark and burning ember, threatening to build into a blaze of a fire that threatens to consume him.

The problem is he doesn't know if that fire will leave him a barren wasteland or be the key to his rebirth.
It's a terrifying thought, and one he doesn't know what to do with. He can't admit that he might be falling in love with Keith because he simply... doesn't know if that's true. And if it is, he doesn't know what that means for him and his soulmate. If it even matters at all. His soulmate has always been his number one, and he doubts that will every change, but... what he has with Keith is beyond special, and he's not ready to give it up.

So for now, he ignores his doubts. Stuffs them in a box and buries them deep inside his heart with a label that reads problems for future Lance, sorry buddy. For now and until something changes, he's fine sitting firmly on the line between Keith and his soulmate. As long as Keith is happy to be with him, and as long as his soulmate doesn't, he's happy to be right here.

For one blissful moment, the buzzing stops, and Lance sighs. Sinking deep into Keith's bed and turning his head to nuzzle into his hair. It tickles his nose, but he doesn't care. His arm tightens around him, and Keith is awake enough to curl further into him. A hand wraps around his waist, curling tight. Legs around Lance's tensing before they relax in some semblance of a hug.

He's in the process of slipping back into his dreamscape when the buzzing starts up again.

He groans, tossing his free arm over his eyes, and Keith burrows deeper into his side, echoing his frustration. He starts to roll into him, lifting the blankets further over them both, but Keith squeezes his side, digging his fingers in pointedly.

Lance yelps, voice cracking in sleep and wholly indignant. He jerks, and the movement pulls him away from Keith, who simply shifts onto a pillow and tugs the blankets around him, huddling them beneath his chin. Which would have been incredibly adorable, if he hadn't just jabbed at Lance's side.

"What the fuck, dude," He grumbles, grabbing for the blankets, but Keith holds firm.

"Turn off your stupid alarms." His voice is low and raspy, and boy if that doesn't do things to Lance's insides. He, however, is exhausted and will not bend to a cute face and sexy voice.

"I did turn off my alarms." He yanks on the blankets, ripping them from Keith's grip and settling back beneath them. Keith's eyes snap open, narrowed at him from beneath a messy bedhead and hazy with sleep. His lips purse, pout ruining the intensity of his glare. Lance doesn't budge. "That's your phone."

"My phone is on do not disturb."

"I turned off my alarms! You watched me do it when I said I was skipping my morning classes."

Keith's frown deepens, drowsiness leaving his eyes but looking no less confused. "That is your phone, though."

Lance blinks, expression going blank for a moment before his lip begins to curl. "Oh my god, is someone calling me?"

"If they have, they've been calling you for the past ten minutes."

"Oh my god. I'm going to kill them. Whoever they are."

"What if it's Hunk?"

"I'll forgive him, but I'll still kill him."
Keith snorts, burying his face deeper into his pillow and closing his eyes as Lance rolls over, reaching out blindly for his phone. "Did you have work this morning?"

"No," Lance mumbles, managing to knock over several objects off of Keith's nightstand before he manages to find his phone. Even then, the awkward angle causes it to slip from his fingers as he picks it up, and it clatters to the floor. "Fuck." He rolls onto his stomach, reaching off the bed for it. "No, I checked last night. I don't have a shift until tomorrow."

He catches his phone with his fingertips, groaning in frustration as he struggles to wiggle it closer so he can grab it. Once he does, he flips it over to look at the screen. The first thing he notices is that there are, thankfully, no cracks from the fall.

The second thing he notices is the picture of his younger sister passed out in the car with her mouth hanging wide open and drool on her shirt.

"Why the fuck—" He rolls onto his back, flopping out on the bed. One hand lifts the phone to his cheek while he swipes to answer, while the other stretches out to slap across Keith. He grunts, but otherwise just burrows deeper into the blanket. "What'd you want?"

"Good morning to you, too." His sister's voice filters through the receiver, clipped and exasperated. "Get your ass out of bed and let us in."

"What're you talking about?" He asks, rubbing his eyes.

She sighs, the sound trailing off to a groan. "You forgot, didn't you?"

"I never forget anything," He mumbles, rolling over and grabbing Keith with his free arm, pulling him towards him. Keith comes easily enough, rolling onto his side and folding so Lance can fit behind him.

"Lance. We're outside your dorm. Our tour starts in forty minutes."

There's a pause, and then with an damn near audible click, the memory slots itself into place.

Lance stiffens, eyes widening for a moment before he groans, burying his face in Keith's back. "That's today?"

"Luis said he texted you last night to remind you."

"I forgot!" His brother says loud enough for Lance to hear him in the background.

Maria groans, and Lance chuckles under his breath. "See? It runs in the family."

"Just hurry up. I wanna get coffee before the tour."

"Coffee is bad for you. You're like twelve."

"And you're like four."

"Four and a half."

"Laaaaance."

He sighs. "Yeah, yeah, I'm getting up. But, I'm... uh, I'm not at my dorm."

"What—"
"I'll meet you guys outside it, though. Give me ten minutes."

"Lance—!"

"Gotta go, bye." He ends the call and tosses his phone across the bed, groaning as he curls into Keith's back, hugging him tight.

"What's up?" Keith mumbles, voice muffled by the pillow.

"Maria and Luis are here."

"Lance."

"Hmm?"

"I don't know who that is."

"Oh. My little brother and sister. They're twins. Sixteen. Or maybe seventeen? Probably seventeen, because they're seniors. Who knows anymore, they'll always be twelve to me."

Keith rolls over to look at him, forcing Lance to roll back to accommodate the movement. Keith's eyes are open, but still drowsy, brows furrowed in confusion. "Why're they here?"

Lance sighs, flopping onto his back and spreading his limbs wide as he stares at the ceiling. "Their school gives seniors free days off if they go do campus tours at colleges. They wanted to borrow a car to come visit on their own, and I said I'd go on the tour with them and then take them out to lunch and show them around and stuff."

"Good thing you already decided to skip all your morning classes."

Lance huffs. "Yeah, I guess." He rolls his head to the side to look at Keith, a small smile playing across his lips. "Hey, wanna come with us."

Keith frowns before quickly rolling back over, pulling the blankets over himself once more. "Nope, I have class."

"After class then. After the tour. Come have lunch with us. I know you don't have anything else until like two."

Keith hums, sounding torn but bordering on a no.

Before he can say anything, Lance shifts, flopping overtop him, limbs sprawled out and blankets bunching between them. "Please, Keith?" He playfully buries his face in the crook of Keith's neck, roughly nuzzling against him. "Please, please, please, please."

"Lance!" Keith tries to snap, but his voice is laced with barely contained laughter and a fondness that makes his heart twist.

"Come on, they'll love you. I can't say you'll love them, but they'll definitely love you. Plus you can hang out with me and save me."

"They're your siblings."

"Exactly. I'll definitely need saving."

"Oh my god."
"Is that a yes?"

There's a long pause, and then his body sags with a sigh. "Fine."

"Yesss," He hisses, clinging to Keith and rocking them back and forth. "You won't regret it, I promise."

"I already am." His voice is dry, but that fondness still hasn't dissipated. He squirms in Lance's grip, getting a hand out and through the tangle of blankets to poke viciously at his side. Lance yelps and jumps, glaring at the smirk that tugs at Keith's lips. "Now get out of here."

"Rude. You have to get out of bed, too. You have class soon." He tries to go for retaliation, grabbing Keith's sides in a way that would have most people jolting. Keith, however, doesn't budge. Just continues to lie there and stare at him.

At his frustrated frown, Keith's smirk widens.

Lance huffs, throwing the blankets off dramatically and swinging his entire body until his legs slide off the bed. "It's not fucking fair that you're not ticklish."

"Mhmm," Keith hums, bunching up the blankets and burying back under them. He turns on his side to watch as Lance gets dressed, blankets pulled up and bunched beneath his chin. Hair a mess on his pillow. Eyes lidded and tired, despite being bright with amusement.

"It's cheating, Keith." He says as he stands, pulling his pants on the rest of the way and shimmying to get into them. He goes a little overboard with it, but that's what happens when he can feel Keith's eyes on him. Sure enough, when he turns around, Keith's eyes drift slowly up the length of his body to his own. He puts a hand on his hip, using the other to point a finger at him. "Cheating, I say!"

Keith snorts and rolls over, pointedly putting his back to him. "Whatever. Just get out of here."

"I'll see you later though, right?"

"You sleep with your socks on."
"That's normal."

"No, it's not."

"My feet get cold!"

"My hands get cold," Keith says, dry and humorlessly.

Another bought of giggles slip past his lips. "Keith, you're so weird." He hadn't meant that to sound as fond as it does. And once it slips out, he's powerless to resist the urge to lean down and kiss him one more time.

He pulls away laughing, catching a glimpse of Keith's blush before he pulls the blankets over his head with an exasperated groan.

As he nears his dorm, he steps off the main path, taking a brief detour that brings him to it from the side rather than head on. Where he had been hurrying the whole way, he now slows, eyes darting around the perimeter.

It doesn't take long to find them. Two kids who could pass as freshmen waiting outside a friend's dorm. Their skin tone is a little lighter than his own, but they have the same messy brown hair and the same eyes. The same sharp features and the same upturned nose. Maria keeps her hair long and pulled up into a high ponytail, strands falling down in front to frame her face. Luis's is just a little longer and messier than Lance's. They have drastically different styles in clothes. Yet despite all of it, they're both clearly twins. From their identical facial features to the way they hold themselves.

Maria sits on the bench outside his dorm, one leg crossed over the other and bouncing, phone in her lap. Luis sits on the back of it, feet on the seat next to her, hunched over his own phone with his elbows resting on his knees.

Lance angles his approach so he comes from behind them, using a lesser used path between two of the dorms.

They don't notice him coming, and with their history, they really should have expected it.

So it's with no mercy that he grabs his little brother, arm slipping from around his shoulders to locking around his neck. Luis yelps and shouts, nearly dropping his phone as his hands fly to Lance's arm, fingers tugging and yanking as Lance bends him over and digs his knuckles into his hair.

"Lance!" He reaches up, trying to sway at Lance's face, but he just leans back out of his reach.

"Too slow, hermano." He tugs until Luis is half dragged off the bench, but doesn't let go until he manages to get his feet under him so he doesn't fall.

Maria laughs, phone out and pointed at them, no doubt snapchatting her twin's misery with that shit eating grin on her face.

He can't have that, now can he?
"And what makes you think you're safe?" He asks as he walks behind the bench toward the door to his dorm. As he passes her, he sticks his finger in his mouth, gets it nice and slobbery, and promptly shoves it in his sister's ear.

She screeches, leaping off the bench and rubbing fiercely at her ear as she rounds a sharp glare at him, rattling off quick and clipped Spanish. It drops from her tongue like venom, but he only grins, shoving his hands in his pockets as he walks backwards toward the door.

He uses his keycard to get them into the building and leads them to the elevators. Maria looks disgruntled and angry the whole way, but Luis's grin matches Lance's.

"I gotta shower and change real quick," He says as they reach his room. He pulls out his key, but knocks sharply three times before saying loudly. "Hunk! Buddy, I'm home."

"Why're you knocking?" Maria asks. "It's your room."

"Common courtesy," He says as he puts the key into the lock. "Hunk's been alone, so who knows what he's been up to."

Luis snickers. Maria lip curls.

He pushes into the room, tossing his backpack to the floor by his desk. "You descent, buddy?"

"No," Comes the grumble from the top bunk, followed by a shuffling of blankets and a creak from the bed.

"Well, stay up there then. The twins are here."

"What?" A head pokes up from the mound, hair sticking up everywhere and eyes blinking owlishly. He rolls to the edge of the bed to look over, staring at the twins as they follow Lance into the room. "Oh, hey, guys."

"Hey, Hunk," They echo in unison.

Maria drops into Lance's desk chair while Luis throws himself onto his bed. They make themselves at home quickly in his space. Maria props her feet up on his desk, crossing them at the ankles and leaning back in his chair as she scrolls through his phone. Luis folds his hands behind his head, feet propping up on the bottom of Hunk's bunk as he looks over the wall of photos.

"You've got a few new pictures," Luis muses.

"What?" Lance looks up from where he's digging through his wardrobe. "Oh, yeah."

"Got any paintings right now?" Maria asks, looking up from her phone with genuine interest. She's always loved Lance's soulmark paintings. Considers them the height of romance and has made it quite clear that she wishes she had something like that. Lance doesn't have the heart to tell her that they're not really as romantic as they seem.

That they're not for him.

That as proud as he is and as beautiful as they are, he'd trade them for what she has with her soulmate in a heartbeat.

He shakes his head, tossing a towel over his shoulder and grabbing his shower caddy. "Nope, last one faded a couple days ago."
In the wake of last weekend's quidditch tournament, and the brief but exhilarating conversation he had with his soulmate afterwards, once their conversation had faded from their skin, Lance had gotten a soulmark painting on his arm. A dark and eerie forest landscape stretching across his left forearm. Shadows and pine trees, negative space creating contrast of his skin against the dark greens of the soulmark. And amongst the trees was a large and formidable rendering of Mothman and his glowing red eyes.

Hunk had thought it was creepy.

Allura had thought it was strangely cute.

Coran had thought it was fascinating.

Pidge had thought it was awesome.

Keith said it was pretty cool.

Shiro had smiled this secret little smile that Lance found hard to read.

But despite the dark and eerie composition of the painting, the feelings that had filtered through their soul connection had been anything but. They had been filled with passion, excitement, and an eagerness that his soulmate rarely had when approaching their paintings.

And... he could be mistaken. It could just be wishful thinking. It could just be him riding the high of actually communicating with them again. But he could have sworn he felt a lingering, sticky fondness, warm and thick in his core.

Then again, that could've just been his own.

"I'm gonna take a quick shower—"

Maria snorts. "Do you ever?"

Lance pauses with the door open, eyes narrowing on her. "Okay, rude, but entirely fair." He glances up at the top bunk where Hunk has partially emerged from his cocoon, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. "Quick shower and then I'll get them outta your hair, buddy."

Hunk waves him off. "It's all good. I don't mind. The twins are cool."

"Don't let them hear you say that. Their egos are big enough as it is." He slips out of the room as a pillow is thrown at him.

Contrary to the belief of his friends and family, he's entirely capable of taking a quick shower, and even manages to do so while keeping all of his usual routine. He moves through it rapidly, pausing at the line of sinks in the dorm bathroom to wash and moisturize his face before hurrying back to his room.

It's not being late for the twins' tour that worries him. It's whatever information they might pull from Hunk in the time he's gone.

He bursts back into the room with a towel wrapped around his waist, a shower caddy in one hand, and clothes bunched in his arms. No one has really moved, and conversation stops as they all stare at him. He looks at each of them through narrowed eyes, lips pursed suspiciously.

Hunk just stares blankly. Luis raises an eyebrow. And Maria sticks out her tongue.
Lance nods once, stepping into the room and closing the door. "Alright, I'm getting naked. If you don't wanna see, close your eyes. Three, two, one."

"Lance, oh my god," Maria says, voice a little high as she slaps a hand dramatically over her eyes. "Why are you like this?"

He pulls his towel from his waist while snickering, using it to dry off his hair while he sets his other things down and starts to get dressed. "You love me."

She turns to Hunk, but keeps her hands over her eyes. "Does he always do this?"

Hunk shrugs. "I'm lucky if I get a warning."

Once dressed, he pauses at his desk, reaching over Maria to grab a pen. She peeks through her fingers, only lowering her hand once she's certain that he's covered. He can feel her watching him as he puts the pen to the palm of his right hand, but he ignores her and she says nothing.

She knows what he's doing. Even though she's made fun of him for his cheesy taste in pick up lines, she's never teased him for doing it.

She knows it's one of the only interactions he gets with his soulmate, and she knows how much it means to him.

He pauses with the pen hovering his palm, rattling around in his brain for what to say today. The morning had been so rushed that he hadn't thought of anything.

His mind reels back through the day, settling back on Keith's apartment. Dredging up a crystal clear memory of Keith curled up in his bed, hair messy and splayed over his pillow, blankets curled up and bunched beneath his chin. Eyes closed and long lashes shadows on his sharp cheekbones. Lips lax as he drifts along the line of sleep. Face relaxed and soft and at ease.

It's with that image of Keith fixed in his mind that his lips curl into a small smile and he writes, **Rise and shine, sleeping beauty.**

He knows what emotions will carry through their connection as he writes, and he knows it'll be no different than what his soulmate usually feels from him.

Which is...

A whole new problem.

Or rather, an old problem that he's been ignoring, and has now grown to a point where it's getting harder and harder to ignore the metaphorical elephant stomping around in his ribcage.

Still...

Problem for future Lance, right? Right.

He slams the pen down on the table a little harder than necessary, making his sister jump. "Come on," He says, pulling a snapback over his damp, messy hair and slipping on his shoes. "You guys have a tour to get to, and Hunk needs to get dressed."

"No, I don't. I'm gonna stay pants-less today."

"Living the American dream," Lance says as he ushers the twins out. He waves his phone in the air before slipping out the door. "I'll text you later!"
The tour had been as boring as Lance remembers it being when he came here several years ago. Still, they need proof of an official tour in order to get signed off from their school, so he deals with it.

He ends up following along behind the twins, mashed up in a herd of young hopefuls who look bored and parents who look far too excited. They stay near the back of the herd, to the point where they can barely hear what their tour guide is saying. He leans in a whispers commentary and anecdotes as they go, making his siblings snicker loudly and getting withering looks from the parents around them.

The tour, thankfully, doesn't take too long. Both Maria and Luis have a few things to attend later in the day, but there's a break long enough for them to grab some lunch.

The restaurant they pick isn't too far off campus. A little out of comfortable walking distance, and a hassle by bus. So Maria drives them in the borrowed family car, an old beat up hand-me-down, but definitely still safe and functional.

They sit in the car in the parking lot. Maria tapping away on her phone, Luis sprawled out watching videos in the back seat, and Lance slouched down in the passenger's seat, feet propped up on the dashboard.

"When's your friend gonna get here?" Luis asks, reaching out to blindly slap at Lance's arm resting on the center console.

He pulls away from the touch, focus remaining fixed on the game playing on his phone. "Soon."

"You said soon like five minutes ago."

"Five minutes is still soon."

"What's taking him so long?" Maria asks.

"He said he had to talk to his teacher after class, then go back to his apartment to get his bike."

"Oh god, he's biking here?" He hears Luis flop his limbs out, hitting various parts of the car seats and doors. "That's gonna take forever! I'm starving."

Lance smirks, but looks up at the sound of a rumble. He watches as a familiar cherry red and black motorcycle turns into the parking lot, easing down the aisle until it pulls into one of the smaller spaces up front.

He clicks his phone off and shoves it into his pocket as he reaches for the door handle. "Not that kind of bike. Come on, he's here."

"What'd you mean not that kind of—" Luis sits up, hand on each of the front seats, and Lance turns to see his wide eyes and gaping mouth as he swings his legs out of the car. "Wait, is that him?"

Lance just grins. "Yup."

"Holy shit, since when did you get cool friends?"
"Hey, Hunk and Pidge are cool."

"Yeah, but you're not," Maria says, but she sounds distant. "Holy shit, he's actually really hot. When did you get hot friends?"

"All my friends are hot!" He says, infusing his voice with indignance, but he can feel heat crawling up his neck.

"Yeah, but you're not." Luis says, grinning from ear to ear.

Lance reaches over, smacking Luis's arm and flicking Maria in the ear. She yelps and swats at him, and he slides out of the car. "Stop staring and be nice."

"Oh, I'll be nice." There's a noticeable curl to her smirk.

"You're already dating your soulmate!" Lance flicks her again.

"Doesn't mean I can't look!"

There's a noticeable silent from the backseat, and Lance doesn't miss the way his brother's face drops. He winces. Fuck. He knows better than to bring up soulmates, especially Maria's. They're just as much of a touchy subject for Luis as they are for him, especially when his twin is already dating hers and he hasn't even felt his First Connection.

Lance slams the car door shut, adjusts his jacket against the fresh bite of the autumn air, and shoves his hands in his pockets as he starts across the parking lot.

It's one of those days where the sun shines, warming your clothes and the air, settling a contentment deep in your chest. And the crisp wind brings with it the sound of crunching leaves and the smell of winter. A chill on your skin but a burn of refreshing liveliness in your lungs.

He watches Keith as he approaches, hearing his brother and sister scramble out of the car behind him. Keith is wearing tight black jeans with rips along the front. Ones that Lance knows make his ass look good. His larger combat boots and red leather jacket complete the outfit.

He turns the bike off, sets down the kickstand, pulls the helmet off his head, and fucking shakes out his hair like a goddamn cliche movie scene.

And just like one of those goddamn cliche movie scenes, Lance feels his heart hammering in his ear, bruising in his chest. His mouth goes dry because Jesus fuck his sister wasn't wrong when she called Keith hot.

And he's tapping that.

More than tapping that, he holds hands with that and makes that laugh, and plays with his hair and nuzzles in his chest.

He's so far gone for that, and he's starting to realize just how much of a problem that might be.

"Hey, man," He says as he stops next to him.

Keith turns to him with a start, but his eyes light up with recognition and his grin is blinding in the late autumn sun. "Hey, Lance. Where's—"

"Hey," Maria comes careening into Lance's side, throwing an arm over his shoulder and causing them both to wobble dangerously to the side. She holds out her other hand to Keith. "Name's
Maria."

He look at her hand, blinking blankly for a moment before his gaze trails back up to look between them. His smile is barely there, but there's amusement crinkling at the edges of his eyes. So slight but so obvious to any who know him. He takes her hand. "Keith."

"Are you sure you're friends with my brother?"

Keith's eyes flicker to him, edges of his smile becoming more apparent. "He makes it hard, but I manage."

Lance snorts, rolling his eyes and pointedly looking away, but he knows he's losing his fight with his own smile.

"Can you give me a ride on your bike?"

Lance's head whips around, eyes narrowing on his sister. "No, absolutely not."

She meets his glare with one of her own, lips pursing into a pout. "Why not?"

"Mama would kill me."

"I won't tell her if you don't."


"I'm sure Luis wants a ride, too. Right, Luis?" She turns, pout fading into a confused frown as she looks for her twin. "Luis?"

He's standing by the door to the restaurant, hands in his pockets and back slouched. He glances at them, but only for a moment before he goes back to scuffing a crack in the sidewalk with his shoe. "Can we just go inside? I'm hungry." Clipped and neutral, but with irritation that sounds far too measured to be natural.

She frowns, but doesn't argue as she peels away from Lance's side with a dramatic sigh, moving toward the door. "Yeah, okay."

Keith gives Lance a curious look, but he just shakes his head.

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Lunch is not nearly as awkward as he feared.

Between himself and Maria, they carry the conversation easily, and they drag the others into it. Keith comes shyly, and Luis comes reluctantly. Eventually, however, they both do end up joining in. Luis and Maria are fascinated by Keith, and while taken a little aback by their general enthusiasm, he handles it fairly well.

In spare moments, he glances at Lance, a hidden smile lifting his cheeks as he says, "They're just like you." And as much as he'd like to take offense to that, there's a level of familial pride that outweighs it.

Lance picks on Keith a descent amount, but it doesn't take much for Keith to get Luis and Maria on
his side. The teasing goes all ways, however, and it's all in good fun. It keeps them laughing and their spirits high.

At some point between ordering their food and it actually arriving, Keith's foot shyly finds his under the table.

Throughout the time they spend in the restaurant, Lance keeps a careful eye on his brother. After some coaxing, he does join conversation. He teases and bounces off all of them in his usual way. He smiles, but it never seems to fully reach his eyes. He laughs, but it never sounds wholly genuine.

There's a hollowness to him and shadows beneath his eyes that Lance is all too familiar with.

He knows exactly what's eating at his brother, what toxic thoughts are corroding away inside his chest. Both from observation and from experience.

So after they'd paid and they step back outside in the afternoon sun, when Maria stares wistfully at Keith's bike and says, "Are you sure you can't give me a quick ride?"

Lance sighs dramatically, shoving his hands deep in his pockets and rolling his eyes with his whole head lolling to the side. "I guess it's fine. If Keith's okay with it." 

Maria seems startled by his easy defeat, but she doesn't question it. Instead, she brightens up immediately, bouncing on her toes as she whips around to stare at Keith. "Well? Do you mind? Please, please, please, please."

Keith blinks at her, looking trapped and startled. His gaze flickers to Lance, and he tries to silently communicate his plea. A slight down tilt to his chin. Raising a brow just so. Widening his eyes for just a second. A wry smile.

Keith's gaze flickers across his features, brows furrowing and lips pursing just slightly. He seems to catch on, though. There's confusion there, and Lance knows he'll have to explain later, but for now, Keith goes with it.

He shrugs, gesturing to his bike. "Sure, I guess that's fine. Just a short ride?" He directs the question to Lance.

Who shrugs and waves a hand vaguely in the air. "Ten? Fifteen minutes? Around the main streets? And do not go over the speed limit, Keith, I swear to god."

He quirks a small smirk, settling on his bike and handing Maria his spare helmet. "Sure thing."

"Hey, Maria, give me the keys so we can wait in the car."

She tosses him the keys, barely paying him any mind as she climbs onto the back of Keith's bike and hesitates only a moment before holding onto him.

Lance watches them ease out of the parking lot and onto the main road before glancing back at his brother. Now that the presence of constant conversation is gone, he's pulled back into himself. The force smile faded and gone. Posture sagging as he bows his head over his phone.

"Come on," Lance nods across the parking lot.

Luis follows him, automatically climbing into the backseat. Instead of taking his previous seat in the front, Lance goes to the other side of the car and slides in next to his brother. Luis looks at him
curiously and cautiously, but says nothing as Lance settles in. He slouches low, pulling out his own phone and propping his knees up on the seat in front of him.


"Hey." Short. Clipped. Not so much a closed door as a solid wall. He hates hearing his brother like this. Hollow and jagged. Thorns protecting everything Lance knows he's burying inside.

"What's up?" He tries to keep it casual. A gentle prod toward the subject without dragging him into it. He keeps his eyes on his phone, playing a mindless game to keep the pressure lighter. *Tap, tap, tap, tap.* Lose. Restart. *Tap, tap, tap, tap.*

Movement catches his eye, and he glances up to see Luis's incredulous expression, arms gesturing pointedly to their phones, the car, the parking lot. Making it very clear what's up, and expression making it very clear that he finds it a stupid question.

Lance gives him a flat stare. "That's not what I meant, and you know it."

"Lance." A warning, stiff and barbed.

"Luis." A challenge, gentle but firm.

Luis huffs, slouching further down in his seat, legs spreading wide to accommodate as he buries his attention wholly and pointedly in his phone.

Lance frowns, trying again with the easy, gentle voice that's always managed to make his siblings crumble. "Talk to me about it."

"I don't *want* to talk about it."

"You haven't felt a connection yet?" It's a soft prod phrased like a question, even though they both know it isn't one. If Luis had finally felt his First Connection, Lance would've heard about it. The entire family would be ecstatic. They would've called him not long after. Hell, Lance probably would've skipped classes to go home and celebrate with them.

That's how it always is in their family. A celebration. Coming together in honor of someone's First Connection. A preemptive welcoming for the soulmate that will no doubt later become part of their family.

They've always made big deals of their connections. So it's no wonder that it's tearing Luis up that he hasn't had his yet.

Soulmates typically connect in the early years of puberty. Thirteen to fourteen is common, but twelve or fifteen is just as likely.

Luis is seventeen and still hasn't felt anything.

It's not unheard of. Soulmates connect at the same time, and only after both parties have begun puberty. No one really knows why, and scientists have never been able to figure out a root cause. They say it's not genetic. Age of connection is unique to the person.

There are two possible explanations. One, that they're both late bloomers. Which is just as common as early bloomers. Or two, his soulmate isn't of a connecting age yet. Which is also just as common. Though soulmates rarely have generational gaps, age differences are common enough.
It's been proven that age of connection has no real impact on the connection itself. Soulmates aren't any more or less likely to be happy together than anyone else. And he's never heard of anyone simply not having a soulmate. Not outside of extremely rare cases and the realm of fiction.

Still... it's nerve wracking to not have a connection yet. Especially in their family, where everyone is just so... happy.

Lance knows better than most how defective it feels to have an unconventional connection in a family of storybook tales. Which is why he knows it's up to him to talk to his brother whenever the weight gets to be too much.

Luis frowns, but says nothing. Lance attempts a smile. "It'll happen."

A sharp exhale, trailing off into a bitter, humorless laugh. "Yeah, that's what they all say."

"Luis..." He reaches out, laying a hand on his brother's shoulder. "It'll happen. You'll feel it."

He feels Luis's breath shudder out of him. "Yeah, well... I wish it would just happen already."

"I know, buddy."

"I don't even care that they're probably younger than me. I can wait. I will wait. I can be patient until they're ready." It comes out of him in a rush of an exhale, words tumbling over each other in a frantic escape until his breath runs out. Fears and insecurities dumped into the still space of the car, into the safe space between them. "I just wanna know they're out there. That I'm not— I'm not alone—"

His voice chokes off, throat closing around what Lance is sure is a sob. His hand tightens, pulling Luis across the backseat until he's leaning into his side. He wraps his arm around his shoulders, and Luis turns his head, burying it in Lance's shirt. He takes several deep, shuddering breaths, and Lance rubs his upper arm.

"You're not alone, man. You'll never be alone."

"Easy for you to say," He mumbles, voice muffled in Lance's shoulder. "You already have a soulmate."

And Lance... has nothing to say to that. His immediate response is his usual one. A habitual back and forth they've had for a couple years now. At this point in their conversation, Lance would defend himself. He'd point out that yeah, he's connected to his soulmate, but he's nothing like their parents or their siblings. His soulmate doesn't talk to him or have any interest in being a soulmate, and that's nearly as bad.

But... the words die before they reach his tongue, and he's so startled by the abrupt halt to their usual back and forth that he finds himself reeling, trying to pin point exactly what caused the death of his usual rebuttal.

And the only answer he can come up with is Keith.

Keith, with his perpetually scowling face that lights up like the fourth of July when Lance can manage to pry a smile from him.

Keith, who's touch can go from hesitant, shy, and gentle to firm, sure, and desperate.

Keith, who's presence in his life inexplicably and undeniably just makes Lance feel better. Makes
him want to be better. Makes him more comfortable in his own skin.

"You know know your soulmate yet," Luis says, breaking through his thought, voice low and defeated. "But you have one."

"Yeah, but..." Lance licks his lips, heart pounding as the words approach his lips. "I'm starting to think soulmates aren't all they're cracked up to be."

The silence feels heavy. Still. Frozen. Time ticking by at half speed. Slowly, Luis rises off of his shoulder, turning to gaze up at him. Lips alternating between pursed and gaping, eyes incredulous, brow furrowed.

Lance can't help the laugh the bubbles out of him, slightly manic, slightly relieved that it's in the open. "Oh my god, don't look at me like that." He says, putting a hand on his brother's face and pushing him away. "I haven't gone crazy, I promise."

"Dude," Luis pushes his hand away, leaning back to look at Lance more fully. "It's just... I've never heard you talk like that. What happened?"

Lance rolls his eyes, propping an elbow on the car door and leaning his cheek against his knuckles. "Nothing happened, I just... I realized a few things." He pauses, and it's only when Luis makes a prompting gesture that he continues. "It's just... Yeah, okay, I'm still crazy about my soulmate. That hasn't changed. I'd still be fucking thrilled if they started talking to me more and actually showed interest in me. But... we haven't quite gotten there yet, and I don't wanna push them. And I just... I realized that I don't want to put my life on hold anymore."

He takes a deep breath, trying to settle his thoughts. Strangely enough, they come easily. With all the chaos in his head and his heart lately, here and now, in this moment, everything settles. Everything is calm. The eye of a storm. Eerily silent but crystal clear.

"I love them, and I'll meet them someday, but for right now... I'm going to live my life. And you should, too. You can wait for your connection and your soulmate, and dude, they're your soulmate. You'll come into each other's lives eventually, and you'll probably fall in love and be all mushy like everyone else, but... for now, just... do what you want. Do what feels right. Meet people. Do stuff. Enjoy life. You don't have to save all your firsts for someone you haven't met yet."

It hurts to say it. It twists a part of him that's always been there. His core, structured and built on the beliefs he's grown up with. It crumbles the foundation and rattles him down to his bones.

But it also feels like relief. Like a breath of fresh air. The moment after a storm passes when the world reawakens. The crisp breeze at dawn as light and color bleed back into the world.

His old foundation is crumbling, but he finds he no longer needs it. He still feels strong with the reinforcements built up around it.

And he has Keith to thank.

And Coran.

And hell, all of his friends.

He may not have a soulmate that's dying to meet him, but he has some damn good friends, a damn fine boy to kiss, and he's... happy.

"Are you telling me to go get laid?" There's a sly coil of amusement in that voice.
Lance's head whips around, eyes widening in mounting horror as his mouth drops open. "Oh my god, no. Well, yes, kinda, but no. Dude, you're like twelve."

"Shut the fuck up, Lance," He says, but he's laughing as he shoves Lance's shoulder. It's shaky and sounds a little watery and thick, but he's laughing. And when he meets Lance's eyes, the shadows haunting him aren't so dark anymore. "Thanks." A whisper in the lightened atmosphere. "Really, it... thanks."

"No problem, man." He looks up as he hears the familiar rumble of Keith's bike pull into the parking lot. A small smile curls his lips. "Want a turn on Keith's bike?"

Luis grins, shadows lost in the brightness of his smile. "Fuck yes!"

Lance knocks on Keith's door with three sharp raps of his knuckle. He tries the door handle, but it's locked. So instead he leans his forehead against the door frame, feeling the cool metal like a balm against his skin. His body slouches into it, barely propped up. He closes his eyes.

"Keeith." He can hear shuffling inside the apartment. The tumble of the lock. The slight creek of the door opening.

"What are you doing?"

"Oh, you know. Hanging out." He waves a hand around vaguely, cracking an eye open to find Keith staring blankly at him, one eyebrow raised. He likes to think there's a smile in there somewhere, but Keith is really good at his poker faces.

He's wearing sweatpants and a faded black band t-shirt, hair pulled back into a messy half-bun. He scratches the back of his neck, glancing away. "You didn't tell me you were coming over."

"Oh," Right. He forgot about that part. That's what people usually do before going over to someone's place. Lance groans, dragging a hand down his face. "Sorry. I meant to, but I guess I just... forgot." He lets his hand drop to his side, offering Keith an apologetic smile.

Keith just rolls his eyes, the beginnings of a smile making themselves known as he steps back, opening the door wider before nodding into his apartment. "Come on, then."

Lance sighs, slouching off the door frame and stumbling into the familiar studio apartment. Keith closes the door behind him as he kicks off his shoes, peels off his jacket and tossing it on the back of the couch before collapsing on top of it. He lays out, face in the cushions, one arm and leg dangling off the edge, the other leg caught up on the arm of the couch.

"You okay?" Keith sounds close, and judging from the sound of shuffling, Lance is willing to bet he's sitting on the coffee table facing him.

Lance hums a weak affirmative, and when he speaks, his voice is muffled. "Yeah, I just forgot how exhausting it is to hang out with the twins all day. I feel like I haven't gotten a break all day."

Keith hums his acknowledgement, and a hand touches Lance's shoulder before sliding to his back,
running warmth up and down his spine. "They run you ragged?"

"They wanted to see everything."

"They have a lot of energy. Reminds me of someone else I know."

Lance flails out the hand dangling off the couch, managing to blindly slap Keith's shins. "I'm not that bad."

"Sometimes," Keith muses, and Lance turns his head to glare up at him. He's rewarded with Keith's small, teasing smile. The one that shines more in his eyes than shows on his lips. The smile fades slowly. Not dissipating completely, but shifting into curiosity as he tilts his head to the side, lips pursing lightly. "Was there... anything you needed?"

Lance shifts in place, fingers picking at Keith's carpet. "Not... really? The twins left, and I went back to my room, but Hunk is having a Skype date with Shay, so I figured I'd give them some privacy, and I just..." He lifts his eyes to meet Keith's, a small shy smile on his lips. "Wanted to see you?"

Keith rolls his eyes, pushing himself up from the coffee table. "If you wanted a place to hide from Hunk's date, wouldn't Pidge be closer?" He moves toward his small nook of a kitchen. "Tea?"

Lance's lip curls as he rolls onto his side, propping himself up on an elbow to watch Keith. "Do you have anything fruity? With sugar? None of that bitter shit you drink."

He doesn't need to see Keith's face to know that he's rolling his eyes. It's in his body language. "Yeah, I keep that around for Pidge."

He fills up his electric kettle and sets it on the base, flicking the switch on before pulling out two mugs, setting tea bags in each.

"And to answer your other question," Lance continues, propping his chin up on the arm of the couch, grinning across the room at Keith. "Pidge would've been closer, but I'm allowed to make out with you. So you're like half a step above them."

Keith looks like he's fighting a smile as he turns to face Lance, propping a hip against the counter and crossing his arms over his chest. It's a losing battle. Still, he manages to deadpan with very little inflection, "So you only came over here to make out."

Lance raises an eyebrow. "...No?" He tries to hold the same level of indifference, but his grin is far too strong, and he lets it spread slowly.

Keith snorts, turning back to the tea as the kettle finishes boiling. He pours the water, fills Lance's with a plethora of sugar, and puts none in his own tea because he's a heathen who likes bitter things.

"So how was your last class today?" He asks as Keith makes his way over to the couch. He moves automatically, sitting up to make room for him. He sits back, half turned with one knee pulled up onto the couch to face Keith, arm thrown over the back of it.

Keith shrugs as he sits, setting both mugs on the coffee table. "Fine. We finished our life drawings."

"Cool, cool." He tilts his head to the side, resting it on his arm. "Did I interrupt anything? I really did mean to text you, but I forgot—"
"Lance, it's fine." Keith leans back on the couch, shoulders brushing against Lance's arm. His hand lifts, half from habit and half from the inescapable urge, and his fingers toy with Keith's poor attempt at a bun. "I was just doodling and watching videos." He gestures to the coffee table, and Lance glances down to the closed sketchbook resting on the keyboard of his open laptop, screen already gone black from disuse.

He hums, fingers diving deeper into Keith's hair to scratch blunt nails against his scalp. Keith sighs through his nose, body relaxing deeper into the couch as he leans into the touch, eyes closing. "One of these days I'm gonna have to braid your hair."

He admires Keith's profile and the fall of his lashes against his cheekbones. The curve of his cupid's bow and the sharp line of his jaw. There's just a hint of stubble from the day, just enough that Lance knows his skin would be rough with it. But in a way that Lance doesn't necessarily dislike.

"Hey, Keith?" It slips from his lips, unbidden and sliding into the silence of the apartment.

"Hmm?" He can feel the vibration of Keith's hum, low and rumbling.

Lance knows what he wants to say, but isn't sure if he should. Isn't sure how to phrase it. But he barrels onward anyway.


Keith's eyes open, blinking several times as his brows slowly furrow. Lance watches it happen, but as Keith turns his head, his gaze moves to where his fingers are buried in his hair. "For what?"

Lance's smile is small. A reflection of the relief left in the wake of the day. "Luis and I had a talk today. It's a talk we've had often, but this time... today was different. And today I think I actually managed to help him. And I don't think I could've done that without you."

"I... didn't do anything?" He can see Keith's slight frown in his peripheral vision. "Unless you mean taking Maria on a ride?"

Lance chuckles, fingers pulling his fingers free from the depths of Keith's hair to tuck a few strands behind his ear. The smile fades from his lips, but his voice remains the same. "You've done more than you realize."

He sighs, letting his head drop to Keith's shoulder. His arm drops to the back of the couch, but his other hand creeps forward. Fingers reaching and hesitant. Keith moves to meet him, offering his hand to Lance before he can fully take it. Their hands rest between them, and Lance keeps his eyes fixed on them. On the contrast to their skin. On the contrast of their finger shapes.

Keith's hand lays on its back, and Lance's fingertips traces the curve of his curled fingers and the smooth, warm leather of his glove. As much as he teases Keith for it, they really do suit him, and the sight of them, the way they fit Keith's hands just right, the way he knows they feel against his body as Keith's hands desperately grab for him—he can't say that he minds Keith's obsession with his gloves.

Keith's breath hitches as Lance's fingertips lightly caress the soft skin of his wrist, just below where the gloves end, and a shiver runs down his spine at the sound.

Keith says nothing. Waits for Lance to gather his thoughts. Leaves the conversation open for Lance to continue if he wants, or to close it if he doesn't.
He appreciates that about Keith. His patience and his silence when Lance finds himself struggling to put his thoughts to words.

"Luis... hasn't had his First Connection yet." He feels Keith's slight jerk, the stiffening of surprise, but doesn't lift his head. A small, wry smile curves his lips. "I know. It's surprising, but not uncommon. And there's nothing wrong with it, exactly." His smile fades. "It's just... kinda hard to deal with in a family like mine."

Keith's hand moves, fingers sliding between Lance's. Slow and gentle. The easy push of a current, seeping into the space where his hand fits just right. Lance can feel Keith's eyes on him, but he stares at the pattern of their fingers. "Tell me about them?"

"It's... not that interesting," He says, but a smile creeps into his voice.

"Lance, you love talking about soulmates, and you love your family. Tell me about them." Keith's hand squeezes his, thumb rubbing soothingly over his knuckles.

Lance breathes in deep, eyes fluttering closed as he lets it out, shuddering and shaking. "Well... I already told you about my parents, right?"

There's a pause, and he can feel Keith shift, but whether it's a shake of his head or a nod, Lance doesn't know. It's soon followed by a sheepish, "Yeah."

He feels the ghost of a smile touch his lips. Squeezing Keith's hand, he continues. "Well, it's... kind of a trend in our family to know our soulmates before we feel our First Connections. My parents were childhood friends. My oldest brother's soulmate is this girl he knew in school that he used to pick on. The whole pull her pigtails kinda crush denial. She gave as good as she got though, and he never stood a chance. They spent years denying they were soulmates, and somehow the picking on each other thing changed into a real friendship. And the friendship grew. They were that couple that's basically dating before they actually officially get together. After they graduated high school, they decided to stop denying it." He opens his eyes, staring at the coffee table with a gentle smile on his lips. He knows it's loving and fond, but he also knows it doesn't reach his eyes. "They're happily married now with two kids, who are the best kids ever."

He sighs, head rolling backwards off Keith's shoulder and onto the back of the couch. He stares up at the ceiling, smile fading.

"My older sister's soulmate was her best friend. Well, still is, I guess. Their connection didn't happen until they were fifteen or sixteen, I can't remember. And they were together when it happened. I don't know the details, but it was at a sleep over. Kinda hard to deny it when you feel it at the same time, and when you write on yourself, you can watch it appear on the other's skin. Veronica didn't even realize she was into girls, but the whole soulmate thing was evidence enough." He holds up his hand, still locked with Keith's, and raises one finger at a time. "High school sweethearts. Married. Happy. Currently pregnant with their first child."

He lets their hands drop with a long exhale.

"Maria's soulmate is this boy she met in Cuba the summer before their connection happened. She was there visiting our grandparents, and he worked at a shop by the beach. They had a whole sweet summer romance, with the whole shy touches and hanging out and holding hands and kissing right before she leaves. Then boom. Soulmates. What a romance." He resents how bitter he sounds, but the bitterness is laced with exhaustion and defeat.

"Then... there's me, and there's Luis. My grandparents have crazy romantic love stories. Hell, most
of my aunts and uncles and cousins do, too. I grew up seeing all of this, hearing all the stories, thinking— no, knowing. Assuming. That I'd get a story like that, too. But..." He lifts the hand resting behind Keith, bending his elbow so he can rub his eyes. They had that familiar phantom burn, and he really doesn't want to cry right now. "Yeah, you know. A soulmate who doesn't want to know me right now, and that's fine. I'm fine, really. I can wait, and I will wait, but... it's just hard when I'm surrounded by—all of that, and I always thought it would be me, too, and it's just... not."

"Lance..."

Lance shakes his head, pursing his lips. Keith's voice is hard to read, and he doesn't want to read it. Doesn't want any sort of pity or sympathy because he doesn't need it. He didn't start this to explain a sob story. He started this to thank Keith, and he's gotten off track.

