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**Steal My Heart Away**

by BlairRabbit

**Summary**

On what should have been an easy mission Keith and Lance run into a strange fortune teller who takes something valuable from Lance. Keith has to work through allot of things he would rather not think about to get it back.
“Why did I get paired off with you again anyway. Why are we always ending up together? I could have just asked for Hunk or Pidge but noooo…”

Keith said nothing. He watched Lance walk slightly ahead of him hands in his pockets. What his teammate was saying was just a bunch of white noise at this point. Keith knew well enough it was all posturing; A bunch of sound and fury signifying nothing.

Lance paused mid-stride and turned around arms flung behind his head nonchalantly.

“So what was our thing again?”

“Our thing? You mean the items Coran told us specifically to find. Our mission?”

“That’s what I said Mullet. What’s our thing?”

Keith sighed and cast an anxious glance at the alien trading posts spread around him on all sides. The paladins were in a free-trade bazaar built into the core of an asteroid. It was loud, boisterous and dimly lit; a smoky marketplace full of strange merchandise and stranger aliens. The whole place made Keith feel uneasy despite Coran’s keen assurances they were far outside Galra jurisdiction.

“Our thing is Nic-weed and Yipa Oil. We’re supposed to find an apothecary.”

The part of the market where Keith and Lance were standing was a ramshackle thing. An eclectic collection of tents stalls and rough buildings carved into the walls of the asteroid itself. Flickering electric bulbs and phosphorescent mushrooms were the only thing lighting most of the market. The lack of natural light made it seem like time was standing still and hours could pass by unnoticed if you weren’t careful.

Pidge and Shiro had headed off into a separate part of the market that sold black-market electronics. Components for ships, illegal hardware and dodgy artillery was easy to find there and Pidge was eager to upgrade the Lions weapons systems with whatever components she could get her hands on.

Hunk and Coran had also gone their own way to look for edible foodstuffs. As much as everyone had grown accustomed to the castle’s unpalatable green nutrient paste it was universally agreed a change of menu would be nice. Hunk was more than willing to oblige.

That left the blue and red paladins on their own quest for infirmary refills. They had wandered aimlessly for the last hour just exploring random booths until they ended up in the shabbier part of the market.

Lingering near a booth full of glowing aquariums, Keith regarded a creature in one of the large, murky tanks. It looked like an overgrown purple shrimp and stared back at him without much enthusiasm. Lance was pre-occupied by a low table full of barrels containing loose goods you could buy by the pound. Keith couldn’t help but smile at the face he made as he picked up a scoop full of damp, oozing eyeballs and let them slowly drip back into the bulk barrel. Lance stuck out his tongue and turned his focus back on his mission partner.

“So do you have any idea what an apothecary is? Cause it’s a new one to me.”

Keith bit back an automatic insult when he realized he had no idea what an apothecary was either. He had been so eager to get away from Coran’s warbling praises to “a good old-fashioned swap market” he hadn’t bothered to ask. He gave a half-hearted shrug.

“Maybe it’s like a pharmacist? Allura said this stuff is for the infirmary so it’s medicinal. We just have to find someone who sells medicine.”

Lance gave a distracted nod as he paused to stare at the rafters of an alien butcher shop. Something that might have resembled an earth chicken if you squinted and ignored its green color was hanging from a hook. It had been plucked and cleaned and Keith couldn’t help notice the melancholy look Lance was giving it.

“You’re not a vegetarian. What’s with the sad look?”

Lance frowned at being called out and turned his attention to a crate of clucking birds. They appeared to be the still living version of the butchered, green space chicken.

“Eh– It’s not that. It just reminded me of home. Mom and my Aunt Verita raised chickens. We used to have these big Sunday dinners and they would serve the hens that didn’t lay eggs anymore. Mom would make me pluck feathers, it sucked but the end result made it almost worth it.”
A babbling group of round, jelly-like aliens that only came up to Keith’s knees passed through the tight pathway between the vendors and he struggled to avoid stepping on them.

“Oh…”

Lance didn’t seem to notice the gaggle of small, strawberry-jam colored creatures around his long legs. He continued on wistfully, eyes on the ceiling of the cavern above them.

“They made garlic chicken with rice and my Aunt Hermosa would fry sweet plantains…”

The last of the glutinous flock moved out of Keith’s way and he jogged to catch up with Lance listening with interest as he drooled over old family recipes.

“How many aunts do you have? How do you even keep track?”

“I have all of them and it’s easy. I just remember the name of the aunt with the best food at the moment.”

Lance gave him a soft faraway look as he reminisced and it gave Keith goose bumps; he didn’t like how vulnerable that look was. Out of all the paladins Lance was the most confusing while also being the most interesting…at least to Keith. He was also a walking contradiction. He was loud because he was insecure. He flirted because he was intimidated. He welcomed people with an open heart that he kept under lock and key. Shiro was strong, approachable and sturdy. Hunk was warm, understanding and empathetic. Pidge was intelligent, intuitive and loyal. Lance was-

“Hey! I think that might be what we need!”

A hand was grabbing his arm and Keith felt Lance yank him forward. He steered them through a busy intersection towards a tumble down booth with a wide, fabric awning. Squeezed between a wooden cart selling pulsating, mauve fruit and a food vendor turning some rat-like animal on a spit was a store dealing in all kinds of herbs. It smelled vaguely of dried cinnamon and the proprietor was a very large square creature with a head shaped like a sentient watermelon.

Keith looked down at his arm when Lance let go and felt a strange sense of loss. He was glad the other paladin didn’t notice Keith staring at his arm like an idiot, engrossed as he was with the task at hand. As hard as Lance was to figure out, Keith’s feelings for him were even more complicated. He couldn’t pin him down like he could the other paladins. Lance was funny but that word didn’t do the warmth Keith saw in him justice. Lance was generous but that word wasn’t enough to describe his little moments of sacrifice. He did have one good word for Lance and that was oblivious.

Lance was oblivious and that was distressing.

Keith pushed his fingers through a nearby box of seeds that smelled like orange peel and tried to decipher a price-list stuck to the nearest wall without success. Lance seemed to be making good headway with the shop owner and Keith sauntered over to join him, reaching into his pocket to make sure the money Coran had given him was still there.

“So does he have the weed or the oil?”

Lance grinned triumphantly presenting a luminous jar of green oil to Keith.

“He’s got the Oil!—said it’s for burns. He told me where to get the Nic-weed too. Three stalls down and past something called the Busker’s Square. He said we can’t miss it.”

The creature held out a long tentacle towards Keith, the three talons at the end spread wide. It cleared its throat with a phlegmy rumble.

“You pay now please.”

Keith paid carefully hoping he was using the currency correctly. Pidge was better with the universal conversion rates and Coran was better at haggling but it seemed like he had made the booth owner happy. It nodded at the small metal ingots at the end of its wriggly appendage and fixed Keith with a tight glare. It spoke in a voice that sounded like water sloshing inside of a plastic bag.

“You. Be careful in the Busker’s Square. Dangerous there yah? You seem good kids.”

Keith nodded unsure of this and noticed that Lance was no longer right next to him.

“Um. Thanks we will.”

Heading back into the bustling street between shops Keith tried to blend into the foot-traffic. It didn’t take him long to spot his tall, lanky teammate. Lance was loitering in front of a stall that sold live plants. Tucking the little bottle of oil into the inner pocket of his jacket Keith joined him in front of the flower shop.

“Lance you can’t just leave without telling me. How can we work as a team if you just wander off?”

Lance ignored the lecture as he considered a peculiar, square-shaped cactus with pursed lips.
He examined some of the other flora with the same intensity and finally flashed Keith a brilliant smile, gesturing to star-shaped flower with white, luminescent spots on its black petals.

“Do you think Allura would like this? It not fair she had to stay in the castle. I wanna get her a souvenir.”

Giving the plant a half-hearted scowl Keith met Lance’s eyes.

“I mean it. Don’t run off I might need you.”

“Whatever, you can handle things fine without me. Everybody on the team can.”

Keith pulled back surprised, his scowl growing deeper. Self-deprecation was a new habit for Lance but he had been noticing more and more of it sneaking subtly into their conversations. There was a disturbing lack of confidence in these comments and Keith wondered if he was the only one starting to pick up on it.

“What the hell does that mean?”

Lance turned back to the potted plant and grabbed it roughly.

“Nothing. I’m buying this.”

Nothing my ass Keith thought watching Lance run nervous hands over the star-plants velvety blue leaves. He decided not to press right now but he wasn’t going to let it go that easy. Maybe it was time to talk to Shiro about it.

“How are you gonna buy that Lance, with what money? Coran only gave me enough for supplies.”

“I got cash to burn my man. I taught Coran how to play poker and he is terrible at it.”

Keith snorted as Lance pulled a jingling handful of metal from his pocket to illustrate his point. That explained all the extra KP duty with Coran he had been so excited to volunteer for lately. The blue paladin scooped up the plant he had picked gently and held it to his chest. He paid a silent, shadowy creature with no visible mouth and it handed him what seemed to be care instructions in a language that made Keith’s head hurt.

Lance spoke directly to the plant in a fawning, babyish voice.

“Come on Planty lets go find that weed thing and get you to Allura!”

“Planty? What a creative name.”

“I wouldn’t be talking Keith. I don’t know which is more out of style your name or your hair.”

Keith felt warmth rise in his chest as they bickered back and forth. It was so familiar and despite sounding like a fight it was just something the two of them did. It was the Keith and Lance language of camaraderie.

Following the vendor’s directions they soon found the area he had called Busker’s Square. At its center was a statue carved into the living rock of the asteroid. It portrayed some kind of featureless blob of an alien with blubbery, outstretched appendages that could have been wings. Keith watched Lance quirk his head at it as he offered his opinion on the sculptor’s skill.

“It looks like this army guy I accidentally left too close to the stove when I was six.”

“Yeah I’m not sure what I’m looking at.”

“Try squinting. If you squint it kinda looks like a hippo…”

At the feet of the statue was a reflecting pool of clear, silver water. It cast sinuous patterns on the plump statue and the high ceilings. Performers surrounded it playing a variety of bizarre instruments and singing in a dozen different languages.

Lance made it a few steps before he stopped to listen to a small furry creature plunk out a tune on something that resembled a drum kit. Keith smiled as the blue paladin put a coin into the creature’s cup and paid it a loud compliment. When Lance smiled like that…when he laughed—all the confusion came back in a flood.

It once again made Keith wonder what he wanted from Lance exactly. Lance had called them rivals and so Keith had just gone with it. It seemed to pacify Lance, so sure they were rivals. They were also good friends even if neither of them would admit it in polite company. Not knowing what he needed from his relationship with Lance made Keith frustrated and he probably lashed out at him more because of it. Not healthy Keith, he chided himself, you need to figure this out eventually.

Lance caught Keith staring at him. Setting down his plant carefully Lance shimmied over to the beat of the alien music. Firing finger guns over his head he offered Keith a hand and did an
awkward, shuffling moonwalk.

“Dance with me Keith! Do the Hustle, the Mambo, the Macarena! Get your groove on!”

Keith blinked at his outstretched hand.

“I…what?”

Lance shook his hips to either side and did a move that Keith was pretty sure hadn’t been popular since disco was a thing. A small crowd of aliens stopped to watch clapping as Lance broke into a full on thriller routine throwing in some river dance for good measure. Keith felt his cheeks flare bright red as he blushed up to his ears.

“Lance…people are staring at you.”

Tossing his long, gangly limbs in random directions Lance threw himself down into a half-split and up again before bending his arms in a stiff robot. He answered breathlessly, enjoying the attention in a way that baffled Keith.

“So? We’re establishing diplomatic ties with the locals right? Paladins are all about that!”

He winked at a feminine alien who looked a bit like a pink octopus and she giggled. Lance offered his hand to Keith again.

“Come on. Be diplomatic with me!”

Keith could only look on horrified. Some of the aliens were throwing coins now. He shook his head, face getting redder by the second.

“No. I don’t dance.”

Lance looked disappointed for a moment but his smile returned as the music grew faster and he danced with his entire body. Keith stepped back with the crowd and after a couple of grueling minutes the song came to a merciful stop. There was a smattering of applause before the crowd dispersed and Lance gave the musician all his earnings with a winded laugh.

Picking up his plant Lance wiped sweat from his forehead and pointed at Keith accusingly.

“You owe me a dance.”

“I do not.”

“You do. I’m gonna cash it in someday too Keith. Someday when you’re least expecting it.”

“You can try but I’m not gonna do it.”

Through the clamor and noise of the beggars and musicians a low hissing voice addressed Lance and Keith excitedly.

“Exquisite! Extraordinary! Wonderful! Hahaha! You and you! What planet are you two from?”

The voice took Keith by surprise and he reached for the knife at his belt going into a defensive stance instinctually. Lance leaned over his shoulder speaking to a creature that only came up to Keith’s knee.

“Are you…Are you talking to us?”

The alien was squat, soggy and a nasty off-brown color. It looked like a frog in the worst sense; its slick, reflective skin covered in fleshy warts and twisting protrusions that looked like wooden thorns. It wore a cloak too big for its thickset body and its head seemed larger than its thin neck could accommodate. Like a frog its features were mostly mouth and eyes and when it spoke the jowly air-sack on its jaw expanded excitedly.

“Yes, Yes! I have never seen anything like you…Almost the same breed as the extinct Altean—but with a pinch of Galra and a huff of Hingora. And your fine coloration, oh yes…”

Keith relaxed his hand away from his knife as he watched the alien circle them. He, Keith assumed something close as it’s voice was masculine, just seemed to be an enthusiastic fan of human beings. The pudgy alien wore enormous, tinted goggles over its massive dinner plate eyes and it gazed at them adoringly through the thick lenses. Lance’s voice grew cocky when he answered.

“We’re from earth. You’re looking at the best that the human race has to offer. Also, Alteans aren’t ex-ooof!”

Keith elbowed Lance in the stomach to cut him off. There was no need to tell some random frog guy about Coran and the Princess. Better to stop Lance before he was spilling his guts about paladins, lions or ships that were also castles.
The stocky creature waddled close and poked Lance’s leg as it hummed to itself. The inside of its mouth was a bright blue and so cavernous he seemed to be hollow inside. It muttered half to them and half to itself

“Ea-rth? Eaaarth…you don’t say, you don’t say. Wonderful just extraordinary-”

It gave Lance’s shin one last poke then hopped away from them to deliver a very deep bow.

“I am Kru-Kron the seer and diviner; revealer of mysteries and teller of fortunes!”

Bringing a chubby hand from inside its cloak the creature turned in a sluggish circle and small sparkles of light erupted from its fingertips. The floated down and dissipated like confetti made of light and Keith could hear Lance Oo-ing behind him. The alien continued pushing itself up on its heels and, Keith noted, sweating profusely.

“I can look into your future! What do you want to know? Will you be rich? Or perhaps…"

The alien leaned close to Keith and he winced away when its breath hit him. It smelled like a gym-sock soaked in dill pickle juice. It continued its spiel unperturbed.

“Perhaps you would be interested in the obscurities of love?"

Throwing another handful of glittery light particles into the air Kru panted and glanced back at them expectantly.

“Well? How about it? I can give you a discount on a reading. It’s rare to have such interesting citizens as yourselves in the market. Please, please come to my tent! It’s not far at all and my fortunes are always good.”

Keith opened his mouth to give a deep and most definite no but Lance yelled over him throwing his free arm into the air in excitement.

“YES! Heck yes!”

“What? Lance no. We’re in the middle of a mis-of shopping and we don’t-er.”

Grabbing Lance’s arm Keith brought him closer and groaned internally when the smell of the blue paladin’s skin hit him. Speaking low he cast Kru a distrustful glance.

“We don’t know this guy. He doesn’t seem dangerous but maybe he’s got weapons back at his place or…”

Lance threw an arm around Keith’s shoulders. He was so good at that, that habit of initiating casual contact that threw Keith off his game.

“Keith…we’re paladins. Look at this guy, he’s harmless. Besides…if he IS untrustworthy we can take him out and protect all the asteroid market folk. Doing a good deed, score another one for team Voltron right? We got time but hey I’ll just go if you’re afraid of the marvelous Mr. Toad…”

Keith tried to pull away from that maddening aloe-vera scent that permeated Lance’s skin even when he was sweating. Why did he always smell like that? Was it even skin-creme or was it just him?

Keith hissed angrily.

“I’m not afraid.”

“Good! Then you can come with me!”

Holding his star-plant gingerly in one hand Lance grabbed Keith’s hand with his free one and wrenched him bodily forward. A prickle of that same dim warmth worked up Keith’s back when Lance squeezed his fingers and he couldn’t stop the little smile on his face.

“Fine, but it better not take too long.”

Kru-Kron’s tent was not far from the blob-angel statue in Busker’s Square. It was made of a heavy purple material that reminded Keith uncomfortably of the interior of a Galra ship. It was also bigger than it looked on the outside. Its garish tassels and massive brightly lit electric signs hid a large space that diverged down a carpeted hallway and branched into several rooms separated by curtains.

Keith took it all in nonchalantly but kept his hand close to his blade just in case there was an ambush or a trap. Nothing of the kind leapt out at them but he noticed that Lance was keeping close, the muscles in his broad shoulders held tense as he scoured the hall.

Kru bowed again and took them into the first of the tent’s many rooms. He removed his goggles and set them on a waiting table covered with books, melted candles and ambiguous
knick-knacks before turning to face them.
The alien’s eyes were like twin galaxies; they swirled with every conceivable color and glowed vibrantly as they took in the room. Kru-Kron fixed them with a stare and Lance let out a low whistle.

“You got one serious set of peepers Kru.”

“Why Thank you young master…Forgive me what is your name?”

“Oh! I’m Lance and the walking fashion faux-pas is my buddy Keith.”

Keith was only half-listening. He hunted for all possible entrances and exits like Shiro had taught them in training. It wouldn’t be hard to make a break for it here; if push came to shove they could slip under the tent itself. The tubby alien couldn’t catch them if they made a run for it. His top speed seemed to be a leisurely wobble.

Kru shuffled in front of Keith, wiping his head with a white handkerchief as he reached out for a long strip of thick purple rope hanging from the ceiling.

“Well let’s begin then shall we? Who will be first?”

Keith shook his head and looked at Lance pointedly.

“I’m not doing it. I’m just going to watch. Lance is the one getting his palm read or whatever it is you do.”

The hypnotic, bulbous eyes took Keith in, bulging slightly from their sockets in the process. Kru opened his giant mouth and in the muted tent light it glowed as bright as his eyes.

“Are you sure Master Keith? Your aura is such a…interesting color. It would be a shame if only one of you-”

Interrupting the aliens wheedling tone Lance stood slightly in front of Keith.

“Hey don’t pressure him man. If he doesn’t wanna do it he doesn’t have to. It was my idea so we’re just doing me.”

The swirling eyes narrowed slightly but Kru gave a noncommittal shrug and pulled the rope cord hanging in front of him sharply two times.

“Suit yourselves.”

As soon as the rope was pulled a pair of curtains split open in front of them. Keith took a startled step back but it was instantly clear there was nothing dangerous behind the drapes. It was just a wall and on it hung racks of large empty vessels; they reminded Keith of Christmas ornaments or mason jars with no opening at the top. They were made of clear thick glass, some tinted, others clear and no two were the same shape. They ranged in size but most were big enough that Pidge could have fit her head and upper body comfortably inside.

Lance lunged forward to examine them, hands running over each inquisitively. He touched the top of one nearly the size of himself tracing the hollow glass arch that stuck out of the top. That feature reminded Keith of something specific but he couldn’t quite put his finger on what.

Lance turned to Kru voicing his thoughts aloud.

“What are these? They kind of remind me of the glass floats we would find washed up on the beach at home…”

Using the same damp handkerchief he had used on his face Kru meticulously polished the nearest vessel. Breathing on it and wiping away the condensation to leave a buffed shine.

“These are fortune scrims. Before I tell your fortune you must chose the scrim that speaks to you Master Lance. Then we will use the scrim in your reading.”

“Oh….ok cool! Here Keith can you hold Keith-Two for me?”

Keith raised an eyebrow.

“Keith-Two?

Lance offered Keith the potted plant he had bought for Allura carefully. He took it blinking down at its glowing petals

“I thought you were calling it Planty? I thought Keith was a dumb, out of style name.”

Shrugging Lance turned back to the wall of scrims, one hand on his chin while the other rested on his hip.

“It’s growing on me. Besides, maybe Keith-Two will be a better dance partner.”
“Mmm, probably.”

Holding the plant close to his chest Keith watched Lance protectively, daring Kru-Kron to do something. The alien pulled at the edge of the cloak around his throat, withering under Keith’s icy stare.

Lance had passed over some perfectly round scrims, ignored the ones shaped like leaves and flowers. He stopped and reached out to touch a scrim curled in the shape of a nautilus shell.

“This one. This is the one. I’m hearing it speak to me and it’s saying good things.”

Picking up the heavy scrim Lance held it close; it was almost the exact same size as his chest. Kru chortled wetly and pulled open the curtain to the next room.

“An excellent choice! I could not have chosen better. Put it there…in the center of the room on that stand.”

Following Lance and Kru-Kron Keith looked around the new room with the same enthusiasm he had in the scrim room. He marked the exits and took stock of anything Kru could use as a weapon. There wasn’t much. Aside from the low padded stand where Lance was fastidiously setting the scrim the rest of the room was nothing but large, woven pillows on a thickly carpeted floor.

After settling the nautilus scrim into the holder Lance did as Kru instructed kneeling down on an enormous cushion and placing his hands on either side of the empty receptacle. Every instinct in Keith screamed at him that this was wrong; the entire scene was like spoilt milk to his senses. Lance just smiled up at him and he choked back the impulse to grab his friend and run.

“Sit down Keith! Isn’t this cool?”

“Cool isn’t the word I would use…”

“I wish I had a camera. Hunk would love this! It’s like a giant, creepy crystal ball.”

The scattered candles in the room went out in a puff of air, shrouding everything in near darkness. The enclosed space seemed even tighter without light and Keith sat as close to Lance as he could manage. He placed Keith-Two in his lap after crossing his legs and realized that his hand was still straying close to his knife. There was an odd electricity in the air that made the hair on the back of Keith’s neck rise up. He shuddered, none of this seemed to bother Lance at all.

Kru’s churning nebulae eyes opened one at a time, the huge starry circles blazing to life in front of the paladins. The alien stood on the other side of the scrim at eye level with Lance and reached out his damp, rubber hands to rest on the paladins.

“Look deeply now into my eyes as I call upon lost spirits of the galaxy to come into this room. You young hooman tell me your full name please. This will gain us their trust.”

Lance spoke automatically, his full attention on the spinning patterns in Kru-Kron’s eyes.

“Lance Charles McClain…”

Keith pulled his focus away from the alien’s magnetic gaze and focused his attention on the back of Lance’s head. He was afraid if he stared to long he would fall into whatever hypnotic state his teammate was drifting into. He was also a bit distracted by the fact he had no idea Lance’s middle name was Charles. Or even that he had a middle name. There was a lot he didn’t know about Lance. Maybe he didn’t know anything at all.

Kru-Kron lowered his voice to a comforting lull and Keith had to strain to hear him speak.

“Good Master Lance…how many rotations are you? Er…What is your age on your home planet?”

“I’m seventeen…in earth years.”

“Excellent…now. Take a deep breath and close your eyes.”

The broad, lean shoulders Keith was all too familiar with rose as Lance took a deep breath through his nose. The light emanating from Kru-Kron’s massive eyes was suddenly joined by a flickering blue light inside of the scrim. The noise of the market outside, which had been muted but still discernible outside the heavy tent walls, was completely silenced by a low, monotonous hum. Lance let the air out of his lungs in a rush and Keith wished he could see his face from where he was sitting.

“I think I feel something. Can I ask you future questions now?”

“Of course you may Master Lance!”

Kru’s toad-like face split in a broad toothless grin and he raised his hands from Lance’s. The blue light inside the nautilus scrim grew in intensity and soon every corner of the tent was lit by it.
Lance’s voice took on a dreamy tone as the blue light illuminated his entire body, casting dancing shadows on the walls.

“Will I uh- Just a second…”

He faltered and Keith realized he was trying to ask questions without giving away any details about the castle or Voltron. He had actually paid attention to Keith and the realization gave him a distinctly nauseous feeling.

“Will I get really good at my job?”

Get good? He was already good at his job. Did he not think he was? Keith worried his bottom lip. Did he mean that he wanted to be a better pilot? That made sense but really not all of them could be Shiro. True, Keith was probably a better pilot but that didn’t mean Lance was a bad one.

Kru-Kron made a theatrical humming noise deep in his throat.

“The spirits tell me you will become one of the greatest pilots in the universe! One of the most important lion pilots to ever live!”

Lance jolted in surprise and almost broke his connection with the scrim. Kru wrestled with him to make sure he kept his hands firmly planted and laughed deep in his throat.

“Did you not believe me? I told you I was a seer. In the universe of the scrim I read your past, present and future. Now please…do not remove your hands. My connection to your fate is very strong.”

The instinct to run that was screaming in Keith’s head raised in volume and the red paladin made a noise that was almost a growl.

“Lance…something about this is weird. Let’s just get out of here.”

The blue light in the scrim had grown into a small mass of blue clouds. They curled around one another filling up the shell with beautiful shades of teal and cyan. There was something in the center of the clouds, hidden and hard to distinguish. It was fluttering weakly, the pattern wild and inconsistent. Lance pressed closer to the scrim and the thing in its center was hidden from Keith’s line of sight. He seemed oblivious to Keith’s protests.

Kru licked his rubbery lips with a long, blue tongue his attention also on the scrim.

“Ask another question Master Lance.”

“Will…will I get to see my family again soon?”

Kru made a gulping noise, his throat expanding out like a balloon as he stared into the scrim.

“Oh yes…oh yes you will be going to one of your family’s famous cookouts very soon. All of your cousins will be there, your aunts and uncles. All around you…Its going to happen very, very soon…You’ll be able to tell your family about all the lives you’ve saved as part of Voltron-“

“That’s…good?-“

“Yes. Open your eyes and look deep, deep into the scrim Master Lance…do you see your heart’s desire? Do you see your future? You haven’t asked the most important question yet…”

“I see…I don’t know…”

Lance was starting to sound short of breath and Keith pushed himself up on one knee narrowly tipping over Keith-Two. The shadows cast by the scrim were moving seemingly of their own accord and when Keith glanced at them out of the corner of his eye he could almost make out the shapes of people.

A sob escaped Lance and Keith froze staring at the back of his head. Lance choked out his next question like he was in pain. Like something was hurting him.

“Will I finally find the guts to tell-“

The hum grew to a deafening pitch drowning out Lance’s voice and in the same instant the scrim burst with a new wave of powerful blue light. It burned so brightly Keith had to look away, blinking after-images from his eyes. Black spots danced in the back of his retinas and he rubbed at them furiously.

Kru-Kron whispered something in his sucking, quicksand voice; the pitch slippery and cloying as his manner. Keith couldn’t hear his answer but Lance started to laugh bitterly.

“Oh. I guess I expected as much-“

Keith’s hands found Lance’s shoulders and he squeezed them fiercely.

“That’s enough! We’re getting out of here right now!”
Inhaling sharply Lance snapped out of whatever stupor he was in and turned to stare at Keith; for a split second there was fear in his watery eyes. Tears slid down the paladin’s cheeks and Keith watched them in wordless shock. Kru threw a heavy rug over the top of the scrim extinguishing the ghostly blue light. Lance’s distraught expression disappeared and Keith could only hear him snuffling in the dark.

There was a shuffling sound as Kru made his way about the tent, moving things around and re-lighting candles. The musty smells of incense and dust disoriented Keith but he kept his hands firmly on Lance’s shoulders.

There was a thick, snotty giggle near Keith’s ear and just as it faded a back entrance was thrown wide. The noises of the market outside came in with a rush of cool air and Keith scrambled to get to his feet. Reaching down to grab Keith-Two he pulled Lance upright and outside. Kru watched them from the open flaps of the tent still grinning stupidly. At some point between covering the scrim and opening the door he had put his goggles back on.

“That was most enlightening Master Lance! Thank you for doing a reading with me.”

Using the sleeve of his jacket to wipe moisture from his eyes Lance turned and walked shakily back towards Kru.

“Wait! I never paid you…”

Keith stood close watching Lance in confusion. The blue paladin was staggering around like he barely remembered what walking was; his long legs working about as well as a baby deer’s.

The alien considered them both and tapped a thick knobby fingertip to the side of his head.

“This one is gratis Master Lance. Have a fine day!”

The tent flaps closed with a whoosh of heavy fabric and Lance just stared at them hands at his sides. Keith grabbed his wrist.

“That was a stupid idea. That guy was a creep Lance.”

Walking around the tent Keith traced the paladins steps back to the statue of saint blob of the angels and once again the world was full of the unruly busker’s music. Lance didn’t answer him, just let himself be lead. Keith decided not to bring up the tears and he looked away politely while Lance wiped the last traces from his eyes.

“It’s freaky…” Lance finally said in a distant voice.”Inside the shell I could see stuff…all kinds of stuff.”

Keith stopped walking and turned to him curiously.

“Like what? I couldn’t see anything but blue smoke. The whole thing looked like a fancy stage-show to get money off tourists.”

On that note Keith reached back to check his pants pocket. His money was still there and the bottle of oil was still in his jacket pocket so at least they hadn’t been robbed. The nauseous feeling in the pit of his stomach had all but disappeared once he and Lance were outside but Keith still felt troubled by the whole experience. His run-ins with the Galra druids had given him a deep distrust of so called “space magic” or whatever it was they dealt in. He didn’t want to say so out loud but whatever Kru-Kron was up to felt like it came close to the dark arts the druids practiced.

“It was like…memories and stuff. It’s hard to remember now but it was so vivid in the shell. Like a TV screen…”

Lance stared vacantly ahead his voice frail and reedy.

“Do you think it matters…that he knows about us being paladins? He could tell the Galra.”

Keith squeezed Lance’s wrist tight and started walking again. He tugged his teammate past the musicians and aliens begging for spare change. The faster they got the Nic-weed and got back to the castle the better. He wanted to put as much distance between himself and the tent of horrors as possible. Seeing Lance this shaken was hurting him in a way he had never felt before and he knew if he wasn’t careful it was going to slip out as anger he didn’t mean.

“No. We’re getting the castle out of here the minute we get back so by the time he tells the fleet we’ll be gone. Besides…I honestly don’t think he cared much about that. If he did he wouldn’t have told us he knew were in Voltron at all. Just don’t worry about it.”

“Keith?”

Keith stopped his whole body tight as he ground his teeth together.

“What?”

Lance clenched his fists and spoke in a breathy whisper.
“Please. Please don’t tell anyone on the team about what happened ok? I was stupid and shouldn’t have done it in the first place. You were right just…promise not to tell?”

“Lance. He did something to you, hypnotized you or something. We should at least tell Shiro. He knew about Voltron…”

Lance was adamant and he tried feebly to pull his wrist from Keith’s grip. Keith didn’t budge and he could feel the paladin’s bounding pulse under his fingertips.

“Please. I don’t want this to go on my list of fuck ups. It’s already long enough. I thought it would be funny and I feel fine. It just got real weird at the end. Just… please promise?”

Keith winced and finally let out a defeated sigh.

“I promise.”

Handing Keith-Two back to Lance he felt the paladin stop short examining the plant in his hand with confusion. The blue paladin ran his hand over the soft leaves, moving them between his fingers thoughtfully.

“Thanks Keith…for not telling. I’m sorry it turned out crappy. Despite what I said I- I was just trying to have fun with you today.”

Keith’s heart stuck in his throat and he moved his hold on Lance’s wrist to his hand, meshing their fingers together.

“Eh. I still had fun. I got a plant named after me and I learned your middle name is Charles.”

“Hah. It’s my middle name because I’m always in charge dude.”

The glazed look in Lance’s eyes faded and he pulled ahead of Keith still clinging to his hand.

“Let’s go finish our mission thing.”

Allura picked up Keith-Two in its pot and held it at arm’s length her nose wrinkled.

“Ah the…extremely poisonous Barbed Sinestra, err…thank you Lance. It’s…lovely.”

Keith collapsed against the couch in the paladin common room and could almost hear Lance’s face fall when the princess said the word “poison.”

She put the plant down very carefully on a nearby countertop and looked to the two of them in concern.

“Neither of you touched the leaves did you?”

Lance heaved an exaggerated sigh and raised his hand. Keith tried to remember if he had but he didn’t think so. He had kept his hands on the pot not the plant. Pidge was sitting on the couch upside down, her head down near the ground and her feet above her head. Hunk was making dinner and Shiro was in the bay doing something lion related. Coran leaned in close to examine Lance’s hands, pulling thoughtfully at his moustache.

“You’re going to have big itchy blisters on your hands tomorrow. Nasty buggers, but nothing a bit of Altean medical know-how can’t fix.”

Raising up a hand Keith flexed his fingers. He blinked and groaned when a thought struck him.

“Coran. What if I didn’t touch the plant but I touched Lance’s hand after he touched the plant…”

Coran marched over and gazed skeptically at Keith’s hand nodding to himself.

“Pustules ahoy Keith m’lad. Probably on every part that’s not glove.”

This revelation sent Pidge into fresh gales of hysterical laughter. She kicked her legs and dropped the miniature computer screen she had been working on as tears filled her eyes. Allura clucked at Lance sympathetically.

“I appreciate the gesture Lance it was really quite sweet of you but perhaps next time you should ask about the plant before you purchase it.”

Pidge’s laughter had turned to ugly snorting and she collapsed onto the ground in a pile, clutching her sides.

“NO MORE! I can’t take it!”

Lance threw his head back and groaned in that melodramatic Lance way and allowed Coran to
push him out the door. Coran waggled a finger at Pidge, reprimanding her even as he tried to keep a straight face.

“Now Now! I remember making similar mistakes as a young’un; eating things that caused swelling and such. Like the time with the Glerinberries. Now that’s a tale for you young paladin! I’ll tell you the whole gruesome thing while you and Keith soak your hands in the infirmary. Give you a few hours in my anti-Sinestra concoction and you’ll be right as mercury rain!”

Lance moaned piteously disappearing out the door while Coran rambled, speaking in an endless chattering stream. Keith called after them.

“I’ll be there in a minute!”

Stepping over Pidge who was recovering in a boneless, giggling heap on the ground Keith made his way over to Allura and pointed to Keith-Two.

“So is that thing safe as long as you don’t touch the leaves?”

Allura regarded it and finally nodded.

“As long as you only handle the leaves with a gloved hand and do not eat the blossoms it is a benign enough plant. I can see why Lance was attracted to it, it really is quite beautiful.”

Keith picked it up and thought he could already feel the ghost of an itch developing on the tips of his fingers.

“If you’re just going to throw it away can I have it? I’ll be careful with it.”

Allura smiled walking with Keith towards the hallway with her hands behind her back. She leaned forward playfully nudging the red paladin with her shoulder.

“Keeping a potentially harmful plant to make Lance happy is a strange gesture coming from someone who seems to barely tolerate his company.

“I have to. He named it Keith-Two. You can’t just chuck out something with your name on it, even if it could kill you.”

Lance and Coran’s voices carried down from the farthest part of the hall. Lance had said something that made Coran laugh. Keith stared at his plant counterpart, debating.

“Princess?”

Allura turned her bright, trusting eyes completely on him. She was so good at that, at giving you her complete and undivided attention.

“Yes?”

If Keith told Shiro or Allura about Kru-Kron and the weird fortune telling session they would interrogate Lance about it. The plant debacle had embarrassed Lance and he risked making that shame even worse if he revealed the paladin had put the team at risk. He wanted so badly to ask Allura if she knew anything about hypnotists or scrims or the weird blue light but Lance seemed fine. Maybe it was best to just let it go, even if it troubled him. He had made a promise…

“What’s for dinner?”

