Ignorance is Bliss

by YouAreInAComaWakeUp (Nikanaiko)

Summary

As it turns out, learning that your house is haunted makes the ghosts a lot more aggressive. Who knew?

Ah, well. At least one of them is hot. And he's the less-evil one, too, so that's always a plus.

Notes

Okay, so, I'm actually working on this as a side thing while I'm putting more effort into the main fic I'm working on under my other pseud. I wasn't even sure I should post this. But I mean, hey, if the plot bunnies were after my butt enough to make me write something, I might as well put it up somewhere, right?

As such, this is gonna have a slow update schedule. I'm just working on this, like, whenever. And not putting much effort into editing. I apologize in advance for any invested readers who
get frustrated with me.

That being said, tell me if I make a typo or whatever. Just copy and paste the sentence with the typo in it so I can ctrl-f to fix it. Thanks.

Now, on to the spooks.
Bills sucked.

Not that that was a huge revelation. Everyone knew that bills were awful, but Lance hadn’t gotten to see that firsthand until he moved out of his family’s house and in with his three closest friends after high school. He got to see exactly how much of his money went to food, water, electricity, and rent firsthand, which was why, when Shiro offered a chance to shed one of those financial drains, especially with the added bonus of extra space, the entire household was on board, Lance certainly included.

At least, he had been on board, until…

“Wait, the day ‘they’ died?” blanched Lance, leaning as far away from Shiro as he could while still remaining in the passenger seat of his truck. “As in, they died on the same day? How?”

Shiro sighed. “Lance, I told you already. They died in their sleep. Same night, same bed. They were found in each other’s arms, remember?”

“I...might have zoned out,” admitted Lance. “I thought you started talking about a movie or something! I didn’t realize we were still talking about your aunt and uncle! That doesn’t just happen to people! And by the way, ‘in their sleep’ is not a cause of death.”

“Heart failure,” said Shiro, slowing the truck to a stop. “They were old, Lance. Old, and very in love. One of them probably woke up in the night, realized that the other was dead, and died of grief. It happens. It’s called broken heart syndrome.”

Lance narrowed his eyes, unbuckling his seatbelt. “That’s not real,” he accused.

“Well, Lance,” said Pidge, eyebrow cocked. “Do you even know what tact is?”

“I’m just saying.” Lance pushed open his door, nearly causing Pidge to fall from the step just beyond it. “It’s weird. No one can say it’s not weird.”

“Actually,” said Pidge, appearing just outside the open window on the passenger side of Shiro’s truck and eliciting an undignified squawk of surprise from Lance, “it’s very real. Stress-induced cardiomyopathy happens when part of the heart swells and fails to pump blood properly.”

“Yeah, like mine just did when you showed up out of nowhere!” snapped Lance. “Don’t do that!”

“See!” said Lance, gesticulating with one hand and batting Pidge’s pinching fingers away with the other. “Not usually fatal! There’s something weird going on with your aunt and uncle’s deaths, Shiro. People don’t just die at the same time in the same place by chance.”

“Wow, Lance,” said Pidge, eyebrow cocked. “Do you even know what tact is?”

“I’m just saying.” Lance pushed open his door, nearly causing Pidge to fall from the step just beyond it. “It’s weird. No one can say it’s not weird.”

“Actually, we can,” said Pidge, looking rather disgruntled from the near-fall Lance had caused. “Now come help Hunk move the mattresses. I would, but these short, skinny arms are meant for delicate equipment, not furniture big enough for Hunk to sleep on.”

“Yeah, yeah,” sighed Lance, stepping out onto the grass and peering up at the three-story house he’d be living in until further notice. On the second floor, a curtain flapped in the wind, the motion
catching Lance’s attention for only a moment before he turned around to head for the trailer full of mattresses he was supposed to be moving.

“...Wait.”

Eyes snapping open wide, Lance whipped back around to take a second look at the curtain he’d seen flapping just a moment before. It had stopped moving, and...

...the window was closed.

“...Hey, uh, guys?”

As far as Lance was concerned, the moving curtain was the first clue that his new place of residence was haunted by Akira and Hiromi Kogane.

The second was a box of comics that had somehow tumbled off of a coffee table and onto the floor in a heap of bent covers and crinkled pages.

“They didn’t fall on their own, Lance,” grumbled Pidge, carefully stacking each volume back in its box in a clearly predetermined order. “All you have to do is apologize.”

“It wasn’t me!” protested Lance. “It was them!”

“‘Them’ who?” asked Pidge, honey-brown eyes narrowing over the circular frame of glass spectacles. “Oh, God, Lance, not--”

“Shiro’s aunt and uncle!” insisted Lance.

Pidge sighed emphatically. “Why would the Koganes want to hurt my comics?”

“Why would I?” demanded Lance.

“Because you’re an idiot who doesn’t watch where he’s going,” said Pidge, attentions back on reorganizing.

“Maybe they’re clumsy, too!” insisted Lance. “Besides, I was in the kitchen the whole time!”

“By the way, Lance?” Hunk poked his head around the kitchen doorway. “Thanks for, uh, ‘helping’? But I totally had to rearrange everything, so can you, like, not be in the kitchen anymore? You have no idea where anything goes.”

“Nothing goes anywhere!” said Lance, the target of his frustrations switching quickly. “We just got here! We decide where stuff goes! It’s a blank slate!”

“Yeah, well, now the plates go in the cabinet by the sink,” said Hunk, raising his voice as he slinked back into the kitchen. “Not the one over the stove. That’s where shortening and oil goes in, like, every house ever.”

“You tried to put the plates in the cabinet over the stove?” asked Pidge, looking up at Lance
incredulously.

“The point is,” said Lance, “I was in the kitchen. Hunk just vouched for me.”

“So you probably knocked them over on your way into the kitchen,” said Pidge. “Someone had to have knocked them over.”

“Yeah!” exclaimed Lance. “The ghosts!”

“Everyone, just calm down,” said Shiro, appearing from the stairs like some peacekeeping god of justice. He put his hands on his hips, looking mildly disappointed, but mostly just calm. “Look, we’re all tired from driving and unpacking all day. We just need a break. I’m thinking lunch. Who’s with me?”

“Ooh!” Hunk appeared again, looking almost childish in his glee. “I saw a Balmera on the way here. Can we have that? A turkey club wrap sounds so good right now.”

“Sounds great,” said Shiro, smiling his usual relaxed smile.

“Okay, while Hunk is making the call…” Pidge grunted and stood from the floor, switching the box of comics for a box that was unopened. “Lance, you take this into the basement.”

“The...basement?” Lance’s eye twitched. “As in this basement? In this house? The one that’s haunted?”

“Yes,” said Pidge, shoving the box into Lance’s arms. “What’s the matter? Scared of the dark?”

“In a house that’s totally haunted?” Lance’s eyes widened. “Yes!”

“You won’t be in the dark,” said Shiro, who seemed to be completely ignoring any possible mention of his family’s house being haunted altogether. “There’s a light switch by the door.”

A switch there may have been, but the lights were dim. Apparently, there were supposed to be three lights that turned on in the surprisingly large basement beneath the house, but the center one was out, and it made everything else seem darker.

Lance was on edge from the second he took one step on the basement stairs, and the dim lighting and the concrete floor did little to ease his worries.

On one wall was a series of shelves. Some were occupied, probably harboring items that Shiro chose to keep when he and his parents cleaned out the house together. Some of the shelves, however, were completely barren. Lance quickly lowered the box onto one of the unburdened shelves, eager to leave, but just as he was about to bolt back upstairs, something in the corner of his eye caught his full attention.

It was a box. White, with black markings, and surprisingly devoid of dust, despite everything around it being absolutely covered with a thick blanket of the stuff. Lance’s first thought was that it must have been brought into the basement recently, but he didn’t recognize it at all. It didn’t belong to Pidge or Shiro or Hunk, and Lance knew it definitely didn’t belong to him.

His terror temporarily forgotten, Lance reached out, as if hypnotized, and unlatched the box.

Inside was a set of simplistic, ceramic sculptures. So minimalistic they were in design that it took Lance several seconds of squinting before he realized what they were. Lions. Or lionesses, maybe. Tigers without stripes? Some kind of big cat, regardless.
The figures themselves were small, lean, with each cat sitting atop what looked like a pedestal. They reminded Lance of the chess set his oldest brother and his dad used to play with when he was younger, to the point where Lance most likely would have thought he’d found replacement pieces for a chess set if not for the colors.

There were four lions. Blue, black, green, and gold, though judging by the dip in the velvet padding between the blue and black lions, it seemed like there had been one more at one point.

Lance had just begun to wonder what color the fifth lion might have been when the light at the far end of the basement flickered out.

His head jerked upright, all of his previous terror returning to him at once. A beat passed, and the light over Lance’s head went out as well.

He slammed the case shut, locked it as quickly as his trembling fingers could move, and booked it for the stairs.

“I’m sorry!” he cried out.

Something grabbed his ankle.

What felt too sharp not to be claws snatched at his ankle, but when he looked down, all he saw was darkness.

“I’m sorry!” he whimpered again, kicking at whatever it was that was grabbing his leg. “I was just looking!”

Whatever was hooked to the cuff of his jeans released its grip, and Lance flipped onto his front, scrambling the rest of the way up the stairs, climbing as much with his hands as with his feet, and slamming the door behind him.

“It looks like you just got it hooked on the stairs,” said Pidge, inspecting the tear on Lance’s jeans as they waited for Hunk to stop shamelessly flirting with the delivery girl. “I took a look at them earlier. They’re old and metal. I wouldn’t be surprised if there are some sharp parts pointing out here and there. We should probably file them down once we get settled just in case, but that doesn’t mean you were in danger. Maybe of a bad cut if you’d been wearing shorts, but--”

“It wasn’t the stairs, Pidge!” insisted Lance. “Something grabbed me. Something with claws, and probably teeth. I swear, I almost died because you made me go in the spooky basement with the creepy ghosts!”

“I’m pretty sure Shiro’s aunt and uncle didn’t have claws, Lance.”

“I--” Lance raised a finger in protest, but stopped short. He had to admit, Pidge had a point. “...Maybe they’re new. Maybe they got them when they died. Ha!”

The second that sharp laugh escaped Lance, a shelf on the wall by the door collapsed out of seemingly nowhere, making a thud that the now-very-skittish Lance would have had to have been
deaf to miss. A candle--thankfully unlit--slid down the now-slanted shelf, bumping into a plastic figure of a snail-like extraterrestrial on the shelf below, which fell off entirely, landing on a stack of board games, causing Settlers of Cataan to tumble from the top of the stack, continuing the Rube Goldberg sequence of events that lasted until Shiro’s multi-purpose workout bar flew with surprising aerodynamic agility right into the back of an unstocked bookshelf, which was now headed straight for Hunk’s head.

“Look out!” screamed Lance, who had just snapped out of the awed stupor that bizarre series of events had put him in, just in time to alert his friend to the possible injury heading his way.

Hunk, wide-eyed, turned around and threw his arms up, managing to do something he would never willingly do in the process and actually throw the food.

Lance managed to snatch both rustling plastic bags out of the air in the exact instant that Hunk caught the top of the toppling bookshelf.

“A-Are you all right?” yelped the delivery girl, golden eyes wide.

“Who cares about me?” said Hunk urgently. “Is the food okay?”

“Right here, Buddy,” said Lance, wide-eyed and breathless, scared somber.

“Nice,” said Hunk, pushing the bookshelf upright again. “Man, what do your ghosts have against books, huh, Lance?” He laughed.

Lance didn’t.

The day continued much in the same way, starting with the shattering of a lightbulb in the bathroom.

Then came Lance walking into his room to find his lucky jacket and all of his shirts lying out on his bed as if someone had gone through them. Harmless though it may have been, it was still weird when Lance asked the others of any of them had gone into his room and they all insisted they hadn’t.

Then there was the old handheld system that not only started by itself, but booted up a racing game Lance hadn’t touched his years. Then the book lying open and spine-up, as if someone had been reading it and set it aside. Pidge would never leave a book like that, Shiro didn’t mess with Lance’s stuff, and Hunk would have hated something with that much blood and gore far too much to want to keep his place. Then, when Lance swore he’d just turned around for a moment, he’d turned back to see all of the action figures on his desk facing the same way when he was sure he’d just set them down haphazardly before.

And then...there were the footsteps. Loud, rushing footsteps clambering down the hallway outside his door, thankfully away from his room rather than toward it, but that didn’t change the fact that the footsteps belonged to an apparently invisible person.

By the time night had fallen, Lance had crossed the point of insanity and delved deep into the realm of paranoia. He trembled at the foot of his bed, rubbing his arms, still fully dressed despite the fact that everyone he knew was already deep asleep.

“Okay…” he muttered, eyes darting around the room, looking for any further signs of the spirits that had made his day hell. “I’m okay, I’m okay, I’m okay…” He took a deep breath, squeezing his arms tighter to his chest.

“I know you’re there,” he said warily. “And I don’t like it. This is our house now, so you can just...pass on or whatever! No one wants you here!”
Lance peered around the room, searching for any sign that the ghosts had heard him.

One of Lance’s drawers opened.

Lance screamed.

All that Keith could say was that he was happy he was able to protect his parents for as long as he did. Even with the Galra seeping in through every dark crack, he’d still been able to give his mother and father the natural death they deserved. And for one guilty moment, Keith thought that maybe he could rest.

Then the doors opened, and he realized how stupid he’d been.

Of course his family would want to keep the house. It was a nice house, and they didn’t know it was Galra-infested. Takashi–regardless of how much he’d grown; Keith did a double-take when he heard Auntie Shirogane say the name, because there was no way that could possibly have been his baby cousin–was young, in his twenties, and eager to make his mark on the world. And he apparently had friends who were just as eager. The house had four rooms, Takashi had three friends… It all made sense.

And Keith was ticked that he didn’t see it before.

Alfor had warned him that the job would always be harder than it seemed.

Keith should have listened.

Whether he was prepared or not, Takashi arrived, along with his friends. They pulled up in two vehicles, bringing with them roomfuls of new furniture and belongings to protect, lives to protect.

Keith peered through the window from his old bedroom on the second floor, recently emptied thanks to the Shiroganes, trying to get a look at his new wards.

Unfortunately, one of them also seemed keen on getting a look at him.

“Shit,” mumbled Keith, ducking behind the curtain, then immediately feeling like an idiot yet again.

They couldn’t see him. Of course they couldn’t.

But that didn’t stop that scrawny, brown-haired tree of a kid from trying.

Keith made his way into the foyer. The closer he was to Takashi and his friends, the easier he could protect them from the Galra.

As much as Keith knew he should have been watching out for Galra, he still found time to eavesdrop on his new roommates. It didn’t hurt to at least learn their names, after all.

The first thing Keith noticed was that no one called Takashi by his given name. Instead, they all referred to him as Shiro. Keith wasn’t sure if it was a diminutive of his surname or if it was due to the new shock of white hair that definitely hadn’t been there when Takashi was a little kid. Perhaps both.
Regardless, Keith was honestly grateful. He was sure, ghost or not, that he would get a brain tumor if he continued to associate his baby cousin with someone who seemed more like a cleaned-up version of Conan the Barbarian.

Of Shiro’s friends, there was a big guy, a tiny...person...and there was the tree from earlier.

The big guy was aptly named Hunk. Keith doubted it was his real name, but it suited him well, so there was no reason not to use it. Hunk seemed obsessed with food, and it definitely showed in his size, but there was still no mistaking the definition of muscle in the tight sleeves of his shirt. At least he would be able to hold his own if Keith managed to slip up, and with the number of people he protected having doubled over the course of a few weeks, that was likely to happen.

The little one—Keith couldn’t figure out if they were a boy or a girl to save his life, even if he had a life to save—was Pidge. Pidge seemed...smart, if a little bit of a hothead, and very protective of their belongings.

Which was why Keith was already wincing when Lance managed to knock over a box of comics that had Pidge scrawled across the side in large letters.

“Your buddy is not gonna be happy with you,” Keith muttered unheard, following Lance into the kitchen, where most of the household was.

Lance was the problem. Keith wasn’t sure if he’d done something during the day to be spotted so quickly, but Lance had clearly seen something, whether it was Keith’s fault or that of one of the Galra. Lance was convinced that it was the spirit of one of Keith’s parents, but Keith didn’t know if that made things better or worse.

Regardless of who Lance thought was bothering him, his continuing attempts to tell his friends about the “ghosts” were attracting Galra attention. The freakish purple things kept crawling into rooms where Lance was, headed straight for him.

The Galra weren’t anything new for Keith. He’d been fighting them off for nearly two decades. Not nearly as long as Alfor had before him, but still more than long enough to know how to keep them at bay when battles were one-on-one. The real problem came when more than one came out of the woodwork at a time, but that rarely happened in broad daylight. As long as Lance stayed above ground, where the sun was out, it wouldn’t be a problem.

“Okay.” The small one, Pidge, stood up, lifting a cardboard box in their tiny arms and pushing it toward Lance. “While Hunk is making the call...”

Keith froze. “No.” He could already tell what was going to happen. “No, don’t you dare say it. Don’t you dare, you little button-nosed--”

“Lance, you take this into the basement.”

Keith roared through his clenched teeth, throwing his head back. His life was never easy. Why should his afterlife have been any different? He reached for the bayard at his belt, gripping it less like the lifeline it really was and more like he was trying to strangle it.

Lance was going to be the end of him somehow. He was already sure of that.

Opening the door to the basement was not like opening floodgates. It was better to say that it was like jumping off of the edge of a boat into lethally cold water. It was still cold above the surface, and jumping in didn’t make the water suddenly rise up and flood the boat, but it was definitely a stupid thing to do.
And Lance had just plunged himself into the Arctic Ocean.

Keith had to rush past him to get a head start, clearing a path the best he could for Lance’s safety. Turning on the lights did make a difference, thankfully. It lessened the amount of space the Galra could crawl into their world through, but it didn’t deplete it completely. They were still out for blood, and artificial light did nothing compared to the light from Sol.

Every Galra that came for Keith was cut short by the edge of Keith’s bayard, and if Keith were just fighting for himself, they would be a challenge, but not impossible.

But he wasn’t fighting for himself at all. He was protecting Lance. Not only did Keith have to fight off every single soldier that came at his own back, but he had to chase after the ones that were retreating from him, straight for Lance.

They came one after another, like a line of ants through a hole in the wall. Some went for Keith, but most realized that Lance was the smarter target. With so many to deal with at once, Keith was quickly wearing down.

“What are you doing?!” he shouted in frustration while he pushed against a sword aimed for his throat, knowing that Lance would never be able to hear him. “Just put your stuff on the shelf and--” Keith looked over his shoulder, and he froze.

Lance had found the Lions.

He’d opened the box.

If Lance touched any of them-- No, if the Galra did--

“Get away from that!” shouted Keith in vain, struggling to get away from the Galra that surrounded him, to close it with his own hands, but before he got the chance, one of the lights went out.

No, a Galra had broken the bulb. He was making room for more.

Horror dropped a cold, heavy stone in Keith’s stomach. He couldn’t handle more Galra. Not when he was already struggling so much.

But, with the curse came a blessing, as that light going out--the fucking light, compared to everything around it that he was blissfully ignorant to--pushed Lance from nervous to outright terrified, as he should have been from the start.

Screaming, Lance slammed the box shut and shot like a bullet to the stairs, unknowingly pushing past tens of Galra on his way there. Keith, grateful that Lance had finally realized that he was in danger, tried his hardest to follow, but the Galra were too many. They grabbed his arms, his jacket, his hair, anything they could reach to hold him back.

There was a loud, painful clang of bone and flesh on metal, and Lance fought to look at the stairs.

Even in the dark, he could see Lance whimpering, terrified, trying his hardest to fight off a threat he couldn’t see.

Keith had never seen any Galra come so close to taking a life.

Something stirred inside of him. Fear, rage, adrenaline, he wasn’t sure, but something clicked into place, and Keith felt a new strength flow through him.
He yanked his right arm free and shoved the Galra back. He used his bayard to cut away the rest of the Galra holding him down, and he sliced through any that stood between himself and Lance.

With a cry of fury or exertion—he wasn’t sure—he pierced through the back of the Galra that had Lance by the ankle, and it dissipated into the darkness, just like the rest.

A relieved, hysterical laugh bubbled up Lance's throat and he tore up the rest of the stairs, Keith hot on his heels.

They both slammed the door behind themselves the second their feet crossed the threshold, and Lance leaned against it, chest heaving, sweat sticking his hair to his forehead.

“Never do that again!” snapped Keith instinctively.

Lance didn’t hear him. Of course he couldn’t. It would take a miracle for that to happen, a miracle Keith had only seen happen once before, and never to himself.

Huffing, exhausted, Keith pressed his back to the wall beside the door and slid to the linoleum under his feet. He just prayed that the Galra would take it easy on him until nightfall.

They didn’t.

One was waiting for Keith the second he and Lance went back into the foyer. Keith, tired from fighting nearly an entire army of Galra in the basement, fought sluggishly, but was able to eventually take the soldier down. Unfortunately, in his fatigue, Keith failed to notice that the Galra had set up a trap, one that he activated during the fight without Keith noticing.

It wasn’t until Lance screamed that he realized something was wrong.

“Hunk! Look out!”

Keith whipped around so quickly that his hair hit him in the face, but not quickly enough to stop the bookshelf from falling.

Thankfully, Lance’s shout had kept the situation from becoming lethal, and Hunk was able to defend himself.

Keith was so relieved that he collapsed where he stood, feeling as though his muscles were screaming out in agony.

It didn’t take long to realize that the Galra were targeting Lance almost exclusively after that. They seemed to realize the same thing that Keith did, that if one of the living members of the house was aware, he was almost certain to stop any indirect Galra attacks that Keith missed. He was an extra pair of eyes and ears, something that hadn’t been in the house since Alfor was still around, and the Galra didn’t seem too excited about it.

They broke the light in the upstairs bathroom, taking advantage of Keith’s attempt to give Lance a moment of privacy, and Keith had been forced to enter the bathroom the hard way to keep Lance from getting attacked while he was washing his hands.

They tried to set up a trap in Lance’s own bedroom, one that Keith was quick to fix, though he was sure Lance had noticed when his action figures moved of their own accord. Better than for them to fall like dominos right into Lance’s paperclips and start a fire.

Keith had actually been forced to chase one Galra out when he’d decided to just bite the bullet and
try to take Lance out directly.

Attempt after attempt was made on Lance’s life, and it was exhausting trying to keep up with them all. It wasn’t until night began to fall that Keith started to relax a little. After all, it was much easier to protect someone when he had a partner.

When the first stars of the evening pierced through the light of day, a specter appeared in Lance’s doorway as invisible to his eyes as Keith himself was.

The specter, a bright red lioness, stretched out, yawned, and plodded under Keith’s arm, forcing him to set down the game he’d been inspecting while Lance unpacked.

“It’s about time you showed up,” sighed Keith, wrapping his arms around the creature’s neck and pressing his face into her scarlet fur. “You have no idea what I’ve been through today.”

The Red Lion growled low, the closest to a comforting purr that she could manage, an unspoken permission for Keith to continue.

“One of Shiro’s--Takashi’s--friends is some kind of Galra magnet,” explained Keith, relieved to be able to lower his guard for once; the Galra didn’t dare come out when Red was awake. “They won’t leave him alone. Do you know how many times he’s almost died today? It’s been a nightmare just trying to keep him alive, not to mention how paranoid I’ve been about the Galra going after the rest of the house while I’ve been distracted with him. And don’t even get me started with the time he decided it would be a good idea to go into the basement in the middle of--”

Lance appeared in the doorway, catching Keith’s attention mid-sentence. Immediately, he seemed to notice the change in his room, and he rushed to the desk where Keith had left the game running.

“Whoops…” mumbled Keith, pulling a hand away from Red’s fur to run it over his face. That made three times Keith’s curiosity got the better of him only for Lance to notice immediately. He’d noticed the book Keith had been looking at, too. That, and Keith’s moment of weakness when he noticed that he and Lance wore the same size of clothing; it had been years since Keith had seen a shirt his size, and he couldn’t help looking through Lance’s clothes and wishing he could try them on, just for something different. He hadn’t even thought about the possibility that one of the Galra could have attacked before he put the clothes back.

The few short weeks Keith had spent in an empty house must have left him careless.

Red flopped in Keith’s lap, allowing him to comfort himself by running his fingers through her fur.

“I’m gonna mess this up,” sighed Keith, watching Lance frantically put the game away. “Even if the Galra weren’t after Lance, I’d be in over my head. There are so many people here now. It’s hard to protect them all.”

Red sent him another “purr”, an attempt to keep him from becoming as jittery as Lance already was.

Keith folded himself forward, pressing his chest to her back; he needed all the comfort he could get.

Even after Keith had decided to sit on the floor and keep his hands away from Lance’s belongings, Lance was still visibly worried. His eyes were constantly darting around the room, searching for anything out of place, and he kept muttering under his breath.

“I haven’t even touched anything in the past three hours,” mumbled Keith; Red growled in agreement.
Lance sat at the edge of his bed, arms wrapped around himself, eyes narrowed.

“I know you’re there,” he called out. “And I don’t like it.”

Red lifted her head curiously.

“Well, good for you.” Keith cocked an eyebrow, unimpressed. “If I wasn’t here, you’d be dead.”

“This is our house now~”

“Yeah, I get it~”

“So you can just…pass on or whatever! No one wants you here!”

Keith frowned, exchanged a brief irritated glance with his Lion, and looked back toward Lance, meeting his eyes the best he could with someone who couldn’t see him. Then, slowly, Keith reached behind his head to the top drawer of the dresser he’d been leaning against, slid his fingers behind the knob, and pulled it out languidly, a metaphorical middle finger for the “no one wants you” comment Lance, of course, screamed. Keith had been fully expecting him to.

What he hadn’t been expecting was for Lance to rush out of the room and drag Hunk back inside with him.

“Oh, come on,” groaned Keith, who thought Lance would have hidden under his bed or something. “Leave the big guy out of this.”

Hunk and Lance both stood over Keith, shadowing him and Red from the overhead lights as they inspected the drawer.

Hunk’s brow furrowed, and he looked at Lance in clear frustration.

“Lance, I have no idea what you want me to say.”

“Say I’m not crazy,” said Lance, moving away from Hunk to grip the foot of his bed, his eyes moving from the sock drawer to the rest of the room, clearly searching for anything else that was amiss. “Say that drawer opened by itself.”

“Well…” Hunk scratched the back of his head, looking helpless. “The drawer’s open? But I’m pretty convinced you opened this yourself.”

“I didn’t!” protested Lance in an annoying squeak that grated on Keith’s ears.

“See, you say that?” replied Hunk with a sigh. “But those… Those are just words, Buddy. I don’t know what to tell you.”

Lance groaned and pressed his face between his hands, squishing and pulling in every which direction. Then, abruptly, he threw his hands down and pointed at Hunk with so much accusation that the change in mood gave Keith whiplash. “You’re gonna see,” he snapped. “One of these days, something really bad is gonna happen in this house, and you’re gonna see that I was right, but it’s gonna be too late, and everyone’s gonna be dead.”

“Don’t worry,” mumbled Keith, resting against Red’s fur again, absently scratching her back. “That’s the one thing that won’t happen. I promise.”
“I guess we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it,” said Hunk, retreating dismissively. “See you in the morning, Lance.”

“What?” yelped Lance. “Don’t leave me here! I can’t sleep alone!”

“Sure you can,” called Hunk. “Just curl up on your bed and forget about all the spooky, scary stuff. That’s what I do when I watch a scary movie.”

“This isn’t a scary movie, Hunk!” snapped Lance. “If I try to sleep now, I’m gonna mysteriously die in my sleep like Shiro’s aunt and uncle.” Deep down, though, he knew that Hunk had a point. What else was he supposed to do, sleep outside? Get a hotel?

Grudgingly, Lance allowed Hunk to leave the room, and he got ready for bed, grumbling to himself all the while.

“You better not watch me sleep, you freaks,” he mumbled, sliding under the blankets.

It took a long time for Lance to find sleep, but once he did, he dreamed.

He dreamed about a knight, sword and all, black hair tickling his shoulders as he frantically fought off an entire army of angry spirits all on his own. One man against hundreds. He never turned his back on the spirits. Not even once.

Lance woke early the next morning, feeling more tired than he had when he’d gone to sleep, frustrated that he’d never seen the knight’s face.

Grumbling at the sunlight streaming through his windows, though slightly less wary of every little creak of the wooden floor beneath his feet, Lance made his way downstairs.

Hunk wasn’t awake yet, which meant no breakfast from the culinary genius, but surprisingly, there was one person who had woken up before Lance.

Shiro was on the couch that still hadn’t been properly moved from the foyer to the living room, his legs crossed, the top leg balancing what appeared to be a large scrapbook.

“I see you survived the ghosts,” said Shiro, not looking up.

“Ha,” said Lance bitterly. “What’cha got there?”

“It’s a photo album,” explained Shiro, flipping backward through it. “I found it in the basement. Guess this place wasn’t as cleaned out as I thought.”

“The basement, huh?” Lance slinked down the rest of the stairs and leaned over the banister, feigning nonchalance. “No...problems, huh?”

“Well,” said Shiro, “I had to change a few lightbulbs. No ghosts, though.” He finally lifted his head, smiling the almost fatherly smile that never seemed far from his features. “Come look through this with me.”

Noting that Shiro rarely asked anything of his friends but peace, Lance decided he could carry out this tiny request and made his way to the couch, taking a seat where he could look over Shiro’s shoulder.
The picture Shiro had flipped to was a family portrait. Clearly an extended family portrait. Each member stood in shoulder-to-shoulder rows, mostly in order of height, though there were some older family members kneeling with the children in front.

“Here are my grandparents,” explained Shiro, pointing to a couple on the far left. “Here’s Uncle Akira and Aunt Hiromi—your ghosts.” Lance nudged Shiro in the side, earning a soft, playful laugh in return. “My parents are here,” continued Shiro, pointing out two people in the back row. “And…” His finger wandered to the bottom of the page. “Here’s me.”

Lance squinted at little Shiro, frowning. “I can barely see any resemblance. You don’t even have the scar yet.”

“It was a long time ago,” agreed Shiro.

“Hm…” Lance’s eyes wandered to the boy kneeling beside Shiro. He looked roughly the age then that Lance was now. He had soft, somber eyes, though Lance couldn’t tell the color in the picture, and he had long hair that barely touched his shoulders.

Lance swallowed, remembering his dream from the night before.

Well, at least he hadn’t needed to suffer long before finding out what his knight looked like.

“What about mullet-head here?” said Lance, tapping the boy, trying to keep himself from squeaking.

“My cousin,” said Shiro, sounding cautious, even reverent, like he was afraid of speaking too loud. “His name was Keith.”

“Was?” echoed Lance, just as cautious. He knew what “was” meant. “What happened to him?”

“Suicide,” said Shiro, matter-of-fact. “A long time ago. It couldn’t have been more than a year after this picture was taken. I…” He shook his head, frowning. “I don’t even really remember him. Not as my cousin, anyway. I just remember a lot of memorial pictures and my family saying his name in hushed voices. My family didn’t even let me go to the funeral because I had school that day. Maybe I’d be able to remember him more if I did.”

“You can’t help stuff like that,” said Lance softly. “It was a long time ago, and you were little. Everyone forgets childhood stuff after a while. Even important stuff like that.”

Shiro managed a half-smile and peered at Lance through the corner of his eye. “You’re being awfully mature.”

“Family is serious stuff,” said Lance, shrugging, his eyes still on the photo.

“Shiro,” he continued warily. “You…said your aunt and uncle were kind of hermits, right? When did that start?”

“Right around when Keith died,” said Shiro, nodding in the corner of Lance’s vision. “I’m surprised you put that together so quick.”

Lance narrowed his eyes.

Why did he ever think that an old couple would want to see his old copy of *F1 Race*? Why did he ever think that an old couple would be into *Battle Royale*?

He’d been wrong this whole time. The house wasn’t haunted by the spirits of Hiromi and Akira
Kogane.

It was haunted by their son.
Lance had strange dreams again that night, and the night following that, and the next. Never quite the same dream, but always related.

The most common dreams were the dreams about Keith as a sword-bearing knight, but even those varied from night to night. Some nights, Keith seemed more capable than others. Sometimes the odd, purple army had him outmatched, and he barely survived.

More interesting than those, however, were the other dreams, dreams that were still about Keith, but varied intensely, and Lance could never make much sense out of them. They were like artsy films directed by college students more than true stories. They were silent, mostly images, but Lance couldn’t help feeling like every image he saw was important. A lion, a crumbling tower, a sword gripped by a fingerless-glove-clad hand, ocean waves, a middle-aged man wearing a suit of regal-looking armor and a kind smile, endless trees, a cliff face… The color red seemed to be a common theme. It appeared everywhere. If the object Lance saw in the dream wasn’t red, everything around it was.

And then there was the box. It appeared over and over and over again. Sometimes, it would remain closed. Other times, it would open slowly, filling Lance with an unmistakable but unplaceable anxiety. It felt less like he was anxious and more like the anxiety simply was, like it filled everything like permeating smoke flooding out of the open box.

Sometimes the box held each of its five figures.

Sometimes, the black cat was missing.

Sometimes the box would fade away entirely rather than simply opening, leaving the five figures on their own, each one spinning in place but the blue one, which seemed to stare into Lance’s very soul.

Sometimes, the contents of the box were exactly as they were in the basement, with the second space to the left being unoccupied.

Sometimes, there would be a red figure in the second space to the left, where the box was usually empty, but it would be broken, and pieces would be missing.

The dreams were maddening, and Lance wasn’t even sure whether they were simply there due to his constant worrying about the hauntings, simply images he’d caught around the house that his brain was desperately trying to make sense of, or whether they were a part of the hauntings themselves.

The images of the box haunted Lance in his waking mind nearly as much as they haunted him when he slept.

In a moment of curiosity mixed with courage—or perhaps simply foolishness—Lance had tried to go into the basement to see the box again, to try to make sense of the images in his mind. When he tried, however, he’d barely opened the door more than a two-inch-wide crack before it slammed shut again, the handle flying out of his hand.

When he tried the handle again, it turned, but the door wouldn’t open, no matter how hard Lance pulled.
The only possibility—one that Lance didn’t like to think about much—was that Keith was holding the door shut, most likely putting his weight against it from Lance’s side, meaning that he was only inches away from Lance when the door slammed shut.

Lance didn’t try to go into the basement again after that.

So far, Lance had decided that Keith was…curious. Hard to understand. No matter how long Lance thought about it, he couldn’t make sense of Keith’s intentions.

Mr. and Mrs. Kogane had lived out their lives without incident—or at least, without incident they told anyone about—for nearly twenty years. Keith apparently hadn’t wanted to harm them. That implied that he cared about his family. However, he didn’t seem to have any qualms about attacking his cousin’s friends. Even Shiro himself had run into a few incidents, ones that he blamed on his own clumsiness when Lance knew that couldn’t be the explanation. Not when Shiro and clumsy were two words that had never belonged in the same sentence before moving into their creepy little haunted house in the woods.

Sometimes, Keith just seemed to want to mess with Lance’s stuff—never anyone else’s for whatever reason, just Lance’s—which would have been nothing more than harmless, if annoying, were Keith simply a living, breathing person. There was nothing sinister about Keith reading Lance’s books or playing his video games.

Other times, however, Keith seemed less in the mood for Metroid II and more in the mood for murder. His disposition seemed capable of swinging from that of an innocent lost soul with as much of an interest in books and games as any other nineteen-year-old to that of a very real, depraved monster in less than a second.

Two weeks into life at the new McClain/Holt/Shirogane/Garrett residence came the worst of it. The worst of the strangeness, the bizarre mood swings.

Lance had gotten in the habit of drowning out the world with music, anything to keep him from slowly drifting further and further into insanity with every squeak of the floorboards; he’d been wearing his headphones while he cleaned under Shiro’s stern orders.

Of course he’d been wearing his headphones. He’d been home alone.

Shiro was out with his parents, who had taken to having him over for dinner as often as possible now that he lived closer, Pidge was out shopping, and Hunk had managed to land a date with the Balmera girl.

If Lance had been keeping up with his column on the chore chart that week, he might have been able to go out himself, maybe grab some pizza, meet a girl or two. Yes, Hunk was usually his wingman, and it would have been boring and a bit sad without him around, but at least it would have been a step up from terrifying.

Instead, Lance had deigned to sweeping and drowning out his fears with the sweet, dulcet tones of Jaret Riddick.

He hadn’t been paying one iota of attention to the world beyond his headphones and his broom until he’d dumped the dust into the trash can, turned around to start washing the dishes he’d been dreading since the moment that chore had been put into his column, and found a stack of wet, freshly-clean dishes set up on the drying rack.

Brow furrowing, Lance emerged from the steady flow of Bowling for Soup pouring into his ears,
letting his headphones rest on his neck. For the longest moment, he simply stared in a blurred mix of awe and confusion.

It wasn’t as though he couldn’t put together who had done it. No, he knew that there was only one person—if “person” was even the right word—who could have done the dishes. Even if Pidge, Hunk, or Shiro had returned home early, none of them would have done any of Lance’s chores for him; Shiro wouldn’t have wanted Lance to lose any opportunity to build character, Hunk hated sticking his hands in gross dishwater as much as Lance did, and Lance swore that Pidge just liked to watch him squirm.

So, as unlikely as it seemed, the only one who could have possibly done the dishes was Keith.

But Keith had never done anything that nice before. Thus far, his only motivations for anything he did ranged from curiosity to privacy to bloodlust.

Lance stood in silence for the longest time, gaze zeroed in on the dishes, trying to figure out why Keith would have cleaned them—whether it was because he just hated seeing filthy dishes and didn’t realize that Lance was getting to them after he swept, or whether he’d taken genuine pity on Lance—when Lance suddenly realized it didn’t matter. He’d just gotten out of doing his least favorite chore, and damn it if his mother hadn’t raised a polite boy.

“Thanks, Man,” he called out to the air, not knowing where Keith was or even whether he was still in the room anymore, but hoping his message got across all the same. Reaching for his headphones again, he dropped to his knees to get the Lysol out from under the sink, ready to move on to scrubbing the counters, when he heard a crunch.

Startled, he lifted his head, and his jaw dropped.

A sword had been thrust into the windowsill above the sink.

It wasn’t the white blade with red accents that he’d seen in his dreams. No, this one was longer, darker, with a broad, curved tip.

But it was still a sword. It was still an attack. One that might have taken off Lance’s head if he hadn’t chosen that moment to reach into the cabinet under the sink.

The sword disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, fading into nothingness, but that didn’t change the fact that Lance had seen it.

“What the hell, Keith?!” He jumped to his feet, turning his back on the damaged windowsill, as affronted as he was alarmed. “Five minutes ago, you were doing my chores, and now you’re trying to kill me again? What gives?!” He wasn’t even scared anymore. Just confused and angry. And if he was really being honest, hurt. For just a few seconds, Lance had somehow managed to look past all of the attempts on his life and he’d started to trust Keith, only to have that trust thrown back into his face. “I don’t get it! Like, what did I do to piss you off? Did you not like me saying ‘thanks’ instead of ‘thank you’? Are you that petty that you had to try to chop my head off? Well, screw you!” He slammed the spray bottle of disinfectant down on the countertop. “Screw you, Keith!”

Lance left the kitchen in a huff, making his way back to his bedroom without finishing his chores.

He was perhaps halfway up the stairs when he realized that he probably shouldn’t have yelled at someone who’d just tried to murder him.
When Keith made the decision to help Lance out with his chores, it had been a conscious decision. He’d weighed the pros against the cons and decided it was best. One less distraction for Lance, who had decided to become a complete idiot over the course of the past few weeks and turn himself into a sitting duck by wearing headphones all the time, making the Galra as invisible to his ears as they were to his eyes.

The sooner he was done with his chores, the sooner he would go back to his room or start playing with his phone, the sooner he would be an easier target to protect.

And, well, if Keith had to be honest with himself, it was pretty funny watching Lance when he got all worked up over his things being moved around. That was bound to be a bonus.

Unfortunately, the lapse in Galra attacks that day was not bound to last, and one had found its way into the kitchen from the pantry. A particularly intelligent one.

Most Galra were closer to animals than the humans they had once been. They attacked out of instinct, out of deep-seated, subconscious desires to drag all of humanity into death with them. They were barely armed with enough sense to tell which of their potential victims were threats. Which ones needed to be taken down as soon as possible. Beyond that, they emerged from their shadows as the embodiments of claws, hair, and bloodlust. Nothing more.

Some, however, still held onto their humanity just enough to plan, to wield weapons, sometimes even to speak.

The one that attacked Keith in the kitchen that day carried a sword, and he definitely knew how to use it.

Keith plucked his Bayard from his belt and extended it, not wasting a second by bothering to unroll his sleeves or pull his gloves on.

This Galra proved to be a fairly skilled opponent, even more than Keith’s usual armed foes. He managed to strike Keith to the floor time and time again, once even managing to send him rolling into the soup cabinet.

Keith was struggling to climb to his feet after that harsh blow when he caught a sight that sent his heart slamming into his throat.

It became very clear very fast that the Galra’s intent had not been to wound Keith at any point in their battle.

It had been to push Keith away.

His target was Lance.

Keith could only watch, wide-eyed, as the Galra raised his broadsword and threw it at Lance’s head with all his might, only to miss when Lance bent low to grab something out of the cabinet.

Luck saved Lance that day, not Keith, but with the Galra having disarmed himself for the sake of a fast attack, he was left wide open, and Keith shot across the kitchen floor like a lightning bolt, striking his enemy down in an instant.
The Galra slain and his sword having turned to smoke and dust with him, Keith was able to crumble to his knees, panting, cursing himself for not being more observant.

Nineteen years he’d been protecting the inhabitants of his home. Nineteen years, and he still couldn’t tell if an attacker was going after him or them.

“What the hell, Keith?!”

Lance’s voice cut into Keith’s head like a knife, tensing every muscle in his body. Warily, he looked over his shoulder, dark eyes wide.

“How do you know my—”

“Five minutes ago, you were doing my chores, and now you’re trying to kill me again?”

Keith fell quiet, choosing to climb to his feet in contemplative silence, just listening to Lance scream.

“I don’t get it! Like, what did I do to piss you off?”

“Nothing—” Keith tried to say, even knowing that Lance couldn’t hear him.

“Are you that petty that you had to try to chop my head off?”

“That wasn’t—!”

“Screw you, Keith!”

Keith clenched his jaw.

There it was again. His name. He hadn’t imagined that, then.

As Lance stormed off, Keith realized three things.

One: Somehow, some way, during the short amount of time Keith wasn’t at Lance’s side, Lance had not only found out that Keith existed, but also miraculously put together that Keith was the one protecting him.

Two: Whatever told Lance about Keith clearly hadn’t followed up with anything about the Galra.

Three… The idiot actually thought that the person who was protecting him and the things that were trying so hard to kill him were one and the same.

Sighing, Keith pushed off from the counter he’d been leaning against and followed Lance upstairs. Idiot or not, Lance was still the only person who’d addressed Keith directly, by name, in the past nineteen years, and Keith wasn’t about to let anything happen to an idiot like that.

Whether either of them liked it or not was irrelevant. Lance was, undoubtedly, Keith’s idiot.

After a few days passed, Lance realized that Keith had actually done as he had asked and stopped messing with Lance’s belongings. No longer did Lance find his old GBA lying around, white text proudly displaying “GAME OVER” against a black background. No longer did Lance find books
lying splayed open and spine-up on desktops. Either Keith really had stopped digging through
Lance’s belongings, or he’d gotten a lot better about hiding it.

Replacing the frequent displacement of Lance’s items, however, was a frequent ringing in his ears.
High-pitched tinnitus squealed in his head during the middle of breakfast, while Lance was doing
chores around the house, when he was helping Pidge and Hunk fix the so-called “faulty wiring” that
caused the lights to burn out in rooms around the house so quickly. It struck without discrimination
for time or activity.

Most of the time, the ringing was quiet. Annoying, but harmless.

Sometimes, however, it was as loud as a scream, loud enough to drop Lance to his knees, hands over
his ears in a futile attempt to make the squeal stop.

When the ringing was loud, it was painful. It hurt Lance’s head, his ears, his heart… It was like the
sound was trying to pull his brain out of his skull, or like it was trying to turn him completely inside-
out.

And then, it would fade away, leaving Lance disoriented, but ultimately unharmed, like it was never
there at all.

Lance did notice a pattern, though. The bad ringing only ever happened during the day, often in dark
rooms, like when Lance was in the bathroom toggling the light switch and suddenly couldn’t hear
Hunk’s voice asking about the lights anymore because the screech in his ears was too strong.

When it happened at night, the ringing only ever appeared in the form of a soft, gentle hum. The hum
could get annoying when Lance was trying to sleep, but it was never, ever painful.

Frightening, on the other hand… Yes, it could be that sometimes.

Usually when a voice managed to push itself through all the squealing.

It was difficult to make out, but there was certainly a voice, and Lance could recognize at least a few
words.

“…him forever…going to get hurt…my fault…”

The voice that spoke the words was raspy when it came through, and sort of nasally, but…not a bad
sort of “raspy and nasally”. Instead, it was strangely comforting. It reminded Lance of when he was
little and his parents would comfort him after a bad dream. A gentle whisper in the dark.

It was still unnatural, though, to hear a muffled voice amidst all the squealing. It was just as
maddening as every other bizarre happenstance caused by Keith’s presence in the house.

“But, I mean, I can handle the voice as long as that part only happens at night. Like, if it happened
while the big squeal was going on, I’d probably pee my pants. No shame.”

Hunk’s horrified reaction to Lance’s explanation might have been humorous, even hilarious, if it
wasn’t such a serious conversation.

“So, you’re, like, actually hearing voices now?” he asked, visibly consumed by absolute terror. “Do
they, like, tell you to do stuff, or—?”

“No, it’s not like that!” insisted Lance, tossing a box of Lucky Charms into his side of the cart, the
fruits of his retail slave labor. “I think he’s just talking to himself or something. I don’t think he even
has a clue that I’m listening. I mean, to be fair, I can barely hear what he’s saying most of the time anyway, so I might as well not be listening, but I swear, Hunk, there’s someone talking.”

“Okay. Yeah. Right.” Hunk’s eyes darted around the aisle that was barren save for them. “So, uh, why are we talking about this in the middle of a supermarket? You know, in public. Where people can hear us.”

“Because I don’t care if strangers hear us,” insisted Lance. “I’d rather have them hear us than Keith. Or worse, Shiro. I don’t have a clue how to talk to him about this yet. I mean, to us, Keith is just a spooky ghost, but this is still Shiro’s family we’re talking about here.”

“Correction,” said Hunk. “To you, Keith is a ghost. To me, he’s a crazy hallucination your brain cooked up because… Well, I don’t know. Maybe you just have schizophrenia. Have you, like, considered seeing a doctor? Or some kind of counselor? Because I seriously think you need to see someone with a degree about this. Some kind of a medical degree. Not half a BS in engineering. Why are you telling me this? I don’t know how to deal with crazy. Why do you think I know how to deal with crazy?”

“I’M NOT CRAZY!” snapped Lance, more than loud enough to catch the attention of people aisles several aisles over, and definitely loud enough for Hunk to make that face, the same face he made in high school when Lance dragged him into stunts that he wanted no part of.

“I’m gonna find a way to prove it,” said Lance. “I don’t know how, but I’m gonna prove to you that Keith’s ghost is in that house. And then you’re gonna be all, ‘Wow, Lance, you were so totally right. I’m sorry I ever doubted you.’”

“Sure, whatever you say, Lance, just could you keep it down?” Hunk all but begged, trying to look through the shelves into other aisles.

After a moment, he sighed and let his tense shoulders fall, apparently satisfied that no one was going to be running at them with syringes and straight-jackets. “You’re right about one thing, at least: Telling Shiro would be a bad idea. So let’s just keep this between us for now, okay?”


“You want me to make a ‘ghost detector’?” asked Pidge, completely deadpan, their amber eyes half-lidded in visible frustration.

“I’ll do your chores for a week,” said Lance, who knew his friend well enough to be able to tell where this was headed long before it got there.

“Make it a month,” said Pidge, brow furrowing.

“A week if we pick something up,” haggled Lance. “A month if we don’t.”

Pidge sighed. “Since we won’t, that’s basically an agreement to the month anyway. You know that, right?”

“Says you,” insisted Lance. “We’ll find something. You’ll see. That’s the whole point.”
“All right,” said Pidge, standing from their setup on the floor. “Deal.” They struck out a hand, waiting patiently, eyebrows raised.

Lance shook Pidge’s hand firmly.

Pidge snatched their hand back and reached behind them, to the top of their desk, which held a large cardboard box. “Okay. Let’s go hunting.”

“Wait.” Lance narrowed his eyes. “Wait-wait-wait-wait. Is that the ghost detector? In there? You had it the whole time?”

“I knew you’d start pestering me about it eventually,” said Pidge shoving the box at Lance’s chest and forcing him to hold it, “so I went ahead and got a collection going. A digital tape recorder for EVP, an EMF detector, infrared thermometer… Basically all the same stuff any—” They wrinkled their nose. “—professional paranormal investigator would use.” They reached into the box for what seemed to be the recorder, attached it to the breast pocket of their shirt, and started it up. “All right, we’re heading to the basement.”

“I can’t get into the basement,” said Lance, frowning over one of the flaps on the cardboard box. “Keith keeps holding the door shut.”

“Keith?” echoed Pidge, cocking an eyebrow. “There’s a Keith now? When did it stop being Shiro’s aunt and uncle?”

Lance flinched. He hadn’t meant to say his name. “Since… Well, since I did some more research.”

“Since when do you—?” Pidge sighed. “Right. Whatever. So ‘Keith’ holds the door shut when you try to go into the basement. That means if we tried to go into the basement right now, he’d show up to stop us, right?”

“Well, yeah,” said Lance, brow furrowing.

“So if we can’t open the door, we turn the EMF detector on whatever’s holding the door shut,” said Pidge, leading the way out into the hallway. “And when we pick nothing up, you’ll start blabbing about how we didn’t try hard enough, so we’ll get Hunk to yank the door open because it probably just sticks, and then we’ll go into the basement and prove there’s nothing in there. Happy?”

“Aside from you being totally wrong about there being no ghosts?” prompted Lance. “Yeah. Pretty happy.” And he was happy. No open door meant no going into the creepy basement again. No pissing Keith off and nearly losing a leg again.

Unfortunately, the door swung open with almost no resistance whatsoever.

“I’m gonna go ahead and guess that Hunk found some WD-40 and greased the latch bolt since the last time you were here,” said Pidge, ignoring Lance’s nervous twitching. “Now come on, you big baby. This was your idea.”

“Yeah…” said Lance, so high pitched it was almost a squeak. “Yeah, I was… I’m just gonna turn on the lights real quick—”

“Nope, no lights,” said Pidge firmly.


“Because you said you didn’t get attacked until the lights went out,” reminded Pidge. “One fewer
step for your buddy Keith to do for us. I don’t want to have to change another bulb, do you?” They stepped over the threshold and into the basement, absolutely fearless. “Now let’s go.”

The walk down the stairs into the basement felt agonizingly slow, almost endless, to the point where Lance began to wonder if they would ever reach the bottom of the steps.

“Ouch, Lance!” hissed Pidge, pushing at the box in Lance’s arms. “Watch where you’re going with that!”

“I can’t watch where I’m going!” snapped Lance, whisper-screaming, as if he were afraid of being heard. “In case you haven’t noticed, it’s pitch black in here!”

“Whatever, just hold it still so I can grab something.” A weight pulled the box down, most likely Pidge’s hand. Not that Lance could actually see them reaching in when it was so dark.

“Here we go,” said Pidge, and the weight disappeared. “I’m gonna turn the EMF detector on first. It measures electromagnetic fields. If we get an unusually high reading—which we won’t—then there’s a presence.” They turned on the detector. Three colors flashed as it booted up. “This is just a qualitative reader, though. No actual numbers here. Just colors. Green means average readings, yellow is a little high, like we’re standing too close to a TV or something, and red… Huh.”

The yellow and green lights had stopped blinking.

Only the red light remained.

“Red is what, Pidge?” Snapped Lance, who was fairly certain by this point that Keith was on his way to murder them for invading his basement. “Red is what?!”

“Well, it’s supposed to show that we’re standing in some seriously high measurements of ambient electromagnetism,” said Pidge, who sounded casually confused as opposed to Lance’s loud panic. “Like, really high. Maybe this thing is broken. We should have tested it on the ground floor as a control—”

Before Pidge could finish their sentence, a series of loud, ferocious footsteps began clanging down the stairs, closer and closer, only to fade out, giving way to the ringing in Lance’s ears.

The last thing Lance heard was Pidge screaming his name.

Then the screech in his head consumed everything.

Chapter End Notes

Whoops, my hand slipped.

This happened a lot sooner than I meant for it to. It's just a short chapter, but...I've been rewarding myself for writing a page of my main fanfic by writing as much of this one as I want. Yes, I'm rewarding myself for writing fanfic by letting myself write fanfic. I'm just...not confident with my other work right now. The chapter I'm working on is a bit dull, and I know that if I don't like writing it, my readers won't like reading it, and... - sigh- So I manage a page through my insecurities and reward myself by writing this, which isn't as difficult to write because ghosts are my jam.
More Keith next chapter.
“What are you reading, my child?”

Keith lifted his head from his book, eyes brightening from the second that deep, kind voice met his ear, the same as they did every night.

“It’s a book about swords,” he said excitedly, shifting so that he was on his knees, closer to the height of the tall, armored man at the foot of his bed. “What the different parts are called, how different types are shaped and sharpened, how they’ve changed over centuries…”

“You seem quite enthralled,” said Alfor in a tone that Keith had learned to recognize as a question over his twelve years of life.

“I bet my Bayard would be a sword,” said Keith eagerly. “Maybe a broadsword, like a medieval knight. Or a katana, like a shogun. Or—”

A heavy hand came down to rest on the crown of Keith’s head, parting his words.

“I pray you never know,” said Alfor, looking solemn.

Keith only dared to open his mouth again when the hand dropped. “Would it be so bad?” he asked, far from the first time. “I mean, if I got to help people like you, with you, then…”

“It is a morbid job to handle,” said Alfor, taking a seat beside Keith on his bed. “As dangerous as it is lonely. I took this burden to save my people from this terrible fate. I would never willingly offer the responsibility to someone with such a bright future. I know in time you will better understand this calling, and I have faith that you will cease to romanticize it by then.”

Keith frowned, crossing his arms. “What if I learn everything about it and still want to be a Paladin?”

“I would find that highly unlikely.”

“Yeah?” Keith narrowed his eyes. “Try me. Tell me about your day. Don’t leave anything out. Not for the next year, at least. I want to know every gritty detail. I’ll prove it. I can handle being a Paladin.”

“Lance?! Lance!”

The ringing in Lance’s ears was louder than ever, and with it came a more severe agony than Lance could ever remember being in. It felt as though someone had turned his skull into an old magician’s blade box. Stabbing pain came from every direction, sinking into Lance’s head as easily as a steak knife through a grapefruit. On some level, Lance registered that he’d dropped Pidge’s equipment, that he was on his knees, that Pidge had grabbed his shoulders, but that understanding was buried deep beneath the squealing in his ears and the pain stabbing into his skull.
Somewhere, muffled by the tinny screech in Lance’s head, was a voice. The same voice Lance had been hearing in his room at night. It sounded urgent, but Lance couldn’t quite understand it.

And then the screeching in his head faded out, the pain stopped, and the voice—Keith’s voice, he was sure—called out, loud and clear.

“—are you even doing in here?! Get out! Go!”

“Pidge, we gotta go,” snapped Lance, lifting his head. Pidge’s face was illuminated by their cell phone, which they had pulled out of their pocket to use as a makeshift flashlight. “Right now. Like, really right now.”

“What the hell was that, Lance?! Should you even be moving—??!”

“No time.” Lance climbed to his feet and reached for Pidge’s wrist. “Nope. Going. Leaving. Right now.”

“Fine, just let me get my—”

“Screw your equipment!” Lance yanked Pidge by the arm, pulling them back up the stairs as fast as possible, leaving no room for argument. “I’m not dying because you suddenly decided your life is worth less than your infrared thermometer or whatever—”

An anguished cry echoed through the basement, bouncing off the concrete walls and sending a shudder up Lance’s spine, one that made him stop so suddenly on the stairs that Pidge bumped into him.

Keith?

Lance drew his eyebrows together, as confused as he was horrified. It sounded like Keith was in pain. But what could hurt a ghost? He couldn’t have just stubbed his toe or something, could he?

“Oh, so I can’t grab my equipment, but now you’re just stopping in the middle of the—”

“K-Keep going, you idiot!” screamed Keith’s urgent voice from somewhere in the darkness, overlapping with Pidge’s nagging. “The door’s right there!”

Lance swallowed hard, gripping Pidge’s arm tighter and pulling them out of the basement, slamming the door behind them, locking Keith inside.

Keith?

Lance drew his eyebrows together, as confused as he was horrified. It sounded like Keith was in pain. But what could hurt a ghost? He couldn’t have just stubbed his toe or something, could he?

“Oh, so I can’t grab my equipment, but now you’re just stopping in the middle of the—”

“K-Keep going, you idiot!” screamed Keith’s urgent voice from somewhere in the darkness, overlapping with Pidge’s nagging. “The door’s right there!”

Lance swallowed hard, gripping Pidge’s arm tighter and pulling them out of the basement, slamming the door behind them, locking Keith inside.

The Galra had been flocking to Lance in droves, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t appear anywhere else. In other words, Keith still had a beat to walk if he wanted to protect the people living in his house.

That beat led him to Shiro’s bedroom—his parents’ old room—where he found the man himself sitting at the foot of his bed, flipping through what looked like an old Kogane family photo album.

“Oh, no,” sighed Keith, inching closer to get a look over Shiro’s shoulder.

As he suspected, Shiro was looking at pictures of him. Of the two of them together when Shiro was still little Takashi.
It’s strange, the things you forget when you spend nearly twenty years on your own. Personal things. Family things.

Keith, for example, had somehow forgotten that he used to babysit Takashi. Pretty frequently, actually, now that he thought about it. Their mothers were close, despite their wide age difference, and they used to tease Keith about history repeating itself, that Keith and Takashi had taken their mothers’ places now that Hiromi’s child had started babysitting Yuuko’s.

Keith had never minded; Takashi was a good kid. Quiet. Easy to manage. He just read, mostly. All he ever asked Keith for was food or, occasionally, stories.

Which was how Takashi had learned about the one and only Great Black Paladin, Alfor.

Keith had never been a creative person. He didn’t have the patience to contemplate stories. He barely even thought before he spoke most of the time. So, instead of making something up, Keith just told his little cousin about the very real adventures of his very real hero. He just...never let on that his hero was real. Or that he’d planned on taking Alfor’s place one day.

“I never thought about what it would do to you,” mumbled Keith, looking over Shiro’s shoulder at a picture taken at least eighteen years prior. A beach picture, with little Takashi sitting on Keith’s shoulders, feet covered in wet sand up to the knee. If they tried that again in the present, Keith would have folded like paper under Shiro’s weight. It was an eye-opener, looking at the five-year-old in the photo next to the twenty-four-year-old on the bed. Proof of how long Keith had been the Red Paladin.

“I always knew that my parents would miss me, but...I guess I didn’t think of anyone else. Just Alfor.” Keith sighed, staring hard into Shiro’s face. He couldn’t have remembered Keith well—it was so long ago—but he still seemed surprisingly emotional. Frustrated seemed to be the right word for an expression like that. “I’m sorry I never got to say goodbye. It all just happened so fast—”


Unlike Keith, Red needed to sleep. She was much stronger than Keith, but that strength came at the price that it couldn’t last. So during the day, she would curl into herself and disappear with the night sky. Regardless of whether she was awake or not, however, she was still connected to the house as deeply as if it were her own body, and a problem in the house would stir her awareness as easily as sudden injury would awaken a sleeping person.

There was no need for Red to waste any of her limited strength explaining where the problem was or what had caused it. There was only one thing it could be.

“Lance,” hissed Keith, whipping around, hand already on his Bayard. Of course Lance had taken advantage of Keith being away to go into the damn basement. Of course he’d taken the first damn opportunity to go exactly where he knew he wasn’t supposed to go. He was like a toddler.

Though Keith was tempted to Push himself into the basement for the sake of speed, he knew how tired Pushing made him, and he knew that whatever had worried Red so much was something he needed to conserve energy for.

Keith threw open the basement door, letting the doorknob slam against the wall and knowing damn well that he was making a lot of noise and not caring a bit.

He’d seen the light switched to “on” just before stepping through the doorway. He knew that not only had Lance gone into the basement, but that he’d willingly gone in with the lights off.
Keith thundered down the stairs, sword drawn, eyes on the only source of light in the basement. It wasn’t the door open behind him, which allowed light only partway down the stairs. No, it was the glowing, purple orb at the end of the staff of the one single Galra that occupied the basement.

The one gigantic Galra that occupied the basement.

Keith had never seen anything like it. He’d seen a variety of unusual Galra, yes. Most were just faceless soldiers, wisps of resentment that lingered when a person died. People who died with enough anger in their hearts to want to bring the world down with them. Some had faces, more passionate drives, specific desires for revenge. Alfor had told Keith stories of the most powerful Galra he’d ever faced, who had gone into the afterlife with so much rage in him that he could hold conversations as easily as any living person. But this was different. This guy didn’t look particularly sapient, just...big. Huge. And that weapon he carried… It definitely wasn’t one of the wide-tipped claymores that Keith was used to.

For the first time in perhaps fifteen years, Keith found himself wishing that Alfor was still around for someone to talk to, to teach him how to still be a Paladin when the world was against him like this.

But Alfor was gone, and Lance was going to get his head bashed in if Keith didn’t act fast. There was no time for missing Alfor, no time for contemplation.

Keith leaped down the last few stairs, rushed past Lance and Pidge—the latter of whom Keith had just noticed was in the basement with Lance but didn’t have time to guess about why—and blocked the Galra’s staff with his Bayard.

The Galra glared at him, glowing yellow eyes piercing through the dark, invisible to the eyes of the ones Keith was protecting.

“Lance!” grunted Keith, shoving hard against the Galra’s staff. Not hard enough to disarm, not even to derail from its course for Lance’s head. This Galra was strong, much stronger than Keith. But Keith had never been about physical strength. His strength had always come from his reason for fighting, his need to protect his family, to keep the Galra from escaping the house and finding their way to the city. His refusal to give in.

Keith twisted his hips, pushing the staff down and using the Galra’s own weight against him, sending him hard into the floor.

“Lance, what the hell are you even doing in here?” gasped Keith, sparing a glance over his shoulder to where Lance was huddled on the floor, hands over his ears, his face twisted in pain, Pidge trying to snap him out of whatever daze he’d gone into.

Did the Galra do something to him?

“Get out!” snapped Keith, hoping against hope that Lance would be able to hear him, that somehow Keith’s desire for Lance and Pidge to find safety would come through. “Go!”

And then, a miracle happened.

Lance lifted his head, eyes wide in the purple light from the Galra’s weapon, recognition in his face. “Pidge,” he said urgently, “we gotta go. Right now. Like, really right now.”

Keith might have been relieved if he’d had time, but Lance realizing the danger didn’t mean that the danger was gone. When Keith turned his attention back to the Galra, he was already on his feet.
again, staff raised and sparking.

Keith rushed in close, hoping he was fast enough to reach the Galra before he sent off that orb.

He wasn’t.

The orb crashed into him, sparking and crackling, burning his chest and sending him flying into the wall next to the stairs.

He hadn’t even realized that the sound of his ears was his own screaming until the screaming stopped. He’d been too distracted by another sound that had just stopped.

The stairs. There was no telltale clang of ascending footsteps, and yet, when Keith managed to push through the pain and open his eyes, he saw that Lance was still there, standing still, just looking around a room that would have still been pitch black for him.

“K-Keep going, you idiot!” snapped Keith, acting on pure desperation once more. Everything hurt. It hurt to scream, to speak, and deep down, Keith knew that it did him no good, but the fear that he might fail to protect Lance and Pidge hurt a lot more. “The door’s right there!”

Immediately, as if having somehow heard yet again, Lance sprinted to the door, dragging Pidge along with him, and slamming the door behind them.

Keith, already shaking, climbed to his feet, glaring at the Galra that was slowly advancing on him. He knew he couldn’t handle the Galra on his own—it didn’t exactly take a genius to tell that he was outmatched—but if he could just keep the Galra at bay until Red could get to him...

“Just you and me now,” breathed Keith, gripping his bayard with all of his strength and squaring his shoulders. “Give me your best shot.”

The Galra was all too keen to oblige.

Lance slammed the door with all his might, pressing his back to the wood and sliding down to the floor.

He’d never heard Keith’s voice so clearly before. That was certainly the same voice Lance had heard in his room at night, but for the first time, he actually spoke full sentences.

And he was in pain. Why was he in pain? Did it hurt him when someone went into the basement? Was that why he got violent?

“Lance—” Pidge pressed their back against the wall opposite the door, sliding down to the linoleum beneath them, panting heavily, clearly unaccustomed to running. “What—the hell—was that?”

“You heard it?” gasped Lance hopefully.

“What—” grunted Pidge, glaring from the opposite end of the corridor. “The sound of my own screaming as you yanked me up the stairs by the wrist? Yes—”

“No!” snapped Lance. “The voice! The goddamn voice telling us to get the hell out of the basement? It was kind of hard to miss!”
“There was no voice, Lance!”

“There _was_—” Lance froze, eyes landing on Pidge’s chest, staring intently at the device sticking out of their breast pocket.

Pidge flinched away, sneering. “What?”

“You’re still wearing the recorder,” said Lance, crawling urgently across the short distance between them. “That’s supposed to pick up creepy ghost voices, right? Because I _definitely_ heard a creepy ghost voice, and I bet that thing did, too.”

“I doubt it, Lance.”

“I don’t care if you doubt it! It takes two seconds to press a button! Do it!”

“Fine,” snapped Pidge, pulling the recorder out of their pocket. “But you’re not pulling me into your delusions.”

They pressed two buttons on the recorder, and it started to play.

The first couple of minutes passed without incident, and Pidge and Lance used this time to catch their breath, seated side-by-side across from the door, Lance’s eyes locked onto the doorknob in case it turned.

The sound of footsteps from the recording was the first thing that Lance latched onto.

“What’s that?” he said pointedly. “What _is_ that if it’s not someone running after us?”

“You kicking the staircase when you were freaking out,” grumbled Pidge stubbornly.

“I wasn’t kicking the staircase,” hissed Lance, careful not to speak over any incoming ghost voices. “That was Keith.”


Lance closed his eyes, focusing his entire attention on the recording when the stomping ceased. He could hear Pidge freaking out, and part of Lance wanted to tease them about actually managing to care about another person underneath the supervillain levels of bitterness and sass, but that part of Lance was dampened by his need to prove that he hadn’t lost it, that there was a real person on the other end of the voices he heard, dead or not.

And he heard it.

It was so faint, distant, like it was being recorded from another room, but it was there, Lance was sure of it.

His name.

Keith’s voice saying his name.

“You heard that, right?” asked Lance. “You have to have heard that.”

Pidge was frowning. Not in the same stubborn, skeptical frustration as before, but in a new expression. Curiosity. “I don’t know what I’m hearing,” they said. “Sounds. It doesn’t really seem like a voice to me, though.”

“Why would it be saying your name?”

“Because it—” Lance stopped mid-sentence. It was a little weird, wasn’t it? That Keith was saying his name, not Pidge’s. “I dunno, maybe it saw me first. But it was definitely my name. Listen.”

Pidge sighed, visibly annoyed again, but reversed the recording as requested.

And it played again.

“Lance!”

“Okay,” said Pidge grudgingly, stopping the playback. “I’ll admit, it kind of sounds like a masculine voice saying your name. But now I’m biased because I’m listening for it.” They sighed and tucked the recorder back in their pocket. “I’m gonna upload it to my computer, amplify it, reduce the noise, yadda yadda… Maybe I’ll be able to hear something better once I clear the recording up. Or maybe it’ll just be a corruption in the file.”

Lance sighed, relieved, and leaned back against the wall. It wasn’t an outright show of trust, perhaps, but at least Pidge had decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. That was more than Lance had gotten from the moment they moved in.

“Thanks, Pidge,” said Lance. Those two words felt more sincere on his tongue than they ever have before.

“Yeah, yeah,” mumbled Pidge. “But you still owe me at least a week of chores. Don’t forget that.”

“I know,” said Lance. “I won’t.”

Keith wondered how Alfor had felt when he was fading. When his spirit finally let go of its last attachments to Earth. Had it been painful when the Galra landed the final blow? Was it like being torn apart? Or was it just a relief?

Keith hadn’t been there at the time. He hadn’t seen Alfor’s last moments. He was too busy trying to...speed along his becoming the Red Paladin, to try to stop Alfor’s last moments from happening.

He’d woken up in the basement, only a small handful of the Galra Alfor had been fending off left around him, the Red Lion at his side, and no Alfor in sight.

His first battle had been fought in anguish, in knowing that he’d failed the man who had been like a second father to him from the moment he was born, that his parents would soon be home to find his body in the bathtub, covered in the very color that was to become his entire life from that point on.

Keith wondered if Alfor had felt the way that Keith did in that exact moment, in so much pain that each blow numbed the next, so exhausted that it felt like that was all he’d ever known.

Keith wondered, staring down the mountain of a Galra that seemed utterly tireless, if this was what dying felt like to the dead. There were no Paladins in waiting, like there was when Alfor faded. No one to take up the mantle when Keith fell.
With no one to guard the door, Galra after Galra would flood into the world. Countless people would die at the hands of those who refused to accept their own deaths.

The world could end, and all because Lance wanted to take his buddy through a tour of the basement.

No… Because Keith wasn’t strong enough to keep this from happening when he did.

He should have let Lance touch the damn Lions. Should have let him bond with the stupid things. Maybe he would have gotten a raw deal, but at least the world would survive Keith’s failure.

The Galra raised his staff. He’d long since stopped sending the orb out. Keith could barely defend himself at all anymore. No need to waste the energy.

Half-heartedly, too tired to truly fight any longer, Keith tried to throw up his arms to break the blow.

The staff pushed right through them, knocking Keith to the cold, concrete floor.

A roar filled the room, echoing off the stone walls, the floor, the stairs, anywhere it could reach. The cold disappeared, replaced by a blinding white heat that abolished the darkness. An unbearably human scream reached Keith’s ears, but he had no strength to lift his head.

The last thing he saw was a wide, heavy, scarlet paw stepping into the corner of his vision.

As the world went black, a voice rang through his head, the source of which, whether it came from his the depths of his memory or somewhere beyond, he would never cease to question.

“Even now, you still yearn for the weight a Paladin carries?”

Yes, thought Keith, sinking deeper into the darkness. Always.

For one bizarre moment, Lance thought it must have been a dog.

Then he remembered that they didn’t have a dog.

Springing up from his bed, Lance rushed to his door and threw it open, worried that something—maybe a raccoon; they were in the middle of the woods—had somehow found its way into the house.

But there wasn’t a raccoon on the other side of the door. No possums, either.

In fact, there was nothing at all.

A strange, alarming warmth spread through Lance’s body from the waist down, sending Lance’s mind reeling, spiraling off into a thousand thoughts.

What was that? Something just touched me. Or went through me. Was that Keith? Is he crawling? Is he a…little person? Dwarf. Dwarf is the appropriate word, right? Or…maybe it’s better to say “person with dwarfism”. Keith could have dwarfism. Wait, no. Duh, Lance, you saw a picture. Keith does not have dwarfism. Maybe dying just makes you smaller. But that wouldn’t explain the scratching, right? So maybe Keith has a dog. Ghost dog. Warm ghost dog. Or maybe Keith is just
being weird. Maybe he can shapeshift. Maybe he turned into a dog when he died. Maybe he’s a talking, warm ghost dog. Except… Can ghost dogs play video games?

“Uh…” Lance ran a hand through his hair. “You’re not Keith, are you?”

No response. Not even any ringing in Lance’s ears. Lance wasn’t sure whether that was confirmation or not.

“Okay…” Lance closed the door, unsure of what else to do. “I guess you can...stay in here? Uh... Just...don’t chew any of my stuff.”

Frowning, brow furrowed, Lance returned to his bed. His day just kept getting stranger, and he wanted to put it all behind him. If he could just make it until morning without anything else happening, he’d call it a success.

He lasted seven minutes before his cellphone rang.

Chapter End Notes

I -clap- need -clap- to -clap- stop.

But I can't.

This is too much fun to write.

Someone take the keyboard from me.

Sorry for another short chapter, but the next part really needs to be its own chapter.

Edit: Yo, Paladins of Voltron [that's what I'm calling you guys I don't even care] I am like 900% sick and miserable, and I have two essays due this week. If I ever find the energy to write this week, it's gonna be those, not this. Sorry, Paladins. If I tried to write about these losers right now, when I can smell colors but can't see which way is up, it'd turn out like crap, and I do NOT want this next chapter to turn out like crap. Thanks for being patient. Love you guys. Peace.

Also, save me. Please. Everything is on fire and I'm going through tissues faster than a pubescent teenager. One who isn't asexual. Is there a word for that? The antonym of asexual? Is it just sexual? idfk just hlep
Death Knocks; The Dead Knock

Chapter Notes

It was still dark out when Keith woke up, exhausted from the near-fade experience he’d endured. Disoriented and weak as he was, it took him a moment to even realize where he was.

His room—well, Lance’s room now, he supposed; Red must have found him passed out and carried him there, where he’d be more comfortable. After all, she was there, wrapped around him like a warm, growling blanket.

Passed out… A scary state for someone who didn’t sleep to be in, to be sure. Keith didn’t even know he could pass out.

He wondered if Alfor had ever passed out.

Frowning against the throbbing in his head, Keith reached for his belt, checking for his Bayard. He needed to know that it hadn’t been left behind in Red’s eagerness to save him. She could be...hasty at times. Like Lion, like Paladin, Keith supposed.

Apparently, she wasn’t too hasty, though. The Bayard was on Keith’s belt, right where it was supposed to be.

“She should have trusted you to be reliable,” he mumbled softly, turning his head to bury his face in his Lion’s fur.

Red curled in tighter, rubbing her face against Keith’s stomach. A gentle growl rumbled up through her body and into Keith’s head. Not a comforting, purr-like growl as she had been doing, but a very specific growl. A message. A feeling he had to translate into words.

“Gone?” Keith sat up, immediately regretting it when his heavy head protested. “What do you mean Lance is gone?” Grimacing, he looked over the foot of Lance’s bed, and sure enough, he was nowhere to be seen. “Where did he go? People don’t just leave in the middle of the night for no reason.”

Red’s answer was less than helpful. Just a reiteration of the feelings in Keith’s head, the absence of Lance. But she didn’t seem too concerned, and Keith was tired, so he laid his head back down on Red’s shoulder and let himself get the rest he desperately needed after that rough battle.

Surely, Lance would be back in the morning, and Keith could find out why he was gone then.

But Lance didn’t return by morning.

Red disappeared when the sun rose, as always, and Keith checked Lance’s bed again. Still empty, blankets slightly wrinkled, an indent toward the middle, as if the bed had been sat upon, but not crawled into. Like Lance hadn’t slept at all.

That on its own had been disconcerting, but not quite so much as the fact that Lance wouldn’t be found anywhere else around the house for days after that. Even Lance’s continued absence, however, was not nearly as worrisome as the whispering.

Keith could remember when the whispering happened before. After his death, when his parents
stopped talking and started whispering, when every guest his parents had started speaking to them exclusively in whispers.

It was exactly the same. Shiro, Hunk, and Pidge had all started speaking to each other in hushed tones, like anything much louder than a murmur would have been disrespectful. It made some voice in the back of Keith’s head—some unreasonable, paranoid voice—terrified that maybe Lance had gotten attacked aboveground while he was stuck fighting off the huge Galra downstairs.

But Red would have said something if that was the case, wouldn’t she?

Unless that was what she had meant by gone. Unless Keith had misinterpreted her tone as casual and informative when it was really shocked and numb.

There was no way of knowing without asking.

“What happened?” demanded Keith when the impatience became too much, when he couldn’t stand not knowing any longer.

Red just stared at him, golden eyes expressionless.

“Don’t just say gone again,” snapped Keith. “I get that he’s gone. I haven’t seen him in days. You need to tell me exactly what happened. There has to be a way. I need to know.”

Red rolled her shoulders and straightened her back. A loud growl surged through Keith’s head, the closest to a barked order he’d ever heard from her. A demand. Sit.

Keith did what he was told, frowning curiously as he crossed his legs, hands on his ankles, waiting patiently.

He didn’t have to wait for long.

The second Keith’s eyes met Red’s, the world melted away, plunging them both into blackness.

When the world faded back in, Keith saw the basement, and he knew he was looking from Red’s eyes, because he saw himself in a heap on the floor, the Galra he’d fought only days prior looming over him.

A ring of fire blossomed around Keith’s body—the Keith of the past—and that fire bloomed outward, consuming everything.

The Galra—which Red called Myzax in her mind, now shared with Keith—ignited the second the flames touched his skin. Red charged toward him, and Keith saw big, heavy paws strike out, claws fully extended, as Red pounced, knocking Myzax to the ground. He saw, through her eyes, as she ducked her head down, teeth latching onto the Galra’s throat and smothering him the same way any wild lion’s would. And then he was gone.

When Red turned around, away from the empty space where Myzax once stood, the flames parted, and she saw Keith. Worry flooded through her mind, and she was at Keith’s side in an instant.

As soon as she was close enough, she took the collar of Keith’s jacket into her maw. From the bottom of Keith’s borrowed vision, where he expected to see a bowed head and thick, black hair, he instead saw scarlet fur, tiny ears, toes, a tail curled weakly inward.

A cub.
Red had turned him into a cub.

Keith had no idea that she could do that. Alfor had never mentioned anything like that in a single one of his stories.

Perhaps because he’d never gotten close enough to defeat to witness it himself.

Slowly, Red carried the past Keith’s tiny new form up the stairs, through the corridor, and all the way up to Lance’s bedroom.

She pawed at the door for several seconds before Lance appeared in the doorway.

Lance. Keith would have sighed in relief if he was able. So he hadn’t been killed. He didn’t even seem to be injured. He just looked confused, alarmed. Not that Keith could blame him, honestly. He probably would have been just as confused himself if some invisible force had been scratching on his door.

“Uh,” said Lance after a moment, long after Red had made her way into his room and set the past Keith down on the floor. “You’re not Keith, are you?”

Keith realized two things in that moment. One, that Lance was smarter than Keith gave him credit for, smart enough to figure out that there was something other than the ghostly presence he’d already discovered at his door. And two… Red had openly revealed herself to Lance when there was no real reason to. She could have brought Keith anywhere, the living room, the kitchen… Maybe Pidge’s room because Pidge always seemed too distracted by whatever they were working on to remember to close the door. And even if Red did have her heart set on Lance’s room for whatever reason, there was still no need to alert Lance. She could have just Pushed her way inside, the same way Keith got into closed doors when he needed to protect someone on the other side. Why out herself to Lance?

Unaware of the confusion she would eventually cause, Red set the tiny, red cub on the floor and began to groom it. Keith could see tiny, blue sparkles float heavenward every time her tongue met his fur, and it occurred to him that she was most likely healing him somehow. That was something else Keith had never heard from Alfor. Again, perhaps because it was never necessary.

Maybe that was the real reason why Alfor never wanted Keith to become the next Paladin. Maybe he just didn’t think Keith was good enough for the job.

And maybe he was right.

“Oh…” said Lance from behind them, interrupting Keith’s thoughts. “I guess you can… stay in here? Uh… Just… don’t chew any of my stuff.”

He’d figured out that Red was an animal, too, then. Keith really needed to give him more credit.

Keith heard rather than watched Lance return to his bed. Red was still taking care of him, grooming him, nursing him back to health, and didn’t bother lifting her head, but Keith could still hear the squeak of bedsprings as Lance climbed onto his mattress.

Several minutes of near silence passed, interrupted only by the click of Red’s tongue against her palate.

Only when Keith had returned to normal, his body having faded in around the lion as if rebuilt around it, did Red lift her head to the next stimuli.

The ringing of Lance’s phone.
This had to be it. The reason why Lance was gone. Keith was sure of it.

“¡Papá!” answered Lance, cheerful, a smile on his face, though Keith could see fatigue in his eyes. It must have been a rough day for him, too. “¿Qué—?” That fatigue very quickly turned to horror. He gripped the phone with both hands, cradling it close to his face. “¿Un derrame—? ¿Otro? Ella—”

One of Lance’s hands went from the phone to his forehead, pressing hard into the worry lines he’d caused.

Keith found himself desperately wishing he could understand Spanish.

“No,” snapped Lance, his voice cracking as he lowered his hand. Even in the dark, Keith could see an extra sheen to his eyes, one that hadn’t been there before. Tears. He was crying? “No, me voy. Ahora. ¡Me voy!”

Lance slapped his phone onto the mattress, staring blankly at his own bedcovers, stunned by whatever news he’d gotten.

Then, as abruptly as if he’d been slapped in the face, Lance stood from the bed, grabbed his phone, and ran into the hallway, screaming for Shiro.

The world melted away again, and Keith was back in the present, seated across from red rather than seeing through her eyes.

“I see why you didn’t tell me much,” admitted Keith. “I’m not even sure what I just saw.”

Red met Keith’s eyes with a steady gaze as if to say “I told you so.”

Keith sighed and reclined onto his back. “I guess...there’s not much to do now but wait, huh?”

Shiro left early the following morning, followed quickly by Pidge, which was a relief because the Galra had taken to Pidge in Lance’s absence. Only Hunk was left behind, flanked by his new girlfriend, Shay.

Shay was a bit of an odd one. She spoke with the same awkwardness and uncertainty as someone who was unfamiliar with English, and yet she had no foreign accent to speak of. Still, as far as oddities went, that one was harmless, so Keith didn’t particularly mind her. She suited Hunk well, and she stayed close enough to his side that it was like they were the same person, like Keith didn’t have an extra charge to protect at all.

“This batch has cooled,” said Shay, carefully touching the top of one sugar cookie in a pile she’d stacked on a plate half an hour prior. “They are ready to be decorated.”

Okay, let me just put this batch in,” said Hunk, carrying a cookie sheet to the oven. It slid inside with a dull sshhk of metal on metal and Hunk set the timer before pulling his oven mitts off and joining Shay where she’d brought the cookies into the foyer.

Keith watched the two of them cautiously, eyes open for any sign of Galra from dark corners, from the shadows behind the china cabinet, from the space under the coffee table. They’d been tame since Lance disappeared.
Shay, like the rest of the house over the past few days, spoke quietly when she talked to Hunk, but it was a different sort of whisper. It wasn’t cautious. It was...comfortable. Keith had a feeling that was how she flirted. She made designs in the frosting and whispered to Hunk about the shapes of the sprinkles, she fed Hunk small chunks of misshapen results, giggled at his contented hums, whispered a teasing, “That is you,” when she decorated a circular cookie with a grumpy-looking frown, and giggled almost silently when she tapped the end of Hunk’s nose with blue frosting.

Hunk, for his part, was even quieter, though he looked far from annoyed. His constant grumbling under his breath had paused when Shay appeared.

Keith wasn’t much of a romantic—never had been—but he had to admit, as far as couples went, these two were...sort of cute.

“Hunk,” said Shay softly when the two of them were perhaps three-fourths of the way finished decorating. “I cannot help but remember something you told me when first we met.” She set the cookie in her hand aside, turning her full body toward Hunk, her large hoop earrings swinging from her ears. “You said, if I recall correctly, that under normal circumstances, you cook for your friends, but that you were too busy that day, which was why you had ordered food from Balmera. And then you began to ramble, and while you were rambling, you mentioned that you bake cookies when you are under stress.”

Hunk paused in his own decorating, butter knife stilling around the edges of the cat shape where he had been adding icing. “...Yeah, I...guess I did say that,” he mumbled, setting the cat aside, but not lifting his head.

“Hunk…” Shay inched closer and set her hand on Hunk’s knee. “I hope I am not intruding, but I worry, and so I fear I must ask. Why are you under stress?”

Hunk took a deep breath and ran his hand through his hair, letting his bangs fall gently against his orange headband. “Okay, so… I told you about what’s going on with Lance, right?”

Keith frowned. Suddenly, the Galra he had been watching out for were forgotten, and Hunk had his full attention.

They were talking about Lance.

The vision Red showed him had revealed so little. Keith still needed to know. Anything Hunk was about to say, anything at all, would have been more than welcome.

“Yes,” said Shay softly. “I remember. Is this the reason behind your stress?”

“I…” Hunk huffed. “Well, I mean… Yes? But it’s not just that, it’s like…” He sighed and finally met Shay’s eyes. “Okay, so here’s the thing. So my buddy Shiro, he lost his aunt and uncle pretty recently, right?”

Shay nodded. So did Keith, though he knew Hunk couldn’t see it.

“But, like, he’d already lost someone.” Hunk sat up straight, letting his head fall back against the couch behind him so that he stared at the ceiling. “I mean, losing someone always hurts. It’s always gonna suck. But it’s different when you’ve lost someone before. And he already lost Matt, which was how he and Pidge got close and how Shiro wound up part of our friend group even though he’s, like, five years older than the rest of us. So he doesn’t get that first rip in the heart you get when you lose someone forever, and Pidge knows what it’s like, too, ‘cause they lost Matt and their dad, so like, if anything ever happens to Pidge again, nothing, like, world-changing is gonna happen to
Pidge. But this is the first time Lance has ever lost someone.”

Keith’s eyes widened, then softened.

Oh.

“So, like,” continued Hunk, unaware of the invisible epiphany he’d caused just a few feet away, “I’m afraid that Lance is gonna be, like, a totally different person when he gets back. I’m freaked out that I’m gonna lose my buddy. I…” He took a deep breath and raised an arm over his eyes. “I’m scared that I’ll lose my friend.”

A Galra crept its way out of the hallway that led to the basement.

Shay drew hunk close; Keith drew his sword. He couldn’t afford to be distracted, even knowing what happened to Lance.

He had to make sure that Lance didn’t lose anyone else.

Several days passed. The whispering continued, but at least Keith was armed with the knowledge of what everyone was whispering about.

And Keith had whispering of his own to do.

“Do you think it’s weird that I’m worried?” he asked Red, scratching her cheek. “I shouldn’t be, right? I barely know Lance. We’re not friends. We’re not anything.” His hand ran down his Lion’s neck. “But I am. Worried, I mean.” His fingers disappeared into her thick, crimson fur, scratching where claws had trouble reaching. “Maybe it’s some weird psychological thing. Like because I’ve been protecting him from the Galra, it feels like I should be protecting him from everything. Even if it’s something I have no business protecting him from. People die. It happens all the time. It happened to me, my parents, Alfor… Whoever he lost, it was just their time, right? And he just needs to live with it.”

Red growled an unreadable grumble and bumped her head against Keith’s shoulder. Maybe it was assurance. Maybe it was just a request for him to be quiet.

“I know,” mumbled Keith, toying with one of Red’s ears. “I’m rambling.”

The door opened.

The faceless silhouette in the doorway, backlit by the corridor, was too lean to be Shiro. Too tall to be Pidge. Too thin to be Hunk.

It should have been too despondent to be Lance.

Should have been.

Lance closed the door solemnly behind him, shoved a box he’d been carrying under his arm on top of a stack of cardboard boxes in the corner that he’d never gotten rid of after he’d unpacked them, and he collapsed in his bed.

Keith gave Red an uncertain look, then climbed to his feet.

Lance was just…lying there. Face-down. Unmoving.

And then his shoulders began to tremble.
“Shiro!” Lance pushed through his bedroom door, charging down the corridor and down the stairs to pound on his friend’s door. “Shiro—”

“Lance.” Shiro opened the door with Lance in mid-knock. At first, he looked a strange mix of worried and skeptical with just a dash of annoyed, but when his eyes met Lance’s, everything but the worry melted away. “Lance, what’s wrong?”

“I need a ride to the airport,” said Lance urgently. “Maybe some help getting a plane ticket.”

“The airport?” Shiro’s eyebrows drew together. “Why do you—”

“Please,” begged Lance. “I’ll explain on the way, I just…”

“Okay,” said Shiro, the epitome of calm in a time of need. This was why Lance valued his friendship so much. “All right. You get packed. I’ll worry about the ticket. Just tell me where you need to go.”

The airport was dimly lit, too quiet, cold even in the summer heat, and normally, conditions like that would have put Lance out like a light, but not when his heart was pounding in his head the way it was.

Even the agonizingly long plane ride didn’t lull him to sleep. His knee bounced and bounced for all 1000 miles of flight, right until the plane landed and he could stand again.

The fairest, pinkest light of morning was streaming in through the windows when the plane landed, and when it hit his older sister’s face as she waited for him just outside of the terminal, it showed her just as tired, just as strained as he felt.

“Oh, Lance,” she whispered, pulling him close, cradling the back of his head with her dainty, manicured hands, forcing his face into her shoulder. “I’m so, so sorry…”

It was all she needed to say for Lance to know that he was too late.

Sleep didn’t come easy, but not his guilt, not his frustration, not even his little brother’s snoring in his ear could keep Lance’s dreams at bay forever.

And to Lance’s surprise, he did dream. Not the same dreams as he did back home. There were no bizarre, surreal images of spinning lion figures or startling flashes of landscapes. No armored soldiers. Even the unfair war that waged in his mind disappeared.
But the warrior himself stayed.

Keith wandered in and out of Lance’s dreams effortlessly, weaving himself into roles that were normally reserved for his friends.

It was no less bizarre, though, when Lance thought about it. How odd was it that he was dreaming about this boy he saw photos of and nothing more? How odd to have such a decided stranger suddenly become the Bonnie to his Clyde when he dreamed about a heist, or one of his roommates trying to put out the fire when he dreamed about a kitchen experiment gone wrong, or a sympathetic classmate trying to sneak him some spare clothes when Lance was plagued by a naked in public dream.

Vaguely, over a quiet and particularly solemn breakfast, Lance told his older sister about the dreams. About the recurring character, his friend’s long-since-dead cousin he’d seen only in photographs.

His sister told him that it was because he was thinking about death a lot, so it made sense for his mind to cling onto someone he knew to be dead, even if it wasn’t the person he lost.

Lance wondered how her answer would have changed had he mentioned that Keith had been speaking to him over the past few weeks.

Lance had never been to a funeral. Not a real one, anyway. His brothers and sisters had held an improvised ceremony of sorts in the backyard when his hamster died when he was nine, but that was the closest he’d ever gotten.

It was nothing at all like the real thing.

After all the movies he’d watched in his lifetime, he’d never expected people to be so...calm at the wake. People were chatting and smiling like it was any other family gathering. Not many people were crying, and if they did, it was with smiles on their faces.

And for Lance’s part, he was smiling along with them.

But that didn’t get rid of the swirl in his stomach, in his heart, when he realized that one of the most important people in his life was gone for good.

Shiro, Pidge, and Hunk were all waiting for Lance when his plane landed. They didn’t say much. Just asked him how the flight was. Shiro kept patting his shoulder. Hunk asked if he wanted to stop and get something to eat. Pidge just...stared, like they wanted to say something but couldn’t find the words.

They were all tiptoeing around him, and Lance hated it. He’d wanted to come home and forget that the week had ever happened, but it was hard when everyone he knew was looking at him like he was the one who died.
When they finally got home, Lance pointedly avoided Shiro’s impending “dad talk,” left his suitcase of dirty clothes in the laundry room, and dropped something his parents had forced on him—a 3x5 box of recipes—on the kitchen counter, knowing that Hunk would get more use out of that than he would, even if the recipes were in Spanish. Then, sluggishly, he returned to his room, opened his door, dropped everything else his family had forced on him on the stack of boxes in the corner, and he flopped on his bed.

He almost expected the ringing in his ears to come back the second he’d lied down. Maybe even Keith was awkward around him now.

“What’s up with you?” Speaking was a struggle. It came out broken, almost closer to a whine than true speech. “I...know...you’re in here. You’re always in here at night. So why aren’t you talking to me? Or screeching in my ear or whatever it is you do.” He sighed and rolled over, onto his back, facing the ceiling. “I’ve dealt with enough different this week, okay? I just want things to go back to normal.”

He let his eyes close, legs dangling off the edge of his bed. “I don’t know how messed up it is that I think of hearing weird ghost screaming in my ears as normal, but, hey, it’s sort of my life now. What’cha gonna do, right?” He sighed. “I just want something besides the pitying looks. I want people to treat me like Lance again. Like I’m the fun guy, the guy who likes playing video games with Pidge and stealing Hunk’s food just to have an excuse to buy him lunch the next day and getting on Shiro’s nerves by playing music too loud because he needs to loosen up a little every once in a while. I want to get on their nerves so we can start laughing again. I want...Hunk to react when I steal his fries. I want Pidge to flip out when I ruffle their hair. I hate them dancing around me like I’m made of thin ice and eggshells. I want my friends back. I want to tick them off and make them laugh at the same time. I want…”

Lance threw an arm over his eyes, as if it would push the tears back under his eyelids. As if he could stop them from streaking over his skin and sinking into his hair.

“...I want my abuela back.”

“Oh, God, Lance...”

Lance sat up so quickly that he felt like his neck was going to snap from wind resistance alone. That was the clearest he’d ever heard Keith’s voice.

And he very quickly understood why.

“Holy shit...”

There he was. Keith Kogane, in all of his lean, dark-eyed, mullet-y glory, staring at Lance like he’d just grown an extra head.

And somewhere behind all the screaming and raging thoughts about how Keith could possibly be standing there as plainly and easily as any normal, living human being sounded one single, hysterical thought as quiet and clear as a bell.

The pictures did not do him justice. This boy is fine.

And then came the screaming.

“Aaaaaa—”

“Oh, God, Lance, don’t do that—”
“—aaaaAAAAAAA—”

“Stop! People are going to hear you!”

“—AAAAAHHHHH! ” Lance flailed an accusatory arm and jumped over the edge of his bed, putting as much solid matter between himself and Keith as was possible. “YOU! I—! MULLET!”

Keith looked positively dumbfounded. “Mullet—?”

“YOU HAVE A MULLET!” screamed Lance deliriously. What he’d meant to express on some level deep inside his awe-addled brain was that Keith was visibly from another era. Just an observation that he was undeniably plucked straight out of the ‘90s. That was not how it sounded, and Lance knew that, but he was also well beyond the point of actually putting his thoughts into words that made sense.

Because Keith was right there. Right there, on the other side of the bed. Despite how sure he’d acted, how much he’d convinced himself that Keith was real and haunting him, Lance realized the moment he’d laid eyes on Keith and seen the real deal up close that there was some part of him deep down inside that hadn’t been completely sure.

And now that part was shattered and splinters of it were stabbing into him from every direction because oh, God, Keith is real.

“It—” Keith looked no less alarmed than Lance felt. “It’s not a mullet. It’s just long— Is that really what you’re freaking out about? My hair?” He leaned over the edge of the bed, setting his hands on the duvet.

Lance snatched one of his pillows off of the bed and held it to his shoulder like he was aiming a gun. “Don’t!” he warned. “You stay away from me! You tried to kill me! At least twice!”

“I didn’t!” snapped Keith, who had just gone from confused to visibly annoyed, his hands half-reached out to Lance like they were itching to strangle him. It took everything Lance had not to dive behind the bed like it was a chest-high wall in a video game. “That wasn’t me!”

“Yeah?” retaliated Lance, repositioning the pillow on his arm. If nothing else, he could use it as a distraction for a quick getaway. “Tell that to my ripped jeans! Or the frikkin’ crack in the windowsill from where you tried to take my head off!”

“Like I said—”

At the raise in Keith’s voice, Lance finally gave in to his instincts and ducked almost completely behind the bed, hiding everything from his eyes down.

The look on Keith’s face might have been funny if Lance wasn’t scared witless.

“Wh— Are you serious?”

Lance narrowed his eyes and gripped onto the pillow, ready to throw it at any moment.

“Would you calm down? I really didn’t— If you’d just listen to me—”

Lance threw the pillow.

“Lance!”

Taking advantage of Keith’s distraction—it was hard to see with a big cotton ball in your face—
Lance rounded the corner of the bed and dove for the door.

Keith got there first.

“No you don’t,” he snapped, dark eyes narrowed, arms outstretched, making an impromptu barricade between Lance and the door. “We are talking about— LANCE!”

Lance had barely hesitated before turning away and rushing as fast as he could to the next possible escape, that being the closet door.

It was pitch black in the closet, and it made everything feel scarier, but at least it was a barrier between himself and Keith.

“Open the door, Lance!”

“How do you know my name?!” snapped Lance, frantic, irrational.

“How do I—? Are you kidding me? Do you know how many times your friends say your name in a day? I should be the one asking how you know my name!”

Lance didn’t say anything. The less Keith knew about him, the less ammunition he had. Though, from the sound of things, it seemed like he had a lot.

Keith sighed emphatically. He sounded defeated already. “Lance, open the door.”

“No way,” snapped Lance, wrapping his hands tighter around the door handle in case Keith tried to force it open. “Not a chance.”

The door rattled harshly, like Keith had just thrown his entire weight into it, making Lance jump several inches into the air. “It’s not safe in there, you idiot! If you’re in there when the sun rises, you’re dead!”

“Yeah, right!” Lance dug his feet into the carpet. “I’m not falling for that! You’re not even trying!”

Keith sighed angrily, and his breath hit the door like he was right on the other side. “Fine. Stay in there. But don’t blame me when the Galra find you.”

Lance narrowed his eyes. “...The what?”

The door rattled, and there was a scraping sound that traveled from the middle of the door to the carpet. “...Do you want to hear what I have to say or not?”

Lance pursed his lips. He couldn’t quite place why, but this felt like a trick.

“Open the door, Lance,” said Keith, trying one more time.

“No,” said Lance firmly.

Keith sighed. “Fine. I’ll say it through the door, then. But you better be listening.”

Chapter End Notes

Can you tell I wrote this sick? I hope not. Probably.
This chapter wouldn't have come out as soon as it did, except...my essays got postponed. And decreased in number. Professor's sort of a flake. And she didn't tell us that the essays were postponed until they were almost due, so I started writing this as a means of distracting myself.

Edit: And one more thing, I adore each and every one of you. I don't care if you leave a comment or kudos or didn't care for the story... If you're reading this, I adore you, and I sincerely hope that the rest of your day, night, week, year goes wonderfully.
Keith wasn’t normally an emotional person, but something about Lance lying on his bed, pouring his heart out to someone he didn’t even know, couldn’t even see… Something about that pulled at his heartstrings. And when Lance finally broke, when the tears came and he admitted out loud, voice cracking, heart audibly shattering, that he just wanted his grandmother back that was when his heartstrings couldn’t take anymore.

They snapped.

“Oh, God, Lance…” breathed Keith, feeling as though he’d been punched in the gut.

Lance tensed on the bed, and for one breathless second, Keith thought that Lance might have actually heard him.

That’s impossible. Unless… In the basement...

Lance sat up.

He stared directly into Keith’s eyes, tears still clinging to his eyelashes. “Holy shit…"

Oh, no. Keith paled. He could see a time bomb in Lance’s blue eyes, ticking away. Keith could tell that he hadn’t fully registered what he was seeing, and any second now, that timer would go off and the bomb would explode, resulting in any number of violent reactions from passing out to throwing a punch to—

“AAAAAAAAH!”

Screaming.

“Oh, God, Lance, don’t do that,” begged Keith, but it was too late, the screaming had already started, and he could already tell that it wasn’t going to stop.

Lance jumped to his feet, tumbling off the back of the bed like a trained soldier seeking cover. “YOU!” he snapped wildly, landing on his feet as expertly as a cat.

Yes, me, thought Keith, words lost on him. You knew it was me. Why are you acting like this?

“How did it even get that high?

Wait.

“Mullet—?” choked Keith, flabbergasted. Had Lance just called him “Mullet”?

“You HAVE A MULLET!”

Keith furrowed his brow, mouth hanging open, his mind a ping-pong ball bouncing between “I do not,” and “That’s what you’re freaking out about right now? Really?”

A mix of the two was what came out of his mouth, but clearly, that was the wrong thing to say,
because Lance’s response to that was to grab his pillow and point it like a gun at Keith’s face.

“You tried to kill me!” accused Lance. “At least twice!”

“I didn’t!” insisted Keith, hurt despite the fact that he already knew what Lance thought of him. Seeing Lance look him in the eyes and say that...was something entirely different. “That wasn’t me!” Keith reached out a hand, trying to calm Lance down by whatever means necessary, to prove that he was non-threatening.

Lance was having none of it. He dove behind the bed, only his wide, blue eyes still visible over the edge of the mattress.

Keith just stared, awestruck. Lance was acting like a spooked animal, almost to the point where Keith expected a hiss or a warning growl to eke out from his side of the bed.

“Are you serious?” Keith almost wanted to laugh. It was surreal: He’d gone nearly twenty years without talking to anyone, and now he was being shouted at by a terrorized man in mourning. It was only as irritating as it was emotionally draining. “If you’d just listen to me—”

Lance did not listen.

Lance threw the pillow.

It hit Keith’s face, falling to the floor as Keith stood, stunned, trying to figure out what had just happened.

He only managed to reboot his brain just in time to see Lance making a break for the bedroom door.

“No you don’t,” he said, running out in front of Lance and playing goalie. He could see Red staring at him from the edge of his vision, her golden eyes twinkling in amusement. Keith didn’t think it was so funny. “We are talking about—”

Lance stumbled backward and swerved around, rushing as quickly as he could to— ...The closet?

Two realizations flashed through Keith’s head at once.

First, Lance had just locked himself into a room with only one exit, which he’d blocked off himself. Good. He wasn’t going to get out of there without being able to face Keith head on.

Second...if Lance fell asleep inside of a dark, enclosed area and he didn’t wake up before the sun rose, he’d never wake up.

“Open the door, Lance!” roared Keith, trying the handle. Lance was holding it shut. Brilliant.

“How do you know my name?!”

“How do I—?” Keith shook his head. Lance sounded terrified beyond the point of reason, but the only reason he had to be scared at all was one he’d brought upon himself. It was so stupid. “Are you kidding me? Do you know how many times your friends say your name in a day? I should be the one asking how you know my name!”

Lance didn’t answer the question. Keith didn’t really expect him to. He was too scared.

“Lance,” sighed Keith. He was so close to the point of begging. Anything to make Lance listen to him, to make him stop freaking out. “Open the door.”
“No way,” said Lance, sounding almost playful. The sound grated on Keith’s nerves, wearing the last of his patience thin. “Not a chance.”

That was it. Keith’s patience snapped like a guitar string wound too tight. He pounded on the door with both fists, just once, causing a sound loud enough for the ground to tremble beneath his feet. “It’s not safe in there, you idiot! If you’re in there when the sun rises, you’re dead!”

“Yeah, right! I’m not falling for that! You’re not even trying!”

Keith sighed and pressed his forehead to the door, his head resting between his clenched fists. He could feel Red bumping against his leg, a silent request for him to calm down. As if she was any better at controlling her emotions than he was. As if she’d be any better in his situation.

But Keith knew he was right. He took a deep breath. Patience. Patience yields focus.

All he was doing was scaring Lance more.

*If I can make him curious instead…*

“Fine. Stay in there. But don’t blame me when the Galra find you.”

“...The what?”

Keith slid down the door to his knees, eyes closing. He was already exhausted just from trying to convince Lance to listen to him. But it was working.

“Open the door, Lance,” tried Keith optimistically.

“No,” said Lance.

Keith pursed his lips. *Figures.* “Fine. I’ll say it through the door, then. But you better be listening.”

Red curled up beside him, laying her head on his knees. Keith ran his fingers through his hair while he waited for a protest from Lance.

None came.

*Guess I’ll start from the top.*

Luxia was nothing but a child when she saw the sarcophagi for the first time. Her first impression was that they were beautiful, and they truly were. Crystalline, transparent, the walls sealed with gold to protect the silk-covered cushions inside as much as the preserved forms that rested upon them.

Decades later, Luxia could still remember her younger self comparing the sarcophagi to the casket Snow White slept in while she waited for her Prince Charming to come in and wake her from the spell.

In some ways, Luxia still wanted to compare her charges to Snow White, especially the woman, with her long, pearly white hair that fanned out around her angelic face. She certainly looked like a
Every evening, Luxia would descend the stairs beneath her home and clean the sarcophagi, marveling at the chill of frozen glass beneath her fingers, how it was always cold no matter how warm the room itself was. She would polish the gold as well, just as her mother taught her, and she would tell the preserved bodies inside of the sarcophagi about her day, sparing no details, just as her mother did, just as her grandmother did, as well as her great-grandmother, and back and back for longer than even Luxia knew.

They were almost like idols, in some ways, and it felt a bit like prayer, telling them everything, asking them to wish her luck on days when she knew she would need it.

Never once did Luxia think that her generation would be the one to see her family’s tradition disappear.

After all, her family’s job had been to take care of invalids, not fully conscious, capable people.

“My name is Keith.”

“Yeah, I got that part.”

Keith sighed emphatically, pressing his hands flat against the door on either side of his forehead. “I know,” he grumbled, “but I have no idea how to start a conversation like this. I haven’t even spoken to anyone in the past eighteen years, so just...let me remember how to talk.”