He sits up, twisting more on the couch, until he's fully facing Keith. He holds Keith's hand in his lap with both hands, staring until Keith meets his eyes. His brows are furrowed, lips pursed. Strangely cautious and mostly unreadable, which is... strange. Lance prides himself on being able to read Keith, but right now, all he can see is a chaotic storm of... not quite pity, not quite sympathy, not quite wariness. It's a storm that shifts and moves too fast for Lance to pick things out. A wall of chaos that keeps him out.

Still, he meets Keith's strangely shy gaze. Fixes him with his own and refuses to let Keith look away. He can see the way Keith shrinks from him just slightly. From the determination and intensity of his stare. But when Lance is certain he has his attention, searches his eyes for a moment, Lance lets himself smile.

Slow and steady. Genuine and lifting. Reaching his eyes and bringing a light to that storm.

"I want to thank you, Keith." He says, voice low and steady. Each word formed on his tongue with care. He wants Keith to understand—needs him to understand. "You... you helped me realize there's more to life than just... soulmates. You... You've made it easier to deal with and accept a lot of stuff. And it's not just because you make out with me, which is pretty great, by the way." He can't help the subtle wink or the tilt of his head, and when Keith snorts, Lance chuckles. He looks down, fingers playing over Keith's hand in his lap. "You've helped me understand that I can just be... me. You've helped me just by being you. Just by being here. And you've helped me help my brother feel less alone. So... thank you."

"Lance..."

He doesn't look up. He squirms in his seat, suddenly feeling too raw. Too open. Too exposed. Too vulnerable. Even around Keith, it's too much. It's too much when Keith's voice is so full. So thick and heavy with far too many things Lance can't decipher and things he knows will remain unsaid.

"Lance—"

He closes his eyes. Squeezes them shut. "So yeah, I just wanted to say that, and thank you." He has to say it. The words bubble up out of him, even as they cut as they rise. Razor sharp and hairline slices, stinging but fading. "You make me a better person, and I think your soulmate is really lucky to have someone like—"

Keith's hand rips from his, but before he can register its absence, there are hand on his face. Warm and calloused fingers. The smell of worn leather. His eyes snap open as his head is tilted up. The hands framing his cheeks are firm and the palms cupping his jaw are unyielding. Strong and solid. Just like Keith.
His breath escapes his lungs as he meets Keith's eyes. Dark blue with flecks of gray and violet. Sharp as a knife. Hard as steel. Blazing with a fire that's startling. Catches him off guard. Spreading instantly and igniting something inside his chest. His brows are furrowed, lips pursed into a scowl.

His gaze is intense enough to make a shiver run down his spine, make him shrivel from it. But it's a warm intensity. One that fills his gut with heat and spreads it through his veins like wildfire.

Keith's thumbs are impossibly gentle as they caress his cheeks.

His expression never changes. His words are clipped and heavy. Each one low and weighted with the same intensity that burns in his eyes. But somehow, impossibly, still soft. "Your soulmate. Is so lucky. To have you."

And before he can respond, before he can fully register those words, before his heart can flutter as they take shape, Keith is pulling him forward. Falling into him.

Their lips come together, and Lance forgets everything else.

Keith's kisses are reverent and passionate, desperate and rough. His lips press against Lance's firmly and fully, tilting his head for the perfect angle to slot them together. And just when it feels like too much, he pulls back, shifting just slightly before diving back in.

He kisses him. Over and over. Each kiss just as full as the last, but rising in desperation. His hands hold Lance still, anchoring himself as if he might float away.

And while Lance is surprised at first, it doesn't take him long to recover. He rests his hands on Keith's wrists. Not to pull him away, but to keep him there. Leaning forward to meet Keith for each push. Adjusting the angle with each pull.

Lips parted. Noses brushing against one another in an intimate touch. Breaths panting, mingling, drifting hot and heavy against skin.

Keith surges into him, and he's tipping, tilting, falling. He falls onto his back on the couch, neck at an awkward angle and a couch pillow wedged under his spine. Arms flail out, pushing things out of the way, toppling them to the floor, pushing at each other until they both adjust to a better position. And all the while, they don't stop. Lips still coming together. Unwilling to break that desperate contact.

Lance lays on his back, legs spreading automatically to accommodate Keith as he settles over him. Keith's weight is as comforting as it is thrilling. His blood hums as he's pushed into the couch, back automatically arching to press more firmly against Keith's body.

Keith props himself up on his elbows on either side of him, hair falling to frame both their faces, tickling Lance's skin. Keith's tongue presses to his lips, hot and wet and insistent, and Lance opens for him, lets him in with a pleased hum. His hands slide up Keith's chest, up his neck, fingers curling into his hair to hold him in place. He tugs out the hair tie, tangling the free strands in his fingers.

He tugs, and Keith moans into his mouth, startled and soft.

Heat floods into Lance's gut and his body rolls, hips jerking upward. Then Keith is pushing back down, and it's Lance's turn to gasp. He breaks their kiss, head thrown back as Keith continues a slow grind, pressing against him, slotting a thigh between his legs and getting the friction just right—
Keith's lips never stop moving. They trail down his jaw to his neck. Teeth and lips. Biting. Sucking. Pressing his tongue flat to lick at the abused spots before moving on. Lance tilts his head to the side, arching his back and stretching his neck, giving Keith all the access he can. It's sensitive. Too sensitive. Every press. Every bite. Every brush of his lips and caress of his breath has shivers running down Lance's spine. Goosebumps rise on his skin. His body spasms and writhes beneath Keith's weight as his nerves are set alight.

He never knew his neck would be such a sensitive spot, but holy shit, he never wants Keith to stop — Never wants anything else— He can't keep still. His body jerks and squirms. His hips move unsteadily and desperately against Keith's, grinding himself shamelessly against Keith's thigh. The friction is so good, and yet not enough.

Keith bites down particularly hard, sucks at his skin, and an embarrassingly high pitched whine escapes his lips. His hands move from Keith's hair, hands clutching at his shoulders and back, bunching up the fabric of his shirt, nails digging through to flesh.

"Keith—" He whispers. He whines. He breathes. Keith's name on his tongue like a plea and a warning all at once.

Then Keith is gone, lips detached from his neck as he sits up on his knees. The chill of the room rushes into his absence, cool on his heated skin, making him shiver. His hands fall as Keith moves, falling uselessly above his head as he stares, gaping and eyes wide, at the beautiful boy towering over him.

Keith grabs the back of his shirt and tugs it over his head, peeling it off his arms and tossing it to the floor. And then he hovers there, up on his knees, gazing down at Lance. Eyes lidded. Lips parted. Chest flushed red and heaving with each pant of breath. Hair wild and a mess. His chest is lean and defined and Lance wants to touch. A dark trail of hair leads down from his navel. Deep V lines disappearing into the waistband of his boxers peeking out over the top of his sweatpants.

And those sweatpants... are really not hiding much of anything.

A needy sound escape him, and he feels his body convulse. His hips arching upward, desperately seeking friction again. His head tilting to the side where Keith's saliva is cooling on his neck. Fingers and toes curling as his eyes rake up and down Keith's body.

He has no reason to feel embarrassed, however. Not when Keith's eyes drop to roam down his own body. Not when his tongue peeks out to lick across reddened lips. Not when he looks at Lance like that and demands in a low, gravelly voice that has his breath catching in his throat, "Shirt. Off. Now."

Lance scrambles to oblige, grabbing the hem of his shirt and struggling to sit up enough to pull it over his head. As soon as it's gone, Keith is touching him. It starts with a palm on his hip, sliding up to his waist, fingers playing across the lean definition that he has, knuckles smoothing across soft skin. He still has those stupid gloves on, but— he really doesn't mind.

There's just something about Keith shirtless with those stupid leather gloves on, calloused fingers and smooth leather, running them over his body—

Yeah, okay, he's a fan.

He tilts his head and makes a sound. He doesn't even know what fucking sound it is. Something needy. Something desperate. Something to catch Keith's attention and beg for him to kiss him.
It works. Keith looks up at him, lips quirked into a small smirk that sparkles in his eyes as he chuckles. But then he's leaning forward, lazily licking into Lance's mouth, and Lance can't complain. He wraps his arms around bare shoulder, dragging nails across naked flesh, hearing Keith's breath go ragged as he does.

Then Keith's lips leave his, trailing down his neck and pausing only long enough to press a kiss to his collarbones before moving on. He shifts down the couch, body dragging against Lance's as his lips trail down his chest, tongue flicking playfully at a nipple. Lance snorts and slaps lightly at his head. Keith's eyes find his, crinkled at the edges, before he moves on.

Lance's breath hitches as he gets lower, and lower, and lower.

Lips and teeth leaving bruises along his hip bones. Tongue trailing along the curve of them, dipping teasingly below his waistband. His breath catches, hips jerking, and Keith's hands are at his thighs, squeezing and holding them down.

Lance watches through lidded eyes as Keith unbuttons his pants, slow and methodical. Glancing up to lock eyes with him. Watching. Looking for any sign that Lance may not want it. He gives none. Just licks his lips and runs his fingers through Keith's hair, along his jaw, thumb pressing at his lip until Keith kisses the pad of it. Licks it. Sucks it into his mouth.

Lance shudders as Keith pulls him out. As the cool air of the apartment hits flushed skin. As Keith's warm breath chases the chill away.

Keith hovers low, one hand wrapped around him and the other splayed out on his thigh. He meets Lance's gaze through lidded eyes, irises dark and lips shining, lax, parted, red and plump.

In that moment, suspended at the edge of a cliff, suspense and anticipation making his chest tight and his skin tingle, Lance swears he sees something flicker in Keith's eyes. Something that shouldn't be there mixed with something he's both scared and thrilled to see.

Guilt and affection. Both of which swirl far too closely, far too deeply. Shifting the lines of his face and altering his expression just slightly. Just subtly. But enough that Lance can see the echo of just how deep they run.

Guilt.

Affection.

Adoration.

Fear.

And then Keith is moving, eyes closing as he swallows Lance down. His back arches. A guttural moan escaping his lips. Fingers digging tight into Keith's hair until his own groan vibrates around him. Hot and wet and tight.

Lance spirals down— down—down— Until he forgets the guilt. Forgets the fear. Feels only affection. Adoration. A pulsing need— desire— desperation— want— want— want—

Keith's name forms on his tongue, falls from his lips, and nothing has ever tasted so sweet.
"Damn, Keith," He says, one hand on the bathroom counter as he leans forward, other hand touching the bruised skin of his neck. It's tender to the touch. "Did you have to make it look like you beat me with your mouth?"

There's the sound of shuffling out in the apartment, but Lance's eyes are glued to his neck, turning this way and that to try and take it all in. He hadn't gotten a good look at it last night, and he sure as hell hadn't thought about the repercussions in the moment. But here and now, in the early hours of a new day, realization is dawning on him.

He's going to have to figure out a way to hide this from his friends or admit to the whole...thing he has going on with Keith.

Or he could say it was a random hook up, but somehow he feels like that would be worse.

He sees Keith appear in the mirror, leaning a shoulder against the doorframe and crossing his arms over his chest. He's managed to get dressed. Something Lance got distracted from doing when he went to pee because holy shit, his neck looks like a war zone.

"Maybe people will think it's a soulmark?" The tone of his voice, laced at the edges with an amusement and a prideful satisfaction that he can't quite hide, suggests he doesn't actually believe it.

"There's no fucking way these are ever going to look like anything besides hickies. Holy shit, dude." He tilts his head, stretching out his neck as his fingers run across the abused skin. The spots are everywhere from his jaw to his collarbones. All different sizes and shapes. Some with clear teeth marks. Purple and red and yeah, definitely hickies. "You mauled me like a wild animal."

Keith chuckles. It's that low chuckle that's deep in his chest and breathy and with a voice that's still raspy from having just woken up. It sends a shiver down his spine, makes goosebumps rise on his flesh, and makes his heart do stupid flips. Which he does not appreciate when he's trying to be indignant over here.

His eyes flick up to Keith's as he pushes away from the door, moving into the small bathroom and slipping behind Lance. He stiffens as Keith's arms wrap around his waist, but then he's relaxing back into his chest. His chin hooks over his shoulder on the side that's mostly unscathed.

The smirk on his lips lifts his cheeks and makes his eyes sparkle, and it looks far too smug and far too proud.

It makes Lance want to punch him in his stupid, pretty mouth.

"You weren't complaining last night."

Lance snorts, rolling his eyes. "And I don't regret it. And I'd probably do it again. But damn, Keith. I don't have enough make up or the skills to cover this."

Keith chuckles again, and the puffs of his breath make goosebumps rise on Lance's bare skin. Keith tilts his head and presses a quick kiss to Lance's shoulder before he steps away and back out into his apartment. "Wear a turtleneck. You'll be fine."

Lance sighs, pouting at himself in the mirror. "At least Hunk has classes, and I can cover up your
"mutilation of my neck before he sees."

"If you don't hurry up, you're going to miss class."

"I have plenty of--" He glances down at his phone, resting on the bathroom counter. His eyes widen as the screen lights up. Grabbing it, he rushes out of the bathroom. "I do not have plenty of time."

He hears Keith's soft chuckle, but ignores it in favor of rushing around his apartment to find where ever the fuck his shirt and socks disappeared to last night. Once he's dressed, he pats his pockets, making sure he has everything, grabs his bag, turns—

Keith is leaning a hip against the counter in his tiny nook of a kitchen, smirking at him as the coffee machine rumbles in the background.

"What're you even doing awake right now? You don't have class for another hour and a half." He's already moving across the apartment.

"Unlike you, I actually like getting up early sometimes." Keith says, tilting his head as Lance steps into his space, putting their bodies inches away but not quite touching.

"I knew there had to be something wrong with you," He says, voice low.

Keith just smiles, and Lance presses a quick kiss to his lips. Keith shoves him, and Lance playfully stumbles back. "Just go before Pidge catches you sneaking back into your dorm with hickies."

"Oh, shit," He breathes, turning on his heel and sprinting across the apartment. He can hear Keith's laugh follow him out the door.

His trek back to his dorm is a quick one. He doesn't run, but he keeps his pace quick and his strides long. It's not that close to class time, but he still has to take a shower and get dressed and make himself feel human again. So, yeah, definitely a time crunch.

Despite knowing that Hunk has a class, he still holds his breath as he opens his door, peeking cautiously into their dorm and eyeing Hunk's bed suspiciously. No Hunk. Thank god.

He closes the door and locks it for good measure, flicking the lights on and tossing his bag aside. He peels off his jacket, drops his phone onto his desk, and turns to gather his things to shower.

He stops, however, when he feels a familiar tingle across his skin. The phantom pressure of a pen. The wisp of emotions that aren't his drifting through his chest.

Nervousness.

Determination.

A strange light contentment.

His eyes snap down to his arm as the words appear, breath held idle in his lungs as he watches each line and every curve ink across his skin.

**Any requests?**

His brows furrow, and he reaches for a pen, knocking a few things off his desk in the process, but he refuses to look away from his arm. Lest the marks disappear and this be a dream. He bites the cap off, quickly writing:
What'd you mean?

Because it's vague enough to mean anything. He has a suspicion. An idea. But he doesn't want to assume. Especially when, if he's right, is... kind of a huge deal. To him anyway.

The response is instant.

For a painting. Any requests?

He feels like the air is punched from his lungs for a moment before his heart starts hammering in his ears, leaping into his throat to make that its new home.

His... his soulmate has never asked him that before. Never asked him what he wanted painted across his skin.

They're...  

Holy crow.

His mind feels distant. Fractured and broken and scattered into the ether. Dislodged from his body in the wake of the revelation of this moment.

His soulmate is reaching out to him.

His eyes drift around his room, and his gaze settles when it finds himself in the mirror hanging from the back of their dorm door. His gaze is drawn automatically to the marks on his neck, and suddenly his mind comes snapping back into place with pinpoint focus.

That's... not a bad idea.

Neck/shoulder painting? The left side?

Sure

For a moment, Lance waits. Breath held. Waiting for more. For the connection to open up again.

Then his breath rushes out of his lungs. Right. It wouldn't be instant. They'd need to like... gather their stuff and get ready, right? He doesn't know what he was expecting. He's still sure what he's expecting. This is all so... strange.

He's not even sure it's real, despite the words on his arm.

He moves toward the mirror, mission to shower temporarily derailed in the wake of anticipation. His eyes settle back on the hickies, and a hand grasps the front of his shirt, tugging it down a bit to get a better look.

Damn.

Just... damn.

Keith really did a number on him, but... yeah, he can't get himself to actually regret it. If he could go back in time, he wouldn't stop Keith. In the future, he probably won't stop him. Because it had felt good. Really good. Keith makes him feel good.

Keith makes him feel... a lot of things.
Still, the hickies are inconvenient. And they'll be there for days. They stretch far up his neck, so while a turtle neck would help, it definitely wouldn't cover everything. If the soulmark painting doesn't cover it all, maybe he can use make up on the rest. Or dedicate himself to a scarf trend for a while.

Okay, so next time this happens, he may not stop Keith, but he's definitely going to make a keep it below the turtleneck line rule. Because this is a little over the top—

Their connection opens with the phantom strokes of a paintbrush across his collarbone.

It comes like the whisper of a breeze at night, rolling over the ocean. Building into a wind that crashes into him. Through him. Drifting across his skin and playing with his hair. It rolls through his chest, stealing his breath and swirling around his heart.

It moves up his neck in swirls and long strokes, coiling and curling. Colors bleeding into his skin. He watches in awe as the strokes come together. As they take shape. He watches as they move up his neck in bold, confident movements. He watches as the greens swirl between his bruises, almost impeccably so. Vines, crawling and twisting and writhing up his skin.

And then he watches as the flowers bloom in shades of red. They come to life in the spaces between the crawling vines. He watches as they cover his hickies in a thatch work of greenery and blossoms. He watches as the purples of them blend in perfectly with the reds of the petals, adding a depth they would otherwise lack.

He watches as life blooms on his skin.
Beautiful and serene. Bold and confident. Reaching and crawling up his neck as if reaching for the sun. Sprouting from the heart of him.

And he can feel it there. The base of the painting at his heart. Hidden by his shirt. Strokes coming from it. Bursting from his sternum. From his core.

It covers his bruises, not so much wiping away the evidence of Keith's touch as obscuring it. Including it in the image. Adding depth and a new color to the painting. Combining the two flawlessly and effortlessly.

He feels the rush of it. The bold determination that echoes in his chest, a reflection of the strokes. He feels the nervousness. He feels a breathlessness that isn't his own. He feels a smugness and a pride. He feels the tingling edges of amusement seeping out through his veins.

He feels the apology.

Soft.

Genuine.

A pulsing of heat in his chest that ripples out. An apology. A metaphorical olive branch. The reaching of a hand across a gap that's been cold and empty for so long.

A shyness, barely containing an eagerness.

It's never felt like this before. It's never felt so direct and has never filled his chest like this. The emotions through their connection have always been faced inward while his soulmate paints. A reflection. A deconstruction. Something Lance has been witness to, but ultimately outside of.

Before it felt like he was basking in the sun.

Now he feels like it's aimed at him, bright and blinding and searing across his flesh.

This one... this one is for him.

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> So I just ran into Lance on campus

Keith
> Congrats?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> He's got a pretty cool looking soulmark painting right now
> It's still strange to see your artwork on him

Keith
> You get used to it
Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Have you?

Keith
> .......No

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> It's really beautiful, probably one of your best floral pieces

Keith
> Thanks

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> I couldn't help but notice this one spot though. Just behind his ear. It's mostly hidden, but he turned at just the right angle. It looks like a darker mark. Like you had panned to make a flower there, but forgot. The vines lead up to it and everything. Just no flower blossom
> Looks SUSPICIOUSLY like a hickie though

Keith
> .......
> FUCK

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> That was very clever though

Keith
> Thanks, it was Lance's idea

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Lance's?
> Does he know?

Keith
> No, but I asked him if he had any requests, and he said a neck painting. I knew he wanted to cover them up, so I did

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> How many more hickies are there?

Keith
> ....
> A lot

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> How'd you know where to put the flowers? Or did you just cover the whole thing just to be safe?

Keith
> I.... may or may not have woken up before Lance

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Okay?

Keith
And kind of... stared at it a lot?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> ..... Were you planning on covering it up with a painting?

Keith
> No
> I just... liked seeing my marks on him

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> You know, most people do that, too. With soulmarks

Keith
> Yeah, well now I can see both

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> I don't know whether to look forward to or fear the things you two will come up with once he knows who you are

Keith
> You should definitely fear it
> I know I do

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Do you at least look forward to it, too?

Keith
> Definitely

Chapter End Notes

Check out Sora's art post to see the full soulmark painting! Linked below.

Check out my tumblr or twitter to learn more about me and my writing.

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TMWM World Building and Lore Master Post
TMWM Playlist
TMWM Body Art Fanart Tumblr
Bruise Our Skin

Chapter Summary

In which guilt is an anchor, shame is a chain, and understanding can’t always save you from drowning. Falling is easy, but love is hard.

Chapter Notes

NSFW Warning: There is MILD nsfw in this chapter. As usual, it's very obvious when it's gonna happen. It's not too detailed, but if that's not your thing, go on and skip to the next line break. You won't miss any plot information.

I have nothing to say other than thank you for sticking with me, thank you for being patient, and thank you for all of your support.

Happy reading <33

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lance never really considered falling in love.

It's always been something he knew would happen, and something he now realizes that he's taken for granted. He grew up with a family that were bound to and in love with their soulmates. And while he knew love wasn't a given with soul connections, he assumed his would be.

He had a soulmate. They connected when he was thirteen. And he considered himself in love since the moment that fire raged through his veins.

He never really considered the falling aspect.

He loves his family. He loves his friends. He loves his soulmate.

Life was simple. Until it wasn't.

Until Keith.

Oh, man, Keith.

The thing about actually falling in love? Truly and actually and romantically falling in love. Is that it isn't always obvious until you're so far down that there's no chance to crawl back out. Until you're head over heels and gravity is a thing of the past. Until you've fallen so far that you're floating. Suspended and surrounded and—happy.

Lance always loved his soulmate. It was never a question, but... now that he's looking back on it, he realizes that he never had the chance to fall.

He simply accepted love. Told himself it was true. And that was that.
So it's no surprise that he didn't see it coming when he fell for Keith.

The moments of giddy anticipation. The butterflies that filled his chest. The aimless nervousness with a source that was hard to pin point. The frustration when things didn't work out in a way he didn't even realize he wanted them to. The attraction, absolute and undeniable. The inability to hold back. The urge to touch and be touched.

The warmth in his heart when a smile was pulled from Keith's stubborn lips.

The smile of his own when Keith showed just how much he knew Lance, even in the most subtle of ways.

The understanding that ran so deep and did nothing but weave them tighter together.

The more he understood Keith, the more he realized just how much he cared. Just how much he didn't want to let go. Just how deeply he was buried in Lance's heart.

His fall was slow, gradual, until all at once he was here. Stuck in a place and locked with a feeling he never intended to have. Never thought he would for someone other than his soulmate.

But the thing is... it feels different than what he feels for his soulmate. Keith. Keith is... Keith is apart of him. A pulse in his veins. A warmth in his chest. They fit in a way that's so subtle but so complete. They know each other. Understand each other. He knows how to read most of Keith's more subtle expressions, and Keith knows how to see past his to the heart of him. They know how to comfort each other, whether it's with a joke, a distraction, or a careful touch. And they do so without hesitation. Just being in the same space as Keith is a thrill on its own. A thrill, but also calming. Grounding.

It's how he always imagined being in love would feel like, but it's not like the love he feels for his soulmate.

He always considered his love for his soulmate to be pure and natural.

Now it seems like a mere flickering ember compared to the blazing wildfire Keith has unleashed in his veins.

When he takes the time to sit down. To really think about it. To really dig deep and dissect what he feels... he realizes that his love for his soulmate feels hollow where it never did before. But now that he has a point of reference, it feels more of an echoed image of what could be compared to something that is.

He loves his soulmate because they're his soulmate. His potential perfect match.

He and Keith fit together like Lance always imagined he would with his soulmate, but it's different. They didn't click perfectly into place. They didn't take one look at each other and fall together. It was a long fall. Long and with a few bumps and bruises along the way. They didn't click into place. They learned how to fit together. They learned how the individual jagged little pieces of themselves manage to snap into place.

And it feels so much more rewarding for the effort.

For the learning.

For the understanding.
All the flaws and all the bumps, they fit together so much better for it.

Keith sees him. Really sees him. For all his flaws and obnoxious habits and insecurities and problems and—and still sees something in him worth reaching out to. Worth holding. Worth touching. Worth looking at with those soft eyes that capture stars.

And Lance sees him. Sees past all the hardened edges and scowls and frustrating habits and—and fell in love with him anyway.

And that's exhilarating.

It's terrifying.

Half of him feels like he's betraying his soulmate, and half of him doesn't care. It's a constant battle. Constant chaos. A back and forth, both sides equal in strength and vying for a foothold in his heart. It hurts. It aches. It tears him apart when he lets himself think about it, so he usually pushes it aside. Throws a metaphorical blanket over it and closes the figurative curtain.

Out of sight. Out of mind.

But see, there's a new problem developing. One that makes all of this all the more complex. All the more terrifying.

Because now he knows what it's like to fall. All the moments of breathlessness, dizzy with giddiness, sick with nerves, buzzing with anticipation. He knows what it feels like now. The soft flutter of butterfly wings in his chest. The warmth that settles like embers in his chest, warming his veins with every pulse of his heart.

His soulmate has been talking to him more. Casual things. Nonsense conversations. Idle chatter. Nothing big. Nothing important. No names or addresses or phone numbers or crucial data. But...through all the glimpses and small conversations exchanged, Lance is learning about them. He's slowly gathering pieces and starting to form a picture of his soulmate.

His soulmate.

He feels them through each open connection. He doesn't just get the words, but he gets the emotions attached to them. He's learning. He's beginning to see them. He's beginning to understand.

And it's through that understanding, through soft moments and teasing exchanged in pockets of time throughout their days, that Lance feels himself start to fall.

Starts to see his soulmate as a person again. Which he thinks he might have once, but lost sight of along the way. He approaches them as a friend, and through that friendship, he feels something growing.

Something exhilarating.

Something terrifying.

Because now he knows what it feels like to fall. And now he recognizes the symptoms. He knows that he's hovering on the edge of an abyss, balance wobbling as he struggles to stay above it. To not give his heart to someone he doesn't know. Not again. But... he does know them. He's starting to know them.
And there rises the guilt again. Guilt over Keith. Guilt over his soulmate. Feeling like he's betraying them both. Feeling like he's betraying himself. Loving them both. Caring about them both. Both so deeply embedded into his heart that he knows that choosing will hurt him.

He doubts.

He aches.

He goes around and around and around until he's sucked down into an endless spiral, dark and filled with everything he hates about himself. Stuck in that endless loop until someone comes along to pull him out of it, if only for a moment.

Then he throws a blanket over it.

Closes that curtain.

Out of sight. Out of mind.

A problem for future Lance. Sorry, buddy.

He's never allowed himself to simply enjoy the moment. To live in the present. And he wants that. He wants to. Desperately.

He's... he's happy. He's found a happiness. He's worked for it. And he's confident in that decision. He doesn't doubt his feelings for Keith. He doesn't doubt his relationship with Keith. Not for a moment. Not when he sees that stupid, beautiful smile. He can't deny the way his heart leaps when they touch or the way he craves his presence when they're apart.

He's fallen, and he knows it.

He's falling again, and he fears it.

And the guilt is a constant companion on the way down.

---

*Give them a piece of yourself.*

Simple advice. Something he's been putting to work more and more lately. Little things. Little observations. Little jokes. Little rants from his day. Little favorite things. Little doodles.

Nothing like this. This feels... bigger, somehow.

*Open the door, but don't force them through.*

Honestly, thinking of his soulmate like a cat has helped a surprising amount. And it seems to be working. They've actually been responsive. Taken to conversation. As long as Lance doesn't ask anything outright or push for personal details, he gets a response. He doesn't push when they pull away, and they always come back.

It's thrilling.

It's terrifying.
This is terrifying.

He sits along in his room. Hunk is gone for most of the evening, studying in the library with Pidge. Even Keith is busy. Said he had several art projects to catch up on and would probably be in the studio for most of the night. Honestly, he should probably be in the library, too. He has a few projects and papers he needs to work on, but they’re not due tomorrow, and somehow this feels more important.

He got the idea in his head this morning, and he hasn’t been able to shake it since. Got the idea when he was lying in his bed, putting off getting up. His eyes had roamed over the pictures of his soulmark paintings on his wall, lost in thought. And the idea came whispered on a breeze, snagging in his consciousness and refusing to let go.

His soulmate has shared so much of themself over the years. Perhaps not in words, but definitely in colors. In art. In images and abstract imagery. In the emotions that come across while they paint. They’ve shared so much, such a big part of themself, and Lance has shared nothing like that.

He may not have the artistic talent that his soulmate has, but... that doesn't mean he can't try, right?

It doesn't mean he can't share.

What had seemed like a great idea all day suddenly feels like a massive undertaking. He sits on one of the beanbags in his room, sprawled out, pants off, staring at his thighs with a skin-safe easily washable soulmark marker in hand. Just kind of... hovering above his skin.

His palms are sweating, and his heart is hammering in his chest. His skin feels hot all over, and doubt is creeping into his head because what if this is stupid— it's stupid, isn't it? No, it's stupid that he's hesitating. His soulmate isn't going to care— but he wants them to care. No, he means they won't mind. Yeah. They shouldn't mind. He's just... sharing something important. A piece of himself that's a little deeper than his favorite flavor of pudding or his favorite season.

He feels... vulnerable. Incredibly so. He's nervous, despite knowing that he has no reason to be, and he wonders if this is what his soulmate feels before they paint. Or does none of this ever cross their mind?

Whatever.

Just do it.

Just... do it.

Just...

He puts the marker to his skin, felt tip strangely cold. His breath hitches, just a little, sounding loud in the silence of his room. His heart does this stupid little jump, but there's no backing out now. He's already started. Might as well keep going. Might as well just—

Draw.

He starts with one star on his thigh, all crisscrossed and everything. He picks up the pen, feeling a strange and exhilarating rush that chases away his nerves. He can do this. He can do this. It's not a big deal. It doesn't have to be.

He draws another star. Then another. They come quicker as his nerves settle down. As a peaceful trance settles over him. It's calming, in a strange way. The glide of the marker over his skin.
Forming the patterns of stars that he knows by heart. It gives him the same sort of soft grounding that he gets when he stares up at the night sky.

He draws the pattern for Leo, drawing lines between each of his stars. He writes out the name of the constellation next to it in his best curving script before shifting his leg for another space. His favorite constellation.


He draws them from the top of his thigh all the way down to his ankle. All the way around his leg. Where ever he can find space. A patch work of constellations. All of his family's favorites. Drawn across his skin in the form of shitty stars and connecting lines. Each one with the name of the constellation next to it.

All the while memories drift through his mind. Family nights out, sitting on blankets and looking at the stars. Huddled around bonfires. Curled up in scarves and jackets and blankets. Pressed around telescopes. Gathered around star maps. Fingers pointed to the sky. Heads upturned as they're swallowed by the heavens.

He imagines another night with his family. Sharing the stars together. Hot chocolate passed between them. Marshmallows roasting. This time with two more additions: his sister's first born and his own soulmate. Someone to press to his side, under his arm, to listen to him as he rambles about the stars.

He imagines dark hair. Entangled and messy and long. Pale skin. The smell of spice and leather. Dark eyes that capture the stars and make them his own—

Lance jerks back, pulling the pen from his leg before the sudden flash of guilt can make it through his soul connection. His heartbeat had calmed down, but now it skyrocket, painful in his chest. Aching and swollen and twisted.

Warm, because he's fond of that image.

Guilty, because he wants it.

Painful, because he knows he can't have it.

Or maybe he can, but...

He shakes his head, pushing it from his mind. Now isn't the time. Right now he's... he's sharing a piece of himself with his soulmate. Pushing it out into the space between them without expecting anything in return. Just... letting it be.

Thankfully, he's done. Mostly, anyway. He puts the pen to the empty space on the inside of his thigh, just below the Leo constellation. He writes, quick and with a sense of relief and finality:

*My favorite constellations*

And it's done. Done and over with. He breathes out a long sigh, capping his marker and letting it roll away as he leans back on the beanbag. Letting his arms drape along it, he stretches out his leg, holding it up in the air and twisting it to admire his work.

He's never drawn on himself like this, but... he can definitely see the appeal of it. It was strangely
relaxing, despite the couple of nervous hiccups. He can see how someone might get into this. Especially someone with a knack for expressing themselves through art.

He sighs again, letting his leg drop back to the floor. Now that it's over with, and the endorphins that came with it are fading, he... really should do some work. They're getting close to the end of the semester, and shit is starting to pile up. Preparing for final exams, projects, papers. He's pretty sure he has some reading to do, too.

He rolls onto his stomach, awkwardly stretched out over the beanbag as he reaches across the floor to where he had abandoned his phone.

He's in the middle of texting Hunk and Pidge, asking them if they're still in the library and if they need anything, when he feels it.

His soul connection opens up with a hesitant touch. A shy touch. The subtle touch of a single raindrop before it pours. Running down his skin, light and cool. A bubbling that starts in his chest as the connection opens, a fresh spring that seeps out with each beat of his heart.


It takes only a second, and he feels the moment that dam breaks. The moment the flood waters rush through. Surging through his chest, pouring out through his veins in a lightness that feels giddy and a fondness that gives him chills.

He feels the cool and bold sweep of a paintbrush down his leg, curling and long. His breath hitches, stopping mid-gasp as his heart seems to stutter in surprise. He starts, rolling haphazardly off the beanbag and onto the unforgiving floor. He hits an elbow. Lands weird on his hip. He doesn't care, sitting up quickly and staring down at his leg.

The brush of midnight blue curls down his thigh, over his knee and down his calf. Weaving through the constellations he drew.

He watches, eyes wide and lips parted, as the night sky comes to life on his leg. Blues and purples and black swirl between his crudely drawn constellations. Speckles of white blink into existence to fill the space. A swirling galaxy.

His own stars are outlined in white, silver, and gold. Exactly as they are. His precise lines. But embellished and added upon until they fit with the rest of the painting. Glittering constellations on his dark skin with the flowing river of a galaxy between them. Each name of the constellation is brushed over with a thin brush. Perhaps a marker. Making his attempts at fine script look more like calligraphy.

From thigh to ankle, his leg is a beautiful testament to the stars. His stars. His family's stars.

And the feeling flowing through their soul connection isn't grand. It isn't harsh. It isn't full of doubt or full of affection. It's soft. Gentle. A cool and soothing breeze. The settling calm that comes during the night, staring up at the stars. A bubble of peace where nerves and doubt fade away. Where the stars remind you how little it all is in the grand scheme of things.

And in his chest, surrounding his heart, is a gentle glow. A gentle warmth. One reminiscent of a campfire's warmth on his cheeks.

It feels like a thank you.
It feels like a gift.

And it fades with the whisper of a breeze as the connection closes.

It’s with a chest that feels far too full, with the prickle of warmth in his eyes, and a trembling smile on his lips that he puts his pen to the top of his foot. Beneath where the painting ends. The words are few and the sentiment simple.

*Thank you, space cadet*

He shows up at the library that night with his bag heavy and ready to study. Pidge and Hunk welcome him with tired smiles that are strained on the edges. They look miserable, but their eyes brighten a little when he puts their coffee orders down in front of them.

Before he gets down into it, he goes to one of the school's computers to print off the newest pictures of his leg painting for his wall.

But when he gets back to the table... he puts the pictures in his bag, discreetly and without preamble. Slides them away and out of sight.

He doesn’t think much of it, but it nags at him. Nags at him the same way the denim of his jeans
itch at his skin.

He doesn't realize what the itch is until the next day.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Hunk asks, sounding for all the world like a kicked puppy. He no doubt looks like one, too, which is why Lance is pointedly not looking at him.

They trudge through the biting autumn wind, hands buried deep in their pockets and chins tucked into scarves. It whips between buildings as they make their way through campus, no longer hinting at the approach of winter but warning of it. Lance goes out of his way to step on the crunchiest looking leaves. He keeps his eyes on them, a minute childish thrill going through him when the sound is satisfying.

"I just... didn't think about it," He mumbles into his scarf, shoulders rising.

"But you always tell me." They're momentarily split apart as they weave around a large group of students leaving the cafeteria. Hunk snags the door before it can close, holding it open for Lance to walk through. "In high school, you used to call me whenever you got one. Hell, man, just a few months ago you woke me up in the middle of the night to show me one."

Lance hurries out of the cold, steps slowing as he's hit by the wall of warm air. His shoulders drop, lifting his chin out of his scarf. He reaches up to pull it looser, still avoiding Hunk's gaze. "I'm not that bad."

"You are." He falls into step beside him. "But as much as I rag on you for it, I think it's sweet. So why didn't you tell me this time? Is it bad? Is it—" He gasps, leaning closer and putting a hand up as if to block his loud whisper from carrying. "Is it a naughty painting?"

Heat flashes hot and sudden in Lance's chest, creeping up his neck at a rapid pace. He chokes back a startled laugh, shoving Hunk away. "What— Dude, no!"

Hunk smiles as he steps away, but there's still something in his eyes. Something hurt. "Okay, but why didn't you tell me?"

"Didn't tell you what?" Lance jumps as Pidge's voice sounds right behind him. He whirls around to find them standing right at his elbow, completely nonplused and grinning as they adjust their glasses.

"Where did you even come from?" He hisses, relaxing as he turns. Keith is behind them, stepping up slower. Which lets him know right away that Pidge had hurried to slip into a spot to startle him. The little gremlin.

"We were hanging out over there," They say, pointing over their shoulder with a thumb. "You walked right past us. Looked distracted though. So what's this you're not telling Hunk?"

Hunk shoves his hands deep in the pockets of his jacket, head drooping as his bottom lip sticks out. It makes Lance feel like a monster. "Lance didn't tell me about his new soulmark painting."

Pidge blinks, expression incredibly blank. When they turn to look at him, slow and methodical, Lance fidgets. He feels his own pout forming. "It's not that big of a deal—"
"But you *always* tell us about those." Pidge's eyes narrow. Just slightly. Looking him up and down like she's trying to pick him apart and find whatever screw came loose.

"I *know!*" Hunk says, throwing his hands up in the air for emphasis. It's a habit Lance is pretty sure he got from him. "I had to find out from the wall. The wall, Pidge!"

Pidge lifts her chin, eyes narrowed to slits. "Who *are* you?"

Lance huffs, rolling his eyes and cocking one hip out to the side. "It's not a big deal, okay? Can we just go get food? I'm starving." He's not, but he's desperate to escape this conversation.

"Depends," Pidge says slowly. "Are you going to show us?"

"Nope," he says, popping the *P* as he turns on his heel, marching decisively toward the food options. He can hear them behind him. After a few more comment on it, the conversation changes pretty quickly, and it's only then that the tension eases out of his shoulders.

He grabs a tray, making a beeline for the pasta line.

"Hey," he hears, turning to find Keith has followed him into the line.

Lance smiles, reaching up to tug playfully on the edges of his slouching gray beanie. It's cute. Perched atop messy black hair. Turning his leather jacket and red scarf look from punk kid to hipster in training.

"Hey," he says. More of a whisper than anything. He knows the smile on his lips is far more fond than it needs to be.

Keith's smile is barely there for a second before it fades. He looks away, making a show of looking over the pasta options while they wait. "So..."

"So?"

He glances up, just out of the corner of his eyes. "You didn't tell Hunk about your soulmark painting?"

Right. That. Lance sighs, deflating a little. One hand shoved in his pocket, his empty tray hands down by his side. He idly taps his leg with it, staring at the ground as he shrugs. "Nope."

"Is it... bad?" There's a hesitancy there. A doubt and uncertainty that Lance can't even begin to dissect.

His head snaps up, eyes going wide as he takes in the look on Keith's face. Brows pinched. Lips pursed as if he's trying desperately not to frown but can't quite help it. There's a tension in his shoulders that hadn't been there a moment ago. He's worried, and Lance can't phantom why he would be, but he feels the air punched from his lungs all the same. Had Lance been making it seem like he was ashamed of his painting? Jesus fucking— no wonder his friends are worried.

"Oh, god, *no,*" he breathes, then shakes his head. "No, no, no, not like that, it's just..." He huffs out a breath, aiming it upward towards his hair. He turns his gaze over the pasta options, if only to look away and get some semblance of privacy as he mumbles, "It's just... special. This one is special, and I just... I guess I wanted to keep it private, you know?"

"Oh." It's soft. A noise that could be easily missed if Lance weren't straining to hear.
He glances over to find Keith's eyes on the empty tray in his hand. "Is that... weird?"

Keith's smile is small. It lifts his cheeks more than his lips. Shines in his eyes more than anything. But he shakes his head, bangs falling to hide them from view. "No." There's something there that catches on Lance's heart and sinks in, making him feel far too warm for far too many reasons.

Butterflies and hornets.

Heat of his own fondness and the heat of his guilt.

Keith nudges him, lightly shoves him with his shoulder. "You're up next."

"Oh, right." He spins around, setting his tray down and waiting for the student worker to give him their attention.

"And Lance?"

He glances sideways. "Yeah?"

Keith isn't looking at him, but that phantom of a smile is still in place. "I think it's sweet."

Lance's chest tightens.

Butterflies and hornets.

"Keith! Your boys are here."

He pokes his head out of the office where he had not-so-subtly been shoveling cake in his mouth. It was one of the manager's birthdays, and she had brought in cake to share with everyone. The whole staff had been taking subtle breaks to slip into the backroom for a piece.

"Hey there, Keith. It's us. Ya boys." Lance's voice carries back to him, and he has enough of a warning to school his smile into something more deadpan.

"I don't have any boys." He says, voice flat but loud enough to carry.

He walks around the corner, sucking frosting off his thumb, to find Ginny swiveling in her chair at the front desk, half turned to grin at him. Hunk and Lance stand on the other side of the tall desk, elbows on the counter as they lounge against it.

"That hurts, man," Hunk says, putting a hand to his chest and wiping away an invisible tear. He even sniffs loudly. Keith can definitely see how these two grew up together.

"You can't deny us, Keith." Lance slouches over the counter, arms outstretched straight as they hover over the front desk. He pouts, but there's definitely a grin cracking through. "We're your boys."

Keith takes his seat, swatting Lance's arms away. "I'm disowning you both." He glances over at Ginny, who's watching with with a smile on her lips and an eyebrow raised. He sighs. "Pidge and I made the mistake of showing them Buzzfeed Unsolved, and now this is what I have to deal with."
Lance stands a little straighter, pulling his arms in to cross them casually on the counter. He gives up the fight and lets his smile shine through. "I gotta make fun of it or I'll be paranoid for weeks."

"It's true. It was so bad he almost didn't go to the bathroom in the middle of the night. Despite the fact that the hallway lights are always on in the dorms."

"Yeah, but the bathrooms have these motion sensor lights to preserve energy, and I swear they always go out when I'm in there. Like, hello? I move around a lot! They shouldn't go out." To emphasize his point, he steps back from the counter, arms flailing and body moving in that fluid way that's just so wholly Lance.

Keith can't taper down his smile even if he tried.

"So what're you guys in for?" Ginny asks, swiveling back and forth in her tall desk chair, one leg idly swinging. In the months that Keith has worked here, she's come to know his friends fairly well. Enough for them to exchange small talk without the awkwardness. She's his favorite coworker, and Lance always makes a point of stopping by to say hi when either of them are working.

"It's swim day," Lance says brightly, and Hunk utters a soft groan, hunching slightly.

"How're the lessons going, Hunk?"

"Better," He admits, scratching the back of his head. "I can get across the pool now without stopping, at least."

"He's being modest," Lance says, slapping him on the back. "He's learning quick. I don't have to watch him as much now, so I can actually get my own swim in."

They talk for a few minutes more. Small pleasantries that actually feel pleasant with the company instead of awkward and forced. But eventually Hunk and Lance have to pull away. Have to get on with their work out.