Hunk put down a steaming plate of purplish fried eggs and sweet smelling oatmeal in front of Keith with a flourish. He looked at it and felt his mouth water but didn’t dig in yet.

“Thanks Hunk. This looks really good.”

Pidge spoke around a massive mouthful of food her eyes half closed in rapture.

“It IS really good”

Keith moved some of the egg yolk around with a fork. Shiro was sitting next to him reading something from an info-pad and eating his breakfast distractedly. Lance was nowhere in sight which was strange; he was never late for meal made of something other than green goo. Shiro noticed the empty chair next to Pidge and chuckled his tongue running his metal hand through his hair. Hunk sat with his own plate heaped with a pile of toast and commented before anyone else had a chance.

“Hey. You guys notice Lance has been kinda…off the last couple of days?”

Pidge wiped at her mouth with a sleeve adjusting her glasses.

“Yeah. He’s been really quiet.”
Shiro frowned into his plate.

“He gets that way sometimes. He goes through bad bouts of homesickness. Plus he wasn’t able to use his hands until yesterday so he hasn’t been participating in drills.”

Lance, naturally, had gotten the brunt of the Sinestra poisoning. Keith had a few itchy bumps on his hands but the swelling hadn’t been bad enough to impede piloting. Lance hadn’t been so lucky. Even with the ointment soak and Coran’s so called Altean medical miracle cures the blue paladin hadn’t been able to bend his fingers for two days.

Hunk swallowed a mouthful of egg and gestured with the end of his fork.

“Yeah I guess that might be it but like, he’s been staring off into space a lot? Not literal space just like…space in front of him space.”

Pidge sipped at the pinkish liquid in her glass that Hunk had told them was fresh squeezed juice; what kind of juice he wouldn’t say. She put her head on her palm and looked a bit guilty.

“I shouldn’t have laughed so much when he gave Allura the plant. I couldn’t help it…”

Hunk stood, empty plate in hand, and went to the counter to serve himself a second helping.

“Just make it up to him today. We’re all doing team building on the training deck, right Shiro?”

Shiro opened his mouth to answer but paused mid-motion to smile at the doorway.

“Morning Lance!”

Keith followed Shiro’s gaze expectantly but felt his own smile shrivel when he saw Lance. The blue paladin looked…droopy. He wasn’t standing up straight and for the first time Keith could remember his skin looked pale, un-exfoliated and slightly greasy. He hadn’t brushed his hair or even showered from the look of it and sat without returning Shiro’s greeting.

Hunk set a plate of food in front of Lance and he gaped at it like he had no idea what it was for. Shiro leaned close to him unperturbed by his silence.

“Hey Lance you think you could train with us today? We’ve really missed you during exercises…”

Keith watched Lance watching his eggs grow cold; he didn’t even realize he was holding his breath until his lungs began to burn. Something was wrong. Something was wrong and he knew what it was. The first day after the fortune telling tent Lance had been fine. Quiet but fine. Keith hadn’t seen that much of him the second day, he had been able to go back to training. Lance still seemed fine by the end of day two but now day three had come and he wasn’t fine. He was the opposite of it and Keith should have told Shiro- he should have told everyone.

Panic built in Keith’s lungs and he struggled to keep it under control. He had to find a minute to tell Lance the promise was off. Everyone needed to know now.

Lance just sat with his brows furrowed, his gaze held by the table top. Finally he gave a slow answer in a lethargic, overcast voice.

“Yes, ok. I just-”

He trailed off and pulled his hands from his lap, laying them out on the table; they were still bandaged. They did look better today, Keith had seen them at their worst: it wasn’t pretty. Lance turned his eyes to meet Shiro’s still speaking softly, almost in a whisper.

“I don’t feel all here right now. It’s weird. I’m really tired and when I sleep I have these super realistic dreams…and when I wake up I still feel like I’m not all the way awake.”

The paladins went silent watching him. Keith noticed the concern on Hunk’s face and apprehension in Pidge’s eyes.

Lance kept staring at Shiro and Keith felt a chill, aside from his strange grayish pallor there was something off about Lance’s eyes. They looked black, like all the color had been sapped from them. The anxiety inside him was becoming unbearable, he didn’t even know if he could wait to ask Lance’s permission.

“Shiro…I can’t feel Blue that well. Like, she’s still there but the connection isn’t as strong as it usually is. Maybe you should just keep working without me.”

Shiro put a supportive hand on Lance’s shoulder and squeezed it cautiously.

“You’re part of the team Lance. We couldn’t be Voltron without you and I know you’re not feeling your best right now but maybe training will help you get back in touch with your lion.”

Pidge pushed her body over the top of the table looking over her glasses at Lance.
“You probably just had an allergic reaction to the plant. Some physical exercise will help you.”

Hunk slapped Lance on the back and pointed to his food.

“You gotta eat something man. You gotta eat if you wanna run around like a lunatic on the training deck.”

Keith pressed into the crowd around Lance trying to catch his eye without success. Everyone was coaxing Lance in their own way and he couldn’t do anything. He fell back into his chair and said nothing, although he didn’t take his eyes off Lance again. Watching to make sure he cleaned every crumb off his plate, waiting for a minute alone with him.

The blue paladin moved automatically, doing exactly what he was told. He didn’t smile or laugh and made no effort to one-up Keith as they finished breakfast and went to suit up. His movements were very slow and he spoke only when spoken too. He was like a man in a fog.

Keith cornered him in the changing room as he pulled on his boot with stiff fingers. Making sure the other paladins were distracted he leaned down to hiss in Lance’s ear.

“This is because of what happened and I’m telling Shiro.”

Lance paused, finished putting on his boot and looked up at Keith in a way that spoke of absolute exhaustion. When he answered he had the nerve to sound angry.

“You promised.”

Keith pulled at his hair furiously staring at Lance in disbelief.

“You... You’re... No. I don’t care if I did promise. I’m telling them because something is wrong with you.”

“I’m just tired! Everybody gets tired Keith. Oh I guess you don’t huh? Perfect guy like you must never get tired!”

Keith threw back his head and gave a small scream of frustration throwing his hands in the air.

“This isn’t about ME. If you would stop acting like an idiot for five seconds you would see that I’m right about this!”

Lance stood and came at Keith pushing recklessly into his personal space.

“You love being right too! You LOVE being right and Lance being an idiot! Keep up the status quo right golden boy?”

“Just shut up for a minute! Can you just shut up and..."

“It’s fine, Ok Keith? You can stop pretending you care.”

The words pierced Keith’s chest like a knife. He drew in a breath to argue, to try and explain he was just trying to help but Shiro shoved between them pushing Lance and Keith an arm’s length apart.

“Whoa! Enough. Lance, Keith calm down. What’s this about?”

They both murmured apologies neither explaining why they had been arguing and Shiro sighed wearily.

“We’re going to have a talk about this after. Please remember that we’re all on the same team? For me?”

On the training deck Lance didn’t even make an effort to flirt with Allura when her voice blared over the intercom from the observation deck.

“Lance! I’m so glad that you’ll be joining us for training today! We’ve missed you!”

Keith stood as close to Lance as he could manage feeling a tremendous amount of guilt. Lance was sick and he could have prevented it multiple times. No more waiting. He was going to tell Shiro and Allura the minute they had finished, the second he was able to.

Lance gave a weak wave to the control booth above them and Allura continued.

“Perhaps today you should all do some basic hand to hand combat, nothing too strenuous. We can finish it off with one combat simulation. Lance you go first – who wants to spar with Lance?”

Keith couldn’t jog forward fast enough. Grabbing two of the short staves they used for practice bouts he handed one to Lance who gazed at it with the same confusion he had regarded his
breakfast earlier.
Making sure he had a tight grip on it Keith started to circle him.

“Lance… You sure you’re up for this?”
Lance looked right through Keith and held out his own staff. Resignation clouded his features.

“Just hit me already Mullet.”

Bringing down his staff Keith felt it strike Lance’s with a reverberation that lingered in his back teeth. Lance started to move in a slow, wary circle. He could cover more ground than Keith could, his legs were longer and he had a longer stride. Keith was the faster of the two however and he lunged experimentally to gauge Lance’s reaction time. It was terrible; he was late on every defensive pose.

After five minutes of tapping Lance on all sides to try and get him to parry Keith froze watching the bland expression on Lance’s face change from confusion to pain. Something was wrong.

The sparring staff fell from Lances nerveless hands and he took a few heavy steps towards Keith one hand outstretched the other clutching his chest. Keith stared in wide-eyed horror as the paladins lips started to turn bright blue, the whites of his eyes darkening to a blood-tinged red. Lance choked, struggled to take a breath and collapsed to his knees.

Keith ripped off his helmet and sprinted to catch him before he hit the ground. He could hear the other paladins running blindly towards them.

“Lance!?”

At a frantic loss Keith yanked Lance’s helmet off and watched as he wheezed, fighting violently for air. Holding him close Keith heard his own voice burst out of him in a terrified jumble.

“I’m here! I’m here what can I do? Please…Lance…”

Raspy syllables escaped the back of Lance’s throat as his eyes rolled back in his head.

“Shi-ro…sor-y. Gon-home.”

Lance stopped breathing, limbs loose and eyes closed. He was very, very still and Keith could only stare at him as his world crumbled. He felt Hunk grab him and heft him up as Shiro pulled Lance from his arms. A blank cold shock was rolling over the scene making everything that was happening surreal and out of place; like watching a scene from a movie he wasn’t a part of.

The black paladin had his ear over Lances mouth listening for breathing that wasn’t there. He pinched Lance’s nose and blew air deep into his lungs before pressing violently on his sternum through his suit.

“Come on…Breathe Lance…”

Keith was aware of Allura’s voice muted behind him, Hunks warm breath on the back of his head and Coran kneeling next to Shiro. He watched all of it as the voices blurred into one another and became distorted static. His breakfast was threatening to come back up and he swallowed down a throat-full of bile. Shiro continued CPR, his chest compressions brutal enough to break Lance’s ribs. Even when the cracking bones were audible he didn’t stop.

“BREATHE LANCE!”

Pidge pressed between Keith and Hunk, her face buried into Keith’s side. He put an arm around her numbly and felt her shaking. This was his fault. He had done this.

Shiro grit his teeth shaking his head as Allura tried to grab his hands-she didn’t understand what he was doing. Shiro screamed wordlessly and delivered one last thump to Lance’s chest. The paladin convulsed and gave a hollow gasp before he started to breathe again in short, pained heaves. Shiro’s voice was a wavery sob.

“Oh thank god…thank god.”

Wrapping powerful arms around Lance, Shiro pulled him close hugging him tightly. He pressed his face into Lance’s neck and just held him that way for a few seconds before he carefully picked the blue paladin up, cradling him like a baby. Allura threw her arms around Shiro’s shoulders tears dripping down her cheeks.

“I thought you were trying to kill him. What was that barbaric display?”

Shiro stood at Coran’s urging, holding Lance like his life depended on it. Hunk answered for him sounding just as dazed as Keith felt.

“It…It was CPR. You-you don’t do that?”
Coran tugged Shiro forward speaking calmly; for once he seemed to be the voice of reason in the room. Maybe he had been through stuff like this before Keith thought bemused. Maybe he had seen friends dying like that before-

“Shiro we need to get Lance into a healing pod. We need to run a diagnostic—there’s no time to dally. We need to figure out what’s happened.”

Pidge looked out from behind Keith and spoke in a small, uncertain voice.

“I think it could have been cardiac arrest…”

The group started to migrate slowly across the training deck at Coran’s steady insistence. Hunk was trying and failing to explain CPR while Pidge supplied details from their basic first-aid training at the academy. Keith lagged behind his footsteps heavy. He stopped to pick up Lance’s helmet and held it to his chest, his emotions deadened by extreme stress.

He didn’t even notice that Allura had stayed behind with him until she tried to gently pry Lance’s helmet from his hands. He yanked it back his grip on it tightening.

“N-no!”

“Shhh…it’s alright.”

The Princess reached up to push a lock of sweaty hair from Keith’s face and he blinked at the tender touch. She was still crying.

“Keith. It will be alright. We will care for Lance. This is not your fault.”

The kind touch broke Keith and his knees finally buckled beneath him. He pushed his forehead onto the top of Lance’s helmet, unable to bring himself to look at Allura again.

“Yes…It is.”

Somewhere deep in the castle one of the lions let loose an ear-splitting roar. Keith had a feeling he knew exactly which it was.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to my friend CJ for being my proof-reader <3
“So this scrim. You say that Lance told you there were pictures inside?”

Keith nodded for the hundredth time in so many hours. He had told the team the story of Kru-Kron and the tent three times, elaborating on the details over and over again.

All of them were exhausted and sitting in whatever spot they could find in the ring of healing pods at the center of the infirmary. Lance was resting inside one of the pods. No one wanted to leave despite Coran having nothing to tell them. The machine was still scanning every part of the blue paladin’s body looking for answers.

Pidge pulled her knees up to her chest leaning against the side of the pod console.

“Do you really think that has anything to do with it? What if Lance just had something wrong with him before and we didn’t know about it.”

Hunk paced past her, his arms behind his head as he walked in ceaseless circles.

“They do those intense physicals before you get accepted into flight training at the Garrison. If he had a hangnail they would have marked it down. A heart defect or something would never have flown under the radar.”

Pidge mumbled agreement to this before offering a counter-argument.

“Well, what if it happened while we were zipping around in zero G -I mean the human body has never been this far out in space before. For all we know he could have picked up a virus that started eating the walls of his heart on some planet we visited. An alien frog-guy giving Lance a magic disease makes no sense…”

Keith glowered at Pidge from where he sat with his back against a far infirmary wall, away from the main group.

“He’s been in the healing pod before! It would have noticed that stuff. Why don’t you believe me! It was weird. The whole thing was just…WEIRD. It did something to Lance and I think he knew it then!”

Pidge threw her arms up in frustration her voice betraying fatigue and frayed nerves.

“So why didn’t you just tell us!”

“I told you before. Lance asked me not to. I-I promised.”

Shiro raised both arms for silence as Pidge started to throw more accusations the red paladin’s direction. Keith couldn’t blame her for being upset with him. He had never felt so utterly miserable before. Not only had he let down a team mate…that team mate was Lance.

Shiro rubbed at the bridge of his scarred nose.

“No more arguing. No more fights! Keith didn’t do anything wrong. We have to stay focused on how to help Lance. We need him.”

Allura put a hand to the pod examining the motionless blue paladin inside. When she spoke she sounded more disappointed with herself than anyone.

“Keith. I’m afraid I don’t know anything about scrims but when I was young there were plenty of races that claimed to have gifts of foretelling. My father said the gift had been lost to the ages and the Galra do not even know of it. I have a feeling this suspicious creature was either a harmless fake or something more menacing under the surface.”

Coran looked up from the pod console long enough to nod in agreement.

“Same Princess, I think if maybe I could see em in person it would -what’s the expression? Bang some bells?”

The healing pod beeped loudly and Coran nearly tripped over himself to look at a wall of readouts flashing over the surface of the pod’s glass door.

“The scan is finally done! Now we’ll figure out exactly what we’re dealing with.”
Keith got to his feet and found one of his legs had fallen asleep. He limped over trying and failing to shake the tingling sensation from his muscles. Hunk, Pidge and Shiro all hovered near Coran’s shoulder pushing in close to see what he was looking at despite none of them being able to read Altean.

Humming to himself Coran rubbed his chin. He tapped the screen and made a puzzled noise just as perplexed as he had before the scan gave him a verdict.

“Er, well. There…is a problem with Lance’s heart after all.”

Pidge gave Keith a smug look.

“See? I told you it was something like that. Nothing some time in the healing pod can’t-”

Coran stopped her mid-sentence, the pointer finger on one hand raised high in the air.

“The problem is that it’s gone.”

The paladins all stared at him in perfect, stunned silence until Hunk let out a pained laugh.

“Um. I’m sorry? That’s not how humans work? If it just poofed like that he wouldn’t be you know…alive?”

Shiro pulled out of the huddle and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Can you explain Coran? How can it just be gone?”

Keith took a few steps away from the pod, the cold weight in his chest and stomach becoming unbearably heavy. Coran rapidly typed a command into the healing pod interface and the infirmary darkened. A hologram of a generic human body appeared above Lance’s pod and Coran pointed to it, using the projection as a diagram.

“I’ve never seen anything quite like this before but this is the case as far as I can tell. Imagine this is Lance.”

A large dark blotch appeared over the hologram’s chest and the bright outlines of its body faded from bright gold to a dull white. It seemed like the vibrancy had been leeched from it in a matter of seconds.

“See, right now we’re existing in our time moving forward. But time can bend and warp, that’s how we move the castle through wormholes into different parts of the universe. We’re not traveling through space we’re just traveling through time really quickly so what would be years of travel is condensed to seconds. Understand so far?”

Keith watched Hunk shake his head nervously while Pidge nodded. Shiro kept his eyes on the hologram. All of them understood it to certain degrees but Keith was still having trouble retaining what was going on. He was too distracted, his mind torn a dozen different directions at once. He spoke up impatiently.

“What does that have to do with Lance?”

“I’m making my way to it young paladin. Er-”

Coran gazed up at the hologram flustered, trying to pull his train of thought back onto the proverbial tracks.

“Alright, so time can be bent which means we can make pockets of it and keep them connected to this timeline. If I was to make an educated guess based on the readings? I think that this Kron-Kroak fellow put something like a small wormhole in Lance and has pulled essential parts of him somewhere else; namely his quintessence and his physical heart.”

The hologram Lance flickered, the black blotch over its heart growing in size and swirling darkly. Coran pulled at his moustache, narrowing his eyes.

“Probably would have killed ‘em too but he’s connected to the Blue Lion and that’s a hard bond to break.”

Shiro flexed his metal hand nervously looking from it to the hologram.

“Quintessence…isn’t that what the Galra harvest?”

Allura put a supportive hand on his back.

“All living things have quintessence within them. It is like a shared life-force or energy. All of us have quintesscent signatures as distinct as our fingerprints. That vibrant energy is even visible to some as an aura.”

Hunk looked ever more disturbed pulling at his headband.

“So they took his heart AND sucked out his soul?”
Pidge interrupted the princess before she could reassure Hunk, her voice on the edge of tears.

“So, we can fix it then? I mean. It’s not really _magic_. Quintessence and wormholes are just science being used like magic and we can find a way to fix that right?”

Coran kept his eyes on the hologram pulling so hard at his moustache it looked ready to tear off in his hand. Keith knew that Lance was his favorite paladin. Everyone did, he was bad at hiding it.

“This is an anomaly. I don’t know if I’ve ever seen anything like it before. Based on what Keith told us maybe the rest of him is inside one of those scrim things. Right now I couldn’t tell you how to fix this; afraid I’m at a bit of loss.”

Hunk tapped his fingertips together and threw in his own concerns voice trembling.

“Is Lance gonna be ok with bits of him in another dimension? I mean…Is what happened on the training deck going to happen again?”

Coran sighed and fidgeted; he folded his arms and unfolded them again his body vibrating with nervous energy.

“I can’t say but it looks like the healing pod and the Blue Lion are keeping him stable. Best to just leave him in there until we get this sorted.”

Shiro tucked his helmet under his arm and put a steadying hand out to Lance’s pod. When he spoke Keith felt himself paying attention.

“We know what we need to do. We need to find this Kru-Kron. We’ll start at the Asteroid Market and if he’s moved on we’ll find out where he’s gone. We’ll find him and the scrims and get some answers.”

Shiro looked to each paladin in turn and Keith averted his eyes when Shiro glanced his direction. He was still too ashamed to look his leader in the face.

“It’s late and everyone is tired. For now I’m going to stay with Allura on the deck while you all take some time to rest up. I have a feeling tracking this guy is going to take awhile. A con-artist never sticks around one place for very long or they risk being caught.”

There were halfhearted murmurs of agreement from all members of the team. Hunk and Pidge turned to leave reluctantly while Allura conversed with Shiro in urgent whispers. When Keith passed them Shiro reached out and caught him by the shoulder.

“Keith. Can we ask you a few more questions before you go?”

Keith stared at his boots and nodded. His hair was sticking to his neck and he wanted very badly to get out of his piloting suit but he couldn’t refuse Shiro or the princess. He watched Allura’s hand appear in his peripheral vision as she reached to give his hand a gentle squeeze.

“Did Lance say something to you? Before Shiro gave him resuscitation?”

Keith shrugged.

“He did but it was hard to understand…”

The princess spoke with quiet patience, her tone encouraging without being coddling.

“What was it? We do not know what he was feeling. Perhaps what he said could give us a clue to his state of mind.”

Keith swallowed but his expression didn’t shift. He knew it didn’t, he prided himself on the ability to keep his face blank.

“He –apologized to Shiro. He said sorry Shiro. Then I think …I think he said he was going home.”

Shiro made a pained hissing sound through his teeth. He grunted and Keith could hear the knuckles in his metal hand scrapping against each other as he made a fist. His voice was strained when he finally spoke.

“So he knew. He knew he was dying.”

Allura held Keith’s hand tighter, her other hand pulled to her chest.

“I do not understand. He said he was going home. That means he was confused, it shows he was not aware of the situation.”

Shiro took a deep breath through his nose.

“It’s an earth expression. Some humans…_religious_ humans, when they’re dying they say
they’re going home, maybe to an afterlife.”

Allura went still and Keith finally found the courage to look up at her. She was staring at the pod thoughtfully, her eyes misty and distant.

“Ah. Some Alteans held beliefs of that kind. But I find it strange. In the many times the paladins found themselves in life threatening situations, even when Lance was very hurt from the explosion on the ship- I cannot recall him using similar language. Do you think on earth he would have used that expression?”

Keith blinked and felt a strange flicker of hope in his stomach.

“Actually, no…. ”

“Furthermore, if he used what strength he had to apologize to Shiro then I would assume he thought he was doing something wrong, something like letting down his team. I don’t know, it does not fit. To me his apology signifies something else… what I am not sure.”

Allura turned to look at Keith and offered him a determined smile.

“There is a mystery here we will solve. I am sure of it.”

Allura pulled Keith into a hug and ran reassuring fingers over his back.

“Go and rest.”

Keith pulled away feeling so numb he barely noticed the friendly shoulder pat Shiro gave him as he turned to leave. He made it to his quarters and stripped off his suit. He didn’t bother to shower and lay staring at the ceiling above his bed wide-eyed and restless.

He had done this. He had hurt the team he had hurt Lance he had let down Shiro and the Princess he…

Hey man, stop that.

Keith wrenched out of bed breathing hard. The voice in his head had been so clear and it had sounded…it had sounded just like Lance. He looked around the empty room and debated just getting up and going to train or do some sort of work out; anything that was a distraction.

You’re super tired dude you should sleep. It can wait for a little while said the Lance voice in his head consolingly.

Reluctantly Keith lay down, half expecting the ghost of Lance to appear out of a wall. He didn’t and Keith took a deep breath as he rested his hands on his stomach

“Lance? Are you there?”

There was no answer inside his head or out and Keith felt stupid. Lance was in a pod several hallways away. The voice he had created that sounded like him was just a sad coping mechanism. He stared at the ceiling again but this time the guilt wasn’t so deep. Even if the voice wasn’t real he knew that Lance would have wanted him to sleep. He would have understood. Shutting his eyes slowly Keith felt his muscles relax.

There you go. Get your beauty sleep, you really need it said the Lance voice fondly.

“You need it more-”

Keith mumbled his reply as he started to doze and by the time he finished it he was asleep.

Keith had never seen pink sand before.

He wondered idly if it was something that existed on earth or could only be found on planets beyond his solar system. The planet he and the other paladins now found themselves on was barely habitable. The temperature was so extreme that Keith kept his helmet’s tinted visor down so he wouldn’t have to breathe in the heat rising from the ground. It burned his lungs and scalded the back of his throat.

The sand that covered every inch of ocean-less planetoid was the same color as cotton candy. The grains themselves were as dangerous as the heat. They were tiny, barely visible to the naked eye and easily coated the insides of mouths, lungs and the corners of eyes. The small grains made the ground pillow soft to the touch and difficult to walk through in full armor. If you fell, and falling was easy to do once you had sunk in the silky dunes up to your knees, it was a lengthy process to get back up again.

There were rocks in the pink desert and each of them looked like mounds of smooth crimson glass. Hunk called them cherries for good reason and when one was peeking from the top of a
sand hill it only added to the illusion that the paladins were struggling through the universe’s deadliest bowl of ice cream.

Keith had wrapped a ripped piece of old fabric around his head and body as a makeshift cloak to keep the sand from the joints of his suit. It flapped in a violent wind kicked up from beyond the pale, mauve horizon. The first sun was beginning to set and thank god the second sun was behind it by only twenty minutes or so.

Climbing to the stop of a stone “cherry” Keith startled a group of blue scorpion-creatures sunning themselves. He watched them scatter, his fingers playing across the hilt of his bayard under his makeshift cover.

*Dude, you look like a heavy metal album cover* said the Lance voice in Keith’s head and he winced, wishing the voice he had made up would just stop talking.

Keith surveyed a small valley stretching out below him. Two cliffs made of cherry stone extended on either side offering a small amount of tinted shade. In the gap between them half buried in the sand was a town of white adobe-like huts. How anything could live on this planet was beyond Keith, but live there they did.

A hand rested on Keith’s shoulder and he nodded back to Allura, gesturing soundlessly. She had also wrapped cloth around her suit and had tinted her visor to keep out the glare. Using the chameleon powers of the Alteans she had darkened her skin to help with the heat but even then she claimed it didn’t do much good.

The planet had been surprisingly large so they had taken to searching it a quadrant at a time. Shiro had gone with Hunk, and Allura had made it known she would be physically helping with the search. Pidge was still on the ship with Lance despite her protests.

Keith slid on the sand-smoothed rock under his boots and Allura grabbed him by his cloak before he tumbled down the hill of sand in front of them. He groaned into his comm.

“You know. Pidge was probably right about being the one to come down here. She isn’t as heavy, walking on the sand would have been easier for her.”

Allura huffed brushing sand from her shoulder.

“That may be, but she’s also the only one of us who seems confident in finding some scientific solution to our problem. To do so she must study Lance and if I’m honest… I do not like the thought of him being always alone; Even if he is not aware of it.”

Keith nodded feeling sweat trickle down his neck in thick beads.

It had been five days since Lance collapsed on the training deck. His condition had gotten neither better nor worse. Outwardly he didn’t seem to be deteriorating but he wasn’t healing either. The impossible hole in his chest wasn’t going anywhere and without quintessence there was really no Lance there at all; just a living shell.

No one was surprised that Kru-Kron had left the asteroid market by the time they returned. It had been a frustrating two day slog through customers, beggars and merchants before they found a good lead. They were saved by eavesdropping fruit vendor who had overheard Kru at a card game. He was leaving for a lawless desert planet known to harbor and hide the worst criminals the system had to offer.

So that’s where they had gone.

Speaking over the shared comm-link feed Allura gazed over her shoulder at the rapidly darkening sky.

“Shiro? Hunk? We have found another town. There looks to be a sandstorm in this quadrant. You should find cover in case it reaches you- over”

Shiro answered immediately voice calm and decisive.

“We’re going to spend the night with the Lions. We should be there before the storm hits. Are you going to stay in the town or try and make it back?”

Allura looked to Keith and he debated before answering.

“I don’t think we would be able to search the town for Kru tonight and beat the storm back to camp.”

Allura nodded in agreement, pushing her weight against the wind picking up at her back.

“I agree. Shiro? We will find lodging in town. Please sign on for checks when you reach the Lions and we will inform you of our situation then.”

Shiro’s voice grew garbled and indistinct in the swirling gusts. Their long wave communications were not compatible with the sand in the air and sometimes contact could only be
held for short bursts. Keith put a hand to his helmet trying to get a better look at the bright buildings below. It was impossible to make out details. Already the sand was pushing through his armor, looking for any skin it could sting.

“Let’s get moving Keith. I am dying for whatever passes for water here.”

Keith nodded and took a few steps away from the edge. Finding his footing he ran in a careful straight line and jumped as high into the air as he could. The leap took him halfway down the mountainous dune and he landed in the dust like sand with a soft, satisfying plop.

Tucking his arms in he rolled laboriously to his feet and waited expectantly.

Allura laughed when she hit the pink sand with a puff of air, holding out a hand so Keith could help her up.

“I never want to see sand again after this but I must admit. That part of the travel is very enjoyable.”

Keith started to walk thankful the wind was at their backs, helping to carry them towards the bright orange lights of the town.

“Getting all the sand out of the Lions joints is going to be a nightmare. I’m glad we only brought Yellow and Black. Red would have hated it here."

"Its like a giant litterbox, maybe he would have loved it said the Lance in Keith’s head.

Allura fell into step behind Keith and the plowed forward. Hunk had discovered when they first landed that it was much easier to walk in a single file line with one person walking in the others footsteps. Keith and the princess had taken turns being in front all day and he was thankful they would be under cover soon. He was exhausted.

By the time they were under the protection of the large cherry-stone cliffs the first of the two suns had set completely casting everything into a crimson haze as the larger sun filled the sky. The overhanging rock picked up the light and glimmered so bright it stung Keith’s aching eyes.

The town was kind enough to have guiding lanterns. As the sandstorm rolled in around them blocking out the last rays of the red sun and bringing with it a starless darkness, Keith was thankful for the lanterns showing a safe path forward. The lanterns were also red, made of the same rock as the cliffs. The paladin touched each as they passed them, checking to make sure Allura was close he moved under the carved arch at the front of the town and breathed an inaudible sigh of relief when they saw the empty town square.

Allura echoed his relief out loud.

“We made it. Thank goodness.”

In the city proper most of the storm was kept at bay by the surrounding stone walls. It had been smart to build it nearly under the rock. There was a muted quality that made the storm sound farther than it really was. Keith walked towards the dry fountain at the center of the city cautiously. It looked like the natives had all taken shelter but there was music and voices echoing loudly from a larger adobe building at edge of the main thoroughfare.

Allura nodded to it.

“That establishment looks like a residential bar or tavern, I would assume a good place to start questioning locals.”

Yeah. If this was a DnD game that would be my first stop said the Lance voice in Keith’s head playfully. Keith took a step towards the tavern then stopped. Some instinct pulled him back. He scanned the square again.

Planet locals rode a thick stumpy creature that closely resembled a rhino. It had six legs with flat feet that acted like snowshoes on the sand and Keith had found enough of their tracks in the desert to know they were common. A few of these creatures were huddled at the side of the tavern and one of them was tied to a caravan hovering above the ground, bobbing slowly up and down. It wasn’t the caravan that attracted Keith’s attention. It was what was tied on top of it.

He grabbed Allura’s arm excitedly moving quickly in the direction of the hover-cart.

“That’s the tent!! That fabric! I think that’s Kru-Kron’s tent!”

Ducking into the alley where the brightly painted caravan was protected by the walls of two buildings Keith grabbed the edge of the cart roof and pulled himself up lightly. Running a hand over the pile of heavy purple fabric and dark metal tent poles he gave an excited laugh.

“This is it! It must be his cart!”

The princess clapped her hands together eagerly, her darkened helmet visor turning briefly to see if anyone was watching them.
"There are no lights on inside Keith… I don’t think he’s in. I would guess he is in the tavern."

Keith leapt back to the ground and peeked into a darkened cart window. Everything inside was obscured by the dust on the glass, but from what he could make out it was lightless and empty. Keith moved back around to the front of the round cart and climbed the small staircase to the metal door.

"Let’s wait for him inside. We can take him by surprise and capture him without a fight."

Allura pulled at her cloak as it flapped into her face and nodded.

"A good plan. Is the door locked? If we broke it open it could give us away when he returns…"

Keith tried the caravan door and found it stuck tight. He grunted, casting about for another way in. His eye caught on a small window above the door and he reached up on a whim to try it. It was askew and pulled open easily.

"This looks like a job for our backup, princess."

Allura laughed softly glancing back once more over her shoulder as a loud crash erupted from the neighboring tavern. Nothing came of the noise but loud, raucous laughing and she turned back to the task at hand. Pinning her cloak to her side Allura found the shoulder bag hidden against her hip and opened the top delicately. Reaching a hand into the bag she made a small clicking sound with her tongue and a blue mouse ran up her outstretched arm. Sheltering it as best she could from the wind Allura pointed up to the small wagon window.

"My friend, could you go inside and see about opening the door for us?"

The tiny mouse saluted smartly and Allura lifted it up as close to the lip of the windowpane as possible. Keith watched it disappear. He felt nervous energy ripple up and down his body. They had finally found it. After all this time slogging through interviews and sand; whatever part that was missing from Lance could be right on the other side of the door.

Allura didn’t seem as excited as he was tracing her fingers over carvings in the metal around the front door frame inquisitively. She hummed to herself rubbing a thumb over the odd lettering that Keith hadn’t even registered.

He was about to ask what was so interesting when the door clicked and slowly creaked inward. The mouse hung from the interior doorknob squeaking in triumph as Allura applauded it, reaching out with both hands to catch it before it fell from the handle.

"A very good job! I can’t thank you enough my friend, despite my reservations about you stowing away you have saved us some trouble."

Keith was already through the door, heart pounding. At first he couldn’t see any of the interior through the dark and his filthy helmet. He reached up and pulled it off with a loud moan of utter relief. He could feel heat rising from his face and sweat dripping from his shoulders in thick drops. Allura followed his example, gasping for air as she pulled off her own helmet. She waved a hand in her face and shut the door behind them softly.

The wind and weather outside muted to a soft whine. Keith could barely wait for his eyes to adjust to the murky light. He stepped into Kru-Kron's wagon feeling carpet and paper crinkle underfoot. The inside of the cart was mercifully cool against his burning skin and as the details of the place surfaced he started to recognize small objects scattered about the tables and benches filling the single, oblong room.

The red paladin peered back at Allura breathlessly, his armor plates giving off a faint blue glow as he whispered.

"This is it! We really found him!"

The princess set her Altean mouse on a side table and glanced around curiously. Although Keith had always had nearly supernatural night vision Allura's was somehow even sharper; Apparently Alteans could see well in darkness or daylight.

Keith expected her to be as keyed up as himself but was disappointed by her reserved attitude to their breakthrough. She wandered over to a wall skillfully avoiding bumping into tabletops and piles of books.

"I feel...energy. Over here."

"Is it Lance’s?"

Keith blurted this out without thinking, pushing over to join her, tripping and bumping everything she had avoided in the process. Allura shook her head and pushed a strand of sweaty hair behind her ear.

"No...It’s something strange. I don’t think I’ve ever felt anything quite like it before…"
The princess held back and looked down at the blue mouse who was busily chewing on a piece of old paper.

“My friend. Do you think you could go position yourself in the alley and stand guard? It would be wonderful to have a warning if the owner of this cart is on his way back.”

Keith heard a small squeak and the skittering of paws over wood. He blinked as Allura turned on a cube shaped table lamp and soft yellow light filled the caravan.

“There Keith. Now we both can see what we are doing and we have a sentry standing guard.”

Allura went back to the wall tracing her hands across it inch by inch. Keith was distracted by a pitcher. He could almost smell the water before he saw it and picked the whole thing up drinking directly from it in huge thirsty gulps. The princess took it from him when he offered, drinking a bit more demurely as she finally found what she was looking for.

“Aha!”

Pushing in part of the wall near a painting of an indigo landscape the entire wall slid away to reveal the racks of scrims Keith had seen in the tent. He gasped, coughing a bit at the moisture still settling into his dry throat.