“How do you forget how to talk?”

Keith sighed again. “Could you be quiet and let me think for a second? I get that you’re scared, and you have every right to be, but it’s not me you should be scared of.”

“So I should be scared of the...Gaura?” asked Lance, sounding no less skeptical than he had been for the entire conversation.

“Galra,” corrected Keith. “And yes. You should.” He took a deep breath, closing his eyes. Red’s nose nudged at his side, trying to provide him comfort and clarity. It might have helped more if Lance wasn’t—

“Uh, you still awake over there?”

If Lance wasn’t Lance.

“Yes,” snapped Keith, irritated that he wasn’t even given a second to process. “I’m awake. I told you to give me a second.”

“Yeah,” said Lance pedantically. “And I did. A few of them.”

“Oh, my god,” groaned Keith under his breath, lifting his forehead off of the door only to let it drop against the wood again. “You’re so—” He scoffed and lifted his head, scowling at the door as if he could see through it and straight into Lance’s eyes.

...Lance’s terror-filled eyes.
God, he’d been so scared when he’d seen Keith. Lance was still scared on the other side of that door, and Keith knew it. Keith also knew that he had to be patient if he wanted to get through that fear, but it was hard when Lance kept...being Lance.

“So you know my name,” said Keith softly. “What else do you know about me?”

“Why?” demanded Lance. “So you can figure out what I know and use it against me?”

“No,” said Keith irritably. “So I can avoid retelling you things you already know.”

A beat passed, then…

“I know you were Hiromi and Akira Kogane’s son,” said Lance, his voice quiet, but matter-of-fact. “I know you’re, like, twenty-ish. Except I guess you’re technically more like forty-ish now. And...I know you killed yourself.”

Keith raised his eyebrows. A little more than just a name, but… “That’s it?”

“Hey, it’s not like I set out to write a biography or something.”

“Right.” Keith sighed. “Well, actually, I’m nineteen, and it’s been eighteen years since…” He trailed off. Lance already knew, so there was no reason to keep quiet, but it was still unnerving for Keith to say “I killed myself,” aloud. “So I was born thirty-seven years ago.”

“Man, close call there.”

“What’s a close call?”

“Nothing!” Lance’s voice raised more than an octave. “So about the...Gaura?”

“Galra.”

“Right! Those! Tell me about them!”

Keith pressed his lips together. “...Fine. The Galra are vengeful spirits of the dead.”

“Like you,” offered Lance.

“No,” said Keith firmly. “Not like me. I’ve been protecting you from them.”

“Uh-huh,” said Lance, his skeptical voice only slightly muffled by the door. “Yeah, keep trying to convince me. It’s not working.”

Keith pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. “So stupid,” he grumbled.

“What was that?”

“I said you’re—” Keith sighed. Best not to antagonize Lance. Not right away. Patience was key. He took a deep breath.

“I’m nothing like the Galra,” said Keith. “If you ever saw a Galra, you’d know. They’re...like animals. Feral animals. They’re the spirits of people who died in anger. Real anger. The kind of anger where you’re beyond reason, when you feel like the world has wronged you so much that you want to bring everyone else who was ever born down with you.”
“Can’t relate,” said Lance.

“Lucky you,” said Keith bitterly. “But not everyone has had the same charmed life.”

Lance didn’t have anything to say to that.

As soon as Keith realized why, he wished he could have taken his words back. It might not have been the most sensitive thing to say, calling a mourning man’s life “charmed”.

“I just mean…” Keith sighed. “It’s not the same. These are people who… Whose lives…” He pressed his eyes shut.

Red nudged at his arm. Her muzzle was soft, her breath warm and calming.

Keith’s shoulders, which he hadn’t noticed were tense, relaxed.

“...Abuse victims,” said Keith calmly, almost a nonsequitur. “People who die with hate in their hearts because the people they used to love pushed them once too far, and killed them when they tried to push back. Or people who were wrongfully accused of a crime and executed without a fair trial because of their race or their social status. The mentally ill or disabled who died because of mistreatment in some crap institution decades ago.”

“...So they’re all victims?” asked Lance quietly.

“Not all of them,” said Keith. “Serial killers who got caught can be just as full of hate. But yeah. A lot of them.”

“Isn’t there some way to help them?”

The kindness in Lance’s voice took Keith off guard; he laughed. Out of all the reactions Keith expected from Lance, pity was not among them. “They’re beyond help, Lance. Like I said, they’re like feral animals. I just...put them out of their misery before they can hurt anyone else.” He glanced down at the red paw on his leg. “Well, me and my Lion.”

“Whoa-whoa-whoa-whoa-wait… Did you just say lion?” Keith could hear Lance’s concerned frown through the door. “Like… You don’t mean an actual lion, do you?”

“Oh…” Keith raised his eyebrows. “Did...you not see her?”

“Uh, no?!” snapped Lance. “I think I would have freaked out a little if I saw a lion in my room—Oh-God-she’s-the-thing-that-was-scratching-at-my-door-I-thought-she-was-a-dog-she’s-a-lion-what-the-hell—”

Keith, in spite of the situation, couldn’t stop himself from laughing.

Luxia had never seen the covering of the sarcophagi fog over before, and at first, an overwhelming dread that she had failed her entire family line settled in her stomach.

And then she saw the handprint.

A single, elegant, umber-brown palm pressed against the glassy surface.
An awe-laced puff of air escaped from Luxia’s lips. “In all my years, I never thought…”

Hurriedly, Luxia snapped herself out of her daze and rushed to the sarcophagus, quickly pulling off the crystal covering, flipping it over, and helping to pull the woman inside to a seated position.

The woman’s eyes were opened for the first time.

Blue. Her eyes were blue.

“How are you feeling?” asked Luxia, one hand wrapped around the woman’s, the other supporting her back.

“A little dizzy,” admitted the blue-eyed woman. “Your name… It was Luxia, wasn’t it?”

Luxia raised her eyebrows. That accent. It was odd. Almost like some sort of English accent, but…off, somehow. Perhaps because it was so archaic. Strange, to hear such an old voice say her name. “Yes. I’m… I’m sorry, your name was lost to time, I don’t…”

“Allura.” The woman’s eyes fluttered closed, and she rested weakly against Luxia’s shoulder. “My name is Allura.”

“So the Galra only come out during the day, never at night, because they’re scared of…Red. Which is your pet lion. Your actual goddamn literal lion.”

“She’s not a pet, but yes.”

“But the Galra travel through shadows.”

“That’s right.”

“And you can’t just magic yourself into the closet because it’s…too small?”

“Basically.”

“So if I fell asleep in here, and the sun rose before I woke up, and you couldn’t get through the door, I’d…just be a sitting duck.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“…Mmkay, I’d like to get out of the closet now.”

“Thought you might.”

Lance resisted the urge to mock Keith’s ‘thought you might’ and instead carefully pushed the closer door open, peering through the small crack he’d made between the edge of the door and its frame.

Keith was just…sitting there, on the floor, legs crossed like a kid in a story circle. He looked just as nervous and lost for words as Lance felt. Honestly, now that they’d spoken for a while, it was hard to believe that Lance had ever been scared of…that. There was nothing intimidating about Keith at all.
Well, except for the fact that he was still gorgeous, but that was a different kind of “intimidating” entirely.

Lance had kind of been hoping that had just been some kind of delusion triggered by how terrified he’d been upon finding undeniable proof that his house was, in fact, haunted. Like, maybe because he’d gone straight into fight or flight mode, maybe other parts of his brain were heightened, maybe it was something Pidge would have an answer for, or even Hunk.

But nope. Keith was just...really that attractive. It wasn’t even fair how attractive he was.

And those stupid, pretty eyes were staring at Lance with an aggravating mixture of expectation and skepticism.

“So…” said Keith, shrugging his shoulders in the most irritating way he possibly could have. “Are you actually coming out of the closet, or are you just going to stare at me?”

Lance growled and stepped out of the closet, closing the door behind him with the side of his foot. “Happy now?”

Keith frowned and uttered a dry, “Not really.”

When he didn’t elaborate on why he wasn’t happy, Lance dropped himself to the floor, his back to the closet door, and crossed his legs, mirroring Keith’s body language, save for the hand that was awkwardly hovering over Keith’s knee.

Oh.

Oh, God, he was petting Red.

Keith was petting an invisible lion like it was no big deal.

Lance cleared his throat, pointing nervously at the space under Keith’s hand. “Does, uh… Does she bite?”

Keith’s frown softened and he glanced briefly down at his lap before turning his eyes back on Lance. “Not unless you’re Galra.”

Lance nodded, though he wasn’t entirely sure he believed Keith, and licked his lips nervously.

It was...awkward. Not just the situation, but every molecule of air in the room. And it really wasn’t helping that Keith was just...scowling. Specifically, scowling right at Lance. Like he was sizing Lance up and didn’t like what he saw.

“Do you ever smile?” asked Lance, desperate for any way to get Keith to stop staring at him like that.

Unfortunately, that attempt backfired, and pointing out Keith’s frown only made him frown even more. “What?”

Lance leaned forward, propping a hand on one of his knees, his other hand pointing between Keith’s knotted eyebrows. “You’re gonna get wrinkles.”

“Why does that—?” Keith leaned sharply away from the hand. “I think I’m past the point where I have to worry about that.”

Lance quickly snatched his hand back, suddenly aware of how insensitive that had been. Wrinkles
meant aging, something Keith clearly didn’t do anymore. “Uh. Right.” Way to point out a guy isn’t human. Smart.

Had he thought it was possible, Lance might have assumed that he’d just made things even more awkward. They fell back into absolute silence.

Keith was still frowning, and it still drove Lance mad, but he couldn’t think of a single way to spark a conversation that wasn’t insensitive or downright rude.

Keith opened his mouth, and for a moment, Lance dared to think he might have been about to say something.

But he just closed his mouth again and started staring at the carpet.

Well, at least he’d stopped staring at Lance, but avoiding his gaze wasn’t any better.

“Okay, I’m gonna go ahead and say it.” Lance slapped his hands on either of his knees. “This is the weirdest situation I’ve ever been in. I’m not even talking about the ghost thing. Just… Are you always this quiet? Is English not your first language or something? Would this be better in Spanish? Or French? I don’t know French that well, but, like, if you want to have a conversation about what color my pens are or where the library is, I’m your man. Just give me something, preferably before I lose my mind.”

“Sorry,” murmured Keith, still not looking up. “I’m not...sure how to…” He raked his teeth across his bottom lip. “It’s been a long time since I looked at someone and saw them look back.” He hesitated. “I... Back when I first…” He sighed harshly, and the next few words came out rushed and brusque. “I really wanted my parents to look at me, and they never did, and I accepted after a while that no one ever would. And now you’re here.”

The silence that consumed the room after that confession was Lance’s fault, and he knew it, but he wasn’t sure how to fix that.

What was he supposed to say to that? He could try to imagine how something like that would feel, but he knew that he’d never really understand something like that.

Lance racked his brain, trying to find a way to say that it was okay, that Keith could relax, and they could talk like normal people, because it wasn’t a big deal. Because it might feel weird at first, but they’d settle into something more comfortable after a while, once they got used to each other.

Instead, what came out was a very rough-sounding, “Well, you still don’t have to look at me like I’m some kind of...cryptid or something.”

Keith lifted his gaze without lifting his head, his scowl more pronounced than ever. “And you don’t have to talk to me like I’m just an inconvenience to you.”

“I wasn’t!” snapped Lance. “Don’t put words in my mouth! You just don’t know how to talk to people!”

“Like that’s my fault.”

“I didn’t say that, either!”

“You implied it.”

“No, you just think I did because you don’t know what implying sounds like anymore!”
“Well, you—”

Keith stopped abruptly, and Lance’s ears started ringing again.

He thought that was over. He thought that the ringing was just Keith talking, and now that he could understand Keith, he wouldn’t hear the ringing again.

“Okay, ow,” said Lance, rubbing his ears when the ringing faded out again. “What the hell was that?”

“You heard her?” asked Keith, raising an eyebrow.

“Her?” Lance narrowed his eyes. “Wait, was that Red? It just sounded like feedback from a microphone or something to me.”

“Uh, yeah,” said Keith slowly. “That was… She roared.”

“What?” Lance tensed his shoulders. “Why? Is there, like, one of those Galra things around, or—”

“No,” said Keith quickly. “Calm down. She was just…”

“What?”

“She…” Keith pursed his lips oddly for a moment. “She was mad at us for fighting. She thinks we need to be nicer to each other.”

“Wait…” Lance raised an eyebrow. “You can talk to her?”

“Talking isn’t really the right word,” explained Keith. “It’s more like...advanced empathy. It’s feelings and images and instincts, not words. That’s the only way we can communicate, but it’s necessary for us to fight the Galra together.”

“Okay,” sighed Lance. “Because I was gonna say, if you talk to Red, why is it so hard for you to talk to me? But since it’s not really talking…” He was rambling. He knew he was. But he’d sort of forgotten that there was an invisible predator between himself and Keith. It was startling to realize she’d roared right in his ear and he didn’t even really hear it. “I guess she’s how you stayed sane all this time, right?”

Keith, for once, actually wasn’t offended. He just looked at his lap—likely where Red was resting her head—thoughtfully. “That’s...probably completely right, actually.”

Keith knitted his eyebrows. “What?”

“I mean…” Lance shifted, straightening his hoodie out behind himself. “People who are on their own for a while—like kidnapping victims and stranded people and stuff like that—they kinda lose it, right? And I mean, you’re kind of awkward, but not, like, batshit, so, like… First of all, good job, but second, I think Red’s probably the reason you haven’t flipped.”

Keith, for once, actually wasn’t offended. He just looked at his lap—likely where Red was resting her head—thoughtfully. “That’s...probably completely right, actually.”

Lance planted his hands behind himself, leaning on one more than the other so that his shoulders were as angled as his crooked smile. “See? I know what I’m talking about. Oh, by the way?”

Keith raised his eyebrows.

“You can have your GBA privileges back.” Lance’s smile widened. “You know, now that I know you’re not trying to kill me? As long as you don’t keep me awake with the light or anything like that. I figure it might help with the whole ‘not going insane’ thing. And, you know, so Red won’t kill me
for not being nice enough to you."

Keith— Well, he didn’t laugh. “Laugh” was too generous of a word. But he gave a sort of amused scoff, and that, Lance decided, was at least better than the scowling.

Chapter End Notes

My professor finally officially assigned the essays. Two days before they were due.

I did my best.

I may cry.

But, hey, at least I'm not horribly ill anymore. I'm actually feeling much better now. Thanks for your support, guys.

Also, do you like Queen Luxia? I like Queen Luxia. Mermaid queens are awesome.
Lance was no stranger to sleeping around cute people.

First off, Shiro was goddamn gorgeous. Anyone with eyes could see that. Hell, he had a bigger chest than any girl Lance had ever known, and Lance had seen what he did to keep that chest. The guy was a knockout and worked hard for it. Lance could still remember how he froze up when Pidge had introduced him to Shiro because just shaking the guy’s hand had nearly been too much.

Then there was Hunk. Hunk, who had been Lance’s best friend for as long as Lance could remember, who had carried Lance both physically and metaphorically through more than one rough patch in his life, who had a winning smile and the most luxurious hugs imaginable, not to mention cooked better than Lance’s own mother, had also been an early object of Lance’s affections.

He’d been sleeping around both of them for ages. He knew all the tricks, how to make your shirt ride up in just the right way so as to be as tantalizing as possible, how to angle your shoulders so that you never stopped looking cute in your sleep, what positions to put your body in to avoid things like snoring and drooling… He’d done research.

Just because he knew he didn’t have a chance with either of them didn’t stop Lance from wanting to show off.

But he definitely wasn’t used to sleeping around Keith yet. That was something else entirely.

And, okay, sure, Keith had gone into Lance’s closet to avoid keeping Lance awake with the light from the SP—that shit had come in handy as a stand-in flashlight before—but he was still there, and Lance knew he was still there, and it was very distressing.

Aside from the whole ‘dead’ thing—which was still pretty intense—Keith was still new. Lance really had no idea what he was like. All he had was “awkward,” but Lance didn’t even know if that was something that would change once Keith got to know him better. Maybe it was just a shell that Lance had to break through. Or maybe that was who he was one-hundred percent of the way through.

Lance had no way of knowing, and that thought plagued him until he was just too tired to care anymore.

It felt like less than a second later that he woke up to a hand on his shoulder.

“What?” he’d attempted to say. What came out instead was an annoyed-sounding, “Mnngh?”

“Sun’s up,” said Keith’s voice. Lance didn’t bother opening his eyes to see if that voice was actually attached to anything. “I’m going to do my rounds.”

“Mmph,” said Lance, still annoyed, pulling more of the blankets around his face.

“Fine,” grumbled Keith. “I’ll leave you alone. I just wanted to make sure you didn’t freak out if you woke up without me.”
Lance thought he might have muttered something in response, but it was lost to the incoherence of sleep.

A few seconds passed.

“Lance.”

“What?” moaned Lance, his lips managing to form words this time.

“There were cookies outside your door,” said Keith. “What do you want me to do with them?”

Lance opened one bleary eye to look at the spirit standing near the foot of his bed. Light was streaming in from the window, but not a whole lot of light.

‘Sun’s up’ my ass, thought Lance bitterly. More like 'sun’s kinda touching the horizon a little bit.'

Still, there really did seem to be a plate in Keith’s hands.


“Dresser?” echoed Keith. “You want me to put the cookies on the dresser?”


“Fine,” said Keith, and there was a soft tunk of ceramic on wood.

Lance thought he’d heard Keith grumble something else, but, honestly, he was too tired to care about deciphering it.

Luxia transferred the tray she was holding to one arm and knocked on the stained oak door.

“Come in,” came a cheerful, feminine voice from the inside.

Luxia pushed the door open and quickly became aware that Allura had been taking advantage of the bookshelf. Specifically the encyclopedia set, by the looks of things.

“Madam Allura,” sighed Luxia, setting the tray on the foot of Allura’s bed and walking to where she stood by the bookshelf. “You should be resting.”

“I have been,” said Allura, clutching the E volume tight to her chest. “Mostly. It’s just… So much has changed.” She lowered the book from her breast if only to stare at it. “The world is so different. Even with you and your family doing your best to keep me up to date, there are still things that I don’t fully understand. Question upon question has been brewing in my head for centuries. I can’t help but yearn for answers.”

Luxia sighed and took Allura carefully by the arm, leading her back to the bed. “I understand, but I still can’t help but be concerned. You are still recovering.”

Allura, eyes downcast, allowed herself to be helped into bed. “I know. It’s just...difficult.” She lifted her head, toes tucked neatly under her linens. “How’s Coran?”
“He’s still too stiff to move much,” said Luxia, pulling the blankets up securely over Allura’s legs. “I would guess it has something to do with his age.”

“Don’t tell him that,” said Allura, the corners of her mouth pulling up in the slightest smile, though it didn’t reach her eyes. “He’d be so offended.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Luxia reached for the tray and lowered it carefully to Allura’s lap. “He’s certainly a feisty one, though, isn’t he? If it wasn’t for his stiff knees, I doubt I would be able to keep him in bed any easier than I can keep you there.”

Allura’s smile widened. “That sounds like him.”

Luxia handed Allura her fork. “Would you rather I move your bed into his room, or vice-versa? It seems like you miss him.”

“Oh, don’t go through that trouble,” said Allura warmly. “I can wait until we’re both recovered. Besides, you and the mice have given me enough in the way of assurance that he’s doing well.” She looked down at her breakfast, but she didn’t touch it right away. “Have you found the location I told you about?”

Luxia hesitated. “...Florona did find it, yes. Or she thinks she has. There are no signs of a castle there, however. Not even historically.”

“My father may have found a way to seal the opening without needing Voltron, and perhaps that razed the castle in the process.” Allura stabbed a grape with the end of her fork and stared at it. “He could have had any records of the castle destroyed as well, to keep anyone from finding the path between the two worlds and reopening it. After all, there’s always the possibility that he recruited another Paladin. As long as it wasn’t the Blue Paladin, the caskets wouldn’t have responded.”

“So the fact that your sarcophagi have opened now…” Luxia clenched her fists. “It means that a Blue Paladin has indeed been chosen, then?”

Allura met Luxia’s eyes, a sea of hardened emotion swirling in her normally-kind blues. “I have absolutely no doubt. The Blue Lion has chosen her Paladin.”

Lance woke up properly a couple of hours later, and more than anything else, it was the memory of the cookies by the door that pulled him out of bed.

His feet hit the floor and he rushed over to his dresser.

Sure enough, there was a plate of sugar cookies covered by cellophane wrap, each iced with blue icing. White chocolate icing, judging by the smell that reached his nose when he peeled the covering back.

Lance bit into a cookie. Absolutely white chocolate. He sighed, soothed by the sweet taste. Hunk had always been the absolute best friend Lance could have ever hoped for. And he still was, even if he was tiptoeing around Lance like he was scared of breaking him.

Sighing, Lance covered the rest of the cookies and pulled a drawer open, the cookie he’d been snacking on still hanging from his lips as he reached for a pair of jeans.
Maybe, he thought as he pulled his pants on, *I can show Hunk that I don’t need to be babied. Maybe it’s up to me. I can do that.*

He closed the drawer and walked to the closet, swallowing the last bite of his cookie.

He’d barely turned the knob of the closet door when it burst open, banging hard against his bedroom wall.

Lance was thrown to the floor, his head bouncing hard off the foot of his bed, sending white stars through his vision, stars he would have been much more concerned about if not for the fact that something was sitting on him. Something heavy.

“KE—!”

Lance’s desperate scream was cut short.

He couldn’t breathe.

He couldn’t breathe, and there was a sharp, hard pain at the back of his neck.

He couldn’t breathe, and tears sprang to his eyes.

He couldn’t breathe, and the sound of water muffled his hearing.

He couldn’t breathe, and his vision was growing gray, like static over a television.

He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t *breathe, he couldn’t*—

He could breathe.

Lance flipped over, coughing and gasping for air, his hand grappling at his aching throat, tears still stinging his eyes.

He could see the carpet beneath him, though, and he could hear grunts of effort to his right.

Wide-eyed, Lance turned his head, just in time to see Keith plunge a white sword into something invisible he had pinned to the wall by his closet door. The tip of the sword moved for a second, as if whatever it had been thrust into were struggling, and then Keith dropped his weapon.

He slammed the closet door without turning around, his shoulders rising and falling as he struggled just as hard as Lance did to catch his breath.

Then he whipped around, black hair whirling around his head, his dark eyes zeroing in on Lance as if they’d found the sword’s next target.

“How stupid are you?!” snapped Keith.

Lance’s jaw dropped, his brow furrowing.

What an absolute *jackass.*

*Way to talk to someone who nearly just died, asshole!*

“I told you that the Galra come in through the shadows!” said Keith harshly. “And what do you immediately do? You go and walk right into the darkest place in your room like it’s no big deal!”
“I had to get dressed!” screeched Lance, his voice raspy from the damage to his throat. “What was I supposed to do? Not wear a shirt? I have to work today!”

Keith clenched his jaw. The sword in his hand shrank until there was nothing left but its oddly-shaped hilt, which he hooked to his belt. Then, without a word, he took a step to the side, reached out, and flicked the switch to Lance’s closet light. A yellow glow bled into the carpet beneath the door.

...Oh.

“Well, how was I supposed to—”

“I don’t want to have to save your ass every five seconds from things that could be easily avoided!” snapped Keith. “What if I was already in a fight, Lance? What if I couldn’t get here in time?”

Lance glared down at the hand that supported his weight, trying to focus more on the carpet fibers between his fingers than the fact that he knew Keith was right.

“You could have gotten hurt, or—”

Keith’s sudden fall to silence brought Lance’s gaze up again, curious.

“...You are hurt,” said Keith quietly.

“What?” asked Lance, narrowing his eyes.

“Turn around.”

Lance sighed irritably and sat on the floor properly, no longer half on his knees, turning his back on Keith as instructed.

“Christ, Lance,” whispered Keith. Lance heard the floor creak behind him.

“What?” snapped Lance, trying to look at Keith over his shoulder.

“Stop that. Keep your head straight. God, how do you not feel—?”

A sting ran through Lance’s upper back, tensing his shoulders. He leaned forward, desperate to get away from whatever the hell that was. It felt like a jellyfish sting. “What the hell, Keith?!”

“So you do feel it.” Keith sighed. “She got you pretty good. Come on. We need to get this cleaned up.”

“Get what cleaned up?” demanded Lance, but rather than answer, Keith just grabbed Lance’s wrist and pulled him to his feet.

“What the hell?!”

“What?” snapped Keith, dragging Lance to the door.

“You can touch me?” asked Lance, frowning. “I thought you were, like, full-on dead spirit, so how’re you—”

“I’ve touched you before,” said Keith.

“Uh, no,” said Lance. “No, I’m pretty sure you haven’t. I would have definitely noticed.”
“Apparently not,” said Keith. “Why didn’t you think I could touch you? The Galra have attacked you before. One grabbed your leg. You thought that was me.”

“Well, that was before I knew you weren’t one of the things that grabbed my leg,” said Lance, matter-of-fact. “I didn’t think you could just… I mean, you talked about going through walls and stuff— You’re not even cold.”

Keith sighed and opened the door. “It doesn’t matter. What does matter is keeping your stupid neck from getting infected.”

Keith’s Bayard skittered across the floor. It rolled into the hallway and hit the banister of the catwalk.

Growling, Keith reeled his arm back and punched the Galra right where its face should have been, and it tumbled backward, taken off-balance by the strength behind Keith’s swing. Hurriedly, Keith rushed into the corridor and snatched his Bayard from the hardwood floor before it could tumble into the foyer.

The sword returned to its full length and Keith whipped around, stabbing the Galra right in its throat. It vanished in seconds.

“Isn’t there some way to help them?”

Keith flinched as Lance’s words ran through his head. For a split second, Keith was tempted to sympathize with the Galra.

Then he heard Lance scream, and any desire to feel bad for the Galra was quickly squashed by a resurgence of hatred.

Gripping onto his Bayard, Keith rushed down the corridor, moving as quickly as his feet would carry him from Pidge’s room to Lance’s. He threw open the door, and he froze.

Freezing was the worst possible thing he could do, and he knew that. He knew that just staring wouldn’t help anyone, but he couldn’t get his legs to move. All he could do was stare at the Galra that had Lance pinned to the floor, its thumbs pressed hard under Lance’s throat. Lance’s face was too red, like the end of a finger that had been slammed in a car door. There were tears in his eyes, but he wasn’t even fighting. He was just...letting it happen.

It would have to be up to Keith.

*Move*, he desperately pleaded his legs, watching the life drain from Lance’s features. *Move! The closest thing you have to a friend is dying five feet away from you! You have to move!*

Lance’s body convulsed as his lungs pleaded for the air that was just out of their reach.

The Galra’s smile—her only facial feature—stretched too wide, wider than any human would be able to smile.

Keith ran.

He charged forward, Bayard raised.
The Galra pulled a hand from Lance’s throat to protect herself, and purple smoke billowed upward from where the blade collided with her arm.

With his free hand, Keith reached under the Galra’s arm and grabbed her by the throat.

“Let’s see how you like it,” he hissed and threw her against the wall.

Before she could move to retaliate, he pinned her down by her neck and shoved his Bayard into her with all of his strength.

The Galra struggled, but not for long. She quickly faded, leaving behind smoke that Keith knew better than to breathe in, but his body had other ideas.

He sobbed—an involuntary response to the realization that he could have lost Lance—and the smoke found its way in.

Images, flashes, flooded into his head, attacking Keith’s mind with horrible truths, truths he’d rather not know about.


Disgusted faces. So many disgusted faces.

She’d asked for help. She wanted help. She didn’t get it.

She tried to do it alone, she couldn’t.

Toilet bowls from every angle imaginable, often cradled by sweat-soaked arms.

And then nothing.

The visions cleared, and Keith was back in Lance’s room, blinking away the beginnings of tears.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a half-open closet door and nothing but darkness inside. He slammed the door shut as quickly as possible, and he tried to catch his breath, tried to will his mind to clear and tell him what he’d been doing before he’d breathed in the smoke.

Belatedly, Keith recognized Lance’s breathing from behind him.

The closet door, the Galra, Lance—

Oh, God, Lance.

Keith turned around, worried eyes seeking out Lance’s body on the floor.

Lance was looking up at him, rubbing at his bruised throat, clearly in pain, but still alive.

That was close. Far too close. If Keith had been just a second later… If he was paralyzed by that same fear again…

“How stupid are you?!” demanded Keith.

Lance flinched, and Keith tried not to wince at the guilt that stabbed into his chest. He knew he was misdirecting his own anger at himself. He recognized it, but… That didn’t change the fact that he was still angry.
“I told you that the Galra come in through the shadows!” snapped Keith. “And what do you immediately do?”

_You nearly get yourself killed._

“You go and walk right into the darkest place in your room like it’s no big deal!”

_I could have lost you._

“I had to get dressed!” protested Lance.

_I could have lost the only person who’s looked me in the eye and said my name in almost twenty years._

“What was I supposed to do? Not wear a shirt?”

_You could have died for a shirt._

“I have to work today!”

Keith took a deep breath, trying to relax his mind, to think of a way to fix the problem so that it wouldn’t happen again.

The answer came to Keith so easily that he was angry, immediately aware that Lance could have died just because he didn’t stop and think of a solution.

Jaw clenched, Keith reached for the light switch outside of the closet door and flipped it on.

Lance frowned, a stubborn urge to argue flashing in his eyes so visibly that Keith could almost hear the words before he said them.

“Well, how was I supposed to—”

“I don’t want to have to save your ass every five seconds from things that could easily be avoided!” cried Keith.

_I don’t want you to die from something that could easily be avoided,_ cried his mind. _I don’t want you to die period._

“You could have gotten _hurt_, or—”

Keith froze.

A single drop of blood rolled down Lance’s shoulders, something that Keith wouldn’t have noticed if Lance was sitting up straight.

Keith’s stomach clenched. He felt like he was going to throw up. “You _are_ hurt.”

“What?” asked Lance, blissfully ignorant of his own injury. Probably thanks to the adrenaline. Or maybe the lack of oxygen numbed the pain somehow.

“Turn around,” said Keith, striding forward and kneeling on the carpet.

The second Lance had turned his back, the injury was clear as day. Eight evenly-spaced cuts zigzagged down the back of Lance’s neck, small, but clearly deep, judging by how much blood was coming out of them. The Galra must have sunk her nails into his neck while she was strangling him.
“Christ, Lance,” whispered Keith, a single gloved hand hovering just inches over Lance’s injury.

“What?” demanded Lance, still audibly ignorant of what he’d sustained. He tried to look over his shoulder, and as the muscles in his neck contracted, they pushed more blood through the wounds.

“Stop that,” snapped Keith. He wanted to forcefully twist Lance’s head forward, but he was afraid of hurting him more if he did. There was so much blood… It should have at least itched while it was dripping down. “God…” Keith carefully touched the very edge of the bottom left cut. “How do you not feel—?”

Lance flinched violently, but, thankfully, he didn’t clap a hand over his neck, either too surprised or actually aware of the fact that he had an open wound on his back and sticking his hand right into it would just expose it to whatever bacteria was on his hand. “What the hell, Keith?!”

“So you do feel it.” Keith climbed to his feet and reached down to help Lance up as well. “Come on. We need to get this cleaned up.”

Getting Lance to the bathroom was a bit like herding cats. Or herding one very, very whiny cat. He had something to say about everything, whether it was how roughly Keith was treating him (not that Keith was trying to be rough) or how someone was going to hear them (never mind the fact that no one would be able to see Keith even if they did) or how Lance insisted that he’d prefer to be pushed into a bathroom by a beautiful woman (which Keith didn’t doubt).

By the time Lance was seated on the closed toilet seat, straddling the back of the toilet with his arms over the tank, he’d complained enough to, strangely, take Keith’s mind off its edge. It was a lot easier dealing with Lance’s complaining than it was his own shortcomings.

Friend… Were they friends? Keith liked to think so, but Lance… clearly didn’t.

“Do you always have to be such a dick?” grumbled Lance, his chin resting atop his crossed arms.

“Would a dick be trying to help you?” demanded Keith, sorting restlessly through the medicine cabinet behind the mirror. “Where’s the gauze? All I see are adhesives.”

“Bottom drawer on the right,” said Lance. Then, “Wait, gauze? What do you need gauze for? It can’t be that bad.”

“It’s bad,” insisted Keith, bending down to open the drawer under the sink. “If it were any deeper, you’d need stitches for sure. I almost think you should see a doctor anyway.”

“What? No way,” said Lance. “I can’t even feel it.”

“And that’s what scares me,” said Keith. He set the gauze on the countertop by the sink and closed the drawer. Once he’d climbed to his feet, Keith turned the tap on and let it warm up while he searched for a rag, preferably one that was a darker color and wouldn’t stain. Once he’d found one that was an earthy brown, he ran it under the warm water, wrung it out and brought it to where Lance sat.

The cloth had barely touched Lance’s skin before Lance started whining again.

“Owowowowowow— Why?”
“It has to be cleaned,” grumbled Keith, irritated, though he did try to dab a little gentler. “Do you want an infection?”

“No,” huffed Lance, “but why are you using water? Why not peroxide it like a normal person?”

“Hydrogen peroxide doesn’t work like you think it does,” insisted Keith. “Alfor told me—”

“Alfor?” Lance tried to look over his shoulder, but Keith gently pushed at Lance’s cheek with his knuckles to make him face forward again.

“Yes,” said Keith. “Alfor. He was my mentor.”

“Your mentor,” deadpanned Lance. “What, for the whole...Paladin thing?”

“Yes,” said Keith firmly, his eyes darkening. What would Alfor think if he knew Keith had nearly let someone get killed? Let...someone else get killed. That would have made two. Two too many.

“So wait, what happened to him?” asked Lance. “Did he, like… Was his job ‘done’ after you took over, or…? Wait, did you meet him before or after you—”

“Stop,” hissed Keith, clenching the rag in his hand. A streaky mixture of water and blood dripped and streamed between Lance’s shoulder blades. “You don’t need to know that.”

“Geez, touchy,” grumbled Lance. “You were the one who brought him up.”

Keith didn’t trust himself to respond to that. Instead, he fell silent and tried to focus more on Lance’s wounds than the incompetence that caused them.

It was an odd sort of silence that filled the bathroom, neither awkward nor comfortable. It simply...was. Neither spoke nor seemed to want to, at least until Lance broke the silence.

“So this Alfor guy, was he hot?”

Keith groaned. “Seriously?”

“Just trying to make conversation.” Lance shrugged and, judging by the way he hissed afterward, immediately regretted it.

Keith reached out and ran the washcloth under the tap to rinse it out. “…No,” he said, deciding to humor Lance. “He wasn’t hot. I mean… He was handsome, I guess. But he was like a father to me.”

“Tell me about him,” said Lance, surprising Keith with how sincere the request was.

“Well,” said Keith, mulling his words over. “He was… I dunno. Fatherly?”

Lance snorted. “The guy who was a father to you was fatherly. I never would have guessed. Thanks for clarifying.”

“Well, I don’t know,” sighed Keith. “I’m not good with words.”

“You got that right,” said Lance. “Start with how he looks.”

“Right…” Keith reached for the gauze and tore open the square packaging. “Well, he was...tall. Dark-skinned. White hair.”

“How long was his hair?” asked Lance. “Did he have a mullet, like you?”
Keith narrowed his eyes. “No, Lance, he did not have a mullet. But it was long. Sort of. Shoulder-length. And he had a beard.”

“Long white hair and a beard?” Lance looked over his shoulder. “Was this guy, like, a wizard or…?”

“Just a Paladin,” said Keith, pressing the gauze to the back of Lance’s neck. “He looked the part more than I do, though. White and gold armor, knightly cape… He was actually prepared when he became a Paladin. I barely had the foresight to grab a work belt and a pair of gloves to keep my Bayard from tearing my hands apart.”

“He sounds…regal,” said Lance.

“That’s the perfect word to describe him,” said Keith, reaching for the medical tape he’d pulled out of the medicine cabinet in his search for gauze. “Here.” He passed the roll to Lance. “I need a third hand. Hold this out for me.”

“Gotcha,” said Lance, sticking his middle finger and thumb through the center of the tape. “What else about Alfor? What were his eyes like? Were they, like, intense warrior eyes like yours?”

Keith’s hand froze over the roll of tape. “What do you mean like mine?”

“Uh, I mean…” Lance cleared his throat. “You, like…always look like you’re about to kill someone so…”

“…I do?”

Lance didn’t answer.

Keith sighed and tore off a piece of tape. “No, he didn’t have ‘intense warrior eyes’. His eyes were…” He taped one edge of the square of gauze to Lance’s neck. “…gentle. And tired. Like he was always a little sad. Even when he was smiling.

“Yeah,” said Lance, barely above a whisper. “I know what you mean. My abuela’s eyes were kind of like that, too.”

Keith’s hand faltered, but only for a moment.

He wasn’t sure what to say to that. Not at all.

So he didn’t say anything at all, not until Lance’s wound was completely dressed.

“You should be fine to go to work now,” said Keith, putting the tape away. “Will you be late?”

“Yeah,” said Lance, light-hearted, as he climbed off of the toilet seat. “But they’ll go easy on me. They like me there, and they know I just got back from a funeral. I’ll be fine.”

Keith nodded and closed the medicine cabinet door, the reflection of the wall behind him staring at him in lieu of his own face. He’d have to take Lance’s word on the ‘intense eyes’ comment, at least for the time-being. “Yeah, well…” He turned toward Lance, unsure of where he stood after a conversation like the one they’d just shared. “Be safe.”

“I should be telling you that,” said Lance. “I mean, you’re gonna be fighting those things all day, right? And if you get wrecked doing that, then I’m probably next. So don’t get yourself killed today, all right? I don’t want my family to have to bury someone else right away, you know?”
“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Keith met Lance’s eyes.

Lance stared back.

Things were awkward again.

“Right, uh…” Lance waved. “See you.”

He all but ran out of the bathroom.

Chapter End Notes

So there's this awesome person called Lance_WhyUAlwaysLion who has kept me company over the creation of the past two chapters and deserves all the love for that, because I'm a very needy and clingy person, so as a small way of thanks that honestly isn't big enough, I've dedicated this chapter to her.

Also, I wrote a great deal of the last part of this chapter while watching Elentori draw a merman Lance. With a lionfish tail. [gET IT?] So I hope I didn't write anything silly. [You guys already know that I've been deliberately keeping myself from editing this story much.] Tell me if I did something dumb like...mixed up their names at some point or something.

Anyway, I'm off to bed. Hope you enjoyed this chapter, Paladins.

Edit: OH PALADINS I FORGOT TO MENTION
If any of you guys are going to ACA [Anime Con Arkansas] in April of this year [2016], so am I. If you happen to be going and you see someone with a bag over their shoulder, a small, gray camera bag swinging from a belt loop, and a red-and-black wristband on their left wrist, that's me. APPROACH ME. PLEASE. I BEG OF YOU. I'M NOT SCARY. I'll probably just be awkward and lonely because the friend I'm going with is the cosplay guest and she'll be busy a lot of the time. The only other descriptors I can really give are my bushy eyebrows and my glasses, because I'll be cosplaying, and...I don't know WHAT I'll be cosplaying yet, hahah. My name on my badge will be Nika. Look for me if you're going. Seriously, you have no idea how much I'd love to meet...anyone.

Edit 2 - The Editening: I have a Twitter account now, if anyone's interested. I probably won't be writing anything super exciting unless you're actually curious about my personal life, but if you want to know my progress with chapters, I'm going to be putting up word counts at the end of every day. They'll be in the format of "initials of work + 'WC' ['word count'] - [number]" like...if I wrote 1000 words for Ignorance is Bliss, it'd be "IIBWC - 1000". So if you're interested in that sort of thing...it'll be there. [ADP is my main fic, anything else might be personal projects or future fics I can't stop thinking about and decided to go ahead and write a bit of.] So feel free to follow me [@YouAreInAComa] if you're interested.
Lance rushed out of the bathroom as fast as his legs would carry him. His face felt like it was on fire.

That conversation got way more intimate than he’d meant it to go.

Because, okay, so Keith was pretty, but he was also technically almost forty, even if he didn’t look it, which was just a bit out of Lance’s range. And he was Shiro’s cousin, which probably made him off-limits anyway. And he was still sort of a dick, pretty or not.

Not to mention the whole ‘dead’ thing. That, too.

There were so many reasons why Lance’s mind shouldn’t have even wandered into that territory.

But...Keith’s hands were actually really gentle, regardless of how much Lance complained. He was careful and warm and...his voice was so soft and...he sounded so full of love when he was talking about Alfor, and... God, was Lance glad that he was required to face away when Keith was tending to his neck, because he was sure he was as red as a cherry; that was a really attractive side of Keith that he hadn’t expected at all.

And then Keith just had to mention that one thing about Alfor’s eyes that immediately reminded Lance of his grandmother and his stupid mouth had to go and blurt it out and make things a whole different kind of awkward.

Not that Lance had wanted to...court Keith or anything like that, but he had kind of been hoping that he’d be able to make it through a social interaction without making an ass of himself in front of the cute ghost boy. So much for that.

“Lance?”

Lance flinched and lifted his head from where he’d been staring at the floor quick enough to hurt his neck.

“Augh!” He reached up over his shoulder, rubbing just short of where the gauze was taped to his skin.

When Lance saw the source of his brief moment of terror, he sighed and narrowed his eyes. “Jesus, Pidge! Way to give a guy a heart attack!”

“Are you...going to work today?” Pidge raised an eyebrow. “Why aren’t you wearing a shirt?”

“I was just about to leave,” admitted Lance, frowning. Pidge normally would have scolded him for not being at work rather than just asking. They would have thrown a hissy fit. They were still tiptoeing. “Y’know, after I grabbed a shirt.”

“We should go together,” said Pidge. “I have to go into town for some parts, so I can just drop you off. That way you won’t have to take the bus.”

Lance recoiled at the idea of being stuck in a car with someone who had been treating him like porcelain. “Uh, how about we don’t—”
“How about we do,” said Pidge firmly.

Oh, God. Lance knew that tone. That was Pidge’s “we need to talk” tone. It didn’t come out often, but when it did, there was no refusing it. Pidge would manipulate agreement out of anyone who tried, and Lance had learned long ago not to bother.

“Okay,” sighed Lance. “Sure. Just let me… I still need to get a shirt.”

“Yeah,” said Pidge. “You do that.”

The first few minutes of the car ride were awful and silent. They dragged on and on and it felt as though a full day had passed before they even made it out of the woods.

“Okay,” said Lance as they passed the abandoned gas station that marked the end of the woods.

“Whatever you think you have to say, just say it, so I can tell you that you don’t need to say it. I’m fine. Losing someone you love sucks, and I know you’ve lost someone, too, and I know I can turn to you if I need it, but I don’t. I’m dealing with it my own way, in my own time, so if you could just stop acting like I’m made of glass—”

“Lance, this has nothing to do with that.” Pidge looked at Lance through the corner of their eyes. “I mean, I’m glad you know you can talk to me, but that’s not what I wanted to talk about.”

“Then what?” asked Lance cautiously. “What’s so important that you needed me to be a captive audience?”

“It’s not about being a captive audience,” said Pidge. “It’s about us getting to talk one-on-one away from the house.” Their thin, bony hands gripped the steering wheel. “I analyzed the recording. Isolated it, removed noise, upped the waves… And you were right, Lance. There’s no mistaking it. That was a voice. And he was saying your name.”

Lance could only stare in awe.

Pidge had just admitted…that they were wrong…and Lance was right.

Why hadn’t he caught that on his phone?!

Pidge pulled over and pulled their phone out of their pocket, along with a loosely-knotted pair of earbuds. “Your name wasn’t the only thing he said, either. You should listen to it.” They unlocked their phone and tossed Lance the earbuds, which Lance quickly plugged into his ears.

The recording began to play, and Pidge handed Lance their phone before pulling back onto the highway.

Lance closed his eyes, concentrating as hard as he could on the sounds in his ears.

At first, it was just something Lance already knew, something Pidge had probably left in just to provide context.

“…too close to a TV or something, and red… Huh.”

“Red is what, Pidge? Red is what?!”
Red is Galra, thought Lance, eyes narrowing.

And he was quickly proven correct.

An almost-human growl rang loud and clear over Pidge’s voice in the recording, sending shivers down Lance’s spine. It was angry and horrifying and so close yet so far to a normal man’s voice. Just close enough to be disturbing. Like the auditory equivalent of uncanny valley.

That’s what Keith has been protecting me from? realized Lance. And then, Holy shit... That’s what Keith has dealt with every day since the day he died.

I owe him so many flowers.

“Lance!” Keith’s voice came through the recording, as clear as a bell, cutting through Pidge’s panic.

He sounded so...sincerely worried. So different from the way Keith had yelled at Lance that morning.

There were grunts of effort, loud cracks and thuds, an audible struggle, and when Keith spoke again, his voice was already strained with effort.

“Lance, what the hell are you even doing in here?” he gasped. There were more scrapes against the floor, scrapes that could have been anything. Keith’s foot sliding, the Galra getting up from where Keith knocked him down...maybe even Keith trying to get up. “Get out! Go!”

Come on, Stupid! Lance silently screamed at his past self. Get out of there! God, no wonder Keith seemed to hate him. He would have hated someone, too, if he was trying to keep them alive and they kept stupidly getting in the way. It had to be like trying to do the worst escort mission in any video game, except there were no continues. Failure meant failure.

Thankfully, his stupid past self had at least heard the “Go!” part, and even though he could remember that “Go!” sounding like more of a threat than a plea back then than it did in the recording, at least his past self had listened to it.

At least until Keith screamed.

Lance—the present Lance—squeezed Pidge’s phone so hard in his grip that he was sure the screen would have broken if not for the OtterBox that protected it.

Keith got hurt. Bad, by the sound of it.

How often does that happen?

Lance’s jaw clenched.

What happens if he gets too hurt?

“K-Keep going, you idiot!” gasped Keith, and the pain in his voice nearly brought tears to Lance’s eyes now that he knew the person behind it. That goddamn altruistic asshole and his goddamn soft voice and gentle hands and how he always sounds pissed— God, he didn’t sound pissed in the recording, did he? “The door’s right there!”

The staircase clanged loudly as the Pidge and Lance of the past stormed the rest of the way up it. The door slammed, and the recording ended.

Lance yanked the earbuds out of his ears.
Pidge had the car parked outside of the mall. When had that happened?

“So…” Pidge looked at Lance. “That Keith guy you were so scared of? He’s clearly—”

“On our side, I know.” Lance handed the phone and its mass of headphone cord back to Pidge. “I talked to him.”

“You talked to him?” Pidge’s brow furrowed. For a moment, Lance thought it was in disbelief, but, thankfully, it seemed like they had gotten past that point. “How?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Lance. “Maybe I’m some kind of Ghost Whisperer or something. Except everything but Keith just sounds like nails on a chalkboard, so maybe I’m more like a Keith Whisperer instead. I can see him, now, too. That’s new. That just started happening last night. Also, he’s kind of a dick, not gonna lie. Not, like, evil, like the Galra. Just a…”

Lance frowned, stopping himself mid-sentence. He was still calling Keith a dick after hearing everything that really happened in that basement.

How long had Keith stayed in the basement after Lance closed the door?

Was that fight a fight he barely won? Was that why Red had come to his room alone the night that Lance got that call from his father? Was she trying to ask for help from the only person who knew Keith was there, even though Lance couldn’t see either of them at the time?

Had Keith barely survived? Was that possible?

“Lance…”

Lance lifted his head and looked into Pidge’s concerned eyes.

“I know you’re having a crisis in there,” they said, their voice surprisingly soft, “but you’re already late for work, right? We’ll talk about this later, when we have more time. I’ll pick you up and we’ll talk this out over ice cream or something. Think you can do that?”

“I— Yeah.” Lance popped open the door. “Yeah. Thanks, Pidge.”

“Don’t thank me,” grumbled Pidge. “I didn’t even believe you. I started doing this to try to prove you wrong.”

“Still,” said Lance. “If you believe me, the others might, so—”

“Don’t tell the others.”

Lance blinked, taken aback. “What do you mean, ‘don’t tell the others’? Why—”

“I’m pretty sure whatever Keith’s trying to protect us from have been targeting you out of all of us,” said Pidge, “and I’m pretty sure that’s because you’re the one who knows. I haven’t done enough tests to be sure, but I don’t really want to, because then they’ll find out that I know. If you can ask Keith, though, I won’t have to run tests.” They glared at their car stereo. “Even if I still want to.” They sighed and shook their head. “Point is, as much as I hate to say it, it’s safest if the demons—or whatever they are—go after just one person. That way, Keith can focus his efforts on one point. And as much as I hate for that person to be you, it already is.”

Lance pursed his lips, but nodded, understanding. He trusted Pidge’s logic.

“If you have to talk to me about it, it needs to be away from the house, so no one can listen in. Aside
from that…” Pidge trailed off. Their stern, serious expression softened, and they suddenly jumped over the console, wrapping Lance in their arms and sending Lance into high alert.

Pidge was not a huggy person. Hunk was. Shiro hugged sometimes. Pidge, though? Never.

What the hell—

“Be careful, Lance,” they whispered, half-muffled by Lance’s chest. “I already lost one brother. I don’t want to lose another one.”

Lance’s breath caught in his throat.

Pidge was that worried about him?

Pidge...thought of him as a brother?

Never, in the entire time Lance had known Pidge, had they ever been so affectionate toward him. He wasn’t sure whether he wanted to laugh or cry.

Instead of doing either, he simply let go of the breath he’d been holding and returned the hug, holding Pidge close.

“You won’t,” he said. “I promise.”

Work was torture.

And that was compared to retail as usual.

On top of angry customers and people telling him to “look in the back” for things and that one regular who always spouted transphobic comments at the register as if everyone agreed with her, there was the new addition of everyone at work walking on eggshells around him even worse than how it was at home.

Even worse than that, though...was Keith’s voice ringing through his head.

The screams from the recording.

Screaming in pain, screaming Lance’s name…

And nothing to distract him from it, because every time there was a stack of clothes to be folded or a customer to help, a coworker always swooped in.

“I’ll get it, Lance.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Nah, man, I’ve got the register. No big.”

Every single time.

Lance had never felt more useless.
He wasn’t even sure why he was there. What’s the point of being at work if he wasn’t even going to work? It was maddening.

Keith’s voice in his head was maddening.

“Lance!”

“Get out! Go!”

“The door’s right there!”

“Keep going, you idiot!”

Lance’s phone buzzed in his pocket and he fished it out so frantically that he almost dropped it.

Pidge. Asking when Lance was getting off work.

“Is that your ride?”

Lance lifted his head, fixing Rolo with a suspicious frown. Don’t say it—

“Go ahead and get out of here. It’s no big deal. Today’s a slow day, anyway.”

Lance exhaled hotly through his nose.

He said it.

And it was a goddamn lie, too. They’d had just as many customers as they always had.

“Yeah,” grumbled Lance, typing out his response to Pidge, a ‘right now i guess’ that looked a lot calmer than he felt.

Pidge picked him up, as promised.

They talked over cheap soft-serve ice cream, as promised, and Lance caught Pidge up with everything he’d learned from Keith.

And Pidge impressed him with how much they’d found out on their own, including things that even Lance didn’t know yet.

“So I set up microphones in a few places,” explained Pidge. “Dark places. Like the basement, which I only went into at night after I figured out that supernatural activity mostly happens during the day.”

“Mmhmm...” intoned Lance, crunching at a corner of his cone.

“So in addition to finding out what you already know, that the Galra only show up in or around populated rooms, I found out that they talk to themselves a lot.”

“Whoa, wait…” Lance frowned, pulling his ice cream away from his face. “They talk?”

“Not well,” said Pidge. “Some of them are...I want to say more developed than others. Almost more evolved. Like some of them are more like Neanderthals and some of them are Cro-Magnons. But yes, they talk to themselves. It’s actually really creepy.”

“You say that like you’re surprised that it’s creepy.” Lance raised an eyebrow.

“Point taken,” said Pidge. “But it’s worse than you’d think. I don’t even think they’re speaking any
human language. Not any that I can recognize, anyway. The only English word I’ve heard is *Paladin*, which makes a lot more sense now that I know more about Keith. But the real creepy stuff is when they just moan words I can’t recognize. Not full sentences, just single words. Like Marley from *A Christmas Carol* saying ‘Scrooge’. All they’re missing are spooky chains to jangle around.”

“‘Scrooge’ is a name, though,” said Lance.

“Thanks, Sherlock,” sighed Pidge.

“Save your sass for a second.” Lance nudged Pidge’s shoulder with the side of his free hand. “I actually have a point. What if those nonsense words they’re moaning are names?”

Pidge frowned. “I don’t know, it’s possible, but I’d have no way of knowing. It’s not like I have a Rosetta Stone.”

“Keith might know,” said Lance, pointing at Pidge with his half-eaten cone. “I could ask him.”

“Good point,” said Pidge. “But you can’t tell him that they came from me.”

“Oh, come on!” whined Lance. “First off, you’re a genius and deserve the credit for figuring this stuff out, and second, how am I supposed to explain why I’m asking?”

“I don’t know, Lance, you’ll have to think of something, but you can’t tell him the truth. The Galra could overhear you.” Pidge smirked. “I’m flattered you want to give me credit, but now’s not the time. This is about finding answers, not being celebrated.”

Lance sighed. “Right… So what are they saying?”

---

Pidge still had some errands to run after their talk with Lance (to which Lance responded with an aghast “HOW?!”) so rather than coming home with Lance, they simply dropped Lance off and went back about their business.

Shiro wasn’t home when Lance walked in, but Hunk was, and Lance, still determined to make things normal again, practically tackled Hunk with an excited hug.

“Hunk, your cookies are amazing,” he said eagerly, still hanging off of Hunk’s shoulders. “I mean, I only had one, but that one was absolutely heaven.”

Hunk laughed, but it was stilted, and when he hugged Lance back, it was a little too tight, lasted a little too long. It wasn’t natural. “Yeah, well, I figured…”

They fell into conversation. It was still uneasy, almost entirely composed of small-talk, but even as it ended just as awkward as it began, Lance swore that it would be easier the next time.

The effort had to come from both of them. It was a two-way street. They’d figure out the road back to a natural friendship eventually, once Hunk realized that Lance was still the same person.

But that was for another time. Until then, what Lance really wanted to talk about was probably upstairs.
Lance climbed the staircase a little too eagerly, and when he opened his door, he had to fight down the bubbling emotion that struggled to swell in his stomach.

Keith was lying on the floor, but he didn’t seem injured. He didn’t even seem tired. Judging by the furrow of his brow, he just seemed to be...pouting.

“...What are you doing?” asked Lance, the question almost accusatory.

“Shh,” hissed Keith firmly.

Lance frowned curiously and crept forward, looming over Keith and casting a shadow over his face.

“You know,” said Lance, “if you didn’t stay up all night playing video games—”

“I’m not tired,” snapped Keith. “I don’t need sleep. That’s not what this is. Quiet.”

Lance’s frown deepened into a scowl. So much for Keith not being a dick. “Fine. Whatever.” He sat on the edge of his bed and leaned back, reaching for his phone. He hadn’t checked on his Robuddy in a while.

Sure enough, Lance’s virtual pet was hungry and angry and rusty. He started to feed it, and while the game played advertisements as a trade-off to get more food without pouring real money into the game, his eyes wandered over the foot of his bed to where Keith lied.

God, he looked as pissed as ever. He really was going to get wrinkles if he kept making that face, ghost or not.

“Could you try not staring at me? It’s distracting.”

Lance, red in the face, turned quickly back to his phone.

“I’m not staring,” he mumbled, dragging the soap icon to his rusty virtual pet with his thumb. “I’m just on my phone.”

“Well,” grumbled Keith. “Now you are.”

Lance cleared his throat in a poor attempt to shake some of his embarrassment. How did Keith know he was watching him? Did he not need his eyes open to see, or...?

Frowning, Lance looked over his shoulder again, just to test it, and—

“Lance.”

“How do you do that?!”

Keith sighed and sat up, fixing his perpetually-annoyed gaze on Lance. “I’m trying to become a better Paladin.”

Lance sat up as well, taking this as his cue to put his phone away. “What does that mean?”

Keith turned his face away, glaring at the floor. “I’m trying to detect the Galra before they appear.”

“You can do that?” asked Lance.

“Not really,” said Keith. “That’s the problem. I can’t—” He huffed a sigh. “It’s something my Lion can do. Alfor could do it, too, even without his Lion around, so I know it’s something Paladins can
do, I just...I’ve never been able to sense them coming like they could.” He looked back up at Lance. “I tried when I first became a Paladin, but when I couldn’t get it down, I just started patrolling instead. Following my parents around. Making sure they didn’t get hurt by just being there when the Galra showed up. But now that there are so many people in the house, I don’t think I can get by with just trying to predict where the Galra will show up anymore.”

Lance hummed thoughtfully and slid down from his bed, joining Keith on the floor. “What are you trying to do exactly?”

“It’s kind of hard to explain,” admitted Keith. He bowed his head and closed his eyes, his brow knotting again. “If I try hard enough, I can almost feel where the walls of the house are. I can see it in my mind’s eye, kind of like how you can get a perfect mental picture of what the inside of your mouth looks like by dragging your tongue across your teeth. That’s one of the hardest parts, though, just trying to give everything context. It’s a lot easier to sense everyone in the house, where all of you are relative to where I am. It’s hard to miss your quintessence.”

Lance cocked an eyebrow. “Our who-dy-what?”

One corner of Keith’s mouth trembled. Lance was fairly sure he was trying as hard as he could to not smile; it almost made him proud.

“Your quintessence,” said Keith. “I guess you could say that it’s sort of what makes a soul. If I look for it, it’s kind of like...feeling a color, and that color says a lot about who each of you are.”

“...Okay,” said Lance, inching a little closer. “Not gonna lie, that’s cool as heck.”

Keith really did smile this time. “Pidge is green,” he said. “Very green. They’re the farthest away right now, but I can still see the color. That tells me that they’re smart. Really smart. And curious.”

“Hunk is right beneath us. He’s got some green, too, but...mostly yellow.”

“Let me guess,” said Lance, who couldn’t remember the last time he was so invested in something. “Yellow means, like, kindness or something, right? Unless it means salty as heck. Because Hunk can definitely be salty.”

“Kindness,” confirmed Keith. “Definitely. Shiro has a little bit of yellow, too, but mostly, he’s... I think it’s supposed to be black, but it looks almost purple. It kind of scared me at first; the Galra are purple.”

“What about me?” asked Lance eagerly.

“Blue,” said Keith without hesitation. “Bright blue. It gets brighter when you’re looking at me. That’s why I wanted you to stop. It gets hard to see anything else.”

“What does blue mean?” asked Lance.

Keith opened his eyes, and the smile disappeared. “It means you’re annoying.”

Lance was offended...for less than a second. “...Are you joking? Was that a joke?”

Keith grimaced and looked away. “It was supposed to be. I’m not good at—”

Lance laughed. “No, don’t— It wasn’t awful—I mean, don’t quit your day job, but—I just wasn’t expecting it. You’re always, like—”
“I know, I look like I’m about to kill something.” Keith ran a hand through his hair. “You said that this morning.”

“Yeah, you’re just way intense and serious, and it’s like...whoa, I didn’t know you could be cool and have a sense of humor at the same time.”

“...Did you just call me cool?”

“No.”

Keith furrowed his brow skeptically.

Lance could only stare at a face like that for so long before breaking. “...Okay, fine. You’re kind of cool.” He wrinkled his nose. “A little bit. I mean, you’re a goddamn ghost-hunting spirit-knight with a magic lion, what did you expect? Not to mention, I mean, like, how many times have you saved my life already? Probably more than I could even keep track of if I could see you doing it every single time. And you never even expected anyone to thank you. You just sort of did it. You’re practically Superman, and I’m Lois Lane, always having to get my butt saved by you without even knowing you’re Clark Kent, which kind of sucks because I know I’m making your job harder, and I want to help you, but I don’t think I even can because I can’t even see what’s going on—I’m totally word-vomiting all over you right now, aren’t I?”

Keith, who had just been staring at Lance with a helpless, trapped look in his eyes up to that point, simply said, “A little.”

Lance groaned. “You’re supposed to say, ‘No, of course not, Lance, you’ve done nothing wrong.’”

Keith just shook his head. “Lance, you— What, were you thinking about this all day?”

“Uh, yeah?” said Lance, as if it were obvious. “You can’t expect to tell me about all this crazy shit that’s been going on behind my back for weeks and have me not think about it!”

“Well, don’t,” Keith snapped, practically ordered. “This isn’t your business.”

“Not my business?” demanded Lance. “How the hell is this not my business? I keep almost dying—YOU keep almost dying BECAUSE of me! Or double-dying or—”

“It’s not because of you, the Galra have always—”

“I don’t care how long they’ve been here, they’re still targeting me, aren’t they?! And I’ve been making it worse by doing stuff like going into the basement and opening the door to my closet without turning the lights on— How hurt did you get the last time you had to save my ass from the basement? How much danger were you in just because I decided to ask Pidge to help me prove that you were real?”

“That wasn’t—”

“And then even when I knew sort of what was going on, I opened the door to my closet, and WHOOPS, THERE GOES MY NECK. And I keep thinking about this physics teacher I used to have who was obsessed with alternate realities and I just think ‘How many realities are there where I died in that exact moment?’ ‘How many realities did Keith die in?’ I mean, I guess infinite because that’s kind of how infinity works, like you can cut it in half and half of infinity is still infinity, but—”

“Lance, will you just—”
“—got so fucking pissed, and I can’t even blame you because I’m pissed at myself. Which makes me even more pissed at just everything because I know it’s my own stupid fault. And then you had to clean my stupid neck and you were still pissed and I had to try to keep things from getting too awkward because that’s the only thing I’m good at, except I’m apparently not good at it because things still got awkward—”

“Stop—”

“—would be so fucking ashamed of me if she was still here, so don’t tell me it’s not my business, because it’s sure as fuck affecting my life, which makes it—”

Keith grabbed onto Lance’s shoulders, hard. “Shut up!”

Lance pushed Keith’s hands off his shoulders and climbed to his feet as quickly as he could.

“Yeah, okay, fine,” he snapped. “You want me to shut up? I can do that.”

He turned away from Keith, walked past his bedroom door, and slammed it so hard behind him that the walls shook.

He heard Keith call his name from the other side of the door.

He ignored it.

Chapter End Notes

Just a few reminders:

1. I’ll be at ACA [Anime Con Arkansas in Little Rock] from April 7th to April 9th.
2. I got a Twitter account, if anyone is interested. I post daily fic progress by word count and stuff. I won’t be checking it more than once or twice a day, but it’s there.
   @YouAreInAComa
3. Lance_WhyUAlwaysLion is still amazing and deserves all of your love.
4. In case I’m somehow the only Pokemon nerd here, Return and Frustration are two opposite moves in Pokemon. Return gets stronger when your Pokemon likes you, Frustration gets stronger when your Pokemon hates you. I decided it was fitting to make a Game Boy-related allusion in the chapter title considering how invested everyone got in Keith's GBA privileges.
All Keith had wanted to know was whether Lance thought he was cool. Not because Lance’s opinion mattered to him. Really. Just because that was what it had sounded like and he wanted to make sure.

He hadn’t expected Lance to get emotional.

He hadn’t expected for Lance to start comparing himself to Keith in the worst way possible.

He hadn’t expected Lance to blame himself for the Galra attacks.

He hadn’t expected Lance to start screaming and cursing and talking about how useless he felt.

For weeks, Keith had been watching Lance when he thought he was alone, just because it was necessary to protect him from the Galra. Even when Lance had no reason to keep any guards up, there was still nothing to suggest to Keith that Lance was susceptible to such insecurity.

He hadn’t expected Lance to feel the same way Keith had when he was a kid.

And he hated it, because every single word that Lance spoke tore at Keith’s chest as easily as if it had purple claws of its own, because Lance wasn’t supposed to be like this. Lance was supposed to have two modes: happy-go-lucky and whiny man-child. Lance wasn’t supposed to break like this just because Keith asked a simple question.

Lance was supposed to be stronger than this.

Lance was supposed to have better reasons to stay in the world he was in than Keith ever did.

Lance wasn’t supposed to imply that he’d become a Paladin in a heartbeat if given the opportunity.

“Shut up!” snapped Keith, grabbing onto Lance’s shoulders and yelling in his face, desperate to make him stop saying so many horrible things about himself, to stop him from saying anything about wishing he could be a Paladin before he said it.

He hadn’t thought about how it could come across. He just wanted to make it stop.

Lance fixed him with a glare, a real glare, one that bore hard into Keith’s gaze and sent chills down his spine.

“Yeah, okay,” spat Lance, pushing Keith’s hands away. “Fine. You want me to shut up? I can do that.” He climbed to his feet.

“Lance—”

The door slammed, and Keith was left alone with his regrets.
A shower, as it turned out, was exactly what Lance had needed.

The second he stepped under the hot water, his mind started to clear, and he realized what had happened.

Keith was a jerk. Yes. Keith was part of the problem, yes. Did Keith owe him an apology? Absolutely.

But Lance was to blame, too, and he realized it just a little too late.

He groaned, letting the scalding water pour over his scalp and into the wounds on the back of his neck, his face hidden in his hands.

He’d been yelling. Right in Keith’s face. And he was putting a lot of pressure on Keith for things that weren’t his fault. And, sure, Keith was a dick, and he was aggravating, but he didn’t deserve that...explosion.

Lance spent the rest of his shower grumbling at himself and scrubbing just a little too hard.

And when he emerged from the bathroom, he found Shiro.

“Uh…” Okay, so his friend was waiting right outside the bathroom door. Right outside the door. To the point where if the door opened outward instead of inward, he would have definitely smacked Shiro in the face. Nothing weird about that, right? “…It’s free?”

“Actually,” said Shiro, putting on the ‘Dad face’, “I was hoping we could talk.”

Oh, no.

No, not two ‘we need to talks’ in one day!

“Yes,” said Lance, deciding to keep his thoughts inside his head where they belonged for once. “Sure, uh…”

“My room?” offered Shiro. “I would have suggested a drive, but I’m going to guess by the pajama pants and the robe that that’s out of the question.”

“Yeah,” said Lance, rubbing the back of his neck until a sharp sting reminded him of why that was a poor idea. “Your room’s fine.”

Shiro’s room was quite a bit tidier than Lance’s was. It was minimalistic and showed almost no signs of having been lived in, save for the workout bar that had tried to kill Hunk their first day in the new house and a single photo of Shiro with Sam and Matt Holt on his dresser.

“So…” said Shiro. “How was your day?”

Lance tried not to wince. He knew that “How was your day?” It was the same kind of loaded “How was your day?” he used to get from the counselor his parents made him see when he started picking fights as a kid, at least until they realized that he only picked fights with people who tried to pick on Hunk for his weight. It was a “How was your day?” that really meant “We’re talking for a reason, and I think I know what that reason is, but I want to see if there’s more to it than that.”

“Crappy,” admitted Lance, who could trust Shiro a lot easier than he did his childhood counselor. “Work sucked. Everyone’s treating me like I’m made of glass. I didn’t even do anything while I was there, unless you count standing around until my knees locked in place, and then they just sent me
home early.”

“You got off early?” asked Shiro, taking a seat on the edge of his bed. “Hunk said you got home at a normal time.”

“Yeah, well, that’s ‘cause I talked to Pidge,” said Lance. “That was the one good part of my day. Pidge is actually treating me pretty normally for the most part.” Short of the whole “brother” thing. That was a little weird. But it wasn’t “your grandma died” weird.

“So everything is fine with you and Pidge?” asked Shiro.

“Oh.” Lance’s shoulders tensed. Uh-oh.

How was he supposed to explain that? “I was talking to your dead cousin and we started fighting?” Yeah, no, not happening.

Instead, Lance tried, “I was on the phone with...someone.”

“Someone?” Shiro raised an eyebrow.

“Someone,” said Lance, trusting Shiro not to press if Lance obviously didn’t want to talk about it. Except...actually...Lance sort of did want to talk about it.

“...I kind of...exploded on a friend.” He crossed his arms and looked at the floor, poking at a bit of unraveled carpet with his toes. “In a big way. Like, we were just talking, and...I dunno, I guess my thoughts just got too loud and found their way into my mouth and I just…” He made a vague ‘boom’ gesture with his hands.

“I can’t say I’m surprised,” admitted Shiro. “You’ve been dealing with a lot over the past week, and you haven’t been going over it with any of us. Did you even talk about it with your family?”

“Well...” Lance turned his face away. “No. But I’m fine.”

“If you’re exploding on friends and don’t know why, ‘fine’ might not be the right word.”

Lance looked back at Shiro’s face and found more concern in his eyes than he was ready to deal with.

“...I know,” sighed Lance, letting his arms fall back to his sides. “I mean...I know that now that it happened, but just...” He groaned and leaned back against the closed door. “I want things to go back to normal. I want my friends to act like my friends again. I want people to treat me like Lance again, not the kid who just lost a loved one. It was awful enough seeing my whole family acting different, to see them walking around like zombies or trying to act way too happy or eating too much or not eating enough. I don’t want to have to deal with you guys tiptoeing around me on top of that. I just want life to go back to the way it was.”

Not that that was going to happen now that Lance had confirmed...well, confirmed Keith.

“I know,” said Shiro. “But it’s hard for us, too, Lance. We’re worried about you, but none of us
know how or when to bring it up. Believe it or not, Lance, you’re acting differently, too.”

“I am not,” grumbled Lance.

“Do you think the friend you blew up on would agree with that?”

Lance winced and shut his eyes. Okay, so maybe he was acting a little weird.

“...Shiro?”

“Hm?”

“Do you have any dad-wisdom for trying to fix things with someone when you were both sort of jerks?”

“I don’t know about ‘dad-wisdom,’ but maybe cousin-wisdom.”

Lance stood up straighter, eyes opening wide. “Uh— C-Cousin wisdom?”

Shiro just nodded. “When I was really little, my family visited this house. We hadn’t planned on visiting, but we were in the area, so we decided to drop in. My parents started talking to my aunt and uncle, and you know how it is when you’re a kid. Adults talking is the most boring thing in the world. So I started looking for Keith.”

Lance crossed the short distance to Shiro’s bed and sat down beside him, eager to hear more of this story, more about the mystery that was Keith.

“I overheard him yelling, and I thought it was weird because both of his parents were downstairs, and no one else should have been there.” Shiro offered a strange sort of half-smile. “I guess he must have been rehearsing a conversation or something. Or maybe he was just troubled and trying to get whatever was in his head out of his system. Either way, I just opened the door and watched him yell at nothing for a while just because I wanted to know what was going on.

“And then he noticed me.”

Lance’s brow furrowed. “What did he do?”

“He got angry,” said Shiro, almost laughing. “Really angry. It terrified me. I think that’s probably the only reason why I can remember that moment out of everything. I started crying.”

“Aww.” Lance, unlike Shiro, really did laugh. “Poor little Shiro. Did Keith freak out?”

“I think he was more scared than I was,” said Shiro, lifting his eyebrows. “Our parents came rushing in, and he didn’t even look at them. He just stared at me with this deer-in-the-headlights look on his face, like he’d never seen a kid cry before in his life.”

Lance, who could perfectly picture Keith’s expression, just started laughing harder. “Oh, my god! Please tell me he groveled at your feet to make you stop crying.”

“He might have tried,” said Shiro, his expression softening, “but all of the adults assumed he did something awful and separated us as quick as they could so I wouldn’t be traumatized or something.” That soft expression quickly turned to something that seemed foreign on Shiro’s features. It looked like guilt. “I’m pretty sure I tried to explain that it wasn’t all his fault, that I was being nosy, but I couldn’t stop crying.

“They wouldn’t let me see him after that.” The guilty wrinkles in the corners of Shiro’s eyes
deepened. “I don’t know what they thought he did, but...whatever it was, I guess my parents decided it was dangerous for me to be around him. I got a new babysitter, and, god, I hated her, but I don’t think I connected the dots that it was because of what happened when I spied on Keith. I must have figured it out eventually, though, because I can remember eventually explaining it to my parents and begging them to let me see Keith again.”

“Did they?” asked Lance.

Shiro nodded. “It took some doing, but they did let me see him eventually. I think it was the following Christmas or something— No, I know it was, because I remember trying to give him some candy from my stocking when I apologized. And...I remember him telling me that I should keep my candy, because he was sorry, too.”

“That’s...way too adorable,” said Lance, “but I don’t know how that helps me. I mean, you were little. You didn’t know what you were doing.”

“Things still got worse the longer I went without apologizing,” said Shiro simply. “And I still knew I needed to apologize, even if I didn’t understand the real reason why. I just kept putting it off, and we both got hurt because of it. Someone needed to make the first step, and I was the only one who could, even if I didn’t realize it.”

“So, you’re saying I should just apologize and hope, uh, *my friend* does, too?” asked Lance.

“Give it a shot,” said Shiro. “Even if it’s not easy. Your friend might be scared that you don’t want to see him again. He might think that he’s doing the right thing by leaving you alone. Is that what you want?”

“...No,” admitted Lance, grudgingly. As much of a dick as Keith could be, he didn’t want to alienate him. Lance sighed. “Okay. I think that’s all I needed to hear.” He stood up and he stretched, already dreading the return to his room. “Thanks, Shiro.”

“I’m always here if you need me,” responded Shiro. “And Lance?”

“Hm?” Lance looked down at the dad-stare that was directed back up at him.

“If you ever want to bring your ‘friend’ to dinner, you know that wouldn’t bother any of us, right?”

Lance blinked, utterly baffled. “...Uh, what?”

“It’s not exactly a big secret that you’re bisexual, Lance,” said Shiro, shrugging. “If you wanted to —”

“No.” Lance turned bright red. “Oh, my god, *no*, we’re *not*— I mean, *I* am, but *he’s*— I don’t *think* he’s— And he’s off-limits anyway because— Oh, my god, forget it, just— We’re *friends! Just friends!* That’s it! I’m— I don’t have a boyfriend! *Especially* not— We’re just friends, Shiro, I swear.”

“Right.” Shiro smirked in a way that very clearly said that he didn’t believe a word coming out of Lance’s mouth. “Well, I just wanted to let you know that he’d be accepted here. And so are you. No matter who enters or leaves your life.”

“Yeah, I get it!” squeaked Lance, slapping desperately at the doorknob behind himself. “I-I-I’m gonna go...apologize now. On my phone. And my phone’s in my room. So, uh. Okay, gonna go do that now. Bye!”
“Good luck, Lance,” said Shiro. “I’m rooting for you.”

Somehow, those words felt like they were intended for more than just the apology.

It was easier trying to identify quintessence with Red’s guidance than it had been alone, but...it was still rough.

Though it wasn’t easy, Keith followed the lights in his mind’s eye. He saw red all around himself, and he saw green glowing from far away. He saw yellow and black mingling, intertwining, conversing. He saw black break away from yellow and rush to the color he was trying so hard not to watch.

No purple. Not true purple, anyway.

But there was another color, one he hadn’t told Lance about, that glimmered from far, far away.

Pink.

And Keith was baffled. He’d assumed that the only colors of quintessence that there were had been all represented by the Lions. Black, Red, Green, Yellow, and Blue. Hell, it was called quintessence. Quintessence. It made sense to assume that it was the five qualities of a personality, right?

So why was there pink? None of the Lions were pink. And it really was far away. Far, far, far away. At least a few hundred times farther away than Pidge was. And yet, Keith could still detect it. As if it was reaching out, or as if it was tied to the house somehow.

Keith couldn’t stop thinking about something from long, long ago, something that Alfor had told him about, that he’d witnessed firsthand before he’d become a Paladin. Something about a woman who tried to use the Galra to her advantage… Keith couldn’t remember much of it. He’d been more concerned with the present than the past in that moment. But he remembered that someone was trying to use the Galra, and that was enough for him to find quintessence of an unusual color suspicious.

He tried to target that strange pink, tried to see how far away it was, whether it was mixing with any other colors, talking to any other people.

And then blue shocked Keith’s entire mental vision and his eyes snapped open.

“What the hell?” he sighed, glaring up at the ceiling of what used to be his bedroom. “That keeps happening. Why does that keep happening?”

A low growl rumbled up Keith’s body from where the back of his head rested against Red’s stomach.

“It’s not like that,” grumbled Keith. “I mean, I care about him, sure, but… If you saw what happened earlier…” He closed his eyes. “You’d know why I can’t stop thinking about him. About what happened. He… He started talking like he wanted to be like me. Like...a Paladin.”

Another growl and a whip of Red’s tail, and Keith jerked upright. “Don’t joke like that,” he snapped, sending Red a scowl over his shoulder. “I’m not letting that happen to him. That’s final. Even if he
hates me for it. He deserves a better life than—”

A click caught Keith’s ear, and he whipped around, facing forward again, toward the bedroom door.

Lance was back.

Great. Time to deflect problems and sulk in opposite corners of the room.

“What do you—”

Keith’s words caught in his throat.

Oh.

Lance crept in silently, head bowed, shoulders slightly hunched. He looked…

He looked sheepish.

“Hey, uh… Keith.” The timid tone in Lance’s voice was so unexpected that it gave Keith goosebumps. “Can we, uh...talk? About what happened earlier?”

Keith’s brain was so close to short-circuiting that he could already smell the burnt plastic. Nothing that Keith had seen of Lance over the past several weeks had prepared him for actual maturity.

“You… What?”

“You know… Talking?” Lance lifted his head, connecting his gaze with Keith’s. The look in his eyes wasn’t quite anger. It was closer to…frustration. “The thing people do when they don’t want their relationships with people to go up in smoke?”

“I…” Keith scooted back, closer to Red. “Yeah, I mean…” He gestured uncertainly to the floor in front of him.

“Actually,” said Lance, striding to his bed and climbing carefully on top. “I was thinking up here. Uh, Red can come, too, if she wants.”

Okay.

So.

Climbing into a boy’s bed.

Well, onto, Keith supposed. Still not something Keith had expected to do that day. Or ever, really, considering he thought he gave any chance of that up the second he became a Paladin.

And yet, there he was, Red pushing against his back with her nose while he struggled to remember how his legs worked.

He could do this. It was just…sitting. And talking.

To a real person. Not a Lion that communicated through empathy and growling.

Nothing difficult about that.

Shoving his nervousness deeper into the pit of his stomach, Keith climbed unsteadily to his feet and pulled himself onto the bed, seated across from Lance.
Lance crossed his legs.

So did Keith.

Their knees touched.

Neither of them moved away from the contact.

Lance took a deep breath. “So… About, uh, earlier…”

Keith watched him rub the back of his neck, eyes downcast toward the point where Keith’s right knee met Lance’s left.

“…I’m sorry.”

“Lance—”

“Hup-up-up, not done yet.” Lance lifted his head and pointed in Keith’s face. “Let me get through this. You went all quiet last night when I wanted information, so you can be quiet now.”

Keith pressed his lips together. Fine. If Lance wanted quiet, he could give him that.

Lance’s blue eyes swept over Keith’s face briefly, apparently waiting for him to protest, before returning to their knees. “So… Shiro thinks I’ve been bottling up my feelings about my abuela for the past week, and I’m...starting to admit that he’s sort of...right.” He pressed his fists together, popping his knuckles against one another. “Because the bottle sort of...broke. Or...you know...exploded and sent shards of glass everywhere. Mostly into you. And, I mean, okay, so it’s not just about my abuela. It’s about all of this, too. The whole...ghost thing. You.”

Keith struggled to keep his mouth closed.

“And, I mean, I get that you’re just trying to help.” Lance sighed and let his hands drop to his knees. “Okay, more than trying. You’ve saved my ass tons of times and probably everyone else’s just as much. And all of this and my abuela are all sort of mashing together in my head, and it’s like... ‘What if I lose—’” Lance lifted his head, eyes wide. “Oh, cheese, that sounds way mushier than I thought it would.” He made a t-shaped ‘time-out’ gesture with his hands.

Keith cocked an eyebrow. What…?

“Forget I said that, just…” Lance sighed and ran a hand through his hair, a hand that Keith had only just noticed was shaking. “I’m totally stressed out about this, because it feels like I’m going to wind up losing a friend and I just lost someone and I don’t want to go through all of that all over again. And I really don’t want it to be my fault. And it feels like that’s exactly what’s going to happen, that I’m gonna mess up somehow and someone’s gonna die because I was stupid, and I’ll have to live with that for the rest of my life.” He exhaled a pent-up breath and leaned back so far that Keith thought he might fall over the edge of the bed.

Instead of falling, Lance just grabbed the edge of the mattress and pulled himself upright. “So that’s what’s been going on in my head since this morning. How are you?”

Keith faltered. “Wh— I…” The conversation had turned on him so quickly that he wasn’t even sure where to begin. He was honestly still trying to absorb what Lance had just said. There had been a lot. Not to mention how it clearly wasn’t all of it. None of the insecurities from before—that “Lois Lane and Superman” garbage—had been anywhere in any of that. And if Lance didn’t want to talk about that again, that was fine, but Keith needed to adjust himself accordingly, and that wasn’t easy. Not
for Keith, at least.

“Come on,” Lance almost pleaded after a moment of silence. “Say something. That wasn’t easy to admit, you know.”

“I know, I just…” Keith furrowed his brow. “I’m trying to...think of what to say. I…” He looked down at his hands, half-covered by black gloves. “I’m not good at this kind of thing.”

“Yeah,” said Lance tersely. “I could tell.”

Keith wanted to glare, but he stopped himself just in time. The last thing they needed was to start another fight. Lance might not be so willing to extend an olive branch a second time around, and as much as Keith hated to admit it, they needed to be able to communicate almost as much as Keith and Red did. If they started fighting again, then people really could get hurt, just like Lance thought. More than likely, though, that person was going to be Lance himself.

So Keith took a breath, exhaled, looked Lance in the eye, and said, “I’m...sorry, too.”

“...Really?” Lance seemed genuinely surprised, almost suspicious.

“...Yeah,” murmured Keith, looking down at his hands again. “I’m sorry for snapping at you like that. That was...the wrong thing to do.” And he knew it was. Alfor probably would have lectured him for at least an hour if he’d seen Keith yell at someone who was already scared.

But, dammit, Keith had been scared, too.

“I was just...startled, I guess,” admitted Keith, only telling a half-truth. “I didn’t expect you to…” He trailed off, distracted by the way Lance’s eyes were flicking back and forth.

“Didn’t expect what?” asked Lance, sitting surprisingly straight compared to how he had been.

“...Nothing,” said Keith. Lance clearly hadn’t wanted to talk about that, and they probably weren’t close enough to approach such a sensitive subject. For now, he would respect Lance’s clear wishes. Lance’s shoulders relaxed. “Okay, weirdo. Whatever you say.”

Keith rolled his eyes. “Weirdo…” Sure.

“Anyway…” Lance stretched his arms over his head. “Hunk was making a late dinner last time I checked, so I’m gonna go see how that’s going.” He climbed off of his bed and sent Keith a surprisingly charming smile. “Thanks for listening, Mullet-head.”

“Don’t make me regret it,” grumbled Keith.

Lance just shrugged, his usual smug smirk returning to his features. “Just calling it as I see it.” He turned away, half-waving with the back of his hand. “Later, Keith.”

Keith hesitated right up to the point when Lance grabbed his doorknob, but the second he started to open the door, Keith all but jumped off of the bed, nearly stepping on Red’s tail in the process. “Lance, hold on.”

“Hm?” Lance looked over his shoulder, closing the door again before someone could listen in on their conversation.

“That thing you said about not wanting to lose any friends…”
Lance raised his eyebrows.

Keith swallowed hard. “…I’m not letting anything happen to Pidge, Hunk, or Shiro. You aren’t my only priority. I’m going to keep all of you safe. I promise. You won’t lose any friends. Not on my watch.”

Lance’s eyes widened. “Uh, I wasn’t—I didn’t mean—I wasn’t even really talking about them, I was actually—” He trailed off, only speaking again after clearing his throat. “I mean, I, uh… Thanks. Keith.”

It was only after Lance left that Keith realized he should have asked how his neck was.

After a somewhat awkward meal with Hunk, Shiro, and Pidge, Lance returned to his room, and soon after, to bed.

His dreams had changed.

He still saw the box of lion figures. He still saw oceans, forests, the crumbling tower, and the cliff face, but Keith himself had vanished almost entirely. Perhaps because Lance had finally solved that particular mystery.

In his place, Lance saw the middle-aged man more often.

A regal-looking man with white hair that reached his shoulders and a matching beard on his chin. There was something familiar about that, something that Lance couldn’t quite make sense of.

The man flashed in Lance’s head with the clarity of a ruined VHS, always in a different situation.

At times, he wore a warm, welcoming smile, one that seemed almost fatherly, and seemed to stretch an arm out to Lance, as if inviting him in for a hug.

At times, he was hunched over a table, palms pressed flat against the wood, eyes dark with dread, even fury.

At times, he seemed to own a beauty all his own.

At times, he seemed more worn and haggard than any man Lance had ever seen.

At times, he was full of life, like he’d harvested an entire country’s goodwill for himself.

At times…he was screaming.

Screaming at Lance— No, for him, terror and despair in his eyes.

Screaming like he had never felt greater grief.

Screaming like he had just lost one of the most important people he’d ever known.

Why was he screaming?

Who was he screaming for?
Who are you?

Who are you?

Chapter End Notes

Crazy week, folks.

My dad just got out of the hospital.

And we've temporarily switched rooms because his room is upstairs and my room is downstairs and he's in too much pain to deal with stairs.

He gets claustrophobic, I think, and doesn't have a bedroom door.

I'm an abuse survivor and I get nervous when I don't have a place to hide.

I got. No. Sleep. Last night.

And I cried. Quite a bit.

Yeah, I know, wah-wah, my problems, my dad just got out of the hospital, I should be more sympathetic, I know.

Anyway, I'm still going to ACA in Little Rock in April 2017 [as far as I know, the hospital thing hasn't changed anything] and I'm still @YouAreInAComa on Twitter if you're interested in keeping up with my writing progress.
Knowing that he was being kept from a board meeting of such vital importance was enough to drive Coran mad, so to keep himself from losing his mind altogether, he’d taken to reorganizing the books in the study.

He’d only been perhaps three-fourths of the way done when a knock came at the door and he abandoned the stack he was on.

“Come on in,” he called, doing his best to seem as cheerful as possible.

When the door swung open, however, and Alfor stood in the doorway, grave as a man on his deathbed, Coran’s brave face faded.

“...Don’t tell me.”

“It was nearly unanimous,” explained Alfor, expressionless. “Only Pyotr was against it.”

Coran pressed his eyes shut, his head bowing in frustration. “Then my presence at the meeting wouldn’t have mattered at all, would it? It seems you’ve all made up your mind.”

Alfor didn’t speak.

Coran supposed there was nothing much to say.

“What of Allura?” Coran raised his head, scowling. “She’s already lost her mother. If this goes wrong, she could easily lose both of her parents. This could orphan her, Alfor. I don’t want to see that little girl grow up alone.”

“She’s not so little anymore, Coran,” said Alfor, finally stepping inside and closing the door behind himself. “And while I would still rather have her grow old alone than not at all, I know that isn’t a problem that I need to worry about. Whether I survive this or not, I go confident that Allura will always have a father in you.”

Coran crossed his arms, shrinking into himself.

“Well, I still don’t like it.”

The smallest of sad smiles tugged at Alfor’s wizened cheeks. “Pyotr said nearly the same thing. And he pouted just like you, too. I suppose that’s the blue quintessence in both of you.”

“I’m not pouting,” gruffed Coran. “I just...” He sighed and allowed his arms to drop. “You know Allura won’t be any happier with this than I am.”

“I know,” said Alfor. “And that’s precisely why she isn’t going to know about it.”

“She isn’t going t-t-to—” Coran spluttered. “Alfor, I mean no disrespect, but are you insane? To risk your life and not tell your own daughter—”

“If Allura knows, then she will try to stop me,” said Alfor. “Once she realizes that she cannot stop me, she will follow me, and if she follows me, she could be spotted. She would most certainly be
taken hostage to prevent me from completing the ceremony. I would have to choose between my
daughter and my people, and that is a decision I could never make. For the sake of her safety, the
safety of every Altean, she cannot know.”

Coran set his jaw. “...She’ll be quite cross when she finds out.”

“I’ll take cross over dead,” said Alfor. “Promise me, Coran, that she won’t find out until the danger
has passed. Promise me you’ll take her somewhere safe, far away from the scene of the ceremony.”

“If it weren’t for Haggar, there wouldn’t be a need for a ceremony,” growled Coran. “Or Paladins.”

“I know,” said Alfor, “but there’s nothing we can do about that now. Will you take care of my
daughter or not?”


10,000 Years Later

Keith stood at the edge of Lance’s bed, his lip caught between his teeth.

This was getting creepy. He knew it was getting creepy, and it was just getting creepier for every
second he stood around hesitating, because technically, he was watching Lance sleep, and there was
nothing okay about that.

But what was he supposed to do, just reach out and yank the blankets down? The last time he’d
woken Lance up, Lance had gotten angry at him, and he didn’t want to spark another fight.

But he needed to see Lance’s neck. He was worried. Was that so wrong?

Okay, maybe he should have asked the night before, but a lot happened the night before, and every
time Keith wanted to bring up the injury, it got swept away in something else.

But it had been nearly twenty-four hours, and Keith needed to know if it was infected or whether
Galra claws might have some kind of venom that only worked on living people or whether it just
wasn’t healing or—

Keith reached out tentatively, his hand hovering over Lance’s blankets, and...his hand froze just a
few inches short.

A tear squeezed out from one of Lance’s closed eyes, marking a trail from his eyelashes, across his
nose, and landing on his pillow, leaving a dark spot on the pillowcase.

Was he...crying in his sleep? Who did that?

...Or was he not sleeping at all?

“Lance?” Keith reached for Lance’s shoulder, his worry about Lance’s wound replaced by another
worry.

Lance’s eyes opened abruptly, almost frighteningly quick, and his eyes locked immediately onto
Keith’s, as if drawn by a magnet.

“What?” he snapped, much more alert than he had been when Keith had woken him up the day
before. “Is this just gonna be a thing with you? Waking me up at ass o’clock in the morning and
staring at me like I’ve grown an extra head?”
“I was just…” Keith frowned and retracted his hand. “You’re crying, so I was…”

“Tch, crying,” grumbled Lance, reaching up to rub his damp eyes with the back of his arm. “I’m not crying. I was just...having trouble sleeping, and...haven’t your eyes ever watered when you lied awake in bed for too long?”

Keith narrowed his eyes skeptically. He was just trying to help. He didn’t need this attitude. “Well, since you can’t sleep anyway, we’re going to the bathroom to look at your neck.”

Lance moaned, rolling onto his back. “You’re the worst. My neck is fine.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” said Keith. “You haven’t even been keeping it covered. What if it gets an infection bad enough that you need to go to the hospital and the doctors ask how you got wounded? What would you tell them?”

“Crazy ex-girlfriend,” mumbled Lance, his arm still draped over his eyes.

Keith sighed and grabbed Lance’s arm. “Come on. We’re going.”

When Keith hit the light switch in the bathroom and the light illuminated Lance’s back, Keith had to do a double-take.

“Holy shit, Lance.”

“Okay, you can’t just say something like that while looking at a crazy ghost wound.” Keith couldn’t see Lance’s face, but he didn’t need to. He could hear the fear in his voice. “What’s going on?”

“It’s not anything supernatural,” said Keith, his fingers gently brushing over the surface of the wound. “You’re just...bruised.” Bruised didn’t really seem like a suitable word. Bruised seemed like a severe understatement. “Really...really bruised.”

Keith grabbed Lance’s shoulders and whipped him around to look at the front of his neck as well, and…

“Holy shit.”

“Stop saying that!”

Keith didn’t answer. He didn’t even bother inspecting the bruises at the front of Lance’s throat any longer than he had to. Instead, he lifted his gaze to Lance’s eyes. Carefully, he reached out and held Lance’s face, holding it still while he tried to inspect for any further signs of damage.

“U-Uh— Um— K-Keith? W-What are you—”

“Your eyes aren’t bloodshot,” explained Keith gratefully. “No bruises under them, either. I’m surprised.”

“Oh. Uh. From, like, the choking?”

Keith absently confirmed Lance’s question with a hum, brushing his thumbs over the places where bruises might have formed, as if the skin would bloom purple if he touched it. “Your face is really warm, though. Are you sick?”

“I’m fine!” snapped Lance, grabbing at Keith’s wrists and pushing his hands away. “You just dragged me out of my warm blankets. That’s all. So stop— Just— Oh, my god...”
Keith sighed. “Whatever.” Lance was still rude. Nothing new there. “Do you have a turtleneck or a scarf you can wear?”

Lance knitted his brow, visibly taken aback. “It's summer.”

Keith pursed his lips and grabbed Lance by the shoulders, whipping him around and leading him to the bathroom mirror.

“...Holy shit,” said Lance.

“I told you,” grumbled Keith. “And the back is even worse.”

Lance whined. It was highly likely to be the most pathetic sound Keith had ever heard.

“Are you wearing a turtleneck now?” asked Keith.


“Where are you getting the makeup?” asked Keith. “You can't just stroll into CVS looking like this. People will think you've been abused. They might make calls or—”

Lance rolled his eyes. “CVS—I haven’t been into a CVS since I was in middle school. CVS is garbage. You want the good stuff? It’s right in here.” He bent to the bottom drawer of the sink and pulled out a black tube of what seemed to be concealer.

“This stuff?” He grinned wide. “This is my jam.”

“You...” Keith raised an eyebrow. “You wear makeup?”

“Yes, I do,” said Lance, his grin quickly replaced by a scowl. “Even my skincare routine—perfected after years of trial and error, by the way—falls short every once in a while. Rarely, but sometimes. And on the rare occasion that I do get blemishes, this little guy pulls through where every other brand in the world falls short.”

Keith frowned. “You...care that much about what people think of you?”

“No,” deadpanned Lance, his scowl becoming more pronounced. “I just like being able to look in the mirror and think ‘damn, I’d tap that.’ The ladies it lands me are just a bonus.”

Keith mirrored Lance’s scowl. “What ladies? You don’t even have a girlfriend.”

Lance’s smirk slowly crept back onto his face. “Just because I don’t bring anyone home doesn’t mean I couldn’t if I wanted to. I mean, would you want to bring a girl home to a house full of creepy ghosts?”

“No,” grumbled Keith, though he doubted it was for the same reason Lance had implied.

“Exactly,” said Lance, uncapping his concealer.

“Wait.” Keith grabbed the hand Lance was using to unscrew the cap. “Don’t put that on just yet. I’m going to clean the open wounds back here first.”

Lance groaned. “Again?”

“Yes, again,” said Keith. “And I’m dressing them again, considering you didn’t bother after your
“You don’t have to baby me, you know,” grumbled Lance, grudgingly turning around. “I can take care of myself.”

“Apparently not,” retaliated Keith, stepping away from Lance to grab a terrycloth. “And if you aren’t going to, then someone has to.”

Lance scoffed, but rather than arguing, he just returned to the toilet seat he’d perched himself on the morning before and sat in silence.

Keith took a cursory glance through the corner of his eye once he was sure that Lance wasn’t looking, a thoughtful frown pinching his features as he inspected Lance’s bare back and arms.

Yeah, if Lance really wanted to bring a girl home, he probably could.

Lance being gone left Keith feeling rather conflicted.

On one hand, Lance was out of danger. He was safe, and when he was away from the house, there were fewer Galra attacks in general, meaning that the rest of the household was safe as well.

On the other hand…

Okay, so Keith missed him just a little. There was no shame in that, right? Keith hadn’t had any human friends since Alfor, and that was if Alfor could be counted as “human”. If he couldn’t, then…

Well, then Lance was Keith’s first and only human friend.

At least, he was to Keith. Keith still wasn’t sure how Lance felt about him.

But he liked to think that they were at least starting to bond. Mutually. And that made Lance important.

And the fact that Keith was fighting for someone important was shown easily in how he fought.

There was more energy behind his every move. Even when Lance wasn’t around, Keith hit a lot harder just knowing that he had to keep the house safe for his return, and because he’d made a promise.

He wasn’t going to let anything happen to Hunk, Pidge, or Shiro. He wasn’t going to let Lance down.

Every Galra he struck down made him feel stronger. Every time he saw their faceless forms disappear under the blade of his Bayard, he felt like his existence held a little more purpose.

There was a reason he was still a Paladin, even after Alfor fell to the Galra.

There was a reason he was still fighting.

And that reason, at least for the moment, was Lance.
And he wasn’t going to—he couldn’t—let anything happen to Lance or anything that Lance cared about.

It was with renewed vigor that he slammed the tenth Galra of the day hard into the kitchen stove, pushing his Bayard so roughly into its sternum that the tip of the blade nearly scratched the white surface beneath. It collapsed into violet smoke, just as every other Galra did, and as the last wisps of that dark color dissipated into the air, the sound of clapping reached Keith’s ears.

Keith whipped around, eyes wide, searching for the source of the applause.

He found it in the form of a thin, lanky Galra leaning against a cabinet by the kitchen archway.

“Well done,” purred the Galra. “You’re quite the fighter, aren’t you?”

Keith’s breath caught in his chest. Galra didn’t speak. Galra didn’t have enough humanity left in them to speak. “What—” choked Keith, frozen in place. “How—”

“How?” The Galra chuckled. “Don’t you know the answer to that already? Or have you forgotten about the Galra your mentor told you about? The one who could speak so clearly it was almost as if he were still human.”

Keith’s eyes widened further somehow. “That wasn’t— He killed that Galra.”

“Did you truly think Zarkon was one of a kind?” The lanky Galra smirked. “Didn’t you wonder if there could be more like him? Or did you assume that you were safe, that every Galra you would face was nothing more than a faceless, mindless drone?” He stood straight, leaning away from the cabinet that had been supporting his weight. “Did you think your job would be that easy? You don’t know anything at all about what it means to be a Paladin, do you?”

Keith’s shaking hand gripped tighter to his Bayard, seeking daylit comfort from the only source he’d known for the past nineteen years.

“Your master did a poor job of teaching you, didn’t he?” purred the Galra. “But then, you never were intended to be a Paladin, were you?”

“Shut up!”

Keith raced forward, Bayard raised, all of his strength in his swing as he brought down the blade. It screamed through the air, headed directly for the Galra’s neck, only to stop just inches short as the Galra snatched Keith’s arm out of the air.

“My…” The Galra clicked his tongue, digging his sharp nails hard into the center of Keith’s wrist and eliciting a cry of pain. “You truly are weak, aren’t you? Weaker than even I suspected.”

“Be quiet!” gasped Keith, fighting agony to claw in vain at the hand that gripped him; the Galra’s hold was unyielding.

“And so full of anger as well,” tutted the Galra. “You might have made a fine Galra, had you died in any other fashion.”

“I’m nothing like you,” spat Keith, gritting his words out through clenched teeth.

“Clearly not.” The Galra lifted Keith’s arm high over his head, high enough that Keith’s feet dangled off the ground. Keith kicked at the Galra with one of his dangling legs, but the attempt was less than successful; the Galra barely even flinched.
“After all,” continued the Galra, his smirk darkening. “If you were Galra, perhaps your friend would be better protected.”

Keith’s eyes snapped open wide, blazing with fury. “Don’t touch him! I’ll—”

“What?” The Galra’s smirk widened into a malevolent grin. “You’ll kill me? Do you really think you can? You lack the power to so much as free yourself from my grip, much less land an effective attack.”

The Galra pulled his arm back to the point where his sneering face was less than an inch from Keith’s scowl.

“The sooner you learn to face this, the better: When I decide to make my move, you will be powerless to save him.”

Before Keith could so much as spit in the Galra’s face, he was thrown across the kitchen. His back hit the handle to the cabinet so hard that white pain drove a shock into his entire body white enough for stars to blossom in his vision, and when Keith was able to blink the stars away from his vision, the Galra was gone.

Growling, Keith stormed into the foyer, looking around wildly, and when he found nothing, he closed his eyes and tried to find the Galra’s quintessence.

Nothing. Not even a trace of Galra-purple marked Keith’s mind.

He retreated? Why? He had me beat. He could have…

Keith fell to his knees, cradling his head in his hands.

Why would any Galra retreat from a fight when he had the upper hand?

It just didn’t make sense.

---

A lot of what Shiro had said stayed in Lance’s head long after their conversation the evening before. Not just what Shiro had said about Keith, but everything else, too. The fact that he wasn’t talking about his problems enough. The fact that no one really knew what to do because he was avoiding his problems as much as they were.

Things were okay with Pidge again, for the most part. He’d had at least one normal conversation with Shiro.

Hunk, however…

And to be honest, that was wrong. Lance and Hunk had been best friends since they were babies. He could talk to Hunk about pretty much anything, usually. It had just been...kind of garbage lately, considering Lance had tried to talk to Hunk about ghosts before he’d had proper proof and Hunk hadn’t believed him at all. But of course he hadn’t, because he was Hunk and he was smart and he was rational, and Lance...wasn’t.

And now that he had proof, thanks to Pidge, he couldn’t really show Hunk that proof because it’d put him in danger.
And Lance definitely didn’t want that.

He didn’t really want to talk about his grandmother, either, though.

And he knew things wouldn’t go back to normal if he didn’t ask Hunk for help in some respect, even if he didn’t get into specifics.

So, with a great deal of hesitation, Lance reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone.

Hunk picked up after one ring.

“Lance?” He sounded worried. Not that that was anything new. “You never— What— What is it? Are you okay? Do you need help?”

“Whoa, calm down.” Lance tucked a hand into his pocket and leaned back, smiling. “I’m fine, big guy. Just looking for some advice.”

“What kind of advice?” asked Hunk. Lance could hear the frown in his voice. “Like, restaurant advice, or—”

“Nah, nothing like that,” said Lance. “Not that your recommendations are ever anything less than phenomenal, let’s be real here. No, what I need from you right now is advice on how to chill.”

“How to…?”

“Well, I just figured…” Lance shoved his hand deeper into his pocket, hunching his shoulders in the process. “I mean, I know you’re always looking up tips for your anxiety and stuff, so I figured...you have to have found something that works for you at least a little bit, right? So I just wanted to know what that was.”

“Oh.” There was a pause, and for a second, Lance wondered if he’d completely missed the mark on what he needed to do for his friendship with Hunk. “Sure, I can— Lance, are you, like…? You know what? Never mind. Where are you?”

“Uh…” Lance raised an eyebrow. “Just got off work, so…”

“Still at the mall?”

“Yeah.”

“Meet me at the south Sears’ entrance in fifteen.”

Exactly fifteen minutes later, Hunk’s van rolled up to the parking lot, and it had barely parked before Lance was swept away by a particularly eager Hunk who had all but dragged him back inside the building and straight to—

“The bookstore?” Lance frowned. “Oh, come on, Buddy, don’t make me read a self-help book—”

“I’m not,” said Hunk emphatically, looking over his shoulder as he dragged Lance along by the hand. “You’re about to learn the secret to my success. You’ll see.”
The bookstore in the mall was a surprisingly large one, but despite the rows and rows of books and
comics and pens and Harry Potter accessories, they stopped right next to the entrance, where Hunk
reached for a thin, white book with colorful spirals on the front cover.

“Behold.” Hunk gestured to the book, looking about a blond wig away from Vanna White.

“A...coloring book?” said Lance skeptically, taking the book into his own hands and scowling at the
front. “Seriously?”

“Uh, yeah. Seriously.” Hunk frowned and put his hands on his hips. “It’s a godsend. It’s best if you
use crayons, but, like, markers? Markers are awesome, too. And colored pencils.”

“Huh.” Lance started flipping through the pages of the coloring book in his hand. “So you really do
this? This is what works for you? Like, personally?”

“Yeah!” said Hunk. “Well, that and cooking, but I know the cooking is just a ‘me thing’. But, like,
coloring is the most relaxing thing anyone can do. You just put your whole mind on what color
you’re gonna use next and staying in the lines and, like, it’s the most non-stressful thing ever and it
soaks up your whole mind like a sponge so you can’t get distracted by anything else.”

“All right,” said Lance, snapping the book shut. “I’ll give it a shot. But if this is the route I’m taking,
I’m gonna be picking out my own books, and I already know what I’m looking for.”

They had to be trying to get him to drop his guard.

That was the only explanation.

There was no other reason for the Galra to just stop attacking in the middle of the day.

It didn’t make sense otherwise.

None of it made sense.

Why did he run?

\textit{Why did he run?}

Keith jerked upright, his eyes snapping wide open and his hands rushing into his hair, tugging at the
roots.

He was going to lose his mind.

He was going to lose his mind, and that was probably exactly what that Galra wanted. For him to
lose it and wear himself out.

“Oh, Keith?”

And that was exactly what was going to happen, and there was no way for him to stop it.

“Keith.”
That Galra was right. He couldn’t protect Lance. He couldn’t protect any of them. He was going to let them all down.

“Hey!”

Warm hands came down to rest on Keith’s, and Keith lifted his head to find Lance staring back at him.

Oh, god, Lance was home?

How did he miss *Lance* coming home? He’d been on the lookout for quintessence for the past hour. Lance coming home should have nearly *blinded* him. Was he really *that* bad at it?

Lance’s hands worked at Keith’s fingers, kneading them until Keith realized what Lance was trying to do and he let go of his hair.