Hunk turns to leave, waving goodbye as he heads toward the locker rooms. But Lance hesitates. He's looking at Keith strangely, but before Keith can question it, he's leaning across the counter. He reaches out, gently swiping the pad of his thumb over the corner of Keith's lips. Slow and languid.

He watches, eyes wide and confusion clashing with the way his heart skips a beat, as Lance leans back. He smirks, coy and playful. Eyes going lidded as he puts his thumb in his mouth. "You had some frosting there." He says, and then he's gone. Turning on his heel and playfully striding away. Not without an extra little swing in his hips. Which Keith very much notices and very much appreciates.

And is apparently obvious in the way he appreciates.

"Is he your soulmate?" Ginny's voice cuts through his thoughts, and he jerks, eyes snapping to hers. He doesn't like how she's looking at him. All sly and knowing. Casually leaning an elbow on the desk as she scrolls through her phone.

"No," Keith says. Habit. An automated response. A defense so deeply engrained in him that despite the lie, despite the fact that his heart beat picks up into double time, it comes out sounding like the truth.

Her face falls, lips twisted into confusion. "Oh, sorry."
Keith waves her off, turning to log into the computer. "It's fine."

"Shame, though. He's cute."

Keith can't help the slight quirk of his lips. "Yeah, he is."

There's a long pause. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see the movement of her leg has stopped. She's no longer swiveling in her chair, and her phone has drooped considerably.

"Oh my god." Keith feels the bubble of amusement in his chest. She leans in close, hissing in a whisper, "You two are fucking."

He feels the laugh, but he catches it in time to hold it down. A burst of surprising happiness. Of contentment. Of a giddy realization that, yes, he is tapping that, and there's no shame in it. Instead, he turns to her, grin gone sly as he lifts his chin, humming softly. "What gives you that idea?"

"Keith," She leans back, laughing as she playfully punches his shoulder. "You're getting some. I'm so proud."

He finally allows a chuckle, surprised when it's genuine and without any nervousness. He turns back to the computer, idly flipping through all the grunt work they're expected to do in their down time. And, because he's curious, and because conversation with Ginny is always easy despite heavier topics, and because she's gone so far as to show him a dick drawing contest she had on her arm once, he asks, "Have you ever been with someone besides your soulmate?"

"Nah," She says, already back to her phone. Already back to swiveling. Occasionally looking up to glance around the gym and make sure no one's breaking rules at first glance. "But before we met, we used to masturbate together."

Keith chokes. On his own saliva, so that's a feat. He coughs, turning to look at her with wide eyes and a cough-strained voice as he says, "What?"

She grins. Cheshire and amused. "Have you never done that?"

"No."

She shrugs, leaning back in her chair as she stretches. "It's pretty simple. Just, you know, do the do while you have your soul connection open."

He wants to drop the subject. Knows he probably should. But curiosity is a powerful thing, and now that the surprise has faded, he finds curiosity is winning out. Because... it's not something he ever would have considered before. Not when he refused to even speak to his soulmate in the vain attempt to not give him hope. But now... now that he's actually starting to open up to Lance as a soulmate. Now that he's actually letting that line of communication grow. Slowly, yes, but steadily...

Well, it's... an interesting idea.

One that has heat running through his veins and pooling in his gut. Goosebumps rising across his skin as he thinks about that. As he thinks about letting a paintbrush run across his skin as he takes himself in hand— thinks about Lance—feels Lance through the intimate bond of soulmates—

"Does it feel good?"

Ginny laughs. "It's like nothing you've ever felt before."
Keith hums, turning back to the computer. That's... interesting. Very interesting. He'll think about it.

Fuck, he's going to think about it a lot.

Keith finds Lance deep in the recesses of the library, at one of the tables that line up with the bookshelves. To be honest, he's a little surprised Lance managed to find a table at all. The library is crowded daily now, with students driven inside in droves from the cold weather and the increase in work load that comes naturally at the end of the semester.


Even Keith is feeling the strain. While he doesn't have as many papers due, and he's past the days of lab reports, he has projects stacking up. So many projects. Honestly, he should be in the studio still, covered in paint and charcoal and trying to come up with a goddamn concept for his art exhibit coming up.

But where a lot of the students here find the library to be a prison, for Keith, it's his escape.

The fresh air on the walk from the art building to the library, cold on his skin and crisp in his lungs, has already helped settle his rising frustration and stress. The smell of coffee is heavenly, and the bitter bite on his tongue is exactly the pick up he needed.

He may be here to work on an art history paper, but that's a welcome change of pace from the four hours he just spent in the studio.

And he'd be lying if spending time with Lance wasn't also a motivator.

"Hey," He says, setting the large coffeecup down in front of Lance's face. He's currently sitting with his arms sprawled out over the table, hunched forward, and cheek pressed into a text book that's resting atop his keyboard.

His eyes open slowly, lidded and lazy until he sees the coffee. Then they snap wider, and he sits up with a groan. "Oh my god, Keith, you're a godsend." He takes the cup, cradling it between his hands as he sits back, pulling his knees up to his chest and planting his feet on the edge of the seat. He takes a sip, head lolling back and eyes closing as he sighs. "This is perfect."

"It's a heart attack waiting to happen." His free hand reaches out to playfully ruffle Lance's hair as he walks past. It's an easy gesture. One he doesn't think about until it's already happening. Until his fingers are harding through soft locks and Lance leans into it, humming low in his throat.

It's with a surprisingly amount of reluctance that he pulls away, setting down his own coffeecup before pulling his backpack off, dropping it to the table as he sinks into the chair next to Lance.

"How many pages have you gotten done?" He asks as he pulls out his own materials.

Lance's eyes remain closed as he sips again. "What did I say last time you asked?"

"Five pages."

"I think I'm at six."
"That was two hours ago."

"Really? Because it feels like I've been dying for seven."

"Here." Keith pulls out a muffin that he'd shoved clumsily into his pocket. It's a little smushed on one side, but still fine within the packaging.

Lance's eyes open, blinking lazily at it as Keith slides it toward him. He looks up, and for the first time, Keith can get a good look at the bags under his eyes. They're dark and sunken, and his skin lacks its usual glow. He looks haggard. Tired. Exhausted.

Honestly, he looks about how Keith feels.

"You got me a muffin?" It's a question. Unsure in delivery but hopeful and fond on the back end.

Keith smirks, turning back to his laptop as he opens it. "It's a please-don't-die muffin. I need you and your mess here or else I'll have to fight off haggard students from claiming the table. Pidge said those ones are your favorite."

"They are. Though, to be fair, if I die, you can just leave my body slumped over the table. I'll look no different." He hums, taking the muffin. The crinkle of plastic is loud as he wrestles it open.

Keith sighs as he stares at his browser, full of tabs upon tabs of research and references. "You look like shit."

Keith scoffs, a sharp exhale through his nose as he deadpans, "Thanks. You do, too."

He nearly jumps when he feels fingers drag across his shoulder. Nearly, but not quite. He's growing more and more accustomed to Lance's casual touches. Has subconsciously learned when to anticipate them. That doesn't, however, stop the heat from flaring to life in his chest every time.

His hand rests on Keith's shoulder, fingers idly tangling in the hair that's curling out from beneath his slouching beanie. He glances over to find Lance leaning forward, cheek pressed to his palm and elbow resting on the table. He stares, eyes lidded and distant, at where his fingers card through Keith's hair, never once hesitating as they reach his neck, digging into the sore and tense muscles there.

He smiles, small and gentle, and Keith wonders if he even realizes he's doing it.

"I had a late night," He mumbles. "Your hair's getting longer."

"Didn't mean to keep you up so late."

"Wasn't just you." He pulls away then, and Keith mourns the rhythmic and soothing press of his fingers instantly. Lance sighs, turning back to the work scattered around the table, eyes and hands flitting around as he tries to refocus.

He's wrong, though. It was just Keith.

The evidence is on their phones and scrawled out across their arms.

Keith keeps his hidden, carefully peeling off his leather jacket but leaving the long sleeves of his sweater pulled down to cover the heels of his hands. Lance doesn't bother trying. The sleeves of his hoodie are pushed up to his elbows. His forearms are decorated with a smattering of doodles and scribbled conversation. Two pen colors. One fading naturally and one tattooed across his skin.
They had both stayed up far later than they should have. Texting as Keith and Lance. Writing on their bodies as soulmates. It had been a strange kind of exhilaration to do both at once. To juggle the two conversations. To bounce back and forth between digital and a pen. Feeling their soul connection open up between. To feel Lance's tired contentment. To feel his amusement and muted giddiness.

Exhilarating in ways Keith had never experienced. He's still not used to talking to Lance as a soulmate. He's spent so long shying from conversation that it still feels strange. Feels oddly exciting. Feels incredibly nerve wracking.

It feels like it did when he spent the night with Pidge, writing to Lance on his arms about Mothman. But now, this time, Keith knows it's Lance. Knows and cares for the boy on the other end of the connection.

It's... strange.

It's new.

It's terrifying.

It's exhilarating.

He never thought he'd reach a day where he was excited to talk to his soulmate, but here he is. He can't help but feel the churning nausea in his gut, the worry and doubt that are so deeply seeded in his heart, growing to shadows in his mind. But... it's Lance. And he's a brightness that chases those ghosts away.

He doesn't know if he's ready for Lance to know. Not sure if he's ready to connect Keith and soulmate together. Not sure if they're ready for that, or if what they have is still too new and fragile and might break under the pressure. That's a question that brings all the anxiety to the forefront. All the paralyzing fear. But... he thinks he might be getting there.

He thinks... with Lance... maybe he can do it.

"You're talking to them more," He says, thoughts manifesting themselves into words before he really has a chance to think it through. He blames his own giddiness. The knowledge that those words he sees on Lance's skin mark his own as well.

"Hmm?" Lance looks up, confusion plain as he blinks. Clearly torn between whatever he had been trying to get back to with his essay and the vague non sequencer Keith has thrown at him.

He reaches out, tapping Lance's forearm gently before opening his notebook, looking for the hastily scribbled outline for his paper. He uses it as an excuse to avoid eye contact. "Your soulmate. You've been talking to them more."

"Oh," It's soft. Realization wrapped up in something else that Keith can't quite put a finger on. "Right, yeah. I have."

And that's... not the excitement Keith had been expecting. He glances over, surprised to see the pinch between his brows and the slight frown on his lips. That's... not at all what he was expecting.

"I'm happy for you," He tries. Soft and genuine.

Lance glances up at him, surprise bleeding to confusion melting into— something. He looks away before Keith can get a firm grasp on it. Whatever it is, he doesn't like it. He doesn't like it. He
"Thanks." Lance smiles, but it doesn't reach his eyes.

Keith's chest tightens, limbs feeling strangely numb as his breaths come short and his heart hammers in his ears.

Life drawings are a pain in the ass. He's pretty sure the human form and anatomy are his weakest areas as an artist. Shiro insists he's wrong, that he's good at it, but that doesn't change the fact that Keith hates it. It's boring and tedious.

He sits hunched over his easel, eyes flickering habitually between his page and the model. The riffs of classic rock fill the room, soft and muted. At least he can appreciate his professor's music tastes. It's about the only saving grace he has.

His eyes are dried out and tired. Tired from staring so long and tired from the sleep deprivation that's becoming more common as they near the end of the semester. His back aches from sitting hunched for so long. The hard wood of the stool is making his ass numb, and he shifts restlessly in a vain attempt to find some sort of comfort in their fourth hour of this hell.

He's been known to lose himself in art. Hours fly by like minutes when he's painting. But life drawings? He feels every minute drag by like hours. Feels them like sandpaper on his skin.

The room is way too warm. Hot enough that his skin feels overheated and he's thrown his hair up into a haphazard bun just to get it off his neck. His long sleeved shirt is pushed up to his elbows, showing the fading lines of a one sided conversation.

His own side of the correspondence had easily come off in the shower. Lance's marks, however, are slower to fade. It's surprising, actually. Usually his words fade pretty quickly, lasting no more than twenty-four hours. Maybe a little more. Concentration and focus play a part into the duration of soulmarks, though scientists have never really been able to figure out just how much.

Lance's quick conversations have always been quick to fade. His pick up lines. His random questions. His doodles usually last longer, but that's about it. Now, however... Now that they're talking more, his words are staying on Keith's skin longer. Pushing it up to at least two days. It's as frustrating as it is a little endearing.

It has to be a good thing, right?

He hopes so, but Lance has been a little... off lately. It's a subtle shift. He can feel it when their connection is open. Just the barest hint of something sour beneath his radiating enthusiasm. Something that Keith can't place. He can't describe or name it, but it makes him feel... well, off. Uneasy.

He sometimes catches the same shadow of that uncertainty when Lance turns away from him, echoing in his silence.

He doesn't know what it means. One moment they'll be fine. Better than fine, really. Close as friends. Happy with their benefits. And getting better as soulmates. But then...
Maybe he's overthinking things. He knows he has a tendency to do that. Especially when it comes to Lance.

Lance is probably just... stressed. They all are. Exams are coming up, and they're all starting to feel the pressure. It's going to be a huge breath of relief when they're done and over with. Allura is already planning an end of the semester party.

Maybe... maybe that's when he'll tell Lance. Not at the party. Too many people around, and he doesn't want to risk it when he doesn't know how Lance will react, but... after exams. Before they head home for winter break.

At least then they'll have time apart if things go bad.

His pencil breaks. Tip of it snapping as he puts too much pressure to the paper. He freezes, staring at it in surprise, and he can see the people to either side of him turn to look. It hadn't been *that* loud, had it? He glances at his neighbors, and they give him sympathetic smiles before looking away.

Okay, so maybe it had.

He sighs, leaning back and taking a moment to stretch, popping his back and shaking out his arms. They're almost done, and this is their last life drawing session for the semester. Thank fuck. With this out of the way, he'll be able to go back to stressing out about other things.

Like what he's going to do for his mandatory art exhibit.

He's in the process of sharpening his pencil, slow and methodical, zoning out as he watches the shaved pieces form and curl, when he feels his soul connection open up.

It happens in a rush. Like a punch to the lungs. Pushing all the air from him in a short exhale. His heart pounds wildly. A tightness in his chest. Anxiety wound and rigid as it flutters through his limbs. It hits him quickly as soon as the connection opens, and it takes him a moment to realize that it's not coming from him. It's coming from Lance.

Quick. Rushed. Panicked. A nervousness that he catches on the backend as the connection closes just as quickly and abruptly as it had opened.

It's strange and unexpected, and the whole thing leaves him bewildered and winded.

Then his eyes trail down to his arm, where the echo of pressure still haunts his skin. There, on his left forearm, are fresh words. Darker than the rest. Scribbled frantically and quickly.

And as Keith reads the words, he realizes that what he had felt as panic was probably closer to embarrassment than anything. A shy shame and the need to do it before doubt takes hold. He's felt that kind of rushed embarrassment from Lance before. Seen it in person. And here it is again, written across his inner forearm.

*Hey so like do you remember yesterday when I wrote a quick grocery list on my arm?*

He vaguely does. Lance has been known to write reminders on himself, and they always come like a whispering spring breeze. There and gone before Keith really realizes their connection has opened up in the first place. They fade quickly, barely enough intent and focus to keep them on his
skin for long.

He reaches out to set his pencil and the sharpener aside, glancing out of the corner of his eyes. But no one is watching him. They're all wholly focused on their work, or at least zoned out while they do it.

He knows his hesitation comes from habit alone. From months of hiding any trace of his marks from his friends. But... none of his friends are in this class. Hell, he barely knows anyone here. They don't know anything about his soulmate troubles, and he doubts they would care anyway. It's what had given him the courage to sit with his sleeves pushed up, exposing fading soulmarks.

And now he's just going to be another person writing something to their soulmate.

It's... strangely nice. More so than he thought it'd be. To sit with his fading marks open and exposed. To have no one care or bat an eye at it. To reach into his bag and pull out a pen, putting it to his skin before writing out a quick and simple:

_Yeah?_

Something so simple shouldn't make his heart pound the way it does. Or give him the rush of adrenaline he feels surging through his veins, making his limbs tingle and his foot bounce restlessly.

He reaches for his pencil once again, but he doesn't have to wait long for a response. It comes instantly.

_Okay so that was a list of things my roommate asked me to get at the store yesterday, and I was stupid and only wrote it down on my arm because we were talking anyway, but I wrote it with a soulmark pen and it washed off in the shower and now I'm at the store and the bus is leaving soon but my roommate is in a class giving a presentation so he can't answer my texts and I was wondering if the list is still there? On you, I mean_

Now that the connection is open for longer, and now that he has words to fill in context, Keith can definitely feel the embarrassment and the shy shame. There's still a panic, but now that he knows, he can feel that it's not directed at _him_. It's not about their connection. It's about his own time constraint.

Before he can respond to the new paragraph that's scribbled on his arm from elbow to wrist, there's another tingling sensation on his other arm. The faint pressure of a phantom pen. The strange weightlessness of their connection being open.

He looks to his other arm, holding it up as a circle comes to life on his skin. An arrow points to it, along with the text, _Somewhere around here?_

Keith doesn't realize he's smiling until he feels the ache in his cheeks, pushing up into his tired eyes. But he doesn't feel as tired as he had before. Not as heavy. He feels... lighter. The bubbling sensation of fondness and amusement a hit that momentarily chases away his exhaustion.

He puts the pen to his arm, tracing Lance's own words. The list is faded and gray. Another ten hours or so and it would be gone completely. As it stands, he has to turn his inner arm to the light to catch the offset of color against his skin tone just to read it.

He traces Lance's list, keeping true to his own handwriting as he sends the grocery list back to him. The quickly drawn circle only cuts off a few of the faded words. He's barely done before he gets a
response.

Oh my GOD, you're a goddamn angel

Impressive guess work on the circle

I'm a man of many talents ;)

You're a man about to miss his bus if you don't hurry

FUCK. There's a pause, and then, almost shyly, Thanks, space cadet

Something else appears, something that looks suspiciously like a heart before it's scribbled and blotted out. Instead, several tiny stars appear around the nickname.

And for once, Keith doesn't pull down his sleeves. Doesn't hide the dark and clear evidence of his soul connection. There's a small level of pride he feels as he reaches for his canvas once again, continuing his drawing. It's a pride that flickers like a small but steady flame as he sees the marks out of the corner of his eye while he works.

It's a pride he's never felt before. A strange surge of endorphins that leave him lightheaded. Limbs buzzing. Smile gone completely rogue as it refuses to leave his lips.

He loses himself to the chorus of graphite on paper. The soothing riffs of an old guitar. The beat of a steady drum. The feeling of friction as his pencil drags across the page. The sight of Lance's handwriting in the corner of his eye, inked onto his skin.

It's warm in the studio. He doesn't mind.

"Shay kinda reminds me of the Gorons."

"Dude, what?" Lance looks up from his phone, glancing across the room to where Hunk is lounging on a beanbag in front of their tv. He's got a Nintendo 64 controller in his hands, and Zelda Ocarina of Time is on the screen.

It's his destress game. Lets him zone out and detox for a bit. He had come back from the library about two hours ago, immediately plopped down and turned on the console. He's been at it ever since. Lance can't blame him. He's got a huge project due at the end of the semester, and from what Lance has heard, his group members are insufferable.

"No, seriously, like... hear me out."

"You just compared your girlfriend— Nay, your soulmate, to a rock."

"Very cool rocks."

"Still a rock, dude."

"She is a rock. She's my rock."

"Oh my god," Lance groans, dropping his phone to his chest and rubbing his hands down his face.
He can't help the laughter that bubbles up. "That was so fucking cheesy, man."

He can hear the smugness in Hunk's voice. "You thought it was sweet."

"If you get to complain when I brag about my soulmate, I get to complain when you get all mushy about yours."

Hunk hums. "Fair point. Seriously, though. She reminds me of the Gorons."

Lance rests his hands on his chest, fingers tapping at his phone as he glances at the screen. The Gorons are pretty big and strong, and Shay's pretty big and strong, too. Tall and solid and curvy. Perfect for Hunk in so many ways. Still, there's not much else he sees. "Mmm, not sure I see it, buddy."

"No, like, listen. They're these big and intimidating rock people, right? But they've got hearts of gold. They just like to roll around, and have fun, and have competitions, and dance, and they're honestly just big softies in the bodies of rocks. Sturdy and strong and stuff, but soft on the inside. Shay's like that."

"Oh." Honestly, he wasn't expecting such a genuine response. "I guess I can see that."

"Plus, I love the Gorons, man. I love them. They're my favorite."

"I've always been a Zora man myself."

"I know, buddy. You have a thing for fish people."

"You have a thing for rock people."

"Touche."

The conversation lapses into an easy, companionable silence. Their room is filled with the sounds of the game and Hunk's occasional mumbled commentary, and Lance doesn't mind. It's familiar and comforting. He lounges on his bed, stretched out on his back and half propped up by his pillows. One hand behind his head, he other holds his phone on his chest as he idly scrolls and refreshes social media.

Hunk has his decompressing methods, and Lance has his.

It's the first real quiet night they've had in a while. Their schedules are getting more hectic, but at least some of his papers are turned in now, and the workload is dwindling. Gives them some time to breathe before final exam week.

He exits tumblr and opens up his messages instead.

Lance
> Hey nerd, you busy?

Sass Master Keith
> Unfortunately
> I take it you're bored?

Lance
> Incredibly
Sass Master Keith
> Isn't this your first night off from studying in a while? Shouldn't you be enjoying it?

Lance
> I'd be enjoying it more with you ;)

Sass Master Keith
> As much as I'd love to take you up on that offer, I shouldn't

Lance
> Shouldn't and can't are two very different things

Sass Master Keith
> Next time

Lance
> You're killin me here
> I need some good old fashioned stress relief
> Preferably in the form of greasy food, a movie marathon, cuddles, and possibly a blow job
> Not necessarily in that order

Sass Master Keith
> Are you asking to give or receive?

Lance
> You know I’m not picky

Sass Master Keith
> Next time

Lance
> Okaaaaaay :((

Sass Master Keith
> Adding more parenthesis to the frown just makes you look more pitiful

Lance
> I know
> It's a carefully devised tactic

Sass Master Keith
> What're you doing?

Lance
> I'll allow the change of subject, but I want you to know that I'm still thinking about "next time"

Sass Master Keith
> Noted

Lance
> I'm just lying on my bed fucking around on my phone. Hunk's playing Zelda
> I should probably shower but I lack the motivation to get up
> What about you?
Sass Master Keith
> I'm about to start on an art project

Lance
> You do so many of thoooose

Sass Master Keith
> The woes of being an artist
> I think this one will be fun though

Lance
> Well, good luck

Sass Master Keith
> Thanks

He sighs, letting his phone drop back to his chest. He stares at the bottom of Hunk's bunk, letting the disappointment wash over him. While he's seen Keith a lot lately, they haven't really been able to sneak in time alone. Not really. They've gotten quick moments. Stolen time where they get each other off in a heated rush.

He supposes this is fine. He's been covered in fading conversations with his soulmate lately, and while Keith insists that he doesn't care... Lance can't shake the guilt of Keith seeing them.

But, if he's being honest, he misses... Keith. Getting off is great and all, and boy does his body appreciate it, but... he kinda wants to take things slow. Be able to take his time with Keith. To really feel him. To actually take their clothes off and just... god, he's a fucking sap. He just wants to cuddle naked with the guy, alright? There's just something incredibly peaceful and intimate and wholesome about curling up with Keith in his bed, bare skin pressed tight.

His eyes drift closed as he lets himself imagine it.

The slight chill of Keith's apartment soothing on heated skin. Lying on their sides facing each other. Trailing his hands along Keith's side. Alternating between feeling him beneath his palm and skimming his fingertips along goosebump riddled flesh. Keith's skin is smooth. The way he reacts to Lance's touch is divine. Body squirming and unable to keep still.

His own hands on Lance. Firm in their conviction. Gentle in their revere. Fingers curling in desperation and clinging in need. Maybe he'd even get Keith to take off those stupid gloves and feel the heat of his bare hands on his skin.

He'd take his time. Letting himself feel out Keith's body. Take it all in before they scoot closer. Before Keith slots a thigh between Lance's and pulls his leg over his hip. Hands trailing up his thigh, over his hip, around to his back, down to the swell of his ass.

Lance's hands on Keith's chest. Fingers dancing across his collarbones. Arms wrapping slowly around his neck to play with his hair. Rolling his hips forward. Slowly. Steadily. Feeling the subtle and gentle friction. Loving every long, slow drag—

He doesn't notice it at first. He mistakes the heat for his own.

He's too wrapped up in his own gentle fantasy to immediately recognize that familiar breathless sensation. It feels like a draft. An extra and subtle breeze through a room. Noticeable that the air is no longer stale, but gentle enough that it's hard to pinpoint at first.
It feels like the flicker of a candle against his eyelids. The smallest of lights in an otherwise dark room. Gentle. Soft. A glow that does little more than offer you bare definition in the shadows.

It takes him a moment to realize that it's not entirely his feelings warming in his chest and occupying his heart. There's something else. It's no longer stale. There's a breeze from the open connection of his soul.

Once he realizes it, the rest become noticeable.

A brush along his thigh. Light and fleeting. Not firm, nor determined. Not a confident stroke. One that starts above his knee and curls upward, slow and lazy. Almost... coy? The phantom pressure against his skin is incredibly light and incredibly soft. Barely there. A wisp. A whisper. The muted glow of a candle. A warmth trailing in its wake. It leaves goosebumps on his skin even as the warmth remains and echos.

He finds himself absentmindedly reaching down, trailing his own finger along the path he feels the brush, nail dragging against his jeans.

It doesn't feel like it usually does. He's learned how to distinguish the emotions and mindset that accompany a painting and those that trail in the wake of words. This feels like neither of those. Nothing decisive or confident about it, which is strange. Everything his soulmate does is purposeful. But... that's the thing. While they don't feel like they usually do, they don't feel particularly aimless.

The brush strokes, curling and coiling and exaggeratedly slow are purposeful. He can feel that. He just... doesn't recognize the purpose.

His brows furrow, tongue running idly to suck on his teeth as he tries to decipher the feelings filtering through their connection. Subtle. Light. Drifting. Almost playful. Coy? A question, definitely. A shy question. A heated question—

His eyes snap open. *Holy shit.*

No, he's wrong. There's no way—there's no fucking way—

The brushstroke ends around his hip, curling and circling around his hipbone, and—* holy shit.*

Heat curls through him. Running down his back. Pooling low in his gut. Goosebumps rise as he shivers.

*Holy shit.*

No, he's not mistaken that. He knows *exactly* what that feeling is, and it's *not* his. There's definitely a question hidden in that brushstroke, but it's not one he ever thought his soulmate would pose.

The connection drifts shut, and Lance is left staring at the bottom of Hunk's bunk. Eyes wide. Heart hammering. Trying not to hyperventilate because—* holy shit.*

His eyes flicker to Hunk, but he hasn't seemed to notice anything. Good. That's good. Really good. Oh god, what's he supposed to do now? Is his soulmate going to just continue? Is he supposed to—like—give them a sign? Did he imagine it? Oh fuck, what if he's just projecting again—

The connection opens. Quick as the familiar tingling sensation starts up on his arm. It's gone and closed before Lance can really pick out any emotions beyond his own frazzled headspace.
He stares at the bold dark words written on his skin. Mouth feeling dry. Heart jammed firmly in his throat. Okay, okay, fuck, he didn't imagine it. He's not projecting. This is happening. This is happening.

He rolls out of his bed, and it's not at all graceful or coordinated. He hits the floor hard in a tangle of limbs, and he barely manages to catch his phone before it falls, tossing it back on the bed as he scrambles the couple of feet to his desk.

"Dude."

"Yeah?" He grabs a pen, hurriedly writing the exact same sentiment on his arm. *Yeah.*

He stares at it, breathless and body buzzing with anticipation, when he realizes that the game sounds have stopped. He turns then, finding Hunk staring at him. Wide eyed. Confused. Brows pinched. He looks to the pen in Lance's hand, understanding smoothing out his features. "Oh, they said something?"

"Yeah," Lance says, trailing off with a nervous laugh.

Thankfully, Hunk doesn't seem fazed by it. He just smiles and turns back to his game. "I'm happy for you, buddy."

"Yeah," Does his voice sound too high? He thinks he's starting to sound hysterical. "Me, too."

Hunk doesn't look away from his game, but he does raise an eyebrow, tilting his head to show Lance he has his attention. "You okay?"

"Me?" Oh god, why can't he stop laughing. "I'm *fine.* I'm—" His whole body convulses as his soul connection opens up very suddenly and very intimately. A brush stroke starts at his knee and moves up his inner thigh, leaving a teasing heat in its wake. It's direct. Faster than previously. And the feeling filtering through their connection is *anything* but subtle. It moves up his inner thigh, shifting at the last minute to slide up the crease of his leg, circling and toying at his other hipbone. "Ffffuck," He hisses out through clenched teeth.

"Lance—?"

"Shower!" He shouts, straightening for only a moment before he scrambles across the room. "I'm going to take a shower!"

"O... kay?"

Lance can't look at him. He *can't.* He grabs his towel and shower caddy as quickly as he can, hurrying out the door and stumbling down the hall as he feels light strokes move from hip to hip, trailing like fingertips below his belly button.

He bursts into the bathroom, breathing out a sigh of relief that it's empty, at least for the moment. He bypasses the sinks and heads straight for the sectioned off space for showers, stepping into the stall in the corner and pulling the curtains closed. His shower caddy clatters to the ground, and he tosses his towel haphazardly onto the waiting hook.

He grabs the back of his shirt, pulling it over his head and looking down. Purple streaks are inked onto his skin, drifting from side to side. Lazy lines drawn under his belly button. His heart pounds against his ribcage, ringing in his ears, urged to dizzying speeds by a thrill that's not wholly his.
He strips quickly, dropping his clothes to the bench in the dry area of the shower stall. Then he looks down, and his breath catches in his throat.

The trails of purple are exactly where he anticipated them being, but it feels surreal to see them all the same. New spots are forming as he watches. A widening spot just under his hipbone. Stroke back and forth. Back and forth. Almost... Almost like a thumb.

Then five lines of purple move down the front of his thigh, firm and confident, no longer light and teasing, and the way they all form at once— *holy shit*.

His soulmate is using their hand. That's not a brushstroke. It's their *fingers*. They're painting on themself as they work themself up. As heat starts to pour through their connection. What had started as the muted glow of a candle flame has grown. Slowly and steadily. Heat building. Anticipation tight in his chest and singing in his veins. It's his own, but there's an echo of it. An echo of tension that sends shivers down his spine. A tingling in his fingertips. The quiver of phantom muscles twitching.

Breathlessness.

A breathlessness that's not his own.

A build. A build as hands covered in purple paint drag across his thighs. The phantom touch alternates between light and teasing, and firm and deliberate. He can feel the intent in his chest. Amusement with the teasing, and a *hunger* with the firmer lines. A consuming, heated hunger that feeds his own.

The bathroom door opens, and he hears someone turn on one of the sinks. Fuck, right, he's in the shower. He needs to at least pretend.

It's with shaking hands that he turns on the water, angling the spray a little to the side and adjusting the temperature.

But the touches keep coming. They never stop. His soul connection is still open, and he can *feel* his soulmate's teasing amusement bleeding into something headier, something needier. He feels something in his chest, twining around his heart.

A question? No— *A plea*.

His eyes snap to his shower caddy and zero in on the soulmark marker that he had haphazardly thrown in there in his mad dash to leave the room.

He grabs it, leans back against the wall. Feels the cold tile against his heated skin. He bites off the cap, holding it between clenched teeth as he reaches down, presses the tip of the marker to the flesh of his thigh. Lets everything he's feeling rush through their connection.

He feels the fluttering hesitation from his soulmate. The moment of pause before the heat is returned tenfold. It surges into him, stealing his breath away, fire in his lungs.

He looks down to see a blatant hand print on his leg, dragging up his inner thigh— *holy shit, holy shit, holy shit*.

He doesn't know what he's drawing. He doesn't care. He moves the marker aimlessly across his leg, up to his hip. He's half in the spray of water, and it washes most of the ink away. But it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. It transfers anyway at the touch. It doesn't matter that his soulmate will have black squiggles all over their skin as long as he keeps the connection open— as long as they
can feel what they're making Lance feel—

He gasps, a whine catching in his throat as he feels a very distinct spike in pleasure, hot and coiled in his gut. He feels the flush of relief through their connection, and he knows they're touching themself. They're touching themself while painting purple across Lance's thighs, his hips, a purple hand sliding up his abdomen to smear it across his chest.

He squeezes his eyes shut, jaw clenched to hold back the sounds that desperately want to escape. His head falls back against the tile, chest heaving with every panted breath, hissing past his lips.

He takes himself in his freehand, several long strokes pouring his own shivering pleasure and relief through their connection. He feels the returning eagerness. The spike of pleasure. Of need. Of hunger. Of desperation. Of more, more, more—

His hand shakes as he drags the marker in aimless lines. As his soulmate smears purple across his skin with a desperate touch. He feels the increase in his soulmate's urgency, and he picks up the pace. Faster, faster, faster—

Behind his eyelids, he sees Keith. Pictures him sprawled out in his own shower. Pictures his hand smeared with paint, desperately gripping his spread thighs as his other hand works at his swollen cock. Imagines his head tossed back, to the side, exposing his pale neck. Imagines his face pinched in pleasure, lips parted, just like all the times Lance has seen it.

Imagines how sweetly he'd whine Lance's name. How it would sound falling from his lips as Lance pours praise and pleasure through their soul connection— as he feels Keith's— as they drive each other over the edge—

He feels a sound rumble in his throat, but he's too far gone to hear it. He doesn't care. He doesn't care as white hot pleasure floods through his soul connection, burning out from his chest. It tips him over the edge, muscle spasming as warmth spurts over his hand.

He keeps the pen pressed to his skin. Letting his soulmate feel it. Feeling their own calm. It settles over him. His own afterglow and the echo of his soulmate's. A strange tingling. Distant and drifting. A contentment. A fondness.

The connection closes. Not abruptly, but easing closed all the same. Lance lifts the pen from his leg, sliding down the shower wall to the floor. Trying to catch his breath. Eyes closed against the warm spray of water that rushes down his body. His body that's smeared with hand prints and the evidence of his soulmate's pleasure.

And it's then, beneath the spray of water, when he's finally alone with his thoughts. Alone with his own emotions. That the guilt rushes in.

That he realizes exactly what he's done.

He— with his soulmate—

But he was thinking about Keith.

He squeezes his eyes shut, trying to steady himself against the rolling wave of nausea and guilt and dread.

He breathes through it. In and out. In and out. Tries to let the tingling pleasure of his afterglow keep the sharp edges at bay.
"Seriously?"

"Yeah, man! When it snows next semester, we're gonna have to show you. There's seriously no better sled than a cafeteria tray."

Keith feels his lips pull into a small smirk. They're laying on his bed, heads and shoulders propped up by pillows as they sprawl out on their backs. Side by side. One hand behind his head and the other arm stretched out to the side beneath Lance's neck, his head cushioned on his shoulder. He stares up at the ceiling as he talks, hands waving around to emphasize his words.

Keith tilts his head, eyes on Lance's profile. On the slope of his nose. On the sharp jut of his chin. On the angle of his jaw and the shadow of it on his long, lean neck. When he lifts up his hands, the collar of his shirt lifts, and Keith can see the fading purple smears on his chest.


When his left hand catches the light just right, Keith can see the fading purple hues that hand managed to transfer in his absent minded painting.

He watches Lance's lips move as he talks. Watches the curve of them. The stretch of his smile. The glint of his teeth. The lift of his cheeks.

"A cafeteria tray doesn't sound like a very good sled."

"I know, but it is. It's witchcraft, I swear. A perfect little single seater. Everyone does it, though the school hates it. We've developed a system." He tilts his head, eyes glinting mischievously while his lips curl into a wicked smirk. "Hunk shoves them under his jacket."

Keith can feel himself grinning. "You're kidding."

"Nope," He says, arms falling across his middle as he wiggles a little bit in his pride, chin lifting. "It's a perfect system."

"I can't wait to see that."

"Next semester, I'm telling you. First snowfall, we're stealing trays."

"Shiro's gonna think you're all bad influences on me."

Lance scoffs, rolling his eyes. "His soulmate is the one who told us about it. Besides, I'm sure he's done it, too. It's like a rite of passage at this point."

Keith hums, gaze drifting from Lance. To the ceiling. To his mom's painting on the wall. His eyes linger over the brush strokes, bold yet careful as they weave together a landscape dipped in a sunset.

It's quiet for perhaps a moment too long before Lance moves. He rolls over until he's lying half on top of Keith. Arms crossed over Keith's chest and resting his chin on his wrists. Long, lean torso pressed up against Keith's. One leg thrown over his. As he moves, Keith's arm moves with him.
Automatically draping over the small of his back.

Keith looks back to him, meeting his gaze as Lance stares at him. His eyes narrow, lips pursing like they do when he's thinking. This close, Keith can see the light smattering of freckles over his cheekbones.

It's a stare down. One that Keith knows he'll win easily. He's fine remaining silent, using the excuse to look at Lance. And he knows Lance isn't one to keep a silence when there's something obviously on his mind.

After a few moments pass, Keith cocks an eyebrow, and that's all it takes for Lance to crack.

"Alright, spill."

"What are you—"

"You've been moping all day."

Keith frowns. "I haven't—"

"Yup, you have." Lance reaches out, pressing a finger to Keith's lips, smooshing them around until they're both fighting off smiles. "I've been around you long enough to know what's normal Keith quiet and what's sad Keith quiet. So spill."

Keith sighs, letting his head push back into the pillows, lifting his chin and moving his gaze back to the painting. "I'm not sad."

"Then what is it?" It's soft and gentle. Not demanding he answer, but... leaving the door open for him. Letting him walk through on his own.

"Just stressed."

He glances down in time to see Lance's lips quirk at the edges, head tilting to the side. The finger that had been pressed to his lips trails down until his hand rests on his chest. "Aren't we all?"

A finger traces along his collarbone. Keith's lips pull into a wry smile. "It's just... my art exhibit coming up."

Lance lifts a brow. "Art exhibit?"

"The art majors are supposed to put on an art exhibit once a year. There's a room for it in the student union. Across from the coffeeshop."

"Oooh, that's what that room is for."

"Yeah, and my time slot is coming up, but... I haven't even started."

"Do you know what you wanna do?"

Keith exhales through his nose. Not quite a huff. Not quite a sigh. Yet somehow both. "No."

Lance lets out a low whistle. "Dang, dude."

"I know."

"Aren't those supposed to be like... pretty big deals? Like with a lot of stuff?"
Keith closes his eyes. "Yes."

"And you haven't even started?" Keith doesn't bother answering, and Lance sighs. "That sucks."

"Yeah."

"Do you at least have any ideas? Even vague tiny ones?"

It's with begrudging frustration that he admits, "No." He opens his eyes, tilting his head to look at the painting on his wall. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do? I've gone to a couple of my classmate's exhibits, and they've had themes and variety and it's this whole presentation, and I feel like I have to do something big and deep like that, but I have no fucking clue."

Lance hums, finger still tracing his collarbone, back and forth in a soothing continuous motion. "Well... what's important to you?"

"What?"

"Well, if something is important to you, then it'll come across, right? Like, if something is a big deal to you, and you're passionate about it, then you can get it done quickly." Keith gazes down at him, and Lance smiles, sheepish but no less bright. His eyes are lidded and there's a fondness in his gaze that tugs at Keith's heart. "When you're passionate about something, it shows. Other people will like it because you like it."

Keith smiles, hand slipping beneath Lance's shirt to idly run his fingers along his spine. "That's... actually kind of helpful."

With the way he's laying on top of him, Keith doesn't miss the proud little squirm. "I have my moments. So does this mean I finally get to see your art?"

"Maybe."

He lets his eyes wander back to his mom's painting. Back to the splash of a sunset over a Texas landscape. Painting had been important to his mom. Painting and expression through colors. A reflection of her heart and soul, exposed for the world to see.

Painting had been important to her. And through her, it's important to him.

"Pidge!" He says it perhaps a little too loudly, slamming his hands down on Pidge's desk.

They jump, blinking rapidly, face twitching a little. With their notebook in hand, hovering halfway to the backpack in their lap, they turn to stare at him. It's a blank stare. Narrowed eyes. Heavy bags hanging under them. "Lance," They say, voice flat and gravelly. "I say this with the upmost love and affection. But what the fuck?"

"Sorry, sorry," He says, pulling his hands off the table, holding them up in the air and stepping back so they can stand. They swing their backpack over their shoulder and head for the door. Lance trails after them. Heart pounding. Feet feeling strangely tingly and uncoordinated. He's pretty sure his knees are shaking.
Once they're out of the classroom, Pidge reaches up to rub their eyes, pushing their glasses to the top of their head. "Okay, I can tell whatever this is has got you all amped up. I just have one question. Can it wait until we get coffee?"

Lance hums, the sound going far more high pitched than intended the longer he drags it out. "I'm gonna saaaaaay... no?"

Pidge tilts their head to glance at him, brows furrowing. They settle their glasses back on their nose and look him over, taking in his restless fidgeting and the way he bites his lip. They step apart to move around a group of students, and when they come back together, Pidge says, "No?"

He rubs his hands together, anxiously cracking his fingers. He can feel the words practically burning on his palm. "Not gonna lie. I'm kinda freaking out here."

"Wow, okay. Give me a second." Pidge takes a moment to breathe deeply, eyes fluttering closed. Then they let it out slowly, opening their eyes wide. Lance jumps when both hands suddenly come up to slap both of their cheeks. Repeatedly. Rough enough to leave their skin pink.

"Pidge, what the—"

"Shush," They say as they smush their cheeks around, blinking rapidly. It's a weird sight, and Lance can't help but stare. When they step out of the building, Pidge lets their hands drop, shaking out their arms and shoulders, rolling their neck until it cracks. "Okay. I think I'm awake now."

Lance cocks an eyebrow, a small smirk tugging at his lips. "Seriously? That's what that was about?"

Pidge glares at him, lifting a threatening finger as they step out into the mass of early morning student foot traffic. "Listen, you know I'm barely a person this early, and neither are you. You and I both barely function in this class. I don't know what's gotten you all wound up, so it must be something big to wake you up like this."

He runs a hand down his face, rubbing his own eyes. They're dry and they burn and he's tired as hell, but he's so fucking wound up right now he doesn't think he could sleep if he tried. "It's not really a big deal—"

"Whatever it is, it's big to you. So spill."

Lance sighs, but it's relief that floods through his system, leaving behind the buzzing wake of an excited giddiness. He lets his hand fall from his face, but he holds it out in front of Pidge. Pidge grabs his wrist, holding his hand steady as they gaze down at his palm.

On a scale from 1 to 10, you're a 9... And I'm the 1 you need

"This just looks like one of your shitty pick-up lines."

"That's because it is." Pidge gives him a flat look and lets his wrist go. "So I wrote that this morning right? Like I always do. And while we were in class, I got this."

He shoves his other hand in Pidge's face, close enough that they blink and pull back. But then their eyes widen, and they snatch his wrist, holding it at a more manageable distance from their face. "Holy shit," They whisper, adjusting their glasses.

"I know."
They twist his hand to see it from different angles, flattening out his palm. The words remain. Words that are in a handwriting that's not his own. Words that are clearly risen from within his skin and not faded ink on top. "Holy shit, dude."

"I know."

"They responded to you." Pidge sounds as awed and off balance as he feels. "They responded to your terrible pick-up line with a terrible pick-up line."

"I know!"

"Holy shit." They drop his hand, but they're grinning. He feels himself mirroring it. Like he's allowed to now. Like he had been waiting for confirmation from someone else that he's allowed to feel happy about this. That it's real. That it's happening. Pidge's grin glitters in their eyes, and they playfully punch Lance's arm. "They really are your soulmate. Congrats, dude. This is a big step for you guys."

Lance laughs, and it feels like he's teetering on the edge of hysteria.

Lance's grin makes his cheeks ache. It's wide and wild and the feeling in his chest is a fluttering mess. He feels full. It strangely stings. Excitement and something nauseous rolling into a chaotic storm that's hard to pick apart.

