Of Lions and House Cats

by Ms_Towa

Summary

Welcome to the City of Monsters.

Crime runs rampant in the streets, and the Voltron Alliance was established to combat the rise of crimes involving superhuman abilities. Revered as upholders of justice and peace, there are measures the Alliance cannot afford to take in order to maintain their public image. All they can do is protect the innocent, defend the law, and keep the peace. The Galra have been dominating both the city and the criminal underworld for too long, however, and what's needed is change.

Change is not meant for heroes. Change is meant for revolutionaries, for rebels.

(Enter Lance.)

tldr: Keith is a superhero who's been pining after the cute boy who works at the music shop across the street from HQ. He also doesn't know that the cute boy is the same vigilante he wants to bring to justice.
(you're the) Devil in Disguise

Chapter Notes

My first Voltron work, and I'm pretty nervous. I've had a couple chapters of this story written for a while, and I was refraining from posting it until I got around halfway done... but then I noticed an influx of superhero fics and jumped on the bandwagon.

Also, just a warning, this story is rated M mostly for language and violence. I don't think it's totally graphic, but if you are squeamish about blood, I'll give you a heads up in the beginning notes here.

There are footnotes at the end!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“You look like an angel,
Walk like an angel,
Talk like an angel,
But I got wise…”

My shoulders are killing me.

The thought ran through Lance’s head briefly as he readjusted the strap of his guitar case over his shoulder. All the while, the King of Rock crooned into his ears.[1] Lance shifted his bags so that he could insert his key into the lock of his front door, and with a quiet little click, he twisted the door knob and pushed his door open. A sigh slipped past his lips the moment he was finally able to drop all of his grocery bags onto the floor of his apartment. Rolling his shoulders, Lance let out a wince before locking up his door.

“You're the devil in disguise!
Oh yes, you are
The devil in disguise!”

Leaving his guitar case at the front door momentarily, Lance juggled his groceries in his arms and shuffled into the tiny kitchenette as he hummed along to the song. However, as he made his way further into the kitchen, his eyes fell upon two figures curled up on his single futon. Two pairs of blue eyes stared back at him. “I was wondering why my beautiful girl didn’t meet me at the door with a kiss today,” Lance remarked with a wry grin stretching across his lips.

Ana stuck out her tongue and teased, “I guess she doesn’t love you that much!” Her blue eyes crinkled in amusement, pink lips lifted in a playful smile, as she stroked Azura’s pure white coat and cooed when the tiny Turkish Angora preened under her petite fingers. He didn’t blame her. Most fourteen year old girls would be taken by his precious baby; hell, even dog people would be captivated by his beautiful little girl.

Ana snorted in response to his younger sister’s exclamation and pulled out his earphones, setting his phone on the kitchen counter, before he began to stow away his groceries, commenting, “Ana Sofia Reyes Acosta, you know that I gave you a spare key to my apartment just in case of emergencies where Enrique and Louisa or Mami or even Estefania is too busy to help you in some
kind of life threatening situation. What is it this time?"

“I don’t understand my math homework,” Ana replied shortly, waving the worksheet in the air.

Lance sighed. “That’s not very life threatening,” he remarked.

“Not very life threatening?” Ana echoed with blatant disbelief. She huffed and mimicked his earlier tone, protesting, “Leoncio Emiliano Reyes Acosta, according to Mr. Biggs, if I don’t do my homework, then I can’t pass his class, and if I can’t pass his class, then I’ll fail. If I fail, then I’m not going to get a good job, and if I don’t get a good job, then I won’t live a very happy life. Ergo, life threatening.”

“Mr. Biggs needs to stop projecting onto you kids just because he’s reached a dead end in his life,” Lance quipped. “Anyways, why don’t you do your homework at, I dunno, home? Does Mami even know that you’re here?”

Ana groaned dramatically and whined, “Of course she does, you idiot! We live in a place called the freaking City of Monsters, so she has to know where I am every five minutes! I just messaged her saying that I’m in your living room, bedroom thing. I took a picture of Azura, too, as proof. Wanna see?” Before he could even answer her, she was already pulling out her smartphone and showing him a halfway decent photo of his beautiful little lady.

Then she continued to bulldoze on, “Anyway, you know Ricky’s house gets super freaking loud because of Alfonso.” In a bout of theatrics, she raked her thin and tiny tanned fingers through her soft brown curls and gripped them, pulling at them and nearly ruining her perfect ringlets. Lance knows how much fun she’s had curling her hair after Estefania taught her. Ana must be desperate for his help this time then. It’s probably serious. “I love that baby boy to pieces, but, like, I can never get any work done with him around—especially if Mami or Louisa are busy!”

Lance shrugged. Fair enough, he supposed. It was part of the reason why he didn’t choose to move in with his older brother, after all. Every time he saw Alfonso, he always felt the urge to drop whatever he was doing to play with his nephew and spoil him rotten. Ana was no different in that regard. “I’m still going to call her and check, you know?” Lance stated. Somebody had to be responsible, and clearly it wasn’t going to be Ana.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Ana grumbled.

Still rummaging through his grocery bags, Lance fished his phone out of his back pocket and pulled up his mother’s contact information. He tapped the call option, pressing the phone between his shoulder and ear, and waited for his mother to answer.

“Leoncio!” he heard her cry, distraught and frantic, immediately after three rings. It might have been a bad move to call her because maybe she was fearing the worst, where Ana had gotten into trouble and Lance had to give an emergency call. It wouldn’t be the first time. At any rate, Ana could probably hear their mother’s rapid fire Spanish from all the way over at his futon. Judging by the little snickers, she most likely did. “Is everything okay? Is everyone okay?”

“Ma—”

“Is Ana okay? Is she causing trouble?”

“Mami,” Lance exhaled with a soft chuckle, “don’t worry. Everything’s okay. Ana’s okay. She only stole my cat.” He waited a second, storing away his cup noodles and chip bags, before explaining himself. “I’m only calling to tell you that I just got home, and I’ll take Ana back before dinner.”
“Then you’ll stay for dinner?”

“Well—”

“Tío Leo?” he heard two year old Alfonso chirrup gleefully in the background. “Leo! Leo!”

“Leoncio,” she addressed him firmly, “you’re staying for dinner, right?” There was a bite to her Spanish that made it less of a question than a statement. Her words were an iron grip around his heart, constricting him and leaving little room for argument.

Lance could only find himself obediently replying, “Yes, of course, Mami.” He could distinctly hear Ana snickering at his expense over on his futon. Lance made a note in his head to call his night job and let them know that he had a… family emergency and that he would be late.

“Good! I’ll see you this evening, then! Bye, Leoncio!”

“Bye, Mami…”

Ana grinned at him, and in that moment, she reminded him all too much of their mother. Moving into his own apartment was practically a long fought war against his persistent mother who had wanted to keep all her babies close to her bosom, but he really couldn’t stay with them.

(God, his shoulders really fucking hurt thinking about the main reason why.)

As much as he adored his nephew and as much as he loved his family, Enrique’s suburban house was too small to house all of them. It was a three bedroom house, one floor only, with two bathrooms and a tiny backyard with enough room for a swing-set and his mother’s garden. Since there was another baby on the way, most everyone was already sharing a room. The newly-wed couple had claim to the master bedroom, where they had moved Alfonso’s crib. Ana and their older sister Estefania shared one room, although sometimes she stayed at her boyfriend’s or her best friend’s, so that their mother could have a room to herself. That meant that Lance could have the living room all to himself, but he figured it would be easier (and less hectic) if he just found his own space despite the happy couple’s insistence.

“What do you think will happen when Alfonso and the baby are all grown up?” Ana had asked him once. “I mean, they need their own room, right? So where do you think Mami, Este, and I will go? I guess I could room with Mami if Este gets married because it seems like Mami likes Gabriel, and they’ve been dating since the end of her junior year of high school… so it’s not unlikely, I think.”

Lance had only shrugged in response, unsure of how to answer, and assured his sister that he would always make room for them. “There’s always Tío Raymón and Tía Kimmy, too,” Lance had reminded. “After what happened with Dad, he’s been trying to help us out. I’m sure he’d give us a hand if we have nowhere to go.”

“Do you think we’d have to go back to Cuba?” Ana had questioned, concern in her eyes. Lance had sensed the unease she felt. Ana wasn’t born in Cuba like he and their older siblings were. Ana didn’t have the same attachment to Cuba as they did, and—honestly?—Lance didn’t know if he also felt the same way about Cuba like he had once upon a time.[4] Sure, there’s always a special place for Varadero Beach and the pizza shack with the amazing garlic knots in his heart, but they’ve made a home on the American East Coast for themselves now.

God knows he could do without the winters though. Who knew what Tío Raymón was thinking when he settled here? Why couldn’t he have dreamt of opening up a restaurant on the West Coast twenty-something years ago instead? Tío Raymón had actually studied in California for a little bit,
and if he had stayed there instead of moving to the other side of the country, they could have lived in sunny California instead.

Thinking back now, it probably had something to do with how his wife, Kimiko Tokuyama, lived in New York. It was sweet that he had decided to move with her, Lance supposed.

Nevertheless, the prospect of moving back to Cuba was slim—albeit not impossible. Even their mother couldn’t deny that they had a better life here, regardless of recent hardships. Unsure of how to answer Ana’s question at the time, Lance had simply admitted, “Mami’s family is in Cuba, and I’m sure she misses them more than I miss you guys even though you’re in the next city over!”

“That’s because you’re a big baby,” Ana had teased. Then she had asked him to help her with her geometry homework, and he had readily agreed.

Breaking away from his reminisce, Lance asked his younger sister, “So what exactly do you need help on?” He picked out an apple from one of the grocery bags and turned the tap, rinsing it underneath the running water. Upon noticing the running water, Azura’s head perked up, and she leapt onto the kitchen counter, tail swishing back and forth, as she watched Lance carefully. The moment he pulled the apple away from the running water, Azura pushed the tap the other way, shutting off the water. “Why, thank you, beautiful,” Lance cooed, kissing her little pink nose, even though he knew well that his Azura couldn’t hear him. Nevertheless, over the years, she had learnt to associate kisses with positive rewards, and Lance considered that an accomplishment.

Plucking a knife and cutting board from his kitchen drawer, Lance cut the apple into different slices, dropping them into a bowl, and sauntered over to his younger sister while Azura roamed the studio apartment. He placed the bowl next to her textbook and pencil pouch and sank into the futon mattress beside her, forcing her to scoot over a few inches.

The fourteen year old girl pouted, whining, “Geometry sucks. I can’t do numbers five to nine.”

“How have you started on them?” Lance inquired.

She gave him a look that just screamed, *Duh.* “I started them and then I erased them and then I started them again. How else would I know I can’t do them?” she said slowly.

Lance rolled his eyes at her dramatics.

“Anyway, you’re a math major, right? So you should get this,” Ana declared simply, crinkling her little nose with disdain at the mention of mathematics.

Right, Lance thought wryly. He was supposed to have a double major in mathematics and music—as far as his mother and little sister knew, at any rate. His mother would be devastated to know that he was a drop out now… and that he was undertaking less than savoury jobs to survive.

Deciding not to comment on the subject, Lance instead peered over her shoulder, reading aloud one of the problems, “Find the dimensions of the following rectangles. Rectangle A: Let *L* be the length and *W* be the width of a rectangle. If *L* equals *W* plus—”

A sudden crash behind the two of them had him leaping over his sister, covering her smaller body with his larger frame, before he could even finish reading the geometry problem. He swore in hissed Spanish under his breath, snapping his head to face the shattered remains of his window and the young man who literally crashed into his apartment. He himself seemed to be more confused than Lance and Ana about what he was doing there, but the Super who didn’t look much like a Super picked himself up and rubbed the back of his neck in a sheepish manner. Lance knew him; everyone
who watched TV, really, knew who this guy was.

Dressed in a long burgundy coat with a fur-lined hood, which was pulled over his head to further obscure his identity, and a white tank, Red Lion didn’t look much like the superhero he was supposed to be. Really, the only tell-tale signs that he was a superhero were, firstly, the lion masquerade mask he wore to obscure his identity, secondly, the badge on his coat that designated he was part of the Voltron Alliance, and, lastly, the katana sheathed in its scabbard strapped to his belt. Seriously, he was even wearing black jeans and combat boots, for fuck’s sake, instead of a typical hero suit the other Knights and Paladins in the Alliance wore.

“Uh…” he began reluctantly. “Nice apartment? Er—shit, no, I… I-I mean, sorry about the window?” He visibly winced at his own words. “Um, I’ll definitely pay you back—for sure—so like, don’t worry about it! S-sorry for the mess, man.” His face was reddening underneath his half-mask, and Lance had to bite back a bit of laughter at the sight before him. Unbelievable. There was a nationwide renowned hero in his apartment, and despite his tough guy image, Red Lion was a bit socially awkward. It was almost endearing.

Too bad Lance really didn’t have a high opinion of the Alliance.

But he could play nice. “I could say the same to you, buddy,” Lance replied with a charming grin on his lips as he pushed himself back up into an upright position. “Don’t sweat it! It must have been a real nasty monster this time, huh?”

“Nothing we can’t handle,” Red Lion hurriedly assured him.

*Uh-huh.*

A loud yowl caught everyone’s attention, and even the all powerful Super couldn’t help but flinch, stiffening when Azura pawed at the fabric of his dark jeans. “Uh… good kitty?” he said uncertainly, glancing between Lance and the curious cat.

“Azura!” Lance cursed. “Sorry about that, dude! She’s deaf, so she really has no clue how loud she can be—*shit*, the fucking *glass!*” At that, the Red Lion immediately plucked Azura from the ground, but he held her underneath the joint between her legs and body, causing her to yowl again. Everyone cringed for the second time that day. Lance immediately leapt from his seat and scrambled over to the window, snatching Azura from the superhero and checking over her paws. No glass shards as far as he can tell.

“Uh, I… I’m… I’m just… going to go,” he said, pointing back out the window. Lance hadn’t thought it was possible for his cheeks to redden even more, but he supposed Supers defied the ordinary anyway. “Um, it was, uh, nice meeting you. I-I’ll be sure to tell the Commander that your window’s broken.” With that, the swordsman leapt back into the fray, flames licking at his fingertips at the ready.

After a pregnant pause, Ana said, “That was weird.”

“Yup,” Lance replied, popping the ‘p’ at the end.

He marched back to the futon, ignoring the mess at his floor, and reached for his remote to switch on the TV. Surely enough, VBC was broadcasting *Legendary Defenders*. As a concept, it made sense to Lance. In a world where superhuman abilities and powers emerged nearly thirty years ago, *Legendary Defenders* was intended to show that not all Supers were inherently “bad.” Like in comic books, they were heroes or villains or even hiding among normal society. *Legendary Defenders* was supposed to show that these superhuman abilities and powers can be used to protect the public, and
over the years, people have grown to idolise these heroes of theirs, making them into figureheads of justice and fairness.

Supers who go public as heroes (or, more formally, “Knights”) register through the Garrison, a specialised division within the Monstro City Police Department, and they are enlisted into the Voltron Alliance and ranked according by their “accomplishments,” as in how many people they’ve saved or how many people they’ve arrested. The top five most powerful or influential Knights are known as the Paladins, and really, Lance thinks the whole thing is a sham. It’s all for entertainment value. It was basically a comic book with branching universes and canons turned into a shitty reality TV show.

“We’re not going to tell Mami about this—ever—yeah?” Lance said to his sister, making direct eye contact with the teenager. “Knowing her, she’d probably force me to move out of this neighbourhood, and this is a pretty convenient location.”

“Yeah,” Ana agreed. “If you move, then I don’t get a quiet place to study until you find somewhere else, and who knows if it’s going to be as close as this place to Ricky’s house?”

“There’s always the library,” Lance remarked.

Ana rolled her eyes. “Uh, yeah, no,” she sneered. “The librarian is a crazy old woman, I swear. She gets on you for everything. I’m pretty sure you went to the same school. You should know this.”

“Uh, yeah, no, I don’t,” Lance mimicked with a snort. “I never did anything to piss her off. Anyway, I’m going to clean up the glass, and then I’ll help you,” Lance told her. “Eat your apples and pretend nothing happened. Make sure Azura doesn’t get near the glass—again.”

They both knew that, sometimes, heroes just couldn’t do anything. They can’t save everyone, and it really fucking blows because who else are they supposed to count on?

What are we supposed to do? Lance wondered as he swept the glass into a dust pan. Pat them on the back and say it’s okay? That they tried?

Sometimes, trying just isn’t enough. Trying doesn’t fix anything. Sorry doesn’t fix anything. It sure as hell doesn’t make anything hurt less either.

_Today turned out to be a real shitty day._

Keith munched on a potato chip, eyes fixated on the TV screen as he watched a dumb blonde go upstairs to escape the axe murderer. What was she going to do after she trapped herself up there? Throw herself out the window?

(That was exactly what she did, but she landed wrongly and busted her fucking leg. Keith had no sympathies.)

He couldn’t even take his frustrations out on the monster of the day because Shiro and Allura had taken care of it by the time he had bounced back into action. They had gone back to HQ at Voltron Towers, and Keith had told Coran about his share of the damages before, like usual, he had gone to lunch with Shiro and Allura at their usual diner. After placing their orders, Allura and Shiro didn’t waste any time asking him about where he had crash landed earlier.

Oh God, he was thinking about it again.

Keith could feel his face warm at the memory.
It was just so fucking embarrassing!

If it had been anyone else, he could have just told them (in some manner), “Hey, sorry about your window, but don’t worry about it because my boss will pay for that. Bye!” However, it had been him of all people! That was definitely not how Keith had imagined their first encounter to go, but maybe he had a chance to redeem himself? After all, he had met him as Red Lion and not Keith, so to say… but what reason did Keith have to approach the cute guy who worked at the music shop across from HQ?

Keith didn’t play any instruments. He also didn’t have the time to pick one up and learn—what with hero responsibilities and all—so really, there was no point for him to walk into a music store. Why couldn’t he have worked at a coffee shop instead? Keith would have drank poison, which wasn’t any different from coffee, honestly, just to see him every day.

“Hey, you busy?” he heard Shiro ask at his bedroom door. Without even waiting for a response, Shiro cracked the door open a smidgen and peeked inside the room. “Hunk says you’re not picking up the phone, and he wanted to check up on you.”

Keith glanced at his phone, or where his phone was supposed to be, and noticed that it was missing somewhere in the sheets of his bed. “Well,” Keith began, “I’m okay? I mean…” Keith shrugged and gestured to his body. “As you can see.”

“I think he’s worried since you’re the only Super without a company approved super-suit,” Shiro remarked. “He probably saw the bruise on your back from your crash-landing and decided to do the big unveiling today.” Shiro had the audacity to smirk at him, and nope, no way was Keith going to take the bait and bite. But then Shiro quipped, “You know, when I suggested that you drop in and say ‘hi,’ that wasn’t really what I meant. You really did fall head over heels for him, huh?”

“This coming from the guy who pined after Allura until she made the first move because he was too chicken-shit to do anything?” Keith snapped.

Shiro shrugged and smiled easily. “All’s well that ends well,” he said. “Did you know that apparently, according to the Internet, we’re the power couple of Monstro City?”

“Did you know that you’re not supposed to believe everything you read on the Internet?” Keith retorted. “Anyway,” Keith hissed through gritted teeth, “I’m pretty sure Hunk was going to nag me about my hero-suit.”

“It’s not much of a hero-suit in my opinion,” Shiro commented. “I really think you should try out Hunk’s latest idea. Coran and your aunt approved it, and the other Paladins think that it looks pretty cool.”

Keith responded, lips twisted into an expression of pure disdain, “Armour restricts my movement, so he’s not going to get me into a chest plate any time soon.”

“Even if it’s potentially life saving?” Shiro retorted. “You should hear him out and see what he has to offer.”

“It better not be another samurai armour,” Keith grumbled.

“I thought it was cool,” Shiro protested. “Your aunt thought it looked pretty cool, too.”

“It was unreasonable, and my aunt is biased,” Keith argued. “That much fabric got in the way of my movements, and the shoulder pads were too much.”
“You’ll make Hunk cry,” Shiro chastised. “You’ll make your aunt worry. Her company, your sponsor company, is pouring in so much money to keep you safe, but you still haven’t settled on a super-suit. There are only so many red coats you can buy before you’re broke.”

“Fine,” Keith groaned. “I’ll try out the stupid super-suit, but I won’t like it.”

Shiro’s smile widened into a smug grin. “That’s all we’re asking for, really.”

Then, all of a sudden, both their phones went off, two different ringtones clashing against one another in an urgent cacophony. Keith dug through his covers, fishing out his phone, while Shiro pulled up the alert on his phone. Just as Keith managed to silence his phone, Shiro skulled through the message HQ sent them.

“Emergency at the Northside Piers,” Shiro informed. “It looks like there’s been a scuffle at the warehouses. Gang territory. It might be a turf war.”

“Can’t the police take care of it then?” Keith bemoaned. He had just managed to make himself comfortable in his bed, and he loathed the thought of having to put on his literal superhero pants after he had just taken them off.

Shiro shook his head. “It’s Galra activity,” he stated, and that was all Keith needed to hear to leap out of his bed and squeeze into his jeans. Shiro retreated to his own room while making a quick call to headquarters to inform them that he and Keith would arrive to meet with Hunk first before checking out the crime scene.

Snatching his trademark burgundy long coat from the back of his computer chair (which, in hindsight, was not the best place to throw his “hero-suit” if he was trying to preserve his secret identity), Keith stuffed it into his backpack along with the rest of his gear. After he hid his katana, scabbard and all, inside a sling baseball bat bag, Keith shuffled out the front door, down the staircase, and into Shiro’s car.

The moment Keith’s seatbelt clicked into place, Shiro pulled out of their parking spot smoothly and switched onto the city streets. Switching the radio onto the Voltron Radio Station, the two of them listened attentively to the sound of the news anchor’s voice commenting on the live action,

“The heroine Crystallis has just arrived to the scene! She is followed by Titania and White Tiger! Red Lion and Black Sky have yet to be seen!”

Keith’s brows furrowed. He never understood the reason behind the ranking system for Knights. Did it really breed motivation to perform better? Keith had thought Supers became Knights because they wanted to be heroes, so why would they need to be motivated to help someone? It never made sense to him, but Shiro had insisted it was because Keith didn’t need motivation to do something he should. It was their responsibility to protect innocent civilians, Shiro had claimed, and Keith wholeheartedly believed him.

After passing the security checkpoint in place at Voltron Towers and parking in the underground structure, the two of them rode the elevator to the laboratories. Pulling up the Voltron App on his phone, Keith resumed the broadcast and tapped on the live video feed. The helicopters seemed to be hovering around the pier, circling the group of warehouses, while the reporter spoke, “The three Paladins have entered the building and are currently engaged with hostile forces.” Shiro leaned closer, hovering over Keith’s shoulder, so the latter shifted the phone so that Shiro could watch as well. There was the sound of bullet fire in the background, distant but violent nevertheless, and the two Paladins could only frown at its intensity.
“Allura’s telepathy could prevent the enemy from shooting, right?” Keith questioned.

“Yeah, but if they’re outnumbered, it’s a strain even for her,” Shiro remarked. “They can’t progress into the warehouse if these guys are going to be in their way.”

“Well, Shay might be able to generate crystals and have them act as a shield,” Keith suggested. “That, or she could trap them in that crystal prison thing she did before.”

“I’m surprised they went in arms blazing,” Shiro remarked. “They might be serving as a distraction for Sven to apprehend the combatants.”

“The show never mentioned who was fighting,” Keith commented. “Who would be dumb enough to go against the Galra? From what it sounds like, it’s just the Galra in there.”

“I don’t think that would be public info,” Shiro responded. “We might be debriefed on it later.” Nodding towards the elevator doors, Shiro stated, “We’re here.”

Keith stowed away his phone and followed behind Shiro to the laboratory entrance. After punching in the security passcode, Shiro and Keith stepped through the entrance, where they were immediately greeted by Coran. Even though Coran was President Alfor’s right hand man, who helped keep the Alliance running on top of managing the Voltron Broadcasting Corporation, he claimed to feel more at home in the labs. (If Keith remembered correctly, it had something about being a mechanic back in the day and some silly nickname.) As a result, President Alfor personally stationed his old friend in charge of the engineering and reparations departments.

“Hello, lads!” the eccentric redhead beamed. “Hunk is over there, running some final tests on your super-suit, Keith!”

“All right, thanks, Coran,” Keith responded, waving at his superior in passing, while Shiro greeted the head engineer, Ryner. He also went out of his way to avoid Slav, who was busy crunching numbers in his safety corner. Keith marched over to where the intern was stationed.

Rather than tinkering away at something, Hunk was running some checks on a computer program. Once he saw Keith approach, however, he immediately dropped what he was doing and smiled widely at the young Super. “Hey, man!” Hunk greeted him.

Keith eyed him warily. Maybe it was him, but Hunk… looked rather skittish. He was probably sleep-deprived. Hunk had been working on Keith’s super-suit for… basically, forever, and Keith was always an ass and had something to complain about his latest invention. A bit of guilt stirred in Keith’s gut, but he stifled it. Maybe this time it’ll work out.

Nevertheless, Hunk held out his hand, and Keith instinctively extended his hand as well, letting Hunk slap his palm and pull him into a handshake by the fingers and, subsequently, a quick one-armed hug. “Anyway, I think you’ll really like this super-suit,” Hunk assured the Paladin. “It looks a lot more like your current get-up, and it doesn’t look like the samurai outfit the last Black Lion had.”

Hunk gestured towards the display case, so Keith turned his head, blinking a few times to adjust his eyes to the red coat on show. It was a longer length than his current coat, falling to about his knees, and it was the same dark cherry red as his motorcycle, Scarlet. Like his current coat, it had a hood lined with fur, alluding his lion motif, but it had a double breasted front with golden buttons engraved with a lion’s head and a high collar. There were even belt loops to hold his sheaths, and a patch with the Kogane Industries logo on the left sleeve.

The coat was fashioned over a plain black suit made of the same sleek material the other Supers were
wearing, and it was paired with cherry red combat boots as well as black fingerless gloves accented with red. “So,” Keith began hesitantly, “did you just give me a fancier coat?”

“Not really?” Hunk replied with a grin. “I couldn’t give you a helmet like the other Supers since, well, you’re so attached to your lion mask—not that I blame you. I mean, it’s super cool—ha, get it?—that you got it from the former Black Lion.”

“Hunk,” Keith snapped, “focus.”

“Anyway, the entire ensemble is flameproof and, for the most part, bulletproof. I wouldn’t test its durability against bullet fire because, well, it is fabric and can tear. Like how bulletproof windows aren’t invincible? Anyway, the suit is supposed to provide more flexibility and manoeuvrability than your jeans, and it’s pretty sturdy against stuff like road rash. It provides some insulation, too, when it gets chilly and all. And the combat boots? Well, they just looked really cool, to be honest.”

Keith gave Hunk a small smile. “Well, it definitely beats the samurai get-up and the chain-mail armour before that,” he remarked. “I’ll give it a test run and let you know how it goes.”

“All right, sounds good, man,” Hunk responded as he opened the display case with a couple of key presses. After a moment, he exclaimed, “Oh!” His grin shifted into something more sheepish. “Hey, uh, Keith… Be careful out there, all right? Don’t… don’t rush into everything recklessly, you know? Like… don’t do that ‘shoot first, ask questions later’ kind of thing you got going on—except with your sword?”

“Uh…” Keith blinked. It was unusual for Hunk to offer advice since the engineering intern normally stuck to his job and left the jobs that required superhuman abilities to the Supers. After all, the man was a staunch believer in letting Supers do Super-things and let Normals do Normal-things because some things were just beyond the capabilities of ordinary citizens. “Got it, Hunk. Thanks.”

“No problem, man.” Hunk glanced at the clock, hanging near the flat screen TV playing the live broadcast, with a frown on his lips. “You better suit up. Looks like there’s a stalemate. More Galra thugs are coming in and trying to out-number them and all.”

Fetching his new hero-suit, Keith slipped into the restroom and claimed a stall. He dropped his bag to the ground, dropping his tank and his jeans inside. He slipped on the plain black suit, that stretched easily over his figure, and the fingerless gloves before stepping into the combat boots. Then he buttoned the coat over his suit and threaded his belt through the belt loops, fashioning his sword and dagger onto them. His mother’s katana fell against his left hip, and her dagger was a familiar weight against his back. He secured his mask and drew up his hood, marching out with his backpack slung over his shoulder and black boots in hand.

Lastly, he pinned his Voltron Alliance badge near the collar of his jacket.

“Shiro, you ready?” Keith asked, dropping his old gear in the lab where it would be safe with Coran and Hunk.

Shiro, already changed into his plain black suit, black and white armour (which featured a larger version of Kogane Industries’ logo on his chest) and helmet, gave a nod. “Let’s get moving,” Shiro stated. Even though Keith couldn’t see his facial expression, the younger Super knew that Shiro was smiling at him as he said, “You look good. Like a generic badass anime character.”

Keith rolled his eyes. “Let’s get moving, Black Sky.”

“Of course, Red Lion,” Shiro responded in just the same tone.
The two Supers hurried to the dispatch centre, where Keith opened up the garage holding his precious bike. Keith slung a leg over his bike first before Shiro settled behind him. After kicking up the bike stand and shoving the keys into the ignition, the two of them sped into the night, tearing apart the city streets, with the Northside Piers as their destination.

“I’m pretty sure heroes aren’t supposed to be breaking any laws—including traffic laws,” Shiro commented.

Keith shrugged. “It was for a good cause. What can I say? Chaotic good?”

Shiro snorted as he followed after Keith, marching into the warehouse. “Think we should scope out the action?” Shiro asked, pulling Keith behind him by the shoulder and peering around the corner.

Keith peered over the older man’s shoulder and frowned in mild disappointment realising that the Paladins and Knights were still at a stalemate. “Jeez, I knew that we’re supposed to be heroes and not harm normal people, but they’re still the bad guys...” Keith muttered.

“Their bodies aren’t capable of taking heavy damage,” Shiro reminded him for the nth time.

“Yeah, but they have guns,” Keith protested. “I’m pretty sure they’re prepared to get shot by a bullet if they’re handling a gun, and knowing how this city works, they ought to know that they’d be biting the dust at some point in time. Why are we holding back?”

“Or maybe they just keep coming,” Shiro remarked, nodding his head over to the new reinforcements marching through the front door.

“Where are they coming from?” Keith asked, brows furrowing in confusion.

“This must be one of their hideouts,” Shiro concluded, “and if they’re gathering here, then they’re probably trying to protect something… but what? Hey, Keith!” Shiro immediately reached out for the younger man’s wrist as Keith stepped in front of him. “What do you think you’re doing?!”

“Getting answers!” Keith shouted. He held out his right hand, palm facing upwards, and willed a fireball to form in his hand. It hovered a few centimetres above the leather fabric of his fingerless gloves, the warmth a welcome familiarity, before he flung it across the battlefield, targeting the openings from which the reinforcements poured out.

“Red Lion!” he heard Allura—or, rather, the heroine Titania—cry out in a strange mixture of irritation and relief. “Don’t harm the powerless!” Her hero uniform consisted of a white suit accented with soft pink and lavender, a pair of silky, elbow length gloves, and an iridescent cape that was split down the centre, fashioned like fairy wings, and fixed underneath her golden epaulettes. Like Shiro, she had a protective helmet with a visor obscuring her identity.

“They don’t look ‘powerless’ to me!” Keith barked back, spreading his flames so that they panned around the battlefield, preventing anyone from leaving or entering. “What are you waiting for? Stage cues? Hurry and subdue them!”

Shay, otherwise known as the heroine Crystallis, dressed in heavy armour like a medieval knight with a helmet fashioned with a visor like Allura’s and Shiro’s, slammed her fists into the ground, causing tremors that knocked the gunmen off their feet. Uncontrolled volleys of bullets fired in miscellaneous directions, but Shay quickly formed a shield of crystal in front of them, the bullets ricocheting off the surface. Shiro leapt from his hiding spot, bending a current of air around the makeshift arena, herding the gunmen into the centre, while Sven, a hero dressed in a white suit with a black pattern like tiger stripes and a helmet, paralysed belligerents with shocks of lightning. Allura,
in the meanwhile, forced those still fighting into submission with her staff. Afterwards, Shay, with the uplifting motions of her arms, lifted crystals from underneath into a wall around them, forming a cage so that they couldn’t escape.

Unsheathing his katana, Keith pointed the edge towards one of the gangster’s neck. “Talk,” he demanded.

The criminal gulped, fear filling his eyes, before Shiro pulled Keith back and, consequently, the blade. Even though Keith couldn’t see it, the younger man could certainly feel the admonishment emanating from Shiro. “What are you keeping here? What is this warehouse used for?”

“Hell if I know!” he shrieked. “I don’t know anything! Honest! We just got an intruder alert, and next thing I know, you loons are out here causing trouble!”

“He’s telling the truth,” Allura replied.

“So who does know what’s going on here?” Keith hissed, bouncing a fireball in his hand. “You guys are trapped, so there’s no where to run if I decide to drop a fireball through the hole.”

The goons exchanged nervous glances before someone admitted, “Look, man, we seriously don’t know! All we got here are our ammunition, our guns, and a bunch of filing cabinets from back in the day that ain’t nobody can open without busting the lock.”

Shiro’s attention whipped from the prisoners to his allies. “You think someone was after something?”

“Weapon smuggling isn’t beneath the Galra,” Keith remarked. “It’s the piers, after all. They probably got a shipment coming in. Somebody might be intervening—probably to take the weapons for themselves. Everyone knows Galra is top dog of the underground.”

“Does that mean someone would actually challenge them though?” Shay asked.

“People clamour for power,” Keith explained. “It’s neither rare nor common.”

“Why go through all this trouble for high-jacking an arms trade though?” Allura protested.

“The cabinets!” Shay exclaimed. “Do you think there might be information in them? It’s being guarded by low level members who aren’t even aware of what they’re protecting?”

“If that’s the case,” Sven spoke up, “then someone used us as a diversion to get what they want.”

Allura cleared her throat and nodded towards the prisoners. “Allow me to check. I’ll go through their minds to see what information I can salvage,” she suggested. They remained silent upon noticing how her turquoise eyes glowed a vibrant pink behind her visor. “It’s true that they were idling here. The reason why is beyond them. As far as they know, there is no arms trade. They also don’t know what’s in the filing cabinets. They never looked and just assumed it was from the previous business that went bankrupt here.”

“All right, Keith and I will scope out the place and look for these cabinets,” Shiro said soon after. “Sven, you check the piers to see if there’s any weapons smuggling going on out there. Allura and Shay will hold the fort here. Issue out orders to any incoming Knights as you see fit.”

The five of them nodded in confirmation before breaking off into their groups. Keith called off the ring of fire and burst into the upper levels of the warehouse, breaking into the doors and finding them empty of all but dusty furniture. There was a pool room, a room with a bar and wine cabinets, a room with a TV and gaming consoles, whatever they could keep there to entertain themselves while
obliviously keeping guard for intruders—such as the one who had started this mess.

Finally, they barged into what appeared to be an office. It was furnished with an ornate desk, scattered with papers, and, more importantly, filled with cabinets lining the walls.

Most importantly, there was someone standing behind the desk, flipping through the files in his gloved hands. He was dressed in a navy blue long-sleeved shirt that clung to his body—slender, lean and toned—underneath a charcoal utility vest with a black hood pulled over his head. His eyes were hidden behind tinted motocross goggles that seemed to be running calculations across the lenses, and his identity was further obscured by the mask bandana, printed with a white skeleton jaw, that covered everything below his nose. Keith made note of the dual handguns he had holstered at his hips along with the sniper rifle strapped to his back. The storage pouch strapped to his right thigh and the pockets of his fitted cargo pants, tucked into black combat boots, were probably hiding more ammunition he could use as well.

Realising that he was no longer alone, the stranger lifted his head, and the calculations running in the lenses of his goggles ceased. “Oh, wow, huh,” he mused, his voice muffled by the fabric of his mask bandana, “I wasn’t expecting guests. You’re here early, you know? I was supposed to be out the window by the time you guys got here. I guess Supers can be amazing!”

“Who the fuck are you?” Keith spat out.

“You’re actually a pretty nasty guy for a hero, aren’t cha?” the stranger chirped.

“Aren’t you a civilian?” Shiro interjected, pushing Keith behind him so that he could take the reigns and handle the situation himself. “What are you doing here? You’re placing yourself in danger; this is Galra territory.”

“What gave it away? The guys downstairs or the graffiti on the walls or the guns?” the stranger retorted as he snapped the file close. He tilted his head, and although Keith couldn’t very clearly see his eyes, he felt as though he being scrutinised—like he was being measured up. Was this guy rearing for a fight? “Anyway, Red Lion and Black Sky, right? If we’re going to do colour motifs, then I guess you can call me… Blue Shot? Yeah, let’s go with that.”

Shiro didn’t relent. “So, Blue Shot,” he began cautiously, “what’s your purpose here? Are you actually a Super? Are you registered with the Garrison?”

Supervillain? Keith wondered himself. No supervillain has ever been strapped with so many firearms though. They normally boasted about their superhuman abilities and showcased them arrogantly. Even superheroes didn’t carry many weapons with them. Allura only had her staff, and Keith himself only had his two blades. Hell, Shiro and Shay didn’t even carry weapons with them!

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Blue Shot responded dismissively with a shrug. “I’m not a Super. It makes things less messy than it already is, I think—no paperwork with the Garrison or anything. This is just extra security.”


“Uh, hello? I’m pretty sure you were downstairs,” Blue Shot remarked. “I shouldn’t be snooping around Galra turf without protection, you know?”

“You shouldn’t be here at all, so why are you here?” Keith hissed, patience tested.

“For this, duh,” Blue Shot said, waving the file in the air. “Come on, lion boy! Keep up! Anyway, I got what I needed, so I’m going to skedaddle now. Adiós!”
In the blink of an eye, Blue Shot had drawn one of his two handguns, and Shiro was ready to force the gun from his hand with a gust of wind—only to fail. Blue Shot used the butt of the gun to shatter the window glass, and in the next second, he had climbed up and stepped out as though he was turning around the corner. Shiro and Keith rushed forward, looking down to see where he had gone, but found nothing.

“What do you mean he just disappeared?” Allura demanded.

“Exactly what it sounds like!” Keith snapped. Shiro gently pulled him back so that he didn’t leap onto the meeting table and, instead, had his back pressed against the back of the leather chair. It reclined slightly with the shift of his weight. All of the other Knights in the Voltron Alliance focused their attention on the two of them. “By the time Shiro and I were going to pursue him, we lost visual of him. We couldn’t tail him. All we got out of him was his alter-ego and what he came there for.”

“But not why,” Shiro added. “It was obvious that he was after information, but we just don’t know what he would do with Galra intel.”

Sven, the large man with pale skin and dark hair and beard behind White Tiger’s mask, questioned, “Do you think he was from an opposing gang?”

“Not many gangs would challenge the Galra though,” Shay mentioned. “In terms of power, the Galra are one of the most powerful gangs in the entire state, if not the nation. They’ve dominated the criminal underworld for so long.”

“Precisely why he would be after sabotage!” Sven protested. “Some people get tired of being the underdog. Maybe they’re tired of the Galra calling the shots.”

At the fore of the meeting hall, President Alfor De Altea[5] leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table, and threaded his fingers together. He observed every single one of his employees and stated, “As far as we are concerned, Blue Shot may not even be a threat. We do not have enough information to go on.”

Out of the corner of Keith’s eye, he noticed Hunk fidgeting with his fingers. The man had never looked well when they were discussing the Galra. Apparently, his close friend had lost his father two years ago during the Galra destruction on Main Street and Central Avenue. Coran said that was the reason why Hunk had decided to go into the business of making hero suits for the Alliance. Keith could relate.

Coran placed a comforting hand on Hunk’s shoulder and said, “President Alfor’s right. We can’t be too sure of anything just yet. There are too many questions to be asked and very little answers we’ve discovered. All we know for certain is that there is someone out there against the Galra—perhaps in the same light as we are, perhaps not. What we can do is try to dig up more answers. I’ll have communications officer look out for this—this ‘Blue Shot,’ you say?”

“That’s what he called himself,” Keith replied, “but it sounds like he came up with it on the spot.”

Shiro nodded in agreement. “It seemed to me that he hadn’t really been expecting an introduction or that he hasn’t been… ‘expecting guests,’ he said.”

“Which means he’s been doing this for a while,” Allura deducted.

“What was his equipment again?” Coran asked. “If that’s a name he came up with on the spot, it’s unlikely that there’ll be a match with it in the database. We could send out searches for someone with
the same equipment though.”

“Two handguns,” Keith recalled immediately, “and a sniper rifle.”

Hunk further slunk into his chair.

“He’s certainly well-equipped,” Alfor mused. “I can’t blame him. Maybe if he’s as skilled—or, rather, cunning—as you’ve claimed, perhaps we could recruit him to be a potential ally.”

Hunk all but buried himself into the ground, wanting nothing to do with the current situation. Keith had never realised how uncomfortable the topic of crime syndicates and gangs could be for the intern. He could sympathise.

“Also,” Keith mentioned, “he has wearing these goggles—like motocross goggles—that were tinted. They reminded me of the visors used in the hero-suit equipment. They were running calculations or something when he was reading the files.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if someone in the underground thought of a way to duplicate our technology—or tried to, at least,” Coran pondered aloud. “They are essentially smart glasses at the core with, of course, a little extra to aid heroes in the battlefield.”

“How funny would it be be if someone decided to use Super technology to combat Supers?” Hunk suggested, laughing weakly.

“That’s impossible.” barked one of the Knights. Keith couldn’t recall the name—Jason or John or Jeff or something with a J. Was it even a J? “Normals wouldn’t even last three seconds in a fight against Supers.”

Hunk’s weak chuckle died in his throat.

“Yeah...” he replied quietly, appearing like a child thoroughly admonished by his mother. Keith frowned, and if it wasn’t for Shiro’s hand on his shoulder, he would have lunged across the meeting room to punch Jeff’s (or Jason’s or John’s or whoever’s) face. “Yeah, you’re right.”

Lance hummed as he stowed away his guns into a guitar case—along with his goggles, bandana, vest, and, of course, the Galra file—before slipping on his university hoodie. He slipped out of the alley and continued his way towards the subway station. Fishing out his phone, he pulled up Pidge’s contact and messaged her through the personal app she had created, “Hey, I got the dropped items from the raid boss! Wanna reap the benefits?”

His phone vibrated immediately.

(Today – 1:06 AM)

Pidgey: ofc I do! :P be online at the usual time

Pidgey: also, tell hunk to calm the fuck down

Pidgey: apparently he just got out of a meeting at work with his bosses and he’s scared shitless about the campaign

Pidgey: he’s been spamming me for the last hour about whether or not you’re going to survive these quests

Pidgey: do something about it
Continuing to hum quietly, Lance typed a quick reply,

*Lancer™: kk ♥

He swapped contacts and messaged Hunk.

(Today – 1:10 AM)

*Lancer™: I’M ALIVE BB!!! :D

*Lancer™: Raid boss ain’t got nothing on me ;)

Hunkster: OH THANK GOD! I was so worried something was going to go wrong!

*Lancer™: Ayyy I know what I’m doing!!!!

*Lancer™: Ain’t ever been a ranged dps as good as me!!! :P

*Lancer™: See you at pidge’s to celebrate???

Hunkster: Oh man, for sure!

Hunkster: Do you need a ride?

*Lancer™: Yes pls :3

Hunkster: All right, man. Just meet me at the MC Station.

*Lancer™: You got it! Thx Hunk ♥

Hunkster: What can I say except you’re welcome?

*Lancer™: Hunk, don’t you dare start.

Hunkster: It’s too late! ;)

*Lancer™: Shit u right, u right

*Lancer™: It’s stuck in my head already

Hunkster: Hahaha, but for real, I’m omw. See you soon, Lance!

Once he reached a busy street, Lance stepped towards the edge of the pavement and hailed a cab to
the Monstro City Station, where he slipped on his earphones, pulled up his music app, and began to
play a stream of soft R&B to bring him down from his adrenaline high. Holding tightly onto his
phone, he tapped his fingers along to the steady beat against the back of his phone case as he waited
for Hunk’s arrival.

Eventually, he spotted a familiar Toyota Camry, painted a strange soft gold that Lance always
thought more of an old and rotting white, and a grin stretched across his lips. He strolled towards
the car as it pulled up to the curb and parked itself there. Without further ado, he opened the back seat
door and stowed his guitar case in the back before closing and opening the passenger side. Lance
slipped right inside. He slammed the door shut and pulled out his earphones. Lance didn’t even have
time to brace himself for the impending hug and the worry that spewed from Hunk.

Lance patted his friend’s back as Hunk continued to babble and ramble. Eventually, Hunk pushed
him away and checked him all over. “You’re okay?” Hunk blurted out.

“Hi to you, too, Hunk,” Lance replied with a grin. “I’m all good. No injuries, see?”

“What about bruising?”

“Nah, I’m totally fine, buddy,” Lance assured. “Your colleagues are pretty interesting folk, Hunk. Do people know how much of a jerk Red Lion can be? What a total hothead.”

Hunk looked over Lance one last time with an almost pitying gaze that the latter avoided. Lance knew that Hunk disapproved of this plan—of all their schemes, actually. Lance knew that Hunk was terrified of Lance being on this kind of battlefield, and, honestly, so was Lance.

His only good point was that he was a sharpshooter. So far on all of his missions, he had never missed a target, but was that because of his own abilities or because he had been using Voltron Alliance Certified™ goggles and a Voltron Alliance Certified™ sniper rifle? He had never even handled a lethal gun before he met Pidge and their “Game Master.” He could be stealthy when he needed to be, sure, and he was a fast runner when things got hairy. His hand-to-hand combat was lacking though, and, above all, he wasn’t a Super. He didn’t have the superhuman strength that seemed to come with being Super, which meant when he took hits, he took them hard.

Eventually, Hunk looked away and set his car into drive. He pulled away from the curb and merged into the main streets. “Yeah, Red Lion is the most impulsive of all the Paladins—maybe even all of the Knights,” Hunk replied. “He’s more impulsive than you.”

“Wait until Pidge hears that,” Lance mused.

Hunk couldn’t bring himself to laugh with his friend. “Hey, Lance…” Hunk began uncertainly. He never took his eyes off the road, but Lance focused his attention on his old friend. “How long are you going to do this for?”

Lance closed his eyes and sighed. “As long as it takes,” Lance replied. “The Alliance is too busy with other baddies to focus on a single investigation. We can’t rely on the Supers.”

“Sometimes, I don’t know if you have a point or if it’s your bias speaking…” Hunk grumbled. Lance made a strangled noise, mildly offended, but Hunk pretended not to notice. “Why not leave it to the police then?” Hunk asked. “You don’t have to do this, you know?”

“We’ve had this conversation before,” Lance nearly remarked. He bit his tongue and then shook his head. Hunk needed to hear this again, so he reasoned, “The MC Police Department hasn’t dug deep enough into the Galra crimes to really make a difference. We can’t rely on them because they’re tied up by legal boundaries… but we’re—well, Pidge, the GM, the others, and I—we’re not bound by legal formalities. We’re walking the grey area, sure, but at least this way we can get what we need.”

“The ends justify the means, huh?” Hunk mumbled. “I don’t like it.”

“It gets results,” Lance muttered.

“Your father would be turning in his grave,” Hunk commented.

Lance cracked a smile. “He always did like vigilante type action movies though,” Lance returned. “If I ever end up meeting him in the afterlife, we’ll share drinks and stories and laugh—like old times.” Reaching over to the radio, signalling the end of the conversation, Lance tuned in to usual station. He beamed upon hearing Sia’s powerful voice and cheered, “Awww yeah!”
Hunk rolled his eyes and brought himself to smile as Lance sang along, attempting to belt to the chorus.

“I’m free to be the greatest, I’m alive
I’m free to be the greatest here tonight, the greatest.”

When Lance prodded him one too many times, Hunk joined in.

Chapter End Notes

[1] Lance has a weird spectrum of musical interests from Elvis Presley to Sia to Swedish DJs, etc. (He was totally introduced to the King by Lilo and Stitch, one of his favourite movies, imo.) The chapter titles will be taken from song titles that are in Lance’s phone. I have over 300 songs dedicated to him on Spotify so that I can get into character... but I might have projected onto him for half of them... This chapter features lyrics from “(You’re the) Devil in Disguise” (Elvis Presley) and “The Greatest” (Sia). Hunk references the song “You’re Welcome” from Moana in the text conversation towards the end of the chapter.

[2] I’ve given Lance the legal name of Leoncio Emiliano Reyes Acosta, approved by the wonderful mods Nelly and Bobbie at lanceiscuban. (A big thank you there because I really fell in love with this name, hahaha.) Leoncio is the Spanish form of Greek “Leontios,” meaning lion, and Emiliano is both a Spanish and Italian name that stems from Roman “Aemilius,” meaning rival. (Yes, I went there.) As for why he goes by Lance... it’s revealed in his origin story (because every “hero” needs an origin story) a couple chapters down the road!

[3] Monstro City, or the City of Monsters (like how Los Angeles is the City of Angels), is a fictional city located on the US East Coast like Metropolis (Superman) and Gotham City (Batman). It’s named after Monstro, the sperm whale from Pinocchio, and, yes, it’s a super lame play on words. (Monstro City, read: monstrosity) It’s loosely based off the concept of Hellsalem’s Lot from the anime, Blood Blockade Battlefront, and Stern Bild City from Tiger & Bunny.

I chose East Coast because that seems to be where all the superheroes are at even though I’ve only ever lived in the southern United States and the West Coast. I also drive everywhere, so what even is public transportation?

There are also original characters here and there, but they’re completely for the sake of world building. (Because I need to create multiple companies, establishments, and families for this fictional city to work.) Some of them also share names with characters from previous Voltron series. They are usually minor or supporting characters.

[4] Lance’s sentiment regarding returning to Cuba is one that I have regarding my own community. It’s one where I’m “too Asian” to be considered American, but “too American” to be considered Asian. My own family have drawn a line where I don’t completely belong with them when it comes to cultural groups, but I don’t feel as if I align with the typical American as well. For the longest time, I just really felt like an outsider with either group. sometimes I still do. It’s kinda shitty.

I’ve noticed that other first-generation or nth generation of other ethnicities have felt
similarly. The same goes for people who’ve immigrated when they were young. I had a lecturer who stated that she was “too American” when she returned to India to visit family, but “too Indian” in America. I have friends who have also mentioned that they’ve felt “too American” when they go visit family in Mexico, but “too Mexican” in America. It’s a little more complicated than this generalisation, but this is the short answer.

[5] I’ve given Allura’s family the last name De Altea because in the show, if I remember correctly, she introduces herself as Princess Allura of Altea. It’s kind of like Jeanne d’Arc being, in English, Joan of Arc? Rather than abiding by French grammatical conventions for *de*, however, I went by the Spanish rules because, fun fact, Altea is apparently the name of a city in Spain? (The things you learn when you Google…) I always thought it was a mythological city because of Fire Emblem; Marth is the Prince/King of Altea.

Also, random tid-bit, regarding text usernames, Lancer™ refers to Lancer Skincare, but there’s also the Mitsubishi Lancer. Take your pick?

If you have any questions, leave a comment or contact me at [my tumblr](https://example.com)!
A Kiss with a Fist (is better than none)

Chapter Notes

There's a bit of violence in this chapter, but it's not particularly gory. Also, we start entering the morally grey area now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Here’s the thing about having a double major in music and mathematics: it sucks. Sure, the same thing could be said about any other major because, really, it depends on how a person could handle the workload, but with how many different jobs he had to work to pay for food and shelter on top of Azura’s needs as well as his skincare and hygiene products, Lance just didn’t have time to work on his assignments and projects. It doesn’t really help that he’s got this vigilante thing of his going on, too, and keeping up a double life was equally exhausting.

He didn’t know how Supers could keep it up for very long, but, then again, they were probably two different cases. For example, the Knights were the public’s figureheads of lawful justice—not anything vigilante or even vaguely morally grey—so they would be lauded as celebrities if anyone ever learnt their secret identities. Villains, on the other hand, would simply be persecuted for their crimes.

Anyway, at least for that point in time, Lance had better things to do than worry about understanding number or music theory.

So he dropped out.

He supposed he could have gotten more sleep if he dropped the whole vigilante gig (and Lord knows he would have saved Hunk from cardiac arrest), but it’s been almost six months already. He couldn’t just stop now—especially since he’s been spotted last night.

Pidge always joked about how she was surprised it had taken him this long to get caught, given how loud his personality is.

Upon feeling his phone vibrate, Lance fished it out of his pocket and thought amusedly, *Speak of the devil*. He glanced around the restaurant and slipped into the kitchen to pull up the message.

(Today – 12:38 PM)

Pidgey: you up for another campaign tonight?

Pidgey: gm wants to know if you’re good

“¡Oye!” his uncle, a rather intimidating man with his heavyset shoulders and deep voice, exclaimed. Lance sheepishly lifted his head and grinned at the older man. Tío Raymón shook his head in disapproval and sighed. “Hurry up and get back to work, Leoncio,” he chastised.

“Sure thing, Tío,” Lance replied. “Just give me a sec!”

His uncle grumbled something under his breath, and Lance took it for reluctant agreement.
“Your mami still thinks that you have morning and night classes?” Tío Raymón asked as Lance approached him. He gave Lance a leer of utter disappointment when Lance hummed in confirmation. “You should tell her that you’re not in college any more; she’d understand, you know? It’s not good to lie.”

Lance shook his head. “I’ll… I’ll tell her eventually,” he assured his uncle. “She’d be crushed if she knew I wasn’t attending college—especially if it’s because of money.”

Tío Raymón gave him one last lingering stare as though to say, “If you’re sure.” However, the older man said nothing more on the subject. Instead, he gestured to a tray of food and told his nephew, “Take this order to table twelve.” Lance stowed away his phone by haphazardly stuffing it into his back pocket while the older man slid over the tray of food and began to prep the next order.

“Okay, gotcha,” Lance replied, taking the tray out of the kitchen. He glanced over the orders before pushing against the kitchen doors and expertly manoeuvring the restaurant floor. Smiling at the two guests, a primly dressed couple probably out on a date, he said, “Here’s the pollo criollo and pierna de puerco! They’re both pretty hot, so be careful! Don’t be afraid to shout if you need anything else, all right?”

“No worries, man,” Lance replied, clapping his shoulder in assurance. He strolled over to one of the booths located near the front windows and pulled out his notepad. It was another table for two, and at least one of the faces he recognised. The other face, he could definitely appreciate. Well, the mullet could be left back in the eighties, but the guy made it work. He had really pretty eyes—like, what colour exactly were they? They were a mixture of dark blue-grey, but under certain lights, Lance swore they were violet—and pretty lips and, well, a pretty face in general. There was something that struck him as familiar though, but he shook it off in favour of doing his job—or else Tío Raymón would be on his case again. “Good afternoon, Miss Asako!” he chirped. “You’re looking as lovely as ever today! Lovin’ the hair!”

The older woman laughed and tucked a curled lock behind her ear, bringing attention to the pearl drop earrings she wore today. “Hello, Lance,” she replied, her dark eyes sparkling with amusement. She gestured to her companion and introduced the young man, “This is my nephew, Keith.”

“Huh, good looks must be genetic then,” Lance remarked playfully. His grin only widened upon noticing the red flush coating Keith’s pale cheeks. “Nice to meet you! Anyway, I’m assuming Miss Asako will be having her usual—right?”

“Of course!” Asako replied with a smile. “Your uncle cooks the beef perfectly, and it’s so tender! And don’t get me started on how delicious the potatoes are! I’ve been craving it all week, but I haven’t had a chance to get away from my meetings!”
“I guess that explains why Miss Cordelia isn’t here today,” Lance commented. “Scheduling conflict?”

“Unfortunately,” Asako responded with a bit of a pout. “It figures that the only break I have this week it would overlap with Corrie’s work hours.” She turned her smile to Keith instead and nudged his foot under the table playfully. “That’s why I decided to spend some quality time with my favourite nephew instead since he hasn’t called me in—oh, I dunno—a month?”

Keith’s cheeks flared red again. Lance rather likes this look on him. “We’ve been busy!”

“Too busy for family?” Asako feigned hurt.

Keith rolled his eyes. “You call every week, Asako-obasan,” Keith protested.

“That’s me calling you—not the other way around,” Asako remarked. She leaned over to Lance and whispered theatrically, “See what he repays me after how I’ve supported him all these years?”

Lance nodded gravely and, just as theatrically, replied, “How ungrateful.”

Asako laughed and patted Lance’s arm. “You’re a good kid, Lance.”

“Oh, that’s great! Now if you could tell my uncle that…” Lance mused, nodding his head towards the kitchen. “Anyway, I gotta get back to work. What would you like, Keith?”

“I-I, uh… I’ll just have the same thing as my aunt,” Keith stammered.

“All right, two carne con papas then! Your order will be right out once it’s done!” Lance jotted the order down on his notepad and excused himself. He pinned the order to the queue before tending to the other customers in his section who were demanding his attention. He spared a glance towards table three, however, and smiled when he noticed the lovely Miss Asako teasing her beautiful nephew, who was turning even redder by the second.

An hour or so later, after greeting and serving numerous customers whose temperaments ranged from amiable to irritable, Asako deliberately searched for him across the restaurant floor to say bye to him. It wasn’t the largest restaurant by any means, but it wasn’t really the smallest either. Tío Raymón’s restaurant, Café Reyes Díaz, was of a modest size, but it was usually pretty crowded around lunch hours—enough to swamp every employee with work. Nevertheless, Lance couldn’t help but feel a bit touched by her actions, so on her way out of the restaurant, he might have slipped a couple more of those chocolate mints he knows she loved into the palm of her hand… And he also might have winked at Keith, chest swelling with pride upon successfully making the poor boy redden yet again that night.

Right when his shift ended, his uncle told him that he was more diligent than usual, but, really, nobody caught his eye so much as Keith. It only meant that he didn’t have any other distractions that afternoon. After encountering Asako’s nephew, Lance had to reconsider his stance on the colour red. Honestly, he wasn’t a huge fan of the colour, especially after last night’s events, but he could admit that red suited Keith—like, really, really suited him.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Tío Raymón!” Lance called into the kitchen. He slipped inside, careful not to bump into anything, and crept toward the cancelled dessert orders. He grabbed a plated flan for himself and deviously slipped it into a small styrofoam takeaway box. Blinded by his greed, he was oblivious to how his uncle crept behind him. Yelping when Tío Raymón swatted his ass with a dishrag, Lance straightened his back and met his uncle’s glower.

“Someone else could order a flan,” Tío Raymón remarked.
“You prefer serving fresh desserts that look pretty because sometimes customers complain,” Lance countered. “And they tip better if the desserts are fresh and pretty.”

Tío Raymón rolled his eyes and relented. “Yeah, yeah, whatever. Now hurry up and get out of here, gordo! You’ll be late to your ‘classes,’ and your mami will never let me hear the end of it if you do!”

“Yes sir!” he replied with a grin, swiping the flan off the counter and booking it out of his uncle’s restaurant. He usually only worked the lunch shifts over the weekdays since his uncle needed a helping hand until he found the time to hire more competent employees, but ever since they saw an increase in customers with Lance’s arrival, his uncle probably never bothered looking for someone else. Lance didn’t mind; sometimes it was a nice break from teaching kids piano over the weekend because at least he managed to get tips. Plus, he gets to take home leftover dessert.

He marched down the station steps and made a quick stop to listen to some street musicians playing. After sparing some change and exchanging some guitar tips, Lance continued to his platform. He swiped his MetroCard at the turnstile and boarded the subway once it arrived, shifting around as more people boarded the subway. A few stops passed with people shuffling in and out of the subway car, and Lance all but spaced out as he recounted what he had left to do for his projects and assignments.

He manoeuvred around people upon reaching his stop and returned to his apartment to fetch his guitar case. He hoped that nobody had the balls to scale the wall of an apartment building to break in through his non-existent window. It wasn’t like he had much to steal aside from his guitar, his laptop, and his cat. (And the guns.)

All of which were basically his life.

As he began to climb up the staircase, a door on the first floor opened, and his landlord stepped outside. Upon noticing Lance, the older man gave a wave, which Lance politely returned. “I was going to give you a call,” Mr. Lin remarked as he shuffled closer, hands clasped behind his back. “There are Alliance people in your apartment,” he informed after stopping right in front of the taller young man. “They are fixing the window—paid for the glass and the repairs and everything themselves. They came not too long ago while you were at work.”

“And they didn’t give me a call?” Lance mused incredulously.

“Well, they gave me a call,” Mr. Lin replied, “and I have the master key. I think it is better for the both of us if it is fixed sooner than later.”

“Fair enough, I guess,” Lance responded. “I’ll see you around, Mr. Lin!” With a wave goodbye, Lance headed back up the stairs, leaving his landlord to whatever business he needed to attend. He fished his pockets for his keys and unlocked his door. He pushed it open and yelped when Azura leapt at him from the floor, clinging onto the fabric of his clothes. “Whoa there, beautiful! Love you, too!” he exclaimed with a grin. He unhooked her claws from his clothes and cradled her in his arms. He shut the door with his foot and locked the door with a single hand.

He sauntered into the main room, where his futon was still left unfolded and unmade. If he had known that he’d be having guests, then maybe he would have made it more presentable—but oh well! The sound of repairs ceased the moment the repairmen noticed his entry, and Lance smiled upon recognising one of the three repairmen. “Hey, Keith,” Lance greeted him amicably. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“Oh, uh, yeah,” Keith stammered. “I, um, I-I work for Voltron Towers—in their reparations department.” He rubbed at the back of his neck, and Lance couldn’t help but notice the redness
burning his ears.

“I can see that,” Lance mused.

“You two have met before?” asked an older man with salt and pepper hair and laugh eyes wrinkling his blue eyes. The older woman with curly red hair pulled into a short ponytail underneath her ballcap grinned mischievously at Keith, nudging him lightly with the caulking gun in her hands. The latter appeared a bit disgruntled at her actions, but the pink coat tingling his cheeks and the pout on his lips made him appear less menacing.

“Yeah,” Lance replied, “we met when Keith was grabbing lunch with his aunt earlier. I’m surprised you have a job as a repairman, seeing that Miss Asako is the CEO of Kogane Industries. Kogane isn’t a very common name, so I kind of assumed… I mean, Miss Asako never corrected me or anything.”

“That’s her business, not mine,” Keith grumbled, looking vaguely uncomfortable with the subject.

“Right, right,” Lance said casually, dropping the topic. He stretched out a welcoming hand towards the older repairman, and Azura shifted so that she climbed over his left shoulder. The young man introduced the two of them, “I’m Lance, and this is Azura.”

The older man pulled off his gloves, sullied with dust and dirt, and shook Lance’s hand. “I’m Cliff, and behind me is Cindy. We’ll get this job done as soon as we can, and then we’ll be out of your hair.”

“No worries, man,” Lance replied. “I just came back to pick some things up for my next class. I hope my Azura wasn’t bothering you guys. She’s a bit curious and sometimes too friendly.”

“She doesn’t really listen when we tell her to go somewhere else,” Cliff mentioned with a weak smile, almost apologetic. “We weren’t sure if she’d let us pick her up and keep her away from our work zone.”

“Oh,” Lance chirped. “She’s completely deaf in both ears, but she knows body language. She’s also really friendly, so if you can do the job with two people, then someone can play with her and keep her distracted.”

“I call dibs!” Cindy chimed. She shoved the caulking gun into Keith’s arms and ran up to Lance, stretching her arms out for Azura. She deflated when she noticed that Azura refused to budge from her perch on Lance’s shoulders. Lance laughed and picked Azura up, holding her towards Cindy, who took her into her arms, and chuckled when the others flinched from Azura’s ear-shattering yowl.

“She’s friendly but not really one to be held by strangers, and she doesn’t know how loud she can be because, well, she’s deaf,” Lance explained. “She won’t bite or scratch you though. I have a couple of toys around here, so if you just amuse her, she’ll be occupied. Anyway,” Lance picked up his guitar case and said, “I gotta head to class! Thanks for this, guys! See you around, Keith?”

“Oh, y-yeah!” Keith replied. When Lance closed the door behind him, he could hear Cindy and Cliff laugh and Keith splutter, “S-Shut up!”

“I still don’t understand how you managed to get a hideout when you’re only sixteen,” Lance commented as he set his guitar case against the wall. He then plopped down onto the sofa and stretched out his legs so that one leg was behind Pidge’s back and the other was bent and dangling off the edge of the sofa. He pulled out his phone and opened up Instagram, scrolling through his feed.
and liking miscellaneous photos mindlessly.

The teenage girl’s fingers flew across the keyboard—click, clack, click, click, clack—before she replied, “This is Matt’s apartment, remember? I managed to persuade my parents to help keep the contract just in case he returns.”

“Do your parents even know you’re here?” Lance inquired. He batted her long ponytail back and forth with his foot, practically demanding her attention.

“They think I’m at the library,” Pidge replied without even batting an eye at Lance’s actions. “I told them you’d walk me back.”

“And I will,” Lance assured. He grinned. “Your parents love me.”

“They also think you’re the same age as me, so that’s saying something about your maturity level,” Pidge commented with a roll of her eyes.

“You are a mean, mean little gremlin, aren’t cha?” Lance asked.

“And you are a silly, silly tall bimbo, aren’t cha?” Pidge mocked.

“Awww, are you calling me pretty?” Lance preened.

“And a toy,” Pidge retorted.

“How sweet,” Lance cooed, stretching his leg so that his foot could pat Pidge’s head, despite the high ponytail tied at the top of her head. It ended up caressing her cheek instead, and she gagged.

“And you said I was mean,” she huffed, a hint of a smile pulling at her pale lips. There was a momentary lull in conversation where Pidge tapped away at her laptop and Lance tapped away on his phone. “Whatever you need to say to make yourself feel better, Lance,” Pidge droned. “I’m not the one working at a shady ass nightclub here.”

“Okay, one, I make good money; two, you work for the same people; and three, I can handle myself.”

“Uh-huh, sure. This coming from the guy who almost got drugged by a creep at the bar. You’re lucky Nyma doesn’t take shit like that lying down. By the way, Game Master says he’s not going to come today,” Pidge mentioned.

“He never shows anyway. He’s got better things to do than hang out with ‘kids,’” Lance replied, undeterred. “Besides, it’s not like I don’t see him at work. He’ll probably remind me later tonight—or the other way around, whichever comes first.” He switched to his side Instagram account, mi.cielo.azura, dedicated to his beautiful cat. It was about time he uploaded a new photo of Azura anyway for his couple thousand followers. He totally wasn’t keeping count. Really, he created the account last year to share how beautiful his cat was to the world, and, as he had thought, the world agreed with him.

“Do you think Hunk will show this time?” Pidge asked.

“Lord knows that boy is too nervous to not come to these meetings,” Lance remarked. “Even if he can’t know all the details because he works in close proximity with the telepath and because he’s technically not one of us, since he’s just a provider for equipment, Hunk wants to know every detail that he can get so that he can calculate where everything can possibly go wrong. After last night, it’s doubtful that he won’t prioritise these meetings.”
Honestly, Lance felt a little guilty, considering Hunk’s day job. Lance might not want anything to do with Supers, but Hunk? He’s all for the protection of his loved ones, and if his engineering can help, then he’ll do it. That also extended to joining Lance on his vigilante endeavours and potentially endangering his internship at Voltron Towers.

Not to mention, with Titania’s telepathy, it was extremely dangerous for Hunk to be keeping these sorts of secrets even with the Alliance’s creed that they would never use their powers to harm innocent civilians. He wanted Hunk to stop—stop worrying, stop caring—but a part of him was relieved that his friend would, in a way, support him.

Lance’s thumb stopped scrolling through his photo gallery, and he tapped on an image, enlarging it onto the screen. It was of Azura curling up in his lap while he was trying to eat his caramel flan. The flan was halfway out of the shot so that Azura’s face occupied the centre of the image. “Pidge, what do you think about this one?” Lance asked as he shoved his phone into Pidge’s face unceremoniously.

Pidge crinkled her nose. “Yes, Azura is cute. Now move your hand; I’m busy trying to insure your life, moron,” Pidge snapped. Lance shrugged and began to shift through the filters and then adjusting the brightness and contrast, the highlights and the shadows, only to save the image into his drafts. He’ll post it tomorrow around five in the evening—when most people would probably see it. (He always got the best turn out whenever he posted around five in the evening.) Pidge sighed and grumbled, “Sometimes I miss when you were more of a lovesick idiot. Now you’re just swooning over your own cat.”

“I don’t have time for a love life, Pidge,” Lance retorted. “You should know that of all people. We both separated ourselves from our families to do this shit alone, and I never get over the guilt when my mom has to force me to eat dinner with the family. I feel bad enough getting Hunk in on this, too.” He missed dinners with his family, actually. He had long tired of making pasta for one. “I’d be such a shitty boyfriend if I went looking for someone now because I wouldn’t be able to give them the time, love, or affection they deserve.”

Pidge flinched. “I didn’t really mean anything by it…”

Lowering his phone, Lance sat upright on the couch, scooting a little closer to Pidge. He patted her head, combing his long fingers through her long hair, and consoled, “I know, I know. That… that came out meaner than expected.” He didn’t apologise though. They both needed the reminder. “A normal life went out the window after I started hauling that crap around,” Lance commented, jerking his head towards the guitar case he left leaning against the sofa. “I’ll… I’ll get around to figuring all that out when all of this is over.”

He honestly wondered if it was even possible to return to a normal life after all that he’s done though. He wondered if Pidge thought it was possible. Probably not in Pidge’s case, Lance thought. She was graduating high school this year at only sixteen, only two years older than his baby sister. Lance was positive she could get accepted into institutions like MIT or CalTech or even the top tier program Hunk was in at Monstro Institute of the Arts and Sciences—MIAS? Something like that, Lance mused—and earn herself a spot at the top of her undergraduate class as well.

Pidge wasn’t normal, and she wasn’t a Super. She was just a genius, but that didn’t mean she didn’t try hard at anything.

Lance knew that best.

Pidge tried her damnedest at finding her brother, but even that wasn’t enough.
There was a knock on the door, and Lance leapt to his feet. Pidge didn’t even budge. Unlike Lance, who spent all of his time trying to figure out where Pidge would hide the spare keys, Hunk was polite… even if he was a bit of a snoop. (How else did he get into this mess with Lance and Pidge?) Lance looked out the peep hole, and upon discovering a familiar anxiety wrecked face, Lance unlocked the door and pulled it open. He welcomed his old friend inside with a teasing grin. “You’re looking pretty sick tonight, Hunk,” he chimed. “Nice shirt.”

“Not funny, Lance,” Hunk groaned as he trudged inside the apartment. “I think I am sick.”

“Take it to the toilet!” Pidge snapped from her spot on the sofa. She finally tore her eyes away from the screen of her laptop just to glower pointedly at the engineering intern. “I am not cleaning up after you, Hunk!”

“I’m only a little nauseous, okay?” Hunk moaned as he plopped down on the sofa right beside Pidge. He didn’t react when Pidge scooted a little farther away from him. Pidge did, however, grunt when Lance laid down and stretched his legs over both of their laps. “I’m just a lot nervous.” He fidgeted with the hem of his mustard yellow button shirt, removing the bottom from where it was tucked underneath the waistband of his khaki trousers, and babbled, “I mean, I know you and Pidge always say that these missions aren’t dangerous, but, dude, they totally are! I don’t know if you guys even realise that! Like, I know you’ve calculated the risks, Pidge, to minimise Lance’s injuries and all, and that Lance would be like taking the safest route and that we would be his extra set of eyes and all—but! But there’s all sorts of things that can go wrong because—and I’m pretty sure you know Murphy’s Law, Pidge—everything that can go wrong will go wrong at the worst possible moment!”

“Hunk,” Lance sat upright, swinging his legs off his friends, and began to pat his friend’s back, “breathe.” His eyes softened as he watched Hunk begin to steadily breathe in and out. Even Pidge had stopped typing, waiting for Hunk to calm down, before she continued. “Listen, we all know this isn’t the safest thing to do for a while now, but this is just something we have to do.”

Hunk frowned. “Yeah, I know,” he replied hesitantly. “I know you two are dedicated to this, and I get why. That’s why I’d do anything to keep you two alive, but it’s just… hard, you know?”

“I know,” Lance assured. He gave a weak smile. “Sorry for giving you heart attacks all the time, Hunk. We’re really grateful that you’ve been helping us out though. The equipment’s top notch, buddy. You’re crazy talented.”

“Oh!” Hunk exclaimed. “That reminds me!” Hunk grabbed Lance’s shoulders and began shaking him in a fit of panic. “The Voltron Alliance is out looking for you! Red’s recognised that the goggles are Alliance tech! They’re searching for a man with your height, build, and firearms, too! Can’t we put this off for another day and lay low?”

“No can do, Hunk,” Pidge replied. “According to GM, this one’s already scheduled for a couple of days. It’s a target this time. They call the guy ‘Haxus.’ Here’s an image.” Pidge pulled up a photo, and Lance and Hunk leaned over her shoulder.

“He looks like a douche,” Lance commented. “Does he have an accent? I bet he speaks with an accent.”

“Is his name really Haxus?” Hunk asked instead. “Oh, wait, it says here that his name is actually Harold Saxton! …what kind of name is Harold?”

“Anyway,” Pidge spoke up, “GM went through the papers, and I went through the flash drive in the file. We found that there’s been human trafficking involved, and we need to slow that down. This Haxus guy is in charge of these… these exchanges. While they’re preoccupied with finding Lance,
I’m going to root around the local computers there and see if I can retrieve any clues about Matt and about that ‘Zarkon’ guy.”

Lance crinkled his nose. “Again with these names! Who seriously names their kid Zarkon? Makes me think of like an evil eighties space villain—like Emperor Zurg.”

“First, you’re kinda being redundant with ‘evil villain,’ Lance,” Hunk commented. “Second, _Toy Story_ was released in ‘95.”

“My point still stands,” Lance retorted. “You can’t say _Zarkon_ doesn’t make you think of _Zurg_.”

“You’re both ridiculous,” Pidge remarked. “Did you overlook how Zarkon could be an alias, like, I don’t know, _Pidge_ or _Blue Shot_? That was a dumb name, by the way.”

“Hey, I was only following the trend!” Lance protested. “There’s Black Sky, who controls wind, and Red Lion, who fights like a fucking _animal_ and has his fire thing going on, and White Tiger, who controls electricity—which is apparently some kind of allusion to Eastern mythology or something—so I thought, okay, I’m wearing some blue and I’m a decent shot! I mean, black was already taken!”

“Wow,” Pidge intoned dryly. Lance was sure that, if she hadn’t been busy typing, she would have slow clapped for him. “Anyway, here’s the plan GM proposed. We have three days to negotiate with him if you don’t like what you see because we’re starting our next ‘campaign’ in four days.”

“Oh, hey, it’s Keith!” Upon noticing a familiar black bob, beautiful dark skin and glowing amber eyes sitting next to Keith, Lance couldn’t help but greet her from across the restaurant as well, “And Shay the bae!” Once he reached the table of five, all of whom were handsome individuals, he began to hand out everyone a menu. A grin stretched across his lips as he greeted everyone at the table. “Hey, my name’s Lance, and I’ll be your server today!”

“You’ve been here before?” a man with broad shoulders—hot _damn_, Lance thought—and a scar across his nose asked Keith. His hair was fashioned in a kind of undercut with a tuft of white hair dyed at the front. The man gave Keith a mischievous smirk that forced Keith to avert his eyes, and the latter seemed tense studying his menu.

“Yeah, Aunt Asako took me here for lunch once,” Keith explained tersely.

“I see…” mused the older man.

Before Lance could spare any thought (other than _strange_) regarding the interaction, Shay took up most of Lance’s attention. “Oh, Lance!” Shay chirped from one side of the booth. “I see you’ve met Keith already, but here are our co-workers! This is Shiro, Allura, and Sven! We’re actually waiting for two more! Hunk and his boss, Coran, should be on their way! They were finishing up a project when we were leaving our office!”

“Oh, I know Coran!” Lance chirped. “He and the rest of the engineering department stop by for lunch every now and then! Anyway, I’ll be back with two more menus for them, so just holler my name when you’re ready!”

Just as Lance pivoted on his heel and began to saunter away from their table, he heard Keith ask Shay, “So how do you know him?”

He also heard Shiro comment, “I have so many questions for you, Keith.”
Lance suppressed a smile of his own as he went to retrieve more menus. By the time he had returned, the five of them were already engaged in a conversation. Leaving the menus at the two empty seats, Lance said, “These are for Hunk and Coran. Do you guys need anything right now? I could get you some drinks to start while you wait.”

“Thank you, Lance!” Shay replied. “I’ll just have some lemonade.”

When Lance shifted his attention to Keith beside her, he immediately blurted out, “Iced tea,” and nothing more.

Blinking, Lance asked him, “Sweet or unsweetened?”

“Unsweetened,” Keith replied shortly.

With a hum, Lance jotted the orders down before his attention moved to the other side of the table. He started with the dark haired, bearded man—Sven, he believed? “What would you like, sir?” he asked.

“I’ll have your best beer,” Sven replied with a grin that Lance easily returned. He liked this guy!

“All right then,” Lance assured, jotting that down as well, “I’ll get you the best of the best!” He turned his attention to the beautiful woman—jeez, was she a goddess or something?—seated between Sven and Shiro. “What about you, milady?”

“Milady?” she repeated, somewhat amused and somewhat disgruntled. Sven openly laughed at her muddled expression while Shiro’s eyes crinkled with humour. Keith wasn’t even hiding the fact that he was gawking, and Shay, of course, was giggling behind her hand.

“Oh, I assumed you were a princess,” Lance replied with a charming smile, “given how beautiful you are. You sure you’re not royalty?”

“You sure you aren’t being a royal pain?” she returned just as playfully.

Lance shrugged, backing off, and held out his arms in a show of surrender. “Anyway, what will it be, Miss Allura?” he asked with a courteous smile.

“I’ll have a daiquiri,” she replied.

Lance nodded and turned to the last member of the present party. Shiro said, “I’ll just have a mojito.”

“All right, one lemonade, one iced tea unsweetened, one of our best beers, a daiquiri, and a mojito,” Lance said, jotting down the last two. “Any appetisers to start with?”

“How about the papas rellenas?” Allura asked the rest of the table, her pronunciation impeccable. “They look quite delicious.”

“Sure,” Sven readily agreed with a grin. “We’re all charging it to Coran anyway.”

“In that case, let’s get some empanadas, too,” Shiro suggested a bit deviously.

“Oh, I agree!” Sven exclaimed.

Keith rolled his eyes. “You’re going to get full before we even order our meals,” Keith remarked dryly. “Sven and Shiro bring out the worst of each other.”

“If you don’t want any,” Shiro retorted, “don’t eat any.”
Keith scoffed. “Anybody else want to hurry and add something to Coran’s quickly accumulating bill?” the raven haired young man inquired of his colleagues.

“Add some tostones on there, too,” Sven told Lance.

Lance laughed. “Okay, I’ll add that to your order, too, unless there are any other disagreements?”

“Go ahead and add it,” Shay assured Lance with a smile.

“Okay, awesome,” Lance chirped. “It’ll be right out as soon as it’s ready. Anyway, if you need anything else, just call for me, and I’ll come running.” He shot them some finger guns and then pivoted on his heel in the direction of the kitchen, where he dropped off the orders. He ran the drinks by the bartender on his way to serve another table.

By the time he was dropping off their drinks, Hunk and a moustachioed man with shockingly red—more orange, really—hair had arrived at their table. He grinned upon seeing his friend and after passing around the drinks. “Hey, man, how you’ve been doing?” Lance greeted Hunk, clapping their hands together in a secret handshake. “You want a Sprite and your usual?”

“Oh yeah, definitely,” Hunk replied with a laugh. “I’m doing as good as I can be able.” There was a slight tremor in Hunk’s voice—hardly noticeable—but Lance could feel his nerves through Hunk’s clammy grip. Today was the day, after all, so Lance didn’t blame him for being nervous. This might have been Hunk’s idea, too, heading to Tío Raymón’s restaurant with his colleagues from Voltron. He wondered how many of them were actually Supers. Lance’s stomach twisted and churned at the thought, but he brushed it aside.

“I’ll have my usual, too,” Shay said.

“Okay,” Lance replied with a smile. “And Keith?”

“I’ll have the... the carne con papas,” Keith answered shortly.

“Cool, what about you guys?” Lance said, turning to the other side of the table.

“I’ll have the—er, boliche mechado?” Sven stated.

After noticing that Lance was ready for her order, Allura said, “I’ll have the arroz con pollo.”

Then came Shiro, asking politely, “Could I get the Cubano?”

“Sure thing, man,” Lance replied. He turned to Coran and exclaimed, “Coran, Coran, the generous man! Would you like a few minutes? Or are you ready?”

Coran folded his menu and smiled. “I’ll just have whatever Hunk is having because, well,” he glanced around the table, “he’s the only one I can trust when I say ‘my treat.’”

“Of course! Anything to drink?”

“Water,” Coran said in a deadpan, narrowing his eyes at the older occupants of the table. Sven, Allura, and Shiro only smiled innocently at Coran. “Tap water.”

Lance laughed and replied, “All right, gotcha, my good sir.”

As much as Lance would love to stick around and chat, however, he had a job to do. He served them their appetizers and then their meals. When he noticed that they were nearly done with their meals, Lance asked his uncle to take payment out of his pay-cheque for an order of flan, and once that was
ready, he made his way to their table.

“Oh, Lance, my boy,” Coran addressed him warmly, “might I get the bill?”

“Yeah, right away!” Lance chirped. He made eye contact with Keith and gestured towards the flan. “I got this for you, by the way, Keith—on the house.” When he saw Keith’s cheeks redden, Lance could feel his own face warm. “It’s thanks for fixing up my window.”

“I was only doing my job!” Keith assured him. “You didn’t have to get me anything!”

“Well, I wanted to,” Lance replied snootily, crinkling his nose and ending the discussion. “I’ll be back with the check. Do you guys need any to-go boxes? I’m assuming you need one for the flan?”

“One for me, too, Lance,” Allura spoke up.

“You got it, princess!” Lance chirped. He pivoted on his heel and made for the register, located near the bar for convenience (as his uncle claimed). He exchanged pleasantries and small talk with his colleague who was already using it while he grabbed two styrofoam boxes from the shelves—one small and the other a larger container. Once his co-worker left for another table, Lance fetched Coran’s bill and then returned to their table, where they seemed to be ganging up against Keith. The raven haired young man had his arms crossed and had taken to staring at the flan angrily as though it had done him a great disservice.

Lance briefly wondered if it had been a good idea. He was stupid. He didn’t even know if Keith liked flan… or desserts in general. After all, Keith had ordered unsweetened iced tea.

He slid the bill, tucked safely inside a holder, towards Coran, who seemed to pale at the amount. “Just let me know when you’re ready,” Lance told Coran while Shiro and the others tried to peek at the amount.

“Coran, we can pay for our meals,” he heard Shiro say as Lance gradually backed away from the soon to be battlefield. “Perhaps we did go a little too far with ordering… almost half the appetisers.”

“No, no, I insisted on paying,” Coran protested, “and so I shall! I pay your salaries anyway. If you notice a pay cut, then… it’s completely unrelated to this.” Lance swore that he heard Coran grumble, “At least the food was heavenly!”

Eventually, in the middle of attending to different tables, Lance went back to fetch the bill and to swipe Coran’s card through the register, punching in the tip and costs, before he returned Coran’s card with a pen. “I’ll just need your signature, and then you’re good to go, Coran my man!” Lance chirped. “You guys have a good rest of your day! Here are some chocolate mints!” Lance fished through his apron pocket and dumped a handful of candies onto the table.

“Wait, Lance!” Keith called out, mild panic spread across his face. Lance paused mid-step and plastered a grin across his lips. “Um, thanks for the flan!”

Lance could feel his grin widen, becoming more genuine. “Yeah, no problem, dude!”

“Be careful getting back home at night, Lance,” Hunk said before he left, and the grim expression in his eyes was enough to let Lance know that Hunk wasn’t just worried about Lance walking home in the dark.

“I’m always careful, buddy,” Lance assured him with a little smile.
“You know…” Shiro began quietly as he drove the two of them back to Voltron Towers. Allura had gone with Coran and Sven, and Shay and Hunk went back together as well. “They use milk to make flan, so if you don’t want it, I’ll take it.” A shit-eating grin stretched across his lips.

Keith frowned and held the styrofoam container even more tightly. “It’s mine, Shiro,” Keith snapped.

“You’re lactose intolerant.”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t eat it.”


“Shut your mouth, Shiro.”

“You’re so far gone,” Shiro teased, “that I can’t even reach you any more. Are you still with us, Keith?”

“Shiro, shut up.”

“IT’s a good thing he doesn’t know that you were the one who broke his window in the first place, huh?” Shiro chirped. “At least Coran makes you clean up your own mess, so that gave you an excuse to see him again—properly this time. Now you have more excuses to visit him, too! Maybe you could ask Hunk for his shifts.”

“Shiro, shut the fuck up!”

“Keith, you can’t eat that flan,” Shiro warned from his desk. He peeked over the files he was browsing on his desktop—firearm purchases in the last six months, namely handguns and rifles. Shiro narrowed his eyes as Keith swiped off some of the excess caramel that pooled at the bottom of the styrofoam container with his finger and stuck it into his mouth.

Wow, this caramel was pure sugar.

Keith liked it.

Picking up a plastic fork that he had swiped from the cafeteria on the way to the investigation offices, Keith stabbed it into the dessert and grinned while Shiro frowned at him. He stuck the piece of flan into his mouth, savouring the taste of custard and caramel.

Wow, it was really good. He was kind of glad that Lance had given this to him now.

“You know, I told you that you shouldn’t have eaten that flan,” Shiro commented as Keith bolted to the restroom later that evening, half-dressed in his hero-suit. “Catch up with the rest of us once you’re good. I’ll catch a ride with Allura.”

Keith had no regrets.

“I’ve disabled the security cameras and began playing the loop. You’re free to continue. Be careful.”

“I’m always careful,” Lance whispered as he crept within the shadows.

“That’s what you told Gold earlier, and, honestly, nobody believes you.”
“Shut up and let me do my job,” Lance hissed as he pressed up against the wall upon approaching a corner. “What’s my position, Emerald?” He peeked around the corner just as a Galra thug had walked by.

“Round that corner,” Pidge replied. “There’ll be a fork up ahead. Head left, and at the end of the hallway, there should be a room labelled C-105. According to GM’s maps, that’s our first stop.”

Once inside, Lance relayed Pidge the information. “There’s cabinets, a desk with drawers, and a computer.” Lance wiggled the mouse, and the screen flickered to life. “It was idling. I’m looking at a log-in screen. What do you want me to do, Emerald?”

“Take the chip I gave you and set it in the PC,” Pidge replied.

“You mean the SD card?”

“Yes, Sapphire.”

Lance shrugged and fished through one of his utility pockets in his vest, pulling out the unlabelled card that Pidge needed. He set it in the PC, watching with awe as the screen turned green, taken hostage by an even tinier (and much more animated) Pidge. “What technological nonsense is this?” Lance wondered aloud. When he heard Pidge take a breath, about ready to speak, through his earpiece, Lance hurriedly said, “On second thought, I don’t really want to know.”

Pidge grumbled something and then announced, “Okay, I’m in.” A loading bar appeared on screen, downloading the information and potentially, knowing Pidge, uploading a virus as well. “Okay, take out the chip. Let’s continue with phase two. Once you head out the room, go back to the fork and head into the opposite hall. There should be a room labelled C-114.”

Lance cracked open the door, peering outside, before slipping back into the hallway. He checked for anyone at the fork, and just as he was about to cross, he heard someone shout, “Hey you!” Without an ounce of hesitation—and perhaps running purely on adrenaline—Lance pulled out his handgun, released the safety, cocked the hammer, took aim, and fired. The Galra thug collapsed, and Lance reloaded his gun with more tranquilliser rounds Hunk had developed for him.

“What was that, Sapphire?” Pidge demanded immediately.

“I was spotted, but he’s knocked out cold,” Lance assured. “I took care of it. Don’t worry about it, Emerald. We have hours before he wakes up.”

“I hope for your sake he does,” Pidge grumbled.

“I found C-114,” Lance informed Pidge shortly. He glanced over at the keypad and mentioned, “It’s protected though. I can’t get in.” A moment later, the screen flashed green, beeping, before Lance heard a lock click.

“Try it now,” Pidge said.

Lance tested the door and swung it open. “All right, I’m in. Thanks, Emerald. What do you need here?”

“Cut off the power, blow up the joint, and get to target point,” Pidge informed shortly. “GM says there should be a control panel with power switches. Just pull all of them down. That should shut off the power.”

“Switches, switches…” Lance mumbled under his breath, scanning the room. “Found ‘em!” he
declared as he strode over. He examined them briefly before grasping onto two at a time, pulling them down. He did the rest with the other two switches.

“Sapphire, you have less than three minutes before someone comes to investigate,” Pidge reminded. “Hurry up and get out of there!”

Lance reached into the storage pouch strapped to his right thigh, reaching for a grenade, as he raced out of the control room. He pulled the pin and flung it inside. Without looking back, he raced away, his goggles adjusting to the change in brightness before shifting to night vision entirely. “Turn right!” he heard Pidge cry, so Lance did. At the sound of running footsteps, Lance pressed himself against the wall, waiting as the thugs passed him entirely.

“Emerald,” Lance whispered, “which way?”

“Head straight. There’ll be a window you can escape from. It’ll land you on the fire escape. GM marked the location for your firing position on the building opposite. It’ll give you a good view of everything.”

At the end of the hallway, just as Pidge had told him, there was a window. Lance slammed the butt of his handgun against the glass, shattering it to smithereens, before leaping onto the fire escape as quietly as he could. He climbed down as softly and swiftly as he could and then followed Pidge’s instructions up the fire escape of another building. He lingered near the edge of the roof, scoping the view below him, as his goggles calculated his distance from the moving bodies below him, the wind speed, and the surrounding temperature.

“Looks like they’re still trying to find me,” Lance said before he lowered himself onto the surface of the roof. He unstrapped his sniper rifle and propped it against the ledge. He peered through the scope and waited briefly as the technology in his scope and goggles identified one another. Once the connection was made, he peered through the scope to peek into the windows, watching as Galra thugs scrambled around the building. “Any idea where the target would be, Emerald?”

“Top floor,” Pidge informed. “His office is the fourth window from the left.”

“Gotcha,” Lance replied. He adjusted his aim, lifting so that he faced the highest, left most window. He counted—one, two, three—before focusing on the people he found himself. “There are three guards, but I found the target.” He silently began to load up his gun, filling it with three tranquilliser shots and a single lead bullet.

“GM says to clean out the place,” Pidge told him. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Lance took in a breath as he released the safety. His hands shook, and he willed them to stop. He squeezed his eyes shut. “Ten piedad de mí, oh Dios, conforme a tu misericordia: conforme a la multitud de tus piedades borra mis rebeliones,” he whispered.

Pidge remained respectfully silent as he continued his prayer, reciting it purely from memory, until he managed to calm down. The first time he had recited them, Pidge had nearly remarked, “I thought you weren’t religious.” She only stopped when she realised he couldn’t stop begging for forgiveness. (“There are no atheists in foxholes,” his boss once told them. Now Pidge could believe him.)

After he finished, he pried open his eyes and forced himself to face his reality. The guards shifted positions, but they were still inside. They haven’t moved, but there was a getaway car arriving just a few blocks away. He had to make this quick.

Lance steadied his aim and then pulled the trigger. He didn’t bother to check if the target was felled
because Lance knew that he was down for the count. All it took was one shot for his targets to go
down. Instead, the sniper yanked on the lever of his rifle, pulling it towards his body, and lifted it up
so that he unloaded the empty cartridge, which clattered to the concrete of the rooftop below him,
and replaced it with another. Before the guards could retaliate against him, he fired off another round.
Pull, lift, fire. Pull, lift, fire. Pull, lift, fire. Four spent shells rested beside his body. Three non-lethal.
One lethal.

“Sapphire, get out of there! More are coming to check!” Pidge warned. Lance rolled over and
hurried to the opposite side of the building, slinging his sniper rifle over his shoulder. He leapt down,
landing onto the fire escape with a clatter, shaking the rusty foundations, before bolting down the
staircase.

A sudden explosion sent Lance flying towards the ground. He rolled over, eyes wide, as he watched
the Galra building combust. That wasn’t part of the plan. “Emerald, did you do that?” Lance
demanded.

“That wasn’t me! I’m adjusting the cameras—*holy shit*, what the hell is that thing? Sapphire, get the
fuck out of there! Something’s breaking out, and it does *not* look friendly!”

“What is it?” Lance asked as he scrambled to his feet.

“Like I fucking know! Weren’t you listening earlier? I can’t tell what the hell it is! It—it’s some kind
of lizard monster!”

“Like from Spiderman?!” Lance squealed.

“Just leave it to the Supers! They probably came running after the explosion *we* caused!” Pidge told
him. “You got your job done, so get out of there! If you’re lucky, they won’t question whether we
were part of it or not!”

“Easy for you to say!” Lance whined as he ducked into an alleyway, only to groan when he felt a
booted foot kick him in the stomach before he could even see it. He gasped for air, clutching his
abdomen with an arm, and gathered his wits quickly enough to avoid a fist to the face. He stumbled
backwards and tried to regain his balance, only for his feet to be knocked out from under him.

Okay, so close combat was not his specialty. Far from it.

Lance rolled onto his side, avoiding being stabbed in the shoulder by a particularly sharp katana. He
swept his leg in a kick, returning the favour, but Red Lion barely stumbled, easily avoiding the
retaliation. It was still enough time to put distance between them, but before he could escape the
alleyway, a wall of flames erupted from the only exit.

Shit. He really fucking hated Supers.

“Sapphire! What’s going on?” Pidge shrieked in his ear.

“I’ve got company. I’ll contact you later.” Lance laughed breathlessly. “This is like… like David and
Goliath.”

“Goliath? Are you there with Red Lion! Lan—*Sapphire*, you can’t take on a Super!”

Lance plucked out his earpiece and dropped it onto the ground, crushing it under his foot. He didn’t
need any distractions if he was going to escape in one piece. Maybe he couldn’t match a Super, but
he could hold out long enough to figure out a way to escape.
“Are you done?” Red Lion grumbled.

“For a sourpuss, you’re quite the gentleman,” Lance replied playfully as he drew his ivory pistol and reloaded it with the proper ammunition. The world would not be happy if he killed Red Lion. “Thanks for waiting, but, good God, we need to stop meeting like this!” He nodded towards Red Lion’s katana—the one made famous by his predecessor, Black Lion—and teased, “You sure you wanna bring a sword to a gunfight?”

“You sure you wanna talk trash when you can’t even land a punch?” Red Lion spat back.

“Grumpy cat, aren’t cha?” Lance mused as he checked his second pistol, this one coloured ebony. After loading up his rounds, he flipped off the safety and opened up his arms invitingly. “Come at me, lion boy!”

“You asked for it!” Red Lion snapped before he charged at Lance. He reached behind him with his left hand, drawing out a dagger held in a reverse grip and lashed out with it. Lance barely had enough time to dodge the dagger before avoiding the sword strike.

Fuck, he’s fast.

Or maybe Lance just wasn’t fast enough.

He remembered back in high school when he used to not pick fights that he knew he couldn’t win. He was, however, a pretty good runner. Nevertheless, Lance was severely outmatched here. Red Lion was stronger, faster, sturdier, and he had goddamn superpowers. All Lance had were his guns, and if only the damn lion boy would stop moving, Lance could get in a clear shot.

Life was never that simple.

Lance hurriedly dodged a swing and pointed his gun at the Super, cursing when he spotted a fireball hurled his way. Lance rolled on the floor before bouncing back onto his feet. For a while, all Lance could do was dodge his attacks, trying to keep his pacing, trying to develop a rhythm. Lance’s heart was pounding in his ears though, and he wondered if the lion boy could hear it, too. Calm down, he told himself. You can handle this. You’ve got this.

It sounded more like he was convincing himself of the impossible though.

The two of them circled each other in a ring, guns drawn and blades extended. “What are you doing here?” Red Lion demanded. “Was this your work?”

Lance made a noise at the back of his throat, a strange, stifled whine, and reflected, “I have nothing to do with the giant lizard guy. He was an unaccounted side effect.”

“So you were plotting something!” Red Lion hissed. “What the hell are you planning?”

“Look, we obviously got off on the wrong foot,” Lance said, shrugging. “I’m not your enemy—honest!” Before his opponent could even blink, he cocked his hammer and pulled the trigger of his ivory gun in practically one fluid motion. He repeated the action without any moment of hesitation.

Was it dirty fighting to attack while your opponent’s guard was down? Maybe. Was it a lucky shot? Maybe. Lance wasn’t complaining though if it let him escape in one piece.

Red Lion grunted as the pellet made impact with his hands, and his sword and dagger both clattered to the ground. Ice spread across his hands, freezing over them, and he hurriedly tried to conjure his flames to thaw his hands free. While Red Lion was distracted, Lance brought up his ebony pistol,
cocked the hammer, and fired, hitting the Super at the sliver of skin near his neck. Red Lion fell to his knees, collapsing onto his side. Lance knelt beside him, kicking the katana away by the hilt.

“I didn’t poison you, by the way. That was a tranquiliser shot,” Lance informed shortly. A shit-eating grin stretched across his lips—not that the Super could even see it—as he said, “Looks like I got some pussy tonight.” Lance cackled boisterously before he crouched and reached for the fur lined hood. Lance began to pull it back ever so slightly and chuckled when he saw the eyes behind the lion mask widen. “Just kidding,” Lance sang, dropping his hand. “I’m not going to unmask you. I don’t care for your identity. I just need you to know this.”

Lance leaned in, his breath warming the fabric of Red Lion’s hood.

“I mean it. I’m not your enemy; for all you know, we could be on the same side. Don’t get me wrong though. I don’t particularly care for Supers, don’t even like ‘em, and we’ll probably never be allies. So stay out of my way.”

A part of him, resentful and bitter and vindictive, pulled down his mask bandana just as Red Lion’s eyes fluttered closed. The sedative was taking effect. He pressed a mocking kiss to the pale cheek and patted him lightly. “Sweet dreams, little lion boy,” he whispered. “Be a good kitty while I’m gone.” The flames at the alley died down. Lance pulled his scarf back up, covering up everything below his nose, and exited the alley.

He could still hear the other Knights of the Voltron Alliance battle the lizard monster and hated himself for being unable to do anything.

Once he was a good distance away, he messaged Pidge.

(Today – 12:43 AM)

Lancer™: I got the reward from the dungeon boss!!!

Lancer™: Leaving the dungeon rn! Heading to the nearest town! :)

Pidgeotto: srsly fuck you

Pidgeotto: guild meeting right now

Pidgeotto: we need to talk

““You hit me once
I hit you back
You gave a kick
I gave a slap
You smashed a plate over my head
Then I set fire to our bed, oh…”

Lance sang along quietly to the lyrics as Florence and the Machine played in his ear. His thumb kept scrolling up the screen of his phone, eyes skimming through his Instagram feed and occasionally liking a cute cat photo, before he received an incoming message from Hunk.

(Today – 1:38 AM)

Hunkster: I’m here!
"A kick to the teeth is good for some
A kiss with a fist is better than none."

Lance approached the gold Camry and pulled open the door to the back seat, laying down his guitar case. He then slipped into the passenger’s seat and removed his earphones. He exited his music player running in the background and locked his phone. After clicking in his seatbelt, he glanced at Hunk, whose face appeared paler than normal. Lance frowned, noticing how tightly he had gripped the steering wheel. “Hunk—” he began, only to be interrupted.

“Save it, Lance,” Hunk pleaded quietly.

A heavy guilt settled in his gut, and he slumped in his seat. An even heavier silence stifled them into submission before Hunk broke the tension between them, “Pidge thought you were going to get arrested, and that was the best case scenario.”

“What was worst case?” Lance asked quietly.

Hunk pursed his lips and shook his head. “I think you know already,” Hunk replied. He slowed to a stop at a red light and sighed. “There’s a lot more to the Galra that we don’t know. Human trafficking? Why would they need that? What else do they do? How much do the police and the Alliance know? I just… especially after tonight, I don’t feel uncomfortable sending you out there, and I hope Pidge felt the same way, too.”

Hunk knew that they saw the world in different ways. Lance knew that as well, and Lance knew that Hunk knew, too. It was simply hard to swallow and, admittedly, frustrating that his best friend from high school couldn’t understand him, couldn’t understand why he thought the way he did or why he felt the way he did. Perhaps it was because of Hunk’s overly cautious character, however, that rooted him down to earth and supported Lance whenever things got rough. Even if Hunk didn’t understand him, Lance could appreciate that he would be there for him.

“I’m fine though,” Lance insisted. “I can hold my ground. Look, I got out of the fight with Red Lion in one piece! I managed to knock him out even!” Sure, it might not have been the fairest of fights (because, seriously, what was that guy thinking? Bringing a sword to a gunfight!) but Lance got through it.

He would get through this. He had to get through this.

“We can’t stop now. We’ve made more progress than anyone else,” Lance persisted.

Hunk exhaled a trembling breath. He pressed down on the accelerator gently as the light switched to green. “Okay,” he acquiesced, “okay…” Hunk forced a smile to his lips and gestured to the radio. “Shotgun gets radio rights. I should know; I wrote the book on shotgun rules.”

Lance returned the grin before exercising his right to the auxiliary cord.

When Lance crawled into bed that night, he couldn’t sleep. Instead, he closed his eyes and combed his fingers through Azura’s fur, trying to find comfort in the sound of her soft purring. A whisper of “Father, please forgive me” echoed in the darkness of the night, of his mind, over and over again, until he rose with the sun.

It was a new day, but he didn’t feel like a new person. He didn’t feel like it was a new beginning.
The menu at Tío Raymón’s restaurant is based off a local Cuban restaurant I go to every now and then. I have a weakness for flan in general (used to hate it as a kid though), but I’m lactose intolerant. Flan gives me cramps. So does ice cream. Actually, there are a lot of things I shouldn’t eat, but I don’t particularly care because it tastes so damn good. Anyway, hopping on the lactose intolerant Keith bandwagon because he seems like the type not to care about those taking those lactase tablets either. :)

Lance is also significantly less flirty in this story because of the shit he has gone through and the shit he has to do. For example, the prayer Lance was reciting is (according to a couple Google searches for cross-referencing) the Spanish translation of Psalm 51, which is known as the prayer for forgiveness, usually (well, supposedly, since I haven’t been to a mass in over fifteen years) said after confession in the Roman Catholic faith; more on this will be elaborated on further chapters.

Also, Lance’s, Pidge’s, and Hunk’s code-names (Sapphire, Emerald, and Gold) actually refer to the Pokemon game titles. They might be doing badass, grey-area and most likely illegal things, but they’re still dorks if you haven’t gotten from their “code,” which just uses a bunch of RPG and D&D type vernacular. Regarding Pidge’s hair length, it’s currently long because it’s so pretty! for now...

So… Does anyone watch Miraculous Ladybug? I wanted to do a love square type thing, but then this hot mess happened.

The song featured in this chapter was “Kiss with a Fist” from Florence + the Machine. It’s a very Klance song if you read Florence Welch’s commentary on its meaning.
He needed to be faster.

Lance’s chest burned, heaving breaths expanding his lungs to a point where they nearly burst his chest, pounding heart threatening to break out of its cage, as he was forced to slow down, his legs nearly giving out, muscles aching.

He wasn’t fast enough.

Lance stumbled to a tree, sick curling its vices around him, twisting his insides and beating at his skull, before bitter acid threatened to rise up his throat. Bile lurched from his stomach, spilling past his lips and into the bushes. Lance groaned.

A cold touch of a plastic water bottle was pressed against his neck. He tilted his head, catching sight of his boss, and groaned once again. How pathetic.

“Don’t push yourself too hard, Reyes,” he advised.

“Too late,” Lance grumbled, wiping his lips with the back of his hand and grimacing. Disgusting. He reluctantly accepted his boss’s generosity and took the water bottle for himself, uncapping it and pouring cool water into his mouth. He rinsed out the lingering sick and then took a gulp of water. Once he was done, Lance asked, “What are you doing here?”

“You’re not the only one who goes for a run here,” the older man replied.

However, he wasn’t at all dressed for an early morning run. Like always, his boss wore a sleek black suit with shoes so well-polished that one couldn’t tell just how blood-stained the soles were, so Lance couldn’t help but wonder what business he had in the area. Then again, everything in this city was practically occupied by Galra; there were too many possibilities.

“There’s no point in forcing yourself like this,” the older man remarked. “It’s not like you’re built like a Super. Everyone and everything has limitations.”

Lance grunted. “Well, maybe it’s time to go beyond those limitations,” he protested.

“Whatever you do, just keep hydrated,” his boss quipped. “I’ll see you tonight.”

Lance watched as the taller man pivoted on his heel and left him behind.
Lance checked the time on his phone and high-tailed it back home. He still had to get ready for his other job, and his students usually preferred if their piano teacher smelt like either vanilla almond, spring meadows, or crisp ocean breeze.

“Here are the facts of the case,” Shiro declared in the front of the investigation hall. He gestured to the first photo held up against the whiteboard by circular magnets. “We received a distress call from the neighbourhood after the first explosion, which we linked to this scene.” Shiro’s finger traced the red line leading to a second photo of a charred room. “From what we managed to salvage from the room, it was the control centre. All the power was found shut down. Furthermore, we found a grenade pin some distance away. It seems like sabotage.”

Shiro moved onto the next image. There were four empty cartridge cases on concrete. “Four empty rounds were found on the rooftop of the building across the street.” Shiro traced another red line to a fourth image. “Incidentally, four bullet holes were found in the glass of the office of this man, Harold Saxton.” He pointed to a fifth image set beside the fourth photograph. “Four men were shot in office. Among them was the man, Harold Saxton, who had been arrested before for tax evasion though he has been suspected of managing a drug ring and prostituting young men and women. Three of the men were incapacitated, but Saxton was dead upon arrival.”

“Furthermore, by the time we arrived,” Shiro continued as he highlighted a sixth image, circling it with a red marker, “there was a lizard monster set loose upon the neighbourhood. However, it would be more accurate to say that it had escaped its prison in the building once the power shut down and security was more vulnerable. We managed to evacuate the civilians, subdue the creature, and arrest the Galra members who were associated with it and its destruction upon the neighbourhood.

“As for who shot Harold Saxton and the three Galra men,” Shiro paused, glancing over in Keith’s direction, “Red Lion had an encounter with the suspect, but he had managed to escape. The suspect is the same man the two of us had encountered the night in the warehouses at Northside Piers. We’ve confirmed that he uses three different firearms. Two of them are pistols that he uses in close combat, and we have reasonable cause to believe that he used the sniper rifle in the assassination of Harold Saxton as well as the incapacitation of the three Galra men.”

“Allura, Sven, Shay, and I have apprehended several Galra men who may have been linked to the lizard creature. Allura and I will lead the interrogation on these men. Sven, Shay, and Keith will continue looking into the crime scene with the Monstro City Police Department, and our investigators here at the office will search for this ‘Blue Shot.’ In the meanwhile, the engineering department will try to analyse the bullets extracted by forensics as well as the empty cartridges. If they can, they should develop a countermeasure against these bullets because, according to Keith, some of his bullets are not ordinary.”