“What’s up?” asked Lance, gently pulling Keith’s hands down, away from his head. “You look about three seconds from actually exploding.

“I, uh…” Keith cleared his throat. “I was… I was just…”


Keith sighed emphatically. “No. I was…trying to concentrate on finding Galra. They stopped showing up at around 1:00 and I don’t know why.”

Lance shrugged. “Maybe they’re done for the day.”

“That doesn’t happen,” said Keith firmly. “They’re never ‘done’. I’ve been doing this for almost twenty years. There’s nearly a constant flow of them until the sun sets. The longest I’ve ever seen them go without showing up is maybe an hour. It’s been—” Keith narrowed his eyes. “It’s…” He sheepishly turned his face away to frown at the floor. “I-I don’t know how long it’s been. What time—”

“Keith.” Lance’s hands, still wrapped around Keith’s, squeezed gently. “Have you been pulling your hair out about this for five hours?”

“Yes,” said Keith without a moment of hesitation. “It’s my job. I have to keep you safe. You and Shiro and Pidge and Hunk— All of you.”

“And who’s going to keep you safe, huh?”

Keith lifted his head, curious. He’d never heard that kind of tone from Lance before.

Lance looked like an angry parent.

It was so far from anything Keith had ever seen on Lance’s face that it was almost funny.

“I’m fine,” said Keith.

“Uh, no,” said Lance. “Do you really think that? Because I just walked in on you *literally* pulling your hair, which is basically the universal signal for ‘definitely not fine’.”

Keith huffed irritably. “Lance—”

“No.” Lance let go of Keith’s hands. “We’re not doing that. What we are doing—” He reached for a
Lance had purchased two coloring books at the bookstore, both incredibly relevant to his interests. The first was inspired by the night sky, mostly full of fields of stars and planets and galaxies and solar systems. He handed that one to Keith.

The other…


“You know that marker’s going to bleed through to the other side of the page, right?”

“A worthy sacrifice.”

“Whatever.” Keith sighed. “I still don’t like this.”

“You said it yourself,” chided Lance, resting his chin on his hand and looking up from his coloring book to send Keith a smile. “The Galra haven’t attacked since, like, noon. What are you so afraid of?”

“They’re probably just trying to get me to drop my guard,” grumbled Keith, glaring at the page he’d barely even touched a crayon to. “So they can attack when I’m not expecting it.”

“Or you kicked their butts so hard today that you scared them,” said Lance, still balancing his chin on his hand while the other returned to the scale-covered tail he’d been turning pink. “Or they’re trying to make you lose your mind over this, and that’s been totally working.”

Keith sighed. “Yeah, I know.” He huffed and abandoned the planet he’d been coloring in favor of reaching for a blue crayon to fill in the tail of a comet. “But it’s still just as likely they’re trying to get me to lower my guard.”

“Either way,” said Lance, “they’re just playing mind games with you, and the best way to win a mind game is to not play it at all. That means getting your mind off of whatever they’re putting you through.”

“No,” grumbled Keith. Lance could tell without needing to lift his head that he was pressing his crayon too hard against the paper. “That means acting like everything’s normal. That means patrolling and trying to sense their quintessence like usual.”

“Yeah, I saw what happened when you tried to do that?” Lance capped his pink marker and used it to point at Keith’s face. “It wasn’t working. I don’t think you can do normal right now. So, instead, you’re getting your mind off it. Next best thing, right?” He set the marker down and reached for a blue one to use for some of the flora around the mermaid.

Keith sighed. “Maybe.”

“Definitely,” corrected Lance, uncapping the blue marker. “You need this.”

Keith abruptly sat up straight, and Lance lifted his gaze to make sure that Keith wasn’t going to abandon him—or worse, that he’d actually sensed a Galra’s quintessence and was rushing off to
fight it—but he wasn’t. He was just…removing his jacket.

Okay.

Wow.

“...I didn’t know ghosts could strip.”

Keith didn’t even try to smile. “It was getting in my way.”

“Your big, droopy sleeves got in the way of your coloring.” Lance smiled wide enough for both of them. “Even you have to admit that’s kind of cute.”

What wasn’t so cute was what Lance noticed when Keith lied back down on the floor, propping himself up on his elbows.

“...Dude, what the hell happened to your arms?”

“What?” Keith met his gaze, eyebrow cocked, eyes wide with genuine confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“Your arms, dude!” reiterated Lance, whisper-screaming. “Why are they all—oh-my-god-that’s-how-you-killed-yourself.”

Keith actually looked down at his arms this time, uncovered by any kind of sleeves, and he went visibly pale.

“Oh.” He cleared his throat. “I guess, uh...yeah. That, uh, is...what happened to my arms. I can cover back up, I just forgot—”

“No, no, it’s okay.” Lance pushed himself up until he was seated on the floor instead of lying on his stomach. “If you’re comfortable like that, I mean… Don’t cover up on my account. I just. Geez.” He exhaled sharply. “You really are a dead guy. Like…” Lance ran a hand through his hair. “I guess on some level, I guess I’ve been thinking of you as more like...some kind of mythical creature or something. But… I dunno, I guess it just really hit me that you really used to be alive at some point and...I am not making you feel better, huh?”

“No,” said Keith, and the look in his eyes made Lance immediately regret everything he’d just said. “Not really.”

Lance hesitated. “...Do you...want to talk about—”

“No.”

“Okay!” Lance threw his hands up in surrender. “I get it. Sorry. I wouldn’t like it if someone pushed me to talk about my abuela, I won’t push you to talk about your...self.”

Keith didn’t answer.

He wasn’t coloring anymore, either.

Yeah, Lance definitely felt awful.

“...So, what about the other thing on your arm?”

“Lance, I just said—”
“Not the big thing! The little ones!”

Keith narrowed his eyes and looked down at his wrist, where four gaping crescent moon shapes lied. “Oh. I forgot about those.”

“Get those from fighting the Galra?”

“Yeah,” admitted Keith, still avoiding Lance’s eyes. “Today.”

“Geez, maybe the reason they left you alone was because they didn’t want to put you through anything more than they already did.”

“Hm.”

Lance pursed his lips, trying to think of something—anything—to get Keith to give answers longer than two words. “…Does the back of my neck look like that?”

“Yep,” said Keith tersely, wrapping his arms around his middle. “Bruised, though.”

*Three words. That’s progress.*

“…Okay, screw this,” said Lance abruptly. “Give me your arm.”

Keith finally met his eyes. “What?”

“Your arm,” said Lance sharply, holding out his left hand. “Gimme.”

Keith narrowed his eyes, and for a second, Lance was nothing short of certain that Keith was going to yell at him, if not outright hit him.

But he didn’t.

He just unfolded his arms and offered the one unmarked by the Galra.

Lance grinned playfully and wrapped his hand gently around Keith’s wrist. Then, he popped the cap of the blue marker off with his mouth and he pressed the tip to Keith’s arm.

“Cold,” grumbled Keith.

“Shu’ uph, you baeh-bee,” said Lance, struggling around the cap in his mouth while he drew a shape on Keith’s forearm, right over the line he’d carved out all those years ago.

Satisfied, Lance capped the marker and sent Keith a crooked grin.

Keith pulled his arm back to inspect it. “…A heart?”

“Yep,” said Lance proudly.

Keith narrowed his eyes. “…It looks like a broken heart because of the cut.”

“Oh, my god,” groaned Lance, uncapping the marker again and grabbing Keith’s arm to hold it steady while he filled in the heart.

“There!” he said once it was finished. “Now you can’t even see the cut.”

Keith looked down at the heart, back to Lance, and then back to the heart again, pursing his lips. Then, slowly, he raised his opposite hand and he dragged his finger across the heart.
The marker came off without a trace.

“Wh— Hey!” protested Lance, somewhere between offended and awestruck.

“Marker doesn’t absorb into my skin,” said Keith casually. “I’ve tried it before. It just sits on top.” He took a deep breath and blew a jet of air at his blue-covered finger.

Lance felt something wet and cold hit his cheek.

“Ah! What the heck?!”

“Sure absorbs into yours, though.”

Frowning, Lance raised a hand to wipe off the marker, though he knew it would be much less successful than Keith’s attempt.

Keith caught his hand. “Don’t,” he said.

Lance nearly protested, but then he saw Keith’s face.

He was smiling.

He’d gone from cold to smiling in a matter of seconds.

Lance liked to think it was because of his heart idea.

“Why not?” asked Lance, raising an eyebrow.

“Because…” said Keith, dropping Lance’s hand to reach for a marker. He drew a purple line across his finger a few times, took a breath, and blew the marker ink toward Lance’s face once more.

Lance cringed. “Why?”

“Because it looks like a nebula,” said Keith, still smiling.

Skeptical, Lance pulled out his phone and looked at himself in his phone camera.

Sure enough, the sight of his own face had him smiling just like Keith.

“I’m a goddamn star-child,” said Lance, beaming as he took a picture. Then, out of curiosity, he used the outside camera to take a snapshot of Keith.

The image on his phone was… Well, it was a disappointment. He’d honestly been hoping for a picture of Keith.

But, hey, a weird, reddish, transparent, Keith-like shape was still pretty cool. He decided to save it regardless.

“Okay, now that I’ve taken a sufficient selfie,” said Lance, grinning as he pocketed his phone, “I am totally taking advantage of the fact that marker comes right off of you and coloring all over your face.”

“Please, don’t,” sighed Keith.

“Nope,” said Lance. “It’s happening. Deal with it.” He grabbed the blue marker again.

“Lance—” Keith warned, trying to climb to his feet.
But it was too late.

Lance had already pounced, and Keith was pinned to the floor.

And to be honest, Lance knew that Keith was most likely letting him do it. After all, Keith was a goddamn Galra-slayer. He could probably flip Lance in seconds if he really wanted to. But he wasn’t. And Lance wasn’t sure how he felt about knowing that.

So he ignored that bit of knowledge that crept into his brain for the moment and instead focused on doodling on Keith’s face, as promised.

“Please, tell me that’s not a penis.”

Lance snorted. “It’s not, but that’s a good idea.”

“Lance, I swear to god—”

“It’s a smiley face, dumbass.” Lance laughed and squeezed tighter onto the hands he’d pressed into the carpet.

“A smiley face?” Keith groaned. “What are you, five?”

“I thought it was fitting,” said Lance, “since, y’know, you never smile, so I figured if I can put one on your face, I should.”

“I smile!” protested Keith.

“Not enough!” countered Lance. “And that’s a total shame, because you have a great smile.”

“What?”

“Aww, are you blushing?”

“No!”

True to Lance’s suspicions, Keith absolutely could flip Lance, which was proven when he actually did it.

“Okay, if you’re drawing on my face, then I’m drawing on yours, too,” said Keith.

“What?!” When Lance struggled under Keith’s hold, it was much more sincere. “No, you can’t do that! It doesn’t come off as easy on me!”

“So use some of that fantastic makeup you told me about,” said Keith, reaching for a red marker. “It definitely worked wonders with your bruise. I think it can handle a little faded marker.”

“That stuff’s expensive, Keith! Come on!”

Keith stuck his tongue out and followed it up by uncapping the marker with his teeth like Lance himself had before, his other hand occupied by pinning both of Lance’s wrists to the floor, which Lance struggled very hard not to think about for too long. Especially not while Keith was straddling his waist. Nope. Definitely not a good idea.

The cold marker hit his face like snow.

“If you draw a penis, Keith, I’m gonna—”
“M not,” managed Keith, grinning around the red marker cap in his mouth.

“Why the hell are you taking so long? What are you drawing?”

Keith laughed and finished with a few dots. He was still grinning when he let go of Lance’s wrists and recapped the marker. “There. Now you have Red on your face.”

“...Did you just draw red lines, or...?”

“Red the Lion, dumbass.”

“Don’t call me a dumbass!”

“You called me one first! I think I have the right!”

“You have the right to keep still while I draw on your face some more!”

“No way!”

From that point on, it turned into an all-out war. By the time an hour had passed, Keith was covered in blue doodles and Lance in red.

“You look ridiculous,” sneered Keith, wrinkling his nose, which caused a few “freckles” Lance had drawn to pool together.

“You’re one to talk,” teased Lance back, feeling a grin stretch his lips.

“Yeah, well, I can just wipe mine off at any time,” said Keith. “You’re stuck like that.”

“Well, why don’t you wipe it off, then?” accused Lance.

“Because that’s not fair to you,” said Keith, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“Then you’re stuck like that, too!” said Lance, poking Keith in the chest.


“Oh, my god, you’re a secret nerd.” Lance laughed, burying half of his face in one hand. “Why are all my friends secret nerds?”

“Is that a bad thing?” asked Keith, his smile shrinking.

“What? No.” Lance laughed again, a little more nervously this time. “Just, I didn’t expect it. You’ve got this whole... ’I’m cooler than you’ vibe going on. I would never have expected a joke with the word ‘physics’ in it. Or any kind of joke from you, really.”

“Well...” Keith leaned back on his hands, each finger now marked by a blue “ring” near the knuckle. “Maybe that’s just because you don’t know me that well yet. Maybe you should learn more about me before you make any assumptions.”

“I definitely plan to,” said Lance, the words slipping out before he had a chance to think about what he was saying or how embarrassing it was.

He was glad he didn’t realize it until the words were already out, however, because the sweet, sincere smile he got in return made every ounce of embarrassment worth it.
And Lance was really glad he hadn’t used up any self-control on keeping those words in. He needed absolutely every ounce of self-control he had in him.

Because looking at Keith’s face covered in little blue marks and symbols, smiling like he’d never had a reason in the world to be upset, and not kissing it was the hardest thing Lance had ever done.

And that realization scared him more than any ghost ever could.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, kind of a longer chapter this time around. Lots of fluff. Like. So much. [I got really upset last night and wound up writing, like, 3000 words more than I meant to because I was freaking out and needed something. So I drowned myself in writing.]
Lance was a polite boy. He was a good friend, and he prided himself on that. He was also acutely aware of when things were his problem, not someone else’s. As such, he didn’t freak out in Keith’s face just because Keith was the reason behind the fact that his heart was going a million beats per minute.

“Oh, you know that the markers were for the coloring books, right? Not your face?”

Hunk, however, was not directly involved, and therefore was fair game.

“Buddy, I need your help.” Lance gripped the railing of the stairs and leaned over the edge, eyes wide.

“Uh…” Hunk’s eyes darted out toward the front door and back, as if he considered making a break for it. “With what?”

Lance rushed down the rest of the stairs and gripped Hunk’s upper arms, yanking him close so he could whisper without alerting a certain someone upstairs. “Have you ever been, like, weirdly super attracted to someone you just met? Like, not even someone who’s sweet or something. Someone you don’t even get along with. But then they laugh or they smile or something and your heart is like, ‘Oh, shit, I want that.’ Except you don’t. You don’t want that. That’s a jerk.”

“Uh…” Hunk carefully reached for Lance’s arms, tugging them down from his own. “No. I haven’t. Jerks aren’t really my type.”

“They’re not mine, either!” whined Lance. “That’s the problem!”

“Okay, uh…” Hunk patted Lance’s arm and stepped back. “Why don’t you grab some spaghetti and we’ll talk about this over dinner. Sound good?”

“Yeah, I…” Lance groaned and ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah. Sounds good.”

Once Lance and Hunk had dropped themselves onto the couch in the foyer—because no one ever used the dining room table—Lance started by silently picking at his food for several seconds, moving pieces of onion around, and absolutely not talking at all whatsoever.

“…So are we gonna actually talk about what we’re supposed to be talking about, or…?”

Lance sighed and gave Hunk a look.

“Hey.” Hunk raised a hand in surrender. “I’m not the one who started this conversation.”

“I know,” mumbled Lance. “It’s just… If you knew the whole situation, like, you’d understand why I can’t go into much detail. So don’t make me go into much detail, okay?”

“Got it,” said Hunk. “Minimal information means minimal advice, though. You know that, right?”

“Yeah…” Lance sighed and leaned back. “But this has to stay between us anyway, got it? Pidge would just make fun of me—which would just make me stress out about it more—and Shiro would put on the dad face and just tell me to go for it, which wouldn’t work because of...reasons.”
“I’m not telling anyone, Lance,” said Hunk. “Not unless I get, like, genuinely really worried about your health or something. As long as it’s not something that’s gonna get you killed or anything like that, then this is staying between us.”

Lance frowned at Hunk for a moment, trying to determine whether it would be a good idea after all, but, in the end…

“Okay, so this guy—”

“Hah, I knew it was a guy.” Hunk leaned back, twirling a few strands of spaghetti around his fork.

Lance whipped his head around, brow knitted. “What do you mean you knew it was a guy?”

“Because you never have problems with girls,” said Hunk. “You always just go right up to them, and if you get rejected, you forget about it. You always get hangups when it comes to guys, though.”

Lance sighed. “Fine, if you say so, but that’s not the point of this conversation.” He began chopping up his spaghetti with the side of his fork—something he knew Hunk hated. “So this guy, ever since I met him, he’s been, like, a total jackass. And I don’t even know him that well, but it’s like every time I talk to him, he’s been like ‘Lance—’” Lance’s voice for Keith was extremely nasally and not really anything like Keith at all, and he knew it, but he didn’t care. “—stop being stupid.’ ‘Lance, you need to be more careful.’ ‘Lance, you’re doing it wrong.’”

“Uh, buddy?” Hunk raised an eyebrow. “That sounds less like being a jackass and more like he’s just worried about you hurting yourself or something. Is this, like, a guy you work with? Oh, god, it’s not Rolo, is it? You know I hate—”

“It’s not Rolo!” Lance nearly shouted, exasperated. Hunk had already expressed his dislike for Lance’s manager a great deal more than once, which was coincidentally the exact amount of times they’d met. Once. “I told you I just met this guy. Rolo doesn’t fall into that category.”

“Right, sorry.” Hunk frowned. “Go on?”

“Point is, he’s a jerk,” said Lance. “And, like, I’ve always known he was a handsome jerk? Like, I noticed that the second I met him. I can appreciate a guy’s face without liking what’s underneath it. I can separate stuff like that. Like, Mel Gibson’s an asshole of the worst kind. Does that mean I can’t appreciate his singing voice in Pocahontas? No—”

“Getting off track, Lance.”

“Right.” Lance took a deep breath. “The point is… This is a good-looking guy we’re talking about here. And he’s good at what he does. And I, like, admire him in that way. And we’re, you know, capable of talking without fighting, just not that often.”

Hunk raised a skeptical eyebrow.

Lance frowned. “What?”

“So what I’m getting from this is that you like this guy in basically every way,” said Hunk, “except that you fight with him…over him being worried that you could hurt yourself.”

“He’s not worried,” snapped Lance. “He’s just an asshole.”

“He sounds worried to me,” said Hunk. “That sounds like the exact same kind of stuff you and Shiro fight over when you’re about to do something stupid, and Shiro definitely worries when he argues
with you when you do something like...avoiding schoolwork to play video games or, like...spitting off the side of a cliff that looks like it could crumble any second.”

“It’s nothing like that,” grumbled Lance, frowning at the spaghetti he still hadn’t really tasted. “K— This guy doesn’t, like, scold like Shiro does. He just yells.”

“Maybe he’s yelling because he’s that scared,” said Hunk.

“He’s—” Lance frowned, his hand stopping mid-gesture. Now that he thought about it, Keith only ever properly yelled when Lance nearly died. Like when that Galra choked the crap out of him, or in that recording from when Lance and Pidge had gone into the basement.

“...Nope, nuh-uh, no way.” Lance shook his head. “I refuse to believe that. He’s just an asshole. And any reasons behind him being an asshole don’t matter. Point is, I don’t like him.”

“You don’t like him,” deadpanned Hunk. “Definitely?”

“Definitely,” said Lance firmly, finally going in for a bite of his spaghetti.

“So why are we having this conversation?”

Lance’s fork froze halfway to his mouth. A clump of hamburger meat tumbled off the side.

He sighed and lowered his fork. “...So he smiled today.”

“And you’ve never seen him smile before?” asked Hunk, inclining his head.

“No, it’s not like that,” mumbled Lance, pushing his chopped-up pasta around. “He just… I dunno, it was different, I guess? A different smile. And he smiled right at me. And... I dunno, my heart did a thing.”

“A thing.”

“Yes, Hunk, a thing.”

“You’re gonna have to be more specific than that,” said Hunk, frowning.

Lance sighed. “It, like… I dunno.” He dropped his fork completely to run his hands through his hair, balancing his plate on his knees. “It felt like my whole chest was gonna inflate until it exploded or something, like sparks were zigzagging all over inside me, even in my hands. Like, it even felt like flowers were gonna grow out of my knuckles or something. And I swear to god, I just wanted to grab him by the cheeks and pull him in for a kiss, which is not something that’s okay to do with someone you can’t stand.”

“Uh-huh…” Hunk raised an eyebrow, going in for another bite of the meal the he’d actually half-finished by now. He held Lance’s gaze for a long, frustrating moment while he slurped up a long string of noodles. “Wha’ were you guys talkin’ abou’ before he smiled?” Hunk talking while he ate was rare. He normally respected food better than that. The fact that he was talking with his mouth full was a sure sign that he was fully invested in what he was doing.

“I… Not much?” admitted Lance. “We were just sort of… I dunno, something kind of intense came up by accident, and he got extra pissed. Not, like, yelling-pissed, but quiet-pissed, and that’s the worst. So I was like, ‘Hey, I’m gonna try to get his mind off of that, because him being a jerk doesn’t mean I have to be,’ and I...guess it worked.”
“Okay, I’m gonna point out two things,” said Hunk. “First off, the whole crazy zigzag sparks thing? Totally happened to me when Shay showed up at the door and we started talking.”

“Don’t compare me and this guy with you and Shay,” whined Lance.

“Second thing,” said Hunk, ignoring Lance’s comment entirely. “You went through something kind of traumatic recently. No offense, but I think your emotions aren’t exactly the most trustworthy things in the world right now.”

Lance frowned. Not skeptical, just interested. This sounded like something he could actually get behind.

“So, like, maybe a part of you is so ready for something good to happen that you really want a serious crush,” said Hunk. “But just because this guy is there and available, with no real feelings behind it. It’s totally just the trauma talking.”

“That’s gotta be it,” insisted Lance.

“Or,” said Hunk, raising his hand to stop Lance from going any farther down this train of thought. “...Or, you totally like this guy, he’s not as big of a jerk as you’re making him out to be, and you trying to think of him as a jerk is just you being in denial about your feelings.”

Lance’s brow furrowed. “So you’re basically saying that either I think I like him when I really don’t, or I think I don’t like him when I really do.”

“Yep,” said Hunk.

Lance pursed his lips for a long moment. “...You know that makes no sense, right?”

“Love rarely does,” said Hunk, shrugging. “Anyway, point is, don’t make up your mind just yet. Don’t decide whether you like him or not. Just take, like, a month or two to think about it.”

“A month?” Lance’s jaw dropped. “I’m supposed to wait a month before this makes sense?”

“That’s being lenient, actually,” said Hunk. “Considering it’s you, I’d say actually three months. Minimum. But a month is a good start.”

Lance groaned, swamped by the sudden desire to shove his entire head into his spaghetti rather than eat it. But Hunk would probably actually kill him for that.

“So mull it over for a month, and if you’ve decided that you really, absolutely like him by then, then you can ask him out.”

“Oh, no,” said Lance, sitting up straight. “No way am I ever asking him out, ever, even if I do like him. He’s so off-limits for so many reasons.”

Hunk sighed, exasperated. “Why are you like this?”

Lance narrowed his eyes. “Like what?”

“You’re so worried about ‘maybe’ liking this guy, and you’re not even going to ask him out if you decide you do?” pressed Hunk. “What’s the point of getting so worked up if it doesn’t change anything? What even makes him off-limits?”

“I can’t talk about that,” said Lance. “I told you, I can’t go into detail.”
“What, is he a spy or something?” Hunk’s expression dropped. “Wait. Wait, he’s not actually a spy, right? Like, you didn’t accidentally find out that someone’s a spy and then—”

Lance reached out and put a finger to Hunk’s lips. “If he was a spy, then I wouldn’t be able to tell you, would I? So what’s the point of asking?” He dropped his hand.

Hunk’s eyes widened. “You basically just confirmed that he’s a spy.”

“He could be a spy,” said Lance, raising a hand to his chin, “or I could just be protecting any possible spies I could meet in the future.”

“Clever,” said Hunk, and though he seemed mostly satisfied with that answer, his eyes darted suspiciously between his plate and Lance’s face for the rest of their shared meal.

Keith turned his face in the mirror, inspecting the right side, the left, and the right again.

He eyed the dots that Lance had planted across his nose and cheeks like handmade freckles.

He inspected the drawn-on “monocle” that Lance had imprinted over his left eye, tracing the edge of the circle with his gaze.

He touched his own skin just under the smiley face Lance had drawn on his cheek, careful not to actually touch the drawing itself and smear the ink.

He looked at his own arms in the mirror, patterned with hearts and stars and flowers and colored-in exclamation points and everything else Lance could think of, including Lance’s own name in one instance.

Some of the drawings on Keith’s arms had gotten smeared past the point where they were recognizable, lost to the struggle for marker dominance, and they had been left behind as odd blue blurs, but, for whatever reason, Keith loved those as well.

It was stunning, seeing himself in the mirror covered in harmless little marks and doodles and knowing that another person, a person who held no ill will toward him, had left those marks. Lance had left those marks, little blue shapes, like he’d tattooed Keith with his own quintessence. And sure, those shapes could be wiped off easily, but...they felt like they reached deeper than the skin.

“What do you think?” Keith turned toward Red, sending her a smile. “Do you think I look good in blue?”

Red lifted her head from her paws and gave Keith a pointed look, her tail thwapping once against the floor.

“I already told you, it’s not that.” Keith set his hands at his hips and looked toward the window, toward the barest glint of sunlight that still peeked over the horizon. His thumbs worked their way into his pockets. “It’s just...good having him around, you know? He’s fun, and he’s... I mean, he can be nice. When he’s not complaining about something. He cares, you know? About...everyone, and...” His gaze dropped to the floor. “I’m glad he didn’t stay scared. That’s all. I wish we were closer, but...”
Red lowered her chin back onto her front paws and growled passively.

Keith scoffed and he turned his gaze back to his Lion. “Friends. I meant friends.”

Red’s ear flicked, and if Keith didn’t know better, he would have assumed that she had raised an eyebrow at him.

Keith really did raise his eyebrow. “No, we’re not. I mean, I’d like to be, but he’s clearly…” He shuffled nervously, crossing his arms and glaring at his feet. “He’s nice, but he doesn’t trust me. And I don’t blame him. If I hadn’t been so young when I first met Alfor, I probably wouldn’t have trusted him, either. You might not think it’s weird, Red, but…it is. Meeting someone and knowing that they aren’t a person, but that they used to be… People tell stories about the dead. Horror stories. Lance has plenty of reason not to trust me. And I don’t think he ever fully will.” He lifted his head and looked at Red. “And that’s fine. What we’ve got now, it… It’s good. It doesn’t need to be more than this. He—”

The door creaked from being Keith and he turned around so quickly that he nearly stumbled.

Lance was in the doorway, staring at him, eyebrow raised.

*God, he didn’t hear that, did he?*

“Hey,” said Lance, unusually quiet. “You, uh, talkin’ to Red?”

“Yes,” said Keith cautiously.

“Oh.” Lance’s face was unreadable. “Cool. Cool.” He slipped the rest of the way inside and closed the door behind himself. “What’re you guys talking about?”

“Just…” Keith shifted his weight to his opposite foot. “…my day. Like usual.”

“Uh-huh…” Lance shifted his own weight, back and forth and back again. “So, you wanna…talk to *me*?”

“About what?” asked Keith, warier than ever.

“You know…” Lance cleared his throat. “…Paladin…stuff?”

Keith sighed. Way for Lance to prove his point. Of course he wanted to know more. Keith would definitely want to know more if he didn’t trust what was going on. “Like what?”

“I dunno.” Lance rubbed the back of his head. “…Paladin…stuff?”

Keith sighed. Way for Lance to prove his point. Of course he wanted to know more. Keith would definitely want to know more if he didn’t trust what was going on. “Like what?”

“I dunno.” Lance rubbed the back of his head. “Like… You’re a ghost, right? So—”

“If you’re about to ask me what happened—”

“I’m not!” squawked Lance, visibly offended, face turning red. “Dude, I’m not gonna do that! You just said that you didn’t want to talk about it, like, two hours ago! I’m not just gonna dismiss that! I’m not that big of a douche! I was just going to ask if you’re, like, stuck in the house or something!”

Keith almost wanted to feel guilty, and he might have, if not the fact that he wouldn’t have been surprised if Lance had, in fact, been that big of a douche. “Oh.” Keith shrugged his shoulders and leaned against the foot of Lance’s bed, supporting himself by pressing his hands into the mattress. “I guess I can talk about that.”

“So is there, like, a wall, or…?”
Keith shook his head. “I’m not restricted to the house, technically,” he explained. “Just to the ground the house is on.”

“What’s the difference?” asked Lance, moving closer to the bed and climbing on top of it so that he and Keith were nearly shoulder-to-shoulder.

Red sent Keith a pointed look, one that seemed to feel like Red’s way of saying, “That looks like trust to me.”

Keith sent her a short glare back before turning his attention back to Lance. “If the house wasn’t here, I’d still be able to walk around on the ground that it’s on. It has nothing to do with the house. The house being here is just a coincidence.”

Lance slowly raised an eyebrow. “So...was this house built on some ancient burial ground, or...?”

“What?” Keith frowned incredulously. “No. It’s just where the lines between this world and the next are...blurred. It’s where I can stay and Galra can appear.”

“Okay...” said Lance, grudgingly accepting. “So why is it like that?”

“I...” Keith pushed himself onto the bed next to Lance. “I actually don’t know. I tried to talk to Alfor about it once, but...he wouldn’t tell me. I...think it has something to do with his death. He didn’t like to talk about that subject any more than I do.”

“So...” Lance frowned thoughtfully, just for a moment, then raised his eyebrows. “So does that mean you can go outside? Or are there parts of the house you can’t get into?”

“The house is in the middle of the boundaries,” explained Keith. “The entire house fits inside. There’s nowhere in the house I can’t go.”

“So how far outside of the house can you go?” asked Lance, kicking his feet absently against the mattress.

“Do you want to see?”

Lance cocked an eyebrow, but he nodded, still visibly uncertain.

“We don’t have to,” mumbled Keith, staring down at his knees. “If you don’t want to go outside, then I guess I can give you an idea of where the border is, but—”

“No.” Lance hopped off of the bed and offered his hand, still covered in rose doodles and swirls and eye-shapes. “Show me. I want to see.”

As Keith tentatively took his hand, Red’s scolding tone rang through his head again.

*That looks like trust to me.*

Lance wondered what it looked like from the point of view of someone who couldn’t see Keith.

Where did Keith’s invisibility end and where did it begin?
Did it seem like Lance just had his hand stretched out in front of himself? Could they see indentations and creases where Keith affected the skin? Did the invisibility go ‘all the way through’ to the point where Lance looked like he was missing part of his hand? How did Keith’s invisibility work, anyway? Was he really invisible to anyone but Lance, or was it just because Lance was the only one who knew how to look? Was it like the perception filters from Doctor Who or the Stone Mask from Zelda? Or was Keith fully invisible even to Lance, and his physical appearance technically a hallucination that Lance’s brain had cooked up to show Lance what Lance had known to be true for a while?

Truth be told, Lance still wasn’t even fully sure what had changed that first night he’d come back. Was it his grandmother’s death that made him more in tune with death? Or was there something else going on?

Somewhere, way in the back of his mind, Lance was aware of what he was doing. He was trying to distract himself. Distract himself from the fact that he was still holding onto Keith’s hand, that Keith’s hips and legs and back muscles were all curving and flexing and stretching… And Lance knew that Hunk was right, that there was no real way of telling whether his attraction was legitimate or whether he was just clinging to Keith because he was lonely and hurting and Keith just happened to show up exactly when Lance needed someone most.

The fact that Keith kept saving his life was probably messing with Lance’s head, too. Probably some kind of Pavlovian thing happening there. Keith felt...safe and...warm and…

*What we’ve got now is good. It doesn’t need to be more than this.*

...and apparently had no interest in closing the emotional gap between them.

Like, sure. Okay. They were friends...or so Lance thought. Even if Keith was a little bit of a jerk sometimes, he was still...pretty cool. And Lance might have liked the idea of being closer friends, even if anything else was off the table.

But Keith apparently didn’t like the idea of being closer, which...really sucked, honestly. And there was a huge part of Lance that wanted to fight about it, to demand to know what was wrong with him, why Keith didn’t think he was good enough, why they couldn’t be *more than this*.

But there was also a part of Lance that never wanted Keith to know that it bothered him, and that part, for the moment, was stronger.

The glass door that led from the kitchen to outside slid open and the soft scrape it made shook Lance from his thoughts.

And if that hadn’t done the trick, Keith dropping his hand certainly would have.

When they reached the end of the back porch—if that little slab of concrete could be called a porch —Keith immediately lowered himself to the ground and began to shuffle awkwardly across the lawn, parting grass with every step he took, his fingers parting blades of green that cut up and into his black, leather gloves.

“What are you—?”

“Shh.”

“Fine, geez.” Lance crossed his arms, but his eyes never strayed from Keith’s odd movements, not once.
Which was why he didn’t miss the way the grass stopped parting.

“What the…?” Lance leaned forward, narrowing his eyes at the lawn, as if there was any doubt that he was seeing what he was seeing.

“Come here,” said Keith without bothering to turn his head.

Suspiciously, Lance crept closer, and he crouched by where Keith had perched on his heels.

“Watch closely,” said Keith, his gaze never once lifting from his own hand.

Lance just barely resisted the urge to keep staring at Keith’s eyes—more intense than ever—and turned his full attention to Keith’s hand instead.

He watched as Keith slowly pushed his hand into the dirt. He didn’t dig, he wasn’t uprooting grass, he was simply…going through the world, like it wasn’t there at all. His fingernails disappeared into the earth. Knuckle after knuckle vanished into the grass and the dirt. The topsoil reached his wrist.

And then he pulled back, apparently satisfied, and finally tore his eyes away from his own hand, looking to Lance, waiting for his reaction.

Lance…wasn’t even sure how to react. “…So what happens if you put more than just your hand in?” he asked, at a loss for something more meaningful, something that applied to the desperate, almost scared way that Keith looked at him.

“Not a lot,” said Keith, proving his point by shakily sitting down and cautiously letting his legs dangle over the edge, like he was just dipping his feet into a pool or a lake rather than into empty space. “But I can tell you what would probably happen if my whole body fell through.”

“Yeah?” Lance lowered himself to the ground, letting his own legs stretch out over the surface that Keith couldn’t touch, hoping that it wasn’t insensitive for him to do so. “What?”

“Well, gravity still applies, but air resistance doesn’t,” said Keith, “so I’d be drawn to the center of the earth at a little less than ten meters per second squared. I’d pass through seven-thousand, nine-hundred seventeen and a half miles of earth, passing the core at the three-thousand, nine-hundred, fifty-nine mile point at my highest speed, start to slow down a little bit as Earth’s center of gravity starts to pull me back the opposite direction, come out through the other side of the world like an old cartoon, reach equilibrium for an instant, then start to fall back the other way until I wound up at the same spot I fell in at, and hopefully I’d be able to catch the part of ground I can touch and pull myself back up before I fell in again.”

His eyes narrowed darkly. “All of that would take a little less than an hour and a half. But that’s providing it happens the way I expect it to. Without any kind of resistance and only the pull of gravity to direct me, I should travel straight down and straight back, but if I’m wrong and it’s not just the direction of gravity that I should worry about but the pressure along with it, then I might not survive passing through the Earth’s core. I might fall down and not come back up.” He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply through his nose, brow knitted. “And even if I survive that, reaching the surface might be a problem on its own. I might be caught off-guard when I do reach the surface and I won’t be able to catch myself, or I might fall too far from the edge for me to reach it, and I’d fall again, and if the sun rises before I can get back—”

“Keith.” Lance reached out and grabbed Keith’s knee.

Keith lifted his head and whipped it around so quickly that his long hair lifted off of his shoulders like a girl twirling her skirt. The look in his eyes almost suggested that he forgot Lance was there at
“You’re freaking out again,” said Lance gently, squeezing the knee under his hand. “There’s nothing to worry about. You’re not about to survive twenty-ish years of fighting the Galra only to lose to gravity. I’ve got more faith in your athleticism than that.”

Keith eyed Lance warily. “You do, huh?”

“I do,” confirmed Lance, patting Keith’s knee before pulling his hand back entirely. “Besides, when would you even fall? Do the Galra even come out here?”

“No,” said Keith, looking down at his lap. Lance caught the look in his eye, and he wondered, briefly, whether Keith saw the ground beneath him, or whether he saw an endless void. “The more direct sunlight a place gets, the harder it is for them to travel through, even if it’s in shadow at the moment. That’s why the basement is so dangerous. The sun never reaches down there.” His frown hardened. “Besides, they won’t appear in a room without people, and none of you are ever outside much, not in the places where they can get to you.”

“Why don’t they?” asked Lance.

Keith took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment before looking back at Lance. “You know how I’ve been trying to predict where the Galra are going to be before they get there?”

Lance nodded cautiously.

“Well…” Keith turned his eyes away, toward the tiny sliver of open sky that wasn’t blocked from view by the awning above them or the tall trees from the other side of the yard. “They can do that. They can sense a person’s quintessence, and they appear in the closest shadow to that person. But a shadow that’s not in the same room might as well be a shadow on the other side of the world for as far as they can tell. There has to be an open route from the shadow to the person the Galra is after. Or…that’s how I understand it.” Keith sighed quietly. “I probably should have asked Alfor more follow-up questions while I had the chance. But I was less concerned about the Galra themselves and more interested in how I could put a stop to them. It didn’t really matter to me how they got here. Just that they do get here, and that I can get rid of them.”

“With that,” said Lance, pointing to Keith’s hip.

“Hm? Oh.” Keith reached for the red-and-white weapon at his belt and held it at arm’s length. A flash of light illuminated the entire back yard, and when it faded, the weapon had transformed from what could have originally passed as a game controller to a very real sword.

“What is that thing, anyway?” asked Lance. “I mean, I’ve seen you use it, but…”

“It’s called a Bayard,” explained Keith. “It...sort of comes as a package deal with a Lion, and it changes shape depending on who uses it. Well, mostly. Apparently, if you’re some kind of Bayard savant, you can make it change shape according to your needs, but that’s really rare. Alfor couldn’t even do it. His was this huge longbow that was about as big as he was. I got this.”

Lance smirked and leaned back on his hands. “I bet I’d get something really cool, like a laser gun or something.” He sent Keith a smile in the hopes that he’d get one back. Or a laugh. Or something.

Keith definitely didn’t laugh.

He looked at Lance, brow knitted, a concerned frown pressing lines into his forehead.
“I hope you never find out.”

The time was right.

The sun was at the peak of its arc, minimizing shadows so that they were almost negligible.

Coran and Allura were far away, far from the castle, far where the ceremony would take place, so neither of them would be harmed.

Alfor and his men were all strong and healthy, armed to the teeth, and ready for anything that could come their way.

Each altar was evenly spaced, black stones pointed south, red pointed east-southeast, green pointed northeast, yellow pointed northwest, and blue facing west-southwest.

Alfor stood at the black stones, each of his men at their own altars, backs toward the center, save for a single member of their number who stood equidistance from each of them, leading the ceremony.

Each of them knew what was at stake.

Each of them knew what they needed to do.

Each of them knew the cost.

There would be no better time.

“The order is yours to make,” called Alfor, not so much as turning his head toward the center. He knew the one he spoke to could hear him. “This is your ceremony to lead. On your word, we will begin.

“Whenever you’re ready, Voltron.”

Chapter End Notes

I know, not much happened. Just some pining Lance and some lore. But, hey, both are necessary.

Right away, Elany drew some fanart and I'm screaming just a bit. Look. Look at it. It's from Shiro's story in chapter 8. I'm so happy, Paladins. I'm so happy. Look at his li'il rainbow fanny pack. He's so '90s. I love him.

Second, I'm still at @YouAreInAComa on Twitter if you guys need me. I'm a social sort of person, so if you talk to me, I'll honestly probably answer. Unless, like, you're rude or I'm not sure what to say or something.

Third... Elany, Mugenjo, and KaSaPe. Sven/Svoon, too. And...NightPanda? [And
Lance_WhyUAlwaysLion, as always. That goes without saying at this point, I think.
You guys are, like, completely awesome. You guys make me feel so damn welcome in
the Voltron fandom? I haven't felt like this, like, at home with other fans of a series since
Kingdom Hearts. I don't even know what to say. You guys are just...so great.
Hell, all of you who comment--especially regular commenters like Suzzz and
GladiatorsKneecaps and countingpaperstars and bean and ismp453 and cuppa and
Slumberdore and strawberry_milk_forever and Vilsky and rubunne and pechat and
gengars and...so many people that I'd be here all day if I named you all--make me feel so
happy and welcome. Thank you. Each and every one of you. Even if I didn't name you
here. Just...thanks. You guys are all so great. It means so much.
The castle had been destroyed for a reason. It cast too many shadows. Alfor should never have let another home be built in its place.

But then, they’d showed themselves. Those settlers. They drilled into the ground and erected walls and...Alfor was curious.

*Humans.* That was what they called themselves now. Of course, they were quite a bit different now. When Alfor had first become a Paladin, they had barely mastered tools. But they were still clearly the same creatures. And, yes, several of them had passed by Alfor’s cursed territory, but either they could sense what it was or they had managed to find and understand old Altean documents somehow, and they gave it a wide berth.

But these humans were different. They were ignorant to the Galra, and willfully so. Even when their own kind who knew better tried to tell them, they ignored the words of the wiser ones.

And Alfor… He let them.

He knew he shouldn’t have, but… These humans. They had quintessence.

And with Alteans all but extinct, the chances of finding an Altean with blue quintessence that was compatible with the Blue Lion, unlike Coran, who had been rejected outright for reasons Alfor didn’t even understand, was nigh impossible.

And it was that knowledge that kept Alfor looking.

He allowed them to build their settlement, knowing full well that it would allow the Galra to return to Earth, just in the hopes that perhaps one of the humans who would live in that settlement would one day become the Blue Paladin.

And the strangest thing happened over the generations.

Curiosity toward the humans gave way to love.

Alfor stopped fighting solely to keep the Galra from wandering off the property and started fighting to keep the inhabitants of the property happy and healthy.

No two of the humans were the same. There were humans with yellow quintessence that worked to the point of breaking themselves for the benefit of their children, and there were humans with the same yellow quintessence that had no children and desired no children but hid refugees from corrupt eyes of unjust authority. There were humans with red quintessence that broke laws and broke bones just for the thrill of it, and there were humans with red quintessence that fell in love with other humans they weren’t allowed to love by ridiculous human laws and loved with all the passion and fearlessness in their being. There were humans with green quintessence that scammed and conned their way to success, and there were humans with green quintessence that worked their fingers to the bone and read by firelight until they found solutions to problems that had been attacking their entire species for centuries. There were those with black quintessence that worked their children too hard because they couldn’t tell the difference between their young and the armies they commanded, and there were those with black quintessence that led protests and fundraisers and gave everything they
had to those less fortunate than themselves.

Sometimes, those with black quintessence tore families from their homes and shoved them into camps where they had nothing and were nothing.

And sometimes, those with black quintessence found those same families after they were at last released and raised money for them and found them new homes, homes that had been demolished and rebuilt again and again over the centuries but still stood on the same level ground.

And Alfor got to see one of those blessed families as they wept and clung desperately to the leaders that gave them new hope, as they rushed around the inside of the house in a whirlwind of relief and excitement, as they found bittersweet happiness in knowing that they still had each other when they knew that other families were not so lucky.

He watched that family grow older, watched as older members died and younger members got married and had children of their own.

And he watched Hiromi and Akira Kogane come home from the hospital with a little bundle of red quintessence in their arms.

And not since Chulatt had Alfor seen quintessence so vividly red.

“You’re going to have your hands full with this one,” he told Hiromi one evening, unheard, from over her shoulder. “He’s going to be a troublemaker, I can see already.”

Little did Alfor know exactly how much trouble Keith would be.

“Have you asked Keith yet?”

Lance’s spoon straw stopped halfway between his snow cone and his mouth, and he raised an eyebrow. “Asked him w— Oh.”

Pidge slowly buried their head in their hands. “Lance… It was your idea to ask.”

“I know.” Lance sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “It’s just been… It’s been weird lately, okay?”

“Weird?” It was Pidge’s turn to raise an eyebrow. “Weird how?”

“Uh…” Lance turned faintly red. “You know.” He stabbed his blue raspberry-drenched ice, eyes narrowed. “Just… Every time I try to talk to him, something else happens. Like, some Galra will show up or… You know, just stuff.”

Pidge sighed. “Okay. I get it. Life or death crap kind of happens when you’re in a life-or-death situation, and questions like that get pushed to the wayside. I know. But…” They pushed their thumbs into the side of their paper cone, denting the lip. “Is there anything you have found out? Something that could be helpful?”

“Helpful for what?” asked Lance, frowning.

“Self-defense,” said Pidge casually.
Lance narrowed his eyes. Pidge was one of the best liars he’d ever known, if not the best. It was always impossible to tell whether there was something going on behind those round glasses, but there was always reason to suspect that there was. “Right…”

Still, if whatever Pidge was planning could wind up helping Keith…

“Keith can leave the house,” said Lance, “but only so far. After a certain point, it’s like the ground isn’t there to him anymore, and he just falls through.”

Pidge narrowed their eyes and stroked their chin thoughtfully. “Are the borders elliptical?”

“Like…continuous?”

“Like round, Lance.”

Lance shrugged. “He only showed me where it ended in the back yard.”

“If they are elliptical, then it stands to reason that the circumference is dependent on a radius from a central point,” said Pidge, expression hardened in deep contemplation. “And if that’s the case, then that central point…”

Lance shifted, waiting hopefully for an end to that sentence.

The ending never came.

“You can’t just end a sentence like that in the middle!”

Pidge flinched, startled, and turned their head to look Lance in the eye. “Shoot, sorry, I was thinking.” They sighed sharply. “I’ll need to give this a lot of thought. To figure out the where and the why. Unless you can figure out a way to ask Keith about that without being obvious about where the question came from.”

Lance frowned. Maybe he could come up with a way to ask Keith about Pidge without letting the Galra know, but he knew he didn’t trust himself enough to try. Still… “The where and the why of what?”

“Don’t you think it’s weird?” asked Pidge. “There are bitter, angry people all over the world. You’d think the Galra would appear frequently enough for people to know that they exist, right? I mean, they’re dangerous. People tend to notice things that are dangerous. Even if they’re not superstitious. You convinced me, Lance. Me. In only a few weeks. This is a real phenomenon that can be recorded and replicated. There’s a science to this. We shouldn’t have been the first ones to know about this. But we are. Which means it has to be localized.” Pidge’s cone was so squished that some of the lime-flavored syrup was dribbling over their fingers unchecked. “The only way that no better scientist has published a journal on this—and they haven’t, I’ve looked; even if they got laughed out of the academic community, the journal would still be there, and it’s not—is if no better scientist has found it. That would only make sense if the phenomenon was rare or localized. And it’s definitely not rare. Galra attacks happen on a daily basis. Which means that the Galra only appear at this point, maybe a few others, but even that’s a stretch.

“So that’s the question I have,” said Pidge, finally looking up from the hole they’d been glaring into their snow cone. “Well, the big one, at least. Why here? Out of all the places in the world that the Galra could show up, why this one house in the woods? But it’s not just the house. I get that now. It probably is within a certain radius around a specific point. But why that point? What makes that little piece of ground so special? I have to know.”
“I’ll tell you whatever I can find,” said Lance, “but if it’s just for the sake of, like, academic interest that you’re doing this, then I’m not putting any lives in danger for this information. Yours or Keith’s or anyone else’s.”

“Well, technically,” said Pidge, frowning, “Keith doesn’t have a life to put in danger. But I know what you mean. I won’t push you for it if it’s impossible. But it’s still important to get as much information on this as we can. The more we know what we’re dealing with, the better.”

“As long as the Galra don’t find out,” said Lance.

“Exactly,” said Pidge.

One after another, they came.

One after another, they fell.

For each Galra that was struck down, another one took its place.

It was never more than one at a time. That wasn’t the problem.

The problem was that they hadn’t stopped since sunrise.

Keith struck another Galra down.

One more immediately took its place.

It never ended.

And Keith was losing stamina fast.

The more time that passed, the less it felt like a fight for his survival and the more it felt like running a marathon.

No battle was too difficult, but it was endless. They just kept coming.

Every swing that Keith dealt to the Galra was less enthusiastic than the last, and he knew that his time was running short. It would only be a matter of time before he became too slow and even these weak, faceless Galra got the better of him.

He understood where the Galra had disappeared to the day before.

That sapient Galra, the lanky one, must have been preparing them for this. Lining them up in a queue.

Keith swung his Bayard.

He missed.

The Galra he’d been targeting evaded his attack faster than he could course-correct his swing, and she dipped behind him to throw him to the floor.

He tried to push himself up, but the weight of her foot on his back was enough to keep him pinned.
He was down. For good.

Another Galra appeared from the shadows at the end of the corridor, and Keith closed his eyes.

He wondered if he would see Alfor where he was going.

He wondered if anyone in the house would notice that he was gone.

He wondered how long it would take for the Galra to leave the house and take control of the city, the continent, the planet.

He wondered whether Lance would miss him.

And then something cut through Keith’s thoughts. Something that carved into his stream of consciousness like a knife.

“Well done.”

When Lance got home, he immediately sought out Keith, determined to ask the question that he told Pidge he would ask.

He sent Hunk a wave on his way upstairs and pushed open his bedroom door.

No sign of him there.

Weird.

Shrugging, Lance closed the door and began to search for Keith elsewhere.

No sign of him in the bathroom, the kitchen, the dining room, or the foyer. He wasn’t in the upstairs corridor or either of the bathrooms, and Lance wasn’t about to start digging through his friends’ rooms. The only part of the house that was left, as far as Lance knew, was...the basement.

The basement that Lance had been avoiding as much as he possibly could over the past few days. It gave him chills just to think about what had gone on down there. But it wasn’t as though Lance was planning on going through the door. He’d just...turn on the lights, briefly call down the stairs, and if he didn’t get an answer, he’d slam the door, run back to his room, and hide under his blankets.

Fortunately, however, that action wasn’t necessary, because Lance had found Keith.

Unfortunately...Shiro was there as well.

Which was a particularly upsetting problem because Keith looked hurt.

And Lance was kind of freaking out.


“Cleaning,” said Shiro simply, sweeping a microfiber cloth over the top of a picture frame. “Something that you might consider doing every once in a while.” He paused and looked over his
“Are you all right?”

“Yeah!” said Lance, not quite high-pitched enough to be called a screech, but just barely short of the mark. “Yeah, yeah, I’m cool. Just. Y’know. Lookin’ for a place to be alone for a minute?”

“You have your own room,” said Shiro suspiciously. “Why not try there?”

“I, uh…” Lance cleared his throat in a weak attempt to return his voice to an octave audible to humans. “I was just thinking, you know, end of a hallway, nothing around but a few pictures and a door and a light switch… It’s kinda zen, right?”

“…Sure,” said Shiro slowly, raising an eyebrow. “But Lance, if there’s something you want to talk about—”

“Nahhhhh,” said Lance, uncrossing his arms if only to shove his hands in his pockets, shoulders still raised. “It’s nothing like that. I just kinda need a second to take a deep breath and clear my head. I’ll be fine.”

Shiro leveled Lance with a stern, worried-looking stare.

Lance tried to hide the concern on his own face, tried not to look at the crumpled, unmoving spirit barely a yard away from his feet. It was almost impossible.

“If this is about your grandmother—”

“It’s not!” said Lance urgently. “I seriously just need a second.”

Shiro sighed. “All right. I’m done in here anyway.” He strode closer, ignorant to the heap of Red Paladin that he walked right past, close enough that the leg of his pants sent a few strands of Keith’s bangs airborne, and clapped a hand on Lance’s shoulder. “But if you need me—”

“I know where to find you,” said Lance, forcing a smile that he hoped was at least somewhat reassuring. “Thanks, Shiro.”

Shiro nodded, patted Lance’s shoulder a few more times, and turned the corner.

Lance waited until he was absolutely sure that Shiro was out of earshot before he rushed forward and fell to his knees at Keith’s side.

“Keith!” he whisper-screamed, carefully adjusting Keith’s shoulders until his back was flat against the floor. “Holy shit, are you okay?!”

Keith’s head rolled limply, and for one terrifying moment, Lance thought that Keith was unconscious. He began frantically wondering, *Is that normal? Is he really dying? Am I losing him?*

And then Keith groaned, and his eyes fluttered open, if just barely. A blue so deep it was almost purple peered briefly through thick, dark eyelashes before disappearing again by the pale rose gold of Keith’s eyelids. “Lance,” he groaned weakly. “What’re you doing here?”

“Oh, y’know,” hissed Lance, *freaking out mostly*? What the *hell* happened to you?*

“Galra,” rasped Keith. “Lots…and lots…of Galra.”

“Well, they’re gone now,” whispered Lance, marginally calmer. “You must have kicked their asses.”

Keith scoffed, sounding almost amused.
“So are you gonna be, like, okay?”

Keith gave a non-committal grunt. “Will be when Red gets here.”

Lance frowned, not satisfied with that answer, and leaned forward, sliding one arm under Keith’s shoulders and hooking the other under his knees.

“Lance—” protested Keith, sounding annoyed.

“Nope,” murmured Lance, pulling Keith close to his chest. He stood with a grunt, unsteadily at first, but eventually finding his balance after a few second of wobbling. “We’re doing this my way. You’ve helped enough, okay? My turn now.”

Either from weakness or submission, Keith didn’t protest, so Lance took that as his cue to carry out his rescue.

*Tch, rescue. As if Keith didn’t do the hard part already.*

Lance awkwardly poked his head through the archway separating the corridor from the foyer, and only after confirming that Shiro was nowhere to be found and that Hunk was occupied in the kitchen did Lance make his way to the staircase.

“Man, you are *light,*” he mumbled, taking the stairs one awkward step at a time, Keith hugged tight to his chest. “Either this is a ghost thing, or you’re seriously *scrawny* under that t-shirt. I was expecting, like, ninety percent lean muscle or something, not—”

An odd sound reached Lance’s ears, one that cut his teasing short.

*Was that…?*

The sound hit his ears again, and this time, Lance was sure of what it was, especially when it was accompanied by Keith trembling in his arms.

That was a sob.

“Come on,” whispered Lance, his smile trained on his lips. “I didn’t mean it like that, Keith. Your *scrawny* butt is—”

Another sob, this one louder, more violent than the one before, and Lance dropped his joke. Whether Keith was just in that much pain or whether something happened with the Galra, Lance wasn’t sure, but he could tell that any attempt to lighten the mood was bound to fail.

So, instead, he simply hugged Keith tighter to his chest and climbed the remainder of the steps in silence.

When Lance finally reached his bedroom—or, as he’d started to consider it, his and Keith’s shared bedroom—he pushed open the door and carried Keith carefully to the bed.

“Here,” he said softly, careful not to let his voice carry through his open door while he lowered Keith onto the bedspread. “It’s better than a hallway floor, right? I don’t know if you’d rather me stay up here with you or leave you alone, though, so—”

Keith answered by turning shakily away and curling into himself.

Lance’s breath caught in his throat.
That...probably shouldn’t have hurt him as much as it did.

“...Okay,” said Lance, trying and failing to veil how offended he was. The result sounded...cold. Angry. “I...guess I’ll leave you alone then.”

Keith didn’t answer. Not verbally, not nonverbally.

So Lance left his room. He closed the door behind himself, made his way down the stairs, grabbed a chair from the dining room, dragged it to the kitchen where Hunk was, dropped it just inside of the archway, and straddled the back of the chair, crossing his arms over the top.

“More boy trouble?” asked Hunk, not turning away from the dough he was rolling out.

Lance grunted ambiguously.

“Don’t want to talk about it?”

Another grunt.

“That’s cool,” said Hunk. “We can talk about, like, Disney movies or something. Like, ooh, I saw this thing online about Beauty and the Beast…”

---

“Well done.”

Goosebumps crawled up Keith’s spine.

“Now, both of you, hold him up.”

Keith’s eyes snapped open, and he was yanked back by four hands, two on his shoulders, two forcing his arms behind his back. He still held his Bayard, but without the use of his shaking, weary arms, his weapon was useless.

But even that wasn’t nearly as frightening as the knowledge that the lanky Galra from the day before had returned and was standing right in front of Keith’s face.

He lowered himself to one knee as casually as if he were crouching low to speak to a child. “How was your brief reprise?”

“Screw you,” spat Keith, struggling in vain to break free of the Galra behind him.

“It certainly seems you enjoyed yourself,” said the lanky Galra, brushing off Keith’s rudeness in favor of reaching for his face. His grip was firm, but not painful. Keith would have almost preferred the pain, given the choice. That would have made him feel like he’d simply lost a fight. This made him feel trapped. “These markings… Are they from Lance?”

Keith flinched.

It was one thing for the Galra to know that Lance existed. They could have sensed Lance’s quintessence.

But a name... That kind of information would have been something that no Galra could have found
out without hearing it with their own ears.

For once, Keith’s sharp tongue had no words.

“He’s left quite the etching on you, hasn’t he? And in more ways than one.” The Galra smirked and Keith’s blood ran cold. “But look.” The Galra, with his free hand, reached up and pushed against Keith’s face, rubbing roughly against his cheek.

And when the Galra pulled his hand away, there was a smear of blue mixed in with the purple on his palm.

“See here,” he said smugly. “It comes away from you as easily as powder.” He closed his hand into a fist, claws pressing into his own palm. “All things do, boy. It is part of who you are, and not only physiologically as a Paladin. This has been going on for a great deal longer than twenty years.”

“What are you getting at?” snapped Keith. “I know I wasn’t exactly the most popular kid in school before I died. That’s nothing new. Why bring it up? Do you think that’s going to break me down?”

The Galra’s smirk widened, growing darker and more sinister than ever. “But it wasn’t just at your school, was it?” he droned. “How much did your own parents know about you? How much time did you spend locked away in your room, talking to a man they would never see, telling him secrets that only he would ever know, secrets he carried with himself to the grave?”

“I had to be secretive,” snapped Keith. “I was trying to protect them. If you’re trying to make me feel bad about keeping them safe, then—”

“But the secrets you kept weren’t just about the Galra or the Paladins, were they?” pressed the Galra. “You kept secrets not to protect them, but to protect yourself, because you were afraid that they would discard you if they knew anything about you at all, and you had every reason in the world to believe those things, didn’t you?”

“What are you—” Keith’s shoulders tensed under the clawed hands that held him down. “How do you know—”

“Your parents said such terrible things, didn’t they?” hissed the lanky Galra, his eyes narrowing further for every inch his dark smile grew. “Of course, they never knew that what they said applied to you, but that didn’t change the fact that they were still saying those awful, terrible, hurtful things. They hated you, and they didn’t even know it. And every second you spent with them, every awkward outing, drove the two of them further and further away from you because you were afraid to speak, because every time you opened your mouth to voice a request for butter or salt, you half-expected something else to slip out instead. The truth.” The Galra’s hand on Keith’s jaw tightened, but Keith could hardly feel it. “Either in words or in body language. And parts of you wondered whether they might know already, whether they said all of those awful things knowing that they were talking about you, whether they were deliberately trying to shame you for something that was out of your control.”

“That doesn’t matter,” snapped Keith. “It doesn’t matter at all. They’re gone now.”

“They died having never known you,” said the Galra, undeterred. “They never truly mourned you. They only mourned their own identities as parents. You fell away from them, and they never missed you. And they never would have. You had one of two options to choose from. Either you would be forgotten, or you would be hated, because people are heartless and unfeeling and they lack understanding, and you’ve always known that.”
“That’s not—”

“And just as was the case with your parents, so too shall this be the case with Lance.”

“Shut up!” snapped Keith. “How would you know anything about—”

“You of all people should know that just because a person doesn’t speak doesn’t mean they don’t listen,” said the lanky Galra, undeterred. “Don’t fool yourself into thinking that you’re loved, Keith. Lance knows nothing about you, and if he did know, nothing in the world should give you the idea that he would be any different from your parents. You have another choice, Keith. To be hated, or to be forgotten. And we both know what you’ll choose, because you are exactly the same person you were nearly nineteen years ago when you threw your world away to save a man who didn’t want to be saved.”

The lanky Galra released Keith’s face and stepped away. Just as before, he retreated, disappearing into the shadows at the end of the hallway, taking the lesser Galra with him.

Keith tried to stand, tried to give chase, but the second he tried to take a step, his shaking legs gave beneath his weight, and he collapsed in a broken heap on the floor.

“Sendak.”

“Yes?”

“The seeds have been successfully planted.”

“Well done, Haxus. Now we need only wait for them to take root. Vrepit sa.”

“Vrepit sa.”

Chapter End Notes

LOOK ART

Look at this cute art of a scene from chapter 10 that Night drew.
And some more IiB-related Night art.
And a, uh...theory. Thanks, Elany. Oh, god.

You can still find me @YouAreInAComa on Twitter. I post daily word counts for those who want to see my progress and stuff. And occasionally unflattering selfies.

And unless something goes wrong, I'm still planning on going to ACA not this weekend but the following weekend, so if you, by some miracle, are going to that little con and you see someone with bold eyebrows and glasses that don't suit their cosplay following AshesNewMoon [cosplay guest] around, yeah, that's me, go bug me.

And, uh... Yeah, I think that's all I have to say. Hope you liked the chapter.
Vaguely, in the back of his mind, Keith registered that he heard Lance talking. Lance and Shiro.

But he didn’t want to listen.

He didn’t want any of this.

He didn’t want Lance to see him like this.

He didn’t want Lance around, *period*.

Because that Galra was right.

Because Lance was sweet and friendly and caring, but only because he didn’t know.

He didn’t know anything about Keith. Not really.

And if he did…

If he did, then Keith knew that Lance wouldn’t be so sweet.

He wouldn’t smile at Keith anymore.

No more of that chipper, playful smile that he wore when he teased Keith about his ‘droopy sleeves’.

No more of that sneaky grin half-formed around the cap of a marker.

No more of the warm laugh that did so much more to pin Keith to the floor than Lance’s legs over Keith’s waist or his hand around Keith’s wrists.

No more faint, summer freckles disappearing into the lines of wrinkled noses or secondhand-embarrassed chuckles barely contained behind sand-colored hands or light-hearted smirks accompanied by raised eyebrows.

Those were all reserved for a Keith that didn’t exist.

If Lance found out that that Keith didn’t exist, the smiles would stop immediately.

And if Keith distanced himself from Lance to keep the real Keith a secret, then the smiles would stop gradually.

That Galra was right.

That Galra was *right*.

And Keith hated him for that.

Vaguely, Keith registered that he was no longer on his side, that someone had rolled him onto his back, and that there was only one person who could have done that, who could have been whispering frantic gibberish over him. Slowly, warily, Keith opened his eyes just to confirm his suspicions.
“Lance,” he breathed, eyes closing again, his voice coming out much lower and raspier than intended. “What’re you doing here?”

Lance was speaking too quickly. Keith could barely hear him over the tired buzzing in his head. But he did understand at least one question, one he could answer.

“Galra,” Keith coughed, wincing involuntarily at the pain that clawed up his throat. “Lots…and lots...of Galra.”

“Well, they’re gone now,” whispered Lance, less rushed, more soothing. “You must have kicked their asses.”

Keith wanted to laugh. Kicked their asses… More like they kicked his until they got bored and left.

“So are you gonna be, like, okay?”

Keith pressed his eyes tighter shut, trying to ignore the way his traitorous eyes burned under the eyelids when he remembered that Lance wouldn’t be so concerned for much longer. “Will be when Red gets here,” he mumbled, throat tight with emotion.

Red probably knew Keith better than he knew himself, and at least she wasn’t bothered by anything that Keith was. Lion or not, Red was still Keith’s best friend. His only friend. The only one he could really trust.

A warm arm slipped under Keith’s back, lifting it from the dusty floor and pulling his entire upper body in toward a broad, lean chest.

Stop.

“Lance—” protested Keith, the words falling just short of begging.

“Nope,” crooned Lance, his voice soft and comforting, a sharp contrast to the terse word he chose. He reached under Keith’s legs, and in an instant, Keith was off the ground, held tight to Lance’s chest like he was something precious Lance never wanted to drop.

Don’t do this to me.

“We’re doing this my way,” murmured Lance, his mouth close enough to Keith’s forehead that Keith felt his bangs move. “You’ve helped enough, okay? My turn now.”

Keith clenched his jaw. As for his heart…that clenched all on its own.

He didn’t open his eyes. He wasn’t sure which part of the house they were in at any given moment. His only hint was the way that Lance walked differently when they reached the stairs.

But never once did he falter under Keith’s weight. He didn’t complain like he always did. He didn’t lay on the drama. There was no whining, no protesting… All Lance did was tease Keith about being light, but his heart wasn’t in it. Keith could tell easily that Lance was only trying to make it seem as though carrying him up a flight of stairs wasn’t a big deal.

But it was.

Keith knew he was heavier than Lance would let on. He knew it was hard to carry him up the stairs. He knew Lance was struggling. And he knew that Lance was dismissing the struggle because he was kind and because he cared.
Lance cared about the Keith that he thought he knew.

*It’s not real.*

But that Keith didn’t exist. That Keith was a shield, a lie.

*None of this matters. None of this would be happening if he knew.*

Keith felt his eyes burn with tears that would never fall. Despite his efforts to keep it pushed down, a sob tore itself out of Keith’s throat.

And Lance faltered. Keith could feel it. He could feel Lance’s weight shift differently. He heard that sob, and that just made everything worse.

*Stop worrying. Stop it. It’s not real, Lance.*

“Come on,” whispered Lance into Keith’s hair, layered heavily with kindness so warm that Keith could hear the sweet smile on his lips. “I didn’t mean it like that, Keith. Your scrawny butt is—”

Keith’s traitorous throat failed—miserably—to choke back another sob.

It was pathetic.

*He was pathetic.*

Lance said nothing. He just held Keith closer and continued his walk up the stairs.

Keith resisted the urge to grip onto Lance’s shirt and bury his face in Lance’s neck, but just barely.

None of it was real. None of it was really directed at him. None of those sweet smiles or kind words really belonged to Keith.

But...that didn’t stop Keith from wishing that they somehow did.

By the time Lance and Keith reached Lance’s bedroom, he’d managed to start successfully holding back sobs, to start packing his emotions deeper into himself like compacted tin cans in a recycling bin, to push it all down past the point where Lance could see.

Lance lowered Keith gently on top of his bed. Keith tried hard to ignore the steady hand that cradled the back of his head, carefully guiding it toward a pillow that smelled so much like the chest Keith had been cradled against just moments before.

“It’s better than a hallway floor, right?” asked Lance, his voice like thorns around Keith’s heart. “I don’t know if you’d rather me stay up here with you or leave you alone, though, so—”

Keith, after a great deal of struggling, managed to roll himself onto his side, his back turned to Lance.

*Go away.*

*Stop looking at me like that and just go away.*

“Okay,” said Lance, and those thorns around Keith’s heart seemed to turn to shards of ice. “I...guess I’ll leave you alone then.”

Lance didn’t leave immediately. For every second that he lingered, Keith felt those shards of ice sink deeper and deeper into his chest, cutting wider and wider until Lance, finally, left the room.
And only then did Keith allow himself to truly cry.

Keith was still crying when Red appeared.

He didn’t look at her. Didn’t respond to her mental nudges. But he felt the weight shift on the bed when heavy front paws pressed down on the top of the mattress behind him, felt the bounce when back paws plodded onto the bed one by one, and he felt a warm, furry back slide into place behind Keith’s own, sending relaxing rumbles into his spine along with much-needed healing.

After at least an hour—an hour of crying, an hour of clenched teeth and a firmly set jaw, an hour of trying so hard not to think about Lance or where he was or what he was doing—Keith finally rolled over and pulled Red to his chest, ready to open up to her.

He couldn’t find words. Those required more courage than he had. But he opened his mind to her. And she opened her mind right back to him, whispering non-verbal assurances that it wasn’t as bad as Keith seemed to think, that he was letting old worries get the better of him, that there was no reason not to trust Lance, that everything was going to be fine.

And Keith didn’t believe any of it.

But it was nice to have some of that pain dulled for the time-being.

After a time, Keith and Red climbed off of Lance’s bed, and they curled up together on the floor under the window.

Keith heard the door open, and he knew it was Lance—he didn’t need to look for his quintessence to tell that much—but he had no desire to lift his head, to emerge from the warmth of Red’s crimson fur, to face his pain head on.

And Lance didn’t ask him to. Judging by the sounds, Lance wandered around his room, turned off the lights, and crawled into his bed without a word.

Keith silently agreed with Lance’s decision.

Better to be forgotten than hated.

It was winter.

The sun had set early.

Akira had his son on the floor of their living room.

Young Keith had started crawling just a few days prior. They were still working on that. But it was going nicely so far.

It was far from the first time that Alfor had seen a human infant, but it still stunned him how... Altean humans had become. Like nature was trying to fill in the gap that Alteans left behind when they were all but destroyed. Humans developed at the same rate, walked when Altean children would have walked, learned to speak when Altean children would have learned to speak... It was so fascinating, and there were times, Alfor could admit, when Alfor forgot that he was the only conscious Altean
left on Earth.

It was easy to forget when humans were just an ear shape short, at least physically. Their culture was different—Altean culture was most likely lost for good—but still...at least something survived.

And at least Haggar couldn’t touch humans anymore where she was.

So lost was Alfor in his own thoughts that he didn’t realize that Keith was crawling right for him until Keith had reached out with his tiny hand and touched Alfor’s leg.

Alfor blinked, taken aback.

Keith patted his leg a few more times.

Alfor frowned, thoughtful, and, after a moment of hesitation, puffed up his cheeks and made a face. Keith laughed.

Alfor’s face fell.

Alteans could see spirits, he knew that, but humans never could. They were always blissfully unaware of Alfor as well as the Galra.

But Keith…

“...Can you see me, little one?”

A long, long way before the child could have answered, he was scooped up by his father and carried into the kitchen.

Alfor took to Keith after that. He felt, admittedly, a bit like the fairy godmother from one of Keith’s animated films, but to be honest, he didn’t mind that role. He liked making faces at Keith from over his parents’ shoulders and earning laughs that his parents didn’t understand. He liked being able to soothe Keith back to sleep when he started crying in the middle of the night, giving his parents the well-deserved rest that they so needed. He liked being able to sing Keith ancient Altean children’s songs because it was only fair that someone living should know them.

And he loved hearing his own name on someone else’s lips for the first time in ten millennia.

“Can you say ‘Alfor,’ Keith?”

“Alfo.”

Or, well, as close as Keith could get for the moment.

Alfor tried not to think too hard about what it meant that Keith could see him, but the thoughts still entered his mind.

He wondered whether this meant that humans were finally evolving the part of their minds that would allow them to see spirits like Alteans could, whether Keith was one of the first of his kind or whether humans could have seen spirits for eons and just never needed to apply that skill, or never told anyone about it.

He wondered, too, whether Keith could have been the reincarnation of an Altean being in a human body, whether it was a product of the soul that he could see spirits rather than a development of the body, that perhaps that was why his brilliant red quintessence was *that* red.
And that thought led Alfor to other musings.

He wondered, now, whether the Blue Lion was just being stubborn. Whether the reason why she hadn’t chosen a new Paladin was because she was still holding onto her old one, or whether she was just upset because she never really got the chance to bond with her last Paladin because he’d died too soon.

Perhaps she was throwing a millennia-long tantrum because she was still waiting for her Paladin.

And here Alfor had thought that Red Lions were supposed to be the fussy ones.

Keith hadn’t realized how close the sunrise was until Red purred her daily farewell and faded away inside of Keith’s arms.

Keith rose his head from where he’d been lying on the floor and carefully climbed to his feet.

He was as good as new physically. He should have been fine.

But there was still a deep hole carved into his chest.

He spared Lance a look over his shoulder from the door of his bedroom, and he saw teardrops on Lance’s pillow.

This time, he didn’t ask.

Galra activity had gone back to normal. No endless lines of them attacking him one after another, no suspicious reprieve, no more of those tormenting talks with the Galra who were capable of speech.

With Lance out of the house for most of the day, the Galra only showed up sporadically, which meant that Keith’s mind had plenty of time to wander.

And, invariably, it wandered back to Lance.

“What are these?” asked Keith one night, his tiny hands pushing at Alfor’s cheeks.

Alfor smiled. “The blue markings?”

Keith nodded.

“Well,” said Alfor slowly, “those are my quintessence tattoos. All Alteans got them as children, markings to tell the world what kind of a person you were. I was born with blue quintessence, so my markings are blue. If you were an Altean child, you would be getting your red markings soon.”

“How’come they’re blue?” asked Keith. “I thought you had black kin-tessence.”

“Ah, that’s the quirk of black quintessence,” said Alfor, tapping Keith’s nose. “Leaders are made,
not born, so everyone with black quintessence used to have a different color, once upon a time. It was very rare for someone to have black markings, because that means they would have had to have learned to become leaders before they were five years old, and that’s a very young leader.”

“Oh.” Keith frowned and wrinkled his nose. “Does that mean that you would have had a blue lion instead of Black if you never got black kin-tessence?”

“That’s right,” said Alfor. “And I wouldn’t have to fight the Galra anymore.”

“But then you would’a been gone,” mumbled Keith. “I’m glad you don’t have blue kin-tessence anymore, Alfor.”

He jumped up and wrapped his arms tight around Alfor’s shoulders.

And Alfor, though he disagreed with Keith’s sentiment, hugged the boy back with just as much fierceness.

The day Lance listened to Pidge’s recording, he couldn’t get Keith out of his head.

The day Lance woke up after silently crying himself to sleep as a result of the gap between himself and Keith growing even bigger for reasons he didn’t understand, his thoughts of Keith had crossed the line from distinctly magnetized to a topic to absolutely obsessed.

He couldn’t stop thinking about Keith lying on the floor after some seemingly agonizing battle.

He couldn’t stop thinking about Keith’s choked sobs.

He couldn’t stop thinking about the back of Keith’s head when he turned away from Lance on the bed.

He couldn’t stop thinking about walking in on Keith, his arms so tightly wrapped around something Lance couldn’t quite see, his gaze dark and pained and—

“Lance.”

Lance flinched and whipped around, gripping the shirt he’d been folding just a little too tightly in his hands.

Rolo raised his eyebrows. “You all right? You look kind of...tired.”

“Yeah.” Lance finished folding the shirt and set it back on top of the stack. “Just didn’t get much sleep last night.” Well, that wasn’t untrue, at least.

Rolo hummed an unconvincing response. “You wanna go home early today? Call that little dude for a ride? He’s self-employed, right? So he can do that?”

“They,” corrected Lance. “And I’m not calling Pidge for a ride. I’m not going home until my shift ends.”
“All right,” said Rolo, turning away. “But don’t do something stupid like go off on a customer. That gets us both in trouble.”

“I won’t,” grumbled Lance, mostly to himself as he grabbed another shirt to fold.

Alfor closed his eyes, his temple resting against the cool glass of the window. He was so tempted to throw that window open, to feel the cool breeze that accompanied the rain he was listening so intently for.

“What are you doing?” came Keith’s voice, cutting through Alfor’s contemplation.

Alfor cracked an eye open and found the child sitting upright in his bed, hands folded politely over his lap, eyes wide in the dark.

“Do you promise to go back to sleep if I show you?” asked Alfor, a warm smile playing at his lips. Keith nodded, long hair bobbing around his face.

“All right,” said Alfor. “Come.”

Keith pushed his blankets off of his legs and swung them over the side of his bed. His bare feet hit the floor with a similar sort of pat-pat as those made by the rain just outside the window.

Black rolled out of the way as Keith grew closer, and Alfor reached under Keith’s arms to pull him onto his knee.

“Close your eyes,” said Alfor, “and listen. What do you hear?”

A few seconds passed, and Keith wrinkled his nose. “That’s the rain,” he said.

“That’s right,” said Alfor. “Rain. I am listening to the rain.”

“I don’t like the rain,” said Keith in a soft grumble. “When the rain comes out, the sun goes away.”

“They take turns,” said Alfor. “If it rained all the time, then everything would be submerged in water, and if it never rained, then plants wouldn’t grow, and you wouldn’t have that nice, green grass that you get to play in when the sun is out, and you wouldn’t have those peeled apples that your mother slices for you, and you wouldn’t be able to play in the pool on warm days or throw snowballs when it’s cold.” He pulled Keith closer, allowing the boy’s head to rest against the chest plate of his armor. “The sun and the rain are both important, little one. Balance is vital for all things. And one day, you may learn to appreciate the rain as much as I do.”

“Why do you like the rain so much?” asked Keith, turning his head to look up at Alfor. “I thought the Galra get mad in the dark, and it’s dark when it rains.”

“That is true,” said Alfor, resting his head against the window again. “And it’s true that I did not always love the rain. But hundreds of years ago, when the first house was built on this land, I felt rain for the last time, and going hundreds of years without something—even something you thought a nuisance—can cause you to miss it. Even a day without a nuisance can make you miss it if you spend that day knowing that you will never experience that nuisance again.”
Keith frowned and reached out to press his hand against the glass.

“Open the window,” he said softly. “Maybe you can feel the rain if you get close enough.”

Alfor hesitated, but he did as Keith asked and pushed the window open.

Keith’s tiny hand pressed flat against the window screen.

Alfor’s hand joined Keith’s, flattening against the woven wires, against the water caught in the squares.

When Keith pulled his hand away, his palm was wet with rain water.

When Alfor pulled his hand away, it was as dry as it had been for the past ten-thousand years.

“Come on, Lance,” sighed Hunk, slapping a wet tea towel against the countertop. “You’ve been moping for, like, forty-eight hours now. What is going on between you and this guy?”

“I wish I knew,” mumbled Lance, his mouth muffled by his own arms, crossed over the back of the chair he was straddling. “That’s part of the problem. I don’t even know what’s going on. We were...fine, and then we weren’t. And I don’t know if something happened or if I did something…”

“Why don’t you just ask?” pressed Hunk, exasperated. “Instead of, you know, hovering around my kitchen like some patron saint of sadness?”

“If you can think of a way to ask, ‘Did I do something wrong?’ without sounding like a drama queen, let me know.”

“How do I ask my mom for a haircut?” asked Keith one evening, his feet kicking absently at the edge of his bed.

“Why do you want a haircut?” asked Alfor, raising an eyebrow. “I thought you liked your hair like this.”

“I do,” mumbled Keith, head bowed, hands gripping fistfuls of his bedcovers. “But the other kids say that it makes me look like a girl.”

“Is there something wrong with girls?” asked Alfor, taking his usual seat by the window, the seat he always sat in when he and Keith had their talks. “Are you so ashamed of girls that you can’t bear to look the least bit feminine?”

“No,” sighed Keith. “But I still don’t want to be a girl. I like being a boy.”

“I have long hair,” said Alfor. “Does that make me a girl?”

“No,” said Keith grudgingly.
“Well,” said Alfor, “if you like the way you look, you aren’t ashamed of looking a little feminine, and looking feminine doesn’t change your identity, why do you want to cut your hair?”

Keith hesitated. His feet stopped kicking. “...I want the other kids to like me.”

Alfor frowned. He stood up from his chair, crossed the room, and dropped a steady hand on Keith’s head.

“Never,” he said softly, “under any circumstances, are you to change something you like about yourself to suit the preferences of other people.”

“Mom says change is good,” mumbled Keith, keeping his head bowed. “She says people should always be trying to change themselves for the better.”

“And she is right,” said Alfor. “But there is a distinct difference between a good change and a bad change, and good changes always come from within. Others can influence you for the better, yes, but there is a difference between wanting to change for the sake of another person and changing because another person wants you to.”

Keith finally lifted his head at that, his dark blue eyes narrowing suspiciously from under Alfor’s palm. “That sounds the same.”

“It may,” said Alfor, “but there is a subtle difference, and that difference is understood with experience.”

“That’s just another way of saying, ‘You’ll understand when you’re older,’” grumbled Keith, narrowing his eyes. “Mom and Dad say that all the time.”

“Not quite,” said Alfor. “It has nothing to do with age. The oldest man in the world could have lived one-hundred and fifty years without experiencing what he needed to learn an important lesson. Have patience, Keith, and keep your eyes open for the lessons that life tries to teach you. Patience yields focus, and focus yields understanding.”

“Everyone looks up to you, Shiro. You’re wise, and everyone trusts you, loves you, for who you are. What do you think I should do? Is there anything I can do?”

Shiro didn’t set down his book, didn’t lift his head, didn’t even shift his gaze. He just kept reading, like no one had said anything at all.

But it wasn’t as if Keith had expected anything different.

“You had a daughter, right?” asked Keith, surrounded by books he’d been attempting to organize by author. That was an oddity in and of itself—Keith was normally in too much of a rush to bother cleaning unless there was something on his mind.

Was there something on his mind?
“That’s right,” said Alfor. “Allura.”

“Was she pretty?” asked Keith, moving a book from one stack to another.

“What is this sudden curiosity?” asked Alfor, raising an eyebrow.

“I…” Keith frowned, furrowing his brow. “I dunno, I just… I heard some guys at school talking about pretty girls and I sort of realized… I’ve never really thought of a girl as pretty. Like, sometimes I’ll think of them as… *handsome*, like a *cat* or a *horse* or something. But not… pretty.”

He paused, his hands lingering over a book he’d just set down.

“I’ve… seen pretty *boys* before, but…”

His brow furrowed.

“Is that… weird? Am I…?”

Alfor waited for Keith to continue.

Keith never did.

“Have you asked Keith yet?” pressed Pidge, pushing at Lance’s shoulder.

Lance hesitated. “I…” He looked down at his hands. “Things have been… weird.”

“ Weird how?” asked Pidge.

“We…” Lance ran a hand through his hair. “I dunno, we just… haven’t been talking?”

“You haven’t been talking,” deadpanned Pidge. “To the guy responsible for keeping you alive. How long has this been going on?”

Lance clenched his jaw, and he slowly, hesitantly admitted… “About a week.”

“A week,” Pidge rubbed their eyes with their first two fingers on either hand. “Oh, my god, Lance…”

“It’s not like I’ve been actively avoiding him!” insisted Lance. “Like, he’s still kicking Galra ass for me, but he won’t, like… *look* at me. *Ever.* But… he’s keeping me alive, so…”

“He might not be for much longer if you don’t communicate with him,” said Pidge urgently. “Lance, you need to fix this. Immediately. If you get into trouble and you even hesitate to ask for help from the only person who *can* help you…” They sighed. “I don’t want to think about it. Just… Try, okay? If not for your sake, then for mine. I don’t want to have to worry about you like this.”

Lance sighed, a hesitant smile playing at his lips. “Yeah, okay. I’ll…” The smile dropped. “I’ll try, but I can’t make any promises. I don’t even know what I did.”

“Are you sure it’s something you did?” asked Pidge. “Maybe he’s just dealing with something. I mean, I don’t know what a dead guy could be dealing with, but, I mean, it’s possible.”
“Well, if it wasn’t something I did before, then it is now,” said Lance. “Because if I let him deal with something that huge on his own for this long, then that’s definitely a mistake on my part.”

Keith spent too much time at home. He never made friends at school, never had guests over, and his relationship with his parents was stilted, at best.

But he trusted Alfor with everything, perhaps just because Alfor couldn’t tell anyone even if he wanted to. Still, it was nice to know one as thoroughly as Alfor knew Keith, considering he was the first person Alfor had truly gotten to know since his decision to become the Paladin.

And it was nice to have someone to share Altean culture with.

Keith asked so many questions, and Alfor was all too keen to answer.

By the time Keith was fourteen, he knew every Altean fairy tale, was fluent enough in Altean to speak it with Alfor when he wanted to, and comfortable enough with the language to whisper ‘quiznak’ when he stubbed his toe or dropped a book.

But he didn’t know it completely.

“Alfor…” asked Keith one evening, scowling at his history textbook in a way that told Alfor that he wasn’t really reading it at all. “What’s…the Altean word for gay?”

“We didn’t have a word,” said Alfor, raising a pale eyebrow. “That’s a social construct we didn’t have.”

“So, what, there were no gay Alteans?” grumbled Keith, audibly irritable. “Doubt that.”

“Everyone has their preferences,” said Alfor calmly. “But there was no need for the word any more than there are words in your culture for people who prefer more feminine girls as opposed to those who prefer what you call ‘tomboys’. There was no need for the word because there was no ‘us’ or ‘them’. When people were attracted to other people, it was seen as a standalone event, not as an identity-defining characteristic. No different from when people make new friends. It was simply a different kind of love.”

Keith narrowed his dark eyes for a long moment, and then, after a long, slow, deep breath, he closed his textbook. “I wish humans were more like Alteans,” he grumbled. “My life would be a lot easier.”

Alfor waited.

He waited for a long, silent minute.

And then Keith finally said the words Alfor had been waiting for.

“I’m gay.”

“I know,” said Alfor. “And I’m proud of you for admitting it to yourself in a world that frowns upon that.”

Keith didn’t answer. He didn’t even lift his head from his textbook.
Alfor didn’t mind. They didn’t need to make it a big deal. All that mattered, for the moment, was that Keith felt comfortable enough to talk about himself. That was enough.

“All right, Lance, this is where I leave you.”

Lance popped open the door and sent Pidge a glance over his shoulder. “You’re never home anymore. What do you even do?”

Pidge just shrugged. “Part hunting, mostly. Looking for a specific piece.”

“A piece for what?”

“Private project,” said Pidge, shrugging. “Doesn’t matter. What does matter is you making nice with our contact.”

“He’s more than a contact,” said Lance, frowning. “He’s—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, but we still need him for info, too,” said Pidge. “So make things right. Lives are kind of at stake here, Lance. Mostly yours. This is important.”

“Yeah, I get it,” sighed Lance. “Could you, like, sound a little bit less like a disappointed mom?”

“Now go make up with your little boyfriend.” They leaned over pushed Lance out of the car.

Lance spluttered in protest. “H-He’s not my—!”

Pidge grinned and closed the door in Lance’s face before sitting back down in the driver’s seat and taking off without so much as a farewell.

Lance sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, watching Pidge’s little white car putter off into the trees.

There was nothing for it. Pidge was right. He’d just...have to seek Keith out and force him to talk. No more of this stupid tiptoeing around one another.

“I can do this,” muttered Lance as he crossed the distance from their curved driveway to the front door. “I can totally make Keith talk to me. We can work this out, just like we did the last time we fought. We can do this. And if he tries to get out of it, I’ll...grab him by the collar and make him talk to me. Yeah. That’s what I’ll do. No more running away. ‘Cause that’s bullshit.”

He stopped at the front entrance of his house, took a deep breath, and reached for the doorknob.

“I got this,” he affirmed, twisting the knob. “I so got this.”

He pushed the door open, lifted his head from where he’d been glaring at his shoes—

“I do not have this. Nope. No way in hell.”

And it may have seemed cowardly. Anyone who didn’t know the whole story might have chided Lance for backing out. But anyone who saw what Lance saw would have done the exact same thing.
After all, fewer things are more frightening than opening the front door to what should be one’s own house and finding nothing but pitch black darkness on the other side.

Though a part of Lance was tempted to reach out into the darkness—because it was so black that it almost seemed solid, and Lance almost wanted to see if it was—his survival instinct kicked in and he turned on his heel as fast as his body would allow him.

Right into more darkness.

Frantically, Lance whipped around, searching for any sliver of light, any break in the blackness.

There was nothing.

His ears started to ring.

“Coño…”

Chapter End Notes

I actually wanted him to say "quiznak," but, unfortunately, he doesn't know that word in this universe.
Miles and miles away from any Lions or Galra sat a little, gray mouse on a windowsill, its clawed forepaws pressed against the cool glass as it watched the rain fall on the other side to the green grass below. It closed its eyes, and its ears twitched, as if it were listening to something.

“You sense it, too, don’t you?”

The mouse’s eyes opened and it looked down at the umber-colored hand that dropped gently next to the mouse, big enough to wrap around it entirely if the owner of that hand so chose.

The mouse’s crimson eyes traced the arm of that hand all the way to the shoulder and then to the kind, feminine face that smiled down with a kindness that people rarely showed to mice.

“It’s very similar, isn’t it?”

The mouse’s nose twitched.

“I suppose that’s why Blue was able to finally choose someone. Stubborn little thing.” The woman sighed. “I do wish she would have chosen a little sooner. It would have been a nice surprise to wake up and see Father still waiting for us. But I suppose we all knew the chances of that going in.”

The mouse turned away, back to the window, and stood up tall, smacking its tail against the windowsill.

“No need to get so fussy. I’m sure that Paladin is taking care of Red. She wouldn’t have stood for anything less. You know her. I’m just glad there’s a Paladin there at all and that the entire world hasn’t fallen into chaos while we slept.”

The mouse dropped itself to all fours, its ears drooping.

“I know,” crooned Allura, a long, elegant finger reaching up to rub the top of the mouse’s head. “I miss him, too.”

Keith couldn’t get it out of his head.

The Galra.

What he said.

How it felt.

Any of it.

He still fought, still protected the house from the Galra, still kept everyone safe, including Lance.
But every time Lance sent him a smile, he felt his stomach drop like a stone. Shame and anger in equal parts boiled his blood and he turned away as quickly as his feet would allow him.

The first day was hard enough. Lance kept trying to wave, smile, get his attention in whatever way possible, only because he didn’t know better.

And when Lance turned in for the night, Keith got up from the floor and left for Shiro’s room, Red hot on his heels, chastising him for being stubborn and self-conscious when, as she insisted, Keith didn’t really know how Lance would react.

But Keith knew. He knew what kind of person Lance was. Fun-loving and popular and never far from the status quo. People who were out of the ordinary—people like Keith—weren’t worth the blow to his social standing.

Red was wrong.

The Galra was right.

Resting for the night in Shiro’s room rather than Lance’s at least meant that he didn’t know whether the teardrops on Lance’s pillow had made a return. He didn’t want to know.

The fought continued with a great deal more frustration because it was apparently Lance’s day off, which made him not only much harder to avoid, but also meant that the Galra were as eager to go after him as ever.

He could always see Lance in the corner of his eye when he fought the Galra, often talking to Hunk, but often just watching Keith fight. Keith could feel Lance’s eyes on him like stones taped to his back. Watching him. Judging him.

As soon as the room was free of any Galra, Keith rushed out, breath held in an attempt to keep him screaming in frustration.

When Red returned that night, she was more irritable than ever. She tried again to tell Keith that he couldn’t keep avoiding Lance, that they needed to talk.

Keith didn’t bother gracing that with an answer.

With every day that passed, Keith grew angrier. He heard Lance talk to his friends. He heard phrases drift out of different rooms like ‘the worst hair I’ve ever seen’ and ‘so stupid’ and ‘what an asshole’ and it never occurred to Keith that Lance could be talking about anyone or anything besides himself.

His Galra slaying over the course of the week turned from a desperate need to protect to numb, automatic behavior to wild rage. Keith’s combat lost all semblance of strategy and forethought, trading it for uncontrolled scrapping. He no longer reached for his Bayard, instead resorting to fist fights that left him more emotionally satisfied but much worse for the wear by the end of the day.

And then, one day, Keith found that balling his hands into fists hurt. He gripped too tight, and his nails pierced his palms. So he turned those fingernails on the Galra he was fighting.

The battle ended quickly. Far quicker than they had been since Keith stopped bothering with his Bayard. It was almost frustrating.

Keith stepped out of the smoke, and he looked down at his hands.

Purple fingers poked out of his fingerless gloves, tapering into claws at the ends.
“What?”

Keith frantically pulled up the sleeves of his jacket.

The purple was visible past the cuffs of his gloves, gradually blending into his usual rosy skin tone as it stretched to his elbows.

“Well, well, well…” purred a familiar voice from over Keith’s shoulder. “It’s about time.”

Keith whipped around, teeth bared. He tried not to wonder if they were sharper. “What did you do to me?” he demanded.

“Me?” The lanky Galra’s smile widened into a smirk. “What makes you think I did anything to you at all?”

“Don’t play with me!” roared Keith. “I’m not Galra! Why else—“

The lanky Galra laughed, low and smug, cutting Keith short. “Spare me. You and I both know that I don’t have that kind of power. The only reason you have those claws, the only reason purple is crawling up your arms, the only reason your eyes are glowing yellow this very moment is because you’ve realized what every other Galra learned long ago, that far from worth protecting, humans have proven themselves unworthy of life.”

“Shut up!” Keith charged forward, thrashing recklessly with clawed hands. “I’m nothing like you!”

“Clearly not,” said the lanky Galra, dodging deftly out of the way of every single strike. “If you were, you might have better control. As it stands, it seems you’re going down the path of mindless pawn. Pity. Well, either way, we’ll have the Red Lion on our side.”

“Don’t—talk—about—Red!” Keith punctuated every word with a slash of his new claws. “You don’t know anything!”

“Don’t I?” The Galra slipped behind Keith, and the solid thump of a boot-clad foot knocked Keith into the hardwood of the dining room floor. “I know the exact reasons why you’re still fighting your instincts.”

Keith pushed up, trying to stand again, but the boot returned to the point between Keith’s shoulder blades, pressing him to the floor, rendering him helpless.

“Let’s start with Lance, shall we?”

 Darkness crept into the corners of Keith’s vision.

Lance wasn’t sure how, but he knew he wasn’t in the doorway anymore. It wasn’t just that the area around the doorway had become dark. He’d been moved elsewhere.

Where “elsewhere” was, however… That was anyone’s guess. It could have been in his bedroom or in the basement or…not even in the house at all.

It could have been wherever the Galra came from for all he knew.
He couldn’t see a thing.

He couldn’t even see himself.

There was nothing but darkness. The darkness and the damn ringing in his ears.

It was like a nightmare.

But Lance supposed that was nothing new; his whole life had been a nightmare for nearly a month, ever since he showed up at the Kogane place. The only thing that had made things a little less like a nightmare and a little more like a dream was Keith Kogane himself.

But even Keith was a nightmare in his own right at times.

That sounded about right. It would be pretty par for the course for Lance to imagine up the most handsome guy he could think of and make him a source of nigh-constant emotional turmoil. Hell, that probably would have been his boggart, if there was such a thing. A hot guy that made him incredibly emotionally conflicted.

“All right!” blurted Lance, slapping himself in the face with both hands. “I need to find a way out of this. Stop thinking about Keith and—”

Wait.

Where was Keith?

If the whole house was like this and Keith was stuck in the house, then...was he in trouble?

Nah. No way. Keith was fully capable of taking care of himself.

But what if he couldn’t? What would happen if he was...killed? Destroyed? Erased from time? Whatever happened to him when he went from hurt to too hurt. Would he just vanish, or was there some weird clause in the Paladin contract that brought the house down with him?

Was that the reason behind the darkness in the house? Because Keith—

No. There was no way. Lance refused to believe that. If Keith was gone, Lance had a feeling he’d know. The same way he hadn’t really needed his sister to tell him about his grandmother. Part of him already knew.

Keith was still... Maybe not alive. That was the wrong word. But he was still present.

So far, at least.

“Don’t think like that,” chided Lance, scolding himself. “He’ll be fine. Focus on you. If a plane crashes, what do you do? You grab your own oxygen mask first, then you help other people. Put your own mask on first, Lance.”

He took a deep breath and he began to walk. First things first, he needed to figure out where he was. If he could find a wall, then he could find a door. And if he could find a door, he could start to map out where he was. Provided he was still in the house, that is. And he’d hold onto that hope for as long as he could.

His hands met a wall after only a few steps, and Lance let out the breath he’d been holding.

The second he did, the smell of cinnamon invaded his senses. Lance considered taking that as a hint
as he walked, hugging the wall—maybe he was in the kitchen—but that didn’t seem right. The smell seemed oddly…internal. It made Lance think about the time an old carton of spoiled milk had exploded in his high school locker room and he couldn’t get the smell out of his nose all day after that gym class, even though he knew he was on the opposite side of the school. The smell was just…pervasive. It seemed to be burned into the inside of his nose.

And this cinnamon smell was the same way, though infinitely more pleasant. Instead of reminding Lance of that entire day he’d spent wanting to throw up, it reminded him of the candles his mom used to always have in stock. Always that same cinnamon smell combined with hot wax and smoke and fire.

Lance faltered, nearly tripping over his own thoughts, even with his weight pressed into the wall.

Somehow, fire made him think of Keith. Again.

*Stop thinking about him,* pleaded Lance silently, pressing his forehead into the wall. *Anything else, just not him.*

He thought about playing tetherball in the park with his sister when he was a little kid.

He thought about the time his dad took him fishing.

He thought about all the times he sat in the living room watching television and knitting with his grandmother.

He started knitting in his head, imagining the yarn as it traveled and looped back and forth.

And then, unbidden, he imagined that same yarn on fire.

He wanted to scream. He wanted to bash his head into the wall. It was like he wasn’t in charge of his own thoughts, and he didn’t like the loss of control one bit.

“Hell of a time to abruptly develop OCD,” he moaned, pressing his cheek into the wall. “Why this? Why now?”

That same flaming thread of yarn stretched out in his head, swirling and spiraling outward like a winding path. The fire turned to water, like a washcloth that had been rung out in zero gravity so it had nowhere to go and simply floated in a big, undulating bubble around the cloth.

That bubble swelled and grew and transformed until it became the ocean. The same ocean that still showed up in Lance’s dreams every night alongside the forest and the tower and the canyon and that old man.

The ocean waves slapped against the shore in the eye of Lance’s mind. The sounds of sloshing water filled his ears. He couldn’t stop thinking about it.

The ocean, the ocean… What about the ocean?

“I’m gonna take a shot in the dark,” said Lance aloud. “These aren’t my own thoughts. So— So whatever weird supernatural presence is in my head, could you be a little more specific? Because at this rate, I’m gonna go crazy way before I figure this out on my own.”

The strangest phenomenon occurred in Lance’s head. It wasn’t really a message, but it was certainly clearer than what he’d been getting. An instinct. One that was almost impossible to ignore.
“Close my eyes?” he questioned aloud. “Okay. Yeah. Yeah, I can do that. What else do I have to lose, right?” He laughed nervously, lifted his head from the wall, and he did as he was bid.

Suddenly, he understood everything Keith had said about quintessence.

He was aware of where all the walls around him were. He didn’t have to see them to see them. Keith was right—it was exactly like “seeing” the inside of one’s own mouth with their tongue. It was just an awareness of where everything was, including Lance’s own self.

He was in—the attic?

He’d never even been up there. It was more trouble than it was worth. There wasn’t even a ladder. The only entrance was what was more or less a trap door in the ceiling of the upstairs bathroom. It was only reachable by climbing on a chair.

He would never have been able to figure out where he was on his own. He would have felt around the edges, realized there was no door, and probably panicked because that was the only idea he’d had.

More important than where Lance himself was, though, was the quintessence itself that he found floating around the house.

He saw purple, though not as much as he thought he would see. It was so dark; there should have been an army. Why wasn’t there?

The purple quintessence seemed to hover around only two points. One was in the kitchen. That wouldn’t be too hard to avoid. The other purple quintessence was in the dining room. That was the one that Lance felt was worth worrying about. Just looking at it in his mind’s eye made the ringing in Lance’s ears unbearable. Unlike the purple quintessence in the dining room, this quintessence was wild, like it wasn’t restricted to one point. It swirled around like a hurricane on a weather radar, spinning and growing.

But as terrifying as that was, it wasn’t what made Lance’s heart drop into his stomach like a stone.

There was red quintessence in the dining room, too. It wasn’t stagnant and steady like the purple quintessence in the kitchen, and it wasn’t wild and unstoppable like the purple quintessence in the dining room. It swirled weakly, misty and faded around the edges, and where it was weakest, the purple quintessence brushed against it, mingled with it, pulled it apart like a black hole consuming a star, stole its color bit by bit.

The red quintessence was fading.

“Keith.” The realization hit Lance like a baseball bat to his stomach, knocking the wind out of him. He didn’t know what was happening to Keith, but whatever it was, it didn’t look like something he would survive.

And Lance wasn’t going to let that happen.

He turned around, eyes still closed, and followed the map in his mind’s eye to the opening in the floor.

His hands were shaking. He wished they weren’t. He didn’t like the idea of trying to save Keith when he was trembling so much he could barely stand. But he didn’t have time to steel himself. He didn’t have a second to waste. Not while Keith’s bright, beautiful red was disappearing from view.
With his hands shaking as much as they were, it was hard for Lance to lift up the thin tile that separated him from the bathroom below. He had to scrabble at it with his fingernails for several seconds before he finally managed to lift it up. He flipped it over and jumped down through the opening it left behind without a second thought. Even though he bent his knees with the landing, his knees still felt the shock. He didn’t care. It didn’t matter. It didn’t slow him down.

He pushed through the bathroom door and ran out into the hallway, following the map in his head as easily as if his eyes were open and the darkness wasn’t there. He rushed down the stairs, hand on the railing to serve as another means of sight.

Keith’s color still flickered in Lance’s mind, fading, fading…

And all the while, the ringing in Lance’s ears grew louder and louder, an extra assurance that Lance was on the right track.

Lance hit the bottom of the stairs and rounded the corner into the hallway, reached the double doors of the dining room that no one ever used because it was too fancy and too far from the kitchen, and pushed them open, his own eyes instinctively snapping open as well.

The darkness bled away like a swarm of cockroaches scattering away from the light. It receded in tendrils, and Lance might have given pause to consider why if not for the fact that Keith was on his knees just a few feet away, clutching at his hair, hyperventilating, looking more ghostlike than ever.

Transparent.

“Keith!”

Every word fed to Keith by the Galra—Haxus, his name was; Keith had learned that much by now—made his will a little weaker. And with every blow to his inner strength, his external strength waned as well until there was no point for Haxus to pin him to the floor anymore. He let Keith go and began to pace conversational laps in front of him. That’s all it was to Haxus. Conversation. But to Keith, it was nothing short of psychological trauma.

He wasn’t sure how much time had passed. Minutes, hours, years—time had blended together until they all felt the same.

And Keith couldn’t stop himself from continually looking at his hands.

At his claws.

Haxus spoke without pause. He told Keith about tragedies, about mass shootings that had targeted people like him, about hate crimes of the present and the past. He told Keith things about his own parents that he didn’t know. He told Keith about bad choices that Alfor made as a leader, about how the fall of the Altean people was as much Alfor’s fault as it was the fault of the Galra because he’d tried to put an end to the attacks in all the wrong ways. He told Keith about how Shiro seemed like the perfect leader on the surface but that he chose favorites, that he doted on Pidge solely because Pidge was his late friend’s family, not even because of their own merit.

And Haxus told Keith about Lance. About his lack of redeeming qualities in the face of all of his failures. About how he was known among his friends for being a girl-chaser, about how vain he
was, about how he held grudges and lost his temper easily and caused his friends much more trouble than he was worth.

About how he’d hated Keith from the start, how he’d attacked Keith with that pillow just because it was the only thing at his disposal, how he would have just as easily reached for a gun had he had one on hand, how he only tolerated Keith because Keith protected him.

“He sees no other worth in you,” droned Haxus casually. “You are a weapon to him. A shield. Nothing more.”

Every word out of Haxus’ mouth pulsed in Keith’s head like the last beats of a dying heart.

Keith found himself staring at his own hands, again and again, just to look at the purple color that had soaked into his hands like dye, the fur that had started growing out of the pads of his fingers and the cut-off fingers of his gloves, the claws that sprouted where chewed-short fingernails had been only moments before.

And every time that Keith looked at those claws, he found that he hated them a little less.

And the less he hated his claws, the more he hated himself.

He gripped desperately at his hair, only half-aware of the sharpness that pressed into his palms in the same instant.

He was no different from any of them.

He told himself that he would fill Alfor’s shoes after he was gone and protect the world in his absence, and he was failing.

He told Lance that he would protect him and all of his friends, and yet he was becoming the very thing he was supposed to be protecting them from.

Keith warred frantically with himself, torn directly down the middle of his mind between the promises he’d made to be the best Paladin he could be and the instincts of the Galra he was slowly turning into.

It hurt.

Everything hurt.

The light hurt as the darkness disappeared.

The soft hands against Keith’s cheeks hurt.

The fingertips digging firmly into his jawbone hurt.

The thumbs stroking just a little too hard under his eyes hurt.

The voice in his ears—not Haxus’ anymore—hurt.

“Keith!” yelled the voice, too frantic, too loud. “Keith, what’s— What do I do? How do I—”

“You…”

Haxus’ voice, now no longer a conversational drone but a low and dangerous growl, began to hurt as well.
The hands on his face being torn away hurt just as much as when they pressed into his skin.
The shake of the room when a heavy body skidded and rolled across the floor into the wall.
The stomping of boot-clad feet across the hardwood floor.
The slam of a body high against the far wall.
It all hurt.

“You’re the one Haggar was so afraid of?” Haxus’ voice pressed into Keith’s head like nails. “This scrawny build might fit the body of a Green Paladin, perhaps a Red Paladin, but your quintessence is as blue as the ocean. On you, a build like this just looks pathetic. You won’t be defending anyone like this.”