“Those are scrims! Look for Lance’s it has to be there! Its shaped like a seashell..round and-“

Allura put a calming hand on his shoulder.

“Keith. These are all empty and I do not feel the blue paladin anywhere…I don’t think Lance’s scrim is here.”

Keith made a choked noise that was almost a sob and he realized how foolish he had been to get his hopes so high. Of course it wouldn’t be here. That would have been too easy wouldn’t it? Nothing in his life could ever be that easy. Keith felt his legs shake, a dry heave moving up from his stomach. He shouldn’t have guzzled that water so fast. He finally managed a nod.

“Oh...”

The princess pushed him down to sit on a nearby bench covered with pillows.

“But that doesn’t mean this isn’t going to help us find him. Just rest a moment and don’t touch the vessels with your bare hands. We have no idea what they really are.”

Keith nodded mutely still holding the water jug in his hands. He leaned against the wall taking deep breaths to find his focus again. It felt like he had been on one long emotional carnival ride since the training deck. He was exhausted mentally as much as physically and he was sure that it showed.

Allura was back at the scrims holding her hands above them and clucking her tongue. She picked up one the size of her helmet and shaped like a ripe fruit, turning it over warily to look at it from all sides. Sitting on a chair across from Keith she tutted and traced a gloved finger along the sides over more lettering, runes that looked, at least to Keith’s eye, very similar to the ones on the doorway of the caravan.

“Is that writing? Can you read it, Princess?”

Pursing her lips, Allura angrily narrowed her eyes at the scrim in her hands.

“The Lions …and living creatures even down to the smallest plant give off energy, pushing it out into the world as much as they take it in. Quintessence is the marker of a living soul. Sharing energy freely –The Galra are abhorrent because they take much more then they give. This seems like something they would create. It is a vacuum, it draws in quintessence and energy inside itself like- like a-“

“A sponge?”

Keith offered unsure what to make of her long speech.

“I was going to say a black hole but I’m sure your analogy is also correct.”

Rapping her knuckles on the scrim the princess looked more baffled by the sound it made under pressure.

“To answer your question Keith yes, I am sure it is a language and…sadly no. I cannot read it. Also, despite my first instinct that it is a Galra tool I think I am wrong. Its make is too elegant and its purpose too egalitarian. This was made for a single person and was created with artistic vision in mind. The Galra prefer things made to production standards and in a stark, simple manner.”

“That explains why all their battle droids look the same.”

“Exactly!”
“So…It’s like I thought. In the tent the blue light I saw—”

“Mm…A scrim holds our blue paladin captive. What race made this and why they created it to
imprison him is truly a puzzle…”

Keith flopped against a cushion and let out a frustrated sigh.

“Well, Ku-Kron will know. We just have to wait for the ugly frog to show his face.”

Allura reached over to dim the table light still examining the scrim in front of her. She spoke
softly, the wind outside nearly drowning out her gentle voice.

“My father would have known the answers. He would have recognized the scrims
immediately. He was so much more learned about the universe. I feel that I’ve seen these letters
before. They seem somehow…ancient, possibly important and yet I can’t grasp what I’m seeing.
I’m sorry Keith.”

Comfort her you dope she’s upset. The Lance in Keith’s head said. This was...odd. Keith hated
to admit it out loud but he knew how bad he was at picking up social cues or even understanding
his own feelings about things. It was strange the voice in his head was more intuitive then he was.

“Um—it’s alright Princess. We’ll figure it out. You shouldn’t blame yourself…maybe Coran will
recognize it.”

She perked slightly and smiled.

“Yes. You’re right. I can’t grow discouraged.”

Keith handed her the water pitcher he was still holding and she took another long sip, setting
the scrim on the table top next to her elbow. Keith fiddled with the frayed hem of his cloak and
wished fervently he could remove the rest of his armor. He was sweating through his black under-
suit and now that he was cooling off it was sticking to his skin and rubbing, making him feel
uncomfortable all over. From the way Allura was squirming he was sure she was feeling the same
way.

He loosened his bayard from his belt and looked around for something to polish it. Shiro
always said that if you needed a distraction try and make it a productive one. After another beat of
silence he cleared his throat.

“Allura, you talk a lot about the bond of the paladins. Is it normal to—hear them? In your
head?”

Allura’s hair was squished to the top of her head in a tight bun and she was working to undo it
to let her hair down a moment. She paused mid-motion staring at him bright-eyed.

“Why? Do you hear them?”

“I—”

Keith avoided her eyes feeling his sun-burned cheeks heat up in a fierce blush.

“I think I hear Lance. But maybe it’s just because I feel so guilty.”

Allura actually gave an audible squeal and clapped her hands.

“No! You are the first of the paladins to have an imprint! This is exciting news!”

“An…imprint?”

Reaching out to grab his hands in hers Allura offered him a wide, honest smile.

“You and the other paladins have been through so much in such a short amount of time. You
have not been able to spend years bonding in your Lions and out. It is no wonder I have not
spoken to you of concepts like imprinting.”

The princess took his hand and laid it out palm up.

“When you form Voltron you feel each other’s pain and emotions, yes?”

“Yes…I guess we do a little bit.”

“In the process of imprinting you will start to feel the others inside yourself at all times. Your
quintessence bonds and mixes so it is like small parts of them are there to offer advice or help in
times of trouble. Here—…imagine your essence, your very soul is your hand and my fingers are the
other paladins.”

She slid her fingers through the gaps of Keith’s and gripped his hand palm to palm.

“Now you are one piece and stronger for it.”
“So...the voice. It isn’t really Lance. It’s like a copy of Lance. An imprint of him from our bond with Voltron!”

Allura removed her hand still smiling like the double suns they had spent all day cooking under.

“Precisely! A piece of his quintessence is inside you and it speaks to you in his voice to guide you. I am so proud!”

Keith couldn’t smile back. He felt a mild disappointment that he wasn’t really speaking to the real Lance with alien telepathy. Although, it was nice to have an explanation for the string of snarky asides running through his head constantly.

“Great…”

“He won’t ‘speak’ to you all the time. I would assume you’re hearing his voice now because you are in distress. That’s how imprinting works. That part of Lance that’s inside you is striving to help you through trouble.”

Keith concentrated on his bayard and watched it transform into his sword in a brief flash of red light. He didn’t know what to say so he only shrugged. Allura seemed to take this as a good sign.

“This should be celebrated! Not even Shiro has established an imprint with any of the team. You two must have a very strong connection. It’s also good to know that some of you is now with him. Maybe you’re helping him as he sleeps and are not even aware of it.”

Keith felt his eyes widen and the blush deepen at that. He hadn’t even considered that the bond went two ways. He had a chunk of Lance making corny jokes in his brain so what did Lance have? What if it was terrible? What if he was just a moody, insulting voice constantly putting him down. He wasn’t a great conversationalist and he doubted his purest essence would be much better.

“I wish he had bonded with Hunk or someone more …supportive.”

“Do not say that Keith. Obviously you are dear to him in a way they are not. He will bond with them too with time but you were special. You two also create balance within each other as he is your natural opposite. The Red Lion and its paladin are impulsive, distant…difficult to grasp or understand at times so his presence soothes that.”

Keith nodded knowing full well how temperamental both he and Red could be.

“How are we opposites? You never did say what the blue paladin’s qualities were. I remember he interrupted you way back when we were first looking for the Lions.”

Allura pulled her knees to her chin looking better now that her hair was drying out around her face in soft cloud-like puffs.

“The blue paladin is acceptance and warmth. The Blue Lion is the most accepting of new paladins but within those it picks there must be a quality of selflessness. The blue paladin shows bravery in his desire to help those around him with his whole heart. In a sense…it is almost love.”

Keith put his sword point down between his knees, letting it sink into the floor as he leaned on it. Yeah...that was Lance; instant, unconditional, sometimes stupid love. The downside was he could easily die from whatever bullet or bomb he was stepping in front of for someone else. No wonder the Blue Lion was always accepting new paladins. They were the fastest to selflessly get themselves killed.

Allura reached out a hand slowly towards Keith, maybe to comfort him or say something else about Lance but she stopped when they both heard the frantic squeaking.

Allura snuffed out all the light in the caravan without another word and the blue mouse’s beady eyes were the last thing Keith saw before being overtaken by semi-darkness. He put a hand to his mouth to stifle his breathing, his other hand ready on the hilt of his sword.

The princess crouched just below the table and Keith could hear her crawling towards the door. He followed her example, trusting her to lead the way. They heard the first murmur of voices on the other side of the thin metal wall just as they moved safely in position on either side of the door.

He realized in the instant before the door opened that they should have contacted Shiro and Hunk to confirm they had found the target but it was too late now. The blubbery, thick voice of Kru-Kron was inside the doorway and he was obviously very drunk. He hiccuped; speaking with a slight slur that brought the anger in Keith’s gut to a boil.

“Eh- you, come on in make yourself comfortable. I’ll go get my private stock. We gotta keep celebrating. I’m RICH now after all.”

A female voice, decidedly not drunk, followed Kru through the door. She seemed to pause and Keith thought she might have had to duck.
“Mmm…Yeah tell me about that again. You were saying in the bar just how rich you are handsome.”

Several lights blinked on through the wagon. Small strings that lined the sides as well as the same table lamp Allura had activated. Keith scrunched up small against the wall looking first at the pure white alien woman right in front of him and then at Allura.

He signaled carefully, indicating that she should go for the woman while he handled Kru. She nodded, instantly lunging forward to shove the tall creature into the wall behind them while Keith jumped to his feet, sword held high.

Kru-Kron was in the middle of opening a cabinet and pulling out a bottle of what Keith assumed was expensive alcohol. When the squat little creature turned, his throat expanded in shock and he scrambled dropping the bottle. Kru staggered away from Keith’s outstretched hand but the paladin had him in a headlock in a matter of seconds. Keith yanked Kru up violently, pulling his feet off the ground. He thrust his sword point into the soft meaty skin of the alien’s neck and hissed in his face.

“If you can see the future it’s weird you missed this.”

Ooo that was a good one, said the Lance imprint admiringly.

Allura had a small pistol on the tall white alien. She raised her arms looking from one to the other with large, pupil-less blue eyes.

“Look! I…I’m not with him I just--”

Allura snorted, changing position so she was in front of the almost cat-like creature.

“You were going to rob him were you not?”

The alien raised her long tapered ears and regarded Allura a moment before she looked away ashamed.

“I-I know it’s wrong. He kept going on and on about how rich he was and how he had come into all this money. I assume you’re here for the same thing. I-I don’t want to fight.”

Allura cut her off lowering her pistol and directing her attention to Kru-Kron.

“Where do you keep your money?”

Kru gasped and wiggled frantically in Keith’s arms. He screamed until spittle spewed out of his wide blue mouth.

“I’m not telling you nothing about my MONEY!! You worthless-”

Keith pressed the tip of his sword harder to Kru’s distended throat threateningly. Kru-Kron swallowed and Keith was sure his huge eyes were wide behind his protective goggles.

“If you’re not saying something helpful I would shut-up if I were you.”

Turning back to the white alien Allura crossed her arms patiently.

“We have no desire to keep any of his ill-gotten wealth. We only wish to take him and the contents of his cart. Ransack the place and take what you find…do you agree Keith?”

Keith blinked surprised at the coolness in Allura’s tone. He had never seen the princess so vindictive. But then again…Lance was her paladin.

“Um…I don’t see why not?”

Re-holstering her pistol Allura held out a friendly hand to the alien, looking up into her face.

“A deal then. You may take his money and we will take him and his cart. In return you will tell no one you saw us here.”

Taking the princess’s hand dazedly the creature beamed from her great height, ears pushed forward in excitement.

“That’s the best deal I’ve had in awhile!”

“We will need to know what kind of currency he has as well. We only wish to take him and the contents of his cart. Ransack the place and take what you find…do you agree Keith?”

Keith blinked surprised at the coolness in Allura’s tone. He had never seen the princess so vindictive. But then again…Lance was her paladin.

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Taking the princess’s hand dazedly the creature beamed from her great height, ears pushed forward in excitement.

“That’s the best deal I’ve had in awhile!”

“We will need to know what kind of currency he has as well. We need to know who he has contacted or sold his wares to. I don’t suppose you know anything about that?”

Shrugging large muscular shoulders the alien started to rummage in the nearest drawer looking for Kru-Kron’s money stash. Allura went to help her, pushing books and clothing from the top of a tiny chest of drawers.

“No. He showed up three days ago and spent his days sleeping and his nights getting drunk in the bar with the girls. He kept going on and on about some deal he had made. Something he had
Kru-Kron made a desperate thrashing movement and Keith almost lost hold of him. He lowered his sword and wrapped his arm tighter around the alien’s stout chest, drawing his hand under Kru’s throat. Kru screamed at them agitated and still sloppy drunk.

“Put me down! YOU KNOW WHO I AM? YOU KNOW HOW I-“

Keith brought the hilt of his sword down hard on the back of the alien’s head and felt him go slack. He was unsure if he had done the right thing but he knew that his tolerance for inebriated screaming had reached its breaking point. Holding Kru-Kron by his collar he held the sweaty creature at arm’s length disgusted by the smell emanating in waves from his mouth. After only a few seconds Kru began to snore.

Allura giggled.

“Thank you Keith.”

The blue mouse found the money hidden under a small un-made bed built into the far side of the caravan. Rooting under the mattress where it directed the princess found a thick cloth bag full of metal and paper money from a multitude of worlds. She looked at it disappointed. There were no clues to be found here. Either Kru had hidden his tracks or his contact had done it for him.

They tied Kru-Kron up with strips of fabric from his own clothing and shoved him roughly into his bed to sleep off whatever he had ingested in the bar. Allura handed the bag of money to the alien woman who took it gratefully, surprised by the weight. She looked from it to them with a curious expression.

“I’m sorry I can’t tell you more about what he sold or who he sold it too. Was it something terribly important to you?”

Keith looked at the ground eyebrows furrowed. His chest hurt as he tried to think of a way to answer. Allura came to his rescue a hand on his shoulder.

“I’m afraid so, but we will get what we need from him.”

Keith squeezed his hand into a fist so hard it hurt. He let the pain ground him taking a breath through his nose. Lance had been sold. Someone had paid for his essence and heart in a bottle. Keith didn’t want the thought to linger too much because the more it did the more he wanted to make Kru-Kron bleed.

“Well. This money will be good for the village. I promise I’m no outlaw. I’m going to help my family and my neighbors. This planet might be swarming with criminals but…not everybody who lives here is one.”

She lowered her head in a bow ears pressed tight to either side of her skull.

“Thank you warriors…safe travels. I hope we meet again.”

Keith mumbled a weak “you’re welcome” watching her duck out into the thick storm and the empty night. It was freezing outside. The moment the suns went down the desert turned from an oven to a refrigerator. He found the stove-shaped heating unit in one corner of the now ransacked caravan and turned it on.

Allura kicked at a pile of clothing at her feet.

“Well…This is safe as any place to spend the night. I’ll contact Shiro and we’ll plan a rendezvous for the morning. The Black Lion should be able to carry this thing to the castle.”

There was an obnoxious, belting snore from Kru-Kron and Keith scowled his direction.

“The sooner we start interrogating him the better.”

Chapter End Notes

I fudged alot of stuff about Quintessence. Other writers have elaborated on what little we’ve been given and I did the same and it expanded into the idea of imprinting. I really like badass Allura doing missions and being friendly with the boys. Lets have more of that.

Again the utmost thanks to my proofreader CJ who was patient enough to figure out what the hell to capitalize and not capitalize.<3
"I heard you got banished. How’s that going for you?"

Keith lay on his back on top of Kru-Kron’s floating caravan in the center of the entrance to the lion bays. He didn’t answer Pidge right away, staring at a single spot on the high ceiling above him, waiting for his anger to cool.

Pidge grabbed the side of the cart and pulled her head over the edge so she could glare at him.

"Hey, don’t ignore me."

Keith grunted and closed his eyes.

"I should be in there questioning him with Shiro."

Pidge lowered herself to the ground with a gentle plop and Keith tracked her footsteps as she walked around the caravan.

"Why? So you can blind him in his other eye? I think Shiro made a pretty good decision kicking you out before you finished Kermit off. We can’t question him if you kill him."

Keith groaned again, louder this time and put a hand over his face. Kru-Kron had woken up on the trip back to the castle, screaming obscenities from the back of the Black Lion’s cockpit. Keith thought he had done a good job ignoring him until he started to gloat. The toadish alien bragged about how getting Lance to separate had been easy. How the blue paladin had no force of will—Keith wasn’t sure exactly what this meant but he was one hundred percent sure it was an insult. He also knew he was being goaded but could not bring himself to care.

"I didn’t blind him…"

"Yeah? That’s not what Shiro said."

Keith moved his arm over his eyes and tried to take deep, calming breaths through his nose like Allura had taught him during meditation instruction. He counted backwards from fifty but started to lose his focus around thirty-nine.

Calm down bud. Being angry won’t get you anywhere, the Lance imprint soothed. Keith made an angry noise at the back of his throat and slammed a hand down on the cart roof. The last thing he wanted was the not real Lance giving him unwarranted, ethereal advice.

Pidge looked over the edge of the roof again her eyebrows furrowed in concern. She stretched out an arm and poked Keith’s hand, still clenched in a tight fist.

"Hey. How about a good old fashioned distraction? I’m about to make a breakthrough on a hunch Coran had. You feel like being a hero?"

Keith pulled his hand away from Pidge’s and sat up swinging his legs side over the edge of the caravan. In truth it felt good to be useful. He hated waiting for something, anything, to happen.

"Sure. What’s the hunch?"

"You’ll see!"

Pidge reached into her pocket and pulled on the gloves from her paladin suit double checking to make sure they fit snugly at the wrists. Most of Kru-Kron’s belongs and books were spread slapdash around the hangar floor; Some of it in sorted piles and some waiting to be examined.

The scrim she had chosen, at random Keith guessed, was shaped like a large alien creature that looked a bit like a bear with curly ram horns. Pidge rapped it with a gloved knuckle and listened to the resonance, measuring the vibrations.

Keith slid off the cart and walked up behind his teammate with his hands in his pockets feeling his curiosity piqued. A screen had popped up on one of the display screens in Pidge’s impressive, improvised set-up and massive walls of green text glided by before he could read a single word.

Pidge apparently liked what she saw on the screen because a huge grin split her face. Keith took it as a good sign; she only made that face when she was very pleased with herself.

"You see those weird squiggly runes on the side of the scrim?"
Keith leaned forward to look at the engraved area where Pidge was pointing and nodded.

“Allura mentioned those, said they looked familiar.”

Pidge made a sound that Keith could only describe as a cackle. She reached forward and snatched something from the edge of a metal box she was using as a makeshift monitor desk. It resembled a paladin helmet but lacked the color-coded edges and had a solid, tinted faceplate.

“If Coran is right you’re gonna need this.”

She tossed the helmet to Keith and he caught it with a flinch turning it over in his hands.

“This looks like a space helmet. Why would I need this?”

Pidge didn’t answer as she tapped out a sequence of numbers rapidly, her tongue pressed between her front teeth as she concentrated on the task at hand. Muttering under her breath she finally struck the enter key with a flourish and as she did the bay exploded in a bright white light.

The intricate symbols on the side of the scrim lit up like a neon sign and the entire structure of the strange container started to shudder. As the white light filled the scrim something started to form in the air above it; something achingly familiar. The light became so intense Keith was forced to turn his head away and close his eyes. Without seeing it he could still feel the light as it reached its peak then slowly ebbed into something more manageable. When Keith finally pried one eye open he froze, breathless.

There was a wormhole hovering above the scrim. It was small, about the size of Hunk, but aside from its miniature size it was identical to a castle wormhole in every aspect. It glowed gently, the delicate, detailed outer edges moving in slow concentric circles. The inside wavered and moved in on itself like a dark whirlpool and Keith just stared at it in awe.

“Pidge how did you do that?”

Pidge was already on her feet, inspecting the small wormhole she had created from every angle. She held up a small box-shaped measurement device and pushed her glasses up her nose as she scrutinized the readouts.

“I just activated it…well, that’s not exactly true. I also changed where the wormhole was set to open but otherwise I just activated it. This is what scrims do. Coran was examining a smaller one and he realized it was made of scaultrite.”

Pidge reached up a cautionary finger and touched the elaborate, inlaid edges of the wormhole. It gave her a mild shock and she jolted back shaking the feeling back into her fingers. Keith was tempted to follow her example, curious what touching something made of pure energy would feel like but he held back.

“Should I remember what scaultrite is?”

Rolling her eyes Pidge blew a puff of air upwards to get her hair out of her eyes.

“It’s what Teludav lenses are made out of. Teludav lenses make wormholes…And those weird squiggly symbols on the sides of scrims? Those are coordinates. They tell the scrim where to open up the wormhole into. See how they match the decorative stuff on the wormhole edges? Coran recognized the scaultrite stuff. Apparently you have to harvest it from something called a Weblum.”

Keith nodded taking a step closer to the gently revolving wormhole just in front of him.

“So that’s why Allura recognized the symbols…”

Pidge nodded finishing his thought.

“Yes. They’re super similar to the ones the castle uses I guess.”

Keith looked down at the helmet in his hands and back up to the wormhole. Realization struck and he grimaced.

“So I’m the guinea pig huh? You want me to see what’s on the other end.”

“That’s the plan Sherlock! Just stick your head in real quick and take a look around. I would do it but I need to be out here monitoring, make sure it doesn’t close up and decapitate you or something.”

“Well that leaves me bursting with confidence. Thanks Pidge.”

Keith slipped on the helmet without argument and sucked in a deep breath through his teeth. Working up his courage he bounced from foot to foot like he was about to enter a combat simulation.

“Ok…here goes. Three-—”
Counting back from three the red paladin pushed all fear aside and charged forward, ramming his head into the open wormhole.

The pain was immediate and incredibly intense.

Keith opened his eyes and stared into an endless white void. He screamed inside the helmet but couldn’t hear the sound of his own voice. As he watched something like red smoke started to stain the white emptiness in front of him. His heart was pounding so hard inside his head and in the silence he could still hear his blood in his ears. Something was pulling him forward, something with the overwhelming weight of gravity.

The red smoke was filling the white vacuum and as it stretched outwards it glittered with a thousand shades of crimson and ruby. There was blood in the smoke and the colors of old apples and fresh roses. So many different types of red and each seemed to reflect a different memory; each color was some part of him being stripped away. The pain in his neck and in his lungs faded more and more as the white gave way to red. Keith couldn’t feel his body, he wasn’t even sure if he was struggling anymore.

A red tendril of smoke the color of sandstone drifted past Keith. When he focused on it he found it was a memory of the desert outside his shack at sunrise. He was watching the sunrise and listening to the call of the lion… the Blue Lion…

KEITH! FIGHT IT BUDDY! YOU HAVE TO PULL BACK!

Imprint Lance was screeching in the back of Keith’s head and every word felt like glass digging into his brain. He tried to ignore it, it was grating and the memory felt so safe. He could smell the cool air and feel the morning heat start seep into his bones. It would be so easy to just sink into the red smoke; just sink in and let go.

The Red Lion made its presence known with the equivalent of a roar in Keith’s mind. Red dug her mental claws in deep unwilling to let her paladin go. Keith pushed against her reflexively. It hurt here… the desert, the memory didn’t hurt. He would just go for a moment-

FIGHT IT YOU JERK. ARE YOU GOING TO SAVE LANCE OR NOT? HE NEEDS YOU! YOU THINK HE WOULD JUST GIVE UP ON YOU?

That did it.

Keith snapped up and pulled his head backwards with everything he had. He wasn’t sure if his legs or shoulders were helping but he imagined they were. Slowly, painfully… the red leached out of the white and back to him. Little pinpricks of sensation ran through his lips and tongue; sparks of electricity moved over his teeth and fizzled on the ends of his hair and then…

Strong arms were wrapped tight around Keith’s torso and he felt himself being yanked away from the white light of the void inside the wormhole. He fell backwards on top of a warm body and the arms holding him squeezed him into a tight hug.

Keith hissed in agony when the helmet was torn off his head and he was exposed to the light of the hangar. A needle sharp migraine was filling his brain and for a moment Hunk’s voice next to his ear sounded like it was coming from under five feet of water.

The yellow paladin held him close, one arm crushing Keith’s waist while the other circled around his shoulders. Keith shut his eyes against the light and moaned. It felt like he had been inside the wormhole for only a few seconds and yet… Hunk had definitely not been nearby when he had gone in.

He coughed weakly throat dry, his voice strained and weak.

“Hunk?”

Hunk stood from the floor and set Keith upright carefully supporting his weight as he did so. To say he sounded relieved when he spoke was an understatement. He sounded about ready to pass out.

“Oh man, Keith. Oh man, oh man you were like a dying ostrich! You were just hanging there. We couldn’t get you out!”

Pidge was shoving her face into Keith’s moving her hands along his neck and tilting his head down to get a better look at his eyes. She spoke a million miles a minute her own eyes enormous and afraid.

“KEITH I am so, SO sorry! I didn’t know that would happen! I was so stupid I should have made you wear something on your neck! I think when it touched your skin something started to happen and then the inside of the scrim started to fill up with red light and-”

Keith leaned against Hunk until he was practically hanging off of him. The migraine was leading rapidly to nausea and Pidge’s voice wasn’t helping matters. The Red Lion was reaching out to him worriedly, her voice a low rumble of concern. Keith reassured her as he struggled to get his bearings.
“Red light…in the scrim?”

The nausea made talking too difficult and Keith stopped before he threw up. Forcing himself to open his eyes the red paladin glanced towards the bear-sheep scrim and found it blessedly empty. The wormhole was also gone, either Pidge had deactivated it when he fell out or it had disappeared on its own.

Hunk was half carrying Keith to the edge of the hangar now, his comforting bulk hovering protectively close. Pidge scurried behind them her laptop in hand. Somehow she was still talking.

“I think it was sucking out your quintessence! What did it feel like? How did you get it to stop? Like, how did you suck the red back out? The scrim was filling up with it and you were struggling and then you just kind of stopped. What did you see in there? Did you see Lance?”

Hunk stepped his pace to a near jog when Keith began to retch; if anyone knew what that sound meant it would be Hunk. With Pidge still prattling on to herself behind them, Hunk managed to get Keith into the kitchen and over a sink before his lunch was outside his stomach.

“There you go buddy…let it all out.”

Keith felt Hunk pull his hair out of his face and away from his mouth, running a soothing hand over his back as he vomited. Struggling for breath the red paladin felt sweat run down his neck and forehead. He hoped whatever was happening wasn’t shock.

Hunk waited patiently for Keith to finish barfing before helping him stand up straight. He guided the red paladin to a chair in the little commissary area where the team shared meals and went to clean up his mess. Pidge took the seat closest to Keith and studied him intently.

“Do you need to go to the infirmary?”

Keith checked himself and found that throwing up had somehow helped his headache. Red was calmer and the nausea felt under control; at least temporarily. When Hunk set a glass of water next to him Keith reached for it with shaking fingers and drained it down to the last drop. He answered Pidge in a raspy, hushed voice.

“N-no. I think I’m better now.”

Hunk refilled his water glass and sat on his opposite side, leaning closer than Keith was usually comfortable with; though at the moment it didn’t bother him at all. Hunk nudged the glass a little closer worry filling his dark eyes.

“You sure? I mean Pidge said your head got like… trapped in another dimension? I’m not gonna lie that sounds pretty bad.”

“…” Keith swallowed and managed to speak. Pidge opened her laptop out and was already scrolling speedily through walls of information. She hummed in the back of her throat and opened up a new document, hands poised to take notes. Hunk was still perched next to Keith protectively and he gave Pidge a warning look.

“You sure? I mean Pidge said your head got like… trapped in another dimension? I’m not gonna lie that sounds pretty bad.”

“No…it’s ok. I’m ready to talk now I think. Tell you what I saw.”

Pidge hummed in the back of her throat and opened up a new document, hands poised to take notes. Hunk was still perched next to Keith protectively and he gave Pidge a warning look.

“Don’t overdo it. Pidge, don’t make him overdo it.”

Using the water to wash the unpleasant taste of sick from his mouth Keith swallowed and felt liquid travel down his esophagus and splash into his now empty stomach.

“Lance wasn’t there. It was just-white. It was just nothing. It hurt and then it started to…to drag something out of me…memories. I think that it was pulling memories out of me…”

Keith shivered when he remembered the raw pain, the strange sensation of having bits of himself wrenched free of his body.

“I think I would have ended up like Lance.”

The green paladin pushed her glasses up her nose and chewed on her thumbnail meditatively.

“I’m pretty sure that scrim was sucking the quintessence out of you so- yeah, you would have ended up exactly like Lance. Difference is that it happened to you super fast and it happened to Lance really slow. Maybe with him it was a time release thing?”

Hunk jiggled his leg up and down nervously, tapping his fingers on the table as he stared at Keith.

“How did you get out?”

The sound of frantic keystrokes stopped as Pidge looked at Keith as well; her eyes huge and hungry behind her glasses.

“If you found some way to do it maybe we could figure out how to apply it to Lance?”
Keith put his head in his hands and rubbed his temples slowly, wearily. How had he got out of the white void? Red had reached out to him, the imprint had yelled at him and he had simply pulled backwards.

He thought back to what Kru-Kron had said in the Black Lion. Getting Lance to separate had been easy…he had no force of will. Separation, that was what Keith had experienced in the wormhole and his own force of will was the only thing that got him back.

“I don’t know Pidge. I don’t think it’s that easy. It’s hard to explain what it’s like but it’s so tempting to just…let go of yourself.”

Another tremor of nausea passed through Keith and he shivered sinking his knuckles deeper into his eye sockets. Pidge made a thoughtful clucking noise and her violent, hurried typing starting up again.

“Well, it wasn’t a total loss. I got a ton of data from your trip into the wormhole so maybe I can find something in it to help Lance once we have his scrim.”

Hunk wrapped a warm arm around Keith’s shoulders and gave him a cautious squeeze. Lance always smelled like Aloe and moisturizer but Hunk smelled more like spices, like his very DNA was composed of the same ingredients as cinnamon cookies. Keith let it wash over him and the dread he had been harboring slithered down to sit cold in his intestines.

The yellow paladin took him carefully under the elbow.

“I think almost getting killed by a floating hole earned you a nap man.”

Keith wanted to argue but couldn’t find the energy. He let Hunk guide him out of the kitchen and towards the dormitories, his eyes cast away from the bright overhead lights. He was glad Hunk was here. As much as he loved Pidge her enthusiasm could sometimes get in the way of her empathy. Hunk was nothing but empathy. He was like an enormous, sentient teddy bear; the living embodiment of a bowl of warm chicken soup. The exact person you wanted to comfort you when you felt like utter shit.

A voice moved through the hall and Hunk stopped reflexively. Keith could hear Coran just a few feet away and he raised his head to see the advisor talking to Allura. He was speaking in a low urgent voice his tone uncharacteristically serious.

“I know this is going to be a delicate situation Princess but I’ve just come from the infirmary and our blue paladin is—Well, he’s getting worse your highness. Pulse hasn’t changed but his blood pressure is dropping. The lower it gets the less bloods getting to vital organs. If it keeps on at this rate he’s only got a week or—”

Hunk made a startled noise somewhere between a gasp and a whine. Keith just blinked at the two Alteans, his chest tightening until it was a burning knot. Allura stiffened when she heard Hunk her gaze fell on the two paladins. She had a hand to her mouth her nose scrunched as if she was holding off tears but her expression sharpened to concern when her eyes met Keith’s; he was sure he looked awful.

“Keith, Hunk! What is going on? Is everything alright?”

Keith tottered forward before Hunk could hold him back; he placed one unsteady foot in front of the other making his way over to the startled Alteans.

“What delicate situation? What did you find out? What did Shiro find out?”

Coran grabbed Keith’s shoulders as he tilted forward. Keith didn’t even realize he had been falling until he had been caught and he grunted out a weak thank you. Hunk scampered to catch up to him looking distressed by every aspect of what was going on. He reached to take Keith from Coran but the red paladin batted his hands away.

An embarrassing, teenage shrillness came through in Keith’s voice and he felt himself flush red as he got in Allura’s face. She was visibly rankled by the smell of his breath.

“Did Kru-Kron tell you where Lance is?!”

Allura pulled away, shaking her head as she tried to escape the stench coming out of the red paladin’s mouth.

“Ye-Yes, we know where it is but the situation is…complicated.”

The anger was coming on hot and heavy and Keith threw his arms in the air unable to control himself.

“What’s complicated?! We know where he is…let’s go get him!”

Keith doubled over then crouched with his head between his knees as he dry-heaved. He tried to fight the nausea as it rippled through him in deep, heavy waves. His head was starting to hurt
again and his heart wouldn’t stop pounding.

*Getting mad at Allura isn’t gonna help Keith. Take it easy.* The Lance imprint said in what was probably an attempt to be comforting.

Hunk hunkered down next to Keith and put his hands on his teammate’s shoulders, speaking fretfully to Allura over the sounds of the red paladin’s stifled gagging.

“Er, we had a little accident with a wormhole and Keith might have gotten his head stuck like a deep-space Winnie the Pooh.”

Coran went down on one knee in front of Keith, leaning down to try and see into his face.

“Winnie the what?”

“It’s like this bear—you probably don’t know what a bear is…um…ok it’s like this toy? That eats too much honey and gets stuck in a rabbit hole?”

“If it’s a toy how does it eat?~”

Despite his best efforts Keith couldn’t control himself. The water he had drunk in the kitchen moments before rushed up his throat in a hot stream, past his lips and up his nose. He coughed, moaned and put his hands on the back of his neck interlacing his fingers. It felt like his brain had become a plate of jello that was being poked angrily by tiny creatures with thumbtacks.

Hunk pulled off his vest and held it under Keith’s nose. When the red paladin made no move to take it he wiggled it back and forth to get his attention.

“Here…you can wipe your mouth.”

Keith accepted it slowly, feeling guilty as he used it to swab the bile and sweat from his face.

“You hold onto that in case you get sick again, ok Keith?”

With a tired nod Keith held the vest close and listened as Hunk give details what had happened to Allura and Coran. During the course of the explanation Keith found crouching on the balls of his feet was too much effort and sat down shakily, his back resting on the hallway wall. Coran and Hunk followed his example and eventually Allura did as well.

Adjusting her dress, Allura sat cross-legged in front of Keith, watching him quietly. Combined with Coran and Hunk on either side Keith felt completely surrounded by warm bodies. He was again surprised to find it didn’t bother him that much.

Hunk finished and Coran tugged at his moustache thoughtfully.

“Well. That just confirms what we already learned unfortunately.”

Keith squinted at Allura his voice coming out in a weak croak.

“Where is Lance?”

The princess looked away, fiddling unhappily with the edge of her dress.

“You really should be recovering in a pod Keith. After perhaps~”

Keith rasped, his fingers kneading the fabric of Hunk’s vest unhappily.

“I want to know.”

A quiet fell over the group before Allura’s face clouded and she stood.

“If I explain everything will you recover in a healing-pod afterwards Keith? Do I have a promise?”

The red paladin looked up at her from somewhere behind his headache. His eyes felt swollen, ready to burst from their sockets. Instead of a verbal answer he held up a gloved-hand pinky out. Lance had taught Allura about pinky swears. Keith could still remember the two of them chatting excitedly about familial earth greetings. The blue paladin had animatedly taught the princess every fist-bump and secret handshake he knew but the pinky-swear had been her favorite; in her words it was “a most elegant way to keep a promise.”

Allura looked at his extended pinky finger and her eyes threatened to tear up. Reaching out a hand the princess clasped their fingers tightly together and shook.