Murmurs rippled across the hall. Shiro made eye contact with Keith and nodded, giving him the go ahead to speak. Keith sighed through his nose, trying to be quiet (and possibly failing because of the glower the guy next to him gave him), before reluctantly standing in front of the rest of the Knights and the Voltron Investigators. His fingers twitched, recalling the ice that had spread over his gloved hands. He shook off the memory and focused on the task at hand.

“As far as we know, he has two or three types of bullets,” Keith stated. “The first type was identified as the one used in the assassination of Saxton; this is unconfirmed as we have not ascertained whether he is the same killer. However, the probability is highly likely because the second type of bullet he uses works as a tranquilliser, which he had used in his fight against Red Lion as well. His third bullet is a type that explodes upon contact and spreads ice, freezing over the target. As mentioned before, engineering is currently examining how the bullets are made.”
He lowered himself back into his chair and crossed his arms as the meeting continued with Shiro’s “Thank you, Keith.” Keith found his eyes wandering over to Hunk, who sat with the other engineers and mechanics, fiddling with the pencil in his hands. Blueprints were laid out in front of him on the table, and Keith could guess that it was about the bullets that they’d found.

Shortly after the meeting’s conclusion, Keith booked it over to Hunk, greeted Ryner and Slav for a second, and pulled the taller young man aside. “K-Keith?!” Hunk spluttered, blinking in confusion and what might have been panic. “What’s going on, man?”

“What have you found about those bullets?” Keith asked bluntly, crossing his arms.

Hunk sighed and ran his hand through his hair. “The tranquillisers and ice ones work in a similar way,” he informed, averting his eyes. “There are chemicals compounded within the bullet, and the shell itself shatters upon contact to allow the chemicals to spread. In the case of the tranquilliser, it works similarly to tranquilliser darts, where the tip injects the sedative before imploding.”

Noticing that Hunk appeared uncomfortable with the subject, Keith relented and pulled back. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket and asked, “You doing okay, buddy?” Hunk blinked, taken back by the subject change, and Keith took it upon himself to explain, “You don’t handle news about the Galra very well.”

Hunk gaped and stammered, “O-Oh, right! Uh, yeah… never liked them much.” That was an understatement. He gave Keith a weak grin and said, “It’s personal, you know? Their acts of destruction have gone on for too long, and they went too far—to the point where people have died.” Hunk inhaled sharply. “They took away the man who was like a second father to me, almost took my friend, too… But I can get over it for work.”

“Your friend?” Keith echoed.

Hunk snapped back into focus. “Uh, yeah, you know, since the Galra are all over town,” he explained. “Pretty much every building, every street, is Galra turf. You run into danger at every corner. Anyway, I gotta go! Ryner wants to check if the hero-suits can withstand the bullets.” Hunk all but scrambled away, giving a wave to Shiro as they passed each other.

“Good job today, Keith,” Shiro said, approaching the young man. “You heading out to the crime scene?”

Keith nodded. “Yeah,” he replied, “not like I have much else to do. I mean, we’re still trying to calculate damages, so Coran hasn’t sent me out with another team for reparations.” He hesitated and then said, “Let me know if you guys find anything in interrogations.”

“Sure thing,” Shiro responded. His expression shifted into something Keith vaguely recognised as concern, however, as he asked Keith, “Are you okay though? You weren’t… yourself when you came to last night.”

Keith refrained from snorting. That was putting it lightly, and they both knew it. Keith had barely managed to thaw his hands free from the ice immobilising him, but by the time the ice had melted, the drug had taken effect. It was humiliating. He had woken up in the infirmary at Voltron Towers to Shiro’s excessive mothering, and the other Knights had given him their condescending pity because they thought he had lost a fight he could have won. He was one of the strongest Paladins, after all, and this loss somehow made him weak. He hated it, and he might have nearly punched Jeff (was that his name? Oh well, it doesn’t really matter) in the face after confronting him in the halls because he was pissed off and not taking any of Jeff’s (if that was even his name) bullshit.
So no, he was not okay.

What was even more irritating, however, was how Keith couldn’t stop thinking about how gentle and soft that goddamn kiss was despite the blatantly mocking intent. Keith’s skin still itched from where the kiss lingered, and he just couldn’t fucking stop thinking about it.

“Keith, you okay?”

Keith felt Shiro pull him back into reality, his hand a heavy weight on his shoulder. He lowered his hand from rubbing at his cheek subconsciously. His cheeks reddened, and he persuaded himself it was because of how harshly he had been rubbing at it earlier. “Peachy,” Keith answered tersely. “I’m fine, Shiro,” Keith insisted, shrugging off Shiro’s hand. “Don’t worry about it. Anyway, I’m going to go now. You should get back to work.”

“Yeah, good luck out there,” Shiro told Keith, patting him on the shoulder encouragingly before turning on his heel and heading back into the office.

“Good luck with those thugs,” Keith returned.

Shiro waved goodbye, and Keith waited until Shiro disappeared back into the office before heading out himself. He shuffled into the elevator and leaned against the wall with his arms crossed, counting down until he reached the ground floor. The doors dinged once before opening, and Keith pushed himself forward. He trudged through the lobby, nodding a greeting to the receptionist at the front desk, before stepping outside. His eyes roamed around him before, as per habit, falling to the music shop across the street.

Then he made direct eye contact with bright blue eyes across the street.

That was new. That was very new.

Keith’s breath hitched in his throat, and a greeting on the tip of his tongue suddenly stumbled to the back of his throat. He nearly swallowed his tongue trying to force himself to greet the young man who had just left the music shop as well. Lance, on the other hand, seemed to brighten at the mere sight of Keith. He gestured wildly, and Keith could guess that Lance wanted him to stay in place. His eyes followed the tall brunet as he jogged to the nearest pedestrian crossing. Once traffic paused to allow him across the road, Lance booked it across the street and down towards Keith.

His eyes were glimmering like the sunbeams reflecting off the ocean’s surface, but Keith couldn’t help but notice that Lance looked a bit paler than the last time Keith had seen him. Not to mention, Keith noted, Lance looked exhausted—like he hadn’t gotten much sleep at all.

“Hey, Keith!” Lance greeted with a grin. “Are you on a break?”

“Um, yeah,” Keith replied without a moment’s thought. Sorry, Shiro, Keith apologised quietly. Lance took priority over a crime scene he had already visited twice. Keith wasn’t even sure what more he could fish from that decimated office building. “What about you?”

“I just got off work,” Lance answered, beaming. “I’m so tired I’d probably crash right when I get home, but, hey, if you’re not busy, do you want to get coffee or something?”

Keith hated coffee.

“Sure,” Keith replied with a shy smile, wary and uncertain. “Anywhere you have in mind?”

“There’s a place a couple blocks away,” Lance answered with a grin. “How much time do you
“About an hour,” Keith answered, averting his eyes and rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. He glanced back at the building and apologised to Shiro once again. He could take a detour to the crime scene—an hour long detour—as long as he got there, right? “Lead the way,” Keith said.

“All right, cool,” Lance chirped. He began to manoeuvre through strings of people with ease, leading the way, while Keith was just a step behind. “Anyway, what do you do in the office all day? Or, like, how does the Voltron reconstruction thing work?” Lance paused, considering something, and then asked, “Can you even talk about your work? Like, nobody knows anything about Voltron Towers unless you work there.”

Keith cracked a smile at Lance’s enthusiasm. “I can’t really tell you much about what goes on inside Voltron Towers,” Keith admitted. Upon noticing the slight downwards curve of Lance’s lips, Keith hastily mentioned, “But I can tell you a little about how my job works—if that’s okay with you?”

“Of course that’s okay!” Lance assured, nudging Keith lightly. “I mean, honestly, you’re a mysterious guy with a mysterious job. People would probably be thrilled to learn something new about you.”

Keith flushed slightly from the attention and… praise? It sounded like praise. Wait, Lance thought he was mysterious? Did he like mysterious? Was mysterious a good thing? Keith glanced over at the taller young man and asked, “What do you mean by ‘mysterious’?”

“Oh, well, you know…” Lance scanned their surroundings almost warily before turning back to Keith. He lowered his voice into a whisper and leaned closer so that he could make certain that Keith would hear him, and Keith prayed to every god in existence that Lance wouldn’t notice the red burning his cheeks. Lance was close—too close—and Keith could smell his cologne and feel his warmth near his skin. “On top of having a job at the elusive Voltron Towers, there’s the whole ‘you’re related to Asako Kogane of Kogane Industries’ thing? Nobody really knows anything about her personal life. Hell, all I know about her is that she visits Tío Raymón’s restaurant for lunch at exactly noon every other week on Thursdays for a date with her partner.”

Lance pulled away, and Keith tried his damnedest to hold in the sigh of relief despite the crushing disappointment that pressed down on his chest. Keith tried to focus his eyes on Lance’s smile and not the distance between them, but that wasn’t particularly difficult after thinking wow, he’s got a nice smile. “That makes you just as mysterious as your aunt,” Lance declared. “She mentioned you a couple of times, but other than how smart and brilliant you are, I don’t know anything about you.”

Keith bit his tongue, unsure of how to reply, before shrugging half-heartedly. “I mean, we’ve never really held a discussion,” Keith managed to get out, choosing his words slowly and carefully so that he didn’t stammer, didn’t slip up. “We only met twice, I think.”

“True, true,” Lance agreed easily. He pulled open a door to a nearby cafe and grinned bright and mischievous. “Let’s change that then? After you, my dude.”

Keith bit the inside of his cheek, willing his cheeks to a normal colour, before stepping inside. He relaxed some upon noticing that the menu offered tea as well as coffee, and he followed Lance’s example, trailing after him to the counter. Keith half-listened as Lance ordered some kind of latte, snapping to attention when the latter asked him for his order. Shaking his head, Keith insisted that he could pay for his own drink. “Besides,” Keith said, “you already got me a flan last time. I could at least pay this time.”
Lance sighed and relented upon noticing that Keith wouldn’t budge from his position. “Fine,” he replied, “but next time, I’m paying.”

Keith bit his tongue to keep from blurting out, “There’s a next time?” Instead, he shrugged and agreed peacefully—or as peacefully as he could be because holy shit, there’s going to be a next time?

He pulled his wallet out of his back pocket as he placed down an order for an unsweetened green tea—easy on the ice. Keith followed Lance to the tables, taking a seat at a window table. “So what’s it like?” Lance asked. When Keith gave him a blank stare, Lance clarified with a sheepish grin, “I mean, what’s working for VBC like?”

“Oh, right,” Keith recalled. He pursed his lips and shrugged. “It’s all right, I guess.”

Lance raised an eyebrow and remarked with not-so-subtle incredulity, “You make it sound like a normal job!”

“Well,” Keith considered this and replied, “for the most part, it is. The reparations department doesn’t really have much to do until after the action happens. We have Supers report what was damaged, and then we send out small teams to investigate and access the damage. We report back, get the funds, and then start on what we can fix. Usually, it’s stuff like broken windows, walls, or fences. We can’t restore entire buildings, after all, and that much heavy damage is a rare case in itself.” Keith paused. “But it happens.”

Lance nodded his head gravely. “Like what happened last night?”

Keith blinked. “You know about what happened last night?”

“Well, it was all over the news,” Lance mused. “I take it that you don’t watch the news for this kind of thing?”

Keith shook his head. “I get all my information through work,” Keith explained. At the mention of last night’s destruction—the destruction he could have helped prevent had he not been knocked out cold—Keith frowned. He stole a glance at the young man sitting across from him and found that Lance appeared just as solemn. The server had taken that moment to drop off their drinks, and they waited until she left to resume their conversation.

“What even was that last night?” Lance asked. “The news said that it was some kind… giant lizard? Not quite a dragon, not quite a dinosaur, not quite Godzilla.”

Keith shook his head. “I couldn’t tell you even if I tried,” Keith replied. There were strange creatures appearing as of late, humanoid creatures who acted more feral than civil, to reign destruction on the city. There was no explanation to why they were appearing and what their purpose was. One theory was that they were also a form of evolution like the superhumans, but it was frightening to even consider that it was natural.

Lance seemed to have the same, if not similar, thought. A shudder wrecked the taller man’s body before he took a sip of his latte. “What are you going to do about that neighbourhood?” Lance asked, sounding all too forlorn about the subject. “There’s a building that was almost completely destroyed, and the neighbouring ones seemed to have sustained damage as well.”

“We’re going to focus our efforts into working on the neighbours’ buildings right now,” Keith answered before he took a sip of his own drink. The tea’s flavour wasn’t as strong as he’d like, but it was fine. It was neither too bitter nor too sweet anyway—as he usually preferred. “We’re going to
see what the city wants to do with the destroyed building. We could contract outside help to rebuild it if they want to keep it, or we can demolish and make it into some kind of lot if they preferred. It was…” a nest full of Galra thugs “It was found to be in misuse anyway.”

Lance hummed. “Was everyone safe?” he asked.

Keith nodded. “Yeah, usually when Knights arrive on the scene, they evacuate the civilians first and try to get everyone out of the danger zone. That’s priority number one. They usually try to barricade the threat to minimise damages and casualties,” Keith explained. Before he ended up telling Lance more than what he could, Keith added hastily, “Or at least, that’s what they’ve told us in the reconstruction and other departments.”

A grin stretched across Lance’s lips that he tried to hide behind the rim of his cup. After he set his cup back down, Lance asked Keith, “Does that mean you’ve met the Knights? Do you know who they are?”

“Well, we both work for VBC,” Keith replied hesitantly. “I don’t really know who they are behind the mask,” he found himself lying. “The only people who probably have direct connection to the Knights would be the engineering department since they work on their equipment, the CEO of VBC, and maybe the sponsors.” His aunt’s company was the one who sponsored Red Lion and Black Sky shortly after Keith joined the Alliance two years ago. Although they never discussed work (as it was one of Aunt Asako’s rules) over lunch or dinner, Keith was positive that she knew. He couldn’t say the same for the other Supers though. “Why do you ask?”

Lance shrugged. “Just curious, I guess,” he replied. “I mean, you don’t really hear much about them, and when I meet up with Hunk, he doesn’t like talking about his work—which is understandable, considering my stance on Supers.”

Keith pursed his lips, mulling over the question maybe several million times in his head, before asking, “Do you like superheroes? Do you have a favourite?”

Please say Red Lion, please say Red Lion.

“Yeah, my favourite is Spider-Gwen!” Lance chirped. “I mean, people say she’s basically a re-skinned Spiderman, but I think she’s pretty cute and badass. And… she’s relatable, honestly.” Lance appeared almost wistful as he said that, but the gravity in his expression disappeared after Keith blinked. Lance faced Keith to meet his eyes and laughed once he realised that wasn’t quite what Keith had meant. “Oh! You were talking about the Alliance!” Lance’s smile appeared more strained the more he went on talking about the Knights. “I’m… well, can you keep a secret?” Keith nodded. “I’m not a huge fan of them—the Knights, I mean.”

Keith felt the world disappear beneath his feet, and he didn’t want to know what kind of face he was making that caused Lance to laugh almost bitterly. He immediately made to apologise, wanting to fix things between them, wanting to make it so that he would never have to hear that bitter laugh again, but Lance spoke before he could.

“I know, I know. It’s weird, isn’t it?” Lance mused, tracing the rim of his cup with a long, slender finger. In that moment, however brief, Keith couldn’t help but think that Lance had beautiful fingers. “Everyone loves them. I can’t say my own family thinks the same way as I do. My baby sister’s favourite is Titania. My older sister isn’t really into them, but if she had to pick one, she’d definitely pick Black Sky. My older brother doesn’t particularly care for them; he’s just indifferent. My mom? She’s… well, recently, she doesn’t like them, per se, but she doesn’t hate them or doesn’t not care for them. It’s complicated.”
Lance inhaled sharply, shoulders rising, and sighed through his nose, almost exhausted. In that moment, it appeared as though Lance had aged ten years in a second. His brows furrowed slightly, his eyes darkened, and his expression clouded over. His form almost seemed to crumple into itself. “Anyway, I just…” Lance pursed his lips and brought himself to finish his thought, “I just can’t bring myself to like them.”

A part of Keith deflated. (I can’t tell him about me? Ever?) Still, maybe there was a possibility he could turn around Lance’s opinion on them if they got closer, if they got to know each other better, if Lance gave them a chance… if Keith even had a chance.

Keith had always been surrounded by people who idolised the Knights of the Voltron Alliance. There were children—and sometimes adults—who bought their action figures. He was surprised that there even were action figures of him! The Knights were supposed to represent justice and fairness like in medieval days, and Keith had always thought they’d done their best to uphold them…

However, now that he’d encountered people like Lance and Blue Shot, he couldn’t help but question himself. What did they do wrong? Where did they go wrong? He pushed down the bubbling resentment and frustration in his gut, but still he could hear Blue Shot whisper in his ear like a phantom haunting his mind.

I’m not your enemy.

We’ll probably never be allies.

So stay out of my way.

“Why?” Keith found himself asking without a second thought. He pursed his lips and then added almost demurely, “If you don’t mind me asking.”

Lance smiled ruefully, a wistful glimmer in his eyes. “Maybe some other time,” Lance replied vaguely with a shrug of his shoulders. “It’s kind of a downer, and I just had a long day at work.” He took another sip of his latte as though to punctuate the end of the topic. “What about you?” Lance asked, diverting the attention to focus on Keith instead. “Who’s your favourite?”

“Black Lion,” Keith answered immediately before flushing in embarrassment.

“Old school,” Lance mused. “Nice. She was my dad’s favourite hero—badass and strong. He said she reminded him of a modern day samurai.” Lance laughed. “A samurai riding a motorcycle. Who would have thought?”

“So… Red Lion decided to fill in her footsteps after she…” Keith swallowed. “After she was killed in action,” he managed. “What does your father think of him?”

“I couldn’t tell you,” Lance replied. He stared into his latte as he clarified, “My father died two years ago. Red Lion came into the spotlight a few months after his death.”


God fucking dammit. Keith nearly palmed his forehead. He could fuck up even worse.

Lance cracked a wry grin. “Yeah, it does, but don’t worry about it. You didn’t know,” the taller man replied. He finished off his latte, and Keith shoved the straw into his mouth before he stuffed his other foot up there. “I don’t know what my dad would say about Red Lion, but… for a Super, he’s kind of an interesting character.”
Interesting, he says.

Keith could work with that. A sappy smile spread across his lips. “Yeah?” Keith hummed.

“Yes,” Lance replied, tilting his head curiously at Keith and blinking in confusion. God, he looked like such a puppy—such a *cute* puppy. “Do you not like him? Some people think he’s a wannabe Black Lion. They call him a copycat and everything, but it’s not really fair since he’s a completely different person.”

Keith knew that already, and he never thought much of it. He was the one with the sword, the dagger, and the mask—not somebody else. His mother had trusted him with her legacy, so he would goddamn carry it and protect it. Nobody else had any business regarding what he does, what she wanted, so he simply ignored all of it—all of the unwanted attention, all of the whispered gossip and rumours, all of the pointed looks—and carried on.

Little to say, he was rather touched Lance had his back here even though he disliked Supers in general.

“It’s not that,” Keith assured him. “I’m just… surprised, I guess. Red Lion isn’t the fan favourite of the Paladins. That’s usually Black Sky or Titania.”

Lance laughed. “I can see that,” he replied. “He’s the most impulsive of the bunch. It’s interesting to see what he’s up to though. Sometimes he’s predictable, and sometimes he’s not. There are people who admire him though; the kid who came in for piano lessons says that he likes Red Lion of all the Supers—says that he’s like the red ranger.”

Keith flushed, and he sipped more of his iced tea, hoping in vain that it would cool down the creeping heat pooling in his cheeks. “You said you had a long day at work?” Keith asked in attempt to change the subject.

Nodding his head, Lance sighed and slumped in his seat. Keith nearly recoiled upon realising how close they were before, how they were leaning in further and further the longer they spoke, before squandering his disappointment before it had a chance to build up. “I teach piano and guitar over the weekend from eight in the morning to two in the afternoon. I mean, I love it, but… gosh, some of those kids are tiring. Most of them are like four year old kids whose parents forced them into it, so some of them don’t even care to learn. It’s just frustrating. I had a kid come in for my last hour like that. He was ready to go home and watch TV or something, but his mom had him stay the entire time.”

“Tired?” Keith suggested.

“Uh-huh,” Lance replied weakly, offering him a sleepy smile. Still, despite the evident exhaustion, Keith couldn’t help but think that Lance was beautiful.

“So when do you work at your uncle’s restaurant?” Keith asked.

“Uh, usually the weekdays from eleven to three,” Lance answered. He grinned mischievously, eyes brightening. “Why? You planning on visiting li’l ol’ me? Dude, I appreciate the thought, but restaurant food is *not* cheap.”

Keith huffed. “Maybe I really liked the flan,” Keith grumbled. Even if it did give him the runs, it was pretty good.

“I’ll just bring you some,” Lance assured. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, entering his pin, before holding it out in front of Keith. “Give me your number, and I’ll text you.”
Keith could feel his eyes begin to widen in shock, and he immediately tried to regain his composure. He might have taken Lance’s phone with shaking hands, entering in his number with a pinch of anticipation. Right after he returned Lance’s phone, the brunet tapped away at the screen, and a second later, Keith’s phone vibrated.

Checking his phone, Keith couldn’t help but burst into laughter, catching the attention of several other patrons in the cafe, upon reading the new notification on his lock screen.

(unknown number): What’s shakin’ pretty boy?? ;)

Looking up, he shared a grin with Lance before he added Lance’s contact and replied.

[2:32 PM]

Lance: What’s shakin’ pretty boy?? ;)

Keith: My world after seeing you.

Keith hid his grin behind his hand after hearing Lance laugh out loud as well.

“Hey, Antok,” Lance greeted the bouncer with a grin as he approached the club entrance. A blue Adidas sports bag was slung over his shoulder, packed with spare clothes, his “uniform,” and his gear. “Good night so far?”

Antok quietly shook his head and stepped aside to allow Lance passage. “Don’t cause trouble,” he warned, a light and playful undertone in his words.

Neon lights flashed inside, and the heavy bass of the club’s usual playlist on shuffle and repeat vibrated against every surface of the room, shaking his bones, growing ever more powerful as he progressed further within the club. Lance gave the clerks working up front, collecting the cover charges, a wave, and most of them returned the greeting. He reached the bar and nodded at Rolo, a fairly attractive man with stubble for a beard and shaggy platinum hair, and Nyma, a beautiful young woman with golden skin and bleached hair separated into two pigtails that were delicately curled, as they worked the bar. Her violet circle lenses practically glowed with mirth—or maybe it was the lighting. Lance couldn’t tell. Rolo returned his greeting with a nod and a lazy grin while Nyma smirked at him and lifted a martini glass in promise.

He shuffled inside the employee lounge, guarded by another member of the security team, and stuffed his bag inside of his locker. He adjusted his clothes before he walked back out to the dance floor—an oversized bomber jacket over a light grey hoodie and black tank top with a neon blue design that complemented his blue galaxy snapback, light washed and distressed skinny jeans (that made his ass look fantastic, in his most honest opinion), and dirtied grey high tops. He secured his black and blue headphones around his neck before locking up his locker and pulling up his hoodie.

He manoeuvred through the crowd expertly, mingling and dancing with everyone there, as he smoothly made his way to the stage and to the DJ booth. He gave a wave to some ecstatic regulars as he prepared his set-up. By the time he finished, so was the song that had been playing. He reached for the microphone, speaking into it, and greeted the patrons of the night.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to Empire! How’s everyone doing tonight?” Lance crooned into the mic. He grinned upon receiving a rowdy cheer from the party-goers. “The name’s León, and if you haven’t guessed, I’ll be your delightful DJ for tonight! If you haven’t already, hit up the bar and grab yourself a cocktail from my pals, Rolo and Nyma, because they are some bombass cocktails—no joke, guys. Honestly, order anything from them because I can one
hundred percent guarantee that it will blow your mind. No returns and refunds though. Anyway, this one goes out to them and the wonderful servers working the tables tonight! Remember to leave good tips because they gotta deal with your shit!”

He started up his first set, laying down some electronic chimes (the sound reminding him of crystal bells ringing from fantasy games) and the bass track before starting up the vocals. A couple of clubbers gave cheers upon recognising the song lyrics, and Lance mouthed along to the lyrics,

“Bend your chest open so I can reach your heart
I need to get inside, or I’ll start a war
Wanna look at the pieces that make you who you are
I wanna build you up and pick you apart.”

As the song approached the chorus, Lance fired off a drum track and built up the action before finally dropping the bass, and everyone in the crowd roared with approval as they got down and danced dirty. The dance floor cleared in the centre for someone breaking, and several other dancers joined in—crumping, popping, locking, and so many more dance styles Lance couldn’t name. On the other hand, the outliers simply moved along to the song—some swaying, some grinding, some bobbing.

Lance danced with the crowd before picking up the song yet again. He bobbed his head to the beat, playing with his mix boards to a set he’s memorised by heart, and thriving off the sound and energy of the crowd as they went wild. He cut off the song once it ended and quickly started up another one of his mixes, losing himself to the night. He wasn’t sure how much time had passed until someone tapped him on his shoulder. He lowered his headphones and turned around, grinning at his boss.

Kolivan was a large, built man with a scar down the side of his face, an impeccably trimmed goatee, and long hair pulled into a braid. He had changed suits from this morning. Rather than the sleek jet black suit from this morning, this one appeared to have a more velvety red-violet undertone.

“Good evening, sir!” Lance practically screamed to be heard over the music.

Instead of presenting him with a verbal response, Kolivan merely tapped the face of his silver watch and jerked his thumb towards the spiralling staircase leading to the offices and “private rooms” upstairs. It was about five minutes past eleven, Lance noted, and he barely registered that he was supposed to be on break. Lance nodded in understanding and switched back to the club’s usual playlist. He hopped off the platform, exiting the designated DJ booth, and followed Kolivan to his office upstairs.

Lance plopped into a comfy leather armchair, slumping after having stood and danced for the past five hours. Kolivan himself leaned against his ornate mahogany desk, amber eyes glowering down at Lance with a frown. To be honest though, Lance had never seen Kolivan smile a single day in his life. “What did you need, sir?” Lance inquired, voice attaining a note of seriousness as the adrenaline rush dissolved in his veins. It must have been important if he had led Lance to his office, which was soundproof so that no sound could get in or out.

“The dogs have been getting restless and rowdy recently,” Kolivan commented.

Lance pursed his lips, body tensing, as he asked, “Did you need someone to put them down?”

Kolivan shook his head and crossed his arms. “They haven’t bitten anyone yet,” Kolivan replied, “and it’s too early to determine whether or not they’re rabid. We just have to keep a close eye for now and watch.”
Lance cracked a wry grin. “I’ve always been more of a cat person,” he commented.

If Kolivan had any other expression besides being stern, Lance was sure he would have rolled his eyes or laughed or something when he said, “That cat of yours has turned you. You used to like dogs.”

“I don’t see why I can’t like both,” Lance quipped.

With his one track mind, however, Kolivan easily returned to the subject at hand. “Be on standby,” Kolivan told Lance. “There’s only so much information a bird can retrieve.”

“What about the mole?” Lance asked.

Kolivan shook his head. “The mole hasn’t been in touch,” the older man replied. “He could have been exterminated.” Lance visibly paled, and Kolivan surely noticed. He lowered his voice and said, “You take care, too. We can’t do much for you if you get caught.”

Before they could continue their conversation, there was a knock on the door before it was unceremoniously opened, revealing Antok at the door. Without waiting to be prompted, Lance heard Antok speak his quota of words for the night, “Reyes’ sister is asking to see him.”

“Estefania’s here?” Lance questioned, mild shock colouring his tone, as he leapt out of his seat.

“She’s at the bar, being entertained by Rolo and Nyma,” Antok informed shortly.

“Reyes,” Kolivan called out, “I’ll speak with you later tonight after your shift ends.”

“Gotcha, Boss!” Lance replied before slipping out the door as it closed behind Antok.

While Antok returned to his station and security details, Lance headed straight to the bar. He waved Rolo down for a beer because, even though he wasn’t technically the legal drinking age for a few months, both Rolo and Nyma owed him for several reasons. Lance sat down next to a slender young woman with tanned skin and curled dark brown hair, highlighted with caramel streaks, swept over her right shoulder. She wore an off-shoulder black dress with golden accents, complementing the golden drop earrings she wore and the simple necklace around her neck. While her thin wrists were decorated with golden bands, her ring finger, Lance noted, was still devoid of any engagement ring. Her brown eyes sparkled with amusement when Lance said to Rolo, “And a rum and coke for the pretty lady here!”

“Who’s paying?” she asked, raising her voice over the bass of the music.

“Well, you’re the older sister, so by obligation, you have to pay!” Lance chirped.

Estefania rolled her honeyed brown eyes and retorted, “It’s not my club!”

“Oh, same!” Lance laughed. “If I had it my way, it’d be themed ‘under the sea’!”

Estefania burst out laughing. “Anything to get that mermaid fantasy of yours, huh?” she teased. “Why didn’t you get a job at the local aquarium instead? I hear they were hiring mermaids at one point for a show!”

Lance shrugged. “I didn’t get the gig, but I can get why. Plaxum makes a better mermaid than I do,” he replied.

Somehow, that statement made Estefania crack up laughing. She doubled over, holding her stomach
as though she was in pain, and Lance could only wonder how many drinks she had so far that night. Looking around, Lance could recognise a few of Estefania’s friends—the closer ones, at least, who’ve visited their family before. One of them, fortunately, was wearing a band that marked them as the designated driver. “Jeez, I feel bad for Gabriel if he’s going to take care of your drunk ass,” Lance commented. After all, their mother would probably kill Estefania if she came home completely shit-faced—if their older brother Enrique was any example when he turned twenty-one.

“Your ex got your dream job, holy shit,” Estefania managed to say in between wheezing breaths. Rolo, witnessing the entire ordeal, glanced at the rum and coke in his hand and raised an eyebrow at Lance as though to ask him, “Are you sure?”

Lance, in turn, also raised his eyebrows and offered a half-hearted shrug. “Your call,” he quietly conveyed.

“I miss Plaxum,” Estefania commented. “She was cute. Real cute. Even though that’s a weird nickname. I don’t get her friends. Why’d you guys break up, Lance? Gosh, you guys were so cute. You were so happy.” She sighed and leaned against Lance, dropping her head against his shoulder. “I haven’t seen you that happy since… well…”

Lance could feel her choke up, and Rolo took that chance to serve other customers, leaving Lance’s beer on the counter in front of him. “Estefania, I don’t think you came here to reminisce,” Lance said. “What did you come here for?”

“It’s Saturday night, and my girls wanted to go clubbing,” Estefania replied. “I told them my baby brother worked as a DJ at Empire, and they wanted to check it out. By the way, Mami wants you to come visit more often.” She narrowed her eyes at him and added, “You still haven’t told her that you dropped out, have you?”

Lance squirmed uncomfortably under her gaze and sighed, nodding his head, in surrender. “You know Mami,” Lance protested. “The only reason I dropped out was because school took up too much time in between two jobs.”

“Three jobs,” Estefania corrected. “You’re hiding this one from her, too. Hell, you’re hiding shit from Ana.”

“It pays well!” Lance argued, ignoring the subject of Ana altogether. As her older brother, he was supposed to be a good role model. How did dropping out of college and picking up a job at a nightclub scream “good role model”? Lance certainly couldn’t tell you. “Besides, you know she hates nightclubs, too! Does she even know that you’re here?”

Estefania averted her eyes. “I may have told her that I was sleeping over at Jessica’s tonight, which isn’t a lie because I am going to stay over at Jessica’s,” she replied. Estefania sniffed in distaste and remarked, “You’re not the one who’s living with her!”

“Please, once Gabriel pops the question, you’re going to say yes in a heartbeat and then shack up with him,” Lance retorted.

Estefania’s expression turned somewhat hopeful and delighted. “You really think he’s going to ask?”

“He worships the ground you walk on,” Lance stated as a matter-of-factly, “even after Enrique and I gave him the shovel talk.”

Estefania nudged him. “Whatever! You guys ended up giving me the shovel talk after you met him for the first time!” she whined.
“Can you blame us!” Lance countered. “He was the perfect storybook gentleman prince! I don’t know what he saw in you!”

“You ass!” Estefania shrieked.

“You did the same thing with Plaxum!” Lance argued.

“She was too cute for you! Way out of your league!”

The two of them laughed together with her before Estefania reluctantly brought the subject back into light. “Anyway, I know you feel guilty about hiding all of this from her,” Estefania commented. “I think you should tell her, and we can work something out together. You don’t have to go back to school if you don’t want to, you know? You seem satisfied with your job at the music shop and here, and Tío Raymón is happy that you’re helping out at his restaurant. Plus, Azura practically charmed you into being her life-long servant, and you’re definitely cool with that. I just… I just want you to be happy, you know? As your big sister.”

Lance was silent.

“You’re not alone, Lance,” she stated calmly, regaining sobriety. “Think about it, and then think about it some more. Eventually, you’ll have to say something, do something, because you can’t keep this from her forever. She’s Mami!”

“I know, Estefania,” Lance replied. “I know.”

“Well, I need you to understand,” Estefania responded.

“I got it,” Lance insisted. “Anyway, I need to get back to work.” Lance accepted the beer bottle and left Estefania to her friends, returning to the DJ booth.

Estefania latched onto Lance’s wrist and pulled him back, forcing him to look at him. She grinned at him and said, both playfully and assuringly, “Te amo, Leoncio. For, like, ever.”

Lance could feel a smile stretch across his lips. “Yo también te amo, Este,” he returned just as lightly, “for, like, ever. Shoot me a text when you get to Jessica’s place, okay?”

“You and Gabriel,” she whined—but all in good nature if her grin was anything to go by.

Lance hummed quietly, Regina Spektor crooning a ballad into his ears through his headphones, a more calming stimulant after a night of fast paced dance music, as he shuffled out of the club through the back door. Lance adjusted the strap of his sports bag against his shoulder and kept his eyes on the street, careful not to draw attention to himself. There was a fair amount of activity at two in the morning, but most people were typically drunk or high or suffering a case of insomnia.

Other people were less drunk or high. In fact, sometimes they were worryingly sober—enough to try jumping someone in the dead of night. It wouldn’t be the first time Lance had that kind of trouble, especially after landing the DJ gig at Kolivan’s, and considering what he has done, a bunch of thugs didn’t terrify him exactly.

Still, it was times like these that made Lance wish that he had invested in a bicycle or a scooter rather than relying on Hunk’s car. He might have to skip out on breakfast or dinner a couple of times to make the payments, but it might be worth it. Maybe. Lance couldn’t say for sure.

Honest to God, Lance just didn’t want any trouble.
(He was happy that his sister listened to him and messaged him the moment she settled into her friend’s apartment though. She even sent him a selfie of her and her girl friends making silly faces.)

It wasn’t so much that he was afraid of getting mugged. Sure, he always lost against his brother when they rough-housed back in the day. Enrique actually had to teach him how to throw a decent punch, but they found that Lance was a lot better at running away from attacks than dishing out one himself. Dealing punches and getting punched both hurt like a bitch, and he liked his face the way it was. (Lance was lucky that Red Lion mostly tended to aim his attacks below his face.)

However, on another note, Lance was probably better equipped than most thugs on the street. He drew fast, and he was a good shot. While he was pretty damn confident he could take on a few thugs without his gun (certainly not more than he could handle though… so maybe like three max, and that was pushing it), debilitating them with his tranquilliser shots would make the whole ordeal so much easier. He carried his gear with him every time he went to Empire, after all, because sometimes he went to his “side job” during his DJ gig at Kolivan’s discretion.

There were only two problems.

One, it would give away his location to the Voltron Alliance, who are apparently searching for the elusive Blue Shot.

Two, the police would get involved.

Hell, the police would probably get involved whether he used his gun or not, and that was a sticky situation he would rather avoid. Lance was fine dealing with thugs; however, what he was more terrified of was dealing with the police. Lance wasn’t exactly a master of disguise, and although his side job might have called for more stealth, hiding guns in his bag from an officer in a pat-down was a different matter than hiding Playboy magazines or firemen calendars from his mother. He couldn’t even take the subway back because of the bag searches that had gotten more stringent after the rise of Supers.

God, he really didn’t want to shoot anyone. That would be a whole other mess he didn’t want to get into. He was trying to lay low to get some attention off his alter ego, so what was the point of drawing more attention than usual? More unwanted attention, really.

Lance noticed a flicker of a shadow out of the corner of his eye, and he nearly booked it all the way home. He shoved impulse down to the back of his mind and stifled it, running all sorts of strategies and scenarios through his head. There was a chance it could have been some kind of animal—maybe a stray dog or cat, maybe a rat—and there was also a chance it could have been the local homeless. Maybe it was a thug or a passer-by. Maybe it was a ghost—oh no, no, no, nooo.

Lance derailed from that particular series of thought, trying not to return to it.

(What? Ghosts were scary!)

Lance lowered the volume on his phone, listening for any noise. He could hear rustling fabric—baggy jeans, probably—and the sound of sneakers against the concrete. Definitely not an animal then. (And certainly not a ghost, fortunately.) Just as he was about to quicken his pace, he caught a glimmer of silver metal being drawn.

Time to bounce.

He was about to book it down the street before someone had tackled him in his side, practically throwing him into an alley. Someone threw a punch, and Lance had enough time to dodge it. He
sidestepped the next punch—a sloppy right hook—and ducked underneath a following left swing.

“Hey now, man,” Lance pleaded with a weak grin as he lifted his hands in the universal sign of surrender. “I’m not looking for any trouble.”

“Yeah, well, neither are we,” replied one of the two assailants. Two. He could handle two. Maybe. He never did well in close combat, but after being out in the field with literal murderers and tangoing with Supers, Lance supposed that he could hold out well enough. “You can make this easy and just hand over your bag, pretty boy.”

“You really don’t want what’s in this bag,” Lance replied, clutching it even more tightly in his left hand. His right hand inched closer to the inside of his jacket. “Gym socks, you know? Real dirty gym socks. Smells like a week of unwashed socks.” And gunpowder, Lance added. Just as his fingers brushed against the cool gunmetal, warmed slightly by his body heat, Lance blinked when he caught sight of gleaming silver and red sparks.

The two thugs shrieked as red flames danced along the length of the katana, and the moment they realised they were dealing with a Super, the two hooligans scrambled away from the scene with their tails between their legs. Lance felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise, warning him of the imminent danger in front of him, and the brunet forced himself to calm down.

Maybe, Lance thought, this was a coincidence.

Maybe, Lance hoped, he didn’t learn who I am.

When Red Lion lowered his katana and sheathed it into its scabbard, Lance forced a smile to stretch across his lips, ignoring the prickling tension that made his skin crawl. He suppressed the urge to cringe. After all, he had to be perfect. He had to pretend. He had to play it safe.

He doesn’t know, Lance told himself. He doesn’t know that you don’t like Supers.

He doesn’t know that you have a vendetta against the Galra, Lance added.

As far as he knows, Lance assured himself, you’re normal—you’re a Normal—so he has no reason to suspect you.

So with that same smile plastered to his lips, Lance inched a bit closer to Red Lion and, unsure of what else he could do, grabbed his arm and said, “Hey, thanks for that.”

Although the masquerade mask covered a good majority of his face, Lance caught sight of the redness darkening his pale cheeks. Lance nearly recoiled in surprise. Did he know? What did he know? Why was he reacting like this? Lance’s grip lingered for a moment, and then his fingers loosened and slipped away. However, before his hand could fall completely to his side, he felt the Red Lion grasp his fingers lightly, a gentle touch, and blinked—marvelling at the warm of the Super’s fingertips.

It must be the fire, Lance thought.

“I-it’s no problem,” he replied. He seemed to hesitate before asking almost timidly, “Do you, um, do you come here often?”

Lance’s eyes widened, and his astonishment must have been enough to trigger something within the Paladin because he immediately yanked his hand away from Lance’s. He was red all over as he spluttered, “Shit, sorry, I didn’t mean it in that way! I mean, I wasn’t trying to hit on you? I, uh, I was just wondering if you took this route often at this time and all because it’s pretty dangerous at night.”
There was a moment of awkwardness before Lance burst out laughing. He couldn’t get a complete read on this Paladin at all. He fought with such rage against him as Blue Shot and acted so rashly on the battlefield that it was surprising to see him behave like such a meek little rabbit. Even if Lance wanted to hate him, hate him for being a Super, hate him for being a Paladin, hate him for being a part of the Voltron Alliance, Lance couldn’t help himself from cracking whenever he acted like this.

Honestly, he would much prefer it if Red Lion acted hostile to him all the time. It would have been much easier to handle. He shouldn’t have a Super for a friend—moreover, someone from the Alliance—because it would only make things complicated in the end. Then again, Red Lion was probably only this awkward because Lance wasn’t his perceived enemy—not like Blue Shot—and because Lance wasn’t his friend either. Lance couldn’t even say if Red Lion remembered him from the other time.

Upon hearing his laughter though, Red Lion looked more like a kicked puppy than a ferocious warrior. Lance’s smile was less strained now as he assured him, “Don’t worry; I’m not laughing at you. It’s just that this situation is pretty ridiculous.” Lance adopted a more teasing tone and said, “I never imagined that I’d be saved by the same superhero who broke into my apartment.”

Red Lion ducked his head in embarrassment, averting his eyes to avoid looking at Lance, and replied sheepishly, “I’m still really sorry about that, by the way.”

“It’s cool,” Lance assured him. Really, what kind of situation was this? Here he was, having a conversation with his… not his friend, not technically his enemy… his rival? “The window got fixed, and I didn’t have to pay for it from my own pocket. I can’t really complain any more,” Lance said. He thought back to Red Lion’s previous inquiry and answered, “Also, I do, actually. I don’t get jumped very often though.” I could handle myself anyway, Lance thought, feeling the press of his gun against his side.

The Red Lion stared at him in length, and Lance nearly fidgeted on the spot, uncomfortable with the attention. He felt as though, any second now, the Super could look through him and piece together his separate identities. When Red Lion did respond, however, it was only with a simple, “Why?”

Lance practically sighed aloud in relief. “I work at one of the clubs as a DJ in this strip,” Lance explained with a shrug. “Since traffic is always congested and parking sucks, I never really bothered with buying a car. Sometimes I have a friend come pick me up though if he’s awake and hungry for a midnight snack—or, well, past midnight. A two AM snack to be precise.”

“Do you always walk home alone otherwise then?” Red Lion questioned with alarm in his voice.

“Oh…” Lance considered this. Then he answered, “Yeah.” Again, he could handle himself in a fight, and if he couldn’t, he’d run. (If he couldn’t run, then he’d shoot and pray that Kolivan’s influence could clean up the mess.) “What are you doing up anyway?” Lance questioned just as sceptically. “I thought that Paladins only dealt with big, scary monsters and bogeymen—not street thugs.”

Red Lion seemed to hesitate before he admitted, “Normally, once my head hits the pillow, it’s lights out, but… sometimes, I can’t sleep. When I can’t sleep, I… I like to go on these ‘midnight patrols’—that’s what Black Sky calls them.”

“So, like a midnight stroll, but with more crime fighting?” Lance concluded.

“Or a midnight drive,” Red Lion corrected lightly. He gestured for Lance to follow him, and Lance complied for curiosity’s sake. Parked at the curb of the street was a sleek red bike that Lance had only ever seen on VBC—on Legendary Defenders—and never in his life would he imagine seeing it
in person.

Red Lion’s bike, Scarlet, was just as famous as the hero who owned her; she was truly one of a kind in the entire world, designed and manufactured by the top engineers Kogane Industries. She was built for speed and only speed. Lance would have to be an idiot to think that it wasn’t a pretty damn cool bike, and Lance was no idiot. Let’s be honest here, it was a fucking sick bike that was always kept in pristine condition.

“Whoa,” Lance breathed.

Red Lion smirked, and, boy, did Lance really want to wipe that insufferable smirk off his lips. Maybe with a punch. Lance’s punches weren’t really as strong as his kicks though; his leg muscles were more impressive than his arms. Still, Lance forced himself to swallow his impulsive decisions before he did something he’d probably regret. Making an enemy out of Red Lion while he was Lance would make things complicated—never mind interacting with the guy.

The Super merely swung his leg over the side of his bike and kicked off the stand. He gestured towards Lance, beckoning him closer, and asked, “Do you want a ride back to your place?” Lance hesitated, and Red seemed to realise that. “Trust me,” he insisted.

Lance cracked a grin and remarked, “I think that’s a little too much to ask, considering you’re a man with a mask out in the middle of the night.”

Red Lion pursed his lips and held out his hand steadily. “I’ll keep you safe,” Red assured, “I promise. I won’t let you fall.”

Well, Lance considered, what was the harm?

The Paladin already knew where he lived, for one, and he’d get back home to Azura more quickly. Plus, he’d get to touch the bike of every motorhead’s wet dreams. The only con he could think of was that he’d be riding home with a Paladin of the Alliance… but if he was Lance—and he was—then there shouldn’t be any trouble compared to if he was Blue Shot.

Because he was Lance though, he couldn’t help the teasing quip that preceded his actual answer. “Gee, you could at least take me out for dinner first. Do you do this with everyone?”

Red Lion reddened even more, and Lance could hardly refrain from bursting into laughter as the Super spluttered some kind of response trying to save his dignity. Lance approached the bike and, mimicking the hero’s actions, swung his leg over the bike. Red Lion visibly tensed, but Lance didn’t really care all that much for the Paladin’s comfort. He had brought this onto himself, after all, for offering. Lance, on the other hand, hesitated for a moment once he realised exactly how close he’d have to be to Red Lion.

Sucking up his pride, Lance wrapped his arms around the hero’s midriff, and if it was even possible (and somehow, it was), Red Lion stiffened even more. God, he was perfectly playing the role of a damsel in distress. “Like this?” Lance asked.

“You… you might want to hold on tighter,” Red Lion choked out. His voice was raspy, and it might have cracked at a point. It sounded like he was dying. “She has a lot of horsepower, so, you know, just to be safe. I wasn’t on planning on having a second passenger, so I don’t even have a helmet for you.”

“All kinds of illegal then?” Lance mused. “I wouldn’t have expected it from a Paladin, bringer of justice.” Nevertheless, he tightened his grip. Strangely, Red Lion seemed to relax.
“Here’s a secret between the two of us,” Red Lion remarked. “I actually used to get in trouble plenty of times before doing this… hero business. I must have been a burden to my guardians.”

A part of Lance sympathised with him, and another part of him grew even more resentful. It wasn’t fair for Red Lion to make himself appear more human. He was supposed to be perfect, more than perfect, because he was more than ordinary, because he was a Super. He wasn’t like Lance, stumbling through life and getting into all sorts of messes, yet Lance could only find himself saying, “I’m sure they’d be proud of you since—well, look at you! You’re a hero! Kids and their moms love you!”

What a world, Lance thought. He never imagined himself having to comfort a Paladin in distress.

Red Lion laughed quietly, and it was a sound that Lance never thought he’d get to hear in his life either. The media painted Red Lion as an indifferent hero—stoic and cool—but his encounters with Blue Shot had shown that he was an impulsive hothead who made irrational decisions. He was probably like Lance then—keeping all kinds of secrets—but the brunet didn’t linger on that notion for very long.

“All right, here we go!” Red Lion announced before he started up the bike and, in a quick burst, merged onto the streets.

Lance had to lean forward, practically lying flat against him, to make sure that he didn’t fall off the bike because, goddamn, they weren’t kidding when they said this bike was powerful! Still, he relished the feel of speed and wind against his face, batting against his cheeks, sweeping back his hair, and he could help but let out a cheerful whoop sometime during the ride.

He hardly even noticed that they had taken the longer, more scenic route home because, by the time he had arrived in front of the apartment complex, he was already dead tired—exhausted from today’s workload. He gave Red Lion a droopy grin and said, “Thanks for the ride. You really didn’t have to.”

Red Lion shook his head and replied, “I had to; there was no question about it.” He paused. “I mean, I kind of owed you for the window anyway.”

Lance laughed. “If you think about it that way,” he mused. For a moment, he actually didn’t hate the guy. “I guess this is it?”

Although his face was hidden by the masquerade mask, Lance could tell by the downward curve of his lips that he was disappointed. “Does it… have to?”

Don’t make it more complicated, Lance.

“Well,” Lance contemplated, “we live in the same city, and you know what they say—small world and all. Maybe we’ll see each other again?”

“Maybe,” Red Lion reluctantly agreed. “I guess… I’ll see you around town.”

Why did he sound so disappointed?

“Yeah,” Lance replied. “I guess so.”

With that, he pivoted on his heel and climbed up the stairs to his apartment. After settling back inside and nestling Azura in his arms, Lance made it over to his new window. He pulled back the curtains and huffed when he realised that Red Lion was still there, waiting for him to get inside safely. God, what was his deal? How many personalities did the guy have? How could he be so sweet to Lance
but so hostile to Blue Shot?

Lance laughed quietly to himself.

What a hypocrite, he chastised himself. Lance probably had just as many—if not more.

Lance waved, and Red Lion raised his hand in response. He seemed to catch himself in the act and panicked, however, because the next moment, the Super was speeding off into the night.

Weird guy.

Chapter End Notes

The title is taken from The Chainsmokers’ “Inside Out,” but I had this remixed version in mind for the club scene.

Like every classic Klance story, Keith has a bike (named Scarlet because colour themes are a motif in every other Klance story) and is obligated to take Lance for a ride.

I imagine Lance to be a bit geeky even though he tries to play it cool. (As you’ve probably noticed, the Garrison trio are huge dorks.) He might not like the Paladins and Knights of the Voltron Alliance kind of superhero, but fictional heroes have never done him any wrong.

Also, on the subject of Spider-Gwen, I could also write an entire paper on why Lance finds Spider-Gwen so relatable.

EDIT: I wrote a paper on why Lance and Gwen are similar here on my tumblr.

Then again, I might be projecting onto Lance again. ˘(♂)˘

As you can probably tell, I'm also a bit of a geek.
You guys are so nice! Thank you for all your support! Here, have this headcanon: Keith developed lactose intolerance when he was eighteen. (I'm really just projecting all my dietary problems onto Keith.) Also, have more bonding moments™!

The chapter title and lyrics are taken from "Wake Me Up" by Avicii.

[2:21 PM]

Keith: Do you want to grab dinner tonight? Like around 7?

Lance: Keith we just had lunch together.

Keith: Is that a no?

Lance: It’s not a no, lol. But yeah sure!!!

Lance: Are your friends and Hunk coming with us???

Lance: Because we might have to make reservations if it’s going to be a big party.

Keith: I was thinking of just us.

Keith: Unless you want to invite them?

Lance: Just us works ;)

Lance: I never get to see you that often so I’ll take my chances!!!

Lance: Have fun at work!!!

Keith: Thanks.

Keith: Tell Azura that I said hi?

Lance: Lol, yeah, sure thing!

Lance wasn’t exactly sure how it started, but after their first coffee date—if you could even call it that—he had been seeing Keith more often. After learning they shared the same lunch breaks on the weekends, Lance had been joining Keith and his colleagues every week for lunch on Saturdays and Sundays. Occasionally, he would get coffee with Keith after his shift at the music shop ended as well—whenever Keith had a break from his work—and every now and then, usually on Wednesdays, the Voltron crew would gather together and head to Café Reyes Díaz when Lance was working the floor. Only just last week had Lance let it slip that he was free Sunday evenings, and maybe that was what encouraged Keith to invite him to dinner.

Honestly, it was nice to eat dinner with someone. He supposed that he could have gone home to his
family for once, but… he just couldn’t risk it. His mother could see right through him and see that he had been keeping secrets—namely secrets from her. She would pry a bit, needle at him, try to assure him that she was always there for him, that there was nothing to hide. Then she would feel hurt whenever Lance wouldn’t open up, and Lance himself would feel guilty for continually trying to hide and keep his beloved family at arm’s length… and he would also feel guilty for keeping them at arm’s length while he was getting closer with another person, with someone who was just a stranger not too long ago.

He wondered what the thing between him and Keith was.

Lance knew it would be dangerous to get any closer. Not to mention, Keith also worked in Voltron Towers. He might have been in a different department than Hunk, and he might not have many encounters with the telepathic Queen Titania—probably not as much as Hunk, who worked directly with the Supers to develop their tech and gear… But there was a risk in getting involved with Keith, nevertheless.

To be honest, he liked Keith though; he really, really, really liked Keith. Keith was a bit awkward and somewhat shy, but once he got out of his shell, he was funny and sweet. Plus, he had a nice laugh kind of like Red—no.

No.

No, no, no, no.

Lance was not going to think about that.

He was not going to think about how Red Lion actually bothered with trying to save his ass from getting mugged in a dark alley (even though he could have totally handled himself, maybe). He was not going to think about how Red Lion had inadvertently flirted with him, about how a legendary Paladin had offered him a ride home on the just as legendary Scarlet, about how the Knight had actually taken Lance home and waited until he was safe inside before leaving. He was not going to think about how Red Lion got easily flustered, how he had stumbled over his words, or how nicely he laughed. He was not going to think about how Red Lion had almost killed him last night—that fucking bastard.

Jesus Christ, the guy jumped the gun faster than Lance could pull the trigger.

Every single time without fail, Red Lion would try to corner him, try to arrest him and take him in for questioning, try to stop him from completing his missions, and as much as he was—he was not—cute, Red Lion was just as annoying.

Anyway, Red Lion—as far as Lance was concerned—wasn’t real. Sure, he was some living, breathing entity with a cool bike, cool sword, cool knife, and cool powers, but he wasn’t an actual person Lance could interact with. With his hero duties, there wasn’t any possible way Red Lion had time to spare for him… even though, after the first night they’ve met as Lance and Red Lion, the Paladin always made time to see to it that he got home safely after his shift at the club. Since he didn’t know where exactly Lance worked, he always made sure they crossed paths at the alley where Lance had nearly gotten jumped, and then he would—every single time without fail—ask if Lance wanted a lift home.

All of that kindness—confusing and stranger as it was—aside, Lance still didn’t even know who he was! Not that Lance wanted to know who he was because he was certainly not interested! It was just exhausting to have to encounter two completely different sides of the guy! He just wanted to know what the guy’s deal was! What the hell was his angle!
"You're here again?"

Speak of the devil, and he shall appear.

Lance raised an eyebrow—an odd sight considering how Lance’s goggles and bandana obscured most of his identity—and retorted, “Am I not supposed to be here?” He ignored how his heart constricted—something dark and dirty squeezing it tightly and trapping it within its vices—and he ignored the rising confusion that slowly crept upon him, clouding his thoughts. He tried clearing his mind, putting aside all of the worries that plagued his conscience earlier, and shouldered his rifle over his shoulder, nodding towards the monster rampaging in the streets in broad daylight. “Don’t you have something else to worry about?” Lance asked dryly.

It was barely three o’clock in the afternoon.

Lance had been looking forward to going straight home to Azura for once, but of course, he had to hide out in his favourite coffee shop when the monster attack started like the other civilians. Once it started airing on the news, he got a message from Pidge to “check out the new dungeon boss.” Since his gear was back at his apartment, he had to sneak out of the café, head all the way home without attracting attention, kiss Azura both hello and goodbye, gear up, and sneak back to the scene.

So yeah, he was tired.

Now he was hiding out on a rooftop, scoping out the new monster, one made of stone, and, according to Pidge, “checking out its stats.” He couldn’t gauge much about its strength because—honestly speaking—it was just as freakishly strong as the lizard creature if not more invincible. Everything about it was stone—its body, its brain, and its heart—so while it was strong, it wasn’t particularly intelligent. The amount of damage it could cause and had caused was still immeasurable, and Lance itched to do something, to stop it, even though it wasn’t his place. Lance wasn’t a Knight, and he wasn’t a Super. He’d be crushed like a bug underneath the boulders it had for fists.

That’s why it was Lance’s job to figure out where it had come from and what it was doing here. All he had managed to find out was that it had emerged from one the nearby buildings, so Lance was supposed to investigate what building that was, who was using it, and why. The only problem was that someone else had thought to use the rooftops as a vantage point—albeit for an entirely different reason—and he was in Lance’s way (certainly not the other way around).

It was unfortunate that they’ve been running into each other as their alter egos more often than not. Lance preferred it when Red Lion wasn’t spitting in his face every other sentence he said to him.

“No, you’re not,” Red Lion snapped. “As far as we’re concerned, you’re not a registered Super, and you haven’t displayed any superhuman abilities. That marks you as a Normal in our books, which means this is a dangerous place for you to be.” He huffed and griped, “Now that I know you’re here, I have to escort you to safety.”

Lance crossed his arms defensively and scrunched his nose in disdain. “How about this?” Lance suggested with feigned amiability. “I throw a punch at you, you let it hit, and I’m no longer a compliant civilian. I’m a menace to society.”

“They arrest you,” Red Lion concluded with a smirk. “Good plan. Let’s get started.” He took a step forward, and Lance took a step back.

“Look, man, don’t you Knights have a creed about using your powers for good and not against innocent, harmless civilians?” Lance said, raising his hands up in surrender. “Let’s not be hasty about this.”
“I hardly think you’re either harmless or innocent,” Red Lion hissed, eyeing the rifle on his back and the guns in his holsters.

“Then I guess you don’t have to escort me off the premises,” Lance chirped with false glee.

Red Lion clicked his tongue disdainfully and crossed his arms. “We’re getting nowhere with this,” he snapped. “Why can’t you just leave things to us and get lost?”

“Because you guys can’t fucking do anything worth shit!” Lance responded, returning the hostility sevenfold.

Red Lion seemed taken back by his outburst, but he recovered quickly. “Oh yeah? And what can you do?” he snarled.

Lance huffed and pinched his nose underneath his mask bandana. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” Lance seethed bitterly through gritted teeth. “Anyway, stay the fuck out of my way!”

The sniper pivoted on his heel and gripped the ledge of the building. He peered over the edge, studying the ledges and porches and hand- and foot-holds, before steadying himself onto the first ledge—right above a window. He heard Red Lion swear under his breath back on the rooftop before a scrambling of footsteps approached the edge of the building. “Are you fucking crazy?” Red hissed, practically glowing at Lance behind his lion mask.

“Parkour, parkour!” Lance chimed. “What? Too chicken, little lion man? I thought cats landed on all fours.” Azura had certainly made a point of showing that off to him. God knows how many times she had leapt onto him from a higher point within their apartment.

Lance stole a glimpse below him, staring down at the distance to the ground, and gulped.

*Hypocrite*, Lance’s mind sang back to him. The sharpshooter could hear his own heart pounding violently in his ears, threatening to burst with crashing waves of fear and adrenaline. Ignoring the Super above him, Lance lowered himself onto the jutting ledge before dropping onto the emergency staircase, which shook with his weight. He allowed himself a few seconds to adjust to the new surface, but that was all the time that the Red Lion needed to make another gutsy move himself.

Propelling himself with his flames, he leapt down and landed himself on the same platform as Lance. The flames, acting as landing thrusters of a sort, eased his descent. The sharpshooter glowered at the Super and grumbled, “Show off.” They exchanged stares momentarily before Lance bolted down the staircase, Red Lion in pursuit, hot on his heels.

“What’s your purpose?” Red Lion demanded. “Why are you doing all of this? You’re a normal civilian, aren’t you?”

Lance could feeling a bubbling discontent—malcontent more like—growing within him. He immediately halted and drew his ebony handgun, pointing it at Red Lion, who froze in return. They weren’t loaded with lethal bullets yet, but the Paladin didn’t know that. Even after a few of their showdowns, the Super hadn’t picked up that Lance was the type who liked to be prepared, who liked to know who or what he was dealing with and how he was going to deal with it. He loaded his bullets appropriately right before he was going to shoot, with an intent to either debilitate or, even rarer, *kill*, and he hated face to face confrontations. He worked better from the distance, within the shadows, where nobody could see him—especially his targets.

On the other hand, Lance had picked up a couple of things about Red Lion. He rushed head first into danger. He acted on impulse. He only froze at gunpoint when, less commonly, he knew there was no
way to avoid the shot or, more commonly, when the gunman hadn’t released the safety yet, and Lance had to applaud his observation skills for noticing that the sharpshooter hadn’t even cocked the hammer of his gun. Then Red Lion would try to find a way around it when he decided Lance wasn’t going to shoot, when he decided to call him out on his bluff. It had worked once when Red had claimed that Lance wasn’t going to shoot, that he couldn’t shoot.

He was both wrong and right.

Lance could certainly shoot. It wouldn’t be the first time. However, Lance wouldn’t shoot at Red. After all, he was a beloved Super, a renowned Paladin cited time and again for his courage and bravery—which the public honestly had mistaken in place of his foolishness and impulsiveness, really, in Lance’s opinion. That meant Lance only had a few seconds to say what he wanted to say before lion boy would lash out at him.

“Would you call this situation normal?” Lance snapped bitterly. “Nothing about this is normal! If I had normal, then I wouldn’t even be here right now! Nothing has been normal ever since you damned Supers started popping up out of nowhere, claiming to be heroes that uphold justice! Somebody has to do the jobs you Paladins on your pretty pedestals don’t want to do! Somebody has to get somewhere, to break ground, to get their hands dirty, just to save someone’s life!” Lance inhaled shakily, taking heaving breaths, before hissing, “You guys represent ideals, but the civilians are the ones who are dealing with reality.”

He fired an empty round, causing the Super to flinch, and took the opportunity to get ahead.

Before he could reach the next flight, however, Red Lion lunged forward and practically pounced like the feline he symbolised. He latched onto Lance’s wrist and pulled him back. “What do you mean by that?” he asked—more quietly this time, Lance noted.

“Do I have to spell it out for you?” Lance grumbled. “Don’t get in my way, little lion man! I’m trying to do my job. Now go do yours.” A bitter smile stretched across his lips—not that Red Lion could even see it behind his bandana mask—but he surely picked up Lance’s tone. “You’re the hero here. Not me. It’s probably never ever gonna be me, so you do what I can’t. Go save people and protect them—all right? Seriously, I may not be your ally, and I may not like you… but I’m not your enemy.”

“What are you looking for here though?” Red Lion demanded one last time.

Lance sighed through his nose, the heat of his exhale trapped behind his scarf, and relented. He spared the Super a bit of the truth and said, “That creature over there? It’s not normal, obviously, but it’s certainly not natural in the sense of how Supers came to be. It’s a complete mutant compared to you ‘evolved’ guys. Nobody knows what it is, and I’m going to find out.”

“Heh, then join us,” Red Lion suggested. “We could use your help.”

Lance laughed that same bitter chuckle. “Were you listening during my spiel earlier? There are some things out there that you can’t do as lawful good,” Lance remarked. “That’s where I come in—comprende?”

“What are you planning to do with that information?” Red asked warily.

Lance shrugged. “Trade secret,” he replied. Before Red Lion could lash out in retaliation, demanding a straight answer from him, Lance darted into the building just as the monster approached them. He glanced behind him, making sure that the lion boy was occupied by the monster. He was joined by his comrades, even more preoccupied by the new arrivals, so Lance crept into the shadows and
stalked the abandoned hallways. There were a few collapsed bodies, some of them unmoving in every way, and Lance forced himself to move on. He took note of the few unconscious, however, and if Red wasn’t in a murderous mood, Lance would drop a note—maybe—that the Super ought to check for survivors in the building, too.

He switched his comm unit back on and heard Pidge groan, “Finally. What happened out there, Sapphire?”

“I met a grumpy cat,” Lance replied. “I got him off my tail though.”

Pidge groaned a second time. “All right, have you at least accessed a computer?”

“Not yet,” Lance said, kneeling down on the ground. Some of these guys were white coats. Lab coats? Doctor’s coat? Lance lifted open the coat and peered inside to check if there were any pockets. He pulled an ID out of a breast pocket and frowned. “These guys are… pharmacists? This dude has an ID saying he’s an employee at Druid Pharmaceuticals. Shit, Emerald, this is a branch of Druid’s? Are they in league with the Galra?” He wasn’t surprised too much at that part. God knows how much of the city the Galra controlled, how much influence they actually had. What was more concerning was the monster outside and the lizard man a few weeks back. “What kind of drugs are these guys making?”

“Sapphire, hurry and get to a computer,” Pidge commanded. “I’ll pull out as much information as I can. We’ll see if we can get confirmation from Mole.”

Lance nodded. “Have we heard from Mole?”

“Negative,” Pidge answered. “But he’s due for a report soon, so we’re going to have to play the waiting game. Can you get to a computer?”

“Sure thing.” Lance made way, opening doors randomly, until he found an office area with multiple computers. He locked the door behind him, to stall Red Lion if he decided to hunt down the sharpshooter, and headed for a cubicle. Then Lance wiggled the mouse, reviving the monitor. He inserted Pidge’s chip into the computer, waiting for her to take over the server and client, and it didn’t take long before she seized control of the computer. Lance watched as the screen tinged green, as the download bar popped up and progressed, and just as it reached 99% completion, Lance heard the doorknob jiggle. Lance cursed quietly. “Emerald, abort.”

“Fine,” he heard Pidge acquiesce.

Lance didn’t even wait for her confirmation. He was already yanking out the chip, stuffing it safely inside one of his secure pouches, and leaping out of the window, clutching onto the iron pipe on the side of the building.

Bad idea, bad idea, bad idea.

Still, Lance had no choice but to lower himself gradually down the pipe, praying to every god and deity that it didn’t give out from his weight.

Once he neared the ground, Lance leapt off the pipe and took off for the dark alleys, planning on navigating the back ways of the city to get home as discreetly as possible. Unfortunately, an explosion had him thrown sideways. He watched with wide eyes as the monster—a stone golem with eyes that glowed purple, the same purple that illuminated the eccentric runes decorating most of its body—approached him, shaking the ground as it marched in his direction.

“It keeps breaking out of my cages!” he heard the Paladin, Crystallis, exclaim.
“It's like it has no mind of its own!” Titania cried. “I can’t dissuade it from causing further destruction!”

Lance scrambled to his feet and dashed for cover, not wanting to reveal himself to the Knights of the Voltron Alliance. He drew his ebony gun first, loading it up with the ice pellets, and then he did the same for his ivory gun. He peered around the corner, grimacing as he watched Black Sky get swatted into White Tiger, and together the two of them connected with the side of a building as though they were nothing but flies.

The golem continued its approach, but a glint of silver overhead caught Lance’s attention.

Red Lion had gone after him then. He was looking out of the window Lance had fallen through earlier, searching for something—or someone. The two of them made eye contact momentarily. Lance couldn’t help but feel a bit of smugness at the frown tugging the corners of the hero’s lips downwards. Lance jerked his head towards the golem, and Red followed his motion. He gave a curt nod to show his understanding.

“Sapphire, report!” Pidge demanded.

“I'm caught in the crossfire,” Lance replied. “I'm engaging target.”

“You’ll be killed!” Pidge protested.

“Not if I can stall it long enough to get away!” Lance hissed. He lined up his shots, holding up his pair of guns, and aimed for the feet first. Could bullets even damage, let alone kill, stone giants? Well, he supposed it was time to find out. He stepped out of his cover, half of his body still hidden behind the build, and fired continuously.

The ice pellets exploded upon target, and with their build up, ice rapidly expanded and froze over the golem’s feet, sealing it to the ground. It was distracted, trying to lift its feet from their prison, and it was nearly successful. Lance gaped briefly as crystals sprouted from the ground, encasing and reinforcing the ice, rooting the golem back to the ground. Crystallis had caught onto his plan, then—for better or worse. In the meanwhile, Red Lion took the opportunity to leap from the same window. His sword danced with flames as he brought it down dead centre onto the golem’s head.

The force managed to split the golem’s head into two halves. A crack formed, travelling down the rest of his body, and it crumbled into pieces like the neighbourhood it had annihilated in its wake. Lance lowered his guns, observing the damage with a hollowness in his chest, before holstering his firearms. He pivoted on the heel of his boot, and just as he was about to enter the nearest alleyway, he felt something encase his foot, causing him to tumble over. He grimaced and looked down, noticing the crystal growing there.

Lance scowled and reached for a gun, replacing the ice pellets with lead bullets. At this distance, the force should be enough to shatter the crystal. He heard footsteps approach him, and he glanced at his guests briefly. Titania and Crystallis stood at the fore with Red Lion, of fucking course, a short distance away. Black Sky and White Tiger recollected themselves and were approaching as well.

“You don’t mind if we start asking you a few questions, do you?” Titania asked. It was less asking though, he realised. That was by no means a question, not even a request, even though it was worded like one. He was dealing with a mind reader, and there were things Lance couldn’t give up to her.

Behind the tinted visor of her helmet, Lance saw a pink glow where her eyes were and mentally hissed a string of expletives in every language he knew just to cover up his thoughts. He scrambled
desperately for a way to latch onto his secrets—no, don’t think about them—fuck!

So he played the first song he thought of—one that a clubber had requested last night—since its chorus, an interesting combination of acoustics and EDM, was already cycling obnoxiously in his head that morning.

So wake me up when it's all over
When I'm wiser and I'm older
All this time, I was finding myself,
and I didn’t know I was lost.

He gave a grin when she frowned. Lance took the opportunity to cock the hammer of his gun and pull the trigger, firing at the crystal. He heard someone—multiple someones even—shout once the crystal binding his foot shattered, and before long, Lance was racing into the darkness with his heart beating in his ears. He didn’t relent, repeating the song over and over, until he felt that he was a safe enough distance from the Supers.

“Sapphire! Sapphire, report!”

“I’m okay, Emerald,” Lance replied between panting breaths. “Target disengaged. The Paladins got ’em. You can come pick up the parcel in a few hours.”

Pidge was silent on the other end of the line. Finally, she replied, “All right, got it.” She sighed heavily as though a few years were taken off her lifespan. “I’m glad you’re okay, Lance.”

“Yeah, me too, Pidgey.”

Lance navigated the dark alleys cautiously, humming Elvis to himself to keep company. He heard Pidge tapping rapidly on her keyboard over the line, somewhat glad that she hadn’t cut the comms just yet. Eventually, he made it to the back alley behind his apartment complex.

He fished out his guitar case from its hiding place and gently placed his sniper rifle and handguns inside, along with his extra storage pouches. He then pulled down his mask and his hood. He slipped off his goggles, letting them hang around his neck, hidden behind his scarf. Slinging his guitar case over his shoulder, he made his way to the front of the apartment complex. Lance climbed up the stairs and unlocked the front door before stepping inside.

As his return was long overdue, Azura hadn’t bothered greeting him. The further Lance made it into his apartment, however, Azura noticed his presence. She leapt off his futon and paced over towards him, rubbing herself all over his legs, and Lance smiled softly.

“We’re good,” Lance said to Pidge.

“I’ll see you in an hour,” Pidge replied before cutting the lines.

Lance shuffled over to his coat closet and placed his guitar case inside—guns and all—before stripping himself of his uniform and shoving it into the same closet. Left in his boxer briefs, Lance shuffled over to his dresser, which was shoved against the wall closest to his futon (since he didn’t really have a bedroom), with Azura close on his heels. He smelt like rubble, debris, and gunpowder, and that was something that ought to be remedied.

He grabbed some boxers and a loose t-shirt from his dresser without sparing a glance to the family photo he had framed and standing on its surface. Lance lumbered to his bathroom, his beautiful Turkish Angora still following after him, and turned the taps to his shower. He hung his towel and clothes on the rack nearby before stripping off his underwear and stepping under the spray of water.
Despite his tired state, Azura jumped into the tub after him, and Lance laughed as he watched his precious kitten get herself soaked underneath the warm spray. After shampooing and conditioning his hair, Lance plopped himself on the bathtub floor and pulled Azura between his legs. He grabbed her own special brand of shampoo and conditioner and began to lather her pure white coat, chuckling when she purred underneath his fingers. He rinsed her off, scrubbed his body clean, and then shut off the water.

He grabbed his towel, drying off his hair before wrapping it around his waist. He reached for a smaller cloth he always kept in the bathroom and began to run it through Azura’s fur, smiling contently as she continued to purr in response to the treatment. He wished he had his phone on him to record the moment and upload it to Instagram; his followers would love it as much as he did.

Once she was somewhat dry, still rather damp though, Lance changed into his clothes and began scavenging his bathroom for the blow dryer. He plugged it into the nearby socket and then set it to low before gesturing with his fingers for Azura to crawl into his lap. She did so obediently and melted in his hands as he ran his fingers through her fur underneath the warm heat of the blow dryer. He wasn’t sure how long they had spent in the bathroom, but the moment Azura’s coat had dried entirely, there was a knock on his front door. Lance stood up, and Azura took the opportunity to climb up his arms and onto his shoulder.

Lance stole a peek out of the peephole and plastered a smile onto his lips upon recognising the messy chestnut brown top knot and green scrunchie with white lace and ribbons. He had bought her a green one and a pink one for Ana, after all. (They were cute and on sale!) Pidge had thought it was a bit over the top considering how she lived in oversized sweaters and shorts rather than cute clothing, but she had accepted the gift, nevertheless. He unlocked his door and pulled it open, bowing theatrically. “Welcome to my humble abode, Pidgey,” he said with a bit of dramatic flair.

Pidge rolled her eyes and plopped down on his futon without further ado. “So,” she began wearily, “where’s the stuff?”

Lance closed the door behind him and locked it up. “Well, that didn’t sound shady at all,” he commented dryly. He held up a finger and pulled open his closet door. He opened up his guitar case and unzipped a pouch before tossing her a chip that she fumbled with the catch. “Anyway, it was almost done downloading. I didn’t want to deal with a confrontation—hope you understand.”

“Oh no, I understand perfectly,” Pidge assured him, frowning at a distant memory of her own. Lance could only wonder what she was thinking about; he never quite knew what was going on in her head. She could have been thinking about another one of his near death experiences or… or maybe she was thinking about her brother. Lance didn’t have too long to ponder the possibilities, however, because Pidge brought them back into focus. “I just hope none of the files are corrupted since you didn’t eject it safely… Anyway, you’re not working tonight, right?”


“That means you don’t have plans right now at,” Pidge glanced at the time on her phone, “five twenty-three.”

“Actually,” Lance protested, “I’m heading out around six thirty… so like an hour. Why?”

“Well, I was going to ask if you wanted to head to Five Guys, but it sounds like you have a dinner date,” Pidge said with a shrug. With that, she slunk over to the kitchen pantry and began to raid his food supplies. After she pulled out a family sized bag of Doritos, she whipped her head around to face Lance and narrowed her eyes at him, saying, “I thought you said you weren’t interested in dating—you sure you’re not the next Lion in the Alliance? Because you’re definitely lyin’ to my
face!” She marched back to her previous spot on the futon and popped open the bag.

Lance groaned and rolled his eyes so hard he could feel himself getting whiplash. “It’s not a date!” he whined, deciding to pretend that Pidge had not just uttered a lame pun. Just as he as about to collapse next to her on the futon, Azura jumped from his shoulder to Pidge’s lap. Pidge’s eyes widened comically from the surprise before she began stroking Azura’s white fur gently, relaxing after a few gentle pats. “He just asked me out for dinner without Hunk, Shiro, and the others for once and—oh my God, it’s totally a date. Shit. Pidge! I’m not looking for a relationship! What am I doing?!”

“Why the hell are you asking me!” Pidge retorted. “I’m sixteen, and I don’t give a shit!” Her eyes gleamed with mischief, and Lance hated that shit-eating grin he had first taught her all those months ago. He was glad that Pidge and Ana had never met each other. They’d be little shits together. “This is about Keith, isn’t it?” she cooed, poking him in the cheek. Lance smacked her hand away, but she was a persistent little chipmunk. “You’ve been talking about him for weeks now. Oh boy, you’ve got it bad.” Her playful pretence dropped as she asked him more seriously, “What are you going to do, Lance?”

Lance squeaked. “I don’t know!”

“You like him, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah, I do! He’s adorable!”

Pidge huffed. “I… I think you should give him a chance,” Pidge suggested with a shrug. “I don’t know much about this romance thing, and I could care less about it… but it might be good for you? You’ve been keeping things from Hunk ever since he’s been trying to get involved with our group, and even between us you’ve kept up this wall that you think would protect me—yes, I’ve noticed, Lance.”

Lance pursed his lips together. “This is just another person I’m going to have to lie to though, Pidge.” He was so done with secrets, with lying. He was just so tired of all of it. He didn’t know if he had the energy to continue, but, then again, it wasn’t like he had a choice.

...or, well, he did—at the very beginning—he had a choice.

“Maybe, if you got to know him,” Pidge mused, “he could be someone you can rely on.”

“Pidge, he works for Voltron.”

“Our battle isn’t with Voltron, Lance,” Pidge retorted. “We’re like… the secret police. We use different means to achieve the same goals as them.”

Lance laughed bitterly. “I don’t know if that makes it any better. We’re technically criminals, Pidge, and the Alliance is practically an extension of the police through the Garrison. We can’t afford to get caught,” he argued. “Then where would our progress go?”

Pidge sealed her lips and finally relented. “I guess you have a point.” Before she completely conceded though, Pidge remarked, “I think you’ve been looking for someone to understand you though—on a subconscious level. I don’t know much about psychology, but you’re looking for someone to connect with now that you’ve kept your friends and family at bay. You’re drawn to him for some reason. I mean, it’s almost been an entire month now?” Pidge gave him a wry smile. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t keep having coffee and lunch dates with him, and now you’re getting dinner. It’s totally a dinner date, Lance!”
Lance huffed. “You never let me have the last word,” he grumbled.

“Damn right, I don’t,” she chirped. “Now get dolled up for your date. I’ll be here playing with Azura while you’re busy fretting over whether the colour of your shirt brings out your eyes.”

“That is a goddamn lie, and you know it,” Lance retorted, sniffling. He scrunched up his nose and corrected her, “I’m going to worry about which pair of jeans makes my ass look fabulous, thank you very much.”

He rolled over and off the futon, dragging himself back to his dresser. Because now that Pidge had planted the idea in his head, his jeans were all that he was going to be thinking about for the next hour. Pidge snorted in a very much unladylike manner, so he very gracefully flipped her the finger.

[5:57 PM]

Keith: What do you want for dinner?

“Pidge, what do I want for dinner?” Lance asked as he wiggled into his white skinny jeans behind the futon.

Pidge kept her eyes trained on the flickering images on the TV before she replied dismissively, “Hell if I know. What do you want to eat?”

“Hmm… maybe pasta?” Lance thought aloud, tapping his finger against his chin—jeans still unzipped.

“Then go for Italian,” Pidge droned, continuing to stroke Azura’s coat in an even pace.

“But what if the sauce stains my jeans!”

“Then don’t drop your food like a fucking three year old,” Pidge grumbled.

“Language, Pidge,” Lance chastised playfully. He stared mournfully at his jeans and mused, “Maybe I should change…”

“Goddammit, Lance,” Pidge grumbled. “Just wear the damn pants and eat with a napkin on your lap! Don’t you have a ‘cute boy’ to reply to?”

“Oh, right!” Lance exclaimed, fumbling with his phone and hastily replying to Keith.

Lance: How about Italian?

Keith: Okay, sounds good. Do you have a place in mind?

Lance: Yeah, I’ll send you the address! I’ll see you there!

With that, Lance tossed his phone onto the futon and zipped up his jeans. He buttoned up his chambray top over his tank top and fixed a dark, midnight blue scarf loosely around his neck. He pulled on his soft blue suede shoes and slipped on his silver wrist watch—off brand, but still pretty fashionable. Shrugging on his usual olive utility jacket, he scoured his room for his faux leather satchel. (After he was nearly pick-pocketed once in broad daylight, Lance had taken to avoiding keeping his wallet in his back-pocket.) Once he was done, he danced into the bathroom, humming the same song that had been stuck in his head since last night, and slapped on a bit of cologne before returning to the main room.
He checked the time on his phone again and switched off the TV. “I have enough time to walk you home,” Lance commented as he unceremoniously shoved his phone, wallet, and travel-sized hand lotion and sanitizer into his satchel. He twirled his keys around his fingers and waited for Pidge to move.

She didn’t.


“You know that’s where I plant my ass, right?” Lance remarked. “I can’t remember how many times I’ve farted into that futon.”

Pidge groaned in disgust and twisted her face into an open grimace. “Why are you so fucking gross?” She made a face and griped, “I can’t tell if I like diva Lance or nasty Lance more. You’re both a pain in the ass.”

“Oh, like you’ve never farted before, Pidgey,” Lance replied with a dramatic roll of his eyes. He jutted his hips to the side, setting a hand on one hip, and huffed indignantly. “It’s au naturel.”

“I don’t think you’re using that word correctly,” Pidge retorted. “You bamboozled that poor sucker with your pretty face. Hopefully, he doesn’t run away once he realises how gross you are.”

“Aw, you think I’m pretty?” Lance preened. He blinked. “Whoa, déja vu.”

“You totally didn’t hear the last part about being gross, did you?” Pidge quipped. “Cute and brainless! Maybe he likes bimbos.” She got up and patted his shoulder in an act of consolation. “Anyway, this date will probably do you good. With the rate you’re going, you’d be picking up more strays and turning into a crazy cat lady.”

“Please, I can only make enough to feed Azura and myself by giving up precious hours of beauty sleep,” Lance retorted. “As if I could afford another stray—especially since this one keeps coming over to eat my snacks.” Lance patted her head, and Pidge swatted his hand away.

Keith couldn’t help but notice that Lance looked pretty good tonight, and that was an understatement. He looked nice, smelt nice, was nice. On the other hand, Keith was… Well, he was so exhausted that everyone noticed. Lance was no exception.

“Rough day at work?” Lance asked Keith with a sympathetic smile.

Keith rubbed his temples and nodded. “Seriously rough,” Keith replied. “It’s been a long day.” Keith offered in lieu of an explanation. Lance didn’t seem to take offence to the secrets; after all, Keith worked for Voltron Towers, which was an entire nest of secrets. In the meanwhile, the server set down their drinks—a glass of Coca-Cola for Keith and an Italian cream soda for Lance. She set a basket of garlic bread in front of them and pulled out her notepad.

“Are you two ready to order?” the server, a cute girl with round cheeks and a rosy blush, asked the two of them whilst wearing a courteous smile.

“Yeah!” Lance answered her brightly. He glanced down at his menu and said, “I’ll have the frutti di mare, please.”

“Okay, and for the dinner specials, you have a choice between our soups or salads,” she mentioned.

“Then I’ll have the minestrone!” Lance replied with a grin.
She quickly jotted down Lance’s order before turning her attention to Keith. “What about you, sir?” she asked.

“Can I get the chicken carbonara? Oh, and no cheese,” Keith answered brusquely. “I’ll have the house salad, too.”

“Sure thing! It’ll be out as soon as it’s ready!” she chirped, jotting down Keith’s order, before pivoting on her heel.

“Not a cheese person?” Lance asked curiously.

“Not a lactose person, actually,” Keith admitted sheepishly.

There was a moment of silence as the words registered in Lance’s head. “Oh… oh no,” Lance moaned, dropping his head into his hands. “I gave you flan.”

“It was delicious,” Keith assured him with a slight smirk, amused at the sight in front of him. Cute, Keith thought to himself. Wanting nothing more to alleviate the dread Lance was feeling, Keith easily lied, “I took lactase tablets before I ate it, so don’t worry.” God knows he told the same to Shiro almost every day of his life in the past two years.

“God, I won’t ever do that again,” Lance told him. “I’ll look into some dairy substitutes and all. Maybe it’ll taste different, maybe it’ll taste the same—I dunno—but I refuse to poison you!”

“Lance, I’m fine,” Keith insisted, rolling his eyes at the dramatic display. “I do have those lactose pills, so it’s all good if I take one before eating it.” Keith just... kind of forgot to bring them with him every now and then. He rested his cheek against the back of his hand and huffed when Lance didn’t let up with his performance. Instead, Keith reached for a piece of garlic bread and began tearing it apart, popping piece by piece into his mouth. Lance rested his chin atop his arms, looking up at Keith, and the two of them shared silly grins for a moment. “How was your day?” Keith finally asked Lance.

“It was probably nothing compared to yours,” Lance mused before sitting properly upright. He took a breadstick of his own and tore off a piece to chew as well. The brunet swallowed before mentioning, “I had the same kid come in—the one who really doesn’t want to learn piano?” Keith nodded, recalling the story Lance had told him about some sullen child who would rather be a Power Ranger. His mother, on the other hand, had other plans. “Anyway, I finally got him to cooperate with me!” he chirped excitedly. “I mean, I had to spend an entire day learning the Power Rangers theme song by ear, but it was worth it. That was all he wanted to play all day. His mom wasn’t too impressed, but at least her son was willing to learn, right? He managed to finally master ‘Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star,’ too, which is technically composed by Mozart, so I’m not complaining even if she is.”

Keith grinned at Lance’s energetic display. “So what’s next up on the list?”

“I was thinking ‘Fur Elise’ or ‘Moonlight Sonata’ by Beethoven,” Lance replied. “They both have some repetition to them, and because they’re classical songs, his mom won’t be too pissed at me. It shouldn’t be too hard to learn once he gets the hang of it.”

“Sounds like you had a pretty good morning though,” Keith remarked. “How’s Azura?”

“Oh, you know, the usual, living the good ol’ cat life,” Lance chirped before sipping his cream soda. His entire expression seemed to soften then, and Keith couldn’t help but squirm in his spot, feeling as though he was being scrutinised.
In all fairness, he probably was. The entire world probably knew that Keith didn’t look the best right now. After he had returned to headquarters, the mission debriefing lasted for hours and dissolved into a massive argument about the increasing monster attacks. The rescue effort lasted well into the evening, and then there were also the data analytics to crunch to gauge the damages done to that particular sector of the city. Keith, although begrudgingly, was nearly ready to cancel his dinner—date? Appointment? Dinner plans—with Lance until Cindy had taken over his job for him.

“You were looking excited ever since this afternoon,” Cindy had explained, “and I hadn’t seen you make a face like that since… well, ever.” She had given him a wink and teased, “Go get ‘em, tiger.” Although, he reflected, it was more appropriate to have called him a lion instead.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Lance asked without bothering to hide the concern in his tone.

“Yeah,” Keith answered, “I’m fine—just a little tired. I probably need to eat.” As though to prove his point, Keith grabbed a second piece of bread and tore into it as well. He offered Lance a grin when the latter didn’t reply. “Don’t worry about it.”

Lance scrunched his nose in disdain and sniffed almost haughtily. “I’ll worry about whatever I like,” Lance quipped. “In this case, I’m going to worry about you.” The musician’s expression eased somewhat, and in a much softer tone, he said, “Just take care of yourself, all right?”

Keith found himself nodding mutely—if only to assuage Lance. He sighed and set down his bread on his plate. He took the cloth napkin, twisting it in his hands, wiping off the butter and garlic and crumbs, before telling Lance as honestly as he could, “There was a lot of damage today.” It was probably the understatement of the century.

“I saw on the news,” Lance said quietly. “That was terrible. I couldn’t imagine having to see it in real life.” He shuddered. “What was that thing? It couldn’t have been a person… right?”

Keith frowned and shook his head. “I don’t know,” Keith admitted. Even if he did know, Keith probably couldn’t even tell Lance. It was better this way—for his own safety. “The important thing is that it’s done with, and it wouldn’t start trouble again.”

Lance smiled a bit wryly. “All thanks to the Alliance, huh?” he mused. He shook his head and quickly added, “I shouldn’t have brought them up—not like that anyway, knowing your field of work. Still, even if that thing is finished, how do we know it’s gone for good? We don’t even know where it came from, so how could we be sure nothing like that would happen again?”

Keith pursed his lips and confessed, “We don’t, but… we’ll be ready next time.”

Lance looked as though he was about to say something. His lips parted, and he began to speak—only to stop. He fiddled with his napkin before laying it down onto his lap. “You seem to trust them,” Lance commented rather calmly. “You and the rest of the city.”

“Well… they’ve always protected us,” Keith replied uncertainly. Was he saying the right thing? What would stop Lance from frowning? From being so sullen? Out of all of Lance’s expressions, Keith hated this one the most. Lance was an animated character, so it simply felt wrong for him to be so… so down. “They’ve never given us a reason to believe otherwise.”

“I guess so,” Lance acquiesced. He forced himself to smile. “That probably means I should put a bit more faith in them.”

“Don’t force yourself,” Keith found himself saying instead. Sure, having Lance trust Red Lion would have been nice… Okay, that was an understatement. Honestly, Keith would bite a bullet—
especially one fired by the annoying as shit Blue Shot—just to earn Lance’s trust, and that wasn’t an exaggeration. That’s why, if Lance was made uncomfortable, would it really be worth anything? More than anything, he wanted to understand why Lance didn’t like the Voltron Alliance, why he didn’t like Supers in general. Keith was a Super, and Keith wanted Lance to like him… so he was going to do this the right way. “I’m sure you have your reasons.”

Lance hummed and shrugged. “On certain matters, the world isn’t as black and white as most people think it is. Of course, on significant matters, such as racism, discrimination, and genocide, there is no grey area; it’s just wrong,” he replied. “Anyway, one’s morality obscures perspective—I guess.” Lance swirled his straw around his glass, eyes distracted. He gave a wry smile and remarked, “This really isn’t the best conversation for a date, is it?”

“This is a date?” Keith blurted out with a bit of surprise, and he immediately recoiled, cursing himself for speaking without thinking. “That came out wrong!” Keith added as quickly as possible. “I mean… do you want it to be a date?”

Lance raised an eyebrow, and Keith had never felt any smaller. “Do you want it to be?” he asked instead.

He didn’t sound offended; for that, Keith was relieved. His tone was inquisitive and almost wary, but Keith couldn’t exactly place why. It nearly intimidated him to hide away—to try to cling onto what he had managed to grasp—but when faced with the prospect of more, Keith couldn’t simply turn down the chance to say yes, yes I want it to be.

So he pursed his lips together and then replied, “I asked you first.”

Lance cracked a smile—almost shy and extremely cautious—and answered, “Well, maybe I do.”

Keith couldn’t help but grin at that. “I wanted to hear you say yes,” he admitted.

“Then yes,” Lance quipped, “yes, I do want it to be a date.”

The server chose that time to return with their food, setting their plates in front of them. Lance was practically salivating over his seafood and pasta, and Keith hadn’t been aware of how hungry he was until that moment exactly. Before the server had even left, Keith was already grabbing his fork and spinning a good portion of spaghetti noodles around the silver prongs. “Enjoy your food!” she had said before disappearing and tending to another table.

Lance practically laughed at the sight of Keith inhaling his food. “Jeez, were you starving all day?” he asked teasingly.

“Construction and repairs is a lot of work,” Keith reasoned. “It’s a lot of heavy lifting, back breaking work.”

It wasn’t a lie. Cliff nearly broke his spine once when he was working on site. Still, what had really drained him was the prolonged battle against the stone golem from earlier today. Battles always left him hungry after the adrenaline rush was over. Keith had to intake more calories than the average man if he wanted to maintain his weight considering how often he burnt them.

Lance’s eyes roved over Keith’s shoulders and arms, and he didn’t bother to hide his shit-eating grin. “I can believe that,” he said, sending shivers down Keith’s spine. “Besides, I’m sure you were overworked today,” Lance replied. “That… that thing wreaked havoc. It sucks that there were any casualties at all. I’m just glad you’re okay.”

“I’m glad you’re okay,” Keith retorted. Before he knew it, he was pouring out all of his thoughts. “I
work for Voltron, and I know it can be a dangerous job. You just happened to work in the same neighbourhood as the Voltron Towers; you shouldn’t have to get involved. You shouldn’t be involved.” Lance was just a civilian, a bystander, so why did villains have to drag them into their messes? Then again, Keith supposed there was no straight answer. It was like asking why did murderers kill? Why did thieves steal? Why was Blue Shot going out of his way to get involved with Supers and monsters when he was an ordinary citizen?

No, Keith scolded himself. Don’t think about him. Right now, Lance was in front of him.

“Hey,” Lance called out to him quietly, gently, forcing Keith to lift his head. His eyes met with calm oceanic blues, and Keith could feel his muscles relax, loosening the tension that strung his body. “I’m okay,” Lance assured him. “It was scary, yeah, but I took refuge in a café—remember the one we went to? Yeah, that one. I hid out there with a couple other people and waited until your Supers came.” Lance smiled wryly. “I guess I owe them my thanks.”

“You don’t owe them anything,” Keith replied. “They’re just doing their job.”

“Their job,” Lance repeated as though testing the words on his tongue. “I suppose so.”

“Let’s talk about something else,” Keith suggested hastily, not wanting to ruin the mood any further. “What did you do once you got home?” He watched as a smile spread across Lance’s lips, and a warmth bubbled within him, a content buzzing in his ears as he realised, I put that smile there.

“Let me tell you about my friend, Pidge.”

By the time that they were done with their dinner, the moon had long settled in the sky. Lance zipped up his coat and shoved his hands into the pockets, trying to keep the night chill from caressing his skin with its icy kisses. He tucked his chin into his scarf and tried his damnedest to keep his teeth from chattering. Keith, however, noticed and cracked a grin. “You cold?” he asked.

“What gave that away?” Lance inquired sarcastically. “I don’t deal well with the cold. Never did. I moved here when I was, like, six, and I still haven’t gotten used to it.”

“Well, I don’t imagine the winters in Cuba to be very cold to begin with,” Keith commented. He glanced at his taller companion out of the corner of his eye almost shyly. “Would you… like me to walk you home?” Keith asked Lance. “You took the subway, didn’t you?” He tugged at a lock of hair and added, “I mean, we live in a place literally called the City of Monsters, so I just wanted to get you home safe and sound.” Especially with the Galra lurking around.

“My personal knight minus shining armour,” Lance teased. He rocked on the balls of his feet and tilted his head curiously, asking, “How did you get here? Subway?”

Keith nodded, and Lance beamed. “Walk with me to the station?”

Keith could feel his heart skip a beat. Not trusting his mouth to say something appropriate, Keith simply nodded and followed after Lance. Lance huffed and extended his hand with a slight pout. “I said walk with me—not behind me—silly boy.” Keith’s heart pounded in his ears as he accepted Lance’s hand. His fingers twitched from the cold, but Keith only tightened his grip and laced their fingers together. Lance grinned even wider than ever. “You’re warm,” he mused.

“I’ve always been warm,” Keith found himself rambling. “Even as a kid, my mom would tell me that it was because my heart was so big that it had to spread warmth and love to my hands so that it could touch other people. My grandfather used to think that I was running a fever all the time when I lived with him though. It’s also the reason why my aunt thinks I’m ‘hot-headed.’”
Lance laughed and swung their hands back and forth, and Keith found it silly that he found it adorable, that he found that he actually liked it. “That’s cute,” he commented.

“You’re cute,” Keith grumbled.

“Aww,” Lance cooed. “Thanks!” Shortly afterwards, Lance began hum to fill the silence, quiet and serene, and Keith indulged himself listening to the taller young man all the way to the subway station. Rather than leaving for his own platform, however, Keith never bothered detaching their hands. Instead, he held on and followed Lance onto his own subway even when it headed off into the direction opposite of his shared apartment with Shiro.

They sat down together, clasped hands tucked between their bodies, and Keith leaned closer to better hear Lance hum his little song. “You really like music,” Keith whispered into Lance’s ear, keeping their conversation as private as possible. This was their moment and nobody else’s—not the old woman sitting across from them with a twinkle in her eye, not the grungy man at the other end of the car, not the family of five seated at the front of the car.

“Yeah,” Lance replied, “music is like… a universal constant. What moves you moves you, and you just can’t explain it, you know? It can touch your heart and soul by chords alone if you don’t understand the lyrics, and the singing style in itself—regardless of the lyrics—can defy language barriers. Songs can give you chills. They can make you laugh. They can make you cry. Songs are powerful. Music is amazing.”

“You’re amazing,” Keith nearly said. He bit down on his tongue and asked instead, “How did you end up liking it?”

Lance laughed. “I don’t even know how I started,” he admitted. “I think it was because I grew up exposed to it. My parents loved to dance. They danced for their anniversaries, for holidays, for their birthdays, for our birthdays. They danced in public. They danced at home—in the kitchen, in the living room, in the backyard. I think I just accepted it—accepted music—as a form of expressing love and other emotions.”

“That’s really cool,” Keith commented.

“It’s nothing really special,” Lance insisted almost bashfully. “My parents though… they were, like, relationship goals. Not even Titania and Black Sky, the goddamn power couple in Monstro City, could top them.”

Keith grinned at this. He couldn’t wait to tell Shiro that not everyone in the entire city thought they were the best couple. “Oh yeah?” he mused.

“Oh yeah,” Lance replied certainly with a nod of his head. “They were so in love even when they were pissed at each other.” He laughed. “They always danced to ‘their song’ on their wedding anniversary and for Christmas or New Year’s. It was cute. I wanted a relationship like that for the longest time.”

At this point, Keith couldn’t help but notice the usage of past tense. “You wanted one? What changed?” he found himself asking. When Lance didn’t answer immediately, Keith added hastily, “Not that you have to tell me.”

“My dad died,” Lance replied shortly. Keith could feel Lance’s fingers twitch against his own hand. “I’ve told you before, right? Anyway, my mom cried for days—months, even. She still mourns his death. After we got the news, she locked herself up inside her own shell, and the only thing that kept her going was when their song. Sometimes, hearing it would make her burst into tears, but other
times, she would remember happier times—all their moments together, maybe. She kept praying, too, probably hoping that he could hear her wherever he may be.” Lance exhaled through his nose, and when he continued to speak, his voice trembled. “I’m not particularly religious, none of my siblings are either, but… I think it helps her cope. She doesn’t dance any more, not without Dad around. I guess… I’m afraid—of being that attached to someone—or of someone being that attached to me—I don’t really know. I don’t know how to handle it or what to do if something happened to one of us.”

“Oh,” Keith fumbled, searching for something to say. He was never the most adept at comforting another person. “That… that really sucks; I’m sorry.”

Lance huffed in a quiet laugh. “It does suck,” Lance agreed shortly. “I’m not going to argue with that. Pretty sure there are worse people off though, so I can’t complain. At least I still got my family. You don’t have anything to apologise for.”

Keith pursed his lips and protested, “It’s okay to mourn though; it’s okay to feel sad. It’s only human, only natural that you’d miss him. There’s no point in comparing misfortunes. And I am sorry for bringing up bad memories.”

“They weren’t all bad,” Lance assured. “You didn’t do anything wrong, so don’t apologise.”

Keith chuckled. “I’m supposed to be comforting you here, aren’t I?”

“I can’t have you monopolise all the good parts of the date,” Lance retorted playfully.

Even when the subway pulled to Lance’s stop, Keith got up and walked him all the way back to his apartment, seeing him all the way to the front door. Lance glanced at the time on his phone—a little past nine o’clock—and stole a glimpse at Keith. “Would you like to stay the night?” he asked. Keith could feel heat flood his cheeks, and Lance hurriedly added, “Not that you have to. I just…” He lowered his voice. “This isn’t the safest neighbourhood in the dark, you know? Granted, it’s not the worst, but it could better or worse, depending on how you look at it. I would feel better if you stayed over and leave in the morning, I guess.I don’t even like having Pidge or Ana over late at night. I always walk them home before dark.”

“I would love to,” Keith blurted out before he could shy away and back down. “I-I-I mean, i-if that’s okay.”

Lance laughed lightly. “Of course it’s okay,” he replied. “I invited you, didn’t I?” He unlocked the door and pulled it wide to allow them both in. Keith followed after Lance, locking the door behind him, and as per habit, he kicked off his shoes at the front door. If Lance noticed, he didn’t say anything. He stepped out of his suede shoes before plopping onto his futon and rolling on his side to grin at Keith, who gulped. “Make yourself at home!” Lance told him. “Do you want anything to drink?” He plucked himself back up and sauntered over to his dresser, pulling out random shirts and sweatpants. He examined the size before tossing them over to Keith, who caught them easily. “Here, you can borrow these! I think they’ll fit.”

“I’m fine, thanks,” Keith managed, refraining from choking. He glanced around the apartment, and even though he had been in here before—twice—he was only just beginning to realise exactly how small the studio apartment was. There was only a single futon and a TV. The kitchenette only had a small conventional stove top and oven, and the microwave took up most of the counter space. “I’m just… going to use your bathroom.”

Lance grinned. “Yeah, sure, it’s the only room in here, minus the closet, so you can’t miss it,” the brunet informed him.
Keith excused himself and found the aforementioned room rather easily, blanching at how it was literally a water closet. There was barely enough room for a toilet, sink, and a joint bathtub and shower. All of the appliances were squeezed in there, wherever there was room. Keith gripped the edge of the sink until his knuckles turned white. Then he forced himself to strip off his clothes and froze when he realised he was going to be wearing Lance’s shirt and Lance’s sweats.

Holy shit.

Holy shit.

Yeah, Keith had been in Lance’s apartment before, but this was different. Lance had actually invited him over this time. He didn’t break in through the window, and he didn’t have to come back to fix said window. Lance had willingly opened his door for Keith to enter.

What was going to happen now? He couldn’t tell Shiro, but he had to tell Shiro he wasn’t coming home tonight. Oh God, what conclusions would his roommate jump to? Keith didn’t want to know. Hell, Keith was jumping to all kinds of conclusions himself.

Maybe he was overthinking it.

Keith quickly sent Shiro a message and set his phone to silent, hoping that Shiro wouldn’t reply or spam him. Then he changed into the lounge wear. While he folded his clothes neatly into a pile, Keith attempted to recollect himself. He trekked back into the main room and found Lance, also changed into a loose tank top and grey joggers, curled up around Azura, who, in turn, was curled into the slender young man. Keith’s heart melted at the sight. Cute.

“How did you meet her?” Keith asked, still standing in front of the futon. He awkwardly set his clothes on the surface of the nearby coffee table.

“Believe it or not,” Lance replied, “she was a stray. I picked her up on the streets one day because she was just so dirty, and that white coat was gorgeous. It was such a shame! Anyway, I took her home and cleaned her up. Then we visited my aunt—my uncle’s wife. I think you might know him? Or of him? He’s the one who runs the Cuban restaurant. Anyway, she’s a vet, and she said that Azura may be a Turkish Angora. Have you ever seen The Aristocats? That’s the same breed as Duchess and Marie. So, yeah, she told me that Turkish Angoras are pretty rare, and then she ran some tests, got her some shots. That’s how we found out she was deaf, by the way. I guess I was lucky to have ended up with her.”

Azura was lulled to sleep, purring affectionately with every stroke to her white coat, and Keith had never been more envious of a cat in his life when Lance pressed a gentle kiss between her ears. Keith found himself replying, “I think it might be the other way around. Azura’s pretty lucky to have found you.”

Lance chuckled, grinning up at Keith with bright eyes. “You think so?”

Keith nodded and reaffirmed shortly, “I know so.”

Lance averted his eyes although the smile lingered on his lips. Pride swelled in Keith’s chest, and he shuffled awkwardly. Lance snorted and rested his head back down on the pillow. “What are you doing—still standing up? Turn off the lights and go to bed. The futon’s a little small, but there’s enough room for the two of us and a cat.”

“R-right,” Keith replied, trying not to let his nerves get the better of him. He nearly tripped over nothing but his feet on his way to switch off the lights, and he certainly hit the coffee table against his
knee on the way back. Lance burst out laughing at the sound of the impact and barely managed to contain himself to prevent Azura from waking up or disturbing his neighbours.

Moonlight streamed in through the cracks of Lance’s curtains, falling atop bronzed skin and making Lance glow in the darkness. In that moment, he was beautiful. (Granted, Lance was always beautiful, but now that thought seemed to strike Keith more deeply than ever and nearly sent him ricocheting from the force alone.) Keith flushed in embarrassment and followed the moonlit path back to the futon, back to Lance. Keith awkwardly sat down on the futon before Lance huffed almost indigantly.

“Lay down, Keith,” Lance drawled. “Neither of us bite, I swear—unless you want me to.”

“Wh-what?” Keith spluttered before awkwardly turning on his side and making eye contact with Lance in the middle of the dark. In the silence of the night, he could hear Azura’s purring, Lance’s soft breathing, and the sound of traffic outside. It was a comfortable silence, and Keith felt himself almost disappointed at the prospect of having to eventually shut his eyes and sleep. So he spoke—about anything—to keep the two of them awake, to prolong this moment between them. “How long have you lived here?”

“In this apartment?” Lance replied. “Almost a year, I think. I have to renew my lease soon. On my own… probably a little after my dad’s death. I stuck around until my family got adjusted to new dynamics, but then everything kind of changed. It was just me, my mother, and my sisters. My brother had moved out to start his own family, and well, my mom just wanted everyone to be together. She moved into my brother’s home with my sisters, and there wasn’t enough room for me. So here I am.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Keith replied. He raised a hand and settled it atop of Lance’s, halting his movements, but not applying enough pressure to disturb the sleeping cat between them. “There won’t ever be ‘not enough room’ for you. Hunk talks about his best friend a lot, you know? He talks about your family a lot, too. I’m not in a position to judge, but… it sounds like they’ll always be ready to welcome you home.”

Keith could catch the barest hints of a smile on Lance’s lips. “It sounds like you’re guilt-tripping me to visit home more often, too.”

“Is it a bad thing?”

“Maybe,” Lance mused aloud. “Maybe not.” There was a pause before Lance mentioned, “I know you mean well though.” Then, before Keith could even process what was going on, Lance pushed himself onto his elbows and leaned over Azura. Keith’s breath hitched in his throat as he felt the barest press of Lance’s lips against the corners of his own. Without giving Keith a chance to say anything more, Lance said, “Goodnight, Keith,” and effectively ended the conversation between the two of them.

Keith, with a fluttering heart and giddy elation in his gut, could only reply, “Goodnight, Lance.”

He lied awake for several hours, unable to sleep, and listened to the soft sounds of Lance and Azura breathing before his eyelids grew heavy and before darkness surrounded him.
For My Darling, I Love You (and I always will)

Chapter Notes

Before you begin reading, there’s a bit of Japanese in this chapter, and not just because I needed the practice, hahaha. Keith and his aunt text and talk in Japanese in private; it’s something my own mother and I do. I’ve never been able to talk to her one-on-one in English -- not that she can’t understand it or anything. She’s like Asako in that she can communicate and converse in English perfectly fine, but it’s a preference to speak in her first language. (You’ll see later in the chapter.) As for me, it’s more of a comfort since she raised me in my first language. Basically, it’s this weird feeling of intimacy and connection to your roots and origin; it’s kind of hard to explain.

Anyway, messages written in text will be in actual Japanese script (kanji, hiragana, katakana), but anything spoken verbally will be in English for better comprehension -- like how I’ve handled Spanish in previous chapters. I’ve tried my best to provide contextual evidence so that there’d be less need for translation, but if you need me to translate, I can definitely provide one for you.

Also, another OC in Lance’s family is introduced; his name is Gabriel, Estefania’s beau. Gabriel is based off a wonderful friend I had. He came from Nigeria, and he was the sweetest man I had ever met. Related to characters, I headcanon Nyma as first-gen Asian-American whose parents came from Hong Kong. (Projecting again, my bad.) I gave her last name is Wong, the Cantonese variant of Wang ( לקבל ), which is apparently the eighth most common name in mainland China.

It also means "king," like "Reyes." ( ° )

The songs featured in this chapter include “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” and “Love Me Tender,” both from Elvis. The chapter title is taken from the lyrics of "Love Me Tender."

Why was it so warm?

Why was it so hard to breathe?

Holy shit—shit, shit, shit, shit!

Keith couldn’t breathe.