**Are you from Tennessee? Because you're the only 10 I see**

His palm burns. His heart hurts. He's happy. He's ecstatic. He's over the fucking moon. He's falling, falling, falling— He knows it'll hurt when he lands.

Butterflies and hornets.

---

His skin is breaking out, and he knows it's because of stress.

End of the semester stress is something that doesn't get easier, but it is something he's used to. He usually breaks out around this time of the year. Less sleep. Dehydrated. Stress from juggling projects and papers and exams. But it's never been this bad.

His hands rest on the counter as he leans forward, staring at his reflection. It might just be the cheap florescent lighting, but he thinks he looks paler than usual. The bags under his eyes are bad, but pretty normal at this point. His hair is a mess, and he's finding less and less energy to try and fix it.

His arms hold the fading marks of his soulmate. Words disappearing into his skin with time. Words from the person connected to his soul.

His neck and collarbone are marred by the fading marks of Keith's lips. Of his teeth. He has matching marks on his hips and thighs, fading into sickly yellow as they heal.

Butterflies and hornets.

His chest feels tight all the time, and his mind is a constant buzz without any real concrete thought.
Too many thoughts. Too many things. All bumping around and vying for his attention and drifting into the ether before he can firmly grasp any of them.

Worries. Doubts. Excitement. Thoughts. Things to do and things he wants to do. They all slip through his fingers like sand, and he can't keep hold of them.

He's restless constantly. More so than usual. And he can't find an outlet for it. He throws himself into his schoolwork, but he can only focus for short bursts. He throws himself into quidditch, and that helps for a while, but practices are coming to an end with the semester. He goes to the gym just to blow off steam, but Keith is often there, and that starts up the buzzing all over again.

Butterflies and hornets.

He's even gone so far as to frantically clean their entire dorm room, and that was the moment Hunk knew something was wrong. Lance only goes into frantic and hectic cleaning escapades with a single-minded intensity when he's really fucked up. When his head is so cluttered and messy that the only way he can hold onto sanity is to clean something else. To show that he has some semblance of control in at least one aspect of his life.

He tells Hunk it's just school.

Hunk doesn't look like he fully believes him, but he doesn't push. For that, Lance is grateful.

It's not a lie either, it's just not a whole truth.

School is stressful. He's starting to delve into more of his major's classes. Higher level ones with more coursework. But if it was just school, he wouldn't be this hung up about it.

It's his soulmate.

It's Keith.

It's how he feels like he's falling in two different directions at once, and it's threatening to tear him apart at the seams.

He knows it shouldn't be a problem right now. He knows. He hasn't even met his soulmate. He doesn't know how long this thing with Keith will last. Keith is fine with him talking to his soulmate and has never given him a reason to think otherwise. Hell, they even started this thing with Keith saying he doesn't expect Lance to change his view on soulmates. But...

But maybe he has?

Maybe he hasn't.

He doesn't know.

The future is looking scarier and darker and more and more unclear. Unfocused. Hazy. It looks like the unknown, and it's terrifying. Lance has always thought he knew what his future would hold, and now he's not so sure. He know what he wants, and it's terrifying.

He tries to throw a blanket over it. Close the curtains. Ignore the future to live in the present.

He shouldn't have to worry about the future. He shouldn't have to worry about choosing because no one is making him choose. No one is telling him he has to. No one is pressuring him to. He doesn't even know who his soulmate is yet, so it shouldn't be a problem.
But he still feels trapped.

He still feels worried.

He feels happier than he's ever been, and it's a rush of endorphins and ecstasy. But it happens because of two different people, and every burst of warmth feels like it's simultaneously singing the edges of his heart.

Butterflies and horns.

Keith.

His soulmate.

He's falling— falling— falling— and he doesn't know where he'll end up.

He tries to throw a blanket over it.

Tries to close the curtains.

Tries to push the problem away.

But as he looks at himself in the mirror, he wonders how long it'll be before he breaks. He wonders if it'll get better when exams are over. He wonders if it'll get better once he just gets used to juggling and separating his affection for Keith and his soulmate.

He wonders if it'll get easier once Keith meets his soulmate. Once Keith opens himself up to his own connection. Once Keith embraces the person the universe gave to him.

And that—

Oh god, that makes it worse.

Butterflies and horns. Hornets and butterflies. Wrecking havoc in his chest and choking him with fluttering wings and stings that tear at his heart.

"Lance," Keith says, breath hot on Lance's lips and amusement lacing his tone. He tries to pull away further, but Lance's arms tighten around his neck, pulling him back down until their bare chests are pressed flush once more. "I need to go."

"Mmm, five more minutes," He mumbles, fingers threading into Keith's hair as he tilts his head, lifting his chin to capture his lips.

Keith groans, and it sounds like frustration and surrender. Lance feels his weight settle back on top of him, and he grins, soft chuckle bubbling out of him as Keith playfully bites at his lip. Keith's body rolls, and Lance's back arches into the touch, humming happily as Keith's tongue sweeps into his mouth.

All too soon, Keith is pulling away again, moving up onto his hands and knees even while he keeps his lips locked with Lance's. Lance clings to him for as long as he can, legs wrapped around his hips and arms wrapped around his neck, leaning up to keep the taste of his lips on his tongue.
"Lance," He tries to say it like a warning, but it comes out like a laugh.

"Keeith."

"I'm going to be late for work, and you have to meet Hunk for dinner."

"Hunk won't care if I'm late."

"No, but my boss will."

It's with a huff that Lance finally lets go, body going limp on the bed and limbs sprawling. Keith chuckles, a rumble of breathy exhales as he leans down, pressing a quick and light kiss to the tip of Lance's nose. He whines, heat rushing to his face as Keith climbs off the bed.

He sighs, rolling onto this side to watch as Keith rummages around the pile of their discarded clothes. It's a nice view. He has a strong back and a nice curve to his perky little ass. His pale skin still shows angry red marks where Lance had dragged his nails. He likes the look of them. Likes the fall of Keith's messy hair on his bare shoulders. Likes the way his shoulder blades shift.

He grabs his jeans and stands, digging around in his pocket for his phone. He pulls it out, clicks it on, and immediately lets out a loud, "Fuck!"

The frantic speed at which Keith gets dressed is as hilarious as it is impressive. Lance just watches, lounging on his bed with a smile on his lips. He feels a little bad, but not enough to not enjoy the show.

When he's done, he shoves his phone into his pocket, grabs his leather jacket and scarf from the back of Lance's chair, and leans over the bed. It's only then that he slows back down. Pauses as he hovers over Lance. Smile almost shy as he mutters, "See you later."

Lance grins, running his fingers through his hair to pull him down into one more heated kiss. It's shorter than Lance would've liked, but then Keith is pulling away and out the door without another word.

Lance sighs, rolling onto his back. The contentment and afterglow buzz in his veins, but he can feel the familiar creep of anxiety waiting in the wings. Waiting for the warmth to fade so it can slink back in. Being alone makes it worse. Being along with his own thoughts is a surefire way to get into a spiral.

But no. Not today. Not tonight. Not after he just had an amazing time with Keith.

With a huff, he rolls off the bed, climbing to his feet. He pauses when he catches sight of himself in the mirror, and his expression softens as his finger run over the fresh marks on his collarbones and chest. Hands skimming down his side to touch at the bite marks on his hips and thighs. Something warm fills his chest, making it easier to breathe and chasing away the colder touch of his worry, if only for a moment.

He and Keith may not be soulmates, but they can still mark each other.

The rest of his body is bare. He's been caught up with things, school and quidditch and Keith, and hasn't really had much time to talk to his soulmate. And likewise, his soulmate hasn't reached out to him. He didn't push it. Let them have a couple days of space. And he tries not to dwell on the fact that he knows he gave them that space so their marks would fade from his skin.
So he could spend time with Keith, touching Keith, without proof of Lance's soulmate hanging over him. So he could pretend, for just a moment, that it doesn't matter that Keith isn't his soulmate. Pretend that maybe Keith—

He shakes his head, moving on autopilot to grab his robe and his towel, nabbing his shower caddy as he slipped out the door. There's a slight hobble to his steps as he makes his way to the bathroom, but he doesn't mind the sting.

Thankfully, the afterglow carries him through his shower. Keeping his mind in a blissful state of static and numbness. He moves through his routine with practiced motions, and he leaves the bathroom feeling refreshed, rejuvenated, and ready to tackle the study session he and Hunk have planned for the night.

He's halfway dressed, running the towel through his hair, when his phone buzzes loudly on his desk. He expects it to be Hunk, but a quick glance at the time tells him that he's technically not late yet. The text is from Keith.

**Sass Master Keith**
> I forgot my bag in your room

**Lance**
> Yup, I can see it right there, all abandoned and lonesome next to mine
> So irresponsible

**Sass Master Keith**
> I was distracted

**Lance**
> Was it a good distraction?

**Sass Master Keith**
> I think you have the hickies to prove it

**Lance**
> And you look like you got mauled by a tiger

**Sass Master Keith**
> A very good distraction

**Lance**
> So want me to drop your bag off on my way to dinner?

**Sass Master Keith**
> Please?

**Lance**
> Np
> I'll be over there soon

He shoots a quick text to Hunk saying he'll be a little late, and hurries to finish getting dressed. His hair is still a little damp, which he knows is going to be cold as shit once he steps outside, but he'll just throw a hat on.

backpack full of textbooks and misery? Check. Keith's backpack slightly less heavy because his art classes don't require as many books that weigh as much as a small horse? Check—

But when he picks up Keith's bag, he does so haphazardly, not realizing that it was left unzipped. Several books tumble out, along with a few loose papers, scattering across his floor. He groans, dropping to his knees to shove it all back in the bag so he can go. The gym Keith works at is in the opposite direction from the cafeteria, and while he knows Hunk doesn't mind, he hates making him wait, and—

He pauses, all thought processes screeching to a grinding halt as he stares at the book in his hand. It's familiar. A plain and ordinary journal of decent size with a simple black cover.

Keith's sketchbook.

Not the one he uses for school assignments, but his personal one. His private one. The one that he was drawing in the first day Lance met him. The one he almost spilled a smoothie all over. The one he's seen Keith drawing in several times since then, but every time Lance asks to look, Keith snaps at him. To the point where Lance has stopped asking, stopping trying, but never stopped wondering.

Keith has always been so... elusive about his art. He'll share his school projects and assignments, but he never shows anything else. He never shows what he draws for himself. It's the only part of Keith Lance doesn't know. The only thing Keith keeps from him.

He thinks it has something to do with his mom. He's said before that his mom was his artistic inspiration, so his personal art has to be connected to her. In a way that's so personal that he feels... embarrassed? Shy? Hesitant to share, definitely.

But Keith has no reason to be nervous. Lance has seen some of his work. The stuff he does for assignments, sure, but Keith is good. Insanely so.

The thought of seeing the art he does because he wants to, fueled by his own passion and not just because a professor told him to... it's tempting. Really tempting. Really, really, really fucking tempting.

He shouldn't.

Keith has made it clear that this sketchbook is private.

He shouldn't.

He shakes his head, reaching down to put the sketchbook in the backpack. Slides it between two other books, but— he can't get his fingers to let go.

He pulls it back out, thumb brushing against the innocent, plain cover.

He shouldn't.

He shouldn't.

He shouldn't.

One peek wouldn't hurt, though, right? He just... wants to see this part of Keith's life. Just get a glimpse. He's so fucking proud of everything he does, and he wants— he just wants to see. Wants to see what happens when Keith pours his heart and soul into something. Wants to see what kind of
amazing things he can create.

Because he— He really likes Keith. Cares about him. Is proud of him. And wants to know every piece of him. Including this.

He shouldn't.

He should wait until Keith shows him on his own.

But... curiosity is a dangerous thing. It's a creature that lives inside you. It rears its head and digs its claws into a thought, an idea, and won't let go. Won't go away. Whispers all the things. Whispers all your wants and desires. Pushes you toward something, be it good or bad.

Curiosity is a monster you can't shake, or at least Lance has never been able to, but the thing is... he can never tell if it's good or bad. Sometimes curiosity is what he needs to push him in the right direction, to overcome doubts and find his courage. Sometimes it tells him to do things he shouldn't and gets him into unfortunate situations.

There's no way to tell until it's over and done with, and Lance— he can't shake the monster. Can't shake his curiosity.

One peek. That's it. Just a couple of pages. He'll just open to a random page, sate his curiosity for now, and then put it away. Keith and Hunk are waiting for him, after all.

His hands shake as he sits back on his heels, excitement running through his veins. He feels like he's doing something wrong, but there's no guilt in it. Like taking a cookie from the jar after your parents say no. Where the reward outweighs the crime.

One peek, one peek, one peek.

His thumb skims along the pages, stopping at a random place about halfway through. He opens it quickly. With a rushed flourish. Like ripping off a bandaid. Nice and fast so he can't back out.

He stares at the page.

And stares.

And stares.

He blinks.

He stares.

It's not that it isn't what he was expecting, because he honestly had no expectations. And it's not that it isn't beautiful, because it is. The two pages each show a different drawing, both done in colored pencil. They're intricate in design, but there's a flawless fluidity to it. One that feels natural. And the use of color is impeccable.

To be honest, it's exactly what Lance had been hoping for. A peek into Keith's creative passions. A glimpse into the art he makes for himself. And he can see it. Can feel it. The way he blends and swirls color together to make a bigger, more intricate design just feels... so wholly Keith. He hadn't known what to expect of Keith's art style, but now that he sees it... he's not surprised. Not at all. It makes sense. It's beautiful. It's just—

It's just something is nagging at him.
The monster of his curiosity has calmed down, quelled in the wake of actually opening the sketchbook. But now there's something new.

Something he just— can't shake.

It's a subtle tug. Something that's hooked into a distant thought or memory. Something in the back of his mind that's caught. Trapped in the breeze. Drawing attention to itself, but too distant to make out yet.

He doesn't know what it is, but it's caught his attention.

A deja vu feeling.

He wades toward it slowly, easing into the murky dark waters of his memory. It's slow going, and he's careful not to rush it. Lest he scare the memory away. Lest he reach for it too fast and it crumbles away. He tries to ease it out of the shadows. Ease it into the light. Tries to put his finger on that thought, that memory, that idea that's fluttering just out of his reach.

Because Keith's art reminds him of something. What he sees on these two pages? It's... it's snagging a memory. It reminds him of something he's seen before, but he can't figure out where.

In a movie. In a game. In a book. In a museum. On a wall—

He's so deep into the recesses of his mind, trying to grasp that fluttering thought, that he hasn't realized his gaze has drifted. That his eyes have wandered of their own accord. Fixing on the wall by his bed.

On the pictures of his soulmark paintings—

No—

His eyes snap back to the sketchbook. His heart is in his throat, choking him, making it hard to swallow. His chest feels tight, too tight, and his breaths come quick and shallow. There's a ringing in his ears. His hands feel numb. The sketchbook in his hand seems to zoom away from him as his vision tunnels and narrows.

He knows where he's seen these drawings before.

They were painted in brilliant tattoos on his skin the summer before the semester started.

Yes—

He doesn't feel his hands move, but suddenly the pages are flipping.

Flames that he's seen in brilliant relief as they consume his arm—

No—

Beautiful cappuccino lily's and twisting green vines that he's seen spiraling up his feet and ankles—

Yes—

A galaxy and stars that have been smattered against his neck—

No—
A sunset in beautiful colors, warming the hues of his skin—

Yes—

The coiling golds and yellows of a snitch design he asked for—

No—

He flips the pages, faster— faster— faster— At the beginning of the sketchbook, drawings reminiscent of paintings he remembers from years ago. At the end—

His favorite constellations cradled lovingly in a swirling river of space.

He turns. Slow and methodical. His body feels numb and distant. The ringing in his ears is loud. He can feel the pound of his heart in his throat as he holds up the sketchbook. Holds it up to the foreground of his vision while his wall stretches across the background.

Perfect copies.

No—

Copies of his paintings.

Yes—

Of his soulmate's painting.

No—

Not just the ones on his wall, but also of ones Lance has in photo albums under his bed. Dating back months. Years.

No—

His vision blurs. Everything burns. Everything aches. He can't breathe— He can't breathe— He can't breathe—

No, no, no no nononono—

Fuck fuck fuck fuck—

The blanket is pulled back.

The curtains are open.

He feels himself crumbling in the wake of the brilliant, burning light of realization. Feels himself crack and shatter and splinter.

Butterflies and hornets. Chaos inside. Devouring him from the inside out. Until the wings are shredded. Until they rip each other apart. Tear him at the seams. Rise up his throat to choke him.

Butterflies and hornets.
Keith should be working right now, but he's not really in a rush. He just clocked in, and he'll be here for several hours more. He's been put on window cleaning duty, but it can wait a few more minutes. Lance should be here soon with his bag.

Lance.

He literally just saw the guy, and his chest is already light and fluttery with the idea of seeing him again. The afterglow hasn't faded. The happy buzzing in his veins. The giddy contentment settled over him, warm and encompassing. Ginny had been able to tell right away that he'd gotten laid, but it's so much more than that.

It's Lance. Just... Just Lance. Spending time with him settles something in Keith. Makes him feel like the world isn't too much. Makes him feel alive and excited and calm all at once. Makes him... happy.

Happy in a way that's different from what he feels when he's with Shiro. Or Pidge. Or Allura and Hunk and Coran. It's a special kind of happiness. One that's wholly Lance. One that doesn't necessarily make him feel complete, because he's always been complete, but makes him feel... more comfortable in his own skin.

Makes him feel like he can breathe when he hadn't realized he'd even been struggling in the first place.

He makes the colors brighter. Makes Keith's worries seem less daunting. Makes him feel like everything, no matter how bad things may get, will be fine.

He always thought soulmates were supposed to make you feel complete, but he's realizing that's not the case at all. He doesn't need Lance to feel complete, but... having him there makes Keith feel stronger. Makes him feel like he can be better. Makes him want to be better.

He thinks this is the feeling his parents were missing.

He thinks this is what his mom found with Shiro's dad.

He never thought or dared to imagine he'd feel this way about anyone, let alone his soulmate, but... he knows better than most that life is full of surprises.

He stands on the opposite side of the front desk, arms crossed and resting atop the tall counter as he leans onto it. The bottle of window cleaner and cleaning rags resting next to him. It gives the illusion that he's on his way to work without actually doing it. Soon he'll wander around the gym, spraying down all the window panes that separate the different rooms, taking his time and zoning out.

For now he waits, leaning against the front desk and casually chatting with Ginny.

"Your boy is here," She says, glancing over his shoulder with a knowing smile.

He firmly ignores the way his heart leaps. Trying to act casual as he turns and not like he's a goddamn teenager with a crush. Trying to pretend like the heat in his chest isn't surging to his neck and threatening his cheeks just because Lance is here and the last time he saw Lance he was naked and Ginny knows that's the case.

But as soon as he turns, as soon as he catches sight of Lance swiping his student ID and moving through the turnstile, he knows something is very, very wrong.
It's in his posture. Stiff and rigid. The pull of his shoulders is tight. His steps are strangely measured. His weight is pulled back and tense. Keith hadn't realized just how much he recognized about Lance's normal movements, his natural gait and the way he holds himself, until it's wrong.

It immediately puts him on edge. The warmth in his chest stills, cooling into concern. A concern that immediately chills into unease when Lance locks eyes with him.

His gaze is... empty. There's tension in his jaw. Lines around his eyes, etched into his forehead, and at the corners of his lips. Lips that are pressed and pulled into a thin frown.

His eyes are ice, empty and expressionless as they bore into Keith's. As they see past him, through him, yet seem to fixate on him wholly and completely.

Unease mingles with dread, an uncertainty that winds itself around his heart, through his chest, crushing his lungs. He smiles anyway, not bothering to hide his confusion and worry but at least trying to be welcoming and reassuring. "Hey, Lance."

Lance stops in front of him. Gazes at him with eyes that cut through him like fractals of crystalline ice. They're so wholly... empty. Like there's a chaos of something happening behind them, but it's hidden from Keith's view. He's locked out of it.

For the first time ever, he can say that Lance looks emotionless and expressionless, and it's incredibly unnerving.

A shiver runs down his spine.

Lance drops his backpack to the ground at their feet, and then suddenly something is being shoved into his chest. Hard. Unforgiving. It makes him stumble back a step, hands scrambling to catch it as Lance lets it go. As his arm drops back to his side. Keith stares down, eyes widening as his fingers wrap around his black sketchbook. Not his school one, but his—

"Hey, space cadet."


No—

Realization and horror mix with the unease and dread in his chest, squeezing it tight. Punching the air from his lungs. Making his heart stutter in his chest. Pulling his mind away until it feels like he's drifting— distant— his body feels numb and tingling and he can barely feel it.

No—


No—

"You knew." Lance's voice snaps him back to focus. Snaps his mind back into his body. Back into the dread, real and chaotic and tearing at his insides.

No. No. No no nononono—
He thinks he moves his mouth, but no words come. He can't find his voice. Can't find the words to say. What can he say? So much. There's so much he can say. So much he wants to say. So much he needs to say.

But the look in Lance's eyes has him frozen. Has his panic overriding everything else. Has his mind viciously spiraling into a pit of denial, hoping that this isn't happening— it's not happening— it's not happening—

Lance's eyes search his own, and he can clearly find the answer in Keith's silence. He breathes deep, whole body moving with it. He sighs through his nose, and some of the tension bleeds out of him. But it's not relief. It looks more like defeat.

And somehow, it seems worse than before.

"Where you going to tell me?" His voice is softer. Emotion slipping through the cracks. Emotion that tears at Keith more than the ice had.

He swallows past the lump in his throat, somehow managing to find his voice enough to say, "Yes."

A sharp look in Lance's eye. A tight press of his lips. "When?"

Keith feels his knees shaking. Feels his hands shaking as he clutches the sketchbook to his chest. He speaks softly, and his voice cracks anyway. "I..." He has to tell Lance the truth. A lie feels too sour on his tongue. "I don't know."

Lance sighs again, sharp through his nose. He looks away then. Frowning to the side, eyes narrowed and glassy. "Fuck," One hand on his hip, he runs his other through his hair, making the damp strands stand on end. "Fuck, Keith."

"Lance," Keith takes a step forward, reaching for him, but Lance's eyes snap back to him. He freezes as Lance takes a step back, pulling away from his outstretched hand.

"No— you— you knew, Keith. You knew, and you still let me make a fool of myself— Let me look like an idiot.""

"I didn't mean to—"

"Yeah, well you did." It's sharp. Final. Making Keith snap his mouth shut hard enough to bite his tongue. It stings, but he barely feels it. "Whatever the fuck you meant to do doesn't change what you did do. And what you did do was— was make me feel like an idiot— dude, I trusted you. I told you so much shit— I— I fuckin' tore myself up over you— because my soulmate— I mean, just— fuck, man.""

"I know," He says quickly, words coming out in a rush as panic grips him tight. "I'm sorry, Lance. Please, just—" He reaches for him again, but Lance twists away.

"No! Just—" He runs both hands through his hair, gripping it tight as he spins on his heel. He stomps several feet away before spinning again and marching back to him. He shoves a finger in Keith's face, and Keith stumbles back. "Look. I'm gonna need to hear an explanation from you. And it better be a fucking good one. But right now..."

His hand drops. His shoulders slump. His eyes are still cold, but they're no longer empty. They're glassy torrents of far too many things to name, swirling and chaotic. But the pain is clear. It's clear in the pinch of his lips and the lines around his eyes. It's clear in his voice, ragged and pulling at
his seams.

"Right now," He says, voice low and shaking. It cracks, and he pauses to lean back. To clear his throat. To take a breath and steady himself. To encase himself once more behind that wall of ice. "Right now, I just.. need time. Alone. Please, don't... don't contact me." He looks down, and the ice melts just enough for Keith to see how tired he is. How defeated he is. How hurt he is. "Just give me time to think."

"Lance—"

But he's already turned around. Already walking away. Pace brisk and rigid, hasty in his retreat. He ignores Keith's cracked whisper. He doesn't look back.

Keith watches as he slips out the doors and into the night.

He feels the world crumbling around him. Fading away. Feels distant. Feels like he's floating. Feels like he's drifting. Pulling from the ache in his chest and the whirling downward spiral of panic in his mind.

He thinks he's trembling, but he's not sure.

He thinks he's breathing, but he's not sure.

He thinks Ginny is talking to him, but he's not sure.

All he can hear, all he can feel, is the frantic pounding of his heart.

---

**Keith**

> Hey, uh, this is Keith's brother, right?

**Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)**

> Yes? Who is this?

**Keith**

> My name's Ginny, I work with your brother at the student recreation center. I was wondering if you could come pick up Keith? I remember him saying you go to school here, too

**Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)**

> Of course, but why? What happened?

**Keith**

> He's fine! No worries. He's a little shaken, but fine.
> He just had a pretty bad panic attack, and our manager insists that he goes home. But he still looks a little too shaken to move much, let alone walk home, so I was hoping maybe you could come get him? Make sure he's not alone?

**Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)**

> Of course
> I'll be there in twenty minutes
> Tell him I'll be on my way soon
Keith
> Will do

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Thank you for looking out for him

Keith
> No problem
> Just take care of him, yeah? I'm worried about him

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Do you know what happened?

Keith
> I don't really know. He'll probably tell you about it later. He's said you guys are pretty close
> But... I think?? He met his soulmate??

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Make that ten minutes

Chapter End Notes

Too much love will kill you
Just as sure as none at all
It'll drain the power that's in you
Make you plead and scream and crawl
And the pain will make you crazy
You're the victim of your crime
Too much love will kill you every time

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TMWM Body Art Fanart Tumblr
Chapter Summary

In which emotions are complicated, acceptance is a struggle, but the sunrise chases away the doubts of night and brings the dawn of new beginnings.

Chapter Notes

I don't have much to say, so let's just right into the fall out, shall we?

Happy holidays, and happy reading!

No thinking.

No feeling.

He's not Lance right now.

He focuses on the pluck of the strings. Taut and rough. Sliding against the fading callouses on his fingertips. It burns, in a way. It also feels good. Feels familiar. Feels... freeing.

He loses himself in it. In the pull. In the resistance. In the release. In the vibration. In the sound.

He focuses on his other hand, fingers pressing strings to the frets. Pressing hard. Cutting into skin that's no longer used to it. Enjoys the slide of fingertips along the strings. The press. The release. The curl and stretch of his fingers.

It's been a long time since he touched his guitar. Way too long.

He hadn't missed it before, hadn't thought about it all semester. But right here, right now, he realizes just how much he had. Maybe it's because he hadn't needed it before, and how much he needs it now.

He sits back in his chair, rocking it back. One ankle resting atop the other knee. Leg pressed into his desk. Guitar cradled on his lap. Eyes closed. Fingers on the strings. He plays.

He plays everything.

He plays nothing.

He lets his fingers move as they might. He lets them run through scales and chords, reliving and flexing his muscle memory. Reminding his fingers of their home on the strings. He shifts from chords to patterns. Patterns to songs. Familiar. Drilled into him. Hidden in the memory of his body and pulled from the depths back into the light.
Patterns.

Chords.

The pluck of the strings.

Songs he knows. Rhythms he made up. Each one leading into another. There's no sense to it. There's no plan. It flows. The chord progression of one song shifts into another. Shifts to him plucking out a melody. Shifts to a different tempo. Shifts to a new strumming pattern.

He hums under his breath.

He doesn't know what he's humming.


He loses himself in it. Gives himself over to it. Lets himself be embraced by the nothing. By the everything. By the sound of vibrating strings and the cut of them on his fingertips. Loses himself in the vibration of his voice, bits of lyrics that dwindle into wordless melodies. English. Spanish. Intertwined. Doesn't matter. Wordless. Sounds.

He loses himself.

Lets himself float down the river of his own making.

Eyes closed.

Heart open.

Pouring out into the waters and letting them go. Refusing to dwell on them. Refusing to think about them. Refusing to give name to the things he's feeling and just... releases them. Releases it all.

He feels lighter than he has in days. Feels emptier. He feels numb. He feels everything. It hurts. It burns. It feels good. It feels cold.

In the sound. In the rhythm. In the melody. In the taut pull. The vibrating release.

No thinking. No feeling. No *Lance*.

He hears the key in the door. Hears the lock tumble. Hears the door open and shut. It's soft. Distant. At the end of a tunnel, like he's hearing it in an echo. Takes him a moment to realize it's his room. His door. His space.

Takes him a moment longer to realize it's probably Hunk.

He keeps playing.

No thinking.

No feeling.

"Lance?"
Right. He's Lance. He doesn't want to be, but he is. And he feels the firm tug in his chest. Feels himself dragged back into the moment, into his body. He tries to resist, but he can't. The taut pull. The release.

His fingers stop. Hovering over the strings. Vibrating and distantly aching. He opens his eyes. Stares at the table in front of him. At the laptop with a dark screen. At the textbooks opened and piled in front of him. At the notebooks filled with scribbled handwriting. At the mug of coffee that's no doubt gone cold.

Right.

He's Lance.

He doesn't want to be.

But he is.

"Uh, Lance?" Hunk repeats, making him wonder just how long he's been staring at his desk in silence.

He shakes himself. Shakes his head. Rolls his shoulders. Flexes his fingers. Pulls himself back to himself and back to reality. Settles himself firmly back in his body and into this moment. It's strange. Like coming down from a high. Like waking from a dream. He hasn't lost himself like that in a very long time.

"Yeah, buddy?" His voice is hoarse. He clears it. It still aches. Still feels thick. He tries to swallow down the emotion choking him. Force it down to ache in his chest instead.

"You, uh... you're playing your guitar." Steps from the old linoleum to the rug in the middle of their floor. The drop of a bag, clanking against Hunk's desk. The unzipping of a coat. Rustle of fabric.


"You okay, buddy?" It's quiet, uncertain. Worried. He hates that it's worried. It tugs at his chest and spirals guilt to his gut.

So he puts on a smile and hopes it looks genuine. "Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?" He turns, shifting the chair back upright and moving both feet to the floor. He makes eye contact with Hunk just long enough to see it's not working before he busies himself with putting the instrument away.

Hunk shrugs out of his jacket, tossing it to the back of his desk chair before plopping down with a sigh. "It's just... you only play when you're feeling a lot, you know? And I can usually tell by what you play and how loud you sing whether it's a good a lot or a bad a lot."

Lance looks up then, blinking at his roommate with his guitar hovering above its case. "Really?"

Hunk nods, opening his laptop and booting it up. "Yeah, dude. Like... you know how when I go on a cooking spree, you can tell by the kinda stuff I make what mood I'm in? It's like that. But with you. With music. And you usually only touch your guitar when you're feeling shit you can't sort out, or it feels like too much you know?"

He frowns, averting his eyes as he puts his guitar away, leaning the case against the wall by his desk. He knows Hunk is right. He knows. Music is... very close to his heart. His guitar, a piano... they're a spigot he can put to his chest and let out all the overflowing emotions rattling around. Everything that he has a hard time talking about or doesn't want to talk about. When things are too
*much* and keep him from being able to think straight.

He knows.

He knows his guitar is his escape. His spigot. His go-to balm for an aching heart.

He just... hadn't realized Hunk had noticed. Hadn't realized Hunk can read read him so easily. He shouldn't be surprised. He notices all those little things about Hunk, too. It's a side effect of being so close for so long, but...

"I'm fine, buddy. Really." He's not. He tries for another smile anyway. He turns away before Hunk can read too far into it. Before he can see the cracks.

Hunk hums, and it doesn't sound at all convinced. "Is it the same thing that's making you avoid our friends?"

Lance rolls his eyes, moving his mouse to wake up his laptop. "I'm not avoiding our friends." *He is.*

"You are."

"I've just been busy." Not a whole lie. Not a whole truth. He *has* been busy. Classes are almost done, which brings about study week, which will lead into exam week. There's a lot to do. A lot to focus on. A lot of pressure. They're all feeling it.

It's as good an excuse as any.

And it's one Hunk isn't buying.

"But you've been hermiting, Lance. You only hermit when things are bad. Did you even *hear* the music you were playing?"

Lance's brows furrow, lips curling a little as he aimlessly flips through the tabs of powerpoint lectures. He should be reading them. He doesn't. "Yes? Sort of... No? I wasn't really paying attention to what I was playing."

"You were playing sad songs, dude. Like... the super bitter sweet ones? That *kinda* sound happy but not really? And you were *humming*. When you're *good* overwhelmed, you sing. When you're sad, you *hum*."

"I'm not *sad.*" Not a whole lie. Not a whole truth.

"Then what's up?"

"Nothing, dude. Just... there's a lot going on right now." A whole truth. An understated truth.

"You know you can talk to me about whatever... right? I'm always here, man. Anytime. For anything. Just say the word, and I'm an ear and a shoulder. No judgement. You know the bro code."

A smile touches his lips. Smooths out the pinch between his brows. It feels genuine, even if the relief is fleeting. "I know, buddy. I know." He says, sigh escaping his lips. He stares down at the open text book on his desk. What was he even reading about? He barely remembers. His focus has been scattered even more than usual. "I just... don't want to talk about it right now."

He doesn't think he can. Talk about it, that is. Doesn't want to. *Really* doesn't want to. Talking
about it would be acknowledging it. Acknowledging it would mean facing it. Would make it more real. Would mean accepting the reality that Keith is—

No.

Nope.

Not going there. No feeling. No thinking.


"Okay, well... I'll be here when you're ready." It's soft and gentle, genuine and wholesome in the best way. Just like Hunk. It makes the ache worse.

His smile becomes strained. "I know. Thanks, dude."

"No problem, man."

Silence floods the room, but that's fine. Silence is better than talking. Talking requires thinking, and thinking inevitably leads to thinking about—

No one.

Nothing.

He's fine.

Studying. That's what he's doing. He can hear Hunk typing and tapping away at his computer, the rustle of notebooks, but he doesn't look. Doesn't care enough to. He busies himself in trying to organize his own things. He can at least pretend to be studying. He can at least act like he's organized in all of this chaos.

Right, so he has a paper due Friday, but he's almost done with that. Just has to do the citations. He's gotta finish up some lab reports. He'll need to meet up with Pidge at some point to study sociology, and he really needs to buckle down and study for art history—

Oh god, art history.

He knows he made plans to study with Keith, but— those are cancelled now, aren't they? Or maybe they wouldn't be. Would it be weird? It would probably be weird. Especially since they haven't talked about this whole— mess yet. And he's not ready to.

He hasn't seen Keith at all since that day in the gym. And that had been— what? Three days ago? Four? Two? Time has been weird. He's just been sleeping, waking up, studying, and working. Classes fit in there somewhere. Keeping himself busy. No feeling. No thinking.

He should think about it, but he doesn't want to. It's too much. It's overwhelming. Keith is— Keith knew— Keith—

Maybe he's wrong. Yeah, he's probably wrong. He could've totally misread the situation. Maybe he just wanted to see his soulmarks in Keith's art. It's not like he hasn't thought about Keith being— so yeah, maybe just... wishful thinking?

There's no way Keith is his soulmate. His soulmate for fuck's sake. The one who gives him rich
paintings and feels so much through their soul connection. The one who loves space, and cryptids, and thinks Lance's pick up lines are bad, and teases him but is overall incredibly kind and endearing, and—

And who's been afraid of their soul connection.

Who... stopping talking to him right about the time Keith and Shiro lost their parents.

Who's been opening up to him more and more as he and Keith have been getting closer...

That's— No, that's not Keith. That's— nothing like Keith. At all. It's just... coincidence. He wants them to be the same, so he can stop agonizing about how he feels about them, but that doesn't make them the same.

But... if he wants Keith to be his... then why isn't he happy?

Why does he feel... like this?

He runs his fingers through his hair, digging in and pulling at his roots. Stifling a groan, he leans forward, planting his elbows on the desk and burying his face in his hands. Why isn't he happy? Why can't he be happy? What's wrong with him? Why can't he accept that Keith is—

Stop thinking.

Stop feeling.

He's not— there's no way he could be— Keith would've told him sooner, right? Surely he would have. Keith's not a dick. He knows Keith's not a dick. Keith has his own problems and his own reservations and he knows— he knows— he—

"Wanna grab dinner with us later?"

"What?" He looks up, startled, turning automatically to gaze blankly at Hunk. There's a brief moment of panic, a brief tightening in his chest from a fear that somehow— by some feat of magic — Hunk can hear his thoughts, that Hunk knows.

But he just glances over his shoulder, one eyebrow raised. "I asked if you wanted to come have dinner with us later."

"Who?" He asks, but he already knows.

"Pidge and Keith."

Yup, there's that tightening in his chest again. Who needs to breathe anyway? "No, thanks."

Hunk sighs, exasperation starting to weigh on his features. He gives Lance that look he gets when tough love is coming. "You need to get out of this dorm."

"I leave the dorm."

"Class and work don't count."

"They do, too!"

"When was the last time you ate something that wasn't ramen or Hot Pockets?"
"I... do I have to answer that question?"

"Lance." Hunk pinches the bridge of his nose, exhaling louder than is strictly necessary. When he opens his eyes again, his hard gaze locks on Lance, and Lance squirms. "Why are you avoiding everyone?"

"I'm not—"

"You are! Did they do something? Say something?"

"No." Yes... kind of.

His gaze softens, voice lowering. "Then come on, dude. You've been cooped up in here for too long. Studying is good and all, but you're gonna burn yourself out. Breaks are good for you. Just come eat dinner with us."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I..." He looks at his computer, then to his notes. His gaze slides to his phone. Technically, Allura had asked him... "I have to work."

Hunk's eyebrow raises, voice flat and dry. " Seriously?"

He shrugs, leaning on an elbow and keeping his eyes on the screen of his laptop as he idly scrolls. "Yeah, sorry. Allura asked if I could pick up a shift so she could finish a paper, and I said yes." The silence is stretched and telling. He glances over his shoulder to see Hunk staring at him, eyes narrowed. "What?"

"You never pick up extra shifts."

He straightens. "I do, too."

"Rarely."

He shrugs, waving Hunk off. "Allura needs me. Can't say no to a lady, dude."

"Mhmm..."

His shoulders slump, and he falls back in his chair, tilting it backward. His arms hang limply to the sides as his head lolls back to look at Hunk. "Come on, dude, don't give me that."

Hunk hasn't looked away. Those big brown eyes search his face, and Lance does his best to hold his exhausted pout in place. Prays Hunk can't see the cracks.

"You promise this has nothing to do with our friends?"

He sighs, putting one hand to his chest and lifting the other in the air. "I promise." A lie.

"And you'd tell me if they did something to upset you?"

"Of course." A partial truth.

Finally, Hunk sighs, a smile creeping across his lips that's genuine enough to have relief crash through Lance's veins. Relief and guilt. "Okay, buddy. Just... don't overwork yourself, okay?"
Lance's smirk is wry and tired. "I'll try not to."

Hunk goes back to whatever it is he's doing, and Lance grabs his phone, shooting a quick text to Allura that he'll pick up her shift after all. Then he throws himself into studying. Throws himself into the paragraphs of text and lets the intricacies of marine life flood his head. Fill up the space. Leave no room for anything else.

He doesn't know if he's actually absorbing any of it, but he actually feels productive, and that counts for something.

An hour later, he gets ready for work. Shuts his laptop but leaves the books scattered around his desk. Stands and stretches and relishes in the pop of his spine. He turns around carefully, keeping his eyes on the floor and on his dresser and definitely not looking toward his bed.

Because his bed is where his pictures decorate the wall. Pictures of his paintings. His marks. His soulmate's marks. Keith's—

In his frustration and rage, he had nearly torn them all down. Nearly. Almost. But he's not ready to talk to anyone yet, and that would be a huge fucking red flag to Hunk. So he left them as they are, but just... tries not to look at them.

Grabbing his keys and wallet, wrapping his scarf around his neck and swinging his jacket on, he mumbles a goodbye to Hunk and slips out the door. Walks down the fluorescent lit hallways of his dorm in a daze.

When he steps outside, he pauses. Hands buried in his pockets, he tilts his head back. Feels the rush of cold on his neck, slipping in the space between skin and scarf. Feels the bit of the chill on his cheeks. He gazes up at the cloudy sky as the light of day begins to fade.

It's starting to snow. First snowfall of the year. Big, fluffy flakes that drift down on a lazy breeze. They land on his skin, melting at his touch. He closes his eyes against the cold. Lets the snow melt on his cheeks. On his eyelashes. On his lips.

He thinks about Keith. About how he's fine with the cold. How he looks bundled in his leather jacket and with his chin buried in a scarf. How even when his mouth is hidden, his cheeks rise out of it when he grins. How his face pales in the cold, but his nose turns bright red.

Keith is...

Keith is his soulmate.

Keith is his soulmate.

His soulmate is... Keith.

He wanted this. He hoped for this. He hated himself for dreaming about this... so why isn't he happy? He wants to be happy, he does, he just...

He's frustrated. He's mad. He's embarrassed and ashamed that he never fucking noticed. And Keith didn't tell him. Keith had to have known for months. He trusted Keith— He trusts Keith, but—

It's so much.

It's too much.
The juxtaposition of his soulmate and Keith is a gaping cavernous trench, and he can't... he can't just fit the pieces together. Not yet. He has an imagine of Keith, and an imagine of his soulmate, and they just... overlapping them is harder than he thought it would be. They don't line up just right. They're out of sync and out of focus.

It's... a lot.

A lot to think about.

A lot to digest.

And he doesn't want to think right now.

Doesn't want to feel.

Hunching his shoulders and burying his face in his scarf, he trudges across campus to work. And as he watches the snow fall and begin to gather on the pavement, he very pointed does not think about how Keith would look with snowflakes melting in his hair.

"Pidge."

"Hmm?"

"Stop looking at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like I'm one of your puzzles. My face isn't an equation, so stop staring."

He tilts his head, to the side, lazily giving them a sidelong glare. They meet his flat stare with one of their own, eyes narrowing just a fraction. They tilt their chin up, lifting a hand to adjust their glasses.

"You'll crack eventually, McClain." There's a certainty in their voice that rubs against his nerves. Makes his hackles rise. "You always do."

He scoffs, rolling his eyes as he looks away. He slouches a little further in his chair, shoulders hunching as he buries his chin in his scarf. His hands dig deep into his pockets, lets stretched out in front of him.

They sit at one of the small tables in the lobby of the gym, before the turnstiles into the gym proper. It's a big open space, echoing and muted all at once. There's a cafe counter off to the side that sells smoothies and protein snacks, but the only ones in the lobby right now are the gathered quidditch players.

With the weather getting colder and the recent snowfall that's managed to stick, outdoor practice is a no-go. They've tried it before and found that it's extremely unproductive and a good deal miserable.

So, like when it rains, they take their practice indoors.
A surprising amount of players have already gathered. With it being the end of the semester and the official start to study week, they don't really have any expectations for attendance. They're students first, and everyone has shit to do. But they also know staying in shape is important, and the more they practice, the less they have to whip into shape next semester.

So Pidge and Hunk sent out a message about quidditch practice being held in the gym, just a quick work out and some dodgeball. No mandatory attendance. No pressure. But a lot of players have shown up already. About two-thirds of the team.

Perhaps the promise of doing something physical and getting the fuck outta the library for a time is motivation in and of itself.

Still, as much as he knows he could use the stress relief, he almost didn't come at all. Because there's the possibility that Keith will be here, and he's not sure he's ready to face Keith. Not ready to pretend everything is fine and normal. The thought of it had his chest getting all tight and anxiety churning in his gut.

He nearly puked. That would've gotten him out of it for sure. But Hunk's goddamn puppy dog eyes got him. All big and brown and sad and pleading. How can he say no to that face? He can't. It's a weakness, and Hunk knows it.

So here he is, sitting at a table while Pidge stares him down, clearly trying to pick him apart like a goddamn equation, while he stares at the wall of windowed doors.

Every time he sees movement, his gaze snaps to it. From the parking lot. From the walkway. From the stairs leading up to the gym. His heart leaps each time, hammering a few erratic beats before the false alarm has him calming. Feeling stupid. Feeling ridiculous.

See, he's got this weird bit of I-really-don't-want-to-face-Keith-because-I-don't-know-how-I-feel mixing really chaotically with a bit of I-can't-wait-to-see-Keith.

That second part is winning out at the moment, and that's only because it's fueled with this little self-righteous, cruel sense of amusement.