The loud, dull thump of a body thrown against the floor shook Hunk’s china cabinet dangerously. The dishes inside rattled, and so did something in Keith’s mind.

Something was happening. Something important. Something had changed.

Haggar. He knew that name. But from where?

“You shouldn’t have been able to navigate the darkness,” came Haxus’ voice. “The fact that you were means that you must have figured out how to read quintessence. We underestimated your development.”

Somewhere, in the very back of Keith’s mind, he registered that the body on the floor, head pressed hard under Haxus’ boot, was wearing Lance’s long-sleeved t-shirt. His shoes. His jeans.

“No matter,” said Haxus. “Plans change. It would have been best to get the Red Lion on our side first and to handle you later, but there is no rule stating that we can’t bring you to Haggar first.”

_Haggar._

Something clicked. Something fell into place. And suddenly, Keith remembered where he’d heard that name.

And he knew that Lance was the one on the floor.

And he knew that he couldn’t let anything happen to Lance.

Everything felt sluggish. Keith’s movements, the motion of the world around him… It all seemed to be in slow motion, or like one of those dreams where you’re running but not actually going anywhere. But despite the heaviness of Keith’s limbs, he still found himself on his feet, still found his hand balled into a fist, still recognized his own arm reeling back, and still felt the shock of impact roll from his knuckles to his wrist and all the way up into his shoulder.

The second his punch collided with the side of Haxus’ head, he went down like a bag of sand, and Keith took his place right where he knew he belonged, between the Galra and Lance.

Haxus seemed much less imposing when he was the one groaning on the dining room floor.

“How…” Haxus pushed himself weakly to his arms, snarling, but clearly dizzy. “H-How are you standing? You’re meant to be mid-conversion.”

To be honest, Keith himself wasn’t sure. His knees were shaking. His head was heavy. He felt
inches from collapsing, and he was sure he looked it.

But Lance was in trouble. And that thought alone had pushed Keith to his feet.

Haxus sighed harshly. Stumbling, he managed to climb to his full height as well.

Keith drew his Bayard, and the blade extended from the end of it in a flash of light.

“Cheeky,” growled Haxus, narrowing his golden eyes. “As much as I would love to tear you apart here and now while you’re still weak, I would rather not wind up in a jar on Haggar’s shelf for disobeying her. Next time, Paladin, I will not underestimate your friend. There will be no one to save you, and you will be struck down.”

Haxus walked back into the shadow of the china cabinet, and he disappeared.

Slowly, Keith lowered his weapon.

“Is it gone?”

Suddenly remembering Lance, Keith whirled around, and he immediately regretted it when dizziness slammed into him like ocean waves. He stumbled, the world swirling around him in grays and blacks like static from a television in a washing machine, and he felt rather than saw Lance grab him by the elbows and hold him upright.

“Whoa, easy…”

Keith blinked, frustrated, trying to banish the swirling static from his vision. Slowly, his own hands, rosy apricot and tangled in Lance’s shirt, came through the spots. Keith released a slow, tired sigh. Thank goodness. No more purple.

“Looks like you saved me again, Superman—”

“What the hell were you doing?!” Keith lifted his head, to look into Lance’s face, and his grip on Lance’s shirt that had been used to steady himself just moments before suddenly felt a lot more threatening.

Something Keith tried really hard not to interpret as hurt flashed across Lance’s face for less than a second before being replaced by affronted anger.

“What, you mean helping you?!” screeched Lance, pushing Keith away, causing him to stumble back and nearly fall.

“Is that what you call helping me?” snapped Keith. “Being thrown across a room and nearly getting your head crushed?”

“You’re not fucking transparent anymore, so I’m pretty sure I did something!”

“Well, in the future, do us both a favor and don’t do ‘something’ anymore.”

“Fine! Next time I see you disappearing, I’ll just let you disappear! How about that?!”

“Works for me!”

“Works for me, too! In fact, you know what?” Lance turned on his heel and headed for the dining room doors. “Let’s both disappear! I’ll start!” He threw open one of the heavy dining room doors, walked over the threshold, and slammed the door behind his back.
Keith, exhausted in more ways than he could count, stopped fighting his fatigue and fell to his knees.

Lance was, without a doubt, the worst thing to ever happen to him.

----------

His entire body trembling, Lance reached into his pocket for his phone. His hands were shaking so severely that he could barely even type in the code to unlock the screen, but somehow, he managed to make it all the way to his address book without dropping his phone.

He scrolled down the long list of names until he found the one he was looking for, hit the call button, and raised his phone to his ear.

“Shiro.” Lance let out a hot breath, somehow both furious and relieved. “I need a drive, like, yesterday. Where are you at?” He stormed toward the front door. “...Yeah, no, I can’t stay in the house for that long. I have to get out. Find me on the road.” He wrapped his hand around the doorknob and pulled the door open. The dim, orange light of dusk hit his face. “Yeah, thanks. And sorry in advance for whatever shit comes out of my mouth. I’m about an inch away from snapping. You have no idea what I’ve had to deal with today.”

Chapter End Notes

Me: "Hm, should I post this chapter now or wait until I'm about to leave for ACA?"
-receives text-
Me: "...Okay, so both."

That's not okay, that's really not okay, you can't just tell me to grab my things and go two days early without warning. One day I can handle. Two makes me cry.

Edit: I WAS PANICKING AND FORGOT ABOUT ART UNTIL I CALMED DOWN
LOOK AT THIS SOFT ALFOR INSPIRED BY THE LAST CHAPTER
There were seven members of King Alfor’s council, including himself. Seven people who could make or break the entirety of Altean culture, or, rather, what was left of it.

What very, very little was left of it.

But if they could even save just a few people…

“So, are we in agreement?” asked Alfor, eyeing every member of the council at his table, save for the two he didn’t want to be there. One, because he would be too emotionally compromised, and the other because they would compromise the others. “This plan… We’re going through with it. Despite the sacrifices that are to be made.”

“Better than to sacrifice all of Altea,” said Plachu, her face taut. “We already know Voltron’s feelings on the matter. They know the price. But they also acknowledge the importance of what we are fighting for, and so should we.”

“I still don’t like it,” grumbled Pyotr, his arms crossed. “If we lose Voltron and this fails, then we’re powerless against Haggar. Altea will be defenseless.”

“What other choice do we have?” snapped Chulatt. “This isn’t a choice between losing Voltron and not losing Voltron. This is a choice between doing something and having a chance to save our people and doing nothing and watching everyone die. Every night, more and more of our people are torn apart by the Galra. Children are ripped limb from limb. We have to do something.”

“But why does this have to be it?” countered Pyotr, scowling. “There has to be some other plan. We can think of something, we can—”

“We don’t have that kind of time,” said Plachu firmly. “Chulatt’s right. For every day that passes, we lose more innocent Alteans. We cannot allow this to continue.”

“Besides, we’re not completely defenseless without Voltron,” said Platt. “There’s Plan B.”

“But Plan B isn’t even possible until Plan A fails,” growled Pyotr. “And I don’t exactly like that plan, either. That just means losing more people. How many people do we have to lose to fix this?”

“If it’s less than the entire Altean population, then—”

“Then what, Chulatt?” snapped Pyotr. “Then it doesn’t matter? It doesn’t matter if Platt dies, or Plachu, or Alfor? You just don’t care. That’s cold, even for you.”

“You think I don’t care?” spat Chulatt. “Of course I care. I care about every life that we lose. I care about their grieving families. In case you forgot, everyone in the world has families. Even the Epipaleoliths have families, and the Galra are starting to attack them as well. For every second we sit around trying to think of a plan that makes everyone happy, we’re putting those families at risk. I don’t know about you, but I’m sick of seeing fresh graves—”

“I’ll put you in a fresh grave!”
“Your Majesty.”

King Alfor, who had been struggling to find a way to quell the fighting, lifted his head at the unexpectedly stern voice of Platt.

“You’re our leader,” said Platt firmly. “Our king. If you make the order, the rest of us will follow.” He sent Pyotr a look that reminded Alfor of the look Coran had sent Allura long, long ago, only once, when she had pointedly refused to listen to her father and needed a second opinion on things. “All of us.”

Both Pyotr and Chulatt turned away from the one they were fighting and instead looked to the head of their table.

Alfor hesitated. “This council is more than one man,” he said quietly, not as commanding and stern as he might normally be. This decision was a difficult one for each of them. “Each person at this table has his or her own opinion, and each opinion is just as important as the last. However…” He pressed his palms flat against the tabletop. “At the same time, Chulatt and Plachu do have a point. We are wasting time. A unanimous decision is something we cannot wait for. We will have to take a majority vote.”

He stood, ramrod straight, from the table. “All in favor of closing the connection between this world and the next by force using the plan that Voltron has decided on and all of the sacrifices implied therein?”

Chulatt raised his right arm almost immediately, soon followed less enthusiastically by Plachu. Platt raised his arm after a moment of hesitation, a mournful grimace on his face, as if he were bringing down the axe on Voltron’s neck himself.

Pyotr kept his arm by his side, half hidden by the table.

Alfor calmly raised his own arm, met Pyotr’s gaze, and lowered it.

“Pyotr,” he said delicately, “I understand if you want no part of this undertaking. If you decide not to take part, then that is your prerogative, and we may be able to find a replacement to play the part of Blue Paladin.”

“No,” said Pyotr firmly. “I might not like this plan, but if it’s happening regardless of what I think, then I’m at least not letting you guys go it alone. I’m with you, Alfor. Always will be.”

Alfor nearly sighed, as relieved as he was grateful.

“Let it be known, then, that we are, from now until the end of all things, Paladins of Voltron.”

---

10,000 Years Later

Lance slammed the door and stormed to the edge of the cliff, where the only thing keeping him from toppling over the edge was a hip-high fence and the tiny bit of will Lance had left not to climb over it.

It was a close thing, though. Close enough that Lance gripped the fence and felt the old, damp, rotten
wood bend under his fingers. He felt gross mush push its way under his fingernails. He’d worry about that later.

“Cool it,” said Shiro firmly as he closed the driver side door much gentler than Lance had slammed the passenger side. He’d left his car running, and faint, muffled grunge music spilled from the open windows like fog from dry ice and water.

Lance clenched his jaw and ducked his head, his eyes scanning the ground for something—anything at all.

He found it in the form of a crushed Diet Cola can.

Growling, Lance dropped to his knees and grabbed the can before jumping to his full height again and throwing the wad of aluminum with all of his strength.

“FUCK YOU, KEITH!” he screamed.

“Keith?” echoed Shiro, concerned, from over Lance’s shoulder.

Lance, instead of responding, ducked down low and began searching for something else to throw. “YOU STUPID SHITHEAD!” he belted out, chucking a piece of gravel from the handful he’d grabbed. “I HATE YOU AND YOUR STUPID INDIGO EYES—” He threw another rock. “—AND YOUR STUPID SMILE—” Another one. “—AND YOUR STUPID SMOOTH VOICE!” One more. “I HOPE YOU CAN HEAR THIS, YOU ASSHOLE! I HOPE YOU CAN HEAR EVERY WORD OF THIS AND IT PISSES YOU OFF SO BAD! I HOPE YOU FEEL THIS FOR ONCE SO IT’S NOT JUST ME FEELING THINGS ALL THE TIME!” He threw the rest of the rocks he had in reserve all at once. “YOU’RE NOT EVEN THAT HOT!” They scattered in the dark purple of the purple-pink gradient that was the twilit sky before falling several hundred feet into the valley below.

“Shiro!” snapped Lance, holding an arm out behind him without turning around. “Give me something from your truck. A piece of trash or something. There has to be something. It can’t be that clean.”

“Lance,” chided Shiro, and a cool hand—much cooler than the blood boiling under Lance’s heated skin—reached out to wrap around his wrist. “There has to be a better way to deal with what you’re feeling than taking it out on the environment.”

Lance clenched his fist, but he didn’t pull away from Shiro’s gentle hand.

“Do you want to talk about it?” asked Shiro.

Lance seethed and hunched his shoulders. “No,” he growled out. “I don’t.” He pressed his eyes shut. “...But I will. Because it’s you who’s asking.”

Shiro released Lance’s arm, allowing it to drop numbly and hit against Lance’s hip.

Lance took a deep breath and reached for the fence again, this time vaulting his legs over it so he could perch on top of the damp wooden beams.

“Lance—”

“It’s safe, Shiro,” sighed Lance. “There’s, like, five or six feet of ground before the actual edge. I could probably lie down and still be totally safe.”
“You should still be careful,” chided Shiro. “That fence is there for a reason.”

Lance clenched his teeth. “Why do you feel like you have to be my dad all the time? Matt was two years older than me, Shiro. Two years older. We went to the same high school at the same time. Did you try to act like his dad, too?”

Silence stretched between Lance and Shiro, cold as stone, and Lance knew that he’d hurt Shiro’s feelings, and he knew that he would regret it later, but for the moment, there was no regret. Regret was a fantasy word, something that only existed in fairy tales and science fiction. For the moment, the only feeling that existed in Lance’s world was rage.

Rage, and the faint sound of music from Shiro’s car, his only comfort.

“I hate everything,” mumbled Lance.

He fully expected Shiro to calmly say, “No, you don’t,” and try to pull him back to the safety of emotional clarity. But Shiro stayed silent. Maybe he was actively trying to be less of a dad. Maybe he was just that hurt by what Lance said.

“I just…” Lance almost felt weird continuing without Shiro’s explicit blessing. “I thought we were friends. I thought we were cool. I thought we were getting closer all the time. And then he goes and pulls this shit and doesn’t talk to me for a week. I wave, he doesn’t wave back. I smile, he doesn’t smile back.”

“Oh, good. Lance really did hurt him, then.

Way to go, dipshit. Let’s lose another friend while we’re at it. Where’s Hunk? We can tell him he’s fat and useless. And we can misgender Pidge. Let’s make this fun for the whole family.

“Yes,” said Lance roughly. “But we made up after that. And we were great. For, like, two days. And then he went off on this—I don’t know, he just started crying one day, and I don’t know why, and I asked him if he wanted me to help him, and he just turned away from me. He didn’t even say anything. Just—he just turned away! And I was like, ‘Well, okay, he’s probably dealing with some shit, doesn’t want to go to me about it because we still don’t know each other that well, whatever, that’s fine.’ But he’s been giving me the cold shoulder ever since! And then today he just fucking explodes on me! I just wanted to help, and boom! Right in my face! He’s such— A fucking— Asshole!”

Lance shoved the heels of his hands so hard into his eyes that he hurt himself in the process, but he had no intention of pulling them away.

“And the worst part is…” Lance had tried to scream that, tried to stick with the same tone he’d been using, but that wasn’t what came out of his mouth. “…I know this wouldn’t suck so much if I didn’t realize how much I liked him right before he pulled this shit on me.”

Another few seconds of silence passed.

Lance heard the soft whisper of boots against dirt and gravel, and then the chunk-chunk of those same boots climbing the fence.

The fence groaned under the combined weight of Lance and Shiro, but, thankfully, it didn’t snap.
“Do you want me to try talking to him?”

Lance snorted. He’d like to see that.

“Okay, fine. I won’t.” A heavy hand weighed down on Lance’s shoulder, adding to the weight that was already there. ‘I’m not going to lie, this is a tough situation. My first instinct is to say he doesn’t deserve you, but I know you, and I know you’re going to be stubborn and say that I’m wrong.”

Lance’s hands traveled up from his eyes, over his forehead, fingers sliding into his hair. Shiro was right, at least about the fact that Lance would defend Keith without a second thought, even when Keith was being a douchebag like this.

“And since I know you’re not going to listen to me…” Shiro sighed and squeezed Lance’s shoulder tighter. “All I can say is that I’m here for you. Even if all I can give is a shoulder to cry on, then you’ll at least have that.”

Lance’s hands dropped to his lap. “Yeah,” he mumbled. “I know.” He lifted his head and looked up at the sky; stars had already begun to peek through the violet sky.

They lapsed into silence again.

The song from Shiro’s truck changed twice.

Lance’s pulse returned to normal.

“...I’m sorry,” he admitted finally. “About...what I said. The thing about Matt. That wasn’t okay, bringing him up just to get under your skin like that.”

“No,” admitted Shiro in a soft sigh. “It really wasn’t okay. At all. But I accept your apology.”

Lance dropped his eyes from the sky to look at Shiro, whose hardened gaze pierced the horizon.

“Do you still…” Lance licked his lips, hesitating. “I mean, I don’t want to, like...invade on—”

“I miss him every day,” said Shiro, his voice devoid of emotion, but Lance knew him better than to take that at face value. “Him and Sam both. In different ways, obviously. Sam basically adopted me the day we met. He said I was ‘a keeper’ and told Matt not to lose me.” He frowned, but his gaze never faltered from the dimly-lit horizon. “No one ever told me to lose him. Maybe I should have known better. Been more careful.”

“Shiro…” Lance wrapped his arm around Shiro’s shoulders—not an easy task; they were very broad—and pulled him close. “There was nothing you could do. That was weather conditions and stupid oversights. It’s not like you were the one who damaged the O-rings, dude.”

“I knew something was going to happen.” Shiro closed his eyes, and his brow knitted. “I felt it in my gut. I should have trusted my instincts.”

“I miss him every day,” said Shiro, his voice devoid of emotion, but Lance knew him better than to take that at face value. “Him and Sam both. In different ways, obviously. Sam basically adopted me the day we met. He said I was ‘a keeper’ and told Matt not to lose me.” He frowned, but his gaze never faltered from the dimly-lit horizon. “No one ever told me to lose him. Maybe I should have known better. Been more careful.”

“Shiro…” Lance wrapped his arm around Shiro’s shoulders—not an easy task; they were very broad—and pulled him close. “There was nothing you could do. That was weather conditions and stupid oversights. It’s not like you were the one who damaged the O-rings, dude.”

“I knew something was going to happen.” Shiro closed his eyes, and his brow knitted. “I felt it in my gut. I should have trusted my instincts.”

“Shiro.” Lance gripped him tighter. “Your boyfriend was going to space. Of course you were nervous. Anyone would have been nervous in your shoes. You would have been nervous even if they made it out of the atmosphere with zero problems. And… I know this is selfish, but personally, I’m just glad you weren’t up there with them. One less near-dismemberment-experience and I would have never met one of the best friends I’ve ever had.”

Shiro’s eyes opened slowly, uncertainly, focused onto his knees. “If I hadn’t lost Matt, I probably never would have met you or Hunk. If I had the chance to go back in time and stop Matt from
boarding that shuttle...I don’t know if I could do it.”

Lance rolled his eyes. “Oh, come on, Shiro. You’d save him in a heartbeat. I know you love me and Hunk, but we’re not that important to you. You’d choose Matt over us a million times over and you know it.”

“You’re more important than you think,” said Shiro firmly, finally lifting his head and looking hard into Lance’s eyes. “You, Hunk, and Pidge are just as much my family as my own parents are.”

Lance shrugged and released Shiro’s shoulders. “Whatever you say,” he murmured, looking off into the horizon. “Regardless, if Matt’s anything like Pidge, he’d kick your ass for even thinking about blaming yourself.”

Shiro laughed softly, and Lance saw him shake his head through the corner of his eyes. “Matt was nothing like Pidge.”

“You serious?” asked Lance, turning toward Shiro.

Instead of meeting Lance’s gaze, Shiro looked out to the horizon, a mild smile playing at his lips. “The only thing they had in common was their intelligence. Pidge has always been a spitfire, but Matt was like bottled sunshine. He always saw the best part of any situation and tried to make people realize that nothing was as bad as they thought it was. He might not kick my ass, but he’d probably elbow me until I admitted how happy I am right now.”

“Huh…” Lance frowned. “I never really got to meet him.”

“I wish you could have,” said Shiro.

Lance licked his lips. If there was any way to make up for what he said to Shiro, he was probably looking it in the face. “...You could tell me about him,” said Lance, raising his eyebrows, smiling hopefully. “That way, it’d kind of be like I knew him. I mean, Pidge never talks about him, and I think it might help if you talked about him.”

Shiro ran a hand through the longest section of his hair, pushing it back against his scalp. “I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“Stories,” said Lance. “Did he have any weird habits? Did he ever totally embarrass himself in front of you?”

Shiro smiled, and before Lance knew it, a soft, sincere chuckle erupted past his lips. “God… Yeah, he did. Sometime before we started dating—”

“Oh, no. An embarrassing pre-relationship story? This is going to be brutal.”

“Just wait. Okay, so Matt had terrible allergies, always did, and it was early spring, pollen was everywhere, so…”

It was well into the night by the time Lance and Shiro had found a stopping point for their conversation and Shiro suggested that it was probably time they headed home.

The first thing that Lance noticed when he walked through the door was the telltale cracks and pings
of stove popcorn, accompanied by a warm, buttery smell.

“Hunk?” called Lance, curious.

“In here!” came Hunk’s voice from the kitchen. “Hey, you like the parmesan-rosemary kind, right?”

Lance cocked an eyebrow. “Sure?” He looked over his shoulder at Shiro, who was locking the front door behind him.

Shiro turned to Lance with a smile and a shrug. “We haven’t properly christened our den with a movie night yet. I figured it was time.”

“When did you…?”

“I told Pidge and Hunk to keep their schedules open before I even got into the truck,” explained Shiro. “I could tell it was going to be one of those nights. And I told Hunk to start up the popcorn before we started for home.”

Lance’s heart softened into mush inside of his chest.

He loved Shiro. He really, truly did.

“I can do this, right?” asked Lance, opening his arms. “I mean, I know we’re both still sweaty and junk, but we’re inside now, right? Air conditioning and all that?”

Shiro smiled and stepped forward to pull Lance into a tight hug. Lance reciprocated the embrace eagerly.

And then he was squished, and his feet no longer touched the floor.

Shiro yelped, which was a very odd sound to come out of such a normally serious person.

“Oh, god, Hunk!” Lance laughed warmly.


“How are you this strong?” demanded Lance. “It’s one thing to lift me off the floor, but me and Shiro at the same time?”

“The power of friendship,” said Hunk, matter-of-fact. “And wanting to show off. That, too. A little bit.” He lowered his friends back onto the welcome mat they’d been on before Hunk decided they needed an increase in elevation. “The popcorn will be done in a few. You guys pick out a movie. Nothing sad. At all. Ever. That means no Lion King. I don’t care how upbeat ‘Hakuna Matata’ is, I’m not dealing with dead lions tonight.

“You know what?” continued Hunk. “Can we just make, like, a no death rule? Nobody dies tonight. No lions or dogs or parents or kids or girlfriends or boyfriends.”

“I’m fine with no more dead boyfriends tonight,” said Shiro.

Lance furrowed his brow and turned his head, taken aback. Did he just…?

Judging by the look Shiro gave him, yes, Shiro had absolutely done that. On purpose.

Lance would probably never understand Shiro’s fatalistic sense of humor.
And yet, he wouldn’t change that part of Shiro for the world.

“Hey, where’s Pidge?” asked Lance, abruptly noticing the absence of their youngest member.


Within minutes, a safe, angst-free movie had been chosen, and Lance was curled up on the couch, shoes gone, knees pulled up to his chest.

A Styrofoam cup appeared in his line of vision like a gift from God, and Lance reached out to grab it, tilting his head back in the same instant to look at whoever had offered it to him.

Pidge loomed over him, grinning that crooked grin that they only ever used when they were truly happy. They climbed over the back of the couch and dropped like a rock on Lance’s left side, leaning into him, legs dangling over the arm of the couch.

Hunk appeared a moment later, a huge bowl of popcorn in each hand. He dropped them both on the coffee table, disappeared back into the kitchen, and returned with four much smaller, empty bowls. Lap-sized bowls.

The movie—a cheesy romantic comedy enjoyed by every person on the couch for entirely different reasons—started up, and it wasn’t long before Lance’s mind began to wander.

He wondered how different things would have been if Matt and Sam hadn’t been on that shuttle.

He wondered, would there be an extra person squeezed onto the couch somehow—maybe on Shiro’s lap—or would Shiro have never made it to the friend group at all? And if Shiro hadn’t made it to the friend group, did that mean that none of them would have moved into the old Kogane house? Or perhaps Shiro and Matt would have moved in on their own, or accompanied only by Pidge. Perhaps Hunk and Lance would still be barely getting by in a tiny apartment together, and Hunk would have never met Shay, and Lance—

Lance never would have met Keith.

Keith would still be fighting Galra on his own, probably with much less trouble without Lance the Galra Magnet hanging around.

Lance wondered whether Keith would be the odd one out forever, whether he might one day become an official part of their cobbled-together family of emotional disasters, whether he could join them one day for movies if not popcorn, could find a place to sit on their couch even if he had to sit on someone’s lap, or…

...or whether he would never talk to even Lance again.

Whether he would really be by himself again.


A buttery piece of popcorn hit the side of Lance’s face. He whipped his head around only to be pegged by another salty puff, this one colliding weakly against the side of his nose.

“My name is Lance,” droned Pidge in a faintly nasally voice. “I’m so emo.” They threw another piece. This one bounced off of Lance’s forehead.
“Wh— Hey!” Lance, rather than reaching into his own bowl, just threw the pieces Pidge had flicked back at his attacker. “What’s that for?”

“Do you want a picture?” asked Pidge, tone neutral. “Because I really think how depressing you look needs to be seen.”

“I’m not depressing!” snapped Lance, insulted. “And if I was, you wouldn’t be helping by throwing popcorn at my face!”

“I dunno, I think it changed something,” said Pidge, throwing more popcorn at a constant rate, one piece after another. “You don’t look two seconds from bursting into tears anymore.”

“I wasn’t crying!” protested Lance, sending the popcorn back as quickly as it came.

“I never said you were.”

“You implied it!”

“No, I implied you were gonna cry.”

“Same thing!”

“No, it’s not—Oops, sorry Shiro.”

Shiro, who had craned his neck around Lance to see what was going on, had just been pegged in the cheek by a piece of rosemary popcorn.

“Wh—!”

“I was trying to hit Pidge!” said Lance hurriedly. “I promise! I— WHAT THE HECK?!”

Several pieces of popcorn had flown at Lance’s face at once, peppering his forehead, nose, and cheeks with salt and butter. That in and of itself might not have been surprising—he had been throwing popcorn at Pidge, after all—but where the popcorn had come from, that was the real surprise.

“Hunk threw food?!?” blurted Pidge, just as thunderstruck as Lance was.

“It was a worthy cause!” said Hunk proudly. “Shiro was avenged!”

“He was hit by one piece!” said Lance. “By accident! You threw a whole handful on purpose!”

“Shiro is a food-fight virgin,” insisted Hunk. “He needs to be protected.”

“Food-fight virgin?” said Shiro, audibly offended. “Is that what you think?” He stood from the couch and walked ceremoniously around the coffee table. The backlighting from the television in the dark den had turned him into an imposing silhouette. Dramatically, he reached for one of the huge, metallic bowls of popcorn and lifted it off of the table like it was nothing at all. “I’ll show you food-fight virgin.”

He scooped up an entire armful of popcorn and met the eyes of each individual person of the couch. It felt like a samurai duel or a Wild West shootout.

But before Shiro could do anything with that armful of popcorn, the entire room went loose.

Salty, buttery handfuls went into Shiro’s hair, individual pieces were catapulted overhead with
extreme precision, Hunk took things to a whole new level by throwing handfuls of pre-chewed parmesan-rosemary popcorn at Lance’s face, and kernels rained from the ceiling like movie snack waterfalls.

By the time each of them had been tired out, the movie had been long forgotten, and a wide smile was on each face. Lance himself was smiling so wide that his cheeks hurt.

“We’re gonna have to clean all of this up,” sighed Hunk, looking around the popcorn-covered floor, forlorn.

“So?” laughed Lance. “I haven’t had this much fun in ages. I’ve got so much energy, I think even cleaning is gonna be fun.”

“Good,” said Shiro, “because we need to get started if we want to actually get any sleep tonight.”

“I’ll go get the brooms,” said Lance, and he left the room still beaming.

On the way to the storage in the kitchen where the brooms were kept, Lance passed by the dining room, and his smile immediately shrank.

Keith was still in there. He could hear Keith’s voice through the door. It was faint, but Lance was absolutely sure that was Keith. He sounded...downtrodden. Even depressed.

Biting his lip, Lance crept closer to the door and carefully pressed his ear to the crack where the double doors met, banking on the hope that Keith was too upset to notice him.

“...too much of a distraction,” came Keith’s voice, hollow and sorrowful. “If I’m just worrying about him all day, then I won’t be able to help him or anyone else. I’d just get hurt.”

Lance yanked his head away. They were talking about him. Talking about how much of a burden he was.

Normally, that realization would destroy Lance, but he’d just been in a particularly positive state of mind, and that optimism still rang through his head.

He knew why Keith was acting weird now. He was trying to shrug Lance off because Lance was making his job harder.

Well, if that was the problem, then Lance would just have to figure out a way to help Keith, to prove that he was worth keeping around, and then they’d be friends again.

“All right,” Lance turned away from the double doors and continued his journey to the kitchen, hands clenched at his sides.

He’d made up his mind. All he needed was a plan.

Chapter End Notes

I had fun at the con. My injured ankle is the size of a balloon now, but it was still fun. I
made a single Klance-loving friend, and that was enough, because we got to be nerds all weekend and he's the main reason for all the fun I had. Speaking of which, because I know you're reading this now... Hi, Sam. -waves enthusiastically-

I'm still @YouAreInAComa on Twitter if you want to say hi or submit art or anything.
Partial Eclipse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Keith didn’t dare move.

He was so tired.

That seemed to happen a lot lately.

But this time, Keith was not only physically exhausted but emotionally drained as well.

He knew he was being dumb.

He knew he was pathetic, lying on the floor, fighting off dry tears by himself.

But he didn’t have the strength, the will, to pick himself up and walk to any of the bedrooms. Even the couch that was barely past the hallway seemed too far away.

So Keith stayed exactly where he was, forgetting the passage of time, forgetting the threat of the Galra, thinking of nothing but what had already happened, right until the sun set and Red broke into his field of vision.

For the longest time, Keith didn’t speak. Nor did Red, in her strange, indirect ways. The only sound was the laughter from the next room.

Lance’s laughter rang out the loudest.

Red curled up under Keith’s arm and growled low in her chest until Keith’s physical fatigue faded.

The mental fatigue, though… There was nothing she could do about that.

“Did you...know that Paladins could turn into Galra?”

Positivity flooded Keith’s head, a solid yes.

“Why didn’t you warn me?”

Fear. Defensiveness. She was trying to protect him.

“...Lance saw.”

She knew.

Keith lifted an arm over his eyes, blocking out the lights overhead. “I don’t know what to do. He’s not supposed to… He keeps coming back and I don’t know why.”

Red growled again, this time different from the near-purr that sent healing waves through Keith’s body. This time, it was aggravated, angry, annoyed, and pointed right toward Keith. She disapproved of their conflict. Keith already knew that. But that didn’t make the conflict stop.

And now Lance had another reason to hate him.

“If he hadn’t shown up, I would have become a Galra,” said Keith. “I think seeing him like that
made me realize that I don’t actually want him to get hurt. No matter what he’s like. Even if he hates me. I still don’t want him dead. And that snapped me out of it, but if he hadn’t shown up...I’d be a monster.”

Red told Keith that Lance helped. That there were so many reasons to ask Lance for help instead of pushing him away. That Keith needed all the help he could get.

“I don’t want him involved,” said Keith firmly, shaking his head under the weight of his arm. “If he doesn’t hate me already, he will eventually. I don’t want to get attached and have him yank the rug out from under my feet. It’s… It would be too much of a distraction. If I’m just worrying about him all day, then I won’t be able to help him or anyone else. I’d just get hurt.”

Tell him, said Red, the thoughts rolling through Keith’s head so vividly that they were nearly words. Tell him. Tell him. Tell him. Tell him.

“I can’t,” said Keith, talking around the lump in his throat. “You don’t understand. You’re not human. The culture you came from is totally different.”


Keith rolled onto his side, away from Red. “You don’t know anything.”

Grass rippled from beneath his feet, stone walls on every side. He knew that there were people at his back, but he couldn’t turn around to look. His hands moved automatically to set on the stones. A voice spoke words he didn’t understand. He still couldn’t turn around.

And then exhaustion flooded through his body, every muscle weighed down, every limb as heavy as solid lead, his head light. The world became hazy. Every blade of grass blurred and mixed together until the ground was nothing but a solid green blanket.

Nausea overwhelmed him. His eyes closed.

Quintessence replaced the stone wall he’d been staring into.

For the first time, he knew what was at his back.

Five colors. Black, red, yellow, green, and pink. The pink at the center was unstable. It rocked and warped, and new colors erupted from the rosy light. The radial glow—like a pink lightbulb through fog—began to shape itself, like it was being tugged in five separate directions, and it became a star, each of the points a different color.

The point that pointed to him was blue.

It stretched closer and closer to him until he felt himself stretch back, and they touched, and they held, impossible to break apart, like a gaze shared between lovers.

Where the separate quintessences met, it was like a magnet. Purple granules, like sand in a sandstorm, swirled around the joining points, rising up from below, growing and growing...

And then everything went black.
Alarmed, he opened his eyes and lifted his head.

Why was it so dark? Was that the moon? It couldn’t be the moon. But it was shaped like the moon. How could the sun be shaped like the moon?

His own voice spoke words that he didn’t understand.

The panic of those behind him answered, frantic, terrified, confused.

He dropped his gaze back to the stone walls.

“Lance!”

Dozens of golden eyes glimmered back at him from the shadows, shadows that hadn’t been there just moments before.

“Wake up!”

Where had they all come from? How did they show up so quickly? How were there so many? He’d never seen—

“Lance, get up!”

Lance’s eyes flew open, and he took in the darkness, eyes darting around frantically. Darkness, darkness, nothing but darkness, he had to get out of the darkness—

Gentle hands touched his face, and when his first instinct was to tear them off, they held tighter.

“It’s me, stupid!”

Light flooded the room with a click—sweet, sweet light—and Lance could see a pair of honey-brown eyes, intense and concerned, staring back at him.

Pidge.

Lance’s pulse began to slow, and he looked around the room he was in, finally able to see through the dark.

The den. Yeah. We decided to sleep in here tonight. All of us. Right.

And they were all still there. Shiro was right behind Pidge, a hand on their shoulder, and Hunk had climbed onto the cushionless couch. His hand was still under the lampshade, and his eyes were wide with terror.

Everyone’s eyes were wide like that, actually.

Crap.

“What’s going on?” asked Lance nervously, looking around at the friends that surrounded him, though he had a feeling he already knew exactly what had happened.

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” said Shiro, brow furrowing. “Are you all right?”

“You were, like, having a nightmare or something,” said Hunk, leaning forward so far that he almost tumbled over the edge of the couch. “Or a seizure. You were just shaking and hyperventilating and sweaty—” Lance looked down at the t-shirt he’d been sleeping in and stretched it out. Sure enough,
yuck, he was *drenched.* “—and you *weren’t waking up.* Shiro said we shouldn’t be shaking you so much, but we were all totally freaked, dude.”

“It looked like you were having a panic attack in your sleep,” said Pidge, finally letting go of Lance’s face.

“Have you been having nightmares?” asked Shiro, the calmest of them all on the surface, though Lance could see how shallow that facade really ran. His eyes were wild under that strong brow.

“I mean, I had one *just now,*” said Lance, trying to smile, though he could feel how his lips were trembling. “But that’s no big deal. It’s not like I was having some kind of flashback or something. Just a weird ‘being chased’ kind of dream, you know? With monsters.”

Hunk seemed satisfied with this answer, and he sighed, shoulders slumping.

Shiro, less satisfied, frowned thoughtfully.

Pidge, if anything, seemed *more* upset. They stood up, wobbling on the cushions and blankets everyone had carefully arranged on the floor before they’d gone to sleep, and they grabbed Lance’s arm, earning a surprised yelp. “Shiro, Hunk, you stay here. I’m gonna talk to Lance outside for a minute.”

“Uh—”

“That’s fine,” said Shiro firmly, cutting Hunk short and sending him a stern glare. When he turned back to Pidge and Lance, his expression had intenerated. “Just don’t stay out there too long.”

“Got it,” said Pidge, and despite Lance’s stammering, they dragged Lance out of the den, down the hall, through the foyer, and out the front the door. They didn’t let go of Lance’s arm or start talking until they were at the edge of the road.

“So, Galra?” asked Pidge, their frown a mix of thoughtful and concerned.

“I…” Lance hesitated, feeling a bit put on the spot. He reached behind his neck. “I-I dunno. Maybe. But I could see them in the dream. I can’t see them in real life.”

“What did they look like?” asked Pidge, voice softening.

Lance bit his lip, dropping his gaze. A shudder ran through him, and even he wasn’t sure whether it was because of the cool night breeze through his soaked, sweaty clothes or whether the thought of the maybe-Galra had brought that out of him.

“It was hard to tell,” admitted Lance. “It was so dark. Something was going on with the sun, something *weird,* I dunno, and the light was hitting everything weird, and the whole thing was just weird. I just saw a bunch of…glowing, yellow eyes staring at me.” He shuddered again, and he held his waist. “God, if those *were* the Galra… Keith said that some of them don’t have faces. If all I could see was their eyes, *god,* how many were there that I couldn’t see at all?”

Pidge sighed and dropped to the ground, unperturbed by the dew-covered grass. “What happened in the dream? Start at the top. The more I know, the better.”

Lance took a deep breath and dropped next to Pidge, letting his long legs stretch into the ditch that separated the road from the lawn, and he started to talk.

He told Pidge everything. Not only about the dream he’d just had, but every dream he’d had up to
that point. Every little detail that he could remember.

“Every night?” asked Pidge.

“Every night,” said Lance, leaning back on his hands. “Ever since we got here.”

“And this is the most coherent one you’ve had this whole time?”

Lance shrugged. “Not like that’s saying much. I still have no idea what actually happened. It’s just better than the weird assault of, like, three-frame GIFs that I’m used to.”

Pidge’s frown hardened, and they covered their mouth with a hand, a clear sign of deep thought. “…Something might be trying to give you a message. The problem is, I don’t know if it’s someone who has your best interests at heart. It could be the Galra for all we know, trying to get under your skin, or influence you to do something for them. Or it could be something else. Maybe Keith isn’t the only spirit on our side. Maybe there’s something that even he doesn’t know.”

Lance furrowed his brow. Something trying to send him a message with weird, seemingly-disconnected images in his head. That sounded...pretty familiar. Maybe I should tell Pidge—

“Does Keith know about these dreams?”


“You need to tell him,” said Pidge, their brow furrowing. “He might have gone through something like this before he died or something. You never know unless you try.”

“Oh, about Keith—”

“You didn’t talk to him,” said Pidge, waving a hand. “I figured. You tried and it didn’t go well, and that’s why you went to Shiro, right?”

Lance raised his eyebrows. “…Has anyone ever told you how smart you are?”

“A million times,” said Pidge, shrugging off the compliment. “Just keep trying. And once everything is okay between you two, then you can bring up the dreams and see if he has an answer for them. For now, though…” They stood up, brushing in vain at their damp, grass-covered clothes. “Let’s get inside before the sun comes up. Shiro’s probably still waiting for us.”

Lance nodded and stood as well. “Thanks, by the way. It’s...actually really nice having someone to talk about this stuff with.”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t get all mushy on me,” said Pidge, elbowing Lance’s arm. “Just keep me up to date with these freaky dreams. Maybe I’ll be able to make sense of them if I get enough information.”

“Got it.”

The next day, Lance called in to work on Shiro’s orders. Hunk wanted to call in as well, if nothing else, then just to give Lance company, but there was apparently something going on at the factory that he couldn’t get out of. Something that involved a lot of jargon that went right over Lance’s head.

And Pidge was… Lance had no clue. Pidge was just gone. But Lance wasn’t complaining. He just took it as a perfect opportunity to put his plan—“Operation Lance Doesn’t Suck”, as he called it—
As exhausted as Keith was, he knew he had to get back to work the next day. He couldn’t afford to be lazy, not when there were lives at stake, so when Red said her goodbyes, he stood up, brushed himself off, made his way toward the door, and pushed it open.

“Wh—”

And tore a bunch of newspapers in the process.

Eyebrows knotted, Keith closed the door and peered down the hallway. What wasn’t covered by newspapers was covered instead by saran wrap, tarps, grocery store bags, and even the odd tarp. Upon further investigation, the same could be said of the foyer, the den, the kitchen… Almost every room.

“What the quiznak...?” Were they painting the whole damn house? No, that didn’t make sense. They would have moved the furniture away from the walls.

Keith sighed and shook his head. Not his problem. His only problem was the Galra.

The floor coverings crunched and flexed under Keith’s weight with every step he took. Newspaper crumpled and even tore in places. It was clear where he had walked. It should have been clear where the Galra had been as well, but there were no signs of footprints anywhere.

Keith closed his eyes and leaned against the wall. He still couldn’t predict where the Galra were going to be, but he could tell where they were.

And they weren’t anywhere.

The only quintessence in the house besides Keith’s own red was...blue.

Lance was home.

Keith opened his eyes, frowning suspiciously. Why was Lance home? Keith thought he had work. Was he the one who had set up the floor coverings?

“Whatever,” mumbled Keith. “He’s alone. That’s all that matters.”

Alone… No Galra.

It was suspicious. The last time the Galra left Keith alone was for so long, it was because of Haxus. And Keith knew he should have been worried.

And yet, strange as it was, all Keith wanted was to talk to Lance.

He buried his face in his hands and slid down the wall he leaned against until he met the tarp-covered floor.

Haxus had just been trying to make Keith hate Lance. Hate everyone. To try to bring out that primal
rage and turn him into something he wasn’t. Keith knew that now. But that didn’t change the fact that everything that Haxus said was just something that Keith would have eventually realized on his own.

Lance was a perfect social butterfly with friends and dreams and a family he loved. Lance was confident, totally sure of himself. Lance was...normal.

And normal was something Keith had never been. He’d been raised by a ghost up until the point where he became one himself. He was defensive and awkward and he rarely understood slang and almost all of his emotions came across as anger.

And he and Lance simply...weren’t compatible in any respect. Lance deserved to live his life to the fullest. To get a place of his own and get his dream job and have a family. Raise kids. Die peacefully of old age without obligations.

Yes, Keith was a little jealous deep down. He was jealous of the life that Lance would live, and he was, as much as he hated to admit it, jealous of that life for stealing Lance away. But Haxus’ plan backfired.

Keith didn’t hate Lance for that. Not really. He was just...

...sad.

And Lance didn’t deserve all the crap that Keith put him through just because he was sad.

“I need to apologize,” mumbled Keith, running a hand through his bangs, twisting them near the ends. “This is stupid. Even if we can’t be friends, it’s not his fault I’m like this.”

“Is that really how you feel?”

Keith lifted his head, eyes wide.

A tall, lanky Galra loomed over him.

“Haxus,” spat Keith, scrambling to his feet and reaching for his Bayard.

Before he could swing it, Haxus grabbed him by the wrist, sinking his fingernails into Keith’s arm and lifting him off the floor.

“My, isn’t this familiar?” teased the Galra, white teeth glinting. “Though...it was in the kitchen last time, wasn’t it? That’s right around the corner. We could go there. Relive old memories.”

“What do you want from me?” growled Keith, hanging limply, knowing better than to fight when Haxus had him like this. It hadn’t exactly gone well the last time. “You’re not turning me Galra. I don’t hate a single person. Just you and the rest of the Galra.”

“Yes, but that’s just the thing, isn’t it?” purred Haxus. “You won’t be turned Galra. Perhaps if we had time to waste, we might be able to brainwash you over the course of several years and you would eventually fall into our hands, but with such little time to waste, it’s better we just take you out of the picture and work with what we have.”


Haxus reached out and gripped Keith by the throat. Keith didn’t need to breathe, he didn’t have pumping blood to be cut off, but it still hurt, and he could no longer speak around the long, violet
fingers that pinned his larynx.

“You really don’t know a thing about Paladins, do you?” Haxus’ smirk widened. “You really are a disgrace to the Paladin name. Open your ears, Child, and perhaps you might not leave this world a disgrace.”

Keith clenched his fists instinctively, wincing as his flexing tendons in his wrist drove Haxus’ nails deeper into his skin. *Might not leave this world a disgrace.* Haxus planned on killing him, then. He had to get away. But how was he supposed to do that? Haxus was stronger, and as much as Keith hated to admit it, smarter.

*There has to be something, some way to get out of this.*

“Consider circuits,” explained Haxus, either unaware of Keith’s frantic desperation to get away or simply confident that any attempt would end in failure. “You have power sources, the Lions, and you have your devices, the Paladins. If you press a lightbulb to a battery, nothing much happens, does it? You need a circuit, a bit of wire for the energy to cycle through. Your spirit, without its body, acts as that wire, not only for yourself, but for all Paladins and Lions. The same was said for Alfor before his *bulb went out.* In other words, you became a Paladin from the moment you bonded with the Red Lion, long before you discarded your body in that bathroom. You needn’t have killed yourself at all because Alfor’s spirit had already allowed you to communicate with the Red Lion. You died for nothing. Now, isn’t that hilarious?”

Keith tore himself from his thoughts if only to narrow his eyes at Haxus.

“Not that it would have mattered,” said Haxus, shrugging casually, undisturbed by Keith’s glare. “You would have left your body behind either way. The second Alfor was destroyed, you would have replaced him as that wire in the circuit. The Lions need a host, after all, and you were the next in line.

“So,” continued Haxus, his eyes widening manically. “What do you suppose will happen when I destroy you here and now? Ah, I can see that look in your eyes. You aren’t the right kind of worried. It’s an impersonal worry. You think that without anyone to protect this house, your Lance will alert the rest of the household and they will leave as soon as possible. Humanity will be at risk, yes, but it won’t be immediate, and you trust your friend to be able to protect himself, should the need arise. Perhaps government action will be taken in your absence, perhaps the world won’t fall into chaos. There’s a chance, but there’s no threat of certain, immediate doom happening to someone you care about.”

Haxus’ grip on Keith’s throat tightened, threatened to crush his neck. Keith would have screamed if he could, but without the use of his larynx, all he could manage was the shutting of his eyes and the faintest, pained rasp that crawled weakly out of his throat. His head was pounding.

“You know nothing of what has been happening, Keith Kogane. Your life is inches from ending, and the moment it does, you will be replaced by the next in line, the next Paladin chosen by a Lion. Can you fathom who that Paladin might—”

A loud, echoing pop rang through the foyer.

Keith was dropped to the ground.

A pained, furious scream echoed around the room, followed by a loud, victorious whoop and several more popping noises.
Wincing, grasping his aching neck, Keith lifted his head and squinted weakly around the blurry room.

The catwalk at the top of the stairs that led to the upstairs bedrooms loomed right above them, and standing on that catwalk with what looked to be some kind of black gun clutched in his hands was Lance.

Well, *standing* wasn’t quite the right word. He wasn’t really just standing.

He was doing a victory dance, pumping the gun in his arms in time with the shuffling of his feet.

“Uh-huh! That’s right!” He pointed his gun over the edge of the banister, presumably aiming right for the same spot he’d been aiming toward before he’d started dancing. “You think you can hurt my boy? Think again, Galra scum!”

Eyes wide, Keith frantically whipped around, searching for Haxus, whom he found very quickly, doubled over, clawed hands clutching at his face. Keith almost didn’t want to see what would happen when he lowered them, but lowered them Haxus did, revealing…

A big, blue spot.

Bits of hair were clumped together, blown back by the force of what looked like an explosion of...paint.

An enraged, animalistic cry broke out of Haxus, and he charged toward the stairs, eager to reach Lance.

Keith tried to stand up as soon as he could, knowing that even injured, he would stand a better chance against Haxus than Lance would against an invisible opponent.

But before Keith could reach Haxus, he was knocked backward and hit the floor, apparently knocked off-guard by another well-placed hit, perhaps in combination with the attempt to climb up stairs made slippery by the tarp that covered them. Haxus slammed against the tarp-covered floor hard enough to rattle everything in the foyer. Lamps jingled, false plants rustled.

Lance rushed to the stairs and made his way down as quickly as he could, and when he reached Haxus, he stepped on his chest, pushing all of his weight down onto the weakened Galra, keeping him pinned.

All Keith could do was watch, awestruck.

“You know,” said Lance, “it’s kinda sucky, going after someone when they’re down, but I’m pretty sure I know of someone else doing that recently, so it must be okay. Let’s see, who was it who did that—*Oh, right, it was you.*”

Lance pointed his weapon at Haxus’ face.

Haxus, apparently still disoriented from his fall, only groaned.

“Okay, your left eye’s about here, isn’t it? Yep, gonna guess right here.”

There was another pop, and where Haxus had been, only a cloud of purple smoke and a blue splatter remained.

Lance stumbled, knocked off-balance by the sudden disappearance of his foothold.
The smoke rose and billowed around him.

Keith’s throat hitched.

“Wow, he went down easier than I thought,” said Lance, too casual. “That shouldn’t have been enough to kill him. Geez. Galra anatomy must—”

“Hold your breath!” Keith screamed urgently, desperately, finally finding his voice after precious seconds spent searching for it.

Lance turned to Keith, frowning, one eyebrow raised. “What—”

Confusion gave way, and nothing remained. Lance’s face lost all expression, save for the torment that whirled a thousand yards behind his eyes.

Keith was too late.

All he could do was watch as the smoke dissipated and fell away from Lance, fell away too late.

And Lance fell to his knees.

Tears welled in his eyes.

Keith moved warily closer. After everything he and Lance had been through with each other, this wasn’t what he wanted to do. He didn’t want to be the one to rush over and talk Lance through a traumatic experience. He didn’t want to have to hold Lance while he came to grips with whatever Haxus had experienced to make him hate humanity so much.

But Lance needed someone.

And Keith was the only one who would understand.

“What did you see?” asked Keith warily, throat sore and voice a weak rasp.

Lance lifted his head, and the tears that had been building in his eyes finally rolled down.

“You.”

Chapter End Notes

...-quietly updates two days after the last update-


Twitter = @YouAreInAComa
He wasn’t going to do any bathrooms or bedrooms. He’d decided that much. Still, Lance had made up his mind about covering the rest of the house in newspapers, tarps, plastic wrap… He knew he was going to make a mess with what he was doing, and he knew he wouldn’t be able to come up with an explanation for why everything was suddenly covered in blue paint splatters. And he definitely didn’t want to ruin the carpet. He would if he needed to, of course. The carpet wasn’t worth his life or Keith’s…afterlife. But given a choice, yes, he’d rather show Keith how great he was without staining anything.

Once Lance had covered the last corner of the upstairs corridor with printer paper—because that was all he had left at that point—he closed his eyes and leaned against the wall.

…He couldn’t see anything.

Maybe he was doing it wrong. Maybe it was adrenaline alone that allowed Lance to see quintessence before. For whatever reason, though, when he tried to find Keith in the house now, there was nothing. No red glow. No purple, either, which was good, because that meant that Lance’s lack of vision didn’t just mean that Keith was… Well, Lance didn’t like to think about that.

“Whatever,” said Lance, standing up, treading carefully across the paper he’d laid out, careful not to slip. “I’ll just have to look with my eyes.” He made his way to the storage closet across the hallway and yanked it open.

Two paintball guns looked back at him from the other side of the closet.

Lance reached for the smaller of the two and inspected it. “Hello, Beautiful. It’s been a while. You still work, don’t you? Of course you do.” Lance paused for a moment, and a slow, serious frown crossed over his face. “I know this isn’t really what you were made for. You’re supposed to be for making people happy, not waging war, but so am I. So if we’ve gotta fight, let’s do it together. Can you do that for me?”

A second passed, and Lance nodded as if taking the silence as an answer.

“Okay, now let’s—”

Ringing thrummed through Lance’s head, cutting his words short. It was faint, but it was still there. He was still sure of the sound. That ringing… Lance still wasn’t entirely sure what it was, but it happened when Red roared, and it happened when there were Galra around. Maybe it was just a sixth sense of some sort, a warning. Or maybe it was his brain picking up supernatural sounds and not quite translating them.

Whatever it was, Lance at least knew that it meant that the Galra were around, and for the moment, that was all he needed to know.

A smirk tugged at Lance’s lips. “Time to kick butt.”

Lance measured every step that he took, as careful of making noise as much as he was careful of slipping. With every footfall, every step closer to the foyer, the noise in Lance’s head grew louder. He was getting closer.
He’d barely turned the corner when he saw it.

Not the Galra. Those were still as invisible to him as ever.

But Keith.

Or parts of Keith, at least.

Lance’s stomach flipped when his gaze landed on the ghastly image of Keith’s feet dangling off the floor, a slow gradient into nothing from Keith’s chest to his throat, and then a gradient back into opacity around his eyes, tightly closed, pained.

It wasn’t the same sort of transparency that Keith had when Lance saw him in the dining room the day before. It was new. An entirely different kind of terrifying.

And parts of his arm were missing, too— God, was he going to be okay?

Lance’s mind worked double-time to try to make sense of what he was seeing, why Keith would be missing parts of himself.

The only sense he could make of it was that the Galra’s invisibility had spread to parts of Keith. Probably parts that the Galra was touching.

It suddenly made sense to Lance why he’d found his things lying out of place before he could see Keith, but he never saw the objects floating on their own. Maybe Keith’s invisibility worked the same way. Or at least similar.

And if that really was how that invisibility worked, then Lance could use that to his advantage.

If the Galra’s feet were right where the dimples in the tarp beneath were (Lance raised his paintball gun) and the Galra had lifted Keith that high off the ground (Lance rested it against the banister to steady his shaking hands) and Galra anatomy was anything like human anatomy (Lance took aim) and the Galra’s hands were right there and there (Lance inhaled a steeling breath) then the Galra’s head…his eye…should be right…about…

Lance fired his paintball gun.

The pop echoed around the foyer.

The paint appeared as a blue splatter on the side of a humanoid face for less than a second before fading away from sight.

Keith fell to the floor, and his opacity returned to him in waves.

Lance grinned, relieved, and whooped a victorious cry at the top of his lungs before firing off several more shots. They wouldn’t kill the Galra—Lance knew that—but they would sure as hell sting, and that was exactly what Lance wanted. He wanted that Galra bastard to regret hurting Keith. *His* Keith.

He kept firing until he could tell that the Galra was hunched over in pain, and then Lance pulled his weapon back, grinning, satisfied.

He couldn’t help the victory dance—a little running man—that his feet and arms had fallen comfortably into upon the realization that Lance had finally done it. He’d finally helped Keith, and this time, there was no way that Keith could dispute his helpfulness. He’d made a difference. He’d
saved Keith. And he’d done it from a distance, so he wouldn’t get hurt in the process.

…Unless the Galra decided to close that distance. That could be a problem.

Lance raised his gun again before the Galra had the chance, but the confidence wasn’t gone. “Uh-huh! That’s right! Think you can hurt my boy? Think again, Galra scum!”

He could see Galra’s footsteps in the tarp as it ran past Keith, leaving him behind. He listened to the screeching in his head, he felt the vibrations in the floor, he observed every tiny detail until he could see the Galra almost perfectly in his mind’s eye…and then he fired.

The Galra stumbled back, misplaced its foot on the tarp, and Lance watched the blue, plastic-like fabric twist forward as the Galra fell backward and slammed into the floor with enough force to rattle everything in the foyer.

It was a lucky shot, but Lance would get that where he could take it.

Lance made his way down the stairs, quickly, but just careful enough of where his feet landed to make sure that he wouldn’t eat shit like the Galra had.

He wasn’t going to make a fool of himself in front of Keith. Not when everything was going so great so far.

Lance lifted his foot and stomped hard on where he was fairly sure the Galra’s sternum lied. He met no conscious resistance, so either the Galra was out cold, or he was just in too much pain to move. Lance normally would have preferred the former, but when something tried to hurt one of his friends, his sadistic side came out. He hoped the Galra was still conscious. He wanted it to feel everything.

“You know,” said Lance, his lips curling back in a sneer, “it’s kinda sucky, going after someone when they’re down, but I’m pretty sure I know of someone else doing that recently, so it must be okay. Let’s see, who was it who did that——” His eyes narrowed. This was probably the same Galra from the day before, wasn’t it? Lance had seen Keith kick ass, and Lance somehow doubted that there would be two Galra that could get the better of him, especially two appearing so close to one another. And Lance knew that the other one had gotten away the day before; Keith had been too tired out from whatever had turned him transparent to give chase. It had to be the same one. “Oh, right, it was you.”

Lance raised his weapon and gripped it hard. “Okay, your left eye’s about here, right?” If Galra were as close to humans as Lance thought they were, then this wouldn’t be enough to kill it by any means. Despite how much it hurt to get even an eyelash in one’s eye, eyes were actually pretty resilient, and Lance was pretty sure there was a bone behind the eye. Something that started with an S. Shiro had tried to teach him self-defense at one point—though Lance didn’t really remember anything from that lesson—and Lance was pretty sure Shiro had mentioned something like that during the lesson. It wasn’t as if Lance was going to pop through the Galra’s eye and damage its brain. Probably. If it even had a brain. Still, it was going to hurt like a son of a bitch. And that would be the last thing it would feel before Keith landed the real killing blow and got rid of it for good. “Yep, gonna guess right here.”

He fired the paintball gun.

And his foot hit the floor hard, sending waves of shock up his shins into his knees.

Okay, ow.

“Wow, he went down easier than I thought,” said Lance, raising a confused eyebrow. “That
shouldn’t have been enough to kill him. Geez. Galra anatomy must—”

“Hold your breath!” Keith’s voice cut Lance’s musing in half with all the sharpness of a knife. He sounded urgent. Terrified.

What the heck?

Lance raised his head and looked at Keith, baffled, worried. “What—”

And then he understood.

In the blink of an eye, Lance wasn’t in the foyer anymore.

It was almost like he was dreaming again, but these dreams didn’t seem to come from the same place. They were new. No more oceans or towers or forests. No more men calling out desperately for him.

There was a woman. Pointed ears. Silver hair. Red markings on her cheeks. She was hunched over, and she wore a great, billowing robe. There was something sinister about her. More sinister than anything Lance had ever seen in the dreams.

More faces.

A man with ruddy-brown skin, a dark Mohawk down the center of his scalp, blue markings on his cheeks, a stern expression.

A man with pale skin, but dark hair, tired eyes, tidy facial hair, white streaks at his temples, and golden markings under his eyes.

A broad-shouldered man with a wild-eyed grin. Red marked his cheeks.

A man with a long scar down the side of his face. The red under his eyes gleamed with sweat, making that crimson color shimmer. It looked almost like blood on his face.

Some kind of frame. A photo. No, a looking glass. He turned his lean face back and forth in the glass. Green stained his—Haxus’—sallow, green-stained cheeks.

That same glass, the same mirror, the same face, but this time, the markings were gone. Ugly, unnaturally pale skin was replaced by violet. A crown of bony ridges marked his head where a sandy ponytail once lied. They looked almost like horns.

He grinned. He didn’t want to grin, but he did. He saw it in the mirror. It gave Lance chills.

And then…he saw the ceremony again.

Six people with pointed ears, five in a circle, one in the center.

The closest was a girl with red hair that she wore braided around her head like a crown.

Lance watched her eyes widen in terror. He watched her hands shake, and the green stones that they gripped on some sort of altar shook within them.

He watched his own purple, clawed hand reach for the altar.

An arrow rushed past the tips of his fingers, and he whipped around to find its source.
A man—the man with earthy skin and blue eye-markings and white hair that brushed over the pauldrons on his armor—glared furiously at him, bow still raised.

A word dripped like venom from Lance’s—Haxus’—lips.

“Alfor.”

Alfor.

Alfor?

That was Keith’s mentor.

Keith.

As if following a river that branched off at the mention of that name, new dreams began to play. More recent memories.

He saw a small child with dark hair huddled in a corner, arms over his face, while Alfor stood between him and two Galra, bow raised. It was a different bow from before. This one was white, like Keith’s sword, but instead of the red accents that Keith’s weapon bore, this one bore black accents. A Bayard. That was Alfor’s Bayard.

Alfor wasn’t looking in Lance’s—Haxus’, Haxus’ direction, this isn’t me, these aren’t my memories—direction. Had he not noticed?

Another scene change. More recent still. This time, there was no denying that the boy was Keith. He was still young, younger than Lance knew him, but he was recognizable as Keith now. Dark hair brushed over his shoulders, and his dark eyes were focused intently on cooking instructions on the back of a box he held in one hand, the other hand balancing a toddler on his hip. Shiro. That had to be Shiro.

The dream changed again. A new memory. A very, very new memory.

“These markings… Are they from Lance?”

Too new.

Lance watched his own hand—Haxus’ hand, Haxus’ memories, not mine—reach out and wipe away the freckles that Lance had drawn on Keith’s face barely more than a week before.

God, it felt so much farther away, but it really was barely more than a week that had passed. This memory was too recent.

“How much did your own parents know about you?”

Lance’s stomach twisted.

“You kept secrets not to protect them, but to protect yourself—”

Protect himself? From what?

“—because you were afraid that they would discard you if they knew anything about you at all—”

Why? Why? What did it mean? Why would Keith’s parents ever discard him?
“Your parents said such terrible things, didn’t they?”

What did his parents say? Why was Keith so scared? Why did he look so horrified?

“They hated you, and they didn’t even know it.”

Keith, no, that doesn’t even make sense. Listen to what he’s saying. It even sounds stupid. You can’t believe this.

“And just as was the case with your parents, so too shall this be the case with Lance.”

No! No, Keith! You can’t believe that! I wouldn’t! I don’t hate you!

“Don’t fool yourself into thinking that you’re loved.”

Of course you’re loved! Don’t listen to him! You know better! Come on, you’ve got to be kidding me!

But he believed it. Every word. Lance knew he did. Because it was the only thing that made sense. Because suddenly, everything made sense.

More images rushed through Lance’s head. Images he didn’t want to see. Things he never wanted to see.

He saw Keith give up.

It wasn’t obvious at first, but the more rushed images Lance saw, the clearer it became.

Keith stopped putting thought into his fights.

He stopped using his Bayard.

He stopped trying.

And eventually, it caught up with him. Eventually, Keith became less human. Eventually, when Lance looked—when Haxus forced Lance to look—Lance saw purple hands, claws, glowing eyes.

And Lance suddenly understood the transparency. The transparency from the day before—the day before? It felt like years now—had been borne from the fact that Lance couldn’t see the Galra…and that was exactly what Keith was becoming.

He felt Haxus’ words in his mouth, words about how everyone hated Keith, about how Keith had every reason to hate them back.

Especially Lance. Haxus went back to Lance every opportunity he got. Why? Why did it matter so much that Keith hate Lance in particular?

“He hated you from the start.”

No.

“Had he been within reach of a weapon better than a pillow, he would have used it.”

I didn’t know. I was scared.

“He’s never stopped hating you.”
I never started.

“And if he learns the truth about you, he’s just going to hate you more.”

I don’t hate you, Keith. I swear I don’t. I don’t even think I can.

“He tolerates you because you protect him.”

I care about you. I wish you’d protect yourself more.

“He sees no other worth in you.”

I see the whole world in you, Keith.

“You are a weapon to him. A shield. Nothing more.”

Why would I care about any of that?

Why would I see you like that?

I see you as a friend, Keith.

I see…

“What did you see?”

Lance lifted his head.

The world he was in faded away. He was back in the foyer with the tarp and the paintball gun and Keith standing over him, watching warily.

And he was okay.

Haxus was gone. He wouldn’t bother Keith anymore, make Keith think those things anymore.

Lance blinked, and tears he hadn’t noticed welling in his eyes rolled down his cheeks.

What did he see?

“You.”

Keith, Lance was sure, had stopped breathing.

“M-Me— What do you mean me?”

“I saw you,” said Lance firmly, climbing to his feet. “I saw— I heard all that crap he said to you. Everything he said about your parents— I know why you’ve been avoiding me now.”

Keith’s eyes darted away for less than a second, then back to Lance’s. Away and back, away and back, like he was trying to look for an escape without showing that he was looking for an escape. Or like he was panicking.

“Keith…” Lance wiped at his face, trying to rid himself of the itch of tears. “Keith, I’m not going anywhere. Whatever you’re hiding, it can’t be that bad. Like, even if you killed someone, you’ve also saved my life tons of times, not to mention Pidge’s and Shiro’s and Hunk’s. You’re in the black, dude.”
“Lance—”

“Are you a kleptomaniac or something? Because I wouldn’t be surprised at all, considering how much of my stuff you took before we actually met, and you know what, I wouldn’t care.”

“Lance, I—”

“Is it the Galra thing? Because I saw that, and—”

“You saw that?” Keith’s eyes widened. He looked horrified.

“Yeah, and I don’t give a crap,” said Lance. “I just want to make sure it doesn’t happen again. You don’t understand, Keith; this past week has been miserable for me. I hate not talking to you. I miss you. And I know that probably sounds stupid, because we really barely know each other, and I get that, but that doesn’t change how I feel about you. I really, really want to be friends, and I hate the fact that you’re not giving me a chance! Instead of just assuming that I’m gonna be an asshole and turn you away, why can’t you just talk to me?! I mean, Haxus told you that I’m going to abandon you, and your response to that was to abandon me first?! What kind of shitty logic—”

“Well, if you were going to hate me anyway, I’d rather you hate me for something I did than something I am!”

“So what are you?!” demanded Lance. “What are you that’s so bad that you can’t—?”

“Gay, Lance! I’m gay!”

Lance froze.

So did Keith.

Lance wasn’t sure, but going by Keith’s aghast expression, it seemed like he hadn’t meant to say that.

“…Is that—?”

Before Lance could so much as get three words out, Keith whipped around, shoulders tense, clearly intent on running away. Where he planned to go, Lance had no idea. But he didn’t dare give Keith a chance.

“No-no-no. Nope. No, you don’t.” He took three long, rushed strides and gripped Keith by the wrist. “We are not running away this time. Every time we get close to talking, we wind up running away. Well, no more. You and me, we’re gonna sit down and talk about this like adults. No more running. I already told you, I hate not talking. We’re not going back to that.”

“Let go,” demanded Keith, his back still turned.

“No,” said Lance. “Never again.”

Keith didn’t try to free his arm. Didn’t try to pull away. But he kept his back turned.

Lance closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“…So this seriously all just happened—all of it—because you assumed I was a homophobe?”

Keith tensed further.
Lance opened his eyes.

Keith’s back was still turned, expression impossible to read.

“Well, I’m not,” said Lance firmly. “Actually, kind of the opposite.” He paused. “Almost everyone in this house is kind of the opposite. The only one who isn’t is Hunk. But he’s, like, the best ally anyone can ask for. I mean, he’s a pacifist most of the time, but he punched someone in the face for me once. It was a glorious moment.”

Seconds of silence passed, silence where Lance waited patiently, hoping that maybe he’d made an impact, some kind of dent in Keith’s armor.

Slowly, Keith twisted to look back. He didn’t twist far. Lance couldn’t even see his face. But he did see a little more of his cheek. That was progress.

“You said you ‘land ladies’,” said Keith, his tone flat, impossible to read. “So if you’re lying to make me feel better—”

“Oh, no,” said Lance firmly. “I’m just more confident with girls. It’s harder to tell if a guy’s gonna be into it or if he’s gonna go all toxic masculinity on me.”

“So you…”

“Bisexual,” said Lance. “Very, very bisexual.”

Silence spanned between them once more. Lance waited, willing to be patient for once, until…

“Lance, let go of me.”

“Why?” snapped Lance. “So you can run away again?! Keith, I’m not—”

“I need to think,” growled Keith. “I need time to figure out—”

“Figure out what?” Lance’s grip on Keith’s arm tightened. “What is there to figure out? You were freaking out because you thought I’d flip out about you liking guys, and now that you know that I like guys just as much, you’re still freaking out? Why?!”

“I need time, Lance,” said Keith. His voice was...not what Lance expected. Lance expected anger, frustration… Keith delivered desperation. “Just give me time.”

Lance closed his eyes, clenched his teeth. Contemplated. Weighed his options. And he realized...that he couldn’t really make Keith trust him. He couldn’t force Keith to be his friend. If he even tried, it would only serve to make Keith bitterer. More closed off. The opposite of what Lance wanted.

“...How much time?” asked Lance, feeling small, eyes still closed.

“I… I don’t know,” admitted Keith.

Lance took a deep breath, brushed his thumb over the sleeve of Keith’s jacket, and then slowly, tentatively, let him go.

“Just come back,” pleaded Lance. “I don’t care how long you need, just as long as you come back.”

By the time Lance opened his eyes, Keith was gone.
At a pink-curtained window overlooking a lake, a man with ginger hair gripped his borrowed cane. He pushed back the curtains of the window he stood at with his free hand, as if trying to get a better look, but instead of peering through the glass at the water, he closed his eyes, brow furrowing intently as he concentrated...focused...on something only he could see.

He was afraid to think it, afraid to hope, but it was the only explanation for what he saw. The only explanation for their revival. For the Blue Lion’s revival.

It wasn’t just similar like Allura said. It was the same. Somehow, in some way, for reasons he couldn’t quite understand, it was the very same.

He knew what was happening. It didn’t make sense, and yet, at the same time, it was the only thing that made sense.

“...I just don’t understand what took you so long.”

Chapter End Notes

So, uh, I attended Elentori’s stream on Friday, and, uh... If any of you guys are from the selkie stream, you should know that it took me all night to stop blushing. ALL NIGHT. What the heck you guys are so nice. Including you, Elentori. I’m glad you all like this little story so much. ;~;

I swear to god, the fighting is almost done. I SWEAR.

Twitter: @YouAreInAComa
When the sun was high and the stars were hidden by the light of day, Alfor patrolled his territory, Bayard drawn, arrows nocked and ready to fire at a moment’s notice.

When the sun set, Black shook out his thick, heavy mane and took Alfor’s place as protector, allowing Alfor to take on a new role as a demolitionist.

It wasn’t easy, taking apart the castle stone-by-stone, chipping away bits of mortar piece by piece with his Bayard until the castle relinquished another piece of itself, then chucking that piece of stone as far from the exposure as possible so that it would not cast a shadow where shadows ought not have been cast.

And with every night that passed, the castle shrank a little more, cast a little less shadow, until finally it was razed altogether, leaving nothing but level ground.

Alfor had just tossed the last of the stones when he arrived.

“You have a great deal of courage to come in the night, Galra,” called Alfor, nocking an arrow. “Courage or ignorance. You should all know by now that my Lion alone is strong enough to handle an army of your kind.”

“And terrified I may have been, were I here for a fight.”

Alfor narrowed his eyes. “You speak?” he questioned suspiciously. “How is an embodiment of hatred capable of speech? Who are you? Come into the moonlight, where I can see you properly.”

The sounds of shifting grass met Alfor’s ears long before the Galra emerged from the shadows, but it took little more than a glance at the Galra in proper light before Alfor understood. His skin was purple now, yes, covered in fur, and his eyes gleamed an eerie, malevolent gold in the darkness. But his hardened expression was the same, his hair still trimmed down on the sides of his head, and he’d been lucky enough to keep the shape of his Altean ears.

“Ulaz.” Alfor frowned. “It’s been so long, I forgot the sound of your voice. How is it that you can still speak?”

“A side-effect of my making,” explained Ulaz. “Courtesy of Haggar’s dark ritual. Handy, but a burden no less. I have enough clarity of mind for my choices to weigh heavy on my shoulders.”

“As they should,” growled Alfor. “The six of you destroyed nearly all of Altea. Our number is so small now, it’s only a matter of time before we fade away altogether.”

“Then why do you still fight?” asked Ulaz. “You said it yourself, Alteans are dying out. Why bother to protect the few who are left? Why fight so hard for a lost cause?”

Alfor glowered. “Is this what you came for? To pick my brain? To casually discuss philosophy?”

“As a matter of fact,” said Ulaz, “that is the precise reason why I have come here tonight. I mean you no harm, Alfor. I only mean to understand.”
Alfor narrowed his eyes suspiciously, then glanced to his Lion for answers.

Black looked up at him, his eyes soft and strong. He saw no threat.

And so neither did Alfor.

“Sit,” commanded Alfor. “If you want to talk, then we will talk. But if I’m going to be answering questions, so will you. You want to know why I still fight? Fine. I’ll tell you. But not before you tell me why I need to fight at all. Why merge this world with the next? Why put the life of every Altean in danger when Haggar seemed to be the only one benefiting from the merge directly?”

Ulaz answered that question with another question. “Why did you allow the ritual to take place?”

“I believed what Haggar told me,” said Alfor. “That we could rehabilitate the Galra, that they could be reborn and that their next lives would be kinder to them. That the Galra would no longer exist, in this world or the next.” He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “Clearly, I was wrong to trust Haggar. But there is no use in blaming myself for what I know only in hindsight, and so I try not to. It helps no one.”

When Alfor met Ulaz’s eyes again, they were downcast.

“She gave me reason to hate. Told me of the worst Altea has to offer. Made me bitter.” He inhaled through his flattened, snake-like nose, and though Alfor could hear the attempt to sound casual, the anger was louder. “In many ways, I am still bitter.”

“Every person is an individual,” said Alfor quietly. “We all make our own choices, carve our own paths. How can you blame a parent who pours their entire life into their children for the actions of a murderer? How can you send mindless soldiers out to kill indiscriminately just because you resent the actions of a minority? Look at yourself, Ulaz. Do you see what you have become?”

“Is that why you protect indiscriminately?” asked Ulaz. “For the sake of that parent and their children? Knowing that you spare murderers, thieves, liars, and traitors?”

“I know that I spare people capable of change,” said Alfor. “I spare people who will look back on their pasts and wonder whether they did what is truly right. I spare those murderers just as I am sparing you now. After all, would you not call yourself a murderer? You’ve killed nearly an entire population. You’ve brought about genocide. And yet I can speak to you as an equal now, knowing that you’ve started to question yourself.”

Ulaz bowed his head. And he thought. A long, silent moment passed where Ulaz seemed to do nothing but think.

“…I believe you have just solved all of my questions,” said Ulaz.

And without a further word, he vanished into the night.

Keith had been lying on Shiro’s bed for hours. How many hours? He wasn’t sure. He hadn’t been counting. But it must have been a lot. And during that time, he’d been doing a lot of thinking.

And he realized...he was an idiot.
Haxus probably knew. He probably knew Lance was bisexual *the whole time*, or at least that he wouldn’t care. That was probably exactly why he decided to go after that particular insecurity while he could, because eventually, Lance probably would have brought it up, because he wasn’t scared like Keith was, because he was confident and strong and…Lance. Not the coward that Keith was. And then Haxus wouldn’t have been able to plant that seed of doubt anymore.

And Keith, the idiot he was, had believed Haxus from the start. Instead of trusting that Lance would have been a better person than that, Keith had fallen right into that trap. Not only had he trusted a Galra, he’d trusted a Galra over Lance. Lance, who had proven that he could look past things. Lance, who took one look at Keith’s partial transformation into a Galra and had brushed it off without a thought.

Lance, who threw himself into danger to help Keith time and time again, even though he was just a normal person. Even though he had a family to live for, friends, a life… Even though he had everything, he risked it all to save someone who was already dead.

“I’m a fucking moron,” groaned Keith, rolling his head back and digging the heels of hands into his eyes.

How did Lance act like he wanted to be friends, even after all that?

A low rumble crawled into Keith’s ears and he dropped his hands from his face. Eyes wide, he sat up, searching for the source of the growl. He found it in Red, who stood just a few feet away, flicking her tail irritably.

“What?” asked Keith, frowning.

Red flicked her head in a way that seemed to read as a rolling of her eyes, and she made an unusually high-pitched noise. She sounded like a frustrated mother.

“What are you doing?” asked Keith, his frown deepening. “Or are you just going to make noises?”

Another noise. It sounded like Red was trying to meow, like a housecat, but she couldn’t quite do it, and the result sounded closer to a whine. A really impatient-sounding whine.

“Red, what—”

She responded properly this time, cutting Keith’s words off with image after image of Lance.

Lance smiling, Lance laughing, Lance’s concerned eyes, Lance’s gentle hands—

“What are you doing?” Keith shook his head, trying to get the images of Lance to go away. “What do you expect—? Red, I messed up. I messed up, and he knows it as well as I do. He’s seen *everything*. He’s seen me at my *worst*. And he knows how I got there. Even if he doesn’t care that I’m gay, he’s going to care that I was stupid.”

Another high-pitched near-meow.

“Stop doing that,” said Keith. “I have no idea what that means. You can’t— Hey!”

Red bit onto the sleeve of Keith’s jacket and began to yank—hard.

“What are you doing?” demanded Keith. He wasn’t sure where his Lion planned on going with him, but he could already tell he didn’t like it. “Red, stop— Cut it out— H-Hey!”
Keith was pulled forcefully off of Shiro’s bed. He stumbled in the process, nearly falling on his face, and he was barely able to regain any of his composure at all before Red started pulling again. Keith tried to pull his arm free, tried to shed his jacket, anything to get away from Red’s firm grip, but the speed at which she was pulling him along and the jerking of her head made any maneuverability nearly impossible. Keith couldn’t even stand up straight, much less figure out how to slip out of his clothes on the fly.

The second Red reached the stairs, Keith realized exactly where she was bringing him.

“No!” he snapped stubbornly. “No, we are not going to Lance’s room. Stop! I can’t— Red, it’s not going to— Cut it out! You can’t make me— Red!”

Keith started squirming all the more frantically, trying desperately to worm himself out of his coat, but Red just kept pulling.

And then they were at Lance’s bedroom door. His open bedroom door. Keith could see Lance inside, Game Boy in his hands, but his eyes—

God, he was looking right at Keith. And he was getting up. No, no, no, don’t get up, I’m not here, you didn’t see me.

Red released Keith’s sleeve, and Keith took a step back, trying as hard as he could to get away, but Red had other plans. She moved around behind Keith’s back, jumped up, planted her heavy paws on Keith’s back, and pushed him forward.

And Keith fell.

Right into Lance’s chest.

*Quiznak.*

Strong, steady hands wrapped around the backs of Keith’s elbows, steadying him. A soft, warm chuckle puffed against the top of his head, kicking up a few strands of hair.

“Geez, Keith, if you wanted a hug, all you had to do was ask.”

Warmth crept up Keith’s neck, pooling in his cheeks and ears. When he lifted his head and saw Lance’s face only inches from his own, that heat tripled.

“I wasn’t—” Keith urgently pressed his hands against Lance’s chest, shoving himself back. “Red, she— She pushed me, and—”

Lance’s smile, already weak, disappeared. “I know,” he said solemnly. “I was just kidding.”

Keith glared down at the lioness perched by his right leg.

She looked up at him expectantly.

Keith looked back at Lance, and when he caught the look in Lance’s eyes—sad, defeated, deeply hurt—his breath caught in his throat.

Keith knew what Red wanted him to do.

And Keith knew that he wanted it, too.

But that didn’t make it easy. And Lance’s face definitely wasn’t making it any easier.
So Keith closed his eyes.

“L-Look,” said Keith warily, hands still planted on Lance’s chest from where he pushed himself away. “About…everything. Cutting myself off and…accusing you of something you’d never do and…trusting Haxus over you, I…” He took a deep breath and bowed his head. He felt locks of dark hair tickle his cheeks and nose as they drooped forward, drawn to the earth below. “I’m sorry.”

Several seconds passed. Seconds where Keith was sure he wouldn’t be forgiven, where he was sure that Lance was about to push him away, or that Lance was trying to figure out how to say “we can’t be friends” without starting a bigger fight than the one they’d already had.

But Lance didn’t do anything like that at all.

Abruptly, without warning, Keith found himself face-to-face with Lance’s shoulder, secured by two surprisingly strong arms that looped around his back and a hand that cradled the back of his head. When Lance inhaled, Keith felt his chest swell with air. They were so close that Keith was sure he could feel Lance’s heartbeat, or maybe that was his own “heartbeat”, the illusion he sometimes felt in his ears when he was scared.

Keith...couldn’t remember a single moment when he’d heard that same pulse in his head outside of when he was terrified, save for that one single moment in Lance’s arms.

“We’re not doing this again,” said Lance firmly, his breath warm against Keith’s neck. “No way in hell. This went on for way too long.”

Keith sighed. He wormed his hands out from where they’d been sandwiched between himself and Lance and tentatively looped them around Lance’s lower back.

“Promise,” said Lance firmly. “Promise me we’re not doing this again.”

Keith closed his eyes, and he rested his head against Lance’s shoulder. It was funny, but despite the fact that Keith hadn’t slept in nearly two decades, he was sure that if he stayed there long enough, he could have slept in Lance’s arms.

“...Yeah,” he mumbled. The fabric of Lance’s t-shirt felt pillow-soft against his face despite the strong shoulder beneath. He wanted to stay like that forever. He might have, if it was only practical.

“I promise. I...didn’t like it, either.”

“Keith?”

“Hm?”

“I’m sorry, too.”

This, of anything, was probably the only cause, short of time, that could have pulled Keith out of the hug.

“What are you sorry for?” asked Keith, drawing his eyebrows together.

Lance’s shoulders sank. He averted his eyes and tilted his head away, apparently mulling over his own words. “…I should have realized something more...external was going on. I just kind of figured that you were being a dick out of nowhere just...because. It never even popped into my head that there could have been a reason for it, and...I should have given you the benefit of the doubt. Or I should have figured out that there was something else going on sooner, or...something. I dunno. I was being stupid. I kind of do that a lot. The stupid thing. I mean, I guess stupid people are kind of
expected to do stupid things, but—"

“What?” Keith furrowed his brow. “You’re not stupid.”

Lance cocked an eyebrow. “...Okay, this is new. Since when?”

“Since always,” said Keith firmly. “Why would you think—”

“Maybe because people are always calling me stupid?”

“Then they’re the stupid ones, because you’re not stupid. At all.”

“Oh, do you realize you just called yourself stupid?”

“What?” Keith narrowed his eyes. “I never called you—”

“No, don’t pull that crap on me,” said Lance. “You totally called me stupid when I got strangled by that Galra that messed up my neck.” He thumbed down over his shoulder, toward where the bruise was still healing.

“I don’t...” Keith hesitated. “I don’t remember—”

“Well, I do,” said Lance. “It’s not every day a ghost saves your life and then calls you stupid. That kind of stuff sticks.”

Keith pulled his hands away from Lance’s back and rubbed at his eyes. He still didn’t remember, but Lance was probably right. “...Look, if I did say that, then I’m sorry.” He dropped his hands away from his face and looked Lance in the eye. “I doubt I meant it. I was really freaked out.”

“Tch, freaked out,” scoffed Lance, rolling his eyes. “Like you don’t fight Galra all the time. What made that time any different?”

Keith sighed, aggravated. “It wasn’t the Galra that freaked me out, Lance.”

“Well, what else—”

“You almost died,” snapped Keith. “Did you think I could just brush that off?”

Lance raised his eyebrows. His eyes widened. He blinked too many times, too quickly for Keith to keep up with. “...You cared that I—”

“Obviously!”

Lance flinched, and his brow furrowed.

Keith glowered at him for several seconds. His expression only softened when the realization hit him. “...It...wasn’t obvious...was it?”

Lance shook his head slowly, staring at Keith like he was a horseshoe puzzle Lance couldn’t quite figure out.

Keith shrank away from that look, suddenly self-conscious, and turned his gaze away to the wall over the bed. “...Well, point is, you’re not stupid. If you were, you wouldn’t have been able to figure out who I was on your own.”

Lance laughed. So startling was the sound that Keith immediately turned his gaze back, and he found
Lance with a wobbly, crooked smile, a hand sliding into his hair.

“Man,” said Lance, his voice wavering. “We have got some serious communication issues to work out.”

The soft, surprised laugh that bubbled out of Keith at that observation took even him off guard. “No kidding.”

“You…” Lance dropped his hand from his hair and nodded toward the bed. “You wanna...work on that? Catch up? I mean, it’s been a week.”

Keith’s smile melted like candle wax. “...I don’t know if you want to hear me talk about my week.”

He crossed his arms. “There wasn’t anything happy about it.”

“You don’t get it, Keith,” said Lance, his smile dropping as well, quickly replaced by a small, perturbed frown. “That’s exactly why I want to talk about it. You can’t just ignore something and expect it to go away. That’s how this whole mess started. If we don’t want this to happen again, then we have to know each other better. If you trust me, then they can’t use me as a weapon against you anymore.”

“You think there’s going to be another Galra like Haxus?” asked Keith.

“I don’t know,” said Lance. “But if there is, I want us both to be ready for him.”

Keith looked down at his feet, and he narrowed his eyes. As much as he hated to admit it, Lance was absolutely right. If he knew about his own weaknesses and didn’t do anything about them, then the Galra could just keep attacking those weak points until he broke.

“Let’s start with another promise.”

Lance’s bright voice tore through Keith’s brief contemplation, warm enough to almost physically lift his head.

“I’ll promise to give you the benefit of the doubt in the future,” said Lance, a casual smile on his face, thumbs in the pockets of his jeans. “I’ll assume that you’re not just an asshole and that there’s probably something actually wrong if you start acting like a dick in the future. But in return, you have to promise to actually tell me what you’re thinking instead of just assuming I’m going to reject you.” He offered a hand. “Sound like a deal?”

Keith eyed the hand for a moment, frowning, but when he looked up again and found Lance’s hopeful smile shining back at him, he knew he couldn’t resist making that promise.

“...Fine.” He gripped the proffered hand and shook it firmly. “I promise.”

He could be more open.

He could do that, right?

“So…” Keith slowly pulled his hand back. “Does this mean we’re friends now?”

Lance laughed, loud and sharp, sharp enough to make Keith jump. “Man, we really need to work on our communication skills. I’ve been operating under the impression we already were.” His smile faltered, and Keith saw hurt flash through his eyes. “What, do you not want to be?”

“No,” said Keith frantically. “No, that’s not it, I just... I didn’t think you wanted to be.”
Lance ran a hand through his hair. “Holy crow.” He gestured explosively, arms fully extended. “It’s like we’re on different planets. What is wrong with us?”

Keith shrugged and offered a shaky smile. “...Our communication skills?”

“Exactly,” said Lance, pointing a finger inches from Keith’s nose. “Our shitty communication skills. And we’re gonna fix that. Right now.” He pointed to his bed. “Climb on. We’re gonna turn on the radio real low and cry about our problems and talk about boys like we’re having a slumber party in the sixties.”

Keith furrowed his brow. “What— You’re serious?”

“Dead serious,” said Lance. A frown crossed over his features for less than a second. “Uh, no offense. Whatever, just—”

Lance moved around Keith’s back, and for the second time that day, Keith found himself being pushed forward by a pair of heavy hands on his back.

For Ulaz’s entire journey, Alfor’s words haunted him. They swirled inside his head, mingling, tormenting him. Overlapping and weaving with thoughts Ulaz had already had on his own or had already been fed.

He carried them like heavy stones in the darkness, paying no mind to the scores of mindless, faceless Galra he passed as he made his way through the catacombs. They weren’t worth his attention, not when he had something much more important on his mind.

He seemed to reach his destination a great deal sooner than he usually did. Time meant nothing to the occupied mind.

“Thace.” Ulaz’s voice echoed off the bare walls, warning his companion of his arrival.

The man himself seemed to emerge from the darkness like he was made of it. And in a way, he was. “I told you not to speak to me—”

“Precisely,” said Ulaz. “It was a compelling motive.”

“You spoke to him?” asked Thace, raising his eyebrows. “So soon?”

“As soon as I possibly could,” said Ulaz. “And you were right. He did make me think. And I think you were right. We did choose the wrong side.”

“So have you come to a decision?” asked Thace.

“I believe I have,” said Ulaz. “Having said that, do we have a plan?”
Despite Lance’s claim that he was “dead serious” about talking boys, that topic never really came up. Perhaps because it was too light of a topic to discuss in the midst of everything else.

At least Lance’s choice of music was light-hearted. He’d made a point of choosing a radio station that played music from Keith’s era, so there were times when Keith would start talking about the deepest, darkest places his mind had gone after his encounters with Haxus, only to falter when he was interrupted by the energetic stylings of Scary Spice.

And though he felt like he should have been put-off by the abrupt shifts in atmosphere, seeing Lance’s crooked, apologetic smiles while he urged Keith to keep going despite the fact that he was talking over “Macarena” or “One Week” or some other bizarre ‘90s song that Keith had forgotten about until that moment, it made Keith feel a little more at ease. A little warmer. A little less like Lance was judging him for his weakness.

Lance, in turn, talked about his week, and Keith felt particularly guilty when he realized that a lot of Lance’s week was just worrying about his relationship with Keith.

Keith had to struggle to keep himself from interrupting Lance’s accounts with apologies. Eventually, he lost that fight.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled, staring down at his crossed ankles, his fingers picking at the seams of his pants. “I had no idea you’d care that much.”

“Yeah, we’ve established that,” said Lance, who sounded a bit impatient, but thankfully not upset at Keith for bringing it up. He twirled his sock-clad foot from where it hovered by his crossed knees. “I didn’t know you cared, either. No more apologizing, or that’s all we’re gonna wind up doing.”

Keith glanced at Lance’s face, then back to the inner leg seam of his pants. “You’re right. But I still feel like this could have been prevented if I wasn’t so...gullible.”

Lance didn’t speak for several beats. Keith could feel Lance’s eyes on him, but he didn’t say anything, and for every second that passed, Keith felt himself grow more nervous.

“...Get down here,” said Lance finally.

Keith lifted his head and looked back at Lance. “What?”

“I said...” Lance grabbed Keith roughly by the arm and yanked him down so that his body landed on the mattress, parallel with Lance’s. “...get down here.”

“Lance—” Keith tried to push himself up again, but Lance grabbed him by the shoulder and kept him pinned to the blankets. “What are you doing?”

“Bringing you to my level,” said Lance, a stern frown tugging at his features. “So you’ll actually listen to me when I say it’s not your fault.”

Keith furrowed his brow. “What are you talking about? It’s obviously—”

Lance clapped a hand over Keith’s mouth. “It’s obviously the result of Haxus being an asshole.” His eyes narrowed. “You’ve been by yourself too long, Keith. I mean, you’ve got Red, sure, but, like, Red would have to be there whether she liked you or not, right? Gotta fight the Galra together and stuff. You haven’t had someone who stayed with you just because they wanted to be with you since, what was it?” He let his hand drop from Keith’s mouth. “Nineteen ninety—”
“Ever.”

“What?”

Keith averted his eyes, focusing on the pillowcase that stretched between his face and Lance’s. “I’ve never had anyone who just chose to be with me. Ever. I’ve...only ever had my family and Alfor. People who felt responsible for me. I was weird, shy, Asian in a mostly white school, gay… Probably a little too into science… And I had secrets.” He shrugged. “I never made friends at school or anywhere else. I had Alfor, books, and video games. That was my life.”

“And...you didn’t even really have your parents because you were too scared of what they’d do if they found out you were gay to actually talk to them.”

Keith didn’t have the words to answer. He just hoped that Lance didn’t need them.

“Okay.” Before Keith could so much as lift his gaze off the pillow, Lance’s hand, which seemed exceptionally tan and sandy against Keith’s pale skin, reached out and grabbed Keith’s, wrapping tight around his fingers. Lance pulled Keith’s hand closer to him, toward his chest, but never lifted it off of the surface of the mattress. Keith’s hand remained sandwiched between the cool sheets and the warmth of Lance’s hand.

Keith’s eyes found their joined hands safe, a safer place to look than Lance’s face.

“I’m going to tell you something really important,” said Lance. Keith didn’t dare to look higher than his moving lips. “So you better be listening. Are you?”

Keith nodded, his hair tangling against their shared pillow.

“Okay. Here goes.” Lance inhaled a breath so sharp that Keith could immediately tell he was breathing through his nose; it almost sounded like a sniff.

“I want to be with you,” said Lance. “Like I keep telling you, this whole last week sucked. It sucked balls, Keith.” His grip on Keith’s hand tightened. “And that doesn’t have anything to do with you being a Paladin or anything like that. I don’t care about you being dead. I stopped thinking about you as ‘that dead guy’ a long time ago. Like, first day. And yeah, I kinda figured you were an asshole because all you did was yell at me. But like... I don’t know, I think part of me understood that there was a pretty good guy underneath all of that. I mean…” He laughed faintly, almost in disbelief. “You washed the dishes for me.”

Even Keith had to laugh a little at that.

“No, you don’t understand!” Lance’s enthusiasm was so warm that Keith had no choice but to finally look at his face and see the smile he knew was there. “I hate washing dishes. That’s basically on par with all the life-saving crap you did for me. And the whole basement thing and everything like that... You are a good guy, Keith, and I figured that out pretty quick. Haxus was bullshit, okay? I didn’t hate you. Ever. I was freaked out for, like, fifteen minutes, and then I was unsure about you for maybe a day. The closest I got to hating you was just being really frustrated and confused when you yelled at me for trying to help you.”

“I’m sorry—”

“I know, Keith.” Lance squeezed Keith’s hand too hard, just for a moment, before loosening his grip. Loosening, but never letting go. “I know. You’re sorry, I’m sorry, we’re sorry. We both fell for Haxus’ trap, okay? You’ve apologized already, and so have I. You don’t need to keep doing it. We’re cool. And that’s not even what this is about, anyway.” Though Lance still smiled, the smile
turned a little more serious. His brow furrowed, and there was something more intense in his eyes than Keith had ever seen. “This is about you being worth the friendship on your own. Like, I definitely appreciate you saving my ass a million times a day, but that’s not why I want to stick with you.”

Lance brought Keith’s hand closer to his chest, close enough for Keith to feel his heartbeat through the fabric of his t-shirt.

“The whole ghost...Paladin...whatever thing, yeah, that brought us together, and I’m glad it did, but what’s keeping us together runs a lot deeper than that.” Lance hesitated, and his eyes darted to the ceiling. “At least, it does for me.” They darted back down, meeting Keith’s gaze effortlessly. “You wanna know what really makes you my friend?”

Warily, silently, Keith nodded. His own hair tickled his cheek with the movement.

“The marker fight,” said Lance in all seriousness.

A startled laugh escaped Keith before he could catch it. “What?”

“I’m serious!” said Lance. “That’s, like, the one time I think I got to see the real you. Not Keith the Paladin, but Keith the person.”

Keith swore he felt his heart—the heart in him that hadn’t managed a single true beat in the past nineteen years—stutter and skip. “What’s the difference?”

“There’s a huge difference,” insisted Lance. “It’s like the difference between seeing someone at work and seeing them at home. You weren’t worried about anyone’s life being in danger anymore, you weren’t all defensive, you were just...you. I got to see how competitive you can get and I heard you laugh and I saw you smile so much that I bet your face started to hurt. I know mine did.” Lance shifted his hand slightly so that his thumb could run over the back of Keith’s fingers.

Keith felt as though sparks flew every time Lance’s thumb moved from one finger to the next, like flint over a series of steel ridges.


“Hey,” protested Keith, though there was a smile tugging at his lips.

“I’m just saying,” said Lance, shrugging, his own smile bright and warm as ever. “Moments like that...and moments like this?” He lifted Keith’s hand off of his chest, presenting it like an award before letting their joined hands fall back onto the mattress. “This is what makes me want to stick with you. This is what I hated not having when we weren’t talking. This is what makes me want to be with you. This is what makes us friends. At least to me.” His smile slid off of his face. “It’s too important to me.” He bit his lip, and it was strange to see Lance so unsure. “You’re...too important to me.”

Keith felt as though Haxus’ hand was wrapped around his throat again. But it was a different sort of choke. Terrifying, but in a whole new way, something Keith hadn’t ever felt before, something he couldn’t quite put a name to.

“...I won’t,” he said, voice cracking. “Leave, I mean.”

“Promise me,” ordered Lance, his eyes narrowing. “Promise me that no matter what any crappy Galra says, you’ll at least talk it out with me instead of just cutting me out of your life again. Promise you won’t leave unless I actually do something unapologetically shitty that’s worth leaving me for.”
“You wouldn’t do that,” murmured Keith, turning his hand over in Lance’s so that they could awkwardly weave their fingers together, the side of Lance’s hand nestled between Keith’s thumb and index finger. “If this is who you really are, just like you were saying this is who I really am…” Keith’s eyes sought out Lance’s, which were locked onto their hands, now joined properly. “Then I can’t see you being that much of a jerk.”

Lance’s eyes finally tore themselves from the mismatched pair of hands and met Keith’s gaze. “That’s not a promise,” he said, his expression unreadable.

“I promise,” said Keith firmly. “Better?”

“Much better,” whispered Lance, his boyish smile tugging at his lips again.

Keith wasn’t sure how long they stayed like that. Long enough for the radio application on Lance’s phone to switch songs more times than Keith could count.

Long enough for Lance to doze off with the lights still on.

But not long enough for Lance to let go of Keith’s hand.

“And if I fail…” Ulaz’s golden eyes narrowed in the darkness. “Should I fail…do we have an alternative?”

“We do,” said Thace, quiet, worlds beneath confident. “But it would take centuries to carry out, if not millennia.”

Ulaz closed his eyes. His wrinkled brow smoothed out. He took a long, deep breath. “Then…I will do my best not to fail.”

Thace gripped Ulaz’s shoulders, squeezed them until Ulaz’s eyes opened again.

“For the sake of far more than the Blue Lion,” said Thace gently, his clawed thumbs stroking circles into Ulaz’s shoulders, “I pray that you don’t.”

Ulaz reached for Thace’s left hand and pulled it free. “Keep your emotions in check, Thace. This is far greater than either of us. An entire world is at stake.”

“I’m well aware,” said Thace, the smallest of unhappy smiles stretching his lips. “Why do you think I had you talk to Alfor in the first place?”

Chapter End Notes

Twitter: @YouAreInAComa
Lance dozing off was not something that Keith had prepared for.

He must have been exhausted. Or maybe just really, really comfortable, like Keith was. He was still in his clothes, hadn’t done his nightly skin routine… He wasn’t even under the blankets.

Well, maybe Keith could fix that part.

If he could just free his hand from Lance’s.

Keith slid his arm back, trying to free himself from Lance’s grip.

Lance’s response, despite his unconsciousness, was to squeeze, pinning Keith’s fingers in place between his own, trapping him.

“Uh, Lance?” attempted Keith quietly, unsure of whether Lance was truly asleep; no sleeping person should have had a grip that strong.

Lance didn’t respond.

Keith sighed emphatically. “Great.” He tilted his head back, trying to find where his Lion had gone. “Red?”

A conversational puff sounded from the floor behind Keith’s back, alerting him to her presence.

“Do you mind helping me out?”

There was a grunt, a few padded footfalls, and Red’s head appeared over the edge of the bed a moment later, the corner of Lance’s bedcovers clamped in her mouth.

“Thanks.” Keith hesitated, frowned down at his arms, and, after a bit of struggling, managed to maneuver the arm he’d been leaning on between himself and Lance and over Lance’s side to grab the blanket corner offered to him. He pulled the edge of the blankets up, over Lance’s shoulders, and around his body the best that he possibly could with his limited maneuverability.

“One more thing,” said Keith, turning his attention back to Red, who was perched upright, her front paws on the edge of the bed behind Lance’s back.

Red blinked, long and slow, sending signals of trust and acceptance and willingness to help.

“Get the lights?”

Unceremoniously, Red lowered herself from the edge, slinked around the foot of the bed, and leaned back on her hind legs to reach up and paw clumsily at the light switch. After a couple of tries, she succeeded in hitting it properly, and the lights went out, leaving only the glow of the moonlight to shine in through the window.

That was the extent of what Keith could do. He wasn’t exactly going to be able to plug Lance’s phone in the way that he was, even with Red’s help, and he couldn’t exactly wash Lance’s face for him.
A bizarre thought ran through his head that horrified him for a full second before he realized where it was that the thought really came from.

“Red,” he hissed over his shoulder. “I’m not taking his pants off!”

Red gave an amused puff and settled herself dutifully to the floor at Keith’s back, thankfully without any further inappropriate comments.

His face nearly as crimson as his Lion’s fur, Keith lowered himself back down onto the pillow. He supposed he was stuck like that for the night, lying in Lance’s bed, curled up beside him, their hands bound together by Lance’s killer grip.

But of all the places to be stuck, Keith couldn’t think of a single place he’d rather be.

Deep in the catacombs, surrounded by walls of cold stone, illuminated by nothing more than the faint glow of the violet crystals that lined the ceiling, was a series of vials. The long list of reasons why Haggar made her decision to expose the world of the living to the world of the Galra in the first place.

Quintessence.

Quintessence that could have granted her immortality, had she not been killed the day that Alfor and his followers decided to fight back.

Quintessence that, to the day, she swore she would be able to use to bring herself back, to take the Galra that she was and turn that Galra back into an Altean.

But there was one vial that had been there from the day she had turned into an Altean. One that Haggar had never used, despite how long it had been there. One Ulaz had seen her deliberately avoid time and time again.

Ulaz had made assumptions about that vial before. Either Haggar was afraid of that quintessence, or she was saving it for some greater purpose. Yes, he’d always known that it was special, but he’d never given the reason why much thought.

But Thace’s theory made a great deal of sense. Too much sense. And Ulaz agreed that it was time that they took action.

He pushed past the seemingly endless rows and columns of colorful lights—the most color any Galra would ever see outside the world of the living—and did his best to ignore just how many of those lights were yellow, yellow like thousands of Alteans lost to the Galra, yellow like dandelions and daffodils and sunshine and the kindest of people, yellow like Thace had been long ago. And at the end of the corridor, on the farthest wall, behind the presently seat where Haggar could most often be found, on a shelf surrounded by dust and little else, sat a diamond-like vial that almost seemed to hover, perfectly balanced on a single sharp point as it was.

The contents inside shimmered a peaceful blue, but Ulaz could sense the desperation that tried so hard to break free.

“Not much longer now,” murmured Ulaz, a purple-clawed hand outstretched toward the vial. “In
only a moment’s time, you will be free once more.”

“No.”

The voice at Ulaz’s back froze him to his bones.

“That quintessence,” said the scratchy, cruel voice Ulaz had come to know all too well over the centuries spent serving it, “is never to be freed. And neither shall yours.”

Ulazy allowed his hand to drop, and he closed his eyes.

There was no point in fighting.

He’d already lost.

*I’m sorry, Thace.*

Pain flushed through his body as if every drop of blood that had once rushed through his system returned as shards of glass.

The last Ulaz saw was vivid streaks of purple, like lightning that danced within his eyes themselves.

And he was no more.

---

*The Galra were far too many.*

*Alfor had picked up his bow, and he was fighting back, but he could only do so much when they were pouring in from every ounce of shadowed earth, which—god, that was every patch of ground, wasn’t it?*

*The other Paladins—that was what they were, right?—were fighting back the best that they could as well, but in the face of an army so huge, that wasn’t saying much.*

*The big guy could take out as many as five with a single swing of his axe, but like the unrelenting heads of a Hydra, ten would rise up in their place.*

*The Paladin with the long, green cape was tiny, and so were the spades that she wielded. She could handle herself well enough, but when it came to actually taking the numbers down and clearing the field, she fell short.*

*Even the skinny guy, as fast as he was moving, wasn’t moving quickly enough to diminish the numbers.*

*Screaming. More screaming in the language that Lance didn’t understand.*

*Lance felt himself scream, heard his own voice, heard himself speak in that strange language.*

*Alfor’s screaming answered him.*

*He felt a coldness spread through him, a fear, despair. He screamed again.*

*More screams returned to him.*
He tried to push through the Galra, to get to Alfor, but he was grabbed by the shoulders and turned around.

The skinny Paladin was screaming in his face, furious, but—God, he looked just like Keith. Not physically—his skin too dark, hair too short and curly, lips too full, height too great—but in his expression, he was identical. It was the kind of fury that Lance had only just begun to understand was thinly-veiled terror.

He was just as scared as Lance was. He just showed it differently.

They were losing the fight.

They were resorting to something, some desperate attempt at a pyrrhic victory.

What? What was it?

Terrible, Lance knew, or the Paladins—all of them—wouldn’t look so horrified.

The wiry Paladin that had been screaming in Lance’s face gripped him by the wrist and began to pull him through the seemingly endless flood of Galra that pushed around him like river rapids, clawing their way toward something more important than Lance or any of the Paladins.

Something wrapped around his leg.

And he woke up.

He woke up to a face so close to his that when he flinched, his forehead cracked against the other like a sledgehammer on concrete.

“Ave Maria, Keith!” Lance frantically rubbed at his forehead, trying in vain to abate the stinging and only succeeding in making it worse. “What the cheese are you doing?!”

“I was just trying to see if you were okay!” yelped Keith, rubbing his own forehead with the heel of his right hand, eyes pressed tightly shut. “You were having a nightmare or something! I was just worried!”

Lance flinched. His shoulders tensed.

His nightmares. The one thing he’d been avoiding during his deep talk with Keith before he’d fallen asleep. The one thing that seemed to stick in his throat every time he tried to bring them up.

And he wasn’t even sure. It had been fine, talking about it with Pidge, but for some reason, when it came to Keith, he just got...nervous.

“Lance?” Keith lowered his hand from his head. Now that Lance knew to look, he noticed the glimmer of anxiety in those narrowed, angry eyes.

“What?” snapped Lance, latching onto his first defensive impulse.

Keith furrowed his brow. “You were the one who said we should have been talking about our problems this whole time instead of shutting each other out. So are you going to practice what you preach, or not?”

“Who says I’m not?” demanded Lance, scowling.