“Coran? Could you help Keith to the control room. Hunk? Please go and retrieve Pidge. I will find Shiro. We will have an all castle meeting shortly.”
Keith sat in his paladin chair impatiently. He was beginning to feel cold and a bit feverish and was now wearing Hunk’s vest. It was comically large and because of him it smelled absolutely disgusting. Pulling it around himself like a blanket Keith gave a silent thanks to Allura for having the forethought to dim the control room lights.

Hunk himself was lingering close by, unwilling to let Keith out of arms reach. Pidge was sitting at Keith’s feet and Shiro was pacing close as they waited for the bizarre presentation to get underway. Shiro strode aimlessly back and forth with his arms crossed, his flesh and blood fingers tapping nervously on his metal arm. He circled the consoles and did another lap around the chairs staring out every window before he finally spoke.

“I should reprimand you two. Pidge you shouldn’t be experimenting with things we don’t understand without me or Coran around. Keith? Do I really need to tell you why what you did was a bad idea?”

Pidge looked down at her laptop sheepishly.

“I’m sorry Shiro. I just-I want to help.”

Keith took a long breath through his nose, preparing himself to speak. He felt a little better after his bad spell in the hallway but now every word out his mouth was a vibrating ache in his skull.

“M’Sorry too Shiro. Just feel like we need to be…doing something. Don’t like holding still.”

Shiro paused mid-step and eyed them both up and down.

“Helping like that almost lost us another paladin. Doing something impulsive doesn’t help the situation, it just makes it worse. Stop and really think next time.”

Keith watched Pidge hang her head in shame. She nibbled at a fingernail, something he had come to recognize as a nervous tic. Shiro sighed deep and walked over to the other paladins. He placed a hand affectionately on top of Pidge’s head.

“I’m not angry.”

Pidge’s voice drifted up slowly and Keith was struck by how young she suddenly sounded.

“I don’t want to lose him like dad and Matt. I miss him.”

Shiro ruffled her hair delicately.

“I do too.”

Keith felt Hunk shift behind him and the knot in his own chest cinched up just a little bit tighter.

Man. You know this seems good time to express your feelings with the group instead of bottling them up like a flat, lukewarm soda. The Lance imprint suggested helpfully. Keith just winced.

Before Pidge could answer, the doors to the control room opened with a soft whoosh and Allura bustled in, her arms full to bursting with a stack of identical metal boxes. Coran was hot on her heels carrying more of the same mysterious packages.

Placing them on the pedestal where she piloted the ship Allura turned to face the assembled paladins with a determined look on her face. She reached up to put her hair into a tight ponytail addressing everyone in a voice oozing false confidence.

“Alright. I think you all know why I’ve called you here. Shiro and myself have spent the better part of the day speaking with our er-guest about the location of Lance...Lance’s scrim. ”

Keith stared at her with rapt focus pushing any pain and lingering queasiness to the sidelines. Pidge shut her laptop and Hunk moved to lean on the side of Keith’s chair. They were all hanging on Allura’s ever word.

The princess picked up one of the metal boxes and wiped some dust from the top. Reading the Altean written there she nodded at it.

“It would be best to start at the beginning I suppose. Being from earth you would not know anything about the universe outside your own planet. Although Altea is a very old civilization there are many planets and races older and more advanced than our own.”

Coran seemed to take a cue from what she was saying and tapped a few buttons on one of the display consoles. The dim room darkened further and an image projected up onto a slightly transparent screen. It felt like a grade school presentation on an elaborate HD overhead projector.

“Allura continued gazing up at the screen.
"There was one that is considered a founding race...one of the prodigal species. Webhum, the species we need to make interstellar flight possible, are born on their planet and it is from them the universe learned about wormhole travel."

A planet appeared on the screen. It seemed to be one giant shade of burgundy and Keith couldn’t spot a single ocean on its cloudy surface. Three blue moons revolved around the planet slowly and in the distance he could just make out the star that served as its sun; it was red.

"These people are the Olim Vell and they are considered sacred and above all conflicts. Their planet Vell is a neutral zone. No matter what wars or battles are fought even the Galra know that Vell is impartial and not to be conquered. They are too powerful for even Zarkon to fell and if he offended them then they could possibly cut off his access to the lay lines, the connecting threads of the wormholes themselves."

Pidge wiggled in her seat and threw her arm into the air like she was asking a question back in class at the garrison. Allura blinked at her and finally pointed to her eyebrow raised.

"Er, yes Pidge?"

"Why won’t they get involved! Couldn’t Altea have just gone to them about Zarkon in the first place and told them to shut him off from the-"

Coran peeked his head around Allura’s shoulder and gave Pidge a long look cutting her off.

"If every species on every planet having a tiff went to the Olim Vell looking to get the advantage then pretty soon nobody would have wormholes at all... don’t you think?"

Pidge considered and finally nodded mumbling under her breath.

"Yeah...I guess."

Allura continued her speech nervously, it seemed like she had been practicing it; at least in her head. It made Keith feel somewhat guilty for putting so much pressure on her.

"Yes, well. Unfortunately, despite their prerogative to remain unbiased even the Olim Vell will sometimes play favorites. Ten thousand years ago...before Coran and I were frozen, there was a shift among the Vell leadership and the Galra became very friendly with the royal mother- The queen of the Olim Vell so to speak."

Sliding the top carefully off one of the metal boxes the princess revealed something inside that shone in the light of the view screens. She stared at it wistfully, her voice growing softer.

"My father never went into detail about what happened between the Alteans and the Olim Vell but whatever it was it still holds to this day."

Keith managed to grit a reply through his teeth. He felt a thrill of real fear because he already knew what the answer to his next question would be.

"And they have Lance. These Olim Vell have his scrim."

Shiro answered for Allura laying a hand on Keith’s back.

"Yeah. Kru-Kron sold him to somebody there."

Allura swallowed a little noise and shook her head.

"Not just anyone. He was sold to the House of Vell, to a member of the high royal court. Exactly which we don’t know."

Hunk spluttered gesticulating wildly in pure disbelief.

"Some royal alien bought Lance’s..."

The yellow paladin gestured to himself trying to find the right words.

"His quint-stuff? Why would they want it!?"

Pidge spoke almost over the top of him moving to her feet and almost dropping her laptop to the ground in the process.

"So we go to Vell and we tell the Olim people they have a paladin! He-you can’t just buy people!"

Coran waved his arms to try and quiet Hunk and Pidge down shouting to be heard.

"It’s not that simple paladins! For one...we haven’t paid tribute or sent an ambassador to Vell in...well ten thousand years give or take. And two you can’t just go in demanding things from the Olim Vell. They’re proud. Don’t take to it kindly. They’re easy to offend and we can’t risk losing our access to the wormhole lay lines either."
Keith almost stood but thought better of it when a cold tremor ran down his legs. He glared at Coran.

“So that’s it? We just let them keep Lance in a bottle? We let his body die?”

Allura stomped a foot down firmly on the metal driving pedestal her voice ringing off the wall and ceiling above.

“No! We do no such thing. We will save him but we will have to use a different approach for this, one involving tact and diplomacy. We must re-establish our ties to the Olim Vell and do so with great decorum!”

Hunk tugged at his bandana hand raised slightly.

“Er…decorum?”

Shiro took his hand from Keith’s back crossing his arms again.

“Etiquette Hunk, good manners. We have to convince these people that we deserve their respect. We can’t ask for a big favor like this if we aren’t on good terms.”

Keith felt his cheeks turn bright red, his pulse picking up loud in his ears.

“You mean suck up to them Shiro.”

Shiro shot Keith a warning look.

“Keith…”

“We have to suck up to a bunch of snotty, self-important alien jerk-offs just to get the blue paladin back, the paladin that they bought.”

Keith looked straight at Allura trying to ignore the hurt blooming in her eyes. He felt something in him stir, something that wasn’t the Red Lion or the imprint. It hurt so badly, like an exposed nerve inside his heart.

“I don’t care if it’s the king of the universe I don’t…I don’t care if it’s Zarkon. We shouldn’t have to kiss-up to the people who stole—…”

He choked and had to stop. The unfamiliar feeling was burning its way out his eyes now. Keith couldn’t remember the last time he had broken down and really cried but it seemed he was edging dangerously close. This was still his fault and the day had already been overwhelming but now he could see some greasy, well-off alien holding Lance’s heart in their oily tentacles because they had paid a few bucks for it. Just trying to picture the scenario was excruciating.

“I know…I know it’s going to be difficult but it’s the only way Keith. The Lions would do nothing against the Olim Vell and even if we were able to form Voltron it would be a mistake to attack them. We would only be hurting ourselves. We must be civil and show only reverence and if—if we can please the court we could ask them for help in finding the scrim.”

Keith struggled to find a good argument but there was nothing he could say. Going in guns blazing was all he really had. It became difficult to swallow and Keith felt his Adam’s apple bob ominously, he was not going to cry.

“Fine. If brown-nosing is the only way then I’ll do the best I can.”

Giving a curt nod Allura finally reached into the open box in front of her and pulled out what was inside. It was some sort of costume, long and pure white with black details on the chest and sleeves. Small white stones were sewn into the leather-like fabric of what Keith could only call a poncho and they glittered like sequins in the muted light.

“The princess gestured Shiro over and held the shining white garment to him.

“Then let’s begin. Lance can’t wait and we’re going to put ourselves on a direct course for Vell. It’s considered very rude to open a wormhole within fifty clicks from the planet itself but that gives us some time to practice our conduct. Coran and I will be teaching you the basics of courtly manners and protocol.”

Shiro shot Keith a warning look.

“You’ll also have to get used to walking about in Vell vestments. We were fortunate enough to find the original paladin’s in storage!”

The princess laid a third short garment that was almost like a collar. This vestment turned out to be a set of elaborate robes. Allura helped Shiro slip on a tight form fitting black robe made of material so dark it seemed to suck in light. She tied it tight around his waist with a length of soft cord then dropped the second, much larger robe around his strong shoulders. It fell to his ankles and covered his entire body back and front like a cloak. Detailed silver filigree of the black lion were embroidered all down the front, encircled by Altean flowers in shades of plum and purple.

Over the second cloak the princess laid a third short garment that was almost like a collar. This
was pure black and fell to Shiro’s chest. The final bit of cloth was adorned with a sewn, silver crest Keith had seen engraved elsewhere in the Castle of Lions.

Shiro quirked an eyebrow down at himself and lifted up his arms, apparently testing the weight of the dense fabric. He didn’t look too happy about how heavy it was. Looking to the paladins he offered a weak smile.

“Well? How do I look?”

Pidge and Hunk both made non-committal noises while Coran gave encouraging compliments behind them. Keith just glared.

*He looks like the new pope of lion land,* the Lance imprint suggested helpfully.

“You look like the new pope of lion land,” Keith said out loud in agreement.

Everyone stared at him before Hunk snorted and Pidge actually started to laugh. Shiro beamed at Keith like he had something intensely profound and struck a regal pose. Allura just looked confused and reached into the box she had pulled Shiro’s outfit from rooting about until she pulled out a silvery object covered with obsidian stones. She stood on tiptoes to plant it on Shiro’s head right behind his tuft of white hair.

It was some sort of headpiece, a small circlet crown to go with the rest of the ridiculously intricate outfit.

*Now he looks like he needs to tell Frodo about the one ring before he catches the five o’clock to Rivendale* the Lance imprint added. Keith didn’t share this one but he felt the side of his mouth quirk despite himself. It almost made the pain in his chest uncurl slightly; almost.

Coran picked up another of the metal boxes and narrowed his eyes at the worn label.

“Alright…er. Pidge! You’re next. We’re probably going to have to tailor these a bit. Shiro’s fits alright, bit big but it works. Pidge and um…Hunk on the other hand might be a bit more of a fixing situation.”

The plain green robe fell down past Pidge’s feet and pooled around her body. The sleeves nearly brushed the ground as well and she groaned.

“I look like a kid playing pretend in their mom’s closet.”

Coran pulled out her over-robe and made her hold it as he jotted down her measurements.

“Not to worry! We’ll get this figured out!”

He placed a green and gold circlet on her head and watched it fall down around her forehead, forcing her ears and glasses to stick out. The green paladin groaned. Allura ended whatever conversation she was having with Shiro and walked past Coran to where Keith still sat brooding in his chair.

“Well Keith. I have kept my end of the promise. Now I believe you hold up your end.”

Keith scowled down at his hands and wondered if he would even be able to stand up. His legs felt like jelly. Allura seemed to sense this and reached down to him.

“Here…I’m sure you won’t be in there long and then we’ll fit you with your vestment. I give my word that you will not miss anything important. Your health is an asset we need right now.”

Taking her hand Keith felt Allura heft him up to his feet with little effort. It was so easy to forget how strong she was. Hunk looked over from where he was helping Pidge navigate her robes, holding them up so she wouldn’t drown in miles of green cloth.

“Are you going to the infirmary? You need help?”

Allura waved him off putting one of Keith’s arms around her shoulders as she nearly lifted him off the ground.

“It won’t take more than a moment! Continue on. Shiro don’t take that off! You can wear your thermal under-armor beneath it planet side but for now you should get used to wearing them even if it is over your regular clothing.”

Shiro pulled a hand away from where he was scratching at the mantle near his neck. He looked a bit like a kicked puppy who had been admonished for chewing a tennis shoe. Keith offered him a weak wave before he allowed Allura to take him out of the control room and down the hall to the infirmary.

The pain in his head pressed down harder and the little thumbtack pricks of agony had grown into hammers sometime during the meeting about the Olim Vell. Allura spoke in a whisper her voice warm near his ear.
“Oh Keith…your nose is bleeding.”

The red paladin brought his fingers up to his face and was surprised by the hot trickle of blood dripping from his nostrils. He tasted the familiar coppery tang of blood on the back of his throat and gagged on it. Maybe the healing pod was the best idea.

*Oh you think so? Aren’t you the smart one,* the Lance imprint said with an unseen eye-roll.

The lights in the sick bay turned on automatically when Allura and Keith walked in the door. The room was silent aside from the faint buzzing of active machinery connected with the healing pods. The princess sat Keith down on an infirmary bed and he used the edge of Hunk’s already filthy vest to wipe his nose.

Automatically Keith felt his gaze drifting to Lance’s healing pod but something else immediately caught his attention.

“**You put him in a healing pod?**”

Kru-Kron’s frog like face looked peaceful in the pod directly to Lance’s right. Seeing him there so close to the blue paladin set Keith’s teeth on edge and he almost let out a soft growl. It felt for a moment like the Red Lion was going to burst out of his skin and rip the entire cryo-pod out of the infirmary floor.

Allura shuffled through a cabinet full of the beige healing suits worn in the pods, evidently looking for one in Keith’s size. She shot Kru a sour look and answered abrasively, she didn’t sound anymore pleased than Keith.

“Regrettably, yes. If we have to return him to the Olim Vell then we can’t present him with an injured eye. It would look like we tortured him which is blatantly untrue…aha!”

“How did you…you know, get him to talk?”

“We threatened to maroon him on an uninhabited planet mostly.”

The princess walked back over to Keith with a suit in hand and presented it to him reverently. Keith barely looked at it his head thrown back; he pinched the bridge of his nose waiting for the bleeding to stop.

“Are all of them as ugly as him?”

“What? The Olim Vell? Goodness no. I had never even seen one that looked like him before. They have a very segregated caste system and he is apparently the lowest of the low. A barren seed is what he called himself. I only recognized him as Olim Vell because of his eyes. They all have that distinct luminous quality to their eyes.”

Keith puzzled over this closing his own eyes against the painful glow of the lights overhead. Caste was a term he had a passing familiarity with, something to do with class structure if he remembered correctly.

“So he’s bottom of the social ladder, I get that. But if they’re the same species how can they look that different?”

The red paladin heard Allura’s voice float over from another part of the room. She was at a console from the sound of it, preparing his pod.

“Well…it’s difficult but we have to think of things outside the human and Altean experience. I myself only know about the upper court in the barest sense. Coran is only a bit more familiar. We’ll just make due with the histories on file as we lack an actual Vell ambassador with experience. We’ll have to be as understanding and civil as we possibly can.”

“So we’re just kissing their alien feet until they cough up Lance.”

The door of a healing pod swung open and Allura gave an enormous and very Shiro-esque sigh.

“We will do what we must to get our blue paladin home.”

The nosebleed slowed and finally stopped after a good minute of dripping backwards down Keith’s throat. Swallowing the blood made him feel even woozier then before and he pulled off his shoes and socks, ready to change into the healing scrubs without further complaint.

“Why do they want him…what are they doing with him?”

“That I don’t know. Kru-Kron wouldn’t give us those particulars. He only said that Lance was very valuable and complained multiple times about how we owed him damages for lost income.”

A smug smile spread over the princess’s face at this though Keith lost sight of it when she turned her back to let him change in private.
“We informed him his life was payment enough.”

“It’s weird…everybody slips sometimes and says we lost Lance instead of Lance’s scrim.”

Keith finished tugging on the scrubs and trained his gaze on Lance’s body laying corpse-still in its healing pod.

“It’s like we all know that’s not him in there anymore…but nobody wants to admit it.”

Glancing over furtively to see if Keith had changed Allura bustled him over to the healing pod and helped him get settled inside.

“Whatever part of him we lost we’re getting back soon enough. Just sleep and look forward to wearing those dreadful, hot vestments when you wake up.”

Keith managed a small smirk as she hooked him in, his head lolling back as he tried to get comfortable.

“Tell Hunk I’m sorry about his vest. I’ll clean it when I get out.”

Allura smiled and brushed hair from Keith’s eyes gingerly before she stepped out of the pod and closed the door.

“I will. Sweet sleep my paladin.”

Keith heard the hiss of air fill the chamber and the familiar cold brush over his skin, burrowing into his muscles. He blinked heavily as his limbs grew leaden with artificial sleep.

Todo estará bien Keith. Dulces sueños, the Lance imprint whispered adoringly.

With those words the last resistance in Keith’s body left him and he was out like a light.

**Chapter End Notes**

Hey my name is Keith and this is Jackass ~RAMS WHOLE HEAD INTO WORMHOLE~

All love to my proofreader CJ!
If he had to make an estimate Keith would have guessed his vestments weighed around fifty pounds; fifty pounds of fabric, gems and hoity-toity bullshit. The robes smelled like dust and age. They stank like they had been malingering in the storeroom of a castle for ten thousand years and Keith hated them the moment he put them on.

The red paladin had ended up spending nearly ten hours in the healing pod. He had wasted most of his training time recovering from the effects of the wormhole and what turned out to be something akin to mild decompression sickness. Now he sat forlornly on the ground near Red’s paw in his Vell vestments contemplating the empty hangar in front of him.

It was good to be somewhere quiet. After spending so much time by himself in the Arizona desert the rough, boisterous atmosphere of the castle had been an adjustment; one he hadn’t really had time to acclimate to. Sometimes Keith just needed a minute away from noise and people.

He lay his head on his knees, the stones of his vestment cloak digging uncomfortably into the skin of his cheek. Red made a low rumbling sound in the back of Keith’s head and he answered her with a half smile.

“Yeah. I’m alright. Just thinking.”

Keith put a hand on the beaten metal of Red’s paw and concentrated on his breathing. Slow inhales and exhales in his nose and out his mouth. It helped the connection with his lion among other things.

“Red…is the Blue Lion doing alright?”

Images flashed through his head in a sequence. That was how the lions “spoke”, less with words and more with feelings interspersed with images and memories. In his mind’s eye Keith saw the links of a metal chain struggling to hold, felt strain and then fear dancing along the struts of his ribcage. The Blue Lion was doing everything she could to hold the connection but it was difficult…and she was scared.

Keith took a shuddering breath trying to find focus again through Red’s answer.

“Can you tell her to hold on? Tell her…tell her I’m sorry I let this happen?”

There was a flash of Shiro’s concerned face, a brief snippet of a memory of Keith blaming himself for a bad team score at the Garrison. This was followed by sensation of claws digging deep into Keith’s shoulder blades; iron tight…unyielding. A bond was unbreakable, lifelong. Blue would hold onto Lance until she had no strength left and her well of strength ran very deep.

“That’s good. Tell her…tell her thank you.”

Red was able to show Keith memories of things she had experienced or his own memories. These conversations were stronger based on proximity. They couldn’t really speak if they were miles apart. The Red Lion repeated the images of Shiro’s face and the Garrison with an added image of Allura tapping her foot impatiently. It had taken awhile for Keith to get the hang of understanding the Lion’s bizarre shorthand language but now he could decipher it almost instantly.

“You all think I shouldn’t blame myself but I think…it’s not just that I let him go into that tent. It’s how I was treating him before too. It was something he said to me before-before he got pulled away.”

Red purred soft and sent an image of Lance’s face laughing, one seen from a distance. Like Keith was watching him from very far away. The sense of remoteness was emphasized and paired with a memory of Keith all alone on his hover-bike under a vast expanse of cold stars.

“Yeah. I thought I was ok with that, keeping him distant, being alone. But he-he said I could stop pretending I cared Red. Shiro knows I never pretend to care about anything. I think even the others know that. But Lance thinks I’m faking my feelings around him…maybe that’s my fault. Maybe if I was better at talking than he wouldn’t always try so hard to impress me. I don’t know.”

Red seemed to consider this, her head leaning down ponderously between her front paws to brush the top of Keith’s head. The red paladin shivered in a puff of imaginary breath, he could almost feel the warm air from her metal nose; sense the living thing that dwelt in the extraordinary machine.

Inside Keith’s brain he saw two people embracing tightly, their arms wrapped around each other. One of them he recognized as King Alfor, Allura’s father, the other was a woman who resembled the princess so much Keith didn’t have trouble guessing she was Alfor’s wife-the Queen. The two Alteans kissed passionately and despite them being long dead Keith felt a little
weird for spying on them. Red let the memory play out before an image of Lance flashing an embarrassing thumbs up appeared paired with a prodding sensation of questioning.

Keith felt his entire body burn and the skin on his face turned as red as his lion.

“I…I don’t know.”

Red made a softer noise, something like a coo. It was musical, a noise reminiscent of a housecat more than a lion; especially a flying robot one. Keith felt the blush intensify and he scowled.

“So what if I do. I don’t want to deal with that. I think we have bigger problems.”

The memory of Alfor and his wife repeated stubbornly before drifting into a memory of Alfor telling his wife, now heavily pregnant, goodbye. He was walking away from her towards Red—towards all the lions. She waved as the sun rose behind her. Lance was smiling at Keith from across the training deck. If they found time why can’t you Red said with this simple juxtaposition.

“Stop ok…It’s just. I don’t like thinking about this. I don’t like thinking about him that way. He’s my teammate. Like Pidge and Hunk and Shiro are my teammates. I just want him to realize I care about him. Stop treating me like some weird opponent—I want…god.”

Keith pushed his forehead harder into his knees, the tiny stones on his vestment robe sank into his skin to leave little diamond shaped marks.

“What If I lost the chance Red? What if he dies. When I thought Shiro was dead after the Kerberos mission I thought the hurt couldn’t get worse…but Lance. It hurts in a way I don’t even understand. It feels like losing a limb, which I guess is accurate right?”

The Lion drew its paw around Keith and made the cooing noise again deep in its throat. The next memory that came was of Alfor again but this time the Red Lion watched as the Altean carried something from the flaming ruins of a large white ship. The sad, limp bundle had familiar hair, white as bone but now stained with blood. Alfor went to his knees and pressed his face to his Queens. She did not stir and Keith knew she never would again.

His stomach dropped and he felt like he was looking at something even more personal and secret than the kiss. The memory of the Queen’s death was filled with an utter sense of loss and Keith was terrified to recognize that same feeling growing inside him.

“No! I told you it’s not like that!”

I think the lady doth protest too much, the Lance imprint said without any humor in its voice.

Keith swallowed the deep breath he was taking in and grit his teeth. The imprint was the last thing he needed to weigh in on this conversation.

Why not just go with it, the Lance imprint pressed, I bet it would go better than you think.

“He’s my teammate. He’s sometimes my friend…maybe. Beyond that there’s nothing I could give and nothing he would want.”

Red raised her head and made a huffing noise that seemed the big cat equivalent of weary sigh. A memory of water putting out a campfire filled Keith’s brain and he just blinked. The fire died and the water sizzled to steam and nothing was left of the long dead campfire but a sad pile of soggy wood.

He had no idea how to interpret that one.

“I …you’re gonna have to explain better Red I don’t get it.”

The large paw moved laboriously slowly and batted Keith out into the hangar with something akin to annoyance. Keith got to his feet with a bit of difficulty, he still wasn’t used to the weight of the vestment robes and they were so long they threw off his balance.

The memory of the campfire unfolded again, the water drowning the fire with a dramatic hiss. After this played out it was replaced by a second memory of Keith’s; a flame on a stove boiling water until it disappeared into vapor. In either scenario she showed the fire or the water overpowered each other. With a feeling of gentle acceptance the lion looked down at him and offered a third alternative.

This memory Keith didn’t recognize as his own but at the same time it didn’t seem to be from Red’s high perspective either. He wondered if it belonged to Red’s former paladin. Was he privy to the dead pilot’s memories? If Red was it seemed likely he was as well. The memory showed a blacksmith? A forge? Was that the correct term? A large shadowy creature put a chunk of metal into a red hot flame, beat it sharp and then doused it in a tub of cool water. They were creating something—a sword…a very familiar sword.

The process needed both flame and water working together to make something powerful. If the water and fire could do this than why could their paladins not come together and make something
Keith said nothing. The images of his Bayard’s creation disappeared from his mind’s eye and he put his forehead to Red’s paw. His chest ached and his heart still felt like an infected wound but somehow the lion’s simple language helped him consider what he wanted from a different perspective.

“I’ll think about it ok? Have to focus on getting him back first.”

Red purred low and gentle lulling Keith further into a sort of half-conscious stupor. He swayed on his feet buoyed up by the connection between them, reveling in how sturdy the two of them were together.

He was drawn out of his trance by the click of the overhead castle comm and Allura’s anxious voice.

“Paladin’s we’ve successfully hailed the Olim Vell. They have given us permission to go planet side but we will not be taking the lions. Please meet in the ship hangar ready to leave immediately.”

Keith felt his expression darken and gave Red’s paw a last affectionate pat.

“Keep an eye on Blue and the castle alright?”

Red answered with a protective growl, her frame vibrating from the force of it. She didn’t even need to send him images to accompany this message. Come back safe. Accomplish your mission. I believe in you.

Allura had first hailed the Olim Vell not long after Keith had gone into the healing pod to recover. They had taken hours to answer her and the princess had been at her wits end, convinced this was a bad sign and they would not be willing to talk.

The apprehension was not gone from her expression as the paladins packed into the crowded land shuttle; a ship usually reserved for retrieving refugees or quick escapes from the castle if it was under siege. Allura clasped the controls in her shaking hands and eased the ship out of the hangar distractedly. She did not even acknowledge Coran who had come to see them off.

Hunk waved at the Altean without echoing his enthusiasm, watching as he became a small orange spot on the flight deck.

“Man, I wish he could have come with us.”

Pidge pressed her shoulder closer to Keith’s and pulled at her vestment collar, trying to get under the hem to itch her neck.

“Somebody has to stay with the ship and the lions I guess…”

Hunk reached up to touch his forehead for the fifth time in so many minutes. Keith had to admit he looked a little naked without his headband. He was wearing pounds and pounds of extra clothing but without the strip around his head he hardly looked like himself. The princess had insisted he take it off in favor of his circlet headpiece and he kept fiddling with it, his fingers running over the bronze circle set with chunky stones the color of amber and old honey.

“I would have loved to do that instead of this…lets trade next time. I’ll stay in the castle.”

Keith looked towards the front of the shuttle where Shiro was riding shotgun next to Allura. He had offered to fly but she had refused him without giving a reason. It made Keith suspicious.

The way the princess was acting and the hurried way they left stank of conspiracy. She had been the only one in the room when the Olim Vell had returned contact.

As if on cue Allura cleared her throat awkwardly and spoke without turning her attention from her flight path.

“We should be there in only a few ticks…The Olim Vell seemed eager to receive us. They didn’t even demand we bring Kru-Kron. It’s good to know they still live under the oath of neutrality. They are beholden to their own traditions and they know they have a responsibility—oh quizznak I’ll just come out and say it!”

The flowery speech gave way in an instant and Allura’s cheeks flushed a livid red.

“There is a Galra force on Vell”

Shiro stood up in his chair, Pidge made a noise that was borderline squawk and Hunk’s skin turned a sickly grayish pale. Keith kept his composure outwardly only because he found he wasn’t too surprised. It would have been too easy to walk up to the Olim Vell and ask for help. Of course the Galra were here. The Galra were everywhere.
Pidge’s voice went up several octaves and she squeaked angrily at the back of Allura’s head.

“So we’re just flying right into a Galra trap without Lions? Without a plan!?”

Hunk was looking around the shuttle like he was searching for a parachute or a life raft.

“We have to turn back! They’ll capture us and then we can’t help Lance at all!”

Keith swallowed hard at that, his throat dry. He didn’t scream his misgivings aloud like the others however, all his attention was on Shiro waiting to see what his reaction would be.

Allura’s shoulders went very stiff and she sat ramrod straight, the silvery ceremonial jewels woven into her hair reflecting the light from the shuttles guidance systems.

“I was assured by the Olim Vell that all rules about being impartial in conflicts stand. We have protection from the Galra on Vell. They will welcome us as friends.”

She took a shallow, scared breath and turned slightly to glance at Shiro.

“If I had told them no…it would have shown my lack of faith. It would have sabotaged the mission before it even began. I had to prove to them that we trust them. Shiro I-”

She was looking desperately for his approval but Keith could see just by the way he held his shoulders that Shiro was upset. When he finally spoke everyone went silent and listened.

“You trusted them but you didn’t trust us, Princess.”

Keith felt Pidge lean forward, heard Hunk take a breath. Shiro was sinking back down into the chair again and when he looked at Allura he had that expression Keith had nightmares about; the look of utter disappointment.

“You didn’t think we would have enough confidence in you to go when we knew the Galra were already there? Or-”

He looked down at his arm under the sleeve of his vestment robe and curled his fingers.

“Did you think I wouldn’t agree to it as the leader because of my history?”

Allura stared back out at the stars ahead without answering, Keith couldn’t see her face but he was almost sure her chin and bottom lip were trembling. The shuttle became so quiet you could have heard a pin drop.

“If you’re going to lie to us then how can we do this together?”

Allura trembled, her voice soft.

“I’m so sorry. I just knew in that moment we only had one choice and I was afraid of your reaction.”

Keith knew she wasn’t speaking to all of them then. She was speaking directly to Shiro. He closed his eyes and bowed his head thoughtfully. He seemed to have aged decades in the year he had been lost in space. It wasn’t the scar or the patch of premature white hair either. It was a deeper, inner weariness that the red paladin attributed to war vets and trauma victims.

“A unit cannot work together without complete honesty.”

Shiro looked back at the other paladins.

“Now that you know there are Galra on Vell do you want to go back?”

Keith answered immediately he didn’t even have to think about it. He knew his answer.

“No.”

Pidge was a little slower but she bit at her thumbnail and finally nodded.

“Yeah...me either. I kinda wish we had a backup plan but I vote we keep going.”

Hunk made a small unhappy yelp in his throat and pointed ahead.

“I vote we turn back.”

Allura slowed the shuttle to a stop and put a hand to her mouth. Keith felt something drop heavy into the pit of his stomach. The wine colored planet and its three blue moons floated languidly in the distance. It seemed to glow from within giving off a wash of gentle indigo light as it floated in empty space. Surrounding it and looking significantly less harmless was a small flotilla of Galra war ships.

The miniature fleet contained one of the biggest battle cruisers Keith had ever seen, definitely larger than anything they had fought before. Pressing against it on all sides like remoras on a shark
were smaller ships similar to the one Sendak had used to attack them on Arus. They were so
dwarfed in size by the central massive space ship they looked like toys.

Hunk stuttered nervously thumping his leg up and down.

“I don’t think even Voltron could take that thing down. W…we should go.”

Shiro narrowed his eyes at the garish purple ships and waited. A nervous moment passed but
the Galra made no attempt to attack them. Not even a smaller scout ship was sent out and Keith let
out a breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding.
The black paladin looked at his team one member at a time and his words came out measured, like
he was trying to sound more certain of himself than he really was.

“I don’t think they’re going to attack us.”

A pinging noise rose from the shuttle’s instruments and the princess relayed their message
reluctantly.

“'The Vell has given us coordinates to land. What do you wish me to do, Shiro?’”

Keith turned his attention to the Galra ships again considering them. The longer he looked at
the colossal cruiser in the middle of the smaller battleships the more he wondered if it was built for
battle at all. It was covered with more decorative touches than he was used to seeing on any Galra
vessel. It also had more windows and obvious weaknesses that would be prone to even the most
basic attack. Perhaps the battleships were there to protect the thing—despite its intimidating size
maybe it wasn’t a war ship at all.

Shiro broke the red paladin out of his thoughts as he pointed towards Vell and gave a decisive
nod.

“We keep going as planned. We trust the Olim Vell for now…but princess-
Allura shuddered at the sound of her title and reluctantly met Shiro’s hard gaze.

“Don’t keep important information from us again. You’re part of the team and everyone is
equal on the team.”

Hunk muttered under his breath eyeing the Galra ships as Allura started to move the shuttle
forward again.

“Equally dead…”

The paladins had visited many planets in their relatively short time together but Keith could not
recall a single place as beautiful as the planet Vell. The air was cool and smelled heavy like
incense and damp dirt after a summer rainstorm. The ground was a burgundy color and long,
silken grass grew everywhere, moving like an ocean in the slightest breeze. The wine-red prairie
went on for miles into the lilac colored horizon, each strand casting strange tinted shadows under
the Vell’s ancient red sun.

Allura had landed in a small space cleared of grass on a pad made of carved rock. There was
absolutely nothing but fields of rippling vegetation and cloudy purple sky surrounding them when
the team climbed out of the ship. Pidge, mindful of the low hem of her vestment robe, wandered
over to examine the grass with a vacant expression. Hunk was eyeing the sky nervously waiting
for the Galra force they were all still expecting.

Keith felt agitated and crossed his arms as he stood by Shiro. The circlet crown that went with
his vestment robes was pointed and uncomfortable. The edges had been shaped into black leaves
and small red stones the size of blood droplets poked his skin and tangled easily in his long hair.
Keith fought the urge to rip it off.

“So…where is everyone? Are the Olim Vell grass? This doesn’t seem like a good way to
greet guests.”

Shiro gave him a light cuff on the back of the head sending the red paladin’s crown into his
eyes.

“Keith. Manners. That goes for everyone. From this moment on we are on our best behavior.”

Allura interlaced her fingers, her gaze following the path of a fat lavender cloud as it drifted
overhead.

“It is quite strange there was no one here to greet us…”

Pidge plucked a string of grass to examine the root before she tossed it out into the field with a
look of absolute boredom. She had not been allowed any of her tech here just as the rest of the
paladins had not been allowed any weapons. Keith felt ill at ease without his knife and had almost
snuck it down with him. It would have been so easy with all the layers he’d been wearing. In
hindsight it had been a stupid idea and the Lance imprint had said as much…multiple times.

They all froze at the sound of distant music. Hunk strode to the edge of the landing pad, carved with the same familiar runes Keith knew from the wormhole and the scrims. The yellow paladin raised a hand to his eyes and peered into the distance over the sea of grass.

“There’s…something coming.”

Keith caught sight of the parade just as Hunk pointed them out. The dark figures seemed small at first, moving somber and slow over the flat ground. The red sun and the overall purplish complexion of Vell made it feel like twilight despite the actual planet time being closer to early morning.