His eyes snapped open, and his gaze met with lapis jewels glistening underneath the sunlight. He didn’t dare open his mouth to say something or risk getting a mouthful of fluff. Instead, when those beautiful sapphire jewels blinked innocently at him, Keith plucked Azura off his face. He nearly called out to Lance to complain about his cat until he found the brunet in the kitchenette, his phone pressed against his ear. Lance leaned against the counter on his elbows, back turned to Keith, and he was hissing something into his phone in Spanish. However, it was in a different dialect than what Keith was used to hearing every now and then—a bit more slurred, perhaps? Keith couldn’t quite tell.
Keith held his breath, keeping quiet, upon noticing the frustrated expression Lance wore. He lowered his gaze, keeping his eyes trained on Azura, who curled up in his lap and levelled her gaze with his own. He raised a hand tentatively and then began to comb his fingers through her long haired coat, marvelling at the silkiness of her fur. Lance really put a lot of care into grooming her.

Unable to catch Lance’s attention, Keith occupied himself with the cat. Occasionally, he would look away to steal a glimpse of Lance, frowning more to himself when he saw the aggravation marring Lance’s visage. Then he would study Lance’s apartment, finding the barest of furnishings, and a guitar case standing next to an acoustic that leaned against the wall. (Keith supposed there was no need to keep it inside the case when Lance was at home.)

Keith fiddled with his phone to check the time, only to notice that it was completely dead. It explained why his alarm hadn’t gone off in the morning though, and he was probably late to work already. Well, on the bright side, he didn’t have to deal with going through all the notifications about the text messages Shiro had sent him last night. He’d do that… whenever he would eventually encounter Shiro at headquarters.

Keith’s attention piqued when he caught Lance muttering something along the lines of “yeah, yeah, yeah” in Spanish. Eventually, Lance uttered a quick goodbye and hung up the call. He turned around, leaning back against the counter, and grinned tiredly at Keith. “Good morning,” he greeted as cheerfully as he could. He fell a bit short, however, but judging by the shadow of exhaustion around his eyes, Lance didn’t particularly care.

“Morning,” Keith offered in return. “Are you… are you okay?”

Lance ran a hand down his face and replied, “Honestly? I’m still a little tired. My brother woke me up this morning at six.” He made a face.

“What time is it now?” Keith asked. “My phone’s dead, so I couldn’t check.”

“Almost seven,” Lance answered. His grin faded into a shy smile. “I’m guessing you can’t stay because you have work?”

Keith nodded, feeling the same palpitation of disappointment in his chest. “Unfortunately,” he replied with a sigh. “I work eight to five all week. I don’t get a day off, but that’s understandable.”

“Jeez, sounds like VBC overworks their employees,” Lance mused, teasingly. “You should call in sick. I’ll lend you my phone and everything.”

Keith laughed. “If I did that, I would never hear the end of it from my co-workers,” he replied. “I’ve never missed a day of work since I started.”

“Oh, Employee of the Month, I see.”

Keith snorted at the thought. With how much destruction he accidentally caused during a fight and how often he nearly started in-fighting, Keith honestly doubted he would ever be employee of the month. That title probably belonged to another one of the Paladins—namely Allura, Shiro, or even shy and sweet Shay.

“There are more deserving individuals out there,” Keith said instead. He swung his legs over the side of the futon and asked, “Do you have a spare toothbrush? I need to get ready for work.” He adjusted his arms to catch Azura in case she fell as she climbed up his back and onto his shoulder. Once she settled on top of his shoulder, Keith stood up and strolled towards the kitchenette.

“Yeah, there should be some in the cabinet,” Lance replied. “Would you like some coffee? I’ll make
some for you, if you’d like.”

Keith crinkled his nose at the mention of the bitter drink and asked, “Do you have tea instead?”

“I have some green tea,” Lance replied. “I bought it to use for DIY facial masks every now and then—never really to drink though.”

“Well,” Keith replied, “I’m pretty sure it’s meant for drinking.”

Lance rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. I’ll get a brew going for you then while you get ready. Do you want to borrow some clothes? You know, since you wore the other set yesterday?”

Keith shook his head and assured him, “Don’t worry about it. My clothes don’t really matter in my field of work.” Considering that he had spare clothes in the gym locker at work—although they were his gym clothes—and that he would have to change into his hero-suit eventually, there wasn’t really a point in changing into fresh clothes. Besides, if he didn’t smell horrible, it was all good. (He’d end up smelling horrible later anyway.)

“If you’re sure…” Lance replied wearily. He sniffed and scrunched up his nose, silently judging Keith with his deep blue stare. Then he shrugged and shuffled around his kitchen, pulling out a kettle and filling it with tap water. Azura leapt from Keith’s shoulder to the sink, and Lance pulled away the kettle just in time before Azura stuck her head underneath the running water. Lance burst into laughter, and Keith couldn’t help but join him after seeing how ridiculous Azura looked. He had never actually seen a wet cat until now, and Gods above, was she adorable.

Lance twisted the tap, shutting off the water, and Azura batted at it to switch it back on, making Keith chuckle. Lance set down the kettle and plucked off the kitchen counter, holding her out to Keith. “Do me a favour and use one of the towels in the bathroom to dry her off?” he asked. “Don’t try to get her fully dry by towel, just damp enough that a little blow dry will do the rest. Use the low setting since I wouldn’t want the heat to irritate her.”

“Yeah, sure,” Keith complied, cradling Azura in his arms like a child, ignoring the dampening spot on his shirt—Lance’s shirt. Intending to thank the brunet, Keith parted his lips, and the words rolled off his tongue awkwardly, infected by his sudden shyness. “Thanks for letting me stay the night.”

Lance waved off the matter and said, “I almost got jumped on my way home the other night; I didn’t want the same thing to happen to you.” He pursed his lips and noted hesitantly, “It seems like this city is only getting more dangerous by the day—or maybe it’s just my imagination—I dunno.”

No, it was definitely getting more dangerous. There were new monsters on top of supervillains on top of the Galra continuing their underground operations. Still, it was Keith’s job to protect everyone and keep them safe. He was never really any good at that though; sometimes, he wondered why he had gone into this field in the first place. He knew he was following his mother’s footsteps, following Shiro’s example, but it felt as though he was just blindly toddling after them, unsteady on his own feet.

He managed to become a Paladin through sheer might. He was one of the strongest—that much he knew—but he wasn’t the most compassionate or the most dedicated Paladin. Shiro was a Paladin because he wanted to protect innocent civilians. He felt responsible for keeping them safe because he had the power to do so. Allura wanted justice, wanted people to answer to their crimes, wanted people to live in a safe world. Keith? He was doing this because… because his mother was the Black Lion, because Shiro became Black Sky, because Asako-obasan supported him, because they thought he was fit for this.
He didn’t feel fit at all. Especially not right now, when Lance was looking so conflicted and there was nothing he could do about it. “It’ll be okay,” Keith said, fumbling with his words. Lance perked up, lifting his head to stare at Keith with wide eyes. Keith averted his eyes, uncertainty clouding his judgement. “Things will get better.”

Lance offered him a wry smile, and Keith’s heart dropped when he realised Lance didn’t believe him—couldn’t believe him. “Yeah,” he replied, taking the kettle and setting it on the stove top. He switched it on, and Keith took the opportunity to escape into the bathroom with Azura, beating himself up the entire time. (*Stupid, stupid, stupid.*) He didn’t know what his mother saw in him. He didn’t know what Shiro saw in him. He didn’t know what his aunt saw in him.

He couldn’t possibly be a *hero.*

He closed the bathroom door behind him, locking it shut, and collapsed to the floor with Azura in his arms. She rubbed her wet face against his cheek, and Keith chuckled quietly. He reached for the nearest towel, rubbing it all over her, before digging around the tiny bathroom for the blow dryer. He dried her off, surprised to find her so obedient even though he wasn’t her owner, and then let her out while he scavenged the cupboard for a spare toothbrush. He grabbed the variety pack and picked out the red toothbrush. Once he was done, he set the toothbrush in a cup with a blue toothbrush. Lance could decide what to do with it. Then he changed into his clothes from last night and mustered up the confidence to face Lance after that disaster.

Keith tossed his sleep clothes—Lance’s sleep clothes—into the nearby laundry hamper he found. Then he trudged silently into the main room, where he found Lance getting cozy with his tiny white cat. Azura was curled up in his lap as he sipped from his coffee mug. The TV played in the background as he plucked through a wooden box filled with cat collars. Most of them were blue in colour though they varied in design. Some had lace, some had bells, and some had gems and rhinestones pressed into the material. There was another mug on the table with a tea bag as well as a huge jar of sugar.

Lance plucked out a baby blue collar embedded with fake diamonds, attached Azura’s crown shaped pet tag, and clipped it around Azura’s neck just as a news channel began to cover the damage from yesterday. “You know,” Lance commented, “I think it’s like a vicious cycle. Bad guy does something bad. Good guy tries to stop him. Damage is done. Good guy has a nine out of ten chance of winning and sends bad guy to jail. Another bad guy decides to pick up the mantle, or the same bad guy gets released some time in the future—could be weeks, could be months, years or decades. Anyway, I just don’t understand why that cycle has to exist. I don’t know how to end it either.” He cracked a grin. “Maybe there wouldn’t be a problem if we just took out the problem entirely.”

Keith joined him on the futon and replied, “Would that solve anything?”

Lance shrugged. “I wouldn’t know,” he admitted. “I haven’t tried it.”

*Taking out the problem entirely*... Now there was a thought. Maybe there was a way to root out the problem or, at least, reduce the spike in supervillains and, more recently, actual *monsters.* That would mean that a number of superhuman crimes would have to be related though or, at least, stemmed from the same origin. That in itself would be similar to saying that every Super were somehow related to one another, and while every Super had some kind of genetic alterations that allowed them to “evolve” to superhuman status, it was a hard pill to swallow. Nobody knew the reason why or how superhumans existed; it just happened one day thirty-some years ago.

Keith brought his mug close and sipped at it tentatively, testing the temperature on his tongue. It was still pretty warm—not boiling hot, at least. Lance made a face when he saw Keith drink it plain without sugar.
“Are you sure you’re okay though?” Keith asked. “You looked upset earlier when your brother called.”

Lance hesitated, biting his lower lip, and Keith watched, mesmerised, before feeling a faint urge to coax Lance to stop. He suppressed it before he could act out. *Not the time*, he chastised himself. “Remember how I said I moved away from my family last night?” Lance began. He didn’t wait for Keith to answer. “You’re not the first one to tell me to go home, but… there’s a reason I can’t go back, Keith. You have to understand—*please*.” He glanced over at the raven haired young man with imploring eyes, and the latter found himself nodding, caving into Lance’s plea. Lance sighed, shoulders slumping. “My brother was just calling me about that, and I… I’m just tired of hearing it all the time. I have my reasons. It’s not like I don’t *want* to go back. I just… I *can’t*.”

Keith set down his mug and reached out for Lance’s hand before faltering. Instead, he awkwardly set his hand on Lance’s forearm. “Look,” Keith began uncertainly. “I don’t know what your reasons are or what happened between you and your family… but it sounds like they’re really worried about you. I’m not going to tell you to go back to them and visit them right now, but… you should do it sometime, whenever you feel up to it, whenever you feel better. I just feel like you’d be happier that way—both you and your family.”

Lance shook off Keith’s hand, but before the latter could feel discouraged, Lance laced their fingers together. “Thanks, Keith,” he replied, smiling. He glanced at the time on his phone and said, “I think you better get going soon though. You might be late if I kept you here.”

“I wouldn’t mind if you did,” Keith remarked but stood up nevertheless.

Lance chuckled and ushered Azura off his lap, seeing his guest to the door. Keith stepped into his boots as Lance unlocked his front door. Before Keith could slip outside, Lance pressed a kiss against his cheek. “Have a good day at work,” he chimed with a mischievous grin.

Keith flushed. “Thanks for having me over,” he found himself saying, “and for the tea.”

“I’m pretty sure you’ve said that already,” Lance quipped teasingly. “See you around?”

Keith nodded. “Yeah, knowing Shiro’s sudden penchant for your uncle’s cooking, we might see you sooner than later,” Keith remarked dryly, the hint of a smirk tugging at his lips.

He awkwardly waved goodbye before setting off down the stairs. He chanced one last glance behind him and noticed that the door was still open as though to invite him back in. Steeling his resolve, Keith forced himself to climb down the stairs. He stole another glimpse towards Lance’s room and saw the curtains get pushed aside. Lance leaned against the window frame, arms crossed, and grinned down at Keith, offering a tiny smile.

Keith shyly raised his hand and waved back before pivoting on his heel and marching down the street to the subway station. His commute back to Voltron Towers was filled with silence. With his phone dead, he couldn’t very much reply to his text messages or even start up a chat with Lance. Instead, he occupied himself with the idle chatter of passer-bys. Some of them were high school students, either late for class or flat out ditching, and others were officer workers hustling to their jobs. Several others were blue collar workers as well, dressed up already in their uniforms for a long day of work, and Keith could emphasise all too well with the feeling of exhaustion that was already heavy in the air.

It didn’t prepare him for a night of getting suffocated by Shiro the very moment he stepped into the investigations office. Keith batted him away like a gnat when Shiro hovered close, a worried expression furrowing his brows and turning the corners of his lips downward. “Keith, where were
you last night?” Shiro hounded him, right on his tail.

“I was with Lance,” Keith answered tersely. “I invited him out for dinner, and it got dark. He let me stay the night—*stop making that face, Shiro.*” Keith scowled at the shit-eating grin that took over the older man’s expression. Any trace of concern had been completely wiped away in favour of mirth and teasing. “*Nothing happened.*”

“Oh-huh,” Shiro replied. “*Nothing happened,*” he repeated. There was a pause where Keith proceeded to plop into his seat at his cubicle, booting up his computer. He pulled open a drawer and fished out a spare charging cable, plugging the USB end into his PC and then hooking up his phone. Shiro kept his eyes trained on Keith while the latter determinedly stared at his phone screen, watching as it revived itself from the dead. “So…” Shiro began. “Are you two dating now?”

“I told you, Shiro,” Keith persisted. “*Nothing happened.*”

Keith pursed his lips, thinking of the warm lips pressed to his own, pressed to his cheek, and wondered exactly where he fell with Lance. They hadn’t exactly made it official, hadn’t exactly said anything out loud or written anything in text, hadn’t really discussed in any form or shape. Things just happened. They were taking things at their own pace, and really, Keith didn’t want to rush Lance into anything when it seemed as though he was having so many other issues to deal with. Still, Keith couldn’t help the disappointment that weighed him down. It was true that he wanted something to happen, but maybe now was not the time. Maybe it would come; maybe it wouldn’t. There remained so much to Lance that Keith didn’t know.

“*Nothing happened,*” he repeated quietly, “so just drop it, Shiro.”

Shiro must have heard the disappointment in his voice because he didn’t bring up the matter again. He only asked, “Is everything with Lance okay?”

“Yeah, it’s… it’s great, honestly,” Keith replied. “It’s more than I could ask for.”

He had spoken without thinking, but when his words lingered in the space between him and Shiro, Keith found them resonating with truth. He never even so far envisioned a relationship with Lance; for the past few months, Keith had only ever been able to admire Lance from afar. Whether it was work of chance, fate, or coincidence, Keith continuously had an excuse to see Lance, and he couldn’t ask for anything more—not now, not when Lance seemed so troubled by his private life.

“I don’t want to push him into something though,” Keith admitted to Shiro. “He didn’t look too happy this morning; I think he’s in a rough spot with his family.” Maybe he was divulging too much information, but Shiro would understand. After all, Shiro had to deal with Keith himself back when he was sixteen and had a major attitude problem. Back then, Keith had taken “questioning authorities” to an entirely new extreme, and his own family was a huge mess.

“He seems close though,” Shiro replied, thinking aloud, “close enough that his uncle would employ him at his restaurant.”

“I don’t know, Shiro,” Keith mumbled. “And it’s not really my place to ask. I’d be stepping out of line. It’s… it’s not my business.”

“Of course it is,” Shiro protested. “You’re worried about him because you care. Just like how your life involves him, his life has you in it now.”

Keith sighed and forced a smile to his lips, trying to reassure Shiro now. “Thanks, Shiro,” he replied. “There’s something about him though…” Shiro thought aloud, catching Keith’s attention. Shiro’s
brows were furrowed, lips set into a thin line, as he continued mulling over his silent musings. A bit of worry stirred within Keith upon observing the gravity in Shiro’s expression.

“Shiro…?”


Shiro leaned against his desk and crossed his arms. “Anyway,” Shiro began, diverting the topic easily, “Coran sent you a file through the private channel. He wants the Paladins to check it out.” Keith navigated his desktop and clicked open the new file Coran had sent them. His eyes skimmed over the content, reading something about a pub and drug dealings and Galra. “The Witch’s Cauldron is smack dab in the centre of Galra turf. There’s a good chance that this pub is a part of their base of operations, especially since there’ve been talk of drugs in that vicinity. Shay and Sven are going to another club in that area to dredge up any clues. You, Allura, and I are going to head to the Witch’s Cauldron, but we’ll be divided into investigative and bodyguard duties.”

“Bodyguard?” Keith echoed.

“President Alfor and his wife, Ariella, were invited to dinner by their business partners, Imperial Tech,” Shiro clarified. “They think it’s a good chance to bolster relationships and get more materials for engineering new equipment for the Knights.”

Keith balked. Shit, his boss’s boss was going to be there? Allura’s parents were going to be there? In such a dangerous area? His expression must have consumed his face because Shiro burst into laughter. He patted Keith’s shoulder and said, “Let’s hope that nothing goes wrong. Remember, we’re not there to bust crime this time. We’d have our hands tied if we did because that area is chock-full of it. We’re only there to investigate, all right, Keith? We’ll leave Allura to her parents and see if we can pick up any clues.”

“Tonight?” Keith asked.

Shiro nodded. “Tonight.” With that, Shiro left to do to what a Keith would usually do at a desk job, stating that he had a case file to deliver to Allura and the others. Keith swivelled around in his computer chair and stared at the screen of his monitor before deciding to start by logging into his email. He pulled up the web browser and redirected it to the company email server, but before he could enter his credentials, his phone buzzed and his aunt’s contact name flickered onto the screen.

[8:33 AM]

Asako-obasan: キース、今日何がするの？

What am I doing today?

Keith glanced around his cubicle as discreetly as he could. After ascertaining that nobody was paying him any attention, Keith unlocked his phone and switched his keyboard to one of the Japanese ones he had installed. He took a second to compose his reply (I’m not doing anything. What’s up?) before sending it off.

Asako-obasan always spoke to him in Japanese in private, and she took to messaging him in Japanese as well whenever she felt particularly nostalgic. Honestly, his Japanese was rather rusty, and he was much better at speaking and understanding it than reading and writing it. Nevertheless,
Asako always appreciated how he tried to respond in text, and she seemed a little bit livelier when he answered in Japanese verbally as well. He didn’t blame her either because he knew that the Japanese language was filled with memories of her late sister and father.

Even Keith recalled gentle guidance whenever he hears it.

Keith: 何もしない。どうした？

Asako-obasan: 伯母さんと、昼ご飯を食べましょうか？

Lunch? Keith could do lunch since their mission was later that night anyway. He quickly typed a message asking her where she wanted to go, and a second later, she replied with only one word.

Keith: いいよ。どこに行く？

Asako-obasan: すし？

Sushi.

He hadn’t had sushi in forever. His budget never quite allowed for it since, well, he didn’t make much money considering his pay-cheque was always getting cut to pay for the damages done to the city… namely, damages that he had done to the city. Somehow, he had earned the reputation as one of the most disruptive Paladins, but at least nobody had ever gotten hurt!

Keith: わかった。またね。

Asako-obasan: 仕事にがんばって！

Okay, so revising his schedule, Keith would have to work with Sven and Shay on the investigation front today, then he would clock into the reparations department to work his shift, and then he would get sushi with his aunt. Later at night, he’d have to go undercover with Shiro and Allura…

God, it’s going to be a long day, Keith bemoaned.

He wondered how Lance was doing this fine morning.

“Fancy seeing you here.”

Lance looked turned around and grinned at the dark skinned, dapper young gentleman in front of him. Gabriel was all bright eyes and bright smiles. Unlike Estefania, Lance, and Ana (okay, maybe most of his family, actually), he wasn’t ever loud and was generally soft-spoken. He was polite, courteous, and the picture perfect prince and literal angel… with maybe a little bit of sass that picked up from Estefania. Of course, that made him a good fit in the family. Gabriel towered over more than half of their relatives in height alone though, but all the women in this family liked tall men for some reason. (It’s why Lance insisted he was the favourite son when he argued with Enrique, who happened to be an inch shorter than him.)

Gabriel pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, and as always, Gabriel was dressed primly in a pressed shirt, a sharp blazer, khakis, and woollen fedora. On the other hand, Lance felt comparably underdressed in his baby blue and white hoodie, galaxy patterned snapback, light-washed grey jeans, and brown combat boots.

“I haven’t seen you in a while,” Gabriel replied in his smooth tenor voice that Estefania had swooned over for the first couple of months before they had started dating. Gabriel had a peculiar accent as
well, lyrical with slight upward intonations, that hinted at his Nigerian roots and his time abroad in France.

“Well, I am a drop out,” Lance returned lightly with a grin of his own. “Even when I was a student, we barely saw each other on campus, being different majors and all.” He jutted his hips and crossed his arms. Azura was happily perched on top of his head, a leash patterned with blue diamonds clipped to her harness with the other end wrapped around Lance’s hand. Now with the ultimate image of intimidation, Lance retorted, “Fancy seeing you here though.” He gestured to the aisles around them, all stocked with cat foods, and added, “Last I heard, you didn’t have a cat.”

“Mind if I joined you?” Gabriel asked, picking out a premium brand that Lance indulged in buying for Azura every now and then and then grinning widely. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you. I was going to visit you and bring you gifts for your cat, but I guess this makes it easier.”

“I could never say no to your company,” Lance replied easily. “Estefania would kill me.” Gabriel chuckled and fell into step beside him as Lance began pushing his shopping cart around the pet shop. If Gabriel was going to buy pet food, then Lance didn’t have to bother with the usual brand he bought and went straight to the aisle with the cat litter. “Anyway,” Lance began, glancing at Gabriel in between studying the bags of cat litter, “what did you need from me?”

“I have a favour to ask of you,” Gabriel answered.

“Well, shoot,” Lance responded as he hefted a bag from the aisle into his cart. Azura leapt from his head onto his shoulder, digging her claws into his left shoulder. He winced and made a note to clip her nails later. “I’m all ears.” Lance leaned against his shopping cart, smiling at Gabriel.

“Well, I’ve known Estefania for a while now, or rather, we’ve been dating for a while now…” Gabriel began, trailing off almost shyly. He offered Lance another smile of his and said, “I would like to propose to her.”


“I’m very serious,” Gabriel answered with a more confident grin. “We’ve been together for five years, almost six now. I don’t think I could ever see any other woman the same way as I do her.” Gabriel paused and amended, “Estefania’s not like any other woman.” He cleared his throat and mentioned, “Anyway, I’ve asked your mother, and she’s given me her blessing. I only need to ask Estefania; now, this is where you come in.”

Lance leaned in, picking up Gabriel’s mischievous tone, and grinned. “What do you need, man?”

“I’ve reserved a restaurant on our anniversary date,” Gabriel explained. “I spoke with the owner, and he’s fine if we book you for the night. So if you’re okay with it, I would like you to perform that night. Estefania loves it when you play, and I want it to be special for her since I know she doesn’t get to hear you play that often any more.”

“Oh, I got you, my man,” Lance assured him. “No worries. Just give me the time and date, and I’ll be your personal piano man for the night. If you’re gonna bribe me with cat food, I’m not going to say no to that either!”

Gabriel laughed. “Then we have ourselves a deal!”

“Did you ask Enrique yet?” Lance inquired curiously as he pushed his cart into the section with all the cat toys. Azura leapt from her perch into his arms, and Lance lowered her onto the ground,
watching as she batted at a couple of toys. He probably wouldn’t buy any new ones just yet—not until Kolivan paid him—but Azura deserved a little bit of playtime.

In the end, however, he plucked a mouse toy that had her enthralled and tossed it into the shopping cart. He shot Gabriel a glare when the taller man started laughing at him. Gabriel made a show of zipping his lips shut, but the grin on his lips told Lance that his future brother-in-law was still all too amused with him.

“Yes, I did, actually,” Gabriel replied. He placed the cat food inside the shopping cart and began to push it around when Lance had to pluck Azura off the ground and carry her away from the toys. Neither of them flinched when she began to yowl in protest. “He wasn’t nearly as thrilled as your mother, but I think he was a little bit happy for us,” Gabriel remarked.

Lance snickered. “It’s probably because Este used to be the little girl who used to step on his heels following him around everywhere,” Lance explained. “It probably feels weird for him.”

“I think I understand to some extent,” Gabriel replied. “I would feel a little uncomfortable if my younger sister had gotten married as well.”

“How is your sister anyway?” Lance inquired. “She’s a little older than Ana, right?”

“Seventeen,” Gabriel answered with a wry grin. “She’s getting swarmed with all of these college brochures and pamphlets. I don’t think she knows where she wants to go just yet, but she wants to be a civil engineering major.”

Lance whistled lowly, highly impressed. “Like sister like brother,” he teased. “How’s grad school? Still doing the architecture thing?”

“It’s… it’s grad school,” Gabriel managed. He appeared sheepish. “If she accepts, the quickest we could get married might be summer. I don’t know if she’d be willing to wait until I get my master’s degree. We won’t be able to have a big ceremony, but we could at least get the documents signed. It’s fortunate, at the very least, that my company is willing to pay for my education.”

Lance nodded in agreement. He would have loved that, too. Even with his scholarship, paying for college and living expenses was difficult. “She’d definitely say yes though,” Lance assured Gabriel. He grinned mischievously and remarked, “Sometimes she tells me that she can’t believe she ended up with someone like you. She says you walked straight out of a Disney movie.”

Gabriel laughed and shook his head. “I’m that one who can’t believe I ended up with her,” he replied easily. “She’s gorgeous and funny and sassy and smart and fun.” Gabriel sighed. “If not a little wild and brash.”

“Sometimes she thinks you’re a stick in the mud, so you balance each other out,” Lance admitted, elbowing Gabriel playfully.

Gabriel smiled. “I guess so,” he acquiesced. “Have you found anyone like that? It’s all right if you haven’t. Estefania just worries about you being alone in your apartment with only a cat to keep you company.”

Lance thought briefly of Keith and then replied, “No… I don’t think so—not yet, but maybe?” Lance shrugged as the two of them made their way to the check out lines. “It’s not like I’m looking for a lifetime partner right now. I’m just trying to provide for me and my baby—isn’t that right, Azura?” He pressed a kiss between Azura’s ears and cooed when she pawed at his nose.

Gabriel snorted and laughed at the same time.
Okay, so maybe he wasn’t as much of a Disney prince as Estefania had thought (because what kind of Disney prince snorted?), but Lance thought he was still pretty chill.

Asako-obasan: 届いた！

Keith peeled his eyes away from his phone screen and scanned his surroundings within the sushi bar. He glanced towards the entrance and found an older Asian woman—small and petite—at the doors still, dressed in a peach coloured lace blouse, a white pencil skirt, an ivory cardigan, and demure white heels. Their eyes locked together, and a smile spread across her lips as she took notice of him. She pardoned herself, passing a host ready to seat her at another table, and made her way towards her nephew.

At the small table for two, she tucked her skirt beneath her before sitting and smoothing out the fabric. “How was work?” she asked, opting once more to speak in Japanese, so Keith responded in the same fashion.

“It was fine,” he answered. “I can’t really tell you much anyway—confidentiality, you know? Even though you’re a sponsor company.”

Asako-obasan chuckled and waved over a waitress, fluently switching back to English to place an order for some hot tea, before she completely focused on her attention on Keith yet again. “I know, I know,” she assured him, returning back to Japanese. “I just wanted to make sure that you’re safe and that everything’s all right—also that you’re not causing trouble for anyone.”

Keith would deny that he pouted even if his aunt would tease him about it later. “I’m not causing trouble for anyone!” he protested.

“That’s not what the damage reports have been saying,” she chimed. Asako-obasan unfolded the menu, browsing through what they had to offer, before remarking, “At least you have a proper hero suit now; it tears less often than those ragged coats you used to wear.”

“You bought me those coats.”

“Yeah, because I thought you’d want to wear them when you go out—not wear them out,” Asako-obasan quipped. Before Keith could make a retort, she added, “By the way, you should take Scarlet in for a check up. We want to make sure that Scarlet is safe for you… that you stay safe. Your mother may have left you in your grandpa’s care, but he left you in my care. I can’t disappoint either of them.”

Keith pursed his lips and offered, “I don’t see why either of them would be disappointed in you. You’re doing your best. I’m sorry I’m not around all the time.”

Asako-obasan laughed and mused, “You’re a good kid, Keith.” She rested her cheek in the palm of her hand and remarked, “You look more and more like Kira every day.” Her eyes widened, and her lips lifted into an elated grin. “That reminds me, I got you a present!”

“Already?” Keith responded. “Isn’t that ruining the surprise? My birthday isn’t for a while now, Asako-obasan.”

His aunt rolled her eyes and said, “I’m not giving it to you right now, silly boy. I know patience isn’t
your strongest point, but you’ll still have to wait and see!”

Before Keith could reply, the waitress walked up to their table, pen at the ready, to receive their order.

(Today – 3:18 PM)

Pidgeotto: gm wants to speak with you tonight

Pidgeotto: he’s got a new campaign planned

Pidgeotto: no objections

Lancer™: Alright, I’ll be down at the usual time!

“Let me get this straight,” Lance said slowly, not once breaking eye contact with his boss. “You want me of all people to go to a high class bistro, undercover, and be a performer who only has an hour to play his set-list so that I can get backstage access and spy on an old lady?”

“Yes, that is the general idea,” Kolivan answered. He glanced at the time on his watch and said, “You’ll be leaving in an hour. Have your set list ready.”

“This can’t wait for some other time?” Lance protested. “We’re kind of rushing in, don’t you think?” He raised an eyebrow, crossing his arms defensively, and remarked, “I thought you didn’t do things like, oh I dunno, rushing in—too high of a chance of being discovered, too high of a chance of getting killed—you know, the usual spiel to think before acting.”

Kolivan had been in charge of this resistance for so long. The good part about him as a leader is that he never took unnecessary risks. The bad part about him as a leader is that he also didn’t take necessary risks. Kolivan liked to play it safe; it was the reason why they had been undiscovered for so long. The Galra couldn’t know what would be creeping up on them.

Every single one of these rebels had a bone to pick with the Galra. There was no way they’d allow themselves to be crushed before being able to finally take action, before fulfilling their personal vendetta, and Lance was itching for that moment.

He’d have it—his justice, his vengeance, his peace of mind, his calm after the storm—and the Blade of Marmora was his best bet.

“Unfortunately, no, we can’t wait or else we’d miss this opportunity,” Kolivan replied just as snappily. “Thace only recently managed to get in touch with us. He confirmed that The Witch’s Cauldron is indeed a Galra-owned pub and bistro, but with its high standards, it makes it difficult to gain entry unless, of course, you’re one of two cases.”

“Not like your trashy nightclub, right?” Lance teased.

Kolivan ignored him and continued speaking, “Case one, you’re of an esteemed standing. We both know that people like you are practically on the opposite end of the spectrum.”

Lance frowned. “Gee, thanks. This coming from a sleazy club owner,” he griped.

Again, Kolivan continued speaking as though he hadn’t been interrupted, “Case two, you pull some strings. We managed to pull some strings. You have Wong to thank for that.”
“Way to go, Nyma,” Lance cheered weakly.

Kolivan openly frowned at him. “This is a Galran establishment, Reyes,” he remarked, “not just an establishment on Galran turf. Further investigations with Gunderson revealed that Helena Agar, the CEO and lead researcher at Druid Pharmaceuticals, is a frequent patron. Druid Pharmaceuticals has been under public attention after the scene with the stone golem. Its attacks were centred on Druid’s branch, but why? Furthermore, it’s strange that you would have such a pub of high society located in the heart of Galra territory, down where drug deals take place in the alleys, isn’t it? Agar, however, has a profession dealing with drugs. You understand what this may mean, don’t you?”

Lance nodded slowly though he doubted Kolivan needed an answer.

“Thace has managed to confirm that Agar will be attending tonight with her cohorts,” Kolivan explained, “which is where you come in. You will perform, and once you manage to put the crowd into a good mood, you’ll start carrying out your investigation. Try to figure out what kind of ties Agar has with the Galra and if there’s any correlation with the drugs they’ve been dealing. We need more information because once this drug falls into our hands…” Kolivan trailed off. There was no need to finish that sentence because they all knew.

Once this drug fell into their hands, they could shut down the Galra. This miracle drug with its crazy high and rumoured side-effects kept people coming back for more. It kept the Galra on top because they were the only suppliers.

“Get ready and take your comm unit with you; Gunderson will be online in an hour.”

That was the story of how Lance found himself dressed impeccably in a sleek three-piece black suit—with a black coat, a dark grey waistcoat, and a royal navy shirt with a black silk tie neatly pulled into a Windsor knot as well as black slim fit trousers and polished Oxfords—seated at the piano stool with a velvet cushion. The grand piano was polished well, and from his earlier checks, he knew that it was tuned to perfection. With the acoustics of the pub, the sound would carry well into the far reaches of the establishment as well.

The Witch’s Cauldron, despite its foreboding name, was a pub with polished marble tiles, ivory pillars wrapped with plastic ivy and white flowers, and arched ceilings with crystal drops and chandeliers strung overhead. Most of the walls were painted an elegant white save for the wall behind the bar, which was made of stone bricks that was mostly covered by the wine cabinets displaying alcohol older than Lance himself. The bar counter itself was white marble, and the other tables on the bistro floor all had glass tops polished until they glimmered and shone.

Lance really didn’t belong there, but nobody had to know. He just hoped that nobody managed to pick out the fact that he had shopped for his suit in the sales’ rack of a department store.

He adjusted his piano stool and laid his fingers flat against the ivory keys. He took a breath, prayed that everyone liked Elvis, and began to play one of the King’s ballads. He leaned closer to the microphone, parting his lips, and began to sing softly and gently,

“Are you lonesome tonight?
Do you miss me tonight?
Are you sorry we drifted apart?
Does your memory stray to a brighter sunny day
When I kissed you and called you ‘sweetheart’?”

He drifted to a farther place, thinking of nothing but his song, of his rendition, of his mother and father, of Keith, of happier days and a happier place. However, the more he sang, the more he
played, the more he thought about his father. He thought of how his father would take his mother by
the hand and lead her into a dance, sweeping her off her feet. He thought of the gentle hums in the
kitchen, the soft sways rocking them to and fro, as they prepared meals for their home and hearth. He
thought of the quiet sobs that shook his mother’s petite frame at her husband’s absence.

Then his voice faded into silence with the conclusion of the song, empty and hollow, before he
forced himself to continue. His fingers continued to play though, and he eased into another classic
ballad. It was a sweeter song, less bittersweet and nostalgic than the last, and his heart ached as he
sang,

“Love me tender,
Love me sweet,
Never let me go.
You have made my life complete,
And I love you so…”

Eventually, his fingers eased into the sheet music that The Witch’s Cauldron had given him to play to
fill the rest of the time. It was a decent mix of soft jazz and stereotypical classical songs.
Occasionally, he would add his own flair to liven things up, but since he was at least getting paid for
covering their absent pianist, who—as Kolivan said that Thace said—was caught in an unfortunate
accident, Lance didn’t stray too far from the written composition.

Once his time was up, he packed up the sheet music and covered the piano keys with the case. He
lowered the top of the grand piano and pushed in his stool. However, when he turned face to exit the
stage, he was caught off-guard by the sudden applause. Lance flushed from the attention and shyly
bowed, heart fluttering like petals in a storm. His insides warmed with the soft glow of happiness; he
hadn’t been applauded in so long, hadn’t played in so long. It felt good—even if it was a farce.

Lance stepped off the platform, only to find himself pulled aside by a group of diners. He gaped at
Allura, who appeared just as surprised to see him there as well, before the young woman offered him

Allura. Allura De Altea. It all made sense now. She was practically the princess of VBC and the
Voltron Alliance.

“Oh? You know him?” asked an older woman who appeared to be Allura’s future self. Her mother,
Lance supposed. Her laugh lines were made prominent with her soft smile, and Lance couldn’t help
but find her dimples charming. “I wanted to speak with you, my boy. What a coincidence! So your
name is Lance? You know my daughter, Allura?”

“Yes, madam,” he answered politely. It was a confidential mission, so he couldn’t go out giving out
his name. He could hear Pidge hissing in his ear to pull back and had a vague vision of a post-
mission lecture from Kolivan during the mission debrief. It wasn’t like Lance was his real name
anyway. “I’ve met your daughter before through her friends.”

“Yes, madam,” he answered politely. It was a confidential mission, so he couldn’t go out giving out
his name. He could hear Pidge hissing in his ear to pull back and had a vague vision of a post-
mission lecture from Kolivan during the mission debrief. It wasn’t like Lance was his real name
anyway. “I’ve met your daughter before through her friends.”

“Allora, who appeared just as surprised to see him there as well, before the young woman offered him

Allura. Allura De Altea. It all made sense now. She was practically the princess of VBC and the
Voltron Alliance.

“What a small world!” exclaimed an older gentleman with the same dark skin as Allura and aged
white hair. He had better facial hair than Coran, Lance noted—not that he would ever tell Coran that.
The ginger man would be devastated. Remembering himself, the man did a double take, “Forgive
me, we haven’t even introduced ourselves yet. I am Alfor, and this is my wife, Ariella. How long
have you been playing piano, Lance? Where did you learn?”

“I’ve been playing since middle school,” he answered honestly and politely. “My music teacher had
taught me how to play, and she kept giving me lessons even after I started going to high school.”
“Do you perhaps study music?” Lady Ariella (for some reason, Lance couldn’t help but associate Allura’s family with royalty; they certainly had the regal air about them) asked.

“I did, madam,” Lance answered. “I couldn’t afford to continue paying tuition though.”

Looks of pity were thrown around the table, mostly from the female patrons, and Lance squirmed in discomfort. There was a particular man, however, who appeared even more disgruntled than Lance. Even sitting down, Lance could tell he was tall, and he clearly held himself above the others—if not everyone else in the world. His cold eyes were able to pin Lance in place with his glower alone, and Lance silently wondered if all of his secrets were quietly being unravelled by the older man. Without any edge of sympathy in his voice, he asked tersely, “Have you tried getting a job to pay them off?”

Lance refrained from visibly reacting despite how he could feel himself bristling, but all three members of Allura’s family were openly frowning at the rudeness. “I had three,” he replied. He tried his best not to sound indignant, but it was hard. He was tired of telling people about this, and he was tired of people thinking they have the solution for all of his problems. “I have three, and even if I could pay my tuition with them, I didn’t have the time to complete my assignments because I had to keep working to keep the jobs.”

Before the cold man could respond with a snide remark, judging from his expression alone, a woman at the table teased, “Oh, President Zacharias, you’re making the poor boy uncomfortable!”

President Zacharias… It only took Lance a second to recall the name. Roderich Konrad Zacharias was the CEO of Imperial Tech, a company that was known for mining precious minerals and resources that were needed for producing military weapons, namely tanks, fighter jets, ships, and submarines. Furthermore, according to Hunk, he also supplied the Voltron Alliance’s engineering department with materials to develop gear and equipment as well.

He was an extremely wealthy man who made money off violence and war. That alone made Lance wonder if the authorities of law enforcement could be bought by this man. After all, the Monstro City Police Department surely didn’t have any qualms for letting Galran killers walk free every now and then because of an apparent lack of evidence.

At any rate, it didn’t take Lance any longer for him to associate the older man with being a threat. He shouldn’t say any more than he already had; he shouldn’t try to make an enemy out of this man—not now, at the very least.

Lady Ariella spoke up, adopting a more gentle tone than her companions, and diverted the subject, “Where did you study previously, Lance dear? I would love to sponsor you; I can see you going far in the musical world.”

Lance nearly gaped. “I-I-I couldn’t possibly!” he stammered. “That is awfully generous, but it’s not necessary, madam!”

She practically pouted. “I happen to think it might be a worthwhile investment,” she snipped, but the playfulness in her eyes told Lance that she meant no harm. “I will come back to hear you play if you were to make another appearance here.”

“I’m only a stand-in for someone,” Lance protested.

“A very wonderful stand-in,” she insisted. “Much better than the usual pianist, and with such a lovelier voice.”

“Sapphire,” he heard Pidge sigh in exasperation, “stop schmoozing with old ladies and get to work.”
“I would love to stay and chat, but I have to go,” he told the table as politely and courteously as he could. “Please excuse me.” He hurriedly pivoted on his heel and exited the scene.

“Agar can be found at the bar with her subordinates,” Pidge told him. “I managed to hack into the security cameras. I need you to get in close and schmooze this hag instead.”

“Oh my way,” Lance replied quietly.

He rerouted his path to lead him straight to the bar, and he seated himself a few stools away from a party of older ladies and gentlemen all dressed up in black suits—except for one woman with snow white hair, ashen skin that appeared almost grey, and amber eyes that seemed to glow yellow. There was age in her eyes, knowledge accumulated over her years of living and experience, but for some reason (that made Lance really, really curious), she appeared no older than her mid-thirties.

Pidge had insisted that she was a fifty year old lady though. He really couldn’t wrap his head around it; a part of him might be even intrigued even. (He wanted to look that youthful at fifty fucking years old!) Unlike the other women dressed in suits, President Agar wore a long, simple black dress and a blazer fashioned like a cape over her shoulders. Her heels were only an inch and a half high, and they were plain black in design. Nothing sophisticated, nothing complicated, but there was something about her that seemed dangerous. His eyes were drawn to the medallion that was strung around her neck, aged gold engraved with a lion’s head.

Lance thought it didn’t suit her.

Forcing himself to pay attention, Lance considered buying a drink to seem natural. The price this place might charge for a drink would cost a pretty penny, but then Lance shrugged to himself in his head. All of this would be charged to Kolivan anyway; he’d make sure of that.

Waving over the bartender, he placed an order for a shot of whisky, but the bartender only frowned at him. “Aren’t you on a break, piano man?” he questioned sceptically.

“My shift is over,” Lance insisted. “The boss only wanted me to play a set—didn’t want to pay more because he wasn’t sure what he was paying for.”

The bartender still appeared rather dubious of Lance’s reply, and he quickly turned his attention when Agar herself demanded his services. “I want to buy that young man a drink,” she snapped, pointing at Lance with a perfectly manicured finger. Her nails were painted a deep rouge and sharpened to a point. Lance couldn’t help but think that they appeared similar to bloodstained claws. An almost carnivorous smirk curved her red lips as she gestured for him to approach.

Gulping, Lance plucked himself off from his seat and made his way towards her. An older man removed himself from his seat to make room for Lance, and hesitantly, Lance lowered himself down on the stool. “Can I help you somehow, madam?” Lance asked cautiously, cursing himself for allowing his voice to tremble.

She tilted her head curiously at him as though she was studying him. (She probably was.) “Why, yes,” she said. “I believe you can.” Not one moment did she remove her yellow amber eyes from him, and for a second, Lance thought she could see right through him. “You’re a curious boy, aren’t you?” she mused. She raised her hand, framing the side of his face, and Lance stilled as he felt her claws—nails, he corrected himself—scrape the skin at his cheek. “You’re very thin; one would think they’d be able to snap you in half. However, your physique suggests you are quite sturdy and flexible. Your legs are rather long, and the muscles are well-developed, my boy. Has anyone ever told you that you were fast on your feet?”
“What the fuck?” he heard Pidge hiss into his ear.

Lance bit the inside of his cheek, forcing himself to be obedient and compliant, and answered, “In high school, I was recruited by the cross country team, but I stuck with music instead. I played baseball for a little bit in middle school though.”

She chuckled. “How charming,” she commented and withdrew her hand, much to Lance’s relief. “You would make for an interesting specimen. Would you care to come work with me? I run a research facility that might pique your interest.”

Lance nearly choked. He apologised to Pidge, Kolivan, and the rest of the rebellion. He had to get out of there. This lady was creepy and dangerous, and he just couldn’t do this any more. He couldn’t play along. Every fibre of his being was screaming at him to get the fuck out of there. He all but leapt out of his seat. Plastering a smile onto his lips, he excused himself and all but flew away from the bar.

“Okay, that was super weird,” Pidge blurted out. “Sapphire, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Lance lied. Clearing his throat and lowering his voice, he tacked on more truthfully, “At least, I will be. Did you get anything from that?”

“Other than the possibility that she might be a cougar, not much,” Pidge admitted almost apologetically. “Maybe the whole mission was a bust this time…”

Lance nearly responded until he heard footsteps approach him from behind. Lance threw a cursory glimpse over his shoulder and found nobody there. Was it Allura? She should still be with her parents though. Lance stole another look at their table and noticed that, yes, all three members of the De Altea family were there. He whispered, “I think somebody’s following me. I’m going to throw them off my trail.”

Pidge grunted. “I think I see something behind you, but I don’t know what it is,” Pidge admitted. “I’m going to try to get an audio feed near Agar. Mole bugged the place when he was scoping out the place earlier to record evidence you were supposed to get out of her. We’re going to have to try our luck and hope she slips up. I’ll have to leave you on your own though.”

“I can handle myself.”

“Good thing, too, because some of the cameras just picked up some activity in the alley—the one where the back entrance is,” Pidge replied.

“I’ll check it out,” Lance told her.

“All right, sounds good.”

“Has anyone touched my stuff?”

“It’s been where you left it for the past hour, and some goons did a bag check while you were playing,” Pidge told him. “The Mole had already dropped by to leave you your equipment when it was safer though. I’ll erase the data once you’re done gearing up.”

Lance weaved through the table, passing by servers and clients alike, hoping to lose his pursuer in the process. He headed into the staff room, where they had given him a temporary locker, which he had secured with his own lock. He undid the lock and pulled out his sports bag, throwing on his uniform and gear. He loaded up his ivory handgun with the ice pellets, slung his bag over his shoulder, and slipped out the window, heading in the direction of the alley, where he found three
people huddled closely in a circle.

“Do you have it or do you not?”

“Hey, hey, hey, no need for the attitude, man. This shit is in high demand, and I can take my business elsewhere if you’re not gonna fork over the money.”

Lance cocked the hammer and aimed, pulling the trigger. One of the punks holding something—a plastic ziplock baggy—in his hand suddenly had that same hand frozen to the wall. The other two booked it out of there, but Lance could count his losses another day. He was going to milk information out of this guy for all this trouble was worth.

Lance picked up the small plastic baggy, narrowing his eyes at the colourful pills in a plastic container that looked as though it had come from a pharmacy. “What do we have here?” he asked, crouching down to make eye contact with the guy sprawled onto the floor. Well, it was eye contact on his part because the dealer couldn’t even see his eyes behind the goggles. He kicked away the knife the guy tried to pull on him, sending it flying away, and pressed the barrel of his gun underneath his chin. “Look, I really don’t want to do this either, buddy. I mean it. It’s my job though, so you get it, right? No hard feelings, yeah? It’s better if you start talking or… well,” Lance wiggled his gun, burying the tip into the guy’s chin, “you know. Boss’s orders. You feel me?”

The guy paled and started nodding rapidly.

“Let’s start with the obvious,” Lance declared. He repeated his previous question, “What do we have here?” He waved the baggy in the dealer’s face. “What kind of drugs are these?”

The guy shook his head. “I-I don’t know w-what kind, man,” he spluttered. “All I’m getting out of it is that it’s crazy enough to get people buying more. I think it’s like some kind of ecstasy or LSD or some shit, I don’t know. People who come back are trippy as fuck though, say they’ve experienced some kinda real power high or something—I dunno.”

“Okay, next question,” Lance started. “Who are you getting these from? Who are you selling for?”

“G-G-Galra,” he stammered. “I-I mean, I’m selling ‘em for the Galra, but I dunno where those crazy fucks are getting ‘em from. They just give me a share of the profits because this shit sells—Fuck!”

Lance first heard the crackle of fire and dodged before he got singed by the fireball flung his way. (Hunk had made the gear fireproof and bulletproof, but the gear didn’t cover Lance entirely from head to toe.) He gritted his teeth and hissed a string of curses under his breath. Of all times, why now? Couldn’t the fool lion see that he was busy?

“Aren’t you supposed to be waiting for sirens or the bat signal or something!” Lance snapped, dodging another fireball. This one happened to hit the hand encased in ice and thawed it immediately. The dealer scrambled to his feet and bolted out of the alley. “Oh, come on! He was my lead!”

Lance whipped out his other gun, ebony, and fired the tranquilliser shots, only to have them deflected by some matrix level bullshit with Red Lion’s katana. “What the hell are you doing here, little lion man?”

“Keeping an eye out for fishy guys like you,” Red Lion grounded out. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I’m fishy?” Lance screeched, indignant. “Your priorities are definitely backwards if you think I’m the threat here!” He threw his arm out, pointing fiercely in the direction of the escapee, and hissed,
“You lost my lead, goddammit!”

“My priorities are perfectly in line!” Red Lion argued, pointing the tip of his katana at Lance. “You can find drug dealers around any corner in this area! You, on the other hand, show your face every so often, and every time you do, something suspect is going on!”

“Ha! That’s enough proof that you don’t even know what the hell is going on in this city! Listen, Red, what I do is obviously none of your business!” Lance snapped. “I thought we had an agreement! You stay out of my way, and I stay out of yours!”

“We never had an agreement!” Red Lion protested. He flung his dagger at Lance, and the brunet rolled to the side, avoiding the blade just as it nearly skimmed the fabric of his utility vest. He didn’t have time to relax when Red Lion swung his sword at Lance, stopping him from firing another shot. Lance barely had enough time to think, Damn, he’s fast. The sharpshooter hurriedly leaned back and dodged, shuffling his feet to keep up his balance, but the extra weight of his sports bag was throwing him off his game. He eventually built up a rhythm, keeping a steady beat with Red’s attacks, so when Red Lion swung yet again, Lance practically danced away from the blade. “This has gone on long enough! No more games! I’m going to put an end to this and bring you in for questioning!”

“This has never been a game, you jackass!” Lance hissed, aiming another shot with ivory to freeze his hand to his sword if Red liked it so much. Even when the shot hit, Red didn’t seem the slightest bit phased when his hand froze over. Instead, he forced his hands to glow with flames, melting away the ice much to Lance’s frustration. “I told you that I’m just doing my job!”

“Well, who the fuck is hiring you? What the fuck even is your job!”

“I told you!” Lance fired back. “I told you that there were some things that heroes couldn’t do! If I said I wasn’t your enemy, why couldn’t you piece two and two together?”

“I never asked you to get your hands dirty for heroes!” Red retorted.

“And I’m not going to waste time waiting for your goddamn permission! Who the hell do you think you are? My mother?” Lance snapped. “That’s precious time I could spend doing something, accomplishing something, instead of having my thumbs shoved up my ass waiting for you Knights to get moving!”

He twisted away from another fireball and stumbled forward when a wall of flames prevented from moving around any further—fucking asshole, Lance cursed with a scowl. He retaliated quickly, firing a rubber bullet with ebony, and only managed to graze the masquerade lion mask and force Red Lion’s hood down. The force was enough to shift the mask ever so slightly to an odd angle where one of his eyes peeked out, but it didn’t quite slide down the Super’s face.

Before Lance could even blink, he found himself impaled to the wall behind him in the left shoulder. He gasped at the sudden sting of pain, distracting him entirely when somebody pulled off his goggles. The next thing he knew, he was staring into steely blue-grey eyes, lit up by vigour and flames, and with the hood down, Lance could see the twist of his scowl so much more easily.

Then Red Lion was suddenly recoiling as though he had burnt himself—as though Blue Shot had burnt him—pulling his hand away and towards his chest, and then Lance realised why. He would recognise that mullet anywhere.

And Keith? The scowl disappeared entirely, replaced by… Lance didn’t know what. Betrayal? Fear? Lance couldn’t say. He watched Keith averted his gaze, guilt and shame and hurt stirring in his stormy eyes, as Lance’s blood dripped from the silver blade of the katana, crashing onto the ground
like rain drops. Several beads of blood slid down the length of the blade, coating the hilt. The sky rumbled over their heads, but Lance held onto Keith’s gaze despite the burning in his shoulder. Keith’s chapped lips parted, hesitated, and when he spoke, his voice cracked, sounding raspy and hoarse, “Lance?”

Lance cracked a wry grin and nearly laughed because, of course, Keith of all people would be Red Lion. Of course, the world had some way of fucking things up for him. Just when he was considering an actual relationship with him, of course, he was actually one of the people whom he had resented for the past two years. Of course, when he wanted to be mad at Keith, all Lance wanted to do was kiss away Keith’s hurt. His own heart ached, and he could feel warmth building up behind his eyes, irritating the hell out of him.

He wondered if Keith had known all this time.

He wondered if Keith was trying to change him all this time.

He wondered if this was really happening now of all times.

Nevertheless, rather than accusing Keith of playing him for a fool, playing with his emotions, all of those times he had confused Lance as both Keith and Red Lion, Lance could only manage a shaky “Hey, Keith.”

A look of horror overcame Keith’s expression just as Lance’s ears picked up the sound of thundering footsteps then and there. Because Keith obviously hadn’t thought of pulling his sword out of Lance’s shoulder, Lance gripped the blade, ignoring the metal cutting through his gloves and into his hands, and yanked the sword out of his shoulder. He had to get away, use up the little time he had before Keith’s allies learnt of his identity, and stumbled out of the alley.

Keith, the bastard, finally reacted and reached out for Lance, grasping his wrist. There was a silent plea in his eyes, and Lance’s heart ached, knowing that he couldn’t stay and comfort him, kissing away the raindrops on his lashes and the tears that began to leak from his eyes. “Let me help—” Keith began. However, before he could say anything more, Lance yanked his wrist away, and because Keith’s palms were slick with blood—with Lance’s blood—warm and red and viscous—Lance slipped all too easily out of Keith’s hold.

“I’m sorry,” Lance whispered, turning his back to Keith.

He didn’t stop to check if Keith even heard him. He had to go, had to get out of there, had to escape, had to get back to base, before everything he’d done would have been for nothing. There were things more important than his happiness.

The sound of the rain drained out his footsteps, carrying away the blood on the ground into the sewers.
I honestly didn't mean to delay an update for like... two weeks? I'm currently in crunch time with some projects irl, so it's been busy for the past two weeks. I think I'm probably going to be busy for the next few weeks, too. (Just a heads up in case I disappear again.)

In the time I've been gone, there's also been another discourse, apparently? In this story in particular, since it is an alternate universe where most of the characters are aged up, most of the characters are consenting adults. The only characters who haven't really been aged up are Coran and Allura's parents, and the most important characters of the main and supporting cast who aren't adults are Pidge and Ana, who have been explicitly stated to be sixteen and fourteen respectively in previous chapters. As I wrote this story, I had Shiro and Allura's age as somewhere between 23-25.

In happier news, I found out that Lance's Instagram handle for his side account, where he posts only about Azura, was available! So... I took it for myself. Since I don't have a cat, I'll probably post story-related pics (mostly food/music, I guess) since I don't really know what to do with it, hahaha. If you want, you can follow me at my Instagram or my tumblr to get story-related updates.

Without further ado, here's chapter 6 (which happens to be slightly longer than usual to make up for the wait)! The song featured in this chapter is "Stand By Me" from Ben E. King.

God, his shoulder was killing him.

Was he going to bleed out? Was he going to die just like this? Of fucking course, he would die because of Keith like it was some kind of sick joke from above. Shit, if he was going to die, he at least wanted to apologise to his mother before they found his body in a dark alley with three guns and a shit ton of ammo and grenades, before they labelled him as a criminal, just so that she would know that, No, Mami, it wasn’t your fault... but it was too late for that, was it? He’d never get to see his mother again, never get to see his siblings or his aunt and uncle or little Alfonso or Louisa’s second kid.

They’d know him as a criminal. They’d know that the secret he’d been keeping was that he was involved in gang wars. They’d know that he wasn’t the good role model they had expected for Ana, for Alfonso; they’d know that he wasn’t the honest, charming son they had thought he was.

He’d be ruined.

He thought he was prepared to face the reality of that, but the hot tears pricking at the back of his eyes, leaking out and intermingling with the drops of rain, seemed to want to prove him otherwise. "Ten piedad de mí," he began to recite, swallowing his miserable sobs, barely recognising the plea that left his lips, "oh Dios, conforme a tu misericordia…"

"Sapphire, are you okay?" he heard Pidge asked him, desperation in her voice.
He clutched onto his shoulder, trying to stop the bleeding, but the blood dripped between his fingers, mixing with the rain. He wasn’t even sure at this point if his blood was flowing from his stab wound or from the cuts on his hand. Was he even applying enough pressure? It seemed as though the bleeding would never stop. God, it burned though. Absently, he hoped that he wasn’t leaving a trail for anyone to follow. Lance lowered his eyes to the ground briefly and sighed in relief when he saw that the fabric of his clothes managed to soak up the blood before it splattered all over the ground, at the very least. The rain, however, tried to wash away the blood, and the trail it was leaving behind was the last thing he needed.

God, he really hoped that nobody was following him. He hoped that it was dark enough that they couldn’t see the trail.


Pidge cursed. “How bad is it?”

“I got fucking stabbed by a samurai sword,” Lance answered. “How bad do you think that is? I don’t think it hit anything vital, but it fucking went through my shoulder. What the hell was he thinking—”

No, stop. Stop thinking about him. This isn’t the fucking time.

Yet all of Lance’s thoughts kept rushing back to him though—to his pretty eyes, to his cute smile, to his cute laugh, to his awkward behaviour—and fuck, how much of it was a lie? Lance swallowed a bitter laugh when he supposed the same thing could have been asked of him. He didn’t even give Keith his real name; hardly anyone but his family ever called him Leoncio though. When he replied to Pidge, however, he found himself choking on his tears. “Emerald, can someone come pick me up? I’m in an alley far away from quest location. You can find me, can’t you?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m zoning in on your position,” Pidge replied. “I already alerted GM, and he’s coming your way. Hang tight. We’ll get you out of there.”

“I don’t really have much of a choice, do I?” Lance grumbled, resting his good shoulder against the brick walls of the alley. He tried to level out his breathing, and he could hear Pidge trembling on the other end of the comm line. Her typing, usually a fast and furious pace, had become uneven and choppy. “Maybe you’re right,” Lance mumbled. “Maybe you and Gold were right, Pi—Emerald.”

He tried to stop, but his head kept rushing back to their last battle, then to every battle they’ve had. Red Lion—no, Keith—was fast, and he was sturdy, and he was strong, and he had powers. Lance had barely been able to keep up. Had he even been keeping up? Every single time Lance had faced off with him, Lance had only tried to out-smart him, tried to out-run him, and when all of that was moot, Lance had tried to reason with him, tried to find a way out. Could Lance even consider all of that being a match with Red—with Keith?

“I’m so fucking tired,” Lance whispered. It was too late to go back though. It was too late to have regrets. He came so far, and he went too far into the deep end. There was no turning back.

So what did that mean for them?

Was there even a them any more?

Lance shook his head, his hair clinging to his forehead and his cheeks, and tried to shake himself back to reality. Pidge had been silent for so long that it took him by surprise when she replied, “I would have believed that if you were anyone else.” She sighed. “We’ve been working together for a long time now, Sapphire, and you’ve always managed to prove us wrong—even if it made us
worried sick to our stomachs—every time you face off against an impossibility.

“With how the world is, we were led into thinking that if we were normal, if we weren’t Supers, we were powerless. We were forced to think, if it’s beyond our abilities, then we can’t help it; we’d let the Supers take care of it. But that’s not what the Blade of Marmora stands for; it took me a while to get it. Sometimes I forget because of how the world works, but when I work together with you, you remind me that we’re not helpless or useless or powerless. I don’t think Gold gets it, not yet anyway, but he’s not actually one of us.

“Gold doesn’t understand that the Blade exists precisely because there are some things that the Supers can’t do. The public expects too much from the Paladins and the Knights. They’re idolised and idealised. They stand for pretty concepts like justice and peace and righteousness. That’s not us, and honestly, it’ll probably never be us. We may not be heroes, but all of us are rebels and revolutionaries hungry for change. If something’s wrong, we fix it. We don’t salvage the remains and pray that it still works. We break it apart and put the world back together again for better or for worse because that’s how change works. That change begins with overthrowing the Galra. We are the Blade that severs the head from the rest of the snake. We fight and fight and fight to get what we want and to get what we need—even if it gets our hands dirty, even if we have to roll in mud and dirt and blood and sweat and tears.

“The Supers protect the world as it is. They keep innocent civilians safe. They’re bound by the Garrison, by the police, by the law, so how reliable are they really? We can’t even say for sure that authority hasn’t been corrupted either. On the other hand, the Blade is corrupted in the sense that we do what we have to. We’re built on the bodies of the fallen and the forgotten to achieve a means to an end. We sacrifice, we struggle, and we survive. We know where we come from and what we have to do.

“That’s why I’m going to need you to struggle more, Sapphire. You need to get through this, live, and survive. GM saw something in you when he took you in, and after all we’ve been through, I’m starting to see it, too.”

“I think that’s the most you’ve ever said to me,” Lance quipped as playfully as he could. His throat was dry and hoarse though, and it hurt to speak. Still, Pidge tried to cheer him up, and the least that Lance could do was try to return the favour. “Did you get that all on recording? I want to save it forever.”

“What a creep,” Pidge returned. “You’re going to become the modern scrap-booking grandpa at this rate.”

“Isn’t that what you do? Your stash of blackmail is practically a digital scrapbook of our most embarrassing moments,” Lance retorted, trying to keep his spirits up for the two of them. Someone had to be strong; Lance had to be strong. Every time he faltered, he thought of cool blue-grey eyes suddenly burning with rage and vigour and just as suddenly darkening with guilt and shame and hurt and betrayal. Lance nearly had to laugh at that last bit. Betrayal? Lance was the one who was fucking played with here. Lance had no clue that Keith was Red Lion or that Red Lion was Keith—whichever fucking way it was—but Keith knew.

All those lunch dates and coffee dates and dinner dates together? Those motorcycle rides home? Hell, when Red Lion fucking crashed into his apartment and when Keith came to repair the damn window, he knew the entire damn time who Lance was. He had him dancing around on strings like a marionette, feeling him out, trying to get him used to his alter ago—Super ego? Whatever. The point was that Lance trusted him with the knowledge that he wasn’t comfortable with all things Super. The possibility that Keith might have tried to “fix him” pissed him off to no end.
The guilt that Lance had lied to Keith hurt even worse.

Because every time he faltered, all that his mind’s eye could see were those cool blue-grey eyes that glowed with fondness and shyness, accompanying a smile just as affectionate, from an awkward young man who was entirely endearing.

“It’s proof that we existed,” Pidge replied. “It’s proof that we’re real and that we’ve done something together.”

“Of course you manage to romanticise blackmail.”

“I’m justifying it,” Pidge quipped. “There’s a difference.”

“I really want to know what dirt you’ve got on Hershey’s and Nestlé to have him wrapped around your fingers,” Lance admitted with a shit-eating grin, recalling how Rolo and Nyma served Pidge cream sodas free of charge every time she appeared at the nightclub. “Who even came up with those names?”

“You did,” Pidge answered shortly.

“Oh, yeah. I did.” Lance chuckled. “How much longer do I have to wait, Emerald?”

“ETA in ten minutes,” Pidge replied—more quietly this time. “Can you hang on?”

“Yeah, I’ll stick it out,” Lance assured her. He glanced towards the entrance of the alley and mentioned, “I hope they find me first though. I’m not in the mood for any other unexpected visitors.”

“Hey, Sapphire,” Pidge began shyly, “can you… can you sing? For me? I mean, just keep talking. Don’t close your eyes. Keep putting pressure on your wound, and… I don’t know. It… it feels awkward hearing you so quiet.”

Lance laughed. He never thought he would hear the day when Pidge didn’t want him to shut up.

“Sure thing, Emerald,” he replied. He winced when he pushed harder into the wound. His blood was warm, staining his fingers, and he didn’t know if the bleeding had ever stopped. He didn’t want to chance it, however. He sighed and could hear Pidge trembling on the other end of the line, trying to remain calm. Parting his lips, he tried to think of a song to sing to keep himself occupied, to keep his mind off his injury, but nothing came to mind except for the galaxies in Keith’s goddamn beautiful eyes.

“Are you lonesome tonight?” he barely managed.

“Do you miss me tonight?”

“Are you sorry we drifted apart?”

Lance choked on a breath, nearly sobbing, because that really was all he could think about—cool blue-grey eyes, violet in some lights, shimmering with conflicting emotions so muddied and heavy and thick that Lance couldn’t filter through them at all.

Breaking him out of his thoughts, Pidge whispered a shaky, “Lance…?”

“I’m here,” Lance replied. “I’m here.”

He choked on a breath, forcing it down his throat and into his lungs, and exerted more force onto his wounds, ignoring the stinging pain that tore through his shoulder. “You know,” he began, trying to
take both of their minds off his injuries, “when I was younger, I wanted to be a lot of things. I wanted to be a doctor to help people, to heal people, and then I wanted to be an astronaut because—come on, *space!* I wanted to be an ice cream man because there was an ice cream parlour my dad used to take us to, and that shit was delicious. It’s not there any more—what a shame. I wanted to be an actor because all the main characters in my dad’s favourite movies were just *so badass.* I wanted to play baseball because that was our thing, you know? Me, my dad, and Enrique. I was a better aim than I was at catching though—figures.

“Pidge, I really, really, *really* wanted to sing songs though. Because it’s fun. It’s always been fun. Singing is fun, playing instruments is fun, dancing is fun.”


Lance barked a laugh. “Just keep singing, just keep singing. Just keep singing, singing, singing,” Lance chimed. “What do we do? We sing, sing, sing.” He sighed once more in nostalgia. “I loved *Finding Nemo.* Shit, when *Finding Dory* came out, I took Ana to go see it with me and Hunk. I fucking bawled my eyes out towards the end. Ana kept making fun of me for days—devil child that girl is.”

Pidge laughed with him. “It’s because you’re too sensitive.”

He thought about the hurt in Keith’s eyes. “I guess I am,” Lance admitted.

“It’s not a bad thing though.”

“You think so?” Lance questioned. He didn’t know if Pidge heard the scepticism in his voice, but she replied in a tone much more fond than he had ever heard from her before.

“Yes, I think so,” Pidge answered. “You’re a good guy, and I hope you find a good match someday. You deserve the world, Lance, even if you’re a little gross.”

Lance could feel his heart flutter even when his stomach churned uncomfortably. He wondered what Keith thought of him now. Does it even matter any more? “Thanks, Pidge,” he managed.

“You love Disney movies too much though.”

“Oh, *Lilo and Stitch* is a masterpiece,” Lance protested, “and I will defend *Treasure Planet* until my dying breath.” Which may be soon, Lance reflected, but at least it’ll get the point across. “*Moana* is also a godsend.”

“It was okay.”

“You’re just okay, Pidgey!”

“Wow, nice one, Lance.”

Pidge kept distracting after all of that. She didn’t give him a chance to think back on Keith’s galaxy eyes or the wound in his shoulder or how long they had until the medic would arrive. Eventually, he saw a slick black car pull up to the curb though, and he braced himself for what was to come. He caught sight of Antok’s giant build first as the bodyguard marched into the alley with a purpose. When Lance greeted the bodyguard (“Hey, Cerberus.”), Pidge cut off their connection. She knew from past experience that it was better not to listen in once the managed to retrieve the Healer.

Antok hauled Lance up with his good arm, checking over the wound in his shoulder briefly, before
grunting. (Lance wasn’t entirely sure if it was a good grunt, meaning that he’ll live, or a bad grunt, meaning that his shoulder was completely fucked.) Aiding Lance to the black car, he all but threw Lance into the backseat, which was covered with clear plastic. Lance supposed that Kolivan didn’t want bloodstains and rainwater in his car, which was understandable.

Antok slipped into the passenger seat after making sure Lance was settled in the back, and Ulaz, a dark skinned man with a clean shaven head and dark, intelligent eyes, helped him sit upright. Ulaz pulled off the fabric of his vest and tore off part of his shirt to examine the wound more closely. Kolivan himself was seated in the driver’s seat, and he watched the entire ordeal through the rear view mirror. “Who got you?” the older man asked.

“Who else fights with a damn sword?” Lance snapped. “That hotheaded bastard has had his eyes on me since we first met.” He hissed when Ulaz began to disinfect the wound with the kit he had brought with him. Kolivan shifted gears and pulled onto the local road. Antok crossed his arms and looked out the windows, probably scouting for danger. The only sound between them was the radio noise from the police feed.

Kolivan took notice of his lack of goggles. “Does he know who you are?”

Lance bit his lower lip, unsure of how to answer.

“Reyes, I asked you a goddamn question: does he know who you are?”

Lance scowled. “He knows my face, okay? Whether he knows who I am is another question.”

“It’s not the time for poetry, brat,” Kolivan snapped. “Drop your other jobs—immediately. You work too close to Voltron Towers to begin with, and while at first it wasn’t a problem, now that Red Lion can recognise your face, it’s trouble we don’t need. You said Voltron staff came to your uncle’s restaurant? Drop that job, too. It’s another potential risk. He knows where you live because of your busted window, so hurry and move out. You can stay at one of the private rooms in the club for the time being. We use those to hide people anyway.” And now you’ve become one of them.

Usually, however, it was to hide people from the Galra. Nobody has ever been dumb enough to cross paths and get involved with Supers—nobody but Lance.

Lance clenched his jaw and nodded silently. Ulaz tutted at him and handed him a clean cloth without any further instructions; they both knew that Lance knew what it was for. Reluctantly, Lance bit into the cloth and braced himself for the oncoming discomfort. He squeezed his eyes shut when he noticed Ulaz’s hand glowing a faint purple and screamed into the cloth gagging him at the rippling pain in his shoulder.

They called him Ulaz the Healer. Nobody knew his last name—or if that was even his real name—or when he developed his powers or how he developed his powers. The only thing they knew was that Ulaz had came out of the Bronx with a hefty scholarship to go through university and medical school like some kind of genius in an uplifting, underdog movie.

Sure, he was still employed at whatever hospital he worked at, but because of his newfound status as a Super, most criminals and gangsters came to him for healing. His ability to expedite the rate of cell division, resulting in tissue and muscle reparation, became infamous among the underground scum who didn’t need hospital staff and authorities breathing down their necks for suspicious injuries. In a way, he became an underground “doctor,” so to speak because, if Lance remembered correctly, Ulaz said that he didn’t trust the Garrison, didn’t want to become a registered Super. Nobody needed a reason to find out why either because they already had similar suspicions anyway; there was a possibility that they couldn’t trust the police.
There were numerous theories behind why they haven’t made any headway into the Galra investigations, and the most popular conspiracy was that the MCPD had been bought by the Galra with their dirty blood money. After how much of the city had been corrupted, it wouldn’t come across as a surprise—not to people like Lance, Pidge, and the rest of the Blade.

As for the Garrison… there were unfavourable rumours circulating in the underground about them. They registered Supers so that they could collect information on them, and word had it that Supers were treated as instruments for law enforcement. If they weren’t actively working in the Voltron Alliance, then they would be kept under observation by the Garrison. It was an invasion of privacy, and it was because of this that Supers who didn’t want to become heroes or villains went into hiding, such as Ulaz.

If Ulaz had registered with the Garrison, then he would be forced to work for the Voltron Alliance if they found his ability useful. (And it was useful, incredibly useful.) Other than that, there would be nowhere else for him to go—unless he wanted to become a criminal. At least that meant he would be free to help whoever needed his aide.

Now he was an unregistered Super, practically illegal, hiding from the Garrison even though he was right under their noses.

At any rate, Ulaz was a wholly neutral party, or so he claimed. If it wasn’t for the fact that he could potentially save their asses, Ulaz would have been killed some time ago. Some paranoid fucks claimed that he knew too much dirt on one gang over the other, and other paranoid fucks claimed that he was aligned with another gang.

Ulaz was actually one of theirs, but nobody had to know that because he was a doctor—even if he conducted practices that might be determined as illegal by the law. Ulaz upheld his creed to take care of others, and that was what had attracted him to the Blade of Marmora and vice versa.

Ulaz had a particular ability. Normally, people couldn’t feel their cells dividing and multiplying as their bodies repaired themselves gradually over time, but because Ulaz can increase the rate of healing, Lance could feel everything he would have experienced over several weeks or several months in mere minutes. Needless to say, it fucking hurt.

Antok, the little shit, to drown out the sound of Lance’s screaming, changed the station to one with obnoxious rap music and upped the volume. Kolivan didn’t even flinch.

Once Ulaz was done healing both Lance’s shoulder and his hands, Lance was a sobbing mess, and all that was left of the stab wound and the lacerations were faint white scars. Soft-hearted to his core, Ulaz patted Lance’s good shoulder, waiting until the boy calmed, while Kolivan drove on. Antok lowered the volume of the radio.

Briefly, Lance was glad that Pidge had cut off their line of communication. She didn’t need a repeat incident of him screaming into her ears. Turning his palms upwards, Lance counted the faint, thin white scars that ran across the palms of his hands and his fingertips. He closed his eyes and turned them back so that they faced downwards, and he experimentally moved his fingers across imaginary black and white keys.

He thanked God for small mercies.

There was a slight ache in the joints of his fingers, but it would get better over time—or so he hoped. At least, he could still play.

Lance nearly cried once again. Instead, he wiped away the tear tracks with the back of his hand and
wiped away the mucus streaming from his nose with the fabric of his shirt sleeve. He was such an ugly crier. “Thanks, Ulaz,” he croaked, barely audible over the harsh rap grating his ears.

Ulaz placed a hand atop his head, and that was enough to send him into another fit of sobs. Ulaz’s hands were large—like his father's hands—and all he wanted to do in that moment was ask his dad where he could possibly go from here. “Take better care of your hands, kid,” Ulaz said quietly, offering a bit of sympathy for the kid. An overgrown, twenty year old kid who can handle a gun, Lance thought bitterly and miserably. Ulaz, however, couldn’t sense his self-depreciation and continued, “They’re made for a musician.”

Lance nearly laughed aloud at the irony. Kolivan had thought otherwise nearly a year ago when he had taught Lance how to pull the trigger of a gun.

That night, when he came home to pack up his shit, he got a call from Hunk that was mostly the bigger man crying and sobbing and bawling his eyes out. Pidge must have told him, Lance thought morosely. He couldn’t even find the energy to be pissed at the teenager. He tried his damndest to cheer up Hunk, but he was sure all of his words fell on deaf ears. He stuffed most of his clothes into his suitcases, left his food to be raided by a certain pigeon later on that day, and went into the bathroom to grab his toothbrush.

There were two of them. One blue, one red.

Lance opened his cabinet and grabbed all of his spares instead. Then he retreated into the living room and, through his tears, ushered Azura into a cat carrier before heading to the club.

Whether Kolivan liked it or not, he’d be back since he didn’t fucking read the terms and conditions of his contract like a good apple. For all he knew, there could be a breach of contract for cancelling his lease, and Lance didn't know if he could afford to pay off the penalties or the rest of his rent on his contract all at once. Nevertheless, even if he could, he wouldn't be able to search for a new apartment so quickly either. He would just have to be careful when he came back to maintain the apartment. Hopefully, Mr. Lin doesn’t question anything, and hopefully, nobody visited him. Not his sisters, not his brother, not Gabriel, not Hunk, and certainly not Keith.

[12:13 PM]

*Katie: Can you pick me up after school?*

*Katie: I want to get Five Guys.*

*Lance: Sure thing. You get out of class at 3?*

*Katie: Yeah. Olkari Academy.*

*Lance: Gotcha. See you then.*

*Katie: Later.*

[3:07 PM]

*Lance: I’m over at the park. Meet me there?*

*Katie: Sure.*
Seated at a wooden bench, Lance scrolled through his newest collection of photos he had taken of Azura on his phone. Today, the kitten was wearing a simple collar that looked like a pearl necklace with her usual crown-shaped pet tag attached front and centre. She lounged in his lap, batting at her leash, before Lance took to snapping all new images of her antics with a soft smile on his lips.

“You have it so good, beautiful,” Lance commented as he switched to his camera and began snapping away. “You don’t have to worry about anything in life as long as I provide for you, right?”

“Lance!”

Lance lifted his head and grinned at Pidge, waving her over. He exited the camera application and locked his phone, stowing it away in his satchel. Pidge was dressed in the uniform required by her school, a black and dark green pleated skirt and a plain white polo, and her hair was pulled into a high ponytail using the green lace scrunchie Lance had bought for her. She carried her backpack on her back, holding onto the straps firmly. She glanced at Azura and commented, “I don’t think they let in cats, Lance.”

Lance shrugged. “You’ll have to order for me then,” he replied. He plucked himself off the bench and had Pidge lead the way to the closest Five Guys. He fished for his wallet in his bag and pulled out a twenty dollar bill. “Order whatever you want, and I’ll have the bacon cheeseburger. We can share the fries. Is that cool?”

“Yeah, that’s cool,” Pidge replied, accepting the bill. “I’ll pay you back.”

“No need,” Lance assured her with a shit-eating grin of his own. “I mean, you keep me out of trouble enough times, so it’s the least I could do for you.”

Pidge frowned a bit at that, but she didn’t say anything in particular in response. She pushed open the door, and Lance lingered outside with Azura planted on his right shoulder. He smiled amicably at a little girl with curled pigtails who had been trying to get her mother’s attention, eagerly pointing at Azura, as they were approaching Lance.

“Would you like to pet her?” he asked, though he made eye contact with the mother just to check it was okay with her.

“Yes!” the little girl squealed, pulling on her mother’s hand.

“Only for just a little bit,” the mother said with a gentle smile.

“Hi!” the little girl chirped, pigtails bouncing as she rocked back and forth on her balls of her feet. “My name’s Clara!”

“Hi, Clara!” Lance chirped. “My name’s Lance, and this is Azura.” He gingerly plucked Azura off his shoulder and cradled her in his arms like a baby. Well, she was his precious little baby.

“She’s very pretty,” Clara chimed.

“Yes, she is, but she can also get a little grumpy sometimes if you touch her belly,” Lance warned. “She only lets me do that, but if you become best friends with her, I’m sure she’ll let you pet her belly one day, too!”

“Okay!” Clara sang. Despite her exuberance, she reached out rather shyly, but the moment her fingers stroked the spot between Azura’s ears, her eyes widened with even more enthusiasm.

That was how Pidge had found him a couple of minutes later. Lance held Azura in his arms as Clara
rattled off a hundred miles per hour with question after question about his beautiful kitten much to her mother’s exasperation. The mother managed to pull her daughter away, giving Lance an apologetic smile, but Lance merely grinned back to assure her that all was well.

“What was that?” Pidge asked as she approached him with paper bags of food in her arms.

“Little girls love kittens,” Lance replied. “Anyway, do you want to head back to the park and eat there?”

“Sure,” Pidge answered, falling into step with the young man. “How’s your shoulder?”

“It’s better now,” Lance told her. “It doesn’t hurt as much. It aches a little, but it’s one of those things that gets better with time, you know?”

“Right…” Pidge responded hesitantly. “So… Keith?”

Ah, Lance figured it would come to this eventually. Even if Lance tried not to think about him, Pidge certainly wasn’t trying to avoid the Paladin. After all, she had overheard most of the discourse, if not all of it. She hadn’t gotten around to confronting him last night simply because there was no time, but now that Lance was supposed to be hiding, they had time to talk about this—even if Lance didn’t want to.

“What about Keith?”

“He’s… you know,” Pidge mumbled.

“Yeah, he is,” Lance grumbled. He sighed again. “I guess it wasn’t meant to be then.”

Pidge pursed her lips. “I know it contradicts what I’ve been saying before… before we found out, but… it might be better if you avoided him. He’s dangerous to your safety, Lance.”

“Yeah, I know…” Lance replied. He offered her a grin, trying to make it appear as confident as he can. “Thanks for worrying, Pidge. Everything’s going to be all right.”

They ate at the park in contemplative silence before Pidge had to leave to do her homework. With nowhere else to go, Lance stayed there—not wanting to return to the club, unable to return to his own apartment, unable to seek out Hunk—and with nothing to do… until his phone started ringing.

Lance stole a quick glimpse at the caller ID before sighing and swiping to answer the call,

“¿Qué bola, hermano?”

A string of Spanish curses assaulted his ear—nothing new, really, coming from Enrique. Then, “Jesus fucking Christ, Lance, is everything okay? You’re not having trouble by yourself or something? Anything?”

“I’m fine, Enrique, really.” Lance insisted as he watched Azura chase after a butterfly, the leash straining when she ventured too far. Eventually, she paced over to him and curled right up into his lap. “I just had a problem with my neighbours and decided to leave temporarily. I’m staying at my workplace for the moment. It’s soundproof, and my boss gave me a lock and key. It’s an even smaller apartment, basically.”

Enrique sighed heavily into the phone, and Lance nearly cringed from the sheer volume of disappointment forced directly into his ears through his earbuds. “If it’s just a problem with your neighbours, then why did you have to leave Tío Raymón’s restaurant?” he asked. “Mami knows, by
Lance flinched. Of course she knew. Tío Raymón couldn’t keep everything from her. “That’s… temporary,” Lance insisted. He knew that he didn’t sound very convincing though. “Is she mad?”

“Not really,” Enrique replied. “She’s more confused. I think all of us are, really. Ever since you’ve moved out, we don’t know what you’re doing, and that worries her—that worries all of us.”

_CLANK!_

Lance lifted his head at the sound of ringing metal and grinned to himself as he watched a baseball fly pretty damn far for a group of kids playing a bit of sandlot baseball. How nostalgic, he mused to himself. Lance hadn’t played in what seemed like ages.

It seemed as though his older brother must have heard the sound of a bat hitting a fast pitch as well because soon he was asking, “Where are you?”

“I’m at a park, figuring out the rest of my life,” Lance answered. He was surprised himself at how much of that was the actual truth.

His phone vibrated with yet another message, and Lance pulled down on the notification. He caught sight of a single name—_Keith_—and swiped the notification away from his sight. Not for the first time, he brought up his contact list, scrolled all the way down to where Keith’s information was, and hesitated.

He tried deleting him.

He tried blocking him.

He tried, but Lance for the life of him couldn’t figure out why he couldn’t do it.

“How poetic.” Enrique paused. “You remember how to play?”

“Of course I do,” Lance protested indignantly. “Dad taught me. How could I forget?”

Enrique chuckled. “I was thinking of teaching Alfonso when he’s old enough. Louisa’s dad said that he would love to join. Maybe I’ll rope Tío Raymón and Gabe into it, too, but that’s still not enough players,” Enrique mused. “I need… like two or three more for a full team. Do you think Hunk would be up for it? I haven’t seen the big guy since your high school graduation. You still in touch?”

“Wait, wait, wait, hold up—are you counting me?” Lance all but shrieked. God, it was just like his brother to include him without even telling him. He always got voluntold for chores when Lance was younger. Enrique would always try to push dish-washing duties onto him because he was too busy with his baseball team back when he was in high school. Having an older brother sucked ass—except if that older brother was Lance because Ana totally thought that he was a great big brother. (She didn’t. Ana always called him a loser.)

“Of course I’m counting you, stupid,” Enrique replied light-heartedly. “You’ve got a good arm and got aim. You’re the best pitcher I know aside from the Lance Moretti.”

Lance scoffed, muttering “Flatterer,” and then remarked, “You still got his ball?”

“The one we got signed? The one from the very first baseball game we’ve ever been to? The one where we saw the Monstro City Monsters in person for the first time? Of course I do! It’s encased in
a glass cabinet where we’re going to have all of Alfonso’s trophies and plaques and ribbons and other shit we’d be proud of.”

“Like the drawing of scribbles he did last week?” Lance teased.

“It’s a work of art, okay? It’s like—ah, what do those pretentious fucks call them? Abstract art?” Enrique answered as a matter of factly.

“Your kid doesn’t even know what abstract art is!”

“Does anyone really? Anyway, doesn’t matter. We’re talking about baseball. You still talk to Hunk or what?” Enrique asked, bringing them all the way back to their original topic.

“Of course we’re still in touch,” Lance answered, mildly offended. Hell, Hunk calls every day now just to make sure that Lance was still among the living and breathing. The first phone call from the night of the Incident™ still haunts him.

“Lance, are you okay?” Hunk had asked.

“Yes, Hunk, I’m fine,” Lance had assured him. The rest of the three hours was spent listening to him cry and sob and wail while intermittently reassuring him that Lance was still there, that Lance was still connected, and eventually, Hunk fell asleep crying. Lance hated it. Lance hated that Hunk had to get involved. Lance hated that he was the reason Hunk was crying. Moreover, Lance just hated that he was such a terrible friend.

“He doesn’t drop by to visit you guys any more because I don’t live there. I mean, he’s my friend,” Lance said before Enrique got suspicious of his silence. Lance talked more; normally, Lance would talk more. Normal. He had to pretend everything was normal. For his family’s sake.

“You should bring him over for dinner,” Enrique persisted. “Mami wants you to come home if you’re having trouble with the apartment, you know?”

“I’ll think about it,” Lance replied. He changed the topic back before it could derail again—and this time into especially unwanted territory. “Gabe’s shit at batting, and he can barely catch the ball,” Lance commented. He navigated his phone, putting the call in the background, and pulled up his Instagram application. Switching out of his personal account, he logged into mi.cielo.azura and tapped on the upload icon at the bottom of the screen. Thumbing through his photo gallery, he settled on a photo of Azura playing in the flower fields earlier. As he browsed through the filters, Lance questioned his older brother, “Remember when we took him out to the batting cages with Ana while Este and Mami were getting their nails done?”

“He’s decent at fielding though,” Enrique protested. “If we stick him in the left field, we won’t have to worry about much about him having to catch balls often. I’m already formulating my dream team here, so work with me. You’d be the pitcher, of course. I’ll be the catcher since everyone is too afraid of your damn fast balls. Hunk can do centre field.”

“You know that leaves the old man as short stop, right field, or one of the basemen?” Lance teased, adjusting the effects of one particular filter that made it look like Azura was prancing through a dream. “You wanna make your father-in-law run like mad?”

“He’s probably more fit than you,” Enrique teased.
Lance doubted that, but of course, Enrique was under the impression that Lance hadn’t exercised since high school graduation—being a starving artist and all. “Sounds fun though,” Lance admitted. It had been at least two years since he last played. His father and uncle would rope all of them into a game—family bonding, they called it—on a good day when everyone was free.

Lance finalised his latest post before uploading it for his followers to see—another masterpiece in his honest opinion. Then he closed Instagram and decided to take a couple of pictures of Azura just like this, curled up in his lap with petals in her glossy white coat, instead. “Where are you going to get the other guys?” Lance asked.

“Maybe from work,” Enrique answered. “Hunk shouldn’t sweat it if he can’t help out.”

“I can’t believe you already enlisted my best friend without telling either of us,” Lance droned. That was a lie. He could totally believe it; he’d had more or less twenty years of experience living with his brother to back that up. Lance leaned back against the grassy hill, and Azura climbed up, resting on his chest, and stared at him with her big blue eyes. Lance smiled back at her and began to rub between her ears idly. His smile only grew as the sound of her purrs reached his ears. “How’s the family?” Lance asked, nostalgia consuming him entirely. “Alfonso just learnt how to run, but you’re already making him learn how to catch and throw balls?”

“It’s a work in progress,” Enrique replied. “Louisa’s getting a little crankier—mood swings and all. Mami keeps telling her that she ought to take maternity leave soon, but Louisa’s waiting until she hits the second trimester.”

Lance hummed contently, causing Azura to tilt her head at him with big eyes of curiosity. “I miss you guys,” he said quietly.

“We miss you, too, you moron,” Enrique grunted. “Come back home sometime.”

“You know what,” Lance thought aloud, “maybe I will.”

Because, right now, fuck Kolivan, fuck the Blade of Marmora, fuck the Voltron Alliance, fuck the Galra. Lance was homesick, and he wanted to go home for a day.

One day became two which became three and then five and then an entire week. If he was staying low anyway, if he wasn’t taking any missions as “Blue Shot,” then there was no harm, was there? After all, Keith or Red Lion or whoever the fuck he is only knew Lance, so he allowed himself to be Leoncio for a few days.

At least it made his mother happy, and, honestly, it made him a little happy, too.

It made him wonder if Keith might have been right about visiting his family and trying to make amends, but he never gave it more than a few seconds’ thought. He didn’t want to think about Keith. He wanted to forget about Keith. He wanted everything to be some sick, perverse dream or a long, languid nightmare because then it meant that he could have woken up to some kind of alternate reality where Keith and Red Lion weren’t the same person.

But no, that wasn’t how it worked.

“You’re taking up too much space on the couch, gordo,” Ana whined as she dropped her school bag onto the floor and then hopped on top of his legs. She pulled out her phone and tapped away at the screen. Immediately, some Korean boy band started playing from her speakers, and Lance rolled his eyes so hard he gave himself whiplash. Still, he didn’t bother moving. Azura was curled up on his chest, and if Ana thought that he was going to move his cat just for his baby sister’s comfort, she had
another thing coming. Lance wiggled his legs underneath her ass and broke free. Rather than plopping his legs onto her lap, he shoved his feet unceremoniously in front of her face. She shrieked in disgust and slapped his feet away, landing them onto her lap. Huffing indignantly, she scowled at Lance and grumbled, “You’re so gross.”

“You’re so gross,” Lance retorted snidely.

“Aren’t you supposed to be twenty?”

“I am forever young,” Lance quipped.

“Or dumb,” Ana remarked dryly.

“Can’t you two get along for two seconds?” their mother snapped all the way from the kitchen, where she was feeding Alfonso. Considering how often Lance had been visiting though, they could easily tell that she was more amused than aggravated, and Lance couldn’t blame her. The way Lance and Ana bickered was nostalgic—like the time he was twelve and she was six and they were far too invested in wrestling for the TV remote.

Nevertheless, ever since he had returned to visit for dinner, she had been smiling more, but that didn’t mean she didn’t hurt every time they had a discourse, every time Lance shut her out, every time Lance tried to keep his secrets.

(“Leoncio, what happened to your hands?”

“Nothing, Mami, don’t worry about it. It was just an accident in the kitchen.”

“What would drive you to hold a knife by the blade?”

“Well, I’m telling you it was an accident! Everything’s okay now!”

“Why are you lying? Why are you always lying to me? I didn’t raise you to be like this! Do you not trust me?”

“Mami, why don’t you trust me?”

“…Leoncio, why are you behaving like this?”)

They’ve definitely said things they didn’t mean, but Lance hasn’t left her alone to stew in her disappointment by herself. Instead, they sat together quietly licking their fresh wounds that still stung with hurt. A part of Lance hated that they both knew that Lance wouldn’t stick around for long after this, after… after the mess with Red Lion—with Keith—settled down.

God, he couldn’t even imagine her reaction if he got arrested though.

It hasn’t happened yet, but Lance knew it was well within Keith’s power to arrest him for trespassing and interfering in federal investigations. Keith knew his identity, where he lived, where he had worked, and because Keith knew where he had worked, Keith knew who his uncle was. Any second now, the phone could ring, or there could be somebody knocking on the door asking for him.

Kolivan would kill him, but it didn’t matter because, right now, his mami was smiling. Who knew how long he had until he could see his family again? Until he could see them smile again? Who knew, on the chance that Lance really did get arrested, if they would ever smile again? He’d be a colossal disappointment by then.
“We are getting along, Mami!” Lance protested. He nudged Ana with his foot. “Isn’t that right, hermanita?”

“Uh-huh!” Ana agreed.

“See?”

They didn’t hear a response, so Lance guessed that Mami had gone back to feeding Alfonso. Louisa, well into her fifth month of pregnancy, burst into the living room dressed in her nurse’s scrubs. She tucked a letter into her handbag and said, “I’m going to head off to work now.” She narrowed her eyes at the two of them and pointed with her finger between the two siblings. “You two play nice now!” she warned teasingly.

“We’re always nice,” Lance protested. “Isn’t that right, hermanita?”

“Uh-huh,” Ana agreed.

“See?”

Louisa laughed and waved goodbye to the two of them, disappearing into the kitchen. “I’ll see you later! Bye!”

“Bye, Louisa!” Lance and Ana called after their sister-in-law.

“Stop copying me!” Ana groaned.

“You stop copying me!” Lance griped.

“If you two have enough time to argue, then go set up the table!”

“Sí, Mami!” they sang.

Eventually, Estefania and Gabriel’s anniversary arrived in the blink of an eye. This year, it fell on a Sunday, which was perfect. Estefania worked six days a week at a beauty salon, and Sunday was her day off. It was also Lance’s night off from the nightclub, so he could be their personal piano man for the entire day if Gabriel wanted. (Fortunately, it was only for the couple of hours they would be at the restaurant though.)

The Jazz Cat was a fairly classy restaurant. The floors were tiled with light grey slates, but the walls were painted in warm, rich earthy tones of soft browns and creams. Lanterns hung overhead, dimly lighting the restaurant with soft yellow lights, while the stage was illuminated by spotlights of various hues of reds, purples, and blues. Heavy burgundy curtains were pulled away from the stage, showcasing the double bass, the upright piano, and the drum kit in the back, and all of the tables and seats were turned to face the stage.

Much to Lance’s relief, it wasn’t anywhere near as high end as The Witch’s Cauldron, and there wasn’t really a dress code. (It was certainly pricey in Lance’s opinion though.) Gabriel had explained to Lance that they really only dined there once or twice a year for special occasions—like their anniversary. It had become something of a tradition, which was why he had wanted to propose to Estefania there.

Lance could see why though. The Jazz Cat had a bit of a warm, welcoming ambiance that invited you to relax, dine, and enjoy the show.

So Lance had arrived at exactly 6:30 on the dot, dressed in soft blue button shirt with the sleeves
rolled up to his elbows underneath a black pinstriped waistcoat, a pair of light grey trousers tucked into polished black boots, his silver, off-brand wristwatch fastened around his left wrist, and a pair of formal gloves to hide the scars on his hands. He had set a grey fedora atop his head to hide his face from Estefania until the moment of the big reveal.

He was ushered on stage at exactly seven o’clock, switching positions with the previous pianist at the upright piano. First, Lance adjusted the seat before positioning his hands and trying to make himself comfortable before he played. Once he was ready, Lance gave a brusque nod to the other musicians—a jazz band with the same name as the restaurant (The Jazz Cats)—before he glanced at the nearby table, where Gabriel and Estefania were already more than halfway done with their meals. He turned back to his accompanists and mouthed down a countdown before he struck the first chords to “Stand by Me” by Ben E. King together with the steady plucked strings of bass and the light clap of percussions.

As according to plan, he stalled for as long as possible, the other musicians following his lead, so that Gabriel could finally pop the question. The moment he heard the resounding “Yes!” from his older sister, Lance leaned into the microphone and sang,

“When the night has come
And the land is dark
And the moon is the only light we’ll see,
No, I won’t be afraid
Oh, I won’t be afraid
Just as long as you stand, stand by me…”

He heard Estefania gasp just before the other musicians joined him for the chorus, and Lance didn’t bother suppressing his smile. He beamed at her from underneath the brim of his fedora and carried on singing his sister’s song—or, rather, her and Gabriel’s song, their song. The violin sang, the bass and cello hummed, the drums clapped, and Lance himself continued to croon the lyrics, his fingers dancing along the ebony and ivory keys.

If only life could be this simple, this sweet, where all he had to do was play piano and people would be happy to hear him play.

Of course, life was never that easy.

“Lance, is that you?”

Lance forced a smile onto his lips as he met with Allura. Behind her, he could see Shiro seated at a table, waving at him courteously. He wondered if they both knew. Keith was their friend, so why wouldn’t he tell them? Do they even know Keith’s other identity? Were they also Supers? Unable to judge how much he knew about them was a goddamn lie, Lance merely waved back to the older man and asked Allura pleasantly, “On a date?”

Allura flushed daintily and replied, “Why, yes, we are. I wasn’t expecting to see you here though. Did you get a new job here? We heard from Hunk that you weren’t working at the restaurant for now. Is everything all right?”

“I’m only working here tonight,” Lance replied. “I wanted to devote my time to being a musician, so I asked my uncle for some time off.” Maybe because it was his dream once upon a time upon a time that the lie had fallen from his lips so easily.

Allura seemed to believe him and smiled widely. “That was really sweet—what you just did for that couple. I wish my proposal would be as sweet,” she mused. She glanced back at Shiro and rolled her
eyes. “Unfortunately, Shiro might be just as slow to propose as he was to ask me out on our first date. I might have to propose to him myself.” She and Lance both shared a laugh.

“You know, my mother has become a huge fan of yours,” she said. Lance felt a bit of warmth—touched, really—that stemmed from the sentiment alone. “Are you thinking about going back to study music? She really would love to sponsor you. She has an eye for scouting talents, you know?”

“That’s awfully generous, but… I couldn’t possibly accept,” Lance protested meekly. For more reasons than one, he thought to himself. Not only was he actively trying to avoid the Voltron Alliance and everything associated with it, but he wasn’t particularly anything special. He wasn’t as well-trained or as skilled as other pianists who’ve been taught since they were six! Sometimes even younger! Anyway, he was a dime a dozen in a crowd of aspiring musicians, but unlike others, he simply didn’t have the time. Before he knew it, Kolivan would call him again, ring him up, with another campaign at the ready. This situation was only temporary. Being reunited with his family was only temporary. Before he knew it, Lance would be thrown back into solitude.

There wouldn’t be a Keith around this time.

No, stop. Don’t think about him. Lance had been doing so well up to this point. He couldn’t think about Keith. He couldn’t go back to simpler times. Keith was from a completely different world. There was no way they could go back to normal. There was never a “normal” to begin with anyway.

Lance’s attention snapped back to Allura when he noticed that her smile faltered somewhat. Allura reached into her clutch to bring out a business card. “Well,” she said, “if you ever change your mind, don’t hesitate to contact me.”

Wearily and wordlessly, Lance accepted it, flipping it between his fingers, before sticking it into the breast pocket of his waistcoat. He watched as Allura returned to her table with Shiro, and he forced himself to turn away. He stepped down from the stage, tagging the other pianist back in, and made his way to congratulate the happy couple. Smiling and laughing and joking whenever it was his cue, Lance kept himself busy with his sister and his new brother-in-law before leaving them to the rest of their dinner date, where Estefania was too busy admiring her pretty ring.

For Lance, on the other hand, the rest of the night he couldn’t help but remember singing Elvis ballads, transitioning to soft jazz. He couldn’t help but remember red lips, red nails, red fury, a red coat, and red blood dripping onto the floor of a dark alley, mixing with rainfall that tried so desperately to wash his blood away.

Forget him, Lance persisted. Stop thinking about him.

He had never hated the colour red so much in his life.

---

[Sunday – 2:41 AM]

Keith: Are you okay?

Keith: Lance, I’m sorry.

Keith: Please answer my calls. I just want to know if you’re all right.

Keith: I didn’t mean to hurt you.

[Monday – 12:01 PM]
Keith: Lance, please, I just want to know if you’re alive.

Keith: I won’t hurt you

Keith: Not again

Keith: Please pick up.

[Tuesday – 12:18 AM]

Keith: Lance?

Keith: Are you mad at me?

Keith: Sorry, that was a stupid question.

[Wednesday – 3:23 PM]

Keith: I have your stuff.

Keith: Do you want it back?

Keith: I'll just… hold onto it, I guess.

[Thursday – 2:53 AM]

Keith: Did you get home okay?

Keith: I mean, I know that you can handle yourself

Keith: but that’s still a pretty dangerous part of town

Keith: Do you even still work there any more?

[Friday – 10:48 AM]

Keith: I haven’t told anyone. I swear.

Keith: Lance, trust me.

Keith: Please.

[Yesterday – 12:13 PM]

Keith: It feels weird not to see you.

Keith: Even Hunk doesn’t know where you’ve been.

Keith: Can we talk?

Keith: I really hope you didn’t block this number.

“Hey, Keith, I’m back,” Shiro announced the moment he opened the front door. He kicked off his shoes at the entrance and locked the door before removing his coat. Shiro all but groaned when he noticed that Keith hadn’t left his blanket burrito on the couch during the time that Shiro had been out. In fact, he settled Keith with such an unnerving stare that Keith was forced to pull his eyes away
from the TV and meet Shiro’s gaze of complete and utter disappointment.

“Did you even eat anything?” Shiro asked with a sigh.

He held out the plastic white bag with popcorn chicken from the local boba joint that Keith begrudgingly accepted. The chicken smelt damn good, and only then did his hunger kick in. He set down an untouched almond milk tea with a straw still in its wrapper, and Keith wondered if Shiro knew whether or not that particular boba shop actually used almond milk. After an unfortunate incident last year, where Keith was rendered useless in the middle of battle due to a stomachache, it was brought to his attention that some boba places used creamer and syrup to flavour the drinks while others used non-dairy products and powder, whichever was cheaper and better for business.

Even though Keith couldn’t handle creamer or milk of any kind (minus the lactose-free variety), that didn’t stop him from drinking his milk tea. He’d take his chances, so he didn’t breathe a single word about asking whether or not it was non-dairy to Shiro. If the older man knew, he’d either take away his milk tea or make Keith take a Lactaid caplet, and Keith was too lazy to drag himself to the kitchen cabinet where the medicines and vitamins were. Plus, he hated the taste of the caplet. It would only ruin the taste of his sweet, sweet milk tea, and Keith had been wanting something sweet for a while—mostly to dilute the bitterness that had been sitting contently at the bottom of his gut and weighing him and his spirits down.

“Here’s some comfort food,” Shiro explained.

“What’s the spice level for the popcorn chicken?” Keith asked as he took one of the two skewers from the bag. He ate it anyway, satisfied with the slight burn against his tongue.

“Spicy,” Shiro answered shortly. “What are you even moping about anyway?”

“I’m not moping,” Keith protested.

“Moping, sulking, brooding, same difference,” Shiro quipped, dropping onto the couch cushion next to Keith. He narrowed his eyes at the TV screen, trying to make out the grainy image on the screen, and asked, “What are you even watching? Is this another one of your conspiracy documentaries?”

“Cryptids,” Keith answered. He stuck out an arm from the blanket burrito and reached for the almond milk tea and the straw. He pulled the straw from the wrapper and poke it into the lid, taking a sip and savouring the semi-sweetness of his drink. “If Supers exist, then why can’t cryptids?”

“Do lizard men and stone golems count?” Shiro asked dryly. “Because we’ve already seen plenty strange things, Keith.”

“That’s different, Shiro,” Keith argued, setting down his drink and returning to munching on his chicken. Taking the skewer, he lined it up with as many pieces of chicken as possible before popping them into his mouth one by one.

“Sure, it is. Are you going to tell me aliens are real now?”

“Aliens are real,” Keith mumbled while chewing obnoxiously. He swallowed his chicken and then said, “Your girlfriend is one.”

“My girlfriend is a mind-reader,” Shiro countered. “Not an alien.”

“Excuse you, but aliens can be pretty capable of reading minds,” Keith returned, trying to win the last word. “Some aliens are mind-readers. You’re dating a mind-reader; therefore, there’s a chance that you’re dating an alien. Considering how eccentric she can be, I would say that the likelihood she is
an alien is extremely high. Accept it.”

“That’s because of her upbringing. She came from a wealthy family and sheltered background, and she got her powers from her parents. President Alfor is a mind-reader, too, and his wife is an empath,” Shiro protested.

“It’s a whole family of aliens. Coran is probably one, too.”

The older man sighed and gave up on reasoning with Keith because now the hothead was just being ridiculous. He rubbed his temples and, mustering all the patience he could afford, asked, “Are you not going to talk about your problems?”

Keith set the bag of popcorn chicken back onto the coffee table, feeling the appetite leave him, and retracted his hands inside the blanket burrito. He pursed his lips, sealing his secrets tightly shut, and clenched his fists underneath his covers. He could still feel it—the coldness of the rain, the warmth of Lance’s blood—and managed, “There are no problems, Shiro. You don’t have a problem; I don’t have a problem. What problem?”

“Is it because Lance hasn’t been joining us for lunch over the weekend recently?” Shiro asked regardless of Keith’s response. “Hunk said that he got a new job that demanded all of his time, so he had to drop his job at the music shop and the restaurant. You know that, right?”

Of course Keith knew that, but he also knew so much more. Keith wondered how much Hunk had known, if Hunk knew anything at all. Hunk had known Lance since high school, after all, and they were best friends. Maybe they didn’t keep secrets from each other…but knowing Lance—if Keith had really known him at all—the brunet tended to keep secrets, big secrets, from the people he loves because he wanted their approval. Keith… didn’t know how he felt about the entire thing. His heart ached thinking about the possibility of Hunk knowing Lance’s secret, but the discomfort grew stronger still thinking about the chance that Lance was shouldering this secret all on his own.

He just wanted Lance to trust him, but now he found that he, just as badly, wanted to trust Lance.

Still, he couldn’t tell Shiro any of that even though Keith knew that he should have. They’ve been searching for Blue Shot for nearly two months now. Keith was obligated, as a Paladin, to report him to President Alfor and to Coran, yet he couldn’t even breathe a single word about Lance to anyone.

Instead, he let them swab his katana clean of Lance’s blood. He let them conduct tests, let them conclude that there were no perfect matches in their databases (because how could there be when Lance’s DNA profile wasn’t even in the national database?), let them assume that the sample may have been contaminated by the rainwater and the dirt, let them assume that he couldn’t have seen Blue Shot’s face clearly in the dark, in the rain.

He was only buying time for Lance before he was caught. They had one too many encounters to be considered a coincidence now.

He didn’t know what his mother saw in him. He didn’t know what Shiro saw in him. He didn’t know what Asako-obasan saw in him. Keith was already turning out to be a failure of a Paladin. He was associating with a criminal, and he was aiding him, too. Some hero Keith was.

“Fine,” Shiro acquiesced after Keith remained silent, but just as Keith thought he would drop the subject, Shiro continued on, “then I’m just going to talk.” Keith all but groaned. “I saw Lance today.”

Keith immediately shot up and turned all of his attention to his roommate. “You saw Lance? When?
“Whoa there,” Shiro mused, whistling at the sudden display of eagerness. His eyes soon darkened somewhat at the implications behind Keith’s reaction though. “So you two haven’t been in touch? Has something happened?”

Keith pursed his lips and averted his eyes, watching the rest of his documentary with waning interest. “He’s… he’s been busy,” Keith managed, “with his new job.” He had a feeling that Shiro would see right through his lies if he made eye contact. They’ve always been like that. Shiro had known him for a long time, and by now, surely the older man has noticed all of his tells. For Lance’s sake, Keith would try to keep bluffing for as long as he could hold out.

Shiro hummed and commented, “I heard from Allura that he wanted to devote his time to music, kind of like the time he played at The Witch’s Cauldron I guess, but I hope he isn’t shutting you out just because he wants to focus on his music.”

Keith gulped, thinking that it was a little too late for that. At the mention of The Witch’s Cauldron, the raven haired young man shut his eyes. Nevertheless, Keith could still see, could still feel, Lance’s wrist slipping away from him. He could still hear Lance’s heartbroken apology, muffled by the sound of the rain. He could still feel Lance’s red, red blood against his fingers—warm and viscous—no matter how desperately he tried to scrub his hands clean. “He can’t help it,” Keith replied. “He… he has a lot of issues to deal with, Shiro. It’s not fair to blame him entirely.”

“You’re still pretty bummed out about it,” Shiro commented.