“You cry at night.”
“Wh—”

“Every night,” pressed Keith, stopping Lance from any attempt at protest. “Even when we weren’t talking, I saw it.”

“You didn’t come anywhere near my room when we weren’t talking,” insisted Lance.

“I was there the first night,” said Keith, frowning in a way that definitely didn’t make him look particularly pretty in the moonlight from the window. At all. “I still noticed.”

Shit. Lance barely resisted the urge to physically shake the thoughts out of his head... Serious conversation. Stop ogling.

“Well,” he grumbled, thinking back to the night Keith had mentioned and realizing he remembered it a lot better than he wished he did. “That actually wasn’t even about the—”

“And I know it wasn’t just your eyes watering like you said it was the first time I asked,” continued Keith, completely ignoring Lance’s attempt to explain. “You’re having nightmares. You’ve been having nightmares. I’m not the only one with secrets, Lance, and you know I won’t judge you for whatever it is you’re hiding. So spill it.”

A tightness around Lance’s hand that he hadn’t noticed since waking grew tighter, finally catching Lance’s attention.

How long had Keith been holding his hand?

Wait, they weren’t still holding hands, were they? From the night before? Surely not.

Oh, god, I held onto his hand all night, didn’t I?

“Keith, it’s no big deal,” insisted Lance, resolving to ignore the hand on his own. “So I’ve been having nightmares. So what? It’s not like it’s affecting my real life or anything.”

“Maybe not, but...” Keith dropped his gaze to the space on the rumpled blanket between them. “...It’s still making you cry.”

Lance’s heart lurched into his throat.

Who the hell gave Keith the right? He wasn’t allowed to be that sweet. No way. It had to be against the law for cute ghost boys with gentle eyes and dark hair that fell over his neck in just the right way to be that goddamn caring and sincere.

“...Okay.” Lance closed his eyes. Maybe if he just stopped looking at Keith, he wouldn’t be quite so weak. “Okay, yeah. I’ll... I’ll try to talk about my nightmares. It won’t be easy, though. They’re...confusing. It’s gonna be real hard to put them into words.”

“That’s okay,” said Keith, his voice soft and assuring in Lance’s ears. “I can be patient.”

At this, Lance opened his eyes, lowering his defenses only to send Keith a pointed, skeptical frown.

Keith averted his eyes sheepishly. “...Okay, so I’m...maybe not the most patient person in the world, but...patience yields focus, so—”

“Patience yields focus’?” Lance barely suppressed a chuckle. “Wow, you and Shiro really are related.”
Keith looked back at Lance, the tiniest of frowns pulling down at the corners of his mouth. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Chill out, Keith, I wasn’t accusing you of anything.” Lance nudged Keith’s leg with his foot. “Shiro just says the same thing is all.”

“...He does?” Keith drew his eyebrows together; he seemed genuinely surprised.

“Yeah,” said Lance. “What, is that some kind of family motto or something?”

Keith shook his head. “No, it’s not. It’s...actually something Alfor taught me, and then I taught it to Shiro. But he was so young back then, I never thought he’d actually remember it.”

Lance’s brow furrowed. Something Alfor taught him.

“Look, Keith…”

Keith did look. His eyes met Lance’s. And Lance’s words caught in his throat again.

Just say it. You can do this. Just say it.

“I’ve been dreaming about Alfor.”

“What do you mean you’ve been dreaming about Alfor?” Keith didn’t seem accusatory so much as he seemed confused. “You don’t know him. You don’t even know what he looks like.”

“Does he use a bow? And have blue eyes? And blue marks on his cheeks?”

Keith narrowed his eyes. His lips parted in shock. “How... How did you—?”

“Dude, I have no idea,” groaned Lance. “I wish I did.” He leaned back, reclining against his pillow. “I didn’t even know that was who it was until I saw him in Haxus’ memories. But yeah, it’s him. It’s definitely him.”

“You saw him in Haxus’ memories?” demanded Keith, squeezing Lance’s hand hard. Too hard. It wasn’t reassuring anymore. It was angry now. So much for patience. “When were you going to tell me this?”

“I…” Lance sighed and laid an arm over his eyes. “I don’t know. When it stopped being confusing?”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” protested Keith. “Why wouldn’t you tell me the second you realized they were about Alfor? I knew Alfor. Maybe I could provide context. And yet you didn’t even try? What kind of dreams are you even having?”

Lance winced and pressed his arm harder into his eyes. “I don’t know, man, there’s a lot of them. Most of them are just, like, images. Like, not still images, but almost like… Do you know what a GIF is?”

“A what?”

“That’s a no.” Lance groaned and raised his arm off of his head. “Damn generational gap—Basically, I wasn’t seeing anything of substance for a long time. Just, like, flashes of him.” His arm flopped against the top of the mattress. “Except...lately I’ve started to see this... I don’t know, some kind of a ceremony or a ritual or something. And then I saw it in Haxus’ memories, too, so... I guess that probably means it really happened, right? I just... I don’t understand why or how I’m seeing it. Do you know anything about—?”
“I’m an idiot.”

Lance lifted his head, a frown creasing his lips as he took in a very frustrated-looking Keith, his face buried in one hand. “Uh… I mean, I’m inclined to agree, but what—”

“I never questioned why you could see me,” said Keith, dropping his hand to reveal a scowl that was pointed at the mattress and thankfully not at Lance’s face. “I just accepted it. Why did I just accept it? There has to be a reason why you can see me. Of course there does. *Augh!*” He hit himself in the head with the heel of his hand. “Stupid!”

Lance quickly sat up again and caught Keith’s hand, keeping it away from his face, away from where it could do damage. “Calm down. You’re not stupid. Why does that make you stupid?”

“Because that should have been the *first thing I worried about,*” said Keith, abruptly turning his scowl on Lance. “Maybe I just accepted it because I could always see Alfor, but that’s not *normal.* I should have questioned it right away.”

“Why does it matter?” asked Lance, sending a scowl right back.

“I *don’t know,*” snapped Keith. “I have no idea. I have *no idea* what’s going on, and that’s part of the problem. I’m supposed to be protecting— This could be really important, but I never even thought about—”

“*Keith.*” Lance let go of Keith’s hands and reached out to grab his face.

Keith flinched, and it occurred very abruptly to Lance that Keith wasn’t Hunk, that while touching Hunk’s face tended to ground him, the same action might have the opposite effect on Keith, might make him even more anxious.

But Keith’s scowl softened, and Lance relaxed; maybe it was the right move after all.

“Stop freaking out,” whispered Lance. “You can’t go back and make yourself start worrying about something you didn’t worry about, and you don’t even know if it’s important to worry about in the first place.”

Keith still seemed tense, and Lance knew from years of being around Hunk that “stop freaking out” wasn’t really going to help anyone, but it was the only way Lance could think of to appeal to Keith’s logical side, to make at least part of him realize that it wasn’t the end of the world.

“Fine,” said Keith stiffly, reaching up to pull Lance’s hands down. “You’re right. I can’t go back in time and make myself realize it was important sooner. But that doesn’t mean it’s not important now. We need to figure out why you can see me.”

“Oh okay,” said Lance, shrugging, trying to seem as nonchalant as possible in the hopes that it would rub off on Keith. “Sure. Why do you think I can see you?”

“I…” Keith clenched his jaw. “…I don’t know. But whatever the reason is, it’s probably the same reason why you’re seeing this…ceremony.”

Lance frowned. “I’m guessing Alfor didn’t tell you about anything like that.”

Keith laughed nervously. “Nothing like that. I don’t have a clue what that could be. Maybe there was some old tradition from his time when people became Paladins, but if that’s the case, then it’d just be a cultural thing, because there definitely wasn’t some big ceremony when I…”
Keith froze mid-sentence. He glared at the blankets so hard that Lance swore he was trying to set them on fire.

“Keith?” Lance leaned down, trying to catch his friend’s eye. “Are you okay?”

Keith’s gaze met with Lance’s so abruptly that it made him jump. “Yeah.” A shake of the head, and Keith seemed back to normal. “Yeah, sorry, I just… I just realized…” He sighed and cautiously met Lance’s eyes. “Lance, I know how this is going to sound after everything we’ve talked about, but… There’s something I want to tell you, but I can’t—”

“Keith—”

“—yet.”

Keith closed his eyes.

Lance frowned, waited patiently for an explanation.

“I will,” said Keith. “I want to, I just… And it’s not that I don’t trust—”

“It has to do with how you died, doesn’t it?”

Keith opened his eyes just as quickly as he closed them, and he gawked at Lance, startled.

Lance shrugged, trying to look less curious than he felt. “You got defensive the last time I asked about it, so I figured it’s probably the same right now. It’s a touchy subject. Probably one that I’ll never totally understand. I get why you’d hesitate to tell me. You don’t have to explain yourself.”

The surprise in Keith’s eyes faded away. In its place, gratefulness flooded in, and Lance was immediately glad that he’d been able to handle a “Keith situation” with grace for once.

“I still want to tell you,” said Keith.

“I know,” said Lance. “But there’s no rush or anything. Tell me when the time’s right. I mean, you’re allowed to have secrets, just...not...” Grimacing, Lance reached up behind his head and rubbed his neck, fingers tracing over the scabs that were still healing. So much for grace. “Not friendship-ruining secrets. You know?”

Keith closed his eyes again. This time, instead of looking like he was bracing for impact, he seemed more relaxed, relieved, and he was quick to open them again. And when he did open them, he was smiling. Just a little bit—in fact, if Lance didn’t know Keith as well as he did, he might not have noticed the smile at all—but it was still there.

“Why bring it up, though?” asked Lance.

“Well...” Keith’s smile faded as quickly as it came. “It...kind of has to do with what I’m about to say, and I wanted you to know why I couldn’t really talk about it much. I didn’t want you to ask questions I couldn’t answer.”

“Okay,” said Lance. “I can keep my mouth shut. Go for it.”

Keith leaned back on his arms, tilted his head back, looked at the ceiling, took a deep breath, and admitted, “I...actually don’t know that much about being a Paladin.”

Lance cocked an eyebrow. “But...you are a Paladin, how do you—?”
“That’s not keeping your mouth shut,” grumbled Keith, his eyes still on the ceiling.

Lance winced. “Guess not. Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” mumbled Keith. He leaned back further, back and back until his spine was pressed to the bed, arms extended on either side of himself. “I… I know some stuff, obviously, but I don’t know any of the history of Paladins before me or how far back it goes. I know it’s at least ten-thousand years, but—”

“Ten-thousand?” squawked Lance. “How?! Were there cavemen fighting caveman-Galra or something?!”

“Alteans, actually,” said Keith. “That’s...sort of a long story, though. If we started talking about that, you’d be up all night, and... Don’t you have work in the morning?”

“Actually,” announced Lance, “I’m off again. Two days in a row, baby. And without a crazy scheme involving cellophane and paintball guns to set up, I’ll actually be able to sleep in for once.”

“Well, still, it’d be exhausting to explain anyway,” said Keith. “Too exhausting for four in the morning, even if you do get to sleep in afterward. We’re saving that for later. Point is, that ceremony you dreamed about? That could be anything. I wouldn’t have a clue.”

“Great.” Lance sighed and leaned back, resting his head against the pillow again. “That’s helpful.”

“Well...maybe we can still make some sense of your dreams,” said Keith, sounding less-than-hopeful. “What was the ceremony like?”

“Five people in a circle,” said Lance. “Pretty sure those were Paladins. There was one person in the middle, too. I’m guessing that one was leading the whole thing, but I don’t know. I don’t have a clue what they were trying to do, but it had something to do with quintessence, and...then the Galra attacked, and they all had to stop whatever they were doing to defend themselves.”

Keith was utterly silent for several seconds.

“...That doesn’t tell me anything,” he finally grumbled, sounding just as perturbed as Lance felt.

“You’re telling me, dude. You are telling me.”

______________________________________

Keith was gone by the time Lance woke up properly.

As expected from a night of life-changing conversations, Lance was tired. Deeply, truly tired. Part of him wanted to go back to sleep, but he recognized this sort of “tired” as the sluggish and heavy fatigue that only got worse with more sleep. And even if it wasn’t, a quick look at Lance’s phone revealed that it was already one in the afternoon.

It was one in the afternoon, and he had two messages from Hunk.

Gonna be gone all day. Shay’s got this bake sale thing going on and I’m helping her with that. You gonna be okay?

with*
Lance smiled. A bake sale? *Damn.* He was almost jealous. A whole lot of people were going to experience Hunk’s cooking for the first time, completely unaware that their entire outlook on life was about to change.

*I’ll be fine. Have fun. Don’t worry abt me lol*

Hunk’s response was a lot faster than Lance had been expecting.

*You sure? Not worried about that guy anymore?*

*Nah,* replied Lance, holding his phone inches above his face. *Were fine now. Called lst nite. Were like actually friends again. Thx agan 4 yesterday btw*

*No prob. Glad you two made up. Maybe I’ll be able to meet him someday. You know, when he’s retired from espionage.*

*Not a spy hunk*

*Whatever you say, buddy.*

A tiny speech bubble indicating that Hunk was still writing gave Lance pause, and he raised his eyebrow as he watched those three dots grow and shrink one at a time. The longer they stayed on the screen, the more concerned Lance grew.

*Good luck getting that sweet, sweet spy D.*

Lance dropped the phone on his face.

“Augh!” He sat upright, rubbing his injured nose with one hand, raising his phone eye-level with his other hand so he could stare at it in disbelief.

*Hunk what the actual fuck*

*Well, I mean, ouy know he’s gay now, right? So you’ve got a chance.*

*Plz shut up 4ever*

Hunk replied with a single cheery, yellow heart that Lance glared at for several seconds before setting his phone down and making his way to his closet for a change of clothes.

Well, that was one way to wake him up.

Upon venturing beyond his bedroom door, Lance was greeted by the sight of Keith. Only the sight of him for the moment; he was a bit distracted for the time being, locked in battle with an invisible opponent. There was nothing frantic about his movements, however, suggesting that it was a normal Galra, nothing in particular to worry about.

Lance leaned over the catwalk banister, trying to get a better look at the battle taking place several feet below.

Well...perhaps less at the battle and more at the only visible combatant.

There was something truly bizarre about watching a person in what could potentially be a life-or-death struggle and only really paying attention to the muscles in his back or the curve of his hips as he twisted away from an attack, and Lance was incredibly aware of that, but he was also aware that this had been Keith’s entire existence since 1998. There was *something* mundane about it. That made
it okay to gawk a little, right?

Judging by the fact that Keith had stopped fighting for long enough to push his hair out of his face, Lance assumed that the battle had been won.

“Looking good, Samurai,” called Lance, supporting his chin with one hand as he leaned over the banister.

Keith lifted his head and smiled so genuinely that Lance was sure he felt his heart grow so large that it squished against his ribcage.

*Out with one problem, in with another.*

Well, at least this ‘problem’ was one that Lance was more than prepared to deal with. He’d take being totally smitten with someone out of his league over *losing* that someone *any* day of the week.

---

Losing Ulaz had been a blow. Not only to the objective, but to Thace personally.

All at once, Thace lost his only ally in his rebellion as well as his only companion.

But Ulaz’s death did teach Thace something, and that was that he needed to be more patient. There was bound to be a perfect time to strike, some time when Haggar was distracted. Not just a minor distraction like the sort Ulaz and Thace had foolishly relied upon before, but a major one. One that would take Haggar out of the picture so completely that even her mind would not wander into the room where Thace’s act of treason was to take place.

And that key time was bound to be when the point of exposure was in the shadow of the moon. Haggar would be pushing as many of the Galra through the exposure and into the world of the living as she could. Her mind would be on attack, not defense. It was the best possible opportunity.

It was just a matter of finding the *right* eclipse.

Complication after complication arose. Either Thace was stationed in a specific place too far from his goal or he would be too close to Haggar for his absence to go unnoticed. During one instance, he realized upon the initiation of his attempt that he wasn’t as prepared as he liked to be, so he didn’t follow through, though he was able to begin to lay groundwork for a sure attempt, one that could never fail, even if Thace was captured, even if he died.

Thace wasn’t sure how many eclipses had passed by the time opportunity raised its blessed head. More than ten. That much, at least, he was sure of. But it didn’t matter. Alfor was still fighting on the other side, and as long as that was true, he wasn’t too late.

Like Ulaz before him, he made his way into Haggar’s private stores. It was with a great deal of guilt that he passed by the dozens and dozens of vials, proof of Haggar’s countless terrible deeds, without sparing them a second glance.

He was there for one reason and one reason alone, and that reason was standing by itself on the farthest wall, far away from any other vial, exuding a pale blue glow.

He recognized the color immediately. It was like the reflection of the sky on the surface of the sea.
Blue. Truly blue. The truest blue he’d ever laid eyes on, the same as it was the day that Haggar brought it in.

He clutched it tight in his hand. Blue quintessence. Blue like Ulaz. So tiny it could be restrained by a container no larger than Thace’s hand. And yet, it was the key to ensuring that innocent people would no longer line the shelves of Haggar’s walls.

Thace took a deep breath. For millennia, he’d been planning for this single moment. It was hard to believe that everything he’d been setting up for nearly ten-thousand years would be over with a turn of his wrist.

He gripped the vial with both hands, twisted its glass stopper...and he heard a click from over his shoulder.

“Sir Thace… Did you find what you were looking for?”

Long, sharp claws pierced his back, digging hard into his spine. Sparks rippled through his entire body.

He could no longer move.

Haggar’s harsh, raspy growl invaded his senses like an airborne poison. “I had a feeling it was you. Ulaz would not have acted without orchestration, and the two of you had always been too close for comfort.” She snatched the vial from his hand. “And to think, you came so close. Had I left the attack in Sendak’s care a tick later, you might have succeeded. Such a shame that the Blue Lion won’t be reviving this eclipse.”

She retracted her claws and whipped Thace around by the shoulders, pressing him against the shelves with one hand.

“I am going to ask you some questions,” she warned, raising her free hand to Thace’s eyes. Something coalesced under her palm, something deep purple and foreboding. Sinister. Unidentifiable. “I will know if you lie.”

Of that, Thace had no doubt. Though he didn’t plan on giving her any answers at all.

“Are there any more of you that I should know about?” demanded Haggar. “Spies, traitors...infiltrators. Anyone who would bring harm to the cause.”

Thace almost laughed. ‘The cause.’ As if it were a movement and not a selfish quest for power. But he didn’t laugh.

Instead, he looked Haggar dead in the eye, summoned what little courage he had left in him, and spoke a single word

“Marmora.”

In response, the luxite shavings Thace had been subtly and silently leaving around Haggar’s study by the handful throughout the centuries began to glow.

Haggar barely had time to stumble away from Thace, eyes wide, before the screeching began.

The shavings began to vibrate with such high frequency and volume that the entire room seemed to be screaming. It was excruciating, not only for Haggar, but for Thace as well. He had hoped to make
it through unscathed, to assist the Blue Lion without activating the luxite. But he’d already lost. There was no choice but to resort to his failsafe.

One by one, the high frequencies pushed the glass of each vial to its limit. They popped like boils, releasing immeasurable amounts of quintessence into the air.

The vial at Thace’s back exploded, bursting into light that mingled for only a moment with every other freed glow that illuminated the darkened catacomb walls.

Haggar may have screamed when she noticed what had taken place, but Thace could not hear her, nor could he hear the luxite anymore. The screech had already completely destroyed his hearing.

His eyes, however...those were fine.

He could see Haggar’s fierce, incensed expression as she advanced on him, her entire body sparkling dangerously.

Thace closed his eyes, and a small, satisfied smile pulled at his lips.

Wait for me, Ulaz. I'll be home soon.

Chapter End Notes

Introducing Your Ghost Boyfriend Like
-waits patiently for the angry mob of Thace and Ulaz fans-

Also, Paladins... Thank you so much for 10,000 hits. It means the world that you guys are consistently bothering to look at my little fic, to spread the word like some of you have been doing. I'm absolutely floored.
Thunder rolled in from the far distance, deep and rumbling, but somehow quiet and calm at the same time. Lance gripped the edge of the sink and leaned in toward the window, which he’d opened, allowing the hot, humid air of the impending summer rain into the house. He arced his trunk over the stainless steel faucet, apparently trying to get as much of his face in the heavy breeze as possible.

“Man, I missed rain,” he mused. Keith could only guess from body language and his knowledge of Lance’s expressiveness what his face—impossible to see when it was turned toward the window like that—must have looked like. Some sort of mix between serenity and excitement, no doubt. A peaceful smile, perhaps, but eyebrows raised and eyes wide, eagerly anticipating the incoming weather. “It’s been too long. I mean, half the reason I wanted to move up here in the first place is because it’s supposed to rain all the time here, but I’ve seen nothing but sun since I got here.”

“It’s summer,” said Keith, casually crossing his arms over the countertop he was seated at. “Just wait until autumn. You’ll get tired of the rain pretty quick.” Lance being the only one home—and the loss of any reason to avoid him—meant that Keith could protect him best by just...spending time with him. It was pleasant. Really pleasant. It almost made Keith feel normal. Like he had never died, like he was just living out a lazy day with a friend. “It did rain a bit after you left for the funeral, though.”

“Of course it did,” scoffed Lance, crossing his wrists over the faucet, perhaps putting a little too much weight on it. “Figures that it’d wait until I was gone to rain the first time.”

“You really like the rain that much?” asked Keith.

Lance turned away from the window, and whatever sense of wonder that Keith knew had to be on his face when he was looking through the window was quickly replaced by a quirk of the eyebrow. “You don’t?”

Keith shrugged. He didn’t have much of an opinion on rain anymore. He missed it sometimes, but for the most part, all it usually meant was that the rooms were a little darker, a little more dangerous. The clouds only made Keith’s job harder. He opened his mouth to say as much, but before he got the chance, thunder rolled again, and Lance grinned and leaned back toward the window again.

“Not as much as you do,” decided Keith, a content smile stretching his lips. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone love the rain as much as you do.”

“And you know,” said Lance, “I never understood that. Even if people hate shoveling the snow or trying to drive through it or whatever, most people agree that snow is at least pretty while it’s falling. And ask ten people totally randomly how they feel about the ocean and nine times out of ten they’re gonna at least say that they like the beach. But rain? Psh.” He straightened his back, finally moving away from the window and back to the stovetop he’d been neglecting. “People always say that it’s ‘gloomy’ or ‘dreary’ or ‘depressing’ or whatever. They don’t see the beauty of it. Not unless they can, like, equate it to flowers growing or something. But I’m talking about the beauty of the rain itself.”

Keith raised one of his hands off of the countertop and rested his chin on top of it. “What about the rain makes it so beautiful to you?”
“Everything,” sighed Lance, picking up the fork he’d been using to stir the macaroni since he set out to make the meal he’d been working on for the past twenty minutes. “The sounds, the smells... The way puddles reflect light...” He stabbed a piece of macaroni in the pot and shook the hot water out of the center before nibbling at it, probably testing to see whether it was still undercooked or not. Apparently satisfied, he twisted the knob at the front of the stove until the fire beneath the pot went out and kneeled set about looking through cabinets. “Not to mention the way it feels on your skin. The way it makes your clothes and hair stick to you and stuff...”

“Most people would hate that,” said Keith.

Lance sent Keith an unimpressed scowl from where he crouched on the floor. “Yeah, well, that’s ‘cause they’re stupid.”

Keith laughed, soft and happy, fond rather than amused.

A particularly loud crash came from the cabinet Lance had been looking through, the sound of several pots and pans clattering against one another.

“You all right?” asked Keith, still smiling.

“Yes!” squeaked Lance. “I’m great! Super great! Why wouldn’t I be great? Just gonna—” He slapped a plastic colander on top of the countertop and quickly climbed to his feet, kicking the cabinet closed. Keith noticed the slightest dusting of red on his cheeks.

“What are you blushing for?” asked Keith, grinning. “You just knocked over some pots. It’s not that big of a deal.”

Lance laughed, audibly nervous, and pushed his colander into the sink. “Who says I’m blushing? I’m not blushing.”

Keith rolled his eyes good-naturedly. “Right.”

Lance hastily grabbed for the pot of boiling macaroni. Too hastily. He quickly pulled his hand away, cursing. Water splashed over the side of the pot as it was quickly dropped back onto the stove, causing loud clang to ring out across the kitchen.

“Potholders— Motherfucking potholders are a thing—” He shook out his hand, hissing.

Keith’s chair scraped audibly across the floor as he jumped out of it. “Are you okay?”

Lance hissed, holding his hand in front of his eyes. “Y-Yeah,” he managed, wincing. “Yeah, I think so. Aloe is gonna be my best friend for the next week or so, but...”

“Show me,” said Keith urgently, pushing forward, moving around the counter without hesitation.

Lance rolled his eyes. “Keith, it’s not a big deal.”

“Still,” said Keith, reaching for Lance’s hand and taking it without permission. The skin was red, but the burn was minor, nothing to worry about, just like Lance said. He’d probably taken it away from the heat fast enough. All the same, Keith ran his fingers gently over the top of the burn, as if it would tell him something if he asked nicely enough.

“When I was little and skinned my knee climbing a tree or something, Alfor would heal it somehow.” He pulled his fingers away from Lance’s burn before he could do something stupid like accidentally press too hard, instead cradling Lance’s hand in both of his own, palm up, where it was
safe. “I think it’s probably like what Red does when I get hurt. But he never taught me how to do it, and neither has Red. I don’t even know if it’s something I can do. Maybe it’s just for Black Paladins. It might even just be an Altean thing. Since I can’t do that, though, I guess we’re gonna have to settle for what my mom did instead.”

“What is?” When Keith lifted his head, he saw Lance watching him skeptically, face still red from before. “Don’t say VapoRub or Tiger Balm. Just don’t. I am not putting any of that smelly crap on my hand.”

Keith looked back down at Lance’s hand. “Actually… I had something else in mind.”

“Like what?”

Keith hesitated for no longer than a second before he pulled Lance’s hand to his lips and kissed the heel of it, far enough away that it wouldn’t cause any pain, but close enough that the intention was clear.

“Like that.”

When Keith lifted his head and saw the look on Lance’s face, what little confidence he’d been holding onto disappeared.

His face was somehow even redder than it had been before, his blue eyes wide, his jaw hanging open.

Keith dropped Lance’s hand so quickly that it was as if he’d the one that had been burned. “I—I didn’t mean it like—”

“I— No, I know— I just—”

“Didn’t your parents ever kiss a scrape better or something?”

“Of course they did! But they’re not a h—!”

Thunder cracked so loudly and so suddenly that both Lance and Keith jumped…and then fell totally silent.

It was the first time in a while that they’d fallen into an awkward silence like that. Keith had foolishly thought that they’d passed that point, that it wouldn’t be a problem anymore, that they were friends and that meant the awkwardness would stop. Far from it, apparently.

He turned away from Lance ran a hand through his hair, pushing his bangs away from his face. This is stupid, he mused, narrowing his eyes at the colander inside the sink. It’s just Lance. I shouldn’t be this nervous.

But he was nervous. He was very nervous. And he had no idea why.

A drawer opened from behind Keith’s back, but he didn’t pay it much mind until it was followed by the sound of a heavy pot scraping against a stovetop.

“Lance.” Keith turned around quickly. “You’re hurt. You shouldn’t be doing that.”

Lance’s back tensed and he threw a frown over his shoulder. His face was still red. “What am I supposed to do, just not eat?”

Keith raised an eyebrow. “Or I could just finish it for you, like I was going to offer.”
Lance’s frown faded. “...Oh. That’d be… I mean… Do you know what to do?”

“I can kind of guess,” said Keith, shrugging. “Homemade or not, it’s still just macaroni and cheese, right? And if I mess up, you can always stop me.”

Lance frowned, narrowed his eyes, like he was looking for something, and he must have found it, because when he smiled next, it was all at once, like he’d just realized something. He looked relieved and overjoyed all at once, and Keith’s nervousness redoubled.

“Thanks, Keith,” said Lance, all warmth and genuine gratefulness. “I was not looking forward to mixing the cheese sauce in like this. It hurts my hand even when it’s not burned.”

Keith opened his mouth to respond long, long before he’d stopped staring at Lance’s smile. The result of that was a very long and drawn-out, “Uhh…” before Keith realized what he was doing and quickly shook his head to try to pull himself back into the present. “S-Sure thing,” he murmured and reached for the potholder in Lance’s hand, pushing past him to get to the pot of noodles.

Hunk was right.

Well, it wasn’t as though Lance hadn’t figured that out on his own by this point. And Hunk usually was right when it came to people, so that was nothing new, but it was always nice when Lance came to the same conclusion on his own some time after Hunk told him everything he needed to know.

And yeah, Keith was sweet.

He was kind and considerate and...not an asshole at all. He was just...kind of bad at showing that. At least like normal people did. He was all action, and when he tried to talk, it was a disaster.

But his actions… Those spoke louder than anything he could ever actually say.

Offering to finish making Lance’s macaroni and cheese...that rang out loud and clear.

So did grabbing Lance’s hand and pushing it under a steady stream of cool water from the faucet.

So did Keith’s constant checking of Lance’s hand, no matter how annoying it was.

And Keith’s offer to wash the dishes.

“You’re a lifesaver,” sighed Lance, crossing his arms over the countertop and resting his chin atop them. “Seriously. I hate dishes.”

“You’ve mentioned,” mumbled Keith, scrubbing at Lance’s bowl.

The pattering of rain through the half-open window in front of the sink grew very loud very quickly, and Lance lifted his head. “We might want to close that,” he suggested. As much as he loved the rain, he didn’t want it to damage the windowsill. That poor thing had already been through enough hell after that Galra sword that nearly took Lance’s head off.

Keith stopped scrubbing the bowl.

He didn’t respond.
His entire body froze in place.

Lance furrowed his brow. “Uh, Keith? The window?”

Again, Keith didn’t answer.

Lance was very quickly becoming very concerned. “Keith? Are you okay?”

Without a word, Keith reached out toward the window, but instead of pulling it closed like Lance had been expecting, he reached for the screen. The very tips of his first two fingers met the wire mesh, his other fingers still occupied by the washcloth he’d been using, and splatters of rain hit his hand only to bounce off and land on the faucet instead.

Lance felt oddly like he was intruding on some intimate moment. Like he’d walked in on a tender kiss rather than Keith simply touching a window screen. But that didn’t stop him from standing from the stool he’d been sitting on and crossing the short distance to where Keith stood in front of the sink.

Carefully, as if Keith were made of very thin glass, Lance lowered his uninjured hand onto Keith’s shoulder.

Keith jumped violently. The bowl in his hand clattered against the bottom of the sink, making Lance very glad that he’d decided to eat out of a plastic bowl that day.

“Hey—”

“Sorry,” grumbled Keith, turning away from Lance and reaching for the bowl.

“For what?” asked Lance, squeezing Keith’s shoulder through the thick fabric of his jacket. “What’s going on?”

Keith’s frown, already present, deepened, and he scrubbed harder at the bowl that Lance would have called clean several minutes ago. “It’s dumb.”

“Uh, no it’s not,” said Lance, raising an eyebrow. “If it’s dumb, you wouldn’t have, like, gone into a trance or something just now. What’s wrong?”

Keith closed his eyes. For the first time, Lance noticed that his hands were shaking.

“I’m not going to laugh or anything,” swore Lance. “I mean, I know I said you have the right to have secrets, but whatever this is, you’re obviously bothered by it. I don’t want you to have to deal with this on your own.”

Keith took a deep breath. He bent over the sink, gripping the edge of the counter. Lance watched water steadily drain from the cloth that was pinned between Keith’s hand and the wall of the sink, more and more wringing out as Keith squeezed it tighter and tighter, and then…

“Alfor…” Keith’s voice was surprisingly small. “Alfor used to say...that the worst part of being a Paladin was that he couldn’t feel the rain anymore. Once the first house was built here, that was it. No more weather. No sun on his skin, no throwing snowballs at his Lion, and no rain.” His shoulders were tense; Lance could feel it under his hand. “I was little the first time he told me that. Really little. I barely even remember it. I just remember wondering why someone would miss the rain. I thought it was gloomy and dreary, just like everything you said. But just now…” Keith stood up straight, his eyes narrowed hard at the window’s opening. “I finally understood. It just hit me that I’m never going to feel that again. I’m never going to come inside from a storm with my hair soaking wet and get to towel off and wrap myself in blankets with some hot tea… I’m never going to be able
to hear the sounds of raindrops echoing around the inside of an umbrella… I’m never going to be able to feel it against my skin again, not unless I press my hand against the window like just now. Even then, even when the wind is blowing in, I can still barely feel it.”

Lance wasn’t sure how long he’d been holding his breath, but it suddenly became very apparent that he was. “Shit,” he coughed through his tight throat. “Shit, Keith, I am so sorry.” Both of his hands raked anxiously through his hair, one after the other. “I didn’t mean— All that stuff I said about how great the rain is, I wasn’t even thinking about how you—”

“It’s fine,” insisted Keith, his hardened gaze still glued to the window.

“No, it’s not,” insisted Lance, dropping his hands to his sides. “I was stupid and inconsiderate and —”


“...And I’m going to make it up to you.”

This, at last, was enough to make Keith turn away from the window, a skeptical eyebrow raised. “...How?” he asked slowly, like he was afraid of the answer. Hell, he probably was.

But Lance knew what he was doing.

He grabbed Keith’s wrist with his uninjured hand and pulled him eagerly to the glass door that led outside. “We’re gonna go in the rain.”

Keith’s eyes widened and he dug his heels into the linoleum, easily strong enough to stop Lance in his tracks before he so much as reached the door handle. “I can’t go outside, Lance. Did you forget?”

“I didn’t forget,” said Lance, grinning. “I just think you’re wrong.”

“I’m not wrong, Lance!” growled Keith. “I’ve been dealing with this for almost two decades. And I watched Alfor deal with it for almost two decades before I took over for him. I might not know much about being a Paladin, but I know this.”

“Yeah, well, now you have something you didn’t have before,” said Lance confidently. “And it’s something Alfor didn’t have either.”

“What are you talking about?” Though a flicker of curiosity flashed through Keith’s eyes, it didn’t detract from the scowl one iota.

“You’ve got me,” said Lance, beaming. “And if I’m right—and I’m, like, at least 95% sure I am—then you won’t have to miss the rain anymore. So do you trust me, or not?”

To Lance’s astonishment, it was those words that finally made the crease between Keith’s eyebrows smooth out. His gaze softened, and their arms slackened between them as he stopped fighting Lance’s hand. He turned his face away, worrying his lip between his teeth, inhaled a hissed breath, and then let go of his lip and turned his eyes back on Lance. “...Of course I trust you.”

Something about those words gave Lance pause. It sounded like there was something more that Keith wanted to say, words that he hadn’t voiced.

But those words never came.

So Lance pulled the door open, slid his hand down into Keith’s, and gently guided Keith through the
The concrete beyond the door was bone dry, but the grass just beyond the concrete gleamed with just a few droplets, the few that managed to worm their way under the patio roof.

Every step that Keith took was agonizingly slow, cautious to the point of tedium, but he never completely stopped walking, so Lance was patient, never pulled Keith harder than he needed to.

Only when they reached the edge of Keith’s territory did Keith fully stop, arm stretched out as far as it could go, attached to Lance’s hand as if glued there.

“I can’t go any farther,” insisted Keith. “Look, even the rain goes right through me.”

Keith was right. Upon close observation, there was a distinct border between where raindrops hit Keith’s arm and rolled off as quickly as they landed and where raindrops went right through his skin and fell into the mud and grass below.

“Yeah,” said Lance. “The rain goes right through you here, but I bet there are places where it wouldn’t. Like the west side of the house. If where you can walk goes in a circle and there’s nowhere in the house you can’t go, then there has to be, like, a ‘bubble’ where you can be outside like here, right? And there isn’t a porch or anything on the west side of the house, so you’d be able to feel the rain there, right?”

“I can’t get there, though,” insisted Keith. “I’ve tried. The corner of the house goes just outside of where I can walk. I’d have to jump. It’s too dangerous. I could fall.”


“You—?!?” Keith’s eyes widened. “I’d go right through you, too! I go through everything!”

“Obviously not,” insisted Lance.

“What do you mean ‘obviously not’? What—”

Lance ran his thumb over Keith’s knuckles, knuckles that weren’t solid enough to stop the rain that fell through them and right into Lance’s hand...but that were firm and steady against Lance’s hand itself.

Keith stared at their joined hands as if noticing them for the first time, and his lips slowly parted in awe.

“We’re touching,” he mused, thunderstruck.

“We are,” confirmed Lance, grinning.

“If…” Keith licked his lips. “If you can touch me even though the rain can’t, then…”

“Then I can totally carry you.” Lance nodded emphatically. He stepped back over the threshold of Keith’s territory and released his hand if only to open his arms. “So what are you waiting for? All aboard.”

“No,” said Keith firmly, taking a step away from Lance, away from the edge. “No way. You could drop me.”

“But I won’t,” said Lance, his smile shrinking. “If I can carry you up a flight of stairs without a problem, I think I can handle escorting you across the back yard.”
“But if you do—"

“That doesn’t matter,” insisted Lance, his smile dropping off completely. “The ‘what if’ doesn’t matter because it’s not gonna happen. I’d never drop you.”

“But you could,” insisted Keith. “And the sun hasn’t set yet. Red isn’t here to pick up the slack if I’m gone. You could get hurt before I find my way back. If I find my way back and something weird doesn’t happen—"

“Keith.” Lance reached out for Keith’s face. Thumbs wet with rain slid under Keith’s eyes, and the absence of a water trail served as a firm reminder of exactly who and what Lance was talking to. “I won’t drop you. I also won’t force you to go into the rain if you really don’t want to. I’m not getting anything out of it but seeing you happy, which means if you’re not gonna be happy, it’d be stupid to drag you out there.”

Keith’s eyes were wide. He looked genuinely scared. He really did. But—and maybe it was Lance’s imagination—there was something else deep in his expression, too. Hope, maybe.

“But I really think it would make you happy,” insisted Lance, releasing Keith’s face. It stayed where it was rather than bowing like Lance thought it would. The wide eyes, the slightly parted lips, they all stayed exactly where Lance left them. “You can trust me. I promise. But it’s up to you to decide whether or not you actually do.”

Keith didn’t move for several seconds, and when he did, it was far from the type of movement Lance expected.

He closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose, clenched his jaw...and then he began to hastily rip off his jacket.

“Uh—” Lance felt heat crawl up his neck so quickly that it felt as though he’d been dunked face-first into a hot spring. “Keith?’

“If we’re doing this,” said Keith, tossing his jacket onto the lawn chair by the grill that was one of the many sources Lance had stolen tarps from just a day and a half prior, “then we’re doing it right.” He peeled back the Velcro of his gloves and pulled them off before tossing them aside. One landed on the chair with his jacket, but the other landed on top of the grill itself. “I’m going out there to feel the rain on my skin, right? So I want to actually be able to feel it.”

“Are you done?” accused Lance, his face still red despite learning the reason behind Keith’s abrupt strip tease. “Not gonna take off your pants? No burning desire to feel the rain right on your—"

“Don’t,” said Keith, pinching between his eyes again, one hand raised in a half-hearted attempt at a ‘stop’ gesture. “Don’t make me regret agreeing to this. I’m still not convinced this is a good idea.”

“You will be by the time it’s done,” insisted Lance. “You’ll see. This is the best idea.”

“Yeah, yeah…” Keith sighed and rested his arms over Lance’s shoulders.

His face was close.

Really close.

And he looked really vulnerable.

And far from the first time, Lance found himself struggling a great deal to keep himself in check, to
resist the urge to close that tiny, tiny gap between their mouths.

But he did. Somehow, he managed it, and he was able to bend down and scoop Keith’s body into his arms without jeopardizing their friendship.

Keith’s eyes snapped shut so hard and so quick that Lance wasn’t sure how he didn’t put himself in pain by doing so.

“I’m really not gonna drop you,” assured Lance, his voice as soft and gentle and reassuring as he could manage.

Keith didn’t answer. He just held on tighter. He gripped Lance’s shirt so tightly that Lance was absolutely sure that his shirt was going to be stretched out by the end of this.

But he could already tell that it was going to be worth it.

He took one slow, steady step toward the rain, watching Keith’s face warily, waiting for any sign of protest, any reason to stop. But they never came. As nervous as Keith clearly was, he seemed firmer in his decision to go through with it than he let on.

So Lance kept walking, even when rain splattered against his face and soaked into his hair while Keith stayed as dry and pristine as ever.

The trek from the back yard to the side of the house was a short one, but it seemed to take an eternity, because with every step that Lance took, he watched Keith’s expression, the draw of his eyebrows, the pursing of his lips… Keith was waiting for one of those thick, heavy raindrops to fall onto his skin instead of through it just as much as Lance was, each of them with a different mix of eagerness and worry.

And then it happened.

A single bead of water landed directly in the center of Keith’s forehead. It rolled down, over the knot between Keith’s eyebrows, down the side of his nose, past the corner of his mouth, and it left a trail all the way down the underside of his jaw until it finally reached the edge of his chin and dropped off onto the fabric of his t-shirt, where it pooled in a fold rather than soaking in like it was supposed to.

That single raindrop was followed by another, and then another. They splattered and bounced over Keith’s face and rolled into balls in the bags under his eyes and gathered in beads that balanced on the high points of his cheeks. They repelled and warped and rolled around and didn’t act at all like that same water acted on Lance’s skin. They didn’t even soak into Keith’s hair or make it frizzy or anything like that at all. The most they did to his hair was smack his bangs around a bit or gather in the part of his hair. Other than that, they simply rolled from Keith’s ink-black tresses into the cotton of Lance’s shirt or the mud beneath his feet.

Slowly, cautiously, Keith’s expression, which had remained tight and nervous and affronted even while the rain was hitting his skin, began to smooth out, to soften, to transform from that anxious, frightened face into something gentler that was much harder to read.

When he opened his eyes, they opened wide, wide and full of...curiosity? Shock? Disbelief? Lance wasn’t sure, and to be honest, it was difficult to even try to focus on what that expression might mean when Keith flinched so regularly at the raindrops, like he was in no way expecting any of them. It was like watching a confused cat, and Lance had to bite his lip to keep himself from laughing; the last thing he wanted to do was to insult Keith when he looked so fragile, but...god was it ever difficult.
The rain swelled again, and with that, Keith stopped flinching quite so much. Perhaps simply because it was impossible to keep up with every single drop of rain. And when he stopped flinching, the reality of the rain seemed to really sink in, and Keith tilted his head back to look into the overcast sky. Any fear of being dropped apparently disappeared, and he sat up straighter, forcing Lance to hold on tighter if he didn’t want Keith to slip between his rain-slicked arms. And yes, it did occur to Lance that he could let go of Keith at any time, that the rain’s collision with Keith’s skin meant that the ground beneath them would be even more solid, but...honestly? Lance didn’t want to let go. No part of him did.

Keith held tighter onto Lance’s shoulders with one arm, allowing himself a free hand to reach up toward the gray clouds overhead. He watched his own hand, completely mesmerized, lips slightly parted, the tiniest sliver of white teeth glinting through, as drops of water collided against his hand and either bounced away or rolled down his arm like marbles, not even put off-course by the fine, fair hair that grew along his forearm.

He lowered his hand and brought it out to his side, this time catching droplets in the curve of his palm, droplets that all slid and gravitated toward the lowest point in Keith’s hand. Lance watched with him as he turned his hand back and forth, left and right, watching the tiny bubble of water slide back and forth in response. That tiny bubble grew with every droplet added until it grew too large for Keith’s hand and overflowed, bursting and spilling out into the mud below.

Lance’s eyes wandered from Keith’s hand, across his wrist, down his forearm, to his shoulder, and then to his face.

The wide-eyed astonishment had faded into something else. Keith narrowed his eyes, clenched his teeth, and crushed the gathered raindrops in his hand into a fist. It was immediately evident that his emotions were catching up to him, and Lance bit his lip as he waited for the sobs to come.

But he didn’t get the sobs he was waiting for.

That wasn’t to say that Keith wasn’t crying. He most certainly was. However, it wasn’t the same sort of crying that Lance heard the last time he cradled Keith in his arms. The last time was horrible and heart-wrenching and made Lance feel like withering into himself.

This time, when Keith sobbed, it was mixed with something else, relief and astonishment and gratefulness and disbelief all mixed into one and boiled over into something that, yes, was a sob...but it was also laughter. Happy, euphoric, almost hysterical laughter.

Keith was laughing and crying all at once, and Lance wasn’t sure whether he wanted to dissolve in the rain and melt where he stood or whether he should just ask Keith if he was okay.

Fortunately, he didn’t have to choose, because his body had other plans.

Laughter bubbled up in his own chest until it overflowed. His feet moved of their own accord, twirling him in time with Keith’s musical laugh. Keith’s hair was caught in the spin, and it fluttered in the wind that kicked up with the rain, flicking away raindrops like they were nothing while Lance’s hair and skin and clothes absorbed every single drop and made the rain a part of him. And Lance knew that he was an absolute mess, that his bangs were sticking to his forehead and his cheeks in ugly, dripping clumps while Keith looked as dry and flawless as ever, but at the moment, Lance couldn’t find it in himself to care how he looked.

Because, god damn it, Keith was beautiful. He was happy and he was laughing and he was beautiful.
“Pretty great, right?” asked Lance eagerly, sneaking one more twirl in without daring to take his eyes off of Keith’s for even a second. “I told you I love the rain. Always have. I’m so glad I live up here now, where it’s gonna rain all the time when the summer ends. I can’t frikkin’ wait. It’s gonna be incredible.”

Keith’s smile softened. His eyes glimmered warmly in the low light of the light from the patio—or what little of it reached around the corner of the house—and he rested his hand on Lance’s chest. That hand slid up, over Lance’s collarbone, and behind his neck. “You’re incredible.”

And Lance knew he was right to tell Keith to trust that he wouldn’t drop him, because if anything would have made him drop Keith, it would have been that—those emphatic and genuine words that made Lance’s heart skip an entire song’s worth of beats—and yet Lance still held onto him as tightly as ever. “Hahah… What?” His heart thundered so rapidly in his chest, desperate to catch up, that Lance was sure Keith must have been able to feel it. “No way, I— I was just— I mean, anyone would have done the same thing if they could.”

“Anyone would have done the same thing,” deadpanned Keith, his smile transforming smoothly into a smirk. “You really think that?”

“Y-Yeah,” insisted Lance. “Sure. It’s just that I’m the only one who can see you and stuff, so…”

“You think just anyone would pick up a fully-grown man and carry him across a muddy backyard in the rain just so he could feel some water on his face?”

“Well, I wasn’t laughing now, when his own knees were threatening to buckle and risk sending both Lance and Keith into the mud below.

“No, Lance,” said Keith, the softest of warm smiles tugging at his lips. “Not everyone would do that. You’re incredible. And it’s because you’re you. I promise.”

Keith closed his eyes and leaned in and—god, he was too close, way too close—

And he rested his forehead against Lance’s jaw.

And Lance looked up into the sky. He wasn’t sure if there was something on the other side of those clouds, but if there was, then it definitely had his thanks, whatever it was.

Lance closed his eyes and rested his cheek against Keith’s dry hair, letting the rain fall all around him until his clothes were so utterly soaked that anyone would have thought he’d jumped into a lake rather than stood outside in a summer shower. But he couldn’t care less. He would have stood there forever, no matter how wet he got, no matter how tired his arms grew, as long as he got to stay just like that, with Keith curled up in his arms, against his chest, like nothing in the world was wrong, like it was just them. No Galra or Paladins or life or death or Lions...just them.

And Lance would have done anything to stay that way.

But the rain worsened, lightning flashed, thunder cracked, Keith finally lifted his head to suggest
they head back inside, and the moment came to an end, as all moments do.

“You want one?” asked Lance, his clothes soaked and heavy and clinging to his every curve. Keith doubted very much that the towel he was holding would do anything for him.

“No, thanks,” said Keith, slipping his arms back into his jacket. “I think most of it just rolled off of me.”

“Lucky,” laughed Lance, unfolding his towel with a flick of his wrists and pulling it over his head. He rubbed his hair through the towel with so much vigor and energy and life that Keith was almost jealous.

And then he let the towel drop, and Keith swore that every single strand of his hair was standing in a completely unique direction to every other strand.

And he found himself laughing again. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been so giggly. He wasn’t sure he ever had been.

And Lance, rather than getting offended and starting a less-than-convicted argument like Keith expected, just looked at himself in the mirror and started laughing at himself.

His laugh was warm, just as warm as his chest was when Keith had curled into it, as warm as his hands had been on Keith’s cheeks when he made his argument that Keith could trust him. As warm as his eyes when he turned away from the mirror to meet Keith’s gaze and send that perfect boyish smile his way.

As warm as the tingles that smile sent from Keith’s chest all the way to the ends of his fingers and the tips of his toes.

Lance winked, and Keith, whose heart had stopped nearly twenty years prior, was sure that it must have somehow stopped again. “You know, a lot of people are turned on by the post-shower look. I’m already part of the way there. All I gotta do is take my shirt—”

Keith didn’t even need to breathe and he was still sure he was about to suffocate somehow.

“Cut it out!” he blurted, bright red, anything to stop that sentence from wherever that sentence was going. He shoved Lance’s arm, earning a playful laugh in return.

“What’s wrong?” Lance teased, nudging Keith in return before bringing the towel back to his hair. “Afraid you’ll like what you see?”

Keith clutched at his chest, right over the heart that somehow seemed to race despite the fact that Keith hadn’t really felt it beat in years.

And he realized that the problem wasn’t that he would like what he saw.

No, the problem was something else.

Somehow, over the brief few weeks between the day Lance arrived and the present, Keith’s appreciation for Lance’s face and body had developed into something else. Somewhere between Lance talking Keith through his panic and saving him from Haxus and all his kind words about
liking Keith for who he was as a person instead of as a Paladin… And his contagious smiles… And the way he looked, the way he felt, when he was holding Keith in the rain…

Oh, no.

*I know what this is.*

*I know what this is.*

*When did that happen?*

Chapter End Notes

It's about damn time, Keith.

By the way, everyone, thank you so much for 1000 kudos. I saw it last night and I'm still freaking out. I'm so grateful, and I'm glad that all of you like this story. Thank you. ;w;

Twitter: @YouAreInAComa
“Allura—” Coran’s boots slipped under the rocks and mud, sending him down the side of the hill and nearly into the trunk of an ancient coniferous tree. He braced himself against the fibrous bark and pushed past the tree, rushing as fast as his legs would carry him.

Honestly, this girl was going to be the death of him.

That’s not funny, Coran chided to himself, lifting his head to look past the tops of the trees into the blue, blue sky overhead. Not right now.

The sun had already reached its highest point in the sky.

The ceremony would have started.

And Coran could do nothing, nothing but make sure that Allura was safe until it was over.

Easier said than done when Allura kept slipping off into heavily shaded areas. Like forests.

“Could be worse,” mumbled Coran, all but sprinting in his attempt to catch up with the runaway princess. “She could have found a cave.”

Not that the trees were much worse, of course. Not when there were so many of them.

“Allura, will you please—!”

“Allura, will you please—!” called the princess from somewhere to Coran’s left.

Coran turned his head quickly, quickly enough that his ponytail hit him hard in the face. He sputtered and pushed it back behind his shoulder. “A-Allura, what are you doing?”

“He’s beautiful, isn’t he?” cooed Allura, her dark fingers digging into the even darker fur of the very, very big cat splayed across her lap. “His name’s Antok. He told me that himself.”

“Did he, now?” Coran crossed his arms. “Did he also tell you how very dangerous it is to go running through a dark forest when there’s Galra about?”

Allura rolled her blue eyes and crossed her arms over “Antok’s” back. “I won’t let the Galra rule my entire life, Coran. There are places that need to be explored, worlds that need to be seen. Besides…” She smiled down at the panther she was curled up with. “Antok will protect me from any stinky Galra. Won’t you, sweetheart?”

Coran charged forward, pushing past vegetation so thick that he was sure Allura had to have gone some other way to get to where she was, though he couldn’t risk searching for whatever route she’d taken at the risk of letting her wander off again. “As much as I’m sure ‘Antok’ would happily try to protect you from the Galra, I’m afraid the Galra are much stronger than any— Quiznak!” A branch of thistles grabbed tightly onto Coran’s pant leg at the thigh, causing him to totter forward and nearly land face-first in mud. He would have returned home a much less dignified man if he hadn’t managed to grab a low-hanging branch quickly enough.

Allura laughed.
She really is going to be the death of me.

Grumbling, Coran pried himself free from the thistles and pulled himself upright with the aid of that same tree branch. “This is unbecoming of someone who will someday succeed the throne of Altea.”

“But perfectly becoming of someone with pink quintessence,” argued Allura.

Which, to be fair, was a decent point. Nevertheless… “Allura, we really should leave the forest. It’s too dark. We could be attacked at any moment.”

Allura rolled her eyes. “I’ve been keeping to the lighter patches of the forest this entire time.”

“Lighter patches?” Coran put his hands on his hips. “Is that what you call this? We’re almost completely wrapped in shadow!”

“Then the sun must be behind a cloud or something,” insisted Allura with a roll of her eyes. “I’ve been careful, Coran. Very careful. Just because I wanted to see the forest doesn’t mean I’m stupid.”

“Clouds,” scoffed Coran. “There are no clouds.” If there were clouds, Alfor would not have begun the ceremony. “There’d be a better chance of the moon moving in front of the sun today than a—”

Coran froze.

He looked up into the sky again.

It was darker than it had been before.

Much darker.

“No… Is that possible?”

His heart lurched.

Alfor.

_____________________________________________________

“Stop laughing! I’m serious!”

Red’s eyes twinkled in a happy mix of knowing and amused.

“What do you mean you knew?” demanded Keith raising his voice. “I didn’t even know! How could you know if I didn’t know?!”

Red loosed an amused puff and swished her tail high in the air.

“How was it obvious?!” Keith’s eyes snapped open wide. “Wait… If it was obvious to you, does that mean he knows?”

Red dropped her tail and fixed Keith with a look that said very clearly, ‘Of course not.’

Keith ran a hand through his hair, sighing gratefully. “At least there’s that.” He sighed and pressed his back against Lance’s bedroom wall. “I guess one thing had to go right.” He slid down the wall until he met the floor. “This is almost as bad as him hating me.”
Red’s disapproving growl rumbled through Keith’s head like a storm warning.

“...Okay, so maybe it’s not that bad,” admitted Keith. “But...it’s still pretty bad. What am I supposed to do about this? How am I supposed to explain—? No.” He ran his hands through his hair and pulled at it, frustrated with himself. “No, I can’t tell him. No way. It’d... We just started talking again.”

A heavy paw pressed against Keith’s chest, and he opened his eyes to find Red watching him.

Her message rang clear as a bell through his mind. He understood it without words.

*That’s exactly why you should tell him.*

“I can’t,” insisted Keith, feeling pathetic. “I... I finally made a friend. Someone who isn’t *bound to me* by some supernatural fate. I can’t risk alienating him. I can’t lose what we have. I can’t.”

Red sighed—an almost human sound—and dropped her paw from his chest only to replace it with her head, big and warm and comforting.

Keith wrapped his arms around her neck and held her close. “At least I’ll always have you, right?”

Red rubbed her head against him, a nonverbal yes, and they stayed like that until Lance returned from his shower, clad in a robe and finally wearing the facemask Keith had seen him neglect for days.

“Coran, what is going on?” demanded Allura, running with her muddy skirt hiked up to her knees. It was terrifying. *Truly* terrifying. She had never seen Coran like this. He looked almost...primal. Like an angry Epipaleolith. Or a scared one.

They’d reached the city with remarkable speed—though there was certainly a stitch in Allura’s side—and within moments they were at the castle walls.

They’d reached it just in time to see three of her father’s guard push through the double doors of the front entrance.

Platt noticed Allura immediately and rushed to her, his great, black beard shimmering with visible beads of sweat that it must have caught from his face. “Allura,” he gasped, charging toward her and pulling him into his armored chest.

Her throat seemed to close up. Her heart seemed to stop.

Why? Why was he in armor?

“What are you doing here, Girl?” he demanded, grabbing her by the shoulders and pushing her at arm’s length. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Oh shouldn’t I?” demanded Allura. “What's going on? Where is my father?”

She turned her head, seeking the same answers from Coran, who was talking frantically with Plachu and Chulatt.
Chulatt had tears rolling down his face.

“Where’s Pyotr?” demanded Coran, gripping Chulatt’s shoulders just as hard as Platt was squeezing Allura’s own. “Alfor, I can guess, but—”

“We don’t know,” said Plachu. “One minute, he was running with us, and the next—”

“You know damn well where he went,” snapped Chulatt, his voice broken with emotion. “He turned back to help Alfor. We should have guessed he’d do something stupid like that. We should have been keeping an eye on him. But we weren’t. And now he’s probably—”

It was all Allura needed to hear.

Ripping herself from Platt’s arms, she charged forward, through the doors.

She heard things from the corridors she ran adjacent to. Snarls. Roars of fury. It wasn’t the first time she heard a Galra’s voice, but the sounds, however terrifying, wouldn’t stop her.

She kept on running, farther and farther, faster and faster, Coran’s voice calling out desperately behind her.

“Stop!” he demanded. “Allura, you can’t! Don’t look, Allura!”

Why?

Why couldn’t she look?

What was he protecting her from?

She had to know.

She wouldn’t stop. Not for Coran or Platt or Chulatt or Plachu.

She kept pushing forward, down the corridors, through the halls, until she reached the doors that led to the courtyard. She pushed through them with all of her strength. The dim, dim light of the eclipse hit her eyes, weaker than the weakest candlelight.

Four bodies laid lifeless in the grass.

Haggar.

Voltron.

Uncle Pyotr.

And…

...and…

*Please… Please, no…*

---

The Galra’s face was upturned as it struggled under the weight of Keith’s body, his Bayard pressed
to its neck. There was no need for theatrics. No reason to drag the fight out any longer. It had already lost.

Keith turned the edge of his sword in toward the Galra’s neck and pressed down hard, and the Galra disappeared under his weight.

He quickly climbed to his feet and stepped back, holding his breath, waiting until the smoke cleared.

The front door burst open.

Keith whipped around, Bayard raised instinctively.

Lance just grinned at him, unperturbed by the weapon that seemed ready to fly at his throat.

“What, are you gonna stab me?” Lance teased brightly, balancing a very full-looking paper bag in one arm.

Keith tried not to think about how much trust would have been necessary to make a joke like that after everything they’d been through. He just shook his head and retracted his blade. “You’re later than usual. Were you hanging out with Pidge again?”

“Nope, not today!” Keith could tell by Lance’s body language alone that he was about to start bouncing in place. He wasn’t sure whether that was because Lance was easy to read or just because Keith had been watching him closely enough for long enough. “Actually, I was at— Well, you’re probably not gonna know the store, but it’s, like, a place that sells all kinds of used media. Movies and games and books and music, and dude—!” Lance leaned over to try to reach into the top of the paper bag and wound up causing some of the contents to spill onto the floor in the process.

Jewel cases.

A bunch of jewel cases.

“Whoops.” Lance laughed and pulled out a few more of the jewel cases, holding them out and pushing their fronts toward Keith. “Anyway, look! They were having a sale, so I got you a whole lot of ‘90s music.”

Keith furrowed his brow. “You...got me—?”

“Yeah!” Every time Keith thought Lance couldn’t possibly grin wider, Lance proved him wrong. “I was thinking, you know, you don’t really have that much to your name. Like. You’ve got your clothes, and that’s about it, right? So, like, I wanted you to own something that’s totally just yours. And— Dude, I even got you an old boom box, so you can totally blast these CDs when you’re the only one home and kicking Galra ass, give yourself a cool ass-kicking soundtrack. Or, like, tapes? If I find any at a flea market or something? ‘Cause that boom box totally plays tapes, too. And— Okay, so I didn’t know what kind of music you actually like, so I got you a little bit of everything. There’s Coolio in here. There’s Shania Twain in here, man. Or, well, the Shania Twain CD’s on the floor now. I can see it.”

Keith worked his jaw, trying to find an appropriate response. No dice. He was speechless. But Lance seemed more than willing to make up for his silence.

“There’s so much— Like, you’ve gotta like something in here. Pop and mainstream rock and ska—”

“Lance—”
“I don’t even know what ska is, but the girl working there said I have to have ska if I’m going for ‘90s music, so I got it—”

“Lance, I—”

“Do you like songs about meth addicts? ‘Cause I’ve got Third-Eye Blind in here—”

“Lance!”

Lance jumped and nearly dropped all of the cases in his hands. His excited grin turned sheepish very quickly. “Uh… Sorry. I guess I kind of got—”

“Thank you.”

Lance’s eyes widened.

Keith swallowed. He wanted to say something more, maybe about how it was probably the most thoughtful thing anyone had ever done for him. Maybe just scold Lance about how much all of those CDs must have cost, even if they were used and on sale. Maybe even to tell Lance how warm that energetic smile made him feel.

But he didn’t say any of that.

He just smiled, sincere, truly happy, and said those words again. “Thank you.”

And Lance smiled back. “Anytime.”

And Keith let himself believe, just for a moment, that maybe the red on Lance’s cheeks was from more than just excitement.

---

Pyotr, it seemed, was gone for good. Voltron, in a way, was still around, but not to the point where conversations could be had.

Alfor, however, was an entirely different story.

“They’re gone, then?”

“Every last one of them,” said Coran, doing his best to pull together some semblance of a smile. “At least outside of the castle. You almost did it.”

“We did do it,” said Alfor firmly. “The Galra might not be gone completely, but they’re still far away from innocent Alteans. As far as I’m concerned, that’s a success.”

Coran’s smile disappeared. He didn’t consider it a success that Alfor’s soul was bound indefinitely to the point where the afterlife was exposed to the world of the living.

“Have the funerals been carried out?” asked Alfor.

Coran nodded weakly. “All four of them. Even Haggar’s.”

“Did anyone show to hers?”
“What do you think?”

Alfor sighed and he reached for Coran’s hands. “Bitterness doesn’t suit you, old friend.”

Coran closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I’m not bitter, I’m just—!” He sighed and looked down at his knees. “I’m just… I’m just sad. How am I supposed to feel? You’re gone. Voltron’s gone. Pyotr’s gone—”

“Pyotr wasn’t part of the plan.”

“I know that.” Coran took another deep breath and met Alfor’s eyes. “Of course I know that. I also should have guessed he would have turned back to save you. I’m more surprised Platt didn’t do the same, to be honest.”

“How’s Chulatt doing?” asked Alfor.

“About as well as you’d imagine,” said Coran, narrowing his eyes. “I went to his home recently, and, you know, I doubt there’s a single wall he hasn’t punched a hole into.”

“Take care of him, will you?” asked Alfor. “And Allura.”

“And Platt and Plachu, yes, yes, I know.” Coran shook his head. “You know I’m not half the leader you are. I wasn’t meant for this.”

“I know,” said Alfor, squeezing Coran’s hands tight in his own. “But I also know that there’s not a single person we know who wouldn’t listen to you. Leaders are made, Coran. Not born. You may find yourself with black quintessence yet.”

Coran scoffed. “I think I’m a bit old for a change in quintessence, don’t you?”

Alfor’s eyes softened, and his smile was just the same as it ever was. “You aren’t that old, my friend.”

Keith frowned thoughtfully as he organized the row of CDs where Lance insisted he keep them, on the top of Lance’s dresser for everyone to see.

“I mean…” Keith slipped a Weezer CD between Wheatus and Spice Girls. “Some of these I’ve never listened to in my life. But I guess I’ll give them a shot, considering, you know, they’re...mine now, I guess.”

“If worse comes to worst, I can always trade them in and get you something else.” Lance, who had been lying on his back, looking at the ceiling, rolled over and crossed his arms over the foot of his bed. “What kind of music are you into?”

“I…” Keith shrugged. “I don’t know. I never really gave it much thought before, I guess. I like artists, not genres. But if I had to pick a genre...maybe grunge?”

Lance laughed brightly. “Why am I not surprised? So, like, Nirvana?”

Keith shrugged. “Nirvana’s good. I like the Offspring, too, but I guess they’re closer to punk.” He frowned at the CD he’d just picked up. “Definitely not...Willa Ford, whoever that is.”
“How dare you?” Lance sat up straight so quickly that his bed squeaked in protest. “You take that back. Willa Ford is a goddess.” He jumped off of the mattress and landed on the floor with a surprisingly loud whump. “Give that to me. We’re listening to her right now.”

Grimacing, Keith turned around and extended the case toward Lance. “Am I going to regret this?”

“Never,” said Lance, snatching the CD out of Keith’s hand with a playful smile.

If listening to bad music was enough to keep Lance smiling like that, then he was probably right: Keith wouldn’t regret it.

The salty sea breeze was cool on Allura’s face, but not as cool as the ice cold urn that she cradled close to her chest.

She felt a bit silly, really...mourning over her father’s ashes, feeling melancholy when she’d last seen her father just the day before, when she knew she would see him again when she returned home. She felt selfish, honestly. Standing next to Chulatt as she was, when Pyotr really was gone for good.

“Are you ready for this?” asked Chulatt, his dark gaze unwavering from the horizon.

Allura glanced at him through the corner of her eye. He’d always been a harsh person. Aggressive. Prickly. To be honest, she’d always wondered what Pyotr saw in him. But he’d never been cold like this before.

Everyone mourned in their own ways. She knew that. But that didn’t change the fact that she was less than comfortable to be standing next to someone who looked so ready to kill at a moment’s notice.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” replied Allura, cold, but nowhere near as cold as Chulatt was.

They marched to the prow of the ship and climbed onto the bowsprit.

Allura’s footing wobbled weakly part way to the end, and Chulatt caught her arm, nearly dropping Pyotr’s ashes in the process.

Allura looked at him uncertainly, scarcely believing that he would have risked something so precious that for her sake.

Chulatt seemed to understand her look and frowned. “You’re alive,” he grumbled. “He’s not. He’s going in the sea either way. You, I’d rather keep out of it.”

Allura frowned at him for a moment longer before finally breaking her scowl.

Perhaps he wasn’t so bad after all.

She climbed the rest of the way up the bowsprit, all the way to the very end, and pulled the lid off of her father’s urn.

His ashes kicked up in the wind almost immediately.

Allura crouched down low, carefully overturning the urn she held and sprinkling her father’s ashes
The first thing Lance noticed when he walked in from work was that tell-tale synthetic bass that just screamed ’90s pop. It was hard to ignore; it was loud.

“Oh, no way,” breathed Lance through an awestruck smile, creeping in the direction where the music was the loudest.

And where he found the source of the music, he found Keith wrist-deep in dishwater, his hips rocking back and forth with the beat of the song. The song that he was singing along to.

And as tempted as Lance was to stand there and listen to the sound of Keith’s voice—which sounded like heaven to Lance’s ears, though he had no doubt it would probably seem average to the uninfatuated ear—or watch the sway of Keith’s ass—which was fantastic regardless of who was watching—Lance’s mischievous side won out instead.

“I WANNA BE BAD!” The lyrics came out in almost a scream; they had to in order to be audible over the boom box itself. The end result was Keith yelping and whipping around so quickly that the plate in his hands nearly crashed to the floor, and would have if not for Lance’s quick reflexes.

“Lance!” Keith slapped at his boom box in a desperate attempt to turn the volume down as quickly as possible. He succeeded, but not on his first attempt. “I-I was… It…”

“Man, you must really hate Willa Ford to be singing along to every word,” teased Lance, handing the wet dish back over to Keith. “How many times have you listened to this song? It’s been a day. That takes some dedication. I’m impressed. No, really.”

Keith snatched the plate back, eyes narrowed in what was doubtlessly supposed to be a scowl that belied the red of his cheeks. “It’s catchy. What, I can’t change my mind?”

“Oh, no,” said Lance, smirking. “You’re totally allowed to prove me right any day of the week.”

Keith rolled his eyes and turned his body back toward the dishes. “Proving you right,” he grumbled to himself, barely audible over the music, though he apparently had nothing to add.

“You know,” said Lance, sliding up next to Keith and bumping him with his hips, earning a startled jolt. “You don’t have to keep doing the dishes. I mean, I definitely appreciate it, but—”

“I just want to,” said Keith, scrubbing a little too hard at the very clean plate in his hands. “I’m allowed to do the dishes if I want, right?”

Lance hummed thoughtfully, taking in Keith’s expression, trying to translate that red-faced glare into something he could understand. It was a feat easier said than done.

“Want me to dry?” asked Lance.
Keith frowned at him through the corners of his eyes. “I thought you hated doing the dishes.”

“Just the part where soggy food touches my hands,” said Lance, shrugging. “Drying is fine.”

Keith turned his attention back to the too-clean plate that he was still scrubbing at. “Fine. Whatever. Be my guest.”

Lance smiled and confidently reached into a nearby drawer for a tea towel.

Apparently, Alteans used to travel frequently. They used to be spread far and wide all over the surface of the world, and there were many more kings than Alfor. When the Galra began to crawl out of the shadows, however, that changed very quickly. Alteans began converging, clinging to each other as tightly as possible. There was power in numbers, and that power could mean the difference between a small tragedy and an absolute massacre.

The last time Alteans had been spread far and wide across the world was well before Allura was born. As far as she was concerned, the sea was a means of honoring the dead, not a way to meet other living people.

But that was exactly their mission.

The city around the Castle of Lions had yielded no Alteans with blue quintessence, no one to carry the Blue Lion. But without the Blue Lion, King Alfor would be bonded to that tiny patch of land forever, and the threat of the Galra, though diminished, would always be there.

The hope was that perhaps those few who had survived far away from the Castle of Lions might still be there. That the survivors might have stayed strong, might have had children, that maybe someone out there would have the blue quintessence needed to seal off the exposure of the afterlife for good.

The chances were slim, but as long as they existed, Allura had to search. The Paladins had to search.

Even if it took them years. Even if it took them decades. Even if they never found anything at all. They still had to try.

Video games had definitely changed since Keith had died.

The biggest sign of that came with the addition of dancing games.

Apparently, Keith had died just in time to miss DDR, which, according to Lance, sounded more like glorified step aerobics than proper dancing. But dance games had become more advanced than that throughout the years, if he understood right, and the ending result was something that involved a camera on top of a television that read and recorded a person’s movements to rack up a high score.

And, admittedly, Keith was curious. Very curious. But he wasn’t going to be able to get a closer look with the entire house shoved into the den.
Still, Lance had insisted on him joining them, even if he couldn’t participate. And that was how he wound up sitting on top of the coffee table that had been pushed aside, watching Shiro, Pidge, Hunk, and Lance follow on-screen dance moves with varying levels of skill while everyone laughed at each other.

Shiro and Lance were probably tied for the most hilarious for different reasons.

Shiro was a hopeless case. He had no rhythm, no confidence, and wound up laughing at himself more than actually dancing most of the time.

Lance, however, was on the other side of the spectrum. He was almost too good at the game, and he had the confidence to show for it. Keith would have accused him of taking it too seriously if not for the eager, fun-loving expressions, the goofy body language that demonstrated that it was all still just a game for him, despite how genuinely good at it he was.

“Okay.” Lance doubled over his knees after a particularly outrageous dance (served to him by an on-screen drag queen), sweating and panting in a way that made Keith stare perhaps a little too long—and made Red stare at him with that knowing glint that seemed to be present in her eye more and more lately. “Okay, I definitely need some water after that.”

“Ooh, I need some, too,” said Hunk, starting to climb to his feet.

Lance threw out a hand. “Nope, you sit. I’ll get some for everyone.” Grunting, he stood up straight and wiped his brow before heading toward the door.

He paused in the middle of opening it and glanced back at his friends before meeting Keith’s eyes and waving him closer.

Cocking an eyebrow, Keith stood from the coffee table and followed Lance out of the room, Red hot on his heels.

“You have to dance with me,” insisted Lance once the three of them were far enough from the doors not to be heard.

Keith furrowed his brow. “Excuse me?”

“I’m serious!” insisted Lance, skipping ahead despite the fact that he was covered in sweat. “I’ll pick a dance that’s made for two people, you get up there with me—”

“There’s no way the camera would pick me up,” insisted Keith, halting in the foyer, arms crossed over his chest. “Besides, I don’t even know most of the songs.”

“So what?” Lance put his hands on his hips. “Neither does Shiro half the time.”

Keith snorted. “That inspires confidence.”

“I’m not asking you to be a perfect dancer,” said Lance. “I’m not even asking you to go for a score, because you’re right, the camera totally won’t pick you up. I’m just asking you to go up there with me.” He pouted. Actually pouted. Puppy-dog eyes, lip jutted out, the whole works. “It’s not like you’ll make a fool of yourself. I’m the only one who would even see you.”

Keith turned his face away, trying his hardest not to look directly into those pathetic blue eyes, lest he be turned to stone. Lance’s words weren’t exactly convincing. The one person Keith didn’t want to look like a fool in front of was Lance in the first place.
Those eyes, on the other hand.

“Fine,” sighed Keith, turning his face back toward Lance, who was already celebrating.

“Yes!”

“On two conditions.”

Keith fully expected that announcement to bring down Lance’s excitement, but it did no such thing. Lance was still grinning, still eager. “Go for it. I’m just happy you’re going up there at all.”

Keith sighed. He really should have been better at saying no to Lance. “No touching. That means no lifts or...whatever Hunk and Pidge were doing with that Grease song. I don’t want you to pull a disappearing act in front of your friends.”

“Duh,” said Lance, rolling his eyes. “That’s obvious. What else?”

Keith pursed his lips, hesitating for only a moment, before admitting, “I’ve...never danced before, so you have to pick something easy.”

“Oh, come on,” said Lance, rolling his eyes. “You have to have danced at some point. A cousin’s wedding?”

“My only cousin was Shiro.”

“Shiro’s parents’ wedding?”

“I was too young for the reception. Adults only.”

“Damn. School dances?”

“Didn’t go.”

“Prom?”

“That’s a school dance.”

“Yeah, but it’s prom. Don’t tell me you didn’t go to prom.”

Keith shrugged stiffly.

Lance ran a hand through his sweat-slicked hair. “Holy shit. You’re the exact opposite of a social butterfly, aren’t you? You’re, like...a social...worm.”

Keith pulled his crossed arms tighter to his chest and turned his face away. Lance should have already known that.

“Okay,” said Lance submissively. “So I owe you dancing lessons.”

Keith raised his eyebrows and turned back to Lance very quickly. “What?”

“But that’s for later,” insisted Lance, dismissing Keith’s surprise altogether. “Tonight, I just want you to go up there, mimic the guy on the screen—I’ll be the girl, naturally—and have fun. Think you can do that?”

Keith worried at his lip. “I’ll try.”
When they returned to the den and Lance’s next turn rolled around, Keith nearly chickened out. It was only thanks to Red’s nudging and pushing that he found himself at the front of the room next to Lance.

Remarkably, the song Lance chose was actually one that Keith recognized from his childhood. It wasn’t one he necessarily liked, but Keith assumed that Lance was probably choosing it because of the difficulty level, not whether or not Keith recognized—

“Hold on, who’s the game picking up?” asked Hunk rather suddenly, dividing Keith’s attention from the game itself.

“Yeah, it’s showing a second player.”

“Everybody, move out of the way of the camera.”

“It’s fine,” insisted Lance, and he started the game before anyone could bring more attention to—

Wait.

Wait, did that mean that the game was picking him up?

“Lance, I don’t know—”

“Totally fine,” pushed Lance, turning toward Keith, and—kneeling?

“What are you doing?” choked Keith, flustered heat crawling up his neck. He quickly averted his eyes.

Averted his eyes toward the screen.

Where the dancers were also kneeling.

“Oh—!” More heat pushed into his face, pooling in his cheeks and ears as he hastily dropped to his knees. “Oh, quiznak.” If that was a sign of things to come, then this was bound to be a terrible experience.

And as far as Keith was concerned, it was.

He suddenly felt very bad for laughing at Shiro, because he was sure he was no better.

“What— What is this thing I’m supposed to be doing with my—”

“I think your ghost is dancing with you,” said Hunk. Keith quickly looked over his shoulder to find Hunk pointing through him at the screen that he was on. “That’s one weird glitch.”

When Keith looked back at the screen, he noticed, for the first time, that there was a small figure above “his” dancer that seemed to be tracking his movements.

Somehow.

“I guess it’s tracking some kind of weird afterimage of you or...something,” said Hunk.

Keith tried very hard to focus on his pathetic dancing rather than listening to Hunk’s theories. It wasn’t easy.

“Except, like, the afterimage of you is, like, a way worse dancer than you somehow. I don’t know
how that works. Pidge, what do you think?”

“Me?” blurted Pidge. “Why are you asking me?”

“Uh, maybe because you’re the only other person in the room who would actually have any idea what’s going on? It’s not like Shiro is gonna know. Right, Shiro? …Shiro? Hey, uh, you okay?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I just… I just zoned out. Sorry.”

“Do you have any idea why the— Oh, hey, it stopped.”

Keith couldn’t take anymore. It wasn’t fun, like Lance said it would be. It was just nerve-wracking.

He left the view of the camera.

He left the room.

He walked up the stairs and retreated to Lance’s room, where Red joined him a moment later.

And where Lance joined him perhaps an hour after that, still sweaty.

“Hey,” he greeted weakly, his back pressed to the closed door.

“Hi,” mumbled Keith, threading his fingers through Red’s fur, watching the crimson strands swirl as he twisted them nervously between his fingers.

“So…” Lance drummed his fingers against the door at his back.

Keith took a deep breath.

“I’m sorry.”

Several seconds passed before Keith realized that Lance had said those words at the same time he had.

“What are you sorry for?” demanded Keith, lifting his gaze from his hands to meet Lance’s eyes.

“For making you do that even though you didn’t want to,” said Lance, frowning intently, as if it were obvious. “And even though we didn’t know what would happen. I didn’t think it through, and it could have gone a lot worse. And then I just let you walk away, like I didn’t care or something, but I swear I did, Keith, I was thinking about it the whole time I was down there. I just couldn’t think of an excuse to get away. I already used the water thing—”

“It’s fine, Lance,” said Keith, wrapping an arm around Red’s neck and pulling her close for comfort. “I needed to be alone anyway. But… I shouldn’t have walked off like a drama queen. I should have explained where I was going instead of just… leaving.”

A silence fell between them that lasted for several seconds before Lance hesitantly broke it.

“No one has any idea,” he said. “Like, no one brought it up again after you left. They just thought it was a weird glitch and left it at that.”

Keith sighed, relieved, and rested his chin on the top of Red’s head. “At least there’s that.”

“So…” Lance shuffled from one foot to the other and back. “Are we still cool? Like, we’re still friends, right?”
Keith raised an eyebrow and lifted his head. “You were worried about that?”

Lance looked down at the floor and shrugged. “I mean...yeah?”

Keith sighed. “Get over here. There’s enough room on this bed for three.”

Allura turned the Blue Lion over in her hands, her eyes narrowed.

“We’ve found people for you,” she chided gently. “Wonderful people, potential Paladins who could get along so well with you. It would save so many people. So why? Why haven’t you chosen one?”

The Blue Lion didn’t respond. Her eyes didn’t glint. She didn’t purr or growl. She stayed completely silent, cradled between Allura’s long fingers.

“Please,” she whispered, leaning down low, resting her forehead against the Blue Lion’s unresponsive idol. “Please, for my father’s sake… For everyone’s sake… Why can’t you just pick one?”

“Okay.” Lance took a deep breath, eyes closed. Never in his life did he ever think he would be so nervous to stand at his own front door. But there he was, heart pounding in his chest so hard it seemed to rattle every other organ in his body. “It’s not a big deal, and I’m not gonna treat it like it’s a big deal. It’s just Keith.”

Just Keith.

Lance gripped the bouquet in his arms just a little too tight and looked down at the red and blue mess of gerbera daisies and delphiniums because that Nyma chick assured him that roses would be trying too hard.

And he probably was trying too hard.

Because it was just Keith.

Just the most gorgeous guy he’d ever met in his life.

Just the bravest, coolest, most incredible person Lance had ever known. Just an actual immortal god walking the earth. Just a guy with most beautiful, dark, mysterious eyes, which were all the more hypnotic when they were watching him from the other side of his own open bedroom door.

Wait.

Shit.

“Lance?” Keith’s beautiful, dark, mysterious, hypnotic eyes dropped down a few degrees before darting back up. “Nice— Uh… W-Who are the flowers for?”
Lance opened his mouth to answer. Words almost came out. Almost. They stuttered and stalled and were far too high-pitched to be meant for human ears and the ending result wasn’t anywhere near coherent.

The strong desire to just shove the flowers at Keith’s chest and make a break for it crossed Lance’s mind, but the realization that he was standing at his own bedroom door and he had nowhere to go besides his own room quelled that particular desire.

Besides, Keith deserved better.

“A—”

Lance’s voice cracked.

He cleared his throat and tried again.

“A-Actually, they’re...for you. Um.” He pushed the flowers toward Keith. “Here.”

Keith’s response came agonizingly slow, forcing Lance to stay where he was, pressing the flowers against Keith’s chest for what felt like an eternity before Keith finally took them.

“Okay,” he said slowly, brow furrowed. “Why did you get me flowers?”

“I’ve...actually been meaning to get them for you for a while,” admitted Lance, rubbing his shoulder. “You know, just as a… You’ve saved my life so many times, you know? I figured...you deserved something.”

“Oh.” Keith frowned down at the flowers, brow knitted. For the longest time, Lance was sure he wouldn’t say anything more than that, but then, “...I don’t have anywhere to put them.”

“I’m sure we have a vase somewhere around here—”

“I meant like…” Keith sighed. “I meant like a place to display them.”

“I just figured they’d stay in our room,” admitted Lance, shrugging.

“Our room?”

“Well, if you put them anywhere else, people would kind of start asking questions, so—”

“No, I get that part, I just…” Keith licked his lips and met Lance’s eyes. “How long has it been our room?”

“Uh… Since always?” offered Lance, baffled, almost accusatory. “I mean, I sleep in it, and you, like...restore energy or whatever it is you do in it… We both use it about the same. Your CDs are on the dresser. If you had clothes to change into, you’d totally have your own drawers and your own closet space. Wait, are you trying to say it’s not my room? Because that’s just—”

“No, I wasn’t, I was just…” Keith pursed his lips and looked away for just a moment before turning back. “Yeah. You’re right.”

“Obviously,” said Lance, shoving his hands into his pockets. “I’m always right.”

Keith rolled his eyes, and Lance found that he couldn’t help but love the contrast between the badass with the pleather jacket and the fingerless gloves and the flowers in his arms. It was...actually sort of cute.
“...Vase?” reminded Keith.

“Right!” Lance flinched and rushed away, completely unaware of the love-struck look in Keith’s eyes as he held the flowers closer and smiled into their petals.

“...But I want to join you!”

Allura tried her hardest to remain diplomatic, but it wasn’t easy when there was a little girl yelling in her face.

Well, little girl might have been harsh. She must have been...perhaps fourteen? Not that much younger than Allura herself, all things considered.

“And we appreciate that,” said Allura. “But your quintessence is red, not blue, and the position of Red Paladin is already taken by Chulatt.”

“What about Black Paladin?” pressed the girl. “You don’t have a Black Paladin with you, maybe I could work on my leadership skills and—”

“We have a Black Paladin,” insisted Allura, perhaps a little too firm, a little too harsh. “He is working very, very hard to protect the world from the Galra at the exposure.”

“Okay,” said the girl, frowning. “But since he’s not here, maybe I could still—”

“Stop.”

Chulatt’s voice was abrupt, sudden, stern, and much harder than even Allura had been.

“You don’t have black quintessence,” he said, hard and strict. “You don’t even have blue quintessence. You have red quintessence. You’re no use to us. End of story.” He crossed his arms. “We’re going to be on this continent for a long time. A very long time, if we don’t find someone compatible with the Blue Lion. And we’ll pass through this city again when we leave. If you have black quintessence by then, we’ll think about taking you with us. If not, it’s not happening. Got it?”

The girl’s frown hardened. “I—” She sighed sharply. “I understand.”

Allura allowed her tense shoulders to relax. “What was your name again, miss?”

“Chuchule,” said the girl.

“Right,” said Allura, smiling. “Chuchule. We’ll ask for you on our way back. And if you have black quintessence, and you’re still interested, then we’ll take you with us.”

“Don’t forget,” said Chuchule firmly. “Because I will have black quintessence, and I’ll definitely be interested.”

Chulatt leaned in toward Allura’s ear. “She’ll be over it in a week.”
“One, two, three, and four, five, six, and— Stop, stop, stop. How the hell are you still skipping steps when I’m counting out loud?”

“Which step am I skipping?!”

“The ‘and’!”

“I don’t know what that means!”

Lance let loose a long, slow, aggravated sigh, his eyes narrowed to mere slits.

Keith looked back at him, looking just as annoyed for his part.

“You’re supposed…” said Lance, every word enunciated and dragged out as long and slow as possible as if he were talking to someone hard of hearing rather than someone who was just stubborn and a very slow learner, “…to keep…your foot…in place…for a beat. Just move your hips.”

“How am I supposed to do that?” demanded Keith, tearing his hands away from Lance’s and throwing them down at his sides. “My weight is shifted the wrong way for the next step if I do that. It’s awkward.”

“It wouldn’t be awkward,” growled Lance, “if you were stepping out with the right foot.”

“I am stepping out with the right foot,” insisted Keith.

“No,” said Lance. “Let me rephrase that: Step out with the correct foot. Your left one.”

“That doesn’t make any sense! It feels weird!”

“It wouldn’t if you shifted your hips like I told you! Oh, my god, you’re impossible.”

“Hey, don’t blame me,” snapped Keith raising a finger to Lance’s face. “This was your idea. Not mine.”

“I know,” said Lance firmly, scowling as he pulled Keith’s hand down. “Which is why I’m not giving up on you.” He grabbed Keith’s free hand as well and put them both back into their starting positions. “But you’re gonna have to start listening to me, or this is gonna be a long, long night.”

Keith closed his eyes and took in a sharp, seething breath. Exertion stained his cheeks red. Was that normal for the no-longer-living? “Whatever.”

“I know what I’m doing, Keith,” said Lance, squeezing Keith’s hands hard. “Trust me.”

“No, I…” Keith released his pent-up breath and met Lance’s gaze. “I know. I do trust you. I’m just really, really bad at this.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what we’re here to change.” Lance furrowed his brow. “There’s no such thing as a hopeless case, Keith. We’re gonna keep doing this again and again until you get it.”

Keith scoffed and narrowed his eyes. “That’s gonna take all night, minimum.”

“So we’ll pick it up again tomorrow if we have to,” said Lance. “And the next night and the next night. And however many more after that. I’ll keep teaching you in my nineties if I have to. I’m not giving up on you.”
Keith raised an eyebrow and fixed Lance with one of the most baffled expressions Lance had ever seen. Lance might have laughed if he wasn’t trying to show Keith how determined he was. “You’re really hung up on teaching me how to dance.”

“You bet your ass,” said Lance. “Now get ready, ‘cause we’re doing it again in three, two…”

The door creaked, catching Coran’s attention and lifting his head from his reading.

Chulatt crept inside, carefully closing the door behind himself, not quite realizing he’d been heard.

“You’re awfully late,” chided Coran, smirking under his ginger mustache when the normally-stoic Chulatt flinched and suddenly seemed almost mousy under Coran’s gaze. “Getting acquainted our lovely hostess, were we? Again?”

Chulatt turned toward Coran slowly and crossed his arms over his chest. “What’s that supposed to mean?” he demanded, just as quiet as Coran had been in their shared attempt to keep the rest of their small party from waking up.

“It means I’m proud of you,” said Coran, returning his gaze to his book in his hands and angling it toward the window as if trying to catch more of the moonlight, though he’d lost interest in the contents of his volume the moment he’d heard the door open. “It’s about time you moved on.”

Chulatt narrowed his eyes. “I haven’t moved on—!”

“Hush, will you?” chastised Coran. “You know how light of a sleeper Allura is. And I’m not accusing you of forgetting about Pyotr, you know. I’m well aware that the hole he’s torn in the fabric of your heart isn’t going away for good. But it’s not a bad thing to sew a patch over it rather than allowing all the cold air to blow in willy-nilly.”

He lifted his eyes from the pages of his book, turning his gaze on Chulatt again. He certainly did look small at the moment.

Coran took a deep breath and set his book aside, allowing him room on his lap to clasp his hands patiently.

“For what it’s worth, Chulatt,” he said, “I’m proud of you. It takes a strong heart to find someone new after what you went through.”

“This is such a bad idea.”

“No, it’s not! It’s a great idea!”

“We’re going to fall. Both of us.”

“I thought you trusted me.”
“I do trust you. It’s the ladder I don’t trust.”

“Don’t tell me you’re scared of heights.”

Keith held tighter onto Lance’s shoulders, his legs pinning themselves to Lance’s sides like a vice grip. “I’m not scared! This is just stupid!”

Lance’s laughter rumbled up through his back and into Keith’s chest. “It’s not stupid. It’s totally worth it. And you’ll definitely see that for yourself once you’re up there.”

The ladder trembled as Lance took his next step, and Keith shut his eyes tight.

This was it.

This was how they both died. Permanently.

This was exactly how Lance broke his neck and Keith got torn apart as he fell through the Earth, or got stuck at the Earth’s core, or something else happened that he didn’t account for.

Lance lurched forward—

_This is it. Right here. Right now. This is us dying._

—and there was a solid thump of rubber soles on shingles.

Warily, Keith opened his eyes and looked down.

They made it.

They were on the roof.

And they weren’t dead.

Or, well, Lance wasn’t dead, and Keith’s soul wasn’t orbiting the Earth’s core for the rest of time.

“There, you see?” teased Lance. “We made it. Even with you choking the crap out of my throat. That takes skills.”

Keith sighed and tried to relax his arms, suddenly very aware of how tightly he was holding on. “Fine. You were right. We made it. But that was still dangerous, and we still have to get down after this.”

“And we’ll make it down just as easily,” said Lance, carrying Keith up the slope of the roof.

He finally let Keith down at the peak of the rooftop and inclined his head toward the starry sky above.

“The one time I’m glad we don’t have clouds,” said Lance. Keith silently chided himself when he caught himself waxing poetic about Lance’s face bathed in starlight. “Now, where’s Perseus?”

Keith lifted his head to the sky as well and squinted for no longer than a few seconds before pointing north-northeast. “There,” he instructed. “Right over the trees.”

“Oh, damn,” said Lance.

Keith looked back at him with a cocked eyebrow, waiting for an explanation.
“You know your constellations,” said Lance, his eyebrows raised. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Yeah, well…” Keith shrugged. “You don’t grow up raised by someone like Alfor without learning at least a little astronomy. The night sky’s a lot different than it was in his time, though. Ten-thousand years is a long time. Stars die, light from faraway stars finally reaches us… And, I mean, his culture had totally different constellations designated. But he was interested in what we called them, so I went to the library and found a book of star charts. We learned them together.”

Lance’s eyes lit up.

Keith could have sworn he felt his heart rev back to life again.

“You’ve got to tell me more about Alfor and his culture— What was it, Alderaan?”

“Altean,” corrected Keith. “And aren’t we supposed to be watching a meteor shower?”

“We can watch and talk at the same time,” insisted Lance, taking a seat right where he stood.

Before Keith got the chance to join Lance of his own free will, Lance had grabbed onto him by the wrist and yanked him down to the shingles by force.

“Ow,” grunted Keith, holding his elbow and glaring at Lance pointedly. “You know I could have sat down without your help, right?”

“Yeah, but you would have taken too long,” said Lance flippantly. “This way you won’t stand around for two full minutes, missing meteors while you wax poetic about a long-dead culture.”

Keith sighed and turned around, carefully laying his back against the slope of the rooftop while Lance slid down beside him, Perseus in full view for both of them.

“I… I don’t even know where I’d start,” admitted Keith.

“You already started,” said Lance effortlessly, tucking his hands under his head in the corner of Keith’s eye. “Old constellations. That’s a great starting point. Go.”

“Oh, uh…” Keith furrowed his brow. It had been a long time. “Sure? Uh…” He furrowed his brow. “Most of them were mythological figures. Like ours. But…different, obviously. Like…the first five Paladins each got their own constellations. Almaak, Ruchbah, Algol, Elvashak, and…” He closed his eyes. “And…shoot. Hold on.” He lowered his voice and began to sing under his breath.

“Laeatagi Elvashak, Algol od Ruchbah; forbeur od godur Almaak, godur Mohtallah—Mohtallah. Elvashak, Ruchbah, Almaak, Algol, and Mohtallah— Why are you looking at me like that?”

Lance, who had been staring at Keith as if he’d grown an extra head, pushed himself up on his elbows. “What the cheese was that? It sounded like something between a sea shanty and, I don’t know, a siren’s song or something.”

Keith scoffed and pulled his jacket collar up over his face, turning his eyes back to the starry sky. “Well, it’s not a sea shanty, and it’s definitely not a siren’s song. It’s just a mnemonic device they taught Altean kids millennia ago. I basically sang the Altean equivalent of the alphabet song, but for constellations.”

“Alphabet song or not,” said Lance, “that was cool as heck. I want to hear the whole thing.”

Keith laughed. “No, you don’t. There are twenty-two verses.”
“How about you start singing and I tell you if I get tired of it?”

“You mean *when* you get tired of it,” said Keith.

“Pretty sure I mean if,” insisted Lance.

Keith turned his head to the side, fixing Lance with a skeptical frown.

Lance just smiled back, cheek half-squished against the shingles.

“Fine.” Keith quickly turned his attention back to the stars. “But you’re gonna run out of patience by the sixth verse, mark my words.”

“You’re on,” said Lance. “If I can sit through all twenty-two verses of your Altean constellation song, then this becomes a regular thing for us. We start coming up here at least once a week to talk and look at the stars. Unless you’re hurt and need to see Red or something, obviously.”

“What about if it storms?”

“Could you stop being so damn contrary for five seconds?” sighed Lance. “We’re obviously not coming up here if it’s legitimately dangerous. I just like the idea of this becoming a thing. So what do you get if you win?”

“What counts as me winning?” asked Keith, brow furrowing.

“Me complaining before I make it through the song.”

“Well, in that case, you could always kiss me.”

Keith had no idea what he’d said. Not until Lance sat up, stared at him agape and red-faced, and Keith quickly rewound his brain until he realized that he’d gotten too comfortable and spoken aloud instead of keeping those words in the realm of his mind where they belonged, where they were safe.

“K-Kidding,” said Keith hurriedly, eyes wide. “I was kidding. Haha...ha.”

*Is it too late to fall off the ladder?*

**Quiznak, it is, isn’t it?**

“Oh.” Lance’s eyes were still as wide as saucers. “Sure. I mean. Yeah, I totally...totally took it that way. As a joke.” He smiled nervously, and Keith knew he hadn’t taken it as a joke, but as long as he thought it was now, that was all that mattered.

“If I win, we never come up here again.”

“Oh, come on!” Lance’s usual color returned to his features—at least for the most part—and he flopped back on the hard rooftop. “You like it up here! You totally do! Admit it.”

“It’s *dangerous*,” insisted Keith.

But even though his face was red, even though he was horribly humiliated, even though there was no way he should have felt anything positive at all, he still looked up into the night sky, caught the glint of a meteor as it darted a short distance across the sky, and he had to admit to himself...*yes*. He really *did* like being able to see a sky full of stars again.
It felt like an eternity since the last time the Paladins had seen the port city they’d arrived in at the start of their journey, and the struggling town that had fallen into disrepair after the effects of Galra attack after Galra attack had managed to pick itself up again despite the meager population.

They were still rebuilding, but the difference was still substantial, and it warmed Allura’s heart to see such progress.

Every person participating in the construction wore a heavy mask, most likely to protect their eyes and lungs from the dust and sand kicked up in the effort. They looked almost like bandits, perhaps to the point that Allura might have been nervous if not for the fact that she could see with her own eyes how much effort every worker was putting toward the good of their city.

One of the workers, upon noticing the small party of Alteans, almost instantly dropped what they were doing to rush in their direction.

In lieu of a face—or indeed, even a body shape, thanks to the bulky clothing the workers wore—Allura followed her impulse to read the worker’s quintessence. Black. Black quintessence seemed to be very common lately, perhaps because the world needed leaders in the aftermath of the Galra attacks, or perhaps because those with black quintessence were often the only ones level-headed enough to survive the attacks themselves.

The worker pulled off her helmet to reveal a pale face, dark hair that had been cropped short, a youthful grin, and red markings beneath her eyes.

“...Well, shit,” breathed Chulatt from over Allura’s shoulder, his words layered with a recognition that Allura didn’t yet understand. “I guess she didn’t get over it.”

“So by ‘contextual’ you mean there’s no way anyone would have any clue what was happening if they zoned out in a conversation.”

Keith rolled his eyes and curled his lip. Lance smirked; sometimes it was worth it to lay his own
ignorance on a little thick just to get reactions like that. “It just means you have to actually think about words could mean. Like ‘klamüirl’. It could mean ‘bear’ or it could mean a thousand different things that are bear-like.” He began counting possible meanings off on his fingers. “Wrath, parental love, sleeping in—”

“A big, hairy, gay man?”

Keith’s expression turned annoyed and hilariously deadpan, and he turned his deeply frustrated eyes on Lance. “No. There wasn’t a word in their language that set people who preferred any gender apart. Their culture didn’t call for it. People just liked who they liked.”

“Huh.” Lance inched closer to Keith on the bed so that their knees touched. Any excuse for them to touch at all was a good enough reason in Lance’s book. “Sounds utopic.”

“Maybe it was,” said Keith, shrugging. “It’s not like I got to experience it for myself. And...you know, there was the Galra thing. Alteans needed Paladins for a reason.”

“Right,” mumbled Lance. “You mentioned that.”

Keith licked his lips, his brow furrowed in thought.

Lance tried not to stare.

It was difficult.

“...Right, like I was saying, it’s a really contextual language,” said Keith, continuing as if Lance had never interrupted him at all. “That means people had to choose their words really carefully, which could lead to some confusion in verbal conversation because it was like trying to talk in metaphors all the time, but a side-effect of that is that their poetry was incredible because any poem could be interpreted any number of ways.”

His dark eyes suddenly filled with a spark of something. Excitement, maybe. An eagerness to share a long-dead culture that Keith might be the only person left on Earth to still understand.

Whatever it was, Lance liked it. A lot. Enough that he couldn’t bring himself to tease Keith about it and chance losing sight of that spark.

“There was one poem that Alfor liked a lot,” continued Keith, leaning forward, elbows on his knees. “He had tons of poems memorized, but he recited this one for me so many times I almost had it memorized myself. It could have been anything from a love letter to a story about a mass murderer depending on how you interpreted it, except the name of the subject was an extremely common Altean name, so it could have been referring to a single person with that name, or it could have been talking about every single person with the name. Which was a huge number of people. So the poem could have even been taken as a joke. Like if someone wrote a poem today called ‘Better Watch Out for Bob’.”

Keith laughed, and the sound was so soft and warm and happy and so wonderfully Keith that it made Lance’s toes curl.

At least there wasn’t a stack of stainless steel pots and pans close enough to knock over this time.

“Alfor used it to teach me about blue quintessence,” continued Keith, unaware of the effect that the smallest of vocalizations had on Lance, “because there’s no easy translation into English for the personality type it represents.”
“You said I had blue quintessence,” remembered Lance, “but you never explained what it is. Is that why?”

Keith averted his eyes for less than a second. The spark, thankfully, was still there. “Sort of,” he admitted. “The other reason was… Actually, it was mostly because I was trying to establish some kind of relationship between us.” He looked past Lance’s shoulder and out the window behind, pushing his long, black hair away from his face by combing through it with his fingers. “I don’t even know what I was going for. Not friendship. I didn’t even think friendship was possible back then. I guess just…acquaintanceship?”

“What,” teased Lance, “was my friendship not good enough for you?”

“Actually…” Keith’s hand continued to travel down the back of his head until he was holding the back of his neck. “…It was the opposite. I didn’t think I was good enough for your friendship.”

Lance, who wasn’t quite sure what to do with that revelation, quickly changed the subject. “So what is blue quintessence?”

Keith finally turned his gaze back on Lance. “Well, like I said, it’s hard to explain. But I can try.” He bit his lip, but this time, Lance had absolutely no trouble keeping eye contact. “…Have you ever met someone who could be the sweetest, gentlest, most sympathetic person you’ve ever met, but also knew exactly when to stop catering to your feelings and start kicking your butt into gear? Like they almost had a sixth sense where they could tell exactly what you needed at any given time and provide it, even when you couldn’t tell what you needed yourself?”

Lance’s mind immediately migrated to memories of his grandmother.

He nodded slowly.

“That’s blue quintessence,” said Keith, nodding as well.

“That sounds a lot like yellow quintessence,” said Lance skeptically.

“It’s sort of similar,” agreed Keith. “There was an Altean word that sort of…grouped blue and yellow quintessence together in one category, and that word was also a homonym for their word for ‘leg’. Someone with yellow quintessence would stay by your side even when you’re wrong, but someone with blue quintessence is more likely to call you out on being wrong if it’s for your own good.” He shrugged. “Someone with blue quintessence is going to be just as supportive as someone with yellow quintessence, but they’ll show it in a different way.”

“And…that’s what you think I have?” Lance frowned.

“I don’t just think you have it,” said Keith firmly. “I can see it. I can see it easier than anyone else’s quintessence in this whole house. It’s almost blinding. When you’re around, especially when you’re looking at me, and I’m on the lookout for quintessence, you make it hard for me to see anything else. You’re blue, Lance. Very, very blue. And—” His breath hitched audibly. He averted his eyes downward, to the space between their connected knees, and when he spoke again, his voice was much less confident, much quieter. “…And even if I didn’t see it like that, I know…or I’d like to think…that I know you well enough for it to be obvious. At least to me.”

“So how was that weird poem supposed to help you figure out blue quintessence?” said Lance very quickly, eager to take attention away from himself and the pulse that had quickened under his skin when Keith let on that he’d been paying very close attention to Lance.

Don’t read too much into it. We’re not doing the whole ‘you could always kiss me’ thing again—
“Because you’re likely to think about that poem in a different way depending on how you’re feeling whenever you hear or read it,” explained Keith, thankfully before Lance could keep yelling at himself. “It treats you differently. Just like someone with blue quintessence will probably treat you differently depending on how you’re feeling.”

Lance allowed himself to contemplate that idea for a few moments before he decided that it made enough sense. “What’s the poem called?”

Keith laughed tersely. “In English? Are you kidding me? You want me to translate that mess?”

“Just the title,” sighed Lance. “It can’t be that bad.”

Keith grabbed Lance’s knees, demanding his attention. He had it. Easily.

“Beware of... Look at... Behold the Beauty of... Make Fun of... Experience... Observe... Be Aware of... Experiment on... Laugh at... Stare Intently at—”

“Okay, okay, I get it! It can be interpreted a ton of different ways!”

“Demonstrate... Introducing...”

“You’re just pulling this out of your ass. Come on, there can’t be this many different ways to interpret one title.”

“Behold… Adore… Pine for…”

“Keith, come on.”

“...Pyotr.”

The party that sailed across the sea in search of someone compatible with the Blue Lion returned larger than it left. They left as five and returned as seven. Chuchule returned with them, just as she promised that she would, and Chulatt returned with a new romance, one formed with a woman who had taken care of their makeshift family while they stayed in her city.

But despite their greater numbers, they returned unsuccessful.

They must have tried to pair the Blue Lion with hundreds of people, but even if the Galra hadn’t dwindled Altean lives to nearly nothing, even if Allura, Coran, and the Paladins would have been able to find tens of thousands of Alteans with blue quintessence, Allura somehow had the feeling that the Blue Lion would have rejected every single one of them.

For whatever reason, she simply wasn’t responding. If Allura knew less about the Lions than she did, she might have assumed that the Blue Lion was dead and that they’d simply carried her corpse across the world for the past decade.

It was with mixed feelings that she stepped into the walls of her old home, the castle that her father now protected, and led her family into the moonlit courtyard that marked the place where her father and two friends who were as good as family had met their ends.

“Allura.” Her father’s eyes were just as blue, just as gentle, just as kind as Allura remembered them.
In fact, everything about Alfor was exactly as Allura remembered. He hadn’t aged. That was a privilege of the living. “How wonderful it is to see you again, Daughter.”

The diplomacy, the noble distance, the regal coldness Allura had built up over years hardened by travel and meeting hundreds of strangers that would soon be forgotten and seeing hundreds of civilizations destroyed by the Galra melted away all at once. Allura felt fifteen again. And she rushed into her father’s arms, sobbing without restraint.

For the moment, she had her father back.

But it wasn’t to last.

“So, you weren’t able to find a replacement.”

Allura shook her head, and she pulled away, forlorn, holding tight onto her father’s hands. “We must have spoken to every Altean on the surface of the planet. Every one of them with blue quintessence interacted with the Blue Lion, but she never responded.”

“I see.” Alfor closed his eyes and furrowed his brow. He took a deep breath, one heavier than Allura could remember hearing, heavy with a decade of battling the Galra on his own.

When he opened his eyes again, they shined with a coldness Allura had never seen.

“I’ve prepared for this eventuality,” explained Alfor. “I feared as much, and I prepared for this result. Unfortunately, this is not something you can afford to refuse.”

“Why would I refuse?” demanded Allura, afraid and rightfully so. “Father, what is it?”

“I’ve spoken to the Druids,” explained Alfor, “and they’ve been kind enough to build two chambers that will hold you and Coran in suspension until either luck or fate provides me with Pyotr’s replacement.”