Every step the figures took sent up waves of small firefly-like creatures who twinkled in shades of ochre and orange. Pidge stood next to Keith pressing into him nervously, her hand straying very close to his without taking it. She whispered to him voice hesitant.

“I think they’re singing.”

Closing his eyes for a moment Keith strained to hear. Yes, they were singing. It was a slow droning noise that had no words. It oscillated monotonously in and out and every step the creatures took was accentuated by the song and the clear glass tone of an unseen bell.

The grass around them was easily as tall as Shiro but its length was deceptive when seen from far away. That was what made Keith think the aliens were human-sized at first. Now as they drew nearer could see they were not just huge, they were gigantic.

As Keith began to make out more details he guessed they had to be over eight feet –maybe ten. There were six in all walking in tandem and perfectly in-synch. Two held flags so large they could have covered the castle shuttle-ship back to front like a blanket.

Shiro stepped to the front of the group protectively and Allura rushed to stand next to him as the strange entourage closed the distance.

The Olim Vell were tapered and slim. They had long pious faces that reminded Keith of a horse or a greyhound dog. They had extremely long necks that bowed in the middle and curved downward giving the appearance that they were constantly in the middle of a prayer. In the center of this curled mass of muscle was a mane of anemone like tendrils that danced and swayed in a bizarre echo of the grass surrounding them.

They looked nothing like Kru-Kron. Keith struggled to find any similarities between the disgusting froggy criminal still cooling his heels in a healing pod and the ethereal things towering before him. Maybe the eyes? Yeah, Allura was right. They did have those same luminous star-filled eyes…but these creatures had six eyes trailing down their long anchor-like faces while Kru only had two.

They also had the same thorny wood-like skin protuberances but Kru-Kron’s had been broken and stubby. The thorns on these Olim Vell were polished to a mirror shine and carved with runes or animal shapes. If Kru-Kron’s skin was stretched over a better skeleton than maybe this is what it would look like Keith decided; but it would have taken a lot of stretching.

“They’re…so beautiful…”

Hunk said in a shaky voice near Keith’s ear.

Allura bowed low to the ground and nudged Shiro subtly to do the same. He copied her and Keith mimicked the two of them trying to grasp his manners crash course as best he could. One of the Olim opened its mouth and some of the beauty and wonder faded from its appearance instantaneously. Its mouth was huge; the edge of its jaw beginning low on what Keith thought was its neck. The top opened just below the eyes and when it moved it looked like the whole creature was splitting in half to reveal a bright blue interior.

<Welcome to Vell paladins of Voltron. May peace and health be on the warriors of the five lions. We are your escorts here to take you to The Mother’s Citadel.>

Allura glanced upwards her eyes bright as she fell into the role of ambassador.

“Honored host…all peace and health be on The Mother and the children of Vell. We are grateful for your hospitality.”

The Olim Vell spoke in a very slow ponderous voice and the way its mouth moved didn’t seem to sync correctly with the words it was saying. Keith watched it eyebrows furrowed, it was more like the mouth moving was just for show and the voice itself was inside of his head, not filling his ears.

<Please…follow us.>

Keith fell into step behind the Olim Vell with Pidge on one side and grass on the other. Hunk sandwiched the green paladin on her other side and kept looking nervously at the back of the alien
in front of him. They wore long vestment robes similar to the ones the paladins had been given but
their trains were much longer and somehow contained more layers. They moved fast and under
their robes and Keith could make out the shapes of more than two legs moving.

Their guides started the weird deep-throated singing again and together the procession shuffled
through the high magenta grass.

No one spoke, each with their own thoughts as they made slow but steady progress. Keith had
an eerie feeling he was being watched and he kept looking around for the source. He wondered if
the others could feel it; the sensation of eyes burrowing between their shoulder blades. The path
went from plain dirt to smooth, white stone and the grass receded to a flat plane completely
covered with reflective glass.

Pidge almost stopped walking to look at it her eyes wide and her mouth hanging open.

“Wow…the whole ground is covered in Scaultrite!”

Without turning his head an Olim Vell escort paused in his singing and spoke in a voice that
thrummed inside of Keith’s head. It vibrated in the bone under the bridge of his nose and made the
paladin feel like he was about to sneeze.

<This is the path of a Weblum Larvae. Ages ago when it rose from the ground to feed on the
Lim grasses it left behind a trail of pure Scaultrite.>

Pidge beamed and her hand automatically reached for a computer that wasn’t there. Her
expression faltered when she realized she had nothing to record her thoughts on but she recovered
quickly.

“How often do Weblum Larvae hatch? Do you have paths like this all over the place? Do
They ever go away?”

Allura cleared her throat loudly.

“Pidge…you shouldn’t trouble our escort with unnecessary questions. The Weblum are very
sacred to them.”

_In other words shut up nosey_, the Lance imprint whispered.

The escort made a low barking noise and it took Keith a minute to figure out it was laughing. It
sounded more like a painful cough.

_<The green paladin is no more a larvae herself. Her questions do not bother an old Radix
Drone. A Weblum birth is rare, perhaps one every few thousand years and not all larvae survive
the birthing process to create a path. The grass will grow over the path with time…that is the thing
that is always constant. All changes and erodes with time.>

_Thanks Mr. Fortune Cookie_, the imprint said in a tone oozing sarcasm.

Keith took a deep breath to calm himself; the imprint would begin to talk more and more if he
was nervous. He had come to recognize that the higher his stress levels the more talkative the
imprint. As nice as it was not to feel alone in tense situations, Lance’s little voice was not a
distractions he needed right now.

Several of the blue, fleshy tendrils from the Olim Vell in front of Pidge started to lengthen and
reach outwards. Without breaking stride the alien, apparently the one who had been speaking,
started to brush the bright glowing appendages against the green paladin’s face.

Pidge squealed and tried to brush them away and Keith almost reached out to slap them
instinctively.

_<It is alright…I am just trying to get a feel for you. Your aura is so beautiful._>

Keith snarled at the word aura- Kru-Kron had said something about Lance’s aura too. He had
complimented it right before he sucked the colors right out of him. The Olim Vell’s fortune telling
gimmick was getting really old really fast.

“She didn’t give you permission to touch her.”

“Keith!”

Allura laughed uneasily.

_“Apologies sir…they are from a primitive planet unused to such tactile greetings.”_

Sweat dripped down Pidge’s forehead as the tendrils slid across her hair and circled around her
neck pulling away slowly. The alien, Radix Drone was what it called itself, did not apologize and
it seemed completely oblivious to Pidge’s discomfort and Keith’s anger. It just kept talking like
everything it had to say was the most important thing they would hear.
The green paladin pines... searching very intelligent. I sense memories of a good home and strong colors that indicate a good character. Beautiful.

Pidge slipped farther behind Keith and Hunk and the yellow paladin put a hand on her back his eyebrows furrowed. He glared at Allura before he piped up to agree with Keith.

"Um…maybe you should ask next time before doing that-Whoa! Ok, that’s my personal space-"

The same Radix Drone reached out for Hunk next and he danced back and forth trying to avoid the translucent round-ended feeler moving towards his face. Shiro lunged forward but Allura grabbed the back of his robes shaking her head frantically. She tried to distract the alien by asking a question in a forced, overly-friendly voice.

"So- um…the Royal Mother, it was kind of her to grant our request.”

One of the other Olim Veil in line answered, his companion still attempting to get a reading on Hunk as he squirmed.

"The Royal Mother is dead.”

Keith, despite being distracted by Hunk’s situation noticed the shock in Allura’s reaction.

"What?"

The Radix Drone finally managed to touch Hunk’s face with a damp, smacking sound. The glowing tentacle burrowed inside the yellow paladins nose and searched the inside of his mouth. Hunk’s eyes teared up and he winced up slowing down enough that Allura bumped into his back and had to push him forward.

When Hunk’s eyes met Keith’s they crinkled up painfully at the edges.

“It’s the same texture as a gummy-bear”

He whispered miserably.

“I’ll never be able to eat a gummy-bear again…"

Keith shuddered sympathetically knowing he was probably next and there was nothing he could do about it. The shining tendrils took one more probing scan over the yellow paladin’s cheeks before retreating backwards.

Beautiful beautiful! The yellow paladin has wonderful kindness. Gold is a good and strong color… Such a strange flavor but worth savoring.>

Allura did her best not to interrupt but she seemed desperate to guide the conversation back to her previous question.

"Honored escorts I…I must apologize for my bluntness but…if the Royal Mother is dead then who leads the Olim Vell?"

Keith was prepared for what was coming but when the slithering tendrils started to make their way towards his face he couldn’t help but lift up a hand to bat them away. They continued on undaunted.

At present we are guided by the last living Caulis Imperials. But not for much longer, you will see. They will speak to you soon enough. Please be patient.>

Keith felt the first slick tentacle touch his cheek and he winced curling his hands into tight fists.

Keep it together man. I know you wanna punch them but don’t do it, the Lance imprint warned.

Each tendril was the width of a human finger and had an internal, bioluminescent radiance that only added to their alien strangeness. At least they were gentle but they were also the opposite of bashful. Keith felt the Olim Vell exploring the inside of his ears and pushing to feel his pounding pulse before spending a moment playing inquisitively with his hair.

Anger...so much anger, rage and confusion but under it longing- beautiful like fire. He burns like fire for many reasons. Curious…very curious.>

Finally, thankfully the elastic tendrils pulled away.

Good job dude… you didn’t break his neck. I’m proud, the imprint said sounding sincerely impressed.

It took a minute for Keith to dig his fingernails out of his palms and he let out a slow breath to regain his composure. The tendrils seemed to have no limit to how long they could stretch and were making their way towards Shiro directly behind him. Keith shook himself starting to feel the
heat of his vestments as the sky around them turned a lighter shade of lilac. He noticed Pidge was panting, the sweat standing out on her forehead.

“Hey, how much farther do we have to walk?”

Shiro pulled in a quick breath between his teeth and Keith glanced over his shoulder to see the Olim Vell tendrils going to work on his face, spending extra time tracing the edges of his facial scar.

One of the Olim holding a flag at the front of the procession lifted a long two-fingered appendage and gestured towards something just visible over the flat, glass plain.

<There. That is the Mother’s Citadel, just beyond the Weblum’s birthing ground where the grass is at its peak.>

The glowing tentacle pestering Shiro pulled away past Keith and he shivered.

<The black paladin is as beautiful as he is unsure.>

Hunk and Pidge looked at each other and Keith raised an eyebrow waiting for more but that’s all the Olim Vell had to say about Shiro and it made Keith more uncomfortable than the feeling of a gelatin tentacle digging around in his ear.

History had never been Keith’s strongest subject. The teachers in the Garrison had always told him that to have a sense of history was to help the world learn from its mistakes. Mostly it just felt like a lot of slideshows of dead people. Even if learning about Napoleon and Churchill was supposed to help his strategy skills, Keith, and everyone around him, knew he wasn’t a guy interested in elaborate battle plans.

Despite that Keith had a weak memory of some movie, a documentary he had watched in a history class. It was about a French castle with a weird name; Ver-something, a French word. The Mother’s Citadel looked like that French castle.

The purple grass and smooth stone pathway moved seamlessly into a long courtyard filled with dozens of magenta fountains filled with something viscous that definitely wasn’t water. Beautiful decorative shapes had been cut into swathes of the tall grass and it was eerily reminiscent of crop-circles found on earth, a hedge maze without the hedge. Statues and pillars lined the walkways each twice as big as anything human-made and created from the Weblum scaultrite.

The citadel itself was a sprawling building of such insane size Keith could barely wrap his head around it. When Hunk saw it he said that it made him feel like a cartoon mouse from an animated movie and Keith agreed. It made him feel undersized, like he was the wrong scale for the model built around him.

The escort left them at a stone door so huge Keith didn’t think even Allura could open it. Bowing, all six of the Olim Vell opened the entrance and retreated without another word.

For the moment the five of them were alone on the threshold of an alien palace unsure what to do. Allura stood her ground and gazed at the paladins wide eyed.

“I…”

Pidge interrupted fanning her face, she looked pale and overheated and Keith was worried she would faint from the sheer weight of her vestments.

“Why didn’t the tentacle guy paw you like he did us?”

“Oh, I—I’m not sure Pidge, perhaps because I am not a paladin. They seemed most interested in the nature of the paladins.”

Shiro locked eyes with Keith and gave him a forced smile.

“Hold it together everyone. I know that first part was rough…Keith just keep a cool head alright? Hunk try not to show how nervous you are. Pidge, we’ll get you some water as soon as we can, if you feel your knees locking say something. Princess you’re doing alright. We haven’t offended anybody yet.”

“Well the day is young.”

At the sound of the new voice Keith turned on his heel hands raised defensively. He heard everyone else twist in a ruffle of robes and when he spotted the familiar purple profile of a Galra, Keith’s guard was up automatically.

From his dress it was obvious that the Galra was important, possibly a general or some other high-ranking military leader. He had on velvety looking finery and his fur was groomed to perfection. To Keith he perfectly mirrored the gargantuan ship they had seen hovering above the
Shiro made a good show of keeping his cool, folding his arms over his chest so the Galra could get a good view of his prosthetic. Keith felt renewed admiration at this. He hadn’t even thought about it but Shiro was the only one of them who had been allowed a weapon on Vell. The Olim probably had no idea.

“I am Takashi Shirogone, the Black Paladin of Voltron. Who are you?”

The Galra snorted through his broad flat nose. He was young, even younger than Sendak had been; The Galra equivalent of a teenager. His dark violet hair was slicked back into a long ponytail and his ears had been docked to keep them long and exceptionally pointed. Smiling with his protruding canines the Galra gave a mock bow to the group.

“I am Duke Nemean, a member of the royal family and distant nephew of Lord Zarkon. Your reputation precedes you Champion! Why, I saw you fighting in the arena once or twice at the behest of my cousin. It was quite a show.”

The Duke turned his gaze to Allura and reached out to take her hand pressing his lips to it lightly. She let him but Keith could see every muscle in her body tighten as if she was suppressing the urge to throw him into the nearest fountain.

“Ah and Princess Allura, or is it queen? Or really can you be a monarch at all without a planet to rule or a people to command? Ah titles. Strange things aren’t they.”

Still holding her hand Nemean raised his glowing yellow eyes to her face.

“You are quite ravishing aren’t you? A credit to your father’s fine genes. Alas, I’m afraid I can’t look at you too long. My fiancée will be jealous.”

Drawing his hand back the Duke cackled at a joke only he understood and turned into the castle beckoning for them to follow.

Keith felt imaginary hackles rise and barely contained the urge to bolt after him. Allura said nothing, her head held high but her eyes shimmering with poorly disguised rage. Shiro followed behind her hovering protectively close. Pidge and Hunk fell in behind them and Keith let himself trail at the back.

The Mother’s Citadel was every bit as grand on the inside as it was out. Scaultrite sculptures adorned every space that didn’t hold a fine painting or a beautifully crafted mural. Scaultrite vases filled with purple grass stood on lacquered furniture and scaultrite glass fixtures shaped like planets hung from bas relief ceilings. No inch was left undecorated and the space itself was so large Keith felt like Alice moments after she had sipped that bottle that said “drink me.” It was made for creatures so much larger than a human.

Keith wasn’t in the right mind to enjoy the view and he barely noticed the breathtaking show of wealth around him. The Duke was prattling to Allura about something that he couldn’t quite hear. The Galra’s voice echoed off the high ceilings and white stone floors but his words were lost in the reverb; every once in awhile Allura would mutter an answer but that to was impossible to hear over their echoing footsteps.

After another hallway full of finery that Keith ignored and Hunk gushed over, the group turned into a pair of doors sized to fit a blue whale and were in a room so large it gave the lions’ hangar a run for its money in terms of sheer space.

Unlike the other parts of the castle, it was much more Spartan when it came to décor. The floor was a long mass of carved, obsidian rock and there were no windows. The only light came from a holographic model of the universe floating above their heads like a child’s mobile. The walls were the same carved stone as the floor but the back wall; the furthest from the entrance was hung with an embroidered magenta curtain that stretched several stories up from floor to ceiling.

Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain, the Lance imprint said suspiciously.

Yeah, it was weird. There was no question the curtain was hiding something. Keith could make out fluttering along its tasseled base and sometimes the heavy material would billow like a large animal breathing.

A dais rose at the center of the room directly in from of the mysterious curtain. Three creatures sat upon it on a pile of pillows made of dried grass. Duke Nemean approached them fearlessly without even a bow. He held his hand out announcing the group in a loud voice.

“My honored Caulis Imperials the paladins are here!”

Allura went down on one knee near the steps of the dais and when Shiro copied her Keith did too watching Hunk and Pidge do the same, although definitely with less grace. They all stayed on the ground, nobody daring to get back to their feet until Allura did. Keith struggled to stay balanced in his robes and thought that Lance would have been better at this kind of thing. The thought added fuel to the angry fire constantly burning in his gut.
“Honored Olim Vell. I am princess Allura of Altea and these are the paladins of Voltron. It is with deepest respect we present ourselves before you and ask for an audience with you.”

Duke Nemean sat beside the Imperials on the only available chair in the room and watched the creatures with unrestrained glee. The first thought Keith had regarding them was the most obvious. They looked….old. Really old.

The Radix Drone had called himself old and he had been huge, these guys the Cal-whatever’s were even BIGGER than the Olim Vell in their escort. They also had the bowed heads and long faces of the Radix but instead of six eyes they had eight a-piece and the long glowing tentacle manes on their backs looked a bit lackluster, their color a faded off-white. The Caulis were wrinkled and twisted, weighed down by gravity and their own vestments; the universes in their eyes cloudy from age and barely focused on the group in front of them. The biggest of the three ancients opened a mouth that split its bizarre body in two and spoke with both its teeth and its brain.

<Princess. We had thought your kind lost. It is a pleasure to see you now at this important time in the turn of the Vell.>

The voice was a deep and almost painful hum in Keith’s head and he noticed Pidge wincing behind her glasses. Hunk wiggled a finger in his ear.

<We are pleased you have come to be part of the nuptial ceremony of the Galra Duke Nemean to our Young Mother. We have not seen an Altean in the House of Vell since the Spur of our last Mother, The Mother of the Age Soluto. It is good to have the blessing of Voltron again.>

Allura seemed at a loss for words, she just stared at the Imperials for a silent minute and Shiro had to gently nudge her to get her going again. Keith felt lost, whatever was going on was bad but he had no idea what the hell was bad about it. He looked to Hunk and Pidge but they seemed just as confused as he was. Good, it wasn’t something that Allura had covered when he was in the healing pod.

A glow on the raised platform where the old aliens sat got Keith’s attention and he frowned moving a tiny bit closer on his knees to see if he could make it out. Allura had put on her very best pretend polite voice and her forced sincerity was excruciating to listen to.

“AH. Yes. I had- forgotten about your nuptial alliance with the Galra ten thousand years ago. I am…sorry to hear that the former Royal Mother has passed on.”

<She travels with the Weblum in the stars your highness. Our Young Mother but awaits her Spur and then the new generation will prosper in the coming epoch. Duke Nemean should prove a strong inspiration but having you as a witness will only strengthen the blood of the brood.>

Keith was tuning out the noise now. He crept closer to the curtain inch by inch and finally he could see the source of the light. Nestled at the feet of the Caulis Imperial’s was a chunk of scaultrite and inside of it was a deep cloud of pinkish light that throbbed like a pulse.

It was a scrim.

Keith’s blood ran cold instantly. It wasn’t Lance’s scrim, the color and shape were wrong but it was still a scrim which meant there was a person in it. Why was it here? Whose was it? Why were the Imperials huddling around it like it was some sort of decorative lava lamp? If they had this one they would have others too.

The red paladin’s brain became hyper-focused only on the scrim and the idea that Lance was within reach. He stood; vestments ruffled and started to walk towards the dais blindly. He had no plan, not a single thought aside from, get up there…ask them about the scrim. Tell them they have Lance. The imprint was screaming at the top of its nonexistent lungs and as Keith walked past Allura still kneeling on the ground she grabbed at his hand. It barely slowed him down.

The Imperials made a bugling noise of disbelief as the red paladin placed his foot firmly on the first step of their raised platform and Shiro was shouting something at him he couldn’t hear past the pounding of blood in his ears. Everything was becoming apologies and outrage from one side to the other before the curtain blew outward and with it came a noise so loud Keith felt like it would make both his head and heart pop like balloons.

The curtain stilled and the room was silent.

The Caulis Imperials bowed to the curtain buzzing and humming to it in a language that made Keith’s teeth itch. Another noise drifted from beyond the cloth barrier and this time Keith was a hundred percent sure it was aimed only at him. Unlike the previous sounds it wasn’t loud or grating it was warm, curious and…shy.

Allura stammered something, another apology perhaps but the Imperials ignored her and turned a collective twenty-four eyes on Keith. They did not look happy.

<Very well. The red paladin will serve as the nuptial Royal Retainer. Thus speaks the will of the grass. Thus speaks the will of the Vell.>
Keith blinked stupidly at the podium then back at Allura and Shiro who were staring at him flabbergasted. Pidge slapped her hand against her forehead and Hunk gave a tentative thumbs-up shrug combo.

Behind the curtain something vast shifted its weight. Keith moved his sandpaper tongue over his teeth and managed a single shaky question.

"Umm. What?"

Chapter End Notes

After watching all the original scenes of the lions "talking" to the pilots I realized it was pretty similar to how drifting works in the movie Pacific Rim. Something I've written about...alot. So think of it as lion drifting with shared memories and experiences.

The Olim Vell are a people who are like part bug part grass. Most of the Names like Radix and Caulis are latin names for parts of a grass stem. The more important part of the grass plant the more important the class is in Vell culture. They freaking love grass.

The Weblum has some weird similarities to the giant worms on the planet Arrakis in the Dune books. without the Weblum or the worms there would be no folding of space. (I'm sure the writers did this on purpose) So I like to think Scaultrite is kind of like Spice in that it must flow and the Olim Vell are gonna be extremely wealthy as their planet produces the only source.

Also come on Keith. Get your shit together dude.

My love to my proofreader CJ <3
<You will strip now.>

Keith stared wide-eyed at the gigantic Olim Vell in front of him and folded his arms tight over his vestment robes.

"Excuse me?"

The alien turned eight glittering planetarium eyes on Keith and when they spoke again their tone was firm. They were giving an order, not a request.

<You will strip paladin. Remove your clothing.>

Keith narrowed his eyes and took a step backwards.

"No."

After whatever it was behind the massive curtain in the assembly room had bellowed its orders to the Caulis Imperials a lot of things had happened in a short amount of time. As Allura desperately tried to explain away Keith’s behavior a host of tiny Olim Vell had appeared out of nowhere and hustled Keith into a partially hidden antechamber. They weren’t as ornately dressed as the larger Olim Keith had encountered planet-side and they looked a lot more like Kru-Kron.

The smaller creatures only had two eyes and the familiar squat round bodies Keith had first seen on the asteroid market what felt like ages ago. Still, despite their similarities they were still far more pleasant looking than Kru. He had been an awful snot brown color and the little Olim Vell that surrounded the red paladin now came in a variety of jewel blues, cool greens and the occasional creamy gold.

They hadn’t spoken as they forcefully escorted Keith away from his fellow paladins and he could only trust Allura’s assurances that “everything was going to be alright” and Shiro’s instructions to “Just do whatever they ask you to do.”

Now the red paladin found himself in yet another stunning, velvet draped room encircled by tiny, silent Olim Vell and facing what was, at present, the biggest alien he had ever seen. Unlike the Radix Drones or the Caulis Imperials the Olim Vell in front of him, the one dead set on getting him naked, had a distinctly feminine voice. The others had been oddly genderless in his head but this massive, commanding Olim reminded him of a cranky drill instructor he had trained under his first semester at the Garrison.

The creature had the same no-nonsense inflection to her voice. It was the voice of someone who did not like to repeat their instructions twice. Naturally Keith made her repeat herself three times.

<Remove your clothing paladin. Please.>

Keith stared her down and did not budge an inch.

"Why? What’s going on? I want to go back to the other paladins. Someone needs to explain what’s going on."

Turning her long tapered head ceiling-ward The Olim Vell made a garbled musical noise oozing with exasperation. She lifted two sets of limbs upwards as if asking for patience and the silver bangles lining her beautiful violet robes jingled with the movement.

<Paladin. You have been given a great honor. You are to serve as Royal Retainer to the Young Mother. Usually this is a position only awarded to the most trusted and revered in the court but the Young Mother has chosen you for…various reasons.>

The Olim Vell didn’t even try to hide the disgust in her thought-projected voice. She gazed down the bony edge of her long face, all eight of her bulbous eyes taking him in. Keith wondered if the number of eyes was some kind of status thing on Vell. From his outsiders perspective it seemed like the higher on the social totem pole you were the more eyes you had.

Keith glanced down at one of the Kru-Kron sized Olim standing at his elbow. There was a silky scarlet garment held aloft in its two chubby arms; a robe Keith realized.

“What kind of reasons?"

<It doesn’t matter at this moment. I just need your cooperation and this will go much more smoothly for all of us.>

“Look I’m honored by this…honor. But if you could take me back to the other-..”
The Olim Vell made a low grinding noise that sounded like two stones rubbing together and the tendrils on her curved neck flared ominously.

<Boy! I am fast losing patience and I have very little patience to begin with. I will explain everything to you in the baths! Please strip and take the covering the Seed is offering you. We have much to do before you are even halfway presentable and I do not like to keep my mistress waiting!>

Keith sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. He didn’t want to concede to this but…

*Just go with it Keith. Make Allura proud and get naked in front of the aliens* the Lance imprint said encouragingly.

Reaching up to remove his circlet crown Keith ran his fingers through his knotted, sweaty hair. This was his own fault; if he had just listened to Allura and Shiro instead of letting his impatience get the best of him again then he wouldn’t be in this situation.

*Patience yields focus Keith. Now off with the shirt* the imprint said in its best bad Shiro impression.

Keith fiddled with his crown a moment more before he finally nodded.

“Fine, but you need to turn around.”

The giant alien huffed deep in her throat, it came out as a gooey warbling noise that made Keith uncomfortable. At first he thought she was going to ignore him but surprisingly she turned full circle on the four spindly legs hidden under her robes. Every movement set off more of the little tinkling ornaments hanging around the bottom of her elaborate outfit.

When he was satisfied that she wasn’t looking Keith tore at his vestment collar chucking it away haphazardly. Only one of the small aliens that she had called a “seed” was left in the room. They turned away as well but were still holding the gauzy robe above their head for Keith to change into.

Pulling off the rest of his heavy vestment robes the red paladin made no effort to treat the garments delicately. He got down to his black under armor and felt his face flush.

*You’re going starkers for Voltron man. You gotta suck it up and take a nude one for the team* the Lance imprint said cajolingly. If Keith didn’t know any better he almost thought the voice in his head was enjoying this.

Face burning, Keith stripped off his boots and the perspiration-soaked body suit in a frenzied rush. He snatched the robe from the Seed’s waiting hands and was horrified how sheer the fabric was once he was wrapped in it. It was like an oversized kimono, its crimson surface covered with woven designs of grass and fireflies.

“There. It’s on.”

Keith blushed miserably and glared at the Olim Vell as she twisted back to look at him.

<Was that so terribly difficult? Now, the first thing we must do is to purify your body so you can enter the inner sanctum of the Citadel. This Seed it to be your personal hand-servant during your stay. They will see you to the bath. I have other business to attend to and I will meet you there momentarily.>

“Whoa! Wait. You just said…Look I don’t need a servant-Wait! You can’t just leave me here!!”

Ignoring Keith’s stammered protests the Olim Vell turned in a cacophony of chiming bangles and excused themselves from the lavish blood-colored room. Keith’s face was so hot he felt nearly feverish and he held his robe closed as he spluttered on his rage. A small voice cleared its throat and Keith glared down at the Seed trying to get his attention.

Unlike the larger Olim Vell the Seed didn’t speak via telepathy. It spoke out loud with real words like Kru-Kron had and Keith was honestly glad to hear another voice; even if it was an Olim one.

“Master Paladin? We should move along. Someone will come for your things, they will need to be purified too. Will you please allow me to lead you to the baths?”

Keith felt exposed and beneath his usual irritation he was deeply uncomfortable. Normally this was the moment when the fight or flight reflex kicked in hard but he held it back. The red paladin took several deep, centering breaths and finally acknowledged the Seed in a strained voice.

“Yeah, fine. Bath sounds…great.”

The Seed beamed up at him cheerfully and he could see now how Kru-Kron, or something like him, could be cute given the right circumstances. Keith’s guide/servant only came up to his hip and was a very subtle shade of turquoise. They wore a plain black robe and their bony-hornish
protrusions were polished to a mirror shine.

Keith followed the Seed, his cheeks still on fire. He focused on the sound of his bare feet slapping the smooth stone hallway glad that Lance wasn’t around at this particular moment. The blue paladin would never let him live this down. Following his new frog butler in a lacy robe after he had embarrassed everyone in front of a committee of geriatric aliens? God, was getting Lance back really worth all this?

*You know he is* the imprint said gently. And yeah…of course Keith knew.

“Master Paladin? Are you alright? Are you feeling ill?”

Keith felt a bead of sweat slip down his face and he jerked his head up when he realized the Seed was talking to him.

“Yeah, I’m fine…and don’t call me that. Just call me Keith.”

“Master Keith?”

“No. Just Keith…”

The Seed turned its head sideways, its wide eyes glowing at him in concern as it opened a door Keith hadn’t even noticed. It was concealed in a dark, wine-colored marble wall, the seam almost flush with the wall. The Seed tugged the heavy door open with a bit of difficulty and bowed gesturing for Keith to enter ahead of them.

“Please enter first Master Just Keith.”

“No. Just…you know what Master Keith is fine.”

Inside Keith’s head he could hear the Lance imprint snort and giggle like an idiot.

*Ask them who’s on first next. That’s a classic* the imprint prodded.

Ignoring it Keith entered the new room feeling awestruck despite himself. The ground was covered in woven rugs made of dried grass. The walls were covered with murals of stars and detailed depictions of wormholes that seemed to glow from within. At the center of the gymnasium length space was an Olympic-sized swimming pool; well, Olympic-sized bathtub in this instance Keith supposed. It glowed a warm orange, lit from underneath by floor embedded lights. It was already full of dark, perfectly still water that gave off soft waves of warm steam.

The Seed watched Keith expectantly.

“Would you like me to turn around Master Keith?”

“Yes.”

Keith didn’t even hesitate he walked over to the pool and sat down on the side waiting for his strange new Seed sidekick to look the other way before he threw the robe off and slipped into the murky water. It took only two seconds for him to realize it wasn’t water at all.

“Ah! What the heck is this stuff??”

The liquid in the bath was much thicker than water and felt like an unpleasant combination of melted gelatin and snot. It was viscous to the touch and made small slurping noises as Keith swam through it; sucking at his feet and ankles. The Seed waddled to the side of the bath its large eyes still averted.

“…Master Keith did not know? To be purified you must bathe in grass milk.”

“Grass milk?”

The Seed positioned themselves on the side of the pool with their knees underneath them and nodded evenly.

“Oh yes! On Vell it is the most sacred of substances. It comes from the roots of the plains grass. It feeds the Weblum and it sustains us as brood. The Mother soaks it into her skin to keep healthy.”

Keith kicked to keep his head above the gooey fluid and felt a wave of nausea as it saturated his hair. The texture was horrible but at least the smell wasn’t so bad. The milk smelted like a fresh cut lawn and Keith tried to focus on the aroma instead of the glutinous feel of it against his body.

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“Right, grass milk. Good to know.”

“If it isn’t too much trouble um… would you please move through the milk to better cleanse yourself Master Keith? Staying in one position isn’t as effective.”

The red paladin wasn’t the strongest swimmer in the world but he wanted to show the Olim Vell he was at least making an effort to cooperate. He paddled in a small circle struggling just to
keep his head above the milk.

It offered so much more resistance than water that he was worn-out after only a few minutes of feeble doggie-paddling. It took a huge thrashing effort just to get back to the tiled side of the bath. Keith wiped a splatter of milk off his lips and squinted unhappily towards the kneeling Seed.

“How long do I have to stay in here?”

“Not too long. The Flos-Matriarch will tell you when. We must wait for her.”

It wasn’t hard to guess who the Flos-Matriarch was. The huge, cranky creature who had told him to strip had said she would meet up with them in the bath. Keith folded his arms on the side of the pool searching the room for a distraction from the sensation of being sucked inside a hot gelatin mold.

“So- er. Seed? Do you have a name?”

The Olim Vell’s little voice piped up eagerly. The questions seemed to make them both excited and nervous at once.

“Master Keith really wants to know my name?”

“Well, yeah why wouldn’t I?”

“I am just a Seed. True I am a fertile Seed but still just a Seed. We are the lowest of all the Olim Vell. Below me are just the barren Seeds and above me are the Folium Drones and the Radix Drones.”

Keith kicked his legs and sucked in a breath when he noticed a weird tingling feeling starting in his toes. He ignored it hoping it was just his imagination. He had no idea the difference between a barren seed and a fertile one and honestly he wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

“And the Flos-whatever and the old guys are above that right? Above the drones?”

The tingling was getting more intense and Keith kept his eyes tightly shut, terrified to look down at what was happening to his legs. It felt like little bits of energy were moving into his blood vessels now making his entire body warmer.

“Oh yes. There is no one higher than the Imperials except the Mother.”

“That makes sense I guess. So…your name?”

“Tou-Yron.”

“That’s- AH!!”

Keith couldn’t ignore what the milk was doing anymore. The tingling sensation had escalated into a full on vibrating pulse that spread through his whole body. He tried to pull himself out of the bath but slipped on the slick edge; he fell backwards, submerging completely under the thick, opaque liquid. It pulled him down and he had to pump legs frantically just to get his head back up into open air. The heat of the milk was making it hard to think and the muscles in Keith’s legs had gone rubbery. Was this normal? Was it an Olim Vell custom to kill guests in vats of grass goo?

Don’t panic Keith! Just keep moving your legs! Don’t open your mouth!

The voice of the Lance imprint was barely there under the sound of blood pounding in Keith’s ears. He couldn’t focus on what it was saying as he went under again. The paladin sank listlessly downward, his half-hearted attempts at treading milk getting him absolutely nowhere. A heavy bubble of oxygen escaped Keith’s mouth and hung in the milk in front of him a moment before it sluggishly drifted upward. He felt his eyes closing as the grass milk’s thrumming warmth started to overwhelm all his senses. Keith knew he was on the verge of passing out when he felt something strong circle his chest and lift him forcibly towards the surface.

Emerging with a gluey splash Keith spluttered and coughed up milk. The bitter, acrid taste of it filled his mouth and made him retch as he struggled to breathe. The Matriarch set him down gently on a grass mat while Tou threw the thin robe around his shoulders.

<I leave you for only half a cycle and you nearly drown? I had expected more from a paladin of Voltron.>
been here from the start. You are just so fragile. Even the Galra can tolerate the milk longer.>

Keith shivered in silence as he blinked at the ground near his feet and pulled his knees to his chest. He coughed to get the last of the gunk out of his lungs and suddenly realized how alone he was. He could have died. Shiro wasn’t here to call him out or watch his back. None of his friends were. He was truly by himself.

The Matriarch put a gentle hand around his back.

<We have a small bath of real water just for you. The Duke brought us several gallons as a gift. Let’s put it to good use. Better you to bathe in it than the Imperials drinking it. Come, you’ve been washed of your impurities as far as I can tell.>

Nodding dumbly Keith allowed the Seed and the Matriarch to help him to his feet and guide him into another room full of four much smaller pools. Only one of them was full and he made a beeline for it, desperate to get the last chunky bits of grass milk off his skin. He didn’t even care of how much of him the aliens saw when he chucked off the robe and threw himself shakily into the clear, clean water.