Keith avoided the subject and instead brought back his previously unanswered question, “So you said you saw Lance today?”

Shiro nodded. “He was playing piano at The Jazz Cat for a couple. The guy proposed,” Shiro explained. “Allura said that he was only scheduled to play that night only, so I don’t know if he’d be back to play again. I’m assuming the guy hired him to play for the night. Not to mention, it’s a pricey restaurant that you shouldn’t make a habit of eating there routinely hoping to see Lance. It’s doubtful Lance will play there again any time soon.”

Keith snorted. “Yet you take your rich girlfriend out to eat there,” Keith retorted.

“Every once in a while,” Shiro assured. “It’s not so much a habit as it is a nice outing for our three month anniversary.”

“I thought that was Thursday,” Keith remarked.

“We were busy Thursday,” Shiro quipped. “Remember? Some kid developed electricity manipulation powers like Sven and decided to cause a power outage instead? He lost everyone’s grades at the school he went to.”

Keith snorted. “That was lame,” he grumbled. “I don’t know why they had to call everyone out. The Knights could have handled it.”

Shiro snorted. “You were the same way when you were sixteen,” he remarked. “Remember when you got so pissed that you accidentally committed arson to your own house?”

“We don’t talk about high school,” Keith bit back.

“Anyway,” Shiro continued regardless of Keith’s comment, “that kid was just like you. He didn’t have control over his powers, and his emotions were also out of whack. It was a volatile situation.
Innocent people could have gotten hurt.”

“I only remember the paperwork that came after all of that shit,” Keith retorted. “My hand was cramping for hours doing the damage report for the reparations department.” His hands were already aching at the mere memory, and he twisted his wrists, flicking them, to ease the discomfort. “It was… it was some weird shit though. Didn’t his powers disappear after we arrested him? Can they do that?”

“They think it might have been dormant,” Shiro explained. “As far as we know, powers don’t just disappear. He probably awoke them in the spur of the moment—emotions going rampant and all. It’s nothing new. He’s going to be registered in the Garrison database, and then we’ll put him in observation to see if they act up again.”

Something about that seemed a little off to Keith, but he couldn’t say what exactly. Back-pedalling, Keith stole a glance at Shiro, whose brows furrowed the more his roommate studied the contents of the documentary, and asked, “How was he?”

“The kid?”

“Lance.”

“He looked fine,” Shiro answered. That was when Shiro chose to make eye contact with Keith, and the latter nearly flinched. “Are you sure everything’s okay with him though?”

“Why do you ask?” Keith replied.

Concern overwhelmed Shiro’s expression. “You look upset,” he explained. Standing up, Shiro shuffled towards the direction of the bedrooms and said, “Eat your food and then go to bed. You look like you need some sleep. Hopefully the caffeine in the tea doesn’t keep you up all night. In hindsight, it might have been a bad call on my part.”

Keith scoffed and retorted, “Popcorn chicken and boba is never a bad call. It’s better than the tiny portions of expensive, fancy food you bought your girlfriend tonight.”

“I knew I should have left you to starve if you’re gonna be bitter.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah!” Keith responded snappily. A grin still lingered on his lips though, and feeling a bit sappy, Keith couldn’t help but cry out for Shiro’s attention. “Shiro!”

“What, Keith!” Shiro replied all the way from the bathroom.

“Thanks!”

There was a pause where Keith was positive that Shiro was chuckling to himself. “It’s nothing, Keith! Don’t worry about it!” Shiro answered. The moment was short-lived, however, when their neighbour banged on the walls, telling them to “Shut up over there!”

Keith smiled to himself. Making up his mind—that he couldn’t bother Shiro with this nonsense, that he would get to the bottom of this case himself—Keith resolved to search for Lance tomorrow night on another one of his midnight patrols. He rearranged himself on the couch and spent the rest of the night finishing off his food and his documentary. Eventually, he crawled into his bed, and in typical Keith fashion, once his head hit the pillow, it was lights out.

Unfortunately, it was another night of fitful sleep.
Keith dreamt of Elvis ballads and soft jazz. He dreamt about making fun of the upper class snobs with Shiro in the shadows of the room while Allura was off mingling with high society, accompanying her parents. He dreamt about watching Lance play piano though he wasn’t close enough to see his fingers dance across the ivory and ebony keys.

In his dreams, Keith didn’t approach Lance until well after he concluded his performance. Keith couldn’t reach Lance; all he could do was watch as Lance was swallowed by a crowd of admirers, pulled away by Allura’s parents of all people. He tried pursuing him as Lance slipped away from the De Altea family and their company. He had questions, and he wanted answers. What was Lance doing here? It was dangerous. It was Galra territory. It wasn’t safe. Lance needed to leave right away.

Keith lost him.

A sense of panic rose within him, twisting his gut uncomfortably, and he held his breath, desperately searching for Lance. Please be safe, please be safe, please be safe.

“Keith,” Shiro had told him, approaching him from behind and pulling him back, “go scout outside. Allura and I will cover the floor here.”

Keith was nodding, obeying orders, because what else could he do? He slipped into his uniform, so that way if someone was looking for a fight, he would be able to give it to them.

Next thing he knew, Keith saw black and blue, and ebony and ivory keys melted into gunmetal. There was flashing silver, there was a burst of fire, there was the pouring rain, there was beautiful blue eyes—so brilliantly blue—and there was so, so, so much blood. Blood seeped from the open wounds, sliding down the edge of Shishi no Kiba, dripping onto the concrete below their feet. Oceanic blues grew stormy like the skies above them, darkening into something almost lifeless, and Keith so desperately scrubbed away the red coating his hands, staining his skin, crusting underneath his nails, clinging to him.

Keith shot upright, breaths heaving, and raked his hands through his hair.

“Fuck,” he hissed, “fuck.”

In the end, it had been Keith who had hurt him when all he was trying to do was keep Lance safe, and all Keith wanted to know was if Lance was okay, if Lance’s hands and shoulder were okay, if Lance could still play his piano and guitar all right.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” Keith chanted, berating himself, as he pulled at his hair and pounded at his head. “You’re so fucking stupid.”

He’d nearly taken away one of the most important things in Lance’s life.

Once he managed to calm himself down, Keith threw off his covers and moved to his desk, pulling open a drawer. Hidden among bank statements, important letters and documents Keith only ever skimmed through, and the occasional memo, was the motocross styled goggles “Blue Shot” wore. He picked it up gingerly, examining the material it was made from not for the first time. Keith had locked himself in the bathroom the moment he had gotten home, had taken care of scrubbing away traces of blood and grime himself, and then he had kept it concealed.

He didn’t know why.

He was technically hindering an on-going investigation. He was technically committing a crime by hiding evidence. He knew that, but he wanted to know why he was strangely okay with it.
Keith just wanted to know, wanted to understand, Lance.

Raising the goggles to his eyes, Keith powered them on, marvelling at the information set in front of him—the distance between him and the objects on his desk, the temperature inside his room, the temperature outside his room as well as the wind speed—before setting down the goggles.

Keith just wanted to know how Lance saw the world.

Mondays in general sucked. It usually meant that Keith had a long week ahead of him, but now it meant that he had gone an entire week without having heard from Lance.

(But, he thought with the slightest tinge of relief, at least he was still alive.)

“You look like shit, kid,” Sven commented as he swung by Keith’s desk. He crossed his arms and stared down at Keith, who was trying to look through the numerous results of who Blue Shot could possibly be from their database. It was fruitless because Keith knew Lance’s name wouldn’t be on there. Their database was built on criminal records, and if Lance had never ever been detained even once, then he wouldn’t even appear on their search results. All this time, they had been played by an absolute newcomer.

He still did it though, playing along with Lance’s farce for God only knows why. It was surprising that he had managed to keep Lance’s secret for this long, and he contributed most of his luck to the fact that Allura and President Alfor refused to use their powers on their allies and on innocent civilians. If either one of the De Alteas had looked into his mind, even Keith himself wasn’t sure of what they would find there.

“Gee, thanks, Sven,” Keith replied dryly, scrolling through the database and, honestly, just killing time. He could feel his irritation grow, temper nearly flaring, when he noticed that Sven was still at his desk. Rolling away from his desk, Keith spun in his chair to face the older man. “Can I help you?” Keith asked impatiently.

“Jeez, a little testy today, aren’t cha, hotshot?” Sven teased, entirely unaffected by the seething aggravation and frustration emanating from the young man. “Are you busy after work tonight?” Sven questioned. Before Keith could even reply that, yes, he was busy tonight (planning on searching the entire city for Lance), Sven answered his own question himself, “Who am I kidding? Shiro says you just laze around the apartment watching Netflix or cat videos the rest of the day after work. Anyway, you, me, and the rest of the Paladins are going to go out tonight to have some fun. Let’s call it team bonding.”

“We’re not even a team,” Keith protested.

Technically, the Knights of Voltron simply worked under the same man, on the same side. They were all aligned together, but they’ve never worked as a single unit. They’ve only ever cooperated and collaborated on the field. They formed teams based on missions, and sometimes they were entirely improvised teams. Keith rarely worked with the same person consecutively. Usually, it would be Shiro, but Shiro worked with Allura more often than he worked with Keith. Most of the time, however, Keith operated by himself rather than in any kind of team.

“Don’t think too hard about the details, kid,” Sven remarked with a soft chortle and a shake of his head. “Anyway, we’re all getting drinks after work.”

“I’m not twenty-one yet, you know.”

“Yeah, you have like a couple of months, but what does it matter? We need someone sober to keep
us in check anyway,” Sven responded. “I already got the others to agree, so we’re dragging you with us whether you like it or not. We’ll go get some burgers after work and then head to the clubbing district.”

“Pretty much all of the clubs are on Galra territory, you know,” Keith grumbled.

“We’re heading to the one strip that has less Galra influence,” Sven assured. “What the boss doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

“You’re taking his only daughter to the enemy’s lair,” Keith protested.

“We do that regularly anyway,” Sven countered with a shrug.

“Don’t you have a wife and kids to go home to?” Keith accused.

“The Missus thinks I’ll be out for an emergency,” Sven answered. “She’ll understand if I message her that I’ll be back late and make her banana pancakes in the morning. Anyway, I’ll see you later, hotshot.”

Keith all but groaned when Sven finally left him alone. He did, however, drag a heavy sigh past his lips and slumped in his office chair. He glowered at the computer screen as though it had done him a major wrong. He returned to his endless clicking and scrolling, nevertheless, although he paid it no mind. Instead, his mind was occupied by scraping together all that he knew about Lance’s schedule. Maybe Lance still worked at the nightclub—unless he quit working there, too, because Red Lion knew that he worked at a nightclub. However, Keith didn’t know which nightclub Lance worked at —only the general direction from where he came from when he walked home—so if he was really that lucky, then maybe he still had a chance of finding Lance in the area at night.

He’d have to save his search for another night then if Sven was so adamant on taking all of them out tonight, and Sven was. That night, he paid for all of their admission fees and even the first round of drinks. He had even bought Keith some kind of fancy cream soda since Keith wasn’t at the legal drinking age just yet. Sven probably thought it was recompense for the fact that the youngest Paladin had gotten a plastic yellow wristband to wear as means of proof that he would have to be sober by the end of the night as “designated driver.” (They all took public transportation though, so that didn’t make much sense to him.) Furthermore, knowing how Shay, Shiro, and Allura were responsible adults, Keith was doubtful that they’d drink any more this night, especially since they were all technically on stand-by if they weren’t at Voltron Towers.

He wasn’t really sure what part of this was supposed to cheer him up because he was ninety-nine percent positive that was Sven’s intentions. It was also the most likely reason as to why everyone tagged along, too.

Keith wasn’t sure what part of this he was supposed to enjoy. Everyone stank of sweat, smoke, and alcohol. The bass was too heavy, too loud, and it hurt his ears. He couldn’t hear a goddamn thing. He could only stare at the dark granite counter of the bar, idly stirring the ice cubes in his glass of Coke with his fancy-ass curly straw, because the flashing lights were just too much for him. Shiro had long abandoned him to go dance with Allura on the floor, and Shay was keeping Sven entertained by nodding along to whatever story he was blabbing about. Keith was sure that Shay could hear the older man just as well as Keith did; the young man didn’t even have to put effort into ignoring Sven. He couldn’t even hear his thoughts.

Hell, even one of the bartenders—an older man with platinum blond hair (surely not natural…) and scruff—gave him a pitying grin.
He hated clubs, so he didn’t see why Sven dragged him out here. If anything, it probably only made him grumpier—

“All right, all you party people, let me hear you say ‘Hey!’”

The crowd roared, but Lance’s voice was all that he could hear. Keith’s head snapped upwards and towards the direction of the DJ booth where Keith was sure nobody had stood there before. Now there was a young man there with a deceivingly lanky build. He was drowning in the fabric of his navy blue sweater with a low collar. The sweater was large enough to be sliding off one shoulder—his good shoulder, his right shoulder—exposing his bronzed skin, and long enough to fall over the curve of his ass. In contrast, the pair of light grey skinny jeans that were tucked into a pair of brown combat boots hugged every curve of muscle in his lithe legs.

The DJ cheered wildly, whooping, and exclaimed, “My name’s León, your DJ for tonight and every night minus Sundays. It’s Monday night, so good luck to you crazy bastards who going into work with a hangover tomorrow morning! This one goes out to all you stressed out, hard-working motherfuckers out there!”

Lance?

Keith really couldn’t believe his luck.
We Used to Play Pretend (give each other different names)

Chapter Summary

Blue Shot et Red Lion: Origines

Chapter Notes

Title taken from lyrics of "Stressed Out" (Twenty One Pilots)!

So I've gotten some comments about cliffhangers, and, yup, sorry guys, can't stop won't stop, lol. Not any time soon at least? They're how I tend to connect chapters. XD What I can do (maybe) is post spoilers on on my Insta (and possibly share to my tumblr) in between updates? If you guys are interested, lemme know so I can probably, maybe, possibly start.

Also, I've gotten some really pretty art!
From Instagram, otakusart's Red Lion portrait is crazy gorgeous. I couldn't stop staring because, goddamn, that's beautiful. And, the chibi doodles of Lance and Keith are just so cute, I died.
From tumblr, gayaliens-and-pidgeons drew the Incident™ and, omg, I just love Lance's expressions. They're amazing -- especially the last panel -- because it was just exactly what I had in mind.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lance.

There was no doubt about it. Now that he was nearly face-to-face with the brunet, all the similarities were far too clear—from the broadness of his shoulders, the slenderness of his frame, the length of his legs, to his teasing, playful nature and lyrical, lilting voice—and Keith couldn’t separate the two from his head. There were too many overlaps but, Keith reflected, only because they were the same person. If Keith had known earlier, how would they be now? Where would they be now? Would Lance outright avoid him? Would he avoid Lance?

No, never.

He just wanted answers—no more of this game, no more of this elusiveness. Lance had once said that Keith was mysterious, but the real enigma here was Lance. Keith realised now that he knew next to nothing about Lance—aside from how cute he was when he laughed, how his eyes crinkled and sparkled, how his lips stretched from ear to ear in pure elated happiness—aside from how his entire face would darken with stormy emotions, how his expression would fall flat, how he was so distant and it seemed as though Keith couldn’t reach him. Lance was like the ocean—every expression so open, so big, and so beautiful—and Keith had thought that meant he knew Lance, really knew him.

But if he was wrong?
Keith supposed it was only time that he found out.

Keith pulled away from the bar without bothering to catch Sven’s attention. The old man wasn’t all that drunk, and Shay could take care of him before he made an embarrassment out of himself. Glancing around, Keith couldn’t find either Allura or Shiro—though they were most likely together—in the swarm of people. Nobody had noticed when he had disappeared, and Keith would rather keep it that way. This was his business—his personal business with Lance—and he wouldn’t have anyone getting in his way.

This needed to be done.

At the DJ booth, Lance was laying down the steady beat of an electric drum and bass, mixing in a bit of keyboards, that matched his pounding heart and the rhythm to which the people on the floor danced—some better than others. Keith braced himself, throwing himself into the crowd, just as Lance added the vocal tracks, a song Keith could recall hearing on the radio, slightly sped up and remixed to suit a dance mix,

“Wish we could turn back time, to the good old days
When our mommas sang us to sleep, but now we’re stressed out.”

Keith was jostled around the crowd, pulled into a dance that he tried to escape, and sloppily manoeuvred around strings and throngs of people all clustered together. Eventually he made it towards the DJ booth and leapt onto the platform behind Lance. Gulping, Keith forced down all his anxiety down his throat and reached out, pulling Lance back by the shoulder—his good shoulder—to get his attention.

Lance whipped around, a bundle of energy and nerves that needed to be let out through his music. “What the fuck, Koli—?” Lance bit down on his tongue the moment he caught sight of Keith. “What are you doing here?” he practically shrieked. His voice was unheard over the music, and only Keith and a few of the dancers on the floor could even hear him.

“We need to talk!” Keith replied, raising his voice to be heard as well.

Lance scowled and gestured to his set-up. “I’m kinda busy!” he hissed.

“I’ll wait!” Keith swore. He crossed his arms and leant against the wall to make a point. He hoped nobody he knew saw him up here; Keith didn’t want to explain himself. He watched, heart clenching, as Lance ran his slender fingers through his mess of brown hair—aggravated beyond belief—before taking a deep sigh.

He glowered at Keith and pointed at him. “Five hours,” he said. “I have a break in five hours!”

“I’ll wait,” Keith repeated himself. “I promise.”

He peered into the crowd and saw waves of people parting like the seas for a large man to pass through. He approached the stage and looked up at Lance and Keith, eyes grave and serious, before pointedly glaring at Keith. It only took Keith a second to recognise him as the bouncer who had checked them in at the front. “Is there a problem here, Reyes?”

“None,” Lance answered shortly, giving Keith a second taste of the same glower from earlier. “It’s something personal, Antok. Don’t worry about it; I’ll handle it.”

“Antok” eyed Keith distrustfully but said nothing more on the topic. “You run into trouble…” he began.
“I’ll let you know; I got it,” Lance finished, assuring the larger man. He returned back to his station, wrapping up the rest of the song, and proceeded as though nothing had happened. Antok, too, retreated into the crowd, this time allowing them to swallow him up as he disappeared from sight.

Feeling his phone buzz in his pocket, Keith fished it out and opened up his messages.

[6:12 PM]

Shiro: What are you doing up there?!
Keith: Lance is works at this club. He’s a DJ.
Shiro: I thought the DJ looked familiar…
Shiro: Still, that doesn’t answer the question.
Keith: I'm going to talk to him, but he has a break in five hours.
Shiro: I guess you’re coming home later then.
Keith: Yeah, don’t wait for me.

Since it seemed that Shiro understood, Keith pocketed his phone and watched as Lance worked the crowd. He had started up another track, jumping in time with the crowd and getting them riled up. Then as they began to form a circle on the floor, Lance was reduced to bobbing his head and swaying his hips, tapping his foot along to the rhythm, and all Keith could do was watch—mesmerised by the sight in front of him—as Lance immersed himself in his work.

Occasionally, a server would work their way from the bar to drop off a glass of water—two after they noticed Keith was staying there with Lance—and Keith didn’t miss the way the two bartenders were openly gossiping about them, the woman taking much more interest in them than the man… at least on the surface level.

“You’re such a creeper,” Lance commented. Judging by the wry twist of his lips, he probably wasn’t intending on insulting—only teasing—the other young man. Keith’s eyes lingered on the jut of his hips as Lance shifted his weight between his legs. He gave Keith a curious, cursory glance before returning his focus back to his set. “I mean, you’re at a club,” Lance explained. “Why don’t you get a drink? Dance?”

Keith frowned and gestured towards the crowd. “You think I’m into this kind of thing?”

“Fair enough,” Lance acquiesced. “What are you doing here then? This seriously is the last place I expected to see you. You seem more like a live band kinda guy—like the teenage, angsty garage band type.” Lance narrowed his eyes suspiciously at him and asked, “You’re not keeping tabs on me, are you?”

“No!” Keith responded with an edge of panic in his voice. He forced himself to calm down and clarified, “My co-workers wanted to go out and dragged me here.” Just as he said so, his phone vibrated yet again, and he pulled it out to check the messages from Shiro.

[9:21 PM]

Shiro: We’re leaving! Don’t stay out too late! Make sure to come home!
Shiro: Your aunt would kill me if they found your body in a ditch somewhere.
Keith closed the messaging app and locked his phone, stowing it away in his pocket. Lance was already far gone in the music, and Keith couldn’t help but smile. It was cute.

Eventually, eleven o’clock came around the corner, and Lance replaced his set with the club’s usual playlist. He navigated towards the direction of the bar with Keith close on his heels, and Keith watched as one of the bartenders—a pretty Asian woman with golden skin, long bleached hair separated into loosely curled pigtails, and purple circle lenses that sparkled underneath the flashing strobe lights—slid up to Lance with a teasing smile. Keith’s stomach churned uncomfortably at the sight of her hand on Lance’s arm. “Hey, handsome,” she greeted him. “Who’s the pup?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Lance assured her, taking her fingers gingerly and peeling them off his arm one by one. “Could you tell the Boss that I’m going to be on my break?”

“Sure thing, León,” she answered. “Always taking in strays, I see. Hard habit to break?”

Lance rolled his eyes. “What can I say? I’m soft-hearted,” he responded. “Lost, stray animals can always find a home in me.”

“Someone will take advantage of that one day,” she warned. Wiggling her fingers in a wave, she sang, “Have fun!”

Lance led them towards the back, the pathway hidden from most club-goers, and up a spiralling staircase. The music had faded some, though Keith could still feel it pounding below his feet, keeping time with his own heart. Lance stopped in front of a door and pulled out a key from his pocket. Unlocking the door, he pulled it open, and to Keith’s surprise, a bundle of silky white fur leapt at Lance, clinging to the fabric of his jeans. Without a moment’s pause, Lance plucked her off his leg and carried her in his arms, letting her settle however she felt comfortable. Lance opened the door wide and gestured for Keith to enter, and after Keith obliged, Lance closed the door behind them with a quiet click of the lock.

The room was small, smaller than Lance’s apartment, but there was actually a twin sized bed shoved into a corner rather than just a futon. There was no decorations, no picture frames or posters or paintings—just a solitary window with plastic, white blinds. There was, however, a hole in the wall big enough to fit someone’s fist. The room did have enough space for a small loveseat and a coffee table as well with ceramic mugs stained with coffee scattered across the table top though. Lance strolled over to the bed and discreetly kicked a duffel bag below the bed frame—but not discreetly enough.

So Lance had been staying here for a while, he noted.

“I didn’t know clubs had rooms like this,” Keith commented.

“Some employees here are dislocated or have bad living conditions,” Lance explained. “We have a couple of rooms available if people need a place to crash. There’s a reason why my boss bought out the entire building rather than just the floor.”

“So you’ve been here the entire time,” Keith concluded, “hiding from me.”

Lance was silent, refusing to answer to him. Eventually, the brunet asked, “What are you doing here, Keith?” Lance seated himself on the bed and lowered Azura into his lap, where she curled up into a ball. The brunet began to stroke her fur, more so to sooth his own nerves.

His hands had white scars.
His hands had white scars where he had gripped onto *Shishi no Kiba*, where he had bled in desperation to get himself free as though he was cornered prey.

But at least he’s okay now, Keith told himself, tried to reassure himself. Lance is okay now. He can play as a DJ, and he can play piano in front of an audience at a jazz club. Lance is okay.

Keith looked around the room, fidgeting, avoiding looking at Lance’s hands, but it didn’t take long for the other young man to notice. Lance paused his ministrations and patted the spot beside him. Keith hesitantly joined him, lowering himself onto the bed, feeling the springs dig into his backside uncomfortably, and Lance resumed petting Azura.

“I told you,” Keith replied. “My co-workers—”

Lance sighed, shook his head, and cut him off. “Don’t give me that shit, Keith,” Lance grumbled. “I know that already. I want to know why you stayed. Keith, look at me.”

Keith stole a quick glimpse at Lance’s eyes—the thunderous blue of a stormy ocean, rolling and toiling and pissed—before just as quickly looking away. Lance sighed.

Well, Keith thought, because you were there, finally right in front of me after all of this time, because I didn’t want you to leave again, because I wanted to know that you were okay.

Without waiting for Keith to respond, Lance asked, “Are you here to arrest me? This may not be Galra turf, but it’s not exactly Alliance friendly either, you know.”

Now that set off Keith; did Lance really think of him like that? Did Lance really think Keith was that cold-hearted? He may have been a hotheaded Paladin quick to temper and eager to right wrongs, but Keith could see reason—especially if something happened to slap him right in the face.

“If I wanted to arrest you, I would have done it five hours ago!” Keith snapped. “I just want to know more about you. I want to get to know you better, Lance. I want answers. I don’t want to run and hide and play chase any more.”

Lance eyed him critically, his expression laced heavily with suspicion, and Keith supposed that he couldn’t blame the brunet for ever feeling that way. “Did you tell…?” Lance began hesitantly.

“I didn’t,” Keith swore. He didn’t know why, but Keith didn’t tell anyone about… about Blue Shot, about Lance’s alter ego. “I swear to you,” Keith repeated, “that I didn’t, and I won’t. Did you?”

Lance shook his head. “Our fight isn’t with the Alliance, so there was no reason for them to know,” he replied.

“‘There’s more of you?”

The brunet continued on as though Keith hadn’t spoken, “I mean, it’s your secret to keep; I know you like your privacy. If the entire world knew who you were, then I don’t think that you’d get any quiet at all.” He gave Keith another wary glance and then added, “What I don’t get is why you didn’t tell. You’re a Paladin. You’re a Knight of the Voltron Alliance.”

Keith bit his lower lip and replied, “You said we weren’t enemies.”

“You never believed me before.” Lance smiled weakly. “Does knowing who I am change that? I’ll still say it—with or without the mask.”

Keith hesitated. “I… I don’t know,” he admitted. “Of course things are different now, and it would
be stupid to say that they aren’t. I’ve always wanted to know though; I’ve always wanted to understand regardless of whether you’re Blue Shot or Lance.”

Lance huffed and reclined, leaning back against the wall. He lifted his eyes up to the ceiling, continuing to avoid all eye contact, before he remarked, “So just because you want to know more about me, you expect me to tell you shit I’m supposed to keep secret. That doesn’t sound right to me.”

“Not… not particularly about your mission,” Keith assured him, trying to compromise with him. “Just… just about you, I guess. I mean, is Lance even your actual name? That woman called you Leon.”

“León,” Lance corrected. He stole a glimpse at Keith and asked, “So what about the telepath? Will anything I tell you get leaked to Titania?”

Keith shook his head adamantly. “She refuses to use her power on her allies and on innocent people,” Keith explained. “She practically lives by the creed, so she won’t know about us. She hasn’t known about us.” As far as Allura was concerned, she was under the impression that Keith was moping because he hadn’t seen Lance all week.

“Fine,” Lance acquiesced. “So am I supposed to tell you about me? What do you even want to know? And, like, what are you going to do with that information? Go to the Alliance? Leave once you get what you wanted?”

“No,” Keith protested. He nearly reached out for Lance but recoiled. Instead, he curled his fingers in his lap. That would have been a bad move. Lance was ready to bolt any second now if Keith so much said the wrong thing—never mind doing the wrong thing. “This is our business,” he assured. “This is between us and nobody else. They don’t get a say in this.”

Lance seemed to relax some though he was still wary.

“But how am I supposed to know that you’ll stay after I finish talking?” Lance hastily added, “If I decide to talk.”

“I waited for you, didn’t I?” Keith retorted. “I’m not going to leave after doing absolutely nothing for five hours.” He wrung his hands and said, “If it makes you feel better, I’ll tell you about me, too. Nothing about the Alliance. Nothing about your secret. Just us.”

Lance pursed his lips and nodded his head in agreement. “Okay,” he agreed after a momentary pause. It sounded as though he was trying to convince himself rather than replying to Keith’s request though. “Okay, I can do that.”

“Great,” Keith murmured, unsure of where to start, keeping his eyes on the steps below him rather than on Lance. When he heard the latter speak, however, he raised his head and couldn’t look away from the expression of nostalgia Lance wore.

“You know the Monstro City Monsters?” Lance asked. His fingers stopped combing through Azura’s coat, the kitten fast asleep. He stared at her for some time, still avoiding Keith’s eyes, while waiting for Keith to reply.

“The baseball team?” Keith recalled, brows furrowing in confusion. “I don’t see what that has to do with anything—”

“Lance Moretti,” Lance cut in before Keith could say any more. “You asked about my name.”
“Is that your full name…?”

Lance barked out a laugh and shook his head in an odd mixture of disappointment and amusement. “Dear God, no,” he responded with a roll of his eyes. “You don’t know anything about baseball, do you?” Keith scowled, mildly offended, and Lance smiled wryly. “Lance Moretti is the pitcher for the Monstro City Monsters,” Lance explained. “He’s been around for a while—maybe for as long as I’ve lived. Probably longer. It’s no wonder why; he’s the best damn pitcher I’ve ever seen. His batting average is hella impressive, too—three forty-two. He’s almost got Babe Ruth beat.”

“So…” Keith began uncertainly. “Lance Moretti is…”

“My namesake, basically,” Lance clarified. “My dad was a huge fan of him. When my mom was pregnant with Ana, he took my older siblings and I out to a game once, and we got a ball signed by him. My brother has it encased in a trophy shelf because he’s a diehard fan; it’s just as new as the day we bought the ball.”

“So you were named after him?” Keith asked curiously.

“Not exactly,” Lance replied. “I got my nickname from him. There was a Korean kid back in elementary school who had an English name—an ‘American’ name—in addition to his actual name. Everyone called him by that name, so… I figured I’d do the same thing. Everybody knew me as Lance ever since because, well, my real name, Leoncio, was hard for some of my teachers and classmates to pronounce.”

“So that’s why the bartender called you Le-Leo—”

“León,” Lance enunciated. His lips were twisted in a wry grin. “My point exactly.” He shrugged before Keith could stutter an apology. “Anyway, Lance was the only name that really stuck with my six year old brain. Before I knew it, almost everyone but my mom was calling me Lance.”

“Huh,” Keith mused aloud. He paused and then said, “I never knew.”

“You never asked,” Lance replied cheekily.


“To be fair,” Lance assured Keith, “not a lot of people know anyway. My bosses know—well, knew, since I only have one employer now—because it’s my legal name; I have to put it there. Same goes for my classmates back in college, back in high school, middle school, and elementary school. I hardly see any of them any more though. I guess in our circle, only Hunk knows.”

“Oh…” Keith replied, unsure of his own words.

“Yeah…” Lance inhaled sharply and offered Keith a weak smile, “So… we’re really doing this?”

Keith nodded quietly. “Yeah,” he answered. “You… wanna go first?”

“I… I guess,” Lance answered reluctantly. The brunet tugged at the soft blue sleeves of his knit sweater, and Keith couldn’t help but stare (albeit briefly) at the expanse of bronzed skin of Lance’s slender neck and delicious collarbones before averting his eyes politely. “I don’t know where to start though,” he admitted. “What would you consider the beginning?”

“Maybe what drove you?” Keith suggested.
Lance smiled bitterly, resent taking hold of his bones and causing him to seize momentarily. “In that case, then we’ll probably have to go back two years,” Lance recalled. “It was before you joined the Alliance. Some guy named Chameleon was ranked back then. You probably know him since I don’t think he retired. He was a shape-shifter.”

Keith couldn’t recall. It might have been Jeff—John? Jason? whoever—before Keith had shifted the rankings. Maybe that was why Jess (or whatever his name is) was so bitter all the time. “Does it matter?” Keith asked sceptically.

“Just trying to get a sense of the time that’s passed, jeez,” Lance returned, nudging Keith with his elbow. Keith allowed a smile, content that Lance was still comfortable enough to joke with him. Still, Keith had an inkling that Lance was stalling, probably just to collect his thoughts. “You’re probably a shitty storyteller if you can’t even set up the scene properly.”

Keith pursed his lips, refraining from commenting that Lance was stalling, and merely shrugged. “Honestly, the easiest thing to do is to get straight to the point,” Keith remarked.

“Yeah, but then there’s no excitement,” Lance quipped. “I’m trying to make this exciting, Keith.” The grin he wore was strained, and Keith dropped the subject altogether, allowing Lance a moment to recompose himself and recollect his thoughts. “You know how I said I didn’t like the Knights and the Alliance?”

Keith thought back to their first coffee date and then all of their encounters as Blue Shot and Red Lion. “I don’t think I could ever forget,” Keith admitted. He glanced at the space between their hands, the short distance he could have crossed to lace their finger together, the short distance he could have conquered to offer Lance a bit of comfort. Then he remembered his position and simply took to resting his arms against his knees, legs slightly spread in a relaxed position. The hole in the wall was suddenly so much more interesting.

“I used to like them,” Lance admitted. “Every kid loved Supers—namely the Alliance—because, you know, they had awesome powers. Everyone loved the Knights and the Paladins because they were the heroes. When I was younger, Black Lion was my favourite Paladin. Then, maybe two or three years ago, I was with my older sister in the Black Sky fan club.”

“So what changed?” Keith asked hesitantly, quietly urging Lance to continue.

“What was the biggest thing that happened two years ago, Keith?” Lance asked softly, wearing a wistful smile. His oceanic eyes shimmered, rippling with tears that shook free from his irises, rolling down his cheeks, following the curve of his jaw, and dripping onto the concrete steps below. Lance’s body trembled, shaken by a force Keith couldn’t see, couldn’t pacify. His hands quivered as he slipped them under Azura, replacing her from his lap onto the pillow at the head of the bed.

In the face of Lance’s sorrow, Keith was overwhelmed by a slew of emotions that rolled and stirred and crashed within himself—so overwhelmed that he nearly forgot Lance’s inquiry entirely. He rushed to regain his wits, scouring his memories, before recalling, “The Galra riots?”

Lance nodded and wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. “Calling them ‘riots’ would be a terrible understatement,” Lance mused. “It was a goddamn pandemonium—like fucking Hell broke loose and tore apart the city streets. They broke windows, broke into homes, broke into businesses, broke down walls and security. Some of them were high as fuck on some mystery drug, and it seemed like nothing could stop them. It was like they couldn’t feel pain—not when they were beaten, bruised, or bleeding—because they just kept going. Maybe it was some kind of fucked up adrenaline rush—I don’t know—but it… it was just terrible—fucking crazy shit.
“They were looting places, vandalising places, and they killed people, Keith, just because they can. It was a show of power and dominance. They wanted everyone to know that this city was theirs, that everything about this city belongs to them, from the surface level to the underground, and nobody could stop them… Or, that’s what it seemed like. I don’t know, Keith. Nobody knows what the hell was going on back then; I don’t think I even want to know what went on in their heads.”

Lance inhaled sharply and exhaled shakily. “The police couldn’t stop them, not all of them, and there were too many of them that the Knights couldn’t round them all up. They’ve gotten the stragglers, sure, but a good number of them got away. Then more joined them because they wanted a piece of that power and bullshit ‘glory.’ They knew that, because some Galra were Normals, the Alliance couldn’t harm them those ‘ordinary’ members. They had a fucking creed to uphold. They couldn’t use their powers against ordinary citizens because the public needed to know that they would never harm an ordinary citizen, but, goddammit, Keith, in that moment, none of the Galra were normal.

“Because of the stupid creed, the Alliance was ineffective—if not completely useless. Damages and casualties—fucking casualties, Keith—could have been minimised if they just took the entire matter into their hands rather than leaving it to the police! What happened out there was not a riot, it was a massacre!” Lance bunched his fingers into fists, leaving tiny angry crescent indents in his flesh, and Keith nearly reached out to unfurl the fingers, to entwine their fingers. Lance’s voice, pinched tight with anger and frustration, melted into something more dark and despairing. “My father was caught up in that mess just because he was at the wrong place, at the wrong time,” Lance managed to croak out. His voice trembled, and his body trembled. The oceanic blues of his eyes rippled with drops of tears that dripped from his eyes and rolled down his cheeks like crystal drops.

“They killed him, Keith.”

Lance’s words were quiet and strained, barely even audible, but Keith was listening… and Keith heard. Really, Keith should have pieced it together earlier. The time-frame for when Hunk’s friend whose father had been killed during the Galra riots two years ago and for when Lance’s father who had died two years ago overlapped. Rather, they were the same man. Keith should have known in hindsight, but it was already done and said. The matter of fact was that Keith didn’t realise until now—now when Lance was ready to burst into tears, consumed by regret and remorse and resent—now when their relationship was strained and blurred and when there was such a slim chance of salvaging what remained of it.

“I’m sorry,” Keith apologised immediately. He wanted to say more, wanted to offer some sort of comfort to Lance, but he found that simple apology was all that he could say.

“You don’t have to apologise,” Lance replied. “It’s not like I hate Supers in general. It’s too easy to lump them all together when the only ones we know are the ones who make themselves known as a Knight or a villain. Sure, the Voltron Alliance means well, but…” Lance faltered, digging through his mind for the right words. He bit his lower lip and then tried to clarify, “There’s just something about the Alliance and the Garrison that didn’t quite resonate with me, especially after the Galra riots.

“I mean, I know that you weren’t directly responsible for the damage and destruction done to the city, and I know logically that I shouldn’t be pissed at the Alliance… but it’s hard to forgive and forget. It just kind of opened my eyes… that you can’t always count on your heroes. They can’t take care of everything. There are some things that you have to handle yourself.” Lance shrugged and added, “Part of it might have been revenge though—against the Galra, against the Alliance? I don’t know. I just… I just couldn’t sit still.”

“The Alliance can change,” Keith said. “It doesn’t have to be this way.”

Lance gave him a wan smile. “Don’t you get it, Keith? It doesn’t have to be this way, sure, but this is
the best course of action. The public wants to be protected by Supers; they don’t want to live in fear of what destruction Supers could cause. Knowing that there’s an Alliance of supernormals in their best interest, an Alliance that will always prioritise the safety of ‘normal people,’ satisfies them. You guys think that you’re playing Knights in shiny hero-suits, but really, you’re being used as tools to benefit the average Joe in average society. It’s not a bad thing—not completely—but it has its limitations.”

“You said that you took care of the jobs that we couldn’t do,” Keith recalled.

Lance nodded. “Exactly,” he replied shortly. “It wouldn’t be right for a superhero to break into private property and steal data, would it?” Lance mused. “It wouldn’t be right for a superhero to take out a human trafficker, would it? Because those things are wrong by definition of the law. Theft is wrong. Murder is wrong. Does a righteous cause justify it? Maybe, maybe not. That’s up to the judges. To deal with the Galra, you have to play by their own rules though. That’s why you need to take care of the people; I’ll take care of the Galra.”

Keith shook his head and finally reached out for Lance. He didn’t relent when Lance flinched and nearly recoiled from his touch. Holding tightly onto Lance’s hand, Keith forced the taller young man to look at him, to look him in the eyes, and said, “You’re not going to do this alone.”

“Don’t tell me what to do, Keith,” Lance snapped, but the heat behind his words was short-lived. “You can’t stop me.” He curled his fingers around Keith’s grasp and offered him an apologetic smile. “Thanks for worrying about me though. I’ll be fine.”

“You got hurt!” Keith protested, anger simmering and bubbling and boiling within him until it finally burst. “I hurt you!” He shook violently and lowered his head, a curtain of hair hiding his face away from Lance’s view. “It wouldn’t be the last time you got hurt…”

“That…” Lance sighed and slipped his hands away from Keith. He adjusted his sweater, pulling down the collar to reveal his left shoulder, where only a white scar remained of his stab wound. Rather than comforting Keith, however, it only cemented the guilt and shame that weighed him down. It reminded him of the blood, and, God, there had been so much blood that night and not nearly enough forgiveness. “That wasn’t the first time I got hurt, Keith, and, look, it’s fine now. We’ve got people on our side who can take care of injuries. Sure, you’re not wrong either. That won’t be the last time I get hurt. I got into this business knowing I could possibly die at any time, Keith. That’s not even the worst case scenario. Even Knights don’t have the longest career-span, if you know what I mean.”

Keith tried to calm down; he really did try. However, when he spoke, all that came out were biting, spiteful words, “Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“You never cared when I was Blue Shot,” Lance accused. “Why does it matter now that you know who I am?”

“You were frustrating!” Keith protested. Hackles raised, he spat, “You still are frustrating. I just don’t get you, Lance! I want to understand why you do the things you do, why you’re the way you are, because you confuse me!” He huffed and added, “I’m sure the way you see me changed the moment you saw me unmasked, too!”

Azura stirred awake, yowling, and Lance immediately lifted her into his arms and cradled her against his chest protectively. Without missing a beat, he snapped, “Of course it did! I trusted you! I told you how I felt about Supers—about Paladins and the Voltron Alliance—but how much of it was spent trying to change my mind? How much of it was you playing me for a fool!? I never tried to force feelings down your throat, but then you had to appear in front of me as Red Lion and confuse me
whether I’m in costume or not! Not to mention, all along, you were one of the people I’ve resented for having the abilities to get things done but never actually settling things! You’ve had the ability to stop the Galra, but they’re still running a shit show all over the city streets! So just mind your own business, and stay out of my way!”

Keith snarled and hissed, “You’re doing it again! You’re pushing me away! You’re pushing other people away! You pushed me away, you pushed Hunk away, and you pushed your family away—”

Keith’s breath hitched in his throat as he marvelled at the incredible sight of chilling, oceanic blue that had frozen over solid, yet they burned with a righteous anger, forming crystalline tears that rolled down Lance’s cheeks. “Don’t talk like you know shit,” Lance said icily.

“Then let me in,” Keith whispered, coming down from the height of his temper. He repeated for the nth time, “I just want to know, Lance. I want to understand.” How long would it take for Lance to get that through his head? How many times would he have to repeat it?

“I’m not your fucking lab rat.”

“Lance,” Keith pleaded, “don’t you get it? It’s not that I want to know how you work, Lance. I just want to get to know you. It’s been that way for the longest time. Whether you’re Lance or Leoncio or León or Blue Shot or whoever, I just want to know all of you.”

Lance pursed his lips and peeled his eyes away from Keith. “Well, now you know,” he muttered, holding Azura even more tightly, “a little bit at least. I still feel like I don’t know much about you after… after the other night.”

“My mother was Black Lion,” Keith blurted out.

Lance’s head snapped to him immediately, eyes wide at the reveal. “Holy shit,” he whispered. He loosened his grip as Azura squirmed in his hands, crawling on his shoulders before leaping onto the pillow. She kneaded the cushion and made herself comfortable before rolling back into a ball. “You serious?”

Keith nodded and pulled out his phone. He entered his pin and unlocked it, opening up his photo gallery, and scrolled all the way back to an image he had taken years ago. It was a framed photograph of four people: an elderly man, an Asako Kogane who looked ten years younger, a near mirror image of Keith, and a young boy. Lance delicately took the phone from Keith’s hands and zoomed into the photo, hovering over everyone’s face, before lingering on his mother’s image. He tried to pinch and expand the screen, trying to zoom in more, but to no avail. The photo remained focused on his mother and the medallion around her neck—a medallion lost somewhere within the rubble of the city, Keith was sure.

Lance handed back Keith’s phone reluctantly, and Keith didn’t think too hard about the reason why. After all, Lance had said that he had admired Black Lion in the past, so perhaps he was in shock of actually seeing her face. Keith explained, “Her name was Akira Kogane; she was my aunt’s older sister. That’s… that’s how I got the mantle, you know? She left me behind her katana, Shishi no Kiba, the Lion’s Fang, and her dagger, Shishi no Tsume, the Lion’s Claw. I wasn’t how else to interpret that.”

Well, Keith supposed Lance didn’t know, but surely, he could piece it together. Red Lion showed up one day, teamed up with Black Sky, wearing the same mask as the previous Black Lion, wielding the same weapons, fighting in the same style. He was raised from the beginning to be a defender and a protector. Keith wondered if his mother had known that he had been born with powers, but he supposed there was no chance of ever finding out now.
“That means…” Lance began uncertainly. “Your mom died twelve years ago… I don’t remember much of it, but it was a big deal—a huge deal. My dad was bummed for days—oh shit, sorry, I didn’t mean to overstep because, you know, you’re her kid. It can’t possibly compare—”

Keith nodded. His chest ached as faded memories of a gentle smile and a warm voice, always encouraging, always comforting, overwhelmed him. He pushed them all to the back of his mind. “Lance, it’s fine. A lot of people were bummed out, and yeah, I was one of them… just more bummed, I guess,” Keith explained. “I mean, it was the only thing the news covered for weeks, if not months. Every newspaper and news article online had the same headline: ‘The Mighty Black Lion Had Fallen by the Hands of the Galra.’ Every news channel was playing the same thing. Everywhere I turned, I could see her face, but I couldn’t see her. It was… it was frustrating. It seriously sucked.

“I was home alone when it all happened. The first person I heard it from? The lady who was the news anchor for Legendary Defenders at the time. They called me hours later, said my mom was in the hospital, said that it was urgent, and, God, Lance, I was only eight years old. I didn’t know what the hell was going on.

“Coran actually came to drive me all the way to the hospital. At first I didn’t open the door for him because my mother always told me not to open the door for strangers, but then… my mom and I had this secret password because one time someone tried impersonating her. Nobody else knew it—just me and my mom. When she came home, she would say ‘taidaima, kurojishi no ko,’ and then I would say ‘okaeri,’ but then Coran… he said it, and, God, his accent was terrible. But he still knew our password, so I went with him. Did you know that he’s always had that ridiculous moustache of his?” Keith inhaled, trembling, and offered Lance a shaky smile. “I sat there for hours in front of the emergency room, just crying miserably and—shit.” Keith hastily rubbed at his eyes upon feeling a warm irritation at the back of his eyes, brimming at the edges and then overflowing. “I was fucking scared for my life.

“I never knew my father. I think he was a journalist? He died before I was ever born, but my mother never told me how or who he was. My aunt never mentioned his name. At the time, because there was nobody left in the United States, they shipped me all the way over to Japan to live with my grandfather and my aunt, and my Japanese was rusty at best. I got better at it though since that was all my grandfather spoke, but then I lost him, too, when I was sixteen… Then I moved back here to live with my aunt because she had already expanded her business from Japan to the United States some time ago.

“She was only in her late twenties, early thirties at the time,” Keith remarked. “She never planned to settle down with a family, but then suddenly she had a teenager dropped off at her doorstep. It was a shaky start. That’s how I met Shiro. He was fresh out of college and just started working for her company. Most of the time, because he was the rookie, he ended up as my ‘babysitter’ though. I guess that’s why he transferred to VBC.” Keith cracked a smile, trying to lift Lance’s spirits, and he lowered his head to hide the oncoming blush tingeing his cheeks when Lance laughed.

“So why did you go into the hero business?” Lance asked, genuinely curious. “Because of your mother?”

“Same reason as you, I guess,” Keith admitted. “Part of it might have been wanting to shut down the Galra. To be honest, I never actually felt too strongly about the hero thing, but… it was kind of drilled into me—by my mother and by Black Sky.

“My mother always taught me to do what was right. She taught me how to defend myself and that I should defend others. I said it before, right? That she left me her sword, her dagger, and even her
“Anyway, I met Black Sky around the time I moved in with my aunt, and he kind of became my mentor. I actually developed my powers when I was fourteen, and they were highly volatile. They acted up whenever I got super pissed off, but I couldn’t really get angry at my own grandfather in Japan. In New York though… I got pissed a lot. Sometimes I would accidentally commit arson—don’t give me that look!” Keith pouted. “It’s not funny!” Still, he couldn’t help but admit it warmed his heart to see Lance grin at him like… like that. It felt good to make Lance feel good, to make him smile and laugh. “The first and only time I got caught was when I was eighteen. My own fucking house burned down actually, but the officer who arrested me happened to be dating my aunt at the time. It was super awkward, but he let me out. They still had to register me through the Garrison though—being a Super and all. That’s how my aunt found out about my powers, and that’s how I ended up with Black Sky as my mentor.”

“So the hard-boiled Red Lion actually had something of a criminal record back during high school,” Lance teased.

“Is that all you got from my whole backstory?” Keith grumbled.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Lance commented. “What were your mom and grandpa like?” Lance back-pedalled and asked sheepishly, “Or is that too intrusive?”

“My mom was… distant at worst,” Keith recalled. “She would always try her best to be a mom despite, you know, hero duties, but she would always be there when I needed her… except for the one time she wasn’t.” Keith sighed and smiled weakly at Lance. It seemed that Lance had taken it upon himself to feel for Keith, however, because he appeared to be twice as remorseful as the Super. “Like I said before, she always taught me what was wrong or right—or the basics, at least, since I was a kid. Don’t lie, don’t steal, don’t cause fights, stand up for what you believe in and, if you believe in it that strongly, fight for what you believe in, share your toys with other kids… Admittedly, I wasn’t very good at that last one.”

Lance laughed, and Keith could feel his own smile widen as he basked in Lance’s laughter. “My grandfather was more subdued. He was a quiet old man, but he wasn’t exactly reserved. He had a way of words when he did choose to speak, and usually when he had something to say, it was a joke. He loved making people laugh—almost as much as he loved gardening. He died just as he lived—peacefully. He just… passed away in his sleep.

“I really liked living with him though,” Keith concluded. “We were sad together, but we cheered each other up. At least, I like to think that we did. It was kind of the same story with my aunt. We were the only family we had left.”

“Miss Asako seems like a cool aunt,” Lance mused aloud. “Not because she’s the CEO of Kogane Industries or anything. She seems very understanding and, well, patient. Actually, dude, you’re like Bruce Wayne or Tony Stark or something.”

“For someone who doesn’t like Supers, you sure know a lot about superheroes,” Keith commented.

Lance laughed. “I just grew up on it? I mean, it was a part of my childhood,” Lance replied. “My dad wasn’t much of an artist, and even though he liked music, he didn’t really know any of the technicalities. We bonded over things like superhero comics and cartoons, action movies, and baseball—same with my brother, really.”

“What’s your family like?” Keith asked.
“Oh, well… you kind of met my little sister before? When you broke into my apartment?” Lance recalled with a teasing grin. Keith nearly buried his head into his hands at the memory, cursing his luck that Lance had remembered the window incident of all things. Still, he supposed most people would remember something like their window breaking because of a superhero crash-landing. “Ana is fourteen and a freshman in high school. She’s pretty smart, and she’s a sassy little thing. I guess you could call her a little pretentious, too? She has everyone calling her Ana Sofia in school because it sounds more ‘classy.’ I don’t know where she gets it from.”

Keith snorted and gave Lance an incredulous leer.

“Then there’s Estefania. She’s two years older than me and also really sassy. I think it might run in the family? Anyway, she works as a beautician. She loves playing with hair and make up. Honestly, nobody in our family has to go anywhere else for a haircut because she’ll cut it for you free of charge,” Lance continued. “Ana likes having Estefania doing her hair. She’d probably want to cut yours if she met you, too.”

Keith frowned and pulled at a lock of hair. “Is there something wrong with my hair?”

“It suits you,” Lance said brusquely. There was something in his eyes—something mirthful and teasing—that had Keith wary of his words though. “Estefania’s engaged now. Her boyfriend of—like what? Six years, I think—proposed to her recently. He’s pretty cool. I mean, I personally think he’s way out of her league; all of us do. Nobody’s complaining though because it means he’s joining our family.

“Then there’s Enrique, my older brother by four years. He’s married to a nurse named Louisa, and he has a kid named Alfonso—two years old. They’re expecting another one right now,” Lance added. “He was always the really cool older brother. We got into a couple of scuffles growing up. He gave me a black eye once, but I got him back. I think my teeth left him a bite mark that bruised for days. When I was younger though, I would try to be like him because he’s really smart, too, and super athletic. He always scored really high on his math and science tests back in high school, and he went to college for automotive engineering, too. Now he’s got his own garage and everything.”

“You got into an argument with him once?” Keith recalled. “You were on the phone with him when I was over.”

Lance scoffed. “I get into arguments with him all the time,” Lance replied. “He’s a real mami’s boy—always wants to please her and make her happy. Not a bad thing, yeah, but that means he’ll usually take her side. He’s stubborn.”

“There’s also Tío Raymón and Tía Kimmy,” Lance added. “Tío Raymón studied abroad in California, and that’s where he met my aunt. She’s first-generation Japanese Brazilian, I think. Anyway, they dated, got married, and he stayed here in the US—followed her back to the East Coast, even. Then my dad joined him over here to help out with his business.”

“And your mom?” Keith asked. Upon noticing how Lance faltered, he hurriedly tacked on, “You don’t have to answer!”

Lance shook his head. “I already got through most of my family anyway,” he remarked. He paused, sighed, and then said, “She worries a lot. I feel like most of the time she worries about me. I was the trouble kid, you know? I kept making messes out of things. Hell, I remember one time in the third grade, I missed fourteen days of school for a stomachache I never even had, and in the eighth grade, I had a crush on Adrian from English class. There was a guy who was talking shit about him, and I tried to set him right because the dickhead didn’t know what the hell he was talking about. Couldn’t get my point across, so I popped him one right in the eye. I got him good, but I broke my thumb
because I couldn’t throw a proper punch. My brother ended up showing me how after the fact that it happened. My mom was super pissed off when she found out though—both times.

“I shaped up around high school, and she thinks it’s because of Hunk’s influence since he’s a good kid—always has been, always will be. Anyway, Hunk and I were friendly with everyone—no point in making enemies. I never picked fights that I knew I couldn’t win, never went around looking for trouble, because I knew it would piss off and worry my mom. I think the only time it got really bad in high school was when one of my exes cheated on me with another guy back during sophomore year; Estefania tore her apart though before Mami got involved. I wonder where that went wrong. It seems like all I ever do is make her worry now.

“Like, I dropped out of college, Keith, and I can’t even tell her because of the whole—you know. Everyone thinks it’s all a financial situation, and that’s only part of it. It’s just so time consuming—my classes, my assignments, my projects, my work, and you know. I couldn’t just drop my day jobs and explain to people how I suddenly had income to pay for tuition! DJs don’t normally earn as much as I do if they’re freelance or just starting out! It’s all compensation because of what I do, and then the night hours usually means I don’t get sleep between classes and assignments and projects!

“So if I just give her the financial talk, then she’ll probably be disappointed in me, say something like how I could have came to her for help, or I dunno! I just wanted to do this on my own; I didn’t want to bother her or cause any more trouble! She didn’t really want me to move out after my father’s death either, but I had to go, Keith. She wanted to keep everyone together, but it was just too dangerous. In the end, I still feel like I’m just causing more trouble for her.” Lance raked a hand through his hair and muttered, “God, this is such a mess.”

Keith reached out and pried Lance’s hands away from his hair and lightly traced his thumbs against the thin scars in Lance’s palms. “Well,” he began slowly, trying to gather his thoughts because, God, this was a total ad-lib performance, “life is always messy, but that’s okay because we’re messy, too. We’re allowed to make mistakes, and if we make mistakes, we’re supposed to own up to them and fix them and make them better. We’re supposed to make the most out of this world—at least, that’s what I’m told.”

Lance smiled. “By your mom?”

Keith nodded. “By my mom.”

Lance inhaled sharply, trying to calm himself, and he pulled away Keith’s hands—though their fingers were still touching. Keith relished the moment while it lasted. “Remember when you told me to go visit my family sometime?” Lance asked.

Keith nodded, encouraging him to continue.

“I did,” Lance replied. He nearly choked up, admitting, “I went back, and I loved it. I love them; I miss them so much, Keith. I couldn’t tell her anything, but I just wanted to see her so badly, you know?”

“I know,” Keith replied quietly, memories of his own mother and her smiling face resurfacing. He pushed them aside. If Lance had noticed that Keith had began to grip his hands a bit more tightly, then he didn’t comment. “How… how was it?”

“I don’t think anything’s better,” Lance said. “I don’t know if it can get better, but… at the time, it felt good—good to be home.”

“That’s good,” Keith reassured him. He smiled weakly and said, “One step at a time.”
“Yeah...” Lance hummed. He stood up and smiled down at Azura when she cracked open a single sapphire eye to peer at her owner. Keith suppressed the urge to turn Lance around so that smile could be directed at him instead. “I have to get back to work,” Lance told Keith, turning his gaze onto the raven haired young man. “Are you going to stick around or head home?”

Keith pursed his lips and said, “I think... I’ll stick around. Can I walk you home?”

Lance looked taken back by the request. He took a second too long to formulate a reply, and Keith nearly revoked his inquiry until Lance said, “I can take care of myself, Keith.”

“I know,” Keith reassured the taller young man. “I know, but...” I just want to stay with you a little longer, Keith thought. I just don’t want you to walk away. “Is it okay? If I stay?”


“I can take care of myself, Lance,” Keith challenged.

Lance groaned. “Why are you so stubborn?”

“Funny hearing that from you,” Keith retorted.

“Fine!” Lance snapped. “You can walk me home—happy?”

Keith grinned. “Very.”

“Asshole,” Lance grumbled. He bent over, scratching Azura between the ears, and chimed, “I’ll be back tonight. Sleep well, okay, beautiful?” With that, he pivoted on his heel and unlocked the door, waiting for Keith to follow him out. Afterwards, he locked it shut. “Don’t creep around the DJ booth this time; I don’t need to get shit from my boss. Hang around the bar and grab a drink or something.”

“I haven’t turned twenty-one yet,” Keith remarked.

Lance blinked. “Really?”

“Really,” Keith answered curtly.

“Huh, well, Nyma and Rolo know you’re with me,” Lance told him, “so they’ll give you a few drinks—not for free though. That’s my privilege.”

Keith shook his head and said, “That’s fine.” He coughed awkwardly. “I guess... I’ll see you later?”

Lance nodded and waved him away rather dismissively. “Yeah, see you,” Lance replied.

Keith watched him go, waiting until Lance disappeared into the dance floor, surrounded by waves of people, before he left for the bar. By the time he had claimed a stool for his own peruse, Lance was already up in his booth, starting another track for the club-goers. Without having to signal her over, Keith had caught the attention of the bartender from earlier. She sashayed over to him and smirked at him threateningly, raising Keith’s hackles. Leaning against the counter, she propped her chin into her palm and asked, “Are you León’s new boo?”

Frowning, Keith answered, “What’s it to you?”

“Feisty, aren’t you?” she teased. “Jeez, his other ex was the same way. I guess that’s his type.”

“Other ex?” Keith echoed, bewildered. Normally, people would just refer to a previous partner as just an ex, right? No modifiers included.
The bartender grinned. “He’s got a personal policy—no dating co-workers,” she explained. “We lasted only three months, but it was a good time. He’s cute, right? And a real nice guy. Treats you like you’re the world. I guess that’s why we still get along pretty well.”

Keith scowled. “What’s your point?”

The bartender backed away and lifted her hands in a show of surrender. “Nothing, tiger,” she replied. “I’m just a little curious is all. He hasn’t had anyone come around for him who wasn’t his sister or best friend for a while now. I didn’t take you for the jealous type; that’s more Lance’s thing. He gets quite protective of his partners.”

A dark feeling stirred in his stomach. “Why are you telling me this?”

Her painted lips curved into a shape of an O, but then she pursed them together as though she was sealing a secret. Instead of answering Keith’s question, she grinned even more widely and asked, “Did you know he worked here?” She didn’t even wait for him to answer. “You didn’t, did you? That’s why you waited for him up there, where you could see him. That’s a little too much, isn’t it?”

“I don’t see why it’s any of your business.” Keith narrowed his eyes. “I mean, you’re just his ex.”

“At least I’m his ex,” she replied smoothly. The bartender didn’t give him a reaction. Her smile continued to linger on her lips. “You’re not even with him. Are you two even friends?” she said icily despite the feigned niceties. She leaned forward, jabbing a French manicured finger into his chest. “Listen, you hurt him; I hurt you.”

Keith’s eyes darkened. “What do you know?” he hissed, ignoring the hurt digging its claws into his chest. She had gotten him. Her words pierced him like sharp knives, digging into him, and he didn’t bother to remove them, to remove the hurt, because the bleeding thoughts just wouldn’t stop. They haunted him like phantom pain.

Keith wasn’t exactly friends with Lance, was he?

Keith wasn’t exactly dating Lance either, was he?

Keith wasn’t even his enemy, but they weren’t even allies. That much Lance had made clear numerous times before. Then… where did they stand? What did Lance think of him? What was he to Lance?

“I know he’s got enough on his plate without having to worry about a little stalker of his,” she retorted. Pushing herself away from the counter, she crossed her arms and smiled pleasantly. The amity didn’t reach her eyes. “Welcome to Empire, good sir, what can I get for you?”

“Coming from you,” Keith seethed, “nothing.”

“One shitty beer? All right, it’s on the house,” she chirped, pretending that she hadn’t heard him. She got him a bottle and served it to him even though Keith wasn’t going to touch it. He watched instead as she went over to another customer—a man with light brown hair, peppered with a few grey strands despite his age (perhaps mid thirties), and amber eyes. As she served him his drink, he slid her a folded piece of paper that was tucked within a wad of cash across the table. It would have been unnoticeable to anyone who hadn’t been watching, and Keith only had a moment to question the secrecy before the bartender pocketed the note in her shorts.

This club wasn’t affiliated with the Galra, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t unaffiliated with any other gang.
Keith wondered what exactly Lance had gotten involved in.

He sought out the young man in the club and found Lance lost in his own music. At least he seemed to be enjoying himself... for the moment, at any rate.

“Nyma’s been giving you trouble?”

Keith turned his head, finding the other bartender observing him quietly. There was an unlit cigarette stuck loosely between his lips, and he removed it as he spoke, “Don’t mind her. She’s worried for good reason. Name’s Rolo. You?”

Hesitating, Keith answered, “Akira.”

“Cool,” Rolo replied. “Like the movie?”

Keith didn’t give him a response, but Rolo wasn’t deterred in the slightest. He merely dropped the matter and picked up another subject, “Anyway, you waiting for León? He’s got a while before he finishes, you know.”

“It’s fine,” Keith replied. “I’ll wait.” For however long it takes.

[1:21 AM]

Shiro: Are you heading home soon?

Keith: Give me until 3

Shiro: Let me know if anything comes up then.

Keith: K

Around two in the morning, Lance stepped down from his DJ booth, and even Nyma and Rolo were starting to clean up. Antok and the other security staff were already trying to usher people out of the doors, kicking their drunken asses out on the curb, so that they could clear out for the night. Every single employee, busy with their own jobs, navigated around Keith until Lance approached him, wearing a hesitant expression. “You want to come upstairs with me to grab my stuff?” Lance asked.

Keith nodded and trailed after Lance. He followed him upstairs and waited patiently as Lance folded his clothes into his duffel bag. Then while Lance coaxed Azura into the cat carrier, Keith took the strap of the duffel bag and shouldered it. Lance narrowed his eyes at Keith, but he didn’t say a word about it. Instead, he only said that he needed to tell his boss about a change of plans and to return the key to the room.

Keith followed Lance down the hall to another room, where the latter knocked on the door. A gruff voice announced “Come in!” and a second later, Lance was twisting the door knob and pushing open the door. Lance waved the key in the air and said, “I’m returning this. I’m going to crash at a friend’s place for a while.” Lance nodded towards Keith.

Lance’s boss, a large man even sitting down at his desk with long, greying hair pulled into a braid and a trimmed goatee, lifted his gaze to stare directly at Keith, who refrained from squirming underneath his gaze. It felt as though the older man was studying him, as though he was examining him underneath a microscope, and trying to unravel everything that made him Keith Kogane. It must have been difficult—if not impossible—to keep secrets from this man, and for a moment, he
wondered why Lance hadn’t just told him that he would be returning to his own apartment—problem solved—before Keith pieced two and two together.

Lance was taking orders from this guy, and his boss knew that Red Lion knew Lance’s identity. He was hiding Lance here at the club because he didn’t want to risk a chance for someone to come arrest Lance, hindering whatever plans he had.

Shit, what kind of mess was Keith getting into?

“Fine,” answered the older man, sounding as though he was granting Lance permission instead.

“See you tomorrow night,” Lance replied amicably before motioning for Keith to follow him.

Once they were a suitable distance away, Keith asked, “Was that a smart thing to do?”

“What was?” Lance asked, playing dumb.

Keith scowled. “Introducing me to your boss,” Keith hissed lowly.

“You’re not going to talk,” Lance said shortly, “so I’m going to hold you to it. There’s no way he’d let me go back so suddenly; it’s too suspicious. He’d know that I would have had a way to make sure that Red Lion wouldn’t rat me out, but then that meant Voltron was getting involved.” Lance looked Keith in the eye. “He can’t know about us.”

Keith gulped. “We don’t even know what we are,” he mumbled.

Lance rolled his eyes. “I’ve said it before, haven’t I?” he quipped. “We’re not enemies. We’re not allies. I don’t know if we’ve ever been friends.”

“Of course we have!” Keith protested.

Lance continued as though Keith hadn’t spoken, “So we’re rivals.”

Keith’s face fell. “Rivals,” he echoed.

Lance smiled wistfully. “It’s better that way. I can’t get you involved any more than you already are,” he explained. They stopped in front of Lance’s apartment complex. “Thanks for walking me back, Keith.”

It was like one step forward and two steps back with Lance.

Lance held out his hand for his duffel bag, and Keith reluctantly handed it over. Before Lance could take it back, Keith yanked the strap, pulling Lance forward. He wrapped an arm around Lance’s waist, securing him before all three of them could tumble over on the side of the street. In a blink of an eye, Keith pressed a chaste kiss to Lance’s lips, but the touch hardly even lingered because a second later Lance was pushing him away.

“Goodnight, Keith,” Lance said.

“Goodnight, Lance,” Keith replied.

It felt more like goodbye.

Chapter End Notes
Baseball is the only sport where I kinda sorta know the rules. not really but better than my comprehension of soccer/football

In my defence, the Monstro City Monsters (the Monster City Monsters) is not as bad a team name as the Los Angeles Angels (the The Angels Angels). So yeah, Lance Moretti is a fictional baseball player (pitcher) with a batting average (number of hits over the number of at bats) of 0.342, and Babe Ruth has a BA of 0.34206 -- placed around number ten among all time leaders, I think.

Anyway, they've talked but... is anything really fixed? :3c
What I Tend to Do (when it comes to you) is See Only the Good

Chapter Notes

gtl it's been a long two weeks, and I haven't really been at home or anything orz
So today, I got home and decided to update even though I have other things on my list to tackle. It can't wait but i'm bad at adulting anyway

Anyway, I got some more lovely art from lovely people that made the last two weeks so much better! :) neko_akiise on insta did this wonderful piece, and I'm just so amazed because it looks exactly like a cover for a comic book. Considering that I'm basing this AU off Marvel/DC comics, it's perfect! <3 
I also got more Lance and one with Azura from otakusart, and they're both just so, so beautiful.
There's also this scene from chapter one by glaxed that's just so perfect, and I love it and the colours and Lance is so on point.
Also, alyxrae drew Keith in his hero persona and the coat and lighting and just everything is amazing. He looks so badass, I love it!

You guys are just so wonderful and amazing! Thanks for all of your support! If you guys have a Twitter and want to chat, I made a Twitter in the middle of a lecture I was falling asleep in @ms_towa! Also, because someone asked me last chapter, here's the link to my Spotify playlist if you're interested!

Without further ado, here's a 14k monster.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What are you looking at?” Shiro asked as the older man peered into Keith’s cubicle. He narrowed his eyes, squinting to get a better look at what was on Keith’s computer monitor.

“It’s a record of all the people who died two years ago on March fifteenth,” Keith replied, scrolling through all of the names whose last name started with an R.

Shiro’s brows furrowed together. “March fifteenth…? Why—oh, the Galra riots?” Shiro leaned against the cubicle frame, watching as Keith finally slowed down his search upon reaching those whose last names started with ‘Re.’ Keith still hadn’t responded, so Shiro repeated, “Why are you looking through those records? The anniversary passed some time ago.”

“I know,” Keith answered. “I just think that… you know, since we’re investigating the assassination of Harold Saxton, there might be someone who holds a grudge against the Galra.” Keith paused as his eyes fell upon “Reyes,” or—more specifically—Francisco Alfonso Reyes Díaz. Lance’s uncle was also named Reyes Díaz; at least Keith would assume so because of the name of his restaurant. He hovered over the name momentarily, risking a glance towards Shiro, hoping that the other man didn’t recognise the last name either. “What do you think?” Keith questioned, trying for normalcy.

“It’s… not impossible,” Shiro replied, “but a lot of people hold grudges against the Galra. You also have to keep in mind that there may be a lot of people who know the deceased, too, and not all of them have a vendetta… extreme enough to carry out the assassination of a higher ranking Galra
There’s also a chance that the grudge might not even be against the Galra, but just Saxton. He’s pissed off plenty of people on his own.” The older man pushed himself off the frame of the cubicle and said, “I’ll leave you to it though. You’ve always had good instincts.” Shiro grinned at Keith, a glimmer of approval lighting up his tired eyes, and left for his own station.

Keith slowly released the breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding before he pulled up the government records and searched the name.

Francisco Alfonso Reyes Díaz married Mariposa Beatriz Acosta Suárez in Varadero, Cuba. They have four children, three of whom immigrated with them to the United States. The five of them became citizens nine years ago through naturalisation while the fourth child, Ana Sofia Reyes Acosta, was granted citizenship after being born at the local children’s hospital about fourteen years ago. The entire family currently resided in Monstro City, New York.

The first child was named Enrique Alejo Reyes Acosta, who had married a woman named Louisa Hernández three years ago and had a two year old son with her. The second oldest was Estefania Isabel Reyes Acosta, and the third child was named Leoncio Emiliano Reyes Acosta.

Lance.

So he wasn’t lying; Lance, as promised, had told Keith the truth last night.

Discomfort brewed in Keith’s stomach, filling him with guilt, and he closed the window immediately. No more, he told himself. If Keith was going to get Lance to trust him, he was going to do this right. After making sure that nobody was paying him any mind, Keith pulled out his phone and messaged his aunt, asking if it was okay to meet today.

Her reply was practically instantaneous.

[9:21 AM]

Keith: 今日、会ってもういい？

Asako-obasan: いいよ。何があった？

Asako-obasan: 大丈夫？

Keith smiled weakly at her response. Sure, she had answered. What happened? Are you okay?

I’m fine, he replied, but Keith wondered if he really was.

He probably wasn’t.

“That’s a new look,” Asako-obasan commented in soft Japanese as she sat across from him. “You haven’t worn that much black since high school, I think.”

Keith crossed his arms against the table, brushing his fingers against the dark leather material of his motorcycle jacket. It was different from his usual vintage jacket. He had zipped up the jacket up until it reached the collar that rested flat against his chest, rather than the popped collar of his typical red jacket, and there was a belt that had buckled around the bottom of the jacket.

Recently, he couldn’t stomach the colour red very well, but Asako-obasan didn’t need to know that.

Asako-obasan laughed and shook her head. “Your mom used to dress in the same way, but probably because she rode her bike all the time,” she mused. “Anyway, it’s rare that you invite me out for lunch. Should I be expecting you to treat me?”

Keith picked up his menu, hiding behind it, “I’ll pay today.”

Asako-obasan probably realised that he was stalling because, honestly, it wasn’t as though the menu was particularly interesting in any way. In fact, it was only a double-sided, laminated menu. On the front side, the selection was mostly based on the different soups they had for ramen—shoyu, miso, spicy miso, or a vegetable based broth—in addition to the extra toppings while the back side listed different appetisers, snacks, drinks, and desserts the restaurant had to offer.

She didn’t comment on anything though and only placed an order for an iced tea, light on ice, and a shoyu ramen when the waiter came by. When the waiter turned to Keith, he ordered an iced tea as well as the spicy miso. Before he could leave, Asako-obasan asked for a side of takoyaki for them to share, but afterwards, when Keith didn’t have a menu to hide behind, she asked, “What’s the occasion?”

“Nothing, really,” Keith answered shortly and uncertainly. Judging by the frown that she wore, Asako-obasan didn’t take his response at face value. He sighed and fiddled with his wooden chopsticks, ripping them free from the paper and breaking them apart into two pieces. “Do... do you think Red Lion makes a good hero?” he asked her hesitantly.

Asako-obasan blinked. The question was unexpected, Keith reflected, but with good reason. Keith had been a part of the Alliance for two years now. After his first arrest related to his powers, Keith was forced to register as a Super through the Garrison, and Asako-obasan had barely managed to get Shiro to become his mentor to better hone his powers. Then Shiro had encouraged him to join the Alliance, to use his powers for good, rather than being stuck in a detention centre trying to get his powers under control—and for nothing. After all, if he wasn’t a Knight, then they treated him like a potential criminal. Keith had nearly forgotten because he had been given a purpose, but what did it really mean to be a hero?

Shiro and Allura wouldn’t have hesitated to answer.

To protect the law, they would say. To protect the people.

But what if the law was in the wrong? What if the people were in the wrong?

Then something needed to change, and that was Lance’s angle, wasn’t it?

“I think he makes an excellent hero,” Asako-obasan said.

Keith pursed his lips. “You’re not just saying that, are you?”

She shook her head and replied, “Sure, he’s not Black Lion, but I don’t expect him to be at the same level when he’s only been in the business for two years. He’s a bit of a novice compared to her, yeah, but he’s learning. It’s not a bad thing if he takes his time to reach her standing because he’s trying.”

“Do you think trying is enough though?” Keith asked. His grip around the wooden chopsticks tightened. “Trying might not be able to save people. Trying might be too late. Trying can’t bring back the dead.”

Asako-obasan’s gaze softened. “Trying might not be enough,” she admitted, “but it shouldn’t be a negative thing. It should be a step forward. That’s why it’s okay to try as long as you do your best, as
long as you do everything you’re capable of, as long as you’re real and genuine. Take your time and build your resolve, Keith. For what it’s worth, I think it’ll make you stronger.”

“Asako-obasan,” Keith began hesitantly, “what if… what if I didn’t want to be a Paladin?”

“What is your problem?” Lance hissed, nearly pulling out his hair from underneath his hood. Since he was missing his goggles (as Hunk hadn’t gotten around to making a replacement pair considering how scarce materials can be), Keith could see his glare and suffer the full effects of it. There was no problem now that he knew that Keith was Red Lion and that Keith knew that he was Blue Shot, right? Lance could fully express his anger and irritation now. “I thought we made it clear that we’ll be staying out of each other’s way!”

“I don’t remember agreeing to that!” Keith protested.

“We go through this every single time!” Lance groaned. “I don’t know why I even expected the answer to be different this time! Seriously, what do you want from me?”

Pidge, confused at the scene she was witnessing through the cameras she had hijacked, asked, “Sapphire, what’s going on?”

“I’m not trying to stop you! You may not have made your motives clear, but at the very least, now I can tell you want the Galra gone as much as I do! I’m just trying to make sure you’re still in one piece!” Keith persisted hotly. His lips twisted into a scowl as though he couldn’t believe they were having this kind of conversation—again.

“I can’t believe this!” Lance shrieked. “I’m perfectly capable of handling myself! I thought you got that through your thick skull! How many times have I beaten you to prove that?”

Keith made an affronted noise in the back of his throat, and Lance couldn’t help but think that he looked even more like a disgruntled cat with its hackles raised than a ferocious lion. “You never beat me!” Keith argued. “You always ran away!”

“Uh, yeah, after I knocked you out! Why are you so stubborn?”

“I’m stubborn?” Keith echoed with sheer disbelief. “This coming from you?”

“You’re—you’re… unbelievable!”

Keith’s expression flattened, giving Lance a blank look. “I’m the one who can’t believe you,” he droned, all but palming his forehead. “Anyway, like I said before, I won’t stop you; I’m going to make sure you stay alive.”

“I don’t need you to be my babysitter!” Lance protested. “I already got a gremlin watching my every move!”

“Damn right you do,” Pidge hissed in his ear. “Now what the hell are you doing? Why the hell is your boyfriend following you? Why are you egging him on and bickering like an old married couple?”

Lance scowled even though Pidge couldn’t see it through his mask bandana via the hijacked cameras. “Okay, one, he’s not my boyfriend. Two, we are not bickering like an old married couple! Back to one, we’re not even a couple!” Lance hissed.

“Okay, okay, jeez, I got the memo,” Pidge griped.
Keith, on the other hand, looked visibly hurt, and Lance himself recoiled at the sight. He averted his eyes from Keith and said, “This is not the time for that kind of conversation.”

Pidge—sharp, intelligent Pidge—had definitely overheard and understood the implications of Lance’s statement. She immediately stated, “Sapphire, you better not be planning another date with your boyfriend. That’s got ‘bad idea’ written all over it.”

Lance stopped himself from groaning aloud. “This is not the time for that conversation either, Emerald!” he practically pleaded.

He could see Pidge frown at him just from hearing the disappointment in her tone. “Fine,” she conceded, “but we’re still having this conversation later.”

Lance huffed indignantly and pivoted on his heel, stalking the dark corridors in accordance to Pidge’s instructions. He glanced behind him and refrained from snapping at Keith, who had continued to follow Lance, remaining only a few steps behind the sharpshooter, ready to jump into action if need be. Throwing open the door into an office, Lance immediately launched himself at the unsuspecting Druid pharmacist and pricked him with a tranquilliser. The man dropped to the ground, and Keith knelt beside him, checking his vitals. Lance rolled his eyes and grumbled, “He’s alive. I always knock them out.”

“Except for Harold Saxton,” Keith commented.

Lance made a face and scrunched up his nose. “He was a drug dealer and human trafficker,” Lance remarked, “but all the proof the police and the Alliance had managed to gather on him was tax evasion.”

“He still could have been tried,” Keith protested.

“Yeah, for tax evasion, and then he would have been let out on the streets again,” Lance responded. “You can buy judges like you buy lawyers and cops and silence. Anything goes in this city.”

Keith didn’t have anything to say to that. Maybe, on some level, Keith knew it was true, too, but Lance didn’t have the time to spend contemplating on what Keith knew or didn’t know. He marched over to the computer and wiggled the mouse, waiting as the monitor flickered to life. Reaching into one of his pockets, he grabbed Pidge’s special chip and popped it into the SD slot of the PC. Keith navigated behind him, watching over his shoulder, and Lance could feel the hairs of the back of his neck bristling.

“Relax,” Keith said. “I’m not going to snitch.”

“That doesn’t really make me feel better,” Lance replied.

“Sapphire?” Pidge asked. “What’s going on??”


“Why is he still there with you?” Pidge persisted.

“It’s complicated,” Lance answered. “I’ll explain later.”

“This wasn’t part of the plan.”

“I’m winging it,” Lance said brusquely, cutting her off before she could continue the conversation. Both Keith and Lance watched as the computer screen was taken over by a screen of green zeroes
and ones before an animated head bearing likeness to Pidge popped up on top with a download bar.

“Cute,” Keith commented.

“Thanks,” Pidge replied grumpily even though the Paladin couldn’t even hear her. “He does know that Legendary Defenders is wondering where he is, right? They’re commenting on how weird it is that he isn’t fighting alongside Black Sky.”

Lance directed the inquiry towards Keith and said, “Emerald’s wondering if you know that the Legendary Defenders crew is looking for you.”

“Emerald?” Keith echoed.

“My security and spotter,” Lance replied shortly. He could hear Pidge protest about him giving away information, but Keith ought to have figured out by now that he wasn’t doing this alone. Hell, he had seen Lance crush his earpiece during their second encounter! “Anyway, answer the question.”

Keith huffed at the tone, and for several seconds, he didn’t respond. It got awkward rather quickly though, and Lance wasn’t about to break the silence. That was up to Keith. “They probably are looking for me,” Keith answered with a shrug. “I usually partner up with Black Sky to take down people, but we solo just as often anyway. I don’t like screen time though, so they’re always looking for me. It’s nothing new.”

“Not just that,” Lance remarked. “You’re practically MIA this time. This is strange, and they’re going to pick up on that. I’m pretty sure you have a bad guy to be fighting; I think you might have seen him on the news. He’s big, hairy, and—oh, I dunno—a werewolf who’s been tearing people apart?” The disapproval was heavy in Lance’s tone as he said, “Listen, Red, just leave this to me. You have people to protect.”

“And you’re one of them!” Keith insisted. He grabbed onto Lance’s wrist and held him in place. “I can’t lose you again!”

Pidge snorted. “I’m guessing he didn’t handle the break up well.”

“We didn’t break up because we were never together,” Lance hissed towards Pidge. Then he turned his attention towards Keith and yanked his wrist away from Keith. “And you shouldn’t do a job half-assed, you know?” he said. “If you’re going to stick to being a hero, then be a hero. If you’re trying to help me, for whatever reason, then all of this is just a huge mess. It’s too sloppy, and I can’t have that. It’s not like I do things completely by the book, but I can’t rely solely on improv—”

Before Lance could finish speaking, Keith threw himself at Lance just as the window shattered. An actual car—a silver Honda Civic—flew across the room, knocking out an entire wall. Lance crawled out from underneath Keith and ejected the chip, stuffing it into one of his pockets, and looked up just in time to notice that the werewolf was approaching them.

Cursing, Lance reached for his handguns and hurriedly loaded them. As always, ice pellets went into his ivory gun, and actual bullets went into its ebony counterpart. He raised his ivory handgun with his right hand and aimed for his target Keith. “And you shouldn’t do a job half-assed, you know?” he said. “If you’re going to stick to being a hero, then be a hero. If you’re trying to help me, for whatever reason, then all of this is just a huge mess. It’s too sloppy, and I can’t have that. It’s not like I do things completely by the book, but I can’t rely solely on improv—”

Before Lance could finish speaking, Keith threw himself at Lance just as the window shattered. An actual car—a silver Honda Civic—flew across the room, knocking out an entire wall. Lance crawled out from underneath Keith and ejected the chip, stuffing it into one of his pockets, and looked up just in time to notice that the werewolf was approaching them.

Cursing, Lance reached for his handguns and hurriedly loaded them. As always, ice pellets went into his ivory gun, and actual bullets went into its ebony counterpart. He raised his ivory handgun with his right hand and aimed for his target himself. It was always harder without his goggles, but he didn’t have the leisure for hesitation. Without blinking, he fired at the werewolf’s feet—one, twice—freezing him in place. Keith leapt from the ground, drawing his katana in one fluid motion, and lighting it with a blazing trail of flames. He swung at the werewolf, and it recoiled. Lance withdrew his guns and instead prepared his rifle. As he gained distance, he loaded up the chambers with more rounds. He aimed at the werewolf creature, and he hoped that he correctly calculated the distance between him and Keith, the distance between him and the werewolf, and the distance between Keith
and the werewolf as they scuffed about the trashed office.

It was a gutsy move, but if he shot Keith by accident, then consider it payback for the stab wound.

Before the werewolf creature could swipe its claws across Keith’s face, Lance pulled, lifted, and fired in almost one motion. The bullet tore through its hand, and it screeched in pain. Lance nearly flinched but quickly recomposed himself; it wouldn’t do to have to realign his shot. One more time—pull, lift, fire—and a bullet buried itself in its leg, slowing it down. Keith hurriedly pinned it down by the blade of his katana, and he instantly recoiled when he saw that the fur had began to recede as well as the creature’s bulging muscles. Still, the snout remained as did the sharpened canines and the wolf-like ears, tail, and claws.

“A human?” Keith muttered. He knelt down and checked the man’s—if it really was a man—vitals. There was a heartbeat there, slow and faint, but he was still alive.

They did it then. He and Lance did it. They worked together and stopped this… this actual werewolf. Still, that wasn’t enough to persuade Lance. When Keith lifted his gaze to grin at Lance, ready words at the tip of his tongue, Lance spoke before the Paladin had a chance to say anything at all.

“I can’t count on you if you’re just going to get in the way like this,” Lance told him. He averted his eyes as Keith’s expression fell. “I can’t charge in, guns blazing, like you do, Ke—Red. You want to help me? Then do your day job properly. You can’t pretend that we’re actually partners.” Lance huffed as a peculiar thought crossed his mind. “It’s like you want to join me.”

He could hear the sound of a storm brewing outside, and Lance took it as his cue to leave before Black Sky could stop him. He brushed aside the building guilt and slipped into the shadows. Once Lance made it into an empty alley he had claimed earlier, he changed out of his gear and stuffed it into his hidden guitar case before heading home.

“Where were you earlier?” Shiro asked the moment they reached Voltron Towers. He was still in his hero-suit, and with how he held himself—back straight, chest out, arms crossed—he was the epitome of disappointment. How ironic, Keith thought, considering how proud he was in the morning. Still, Keith couldn’t face that sort of expression; he hated disappointing his mentor. Shiro had even removed his helmet so that Keith had the full effect of Shiro’s frown of blatant disapproval. His expression eased up once Keith didn’t immediately respond though. Keith was always quick to anger; everyone knew that. Hell, even Keith knew that. “What happened back there?”

“Blue Shot appeared again,” Keith answered. “I decided to pursue him.” Guilt stirred within him for lying so blatantly to his mentor. He refused to avert his eyes and attempted to make eye contact to seal the deal. I’m not lying, Keith thought to himself. Blue Shot did show up, and I did chase after him. That was the truth. “I thought that he could answer some questions.”

Shiro sighed. “Blue Shot again, huh?” he mumbled. “I wonder what his motive is. It doesn’t seem as though he’s causing trouble, but he keeps showing up whenever these… these monsters appear. It’s as though there’s some kind of correlation, but we might be grasping at loose straws.”

“Is it really a monster? Do you really think Blue Shot has something to do with them?” Keith inquired, feeling the slightest bit relief when the topic shifted to the investigation. “Isn’t there a possibility that the werewolf guy was a shifter like… uh, Chameleon?”

“You mean Jeff?” Shiro corrected, a tinge of amusement in his tone.
Oh, so that was his name.

“He could be a shifter,” Shiro admitted, “but… the forensics lab thinks otherwise. They say the biology is different from Jeff’s; Jeff normally recedes his transformation completely when he’s out. Still, we can’t say for sure until the results come back. For now, he’s in quarantine.”

Keith visibly shuddered at the mention of quarantine, and Shiro’s brows furrowed in worry. He placed a hand on Keith’s shoulder and said, “You’ll never be back there again, Keith. You’re one of us now.”

“Right…” Keith replied almost uncertainly. Keith might have been a Paladin, but he wondered where his heart was.

“Good job taking him down though,” Shiro said. “You and Blue Shot, huh?” Keith tensed, and he tried not to let it show. He couldn’t say if Shiro sensed his discomfort though. “I noticed the bullet wounds,” Shiro explained. “Do you think he’s on our side?”

“I can’t say,” Keith forced out.

“He’d make a good ally,” Shiro remarked, “if he could hold his ground against monsters despite being a Normal.”

He would refuse to be one of us though, Keith noted, for his own personal reasons.

“I’ll see you during the debriefing,” Shiro said, walking away from his protégé.

“What is this?” Lance asked the moment he got home, blinking at his two uninvited guests on his futon playing on their Nintendo 3DS. He turned his back to them momentarily in order to lock his door and then strolled into the living room, setting his guitar case against the wall. Kneeling down, he scratched Azura under her chin and held out his arm, allowing her to climb up the sleeve of his jacket and onto his shoulder. He made his way into the kitchenette and opened up the fridge, fetching a bottle of water for himself, and asked, “Do you guys want anything to drink?”

“This is an intervention,” Pidge stated shortly before snapping her 3DS, a Yoshi limited edition 3DS XL, shut. Hunk followed her example with his Legend of Zelda limited edition 3DS XL as well. Her hair was down this time, frazzled as though she had run across town just to get here, with only a green hairband keeping the longer strands from falling in front of her face. “Also, no, I already helped myself to your root beer.”

Lance pouted. “I was going to use that to make floats,” he grumbled. He retreated into the bathroom for a moment, bringing a hairbrush with him.

“Oh, sorry about that, man,” Hunk said. “I took some ice cream from your freezer while waiting for you.”

Lance sighed dramatically before uncapping his bottle and taking a large gulp of water. “So… an intervention,” he recalled, plopping onto the futon between his two friends. Azura leapt from his shoulder into his lap, curling up contently and closing her eyes for a little cat nap. Lance reached for Pidge’s hair, pausing to see if she would react, but when she didn’t respond, Lance combed his fingers through the tangles before brushing her brown hair. “What for?”

“Oh, I think you know what for,” Pidge said smoothly, refusing to make eye contact with him. She shifted on the futon, turning her back to him, so that Lance could better brush her hair. Then she silently held out her palm, and Lance reached into his pocket, handing over the chip. She didn’t
thank him this time. “What the hell was that earlier with Red Lion?”

Lance paused in his ministrations, and he knew that second was enough to tell Pidge about his hesitation. He picked up where he had left off brushing her hair and answered, “You know that he knows my face now.” He picked up her hand and laid it against his left shoulder. “You were there when this happened.”

Pidge clicked her tongue in obvious disdain and retracted her hand.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Hunk exclaimed. “Back up a sec! You said that Red knows your face? I didn’t know that!”

“Because I don’t want to make things rougher for you at work!” Lance hurriedly defended himself. “You work as their engineer, so you know all of them by face and name! I didn’t want to make it any more complicated than it already was!”

Hunk’s surprise gave way, collapsing under the weight of a more solemn expression. Lance sighed and set down the brush, fixing Pidge’s hair, and then replied, “I’m fine, Hunk. It’s been almost two weeks since that happened, and you know Ulaz can heal anything.”

“That doesn’t make it okay, Lance,” Hunk chastised. “You’re pushing yourself too hard.”

“I know my limits, Hunk,” Lance insisted. He gave Pidge a glare as though to say that this scenario was all of her fault, and the teenage girl only returned his glare with her own incredulous look. Disappointing Hunk was only second to disappointing his own mother. “I’ll be careful.”

“You always say that, Lance!” Hunk protested. “Every single time, it’s the same thing; it doesn’t change at all! Every single time, you get into danger, and every single time, you almost get caught!”

“That’s not fair, Hunk,” Pidge interrupted. “These missions are only getting progressively harder because we are making headway.”

“Okay, okay, okay,” Hunk acquiesced, but the grim twist of his lips was more than enough proof that he didn’t quite believe them. “You guys are making progress, and I respect that. I get why you’re doing this, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it. I…” Hunk sighed. “I honestly can’t stand it. I hate standing by and twiddling my thumbs while you’re hacking into databases, Pidge, and while you’re actively breaking into dangerous places, Lance.” Azura’s eyes fluttered open, staring at Hunk from her place on Lance’s lap, before she began to bat at the gentle giant with her fluffy white tail. Hunk’s lips cracked into a bitter smile. “Apparently, that’s not what this intervention is about though.”

“Damn right it isn’t!” Pidge exclaimed, whirling around so quickly that Lance ended up with a mouthful of her long hair. She jabbed her forefinger into Lance’s chest and glowered, “We’ve talked about this, Lance! We’ve talked about staying away from Keith—or Red or whoever the fuck he is—but for some reason, you’re going to speak with him? At least, that’s what I’m getting from that whole ‘This isn’t the place for this conversation’ thing you said!”

Hunk’s eyes widened, and all his best friend could do was gape openly at Lance, who, on the other hand, was scrambling for words trying to amend the current situation. Everything that came out of his mouth was nonsense though, and by Pidge’s glower, she was not at all pleased. Slumping in defeat, Lance tried to sink into the futon between his friends as he admitted, “I’ve actually spoken to him after the accident.”

“You mean incident?” Pidge seethed. “That was hardly an accident, Lance! Sure, Voltron may not
be our enemy, but getting directly involved with a Paladin is *really fucking dangerous*, Lance! And that’s an understatement!”

“I know, Pidge,” Lance assured her.

“Do you really know the situation you’re in, Lance? Because it sounds like you’ve gotten romantically involved with him!” Pidge shrieked. At that, Hunk looked like he was nearly having an aneurysm. “I thought it was bad before when you kept running into him, but now it looks like he’s running after you.”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait,” Hunk jumped in. “Rewinding: you guys know Keith and Red Lion are the same person?”

“Yes, Hunk! We can stop dancing around the issue of secret identities now because we know that you know and you’ve already figured out that we know,” Pidge babbled. “You know who else knows? Keith!”

Lance could feel heat climb all the way up his neck, staining his cheeks, until it reached the very tips of his ears. “So what if he knows? Like I said, *nothing* is going to change. I made an exchange with him. I told him I wouldn’t let his secret slip if he didn’t let mine slip.”

“Oh dear Lord,” Hunk breathed out, quietly muttering, “that boy is so far gone I can’t even see him any more.”

Lance turned to Hunk with questioning eyes, but Hunk not-so-discreetly averted his eyes, whistling innocently. Pidge, on the other hand, was practically simmering. “Fine,” Pidge grunted, crossing her arms.

“He won’t rat us out, Pidge,” Lance attempted to assuage her worries. “He’s a good guy—seriously.”

“Funny hearing this from the guy who cursed his name an hour or two ago,” Pidge remarked dryly.

Lance huffed. “That was me getting annoyed with him,” Lance protested. “Anyway, after you get him to calm down and after you get to know him, he’s a nice guy. I don’t think he’s going to try to stop us. He… he probably understands. I’m not sure.”

Hunk made a sound like a dying cat at the back of his throat. Lance and Pidge openly stared at him with wide eyes, and, having sensed the shift in movement, Azura’s head perked up and tilted curiously at her human’s best friend. Hunk panicked. “Don’t mind me, guys! It’s just, well, yeah, he’s a nice guy, and he might not try to stop you from completing your missions, but knowing Keith, he’s going to try to keep Lance safe because he’s head over heels—”

“He’s what now?” Lance shrieked.

“That’s only going to interfere in future missions!” Pidge stated, frowning. “He’s a completely unknown variable! We can’t really factor him into our plans when we can barely account for the Voltron Alliance appearing!” Noticing that Lance was giving her a pleading expression, begging her to just understand, she sighed. “But the two of you know him personally,” she continued, “so I guess I’ll trust you if not him.”

Lance smiled weakly. “Thanks, Pidge,” he said. “I’ll clean up the mess if anything happens. Don’t worry about it. This was my fuck up.”

“You didn’t fuck up, Lance,” Pidge replied. “If it’s anything like what you’ve been saying, we
lucked out… maybe—and I’m just saying maybe—we do have an ally in him. Who knows?”

“I wouldn’t count on that just yet,” Lance said. “I don’t want to make him one of us. I mean, he’s a hero. He belongs out there, saving people. We’re not quite about saving people—if you haven’t noticed. We’re more about putting an end to things.” Before Pidge and Hunk could segue into a lecture, Lance stood up, sending Azura flying into Hunk’s lap, and said, “Anyway, I’m going to make myself an ice cream float, and you two don’t get any because you’ve cleaned out my fridge.”

At the very least, Keith seemed conflicted the last time they met—like he didn’t know what to believe. Maybe people piled on the expectations too high, and Keith was having trouble meeting all of them. Maybe he didn’t understand those expectations himself, or maybe he just wanted to decide things for himself for once. Lance couldn’t say.

He just knew that he didn’t really know Keith.

His ringtone—Ana’s own unique ringtone he had assigned to her contact—suddenly pierced through the silence. Without giving it a second thought, Lance swiped his thumb across the screen to accept the call and lingered in the kitchenette to give some semblance of privacy. Hunk and Pidge busied themselves trading Pokémon, and although it looked as though they were minding their own business, Lance knew that the little shits were definitely listening in on his phone call.

“Hey, Ana, what’s up?” he asked.

“Take me to the movies on the weekend,” Ana declared. “My friends have something to do with their family, so they can’t go opening weekend. Plus, Mami’s busy, Este’s busy, and of course Ricky and Louisa are busy.”

Lance sighed. “Jeez, what if I was busy?”

“Well, you just admitted that you’re not,” Ana pointed out. “Besides, I know you want to watch this movie, too.”

“What makes you say that?” Lance retorted, keeping a playful edge to his tone. He knew that, in the end, he’d indulge his little sister anyway.

“It’s a Disney movie.”

“Sold,” Lance responded immediately. “You can come over Saturday morning. Have Enrique drop you off when he goes to work. We’ll have breakfast, and then we’ll go to the movies.”

“I have to do my homework first though. We’re starting to do trig, and I don’t get any of it,” Ana whined into the phone.

“I’ll help you,” Lance assured her.

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Also, Mami wants to know if you’ve eaten dinner yet.”

Lance eyed Hunk and Pidge from where he stood and replied, “I ate with my friends.” That earned him a loud snort from Pidge and a roll of Hunk’s eyes. He flipped off his friends and thanked the Lord that Ana didn’t question his answer. He didn’t need his mother on his case on top of all of this.
“So about Keith,” Pidge began once Lance hung up on his sister.

Lance groaned and responded, “Can we not talk about this? Can’t we just trade Pokemon? I hatched another popplio this morning; I thought you wanted one in exchange for a rowlet!”

Pidge narrowed her eyes at him before rolling her eyes. “Fine,” she griped, “but you better fix that situation with him! We really don’t need him getting in our way!”

The quiet purr of Obsidian’s engine was nowhere near as loud and threatening as Scarlet’s. She was larger and not nearly as fast, too, but she was sturdy and powerful. Keith figured that must have been why his mother preferred riding her over Scarlet. Not to mention, she wasn’t painted the same cherry red as Scarlet.

God knows he had too much of the colour red now.

He caught his hands twitching and shook them free of his nerves. It would never get rid of that disgusting sensation of red, red warmth clinging to his skin though. Black was a welcome change, and maybe it helped him understand his mother a little better. He couldn’t help but feel a little grateful to Asako-obasan for giving him Obsidian now of all times.

“It’s an early birthday present,” his aunt had told him. “I was going to wait, but I suppose with what you’re thinking of doing, you might need it sooner than later.”

Keith pulled into a spot between two sedans over by the curb, right in front of Empire. Pulling down the motocross goggles so that they rested around his neck, Keith inhaled sharply and gathered all of the resolve he needed to pull off this crazy stunt of his. He reached into his leather jacket and pulled out his phone, turning it off just in case he spent too much time out late and worried Shiro. Knowing his mentor and roommate, it wasn’t beyond the older man to track him down by his phone. Shiro shouldn’t miss him though, Keith reflected. This was a usual case for Keith—another one of his midnight patrols. Only this time, he was out of costume… and he wasn’t really patrolling.

He was looking for someone.

Keith tucked his phone back into his pocket and zipped it up. He stored his helmet in the compartment at the back of his newest bike and locked it up. Kicking the stand, Keith set it upright and then made his way towards the entrance. The bouncer—Antok, Keith recalled—eyed him suspiciously, his studious gaze lingering too long on the goggles around Keith’s neck, before nodding his head and giving him entrance. Keith paid his cover charge upfront and then navigated his way to the bar. Nyma immediately caught sight of him and grinned rather deviously, sliding up to him and leaning against the bar counter.

Like Antok, her eyes immediately drifted to the goggles around his neck.

So all of these people were involved in Lance’s gang, Keith noted. Or whatever they were.

“No looking for someone tall, dark, and handsome?” Nyma inquired casually as though she hadn’t been studying him a second ago. She passed him a glass of water as her violet eyes roamed over the dance floor before focusing intently on the DJ booth, and Keith followed her gaze.

Tonight, Lance was dressed in a dark grey, longline cardigan over a white, low collar shirt that exposed his collarbones. A pair of headphones hung around his slender neck, and a pair of blue skinny jeans hugged the curves of his long legs, falling into a pair of navy blue high-tops that have seen better days. Once again, he was dancing in his booth, trapped in his little world, as he remixed a pop song Keith might have heard somewhere before,
“I can’t remember to forget you
I keep forgetting that I should let you go
But when you look at me,
The only memory is us kissing in the moonlight…”

“You’re just in luck,” Nyma said, pulling Keith away from his observations. “We’re closing in an hour, so sit tight.”

Unfortunately, Keith couldn’t quite sit tight. He slipped away from the bar (while ignoring Nyma’s indignant “Hey!”) and weaved his way through the dance floor. The second time, Keith mused, was definitely easier than the first. He leapt onto the platform and slid inside the DJ booth, tapping Lance on the shoulder. The brunet startled, practically jumping out of his shoes ten feet in the air, before turning around with wide eyes. “What the fuck, Keith?” he asked, raising his voice over the music. He pressed his hand against his heart as though he could physically still it. Lance caught sight of his goggles around Keith’s neck and scowled briefly. He inhaled sharply, his shoulders raising then dropping, before sighing and trying to recompose himself. “What’s up? What are you doing here?”

Keith pursed his lips and asked, “Do you remember what you said this morning?”

Lance furrowed his brows and scrunched up his expression. Cute, Keith thought with a little smile on his lips. He wears all of his feelings on his sleeve, but there’s still so much people don’t know about him. It was amazing. Lance was amazing.

“I said a lot of things this morning,” Lance replied tersely. “So what are you talking about…” Lance faltered. His eyes hardened like the surface of the ocean freezing over. “What’s this about, Keith?”

“I’ll do it,” Keith declared firmly. “I’ll join you.”

Lance’s eyes widened. Before he even had a second to think about Keith’s offer—or, rather, his demand—Lance was already blurt out a frantic “No!” His oceanic blue eyes trembled with a dark fear that Keith had never known before. “You can’t,” he said more calmly. “You shouldn’t.”

“I can,” Keith insisted, “and I will.” He fingered the goggles around his neck and said, “You need this back, don’t you? You didn’t have any goggles this morning, which means that supplies are low on your end, right?”

Lance sighed, rubbing the back of his neck, and cast a glance towards the crowd, dancing away their worries while entirely oblivious to the drama unravelling within the DJ booth. “We’ll talk later,” Lance said. “Not right now.” He pulled back the sleeve on his left arm and glanced at his silver watch. “Can you wait an hour?”

“I’ll wait,” Keith promised. Before he could let Lance go back to his job, however, he latched onto his wrist and said, “I promise I’ve thought about it. I’ve been thinking about it all day, I swear.”

Lance smiled sadly. “That’s what scares me the most,” he admitted. With that, he turned his back on Keith, leaving the raven haired young man at a loss. Keith jumped off the crowd, rejoining the crowd, before manoeuvring his way back to the bar, where Nyma was waiting for him with a drink.

“Every time you come here, you cause a scene,” Nyma commented. “I wonder if that means something—Akira, right?” She smiled at him as though she didn’t quite believe him.

Keith narrowed his eyes at her suspiciously. “What do you mean by that?” he asked, blatantly ignoring her question regarding his identity.

Nyma laughed. “That’s what I’m asking you!” she retorted with a shrug. “Can I get you anything,
“Lover boy?”

“Some peace and silence,” he grumbled.

“Well, you’ll find that right out the door,” Nyma chirped. “You already paid the fee to get in, so why don’t you live a little? Go dance! Get drunk!”

Well, considering that Keith needed to have all of his wits together by the end of the night, he’ll have to pass on the latter. “I don’t dance,” he opted instead.

Nyma jutted out her plush, pink lips in a pout. “How boring,” she said. “León likes to dance, you know? I’m sure you know. You’ve been staring for a while.”

“Well, he isn’t here right now, is he?” Keith retorted.


Keith visibly bristled. “I’m not insinuating anything!”

“Wow, so bold,” Nyma chirruped. “Anyway, I gotta get back to customers who actually pay. Let Rolo or me know if you need anything—aside from León, of course.”

Keith gave her a blank stare. “Don’t you have customers to attend?”

Nyma rolled her eyes and wiggled her fingers in a playful wave before strutting up to a tipsy client nearby. Keith looked away and found himself searching for Lance once again. The brunet was starting up another song with a beat so catchy that Keith couldn’t help but drum his fingers against the top of the bar counter. Keith nearly fished out his phone but refrained once he remembered that he couldn’t afford to be tracked by Shiro, the worrier. He sighed inwardly and took to observing the crowd, only looking away when the dancing got far too intimate for his liking.

At least his scowl was keeping people away.

He couldn’t back down now that he was here. He had told Lance had that he had thought about it, and that wasn’t a lie. “What if I didn’t want to be a Paladin?” he had asked his aunt. In the past, the decision had made sense. The Garrison had gleaned every bit of information about him from his arrest, so there was no point in hiding from them any longer and pretending that he was Normal. Plus, Shiro was already a Paladin to begin with, and the older man had been a mentor to Keith from day one.

Then there was also the fact that his mother had left him her sword, her dagger, and her mask. All he could think about, at the time, was that she had wanted him to pick up her mantle and follow in her footsteps.

But maybe he was wrong.

“You mean,” Asako-obasan had replied quietly, broaching the topic delicately, “what if you don’t want to be a Paladin?”

Keith had only nodded shakily.

“Then you don’t have to be,” she had stated.

“You’re not disappointed in me?” Keith had asked weakly and warily.
Her eyes had softened with a patience Keith had never known, had never possessed. “You’re a good kid, Keith,” Asako-obasan had told him. “If there’s something that’s making you doubt your decision, you have the right to take a couple of steps back and evaluate your position. If you can’t trust the Alliance or the Garrison or the police, then maybe there’s a reason why.”

“But Shiro is a Paladin,” Keith had protested. “Mom was a Paladin.”

“They can’t enforce their choices and beliefs onto you though,” Asako-obasan had said. “Whether you choose to be a Paladin or not, that is your decision.” A frown had marred her lips then. “Although it didn’t feel like much of a choice at the time…” With how the Garrison had registered all of his information into their registry of superhumans, he didn’t have many options: align himself with the Alliance or be treated as a potential criminal all the damn time. Keith had just narrowly avoided being thrown into a detention centre for life because he had chosen to follow his mother’s footsteps and Shiro’s example.

“What if I’m wrong though?” Keith had asked, trying to reason with her.

Asako-obasan hadn’t faltered though. “Do you think that you’re wrong?”

“I don’t know!” he had admitted. “I don’t know what to think! I don’t know what to believe!”

“Then maybe…” she had began slowly and cautiously as though approaching a cornered animal, “Maybe you should start searching for your answers. Nobody should be able to tell you how to think or what to believe, Keith. That all depends on you.”

“Do you think Mom would be upset?” Keith had inquired, voice trembling.

“Of you?” Asako-obasan had responded. “Never.”

“But didn’t she want me to be a hero?” Keith had pressed.

“Everyone’s definition of justice is different, Keith. That’s why she would rather have you do what you think is right, what you feel is right, not what the Garrison or the Alliance or the police think is right. Laws can be uncivil, unrighteous, and it’s up to the people to test the law, to challenge the law, to change it,” Asako-obasan had assured him. “You know what that means?” She had paused, waiting for him to respond, but when he didn’t answer her, she had smiled and stated confidently, “You don’t have to be a Paladin to be a hero.”

Then her smile had dropped from her painted lips, and she had told him, “But, Keith, if you leave the Alliance, the Garrison will never leave you alone. They keep outed Supers in detention centres, and who knows how many Supers are actually in hiding to avoid registration? To avoid having their lives decided for them? My sister—your mother—may have chosen to go to them, as did Takashi, but you, Keith… you didn’t have that luxury. I can’t say how well they handle resignation, so if you leave…”

Keith could remember all too clearly the eyes that followed and tracked his every movement after his first superpower-related arrest.

“Be careful,” Asako-obasan had warned him.

“Hey, lover boy,” Nyma called to him, twirling her bleached blonde curls around her thin finger. Her violet eyes twinkled with mischief as though she knew exactly what he was up to. “We’re closing up.” Turning her head towards Lance, who was steadily approaching the bar, she said, “I’ll leave you two alone now.” She twirled a butter knife between her fingers and then slammed it down between Keith’s middle and index fingers. “Remember: you hurt him, I hurt you.”
Keith plucked the knife out of the counter top and returned it to her. “Noted,” he replied, smirking all the while she was huffing. Nyma tossed it into the sink and plastered a grin onto her red lips the moment Lance reached them. “Hey, handsome,” she greeted the brunet teasingly.