“What?” demanded Allura. “Where is the logic in that? How is that supposed to help anyone at all?”

“You’ve done your part, Allura,” said Alfor sternly. “You’ve spoken to every single potential Blue Paladin on the planet at this moment, and it took you ten years to do so. You’ve grown older. Coran has grown older.” He turned to the rest of the Paladins. “Every single one of you has grown older. Do you deny it?”

No one dared argue.

None of them had ever seen Alfor like this.

Alfor turned his attention back to Allura. “The last I saw of you, you were a girl. You’ve grown into a woman. In twenty more years, you will be middle-aged. In fifty, you’ll be an old woman. And in that time, I will not have aged at all. If you continue to age, your body will fail you, and you will die, and I will be here, as always. I can continue to search future generations of Alteans while you sleep —”

“I see no reason to sleep for hundreds of years while you search,” snapped Allura. “What is the point of keeping myself young—”

“In case I fail!” answered Alfor with all the fury of a Lion’s roar. “In the case of my failure, in the case that it is impossible for the Blue Lion to choose a new Paladin, in the case that so much time passes that it becomes clear that there is no Blue Paladin, that there never will be a Blue Paladin, then
for the sake of the planet, for our people, as much as it pains me to say it, your quintessence will need to provide a new generation of Lions.”

“Why wait?” demanded Allura. “Why not create the next generation now? I can choose my own Paladins and we can seal the exposure immediately rather than wait centuries and put countless generations at risk!”

“Because you are my daughter!”

“In case you haven’t noticed, I’m not a child! I am not a little girl who needs permission from her father for every single choice she makes! You hold no authority over me anymore!”

“It’s not a matter of authority, Allura!”

“How else am I supposed to—”

“Coran!” Alfor turned to his friend, his advisor, ignoring Allura and only serving to anger her further. “Escort her outside until she has come to her senses.”

Less than a second passed before Allura felt Coran’s hand on her arm.

“No!” Allura yanked her arm away. “This is not right! What about Platt, Chulatt, and Plachu? Are they any less important than me or Coran? Why are they not included in your plan?”

“Plachu,” said Alfor sternly. “Describe the circumstances surrounding the replacement of Paladins in early Altean history.”

Plachu swallowed. Her voice was remarkably small compared to Alfor’s or Allura’s. It was small even compared to her usual volume. “Before Alteans realized that only one Paladin was necessary at any given time in order for any given generation of Lions to communicate with the living and provide the protection necessary to their purpose, they took a precaution that they considered a necessary evil in their desperation to protect the world from the Galra. Acknowledging that bodies age and rot away with time, they discovered that...that they could, in essence, cure the soul, allowing it to maintain a bond with a designated Lion while, in a way, remaining immortal. In this way, a Paladin could be replaced in an instant, but at the price of a Paladin’s humanity. That is...”

Plachu closed her eyes and clasped her hands behind her back. She took a deep, agonizing, shaking breath, and she grimaced before delivering the words that she was so hesitant to say.

“That is, the souls of Paladins, still connected to their Lions, would be...removed from their bodies and put on standby for whenever such a time came that it was necessary to take over for their predecessors.”

Allura tensed her shoulders. “What...?” She turned on her father, glowering at him with a look so dark that it was completely foreign on her features. “You cannot expect me to allow this to happen. These are people. They have lives. They are my friends. I cannot allow such inhumane treatment to come to them, no matter how necessary you seem to think it is. I refuse.”

“Coran,” said Alfor firmly, “did I not tell you to escort my daughter outside?”

Coran grabbed onto Allura’s arm again, this time a bit more forcefully. “Princess, please—”

“You cannot tell me what to do!” Again, Allura was able to pull free, but only to stumble backward, directly into Platt’s chest.
“Platt—!”

“I’ll take her,” said the great beast of a man before lifting Allura into his arms as easily as if she were made of paper.

“No!” Allura struggled, but there was no point against a man so large. “No, put me down! I refuse to allow this to go on! Let me go, Platt! Let me go!”

Keith heard the bedroom door open.

He didn’t lift his head.

Even as he heard the floor creak under Lance’s weight, he refused to move, his head in his hands, knee bouncing under his elbows.

Lance’s hands wrapped around his shoulders.

Still, he didn’t lift his head.

“Keith?” The concern in Lance’s voice was almost crippling. “What’s wrong? Was it another Galra like Haxus, because if it was—”

“It’s not—” Keith set his jaw. “No. It wasn’t.”

For the entire day, he’d been contemplating it.

From the moment his daily routine began to the moment Red appeared with the setting sun, he’d been mulling it over, weighing pros against cons, reasons why against reasons why not.

And he’d finally decided.

He cared about Lance too much.

And Lance cared about him too much.

He was running out of reasons to keep it a secret.

Slowly, cautiously, Keith lifted his head.

Lance’s worried, blue eyes bored deep into his own, and any doubt he’d had left disappeared.

“How we…go on the roof again? I want to talk about something.”

Lance paled considerably. “The roof? You hate going up there.”

“It’s private,” explained Keith. “And quiet, and…”

He closed his eyes, and he inhaled a deep, deep breath through his nose.

It was time.

“Lance… I want to tell you about the day I died.”
Chapter End Notes

I guess people liked the last chapter, 'cause two whole arts happened. Two whole arts. Lookattem.

itsrainingmen.png
Untitled?

YELL AT ME ON TWITTER

-SCREAMS- 12K WORDS. ARE YOU TIRED? I'M TIRED. ALSO IT'S 2:00 IN THE MORNING AND I'm DRINKIN' TEA.
The foyer was stained in darkness. All of the lights were out—in just a few moments, it would be pointless to have them lit—and yet, there were no Galra. They were waiting, just as they had for every eclipse since the one that left Pyotr dead and Alfor a Paladin. They would attack all at once the very second that the moon’s shadow fell over the exposure.

But Alfor would be ready.

He’d survived the past eleven eclipses. He could survive this one as well.

He climbed to the top of the stairs, Bayard drawn, extended into its bow shape and held out at arm’s length.

“All right…” Alfor nocked an arrow, one that glimmered bright violet, like a black light, illuminating the entire foyer with its purple glow. “Whenever you’re ready, boys.”

The moment those four words fell from Alfor’s lips, the floor of the foyer glittered to life with the gleam of countless yellow eyes.

Alfor loosed the first arrow, landing it right between two of those golden lights and dousing them instantly, and the floodgates were opened.

Every Galra advanced at once, charging like the army they were. The floor rumbled with their every heavy footfall, like an earthquake that rolled up the stairs.

Alfor loosed arrows as quickly as he could, but it wasn’t enough to keep them all at bay. They reached him faster than he could kill them, and he was forced to push them back, using his bow like a riot shield. They piled around him like ants around sugar, all tearing and pushing against each other, desperate for a taste of the Paladin that guarded the exposure.

Claws latched onto Alfor’s armor, tugging at the plates, trying to rip them off of him and reach the vulnerable body beneath. One claw slashed at his face, leaving a series of long cuts that Black would
It was hard to maneuver around the Galra that pressed into him from all sides, but Alfor somehow managed to pull an arm back and lose a glowing arrow. That arrow shot out, carving a path through at least ten Galra before fading away just inches from the wall by the door.

More Galra appeared, filling the space as easily as water.

It was never easy, but Alfor always survived. Or, at least, he had the past eleven times. He would make it twelve. He had to make it twelve. He had something worth truly fighting for this time. Someone he had to protect. It was no longer a moral matter anymore, but a personal one. He had every reason to fight harder than he ever had.

So why did he feel weaker?

Why did the Galra seem to outmatch him so easily?

The answer caught his eye from the eastern side of the catwalk. A Galra, fully formed, a cunning and terrible grin on its face, sneered at him from afar with a sickening sort of pleasure that seemed to radiate from every single purple hair on its face.

Another one. Like Zarkon or Ulaz. That was why the Galra were overwhelming Alfor so easily. They were being led. Something about their strategy had changed, something that clearly made a difference despite the fact that Alfor was unable to determine exactly what it was.

And Alfor knew immediately that his newfound drive to protect a loved one meant nothing, because he was going to die before the eclipse ended.

“Alfor!”

A familiar voice dragged Alfor’s eyes away from the Galra on the stairs. He whipped around, though something in the back of his mind screamed for him not to look.

And the moment Alfor realized what he was looking at, he decided that that part of his mind was right.

Keith stood at the bottom of the stairs, armed with nothing but a hunting knife that Alfor immediately recognized as the one his parents had given him the previous Christmas. Though it was just a knife, it was much better suited for close combat than Alfor’s bow, and it was capable of cutting through the horde of Galra as easily as if they were paper. Keith forced his way through the crowded foyer like a jungle explorer with a machete, downing the Galra left and right until he was at Alfor’s side.

“Keith,” roared Alfor. “What do you suppose you are doing?”

“Helping!” said Keith, lifting a leg for a kick and pushing a faceless Galra away by its chest. “You look like you need it!”

Alfor whipped around so that he was back-to-back with Keith, protecting him from any Galra that dared to attack the boy from behind. “You were meant to be watching the eclipse with your parents.”

“I was,” said Keith, punctuating his words with a grunt that Alfor suspected to be the result of another attack, though he dare not turn around and see for himself. “And then I remembered what you said, why it’s so important that Black shows up at night—because a shadow big enough, like the one from the Earth, makes it so that artificial lights don’t work anymore. I thought it’d be the same with the moon’s shadow, and I was right, wasn’t I?” Another grunt, one that seemed to accompany a
shove rather than a slash.

“You should still be there,” snapped Alfor, barely managing to loose another arrow in such close quarters. He bumped hard against something lumpy—a backpack? Had Keith brought his backpack with him to the event? Was that why he had his knife? And those gloves? Why on Earth did he have his backpack? “It’s too dangerous!”

“That’s exactly why I came!” said Keith, stumbling into Alfor’s back. “It’s dangerous! You don’t have to do this alone! I can— Hngh!”

Alfor whipped around, alarmed by the sudden expression of pain, and felt the hard slash of claws across the back of his neck. The claws went deep, and it hurt Alfor so much more than he was prepared for, but he ignored the pain, too concerned for the boy at his back. “Keith!”

“I’m fine,” said Keith, clutching his abdomen with his left arm and managing another—weaker—attack with his right.

“You aren’t fine,” said Alfor sternly. “None of this— Keith, you can’t see the Galra. How are you fighting them?”

“I can,” said Keith, sparing an angry glare over his shoulder. “I can see the Galra. I don’t know how, but—”

“Even if you can,” said Alfor, ignoring the clench of his gut as to what that could possibly mean for Keith. “Even if you are able to see the Galra, you should not be fighting them. You are not a Paladin, Keith.”

“Well, maybe I should be!” snapped Keith.

“You are not,” repeated Alfor, raising his bow. “And this is not your fight.”

A single, glowing arrow erupted from Alfor’s bow, piercing through layer after layer of Galra and cutting out a path that led directly to the restroom door on the far western wall.

Without a modicum of warning, Alfor grabbed Keith by the strap of his backpack and began to drag him down the path he’d made, ignoring any protests from Keith himself. When the Galra got too close, he swung his bow to push them back. Nothing was going to stop him from protecting this boy, this boy he raised from infancy, this boy he saw struggle with social situations for his entire life because he was always too short-tempered, too impulsive, too odd. This boy who had grown into a man under Alfor’s watchful eye. This boy who deserved better than the doomed life of a Paladin.

“Wait—!” screamed Keith, protests cut short as he was pushed inside the restroom. So hard was he thrown that he slid into the bathtub.

“You’ll be safe here, Keith,” said Alfor, speaking as quickly as he possibly could. The Galra were closing in on his back quickly. He only had a short time before they caught up to him, and once they caught up, they could push inside, and Keith would be no safer. “Their target is me, not you. They won’t bother you so long as you and I are in separate rooms.”

Keith pushed himself to his elbows quickly, though he was obviously in pain from Alfor’s harsh toss. Alfor might have found it in himself to be guilty if not for the fact that he knew he’d been protecting Keith from far worse injury by causing that small one.

Keith pushed himself shakily to his knees as quickly as he could, but it wasn’t quickly enough. He was still getting his bearings when Alfor reached for the doorknob.
It wasn’t easy—in fact, it was probably the hardest thing Alfor ever had to do, short of putting his daughter and dearest friend into a sleep that he knew he would never see them wake up from—but Alfor, who didn’t want Keith’s last memory of his face to be a snarl of effort and frustration, reached deep down inside of himself, pushed through all of the pain and the despair of his own impending end, and somehow found a smile.

“Be well, Keith,” said Alfor, as kindly as the situation would allow, and he closed the door just as Keith managed to pull himself to his feet.

As fast as his dexterous fingers would allow, before Keith could reach the door, Alfor raised his bow, took aim, and fired an arrow directly into the point where the door latch pushed into the doorframe. The arrow pierced the metal, warping it to the point where the door was unusable, a blockade rather than an entrance.

Satisfied, Alfor whipped around.

He was going to be struck down, he could already tell, but if he was going to go down, then he was going to go down swinging.

Keith pounded his fists against the door, desperate and angry and terrified.

“Alfor!” he screamed, each blow to the door strong enough to quake it, but not strong enough to loosen the broken doorknob that kept him trapped inside. “Alfor, please! You have to let me out! You can’t do this by yourself!” He reeled back an arm and punched the door. His fist barely made a dent.

The feeble result of his own attempt at escape brought frustrated tears to Keith’s eyes. They rolled down his cheeks, hot with rage.

“I’m not leaving you!”

Though the words tore from Keith’s throat with all the power of a lion’s roar, it meant little to the unbreakable wall that kept Keith from Alfor’s side.

There was nothing he could do.

And he knew it.

Tormented, torn apart by the knowledge that he could do nothing, Keith fell to his knees, tears dropping from his chin to the fabric of his pants unchecked.

He could hear the grunts of effort and pained screams on the other side of the door. They drilled into his skull, piercing Keith with a pain greater than anything he ever knew. He continued to beat against the door, his pounding and sobbing growing weaker and weaker with every scream that pushed through the door.

He trembled, trembled like he was being physically tortured, as if every pained cry that worked its way through the walls carved into his skin.

There was nothing he could do.
Not unless he could push through the door the same way those screams did.

His eyes snapped open wide and he lifted his head. Quickly, he slid the backpack off of his shoulders and pulled it onto his lap. With fingers that shook so uncontrollably that he could barely hold the zipper, he yanked the bag open and he pulled the box free.

He wasn’t supposed to have it. It was supposed to be in the basement, dusty and uninteresting and untouched.

But no matter what Alfor said, Keith knew what his destiny was.

And it was calling.

Desperate, Keith flicked open the latches on the box and pushed the lid open, chest rising and falling, exhilaration piling on top of the rest of the emotions that warred within him.

And his shaking hands sought out the Lion that called to him.

“Please,” he begged, plucking Red out of the box, cradling her between his hands. “Please, I know I’m your Paladin. I have to be. Living here, being able to fight the Galra, seeing Alfor— It has to mean something. I know I’m supposed to help him. But to do that, I need your help.” The glistening red caught the pale glow of the restroom’s nightlight and shimmered in its glow. “I’d like to be able to bond with you more before we have to fight together, but this is important, Alfor’s in trouble, he’s dying. If I don’t do something—”

If he didn’t do something, that weak smile in the bathroom doorway would be the last Keith ever saw of the man who raised him more than his own father.

Keith’s hands clutched desperately at the Red Lion’s figurine, holding her to his chest. “Please,” he begged yet again. “I can’t lose him.”

It felt like an eternity that passed like that, shaking, crying on the bathroom floor, before something shifted. Something fell into place. And Keith saw.

He saw death in his mind’s eye.

War and genocide and open graves and blood, so much blood.

And he understood.

“How?” he demanded, pulling back to look at the figure in his hands. “How do I do that without leaving the room?”

He lifted his head and peered at the medicine cabinet over his shoulder.

With a great deal of care, as if handling an infant, he transferred the box with the remaining three Lions onto the floor of the bathroom and stood to dig through the contents of the medicine cabinet.

The medicines were useless. High dosages of ibuprofen, cough syrup, diphenhydramine, a few tablets of paracetamol… Nothing lethal. Maybe if he swallowed everything in the cabinet at once, but he couldn’t risk Alfor’s life on a maybe.

His eyes slid from left to right on the bottom shelf, inspecting every item they came across, trying to glean some method from each of them. It didn’t have to be pills. It just had to be lethal. Bandages, hydrogen peroxide, a roll of gauze…
A box of razors.

It was exhaustion like Alfor had never known it. The Galra had become too much. The world had become too much. And he was on the edge of giving up.

He supposed that was what dying was.

The eclipse had ended, but there were still so many Galra. Too many to fight, yet every Galra he defeated was another Galra that Keith would not have to face, and so Alfor continued to fight.

He pushed himself to his limits.

He pushed himself until his armor served more to weigh him down than to protect him.

He stumbled backward, so tired he could barely raise his bow, so weary that he struggled to aim, but still he fired as many arrows as his heavy arms could bear to draw back.

The fifty Galra that remained dwindled slowly to forty, then to thirty.

Twenty-four remained when a solid hit to the back of Alfor’s head knocked him down for the last time.

Keith didn’t feel it anymore.

He did at first, and the pain was so sharp that he could barely stand to carry out the act, but, hands shaking in their gloves, Lion resting between his legs, he managed, and he’d rushed to the tub to turn on the faucet, to speed things along.

The water pounded against his opened arms, flushing out the red centiliter by centiliter.

And Keith was numb to it.

He wasn’t sure when he stopped feeling it. Long before he’d started to feel dizzy, he knew.

The red fell down his arms in thick, heavy ribbons that were quickly washed away by the warm water, only to be replaced by more and more red, red that smeared over everything, stained his clothes, washed over the Lion’s already-crimson face in waves as she rested in his steadily weakening grip.

“Please,” rasped Keith, resting his forehead against the shower wall, his eyes fixed on his Lion’s. “Please, please…”
“Why do you still fight?” asked the Galra, his wide, bat-like ears blocking out what little light bled in through the windows. “There is no chance of victory. You have lost, Paladin. The world is ours.”

“I haven’t lost,” growled Alfor with the last of his strength. “Keith has survived. That is my victory.”

“What is one boy to the world?” snarled the Galra. “Once you fade away, there will be nothing left to stop us from spreading across the surface of the planet.”

“That boy,” rasped Alfor, “is going to change the planet. The world is not lost, so long as he is in it.”

“You have a great deal of faith in one human boy.” The Galra’s grip tightened around Alfor’s throat. It was tight. Unbearably tight. But it didn’t kill him. Not yet. “You lost because your fight became a fight for him. Do you realize that?”

“It…does not…matter.” Alfor could scarcely breathe enough to speak. He choked on his words. “He…is…my son.”

It was strange, how true those words rang, having never been spoken before. Not by blood, not by lineage, but still, without a doubt, Keith Kogane was his son.

“The world for your son,” scoffed the Galra, dropping Alfor to the floor, where he clattered to his end. “I hope you’re satisfied with that choice. It will be the last one you will ever make.”

Alfor closed his eyes.

Ten-thousand years was too long for any one man, and the last nineteen had made every year previous worth the effort.

He welcomed the end.

Keith’s grip, already weak, loosened too much, and the Lion slipped from his fingers.

The world went black before she hit the tub.

Lance stared, brow knotted, lips just barely parted as he desperately searched for something to say. Anything at all.

He came up blank.

“Don’t,” growled Keith, rolling onto his side, turning his back toward Lance. Lance hated the way it reminded him of the day they stopped talking. “Don’t look at me like that.” Keith shrank, hunching his shoulders to the point where they touched his ears. “I didn’t tell you this just so you could pity me.”

“That’s not… That’s not what I’m…” The harder Lance tried to speak, the more blanks he drew. “I’m just trying to figure out what to say. I mean… I wouldn’t even know what to say if you just
found somebody like that, but knowing you did it to yourself... And after all that—"

“I was still too late,” said Keith, dejected, curling even further into himself. “It didn’t even matter. I did it for nothing.”

“No, you didn’t!” protested Lance.

Keith didn’t turn around, but he didn’t complain, either, so Lance took that as his cue to continue.

“You’ve been fighting off the Galra for years,” said Lance. “You protected your parents, you’ve stopped the Galra from escaping out into the world, and pardon me for being selfish, but if you didn’t...you know...then I never would have met you.” He hesitated. “Well, I might have, considering you’re Shiro’s cousin, but you would have been, like, twenty years older than me, and we probably wouldn’t have, you know...clicked? Anyway—” Lance shook his head. “—point is, yes, what happened to you sucked, and you deserved better, but it wasn’t for nothing.” Lance leaned forward and carefully, warily rested a hand on Keith’s arm. When Keith didn’t flinch or move away, Lance assumed that meant he wasn’t invading his personal space, and he let his hand stay where it was. “…You saved me. You saved me tons of times. Where do you think I’d be if you weren’t here to protect me?”

Keith finally rolled over and looked up at Lance’s face.

Lance tried to offer a smile. It was weak, but still, he thought it might help.

“I don’t pity you,” he said firmly. “I don’t really know what to say—I don’t even think there’s anything I can say—but I don’t pity you. I’d have to be really stupid to look at someone who’s saved my life more times than I can count and think of him as pitiful.”

Keith sighed and blinked rapidly, like he was blinking away tears, despite the fact that Lance had never seen him shed a tear. For any of the times Lance had seen Keith sob and shake, he’d never seen a single tear fall.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, still holding Lance’s gaze. “I didn’t mean to...imply that saving your life wasn’t worth it or something.”

“Nah,” said Lance. It was easier to smile this time. “You didn’t. I just didn’t want you to think that your death didn’t mean anything. It did. To a lot of people.”

Keith sighed again and turned his gaze away. “...I always wanted to be a Paladin, you know? My whole life. From the day Alfor told me what he was. I wanted to be just like him. I wanted to help people. He...didn’t want this life for me. We fought about it all the time—”

“Did Shiro walk in on one of those fights?”

Keith looked back at Lance, raising an eyebrow. “Yeah, he...he did. How did you—?”

“He told me,” explained Lance. “Not that he knows I’m, you know, on speaking terms with you right now, but...he told me he walked in on you yelling with no one else around. I kinda put two and two together.”

Keith sat up, and Lance scooted back, allowing him space. “Shiro talks about me?”

“Not, like, on a regular basis or anything,” said Lance. “But he did bring you up a couple times. How do you think I learned your name?”
“I didn’t even know he remembered me,” said Keith, frowning. “He was so little.”

“He doesn’t remember a lot,” explained Lance, “but he remembers that.”

“Great.” Keith covered half of his face with one hand. “He remembers the time I yelled in his face. That’s...perfect.”

“He remembers you regretting it immediately afterward,” explained Lance. “And he remembers trying to fix everything. He remembers you being a good guy, Keith. He’d want to see you if he could.”

Keith dropped his hand from his face, but he stayed silent, glaring at a patch of shingles by his legs.

Lance watched him for a long, awkward moment before breaking the silence with an announcement. “I wanted to be an astronaut.”

Keith lifted his head again. “What?”

“You said you wanted to be a Paladin your whole life,” said Lance, shrugging. “I wanted to be an astronaut. And I didn’t grow out of it like most little kids who want to be astronauts do. I held onto the idea for a really long time. As far as high school.”

“So what changed?” asked Keith. “What made you give it up?”

“Pidge,” said Lance. “Or, well… Pidge’s brother, I guess. And their dad. And Shiro.”

Keith raised an eyebrow.

Lance took a deep breath. “Well, you already know that Pidge lost their brother, right?”

Keith nodded.

“Well, Matt and Sam Holt died during the launch of the Argo a few years ago,” explained Lance. “I don’t want to go into all the details of what happened. I know too many of them. But...point is, they went up and never came back down.”

“And now you’re scared of going into space?” offered Keith.

“Scared, yes,” said Lance. “But...not of space. See, Shiro was supposed to be on that shuttle, but he was in a slightly less lethal accident a few days before. Obviously, he retired right after that. Pidge was going to follow their family tradition of going into space, but they retired that idea, too. They’re both traumatized. Especially… Especially Shiro.” Lance shrugged. “I-I don’t want to be the one to force them to relive that trauma. I’m not scared of what happens to me. I’m scared of what’ll happen to them if something does happen to me.”

Keith frowned. Lance thought, for a moment, that Keith was going to protest. People usually did when he told them about his reason for not following his dreams. But Keith didn’t say anything like that at all. And for that, Lance was glad.

“It’s kind of dumb how I got that idea in my head anyway,” said Lance. “Being an astronaut, I mean. Want to hear why little me wanted to be an astronaut?”

Keith nodded silently.

“You know that memorial statue, the Space Lance?”
Keith buried his face in his hands. “Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes!” Lance grinned. “Little me saw the title of it somewhere a long time ago, not realizing the tragic purpose behind it, and decided, ‘Hey, my name’s Lance, I could be a real Space Lance.’”

Keith started laughing into his hands. He peeked out between his fingers, eyes squinted in mirth.

Lance only grinned brighter. “Right? It was so stupid! But, you know? Once I started actually doing research on astronomy and found out stuff like why black holes are black and what happens to time when people move faster and all this crap about light speed and stuff, I fell in love with it. And I decided I needed to see it all.”

Keith was still smiling when he lowered his hands, but it was a different kind of smile. It was gentle and warm, and Lance’s heart started doing acrobatics all over again.

That smile was going to kill him one of these days, if the laugh that often accompanied it didn’t.

“So that’s how you knew what Perseus looked like.”

“Yep.” Lance cracked his knuckles. “Know all the constellations and all their major stars, the difference between a constellation and an asterism, all that jazz. The sky’s a beautiful thing. And I always take the time to get to know beautiful things as much as I can.” Lance winked.

Keith’s smile disappeared, replaced by utter bemusement. “...What?”

“Hold on.” Lance held up a finger and whipped his phone out of his pocket. Within seconds, the peaceful strumming of an acoustic guitar filled the air.

Lance pocketed his phone, music still playing, and climbed to his feet, hand outstretched toward Keith. “You said you never went to a school dance, right?”

“No,” Keith scooted away from the hand. “We’re not dancing up here. No way. The last time we tried to dance, I fell into your dresser so hard that I nearly knocked it over. And we’re two stories up and on a slope.”

“I’m not that stupid,” sighed Lance, hand still outstretched. “Does this sound like a song that warrants salsa? I was gonna slow dance. You can’t mess up slow dancing.”

“You sure about that?” asked Keith, eyes darting skeptically between Lance’s hand and his face. “I think I’m about to prove you wrong.”

“Well, maybe you’re wrong,” insisted Lance. “And if I prove you wrong... Well, in that case, you could always kiss me.”

Keith turned bright red and groaned. “That was a joke!”

“I know,” laughed Lance. “And you’re still as crap at making jokes as you were when we met.” He bent lower, offering his hand toward Keith a bit more insistently. “I still want to dance with you, though. So are you going to take my hand or not?”

Keith closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

And he took Lance’s hand.

Lance tugged hard, but not fast, and pulled Keith carefully to his feet.
“So, how do we do this?” asked Keith, squeezing Lance’s hand as if it were a lifeline.

“Are you serious?” Lance cocked an eyebrow. “Have you never watched a chick flick in your life?”

“Do I look like someone who watches chick flicks?” countered Keith, monotone.

Lance rolled his eyes. Okay, admittedly, no. Keith seemed like the kind of person who barely watched movies at all, much less chick flicks about teenage girls and their high school crushes. But Lance tried not to judge.

“Okay, whatever, just… Remember when I carried you in the rain?”

“Of course,” said Keith, frowning. “Why?”

“Remember how you had your arms before I picked you up?” asked Lance, letting go of Keith’s hand.

Keith nodded.

“Do that again.”

Though it was much less confident than it had been that day in the rain, Keith did. He draped his arms over Lance’s shoulders.

Lance didn’t notice how much he was shaking until he looped his arms around Keith’s lower back.

“You okay?” he asked, raising his eyebrows.

The worried lines in Keith’s forehead belied his answer. “Sure.”

Lance leaned forward, and despite how it made his heart feel like it was going to burst, he pressed his forehead against Keith’s, trying to smooth out the wrinkles without using his hands. “That’s not what your face says. You know I’m not gonna let you fall off the roof or anything, right?”

“I—” Keith’s voice cracked.

Lance smirked.

“I know,” said Keith firmly, somehow managing to make his voice work this time. “I t— I trust you. That’s not the problem.”

“Then what is it?” asked Lance. “Am I just too handsome? Is it distracting?”

Keith murmured something that Lance couldn’t quite hear over the music rising from his pocket.

“Hm?”

“Nothing,” said Keith. “I’ll be okay. I’m just… I’m going to wind up stepping on your foot or something.”

“Nah,” said Lance confidently, tilting his head away from Keith’s face. “I trust you just as much as you trust me.”

“You shouldn’t,” warned Keith. “I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“Yeah, well, that’s why I’m leading,” said Lance. “All you have to do is follow my lead. Think you
can do that?”

“I guess we’ll see,” sighed Keith, who still looked very concerned.

“It’s seriously not that hard,” whispered Lance. “We’re going full middle school here. Our feet are barely going to leave the ground. Er, the roof, I guess. You’re not gonna have the chance to step on my feet. Relax.”

Keith closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Still seeming very nervous, he nodded, apparently not trusting himself to speak.

“You ready to move?” asked Lance, as gentle and reassuring as he could possibly make himself sound.

Again, Keith nodded.

“Okay,” whispered Lance. “Here we go.”

Lance took a tiny, cautious step, leading them just barely counterclockwise.

Keith had to take another deep breath to tame his nervousness, but as long as he was moving along with Lance, that was all that mattered. At least, at first.

“Are you ever going to look at me?” asked Lance, quiet and uncertain.

“I don’t… I don’t know if I should,” whispered Keith.

“Why not?” asked Lance, gently teasing to hide the barest hint of hurt Keith’s words gifted him. “Are you breaking some promise you made to yourself that you’d only slow dance with your one true love or something?”

Keith scoffed. “Trust me, that’s not the problem.”

“Then what is it?” asked Lance, his feet and hips still guiding them automatically.

For a long, long moment, Keith didn’t answer, and when he finally did, it was with a question. “Why did you want to dance?”

“Reasons,” said Lance flippantly.

“What reasons?” asked Keith, the barest glimmer of annoyance shining through his tone.

“A lot of reasons,” said Lance. “Too many to list.”

“Give me at least one,” said Keith.

“Hmm… Okay.” Lance smiled. “You never experienced an embarrassing middle school dance, and we needed to remedy that.”

“That doesn’t explain why you picked now of all times to drag me into it,” Keith pointed out.

“I know,” said Lance.

“Give me another reason,” said Keith. “One that explains why you’re dancing with me right now instead of any other time.”
“Well…” As tempted as Lance was to pull Keith closer, he knew that he really would get his feet stepped on if he did that, and he didn’t want to break the moment. The warm night, the stars, the moon, the summer breeze that toyed with Keith’s long hair… It was all too nice to give up. “I wanted to make a point.”

“What point?” asked Keith. Though his eyes were still closed, Lance could see movement behind his eyelids, the temptation to open his eyes visible even in the low light.

“That I’m glad you’re here,” said Lance. Though he’d meant to sound light-hearted, playful, his genuine gratefulness broke through the facade, and he saw no reason to hide how he felt once his tone snuck through. “I know that what brought you to me wasn’t exactly happy, but to be honest, I could have found you because of a hurricane that killed hundreds of people and I’d still be glad it happened, even if they were all people I knew.”

“That’s awful,” said Keith, frowning.

“Still true,” said Lance. “You make me happy. Really happy. And I know it’s easy for me to say that when I’m not the one who lost someone, but… Seriously, you’re here, right now. Ghost or not, you’re in my arms. We’re dancing, and we’ve got each other, and everything is so goddamn wonderful. You lost Alfor, and your parents passed away, and Shiro lost his boyfriend and Pidge lost their brother, and I lost my abuela, and a whole shit ton of people died on our way to finding each other, and yeah, it sucks that they died, and we’re gonna miss them, but you know what? I like the present too much to want to change the past. If saving any of those people, even my abuela, made it so that we never met, it wouldn’t be worth it.”

“You don’t mean that,” mumbled Keith, squeezing his eyes even more tightly shut.

“Except I totally do,” said Lance. “And if you opened your eyes, you’d see that.”

Keith seemed to take those words to heart, because he did open his eyes. Slowly, hesitantly, but he did open his eyes. And his gaze bore into Lance’s, and he scrutinized and inspected with an expression far too sharp to accompany slow dancing, but eventually, the skepticism softened.

Keith pulled Lance closer, apparently no longer afraid of stepping on his toes, and he leaned in, closer and closer until they were dancing cheek to cheek.

And Lance prayed that Keith didn’t feel the heat radiating off of him, because his face was warm enough to compete with the sun.

Keith sighed, and his mouth was so close to Lance’s ear that his breath tickled him and sent goosebumps down his spine and across his arms and anywhere they could possibly reach.

“I wish we could stay like this forever,” whispered Keith.

“Why can’t we?” asked Lance, his voice just as hushed.

“Because we can’t stop time,” said Keith. “You’ll get tired soon. You’ll need to sleep. And then the sun’s going to rise, so Red won’t be able to protect the house anymore and I’ll need to pick up the slack.”

“Psh.” Lance rolled his eyes, though he knew Keith couldn’t see it. “We can find a way around it.”

Keith laughed, soft and warm and right in Lance’s ear, and it took everything in Lance’s will not to melt then and there in Keith’s arms. “Oh, yeah? How are we supposed to do that?”
“We could just make this a nightly thing,” said Lance. “I mean, I did win the bet. We agreed that we’d keep coming out here if I listened to the whole constellation song without complaining.”

“It’ll start getting cold in a few weeks,” argued Keith.

“So I’ll wear a jacket,” said Lance.

“It’ll rain,” said Keith.

“We’ll dance inside when that happens,” said Lance. “Come back when it’s dry.”

“I don’t know how your future girlfriend or boyfriend would feel about that.”

Was it Lance’s imagination, or did Keith’s voice sound smaller when he said that?

“Well, there’s an easy fix for that, too,” said Lance cautiously.

“Which is?”

“You could always be my future boyfriend.”

“Very funny.”

“Yeah.” Lance closed his eyes. “Yeah, I’m a real kidder.”

He took a deep breath, trying to soothe the ache in his heart.

That hurt.

A lot.

Much more than Lance was expecting.

Keith dropped his head onto Lance's shoulder.

Shit.

Lance gripped the back of Keith's shirt.

I don't just like you anymore, do I?

He opened his eyes and looked up at the starry sky.

Okay, so my first love is a dead guy. That's about par for the course. So what do I do about it?

“Keith?”

“Hm?”

“...You think you could spend the night in my bed again?”

A long, long pause ensued, and Lance grimaced all the way through it.

Was that too much? Shit, I pushed too hard, didn’t I?

“...Why?” asked Keith, after letting Lance worry for at least a full minute.
“Honestly?” Lance chewed his lip for a moment. “I... I just think I might have a nightmare. A real one, not a weird Galra one. Just… After what you told me about, you know, your death... That was pretty intense, you know?”

“Hm…” Keith sighed. “Sure.”

“Really?” asked Lance. “You’re okay with that? You sure?”

“Mmhmm,” said Keith. His arms tightened around the back of Lance’s neck. “Actually, it’s more than okay.”

Lance raised his eyebrows and pulled back to look at Keith’s face. “Really?

"I...probably need it as much as you do.” Keith shrugged. “Besides, I liked it last time. Why wouldn’t I like it this time?”

“You liked it?” Lance quirked an eyebrow.

“It was nice,” said Keith. “Is that a crime?”

“No!” said Lance hastily. “No, no, I was just surprised.”

“You shouldn’t be,” said Keith. “Anyone would jump at the chance to be in bed with you.”

Lance’s jaw dropped. “Was that a line?”

“What?!” Keith pulled away from Lance as quickly as he could without stumbling. “No!”

“It definitely sounded like a line, Keith,” accused Lance, grinning.

“It wasn’t!” insisted Keith. “You— You’re crazy.”

“No way.” Lance laughed. “That was definitely a line. You’re hiding some serious game under that mullet.”

Keith, bright red, turned away and started for the ladder, though he surely knew he couldn’t climb down it on his own.

Lance shook his head, still grinning as he watched Keith try to creep closer to the edge of the roof without getting too close.

What he wouldn’t have given to make that line intentional.

Keith wasn’t exactly sure what counted as crossing personal boundaries anymore.

Was there a law for this sort of thing? Some sort of rulebook?

There had to be.

There had to be some sort of protocol on whether or not someone was allowed to touch the hair of someone while they were being used as a human pillow by that same someone.
Keith closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

He felt Lance’s head and arm rise up and down with that breath.

*Screw it.*

Keith gently reached up and ran his fingers through Lance’s short hair. He watched the fine, chocolate-colored strands bend against his fingertips and then flick themselves right back into position at the first opportunity.

Lance nuzzled into Keith’s chest and wrapped his arms tighter around him.

*Shit.* Keith closed his eyes. *I’m so far gone.*
The dream that Lance had that night was different from any of the others.

It was black.

Pitch black.

Save for his own feet when he looked down.

And, remarkably, they were his feet. He wasn’t just floating consciousness, and he wasn’t wearing the same white and blue armor he’d seen himself wearing in previous dreams. Those were his shoes, and his jeans, and his t-shirt, and…shit, even his jacket.

And he could move them.

He could lift up his feet and wiggle them back and forth and watch the loops of his shoelaces bounce. He could lift up his hands and wave them in front of his own face.

“Holy shit.”

He had total agency.

“Holy shit.”

Lance clapped a hand over his mouth.

He could speak, too.

Was he dreaming again? He must have been. He could even remember falling asleep next to Keith.

If he wasn’t dreaming, though…that meant that the house was totally consumed by darkness again. And if that was the case and he couldn’t contact whoever it was that helped him out the time before, then he was probably pretty screwed, wasn’t he?

Clenching his jaw, Lance sat down where he stood and crossed his legs, setting his hands on his knees.

"Okay," he murmured, closing his eyes. "I know you're out there. I know you helped me before. I know you can help me again. So just, please..."

Everything in his mind’s eye cleared out at once.

There were no walls like there were before. No borders to be felt. And Keith wasn't anywhere to be found.

And for some reason, that scared Lance more than the vignette of bright purple that surrounded him from every direction.

What happened to Keith?
What's happening to me?

“Finally,” boomed a voice from every direction.

Lance’s eyes snapped open wide and he leapt to his feet.

He was still in total darkness. There was nothing around him but the inky blackness.

“I’ve been waiting, Blue Paladin.”

The voice was confident, commanding, deep, like the clang of a church bell. It seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere all at once.

Lance wasn’t sure how immediate the danger was, but he knew it was there. He was in trouble. He was unarmed, Keith wasn’t anywhere to be seen, and he was in trouble.

“It was only a matter of time,” continued the militant voice. “For the past two months, you’ve been standing on the edge of a bridge, either too ignorant or too afraid to cross. The water dashed against the stones miles beneath you, and the ropes seemed too fragile to hold the planks, much less your own weight, but you knew, deep down, what lied on the other side of the bridge, and you couldn’t keep yourself from the temptation for long.”

A pair of mismatched yellow eyes glinted in the darkness, seeming to appear out of thin air. The rest of the body crept into view like watercolors bleeding through paper, as if someone had touched the point between those two eyes with a paint brush and the rest simply filled in.

“Unfortunately for you,” said the figure appearing all too quickly, “there was a troll under the bridge.”

Lance had never seen a Galra in person before, but he knew immediately what it was. Even without Haxus’ memories, Lance was sure he would have understood. The fear that coiled in his stomach was so primal, so visceral, that Lance was sure it would have been there no matter how little he knew about the Galra.

The figure took a step forward.

Lance tried to take a step, but found he couldn’t.

Run, everything inside of him screamed. Run. But his legs wouldn’t move.

The Galra grinned maliciously with a smile that held too many teeth, teeth that were far too sharp.

“I watched your relationship with the Red Paladin flourish,” said the Galra, advancing too quickly. “I watched you grow closer and closer, and I knew it was only a matter of time before your relationship with him led you back to the Blue Lion.” A hairy, clawed hand reached out, stretched toward Lance, and yet Lance still couldn’t move. “The bridge was already there, after all. And so I waited. I waited directly underneath until I saw your feet between the boards.” Lance shivered, he shook, and yet his feet refused to step away from the steadily approaching threat. “And now that you’re here, finally, I can return you to Haggar, where you belong.”

Lance closed his eyes

That was all he could do.

And he waited for those claws to reach his throat, to rip him apart, to tear him open, to rend his neck
from his shoulders.

But just when he was sure that the end had arrived, his vision exploded with blue.

Bright, bright, brilliant blue. And if that was anything like what Keith said he saw, then Lance could understand how it would be a distraction.

He opened his eyes, and he found the Galra still standing in front of him, but the arm that had been reaching for him had gone. It was severed just above the elbow, and dark violet steam rose off of the amputated remains, merging with the sticky black that surrounded them.

Alarmed, suddenly armed with the strength to move, Lance stepped back and looked around, trying to make sense of his situation.

A fair distance to his left, he found the Galra’s arm, torn and impaled to the ground by a spear of ice.

And to Lance’s right, he saw what was perhaps the most beautiful, elegant sight he’d ever seen.

A lioness. Blue, transparent…brilliantly luminous, like she was made of blue starlight. She seemed somehow incredibly powerful and clearly weak at the same time, like an injured goddess. Her light flickered like a dying candle, but she stood strong, and when she ran, she charged with the fury of an army behind her paws.

She pounced, her claws outstretched, aimed directly at the Galra’s head.

But the Galra vanished, gone before she could land her attack.

When her feet hit the surface beneath her, she folded like paper, crumbling into a heap.

Lance rushed to her side without thinking and kneeled by her head. Only just then did he realize how huge she was; her head was easily as wide as his chest, and her paws were certainly no joke either.

“Are you okay?” he asked urgently.

The lioness growled deep in her throat, and Lance’s mind was flooded with positivity, affirmation. It was a means of communication he quickly recognized.

“You’re what helped me find Keith that time,” realized Lance, running his fingers through the fur on her head. He could see his own fingertips easily through the soft hairs. If not for how much the lioness glowed, Lance probably wouldn’t have known that there was anything there at all. She was really, truly ghostlike.


Heavily, the blue lioness lifted her head to look at Lance. Her eyes glowed gold, just like the Galra’s did, but they were kinder, and they didn’t inspire fear in him like that same glowing gold did from the Galra.

On shaking legs, she stood, and without an explanation, she began to walk deeper into the darkness.

Risking an assumption, Lance followed close behind.

The walk seemed to last for an eternity. Lance wanted to wonder whether he had died, whether he was walking through some sort of purgatory, but he was far more curious about the lioness, and so his mind always wandered back to her before he could journey too far along that line of thought.
As they walked, they passed figures, each of them with their backs turned.

The first two Lance saw were standing together as a pair. They seemed to be Galra, but for whatever reason, they didn’t make Lance nervous. Perhaps because he was with the lioness, or perhaps because they didn’t seem to notice him. They just stood together, staring off into the distant darkness as a unit.

The second figure that caught Lance’s eye looked almost like Pidge. Curious, he started to veer toward the figure, only for the lion to roar at him tersely. None of that vague communication came with the roar, but he understood the language of an animal enough to be able to understand that he should stop what he was doing.

He stayed close to the lion after that.

They passed more figures. An older man, perhaps middle-aged, lean and lanky with graying hair. Another couple, these two holding hands, their only distinct feature their dark hair. A man with white hair who wore a suit of armor.

The lioness stopped for a moment, and Lance was fed an order he recognized, an order that had most likely saved his life and Keith's the last time he'd received it.

*Close your eyes.*

Warily, Lance did as he was told, and he kept walking, following the lion’s blue light.

They passed a light almost as bright of a blue as the lion’s itself.

“Where are we?” asked Lance. “And who are *they*?”

He was met with the image of a chess board covered with far more pieces than a standard set, most of them black.

The lights went out in his mind’s eye, and only the white pieces were still visible.

Lance still didn’t understand, but he didn’t ask any further questions.

He kept his eyes closed for the rest of the walk to wherever it was the lioness was leading him.

He didn’t open them, didn’t even steal a glance, until the lioness told him that he could.

When he did, he came face to face with a wall.

A white wall, one with black markings.

It looked familiar. Really familiar.

The lioness laid herself down in front of the wall and crossed her paws, watching Lance expectantly. She whapped her tail loudly against the wall. If Lance didn’t know better, he’d say she looked almost *annoyed*.

Frowning, confused, Lance moved closer to the wall and pressed his hands against it.

He stumbled forward as they went right through.

Yelping, Lance pulled his hands back and looked back at the lion.
Her tail was still wagging back and forth, thumping against the wall. It was clearly solid to her.

“You want me to go in there?” asked Lance, frowning. “Alone?”

The lion didn’t react at all. She just watched Lance, the same way she had been, that same irritated, expectant look in her eye. She very clearly wanted something from him.

Lance only wished he could understand her better.

“Okay,” he said warily. “I guess I’ll go in. All by myself. Probably going to die.”

The lion still didn’t react. No sympathy whatsoever.

Frowning, Lance turned his full attention to the white wall, sizing it up, treating it more like an opponent than the simple barrier that it was.

And he stepped through.

It was dark on the other side. Not like the inky blackness from before, but true darkness. Lance could barely see his own hands. The only thing that was easily visible was something that lied on the floor a few yards ahead.

Brow furrowed, Lance hastened toward what seemed to be the only reason for the room.

The closer he got, the clearer the object became. It was mostly black, curved into a round A-shape, but with a separation at the point at the top of the “A”. Despite the fact that its accents were white and blue rather than white and red, the real reason it took so long for Lance to recognize it was because he was used to seeing it attached to a belt or gripped in Keith’s hand with a sword’s blade attached to the end.

It was a Bayard.

Lance kneeled in front of it, hand hovering just inches above it.

He was afraid to touch it.

A part of him felt like it wasn’t meant for him, like he wasn’t worthy of it.

But the lion led him there for a reason, didn’t she? And there didn’t seem to be anything else there.

Setting his jaw, Lance let his fingers cross those last few inches and snatch the Bayard off of the ground.

The darkness vanished all at once, and Lance instantly became very aware that there was more than just a Bayard in that strange place.

A gigantic replica of the blue lion figurine Lance had found in the basement loomed over him.

Vaguely, Lance registered that the other three figures were there as well, but it was hard to pay them any mind at all when the blue one’s glowing, yellow eyes seemed to be piercing directly into his own like daggers.

Lance gripped the Bayard in his right hand.

He was supposed to do something. He knew it.
Tentatively, Lance stepped forward, holding the figure’s gaze until the lion’s own muzzle blocked it from view.

That was when Lance noticed it. He wasn’t quite sure what name to give what he was seeing. An imprint, perhaps, or an emblem. A circle depressed into the center of the statue’s chest, lined with bright blue lights that curved inward toward two deeper indentations.

Lance looked down at the Bayard in his hand, then back to the indentations.

“I’m going to feel really stupid if this doesn’t work,” he mumbled, lifting his arm to line the front of the Bayard up with the indentations.

The Bayard fit into them like a key into a keyhole.

And when Lance twisted the Bayard, the indentation moved until it locked into place 90° from where it was.

There was a click, one that seemed to echo throughout the entire chamber, and then light—blinding, brilliant light—poured out of the impression like water from a collapsed dam. It filled the room, seeming to invade every single one of Lance’s senses rather than just his sense of sight. It was so vibrant that he swore he could smell it, taste it, hear it ringing in his ears, growing louder and brighter and hotter until there was nothing in the world but the light.

And then it faded, and Lance was in a place he recognized all too easily.

It was the worst of his dreams, the nightmare that threw him out of sleep drenched in sweat and trembling more than once.

He’d seen it enough times over the past few weeks to recognize it instantly.

He was surrounded by stone walls, and a gentle breeze stirred the grass all around him.

The sun was at the peak of its arc, minimizing shadows so that they were almost negligible.

It was right when everything was about to go horribly, horribly wrong.

But it was different, this time. The angle was different. Like he was watching a familiar scene from a movie, but the recording from a different camera on the set.

He was seeing someone else’s perspective.

He saw one of the figures he’d seen in the blackness that the lioness had led him through. White hair, armor, and a great, regal cape that fluttered in the breeze.

The man didn’t turn his head, but Lance’s own suspicions aligned with the mind he seemed to be accompanying in that moment, and the name Alfor echoed within him.

Alfor spoke, and his words didn’t sink in for several seconds; Lance hadn’t expected himself to be able to understand them.

But he did.

It was still that strange, vague, ancient language, but for whatever reason, he could understand it.

“Whenever you’re ready, Voltron.”
Voltron. **Voltron.** The name sounded so deeply familiar, as much as if it were Lance’s own name.

And he quickly realized why when the person whose mind he seemed to occupy answered to it.

“We all know what we’re here for,” said the voice from Lance’s borrowed mouth, regal, booming, yet androgynous despite its low pitch. “We all know why we’re fighting today. Nothing more needs to be said. But, considering this will be the last time I speak to any of you, for better or for worse, I want each and every one of you to know that I have no regrets. I am proud of each and every one of you.” Lance watched through his borrowed vision as this person—this **Voltron**—turned and looked at each of the people—the Paladins—surrounding them. The smallest of them, her hair pulled up into a ginger braid that encircled their head, who stood behind Voltron’s left shoulder. The tall, lean one who reminded Lance so much of Keith, who was at Alfor’s left. The mountain-sized man with dark, curly hair to Voltron’s far right. And the last of them, someone Lance had never noticed before. Someone with a wiry frame, sandy skin like Lance’s mother’s, and brown hair trimmed close to his head.

“And,” continued Voltron, their eyes lingering on the back of the last person’s head, “whatever the outcome, I hope you are all proud of yourselves.”

Voltron took a deep breath and bowed their head. Lance got a look of their wide, umber fingers as they splayed over the surface of a white box with black markings.

The very same box that was in Lance’s basement.

**Oh.**

“Think hard about where you want your Lion to appear,” said Voltron. “If all goes well, it should appear exactly where it belongs. If not, you will have to carry the Lions there yourselves, and that will take more time. More time means more lives lost, so don’t let your minds wander.”

Voltron closed their eyes.

Lance could feel everything they felt, their pain, their submission, their relief.

“Now...I am ready.”

And Lance felt the split.

The star-shaped split as Voltron was pulled apart from the inside like a Christmas cracker, a piece of them latched onto each of the Paladins.

It wasn’t a sharp pain that Lance felt, but more of a malaise, a general feeling of unwellness that grew stronger and stronger with every second that passed.

One of the five points seemed to pull him harder than the rest, however, and the farther Lance was pulled in that direction, the better he felt. He felt more at home. At peace. He almost felt like himself.

What felt like an eternity passed where Lance felt less and less like Voltron and more and more like something else.

And then the panic set in.

Lance recognized this part easily.

The fear was almost instantaneous. He remembered ever scream that reached his ears, but this time,
he understood the words screamed. At least, he understood some of them. It was still utter chaos, and everyone spoke over each other so consistently that it was difficult to tell who was saying what without being able to see who was speaking.

“What is that? Why is it getting so dark? Is that— Is that the moon?”

“No. That’s not the moon. But that is.”

“Is it— No, that’s impossible! An eclipse, now of all times?”

“It’s not impossible. But it is a problem.”

“What should we do, then? We cannot carry out the ceremony like this!”

“We have to, Platt. We don’t have a choice. We’ve already started.”

“Plachu’s right. We’ll be attacked any second, and we all know that, but we knew there was a chance something would go wrong when we started this. Pyotr, are you okay?”

“What does it look like?! Of course I’m not okay! I knew something like this would happen! I knew it!”

“Pyotr, I understand that you’re upset. We all are. And we’re scared. But anger won’t solve anything. Besides, there’s always a chance that we’ll be able to finish the ceremony before the Galra arrive.”

“No, there’s not. Look.”

The ensemble of Paladins finally went quiet. Lance already knew what they were looking at.

“Alfor,” said one of the Paladins, Lance wasn’t sure who. It was only as familiar as the rest of them. “What do we do?”

“Hold,” said Alfor. “Stand your ground. For as long as you can bear. Each of you. Only part with your runes when absolutely necessary. The longer we hold, the less exposure there will be at the end of this. A smaller exposure means fewer Galra, a smaller chance for our families to be hurt. So hold. Hold until it is no longer possible. And then retreat.”

“Retreat?! The same voice that had asked Alfor for guidance squawked. “We can’t retreat! We’re Paladins now! We have the Lions! We’re supposed to be fighting the Galra!”

“You were the one against this from the start, Pyotr,” snapped one of the other Paladins. “Why are you so keen on fighting now?!”

“I was against sacrificing ourselves,” said Pyotr. “Not fighting. But we already made a sacrifice. Two, if this fails, and—”

“It’s failing as we speak,” said Alfor. “And I’m ready to face my duty as a leader.”

“What about your duty as a father?! demanded Pyotr. “I’ll be the Spirit Paladin, let me—”

“We would all be missed, Pyotr. All of us.”

“You can always find a new lover, Chulatt,” said Pyotr, firm, unyielding. “Allura can’t get a new dad.”
“We don’t have time for this discussion,” said Alfor. “It’s been decided. You won’t change my mind.”

Silence fell again. Lance could only guess what caused it.

“Hold,” said Alfor patiently. “Hold.”

Lance could hear the soft, hushing sounds of footsteps in grass.

He doubted they were the Paladins’ footsteps.

“Hold,” said Alfor again, slower, drawing the word out.

A beat passed.

Lance heard the whistle of an arrow through the air, and a solid thump as it landed.

Chaos broke out again.

This time, it truly was impossible to discern words among the screams.

He heard Chulatt and Pyotr fighting.

It might have been embarrassing how much they reminded him of himself and Keith if not for how terrifying...how tragic it all was.

After what felt like hours but must have been only minutes, if even that, the voices disappeared, save for Alfor’s, which challenged the Galra regularly, until…

Until the box opened.

Lance saw the lid lift, revealing a darkened sky, the total eclipse hanging high above, and Alfor’s stern face looking toward Lance’s left.

He was in the box of lions.

*That tearing feeling,* he realized. The separation. *I get it. The Lions... They’re Voltron. They’re all parts of Voltron.*

*Then all of this... The statue...*

*I’m seeing the Blue Lion’s memories.*

*Have they been hers this whole time?*

The next thing that Lance saw was perhaps the most bizarre occurrence he’d ever witnessed.

Alfor plucked the Black Lion out of the box, and then he immediately collapsed.

Or, rather, one version of his body immediately collapsed.

The other stood exactly where it was, still holding onto the Lion figurine, clutching it tight. It seemed like an incredibly intimate moment, perhaps one that Lance shouldn’t have been watching.

But apparently, he was the only one who seemed bothered by the idea of interrupting.

A loud, enthusiastic whoop cut through the atmosphere like a knife, tearing Alfor’s eyes away from
his Lion, off toward something that Lance couldn’t see.

“How do you like that?!”

Lance felt a wave of secondhand embarrassment so visceral that it could have been firsthand instead.

He knew that voice.

“No!” roared Alfor, charging out of Lance’s field of view. “What do you suppose you are doing?!”

“Helping you!” said Pyotr. “Obviously!”

“The deed is done, Pyotr. You can’t take me from the path I’ve chosen.”

“So I can’t stop you from being the Spirit Paladin,” said Pyotr. “Big deal. I can still help. Me and my Lion.”

“You should be with the others!”

“And you should be with Allura!” countered Pyotr. “And besides…” Lance could hear the smile in Pyotr’s voice. “You can’t take me from the path I’ve chosen.”

He heard another rush of chaos, the sound of Galra being struck down one after another, and then a rush of clattering armor plates as Pyotr presumably grew closer to the box.

And then his face came into Lance’s view, and Lance’s heart stopped.

In Pyotr’s face, he saw his own blue eyes. He saw his father’s sharp chin and his mother’s high cheekbones.

The only differences between himself and Pyotr were a pair of blue tattoos under Pyotr’s eyes that matched the ones he’d seen on Alfor and a pair of sharp, pointed ears.

It was bizarre. Lance was confused, more so than he’d ever been. But he didn’t have time to dwell on it, because the second Pyotr touched the Blue Lion’s figurine, she was bombarded with hundreds upon thousands of memories, and she was taking Lance along for the ride.

Lance was flooded with images that went by quickly, most of them too quickly for him to make sense of.

He saw a man with brilliant orange hair pulled back into a ponytail laughing heartily over a half-filled goblet. A name came with the image. A name that meant something to him. Coran. Who was Coran?

He saw the large, bearded, Yellow Paladin from before shaking and weeping, and the name Platt sprung into Lance’s head.

He saw the small, redheaded Paladin, her features pinched as she tore eagerly through a book, spouting off words that Lance couldn’t catch. But what he did catch was another name: Plachu.

He saw a younger Alfor standing with a small girl who looked remarkably like him, perhaps the Allura that Pyotr had mentioned. Her thick, textured hair was tossed behind her in the wind as her hand reached for the urn in Alfor’s hands. They overturned it together, carefully emptying the ashes out into glowing hot lava as it slowly dripped down the side of a volcano.
And he saw Chulatt catching moonlight in the sheen of sweat on his very, very bare skin as he leaned against the sill of an open window. As if noticing Pyotr for the first time, he turned his head and smiled a smile so soft that Lance could have never expected it from someone as brash as him.

But then, he supposed he wouldn’t have expected a smile as soft as that from Keith when he first met him, either, and yet he had. And every single one of them stood out in Lance’s mind like a single candle in an otherwise dark world.

The memories faded, and Lance was in the fight. Surrounded by the Galra. Pyotr at his side. At the Blue Lion’s side.

And it was the same damn fight he’d seen a thousand times before with the same damn Galra he’d watched Pyotr come into contact with again and again. And he recognized them. He saw Haxus directing many of the Galra rather than fighting on his own. He saw the same bat-eared, one-eyed Galra that had confronted him earlier that very night.

And Lance had a feeling that he knew how this story was going to play out, because there had to be a reason he was seeing all of this, why he’d been seeing all of this for months.

But he couldn’t help getting his hopes up. He couldn’t help rooting for Pyotr and Alfor and for the Black Lion and the Blue Lion.

He wanted them to win. He wanted them to win so badly.

He wanted Pyotr to be able to comfort Platt again and hear Plachu rant about something that excited her again and to see Chulatt smile like that again.

But he also noticed the Galra, and he had his eye on one in particular, one who wore a helmet, whose mouth was wrinkled and disfigured to the point where it looked as though his lips themselves had teeth. Everything about him screamed “dangerous”, and neither Lance nor the Blue Lion he occupied seemed able to keep their eyes off of that one for very long.

And in doing so, they neglected the real threat.

They’d barely glanced at her foreboding silhouette from where she perched atop the castle walls themselves, watching over the war that waged within the courtyard. They paid no mind to her long, flowing robes flapping in the wind or her keen, glowing eyes as she took in every tiny detail, waiting for the ideal time to strike.

As such, when she swooped down, owl-like, from her vantage point, she seemed to appear like the ghost she was, as if out of thin air.

But the Blue Lion noticed the crackling from her fingertips as she outstretched her hands in front of her, as if trying to strangle Pyotr from a distance.

And she leapt, desperate to try to save her Paladin, to sacrifice herself if she needed to.

And Lance felt it.

He felt it not only in the Blue Lion’s memories, but in his own.

He felt the lightning as it seemed to shoot directly through the Blue Lion, as it seemed to scorch Pyotr’s very soul.

He felt the pained roar that ripped from the Blue Lion’s throat and the anguished scream that tore
from Pyotr’s.

He heard Alfor’s scream of despair in both their ears, saw him reach out through Pyotr’s eyes.

And he felt Pyotr’s soul as it was cleaved from his body, yanked through the Blue Lion’s, taking a piece of her with it.

And he could remember being trapped. And the Blue Lion could remember being trapped.

And he could remember the first Galra who tried to save him and failed, and the Blue Lion could remember that same Galra.

And they both remembered the second one, who sacrificed himself to finish what the first Galra started, proving that not all Galra were lost causes, that at least some of them could do some good.

And Lance...he remembered something, something on his own, that the Blue Lion could not possibly know.

“I don’t even think they’re speaking any human language. Not any that I can recognize, anyway. The only English word I’ve heard is Paladin, which makes a lot more sense now that I know more about Keith. But the real creepy stuff is when they just moan words I can’t recognize. Not full sentences, just single words. Like Marley from A Christmas Carol saying ‘Scrooge’. All they’re missing are spooky chains to jangle around.”

“Keith might know. I could ask him. So what are they saying?”

“The one thing I’ve heard them say more than anything is ‘Pyotr’. If Keith knows what that is, it could make a world of difference.”

Lance opened his eyes.

He wasn’t in the memory anymore, but he wasn’t out of the dream yet, either.

He was in an almost perfect replica of his own bedroom, save for the fact that every surface from his curtains to his blankets to his mirror were all stained a deep, inky black.

He was cross-legged on the floor between the foot of his bed and his dresser, and his Lion, the Blue Lion...Blue...was sitting across from him, looking a great deal more opaque than he had been.

He was still holding his Bayard in his right hand.

Lance opened his mouth to ask a question, anything, just to confirm what he saw, but he doubted Blue would be able to give him an answer, and deep down, he knew he didn’t need to ask at all.

He knew what he saw.

He knew how real it felt. How real it was.

It was all him. The weird dreams, the memories, they were his.

Alfor was gone.

Pyotr’s—Lance’s—entire civilization was gone.

Coran, Allura, Plachu, Platt...Chulatt...all of them...gone.
And what did they have to show for it? The Galra were still there. Still terrorizing people.

Terrorizing Keith.

They should never have been Keith’s problem. Never.

And it was his fault that they were.

“It was my fault,” realized Lance, tears springing to his eyes. “Just because I had to turn around, because I just had to go against Alfor, I fucked everything up for ten-thousand years. Is that what you’re telling me?”

Blue responded with a brief flashback of the moment where she jumped in to save Pyotr. Where she was torn apart by Haggar’s magic as well.

It was a correction: “Our fault.”

Lance sighed sharply and rubbed at his eyes. “Well, you’re better now, right? We can fix this now, right?” He shoved his Bayard in his coat pocket, freeing himself to lean across and hold Blue’s big, furry face in his hands. “Come on, tell me we can fix this. Just tell me what to do. Whatever it is, I’ll do it. There has to be a way.”

Blue responded with another mental image, and then another.

The little girl Lance had seen in Pyotr’s memories, followed by the ginger man with the thick mustache.

“Allura and Coran?” asked Lance. “What do they have to do with anything? What—”

Blue’s eyes snapped open wide, and she suddenly jumped to her feet, startling Lance so severely that he dropped her and scooted away, as if afraid that she would attack him.

But she didn’t. She turned toward the mirror, the perfect, pitch black replica of the one Lance had in his own room.

The inky black on the surface of the glass faded away, revealing a face Lance had hoped not to see again quite so soon.

It was the Galra from before, the one with the mismatched eyes. But the image was strange. It was sideways, and it seemed to fade in and out of focus, as if someone were adjusting a camera.

“What—?”

Before Lance could form his question, Blue already had an answer.

A trail of yarn on fire, and the smell of cinnamon.

“...Keith?” asked Lance, able to make much more sense of those strange images now that he realized that Blue was trying to talk to him using vague, confusing, context-sensitive Altean.

But realizing what Blue meant provided Lance with no comfort whatsoever.

“...I-Is this what Keith’s seeing right now?”

It was the only thing that made sense. It was his bedroom. He recognized his dresser, his window, the foot of his own bed.
And from the looks of it, he was getting the shit kicked out of him.

Blue showed Lance the yarn again, apparently trying to explain how the mirror worked. It tied into a knot in the eye of Lance’s mind. Lance shook his head, trying to get rid of the image.

“Look.” He turned toward Blue, heart thundering in his ears. “I don’t care how you’re showing this to me or what it means. You know how I feel about Keith, right? If you saw Pyotr’s memories, then you saw mine, too. You know how I think. And right now I don’t give a shit about what magic stuff is happening right now. Keith’s in trouble, and I have to get down there to help him. How do I do that?”

Blue’s eyes, endlessly calm and kind, locked onto Lance’s.

His heartbeat slowed, and the world melted away like fresh paint in the rain.

And he was in his own bed.

He jolted upright, his heartbeat quickly picking up again as he saw—actually saw—the Galra from before lifting Keith’s body off the ground, carrying it in a hand so large that it could wrap around Keith’s entire body.

Apparently, he’d gotten a replacement for the one Blue destroyed.

Lance threw his blankets off of his body and jumped out of bed. He no longer had his Bayard, nor did he have Blue. He was unarmed, unprepared, and wearing nothing but a pair of gray sweatpants. But absolutely none of that stopped him from charging toward the Galra that had Keith in his clutches and throwing his entire weight into the Galra’s side, knocking him into the dresser with a battle cry Blue would have been proud of.

The Galra stumbled back, clutching at the pain in his side and sending a dirty look toward Lance with the one eye that was capable of it.

He opened his mouth, most likely to spit some sort of insult, cause some sort of emotional wound. But Lance didn’t let him.

Lance punched him in the mouth before he could get a single word out.

“I’ve had enough,” growled Lance, reeling back for another blow, regardless of the stinging in his hand. He landed it in the exact same spot, a hit that probably would have knocked some teeth out if the Galra were human. As it was, it seemed to only knock the Galra back a few inches. But that didn’t stop Lance. “You—” Lance aimed a little lower, into the Galra’s jaw. “—and all your shitty friends—” Another blow moved lower still, directly into the Galra’s gut, which probably hurt Lance’s hand more than the Galra, thanks to the armor the Galra was wearing, but it still pushed him back. “—can stay the fuck out of my house—” Another blow to the gut, but this time with a kick. “—and away from my friends!”

Lance tried to reel back for another punch to the face—maybe to the Galra’s nose, if he could reach it—but his attack missed when the Galra moved out of the way and dove for Lance’s closet.

“No, you don’t!” snapped Lance, running after him. But he wasn’t quick enough. The Galra dove between Lance’s winter jackets and he might as well have found Narnia. There was no chasing after him after that.

Lance growled, fueled by a whole new lifetime of righteous anger. “Coward.”
“Lance,” Keith called out from behind Lance’s back. He sounded worried—or, at least, the kind of anger Lance had come to translate as Keith’s personal flavor of worried—and Lance was about to turn around and respond, to assuage Keith’s concern, when he caught sight of an article of his own clothing.

The green jacket he’d been wearing in the dream.

He frowned. His brow furrowed. He wondered…

“Lance,” Keith called again.

Lance ignored him. He grabbed for his jacket, knuckles stinging fiercely as he shoved his hand into his coat pocket.

He found what he was looking for almost immediately.

No fucking way.

He wrapped his hand around it and yanked it free from the olive green fabric. His eyes were instantly glued to the blue and white accents, and he didn’t lift his gaze off of them once, even while he turned around.

He was so distracted by the realization that he was holding his own Bayard in the real world, that he’d pulled it out of his pocket like a rabbit out of a hat, that he didn’t notice Keith until he’d nearly walked into him.

Though perhaps that was in part because Keith was so quiet. He seemed to be shaking, wide eyes flashing through a Rolodex of emotions including fury and confusion and worry and what looked—much to Lance’s guilt—like hurt.

“Where…” rasped Keith, “...the fuck...did you get that?”

Chapter End Notes

...So in this fic, Lance has cradled Keith in his arms AND he’s punched Sendak. ...Am I getting these characters confused or what?

Also ART YAY

Mullet Ghost Boy and Paintball Sharpshooter
Lance knelt on the bathroom floor, his shoulders reaching just above Lance’s knees.

He tried hard, very hard, to think of them as just a pair of knees rather than Lance’s knees. Just as hard as he tried to think of the injured hand cradled in his own as anything but Lance’s hand.

He wound the roll of bandages around the back of Lance’s knuckles, under his fingers, down to his wrist, and back up. Keith was no danger to injured hands; he’d messed up his own on more than one occasion before he became a Paladin. He was familiar enough with an injury like the one he was tending to at least to know that Lance should have seen a doctor. To know that he could have easily broken something.

But, in lieu of that, at least Hunk kept a fully stocked first aid kit in their medicine cabinet.

Because Lance just had to insist on staying close.

Following the path of the bandage with his eyes seemed to be the only thing capable of bringing Keith any sort of peace. The over and under of the wrapping was almost hypnotic, almost enough to ease the turmoil storming in Keith’s mind.

Almost.

It could only do so much.

When Keith stopped to think about how it was Lance’s hand he was wrapping, the torment stirred again. His stomach clenched, and dread strangled his heart.

He wanted to cry.

He couldn’t cry; he was a Paladin.

But he wanted to.

*How did this go so wrong?*

From the moment he’d crawled into Lance’s bed, Keith’s mind, which spent most nights simply wandering, latched tight onto thoughts of the boy curled up against him and never once let go of them.

When he’d asked Lance to bring him to the rooftop, he was expecting awkwardness. He expected pity, long stretches of silence where Lance didn’t know what to say and Keith didn’t know how to lighten the mood without making himself seem cold and uncaring that he failed to save someone he considered a father.

But it hadn’t been anything like that. There had been one brief moment of awkwardness—the
briefest imaginable—and then it was over.

Lance said everything right. He did everything right.

He told Keith not only that his choice made a difference—which was something that Keith had desperately, desperately needed to hear, not only in that moment, but for every moment since that choice was made—but that it was a great sacrifice, that his life was important in its own way. That he was remembered, that he was missed.

That Haxus was wrong.

And then he’d made Keith laugh. Never did Keith think for even a second that he would be able to laugh so soon after reliving the most traumatic experience of his short life, but somehow, Lance had managed to convince him. Effortlessly.

And as if that wasn’t enough, Lance held him.

Dancing, he’d called it.

There was no way the lazy sway Lance had pulled Keith into should have been called a dance. It was an embrace set to music at best.

Keith replayed that moment in his head so many times that, if someone were to copy his memories onto a VHS, that dance would have wound up blurred and obscured by dozens of flickering, horizontal lines, irreparably damaged from overuse.

Lance’s arms looped lazily around his waist.

His soothing, gentle voice a stark contrast to the indignant squawking Keith was used to from Lance.

The warmth of his chest pressed against Keith’s.

Keith’s knees, weak and wobbling under his weight, likely to give if not for Lance holding him upright.

And Lance constantly feeling the need to make it worse.

Teasing Keith, trying to get him to open his eyes when Keith knew damn well that keeping them closed was probably the only thing keeping him making a huge mistake, because he could feel Lance’s face inches away from his own and it was just too easy.

Making a joke about Keith dancing with someone who wasn’t his ‘one true love’, completely unaware that that was as far from the problem as could possibly be.

It wasn’t that Keith was dancing with someone he wasn’t in love with.

It was that he was pretty sure he was dancing with someone he was in love with.

Which was infinitely worse.

Because Keith was well aware of how impulsive he was. Of how hard his emotions were to control sometimes. Especially when he really, really wanted something.

And he knew damn well what he wanted.

He wanted to stop dancing, to hold Lance’s face in his hands, to look deep into Lance’s deep,
entrancing, unbelievably blue eyes until his heart was beating too fast for him to keep his own eyes open any longer, and then to coax Lance’s face gently closer until that tiny, tiny gap between their mouths dwindled to nothing at all.

Or, more likely, to hastily and nervously yank Lance into a sloppy, inexperienced, frantic rush of hormones that should have stopped being a problem when he died and apparently hadn’t for some stupid reason.

Which was beyond unfair. He was a ghost. What was he supposed to do, act on his feelings? Right. That’d go over well. “Hey, Lance, I know I’m dead and we’d never be able to have a normal relationship or grow old together, but I’m really, really into you. Maybe we can talk about this over coffee. Or you can have coffee while I talk over nothing because I can’t eat.”

Keith groaned, breaking his gaze from the ceiling to roll his eyes. He was mortified just thinking about that.

Lance stirred, and the hand that rested on Keith’s chest tightened, grabbing a fistful of Keith’s t-shirt.

Keith frowned, his own problems pushed aside for the time-being, easily replaced by worry.

Was Lance having another one of those strange dreams, or was he having a nightmare, like he claimed he might?

Keith dropped his hand over Lance’s and squeezed tight.

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “Nothing’s going to hurt you. I’ll always be right here.”

Always.

He didn’t have a choice.

The night seemed to drag on forever, keeping Keith trapped between bitter and sweet, between holding Lance close and knowing that the closeness could only ever be physical.

The sun rose, and Red peeked over the foot of Lance’s bed to tell Keith that she was leaving, to remind Keith to be careful.

Something didn’t feel right, she told him.

Keep an eye open, she told him.

And Keith wasn’t sure whether it was the warnings or his desire to stay close to Lance for as long as possible that kept him in that bed, but he stayed exactly where he was, eyes closed, mind focused on the quintessence in the house, on the lookout for any signs of the Galra.

And one appeared, exactly where they were.

It crawled out from under Lance’s bed like a child’s worst nightmare, like a boogeyman, pushing boxes out from underneath to make room for its great, hairy body.

Keith reached quietly and carefully for the Bayard he’d left on Lance’s nightstand and tucked it under the blankets.

And he waited.

His fingers twitched impatiently, but he didn’t strike.
Not yet.

*Patience yields focus.*

A new weight pressed down onto the top of the mattress, on Lance’s side of the bed.

Keith gripped his Bayard tighter.

*Patience.* Patience.

“I knew you would still be gone by morning,” purred the Galra.

Splintering goosebumps crawled up Keith’s back.

Another one. Another one capable of speech, just like Haxus.

“How should learn to be more punctual, Boy.” Altean dripped like poison from the Galra’s lips. “Wake up, Lance McClain,” he cooed as if talking to a sleeping infant. The bed creaked as he inched dangerously close to Lance’s face. “Wake up, child. I want you to feel it when I rip your fragile body in half.”

Keith’s goosebumps disappeared instantly, replaced with the heat of rage.

*Screw patience.*

He threw the blankets back and pushed his Bayard against the Galra’s throat, but not through it. Not yet.

He narrowed his eyes, taking in the Galra’s appearance. He was big. Very big. But Keith could take him. He’d taken bigger.

“You…” seethed Keith, shaking with rage, “…just made the biggest mistake of your life.”

The Galra grinned, teeth glinting in the early morning light. “Oh, you’re here? I thought you might have followed him.”

*Followed him? Where?* Keith clenched his jaw. *No, don’t play into his hand. We’re not doing this again. I’m not listening to them again.*

He slipped the arm that had been around Lance’s back out from underneath him and jumped to a crouched position on the bed.

He didn’t pay attention to how heavy of a sleeper Lance must have been to drift right through a battle so fierce.

He didn’t pay attention to how much noise he must have been causing, and how Lance didn’t so much as stir in the presence of it.

All he cared about was how he was going to land that killing blow, that slash or stab of his Bayard that would ensure that no Galra would ever try to threaten Lance again.

He wanted to bring that big, one-eyed Galra so much pain that every other Galra felt it, that they were all so terrified of the consequences of getting so close to Lance that they’d never try again.

But it was hard to land a single attack when that big, false arm kept blocking every swipe of his blade.
Keith couldn’t land a single hit.
It was frustrating.
It was infuriating.
It was terrifying.
It was exhausting.

The Galra hit Keith’s side so hard that he felt it throughout his entire body. He hit the wall with a thump so loud that it seemed to echo throughout the entire house, and he collapsed to the floor, his Bayard skittering under the bed.

What a way to start the day, to already be exhausted when Red had only just left and wouldn’t be back to heal him for another fifteen hours at least.

He could only lie there as the Galra approached, fading in and out of focus as Keith’s exhausted body struggled to take in what it was seeing.

His body shook as the Galra scooped him up into his enormous grip, squeezing Keith’s body so tightly that he could feel bones touching bones that never should have touched.

“You should have let me kill him,” said the Galra, effortless, toneless, matter-of-fact. “You should have stood back and let it happen rather than attempting and failing this rescue of yours. You should have submitted, and you wouldn’t have been harmed.”

“Like I’d ever let that happen,” hissed Keith through clenched teeth.

“You let yourself become a Galra, didn’t you?” asked the Galra, his tone almost conversational. “And you would have been better off that way. You wouldn’t have gotten hurt.”

“I don’t care what you do to me!” snapped Keith.

“Me?” The Galra didn’t laugh, but he didn’t need to for the amusement to come through as clear as a bell. “Oh, no. I wasn’t referring to myself. I was referring to what I’m sure you were contemplating in that very bed before I arrived.” He pulled Keith’s body closer. “The boy you are protecting will hurt you more than I ever could.”

Keith pressed his eyes shut. It was Haxus all over again. He wasn’t going to listen. He’d learned his lesson. The Galra lied. He trusted Lance. He trusted Lance.

“You’re already experiencing that pain, aren’t you?” whispered the Galra. “You already know how it will feel. I almost pity you. Falling in love with the living can’t be a pleasant experience. Not when you know exactly what you are.”

“Shut up,” hissed Keith. “Shut up!”

“Why should I?” asked the Galra. “I’m not saying anything you don’t already know. These feelings are fruitless. They will only lead to pain.”

“Shut up,” repeated Keith, weaker, but angrier, shaking from more than just the pain of being constricted in the Galra’s grip.

“You would have been better off not feeling anything at all.” The Galra’s grip tightened. “We tried to give you an easier escape. We invited you to join us, become one of us. You wouldn’t have felt
anything at all for the boy who brings you so much pain now. You would never have fallen in love. You would never have known the realization that he will never feel the same way. You wouldn’t have been gripped by the fear of the inevitable, that one day he will die, and you will wander the rest of your existence just as alone as you were before he arrived.”

_How does he know?_ thought Keith, desperate, almost pleading. _How does he know any of this?_

“Stop it,” growled Keith. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so powerless. Keith closed his eyes, furious, frustrated, _pained_. Unable to handle the Galra’s ugly smirk any longer. It wasn’t like with Haxus, when he didn’t have the will to fight. This time, he _wanted_ to fight, he _wanted_ to punch the Galra in his stupid, batty face—if only his arms weren’t caught in the grip of the Galra’s massive hand—!

And then, suddenly, he wasn’t.

He hit the ground. Feet first, then his knees. His entire body ached, and he was on the cusp of unconsciousness, just like the second time Haxus found him, when Lance had picked him up and carried him up to the safety of his bed.

_Lance._

Keith already knew what had saved him before he lifted his head. Who else would have been able to?

But when it finally sank in what he was looking at, he still couldn’t quite believe it. Lance was landing punches with all the experience of someone who’d gotten into street scraps before and with the accuracy that could match Keith’s own. Which was astonishing, considering Lance couldn’t see his opponent.

Keith remembered Lance’s marksmanship saving him before, and he almost chalked it up to that, and would have easily, if not for what Lance was saying.

That wasn’t English.

It wasn’t Spanish, either, because Keith didn’t speak Spanish. He wouldn’t have been able to _understand_ Spanish.

But he definitely understood what Lance was saying.

Because it was in Altean.

Perfect, practiced Altean. His accent was better than Keith’s, who had been taught Altean from a very young age.

_How did Lance know fluent Altean?_

A thousand thoughts ran through Keith’s head. Hurt thoughts. Defensive thoughts. Thoughts that froze Keith in place, even as he watched Lance go toe to toe with the Galra that stomped Keith only moments before.

_Did Lance know Altean the whole time?_

_Was that ignorance faked?_

_Why would he lie about that?_
You trust him, Keith told himself firmly, glaring at the floor, grimacing through the pain he was in. If he was hiding it, he had a reason. Just ask.

Keith lifted his head just in time to see the Galra make a break for the closet. He might have cared more about a retreating Galra, particularly one cut from the same cloth as Haxus, but his heart had overruled his head, and he was more worried about the boy storming into the closet after the Galra than the Galra itself.

“Coward,” spat Lance in Altean. (Though he could have just as easily been calling the Galra fast—both were homonyms for squirrel.)

“Lance,” called Keith, climbing cautiously to his feet. He was exhausted. Really, truly exhausted. And Lance’s lack of response seemed to exhaust Keith further.

“Lance,” pressed Keith, dragging his feet to the closet door. He had to stop at the door itself and hang off of the door frame to keep his knees from buckling, but he made it eventually. He pushed past the doorway and joined Lance in the closet.

Just in time to see Lance pull a Bayard out of his jacket pocket.

A blue Bayard.

Keith froze.

Every muscle in his body seemed to tense, putting him into even more pain than he was already in.

He met Lance’s eyes—wide with the realization that he’d been caught.

“How…”

The Blue Lion.

“...the fuck…”

He already knew the answer to his question, it was the Blue fucking Lion.

“...did you get that?”

Lance was a Paladin.

No... No, this isn’t what I wanted.

“I…” Lance averted his eyes guiltily.

This isn’t supposed to be your problem.

“I had a dream?” Lance grimaced. “That— That sounds kind of MLK, doesn’t it? Uh, let me start over—”

Keith’s tired legs finally gave out and he fell to the floor.

“Shit, are you okay?!” Lance kneeled in front of Keith and gripped his arms, sandwiching the blue Bayard between his hand and Keith’s bicep. “Man, that Galra really did a number on you, didn’t he? Come on, let’s—”
“No.” Keith tore his tired arms out of Lance’s grip and glared, furious. Terrified. “No, I’m not fucking okay. How am I supposed to be okay when— You’re the Blue Paladin.”

Lance recoiled, wincing. Keith almost felt guilty, but that guilt was buried deep, deep under his fear.

“You are, aren’t you?”

“...Yeah,” admitted Lance, narrowing his eyes and looking over Keith’s shoulder, just barely avoiding eye-contact. “Yeah, I’m the Blue Paladin.”

“Fuck,” breathed Keith, bowing his head and pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes.

For the first time, Keith really understood why Alfor was so against him becoming a Paladin. It didn’t have anything to do with how capable Keith was, whether or not he could handle it.

Lance was more than capable. He was altruistic and strong, and he was patient, and he had great reasons to fight. Objectively, he’d be a great Paladin.

But it didn’t matter how great he’d be.

Keith still wanted better for him.

And it was hard, thinking about the torture he’d endured for decades and knowing that Lance...that someone he loved so much...was bound for the same tragedy.

Grief-stricken and exhausted, Keith allowed his hands to fall from his eyes to his lap, head still bowed.

When he opened his eyes, he saw not only his lap, but Lance’s as well, and the tanned, shaking, bloodied hands that gripped onto the blue Bayard like it was a lifeline.

“...We...” Keith swallowed hard. “We should...” He felt Lance’s eyes on him. “Your hands... You could have...”

“Oh,” murmured Lance. He was so quiet. It wasn’t like him. Keith didn’t care for it. “I’ll be fine.”

“No,” said Keith, as firm as his broken voice would allow. “You’re hurt. You need to see a doctor.”

“And tell them what?” Lance laughed, but there was no heart in it. “I broke my hands punching a suit of armor with a giant, furry, purple guy inside of it?”

“Tell them you punched a wall or something,” grumbled Keith, furrowing his brow, glaring at the hands rather than at the face that he couldn’t bear to look at.

“I’ll be fine, Keith,” sighed Lance, his aggravation clear in his voice. It had been a while since the last time Lance spoke to Keith like that. He’d almost forgotten what it sounded like.

Sighing, Keith grabbed Lance’s wrist and stood on shaky legs. “If you’re not going to see a doctor, then at least let me help.”

“Keith,” sighed Lance, “you can barely even stand—”

“Shut it,” snapped Keith, squeezing Lance’s hand too hard. “Let me do this one thing. Just this one fucking thing, Lance.”

Keith heard rather than saw Lance’s mouth close. He heard the click of his teeth, and then nothing.
Absolute silence.
Too much silence for Lance.
But he’d stopped fighting, and for the moment, that was good enough for Keith.

Keith taped the end of the roll of bandages down and set the tube aside.
But he didn’t stand up from where he kneeled on the linoleum floor, and he didn’t let go of Lance’s hand.
Maybe if he never let go, nothing bad would happen to him.
Maybe Paladin could just be a title.
He hadn’t died or anything, right? He could just leave. Go somewhere else. Be safe. If he hadn’t died, he wouldn’t fall through the ground if he tried to leave, would he?

He... was still alive, wasn’t he?

For the first time since they reached the bathroom, Keith lifted his gaze above Lance’s elbows, to his bare chest. He wedged himself between Lance’s knees, ignoring the flustered protests he got in turn because he knew how it looked, he just didn’t care. It didn’t matter. He was worried, and this was all he could do to soothe those worries.

Closing his eyes, he turned his head and rested his ear against Lance’s chest, concentrating.

Th-Thump.

Th-Thump.

Th-Thump.

A heartbeat. A little fast, but still strong.

Lance was alive. Becoming a Paladin didn’t change that.

Keith’s shoulders began to shake from weakness as much as from emotion.

And a pair of warm, strong arms wrapped around them to steady the shaking. They almost succeeded.

“Seriously, Keith, are you okay?” Lance’s voice was soft and gentle and understanding, serving as an unmistakable reminder of why Keith was so in love with the heart still beating in his ear.

“How am I supposed to be okay?” whispered Keith, wrapping his arms tight around Lance’s back. “You’re a Paladin. You weren’t… You weren’t supposed to…”

“I know,” said Lance, wrapping his arms tighter around Keith’s shoulders. “But I’m not going to get in your way. You know what you’re doing. I get that. But there’s no rule saying I can’t be your backup, right? I mean, I’ve got the Bayard, I’ve got the Lion… And I don’t think Blue would be too
happy with me if I didn’t at least try to help. And besides—”

“IT’s not that,” insisted Keith. He’d meant to sound firm, angry, offended that Lance would even think along those lines. It just came out as tired. “It doesn’t have anything to do with that.”

“Then what?” asked Lance. He dropped his chin on top of Keith’s head, and when he spoke, Keith could feel every syllable dig into the part of his hair. “Why don’t you want me to be a Paladin?”

“It—” Keith sighed. How was he supposed to explain something like that? “…Lance, being a Paladin isn’t fun.”

“I know,” said Lance.

“You’re going to get hurt,” said Keith.

“I know,” said Lance again. “But, I mean…if I get hurt trying to keep you from getting hurt, it’s totally worth it.”

“No, it’s not,” argued Keith firmly, holding tighter onto Lance. “It doesn’t matter if I get hurt. I’m dead. This is what I’m supposed to be doing. You’re supposed to live a normal life with your friends and—”

“Okay, see, you lost me at the part where it doesn’t matter if you get hurt.”

Lance grabbed Keith by the shoulders and pushed him back to look him in the eye. His brow was knotted, furrowed, caught somewhere between anger and confusion.

“I have no idea how you got that idea,” said Lance, his fingers digging almost painfully hard into Keith’s shoulders, his grip surprisingly tight despite the bandages wrapped around his hands. “It doesn’t matter if you’re dead or alive or somewhere in-between or, like, extra dead or something. Of course it matters if you’re in pain. Of course it matters, Keith.” Lance released Keith's shoulders, and his hands found their way to Keith's face. They were still warm, even through the bandages. "When I even think about you getting hurt, I get scared. Or angry, or just— Think about every time I found you hurt, Keith. Did I look happy when I found you in the hallway on the floor that time? Or what about when I found you in the dining room with Haxus. Was I happy then? Or when I saw what Haxus did to your memories. Did I look okay? What about this morning? Do you think I punched that asshole in his gross, sharp teeth for the fun of it, or do you think I did it because he was crushing you and I was scared to fucking death of losing you and mad as hell that someone tried to take you from me?"

Keith curled his hands into fists from where they sat on Lance's thighs. "Take me away from you? Lance, I'm already away from you. I'm—"

"No, you're not!” screamed Lance. "You're right here, Keith!" His thumbs pressed hard into Keith's cheekbones. "Don't try to tell me you're not! Not when I can see you and touch you and hear your voice."

Keith set his jaw. "I'm dead, Lance. You can't change—"

"I don't care!" screeched Lance. "What the fuck does that even matter?! Didn't you care when Alfor got hurt?!!"

"Don't bring him into this!" snapped Keith. "You don't know a thing about him!"

Lance laughed bitterly. "I probably know as much as you."
"Bullshit," snapped Keith.

"Try me," said Lance, his voice dropping dangerously low.

"Fine," said Keith. "What was his daughter's name?"

Lance looked Keith dead in the eye, dropped his hands from his face, and leaned back, looking more serious, angrier than Lance had ever seen him.

"Allura," he said without hesitation. "Her name was Allura."

Keith's mind short-circuited.

First, Altean. Now, this.

"H-How do you—"

Before Keith could find the words to form his question, a roar rang through his head. It was just like the one that had warned him of Pidge and Lance's little adventure into the basement two months before.

He closed his eyes, trying to concentrate hard on the quintessence in the house, to see what Red was warning him of, but all he could see was Lance's bright, brilliant blue.

"Shiro." At the sound of Lance's stunned, breathless voice, Keith opened his eyes and looked into his eyes. All of the anger and frustration was gone, replaced by earth-shattering, contagious fear. "It's Shiro. He's in the basement."

Too alarmed to worry about what it meant that Lance knew that, Keith pushed himself to his feet, only for his knees to buckle under his own weight.

*Shit.*

He really *was* exhausted.

Lance stood up quickly enough to catch Keith by the elbows before he collapsed. "Uh, what do you think you're doing?" he asked urgently.

"What do you *think?" demanded Keith. "I'm getting down there!"


His eyes narrowed, and he made it very, very clear that the next few words out of his mouth were not to be negotiated under any circumstances.

"*I'm* saving Shiro."

Chapter End Notes

Finished up my finals yesterday, pretty much immediately started working on this.
He wasn’t sure what it was.

Maybe it was just being in the same house.

Maybe it was because he’d found those old photo albums when they first moved in.

Maybe it was because Lance’s ‘mystery man’ seemed to have the same name.

But for whatever reason, Shiro found himself unable to stop himself from thinking about Keith.

Keith, who died about twenty years prior, a long-lost family member Shiro never really gave much thought, right until he moved into the place where Keith died.

And then, suddenly, everything started to be about him.

Shiro found an old photo album in the basement completely full of old pictures of Keith. Lance met—and started obsessing over—someone named Keith. And then there was all the talk of ghosts. And that weird glitch where the motion-sensor for their Xbox picked up the presence of someone who wasn’t there.

And that gave Shiro pause, because that silhouette looked suspiciously like Keith. It was hard to make out any sort of detail, but the hair length, the body type, the height…

Shiro tried to tell himself that he was being ridiculous, that Lance had pulled him into his delusions.

But that heavy “what if” weighed down his mind every single time he misplaced something and swore he would never have put it in the place where he eventually found it. Every time his hair stood on end for seemingly no reason. Every time he got the feeling he wasn’t alone.

He’d been thinking about it so often that he almost wanted to talk to Lance about it, to see if he could find out anything more about what Lance had been experiencing, provided he did still experience anything. He hadn’t talked about that in some time, but for all Shiro knew, that could have just been because no one else in the house was being receptive.

For all Shiro knew, Lance could have found irrefutable proof and kept it to himself because he doubted anyone would believe him with or without that proof.

But Shiro knew how it would look if he suddenly changed his mind, if he went to Lance asking questions about something he was unshakeable about only months prior.

So he decided to find his own answers.

He’d been pushing it back for weeks, procrastinating, almost afraid of the answers he would or wouldn’t find.

And Pidge texted him.

*Hey, Shiro. Gonna be out all night. Doing an experiment. Do you mind getting something out of the basement for me? Kind of a small box, black and white. Just put it on the kitchen counter. I'll find it*
when I get back.

Shiro?

You asleep?


Shiro looked at the clock in the upper corner of his phone.

Nine in the morning.

Was Pidge still out?

Sighing, Shiro lifted his head from his phone and frowned at the photograph on his dresser.

“Should I do something about them?”

Matt and Sam Holt smiled back at him.

“...Guess they wouldn’t listen to me, anyway.”

Tiredly, Shiro climbed out of bed and made his way to the closet.

He could grab the box. It was no big deal. He’d been planning on going into the basement anyway.

What better place to start looking for answers than the first place that gave him questions?

---

A roar rang through Lance’s head, something he immediately recognized as a warning. A signal from Blue. Before he could ask, he was bombarded by image after image, visuals that fluttered his mind so quickly he could barely keep up.

A castle. Silver coins. An explosion of pure, bright white.

Shiro.

Frantically, Lance sought out his quintessence. Keith said it was black, didn’t he? Black, almost purple.

And Lance found it. Black quintessence, deep beneath himself and Keith.

Completely surrounded by violet. Bright, blinding, severe violet.

Oh, no.

“Shiro.” Horrified, Lance opened his eyes and looked to Keith. It seemed he’d gotten the same message from his own Lion. “It’s Shiro. He’s in the basement.”

Keith, who looked just as terrified and torn up as Lance felt, tried to climb to his feet, only to collapse before he’d even climbed to his full height. Lance had barely stood up himself in time to catch him.
“Uh, what do you think you’re doing?” demanded Lance.

“What do you think?” countered Keith, looking strong and defiant and determined despite the fact that he was shaking in Lance’s arms. “I’m getting down there!”

Lance almost laughed. He might have, if not for the fact that Shiro’s predicament was still tearing away at his mind. “Oh, no. No-no-no. No, you don’t. Not like this. No way, José. Not happening. No.” He squeezed Keith’s arms, pressing the Bayard still in his hand into Keith’s elbow, and looked deeply into his eyes, making damn sure he had his attention. “I’m saving Shiro.”

“You?” choked Keith as Lance let him go, making sure he was close enough to the bathroom counter to be able to catch himself on it if need be. “Are you insane?! You have no idea what you’re up against. You’ve only ever fought one Galra at a time, and you’ve never even used your Bayard. Do you even know how?”

Lance, who didn’t have time to argue, lifted his Bayard, and it transformed effortlessly into something that felt as comfortable in his hands as a pencil.

A laser gun. I knew it.

Keith’s jaw dropped. He looked like he’d been slapped in the face. It might have been comical if not for the fact that Shiro was still in danger. No time. No time to laugh at Keith’s face. No time to think about the fact that he was going to be saving Shiro’s life barefoot and shirtless. No time to even wink at Keith like an action hero before rushing off to kick Galra ass.

...Well, maybe there was time for that.

Lance threw Keith a confident smile, the only assurance he could spare that he knew what he was doing, and winked before rushing out of the bathroom without a warning.

Keith called out for him, but he didn’t follow, presumably because he was too hurt to keep up.

Good. He’d already held Sendak off while Lance caught himself up to speed. That was enough for one day.

Lance rushed down the stairs, through the foyer, and into the hallway, fully aware that he had no plan, no chance to strategize; there was no telling how much time Shiro had left. He had no choice.

He threw open the door and rushed noisily down the stairs, but before he even reached the bottom, a very clear mental image rushed into his head.

A memory. His older sister shooting off a flare gun into the night sky just to show Lance how to do it, about ten minutes before she got grounded for a month.

A flare gun? Lance halted at the bottom of the stairs. I can do that?

Blue didn’t answer.

But when he was already fighting in the dark, it didn’t hurt to try.

He raised his Bayard, pointed it at the ceiling, and fired.

A rocket of blue light exploded from the end of his barrel. It careened toward the boards and piping at the top of the basement and hit the flat surface overhead before bursting into shards of light that scattered like snow, drifting down all around the point where the light broke and illuminating
everything, illuminating it all in a way that didn’t seem to go away when the blue light itself faded.

Lance saw the small army of Galra, faceless and emotionless, crowding around a central point where the big, bat-like Galra Lance had already seen twice that day was steadily walking toward a bloodied and beaten Shiro.

Shiro, who was crouched, fists raised. Everything about him read as “poised to fight” except for his eyes, which were scared and confused and directed toward Lance, not entirely aware of the advancing danger.

Lance bolted between Shiro and the big Galra so quickly that his feet scraped against the concrete floor as he skidded to a stop, Bayard aimed toward the Galra’s face.

“Don’t even think about it,” growled Lance, glaring hard into the mismatched eyes that stared him down.

“So you’re awake, are you?” asked the Galra, looking almost amused.

Lance heard more than one question in those words. He didn’t grace any of them an answer. “I thought I told you to stay away from my friends.”

“Lance,” Shiro’s voice, concern and confusion audible through his fear. “What’s going on?”

The broad-shouldered Galra didn’t give Lance time to answer Shiro’s question. “I’ll ask you this just once: Stand aside.”

Lance smirked defiantly. “Not happening.”

The Galra reeled his arm back, but Lance had already dealt with him once before, and he was unarmed the last time. This time, he knew what he was dealing with, and he was prepared.

He quickly ducked under the Galra’s punch and rolled onto his back, shooting upward from underneath the arm to knock it out of the way of its intended path, far away from Shiro. Then, before the Galra could reel his heavy appendage back for another hit, Lance rolled onto his side and fired a barrage of quick shots, hitting as many of the faceless drones that stood between them and the stairs as possible.

“Shiro, run for it!”

“Wh— But—!”

Something grabbed Lance’s leg. “Just go!”

Before Shiro could protest again—before Lance could even twist his body around to shoot the Galra that had its clawed hand wrapped around his ankle—Lance was yanked hard, hard enough that he felt his knee pop, and he disappeared beneath a swarm of claws and fur and armor.

If Lance thought that Keith was just going to sit by and let him take on whatever was in the basement, he had another thing coming. However, it wasn’t really fair to say that Keith was hot on his trail, either.
The world swam in Keith’s vision, and he had to hold onto a wall to be able to walk, but still, he managed to make it to his and Lance’s shared bedroom down the hall.

He stumbled inside, nearly knocking over the vase of wilting flowers in his haste to grip onto the corner of the dresser for stability. He knelt slowly and realized for the first time that some of his CDs had fallen to the floor at some point, probably when Lance pushed the Galra into the dresser. When Keith reached under the unmade bed he’d been resting relatively peacefully in just the night before and began to search for the Bayard he’d seen slide underneath it that morning, his hands first came into contact with a black marker, one he remembered Lance losing the night they colored together.

Everything he came into contact with seemed to have something to do with Lance. It was so hard for Keith to keep himself from thinking that his life with Lance was flashing before his eyes.

Nothing bad was going to happen. He was going to get down there in time. He was going to keep Lance from getting hurt.

This is so wrong, he told himself, his hand finally finding the discarded Bayard that slipped underneath the bed. I should already be down there. I should be with him. He shouldn’t have to take on that many Galra alone, not this soon. Not ever.

It took a great deal of energy for Keith to climb to his feet, but he didn’t have time to catch his breath once he had.

He turned away from the bed and made his way slowly to the stairs.

Every footfall seemed to take a year to land. It felt like the world was going in slow motion, but that couldn’t have been the case, because if it was, Keith wouldn’t have been able to so easily hear Shiro talking to Hunk at the bottom of the stairs.

“You don’t understand. There’s something down there, and Lance is fighting it—or them—alone.”

“Wait, so, there really are ghosts?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they’re ghosts. Maybe they’re something else. Does it matter? We have to help him.”

Keith pushed past, trying not to listen. It didn’t help, knowing that Hunk and Shiro knew the kind of danger Lance was in, that they were just as desperate to help him as Keith was.

Distantly, Keith heard muffled voices. There were people outside. They were bound to be a problem eventually, if they showed up while the Galra were still attacking, but that was for later.

For the moment, all that mattered was reaching Lance in time.

Hold on, Lance. Hold on.

Sendak by himself might have been a reasonable opponent. He was incredibly powerful all on his own.

And the horde of Galra, that might have been a challenge, but tolerable, given enough time and enough of a reason to keep fighting.
But together, they were impossible to handle.

Lance could shoot Sendak a million times, fast enough to mute his incessant taunting if not fast enough to break through his powerful new arm, but the second he put too much of his focus on Sendak, one of the smaller Galra would leap at his back or grab him by the ankle and knock him down.

And the second Lance made enough of a clearing so that the Galra weren’t close enough to pull him down anymore, Sendak was breathing down his neck.

It became very apparent very quickly that Lance was not meant to work alone.

He should have been part of a team. He and Keith should have been working together. Keith could kick all of their asses halfway back to Hell or wherever it was they came from while Lance could watch his back from a distance.

Sharpshooters were not meant for close combat.

And with every time that Lance was yanked back down to the floor, that fact became increasingly apparent.

It probably didn’t help that he was barely dressed, either. The scrapes and cuts he got on his arms, the bottoms of his feet, all down his back every time he was struck to the floor added up over time and made every single twitch of his body seem to ache relentlessly.

And he only had to stop to nurse a superficial injury to his shoulder once before he learned how bad of an idea that was.

He’d taken his eyes off the fight.

Yes, it was only for a moment, but he’d still taken his eyes off the fight.

And that moment was enough to send him to the ground, to throw his Bayard from his hands, to press Sendak’s heavy foot into his gut.

He felt like he was going to vomit, and more importantly, he couldn’t get up.

Shit.

Lance glared up at the mismatched eyes that gleamed down at him, cutting through the darkness like a silent but keen laugh.

“You’ve gone soft,” growled Sendak.

Lance opened his mouth, daring Sendak to answer why being ‘soft’ was such a bad thing, but his words caught in his throat.

Sendak’s expression had changed. The challenging glint in his eye faded. He’d gone still as a statue.

With his natural hand—if one could call a Galra hand natural in any sense—he reached for his chest, and for the first time, Lance noticed the glint of white metal piercing through his armor.

Sendak clutched at his wound, and he muttered something, something his mind had to race to catch up with.

“To victory,” Lance heard. But he also heard “To death.”
And, ever so slowly, he realized—it was both. It was Altean.

*Vrepit sa.*

To victory, or to death.

Just as Lance began to wonder what kind of strange culture would have the same word for victory as for death, Sendak began to dissolve in the air like sand blowing away in a fierce wind.

Lance held his breath—too many times during that battle alone had Lance accidentally gotten a whiff of trauma or tragedy only to be brought back to the present by his arm being nearly torn off—but before the smoke had even dissipated completely, something fell through it, collapsing directly onto Lance’s chest and making Lance very abruptly aware of what had just killed Sendak.

“Keith!” Lance sat up hurriedly, clutching his fellow Paladin—*his friend*—tight to his chest.

Keith didn’t respond.

He didn’t speak, didn’t move, and if he so much as groaned, it was drowned out by the affronted screeching of the surrounding Galra.

*Oh, man.*

*We’re so fucked.*

“Keith,” Lance said urgently, holding on tighter, shaking Keith’s shoulders frantically. His only result for that was watching Keith’s head turn in towards Lance’s chest. “Keith, come on, buddy. I can’t save us both by myself.”

Tearing his eyes away from Keith, Lance turned his head and began to look around himself frantically for his Bayard.

He found it lying next to his thigh and quickly picked it up with the arm that wasn’t supporting Keith.

He couldn’t imagine a worse situation.

If Keith had stayed upstairs, at least one Paladin could have made it.

If Keith stayed upstairs, then...then at least he would have survived.

Lance scooted them both back against the basement wall and began to shoot awkwardly, one-handed when the hand he had free was injured and wrapped in bandages and almost completely lacking dexterity.

Lance missed almost as many times as he fired, and there were too many of his enemies for the shots he did land to count.

The Galra didn’t even seem as frenzied as they had been only moments before. They were advancing slowly, like zombies. They knew that their prey was helpless. They knew that they had the upper hand.

And Lance knew it as much as they did. Even as he fought them off with what little power he had, he knew it was hopeless. He knew he was done for. He knew that it was only a matter of time before the Galra closed in around him and any attempts to save himself—to save Keith—would be rendered pointless, and his only consolation would be that at least Shiro survived.
Lance pulled Keith tight to his chest, dropping his Bayard—useless thing that it was in his injured, unpracticed hands—and closing his eyes and pressing his forehead into Keith’s hair.

A million ways he could have changed the outcome of the battle rushed into his head too late. He could have stayed on the stairs and shot the Galra from afar. He could have brought another weapon for Shiro and called out instructions and the effort would have been cut in half. He could have kept his cool and let Shiro get a little bit hurt until Sendak was sufficiently distracted and then he could have saved both their lives at a minimal cost. That would have been shitty, but better than the outcome that was quickly surrounding him.

Lance wanted to throw himself over Keith, use himself as a shield, but he knew that the Galra would probably rip through him like paper before moving on to the person he was trying to protect. So all he could do was hold Keith close and wait for the end to come.

“I’m so sorry,” hissed Lance through clenched teeth. “I’m so sorry, Keith. I should have been able to handle this on my own. You shouldn’t have had to save my ass. Not this time.” A soft, bitter, helpless laugh fell from Lance’s lips. “I have all the superpowers and I’m still Lois Lane.”

Lance opened his eyes, just to get one more look at Keith’s face. He saw the toe of a Galra’s boot enter the corner of his vision, but didn’t waste what would most likely be his last moment worrying about how close the Galra was.

He just swept Keith’s bangs away from his eyes with a bandaged hand and trailed his exposed fingertips down Keith’s cheek.

It was soft. It was so soft. And it was so stupid that Lance would never get the chance to feel that softness when Keith was smiling. Smiling at him in that beautiful way he did, like he wasn’t used to it, like the smile had crept up on him and he just let it happen because he didn’t even realize it was happening. Like it was the only truly genuine smile that had ever existed at all.

God, he’d never know.

It was already too late. There was nothing Lance could do to change that. It was too late, and Keith would never know.