It felt amazing.

The Matriarch reclined on a pile of grass pillows near the bath and observed Keith carefully, possibly to make sure he didn’t drown again. Tou positioned themselves a bit closer, a new robe at the ready. Keith didn’t even question where they had gotten it from.

<I apologize again for my behavior young paladin. I am just concerned for the safety of my charge. This engagement has come too quickly and I have long spoken against it. My disgust should not affect my conduct. You are not to blame for this.>

Half listening to the Matriarch speak Keith dunked his head under the warm water. He rested in a spot where his feet touched the pool-bottom and counted to try and clear some of the residual panic from his brain. He filled his mouth with the sweet-tasting water and swished it around in an attempt to get the lingering taste of milk off his tongue.

>You’re ok buddy. Everything is gonna be ok. The lance imprint whispered to him softly and it made his the red paladin’s heart clench. He didn’t want a pale imitation to tell him everything was going to be alright. He wanted the real thing. He wanted Lance.

Tou’s little voice cut through Keith’s wallowing and he turned to look at them reluctantly.

“I can’t believe you can tolerate that much water…won’t you be sick Master Keith?”

Keith frowned, confused by the question.

“Sick from…water?

The Flos-Matriarch pulled a curvy scaultrite pipe from a pocket in her robe and stuffed something in the bowl of it as she clenched the stem between enormous teeth.

<Olim Vell become intoxicated after drinking or soaking in water-other species have a close equivalent…er, alcohol I believe.>

Keith pulled at a stubborn patch of grass milk stuck in his hair as he considered this. He wondered what they would think of earth a planet almost completely covered with the Olim equivalent of a Rob Roy.

_Talk about sex on the beach_ the Lance imprint said thoughtfully and Keith couldn’t stop the small snort that bubbled out of his nose.

Using a bit of flint to light her pipe the Matriarch puffed on it contentedly. A cloud of purple smoke wreathed her narrow face, obscuring her bulbous eyes.

<So young paladin, I take it you know absolutely nothing about Vell customs or the Young Mother?>

Letting the warm water relax his tense, tired muscles Keith nodded eyes half closed. He drifted to the side of the pool and found a step to sit on so he could rest with the waterline just below his shoulders.

“No. Allu-Princess Allura didn’t tell us very much. We were kind of in a rush. We’re here for a reason~”

The Matriarch cut him off launching right into a lecture as she blew a magnificent purple smoke ring.

<Each Mother of the Olim Vell lives at least twelve thousand years, sometimes much longer. In her time the Mother’s main job is to give birth to clutches of brood, you call them children. But with humans you know that if two humans have a brood it will be like them…it will be the same sort of human yes?>
Keith made a startled noise when something touched his hair. He looked back uneasily and found Tou was moving a thick brush through it; combing something oily into the strands that smelled like orange citrus and lavender. Swallowing thickly the red paladin bristled but didn’t move. He guessed this weird grooming thing was part of the purification so he let the Seed continue; plus it didn’t feel too bad.

The Matriarch was still waiting for him to answer. She was doing that thing instructors at the Garrison loved: asking students questions to make sure they were paying attention.

“Well that’s normal. If two humans have a baby it’s just gonna be you know, a human baby.”<br/

<br/>&lt;It is different on Vell. Not all children are born the same caste. A Mother may give birth to five clutches or fifty in her lifetime. She may birth nothing but barren Seeds or she may birth all castes from Radix to Imperial. It is completely unpredictable.&gt;

Keith raised an eyebrow trying his best to be polite as he interrupted.

“I don’t know if I understand…They’re all still Olim Vell right?”

&lt; Yes, but different. You have one kind of human to do all jobs. We have many Olim Vell to do many jobs. We need all kinds to be born. A good Mother births diverse clutches over her lifetime and her final birth is always a Young Mother that will eventually replace her. Our Young Mother is not quite eight hundred. Much too young to ascend but…her predecessor gave birth to barely any children and our old ones are rapidly dying out.&gt;

Keith felt his forehead crease as he scowled, considering this.

Aliens are so weird the Lance imprint whispered and yeah, that was pretty much all Keith could think too.

“So, what does that have to do with me? Why do I need to know this?”

Tou was humming softly to themselves as they touched each individual strand of Keith’s hair. Moving nimble fingers along the roots they removed every single snag and tangle leaving behind a waterfall of shiny black hair. It felt like a bizarre shampoo commercial.

&lt;Young Mothers go through a process to become Mothers. It is called a Spur and during a Spur ceremony a Young Mother is married to another symbolically. Ages and ages ago she would wed one of the Olim but after the opening of the gates, the wormholes- it became tradition for the Young Mother to marry a being of another planet to show our openness to all the universe.&gt;

The Matriarch paused to take a long pull from her pipe and blew five concentric smoke rings, once inside of the other like an enormous bull’s-eye. The remaining smoke drifted dragon-like between her huge, pointed teeth. The smoke smelled like burnt wood and incense and made Keith feel slow, like his head was full of cotton.

&lt;There are many steps to the Spur but the Young Mothers partner, her Auricle, is an integral part of the inspiration rite. The rite hopes to inspire the Mother to give birth to strong children. Our last Mother was very sickly after her ceremony and died too soon. Most of her Seeds were barren and her Drones selfish…&gt;

“So Duke Nemean is this Mother’s Au-Auricle? So who was the last Mothers? It was a Galra too right?”

Nemean had been crowing about his fiancée in the garden so that was a riddle easily solved. Keith had only been half listening to the conversation with the Caulis Imperials in the meeting chamber but this all sounded very familiar. They had mentioned a Galra nuptial alliance and Allura had not been happy about it.

The Flos-Matriarch fidgeted uncomfortably taking a long pull from her pipe.

&lt;You do not know? Emperor Zarkon was Queen Soluto’s Auricle. He gave her a name. He took her dowry. &gt;

“Still puffing away at her translucent pipe the Matriarch paced at him intensely.

&lt;I have taken care of this Young Mother her entire life. I do not like the thought of her taking another one of Zarkon’s poisonous line in her Spur ceremony. She has told me time and time again that she is honored by his offer and yet…she takes one of Zarkon’s sworn enemies as her Royal Retainer. &gt;

There was something in her tone that made Keith pause. It was like she knew something that he didn’t and it made him uneasy. He had been so hung up on the fact he had almost died in the
grass milk that he had forgotten to be angry at being shanghaied. That was rapidly wearing off.

“So what do I do as her Retainer? Why did she choose me?”

The Matriarch regarded him a moment more, her alien expression difficult to read. She let her pipe cool as its fire slowly extinguished itself. When she did speak it was in a softer more pleading voice.

“She has never been outside the walls of the Citadel. You will speak comfort to her. Tell her stories perhaps. Mostly you are for company as she prepares for the ceremony. She is not allowed to see a Seed or even myself in the week before. As to why she chose you…>

Tucking her pipe into a pocket of her robe the Flos-Matriarch stood stiffly. She glared at Keith from her towering height and the skin around her mouth crinkling into an indefinable shape that could have been a smile.

“…You’ll know soon enough. The Young Mother is naïve but she is not stupid. Do not hurt her but do not coddle her either. I am depending on you paladin of Voltron.”

“Wait. You didn’t answer my…”

Keith felt his temper flare at her cryptic answer but she interrupted his protests mid-sentence.

“You hand servant will see to your dressing and then you will be taken to your room. It is adjacent to the Young Mothers chambers and you can receive visitors there.”

A small flood of relief went through Keith but he tried not to break his poker face and let it show outwardly. She didn’t need to know how much being separated from the others scared him.

“Do you know when I can see the other Paladins? The Princess?”

“Soon enough. You will meet the Young Mother first. Remember that as long as you are a Retainer your duty is to her above all else. Even if you are not Olim Vell or Galra your position is still an honor and you are still a guest.”

Keith felt Tou finish the last of his braids and reached back to touch them curiously. It was like the Seed had given him a bizarre French braid with grass woven all the way through. He idly wondered what it looked like.

“Retainer, duty, got it.”

The Matriarch made a disgusted whistling noise followed by some chittering sounds directed at Tou. The Seed answered in the same language and threw themselves at her feet as the Olim Vell left the bathroom the same shadowy way she came.

Tou made sure she was gone before they straightened and gave Keith a comforting pat on the shoulder.

“You scared me Master Keith! Please be more careful. I was afraid for you when you sank to the bottom of the milk pool! You are lucky the Flos-Matriarch came when she did.”

“Er, sorry.”

Keith mumbled as he took the dry robe Tou offered.

“-Was an accident.”

Tou hovered close as Keith tried to dry off, their face still politely averted.

“It would be a shame to lose someone with such lovely, soft tendrils! Your head stems are just like fresh, wet grass.”

“Um. Thanks?”

“Aww you hear that? Somebody likes your mullet, Mullet the Lance imprint said with a playful mental shove.

The red paladin felt his face color against his will and groaned.

Keith wondered if his humiliation would ever end. He sat on a huge feather-soft reclining couch in his luxurious room in the most embarrassing outfit he had ever or probably would ever wear. The vestment robes had been garish, ugly and heavy but they had nothing on the terrible Arabian night’s negligee he was wearing now.

Putting his face in his noticeably gloveless hands Keith made a growl deep in his throat. He wore a skin tight top with a high collar that started just below his chin and ended above his
bellybutton. The sleeves were so long they were easy to trip over and covered with enough jewels and bangles that they made him constantly feel like he was about to tip forward. The billowy pants, if you could call them that, were low cut, bejeweled and baggy to the ankle. Over the top of these he wore a strange loincloth made of long strings of dried, braided grass.

He felt like an idiot.

You look like the Goth love child of Princess Leia and Aladdin the imprint cackled inside his brain.

Keith did his best to ignore it, staring hard at the golden door opposite the couch where he was perched. Tou had told him that when The Young Mother was ready to see him the door would open. Until then all he could do was get used to his weird courtesan costume and mentally prepare for some unearthly monster to welcome him in.

A pulse pounded in Keith’s neck as panic gripped his whole body. The Matriarch had cut him off before he even could even bring up Lance but maybe if he sucked up to whatever snobby ethereal thing lay beyond the heavy golden door he could finally get some answers. He could ask why the hell the Caulis Imperials had been lounging around with a scrim- what were scims even used for?

Keith struggled as he started to hyperventilate. It was just so overwhelming and he had no fix. If he got this overwhelmed in the Garrison he could escape to the desert. If the castle got too loud he could get away to the hangar or some other empty space. Here he was trapped and he couldn’t even see his teammates; he could barely even feel Red.

The Matriarch had said he could see them after… but what if she had been lying? Keith wrapped his arms around his chest and struggled against the crushing sense of helplessness. The imprint had stopped laughing and it spoke in a gentle but firm voice.

Keith. You’re doing a great job ok? Lance is gonna be so proud of you. Just. Take a deep breath in…

Keith did so, breathing in until the imprint told him stop. It counted five before letting him breathe it out. The red paladin wheezed on the exhale, his chest burning.

“I can’t do this.”

Course you can! You’re the red paladin! The sword guy, the renegade!

“I-I can’t. This is a job for Allura or Shiro or…”

But none of them are here. You’re here. So keep breathing for me. In and out.

Keith nodded and sucked in another tight breath. He kept looking at the golden door as his body shivered with nervous tension. He kept envisioning some love-craftian horror pulsating and oozing behind the door; something that was all bile and tentacles and a growling voice that would ask him to entertain it until he couldn’t move.

Keith didn’t have time to put on puppet shows for Godzilla’s gross cousin. Not when his friend was dying in a tube in the castle. Keith was so distracted by his own panic that he didn’t notice the golden door creak slowly open. It was the bang of it hitting the inside wall of his room that finally made the red paladin jump to his feet.

Go time Champ. Just try to remember everything that Allura said about manners and maybe don’t scream at them the imprint said in a tense voice.

Keith, who prided himself on being fearless, felt a sort of dread as he passed through the entryway and into the inner chamber of the Young Mother. Adrenaline coursed through him and he reached subconsciously for a knife that he knew wasn’t there. He doubted the knife would have been much help anyway but its absence only made him feel more exposed.

The room on the other side of the golden door was almost completely pitch black. Aside from a few tree-sized candles in sconces on the walls Keith couldn’t make out anything but empty, endless space. There were soft woven grass rugs under his feet and the rustle of fabric somewhere distant but otherwise it was just him, shadows, and the suggestion of an infinite room.

“Um…hello?”

Keith’s voice echoed back to him dully, reverberating off walls the size of cliffs and muffled against titanice objects he could only guess were furniture. He could make out something in the light of the nearest candle. A large pillar carved with life-sized images of Seeds, Drones and grass fields. At the base of the pillar was an overstuffed human-sized chair. When Keith got no answer to his greeting his cleared his dry throat and tried again.

“Er…do you want me to sit in the chair?”

Something moved, something the size of a mountain wriggled somewhere in the room and Keith felt its reverberations in the floor through the soles of his bare feet. Something burrowed
through him, a strong emotion that felt like fear. It didn’t feel like his own overwrought, manic fear. It felt nervous, painfully shy and desperately insecure; it was fear that belonged to someone else.

Approaching the chair Keith could sense someone watching him. He sank into the bit of grassfiber furniture and felt air wheeze out its fluffy innards in a long drawn-out sigh. The room remained quiet and the red paladin cleared his throat loudly unsure what else to do.

"This chair is…nice?"

The voice that finally spoke in Keith’s head wasn’t quite like the Matriarch, the Imperials or the Drones. It had more similarities to his conversations with the Red Lion. Little threads of emotional came through with the words so he could feel them as well as “hear” them. The self-conscious fear emanated from the voice in jittery waves.

<Oh! I’m so glad…I was worried you wouldn’t like it. I h-had it made especially for you.>

The voice had to be the Young Mother and she sounded just like a teenage girl; not that different from Pidge. It was not what Keith had been expecting.

<But-if…if you don’t like it I can get you something else! I could…um- get you a bigger chair.>

“No. No this is great thank you.”

Fluttery little feelings of relief, and timid excitement came through the Young Mother’s stuttering words and Keith had to take a sharp breath through his teeth just to get a grip on himself. It was difficult keeping his own emotions separate from the ones being projected directly into his brain.

The huge creature in the dark, the Young Mother, moved again and it was off-putting being able to hear her but having no idea where she even ended or began. She shuddered and Keith’s heart gave what had to be an empathetic flutter.

<I-I can’t believe you’re really here Keith! I can’t believe you’re sitting here with me! You’re so beautiful. Yu-your aura is the most beautiful color…I love your eyes and your hair. Its called hair right?>

More foreign emotions hit Keith hard: gushing affection, infatuation and a deep gratitude that made Keith blush furiously. He wondered briefly how the Young Mother knew his name but assumed that either someone had told her or she had overheard it behind the curtain.

“Yes? T-thank you?”

The Young Mother made a trilling noise that hung in the air and tinkled like shards of crystal striking each other. It was a musical sound and Keith could almost physically feel the Young Mother’s happiness in it. She really was glad he was there…but why? Why was she so glad he was there?

“So you’re the Young Mother right? That’s a lot to say can I just call you Y.M. for short?”

<R-really? A nickname for me? I would really, really like that…>

Bubbling joy came with her answer and Keith smiled despite himself. He worried his bottom lip as he tried to think of a good icebreaker. He had never spent much time around teenage girls outside of Pidge. There had been times in the past where girls acted flustered around him or tried to flirt with him but Keith hadn’t paid much attention…for a variety of reasons.

“So, Y.M., why’s it so dark in here?”

<Oh…I->

She hesitated and her reply felt embarrassed.

<I didn’t want you to see me.>

Keith opened his mouth to answer and stopped frowning into the dark. That was not the answer he anticipated at all. This whole situation was not what he predicted in the slightest. Fighting Galra droids was easier than this.

“Why not?”

<i don’t want you to be scared of me. I know Duke Nemean thinks I am disgusting. I can see it in his face when he looks at me. I…I don’t want you to think of me that way.>

Biting back a snarl at the sound of Nemeán’s name Keith couldn’t help but feel rage at the thought of the snotty Galra insulting the Young Mother. It might have been the telepathic link talking but she seemed so open and vulnerable. All he could think of was someone hurting Pidge’s feelings like that and it only added fuel to the fire.
“Well I know your gonna marry that guy and everything? But he’s a jerk. I won’t think you’re disgusting. We’re gonna be together for a week right? Do you really want to be in the dark the whole time?”

<…I don’t know. What if you won’t want to stay if you see me?>

With the Young Mother’s doubts came feelings of fear and insecurity and the Lance imprint whispered dazedly in the back of Keith’s head.

*Who knew that space queens could also suffer from low self-esteem?*

“I’m not going to run off ok? I promise.

After a long pause something illuminated the dark in front of Keith. It looked like a forest of waving kelp above him on a sloping hill; they danced and undulated like they were deep underwater. Each “kelp plant” was at least twenty feet tall and so wide Keith didn’t think he could wrap his arms around it completely. It took him a moment to recognize the glowing objects for what they really were: *tendrils*. Just like the tendrils on the backs of the Drones and the Imperials except one hundred times larger.

One of the shimmering white tendrils snaked towards Keith and brushed against his foot gingerly, barely touching his toes with its warm, pliable surface. He tried not to shudder.

<Will you pinky swear Mullet?>

Keith froze but not because of the tentacle wrapping around his chair. The red paladin blinked up at the forest of glowing appendages, his voice a soft growl.

“What did you call me? ”

One by one eyes started to open under the tendrils; each one as big as the head of Keith’s lion and filled with countless stars. The Y.M. drew away from Keith her voice confused.

<I’m s-sorry. Am I not supposed to call you that? You called me a nickname so…> 

“When did you hear that? Where did you hear that name!?”

The lights in the room came up slowly; hundreds of softly tinted golden orbs that lined the walls of the gargantuan room flickering into existence to define the space and Keith’s place in it. It just went on and on, pillars and carpets, paintings and whole areas obscured by miles of purple curtains.

The Young Mother reclined at the center of it and she was right…her appearance terrified Keith. She was too much to take in and every instinct in him screamed danger. She was coiled tightly her body thick and muscular like an eels, her face a mass of eyes and iridescent skin. Her mouth ran all the way down her throat and was partially open, revealing teeth the size of healing pods.

She pulled away from Keith when she saw his expression panic rippling through her mind and body all at once making her skin flicker like a scared cuttlefish. A sorrowful noise erupted from deep in her body as she pulled her tendrils close and tried to hide behind the nearest convenient curtain.

Keith stood so quickly his chair flipped backwards with a loud bang and he stood ramrod straight his hands clenched at his sides.

“Hey! I asked you a question! Answer me! ”

The massive alien turned her head away from him and made a low despondent warble. She felt so utterly confused it dawned on Keith that she had no idea why he was angry. He stopped and tried to get his composure back.

It was just like Shiro, Allura, the imprint…*everyone* really, had told him. Angry yelling does not get you anywhere and it really wasn’t gonna get him anywhere with the Young Mother. She was just a giant lonely kid who…who had a crush on him. It didn’t matter what she looked like or how massive -that’s all she really. She was a kid who for some reason knew him and had a crush on him.

The red paladin rolled his neck and loosened his shoulders. He struggled to smile and lowered his voice until he thought it sounded friendly…or at least not as livid.

“Y.M. I’m not angry with you ok? I shouldn’t have yelled and I’m not going to run away.”

With a quivery unsteady hand Keith reached out towards the Young Mother his pinky extended. Her body, and the room by extension, vibrated when she made a soft humming noise. Tentatively she extended a supple tendril to meet Keith’s pinky. A throb of energy surged through the paladin when his finger and the glowing appendage connected. She purred with relief, the sound like a symphony of jack-hammers.
"Pinky swear to be friends...promise?"

"I promise."

The tendril fell back and the Young Mother pushed herself upright so she wasn’t ducked behind the curtain. Once the initial shock wore off Keith found looking at her wasn’t as difficult. She was just so...different. Most aliens had some bipedal traits in them; even the other Olim Vell had varying degrees of humanoid features. The Y.M. was completely alien and it was almost too much for Keith’s brain to take in at once.

"Y.M. please...tell me where you heard that nickname. Only one person ever called me that."

The Young Mother purred louder moved her hulking body sideways, hundreds and hundreds of unseen legs carrying her several ton bulk to the other side of the room that felt like it could fit a small residential neighborhood in its confines. She chattered eagerly, body glowing with enthusiasm.

<I know! Lance! You want to see Lance?>

Keith scurried after her eyes huge.

"Yes! You know where his scrim is? Please, we’ve been looking for it- we…"

Reaching to the top of the ceiling several miles up the Young Mother pulled open a curtain to reveal a side room smothered with pillows the size of king-sized mattresses. She waited for Keith to catch up and gestured him to go inside the nook with a mass of undulating tendrils.

<He’s in here>!

The red paladin’s heart caught in his throat as he stared around the hidden alcove of the mothers chambers. It was covered floor to ceiling in shelves. At first glance it would be easy to confuse it for a library but Keith quickly realized that every shelf was stacked high with scrims.

Scrims of every size and color piled high on each ledge and even on the floors or on the pillows. They didn’t hold his attention long...there in the center of the room on top of another ornately carved pillar, cradled in a downy pillow sat the only blue scrim in the room. A scrim that was shaped like a shell and pulsed slowly from within with a slow, steady pulse.

"Lance…"

Keith felt his lungs constrict and his eyes grow prickly with the threat of tears. He rushed headlong at the pillar looking for some way he could climb up it. He was so intent in finding some way to get the scrim in his hands he almost forgot about the gargantuan alien watching him only a few feet away.

She made a bizarre clucking noise that was almost laughing as she reached up to hold Lance’s scrim delicately with several of her tendrils. She rubbed it all over with the fleshy ends of each tentacle like protrusion in a way that struck Keith as oddly affectionate.

<Lance is my dowry!>

The floor dropped away and something cold moved through Keith’s body.

"Your…what?"

Settling her body down into the nearest pillows with surprising grace the Young Mother held Lance closer, each of her dozen eyes turning blue and dreamy.

<He was given to me as a gift. Brought from faraway and given to the Imperials. He will be the initiation in my Spur ceremony. He will be the witness of the union between Duke Nemean and myself.>

The Olim Vell queen’s warm feelings turned to sadness, a heartfelt sickness and she cradled the paladin’s scrim closer.

<Then I will gift him to the Duke and Lance will intertwine our fates forever.>

Icy shock coursed through Keith and he tried to find something to say that wasn’t rage. The Flos-Matriarch had known about this. She had probably known exactly why he and the other paladins were here. All the Caulis Imperials had known. They had all known.

It struck Keith that not one of them had asked why the blue paladin was absent from their party. They hadn’t asked because they had known why.

If he screamed at the Young Mother, screeched at her about how Lance wasn’t hers to take would she even understand? If he somehow grabbed the scrim and made a run for it he wouldn’t get far…and if he took something so important to the Spur ceremony, the single most important event to the Olim Vell, then Voltron would lose the wormholes for sure.
Keith’s breath started to grow ragged as his thoughts went into overdrive again. The Young Mother burbled at him in sincere concern, some of her tendrils brushing over his body gently.

"Keith? Are you feeling alright?"

He wasn’t. He was feeling the opposite of alright. He was felt like he was drowning in milk again. He felt helpless and at a loss for what to do. He stared at the Scrim clutched protectively in the Y.M.’s curling limbs and the panic edged into something like white noise that even the imprint couldn’t get through.

“I’m really tired Y.M.”

"Oh! Of course! I’m so sorry. I bet they made you swim in the milk and do all those other things today. You must be exhausted! Please go to your room and sleep. You and I can view Lance together after you’ve rested. It will be fun!"

Oblivious to Keith’s distress The Young Mother put the blue paladin’s scrim back on its stand delicately then lifted the curtain so the two of them could leave. Keith’s movements were sluggish, he felt sick but he allowed the Y.M. to guide him through her quarters and back to his little golden door. She was saying more things he didn’t understand and using more words that made no sense.

"I still can’t believe you’re here. I am so happy to have you and Lance both. Sleep well Keith!"

A shy tendril touched Keith’s hair then pulled rapidly away, the door shutting behind it. Keith stood a moment more then collapsed to his knees staring at the floor or his room. What the hell was he going to do now? What could any of them do?

Pulling the grass from his hair and ripping off his heavy ornamental clothing angrily Keith struggled upright long enough to fall into the bed they had provided. It was soft against his skin and smelled wonderful—because why not. Everything was so deceptively gorgeous on the surface. Bringing his knees up to his chest Keith curled into a tight ball and closed his eyes.

Hey. You found him. That’s the important part. The rest you’ll figure out as you-

“Stop!”

Keith covered his ears and pulled a blanket closer around his body.

“Just...be quiet. Please.”

The imprint went silent and somehow Keith drifted off into troubled, shallow sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Oh Keith. You poor baby boy.

I don’t know if its crystal clear yet but the Olim Vell like grass ALOT. Your ass is grass and they’re gonna mow it.

Thank for the comments/kudos everybody! ETERNAL THANKS TO CJ THE PROOFREADING QUEEN.
“Wake up.”

At the sound of the voice Keith curled tighter involuntarily, pressing his body deeper into the soft bed and warm blankets. He was still so tired; it felt like he couldn’t have had more than an hour or two of sleep. He didn’t even remember how late drills had gone the night before.

Did Hunk really need him at breakfast? Maybe he could just sleep in for once. He was usually punctual for meals but he couldn’t remember the last time his rock-hard dormitory bed felt so good on his aching muscles—or smelled so good…like lavender.

“I said wake UP!”

Something kicked the side of Keith’s bed and he forced open a tired, stinging eye. Whoever was speaking didn’t sound like Shiro or Coran- The room came into swimmy focus and with it a flood of unpleasant realizations. Keith drew in a sharp breath taking in the soft grass rugs and strong stone walls; the alien grandeur of the inner Citadel.

The red paladin raised his head up feeling groggy and disoriented in a strange bed in a foreign place. His confusion was only compounded when he saw who was addressing him.

“Good, you’re awake. I don’t want to be here all day you know.”

Duke Nemean paced the luxurious suite petulantly, his boots clicking anytime they hit hard floor. He was dressed in a well-tailored, soft leather suit that looked very expensive. All of its buttons were inlaid with pearl and a long string of purple gems lay down the Galran’s back in a woven grass band. Despite his elegant clothing and immaculately brushed fur Keith thought he looked a bit…stressed.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes Keith sat up in bed and yawned wide, picking small remnants of dried grass from his tousled hair. After a quick, self-conscious glance downwards Keith realized he had gone to sleep naked. His ripped Retainer outfit still lay in a crumpled pile on the floor where he had thrown it. The red paladin pulled a blanket tight around his body and glared at Nemean irritably.

“What do you want?”

The Galran royal stopped pacing and turned to face Keith with his ears perked high. His face looked thin this morning, the cheeks sallow. Some of the luster had gone from his fur and his eyes had turned a paler shade of yellow. When Nemean spoke it came out as a long, childish whine.

“They told me to bring you her gifts. I’m supposed to be courteous to you because you’re her Retainer.”

Keith scowled, his head ached this morning and the Duke’s voice was doing nothing to help it.

“Whose gifts?”

“Whose do you think?! The Young Mother ordered a pile of gifts for you. It’s not FAIR. I’ve been giving her courting gifts for months and she hasn’t given me anything but some grass baskets and a couple of ugly vases made of that worm stuff.”

Keith rubbed his forehead and forced himself to start counting backwards. Now that he could see the Duke up close it became even more obvious that the Galra was an adolescent; a teenager just out whatever served as Galran puberty. Mentally he was probably the Galra version of sixteen or seventeen; very close to Lance, Hunk and himself.

“I wasn’t expecting her to give me anything. I didn’t go begging her for stuff.”

Nemean folded his arms over his skinny chest, his ears pressed flat against his skull.

“You didn’t need to, she favors you. It’s always Keith this and Lance that, ever since she got that scrim its nothing but paladins, paladins, paladins.”

“She- The Young Mother knew about me before I got here?”

Nemean pointedly ignored him, stalking over to a heap of basket-like boxes Keith hadn’t noticed stacked near his door. The Duke picked some off the top of the pile and presented them to the paladin with an exaggerated bow.

“Just take them your most Royal Retainer-ship.”

Keith stared at the boxes blankly, a million questions already rushing through his sleep-addled
brain. Nemean growled under his breath.

“I can’t believe I have to do this. They want me to curry favor with a sworn enemy of my uncles? It’s bad enough I have to spend time with the tentacle beast but I wasn’t told that I was required to interact with you your entire stay!”

When Keith made no move to grab the presents the Duke waved them impatiently under his nose and finally dumped them roughly onto his lap. The sudden weight made the air expel from Keith’s lungs with a loud “oof” sound.”

The back of Keith’s neck prickled, the little hairs rising up as he tried to tamp down his anger. He closed his eyes for a few seconds sucking in a deep breath through his nose. The Duke was important to the Y.M. and to the Olim Vell. He had to tolerate him.

Even if he is a spoiled little brat the Lance imprint mumbled; Keith didn’t want to admit to himself how glad he was to hear the familiar little voice.

“Maybe if you were a bit nicer to the Young Mother she would “favor” you too. I’m not here to threaten you or your er-nuptial…ceremony.”

Throwing his gangly body dramatically onto a nearby bit of furniture that resembled a fainting couch Duke Nemean gave Keith a wide, shit-eating grin.

“Oh I know. You’re here to get the Mother’s dowry, the blue paladin’s sad little scrim right? Took you long enough to figure it out where it was. I have to say, the blue paladin must have been pretty stupid to let himself get trapped by an idiot like Kru-Kron.”

Hot coals stirred in Keith’s stomach and he had to take an exceptionally large breath through his teeth just to vent off some of the anger. Royal Retainers probably shouldn’t be punching out their Young Mother’s Auricles. Ignoring Nemean’s obvious attempt to rile him Keith considered the presents in his lap.

“So why did they choose you to marry the Young Mother anyway? You obviously hate it and her and…here.”

As he spoke Keith brought his hands up from under his blanket to pull off the lid of the first box. The Duke huffed and made a concentrated effort to look anywhere but Keith.

“My cousin claims he’s too important to be spending his time on this ball of grass. Being part of the Spur ceremony means living in the Vell court for at least a year…alone. I wasn’t even allowed to bring an entourage! Do you have any idea how boring these people are? The Voltron paladins’ coming here has been the most exciting thing to happen in months.”

Nemean paused and his voice wavered. It became something smaller…more vulnerable.

“Even the tentacle beast is ignoring me.”

Keith paused shuffling around loose bits of paper in the box to give Nemean a contemplative look.

“You sound lonely.”

The Galra raised his head and bared his fangs hissing without much real anger behind it.

“I’m not some homesick cub paladin.”

Nemean’s quivery tone said otherwise and Keith noticed him scratching at a patch of fur on his neck. It was thinning under his claws where he scraped at it; a sure sign of stress. Keith couldn’t help but feel a bit sorry for him. Being young and isolated on a planet full of complete strangers had to be hard, let alone being forced to marry one of them; even if it was just a symbolic gesture.

Turning his attention back towards the grass box Keith finally pulled out its contents with a raised eyebrow. It was a shirt-no…a hooded sweatshirt, several sizes too big. It was a faded blue color and made of a weird heavy material that was coarse on the outside but fluffy and soft to the touch on the inside. Its inner texture reminded Keith of the downy fluff on a dandelion when it went to seed. It was safe to assume it was made of grass.

“So if you didn’t volunteer to be here… did your family make you sign up?”

Nemean gave Keith a guarded look but his posture had become noticeably more relaxed.

“Why are you so interested paladin? Gathering intelligence? You won’t be forming Voltron without your dead blue friend anyway.”

“I’m Not gathering anything. Just, you know…Zarkon did it before you. You’d think you’ve be more honored or something. Make your parents proud.”

That was it, parents was the magic word; the key that opened the door to Nemean’s spilled guts. Kicking his feet over the side of the couch The Duke growled at the ceiling.
“Nothing I could do would ever make *them* proud. They’re glad I’m here! I’m just the embarrassing whelp, the smallest born, the disappointment. You know why they sent me out here to marry the tentacle beast?”

Keith pulled on his new grass fiber hoodie and had moved on to the next present box quietly. He opened it slowly, careful not to distract Nemean mid-rant. The box contained a pair of grey knee-length pants made of the same fiber as his sweatshirt. He slipped them on under his blankets feeling better now that he was fully dressed.

“Why?”

“All Galra have to serve in Zarkon’s military for at least three years. It’s mandatory even for the aristocracy! All Galra! You have to serve your empire with your blood and body!”

Nemean scratched at the balding patch on his neck and whined low in his throat.

“My Mother offered me for this instead so I wouldn’t have to serve. Just because I’m not as strong as my brothers doesn’t mean I couldn’t do it! She has no faith in me! She would rather push me out here with these grass-obsessed bugs and leave me to rot! I could still fight!”

Keith considered the Duke’s narrow frame and wondered if maybe Nemean’s mother was just trying to protect her son. He didn’t look that small to the red paladin but then again…he was considering him on a human scale. He was large for a young human but maybe he was scrawny for a young Galra.

Nemean glanced towards Keith with his sharpened ears pricked forward. He was almost upside down on the couch now and his ponytail was coming lose.

“Just look at you! *You* get to fight and you’re a frail little…what are you anyway? You almost look Altean but you have that strange skin tone and stunted ears. You’re like a half-formed albino Altean without proper markings…”

“Human. I’m human. All the paladins are.”

Duke Nemean narrowed his eyes at Keith from his upside down perch and took a long sniff of the air.

“Funny. You smell different than the others, more trustworthy. The largest of you, the Champion, he has the druid’s gift so he isn’t all human either. Not anymore.”

Keith felt his hackles rise again. He didn’t know what the Duke was insinuating about himself or Shiro but he didn’t like it. The red paladin looked around for a change of subject and nudged the empty present box still sitting near his legs. The clothing had been such a thoughtful gift; the Y.M. had probably noticed how uncomfortable he was in the ceremonial clothes. She was doing her best to help.

“You know Nemean, you don’t deserve the Young Mother’s friendship…maybe your mother was right. Maybe she is just trying to keep you safe.”

This struck a raw nerve and the Duke sprung upright from the couch with a snarl.

“Oh y-yes? Well, as soon as I get that stupid scrim in the Spur ceremony I’m going to SMASH it. I’m going to shatter all that’s left of the blue paladin into tiny little pieces just like my uncle did with that Altean’s scrim when he had to do this stupid ritual!”

Keith’s breath caught in his throat. He kept his face a blank mask, determined not to let the Duke see how much this threat bothered him. Despite his best efforts his voice grit out in a ragged whisper.

“What Altean scrim? What are you talking about?”

Duke Nemean straightened, adjusted his fine clothes and smoothed down his hair.

“You don’t know? That figures. All Galran’s know the story so I’ll enlighten you.”

The Galran royal gave Keith a confident, toothy smile. It all felt like overcompensation considering Keith had seen him have a childish tantrum a moment earlier.

When Emperor Zarkon was betrothed to the Mother Soluto she and the Imperials wanted to gain his goodwill so she would have a good Spur. They wanted to get a dowry worthy of his position. The story goes they made a scrim with an Altean in it; someone with royal blood, a Court Lady or a Duchess, I don’t remember exactly. Point is Alfor was related to her but he let the ceremony happen anyway. He just let Zarkon shatter his own blood relation. Like a *coward*.

Nemean leered at Keith and any lingering sympathy the red paladin might have felt for him evaporated instantly. When he answered he couldn’t help but bare his own teeth.