“Hey, Nyma,” Lance returned just as lightly. “Busy night?”

She rolled her eyes. “As busy as a Tuesday night can get.”

“Fair enough,” Lance replied before turning his attention to Keith. “We need to talk.”

“We need to talk about a lot of things,” Keith remarked dryly.

Lance narrowed his eyes and laughed sarcastically before pulling Keith away from the bar by the wrist. They settled on the stairs, away from everybody else, and Lance was quick to ask, “What the hell are you thinking, Keith?”

“I told you,” Keith said firmly, “I want to join you.” He lifted the goggles from around his neck, pulling it over his head, and handed it over to Lance. “Here, a peace offering.”

“You can’t be serious,” Lance hissed as he snatched his goggles away from the Paladin—soon to be former Paladin, if Keith was playing his cards right. “Tell me you’re joking.”

Keith frowned. “I’m not joking,” he declared. “This is serious, Lance. I want to help you. I want to help your cause.”

Never once did Lance look away. His oceanic blues were frighteningly calm as he studied Keith, trying to search for any tells. After a lengthy pause, Lance asked, “Why?”

“We both know that the Galra can’t be left to their own devices,” Keith said. “I want to help you stop them.” He sighed as his fingers twitched with the need to hold onto Lance’s hands, to ascertain that Keith was there with him, that Keith would be there for him. “Do you remember that morning in your apartment? You were watching the news, and you said that everything—the Paladins, the Galra—were a part of some vicious cycle. You said that the only way to stop it was to take away the problem entirely—at its roots, right? I want in on that. I want to find this root cause, whatever it is, and then stop it. I want that as much as you do.” Keith pursed his lips and added, more hesitantly, “And I want you to know that you don’t have to fight these battles alone.”

Lance shook his head, still refusing to accept it, and insisted, “You’re a hero though. You belong in the spotlight, saving people! People who look up to you!”

Keith smiled. “You don’t need to be a Paladin to be a hero, Lance,” he stated, reciting Asako-obasan’s words calmly. “You just need to do what’s right, and what I think is right is helping you. I can’t let you do this alone.”

“I can handle myself,” Lance protested weakly.

Keith was sure that Lance had known that particular argument had fallen flat though. Keith knew that Lance could handle himself, but…it crushed him to carry the burden all by himself. He was lonely. Lance wanted to go home to his family. He wanted to go home to his friends. Keith would make sure that Lance would get to go home, and in order to do that, the Galra had to be stopped—by any and all means.

“You can’t do this,” Lance whispered.

“I can,” Keith persisted, “and I will.”
“Don’t,” Lance pleaded with him. “Please, this is my fight.”

“It’s as much my fight as it is yours,” Keith argued. “You’re not the only person who’ve lost someone to the Galra, Lance. I have my own stake in this, too. You can’t stop me.”

“Keith, think this through one more time,” Lance insisted.

“I’m done thinking about it, Lance,” Keith stated. “I’m tired of just thinking of all the different possibilities and what ifs, okay? There’s only one way to find out if this is what’s right or not.”

Lance shook his head. “You can’t back out if you go through with this, Keith.”

Keith’s eyes softened. “I know,” he said, “but at least I’ll have you there with me.” He offered Lance a smile and remarked, “I guess you’re stuck with me.” Standing up, Keith nearly continued climbing up the stairs until Lance reached out and grasped his wrist.

“There’s no turning back, Keith,” Lance repeated. “I hope you know what you’re doing—for your sake.”

“There’s no room for second guessing,” Keith said as he reluctantly pulled away from Lance.

He marched up the stairs, and only a few beats later did he hear Lance’s footsteps behind him. His hand hovered over the door leading into the club owner’s office, and there was a moment where he hesitated, feeling Lance’s eyes burn into him.

“You can turn around now,” Lance said, “before it’s too late.”

“Nice try,” Keith mumbled before resting his hand on the doorknob.

He knocked roughly against the wood, and a gruff voice answered, “Come in!”

Keith twisted the doorknob and pushed the door open, only to find himself staring into glowering eyes. “Did you need something from me?” the older man inquired brusquely. His gaze briefly trailed towards Lance, eyeing the goggles in the brunet’s hand, before returning their focus back to Keith. Still, Keith tried his damnedest not to let the older man intimidate him.

“I want in on your operations,” Keith stated confidently. “I want to be a part of whatever you’re trying to pull against the Galra.”

“And why should I let you in?” he asked coolly, leaning back in his seat. “You didn’t even ask nicely.” He never once removed his eyes from Keith and commented in an almost icy manner, “What makes you think that I’d give you a chance? If you’re anything like your mother, which you are—frighteningly so—then you’d walk away from our cause, Red Lion.”

Keith’s eyes widened, and he whirled around to Lance, who stared at the man at the desk with eyes just as wide as Keith’s. “I didn’t tell!” Lance immediately protested. “I swear!”

A scowl marred Keith’s lips. “How did you know who I am? How do you know about my mother?” Keith practically snarled at the older man—not the wisest decision he’s ever made, sure. Keith has made a lot of mistakes in his past though.

“You did not hide it very well,” he remarked. “I knew that Reyes had been caught by Red Lion and had been in hiding for the last week, so Red Lion was the only one who could have had possession of those goggles—the same goggles you carried into the club that Reyes is currently holding. Furthermore, I knew from the other night that you were your mother’s son. Your resemblance is
uncanny. I knew her more than you ever did,” he replied shortly. “Did you think Kogane was a hero all her life?”

Keith pursed his lips. “What are you saying?” he forced out as calmly as he could.

“You have to join the Alliance,” was all the information that the other man offered Keith.

“And?” Keith demanded.

The club owner didn’t respond, only scrutinising Keith with his eyes, before stating at long last, “So you really don’t know.”

Keith’s scowl deepened. “No shit—no, I don’t,” Keith hissed.

Once more, the older man studied him at length, and Keith was just about ready to lose it until he said, “Then I suppose I shall enlighten you on behalf of your late mother, lion cub. Take a seat, Keith Kogane.” He gestured to the seat across from his desk, but Keith refused to budge.

“How do you know my name?”

“Your mother told me,” he answered shortly. Keith didn’t respond and kept his silence, so the older man proceeded, “Your mother was one of us, and we were part of the Galra.”

Keith whipped around to Lance for a second time, eyes wide and betrayed. “You’re Galra?” he spat.

Lance narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms. “It’s like the conversation from last night never happened,” he grumbled. Indignation coloured his tone as he “Does it sound like I would be Galra?”

“But my mother was?” Keith seethed, turning back to the older man, who continued observe the scene quietly.

“Reyes has never been Galra,” the older man stated, “but your mother was, yes.”

“I’m supposed to believe that?” Keith nearly screeched, incredulous. “My mother was a hero!”

“Believe whatever you want,” he said. “I cannot dictate your thoughts, but these are facts you are turning away from, lion cub. Your mother was Galra, and as was I. Our group began as a faction of dissenting Galra, and we broke away from them—though we have moles on the inside to feed us more information.

“Now while you may think that your mother was a hero, to us, she might as well have been a traitor had we been less understanding.”

Keith narrowed his eyes. “Explain,” he demanded.

“Kogane had a warrior heart,” the older man explained. “Believe it or not, the Galra used to protect the city back when the police were inefficient. They were an underground vigilante group that provided services to the local businesses, but once the Supers rose and the Alliance formed, they sought a greater power to up their ante on the same playing field.

“Their search for power ultimately corrupted them and skewed their cause. We broke apart from them with great difficulty. We were man-hunted for the most part in the early years as betrayers, and those of us who survived—your mother included—sought refuge by starting our own organisation. It’s small, but our network expands across the city to include those who’ve grown discontent with
the Galra. Your mother, however, left only a letter and disappeared some time after we’ve obtained this estate.”

He reached into a drawer and pulled out an envelope, aged and torn. He flung it onto the surface of his desk, but before Keith could reach for it, he slammed the blade of a dagger into it, impaling it onto the desk… It was a dagger that bore uncanny likeness to *Shishi no Tsume*, the Lion’s Claw, which Keith had always thought to be one of a kind.

“What do you have that knife?” Keith inquired, eyeing the older man with a great deal of suspicion.

“A friend had it made for me,” he answered. “The same friend who made one for your mother and three others. We were comrades in arms, but then she left because she was pregnant with you and wanted to raise you properly.”

Keith reached for the hilt of the dagger, admiring how similar it was to his own dagger. There were more nicks on his. On the other hand, the older man seemed to hardly ever use his, or, if he had, then he kept it in pristine condition.

“All this time, you’ve been using our blade and flaunting it in the public’s eye despite our efforts to remain separate from the Alliance,” Kolivan said, sounding disgruntled. “Give me one good reason why I ought to let you in when you’ve been causing trouble for us.”

Keith lifted the knife to pull out the letter, and despite the hole in the centre, his mother’s handwriting was perfectly legible.

*Kolivan*, it read.

*My dearest comrade and closest friend, I regret to inform you that I shall leave the Blade, but not for the reasons you assume so. I still believe in our cause—your cause now, I suppose—but this child I carry will know nothing of the world from the moment he breathes. He is an innocent life, and I do not wish for him to ever have to walk in the darkness as we have had.*

*I wish for him to live in the light, free of the cynicism and cruelty we’ve known, and in the future, when he is free to make his own decisions, he can walk his own path, carve a new one, and form his own convictions.*

*Know that I do not abandon your cause. I shall support you from the surface in any form I can, but I cannot wander to the underground for fear of this child’s safety.*

*His name is Keith, and should he ever seek you out one day, if I am no longer there for him (for careers like ours are often short-lived), please give him the answers he desires. You owe me.*

*A. Kogane*

He really didn’t know anything.

He wondered if Asako-obasan knew anything.

Shiro probably didn’t know anything. He would have been devastated to learn that his role model and mentor was once Galra.

Maybe it was time that he dug into his mother’s past as well.

“This letter doesn’t change anything,” Keith stated. “My stance hasn’t changed. I’m going to join you; face it, you need me. It’s always safer to work in teams, especially for stealth missions, and
Lance’s spotter can’t physically help him from a remote location. I want to help him, and I can. My mother believed in you, for whatever reason, and I want to know why she did. I want to understand what she did, what all of you are doing, so I’m joining.”

“It’s not something you join at your fancy,” Kolivan warned. “I cannot have you joining because you felt like it and leaving because you’ve had enough. As per your mother’s request, I have told you what I know, and her debt can be considered repaid. I am not obligated to let you join in our mission.”

“I know that,” Keith insisted. “I’ve already fucked up my job for you guys already. Technically, I’m impeding a federal investigation whether my colleagues are aware of it or not, and, honestly, I would rather have that they not know. I could have told them about Lance, and now I could tell them about you. Don’t you think that you owe me now? How are you going to buy my silence?

“Listen, I’m supposed to be a superhero whom kids and other ordinary civilians look up to, but I can’t even tell them what justice means. I want to learn. I will take your secrets with me to my grave if you just give me a chance.”

Kolivan didn’t utter a single word and only studied Keith with narrowed eyes as though to pick out his flaws and weaknesses. Lance, on the other hand, refrained from making any noise during the entire exchange, and that was what had unnerved Keith.

“Fine,” Kolivan acquiesced, “but I’ll take something from you as compromise.”


“I’ll take Reyes’ life,” Kolivan stated.

Keith tensed. “You can’t,” he hissed.

“I can,” he assured the young man in a haunting echo of Keith’s previous words, “and I will. You fess up to the Alliance, the Garrison, or the police, and I’ll hold Reyes accountable. He brought you here, after all, and since you seem to care for him, I’m sure you want to keep him out of trouble. Are we clear?”

Keith glowered at the older man. “Crystal,” he seethed.

“You can remain with the Voltron Alliance,” Kolivan added. “It would be useful to know of their location to prevent future… mishaps.” He glanced at Lance briefly.

“Right,” Keith grunted.

“Then we’ve reached an accordance,” Kolivan declared. “Reyes, have Gunderson add him to the network.”

“Sure thing, Boss,” Lance replied calmly. He glanced over at Keith and said, “Come on, let’s get going.” He pulled at Keith’s wrist and moved away when Keith tried to lace their fingers together. Closing the door behind them, Lance told Keith, “Maybe Nyma told you already, but—now that you’re a part of the Blade of Marmora—I figured I should tell you myself: I don’t date co-workers. It makes things complicated.” Lance forced his eyes away from Keith, refusing another confrontation. “We’re rivals, remember? Even if we are technically working together now.”

Keith… might have been expecting this, but he never thought it would hurt so much.

“That’s fine,” Keith assured him. It wasn’t. “Let me take you home though.” He paused and then
tacked rather meekly, “Please?”

Lance pursed his lips before nodding hesitantly, still refusing to meet his eyes. This time, he followed Keith to his bike and couldn’t help but comment, “What happened to Scarlet?”

“She stands out too much,” Keith answered.

“And Obsidian doesn’t?” Lance retorted.

“You noticed? All of the tells had been painted over,” Keith mused, slightly impressed. Asako-obasan had given him Obsidian after fixing her up and painting over the old logos of his mother’s sponsor companies from twelve years ago. Keith kicked up the stand and pushed the start engine button, letting Obsidian’s engine purr quietly. He relished the awed expression on Lance’s face before chastising himself.

He was only going to make this harder on the both of them.

“My dad and I were fans, remember?” Lance reminded. “Honestly, if you hadn’t told me about your mom, I would have guessed that your bike was a replica. There are a lot of Scarlet and Obsidian replicas around the world, you know? Since it was you though…”

“You want a lift or no?” Keith asked almost shyly, handing over his helmet.

Lance rolled his eyes. “Of course I want a lift! It’s Obsidian!” Lance theatrically accepted the helmet and plopped it onto his head. He slipped behind Keith, and Keith stiffened, tensing up, as he felt Lance’s warmth press against him from behind. His long arms wrapped around his middle, and Keith had to remind himself that this wasn’t the first time they’d done this… Nevertheless, he couldn’t help but feel a little thrill every single time.

He wondered if he could ever get over Lance.

He wondered if Lance had already gotten over him.

Keith stopped wondering and took to the city streets.

At least he still had the little moments between them.

(Today – 8:15 AM)

**Pidgeot has added Newbie to the chat.**

**Pidgeot has changed Newbie’s name to Dark Knight.**

**Pidgeot: I don’t trust you but Lance and Hunk do**

**Pidgeot: GM accepted you for some reason, too.**

**Pidgeot: So he gave you and Lance a mission.**

**Pidgeot: Be online tonight at 10 pm.**

**Pidgeot: Lance can brief you on our game rules.**

**Lancer™: Pidgeotto has evolved to Pidgeot!**
“Hi, I’m looking for a Keith Kogane,” he heard Lance’s voice—of all people—echo in the empty lobby of Voltron Towers.

“Sir, you’re not allowed to bring cats in here,” the receptionist replied as politely as possible.

Yeah, Keith thought as he approached the front desk, that was definitely Lance. Now that he was out of the elevator, he could easily spot the other man’s tall, lithe figure leaning against the front desk. He was dressed in a white long-sleeved shirt with the sleeves rolled to his elbows underneath a black waistcoat that laced in the back, the ends of the ribbon tied into a neat bow, with soft pink jeans and black ankle boots. A guitar case was slung over his shoulder.

Azura, as usual, was perched on his shoulder, and this time, she wore a pink silken collar shaped like a bow to match her owner with a black leash clipped to her harness to ensure that she didn’t wander too far.

“Is that Lance?” Shiro asked from beside him.

“There’s nobody here but you and me. Are you allergic?” Lance asked with an incredulous tone.

“Yup,” Keith answered shortly as he picked up his pace.

“Well, no…” the receptionist replied to Lance.

“So, there’s no problem, right? Or at least I hope so. Right after I see Keith, I’ll be out of your hair—love the shine, by the way. What shampoo and conditioner do you use?”

“Uh… Pantene?”

“Lance,” Keith hissed, “what are you doing here?”

Lance beamed at the receptionist, and his charming smile was enough to make her flush. A spark of irritation flickered in Keith’s mind, causing his head to throb with a dull ache for a second, before it was gone. “Never mind,” he chirped. “I found him! It’ll only take a second!” Latching onto Keith’s wrist, Keith smothered the warmth rushing to his cheeks as he followed Lance out the doors.

Lance set aside his guitar case as they sat down on a nearby bench. Azura leapt from Lance’s shoulder into his lap, making herself comfortable, and while Lance began to comb his fingers through her fur, Keith repeated his earlier question, “What are you doing here, Lance?”

“I was bored,” Lance confessed with a shrug of his shoulders. He leaned in closer to Keith’s ear and whispered, “I have too much free time ever since Kolivan made me quit my other jobs.” His words brushed against the shell of his ear, and Keith shoved his embarrassment to the back of his mind, refusing to let redness stain his cheeks. Pulling away, Lance admitted, “I did have a reason to come see you though.”
“You couldn’t have texted me?” Keith inquired incredulously. “Or send me a private message through Pidge’s app?”

“Pidge would have monitored our conversation if we used her app,” Lance said, “and I would have sent you a text… but I didn’t want to risk the information being tracked. I decided to visit you instead since I was going crazy waiting for my shift at the club to start anyway. I’m probably going to get ice cream after this—I dunno—but if I get ice cream, I can’t share it with Azura.”


“See, I’m not sure where that myth started,” Lance began, “but cats are just like you—finicky and lactose intolerant.”

Keith frowned. “I’m not finicky,” he protested. “I’m pretty sure that’s you.”

Lance crinkled his nose. “Details,” he said dismissively. “Anyway, ice cream has milk and sugar, which is bad for her. I’ll probably have to stop by a pet store and check out their frozen section to see if they have any kitty-friendly ice cream.”

“I could go with you,” Keith offered without a second thought. “I mean, it is my lunch break.” He could just ditch Shiro, right? It probably wasn’t cool, but Shiro would understand. Shiro left him for Allura every now and then anyway—even if it was because Keith was called out by his aunt for lunch. Shiro could join Shay and Allura for the day.

“Nah, it’s cool,” Lance assured him. “You don’t have to. I was just going to chill at the park with Azura anyway.” He gestured towards his guitar and said, “I figured I could get some practice in. I haven’t played my guitar for a while.”

Keith blinked and mentioned, “You usually carry it with you though.”

“Yes,” Lance said amusedly, “you carry around a bat bag, but you don’t know shit about baseball. Why is that?”

Oh.

Keith cleared his throat, ignoring how his ears warmed with embarrassment.

“Anyway, back to the point,” Lance declared, smugness curving his lips into a cocky smirk at Keith’s flustered expression, “I came to tell you to carpool with Hunk when you both are done with work. I want you to meet Pidge because we have to go over some ground rules.”

“Rules?” Keith echoed.

“Yeah,” Lance affirmed. “If we’re going to play this game, we have to play it right.”

The gears in Keith’s head clicked immediately as he recalled their earlier chat conversation. “Pokémon?” he blurted out. “You guys never answered by the way.”

“Pidge had class,” Lance explained. He paused and then added, “Or maybe she was laughing at you. I was.”

Keith frowned. “Thanks.”

Lance beamed. “No problem!” he chirped. After a beat, he said, “It’s not Pokémon. We have codewords and code names, you know?”
Keith nodded as more gears clicked into place, this time fitting into the right places. “So… we’re meeting tonight then?” he asked.

“Yup,” Lance replied, popping the ‘p’ at the end. “We have to make it quick though since I start my shift at six. I mean, you’re free to follow since we have to introduce you to the rest of the team anyway—or, at least, most of them. They might know you, but it’d help if you knew who’s part of the campaign.” Plucking Azura off his lap and cradling her in one arm, Lance slung his guitar case back onto his shoulder. “Anyway, I’ll see you later, Mullet.” Azura crawled back onto his shoulder.

“Mullet?” Keith echoed.

“You can’t deny that you have a mullet,” Lance teased him with a cheeky grin. “You’re the only dude I know who has one.”

Keith frowned. “I don’t have a mullet.”

“Call it whatever you want,” Lance returned, “but it’s definitely a mullet. That’s how I recognised you at The Witch’s Cauldron.”

Just as Lance had left, unfortunately, Shiro exited the front doors and stood behind Keith, who lingered in his spot on the bench, and said, “See? Everything turned out all right in the end, didn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Keith managed before standing up and following Shiro to the deli down the street. He tried to keep up with Shiro’s small talk, but after receiving his order to-go, Keith couldn’t help but ask, “Do you mind if I… if I ate at the park?” He glanced at the time on his phone and said, “I’ll be back to headquarters just in time to restart my shift.”

Shiro smiled. “Any particular reason why?”

The older man definitely knew the reason why, Keith thought, but he didn’t bother giving him an answer. He only said, “No particular reason.”

“Of course it’s fine,” Shiro replied. “I’ll go hang out with Allura, Shay, and Sven. They’re probably eating back at the office. I’ll see you later, Keith.”

With that, Keith bolted to the park. There was only one major park in Monstro City, and while it was a family favourite for picnicking and playing, it was also a rather famous gathering spot for artists, dancers, and musicians. Lance should be there, Keith thought desperately as he booked it across the street once the crossing signal changed.

Please be there, Keith thought as he leapt over a fence. It was a shortcut.

Please be there, Keith thought as he turned the corner, heading back into the main streets and manoeuvring between throngs of people once more.

Please be—here, Keith thought, standing still in place as he found Lance in a patch of grass within the gardens. His chest heaved up and down in short breaths, slowly regaining its normal pace, as he felt a weight lift off his shoulders. He grinned and jogged towards Lance, who was leisurely strumming a guitar while Azura wandered a short distance away, leaping in flowers. Azura had taken notice of him first, and she pranced towards him before pouncing onto his leg, clinging to the fabric of his black jeans by her claws. He felt them scratch against his skin but took no mind. Instead, he laughed, and that had caught Lance’s attention instead.
The musician’s eyes brightened, expression softening, as Keith joined him, Azura in his arms. There was an empty cup of ice cream and a plastic wrapper for a “Frozen Kitty Treat” set off to the side.

“What are you doing here?” Lance asked.

“I figured I’d keep you company,” Keith answered. “Since you’ve been so bored, I took some pity on you.”

Lance snorted. “Whatever you say, hothead.”

“What are you playing?” Keith asked. “I’ve never heard this song before.”

Granted, Keith didn’t know very many songs.

Lance huffed and replied, “I would hope not.” He grinned haughtily and added, “It’s my own composition. I started it for an assignment back in my first year of university, but I never finished it. Since I have time now, I figured that I might as well.”

After that, they sat together amiably—neither one of them exchanging a single word—with only the sound of Lance’s guitar drifting between the two of them, trying to finish his incomplete song. Maybe they’d be okay, Keith thought, but never once did he try to close the precious few centimetres between them.

__________________________________________________________________________________________

Not everything was okay though, as he discovered later. Hunk was even more a nervous wreck than he was at meetings, and it was driving Keith up the wall. (Honestly, it was a miracle that the two haven’t crashed yet.) Hunk drummed his fingers against the steering wheel with his left hand and tried to adjust the radio station with his right, finally settling on the same pop song Keith heard Lance play at the club—only not as heavily remixed.

“The way he makes me feel like,
The way he makes me feel,
I never seemed to act so stupid.
Oh here we go
He a part of me now,
He a part of me,
So where he goes,
I follow, follow, follow, oh…”

“You know this song?” Hunk asked Keith. “I never really took you as someone who listens to Shakira or Rihanna.”

“I don’t,” Keith answered. “Lance played it once though—at the club.”

“Oh yeah, man, Lance really likes Rihanna,” Hunk replied. “He likes a lot of different artists though; it might even be accurate to say he likes everyone. He used to write his own songs.”

“Used to?” Keith echoed.

“Yup,” Hunk answered. “Didn’t have the time any more—or well, in the past anyway.” He pulled his hand away from the radio and gripped his steering wheel tightly. “So, uh, you and Lance…” Keith flinched, and Hunk must have noticed because he didn’t continue. An awkward silence swept over the two of them before Hunk broached the topic again with a newly found determination, “Look, man. I don’t really get what your intentions are; I don’t think anybody does…but I do know that you care about Lance—like a lot—and I’m not just teasing you this time.”
“So you know about…” Keith faltered.

The song on the radio station changed to one that Keith couldn’t recognise.

Hunk sighed. “Yeah, I know,” he replied. “How else does he get his equipment? Anyway, if you’re going to be doing this,” Hunk continued, “then take care of him. Lance thinks that he can take care of things himself—not because he can but that he has to. That only gets him into more trouble.”

Keith bit his tongue to refrain from commenting.

“Are you going to be okay though?” Hunk asked. “Because, well, you had a thing for Lance, but Lance doesn’t date his co-workers because he thinks it’s like opening a can of worms—”

“Hunk, I’m fine,” Keith insisted. “Thanks for worrying though.”

“Dude, of course, I’m going to worry,” Hunk spluttered. “I mean, you’re my friend, too. I just hope that you know what you’re doing.”

That makes two of us, Keith thought. He watched silently as Hunk pulled up to an apartment block, parking along the curb. Keith stepped outside and followed after Hunk, waiting behind the taller man when the latter knocked against a door.

The door pulled open, revealing a head of long, tangled chestnut brown hair and glowering amber brown eyes that narrowed at the sight of Keith. “Hey, Hunk,” the teenage girl greeted the taller man amiably.

“Hey, Pidge,” he returned. He pushed Keith in front of him like he was a sacrificial offering. “This is Keith. Keith, this is Pidge.”

“Hey,” Keith greeted.

“Hey,” she replied.

“Pidge is mad because you stabbed Lance in the shoulder,” Hunk whispered into Keith’s ear. Keith reflexively tensed, and his fingers balled into his fists, ignoring the unsettling warmth of bloodstains still imprinted within his memory. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m pissed at that, too, but I know you while she doesn’t. I get why you did that—doesn’t mean you should have though.”

Pidge pulled the door open to let the two of them in. There was something about Pidge that seemed familiar although Keith couldn’t quite pinpoint it exactly—until he passed by a family photo. “Matt,” Keith breathed. “You’re Matt’s sister?”

Matthew Holt was an investigator at the Garrison and Shiro’s closest friend. Unfortunately, he had disappeared during an investigation two—almost three—years ago and had been declared MIA. The Garrison had stopped looking for him, deeming it a lost cause, although it was never announced publicly. The news was only disclosed to his family and colleagues, and neither had taken the news very well. Shiro had called bullshit, but there was nothing he could do when his hands were tied with the Voltron Alliance.

“I am,” she answered.

“You’re only sixteen then? What are you doing involved with—”

“I’m looking for my brother,” Pidge interrupted him, “but that isn’t important right now.”
“Don’t underestimate her, hothead,” Lance’s teasing voice broke into the tense air. “She’s been doing this longer than I have. She knows what she’s doing.” Lance sat on the floor in front of an open guitar case that was filled with different gun parts, disassembling them and cleaning the individual parts before reassembling them. To his right, Azura was passing an empty shell back and forth between her paws.

It was rather surreal.

“I’m going to order pizza,” Hunk declared as he excused himself to the kitchen.

“What’s the meaning of this, Lance?” Keith inquired, awkwardly standing in front of the brunet. Pidge had opted to occupy the entire length of the couch with her and her laptop.

“I’m pretty sure you got the message,” Lance replied. He patted on the spot to his left, and Keith hesitantly joined him, staying away from the three guns that had caused him a great deal of trouble in the past. “I’m supposed to be explaining the ‘game rules’ to you, remember? I figured this was a good way to introduce you to Pidge.” Keith chanced a glance over his shoulder and noticed that Pidge was adamantly studying her laptop screen. “She’ll warm up to you.”

“So, what are these… game rules?” Keith asked.

“It’s kind of a code,” Lance answered. “Basically, you have until tonight to practise our language, but I only have a couple of minutes to teach you the basics before I gotta start my shift at Empire. Pidge will walk you through the rest, but you have to walk her home once you guys are done here.” He punctuated his declaration with a frown and a raised finger. Then he narrowed his eyes and said, “I’ll be pissed if you don’t.” He returned to polishing a gun barrel. “You’ll also be meeting some of the Blade tonight, too. Kolivan wants to give us our first mission tonight, but I think it’s a test.”

Keith pursed his lips. “What kind of test?”

“I’m not sure,” Lance admitted. “It might be to see how well we work together or how devoted you are. I can’t ever really tell with him. You just need to pass.”

“Easier said than done,” Keith muttered.

“Not gonna lie,” Lance replied, “but he might go easy on us. He doesn’t want to make any risky move with a new variable in the equation, you know? He probably just wants to see what you do.”

“That… doesn’t really make me feel better,” Keith remarked.

“It wasn’t supposed to,” Lance said.

Pidge snorted.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is dedicated to everyone who really, really wanted vigilante!Keith; that had been my intention all along! B)

Title taken from lyrics of “Can’t Remember to Forget You” by Shakira, featuring Rihanna.
Also, fun fact: the silver Honda Civic that was thrown in the third scene was my Honda Civic. The bottom of my bumper has seen better days... (I've never gotten in an accident. This is the only problem: I don't see the parking blocks; I feel them.)

And the fact that Al Capone got arrested for tax evasion and not any gang crimes just kills me.
Suppose I Never Ever Met You (suppose we never fell in love)

Chapter Notes

Ahhh! I'm really excited to post this chapter! It was one of my favourites to write! Most of my projects are out of the way; I have two submissions left and a handful of exams.

You guys are so nice and supportive and understanding that I hope this chapter is a treat for you and gives you cavities because I tried to make it extra sweet like all of you :)

The title and lyrics in the chapter are taken from Regina Spektor's "Fidelity."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“That was the worst mission run in the entire history of the Blade ever,” Pidge griped, throwing a peanut butter cookie at the two scowling young men seated on her brother’s couch. Lance plucked the cookie off where it landed on his shirt and tossed it into Keith’s lap in an act of petulance. Keith’s brows furrowed, expression souring, and he took the cookie and flung it back at Pidge. It hit her chest and then clattered to the floor on top of the scrap paper littering Matt’s apartment, and that only made her scowl even more. Lance hadn’t even thought that was humanly possible, but of course, Pidge of all people managed to prove him wrong.

Pidge made a show of plucking the cookie from the pile of scrap paper scribbled with notes and calculations and eating it in front of them. No doubt, she had been trying to figure out the possibilities of whether or not they would succeed with the mission Kolivan had assigned them. After what had happened tonight, Lance doubted it. The moment they had returned to Pidge’s hideout, the sixteen year old girl had forced them onto the sofa with a fierce glower.

While Lance was still dressed in his usual gear, mask bandana pulled down around his neck and his goggles resting at the crown of his head, Keith wore different clothing for a change. He wore his black hooded motorcycle jacket zipped up all the way over his black hero-suit that he typically wore under his red coat. Instead of his red combat boots, he wore black motorcycle boots, and he actually wore normal leather gloves that weren’t fingerless for once as well. He carried around a Mizuno bat bag to conceal his katana and dagger, which were wrapped with gauze to hide their unique design that Red Lion normally flaunted in front of the cameras. The only thing he wore that was red was the bandana he had used to cover up everything below his nose, which now—like Lance—was pulled down around his neck.

When Lance first saw him, it had thrown him off his game. Lance may have told him to dress in something discreet that wouldn’t draw a lot of attention, but he never thought how much he would miss seeing Keith wearing red. Rather, he hadn’t seen Keith wear red that often in the past few days—not that he had been paying attention or anything! It was just odd, okay?

“Are you even listening to me, Lance?” Pidge hissed.


“GM gave you guys three days to finish this mission,” Pidge cried. “For what was supposed to be a simple mission, I thought that was generous, but now I’m freaking out because you guys can’t get your fucking shit together for five minutes!” She threw her arms into the air, flailing, and shrieked,
“All you had to do was follow him! But you lost him immediately just because of your disgusting unresolved sexual tension! What the hell happened to the drift compatibility you guys had back when you took out the werewolf?!”

Keith made a sound like a dying cat in the back of his throat—probably to voice his dissent. Lance didn’t even turn to stare at him, bewildered, like Pidge did. Instead, Lance kept his attention focused on the ever so frazzled Pidge, who nearly pulled out all of her hair in front of him, and drawled flatly, “Try saying that a little louder, Pidgeot, because I don’t think Africa could hear you all that well.”

Pidge laughed sarcastically, staring at him with the eyes of a dead fish, and then grumbled, “Very funny, Lance.” Her eyes narrowed at him as she said, “You’re going to fix this. You still have two days left to get something accomplished, and I’m going to fix this. We can fix this. This is fixable.”

“Pidge…?” Lance called out to the tiny brunette. “You okay over there?”

She scowled at him once again and then pointed a finger at the two of them. “Just sit there and behave!” she chastised before plopping back onto the floor. She opened up her laptop and typed away, her screen hidden from Lance and Keith’s view. Pidge reached for another peanut butter cookie from the platter of snacks she had set aside for herself to munch on during their mission to tail Prorok, a buyer and dealer for the Galra.

According to the gossip Rolo and Nyma had picked up, he regularly meets up with someone to secure a fresh supply of the wonder drug. It was Lance and Keith’s mission to follow him, confirm the identity of their supplier, and identify the wonder drug itself. Kolivan had given them a limit of three days to complete the mission, and already they had botched one day because Keith couldn’t listen to plans.

(Keith would later complain that Lance had quit halfway, and Lance would own up to it because he wasn’t going to work with with someone who can’t even listen to his teammates.)

“Check your phones,” Pidge demanded.

Lance sighed dramatically and fished out his phone, entering his PIN and unlocking it. “What are we supposed to—?” Lance cut his sentence halfway when he got an email notification from Pidge. He pulled up his email inbox and tapped on the newest notification, immediately frowning. “Pidge, what the hell is this?”

“Tickets to the local aquarium,” Pidge replied as a matter-of-factly. She looked particularly smug. “You know,” she continued, “the one you were going to apply to like two years ago before you landed the teaching job at the music shop. You said you liked going there, right?”

Lance pinched his nose. “Why are you giving us tickets to the aquarium?”

“You two are going on a date,” Pidge answered tersely.

Lance blanched, and Keith went ramrod still beside him. Every muscle in Keith’s body was tense and stiff. Narrowing his eyes in a blatant show of suspicion, Lance asked her, “Why do you want us to go on a date? Pidge, I remember us having this conversation like two days ago. You didn’t want me to date him.”

“That was two days ago when he was still just Red Lion,” Pidge replied. “Now he’s got just as much at stake here as the rest of us.” She narrowed her eyes at Keith, and Keith looked away, unable to meet her gaze. “Anyway, it doesn’t have to be a romantic date. It doesn’t have to be anything at all. Just use the damn opportunity to fix this—this disgusting sexual tension or ‘unrequited pining’ or
whatever the fuck *this* is—because it’s hella awkward.”

Stealing a glimpse of Keith’s expression, Lance could only notice the guilt Keith wore, the guilt he tried to hide. Sighing, he nudged Keith lightly and said, “It’s not his fault, Pidge. GM practically owns my ass anyway, so it’s nothing new. He’s just going to give me shit if Keith fucks up.”

That, of course, didn’t seem to make Keith feel any better.

“He’s not going to do anything to me,” Lance continued, “because I’m his favourite.”

“Well, he’s going to do *something* if you keep dancing around each other on missions,” Pidge responded easily. “It’d be bad if you went out of your way to avoid each other while you’re approximately a foot away. It’s a team-building exercise.”

“If it’s a team-building exercise,” Keith said, “how come you don’t have a ticket?”

“Because I’m not going to be third-wheeling a date when it already feels like I’ve been third-wheeling our missions,” she answered easily. “Also, I’m sixteen, a high school student, and I still have to work on a history project that’s due in two days.”

“Have you started?” Lance questioned with a quirk of his brows.

Pidge snorted. “Of course not. Does it look like I’ve been working on it? No, I’ve been working on keeping your asses out of trouble,” she stated. “You’re lucky that you didn’t get caught.”

“How did you even pay for them?” Lance inquired. “Isn’t it like thirty bucks per ticket?”

“Don’t worry about that,” Pidge replied.

“And this guy gets off work at five.” Keith gawked at Lance as though he couldn’t believe that Lance remembered, and Lance couldn’t help but feel mildly offended. Of course he remembered; they used to eat dinner together every now and then.

“Take the day off!” Pidge exclaimed, throwing her arms into the air once more. “I don’t care how! Just make it work!” She stood up and tossed all of her papers into the trash can before stowing the rest of her peanut butter cookies away into a plastic bag, shoving it into the front pocket of her hoodie. “Anyway, I have to get back before my parents freak out. I was supposed to buy milk two hours ago.”

“Well, jeez, what the fuck have you been doing?” Lance asked sardonically.

“I’m going to tell them I got distracted in the peanut butter section,” Pidge replied. She waved her phone in front of his face and said, “In fact, I already did.”

“When I was your age, my mom didn’t even let me go to a sleepover across the street,” Lance grumbled. Hell, Mami still called every other day just to make sure he was eating properly and sleeping regularly, especially after he left Tío Raymón’s restaurant. “How are your parents okay with this?”

“They’re not really,” Pidge replied, “but I leave before they can say no. When I get back, they’ll be mad. They usually try to ground me, but it doesn’t really work out that well because I have school projects to finish using my laptop. Besides, I know where they hide my laptop even if they do confiscate it.”
Lance shook his head and stood up. He glanced back at Keith, feeling the remnants of anger simmer down. His scowl fell, and he stretched out a hand, offering it to the shorter man. Keith accepted it hesitantly, letting Lance pull him onto his feet. “I’ll take Pidge to buy her damn milk, and then I’m going to walk her home,” he told Keith as he handed over his bat bag. Lance himself shouldered his guitar case and followed Pidge out of the apartment.

“Do you want me to—”

Lance shook his head. “Don’t wait up or anything,” Lance said. “I’ll be fine getting home. Besides, you took your bike here, right? I doubt there’s room for three.” He nearly laughed at the petulant frown Keith wore, refusing to admit—at least—that it was cute. Keith was cute. Even if he was frustrating.

He waited as Pidge closed the door and locked it tight before following her down the steps and onto the pavement. Before they could all go their separate ways, Pidge crossed her arms and looked between the two of them expectantly. Keith fidgeted uncomfortably, rubbing at the back of his neck, before Lance took it upon himself to break the tension in the air.

“I’m planning on roaming the city with Azura tomorrow morning,” Lance informed Keith, “and I start my shift at Empire at six. We don’t have to go to the aquarium or anything, but if you want to do something, I have all the time in the world. I’m sure I can pencil you in somewhere.”

Keith nodded. “Okay,” he replied. He looked up and met Lance’s eye for the first time that night. “I’ll… I’ll text you and let you know.”

“Cool,” Lance responded, averting his eyes the moment he felt his heart squeeze uncomfortably. He pushed down at the fluttering elation he felt in his stomach. “Cool,” he repeated, though it sounded more like he was trying to tell himself to be cool. “So, uh… I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Keith nodded and walked over to his bike. He opened the back compartment to take out his helmet and slipped it over his head. Lance watched as he swung a leg over the side of the bike, kicking up the stand and readying it. Keith eventually raised his hand in an awkward wave, and Lance found himself returning it.

They lingered there for a second or two, neither of them budging, until Pidge elbowed Lance in the ribs, snapping, “Hurry up, Romeo. I seriously need to bring back milk or else my parents are going to get suspicious.”

Lance huffed and pivoted on his heel. He tried not to steal a glance over his shoulder, tried not to turn his head as he heard Keith’s engine purr, as he heard Keith take off into the night, tried not to watch as Keith sped down the streets.

“I thought you were pissed at him for not listening to orders,” Pidge grumbled.

“Oh, I am,” Lance returned, “but that’s about as effective as staying mad at a puppy.”

Pidge snorted. “You two are so gross,” she griped. “I never want a relationship as gross as yours, and you two aren’t even together yet.”

“And we won’t be,” Lance protested. “I don’t date my co-workers. You know that. I broke it off with Nyma the minute I joined the guild.”

“She still regrets it,” Pidge commented. “She said she shouldn’t have introduced you to GM. If she hadn’t, you probably would have introduced her to your family instead. Then you both would have lived content lives where you spoil her and she lives spoilt.”
“She’s over me,” Lance argued. “We’re just friends now.”

In fact, Lance never actually figured out if feelings—real feelings—were actually involved during the length of their relationship to this day. Sure, he cared about her—just as much as he cared about anyone else he considered a friend—but at the time, he was lonely and she was lonely and they were probably just licking each other’s wounds the entire relationship now that he thought about it.

Nyma probably knew that, too. She never tried to chase after him, never tried to convinced him not to break it off, never really did anything but try to protect him when his life was on the line.

“Were you not listening to me?” Pidge quipped. “I didn’t say she still had feelings for you. She just knew that, if she hadn’t introduced you to GM, then you would have spent the rest of your life making sure she was taken care of. That’s the kind of boyfriend you are, apparently.” Pidge glanced at him critically. “That’s also why you didn’t want Keith to join, isn’t it? And why you refuse to get into a relationship with him.”

Lance huffed and hip checked her. “Sometimes I hate it when you try to analyse me,” he griped. “Only because you know I’m right,” Pidge retorted.

“Well,” Lance admitted, “you’re not wrong.”

“What are you looking at?”

Keith lifted his eyes from his phone and met with his aunt’s curious gaze. “It’s a ticket to the local aquarium,” he answered, replying in Japanese. “Lance’s friend sent it to me, but it’s only for tomorrow. I have work during the hours of operation though, so I can’t make it.”

Asako-obasan plucked the phone out of his hands. She scrolled up and down the email before commenting, “The tickets aren’t very cheap… so you should go. You’ve accumulated sick pay, right? It should be all right.”

“I’m supposed to be a Paladin though,” Keith protested. “I can’t take a break; I’m never off-duty, really. If I take a sick day, it’s considered being on stand-by anyway. The hours I clock into the office are basically just a big façade to show that being a Paladin is considered a job. I get paid the same amount as a normal police investigator.”

“You can take a break,” Asako-obasan chastised. “In fact, you should. What is that proverb?” She switched over to English just to recite, “All work and no play makes Keith a dull boy.” A smile on her lips, she handed Keith his phone, and he pocketed the device. She ran her fingers through his hair, combing his tangled locks, and returned to speaking in Japanese. “You might be superhuman, but you’re not invincible. Call in tomorrow morning, say that you have a family emergency, and I’ll take care of the rest.”

“What?”

“Are you sure about that?” Keith asked.

“As sure as I can be,” she replied. She rested her hands on his shoulder and massaged them lightly. “You’ve been so tense lately. This will be good for you. Besides, it’s with Lance, isn’t it?” There was a mischievous gleam in her eye as she smiled. “Ask him out on a date!” she teased, pinching his cheek. “You’ve been eyeing him since you’ve first met!”

“I don’t think he’s interested,” Keith responded, batting away her hands gently. He ignored the pain in his chest the moment he heard his own words. He stood from his chair at the dining table and stepped away from his aunt, taking his now empty bowl of cereal to the sink, running it under the
water tap before starting to scrub it clean. Opting for a change of subject, Keith asked, “How’s my bike?”

“Which one?” Asako-obasan asked, watching him with obvious amusement in her expression. Her smile lingered on her lips while the mischief still hadn’t been snuffed from her dark eyes. “Scarlet or Obsidian?”

“Scarlet,” Keith answered. “It still doesn’t feel like Obsidian is really my bike.” He sighed. “She feels like my mother’s bike; I know you gave her to me… but still. It’s like I’ve never really owned her, you know? I’ve only ever had my mother’s gear—her sword, her knife, her mask—and I’m sure that if they had found her medallion, that would have also been given to me. In the end, Scarlet was the first thing that was really mine, that was really symbolic of Red Lion.”

“Your mother left you a great burden to carry on your shoulders,” Asako-obasan agreed, “but you don’t have to carry it alone, Keith. There’s me, and there’s Shiro. There’s Lance.” That was the segue she wanted in order to return full circle to the original topic. Just as Keith was drying the cereal bowl, Asako plucked it out of his hands so that he couldn’t fiddle with it and shelved it within the cupboards. Grinning at him, she said, “Now why would you say that Lance wouldn’t be interested? He’s a very nice boy, Keith. He’d be good for you.”

“He’s not looking for a relationship, Asako-obasan,” Keith said, sighing. “I don’t want to push him into something he doesn’t want.”

Asako-obasan sighed dramatically in response. “Fine, fine,” she acquiesced. “Scarlet’s fine. I just had my engineers tune up her engine for you. You haven’t run into any problems with Obsidian?”

Keith shook his head. “She’s in perfect condition.”

“Then we’re all good here,” Asako-obasan replied. “Remember to call me if any complications arise, and I’m not just talking about the bikes, Keith.” She crossed her arms and bumped into his side lightly, a soft smile lingering on her lips. “If you need anything, anything at all, don’t hesitate to call me. Also, remember to call into work and take the day off. You need it to clear your mind, you know? Maybe you need a break from this Paladin business to get your priorities straight. Have fun at the aquarium with Lance, all right?”

Keith returned her smile with a touch of reluctance. “All right,” he replied.

“Also say hi to Shiro for me,” Asako-obasan demanded. “Tell him I’m expecting an invitation from President De Altea for the Voltron Alliance’s thirtieth anniversary!”

Keith laughed. “You do know that Shiro doesn’t control who gets invited, right?” he teased. Keith returned his aunt’s bump with a little nudge of his own. “Besides, you’re guaranteed an invitation since you’re already sponsoring two heroes.”

“I better!” Asako-obasan huffed. “The Missus De Altea and Mr. Smythe throw the best parties.”

Keith grinned at his aunt, her good mood rather contagious, and mused, “I’ll tell them that when I see them.”

“Drive safe, okay?” Asako-obasan said as she walked Keith to the door. “Let’s grab breakfast in the morning—at a proper hour. Like nine.”

“Sure thing,” Keith responded. “Where do you want to meet?”

“I want dim sum,” Asako-obasan answered. “I’ll treat, so you better eat to your heart’s content,
Keith.”

“Of course,” Keith replied cheekily. “I’ll see you later.”

“You better show up,” Asako-obasan threatened lightly before she closed the door to her penthouse apartment behind her. Keith rode the elevator all the way down. The receptionist had long disappeared, probably nodded off somewhere, but considering the hour, Keith didn’t blame her. He quietly slipped into the underground parking garage and scoured the area for his bike. He kicked up the stand and swung his leg over the side before throwing on his helmet and starting the engine.

He took a second to bask in Obsidian’s quiet purr before taking to the streets. A blur of neon lights passed him by as he gained more and more speed, weaving between larger cars, covering more ground, catching as many green lights as he can. Keith slowed to a stop in front of a familiar block of apartments, tilting his head to catch sight of the lights illuminating the apartment. He stole a glimpse of a man’s silhouette dancing with his cat before just as quickly looking away. An odd mixture of guilt and relief coiled uncomfortably in his gut, dampening his mood, before he returned back to the streets, leisurely cruising back to his shared apartment with Shiro.

“You’re back late,” Shiro commented the moment Keith opened up the front door. The older man was surrounded by piles of paperwork, and if Keith had been a more sympathetic man, he would have felt sorry. However, as it was, Shiro probably would have dragged Keith into sorting through documents as well, and Keith was glad to have avoided such a fate. “How were your rounds?”

Rounds?

Oh right, Keith chastised himself. He had told Shiro that he was going for another one of those midnight patrols.

“They were all right,” Keith answered. “Strangely, the city isn’t nearly as alive at night.”

That’s because everything apparently happened underground—or so Keith had learnt.

“Everyone ought to be sleeping,” Shiro replied as he flipped a page of another file.

“You should take your own advice,” Keith responded as he marched to his bedroom. He threw his keys onto his desk and set his helmet on the surface a moment after. Stripping off his jacket, he strolled into the bathroom and commented, “You look like you’re running yourself haggard, Shiro. Give it a rest and, seriously, go to bed.”

Shiro shook his head and protested, “We’re so close to solving this mystery.”

After everything Keith had been exposed to, he kind of doubted it. There was so much of the underground they didn’t know beyond the fact that the Galra controlled the gangs. Hell, the Galra controlled more than just the gangs. They controlled the entire city. The Alliance have been trying to shut them down, but they couldn’t even place where to start since they were too busy handling all of the Super-related crimes that cropped up every other day.

They were spread too thin, and for all Keith knew, that may have been the way that the Galra would have wanted it. They wanted their attention diverted, occupied, in a way that felt as though the Alliance was making progress. Hell, they’ve probably been stagnant for the past thirty years, and the Galra have been taking advantage of that to spread their influence.

“Shiro,” Keith reiterated, “go to bed. You can’t do much if you’re exhausted anyway.”

Shiro rubbed his temples and finally caved into exhaustion. “I suppose you have a point,” he said. “If
I go to bed, I could get an early start tomorrow morning.”

“Right,” Keith responded. There was a bit of nagging guilt tugging at his conscience. “By the way,” he said, “I… I won’t be at the headquarters tomorrow. Family emergency.”

“Is Miss Asako all right?” Shiro asked with a frown.

“She’s fine,” Keith assured him hurriedly before Shiro could leap into action. “She’s just, you know, a little stressed out from her work—CEO stuff and all. She needed a break, and I’m supposed to take care of her and all that—family thing.”

“I hope she’s feeling better,” Shiro offered.

The guilt tore his conscience apart. “Yeah,” Keith replied, averting his eyes. “I’ll let her know.” To signal the end of the conversation, Keith twisted the water taps and started to brush his teeth. Shiro didn’t make another comment even as Keith left the bathroom and slipped into his room. He switched off the lights and crawled underneath his covers, pulling out his phone. He briefly checked the time—well past two in the morning—and wondered if he ought to send Lance a message. It could wait, he supposed.

Against his better instincts, Keith shot Lance a message.

[2:14 AM]

Keith: Did you get home all right?

After waiting for a few seconds, Keith pulled up his Facebook application and scrolled through his newsfeed. There wasn’t much news, considering his only friends were his fellow Paladins, his colleagues in the reparation department, and Hunk and Coran. His brows furrowed once he stumbled upon a post that Hunk had commented on—shared from another social media platform, apparently—featuring a picture of a cat that highly resembled Azura. Keith opened up the attached link that led into the cat’s Instagram profile and nearly did a double-take upon recognising Lance in one of the photos.

Princesa Azura. Turkish Angora, the profile description read, decorated with several cat and crown emojis. Rules from her kingdom in Monstro City, NY.

Keith thumbed through the photo gallery, and the more photos that he scrolled through—and dear Lord, were there hundreds of them—the more his heart melted at the mere sight of Azura. Lance probably thought he was doing God’s work with all of these photos. Honestly, Keith couldn’t find it within himself to disagree; after all, he was the one cooing over Lance’s cat.

Speaking of the devil, his phone finally vibrated with a message.

Lance: Lol, why? You worried?

Keith pursed his lips together. Of course he was worried. The city of fucking monsters wasn’t the safest place in the nation, especially at night-time! Sure, Lance could handle himself, but there was only so much that he could do.

Nevertheless, Lance saved Keith the trouble of responding because two more messages popped up on his screen.

Lance: Yeah, I got home fine.
Lance: Thanks for asking.

Keith’s thumbs moved across his keyboard before he even realised it.

Keith: It was nothing.

Keith: Do you want to do something for lunch tomorrow? Today?

Keith: It’s okay if you don’t.

Keith: But if you do, I can come pick you up for lunch and then we can go to the aquarium.

Fuck, Keith cursed his impulsive decision making tendencies. Was that too much? Was he being too much? Too clingy? Too strong? Too forward? Fuck.

Lance: Okay, sure. That sounds good.

Lance: What about your work though???

Keith: It’s fine. I got it covered.

Keith: Where do you want to eat?

Lance: Idk. Pancakes maybe???

Keith: I know a diner that serves breakfast 24/7.

Lance: Okay, cool.

Keith: I’ll see you tomorrow?

Lance: Yeah for sure!

Keith heaved a sigh of relief. Well, he reflected, at least that wasn’t a no. His phone vibrated, and Keith checked the notifications, heart dropping when he skimmed through the contents of Lance’s newest message.

Lance: I’m still mad at you though.

Swallowing his pride, Keith offered an apology, but Lance would have none of it.

Keith: I’m sorry.

Lance: Do you even KNOW what you did???

Lance: Like there’s no point in apologising if you’re just going to do it again!

He’s mad, Keith noted. He’s really mad. Taking a moment to reflect on his previous actions, Keith hoped that his prolonged silence wasn’t reason enough for Lance to stop talking to him. Admittedly, in hindsight, Keith hadn’t been particularly smart about his actions. Once he had spotted Prorok shortly after he had made an exchange with some man dressed in a grey suit, Keith had nearly leapt out of their hiding spot to apprehend him, and he would have tried to arrest him if Lance hadn’t pulled him back by the hood in time.

They were in a precarious situation. The Blade didn’t have the luxury of jumping into action and
arresting bad guys—not like the Alliance did—and Lance, while trying to keep both of their asses safe, only managed to get yelled at by Keith, who couldn’t just seem to understand the concept of being discreet in the heat of the moment. Prorok could have found them. He could have had them killed. He could have discovered the Blade—all because Keith was reckless.

Keith: I’m really sorry.

Keith: It won’t happen again.

Keith: It was a dumb mistake.

Lance: Fine. I’ll take pity on you.

Lance: Goodnight, Keith.

Keith pursed his lips and quickly sent Lance a goodnight message. Then he had backed out of the Instagram application, returning to his Facebook feed. It was Lance’s post, Keith realised, that Hunk had commented on. It was a photo that Lance had shared.

Keith worked best on impulse, and in that moment, on some kind of whim, he clicked onto Lance’s profile and sent a friend request. Before he could cancel the friend request, Keith locked his phone and set it on his bedside table. Then he rolled onto his side and closed his eyes, refusing to continually and obsessively check if Lance had accepted.

Sleep came easily to him, and if he had dreamt of his first date with Lance, then nobody else had to know.

In the morning, Keith had gotten a notification that his friend request had been accepted, and if that warmed his heart, then nobody else had to know.

The moment Lance stepped out of his apartment, rain soaked his grey utility shirt and his baby blue jeans, cuffed above his ankles. It seeped all the way through the material of his dark grey high-tops and into his socks. Rather than hurrying back inside for shelter, Lance took off his favourite galaxy snapback and let the rain dampen his hair, relishing the cold downpour with a grin. He couldn’t bring himself to step away from the gentle spring shower. (Fortunately, everything he kept on his person was safely dry inside his faux leather satchel.)

He tried not to think about the last time it had been raining, but that split second of hesitation was enough for him to relapse to the moment when he found himself staring into steely blue-grey eyes burning with rage and vigour and the moment when a blade of steel, kissed by angry red flames, pierced his left shoulder.

His fingers twitched—his shoulder aching with a phantom pain, his palms stinging with the bitter reminder—and Lance clenched his fists, trying to still the tremble in his hands. Remaining in the middle of the pavement, people navigated around him, happily oblivious and ignorant of what happens within the dark alleys of this monstrous city.

The soft purr of an engine pulled Lance back into reality. Lance frowned upon noticing that, once again, Keith was garbed almost entirely in black—black shirt, black boots, and a different black motorcycle jacket. The only exception was his pair of indigo jeans.

“That’s what you’re going to wear?” Lance mumbled. He was surprised himself to see that Keith wasn’t wearing even a splash of his usual red today and, Lance reflected, maybe a little disappointed. Keith didn’t respond and only offered a spare helmet to Lance. “No car?” he asked, raising his voice
to be heard over the rain, as he accepted the helmet.

Keith shook his head. “A car is expensive,” he explained, “and you can get to places faster on a motorcycle.”

Lance snorted and rolled his eyes. “I’m pretty sure your bikes individually are more expensive than any car,” he retorted before securing the helmet around his head. He hooked his snapback onto the strap of his satchel and then swung his leg over the purring bike. He wrapped his arms around Keith’s waist, securing the two of them while trying to keep his distance. He ignored how Keith had tensed again and said, “Okay, I’m ready to go.”

Kicking off his bike, they puttered onto the road once the coast was clear, and once they got going, Keith gained some more speed—enough that Lance had to tighten his hold around Keith’s waist to ensure that he wouldn’t fall off. They were definitely going well above the speed limit, and with how often Keith weaved between cars during heavy traffic, he was honestly surprised that they hadn’t gotten into an accident yet. It was as though Keith was trying to race the rain, but to no avail because Lance could still feel the droplets permeate his clothing.

Despite himself, Lance held tightly onto Keith’s waist with his right arm and momentarily stretched out his left arm to cup a few raindrops in the palm of his hand. He noticed that Keith slowed down some upon realising that Lance had let go of him, and he returned his arms back to their original position. He was unaware that he had leaned closer against Keith, marvelling in the latter’s warmth, until the raven haired young man was relaxing underneath him.

Well, Lance reflected, at least he wasn’t stiff like a board any more.

Upon arriving at the diner, Keith snatched himself a parking spot relatively close to the entrance. They raced inside, and Lance flashed two fingers at the hostess standing front and centre. “Table for two, please!” he chirped.

“Perfect!” she replied cheerily despite the clear exhaustion in her eyes. “Please give me a second! We’re a bit full because of the rain.”

“Yeah, of course!” Lance assured her.

Lingering near the doors, Lance wrung out his shirt and his tank top the best that he could before glancing over at Keith, which was, in hindsight, a mistake that was bound to happen anyway. Lance burst into laughter at the sight of Keith’s flattened mullet clinging to his face and his neck. He took in Keith’s scowl with a delight and mirth that he didn’t bother to hide, instead choosing to tease the shorter man. “You look like a wet cat.”

Keith huffed and crossed his arms. Rather than indignation, however, Keith matched Lance’s grin and returned, “Are you saying Azura looks ridiculous when she plays with water?”

“Okay, now you’re just putting words in my mouth,” Lance quipped. “Azura never looks ridiculous; she’s my little princess and behaves like a purrfect little lady.” Keith snorted at his pun, but Lance continued as though the other man hadn’t reacted at all. (He didn’t need Keith to tell him it was bad, but at least it wasn’t Hunk or Pidge level of bad.) “Anyway, I never said that you looked ridiculous. You just jumped to conclusions all on your own there.” Lance smirked. “But you do look ridiculous.”

Keith rolled his eyes. “Thanks,” he grumbled, running his fingers through his hair and pushing back his bangs. Lance tried not to stare at his face, tried to focus on those blue-grey eyes as Keith spoke and not on his lips, and he could only curse his beating heart for beating all too loudly because he
was one hundred percent certain that Keith could hear it. Keith’s grin became more mischievous in nature as he commented, “You don’t look too bad yourself though.”

Lance choked, and when he replied, Lance himself flinched at the high-pitched squeal that pulled itself out of his throat. “What are you talking about?” Lance blurted out. “I’m a mess.” Don’t get him wrong. Lance loved the rain. “Singin’ in the Rain” embodied his mood every time it rained—except for the night of the Incident™—but Lance knew that it only made his hair curlier and harder to tame. Subconsciously, he tugged at a lock, but Keith reached out and pulled his hand away from Lance’s face with a smile.

“You look fine,” Keith assured him almost shyly. His cheeks reddened as he turned away. He muttered much more quietly, saying, “You’re beautiful.”

Lance, too, found himself looking away, but before the awkwardness could persist, the hostess returned with her merry grin and asked for them to follow her to a table, where a server took over for her. “Can I get some hot coffee?” Lance requested.

“I’ll have hot tea instead,” Keith tacked on. When the server left to get their drinks, Keith asked, “What did you do this morning?”

“Not much, honestly,” Lance replied as he unfolded the menu. “I groomed Azura—brushed her fur, clipped her claws—and had ice cream with her while browsing Netflix. My mom called, so we talked for a bit.” He fiddled with the napkin in front of him, recalling the discomfort that had begun to well up when she asked him about his plans. “She wants me to visit again.”

“You should,” Keith mumbled. “Since you miss her.”

Lance pursed his lips. “It’s not that easy,” he managed.

“I know,” Keith responded tensely, “but… she’s still there for you, so… I think you should visit her sometime before… before anything happens.”

Lance couldn’t help but remember the fear that had nearly paralysed him in place when he had thought he was going to die in an alley from a shoulder wound. His scar ached with the memory, and Lance’s hand trailed towards his left shoulder to soothe the pain. Lifting his eyes from the contents of the menu, Lance noticed that Keith’s eyes had darkened, focusing on the hand gripping his left shoulder.

Okay,” Lance acquiesced quietly.

“I’m sorry about that,” Keith blurted out, hands gripping his menu all too tightly. He nearly choked on his words. “I really didn’t mean to hurt you. I’m so sorry”

“That’s how you treat all of your opponents—no mercy,” Lance replied. He managed a weak grin. “If anything, I should be honoured you didn’t hold back.”

Keith shook his head. “It’s not something to be proud of,” he mumbled, adamantly lowering his head and studying the menu.

“Don’t think so hard about it,” Lance said firmly, causing Keith’s head to jerk up. “It already happened… and while it’s not okay, I can deal with it. Besides, I’m fine now.”

Keith looked like he wanted to protest, but Lance cut him off, laying down his menu and pointing to an impressive stack of pancakes with strawberries and bananas. “I want this one, by the way. If you’re so sorry about my shoulder, then pay for my food,” Lance said, smirking.
Keith’s lips cracked into a smile. “Fine,” he agreed.

When the server returned, Keith placed an order for strawberry-banana pancakes and one for an omelette. “Would you like to split the bill?” the server asked.

“No, it’s fine,” Keith replied, making eye contact with Lance with a smile. “I’ve got this.”

“Nice,” the server commented. “I wish my friend would pay for my food.”

“Yeah,” Lance mused somewhat bitterly, feeling a bit of guilt when Keith’s eyes flickered with hurt, “I guess he’s an all right friend.”

“Lance,” Keith started when the server walked away, but he couldn’t say anything more because Lance shoved a picture of Azura in front of his face.

“What do you think of this contrast? Or this one?” Lance swiped his thumb across the screen, bringing up the same picture but with the brightness and contrast changed. “I think it looks a little bit bright, but I can’t get it to a perfect balance.”

There was no relationship to talk about, Lance insisted, and the sooner Keith realised that, the better.

By the time they had finished eating, the rain had already stopped, but Lance could still feel his definitely-not-dry socks squish and grimaced at the wetness underneath his heels and between his toes as he hopped off Keith’s bike. “Let’s get going,” he declared, marching towards the ticket booth of the aquarium. “I wanna see the jellyfish!”

Keith nodded wordlessly and trailed after Lance. They flashed their digital tickets to the seller and were allowed entry inside. Lance immediately headed in the direction of the first exhibit beyond the entrance, and Keith had to pick up his pace to stand side-by-side with Lance. When the back of their hands brushed against one another, Lance blatantly peeled away from Keith.

Keith needed to know that they couldn’t do this—that they shouldn’t. It was too dangerous, and Keith was one of people Lance couldn’t risk losing. It was already bad enough that Keith had to join the Blade of Marmora.

Lance refused to meet Keith’s gaze, too afraid of what he’d find there, and Lance wondered when exactly had he become so cowardly.

However, Keith was nothing but persistent—more like stubborn, Lance thought—and in typical Keith fashion, he pushed his way forward. Grasping Lance’s wrist, he turned the brunet around and forcibly made eye contact. “What’s your problem?” he demanded. “We’re supposed to be getting along, especially if we’re going to be working together, and I thought that we did get along? So why are you running away from me? I thought that we reached an understanding, so what gives?”

“Look, Keith,” Lance began slowly, trying to remain calm in the face of Keith’s anger, “it’s got nothing to do with you.”

“Bull. Shit,” Keith spat, visibly seething. “It has everything to do with me. I’m not fucking stupid, Lance; I’ve noticed how you’ve been acting for the past few days—for the past few weeks!”

Lance wanted to say that they were causing a scene. However, it was weekday at the aquarium, and, with such rainy weather, there were hardly any other people there. Lance could count a handful of tourists, a number of couples, and a few families. Nobody even so much glanced their way. The security guard nearby didn’t spare them any attention at all. If he had noticed, he probably thought it
was a little lover’s quarrel, and everyone knew it was best to stay out of *those*.

“Okay, fine,” Lance relented, “maybe it has something to do with you. Can we drop the subject now, Keith? And just have a good time?”

Keith’s expression shattered, and Lance immediately hated himself for putting that expression there. He inwardly kicked himself in the ass. Unable to bring himself to look at Keith’s crestfallen image, Lance pulled away and continued to the first exhibit. “Fine,” he heard Keith grumble behind him, “let’s do this.”

Lance shuddered, and he convinced himself it was because of how cold his clothes were—not because of how frighteningly cold Keith’s tone was.

They made their way through the exhibits, admiring the tropical fish, and Lance made it his personal goal to forget all about their previous tension. He pointed out all of the funny looking ones to Keith, aiming to make the latter laugh by mimicking their expressions, and quietly appraised the more beautiful specimens. On the other hand, Keith read all of the little fun facts and plaques aloud, occasionally making a comment here or there. They could do this, Lance reflected. They could be civil. They could get along. They could pretend as though nothing had happened.

And they were doing so well, too.

“Whoa,” Lance breathed upon reaching the jellyfish exhibit, which was really just an entire dark room with several LED lights strung along the floor to illuminate the path and tanks that covered all four walls and even the ceiling itself. It brought out the ethereal glow of the jellyfish even more, and Lance stared wide-eyed in the middle of the room as jellyfish floated overhead. “Are you seeing this?” Lance beamed. He nearly pressed himself against the glass to get a closer look at the fascinating creatures.

They were like little parachutes—little, glowing parachutes—floating in the night sky, illuminating the darkness as though they were stars.

“It says here that jellyfish glow to frighten away predators or to attract prey,” Keith read aloud from one of the plaques, which was framed with a string of LED lights to make reading easier. “The *Aequoria victoria* use a certain protein to create bioluminescence—”

“Keith, stop reading!” Lance exclaimed. “Are you seeing this?” He turned around, throwing his arms—well, everywhere—to demonstrate his point.

That was his greatest mistake.

Keith stared at him with wide-eyed wonder, but in that moment, Lance could easily say that Keith was even more captivating and mesmerising than the jellyfish. Sure, his clothes and hair were still damp and could use a bit of work in the style department, and Keith in general looked a little bit like a drowned rat… but with the expression he wore, Keith could only be described as endearing and beautiful and charming.

The glow of the LED lights and the jellyfish illuminated the line of his jaw and the angles of his face, softening them somewhat, and they bought out the colour of his eyes. Rather than the typical steely blue-grey, Keith’s eyes were a radiant violet hue that stole Lance’s breath because, goddammit, eyes should not be allowed to be that gorgeous. It felt as though Lance was staring into the galaxies.

It reminded Lance of when they had first met, when Lance had fallen for him.

In that moment, Lance knew that Keith had been right earlier.
Everything about Lance’s behaviour had been about Keith; everything he had done and everything he had tried to do, including everything he was planning to do, was all because he had Keith in mind.

He couldn’t lose Keith. He couldn’t.

Keith belonged out there in the spotlight, captivating hundreds of thousands of other people aside from Lance, idolised by little boys and girls who thought he was like the red Power Ranger, admired by regular, ordinary citizens who felt as though they owed him their lives because he protected them and kept them safe. There was no point in dragging Keith to the underground; there was no reason for Keith to get his hands dirty. Lance had only wanted to keep Keith safe. Like with Hunk and his family, Lance wanted him to stay far away from danger, which was absolutely ridiculous considering his damn occupation.

“Lance,” Keith began, but Lance wouldn’t let him finish.

“Let’s move onto the next exhibit,” Lance declared, moving into the next hallway that would lead him out of there and away from Keith. His eyes burned at the sudden increase in brightness, but they quickly adjusted to the change in lighting after a few blinks. Lance managed to make it halfway through the shark tunnel before he halted in his middle of his tracks.

A part of him wasn’t sure why he was waiting for Keith to catch up when he so desperately wanted to push Keith away before he could lose him.

It didn’t make sense. Lance knew that it didn’t make sense, but he didn’t know what else to do, what else he could do. He ignored the burning sensation irritating his eyes and squeezed his eyes tightly shut, trying to suppress the warmth welling up within his eyes.

“Lance,” Keith echoed, reaching out for his hand and twining their fingers together. Lance tried to pry his fingers away, but Keith held on, unrelenting, and pulled him closer when Lance attempted to distance himself. “Lance,” Keith practically pleaded, “we need to talk.”

Lance shook his head. “We’re okay,” he insisted. He tried yanking his hands away once more, but Keith only tightened his grip, squeezing so tightly that Lance was forced to yield. Damn superstrength, Lance cursed. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Lance, pull your head out of your ass and listen to me,” Keith hissed, rooting the taller man in place, “because, thinking back on it now, Pidge has a point. Right now, relationship be damned. We need to reach an understanding because, obviously, we’re not on the same page.” His voice softened as did the expression in his eyes, becoming more of a darker blue underneath the aquarium lights. “Are you okay with that?”

Lance nodded stiffly. “Yeah,” he replied quietly. He repeated his answer once more as though to reaffirm it—not with Keith but with himself—and said, “Yeah… Yeah, that’s okay. I’m okay.”

Keith didn’t seem to believe him, but he didn’t press the issue. Neither did he retract his hands. Instead, he asked, “What happened back there? You just… booked it.”

Just an earth-shattering revelation that I couldn’t afford to lose you either, Lance thought bitterly as he lowered his eyes to the tiled floor. Of course, he couldn’t tell Keith that, could he? Sighing, Lance pursed his lips, hesitating, and then replied with a question of his own, “Have you ever… done anything that you’ve regretted?” It was a shitty move, yeah, but Lance didn’t need all of this attention on him.
Keith wasn’t having any of this deflection though. His brows furrowed, and without hesitating even once, he asked Lance, “Do you regret us?”

“Keith, there was never really an ‘us’ to begin with,” he protested. Somehow, he ended up holding Keith’s hands even more tightly. Somehow, he ended up being the one trying to comfort Keith. “But I don’t regret all the things we’ve done. I…” Lance flushed. “I liked it. It was fun.”

“So what are you so afraid of?” Keith asked, eyes bright and imploring. Even though Lance refused to meet his eyes, Keith didn’t dare back down. God, Lance sighed quietly, he was so stubborn—so frustratingly, beautifully stubborn. However, when Lance slowly lifted his eyes to face Keith head-on, he was enraptured by the determination he found here.

“I’m not afraid,” he said, but his voice sounded too weak compared to the strength and determination he found in Keith. Neither Keith nor Lance himself could believe in his own words. “Okay,” he conceded, “maybe I’m a little afraid…” He hesitated, unable to maintain eye contact, and squirmed underneath Keith’s steady gaze. “It’s just… is this really the right path for you, Keith? I mean, you’re a hero, an actual hero, and this could ruin you and I don’t want that!” Lance huffed. “I guess it’s too late for that though; you can’t back out now.”

Keith frowned and replied, “It was never really my choice to be a Super, to be a Knight or a Paladin, but working with you, working to shut down the Galra, that’s my decision. That’s something I want to do. I want to know if what my mother wanted to do, what she tried to do, was right. I want to know if what the Alliance is doing is right. I want to know if what you’re doing is right—because I don’t know what the hell ‘right’ even is.

“You don’t have to worry about whether or not I made the ‘right choice,’ Lance,” Keith assured him, “because I’m pretty sure it is. You know I can take care of myself, just like how you can handle yourself, so… I’ve got your back—if you ever need it. I just need to know if you’ve got mine.”

Lance pursed his lips before nodding. “All right, fine,” he agreed. “I’ve got your back, too.”

“Then… we’re partners, right?” Keith asked. “I mean, if we keep each other safe, we shouldn’t have anything to worry about.”

Lance choked on a bit of laughter, and Keith’s hands reluctantly slipped away from his. “I don’t think that’s how it works, Keith,” Lance replied with a sheepish grin of his own.

Keith practically pouted. “Are you too afraid to even try? There’s nothing wrong with trying,” Keith persisted. “You said it yourself once,” Keith remarked, “that you’d never know whether something works or not if you haven’t tried solving the problem.”

“That was a different scenario,” Lance grumbled.

“But it’s still applicable,” Keith insisted.

Lance was quiet, so quiet that Keith’s expression eventually started to crumble, giving way to disappointment. Sighing, he gave into Keith’s logic, replying with a smile of his own. “Partners then.”

Keith brightened so quickly that Lance himself could feel elation swell in his own chest, lifting him up to the clouds. His cheeks reddened, and he averted his eyes. “Come on,” he declared, “let’s get out of here.” Before he could turn and leave, however, Keith began to match his pace perfectly so that they walked down the shark tunnel side-by-side, so close that the backs of their hands brushed against one another every other step.
Upon reaching a new area, they only observed the exhibits, basking in silent serenity. Lance himself appeared to be in deep contemplation, and Keith left him alone in his thoughts… until a certain creature caught his eye. “That penguin reminds me of Shiro,” Keith commented as he pointed to one of the exhibits.

Lance followed his line of sight and snorted upon noticing one of the penguins waddling back and forth behind another penguin whilst simultaneously remaining out of sight. “Let me guess,” he mused, “The awkward one that keeps pacing behind the Allura penguin.”

Keith cracked a smirk. “So you do get it,” he responded.

“Kinda hard not to,” Lance replied. “I was playing at The Jazz Cat once, and they were there the same day for a date. Shiro looked absolutely smitten. My sister’s boyfriend proposed to her on the same day—weird, right? Anyway, I thought that Allura actually wanted something like that to happen to her right then and there.”

“Knowing Shiro,” Keith mused, “he’d probably wimp out of the proposal, and Allura would have to do it herself.”

“Is that how they got together?” Lance inquired, a smirk tugging at the corners of his lips.

“That’s how they got together,” Keith confirmed.

“Cute,” Lance mused aloud. He burst into laughter at the sight of the pacing penguin finally approaching the other and watched as they waddled off into a corner of the exhibit to cuddle. “But totally not as cute as these guys though.”

“They definitely have Shiro and Allura beat,” Keith agreed. But, he thought as he glanced in his partner’s direction, not you. Keith couldn’t help but think back to the jellyfish exhibit, illuminated only by sparse LED lights and the glow of bioluminescence. He remembered the shine in Lance’s deep blue eyes like the reflection of the moon on dark waters, and he remembered his soft smile and his laughter and his excitement and his awe and wonder and his peace.

Keith would do anything for Lance’s peace of mind.

It would be worth it, Keith repeated to himself as he followed Lance to the next exhibit. When Lance’s eyes brightened, Keith felt a swell of happiness in his chest, and he couldn’t help but think that he wanted to give that kind of happiness every single day of his life.

They’ll have to take it slow, and there would be a long road ahead of them… but it will be worth it.

“Keith, look!” Lance shrilled, pointing at a large tank in front of them filled with all sorts of tropical marine life, including— “They have dolphins here now! They didn’t have this last time I came here! I mean, that was like three years ago, so yeah, they might have changed a bit—but dolphins!”

Keith smothered his laughter, and his amusement assumed the form of a wide grin instead. “You like dolphins?”

“Dude, it was my dream to swim with dolphins,” Lance replied. “No joke. I love dolphins.”

Keith chuckled. “What about Azura? Did you forget about her in your excitement for dolphins?”

“Of course not!” Lance gasped. He pressed his hand to his chest, swooning. “You heathen! How could you even say that? I love mi princesa more than the moon and the stars in the sky!”
Keith snorted at the dramatics, but when he spoke, it was with a softness he didn’t even know he possessed. “Yeah, you really care about her.”

Lance, too, seemed taken back by his tone, but Keith assumed he must have said something right if Lance was relaxing. The exuberance in his oceanic blue eyes calmed to a gentleness Keith had only seen Lance wear on few occasions. “It’s kind of sad for me to say this,” Lance murmured, “but she’s been my best friend for the past year or two—since I had to distance myself from my family, and I couldn’t get Hunk involved with my mess. Pidge, too, doesn’t need my shit when she’s got her own problems.”

“They’re your friends though,” Keith responded, “so they’re always going to worry about you. That’s what they do best.” If they were anything like Keith, anyway. “I mean, you worry about them, too.”

“I guess you have a point,” Lance admitted. He sighed through his nose, shoulders slumping, and—oh no—did Keith put that expression on his face? Keith turned away from Lance and instead watched as the dolphins in front of them swam idly and leisurely in the tank. Then a strange figure caught his attention, and it seemed Lance had noticed it, too.

“What was…?” Keith faltered, holding his breath as a young woman with turquoise hair swam up to the glass tank, dressed in a bikini top and a mermaid tail that was too shiny and gimmicky to be considered real.

“Plaxum!” Lance exclaimed, grinning widely. Something unpleasant twisted in Keith’s gut. He waved at the young woman ecstatically, and she returned his wave with her lips pressed into a smile. She held out her hand, palm facing them, in a gesture to stop and wait where they were. Then she tapped her wrist as though there was a watch and held out five fingers. Wait five minutes.

“You know her?” Keith asked, struggling to keep his voice levelled. He bit back a comment about how “Plaxum” was a weird name. Lance wasn’t likely to appreciate it, and Keith wanted the relatively happy atmosphere to last—even if it was ruined for Keith… just a slightly bit.

“Yeah,” Lance answered. “We dated back in high school. I haven’t seen her since graduation. I didn’t think she was still working here.”

Keith scowled. Goddammit. He fished out his phone and glanced at the time—nearly a quarter until four o’clock. “Don’t you have to get going soon though? To make sure Azura’s all right and then to head off to work?” he asked. “I don’t want you to be late for work because of poor planning.”

“It’ll be fine,” Lance replied. “We can leave in fifteen minutes. She probably just wants to catch up; I mean, we didn’t break up on bad terms or anything.” He offered Keith a sheepish grin. “You kind of remind me of her—just a little bit though.”


“You both like to take matters into your own hands,” Lance answered. “You’re both headstrong and stubborn in that sense, but you’re firm in what you believe in. If you don’t have the answer, you search for it and try to come to your own conclusion. You don’t let anyone influence what you think.” Lance smiled. “Not bad things, I swear.”

“Lance!”

Keith whirled around, eyes subconsciously narrowing at the newcomer steadily approaching them. Her turquoise hair was still wet, clinging to her pale skin, and her blue eyes practically glowed upon
setting sight on Lance. She said something in Spanish that Keith couldn’t quite understand, and maybe it was something nice, considering how happy Lance looked when he responded. Keith didn’t know; he couldn’t say.

“Hey, Plaxum,” Lance greeted once she was in front of them, giving her a little smile. “I can’t believe you’re still working here.”

“Well,” she said, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear, “training was rough, but once I got started, I couldn’t stop. I mean, I’m finally swimming with dolphins!”

Lance sighed. “I’m so jealous,” he said. “I’ve always wanted to swim with dolphins.”

Plaxum giggled. “It was always your dream to be a mermaid, no?”

Red stained Lance’s cheeks as he rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “Yeah, it was,” he mumbled, diverting his eyes to the floor. “But you make a better mermaid than me anyway. You’ve always been a better swimmer.”

Keith frowned, and he couldn’t help but notice that Plaxum was giving him the same frown. “Don’t say that!” she protested. “You’re the hardest worker I know! What have you been up to recently?”

Lance gave her a smile. “Oh, you know, the usual,” he replied. “I’ve just been writing songs and trying to get by. I have a cat now.”

“I’ve always thought you were more of a dog person,” she admitted.

“I can like both,” Lance retorted with a pout. “So what about you? How’s marine biology going?”

“Oh! I’m almost done with my courses!” she chirped. “I got accepted into a research programme to travel the Caribbean; hopefully, I have some time to visit my family in Colombia. I might be able to graduate a semester early, so I’ve been studying for grad school and looking for places to apply. I was thinking of Miami or San Diego so far.”

“Wow, they’re both pretty far,” Lance commented with a low whistle. “That’s impressive.”

“You think so?” she mused. She gave Keith a sly glance and teased, “I’m glad you found a new partner by the way. I was a little worried after we broke up, but it looks like you two are pretty happy.” Lance’s cheeks reddened, and he looked ready to say something in response. However, before he could speak, Plaxum grinned deviously and chimed, “I was spying on you two earlier, cheering you on, but then you spotted me. At least now that I’m out of the water, I can sing, ‘Lance and his boyfriend sitting in a tree—’”

“Plax!” Lance whined, and Keith could feel his own cheeks burning red with the same embarrassment.

She giggled. “I’ll see you around, maybe? I have to head back to work,” she said. Turning her attention to Keith, she mentioned, “I never got your name! I’m Plaxum.” She stretched out her hand, and Keith reluctantly accepted it, shaking her hand amicably.

“Keith,” he replied.

“It’s great to meet you! Have fun with the rest of your visit!” she sang before retreating back to where she had come.

There was a momentary lull, but knowing Lance, it wouldn’t last long. Lance grinned devilishly and
sang tauntingly, “You were jealous.”

“Oh, piss off,” Keith sneered, face crumpling into a mess of nasty emotions. “So she was your ex?”

Humming, Lance shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans and replied, “Yeah, she was. It’s good to see that she’s doing well though.”

“Nyma’s mentioned her before,” Keith said. She mentioned, Keith didn’t add, that I was the “same way” as the other ex. “Did they meet?”

Shaking his head, Lance answered, “They didn’t. When I got together with Nyma, it wasn’t too long after I had broken up with Plaxum—maybe around half a year.” Lance gave Keith a weak smile. “Which… might be long for other people’s standards.” Shrugging, he continued before Keith could interrupt, “Anyway, Nyma knew about Plaxum, but Plaxum doesn’t know about Nyma.” He frowned and then added as a second thought, “And I’d rather it stay that way.”

Keith, too, couldn’t help but frown as he mumbled, “Because you still care about her?” Something ugly clawed at his chest, breaking past his skin and sinking its claws into his heart. Keith had to turn away because he couldn’t tell what kind of face he was making, but all he knew was that he didn’t want Lance to see.

“Of course I do,” Lance responded. “We dated for like two years in high school, so of course I care for her. Even if I don’t see her in that way any more, I still want her to be safe and sound.” He offered Keith a grin and nudged him with his elbow. “I wouldn’t want anyone to get involved in this kind of a life.” He gestured towards Keith and sighed, “Exhibit A.” Before Keith could protest, Lance was already laughing at whatever expression Keith was wearing on his face—a muddled mess of shock and indignation and frustration. “Come on, partner,” Lance said. “Let’s get going. I need to check up on mi princesa before work.”

“Midnight patrol?” Shiro asked as Keith tucked his helmet under his arm to unlock their front door, bat bag slung over his shoulder. “You’re out of uniform.”

“Yeah,” Keith answered shortly. “I figured they couldn’t run away from me if they aren’t expecting me.”

Chuckling, Shiro teased, “I guess you’re learning to use your head.”

It was Lance’s idea, Keith refrained from replying, and not for the reason you’re thinking of. Because of his silence, Shiro took it as his cue to offer Keith more advice as though he was still a novice Knight, “Don’t come back too late. You still to be well-rested in case something pops up.”

“Don’t worry so much, Dad,” Keith teased with a roll of his eyes. “I’ll be back safe and sound, and then I’ll rub it in your face because you worry too much.” With that, he slipped out the front door and locked it behind him. He marched down to Obsidian and kicked the stand, swinging his leg over the side of his sleek black bike. He started up the engine and pulled out of his parking spot before merging onto the road. He no longer needed the street signs guiding him to his destination and instead allowed the city lights blur around him as he traversed a familiar route that would lead him to Empire.

He pulled up to the entrance at the curbside fire lane, where Lance, dressed up in his gear with his equipment hidden away in a guitar case, was scrolling through an app on his phone. His mask was pulled down, hanging around his neck, and his goggles rested against the crown of his head. He didn’t bother lifting his head, only raising his eyes and grinning mischievously at Keith. “You know
that’s illegal, right?” he teased, kicking at the red paint that clearly read “NO PARKING” in bold font.

“I won’t tell if you won’t,” Keith returned as he extended a helmet towards Lance.

Lance cackled and accepted the helmet before he slipped behind Keith on his bike with practised ease. “You have your communicator on you?” he asked the same moment Keith tensed in front of him—again, Keith bemoaned.

“Of course I do,” Keith answered Lance’s question with a frown.

“Just making sure,” Lance replied. “I mean, you guys never really had comm lines in the Alliance from what Hunk tells me.”

Keith frowned even more deeply. “He’s not supposed to tell you anything. As far as anyone in the Alliance knows, you’re just a civilian,” Keith said.

“You think Hunk can keep a secret?” Lance retorted with a little huff. “I’m surprised you haven’t caught onto the fact that he rants about work to me whenever he can.”

“Even confidential information?” Keith asked, brows furrowing.

“If it’s not that confidential,” Lance replied. “He’s not stupid. I mean, he hasn’t outed either one of us yet. He knows where to draw the line. All right, enough talking, let’s go, hothead,” he declared, raising his mask up and slipping his goggles over his eyes. He lowered his hood to fit the helmet Keith had given him over his head before wrapping his arms around Keith’s middle. He sighed when he felt Keith’s muscles stiffen. “Loosen up, will you?” he teased.

“I’m taking this seriously,” Keith protested as he slipped back onto the roads before anyone took notice of them. It wasn’t a complete lie, Keith reflected. All of his nerves were tangled up with one another for various reasons. He had to be serious; he couldn’t mess this up for either of them a second time.

“Ruby, Sapphire, can you hear me?” Pidge asked.

“Crystal clear, Emerald,” Lance replied. “We’re heading to the quest location right now.”

“I’m securing your path,” Pidge stated, typing so quickly and loudly on her laptop that Keith was surprised it hasn’t combusted yet. “Aaand… it’s done!”

“Thanks, Emerald,” Lance said.

They neared the destination point, and Pidge instructed them to hide the bike in the same alley as before. “It’s our turf,” Pidge had explained to Keith the first time. “Not that they know it. We have this area infiltrated and outnumbered, so the guys here will take care of it.” With some wariness, they hid Obsidian within the shadows along with their bags.

Venturing further down the alley with Pidge’s guidance, they made a few turns and squeezed through a narrow passage, eventually reaching a wider clearing in another alley. They lurked behind a dumpster, waiting for Prorok and his supplier to reveal himself.

“You go through our stock like a madman.”

Just on time.
Keith nearly poked his head around the corner to peek at the scene until Lance pulled him back. Keith turned around, an incredulous expression plastered on his face, only to meet with Lance’s exasperation. Lance only pointed off to the side, and Keith craned his neck to follow Lance’s line of sight. Near a stack of cardboard boxes and empty crates was a full body mirror leaning against the dilapidated body of another rusty dumpster, and while they were in its blind spot, two men—one dressed in a suit, the other dressed in a polo and slacks—were not.

Keith’s lips formed an “Oh.”

God, did he want to wipe that smirk off Lance’s lips.

“They’re in high demand within my area of business,” Prorok answered.

“I would assume so,” replied the other man. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t have doubled the amount you bought—again. Not that it matters. Do you have the direct observation results?”

Prorok reached into his pocket and flashed a USB drive. “As always,” he replied. “I don’t know that that witch Haggar is getting out of this though. I’m not complaining that we’re getting the better end of the bargain though.”

The man in the polo shirt pushed his wire glasses up the bridge of his nose. “We shall see.” Reaching behind him, he held out a briefcase towards Prorok, who in turn extended the hand with the USB drive. Simultaneously, they reached out for the offering while relinquishing the item held in exchange.

“You’ll hear from us again tomorrow night if all goes well,” Prorok stated.

“I await your results with eager ears,” the supplier replied—in a not particularly eager tone. They both strolled to the opening of the alley and went their separate ways. Keith and Lance stalked to the entrance after a few seconds’ delay, and quietly, Lance motioned for Keith to follow Prorok while Lance pursued the supplier. Keith nodded both his understanding and consent, and they broke apart.

“Ruby, stay back a few feet,” Pidge warned him. “You’re drawing too close to the quest mark.”

Keith obeyed.

“Sapphire, what the hell are you doing?” Pidge hissed into the comm lines.

“Getting a better view,” Lance whispered. “Rooftops are my thing.”

“Just don’t get caught doing your parkour,” Pidge grumbled. “And don’t fucking venture too close to the edge. Fall damage is a bitch.”

Keith nearly stopped in his steps, halting his pursuit, until he heard Lance snort. “Sustain damage once, and nobody ever lets you live it down,” he muttered.

“Well, now we at least understand why you suck at platformers,” Pidge sneered.

“How’s it going, Ruby?” Lance asked.

Keith pursed his lips, keeping his eyes trained on Prorok. The dealer was accompanied with three larger men, and Keith might be able to take them down if things went to shit… but it would be more difficult without using his powers. Nobody could know that he was Red Lion, after all, and fighting with fire and swords were trademark of Red Lion.
“He’s still too close to the target,” Pidge warned. “Stay back, Ruby.”

Keith slipped into a crevice and waited until he had gained some distance.

“She’s still too close to the target,” Pidge warned. “Stay back, Ruby.”

“Sapphire, you’re approaching an unmapped location,” Pidge informed.

Unmapped locations, Keith recalled, meant…

Shit. Galra territory—with heavy Galra presence, to boot.

“Sapphire, what are you doing?” Keith hissed quietly, ducking behind a bus shelter.

“I’m pulling back,” Lance responded, voice flat. “The second quest mark fled from area.”

“I just saw it flee. Return to the dungeon entrance,” Pidge stated. “I’ll track down number two.”

“Got it,” Lance responded.

Keith slipped back out, following Prorok and his crew to another strip of clubs. He watched as Prorok entered one of the numerous clubs, taking note of the name.

The Snake’s Eye.

“I’ve got a location for the first mark’s lair,” Keith told the two of them.

“I’ve got one for the second,” Pidge informed shortly. “Return to dungeon entrance, too, Ruby. We’ll debrief once we return to the guild.”

“I never loved nobody fully
Always one foot on the ground
And by protecting my heart truly
I got lost in the sounds
I hear in my mind…”

Lance, leaning against Keith’s bike, stopped singing softly upon noticing a certain mullet at the entrance of the alleyway. Lance grinned and threw Keith’s bat bag towards him, and he caught it without any difficulty. Keith unhooked his scabbard and katana, concealing it within the bat bag, as he marched towards Lance and Obsidian. “Hey,” Lance greeted his partner. “Good work. Mission accomplished.”

Keith returned his grin, and Lance couldn’t help but notice how his gorgeous eyes, violet under the flickering light of the lamppost, sparkled. “It was a success?” Keith inquired.

Lance couldn’t suppress the swell of pride and happiness blooming in his chest, sending his heart fluttering at the sight of Keith’s smile. “Definitely,” Lance replied. He crossed his arms and ducked his head, making himself appear even smaller, and offered, “I guess we do make a good team.”

Somehow, defying the impossible, Keith’s grin widened even more. “We do make a good team.”

“Oh, gross.”

“Pi—Emerald!” Lance shrieked as he flushed red with frustration. He huffed and pouted before adjusting the strap of his guitar case, concealing all of his firearms and explosives, on his shoulder. “Why are you watching? Why did you have to say something? We were having a moment!”
“Well, sorry for making sure that you lovebirds were still alive,” Pidge grumbled. “Hurry up and get your asses back to the guild. I’m about to call in GM. You can have your bonding moment somewhere else where I won’t have to see.”

Lance rolled his eyes and flipped off the nearest camera before straddling Keith’s bike. Keith slipped in front of him and started the engine. “You know,” Keith said as he kicked the stand, “I think I can get used to this.”

Lance wrapped his arms around Keith’s waist and scoffed as Keith’s tensed a bit under his touch, relaxing only after a second.

“You’re getting better.”

Chapter End Notes

I know I'm real shitty with cliffhangers, so here's a cute ending to a chapter for once. Nothing good ever lasts though.

Anyway, as always, you can find me on Tumblr or Twitter if y'all ever want to talk to me.
Before you begin reading, this is the chapter that warranted the Graphic Depictions of Violence archive warning. It's a lot worse than the action sequences in the previous chapters in that it actually is pretty gross and disturbing. Take caution around this line if you're easily grossed out by violence/gore: Keith gripped his hand. "Sapphire," he said—and nothing more.

If you seriously cannot handle it, Control/Command+F to this line, where it's safer: Myzax, Lance noted, was a hulking creature that resembled a giant gorilla with bulging muscles, razor sharp teeth, and pointed claws.

Another note, because this story is diving deeper into the Galra plot, it's going to get real nasty.

Title and lyrics are from Panic! At the Disco's "The Good, the Bad, and the Dirty."

As always, you can reach me at Tumblr or Twitter! :)

Oh, and make sure to check out this lovely piece of fanart by Dodobirdsong! I just love the intricate details and everything about it!

[11:27 AM]

Lance: I'm gonna stop by for lunch!!!

Lance: So pick a cat friendly place!

Keith: There are almost zero restaurants that cater to cats.

Lance: [image sent 11:30 AM]

Keith: Is Azura in a baby pouch?

Keith: Wait, are you actually shopping for dresses with Azura?

Lance: Yes and yes! :)

Lance: Mi princesa needs the best of the best B)

Keith: Is she wearing a diamond necklace?

Lance: :3c

Keith: It's not real, is it?

Lance: It's not real.

Lance: Really it's not.
Lance: Like who do you think I am?

Keith: You buy actual dresses for your cat. What am I supposed to believe?

Lance: Oooh what about thai food???

Keith: You’re changing the subject.

Keith: But Thai does sound good.

Keith: We’re probably going to need to get it to go because Thai restaurants don’t let in cats.

Lance: Fiiine!

Keith: I’ll order it now. What do you want?

Lance: Pad thai!!! :) 

Lance: I’ll pay you back!

Keith: Don’t worry about it.

Lance: :/

Keith: Seriously, I mean it.

Lance: :P

Keith: Lance.

Lance: Ugh, fine.

Lance: But I’m paying next time!

Keith: Okay, sure. Do you want to meet at the park?

Lance: Sounds like a plan!

“You really did buy clothes for your cat,” Keith said flatly, levelling Lance an unimpressed stare, after turning his eyes away from the white kitten prancing in the flower patches wearing a sleeveless pink floral laced dress with a circle skirt. The fake rhinestones on her diamond necklace reflected sunbeams, nearly blinding Keith, as did the tiara between her large, tufted ears. “Isn’t that a little too much?” Keith asked, glancing at the shopping bags beside Lance, where Azura’s baby pouch was tucked into one of the bags. He set the plastic bag with their food on the bench before sitting down. After undoing the knot, he handed Lance his pad Thai and a pair of chopsticks.

“You think so?” Lance asked as he accepted the food. “I mean, at least I didn’t bury her in petticoats like some people. That dress is still pretty manoeuvrable.”

“I… I don’t think that’s the problem here,” Keith mumbled.

Lance raised an eyebrow, silently asking, “Is there a problem?” Then he shrugged and said, “Thanks, by the way.” After opening the lid of his take-out container, Lance expertly picked up some noodles with his chopsticks, slurping them up, and chewed with a contemplative expression
painting his features.

Keith was tempted to ask him what he was thinking, but instead, he only asked if Lance was okay. The sigh Keith received in response was enough to cement worry in his thoughts, plastering a frown onto his lips.

“I don’t know what I should do with all of this time,” Lance confessed. “I might be able to go back to school since my boss pays me a shit ton for risking my neck, and if I decide to take Mrs. De Altea’s offer, it’s definitely possible... but it might be too late anyway.” He huffed and muttered, “And knowing GM, he might say it’s too dangerous.”

“What would you do if you earned your music degree?” Keith asked, picking at his fried rice with his chopsticks.

Lance shrugged. “I don’t really know,” he replied. “I mean, I just want to play music. It’d be cool to play in an orchestra, but you need to be like crazy good to do that. It’d be pretty nice to play in a band, too—or maybe just a piano teacher? I don’t know, but the ambience at Empire isn’t bad either. I mean, it is a sketchy club, but it’s lively and fun. Plus, it’s good pay, especially considering... everything.” Lance hummed. “I guess I’m already doing it? Living the dream? It’s just a different kind of music and... well, a different kind of situation.”

Nobody would have asked for that kind of situation.

Keith started to dig into his pineapple fried rice. “Is there a particular kind of music you wanted to play?” he asked after swallowing a mouthful of food.

“No really,” Lance replied. “As long as it can move people and as long as I can have fun, it’s perfect, and I do have fun at the club—just as much fun as I do playing piano for wedding proposals.” He moved his shopping bags near his feet to make room for Azura as she leapt onto the bench. Lance dusted off the skirt of her dress, an action Keith found rather hilarious considering the grass stains on Lance’s own light-washed blue jeans. Then Lance held out a piece of chicken for her to eat. She nibbled at the offering before taking the rest into her mouth. Then she kneaded Lance’s thighs and curled up contently on his lap.

(Seriously, how was it even possible to be jealous of a cat? That was just ridiculous.)

“Your princess’s skirt is riding up,” Keith mumbled, hiding his face.

Lance frowned and pressed down the offending skirt, only for Azura’s tail to bat away his hand. “Well, we can’t have it all,” Lance bemoaned with his bottom lip jutting out in a pout.

Goddammit, Keith cursed, nearly choking on his rice, he’s so cute.

“So what were you planning to do when you applied for university anyway?” Keith managed to ask.

“Oh, the music major was mostly to refine my practice and skills,” Lance replied. “I wanted to learn a little bit more about composition, too; it would have been really fucking awesome to compose a score for a video game or for a movie, you know? I wanted to take this upper-division course where you’d have to write parts for an entire orchestra, too.

“I did math more like a fall back just in case the music thing didn’t work out. The classes didn’t overlap all that much credit-wise, but it came hand-in-hand with the music major. I would have been a teacher, I think, if I had to use my math degree.” He fed Azura another piece of chicken, and Angora eagerly nibbled away at the piece of meat. “What about you?” Lance inquired. “I know about what happened with the Garrison, but did you go straight into the hero business after high
“I never graduated high school, actually,” Keith responded.

If he was surprised, Lance didn’t show it. Instead, he raised a single eyebrow, silently prodding for more details, and Keith dug his spoon in his fried rice, pushing around the grains and meat and vegetables, before he dropped his hand, merely holding the container of fried rice.

“I was arrested before I even graduated,” Keith explained. “The Voltron Alliance may have accepted my application, but the high school was left in the dark. As far as they knew, I was an arsonist, and they didn’t want me around. It’s not like I could tell them the reason why I got arrested or how I got released; that became confidential information the moment I joined the Alliance.”

“That’s harsh,” Lance said, picking at the bean sprouts in his noodles.

Keith snorted. “It was a pretentious school anyway,” Keith said. “I went to a public school back in Japan since it was closer to my grandpa’s estate out in the boonies even though it was the next city over and a long-ass commute. I didn’t have to deal with any of that fake clique shit though. Most of them were just curious about America, and the rest poked fun at my name—but whatever. High school sucks no matter the country.”

“They made fun of your name?” Lance echoed with a baffled expression. “I mean, it’s a fairly common name if not a bit old school,” he said, backtracking.

Keith rolled his eyes. “It’s because of what it sounds like in Japanese,” Keith replied. Before Lance could ask him to pronounce his own name, Keith went ahead and demonstrated, “Kiisu.” Then just as Lance was about to ask him what exactly was the problem, Keith grumbled, “It sounds like… kissu.” Judging by the grin that spread across Lance’s lips, Keith could probably assume that Lance guessed what that word meant.

“Kissin’ Keith,” Lance teased.

Keith grunted, “Fuck off…” He nudged Lance with his shoulder. “You’re no better than those high school brats then.”

“Well, I think it’s cute,” Lance replied shortly, lifting his nose up into the air snottily. “They were just jealous because they didn’t have such an adorable name!”

Keith shoved another spoonful of rice into his mouth so that he didn’t have to indulge Lance and give him an answer. After chewing and swallowing, he said, “Anyway, it was a typical school with
normal kids. When I moved back to America, my aunt had me attend a private school because she thought it would be good for me. It’s not like I went to school to socialise, but even I had to admit that everyone was a snob.”

“You didn’t transfer schools?” Lance questioned.

“What was the point?” Keith replied grumpily. “I was already stuck as a Knight for possibly the rest of my life. It’s only a short career because it’s dangerous, and Knights are usually put out of commission because of injuries or… well, you know.”

Lance hummed. “What a shame,” he mused. “We could have gone to the same school—at least for a little bit. I mean, there’s a good number of public schools, sure, but you could have ended up at the same one as me depending on which one would have taken you in after that whole fiasco with the arson and the burning.”

Keith snorted, but he couldn’t help but smile at the possibility of attending school with Lance. Every day would have been exciting, he thought. Every day is exciting. “What school did you go to?”

“The one and only Monstro City High,” Lance replied with a grin. That grin quickly disappeared when he said, “Our mascot was a whale though. It wasn’t even a cute whale. Even though we were technically the Monstros, we were called the Moby Dicks. Or just Dicks. But they were sore losers anyway. We were the best school in the district.”

Keith burst into a fit of laughter—loud and raucous—that caught attention as far as the kids playing soccer down the hill and even the recreational team playing basketball down at the courts. He had to set aside his container of fried rice in order to clutch his stomach in wheezing pain and wipe away a stray tear. “That’s unfortunate,” Keith managed once he calmed down, staring into Lance’s wide blue eyes.

“Oh-huh,” Lance replied shortly, raising a brow without making any other comment. He put down his half-empty container of Pad Thai and said, “Oh yeah, I did have something important to tell you. It’s a message from GM.”

Keith recomposed himself and stared at Lance expectantly, so the latter continued with the debriefing, “He says all the field agents are on stand-by while the informants work their magic.”

“Is that a good thing?” Keith asked.

Lance grinned and repeated almost teasingly, “Is that a good thing? he says.” Lance chuckled, and there was no way to mistake the pride in his open—so open, so blue—expression. “Keith, you hit the jackpot. We have a new lead, and we’re one step closer to busting their operation!” His mood plummeted in the next second, however. He lowered his voice and said, “I mean, sure, all of that comes after we figure out what exactly they’re trying to pull, but that’s where information specialists like Pidge, Nyma, Rolo, and Mole come in.”

“I get that Pidge is a hacker, but what do the others do?” Keith asked quietly.

“Nyma and Rolo are information brokers,” Lance answered, keeping his voice so low that Keith had to inch closer to hear him. Lance leaned in closer so that the warmth of his breath ghosted the shell of Keith’s ear, sending tingles down his spine. “They collect gossip and word from the bar and the streets. We have lots of people coming in to complain about the Galra, actually. I think Mole’s job is pretty obvious from his codename.”

“The double agent,” Keith muttered.
“Yup,” Lance responded, popping the ‘p’ at the end. “We have plenty of deserters in the enemy team, but some of them aren’t in any position to obtain new, fresh information. They’re just grunts. Mole’s different though.”

“You’re not afraid of it backfiring?” Keith asked without bothering to hide his scepticism.

“Of course we are,” Lance replied. “That’s why GM doesn’t really let the lower-level guys go any higher into our ranks. If it blows up, then the damage done to our ranks wouldn’t be so extensive. If questions are asked, they wouldn’t be able to give any kind of answer, and Mole is sworn to secrecy. GM like seriously trusts him. He gets the job done. Last I heard, he’s climbed up the ranks high enough to hear the boss’s name.” Lance leaned closer and whispered directly into Keith’s ear, “Zarkon.”

Keith shuddered. “Sounds like the name of a twisted galactic emperor,” he mumbled.

“Right?” Lance beamed, grinning. “I thought so, too.”

Keith elbowed him. “Take this seriously, Lance.”

“I am serious,” Lance grumbled petulantly. “Besides, you’re the one that brought it up. Jerk. Anyway,” he said, lowering his voice once again, “nobody knows who he even is. He’s got all kinds of body doubles to take his place so he doesn’t get caught. Pidge and Mole are working to get confirmation on the connection with—with the druids—and, hopefully, that would lead us to the final boss. Nyma and Rolo are trying to get any insider information on that new location we found on the map. We just have to wait until something turns up.” He went back to eating his noodles. “I just wonder,” he said, “what he wants with this entire server—because it seems like he’s just not satisfied with being one of the strongest guilds on the map.”

“GM said that the… the other guild used to be a like a secret police, right?” Keith recalled. “Maybe they felt like the Alli—the—the… admins were putting them out of business.”

“Maybe,” Lance agreed quietly, “but the admins couldn’t protect everyone back then either. There were still behind-the-scenes type of dealings going on, and of course the admins had no place in that. If players kept getting stronger, kept levelling up, then that guild would look for other powerful weapons to back them up… but why wouldn’t they just stop there?”

“They wouldn’t stop there because there’s a possibility that they could keep getting stronger,” Keith concluded. “Maybe they thought that they could overpower the… the higher ranked players eventually, and maybe dominating the map was meant to show that it was definitely something probable.”

Lance frowned and said, “And that’s why we have to stop it before it gets out of hand. They’ve become too corrupted; it’s gotten out of hand and become a danger to everyone.” He glanced at the time on his phone, and Keith stole a peek at the lock screen, which featured a selfie with Azura as the wallpaper, pouting with disappointment as he noticed the time. “It’s about time for you to get back to work, huh?” he commented.

Keith nodded quietly before the two of them finished their food and cleaned up their mess. Keith dumped the plastic bag of empty take-out containers into a nearby trash can while Lance gathered his shopping bags, looping them through one arm, and slipped his baby pouch over his shoulders. He plucked Azura from the ground, not even flinching when she yowled, and gently laid her into the pouch, combing his long fingers through her fur to soothe the disgruntled cat.

Lance smiled at Keith, averting his eyes momentarily, before meeting Keith’s curious gaze and
asking, “Will I see you tonight?”

“Yeah,” Keith found himself promising without a pause. “Yeah, I’ll drop by your apartment after work and give you a lift to work.”

Lance’s expression shifted into something more playful, eyes glimmering with mirth and mischief. His eyebrows raised, and the smile on his lips grew into a smirk. “Are you going to pick me up from work, too?” he asked teasingly.

“If you want,” Keith whispered breathlessly, staring into those sparkling oceanic blues reflecting the brightness of the sun’s rays.

Lance’s expression seemed to crack, but when Keith blinked, Lance was smiling just the same as before. “I guess I’ll take you up on that offer then,” he chirped, quickly pivoting on his heel. “Good luck at work.”

“Uh, yeah, you too,” Keith spluttered before immediately backtracking. “Wait, shit, you don’t have to get back to work!”

He jogged towards Lance, keeping up with him, and once they were side by side, Lance bumped his hip against Keith’s and stepped away with a bounce in his step and a charming grin stretched across his lips. Lance rolled his eyes and remarked, “You’re such a dork.”

“And you’re an asshole,” Keith grumbled before noticing that they had reached the edge of the park

Lance laughed and replied, “I am, aren’t I?” Before Keith could read any more into his tone, Lance added, “I’ll see you tonight.”

“Okay,” Keith responded, “yeah, I’ll see you tonight.” They returned to the noise and liveliness of the city and went their opposite ways. Keith glanced over his shoulder, just to make sure that Lance was on his way home, before ambling back to Voltron Towers. He nodded towards the receptionist in lieu of a greeting and shuffled towards the elevator, pressing the button for the fourth floor. The moment the elevator doors slid open, Keith startled at the sight of Sven’s shit-eating smirk.

“What the fuck, Sven?” Keith hissed between his teeth. He skulked to his desk, and the older man pivoted on the heel of his loafers, following after Keith.

“So how was your lunch date?” Sven teased.

“What’s it to you?” Keith grumbled, hunching his shoulders and steadfastly ignoring the older man’s approaches. “You never took any interest in my lo—in my life.”

“Au contraire,” Sven responded, “your love life is of definite interest when it involves you, grumpy little cat that you are, being in a better mood at Headquarters while doing actual paperwork.” His grin only got wider the more he spoke. “So yes,” he concluded, “of course I’m interested in who had sparked the elusive Red Lion’s interest and fanned it into a flame.”