He’d never know how much Lance loved that soft, genuine smile. Or how much Lance loved the way his own name sounded in Keith’s voice. Or how much Lance loved just being close to Keith, feeling him near, knowing that they were together. Hell, he’d never even know that Lance liked the way he looked when he was fighting.

It was too late for all of it. For everything.

Keith would never know that the one thing Lance didn’t mind having in common with Lois Lane was how much she loved her Superman.

Just like Lance loved his.

“I’m so sorry,” whispered Lance in a broken croak as the tears he hadn’t felt welling in his eyes rolled down his cheeks.

A clawed hand entered the corner of his eye.

There was no time.

Lance held Keith tight to his chest, as tight as possible, cradling Keith’s head under his chin, and
three words that Keith would never hear were finally at least spoken aloud.

“I love you.”

As if summoned somehow by the mere honesty of those words, a bright, brilliant, violet light exploded throughout the basement like fireworks. Sparks flew and lightning flashed, targeting the Galra nearest Lance and Keith and striking it down, turning it to dust, its claws just inches away from Lance’s face.

Every other Galra turned its head toward the source despite the fact that none of them had eyes to see with.

Lance followed their attentions all the way to the stairs leading to the exit and he found perhaps the last thing he was expecting.

A woman. And a beautiful one at that.

She stood on the metal stairway, one foot on a step beneath the other, a pure white quarterstaff gripped in one hand like a warning while the other hand rested elegantly on the stairway’s cheap railing. Coarse, curly, pearlescent hair lifted off of her shoulders, billowing as if kicked up by a breeze caused only by the immense power that seemed to radiate from her in calm waves, like ripples in a pond.

Her expression was hardened, stoic, and the moment Lance looked into her eyes—eyes so familiar that it seemed to itch at the corners of his mind—he lost any certainty that he wasn’t gazing upon some ancient goddess of war.

The Galra advanced on her, and rather than being afraid for the woman, Lance was almost more scared for the small army pursuing her.

She descended the stairs like a queen, or perhaps more like an admiral. With every step, tiny, violet lights rose from her like fireflies, though Lance doubted they were as harmless.

The same lightning that struck the Galra that nearly brought an end to Lance’s life surged out, striking the horde of Galra in a pattern that at first seemed random, though Lance recognized quickly enough that she was targeting the fastest of the Galra, the ones who were pushing paths to the front of their formation the quickest.

She walked, unafraid of death, into the mass of armor and hatred, her very eyes daring the Galra to come near her.

The weakest who drew too close seemed to disintegrate upon merely being exposed to the violet waves that rippled off of the woman.

Those strong enough to make it past her first two defenses met their end at her staff.

In only seconds, every single Galra was gone. No replacements arrived. No second wave. The basement was empty, save for Lance, Keith, and the woman herself.

She turned her eyes on Lance, and Lance felt goosebumps crawl up his spine. He desperately, desperately hoped that she didn’t see him or Keith as a threat—or prey—like she saw the Galra.

But then, something extraordinary happened.

The woman’s hardened expression filled with emotion. Fear? Lance doubted it. No, it was shock.
Shock and disbelief.

The light rippling off of her dimmed and faded, and she looked, for the first time, like any normal human, save for her pointed ears.

Her staff clattered to the floor, and tears welled in her eyes.

“Pyotr?”

Every muscle in Lance’s body stiffened at once. His shoulders tensed, his back straightened, his heart stopped.

_How—? Wait… No way. No way in hell, it’s been ten-thousand years._

“...Allura?”

Chapter End Notes

Allura.
Pidge was close to falling asleep at the wheel by the time they got home, but it was worth it. Thanks to the help of a contact they’d found online, they were able to create a device to pinpoint not only the exact point where the “Galra infestation” was centralized, but they were also able to detect a few places in the general area that gave off similar readings.

Well, perhaps “general area” was a bit generous. They were all within a fifty-mile radius, though.

The strangest thing was that they were all exactly fifty miles away from the centralized point Pidge had found in the kitchen.

Pidge tried following the pattern, tried walking along the circumference of the would-be circle made from the points they found, but readings got weaker the farther they moved away from those key points.

For the moment, Pidge had no idea what those readings meant, but they were still sure that they were important somehow, and that was still progress.

But progress toward what Pidge wasn’t sure.

So tired was Pidge that they’d completely parked their car in the driveway before they even noticed the two foreign vehicles parked in their front yard. One, a nice-looking Lincoln. The other…

“Is that a hearse?!”

Pidge yanked their keys out of the ignition and clumsily pushed their car door open, frantic to find answers.

Before Pidge reached the vehicles, occupants emerged. The three who came out of the Lincoln were Pidge’s first clue that these were no ordinary visitors; two of the three had pointed ears, and all three looked remarkably elegant, almost regal.

It was the hearse’s occupants that caught the most of Pidge’s attention, however, because after the driver stepped out—a woman with long, blue-dyed hair tied back in voluminous pigtails—the passenger opened her door, revealing a very familiar-looking woman with long, pink hair cascading down her back, blond bangs striping over the top of her head.

What the ever-loving fuck?

“How?”

The pink-haired woman in question whipped around, her eyes wide. “…Pidge?”

The driver of the Lincoln turned as well, frowning curiously. Thankfully, she didn’t look angry. Pidge could already tell from this woman’s presence alone that she wasn’t someone they wanted to get on the bad side of.

“Florona, who is this?”

“I…” Florona shook her head, her mouth hanging open. “…Pidge, do you live here?”
Pidge nodded silently, just as stunned as Florona was.

“I suppose that explains a lot.” Florona sighed and turned toward the driver of the Lincoln. “Mother, this is Pidge. A...friend of mine, I guess you could say. I found them searching for information about activity I recognized as similar to Galra behavior. I thought perhaps someone had discovered an escaped Galra, and I wanted to arm them against it.” She turned back toward Pidge, shock still in her wide eyes. “I never once thought that they could have found the source.”

“So you’re the one Florona’s been talking to all the time.” The other woman from the hearse laughed and leaned against the hood, her blue pigtails falling over her shoulders. “I thought she got a boyfriend or something. I’m kind of disappointed.”

“Unexpected or not, it’s good to have someone on our side.” One of the people with pointed ears, the man with the impressive mustache, spoke up brightly, catching Pidge’s attention, and then immediately diverting it to the four mice perching on the man’s shoulders.

*What the Jolly Green Giant is happening?*

“Uhh…” Pidge shook their head, tearing their own attention away from the mice for the sake of manners. “Like Florona said, my name’s Pidge. Pidge Holt. And you are?”

“Coran Hieronymus Wimbleton-Smythe.” The very, very ginger man with the mustache offered his hand. “Pleasure to make your acquaintance. These lovely ladies here are Plaxum and Luxia. Of course, you already know Florona. And this is Allura.”

When he gestured to the woman beside him, the one with pearly white hair, she smiled, though there was clear tension in it, and it didn’t stay for long. She kept looking toward the house.

Pidge turned their attention away from the clearly distracted woman and took Coran’s hand, shaking it uncertainly. “That’s...a pretty fancy name, Coran. Are you, like, some kind of duke, or...?”

“Nope,” said Coran brightly. “Just an advisor. Or I was, once upon a time. The only nobility here is Allura—Oh, nearly forgot.” He pulled his hand back and began to point to the mice on his shoulders. “Chulatt, Plachu, Chuchule, and Platt.”

Chuchule bounced eagerly. Plachu regarded Pidge with what seemed to be—if Pidge didn’t know better—suspicion. Platt waved, seeming remarkably human-like in his movements. Chulatt didn’t look at Pidge at all, preferring instead to look at the house, seeming just as strangely tense as Allura did.

“Oh, cool mice,” said Pidge, raising an eyebrow. “They seem...smart.”

“Oh, that’s because they’re not really mice,” said Coran, as chipper as ever. “Well, they are, but they aren’t. They’re spirits!”

Chulatt began squeaking frantically and tugging at Coran’s blue polo.

“Coran, I don’t think we have time for introductions,” said Allura, rushing to the back of the hearse and opening it up. Pidge caught a glimpse of what definitely seemed to be a coffin—one they dearly hoped wasn’t occupied—before Allura yanked out a quarterstaff as white as her hoodie and slammed the door shut.

“Pidge,” said Coran, who had been staring sternly at the house himself for a few moments only to turn around when he spoke. “I assume you know the fastest route underground.”
“You mean to the basement?” Pidge knitted their brow. “I— I mean, yeah, sure, but— What’s going on?”

“I’ll need to be down there as quickly as possible,” explained Allura, grabbing Pidge’s arm as she rushed past, dragging them along with her. “The Red and Blue Paladins are in danger.”

“H-How are you alive?” demanded Allura, her blue eyes wide, shoulders trembling. “I— I saw your body— Father said— Haggar—”

“I could ask you the same thing,” said Lance. “But honestly, I don’t give a shit right now.”

Allura recoiled, and perhaps Lance would feel bad about speaking so rudely to a princess—especially one who had just saved his life and Keith’s—later.

“Keith doesn’t sleep,” said Lance urgently. “This isn’t normal. I-I don’t know what to do. I don’t even know what this means. I had no idea he could be unconscious. You have to know what to do. Tell me what to do.”

Allura’s expression softened. Tears continued to roll down her cheeks. “...How much do you remember?”

Lance, who didn’t know if what he saw could be counted as remembering, didn’t waste time explaining as much. “Not a lot. Does it matter?”

Allura sighed and pulled down the sleeves of her hoodie to wipe at her face. “The Red Paladin—Keith, was it? He’ll be fine.”

Relief washed through Lance’s body like warm water.

“Paladins and their Lions, they work as a unit,” continued Allura, rubbing at her eyes. “This is particularly true with the Spirit Paladin. As long as you continue to hold onto Keith, that is, as long as you keep in physical contact with him, you will be able to restore his strength over time. If you hadn’t been healing him from the moment you reached for him, he would have long since reverted.”

“Reverted?”

Allura’s shoulders sank. “You really don’t remember anything, do you?” She sighed submissively and bent low to grab her forgotten staff. “I presume you can stand?”

Lance nodded.

“Then we should get upstairs,” said Allura. “You aren’t the only one who deserves to hear this information, I should think. But first...” She heaved a tired-sounding breath. “Where are you keeping the Chest of Lions?”

Allura went ahead first to warn Shiro and Hunk of what they were about to see, how someone
holding the Red Paladin would look to human eyes, but the second Lance got the okay, he walked out, Keith clutched tight to his chest, his head lolling on Lance’s shoulder.

Hunk stared, frowning in a combination of confusion and distress.

Shiro just looked relieved, despite the fact that Lance must have been partially transparent to his eyes.

Seeing Coran was a surprise, but a relatively small one after the shock that was Allura.

“So, is that Keith?” asked Pidge, adjusting their glasses curiously.

Lance, lacking the strength to speak after his near-death experience—after Keith’s near-death experience—only nodded. Or he started to before Hunk chimed into the conversation.

“Wait, Keith?” Hunk pointed nervously at Lance’s chest, a little higher than Keith actually was. “As in Ghost-Keith?”

Oh.

Right.

“You knew about Keith?” asked Pidge, their eyes going wide as they turned on Hunk.

“Well, Lance told me,” said Hunk. “Like, ages and ages ago? Maybe a day or two after we moved in? It’s not like I believed him! Who would believe that?!”

“That’s why you didn’t tell me,” said Shiro, stealing the focus of the conversation. Lance turned to look at him, and the guilt that he felt upon seeing the hurt in Shiro’s eyes probably would have twisted his gut if he wasn’t already so emotionally exhausted.

“There’s more to it than that,” said Lance, his voice as quiet as his mood.

“I think we all have some catching up to do,” said Coran softly. His kind eyes turned on Lance, and he offered a smile.

Lance tried to return it with a smile of his own, but his heart wasn’t in it.

After a brief discussion about which room would be most comfortable, a discussion that Lance had no part in, most of their group—Shiro, Hunk, Coran, Allura, and the three women Lance didn’t recognize—left to bring more furniture from the den into the foyer, where there was more room for all of them to sit and talk. Lance himself stayed behind and lowered himself carefully onto the couch, settling Keith as comfortably as he could on his lap.

Gravity dipped Keith’s head down as they hit the cushions, and Lance carefully lifted it back onto his shoulder, where it was likely to be more comfortable. His hair had fallen into his face again, and Lance swept it away from his closed eyes.

“You never said anything about being in love with him.”

Lance lifted his head and looked toward the stairs, where Pidge sat, legs hanging off the side, a banister pole between their knees.

He wanted to ask them if this was another example of their genius or if it was obvious, but he didn’t have the energy, and he supposed it didn’t really matter.

“It’s a new development,” mumbled Lance, looking back at Keith’s sleeping face, his neutral
“Lance…” Pidge sighed with a patience that was almost uncharacteristic of them. “I’ve never seen you look at anyone like that before. You don’t just…start looking at someone like that overnight.”

“Yeah?” Lance didn’t lift his head, didn’t turn toward Pidge, didn’t show much of a sign that he’d heard them at all, save for his answer. “How am I looking at him?”

“It’s like…” Lance heard Pidge kick the side of the staircase with their heel. “It’s like how Matt used to look at Shiro. Before they got together. When he thought he had no chance.”

Lance wasn’t sure how to respond to that.

“He was wrong,” added Pidge after a few seconds that felt closer to several minutes. “Just a reminder.”

Lance wasn’t sure how to respond to that, either.

“Catching up” went on for a very long time. Long enough that Hunk finally reached his limit at one point and stopped staring at Lance to go into the kitchen and start stress baking.

The two mice who hopped down from Coran’s shoulder and climbed onto the back of the couch Lance was seated on, however...they never stopped staring.

For the most part, Allura was the only one talking. Occasionally, Coran would jump in to add a detail, or Pidge would ask a question. Shiro spent most of the talk in pensive silence.

Lance’s attention never fully diverted from the boy in his arms.

Occasionally, he would glance up to see how his friends were taking the new information, or some metallic sound would catch his attention from the kitchen, or a new piece of information would catch his curiosity enough to borrow his ear, but those brief breaks never lasted for more than a moment. Lance always went back to Keith.

Even while Allura and Coran talked about sailing from country to country, testing hundreds of potential Paladins, and the hopelessness they felt as it became all the more clear with every failure that no one was going to earn Blue’s favor...all Lance could see was Keith.

He couldn’t stop thinking about how he’d nearly lost him. True, if Keith had died down there—really died, more than what happened to him when he became the “Spirit Paladin”—then Lance would have certainly died as well. They would have gone down together. But Lance couldn’t care less about himself. Not up against Keith’s life. Even when Keith wasn’t even really...alive anymore to begin with. His existence had still been on the line.

And for Lance, knowing that Keith had nearly been killed—destroyed, defeated, whatever it could really be called—without even knowing how Lance felt about him…it tore Lance apart just thinking about it.

He kept touching Keith’s face. He knew he was doing it. And he was aware he was doing it in front of Pidge, a princess of an ancient civilization, and Keith’s own cousin, but he couldn’t stop doing it.
He deserved to know.

He deserved to know how important he was, at least to Lance.

He needed to know how beautiful he was, how endearing it was that he couldn’t dance, how his laugh was so warm that it gave Lance goosebumps and made him drop whatever he was holding at any given moment.

On some level, Lance registered that three of the four mice that had arrived onto the scene with Coran and Allura were Pyotr’s friends.

It suddenly made sense why two of them had perched over his shoulder and were watching him so intently. It made sense why a third one seemed to look away any time he glanced in its direction.

Platt, Plachu, and Chulatt.

Lance knew he should have been excited to see them.

But he just...wasn’t.

He just felt...tired.

The couch sank as Hunk lowered himself into it at Lance’s left.

“Okay, so I might not know much about what’s going on, but the princess did say that you’re sort of sharing your energy with Keith right now, right?” Hunk pushed a plate with a hot dog, some potato chips, and a snickerdoodle under Lance’s nose. “I think that means you need to eat something. You’ve been totally spacey all day.”

Lance eyed the hotdog for a few moments before grudgingly reaching for the plate with the hand that wasn’t supporting Keith’s back and setting it aside.

“Man, that is weird,” said Hunk. “It’s like your hand just appeared out of nowhere. You look like someone just...erased some of your layer on an editing program or something. Like someone just took a big bite out of you. Er, a bite with feathering, I guess. There’s, like, a gradient— Buddy, you have to eat something. Some of the chips or...something, Lance. You’re freaking me out.”

Lance sighed, and for Hunk’s sake, he took one of the wavy potato chips from the plate he’d set on the coffee table and popped it into his mouth.

He felt rather than saw Hunk’s eyes on him. He felt like he couldn’t lift his head.

“...Where is everyone?” asked Lance, suddenly aware that they were the only ones still in the foyer.

“Man, you really are out of it today, aren’t you?” asked Hunk. “What happened to you down there?”
Lance closed his eyes. His shoulders sank, and he held Keith closer.

Hunk seemed to understand that he wasn’t going to get an answer. “They’re all trying to figure out how far the spooky stuff stretches. Coran calls it ‘the exposure’. I guess it means, like, the part of the world that’s exposed to the ghosts or whatever—the Galra?—but all I can think about is photography stuff. We’re all waiting for Keith to wake up before we get into your side of things.”

Lance tried to find words for a response, but they didn’t come.

“So...definitely not a spy?”

Lance didn’t laugh, but one corner of his mouth did quirk up into a half-smile. “Yeah,” he answered. “Not a spy.”

Hunk was the one who stayed silent this time, but he stayed close. Lance was grateful for that. Just his familiar presence was enough to give him a little clarity.

“Hey, Hunk,” said Lance quietly. “You know what you said about waiting a month or two before I figured out my feelings?”

“Yeah,” said Hunk. “I remember.”

“Well...” Lance swallowed. “It’s been a month or two.”

“Oh.”

For a long time, Hunk didn’t say anything more than that.

“...Does he know?”

Lance bit his lip. Hard. And finally the tears—stressed and scared and guilty and distraught—tears Lance didn’t even know he’d been holding back—spilled over. He bowed his head, and violent sobs shook his entire body.

“Oh, buddy,” whispered Hunk. His arms, big enough to envelop Lance and Keith both, wrapped around Lance’s shoulders and pulled him into the warmth of his chest. “It’s okay. It’ll be okay. You’ll... You’ll figure things out.”

Lance hoped so.

He really, really hoped so.

__________________________

It felt like being back at his grandmother’s wake. People were milling about, talking, drinking tea and coffee, eating Hunk’s cookies... Even Lance, at Hunk’s urging, did eat all of what Hunk had brought him, along with drinking a full glass of water.

His head was still swimming from crying.

Everyone was far too cheerful.

Coran and Hunk were arguing about recipes in the kitchen.
Pidge and Florona were on the floor in a corner, having a fervent conversation about coordinates over a pair of laptops.

Plaxum and Luxia were chatting casually near the top of the stairs.

And Shiro and Allura… Even through Lance’s numbness, he could recognize the hint of a spark between them. And on any other day, Lance might have been happy that Shiro found someone besides Matt.

But for the moment, all Lance could think of was how wrong it felt for everyone to be so casual all around him when he felt like he was rotting from the inside out.

It was exactly like his grandmother’s wake.

But instead of an open casket contrasting against the casual conversation, it was just him.

Him and Keith.

If Keith could just wake up, if they could just talk, then maybe it wouldn’t feel quite so alienating anymore. Maybe it would all start to feel normal.

*Please, wake up.*

*Please, Keith.*

*Wake up.*

Every step taken into the darkness made Keith feel like he was about to lose balance. He was sure he was going to fall at any second.

But Lance was down there.

And so was a whole army of Galra.

A whole army of Galra that, for whatever reason, wasn’t fighting back. Not against Keith, anyway. They were certainly after Lance.

Was Keith really so weak that they didn’t care?

Or did they just have it out for Lance?

Regardless of the reason, they were all turned away from Keith, toward the center, where the big Galra from earlier that morning stood over something that was hidden behind the numerous armored Galra.

Keith didn’t have to see what he was standing over to know what it was.

Who it was.

Without much resistance, Keith weaved between the drones, pushing past their countless bodies, conserving his strength until he reached the big one.
And he needed that strength, because pushing his Bayard through the Galra’s armor was like trying to stab through stone.

With a great deal of effort, Keith managed to bury his blade in the Galra’s back, all the way to the hilt.

The other Galra didn’t care for that, and their docile nature faded away instantly. One lashed out at the back of Keith’s neck, and whatever strength Keith had left that kept him upright and conscious was forfeit.

He was out cold before he hit the floor.

His final thought went unheard.

*I hope that was enough.*

Violet smoke swirled around his hands.

*It’ll have to be.*

It stretched upward, like a vine seeking the sun, as Keith’s legs gave out.

*I don’t think I’m coming back from this one.*

He heard wind rush past his ears as he fell forward.

*It’s up to you now, Lance.*

*I’m sorry.*

---

Uh, excuse me, what do you think you’re doing? You’re not supposed to be here. Not yet.

No, don’t even think about it. You turn your little gay butt around and go home. You’ve got stuff to do, and you’re not getting out of it.

We’ll talk later, I promise. But not yet. Not now.

You’re still needed.

Go home.

I’ll be here when you get back.

---

The first thing that Keith registered was the warmth all around him. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so safe. So at peace. So comfortable.

The second thing he registered, however, was the migraine, and the comfort he’d felt before was
immediately lost.

He groaned and turned his head inward, toward the warmth, toward the relief, but before he could find any sort of comfort, a voice called out his name.

“...Keith?”

Grumbling with annoyance, Keith pulled his head back and blinked. The world was blurry, and far too bright, and definitely not the basement, so Keith blinked again, and he blinked and blinked until the blinding blur he was staring at began to take shape.

And it was the most beautiful face he’d ever seen in his life.

Tear-stained and tired, but no less beautiful than it had ever been.

Lance’s eyes were wide, and he looked almost scared.

“Hey,” murmured Keith, his voice broken and gravelly. One weak, shaking hand reached up, and he captured Lance’s cheek in the curve of his palm. “What’s that look for?”

Lance narrowed his eyes, and a hissed sob escaped through his bared, clenched teeth. He looked almost angry, or offended that Keith had to ask. But he didn’t call Keith out. Instead, he just cradled the back of Keith’s head, his long fingers cold and clammy as they pushed through Keith’s hair and pressed against his scalp, and he pulled Keith against him. His hold was tight, tighter and more desperate than anything Keith could ever remember feeling, but Keith didn’t mind.

He wrapped his arms around Lance’s back and held on just as tight.

He knew why Lance was holding him the way he was.

It was the same reason he was holding him back with the same fierceness.

They’d both been scared.

They both thought that they’d seen each other for the last time.

And even as Keith pressed his face into Lance’s neck, even as he felt Lance’s skin under his fingers and his grip that pinned them together, he couldn’t help but wonder…

...how many more chances did he have?

Chapter End Notes

The Unheard Confession

In 2011, a friend of mine, a Roxas [Kingdom Hearts] cosplayer, was in a fatal car accident. I spent a lot of time dwelling on how much we had in common, as if we were so similar that the universe didn't like the fact that we'd met and needed to pick off one of us at random, and he'd lost the coin flip despite the fact that his life had been getting better over time and mine had been getting worse. I felt so much like he should have
been the one to survive. Almost two years later, a new Kingdom Hearts came out, and near the end, Roxas appeared, and after a long and anxiety-inducing silence, his first line in that scene was, "This could have been the other way around, but it really has to be you." And though it was Roxas talking to Sora, it also, on some weird level, felt very much like my friend talking to me.

So what I'm saying is...that weird passage near the end of this chapter? Yes, that's a character talking to Keith. And you'll see who that is soon enough. But if you're in a situation where you took those words to heart, then yes, those words were a message to you as well.
And Nothing Else Mattered Anymore

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Allura was a little girl, she often wondered when or how she would meet the Altean of her dreams. What they would look like. What kind of quintessence they would have. Whether she would meet them at all.

She imagined wry, clever women with witty words that could cut people down like knives.

She imagined kind, selfless men who would sweep her off of her feet and charm her to within an inch of her life.

She imagined people who were brave, smart, strong…

And as she grew older, she stopped imagining.

She lost her father. She lost friends. She saw all of the destruction and despair that the world left behind.

And then, she lost her freedom.

She lied in her sarcophagus, waiting millennia for the Blue Lion to finally settle on a Paladin.

And then she did, and Allura woke up, and she charged into the door of the house where the Blue Lion was kept, and a man tried to stop her. A man with broad shoulders and battle scars running all down his right arm and wide, worried eyes. And before she yelled in his face and pushed him aside to save two complete strangers, the strangest, most hysterical thought ran through her mind.

The Blue Lion has been waiting ten-thousand years for the Blue Paladin, and I’ve been waiting ten-thousand years for you.

It was bizarre and inexplicable and completely out of place considering the dire situation that Allura and the Paladins were in. Honestly, she wasn’t sure where it came from at all.

But she couldn’t help being drawn to him—the man she later came to know as Shiro—for the rest of the day.

She sat near him when she explained to a room full of strangers where she and Coran and the mice came from, what they’d all seen, what they’d been through.

When their conference broke off into smaller conversations and Shiro offered her a modernized tea, she stayed with him.

She listened to his anxieties, how he was still in denial about Keith, someone he’d long believed to be gone forever, having been in that house for decades, fighting a battle Shiro knew nothing about.

And she told him about how she still missed her father, even ten-thousand years after the last time they spoke.

By mid-afternoon, Allura already felt as though she’d made, at the very least, a lifelong friend very quickly.
Which was why, when she saw Keith wake up in Lance’s arms, she stood up at once and made her way to the couch where they sat.

Only to be stopped halfway there by the potential Yellow Paladin. By Hunk.

“No,” he said, sliding into Allura’s path and stopping her in her tracks. “Look, Princess, I know you’re gonna want to talk to them about whatever it is that’s going on, like their responsibilities or whatever, but can you, like, not?”

“I—” Allura was taken aback for only a few second before she lifted her chin, challenging. “Excuse me, but time is of the essence, and I will not be stopped. Not by the likes of you.”

“Exactly,” said Hunk, firm, but not unkind. “If time is of the essence, then we have to give them time. Look, when Lance got up this morning, I don’t think he was prepared to deal with someone almost dying in his arms or whatever it was that happened down there. Look, he’s still in the clothes he slept in. I don’t know about Alteans, but humans don’t normally walk around without a shirt on.” He crossed his arms, a broad and impenetrable wall, impossible for Allura to cross. “All I’m asking is for an hour. Let Lance take a shower or something. Let them talk. Then you can dig answers out of them or whatever you wanted to do.”

Allura sighed sharply and peered around Hunk’s shoulder.

The Blue and Red Paladins were curled up together on the couch, desperately tangled in each other’s arms.

To her, it was seeing Pyotr again, and after seeing him distraught and silent all day, finally remembering what it looked like to see that face, those features, happy.

And she felt a stab of sympathy.

“Fine,” she murmured, and then raised her voice, pointing around Hunk’s arm. “The two of you have an hour! Get cleaned up and be ready for debriefing in sixty of your minutes!”

As she turned away and walked back toward Shiro, she heard the Red Paladin speak up behind her.

“How did…? What’s going on? Who was that?”

“That… That’s Allura?”

“…Allura? As in—”

“Uh-huh.”

“How—?”

“We have a lot to talk about, okay?”

On hearing that, Allura had to concede that Hunk was right. Perhaps they did need time.

“…Oh.” Keith pulled his collar higher around his face and slinked around the corner of Lance’s dresser.
“Oh’?” Lance chuckled; the sound was soft, and it left Keith almost breathless with just how happy he was to hear it again. He never thought he’d get the chance. He was so sure he was going to die down there. To fade away, just like Alfor did. “Is that all you have to say? You find out that we both almost died, we were saved by your father-figure’s magical daughter, our house is full of millennia-old Alteans and their nurses, and everyone knows about you and the Galra—including Shiro—and that I’m the direct reincarnation of an ancient Altean Paladin, and all you can say is ‘oh’?” He pushed the top left drawer of his dresser closed and sent Keith a tired-looking smirk. “You’re a weird guy, Keith.” There wasn’t much heart in it. He just looked tired.

Keith shrugged and shoved his hands in his pockets. “I think it’s still sort of...sinking in.”

“Now that, I totally get.” Lance set aside the clothes he’d been gathering, dropping them on his dresser top, and walked around the dresser to pull Keith into a particularly tight hug.

Lance was a very touchy-feely person. That wasn’t anything new. But usually, he had an explanation for it, or he made an offer and waited for Keith to accept it before making a move. And if he didn’t, the touch was always light. A hand on a knee or a shoulder, a nudge, a poke.

An unsanctioned hug out of nowhere, though? That was completely new.

Cautiously, Keith wrapped his arms around Lance’s back. “You okay?”

“Mmhmm,” murmured Lance. And that was all he said.

They stood like that for more than a full minute before Lance finally pulled away, not a word spoken, leaving Keith confused and, admittedly, a little worried.

“Lance,” whispered Keith, reaching for his...his friend’s hand. “What’s wrong?”


Keith shoved his hands back into his pockets. “...Yeah, well, so did you.”

Lance rolled his eyes and gathered his clothes back into his arms. “Yeah, I know. Doesn’t mean that’s the part that’s bothering me.”

“It’s the part that’s bothering me,” said Keith before he could stop himself.

Lance whipped around, eyebrows raised, and looked at Keith as if appraising him.

Keith felt like shrinking under his gaze, suddenly self-conscious, fully aware of how many of his feelings had just escaped his mouth, but he wouldn’t. Lance needed to see that he was serious.

Lance’s eyebrows went very quickly from raised to furrowed.

Still, Keith didn’t look away.

His hands clenched into fists in his jacket pockets.

He waited for Lance to say something.

But he didn’t.

Lance just turned away and left the room.
A few seconds passed before Lance’s voice, though not his face, returned to the doorway.

“You coming or not?”

Nervously, Keith made his way to the door and peeked around the corner. “Aren’t you taking a shower?”

Lance’s shoulders tensed and he turned around, clutching his clothes to his chest. “That wasn’t—I was just— Shut up! I didn’t mean it like that! I just want to talk to you through the door! That’s it!”

Keith cocked an eyebrow. “Do you normally talk to people through the door while you shower?”

“No!” said Lance, no less defensive. “But I don’t normally let people almost die, either!”

“Let—?” Keith knitted his eyebrows. “Lance, that wasn’t your fault—”

“Hup-up-up-up-up, no, we’re not getting into this.” Lance threw down his arms and nearly let his clothes hit the floor. His jeans unfolded in his attempts to grab them, and when he straightened up again, the pointed at Keith accusatorily. “Are you gonna talk to me through the door or not?”

Keith inhaled a sharp, heated breath through his nose.

“...Fine,” he said tersely. Lance was right; they only had an hour, and it was stupid to argue so soon after everything they went through. Even about something as important as that. “We can talk.”

Lance sighed, and his shoulders dropped like rocks. “Thank you.”

The door closed with a click behind Lance’s hand, and he released the breath he hadn’t meant to hold.

“Aren’t you taking a shower?” Are you kidding me?

“Can you hear me okay?” asked Keith, his voice only slightly muffled by the door.

“Yeah,” called Lance. “I can hear you fine.” He slapped his clothes, now a rumpled mess rather than neatly folded like they had been before, on the edge of the sink and caught sight of his own face in the mirror.

*God, I’m a mess. No wonder Keith was looking at me like I was a three-legged puppy.*

“What do you want to talk about?” asked Keith.

Lance closed his eyes. “I… I dunno, I just…” He took a deep breath and locked the door. “I-I just wanted to hear your voice.”

That was much, much easier to admit with the door locked.

Even when it took Keith several agonizing seconds to answer with just another pathetic, “Oh.”

Lance scoffed and pulled off his sweatpants before dropping them unceremoniously on the scale under the towel rack. “Man, you are eloquent today, aren’t you?”
Even Keith’s marginally-annoyed sigh was audible through the door.

Lance crossed the short distance to the shower and leaned over the edge of the tub for the faucet.

“Hey, I’m turning the water on,” announced Lance. “It might be hard to hear me for a while, but just...stay there, okay?”

“I will,” said Keith. His words were simple, but they were assuring. Those two syllables fought back Lance’s anxiety more than he ever could have expected, and it was thanks to them that he was able to start his shower with no hesitation.

The scalding water wormed its way into Lance’s scrapes and scratches. It stung like hell, but somehow, even the stinging was relaxing. It kneaded at his tight shoulders, his back that ached from being hunched over in the same position for hours.

A heavy, relieved sigh fell from Lance’s open mouth. Tiny droplets of shower water bounced off of his lips and landed on his tongue, and he couldn’t care less. All that mattered was the warmth that washed dirt and blood off of his skin and down the drain.

Normally, Lance was the type to sing in the shower, but that day, his mind was far too focused on something else. Words—important words—that still went by unspoken. Or, more accurately, spoken, but unheard.

He’d been dwelling on those words all day, and that fact was no less true when Keith was awake and more or less recovered on the other side of the bathroom door.

He still deserved to know.

With a fair amount of disappointment and only the slightest bit of worry, Lance turned the water off and shook the water from his short hair.

“Lance?” called Keith’s voice.

“Yeah,” called Lance in turn. “I’m here.”

“That thing about you being the reincarnation of a Paladin...you only found out about that recently, right?”

“Just last night,” said Lance, pushing the shower curtains back.

“So...you really didn’t know any Altean before then?”

“Obviously,” said Lance, plucking his towel from the rack. “What, did you think I was lying?”

“...It was possible,” said Keith, barely audible.

“Nah, it wasn’t,” said Lance, pulling the towel over his head and rubbing his hair dry. “I couldn’t lie to you.” He sighed and raised his head, twisting his towel nervously in his hands. “Secrets, though… That’s something else.”

There was a long silence. A very long silence. A silence long enough that Lance already had his jeans and socks on by the time Keith broke it.

“That’s okay,” he said, though there were as many signs that he was hurt as there were signs that he was trying to hide how hurt he was. “We already agreed that some secrets are fine. I don’t want to step over your boundaries or...whatever.”
“Yeah, well…” Lance reached for his long-sleeved t-shirt and pulled it over his head. “It’s not overstepping if I’m choosing to let you in.”

There was another long, long silence, so long that Lance wasn’t sure whose job it was to break it anymore. If it was his job, he wasn’t sure he would be able to do it. He was frozen in place, clutching onto the green jacket he’d brought. His lucky jacket. He needed it if he was going to do what he wanted to do.

“Lance,” said Keith at long last, his voice small, clearly anxious. “Is there something you want to tell me?”

“Yes,” said Lance, his voice shaking. “There is.” He hastily pulled his jacket on, spurred into action. He needed the luck. He desperately needed the luck.

“You know…” The door trembled, and Lance had the feeling that Keith was leaning into it. “I’m not going to judge you or anything. You’ve never judged me, even when you saw what Haxus...what I did to myself after I met Haxus. I can’t imagine anything worse than that, so...I think you’re off the hook.”

Lance smiled, but his lips still trembled. “I-I know. Thanks, Keith.” He took a deep, steeling breath. “It’s still not easy.” Even if the closed door made it easier.

“Take your time,” said Keith. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Lance almost laughed.

*Take my time?*

If what occurred in the basement was any sort of indication, time was something they absolutely didn’t have.

Time could run out at any second.

Any chances he might have had could be gone.

He stared hard at the closed door, the easily-movable barrier that separated himself from Keith. It was almost funny, when Lance thought about it. They’d started out together with a conversation through a closed door, and there they were again, when everything was about to change. And both times, it was a door that Lance had closed between them, a door he’d closed trying to protect himself from Keith in one way or another.

But now, he was trying to open a door, to let a barrier drop down.

And he’d never felt more vulnerable. Not once in his entire life.

But Keith was worth it.

Keith was definitely worth it.

Lance pulled his jacket tight around himself and took a deep, deep breath.

His hands were shaking, and no amount of fist-clenching could stop it.

But maybe, just like his feelings for Keith, he was better off that way. Unable to help himself. Unable to stop himself. Unable to keep his hands from shaking any easier than he could keep his heart from beating, beating for Keith.
He couldn’t stop himself. And there was no turning back, not now that he was so close.

He had to let Keith know.

He had to.

Lance clapped his hands together and rubbed his shaking palms.

“Okay.” He pressed his eyes shut. “Here goes nothing.”

Keith didn’t say a word, and for once, Lance was grateful. One less opportunity to hesitate. One less reason to second-guess himself.

“I… I think…” Just say it, you moron! Use your fucking words! “I think…you’re incredible.”

Good. Good jumping off point. Keep going.

“…Is that—?”

“No, that’s not all!” snapped Lance, too nervous to deal with Keith’s loose understanding of social cues. “Just shut up and let me talk!”

Keith fell silent.

Lance would feel bad about yelling later.

“You’re incredible,” he repeated, suddenly finding himself wishing he’d had time to rehearse this. “You’re a total badass and I’m constantly impressed by you.” He nervously carded one hand through his hair, the other gesticulating wildly toward the door. “You’re like a fucking action hero. Like, it’s more than just you being a Paladin. It’s your whole attitude. Like, I can so easily see you walking away from an explosion in slow motion and not looking back. You’re fucking cool as hell, and that’s not even the only thing I love about you.”

His legs had joined his hands in shaking. Was he that tired, or were his knees knocking? It was hard to tell.

“You care so fucking much. You’re crap at showing it—you express at least ninety-nine percent of your emotional spectrum as different flavors of pissed—but holy shit, if anyone bothered to look at just your actions… You learned a dead language just so you could speak it with one person in the entire world, and you didn’t even expect anything in return. You worked your ass off saving your parents day after day until they died, and they didn’t know you were there. But you kept fighting. You still love Shiro even though you haven’t spoken to him in years—don’t deny it, I see the way your eyes light up when we talk about him. I bring him up even in passing, and I see this little signal fire away in your eyes that’s like ‘Holy shit, that’s my cousin’—and speaking of your eyes, they’re beyond amazing.” Lance was on a roll by this point. There was no stopping him. “Like, I said that all your emotions come across as angry, but one look in your eyes, and it’s like— Fuck, it’s like you’re telepathic or something. If I didn’t know you better, I’d still just think you were pissed off, but there’s something in there when I look at you, something I didn’t see at first, that says exactly how you’re feeling with just a glance. One look in your eyes, and I understand, ‘He’s scared,’ ‘He’s sad,’ ‘He’s worried,’ and you don’t even need to say anything. It’s subtle, and it’s beautiful, and I’m so glad I figured that out because it’s amazing just knowing that I didn’t understand you before and I do now, like I’ve reached enlightenment because I understand one of the most beautiful mysteries in the world. And don’t even get me started on when you’re happy.

“Actually, shit, I’ve already started, so here goes.”
Lance took a sharp, deep breath. Not too deep, not deep enough that it gave time for Keith to interject.

“You know how I said that your emotions come across as just a bunch of different flavors of pissed? Well, you actually have a bunch of different flavors of happy, and they’re all amazing. Like, you’ve got this one sort of...exhilarated kind of happy? Like when we had the marker fight and you were all competitive and I got to see the real you for the first time, and holy shit, your eyes were like fireworks, just boom, and light, and I swear to god they sparkled and flared in exactly the same way. And your laugh? When you laugh, my body doesn’t even know what to do with itself. It’s like every nerve ending in my body just explodes and my hair stands on end and I spaz out and suddenly Hunk’s perfectly-stacked pots and pans are all over the place.

“And then there’s your engaged happy,” continued Lance, unpausing, unyielding. “The kind of happy where you’re totally transfixed on something like the stars or the rain on your own skin, and your eyes are like lanterns. I swear to god, they have to be literally glowing. They’re that bright.

“And there’s your calm happy, like when we’re just sitting together and talking, where you get the smallest smile on your face, so small I probably wouldn’t even notice it if I didn’t know you like I do. And there’s the chill happy—not to be confused with calm happy—like when I caught you singing Willa Ford while you were doing the dishes—which, by the way, was fucking adorable, and I never told you, and now I am. And I could go on forever about all the different ways you’re happy, but I won’t because you’re probably totally freaked out by this point, and I’m sorry, except I’m totally not sorry because I’ve been keeping all of this to myself for way too long and it feels so fucking good to finally be able to talk about it.”

For the first time since he’d started babbling, Lance’s voice finally dropped a few tones from frantic and wild and unstoppable to something that was still emphatic, but calmer, more sincere.

“I love everything about you, Keith. Even the stuff you hate about yourself. I love that you almost turned into a Galra, because the fact that you didn’t means that you’re so much stronger than you or Haxus or Sendak or anyone else gives you credit for.” He took another deep breath, and his voice calmed further, to the point where it was slower than conversational. “I love that you can’t dance. I love that you wrote over all my high scores on F-Zero—and, yeah, I saw that, you jerk.” Lance smiled nervously. Again, his lip quivered with the attempt. But his smile didn’t fade this time. Didn’t shrink into his nervousness. It was too real to disappear so easily. “I love that you’re a social worm and don’t know what to do with yourself around people. I love your short temper. I love that you never made any plans for your life beyond ‘Paladin someday’. I love your mullet. I love—”

Lance’s breath hitched.

“I…”

Don’t fuck it up now. Come on. You came this far. Just say the stupid words.

“I-I love…”

Lance shoved his hands hard into the inside of his pockets and gripped fistfuls of the lining.

Say it!

“I love you.”

Though the bathroom was hot and humid, though the mirror was completely white with fog, though Lance was wearing his jacket in late summer, the entire world suddenly felt ice cold.
Lance swallowed hard, waiting.

For what felt like a century, Keith didn’t answer. Lance began to worry that he’d bored Keith or made him uncomfortable with his rambling, that Keith had walked away in the middle of it, that Lance had been literally talking to the door for the past few minutes.

And then Keith was in the room with him.

He appeared like the pan of a spotlight, like a power surge. He shot through the door, blurred and abstract and unnatural in his movements, like someone sped up footage of someone trying to mimic slow motion. It would have been horrifying if it was anything but Keith. But it faded quickly, and in a matter of seconds, Keith had settled into something resembling normalcy.

And his eyes…

Lance had never seen his eyes quite like that before.

He wasn’t sure what that emotion was at all.

It wasn’t quite fear. It wasn’t sadness, either, though, and it definitely wasn’t anger.

Whatever emotion it was, it was strong. Keith’s eyes were so wide, like nothing could separate Lance from the bright, vibrant indigo that had made Lance’s life heaven and hell all at once from the day he’d moved in.

“What do you mean?” demanded Keith, somehow insistent and soft at the same time.

Lance’s heart skipped a beat.

Oh, quiznak. Lucky jacket, what did you do?

Keith wasn’t used to caring about people like he cared about Lance.

Not just the type of love—which was entirely new—but the amount of it.

He’d loved Alfor with his whole being. Red mattered so much to him that she felt like a part of him, something he’d be incomplete without.

And Lance…was Lance.

He was strong and he was beautiful and he had a smile that could light up the room and he was so, so open.

So it was weird—really, really weird—when Lance had spoken Altean that morning. And Keith should have known right away that Lance hadn’t been pretending not to speak it. He really didn’t know. Or, at the very least, he didn’t know that he knew.

But it was still just as weird, just as worrisome, that Lance answered Keith by admitting that there was something he was keeping quiet.

And Keith knew he shouldn’t have been upset. Lance himself said that they were allowed to have
secrets. But Lance knew everything there was to know about Keith. He knew that Keith ran headlong into being a Paladin without knowing much about what he was doing, he knew that Keith nearly became a fully-fledged Galra, he knew the circumstances of Keith’s death. He knew everything that Keith had to hide.

So why didn’t he trust Keith with his own secrets? How couldn’t he after all that?

It hurt, but not enough that Keith wanted to hurt Lance right back.

“We already agreed that some secrets are fine. I don’t want to step over your boundaries or...whatever.”

“It’s not overstepping if I’m choosing to let you in.”

Keith raised his eyebrows. Was it too much to hope for? Because that sounded like… “Lance, is there something you want to tell me?”

When Lance answered, his voice was tremulous. “Yeah. There is.” Why? What could possibly be worse than what he already knew about Keith?

Keith closed his eyes and rested his forehead against the door itself. It jostled in its frame. “You know,” he reminded, “I’m not going to judge you or anything.”

“I-I know,” said Lance. His voice still quavered. Why? What was he hiding? “It’s still not easy.”

Keith pressed his hands against the door, wishing he could reach through it and touch Lance instead. And, physically, he could. Aside from the slightest headache throbbing in the back of his head, his strength had mostly returned. He could easily Push through the door. But the boundary was there for a reason. Lance could have still been getting dressed for all Keith knew. It wasn’t right.

“Take your time,” said Keith. “I’m not going anywhere.”

And Lance did. He took a very, very long time.

But then he spoke.

And once he began to speak, he didn’t stop.

And every single word was kind. Incredibly kind. Keith kept searching for evidence of sarcasm or insincerity, but no matter how much he looked, how much he analyzed Lance’s tone, his words, Keith came up with nothing.

He wasn’t teasing.

He was speaking from the heart.

And every single word drilled into Keith’s mind, into his heart, breaking down the few walls he had left.

“You’re incredible.”

“I’m constantly impressed by you.”

“You care so fucking much.”

“You eyes, they’re beyond amazing.”
“It’s subtle, and it’s beautiful.”

“One of the most beautiful mysteries in the world.”

The more Lance spoke, the more Keith realized that despite the fact the only company he’d had besides his own thoughts for the past twenty years had been Red, he couldn’t have known himself very well at all, because somehow, before the end of a single summer, Lance already knew Keith better than Keith knew himself. Worlds better.

Everything Lance said about the way Keith expressed himself, about his habits, about his eyes… It was all said without hesitation. Keith wanted to believe that Lance was making all of it up, that there couldn’t be so many complexities that Keith didn’t know about himself.

But there was no reason for Lance to lie. And even if there was, he wasn’t. Keith could tell.

He was telling the truth.

Or at least, the truth as it was to him.

He was too worked up to lie. Too nervous.

But Keith couldn’t figure out why. Why he would have kept all of that a secret. Why he would have been so scared just to tell Keith he admired him.

They were friends. There was no reason to keep the reasons why Lance saw Keith as his friend a secret.

At least...that would be the case if they really were talking about friendship.

If they weren’t…

Don’t think like that. That’s not what he means. Why would it be?

But the longer Lance spoke, the more Keith wondered.

“I love everything about you,” said Lance, his voice softening.

Keith refused himself linger on the word “love” for too long. It didn’t mean anything. Or, at least, it didn’t mean what he really wanted it to.

“Even the stuff you hate about yourself.”

Keith’s hands curled into fists against the door. He pressed his knuckles into the wood. It doesn’t mean anything.

“I love that you almost turned into a Galra, because the fact that you didn’t means that you’re so much stronger than you or Haxus or Sendak or anyone else gives you credit for.”

Keith clenched his jaw. He couldn’t cry. He physically couldn’t. But he wondered if he would have, had he been able to.

“I love that you can’t dance.”

Don’t read into it. Don’t.

“I love that you wrote over all my high scores in F-Zero.”
He doesn’t mean it like that. He doesn’t mean it like you want.

“I love that you’re a social worm and don’t know what to do with yourself around people.”

Just appreciate what he’s saying for what it is. It doesn’t have to be more.

“I love your short temper.”

You wanted to be his friend. You wanted that from the start. Why isn’t that enough?

“I love that you never made any plans for your life beyond ‘Paladin someday’.”

It should be enough. Why isn’t it? I wanted this more than anything two months ago. Why does it hurt now?

“I love your mullet.”

Keith almost laughed, but he didn’t want Lance to stop. Even if it hurt, he never wanted Lance to stop. He could almost pretend like this.

And he knew he would have been crying if he could.

“I love…”

Keith waited.

“I…”

He waited for some other word to fall. Some other part of him, big or small, that Lance swore he loved about him.

“I-I love…”

Even if it was just their friendship. Keith just wanted to hear something.

And he got his wish.

“…I love you.”

Keith’s eyes snapped open wide.

He lifted his head away from the door and stared at it, as if he could see Lance through the white paint and the maple wood beneath.

His lips parted.

He listened for the addendum, the “Not like that, but still,” the “You know, as a friend.”

It never came.

And his heart, as still as it had been for twenty years, still felt like it was trying to claw out of his chest, like it was trying to push right through his bones and his skin, through the door Keith was boring holes into with his eyes, through any barrier to get to where it belonged.

And screw etiquette. Screw privacy. Screw anything that barred the way between himself and Lance. He needed to see Lance’s face, to see his eyes and figure out what he meant by those three words, because there was no way Lance could mean what Keith so desperately wanted those words
At Keith’s will, the door was behind him, and he stood in the bathroom, in the thick weight of humid air and the sharp scent of shower gel.

And Lance looked so, so small. So fragile that Keith was almost afraid to ask, afraid that it might break him, but he needed to know. He needed to know.

“What do you mean?”

Lance’s eyes widened. He shrugged without taking his hands out of his pockets and looked back at the shower curtain behind him as if searching for an escape. “Um… I mean…”

“Look at me,” pleaded Keith. He wondered if he looked angry. He hoped he didn’t. “Please.”

Lance’s eyes darted back to Keith’s. Wide. Terrified. He looked so scared. And guilty. Like a child that got caught doing something he knew he shouldn’t.

He bit his lip, and his eyes darted away for less than a second before he pulled them back toward Keith with a wince.

“I…love you,” he admitted again. Keith’s throat closed around the words. “I-I don’t know what else to say, or…or how else to say it.” He turned his hands inside his pockets, tugging the corners of his jacket upward. “It’s not like I expect anything from you or anything, I just… You almost died down there, and I kept thinking about… What if I never told you? What if you died not knowing how beautiful you are or great you are or how important you are? I mean, at least to me.”

He inhaled a shaky breath.

Keith felt himself do the same.

“And I know you’re way out of my league,” continued Lance, back to rambling. “I mean, you’re gorgeous and basically immortal, and I know things are weird because you’re technically about twenty years older than me and you’re my friend’s cousin and we’re basically on two separate planes of existence—”

Keith suddenly wanted Lance to stop talking.

“—so that’s a big part of why I don’t expect anything from you. I mean, not that I’d expect anything from you anyway—”

He understood what Lance meant. That was all he needed to know. And he wanted Lance to stop talking.

“—but, like, especially considering how weird this whole situation is—”

He really wanted Lance to stop talking.

“—but you deserved to know that I’m totally head-over-heels, and…”

And then he did.

And it was only after realizing that Lance had stopped talking that Keith realized why.

He very, very slowly realized why.
And he wasn’t even sure who started it, who had turned the two feet of distance between them into absolutely nothing, but his hands were on Lance’s face, and he cursed himself for not thinking to take his gloves off, because the only parts of him that could feel Lance’s skin were his fingertips.

Those...and his lips.

And Keith was suddenly aware of his own hands still pulling Lance’s face closer, suddenly aware of who kissed whom, and his hands began to shake. He’d never kissed anyone before in his entire existence. He was probably terrible at it. He probably already made some kind of faux pas. And it occurred to him, far too late, that just because Lance said that he was “head-over-heels” didn’t necessarily mean that he wanted to be kissed.

Thoroughly self-conscious, Keith started to pull away.

But he was stopped by the hands in his hair, by the long fingers that tangled strands and massaged the back of his head, by the palms that slid down against his neck. And just as much by the lips Keith finally realized were tugging at his own, eagerly reciprocating every nervous, unpracticed pull.

Keith’s hands slid down Lance’s neck and into the zipper of his jacket, gripping in an attempt to drag Lance closer.

Lance couldn’t be close enough.

Keith stepped in closer, pressing himself flush against Lance, desperate to feel more of his warmth, anything to luxuriate in the moment, to commit to every feeling, to memorize the smell of his shampoo and the dampness of his hood and the warmth of his chest against Keith’s own.

And all too soon, Keith was forced to pull away.

Because at some point during his attempts to pull Lance closer, he’d walked them both into the bathtub, and Lance tripped over the rim of the tub, sending them both sprawling rather ungracefully into the still-wet tub itself.

They landed with a thud. Three shampoo bottles crashed against the bottom of the tub like stones. Lance’s head smacked audibly against the shower wall.

“Shit!” Keith reached out and cradled the back of Lance’s head, wincing sympathetically. “Are you okay?”

Lance just laughed. “Are you kidding me?” His deep, blue eyes seemed to shine with an almost unnatural brightness, even under the yellow bathroom lights. He reached up and ran a hand through Keith’s hair, pushing his bangs back, past his right temple. “This just went from the worst day of my life to the best in, what, five minutes?” He grinned, and Keith’s bangs fell in front of his face as Lance’s hand slid down to his jaw “Nothing could bring me down right now.”

Keith couldn’t stop himself from smiling no matter how hard he tried. “Are you always this cheesy with people you like?”

“Maybe,” said Lance, shrugging one shoulder. “Or maybe it’s just something that happens when I’m kissed by a really cute Paladin.” The hand on Keith’s jaw tugged gently, coaxing him forward. “We should test that theory.”

“Allura’s going to come looking for us,” said Keith, providing no resistance to the hand that guided him closer. “I think our hour’s almost up.”
“Nah,” whispered Lance. “We’ve got another five minutes at least. C’mon, dead boy. Live a little.”

As Keith’s lips met Lance’s for the second time, he knew that “living a little” would never be a problem ever again.

He’d never felt more alive.

Chapter End Notes

:3

THIS AGAIN: The Unheard Confession Because it didn't get enough attention when I put it in the notes of the last chapter. I think talked too much after the link. Whoops. Not my intention. It's some really emotional art and I still love it. So you guys should take a look.

Anyway, I'm still at Twitter and if Twitter isn't your thing then be a nerd with me on Discord.
Lance and Keith had curled up into a more comfortable position by the time their hour was up. Keith had pulled the rest of his body inside, his legs finally joining his upper half, and he’d laid himself along Lance’s left side. They’d gone from kissing to just lying with each other in a matter of minutes, and Keith found himself playing with Lance’s hand in comfortable silence.

And that was all.

He’d taken his gloves off, curled into Lance’s side, laid his head on Lance’s shoulder, and just started playing with his hand.

He watched his own hand, so pale against Lance’s sandy skin, as it ran along the insides of Lance’s fingers and bent them ever so gently to his favor. He’d never realized quite how malleable hands could be before. They could be in a million different positions and still touch somehow.

They were like relationships, he decided.

Somehow, even when they crossed over the boundary between life and death, Lance and Keith had still managed to be friends, and then…

“What are we?” asked Keith softly, still sliding his fingers slowly along Lance’s, still watching the way they overlapped.

“I was kind of hoping you’d answer that,” said Lance. “What do you want to be?”

“I think it’s better if you tell me what you want to be first,” said Keith. “I mean...I’m not the one whose life could be ruined by getting too involved with someone like me. Someone no one else can see.”

“Hey.” Lance squeezed Keith’s fingers between his own, trapping them in place, and then pressed their palms together. Instinctively, Keith curled his fingers down over the back of Lance’s knuckles. “You’re not gonna ruin my life. I’m totally happy with the idea of having a ghost boyfriend. And, I mean, everyone else in the house knows you’re here now. It’s not like I’d have to keep you a secret from everyone.”

“What about your family?” asked Keith. “Aren’t they going to ask you questions if you tell them you have a boyfriend?”

“They’d be asking questions anyway,” said Lance, his shoulder digging into the side of Keith’s face as he shrugged. “They ask questions when I don’t have a boyfriend. It’s all up to what you want, Keith.”

“Well…” Keith squeezed Lance’s hand and turned to look up at his face. “I know what I want. As long as you want it.”

Lance smiled warmly and answered Keith with a kiss, one quickly returned.

The kiss was interrupted all too soon, however, by a knock on the door.
Lance groaned against Keith’s lips, clearly not happy about being cut short.

Keith pulled back with a chuckle and reached over Lance’s side for the gloves he’d set on the shower shelf. “Come on,” he said quietly. “Playtime’s over.”

“Are you two finished necking in there?”

Keith’s brow furrowed. He’d been expecting Allura’s voice, but that wasn’t Allura. The accent was similar, but the voice itself was wholly unfamiliar.

At least, it was to Keith.

Lance, on the other hand, definitely seemed to show signs of recognition. His blue eyes widened, and any complaints he’d been planning died in his throat. He flung himself out of the tub and landed clumsily on the bathroom floor, nearly elbowing Keith’s cheek in the process.

“Hey!” protested Keith, more confused than he was offended.

Lance whipped around in place and made a heart shape with his hands as a form of apology before turning back to the door and unlocking it as fast as his hands could manage.

He’d barely yanked it open before he screamed eagerly and scooped whoever it was at the door into his arms.

Brow furrowed, Keith climbed to his full height and tried to peer past Lance’s broad shoulders to whoever it was he was holding. It wasn’t completely necessary to look past him, however; Lance was quick to spin the person he was holding in a circle, revealing them to be a short, disgruntled-looking red-headed woman with crows’ feet at the corners of her eyes.

To say that any of those features were her most prominent feature, however, would be to discount the green light that surrounded her, coiling and curling toward the ceiling like smoke.

That, and the white armor she wore that looked exactly like Alfor’s.

“Okay, yes, yes, I missed you, too,” sighed the woman. Her fond expression, squished into Lance’s shoulder, belied the aggravation in her voice. “Put me down now. We don’t have time for this. We’ve wasted enough letting you get cozy with the Red Paladin.”

Lance seemed unperturbed by the woman’s strict voice, but put her down all the same.

“Keith!” said Lance eagerly, shooting off fireworks in Keith’s chest. “This is Plachu, the Green Paladin from Alfor’s time. Isn’t she cute?”

Keith looked at the woman skeptically. At first, all he saw was the stern expression and the crows’ feet, and she reminded him of his junior year history teacher, but it didn’t take too long for Keith to notice the curious gleam in her wide, blue eyes. That, combined with her small stature, did indeed make her at least a little bit cute. At least enough that Keith could see where Lance was coming from.

“Yes, yes, nice to meet you, Keith,” said Plachu dismissively. “As lovely as this is, we have a place to be.” She turned pointedly toward Lance’s face and pointed up at his nose. “Allura’s getting rather impatient, and you should know how she gets when she’s angry.”

“Uh…” Lance raised his eyebrows. “I actually don’t have a clue. Remind me? Or— You know what? Don’t. I get the feeling I’m better off.”
When they reached the living room, Lance saw that Plachu wasn’t the only mouse who, well, wasn’t a mouse anymore.

Platt had joined in with Coran and Hunk’s cooking arguments, a girl with braided pigtails Lance didn’t recognize sat with Plaxum, Florona, and Pidge, looking a great deal more confused than any of them did while looking at the two screens Florona and Pidge were so focused on.

Chulatt was by himself, leaning against the wall by the door, arms crossed, his braided rattail lying over his shoulder, weighed down by three blue beads—definitely a new addition—that Lance tried not to think about too much.

When Lance’s eyes locked with Chulatt’s from across the foyer, he felt the smallest stab of guilt. Not enough to let go of Keith’s hand, however. Just enough to make him squeeze Keith’s hand tighter in an attempt to divert the grip around his heart.

“How are you guys like this?” asked Lance, leaning down toward Plachu’s ear.

“Part of being in the exposure,” explained Plachu. “We could have taken these forms at any time from the moment we stepped onto your land, but we agreed that it would probably be too much for you to handle when you were cradling a half-faded lover in your arms.”

Lance winced, but silently, he agreed. If he had to look at Chulatt’s face, knowing what Chulatt meant to Pyotr, while Keith was so close to death—or fading—he didn’t know how he would have reacted.

“It’s about time,” said Allura sternly, appearing from the kitchen with Shiro, both holding steaming mugs in their hands. Judging by the smell, coffee. “You three, sit down. We have less than three hours before sunset, and one of those hours needs to be reserved for travel.”

“Travel?” asked Keith from Lance’s right. “Travelling where?”

“That’s for later,” said Allura, dropping into one of the couches that had been moved from the den. “For now, what’s most important is understanding what we’re up against.”

Once upon a time, long before the reign of King Alfor, the dead and the living both wandered the surface of what is now known as Earth alongside one another, as equals. Every living and unliving person lived in absolute balance. Each had flaws, and each had strengths, and each knew that those same flaws and strengths could be found in every other person.

Over time, for reasons as unknown to those who lived in that time as they continued to be on into the future, a split began to take place. Either by birth or by life’s experiences, people began to divert to one side or the other. Either they would die with a love for life and a love for people so strong that it followed them through the afterlife and on into their next lives, or they would die with so much hatred in their hearts that they refused to take a new life at all, choosing instead to drag all those who wronged them into death with them, as well as the children of those who wronged them, and their
children’s children, and on into eternity for as long as their lines continued.

Eventually, the hate in those souls grew so great that it began to mutilate their appearances. They became animalistic. Many grew cat-like claws or bat-like ears, and they sprouted fur as deep a purple as the last moments of sunset. They traveled from one shadow to the next, using them like tunnels, and the eyes of many began to glow like fireflies. Some became so dehumanized that parts of their faces smoothed out. Some only had sharp, gleaming smiles with far too many teeth that were all far too sharp. Some had only eyes. Some lacked faces altogether.

The longer these fierce creatures existed, the more the world began to fall out of balance. The dead began to far outnumber the living, and these creatures of the darkness earned a name, one that sent chills down the spines of all who dared speak it.

Galra, they were called. Hate for all of Altea given bodily form.

When at last Altea had had enough of these countless dark creatures, they began to defend themselves. The defense itself had been lost to time. Some believe it was an army’s worth of Druids who did the deed. Others say that it was just one Druid with the strength of an army within them.

Regardless of who did the deed, however many it took, the result was the same: The world was split into two. The world of the living, and the world of the dead.

Some say that the world of the dead split itself further, that those willing to be reborn took the sky from that world and used it to create their own brief reprise, an oasis to rest between lifetimes, but no one could possibly know for certain without seeing it for themselves, and those who do see it for themselves rarely return.

Even with the world split, however, the Galra still found a way to return. It seemed that the shadows they used to transport themselves still worked as open tunnels, and when the sun set, it was as if the world had never been split at all. The Galra would come and go as they pleased until the sun rose.

And so, again, Altea began to defend itself.

Druids began to experiment, and they realized that separating a soul from its body voluntarily, they could create a spirit who could still walk amongst the living, and those spirits could predict where the Galra would strike.

And then, they tried that same method on one of the rare few with a soul of pink quintessence.

The soul split itself into five equal parts, each of them Lions.

At first, the Druids thought that their ceremony was a failure, that each of the five pieces of the soul would be one-fifth the strength of a whole soul, but they were wrong. For reasons they did not understand, the five Lions became infallible guardians with the strength of gods. Each of them chose one person, just one, to guard with their entire existences, and the desires of that person would spread into their Lion.

So long as the person the Lion chose longed to protect Altea, the Lion, too, would protect Altea.

And when the Lion’s chosen partner’s body ceased to function, either by natural or unnatural causes, the partner, too, would walk the surface of the Earth with their Lion until they were struck down.

When the very first partner of a Lion lost his life to the Galra and he began to walk the surface of the world as a spirit, he found that he could predict where the Galra would appear, just as his Lion could. Stranger still, his brother, bonded with the Green Lion, and his sister, bonded with the Black Lion,
could predict the appearances of the Galra as well, though they were still very much alive. The partner of the Blue and Red Lions, however, could not.

The partner of the Yellow Lion proposed a hypothesis to the druids, that perhaps it was his relationships with his brother and sister that allowed his sight to be shared with them. This hypothesis was proven to be correct when the partner of the Yellow Lion and the partner of the Red Lion were formally introduced to each other and fell hard and fast in love.

The Druids, seeing potential, deliberated, and they decided that it was best to make warriors of each of the Lions’ partners, to take advantage of their sight to be able to attack the Galra wherever they would strike.

Thus, a new tradition was born, and the Paladins became the first line of defense against the Galra threat.

More teams were created from those willing, and every team of Paladins protected their own regions with their lives as much as their afterlives.

When one particularly clever woman with pink quintessence began to create her own pride of Lions, she noticed something odd. She stopped the ceremony before it could truly begin, and she told her family (the five Paladins-to-be) that she knew why the Galra could still appear in the world of the living despite being exiled to a world of their own.

The world of the living and the world of the dead were on two different planes of existence, but within those planes, the two worlds occupied the same space. They were exposed to one another, therefore the Galra could cross easily, so long as they used the shadows.

When the woman sensed the overlap, she also felt an assurance, a certainty, that so long as she and the Lions that resulted from her coexisted, she could separate the worlds of the dead and the living. She could direct the Lions, control their immense power as a single unit, and use their combined strength to push the worlds apart, to be rid of the Galra for good.

She tried, but the Galra were quick to understand what she was doing, and they appeared as an army. She and her family were slain before they could complete their goal, save for her youngest brother, the would-be Green Paladin. When the massacre began, rather than save himself, he remembered the necklace he’d made for himself before the ceremony, something he’d made to remember his sister by.

He’d carved five identical lion shapes out of stone and he’d bored holes into them to make five identical beads.

Thinking quickly, he yanked the necklace from around his neck and held it above his head, calling the Lions—what was left of his sister’s soul—to the beads before their spirits, incomplete without the finished ceremony, could fade away.

And the Green Paladin turned and ran away with all the strength and speed he had left inside of him.

It was only once he’d found safety among another team of Paladins that his hand slid down the cord of his necklace to the beads themselves, and his body fell away, leaving only his soul standing, still clutching the necklace, his sister’s Green Lion at his side.

For years, the Green Paladin wandered with his Lion, searching for four other Paladins to awaken the remaining Lions, and thanks to his resolve, he was able to find them.

During the time that he found four Paladins to replace his fallen family, he’d come up with a theory.
If the strength of the Lions that pushed the world away came from their shared determination, their shared goal, their shared mind, then perhaps all they lacked was a deeper bond.

So the Green Lion, knowing his family better than he knew himself, sent the Lions that were meant for his family members each to places his family members valued, each of them safely in their beads.

The Red Paladin carried the Red Lion to a forest that had burned down years before, where the Green Paladin’s mother used to hunt.

The Blue Paladin carried the Blue Lion to the top of an icy mountain, where the Green Paladin’s father called a second home.

The Yellow Paladin carried the Yellow Lion to a rock formation where the younger of the Green Paladin’s sisters used to play.

The Black Paladin carried the Black Lion to the peak of a tall tower, where the Green Paladin’s older brother once watched the stars.

And the Green Paladin himself cradled the Green Lion in his hands as he knelt in the vegetable garden that he and his family used to tend to together.

When the sun set that night, there were no Galra to be seen. At long last, the threat had finally been vanquished.

This remained true for many, many years until a woman named Haggar approached the King of her people with a proposition.

Keith gripped Lance’s hand bruisingly tight. “What did she do?”

“She’d crafted a reverse ceremony,” said Allura, her eyes dark and full of age-old fury. “She found five Paladins of her own, and instead of offering her own life, she offered theirs. They each turned into Galra, and they drew the world of the Galra exactly back to where it was.”

Keith felt Lance shudder against his shoulder.

“Sendak and Haxus,” breathed Lance.

“Those were two of them,” confirmed Platt. “The other three were Zarkon, Ulaz, and Thace. Rotten bastards, all of them.”

“Hey,” snapped Lance, jumping to his feet. “Don’t talk shit about Ulaz and Thace. If it wasn’t for them, I wouldn’t be here right now!”

“Then maybe they changed,” said Coran, raising his eyebrows sympathetically in Lance’s direction. “But they were certainly rotten enough when they agreed to go along with Haggar’s plan.”

“Hardly,” growled Allura, pressing her elbows into her knees. “The Galra don’t change. It’s what they are. If you’ve got enough evil inside of you to become a Galra, that isn’t something that goes away.”

Keith tried not to flinch, but judging by the squeeze to his hand, Lance noticed regardless.
“You’re wrong,” growled Lance. “Ulaz and Thace sacrificed themselves. Not even for me personally, but for Blue, so we can fix the mistake they made.” His hand squeezed even tighter around Keith’s. “People make mistakes. The first time I saw Keith, I ran away from him. I thought he was going to try to kill me. Does that mean I ran from him every time I saw him after that? No, because I realized I was wrong. And that’s all it takes.”

“I knew it.” Chulatt pushed himself away from the wall and glared into Keith’s eyes. “How much did you change? Did you get the fur? The claws? Did you grow a pair of ears? How about a tail?”

Keith’s stomach dropped like a stone.

How could he tell? Just from that?

Before Keith could stammer out an answer, Lance let go of his hand and leapt in front of him like a shield.

“What do you know?” he demanded. “You haven’t been here for any of this! You haven’t seen anything he’s been through! Anything we’ve been through! And— And anyway, I could ask you the same thing! How did you feel about having fur and claws and a tail, huh?!”

Keith couldn’t see Chulatt anymore. Not with Lance’s back blocking his vision. But he could still hear his fury-filled voice. “That thing you’re protecting is exactly what destroyed our people! He destroyed our home!”

“He wasn’t even born yet!” retaliated Lance, so charged with anger that Keith was sure he could feel his hair standing on end. “He’s been protecting Pidge and Hunk and Shiro and me for as long as we’ve all been here! Protecting us from the Galra!”

“That doesn’t change the fact that he’s Galra himself!”

“Does he look like a Galra to you? And so what if he was?! Ulaz and Thace saved me, and they were Galra!”

“So what if they faded saving you? They were the reason you died in the first place! They owed you!”

“They didn’t even do it for me! They did it for everyone!”

“I don’t give a shit about everyone! I haven’t given a shit since you died, Pyotr!”

“THAT’S NOT MY FUCKING NAME!”

The tension in the air shattered like glass.

It rained to the floor in shards, tearing holes in the upholstery of the furniture and stabbing into the wooden flooring.

And Keith could tell that it stabbed into half the people in the room as well.

“...Chulatt,” said Chuchule, speaking up from the corner of Keith’s eye. “That’s enough.”

A beat passed, and the tense muscles in Lance’s back finally relaxed. He returned to where he’d been sitting next to Keith on the couch and wrapped an arm around his waist. He didn’t pull him close, didn’t look at him, but his hand was there, and that’s all Keith really needed.

“Alfor trusted him,” said Coran, speaking up suddenly. “And if Alfor trusted him, then we can as
well. As for you, Chulatt…” He turned his eyes on the man leaning against the wall by the door. “I’m sure your lovely wife would be turning in her grave if she heard you say you didn’t ‘give a shit’ about her.”

“I…” Chulatt crossed his arms and scowled at the floor. Keith expected him to finish his sentence, but he never did.

Allura was the next to speak.

“Right, well…” She took a deep breath and stood up from the couch she’d been sitting on. She walked closer, and for a moment, Keith was afraid that she had something to say about him being Galra as well—she didn’t exactly look happy—but instead, she just unlatched the box where the Lions were kept and lifted the lid. “I’m sure you all know why we’re here today.”

The four remaining Lions gleamed from where they sat in their box. Each seemed to have a knowing look in their eyes, as if they understood perfectly. Knowing them, they probably did.

“I presume the Red Lion is in your possession?” asked Allura, fixing Keith with a skeptical look.

Keith reached into one of the pouches at his belt and pulled out a small thermos—no bigger than a bottle of water—he’d managed to just barely fit catty-corner inside. He uncapped it and carefully plucked at the maroon scarf inside until he was able to pull it out, and he unwrapped the figure it protected.

“Wh—!” Lance squawked, his eyes wide as saucers. “You had that with you the whole time?!”

“I needed to keep her with me,” said Keith, clutching Red’s idol tight in his hand. “I kept her safe. It wasn’t like anything was going to happen to her when she was padded in a metal case.”

“I know, but—” Lance ran a hand through his hair, still staring at the idol in awe. “The whole time? Dancing on the roof? In the bathtub just now? The—”

“Lance, if you please…” Allura sighed emphatically.

Lance closed his mouth right away, cheeks red for what Keith was sure was more than one reason.

A beat passed in silence.

“…Your Lion?” prompted Allura.

“Uh, right!” said Lance, hurriedly reaching for the deep blue idol and snatching it out of the box, leaving only three Lions remaining.

Allura turned the box around, pointing the remaining Lions toward the rest of their small militia.

“I normally wouldn’t ask you three of this, but seeing as you have the proper quintessence and you just need to take up the mantle long enough to carry the Lions to where they need to be for the sake of the ritual—”

“Dibs on Green!” shouted Pidge, raising their hand high above their head. They hastily moved their laptop to the floor beside them and jumped up, nearly tripping over wires in their haste to reach the box.

Their tiny, thin-fingered hand latched out immediately for the Green Lion before Allura could so much as protest.
And they locked gazes with Keith for the very first time.

Keith froze in place.

It hadn’t even occurred to him that that would happen.

“Hey, Keith,” greeted Pidge, grinning and offering a hand over the Case of Lions. “Nice to finally meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“You— Uh— Really?” asked Keith, raising an eyebrow as he took the hand offered.

“Well, other than the whole ‘being in love with you’ thing.”

Keith suddenly turned very bright red. “O-Oh. Uh.”

“Pidge!” hissed Lance. When Keith looked through the corner of his eye, he found Lance just as brilliantly red as he was sure he himself was.

“Hey,” said Pidge smugly. “If I see you as my brother, part of that is embarrassing you in front of your boyfriend.”

“Hey, he told me he liked Keith before I even knew who Keith was,” said Hunk, who was holding the Yellow Lion in one of his gloved hands. “Also, hi, I’m—”

“Hunk!” screeched Lance. “What the hell?!”

“Best man privileges,” said Hunk. “You are making me your best man, right?”

“Best m—?!” Lance’s jaw dropped. “We just kissed for the first time, like, an hour ago!”

“That’s the part that bothers you?” demanded Keith. “Not the part that I can’t legally get married?”

“We could still have a ceremony here,” protested Hunk. “Like, we could get—”

“Shiro?” called Allura, cutting Hunk short. “Is there a problem?”

“N-No, I…”

Keith whipped around so quick that his hair hit his face.

If Pidge could see him, and Hunk could see him, then Shiro…

Lance’s hand wrapped around Keith’s wrist.

Keith wanted to slide his hand into Lance’s, but he was frozen.

“No, I…” Shiro looked just as nervous as Keith felt. He was sure they both wore the same pinched expressions, that their shoulders were tensed in the exact same way. “There’s no problem.”

Every step that Shiro took from the couch to the coffee table seemed to last a year. He’d lift his foot in January and his heel wouldn’t touch the floor again until December.

Keith watched Shiro’s hand closely as it dropped toward the Black Lion’s idol. Closely enough that he noticed the hesitation, the ever-so-slight pause, the hover over the Lion’s sleek, shining coat.

And then he lifted it from the velvet lining with all the ease of a librarian choosing a familiar book
from a familiar shelf.

And he stood, not quite frozen, but still tense. Broad shoulders squared, dark eyes wide.

“...Keith?”

A lump formed in Keith’s throat, obstructing his speech, but somehow, even through the stone he seemed to have swallowed, he managed the words.

“...Hey, Takashi.”

Chapter End Notes

A lot of you guys have been waiting for those last few lines for a long time.

A cute scene from Chapter 17, Look addem. Dey hol' hans. 
And something from last chapter because Elany is great. 
I'm still at Twitter and Discord if you need me.

PS, sorry for all the ridiculous amounts of lore, guys.
Shiro was right there. Right there.

And it was killing Keith that they didn’t have time to talk. To hug it out. For Keith to find out more about him, about the person he became. Not from Lance’s point of view, but from Shiro’s own.

From Takashi’s own.

But if there was anything they were short of in that moment, it was time.

He stepped over the threshold of the house and onto the stoop, then onto the grass, gripping tight onto Lance’s wrist.

He didn’t like the front yard. Not at all. It was too small. It felt like walking on the edge of a cliff, which was why he was the only spirit told to join Allura out front. Apparently, the “mice” already knew what they needed to know anyway, so they stayed inside with Plaxum, Florona, and Luxia.

“Don’t let go,” murmured Keith, holding onto Lance tighter.

“I can’t,” said Lance, raising an eyebrow. “You’re holding onto my wrist. If we were holding hands —”

Keith scowled at him, but his heart wasn’t in it. Even after a sarcastic remark like that, it was hard to be mad at Lance after he protected Keith from Chulatt.

“All right,” announced Allura, standing on the very border of what Keith now knew as the Exposure. “This is it. By the end of the night, provided everything goes well, this should all be over and done with. We know what we need to do. We know where most of the Lions need to go, thanks to Pidge. Thanks to the suspicious absence of the Galra, we can assume that Haggar is planning a counterattack, most likely at sunset.”

She locked eyes with each of the Paladins in turn, her gaze eventually landing on Keith.

“We have no time to argue.”

He had no reason to.

“Will the Black, Green, and Yellow Lions please come forth?”

The Lions sprung out of their idols like flowers out of the snow and landed on the ground in front of their Paladins, each with Bayards held gently in their jaws.

It had been a long time since Keith had been around Black, and he’d never seen the Black Lion with his own eyes, but one look was all Keith needed to be able to tell that Black was a Lion worthy of both Alfor and Shiro.

It was a serene sort of power, like a motorcycle leaning on its stand, one that was bound to have a deafening roar once ignited.

Shiro kneeled on one knee and looked his Lion in the eye; his expression seemed to land off-center
between the familiarity of an old friend and the awe of a prophet speaking to their god for the first time.

Pidge, meanwhile, was poking at their Lion with a thrilled, curious expression, like they were given free reign with an advanced piece of technology.

And Hunk, well... Hunk dropped to his knees and immediately started treating his Lion like he was a dog rather than the ancient and powerful being he was, complete with baby-talk and scratches.

But, judging by the Yellow Lion’s body language, that seemed to suit him just fine.

“Allura,” called Keith, tearing his curious eyes away from Hunk and Yellow. “Why can they see me now when they couldn’t before?”

Allura frowned at Keith, almost an unspoken accusation, and it was clear that she didn’t care for him much more than Chulatt did.

Keith just barely resisted the urge to glare right back, if only for the sake of diplomacy.

Apparently, diplomacy worked for Allura as well. “I’m not sure,” she admitted. “But I would assume it has something to do with the fact that Lance can see you. When a Lion is bonded with a Paladin, their Paladin can share their sight. For Alteans, that means being able to predict where the Galra will appear. For humans, I suppose that means being able to see spirits at all with your blind eyes.”

“Allura,” corrected Pidge, lifting their head from their Lion.

Allura raised an eyebrow. “I beg your pardon?”

“I don’t think it’s your eyes that let you see the stuff we can’t, but your ears,” said Pidge. One of their arms wrapped around the shoulders of their Lion. “Like... There are bird feathers we humans see as a certain color, but they’re not really that color. They just look like that color because our eyes are confused by the feather structure. I think it’s the same thing with Alteans, but with your ears.”

They tugged at their own ear. “I bet you’re picking up sounds that we aren’t because your ears are a different shape, frequencies that spirits give off that you aren’t consciously aware you’re hearing, and your brain is interpreting those frequencies as visible light. Kind of like synesthesia.” They dropped their hand to their lap. “And I bet humans didn’t develop those same pointed ears because we didn’t need to. If you guys got rid of most of the Galra that long ago, then there were no frequencies to pick up anymore.”

“That makes sense!” blurted Lance from Keith’s left shoulder. “I could hear Keith way before I saw him, and I bet you anything that’s related.”

“You heard me?” asked Keith, frowning.

“Yeah!” said Lance eagerly. “I mean, not that great. All I heard most of the time was this crappy ringing in my ears.”

“I’d assume that was because the Blue Lion was injured,” explained Allura, who was much, much sweeter when talking to Lance than she was while talking to Keith. “You already shared a bond with her, but she was too weak to be able to help very much.”

“Mmkay, cool,” said Lance, his arm twitching in Keith’s grip. He was much more jittery than his conversational tone let on. “Finally have an answer to that. But I still don’t understand why I could suddenly see Keith out of the blue.”
“Good one, Lance!” called Hunk, his hands still buried deep in the Yellow Lion’s fur. “Out of the Blue. I get it.”

Lance gave a half-smile that very clearly said that the pun wasn’t intentional.

“I believe I have an answer for that,” said Coran, leaping into the conversation with boundless enthusiasm. “But just to be sure, you knew Keith was there before you could see him, correct?”

“I just said I heard him,” said Lance. “Of course I knew he was there.”

“What kind of day had you been having the day you started to see him?” asked Coran, still bursting with eagerness. “Was it out of the ordinary? Phenomenal, perhaps? Or traumatizing?”

Lance shifted uncomfortably, and Keith let his hand slide down Lance’s arm to join their hands. He could feel the gratefulness in Lance’s grip when he squeezed back. “It definitely wasn’t a good day.”

“And did you, perhaps, decide to tell Keith about your day?” asked Coran. “To open up about what made it so terrible?”

Lance nodded stiffly and stayed silent.

“So there you have it!” said Coran, twisting one end of his bright orange mustache. “A bond. You opened up to Keith, and I’m assuming Keith either sympathized or reciprocated, and a bond was formed between two active Paladins. You saw what Keith saw, and Keith sees what the Red Lion sees. Ergo, you could see him.”

“But I still couldn’t see the Galra,” protested Lance. “Not until this morning.”

“You helped Blue last night,” said Keith. “You probably helped her enough that she was able to help you see the Galra when you woke up.”

“Maybe, but I don’t know,” said Lance, his skeptical eyes meeting Keith’s gaze. “She was still pretty weak.”

“Then it’s entirely possible that you and Keith reached a new milestone in your relationship,” said Coran, interjecting again. “It would just have to be between the last Galra attack you witnessed and the one this morning. It didn’t necessarily have to be last night.”

“Like wh—?” Lance began to ask, only to stop himself mid-word and raise the back of his Lion-occupied hand to his mouth. His face went from his usual sandy brown to an apple red very, very quickly.

“Oh,” he said, muffled by the back of his own hand.

Keith frowned, knitting his brow, trying to understand what it was that Lance had put together. He retraced his steps, thinking about every moment he and Lance had spent together between Galra attacks.

The second he took the time to think about it, it clicked, and he turned almost as red as Lance.

The moment Keith realized he was in love with Lance could have easily been considered a milestone.

But how did Lance know that? How did he know that it was the night before?

Keith opened his mouth to try to ask, but he was cut short by Allura’s commanding voice.
“Paladins,” she called out firmly, “as much as I would love to see you connect with your Lions, that is not why I called them here. Take the Bayards from them. You won’t need them, but the former Paladins inside will still be able to use them, and every advantage helps in the battle they’ll be facing.” Her eyes narrowed. “Haggar herself may be showing up in this fight.”

Lance’s hand squeezed Keith’s hard. “What do you mean Haggar herself will be fighting?”

“You’ve caught us up with the deaths of her Paladins,” said Allura. “Ulaz and Thace in freeing your soul from the Galra world, Haxus in a previous battle you were in, and Sendak earlier today. Unless Zarkon is still around—”

“He’s not,” said Keith.

Allura looked at him skeptically.

“Alfor…” Keith swallowed. “Your father… He killed a Galra named Zarkon ages ago.”

“I thought as much,” said Allura. “Zarkon was her right-hand man, her most powerful follower. He would have been her first line of defense. Haxus would never have crawled out of his hole unless Zarkon was already out of the picture.”

“S-So what do we do about her?” asked Lance, his voice quivering so much that Keith wondered what exactly he was missing about Haggar that made Lance so afraid.

“There’s not much we can do,” admitted Allura, a sadness behind her intense eyes that reminded Keith so, so much of her father. “The mice—that is, Chulatt, Platt, Plachu, and Chuchule—they know that all they can hope to do is to buy time. The chances of them surviving this fight…aren’t very high at all.”

Lance gripped Keith’s hand tighter. “What about Keith?” he asked urgently. “It’s not like he can leave Ground Zero here.”

“Well, exactly,” said Allura. “That’s the main reason it’s so important that there’s a unit here to fight the Galra back, so that they don’t put an end to Keith before he’s able to perform his end of the ceremony.”

Lance’s twitching turned to shaking very quickly. Keith was sure, for a moment, that Lance was going to yell in Allura’s face, to stand up for him again.

But he didn’t. And Keith completely understood why.

It wasn’t for lack of love, or hesitation to stand up to a beautiful woman.

They just didn’t have time for it.

The longer they waited, the more time Haggar would have.

The more likely it was that the ceremony would fail.

Then it would be all for nothing.

“Now, there’s a reason I brought you outside,” said Allura. “And that has a great deal to do with Haggar.” She took a step back, away from the exposure, still facing the Paladins. “See, as long as Haggar stays within the exposure, she’ll disappear as long as it does. If she escapes, she’s still a threat.” She took a deep breath and knelt to the ground. “My role in this, as well as Coran’s, Luxia’s,
Florona’s, and Plaxum’s, is this.”

Her hands touched the earth, and a pale, blue, glowing wall erupted from the ground, shimmering in the already-fading light of the setting sun.

Keith’s eyes widened, and he was sure he wasn’t the only one staring on in awe, though he didn’t spare a glance at his fellow Paladins to make sure. He was too busy staring at the wall, observing where the edges of the wall ended.

Allura’s barrier disappeared as quickly as it appeared, and she climbed to her feet again.

“As you see, it’s not enough to surround the entire house,” said Allura conversationally. “Coran, Luxia, Plaxum, and Florona can offer themselves to extend the wall, but only so far. Even that isn’t enough to completely trap Haggar in. We’d need at least one other person with Altean blood, though I’d certainly feel better with two. The more people we have, the more time—”

“Excuse me?”

Every head turned toward the tiny voice that called out from behind Allura’s parked hearse. From around the corner appeared a woman with broad shoulders and shining, honey-colored eyes.

“Shay?!” blurted Hunk, jumping to his feet and gesturing wildly, nervously, his arms whipping around too fast to follow. “Uh! This is—! Um! You see—!”

“Hunk,” said Shay calmly, setting the wicker basket she carried on the ground. “I know what occurs here. I sensed it first I came here. What I heard just this moment, it confirmed what I already suspected to be true.” She clasped her hands in front of her waist and wrung her hands. “I heard...things. Strange things. A high-pitched squealing. Like a microphone would approximate a speaker. Like this one said.” She gestured to Lance. “And though I know naught about this word, ‘Altean,’ my family is old, and we remember well into the past. We recall our ancestry, if only just, and we are told stories of the Lions and the Galra.”

The Yellow Lion chuffed in approval. Keith wasn’t sure whether it was a sign that he approved of his Paladin’s taste in women or whether he would have chosen her as his Paladin just as easily if she’d found him before Hunk. Perhaps both.

“If I or my family can help in any way,” continued Shay, squaring her shoulders and dropping her arms down to her sides, “if we have Altean blood, or similar, then perhaps there is a chance that we could make a difference.” Determination set deep into her eyes. “I would like to make a difference.”

“Holy shit,” breathed Hunk. “I love you.”

Shay didn’t so much as turn her head at Hunk’s proclamation; it seemed she’d made up her mind.

“I always knew she was weird,” muttered Lance into Keith’s ear. “You know, in a good way.” His voice still shook.

Keith could appreciate his attempts to stay strong.

Allura walked the short distance from where she stood to where Shay waited for an answer on the gravel of their driveway.

And she put a hand on Shay’s shoulder.

“Contact your family. If there’s even a chance, we’re better off taking it.” She narrowed her eyes.
“We’ll wait for them to show. We can lose ten minutes of daylight if it means trading it for an extra thirty with the barrier up.”

Allura continued to talk to Shay, most likely preparing her for what she was about to do, but Keith couldn’t hear it, not over Lance’s voice in his ear.

“Speaking of chances, I think this is yours.”

Keith raised his eyebrows and turned his head to look at Lance, brow knotted in confusion.

“You and Shiro,” said Lance softly, his own brow furrowed, but for an entirely different reason. “You have time now. Take it.”

Keith bit his lip. He knew what Lance was getting at.

They both knew he might not survive the battle that was coming for them.

“What if I don’t want to?”

Lance quirked an eyebrow, and the tiniest smirk pulled at one corner of his mouth. “Keith, I’ve had months with you. Give Shiro ten minutes.” He pulled their joined hands up to his mouth and kissed Keith’s knuckles.

“Besides,” he said, still smiling, though there was the smallest hint of pain in his eyes, along with something else Keith couldn’t quite place. “There’s a chance I have to take, too.”

The stairs creaked under Lance’s feet as he traveled up the stairs, following Chuchule’s directions.

After a brief trip to his bedroom to grab a messenger bag for Blue’s idol, he found himself right back in the restroom, but this time, it was someone else he found there.

A different Red Paladin.

Lance cleared his throat, but Chulatt didn’t turn around. His gaze seemed glued to the surface of the mirror.

“I saw you coming,” he said softly. “Through Platt’s eyes.”

“...Yeah?” Lance shoved his hands into his pockets.

“You don’t remember, do you?” Chulatt’s voice, if it were possible, became softer still. Further broken. “Paladins can see what Lions and other Paladins see by looking into a mirror.” He paused, and the wait was heavy.

“...I can’t see what you see anymore.” His hands gripped the edge of the sink. “We aren’t connected anymore.”

“Things change,” said Lance, shrugging. “Life is beautiful like that.”

Chulatt scoffed and bowed his head. “Spoken like a man in love.”
“It’s true, though,” said Lance. “And it’s a good thing. Just like you getting remarried, that’s a good thing. It’s a beautiful change.” He scuffed the bottom of his shoe against the linoleum floor. It was strange, how many important memories he’d made with Keith in that very bathroom. Having one with Chulatt after all that felt...off, somehow. “I guess I can’t really speak for Pyotr. There have to be some things we don’t have in common. I mean, people change over ten-thousand years. But...I know, if I died, and someone I loved had the chance to find someone new, I’d want them to take it.”

For the longest time, Chulatt said nothing at all, then, slowly, he turned around and looked Lance in the eye.

“I’m sorry about what I said to the new Red Paladin,” he admitted, genuine regret in his eyes. “I got...angry. I’ve been angry for a long time.”


“Isn’t Galra, I know.” Chulatt’s eyes darkened. “I wasn’t being rational. I was being...” He sighed and crossed his arms over his chest. The armor on his arms clanked against his breastplate. “...jealous.”

“I’m not Pyotr,” said Lance.

“I know,” said Chulatt. “But you’re the closest any of us have had in a long, long time. It’s hard not to look at you and see him.”

Lance glanced briefly at the floor, then back at Chulatt. “Do you...want a hug? Totally platonic, no romo.”

Chulatt sighed, his wide, hopeful eyes making him look almost childlike despite the fact that he was nearly a full head taller than Lance, and a great deal physically older than even the last time Pyotr saw him. “Yes. I do.”

Lance opened his arms and Chulatt walked into them without hesitation. The red smoke that rose from his skin—one sign that he and Keith weren’t quite cut from the same cloth—swirled over the curves of Lance’s arms.

“Hey, could you do me a favor?” asked Lance, tilting his head back to try to fit his chin on Chulatt’s shoulder. “Like, I’m glad you apologized to me, because it really pissed me off, but...could you apologize to Keith? He’s the one who needs to hear it.”

“Yes,” sighed Chulatt, holding Lance tighter. “I can.”

“And could you—”

“Take care of him?” Chulatt broke the hug, and when he pulled back, there was a knowing curve to his sad smile. “Of course. Why do you think I’m here at all?”

Lance returned the smile. “Thank you.”

Chulatt rubbed his arm amicably, and then, without warning, he reached up with both hands and tugged at Lance’s earlobes.

“Your ears,” he said, smirking. “They’re hideous. What’s wrong with them?”

Lance laughed and pushed him away by the wrists. “Nothing’s wrong with them! They heard
exactly what you said about them!” There was something so familiar about that teasing, something on the very tip of Lance’s tongue. “Besides, you’re one to talk! Look at the wrinkles under your eyes! Those definitely weren’t there before. How many people have you glared at to get wrinkles like those?”

“There were bound to happen the second I laid eyes on your sorry soul.”

“Rude.”

“Foolhardy.”

“Klanmüirl.”

“Weblum.”

“Weblum?! Oh, that is it. You’re on.”

When Lance made it downstairs, Chulatt right behind him, he made a point of finding Platt and giving him the tightest hug that his arms would allow around a person so large; he was the only one of Pyotr’s old fellow-Paladins that hadn’t been hugged yet, and it felt wrong to leave him out.

Hunk rushed into the foyer before the embrace was broken, having apparently rushed away to the downstairs bathroom fairly recently to, well, do what Hunk usually did when he was nervous, and he definitely had plenty to be nervous about.

Keith had looked at Lance when he walked in, but he didn’t end his conversation with Shiro, not right away.

The Balmerans—as Hunk jokingly called Shay’s family; they all worked at Balmera—had just arrived, and Pidge was working with Allura and Coran to arrange them around the house like chess pieces.

And all at once, Lance understood why Hunk tended to be nauseated when he was stressed out.

Lance felt very much like he was going to throw up.

He stepped away from the former Paladins and Hunk with urgency and crossed the foyer to where Shiro and Keith sat. He felt bad for interrupting, he really did, but he couldn’t contain how worried he was.

He knew there was no way around it, but nothing in the world could have really made him okay with the idea that Keith was about to take on Haggar.

The very woman who ripped Lance’s soul away from Pyotr’s body and kept it for ten-thousand years.

Without permission, without warning, Lance stepped between Keith and Shiro and dipped down to pull Keith in a hug, one made very awkward by the fact that Keith was seated and Lance was on his feet. Even more so with the strap of Lance’s bag digging into his neck.

Keith didn’t say a word, but Lance could feel his gloved hands hesitantly reach around his back to
hold him close and pet his hair.

Shiro quietly excused himself and stepped away, but Lance could barely hear it over the sound of his own deep, shaky breath.

They didn’t have long. Not even a minute had passed before Allura’s commanding voice filled the room.

“Paladins, hand your Bayards to your substitutes. Shiro to Chuchule, Hunk to Platt, Pidge to Plachu, Keith to Chulatt.”

Lance pulled away from Keith with a great deal of hesitation, and with a great deal more, he looked away from his face.

“What happens to the blue Bayard?” asked Lance, looking between Allura and Coran.

It was Coran who answered. “We assumed you’d leave it with Keith. Unless, of course, you want to leave him unarmed.”

Lance threw a cursory glance at Keith, then turned his eyes back to Coran. “I can do that? Even though we don’t have the same quintessence?”

“You have a bond,” said Allura, approaching Lance calmly. Much to his relief, she sounded less angry than she did the last time she spoke about Keith.

She plucked the blue Bayard from the front pocket of her white hoodie and held it out toward Lance. “As long as you offer it willingly, it should listen to him. Even a Lion would listen to a Paladin not their own provided it was a Paladin who mattered to their own.” Her expression softened. “It won’t be as strong, but it will work in a pinch. And if all goes well, Keith won’t need to defend himself anyway.”

Lance took his Bayard from Allura’s hands and turned around, so close to Keith that he nearly hit him with his shoulder when he turned.

Knowing full well that he’d wind up staring if he looked into Keith’s eyes, he just reached for his hand and pulled it close enough that he could press his Bayard into it with his other hand.

“This is yours,” he said firmly. “For better or for worse, I won’t need it anymore after tonight.”

He watched Keith’s fingers curl around the grip of the Bayard, and he tried to convince himself that it wouldn’t be the last time he held Keith’s hand between his own.

At Allura’s command, the Paladins headed outside. Keith walked so close to Lance’s back that Lance was surprised he didn’t step on the heels of his shoes.

At least, he did until Lance passed the point where Keith could walk.

When Lance turned around and finally met Keith’s eyes, he saw worry. He saw fear and apprehension and sadness and something else that Lance wasn’t quite sure of. He opened his mouth to try to speak, to try to say something, anything, to make all of that anxiety go away, but before he got the chance, Plaxum shoved something at his chest.

“Coordinates and directions,” she said. “And…” She fished in her pocket for something that turned out to be a set of keys. “You’ll be taking the Lincoln.”
Lance laughed, relieved. “For a second, I thought you were giving me the keys to the hearse.”

“Do you want the keys to the hearse?” asked Plaxum, smiling brightly.

“Not really?”

“Good,” said Plaxum, stepping backward from Lance, still grinning, her hands behind her back. “Cause we’re still using it.”

“For what?!?” Lance asked.

But Plaxum didn’t answer. She just ran off, presumably to take her place where she needed to be for the barrier.

Everyone else was already in position. From where Lance stood, he could see Rax, Shay’s brother who apparently never cared much for Hunk, crouched low to the ground, a deep frown set into his brow.

Conversely, Shay’s grandmother was also within view, smiling benignly over her shoulder at Hunk, who was also holding a sheet of paper, presumably his own coordinates.

Every Paladin was holding a sheet of paper, except for Keith, who was still only holding onto the Bayard Lance had handed to him.

And he was staring at it, staring like it was a blessing and a curse at the same time, like instead of holding a weapon in his hands, it was a baby that survived when the birth killed the mother.

Lance didn’t like that look, but he had no idea what to say.

“Paladins, step back,” said Allura, kneeling to the earth. “You won’t want to be on the wrong side of the barrier.”

Lance barely had time to stumble backward before blue light surged from the ground at Allura’s will, but before the barrier stretched too far, Lance was able to shout a single word.

“Keith!”

Keith lifted his head, his features ever-so-slightly blurred from the barrier.

Lance wasn’t quite sure what he’d been planning when he called Keith’s name, and he wasn’t quite sure what to say now, but with the barrier up, there was no risk of drawing closer anymore, so Lance stepped in close, as close as he could get.

So did Keith.

When Lance lifted his hand and pressed it against the barrier, it was cold and solid, like glass, but it only stayed cold like that until Keith put his hand to the barrier as well, almost a perfect shadow to Lance’s own. His hand was a little wider, his fingers not quite as long, but Lance could feel his warmth against every single one of his fingers.

And he could see Keith’s eyes, that odd indigo color, looking back at him through the barrier.

He said something, but it was muffled, and Lance couldn’t read his lips.

Shiro’s voice cut through the silent, heavy air so suddenly it made Lance jump. “Lance, we don’t have time!”
Lance stole a look over his shoulder and he saw his three friends each running to their respective vehicles. Pidge was already halfway in.

His heart twisting inside his ribcage, Lance turned back around to find Keith smiling. This time, when he spoke, Lance understood the message clearly. It was one word, one syllable, hard to miss.

Go.

Lance miserably peeled his hand back from the barrier and turned around, taking off at a run.

Before he’d made it farther than five steps away, he turned back to see if Keith was still watching. He was.

With a smile, Lance tucked his page of directions under his arm and fired off a pair of finger guns.

When he turned his back on Keith again, he swore he heard Keith’s laugh, muffled, yet somehow more audible than any word he’d said, ringing through the barrier, and Lance took that as a sign that that single, silly gesture had been the right choice.

He still felt Keith’s warmth against his hand as he pulled open the Lincoln’s driver-side door.

It was a blessing that he knew so little about what he was going to experience that night.

If he knew then what he would come to know in less than two hours’ time, he never would have let go of Keith’s hand.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, originally, this and the next chapter were going to be one chapter, but the buildup was long enough to be a chapter of its own, so I was like "fuck it" and made it its own chapter. Look. Here it is. IMPENDING DOOM. [This also means that there's STILL 2-3 chapters left.]

The same art from Chapter 17 because I don't know if many people actually saw it last chapter [I added it kind of late because it took the artist a day or so to get back to me]

And...a song? I was not expecting someone to, of all things, compose an instrumental melody inspired by something I wrote, but...here it is. And it's very, very pretty.

Twitter
Discord

Also, if you were wondering, yes, that's a Cats reference.

...Lions? Cats? No?
If Lance hadn’t said anything, Keith might not have approached Shiro at all. Just walking up to him was nerve-wracking.

But once they’d started talking, Keith was so, so glad that Lance had pushed him to cross that distance.

Lance might never know how much Keith appreciated every little thing he did.

“You haven’t told him? At all?”

Keith grimaced and turned his face away, toward the stairs. “He… I kissed him?”

“But you didn’t tell him.” Shiro sighed, and Keith felt his weight against the chair he sat in. When he turned his eyes back to Shiro, he had his hips pressed into the side of Keith’s chair. “I can’t believe I used to think you were mature.”

Keith managed a small, hesitant smile. “Neither can I. Believe me. You’ve really grown up.” He tilted his head back and looked up at the ceiling, his smile shrinking. “Black quintessence suits you.”

“I guess I’ll take that as a compliment,” said Shiro, “but don’t change the subject. Lance has been one of my best friends for a long time now, and something I’ve learned about him is that if you don’t put things into exact words, he won’t let himself believe it.”

“I know,” said Keith. “I’ve seen it work the opposite way, too. Say something you don’t mean once, he’ll take it to heart. I know what Lance is like, Shiro.” He closed his eyes. “If I didn’t, I wouldn’t care about him so much.”

When Shiro’s hand hit Keith’s shoulder, it weighed as heavy as the thoughts on his mind.

“If you care about him so much, he deserves to know.”

Keith took a deep breath of the air he hadn’t needed in twenty years.

“I know he does.”

For the longest time, nothing was said at all. Even with the weight of their conversation, the silence wasn’t uncomfortable.

It was still just...bonding with Takashi, the same little boy Keith used to tell stories to, stories about Alfor. The only difference was that he was a bit older, and now he knew that those stories were true.

“Keith…”

The wariness in Shiro’s voice was enough to open Keith’s eyes.

He lifted his head, concerned.

Shiro had the same exact worry in his own eyes.
“What happens when we get rid of the...exposure?” he asked. “What happens to you when the only ground you can stand on isn’t there anymore?”

Again, Keith pressed his eyes shut.

“...I don’t know.”

The breath he took was so deep that it hurt his chest.

“And...I don’t care. I’ve seen all of you—especially Lance—come so close to dying so many times. Too many.” When he looked into Shiro’s eyes, they seemed almost physically pained. “Whatever happens to me doesn’t matter. I can’t let this go on, not when I know there’s a solution.”

Shiro squeezed Keith’s shoulder in a painful grip.

“It matters,” he said firmly. “If this is what you want, then it’s your choice. I won’t stop you. But it does matter. Don’t forget that.”

For Shiro’s sake, Keith managed a smile. It was weak on his lips, but still there. Only for Shiro’s sake.

It did nothing to soothe the sadness in his eyes.

Far sooner than Keith had ever wanted, he stood at the edge of the world with Lance’s Bayard in his hands.

Despite having the same shape and the same purpose, it felt so different in his hands. It felt colder, somehow lighter, like Lance had an imprint of his light-hearted personality on the weapon itself.

Or maybe it simply hadn’t seen as many battles. Maybe it had a soul of its own, one that wasn’t heavy from years of battle.

Keith wondered how heavy the black Bayard must have felt.

Like a clap of thunder, Lance’s voice cut through the haze in Keith’s mind, and he looked up just in time to see those fierce, blue eyes one last time before Allura raised the barrier.

Then the world outside became as much a blur to Keith’s eyes as it was to his mind. Like frosted glass. Or the mirror after Lance had finished his shower.

Lance stepped up to the glass.

So did Keith, wishing he could get even closer, wishing that Allura could have waited a moment longer, or that the barrier didn’t have to be there at all.

Lance pressed his hand against the barrier, his fingers spread wide, as if he could push through the wall of light if he tried hard enough.

Keith couldn’t resist meeting Lance’s hand with his own.

“I love you,” he said, knowing already from the muffled chirp of cicadas that he wouldn’t be heard.
“I love you so much, Lance.”

Lance furrowed his brow, his confusion clear, but only for a moment before Shiro’s muffled yell pushed through the barrier.

Lance looked over his shoulder at Shiro, then back to Keith, his hesitation obvious in his wide, worried eyes.

“Go,” said Keith, smiling in a muted attempt to assuage that worry.

And Lance stepped away.

There was no goodbye spoken, not even a wave.

Keith was left alone, and alone, with his hand still pressed against the barrier, he watched the boy he loved take off at a run.

Alone, he watched that boy for what he didn’t doubt would be the last time.

Halfway to the car that would take Lance far, far away from the tragedy that was about to take place, he turned in place and threw a silly, flirty gesture back at Keith. It was blurred, and it took Keith a moment to decipher what it was.

When it finally sank in that the last communication Keith would ever receive from Lance was the firing of finger-guns, he fell to his knees...and he laughed.

Something about that was so beautifully Lance.

Keith wouldn’t have it any other way.

Lance pulled out of the driveway as fast as he could.

The only thing that kept him within the speed limit was knowing that it would just take longer if he was pulled over by the police.

The second he turned onto the highway, he rolled down every single window and opened the sunroof, desperate to feel the wind on his face. The car’s stereo was his second priority; he needed something, anything, to get his mind off of what he was leaving behind.

Keith.

Against Haggar.

An angry and desperate Haggar.

Lance shook his head vigorously and smacked himself on the cheek.

“Stop it!” he snapped, glaring at himself in the rear-view mirror. “He’s fine. Chulatt said he’d take care of him. Plachu and Platt are gonna take care of him. All of them are.”

He began to change channels on the radio, searching for the perfect song, anything to fire him up, to
get him excited for what he was doing instead of scared or guilty.

It was a road trip. He could make this fun. He could totally make this fun.

If...he could find at least one song that didn’t remind him of Keith.

“—she laughs at my dreams, but I dream about her laughter—”

“Nope.”

“—I am the fire and you are the rain—”

“No thanks.”

“—tell you what I want, what I really really—”

“Are you kidding me?”

When he changed the station yet again and walked directly into the song he and Keith had danced to on the roof, he was ready to give up and just drive in silence.

Thankfully, it was only one more station away that he’d find solace in a song that reminded him more of his family than anything else. It reminded him of sitting in the kitchen as a little kid and watching his dad install new cabinets, of listening to his mom hum along with the radio. Of watching his grandmother knit in the living room while his sister watched MTV.