“Alfor was doing what was right for his people. The Olim control the wormholes…”
“Well you can be just like him because I’m going to kill your blue paladin all over again. He’ll be dead twice. Just like that Altean there won’t be anything left of him! Then after I finish with the beast Zarkon will give me a command and I’ll be a hero; a hero who utterly destroyed a paladin of Voltron!”

The anger in Keith built into something dangerous and dark. It was worse than the usual angry fire—so much worse. When the red paladin spoke it was in a voice he barely recognized as his own, low, icy and ominous. Still sitting in his same spot on the bed Keith watched Nemean without blinking.

“No matter how many people you hurt you’ll always be a feeble little kitten your mother had to save and you’ll never forget that as long as you live.”

The Duke pulled away, body trembling, from fear or anger Keith honestly couldn’t say. He stood and stamped towards the door casting a quick glance over his shoulder. Kicking at the remaining present boxes as he passed them Nemean spoke in a high-pitched yowl.

“You shouldn’t be too sad about your blue friend paladin. My uncle will make sure the rest of you join him eventually!”

The heavy door closed with a muted bang that Keith was sure was supposed to have more impact. Duke Nemean hadn’t managed a good slam but he got his point across. The red paladin let out a long breath and held his pounding head in his hands.

That…was amazing. You were amazing! the Lance imprint said breathlessly.

Keith pushed his legs over the side of the bed and stared at his bare feet his thoughts racing. Duke Nemean didn’t know that Lance’s body was still alive. If he didn’t know the Olim probably didn’t know. They assumed he was dead—he would have been without his lion. They had to get Lance’s scrim before the ceremony; they couldn’t let the Galra get it.

Keith wondered if Allura knew about the Altean scrim, the one Zarkon had destroyed. Something told him no. If Alfor had told Coran he would have remembered and if he hadn’t told Coran, his closest advisor, he wouldn’t have told Allura. It was possible the princess had known whoever had died to make that scrim. Maybe she never learned what happened to them. Was it his responsibility to tell her?

Blood pounded in Keith’s ears and he pressed his thumbs into the back of his neck trying to collect himself. The scrim, the Spur, the Mother, the Galra and the Alteans: It was like history was repeating itself. No. Keith wasn’t going to let the same tragedy play out twice. This time history was going to correct itself.

We can’t let Douche Plebian win! We gotta figure something out, some kind of plan the imprint said thoughtfully.

Pushing himself out of bed, Keith walked to the door and picked up the three remaining gift boxes. His thoughts were going in an endless circle as he wrestled with everything he had learned, trying to find some loophole that would get Lance out of here. With only half his attention on the task Keith went about opening the last of the Young Mother’s gifts on a nearby table.

The first box contained a pair of what Keith assumed were boots. Unfortunately, because they were made of the same grass material as the other clothing they were more like floppy knee high socks. Keith put them on anyway, they had hard, reinforced soles and it was better than going barefoot. Without shoes it always felt like the paladin was on the verge of stubbing his toe or getting his feet caught in the grass carpeting.

The second present box had a scaultrite container full of sweet smelling oil and a small tendril comb like the one Tou had used on his hair in the bath. This seemed less a present and more a suggestion and Keith took the hint, brushing the oil into his tangled hair gently until it shone. The grass milk bath had done wonders for his skin which was soft to the touch and shone with a luster Keith hadn’t seen before; Lance would have gone crazy over it.

The last grass box was smaller and when Keith opened it he couldn’t stop a smile from creeping over his lips. It was a pair of fingerless, grey gloves. He picked them up reverently, flipping them over to admire the strong grass fibers. Pulling them on instantly made him feel a little less anxious in his own skin.

Man she really gets you the imprint said approvingly.

“Yeah, but the real question is how.”

The most frustrating thing about the inner chambers of the Citadel was its complete lack of windows. Without anything to mark the hours or a sun to keep track of Keith had absolutely no idea what time it was.
Allura had informed them that Vell days were slightly shorter than an average human day. They lasted twenty earth hours instead of the usual twenty-four. The princess had gone on to talk about other facts she had dug up from old records. Like how the break between day and night was a different concept to the Olim Vell altogether. They did not need to sleep as often as humans or Alteans did. They lived by grass growing cycles and pollen waves and all other sorts of crap that Keith had completely tuned out. He kind of regretted that now.

If Keith had to make an educated guess from the way he felt and how hungry he was he estimated it had been at least fourteen hours since he had left the castle; four or five hours of that was taken up by sleep but it felt like much less. After Duke Nemean left him Keith had expected Tou or another Seed to show up with food but…no one came.

After fifteen minutes of waiting the golden door to the Y.M.’s room opened by itself. Armed with his new clothes and a throbbing headache Keith staggered into the private chamber. The lights were on this time, that was an improvement, but he couldn’t see the Young Mother anywhere and considering her size that was one hell of a trick.

“Y.M.? Where are you?”

Keith’s voice echoed plaintively back to him and he winced at the sound of it. After a small beat of silence the Young Mother’s sweet, shy voice rose behind the red paladins pounding temples.

<Keith! I’m in the milk bath! Just keep walking forward until you see the orange light.>

At the words “milk bath” it took all the willpower Keith possessed to move forward instead of turning and going straight back to bed.

Think happy thoughts buddy; Knives, swords, cutlasses, uhthh….bigger knives. The Lance imprint said good-naturedly.

Keith smiled despite the raging migraine that was starting to make his vision swimmy. He wanted to inform the imprint that he enjoyed things that weren’t knives but he also didn’t want the Y.M. to think he was talking to himself. He had to keep up some kind of cool persona around her, it was better for everyone if she kept on liking him.

Keith made his way deeper into the room and around a massive pit full of hot stones the size of boulders. Steam was wafting from the stones slowly and deep down in the partially hidden floor he could see a pane of scaultrite glass separating them from a blazing fire.

Small pipes anchored on all sides of the stone pit spewed streams of something oily at random intervals; it smelled like cedar and incense. Whatever the oil was it was keeping the Young Mother’s quarters warm and humid; the air felt comfortable without being too damp.

Around the pit were more bed-sized pillows and a mountain sized contraption that Keith decided was a reclining chair. He passed these and in the distance of the canyon sized room he finally saw the orange light that Y.M. had told him about.

The paladin could smell the grass milk before he even saw it. Passing through a hallway covered in colossal depictions of Weblum’s Keith found himself in the Young Mother’s bathing chamber. Its high-ceilings seemed miles away and the actual tub where the Y. M. was soaking had to rival a great lake for sheer capacity.

Her gargantuan body was completely submerged under several tons of milk that shone an eerie, almost embryonic pink. The Young Mother’s massive head hovered just above the water, her chin resting on the side of the pool, the starry eyes filmed over with a gauzy, semi-transparent eyelid.

The translucent eyelids flew back as Keith got closer and she made a ground-shaking noise between a purr and a hum.

<Hello Keith! Did you sleep alright?>

“Yeah. The bed was nice and the clothes are great too Y.M., thank you.”

The Y.M.’s mouth opened slightly, the long rubbery lips parting to reveal the stubby points of her whale-like teeth. Deep in the recesses of her throat Keith could just make out a white iridescence but the longer he looked at it the worse his head ached. A sound reverberated from the alien’s open mouth and the Young Mother wiggled in her soupy bathtub like an excited puppy.

<I’m so glad you like them!! You’re wearing them and everything! You look so….so cute! Can you turn around so I can see them in the back?>

A tentacle emerged from the bath next to Keith and its tip spun in a slow circle to illustrate what she wanted. Keith tamped down a sigh holding out his arms and turning in a slow circle so the Young Mother could see his outfit from all angles. He felt his cheeks flush, this was ridiculous.

Give the girl a grass fiber fashion show man she had them made just for you the imprint said with a poorly disguised giggle.
<Oh good they fit! I was worried- the weavers aren’t used to human measurements...If you want something else tell me alright? I just—yo-you looked so miserable in the Retainer finery...If you want something else tell me alright? I just—yo-you looked so miserable in the Retainer finery. That old suit was made for a Galra anyway- not for you. The clothes you have now are made of purified material so your aura won’t be affected so I just...yeah...s-sorry.>>

The nervous butterfly feeling in Keith’s stomach only grew stronger as the Y.M.’s long rambling speech came to a merciful close. She seemed to remember who she was talking to and became instantly nervous. The tentacle still hovering near Keith gestured towards another part of the room hesitantly.

<...there’s food. I know you must be hungry.>

Searching the direction the tendril pointed Keith was surprised to see his human-sized chair from the day before sitting before a matching human-sized table. He approached it curiously as the tendril behind him retreated back into the milk with a glutinous splash.

The table was covered with scaulritle plates full of questionable looking food. Keith knew that part of the reason his head was aching so badly was because he hadn’t eaten anything in...what? A day? A day and a half? He couldn’t really remember the last time he had eaten. He hadn’t been eating on a regular, healthy schedule since, well, since Lance had been taken.

There was no cutlery so Keith assumed he was going to have to use his hands. He stared at the thing on his plate for a full minute trying to figure out why it looked so familiar; then it hit him.

“Uh, is this this pizza?”

Examining the thing at his fingertips Keith tried to dissect its individual components with his eyes. The steaming hot, triangular piece on his plate was from a larger spherical thing on a larger plate in front of him.

It had what appeared to be a crust that was baked to a slightly darkened purplish-brown. The, well he would just call it cheese, was bubbling and looked like the right texture but had the wrong smell. The “pizza” toppings looked like wet grass and the crushed remains of dead insects.

<Yes! I had it made for you...Do you not like pizza?>

“Um...”

<Could get you something else!>

“No...this is fine.”

Keith felt bile rise in his throat as he stared down at the bizarre thing that was most definitely not a pizza. He glanced up and saw the Young Mother watching him from the side of her milk pool with twenty wide, expectant eyes.

Look at her sad face man. You gotta eat it. Just eat the not-pizza the Lance imprint coaxed.

Setting his face into a determined scowl Keith took the deepest breath he could and let it out slowly, hyping himself up as he picked up the oozing piece of counterfeit pizza. He closed his eyes and bit into it with his front teeth first. Clenching his free hand Keith chewed it slowly and prepared himself for something disgusting beyond description.

Opening one eye and then the other Keith kept chewing slowly and swallowed the bite down without difficulty. It... actually didn’t taste half-bad.

It didn’t taste like pizza but it didn’t taste...toxic. It tasted a bit like roasted almonds. The texture of the crust was kind of gritty but otherwise it was like eating weird bread made of almonds covered in a large warm mushroom and...something vaguely chicken-y; he guessed that was the insects.

Keith took another larger bite and didn’t waste as much time chewing before he swallowed it. Before long he was on his third slice. Looking up the Young Mother still watching him Keith spoke around a half-chewed bite and reached for a glass of water near his elbow.

“S’good thank oo.”

He drank with one hand and offered her a slice with the other.

“You want some?”

Sliding further down into the milk all of the Y.M.’s eyes swirled into a myriad of different vibrant colors. The purring noise from her grew louder and the milk started to bubble from the force of it.

<You’re welcome! I would love some but I have to fast until the ceremony.>

“Oh...sorry.”
That’s ok!

She lovingly watched the red paladin jam the ersatz pizza into his mouth another minute before timidly raising her voice again.

I know Lance likes it so I thought you would like it too. I don’t know what your favorite food is...I wish Hunk could come visit but it's not allowed. He would have made better pizza.

Keith swallowed his water so fast it went down the wrong tube and he choked, thumping his fist against his own ribcage to dislodge a blockage from his esophagus. The Young Mother burbled in alarm a tendril flying out of the milk towards Keith who shook his head, eyes watering.

“No! M’fine just..startled me!”

Clearing his throat Keith looked down at the last few slices of melted not-pizza, his eyebrows crinkled.

Y.M. how do you know about Hunk?.

Lance! I know about Shiro, Allura, Coran and Pidge. Umm-the lions, the Garrison, Cuba…

Cuba? Like, earth country Cuba?

The Young Mother shifted her weight in the tub and leaned her head to the side looking at Keith curiously; or at least what he assumed was curiously. Her intensely alien face was so hard to read but her feelings were still loud and clear in his head. He kept assigning meaning to her expressions when really it was just a cluttered mess of teeth, loose tentacles and dome-shaped eyeballs.

Yes, Lance was born in Cuba. He spent some of his childhood there.

“What…Seriously? I didn’t know that. He never talked about that. How do-How do you know all this?”

The tight feeling of nervousness in Keith’s chest was loosened by a kind of fierce joy, almost pride.

Lance shows me! He’ll show you too. After I’m done soaking and you’re done eating we can view him ok?

Keith had about a billion follow up questions to this but he bit them back. If the Young Mother promised to show him then she would. He just had to be…patient.

Your greatest enemy…patience the Lance imprint said with perfect mock sympathy.

The not-pizza was soothing the empty pit of the red paladin’s stomach but his headache stubbornly remained. He finished the final fragrant, almond-flavored piece of mock pizza and barely held back a loud belch.

Sitting back in his chair the red paladin was so busy rubbing his temples he didn’t notice the bashful tendril lingering over his head.

Your aura is dark around your head Keith. Are you in pain?

Keith nearly fell backwards when he looked up and found the Young Mothers tendril just inches from his scalp. Everything about her was just so massive.

This one flexible, prehensile appendage was easily the width of the Black Lion’s tail, glowing from within with a strange neon radiance.

Oh uh, I woke up with a headache. You can see that?-in my aura? That’s cool.

The little flickering flame of pride blossomed at this and Keith made a mental note to compliment her more if possible. It made her so happy.

Aura’s can tell you a lot. Quintessence changes and grows and it’s different with everybody. If your body hurts or you feel sad your aura can darken or even turn black.

The tendril lowered incrementally closer to the top of Keith’s head but the Young Mother held back from actually touching him.

Can I help you? I could make the pain better if…if you’ll let me.

Keith worried his bottom lip and eyed the tendril one more time before he finally nodded.

Yeah, uh…go ahead.

Ever so gently the tendril caressed Keith’s cheek and moved over his hair. Its surface was smooth and felt a bit like a warm water balloon made out of thick, soft latex. The tip glowed brighter and Keith could see its color changing. It soaked red down the length a few inches then darkened to black. The deep, grinding pain pressing against the red paladin’s skull faded in
delicious increments until it disappeared completely.

Keith let out a long groan and just sat there with his head still tilted back. The tendril pulled away, its tip still tainted by ugly black light, and vanished over the lip of the milk pool.

Whatever she had done seemed to have drained the Young Mother somewhat and her emotions became quieter, her earthquake purr losing some of its strength.

“Y.M. I feel a lot better, thank you. Are you ok?”

She slid off the side of the pool and disappeared all the way into the milk with hardly a ripple. The surface went mirror smooth above her as she rested her body near the bottom of the bath. Despite the distance her voice didn’t change its volume in Keith’s head.

“I’ll be fine in just a minute. I don’t heal very much so it’s a lot of work. The Matriarch and the elders won’t let me practice. They still treat me like a broodling. They want me to be a Mother but they still act like I’m only a cycle old. Its so confusing.”

Keith stood and walked to the edge of the bath nervously. Being this close to a seemingly bottomless pool of milk sludge made him agitated beyond belief but the Young Mother felt so upset that her pull was like a magnet. Keith answered as he looked down into the murky orange milk and wondered if she could even hear him down there.

“I know what you mean. I mean…paladin or not Shiro and Allura still make me feel like a kid sometimes. They expect so much of me, you know? I just don’t want to let them down. It’s a lot of pressure and I don’t always…Well I don’t always know how to deal with it.”

It felt kinda good saying this stuff out loud. Keith wasn’t great with talking about feelings in general but the Young Mother perked at his words and there was an instant sensation of understanding and empathy. Apparently she could hear him just fine.

“I don’t want to let them down either! But I don’t know If I’m ready to be a Mother. I don’t know if they even think I can do it. I don’t know if I can do it! It feels like Nobody really…believes in me.”

Deep in the jelly-like milk the Young Mother curled her body and chewed at the end of her tail with her teeth. Judging by the feelings associated with the gesture Keith got the impression it was like the Y.M. equivalent of thumb-sucking.

“I felt so alone and lost until Lance came. But he feels the same things I do! I don’t want to lose him. I don’t know what I’ll do when I have to give him to the Duke.”

Keith felt his skin twitch at the thought of the Dukes perfectly manicured claws sliding over Lance’s scrim. He stuffed this down and began walking casually around the enormous edge of the milk pool. He didn’t know which way to push the Y.M. yet, his best option was just wait. He had time…Lance could hold on a bit longer.

“You’re not alone Y.M., I’m here. Maybe together we can figure this out.”

Twisting her body around in a slow circle like a hot dog rotating on a spit Keith got a good look at the Young Mother’s underbelly. It was eerily similar to the bottom of a horseshoe crab but with about a hundred more legs.

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“You’re not alone Y.M., I’m here. Maybe together we can figure this out.”

Keith stopped mid-stride folding his arms over his chest. The way she spoke about him… this speech and the words she used sounded so hauntingly familiar.

“Did…Lance? …You got that stuff about me from Lance.”

Keith was listening to Lance’s compliments coming out of a young Cuthulu’s brain.

With one powerful push the Young Mother turned back on her stomach and bobbed to the top of the milk pool. She surfaced like a whale the size of an island and blew a spray of milk from three vent’s behind her eyes; doing her best to avoid hitting Keith as she did so.

Keith looked her straight in the nearest eye and offered a small, genuine smile.

“Can we go view him now?”
<Take your shirt off and lie down, make yourself comfortable.>

Keith glanced up at the Young Mother reluctantly but she was already reaching up to pluck Lance’s scrim from its column. The red paladin shrugged and pulled off his grass weave sweatshirt. He situated himself on one of the enormous pillows on the floor of the scrim library and lay the sweatshirt over his legs like a blanket.

The massive alien lowered her body close to Keith’s curling around him protectively. She placed her head next to his and her tendrils danced around him in rhythmic waves.

<You’ll have to view him like a Seed, your hair doesn’t work like tendrils do. You’ll have to go in another way and without practice I’ll have to help you at first. The Seeds have to practice to view a scrim by themselves. Humans shouldn’t be any different.>

“What do I need to do?”

A low rumble came from the Y.M.’s throat and she lowered the blue scrim, wrapped firmly in one tendril, towards Keith. She laid it out flat on his chest with a soft touch and rested the now empty tendril on his forehead. The scrim felt heavy and Keith looked down at it unsure where to put his hands. He settled for at his sides and looked up at the wall of eyes above him.

“Now what…”

<Close your eyes...reach out and feel for his heart.>

“His...heart?”

<Mmhmm. That’s the key for you to get in. Just...take a deep breath and concentrate on the scrim where it’s touching you. Think about what color it is. Like-how blue it is.>

Keith took in a deep breath feeling the bulky weight of the scrim move with his chest. He concentrated on where the smooth scaultrite pressed to his bare skin. It started to soak heat from his body and Keith wondered what he was supposed to be waiting for.

He did feel good knowing that he had Lance close, at least part of him; the quintessence part. This is the closest Lance has been to you topless that’s for sure the imprint said with a snicker that made Keith blush.

Ok, so Lance was technically here...touching him.

Lance was inside and he was blue. Blue like the ocean and like the sky on earth. Blue like his Lion, blue like his eyes. Keith felt himself start to fade at the edges, he lost track of his hands and feet as all his focus turned to the scrim and its heat at the center of his chest. He took another deep breath and felt his heart fluttering nervously against his ribcage, his pulse rocking the scrim slightly back and forth.

Then he felt something else, an answering heartbeat inside the scrim. It was much slower than his but he could feel his own body responding to it. His heart tried to match its speed, skipped a beat and Keith felt a jolt of panic. It was very tempting to pull the scrim away and chuck it as far as possible.

<You’re fighting him Keith. You have to let yourself go. Lance leads the way.>

Keith gagged on a reply as he struggled to get control over his body. Lance’s heart was loud in his head and the blue paladins pulse reverberated in his chest, moving through him.

Go with it dude. Lance would never hurt you right? Trust him. The imprint whispered.

No. he wouldn’t. With that thought the fear of surrender drained out of Keith gradually and after a few minutes of silent resistance his heart synched with the pulse in the scrim.

The Young Mother’s scrim library fell away as the world filled with blue fog. The blue light flowed into the corners of Keith’s brain and made everything feel muddled and indistinct. There was a hazy impression of falling and with it came something that Keith didn’t even realize he had been missing.

He could smell Lance, the Aloe Vera, cucumber scent that always lingered on the blue paladin’s skin. The smell was strong and Keith felt himself drifting through it, it infused the air around him. The swirling blue mist started to clear away and Keith began to see things-impressions. Light at first but then...everything broke apart and he could see the ocean.

Keith could feel the salt spray on his face, the sand of the beach between his toes. He ran towards the surf and giggled as it splashed against his ankles. A seagull cried overhead and he watched it, chasing it with his small, chubby hands raised towards the sun; reveling in being alive.
Down the beach a voice called out, deep and comforting. It was speaking in another language but Keith could understand it perfectly.

"Lance! Come build a sandcastle with us!"

Keith ran towards a group of smiling people on short, stubby legs. He giggled as he reached out to his father. He was picked up in strong arms, swung up towards the sun. For a breathless second he was weightless, staring out at the world around him from the sky above his father’s waiting hands. There wasn’t a trace of fear, he never doubted for a second he was going to be caught.

A young girl that Keith knew immediately was his older sister beamed at him from a beach blanket spread out nearby. She lounged under an umbrella and leaned on a nearby cooler. Pushing herself up his sister ran to take Keith from their father rubbing her nose against his and moving their eyelashes together in a butterfly kiss. She spoke in the same magical, musical language as Keith’s father.

“How big should we make our sandcastle?”

“HUGE!!”

Keith felt himself reply.

“Big as our house!”

His sister considered the beach bouncing him on her hip.

“Mmm…that’s going to take a lot of sand. We better use the bucket.”

This wasn’t right. Keith struggled to rip himself out of the small body, out of the memory—this wasn’t him this was Lance. This was Lance’s past. He was four or five? His sister looked ten… maybe older. He didn’t have to wonder her name he already knew it. She was Isadora, Isa for short, and they were at the beach near their little house in Matanzas, Cuba.

They came to the beach twice a week. His whole extended family.

Isa carried Keith-Lance to the water’s edge and the two of them started to dig with an assortment of well-loved plastic buckets and shovels. Lance’s older brother Teo joined them and Keith felt everything Lance felt, saw everything he saw. He lived the memory like it was his own. The sand was warm under his hands; he loved the way it crumbled when it dried.

He was afraid of crabs and cried when one appeared from the tide-line. Three people ran over the instant he started to sob. They were at his side in a matter of seconds, showering him with attention and a homemade ice-cream sandwich that tasted unlike anything Keith had ever eaten before.

As the sun set Lance’s uncle Ramon pulled out a guitar and everyone sat around a campfire watching the stars come out as they listened to the man sing. Soon everyone was taking their turn. They sang together or one at time, some of them good, others not so much. But Lance, and Keith, loved it all; the day, the ocean, the stars and his family.

Lance’s mother held him in her lap wrapping him in a blanket as the summer night grew chilly. He fell asleep listening to his uncle sing a sad lullaby he had written about a family dog that had died before Lance was born. It was one of his favorites.

The memory was over but Keith already ached for it. He barely had time to think before everything shifted and…

He was Lance again. Lance looking at…the castle. He was in the Castle of Lions.

Lance was standing on the training deck in full armor his Bayard at his side staring up at Allura in the observation deck above. Keith could feel his, Lances, muscles grow taut. Had the guy even stretched? Didn’t feel like it. His shoulders were stiff and his legs felt sore. When was this?

A voice spoke behind Lance and it wasn’t friendly. It was cutting and had a mocking sharp edge to its tone. Horror moved through Keith as he recognized who was speaking.

“Do you remember the plan?”

Lance turned and Keith felt an intensely confusing out of body experience when he saw he was standing next to himself.

“Course I do Mullet! I take a position back there and sharp-shoot all the bots who make it too close to the bowl…”

“The Package. We’re protecting the diplomat. Remember the scenario.”
“Oh yeah, sorry. In case the robots make it to that center line halfway to Baron Von Bowlington the third.”

Lance looked over his shoulder at the upside-down bowl sitting on a chair in the center of the training arena. Hunk had drawn a little smiley face onto it to help “add realism” and it sat there smiling stupidly at the paladins. *Oh no.* Keith remembered this now.

Allura popped up over the comm. Her voice commanding as she gave them final instructions.

“Paladins! You must protect your charge for five minutes without them getting struck by your enemy or friendly fire. You must work together with your partner to complete your goal. On the count of three…one-two—THREE!”

All hell broke loose on the floor. Lance rolled to take up his position behind the bowl his Bayard aimed at the first wave of oncoming soldiers.

Keith had never experienced anything as surreal as watching himself fight from a distance. He moved through the robots slashing and hacking them before they could make it to the halfway point between the target and Lance.

It was so much different looking at the battle from Lance’s point of view. Keith had always thought that shooting was much easier than hacking and slashing but now he was having second thoughts. Everything moved so quickly and Lance had to visualize where his target was going to go before he shot; you had to practically predict the future to hit anything.

The Bayard gun had a mean recoil kick that made Lance’s arms and shoulder go numb after so many continuous shots, another thing Keith had no idea about. The barrel of the gun grew superheated and he could feel it burning the side of Lance’s face. The longer the barrage went the harder Lance was breathing and that only made targeting more complicated.

Sweat was dripping into their eyes inside the helmet where the blue paladin couldn’t reach. Keith could see himself getting tired too, they were both starting to flag and that’s when the first bot got through Lance’s defenses.

“LANCE SHOOT IT!”

Keith was startled by his own voice and felt his…Lance’s foot catch the edge of the diplomat’s chair as he turned to try and get a lock on the approaching target. Lance slipped backwards his gun shooting into the air, hitting the observation tower with a few wild shots.

The glass windows cracked and Keith could see Allura and Coran ducking for cover right as he fell backwards, the weight of his gun throwing off his balance. Lance kicked the chair as he went down sending the smiling bowl into the sky and straight into the line of gunfire.

A stray shot broke the bowl clean in half and Keith watched as the two sides of the Baron’s sad broken smile went sailing through the air in smoking chunks. Lance lay there staring up at the ceiling, his Bayard transforming in his grip.

Keith heard himself take out the last of the practice droids and then there was a painful, pregnant pause. Finally, Allura’s shaky voice came back over the comm speaker.

“Er, end simulation…mission failure paladins. Lance you have killed your diplomat.”

Lance lay on the floor and groaned weakly his face flushed with hot shame. A wave of emotions went through him and Keith felt them all. Embarrassment, anger and hurt: all of which were directed at himself. He was a disgrace, a stupid loser. He didn’t deserve to be the blue paladin. He didn’t deserve to be in the same room—no—the same universe as the other paladins.

Keith watched as—Keith, loomed above them. He was panting hard, helmet held under his arm. His face pinched and red as sweat dripped from his hairline.

All the flagellating self-hatred blurred together into a burning ball in Lance’s chest but when he saw the red paladin’s face he couldn’t bring himself to apologize. If he started that he wouldn’t be able to stop. Lance managed a crooked smirk and out of his mouth instead of an apology came…

“Man, if you were a transformer Keith you know which one you would be?”

The red paladin gaped at him and Keith watched in cold horror as his own face clouded with confusion as well as rage.

“What?" "Optimus Fine."

Please don’t yell at him, Keith wanted to say to himself, just tell him it’s alright. He made a mistake, he did his best. He wants to impress you so badly. Can’t you see that?

“What the HELL! Your job was easy Lance!! All you had to do was cover me and shoot the ones that got past the line! That’s all you had to do! You’re just…you—you’re just USELESS.”
The blue paladin flinched, deflected reflexively.

“Oh-oh yeah?! Well you have even less use than me buddy!”

“What does that even MEAN!”

“I DON’T KNOW!”

The shame grew hot and more of Lance’s thoughts raced through Keith’s brain. He’s right. I didn’t sweep the field like Shiro told me to. I should have checked for obstacles. I’ll never be as good as him or Shiro. Keith knows I’m a loser. The way he looks at me…I’ll never…

“LANCE are you even listening to me!”

“No! I can barely hear you down here why don’t you scream a little louder!”

The bickering continued and inside of Lance Keith wanted to curl up and hide. This was torture; observing how he treated Lance from the other side was unbearable and just when he thought it couldn’t get any worse he felt it. The feeling started off small inside Lance’s chest, flickering warmth and desire. It flared into disappointment and yearning as the blue paladin watched Keith walk over to Shiro to talk about the failed exercise.

Lance pushed his back off the floor and observed them from a distance. He was staring at Keith as he conversed passionately with the black paladin about something. Lance was watching his eyes, his body, and his mouth. After a few minutes Hunk jogged to meet Keith and Shiro and for a brief instant Keith saw his own face flash into a smile. When it did the emotions in Lance’s chest turned into a sharp, raw pain.

*I’ll never be good enough for him* Lance thought as the flicker in his chest imploded in on itself and turned into something withered and icy. *I will never be good enough and it hurts.*

Pidge sauntered over to help Lance up her expression sympathetic.

“You were doing really good at first. I saw you getting tired why didn’t you just tell Keith so he could have given you a minute to recover? You could have figured out some other way around it…that’s why we do these strategy things in the first place.”

Lance watched Keith a moment more and stared down at his clenched hands. His whole body ached from the fall and his shoulder was still numb but the humiliation was worse than all the physical pain combined.

“Yeah. I just love telling golden boy how weak I am.”

Pidge sighed, leaning down to retrieve the charred remains of Baron Von Bowlington.

“You aren’t weak…”

Lance pulled off his helmet, his body cold. The voices in the room faded with the memory and Keith felt himself coming up to the memories surface, moving away from the world in the scrim. The last thing he saw was his own face staring irately at him from across the training deck.

The Young Mothers tendrils moved against his face and body as she made comforting noises.

<Keith, oh no…please don’t cry.>

Keith blinked and felt hot tears slide down his cheeks and soak into his hair; oh…he was crying, when did that start? He pulled in a breath that mutated into a sob. Moving onto his side Keith hugged Lance’s scrim tight against his body, pushing his forehead into it. Once the tears started they wouldn’t stop. Something had ruptured inside and Keith felt like he was leaking. If it was his emotions or Lance’s…he couldn’t tell anymore.

Y.M. stroked his back continuously as she hummed a rambling melody. It vibrated through his bones and teeth and somehow made the tears fall even faster.

<This is normal. Viewing a scrim is always overwhelming the first time…it’s going to be ok.>

Keith wiped frantically at his eyes and sniffed loudly. He grit his teeth furious with himself, with Lance, with the entire goddamn universe.

“He’s in *love* with me. It’s so *stupid*. I can’t believe he…I can’t believe he’s in *love* with me.”

The Young Mother made a confused bugling sound her tendril slowing mid-stroke. There was an unsure chuckle in her voice that she only half-attempted to hide.

<Well, yeah. You…you didn’t know?>
Man I can't believe he ate the entire pizza.

Thanks CJ you proofreading goddess.
The mountains were ancient and full of deep holes. As far as Keith could see, and he could see quite far, it was nothing but primeval forest and unruffled lakes. The lakes were great bodies of water filling ancient craters shaped vaguely like a humanoid footprint. It was as if some huge creature had taken massive steps over the curved teal landscape and left watery impressions in its wake.

Keith let a gust of wind carry him higher, he stretched all four of his enormous wings out towards the orange sun and let the warmth settle into his thin, fragile bones. His feathers caught on an updraft and made a sound like a canvas sail unfurling as he used the sudden momentum to spin lower, circling a half-hidden valley at the edge of the diamond lake.

The prey was there. His keen eyes could pick up the panicky movements of a herd going to drink. The smells on the wind spoke of breeding season, when the young females were at their most vulnerable; their bodies thick with fat, savory and filling. Keith stuck out a long blue tongue to the air to taste it, scenting for the warmer currents.

He was too large to fly directly overhead, his shadow would give him away. It would be best to come from very high and drop directly down on top of a lagging doe; like a silent arrow.

With a powerful flap of his wings Keith moved upward into the creamy umber cloud cover. Here the herd at the tree line was nothing but a meandering group of dots. He zeroed in on a straggler that was moving away from the herd, zigzagging slowly in an area with less cover. Keith turned all his intense focus on the lost animal. Without a sound he tucked in his wings and dove.

He fell from the sky like a rocket, like a bullet. Even during his training exercises in the Red Lion he had never free-fallen this recklessly. It reminded him of the time he and Lance had played chicken blindfolded and that had ended with them both face down in the dirt.

He had been safe in his armored lion then but now- if he hit the ground like this it would break his neck and kill him instantly. There was no metal hull around him, nothing to stop his descent but his own wings and endurance.

He was falling faster, the ground and his prey rushing up to greet him. The deer like creature hadn’t seen him yet and Keith let out a fearsome call as his talons made contact with soft flesh. Hot blood filled his mouth-

He had only been able to maintain the connection for five minutes or so but he was definitely getting better. It was a huge improvement over the first couple of attempts with the Young Mother in her chambers. She had insisted on using what she called “simple scrims” for practice. These turned out to be the scrims of animals and birds; creatures with fewer memories or short life-spans.

It turned out most of her impressive collection was made up of these. The scrims of more intelligent beings- people like Lance- were extremely rare and all the more precious because of it. Y.M. told Keith that most of the complex scrims in her collection were very old and nearly all of them belonged to Olim Vell. Keith had not asked her about the ones that were not. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

Pushing his sweaty hair away from his face Keith pulled his shirt down to cover his torso and hugged his knees to his chin. Hugging his legs to his chest he glanced over at the glowing raptor scrim, into the world of swirling silvers and pale earth tones. It was shaped like a feather and was the length of his leg from foot to the knee. The Young Mother had given it to him as a gift and now he regretted accepting it.

Even if it was an animal… was it killed to make this beautiful object? Was its life cut short like-

There was a knock at the door, so soft Keith almost missed it. The red paladin said nothing, his gaze held by the feather-shaped scrim as he rocked himself quietly back and forth. After another tentative knock the door opened into the dim chamber and a familiar little voice called out to the red paladin worriedly.

“Master Keith? Are you resting? I don’t mean to disturb you…”
Keith didn’t look at Tou; he absenthly hid the feather scrim under his pillows then turned forward to stare blankly into the middle distance. His eyes unfocused and his brain filled with static as the Seed crept to his bedside, their wide expressive eyes looking up at him in concern.

“Master Keith? The Young Mother is engaged in meditation now, yes?”

Keith nodded and spoke automatically, his voice more choppy and robotic.

“She told me…sleep while she was busy.”

Tou smoothed the ruffled covers of Keith’s unmade bed and tutted under their breath.

“She’ll be in meditation for awhile. You may receive a visitor now if you would like.”

With a quick intake of breath Keith finally focused on the Seed and nodded against his knees.

“Yeah! I mean-yes, please.”

“I’m afraid you’ll only be able to see one visitor at a time Master Keith. If you tell me who you would like to see I will send for them right away and escort them here…”

Tou’s hand had strayed to rest on Keith’s bare arm but the paladin pulled away shakily staring down at his feet. The Seed took a step backwards.

“You look ill Master Keith.

“I’m fine.”

Keith felt utterly miserable. This felt like the lowest point of his entire life and he had lived alone in a desert shack for months on end. He had lived through a long string of disappointments and fist-fights and foster homes. He had even lost Shiro once but this-this was the worst he had ever felt.

Tou didn’t ask again but they seemed incredulous of Keith’s reassurances. The Seed went about cleaning what little mess there was to clean. Organizing Keith’s grass boot-socks and pulling his sheets up on the bed where they could. Keith didn’t move to make it easier for them.

“Who shall I bring then?”