He wonders if Keith is brave enough to show his face.

He wonders if Keith will try to hide it.

He can't wait to see his handiwork.

Can't wait to revel in his embarrassment.

"I know you're not okay," Pidge says, matter-of-fact but gentle. Like they're trying to pull it out of him. He knows they mean well, but it's not going to work.

"No one is okay, Pidge." He says flatly, almost bored. "It's almost exam week."

"I've seen you during exam week. Several times. You're usually loud when you're school miserable. I usually hear all about it. I've heard nothing from you for days. Something else is at play here, and it's bad enough that you won't even tell Hunk."

He looks to Pidge, eyes sharp. Lips pursed into a thin line. "What's Hunk been telling you?"

They smile, but their eyes are still curious and calculating. "Enough to make me worry."
He looks away, feeling that sliver of guilt in his chest that twists and writhes and is becoming far too familiar a sensation lately.

"You know you can talk to us about anything," They say, voice dropping.

He huffs through his nose, mumbling into his scarf. "I know."

"If you would just talk to us, we could help you—"

"Pidge," He bites out. That sliver of guilt hardening into something more volatile.

"I just mean—"

"Drop it, okay?" It's sharper than he intended it to be, and he can see the hurt in their eyes that their frown doesn't quite mask. But he can't bring himself to feel bad. Not completely. Not when he's tired of everyone pushing him. Tired of people prying and pushing. He's just tired.

"Fine." It's harder, but he knows this conversation isn't done. Just put on hold.

"Thank you." He pulls out his phone, checking the time. They're set to start soon, and still no Keith. For a moment, just a moment, his thumb hovers over the messages app. But with a scoff and a rolling wave of irritation, he clicks his phone off and shoves it back into his bag.

No. Nope. Not messaging him. He had told Keith not to contact him, that he needed time, and Keith has respected that. If Lance opens up communication now, that's giving permission for Keith to talk to him. And he... doesn't know if he's ready for that.

Besides, he's not going to have the first message he sends him after finding out about the whole soulmates thing be about quidditch practice.


Instead he lets the dare hang in the dead space between them.

"I'm calling it," Pidge says, chair scrapping the floor as they stand up. They shove their phone in their pocket. "Hey Hunk, ready to start?"

Hunk glances over from where he'd been talking with Allura and Romelle at another table. Smile bright as he says, "Yeah, sounds good."

They start calling the scattered quidditch members together. Give a little speech or pep talk or whatever before they go in. Lance just pushes himself to his feet, already heading toward the gym. Shoulders slumped. Hands shoved deep in his pockets. He knows the whole spiel already. He already knows the plan for today. And he really doesn't feel like standing around with everyone.

He's not exactly in a team player kind of mood.

He has his student ID out, poised over the card reader at the turnstile when he hears the doors open. When he hears the Hey, Keith! that echoes around the open lobby. Hears the loud gasps and choked, surprised laughs.

He pauses, taking a step back to look over his shoulder.

Keith steps into the circle that's gathered around Pidge and Hunk. His workout bag is slung over one shoulder, one hand holding the strap while the other is buried in his pocket. His scarf is
bundled around his neck, hiding his frown. A hat slouching over messy hair. Even from across the room, Lance can see the heavy bags under his eyes.

But that's not what draws his attention.

Oh no.

Everyone's gaze is immediately drawn to the dick tattooed in solid black lines across his pale face.

It's a work of art, really, and Lance is quite proud of it. The heavy nut sack hangs down over his left jawline, drooping down his neck. The shaft is long and curved, stretching from his left jaw, across his cheek, nose, and ending high on his opposite cheekbone. Thick head. A few sprigs of hair. A few droplets down the side of his face for flavor. A few veins for realism.

Yup. Definitely Lance's best work.

In a little bout of frustration over the situation and panic that he would probably see Keith today, he had let that irritation brew into something angrier. Something darker. Given into that writhing beast in him that just wants Keith to feel as embarrassed and he does. That just wants Keith to *suffer.*

So while Hunk had been out, he had taken one of their soulmark markers and drawn the best dick of his life across his face. And with a manic grin he had washed it off.

Now he gets the twisted satisfaction of seeing that same dick etched in dark lines across Keith's face. Complete with his pursed scowl.

A little childish? Maybe. But right now, he doesn't give two shits. It's the funnest fucking thing he's seen all week.

Keith looks up then, catching his gaze across the room. He had hoped, somewhere deep in that twisted knot in his chest, that Keith would be angry with him. He *wants* Keith to be angry with him.

But when Keith's eyes narrow, as his frown deepens, it's not with anger. There's a spark of shame. Lines of guilt. Things so subtle that Lance knows he would miss them if he hadn't gotten to know Keith so well.

And somehow his shame hurts more than his anger would have.

So Lance just smiles. Lets his lips curl into a sardonic grin to mask his pain, and he turns. Swipes his ID and steps through the turnstile. He heads to the locker room without looking back, hearing the quidditch team start to pour into the gym after him.

He ignores them as he gets ready. He keeps his eyes down as they pour into the gym. He barely acknowledges them as they say hi, and he pretends he doesn't hear when they ask if he's okay. He changes into a t-shirt and shorts. Laces up his shoes and grabs his phone. Shoves his earbuds in as he stares down, shuffling through his music, using it as an excuse not to look at Keith as he passes him.

He's already running on the track when the rest of the team gets there. Already has two laps under his belt. Passes by them as he hears Pidge say they'll go for thirty minutes, and everyone should push their endurance but go at their own pace.

He's already gone before he hears the rest.
The indoor track isn't crowded. In fact, the whole gym is pretty empty. That's fine. Less obstacles for him.


No feeling.

No thinking.

No—

One of his earbuds is pulled out, and the surprise of it causes him to stumble. He catches his balance quickly, resuming his comfortable jog and turning to find Keith running next to him.

His hair is pulled back into a pony tail that's extremely adorable, and he fucking hates it. He hates the cute little pout on his lips. Hate how they looked chapped from the cold wind and how that does things to his insides. Hates the little furrow in his brow that's so familiar it's endearing. Hates the guilt and fear and shy wariness that's being trampled by a fiery determination that sparks in his dark eyes and sends shivers of heat through Lance's chest.

None of his reactions or thoughts can be trusted in his moment, so he focuses on the giant dick tattooed across Keith's face instead.

"Nice soulmark," He says, lips quirking into that sardonic smirk as the words bite.

Keith winces, turning forward as his eyes fix on the track. "We need to talk."

"No," He says, reaching for his dangling earbud. "We really don't."

They do. They really do. But not right now. Not yet. And definitely not here. He's definitely not about to rip his chest open and bear his bleeding heart to Keith in the middle of the gym.

So he puts his earbud back in. Lets the music consume him. And he runs faster. Puts distance between them on the straight of the track. Sprints around a couple of beaters jogging before he slows back to his usual pace.

It makes no sense. He can't hear anything over the drive of his music and the beat of his heart, but he swears he can feel Keith's footsteps as he runs up to him. And this time he anticipates it when his earbud is ripped out, dropped and left swinging in front of his chest.

"Lance, you can't avoid me forever."

And if that ain't a sharp stab to the chest with a nice little twist for good measure. He finds the laughter bubbling out of his throat. It tastes acidic on his tongue. He turns to look at him, eyes sharp even as he smiles. Far too wide and far too sweet. "Why not? You were going to."

He sees the moment it hits. The moment it sinks in. The moment there's pain. Sees it in the way his eyes widen a fraction and his lips part. Sees it in the depths of his gaze.

Good. He wants Keith to hurt. He hurt Lance. Fair is fair, or whatever.

So he buries that spark of guilt deep, deep down and keeps running.

He lifts his earbud, but only gets it about halfway there before Keith grabs his wrist. "Will you just
—" Lance rips his arm away, glaring at him. Lance speeds up, kicking his jog up to a steady run. Unfortunately, Keith is the only one on this damn team who can actually keep pace with him. "Lance, I'm trying to apologize."

"Yeah, well I don't want to hear it," He snaps.

He runs faster. Keith speeds up with him.

"Stop being a dick—"

"From what I can see, you're the one that's a dick." He grins that far too bright and far too saccharine smile. "In more ways then one."

Keith frowns, but it's not the angry scowl Lance wants. It's all guilty and ashamed and ugh. "I'm trying to not be—"

"Too late for that—"

"Will you just let me—"

"No."

"Why not?" He grabs Lance's arm, vice grip stopping him in his tracks and pulling him around. Keith drags him off the track, off to the side and gets in his face. Gets far too close for Lance's poor heart. He takes a deep breath, closing his eyes as his fists clench and relax. He exhaled as he opens his eyes, and Lance is struck by the depths of those dark irises. The pain. The vulnerability. The desperation he sees swirling there. Chaotic and reaching out to drown him. And he can't even distract himself with the dick on Keith's face because those fucking eyes are swallowing him whole. "Lance, I—"

He slaps his hand over Keith's mouth. Halts him mid-sentence. Keith stumbles back, eyes going wide and confusion clear. Lance keeps his hand there, firm and maybe a bit too forceful.

He stares at him, hard and sharp. Lets Keith see him. Really see him. Lets him see exactly what he's feeling. Watches Keith's brows furrow and his throat flex as he swallows.

"No," He says, firm and biting. Then he sighs, letting his shoulders sag and his eyes close. For a moment, just a moment, he lets his defenses drop as he whispers, "Not yet. I'm not ready to forgive you yet. Just... wait."

He lets his hand drop. Opens his eyes but just looks past him. Can't make eye contact because he feels that fucking telltale burning in his eyes and he is not going to cry about this in public.

He shoves his earbud back into his ear, drowns himself in his music once again, and takes off once more around the track.

For the rest of their time on the track, Keith doesn't try to catch up to him, but neither does he fall behind. He doesn't pass Lance, and Lance doesn't pass him. He just runs an equal distance behind Lance, keeping pace behind him. And he can feel his eyes on him. He can feel him staring.

He hates it. It makes his skin crawl just as much as it makes his heart race. Makes his skin run hot and cold in turns. It crawls up his spine and grates against his nerves because can Keith please stop staring for two goddamn seconds? Staring at him with those big, soulful, beautiful eyes. Eyes that are wretched in pain and guilt and shame.
He knows, alright? He knows Keith is sorry and regrets what he's done, blah blah. Oh, woe is Keith. Woe is him. He's having such a hard time, isn't he? Lost his plaything and his soulmate. Forced to wait out his soulmate's chaotic emotions for who knows how long like Lance has done for years.

He knows Keith is sorry. He knows there's regret there. But right now? Right fucking now? He doesn't care.

Because seeing Keith's sad puppy dog eyes makes him feel bad. Makes him feel bad for feeling rightfully and justifiably upset. Makes him feel guilty because he's not giving Keith comfort.

But what about him? What about his feelings, huh?

Yeah, fuck all that noise. He's tired of all the questions. Of all the worried looks and concerned frowns. He's tired of all the prying and the guilt. And you know what? He's tired of Keith's goddamn pretty sad eyes.

He sees them every time he rounds the edge of the track. When he glances over his shoulder to shoot Keith a glare. Catches Keith staring and gets the brief but fleeting satisfaction of startling him.

He's tired of the staring though.

He's tired of the sadness.

Keith doesn't get to be upset right now. That's not fair. Lance gets to be upset. This is his moping time, and Keith does not get to infringe on that.

Fuck that.

Fuck this.

Fuck him.

He steers off the track, slamming through the heavy glass doors as he stomps to the drinking fountain. He rage guzzles as much as he can, comes up for several gasping breathes, then goes again.

Fuck this. Fuck the universe. Fuck soulmates. Fuck this whole goddamn situation.

This isn't fair. It wasn't supposed to be like this. He was supposed to be patient, supportive, and encouraging. And then in a few years, he was going to be rewarded by having a romantic and amazing first meeting with his soulmate and—

Oh god.

Their first meeting.

He— No— Fuck— He spilled a smoothie all over Keith for their first meeting.

He groans, turning to the wall and slamming his forehead against it. It hurts, but he doesn't fucking care. Pulls his head back and lets it drop again for good measure.

This is so fucked up. Everything is so fucked up and confusing and he has lab reports to do and exams to study for and just— man, fuck Keith for not telling him sooner. For letting him make a fucking fool of himself with the whole pining after his soulmate thing. For letting him fucking
agonize for weeks over the fact that he had his soulmate and Keith and didn't want to choose between them because he—


Movement catches his eye, and he turns as Pidge leads the mob of quidditch kids out of the track area. He tugs an earbud free in time to hear Pidge's loud laughter.

"I mean, I knew you'd fuck up eventually, but holy shit. You have a dick on your face."

"Shut the fuck up, Pidge." Keith glares at them, but the sharpness of it is dulled by the blush creeping up his cheeks.

"What did you even do?"

He glances up, catching Lance's eye from across the hall. His lips purse as he looks away, grumbling a sharp. "Just drop it."

"Okay, but you're telling me later."

He glares at them, glances at Lance, then huffs. He turns on his heel and heads toward the front desk, muttering, "I'll go get the dodgeballs."

Lance watches him go, stomach churning unpleasantly. Fuck Keith's pity party, he doesn't deserve —

"Oh man, have you seen Keith's face?" Pidge asks, sliding up next to him.

Lance pulls out his earbuds, robotically wrapping them up with his phone. "Yeah, I saw."

Pidge chuckles, hands on their hips as they shake their head. "I hope he didn't royally fuck things up with his soulmate, because I would love to meet them someday. I have a feeling we'll get along great."

Lance's smile is small and wry, a rush of dry amusement whispering through him. "I bet you will."


He's glad Pidge has moved past the whole prying are you okay thing, but his relief is short lived. It's short lived because as soon as they've gathered in the empty indoor soccer field on the third floor, he has Keith's eyes on him.

Those sad, miserable, ashamed eyes that make Lance's skin burn and itch and crawl.

He's tired of it. He's just fucking tired.

It all twists in his gut. His frustration. His irritation. It itches and it burns and it writes inside him. Grips tight on his own sorrow and embarrassment and shame and buries it. Drowns it. Leaves him with nothing but fraying nerves and a bitterness on his tongue.

Because fuck this.

Fuck Keith for not telling him. How long had he known? It would have to be months. Months. He shows off his soulmark tattoos all the damn time, and Keith would surely fucking notice.
He's known. He's known, and he's selfishly gotten to get closer to him, use him, all while knowing and keeping Lance in the dark. All while Lance has been agonizing about betraying his soulmate. Feeling guilty over wanting Keith.

Fuck the universe.

All he ever wanted was a happy soulmate story. Is that too fucking much to ask? And when he can't have that, he starts to fall for one of his best friends, and it's perfect, and wonderful, and—and then they're the same. And he should be happy. He's fucking dreamed of Keith being his soulmate. Wished for it. Wanted it so fucking much.

By all fucking rights, Lance should be happy. He should be over fucking joyed.

But he's not. He's fucking not. And that makes him even more frustrated. Even more upset. At himself. At Keith. At the universe. At every single fucking person who asks him if he's alright because no. He's not fucking alright.

But Keith keeps looking at him with those big, sad eyes and making Lance feel like he shouldn't get to be upset and making him feel bad that Keith is upset when Keith upset him to begin with and —

And he knows, he knows, that Keith doesn't mean to. He knows Keith knows he has a right to be upset. He knows Keith is respecting his wishes and not pushing and actually keeping a distance because he's respecting Lance's time to be upset.

But those eyes.

They're pissing him off.

And the fact that beneath it all, buried deep in the heart of his aching chest, he really just wants to fucking kiss that stupid fucking mouth of his and find comfort in his stupid arms, but he can't and he won't and he's—he's just—angry.

He feels so much, too much, and it twists and collides and knots together in his chest with no outlet besides fraying nerves and burning veins and itching skin.

Pidge chooses him and Keith to be the team captains. Lance, because they know he fucking loves dodgeball and he knows they're trying to make him feel better. Keith, because they want to call him Captain Dick-Face. He gets a twisted enjoyment from that and does nothing to hide it.

This also means they're on opposing teams.

Which means he gets to hit Keith.

And ooooh boy, does he hit Keith.

Pegs him every single fucking time he's on the court. Lance's aim and long shot are legendary, and he puts far more force into than necessary. Enough force to make the sound echo and the ball ricochet way the fuck away. He aims for skin because it makes the best sound. He aims for his chest just to hear him lose his breath.

And every time he walks off the court, he sends Lance a glare that has him smiling. Grinning. Because fucking good. He wants Keith angry. No more of those sad, pitiful eyes. No more of that fucking adorable pout. Keith's anger justifies his own. Fuels him. Burns the fire in his chest hotter and higher.
He wants to scream.

He wants to rage.

He can't, so he settles with pegging with with a dodgeball from across the court.

He's not subtle about it. He can feel the eyes on him. Hears the whispers. Sees the winces and hisses of sympathy when the ball collides with Keith again and again. Keith takes it in silence, though. Grits his teeth and bears it. There's a fire in his eyes now, too. His own rage.

_Good._

He fights back. He's not as great at throwing. Aim kinda sucks, actually. But he's good at dodging. Picks up on Lance's game and actually starts to avoid his shots. Gives Lance more of a challenge, and he likes that. Likes the bite of it hot and sharp on his tongue. Makes it all the more satisfying when he hits him.

People start avoiding the two of them. Let them have their own little stand off on the side because no one wants to get in the way of Lance's shots. Lance locks eye with him. Watches his every move. Bends down to pick up ball after ball. Keith watches him. Eyes sharp and calculating and angry.

And Lance doesn't hate him. Knows that deep down, he never could. Never will. But he's _angry_. He's hurt and he's angry. He's angry at Keith. He's angry at the universe. He's— he's angry at _himself_.

Why can't he just be fucking _happy_?

He throws. Keith ducks. Lance scoops another ball up and hurls it forward. Keith doesn't have time to react. It hits him in the face with a sound that echoes throughout the room, sharp and painful. Enough to make even Lance wince.

His head snaps back, and he stumbles before falling to the floor. Play stops. Gasps around the room. It's silent and tense and Lance can't fucking breathe—

Keith sits up, scowl on his features as he rubs the reddening mark on his face. Thankfully he turned his head enough to avoid a broken nose, but he looks dazed. His eyes don't look focused.

"Dude!" Hunk's voice, more panicked then reprimanding.

"That wasn't fair, Lance!" Pidge's voice, far more sharp.

He doesn't look away from Keith. Can't look away as the bubble in his chest bursts. As his anger pops and fizzles and leaks out. Fire turning to ice in his veins. His eyes burn. They prickle and ache and he feels his throat closing up.

"Life isn't fair," He says, voice soft and low, but carrying across the stunned silence. He knows they can all hear his voice crack, but he turns away before they can see him cry.

Turns and walks toward the stairs without looking back.
There's a knot in his chest, and it's been there all day.

It was there when he woke up. A tension caught between his ribs, stitching them together far too tightly and pulling them far too close to his lungs. Breathing is hard. Short and shallow. Any attempts at deeper breaths are only temporary relief. Only achievable when he focuses on it.

He had hoped that it would slowly unravel if he ignored it, but he was wrong. It's still there. It's still twisted and writhing with every beat of his heart.

And every pulse sends a skittering across his skin. An anxious crawling that simmers just below the surface. Makes him restless. Makes him twitchy. Even as his bones feel heavy and his movements sluggish.

His head feels hazy. Dizzy. And he's not sure if that's just numbness in the wake of his faded anger or if it's from the shallow breaths he's forced to take.

He sits on the stool behind the register, slumped and slouched until he's lying out over the counter. He had been standing. Had been cleaning up the lobby of Local Lion. But it's spotless now, and his mind and body are fluctuating heavily between restless hyper-fixation and extreme lows with dragging movements. While he had been fine while he was a flurry of cleaning vengeance, without anything to focus on and without the frantic cleaning to keep his body busy, merely standing still left his skin buzzing and head far too light than was probably healthy.

Maybe he's had too much coffee. That's likely, to be honest. Study week is in full swing. A whole week after classes end and before exam week begins. A week off that somehow manages to make students even more of a disaster than they already are. A week full of bad sleep habits, bad eating habits, far too much stress from last minute studying, and far too much partying in a desperate attempt to relax.

Oh yeah, he hasn't really been eating well either. That's a thing. Or sleeping, for that matter. Hasn't really felt up to partying, but he's had enough caffeine in his veins and not enough food in his stomach to absorb it lately to make him feel drunk.

He should probably sleep more. Wants to sleep more. Wants to sleep more than anything, really. But his brain doesn't like to shut up, and that's a problem. The only real sleep he's gotten lately, the kind where he passes out without mental interruption and emotional turmoil, are the hours he can catch between studying where he's sprawled out on the floor or curled in a chair in the student union.

He's caught up in this idea that if he studies really hard, and really fucking applies himself that the universe will grant him a restful night's sleep. Hasn't worked so far, but doesn't stop him from trying.

Studying also keeps him from thinking about Keith. So that's cool.

And he knows damn well that the knot twisted between his ribs and the restless nights have pretty much everything to do with Keith, and are just compounded on with the stress of school, but he'd rather not dwell on that.

So he blames the caffeine overdosing for the jittery nervousness crawling beneath his skin. The lack of proper nutrition for his hazy mental state. The lack of sleep for the lethargy that seeps heavy and sluggish into his bones.

Maybe if he just... does well in school, things will be okay.
Maybe if he just... ignores it, things will go back to normal.

God, what he wouldn't do for some normalcy.

To have things go back to the way they were.

Maybe not to when he was being eaten alive by guilt but... before that. When he was happier. When things were easier. Simpler. When he could sneak moments away with Keith and kiss that stupid face of his and he was getting used to the idea of doing things for himself for once.

He wants that back. So fucking much. But he doesn't know if he can have it. Doesn't know what to do to even try.

He's been using the upcoming exam week as his anchor. Uses it to keep him grounded in something. *Anything*. As long as he knows he needs to study for his exams and write his papers, he knows what to do. No matter how lost he feels and how much he's drifting, he knows what to do. He knows what to throw his energy into.

It's his escape.

It's his anchor.

He doesn't know what the fuck he's going to do once exam week is over. He'll be left to drift, and he doesn't know if it'll be way into the ether or to be set out to sea where he can drown. Neither sounds pleasant, to be honest.

He keeps telling himself he just needs to survive past exams, but... he doesn't know what awaits him on the other side. Winter break, for one. Maybe it'll be good once he can get away from school — away from all of this — and be with his family and—

Oh god, his family.

His family.

How is he going to tell them— oh my god, he doesn't want to face them. This situation with his soulmate— with Keith — is so fucked up. He wants to tell his mom and curl up with her on the couch and have her rock him like when he was a child, but—

Would she be disappointed in him? Would she disapprove of how he's handling this? Would she also think he's being a total fuck up because he *should* be happy but it's hard and it's not all his fault, Keith is to blame, too—

Oh fuck, what if she got mad at Keith? Would his family hate—

Movement catches his eye, and he lifts his head to see two familiar faces crossing the street in front of the coffeeshop, headed right for it.

Pidge and Keith.

One short and one taller. Both bundled up nearly beyond recognition, if he wasn't familiar enough with both of them to know their winter wear. A mop of orange and black hair, both buried beneath beanies but a mess all the same. Chins buried in scarves and hands buried in pockets as they hurry across the street before traffic can start up again.

And that knot in his chest, the one he's been ignoring, tightens. Constricts. Demands his attention.
He sits up, one hand gripping the counter and the other curling into the front of his shirt. He can feel his heart hammering against his ribs, squeezed tight and frantic in its cage.

He stares. Watches as Keith and Pidge trudge through the snow pile at the side of the road, stumbling down into the parking lot. Keith glances around, eyes darting between Pidge, the ground, and the coffee shop.

He looks as nervous as Lance feels.

And as nervous as he is, despite anxiousness running cold and clammy through his veins, there's that dull and deep ache. A pulsing of genuine warmth. Snuffed and stifled, but miraculously still alive.

He can't tell his family about Keith.

What if they get mad at him?

Not yet— Not while he's this torn up about it— Not when they'll be able to see how hurt he is.

What if they hate him?

He can't — That can't happen— Yes, Lance is mad, too, but he doesn't hate — He could never hate —

What if they never forgive him?

No. No, no, no, no. They have to like him. They have to love him. He's an idiot, but he's Lance's idiot. He's his soulmate, and he wouldn't be able to bear it if his family hated him—

The knot in his chest squeezes. The stitches binding his ribs together tightens. There's a tingling fizzling across his skin. His hands are numb. He can't feel his face. He can't breathe— He can't breathe —

It happens all at once. And, still staring at Keith as he is and with his mind working a million miles a minute, Lance sees it all happen in a strange sort of slow motion.

Keith takes a step, and his eyes widen comically. It's only half a second later that the reason becomes apparent. His foot slides further than it should, slipping out from beneath him. He over compensates, weight thrown completely, bending forward and then bending back. His other foot just as useless as it catches the ice as begins to slip as well.

His hands get caught in his pockets, arms lifting his whole jacket as they struggle to get out, struggle to balance him.

It's almost impressive that he manages to stay standing for so long. His feet slip back and forward, scrambling and failing to find traction. They slide out from under him, and he topples backwards. As he goes, his hands finally pull free of his pockets and grab the closest thing in his panic: Pidge.

Pidge yelps, laughter turning to horror as Keith frantically wraps his arms around their shoulders. They try to pull away, but it's too late.

Keith lands hard on the iced pavement, Pidge falling back on top of him. Their bodies are tense with the impact and slide several feet backwards before coming to a stop. And, with what looks like a sigh of defeat, their bodies relax.
They lay there for several long moments, a defeated pile of limbs, wallowing in their misery on the
cold, hard ground.

And the tight knot in Lance's chest pops.

It bursts into a choked and cracked laughter that bubbles up his throat, startling and unbidden. He
slaps a hand over his mouth, but the sound oozes out from between his fingers. His shoulders shake
with it. It eases the tension between his ribs and leaves him feeling giddy.

And then Pidge and Keith try to stand up, only to slip and flail and shout and fall back down all
over again.

He laughs. Deeply and genuinely. Unable to stop the wide grin spreading beneath his palm. The
rush of it is exhilarating, endorphins crashing through his veins and leaving him feeling lighter
than he's felt in weeks.

By the time the two of them make it to the front doors, Lance's grin is in full swing and his cheeks
ache.

Pidge's eyes snap to his the moment they're through the door, narrowing as they purse their lips.
Their cheeks are dusted with a faint blush that Lance knows isn't entirely to blame on the cold.
"Not a word, McClain."

He lowers his hand, grin tapering into a smirk. "Wouldn't dream of it."

He glances at Keith, but he hangs behind Pidge, eyes sweeping out over the coffeeshop and
pointedly avoiding meeting his gaze. His face is buried in his scarf up to his nose, but Lance can
still see the evidence of his scowl. His beanie is askew, hair a mess, and his cheeks are burning.

Lance tries not to think too much about it.

He clears his throat, already reaching for a cup. "The usual?" He aims for casual but falls short of
the mark. He can already hear the strain creeping in.

"Yeah," Pidge says, already digging in their bag for their wallet. "I have a group project together,
and I'm going to need a heavy dose of caffeine if you want to avoid a murder. Also a couple maple
donuts. Keith?"

Keith blinks, eyes darting back to Pidge. He glances up at Lance through his lashes, impossibly
shy, before looking away with a shrug that he's sure is meant to be casual. "A medium drip coffee
and a chocolate espresso donut," He mumbles into his scarf.

He takes payment from Pidge, swiping it and handing the tablet over for them to sign. As they do
so, he grabs their cups. It's automatic and robotic. Pulling out the Sharpie and scribbling Pidge's
usual order. He sets it aside, reaching for Keith's cup—

And he pauses.

Because he doesn't need to write anything on it. It's just a drip coffee. Pass it over and let him go
fill it up at the station. But...

He pauses.

Because Keith still isn't looking at him, and Lance's chest aches.
He's hit with the sudden desperation for normalcy. To have things back to the way they were. It crashes into him like a wave, stealing his breath away and flooding through him. Sweeping away his doubt and his hesitancy and drowning out his confusion for just a moment—just a second—just long enough for him to scribble on the cup and set it down, pushing it across the counter before he can change his mind.

He's written *Devil Juice* on Keith's cup, adding next to it a sloppy doodle of his version of Mothman giving a thumbs down.

He turns, refusing to look at them as he goes through the motions of getting the donut papers, the tongs, grabbing them from the glass display case, putting them in a bag with napkins, pushing them to Pidge before grabbing their cup and turning around.

Making their drink is robotic. Something he's done countless times. But his heart hammers and his hands shake.

He hears the two of them move. Hears Pidge go claim a table across the room, chair scraping across the floor. Hears Keith quieter steps move toward the drip coffee station. And curiosity is a beast he's never learned to contain.

Lance lifts his head, tilting it to the side to glance down the long counter to the far end, where the drip coffee urns sit. Watches as Keith lifts his cup to the middle one. The one that Lance recommended to him so long ago. Watches as Keith freezes suddenly, one hand on the tap but cup not quite beneath it.

He twists his wrist just a little, turning the cup. Lifts it a little higher to get a good look at it. Eyes going wide and lips parting.

Then his head snaps to the side, meeting Lance's eyes.

They stare.

And they stare.

And they stare.

Seconds tick by like hours. Breath stolen from Lance's lungs as he's pinned by the familiar and dark gaze. As those sharp eyes search his own, search his face, brows pinching just slightly.

And then he smiles. So small. Just a mere tilt of his lips that shows more in his cheeks than anything. A soft look. A shy look.

And in that moment. In that brief and fragile moment. In those couple of seconds that feel impossibly like hours. Lance gets what he wanted: a sense of normalcy.

Small and fragile and delicate, but normalcy all the same.

Then Keith is turning away. He fills up his cup and doesn't add any cream or sugar to it, just like the heathen he is, and turns to scurry to the table Pidge has claimed. When Pidge's drink is done, he takes it over to their table before walking back to his station.

He and Keith avoid looking at each other. They don't say a word. They're back to silted and awkward and unsure. But for a moment, just a moment, he had a taste of what they used to have.
And he desperately wants it back.

"Coran?" He says as he steps into the kitchen. As soon as the door closes, he leans back against it, weight slumping as his knees threaten to give out. Coran looks up from where he's manning the fryer, one eyebrow raised. "Am I a bad person?"

Coran's brows furrow quizzically, lips pursing into a thin line. "Not that I'm aware of." And just as quickly, his expression clears, grin splitting his face, wide and honest. "In fact, you're possibly one of the best people I know."

While he's grateful, he can't help the tired sigh that leaves his lips, trailing off into a groan as his head drops back against the door. "Then why does all the bad shit happen to me?"

There's a beat of silence before he hears the basket lift from the fryer. Hears Coran set it aside to cool before there's a shuffling. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Coran has turned to face him, leaning back against the table and crossing his arms over his chest. "What's going on, Lance?"

And it's just so... so patient and kind and unassuming and genuine, and there's just something about it being Coran that makes his last defenses crumble. Something about the fact that Coran has always been an older and wiser presence that Lance has always looked up to. Something about him that makes Lance want to curl up on his lap and be held like his dad used to do when he had nightmares.

Or maybe he's just too fucking tired of keeping it bottled up.

"It's Keith...." He mumbles, eyes sliding closed.

"Keith?" Confusion bleeds into realization, but never fully dissipates. "Is this about what happened at practice? I'm sure Keith doesn't mind the blow he took. Yes, it was a little hard, but he was only dazed. Besides, the two of you have gotten close. I'm sure if you apologize, he'll readily forgive—"

"He's my soulmate."

He can't stop the words. It comes out in a rush. Blurring the truth that he's just begun to acknowledge. He doesn't know why he says it, only knows that he needs to. Needs to get it off his chest and out in the open and—

And he's surprised by how good it feels to say aloud.

"He's my soulmate," He says again, softer this time, a fragile whisper.

"Oh," It's surprised, followed by a low whistle. "Well, that's... my, what a surprise." While the surprise doesn't fade, it's slowly overtaken with... awe? And suddenly bubbling chuckle. "I must admit, I knew you two were getting closer than strictly friends—"

Lance groans. "Was it that obvious?"

"Yes, my boy, incredibly so, however, soulmates, that's... unexpected but— well— incredible. Congratulations, Lance! You found him!"

Lance groans again, reaching up to dig the heels of his hands into his eyes.

There's a heavy pause, followed by a wary, "Correct me if I'm mistaken, but shouldn't this be good news?"
"I don't know, maybe?" He says, voice mumbled as he drags his hands down his face. When he opens his eyes, he levels Coran with a pleading look, brows drawn and lips pursed. He feels small under the man's patient gaze, but not in a bad way. It is, however, overwhelming. So he looks down. Kicks the tiles with his shoe. "He's known for months and never told me. I found out on my own."

"Oh," Coran hums. "I see."

And while he doesn't elaborate, Lance knows that he *does* see. He can hear the understanding. He can also hear the sympathy, but it lacks the biting edge of pity. And while the silence stretches, it doesn't feel tense. Doesn't feel weighted. Coran doesn't push or pry, merely waits patiently for Lance to say what he needs to say.

And that's, perhaps, why he found himself opening up to Coran in the first place.

"I used to think..." He stops as his voice cracks, sighing with frustration. He crosses his arms tightly over his chest, as if it might help stop the way his ribs feel fit to burst. "I used to think things would be easier this way. If— If he was my soulmate. I used to think everything would just be okay if it was him. Now I don't know... Everything just... It's complicated now? It shouldn't be, but it is, and I don't know how to fix it. It feels like things will never go back to the way they were, and I... really miss the way things were."

"Does he make you happy?"

Lance looks up, brows pinching as he frowns. "What?"

Coran's eyes are patient, smile small as he says, soft and low, "Does he make you happy?" Lance looks away, gaze dragging across the boxes of coffee beans and cups and napkins. He doesn't trust his voice, so he simply nods. "Then don't worry so much."

"What if..." He licks his lips, hating the way his eyes burn. "What if I screwed up?" What if I can't fix it? What if I handled it the wrong way and *I'm* the reason things will never be the same?"

"Then I suppose you should fix it." It sounds so simple. Said with that lilting edge of amusement. "For what it's worth... he looks like he wants to, too."

Lance glances back at him, but his eyes are turned elsewhere. He follows Coran's gaze to the line of monitors along the far wall. The ones that show the security camera feeds. In one, he can see Pidge and Keith at their table.

Keith looks... well, miserable. He keeps glancing away from his notebook, pen tapping on the page, furrowed brows turned toward where Lance knows the door to the kitchen is. It never stays there for long, snapping back to his notes with that frown that Lance *knows* is self-berating.

But then he looks at his cup, and the soft, small smile is enough to make Lance's heart lurch.

"I don't know if it'll be that easy," He whispers, not bothering to hide his fear. His trepidation. The anxious worry that seems to live beneath his skin lately. He lets Coran see it, knowing that he'll never think less of him for it.

Coran merely hums, and wistfully, thoughtfully, he says, "Nothing in life ever is."

Eyes on the monitor, he can't help but say, "It was for my family." He hates the bitter taste on his tongue. The sour roll of jealousy in his gut.
"Was it though?"

His eyes snap to Coran's, unchanging in their thoughtfulness. That small, secretive quirk to his lips still in place. "What?"

"Was it really that easy for them? I've heard your stories before, Lance, and I want you to really think about it. They may be happy now, but was it really that easy for them?"

Lance nearly scoffs. Nearly waves Coran off and tells him that of course it was easy for them. Nearly brushes it away.

Nearly.

Nearly, because then he actually thinks about it.

Thinks about how Marco and his soulmate had spent years denying each other. How they fought and picked on each other, and while it eventually became fond teasing, it wasn't always that way. He was young, but... he still remembers the nights he found Marco crying. The nights Marco punched holes in his wall in his frustration.

Thinks about Veronica, and when she first found out her best friend was her soulmate. How she hadn't even known she liked girls, and having to come to terms with that realization while also trying to find new footing with her closest friend. He remembers the awkwardness. The doubts. Veronica spending hours sitting with their mom in the kitchen while she vented her worries over half empty mugs of cooling tea.

Thinks about Maria. How... how strained she is when people ask about her future. Whether she'll stay here or move to Cuba. About how lonely she gets. About how, beneath her boisterous attitude and beneath the laughter and the grins... she has her own uncertainty. Her struggles. Her regrets.

Thinks about Luis, and how hard it must be to be seventeen and never feel a connection in a world where connections mean everything. How hard it must be to know that he'll have to be patient for long after the connection happens.

He looks back to the monitor, to where Keith taps his notebook and sips his coffee. To where his gaze occasionally drifts to the kitchen before snapping back to place.

Maybe having a soulmate isn't easy, but he wishes it was. He'd give anything for it to be. He'd give anything to just go back in time and change things. He doesn't even know what he'd change, but he just—

He wants his friend back.

He wants Keith back.

Study week is a war zone, and the students are nothing more than tired soldiers clinging to life.

The library and student union are open for twenty-four hours a day, and students fill up every nook and cranny in an attempt to find somewhere to work that isn't their dorms or apartments. Every space is filled. Tables. Chairs. Floors. Corners. Students holed up with their things strewn about
them, bundled in hoodies and blankets. It's not uncommon to find them sleeping. Just a nap. Just closing their eyes. Crammed in the strangest places and the strangest positions.

They do what they've gotta do, and there's no judgement during study week. Everyone moves about like a ghosts, tried and heavy, on the verge of hysteria yet somehow still hanging on.

You don't blink when you see someone sprawled across the floor in the stairwell, fast asleep. You merely step over them and wish them a silent good luck.

And Lance? He blends right the fuck in. With the dark as shit bags under his eyes and messy hair and skin that's far too oily for his own good.

He managed to get a table in the library though, so that's one saving grace. Not that he really needs a table. He had been doing just fine in the corner of bookshelves he'd scoped out and turned into his study nest. But when the group at the table nearby left, he'd swooped right in and claimed it.

Feels good to sit at a table.

Makes him feel more like a person.

Too bad it doesn't help him study.

He has his laptop out and open, half finished essay staring at him with the cursor blinking. His browser is open to at least ten tabs of research and articles that hurt his head every time he tries to read them. His textbook is opened next to him, but he's not sure if it's even the right page, and he has at least three notebooks scattered around the table.

And he's currently hunched over, forehead resting on one of the notebooks with his arms sprawled out over the table.

He tried. He really tried. He had hoped that by getting everything set up, he'd be kickstarted into the right mindset. He's wrong, of course. What else is new? He managed to limp his way through a couple more paragraphs of his paper, but now he's thoroughly run out of steam, and he's pretty sure he's dying.

Truthfully, he's not sure what he expected. He's been miserable all day, and going to the library was a last ditch effort to force himself to get something done. That, and to escape Hunk's probing stare and awkward attempts at conversation.

He heaves a heavy, defeated sigh and wishes...

He wishes Keith were here. That Keith were here to surprise him with coffee and a muffin. To give him easy conversation and dry humor. To give him just enough of a distraction to lift his spirits a little.

Though, he supposes, if that were the case, his spirits wouldn't need lifting to begin with.

He groans, rolling his forehead back and forth over the notebook beneath him. This is such a mess. Such a fucking mess. He just wants Keith back. He wants his soulmate back. He... he still has trouble trying to fit those two pieces together. Like the edges don't quite line up and the outlines of them are blurring, but... he'd like to. He'd like to more than anything.

Too bad he's a fucking coward and a miserable stressed out piece of shit—

Someone clears their throat, and Lance's head snaps up. He blinks, staring at the person hovering
next to his table for a solid five seconds before his sluggish brain is able to fully decipher what he's seeing.

"Shiro?"

The man smiles, and it's that same kind of patient, warm smile that Coran has. Yet despite all the easy confidence Shiro exudes, despite being tall, broad, and handsome, he manages to look small and sheepish as he lifts one of the two coffee cups in his hands. "Peace offering?"

Lance lifts a brow, lips pursing. "Why are you extending a peace offering?" He asks, but he's already stretching his hands out, taking the cup from Shiro. It's a large, and it's warm. He leans back in his seat, cradling it between his hands.

Shiro nods to the seat across from him. "Mind if I...?"

Lance just shrugs. "Go for it." He eyes the cup curiously. It smells like coffee, but there's a hint of vanilla so that's gotta mean it's not straight up bitter juice, right? Still, even if it was, he'd probably drink it anyway. He puts it to his lips, sipping cautiously, and is pleasantly surprised by the sweetness, even if it does burn his tongue.

"Keith told me your favorite drink," Shiro says as he pulls out the chair.

Lance tenses at the mention of his name, heart already reacting far more than it should. He takes another sip to hide whatever expression is on his face at the moment. He's too tired to be able to control it.

Shiro sits, but while he makes himself comfortable, he doesn't settle in. His bag sits on the floor, propped up against the table, unopened. His scarf is unraveled and his jacket is unzipped, but he doesn't take it off. He sits forward, cradling his own cup between his hands on the table.

He's clearly not here to stay, or to study. The look in his eyes as he meets Lance's, patient but tired and cautious, tells him that Shiro is here to talk, and that puts him on edge. Makes him squirm in his seat under the weight of that gaze. Makes him want to hide behind his computer screen and his coffee cup.

But he already accepted the coffee, so now he has to listen.

Man, fuck social conventions.

"Thanks for the coffee," He says, if only to break the silence. He tries for a smile and thinks he hits it at least fifty percent.

Shiro's smile is a mere quirk at the corners of his lips. "No problem, I figured you could use it." He sighs then, eyes dropping down to his own cup as his smile fades. Lips pursed, his fingers tap against the sides of the cup. "Lance, I'm here to apologize."

Lance heaves a heavy sigh, dropping his cup to the table as he rubs his eyes with one hand. Great. Figures Keith would tell Shiro. "Look, if this is about Keith—"

"I'm not here on behalf of Keith."

Lance's eyes open, narrowing in suspicion as his hand slowly drops to the table. "You're... not?" Shiro shakes his head, and Lance quirks an eyebrow, lifting his cup a fraction. "Then what's with the peace offering?"
His smile is small, edged with a guilt that Lance doesn't understand. There's still warmth in his steady gaze, but beyond that is a plea... a plea for forgiveness. "I want to apologize on behalf of myself."

"That... doesn't make sense, Shiro," He says slowly, carefully, feeling a trickle of confusion and uncertainty slip down his spine.

A wry smirk. Exhaustion in his eyes. He tilts his head to the side, breathing in deep and letting it out long. "I knew, Lance. Keith told me the day he found out. I've known this whole time."

Dread. Confusion. Surprise. He feels his lungs squeeze, air rushing past his vocal chords and letting out a soft, "You knew?"

Shiro rests an elbow on the table, bending forward to run his fingers through his hair and rest his forehead in his palm. His shoulders slump, fingers of his prosthetic tapping repeatedly on his cup. "Yeah," He says with a sigh. He... doesn't sound too happy about it. "Yeah, I knew. And it wasn't my secret to tell. I knew Keith had to handle this in his own way, and I don't regret keeping his secret. But... I am sorry I had to. I'm sorry it went like this. I know it's not what you wanted."

"Yeah, well..." A bubble of incredulous laughter drips from his lips, sounding dry and cracked as he mutters, "We don't always get what we want."

"For what it's worth, I did try to get him to tell you. And he was going to. Soon, I think. But he needed time. More time than most people probably would've needed, but... he's... complicated."

"Don't I know it..." Lance snorts, rolling his eyes as he lifts his cup to his lips and tries to take brief solace in the sweet, caffeinated heat. It's probably not good for his already racing heart, but he doesn't really care. It settles his nerves all the same.

A silence stretches between them. Lance isn't sure what to say, and it looks like Shiro is lost in thought. Eyes on the coffeecup between his prosthetic fingers, thick brows furrowed and lips pursed. Lance lets him have the time to collect his thoughts as he tries to do the same.

He... really isn't surprised that Shiro had known. Like, initially? Yeah, surprised. More than a little embarrassed. Because Jesus Christ, Shiro's been watching him blunder around Keith for months and gushing about his soulmate and knowing that Keith is that soulmate—_god_, what he wouldn't give to have the library floor just open up and swallow him whole.

So yeah, embarrassed as hell, true, but not really surprised. And... he can't really blame Shiro for not telling him. He's a good guy. Loyal and pragmatic. Lance believes him when he says that he thought it would be best for Keith to tell him. Lance thinks so, too.