Lance leaned back in the driver’s seat, allowing the music swallow all of his attention.

“Bless whoever came up with variety stations.”

“You’re sure this will work?” asked Keith, watching the blue flames of the gas stove dubiously, clutching Red protectively to his chest with one hand, Lance’s Bayard secure in the other.

“Where I wanted to be more than ever when the ceremony began was back at home in front of the fireplace with Pyotr.” Chulatt crossed his arms and leaned his hips into the countertop. “My home is long gone, and you wouldn’t be able to travel to it even if it wasn’t. Seeing as this house doesn’t have a fireplace, this will have to do.”

Keith frowned a moment longer before turning his back on the stove. “What if the Galra put out the fire? It can’t be that hard with a little flame like this.”

“That’s part of the reason we’re here,” said Chuchule, smiling warmly. “To protect whatever’s needed for the ceremony. You, the Red Lion, and the stove all fall under that category.”

“Well, that’s why most of us are here, at least,” said Platt, one eyebrow raised. “Chulatt apparently made plans of his own.”

Keith turned a dubious expression on Chulatt. “Look, if you’ve got a problem with me, that’s fine, but this is more than—”

“Oh, come off it, Epipaleolith,” sighed Chulatt. “Get over yourself. I wouldn’t risk letting Haggar out
into the world over a personal grudge.” He kicked his heel against the cabinet behind his legs.
“Lance asked me to look out for you in particular.”

Keith turned away and frowned to himself.

That sounded like something Lance would do.

The lights in the kitchen flickered and failed. When Keith lifted his head, he saw the purple sparks
dancing around the bulb.

With only that flickering as warning, the bulb popped like a glass bubble, sending shards of glass in
every direction. Keith had to cover his face with his arm to keep himself from being hurt. The same
glass that bounced harmlessly off the material of his jacket would have been a bad way to start
something already so dangerous.

He wasn’t even fully recovered from his battle against Sendak that morning.

When he lowered his arm, he looked instinctively toward the rest of the Paladins, who were all
watching each other with a mix of worry and determination in equal parts.

“All right,” said Chulatt slowly. “We’re ready for this. We’ve been waiting millennia for a second
crack at the Galra. We know what we’re up against. This is nothing new for any of us.”

There was something about the way she spoke that twisted at Keith’s gut. It sounded...final. Almost
fatalistic.

He knew what Allura said, that the former Paladins were just there to buy time, that they weren’t
likely to survive the battle. Even less so than Keith himself, but it was one thing to hear it from Allura
and something else to hear it straight from the mouth of someone sacrificing herself.

“Allfor gave us the choice to back down when Altea still stood,” said Chuchule, gripping Alfor’s old
Bayard in her hands. “None of us did. We knew we were giving up our lives, we knew we might
wait forever, and we knew the dangers that awaited us if and when we woke up, and we each
decided that our cause was worth more than ourselves. Have we changed our minds? Have you,
Plachu?”

“No,” said Plachu, straightening her shoulders. “I swore fealty to Alfor and to Altea before you were
even born.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Chuchule. “What about you, Platt? Are you turning back now that
you’ve come so far? When you’ve already sacrificed so much?”

“Alfor was my friend.” Platt’s gruff voice spoke with such sincerity that Keith was sure he felt his
heart break. “Pyotr was my friend. Coran is my friend. Allura is like a daughter to me. If I were to
give in now, I would disgrace too many memories, and Coran and Allura would have to clean up
after the mess. Thousands more could die.” His brow furrowed. “No, I will not throw away this
chance. This is where Haggar’s genocide ends.”

Chuchule nodded firmly before turning her attention to the last of the former Paladins. “And you,
Chulatt? Will you hesitate?”

“I scattered Pyotr’s ashes in the ocean so long ago that they must have drifted to every inch of the sea
floor by now.” He uncrossed his arms and strode away from the edge of the counter. He was elegant
and strong, and it was easy to forget that he wasn’t a Paladin anymore. He was just...a spirit. “My
family was struck down by the Galra when I was so young that I barely remember having a family at
all. Alfor’s father took me in, only to be killed by the Galra himself. Every person I dare to love seems to be taken away by the Galra. I will not allow this to continue. I will not abide by their existence in this world. I will not let them add Allura or Coran to this list. And…”

There was no way to be sure, but Keith thought, for the briefest moment, that he caught Chulatt’s glance.

“And I will not allow anyone I care about to lose the people that they love.”

He extended his Bayard, which took a form similar yet so different to Keith’s blade. Chulatt’s was shorter, and he held it with a reverse grip.

“Haggar killed Pyotr with her own hands,” he growled. “I’ll make sure she regrets that.”

“She will,” said Chuchule. She gripped her Bayard, and it lengthened into a spear with a guard over her hand. “We’ll all make sure of that.”

Platt summoned his Bayard as well, and it extended into an axe that stood as tall as he did.

Keith expected Plachu to wield her Bayard as well, but rather than reach for that, she clipped something dark off of her armor and tossed it at Keith.

Keith caught it clumsily in his unoccupied hand and brought it to his face. It was small and black and plastic with one button and a tiny, digital screen on the front. It looked like a pager. “What is this?”

“Not sure,” said Plachu. “Some kind of counter. Florona told me to pass it off to you once you and Lance stopped cuddling on the chair. Just press the button when your Lion is where it should be, and press it again if something goes wrong.”

Keith nodded and clipped the device to his jacket pocket.

He just hoped that nothing went wrong.

Pidge grumbled as they slammed the door of their car and stepped out onto the dirt and twigs and acorns of Antok Forest.

Of all of the landmarks Pidge had found while searching for strange energy sources, of course they were stuck with the forest. The one they hated crawling through the most. The one they’d just gotten home from when they found Florona parked in their driveway.

Stifling a yawn, they carefully pulled the straps of their backpack over their shoulders.

“Here we go,” they sighed. “Again.”

With a quiet groan, they stepped away from their car and ventured deep into the forest.
The electricity Keith tasted on his tongue was more than just the sparks left behind by Haggar’s magic destroying the lights.

There was something between the former Paladins, particularly between Platt, Chulatt, and Plachu. A connection. Like they communicated without speech, like they were always looking at each other without turning their heads.

Keith wondered, given time, whether he might have formed a connection like that with Shiro, Pidge, Hunk, and Lance. Whether he might still feel them while they were far away, delivering their Lions to where they needed to be.

He gripped Lance’s Bayard tight in his hand, ready to use it at any given moment.

Red, or at least her idol, sat behind him on the grate of the stove.

The counter clipped to his pocket read 1.

“Any second now,” said Chuchule, her knuckles white on the black spear she held under her arm.

“Better be,” said Chulatt confidently. “I’ve been waiting ten-thousand years for this. What about you, Platt? Are your fingers itching for revenge like mine are?”

“Not revenge,” said Platt, his voice warm and calm, even when the anticipation in the air was enough to make Keith’s hair stand on end. “Only peace.”

“Revenge, peace…” Plachu’s spade glimmered bright green under her palm. “Whatever your motives are, just focus on kicking some Galra butt.”

The last glimmer of summer sunlight disappeared over the horizon, and the Galra rose out of the carpet like crabs from the sand.

Hunk left his car running, letting his headlights provide illumination.

He really didn’t like how the coordinates Pidge left him seemed to lead over the edge of the cliff. He didn’t like it at all.

“Okay, Pidge, what am I supposed to do here?” he whispered in a sing-songy voice, creeping carefully to the rotting wooden fence and peering over the edge. He didn’t trust the fence itself to take his weight, much less the ground on the other side.

Whining, he reached for the Lion idol in his vest pocket and turned it carefully over in his gloved hands.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked cautiously. “Do… Do you want me to climb down over the edge, or…”

In response, the Lion’s eyes lit up, and a low, comforting rumble filled his head, slowing the rapid pounding of his head and easing his anxiety. He felt the sudden desire to set the idol down and curl up around it. Yellow was more relaxing than any of his coloring books had ever been.

But he had a job to do, and Yellow seemed to be telling him as much.
The glow in Yellow’s eyes brightened like the sun, and Hunk heard another rumble, this one less like a roar and much more like a landslide. When he lifted his head, he looked to the edge of the cliff again, and this time, he found that it reached farther out than it had before.

Very, very carefully, he crawled over the wooden fence and crept toward the edge of the cliff.

He never saw the mountain itself change shape, but any time he dared to take his eyes off of the edge of the cliff, or he blinked, or he glanced at his Lion, he would always look back to see that the path in front of him had grown, leading him down the cliff face.

“Okay,” he breathed. “You’re a supernatural...Lion...thingy, right? I...guess you know what you’re doing.” He lifted his head up to the dark blue sky overhead. “I hope you know what you’re doing. For everyone’s sake.”

Especially Lance’s.

Heaven knew Lance deserved someone who made him as happy as he seemed to be when he looked at Keith.

*You better still be there when we get back, buddy. You can’t leave Lance that fast.*

Platt, Plachu, and Chulatt moved like dancers around each other. They were like a machine, each cog turning the next, but they were far more elegant than machinery could ever be.

Platt turned his axe in his hands and pivoted, using the flat of his axe to knock six Galra off their feet and push them into Chulatt, who sliced through them as easily as if they were cucumbers rather than armored harbingers of hatred and darkness.

While Platt pushed the groups of the Galra together for Chulatt to take care of, Plachu watched their backs, sneaking behind the Galra that crept on her friends and striking them in the back of their necks, their sides, their stomachs, as if she were invisible.

By comparison, Chuchule worked almost on her own, taking out any of the stragglers who wandered away from the rest of her team and taking them down before they were able to enter the kitchen where Keith stood.

Keith was transfixed, so much so that he almost missed the Galra that had appeared outside the kitchen doors until it was breathing down his neck.

Instinctively, he struck out with Lance’s Bayard, and while it was enough to handle that Galra, it was a good thing that there was only one.

Unlike Keith’s Bayard, which had extended parallel to his knuckles, the blue Bayard extended perpendicular to his knuckles, like someone had somehow managed to snap two of Wolverine’s claws off, leaving him with only the middle one.

While it was still better than nothing, it felt very, very awkward in Keith’s grip, and he wasn’t sure how he would do in a real fight.

And with Haggar yet to show herself, but signs of her all around, Keith couldn’t help being nervous.
“That’s all the information you have?”

“I’m afraid so, Princess.”

“Well, thank you for your efforts regardless, Pidge.”

Shiro could feel Allura’s heavy sigh from across the room. She seemed almost as broken as Lance did from where he sat on his couch.

Wrapped around Shiro’s own cousin.

Shiro shook his head and ran a hand through his hair, pushing his long, white bangs back over his head. He would let that sink in later; there was nothing he could do about it at the moment.

There was, however, something he could do about Allura.

“Something wrong?”

Allura turned around, and when she saw Shiro, she sighed. “Well, yes,” she admitted. “There’s something—I’ll have to explain it later, but…” Heavily, she walked to the couch across from Lance’s, the one they’d borrowed from the den, and she lowered herself into it with all of the grace of the princess she was.

“There was this tower that used to stand near the castle,” she explained cautiously. “It was old, very old, but my father was very fond of it. He used to take me to the top of the tower when I was little, and we’d watch the stars and...we would talk about my mother. At least, we would before it began to crumble. Even then, he still climbed it alone, though he wouldn’t let me come along like before, in case it collapsed while we were climbing the stairs.”

She picked at the denim covering her knees, plucking at the folds under the bend of her legs.

Shiro waited patiently for the words he could almost hear on the tip of her tongue.

“I don’t suppose there’s something like that anywhere around here,” said Allura, her wide, blue eyes looking hopefully into Shiro’s. “Somewhere people go to mourn, a place that captures the sky?”

Shiro’s heart answered before his mind caught up. “The Space Lance.”

Allura’s eyes widened further, and she leaned closer. “The what?”

“It’s…” Shiro crossed his arms. It didn’t feel quite right, talking about a place so personal to him with a near stranger, even one like Allura, but she must have had a reason for asking.

“It’s a statue,” he explained grudgingly. “It was commissioned after an astronomic tragedy decades ago, but over time, it’s become a place where people mourn anyone in the space program, even people who died of natural causes but worked on a project. I…” He shifted uncomfortably and glared at the carpet between his feet. “Nobody here knows how often I go there, and I want to keep it that way.”

Allura didn’t say anything for a long, lingering moment, but she put her hand on Shiro’s knee, and she kept it there for a long moment, until Shiro’s tense shoulders began to relax.
“I hate to ask, Shiro… But would you mind going there again tonight?”

Chulatt, Platt, and Plachu were so hypnotic that he didn’t notice that anything was wrong until he looked for Chuchule among the sea of Galra and realized that he couldn’t find her.

Guilt stabbed into him when he realized that she’d been slain without his notice, that she’d been killed unceremoniously and that he’d done nothing.

But she was already gone. There was nothing he could do.

He gritted his teeth and clenched Lance’s Bayard tighter in his hand.

His job was to take care of Red.

He couldn’t let himself be distracted.

But he couldn’t lose anyone else.

It wasn’t the first time Shiro visited the Space Lance. Far from it. But it was the first time he’d ever visited it so late.

He’d never seen the lights illuminate the bronze moon from underneath, pooling in the shadows of its craters.

He’d never seen how harsh the cracks in the surface looked when they were pitch black, when no sunlight at all reached the shadowed bronze within.

He’d never seen the silhouette of the lance itself, elegant and sharp and rending the moon in twain, look quite so mystical, backlit the way that it was.

Shiro took a deep breath and dropped to the cobblestone, the same way he always did. He crossed his legs and cradled his lion in the curve where his left shin met his right calf.

“I never thought I’d come here for any reason other than talking to you, Matt.” Shiro looked up into the shadow under the moon. “But things got really...incredible, really, really fast. Not great, but hard to believe. You wouldn’t believe the things I’ve seen today, Matt. Monsters and ghosts and magical lions… My cousin, Keith, the one I told you about, talking to me like nothing’s wrong, and still nineteen, like the day he died... A beautiful princess from ten-thousand years in the past…”

Shiro took a deep, mournful breath and closed his eyes.

“You’d like her, Matt. She’s powerful and warm, and…” He sighed. “Definitely not perfect. She’s been through a lot, and she gets angry at people who don’t deserve it, but she knows when to put that anger behind her. She’s a good leader. But…”

Shiro pressed his eyes shut and bowed his head.
“...but you’ll never get to meet her, and I...and it kills me every time I realize that.” He clenched his jaw and sucked a shaking breath through his teeth.

“I miss you,” he choked out. “I miss you today more than I have in a long time. And I look at Keith, and I think about how he’s really there, and I know how selfish I’m being, but I can’t help but think...of the three people I lost in my life, why wasn’t it you I got back?” He shook his head. “And I know how awful that is to think. Lance, he... He fell in love with Keith, and he’s happy, and I’m happy to see him happy, but...wouldn’t Pidge be just as happy to have their brother back?” He lifted one hand from his Lion to cover his eyes. “I should be counting my blessings. I should be happy to see someone I thought was gone for good. And I know it’s not what you would want. But I...I can’t help missing you. I’m sorry.”

A warmth washed over Shiro like sunlight peeking out from behind a cloud, and when he opened his eyes, he saw the Lion in his lap giving off a bright, serene, consistent glow.

Shiro wiped his eyes and carefully put the idol down on the cobblestone in front of his legs before reaching into his jeans pocket for the device Pidge had given him.

He hit the button on the side, and the number on the device’s screen changed from a 1 to a 2.

Without Chuchule around to keep the others’ leftovers from getting free, more Galra were able to creep past and find their ways into the kitchen.

Keith was able to protect himself when the Galra fought him one on one, but between his weakened state and his strange weapon, more than one was enough to cause a problem.

Which was why, when two broke through, Chulatt broke free of their formation to rush into the kitchen and come to Keith’s rescue.

“Are you all right?” demanded Chulatt, more clinical than concerned.

“Fine—”

A loud scream tore through the kitchen, an anguished cry that twisted itself into the squeaking screech of a mouse, and then faded away into nothing.

Without Chulatt there to balance out the team, it was only a matter of seconds before tragedy struck. Keith’s stomach knotted and shriveled in terror.

Plachu was down.

The winding path down the side of the mountain led Hunk into a cave opening, one he wasn’t sure had been there only moments before.

The light from his Lion’s eyes led him deep, deep into the cavern. He wound around stalagmites and
stalactites and one crushed Diet Cola can that had somehow found its way into the cave—dirty litterbugs—until he reached the wall at the end and could walk no farther.

It was as damp as it was dark inside the cave, and water dripped down from the ceiling and onto his Lion’s head.

“Oop.” Hunk lifted one of his hands from Yellow and used it as an umbrella. “Sorry about that, little guy. There you go.”

The idol began to glow.

Eyes wide, Hunk lowered it to the cave floor and reached for his pager.

In the light of his Lion’s glow, he watched the digital 2 turn into a 3.

---

Keith wasn’t sure how it happened. Which Galra had done it. Whether it had been one of them at all.

There were too many in the kitchen now.

But one of them had broken the faucet in the sink.

Water sprayed everywhere. It hit the window, soaked into the curtains, pooled on the floor.

It splashed the stove.

More than that, it was like the water was drawn to the stove, like iron shavings to a magnet. It poured into every burner, dousing the flame Keith had lit and filling the kitchen with the smell of flammable gas.

Flammable, but not ignited.

“No!” In vain, Keith tried every burner. They clicked and clicked and clicked, but they didn’t spark. They were soaked. “NO!”


“They put out the fire!” said Keith, frantically stealing Red away from the water and instinctively trying to wipe her down with his shirt, only succeeding in smearing the water around on her brilliant, red surface. “The stove won’t light! Shit—!” He reached frantically for the pager-like device Plachu had given him and hit the button on the side.

“No!” said Chulatt, though the crack in his voice made him sound no less worried than Keith was. “There has to be something else, some other source of fire—”

“The Yellow Paladin,” said Platt suddenly.

“Hunk?” Keith clutched Red tighter to his chest and tucked her under his jacket, preventing her from getting wetter than she already was. “He’s gone, he’s delivering the—”

“I know, but he was cooking earlier,” said Platt urgently. “He made everyone lunch. He made Pyotr—Lance—eat when he was barely moving, and that food seemed cooked over an open flame, not on
that tiny flame from the stove.”

“The grill,” realized Keith. “If he grilled food, he would have done it with charcoal and—”

“*Matches.*” Chulatt kicked the Galra he’d been fighting into the wall and rushed to the sliding glass door that led to the backyard, the door Keith had been led through by Lance’s hand more times than he could count now.

“...*Quiznak.*”

Already grimacing, Keith followed Chulatt to the door.

And he saw the grill.

And the saw the matches lying on the shelf attached to it.

In the middle of the back yard.

On the other side of the barrier and Shay’s parents.

Shay’s very, very tired-looking parents.

They were sweating, shaking, and Keith felt a pang of guilt; the barrier was taking so much out of them, and Keith was part of the reason they were still out there, draining themselves.

And then, it happened.

Shay’s father collapsed.

Then her mother.

And then Plaxum, on the very edge of what was visible from the view of the sliding glass door.

They went down like dominos.

And the last to go down was the barrier.

Chulatt and Keith exchanged a glance. The same realization ran through both of their heads.

They could reach the matches, yes, but…

They both abruptly realized why they hadn’t seen Haggar yet.

“Did she—?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps. That, or she’s been waiting for it to go down by itself.”

“Shit.”

Chulatt slammed his Bayard on the counter and pushed open the sliding door. “Well, regardless, we can reach the matches now. Or, well, Platt and I can. As long as we revert, we can go past the edge of the exposure just fine.”

“You go,” said Platt, appearing behind Keith so suddenly that he nearly lashed out in surprise. “I’ll hold the Galra back. It’s all the more necessary with the barrier down.”

There was no time to argue. Chulatt shrank into the size and shape of a mouse and dove into the tall,
green grass of the back yard, leaving Keith and Platt alone in the kitchen.

Keith stood at the open doorway, Red still under his coat, and turned his back to the yard. He still gripped Lance’s Bayard with the hand that didn’t hold Red, and he was ready to protect his Lion with his life if need be.

However, he wasn’t the only one willing to give up his life.

Despite Platt’s size, even the size of his Bayard, he was no match for an army of Galra on his own.

The enormous axe he wielded shrank away as the Bayard returned to its original form, and Keith watched helplessly as Platt’s great and powerful form was reduced to a mouse, one that vanished into yellow smoke under the heel of a Galra’s boot.

The countless Galra each turned their faces toward Keith at once, like a pack of hungry wolves that just smelled something alone and injured.

Keith backed away nervously through the open door behind him, but there was only so far he could go. The edge of the exposure was right behind him.

He was already cornered.

And yet, the Galra stopped advancing.

Keith gripped Lance’s Bayard tight in his hand.

Something’s wrong.

His eyes narrowed.

Why did they stop?

Thunder crashed.

Violet lightning struck the hardwood flooring in the foyer.

The Galra parted like an ocean.

And in the center of the horde stood a hooded figure.

Keith didn’t have to know what she looked like to instantly recognize her for who she was.

“Haggar.”

Pidge flopped face-first on the top of the tangle of trees, their groan muffled by the bark. They were drenched in sweat and smelled like fresh soil. They supposed they should have been grateful that they’d visited the forest just that morning, making it easier to navigate at night, but for the moment, Pidge just felt tired. It was only the weight of the Green Lion rolling around in their backpack that reminded them that there was a reason they were working so hard.

With a soft whine, they pushed themselves upright and slipped their backpack from their shoulders.
Using their phone as a flashlight, they unzipped the bag and reached in for the Lion idol.

The flashlight wasn’t needed for long, however; the moment Pidge opened their backpack, they were nearly blinded by a brilliant, verdant light.

Frowning, they reached for the counter they had in the pocket of their shorts. “I’m guessing that means you’re ready to go.” They clicked the button on the counter and watched it under the green light as the number on the display turned from a 3 to a 4.

Only four? The forest should have been the hardest point to reach. What was taking the others so long?

Did Shiro and Allura’s plan fail? Was Shiro frantically trying to figure out what to do in the city?

Concerned, Pidge moved from the flashlight app on their phone to their text messages, and made a household group chat.

*Everything okay? Shiro?*

*It worked. Guessing you’re not the one left behind.*

*Whoa, wild. I have, like, perfect reception in this cave.*

*No problems, Hunk?*

*Nope. Not aside from being kinda cold.*

Pidge waited, eyes trained on the screen, for Lance to join in on the conversation.

He never did.

And that was the only answer they needed.

Pidge sighed and set Green down, shifting the phone from one hand to the other. “Come on, Lance. Waiting on you, buddy.”

---

Keith’s heart leaped into his throat. He froze, not from fear, but from pressure.

The door was open, the barrier was down, and Chulatt was in the backyard behind him, fetching matches from the grill.

He only had one hand to fight with because the other was trying to protect Red from the water that still reached as far as where Keith stood.

And the hand he did have to fight with only held a weapon he wasn’t used to.

On top of everything, he was still weak from his collapse earlier that day.

The biggest threat Keith knew of was staring him down, walking through the parting Galra like Moses through the Red Sea, and all Keith could do was stand there.

What else was he supposed to do?
Haggar stopped in front of Keith, her hood hiding her expression.

“All this time, it was you.”

Never before had Keith quite understood when voices were described as gravelly, not until that moment. Haggar spoke like her throat was lined with jagged stones, stones that crashed and scraped against one another with every syllable.

“Every attempt I’ve made, every plan I’ve carried out, has been thwarted thanks to you.”

Keith furrowed his brow. He was speechless. He might have killed Sendak, but what else had he done?

“Don’t be so modest,” growled Haggar.

As much as it worried Keith that she seemed somehow capable of reading his thoughts—or at least his expressions with incredible accuracy—it worried him more that she was just standing there, her shoulders slack, her guard down.

She could have most likely killed Keith with a flick of her wrist.

So why hadn’t she?

“You may have brought Sendak to his end, but it wasn’t your Bayard that killed him.” Haggar didn’t move as she spoke. Nothing more than her mouth, her jaw, so much as twitched. She was eerily, deathly still. “When the Blue Paladin rushed into the basement in your place, that was what ultimately killed Sendak. He was prepared for another fight with you, not Pyotr’s ill-experienced reincarnation.”

The breeze from the open door tugged at Haggar’s robes, allowing them to move more than the woman herself did.

“It was the Blue Paladin’s desperation to save you that navigated him through the darkness and allowed him to come to your rescue when Haxus had nearly converted you to our side,” growled Haggar. “It was his need to protect you, to impress you, that gave him the idea to attack Haxus and somehow kill him with nothing more than what accumulates to a child’s toy.

“Even Zarkon,” spat Haggar, “was destroyed at the hands of your late father figure, solely because Alfor deemed Zarkon too much of a threat to exist around an infant he’d grown a fondness for.”

Keith’s stomach clenched.

He’d assumed Alfor had taken care of Zarkon long, long before Keith was ever born.

It had never so much as entered Keith’s mind that Alfor could have killed Zarkon because he was born.

“Ten millennia of planning wasted because Alfor became unpredictably protective. All because of you.”

She raised her clawed hand to Keith’s face.

Keith knew that he was running out of time, that he’d have to do something soon, but he was frozen to the spot.

“But there is no one here to save you now.”
Keith knew that.

“No one left to protect you.”

He knew.

“Your Lion is in her idol, waiting for her cue to separate the worlds. Your friends are gone.”

He knew that.

“You are defenseless.”

So why couldn’t he move?

Lightning sparked and flashed in the palm of Haggar’s hand, illuminating her severe face under her hood.

Her sharp eyes.

The red markings underneath.

Red.

She had had red quintessence before she became a Galra, just like Keith.

Just like—

“Move, you idiot!”

Keith was pushed to the ground so quickly and so unexpectedly that he barely had time to turn his body, to make sure he didn’t land on Red, before his hip and ribs hit the floor.

He looked up just in time to see Chulatt push Haggar back, to see the lightning spark across him, searing his soul as he hoisted her off the ground by her robes and throw her into her army.

Her screeching carried into the kitchen as Chulatt, scorched and torn and still sparking, crumpled to a heap on the floor.

“Chulatt?!” Keith darted across the kitchen, low to the floor, and turned the former Red Paladin carefully onto his back.

Pain was etched into Chulatt’s every feature.

“I’m sorry,” he choked out between clenched teeth.

“Wh—”

“I’m sorry about what I said,” hissed Chulatt, barely opening his eyes to look at Keith through strained eyelids. “Lance was right to be angry with me. I-I… I couldn’t have chosen a better successor. And I’m sure he knew that.” He reached toward Keith with a shaking hand.

Keith, unsure of what else to do, what was expected of him, dropped Lance’s Bayard and grasped Chulatt’s hand.

He hadn’t done anything for any of the other former Paladins. After everything they’d done, everything they’d sacrificed, he hadn’t done anything at all.
The least he could do was to hold Chulatt’s hand into the next life.

“Take care of my girl, will you?” begged Chulatt. “S-See her off?”

Keith’s eyes darted toward Haggar for less than a second. She was already on her feet again, and she was angrier than before.

This time, Keith really was scared. But not scared enough to let go of Chulatt’s hand.

“I will,” said Keith, nodding firmly. “I promise.”

Though still visibly pained, Chulatt somehow managed a smile.

Only in his last remaining seconds did Keith release his hand, and Chulatt’s spirit, much like the Galra, dissipated like smoke in the air.

And before Keith could quite move away, Chulatt’s last few moments of life reached into his mind.

Keith saw the world from his point of view, as a mouse. He saw tiny paws dragging the matchbox as quickly as he could through the tall, damp grass.

And he saw himself, at a distance, Haggar’s hand looming remarkably close to his own face.

He felt Chulatt’s panic, but more than that, he saw Chulatt’s resourcefulness.

He couldn’t bring the matches and save Keith both. There wasn’t time.

But there was time to set the matchbox on fire.

The moonlight overhead and the headlights of Lance’s car were the only lights around for miles and miles. Even after nearly an hour of driving, his worries still clawed at his stomach, and the faint pop music playing from the radio he’d long-since turned down did little to assuage his anxiety.

The air was starting to feel colder, and he could smell salt. The coordinates from the page he’d been given had led him to the beach.

After several minutes of searching, Lance found an empty parking lot. He rolled his car to a halt in front of a concrete stopper and rolled up his windows, staring through the windshield at the water just meters ahead of him.

With a shaking hand, Lance reached down for the paper he’d been given and turned on the overhead lights in the car to read what it said.

He’d followed the coordinates.

He had his Lion.

He didn’t have the counter yet, whatever that was.

Skeptically, Lance followed the instructions he’d been given and reached to the passenger side to pull open the glove box.
Inside were a few papers he had no interest in reading and a small, black device with a single number displayed on a small screen.

4.

Curious, Lance clicked the button on the side.

5.

He hastily clicked it again, sending the count back to 4.

“Okay, so that’s what that does.” Lance took a deep breath, hit the lights, and turned the keys in the ignition, cutting the car engine.

The world went silent, save for the sounds of the waves and the distant call of what Lance could only assume were insects.

The waves, as well as the insects, grew a great deal louder when Lance opened the car door and stepped outside.

Goosebumps crawled all over him, and he doubted it had anything at all to do with the mildly chilly sea air.

He gave a full-body shudder and shoved the page of instructions into his messenger bag, along with the keys to the car, letting them join his cell phone and the Blue Lion’s idol.

Static crawled across Lance’s skin, zigzagging around his goosebumps and making every hair stand on end. It followed him across the sand to the edge of the water, close enough that the waves licked the soles of his shoes.

The coordinates had led into the sea.

What was he supposed to do about that? Throw Blue and hope she landed in the right spot without breaking?

With jittery fingers, Lance opened the flap of his messenger bag and reached inside for the cool, smooth surface of the blue idol inside.

Blue looked at him with gleaming, golden eyes, and the sound of the waves changed in Lance’s ear.

He tore his gaze away from Blue’s idol to look at the water.

The waves looked different as well.

Curious, Lance took a step forward.

And the water took a step back, as if magnetically repelled from Lance’s body.

Or, perhaps, more accurately, from the Blue Lion’s body.

Afraid of losing anything in case the effect failed over time, Lance removed the messenger bag from his shoulders, along with his shoes and socks and his jacket, and set them all safely on the sand, far away from the tide.

Then, with nothing but his clothes, the primitive-looking counter he’d found in the glove compartment of the borrowed Lincoln, and the Blue Lion in his hands, Lance walked into the ocean.
Lance had fully expected to feel wet sand under his feet as he walked, but the sand where the ocean had just been was just as dry as the sand he’d left his bag on. It was almost disappointing.

The dry patch around Lance’s body was less than Biblical. The sea didn’t part where he walked so much as it simply evaded him. There was a perfect, dry circle around Lance’s body. Not a sphere, but a circle, one that led from the sand beneath Lance’s feet to the top of the water, as if someone had built a glass cylinder around Lance’s body. A very narrow glass cylinder. If Lance were to extend his arms out to either side, he would have gotten his arms wet from the tips of his fingers to the crook of his elbows.

“Oh goodness I’m not claustrophobic, huh?” he asked the Blue Lion.

Blue didn’t answer.

When the water around Lance reached almost twice as tall as he was, the dry cylinder no longer moved forward with him. Lance found that out the hard way when he walked face-first into the wall of water.

When he stepped back, however, his face was completely dry.

He looked down at the Lion in his hands. “End of the road, huh? Is this where you’re supposed to go?”

The idol lit up, glowing with a blue light so bright that it reached deep into the ocean itself, making the water around Lance look like an aquarium exhibit.

Nodding in understanding, Lance placed Blue carefully on the sand and reached for the counter. He pressed the button on its side.

4 changed to 5.

Then back to 4.

Lance’s brow furrowed.

Did I hit it twice?

He hit it again.

3.

A deep, deep chill clutched at Lance’s bones as he changed the number on the counter back to 4.

Something happened.

Something happened to one of them. Something bad, something that kept them from carrying out the ceremony.

And he had a feeling he knew exactly which of the Paladins it had happened to.

Shaking, Lance lowered himself to the sand, his eyes focused hard on the tiny, digital 4 on the screen in his hands.

“Please, be okay,” he whispered. “Please, Keith. You have to be okay.”
Keith couldn’t spare a second to see how quickly Haggar was catching up to him. He didn’t have a second.

All he had was Red in his hands and a matchbox on fire.

They wouldn’t stay burning for long. It was a miracle that they’d managed to burn as long as they had.

Keith had one chance.

He’d fall through the earth if he went out there, he knew he would, but if he succeeded in what he was setting out to do in the first place, he was most likely going to fall through the floor regardless.

He spared less than a second to check the counter attached to his pocket.

4.

Everyone else was ready.

All he needed to do was to carry Red to that fire and it would all be over with.

All of it.

The Galra.

Him.

Everything.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, sparing a second only to make himself stop shaking. He would need every ounce of strength he had.

Then, with that strength, he grabbed Lance’s Bayard, climbed to his feet, turned on his heel, and he rushed at Haggar as fast as his legs would carry him.

The world seemed to move in slow motion. Every thundering footstep that carried Keith closer to Haggar seemed to shake not only the house but the entire planet.

She raised her hand, claws sparkling with purple that floated around it with a gentle grace that seemed bizarre for such a savage intent.

Keith raised Lance’s Bayard, as if to deflect the attack, but, instead, he dodged it. He slid under Haggar’s arm and stabbed with all of his might into the hem of her long robes, pinning her almost comically to the floorboards.

Keith had no intention of fighting Haggar. He knew he wouldn’t win. But he could slow her down. That was all he could do to slow her down, to make her less of a threat as he headed for the door.

The only stretch of space that was free of the Galra ran from himself to Haggar. He had no choice. He needed a runway.
Before Haggar could grab him, Keith darted away from her, keeping low to the ground in a feeble attempt to avoid the magic he knew she would send his way.

Alfor.
The former Paladins.
Coran and Allura.
Hunk and Pidge.
Shiro.
Lance.

It was because of them that Keith fought.

And it was because of them that Keith was prepared to sacrifice himself.

He pushed himself past the back door, across the patio, to the very edge of the exposure, and aiming for the burning box of matches, gripped Red firmly in his hand, lightning licking at the back of his neck, he jumped.

Every millisecond he spent in the air felt like hours.

Keith knew that it wasn’t even close to midnight yet, but by the time Red began to glow in his hand, he swore the sun was already rising.

He closed his eyes.

A blinding flash of light filled the entire cave. There was a crash, and the yellow glow radiating from Hunk’s Lion was gone.

As was the Lion itself.

“Do me proud, Buddy,” Hunk whispered to the ceiling of the cave, hoping that his words would carry.

The Green Lion, without warning, exploded, bursting into a thousand glittering, green shards that shot off into the forest in all directions.

For a split second, Pidge was terrified, and then a soft, steady calm washed over them as if a warm blanket had been wrapped around them, and Pidge realized that what had happened was nothing more than what was meant to happen.

A soft, gentle smile took over Pidge’s expression.
“Thank you,” they whispered to the trees. “If you see my family, tell them, ‘Hi,’ for me, okay?”

The sound hit Shiro’s ears before anything else—piercing, like a sonic boom—and he hastily covered his eyes with the back of his arm, afraid that something might hit his eye.

It was only when the faintest echoes of the explosion faded away that Shiro realized what had happened.

He lowered his arm, and where the Black Lion once stood, there was nothing. Not even a scorch mark.

Shiro took a deep breath and tilted his head back into the sky.

The stars above glittered and shone with a calm that Shiro hadn’t felt in a long time.

“Good luck,” he whispered, and he carefully climbed to his feet and began his walk home.

Lance didn’t have time to take in the sound of the explosion or the glittering of Blue’s pieces as they scattered into the ocean. He couldn’t appreciate the calm that settled over him as Blue’s Paladin, knowing that she finally achieved her goal.

The only thing he felt was the water crashing into him from all sides.

The sound of shattering ceramic tore through Keith’s ears, and the pieces of Red’s idol seared his hand as she abandoned it, abandoned him, for the last time.

It marked the end of the exposure, the end of ten-thousand years of struggle.

Keith had done it.

He’d finished what Alfor had set out to accomplish all those years ago.

And he was ready for the eternity that awaited him in the center of the Earth.

What Keith wasn’t ready for was the Earth itself crashing into him, bruising his cheek and scraping his hands and staining his clothes with the grass his momentum dragged him through.

For several seconds, Keith lied still, curled up on his side, his face stinging, his arms stinging, his body utterly unmoving as his brain tried to catch up with what had happened.

Then, slowly, cautiously, Keith opened his eyes.
He saw his house.

The house he’d grown up in.

The house he’d spent the past twenty years confined to, guarding its inhabitants.

It was completely devoid of Galra. Not a single one showed its ugly, purple, hairy face through the open door that led to the kitchen. Not even Haggar still occupied the windows. The house was completely abandoned.

And...it was far away.

Really, really far away.

Keith had left his house, and he hadn’t fallen through the Earth. He wasn’t careening toward the center of the earth at 9.8 meters per second squared. He wasn’t even sinking slowly into the dirt.

Confused, Keith pushed himself upright, still staring at his own back door from the backyard—a view he hadn’t seen in twenty years.

His face still stung, his arms still hurt, but his brain refused to translate that pain for Keith’s conscious mind.

A strange sort of itch rolled down Keith’s left wrist, and he scratched the itch absently, still staring.

A thick wetness crawled under his nails.

It took several seconds for Keith to realize how abnormal that was.

Hesitantly, he tore his gaze away from the house and looked down at his hand to see what the wetness was.

Red.

Sticky, shining red so dark that it looked almost black under the moonlight.

And Keith’s brain finally caught up with what was happening.

As quickly as his shaking hands could manage, he pulled himself out of his jacket. He ripped his stinging arms from his sleeves and looked down at his own stinging wrists.

Terror instantly gripped at his insides.

Terror instantly gripped at Pidge’s insides.

Terror instantly gripped at Hunk’s insides.
Terror instantly gripped at Shiro’s insides.

Terror tore into Lance’s chest and stomach like desperate, seeking claws.

He swam upward as quickly as his arms and legs would allow and broke through the surface with a cry of agony.

“Keith!”

Something was wrong.

Something was very, very wrong.

He could feel it.

Lance turned frantically in the water, searching desperately for the shore, and once he spotted it, he swam toward it as quickly as his arms would pull him, fighting wave after wave as they tried with all their might to pull him out to sea.

The second Lance’s feet touched wet sand, he ran across the beach, filthy with sea water and beach mud. He scooped his belongings into his arms as he ran, never stopping once, not even to put his shoes on.

He didn’t care that he was climbing into a rental car soaking wet and bare-footed.

He didn’t care about his phone being thrown haphazardly into the floorboards of the passenger side.

All he cared about was putting the keys in the ignition and driving home as fast as his car would take him.

Something was definitely, definitely wrong.

Everything in Lance’s head was screaming, but only half as loud as his heart.

He kept looking up at the rear-view mirror, remembering what Chulatt said about being connected to other Paladins, being able to see through their eyes if he looked into a reflection.

Maybe he was doing it wrong, because he didn’t see anything.

He had to be doing it wrong.

It wasn’t because Keith was—

It couldn’t be because Keith was—

He was just doing it wrong.
He was just *doing it wrong*.

In much less time than it took to reach the ocean, Lance arrived home.

Shay’s brother and grandmother were lying unconscious in front of the house, but Allura was gone. The front door was wide open. So was the back of the hearse.

The empty hearse. And Lance wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or horrified.

Either it was a good sign that there was nothing there, or…

...or it was empty because someone was making room.

Lance’s throat felt like sandpaper when he swallowed. *That’s not it,* he told himself. *That’s stupid.*

He ran past the hearse, toward the front door.

*That doesn’t even make sense. What would they need a hearse for? His body?* 

With shaking legs, Lance stepped inside.

*What body?*

The hardwood floor felt ice cold under his bare feet.

*He doesn’t have a body; he’s a—*

The cold under Lance’s feet shot up from the floor all the way to his head. He felt encased in ice, frozen in place, frozen to the floor just past the threshold of his house.

There was blood.

Blood on the kitchen floor.

Blood in small puddles and splatters and diluted by water, trailing streaks and footprints that led across the kitchen floor, through the foyer. It soaked into the cracks between the floorboards. It left handprints on the furniture and the walls. It dripped onto the backs of couches and discarded Bayards—even Lance’s own Bayard, which had taken a shape far different from the gun he’d turned it into that morning and had been stabbed between two of the floorboards like a stake—and carved a pathway from the sliding door in the kitchen all the way to the bathroom.

Not the upstairs bathroom, where Keith and Lance had shared their first kiss, but the downstairs bathroom Lance rarely used at all, the one near Hunk’s bedroom.

The bones in Lance’s feet felt as heavy as lead, but by some miracle, he managed to pick them up off the floor and force himself to follow the trail of blood.

*Blood.*

*Why was there blood?*

It couldn’t be Keith.
Keith didn’t bleed.

Lance dug his own fingers into his stomach, willing himself to stay strong, to think rationally.


He kept that mantra in his head, clinging to those words as his only comfort.

There was some sort of accident. One of the people keeping the barrier up had gotten hurt somehow.

It’s not Keith’s blood.

It didn’t matter that the footprints looked suspiciously like the bottoms of Keith’s boots.

Keith can’t bleed.

It didn’t matter that the handprints on the walls were clearly from hands that wore fingerless gloves.

It’s not Keith’s blood.

That didn’t change the facts. It didn’t change what Lance knew about Keith, what he’d known from the night they met.

Keith can’t bleed.

The bathroom door was slightly ajar. The softest feminine sobbing echoed inside.

It’s not Keith’s blood.

Lance raised his hand to the door, and right where he placed his hand, there was a half-formed, smudged, red handprint. Though it wasn’t a perfect handprint, Lance could compare it to his own.

Fingerless gloves.

The palm just a little wider than his own.

The fingers just a little shorter.

It’s not Keith’s blood. Keith can’t bleed. It’s not Keith’s blood.

Lance pushed against the door, and it swung easily open.

Keith can’t bleed.

The door stopped short, blocked by something behind it, but there was enough room to walk inside. Enough room to see inside.

Keith can’t…

He saw Allura, her white, cotton hoodie stained with bright, vibrant red. Red that smeared across her shoulders and soaked into the ends of the sleeves she’d pushed up to her elbows.

Her long, elegant fingers were hidden by the folds of a towel that had at one point been goldenrod but had become stained with bright, brilliant scarlet.

That towel was being used to apply pressure to an arm that she held tight to her chest, an arm that she
struggled to keep steady with her own shaking hands.

An arm that belonged to a boy who was propped against the wall by the corner, a boy who had apparently tried to bandage his own arms with one hand judging by the poor job he’d done, a boy with long, obsidian hair and the most beautiful eyes Lance had ever seen.

And those eyes flickered weakly with only the tiniest remainders of consciousness. The last few sparks of life.

“...K-Keith?”

Keith’s eyes fluttered in recognition, but it wasn’t Keith who answered.

“Allura turned to face him, her eyes red and puffy, her cheeks stained with the sheen of tears. “We— We don’t know what happened,” she explained rapidly, her voice cracking on more syllables than they didn’t. “Keith was— We think maybe he wasn’t dead when he became a Paladin, perhaps his soul took up the mantle of Spirit Paladin before he could— And now— Perhaps his body is picking up where it left off, and—”

Lance only partially recognized what Allura was saying. Between the numbness in his head and Allura’s panic, it was hard to understand anything at all.

But he could see the look in Keith’s eyes, and that was enough to carry his heavy feet from the door to Keith’s side.

When Lance closed the door behind himself, he noticed what was happening behind it, why he hadn’t been able to open the door fully. Plaxum and Florona were perched on the edge of the tub, frantically adjusting pieces of what looked like an overturned casket.

Lance wanted to ask what it was for, what they were doing, but he couldn’t form the words. Any time he tried to open his mouth to ask, he could feel his tongue start to form a completely different sound than the one he wanted to make.

The sound of Keith’s name.

Slowly, Lance lowered himself at Keith’s side, and Allura shoved the towel she’d been using at Lance’s chest.

“You take over here,” she said hurriedly. “I’ll help Florona and Plaxum. The sooner we fix the chamber, the sooner we can help Keith.”

Help Keith?

They were trying to help him.

He wasn’t a lost cause, then. Not yet.

Something about that cleared some of the fog in Lance’s mind, and he quickly took it upon himself to press the towel Allura had been using into Keith’s arm.

Keith hissed weakly and pressed his eyes shut.

“Sorry,” said Lance hurriedly. “Gotta apply pressure.”

“I know,” said Keith, his words airy and quiet and not fully present. His head was probably swimming more than Lance’s was. “Still hurts.”
“Sorry,” said Lance again.

“Mm,” mumbled Keith. He opened his eyes slowly, far too slowly, and looked at Lance with a tired expression. “Why are you wet?”

“Ocean,” said Lance quickly, glancing over his shoulder when he heard a clank from the sarcophagus. The chamber. He hoped it was a clank that was supposed to happen, not the sound of something breaking. All he could do was hope; he had no idea what was happening.

“Not important right now,” continued Lance. “How are you feeling?”

Dumb question.

Keith, judging by his expression, seemed to agree. The smallest of bittersweet smiles tugged at his lips, and he let his eyes close. “How do I look?”

“Honestly?” Lance grimaced. “Like crap.” He moved Keith’s arm from one hand to the other, freeing his right hand briefly to brush Keith’s hair away from his face. His fingers left a streak of red in their wake. “...Still gorgeous, though. Which, I mean, t-that’s nothing to shake a stick at.” He laughed weakly. “Not everyone could pull that off when they’re…”

Keith’s smile vanished, and he opened his eyes. Beautiful he might have been, but still weak.

Why was it so quiet?

Why was it so peaceful?

It should have been frantic, it should have been desperate.

Everyone should have been screaming.

But the only sounds in Lance’s ears were the faint tinkering of metal and his own rapid heartbeat.

“Lance?” said Keith, his voice soft, frail.

“Yeah, Keith?” Lance gripped Keith’s arm tighter, pressing the towel more firmly against Keith’s open arm. This time, Keith didn’t so much as flinch.

“What do you think happened to them?” Keith’s fingers, half-curled in toward his palm, twitched. “When Chuchule and Plachu and...Platt...and Chulatt... When the Galra... W-Where do you think they went?”

Goosebumps crawled up Lance’s back. “I... I-I don’t know,” he admitted. “Don’t think about that, okay? Not right now.”

“I can’t help it,” said Keith, his voice barely more than a whisper. “I couldn’t do anything. They were just...there one minute and gone the next. No one was even around to tell them goodbye.”

“Let’s talk about something else, okay?” pleaded Lance, his eyes widening. “Like— Like constellations, or—”

“Lance, listen—”

“—we can talk about music, o-or—”

“Lance!”
Keith sat up straight so suddenly that Lance flinched away, nearly dropping the blood-stained towel in his hands in the process. It was for less than a second, and Keith collapsed against the corner again almost instantly, too weak to keep himself upright. His head collided with the wall with a sickening thud.

“Are you listening now?” murmured Keith. It seemed to take more energy than he had just to narrow his eyes. His brow was twitching.

Warily, Lance nodded.

“Good,” said Keith. “Because you need to know...that I love you.”

Words that should have made Lance’s heart soar only served to make it sink instead. “What?”

“I love you,” repeated Keith, his eyes closing. “You’re...selfless, and...so...full of energy, and you make me try things I’d never do on my own. You...” He took a slow, shaking breath. “You showed me that life was worth living, I learned more about what it was like to live when I thought I was dead than I ever did when I knew I was alive.” Tears squeezed through his closed eyelids. “And now that I know what it’s like to live, I’m so fucking scared of dying.”

Lance’s heart broke. It broke like a stone statue, and its pieces dropped into the pit of his stomach with just as much cold weight. “You’re not dying,” he said frantically. “You’ll be fine, Keith. They’re gonna—”

“I don’t know how I lasted this long,” mumbled Keith. “Maybe I just wanted to see you that much. Just one more time—”

“We’re gonna see each other every day for the rest of our lives!” insisted Lance, yanking Keith’s hand to his chest. His fingers brushed against Lance’s neck. They were like ice. “Don’t you dare fucking give up!”

Keith didn’t answer.

The furrow of his brow had smoothed out.

He no longer smiled or frowned.

He was expressionless.

Lifeless.

“Keith?!” Lance let go of Keith’s arm to reach instead for his face. His cheeks were just as cold as his fingers had been “Keith! Wake up, you shithead! I’m not done with you yet!”

In desperation, he raised his hand to slap Keith’s face, only for his wrist to be caught by a bulky, steady hand.

“Lance, stop it!” Hunk’s voice broke into Lance’s mind like an axe through the surface of a frozen lake. His great, powerful arms wrapped around Lance, pulling him back against a broad chest.

A thousand voices seemed to erupt all around Lance at once.

“What’s going on?!”

“The chamber’s ready! We need to get him in, now!”
“Shiro, grab his legs. I have his arms. Hurry!”

“Is he—?”

“We don’t have time to check for a pulse! Just move!”

None of the voices felt familiar.

The faces in Lance’s vision blurred.

Even the arms he fought against seemed foreign.

All that he knew was in the boy being carried away from him.

All he knew was that he loved Keith, and that Keith was gone.

Chapter End Notes

This story isn't over yet.

Also~ -deep breath- HAPPY BIRTHDAY MUGEEEEEEN
Gray, faded sunlight bled in from the window, desaturating the blue walls of Keith’s bedroom.

He covered his eyes with the back of his arm, trying to block out the sun, but he wasn’t sure why. He didn’t really mind it. Habit, perhaps?

Sighing, he sat up and climbed out of bed to inspect the weather through the window.

It was cloudy, overcast, and so foggy he could barely see five feet past the windowpanes, but somehow, it was still so bright out.

It was going to be a long, foggy day. Keith could see that already. But it was still beautiful.

A long, foggy, beautiful day to be alive.

He dressed slowly, his gaze wandering toward his window time and time again, yearning to make it outside and feel the mist on his skin. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt the mist, or even the rain.

(Droplets rolled down his face so quickly that it was like his face was hardly there at all. They gathered in the folds of his shirt without soaking in. They dripped from his hair without clinging to a single strand. He curled into a warm chest, pressed his forehead up against a sharp jaw, and closed his eyes. His heart was beating so fast. Why was it beating so fast? It shouldn’t have been beating at all.)

Still, it was cold. He needed a jacket.

As Keith flipped through the contents of his closet, he came across something he didn’t recognize. Very strange, considering it was his closet he was flipping through.

He frowned curiously and pulled the jacket off of its hanger to inspect it.

Did his mom buy it for him? She must have thrifted it; it looked old. Olive green, with yellow-orange striping on the sleeves.

He sniffed it.

It smelled like the rain mixed with...shampoo?

(The air in the bathroom was still humid, and his hair was still damp. The jacket was damp, too, thanks to his hair. Everything was warm. His chest was warm. Keith’s face was warm. Everything. But especially his lips. They were bound to keep buzzing with that same dizzying warmth for hours.)
It must have been the detergent. Either way, it looked clean enough, and it seemed warm. Keith saw nothing wrong with wearing it.

He slipped his arms inside. It was warm. Incredibly warm. Almost unnaturally so. Like he was being hugged endlessly from the moment he put the jacket on.

It may not have been his style, but it was nice. He liked it. A lot.

Satisfied, he left his bedroom and jogged down the stairs to the kitchen for breakfast.

He served himself a bowl of cereal and dropped himself at the kitchen table between his mother and father.

His mother spared him a kind glance over the top of her newspaper.

His father smiled at him from over his coffee.

Words weren’t needed. The silence was comfortable.

Keith finished his cereal and his mom pulled him down for a hug.

His dad raised his mug toward him, a silent nod toward good luck.

When he left his house, it was with an odd sort of closure, as if he was never going to see his parents again and that was fine.

It was an odd sort of feeling, to be sure, but not a bad one.

It didn’t weigh him down on his bike ride to school. It simply was.

The fog followed Keith all the way into the city, a constant haze of gray and white. Keith was glad for the jacket he’d decided to wear; he didn’t even notice the cold.

What Keith did notice was that people were unusually friendly.

He rode past a couple curled up against each other on a park bench. They were hand-in-hand, and one of them, a man with a mohawk, was resting his head on his partner’s shoulder. When the hairier of the two noticed Keith, he gently nudged his lover to catch his attention, and both waved at Keith as he passed by. Keith slowed to wave back, and the two men smiled.

They seemed sweet. He hoped they were happy together.

Then there was a man on the opposite side of a crosswalk, one with gray hair, wire-frame glasses, and a cheerful smile. He sent Keith an encouraging thumbs up from the opposite sidewalk, and Keith, not knowing what else to do, just waved again.

The man didn’t seem bothered. In fact, he smiled wider.

Then a bus without a driver passed between them, and the man seemed to disappear.

And that was fine. Keith saw nothing wrong with that. He just waited for the light to turn green and continued on his usual route to school.

None of the classmates that gathered in the cafeteria before the bell rang had faces. There was a low buzz of conversation, but Keith couldn’t make out a single word. Normally, he’d be able to pick out at least one conversation, but not that day. But that was fine. There was no need to eavesdrop.
The bell rang soon enough, anyway. Sooner than usual, maybe. But there was nothing wrong with that. At least Keith didn’t have to wait long before he started his first class.

The lights in the classroom were low. There were windows, but the blinds were drawn, most likely to prevent glare from reaching the television that had been wheeled in.

A video was playing, one that showed a pink, five-petaled flower blowing in a silent breeze. There was no sound from the video save for faint piano music.

Keith’s teacher, a woman with long, white hair, pointed ears, and gold markings high on her cheekbones, sent him a sweet smile from across the classroom as he walked in, but said nothing.

Keith sent a smile back and took his seat next to the only student in the classroom who wore a face.

“Hey, Keith,” greeted the boy, his golden-brown eyes glimmering warmly from behind a pair of round glasses.

Keith smiled at the boy and dropped himself into his seat, settling into the cozy darkness of the classroom.

Faintly, in the far reaches of Keith’s mind, he registered that those words were the first he’d heard all day, but he didn’t care enough to dwell on that realization.

The video ended, and Keith stood up from his desk to make his way to his next class, though the bell hadn’t rung. The lights in the hallway were bright, but not blindingly so.

The fog had followed him inside. But that was fine.

The boy with the face followed Keith to his next class, and they sat next to each other again.

Keith wondered whether he should say something to the boy, but he didn’t. He was too distracted by the teacher at the front of the dimly-lit class, a silent man keenly occupied with changing transparency sheets on an old projector, demonstrating star charts. Every time he bent down to change the sheet, his silvery, shoulder-length hair swept over his neck.

When class ended, Keith got up to leave the class, but as if drawn in by a siren’s song, he found himself walking toward his teacher instead of the door.

He and his teacher reached for each other simultaneously, hugging as if they did that every day. Keith didn’t mind, either. It was fine; he was a good hugger. Softer than Keith imagined. For some reason, he’d half-expected the man to be as rigid as a plate of armor.

The boy with the face waited patiently for the hug to end before joining Keith on his way to the door.

After only two classes, school ended. And Keith didn’t mind. He was looking forward to going home. It was fine.

In the rush to escape the school, a girl with black, braided pigtails knocked into Keith’s shoulder. She ran ahead a few feet before stopping in place and waving enthusiastically with a smile so wide that it shrunk the red markings under her eyes to mere slits.

Keith waved back with an uncertain smile of his own, wondering what class they must have had together for her to recognize him.
“She seems happy,” said the boy who had waited for Keith by the door. He still seemed to be waiting. But that was fine. He seemed friendly enough. “I guess you made her proud.”

Keith kept his eyes on the girl as she turned away and ran into the fog. Before she disappeared from view entirely, a man and a woman, most likely the girl’s parents, emerged from the whiteness. They took either of her hands, and when they walked into the fog, it was together.

Proud…

(The blue heart lied perfectly flat against the skin, glistening and wet and undrying. The blue marker cap still hung from his lips like an unlit cigarette, even as he smirked, pride bright and gleaming on no less than his every feature, like he’d just come up with the most brilliant idea in the world.)

Keith frowned. What could he have done to make her proud?

“Anyway,” the boy at Keith’s side spoke up brightly, yanking Keith out of his musings. “I’m starving, and there’s this restaurant on the way home that’s calling my name. Want to come with?”

Keith wasn’t sure why he nodded. He wasn’t hungry. He had no reason to spend time with someone he didn’t know. Still, he felt his head move of his own accord.

“All right, then,” said the boy eagerly, sticking his hands in his pockets. “Guess I’ll lead the way.”

They left Keith’s bike behind at the school, and it disappeared into the fog as easily as Keith’s memory of it.

The journey to the restaurant seemed to take both an eternity and an instant.

They kept passing people, and each of them stopped to greet Keith.

A mountain of a man with a bushy, black beard and gold markings under his eyes patted Keith’s shoulder with an enormous hand as he passed by, careful not to let the little girl he was carrying slip from his shoulders.

A short woman with wide, curious eyes and green markings nudged Keith’s arm with her fist too gently to call it a punch, but didn’t spare Keith a second glance. She just walked by, falling in step with an older woman who looked very much like her, down to the same green markings.

A tall man with a blue-beaded rattail stopped and took Keith’s hand in a strong, amicable grip. The woman he was walking with peered around his shoulder and sent Keith a smile that seemed bafflingly grateful. Keith smiled back. Normally, the confusion would have been enough to shake his smile, but not that day. Not when he was in such a good mood.

Every single person who touched Keith seemed to carry ten-thousand years with them, and they temporarily passed those years on to Keith, making him feel ancient. The second the contact ended, however, it felt as though less than a second had passed. They just walked into the fog and faded away as though nothing had happened at all.

And the boy with the glasses never stopped smiling once.

“It sure was a good day, wasn’t it?” he asked, warm and chipper.

Keith nodded. It had been a good day; he’d been lighthearted from the moment he’d woken up. It wasn’t for any particular reason, either, and that was fine. He wasn’t going to complain about being happy.
“Do you think you’d want every day to feel like this?” asked the boy with the glasses.

Keith thought about it for a moment. Just for a moment. “I wouldn’t hate it,” he decided.

“Is there something you’d like more?” asked the bespectacled boy.

Keith thought again. Harder this time. His feet carried him along the sidewalk unbidden, the boy at his side keeping up easily. “I think I’d like to fall in love,” he admitted. It was easy opening up to this stranger. And that was fine. “Today was nice, but it wouldn’t

(acoustic guitar music from a cell phone, his hand outstretched, a tentative reach to touch that outstretched hand, that outstretched hand pulling him to his feet)

be as nice as

(they were all having so much fun, sweating, dancing to the music, and he was stuck in the corner with his Lion, but God, did he ever want to join, to sweat with them, to dance with them)

and I made some friends

and I got to see my family

(it was so good to see him again, to talk to him, so why were they talking about disasters, why weren’t they talking about him and his life and how long his hair had been white like that and where he got that scar, why were they still strangers)

then that would be a good day. A better day.”

The boy with the glasses watched Keith, pensive, but still smiling. “What if you had to work really hard?” When he stopped on the sidewalk, so did Keith. “Would that be worth it?”

Keith nodded. “I think so.”

The boy’s smile widened. “Good. That’s all I wanted to hear.” He nodded at the restaurant they’d stopped in front of. “Now let’s eat.”

The person behind the podium at the restaurant they’d stopped at smiled warmly at Keith when he entered. Just Keith. Not the boy with the glasses. They looked at him almost paternally, their dark eyes softening above the pink markings on their cheeks. The four thick braids that ran over the top of their head like a mohawk rested over their shoulders almost like a shawl. The braids jostled with every movement as they bent down to grab a pair of menus from behind the podium and waved for Keith and his companion to follow them.

When the three reached the table, the host set the menus down in front of two of the chairs. Once their hands were free, they turned to Keith and wrapped him in a warm, familiar embrace. One that was easily returned.
And in a voice more feminine than Keith was expecting, he heard a soft whisper in his ear.

“I am so proud of you, my Paladin. Thank you.”

Keith didn’t understand the words. They made no sense to him at all. But they were warm and welcome, and Keith held onto the host tighter. He never wanted to let go.

But then the host was gone, and Keith was already seated in his chair across from the boy with glasses. And Keith was fine with that.

An older woman, one with a wizened but beautiful face, approached their table. The messy, gray bun at the back of her head wobbled when she spoke.

Keith wasn’t sure what she said. He couldn’t make out a single word.

“I think we need a minute to decide,” said the boy with glasses.

Keith nodded in confirmation, though he still wasn’t sure what the woman said.

The woman smiled at the boy with glasses, then at Keith. She frowned at his sleeve, picked at it for a moment, and then reached up to touch Keith’s face. She patted it, then rubbed her thumb against it as if trying to rid his cheek of a stain.

Then she smiled a strangely grateful smile, and she walked away with a spring in her step that seemed out of place for her old age.

And that was fine.

The restaurant was filling with fog very quickly, more fog than had been outside.

And that was fine.

The boy with glasses was smiling at Keith, just like he had been from the moment Keith first saw him.

“So,” said the boy conversationally. “Have you never been in love?”

What an odd question to ask. Keith was sure he’d implied as much when they were talking before.

He opened his mouth to answer.

“I…”

His mouth snapped shut again, so quickly that his teeth clicked.

He’d been about to say that he hadn’t.

But why did that answer sound wrong?

The room was smaller.

There was more fog than ever.

Keith couldn’t see the walls, but he knew that they were closing in.

And that was not fine.
“I don’t know,” said Keith, pulling his jacket tighter around himself.

His jacket?

“Sure you do,” said the boy with glasses, his smile brightening.

The room felt even smaller.

“No, I don’t,” insisted Keith, bowing his head, pulling his jacket even tighter around himself.

His jacket didn’t smell like him. It should have, if it was his jacket. But it smelled like someone else.

Distinctly like someone else.

Someone Keith knew.

But who?

“Whose jacket is that?”

Keith lifted his head. His mind was reeling, and nothing made sense.

Whose jacket?

“I…”

He didn’t know.

Did he?

“I don’t…”

It smelled so familiar.

Why did it smell so familiar?

“I-I don’t know, I—”

“Don’t give me that,” said the boy, his smile fading, his eyes ceasing to sparkle behind his glasses. “You know. I know you know. Whose is it?”

Keith didn’t know. He swore he didn’t.

But he felt like he should have.

The jacket definitely didn’t feel like his. And it wasn’t just something his parents thrifted, either.

He liked the jacket too much for it to be his.

It wasn’t his style, and it was old, and it was fraying at the sleeves, like someone had been wearing it for far longer than anyone should have. It was ratty and faded, and it fit strangely under the right arm as if a seam had been torn and sewn back together, but for whatever reason, Keith loved it, and he loved wearing it. Why did he love it so much if it wasn’t even his?

“Whose, Keith?”

It was like wearing a hug, or like being lifted up the stairs with a caring embrace when he was too
tired to move, or like holding the hand of someone who wouldn’t let go even in his sleep, or being carried through the rain by arms that held him close and would never one dream of dropping him, or like dancing on the rooftop under the stars.

It was so familiar.

So familiar.

Why? How could it be so familiar?

“Whose jacket is it, Keith?”

Keith’s heart screamed in his head, and he screamed what his heart said.

“Lance!” he roared, pressing his eyes tightly shut. “Lance! It’s Lance’s! Lance’s jacket!”

He didn’t need to open his eyes to know that the restaurant was gone.

The world was completely silent.

The boy with the glasses said nothing at all.

But other voices began to build up. At first, they were like a low buzz of conversation, but over time, they grew and grew until they were like an explosion in Keith’s head.

“—can’t keep sitting in here, Lance. It’s not doing him any—”

“—not leaving him. Not until—”

“—not eating enough, you’re not drinking enough water, you’ve barely—”

“—slept! I sleep right here! You can’t tell me—”

“—not sleeping, Lance. That’s napping. In a chair. When was the last time you saw a bed, or even—”

“—YOU, PIDGE! I CAN TAKE CARE OF—”

“—take it out on Pidge! They’re just worried—”

“—all are, Lance. You’re not taking care of yourself. This isn’t—”

“—you crying? God, Lance, don’t—”

“—keep thinking, ‘What if he never wakes up?’ What if I lose him, and all I have left is this crappy, blurry picture on my phone of a red—”

“—wouldn’t want this. He’d want you to—”

“—don’t know anything about—”

“—if he cares about you like you care about him, he’d never want you to—”

“—need rest, Lance, and water, and—”

“He loves you, Lance. He told me. And I know it was the truth. I saw it in his eyes. He wouldn’t want you to be miserable like this.”
“I’ll be miserable either way, Shiro.”

“Not if you get your mind off of this. You have to at least try.”

“I don’t have to do anything.”

“For us, Lance. All of us. Please.”

All at once, the voices stopped.

The gentlest of breezes tugged at Keith’s hair, tickling at his cheeks. The sound of rustling vegetation broke the silence.

Slowly, hesitantly, Keith opened his eyes.

And he found himself on top of a hill. An almost featureless hill with nothing more on it than a paved road and the bench he sat on. Grass stretched as far as the eye could see, which wasn’t very far at all, considering the hill he was on seemed to be very, very high up. So high that Keith couldn’t see the bottom. He saw the hilltop, and then nothing more than blue, blue sky.

The fog was gone.

But the boy with glasses was not.

And Keith remembered.

He remembered everything.


And… God, this guy looked just like Pidge.

He was relaxed. A hell of a lot more relaxed than Keith was. He was reclining, his legs stretched out in front of him, arms crossed behind his head, his gaze pointed skyward.

Keith opened his mouth. He wanted to ask who the boy was, but that wasn’t the question that came out. Instead, he asked, “Where are we?”

“Bus stop,” said the boy with the glasses brightly.

Keith furrowed his brow. *Bus stop.* His jaw worked rapidly as his mind tried its hardest to catch up.

“Are… Are we getting on a bus?”

“Well,” said the boy with the glasses, “I am. But what about you? What do you want to do?”

Keith sat back in his seat, letting his back fall against the bench. He had a choice. He had some modicum of control. Some of his anxiety was soothed, at least a little bit. Enough to untie the knots in his stomach and clear the tension in his mind.

“…Where does the bus go?” he asked.

The boy crossed his ankles. “Where do you think it goes?”

“…Oh.”

Keith looked down at the ground, at the exact point where the grass met the black asphalt.
“...Who are you?” he asked finally.

“Pidge’s brother,” said the boy. “And Shiro’s boyfriend. You know, before I kicked it.” He nudged Keith’s arm with his elbow. “You can call me Matt.”

“Matt.” Keith closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “What’s it like?”

“About like today,” said Matt. “Kind of like normal life, but with no obligations. Lots of people happy to see you. General feeling of contentment. Nothing bothers you. People actually talk to you, though, and there’s none of that fog.” He shuddered so violently that Keith could feel it without looking up. “That stuff was creepy. But without that, no one would be able to visit you but me.”

“...I didn’t know those people, though,” admitted Keith, turning to look at Matt. “Or, at least, most of them. I knew my parents and Alfor, and I knew the Paladins, but...”

“Man, you didn’t recognize Voltron after spending twenty years with a fifth of them?” Matt chuckled. “That’s harsh.”

Keith’s eyes widened, and he sat up straighter. “That was Red?”

“Well, Red and the others,” explained Matt with a shrug. “Before Voltron split off. As for everyone else...” He let his hands fall to his lap. “They’re just people who were grateful for what you did. People who were involved with trying to bring the Galra down somehow, or people who’ve been waiting for their families for way, way longer than anyone should ever have to.” He chuckled. “One of them was just my dad. He wanted to meet you. See the Paladin who changed everything for himself.”

“The Paladin who changed everything?” echoed Keith, knitting his brow.

“Sure,” said Matt. “Weren’t you listening to Haggar? None of this would have happened without you.” He crossed his arms and rested his chin in his hand. “Alfor was around for ten-thousand years, and he just sort of...stayed with the status quo that whole time. If a Galra showed up in your world, he’d fight it back. If it ran back to its own world, he didn’t care, as long as it didn’t get out and run amok in the living world. At least, until your mom looked away from you for five seconds to do laundry and you found the Case of Lions.”

“I...” Keith’s frown. “What?”

“Yeah, I know.” Matt’s grin was nearly wide enough to split his face in half. “Ten-thousand years of hell down the drain because your mom decided to bring you with her into the basement when she went to put wet clothes in the dryer. I don’t even know how you got the Case open with your little baby hands, but according to Ulaz—”

“That’s why I could see Alfor all that time,” realized Keith. “I bonded with Red.”

“Exactly,” said Matt, snapping his fingers excitedly. “You caught Alfor’s attention, and you caught Zarkon’s. The Galra didn’t want any more Paladins to worry about, so Zarkon tried to kill you when you were a baby, and, well, you can imagine how Alfor felt.”

Keith thought back to how it felt the first time Lance looked at him instead of through him. Before they even became friends, Lance meant the world to Keith, just because he could see what no one else could.

Yes, he could imagine how Alfor felt.
“Alfor killed Zarkon,” said Matt, raising a finger to count off the event, “which meant that when the
next eclipse rolled around, Sendak was leading the Galra instead,” he counted off another finger,
“which meant that Haggar was distracted, making sure Sendak didn’t mess everything up,” another
count, “which means that she was far away when Thace broke in, so he just barely had enough time
to save Lance—”

“Wait.” Keith shook his head. “Slow down. If… If what you say is true, then—”

“You know, it’s not a good sign that you don’t know your own boyfriend’s birthday,” teased Matt.
“If you did, you would have suspected something like this a long time ago. He was born the day you
died, Keith. Well, ‘died’.”

Keith ran a hand nervously through his hair, and upon doing so, suddenly remembered that he was
wearing Lance’s jacket.

He could still smell Lance’s shampoo.

“And then, of course, Lance found the exposure,” continued Matt as if he hadn’t just dropped a
bomb on Keith. “We have no idea how that happened. Destiny, I guess. And then he found you, and
holy crow, if you hadn’t changed everything enough already…” Matt laughed. “Well, I guess you
know what happens from there. Lance kicking Galra butt because he had the motivation to do so.
Because you were there.” He dropped a hand on Keith’s shoulder. “You changed everything, Keith.
Everything.”

“But I didn’t do anything,” said Keith. “I just…existed.”

“Exactly,” said Matt, all the more excited. “The only part of you being a Paladin that was ever that
important was just being able to talk to people you wouldn’t have been able to talk to otherwise. You
were loved, so the world changed around you. How wild is that?” He clapped his hands together like
he was making a small explosion. “It’s crazy, like you were some kind of chosen one or something.
But that’s just it. You weren’t. It’s just a testament to how much difference an ordinary person can
make.”

Keith licked his lips nervously. He didn’t know how to feel about that at all. If anything, he just felt
more confused. Maybe not about his situation, but about his life. “So what now? Now that it’s over, I
mean.”

“Over?” Matt scoffed. “Are you kidding me? Weren’t you just telling me that you wanted more than
anything to fall in love and make friends and be with your family?”

“I…” Keith frowned. He did say that, didn’t he?

“When you’re in a place like that, you’re supposed to feel content,” said Matt. “Like, you obviously
weren’t bothered by things not making total sense, but you weren’t content with what you had,
either.” He leaned back, resting one hand on his own knee, the other gesturing excitedly. “You
wanted things. You wanted love. Not just from Lance, but from your family, and from the friends
you never got to make when you were alive. You’re so obviously not ready to move on.” He
frowned briefly, as if merely in thought. “I mean, technically, you could, if you chose to, but… Do
you want to?”

Keith crossed his arms. The fabric of Lance’s jacket folded and crinkled in the crook of his elbows.
“…It won’t be like when I was a spirit, right?”

“No way,” said Matt, utterly lacking in hesitation. “No going through walls or doors, no being stuck
at home, none of that ‘not being able to get wet’ crap… And you’ll age, and you’ll bleed, and you’ll actually get localized pain instead of just being tired when stuff happens to you, and you’ll cry.”

“That…” Keith couldn’t help smiling to himself. He bowed his head, trying to hide his expression, but he had no doubt that Matt could see it. “That actually sounds…great.”

“And that’s why you’re not ready,” said Matt. “I was ready to go. I knew that Mom and Pidge and Shiro would miss me, but I knew they’d be okay, and I was satisfied with my life the way it was. But you…” He chuckled and shook his head. “You’re just getting started.”

The distant sound of an engine caught Keith’s ear, and he looked to the right, trying to see over the side of the hill, but to no avail.

“...I really don’t have to get on?” he asked, frowning at where the grass met the sky.

“Nope,” said Matt. “You have no obligation. Your body is right where you left it, waiting for you to go home. And it’s not the only one waiting.”

Slowly, Keith turned back toward Matt. “And...you’re really okay with where you are?”

“Of course,” said Matt. “And someday, you will be, too. Even if it doesn’t seem like it right now. We all have our time.”

Keith chewed his lip. “Is...there anything I can do to help you?”

“Hmm…” Matt crossed his arms, frowning in thought. “Actually, yeah, I think there is something.” This time, when Matt smiled, it was softer. Less excited. “Tell Shiro to stop letting my memory rule his life. He should call my mom; she doesn’t blame him for not being in that shuttle with me and neither do I. And kick his butt if he doesn’t ask Allura out in at least three months, okay? Don’t let him miss out on a babe like her. As for Pidge…” The eagerness to Matt’s smile returned with full force. “Just tell them I love the hair. They’ll get it.”

Before Keith could ask, a simple, blue bus appeared from over the side of the hill, indistinguishable from any ordinary Greyhound. The only real difference, Keith supposed, was the destination. It screeched to a stop right in front of their bench, and the doors opened. There was no driver.

With a deep breath, Matt stretched his arms over his head and stood from the bench. “That’s my ride. Better go before it leaves, or I’ll have to catch the next one.” He grinned one last time and sent Keith a wave. “See you around, Keith. But not too quick. You’ve got your whole life ahead of you.”

Keith, unsure of what to say, simply watched in silence as Matt rushed to the open doors and bounced eagerly inside.

It was only when the bus began to leave that Keith realized what he wanted to say.

He climbed to his feet, wrapped Lance’s jacket tight around his body, and shouted, “Matt!”

Matt turned around and peeked around the door of the moving bus.

Keith took a deep breath, and he summoned the courage for a smile. “Thank you!”

Matt didn’t say a word. He just leaned a little farther out of the bus and tossed Keith a two-fingered salute.

Then, he disappeared over the side of the hill, and that was the last Keith ever saw of Matthew Holt.
Keith opened his eyes.

The fog was back.

And he was freezing.

He reached out and tried to push through the fog, only to realize it was solid. Like a wall of ice. He was trapped.

Alarmed, Keith slammed his fists against the fog.

A shadow stirred in the fog. Distant at first, but it drew closer...closer...

Keith clenched his fists, ready to fight if the shadow turned out to be hostile.

The shadow pushed his hands against the wall. A muffled voice worked its way through the wall. Keith couldn’t quite hear it, but it sounded just as frantic as Keith felt.

Keith lowered his guard, but only just. He was still trapped, and he was sure that whatever that shadow was had the upper hand.

There was a click, and then the fog lifted.

Literally. As if someone had picked it up and moved it. The fog swung away from Keith like a door, revealing a stucco ceiling, a hanging light, and—

“Shiro?”

More than ever, Shiro looked old. Not just in the sense that Keith remembered him best as a small child and he was most definitely not a child anymore, but even overlooking Keith’s bias, Shiro seemed twenty years older than he really was.

Before Keith could even consider saying something about that out loud, however, Shiro scooped Keith into his arms and held him tight. So tight that Keith’s shoulders popped.

“Ow—”

“I’m sorry,” said Shiro, releasing Keith quickly. “I just got— Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” mumbled Keith, reaching up to rub the joint he’d popped. “I’m fine. Are you okay? You look a little...”

Keith wasn’t sure how to finish that sentence, but Shiro seemed to understand, and a worn, weary smile appeared on his face.

“I’ll be fine,” he said. “I’ve just been worried. We all have.”

“All—?” Keith looked around the room and realized that he was in the dining room.

On the table.

Maybe there just wasn’t anywhere else to put the...the chamber.
Right. Of course. The chamber.

Keith looked down at himself, at his arms and his clothes.

The front of his shirt was rock solid with dried blood.

His arms were still bandaged, and there was more dark red in the wrappings than white.

Slowly, carefully, he began to pick at the knot he’d haphazardly tied in his frantic attempt to live just a little longer.

“Hey— Careful,” warned Shiro.

Keith lifted his gaze from his wrappings for a moment, just to connect his gaze with Shiro’s worried, uncertain eyes before turning his attentions back to the wrappings and freeing his arms.

The cuts that Keith had known for twenty years, that had nearly killed him on two separate occasions, were healed. Nothing remained of them but a raised, pink scar.

It was all over.

After decades less than a century of being a Paladin, despite embracing the idea that he was going to be a Paladin for ten-thousand years just like Alfor had been, it was over. Just like that.

He had his cousin back.

He had potential friends in Pidge and Hunk, maybe even with everyone who got involved in the ceremony.

And he had—

“Are you sure you’re okay?” asked Shiro.

Keith raised his head.

The world was blurry.

He blinked, and it cleared again as the tears in his eyes rolled down his cheeks.

“Yeah.” Keith frantically wiped at his face. “I’m just…” He sighed sharply and managed a shaky smile. “I guess I’m shocked. I thought I was dead.”

“We all did,” said Shiro.

“How long?” asked Keith.

“Six days.”

Though Keith was the one who asked, he wasn’t sure what he was expecting from the answer.

Six days felt like nothing after twenty years.

But there was another question on the tip of his tongue, one that would matter once it was answered.

“Where’s—”

“Lance?” Shiro smiled knowingly. “Sleeping, hopefully. For the first time in the past week. Hunk
and I had to drag him to his room.”

“Oh.” Keith took a deep, shaky breath. “I...guess I shouldn’t—”

Shiro’s hand on his shoulder stopped Keith mid-sentence.

“Go,” said Shiro. “He’ll sleep easier knowing you’re okay.”

Keith sighed, relieved, and carefully began to climb out of the chamber.

“Lance left you a change of clothes,” explained Shiro while Keith carefully tried to step down from the table. “You should probably take advantage of that before going upstairs. You look a little…”

Keith looked down at himself, at his blood-soaked clothes, clothes that were most likely impossible to save.

Well, he’d been wearing them for twenty years. Maybe it was time for a change.

“Here.” A stack of folded clothes entered Keith’s vision.

Once Keith had taken them, Shiro turned away, giving him privacy.

Keith took hold of the long-sleeved t-shirt on top and shook it out. It unfolded easily and dangled from Keith’s fingertips innocently.

Keith couldn’t help but think back to the day Lance had moved in, the day he’d gone through all of Lance’s clothes, wishing he could try them on because they were all in his size.

He never thought at the time that he would ever get the chance.

Presented with that chance now, Keith could hardly believe it at all.

His hands shook as he carefully set his clothes down on one of the dining chairs and began to pull his blood-crusted shirt over his head.

And Keith paused, still holding his old shirt. A frown pulled at his lips.

“...Shiro?”

“Something wrong?”

“No, but…” Keith swallowed. This was weird, wasn’t it? Yeah, it was definitely weird. But he still had a message to deliver. “...You should call Matt’s mom.”

After some convincing, Keith left Shiro in the dining room and closed the door, allowing him privacy for his phone call.

With bare feet and bare hands, Keith crept across the hallway, sparing only a glance at the basement that was no longer dangerous, and made his way into the foyer.

The foyer itself was unlit. None of the lamps were on. The kitchen, on the other hand, was very well-lit, and light bled from the archway, splashing against the side of the staircase. The soft, metallic
clash of pots and pans under running water reached Keith’s ears, and as much as Keith wanted to go upstairs and find Lance, he couldn’t resist making a detour.

As he suspected might be the case, Hunk was in the kitchen, scrubbing dishes in the sink.

The second that Keith crossed the imaginary doorway between the foyer and the kitchen, however, Hunk whipped around.

His dark brown eyes widened. His jaw dropped. A shocked, ecstatic laugh broke out of him like an explosion.

Before Keith knew what was happening, he was wrapped in another bone-crushing hug. This one was different from Shiro’s, excited rather than desperate, and much more...cushioned.

Not to mention a bit more shocking.

“I— Man, I’m sorry.” Hunk released Keith quickly and stepped back, a sheepish smile on his face. “I should have asked instead of just jumping all up in your personal space like that. You just have no idea how heavy it’s been here. Especially with Lance. Watching him this whole time has been awful. He’s barely been eating, and that’s just a crime against humanity. I mean, for real? If you would have died, I would have killed you. Not that that’s possible, but, you know. Man, you haven’t eaten in— I was about to say a week, but I bet it’s more like twenty years. Are you hungry? You’ve gotta be starving. Nearly dying has to work up an appetite. Can I—”

“Hunk.”

Hunk fell silent.

Keith managed a patient smile. “I appreciate it, and food sounds great, but…”

“Buuuut you want to see Lance first?”

Keith nodded.

Hunk smiled. “Yeah, I kind of figured. I’m going to go ahead and start making you something to eat, though, okay? Until then—hold on—” He rushed to a countertop where a plate of cookies rested within view. In a flash, he grabbed two from the batch and returned, shoving them toward Keith.

“It’s not much, but it’ll tide you over until you get back from a well-deserved cuddle-fest.”

Keith looked down at the cookies.

They were cat-shaped, and still warm in his bare hands. The red icing smelled a little different than what Keith had been expecting.

Cautiously, for the first time in twenty years, Keith sank his teeth into something edible.

The flavor of the cookie exploded in his mouth, a sharp reminder that Keith hadn’t tasted anything for longer than he could remember.

And yet, he still recalled the flavor of white chocolate enough to taste it in the icing.

The first cookie was down in seconds, but Keith could still taste it in his mouth.

Aftertastes. Food left aftertastes. Keith had forgotten about that completely.
“That good?” asked Hunk, grinning wide.

Keith nodded silently, suddenly self-conscious of how fast he must have eaten. That was probably attractive.

But Hunk didn’t draw attention to it. He just laughed. “Well, there’s more where that came from. After dinner, though, okay? For now, stick to those two.”

Again, Keith could only nod.

“All right, that’s enough hanging around my kitchen.” Wide, heavy hands pushed at Keith’s shoulders, turning him around. “Go get Lance. It’s a *crime* I got to hug you first.”

With a shove to his back to get him going—courtesy of Hunk’s mighty hands—Keith made for the stairs, still holding onto the second cookie Hunk gave him. Every piece he broke off as he made his way to the second floor tasted like heaven. Keith swore he’d never take taste for granted again.

Or maybe he would. And that was the beauty of being alive. He could afford to take things for granted.

“Oh, shoot, you’re awake.”

Keith lifted his head, tearing his attention from the last bite of cookie to find Pidge standing in the doorway of their bedroom, hair sticking every-which-way and deep bags under their eyes.

“Pidge,” greeted Keith slowly. “Uh… Hi.”

Pidge snorted. “You’re articulate, aren’t you? Well, I’ll let it pass. You did just kind of wake up from a six-day sleep. Goals, by the way.”

Keith raised an eyebrow. “Um…”

“Okay, proving my point. Good. I like you.” They made a circular motion with their index finger. “Now turn around and keep going. If you’re going to pass out from cognitive overload, I’d rather you do it in Lance’s bed.”

“I wh— Pidge?”

Pidge crossed their arms over their chest and raised an eyebrow of their own, looking expectant rather than confused.

“I… I don’t know what it means,” admitted Keith, “but he said you would, so—”

“Who?”

Keith took a deep breath. “…Matt said he likes your hair.”

The expression on Pidge’s face slid off like soap suds under running water. “…What?”

“Matt,” said Keith nervously. “Likes your hair. I don’t—”

Pidge’s eyes glinted as the light from downstairs got trapped in their eyes. “I…came out after he…and I cut my…I asked him what he thought at his grave, but… How did…? What *happened* to you?”

“I…have no idea,” admitted Keith, feeling like he’d just stumbled into something very personal by complete accident.
Pidge pulled their glasses off of their face and rubbed their eyes with the loose sleeve of their shirt. “It’s okay,” they said quietly, their voice cracking. “We’ll find out later. Just...go find Lance.”

“Are you o—”

“I’m fine,” snapped Pidge, still wiping at their eyes. “Go. Lance.”

“Right.” Keith took a breath and turned around, holding onto the half-eaten cookie in his hands so tight that crumbs fell to the floor without his noticing.

He stood in front of Lance’s bedroom door—their bedroom door, as Lance called it—for far too long. And he recognized himself doing it. But he still kept thinking of excuses.

He had to finish his cookie first.

He had to make sure there were no crumbs on his borrowed clothes first.

He had to check for dried blood on his hands first.

It wasn’t before long that Keith ran out of ways to procrastinate, however; there weren’t that many things to do by himself in a dark hallway.

So, nervously, he reached for the brass doorknob, twisted it, and pushed the door open in utter silence.

The lump of blankets curled up in the darkness of the bedroom, illuminated by only the moon and stars in the window, gripped at Keith’s heart.

Keith closed the door behind himself and walked cautiously around the foot of Lance’s bed, careful not to make too much noise. He wanted to wake Lance up gently. If he was really as worried as Shiro said he was, then Keith didn’t want to startle him.

There were tear stains on Lance’s pillow again.

What Keith wouldn’t have given to make sure he never saw tears on Lance’s pillow ever again.

He slowly lowered himself onto the edge of Lance’s bed. Very slowly. Very gently. Lance didn’t so much as stir. Despite the moonlight showing evidence of tears on his pillow and even on his cheeks, Lance seemed peaceful.

“Lance,” whispered Keith, leaning down and tucking his own hair behind his ear when it fell in front of his face. “Wake up.”

Lance’s brow furrowed, and Keith felt a little guilty for waking him up when he apparently hadn’t slept in days. Guilty, but not guilty enough to keep him from still trying to wake Lance up.

“Wake up,” repeated Keith, a tiny, tiny smile pulling at his lips. “It’s me. Keith. Your—”

Lance’s eyes shot open before Keith could finish what he was saying, and Lance sat upright, crashing their foreheads together with an unpleasant crack.

“Quiznak!” hissed Keith, leaning away as fast as his body would allow and rubbing his forehead with the heel of his hand.

“Ave Maria, Keith! What the—?”
How familiar. So much for not startling Lance.

“...Keith?”

Keith lowered his hand, still wincing, and found Lance looking back at him.

Lance, eyes wide, blankets bunched around his waist, hair sticking in odd directions on just one side of his head...more beautiful than Keith had ever seen him.

“Yeah.” Keith smiled warmly, his heart fluttering like frantic butterfly wings inside his chest. “It’s me.”

“You’re here.”

“I’m here.”

“You’re...alive?”

Keith shrugged one shoulder, a crooked smile on his lips. “As far as I can tell.”

Without permission or even warning, Lance jumped forward and pressed his face against Keith’s chest, wrapping his arms tight around the small of Keith’s back.

Keith waited, patient, understanding.

“...You have a heartbeat,” murmured Lance.

“I guess so,” said Keith, shrugging again.

“It’s...going really fast, though.” Lance lifted his head, frowning. “Is that normal?”

“With you around?” Keith reached for Lance’s cheeks and tilted his face up. “Very normal.”

Lance laughed and leaned closer to Keith’s face, Keith’s hands chasing his jaw with every inch he crossed.

“How did I wind up falling in love with the biggest nerd of the century?” asked Lance, eyes sparkling with unshed tears.

“I don’t know,” said Keith, stroking under Lance’s tired eyes with his thumbs. “Maybe you should do something about that.”

“Yeah?” asked Lance, his nose brushing against Keith’s. “Like what?”

“Well...” Keith closed his eyes, and his smile widened. “You could always kiss me.”

Lance laughed, his breath warm against Keith’s lips. “Works for me.”

Epilogue
“I think you’re more nervous now than you were when you met my family.”

Keith narrowed his eyes at the trees through the sunroof, his knee bouncing incessantly. “That’s because when I met your family, they didn’t think I was dead.”

“My sister did,” said Lance, poking Keith in the shoulder. “You know I told her about you.”

“That’s still your sister,” said Keith, gripping the edge of his seat. “She didn’t know me before I became a Paladin. You can’t compare that with this.”

“Exactly,” said Lance, his hand coming to rest on Keith’s knee, the one that wasn’t bouncing wildly. “This is your family. They already love you. And they know what happened. They’ve met Allura, and they like her, pointy ears and all, and they love her! You have nothing to worry about!”

Keith stopped bouncing his knee. “...It might not be too late to back out.”

“Are you nuts?” asked Lance hastily, squeezing Keith’s knee. “Of course it is! We’re already here! Shiro and Allura are inside right now, easing your aunt and uncle into the idea of you being back!”

“But they might not have actually brought me up yet,” said Keith. “You can go in and check, and if they haven’t, then we could drive me back home, and you could come back here and explain that something came up and your boyfriend couldn’t make it—”

“And then what, you’ll spend Christmas Eve alone?” Lance pushed the center of Keith’s chest, shoving him back against the seat. “I think the quiznak not. You deserve a family, Keith, and they deserve to know you’re alive.”

Keith closed his eyes and inhaled deeply through his nose.

He knew that Lance was right.

But that didn’t make it any easier.

“...You’ll be with me?” asked Keith, already knowing the answer, but worried enough to seek confirmation.


“Okay, we’re stopping there.” Keith opened his eyes and turned to face the window before Lance could see the quiver of his lips, the first sign of the laughter he was trying to suppress.

“Aw, come on.” Lance wrapped an arm around Keith’s shoulders. “I was just trying to lighten the mood.”

Before Keith could respond, his eyes caught the movement of the door to his aunt and uncle’s house.

Lance took his hand. “Seriously, Keith. Hand in hand. I’ve got you.”

He laced his hand with Lance’s and squeezed with all of his strength.

Lance squeezed back, strong and steady, Keith’s rock as much as he had ever been.

Allura tapped on the window of the van, and Keith opened the door with his free hand.
“We’re ready for you,” explained Allura, smiling kindly, her mistrust of Keith nothing more than a weak memory after years of learning more about him. “Though, fair warning, your aunt is already crying.”

Keith’s hands began to shake.

Lance squeezed his hand tighter, and the shaking stopped.

“It’ll be okay,” whispered Lance again. “I promise.”

It took some maneuvering, but he and Lance managed to escape the van without letting go of each other’s hands.

Snow crunched under Keith’s boots as they crossed the short distance to his aunt and uncle’s house for the first time in years and years. They were approaching far too quickly. Keith wanted the world to slow down, to stop, so he could catch his breath and collect his thoughts. He wanted to turn back, to run back to the van and curl up in the back seat and never come out.

But Lance’s hand was sturdy and strong against his own, and it kept him grounded, kept him from backing down.

They climbed the stairs of the Shiroganes’ deck, each step on the wooden boards sending tremors up Keith’s legs.

“Want me to go first?” whispered Lance, leaning close.

Keith, not trusting himself to speak, nodded.

“Okay,” said Lance. “I can do that. But only if you don’t let go of my hand.”

Keith, again, nodded.

Allura opened the door, leading the way inside.

Lance lifted Keith’s hand to press a soothing kiss to his knuckles. He smiled, kind and encouraging and warm, and then, tugging gently on Keith’s hand to ensure he followed, Lance stepped over the threshold.

Keith closed his eyes, hovering in the doorway. He knew he was letting the cold air in, but he was scared to walk any further, afraid to see their faces.

“Mr. and Mrs. Shirogane,” called Lance, sounding not unlike a game show host, “I present to you...” He rolled his tongue, making an impromptu drum roll, and he tugged harder on Keith’s hand, pulling him inside. The screen door slammed in the wake of his clumsy footsteps. “My boyfriend, Keith Kogane!”

For a long and excruciating moment, nothing happened at all. Neither Keith’s aunt nor his uncle made a single sound. It was so silent, that Keith wondered whether he’d somehow reached the afterlife from simply being too anxious.

And then, a choked sob met his ears.

Wincing, Keith raised his head and opened his eyes, wincing.

And he saw his aunt on the living room couch, tears in her eyes, hands over her mouth.
And he saw his uncle, jaw dropped, Shiro smiling kindly with a hand on his shoulder. And they looked old. So old. And yet, still completely recognizable as Shiro’s parents. Keith’s aunt and uncle.

This… Keith’s heart shattered, and tears welled in his eyes. This is my family.

Neither his aunt nor his uncle moved. They stayed utterly still, as if someone had hit the pause button on Keith’s life. And there they stayed, apparently frozen in shock… until they weren’t.

Keith was forced to stumble back, taken by surprise as the little, sixty-year-old Asian woman on the couch leapt up and charged at him like a quarterback, wrapping him in a hug that had so much force behind it that it nearly knocked Keith on his ass. In fact, Keith almost thanked Lance’s hand more than his own legs for keeping him upright.

Unsure of how exactly to handle the sudden and powerful affection of a woman he hadn’t seen in nearly twenty-five years, Keith hesitantly reached up and patted the woman’s back with his free hand, the other still holding tight onto Lance’s hand as if it were a lifeline.

His uncle wasn’t quite as enthusiastic, but he approached in time, slowly, and when he wrapped himself around his wife and his nephew, Keith could feel the tremble in his arms.

It took a deep, steeling breath to do so, but Keith recognized his cue, and with one last squeeze, he pulled his hand out of Lance’s and used that same hand to wrap around his uncle’s back and pull the family he hadn’t seen in years into a strong and fierce embrace.

He had his family back.

And it felt wonderful.

The last time Keith had seen the guest bedroom in his aunt and uncle’s house, everything had been different. The wall colors, the furniture, the bedcovers… Everything. But Keith didn’t mind the change.

All he cared about for the moment was that he finally had a chance to unwind.

As much as he loved rekindling his long-dead relationship with his family, he was still an introvert, and it was still a drain on his mental resources.

He barely paused to hit the light switch before he stumbled across the room to the guest bed and collapsed against it, groaning into the pillows and earning a laugh from his still-chipper boyfriend.

Mostly-chipper, at least. He’d been fidgeting for the past ten minutes or so. Keith had a feeling that even he was starting to be overwhelmed by the constant flow of questions and affection.

“Tired?” asked Lance, his question punctuated with the click of a closing door.

“Mmph,” responded Keith, unmoving.

“Tired enough to regret it?” asked Lance.
Keith took a deep breath and rolled onto his side, eyes still closed.

“No,” he said, his voice no longer muffled by the pillowcase. “Still tired, though. Kind of wish I hadn’t agreed to stay the night.”

“Too late now,” said Lance. “I can’t even see the van through the window anymore, not with all this snow.” His footsteps carried across the carpet, creaking until they reached the bedside.

Keith had fully expected Lance to climb into bed with him, and when Lance didn’t, Keith opened his eyes.

Lance was crouched at the bedside, only visible from his nose up, his fingers drumming on the edge of the mattress just inches from Keith’s face. The faintest hints of a pink blush dusted his cheeks.

“What are you looking at?” grumbled Keith, raising an eyebrow.

“You,” said Lance, moderately muffled by the blanket. “Being cute.”

Keith snorted and turned his face back into the pillow, hiding it. No matter how often Lance called him ‘cute,’ he doubted he would ever really believe it. “I’m a mess,” he argued, one eye still peering at Lance.

“Yeah,” said Lance, “but you’re a cute mess.”

Keith closed his eyes again and sighed into the pillow, lacking the energy to argue.

“Ha,” said Lance. “I win.”

“Sure,” mumbled Keith. “Whatever you say.”

“That’s two for two tonight.” Lance’s fingers weaved themselves into Keith’s hair. “The family thing and you being cute. I’m on a roll.”

“I still can’t believe your family let you stay up here for the holidays,” murmured Keith, relaxing under Lance’s touch. “They’re usually so vocal about you going back home. You’re usually so vocal about going back.”

“Yeah, well…” Lance’s voice raised a few octaves, a sure sign of stress. “I may have had to strike a deal with them. I mean, it wasn’t like it’s something I wasn’t planning on doing anyway, but they wanted me to hurry up and get it over with— Yikes, ‘get it over with’ like it’s not something I was looking forward to anyway, but it’s just—”

“You’re rambling,” chided Keith, smiling into the pillowcase.

“Yeah,” sighed Lance. “I am. I know.” He leaned over Keith, planting a sweet kiss on his cheek. “How tired are you, exactly?”

“Pretty tired,” mumbled Keith.

“Hm, all right.” The floor creaked when Lance stood. “Take a nap. Short one. Okay?”

_A short one?_ “What are you planning?”

“Nothing!” insisted Lance, his voice raising pitch again. “Nothing at all! Just don’t worry about it, okay? You’re tired! Rest!”
Keith sighed. Normally, he would have argued, insisted on the two of them getting undressed and settling down for the night, but honestly, for the moment, he couldn’t care less what Lance did. Five minutes, five years, Keith didn’t care. He just wanted to sleep.

And sleep he did. Within seconds of Lance turning out the lights, Keith was out, and he didn’t wake up until he next heard Lance’s voice.


“What?” sighed Keith, furrowing his brow.

“I told you I was going to wake you up soon,” said Lance, sounding surprisingly unbothered. “You should have been expecting this.”

Keith grumbled into the pillow and rolled over, keeping his eyes closed. The lights were still off, at least.

“If you don’t wake up,” warned Lance, “I’m gonna pick you up. Gonna grab you right off of this bed and carry you around like a princess.”

“Do what you want,” mumbled Keith.

“Okay,” said Lance, too brightly for Keith’s tastes. “You asked for it.”

Keith wrenched his eyes tighter shut and braced himself for Lance to lift him out of bed.

But it never happened.

Curious and highly doubting that Lance would ever back down on a threat like that, Keith pushed himself up to a seated position and opened his eyes.

And the first thing he noticed was not Lance, but the redecorating that had taken place around him.

Strings of fairy lights looped all around the room, bathing everything they touched in a pleasant, blue glow. Everything, that is, but the lit candles that had been placed strategically around the room.

Frowning, Keith finally turned his attention on Lance, who was trying to balance his phone against a vase on the dresser by the door.

“What is this?” asked Keith warily.

Instead of an answer, Keith received the strum of an acoustic guitar. A rather familiar strum.

“...I know this song,” he said slowly, narrowing his eyes.

“You better,” teased Lance, turning away from his phone and putting his hands on his hips. “It’s only the song we had our first real dance to.” He raised an eyebrow and shrugged one shoulder. “Not to mention the song that was playing when I realized how desperately in love with you I was, but, you know, no big deal.”

Without giving Keith a chance to feel self-conscious, Lance walked to the edge of the bed and held out his hands. “So, do I really need to pick you up, or are you gonna dance with me?”

Keith frowned and looked down at the hands offered to him. He and Lance had danced countless times since that night on the roof, but Keith still couldn’t quite keep up with Lance’s salsa. Slow
dancing, of course, wouldn’t be a problem, but that wasn’t what bothered Keith.

What bothered Keith was how romantic Lance was being.

Not that Lance wasn’t guilty of being a hopeless, cheesy romantic from time to time, but he usually saved that for anniversaries and birthdays. Keith supposed it was Christmas, which counted as a holiday, but not really a romantic one.

So what was with all the candles? And why was it such a big deal that Lance had to wake Keith up to do it?

“Seriously,” prodded Keith, allowing himself to be pulled to his feet. “What’s this about?”

“What do you think it’s about?” asked Lance, sliding his hands along Keith’s arms down to his waist. “Go ahead, I’ll give you three guesses.”

Keith looped his arms over Lance’s shoulders, mimicking the same position they were in the first time they danced to the song they were revisiting. “It doesn’t have anything to do with Christmas, does it? Anniversary of the first Christmas we spent together or something like that?”

“Nope,” said Lance brightly. “That’s your first guess. Two left.”

“Well…” Keith frowned. “Everything really important that happened between us happened in summer. The day we met, our first kiss, our first date… Everything. It’s not just to celebrate me seeing my family again, is it?”

“Nah,” said Lance, leaning in closer and resting his chin on Keith’s shoulder. “I think we’ve celebrated that enough tonight. Strike two.”

Keith’s frown deepened and he glared at the end of the fairy lights that Lance had somehow hooked over the top of the doorframe. “Well, it’s can’t be just because you felt like it.”

“What?” Lance scoffed. “Can’t a guy do something nice for his fiancé?”

“Not when it involves waking me up after— Wait, fiancé?” Keith raised his eyebrows and looked through the corner of his eyes at the side of Lance’s head. “We’re not engaged.”

“Yeah, well…” Lance stopped dancing, forcing Keith to stand still as well. “About that…”

If Keith didn’t know what it really felt like for his heart to stop, he would have thought it had. “...What?”

Lance stood up straight and took a step away from Keith, leaning back to meet his eyes. He reached up and took Keith’s hands down from behind his neck. “So, Keith, we’ve been together for a few years now—”

“What?”

“—and we’ve been through everything together. Way more than normal couples will ever have to deal with. I mean, how many people can tell other people that they met the loves of their lives thinking that they were dead?”

“What?”

“Not to mention taking on the Galra and probably saving the whole damn world together. So, like, marital issues shouldn’t be a problem for us at all, right?”
“What?”

“Not to mention, I think it’s pretty obvious by now that you’re the only person in the world I want and the only one I’m ever going to want—”

“What?”

“Keith.” Lance steepled his hands in front of his face and took a deep breath through his nose before meeting Keith’s eyes again. “Babe. I know you’re freaking out. Trust me, so am I. But I’m trying to propose here, and I would really, really appreciate not having the speech I’ve been rehearsing for two years interrupted every other sentence.”

Keith covered his mouth with a fist, pressing the knuckle of his index finger hard into his lips in an attempt to keep himself quiet, even though every part of his mind was screaming, WHAT? WHAT? WHAT? louder than ever.

Because Lance had just used “propose”.

“Thank you,” said Lance, reaching for Keith’s free hand with both of his own. “Anyway. ...Shoot, where was I?” He clicked his tongue and rolled his eyes. “Great, I lost my place. Point is…”

Lance dropped to one knee and reached into the pocket of his green jacket.

Keith’s ears started to ring.

“Keith…” When Lance withdrew his hand, he had a velvet box cradled in his grip. “Will you…”

Still holding onto Keith’s hand, Lance began flicking at the box with his thumb in a poor attempt to open it one-handed. “Will— Shoot. Um.”

Keith dropped to his knees in front of Lance and used his free hand to flip the box open. He barely even spared the ring itself a glance. Just enough to make sure it was what Keith thought it was. The way it looked didn’t matter; what it represented meant the world.

“Better?” asked Keith.

“Yeah, actually,” said Lance, his voice quivering. “Anyway, uh…” He cleared his throat. “Keith, will you—”

“Why now?” asked Keith. “I mean, we’ve been together for years and we never even talked about it. Any time I brought it up, you changed the subject. I just… I assumed you didn’t want to get married for some reason, that you’d talk about why when you were ready. I gave up on the idea. So why tonight?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Lance furrowed his brow.

Keith, mirroring his expression, shook his head.

“Keith…” Lance said slowly, as if talking to a child. “What did we do today? What big, huge, life-changing event did you go through?”

“I...talked to my family?”

“Uh-huh.”

“...You…” Keith felt like an idiot. “You wanted my family to be there for the wedding.”
“Good job, Keith,” said Lance, smirking.

“So every time you tried to get me to talk to my family before tonight—”

“Yep.”

“—the reason you pushed me so hard to talk to them—”

“Well, one reason.”

“—the whole time, you were trying to propose?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m very sneaky, I get it!” Lance squeezed Keith’s hand. “You can’t keep me hanging like this, Keith. Will you marry me, yes or no?”

Keith sighed, and a smile spread across his lips. He let go of Lance’s hand, let go of the ring, and grabbed him by the front of his jacket. When he answered, it was an answer filled with confidence, completely lacking in hesitation.

“Yes,” he whispered against Lance’s lips. “Of course, you idiot.”

Lance sighed dramatically and wrapped a hand around the back of Keith’s neck. “Finally. Thank you.”

They pulled each other close in the exact same instant, and the ring fell to the floor, unnecessary, easily forgotten. It was never really important in the first place.

All Keith and Lance needed from each other was love, and that was all they would ever need.

“...Oh, shoot, did the camera get that?”

“Camera?”

“Uhh… You know how I said I cut a deal with my family?”

“Oh, my god, Lance…”

Chapter End Notes

Some time later that night:
"You know I'm not really a jewelry person."
"You don't have to wear it."
"No, I'm gonna wear it forever. Back off."

Holy shit, Paladins, it has been a ride. It is also 1:46 in the morning and AO3 ate my first author's note. All I really wanted to say, though, was thank you. Thank you for reading, whether you've been here since the start or whether you binged it all in one go after it was finished. Thank you for every comment you've written, every kudos left, every time you've ever tried to get to know me as a person and not just a writer. And thank you to those who haven't left comments or kudos or anything else, even those
who didn't really like the story and just finished it because they can't put something down once they've started no matter how bad it is. As long as you're here, reading this, just...thank you. So much.

~Art~
A scavenger hunt of the whole fic
Allura saving Keith and Lance
An animatic that made me cry ngl thank you so much
Matt and Keith waiting for the bus.
A song demo. :D
Lance asleep and Keith holding his hand.
Red hits the lights.
Keith and Matt between life and death.
ghost Keith protec and attac
We're a team now.
Lance reached for the pillow.
MARKER FIGHT FLUFF
The boys being sweet.
Wildcolors' take on the rain scene.
Fanart for Klance month. :D

Twitter
Discord

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!