Keith rolled his eyes. “Piss off, old man,” he grumbled.

“This conversation isn’t over,” Sven warned. “I’m telling you. You’ve been affecting the workplace with your good mood. It’s contagious.”

“I wonder why you don’t,” Keith remarked snappily. “Trouble in paradise with the missus, old man?”
Sven huffed haughtily. “Natasha and I have a wonderful relationship, thank you very much.” He winked at Keith and said, “If you ever need any advice, you know who to go to.”

“Not you or Shiro, that’s for sure,” Keith grumbled.

“What was that? Stop mumbling, boy; nobody can ever hear you!”

That was kind of the point, but Keith wasn’t about to say that—not when Shiro was marching over in their direction, looking very much like a proud father for whatever reason. Only when he opened his mouth did Keith realise why. “So how was your lunch date with Lance?” Shiro asked.

Sven’s eyes sparkled. “Lance, hmm?”

Keith buried his face into his hands. Great, he thought sardonically, now there were two of them.

(Today – 3:31 PM)

Pidgeot: gm wants the two of you online tonight
Pidgeot: same time and place as usual
Pidgeot: he says it’s a pretty important campaign
Lancer™: Okay! I’ll be there!
Dark Knight: Same.

Just as Keith was about to rap his knuckles against the door, he could faintly hear music coming from Lance’s apartment. Furrowing his brows, he pressed his ear against the surface instead. The vibrations thrummed against his ear, and although the lyrics were muffled, he could hear them. More importantly, he could hear Lance singing them,

“If you wanna start a fight,
You better throw the first punch
Make it a good one
And if you wanna make it through the night
You better say my name like
The good, the bad, and the dirty.”

And then Keith heard Azura’s yowl, disrupting her owner’s one man performance, but it was short-lived as—Keith was sure—Lance took to her needs like a doting parent. Rolling his eyes, Keith recomposed himself and knocked on the door. He shoved his hands into his pockets and tried to act casual.

But then Lance opened the door, and Keith’s facade crumpled once he was confronted with Lance’s grin. “Hey,” Keith greeted Lance with a smile of his own.

“Hey,” Lance returned before opening the door even wider. “Come on in!”

“Don’t you have to get going soon?” Keith asked, but still he accepted the invitation.

After closing and locking the door behind him, Keith followed Lance into the main room, eyeing the latter’s change of clothing. Rather than the more modest outfit he had worn earlier, Lance had changed into a boxy black crop top with lace ribbons holding the back of the shirt together, baring
his back, all lean muscle and smooth skin. Dark indigo jeans tucked into black boots sat low on his hips, exposing smooth, bronzed skin and his lean, taut abs.

It’s just club culture, Keith told himself. It wasn’t like Lance was going out of his way to impress someone… was he?

Stop thinking about it.

Instead, Keith diverted his attention to the rest of the apartment. He noticed how the volume of the music playing on Lance’s laptop had been lowered some, and Azura, rather than climbing up the furniture and ledges, laid on top of the keyboard, the music not in any way bothering her though, Keith supposed, it might have been partially due to the deafness. “She likes the warmth and the vibrations,” Lance explained once he noticed Keith’s gaze lingering on the Angora. “Anyway, do you want anything to eat?”

“Lance, we’re going to be leaving soon,” Keith reminded.

“Please, on your bike, a twenty minute drive gets cut into a ten minute ride of death,” Lance remarked huffily with a roll of his eyes.

Well, he wasn’t wrong.

“I’m fine,” Keith replied, but Lance was still rummaging through his fridge. Keith quietly sat down on the futon and made eye contact with Azura, proceeding then to have a staring contest with the kitten. The shine of her crown shaped pet tag caught him off-guard, however, and forced him to blink. Narrowing his eyes at her sparkling blue collar, Keith wondered exactly how many different collars Azura had.

Knowing Lance, probably enough to be considered a wardrobe.

“Here we go!” Lance chirped. Keith watched as he reached for a knife, cutting a slice and placing it onto a separate plate, before dropping the knife into the sink and returning the main dish back into his fridge. After kicking the door to his fridge shut, Lance sauntered over to the futon with two forks and a plate of food in his hands. All the meanwhile, Keith couldn’t keep his eyes off Lance’s stomach, off his waist, off his hips, until Lance sat down beside him, and Keith had to avert his eyes. In the process, however, he noticed the plate in Lance’s hands and perked up immediately.

“Is that flan?” Keith asked, unable to keep the excitement out of his tone. He automatically reached for the plate and one of the silver forks in Lance’s possession.

“Yup,” Lance answered. “I got bored, so I made it myself earlier. My little sister came over and ate like half of it while she was doing her homework, but at least there’s still some left for you.” Lance narrowed his eyes as Keith went in for a chunk of the slice and manoeuvred the plate out of the way. “Do you have your pills on you?”

“I don’t,” Keith replied, “but it’s a little bit. I’ll be fine.” When Lance narrowed his eyes at Keith warily, eyeing him with such blatant suspicion, Keith had to roll his eyes. “I’ll be fine,” Keith reiterated.

Lance sighed with great, dramatic flourish and returned the plate to its former position between them, watching as Keith stole a rather hefty chunk of the slice for himself. If Lance had anything to say—judging by his leer—then he kept it to himself, opting instead to eat an even bigger chunk than Keith. Savouring the blend of custard and caramel, Keith reached in for another bite, and between the two of them, they quickly finished off the slice of flan. Then Lance was shutting off his laptop and
pressing a kiss between Azura’s ears while Keith dropped the plate off into the sink and shuffled
towards the front entrance.

“I’ll see you later, beautiful! Have fun!” Lance cooed before stepping out of the apartment, where
Keith was waiting for him. Keith couldn’t help but snort at the sight of Lance blowing kisses to
Azura before closing and locking his apartment door.

“What do you think GM wants with us?” Lance asked as they climbed down the apartment stairs.
“It’s pretty early for another campaign, considering we just finished a session.”

“Something must have come up,” Keith replied. “Maybe it’s a shorter campaign this time that he
wants to try.” The words came out choppy and awkward, and Keith was glad that he at least didn’t
stumble over them—unfamiliar as they were—like he had earlier today. Maybe that meant it was
getting used to the strange jargon, and he wasn’t quite sure if that was a good thing.

“Must be exciting,” Lance responded, accepting the helmet Keith had fetched from the compartment
on his bike for him. He watched curiously as Keith slipped off his jacket and draped it over Lance’s
shoulders. Slipping his arms through the sleeves, the jacket a perfect fit, Lance then asked, “Why are
you lending me your jacket?”

“Your clothes,” Keith explained shortly. Lance arched an eyebrow, silently demanding more
clarification. Keith sighed and said, “If anything happens, it’ll be protection. Road rash isn’t fun.”
Keith slung his leg over the side of his bike and fiddled with his keys, adamantly refusing to meet
Lance’s gaze, as he felt his words tumble past his lips awkwardly, “Besides, your skin is really
pretty.” He could feel his cheeks and his ears redden from sheer embarrassment, but Lance didn’t
say anything in response. As much as Keith wanted to, he couldn’t even steal a glimpse of Lance’s
reaction, far too afraid of what he might possibly find.

Nevertheless, Lance slipped onto Obsidian behind Keith, and he hummed in amusement when Keith
tensed briefly at his touch, causing the latter to flush with embarrassment before relaxing completely.
“Seriously, will you ever get used to this?” Lance asked with an incredulous tone, tinged with
unabashed amusement. “I thought you were getting better.”

“I don’t know,” Keith mumbled, ducking his head low when Lance tried to peer over his shoulder to
tease him, taunting him with his shit-eating grin.

“I guess we’ll just have to keep trying,” Lance chirped, wrapping his arms around Keith’s waist.
“Now onward, my dear Knight!”

Keith snorted. “Say that a little louder so the rest of the world could hear, won’t you?” he grumbled
as he pressed the button to start the engine.

Obsidian’s engine purred softly, rumbling underneath them, and right before Lance could deliver his
request at a much higher volume (because Keith just knew that Lance would take it as a challenge),
Keith kicked off and merged right onto the local streets, grinning at Lance’s wild whooping and
cheering. Encouraged, Keith pushed on at faster speeds until everything around them become one
continuous motion blur—the lights, the cars, the pedestrians—until Keith was forced to slow down at
a red light.

Happiness hummed within his head, a light buzz, as he felt Lance lean against his back, resting his
head against Keith’s shoulder. Keith’s grin only grew wider, and while it hurt to smile, he couldn’t
stop—not when Lance was this close to him, not when Lance’s good mood was so contagious, not
when Lance made him so… so deliriously happy.
Happiness hummed within his head, and it both sounded and felt like a light buzz, a good buzz.

When the lights at the intersection switched back to green, Keith kicked off, riding forward, and gradually built up the speed that he had lost, breaking past the yellow lights even as it turned red. Eventually, Keith slowed to a stop in front of Empire and parked in his spot. (Antok had begun to reserve it considering how often Keith was making his appearances at the club.)

Lance thanked Keith for the ride before marching up to his booth and checking his equipment and setting up his mixers appropriately. Keith, on the other hand, headed to the bar, where Rolo fixed him with a bottle of beer. “I’m putting it on León’s tab,” Rolo explained. “I owe him too many drinks anyway, so he could at least pay for yours.”

Keith accepted the drink and warily eyed the bar for a certain blonde haired vixen. “Nyma’s not here,” Rolo said. “Kolivan sent her to play messenger.”

“Is that something she does a regular basis?” Keith asked.

“Yeah,” Rolo answered. “She and I switch off on the messenger thing—depends on who’s calling, really. Kolivan sends me when the client’s a paranoid clusterfuck of a mess, make ‘em all nice and relaxed; Nyma is the kind no-nonsense types prefer because she gets right down to business.”

Keith hummed, and he supposed he did a decent job at hiding the relief he felt when Rolo didn’t comment on his general dislike for Nyma. They were too antagonistic towards each other, after all, and Keith had nothing to say about her—much less to her.

His phone vibrated in his pocket, and Keith fished it out to glance at the notifications.

Shiro.

Unlocking his phone, he pulled up his messages to respond.

[6:04 PM]

Shiro: Where are you?

Keith: I dropped Lance off at work.

Keith: I probably won’t be back until late.

Keith: I’m going to patrol the area. Make sure it’s safe.

Keith: Drop him back off at home when he’s done.

Shiro: What a caring boyfriend.

Keith: I’m not his boyfriend.

Shiro: Not YET.

Keith: But if I was, I’d be better than you.

Keith: Allura’s still waiting for that proposal.

Shiro didn’t reply after that.

“You know, there are better places to hang out than a club if you’re not going to be doing anything,”
Rolo commented as he served someone else her drink. By the looks of it, she was probably going to approach Keith until she noticed his glare, and while it wasn’t directed towards her, it was still enough to intimidate her to back off and go back to her friends. Rolo snorted at the sight, but by his easygoing grin, he wasn’t nearly as affected as the girl. “Just saying, you could kill time elsewhere.”

“It’s convenient to be here,” Keith replied, “considering that Kolivan wants to meet anyway.”

“You have four hours ‘til the arranged meeting time,” Rolo remarked incredulously.

“I’ll sit here for four hours then,” Keith responded. “I’ve sat in an office cubicle for longer, you know?”

Rolo rolled his eyes. “How could I forget about your day job?”

“I’m surprised you did,” Keith remarked. “Nyma never lets me forget about it.”

“Well, that’s Nyma’s problem,” Rolo responded as he prepared another cocktail. His eyes shifted towards Keith momentarily, narrowed with suspicion. “As long as you don’t rat us out, I don’t have anything against you. You’ve never fucked around with my business. Nyma, on the other hand, thinks you’re a threat because you are fucking what she thinks is her business—or, trying to anyway.” Then, just as easily as when his expression first changed to hostility, it reverted back to his usual easygoing nature as he returned back to focusing on the pink cocktail in front of him, serving it up to another pretty girl.

Keith scowled. “What Lance and I do is nobody’s business but our own,” he snapped.

“See, I know that,” Rolo replied. “I’m pretty sure everyone knows that, including Nyma, but it doesn’t really matter when people have loose morals, especially considering our business is built on information. You’ve gotta admit that we’re a little curious. Little boy blue has a pretty strict policy to avoid dating co-workers because, in this field of work, things can get real messy real quick. It’s not just dating either. The casanova’s also distanced himself from his own friends and family even though he’s a real social butterfly. The only exception to all of this? You, ‘Akira.’ The two of you just keep getting closer and closer,” Rolo said with a dirty smirk, eyes mischievous and daring, and Keith knew that the other man had long figured out that was not his actual name. “And Nyma? She’s real curious about all that.”

“Well, tell her to mind her own goddamn business,” Keith grumbled.

“She’s not digging into your personal affairs,” Rolo assured him. “What you and Mister Blue Lion up there does behind closed doors remains behind closed doors.” Before Keith could protest, Rolo tucked on, “She does tend to get involved with things she thinks is a threat to León though.”

“I would never hurt him!” Keith hissed. At Rolo’s pointed look, Keith lowered his eyes to his hands guiltily, hands itching with the memory of warm, viscous blood sticking to his palms and between his fingers. “Not again.”

“She thinks she owes him,” Rolo continued as though Keith hadn’t spoken. “Feels bad that he’s gotten involved in the underground and all—considering what he’s done for her. He was a real darlin’ of a boyfriend, apparently, and he would’ve never been here if she hadn’t introduced him to our boss.

“León left her because he thought it would have been safer for the two of them, and Nyma agreed. A relationship between an informant and a field agent would have been messy. Hell, any relationship would have been messy. But then you show up, and Kolivan’s tightened the leash he has around
León’s neck. You think it’s any wonder why she’s worried?”

Keith bit down on his tongue, angry at the similarities he was beginning to recognise between himself and Nyma.

“By the way, that information wasn’t free,” Rolo mentioned off-handedly. “That’s worth maybe twenty bucks.”

“I’m just going to buy a fucking sandwich and beer,” Keith snapped, slapping the money onto the counter.

Rolo winked at him. “Pleasure doin’ business with ya.”

Four hours passed with Keith playing mobile games on his phone, ignoring everything and everyone around him, before Lance tugged him back by the collar of his jacket. “Come on,” Lance said, “he’s waiting for us.” Keith stumbled off the bar stool and followed Lance as the latter led them to Kolivan’s office.

Lance knocked on the heavy wooden door, and Keith waited with his arms crossed for the older man to let them inside. “Come in,” he heard Kolivan’s voice bellow, muffled slightly by the material of the wood. He didn’t look up at them when they did enter the office. They stood front and centre, and once the door closed behind them did Kolivan speak again, “Mole has managed to determine what The Snake’s Eye is.” He stacked his papers, lining them up, before slipping them into the drawer of his desk. “It’s a cover for a fight club.”

“First rule of fight club,” Lance mused, “don’t talk about fight club.”

Keith gave Lance an exasperated look before asking Kolivan, “Like boxing?”

“That’s what they used to be,” Kolivan replied. “Just a bunch of men looking for a good fight and a good pay. People attend because they’re either a fighter looking to make money or a gambler trying to win the betting pool.”

“So what are they now?” Keith questioned, raising an eyebrow.

“They don’t put only men into the pit there any more,” Kolivan clarified. “They’re also throwing in monsters.”

Lance’s eyes widened, and Keith could feel the disgust, repulsion, and horror emanating from him. “That’s insane!” Lance hissed. “A normal fighter can’t stand his ground against a monster with just his bare fists! As far as we know, only the engineers at Voltron Towers have the equipment for combating them!”

“Why are the Galra doing this?” Keith demanded. “There’s no meaning to that other than for sick entertainment!”

“Precisely why we’re sending you two to investigate,” Kolivan stated. “I’ve received word from Wong. You get access to what they call the Arena when you order a drink off their supposed secret menu, such as The Champion’s Goblet. Gunderson will be online in a half an hour.” He narrowed his eyes at the two of them. “And don’t cause trouble.”

“I can smell the bloodlust all the way from over here,” Keith stated dryly as they stared up at the neon sign reading “The Snake’s Eye” in looping, serpentine font. His fingers twitched, itching to grab his sword that he hadn’t brought with him, and Lance could understand the sentiment all too
well. His dual handguns were hidden underneath the borrowed motorcycle jacket with a hood pulled over his head, and the familiar weight of his sniper rifle was missing from his back. Keith, too, was only able to bring his dagger, hiding it in his right boot. Kolivan had urged them to conceal their weapons, so the big guns were left behind in the safety of Empire. Their usual garbs were forgone in favour of more discreet clothing so not to attract too much attention.

Lance had kept Keith’s motorcycle jacket, wearing it over his crop top, with the same jeans and boots from earlier; the only trace of “Blue Shot” was the pair of leather gloves he wore on his hands. A midnight blue silk scarf was wrapped around his neck, large enough to hide his face behind the fabric if need be, but otherwise fashionable and unsuspecting. On the other hand, Keith wore his usual black get-up, minus the jacket, but his red bandana scarf was knotted around his neck rather than covering up everything below his nose.

“You’re nervous,” Lance commented. Really, Lance wasn’t in such a position to speak either, given how shaky his hands were.

Keith was right. There was something wrong with this place, and they were supposed to find out what it was.

“Hey,” Keith called out to him, clasping their hands together, “we’re in this together.” He smiled, and Lance could feel his nerves settle somewhat. “We’re a team.”

“And we make a good team,” Lance quipped with a smile.

“You two are so gross,” Pidge bemoaned. There was a thunk and the sound of books and pens clattering on a desk, and Lance snickered at the imagery of Pidge pounding her head against the surface of her desk. “Just hurry up and go.”

Lance tugged on their clasped hands, pulling Keith forward, and chirped, “You heard the little lady. Let’s get moving, hothead.” He reluctantly let go of Keith’s hand the moment they approached the bouncer. Then Lance forked over the cover charge for the two of them, much to Keith’s displeasure. It wasn’t as though Keith could suddenly explain his draining bank account to his colleagues, Lance reasoned, when so much of it were now admittance fees into Galra clubs in addition to his visits to Empire, where he does absolutely nothing.

Keith struggled to stick close to Lance as the latter easily manoeuvred his way into the crowd, dancing with the other club-goers and backing off when it got too flirtatious and intimate. Of course, he immediately stopped when Keith latched onto his wrist and levelled Lance with a glare. It wasn’t only him either. Keith sent the other guy scrambling away with his tail between his legs with only a threatening glower. Sighing, Lance turned to Keith and teased, “You suck at covert operations.” His voice was amplified by his microphone, and he knew that Keith could hear him clearly—if the scowl was anything to go by.

“Doesn’t mean you have to flirt with them,” Keith grumbled.

“Oh my God,” Pidge groaned.

Lance pulled Keith closer and rolled his hips. “If you don’t like it, then dance with me to keep them away,” he simply said with a taunting grin on his lips, and Keith most definitely picked up the challenge because Keith, who didn’t dance at all during his time at Empire, narrowed his eyes at his partner and then rolled his fucking hips in response.

It was only once, and Keith just about died from mortification at his own actions.
Lance had nearly died, too.

“Oh my God,” Pidge echoed, “we don’t have fucking time for this! Ugh, you’re so gross! I thought you assholes fixed up your nasty sexual tension! Can I please get reassigned to a different team?”

Laughing, Lance sashayed away, heading to the direction of the bar. Keith chased after him, elbowing and forcing his way through the crowd while Lance was easily dancing away from everyone. By the time Lance had seated himself at the bar, Keith was hovering behind him, glowering indignantly at Lance. Lance waved over to the bartender to grab his attention.

“What can I get for you boys?” he asked, wiping his hands dry on a cotton towel.

Lance leaned forward, arms resting against the counter, and the bartender leaned forward as well. Lance raised two fingers and replied lowly, “Two of The Champion’s Goblet.”

The bartender’s eyes shifted between the two of them before nodding towards the door behind him. “Down the stairs, but it is doubtful you’ll pass through the spider’s web.”

“Thanks for the help,” Lance said before hopping off the stool, Keith following after him.

“What does that mean?” Keith asked, stopping Lance before he could open the door to which the bartender had directed them. “Did you get it?”

“It means I got our way in,” Lance answered with an uneasy grin. He returned the grip Keith held on him and said, “You be careful down there. Don’t… don’t do anything stupid.”

Keith frowned and said, “That goes for you, too.”

“I thought we agreed to stop being gross,” Pidge protested. “Anyway, if you open that damn door, know that you’re going in blind. The cameras are only on the main floor. There’s nothing down there.”

“All right,” Lance replied. “Thanks for the heads up.” Lance slipped past the door first, and Keith trailed after. It clicked shut behind them that made them flinch. As they climbed down the stairs, the noise only grew louder and louder, and they could barely hear the heavyset man, dressed entirely in black with a shirt that had “SECURITY” printed on the back in hideous yellow font, over the crowd.

“You can’t pass through here, boys,” he said, raising his voice to be heard by the two of them. “Turn around and head back up to the club.”

“It’s because of the spider’s web, isn’t it?” Lance responded. Honestly, he was rather proud of the fact that he had somehow managed to keep the waver out of his voice.

The guard nodded his approval, and he stepped aside. Lance caught a glimpse of the Galra symbol tattooed on his arm. Hatred and loathing gripped at his heart, and Lance clenched his jaw tightly to prevent himself from outright scowling and lashing out at the guard. He was in a nest full of Galran vipers; it wouldn’t do to lose himself here.

Glancing over his shoulder, it seemed that Keith had come to the same consensus. Keith’s fingers were furled tightly into fists, nails digging into the flesh of his palms, but unlike Lance, his visage was set in a quiet fury. He inched closer to Lance, and together they traversed the crowd of people, venturing closer to the front.

The spectators were caged behind a barbed wire fence several feet above a ring like a Roman coliseum. Lance couldn’t help but think that it was aptly named the Arena.
Keith gripped his hand. “Sapphire,” he said—and nothing more.

Lance followed Keith’s gaze, eyes widening when he saw a man—tall and spindly with only lean muscles—suddenly grow taller, muscles bulging. His skin, once a healthy pallor littered with blue and black bruises, grew pale and slick with sweat. Green scales formed underneath his skin, breaking out at his joints and spotting over on his arms and legs and neck and face. He screamed—roared—as something broke out of his skin near his tail bone—an actual tail. Lance watched in horror as his teeth elongated, becoming sharper, more pointed and jagged, and as his ears shrunk underneath a splattering of scales. His nose flattened into a scaly snout, and his eyes narrowed and sharpened. As the former man hissed, Lance caught sight of his tongue splitting and forking.

“What the fuck…” Pidge muttered into the line, and Lance himself felt sick and disgusted at the spectacle in front of him.

“Chameleon never shifted like that,” Keith whispered. “He… He can’t be a shifter; it shouldn’t be that painful. Shifting is what the word implies; your body accommodates the changes because it’s a part of you. This… this is forcing the changes.” Keith nodded his head in a different direction, and Lance reluctantly looked away from the repulsive sight to look at whatever other horror was present in the Arena.

There was another man whose skin grew grey and ashen. His limbs elongated, and his muscles grew bulkier before hardening into stone.

“The fucking golem,” Lance murmured under his breath.

“They’re… they’re harvesting monsters,” Keith said, eyes fixed on a man who fell onto all fours, his limbs and muscles becoming more wolf-like in appearance. His nails fell out, replaced by bloodied claws, and his hair grew and grew and grew all over his body. “The werewolf we fought is only a werewolf.”

“What the hell is this?” Lance mumbled. “What the fuck are they?”

“Chimeras,” someone stated beside them, voice low among the crowd. “They’re called Chimeras.” Keith immediately pulled Lance behind him, standing in front of Lance to shield him from danger, but before Keith could confront the stranger, they were already long gone. Lance had only gotten a glimpse of chestnut brown tufts of hair—like Pidge, he couldn’t help but think.

“Who was that?” Pidge demanded immediately. “Who the hell was that? Did they know who you were? What the hell was that?”

“Emerald, calm down,” Lance said. “There was no way for anyone to know we were coming unless…”

“Unless Mole was compromised,” Pidge finished.

“Be on your guard,” Lance told Keith, who only nodded in agreement, but the moment he spoke, there was a clattering of metal. They turned their attention back to the Arena, gaping as metal gates rose to release one of the so-called Chimeras, the stone golem. Then they opened another pair of gates on the opposite side, pushing in a muscular man wearing the same all-black get-up as the security guard who had stopped Lance and Keith previously. “Fuck…” Lance muttered, eyes wide, as he realised what the hell was going to happen next. “He’s going to get killed.”

“I don’t think they care,” Keith muttered, scowl set deep on his lips. “I think they’re doing this to prove a point.”
And when Lance heard the first punch hit—filled with the sickening sound of cracking bones—he felt terror dig itself into his core. The man flew across the stadium, falling limp to the ground, and although he scrambled to get away (for the stone golem sacrificed speed for strength and durability), it was all in vain. Lance flinched as the stone golem crushed the poor man’s legs underneath its foot. Lance cringed, squeezing his eyes shut, as the man screamed, the cry of agony enough to drown out the sound of his breaking bones.

Keith inched forward, making to lunge at the golem, and Lance hurriedly grasped his wrist, pulling him back and rooting him in place. When Keith whirled around, wearing an expression of disgust and fury and pure, unadulterated vengeance, Lance could feel his own heart breaking. He wanted this madness to stop, too, but he couldn’t stop it. Not right now. Not like this. Not when it’s only the two of them in a swarm of Galran filth. “We can’t,” Lance said, and he could hear his own voice break as well.

Keith’s rage shattered, replaced by frustration, and he turned away, determinedly watching the gore in front of him, storing away the information to later return his rage sevenfold. Lance could feel his own heart become twisted and crippled by the revulsion. Galra or not, nobody deserved such a fate. It was too cruel, too disgusting and sick.

He hated feeling helpless.

They dragged away the corpse, bloodied and lifeless, and Lance released the breath he’d been holding, only to inhale the dirty atmosphere filled with the stench of sweat and blood and filthy money that’d been swapped between hands too many times to count.

He’d relaxed too soon, however.

“That was only the introduction,” Lance observed as the gates opened again, and a second monster, the werewolf, entered the stadium. “They were measuring its strength against a human,” he spat. “It was a fucking demonstration.”

“Other than making money, why would they pit their monsters against each other?” Keith asked. “How are they even making them?”

“I guess we have to find out,” Lance said. “Emerald, are you with us?”

Pidge exhaled, her trembling breath muffling the microphone, and then responded, “Yeah, go ahead, but I don’t know how much use I can be now that I can’t monitor anything. You’ll just have to be careful—way more careful than usual for the two of you, anyway.”

“I resent that,” Lance huffed.

“Please, you’re the one who gets in the most trouble,” Pidge grumbled. “It’d be a miracle if you didn’t run into any Voltron Alliance people today.”

“Don’t jinx us,” Lance warned in an attempt to keep their moods up. With that, Lance and Keith navigated through the crowds and stumbled upon a circle or pit of sorts where people were practically throwing their money away. Lance had never seen so many dollar bills exchanged between more hands than he could count at once, and considering how many under the table exchanges he has witnessed at Empire, that was saying something.

“Up next we have the Sorcerer versus the Stone Giant!” exclaimed the man in the centre of the ring, dressed in a cheap waistcoat with a wrinkled button shirt covered in stains—coffee stains, beer stains, blood stains. His voice was bigger and louder than his actual appearance—complete with wiry black
hair, beady rat eyes, and a crooked nose that didn’t heal properly after it was broken one too many times. “Place your bets here! Place your bets now!”

“Five hundred for the Sorcerer!”

“Seven hundred for the Stone Giant!”

“Eight hundred for the Sorcerer!”

“One thousand for the Stone Giant!”

The numbers kept climbing upwards—skyrocketing—and Lance could barely wrap his head around it. He felt Keith pull him by the arm, pointing to the two combatants in the Arena. One of the two combats was another Normal, and Lance felt sick to his stomach knowing that another human would be going up against the same monster that was physically and morally (or, Lance supposed, immorally) capable of crushing a grown man underneath his foot.

This Normal looked to be about a teenager, barely a young adult, maybe seventeen or eighteen.

Lance blanched as the fight commenced, but he couldn’t look away.

He had jumped to conclusions far too soon because the moment the Stone Giant leapt forward, the teenager—no, the Sorcerer—raised his arms, palms facing outward, igniting the air surrounding the golem with flames that wrapped around the Stone Giant like a snake tightening its hold around its prey. The air in the Arena grew several times warmer, practically smouldering everyone in the Arena. Lance turned to face Keith, about to ask the other man if the Super could do that, too, but stopped once he noticed how Keith’s eyes were narrowed in suspicion.

“There was a kid like two weeks ago,” Keith said, “who developed powers of electricity. He caused a blackout in an entire district, but afterwards, his powers didn’t activate again. They’re keeping an eye on him at the Garrison just in case but…”

“If they can create monsters,” Lance concluded, “then maybe they can harvest powers like elemental manipulation.”

Keith nodded, a grim look in his eyes. “That kid who manipulated electricity doesn’t belong there in the Garrison—at least not for the reason they think he should be there,” Keith stated. “Somehow, if he managed to get himself involved in this mess, we need to know how, for what, and why.” Keith huffed, frustration overtaking his expression, and crossed his arms. “I can’t question him though without the Garrison questioning me.”

“Well, now there’s no denying that the Galra and the monsters are connected,” Lance stated, “and that they’re getting something from Druid Pharmaceuticals.”

“The miracle drug,” Pidge concluded, “that’s keeping the Galra on top. It’s still not confirmed, but from what we’ve seen, it’s highly likely. We at least know they’re connected somehow, too.”

The Stone Giant broke out of the whirlpool of flames and raised a large fist, hovering over the Sorcerer’s head. The Sorcerer managed to leap out of the way—though just barely—but his foot was crushed underneath the Giant’s large fist. Lance flinched at the sound of the bones breaking and the boy’s ear-shattering pain, and he crumpled as though he was the one who been injured.

Lance averted his gaze immediately as the Stone Giant delivered the final blow, refusing to watch the boy’s end. Keith, on the other hand, was vibrating with rage that was aching to be released, to destroy the entire arena. Lance reached for Keith’s hand, unfurling the fingers that had curled up,
nails digging into the flesh of his palms, and laced their fingers together.

“I’m sorry,” Lance whispered, “but we can’t do anything right now.”

And God, did he hate it.

The gate opened once more, and this time, the werewolf entered the Arena. While the werewolf was certainly strong and faster, he—it? Lance didn’t know—couldn’t get past the golem’s defence. The werewolf did, however, manage to disable the golem over time by causing damage to the joints. Eventually, the werewolf was thrown into a wall, and Lance heard both the wall and the werewolf’s bones crack.

While the lizard man was certainly strong, he wasn’t nearly as fast as the werewolf, nor was he as clever. He managed to sink his claws into the stone and pry it apart, crawling onto the golem and trapping the golem within his vices. Despite how much the golem flailed, it wasn’t able to throw off the lizard man.

The lizard man with his hard scales, his fearsome strength, and his dexterity had won through endeavour and endurance alone, but that wasn’t enough to protect him from the next challenge. Given his own exhaustion, there was no way he would last.

“And now!” the beady eyed man with the crooked nose exclaimed. “We will be placing bets for our champion, Myzax!”

Myzax, Lance noted, was a hulking creature that resembled a giant gorilla with bulging muscles, razor sharp teeth, and pointed claws. However, he didn’t crawl like the werewolf or creep like the lizard man or march and stumble like the stone golem. He walked, chest out and head held high, like any man would. His eyes glowed with intelligence, and something told Lance that he hadn’t remained “Champion” through strength alone.

“It’s like paying to watch Godzilla and King Kong duke it out,” someone commented behind Lance. In any other situation, Lance would have laughed, but right now he didn’t feel the slightest bit of amusement. He felt terribly ill, nausea churning within his stomach uncomfortably, vertigo making his head spin in every direction, because all of this was sick—terribly, disgustingly sick.

“It doesn’t seem like anybody is questioning how they made these guys or what they are,” Pidge commented, and Lance was suddenly very glad that she wasn’t there to witness what he had Keith were forced to spectate.

“It just means these guys have been around for a while,” Lance said. “This must have been a long way coming.” Lance caught a glimpse of movement and tugged on Keith’s hand, pulling him closer so that Lance could lean in and whisper, “I see Prorok over there.”

We could get more information from him, from whatever he’s hiding.

Keith nodded in a show of understanding and began to follow Lance as they navigated to where they last saw Prorok. However, before they could progress, the floor below them began to tremble. Lance stumbled over his feet, and Keith instinctively reached out, snatching onto his wrist and pulling the brunet upright. They were unable to regain their balance because, a second later, the world shook once again. Lance was shoved aside, pushed against the wire fence, so that he wasn’t trampled underneath running feet.

People were scrambling away from the Arena.

Myzax was going crazy; the intelligence that he had possessed had vanished without a single trace
left in his eyes, in his posture. He panted heavily, nostrils flaring, and his eyes were wide and red with hunger and bloodlust. Where he had once stood upright, he had taken to fours, tearing into the lizard man with a ferociousness Lance had never before seen, and that one victim was not enough. He had latched onto the wire fence, trying to pry it apart with his bare hands, on the opposite side of the Arena.

Lance cursed his luck. “We have to do something!” Lance exclaimed, latching onto Keith’s shoulders. “The people down here might be the scum of the earth, but the guys up there might not even know about this place! It’ll be a massacre if he escapes!”

“Already on it!” Keith responded, rushing towards Myzax before Lance could stop him and warn him to be smart about this. Lance huffed, silently groaning, and chased after Keith while simultaneously reloading his handguns, filling the clips for both of his guns with lead bullets. He lined up his shots just as Keith leapt into action, landing a roundhouse kick reinforced with his brilliantly red flames across Myzax’s jaw.

Leave it to Keith to be both badass and idiotic all at once.

“Be careful!” Pidge warned them. “I’ll keep an eye on the action outside! The escapees have caused a mess out on the club’s floor, and that’s bound to catch attention!”

“Got it!” Lance replied as he lined up his shots.

He fired at Myzax’s hands when they reached out for Keith. The latter ducked underneath Myzax and slipped his knife out of his boot, lining the blade with his fire, just as Myzax recoiled when the lead bullets pierced through his hands with a furious screech. Keith lashed out then, cutting through the muscles in his right arm to render it useless. The bullet wounds and the laceration didn’t seem to deter him though. The gorilla hybrid swung at Keith once more, and the Super rolled away on the floor, dodging the attack, and Lance fired twice more, landing two more bullets in his right hand.

Even as Myzax was dripping blood, he persevered; his carnal instincts drove him to fight and fight and fight despite the injuries, despite himself. Keith himself was egged on, unable to back down from a fight, from a challenge, and Lance was stuck in the back, trying to support his partner and provide him with cover.

“Guys!” Pidge snapped. “We’ve got company! Legendary Defenders just started airing! If you’re going to finish this, do it quick!”

“We can’t just leave him roaming free!” Keith declared. “If he gets out and up there, who knows what the fuck would happen!”

“There’s no way to tell how long it would take for the nearest Knight or Paladin to get here either!” Pidge added. “I’m trying to track down their progress on the city streets, but there are so many cameras—”

A sudden beeping pierced the air.

“You forgot to silence your phone?” Lance shrieked, disbelief and incredulity at the fore of his mind, as he reloaded his clips while Keith was keeping Myzax occupied. Keith fell back, scrambling for his phone in his backpocket, and Lance took over, relentlessly firing at Myzax—aiming again for his hands, for his legs, for his feet, in attempt to render him immobile—while Keith cursed and tried to shut off his phone.

“People normally don’t call me anyway!” Keith grumbled. “I forgot!”
“Oh my God,” Lance bemoaned. “Do we have to go over the basics of stealth missions again?” Lance huffed, lips set in a petulant pout, as he grumbled, “Who called you then? If people normally don’t call you…”

“Oh my God,” Pidge echoed, “are you really going to do this now?”

“It’s just Black Sky. He probably wants to know where I am, which means we have to wrap this up quickly,” Keith answered, amusement faintly colouring his tone. “Why? Are you jealous?”

Lance spluttered, cheeks reddening, before protesting, “I am not! Why would I be jealous of Black Sky? I can call you, too, you know! It’s not like I have a monopoly on phone calls!”

Keith jerked to a pause, and Lance noticed that Keith’s ears were just as red as his bandana. It was only a momentary lapse in judgement because Keith leapt out of the way, rolling on the floor to break his fall, as Myzax made to grab him. “I thought you were jealous because you were a Black Sky fan!” Keith returned.

“Why the hell would you jump to that conclusion?” Pidge snapped. “Anyway, you two should get out of there! They’re not that far from there! I’m focusing on only tracking the helicopter, which means that the Paladins might even be farther ahead!”

“Ruby, get out of here!” Lance cried. “They can’t find you! You’ll be compromised!”

Keith didn’t budge an inch from his position though, still heavy on the offensive front. “I’m not leaving you alone!” Keith argued. “They can’t find you either! We’re a team, remember? A damn good team!” Keith’s eyes widened, and Lance couldn’t understand why until— “Look out!”

Lance turned his head, catching sight of Myzax’s open, bloody palms, before a gust of wind surged past him, sending Myzax flying to the far wall.

Black Sky.

Lance pulled the scarf around his neck higher up, covering everything below his nose, and he replaced the clips in his ivory handgun with ice pellets—just in case. He glanced over at Keith, who was frozen still, and chanced a look over his shoulder, finding the power couple of Monstro City behind them.

“What’s the meaning of this, Keith?”

“Black Sky,” Keith began, “do you trust me?”

Still, the other Paladin continued speaking, his voice cold and demanding and just chock full of disappointment and disapproval, “Is this why you weren’t answering? Is this why you’ve been disappearing at night? How long has this been going on, Keith?”

“I can explain,” Keith insisted.

“I’m listening,” the Paladin in black responded coolly.

“But not right now,” Keith continued from his earlier statement. “Do you trust me?”

“Can I trust you, Keith?” Black Sky retorted. “As much as I want to, it’s hard to see if I can—”

“Then fucking don’t,” Lance cut in, refusing to make eye contact with either Super behind him. “He doesn’t need your half-assery. You either trust him or you don’t. You don’t have to be with him to
trust his decisions and his intentions.” He scoffed, holstering his handguns, and remarked, “But I guess I can’t expect you Knights to understand the difference between being comrades and being friends.”

“Trust me,” Keith pleaded with his mentor once more. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Titania,” Black Sky stated, “if you would—”

“You fucking bastard,” Lance hissed. “Don’t you dare—”

Before he could cross the distance and pull Keith away from the other Paladins, a gust of wind pushed him aside. He held onto his hood and his scarf, covering his face with his other hand, but he felt a hand latch onto his forearm, trying to force it down. Cracking open an eye, Lance panicked when he noticed Black Sky’s other hand reaching for his hood and his scarf.

Black Sky snarled, “Blue Shot, right? This is all your influence, isn’t it?”

“Black Sky!” Titania exclaimed.

Then, suddenly, the older Paladin was shoved aside.

“Keith!” both Titania and Black Sky called out to the younger Paladin.

Or, Lance supposed, eyes softening as he saw pain and misery cross Keith’s features in that very moment, former Paladin now.

Keith reached for Lance and helped him to his feet before sprinting for the exit. Myzax was the Alliance’s problem now. It was time to pull back. They had gathered some information though scarce it may have been, and it was far too risky to stay—not when the Paladins didn’t seem to want to listen to Keith, not when the tension in the air was pulled so tautly that it would snap with a single misspoken word, with a single misstep.

“They haven’t left The Snake’s Eye,” Pidge informed. “I’ll get you out of there and send Cerberus to fetch you.”

Following Pidge’s instructions, they ducked into the closest alleyway and took the back paths. Neither one of them spoke; they simply listened to Pidge’s succinct directions. Lance couldn’t broach the subject; Keith’s shoulders were hunched and tense. There was no way that Keith wanted to talk about what had just occurred. When they reached an opening, a sleek black car was parked at the curb, its engines running quietly. Lance opened the door, and Keith slid inside without a single word. Lance followed shortly after and closed the door behind him.

When Lance turned to face Keith, he was confronted with how completely shattered Keith looked.

“Oh, Keith,” Lance exhaled, feeling tears forming in his own eyes. His own heart ached at the sight of Keith’s crestfallen expression, and without any further thought, he reached out for Keith and pulled him into his arms. He pressed Keith’s face into the nape of his neck, and while Keith tensed initially, he later relaxed. Lance said nothing as warm drops of tears fell against his skin and only continued to stroke Keith’s hair, trying to offer whatever comfort that he can.

“Shh… hey,” Lance whispered into Keith’s ear, feeling the latter shudder within his arms, “hey, listen to me. It’s gonna be okay, I promise. You’re not alone. You told me that a while ago, remember? I don’t know what the future has in store for you or me or us, but… you won’t be alone. Just like how I’m here right now, I’ll be there. I’m with you, no matter what happens. Keith, you’re not alone. I won’t let you be alone.”
His hands shifted so that he held tightly onto Keith, embracing him and enveloping him with all the warmth Lance could give. Lance pressed a kiss against Keith’s temple and remained silent for the rest of the drive, and Antok himself didn’t utter a single word either.

Keith, too, was quiet the entire ride to Empire.

“We’ll need to erase all of the files about you from the Garrison database. Gunderson has already started,” Kolivan declared. “It may not do anything, but there’s a chance that it could hinder them from using that information against you. You won’t be returning home for a while either. I would say that you are welcome to stay here, but they already know that you’re a frequent patron of Empire. It’s one of the places where they would search for you.”

“He can stay with me,” Lance replied. “They might know about his connection to me as civilians, but they don’t know where I live unless they try to wheedle information from Hunk. They also don’t know my legal name.”

Kolivan nodded his agreement. “For now,” he said, “the two of you are on stand-by. It’s obvious these missions are getting riskier, and we can’t risk another encounter with the Voltron Alliance if they get an emergency call from someone in the vicinity. Do you have your cell phone?”

Keith fished it out of his pocket. “Why?” he asked.

Kolivan stretched out a hand for his phone, and Keith hesitated for a moment before he handed it over. It wasn’t like he had anything to lose. Anyone who could contact him—Shiro, the traitorous voice in his head whispered, Shiro could call him—probably wouldn’t want to speak to him.

When the older man reached into a drawer and pulled out his dagger, there was no questioning what his intentions were, and Keith didn’t even bother to stop him. There was no point in stopping him. Keith only watched as Kolivan slammed the point of the dagger into the cell phone, shattering the glass screen and leaving a gaping hole in the chunk of metal. The tip of the dagger buried itself into the wooden flesh of Kolivan’s desk, and it was no easy feat to yank the dagger out. The man was stronger than he appeared.

“Dispose of it,” Kolivan told him. “There’s no doubt that the Garrison or Alliance would have it bugged to keep track of where their Supers are.”

It was definitely possible, knowing how paranoid the Garrison is.

“Now,” Kolivan addressed the other matter at hand, “you said something about ‘Chimeras’?”

“That’s what someone said at the Arena,” Lance responded. “Have you ever heard of them?”

“It’s like the mystical creature,” Keith mumbled. “The creature made of different animal parts—like a lion with goat’s head that sticks out of its back and a snake for a tail. An omen for disaster.”

“In genetics,” Kolivan remarked, “it refers to an organism made of different zygotes. I’ll get Thace and Ulaz to look into these… Chimeras.” He sighed, leaning back in his office chair and forcing the back of the chair to recline, and said, “For now, you’re dismissed. The two of you be careful.” He eyed Keith and then mentioned, “Leave your bike here. They definitely have your licence plate on record, and the last thing you need is for them to trace it back to Reyes’ apartment. Clearly, this is no decent hiding place for it either, so I’ll have it towed to your aunt’s. We’ll come up with countermeasures to prevent it from being tracked.”

“My aunt knows?” Keith managed to ask, bewilderment further clouding his mind.
"The Kogane sisters were as thick as thieves," Kolivan responded. "If Akira Kogane asked her sister to keep her past silent, then Asako Kogane wouldn't say a single word. It's no wonder that you didn't know about your mother's dark past, and it's also no surprise that Asako Kogane didn't stop you from coming here."

So… only Keith was kept in the dark. He wondered if his grandfather knew about the Galra, about the Blade of Marmora, too. Not like it mattered. His grandfather was a dead man now, so it's not as though confronting him—or his mother—would do any good. There was only one person he could approach now, one person who had held her tongue for the entirety of his life, but doing so would be a danger in itself—for him and for her.

Still, he couldn't bring himself to be mad at his aunt.

Hell, he was just too fucking tired.

"I'll leave her a message to let her know that you are currently safe," Kolivan mentioned after Keith's silence.

Keith only nodded in response before allowing himself to be whisked out of the room by Lance, whose warm hand was a comforting anchor around his wrist.

Shiro didn't listen to him. Shiro didn't know if he could trust Keith and instead asked Allura to read his mind, and Allura actually did try to read his mind. He should have known they would react that way. He was an idiot for trying to reason with them. He was so fucking stupid for thinking that they would at least let him go if he had stayed behind, if he had let Lance escape first.

In the end, Lance didn't want to leave him behind, and ironically enough, Keith was glad for that because now he didn't know what would have happened if Keith had been left alone with Shiro and Allura.

He certainly wouldn't have been with Lance.

Maybe he would have been back in the Garrison, back in the detention centre, even though Shiro had said that Keith wouldn't have to go back there ever again.

But Shiro had said a lot of things, and Keith supposed they didn't matter now.

"Stop it."

When had they entered Lance’s apartment?

Keith snapped his head upwards, confronted by the calm waves that rippled across the surface of dark pools, but despite how beautiful the ocean was at midnight, the tides rose ever higher and became ever more dangerous.

"Stop thinking that way," Lance said, but then the resolve in his beautiful, beautiful eyes shattered. The fragments of his façade escaped his grasp. No matter how hard he tried to remain calm and composed, no matter how hard he tried to cling to his mask, Lance’s concern and worry seeped through the cracks, and it only broke Keith’s heart because this was his mess Lance wanted to fix.

And maybe there was just no way to go about fixing it.

"Please," Lance whispered, "stop thinking that way." He reached out with his hands, framing Keith’s face, and stepped closer, bridging the distance between them. He rested his forehead against Keith’s, and Keith could see the glow of the moon in the oceanic blues. Its reflection rippled, and
Keith’s breath hitched in his throat as he saw crystalline drops line at the brim of Lance’s eyes. “It’s not your fault,” Lance stated.

“It was my decision,” Keith replied.

“It was,” Lance acquiesced, “but it wasn’t your fault they reacted the way they did—and you shouldn’t blame yourself either. You didn’t do anything wrong; you’re just trying to save this shitty, fucked up world. You’re trying to define your own sense of justice. You’re reflecting on your morals and values, trying to figure out what’s right and what’s not, and there’s nothing wrong with that. They have to own up to their emotions, to their actions, to how they fucking reacted earlier.”

Lance’s eyes fluttered, and he was so close that Keith could count each individual eyelash—and, God, they were so long and Lance was so beautiful and even though he was so close, he wasn’t close enough.

“If anything,” Lance whispered, “it’s my fault. I… I dragged you into this lifestyle. You wouldn’t have been here if it wasn’t for me.”

Keith scoffed lightly and, opting for a lighter, milder tone, said, “Don’t flatter yourself. You’re only part of the equation.” He tried to smile, though strained it was, and added, “Like I said, it was my decision. I’ll live with the consequences; it’s just…”

“It’s scary,” Lance concluded. “I know. I’m scared, too. I’m scared for you. My family still doesn’t know; I don’t ever want them to know. I can’t… I can’t tell them, Keith. I’m scared I can’t protect them, and I hate that I couldn’t protect you.”

That’s not true, Keith wanted to protest, but he was held captive by those oceanic blues, swirling with turmoil and grief and concern. The waves washed over him, knocking him off his feet and sweeping him away, and before he even realised it, Keith swallowed Lance’s lips in a kiss and welcomed the return of affection that then surged through his veins and swelled in his chest.

However, the chaste press of his lips was far too little. He wanted to taste more, wanted to feel more, and a pleasurable thrill shot up his senses when Lance allowed himself to be pulled closer, compliantly melding into Keith’s arms, with every kiss stolen.

“I think it’ll be okay though. They’re detectives,” Lance whispered in between kisses. “Give them time. Let them figure it out. I’ll wait with you.”

He laced their fingers together, and Keith followed him to the futon, chasing after him with more lazy kisses soft and gentle and warm and tender and so goddamn intoxicating. Still, it wasn’t enough.

Closer, a voice in his head whispered. Closer, closer, closer. More, more, more.

Lance obediently slipped into Keith’s lap, and Keith tugged his motorcycle jacket off Lance’s shoulders, throwing it aside. He tugged at the ribbon holding Lance’s crop top together, and as it loosened, the top fell off Lance’s shoulders. Keith’s fingers skated over Lance’s brown skin while Lance’s long, beautiful pianist fingers carded through Keith’s hair. Keith couldn’t help but moan quietly—because, dear God, that felt nice.

But then the spell broke.

Lance froze in place, eyes wide and suddenly aware of himself, and Keith, too, tensed in response. Lance parted his swollen lips, about to say something, until the storm in his oceanic eyes broke free. Crystalline drops rolled down his cheeks, and again he brought Keith into his embrace, one hand at
the back of Keith’s head, the other wrapped around his shoulders.

“I’m sorry,” Lance apologised. “You lost your friends because of me. I’m sorry it came to this. I’m so sorry, Keith.”

Keith shuddered, overwhelmed by the warmth enveloping him, and placed a delicate kiss against the white scar at Lance’s shoulder. “You didn’t do anything wrong,” Keith reassured. “I’m just glad that you’re still here.”

Lance’s fingers curled into Keith’s shirt as he tightened his grip. “I’ll always be here for you,” Lance said, and it sounded like a promise.

I love you, Keith wanted to say, but then a sudden weight dropped onto Keith’s head, smashing his nose into Lance’s shoulder. Hissing, Keith rubbed at his irritated nose as Lance burst into a fit of giggles, and Keith’s face burned scarlet for various reasons.

Goddammit, Azura.

Lance plucked his kitten off Keith and grinned sheepishly at the latter. He held out Azura, who lapped at Keith’s nose in her own form of kisses, and laughed once more at Keith’s disgruntled expression.

“We’ll be there for you,” Lance said. Then he turned to Azura and began to rub his nose against Azura’s, “Isn’t that right, beautiful?” Lance cooed as Azura mewed at the show of affection.

He lowered Azura, who then kneaded one of the pillows atop the futon before curling into a ball and watching Lance and Keith with her blue eyes. Chuckling, Lance shrugged, his top sliding down to his elbows, and Keith tried not to focus too much on the exposed skin. “I guess it’s bedtime,” Lance mused as he pulled the covers over his shoulders before laying his head atop the pillow beside Azura.

Keith pulled off his gloves, setting them aside, and stole a glimpse of Lance, but then their eyes locked together. Keith couldn’t pull away from Lance’s magnetic gaze, and it didn’t help much when he tried to stop his beating heart from pounding ever louder—because he was so sure that Lance could hear it in the stillness of the night.

Then Lance huffed.

“Lay down, Keith,” Lance drawled, a mischievous glimmer in his oceanic eyes. “Neither of us bite, I swear.”

Keith chuckled quietly, a smiling creeping onto his lips, before he crawled underneath the covers. He met Lance’s gaze much more comfortably now. His heart rate didn’t slow down in the slightest, but he found that he didn’t really care because, right now, he was in this moment with Lance. That was all that mattered.

“Goodnight, Keith.”

“Goodnight, Lance.”

He would save his regrets for the morning.
“Lance, are you here—what the hell?!”

Azura yowled so loudly that Keith swore that the entire apartment block could hear her. Unfortunately, that also meant that it was his personal wakeup call, but, dammit, he didn’t want to wake up. Here, it was nice and warm, and Azura couldn’t do anything about it. Keith buried his face into Lance’s shoulder, groaning at the loss of warmth when he felt the latter shift to sit upright.

“Ana, what are you doing here?” Lance croaked, his voice groggy with sleep.

Ana?

Keith rolled over onto his side, his eyes fluttering open and shut, wavering back and forth between states of consciousness. It only took him a few seconds to realise that Lance was speaking with someone else, and once that registered in his head, Keith’s eyes shot open wide. He quickly scrambled upright, the blanket pooling at his waist, and ended up facing a pair of brilliantly blue eyes that were spread wide open with shock.

Then she screamed.

A string of Spanish spewed from her lips, pouring into the once quiet apartment, and Keith could only mourn the loss of serenity as he stared, wide eyed, at the teenage girl, who was gesturing wildly in his direction. Keith breathed a sigh of relief as she kept her eyes strictly on her older brother, feeling some of the pressure alleviate.

The resemblance, Keith noted as the siblings were distracted with screaming at each other, was uncanny. Ana’s complexion was nearly as tanned as Lance’s, and her hair was arranged in neat curls while Lance’s own dark brown locks—after eight hours of sleep—were curled ever so slightly at the ends. While she was significantly shorter (and rather petite for her age), she was still of a slight frame similar to her brother, and her chin and nose were pointed just like Lance’s.

“Ay dios…” Lance muttered with a sigh before raising his voice, cutting off his sister in a tone that could have passed as whining, “¡Oye, Ana!”

She only narrowed her eyes at him before continuing her tirade, and eventually, Lance turned to Keith with wide eyes, pleading and pitiful. “I’m sorry,” he mouthed. Keith tensed as Lance leaned closer and whispered in his ear, “Could you make breakfast and feed Azura? I have some eggs and bacon you could fry, and there’s also bread and butter for toast. Sorry to push this on you, but I really need to talk with my sister.”

“It’s fine,” Keith assured Lance, both of them practically shrinking underneath Ana’s glower. “I’ll get ready.”

Jeez, never before had Keith realised how intimidating teenage girls could be.

Keith then slipped out of the futon, silently stalking in the direction of the bathroom, while Azura paced after him, meowing for his attention. He glanced down at the white kitten before plucking her off the floor and carrying her into the bathroom, setting her inside the tub. He glanced at the plastic cup, smiling when he saw his red toothbrush from his first night still there, and was about to begin
his morning routine until Azura meowed again.

Keith glanced at her curiously. “You’re awfully chatty today,” he commented, crouching down to make eye contact with her. He gave her a little smirk. “Worried that I’m stealing Lance from you?”

God, he was seriously talking with and competing against a cat. How pathetic. If only Shiro could see him now—no, stop. Keith scowled. Don’t think about—just fucking stop.

Azura meowed and raised a paw, placing it atop Keith’s nose. Keith huffed. “Cute,” he said before narrowing his eyes. “I’m not going to lose to you.” Taking no heed of Keith’s threat, Azura leapt onto his shoulder, and he hissed when he felt her claws sink through the fabric of his shirt and into his skin—nothing too deep, thank God—to gain leverage on him. She balanced her weight and leapt into the sink. Keith sighed, grumbling “Of course” under his breath before plucking her out of the sink so that he could brush his teeth.

“Seriously?” he grumbled as Azura stuck her head underneath the running water, lapping at the steady stream with her pink tongue. Keith spat out the foam and rinsed before grabbing a towel and a blow dryer. “Lance spoils you too much,” he muttered, plopping down on the bathroom floor. He towelled her white hair as dry as he could without irritating her before starting up the blow dryer on its lowest setting. Keith scoffed as he watched Azura preen underneath the blow dryer. “You’re just like your owner,” he stated as he began to clean up Azura’s mess.

By the time he had exited the bathroom, Lance and Ana were sitting on separate sides of the futon with the same expression of irritation and the very same posture—tense, crossed arms, and deep scowls. Lowering his head to avoid eye contact in an attempt to slip out of the tense situation, Keith ducked into the kitchenette. He opened up Lance’s fridge, grabbed six eggs and a pack of bacon. He scoured the cabinets for the frying pans and started with scrambling the eggs, plating them onto three plates. As he busied himself, he could hear a smattering of English mixing with the Spanish within the living room, and Keith tried his damnedest to ignore the private conversation—even if he couldn’t understand three-fourths of it.

By the time he was done, he poured a good amount of dry food into Azura’s bowl and refilled her water. Unsure of how to prepare Lance’s coffee, he brewed some tea for himself instead and poured the orange juice he had found in the fridge into two cups for the Reyes siblings. Balancing two plates in his hands, he handed it off to Lance and Ana. Lance muttered, “Thanks, Keith,” and Ana, too, grumbled a “thank you” after Keith returned with the glasses of orange juice for the two siblings.

“Ana needs help with her homework,” Lance stated. “So I’m planning on helping her out, but after that, if you want, do you want to go watch a movie together?”

“They’re showing a new horror movie in theatres,” Ana stated, speaking to Keith for the first time—albeit eyeing him with blatant suspicion and curiosity.

“I thought you said it was a Disney movie!” Lance whined.

She scrunched her nose at Lance, leering, and quipped, “I lied. You hate horror movies, so I had to get you to come somehow! At least I didn’t make you take me to the night showing, you baby!” She huffed just as Lance made another wailing noise and added, “You’ve been so out of the loop lately that you would actually buy it; normally, you know everything about which Disney movie is coming out. I don’t know what is up with you, but you promised me that we would go to the movies today! Then you totally forgot and had your boyfriend come over instead! I didn’t even know you had a boyfriend!”

“He’s my new roommate! I told you it was a recent thing!”
“Uh, yeah, like three seconds ago!” Ana snapped.

“Like I said—recent!”

“I’ll go,” Keith cut in before the siblings’ bickering could progress any further. He tried to push aside how Lance didn’t exactly protest that boyfriend comment.

Shiro would have picked it up immediately and never let it go.

But Shiro’s not here right now, Keith reminded himself, and he’ll never forgive you. Just let it go. Stop thinking about him. You fucked up; now move on.

Then he noticed the two sets of blue eyes that were focused on him, and Keith tried not to shrink under the sudden attention. “I’ll go with you, I mean—to the movies—but… is it okay?” He maintained eye contact with Lance with that last inquiry, and the two of them knew it wasn’t about intruding on Lance’s plans with his baby sister.

*Is it okay if I go outside?*

Considering that the Voltron Alliance may be on the lookout for him, it might present a problem. Keith pursed his lips together. Would he even be able to live *normally*? He doubted that the Alliance would start a manhunt for him, but he couldn’t say the same about the Garrison if word happened to spread. They wouldn’t draw attention to themselves by announcing it to the public either. If what had happened between him and Shiro and Allura hadn’t been shown on *Legendary Defenders* (and he was positive that it hadn’t aired), then Keith might have some time before they started looking for him.

Then what would happen?

They would probably hold him in quarantine back at the Garrison, confined to a cell that sapped him of his abilities, so that they could question him—about Blue Shot, about his intentions, about everything he learnt. If they managed to squeeze information out of him (and there was a good chance they could, considering they have Allura on their side), then Lance and everything he worked for would be put at risk, and that made everything about this situation even worse.

He shouldn’t. Keith really shouldn’t go outside. It would minimise the chances of being discovered if he just stayed behind.

Sure, Shiro had said once upon a time that Keith wouldn’t have to go back to the detention centre, and in hindsight, maybe he shouldn’t have said any of those comforting reassurances. After all, some of them were promises he just couldn’t keep. Hell, Shiro and Allura both were ready to detain him last night, and they certainly didn’t have trouble raising a hand against Lance even though the latter hadn’t even tried anything. Lance had only spoken in his defence. It wouldn’t be a surprise if he ended up in quarantine again.

Before Keith could take back his earlier request, Ana was already speaking up, “Of course it’s okay!” she exclaimed. “You haven’t done anything wrong! It’s *Lance* who hasn’t told me anything about you, so it’s my duty as his younger sister to dig for information myself!” Her lips were pulled into a wide grin, and her brother, too, was quick to follow her example. Her enthusiasm was contagious; even Keith himself couldn’t refrain from smiling. She then scowled, her mood plummeting, and grumbled, “But first, *trig*. What the heck even *is* trig? When am I ever going to use it for something?!”

Lance sighed. “Why do you hate math so much?” he asked, inching closer when Ana shuffled
through her backpack to bring out her textbook and her pink folder. The moment she pulled out a
crisp, white worksheet, Keith took it as his cue to leave the main room, taking their plates and
returning to the kitchenette. Meanwhile, Lance hovered over Ana’s shoulder, mouthing the words
written on the paper, and Keith watched from the sink with a smile lingering on his lips, happiness
humming in the back of his head.

Keith wanted to enjoy this moment while it lasted. For a little longer, he could at least pretend
everything was normal; he could at least pretend that he was normal, that he was living a normal life
with Lance.

Twisting the water taps, Keith hissed when Azura, who had followed him all the way to the sink,
was about to poke her head underneath the running stream of water. Keith slapped his hand on top of
the taps to prevent Azura from prodding at them and narrowed his eyes at her. Even when she batted
her big blue eyes at him and patted his hands with her little paws, he didn’t budge. “Look,” he
reasoned with Azura, “why don’t you go bother Lance while I do the dishes? You can have bath
time later.”

“She’s deaf!” Lance reminded.

Keith scowled. “How do you even get her to do stuff?”

Staring down Azura, Keith swiftly manoeuvred around the sink to pluck her off the counter before
she could reach the taps. She yowled, and while Lance and Ana both flinched, Keith refused to yield
to her demands. Carrying her over his shoulder, Keith kept a careful grasp on her until he reached
Lance, who stretched out his arms for his cat. Prying Azura off his shoulder, he lowered her until
Keith could drop her into Lance’s lap.

As he turned back to the kitchenette, he could hear Ana whisper to Lance, “Jeez, I thought he was
way out of your league since he’s pretty hot, but he’s just as much of a loser as you are.”

Keith could feel his ears burn as he began to scrub the dishes clean.

“You’re fourteen,” Lance droned.

“Yeah, and I know what a stereotypical bad boy looks like,” Ana quipped as she scribbled
something onto her homework paper. “Does he have a bike, too? Oh, are we keeping your boyfriend
a secret from Mami? You know she’s not a big fan of bad boy types.”

Lance groaned, and the heat burning his ears spread across Keith’s cheeks as Lance said, “He might
be good-looking, but there’s nothing ‘bad’ about him. He’s a total dork, Ana. There’s no need to
keep him a secret from Mami.” Lance paused. “But we’re keeping the motorcycle a secret.”

Ana doubled over into a giggling fit, and Keith ducked his head to hide the scarlet flush staining his
cheeks as he realised that, one, Lance had admitted that he was “good-looking” and, two, Lance
didn’t bother to refute the boyfriend comment—again.

By the time he was done, Ana and Lance were laying flat on their stomachs on the futon, going back
and forth between the textbook and Ana’s notebook. Keith could feel his gaze soften as he watched
their exchange from the kitchen counter, and his heart began to constrict in his chest upon realising
that he really, really, really wanted this kind of normalcy in his life.

Maybe in another life, he and Lance weren’t vigilantes infiltrating the underground to take down the
head of a crime syndicate. Maybe in another life, they were defenders of the universe, or maybe they
were just peacefully living ordinary lives where they were free to go on coffee dates or free to have
breakfast at midnight or simply free to do whatever they wanted without having to worry about the consequences.

Not in this life though.

In this life, Keith wasn’t even sure where they stood—not after last night.

“Oh, Keith,” Lance spoke up, lifting his head and making eye contact with Keith, “you can borrow my clothes since… you know.” Lance’s bright eyes dimmed somewhat, darkening with the memory of the thrashing storm beating them and tossing them around and all over last night. “Since your stuff is still at your old apartment,” he finished rather lamely.

“Are you sure?” Keith asked.

Lance raised his eyebrows, silently challenging Keith. “Of course I’m sure,” he replied.

“I might be able to fit into your shirts, but your jeans…” Keith faltered off. There was just no good way to phrase it. Lance’s waist was narrower; Lance’s legs were longer. There was no way that they’d fit perfectly. He couldn’t wear his clothes from last night though. If there was a chance that they would run into the Paladins (and there was always a chance), then they would immediately recognise him. While Keith’s sense of style wasn’t much, not compared to someone like Lance, apparently, his appearance was.

“If you borrow just a shirt,” Lance replied. “Also a jacket. And a hat.” His expression brightened as he teased, “Gotta cover up that awful hair, you know?”

Keith bristled. “There’s nothing wrong with my hair!” he protested.

Ana smiled. “Long hair, don’t care?” she mused. “It kinda suits him; don’t you think so, Lance? Very fitting for the bad boy image.”

Was she teasing him, too? Keith couldn’t tell. He tugged at a lock of hair and mumbled, “Is it really that bad?” Maybe he should cut his hair. After all, if it was how Lance had—allegedly—recognised him at The Witch’s Cauldron, maybe Shiro and the others would recognise him as well.

But then he remembered long, beautiful pianist fingers carding through his hair and decided against it. Besides, it’s just hair. It’s not like cutting his hair would make a difference anyway. There were more important things at hand—like actually keeping an eye out for wanted posters with his face on them and… another overdue talk with Lance.

Of course, with Ana hanging around, Keith figured it wasn’t quite the right time for that.

Lance rolled his eyes and assured him, “Keith, you’re fine. It really does suit you. Not a lot of people can pull off that kinda look.” The smile on his lips made Keith’s heart inflate with a slew of emotions all trying to cram themselves into his chest.

Keith pursed his lips, trying to keep the flush off his cheeks, and replied, “Okay then.”

“Oh, and by the way,” Lance mentioned, “take a shower. You reek, and you need to take care of that greasy mullet of yours. Just borrow one of the towels from the closet in the bathroom.”

Scowling, Keith grunted, “Duly noted.”

Even with Lance’s express permission, Keith hesitated for a moment before navigating towards Lance’s dressers. He sorted through the drawers as carefully as he could and settled on one of
Lance’s plainer shirts—a plain black v-neck. When Keith headed towards the bathroom, he heard little feet pattering behind him, and with a turn of his head, he noticed Azura trying to keep up with him. Just as he slipped into the bathroom, he gently pushed Azura away from the door before closing it and locking it shut.

Pulling open the small closet, Keith fetched a random cotton towel and hung it onto the rack mounted onto the wall. Then he peeled off his shirt and, after folding it neatly, hung next to the towel. He did the same with his jeans and boxers before placing the fresh shirt on top. Turning the taps to the shower, Keith tested the warmth of the water against the back of his hand before he stepped underneath the spray.

His hair clung to his face and to the back of his neck underneath the running water, and he pushed the curtain of hair back. His muscles were still tense, and he just couldn’t relax, not while knowing that—no, don’t think about it. There was no point. It’s already been done.

Distracting himself with Lance’s various bottles, Keith searched through all of them just for shampoo. What even were half of the bottles? Bath salts… Bath and body oil… Shower gel… Body wash… Why would Lance need both? Conditioner… Shampoo.

Jeez, between him and Shiro, they only had bar soap and Head & Shoulders.

Keith scrubbed and lathered harder than usual—until his scalp hurt and until his skin reddened. After shutting off the taps, he dried off his skin and slipped back into his boxers and jeans. He pulled Lance’s v-neck over his head and then plopped the towel over his damp hair. Heading back outside, Keith was immediately tossed a jacket that landed atop his head, blinding him.

“You need more colour in your wardrobe, or else people are going to start thinking you never got out of your emo phase from high school,” Lance teased. “We’ll have to go shopping later.”

Keith peeled the jacket off his head, surprised to find that it was actually a bomber jacket dyed a deep cherry red with an off-white hood. “I didn’t think that you liked red,” he commented as he slipped it on. The jacket was a perfect fit, and while it wasn’t made of a heavier material like his motorcycle jacket, it was rather comfortable.

“It’s not really my colour. I usually wear it out to a Monsters game, but that doesn’t really happen often anyway,” Lance replied with a shrug. “My older brother wouldn’t appreciate the gift since he’s a filthy grease monkey.” Ana nodded her head with a grave expression on her youthful face, but then her lips spread into a mischievous smirk when Lance said, “You can keep it if you want it.”

“A-are you sure?”

“Totally sure,” Lance replied. “I said I didn’t wear it much, right? And it fits you pretty well.”

“Thanks…” Keith responded, seeming to shrink under Ana’s sparkling eyes. She turned to Lance and whispered something that made her older brother flush, and Keith took the opportunity to snatch his gloves and duck his head into the kitchenette, where he ended up sitting on the floor, stroking Azura’s silky white coat while she ate her kibble.

Lance headed into the bathroom to get ready, leaving Keith alone with his precious baby sister and his precious baby girl. Azura crawled into Keith’s lap, mewing for his attention, and Ana plopped onto the floor next to him, smoothing out her pleated lavender skirt and adjusting the oversized knitted, grey sweater. She tilted her head innocently, brown curls bouncing, and blinked her big blue eyes at him with a smile stretched across her lips.
“Keith, right?” she chirruped.

“Right…” Keith responded.

“Lance didn’t introduce us earlier,” Ana said. She extended her hand and chimed, “So, in case you didn’t get it earlier, I’m Ana Sofia!”

Keith accepted her handshake, mildly surprised that she had a pretty decent grip for a fourteen year old little girl, and replied, “Well… I’m Keith.”

She giggled. “I got that, but thanks,” she mused. “So how did you and Lance meet?”

Your brother used to work at the music shop across from HQ, and I noticed him opening shop on my way to work every weekend.

“I went out with my aunt to your uncle’s restaurant,” Keith answered. “He happened to be our server that day, and….” Keith paused, trying to word his sentences carefully. “I’ve run into him a few times… so we just got to know each other after that.” Well, it wasn’t a lie.

Ana seemed to accept his reply at face value. She reached out to stroke Azura’s fur and said, “He really likes you.”

“We’re just friends,” Keith muttered. To be honest, he didn’t even know if they were friends. At the very least, they were allies; they were partners. Lance had insisted that they were rivals. At one point, they might have been dating, but that was in the past when everything was so much simpler.

But now, Keith couldn’t say that he would rather have that again because, after all of this time, they had gotten closer. They were making progress. Keith had to believe that they were making progress. Right now, Lance was all that he had.

Keith had lost everything.

He wasn’t okay with it, but he had to deal with it.

“You don’t get it,” Ana stated. She shifted her legs, pulling her knees up to her chest, and wrapped her arms around her knees. Her eyes were soft and gentle as she said, “Lance really likes you.” Keith’s heart fluttered the more she spoke, and he couldn’t stop the smile from spreading across his lips. “Recently, he doesn’t let just anyone stay over—never mind even room with him. He doesn’t trust just anyone with Azura either. He doesn’t let just anyone borrow his clothes. He doesn’t give out gifts to just anyone—whether they’re a new purchase or not. Trust me, I know my brother—even if he’s being stupid right now.” She smiled and said, “He really likes you, Keith. Thanks for sticking with him for so long.”

Keith chuckled. “I’m the one who should be thankful,” he admitted, and it was the truth.

Even if he had lost everything, Keith had found a new purpose in life. There was a long, trying road ahead of him, but it was still more direction than he had ever had.

He had to believe that.

“You like him, too,” Ana observed. “Maybe it’s a good thing we invited you out.” She looked much too happy when she said, “I can third-wheel on your date; it’ll be fun!”

Keith’s cheeks flushed, and he nearly protested, insisting that it wasn’t a date, until Lance entered the scene, dressed in a light blue denim jacket with a grey hood, a white tunic that fell to his thighs, and
black leggings that emphasised how long and slender his legs were. As he approached the kitchen, he pulled on his brown ankle boots and, wearing an expression of sheer bewilderment, asked, “What are you guys doing on the floor? I know Azura’s cute and beautiful, but there’s really not much to do when she’s eating.”

“We were just having some one-on-one time!” Ana chirped as she hopped to her feet. She pulled up her white and lilac striped stockings. “Anyway, are you ready to go?”

“Almost,” Lance answered. He marched over to his dresser and picked off a hat from the surface before sauntering towards Keith and Ana. Crouching in front of Keith, he dried off Keith’s hair using the towel atop his head—much of Keith’s disgruntlement—before he tucked a few strands of hair behind Keith’s ear and rearranged his bangs. Then he fitted a red Monstro City Monsters snapback onto Keith’s head. Grinning as he pulled Keith’s hood over his head, Lance mused, “Perfect.” His voice was just so soft and tender and warm that it made Keith’s cheeks redden.

And it was only made worse when Ana cooed at the two of them.

“Oh my gosh! You three are so cute!”

Lance beamed at the clerk running the ticket booth and responded, “Thank you! So are your nails!” She giggled and fanned out her fingers, which were painted a pearly shade of pink that glittered underneath the ceiling lights. “You’re sweet,” she responded with a smile. “Did you guys coordinate your outfits on purpose, Blue?”

“Not really,” Lance responded easily. “It was just a coincidence.”

He honestly didn’t account for Ana wearing purple, and it just so happened that most of his wardrobe was blue with splashes of other colours. Plus… Keith hadn’t been wearing red recently, and it was odd seeing him wear all black. Lance had to intervene somehow, and there were only so many items he owned that were actually red and not some shade of rosy pink.

Lance was glad that his brother was such a diehard Monstro City Monsters fan, or else he probably wouldn’t have that red snapback. Hell, a good number of red that he owned was because it was the team’s colour.

“So what will it be this afternoon?”

Ana took that as her cue, shoving her older brother back, and announcing what movie she wanted to watch and at what showing. The clerk giggled again, gushing about how cute they were, as she punched in the necessary information on her computer. She printed out the tickets, but before handing them over, she told them with a wide smile, “That will be forty-five dollars.”

Keith blanched at the price, and Lance couldn’t help but laugh at the panic that had taken over his face when he saw Lance forking over the cash. “Relax, hothead,” Lance teased. “You can buy the popcorn.” It was slightly cheaper than paying for his own ticket anyway, considering that Keith was now out of a job anyway.

Not only that, but there was a possibility that Keith couldn’t access any funds from his bank account. The Garrison or the Alliance—or even both—might be monitoring his spending activity to pinpoint his location, and they couldn’t have that.

He seriously gave up everything for the Blade’s cause. Lance couldn’t underestimate him—how ballsy he is, how determined he is, how unbelievably and frustratingly stubborn he is—but,
regardless, Keith somehow always managed to blindside him recently.

When he was handed his ticket and turned away from the clerk, however, his mood depleted significantly. “Ugh,” he groaned, “Ana, did you have to choose a horror movie?”

“We’re going to need to build up your immune system,” Ana teased, hooking her arm with his, as she nearly dragged him inside the lobby. Keith was hot on his heels behind them. “You’re almost twenty-one, and you still can’t sit through a horror movie!”

Pouting, Lance grumbled, “Ghosts are scary, all right?”

“It’s only PG-13,” Keith remarked.

“You’re only PG-13!” Lance snapped.

Ana rolled her eyes. Keith snorted. Lance huffed.

They got in line for the snacks, and Ana immediately turned to Keith and begged for extra buttery popcorn. “You have to get it super buttery,” she stated. “There’s nothing like movie theatre buttered popcorn.”

“Keith is lactose intolerant,” Lance told Ana, bumping his hip into hers. She stumbled a bit from the force, but Lance easily pulled her upright. “You can’t get it super buttery. Just get normal popcorn like normal people, Ana. You’re not going to die. Keith’s bowels, on the other hand…”

Ana’s eyebrows furrowed together, a pout forming on her lips, as she quietly relented. Ana might be rather headstrong, but she typically thought about other people before herself. Of course, that didn’t mean everything ended peacefully because, judging by the horror striking Keith’s face, Ana was just about to get her way.

“It’s just butter,” Keith insisted. “Everything will be fine. You can get buttery or super buttery popcorn if you want, Ana. It’s not like I’m going to die from it.”

Lance didn’t say anything, but he did give Keith a Look. All he knew was that, if not everything—particularly Keith—was fine, he would be the one gloating and rubbing it in someone’s face—namely Keith.

After Keith paid for a large bucket of popcorn, they handed over their tickets to one of the ticket takers and were directed to one of the theatres, where Ana immediately led them to the centre of the theatre and forced Lance to sit between her and Keith. Just as Keith was about to hand Lance the popcorn, Ana pushed it back towards him, saying, “If you know what’s good for the popcorn, you wouldn’t give it to Lance. He’s a jumper.”

Keith retracted the popcorn, smirking at the disgruntled expression that contorted Lance’s face. Just as Lance opened his mouth, Ana teased, “Leoncio Emiliano Reyes Acosta, if you don’t have anything nice to say, you shouldn’t say it at all.” Lance sighed through his nose, glowering at his sister, before taking a handful of popcorn and stuffing it into his mouth. There, he couldn’t say anything now. Slouching in his seat, Lance crossed his arms as the previews began to unfold across the screen.

When the actual movie started, Lance hated every moment of it.

Bitch, don’t you dare open that door.
Keith dropped his head back onto his fist, elbow propped up on the arm rest closest to Lance, and his groan of sheer and utter frustration was drowned out by the noise of everyone else in the theatre shrieking their lungs out. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw flailing arms and legs. The fleeting thought of *is he okay?* crossed his mind as he turned his head ever so slightly to steal a glimpse of Lance, and his heart squeezed with affection as he saw Lance trying to hide behind his hands. Keith hid his grin behind his fist while Ana openly displayed her amusement.

She’s actually a bit of a bully.

Maybe teasing and pranking each other was something that siblings did. He and Shiro were kind of like that—or, Keith corrected himself, they used to be like that. Shiro probably didn’t want to see his face ever again, not after last night.

He inhaled sharply through his nose and, although it wasn’t intentionally, managed to grasp Lance’s attention. While Ana had gone back to paying attention to the poor plot unravelling in front of the audience, Lance stared at him with his brilliantly blue pupils blown wide with terror. A befuddled expression overcame his visage once he realised that Keith wasn’t even the slightest bit scared of the images rolling across the screen in front of them. It was strangely ironic, Keith thought, that Lance would be so terrified by a movie despite the horrors they’ve witnessed last night.

Keith watched as the colours from the big screen flickered across Lance’s skin, hypnotised, before he was struck with the urge to reach out for Lance’s hand, to lace their fingers together and squeeze tight. Nevertheless, his hand remained still at his side, weighed down by fear and apprehension and the complete uncertainty of the nature of their relationship.

Lance’s lips moved. “Are you okay?”

Keith nodded.

“Are you sure?”

Keith pursed his lips and nodded.

However, Lance didn’t seem to accept that response. He nodded his head towards one of emergency exits and asked, “Do you want to leave?”

Keith shook his head, refusing to budge.

Still, Lance was reluctant to let the matter slide. Narrowing his eyes, he mouthed, “We’re talking later.” Just as he turned back to the screen, he caught sight of a porcelain doll and grimaced, quickly looking away yet again. In the process, he made eye contact with Keith, who hadn’t bothered hiding his amusement this time. Lance scowled and kicked Keith’s foot, and snorting, Keith returned his kick. Lance scoffed beside him. Not one to be outdone, however, Lance kicked Keith’s foot once again—with such force that it nearly toppled over the bucket of popcorn sitting in Keith’s lap.

Ana hissed and stretched out her arms. Lance gave Keith a droll look, his eyebrows raised and his lips twisted into a grin. His eyes shifted towards his sister and back to Keith before rolling so hard Keith was surprised Lance hadn’t gotten whiplash. Then he reached out for the bucket of popcorn. Keith handed it over, and Lance passed it to his sister, who made a show of munching on the popcorn and hogging the bucket to herself.

Ana reminded him of how he sometimes acted when Allura came over—used to come over, considering Keith was probably kicked out now—for movie nights with Shiro. Keith would try to make himself scarce, but then they would guilt trip him into joining because, otherwise, they would
feel guilty for not inviting him (even though he lived in the same damn apartment).

On the bright side, he wouldn’t be third-wheeling movie night any more.

For the next hour, neither Keith nor Lance paid much attention to the movie, and Keith wouldn’t have it any other way. They fought over the armrest between them, over leg space that Lance wanted to claim for his long, long legs, over popcorn Lance had to wrestle away from Ana. Eventually, Ana was the one who had them kicked out and not an employee. The moment they stepped out of the theatre, Lance burst into giggles. Keith rolled his eyes and nudged Lance with his elbow. “Come on,” he said, “let’s get out of the way and wait for Ana.” He reached for his phone, only to remember what had happened to it. The consequences of his actions finally hit him.

Keith may not have been the most social person out there, but now he had no way to contact Shiro if either of them wanted to try to reconcile, to try to reach an understand. Now he had no way to contact his aunt, no way to get the fucking time because he can’t afford a watch.

His emotions must have been showing on his face because Lance stopped laughing. His oceanic blue eyes grew turbulent with worry, and Keith was swept away by his concern. “Seriously, Keith,” Lance said, “what’s wrong?”

Everything came crashing down around him. Keith could feel himself shatter underneath rogue waves, his heart dropping, his stomach sinking, because everything had gone wrong. “Shiro’s not going to want to see me again,” he muttered.

“Shiro?” Lance echoed, confusion clouding his worry. He glanced around them and said, “Hey, Keith, we’re going to step away from the entrance. Is that okay?”

Keith managed a nod, and he allowed Lance to take him by the hand, pulling him to a bench in a lounge area connecting all of the theatre rooms in that wing. The employee running the concession stand didn’t even spare them a glance as they sat down. Keith immediately slumped, resting his forehead against Lance’s shoulder, relaxing when he felt Lance’s arms wrapped loosely around him.

“You wanna talk about it?” Lance inquired.

Keith pursed his lips. “There’s a lot to talk about,” he replied.

“What’s a good place to start?”

Keith sighed and shrugged. “There’s confidential Alliance information involved,” he muttered. He supposed that didn’t even matter any more though. Keith was no longer a Paladin, and he sure as hell was fired from the reparations department. There’s no way he was keeping that job considering that Shiro thought that he was a traitor. He was certain that Shiro and Allura, diligent as they are, have probably already delivered the news to President Alfor.

It’s fine, he told himself. He’s lived life without Shiro before, and he could do it again. Nothing to it. Except… back then, even if he didn’t have many friends, introverted as he was and still is, he still had his mother, and when she was gone, he had his grandfather and then his aunt. Now there was nobody—nobody but Lance, and he really didn’t know where they stood.

“You’re not alone,” Lance had said. Keith found that difficult to believe right now.

“I don’t know where to start,” Keith admitted.

“Okay, fine,” Lance whispered, “so you don’t have to talk right now. Go ahead and take your time. If you want, you can just listen to me—if that’s okay.”
Keith nodded.

“I know what you’re feeling right now,” Lance said, lowering his voice so that only Keith could hear. His breath warmed the fabric of the hood near Keith’s ear. “I know what you’re going through, and I know it’s hard… it’s been hard.” Lance paused. “Honestly, I don’t know if it’s going to get better, but… remember when you told me that I don’t have to do everything by myself? It’s like that. I won’t let you go through what I did. You have me… and Hunk and Pidge—even though she acts like she hates you. She acts like she hates everyone.”

Keith couldn’t help but chuckle a bit at that.

The two of them remained seated at the bench for nearly half an hour until people began to pour out of the theatres. Some of them appeared shaken with fear while others were chattering with their friends. Ana, on the other hand, was neither. As she approached, Lance pulled away from Keith, who sat upright and shoved his hands into the pockets of his bomber jacket in order to avoid reaching out for Lance’s hand.

“How was the movie?” Lance asked his sister, grinning up at her frowning face.

“In the end,” Ana muttered, “you managed to avoid watching the entire thing.”

“Why are you so afraid of ghosts anyway?” Keith inquired in an attempt to occupy himself with other thoughts.

Before Lance could answer, Ana beat him to it, “When he was twelve, Enrique managed to make him think that our house was haunted.”

Keith cracked a smile as he watched Lance bristle, lips curving into a pout. “You might not remember, but the house was really, really scary back then, okay?” he whined. “The roof and the stairs both creaked, and things would go missing all the time!”

“One, that was the neighbourhood stray cat,” Ana replied. “Two, Ricky always uses the toilet at night, and you know that the floorboards made noise when you step in a certain spot. Three, things went missing all the time because you randomly shove things under your bed or somewhere in a closet when ‘cleaning.’”

“Ghosts are still scary,” Lance grumbled.

“This movie wasn’t even that scary,” Ana protested. “It was just really weird. I still don’t get the ending.”

“I’m still mad that best character died halfway through,” Keith commented, feeling his mood alleviate somewhat. He was glad for the distraction, and Ana’s optimism was rather infectious—much like her brother’s.

“That was the worst part!” Ana agreed before proceeding to ramble on as Lance and Keith led her out of the movie theatre.

“You really don’t have to do this,” Keith said, frowning, as Lance piled on another shirt on top of the stack Keith was juggling in his arms. Ana had disappeared in the mess of pastels in another corner of the store, deciding that men’s clothing wasn’t cute enough to hold her interest. Lance didn’t blame her either. These clothes were a little too monochromatic for his tastes, but he was trying to work with Keith’s style—or lack thereof—and not his own.
“Uh, yeah, I do,” Lance replied with a roll of his eyes. You’re out of a job, Lance thought bitterly, and you’re out of a home.

From what Lance knew, Keith had been living with Shiro, and Shiro was employed at Voltron Towers. Black Sky and Titania had definitely known it was Keith last night, and they most certainly knew who Keith was. Word had probably gotten around at the Alliance headquarters then. Lance couldn’t be sure that Shiro had clearance to that sort of information, but it was highly likely that Keith wasn’t welcomed back. They couldn’t risk Keith going back to that apartment to get his stuff, and while Lance would have let Keith share his clothes, Keith couldn’t exactly fit into his jeans. Sure, he could have just picked out a couple pair of trousers, but Lance figured an entire wardrobe change might have been better.

Plus, Lance didn’t have much red in his closet, and Keith looked nice in red.

He glanced over a red hoodie with the word “UNREAL” printed on the front with a backwards R. He peered inside to check the seams before tossing it in Keith’s direction. Keith barely managed to catch it with how full his hands were. “Don’t question it,” Lance responded once Keith looked ready to argue. “If you feel bad, get a job and pay me back—or buy me a drink.”

Keith’s cheeks reddened, and, yes, red really did suit him well.

Lance shook his head and began to push Keith in the direction of the dressing rooms. “You better have at least six pairs of trousers picked out by the time you’re done,” he quipped. “I don’t really care how many shirts you pick out as long as you have some, and you better pick out a sweater or a hoodie, too, while you’re at it. I’m going to go check up on Ana, so you can go look for underwear after you’re done. We’ll meet you there.”

Keith scowled. “Seriously, Lance, this is too much,” he protested.

“Keith,” Lance persisted, “it’s really not.” A familiar stirring of guilt rolled forward from the back of his mind, washing over his thoughts, knocking him off-balance. He tried to recompose himself, tried to remain calm so that Keith didn’t worry, but in the end, Lance wasn’t quite sure if he succeeded. “It’s my fault anyway,” he whispered, “so I’ll take responsibility. I don’t know how yet, but—”

“It’s not your fault,” Keith snapped. “I said it last night, and I’ll say it again: it’s not your fault.” Memories flooded Lance’s head—all too fresh and too sweet and saccharine—of warm hands and unyielding affection that completely overwhelmed him. It as though he was facing high tide that knocked him of his feet, sweeping him away and dragging him under its force to be carried away by the currents. He wasn’t ready; he wasn’t prepared. He didn’t know if he ever will be. His breaths stuttered, and Keith, tuning to Lance’s shifting moods, softened his tone and said, “Actions have consequences. I’m just reaping what I sowed.”

It didn’t have to be this way though.

Biting the inside of his cheek, Lance watched as Keith headed inside the dressing rooms, one of the employees taking some of the clothes off his hands. Once Keith had disappeared from his line of sight, Lance followed the trails of sparkles and pastels in search of his little sister.

Lance found Ana holding up a sundress to her chest, standing in front of a mirror, turning this way and that way. “You can try it on, you know?” Lance teased as he began to browse through the clothing racks nearby.

He plucked out a black chiffon top with a turtleneck-styled collar that tied at the back of the neck, folding into an elegant bow. The back itself had a low cut meant to reveal skin, nearly backless in
design. Flipping over the tag, he took note of the price—half off the original—and the size before draping it over his arm. He could wear it out to Empire with one of his high-waisted shorts and a pair of black boots.

Ana hummed and held out the dress, bat ting her eyes at him and jutting her lips into a pout. “Laaance,” she sang, “could you buy this for me? I’m short five dollars.”

He would have bought it for her anyway even without her asking, but it would probably look suspicious considering that he was supposed to be masquerading as a broke-ass college student—at least in Ana and their mother’s eyes. However, in retrospect, all of his actions so far that day had been rather suspect. He had paid forty-five dollars for movie tickets in full, and he had declared—mostly to Keith—that they had to go shopping.

“How much is it?”

“Twenty dollars.”

“What’s in it for me?” Lance asked.

“I don’t tell Mami about your boyfriend,” she chimed. “You know how Mami gets when you’re dating. She’ll definitely want to meet him, and then she’ll find out about how much of a stereotypical bad boy he appears to be and his bike.”

Lance frowned, trying not to rise to the bait, and decided to let the boyfriend comment slide. That was a topic he didn’t want to broach precisely because he just didn’t know what the hell he was doing any more. He didn’t know where he stood with Keith, and really, relationships ought to be of the lowest priority.

But then he would remember how crestfallen Keith looked, and Lance couldn’t simply leave him alone. Misery was not an expression that suited Keith. For all Lance cared, misery could go fuck off and find company elsewhere as long as it left Keith in peace.

Lance held his chin in thought, tapping his foot against the tiled floor and humming just for show, before replying, “You’re bluffing.”

“Am I?” Ana sang deviously.

She was, Lance thought as he matched his sister’s smirk with his own. Ana might have been a little imp, but she would never threaten to ruin any kind of relationship, including whatever he has going on with Keith. Still, he could at least play along. “Here’s what we’re going to do,” Lance stated. “I’ll buy you that dress, but you have to keep Keith a secret between the two of us. You can’t even tell Estefania or Enrique.” God knows his older siblings would just crowd Keith and poke and prod him until Keith cracked. At least Ana is incapable of giving him the shovel talk.

Ana made a show of considering his proposal as well before extending her hand for him to shake. In good nature, Lance accepted her handshake and the dress she handed him. “It looks like your boyfriend is done, by the way,” she said, pointing towards Keith as he exited the dressing rooms. “I’m going to go look at the hats,” she declared.

“You hate wearing hats,” Lance remarked.

“Because who actually like hat hair?” Ana quipped, making a face. “They’re still fun to try on though.” With that, she bounded off towards the section of the store stocked with hats, scarves, and gloves, and Lance made sure that she hadn’t gotten into trouble first before heading towards Keith, who had plucked a random pack of boxers off the rack upon noticing Lance’s approach.
Keith glanced at the items Lance carried with him and asked, “Is that for Ana?”

“Only the dress,” Lance replied. “The shirt is for me.” He winked at Keith, chirping, “I think I can pull it off.”

Then Keith’s face was reddening, and, suddenly all too aware of his actions, Lance could feel heat crawl up his neck, pooling in his cheeks.

“Let’s go,” Lance blurted out, quickly pivoting on his heel and marching towards check out.

Why was he so flustered? It was stupid, considering all that they did last night, but then… They were running off emotions—broken, frustrated, desperate for help, for someone to just be there—and maybe that meant something, maybe it didn’t. Maybe they were just licking each other’s wounds.

Maybe it was best to leave it as it was for what it was.

The cashier didn’t even blink as they piled the mess of clothes onto the counter. Instead, she plastered a smile onto her red lips and asked, “Did you find everything okay today?”

“Yeah,” Lance answered, returning her fake smile with one of his own out of politeness. “Thanks.”

“How was your day?” she asked as she began ringing him up and folding the clothes into the first of several plastic bags.

“Good,” Lance replied without stealing a glimpse at Keith. “What about you?”

“Great, thanks,” she responded with any further elaboration.

She must really hate her job, Lance thought, watching as she punched a couple of keys on the register before announcing the total. Lance fished out his wallet and pulled out his credit card, swiping it quickly to prevent Keith from getting a chance to intervene with the transaction. “Thanks for shopping with us today,” she said, handing them their bags.

“Thanks,” Lance offered her before rearranging the bags. He separated Ana’s dress from the other purchases and scoured the store in search of his sister until Keith’s hand latched onto his wrist, pulling him back. “What’s up?” Lance questioned, raising an eyebrow, as he met face with Keith’s narrowed eyes, a steely blue-grey swirl of aggravation and determination.

“You’re doing it again,” Keith grumbled.

“Doing what?”

“That,” Keith hissed. He still hadn’t let go of Lance’s wrist, but after a cursory sweep of the floor, Lance affirmed that they hadn’t gotten too much attention from making this scene. The moment Lance’s eyes fell back onto Keith’s irritated expression, Keith remarked, “You’re doing that thing where you avoid me because you think you can solve this entire mess by yourself. Lance, you’re such a hypocrite.”

Lance scowled. “I’m a hypocrite?”

“Yes, you are,” Keith insisted. “You tell me that I don’t have to go through this shit alone, yet here you are, alienating yourself because, lemme guess, you think that you can’t drag me into more trouble.” The anger in his eyes simmered down, giving way to a sort of despair that had Lance grasping for straws, and Keith’s grasp slipped to Lance’s hand, twining their fingers together. “If you say that you’re going to be there for me, then be here with me, and for fuck’s sake, don’t try to fix
my problem on your own. We’re a team—a damn good team—so we have to work together.”

For once, Lance didn’t have anything to say in response. He could only stare at their interlocked hands, speechless, before feeling warmth welling up in his eyes. He blinked furiously before using the back of his free hand to wipe away the tears before they could roll down his cheeks. He gave Keith a sad excuse for a grin and said, “I’ll try to stop, but… old habits are hard to break.”

“Well,” Keith responded, squeezing Lance’s hand, “you don’t have to do it alone, right?” He offered Lance a smile before shyly turning away. “I’ll be here for you, too, remember?”

Lance could feel his heart flutter, and he, too, turned away so that Keith couldn’t spot the red staining his cheeks. “Thanks, Keith,” he mumbled.

“You… really didn’t have to do all of this,” Keith replied, “so thanks, Lance. I’ll pay you back, I swear, if I even manage to land a job somewhere.” He sighed, the grip on Lance’s hand loosening, and Lance could hear Keith shift his weight between his feet, shuffling awkwardly. “The Garrison has my records though, so… that’s doubtful.”

“If you ask nicely, maybe Kolivan will pay you,” Lance said, trying to offer Keith even a shred of hope. “I mean, this shit show happened, and he’s not completely a bad guy.”

Spotting Ana approach out of the corner of his eye, Lance made to detach their hands, but a subtle yank forced him closer towards Keith. A pair of lips—a little rough, a little chapped—brushed against the corner of his lips, and the heat that he had been trying to keep from showing on his cheeks returned several times stronger than before.

“Is that okay?” Keith asked.

Lance nodded. After what had happened last night? “It’s definitely okay.” And if another wave took him unaware yet again, then maybe that was okay, too. Lance could swim, but, really, with how giddiness bubbled underneath his skin, Lance was probably already drowning in this sea of affection… Keith didn’t have to know. There would be time for this later—one the Galra are finished, once he got his revenge—because there was no going back, and right now, there was no time for distractions.

Later, Lance promised himself. We’ll deal with this later. For now, we’ll just have to take it one step at a time.

Keith didn’t say anything about the silly grin Lance was wearing the rest of the afternoon.

When Keith accompanied Lance to drop Ana off at the Reyes household, he hadn’t expected to be forced to stay, and by the looks of it, neither had Lance.

“You’re hardly around any more!” Lance’s mother had scolded her son when he tried to leave. “You visit for a week and then disappear! No more of that!”

With that, all of the resistance had left Lance’s body as he followed his mother into the house like a little duckling waddling after its mother, and Keith—with nowhere else to go—trailed after the pair awkwardly.

Lance’s mother by herself was a force to be reckoned with, and she was only a petite woman in her late forties with short, curly brown hair that had started to grey. Her eyes were brown and kind, and her lips were almost always curved into a smile as she brought out plate after plate of food.
And God, did everything smell heavenly.

Keith bit into another *papa rellena*, closing his eyes and relishing in the taste of savoury ground beef and potatoes all fried in a tiny little ball. He couldn’t believe these were *leftovers* from last night’s dinner. Hearing snickering beside him, Keith cracked open his eyes and narrowed them at Lance, who hadn’t even bothered hiding his shit-eating grin.

“Let the poor boy eat, Leoncio,” Mariposa snapped from the kitchen sink, admonishing her twenty year old son unabashedly. “You don’t feed him enough. Look at how skinny he is! Look at how skinny *you* are! Have you even been eating?”

To be fair, Keith burns off everything he eats, but he decided to keep that tidbit to himself just to watch Lance’s expression turn exasperated. Fondness swelled in his chest as he hid his smile behind his hand. He was sure that his eyes would give him away though, and if someone was to look at him, they’d probably realise how much of a dork he was—at least in that moment.

*It’s definitely okay*, Lance had said.

Keith couldn’t help the grin that surfaced at the memory.

It was a start, and they were probably doing shit out of order. Still, that didn’t matter so much because Lance hadn’t complained, hadn’t rejected him. He was *here* in Lance’s family’s home. He had actually met Lance’s beloved family, his doting mother, his bubbly little sister, and his adorable two year old nephew.

“Keith is capable of feeding himself, Mami,” Lance protested weakly as he fed Alfonso a sliced banana. “He’s twenty years old.”

“So are you,” Mariposa quipped, “but I have on good accounts that sometimes you ‘forget’ to eat.”

“Goddammit, Hunk,” Lance grumbled under his breath.

“Watch it around the baby!” Mariposa chastised. “He’s learning how to talk. Ay, you and Enrique… At least Estefania knows how to watch herself. Besides, he’s your boyfriend, isn’t he? Your bad habits must have been rubbing off on him.”

Keith nearly choked on potatoes and ground beef at the innocent inquiry. Lance’s eyes seemed to have widened to match the size of the dinner plates on the table.

“That’s what Ana told me anyway,” Mariposa continued as though she hadn’t caused the two boys seated at her dinner table to have an aneurysm. “That girl’s just as dramatic as her older brothers. At least I have one no-nonsense child in my house. I’m surprised Estefania even managed to get a proposal from Gabriel.”

Lance tossed a banana slice into his mouth so that he didn’t have to respond. Alfonso giggled in his seat, spitting banana mush everywhere. Lance made a disgusted face but still wiped the baby boy’s mouth clean. He swiped a *papa rellena* off the plate, biting into it, as his mother continued to nag him about nutrition and his dietary habits. Keith polished off the last *papa rellena* and watched as a smile slowly crossed Lance’s lips.

He must have felt at home.

“Mami, Keith and I are going to get going,” Lance declared once his mother was drying her hands using the kitchen towel. He pressed a kiss to Alfonso’s forehead, smiling sadly at the boy who began crying Lance’s name.
The expression Mariposa wore broke Keith’s heart, and for a moment, he could relate all too well to Lance’s guilt. “So soon?” she practically pleaded. “You’ve hardly been home for an hour.”

“Sorry, Mami,” he apologised, trying to maintain his cheery façade. “There’s a group project at the university I have to get to.”

She sighed as Lance gave her a one-armed hug. “Come visit again,” she demanded, her hard eyes softening. “Soon.”

She saw them out the door, and Keith knew that she was watching them leave.

“She’s nice,” Keith managed before inwardly grimacing and kicking himself for saying something so lame.

“She’ll welcome you with open arms,” Lance mused with a little smile, “and try to feed you until she thinks you’re stuffed.” When he directed that smile to Keith, he felt his heart skip a beat, and his hands holding onto the shopping bags grew a little sweatier underneath the warmth of Lance’s radiance. “I think she likes you.”

Keith gulped. “You think so?”

“I know so,” Lance responded. “She gets excited when one of us brings someone home, and I haven’t brought anyone else in two years.”

“Nyma’s never met your family?” Keith couldn’t help but ask.

“Given her occupation and our casual relationship?” Lance mused. “No, never. They did meet Plaxum though, and everyone thought her accent was cute.”

For some reason, Keith felt a strange urge to learn Spanish.

“You took me to meet your mother though,” Keith pointed out, “and… our situation is probably worse than the one you had with Nyma.” For one, Keith was actually a fugitive now. They were only lucky that neither the Garrison nor the Alliance had plastered his face onto wanted posters and hung them around the city—or had his image circulating online.

Lance gave him a grin, and suddenly Keith’s previous statement seemed ridiculous. “We’re partners,” he said as though it was the answer to all of Keith’s questions, clear cut and simple in every way. “We stick together through thick and thin.”

I won’t let you be alone.

“We make a good team,” Keith remarked.

I’ve got your back.

“Huh, that’s new,” he muttered as they approached Lance’s apartment block. His eyes narrowed in on the sleek, black car parked at the curb. “None of my neighbours has that car—Keith?”

Lance might not have known whose car that was, but Keith certainly did. His heart pounded in his ears as though he’d been running a marathon, and he couldn’t hear anything, deafened by the sound of his pumping blood and the surge of adrenaline through his veins.

Pulling Lance into an alley, Keith took away Lance’s shopping bags and said, “That’s Shiro’s car. He’s looking for me. The chances are that he’s here with Allura, and Allura… shit, you can’t let
Allura make eye contact with you. But, fuck, she can read body language pretty well. She’ll know you’re hiding something if you don’t make eye contact. Can you, like, not think when you’re talking to them?"

“Whoa, hold your horses there, cowboy,” Lance spluttered. “What’s going on?”

“Shiro and Allura are investigators for the Alliance,” Keith whispered.

“Okay, I figured,” Lance responded, “but it doesn’t explain why I can’t make eye contact with Allura or even think thoughts around her. What? Is she a mind-reading Medusa?”

“She might as well be, considering that she’s Titania, Lance,” Keith hissed in a vicious whisper.

Lance’s eyes widened immediately, and his pouty lips curved into the shape of an O. “That… that actually makes a lot of sense now,” Lance mumbled. Just as Lance began to cool down, his eyes widened yet again. “Wait!” he whispered. “If Allura is Titania, and Titania is seeing Black Sky but Allura is seeing Shiro, then that means…”

“Lance! This is not the time!”

“Okay, okay… you’re right.” Sighing, Lance raked his hand through his hair, and Keith found himself staring at vivid blue of Lance’s eyes—calm and contemplative—before Lance’s voice snapped him back to reality. “Here’s the game plan,” Lance declared. “It’s still risky if you try to hide in this alley because there’s a chance they could spot you idling when they drive by, but there’s a way to get back into my apartment from here. You see that iron pipe on the side of the wall?” Keith’s eyes followed where Lance’s finger was pointing, studying the brick walls and how some bricks seemed to jut out farther than others as well as the ledge that separated the ceiling of the ground floor from the bottom of the upper level. His eyes strayed to the iron pipe, noticing the grooves and dents as well as the welded mounts to the wall. “You think you can do it?” Lance asked.

“Piece of cake,” Keith answered.

“Good,” Lance said before taking away the shopping bags. “I’ll take these and head inside. When you see the window open, that’s your cue. I’ll keep them distracted at the entrance so they can’t see you slip in through the kitchen window.”

“Got it.”

Keith watched from behind the corner as Lance approached Shiro and Allura with a slight swagger in his step that masked all traces of the cunning Lance had displayed previously. Lance’s confident strut faltered, giving way to a feigned confusion, as he questioned the two Voltron Alliance agents at his doorstep, “Shiro? Allura? What are you two doing here?”

“Hey, Lance,” Shiro said, stepping forward. Keith crept back around the corner, shielding himself from view. “Do you have a second?”

“Uh, sure,” Lance responded. “How… did you know I live here, by the way? Did Hunk tell you?”

Keith strained to hear with how Shiro lowered his voice, but he could tell, at least by the reluctance, that he felt sheepish about whatever methods he had to use. If Keith knew Shiro at all—and he would like to think that he did—then Shiro had probably tried to search for Lance’s address through the government databases. However, because he didn’t know Lance’s legal name, there was a chance that he had gone to someone who had known Lance for a long time… someone who had known Lance well enough to be trusted with his secrets.
“Keith? What about Keith?” he heard Lance ask rather loudly—probably for Keith’s benefit—with a shrill of panic. “Did something happen to him? I thought he was just in the reparations department.”

“We were hoping you would know,” Allura said. She paused, and Keith could just imagine her surveying their surroundings. “Please, Lance, this is not the place for this sort of discussion.”

“All right,” Lance conceded, sounding demure. “Here, we can go up to my apartment, but… it’s a mess, so you’re going to have to let me clean up first.”

“That’s really not necessary,” Shiro tried to assuage him. “We did come on rather short notice.”

More like no notice, Keith thought bitterly.

“Oh no,” Lance protested. “No, no, no, no, no. My mother raised me to be a hospitable host, so that’s what I’m gonna be.” He heard Lance lead them up the stairs and counted down the steps until they finally reached the entrance. Lance’s voice carried—again, probably so that Keith knew what was happening—and Keith caught the words, “...wait here... be right back!”

Keith stayed rooted in place, eyes trained on the window. He heard the lock click and the window slide open, and a second later, Lance was waving for him to come on in. He backed away from the window, and Keith started to scale the wall, placing his hands on the jutting bricks and hauling himself up. He climbed up, refusing to look down at the fall that awaited him, with nothing but sheer determination and force of will powering him. When the bricks began to even out, he switched to clutching onto the iron pipe, forever grateful that his fingerless gloves had a pretty sturdy grip to them, before planting his feet onto the ledge.

“Pretty fearless, aren’t you?” Lance teased, resting his face in the palm of his hand, his elbow resting against the windowsill.

“Shut up,” Keith grumbled as he pulled himself through the window. He stumbled a bit and crashed onto the floor, causing Lance to chuckle and Azura to yowl at the rumble.

“Déjà vu much?” Lance mused. “At least I don’t need a new window this time.”

Keith sighed and directed an exasperated glare towards Lance. “You are never going to let that go, are you?” he mumbled.

Before Lance could make some kind of remark, Allura asked from the other side of the front door, “Lance, are you all right in there?”

“I’m fine!” Lance responded, but never once did his eyes move from Keith’s. The grin on his lips only grew wider with budding mischief from the prospect of fooling the most famous and feared Paladins. Keith could feel himself relaxing some in the face of Lance’s confidence. “It’s just the stray cat that always bothers Azura!”

Keith hissed in protest, and Lance rolled his eyes. Closing the window, he held up a palm and then pressed his forefinger to his lips, requesting silence. Keith held out a thumbs-up; he got the message loud and clear. Pressing himself against the kitchen counter to conceal himself from plain sight, he squeezed his eyes shut, heart pounding in his ears, as he heard the front door click.

“Welcome to mi casa!” Lance said as he invited Allura and Shiro inside.

Keith kept a wary eye on Azura, hoping that she didn’t give away his position, but it seemed his worry was for naught when Azura bounded over to the new guests, curiously examining them up close and personal, before deeming them unworthy of her attention—by the sounds of it.
“She’s very cute,” Allura said.

“She’s pretty friendly with strangers, but of course, I’m her favourite,” Lance responded. “Isn’t that right, beautiful?”

Azura mewed and then purred, and she only ever purred that way when Lance was petting her.


“Just water is fine,” Shiro replied in his most amicable tone. Keith frowned. That was the tone Shiro tended to use when handling a difficult situation. “Thank you, Lance.”

“It’s nothing!” Lance chirped as he sauntered his way back into the kitchenette, Azura cradled over his shoulder like a babe. She meowed loudly upon noticing Keith. “No, baby,” Lance chastised his kitten even though she couldn’t hear. Keith assumed that it was mostly for show. “You can’t play with dirty strays right now.” He gave Keith a wink as he passed by, fetching two bottles of water. “Have you two eaten? I have some flan leftover.”