Is he hurt? Maybe a little. But the new revelation doesn't really make much of a difference when everything is already aching. Just another pebble on the top of a pile of stone.

At least he can rest easy knowing that no one else probably knew. Pidge might be one of Keith's closest friends, but they suck at keeping secrets and would've definitely meddled. For the briefest of moments, he wonders if Allura knew, but— no. He doesn't think Shiro would've told her. If he said he kept Keith's secret, that meant one hundred percent.

"Has Keith told you about his parents?" Shiro asks.

Lance blinks, looking away from the spot on his keyboard where he'd been zoning out. How long had they sat in silence? He clears his throat, shifting a little in his seat. "Uh, yeah... yeah, he has."
And that's... oh god, that's his soulmate's story. Like, he knew that. Logically. But... while he's had all the pieces, he's never really put the puzzle together? Never really looked into what exactly that meant because he was trying not to think about it at all, and...

Keith's parents rushed things, and it ended poorly, and he's been terrified of his own soulmate doing the same, and— oh god, that's him.

That's—

He's—

There's a level of irony in the idea of Keith being afraid of fucking things up and then all of this going down, but it's overshadowed by the ache between his ribs.

That's... that's why his soulmate— Keith— always avoided direction questions and Lance's poorly disguised attempts to learn who he was...

He's taken back to a moment shared on the parkway. Sitting on a rock and overlooking the rolling mountains, painted in colors of autumn.

Shiro lets out a breath that sounds like relief. Some of the tension leaves his shoulders. "Yeah, okay, that's good. Because that's... not really my story to tell. But he's already told you, so... that's good. Has he told you about our parents?"

Lance blinks, not really sure why that matters. He shakes his head all the same. "No, not... really? He's said they were really close and loved each other and you used to joke they were soulmates, but that's about it. He... doesn't really like to talk about them. I think it still hurts too much."

Shiro nods. "Yeah, it's... still a bit of a raw topic." He trails off, turning his head to the side as his hand drops, fingers idly pressing into his prosthetic wrist beneath the layers of his jacket. He clears his throat then, straightening as he turns back to Lance. "Anyway, that is partly my story, so I can tell you about them. What you gain from it and what you learn about Keith... well that's up to you."

Lance lifts an eyebrow, intrigue and curiosity starting to gnaw at him, heart racing in a familiar giddy anticipation at the prospect of learning a new puzzle piece that makes up Keith. He hates it, but it's there. He wants to know. He wants to understand. And whatever it is, Shiro seems to think it's important.

He says nothing though. Simply waits. Waits for Shiro to gather himself and his thoughts. Waits because somewhere deep down, he fears that his voice or movement might shatter the moment. Might somehow scare Shiro away and he'll never learn. Never understand.

"It's not really a long story," Shiro starts, each word said slowly and carefully. His lips curve into a wry smile, eyes distant. "We didn't just joke that they were soulmates, Lance. They were soulmates."

"But that's—" Lance's eyes narrow, mouth snapping shut to frown as he sorts through memories. "Keith said that his birth parents were soulmates."

"They were." Shiro's smile widens. Still wry, but amused. The edges of his eyes crinkle with it. "As were mine." Lance opens his mouth, but no words come out. So he settles on a frown instead. Lifting his chin and narrowing his eyes. Shiro chuckles. "I know it sounds strange. Unbelievable, even. Keith's parents were... well, you know about that. My parents were different. They were soulmates, and they loved each other. But my mom... she had cancer, and it was a very slow decline. After we lost her, he... wasn't happy for a long time. He tried, for me, but I could see the
weight of it. Then he found Keith's mom, and everything was lighter. He smiled more. He **laughed.** He was happy again."

Shiro's smile is fond. His eyes distant but... softer. Lance feels himself smiling with him.

"They dated for two years before their First Connection happened." Lance's smile fades as his mouth drops open, eyes widening along with Shiro's smile. Whatever he looks like must be exactly what Shiro was expecting because the man chuckles, shaking his head. "Yeah, I know, it sounds crazy, but... they were one of the rare few. The ones that prove it can happen, but no one likes to talk about because it makes it harder when it doesn't happen to them, you know?"

"They..." Lance mouth feels dry, and there's a lump in his throat. He knew it was a possibility. Everyone does. But it's so damn rare. Rare enough that some people believe it's myth, despite couples out there existing as proof. "They formed their own soul connection?"

Shiro nods, smile gentle and eyes wistful. "Yeah. It happened when Keith's mom was painting one day. She's the one who taught him how to paint on himself. They must've been doing that, and— and I was with my dad at the time. He dropped a plate and shattered it all over the kitchen floor. He looked so startled, but happy, too? I remember him crying, and I was worried until I saw the colors on his arm."

"That's... incredible," He says, breathless and awed.

"I know," Shiro's smile could blind the sun. "They were incredible. They found so much happiness in each other, fell in love without soulmarks, and... and then their connection grew naturally. It was incredible to see growing up. To know that kind of love is possible. But..." His smile doesn't fade, but it shifts. It's in his eyes. The melancholy edge. "I also had birth parents who were original soulmates and just as happy. Keith..."

He trails off. Doesn't finish. Leaves it hanging in the open, dangling the puzzle piece in the air, waiting for Lance to pick it up and set it into place.

And he does.

It's all laid out before him.

Mind whirling as the pieces shift together.

Keith, growing up knowing that soulmates don't equal happiness, that nothing is guaranteed. Watching his mom suffer and lose a father he'd never known. Watching his mom meet someone new. Fall in love. Love so deeply that their souls, broken and alone, reached out for one another and let the universe stitch them together...

"He wanted you to fall for **him,** and he wanted to get to know **you.** Not as soulmates, but... just as Keith and Lance." Shiro says, voice soft and gentle. Not so much breaking him from his thoughts as slipping into them. "He didn't want you to like him just because he's your soulmate."

Lance closes his eyes, breath shaking as it leaves his lungs. He slips further down in his chair, tilting his head to rest on the back of it, arms still lifted at an odd angle to grip his coffee cup on top of the table. "I know, Shiro," He says, voice cracking before dropping to a whisper, "I **know.**"

And he does.

He really, really does.
As much as he'd like to rage and scream and shout that it isn't fair, that Keith should've done things differently, that he wouldn't have changed just because Keith is his soulmate—he can't. He can't, and the fight has already left him. The heat and fire of his anger has already puttered out. Leaving nothing but a cold and numb pit.

Because he knows.

When he thinks about it, when he really lets himself think about it, he knows Keith's fears weren't unfounded. He knows, deep in the shadows of his heart, that he would've changed. Would've seen Keith differently. Would've done anything and everything to appeal to Keith.

But he hadn't needed to.

He hadn't needed to change a damn thing about himself, and yet Keith still managed to look at him with that soft fondness that makes his heart leap and touch him with a grip that's desperate and fingertips that are reverent. Like he's a treasure. Like he's precious.

He squeezes his eyes harder, feeling the burn and the prickle and refusing to give into it. He's not going to cry in the library. He refuses.

He takes a deep breath, letting it out with a shaky exhale. "I know, Shiro. And I... I understand why Keith didn't tell me. I... I get it. I really do. But... I'm still allowed to be mad."

"I know you are," Shiro says, all patient calm and without a hint of judgement. If anything, there was an understanding there. One that made Lance feel better about the way his insides have been twisting themselves up. "But... are you?"

Lance frowns, opening his eyes and blinking the burning away. He looks at Shiro, lifting a brow. "Am I what?"

"Mad," He says simply, lips curling into that same faintly amused smile he's seen on Coran. One that's patient and kind, but lined with the amusement that comes with understanding. "Don't get me wrong, you have every right to be mad, but... are you?"

He opens his mouth to say yes, and instead he says, "No." Frowning, he looks down at the table, at the cup in his hands. He's surprised by his own answer. By how right it sits in his chest. "I was, but... Now I just... I just want Keith back." He says it so softly, voice barely above a whisper to keep it from cracking. Hates how small and vulnerable he sounds, but feels his chest flutter all the same as the words leave his lips.

He refuses to look up at Shiro. Not when there's a rush of heat creeping up his neck to settle on his cheeks.

"You should tell Keith that."

He purses his lips, glaring at his cup. "It's not that easy..."

"It's also not as hard as you're making it." It's quiet. Patient. Amused. And Lance feels like it should sound condescending, but it doesn't.

Instead, it makes a little spark of something crackle in Lance's chest. Hope, maybe? Hope that maybe Shiro is right. God, he wants Shiro to be right.

He licks his lips, voice barely audible above the general din of conversation in the library. "What if things aren't the same? What if he changes around me? I just... I just want things to go back to the
way they were, but everything is gonna be different now."

Shiro chuckles, low and rumbling. Lance looks up at him sharply through his lashes, frown pursed against the light in Shiro's eyes and the quirk of his smile. "Sorry," He says, lifting a placating hand. "It's just... funny, because Keith has been afraid of the same thing."

Lance opens his mouth, only to snap it shut. His gaze drops back to his cup.

And slowly, so very slowly, a smile rises unbidden to his lips. Just a curve. Barely there. Can hardly be called a smile. Yet it's there. Lifting his cheeks. A bubbling in his chest making him feel lighter than he has in days.

The knot in his chest unravels, just a little, slowly but certain. Releasing with it a rush of endorphins that hum through his veins. Eroding away the lingering shadows and doubts and the digging claws of uncertainty.

He's still embarrassed. Still hurt. Doesn't think those will go away so easily, but... he's not mad. And he's tired of existing in this miserable state.

"Thanks, Shiro," He says, voice like a sigh, tasting of relief. "I... thanks."

"No problem, Lance." His own shoulders slump. His own relief palpable. He reaches across the table, setting a hand on Lance's wrist. Meeting his gaze with eyes crinkled and lips quirked. "It's okay to make him squirm for a bit, I can't say he doesn't deserve it, but don't torture yourself in the process, okay? You can let yourself be happy."

Lance smiles, but can't find his voice. There's a lump in his throat and tears burning in the corners of his eyes, and the most he can do to keep from cracking is to just sit still and silent.

It's enough, however, because Shiro pats his arm before pulling away. Before standing and swinging his bag back over his shoulder. "I'm going over to Keith's to help him with an all-nighter. Don't follow our example, though, and try to get some sleep."

"I'll try," He says, quirking a wry smile.

Sleep, however, is the last thing on his mind. He has a better idea.

By the time he leaves the library, it's late. Nearing midnight.

After Shiro had left, Lance had been overwhelmed with a desperate and frantic wave of hyper-fixation. He rode the tide, brain churning a million miles a minute as his fingers struggled to keep up. It wasn't a pleasant hyper-fixation. It was one that felt scattered and desperate and like he was scrambling to finish before he crumbled.

Because he needs to talk to Hunk. And Pidge. And quite frankly, Keith.

He'd like to say that his hyper-fixation and frantic attempt to get some work done was out of a sense of responsibility. Get your homework done before you go have a heart-to-heart with your friends.

But he knows that while the need to pour out his guts was a boiling and rolling itch beneath his
skin, finishing his paper was done more out of procrastination and putting off the inevitable while he gathered the strength to do what needed to be done.

While the library had been bright and crowded, campus itself is dark and quiet. It snowed while he was locked away. A lot, from the looks of it. There's a thick layer of snow on the ground, untouched save for the trails of footsteps on the main walking paths between the library and the dorms.

The rest of campus is blanketed by a thick layer of white. Untouched. Pristine. Glowing under the soft yellow light of the streetlights that line the walkways.

It's still snowing, but not heavily. Drifting lazy flakes, catching the light and dancing on the breeze.

It's... peaceful.

Calming.

Settles something inside him that had been writhing and coiling.

He feels... strangely, and incredibly, at ease. Centered. Light. Not numb, but... calm.

He's not surprised to find Hunk is still up when he gets back. He'd been counting on it, actually. Their room is dimly lit, a welcome comparison to the bright hallway. He slips inside, dropping his bag off on the floor. But he doesn't unzip his coat. Doesn't kick off his boots.

He stands in the entryway, staring at Hunk. Waiting patiently for his attention.

The only light source is his computer screen and the lamp on his desk. A soft light. A comforting light. One that makes their room glow gently and warm the shadows. It's warm. Smells like cookies and knows instinctually that Hunk must've taken a break from is project to go to the kitchen downstairs to stress bake.

Cookies. Chocolate macadamia nut, if he's not mistaken. Not a bad stress, then. More like the kinda overwhelming need to take a moment away to reorganize thoughts. He probably had to rewrite some major portions of his paper—

Wow, okay, so maybe Hunk was right about the whole knowing-each-other's-stress-habits thing.

After a few moments, Hunk looks up. He looks tired, but he smiles. "Hey, man." When Lance doesn't move from the door, he raises an eyebrow, smile slowly fading. "Is everything okay...?"

He hates that question. He really does. But he thinks he's ready to start answering honestly.

He swallows past the lump in his throat, closing his eyes as he takes a deep breath and lets out a choked and ragged, "I'm calling a code sixty-three."

There's a sharp intake of breath. A long pause. A whispered, "Seriously?"

He opens his eyes to find Hunk staring at him. Eyes wide and concerned. Brows pulling together and mouth hanging open. Lance's mouth feels dry and his voice hoarse as he says, "Yeah."

Hunk's mouth snaps shut, pursing into a frown. The shock leaves his face, replaced by a single minded determination. "Right. Got it, buddy." He turns back around, quickly saving whatever document he has open and slamming his laptop shut. He's on his feet in seconds, standing in front of Lance with his hands on his shoulders. Firm and warm and grounding. He ducks his head a little
to meet Lance's gaze, eyes searching. "Got anything in mind?"

Lance manages to quirk a wry smile, ignoring how shaky it feels. "There's a lot of fresh snow outside..."

Hunk's eyes widen, a buzz of understanding and excitement daring to lift his frown. "Oh man, we haven't done that since freshman year."

Lance's smile still quivers, but his voice is more solid. "I know."

Then Hunk is moving, scrambling around their room. Changing into warmer clothes. Pulling on his boots. Grabbing a hoodie and his jacket. His hat, scarf, and gloves. He insists Lance puts on a couple more layers, and after half-hearted whining, he does so.

When they're both bundled and far too warm in the heat of their dorm room, Hunk pauses at the door. He glances back at Lance, expression intense and concerned all at once. "Should we get Pidge, or do you want it to be just me?"

He buries his hands in his pockets, hunching his shoulders. "We need Pidge."

Hunk nods once, and they leave the room, locking it behind them before climbing the steps to Pidge's floor. They knock softly, but firmly. Pidge doesn't have a roommate for them to worry about waking up, but they'd rather not disturb the whole floor.

Neither of them are surprised when Pidge answers, disgruntled but still very much awake. Their hair is a mess, pulled back with various clips in random places. Their small frame is swallowed by pajama pants and an oversized hoodie. They lift a silent brow, eyes roaming over the two of them in their full winter wear.

"It's a code sixty-three," Hunk says before Pidge can voice a question, nodding his head toward Lance.

Lance keeps his hands buried, his shoulders hunched, and stares intently at Pidge's bare feet.

A sharp intake of breath. A pause. A whispered, "No shit?"

Lance purses his lips, not quite trusting his voice as he nods.

"Alright, give me five minutes," They say before disappearing back into their room.

They're ready in two, and the three of them make their way to the elevator. The ride to the ground floor is silent. Neither of them pressing him for answers. They know as well as he does that he'll open up tonight. It's just a matter of time. Of gathering his thoughts. And they'll wait for him and keep him company, because that's what best friends are for.

That's what code sixty-three is all about.

Sixty-three.

The day that his soulmate broke their month long silence to paint an emotional storm on their skin that ripped through Lance and tore him to shreds.

Six. Three.

The day they struggled so violently with their own consuming sorrow that Lance could practically feel their voice through their connection, crying out in agony as maroon fingers clawed down their
throat.

June third.

The day his soulmate—the day *Keith*—and oh *god* Lance feels a painful lurch in his chest as he realizes that all those emotions had come from *Keith*—had left him a shattered and hollowed shell, ravaged by a storm he couldn't control and abandoned him shortly after. Helpless and useless and knowing that his soulmate was out there somewhere suffering, and there was nothing he could do.

He had called Hunk that night. Hunk had come over without question. They had stayed up the whole night. Baking. Playing games. Distracting Lance from the echo of his soulmate's storm and his own creeping anxiety. And in the early hours of dawn, they had sat out on his family's old swing set to watch the sunrise in companionable silence.

Ever since that day, he and Hunk have a code. Code sixty-three. It's a distress call and an emergency lifeline. Able to be enacted at any time but only in dire circumstances. It's a call for extreme bro time. It means that whatever is happening, they can't be alone. Everything is too much. They need company and a firm distraction and, usually, to stay up all night for no reason other than they can.

Code sixty-three has only been enacted a few times since that first day. When the stress of life becomes too overwhelming and there's a desperate need to escape, to fight, to *survive*. To see the sunrise, if only to reaffirm that the night always passes.

They drop everything if someone calls a code sixty-three. If they can, they do. It's just part of being best friends. Of being there, no questions asked. And once Pidge had been pulled into their group in college, they had quickly been taught the meaning of code sixty-three. They've enacted it a few times themself over the years.

It's a safety net, and it's one that none of them take lightly.

They trudge out into the snow, and while Hunk and Pidge flank him, they let him lead. Out into the untouched snow. Off the beaten path and walkways. Out into campus. Out into the night, lit only by dim lamp posts.

He lets himself enjoy the crunch of fresh snow beneath his boots. Lets himself laugh at Pidge as they hilariously try to lift their legs high to walk through deep snow, and at Hunk as he shuffles his feet quickly, bulldozing through it and creating a wide spray of snow in all directions.

He tries to catch snowflakes on his tongue, shoving Pidge when they succeed first and yelping when they drag him down to the ground with him.

They build a snowman army in the courtyard in front of the student union. With mercilessly slain snowman parts strewn across and several others in dramatic poses. They work until their hands feel numb, and then they move on, walking more to get their blood flowing and burying their frozen hands in their pockets.

They walk through the small park on campus. Walking along the little stream that flows through it. Pidge and Lance making Hunk nervous that they're going to fall.

They spend hours walking around campus, playing in the untouched snow, tearing it apart and leaving it a mess in their wake.

It's cold. The breeze is a chill against his exposed skin. His fingertips and toes feel numb, and there's a bite on his cheeks. But in his chest, at his core, he feels warm. He feels lighter than he has
He's cold, but he feels at ease. At peace. There's only one thing missing, but... he doesn't feel like it's as lost as it was earlier that day.

Maybe Keith will join them for the next code sixty-three. He likes that thought.

None of them have their phones, but the clock tower at the center of campus chimes four in the morning by the time Lance feels settled enough. By the time he's ready.

Pidge and Hunk seem to pick up on his somber shift in mood as he leads them across campus, strides purposeful instead of aimless. They fall into a silence, jokes and laughter petering out. But it's not tense. It's companionable. They let themselves enjoy the night and the stillness, a welcome reprieve from the hectic days of study week.

He leads them to one of the parking decks on campus. Pidge looks confused as he leads them to the stairwell and begins to climb, but he catches Hunk's small smile. They climb, and climb, and climb. Legs stiff and feet numb. And they pause as they step back out into the night.

Just as he had hoped, the entire top floor of the parking deck is completely untouched. An entire open area with a waist high concrete wall surrounding it, covered in a thick pallet of snow. Untouched by footprints or tire tracks. High above the buildings around them. Open to the sky.

Peaceful.

Secluded.

A bubble of stillness amongst a campus full of people.

He walks out to the center, breathes a deep breath, and lets himself fall backwards into the snow. And he lays there. Limbs sprawled out and eyes on the night sky. It's mostly cloudy, but he can see the stars peek out where the clouds shift with the wind. He watches the snow fall. Feels it stick to his eyelashes and melt on his cheeks.

Footsteps. Slow and hesitant. Approaching him. He sees Hunk and Pidge enter his field of vision, but he doesn't look at them. Waits as they lie down on either side of him. Both of them sprawling out the same way.

And they lay in silence. Letting the peace of the night and their own exhaustion sink into them. They're tired. He knows they are. He is, too. But he has stuff to get off his chest, and he knows that they're determined to stick with him till sunrise. He'd do the same for them.

They wait. Patient.

Lance counts the moments pass in heartbeats. Waits for the tense knot in his chest to loosen. Waits for his breathes to even out and the nerves to slink away into the night. Waits for his pulse to slow as a calm settles over him.

An acceptance.

He's ready.

"Keith is my soulmate."
And then he tells them everything.

Lance slouches low in the metal chair, legs stretched out in front of him. His hands are buried in his pockets, but his jacket is unzipped and his scarf unravelled. His skin is still numb, but feeling is slowly starting to seep back into his fingers and toes.

"I think they're more upset than I was," He says, voice lilting with amusement. He glances over at Hunk, huddled in his own chair, with a smirk curving his lips. Hunk just snorts a short laugh, eyes fixed on Pidge but gaze distant.

"Shut the fuck up, Lance." Pidge's voice is muffled from where they lay their head face down on the small table. Their arms are flung out, flopping over the edges. "I'm trying to process everything."

Lance hums his understanding, gaze drifting to the large windows that separate the lobby area from the library itself. It's not as crowded as it had been earlier, but there are definitely a good few dozen students in there. And that's just what he can see on the first floor. Who knew how many more were sprawled across tables and curled up in corners on the other floors.

He doesn't know the time, but he knows it's late as hell— early as fuck?

It's nearly the end of the night, that's for damn sure. He can feel it in the exhaustion clinging to him. Making his eyes burn and heavy. There's a chain of yawning going between the three of them that they can't seem to break.

Still... he feels light. Lighter and happier and just... freer than he has in a very long time. He hadn't realized how good it would feel to tell his friends, but it's euphoric. He's got all the good vibes and shit running through his veins. It's all warm and fuzzy, though that might just be the fact that they're actually in a heated building now.

He told them everything on the top floor of the parking deck, lying in the snow beneath the night sky.

Told them how he and Keith had a thing. Told them how he started to fall for Keith. Told them about how guilty he had felt. About how much he had struggled with that. Got side tracked for a bit and let himself gush about Keith for a while, which was surprisingly cathartic. He hasn't gotten to gush about Keith to anyone yet, and boy does he have a lot of mushy thoughts about that guy. He told them about finding the sketchbook where Keith redraws— or maybe pre-draws?— all of his soulmark paintings. Told them about confronting Keith in the gym and all the fall out that's happened since.

They were shocked, understandably. Surprised, definitely. They interrupted him with a few questions, but mostly listened. Let him get it all out. After some moments of rapid fire questions, several minutes of Pidge pacing and ranting, and a few wordless shouts to the night air, Hunk had suggested they go somewhere warm.

Not wanting to go back to their dorm yet, they went for the library lobby. It's big and open and empty. They sit at one of the small tables that fill the area between the library and the library's coffeeshop. The coffeeshop is, unfortunately, closed, but the library is open twenty-four-seven. Which means the lobby is, too.
Normally not a secluded area, the emptiness of the early morning hour gives them privacy and a place to warm up after trekking around in the snow for hours.

Now that he's gotten it off his chest, now that he feels nearly giddy with the lightness of it all and probably some sleep deprivation, he gets to sit back, thaw, and watch his friends go through all the painful processing that he's spent weeks on.

"You found your soulmate," Hunk says, barely more than an awe filled whisper. He's still staring at where Pidge is sprawled over the table, but his eyes are unfocused. He's been doing that. Muttering phrases like that over and over, whenever there's a lull in the conversation.

"Yup," Lance says, finally allowing himself to be a little pleased by that fact.

"And it's Keith."

"Mmm."

"We've known him for months. How long has he known?"

Lance shrugs, slouching far enough in the chair to rest his head on the back of it. "Dunno. Haven't asked. Part of that whole avoiding him thing I've been doing while I process all of... this."

And it's really the processing that's the hard part. Acceptance is easy once the processing is over. But the processing... it can take time. When you're so sure of something, so certain that things exist in a certain state and a certain order. And then you learn that it's completely different. You have a whole puzzle already put together, and someone gives you a piece you hadn't realized you've been missing. And you've got to find a way to rearrange everything to make that new piece fit.

Takes time.

Can be painful. It was for him, but he's a lot closer to the heart of this than Hunk and Pidge are.

It's... actually kind of amusing to watch them go through it. To watch all the expressions flit across their features, far too sleep deprived to hold anything back. He gets to watch as they shuffle back through an entire semester's worth of memories and see all the things they've missed. Making sense of all the things they never questioned. Seeing their memories with newfound lenses.

Pidge lifts their head suddenly, hands slapping flat on the table, loud and echoing in the empty lobby. "You!" They snap their head to the side, eyes boring into Lance's. They lean forward just a fraction, eyes narrowing as they hiss, "You didn't know who Mothman is."

Lance blinks. Once. Twice. A choked laugh bubbles up his throat and snorts out in a sharp exhale. "I do now."

"I told Keith to dump his soulmate because you didn't know who Mothman was."

"Gee, thanks, Pidge."

Pidge groans, running their hands through their hair before dropping their head back to the table with a loud thunk. "I hate this."

"Imagine how I feel."

"Everything just makes sense. It all makes sense now. Everything just— ugh. I should've noticed. I should've seen this coming. All the clues were right there. It's so obvious now."
"That's the thing, Pidgey. Hind sight is twenty-twenty, and all that."

"Yeah," Hunk adds, pulling off his gloves and rubbing his hands together, flexing his fingers. "None of us saw it coming. I mean, I kinda got that there was something going on between you and Keith. You guys were like, super flirty sometimes. And sometimes I'd catch you like... making these eyes at each other when you didn't think anyone was looking? But I just... didn't push it."

Lance winces, eyes on the table. "Were we that obvious?"

"Yes and no? Like sometimes I could've sworn there was something going on between you, but other times it just seemed like I was making it up? Like... you're affectionate with all of us, so I guess I didn't read too much into it. You did spend the night at his place a lot, but friends also do that, too, so... I... kinda just figured you'd tell me if there was something going on."

Lance closes his eyes, face scrunching up in pain. "Yeah... sorry about that, buddy. I wanted to tell you, but... it just..."

"Hey, dude, it's okay. I get it. It was a weird situation. I'm not mad at you."

He opens his eyes, meeting Hunk's warm gaze. Relief pulsing through him with every beat of his heart. "Really?"

"Yeah, man. It's okay. Seriously."

"I'm mad at you," Pidge cuts in, lifting a hand but keeping their face to the table. "I'm mad at both of you."

"You just don't like not knowing stuff."

"I don't! And I'm mad at myself for not noticing! You're both my best friends! I should've noticed something was going on. I mean, there was that time he was super mad at you or something? Avoiding you? That was probably when he found out! And I've seen his paintings before, but I don't know art enough to know if his style matches the style on your soulmarks. And he never took off his stupid gloves because of your stupid pick up lines, and I really should've made that connection. I should've—"

"Pidge," Lance says, sharp and firm. He knows Pidge. Knows they'll go around and around in circles, beating themself up about this. He has to cut it off at the head. He waits until they've lifted their head, gazing at him from beneath messy copper bangs. "It's not your fault. If I didn't notice, then I really don't expect you to have noticed. Stop beating yourself up about it. You're a genius, but you're not omnipotent."

They huff and look away, but he can see some of the tension leak out of them. A small smile ghosts across their lips. "It's omniscient."

"Whatever."

"So you really had no idea?" Hunk asks, quiet and hesitant.

Lance sighs, tilting his head back once more and closing his eyes. "No, I... I really didn't."

"How, though? There had to be some signs, right?"

Lance shrugs. "I mean... probably? But like... it wasn't even a possibility to me. Keith saw my soulmarks all the time and never said anything about it, never even acted surprised or like he
recognized them? So I just... didn't think about it. I figured if it was Keith, I would've noticed. I also..." He squirms in his seat, pursing his lips as he frowns. "I also just kind of always thought I'd know when I met my soulmate, you know? Like it's just know instinctively that they were the one. Anyway, I just... didn't think Keith was a possibility, and anything past that was just wishful thinking on my part, so it was pretty easy to brush anything off."

"Oh my god," Hunk's mouth drops open, horror slowly dawning as his eyes widen. His gaze snaps to Lance, who simply watches as he lifts an eyebrow. "I told Keith that you were so head-over-heels for your soulmate that you'd never do anything with anyone else, but... Oh..." He blinks, gaze drifting away as he horror melts away into a hilarious mix of perplexed realization and amusement. "I... guess I wasn't wrong, huh?"

Lance can't help it. The laughter bubbles out of him and slips from his lips, sounding a hair too hysterical but genuine all the same. "No, I guess you weren't."

Pidge groans again, loudly and dramatically as they throw themselves backwards off the table, flopping over their chair. Head back, arms dangling off the sides. Glaring at the vaulted ceiling. "I can't believe I was trying to get you two to talk to each other this whole time."

Lance smiles, and he hears Hunk's soft chuckle.

Pidge crosses their arms over their chest, pout evident on their lips. "This is way more complicated than I was anticipating when I introduced you two."

"So..." Hunk says, trailing off and drawing both of their attention. He looks between them, but his gaze lingers on Lance the longest. "What're you going to do now?"

And... that's the big question isn't it? What is he going to do now?

Truthfully... he doesn't know. He hasn't gotten that far yet.

Over the years, he's imagined a thousand different scenarios, and a thousand different circumstances. He imagined a thousand different First Meetings and a thousand different interactions with his soulmate.

But nothing ever like this.

He never expected things to go down this way, but... they have. It's how it is. There's no going back, and there's no changing it. And honestly? He's... not sure he wants to anymore.

He's always wanted stories like his family has. His parents. His siblings.

They're happy. His family. They're happy and in love with their soulmates, but... it wasn't easy. He knows that now. He was blinded by their happiness. By their smiles. By what he wanted— what he wants— that he... he erased their struggles.

Realization doesn't hit him hard. It doesn't flick on like a light switch. It comes slowly. Gradually. Like a sunrise. Where the night slowly fades to gray before colors slowly leak back into the world. Slowly, gradually, and peacefully.

His family... they're not perfect. Their soulmates and connection's aren't perfect. But... they're happy. They're so fucking happy. They have struggles and regrets and doubts, but... they're happy. Maybe they're happier because of them. They're happy now.

It's not the story he wanted, but it's the story he has.
And he doesn't want to let it go.

"I think," He says, idea slowly forming as a smile curves his lips. "We should pay Keith a visit. Do you have a pen?"

---

**Hey space cadet, put on your shoes and a jacket and come outside**

It's not hostile. Nor is it angry. He lets the lightness he's feeling pour through their connection. The strange buzzing giddiness. The settled calm. The lilt of mischief. Maybe a dash of the sleep deprived hysteria.

He even lets some of that fondness, some of that affection that he hasn't been letting himself feel, seep through.

He knows the sudden change will leave Keith confused, but that's fine. He'll figure it out soon enough.

"How'd you even know he's awake?" Hunk whispers, leaning in close where they're crouched behind one of the cars in Keith's parking lot.

"Shiro said the two of them were gonna pull an all-nighter." Lance says, holding his arm back, cocked and ready. Perfectly packed snowball in hand.

"I remember Keith mentioning that," Pidge says from his other side. "Something about needing to prepare for his art exhibition."

The door to Keith's apartment complex creeks open. A body steps out. Lance hurls the snowball without a second thought, watching in horror as it splatters across Shiro's face.

"Oh— shit— Sorry, Shiro!" He calls out, straightening from behind the car, hands held up placatingly. "I was aiming for Keith—"

Snow hits him in the face. Cold and biting as it splatters across his cheeks and off his jaw. He blinks. Dumbfounded. Surprised. Caught off guard as his eyes slide to Keith—

Keith, who stands beside Shiro, another snowball already being packed in his hands. The smirk on his face is deadly. The light in his eyes mischievous and smug. Despite how pale he looks. Despite the dark marks beneath his eyes. Despite the exhaustion that hangs on him, Keith looks alive.

Alive and smug and with a fire burning behind his gaze that has an answering spark igniting in Lance's chest.

"Heh," He laughs, smirk curling, eyes crinkling, voice low and rumbling. "Like that?"

There's a moment of tension. A moment where the air between them is pulled taut. Brittle and fraying and— Pidge shatters the moment as another snowball flies, forcing Keith to duck out of the
And suddenly they're all shifting into action.

The three of them launch snowball after snowball, depleting their stash they'd built up in preparation. Keith and Shiro take it in stride, managing to avoid most of them and even managing to scoop up a few handfuls of snow themselves to launch back in retaliation.

"Uh, Lance?"

"Yeah?" He glances at Hunk, who's biting his lip and staring at the empty spot where their stack had been only moments before. "Fuck—"

"They're out, Shiro—"

"I'll go left—"

Both of them are already running, sprinting out into the parking lot and moving to flank their position behind the car. Lance yelps, already scrambling to get away. "Scatter!"

Laughter echoes in the early morning air as they chase each other through the snow. Keith and Shiro pursue them as they retreat back toward campus, scooping up snowballs and throwing them as they go. They duck behind trees and statues, the corners of buildings and snow mounds.

They run. Chase each other. Kick up snow and throw loosely packed balls that explode over their backs as they hunch and turn for the impact. Lance gets a mouthful of snow on several occasions, but gives them right back. Pidge uses them as shields before diving into snow piles to avoid being hit. Hunk chases Shiro with a chunk of snow held above his head. Keith turns on Shiro and shoves a handful of snow down his shirt before sprinting away, his brother hot on his heels.

Lance laughs. Loud and long. Doubled over at the waist. Tears forming at the corners of his eyes. It feels a little hysterical, a little maniacal, but it feels good. It feels right.

A weight is lifted from his chest, and the writhing knot has uncurled from his ribs. The hornets have died and leave nothing but butterflies. Butterflies that flutter frantic and manic, until it bubbles up his throat and drips past his lips.

He's here. As dawn rises. As night is chased from campus and color starts to flood back in. Here, in the cold, playing in the snow with his closest friends and his soulmate.

And everything feels right.

He scoops up a tight ball of snow, reaching back to hurl it at Keith. It hits him right where he wanted it to: right on his perky little ass.

Keith freezes, whipping around to gape at Lance. He grins, lifting a hand to innocently waggle his fingers.

And then Keith is charging him, chasing him, and Lance is running. Sprinting through the snow. A laugh and a taunt on his lips. His lungs burn and his clothes are soaked and his legs are tired, but he runs.

He knows Keith will catch him.

Is counting on it.
He's tackled to the ground, the two of them rolling through the snow.

He ends up on his back, arms flung out to the sides and body relaxing in defeat. Snow is plastered to him, melting on his skin, but he doesn't care. Doesn't care because Keith is hovering over him. Straddling his hips to pin him down. Hands on either side of his head.

He's beautiful.

The light of the morning sun catch on the snow melting in his hair. On his eyelashes. He's pale in the cold, but his nose and cheeks are flushed pink. His lips are parted as he pants. As his chest heaves with every breath.

And he smiles. Barely. A small thing. A shy thing. Just the ghost of a curve at the edge of his lips. Just the slight lift of his cheeks.

And his eyes.

His eyes are dark and glistening, wayward beams of sunlight highlighting the color deep in his irises. And they're soft. So incredibly soft and fond as he gazes down at Lance. There's a sunrise right there, but Keith looks at him like he's the only thing worth seeing.

He's always wanted his soulmate to look at him like that, and it may not have happened right away, but... it's happening now.

It's happening right now, and Keith is his soulmate.
"I'm ready," he says, words coming out in a rush. His heart hammers in his chest, but it's not the twisting pound of dread. It's lighter. Fluttering. Dizzying as he loses himself in Keith's eyes.

Keith's smile fades, eyes searching his face, thick brows bunching in confusion for just a moment before— before realization dawns on him. Eyes going wide. Lips parting. Shock making his expression blank for a moment before the words are tumbling from him, "I'm sorry. Lance, I'm so sorry—"

He lifts a hand, grabbing Keith roughly by the back of the head and pulling him down. He collapses on top of him, breath rushing out of both of them at the impact. And then Lance wraps him up. Keeps one hand buried in his hair and wraps his other arm around his shoulders. Holds him tight.

Keith tenses for only a moment before relaxing into him. Before burying his face in the divot between Lance's scarf and his neck. Feels the cold touch of his nose, but doesn't care.

Because this? This feels right.

"Can you forgive me?" Keith asks, voice mumbled against his skin, lips cold and sending shivers down his spine.

Lance hums, gazing up at the brightening sky. It's stopped snowing, but it's still beautiful. "I'll think about it."

But he already has.

And judging from the small smile he feels pressed against his throat, Keith knows it, too.

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Remind me to never pull an all-nighter again
> Everything hurts, and I've never been more tired in my life

Keith
> Isn't this supposed to be part of the college experience?

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> The college experience can suck my ass, I'm too old for this

Keith
> Shiro, you're only twenty-six

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Tell that to my back and my immune system
> Did you at least get enough done for your art exhibit?

Keith
> Yeah
> And now that everyone knows, I asked Hunk to help me and he's pretty excited about it. Said
he'd scan the pictures for me as long as I distract Lance for a few hours

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> Which I'm sure you'll be able to do easily ;)

Keith
> Please never, ever use that smilie like that again

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> I don't know what you're talking about ;)))))))

Keith
> Keep it up and I'll get Pidge to teach me how to program your prosthetic to lock with the middle finger up

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> You wouldn't

Keith
> Try me

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> ....
> Fine, I yield

Keith
> Good

Sir Nags-A-Lot (Shiro)(ICE)
> So do you think Lance will like it? Your art exhibition?

Keith
> I hope so
> I really really hope so

Chapter End Notes

If you haven't seen already, Sora and I started a new fantasy, adventure, and magic au called Wild Magic. Check it out!

While we love seeing your comments and reading your thoughts, I ask you to please leave the season 8 hate out. We both enjoyed it for what it is, and the ride that the show has taken us on. It's discouraging and disheartening to see the hate, and for my own emotional/mental state, I ask you to please keep this a positive place. Thank you <33

Check out my social media to learn more about me and my writing <33

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Chapter Summary

In the wake of the storm, when the fire dies out, there's a peace and a calm that settles, allowing hearts to truly know where they stand. Fates intertwined finally align, and new beginnings bloom from the end.

Chapter Notes

Before we dive into it, I just want to say thank you to everyone who's stuck around with us for this long. It's been a great ride. I had fun, and I hope you enjoyed it. And if you didn't? I hope you go out and find something you can enjoy instead.

This chapter isn't an epilogue. There is no major time skip. This is just a final chapter to the story. I've decided this isn't a story that needs an epilogue, so this is where our journey ends.

But this isn't the end for me. I have more fics planned, and I'm not done kicking. Check out the end notes for upcoming projects.

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Even in the modern age, no one is certain how or why soul connections exist. They're something that's been apart of human physiology for as long as history can be traced. Even when mankind didn't know what it meant, they existed. There are records of the mysterious marking that would appear on skin. The feeling of being connected to something or someone else.

It spawned many theories throughout history. Many belief systems. Many fears. Many hopes. Many dastardly plots and many stories of love and trust.

It's not until the modern age that mankind has come to accept and respect them for what they are. Research has been put into place to try to figure out the details of the how and why. Desperate attempts to figure out precise reasons and algorithms behind the strange way mankind is connected, and exactly what sort of forces weaves people together.

Yet the how and why of soulmate connections are still a vague mystery.

No one knows with certainty how the universe manages to decide who a perfect potential match is, and no one knows exactly when it will happen.

But while the how and why remain vague at best, there are certainties that have become modern day fact. On average, a First Connection happens during early to mid puberty. There are theories, of course, about what activates or triggers the connection, but there’s been no solid proof, and it’s rarely the same for everyone, making it difficult to pin point.
As for what it feels like during the First Connection, it differs for everyone and every connection. It’s a mingling and connecting of hearts, souls, and bodies. There have been vastly differing accounts throughout the ages. For some, it’s so mind-blowingly overwhelming that it’s led to fainting. For others, it’s so subtle that it was written off as something else entirely and the connection wasn’t recognized until the marks started appearing.

There is a theory that the feeling of a First Connection mimics and foretells the First Meeting. It is a difficult theory to test and prove, as the things souls feel during the First Connection are vague and varying, and First Meetings are tricky to put to words.

But it’s a prevalent theory. One that's gained traction in the modern era. One that's widely accepted. One that states, if you pick apart the things felt during a First Connection, they can be framed in the form of a foreshadowed metaphor for the First Meeting. Perhaps, even, for the connection as a whole.

However, people rarely understand the meaning of their First Connection until much later in life, when things have settled and they can look back through memories with a clearer lens and level head. When they can see the cosmic irony and humor of the universe.

Shiro was fourteen and Allura was thirteen during their First Connection.

It felt like a sudden disembodiment, a lightness in their heads and chest. A light summer breeze rolling through them, wrapping them in subtle warmth. It felt like sunshine on their cheeks, and the vague scent of flowers. It felt like the light tingling of adrenaline at their fingertips before leaping from a cliff, and then the burst of warm, bubbling joy as they take flight. A loss of breath in a gust of wind as it plays with their hair and caresses their cheeks.

Coran was twelve, and it was subtle.

It felt like the tickle of hair against his neck, his cheeks, his arms. It felt like laughter in his ear, too soft and too silent but causing shivers to run down his spine and settle in his gut, warming and bubbling into his own laughter. It felt like the warmth of the crackling embers in a fireplace in his chest on a cold winter’s night. It felt like a tingling in his limbs, a lightness in his spirits, a happiness in his heart. He had woken up in the middle of the night laughing from a dream barely remembered and slipping from his mind like grains of sand through his fingertips. He thought nothing of it until he woke up with foreign words written on his arm in a messy script.

Pidge was twelve, nearly thirteen.

It felt like a spark. Like the brief crackle and zap and tingling from a sudden static shock. It sparked deep in their chest, crackling and disappearing so fast they were left sitting with a hand on their chest, wondering if they had imagined it. Then it was a slow bloom, so slow and subtle that they barely noticed at first. A bloom of warmth like sunshine, a soothing brightness. Like moonlight. It grew in their chest, spreading and crawling it’s way throughout their body, seeping into their fingertips and toes with the easy trickle of water. Slowly, calmly filling them with the warmth on their skin and the pleasing coolness in their veins. Like a pool on a summer day. Then their fingertips sparked, crackled like static, and everything disappeared just as quickly as it had come.

Hunk was fourteen and Shay was fifteen, nearly sixteen, and it felt like an earthquake.

The tremors started out slow, rolling through them with all the subtly of an unexplained shiver. The rumble deepened, shaking them to the core. Everything felt like it was moving, yet they felt perfectly grounded. A connection in their chests, a glow that was invisible to the eye but easy to
feel. It felt like the warmth of another body, the comfort of a hug, the comfort of watching the sunrise chase away the shadows of night. It felt like a song drifting past their ears, unable to be grasped but drawing out feelings of nostalgia, the comforting notes of home. And while it felt like a rockslide was crashing through their bodies, they stood completely firm, balance unwavering, strength firm. And then the rumbling stopped, echoes of it tingling in their fingertips. The glow in their chests took longer to fade, like a sunset, colors slowly shifting and fading against a cloudless sky, giving way to the peaceful blanket of stars.

Keith and Lance were both thirteen.

It came on quickly, causing both of them to stutter in their steps. It came like a flash of ice, fracturing in their chests and shooting out through their veins, chilling their blood and oozing into their core. And it held for a fraction of a second, cool and hard and sparkling like crystal, before the flash of fire blazed from the crystal’s center and burned it’s way out, trailing along the fractures of ice. The fire raged hot and heavy.

The ice had made them gasp, but the fire made them scream, choking and singing. Then it was gone. The intensity of it left them both on their knees, shaking and dragging in ragged breaths. The storm was quick, overwhelming, and with a strength that left them both reeling. The shock was so great that at first, neither of them noticed that the connection still remained.

It felt like the casual blaze of a bonfire, bright and hot, crackling and humming, surrounded by the warmth and contentment of loved ones, autumn nights, and sleeping under the stars. And while that fire burned in their chests, the slow, steady flow of water trickled through their veins, cool and serene, ever sure and ever strong, diverted but never stopping, always moving forward. Like the flow of seasons into the next, of the flow of time, of things unchanging but never the same.

It was the calming balm on their shocked nerves, easing them back to consciousness while the warmth of the fire crackled with steady strength in their chests. And while they caught their breaths, heartbeats slowing and calming, the sensations faded.

Their First Connection Closed gradually, until it was as if the sensations were never there in the first place. But the echoes of them could never be forgotten.

And deep in their chests, the embers still burned. Hot and bright. Stubborn and defiant. Resilient to the weather and the change of the tides.

A warmth. A passion. A home.

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They come together like ice. Clashing and fracturing. Caught in a moment in time where neither are soft. Neither are kind. Words caught in the wrong places. Misunderstandings freeze like fractals. Jagged and sharp. Crack like fissures. Building a frozen landscape between them. Separating them with glacier of their own making.

Until the ice melts, and they're brought together by the current of the flood.

Until there's nothing but ash in their wake.

And beneath that ash lives embers. Embers that still burn. Embers that refuse to be put out. Embers that refuse to die. Embers that continue to burn, warm and defiant and steady. Until they catch. Until a flame builds. Smaller. More controlled. Building something similar, but something newer. Something better.

A warmth on a cold night. A breath of air at sea. A connection that refuses to die. Formed in ice and forged in flames. Molten turned hard in the cold storm. Flexible and strong. Unable and unwilling to break. Keeping them connected even during the storm. Warmth in the heart of a blizzard.

They come together like the shy burning of an ember to a flame. A precious thing. Small and fragile. But with the potential to grow when fueled. The ability to become controlled. The warmth of a fireplace. The warmth of a bonfire. The warmth of two bodies held close on a cold winter's night.

They come together, fractured and broken and hesitant.

They come together, passionate and reckless and torn.

They come together, stronger and new, understanding and patient, warm and lasting.

It's a cold day. One where the crisp wind blows, biting through layers to settle deep within your bones. But despite that, the sun is out. Shining bright with few clouds in sight. Glistening off the snow piles that remain, coating campus in a near endless blanket of white. Cut through with the wet, dark asphalt of sidewalks and walkways.

Lance closes his eyes, tilting his head back. The sun warms his face, pleasant on his cheeks, despite the bite of the chill. His hands are warm where he holds two coffee cups, the heat sinking through his gloves.

It's a strangely pleasant balance of hot and cold. There are enough points of warmth to ward off the chill, but the crisp air feels clean and refreshing in his lungs. He breathes it in greedily. Lets it slowly wake him from the hibernation of study week. Lets it slowly bring him back to life.

He feels... lighter. In head and heart and body. He had known the weight of his emotions, torn and splintering, was a heavy press on his chest, but he hadn't realized just how bad it had gotten until he's free of it. Until he feels like he can breathe again. Until he feels like he's giddy, weightless, floating.

He feels the curve of his smile. Pulling up despite himself. Despite everything. As weightless and light as the rest of him. Tugging up at the corners.

He hasn't felt this good in years. Perhaps ever. Exam week is here, the pressure of the semester is compounding, yet he feels... freedom.

He feels... happy.

He hears the doors of the art building open, bodies pressing out into the cold air. It starts as a
trickle before quickly condensing into a flood. Voices spill out into the crisp air, muted and private conversations, building atop one another and colliding into the din of campus.

Leaning against the brick wall of the building, he listens.

Voices. The sound of car wheels on wet streets in the distance. Laughter. The crunch of shoes on the salted concrete. The rattle of the wind drifting through barren tree branches.

"Lance?"

He opens his eyes, gaze immediately fixing on the man standing in front of him.

Disheveled dark hair. Messy and curling at the edges. Pushed down by a charcoal beanie. Hanging partially in front of his face. A deep red scarf wrapped around his neck. A familiar dark jacket that stretches across broad shoulders. A large art bag hanging at his side, strap over one shoulder.

Dark smudges under dark eyes that gaze at him curiously. A little surprised. A little hesitant. A little hopeful. Pale skin already starting to redden around his nose and high on his cheekbones from the chill in the air.

He tilts his head, brows pinching in the center, lips pursed as he stares at Lance like he's trying to solve a puzzle.

Cute. The thought is accompanied with a flutter in Lance's chest and a flipping of his stomach, no longer edged with the sharp, jagged barbs of guilt and doubt. He feels dizzy with it.

"Hey." He pushes off the wall, taking several steps forward and stopping just in front of him. Far enough away to give them space. Close enough to still be intimate. He feels his smile soften, tapering down to something almost shy. "How'd it go?"


Lips easing, pulling at the edges into a small smile. A fragile, tentative little thing. A shy ember in the ash.

And Lance is witness to it all. All the small, barely there changes in his expression. All of them easily visible to anyone who knows him well enough. He's expressive, each and every thought having control of his features, but they're not big reactions. Not grand. Subtle. Small.

Lance sees them. He knows them. He can read them. And the realization that he knows his soulmate so well warms whatever chill has sunken into his bones.

"The exam?"

"No, your dentist appointment." Lance huffs a short breath, watching it turn to smoke in the air. He rolls his eyes, pushing forward to lightly shove Keith's shoulder with the back of his hand. "No shit, your exam, you doofus. How'd it go?"

Keith chuckles softly, breath catching in the air. He rocks back with the light shove. Rocks forward a step. Closer. "Fine, I guess. Won't know until grades come out, but I'm pretty sure I passed." He shrugs, hiking the strap of his bag further up. He shifts his weight, glancing away before glancing back. Through his lashes. Uncertain. Voice softer. "What're you doing here, Lance?"
Lance shrugs, lifting his hands a fraction. One closer to himself. The other extended. "Thought you could use a pick-me-up after your first exam of the semester. Especially an eight am one, yikes. I can tell by the bags under your eyes that you haven't slept. A little devil's juice outta make you slightly less zombified."

Keith takes the offered cup gingerly, cradling it in his hands and close to his chest. He looks down at it, a small smile playing across his lips. Chin tucked into his scarf. "Thanks."

It's Lance's turn to shuffle, shoes crunching on the salt that decorates the sidewalk. He looks to the side, lips pursed in his attempt an nonchalance. He opens his arms wide. "And, you know... I thought maybe you could use a hug, or something..."

He doesn't see Keith's face. Keeps his eyes averted to avoid it. Feels the heat rising up his neck to settle on his cheeks. But he hears the soft huff of breath that nearly forms a laugh. Hears the crunch of salt as Keith shuffles forward.

And then there's a body pressed against his. Strong and firm. Warm and fitting against his in all the right places. Arms wrap around his waist, and Keith ducks his head to nuzzle into Lance's scarf.

He expects hesitancy. He expects shyness. He expects things to move awkwardly. Stilted as they try to fit back into the pieces they once were. As they try to figure out how they fit together again. As they figure out where they stand and wade into these new, uncertain waters.

But it isn't like that at all. Keith falls into his arms like he's meant for it. Like he's been craving it. Like he's needed it and can no longer hold himself back. He steps into Lance's embrace and fits himself into place perfectly. With a certainty. With a sigh of relief. Body melting against Lance's with his exhale. Stitching them together with every breath shared.

It feels... nice. It feels right.

Lance's arms settle around him, wrapping tight at the shoulders. Coffeecup held in one hand and the other rubbing up and down his back. He tilts his head, resting it atop Keith's. "I was also thinking, if you don't have anything to do right now, maybe you'd wanna come by my dorm?"

Keith stiffens in his arms. Voice merely a breath. "Your dorm?"

"Yeah, so we can, you know... talk and stuff. We haven't really gotten a chance to."

Keith's arms around him tighten for just a moment, pressing them closer before he lets go. He steps back, smile small and sheepish. Exhaustion plain on his features. "Right. We should... probably do that."

"Yup," Lance nods, reaching out and snatching Keith's free hand before he can shove it in his pocket. He blinks, face going blank as he stares at their hands. Lance weaves their fingers together, and when Keith looks up at him, lips parted and eyes wide, he winks, a laugh on his tongue. "Come on, space cadet."

They walk together in companionable silence. Listening to the sounds of the early morning around them and the crunch of salt and snow beneath their shoes.

It's strange being hand in hand. Familiar and new all at once. He's memorized how he and Keith fit together, how their fingers slot between each other, but having that knowledge out in the open, on display, is something new entirely. It's... exhilarating. Thrilling. Makes his chest flutter and giddy bubbles pop on his tongue.
He squeezes Keith's hand and lifts his coffeecup to his lips to hide his smile when Keith squeezes back.

"So..." Keith shifts his weight in the beanbag chair, knees bent, arms crossed over his chest. His empty coffeecup sits on the floor beside him. Lance can tell he's aiming for nonchalance, but he's failing miserably. In an attempt to not fidget, he's far too stiff. His eyes trail around the room. Noticeably anywhere but at Lance.

"So..." He echos. He sits in the beanbag across from him. Bodies angled so they're nearly facing each other but not quite. His sits with his legs lazily stretched out and bent, arms spreading out along the beanbag on either side of him. His empty coffeecup is held loosely between his fingers, idly tapping against the beanbag.

"I, uh..." Keith trails off, eyes darting to him out of the corner of his eye before snapping away. He purses his lips. "I owe you an explanation..."

"Yeah, you do," He says, not accusatory, but matter-of-fact. Lilting on the end with a lightheartedness bordering on amusement. Keith looks at him then. Not directly, but through his lashes. There's a pitiful purse to his lips, but a slight quirk to his brow. Lance tilts his head, smile softening. "But I don't need one."

It takes Keith by surprise. His brows rise, leaning a fraction away from Lance as his lips purse and eyes narrow. His gaze darts around Lance's face, looking for any sign of a trick, any telling crack or seam. But Lance has nothing to hide. He's being honest.

"I... I don't..." Keith trails off, uncertain.

Lance chuckles, a low huff of breath that bubbles past his lips. "Dude, stop thinking so hard. This isn't a puzzle, and I'm not trying to trick you."

Keith's eyes narrow as Lance's grin widens. He tilts his head, feeling his smile in his eyes. Feels his lids droop as his gaze softens. Feels the fondness flutter in his chest as he takes in Keith's pouting frustration.

He shifts a leg, prodding Keith's foot with his own, needing some point of contact. Keith looks down at it, and when his gaze flickers back, Lance continues. "I know you, Keith. I know you a lot more than you probably realize. I know so much about you, and I know so much about my soulmate. I'm not gonna lie, fitting the two of you together was a little hard at first, but now... now I can't imagine you as two different people anymore."

He doesn’t need Keith’s explanation because he already knows. And more than that, he understands. He’s heard it from Keith before. He’s felt it from his soulmate. They don’t need to go around and around with why did you do this and why why why. He knows. He knows Keith knows exactly the impact his actions have had. Because when it comes down to it, Keith knows him, too.

Still, he wants to say his peace. He’s already forgiven Keith. Forgiveness comes easy, everything considered. It’s moving forward that’s tough. He thinks they can do it, though. They’re both stubborn enough for it. He merely wants to say what he needs to. To get the last of it out in the
open and out of his system. Let it out like a sigh and breathe in something new.

And he thinks Keith knows it. From the way he stares at Lance with an intensity that says he’s waiting. He’s patient. He’s listening. Lance has his full and undivided attention.

“You hurt me,” He says softly, holding that intense gaze. He sees the flicker in Keith’s eyes, but he doesn’t interrupt. “And I’m not talking about when we were kids, because fuck all that. We were young and dumb. I’m not exactly happy about you ignoring me for the majority of our teen years, but I’m not gonna blame you for it. We didn’t know each other back then, and you didn’t owe me anything. You hurt me because you didn’t tell me months ago. Because we’re friends.” He holds up a hand when Keith opens his mouth, pressing forward before he can speak. “I know why you did it, okay? Shiro told me about your mom and his dad. How you watched them… become soulmates.” Keith stiffens, and Lance’s voice softens. “You were scared, and we do stupid things when we’re scared. I know… I know just wanted me to see you as you.” He offers a small smile at that, drawing the ghost of one from Keith. “I understand. I’m embarrassed as hell that I didn’t notice sooner, and I’m pissed that you made me look like an idiot for months, but… I can move past that. I can forgive you.”

“Really?” Keith breathes, wary and hopeful all at once.

Lance nods, rolling his head to the side. “Really. That’s what friends are for, dude. And… you know, all things considered… this could’ve gone way smoother, but I’m not exactly upset that you’re my soulmate.”

Keith’s smile rises and fades. He looks down, eyes glued to the point of contact where Lance's toes press against his ankle as he mutters, “I never meant to hurt you, and it was just… a lot, and I wasn’t ready.”

“Are you ready now?”

A twitch at the corner of his lips. The ghost of a wry smile. “I am. I think I have been. I’m sorry.”

"I know," Lance whispers, lips quirking at the corners. "I am, too."

Keith's gaze snaps to his, features pursed in a spark of righteous fury. "You have nothing to apologize for, I was the one--"

"Ah bub bub bub," Lance holds up a hand, cutting him off as he shakes his head. "I didn't exactly handle the situation like a saint either, okay? We both did stupid things, we were both assholes, and I'm sorry, too."

Keith purses his lips tight, but he nods. "Okay." He lets out a pent up sigh, looking away as he runs his fingers roughly through his hair. "Look, I really am sorry, Lance. I didn't mean for it to go this way, and I swear I was planning on telling you. I just... I was scared. I didn't want--"

"For things to change?"

Keith looks at him sharply, expression open and vulnerable, desperately trying to keep the pieces of his composure in place.

Lance just smiles, letting that fondness fluttering around in his chest shine through as he tilts his head, lazy grin stretching across his lips. "I told you, man. I know. I know why you did the stuff you did. I know why all of this freaked you out so much-- why I freaked you out so much." Keith opens his mouth, but Lance puts up a finger to cut him off. "Don't deny it, I did. And I know now that my whole view on soulmates wasn't exactly... healthy either. We both fucked this up."
Keith's smile is a small and fragile thing, slowly blooming across his lips until it dares to touch his eyes, shinning in dark indigo depths. "Yeah. Yeah, we did."

They share a moment of silence. Not strained or stiff, but companionable. A moment lost in their own thoughts. The touch of a smile on their lips. Eyes distant as they let the remaining tension of guilt and uncertainty dissipate into the air. The weight drifting away and leaving them lighter.


Lance merely grins. Let's it slowly split his lips and lift the edges of his eyes. "You're my soulmate." He hadn't meant to say it so breathlessly. So full of awe. But there it is, quiet and hushed in the space between them.

It's the first time either of them have really acknowledged it to each other. No dancing around it. No implications. Straight forward. To the point. Words so simple and so fleeting, yet holding so much weight.

Keith blinks, face going lax in his surprise. He stares at Lance for a long moment, eyes impossibly wide. Pretty lips parted. And then slowly, like a sunrise, he smiles. The corners of his mouth curve just so. His cheeks lift just enough. His eyes go lidded, darkening and shining. Voice equally breathless as he says, "Yeah. Yeah, I am."

"I want to go back to the way things were."

"Me, too."

“But we can’t. It’s always gonna be different.”

“I know.” A shift of his weight. A plea in his eyes. A bite of his lips. Voice softer, more vulnerable. “I don’t want to start over…”

Lance is surprised by the soft laugh that slips out of him, a bubble of relief popping on his tongue. “I don’t either. I spent way too much time breaking down your stubborn walls.” He looks down, feeling something settle in his chest. “And… I miss you. As my friend and whatever the hell else we were. I know it’s not gonna be the same, and I’m not saying we should rush things, but… I miss you. Feeling bad for myself is exhausting, and I wanna move forward. I wanna let myself have this.”

“Me, too…” It’s soft. Choked. Cracked. Caught on the edge of a relieved, half-formed laugh. Raw and whispered in the space between them.

Lance sets his empty cup down and holds out his hands. Keith stares at him blankly for a moment, lifting a brow. Lance merely rolls his eye as he groans, "Oh my god, Keith, just come here." He flaps his hands, fingers curling, gesturing him over.

Keith smirks, eyes lidded as he uncurls from his beanbag seat. He falls forward on his hands and knees, crawling slowly across the distance between them. Shoulders shifting with each stretch of his hand. Each step. Eyes never leaving Lance's. Hair messy and framing his face. Framing that perfect coy tilt to his lips.
Lance swallows hard, heat rising to his cheeks and pooling in his gut.

And then Keith is crawling on top of him. Pressing them both into the beanbag. He straddles Lance's legs, sitting firmly on his thighs, knees bracketing his hips. His hands press into Lance's stomach, fingers spread and searching as they push up his chest to rest on his shoulders.

"Here?" He asks, all innocent and coy. Head tilting to the side. Lips curled in a devilish smirk.

Lance's heart is pounding. Mouth feeling dry as heat sears through him. Body tingling where they touch. Still he manages a smirk of his own, hands coming to rest on Keith's thighs, sliding up his strong legs to rest at his hips. "Yeah, right here."

Keith's eyes are too bright. Too lidded. Too full of far too many things all at once. Lance feels overwhelmed by them. Drawn in by them. Wholly willing to let himself drown.

But there's something he has to say first, so he lets his own gaze trail away from them. Down a perfect jawline and kissable lips. Down that tempting neck of his to the beautiful dip of his collarbones.

"You know, I've been thinking..."

"That's dangerous."


"Sorry," He murmurs, though he doesn't sound like he means it. But his fingers trail up to play with the curls at the back of his neck, and he supposes he'll forgive him. "Go ahead."

"I don't want to go back to exactly the way things were." Keith's fingers in his hair still. Lance can see him holding his breath. He looks up then, through his lashes. He can feel his smile shrinking to something meek and shy. "I was thinking... maybe boyfriends would be better?"

Keith surges forward, capturing his lips.

It's not their first kiss by far, but it feels entirely new. Because right here, right now, Lance is kissing his soulmate. And while he's done it before, now he knows it. His soulmate is right here, on his lap, kissing him with a desperation that feels like relief.

His eyes drift closed, tilting his head and narrowing his world down to the feeling of Keith on his lap and Keith's hot mouth on his. Tongue sliding past his lips. Teeth teasing and playful. His hands slide under Keith's shirt as Keith's card through his hair.

He missed this. He's missed this so fucking much. Everything feels right. Keith feels right. It's so much, and yet it's not enough. He feels like it's been forever since they've touched, since they've kissed, since he's felt this good--

He doesn't register the sound of the lock tumbling until it's followed by a voice. "Hey, guys, sorry to interrupt, I just need to grab--"

He freezes. Keith stills on top of him. Mouths broken apart but hovering close. Breaths shallow and quiet. He meets Keith's eyes, equally wide. He doesn't have to look to know that Hunk has frozen, too, gaping at them in silence.

But the panic is only momentary. Fleeting. Because... because it's not a big deal anymore. They're
allowed to do this.

He turns his head slowly, watching Keith do the same out of the corner of his eye. Just as he thought, Hunk stands in the open doorway, eyes wide and mouth agape. "Oooh my god," He whispers.

"Hey, buddy," Lance says, voice surprisingly even.

"Oh, shit. I am so sorry. You guys were-- Oh fuck." He starts, entire body jerking into motion. He slaps his hand over his eyes, shuffling into the room sideways, free hand outstretched toward his desk, waving in the air. "I just-- I'm just gonna grab something, and then I'll go. Like I was never here. I didn't see anything."

"Oh my god, Hunk." A giddy lightness bubbles up inside him, drawing his lips upward and lilting his voice with amusement. "You don't have to cover your eyes. It's not like we're naked."

"Oh, oh no. That's what I'm gonna have to worry about from now on, isn't it? Walking in here and finding you two naked." He reaches his desk, slapping around blinking and knocking things over. "I mean, technically that kinda already happened--"

"What?"

"But Keith was hiding under the covers."

"Oh my god."

Keith groans, forehead dropping to Lance's shoulder.

"I'm just-- gonna-- aha! There it is." He grabs his wallet from the desk, quickly shoving it into his pocket before hastily retreating back to the door. But not without nearly tripping twice and running into his open wardrobe door.

"Hunk! Just open your eyes!"

"No! I'm pretending like I'm not intruding on your moment!"

"Hunk!"

"I was never here! Goodbye!" The door slams shut, echoing in the hallway beyond. Hunk's footsteps hurry away, voice calling back to them through the door, "Don't defile the beanbags!"

Keith groans again, and Lance wraps his arms around his waist, pulling him close and muffling his laughter in the curve of his neck. He feels Keith's smile press into his temple.

The coffeeshop in the student union is packed. It has been for weeks leading up to exams. During study week, it was filled to the brim with lifeless students, desperately seeking out caffeine to stay alive, slipping into naps resembling comas as they sprawl across available flooring and the cushioned armchairs that line the corners. Or simply draped over the tables, listless and lifeless.

It's a different kind of packed now.
Now that exam week has official started, the crowd has a new life to them. A frantic and desperate life. There's an odd mix of listless misery, panic induced haze, and exhausted relief. It hangs in the air, creating an atmosphere that's a strange mix of tension and utter defeat.

Still, no matter where students fall on the exam week emotional spectrum, they all need caffeine. And the coffeeshop in the student union is a safe haven that promises comfort and a quick fix.

Keith sits on the stage at the far end of the coffeeshop. The piano is covered, the mics put away, and it serves as nothing more than another place for students to lounge. And right now, he and his friends have claimed it.

He sits with his back to the wall, slouched down until his neck is at an odd angle. He can already feel it aching, but he ignores it in favor of not moving. Body stretched out, knees bent, his laptop props up on his stomach and thighs as he mindlessly scrolls his notes, doing some last minute preparation for his final speech for his public speaking class later.

Pidge sits next to him in a very similar position. Eyes glued to whatever powerpoints they're looking over. Chin tucked into their oversized hoodie. Their sleeves are pushed up to their elbows, and there's faded handwriting on their skin.

When he had first seen them, he had braced himself for the family queasy flip of his stomach, but... it never came. Instead he felt nothing but a fluttering warmth as he had pushed up his own sleeves, revealing Lance's messy script and lazy doodles. Faded and worn into his skin like they belong there. Capturing a moment in time when they both had been procrastinating from exam prep.

It feels odd to have his soulmarks on display. Odd, but exhilarating.

Pidge had taken one look at the doodles and snorted, rolling their eyes before going back to their work. Keith had merely smiled.

Allura sits nearby, legs crossed and a thick textbook open in her lap. Her elbows rest on her knees as she leans over it, eyes relentlessly scanning the pages. Shiro sits behind her, leaning against her back. His head tilts back against her shoulder, arms loosely crossed over his chest and legs stretched out. His eyes are closed, face lax, but it's difficult to determine if he's truly asleep.

Hunk sprawls out in front of them, lying on his back. One arm lies at his side and the other folds over his midsection. His phone lies on his face, screen already dark. He had been holding it above his head before he had accidentally dropped it, and he hasn't moved since. Just let it there and closed his eyes with a defeated groan. He hasn't moved in a while, but Keith doubts he's asleep.

His mind is a whirlwind of information, running through the things he needs to say in his speech, making sure that he remembers his facts, when he feels his soul connection open up.

It shimmers through him like a winter breeze, tingling across his skin and making him shiver. A cool rush of air that fills his lungs and stills his mind.

His eyes dart from the computer to his arm, where there's the phantom press of a pen, tingling and light. He feels a flood of exhaustion fill his chest, making his body melt with the heavy edge of relief. He knows it's not his own, but it makes him slump further all the same. And yeah, his neck is definitely going to hurt later.

The connection closes as quickly as it appears, leaving a messy and hasty message scrawled between the fading marks of the previous night's conversation.

*Where are you guys?*
"Anyone have a pen?" He gets a few glances and grunts in response, but it's Allura who reaches into her open bag and tosses him a pen. "Thanks."

"Lance?" She asks, corner of her lips pulling into a knowing half smile.

He feels the heat flood his face and resolutely ignores it as he puts the pen to his arm, just below Lance's question. It's still so new. Acknowledging it in front of the others like this. But it feels... nice. Really nice. A lot nicer than he was expecting it to. A lot more natural than he had anticipated.

"Yeah," He says, feeling the ghost of a smile on his lips as he writes.

**Student union coffeeshop. On the stage. You could've just texted.**

The response comes quickly, a light and bubbling amusement filtering through their connection, filling his chest and popping with a fond warmth.

**You could've, too**

He doesn't dignify that with a response, but the smile is still fixed on his lips as he sets the pen aside. As his attention fixes back to his laptop screen.

Yes, they could've just texted. In a lot of ways, it would be easier. But... this is something they've never had. An easy back and forth. The opening of their connection without fear or doubt or worry. The ease of it. The normalcy of it. It's so... *domestic*, and Keith finds that he enjoys it a lot more than he thought he would.

They never had this as teenagers. They never had this when they were young and the connection between them was fresh and new. It's always been a tremulous thing. An uncertain thing. A thing he's feared and been wary of. For the first time, he's able to revel in it. He's able to see it and treat it as a normal extension of himself. A simple part of his life, with no need to hide it or feel shame for it. Without needing to fear it.

It's a strange giddiness that he's pretty sure most people get out of their system in their teen years, but they never got the chance. But they have the chance now, and... he thinks it might be better this way. Here and now, he can actually appreciate it. Appreciate *Lance*. Appreciate the bond that they have. Because for the first time in his life, he actually *wants* it.

He's lost once more in frantic recollection, picking apart facts and mentally trying to phrase his thoughts, when Lance arrives.

He announces his presence with a loud groan, causing all of them to look up at where he trudges up onto the small stage. He drags his feet as he walks toward them, shoulders slumped. Face lined with exhaustion.

"Hey, Lance," Hunk says, eyes cracking open and phone falling to the stage as he turns his head.

"Hello, Lance," Allura says, though she doesn't look up. Shiro cracks an eye, mumbling a greeting as he lifts a hand in a halfhearted wave.

"Hey, nerd," Pidge greets unceremoniously, eyes going back to their computer screen.

Lance grunts his own form of a greeting as he steps through them, coming to stand in front of Keith. He stares for a long moment, brows furrowed and lips pursed into a contemplative pout.
Keith meets his gaze, though the angle is difficult. He lifts a brow. "What?"

Lance kicks his foot, dropping his backpack to the ground. "Move it, space cadet." Keith's lips purse as he frowns, kicking him back. Lance's head lulls back, body shaking as he pathetically kicks at Keith again. "Keeeeith."

He can feel the tug at his lips, threatening to break his disgruntled scowl. He tries to keep it at bay, despite the fact that he's certain the ghost of it shines through. To cover it, he sighs loudly, rolling his eyes as he grabs his laptop with both hands, lifting it above him as he spreads his knees.

Lance's grin is small. A hair triumphant but mostly just tired as he drops to his knees and falls forward. He settles himself between Keith's legs, draping himself across his chest. He nuzzles into Keith's sternum with his nose and cheek, face buried in the folds of his sweater. His arms wrap around him, squeezing him tight as he sighs, entire body collapsing onto Keith's.

A rush of air escapes him. Lance is heavy. His neck still hurts. But he can't bring himself to move. Instead he sets his laptop down on Lance's upper back.

"Rough exam?"

"It's over. That's all that matters." Lance's voice is mumbled into his chest. Lance's eyes drift closed, and Keith feels himself losing the fight with his smile. One hand remains on his laptop, steadying it and scrolling his notes while the other rests atop Lance's head, fingers idly carding through his hair. The soft hum from Lance's throat vibrates through his chest.

It's familiar, this kind of back and forth. It's been easy to slip back into. To fit back together. It hasn't been without trepidation and without shy hesitation, but it's been easy to get back into the flow of their friendship. Of the banter. Of the fond and simple touches. This time unhampered by guilt and doubt and uncertainty. It makes him hopeful, and it makes him giddy with relief. That all ways they've learned to fit still work. That they can still snap back into place. That things aren't torn between them.

"Ready for your final speech later?"

"No."

"Did you do notecards like I told you to?"

"Sort of."

"Lance."

"It's fine. I'll wing it. I'm great at winging it."

"I hate that you're right."

"Aww, don't be nervous, babe. If you get stage fright, just look at me and imagine me in my underwear."

Keith huffs a short laugh, flicking Lance's ear as the body on top of him shakes with silent laughter. "I am not doing that."

It's only then that he notices the strange silence that's fallen over their little ground. They were quiet before, but there's a strange weight to it now. One that prickles at his attention until he's forced to acknowledge it.
He looks up to find everyone staring at them. Eyes wide and blinking. Expressions twisted into various states of surprise and amusement. He glances between them, brows furrowing and scowl returning. "What?"

"This is... so weird," Pidge says slowly, eyes narrowed like they're trying to assess a puzzle. They adjust their glasses, lip curling into a small grimace.

"I think it's cute." Allura tilts her head to the side, resting her head atop Shiro's. Her lips curl into a pleased smile, even as her eyes gleam with mischief. "They're adorable."

Keith glares at his brother, only to get a small smile as he lifts his brow. "Agreed. Even when Keith looks like a disgruntled cat."

"He's a cute disgruntled cat," Lance mumbles into Keith's sweater, lifting a hand to blindly try to pat his face. He succeeds in pressing his palm flat to Keith's cheek, fingers pushing at his nose and poking his eye. Keith slaps it away, and Lance just chuckles, arm returning to wrap around him.

Hunk eyes them both through narrowed eyes, lips pursed out as he thinks. Then finally, he nods before rolling back onto his back and placing his phone back on his face, eyes closing. "They're cute, but it's definitely still weird."

"Are you guys going to be gross all the time now?" Pidge asks with a quiet groan.

"No," Keith says.

At the same time Lance lets out a muffled, "Yes." He shifts his head, still resting it on Keith's chest but turned to look at Pidge. "Get used to it, munchkin."

They flips him off, and he sticks out his tongue. Then their group lapses back into comfortable silence. Shiro, Hunk, and Lance attempting to rest while Pidge, Keith, and Allura study. Quiet but together. Lance's weight pressing in on him, warmth comforting. His fingers passing idly through the short, curled locks.

It feels... right.

When Lance starts to drool on his sweater, and Pidge pokes and prods him until he groans and nuzzles into a pool of his own saliva. When Hunk gets a text from his group about their project, and it spurs him on an animated rant fueled by sleep deprivation and stress. When Shiro loses a game of rock, paper, scissors and has to get up to get them all a round of drinks, but instead takes off his arm and tosses it aside to claim that he can't carry them all.

Everything feels right.

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Lance had never asked, but he hadn't needed to. Keith knows he's curious. Knows that he wants this. Knows that he knows how personal it is. Knows he won't ask for fear of overstepping boundaries. Some invisible lines Keith has inadvertently drawn between them with his own actions.

Lines that have no meaning anymore. Lines that he wants to erase. Lines that he ignores as he steps over them, reaching a hand out to Lance with a shy olive branch.
Lance had been surprised when he suggested it. Surprise that quickly dissolved into unfiltered and unabashed excitement. A joy that sparked in his eyes and split his lips into a wide grin. A breath of awe and a thrilled sound caught in his throat. All before he tapers it down. Reigns it in. Coughs and tries to pull his grin back into something more casual. Something more manageable. Something that wouldn't scare Keith away.

But he'd already seen it, and it sparked something deep inside his chest. His own excitement. His own joy. His own thrill at sharing something so deeply personal with someone who means so much.

Exam week is nearly halfway over, and Keith's art exhibit is tomorrow. He's spent nearly the entire day setting up the room in the student union, door shut and curtains pulled over the windows.

He'd lost track of time, only coming back to reality when Shiro arrived to drag him to dinner.

And now he's back in his apartment, pushing his furniture to the side. Clearing out a space in the center of his floor. It's something he's done hundreds of times before. In this apartment and back home. Spreading out the familiar and stained paint tarp over the floor. Pulling out the paints he'll need and his worn brushes, putting them to the side.

Going through the motions are usually automatic. Calming. Ready him to lose himself in the colors and texture of paint.

Now, however, his heart can't seem to calm down. There's a buzz in his veins he can't quite be rid of. It's a jitteriness beneath his skin. An anticipation that pulls him taut and tight.

A soft knock on his door. Almost hesitant. Not at all the boisterous, rapid, and obnoxious rhythms he's used to hearing from Lance. His heart skips a beat all the same, stuttering in his chest and sending a jolting vibration through him.

His steps feel stiff and stilted as he hurries to the door, breath catching in his throat as he swings it open. Lance stands just outside. Chin tucked in his scarf. The bite of cold causing a flush of pink across his cheeks. Melted snow glistens in his hair and on his lashes as he gazes up through them. Hands in his pockets, shoulders hunched against the cold.

His smile is a lift in his cheeks rather than a tilt of his lips. "Hey," He says, voice accompanied by a fog in the air. He sounds as breathless as Keith feels.

"Hey."

He moves aside, opening the door wider, and Lance steps inside. He steps in close, smile sparkling in his eye as he leans in, running his cold nose along Keith's cheek before pecking him on the lips. Keith shies away from the chill, but smiles under the touch all the same.

"Hey," Lance repeats, breath warm against Keith's lips.

Keith leans into him, swinging the door shut before resting his hands on Lance's hips. He surges forward to capture his lips. Firmly. Gently. Guiding them in a lingering, languid kiss that has Lance's cold lips parting beneath his. Mouth warm and eager. Plant and willing as fingers weave through his hair.

Keith pulls away first, leaning back far enough to stare into hazy, lidded eyes. "Hey."

Lance's gaze roams over his face, thumbs caressing his cheeks while his fingers tuck away wayward strands of hair. His fingertips are cold, but Keith doesn't mind. He closes his eyes under
the touch anyway, humming softly.

"Are you sure about this?" Lance asks, voice soft. Keith opens his eyes to find the gentle pinch between his brows. Lips pressing together in the barest of frowns. "I know this is like... super personal for you and kind of a big deal, and don't get me wrong, I'm fucking honored you asked me if I wanted to watch, but I don't want you doing it just because you think you should, because you don't have to--"

"Lance," He says flatly, watching Lance's mouth press shut. He tilts his head, pressing his cheek into Lance's palm. "I want you here."

"Okay," He lets out in a rush of air, visibly relaxing. Frown dissolving into a shy smile. "Okay, okay, okay."

Keith huffs a short breath, rolling his eyes as he pulls away. "It's not a big deal, Lance." It is, but not really. He'd never do this in front of others, but Lance... He's alright if it's Lance. He moves toward the kitchen, filling a couple cups with water to clean his brushes with. "I used to do this with my mom all the time."

"Yeah, but your mom was super important to you."

"So are you."

He doesn't realize the impact of what he's said until he's met with silence. He glances up, cups of water in hand, pausing mid-step as he looks at Lance. He's frozen with his jacket half unzipped, in the process of kicking off his shoes. He stares openly at Keith, eyes wide and lips parted. Expression open and awed and far, far too earnest.

Keith blinks. "What?"

Lance's mouth snaps shut, brows coming together as his pursed lips quiver. "Babe."

"Oh my god, Lance--"

"No, you said something sweet, and I'm getting emotional." He's jump started back into action, kicking off his shoes haphazardly and struggling out of his jacket, leaving it in a pile on the floor with his scarf thrown over it.

"It's not that big of a--"

He suddenly has his lanky beanpole of a boyfriend wrapped around him, and Keith stumbles back a step with the sudden impact. Lance's arms wrap around his middle, body pressed flush and face buried in his neck. Keith can feel his breath against his collarbones and the chill of his nose against his throat.

He holds his arms out to the side, barely managing to keep from spilling the cups in his hands. "Lance--"

"Shush."

"Lance."

"Don't ruin the moment."

Keith sighs, turning his head to rest his cheek against Lance's. "You're ridiculous," He says,
exasperation wrapped up in a bundle of fond amusement. He lets Lance have the hug for a moment longer before he starts to wiggle in his embrace, pulling away and playfully kicking at his leg with his bare foot. "Now go. I have to finish setting up."

"Fine, fine." He makes a show of groaning, huffing and pouting as he shoves his hands in his pockets and slinks away, but there's a smile tugging at his lips and a sparkle in his eyes. "Bossy."

He sits on the end of Keith's bed, legs stretched out comfortably and leaning back on his hands. Keith moves to the center of the tarp, sitting crosslegged and facing him. He then sets to work putting the cups of water and paints in front of him, organizing them by color, all within reach.

When he's done and there's nothing else to distract himself with, he sits up straight, hands resting on his knees as he takes a deep breath, eyes drifting closed. That buzzing of energy still crawls beneath his skin, eager and vibrant. But there's a calmness that settles in his chest. A peace and a stillness.

"Don't be nervous."

He opens his eyes to meet Lance's, lips quirking wryly. Lance looks far more nervous than he does. Shifting his weight. Foot bouncing. Lip caught between his teeth. Smile wavering. Keith has a feeling the words aren't necessarily for him.

"I'm not nervous," He says, surprised by the truth of it. Surprised by how even and calm he sounds. He reaches behind him, grabbing his shirt and pulling it over his head. He tosses it aside, rolling his shoulders. He doesn't miss the way Lance's eyes go lidded, nor does he miss the way his heated gaze moves down his body. Keith smirks, feels it play across his lips as his body inherently stretches and tightens under Lance's gaze. "I'm excited." His voice drops in a way that has Lance's eyes snapping back to his.

He swallows hard, tip of his tongue peeking out to wet his lips. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Lance sits up, reaching behind him to pull off his shirt as well. He struggles with it, caught for a moment in the fabric before wiggling out of it and tossing it aside. Keith feels his smile widen at Lance's sheepishness, fixing his mused hair as he slides off the edge of the bed to sit on the floor, leaning back against it. Facing Keith.

He takes a deep breath, hands on his knees, eyes drifting shut. Mimicking the way Keith had centered himself only moments before. When his eyes open, they're calm. The ocean of his blue gaze settled and still. Confident and serious, meeting Keith's gaze steadily. The intensity makes his stomach flip.

"I'm ready." Even his voice is low and even, intense despite sounding breathless.

Not quite trusting his own voice, Keith merely nods, eyes dropping to the paints set out before him. He has them split into two groups. One of reds and oranges and golds. One of blues and purples and silvers. His hands shake as he picks up his brush, but stills as he presses the paint to his skin.

It's a familiar feeling. Cool and smooth. The texture of the paint. The texture of the brush. It calms his nerves. Settles the buzz of anticipation. Until he feels grounded. Losing himself in the familiarity. He breathes out a long breath as he smears a waving line of blue down his bicep.

He hears Lance's soft gasp. The hitch in his breath. He feels their connection open. Feels the strange tingling in his chest like a dam lowering, slowly trickling emotions from him. Slowly
leaking them through the connection.

He doesn't dare look at Lance. Isn't sure he can just yet. It's still so new, having an audience. He had expected it to feel strange, but he hadn't prepared for how vulnerable he feels. How raw and open. He can't meet Lance's gaze yet, isn't sure he's prepared for what he'll find.

So he loses himself in the familiar touch of paint. In the stroke of a brush. In the familiar poignant smell. Keeps his eyes locked onto the colors he smears across his skin. Lets himself be lost in his thoughts. In the things he can't bare to face without the touch of paint. Lets the things he feels take shape in the form of color.

Blues dance down his arm, from shoulder to wrist, spreading across the back of his hand. Dark shadows and icy swirls. Highlighted with purple and silver. Lines stiffer at his upper arm. More jagged. Fractals and cracked sheets of ice. Melting as it moves down his arm. Turning to swirls and waves of water. A current that wraps around his arm. A trickle that spreads down to his knuckles.

From jagged and hard to soothing and playful.

Colors deepening from the pale shades of ice to the dark waters of the sea.

He drops the brush, setting it aside and reaching for another with a sense of fervor. He turns to his other arm, covering in in warmer shades. In the reds and oranges of fire. A blaze comes to life on his upper arm. Yellows and golds. Bright and blinding. A blaze trailing high over the curve of his shoulder. Flames swirling and chaotic. Consuming.

The tight spirals and frantic spirals calm as they move down his arm. Evening out into gentle curves. Rolling waves of flame. Deepening in color. Darkening. Reds and oranges. Darkening across the back of his hand, dotted with the gentle glow of persistent embers.

He thinks of Lance. Of his soulmate. Of them being one in the same.

He thinks of their First Connection. Of everything that transpired when he was nothing more than a faceless presence that he never asked for. He thinks of their First Meeting. Of how he felt when he realized who Lance was.

He thinks about the panic and chaos he felt when he saw the stars tattooed across his skin. He thinks about all the chaos he struggled to wade through. He thinks of his denial, his anger, his misery, his acceptance. I pulls those emotions from the vault of his mind, bringing them to the surface, feeling through them with the more steady peace of mind that comes with time. He lets Lance feel them, knowing it will do far more to explain himself than words ever could. Knowing that Lance will know what he’s giving to him.

He thinks about how things changed. Gradually. Slowly, but strongly. How things shifted between them. How he shifted. How Lance changed him for the better. How Lance gave him the strength to face the things he's feared. How he's done the same for Lance.

He thinks of Lance.

Just... Lance.

Everything he feels. Everything he's ever felt. Letting it collide in his chest. Painful and overwhelming. Filling him and expanding until it catches at his ribs, ripping him apart at the seams. Lets it flood through their open connection in a chaos of color.
All his fears. All his doubts. All his uncertainties. He lets himself feel those, too. He doesn't hide any part of himself. Any shadow. He gives them to Lance. Shows them to him in the most intimate way he knows how.

He shows him the overwhelming fondness he feels. The attachment. The attraction. The hope he feels whenever he sees Lance. The blinding light that seems to radiate from him. The relief that surges through him whenever they're together. The calm that settles deep in his bones at Lance's touch. The spark and sizzle of electricity whenever he sees his smile.

The overwhelming warmth that fills his chest whenever he thinks about Lance. About the fact that Lance is attached to his soul. The warmth that burns low and hot deep within his heart. A core of molten heat. Where fire becomes liquid. Where the two mediums meet in a form that fills him to the brim.

He spreads the fire from his arm across his chest. Swirling flames across his pec. He takes the other brush and does the same with the crystalline blue waters. Spreads the two colors across his chest, swirling and rolling, until they collide in the center.

Right over his heart. In a playful swirling cloud of purple.

And he lets himself feel what he's been afraid to touch.

That feeling that's still so new. Still so fragile. Something he's been afraid of feeling. Something he's been afraid to acknowledge. A sprouting seed deep inside his chest. One that's already taken root.

He lets himself see it. Brings it to light. Lets himself feel it. Cradles it gently, wary that it might shatter, wary that it might break him. He feeds it with the water and the fire. The chill and the heat. He brings it to the surface and lets it unfurl. Lets it bloom.

A feeling he's still too shy to name, still too scared to say aloud, but one he knows Lance will understand all the same. Knows that one day, he'll put it to words.

And as he makes the last stroke. As he lifts the brush from his chest. As the connection between them begins to close like echoes fading into the night. He looks up.

Lance hasn't moved. He still sits on the flood. Back to the bed and legs crossed, hands resting on his knees.

His arms and chest are now decorated in bright color. Vibrant and practically glowing with the intensity of what Keith had transmitted through their connection. Standing out brightly against his skin like a new tattoo. A perfect mirror of what's on Keith but without the mess of paint. Without the sticky tack and the drying peaks rising off his skin.

Just... color. Bright and vibrant. A storm of fire and ice, meeting in the middle in a beautiful chaos. Brought to life on his flesh like it was meant to be there.

Beautiful.

When Keith's eyes lift to his face, his breath catches.

Lance is staring at him. Openly and earnestly. His eyes are wide, irises dark and tormented. Swirling with so much. Glistening and glassy. Lips parted. Brow pinched just so. Wet tracks trailing down his cheeks.
He looks dazed. Eyes seeing through Keith. Straight into his heart. A storm of emotion swirling in the depths of his irises. Playing across his features as he tries to process. As he tries to cling to the echoes as their connection closes.

He looks as raw and vulnerable as Keith feels. Stripped bare of his defenses and left to feel so much. Too much. Overwhelming and filling him to the brim.

It takes him a moment to realize there's a familiar burn around his eyes, too. That there's moisture on his cheeks. That his breath is coming short and ragged. That he feels like he's drowning.

And then Lance is surging forward. Throwing into momentum hard and fast. He scrambles forward, knocking aside paints and spilling a cup of murky water. It makes a mess. It smears across the tarp. Across their pants. But he doesn't care because then Lance is in his lap, fingers combing through his hair and holding fast as his mouth comes down on Keith's, hot and desperate.