Keith bit down on his tongue to prevent a whine that threatened to wrangle itself out of his throat involuntarily because, goddammit, that was flan that Lance made for him. Lance—the fucking beautiful asshole—gave Keith a little smirk, nudging him a bit with his foot, as he returned to the main area of his studio apartment to hand over the water bottles.

“It’s fine, Lance,” Shiro assured him. “We’re not planning to stay for long. We just wanted to ask you a few questions.”

Lance was quiet for a moment, and then Keith heard him say, “Well… fire away.”

“Have you heard from Keith?” Shiro asked, getting straight to the point.

Lance, on the other hand, was having none of it. “What makes you think that he would come to me before you?” Lance asked without bothering to hide his wary tone. “Aren’t you supposed to be like his brother?” He hesitated for a moment before adding, “I’m not really anyone important to Keith.”

Allura made a sympathetic noise before tutting at him, and Keith wholeheartedly agreed with her in that moment. There was no way that Lance wasn’t “anyone important.” Keith wouldn’t have gone this far if Lance was “just anyone.” How could he not realise that?

“I would like to disagree with you there, Lance,” Allura protested. “You’re very dear to him; you are important to him. Trust me on this at least when I say that he… he really cares for you.”

Keith nearly choked on his breath. Was he that transparent? Still, it seemed that Lance hadn’t noticed.

“We believe that’s why he might have been in contact with you,” Allura continued, turning the conversation back around to Keith. She hesitated and then said, “Keith has… gotten involved in something dangerous. We need to know if he’s okay.”

Keith pursed his lips, holding his breath, and closed his eyes as he listened. “I can’t say if he’s fine,” Lance admitted, and that was as close to the truth as he could get.

“Have you heard from him?” Shiro asked. Keith heard him shuffle around and the click of his phone unlocking. “Keith said that he’s been dropping you off at work.”
“That’s strange,” Lance replied without missing a beat, “considering that I haven’t really seen him around this neighbourhood recently.”

Keith’s brows furrowed, wondering what exactly Lance was up to. No doubt, Allura and Shiro were probably thinking the same. Squeezing his eyes tightly shut, Keith began to count the seconds that passed with the deafening silence.

“You haven’t seen him at all?” Shiro pressed.

“Sure, I’ve seen him,” Lance answered. “We get lunch together and all, but… I don’t see him in the evenings.” There was a pause. “Guys, what’s going on? Where’s Keith? What happened to him? Isn’t he just a repairman?”

“Don’t worry about it, Lance,” Allura said. “We’ll make sure he’s safe and sound.”

“You can’t just say shit like that and then tell me not to worry about it!” Lance protested. “Of course I’m going to worry about him! I care for him, too!”

Keith’s heart lurched painfully in his chest.

“I know, Lance—” Shiro started, but Lance didn’t let him have the chance to speak.

“No, no, you don’t know!” Lance hissed. “You can find out what happened to him, but I’m supposed to sit around, waiting for the search results, with my thumbs shoved up my ass? You’re not telling me anything!”

“It’s confidential!” Shiro tried to reason.

“Then why would you tell me that something’s wrong without telling me what’s wrong and then expect me to react calmly?” Lance seethed. “What happened to him? What’s going to happen to him?” Then he snapped, “And don’t say that it’s nothing!”

“It’s going to be okay,” Shiro said, “I promise.”

“You better keep that promise,” Lance hissed. “He will be safe and sound. Nothing will happen to him. This is non-negotiable.”

“Okay, Lance, I understand. Everything is going to be okay.”

“Swear it.”

“Excuse me?” Shiro sounded taken back, and Keith prayed to every god in the heavens above that Shiro couldn’t hear his beating heart because he was just as apprehensive. What the hell was Lance doing? This situation was spiralling out of control with every passing second!

“You heard me.” Lance scoffed. “Swear it. On your name, on your mother’s name, on your fucking job, it doesn’t matter. Just swear to me that he will be safe, that ‘everything is going to be okay.’”

“Lance—”

“Swear it!”

“I swear, Lance,” Shiro acquiesced. The calm in his voice cracked ever so slightly, struggling to remain composed in the face of Lance’s budding frustration, and if Keith hadn’t been paying such close attention, he would have missed it.
Lance seemed to deflate then. “Okay,” he muttered, “okay… good.”

“I think… it’s best if we go,” Allura announced. He heard her stand out, her heels clicking on the floor, before two sets of footsteps followed her exit. The front door clicked, and he heard the hinges squeal as Lance opened the door. “Thank you for your assistance, Lance,” she said. “Oh! Give me your number. I’m sure you would rather have us notify you if we find anything about Keith.”

“That’d be great,” Lance replied. “Thanks, Allura.”

There was another lull in conversation. Somehow, Keith just knew that Shiro was either trying not to speak or not willing to speak. Shiro would never admit it, but other people’s emotions tended to overwhelm him. He was someone who was normally in control of his emotions, after all, so sometimes he didn’t know how to handle extremely stressful situations, when emotions ran amok and tensions ran high, such as Lance’s emotional outbursts.

However, the frightening thing about Lance was that he was a terrifyingly decent actor.

“Okay, I’ll keep you informed, Lance,” Allura said. “Anything that we can tell you, we will. I promise.” She paused, and Keith could hear her shuffling around. “I’m glad that Keith has someone like you caring about him.”

Lance spluttered as she giggled, and he could even hear Shiro’s quiet chortle. Keith opened his eyes, staring at his reflection in the refrigerator, a little smile on his lips.

Yeah, he thought, we’re making progress.

“We’ll stop by some other time if something comes up,” Shiro said. “See you around, Lance.”

“Yeah,” Lance replied. “See ya…”

Then the door closed shut with a thud, and the locks clicked in place. Keith heard Lance sigh and his footsteps grow louder. He turned around the corner of the counter and slid down, collapsing onto the floor beside Keith. Azura mewed, leaping into his lap and curling up into a ball, and Lance combed his long fingers through her fur, smiling when Azura pushed her head underneath his hand to brush his fingers between her ears.

“Well, this is a mess,” Lance remarked in a soft voice.

“Why didn’t you tell them the truth earlier?” Keith questioned. “I have been dropping you off at work.”

“That would give them more reason to drop by Empire,” Lance answered. “They already said that they’d come back here, so… if anything happens, you can probably stay in one of the safe rooms at the club. They’ll probably still investigate it, just to make sure my story checks out, but it won’t be that high on their priorities.” He sighed, giving Keith a tired smile, and said, “They do care about you, you know? It shows on their faces. I think they’re confused because they just want the best for you, and working in cahoots with some kind of masked man with too many firearms probably isn’t considered the best thing in the world… but give them a bit of time, and they might come around.”

Keith returned his smile, replying, “Thanks, Lance.”

Lance merely shrugged and responded, “It’s what I ought to do, partner. We’re in this together; if you don’t let me forget that, then I won’t let you forget either.”

Keith huffed and held out his hand towards Azura, smiling when she nuzzled his fingers. “So what
“We’ll have to take it day by day,” Lance mused. “Don’t rush. Be careful. Keep your head down. Stay out of sight, out of mind.” He tugged at a lock of Keith’s hair with a teasing grin. “Cover up that mullet because it’s too recognisable.”

Keith rolled his eyes, and just as he was about to respond with a snide remark, Lance’s phone vibrated with a new message. He pulled his phone out of his pocket, blue eyes flitting over the screen, and then said, “Also, head over to Empire, like *right now*.”

He angled the phone so that Keith could read the message on the screen.

**(Today – 2:21 PM)**

*Pidgeot: emergency guild meeting*

*Pidgeot: come asap*

“The house that’s made of glass is breaking
The world that I knew is caving in
And gravel on my feet is shaking

“But this is the moment
When I turn my life around
This is the moment
I won’t let life tear me down…”

“Is soundcheck really necessary at this time?” Keith roared over the dance music blaring on the speakers.

Lance looked over his shoulder, scoffing when he spotted Keith with his arms crossed over his chest, and replied, “Of course it is! Pidge isn’t even here yet, so we can have a little private party before opening!”

“Relax, lion boy,” Nyma sneered as she approached the two of them at the DJ booth, tossing a wet dish rag in Keith’s direction. Keith scowled as it slapped him in his face, and he nearly flung it back at Nyma until Lance stepped in between the two of them. Keith growled, unheard because of the blaring music, but at least everyone could see the blatant expression of dislike on his face. Ignoring Keith entirely, she focused her attention on Lance and said, “Pidge probably arrived at a breakthrough.”

“What about you?” Lance asked. “Did you find anything?”

Nyma sighed and shook her head. “When we started digging around The Snake’s Eye, all Rolo and I managed to find out is that the Galra are selling some drug called ‘Quintessence,’” she replied. “We’re not sure what it does exactly—only that it gives the user some crazy high and that they started selling them around… two years ago, I think.”

Lance’s brows furrowed. “You think that might be the drug they were on during the riots?” Lance suggested. He frowned. “Do you think that’s what the fighters at The Snake’s Eye were on?”

Nyma shrugged. “I can’t say,” she replied. “It would be likely, but there’s not enough information to confirm it.” She glanced over at Keith and told Lance, “You have a really bad habit of picking up and adopting strays, you know?”
Keith bristled, and he was nearly going to tell Nyma to mind her own business. However, Lance was quick to offer her a smile and say, “Stray cats are cute, too.” A hot flush stained Keith’s cheeks, and he was glad for the dim lighting of the club. Nevertheless, he turned on his heel, refusing to look at either Lance or Nyma.

He heard Nyma laugh and pat Lance’s shoulder. “That kindness is going to get you killed one day, León,” she said. Keith could feel his hackles raise at the warning note in her voice. “Be careful, all right?”

“Of course,” he answered.

“As for you,” Nyma said, and Keith could hear her heels click against the floor during the pause where the music changed. Nyma pulled him down by the ear, and he hissed at her. “You take care of him. Do you even know what he did for you, Akira? León managed to get attention off the club for a bit and persuade Kolivan of all people to see it his way. That’s why, right now at this very moment, your precious bike is back at Kogane Industries, getting fitted for a new licence plate that won’t be detected by police scanners. As long as you can keep your head down, you can stay.” She narrowed her eyes at him, the violet of her contacts glowing with a threatening glare, and said, “You best not bite the hand that’s feeding you, stray.”

“Nyma,” Lance sighed in exasperation.

“Just looking out for you, handsome,” she sang, backing off and returning to the bar before Keith could retaliate in some way.

“What does she mean ‘stray’?” Keith managed to blurt out just as the next song started up, but by then Lance was already busy adding in more percussion to the track—or pretending not to hear Keith. Huffing, Keith crossed his arms and leaned against the wall, keeping an eye on the entrance.

Then the slightest bit of movement caught his eye, and his brows furrowed in confusion at the sight of the newcomer.

They… they looked familiar, but he couldn’t say where he had seen them before. Their build was small and tiny, and their hair… was short but fluffy—extremely fluffy. They kinda reminded him of —and then it clicked, “Matt?”

But, no, they were too small to be Matt, which left—

“Oh dear sweet baby Jesus, what did you do to your hair, Pidge?” Lance blurted out.

Chapter End Notes

Lance really did promise Ana that he'd take her to the movies! (Chapter 8) Lol, but yeah, she's like the opposite of Pidge where she purposely third-wheels if she can get something out of it -- entertainment, blackmail, a new dress? Why not! Pidge, on the other hand, is just grossed out.

But really, this chapter is rather sombre despite the ”date.” The purpose of going out was mostly to get Keith some essentials, namely clothes, because he’s technically a
fugitive now.

Title and lyrics taken from “The Moment” by Nicky Romero!

If you wanna talk, you can reach me at my tumblr or my twitter! :)
(you need me) There Ain't No Leaving Me Behind

Chapter Notes

Hey, everyone! You should come take a look at the aquarium scene done by rikinspu! It's so cute and precious!

okay, carry on :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It’s so short,” Lance whined as he combed his fingers through Pidge’s hair.

“Your hair is also short,” Pidge remarked.

“Yeah, but mine has always been short,” Lance griped. “At least I can still braid yours.”

“I feel like you’re more disappointed this happened than me,” she mused, elbowing him in jest. Still, Lance noticed the tinge of bitterness in her voice even if she tried to hide it. She tugged at a lock of her hair before asking, “Does it look bad?”

“No,” Lance answered, softening his voice. “It’s cute.”

Pidge pouted. “I’m not cute,” she protested. Still, she didn’t protest as Lance began to part a lock of her hair, separating them into three, before beginning to weave them into a small plait. “Anyway, is everyone here yet? I don’t see Kolivan.”

“He’s on his way,” Nyma answered from behind the bar. “He said he had to pick up something.”

Rolo wiped the surface clean of any fingerprints, avoiding the spot where Keith laid his head atop his arms. Keith had been silent for quite a while, and Lance had no doubt it was because of Pidge’s sudden appearance.

After all, Keith had mistaken Pidge for her older brother.

“Why the haircut?” Keith asked then.

Pidge avoided his gaze, lowering her eyes to the floor, with her shoulders hunched up to her ears as though to hide her face. “I got caught by the Garrison,” Pidge grumbled, “so when they came to pay me a visit, I chopped off my hair and put on some glasses to spite them. Apparently, I look like Matt when he was younger, and I hope that whatever is left of their conscience feels really fucking guilty for not looking for him.”

“Whoa, whoa, hold the phone,” Lance said, dropping his hands from Pidge’s hair. Her braid fell apart, and Lance placed his hands onto her tiny shoulders and forced her to turn around by swivelling her stool himself. She tried avoiding his gaze, but Lance wouldn’t have any of it. With the prolonged silence, Pidge eventually gave into the pressure and raised her amber eyes to meet with his. “What do you mean when you say that you got caught by the Garrison?” he asked.

“It’s exactly what it sounds like,” Pidge spat. “I hacked into the Garrison, but I wasn’t fast enough. They followed the traces I was leaving before I could erase it. I managed to break past their firewall
and do what was needed, but they caught me before I could completely secure my trail. At least they
let me off with a warning because I’m ‘still a minor.’ They took me in for interrogation, but I didn’t
‘fess up, all right? I told Kolivan that already. I’m still under surveillance, but I managed to lose them
at the subway station when I was heading over.”

Her eyes welled up with angry tears, but Lance knew that she wasn’t mad at him for the
confrontation. She was mad at herself.

Exhaling through his nose, Lance felt his shoulders slump as he pulled Pidge into his arms, burying
her face into his chest, and ignoring the dampening patch of fabric in his shirt that began to cling to

If she was caught by the Garrison, what did that mean for her future? Pidge was only sixteen, but
hacking into the Garrison could amount to treason. Pidge could have been branded a felon. Now she
had the government’s eyes on her every action.

“They don’t want word that a sixteen year old girl managed to break into their database getting out,”
Pidge grumbled. “They don’t want to lose face. They want the public’s faith so badly that informing
everyone that they’re hackable would have damaged their pride.” She sniffed and pulled away,
shooting Lance a haughty smirk. “At least I dealt them a blow.”

Lance tried to match her grin. “You’re a damn right genius, Pidge,” he said. “Just know that I’ll be
there to help you if something goes wrong.”

Pidge laughed quietly, shoulders falling as she relaxed. “Thanks, Lance.”

“It looks like we’re all accounted for then.”

Everyone paused, dropping what they were doing previously, and straightened their backs as
Kolivan entered Empire, flanked by Ulaz and Antok. However, rather than turning his attention to
Kolivan alone, Lance stared directly at the man standing behind the three men in the front, a man
whose black hair was now peppered with grey strands, whose olive skin was marred with new scars,
and whose beard, normally neat and orderly, needed a little trim.

Lance’s eyes locked with golden brown eyes, and when the older man gave him a wary smile as
though he had somehow sensed Lance’s unease, dread and worry sunk like lead within his stomach.
He felt sick.

“Thace,” Lance croaked, “what are you doing here?”

“His position was compromised,” Ulaz said. “He was lucky to get away and find me first; I’m
surprised he was still breathing when he made it to my doorstep. Aside from bruising and scrapes
from knife wounds and gunshots, he took a bullet to the shoulder and to the leg, and two of his ribs
were broken, one nearly punctured his lung.”

Lance’s insides curled and twisted uncomfortably. He felt sick. Even though he knew that they had
gotten into this business aware of the consequences, he wasn’t sure he would ever get used to it. He
wasn’t sure if he even wanted to get used to it.

“How?” he blurted. Thace was always so careful; he rarely ever contacted them unless he needed to
relay urgent information. Sure, they all knew that this was a risk that was bound to happen one day,
but now of all times?

Thace shook his head and answered, “I was following a Galra member’s tracks. He’s a higher
ranking member named Sendak. I was hoping that he would lead me to Zarkon, but… it would seem
that I’ve underestimated his guard.”

“This is such a shitty string of bad luck,” Nyma griped. “First, Akira was found out by the Alliance, then Pidge was caught by the Garrison, and now Thace was discovered by the Galra. What’s next? Someone gets caught by the cops?”

Pidge flinched at the mention of her name. Unlike Lance, she had never quite mastered concealing her feelings, and shame and hurt and disappointment quickly flooded her visage, clashing one after another like turbulent waves. She looked like she wanted to cry again. Lance placed a careful hand on her shoulder, squeezing it lightly to offer some comfort, but he wasn’t sure how effective that was when he could still feel his body tremble after hearing what injuries Thace had sustained.

Even Keith, standing beside Lance, grimaced, temper flaring. He didn’t bother hiding his scowl and clicked his tongue disdainfully at Nyma. She harrumphed, slanting her shoulders and hips, and crossed her arms while she returned Keith’s glare. “What? You think I’m calling you out? I’m just stating facts, hothead,” she snapped. “It’s my job if you haven’t realised.”

“You don’t have to be such a condescending little bitch—”

Whatever complaint Keith had about Nyma never saw its completion, dying underneath Kolivan’s sharp glower that focused on the two quarrelling members of his gang.

“*Enough,*” he commanded. “We’re here to compile what data we have gathered—despite shortcomings. It’s best that we do not waste time.” He levelled his gaze on Pidge, who tried not to shrink under his stare, and addressed, “Gunderson, you start.”

Pidge cleared her throat, and when she spoke, Lance could tell that she was trying to hide the quiver in her voice. “I managed to clear Keith’s—”

“*Keith?*” Nyma repeated, grinning like a madwoman at the discovery.

“So that’s your real name,” Rolo commented. “Like Keith Urban.”

“That’s such a white boy name!” Nyma cackled.

At the disgruntled look Keith wore, Lance bit down on his tongue to prevent himself from laughing aloud. The tension in Pidge’s shoulders relieved itself somewhat, and for that, Lance couldn’t help but be glad for the interruption. Of course, Kolivan thought otherwise.

“Wong, Hansen,” Kolivan growled. “*Behave.*”

Nyma bit the inside of her cheek and gave their boss a strained smile. Rolo, as always, wore his easy-going smile and leaned against the counter. With silence established, Pidge continued from where she had left off. “Anyway,” she said, “I managed to clear Keith’s records from the Garrison. Everything regarding where he lived, where he was born, his criminal history and his job experience, his powers and its strengths and weaknesses—you name it, I got it—and *all* of it is backed up on this drive.” She fished a flash drive from her pocket, holding it up. She tossed it to Keith, who caught it expertly. “If you ever need it restored, let me know, and I’ll pull some strings. It’ll be like it never went missing.”

“Thanks, Pidge,” Keith responded, turning the device between his fingers. Curiosity brightened his eyes, Lance noted, just like the big cat he was.

“I also got my hands on a list of agents that would try to look for Keith and ‘Blue Shot.’ I gave it to Antok and the rest of security to look at just in case anyone tries to pay us a visit tonight. They
should have left a copy on top of your desk after they were done, Kolivan. Anyway, I tried to dig up anything about Matt and Zarkon while I was at it,” Pidge added. Disappointment coloured her tone as she continued speaking. “There was nothing new on Matt after he was assigned his last mission—just the same old files.” She paused, swallowing, and then added, “There was also no signs of the name ‘Zarkon,’ encrypted or decrypted, within their files. There’s a chance they don’t know about his existence.”

“I can confirm that. The Alliance really doesn’t know about Zarkon’s existence. If they do, then they’ve been keeping it from the Paladins and anyone below that security level,” Keith informed. “It’s more likely that they don’t know about Zarkon; otherwise, they would have conducted a search for him. When I was a Paladin, we would only respond to emergency alerts. Investigators have tried to piece together suspicious crimes, and, sure, a good number of the cases are closed because they managed to find the culprit who committed the crime... but after what Lance and I saw last night, there’s a good possibility that they’re being led in circles by the Galra.”

Nobody looked surprised at Keith’s input, and Lance couldn’t blame them. Everyone who had gathered there had, at one point or another, lost faith in the authorities, whether it was the Garrison or the Alliance, for one reason or another. It was merely a confirmation of their suspicions.

“We do know for a fact that the Galra are getting their drugs from Druid Pharmaceuticals,” Nyma mentioned. “The one that’s in high demand, the crazy miracle drug, called Quintessence.”

“Unfortunately,” Rolo said, “we don’t exactly know what effect it has. The folks we’ve spoken with had the common sense to stay away from it ever since it started coming out like crazy around two years back. All we know is that it drives people to the brink of insanity.”

“You’re on the right track,” Thace assured. “I can’t tell you much about Druid Pharmaceuticals other than they’re whom Prorok has been making exchanges with, but I can tell you about Quintessence.” His golden brown eyes fell upon Lance and Keith. “There’s a reason why I had Kolivan tell you to follow Prorok. I wanted proof.”

“Proof?” Lance echoed.

Thace nodded. “On the existence of Chimeras,” he clarified. “Sendak was both Haxus’ and Prorok’s commanding officer. Haxus oversaw a drug and human trafficking ring while Prorok secures the drugs, namely Quintessence, to sell. Quintessence is a drug that alters the genetic structure of the user. It introduces a foreign DNA to be cloned and combined with the original, and this foreign DNA originated from superhumans.”

“Wait, what?” Pidge blurted out. “How did they even manage to do that?”

“They have a fairly decent sampling size,” Thace replied. “They’ve been partnered with the Galra for quite some time—years from what I’ve gathered—and the Galra had taken some superhumans under their wing nearly thirty years ago. It wouldn’t be surprising if Zarkon had them offered for research. After all, they’ve managed to differentiate what would be considered ‘Normal’ and ‘superhuman’ DNA molecules, and from that, they’ve tried to modify ‘Normal’ DNA to see if they can replicate ‘superhuman’ DNA. They reached a breakthrough two years ago—increasing strength, invincibility, and agility of mere humans—and thus released the earliest form of Quintessence to the Galra. However, it did not come without drawbacks.”

“The Galra riots,” Lance recalled, exchanging the same knowing looking with Nyma. Their earlier hypothesis was correct then.

Thace nodded and continued his previous explanation, “Continued use of Quintessence chipped
away a person’s sanity. Withdrawal symptoms are also a bitch, and they also have a chance to drive a person insane with illusions of grandeur. They’ve continued testing different forms of Quintessence though,” Thace said. He stared directly at Lance and added, “You’ve likely seen the most recent form the night at The Snake’s Eye.”

“These guys weren’t just tougher or stronger or faster though,” Lance replied. “They actually transformed into the monsters we’ve been seeing around town.” He paled at the memory of the physical transformations, bloody and messy and unnatural, before tacking on, “It was disgusting.”

“Like I said,” Thace explained, “these new ‘powers’ of theirs don’t come without drawbacks. It’s a more stable form than what they’ve achieved two years ago, but it’s still dangerous. My sources have told me that it is easy to succumb to addiction with continued use.”

“Your sources?” Keith echoed, a note of scepticism in his voice.

Thace levelled Keith a quiet stare before replying, “You might have known of him. He was a former Garrison investigator. They had sent him on a covert operation three years ago, but he was never able to surface once he was dragged down to our side. They went so far to declare him missing.” His eyes wandered over to Pidge, and he offered her a weak smile, “It’s your brother, young lady. My accomplice is Matthew Holt.”

Pidge trembled underneath Lance’s steady hands. “Matt’s alive?” she croaked.

Thace gave a curt nod, and suddenly, Pidge broke out of Lance’s hold, bolting towards Thace and leaping into the air and throwing her arms around his neck. He steadied her with his good hand so that the two of them didn’t tumble over. “Thank you!” she choked out between sobs. “Thank you so much, Thace.”

Thace, humble as always, was ready to discredit himself—probably to say that he didn’t do anything, that it was only coincidence. However, his eyes met with Lance, who shoved his hands into the pockets of his jacket and grinned at the older man. Shaking his head, Lance mouthed to Thace, “Just accept it.”

He gave Lance a nod and then said to Pidge, “It was nothing.”

Kolivan cleared his throat, and Thace lowered Pidge to the ground. Pidge shyly stepped back before completely retreating to Lance’s side, returning to her seat on the stool at the bar counter. Rolo crossed his arms, resting them against the counter top, and asked, “Well, Boss, what’s the game plan? All the pieces have assembled, yeah? We’ve got the drug and the guys producing it; now all we got to do is shut down the Galra.”

“Not quite,” Kolivan replied. “We have most of the pieces, but we don’t have enough. Wong, Hansen, you’ll look into Sendak.”

Thace mentioned, “He often goes to the main branch of Druid Pharmaceuticals to deal with Helena Agar directly now that Haxus is… gone.”

“Helena Agar…” Lance mumbled, recalling her snow white hair, her ashen skin, her malicious amber eyes, her red painted lips and claw-like nails, and the stolen lion medallion that hung around her neck. Then it all clicked. Lance gasped, eyes widening, and began to flail his arms, gesticulating wildly. “Haggar—as in H. Agar! The guy Keith and I followed—Plytox—”

“Plyrox,” Keith corrected, but it didn’t sound all that right either.

“Prorok,” Nyma helpfully supplied, blatantly ignoring Keith’s glare.
“Prorok,” Lance continued, “said that Haggar was bargaining with them: Quintessence for more data. That data is then used to improve the formula for Quintessence, which Druid Pharmaceuticals, run by President Agar, is producing. They’re the same person!”

“That settles it: there’s definitely a connection with Druid Pharmaceuticals,” Rolo stated.

“And if Sendak is someone who’s important enough to be talking with Agar,” Nyma deduced, “that means…”

“That means he might know who Zarkon is,” Pidge finished, looking up at Thace.

“We’ll get right on it,” Rolo told Kolivan.

Kolivan nodded his approval. “That leaves the last unknown,” he stated. Turning his attention to Lance, he declared, “Reyes, you’ll be investigating Matthew Holt and the Garrison.”

Pidge tensed, bristling. “Matt isn’t going to betray us—”

“He might be Thace’s accomplice,” Kolivan snapped, interrupting her before she could finish her argument, “but he is not ours. He is a Garrison agent. For now, our interests are aligned, but there’s no way to tell that he would not arrest us if given the chance.”

Pidge scowled, but she kept silent. Even if she trusted her brother, Lance reflected, Kolivan had a point. Matt was an officer of the law, and they were technically all criminals running illicit affairs if you disregarded their “good intentions.”

“Wait, you’re going to send Lance to investigate the Garrison on his own?” Keith snarled, bearing his teeth at Kolivan. “The Garrison is different from a shanty club downtown. There’s more risk involved here. At a shady ass club, if you get caught, you’re looking for a fight. If you get caught by a Garrison officer, you’re branded a felon at best. Then what are you going to do?”

Lance frowned and pulled Keith back by the shoulder. “Well, first,” Lance remarked, “I’m not going to get caught. The only time I’ve been caught was by you. I have a pretty decent track record, you know? Second, who said we had to go to the Garrison to get information on Matt? After what just happened with Pidge, we’re going to be avoiding the Garrison because their guards are going to be up.”

Keith’s snarl shattered, and he picked up the fragments to form a confused scowl. He crossed his arms, brows furrowed, and asked, “Then how else are you going to get information?”

“Who else has ties with the Garrison?” Lance asked, ignoring everyone else there watching them. He focused on Keith, watching—mesmerised—as the blue sparks of anger dancing in his steely eyes calmed. It shouldn’t be possible such gorgeous, expressive eyes to exist. Softening his voice, Lance repeated, “Keith, who else has information on the Garrison?”

Keith’s visage shattered; all of his fury was replaced by a new worry. “You can’t go to the Alliance,” Keith protested. “It’s too dangerous. They’re already searching for me; they’re already hounding you. You can’t go to them!”

“And I won’t,” Lance replied. He offered Keith a grin. “They’re the ones coming to me. They’ve been after me since we first met, no? We can use that to our advantage.”

“It shouldn’t be a difficult mission,” Kolivan added. He held his stare, held his ground, daring Keith to disobey his orders. He asked, “VBC holds an annual gala of sorts, correct?”
Keith spat his response through gritted teeth, “Yeah, it’s for the Voltron Alliance’s anniversary. They invite the mayor and all of the sponsor companies to celebrate another successful year. The entire thing is aired on national TV, too. It’s a load of bullshit, and the only good thing about it is the hors d’oeuvres. What about it?”

Lance made a show of thinking, holding his chin between his index finger and thumb while tapping his foot and humming, before replying, “Well, at parties, normally they have entertainment. Like juggling acts, magic tricks, and—oh, I dunno—musicians.” He blinked innocently at his boss. “Am I right?”

Kolivan didn’t react and only answered, “I suggest becoming better acquainted with Antonio Vivaldi. I hear Ariella De Altea is fond of his works.”

Lance squealed, plenty insulted at the slight towards his piano skills. “Okay, first of all, Vivaldi is a violin virtuoso. I don’t even play violin, but I’m plenty acquainted with piano transcriptions of Vivaldi’s works!” he protested. “I can play The Four Seasons with my eyes closed! Have you even heard me play ‘Winter’? It’ll give you literal chills!”

“Wonderful,” Nyma slipped in from behind the counter, smiling sweetly at Lance, “because they’re holding auditions for live performances over the weekend. I managed to secure you an audition tomorrow morning.”

“If you see the De Alteas,” Rolo mentioned, “don’t forget to say hi.”

“You were already planning on investigating the Garrison,” Keith remarked, sending a furious glare in Kolivan’s direction, but the older man was not the slightest bit intimidated.

“I was already planning on investigating both the Garrison and the Alliance,” Kolivan responded coldly, returning Keith’s glare with one of his own, “because one of my field agents is now at risk of arrest. Matthew Holt is another factor that happened to come up and align with my original intention—to determine when and where the Alliance would send their Knights.” He pivoted on his heel and said, “Perhaps you weren’t suited for this line of work, after all. You should have just obediently followed your mother’s footsteps up on the surface.” With that said, he marched towards the stairs, only ordering, “Be ready to open at five.”

Thace stole a glance in Keith’s direction before following Kolivan upstairs. Ulaz sighed and gave Lance a smile. “Take better care of your hands this time,” Ulaz warned.

“Hey now,” Lance protested, trying to match Ulaz’s grin, “I don’t plan on getting hurt.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Keith shrinking into himself, and the moment Nyma and Rolo returned to checking inventory, the same moment Pidge excused herself to call Hunk to pick her up from Empire, Lance pulled Keith aside by the arm. “You okay?” he asked Keith.

Immediately, a frown tugged at Keith’s lips, and his dark brows furrowed together. “I’m going to prove him wrong.” Keith grumbled. “Maybe I’m not suited for this, but I can do it. What happened last night won’t happen again—even if I have to cut ties with Shiro.”

Lance winced, but he couldn’t exactly argue with Keith. That would have been hypocritical; after all, Lance had tried to give up his own family to deal justice—no, to take revenge—into his own hands. Keith himself appeared pained to have to say such a thing, and Lance knew all too well how he felt about the entire matter.

“You just want him to believe you,” Lance concluded.
“Is that so wrong?” Keith mumbled.

Lance offered Keith a small smile, trying to reassure his partner, and replied, “There’s nothing wrong with it at all.” When Hunk had found out, Lance was more than relieved that his best friend hadn’t chosen to abandon him—even if Lance wasn’t exactly happy with how Hunk had chosen to involve himself. He could only hope that—God forbid—if his family ever found out, they would try to understand. If Shiro was really as close to Keith as Lance was led to believe, then maybe—just maybe—he’d come around.

Keith cleared his throat, cheeks reddening some with a bit of embarrassment, and Lance felt his own heart warm. The smile sitting on his lips grew more comfortable. “Anyway,” Keith said, “you… you be careful out there.”

“Oh, come on, samurai, you know me,” Lance replied with a cheeky grin. “I’m always careful.”

Keith gave Lance a little smirk. “That’s precisely why I’m worried.”

“Hey! What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re wearing holes into the floor,” Thace commented from his seat on the couch within Kolivan’s office. He watched in amusement as Keith paced back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. His gaze followed Keith’s every move, from the twitching eye to the clenched jaw and tense shoulders, with a mild sort of curiosity—like he was trying to dissect Keith by his actions to judge his character.

It was a lie to say that it wasn’t the slightest bit unnerving.

“Leave him be,” Kolivan barked from his desk, shuffling through another set of paperwork. “It’s better that he’s here so that we can keep a leash on him—lest someone from the Alliance or the Garrison discovers him while he’s wandering around. Go loiter at the bar, Kogane.”

“Can’t,” Keith grumbled. “Nyma says I’m wasting space by ‘moping’ there.”

“Then go wash dishes or wipe down tables.”

“That’ll be docked from your pay.”

“You don’t pay me,” Keith snapped.

“You’ll be docked from Reyes’ pay,” Kolivan concluded.

Keith grounded his teeth, narrowing his eyes at Kolivan. However, the older man didn’t take any notice, and if he did, then he just didn’t care. Scoffing, Keith crossed his arms and leaned against a wall to glare at everyone and everything in sight.

Thace chuckled. “He’s every bit like Akira, isn’t he?”

At that, Keith’s glare faltered, and he turned to face Thace. There was a faint glimmer of nostalgia in his expression, smile hanging loosely onto his lips and a stare that wasn’t all quite there in the present. “You knew my mother?” Keith asked, hesitating.

“We were friends,” Thace replied. “Close friends, even.” He reached into his jacket and pulled out a
dagger that was identical to Keith’s—and Kolivan’s by extension—in design. “Got matching knives to commemorate. I’m sure you’ve heard the story by now.”

“Not really,” Keith responded, carefully selecting each word. He cast a cursory glance towards Kolivan, who was still religiously ignoring his presence in the office. “It never came up. Kolivan never told me.”

Without bothering to look away from his paperwork, Kolivan retorted, “You never asked.”

Keith snorted derisively and sneered, “You never had the time for ‘small talk,’ considering your busy schedule.”

“You never asked me to make time for your questions,” Kolivan remarked, “so how could you have possibly known?” He set down his documents and scowled after noticing the smile on Thace’s lips. “Wipe that smirk off your mug, Thace. It’s disgusting.”

Thace chuckled, twirling the dagger between his fingers before concealing it back in his jacket, and responded, “You have to admit that the resemblance is almost uncanny. It’s like staring into a younger version of Akira—only as a boy.” Turning his grin to Keith, he mentioned, “You have quite the TV presence. Your mother was something of a show stopper herself.”

It was… strange, almost disconcerting, to learn of another side of his mother from someone he hardly knew.

Then Keith snapped to attention when he heard Kolivan gripe, “His ‘TV presence’ is troublesome. He grabs attention far too often whether he is a Paladin or not. He is brash, reckless, stubborn.”

Thace shook his head, chuckling once again, and commented, “You didn’t have much of a problem when it was Akira. He fights just like her.” He directed his attention back to Keith and asked, “Did your mother teach you how to fight? She did, didn’t she? It shows.”

Growing ever more flustered from the attention, Keith ducked his head and averted his eyes, hiding behind a curtain of hair. “She did,” he admitted. “According to my aunt, I’ve known how to defend myself before I even started walking. After she died, my grandpa had me join the kendo club back in Japan; he said it was the same school my mom and my aunt attended.”

“That sounds about right,” Kolivan mumbled, much to Keith’s confusion.

Thace nodded. “She always wanted to protect the people she cared about,” he clarified, “but she knew that she couldn’t be there all the time. That’s why she started teaching you at a young age, and Old Man Kogane probably felt the same way.”

“What… what was my mother like?” Keith asked.

“That’s what I want to know, honestly speaking,” Thace mused. He propped his head against his hand, continuing to observe Keith like he was some kind of lab rat. “The Akira Kogane I knew was likely to be different than your mother.”

“But I still want to know!” Keith roared. He didn’t even realise that he had pushed himself off the wall and stomped towards Thace until he noticed the shortening distance between them. At that point, he was staring into calm golden brown eyes, and his heavy breathing—laden with a frustration that gradually simmered down—was loud in the silence of the office. “In the end,” he croaked, his mouth dry, “it feels like I never really knew who she was.”

And that was what hurt the most.
She was the person he had admired most. She was the person who had raised him single-handedly when it was just the two of them. She was there when he couldn’t make friends in kindergarten. She was there when the other kids started bullying him in kindergarten, and she was there when he made his first friend in first grade. She was there when he had terrible, terrible nightmares, and she was there to sing him to sleep. She had taught him everything he knew, and she was taken away from him all too soon.

He thought that he had known her, but apparently, he was wrong.

““The best person to ask,” Kolivan said, “is her sister—your aunt, Asako Kogane.”

Keith scowled. “You’re avoiding the question.”

“I’m redirecting you to a better source of information,” Kolivan retorted. “I’ve told you before that the Kogane sisters were as thick as thieves. Asako Kogane knows the evolution of her sister’s personality the best. If you had asked Thace or myself, then you would only know your mother as Akira Kogane, former Galra and former Blade.”

“The Blade have a creed,” Thace mentioned. “‘Knowledge or death,’ and I don’t think your mother would appreciate it if we endangered her only son, especially since we owe her for taking attention away from the Blade of Marmora. However, I don’t think it would hurt to ask Asako about your mother.”

“She never spoke about her before,” Keith protested.

“Did you ask?” Kolivan grumbled.

Keith glowered at the older man but remained silent. He pulled away his gaze and muttered, “I thought she wouldn’t want to talk about it. She was only in her late twenties when child services dumped a teenager at her doorstep.”

“You only need to ask,” Thace urged. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“The Garrison or Alliance could be lying in wait for his return and arrest him before he even gets a chance to speak with Asako Kogane,” Kolivan stated. He neatly stacked his paperwork, lining up all of his documents, and said, “If you’re going to speak with your aunt, do it carefully.”

“Fine,” Keith grunted.

He stalked off towards the door, and just as he was about to pull it open—possibly try to yank it off its hinges with the new budding aggravation building up in his chest—he heard Kolivan call out to him. “And where do you think you’re going?”

“To bother Lance,” Keith grumbled, “since you won’t let me leave this place unaccompanied anyway.”

He slammed the door shut behind him, hearing Thace’s comment (“He’s in every way just like Akira before she learnt the meaning of patience yields focus”), and tried to shove the mental picture of his mother as a criminal out of his mind. He breathed in sharply and then calmly breathed out, releasing some of the weight that pressed down against his chest. Conjuring the image of his mother’s radiant smile, the warmth of her tender embrace, the sound of her gentle voice, to the fore of his mind, he tried to negate it with the concept of her cutting down her foes mercilessly, forging a path to meet the end regardless of the methods she used.

Keith couldn’t fathom his mother hiding such a nature.
Climbing down the stairs, he scoured the crowd in hopes that there wouldn’t be anyone searching for him. Pidge might have given Antok and the rest of security a list of agents from the Alliance and the Garrison to look out for, but there was no way they could have kept track of all of the club-goers as they came and went.

He slipped into the crowd, weaving between bodies that tangled together on the dance floor, and elbowed his way towards the DJ booth. Lance had his hood pulled up over his head, headphones covering his ears, as he bounced on the balls of his feet, mouthing along to the occasional sampled lyrics.

“Yeah, yeah, there ain’t nothin’
There ain’t nothin’ here for me
There ain’t nothin’ here for me anymore
But I don’t wanna be alone…”

Keith flitted over to his usual perch against the wall, catching Lance’s eye. Lance shot him a grin, fingers never once leaving his mix board, as he scratched a record on the turntable before dropping the bassline. The entire club seemed to explode at once, down to dance and dance dirty, and Keith rolled his eyes at the glimmering mischief in Lance’s brilliant blue eyes.

He couldn’t suppress the smile that sneaked onto his lips though.

“What brings you over here?” Lance asked as he started up another track, raising his voice to be heard over the music. A smirk stretched across his lips. “Did you get kicked out by Kolivan, too?”

Keith scowled. “I voluntarily left,” he replied tersely.

Given Lance’s bright laughter, he didn’t believe Keith in the slightest, but Keith found that he didn’t mind. He loved it when Lance laughed, and he loved it when Lance laughed with his entire body. Lance stepped away from his mix board, stretching out a hand towards Keith, and grinned his partner—blue eyes bright and brilliant and beautiful—asking, “May I have this dance?”

Keith could feel his cheeks redden. “I don’t dance,” he managed.

Lance was still smiling. “Shut up and dance with me, Keith.”

“Lance, no,” Keith insisted.

“Lance, yes,” Lance mocked, rolling his eyes. He relaxed his stance and stared at Keith with an expression that was just so… so open. “Just one dance, all right? It’s not gonna hurt you,” he said, his voice rich with a taste of something so sweet and saccharine, something so intoxicating, that it left Keith reeling and hungry for more.

Ultimately, that was what made him cave in.

Keith pursed his lips before pushing himself off the wall and surrendering to Lance’s whims. “One dance,” he stated firmly, sending a weak glower Lance’s way. He placed his hand into Lance’s, ignoring the way his fingers warmed and tingled with the contact, and swallowed.

At first, Keith stood awkwardly in front of Lance, trying to mimic the crowd’s movements half-heartedly, before Lance had to stop him. “Here,” Lance said as he popped his shoulders and bobbed his head, “just move to the music. Nobody’s going to care. They’re already having a good time with other people.”

“Move to the music,” Keith echoed as a wave of embarrassment crawled up his spine.
“Yeah!” Lance chirped enthusiastically, rolling his body in time with the rhythm of the music playing in the background. “Just feel it! Don’t think about it, Keith! I thought you were good at running with your instincts! Just work off impulse!”

Well, impulse would have him grab Lance by the hips and pull him closer, but even Keith knew that was a bad idea from the get-go.

Lance, sensing his hesitation, scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Come on, Keith!” he whined, entirely oblivious to the fact that his tone was sending shivers down Keith’s spine. “Live a little!”

Keith frowned. Lance asked for it then.

Reaching out with his hands, Keith pulled Lance closer to him, almost missing how Lance shuddered under his touch, and mirrored Lance’s movements from the body rolls to the rotating hips. Lance laughed into his ear, and Keith grinned as Lance dropped his head onto Keith’s shoulder.

“You’re really something, lion boy,” Lance mused, his soft chuckles brushing against Keith’s neck.

Keith pursed his lips tightly as they slowed down their movements, simply swaying to the beat of the song and the beat of their hearts both sensually and intimately. As the song came to its conclusion, Lance reluctantly stepped away from Keith, offering him a shy little grin. He returned to his mixer, and Keith, unsure of what else to do, followed Lance.

“You want to try something out?” Lance asked as he set the stage for the next song.

“That’s asking if you want to lose your job,” Keith retorted, crossing his arms.

Lance rolled his eyes and pointed to a series of neon buttons on the mixer. “There are all the special sound effects; I designed them especially for this club!” he exclaimed, a note of pride in his voice. “You just gotta lay down the right sounds at the right time!” To demonstrate, he tapped a green block multiple times, nodding his head to the rhythm, adding crystalline drops to the song before hitting another switch that looped back to the previous section. Lance tapped another button, hitting it in the same pattern as before but with the sound of a snare. He grinned up at Keith, who furiously shook his head. “Come on, Keith!” he whined, pouting.

Keith groaned before marching over to Lance. “I’m tone deaf!” Keith tried once more.

“Please, as though I can’t clean up your mess,” Lance teased.

Keith narrowed his eyes, accepting the challenge. His finger hovered over the same green square Lance had pressed earlier before he made up his mind. He jabbed his finger into it, and Lance quickly followed his actions with another sequence.

Nobody in the club was any wiser.

Except for Nyma, Keith noted. She was smirking in their direction, rolling her eyes and mouthing something at Keith in particular—because Lance hadn’t noticed at all. Lance was too occupied with filtering the vocals to even notice that Nyma was making faces at them. Keith flipped her off, and she returned the action with a witchy cackle.

“You want to try that again?” Lance asked, beaming.

Keith returned his smile and shrugged. “Sure,” he replied. “I’ve got all night.”

Nobody said anything about the two of them playing around in the DJ booth, where Keith curiously
pressed random sound effects to see what would happen and then Lance would quickly improvise to make something out of Keith’s nonsense. Keith never stepped down from the DJ booth, taking to hovering around Lance after he noticed some clubbers staring at Lance’s legs for too long. Even at closing, he stuck close to Lance’s side, glaring at all the drunkards Antok and the other security guards had to escort out of the club.

“So when is the audition?” Lance asked before he took a sip from the glass of water Nyma had served him.

“They start at ten in the morning,” Nyma answered, taking Keith’s empty shot glass and setting it into the sink. “I had the form filled out with all of your legal information. They’ll call you by your assigned number; you’re number six. That means that you’re scheduled for eleven, but if you show up earlier, it leaves a good impression. You have six to eight minutes to make a good impression, so use that time wisely. You have a chance for a slot in the orchestra or as a solo performer.”

“I hardly have time to put together something,” Lance complained. He immediately went quiet for only a moment, but Keith caught sight of the solemn expression that crossed Lance’s visage briefly before his mask was set back in place.

Nyma must have noticed as well. Keith watched as she patted Lance’s shoulder in some kind of conciliation before saying that she had to take care of stock. “If you need anything,” she said, “just let me know, okay?”

“Okay,” Lance replied, grinning at the bartender. “I think I’m going to head back though. Let’s go, Keith.” He hopped off the stool, stretching his arms and his back, before waving goodbye to Nyma and Rolo. “See you guys Monday night!” he chirped.

“Be careful on your way back!” Nyma called out before they could leave.

Be careful not to get caught.

“Thanks, Nyma! You too!” Lance returned. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his denim jacket and marched towards the exit, and Keith increased his pace to keep up with Lance’s long strides. “Goodnight, Antok,” Lance said as he passed the bouncer. “Do me a favour and tell Kolivan that he’ll hear from me after auditions?”

“All right,” Antok grunted.

“See you Monday!” Lance chimed before he pushed open the doors, holding it open for Keith to exit.

Their walk back to Lance’s apartment was quiet, and while any other day Keith would have appreciated the silence, there was something unsettling about it tonight.

Maybe it was because he knew that this was the second night in a row he was banished from his apartment. Maybe it was because it was the day after he abandoned his duties as a Paladin, after he abandoned his post within the Alliance. Maybe it was because he knew that he wouldn’t be going home to the same apartment as Shiro. They wouldn’t be fighting over pizza rolls or nagging each other to go to sleep. They couldn’t even be considered friends; in Shiro’s eyes, he was the enemy.

Or, Keith thought as he cast a glance towards his silent partner, maybe it was because Lance wasn’t entirely at ease either.

“What’s wrong?” Keith asked. His fingers twitched at his side, yearning to reach out for Lance’s hand, and he had to curl them tightly into fists to prevent himself from acting out. Would it be okay
to touch Lance? He had said it was okay to kiss earlier this morning, but… that could have been a one time thing. Keith didn’t know.

Lance slowed his pace and gave Keith a grin, but its radiance was dimmer than usual. “Nothing,” Lance insisted. “Don’t worry about it—”

“Stop doing that,” Keith growled as a familiar frustration began to simmer underneath his skin, itching to burst.

Lance gaped at him, bewildered, and Keith sighed, forcing himself to calm down before he did anything that he would regret. He pursed his lips and stared into Lance’s oceanic blue eyes, disturbingly calm just as they were dark. “You’re doing it again—the same thing from this afternoon,” Keith stated. “You’re avoiding the problem.” He shoved down the irritation and instead found desperation. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course I do,” Lance answered without missing a single beat, eyes wide and sparkling with the reflection of the stars in the night sky.

“Then don’t run from me when I’m trying to help,” Keith pleaded. Don’t shut me out. Keith bit down on his tongue, but that didn’t stop the thoughts from running through his mind. Let me in. “Lance, what’s wrong?” he repeated himself, and Keith nearly cringed when he heard his voice crack.

Lance’s crooked grin lightened some at the sound of Keith’s slip up, at the sight of Keith’s reddening cheeks and ears. “Can it wait until we get home?” Lance asked, shoulders slumping. His grin turned sheepish as he assured Keith, “I’m not trying to avoid it or anything. I’ll… I’ll tell you later, I promise. I just need to get my thoughts in order.” A bitter laugh escaped past his lips, and Lance carded his fingers through his dark hair, panic striking his features only momentarily, before sighing. He shoved his hands back into his pockets and said, “Let’s go home, Keith.”

Home…

“Okay,” Keith responded just as quietly.

Right, he just had to make a new home. It was that simple a concept, and, hopefully, Keith thought as he stole another glimpse at Lance’s profile, that new home was with Lance.

“Pick up your feet and move, Keith!” Lance called back to him a short distance away with a cheeky grin plastered to his lips. “I thought you could move faster than that, samurai!”

“Are you trying to get us caught?” Keith hissed. He scanned their surroundings, only to find nothing and nobody around. Sighing, he stomped towards Lance. “This would have been a lot quicker if we had my bike,” Keith grumbled. Because they couldn’t take their gear through the subway, they had to settle for walking—especially since they couldn’t risk calling Hunk for a ride.

“Yes, because Obsidian doesn’t stand out in the slightest,” Lance teased.

“You said it yourself,” Keith retorted, “that there are plenty of replicas of Obsidian. Maybe someone would think it’s a counterfeit. Besides, black paint doesn’t stand out nearly as much as red.” That was the primary reason why he used Obsidian more as a civilian motorcycle, reserving Scarlet for Red Lion related instances… although, Keith supposed, that meant he wouldn’t be using Scarlet for quite some time.

“You were one of the flashiest characters on TV,” Lance mused.
Keith scowled. “I was not,” he protested. “That was White Tiger’s job.” Hell, Sven loved the spotlight. If Allura and Shiro were best known for their dedication and their relationship as the power couple, then Sven was the fan favourite for best TV personality.

“Oh, whatever,” Lance argued. Lowering his voice to a whisper, he then hissed, “You had a red coat, a red bike, and a blazing sword! How could you not be asking for attention?”

“It just happened to turn out that way!” Keith insisted. “I didn’t want to be Black Lion II!” He huffed and grumbled, “Besides, Shiro already called dibs on the colour black.”

Lance snorted before breaking down into a giggling fit. “Really,” he mused, “what is with the colour schematic?”

“You bought into it, too,” Keith accused, crossing his arms and huffing.

“Only because I was short on time!” Lance whined. “I had to think of something on the spot.”

“It was a very creative name,” Keith retorted, grateful for the lightened mood.

“Well,” Lance quipped, “I’m a very creative person.”

“You are,” Keith acquiesced, allowing a smile to cross his lips. He stole another glimpse of Lance’s profile, heart fluttering when he saw Lance wearing a matching smile.

This time, the silence that crept between them was more welcoming. He heard Lance shudder as a night breeze brushed past them before Lance pulled his denim jacket closer to his torso, grumbling something about how cold New York was, and Keith couldn’t help but remark, “You could have dressed more warmly.” It might have been fine—more than fine, really—for Lance to wear those leggings throughout the day when it was warmer, but the nights were far chillier.

“Oh, shut up,” Lance grumbled, nudging Keith with his elbow. “Don’t you ever get cold?”

Keith shook his head. “Fire powers, remember?”

“That’s got to be cheating,” Lance wailed. He slipped a hand from his pocket, latching onto Keith’s and clasping their hands together, and scowled. “Why are you so warm? This is so not fair.”

Keith could feel all the heat to his cheeks. His fingers twitched in Lance’s hold, but then he tightened the grip. He was only keeping Lance warm; otherwise, Lance would be complaining about the cold the entire walk back to the apartment. The tenseness in Keith’s shoulders slowly eased when Lance didn’t pull away. His hand only slipped away when he had to fish his keys from his pockets.

Lance unlocked the door, bending down to welcome Azura into his arms, and left Keith to close and lock the door behind him. Lance kicked off his boots before falling backwards onto his futon, the springs squeaking under the sudden weight. He sighed as Azura began to curl up on his chest, and Keith couldn’t possibly miss the sudden weariness that shook Lance’s eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Keith asked for the third time, sitting down beside Lance.

Shaking his head, Lance replied, “Keith, they want me to audition for the gala.” His eyes widened with terror, and Keith wanted to take his hands again, squeeze them tightly, if only to bring him back to stable ground. Keith didn’t know if he could chase away Lance’s fears, but he knew that right now he wanted to do so more than anything else in the world—if only to ease Lance’s worries.

“Keith, the greatest acts from all over the world are going to be there auditioning, and they want me
to try out?” Lance’s voice cracked. “I’m just a dropout. I went to a normal high school, not a fine arts conservatory or whatever the fuck they are, and I wasn’t trained since I was like three like some geniuses out there. Keith, I’m just normal. I don’t know what Ariella De Altea saw in me because I’m nothing special, but Kolivan wants me to compete against people who are?

“And I can’t fail. I’m the only one who has connections to the Alliance now, and it’s so fucked up because the only people I really know there are Hunk and Coran—and I guess Shay because Hunk has a ridiculous crush on her that he’s been denying for as long as they’ve known each other. It doesn’t feel right to use them for information; it’s like violating their trust.” He began to tremble, his eyes watering with frustration and shame. He didn’t even notice that Azura was patting his cheeks with her little paws. Covering his eyes with his arm, Lance bemoaned, “And I only have tonight to figure out what I’m going to present to them. Nyma says I only have six to eight minutes for my audition piece, and I’m sure these guys have heard every classical composer since the beginning of time. What do I even have to offer?” He tossed his head to the side, scowling. “I haven’t even practised.”

“Not like you can with Azura on your chest,” Keith commented before he plucked the Angora cat off Lance. She yowled in protest as Keith settled her in his lap. “Listen,” he began hesitantly, “I don’t know anything about music…” Or comforting, for that matter, but Keith could try. “But,” Keith continued, “you are special, and that’s what Mrs. De Altea saw in you.” He fidgeted, moving to comb his fingers through Azura’s silky coat, and suggested, “So maybe… maybe don’t think about what would please them? Maybe do something that shows what makes you special, Lance. Show them why they would want you to be one of their performers.” Keith hesitated before he added, “Have fun with it. Be yourself. Don’t compare yourself to others, and don’t worry so much because I know that you’re going to be great.”

Lance lifted his arm, peeking up at Keith. “You think so?”

“I told you,” Keith reiterated with a sense of calm blooming in his chest that he hoped Lance received as well, “that I know so.”

Lance didn’t seem to completely believe him, but he did seem more reassured than before. “Do you want to help me pick out a piece?” he asked.

Keith looked around the apartment. “Are you going to be playing your guitar?” he asked.

Lance shook his head and wiggled over to the edge of his futon, reaching underneath the frame to pull out something heavy and rectangular. When Lance hefted it onto the futon, Keith realised that it was a Yamaha keyboard with far too many buttons and knobs. Lance returned to his search underneath the futon, pulling out a power chord that he plugged into his keyboard and the nearest outlet.

“How many things do you keep under there?” Keith asked, slightly amused at the sight.

“Enough,” Lance answered, snottily scrunching up his nose. He grinned down at Keith before he plopped back onto the futon. “It’s mostly so that nothing is really in the way. I don’t have the biggest apartment, you know?” He shrugged. “Welcome to New York, where you pay three grand a month for a studio apartment that has a tiny ass bathroom and kitchen.”

Keith rolled his eyes, but he supposed Lance made a fair point. “So?” Keith questioned. “How can I help?”

“You’re going to sit there and tell me what sounds good,” Lance said, switching on his keyboard. He tested the scales—something Keith vaguely recognised along the lines of do, re, mi—and lowered
the volume as he went along. His fingers then danced along the black and white keys, and it only
took Keith a second before he could identify the song.

“Are you playing ‘Never Gonna Give You Up’?”

Lance grinned.

“Lance, no,” Keith groaned.

“Lance, yes,” Lance protested. “All of those judges are gonna get rickrolled.”

Keith gave Lance a pointed stare until he conceded to Keith’s demands with a defeated sigh. He
switched keys, playing the opening chords of a classical piece Keith didn’t know—soft and slow and
smooth. Pulling his gaze away from Lance’s long fingers, Keith startled a bit at the serious, sombre
expression that painted Lance’s features.

Lance closed his eyes, long lashes brushing against his bronzed cheekbones, moving his fingers
according to muscle memory alone. He fed off the sound that quietly vibrated throughout the
apartment, careful not to disturb their neighbours, and Keith found himself relaxing as well. He
couldn’t close his eyes like Lance though. In that moment, he was enraptured, held captive by the
grace Lance emanated, and Keith just couldn’t stop watching.

There was something enchanting about the song. It was melancholic yet, strangely, peaceful, and
Keith couldn’t help but think back to the nights he spent curled up into his mother’s side. He recalled
the quiet nights at his grandfather’s estate where the only sounds were the rustling of the leaves
outside his bedroom window and the chirping of the cicadas that visited in the summer. Then there
were the lonely nights at his aunt’s penthouse several years ago. Asako-obasan would work late
nights, and Keith was left to his own devices. Shut in his dark room, the only sounds he could hear
were the cars in the city streets below and the hum of the air conditioner.

The spell only shattered when Lance’s finger slipped, hitting the wrong key, and like a taut string,
the serenity that occupied the apartment snapped. Lance broke out of his peace of mind, and Keith
broke out of his reverie.

Hissing a curse through his teeth, Lance raked his fingers through his hair and tugged lightly, and
Keith moved to pull away his hands, rubbing them in circular motions, taking care to pay the most
attention to the pads of his fingers. “I need more practice,” Lance lamented. His eyes softened, only
to grow ever more glassy, ever more solemn. “Shit,” he echoed. “This is bad. I’m so rusty.”

“Then practise,” Keith encouraged him… or, rather, he hoped that he was being encouraging. “What
song was that?”

“Chopin’s ‘Nocturne,’” Lance answered. “Opus nine, number two.” Keith’s brows furrowed, and
Lance chuckled. “‘Opus’ means work number, so it’s his ninth nocturne, which are pieces related to
night-time, and the companion piece to the first one.” He sighed and flexed his fingers, slipping them
out of Keith’s hands. “I probably won’t go with that one then.”

“What about Beethoven? Mozart?” Keith listed off the top of his head. Really, they were the only
composers he knew, and Lance probably figured that out, going by the little snort he emitted.

“They’re overrated,” Lance said, giving Keith a fond look, “but thanks for the suggestion.” He fell
forward, resting his forehead against Keith’s shoulder, and said, “I think I might have to play
‘Winter,’ after all. I know Ariella De Altea loves it, and anyone who knows that might use it to their
advantage… which means it wouldn’t stand out.” Lance sighed. “I just don’t know what to do on
such short notice.”

“Maybe…” Keith faltered. It was a stupid idea, but that was better than no idea, right? “Maybe… you can use that to your advantage.”

Lance popped his head off Keith’s shoulder, staring him right in the eyes with unabashed curiosity and intrigue, and Keith could feel his confidence grow. “I mean,” Keith continued, “you said that Vivaldi was a violinist, right? That means different transcriptions for piano could exist, and then you can do your own spin on that? Maybe—and I’m just pulling shit out of my ass—you shouldn’t think too much on what to play and how to play it. Maybe… you should just feel the music.” Keith smiled. “That’s what you do at Empire every night, right?”

A grin stretched across Lance’s lips. “Now you’re learning!” he exclaimed. He dashed towards the kitchenette to fetch the laptop he left on the counter and, after powering it on and launching Google Chrome, began to pull up piano scores in different tabs.

Keith watched, smiling, with affection bubbling in his chest as Lance began to play different covers of Vivaldi’s “Winter” on YouTube, each featuring different instruments and different musical stylings. After the third cover, Keith leaned back, resting his head against the pillow, and welcomed Azura as she curled up on the pillow beside his head.

“I’m going to have to learn it by ear then,” Lance muttered. Keith assumed that Lance was thinking mostly to himself since Keith knew absolutely jackshit about music. “I guess these transcriptions are a good starting point… Most of them are pretty similar anyway.” He held his chin in thought, crossing his arms briefly, and mumbled, “I swear I had an old mixer somewhere…” Lance ducked his head over the side of the futon and then cheered a quiet, “Aha!” Without further ado, he pulled out a mixer—one that happened to be smaller than the one Keith had seen at Empire, with fewer buttons and knobs—and plugged that into an outlet as well before hooking it up to the rest of his gear.

Lance spent the entire night practising, and Keith knew because he was lulled to sleep by the same composition playing continuously with different nuances compared to the last rendition. He heard the song in his dreams (although Keith swore he heard a Disney song mixed in there somewhere as well, but that could have been his imagination). He heard it when he woke up to the smell of coffee wafting throughout the studio apartment, Lance humming it quietly.

Suddenly, Keith was blinded by Lance’s radiant smile. “Mornin’, sleepy-head,” he teased. “You were supposed to help me last night—not fall asleep.”

Keith yawned. “I’m guessing you got it all figured out though,” Keith responded, voice gravelly and throat scratchy. “You’re smart.”

“That I am,” Lance responded cheekily, “and pretty, too. A dangerous combination.”

“I’ll bet,” Keith grumbled, rolling onto his side—only to get a face full of Azura’s white fur. “Goddammit,” he groaned as Azura began to bat at his face with her tail.

“So what are you going to do today?” Lance asked as he came around to the futon. The mattress dipped under his weight, and Keith heard him sip at his coffee. “Babysit my princess while I’m gone?”

Keith was quiet for a moment as he considered what Kolivan and Thace had brought up the night before with the matter of “knowledge or death.”
“I think I’m going to pay someone a visit,” Keith responded.

Lance arched an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“My aunt,” Keith answered. He sat upright and locked his gaze with Lance’s. “We’re due for a family reunion. There’s a lot that we need to catch up on.”

Lance hummed and pursed his lips, nodding. “Okay,” he said. “Just be careful.”

“You too,” Keith returned. “Don’t… don’t get caught.”

Scoffing, Lance retorted, “Oh, please, I should be saying that to you.” The playful glimmer in his oceanic eyes faded somewhat. “Seriously,” Lance continued, “don’t get caught. I don’t know what I’d do without you, Keith.”

Keith could feel his breath hitch in his throat, heart stopping, and he managed to respond with a raspy croak, “Same here.”

And he knew it was the truth.

“Wait here,” Lance told Keith. He set his mug down on the coffee table and then strolled back to the kitchenette. Keith watched him curiously as he shuffled through numerous drawers before returning back to the futon. “Give me your hand,” Lance demanded, and Keith obliged.

Lance pressed the cool metal of a key into his palm.

Grinning, Lance said, “You’re going to need this when you go home.”

Keith’s chest swelled with warmth. He returned Lance’s grin. “Thanks,” he responded.

“Yeah, it’s no big deal,” Lance replied, but Keith didn’t miss the red flush staining his cheeks—not that he even could. Laughing (anxiously? Keith could feel his heart flutter at the thought of Lance because flustered because of him), Lance suggested, “Let’s get dinner together. I don’t have to report to Empire tonight, so… it’ll be nice.”

“Dinner sounds great,” Keith responded. He hadn’t even eaten breakfast yet, but he was definitely looking forward to dinner. “Do you want to eat out or…?”

Shaking his head, Keith noticed how Lance’s features seemed to fall, becoming more dismal, and how the light in his eyes grew slightly dimmer. “It… it might be for the best if we eat at home,” Lance said. He gave Keith a slanted smile and added, “We cut it pretty close yesterday.”

Keith swallowed, recalling Lance’s wrath and his worry, recalling Shiro’s panic and desperation, recalling Allura’s weak attempts to mediate, and then responded, “That’s a good idea.”

“Don’t get too hasty out there, hothead,” Lance advised, the brightness in his eyes returning with a streak of mischief. “Don’t jump in head first either; use that hard head of yours to think for once.”

Keith scowled. “I think plenty.”

Lance snorted. “Sure you do.”

Thank God for Hunk and his hideous Toyota Camry because Lance’s arms would not have survived lugging around nearly thirty pounds of equipment across Monstro City.
“Seriously, Hunk,” Lance beamed as he fiddled with the radio, constantly switching between pop, rock, hip hop, and Latino stations, “you’re a godsend!”

“Dude, relax. It’s no big deal,” Hunk assured, grinning at Lance. “I mean, I go to work at the same time, anyway, and it’s at the same place. So might as well, am I right? Anyway, I’m really excited for you, man.”

“I’m pretty excited, too,” Lance said, lying through his teeth. “It’s not every day you get to audition for a big party that’s going to be aired on national television, you know?”

By now, Hunk must have noticed that Lance was adamantly avoiding scanning radio stations anywhere near the classical stations, but he didn’t make any kind of comment, only giving Lance a concerned look. His gaze, however, did linger a second too long on Lance’s twitching fingers of his free hand, moving across invisible keys.

Eventually, Lance settled on a station playing throwbacks from the early 2000s, letting Alicia Keys’ voice pour through Hunk’s car stereo speakers. He closed his eyes, trying to relax to the steady beat of her ballad. Alicia Keys is right, Lance thought. He shouldn’t worry. Everything’s going to be all right. Listen to her. Listen to Keith. You’ve got this.

“What’s with the love song?” Hunk asked, trying too hard to play nonchalant. He wanted to stifle his smile, but Hunk had a slight twitch that lifted the corners of his lips into a subtle upward curve every so often.


“Uh-huh…” Hunk replied. Obviously, he didn’t believe him one bit. “So…” Hunk drawled, “How are you and Keith?”

Lance pursed his lips and turned his head away from Hunk. He propped his elbow against the car door, resting his head against the back of his hand, and replied, “We’re good. Chill. Or, you know, as can be. Given the circumstances.”

Hunk made a pitying noise that was a cross between a wince and a squeak. Lance looked back at his friend, who stubbornly kept his eyes on the road, with a raised brow. He laughed at the expression Hunk was wearing because—goddammit, Hunk—he looked emotionally constipated, caught between worry and apprehension and sympathy. “Don’t worry about it, Hunk,” Lance assured. “We’re taking it day by day.” He hesitated before asking, “How’s Shiro taking it?”

Hunk startled at the inquiry, and Lance bit down on his lip. Maybe that was the wrong thing to ask. He chanced another glimpse at Hunk’s profile, remaining quiet when he saw that Hunk was trying to piece whatever information he had together. “How much do you know?” Hunk asked.

“How much do you know?” Lance returned.

“I know their identities,” Hunk replied, “and I’m guessing you figured them out, too. Did Keith tell you?”

“It slipped,” Lance responded. “He panicked when Allura and Shiro stopped by my apartment—said that Allura was Titania. Otherwise, he would have never told me; he’s loyal to a fault. I figured out the rest on my own.” He paused before remarking, “Thanks for telling Allura and Shiro where I lived, by the way. Best bro ever.”

“Hey, it would have been suspicious not to,” Hunk protested. “Besides, you’re crafty. You would
have figured something out.” Hunk offered Lance a weak, wry grin. “You always do.”

Lance huffed. “Because I have to,” he grumbled, returning his gaze back out the window. Lance himself wasn’t sure how he had even managed to handle Allura’s and Shiro’s visit yesterday. If Allura had tried to read his mind (regardless of the Alliance’s creed not to use their powers on innocent civilians), then all she would have managed to glean from his thoughts was merely a siren blaring, **PROTECT KEITH. PROTECT KEITH. PROTECT KEITH.**

Really, Lance was surprised that had gone as well as it had. He somehow managed to threaten Black Sky while he was at it. Shiro seemed to be a straight-laced man though, so hopefully, he would keep his word if...

No, don’t think that way.

“So, Shiro,” Lance began again, readdressing the former topic, “how’s he doing?”

Hunk shook his head with a dismal sigh. Well, that wasn’t good. “He’s a mess,” Hunk admitted. “He’s been searching for Keith up and down the city. I think he’s going to visit President Kogane today to see if she’s seen him.”

Dread sunk in Lance’s stomach, and he scrambled for his phone to message Keith, warning him to delay his visit, before realisation slapped him in the face. With a loud groan that possibly caught the attention of some of the passer-bys outside his window, Lance slumped back into his seat.

Fucking Keith doesn’t have a fucking phone on him.

Lance dropped his head against the window, glaring at everyone and everything that they passed and cursing their godforsaken luck. Hunk gave Lance a pointed look after he had settled down in his seat. “You all right, Lance?”

“Just fucking peachy,” Lance grumbled.

On the bright side, Shiro was worried about Keith.

Don’t think about it, Lance told himself. Listen to Alicia Keys. Everything’s gonna be all right. Keith’s smart. He’ll figure something out if Shiro’s there. Shutting his eyes closed, Lance tried to alleviate the tension tightening his muscles. Relax. Keith’s got this. Trust him. Trust Keith. Trust in yourself. You’ve got this.

“All right, man, if you’re sure,” Hunk responded before pulling into the Voltron Towers garage. He announced, “We’re here! Shay will be coming down in a sec to help you out.”

A smirk spread across his lips. “Shay, huh?” he teased.

Hunk flushed. “I told you, Lance,” he protested. “It’s not like that! Shay is just an agent of Voltron, and I’m just an engineer.”

“An agent you happen to admire very much,” Lance chimed. He opened the car door, leaping out, and began to scour the parking lot for a certain enchanting woman who had captivated his best friend. “And look!” he chirped. “There she is! Hey, Shay! Lookin’ snazzy!”

Shay, dressed in a sleek, black blazer with a white blouse tucked into black trousers and polished Oxfords, laughed and shook her head. “I’m flattered,” Shay responded, tucking a few strands from her bob behind her ear, golden hoop earrings glimmering underneath the dim lights of the garage,
“but, really, you should look at yourself, Lance.”

He pulled uncomfortably at his dark grey bow-tie and asked Shay, “It’s not too much, is it?” Lance had been doubting himself earlier. Maybe a three piece suit was too much for an audition, but it was an audition for VBC’s gala. He had to dress to impress, so he had chosen to wear a white button shirt, tucked into a pair of slim-fit dark grey trousers with a dark, faux leather belt, underneath a baby blue waistcoat with a black collar and buttons. Then he had draped a black blazer over his shoulders and completed the look with some baby blue suede boots to match his waistcoat. Was he trying too hard? Was it too casual?

But then Shay, the sweetest woman alive, said, “It’s perfect.” Maybe it was all right then, Lance tried to reassure himself. He snapped out of his thoughts as Shay declared, “Now let’s get your stuff and escort you to the audition hall.”

Before he could stop her, Shay was already pulling his keyboard case from the backseat. “You really don’t have to do that, Shay,” Lance protested. “I can carry it myself—”

“Nonsense,” she quipped, smiling at him in an almost threatening manner. She then reached into the backseat for another bag, pulling out his laptop case. “We have to protect those pianist hands of yours, right?”

Lance’s insides twisted uncomfortably, and he curled his fingers tightly into fists to hide the tiny white scars on his hands. Hunk offered him a smile before taking caring of the other two bags holding his amplifier and his mixer. “Shay’s right, man,” Hunk said. “Those hands of yours are a gift from God. You’ve got to take good care of them, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Lance managed, returning their smiles with one of his own. It was a little wobbly, and so was his voice as he spoke, “Thanks, guys.”

“Think nothing of it,” Shay told him, easily and casually strutting past him while carrying a full keyboard in a single hand. “Let’s get moving! We wouldn’t want you to be late!”

Hunk nudged him, and Lance choked out, “Dude, if you don’t date her, I will.”

Hunk frowned. “Go back to Keith. Right now.”

Lance laughed, and Hunk eased up, grinning all the while as they followed Shay to the audition hall. Hunk and Shay waved to the receptionist—the girl with the pretty hair, Lance realised—who promptly flushed upon recognising Lance. Flashing her a smile, he lingered beside Hunk and Shay as they told her that he would be here for the gala auditions.

A smile strained her pretty pink lips as she shyly turned her attention to Lance. “It’s located just around the corner to your left,” she said, gesturing in the specified direction. “Good luck, Lance!”

“Thank you—err,” Lance stole a glimpse at her name tag and grinned, “Olivia.”

She flushed and went back to her receptionist duties. Hunk rolled his eyes and pushed Lance follow. “Keep on moving, casanova,” Hunk griped. Shay took the lead, and the two of them were a few steps behind. Lowering his voice, Hunk whispered, “Jeez, I thought you were dating Keith.”

Lance flushed. “I’m not dating Keith!” he hissed.

“Pidge says you are,” Hunk pointed out.

“Pidge is a lying, cheating gremlin!”
“You’re just mad because she beat you seven out of ten times in Pokemon battles.”

“Here we are!” Shay declared, carefully setting down Lance’s keyboard case. She placed a hand on Lance’s shoulder and gave him an encouraging smile. “Best of luck, Lance.”

“Thanks, Shay,” Lance responded.

“You’re gonna do great, buddy,” Hunk said, patting his back after setting down his amplifier and mixer. “Do you want to grab lunch together? I’ll drop you off back at your apartment once we’re done. I have a break at twelve, so if you don’t mind waiting around for me, then we can head somewhere nearby. I’m feeling poke.”

“That sounds great, Hunk,” Lance responded. His thoughts strayed to Keith, but Lance pushed them aside. Keith could take care of himself. He wasn’t an idiot. Okay, he might be impulsive, but he wasn’t a complete idiot. “I’ll see you later.”

“For sure,” Hunk replied before leaving with Shay, abandoning him in a room full of performers. Some had taken to eyeing their exchange curiously while others were more intrigued by all of the equipment he had brought with him. A larger number of people were already practising, last minute, what they were going to do. Lance spotted a handful of magicians, even lesser stage actors and actresses, a decent number of stand-up comedians, and even more musicians.

Competition was tough.

But, Lance insisted, you like competition. You like coming out on top. You’re going to come out on top. You can do this. You’ve got this. It’ll be okay.

Lugging his equipment to one of the free chairs, Lance plopped down onto the hard plastic and fished out his phone and earphones. He swiped across the screen, pulling up one of the rhythm games he had installed a few days ago, and selected one of the classical options. He took note of the time—ten o’clock sharp—before starting the game, focusing on the beat.

As the time approached half past ten, Lance switched to his playlist, starting up the familiar notes of Vivaldi’s “Winter,” and closed his eyes. His fingers twitched, moving of their own accord, and he heard someone scoff. Lance cracked open an eye, noting that someone had quickly turned away, but judging by the scowl she was wearing, she knew what he was going to play and why he was going to play it.

She didn’t know how he was going to play it though, Lance told himself. That was all that mattered. He had the element of surprise on his side—going straight for the shock factor. Besides, nobody else brought their DJ set up. She was judging him too quickly. Just wait, just you wait… Lance was going to blow them away.

10:45 AM, read the clock on his phone. Lance pulled out his earphones and calmly breathed in and out. Fifteen minutes. Only fifteen more minutes. Fifteen more minutes, and then he can perform, and then it’ll all be over.

He can do this. He’s got this. Everything’s gonna be all right. It’s gonna be okay.

“Number six,” announced a sharply dressed woman holding a clipboard. She narrowed her eyes at whatever was written on her board. “Le… Leon…”

“Here,” Lance quickly stood up. He offered her a grin, trying to mask his frayed nerve endings, and
hoped that it wasn’t twitching. “Leoncio, right?”

“Right,” she answered, tone clipped. She looked at him up and down, studying him as though he was a specimen. Then she clicked her pen and crossed his name off the list. “You have up to two minutes to prepare.” Tucking her clipboard underneath her arm, she glanced at his three pieces of equipment and asked, “Would you like some help?”

“Yes, please,” he replied, handing her the amplifier. “Thank you so much.”

She scrunched her nose. “Nothing to it,” she replied. “Good luck, Mr. Reyes Acosta.”

His smile dropped from his lips once her back turned to him.

Bitch.

Lance slung his keyboard case over his shoulder and carried his laptop case and case holding his mixer in separate hands. Then he followed her into the audition room, where a panel of five judges were seated at a table. They watched curiously as he began to unpack and set up his gear as quickly and carefully as he could in under two minutes, unplugging everything in the right place, powering everything on, and then double checking.

He looked up and mustered all of the confidence he had, hoping that it showed in his smile. His anxiety alleviated somewhat when he saw a familiar smile shot his way.

“Mister… Reyes Acosta,” one of the judges, an older man dressed to the nines in a stuffy suit, drawled, “what will you be performing today?”

“‘Winter,’” Lance answered, trying to keep the tremble out of his voice and—more importantly—his fingers, “by Antonio Vivaldi.”

The man grumbled something under his breath and already scribbled something down in his notes.

Lady Ariella rolled her eyes and, smiling, assured Lance, “I love Vivaldi.”

“I know,” muttered the same man from before. “You said that about the last person who played ‘Spring.’” He paused for a moment, contemplating, and then mentioned, “Though, I admit, it is a rather interesting selection, given the current season. It is the opposite of spring, after all.”

Lance tried not to flinch. He knew this would happen, but he was going to own up to it. Closing his eyes, he breathed in.

The first movement, he reminded himself, *allegro non molto*.

Then he started.

Slowly, slowly, slowly, the snow would fall from the skies. In the beginning, it’s soothing, calming, like a peaceful white Christmas, but then harsh winds would be introduced, becoming ever colder. The gentle snowfall would then evolve into a flurry, the storm growing more and more powerful. It would become darker and darker, and its beauty more poignant with every passing beat.

*There.*

Lance quickly switched on the first track, laying the foundations he had recorded the night before and started up the drums, and continued playing the melody while his other hand reached over for his mixer, starting up his electronic and almost extraterrestrial sound effects—because winter in space
sounds pretty cool, doesn’t it?

Lance bobbed his head, morphing the piano’s bass part into a more crystalline ring to make it sound more ethereal. He’s back at Empire, having fun, being himself, feeling the music, and there’s nothing wrong with that.

Winter is cold, but it’s not limited to snowfall and flurries and blizzards. It doesn’t have to be harsh and severe. He would join in a snowball fight with Hunk and Pidge and maybe even Keith, and he would make a snowman with his sister after serenading (read: annoying) her “Do You Want to Build a Snowman?”

Winter can be fun. Winter can be epic. This was fun, Lance thought, smiling. This was really freaking epic. Here he was, auditioning to be a part of one of the biggest parties of the year in Monstro City. He had a chance, and he had people who believe he really does have a chance.

He’s got this. He can do this.

The second movement, Lance thought as he layered another pre-recorded track on top of the one currently playing, largo.

After spending his time outdoors, he would curl up with a mug of hot chocolate with Azura on his lap. Ideally, he would be back with his family for Christmas, and Keith would be there, his partner in crime through thick and thin. His uncle would make extra flan to bring home for the family, and his mother would make arroz con leche and pastelitos de guayaba. The dinner table would be lively and crowded, and Keith might be just a little bit overwhelmed, especially when he realised that he would have to fight for a bit of the roasted pig or starve.

Drinks would be going around the table every now and then, too, because Estefania and Tío Raymón would do everything to ensure that everyone has a good time. Ana would be whining about drunks all the while, but Mami, Louisa, and Tía Kimmy wouldn’t pay her much mind, too busy fawning over Alfonso and his silly antics.

Music would be playing in the background—powerful, fast, and lively just like this—and people would be swept up in dancing. He would take Keith by the hand and lead him in partner dancing—maybe salsa or merengue—and Keith, who doesn’t have a dancing bone in his body, would probably stumble with every step trying to keep up. Still, he’d have Keith look up so that he wasn’t staring at their feet so that he could look into those expressive blue-grey eyes of his, and then the distance between them would close and… and…

And, yeah, no, not going there. It wasn’t the time for those thoughts.

(But it still made his heart flutter and his chest swell with warmth and—oh God, stop already, Lance lamented.)

Nevertheless, everyone would be filled up and jubilant by the time dinner was over, cracking jokes and telling stories and reminiscing. After all, winter wasn’t just cold; it brought you warmth. You just had to be careful.

(Yes, Lance, he admonished himself, be careful.)

Lance transitioned into the third and final movement, allegro.

Winter had the potential to be dangerous, and the storms sometimes would cause blackouts. Ana never really did well in those kinds of situations, and Alfonso would be so startled he would cry. Louisa would take to calming both Alfonso and Ana. In the meantime, Enrique and Tío Raymón
would trek all the way outside to see if they could start up the power, and his mother and Tía Kimmy would try to search the house in search of candlelights and matches with Estefania and Gabriel’s help.

He and Keith would try to help in some areas between helping Louisa look after his younger sister and his nephew in addition to helping his mother and aunt search for candlelights to illuminate the house. However, in the end, they would remain cuddled up in the living room, trying to share warmth between the two of them. It would be all too easy, too, considering Keith’s powers.

Seriously, that was so unfair.

When the temperature dropped even more as the night progressed, Keith would try to use his powers when the candlelights couldn’t provide enough heat to warm up the house. It would be a riot if Mami’s flowers caught on fire though, but it would fine (if Keith could manage to put out the fire). Everyone would have a good time, and that was all that mattered.

He ended on a good note.

Lady Ariella, once again, smiled at him, and two of the judges did, too. The third judge was completely neutral, but the man who had criticised him before was now chuckling and crossing off a note he had written earlier. “Thank you, Mr. Reyes Acosta,” he said. “Your piano skills have much left to be desired…” Lance tried not to flinch, but goddamn, did that hurt. “But,” he continued, “that was an entertaining performance.”

Lance beamed.

“Unfortunately,” the judge with the neutral expression commented, “you went over time by a minute and a half. It’s nothing much to fret over, but points will be deducted. In a live orchestra, you will be expected to play according to the conductor’s discretion. Rules must be followed.”

Lance’s smile faltered somewhat, but when he caught Lady Ariella shaking her head, encouraging him to continue smiling with her big grin, Lance tried to cheer himself up. It’s okay. That judge didn’t say anything about the performance in itself, which meant it couldn’t have been terrible.

“It’s not quite what we were looking for in an orchestra to play live,” said the one of the two smiling judges, “but… it was different. We’ll take it into consideration.”

“We’ll give you some time to disassemble your equipment,” remarked the second of the two smiling judges. She laughed, eyes crinkling and cheeks dimpling, and mused, “You came quite prepared today.”

Lady, you have no idea.

After collecting all of his equipment and stowing them away, Lance shuffled back out to the waiting hall. A number of curious eyes lingered on him as he sat down, and he fiddled with his phone for a moment before shooting off a text to Hunk to let him know that he was done and that he’d be waiting for him in the audition hall.

He pulled up Instagram, ignoring the woman who came out after him, calling out someone else’s name, and liked several of his friends’ photos to pass the time. He tried to ignore the next contestant’s piano skills—Chopin’s “Fantasie Inpromptu,” played flawlessly—and tried to ignore the trembling in his hands. He tightened his hold on his phone, switching over to his side account to upload a daily photo of Azura.

Lance went through all of his photos of Azura, selecting one of her in a wedding dress, and edited
the filters and colour balance. Still, his attention lingered on every note played by the pianist. Perfect tempo, perfect pacing, perfect everything… and he realised that the judges were right. His skills weren’t all there.

Sure, Lady Ariella might have been encouraging, but what if that meant nothing?

What if he had already failed?

Don’t think about it, Lance told himself as he uploaded Azura’s picture. He signed out of Azura’s Instagram and went back to his personal account. The first thing he saw was a post from Estefania, and he thumbed through the collection of photos, where she and her friends were trying on dresses for her wedding, liking the post in the end.

But still, he couldn’t stop thinking about his results. He had to stop thinking about it, but he just couldn’t.

God, where was Keith—the impulsive, idiotic, ingenious hothead—when he needed him?

Keith shuffled through his collection of keys, trying to identify which one would open up Asako-obasan’s front door. In the process, maybe—just maybe—he lingered a little too long on the newest addition to his keyring, and maybe—just maybe—he might have been wearing a goofy grin because, holy shit, Lance actually gave him a key to his apartment to come and go as he pleased. Maybe—just maybe—it meant that Keith was a welcome presence in Lance’s home, in Lance’s life, and maybe—just maybe—that meant they were making progress in their relationship.

Keith pulled out the spare key to Asako-obasan’s penthouse suite and unlocked the door. He pushed it open, cringing at the squeal of the hinges.

“Who’s that?”

Keith froze in place.

Shit, Keith cursed, heart leaping to his throat in a spike of anxiety, as he fumbled with the locks to the front door in his hurry. Keith held his breath as his ears picked up the sound of approaching footsteps. Without wasting another second, he ducked into the nearby hall, pressing himself against the wall.

Of course, Shiro would be here.

Chapter End Notes

The lyrics and title are from "Desperado" by Rihanna! (The song that was alluded to in Hunk's car is "No One" by Alicia Keys.)

So... who remembers Thace? It only took halfway through the story for him to be physically introduced, but... yeah, he exists, lol. So does Matt, apparently.

Also, when Lance performs, he is envisioning what "Winter" would look like to him personally, given that he's pretty much adapting the entire composition. "Winter" has three movements, 1. Allegro non molto ("Lively/Fast, but not much"), 2. Largo (Slow), and 3. Allegro (Lively/Fast)... but don't quote me on that. I can only read bass/guitar
tablature, and my Italian sucks. Anyway, each of the movements have their own stanzas in Vivaldi's sonnet for "Winter" of the *Four Seasons* suite. I based Lance's impression loosely off those stanzas.

As always, you can find me on [tumblr](http://tumblr.com) or [twitter](http://twitter.com)!
“That must be the new housekeeper,” Asako-obasan responded calmly to Shiro’s inquiry. Keith was envious of his aunt’s nonchalance, but he supposed she had time to practise keeping secrets. “I had to hire someone after Keith moved out, you know? There was no Keith left to do the chores while I was gone.” She raised her voice, calling, “Sebastian, the guest room might need to be vacuumed since it’s been in disuse!”

Vacuum? Keith eyed the supply closet, pulling it open and taking the vacuum. He wheeled it into the nearest room, plugged it into the wall, and powered it on. He crossed his fingers, hoping that the noise was enough to appease Shiro’s paranoia.

Keith eyed the vacuum cleaner before sighing. He started to move it around the room to solidify his “disguise.”

Eventually, he abandoned the vacuum cleaner in a corner of the room, still leaving it powered on just in case, and pressed his ear against the door. “Keith really hasn’t been around?” Keith heard Shiro ask, raising his voice to be heard over the vacuum cleaner and inadvertently revealing how his tone bordered on the brink of desperation and despair.

“The last time I’ve seen him was… three, maybe four days ago, if I remember correctly,” Asako-obasan answered.

“When he called in sick,” Shiro recalled, “for a family emergency.” Shiro hesitated for a moment before asking, “What really happened that day?”

So, Keith realised, heart falling, Shiro hadn’t believed him. Or maybe he just lost cause to believe in Keith after everything that’s happened.

“I was feeling a bit fatigued,” Asako replied with a small laugh. “There’s just so much to handle sometimes, and so many people I don’t want to deal with but have to.” She sighed. “It doesn’t help that I’ve been overseeing so many projects and trying to manage your and Keith’s sponsorship… though I suppose, with Keith’s disappearance, there’s less of a workload now.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Shiro responded. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“If you can manage to get President Zacharias to back off on trying to buy my engineers, then that would be fantastic,” Asako-obasan replied, her tone both exasperated and playful. “Don’t worry about it, Shiro. I can handle it.”

“That… doesn’t make sense though. Why would Imperial Tech need to steal engineers from your company?” Shiro asked without bothering to hide his incredulity. “Don’t they already have plenty themselves?”

Asako-obasan sighed once more, sounding even more exhausted than before. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “It could be that he’s worried about competition, but Kogane Industries is focused more on automobile and motorcycle production. We don’t have anything to do with Zacharias’s… areas of speciality. I don’t see why he would concern himself with my company unless he plans on expanding his business to include cars on top of tanks, but from a man like Zacharias, that’s doubtful. Anyway, sorry, Shiro. I’m not much help here.”
“No, don’t be,” Shiro responded. “I understand that this is rough on you, too.” He paused. “Keith has so many people who care about him. The other day, Lance looked so close to crying. I… I just wonder what Keith is thinking, what he’s trying to accomplish. The entirety of the Garrison and the Voltron Alliance are already searching for him. However, we can’t release information to the public, or else it might cause widespread panic.” Shiro sighed. “Because of his past and his abilities, the Garrison thinks that Red Lion is a threat to the general public, and they want to detain him as soon as possible. The Alliance is trying to get to him before that happens, but we can’t find him anywhere.”

The guilt sunk its claws deep into Keith’s conscience, ripping apart his mind. He bit down on his lip, fighting the whimper of an apology and the tears of shame burning his eyes. He squeezed them tightly shut, breathing in and out, counting to ten, focusing on anything but the emotional wreck stirring in his mind, because it wouldn’t do if he lost control right now.

“I’m sure that boy has good intentions,” Asako-obasan stated.

“But is whatever he’s doing worth it?” Shiro protested, sighing.

“Well,” Asako-obasan remarked, “only one of three things can happen now. One, he succeeds, and we find out. Two, you catch him before he manages to do anything. Three, the both of you fail.” She chuckled and said, “I really hope the third option doesn’t come to pass, but I suppose we’ll have to wait and see.”

“Right,” Shiro agreed. “I’ll let you know if I hear anything about him.”

“Thanks, Shiro,” she said. Keith’s breath caught as he heard their footsteps grow louder. “I’ll let you know if I hear anything from my end, too.” Keith pressed his ear flat against the door, waiting for the click of the lock. Then, before he knew it, the door he leaned against pulled open, and Keith collapsed onto the floor. “Hello, Keith,” Asako-obasan greeted him cheerily in Japanese, “how have you been? Thanks for vacuuming the room.”

Gathering himself together, Keith scrambled to his feet and, switching to Japanese, replied, “We need to talk, Asako-obasan.”

“That’s funny,” she chirped, “I was about to say the same thing.” Glancing down at his feet, she said, “First, take off your shoes and turn off the vacuum cleaner. You’re tracking dirt everywhere.”

Asako-obasan pivoted on her heel, and Keith unzipped his boots and pulled them off, leaving them by the entrance near Asako-obasan’s shoe rack. He followed her into the living room, settling down on the sofa while Asako-obasan continued into the kitchen. He could hear her filling a kettle with water and starting up the stove.

As she prepared her tea, Keith was left to stew in his own thoughts.

So, Keith reflected, he really was a fugitive. Shiro and the rest of the Alliance were trying to get to him before the Garrison could, but even being caught by the Alliance had its own dangers. He couldn’t risk it. There was no way that the Alliance would let him act freely after this incident, so he wouldn’t be able to help the Blade uncover the root of the Galra infestation.

He couldn’t go back to Shiro, Keith decided, but at least Shiro… it didn’t sound like Shiro was mad at him. Confused, maybe, but that was understandable considering how little the Alliance actually knew about what was happening behind the curtains.

“Have some tea,” Asako-obasan said as she placed a glass of iced tea in front of him. Barley, Keith recognised. Asako-obasan rarely served anything else but barley tea. Then she slipped into the spot

“Have some tea,” Asako-obasan said as she placed a glass of iced tea in front of him. Barley, Keith recognised. Asako-obasan rarely served anything else but barley tea. Then she slipped into the spot
beside him on her sofa and took a sip of her own iced tea before sighing. “What are you thinking, Keith?” Asako-obasan asked. “I told you to be careful if you were going to leave the Alliance,” she recalled. “Somehow you went and blew your cover. Shiro’s been looking for you day in and day out. Poor kid doesn’t look like he’s gotten any sleep.”

Keith flinched, and he took to studying the drops of condensation dribbling down the side of the glass. He tried to put aside the guilt stirring in the pit of his stomach, making him nauseous with sick. Asako-obasan clicked her tongue, nudging Keith with her elbow, and leaned back against the arm of the sofa. She sipped her iced tea and said, “I don’t mean to make you feel bad over your decision, but I do genuinely wonder what’s gotten into your head as of late.” She turned the glass in her hand, watching as the ice shifted, before fixing her gaze onto Keith. “I know that the Alliance wasn’t your first choice—or, really, a choice at all—but why now of all times?”

Keith pursed his lips, hesitating, and then blurted out, “I learnt about Mom.”

It wasn’t completely the truth, but he couldn’t rat out Lance—not when he made a promise.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Keith continued, unable to look his aunt in the eye, too afraid of what he would find there—hurt or disappointment or remorse? He didn’t know, and he didn’t care to find out. He was only after the truth… or so he told himself.

Asako-obasan took a swig of her tea before she set the glass down on the coffee table beside Keith’s untouched glass. “I wanted to preserve the memory of your mother as someone you knew, not the woman someone else remembered,” Asako-obasan responded coolly. “I thought that was what she wanted; it was part of the reason why she left that lifestyle.”

“You didn’t stop me from heading in that direction either,” Keith remarked.

She chuckled. “You’re a stubborn boy,” she commented, “just like your mother. I never won against her whims either; I don’t think anyone ever did. She was a force to be reckoned with, and you… you’re very much the same way. I knew I couldn’t stop you from paving your own path, regardless of the consequences you might face.”

“What was it that made her quit though?” Keith asked, slumping over so that his elbows rested against his knees. “Why did she even start?” He frowned. “I can’t see her as someone who would join the Galra. It doesn’t match up.” Even if the Galra had formed with good intentions in the beginning, Keith couldn’t imagine his mother as one of them—ever.

Humming, Asako-obasan stretched out her hand, tucking a lock of his hair behind his ear. She tutted and said, “You need a haircut, and when was the last time you’ve combed your hair? It looks like a rat’s nest.” Before Keith could protest, claiming that she was derailing the topic, Asako-obasan remarked, her tone losing the hard edge with which she had spoken earlier, “You know, Keith, thirty-some years ago, the world was a very different place. People had just learnt—and not in the best way—that a select few humans, extremely rare and special humans like yourself, could… evolve into superhuman beings.”

“And in the beginning,” Keith recited from what he remembered of his history books, “society didn’t take too kindly to that. That’s why the Voltron Alliance, sponsored by the Voltron Broadcasting Corporation, was formed.”

“But, you see, for your mother, it started before that,” Asako-obasan stated. Her eyes dimmed with remorse as she stared at the distance between them on the sofa. Keith glanced in her direction and found that despite her presence beside him, she was already far away, lost in memories to which he was not privy. “She was one of the first Supers who manifested, and I was there to watch my older
sister—proud, brave, and resolute—turn into someone skittish, fearful, like she was afraid of her own shadow. Maybe for a time, she really was.”

Keith turned his head, meeting her gaze with an incredulous stare, and Asako-obasan could only laugh. “I know,” she mused. “It doesn’t really sound like your mother at all, does it? But times have changed, and she changed with time.”

“It doesn’t explain why she joined the Galra though,” Keith muttered.

“Well, back then the Galra were the only ones tolerant of Supers,” Asako-obasan explained.

Keith felt his jaw drop, and Asako-obasan laughed at his gaping expression. “The world is always changing, Keith,” Asako-obasan reminded. Her smile faltered as she admitted, “Though I use the word ‘tolerant’ very loosely.”

“What do you mean?” Keith questioned.

“The Galra didn’t discriminate against Supers because they saw their potential,” Asako-obasan clarified. “They saw their new abilities as a gift or as a tool. They saw the potential in using them for their own benefit as weapons, and your mother was lured by their offer to help her control her powers. She was like you; her powers were volatile and strongly based on her emotions.”

“Did they really teach her how to use her powers?” Keith inquired.

“They did,” Asako-obasan replied, “and that helped her regain the confidence she had lost. She wanted to use her powers to protect people, but in the end, she had become their strongest weapon. Ultimately, that came with a price she had to pay.”

“A price?” Keith echoed, dread lurking in the shadows of his mind. He knew the answer already, and he didn’t want to hear it again. He averted his eyes, furiously blinking away the tears, as he was thrust back into the memories of being eight years old and helpless. He tried not to think about that empty apartment, tried not to think about waiting for his mother to come home, tried not to think about waiting in the emergency room with only Coran, President Alfor and his wife, crying for his mother who would never return.

“The Galra become corrupted,” Asako-obasan stated, “by greed and lust. They coveted for more power, and Kira… she was symbolic of that power, of that strength they sought. That’s why they didn’t take it lightly when she left with four others, Kolivan, Thace, Antok, and Ulaz, to start the Blade—not that the Galra even knew about the Blade because they were so focused on her. That was a huge betrayal, and they wouldn’t let her go. The rest of the Blade didn’t matter so much as the one person with powers.”

“So they killed her,” Keith spat, hackles raising, shoulders tensing. His eyes burned with angry tears that threatened to fall, and rage hummed beneath his skin like vibrating molecules ready to burst into flames within the palms of his hands. He squeezed his eyes shut, facing the blinding red, and breathed in, trying to prevent his blood from boiling—lest he have a repeat of the arson incident.

“And your father,” Asako-obasan mentioned, “and they were going to come after you, too.”

Cold shock overcame him quickly, the sparks of his anger dying, as confusion numbed him from his burning anger. Keith whipped his head to face his aunt so quickly he nearly gave himself whiplash. “What?”

The smile that stretched across Asako-obasan’s lips was bitter and melancholic. “It was a love story taken straight out of the pages of a comic book,” she told him. “She was a vigilante, and he was a
reporter. He was doing a segment on superhumans and chased her to the ends of the earth. He was half of the reason why she left the Blade; the other half was you.” The warmth in her smile graced her tired eyes. “She wanted to raise you right. Rather than involve you with the morally grey areas of the underground, she wanted you to live as peacefully as possible, to never live in fear or want, because of what happened with your father.”

Keith’s head spun. He turned away yet again to hide his bewilderment and asked, “Who was he? Who was my father? She’s never talked about him before; you’ve never talked about him before.”

“It hurt her too much to think about him,” Asako-obasan explained. “Kira always thought that it was her fault that the Galra came after him—in order to get to her.” She sighed. “In the end, it will always be dangerous to be involved with a Super, but that never did dissuade your father. He was going to propose to her and made a promise on that missing medallion—an engagement to be engaged.” She offered him a sad smile. “Austin,” she said. “His name was Austin Yan, a man who came from Taiwan chasing the allure and enigma of these new superhumans against his own family’s wishes. His articles are still circulating around the Internet if you ever want to search for them. He was a brilliant writer.”

Keith bit down on his bottom lip and nodded. He felt his hands tremble and clenched his fingers into tight fists, refusing to cry. His head was starting to hurt; this was too much information. “Keith,” he heard his aunt call to him, “have you found what you’re looking for?”

Swallowing, Keith stared down at his fists resting atop his knees. They were hands stained with Lance’s blood, hands that pushed away Shiro and his concern, hands that tried to grip Lance closer and never let him go. “I just want to make it a safer world,” he found himself confessing, “so that Lance doesn’t have to.”

“Lance doesn’t have to do what?” Asako-obasan echoed, bewildered.

“So that…” Keith hesitated. “So that he doesn’t have to live in this shithole of a city any longer. I want to make it better for him and for his family and for Shiro and for you and for our friends, but that can’t happen if the Alliance keeps going in circles trying to chase after the wrong leads. There’s one guy at the centre of it all, and I’m going to take him down.”

Keith shuddered before clasping his hands tightly together to prevent them from trembling with his silent wrath. “The Galra took everything from me,” Keith mumbled. “They took my father before I was even born. They took my mother. I won’t let them take Lance. It’s only fair if I return the favour, isn’t it?” Keith growled. “I’m going to destroy everything that bastard holds dear to him.”

Maybe that wasn’t a very heroic thing to say, Keith reflected, but this was no longer about heroism. What the Blade wanted to achieve wasn’t about saving people or protecting people; it was about changing the playing field so that no more people would get hurt. It was about prevention.

Asako-obasan hummed. Her painted lips curved into a mischievous smile. “That’s another thing you two have in common,” she noted.

“What?” Keith asked, blinking in confusion.

“You and your mother both are extremely protective of those you hold dear,” Asako-obasan teased. Her smile widened, and Keith could feel his heart rate shoot up at the implications. He forced himself to look away—as though it could get his heart to calm—but the moment the accusation left her lips, Keith could do nothing to deny it. “Like Lance,” she said, and he knew it was true.

Heat crawled up the back of his neck, and Keith could feel it pool in his cheeks, reddening them and
staining them red. Before he could protest, Asako-obasan stood up and gestured for him to follow her. “Come on, lover boy,” she teased, swiping her car keys off the coffee table. “I got something for you.” She strutted over to her coat rack, removing her purse from the hanger, and levelled an expectant stare at Keith.

Keith reluctantly stood and trailed after his aunt as she led him out of her apartment and down to the garage. He followed her to the sector designated for her peruse and slipped into the white Kogane Industries convertible after she unlocked it. “So?” Keith asked, leaning back in the dark leather seats and relaxing. “Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise,” Asako-obasan responded.

“There’s still a while until my birthday,” Keith retorted, “and you’ve already gifted me Obsidian.”

“What can I say?” Asako-obasan teased as she started the engine and shifted into reverse to pull out of her parking spot. “You’re a spoilt rich kid, Keith.”

Keith scoffed. “And whose fault that is?”

Humming, she chirped, “I wonder.” Before they pulled out of the garage, she threw a pair of sunglasses in Keith’s direction, telling him, “Wear those sunglasses and throw on your hood. I can’t risk the traffic cams spotting you.”

She had a point. Keith put on the aviators and pulled up his hood, resting his head against the window as he stared out into the streets. It was a familiar route, he noticed, and then only a second later did it click. “Why are we heading to your company?” he asked.

“It’s a surprise,” she repeated while lowering the volume of the radio.

The song sounded familiar, Keith thought, furrowing his brows. He glanced at the screen installed on the dashboard displaying the current music selection and inwardly groaned—Antonio Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons.”

“You don’t like classical music?” Asako-obasan questioned. “I thought you didn’t care about what people listen to in their car.”

“I’ve just heard enough of this,” Keith responded, “from Lance. He was practising this all night long for an audition.”

“For the gala, I’m assuming? That’s the biggest event coming up anyway. He has good taste,” Asako-obasan declared. “After all, he has you for a boyfriend.”

Keith choked on his breath and shrieked, “He’s not my boyfriend!” He tried to ignore the flush that burned his cheeks and stubbornly stared out the window, refusing to look in his aunt’s direction.

“Not yet,” she chimed. Stopping at a red light, Asako-obasan reached out to Keith and pinched his red cheeks, cooing, “But you’re a Kogane, so put those charms to good use!” Keith batted her hand away from his face, scowling, but Asako-obasan kept laughing at his expense. She returned her hand to the wheel and continued driving once the light turned green. “How is Lance anyway? I heard from Shiro that he seems really worried about you,” Asako-obasan inquired. “Are you keeping in touch with him? Are you planning to?”

“Yeah,” Keith answered. When she was about to speak, possibly to warn him about the dangers associated with keeping in a contact with a civilian while he was on the run, Keith responded, “I know it’s dangerous, and so does he. We’re being careful—or, well… we’re trying to be.”
“You would really do anything for this boy,” Asako-obasan mused. “What is it that you see in him? He’s a good guy, but indulge me.”

Keith flushed. “There’s a lot,” he muttered.

“Don’t hold back,” she urged. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, mirth dripping from every word as she said, “You’ve got time. It’s not like you have anywhere to be, right?”

Keith groaned, but knowing that she wouldn’t let the matter drop, he caved into her demands. “He’s… he’s actually kind of annoying after you get to know him,” Keith grumbled. “He knows exactly which buttons to push and how to push them to get what he wants, and he likes to tease you. He’s also really stubborn. You’d think from his appearance that he’d be more graceful, but he’s really just a giant dork. Then he seems like a giant dork, but he’s actually a bit manipulative. He only shows you what he wants you to see, and then he covers everything else up.” He sighed.

“It’s because he doesn’t want to worry you,” Keith continued. “He pushes people away, keeps you at a distance, because he thinks that’s the safest thing to do to prevent the both of you from getting hurt. He thinks that he shouldn’t have to burden you with his problems, or sometimes he tries to solve your problems for you, which is ridiculous. It’s because he doesn’t want you to hurt so much; like, he doesn’t want anyone to feel bad. He just worries and cares too much, and because of that, he hurts easily. He’s… he’s really sweet. He’s kind and caring, and he’s beautiful… although he’s a complete dumbass trying to solve everything on his own.”

Asako-obasan hummed. “You really are in over your head for this boy.”

Keith’s shoulders slumped. “It’s hard to explain, but I just… I just want to protect him and shelter him from danger,” he answered. “And I want to be able tell him that everything is going to be okay. It’s not like I want to save him; he’s already made it pretty clear that he can take care of himself—even though literally everyone has something to say about that. I just want to be there for him, support him, let him know that he doesn’t have to do everything alone.”

“You’re going to make him very happy one day,” Asako-obasan assured him. “I just hope that he does the same for you.”

Keith laughed. “He already does,” Keith murmured. “His happiness and peace of mind are enough.”

Asako-obasan’s smile grew wistful as she turned into the parking lot for her company. After she parked her car in her reserved spot, she led Keith into the building. She greeted the receptionist in passing before accessing the elevator, taking it down to the third basement level. “Isn’t that where you keep your secret prototypes you can’t leak to the public?” Keith asked, brows furrowing. “What are we going to do there?”

“Like I said before,” Asako-obasan replied, “it’s a secret.”

The doors slid open, and Keith lingered behind his aunt as she led them deeper into her secret laboratory. Upon reaching a pair of double doors, Asako-obasan punched in a sequence into a keypad, waiting until it flashed neon green lights enabling access, before she opened the doors for Keith to walk in first. She promptly followed after him before taking the lead again.

They passed row after row of cars still in development—from city sedans and coupés to minivans, motorcycles, and sports cars—and Keith tried not to stare too long at the new models, attempting and failing to feign nonchalance and disinterest. His fingers twitched with the urge to take his aunt’s prototypes out for a spin. Asako-obasan’s steps slowed to a stop, and Keith halted a short distance behind her, peering over her shoulder only to find a project covered underneath a plastic tarp. “This
“It would look strange if suddenly my nephew went missing and I bought a new phone, so I’m having all my personal calls, emails, and text messages sent to my work phone instead. I told everyone on my personal phone that I lost it, so you’re free to use it as you please—as long as you don’t get caught. There’s a chance that the government might be monitoring the text messages though, but I’m sure your allies are aware of that.”

She reached into her purse once more, bringing out her wallet, and handed him a plastic card—a shiny, black matte credit card. “Only for emergencies,” she warned him. “They’re probably keeping tabs on your bank account, but they shouldn’t be watching mine without a search warrant of sorts. Still, if they are, then use this with caution. Don’t spend it on something outrageous like a new sword or dagger, and I hope to God that you won’t be wearing out all of your jackets again now that you don’t have access to your hero-suit.”

Keith openly gaped at his aunt, barely managing to reply, “Thanks, Asako-obasan.”

She shook her head and gave him a wary smile. “You think this is my first time dealing with this?” she teased. “Your mother had gotten into so much worse during her time with the Galra and the Blade of Marmora. Kolivan still owes me big time for some of the cover-ups I had to do.”

Keith shook his head. “Do all businesses have under the table dealings?”

“That’s for me to know,” Asako-obasan responded cheekily, “and for you to never find out.” She kicked the stand for Obsidian and pushed the bike towards Keith. “Now go on and get out of here,” she told him, smiling. “And if you’re going to see him again, tell Lance I said ‘hi.’”