And he feels like he can breathe again.

Keith falls backwards with the momentum, dragging Lance down with him. Until he's lying on the floor amidst spilled paint and water. Lance straddling his hips. Fingers tight in his hair and long fingers cupping his face. Lance's mouth on his, open and panting. Eager and desperate.

Their kiss is all teeth and tongue. All heat and quick breaths. Driven by a hunger that fills them. Claws at them. Urging them to be closer, closer, closer. A heat that consumes them. Catches on what's been blooming in his chest and builds it higher.

His arms wrap around Lance's back. One wrapped tight around his waist while the other moves up his spine, digging his own fingers through Lance's hair, holding his head firmly in place.

Lance's hips rock against his, and Keith responds instantly. Quick and rhythm jerking. Fueling their desperation. Accenting their need.

When they finally break apart to catch their breath, they don't go far. They stay pressed flush, paint sticky and oozing between them. Smeared over both bodies. Smeared through their hair. He's grateful that marks only transfer by drawing on your own skin, otherwise Lance's new painting would be completely ruined.

And Keith needs him to be the star of his show tomorrow.

Lance rests his forehead against Keith's. Close enough that everything else disappears, Keith loses himself in his eyes.

"Now you're covered in paint, too," He says, lips moving against Lance's.

Lance chuckles, breath fanning out across Keith's cheeks. His voice lowers, eyes lidding as he playfully nips at Keith's bottom lip. "Then I guess you better clean me up."

"My shower isn't big enough for two people."

"Don't worry." Lance rolls his body, pressing his hips to Keith's in a slow grind. He pulls back far enough for Keith to see that heated smirk. "I'll stand real close."

Keith's shower is, in fact, too small for two people. But they make it work.
He's awake long before his alarm goes off. The anticipation wakes him early and the nerves refuse to let him go back to sleep. But he doesn't get out of bed. Not yet.

Instead he turns his alarm off and curls back under the covers, wrapping himself around his sleeping boyfriend. His soulmate. His... Lance.

Lance sleeps soundly and heavily. Lips parted and drooling on the pillow. His hair is mused from sleeping on it wet. Eyes closed and face lax, lashes long and dark against his cheekbones. His arms, chest, and shoulders are decorated in a tattoo of fire and ice. Colors still vibrant from the night before.

It stirs something inside him to see it. To be able to lazily trail his fingers along the patterns without shame or guilt. It makes him feel light and dizzy, a bubbling filling his chest and bursting with little jolts of pleasure.

He didn't get through the night unscathed either. His neck and chest are marred and bruised, carrying the marks left like Lance's desperate teeth and eager mouth.

He lays in bed for hours as his room slowly brightens with the sun peeking through his blinds. He stays where it's warm and comfortable. Curled around Lance's body, arm wrapped around his waist, legs tangled together, and fingers loosely intertwined.

He simply lays there and lets himself breathe.

Breathe with Lance. Focus on his heartbeat. As time shifts sluggishly, hanging thickly in the air like a fog. The haze of morning, lethargic and refreshing all at once. His body aches from the night before, but it's a good ache. It's an ache that reminds him of good things. Of Lance. Of the intimacy they share. It's satisfying, and it's an ache that makes him feel alive.

He revels in it. This new feeling of calm. It's a peace he's never really known, and one he never thought he would.

It's... contentment.

True contentment.

He's nervous about his art exhibit. He's worried about his grades. He's anxious to meet the rest of Lance's family and spend the holidays with him. His future is uncertain, and there are so many things in the world he fears.

But Lance is no longer one of them. His soulmate is no longer one of them.

The guilt is no longer a weight on his shoulders, crushing him and caving in his chest, making it harder and harder to breathe. He feels lighter. Stronger.

He feels... happy.

Actually and truly happy. And that's... that's a genuinely new thing.

He thinks he could get used to it.

When it is time for him to go, it's with great effort that he disentangles himself from Lance. And it's not without a fight. As soon as Lance seems to sense that he's leaving the bed, he rouses. Or maybe
he hadn't been that deeply asleep to begin with.

He clutches onto Keith, clinging to him. Long, gangly limbs wrap around him, awkward and desperate. His face nuzzles into Keith's bare skin as he mumbles his protests, voice slurred with sleep.

Keith chuckles under his breath, voice low and hoarse with disuse. He pacifies Lance with languid, lazy kisses. Kissing him deeply until he melts back into the bed and releases his grip.

Lance watches as he gets dressed, lidded eyes, heavy with exhaustion, following him around the studio apartment. Body bundled and tangled in the blankets. Hair messy against Keith's pillow.

He gets dressed quickly, pulling on the nicest things he owns while still trying to remain casual. He tries to tame his hair, but it's more or less a lost cause, so a neat ponytail will have to do. He packs his bag with last minute things, slips on his nicest boots, and slips on his leather jacket.

When he sits on the edge of the bed, Lance immediately curls his body around him, wrapping an arm around his waist in a half-formed hug and a half-formed spoon.

"You're coming by, right?" He asks, voice soft in the morning light. Gentle with fondness. Light with amusement. Breathless with a buzzing sense of nervous anticipation.

"Wouldn't miss it, babe." Lance hums, nuzzling into his side. "Don't forget to leave your key, so I can lock the door behind me."

"Actually..." He unzips one of the small breast pockets of his jacket, reaching in to pull out the small piece of metal. "I have something for you."

Lance rolls away from him slightly, just enough to half lie on his back. Looking up at Keith with one eyebrow raised. Keith presses it into Lance's hand, wrapping his fingers around it. Lance frowns, moving to hold it above his face, eyes darting over it and the space between his brows tightening like he's trying to solve a puzzle. "This isn't your key," He says slowly. "Your key is older than this and attached to that old cowboy keychain Pidge got you as a joke."

Keith hums, tilting his head. "You're right. That's not my key." Lance looks at him then, and Keith feels his lips tug upward at the edges. "It's yours. I had it made yesterday."

Lance's eyes blow wide, mouth falling open as he breathes, "You..."

Keith leans down, capturing that pretty little mouth in a kiss that's twisted with his own smile. When he pulls back, he cups Lance's jaw, thumb brushing across his cheek. Lance stares up at him, eyes color and sparkling with awe and far too many other things to name. "So you can come and go whenever."

"Keeeeeith," Lance whines, throwing out his arms and dragging Keith down into a hug.

He chuckles, pressing his lips to Lance's jaw before pulling away. "I've gotta go." He stands, making his way to the door. "Don't forget."

"I'm not gonna forget about your big art exhibit," He scoffs, rolling his eyes as he rolls himself bodily back into a blanket burrito.

"And Lance?" Keith pauses in the open doorway, half turned to look over his shoulder.

"Hmm?"
"Wear something sleeveless."

"... What the fuck is that supposed to-- Keith!"

Keith closes the door behind him, smiling as he hears Lance’s muffled shouts.

Lance slips into the student union on a gust of cold air, letting out a sigh of relief as he's hit with the wall of warm air. It burns against the chill on his cheeks, but he doesn't mind. The walk from his dorm to the union had been particularly cold with the wind chill and his lack of a vital layer. *Wear something sleeveless. What the hell kind of request is that in the middle of winter.*

He'd done it, though, and his arms had suffered under the sole layer of his jacket.

He shivers as he steps down the wide hall, brushing the snow from his hair and coat. He unzips his jacket, loosening his scarf so he won't be dying of heat stroke with the way the heaters are on full blast. Shoving his hands in his pockets, he heads off through the union.

The art exhibit is a room near the center of the student union. Right smack dab in the middle of the busiest section of the building. A decent sized room with glass walls that face the hallway, so any passerby can peer in. Good for art, he supposes. Despite that, he's never paid particular attention to the room. He's passed it thousands of times over the past three years, but it's never caught his interest. He's seen art and exhibits, sculptures and paintings, but he's never cared enough to actually look. Didn't realize it was for art students until Keith had said something.

He's... a little late. Not that there was a set time he said he'd be here. Keith's exhibit isn't over until five, so it's not like he's cutting it close. He just *feels* like he's late. He'll admit that *maybe* he overslept, but in his defense, Keith's bed is super comfortable and smells like him, Lance needs his beauty rest after the hell that exam week has brought, and he had to go by his dorm to shower and change.

Still, he probably feels like he's running late due to the barrage of texts he's gotten from Hunk, Pidge, Allura, Coran, and Shiro, all telling him to *stop by Keith's exhibition, don't forget the exhibition, man you gotta see Keith's thing!*

Like he's gonna *forget* or something. Come on, he's not an idiot, and he's not a monster. He knows this means a lot to Keith.

Speaking of...

He rounds the corner into the main hall, spotting the room further down. He's not at an angle where he can see through the window walls, but Keith stands just outside the room. Arms crossed loosely over his chest, occasionally using his hand to gesture while he talks, deep in conversation with an older man and an older woman. Probably a couple of his professors.

Lance slows, taking the time to really appreciate his boyfriend as he approaches. Because *damn* that boy deserves to be appreciated.

He's wearing his best pair of black skinny jeans, the ones that cup his ass *just right*, and boots that emphasize his calves while still managing to look classy. In a badass punk-gone-formal kinda way.
His collared button up clings to the width of his shoulders and his upper arms, sleeves rolled up to the elbow to emphasize forearms that make Lance embarrassingly weak at the knees. Overtop, he wears a dark red vest that hugs his torso and his trim waist.

Hair pulls back into a little ponytail with strands falling loose to frame his face. The peek of hickies from beneath his collar, just enough to allude to more beneath (and there are a lot more, and Lance is quite proud of that). Even his dumb fingerless leather gloves don't look quite so dumb anymore, and Lance would be lying if he said he isn't into it.

Because he is.

He's very much into it.

Keith glances around the hallway as he talks to his professors, and at first his gaze brushes right over Lance, only to snap back. He sees the moment Keith pauses, freezing minutely, words dying on his tongue. Then the man says something, and Keith jerks back into motion, blinking and turning back to them, smiling sheepishly.

Whatever he says has both of them turning, eyes fixing on Lance as he approaches, smiles wide and welcoming, and the attention makes him pause for a second.

"Hey," He says as he steps up next to Keith. He longs to reach out to him. To pull him into a quick hug. Maybe press a kiss to his temple. But it feels awkward with his professors staring at them, so he keeps his hands in his pockets.

"Hey." Keith sounds strangely breathless. A weird sort of strain in his voice.

"So you're the muse," The older man says, reaching out a hand, which Lance takes more out of habit and drilled manners than anything. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

He blinks, brow furrowing as his lips try to find words. "I'm the what?"

"He, uh... He hasn't seen it yet," Keith cuts in, eyes averted, clearing his throat and absently covering his mouth with his hand.

"Oh," The man's eyes go wide, as does his grin. "I see. I apologize."

Lance stares at him as his hand is dropped, turning his confused gaze to Keith. "What--"

Keith just nods his head back, gesturing toward the room. "Maybe you should... go look. I'll be right there."

Lance raises an eyebrow, but Keith only meets his gaze for a moment before looking away. "I, uh... Okay? I'll see you inside then, I guess." With a sheepish half-smile and a little wave toward the professors to excuse himself, he turns toward the room.

And he gets approximately one and a half steps inside before he freezes.

The room itself is longer than it is wide, stretching out in front of him. Paintings hang along the walls. Close together and offset in a pattern of one higher and then one lower. The canvases vary in size, but most of them tend to be roughly the size of his torso. Medium sized? He doesn't know what the standard is.

Pedestals are set up throughout the empty space in the middle of the room. Each one has two more paintings displayed, propped up back-to-back.
There's a good handful of people within the room. Students and teachers wandering around slowly, gazing at the paintings and the plaques that hang beneath them.

But he barely notices the people.

He's wrapped up in the colors.

In the nostalgia and deja vu that hits him like two freight trains coming from opposite directions, crushing and shattering him.

Because he knows these colors. He knows these paintings. Even when he takes them all in at once, unable to focus on one but absorbing them all as a whole, he can't shake the familiarity. And as he takes a hesitant step forward, and then another, eyes darting from display to display, he realizes why.

He's seen them painted on his skin.

He's lived them.

He's seen them recreated on the pages of a private journal clutched in his shaking hands.

His... his soulmarks.

He stops in the center of the room, turning slowly as he tries to take it all in. Old paintings. New paintings. All of them he remembers. All of them he has pictures of. All of them-- wait.

He stops by one of the pillars, looking at a painting that he remembers from his first year of college. Below the propped up canvas, stuck to the side of the pillar, is a plaque made simply of laminated paper.

It has the vague title of Thorns. Beneath that is the brief description, "The stress of community college", finished with a date.

It's the picture below it that catches his eye. Because he knows that picture. That picture has been on his wall all semester. It's an image of his own thigh, covered in a mass of bright and vibrant green vines, wickedly dark thorns, and pale, crumpled roses.

It's... it's him. The original soulmark. Displayed below the recreation on canvas.

And as he looks around, he realizes there are more. Every canvas as an image below it. One of his pictures. Taken with his phone. Printed to be hung on his wall and saved in photo albums. Candids. Weird lighting. Odd angles that Hunk often had to help him with. His legs, and arms, and chest.

Keith's colors adorning his skin.

His face is cropped out of most of them. Not by Keith's doing, but his own. But in some of them he can see a glimpse of his proud smile or cocky smirk.

The paintings line all three walls, and at the back wall, above the line of canvases, are words.

The Marks We Make, by Keith Kogane.
"Hey."

He's not sure how long he's been standing there, staring at the words, at Keith's name, with the colors dancing in his peripheral vision. But Keith's voice draws him out of his trance. Deep and soft, hesitant but hanging on the edge of excitement. A thread of anticipation pulled taut.

He turns, blinking away the haze. Keith stands next to him, arms crossed loosely over his chest. He's facing the same direction, toward the back wall, but his head is tilted toward Lance. Gazing at him sidelong.

"Hey," Lance breathes, not quite trusting his voice. Not quite grounded yet.

"Um... surprise?"

At that, a surprised laugh bubbles out of him, filling his lungs and popping on his tongue, stretching his lips with it. "Yeah, no shit." He half turns, arms held out to gesture to the room around them. "Dude, this is... this is incredible."

Keith watches him warily, tension around his eyes relaxing. A small, hesitant smile touching his lips. "You're not mad?"

"Dude, why would I be mad?"

He shrugs, eyes sliding away. "I didn't ask you if it was okay. The paintings may be mine, but these..." He gestures to a podium next to him, where there's a picture of Lance's forearm tattooed in a silhouetted forest landscape. "These are yours, and it's your body." His bottom lip is chapped and
red, and judging from the way he pauses to gnaw at it, Lance has a feeling he's been doing that a lot today. "I wanted it to be a surprise, but I didn't think about how this might be invading your privacy until people started showing up, and--"

He cuts off as Lance reaches for him, grabbing his arm and pulling him into a hug. He's stiff for just a moment before he relaxes into it. Hands coming to rest lightly around Lance's lower back.

"Surprised? Definitely. But mad? No. This is... really sweet." He pulls back, holding Keith at arms length with hands on his arms. Keith's shoulders are hunched slightly, head bowed and gaze shy. It's clear he's not used to praise, especially about his art. He's not really surprised, with how private he is about it. "How'd you get these pictures anyway? Most of them are still on my wall, and I think I would've noticed them missing."

He shifts his weight, eyes darting away before returning. "Uh, do you remember a couple days ago when you came over to study for art history?"

"And we ended up watching Netflix and making out instead. I remember."

Keith's smirk is small. Sheepish and playful all at once. "Hunk took them down and scanned them for me before putting them back up."

Lance gasps, tilting his head back as his eyes drift to the side. "That's why some of them looked out of place. I knew I wasn't going crazy. I look at that wall every day. I know where they're supposed to be. Exam stress and bad cafeteria garlic knots my ass, Hunk."

Keith chuckles. Just soft huffs of air that qualify as laughter. He looks lighter. More at ease. The tension of anticipation has snapped, melting away. He looks better like this, and Lance can't help the warm bubble of pride in his chest knowing he's the one that's caused the shift.

Lance smiles, dropping his hands to start peeling off his jacket. He glances around as he does, eyeing the other students wandering between the paintings. None of them pay either of them much mind. "Is this why you wanted me to be sleeveless?" He asks, smirking as he looks back to Keith, folding his jacket over his arm. "Wanted to show off your latest work and these guns?" He flexes for good measure, and he's rewarded with the lift of Keith's lips.

Keith hadn't given him any direction other than sleeveless, and for a moment, Lance had nearly just grabbed one of his muscle tanks. But this is a big deal to Keith, and Keith had dressed up nice himself, so Lance thought he'd do him the same courtesy.

So he'd gone with a plain black sleeveless turtleneck. Shows off his arms and his lean figure while also being more weather appropriate than a loose tank. Not to mention the black puts emphasis on the swirls of fire and ice racing down his arms.

Keith takes a moment to look him over. To drag his eyes up and down, dark with appreciation and lidded with what Lance has come to recognize as desire. He watches Keith's gaze linger in places, but none more so than his arms. His soulmark painting from the night before is still bright and fresh.

Keith's smirk is lopsided and fond, lifting his cheeks and crinkling his eyes. "Put those away, sharpshooter." He reaches for Lance's jacket, taking it and his scarf. "But... yeah, that's why. You don't mind?"

"Nope," He says, popping the P as he follows Keith to a table near the front.

Keith dumps his jacket atop his own in a chair behind the table. The table itself is covered in
pamphlets about the exhibit, as well as a sign in sheet for all the art students who are forced to come.

"I am, after all, your muse," he says, crossing his arms over his chest and bumping his hip against Keith's before leaning in and lowering his voice. "And your favorite canvas."

Keith glances at him, eyes lidded and smirk playful. He bumps Lance right back. "Technically, I paint on myself."

"But it's not pictures of you hung up around this room."

Keith hums, turning to absently look around the room. "True."

Lance leans back on the table, resting his hands on the edge. "So... how'd you come up with this idea, anyway? Last I checked, you were super secretive about your soulmark paintings. And I know that wasn't just with me. Pidge never recognized any of my marks."

Keith shifts closer to him, leaning back to sit on the edge of the table. He puts his hands behind him, one of them right next to Lance's. His fingers stretch, overlapping a couple of Lance's. "You did, actually."

"Me?" A short laugh bubbles out in his surprise, colored with confusion. "I know I'm your muse and all, but I didn't do anything."

Keith tilts his head, eyeing Lance out of the corner of his eye. His smile is more in the lift of his cheeks than on his lips. Lance waits, but Keith merely watches him for a moment before looking away. Before letting his gaze sweep once more across the room.

Students and teachers come and go. Some alone and some in small groups. They roam throughout the room, pointing out paintings, pointing out the pictures on the plaques, talking amongst themselves. The usual loud din of the student union seems muted in here. A bubble of space that's calm amongst the chaos. Strangely detached.

Keith speaks softly, voice low and private. Kept solely between them in the strange hushed atmosphere of the room. "Did I ever tell you why my mom used to paint on herself?"

That's... not really where he expected the conversation to turn. He's not gonna lie, at first he thought Keith's mom would've been the inspiration for this whole thing. After all, she gave Keith his love of art. She's the one who taught him to paint on himself. She's the one who gave him all of this.

But then Keith had said he was the reason, which, while flattering, doesn't explain why they're suddenly talking about his mom.

Still he finds himself saying, "No?" Attention and curiosity fixated on Keith as he looks around the room.

But while his gaze is on the paintings, there's a far away look to his eyes that tells Lance his attention is far away. "Neither did she." His smile is small, fondness hedged with a deep wistful melancholy that always surfaces when he talks about his mom. "She never told me, but... I know why. I figured it out."

"And?"

"She didn't start painting on herself until my dad passed away. After that... her body became her
favorite canvas. I didn't understand when I was a kid because if she painted on herself, she couldn't save the paintings. It seemed like a waste. So she started inviting me to join her, and... I realized it was fun. It helped when I was sad or scared, so I figured it was the same for her. I didn't question it for a long time. It was just... cathartic.

"But... I know why she did it now." Keith pauses, trailing off into silence as he loses himself in memories.

Lance shifts his hand, twining their fingers together on the table. Squeezing just enough to reassure him. To ground him to this moment. Keith lets out a shuddering breath before continuing.

"She did it to connect with my dad, but also... to connect with herself? She lost her connection. She felt it break, and I was there to see how much it hurt. She painted on herself as a way of... paying tribute to my dad, but also as a way to give herself soulmarks when no one else would."

Lance feels his lips lift at the corners, voice as soft and private as Keith's. "It was a self love kinda thing? Be her own soulmate?"

Keith nods, smile growing. Fond and wry all at once. "Yeah, something like that. She never said it, but I think she was lonely. Even when you're not with your soulmate, you're still connected to someone. And I think she was lonely without that. So she... learned to love herself. Expressed herself through it. Worked through her shit like I do."

He gestures around the room with his other hand. "All of this? She did it to connect with herself. With my dad. She used it to connect to me. Then she used it to connect with Shiro's dad. The marks she made? She used them to connect to the people she cared about."

Keith looks at him then, and Lance finds himself falling into that dark gaze. Lidded eyes and pupils wide. There's so much beyond the sea of his irises. So much emotion there. Tremulous and raw. Far too much to pick apart. Everything that Lance felt from him the night before, when Keith had opened up their soul connection and poured everything through it, leaving himself bare and vulnerable.

He looks at Lance now with that same intensity. Open and honest, without hesitation and without fear. His fingers squeeze, the corner of his lips quirking a fraction wider. "You told me to do my exhibit on something I care about... And I care about you. I use my art as a way to connect to people. To my mom. To myself. To you."

"Keith..." Aw, man, he can feel his lip quivering. He can hear it in his voice. His eyes have that little burning sting they get right before he gets super emotional.

Keith looks down at their joined hands, thumb brushing along where blue waves dance across the back of his hand to his knuckles. "I didn't always paint for you. Most of the time it was for myself because it's one of the only ways I know how to deal with stuff. It wasn't for you, but... I think I always liked knowing there was someone there on the other end."

"So even though you hated the idea of soulmates--"

"I didn't hate it."

Lance gives him a flat look, one eyebrow raised. Keith meets his stare with one of his own, lips pursed into a small frown. "I didn't..." He huffs, looking away, down at his lap where he picks at his jeans. "I... I think I really liked the idea of soulmates. Mom and Shiro's dad... they were great together. But there's so much that can go wrong, and fucking up can hurt. I think... I think I liked
the idea of soulmates so much that it fucking terrified me."

Lance snorts. "You can say that again. You were so scared of fucking up that you fucked up anyway."

He expects a scowl at the dig, but instead he gets a soft gaze and a playful smirk. "But you're still here..." He says softly, almost wistfully.

"Yeah," He looks away, unable to handle the soft intensity of Keith's gaze. "Yeah, I am. Guess I'm just a sucker for cute boys with stupid haircuts who make a lot of mistakes but are good at learning from them."

Keith's head falls to his shoulder, his hair tickling the underside of Lance's jaw and his upper arm. His head tilts automatically, leaning his cheek against Keith's.

"She'd be proud of you, you know." He says softly, voice barely above a whisper. He hears Keith's breath hitch. "Your mom would be proud of you and all of this. How much you've grown. How far your art has come." He smirks, turning his head to press it against Keith's forehead. "And I would know. I've had a front row seat."

Keith squeezes his hand, voice hoarse and raspy as he says, "Thanks, Lance."

The silence between them is comfortable. The stillness that settles is peaceful. They stay like that, listening to the amorphous din of voices from the student union, the hallway, the foot traffic, the coffeeshop across the hall. They listen to it from their strangely muted bubble of a room, surrounded by Keith's art and the soft appreciative whispers of the people who flow in and out.

It's nice, but Lance is who he is, and he can only stay still for so long.

"Come on," He says, pushing off the table. His fingers tighten in Keith's, pulling him up as well. He takes a few steps backwards, facing Keith as a smirk plays across his lips. "Let's take a trip down memory lane."

He catches Keith's answering smirk before turning back around, tugging Keith along behind him as he dives into the room filled with paintings. There doesn't seem to be an order to them. Not chronologically and not by color or theme. Just a chaos of paint strokes and color pallets. Much like the chaos of emotions that always filter through their connection.

"I remember this one," He says, stopping in front of a canvas filled with the swirling warm colors of a fire. Much like what's currently tattooed on his arm, but wispier and gentler. The statement itself is redundant. If he's honest, he remembers every single painting in this room. Even the older ones. Given time, he can probably recall exactly where it was painted and what he was doing when it started without even looking at the laminated plaques. "First day of school."

He looks down at the plaque, seeing that it says just that. The picture is of Lance's left arm.

"Yeah," Keith stands next to him, fingers still loosely intertwined, his other hand in his pocket. "My first day of classes here. I couldn't sleep."

"I know," Lance says with a lopsided grin. "You woke me up."

"Oh... I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. I'd rather be awake when you paint anyway. I always have."
Keith hums, at a lack for words. But he leans into Lance's arm, pressing their shoulders together, and he finds that they don't need words for him to feel the sentiment.

"This was the first day we met." Lance taps the picture of himself with a finger. "Our official First Meeting."

"And you spilled a smoothie on me," Keith says without malice, lips twitching at the corners.

"And you were an asshole about it!"

"I was in a bad mood because some random dude just dumped a smoothie all over my desk. And then you were an asshole."

Lance places his free hand on his hip, half turning to glare at Keith. It's a struggle to keep up his indignant scowl. He can feel it doesn't really reach his eyes. "I was defensive because you were being rude."

Keith loses his battle with his smirk, and Lance feels his own mockery of a scowl give way. "Figures we would have a disastrous First Meeting."

"Yeah, we're quite a pair." The fondness in his voice has Keith looking away, clearing his throat as he tugs Lance further along the wall.

"I didn't know you were my soulmate then. For a while, whenever we met up, your marks were covered."

"When did you realize it was me, then?"

"Here," He stops in front of another painting. One of the ones on a pedestal. The canvas is smeared with galaxies and dotted with stars. The plaque displays a picture of Lance's stretched neck and bare shoulder. The title is simply Searching. Keith stares at it, voice soft as he says, "You had written on your hand a time and a restaurant. I didn't know if it was the same one we have in town, but Shiro encouraged me to go. Just to see if I could see you. That maybe if I knew who you were, I'd feel more in control and less scared. So I painted the stars in a place that would be harder to hide so I could easily spot you."

Lance remembers this painting. He remembers that day. "The Spanish dinner Pidge and I went to," He whispers.

Keith nods. "I was sitting at the cafe across the street."

"You saw me."

"Yeah..."

He doesn't need to ask what happened after that. Keith had shown him, in the most intimate way possible. He had relived those chaotic feelings and poured them through their soul connection as he painted a storm of ice on his arm. Lance had felt it, as if the panic and fear had been his own.

The hurt hadn't lasted long, however, because Keith had shown him so much more than his fear. So, so much more.

With a soft punch to the lungs, a piece of the puzzle clicks into place and the air rushes out of him. "That's why you were randomly mad at me."
At his side, Keith stiffens. "I wasn't mad at you."

"Yeah, but you took it out on me."

"I... I guess." He shuffles his weight, glancing sidelong at Lance. "Sorry about that. It was... a lot to process. And I couldn't even take time away from you without Pidge getting mad at me for avoiding you. And I couldn't even tell them why without them meddling."

A surprised laugh bubbles out of him, "Oh man, they would've meddled so hard."

There's a tug at his hand, and Keith pulls him around the pedestal to stand in front of the painting on the other side. He recognizes this one, too. There have been a lot of sunset paintings over the years, but this one has always stood out. Perhaps it's the specific arrangement of colors, or perhaps it's the emotion that tore through his chest and left him raw, vulnerable, and strangely at peace, but he doesn't think he could ever forget this one.

Beneath it is a picture of Lance's forearm with the sunset tattooed into his skin.

The title simply reads: Acceptance.

He remembers the emotions that blew through his chest. The pain. The relief. The settling of peace. Acceptance.

"Oh..." He breathes.

"This was when I came to terms with our connection," Keith whispers, but he doesn't need to.

He leans into Keith, resting his head on his shoulder. Squeezing his hand. The moment stretches between them as the new information settles into place. As Lance mentally pulls that memory and fixes the new knowledge to it. The new lens to view it through. Before carefully and fondly setting it back into place.

His eyes wander as he does so, and before he realizes it, he's staring at a swirling storm of blues and shadows. Chaotic where sky blends into sea. It hangs above a picture of him wearing a cat-face crop top, focus on his midsection, hands proudly on his hips.

Before he can help it, he snorts a short laugh.

"What's so funny?" Keith asks, curious but edged with caution.

As if Lance might be laughing at his work. As if he could. Fat chance of that happening.

"That one," Lance points to the painting further down toward the back wall. "I just realized that my plan of waiting outside the art building actually worked." Something bubbles up in his chest, fluttering and expanding until it bursts, a giddy laugh on his tongue and a prideful smirk on his lips.

Keith eyes the painting, humming thoughtfully. "I guess it did."

"I'm a genius."

"Don't get carried away."

Lance pulls him around the room, and in turn, in a mismatched randomized order, they stop at all of the paintings. Lance asks questions. The meanings behind them. He learns even more about Keith. About what prompted the paintings that were tattooed on his skin and the emotions that
were seared through his chest.

And slowly, the parts of Keith and his soulmate that are still a little blurred where they overlap, start to come together. Until they slowly slot into place. Until the picture shifts into focus, and all he can see is just... Keith.

Until he can't imagine his soulmate ever not being Keith.

And Keith learns about him, too. He shares his own anecdotes. About what he was doing when the painting started. About the times he nearly tripped over himself in public when the connection opened up and the times he ran to the bathroom to strip off his shirt in the middle of class. About how he displayed the marks and the compliments he got.

He learns about Keith's mom's favorite flower while looking at a canvas covered in lilies.

He learns that the cool metal leg was Keith spiraling about the car accident and imagining himself in Shiro's place.

He learns from a wistful smile and a bashful gaze that Keith's favorite painting is the one that displays Lance's favorite constellations. The one they made together. And that's why it hangs on the back wall, right in the center.

He stays with Keith for the entire time his exhibition is open. Sometimes hand-in-hand. Sometimes with their arms playfully linked. Sometimes Lance wraps an arm around his shoulders and leans into him in a show of casual nonchalance. They walk through each painting. They walk through memory lane together. Some pleasant and some shaded with melancholy. All of them nostalgic. All of them memories they share together, experienced from two different sides of the same coin.

And Lance keeps some point of contact with Keith through all of it. Unable to not be touching him. Needing that grounding anchor. Overwhelmed by the desire to be close.

Occasionally Keith steps away to speak with a professor or curious guest. He speaks with students and adults alike, answering questions and awkwardly taking their praise. Lance hangs nearby, saving him when he's floundering with small talk.

Lance gets his fair share of compliments, too, as people realize what his arms are displaying and recognize him from the pictures.

He ends up being the last piece of Keith's exhibition, on display and glowing in the praise.

And he doesn't mind. Not when he can show off his soulmate's work and actually watch his soulmate gaze at him with that soft, fond intensity that completely wrecks his insides.

After he's done closing up the exhibit, they go across the hall to the coffeeshop. They sit with their drinks cradled in their hands. Talking about everything. Talking about nothing. Their legs hooked around each other under the table.

His soulmate. His best friend. His Keith.

They have a party at the end of the year. After exams. Before everyone goes home for winter
Shiro offers to host it at his apartment, and they invite the entire quidditch team. Not everyone can make it. Some have already gone home. But a fair amount of people show up. Plenty of booze is acquired, a gift from Coran. Everyone brings snacks, but they order pizza for dinner anyway.

One last get together. One last hurrah before they don't see each other for weeks. A chance to get drunk and celebrate surviving their exams, high on the exhilaration and relief of being done.

They play card games until people are too scatterbrained to focus. They split up into smaller groups. Some play video games. Some continue card games. Some just gather and talk, groups amorphous and constantly shifting as people move about the apartment in a social haze.

Lance stay glued to Keith's side, but he swears it's not on purpose. They just tend to gravitate toward each other. Always ending up back in each other's orbit despite spending whole conversations apart. They simply end up near each other. Greeting one another with a casual touch. Casually leaning into the other.

Not overly affectionate. Not obnoxiously so.


A touch at the hip. Draping an arm around his shoulders. A chin hooked over his shoulder. Brushing the hair out of Keith's face.

He can't resist, and while their friends tease them for it, there's no heat behind it. No mockery.

He plays beer pong with Hunk against Pidge and Keith, just barely managing to scape into a win with some heavy diversionary tactics that may or may not have involved taking off his shirt.

He tires to get everyone dancing, but Allura is the only one who can keep up with him. He sweeps her off her feet, and she follows gracefully. They laugh, show off, and barely manage to keep from knocking over one of Shiro's lamps. All the while pretending not to notice the way the two brothers stand close across the room, whispering to each other and casting them fond glances.

He attempts to make midnight hot pockets with Pidge, only to instantly burn his tongue in his drunken haste. Pidge laughs, but does the same, only to spit their bite out onto their shirt and send Lance into a laughing fit that lands him on the floor.

He and Shiro start up an intense game of quarters that gathers a surprisingly enthusiastic crowd, building up the energy as they chant and cheer. It leaves dents all over Shiro's kitchen table, but he says he doesn't really care.

He ends up wrapped up in a conversation with Coran, both of them leaping from one topic to another at a rapid pace, fueled by their own scattered headspaces and the influence of alcohol. They manage to talk about Coran's soulmate, about the new dnd campaign he's planning, about some insane combinations for new donuts.

He ends the night curled on the couch with Keith sitting between his legs, leaning back against his chest. He leans his head against the back of the couch, eyes closed, hands lost in the repetitive motion of running his fingers through Keith's hair and absorbed in the sensation of how soft it is.

He can feel Keith talking, vibrations rumbling through him. He can hear his voice, low and slurred, clinging to the soothing quality rather than the words. He's pretty sure him and Pidge are having a debate about the legitimacy of the Jersey Devil, but he stopped listening a while ago.
Hunk sits on the floor next to the couch, leaning back against Lance's hip and arm. He's having some sort of conversation with Romelle and Kinkade, one of the team's chasers. About yeast? He's not sure.

He falls asleep like that. Curled up on the couch with his soulmate. Surrounded by the voices of his friends and teammates. Warmed by their laughter. Alcohol a tingling buzz in his veins.

People he likes. People he cares about. People he trusts. A family away from home.

Keith is warm against him. A grounding point in the center of it all.

And this... this is all Lance has ever really wanted. His friends. His soulmate. All together. Weaving together to make a patchwork quilt that he can wrap himself up in. To feel safe. To feel at home.

Despite the way the alcohol makes his head spin, he feels strangely grounded. He feels a stilling calmness in the center of his chest.

He feels... happy.

It’s not the story he always imagined having, but it’s the story he has. Perfect in all its imperfections. And he wouldn’t trade it for anything.

The air is cold, but the sun warms his cheeks and soaks into his clothes. Fresh snow covers the ground and crunches beneath his boots as he leads Lance through the maze of headstones.

Lance's hand is warm in his. The cellophane that bundles the flowers in his other hand crinkles in his grip.

His mom and Shiro's dad are buried toward the back of the cemetery, past the older and worn headstones, towards where the rows get neater and the headstones become more uniform. Right next to a large, withered oak tree. One that Keith has spent many afternoons sitting under, talking to them.

He hasn't been here in a while. Not since the summer, when he visited before leaving for his new college. It's only been six months, but it feels like ages. Feels like so long ago, when he was alone and scared and stubbornly defiant. So long ago when his soulmate was nothing more than a far off problem. So long ago when his only friends were Pidge and Shiro.

So very long ago.

And yet here, it feels like nothing has changed. Like a bubble surrounds the cemetery and time moves slower. Keeping it in tact longer. Keeping things the same while the world around them changes. A liminal space. A trapped space between the present and the past.

For the first time in a long time, his heart beats erratically in his chest as he walks the familiar route to his mother's grave. But it's not anxiety or nervousness. It's not the stress of the world or the sorrow that came from her passing.

It's a strange, fluttering nervousness. New and strangely bright.
Because this time Lance is with him.

He never thought he'd be able to share his soulmate with his mom. Never dared imagine things would work out well enough to.

When they reach the familiar headstone, Keith stops, and for a moment, they stand in still silence. Staring at the large double headstone with the names Krolia Shirogane and Ryou Shirogane carved in elegant script.

Then Keith lets go of Lance's hand, taking a deep breath as he steps forward, falling to his knee to wipe the snow from the base of the headstone, clearing out the small stone vase.

"Hey, mom. Hi, Ryou," He says softly, voice cracking. "It's been a while. I just finished my first semester at that university Shiro goes to. It was... a rough semester, but... a lot of fun. I made a lot of friends. Pidge made me and Shiro join the quidditch team. Shiro found his soulmate. Her name's Allura, and she's... she's really great. I think Shiro's gonna bring her by soon."

He places the roses in the vase gently and carefully, taking his time to make sure they sit just right.

Then he stands, reaching a hand out behind him. "I brought someone to meet you..." Lance's hand slips into his once more as he steps up beside him. "His name is Lance, and... and he's my soulmate." His voice cracks, and he has to pause to take a deep, shuddering breath. He can feel the familiar sting behind his eyes that he knows has nothing to do with the cold. Lance squeezes his hand, and Keith holds on tightly. "I found him, mom..." He whispers. "It wasn't... it wasn't easy. I fucked things up, and he's an asshole sometimes, but... but we're okay now. We're gonna be okay. I'm gonna be okay."

He trails off, reaching up to rub at his eyes before any tears can escape.

Lance clears his throat, standing up a little taller at his side. "Um, hi, name's Lance, and it's nice to meet you, Mrs. Shirogane. I'm a big fan of your work." His hand leaves Keith's, wrapping around his waist to pull him to his side.

Keith turns into him, wrapping his arms around Lance and burying his face in Lance's scarf. Lance's arms wrap around his back, cheek resting against his hair.

"You've done a great job raising this guy," He continues, voice hushed but personable. As if he were really speaking to her. Keith appreciates the effort, a bubble of warmth expanding in his chest. "And his art? Man, you would be so proud of him. Thanks for teaching him how to paint on himself, by the way. I've gotten a lot of cool ass soulmarks because of that. And... you don't have to worry about him anymore. I'll take good care of him. I promise."

Keith's hands tighten, fingers curling into the back of Lance's jacket, and Lance chuckles. It rumbles through Lance's chest and into his.

"Yeah," Lance says, a smile in his voice. "We're gonna be just fine."

They stay until their fingers are numb, and they can no longer feel their toes. They stay until even Lance's nose turns pink, and he can't stop sniffling as it runs. They stay, buried in their layers and huddled together.

And the whole time, they talk. They talk aloud to Keith's mom and step dad. They tell them how they met, and everything that's happened since. How they became friends. How they grew closer. Lance tells them all about Keith's soulmark paintings, bragging about his exhibition. Keith tells them about quidditch, sharing stories about his new friends.
At first Keith had been worried that Lance might not have gotten it. That he might not have understood the need to talk aloud to them. To share everything as if he were talking directly to them.

But... Lance seems to get it. He goes with it, going to far as to ask whether or not it's weird to curse in front of him mom. And it doesn't feel like Lance is just humoring him. It feels... real. Lance understands.

It's several hours later that they make their way back through the cemetery, retracing their steps in the snow. Hands buried deep in their pockets for warmth, but shoulders bumping together in an instinctual need to keep contact.

It took several hours to get here, and they have several more hours to go. Stopping by the cemetery in Keith's hometown had been a pretty big detour, but when Keith had shyly brought it up, Lance had latched onto it with far more enthusiasm than Keith could have hoped.

This was just as important to him as it was for Keith.

The drive to Lance's house is still a few more hours from here, down towards the coast. Lance had asked Keith to join him for the holidays, and Keith... well, he can't really say no to Lance when he looks so heartfelt and excited. So he'll be spending most of winter break with the McClains.

They'll be leaving early, though. Stopping at Keith's place for a few days before returning to school, so he can see his grandparents and Lance can meet them.

He feels strangely giddy about that prospect. Nervous and excited all at once. He wasn't sure his grandparents would ever get to meet his soulmate, and he knows how much it means to them that they can.

They stop as they reach Lance's car. But instead of going around to the driver's side, Lance stops next to Keith at the passenger's side, turning to face him with a lopsided grin. "Well, as far as first impressions go, I think I made a good one."

Keith smiles, tucking his chin into his scarf. "They would've liked you." He pulls his hands from his pockets, reaching out to Lance. His hands are barely on Lance's waist before Lance steps forward into his space, his own arms lifting to rest on Keith's shoulders, wrapping loosely around them. "I wanted to thank you..." He says softly, breath fogging in the cold air.

Lance tilts his head, lopsided smile still in place, eyes softening. "It's no problem, Keith. I wanted to come. I know how much this means to you."

He shakes his head. "Not just that."

He lifts his chin to meet Lance's gaze. Unwavering and unafraid. He wants Lance to know he means it. Want him to know how much he feels. All of this warmth filling his chest until he's bursting at the seams. Wants Lance to know it, to see it, even without opening up their soul connection.

"Thank you for always being there for me," He says softly, voice surprisingly steady despite the waver he feels in his breath. "Even when I didn't want you to be. Even when I was pushing you away. Thank you for being there. For listening even when I didn't want you to. Even when I painted only for myself, it was nice knowing... I wasn't alone.

"Keith..." Lance breathes, grin fading into something softer. Something far more vulnerable and far more shy. Like a smile he doesn't mean to have but can't quite hide. His hands shift, pushing the
hair back from Keith's face, eyes lidded and meeting Keith's with a storm that threatens to blow him away. "Thank you for giving me a chance. For getting me out of my own head, and just... not letting me change myself for you. For letting me be me. For loving me for me."

"I never said that..." Keith breathes, a smile in his voice even if it doesn't quite reach his lips.

Lance chuckles, leaning forward to press his forehead against Keith's. His eyes drift closed, smile on his lips lifting a fraction. "You didn't have to. I felt it."

Keith pulls him closer. Until they're pressed together and his arms are wrapped tight around Lance's waist. Lance's fingers comb through his hair and hold him in place. As if Keith would ever want to pull away.

"I know we said we wanted things to go back to the way they were..." Lance starts, opening his eyes and pulling back far enough to look at him, but staying close enough to feel his breath. "But... I'm starting to realize that I don't mind change. I don't mind this kind of change." His thumb brushes along Keith's jaw, down his neck until it reaches his scarf.

"I don't mind either." Keith feels his lips tilt upward, lifting of their own accord. One of Lance's hands cups his jaw, and Keith leans into the touch. He turns into it, holding Lance's gaze as he presses a kiss to his palm and whispers against his skin, "I'm glad it's you."

He feels the shudder run through Lance. Watches it run down his spine and back up, lifting his smile wider until it crinkles at the corners of his eyes. "I'm glad it's you, too, space cadet. Makes the whole falling for you thing less complicated."

Keith's breath hitches. Lance's grin curls coy and lopsided, and Keith surges forward to capture it. Lips melding together. His hands tight around Lance and Lance's fingers clutched in his hair and around his shoulders. Lance exhales through his nose, a deep sigh as he tilts his head, deepening the kiss.

Their lips are cold. The touch of their noses is like ice. But the heat between them burns. Low and pulsing and bright. Building and surging through their veins.

He knows things won't be easy. He knows life never is. He knows things won't be automatically perfect, and he knows they'll have to work for it. But with Lance... he thinks it'll be worth it. And he knows that they'll be fine.

He's with his soulmate, but they're not at their happily ever after.

They're still writing their story with every mark that they make.

And he hopes this is a story that never ends.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who's joined me on this journey. Stories are the marks I choose to make, and if I've made you feel any kind of way, if you've taken refuge and an escape in this story, if it's helped you at all, then it makes everything worth it. That's why I write.

Thank you <33
If you haven't seen already, I've uploaded a 21k oneshot called Siren's Call. Now that this fic is finished, Sora will be working on finishing the art for Wild Magic, so we can finish uploading that fic.

After Wild Magic, Sora and I will be working on a action packed, free running, dark dystopia fic that you can see some preliminary art and explanations for here on Sora's tumblr.

I'm also in the process of writing a modern fey au.

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