“How do you think it went?” Hunk asked as he scooped a spoonful of raw salmon and sushi rice, all covered in spicy mayo, from his plastic bowl. He shoved it into his mouth and, after chewing and swallowing, asked, “Do you think you did all right?”
“I think I did,” Lance replied as he mixed up his fish, rice, sauce, and vegetables. “Who knows how well the other guys did though? There were some pretty serious looking dudes over there, man. Lots of people were trying out for piano, too, and there’s only room for one pianist in that orchestra.”

Lance stuffed his mouth with rice, seaweed salad, and spicy tuna to avoid speaking any more on the subject. He kept his eyes on the contents of his bowl, stirring his crab meat and avocado into the mix as well, trying not to shrink under Hunk’s incredulous stare.

Honestly, he didn’t know if Hunk was judging him for how he was eating his poke bowl or his previous response to Hunk’s inquiry. It could have been both.

“You shouldn’t be comparing yourself to other people, man,” Hunk chastised.

Lance shrugged. “Well, the judges certainly are,” Lance responded. “Personally, I think I did pretty damn amazing back there, but considering everyone else’s skill level, maybe that means I didn’t make the cut. They can’t choose everyone who performed well, Hunk. You’d have to be spectacular, and I’m… I’m just a boy from Cuba.”

Since Lance was one of the first auditions, he had more than enough time to see the looks on the other performers’ faces when they had performed well and when they hadn’t. By the time he had left the audition hall with Hunk, there was still a good deal of performers remaining, waiting for their time to audition. The acceptance rate to be a part of the gala’s line-up was probably ten percent, and there was even less of a chance to become a part of the orchestra.

Hunk deflated with a sigh. “That’s true,” he conceded albeit reluctantly, “but you just have to have faith, I guess. Mrs. De Altea really likes you, and it’s her gala. She gets the final say on who gets to perform, when they get to perform, and how they ought to perform.”

Lance pursed his lips before shoving aside his reluctance. “Doesn’t that make it worse?” Lance inquired as he scooped another helping of fish, krabmeat, avocado, and vegetables into his spoon. “If I get in on her favour, but I don’t have the skills to keep up with the other musicians, I’d only be dragging them down.” Lance lifted his spoon and pointed it at Hunk, remarking, “A team is only as good as its weakest link, you know?” He shoved the spoon past his lips and chewed to avoid elaborating on the subject. “It’s even worse if it’s a performance because then you can hear and see and pick out the mistake.”

“Okay,” Hunk hissed, “that is the most ridiculous load of bullshit I’ve ever heard, and I work with Coran! The man is a genius, but we’ve improvised almost all of our designs so many times that I’m absolutely positive Coran pulls ideas out of his ass half the time!”

Lance flinched at the tone and cowered underneath Hunk’s anger, but he refused to give any kind of response. Instead, he remained silent and ate more of his poke bowl, accepting his fate and subjecting himself to Hunk’s fury.

“Mrs. De Altea isn’t irrational,” Hunk snapped as he reached out and pulled Lance’s poke bowl away. Lance’s protest died on his tongue, withering into nothingness once exposed to Hunk’s glower, and Lance could only stuff his mouth with the fish and rice on his spoon in a vain attempt to focus on anything but Hunk’s lecture. In the end, however, Lance couldn’t not listen. Hunk was loud when he needed to be, and now of all times, Hunk decided that he needed to be heard. “Just because you’re one of her favourite musicians doesn’t mean that she’ll hook you up with a gig if you’re not a good fit! She has to make sure that this gala goes off perfectly without a hitch, and maybe the missing piece is you! So, yeah, sure, you can call yourself an amateur, Lance, but you’re still a musician. Let’s face it; you love making music. Don’t let this hold you back!”

“Okay, so hypothetically speaking, let’s say that I get in by some miracle,” Lance responded. “How
the hell do I measure up to everyone else? Hunk, this is my chance to play with world class musicians; I can’t mess this up!”

“Practice,” Hunk answered. “Practice makes perfect, Lance. You wouldn’t get into the orchestra by a miracle. It would be entirely based on your skills. If they’re not where you expect them to be, then practise. Sure, there might be musical savants and gifted geniuses playing with you, and, yeah, that might mean you’ll have to work harder than any of them to get to that level. But that’s okay! You have so much talent, Lance!” He smiled. “And I’m sure Mrs. De Altea sees that in you, too.”

Sniffling (it was just the spicy tuna or the spicy mayo or both burning his mouth, okay? Nothing sentimental), Lance blinked furiously to prevent the warmth in his eyes from spilling, refraining from wiping at his eyes with the back of his hand. He gave Hunk a shaky grin. “Thanks, buddy,” he responded. Lance stared hungrily and longingly at his confiscated poke bowl and then asked, “Can I have my food back now?”

Hunk rolled his eyes, but, grinning all the while, he pushed the plastic bowl back in Lance’s direction. “No problem, man,” Hunk replied. “I’m happy for you.” Hunk took another bite from his poke bowl. After chewing and swallowing, he added, “Maybe this will be your big break. All kinds of people attend the gala, so maybe…” Maybe you have a chance to leave behind your vigilante career and pursue something better, something safer, for you.

Lance had faltered, but Lance knew his friend pretty well by now. After all, Hunk was a worrywart through and through. Lance knew his friend pretty well by now. “I have business to finish first,” Lance told him.

Yeah, Lance thought as he finished off his last piece of salmon, it was better that Hunk didn’t know what exactly Lance had planned by auditioning to be a part of the line-up for the gala. Instead, he changed the topic, suggesting, “We should go celebrate if I get in.”


Lance refrained from flinching. “Yeah… ‘oh no’ is right,” he mumbled. He sighed and set his spoon down in his nearly empty bowl. “What’s going to happen to him, Hunk? Shiro didn’t tell me anything when he visited yesterday afternoon. I made him promise that nothing would happen to Keith though. I’m not sure if that even means anything.”

Hunk made a sympathetic sound. “Sure it does,” Hunk assured. “Shiro’s a man of his word.” He chewed the last pieces of his salmon thoughtfully before swallowing the last of his food. “Shiro keeps his promise, so if he gets discovered by the Alliance, then nothing terrible will happen to him. They might—no, wait, my bad—they will keep a close eye on him though.”

Lance frowned. “In the end, he can’t get caught,” he concluded. “If the Alliance keep him on a tight leash, then there’s no way he would be able to help us out.” And he knew Keith wouldn’t take that lying down, and maybe, in trying to fight back against the leash that bound him, Keith would take actions that would endanger himself. He set his spoon inside the empty plastic bowl and crossed his arms, laying his head in his arms. “This is a damn right mess.”

“Yup,” Hunk replied. He patted Lance’s shoulder consolingly and responded, “Whatever you decide to do, just stay safe, Lance.”

“Yeah, I got it. Thanks, Hunk,” Lance replied. Sitting back up, Lance gestured towards their empty bowls and asked, “Are we done here?”
Hunk nodded and fished out his keys while Lance threw away their trash. “I’ll take you back to your place,” Hunk told Lance. “Is that all right?”

“Yeah, totally,” Lance responded, trailing after Hunk. He slipped into the passenger seat and immediately took control of the radio, amping up the volume of the current pop ballad much to Hunk’s dismay. “Oh, come on, Hunk!” Lance whined.

Hunk rolled his eyes. “No, Lance.”

“And I… will always love youuuuu!” Lance crooned. “Hunk! I will always love you, my best bro!”

“I know, Whitney. I know.”

“Hunk!” Lance whined. “Sing with me!”

Hunk snorted before joining Lance in belting out the lyrics, and he nearly stopped when Lance cheered in success. Still, given Lance’s depressive mood earlier, Lance knew there was no way that Hunk wouldn’t humour him. He was a big softy in the end, after all.

Pulling in front of Lance’s apartment block, Lance hopped out of Hunk’s car, dramatically and enthusiastically blowing kisses towards his friend, before bidding him adieu and slamming the car door shut. The moment he turned around, however, his eyes fell on the black motorcycle parked right in front of the stairs that led directly to his front door.

Relief flooded his mind, overwhelming him with thoughts of thank God, Keith didn’t get caught by Shiro. However, just as quickly and just as powerfully as it came, he could relief drain from his body.

Why would Keith leave Obsidian out in the open! That dumbass!

“Kei—” Lance immediately clamped his mouth shut. Narrowing his eyes, he stomped all the way up the stairs and, after unlocking his front door, threw it open. “Keith!” he hissed as he marched into the main room, where he found Keith crouching on the kitchen floor, feeding Azura her kibble and refilling her water bowl. “Do you want to explain why Obsidian is parked out in the open in front of my apartment when it’s supposed to be missing like its owner?”

Keith didn’t react immediately, only raising an eyebrow in response, and then replied, “Don’t worry, Lance. I just got back and went to feed Azura since I noticed that you weren’t home yet. I was going to move it into the alley behind your apartment after I was done here.”

Lance sighed. “Just… be careful, all right?” he mumbled, plopping down onto the futon. He heard Keith approach and then felt the dip in the mattress from where Keith sat.

“How was the audition?” Keith asked.

Lance rolled over onto his side, only to find his head brushing against Keith’s thigh. His gaze lifted, meeting with Keith’s wide-eyed gaze, and he barely had time to even think eyes should not be allowed to be that pretty before his heart was thrumming in his chest, breath hitching in his throat.

Indecision clashed within his mind, hesitation stalling him for a moment, but what did he have to lose? They weren’t in a relationship; they couldn’t be. They didn’t have time for it—not what with Thace’s and Pidge’s circumstances—so… it was okay to take what he could get, right?

A second later, Lance lifted his head, resting it against Keith’s thigh, before fear had him backing out. He felt Keith stiffen for a second, and Lance, too, froze in response. Had he made a mistake,
after all? Lance nearly moved away, but then he felt Keith’s fingers thread through his hair, nails brushing lightly against his scalp. His heart thrumming in his chest slowed down ever so slightly, beginning to relax under Keith’s touch, and Lance closed his eyes, just to rest them after the long night that he had, and then answered, “It was… all right. I just hope I get accepted.”

“You gave it your best,” Keith replied, “and on such short notice.” There was a smile in his voice, and Lance made the mistake of opening his eyes. Keith’s smile was radiant, and Lance’s heart had never beat so rapidly before in his life. “I’m proud of you,” Keith told him. “Even if you don’t get in, we’ll think of something, but… for actually accomplishing something like that, it’s impressive.”

Lance could feel all the heat rush to his cheeks. “I-it’s nothing,” he stuttered.

“It’s not nothing,” Keith argued. “I don’t know how long you stayed up trying to perfect your audition piece, but with that much effort you put into it, you shouldn’t play it off as nothing.” His smile softened, and his hand stilled, fingers resting against Lance’s temple. “I… I’m…” Keith pursed his lips, wetting them, before spluttering, “I-I’ll go move my bike now.”

“Right…” Lance rolled right off Keith before rolling onto his stomach, burying his reddened face into his pillow. He waited until he heard the front door click shut before proceeding to scream into the pillow. The mattress dipped slightly from another weight, and Lance stole a peek at his surroundings and found himself staring into Azura’s curious blue eyes. “Princesa,” he whined, “What do I do? This boy is gonna be the death of me.” Azura’s tail batted his nose, and Lance chuckled. He shifted onto his back and pulled her into his arms, pressing her against his chest in some semblance of a hug. Lance sighed.

“This sucks. This seriously sucks.”

When Azura yowled, Lance loosened his arms and let Azura climb all over him. She settled with curling into a ball beside his head, brushing her fluffy white tail against his temple. “You like him, too, don’t you, beautiful?” Lance asked although he knew that she couldn’t hear him. “He takes care of you even if he doesn’t get you. He’s a nice guy. He tries to do his best and doesn’t half-ass things.” Lance huffed. “Not that it matters,” he grumbled. There were more important things than a romantic relationship—like keeping his friends and family safe, like keeping Keith safe… especially now that he’s a fugitive.

Lance sat upright, furiously shaking his head as though to empty it of any thoughts, before reaching for his guitar. He circled his futon, searching for his tuner, before sitting back down, plucking each string one by one until it was perfectly tuned. By the time he was done, Keith was already stepping through the front door, and Lance tried to stifle the giddiness fluttering his heart. It was stupid, he told himself, to be so excited about the fact that Keith has a goddamn key to his apartment. He made the logical choice. If Keith was going to come and go, then he needed a key just in case Lance wasn’t around. It wasn’t like Keith was staying here permanently.

Ignoring the part of his brain that whispered traitorously about how it would be nice if Keith did live here with him, Lance began strumming the first few chords to an old composition. His left fingers shifted across the neck of the guitar, pressing down on the cold metal strings, while his right hand continuously plucked, creating soft and gentle rings that echoed within the four walls of his studio apartment.

He felt Keith sit down beside him, pulling his knees to his chest, but Keith didn’t speak a single word. He could hear Azura purring quietly, unaware of the music of the apartment, content simply to nap away all of her worries atop his pillow.

Then his finger slipped.
Lance stared wide-eyed at his trembling hand. His fingers twitched, wanting to return to the metallic strings, but he couldn’t seem to move. His eyes remained fixated on the tiny white scars running across his hands. He clenched his fingers. “I think… I might have messed up,” Lance mumbled. “Everyone auditioning was doing classical pieces, true to the composer’s intent, but… I had to go and be different. What if that’s not what they’re looking for? I’m sure that they wanted to be a part of the orchestra, too, so…”

Keith’s fingers grazed over his, gently prying them open, before the pads of his fingers brushed against Lance’s callouses and the tiny white scars left behind from where he had gripped Shishi no Kiba. “I don’t know much about music,” Keith said, “but I know that you have fun making music. I know that you want music to be just as enjoyable for other people, too, and that’s beautiful. If they can overlook that, then they don’t know just what they’re missing out on.” Keith grinned at him and teased, “With how much you demand attention though, I doubt that could ever happen. You’ll get the part, Lance. Hell, even Kolivan has confidence in you; that man probably wouldn’t have banked his plans on you if you couldn’t do it.”

Lance laughed, lacing their fingers together. “I guess you’re right this time, hothead,” he responded, relishing the way their hands fit perfectly. Deciding to change the subject, Lance set aside his guitar and asked Keith, “So what are you planning to do the rest of the day? I don’t have to work at Empire tonight, and we probably won’t hear back from Nyma and Rolo until the end of the week. It wouldn’t be wise trying to get in contact with Pidge when the Garrison’s got their eye on her either.”

Keith sighed. “What do you even do with all of this time?”

“I’ve gone shopping,” Lance answered with a laugh. “I’ve gone to the park to run or chill or play music, too. Sometimes, I go to the subway station and play there. Otherwise, I stay home and kill time surfing the Internet.” He glanced over at Keith, the smile on his lips withering away, and commented, “Though I guess we can’t really do that without taking extra precautions.”

“Shiro’s been looking for me,” Keith stated. He hesitated and then corrected himself, “Shiro’s still looking for me.”

“I heard from Hunk,” Lance mentioned. His lips twisted into a smile. “He’s worried about you.”

“I can’t turn myself in though,” Keith snapped. “If I turn myself in, who knows what will happen? Even if they don’t send me back to the Garrison’s detention centre to be quarantined, they definitely won’t let this slide, and if they look into my head? Let’s say they act on whatever information they find. If, hypothetically, the Galra gets busted by the Alliance instead, what about you and the others? They’ll learn about you guys, too, and they’re not going to let you go scot-free.”

Lance hummed. “A mercenary, former gang members, an underground doctor, information brokers, and a hacker…” he mused. “It doesn’t spell out anything good.” A sense of forlorn and guilt twisted up his insides and his smile. “I guess that means we’re stuck together then.”


“In that case,” Lance responded with a waggle of his eyebrows, “you can help me prepare dinner later.”

Rolling his eyes, Keith huffed and droned, “Yeah, yeah, yeah…” The smirk on his lips gave away his amusement though. “It’s the least I could do for you, anyway.”

Lance shook his head, ignoring how his cheeks warmed and how his heart swelled at the sight of
Keith’s smile, ignoring what fondness Keith may have held in his gaze. “It’s nothing, really,” Lance tried to protest. “Anyone would have done it.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re wrong,” Keith returned, “but okay.”

“It’s just doing the right thing,” Lance insisted.

“Well, not everyone does the right thing even if they know it’s right,” Keith remarked. His eyes softened, and his voice lowered into a soft, rich timbre as he spoke, “So thanks, Lance.”

Lance averted his eyes, unable to meet Keith’s steady gaze and unable to rid himself of Keith’s rich, velvety tone, pursing his lips together and wetting them briefly. He ended up repeating himself from earlier, “It’s seriously nothing, Keith. Don’t worry about it.”

“Fine,” Keith replied. However, his tone held a note of defiance, and Lance knew that Keith would never let the subject go. For now, much to Lance’s relief, he dropped the subject. “What do you want for dinner?”

“Hmm, what’s your expertise?” Lance asked. “Aside from eggs and bacon.”

“Fried rice, pasta,” Keith listed off on his fingers, “and curry.”

“Curry?” Lance repeated, eyebrows raised.

“Not like Indian curry or Thai curry,” Keith responded. “Japanese curry—from a packet, actually, not from scratch.” Keith rubbed the back of his neck. “My mom used to make it from scratch though every time she came back from a rough mission. It was my favourite thing to eat.”

“Curry,” Lance echoed.

Keith hummed and then shook his head. “Just my mom’s curry, I think,” he clarified. “From memory alone, it was the best damn curry I’ve ever eaten.”

“I get that,” Lance assured with a small grin. “My mom makes the best arroz con pollo. Not even my uncle’s can beat hers, and he runs a damn restaurant that has a four star rating on Yelp!” He laughed and added, “Maybe I’m just a little bit biased though.”

“A little bit?” Keith teased. He rolled his eyes and nudged Lance. “You were brought up on her cooking, so it’s no wonder you’d prefer her cooking over your uncle’s.”


“I could make it for you one day,” Keith responded. “I mean… it’s not the best curry, and it tastes nothing like my mom’s… but I’d like to think it’s not bad. It’s better than Shiro’s.” Keith laughed, but it sounded like a tumble of chords played in a minor key—bittersweet and sombre, a poor mimicry of the laugh that had rocked his entire body with joy and jubilee. “Shiro can’t cook worth shit, and my culinary expertise isn’t that varied… so we usually ended up ordering take-out or pizza. Usually pizza.”

Lance fiddled with his guitar strap before replying, “That sounds nice though.” He plucked a few chords, playing some whimsical melody that his fingers dictated, and suggested, “You can try to make your mom’s curry one day, and I’ll make my mom’s arroz con pollo. It won’t taste the same, but… we tried?”
“One day then,” Keith promised. “Sounds good.” He stretched and then asked, “What do you have for tonight though?”

“I have rice,” Lance replied. “And eggs. No bacon—pretty sure we used the last of it yesterday morning—but I have chorizo. Maybe vegetables.”

“Chorizo?” Keith questioned. “What’s that?”

Lance gasped. “You’ve never had chorizo before?” Before Keith could answer, Lance declared, “We are remediying that immediately!”

“Lance,” Keith drawled, “answer the question.”

Lance rolled his eyes. “It’s a type of sausage, okay?”

Keith hummed before responding, “Then we can probably scrape together some kind of fried rice. Do you have soy sauce?”

“There might be some left from when Hunk came over,” Lance answered. He grinned. “I guess we’re making fried rice a lo cubano for dinner then?”

Keith returned his grin. “I guess so.”

“I’m going to name this one ‘Keith,’” Lance declared as he began punching in the letters for his Flareon’s name.

Keith snorted. “Creative,” he grumbled. He was about to inch closer to get a better view of Lance’s 3DS screen until he realised that… perhaps he was too close already.

However, he spent the last week (and will possibly spend more weeks to come if he was lucky enough not to get caught) living with Lance, so fuck it. Besides, he was supposed to be keeping his head down anyway, so Keith dropped his head onto Lance’s shoulder, tugging down the bill of Lance’s Monstro City Monsters snapback to avoid having his face get captured by the security camera. His eyes glanced back at the washing machine with their clothes before he continued to observe the game in front of him.

“Seriously, does your team have anything other than water and ice types?” Keith asked incredulously. He doesn’t even have any of the recent Pokémon games, but he was sure that he could beat Lance’s team easily if he had a ready console, considering that Lance’s current party was composed of a Primarina, an Alolan Ninetales, a Vaporeon, his new Flareon, a Dragonair, and a Lapras.

“Okay, one,” Lance replied, feigning offence, “Dragonair is a dragon-type, and two, water and ice type Pokemon are my aesthetic, Keith!” Lance whined.

“I’m surprised you even beat the Elite Four,” Keith remarked.

“Okay, to be honest though, my Primarina owned all their asses,” Lance quipped as his avatar accessed a nearby computer at the Pokémon centre. “Still, I had a different team when I was battling them. You can swap out Pokémon in your party, you know? Anyway, I just got this Lapras and the Dratini, so let me level grind my Pokémon in peace!” He huffed and lifted his nose into the air haughtily, chiming, “Post-game, my strategy is more ‘be stronger than my opponents,’ and my Primarina creams everybody… who’s not a legendary… or Pidge. She likes grass and electric types.”
“Isn’t grass type kinda useless?” Keith remarked. Maybe they wouldn’t be useless when up against water types like Lance’s party, but they never stood a chance when they were against Keith’s party… which, in reflection, was mostly fire-types. Then again, the last time he played a Pokémon game was probably fourth gen. Maybe the game changed; maybe grass type Pokémon were pretty useful nowadays.

He seriously doubted it though. Grass-type would always suck.

Lance snorted. “In general, yeah, maybe, but Pidge has an agenda against me,” he responded as he continued substituting the members of his team to make up for each Pokémon’s weaknesses. “Then again, she has no mercy at all against other players.”

“Gotta be the very best,” Keith stated, deadpan.

Lance snorted, but Keith couldn’t help but focus on how his eyes crinkled with laughter. Keith held his breath, captivated by the sparkle of mirth in Lance’s eyes, and tried to maintain his composure when all he wanted to do was pull Lance in for a kiss. “That no one ever was,” Lance sang.

Keith returned his smirk, and Lance’s attention went back to his 3DS. However, before he could do anything else in-game, the washing machine’s timer went off. Lance quickly saved what little progress he made and stowed away his 3DS into his satchel. Keith followed after him, helping Lance claim a dryer for their clothes before stuffing it with their wet laundry. Lance inserted the coins, adjusted the settings, and then started the machine. He returned to their bench, flipping his 3DS back open to resume the game, and went into the Pokémon League to demonstrate exactly how his Primarina could decimate the Elite Four.

Keith was content to watch Lance face challenge after challenge (or lack thereof since Lance knocked out every Pokémon in one or two turns) until the timer for the dryer went off. Lance closed his game, stowing it away into his satchel once more, before picking up his laundry bag and heading over to the dryer. Together, they threw the clothes into the laundry bag, leaving it to be sorted at home, and returned to Lance’s apartment down the block, where Lance promptly threw their laundry onto his futon.

Groaning, Keith climbed onto the futon, throwing off his borrowed snapback and crossing his legs in a lotus position, and reached for the first shirt to fold. Azura leapt onto the futon, curling into a ball on top of the warm clothes, and Keith groaned even louder. Lance snorted and rolled his eyes. “A little bit of cat hair isn’t going to ruin your—oh, wait, you only have black shirts,” he teased. “What a pity.”

“I’m going to steal your lint roller,” Keith warned, a smile tugging at his lips.

“You can sure as hell try!” Lance retorted, sitting opposite of Keith and reaching for another shirt to fold.

Lance pulled out his phone, putting on some music on shuffle to listen to while they worked, and occasionally skipped whatever classical song popped up. It had been a week since the audition, Keith recalled, and Lance still wasn’t entirely confident in his performance. He tended to avoid classical music recently—not that Keith could blame him.

Likewise, it had been a week since the Blade held their last meeting, and it had been a week since they were all given their latest assignments and a week since they last heard any news regarding the Galra and Druid Pharmaceuticals. Lance had assured him that it was normal to wait a couple of days—sometimes even a couple of weeks or months—before they had gotten anything new.
It had also been a week since he had last heard from Shiro. From what they’ve heard from Hunk, it had only been three days since the Garrison has put up a missing persons report for Keith Kogane. “It’s basically an undercover wanted poster,” Hunk had told the two of them. “You guys really ought to be careful now.”

“Do you think your family saw it?” Keith had asked Lance immediately.

“My mom’s not very connected to the Internet,” Lance told Keith. “It looks like they’ve spread it on their Twitter and Facebook accounts, and my mom doesn’t use either. Enrique only uses YouTube to watch do-it-yourself videos, and Estefania mostly uses it to watch Netflix or make-up and hair tutorials. They both have Facebook to catch up with their friends, but the chances that they’ve seen it are still rather slim. Even if they have seen it, they probably only know you by name—just Keith, Lance’s new roommate—and not by identity. The one you have to worry about is Ana since she knows your face.”

“And the chances that she’s seen it?” Keith had inquired.

“Small,” Lance had answered. “Only old people follow the MCPD’s Facebook or Twitter account. Ana uses Twitter and Instagram to follow her k-pop boy bands plus her closest friends, and she barely goes on Facebook.” His expression had turned grim, however. “You just need to worry about signal boosts, really. They’re lumping your missing persons report with a group of others so not to look suspicious. Rather than worrying about my family, it’s more of a concern whether people on the streets recognise you.”

“And if someone reports me,” Keith had realised, “it’s also a matter of who gets to me first—the Garrison or the Alliance.”

Lance had given Keith a wry smile. “If they get to you at all, you mean,” Lance had said, trying for optimism. “For now, you should stay indoors so that nobody can see you.”

Of course, Keith had gotten antsy on occasion for being holed up in Lance’s apartment that he was willing to accompany Lance to do laundry just to get out.

Eventually, they managed to finish and put away all of the folded clothes. While Lance busied himself with dinner preparations—simple fettuccine Alfredo with chorizo replacing Italian sausage—Keith began to browse the Internet on the phone he borrowed from Asako-obasan.

Austin Yan.

No matter how many times he searched his father’s name, the search results would never change. Nothing new would ever crop up because everything that the world knew about his father was already there. His obituary, the articles about his death, the articles that he had written, were all there for Keith to access. Honestly, Keith didn’t know where to start with all this information because everything he found led to more questions. It was a chance to learn more about his father, but… in the end, what did he gain from this knowledge?

He had been hoping to learn more about himself in the process, but nothing… nothing really changed. His father was dead, and he was still a missing piece in Keith’s life. All he had now was a name to call that missing puzzle piece. The only physical remnant that he had of his father was lost with his mother.

From the kitchenette, as Lance was wrapping up dinner preparations, he had begun to hum a song some time ago before switching into singing.
“Come take a walk on the wild side
Let me kiss you hard in the pouring rain
You like your boys insane…
Choose your last words, this is the last time
‘Cause you and I… we were born to die.”

Keith closed his eyes, trying to relax, and tuned into the sound of Lance’s voice.

“What are you doing?”

Keith startled, tossing his aunt’s phone into the air with a scream, and whipped around to come face-to-face with Lance’s shit-eating grin and raised eyebrow. God, Keith wanted to wipe that smirk off Lance’s lips so damn badly, but for now he’d have to settle with a glare. “Was that really necessary?” Keith snapped.

Lance rolled his eyes. “Don’t get your panties into a twist,” he responded with a casual shrug of his shoulders. “You’re usually pretty sharp, samurai.” That shouldn’t have taken you by surprise was left unsaid. His close-lipped smile faltered, worry creasing his brows, before he asked, “Seriously, what’s wrong, Keith?”

God, he hated making Lance worry. For a moment, he wanted to lean forward, to close the distance between them. He wanted to kiss Lance, to hold him, to comfort him and assure him that everything was all right, but Keith couldn’t. He couldn’t push his luck. “Nothing,” Keith responded, but Lance wouldn’t have any of that. Lance moved forward, brushing his shoulder against Keith as he picked up the phone from where Keith had dropped it earlier. Squeezing his eyes shut, Keith braced himself for the confrontation.

“Who’s Austin Yan?”

Keith hesitated before he answered, “My father.”

Lance’s eyes widened, and a second later, he joined Keith on the futon. “No kidding…” he muttered, scrolling through the search results. “He’s a reporter.”

“He was,” Keith reminded. “He’s dead. He’s been dead before I was even born remember? I… I never knew him.”

“A reporter killed by the Galra,” Lance said, reciting one of the headlines of the online articles. He laughed bitterly, but none of his amusement shone in his eyes. “How funny.” It wasn’t, “My dad was killed by the Galra, too. I guess we’re more alike than we thought.”

Keith breathed in sharply through his nose. “I guess so,” he mumbled.

Lance pursed his lips, setting down the phone to look Keith in the eye. “Are you going to be okay?” he asked.

“I kinda have to be,” Keith responded.

“But it’s fine if you’re not,” Lance told him, taking his hands and gripping them lightly to offer some comfort. He gave Keith a small smile. “Superpowers or not, you’re only human.” Before Keith could say anything in response, Lance squeezed his hands tightly one last time before slipping back off the futon, returning to the kitchenette. “Anyway, dinner’s ready,” Lance announced as he plated the pasta. He strolled back to the futon, handing Keith a plate with a fork, before switching on the TV.

The logo for *Legendary Defenders* flashed on the screen. Recently, they’ve only been watching to
keep tabs on where the Paladins were heading next to learn which areas to avoid. The two of them watched as the helicopter circled around a business strip downtown, following two runaway cars. Close on their tail was the heroine Crystallis, chasing them on a levitating piece of crystal, while Titania and White Tiger were close behind in an Alliance cruiser. Black Sky easily caught up to the cruiser, soaring on a gust of wind, before bypassing the cruiser entirely and overtaking Crystallis as well.

They had been watching VBC’s channel almost religiously as of late, trying to keep up with what the Alliance was planning.

The moment he approached the getaway cars, one of the windows rolled down, and someone started to open fire on the Paladin. Keith’s grip on his silverware tightened, his jaw clenching, as he fought the urge to scream out Shiro’s name, warning him to be careful.

Before the bullets could even reach Black Sky, Crystallis summoned a shield of crystal from the ground, and the bullets penetrated the crystal sheet instead. Black Sky directed a current to knock the escapees off course while Crystallis rolled onto the ground, slamming her fists into the road and raising four crystal walls to trap the criminals.

“People are getting bolder,” Lance murmured as he twirled pasta around his fork. “I wonder if it has anything to do with the Galra.”

An ear-shattering crash had them jumping from their seats on the futon, and they watched with wide eyes and gaping mouths as a man made of stone broke through the crystal walls of the criminals’ temporary prison.

“I think it has something to do with the Galra,” Keith responded.

“You don’t say…”

The situation was hardly under control. White Tiger managed to neutralise the other targets with electric shocks to stun them into submission, but the stone golem was another problem on its own. It kept breaking out of Crystallis’ prisons, and White Tiger’s electricity had no effect on it. Titania couldn’t damage it effectively with her staff. Everyone was trying to stall it while Black Sky tried to erode its stone armour.

“They need to get the joints,” Lance muttered. Keith looked over in Lance’s direction, taking notice of his partner’s fingers—twisting as though they were pulling an invisible trigger. “If they can damage the joints, it’ll crumble. There wouldn’t be anything holding it up.”

It seemed as though they had gotten that idea a few minutes later. Crystal crawled up the golem’s legs, trapping it in place momentarily, and Crystallis formed two crystal spears in her hands. Simultaneously, she and Titania forced them through the golem’s kneecaps. Unable to stand upright, it collapsed to the ground as Black Sky’s wind continually weathered away its armour.

Keith and Lance watched as the police arrived to arrest the criminals—bank robbers, apparently—while slowly eating their pasta. The video feed then transitioned into a small box, the focus shifting to the news anchors. As they spoke, Keith and Lance polished off the last of the dinner.

“It looks like they’re doing perfectly fine without me,” Keith commented. It made sense; Keith had only been their teammate for two years—not ten like Sven.

When Lance turned his eyes onto him—stormy oceanic blue toiled with worry—Keith gave him a small smile and said, “Besides, I have a new team now.”
“And a damn good one at that,” Lance responded, trying to match Keith’s smile, but it sounded more like he was trying to persuade himself than to comfort Keith.

“It’ll be okay,” Keith declared, mustering all the confidence he had to overpower any shadow of doubt lingering in his head. “We just have to believe that it’ll be okay. There’s no other choice.”

“You’re right,” Lance responded. “We don’t have much of a choice. We can’t fail.” The smile on his lips stretched wider ever so slightly. “I wonder if it’s a bad thing that I’m grateful to have you here with me… I mean, you went through so much shit, and maybe I’m a little selfish for saying this, but —but… Seriously, you being here makes—it makes me feel a little bit better, a little less lonely… you know?”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Keith protested. “There’s nothing wrong with that at all! Yeah, it was rough getting here, but I’d do that all over again.” If it means that I’ll end up here with you.

Keith was sure that his cheeks were stained red given how warm they were. Still, he pressed on, intent on making sure that Lance knew that he wasn’t being selfish, that this wasn’t something Keith regretted in the slightest. “Shiro and I can make up in the future. Right now, I have to own up to my decisions; you’ve said something like that before. I’m not going to let you down, and I’m not going to let the Blade down. Not when we’ve gotten this far. If it means that I have to sacrifice my career as a Paladin, then fine, and if it means that I remain a fugitive, then that’s also fine. What matters is stopping the Galra.” And your happiness.

Because Lance deserves the world.

Lance looked like he wanted to cry, and Keith didn’t know what to do when he was confronted with those glassy oceanic blue eyes. Any minute now, it could shatter, and as breathtaking as it was to watch those beautiful crystalline drops roll down Lance’s bronzed cheeks, Keith hated every moment of it because Lance was so obviously disheartened.

But then Lance’s phone vibrated, just as easily breaking the tension in the air. Lance plucked it off where he had left it on the futon, checking his notifications. His brow furrowed, and he turned the screen so that Keith could read it, too.

(Today – 4:23 PM)

Bluebird: GM has a new quest for you and the samurai.

Bluebird: It’s an unexplored dungeon, so come prepared.

“Bluebird?” Keith inquired.

“Nyma,” Lance answered. “She almost always wears blue,” he clarified. “Anyway, Pidge must be under lock down still.”

“Do you think we’ll be okay without Pidge?” Keith asked, warily eyeing the sent messages. It wasn’t like he didn’t trust Nyma when it came to their safety; he just didn’t like Nyma.

“I’ve worked with Nyma on smaller missions before Pidge and I were permanently a team,” Lance answered. “I’m pretty sure with all that’s going on that Nyma won’t be our spotter though. They probably found a way to connect us with Pidge, but she couldn’t risk sending us the usual alerts—not when there’s someone else who can do it.”

“And it’s a new dungeon,” Keith commented, “which means… which means they want us to break into some place.”
Lance nodded. “I hope you’re willing to add breaking and entering on your record, Samurai,” he mused, a bitter smile curving his lips.

“I already have arson, escaping arrest, and impeding investigation on my record,” Keith retorted, trying to lift the heavy mood. “Breaking and entering is child’s play.”

Scoffing, Lance rolled his eyes and took Keith’s plate before sashaying to the kitchenette to do the dishes. “Somehow, this criminal managed to charm my poor mother and fool her into thinking that he’s a sweetheart in need of a haircut,” he mused.

“Pot,” Keith retorted, smiling even more widely than before, “meet kettle.”

Lance sniffed. “Please,” he quipped, “I’m Mami’s favourite.”

“That can’t be right!” Keith protested. “Sendak can’t possibly—”

“My information isn’t faulty. Sendak’s real identity is a man named Nathaniel Dakota Seaton, a man employed at Imperial Tech,” Nyma snapped, “and he’s pretty high up in the company pyramid. Makes you wonder what a high middle-class businessman is doing with gangsters, doesn’t it? It’s not impossible for Imperial Tech to have some kind of connection to the Galra; after all, Druid’s is a pharmaceutical company that’s like fifty years old. People trust Druid’s, yet they obviously have ties to the Galra! It’s not difficult to imagine that Imperial Tech is the same way!”

“It would actually make sense,” Rolo continued, “considering that they produce firearms and military weapons. They have influence over the Garrison and, judging by your reaction, maybe even the Alliance to some extent. They possess the kind of power that the Galra admire.”

“There’s a chance that the Garrison has already been corrupted,” Thace said. “I’m sure you have already suspected it. It wouldn’t be far-fetched to believe that Imperial Tech is to be infected by Galra either.”

“Arrested by the Garrison for arson,” Nyma recounted, “and holed up there. Even after you registered as a Super, you were held under observation in a detention centre until your transfer into the Alliance. It was all in the files Pidge had stolen from she was caught.” Her eyes softened for a moment as though she felt an inkling of sympathy for Keith. It couldn’t be; she hated him just as much as he hated her. “You don’t have to deny it.”

“I’m not!” Keith hissed. “It’s just—it’s…” It’s fucked up, he wanted to say. It’s fucked up because they’re Shiro’s sponsors, too. Somebody as popular as Black Sky would have multiple sponsors, and while their contributions didn’t quite measure up to Kogane Industries, they still covered the cost for his hero-suit and his medical expenses. Shiro… probably didn’t even know.

So maybe it did make sense.

If they wanted influence, then they would endorse the one of the most popular Paladins. They would make dealings with the Garrison. They would try to suck up to the Alliance by inviting President Alfor and his family to dinners. If they wanted to spread their powers, then they would try stealing engineers from other companies—like Kogane Industries.

“Hey,” Lance called out to him, coaxing Keith out of his muddled thoughts, bumping his shoulder into Keith’s, “this is our job. We’re going to get to the bottom of this.”

“Reyes is right,” Kolivan declared. “This time, you’re going to infiltrate Imperial Tech’s headquarters in search of incriminating evidence that they are truly aligned with the Galra. You have
two days to prepare. The mission will commence at midnight.”

“What about Pidge?” Lance inquired. “Isn’t the Garrison keeping an eye on her? Since she broke past their firewall, I’m assuming that means that her online activities are being monitored, too.”

“Don’t worry your pretty little head about that,” Nyma replied. “We found a way to connect her to Empire, so while they’re keeping watch on her personal network, they won’t have a clue of what’s happening on ours. Also…” Nyma reached below the bar counter, retrieving a black box with only a single switch, “She built something for you.”

“What is it?” Keith asked as he swiped it off the counter, turning it around in his hands.

“That’s going to be your diversion,” Rolo explained. “I don’t get all the fancy-schmancy jargon she used to describe it, but it’s some kinda remote bomb once activated.” His lips cracked into a twisted smile. “Figured you’d probably need a couple more tricks under your sleeve if you’re going up against big ol’ Imperial Tech.”

“But why a bomb?” Keith inquired, handing it over for Lance to inspect.

“You don’t sound very impressed,” Lance commented.

“Well,” Keith responded, “I basically blow things up on a daily basis back when I was a Paladin.”

Lance snorted and rolled his eyes. “Cool your jets, hotshot,” he teased. Waving the black box in front of Keith’s face, he grinned and said, “It’s a remote bomb, right? Which means you don’t have to be in two places at once and we don’t have to be separated. Less hazardous that way, no?”

Keith hummed in agreement. Lance had a point. As much as he trusted Lance to hold his own in a fight, they would be safer together. “All right, let’s get started then.”

Chapter End Notes

The title and lyrics are taken/adapted from Lana Del Ray’s "Born to Die."

I wanted to mirror Keith’s discovery of self in VLD canon when he discovers his other, more alien heritage. Here, there’s a lot of mystery behind Keith’s parents mostly because it would seem that neither his grandfather nor his aunt speaks about them often, and now that he’s met Lance and the Blade, he’s discovered all kinds of secrets about his mother at the very least.

As far as I know, to this date, Keith’s ethnicity is unconfirmed in VLD, but the predominant headcanons appear to be Korean (because of his voice actor, I’m assuming) and Japanese (because of GoLions). So, here, in homage to Keith being half-Galra in VLD canon, OLaHC!Keith is also biracial, similar to the incarnation of Keith from GoLions. However, where Keith was half-Japanese and half-Chinese because his father and mother were Japanese and Chinese respectively in GoLions, OLaHC!Keith is Japanese on his mother’s side, and rather than mainland Chinese, Keith’s father is Taiwanese. Keith took his mother’s last name because she never married his father.

I also wanted to allude a little bit to Keith’s VA, too. Yeun is an alternate transcription of the last name Yeon/Yun (hangul: ᵀᵉᵉⁿ), which may correspond to the Han character 燕,
meaning “[barn] swallow,” and these birds are apparently excellent flyers. (It fits Keith, no?) Anyway, Yan (燕) is a Chinese last name with origins as far back as Ancient China.

In Japanese, it is both a given name and a surname, both of which are pronounced as Tsubame. However, the surname can also be pronounced as En. Another interesting thing to note is, when written as 膚脂 (romaji: enji), it means “rouge” or “a deep red pigment” in Japanese. (Also very fitting, lol.)

One last thing before I let you go: Keith’s father’s name (Austin) refers to the capital of Texas because Texan Keith was also pretty popular.

(sorry for the information dump, I just really love linguistics!)

Find me on tumblr || twitter!
Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry I've been dead for months. I've just been really busy irl, and I'm not really sure when things will slow down. I didn't reply to everyone's comments, but I read them all. I'm still really happy that people are still enjoying this fic asdfjkhijkl and I'm sorry for worrying my readers! Thank you for your support!

For now, have this update?

Title and lyrics taken from Beyoncé's "Halo."

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Sapphire?” Pidge’s voice inquired, distorted by static.

“I’m ready,” Lance replied as he pulled his goggles down from the crown of his head. He blinked when the feed of information began to flicker across the lenses and then adjusted the mask bandana around his neck, securing it to cover everything below his nose. Flipping his hood over his head, he glanced over towards Keith, who was hiding Obsidian from plain view.

“Ruby?”

“Ready,” Keith answered as he stepped away from his bike.

“Okay, everyone is online. Connection is both secure and stable. Proceed to the starting point.”

Lance looked up the rectangular building—all twenty-one metres of concrete and glass—and blanched. Suddenly, the plans from last night seemed more daunting now that they were about to execute it. “Why couldn’t you have powers of flight instead?” Lance whined as they slipped deeper into the back alleys. He stepped onto the fire escape of a neighbouring building and started to climb up the metal staircase with Keith close on his heels.

“I mean, I could try to fly us up there,” Keith replied, flames sparking in the palm of his hand, “but it probably wouldn’t be safe. You’re going to have to hold on really tight and never let go.”

Lance snorted. “Cheeky, aren’t you?”

Pidge groaned. “Stop flirting and start moving!” she griped. “Anyway, I’ve taken control of the security system. There should be an entrance on the rooftop. You’re going to have to make the jump from that building onto Imperial Tech’s. No falling. Ulaz has an emergency call at the hospital, so there’s nobody on standby to put you back together.”

“Good to know,” Lance responded. He sent a grin Keith’s way, egging him on, if only for his own bravado. “You backin’ down, Ruby?”

“Hell no!” Keith hissed through his teeth. “Let’s go!”

Before they could race to the top, Pidge screeched into the comms, “Quietly, you idiots!”
Deflating, Lance sighed and tiptoed up the steps with Keith behind him. Upon reaching the final level, they collapsed onto the floor, huffing and panting, falling into a moment of reprieve. It felt as though hours had passed before they had to force themselves to get back to work—or risk getting caught trespassing—with burning lungs and aching calves and feet. Lance gauged the distance to the roof of the building, refusing to look down to the ground. He gripped the side of the wall, latching onto the protruding bricks, and began to climb upward.

“Be careful,” he heard Keith whisper.

“Hey, I’m always careful, remember?” Lance retorted, trying to maintain a light-hearted mood.

He stretched for another ledge, continuing to carry himself upwards, and hissed a curse through his teeth when he felt his left hand slip, instinctively reaching for another perch.

“Lan—”

“I’m fine,” Lance reassured Keith immediately. “That one was crooked, so watch out.”

Continuing his upward climb, Lance gripped onto the edge of the wall and hauled himself over the rooftop. He peered over the edge, stubbornly refusing to look down at the long, long fall that would await them if they failed, and gestured for Keith to follow him. When Keith reached the edge of the rooftop, Lance held out a hand for Keith to grasp. Lance dug his heels into the concrete slabs of the roof and hauled Keith over the rooftop with a quiet grunt. After Keith regained his footing, Lance calculated the distance to Imperial Tech’s rooftop.

“I’ve lost visual,” Pidge warned.

“Not like you can back me up here anyway,” Lance remarked. “It’s fine.”

It was only one and a half metres. Lance could make the jump if he got a running start.

“You think you can do it?” Keith inquired.

Lance gave him another haughty smirk, feigning the confidence that he needed. “You scared? I’m surprised, hothead,” Lance taunted. “You’re usually rushing head first into these kinds of things. People know you for your lack of impulse control.”

Keith scowled, and for a second, Lance wondered if he had pushed too far. “I’m not scared for me,” Keith hissed. “I’m scared for you.”

That shouldn’t have been touching, Lance reflected, but his heart still fluttered and twisted within his chest. The smirk on his lips stretched into a goofy smile, and the moment Lance felt his cheeks warm, he pivoted on his heel and stared adamantly at the gap between the buildings.

“It’ll be like jumping over Pidge,” Lance stated. “It’ll be fine. Just watch me.”

“Sapphire,” Pidge protested, “what are you—”

Before his doubts could get the better of him, Lance backed away from the edge and then sprinted towards it. He leapt onto the ledge with his right foot as though it was a mere stepping stone (briefly hearing someone cry “Lance!”) and launched himself over the gap between the two buildings. For a second, he was airborne, and it was exhilarating.

“—doing?”
Lance landed on his left foot first in a low crouch. His glove covered palms smacked and scraped against the new surface as he braced himself for impact. Once he steadied himself, Lance released a breath he didn’t know that he had been holding, dragging it out between his gritted teeth. He collapsed onto his ass, laughing quietly, as relief and adrenaline surged through his veins, heart pounding loudly in his eardrums.

Lance pushed himself back onto his feet, staggering for a few seconds, and waved to Keith from the other side.

“Scared?” Lance taunted yet again, and his heart soared when he saw Keith return his smile.

“With you trying to catch me,” Keith replied, his voice loud and crisp and clear and just as teasing, “terrified.”

Lance laughed. “Shove it, samurai,” he quipped, “and get moving.” He stepped back to give Keith some space to land, keeping a steady watch as Keith mimicked his earlier actions. Keith was faster, smaller, and maybe he would fly even farther than Lance. If Lance had stuck the landing, Keith undoubtedly would be able to land more gracefully, and as Keith propelled himself across the gap—a shadowy figure, small and lithe and fierce—Lance could only gape in open wonder.

As expected, Keith’s landing was flawless in every single way.

“Like that?” Keith questioned, tilting his head. His eyes gleamed in the surrounding darkness, and a confident smirk carved his lips into a half-smile. Lance instinctively averted his gaze, pursing his lips together to refrain from smiling back at Keith, but there was probably no point in doing so. The warmth pooling in his core spread to his chest, creeping up the back of his neck and to his cheeks, staining them a deep red that surely gave his expression away to Keith.

“I guess you did all right,” Lance mumbled.

“There’s a hatch that leads down to the last floor,” Pidge reminded, and the spell broke, snapping the two of them back to reality.

“It’s kinda hard to miss,” Lance commented as he stalked towards the only structure on the rooftop, a concrete crate-like formation that jutted from the floor. Keith followed him, close on his heels, and stood watch as Lance jiggled the handles. “It’s locked.”

“I got it,” Pidge stated, typing away on her keyboard. Lance was tempted to close his eyes, simply to listen to the rhythmic clicks of her keyboard, to try to relax. However, in a matter of seconds, Lance could hear the whirring of mechanical gears from the other side of the hatch before a digital beep sounded. “It’s open. You’re clear to proceed. There’s nobody on the other side.”

“Thanks, Emerald,” Lance responded. “Follow my lead, Ruby.”

“I can watch myself,” Keith grumbled before Lance pulled open the hatch.

“Relax, hothead,” Lance teased, smirking. “I didn’t mean that you can’t. I just meant for you to watch my back, comprende?” He tossed a glance over his shoulder, catching how Keith’s cheeks reddened, delight thrumming in his chest, before he lowered himself onto the ladder bolted to the wall and climbed down.

The two of them ignored the gagging noises Pidge made, and Keith followed after him, continuing their mission. Soon, they found themselves in an empty corridor. Before they were spotted, Lance tugged Keith by the arm, pulling him to the wall and pressing them close against the wall at the nearest corner.
“Keep moving,” Pidge urged. “There’s one guard making rounds on this corridor, and I think he’s just about to come from behind you. Turn and head down that hall. There should be a staircase to the left of the upcoming fork. You’re going to have to go down. Our goal is on the fifth floor.”

“So two floors down,” Lance mumbled. He turned to Keith, jerking his thumb in the direction in which he was about to move, and Keith nodded his agreement. Lance slipped around the corner, Keith lingering after him, and paced down the hall.

He kept an eye out for any possible guards and employees that Pidge might have missed, his ears attuned to pick up any disturbance in the silence of the corridors. He paused in the middle of a step when Pidge’s voice crackled through the static, declaring, “There’s an employee leaving their office in front of you. Hide in the supply closet to your right—unlocking in five… four… three… two… okay, enter.”

Keith immediately pushed open the door to the alleged supply closet after the keypad beside it beeped green. He pulled Lance in by the wrist, closing the door behind them and engulfing the two of them in darkness.

“Emerald, do you see anything?” Keith asked.

“Quiet,” Pidge demanded. “He’s getting close to your location; let’s pray that he’s not looking for some extra computer paper.”

At the mention of a prayer, a familiar verse crossed Lance’s mind, and he bit down on his tongue to refrain from uttering the line, Ten piedad de mí, oh Dios.

“He’s coming,” Pidge announced.

Lance held his breath, and he felt Keith tense close to him—so fucking close—with every muscle in his body taut. Pursing his lips, he waited as Pidge chanted, “Hold your position… hold… hold…” It was like a calming mantra that was meant to root him in place. Lance didn’t dare move a single inch. He stiffened, latching onto Keith’s wrist instinctively, when he heard a set of footsteps pass the door. It wasn’t soundproof. Of course, it wasn’t, Lance thought. It was a fucking supply closet.

He could hear the Imperial Tech employee muttering something—nothing too clearly that Lance could make out into specific words—but he did catch the faintest hints of a complaint from the tone in itself. He hoped that Pidge might have it on recording to amplify and study later if it was something important.

“He’s several feet away from the closet,” Pidge notified them. “Don’t move just yet. He’s going into another room… right… now. Get out of there! I can’t tell when he’s going to be done and heading back, so you have to get to those stairs right now.”

The lock clicked, and Keith pulled open the door, dragging Lance behind him as they hurried towards the stairs, trying not to draw attention by the rapid pacing of their footsteps.

They scrambled down two flights of stairs before Pidge directed them to an empty computer room. “Rest here for a bit,” she told them. “I’ll reroute you to Sendak’s office. There’s a lot more traffic in these halls.”

“Will anyone come here?” Keith asked. “Is this room even in use?”

“It used to be a break room, according to my blueprints,” Pidge informed, “but now they’re renovating it to be some new department that focuses on… manufacturing some new military weapon, I think. There hasn’t been much information released about it—not even leaks.”
“Surprising,” Lance commented, “given how much attention this company gets.”

Keith was quiet for a moment, and Lance turned to look at him with concern stirring uncomfortably underneath his skin. Just as Lance was about to ask what was bugging Keith, Keith explained, “I overheard Shiro speaking with my aunt. It looks like President Zacharias is trying to buy off her engineers.”

Lance’s brows furrowed, confusion muddling his mind. “Kogane Industries is focused on cars though. I don’t see why Imperial Tech would need automotive engineers.”

“Now that you’ve mentioned it,” Pidge commented, “I’ve heard of engineers switching over to Imperial Tech, saying that defence is the area you’d want to be in to make big money—and not from automotive engineers either. Aerospace, civil, chemical… every kind of engineering field available, basically.”

“Aren’t monopolies illegal though?” Lance questioned.

“Do you think they care?” Keith shot back. “As long as they make more than enough profit, they can afford some losses.”

Lance shrugged. He supposed that Keith had a point. Plus, considering that Keith was the nephew of a wealthy CEO, he might have had more dealings with scummy businessmen and women within a week than Lance ever had in his life.

“It doesn’t even matter,” Pidge said, “since we’re going to blow up this room anyway.”

“What if it contains important information?” Keith asked.

“They wouldn’t have them on these computers alone,” Pidge replied. “We’ll sample some data just in case, but it’ll take a while to get through all of these computers. If you hook up my device, then I could try to see if they have a network that shares their data—or some kind of cloud service.”

Lance selected the most neatly organised desk. “Looks like this is the type of employee who gets their shit done,” he stated. He powered on the computer and inserted Pidge’s USB, watching as her software infected the computer and began to download all the information they could extract. Once it was completed, he ejected the device with Pidge’s approval.

“You’ve got my box of magic tricks, right?” Pidge asked the two of them.

Lance turned to Keith, who reached into the pocket of his black motorcycle jacket and fished out the bomb in question. “Got it,” Keith told her. “What do you need with it?”

“You’re going to plant that where it’ll cause the most damage,” Pidge informed. “Books, papers, computers, everything has to go—or as much of it as possible.”

Frowning, Keith said, “If we don’t find anything, this is just pointless destruction of property.”

“Trust me,” Pidge assured. “That definitely wasn’t nothing, and this isn’t pointless.”

“Fine,” he acquiesced. Keith ducted underneath a desk closest to the bookshelves and cabinets, planting the box on top of a computer tower. “All right, that’s done,” he told her.

“Flip the switch, and it’ll be waiting for my signal to detonate,” Pidge stated.

It was supposed to be a diversion, Lance realised, to get people evacuated from the building and to
congregate them somewhere else. That way, they had more access to other sections of the floor, such as Sendak’s office. It wasn’t the first time he and Pidge had to rely on such methods, but it was never any less risky even with the more experience they’ve garnered. This time, it was even more of a volatile situation, considering that Imperial Tech might not even be connected with the Galra. Hell, there was a chance that they could possibly be labelled as terrorists simply because of the explosion.

All the more reason not to get caught then.

Besides, Lance thought, trying to convince himself, Pidge sounded confident.

“I’ve got your path, so listen carefully and don’t get lost! You hear me?” Pidge demanded.

“Loud and clear,” Lance replied. He inched closer to the door, resting his hand on the handle, and waited for Pidge’s signal. Keith crept away from where he had planted the bomb and inched closer to Lance. “Ready when you are, Emerald,” he notified.

“Turn right immediately,” Pidge instructed, “and head straight down the hall.”

Adhering to Pidge’s directions, they crept along the walls, slipping from and into shadows, weaving between pillars, ducking behind furniture and elaborate decor, to avoid capture. “Room 538,” Pidge stated. “That’s where you’ll find Sendak.”

Lance peered around the corner, narrowing his eyes at the glaring metallic plaque across from him. “Nathaniel D. Seaton,” Lance read aloud. “Looks like we’ve reached our destination.”

“Nobody’s coming your way,” Pidge informed, “but it’s best to stay hidden.”

“Kinda hard when most everything is out in the open here,” Lance mumbled. There was a lobby in front of Sendak’s office, consisting only of leather couches and armchairs surrounding a glass coffee table. It didn’t leave very many places for them to hide.

Lance turned to Keith, gesturing for him to stay put, before he hid behind one of the two enormous potted plants positioned in front of Sendak’s office doors. Once he settled behind one of the plants, he motioned for Keith to approach and join him in his less than perfect hiding spot. Lance pressed his ear against the wall, frowning when he couldn’t hear much. “Soundproof.”

“He’s on the phone,” Pidge supplied. “I’m wiretapping him and recording his conversation as we speak. Right after he’s done, we’re going to bust in, steal some information from his company and personal computers, and then we’re going to bust out—got it?”

“Roger,” Lance responded, his muscles tense and ready to burst through the doors.

“Okay… it looks like he’s almost done,” Pidge stated. “All right, he hung up. I’m going to detonate the bomb in three…” Lance braced himself against the wall, and he could feel Keith tensing beside him as well, preparing for the imminent explosion. “Two… One.”

Lance squeezed his eyes shut as the floor rumbled below his feet. Despite how thick the walls were, he could hear a deep, gravelly voice roar a curse. Cracking his eyes open just in time, Lance caught sight of a large man, dressed impeccably in a pressed suit, marching in the direction of the explosion. Lance hadn’t even noticed that he had been holding his breath until Pidge shrieked, “Move, move, move!”

Glancing over his shoulder just to make sure that Sendak was out of sight, Lance broke into a sprint, charging into the office with Keith hot at his heels. Keith closed the door behind him, bolting the lock shut, and Lance immediately took to the computer still powered on at the desk. At the same time,
Keith rifled through the desk drawers, making a small noise (“Aha!”) when he discovered a slim MacBook. Lance pulled out a SD card from his pockets, inserting it into the PC tower, and Keith popped an almost microscopic USB device into one of the ports of the MacBook. Both the computer and laptop monitors then lit up with a green animated Pidge, and a progress bar depicting how much information was being downloaded popped to the fore of the screen.

“This was… easier than anticipated,” Keith muttered.

“Don’t jinx us,” Lance chastised. “Knock on wood.”

Keith blinked. He glanced at the desk and hesitantly rapped his knuckles against the surface.

Pidge piped up, “Legendary Defenders just started airing. I’m ninety-seven percent sure that they’re starting to mobilise in response to the explosion.”

“What’s the other three percent?” Lance asked.

“That they’d be chasing a pickpocket in the shopping district,” Pidge replied. “Highly unlikely, but not impossible. I’m certain they’d give priority to the explosion at a major company though.”

Lance gave Keith a look of unadulterated exasperation, complete with a raised brow and a short huff of breath, as though to say, “This is somehow your fault.” Keith made a low noise at the back of his throat and threw his arms into the air, eye twitching, but Lance paid him no mind. Instead, he leaned closer to the computer monitor, squinting at the progress made, and pursed his lips. “Almost there,” he muttered. “We’re at seventy-five percent.”

“Well, Sendak isn’t coming back any time soon,” Pidge said. “He’s trying to sort out the mess. He looks like he’s about to kill one of his subordinates because he’s so… either pissed or stressed or both. I’m positive he’s going to check out the security footage soon, and I might have to deal with their programmers when that problem comes up. I won’t be able to help you guys out that much, so you’ll have to look for an escape on your own.”

“And the Alliance?” Lance questioned.

“The Knights and Paladins will take a while to get there since they’re coming from… various locations.”

“A Knight is likely to get here first,” Keith stated. “They’re usually patrolling the city—at least, the lower ranking ones are. The higher ranking Knights and the Paladins are typically given roles in the investigation department, so they’ll be heading from Headquarters. That’ll take even longer to get to Imperial Tech, considering that this building is at the edge of Monstro City.”

“All right,” Lance mumbled, “so we have a little bit of time. How much is left on the laptop?”

Keith narrowed his eyes at the screen. “Eighty-eight percent completed.”

“Ninety-four over here,” Lance supplied. “Emerald, can you scout us an escape route beforehand? We’ll figure out the rest.”

“On it,” Pidge responded. He counted the seconds that passed, keeping a close eye on the progress bars, as her fingers tapped away across her keyboard, the rapid click-clack, click-clack sounding all too much like gunfire. Keith had inched closer to the door, pressing his ear against it, as though to discern whether or not anyone was approaching. “There’s no use,” she said with a sigh. “All of the halls are clogged with people trying to get out of the building. It’d be almost impossible to sneak out.”
Keith circled the room before peering through the window blinds. “Sapphire,” Keith called out. Lance pried his eyes from the computer screens, and his heart squeezed tight at the smirk on Keith’s lips. “You wanna do something stupid?”

“How stupid?” Lance found himself asking.

“No stupid!” Pidge protested vehemently. “You two are not doing anything stupid!”

Keith jerked his thumb out the window, and Lance slipped from his position to join him at his side, ignoring Pidge’s fuming tantrum. He peered out the window before his eyes lowered. “Ah,” he said upon spotting the source of Keith’s suggestion.

“How about it?” Keith inquired.

“It’s not that stupid,” Lance replied, “but… pretty stupid.”


Two fully downloaded USB-shaped hacking devices later, Keith and Lance were jumping out of the fifth floor window to land on a suspended platform outside.

“Holy—f**k!” Lance hissed, clutching onto the ropes the moment he felt the weight distribution shift. He tried steadying the ropes, levelling the platform, and gulped once he saw the window cleaning supplies slide off and down five stories. Hopefully, they didn’t hit anyone. “So, uh,” Lance turned to Keith, eyes wide with the realisation that they couldn’t really backtrack any more, “you ever worked one of these things before?”

“A couple of times in the reparation department,” Keith answered. “This one is manually driven instead of motor, so we’ll have to do some work to get to the ground.”

Lance tried keeping his eyes focused solely on Keith, avoiding looking towards the ground, and struggled to grin. “I’m leaving it to you then.” If Keith happened to notice how he was gripping the bars of the cradle, then he didn’t say anything all the way to ground level.

The two of them hopped off the platform, ready to slip back into the alleys, before a gust of wind knocked them off balance. Keith’s hood fell off his head, and Lance struggled to keep his up as well. Dread sunk its claws deep into Lance as he turned his head.

He hated it when he was right sometimes.

Black Sky stood there, tall and intimidating, with another swirl of wind floating in an orb above the palm of his hand. “We got a report from one of the employees of Imperial Tech that there was an explosion in one of their newest labs. Were you behind that?”

Lance clenched his jaw, remaining silent, and he didn’t have to turn back to his partner to know that Keith adamantly refused to look at Shiro. It seemed that silence didn’t sit all that well with Black Sky, however, because—even though Lance couldn’t see Shiro’s expression behind the dark visor of his helmet—Black Sky’s voice deepened to a low growl. “Answer me, Keith!”

Keith didn’t reply immediately, and Lance wasn’t sure if it was because Keith didn’t know whether or not he ought to lie to his mentor and brother figure. The truth wasn’t all that great either; after all, they were definitely the ones who caused the explosion.

“Run,” Lance muttered so that only Keith could hear.
“Not without you,” Keith whispered vehemently.

Lance wanted to laugh, but he couldn’t—not in front of Black Sky. “Who said you were going without me?” It was a quiet taunt that he knew would bait Keith into action. “On three, all right? One… two… three!”

They bolted into the alley, but a force of wind had them toppling back. Keith hissed through his teeth and lashed out, trying to raise a wall of flames between them and Black Sky, but that was easily extinguished with another cold gust of wind. Keith’s expression fell the moment he realised they were outmatched, and Shiro seemed to relax upon noticing that Keith didn’t have the strength to fight against him.

Lance was waiting for that.

There was a single shot, silenced, fired, and that single shot was all it took to bring Black Sky to his knees, tranquillised.

“He’ll only be unconscious for half an hour,” Lance answered, “but considering genetics and body types and all, that’s only a rough estimate. He might wake up earlier, but it’s enough time for us to escape. Let’s get going.” He tugged Keith’s hand, leading them into the dark alleys, and the moment they were a far enough distance away from Shiro, Lance pulled Keith into his arms.

“I’m sorry for that,” he whispered.

Keith shook his head. “You did what you had to do.” He pulled out the small USB device from his pocket and said, “You were right all along… There are some things the Alliance can’t do. There was no way for them to get this information from Imperial Tech, but… we, on the other hand, we can make a difference.” Keith sighed. “At least, that’s what we have to believe.”

Lance smiled, trying to offer a bit of comfort. “You think you can keep going?”

“Of course,” Keith answered, nudging him in the ribs.

Lance turned up the volume of the TV, only for the remote to be snatched away. He hissed, pink marks lingering on his skin from his sister’s pointed manicured nails. He rubbed his hand, glaring at his older sister, as she turned down the volume of the TV. Estefania clicked her tongue. “There’s never anything happy on the news anymore,” she stated, frowning at the footage of an office burning inside the Imperial Tech headquarters. She threw the remote onto the futon beside Lance, Azura startling from the small impact it made with the cushion.

The headlines read, “TERRORIST ATTACK AT IMPERIAL TECH.”

“Investigations have confirmed that this was a deliberate attempt at sabotage,” the news anchor reported, “though both the Monstro City Police Department and the Voltron Alliance have yet to find any leads.”

Estefania shook her head and returned to what she was doing before Lance had tried cranking up the volume. “You have so many split ends!” Estefania exclaimed, voice slightly admonishing, as her fingers threaded through Keith’s hair. Keith shifted uncomfortably under her scrutiny but didn’t voice any complaint. After all, this was Lance’s older sister, and he had to leave a good impression—even if it was at his own expense. “When Mami said that your boyfriend needed a haircut, I didn’t think that he would need one this bad!”

“Not my boyfriend,” Lance remarked, voice flat and dismissive.
Keith ignored the small pang in his chest, trying to act as nonchalant as Lance was.

“Please,” Estefania retorted, rolling her dark brown eyes. “How can he be anything but your boyfriend? You only have one bed—that’s hardly even a bed, by the way—and, according to Ana, you’re even sharing your closet, cooking together, and doing chores together. You’re disgustingly domestic. Not even Gabe and I do that, and we’re getting married.”

“Since when can you trust Ana?” Lance quipped. “She tends to exaggerate.”

Estefania snorted. “She’s been more honest than you have been since Papi…”

Keith lowered his eyes to his lap, stiffening when he felt Estefania’s hands faltering with her words, and he stole a cursory glance towards Lance, heart stopping at how distraught and torn Lance appeared for only a second before he steadied himself.

Keith’s eyes flickered away from Lance’s expression, but they lingered on his hands. There was no way to mistake the way Lance’s grip tightened on his sheet music, the way his other hand stilled in the middle of stroking Azura’s coat, and the way his jaw clenched as anything but discomfort.

Estefania’s hands lowered from Keith’s head, and she reached over to squeeze Lance’s shoulder. Not a single apology was offered. Keith could guess why. What Estefania said was true; Lance had been hiding things from his entire family ever since his father’s death. She wasn’t sorry for saying it. Estefania just wanted her brother back—even if it meant forcing him to see the truth.

The thing was, Keith thought bitterly, Lance was already well aware of the facts.

“Did Mami really send you over here to give Keith a haircut though?” Lance asked, changing the topic, as he peered over the stacks of sheet music to look at his older sister. “I thought you wanted to go over songs to play at your wedding. When is your wedding anyway?”

“We’ve agreed to wait until Gabe gets a stable income and starts paying off his loans,” Estefania replied. “After he graduates, we’ll probably have it near Christmas or New Year’s. That way, his extended family can stick around for a little longer.”

“Isn’t Gabe going into his third year at grad school?” Lance remarked. “It’ll be around two years and a half before you can get married.”

Estefania huffed. “There’s no rush. We’ve been dating since high school,” she said. “Yeah, sure, we’re engaged now, so of course things are going to change bit by bit. For now, we’re going to rent out an apartment together this summer, see if we can cohabit, and test the waters. Mami’s okay with it. Besides, it’s good that we’re planning this two years in advance. I want everything to be—”

“Perfect,” Lance cut in, smiling. “I know. It’s your big day. I’ll make sure everything goes well on my end. Promise.”

“Well,” Estefania mused, continuing to comb her fingers through Keith’s hair, “you can start by persuading your boyfriend to get a haircut. You’re gonna be Lance’s plus-one, right? I mean, I already sent an invitation to Hunk, and he’s thinking about inviting a ‘lady friend’ from work. I don’t see who else you could take.”

With such an intimidating grin on her lips, there was no way that Keith could even say no to her. “Yeah, of course, I’ll go,” Keith managed to splutter out, appeasing Lance’s older sister quite easily.

Lance made an odd noise that sounded as though it had been wrangled out of his throat, and only then did Keith realise that he hadn’t protested the idea of being Lance’s boyfriend all this time. His
face burned, but Estefania paid it no mind. The only sign she had noticed—and of course she would notice—was how her smile had widened into a devious grin.

“Good,” she chirped. “I just want you boys to look your best for the photos. You’ve got a nice face, so let’s get some of that hair out of the way, yeah?” She brushed aside his bangs and patted his cheek. “Be sure to coordinate your outfits, okay? I was thinking of making the theme colour be red, white, and gold or whatever—make it all royal and fancy for the holidays. It’ll be super cute, so you two better look super cute. I reminded Louisa to do the same with Enrique because the poor dude doesn’t know how to dress himself.”

“I mean,” Lance mused, “Enrique is basically the definition of a grease monkey.”

“True.” She leaned against the back of the sofa and looked over Lance’s shoulder. “How’s it looking over there?”

“I mean, it’s all doable,” Lance replied. “I have most of what you want, and I know how to play almost all of them. The others I’ll have to look up, but I’ve heard them all before. They sound manageable; I’ll need some practice to really see how it’ll sound though. You sure you want me to play your wedding march though? Wouldn’t you want an actual professional playing?”

Estefania’s smile was so radiant to the point where it was blinding. Even Keith could feel the warmth spread to him even though it was meant for Lance. “Ah, now that’s where you’re wrong,” Estefania responded, grin lingering on her lips. “I do have a professional playing at my wedding, and he knows exactly how I like my music because he’s known me for all twenty years of his life.”

Keith watched, admiring the way Lance’s cheeks flushed red, as Lance ducked his head at the attention. “You’re so embarrassing,” Lance responded, his voice strangled.

“I’m your older sister,” Estefania retorted. “I’m supposed to embarrass you. At least I haven’t told Keith about the time you literally ate dirt at a baseball game! That’s Enrique’s job.”

Lance threw his head into his hands before flinging his arms out in a show of exasperation. “You just did!” he whined.

Estefania tutted and teased, “Not the details though!”

“Wait, you mean he literally ate dirt?” Keith inquired, curiosity piqued once he picked up the mischievous grin Estefania threw his way.

Lance instantly turned to him, fire in his oceanic blue eyes, and hissed, “You don’t really want to know—right, Keith?”

“Oh no,” Keith responded teasingly. A smirk matching Estefania’s curved his lips, further ruffling Lance’s feathers. “Now I really do want to know.”

Estefania threw her head back, caramel curls cascading over her small shoulders, and cackled. Out of the corner of his eye, Keith could spy Lance mouthing the words “You witch” (or possibly “You bitch”) in his sister’s direction. She didn’t take any offence to it, nor did she call Lance out for the insult. In fact, she was positively beaming. She leaned against the back of the sofa and said, “You two better not break up before the wedding. I really like this one, Lance. He’s a keeper.”

Lance opened his mouth just as Estefania turned her attention away from her little brother, and from the expression he wore, Keith knew that a protest was ready on the tip of Lance’s tongue. Keith’s heart fell as he realised that Lance might try to correct his sister about their relationship status yet again—not that there even was a relationship, probably—but then the protest Lance prepared died.
He gave Keith a lingering glance, eyes averting after making direct contact.

Before the awkward tension could settle between the two of them, Estefania reached into her handbag, pulling out a white and rose coloured business card with her name printed in a neat cursive font. “If you ever need a haircut,” she said, “come see me. I’ll make sure you’re taken care of before picture day, all right?” She grinned. “Hell, it’ll even be my treat since you’re going to be in my wedding photos!”

“Thank—thank you,” Keith stammered, taking the business card from her hands.

“Any time after the wedding,” Estefania mentioned, “I’ll put in a discount since you’re Lance’s boo, okay? You’re as good as family now, Keith!” She slung her handbag over her shoulder and grinned at the two boys—stunned into silence—before saying, “I’m going to pick up Ana from school. You wanna join me and then head home for dinner?”

“Sorry, Este,” Lance apologised. He stood up, Azura leaping into Keith’s lap instead, and escorted his sister to the front door. “I already made dinner plans with Hunk.”

Estefania stuck out her tongue and reached out, standing on the tip of her toes to ruffle Lance’s hair—much to his disgruntlement. “Come back home and visit sometime, you stupid little brother!” she grumbled. Despite her vicious smile, there was no way to mistake the bittersweet fondness in her eyes. The delighted trickle of laughter that danced past her lips, growing louder with Lance’s accumulating protests, gave away how happy she was to see her brother, that he was still alive and in one piece.

Keith would see to it that it stays that way.

“Tell Ana that I said hi,” Lance said as he unlocked the door for his sister.

“Of course,” Estefania replied. “I’ll bring her back here so we can kick your ass together, too.”

Lance laughed and rolled his eyes. “I’d like to see you try.”

“Bring it, you twig,” Estefania snapped playfully. Her tone softened as she nudged him. “You two be careful, all right? I’ll see you again some other time.”

“Yeah,” Lance replied, losing the playful edge in his voice as well. “I’ll see you around, Este.”

“Don’t get into trouble when I’m not around, Lance,” she called before stepping down the stairs. “If you need anything, you always have us!” She turned and gave one last wave that Lance returned before closing the door behind him.

Stalking over to the window, he waited until Estefania was out of sight before commenting, “I think she knows about you.”

Keith’s brows furrowed, confusion clouding his mind. “What do you mean?” he asked. The possibilities ran through his head. Estefania knew that they weren’t actually boyfriends, that they weren’t actually roommates, that they were probably-maybe-barely-even-friends, that—

“The missing persons post,” Lance stated. “The signal boost must have gotten stronger.”

Keith could feel his mind crash. Azura’s weight was the only anchoring him to reality. “You don’t think she reported us?”

Lance shook his head. “She wouldn’t do that because she knows me. She knows that I have my
reasons, and she knows the kind of person that I am. After all, we’re siblings. We… we were close.”

“You still look close,” Keith mentioned.

Lance laughed—a bitter, acerbic laugh that Keith never wanted to hear again—and responded, “With the rift I’ve tried to put between us? I’m surprised she stuck around… but then again, it might be because we’re family.” He sighed, shoulders slumping after a half-hearted shrug. “Anyway, people go missing for numerous reasons; running away from home is one of them. She didn’t pry, but I think she probably guessed something’s up.”

“What makes you think that though?”

Lance hummed. “She kept pushing you for a haircut,” he stated. “I know my sisters and I have teased you about having a mullet—even my mother has—but we wouldn’t actually want to cut it regardless of what you want. It’s your hair. Estefania was insistent this time though. I don’t think she was telling the truth when she said it was all because she wanted her wedding photos to be perfect, especially considering it’s going to take place in two years. My sister doesn’t believe in forcing people to change for someone else, and even if she wants her wedding to be perfect, she’s not a perfectionist per se.”

Keith pursed his lips. “Is that all? She might actually be excited about her wedding.”

Lance hummed. “She told us to be careful,” he added. “It’d be one thing if it was just me she was talking about, but it was the two of us. Normally, she doesn’t even tell me to be careful—just to stay out of trouble and to rely on my family more.” His tone took a depreciative note.

“So what do we do now?” Keith asked, dread pooling in his gut.

“The same thing we’ve been doing, I guess,” Lance replied. “We don’t have any other option, really. There’s nothing else that we can do. We just have to keep hiding and lay low.”

Lance plucked his jacket off the back of the sofa, throwing it over his shoulders and slipping it on. Keith could feel his brows furrow again. Confusion was a familiar sensation now, and once again, it took over his mind, muddling his thoughts. “Where are you going?” he asked.

“I wasn’t lying when I said I made dinner plans with Hunk,” Lance replied. “We’re heading to Korean barbecue—some place called The Fripping Bulgogian in Koreatown. Hunk says they have an all-you-can-eat dinner special, so we’re going to check it out.” Lance threw his varsity jacket and Monstro City Monsters snapback at Keith. “Come on, get ready. I have to feed you, too. It’s like I have two cats.”

“Did you forget the conversation we had five seconds ago?” Keith retorted, rolling his eyes. “We’re supposed to lay low and be careful. We practically got caught already! Just bring me back some bulgogi and galbi and whatever else.”

“I wasn’t lying when I said I made dinner plans with Hunk,” Lance replied. “We’re heading to Korean barbecue—some place called The Fripping Bulgogian in Koreatown. Hunk says they have an all-you-can-eat dinner special, so we’re going to check it out.” Lance threw his varsity jacket and Monstro City Monsters snapback at Keith. “Come on, get ready. I have to feed you, too. It’s like I have two cats.”

“Then Hunk will lecture me about how I’m clogging your arteries with cholesterol!” Lance whined. “Look, everyone will be too busy eating to even pay attention to us! We’re going to be the only ones worrying about being in hiding!”
Keith hesitated. “It’s really all-you-can-eat?”

“Yes! Now hurry up!” Lance tugged Keith’s arms through the jacket sleeves and tossed the hood on top of Keith’s head. “We’re keeping Hunk waiting. The big guy’s always a little bit early. We’re going to have to avoid taking the subway, too, since there’s higher security there.”

“You’re forgetting about Obsidian,” Keith reminded. “She’s been hiding out back, waiting for someone to take her out on a spin.”

“You sure it’s safe to take her out though?” Lance asked.

“Black Lion has more admirers than I ever will,” Keith protested. A strange expression he couldn’t place crossed Lance’s visage momentarily, and he hurriedly tacked on, “There’s a number of Obsidian replicas around the world. Nobody would bat an eye without looking closely, and even then I doubt they’d recognise it for the real deal. Plus, the licence plate is different. It’ll buy us time if they try to trace it back to me.”

“If you say so,” Lance replied, giving Keith one lingering look, before unlocking his front door yet again and spreading it wide open. He gestured for Keith to walk through with a dramatic bow. “After you, my good sir.”

Keith grinned widely. “I’d rather you lead the way,” Keith responded. “I’m not entirely sure where the… The Fripping Bulgogian is.”

As it turned out, The Fripping Bulgogian was located at the midway point between Koreatown and Chinatown. It was a part of a street that slowly morphed from Chinese, Taiwanese, and Hong Kongese establishments to a small district consisting of Korean shops and restaurants. Just a couple blocks down from the little Koreatown. The Fripping Bulgogian itself was part of a plaza that included a bakery, a frozen yogurt place, a stationary shop, and a café.

There was a small crowd lined up outside the restaurant, waiting for an available table, but Hunk was nowhere in sight. Strolling up to the entrance, Keith could pick out syllables of different languages. Korean and English were both dominant over the rest, but then there were also trails of Chinese, Vietnamese, and Japanese that Keith could pick up.

While Lance was on the phone with Hunk, confirming that, yes, Hunk, we just arrived, Keith fiddled with his helmet. A flock of girls to his right giggled, chattering away in Chinese (Mandarin or Cantonese, Keith couldn’t really tell himself), but Keith didn’t pay them much mind—until they started pointing at his bike. Keith could feel his hairs raise, wondering if, in the end, Lance was right about being conspicuous. However, his nerves flat-lined the moment one of them said, “Is that your bike? It’s really cool.”

“Uh, yeah,” Keith replied. “It is.”

A grin spread across her lips, but before she could say anything else, Lance stepped forward, looping his left arm through Keith’s right. A pleasant smile curved his lips as he asked, “Are you making new friends, Keithy boy? I’m Lance. It’s nice to meet you!” He stretched out his right hand in a show of cordiality, and the girl shook it though her smile faltered somewhat, appearing almost disappointed. Her friends twittered behind her again in Chinese, and Keith got the distinct feeling that they may have been gossiping about him and Lance.

For a moment, he wished that his mother or his aunt would have enrolled him in Chinese classes in the past.
“I’m Cindy,” she replied. “It’s nice to meet you, too!”

“Well, Keith and I are going to head inside now!” Lance chirped, keeping up the friendly pretence. “Bye, Cindy!” With that, he pretty much steered Keith inside the restaurant, greeting the hostess with a smile and telling her that they were meeting someone here. As he led Keith through the restaurant, Lance leaned closer to his ear, whispering, “Do you think she recognised you?”

“Not at all,” Keith replied. “She was just asking about my bike.”

“Like she recognised it?”

“Doubt it,” Keith responded. “She just said it was cool. She would have said it was like Black Lion’s if she did recognise it.”

Lance huffed and rolled his eyes, muttering something under his breath that Keith couldn’t make out. Before Keith could ask him to stop mumbling, he was shoved unceremoniously into a chair next to a wall and met Hunk’s blinding grin head-on. Of course, Keith couldn’t help but notice that, rather than delight, Hunk was more… apprehensive with Keith’s sudden presence.

“Hey, Keith!” he greeted, his voice cracking. “What’s up, man? I-I haven’t seen you in forever!”

Lance snorted, plopping into the seat beside Keith. “So much for acting natural,” he mused, rolling his eyes. He cracked his chopsticks into two. “What’d you order for us, Hunk?”

Hunk brightened immediately. “Oh! Okay, so for twenty bucks per person, we get this all-you-can-eat platter that includes beef ribs, pork belly, spicy pork belly, marinated chicken, marinated beef, not-marinated beef, beef brisket, soft tofu soup, and more. Since this place is pretty famous for their bulgogi, I got two servings, plus the short ribs and spicy pork belly and teriyaki chicken, but they had to stop me from ordering more because, well, table space. Also, I got everyone a glass of water for now, but you guys can get something else when they come back around. I guess we’ll just keep ordering more once we finish a plate or two.”

Keith could feel his mouth water at the mention of food, but before he could reply to Hunk, Lance elbowed him lightly, catching his attention. “Hood up, head down,” Lance whispered as soon as a server approached them with three glasses and a pitcher of water.

Keith obliged, lowering his head ever so slightly, and pulled out his borrowed phone to look as though he was fiddling with an app. He kept his eyes down while the server handed them all glasses and filled them with ice water, counting the seconds that ticked by. The silence between everyone at the table was thick and heavy, and Keith instead tried to focus on the sound of K-pop playing from the speakers overhead.

“Your order is coming right out,” she informed them, her words tinged ever so slightly with a subtle accent, entirely oblivious to the tension at the table.

“Thank you,” Lance said from beside Keith.

Once he heard her footsteps fade, Keith lifted his head, only to see how fidgety Hunk was. Right, he thought, his lips setting into a scowl. The big guy definitely wasn’t asking for… for any of this in his life. He didn’t ask for his best friend to be a vigilante, nor did he ask to keep one—or, rather, a good number—of the biggest secrets of the century… especially since he was an employee of the Voltron Alliance.

Guilt tugged at the corners of Keith’s mind, nagging his conscience with painful reminders that Keith couldn’t play the role of a normal civilian ever again. His lips parted, an apology ready on the tip of
“I’m starving!” Lance exclaimed. “Thanks for the invitation, Hunk!”


He offered Keith a shaky grin that Keith tried to return.

“Thanks, Hunk,” Keith finally responded, for everything you’ve done.

“Hey, it’s no big deal,” Hunk said. All three of them knew that was a big, fat lie. Hunk’s smile soothed everything over though, and it felt more genuine than the last. “Glad to see you’re doing alright though.”

“Yeah, you too,” Keith returned.

“So what have you two been up to?” Hunk asked.

“Nothing much—actually, no,” Lance replied, eyes widening. He slammed his hands onto the table dramatically and leaned forward as far as he could without hovering over the built-in grill at the centre of the table. “Hunk, get this: Keith legit thinks that he could beat Pidge in a Pokémon battle!”

Hunk openly gaped at Keith. “Get out,” Hunk snapped. “Like how? We’ve been trying to best her since we’ve met!”

The earlier tension easily disintegrated into something more fast-paced and, honestly, comfortable. Hunk took the reins of the conversation, steering it forward, as he continually pressed Keith on what strategy he would use. He presented hypothetical situations, immensely familiar himself with Pidge’s favourite party, and Keith would reply to them to the best of his ability. His knowledge of the game was rusty at best, but he remembered the basics. That was enough for Hunk to work with though, and Hunk was eager to supply Keith with more information where he was uncertain.

They only broke conversation momentarily when their side dishes and entrées arrived. Hunk’s first priority, of course, was to pile the meat onto the grill, and both Lance and Keith enthusiastically helped him. There was never too much meat on the grill—even when they ran out of room—and after digging into their feast, the conversation never died out.

“You know,” Hunk remarked, “you could get yourself a 3DS and Pokemon Sun or Moon, and we could have a Battle Royale—you, me, Lance, and Pidge. It’ll be fun!”

Keith cracked a grin and replied, “I’ll think about it.”

“Please, up against my team, the two of you will be completely annihilated,” Lance boasted as he wrapped his bulgogi in a lettuce leaf. He took a bite, and even while chewing his food, he sent a haughty smirk Keith’s way, eyebrow quirked, in a silent challenge. Keith rolled his eyes, and the urge to wipe the smirk off Lance’s face overwhelmed him, nearly taking over his mind and all of his control. Warmth flood his veins, fire burning underneath his skin, diffusing only under Hunk’s watch—one that was not too kind either.

Hunk’s gaze was sharp and piercing and inquisitive in nature, and Keith couldn’t not pay it any mind. Not that Keith could blame him either. After all, his best friend was involved (possibly? hopefully?) with a fugitive. He would be worried if Shiro found himself in Lance’s position.

Keith cracked a grin and replied, “I’ll think about it.”

Lance’s smirk faltered, eyes softening, and pulled his eyes away from Keith to say something to Hunk. The fire underneath his skin was doused entirely, and Keith himself had to avert his gaze. He
picked at the kimchi remnants on his plate, plopping them into his mouth, and chewed contemplatively. Keith’s attention snapped back to Lance once he heard his phone go off. Lance excused himself from the table to take the call outside, and, oddly enough, Hunk was practically vibrating in his seat after Lance left.

“What’s with the excitement?” Keith asked.

“I can’t tell you,” Hunk replied. Then, because Hunk was terrible at keeping secrets, he exclaimed, “Okay! So you remember Lance’s audition last week?”

Keith huffed, crossing his arms at the table, and responded, “You’re acting as though you got the — no way.”

“Uh, yes way,” Hunk replied, grinning cheekily.

“How did you find out?” Keith asked, lowering his voice, as he scanned the restaurant for any sign of Lance’s return.

“Oh, so Coran is best friends with Mrs. De Altea, so she tells him everything,” Hunk explained. “One day at work, Coran let it slip though, so I knew it was a long time coming.” He slumped in his seat and ripped a chunk of meat off the ribs. He chewed thoroughly and swallowed. “Man, it was hard keeping it to myself, but Lance is the type who doesn’t like spoilers, you know? Even though the curiosity seems to literally kill him.”

“Good job so far,” Keith mused. He gestured to the entire table and added, “But Lance is going to come back and figure out that you did all of this just to celebrate him.”

“He deserves it,” Hunk stated firmly as he placed some sliced beef brisket in a radish wrap. “Besides, with… with our current lifestyles, who knows when we’ll have another chance to celebrate?” Hunk bit into his food uncomfortably as the previous tension slowly began to slip back between them. “Is everything really okay, Keith?”

“Honestly,” Keith managed, “I can’t say that it is, but we’ll get through it… We have to.” He hesitated for a moment before asking, “How’s Shiro?”

Hunk grimaced. “He’s tearing himself up looking for you, dude,” he admitted. “He thinks that, if he can get to you before anyone else, he could still protect you from being punished. With Allura’s influence, it’s probable at best. Is it your best option? Can’t say.”

“I’m not going to get caught,” Keith insisted. “I’m not going back there until I get things done.”

Hunk’s laugh was strangled by bitterness and worry. “For a moment, you sounded kinda like Lance there,” he explained. His shoulders slumped. “I guess you two do have the same intentions though. You’re not going to contact him at all though?”

Keith shook his head. His hands dropped to his lap, tracing the shape of his phone in his left pocket, and said, “Shiro might not be able to accept me—or what I chose to do—even if he does understand why I’m doing it.” He gripped his phone, fingers scraping against the fabric of his jeans, and confessed, “Shiro and Allura are good people. I’m probably the one in the wrong, but… I can’t ignore what I’ve chosen to believe in.”

“What did you choose to believe in, Keith?” Hunk asked.

“I chose to believe in Lance,” Keith answered, “and when I chose to believe in Lance, I chose to believe that the world isn’t always right, that the law isn’t always right, that we don’t have to accept
that things are the way they are. Sometimes, rules are meant to be broken because we have to do something—anything at all—just to set the record straight. We don’t have to sit around doing nothing, waiting for someone else to clean up the mess. We don’t have to be helpless because we can change things ourselves, because we can change the world.”

“Wow,” Hunk stated. “That is the most I’ve ever heard you speak, like, ever.”

Keith flushed, rubbing his head, flustered with the attention. He stole another glance towards the entrance, clearing his throat when he saw Lance manoeuvre his way to their table, and Hunk quickly dropped the subject, grinning when he saw Lance march directly towards him.

“Hey, buddy! What’s up?” Hunk greeted, trying to act casual but failing.

“Hunk, you beautiful ray of sunshine,” Lance spread his arms wide, “give me a hug.”

“On it, my brother!” Hunk exclaimed, jumping out of his seat to catch Lance in his arms. He swung him side to side, laughing boisterously, and although they were causing a scene, Keith didn’t have the heart to tell them. Before they bordered reaching obnoxious levels that would result in them getting kicked out, Hunk and Lance plopped back into their respective seats.

“Hunk, you knew!” Lance exclaimed, eyes bright and tone accusatory. He gave Hunk a playful leer.

“How long have you known?”

“Not that long, I swear!” Hunk assured, smiling.

“It wasn’t even the official notice,” Lance rambled. “Lady De Altea said it was supposed to come in the mail soon with all of the music scores for the orchestra, and they’ll give us some time to get familiar with it. Then about two weeks later, I’m supposed to report to Voltron Towers for rehearsals, which will last for about a month.”

“I told you that you were good enough,” Hunk boasted.

“Oh my God, I’m going to be on national television!” Lance crowed.

“Hey, good for you,” Keith said, kicking the toe of his boot lightly against Lance’s. “This might just be your big break.”

“Oh my God,” Lance echoed. “I have to thank Nyma. If I don’t screw this up, this is gonna be huge!”

That had both Hunk and Keith frowning. “You’re not going to screw up!” Hunk protested.

“Well, I got in the orchestra,” Lance remarked, taking some non-marinated beef fresh off the grill and dipping it into a sauce plate, “but staying in is a different matter. It’s like landing a job offer, but there’s no guarantee that you’re going to keep the job.”

“You’re going to do fine,” Keith insisted. “They chose you, after all, and I’m pretty sure they know what they’re doing if this is the thirtieth time they’ve thrown a damn party.”

“I guess so,” Lance mumbled.

“Well, I know so,” Keith retorted. “I’ve had to sit through two of them before, and if you consider boring as hell as perfect, then everything went off without a hitch.”

“Hey, guys, I hate to be the mood-killer, but, uh…” Hunk looked around their table, looking a bit
“Hey, if you’re going to take up space, then don’t get in the way,” Nyma snapped, her voice sharp and piercing despite the heavy bass vibrating throughout the club like a collective heartbeat. She slapped a wet cloth in front of Keith, arching a finely plucked brow, and said, “At least make yourself useful and polish off the tables.”

“What happened to ‘the customer is always right’?” Keith retorted.

“Well, we all know that’s bullshit,” Nyma remarked, red stained lips curving into a scowl, “since you’re not even a paying customer.” She crossed her arms, slanting her hips, and added, “You might as well ask Kolivan for a job here. It’s not like you do anything else with your time aside from hiding from the public eye.”

“You think he’d really employ me?” Keith asked, dropping his face in the palm of his hand. “I’m pretty sure I mentioned this before, but I think he hates my guts.”

“Is that all that’s stopping you?” Nyma huffed.

“That, and filing for employment usually means documentation that I can’t really hand out right now,” Keith stated. “Plus, I could get recognised.”

“Doesn’t stop you from coming here regularly,” Nyma sneered. “It’s dark, so nobody can even see your ugly mug. Besides, do you think Kolivan gives a shit if you have paperwork ready?” She gestured vaguely to the dance floor and stated, “This is a gathering place for the drunken, the miserable, and the lonely. Everyone’s looking to have a good time before they have to return to real life the next morning. People will leave you alone. Why the fuck would they give a shit about a runaway when they’re running away from their problems themselves?”

Keith snorted. “That definitely cheered me up.”

“It’s not my job to make you feel better,” Nyma retorted, flipping a curled, bleach blonde pigtail over her shoulder. “Anyway, do you want a job or not? We’ve already got all kinds of sketchy business going on under the table. It’s not like it’ll kill Kolivan to forge more documents or just hand you over a job—no questions asked. You think Thace has been sitting in an empty room twiddling his thumbs this whole time?”

“What’s Thace up to anyway?” Keith asked.

“He’s working head of security,” Nyma answered. “He’s assigning shifts, positions, formations, and strategies and such, especially considering what could happen to this place. He’s usually keeping
watch on the cameras.”

“So Thace has been sitting in an empty room twiddling his thumbs,” Keith pointed out.

“I’ve been doing what now?”

“Are you sure it’s okay to be down here?” Keith asked, eyeing the older man warily.

Keith crossed his arms, resting them against the bar, tactfully avoiding the rings of condensation and spilt beer. Nyma huffed and flung a wet rag his way, but Keith dodged it before it could smack him in the face. Thace managed to catch it just before it hit the ground. He sat down beside Keith, handing the wet rag back to Nyma, and laid down an order for a shot of scotch, neat.

“He has a point,” Nyma remarked, pulling out a bottle of alcohol just for Thace and a shot glass, careful not to let anyone else hear them over the electronic beat Lance had been fancying. “It’s marginally safer for this bum here because someone as straight-laced as Black Sky or Titania would never be caught in a seedy joint like this.” Keith refrained from mentioning that the first night he had come here was with Black Sky and Titania. It wasn’t like Nyma would even give him a chance to speak, nor would she listen to him. “But the reason why Kolivan has you holed up in the security room is so that nobody else here has a chance of recognising you, Thace. There’s no way to tell who’s with or not with the Galra.”

She served him the shot, sliding it over his way, and Thace stopped it just before it could tip over the edge, downing it in one gulp.

“Sure there is,” Thace argued, seemingly unaffected by the alcohol. (Keith was rather impressed.) He nodded over his shoulder, and Keith couldn’t help but glance in the same direction. “That cocky bastard over there? He’s Galra. You can tell because of the way they hold themselves higher than anyone else. If you’re Galra, then you don’t have anything to be afraid of—except for the Boss, of course.”

“Isn’t that too general?” Keith inquired. “Maybe he’s just an asshole.”

Thace chuckled. “There’s always that, too,” he acquiesced. “The most foolproof way to find a Galra is by their symbol.” Thace lifted up the sleeve of his shirt, revealing a black mark on the inside of his arm that reminded Keith of a stylistic X. If he squinted, it kinda looked like a spider or a skull. “Some of them might be boastful enough to flash their tattoo in your face. Otherwise, there’s no way to know for certain, but… the mentality of the Galra has changed recently. It’s the mindset of the invincible, the mindset that they could never be taken down, and that in itself is dangerous.”

“But it’s also our biggest advantage,” Keith protested. “They won’t see us coming.”

“That doesn’t make it any safer for you to be here though,” Nyma retorted.

Keith eyed Nyma warily. “You’re saying this after trying to needle me into wiping tables?”

“I wasn’t talking about you,” Nyma retorted, sniffing. “An old man like Thace stands out more in this crowd than you, edgelord,” Nyma quipped.

Keith and Thace both made affronted noises, to which Nyma responded with a fit of giggles. Honestly, it made her seem more like a normal young woman. For a moment, Keith wondered how she had gotten roped into the underground business of dealing information, but… it wasn’t his place to ask.

Plus, he was pretty sure that Nyma still hated him, civilities and pleasantries aside.
Another customer called for Nyma, saying something in Chinese, and she high-tailed it away from
the two of them. Keith wondered, briefly, if he would have known Chinese or Taiwanese Hokkien if
his father had been alive.

“Did you know my father?” Keith asked Thace.

Thace raised an eyebrow but remained stoic. “I knew of him,” Thace answered. “It was hard not to
know of him—back in the day—especially since we were close with Kira. Why do you ask?”

“My aunt told me about him,” Keith replied. He backtracked. “Or, I guess, of him. I don’t know
much about him still—just that he was a reporter, that he died by the hands of the Galra. I didn’t
know his name. I didn’t know where he came from. I didn’t know who he was or why my mother
loved him.” He held out his hands in front of him, tracing the life lines running across his palms. “In
the end, I don’t know much about my own parents, do I?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Thace declared. “I think you know the kind of person your mother was—at
least at the very end.” He toyed with the empty shot glass, tracing the rim with his forefinger. “She’s
the woman from your memories.” He offered Keith a wry half-smile and slid the shot glass away
from him. “It doesn’t matter what other people think of her. You already know what she’s like, don’t
you?”

Keith remembered tender warmth and guidance, a gentle voice and flame, and a grip both firm and

“I know you do,” Thace assured. He stood up and announced that he would be returning to the
security room. “You can come find me if you need anything to do,” Thace said. “I'll see you later.”

“Later” happened to be when Kolivan told them to stay after closing Empire for the night. The Blade
of Marmora congregated at the bar, polished and clean, waiting for their leader with bated breath.
When Kolivan climbed down the stairs, footsteps echoing in the empty club floor, Keith’s eyes
trailed to the manilla folder he held in his hands.

“Did you find anything?” Keith asked. Lance leaned forward, placing a steady hand on his shoulder
to ground him to his stool, preventing him from lunging at Kolivan to seize the files for himself.
Keith pried Lance’s fingers off his shoulder, and if anyone noticed that he tangled their fingers
together (and that Lance actually let him), they didn’t say a single word.

“Enough to determine suspects,” Kolivan declared. “We have a good idea about the ringleaders
might be—including Zarkon himself.”

Nyma and Rolo didn’t look surprised, seeing that they probably had a hand in analysing the contents
of the extracted information Keith and Lance had stolen from Imperial Tech, but reactions among the
other members of the Blade varied. Keith’s fingers itched for his blade, legs ready to bolt and carry
him to action, and it only took a squeeze of his hand for Lance to anchor Keith to the present.
Glancing over toward his partner, there was no way to mistake the coldness in Lance’s oceanic blues
as anything but contempt. Keith watched as Lance’s jaw clenched, gritting his teeth, and squeezed
back, returning the grip twice as strongly.

Lance blinked.

Keith breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing the disdain evaporate from Lance’s gaze.

“Don’t get trigger happy, Reyes,” Kolivan barked out. “We’re still looking into it, and if we find
anything promising, we’ll send you in.”
Keith might be new at being a vigilante and a member of the Blade of Marmora, but he was certain that Kolivan hadn’t included Keith in whatever mission he was scheming even though he and Lance were de facto partners now, even though they have been de facto partners for a while now. Still, this wasn’t the time to call out Kolivan on his intentions, not when everyone was so focused on shutting down the Galran operation before it escalated any further.

“From what we’ve gathered from Sendak’s call history, text logs, and email correspondence,” Kolivan began, “we know that he has been mediating communication between Agar and Zacharias.”

Lance’s brows furrowed. “What does Zacharias have to gain from a pharmaceutical company?” Lance asked. “I mean, if he needed to buy or refill a prescription, he could just go to a pharmacy like everyone else.”

“The same reason why, according to the files we’ve extracted from Imperial Tech, he’s been hiring more engineers and relocating his most dedicated ones,” Kolivan answered. “He’s creating a new weapon, and it’s not one of his traditional ones used for war. After decrypting the emails and text logs, we’ve determined that he’s working on something together with Haggar to create a biological weapon, and that something involves the Chimeras.”

“Could the Chimeras be the weapons?” Keith inquired. “Rather than having rampant monsters on the loose, they would usurp any kind of thought process to command them, to have perfect control, but they’d have to tamper with the humans taking the drugs directly. That’s just—that’s inhumane.”

“So are plenty of things that the Galra have done,” Thace interrupted quietly. “Why do you think the Galra have been buying people from human traffickers? People who, when missing, won’t be missed. It’s likely that they’re test subjects for Quintessence. They need all the data they can get..”

“It’s not like the Galra to have a shred of humanity after the shit they’ve done. They’ve created monsters, mindless monsters, and nobody knows what for,” Rolo commented. “At first it was just strength enhancement, sacrificing brains for brawns, but now they have abilities that Imperial Tech could make use of as weapons of war. They could market these Chimeras to countries all around the world, to anyone who could afford it.”

“Their agenda is still unclear,” Kolivan admitted, “but we can say for certain that Druid Pharmaceuticals is developing a drug called Quintessence for the Galra, which grants the user superhuman abilities for several hours but also robs them of their mind and senses, and that Imperial Tech profits from that drug ring.”

“I say we keep tabs on Zacharias for now,” Thace suggested. “There’s also Sendak and Haggar to keep an eye on.”

“Gunderson can’t be three places at once no matter how good she is,” Kolivan grumbled. “I need Wong and Hansen to keep an ear out on the streets though.”

“Get Pidge to focus on Imperial Tech,” Thace advised. “As for Druid Pharmaceuticals… there’s someone that we can rely on.”

Kolivan glowered. “We’re not trusting that Garrison spy; we’re not going in blind. Reyes has yet to find anything regarding his background.”

“You’re planning on waiting two weeks for this rehearsal to start?” Thace retorted.

“We’ve already waited years,” Kolivan snapped.

“But who knows how much longer we have!” Nyma argued. “We can run background checks later!
Right now, we know for certain that we have a common enemy. You already plan ahead for different scenarios anyway! How would this be any different?

Thace nodded. “It’s time to make our move, Kolivan,” he declared. “We can’t keep delaying action; what if we’re too late again?”

“It’s not our job to save lives,” Kolivan protested. “We’re here to make changes.”

“Well, nothing’s going to change if we keep sitting around with our thumbs shoved up our asses,” Lance hissed. “It’s time that we take risks, Kolivan. It’s not like we can keep waiting for ten thousand years.”

Faced with the disgruntled expressions of his allies, Kolivan’s hand was forced. Keith watched as the older man closed his eyes, inhaling deeply, pausing for one beat, two beats, three… He spoke at long last, “Gunderson will keep monitoring Imperial Tech. Wong, Hansen, continue as usual and keep an ear out on the streets for any news regarding the Galra. Reyes, Kogane, you’re on standby until further notice. Thace will get in contact with Holt.” His eyes peeled open, and Keith couldn’t help but notice how exhausted their leader looked. “We’ll have a plan ready by the end of the week, two weeks tops.” His eyes swept over the crowd, lingering a few seconds longer on Lance’s stubborn glower. “You’re all dismissed.”

Keith sighed through his nose, shoulders loosening ever so slightly, and turned to Lance just as everyone else left the club or migrated elsewhere inside Empire. “Let’s go home,” Keith said.

“Yeah, sounds good,” Lance replied, smiling. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jacket and added, “Just give me a sec. I need to go talk to Kolivan about my pay cheque.” Before Keith could follow Lance, the latter danced around him and practically bounced up the stairs.

“If you’re planning to put a hit on anyone’s head—Zarkon, Sendak, Haggar, Zacharias—anyone at all,” Lance said, “then leave Keith out of it.”

Kolivan drummed his fingers against his desk. “I wasn’t aware that you were so worried about him,” Kolivan remarked, “considering how you’ve held superheroes in contempt all this time.”

Lance frowned. “People change,” he grumbled. Lance crossed his arms and scrunched his nose, lifting it into the air. “Besides, he might be a vigilante now, but… he still tries hard to be a hero.” He hesitated underneath Kolivan’s curious stare. Pursing his lips, Lance mustered his courage and mentioned, “I think he still has a chance to be a hero after all of this.”

“You don’t think he’s going to stay for the long run,” Kolivan stated.

Lance shook his head. “He’s different from the rest of us,” Lance replied. “He doesn’t have blood on his hands. Once this is over, once his name is cleared, he has a better future up on the surface, saving people and being a hero. He has no business being with a bunch of thugs and gangsters. Right now, he’s allied with us because we have a common enemy. There’s no guarantee that he’ll stay.”

“And what about you?” Kolivan asked. “If Wong hadn’t brought you here, then you would have been a normal college student.”

Lance shrugged. “It’s too late for me,” he said, grinning weakly. “I see two futures for me: I die as a Blade or I get thrown into jail because of what I did for the Blade. There’s no escaping it.”

Kolivan paused. “That’s hardly much of a future.”
Lance laughed, harsh and coarse. “That’s why I plan on staying alive. I don’t plan on heading to prison any time soon either.” He grinned. “Why? You worried about me?”

Kolivan didn’t look moved at all. “I’ll keep you posted on your next mission,” Kolivan declared.

Nodding, Lance pivoted on his heel and marched to the door. Before he placed his hand on the knob, Kolivan called out for him to halt. Lance froze in place, not bothering to look over his shoulder. He was silent, waiting for Kolivan to say his piece.

“I never planned on having Kogane join you for the next mission,” he stated. “He’s too unstable, too unpredictable, and when you sever the head from a snake, you want it to be quick. There’s no room for hesitation.”

Lance pursed his lips. “I know that already.”

“But Kogane doesn’t.”

“He doesn’t,” Lance agreed, “and I would like to keep it that way.”

“Then consider it done.”

Lance nodded and then pulled open the door. He marched down the stairs, hands shoved into his pockets, and rejoined Keith at the bar. Plastering a smile onto his lips, he chirped, “You ready to go?”

“Yeah,” Keith replied, snatching their helmets off the bar counter, “let’s go.”

(Yesterday – 11:56 PM)

_Pidgeot_: GM says we’re starting a raid in a few hours

_Lancer™_: Same quest location??

_Pidgeot_: yeah, be prepared

(Today – 3:04 AM)

_Pidgeot_: are you ready?

_Lancer™_: Our paladin isn’t out yet

_Lancer™_: Give it some time

(Today – 4:11 AM)

_Lancer™_: Our paladin isn’t showing up to the raid

_Lancer™_: I’ll be on location in half an hour

_Pidgeot_: sounds good

_Pidgeot_: be careful

“Everywhere I’m looking now, I’m surrounded by your embrace,” Lance sang quietly as he slipped out of bed. “Baby, I can see your halo. You know you’re my saving grace…”
He carefully pulled out his equipment from underneath the futon, swiftly changing into his gear without making a single noise. Fixing the scarf around his neck, he glanced back at Keith, smiling softly. He stretched out a hand, brushing away a few strands of hair that covered Keith’s face and tucking them behind his ear. Lance crooned,

“You’re everything I need and more.
It’s written all over your face.
Baby, I can feel your halo…
Pray it won’t fade away.”

Leaning down, he pressed a chaste kiss to the corner of Keith’s lips.

“Goodnight, Keith,” Lance whispered. He set his phone down on top of his pillow, using it as a paperweight for the slip of notebook paper he had scrawled on earlier. “Sweet dreams.” He pulled his mask bandana up to his nose and marched out his apartment, locking the door behind him. He powered on the earpiece and whispered, “Emerald? Are you there?”

“I’m here,” Pidge replied immediately. “What’s the situation with Ruby?”

“He’s out like a light,” Lance answered. He pulled on his gloves. “I think I see Antok coming. We’re on our way.”

“I’ll monitor you through the traffic cams,” Pidge assured.

“Let’s get this done quickly,” Lance said, “so I can go back home and sleep.”

“Agreed,” Pidge mumbled. “I have a German test tomorrow, and I’m not looking forward to it.”

“Nerd.”

“Loser.”

“You know it. You love it.”

Pidge snorted. “And, Sapphire?”

“What’s up, Emerald?” Lance asked as he slipped inside the car. He gave Antok a nod and then removed his guns so that they were on the floor and not pressing uncomfortably against his back. He stared out the window, watching the skyscrapers pass by. The night was strangely peaceful.

There was a pause before Pidge spoke, “I know I said it already, but be careful.”

Lance smiled, pressing it against his knuckles. “You worried about me, Emerald?”

“I always am,” Pidge admitted, and for a moment, Lance was taken back by her honesty. “Me, and so many more people. So… stay safe, alright? Or try to, at least.”

He didn’t try hiding his grin this time around. “Yeah, I’ll try.”
thought about kbbq first.

Follow me on Twitter || tumblr!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!