Keith knew that the right answer to this question was Allura, maybe Shiro. They would want to debrief him. They would want all the gritty details of his Y.M. meetings. They would want to know about Lance, Nemean and Zarkon—all of it. Keith didn’t know if he could look either of them in the eye. Just the thought of it made him nauseous.

Allura would want to face the problems properly, with decorum and tact. Shiro would probably keep his personal feelings at bay for the good of the mission. Pidge would only want the cold hard facts and none of them would understand that the situation he was dealing with was more emotional than anything else. There was only one person he wanted to talk to. The same person Lance would have wanted to talk to.

“Hunk, the yellow paladin. Can you bring him here? P-please.”

Keith wondered if this was selfish. Allura and the others wouldn’t understand why he asked for Hunk—an engineer with anxiety issues didn’t seem applicable to this situation. The red paladin realized he didn’t care.

The moments after viewing Lance’s scrim were hard for Keith to describe. He recalled in books he read for English classes writers often used the word “inconsolable” when it came to sadness or grief. He had never understood what that meant until now. After viewing Lance’s scrim he had truly been inconsolable.

Nothing the Young Mother or the imprint said or did had meaning. All he could think about was what he saw inside the blue paladin’s memories; how it had felt. He couldn’t remember the last time he had physically broken down and cried so violently. A tear slipping out once or twice was one thing but he had sobbed until he could barely breathe; His eyes still felt red-raw and puffy.

The Young Mother had stayed quietly by his side until he calmed down and was able to think again. She had caressed him kindly with tendrils that could probably rip him in half and waited until his hiccuping had eased enough that he could speak.

Then she changed the subject and they didn’t talk about Lance again.

The red paladin listened while Y.M. talked about her scrim collection. She talked about the different things she had seen through the eyes of trapped animals and dead ancestors. Keith listened and accepted the feather scrim when it was given. She had done her best to sound cheerful but Keith could feel that she was just as distracted and distraught as he was.

After he made a few rudimentary attempts at solo Viewing Y.M. had made some excuse about
meditation and Keith found himself alone and confused back in his quarters. She didn’t say as much but it was pretty obvious the Young Mother wanted time alone.

The trip into Lance’s memories had been harrowing and painful but all Keith could think of was how much he wanted to do it again. He wanted to be with Lance and enjoy the strange high he had experienced being a stranger in his body.

He understood now why the scrims were so valuable and why the Young Mother coveted Lance. It was... intoxicating. Being a voyeur inside another creature’s skull and experiencing things not only in a completely new way but from a completely different perspective.

Even now the bird scrim was already calling to him. The five minute increments Keith could use the scrim on his own weren’t close to long enough. He wanted to lose himself longer. Immerse himself completely in a situation he couldn’t control.

Pressing his back was against the wall at the head of his bed Keith debated his next steps. The way the Young Mother talked about the scrims she seemed to have no idea where they came from but if he told her the truth about Lance- what would she do? Would she get angry? Would she even understand? She seemed so utterly separated from the real world outside, Keith honestly could not predict what she would say if he told her the hard truth about the blue scrim and its occupant.

You ever think to ask her why she thought you and the others were here In the first place, The Lance imprint asked pointedly.

"I…The Caulis thought we were here for the ceremony."

*Bullshit! They knew exactly why you were here. Nemean knows so the Imperials definitely know. If they told her you were here for the ceremony, imagine what other lies they’ve been feeding her,* the imprint said with a tinge of impatience.

“Then why did they let me be her Retainer?”

Keith rolled his cheek onto his folded arms lowering his voice to a whisper. He wondered how strange it looked...a paladin of Voltron talking to himself in an empty room.

*They definitely didn’t want you to be her Retainer. She picked you because of Lance. It probably took them by surprise and that’s why they sent Nemean in here to threaten you- to scare you? Whatever dude. Your being here bothers them.*

The pitch of the imprint’s voice rose higher and higher, exactly like the real Lances did when he was upset by something.

“So what should I do? They still control the wormholes! I don’t know what to DO !”

Raising his voice brought on a brand new round of hiccups and Keith felt his diaphragm spasm viciously. He let out a long frustrated groan and debated punching himself in the stomach.

*How about you drink some water? That’s something you could do,* the imprint said with a tired sigh.

Getting water meant getting up from the bed and that was too much work. Keith eyed the jug on a distant table and bounced from another hiccup. His eyelashes itched, full of dry salt from crying and his cheeks still felt wet despite the number of times he had rubbed at them. Irritation was building behind his exhaustion.

How had he ever blamed himself for this? This was clearly all Lance’s fault. Why did he have to go into a fortune-telling tent in the first place? Why didn’t he just say how he felt, why the hell did Keith have to guess? He wasn’t a goddamn mind reader. Everyone knew how bad he was at reading people! Did Lance not get the memo?

Burying his face back in his arms Keith tried to ignore the hiccups still bursting from low in his throat. The red paladin was so wrapped up in his own miserable thoughts he didn’t notice the door open or hear the approaching footsteps. A huge warm hand came to rest on his shoulder and Keith looked bleary eyed up into a round, familiar face.

“Keith? Oh Keith, dude.”

Hunk faltered, his arm partially outstretched. Juggling a plate of food in one hand, he danced a bit from foot to foot with a desperate expression. Putting the plate down on a bedside table he closed the gap between himself and Keith, spewing apologies as he went.

“I’m sorry! I-I gotta hug you man I’m sorry!”

Keith melted into Hunk’s snug embrace as the yellow paladin held him tightly, sitting next to him on the bed. Closing his eyes Keith let himself be held. He hiccuped forlornly into Hunk’s chest as his friend rubbed small circles on his back.

“It’s ok. It’s ok I got ya.”
It was a huge effort but Keith managed to keep his composure. Losing it in front of Y.M. was one thing but crying in front of a teammate, even if it was Hunk, was just too much. Maybe they didn’t think he was as tough as Shiro but keeping some of the mystique and not turning into a blubbering mess was preferable.

That didn’t stop him from enjoying Hunk’s bear hug any less. He finally spoke, his hoarse voice muffled against the grass fiber clothing his friend was wearing.

“Hunk, I-I’m glad you’re –hic- here.”

“I’m super glad I’m here too! They didn’t tell us anything about you for like two days. We’ve all been freaked out. I think Pidge is about ready to have an aneurysm; the lack of tech is really getting to her.”

Keith reluctantly pulled back and looked into Hunks face.

“Has it been two–hic- days then? I thought so. I’ve been trying to keep track but its hard–hic- in here.”

Hunk examined Keith’s face his eyebrows creasing with worry.

“You look-I don’t know-upset? No, sad. Like, really, really sad. Are you ok man?”

Keith glanced down at his shirt and reached up a hand to touch his own face. Did he look that bad? Hunk looked the opposite of bad. His skin looked amazing which lead Keith to believe he had taken a dip in a milk pool. His hair was oiled and slicked back and he had been freed of the heavy vestment robes.

“I’m–hic- fine…”

The lie slipped out easily. Keith was unsure what else to say at this point. If he said it enough times maybe he really would be fine. Hunk narrowed his eyes and leaned closer looking very unconvinced.

“Are you sure? What’s been happening to you in here? The Mother-thing didn’t hurt you did she?”

Hunk searched Keith’s face his expression concerned. His gaze moved from Keith’s bloodshot eyes, over his haggard pale face and lingered on the tear tracks that Keith prayed weren’t still visible.

“No…The Young Mother would never- hic-hurt me.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard you have hiccups before. Heh-you hiccup like a kitten.”

“I do –hic- not!”

Getting to his feet the yellow paladin went to grab the water jug and a cup from the table. Looking over his shoulder every few seconds like he was making sure Keith was still there. He offered Keith a full glass and shook his head.

“You know, you said you were fine the last time I gave you water too. Remember? After you stuck your head in a wormhole ?”

Keith took a grateful drink of the water Hunk handed him and held his breath waiting for the hiccuping to stop. He didn’t know how to answer so he just stared at the cup in his hands. Hunk put an arm around him and squeezed his shoulder; the fibers of his shirt were rough where they touched Keith’s skin.

The yellow paladin’s grass cloth shift wasn’t nearly was fancy or well made as the clothes Keith was given. It was a simple thing that hung on him like a baggy knee-length shirt over equally baggy pants; the fibers weren’t dyed, they remained a dull, dun brown.

Keith bit his lower lip until it hurt and one final hiccup ripped through him before they finally stopped. He knew he needed to tell Hunk everything but he didn’t know how to start. He felt overwhelmed just trying to pick a place to begin. After a long stretch of silence Hunk lowered his voice, speaking gently near Keith’s ear.

“Do you wanna just sit for a minute? We don’t have to talk. If you need to be quiet for a bit it’s ok.”

Hunk was good at that, the understanding, companionable silence thing. Sometimes Pidge became so stressed she just needed to be quiet with someone; she needed someone just non-verbally being there as a support while she decompressed. Hunk called these episodes Pidge’s “quiet days.” Keith didn’t think they had the luxury of one right now.

“I-…I-just….”

Hunk adjusted his weight on the bed, settling into a more comfortable position.
“How about I start, I can tell you what happened to us and then maybe you can tell me what happened to you?”

Keith nodded taking another sip of water. He looked down at his hands and tilted his head to the side to show he was listening. Hunk pulled his arm away but kept his hand on the small of Keith’s back.

“So, the Caulis guys sent us off with this escort, a little dude like the ones that got you. They call them Seeds right?”

Keith nodded again and found his voice creeping back.

“Yeah…Seeds.”

“So the little Seed dude takes us to this huge wing of the outer Citadel and it’s pretty much empty. Like there don’t seem to be many aliens actually living in this huge place? It’s weird, anyway they give us rooms and then they don’t contact us for like…a day? The Seeds bring us food but the bigger guys aren’t saying anything. Allura and Shiro are getting all antsy so the princess tells the Seed that she wants to talk to the head honcho, the mom thing or the imperial guys but nobody shows up.”

Keith didn’t find any of this surprising. Voltron being here was just interference, a distraction from the greater forces in the Olim Vell’s lives. They didn’t care about anything but getting the Young Mother to Spur.

“But then this big one shows up. She’s HUGE and she comes into Allura’s room through a secret entrance like an old Scooby-doo episode or something! She called herself the Flos-Matriarch and she said you were ok.”

Keith sat up straighter looking into Hunk’s face again. He felt his eyes widen.

“I met her! She takes care of the Young Mother. The Matriarch was the one who got me ready to see her.”

“She told us! She told us about the Retainer thing and promised she would keep tabs on you. Oh, that reminds me!”

Hunk reached forward and grabbed the plate of food he had set on the end table. He offered Keith what looked like a pile of gently steaming green noodles.

“This is what we’ve been eating. It’s pretty darn good. I didn’t know if you had been getting enough grub so I brought some with just in case.”

Keith examined the bowl and felt a dull pang in his stomach. It didn’t seem that long ago he had eaten the not-pizza and despite the tug of hunger in his gut eating right now seemed out of the question.

“Maybe in a minute, I’m not really hungry. So– was that all the Matriarch said?”

Hunk took the bowl away grudgingly, setting it where they could reach it. Keith set his half-empty water glass next to it.

“No. Not even close. Uh, she came to us secretly because she’s part of this hush-hush Olim resistance in the Citadel; dropped the biggest bomb on us man, like get this. That thing that Lance got sucked in? The wormhole scrim thing? The Galra have been trafficking them.”

“What? Why would they–”

Keith stopped and put a hand to his forehead his thoughts racing back to the feeling of being so close to Lance; experiencing the ocean through his five year old eyes.

“So Kru-Kron in the market? He was making scrims for the Galra? All those empty scrims we took from him… the Galra were going to sell them?”

“Yeah apparently they’re like Galra-nip. The purple guys can’t get enough of them. It’s not just the wormholes they care about, the Galra have to keep buddy-buddy with the Olim Vell or they can’t get Seeds to make scrims for them. The whole system is corrupt!”

Hunk pursed his lips, eyebrows furrowed.

“The Matriarch told us what the scrims do. They’re like little TVs that you use to watch a person’s memories.”

Keith sighed and reached under his pillows to pull out the feather-shaped scrim. He gazed into it before lifting it where Hunk could see.

“It’s more than just watching. It’s like… being them. It’s like being part of the memory with them.”
Hunk jerked his hands to his chest like they had been scalded by hot water and leaned his upper body away from Keith.

“Whoa!! Where did you- how did you get one?! It’s full and everything? Er…”

Holding out the scrim to Hunk Keith gestured towards it with his free hand.

“You can touch it, it can’t hurt you. It was a gift.”

Reaching out slowly with one finger Hunk tapped the scrim once before jerking his hand back like he was afraid the thing would burn him. When nothing happened the yellow paladin reached out more carefully and took the scaultrite vessel into his hands.

“Uhhh- do you know who is in this one? Oh geeze it’s not Lance is it? No, you said Lance is blue this more like…Grey-brownish.”

Drawing his knees back up to his chest Keith watched Hunk turn the scrim over in his hands.

“It belongs to an alien bird. Lance-Lance’s scrim is in there.”

Pointing towards the golden door Keith couldn’t bear to look at Hunk’s face as the words came out of his mouth. To his surprise Hunk just reached back out to him and started rubbing his back again.

“Yeah, the Matriarch told us that too. She told us about the dowry thing and about why he’s so important. She couldn’t really talk about it with you, I guess? The Caulis guys don’t trust her, they listen in on her conversations.”

A ripple of good, clean, delicious anger moved through Keith. She had all that time with him in the bath and she couldn’t figure out a better way to warn him about Lance’s scrim? Giving him little subtle jabs about the Y.M. being naïve and young was the best she could do? A comfortable scowl settled on Keith’s face and he was glad.

“Well, she told you everything already. There’s nothing left for me to say.”

Hunk swallowed nervously and tapped his pointer fingers together.

“Dude, I don’t know how to ask this… The Matriarch said that giant mom in there-The Young Mother. She said that she, like, loved you.”

Keith whirled to face Hunk feeling suddenly exposed. He looked around for something to fiddle with wishing he had his knife or his Bayard.

“Hunk, I-you’re close to Lance. You’re his best friend right?”

The yellow paladin nodded slowly one eyebrow raised, confused by the direction the conversation was going.

“Yeaaaah?…”

Keith steeled himself feeling like an idiot. He was the guy who went charging into battle, who took the hard assignments and faced impossible odds and yet he could not bring himself to ask Hunk stupidly simple questions.

“Hunk…did you know Lance…did you know he-likes me?”

Hunk blinked at Keith in surprise before he snorted and launched into a long belly laugh. He laughed until tears started to form in the corners of his eyes and Keith ducked his head as his face turned red. He punched the yellow paladin in the arm a little harder than he meant to and Hunk gripped his bicep as he finally started to quiet down.

“Ow! Ah…oh man, Keith. I’m sorry dude it’s just really funny because you’re bringing this up right now? Like, in the middle of an alien castle, this is when you wanna talk about it?”

Keith wanted to disappear, or die, or explode-whichever was the easiest and most convenient. He felt the mixed up blender that was his thoughts go from mince to blend and all he could do was grab at a lock of his hair and tug it distractedly.

“The Young Mother loves me because of Lance. She looks at his memories in his scrim. She calls it Viewing them and she’s been Viewing Lance and he-…”

Hunk whistled at this, rubbing the back of his head as he considered the ceiling.

“Damn. That’s crazy, but it makes sense. Lance has been smitten with you for a long time. I think it started in the Garrison when he created the whole rivalry thing to try and get your attention.”

This information was new. Keith had been so busy with his own bullshit in the Garrison he hadn’t even attempted to form relationships with other students. Lance was not even on the edges of his radar. Keith felt like his skin was too small; he wanted to jump up and run laps or do
something physical to deal with it but he was too damn tired.

Hunk tried to catch his eye.

“Soooo... How do you feel about that? I mean. I guess that explains why you asked for me, huh? Instead of Shiro?”

The red flush on Keith’s skin burned so hot he could almost feel sweat beginning to prickle on the back of his neck. He sucked in a breath through his teeth.

“It doesn’t matter. I just wanted to confirm with someone who knows him well.”

Did that sound professional and convincing? God, Keith hoped so.

“This Lance thing won’t impact the mission. The Young Mother isn’t hostile but I can’t just take the scrim from her. They still control the wormholes and they’re still friendly with the Galra so... I don’t really know what to do. I—”

When Keith admitted he didn’t know what to do the words came out slightly strangled.

A warm hand moved onto Keith’s neck and Hunk stood from the bed. He pushed Keith gently back onto his pillow and lifted his legs up and under the blankets. He did it so fast and with so much finesse Keith didn’t realize what was happening until the yellow paladin was tucking him in.

“Hunk, don’t treat me like a baby.”

“You sound exhausted man. I’m trying to help. I know it feels like you’re alone in here but we’re trying to figure something out too, ok? You’re gonna see Lance again. We all are. It sucks you had to find out about his feelings this way.”

The warm hand stayed on Keith’s neck steadying him. Hunk smiled sitting protectively close.

“It’s ok not to know what to do sometimes. I don’t know what I’m doing like...half the time.”

“It’s not ok... he could die. I need to ask the Young Mother for help but I’m... I’m afraid to.

Keith lowered his voice shamefully as Hunk shoved the feather scrim under the blankets near the red paladin’s feet.

“It wasn’t just the Young Mother Hunk... I viewed his scrim. I-I felt him. All I can think about is what I saw—the terrible things I said to him.”

Hunk grinned.

“Keith. My man. Lance forgives super easily. If I know anything about him it’s that he’s great at accepting apologies and bounces back fast. Also he never wears socks so he gets blisters on his feet all the time.”

Keith managed a smile at this and felt his muscles begin to relax. He watched Hunk through half-shut eyes still fighting sleep.

“Why doesn’t he wear socks?”

“When he was a kid he would go to the beach all the time. He told me that socks just hold you back on the beach and he would lose them anyway. So now he just doesn’t wear them.”

“I saw him, in the scrim. I saw him on the beach with his family. He was small, they built a sandcastle.”

Hunk’s expression shifted darkly but he just hummed in thought. He glanced back at the door and puffed out his cheeks in frustration at something he saw there. When Keith looked around him he could just make out the shadowy outlines of a Seed in the open doorway; it didn't look like Tou. Lowering his voice to a whisper Hunk leaned in close.

“Keith, buddy? I should probably get going. Are you gonna be ok?”

The red paladin tried to push himself back up into a sitting position.

“I didn’t give you a full report! I...”

Hunk stood and gripped Keith’s shoulder anxiously.

“You told me plenty... just keep doing what you’re doing until we figure out a plan. There’s this wedding banquet tomorrow and your Seed bud told me you were invited. We’ll all see you there ok?”

Keith caught the conspiratorial wink in Hunk’s tone and nodded settling back into his bed.

“Alright, tomorrow.”
Hunk let out a sigh and gave him one final shoulder squeeze before he headed for the door.

“Get some sleep buddy. And just, be careful ok? If anything happened to you Lance would kill me.”

Keith woke up confused in his room a few hours after his talk with Hunk. The nap left him unsettled but he had a bit of his energy back. His conversation with the yellow paladin seemed like a strange dream after the fact. He ruminated on it as he sat on the side of the bed staring at the plate of cold noodles still sitting on his bedside table. They didn’t look appetizing.

The golden door was already open, waiting for him and Keith stared at it for a moment before he slipped on his grass weave boots and made his way inside. There was a sticky awkward feeling that permeated the room on the other side and he shuddered. The Young Mother was feeling something very strongly; something like shame, maybe embarrassment.

She didn’t waste any time, speaking to him the moment he was across the threshold.

<Keith. Are you angry with me?>

The voice was loud in Keith’s head but he couldn’t see the Young Mother anywhere. He continued walking, passing several large curtains as he made his way towards the heated rockpit that smelled so strongly of oil.

“Why would I be angry at you? I was upset by something I did, then you asked me to leave because you had something to do. It’s fine.”

Standing near the heated stones Keith looked towards the orange light of the bathing room, wondering if maybe he should check there first. There were still many places in Y.M.’s chambers he hadn’t seen yet; rooms and cubbyholes hidden behind curtains or down deceptively narrow hallways.

<You didn’t know about how Lance felt…you cried. I meditated on it and I realized I am very confused by your reaction.>

Frowning, Keith started to go in a slow loop around the pit at the center of the pillowed sitting area. Y.M. hadn’t given him instructions where to find her yet. Maybe she wanted her space.

“You said it was normal to be overwhelmed and I was.”

<It wasn’t just that. I thought. I thought you knew that he loved you. It was so clear to me in his every word and action. When you turned him down it made sense why he volunteered to become my dowry but if you did not know…it changes everything.>

Keith sat down on a pillow the size of his room on the Castle of Lions and curled his head to his knees his breath catching hard in his throat. The Young Mothers sadness was so sharp it felt like a knife edge held against Keith’s heart. Coupled with his own distress it was getting hard to keep his throat from clenching.

“Y.M. he didn’t-he didn’t volunteer to be your dowry.”

The immense chamber seemed to drop in temperature by several degrees. Everything became very still and unnaturally cold. Keith knew that he would have to tell Y.M. the truth about this sooner or later but he didn’t expect it to be the first thing he tackled through the door.

<No! The Caulis Imperials said he did…they said he volunteered!>

Keith cowered under the overpowering weight of the Young Mother’s anguish. Her voice thundered in his head so loud he put his hands to his ears knowing it would do nothing to block out the noise.

“Volunteered?”

Keith whispered as his heart pounded hard against his breastbone.

“VOLUNTEERED!”

The red paladin shouted at the empty space and the rustling curtains.

“Lance was tricked into becoming your dowry! A Seed named Kru-Kron tricked him!! H-he told Lance he was a fortune teller! I was there and I watched it happen! Come on Y.M.! I know you aren’t stupid. Why do you keep letting everyone take advantage of you!?”

Clenching his hands to his sides Keith’s throat burned as he panted for breath. When the Young Mother didn’t reply Keith started to run. He sprinted towards the bathing room still screaming as he did.

“Lance is the blue paladin of Voltron! He isn’t a toy or a dowry, he’s a person! How could you
look at his memories and not realize he had things to live for?"

The milk bath was glowing faintly when Keith made it into the room; his breath coming in wheezy gasps. The bathroom was empty, the tub glassy, steaming and without an occupant. Keith turned in a frantic circle and ran back down the corridor his soft footsteps echoing off the high, carved walls.

"Did you not think to look at the memories of him going into the scrim? You could have checked! You could have…"

Keith ran in another short circle and tripped over a rug. He pushed himself angrily to his feet and kicked at it letting out a long frustrated scream. Dashing forward he peeked into the scrim library and found nothing there, no Young Mother.

"I don’t know what I would have said- I don’t know what I would have said if I knew he loved me, but now…"

Every place he checked was empty. Other rooms were closed to him or hidden and Keith slowed to a jog as he made his way back towards the pit of hot stones. There was a painful stitch in his side and as he sucked air into his blistering lungs. He wondered what he would have done if he actually found the Young Mother; it almost made him laugh.

"Fuck…"

The red paladin dropped to his knees and fell back to sit on the ground with his legs splayed in front of him. He stayed like that until he could breath normally. Finally, after some long minutes of silence the Young Mother’s voice spoke in his head again; this time much more softly.

< Keith…>

Keith continued to stare at the carpet between his legs like it was the most interesting thing in the entire universe. He pushed a knuckle into his eyes and tried to stop the moisture he felt collecting there.

"I’m sorry Y.M."

<Keith, I…>

"I lost my temper… I’m sorry. I thought I was getting better at the angry outbursts but I guess not."

A tendril curved delicately around Keith’s body, its glowing tip brushing his cheek carefully. Keith startled and looked around uneasily to see where it had come from. The long swaying appendage had dropped from the last place he had expected; the ceiling.

The Young Mother curled above him in a long line of heavy steel rafters that looked like giant letter U’s stuck up into the ceiling. Her stubby, insectoid legs hung through the girders in places and her tendrils curled around the beams and ceiling for support. The mountainous face of glowing eyes gazed down at Keith mournfully.

<You’re right. You’re right about everything. I want to make the Caulis and the Galra happy and I want to stay a child and be taken care of… I’m afraid of moving forward. I dislike uncomfortable questions and I-I should have realized someone like Lance would never volunteer to die. I just assumed without you he->

She paused and another tendril dropped down towards Keith. He reached out for it and placed his hand palm down on the end, hoping it would show that he still trusted her.

< I-I can’t force Lance to show me anything. The memories I see just seem to surface randomly. I’m not sure he even remembers what happened to him before.>

Keith looked up at her eyes narrowed his voice softened by awe.

"He’s in the scrim? I mean his mind? Could- is it possible to talk to him?"

Ever so slowly the Young Mother slid her long body forward. Inch by inch she dropped her head and front-most legs down from the ceiling until she was eye to eye with Keith. Well, he sat under one of her planetarium sized eyes anyway. He stared up into the swirling nebula depths of her cornea feeling very small and very lost.

< I-I can’t force Lance to show me anything. The memories I see just seem to surface randomly. I’m not sure he even remembers what happened to him before.>

He’s alive. Lance’s body is still alive.

In her eyes an eternity passed, a sun burned out and a black hole was born. Her voice moved
like silk over Keith’s brain and her joy filled up his lungs.

<I-I didn’t think that was possible…Keith are you sure?>

“He’s a paladin. His connection to the Blue Lion is keeping his body alive.”

A tendril wrapped around the red paladin’s waist like a boa constrictor and lifted him up off the ground with no effort at all. Gently, Y.M. pulled Keith up to her perch on the rafters, supporting his head as she shifted her weight and pushed open a hidden panel in the dark stone ceiling.

Keith clung to the tendril where it gripped him ducking his head as he was pushed through the panel and out into natural light. Blinking against the dim lavender daylight Keith gazed about to get his bearings. He was in a large round room and its circular floor was covered end to end in a still carpet of purple grass. Tilting his head up Keith realized that there was a pane of scaultrite glass separating the room from the outside. It was tinted a subtle golden color and beyond it lay the endless ocean of the Vell grasslands. The dome had to be on the roof of the Citadel itself.

Putting Keith down carefully into grass taller than he was Y.M. heaved the rest of her body through the tight trapdoor; it shut behind her automatically. Curling herself up like a centipede the Young Mother rested her head on a fold of her body. Her breath stirred the grass around Keith, moving the stems like a gentle wind.

“Where are we?”

<My meditation chamber…I was told not to bring you up here-but I d-don’t care!>

It sounded like she very much did care. Hunching her body tight Y.M.’s eyes flickered around the meditation room expectantly; like she was waiting to be scolded for doing something naughty.

After she had assured herself there wouldn’t be any immediate repercussions the Young Mother slipped a tentacle through the grass near a far wall of the dome and pulled Lance’s pulsing scrim from where she had apparently hidden it.

Holding it to the highest of her eyes Y.M. turned it this way and that with a level of tendril dexterity Keith didn’t think was possible. Y.M. made a low noise like a gurgling coo her psychic voice brimming with wonder.

<He’s alive. He could make more memories. See his family again. He could tell you…>

One of her lower eyes turned to look at Keith while the top kept its focus on the scrim.

<He could tell you how he feels finally!>

Keith stood with difficulty as he found his footing in the spongy damp ground. Four of the Young Mother’s tendrils pushed under him forming something for him to sit on as they brought him closer.

Sitting suspended above the tall grass on a flat surface made of alien tentacles the red paladin cleared his throat nervously.

“Y-yeah maybe, let’s just go one step at a time.”

He met her gaze again and felt his expression turn desperately hopeful.

“You said you thought I could talk to him? If I could- do you think I could help him get back to his body?”

<I-It has never been done before.>

The words hit Keith hard despite the Young Mother’s gentle tone. The anxiety bubbled up instantaneous and Keith felt like his ribcage was shrinking, constricting his lungs and heart until he could only breathe in shallow, rapid huffs. It had never been done before.

Let the girl finish, don’t freak out prematurely, the imprint said soothingly.

Keith jumped in surprise when the heavy weight of Lance’s scrim pressed against his chest. Reaching up to take it from the Young Mother’s cautious tendril Keith folded his legs and put the shell-shaped scrim into his lap. He ran a reverent hand over the sculpted scaultrite, gazing into the swirling blue depths.

<But there’s something about Lance’s scrim I’ve never seen before. Just look into it, watch the colors and wait…>

Raising an eyebrow Keith nodded warily. He wrapped his arms around the scrim and struggled to keep his eyes open. He could feel Lance’s heart fluttering inside, It was more rapid now than before but he thought it felt…happy. He didn’t know if it was possible to assign an emotion to a pulse but he was almost positive Lance felt pleased. He could almost see the expression on the blue paladin’s face that matched the way his heart was beating.
Biting his lower lip Keith struggled to keep his attention on the rippling colors. They were so hypnotic and the longer he looked the more he could smell the phantom scent of Aloe Vera and hear a loud familiar laugh. Inside those hundred shades of teal and cyan was someone who loved him and he was having trouble resisting the urge to dive into the ocean of his memories.

After Keith had completely lost track of how long he had been staring at the scrim he finally saw it; the thing he had been waiting for. Moving through the serene blue of Lance’s quintessence was a streak of something that didn’t quite belong. It looked like blood spreading through clean water at first but as Keith tracked the color he realized it was self-contained. A single strand of ruby paint staining the world inside the scrim.

It was the exact same color as the liquid smoke sucked out of him when he stuck his head into the miniature wormhole.

<It’s a piece of quintessence and I don’t think it belongs to Lance. I can’t see auras in memories but the moment I saw you in person…I knew the color of your quintessence before I recognized your face. I have never seen an aura or a scrim with a filament of another’s quintessence.>

Keith’s grip on the sides of the scrim tightened until his knuckles turned white. He followed the path of the red wisp as it faded back into the watery blue light and disappeared from sight.

<Then…>

Y.M. continued shyly.

<When I really looked at you I saw you have the same thing. In your aura you have a filament of blue, of Lance’s quintessence. It’s with you all the time-I didn’t even notice it until you Viewed him the first time. It became so much brighter afterwards.>

Dipping his head down Keith ran longing fingers down the side of the scrim.

“It’s called an imprint.”

Pulling his eyes away from the scrim Keith hugged it to his chest and rested his chin on it. He could still feel Lances pulse muffled by the fabric of his shirt; Lance still felt content and it was reassuring.

“Princess Allura told me all paladins share them but Lance and I were the first.”

<Because he loves you?>

That’s about half of it, the imprint said coyly, like it knew it had come up in conversation.

Keith ignored it mumbling under his breath. Once again he could feel the skin on his cheeks heating up. It was so annoying that he lived in a perpetual state of blush these days.

“Something about complimenting each other or something…”

Keith decided that the Young Mother didn’t need to know that he could hear the imprint. She definitely didn’t need to know about the Lance like voice inside his head. It was a secret best kept between himself and Allura. The red paladin thought back to the inside of the stifling cart in the desert what seemed like months before- Allura had said then that Lance would have a piece of him too but Keith never imagined he would actually see it.

Y.M. pulled the supple tendrils Keith was sitting on up a little higher and tilted her head to the side so she could take him in with more than one eye.

<Seeing you and Lance share it…I think if you tried to speak to him you might be able to find your way to his core memory.>

“His what?”

The Young Mother hummed to herself thoughtfully as she considered. Her eyes flicked from Keith to the scrim and she gestured to it with a wavering motion of her tendrils

<You watched him being put in right? The Olim Vell who did it-did they ask him what he wanted most? What would make him happy?>

“Kinda? Lance just asked some questions about his future and the Seed answered them.”

<And the answer the Seed gave made him happy, right?>

Keith strained to think back. He had been so uneasy in Kru-Kron’s tent he had trouble remembering the exact sequence of events. Lance had asked about seeing his family and something else-something Keith hadn’t heard.

“He wanted to see his family. He asked about them. Kru-Kron, the Seed who did this, said he would and Lance was touching the scrim while it was happening then he was crying at the end?”
That Keith did remember with absolute clarity, by the end of the session Lance was definitely crying.

<The Seed was forming the core of the scrim, the foundation where the memories rest. It’s a beautiful memory where the consciousness of the inhabitant lives. A much loved memory that they re-live while the scrim is active.>

Keith pressed his cheek to Lance’s scrim crossing his arms over it protectively.

“So…if I can find the core memory? If I can talk to him there I can help him get back to his body?”

Rumbling low Y.M. settled another tendril around Keith’s shoulders and gave him the behemoth version of a reassuring hug.

<With your connection? In theory it could work. But first you have to find the core memory and that in itself is nearly impossible. You have to push against him to navigate through his other memories. And once you find the core? I’m not even sure what will happen…he probably won’t understand what’s going on. The core memory will feel real to him.>

When Keith didn’t answer the Young Mother spoke again her voice hushed and mournful.

<If you can’t do it before the Spur ceremony then…Keith, I can’t stop this. I can’t change my dowry; the Galra won’t accept anything else. If he’s gone and the scrim is empty? They will have to accept that it was beyond my control but if- Keith I’m so, SO sorry. We only have three days to get him out…>  

Keith winced and took a long harsh breath through his nose before he answered.

“Then let’s get started.”

Chapter End Notes

LOOK LOOK LOOK ------> http://glassvines.tumblr.com/post/163682613404/well-yeah-you-you-didnt-know-the-last LOOK HOW BEAUTIFUL THIS IS. I LOVE IT SO MUCH! Glassvines (http://glassvines.tumblr.com/) made me a comic based on the last chapter and I can’t gush about it ENOUGH.

I think quite a few of you new readers are here because of her so thank you to her and to you! Also the usual thanks to CJ the magnificent for proofreading.

The imprints mystery is finally revealed and allot of planting pays off in this chapter. Also aww Hunkmeister I love you <3
"Excuse me."

The man said loudly outside the food truck window. Keith felt his shoulders hunch involuntarily. He knew that tone of voice better than his mother's face. That was the voice of a customer that was about to ask…

"Do you speak English?"

Keith turned and felt Lance putting on his most cheerful, blank smile. He quirked his head to the side and gazed down at the man who had addressed him. He was obviously a tourist, the loud Hawaiian shirt and bad sunburn gave him away immediately. Putting a hand to his ear Lance shook his head in mock sadness and shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah...Lo siento! No hablo ingles!"

The tourist rolled his eyes wiping sweat away from under the brim of his sunhat. Lance thought his moustache made him look like a walrus and Keith agreed with him one hundred percent. The man brought his words to a crawl, as if speaking slower would somehow magically translate his English into something Lance could understand.

"Look kid...I...Just...want some...Shrimp Empanadas.... the Shredded...Beef...with white...riiiice...and a cooooke."

Lance grit his teeth but kept smiling. He put on his most polite expression and pouted, curling his eyebrows up in a perfect expression of confused innocence.

"No lo entiendo, que?"

Keith wondered if he had ever spoken to anyone like this. He really, really hoped not. If they ever encountered an alien species that the link to the lions couldn't translate he vowed not to just speak English slow; it was degrading.

The tourist grunted angrily and pointed a puffy, red finger at the menu on the side of the truck. Gesticulating between photos of the food he wanted the walrus man managed to speak even slower and louder than before. Sweat pouring down his face as he tried to order again.

"Thiiiss...ONE and thiiiiis one! And an EL coca COLA...you got it!"

Lance scratched his chin thoughtfully as if solving a complex riddle. He finally gave a thumbs up and nodded.

"Hueles a un búfalo de aqua!!"

The man gave a thumbs up back.

"Right! Great haha...you got it!"

Keith snorted as Lance turned into the scalding, un-air-conditioned food truck and almost ran into his sister who was watching him with her arms folded.

"Lance. Why don't you take a break?"

Keith pulled back and Lance rubbed at his arms looking down at the floor ashamed. He spoke in Spanish but Keith understood every word without difficulty.

"I'm sorry Isa. I know I shouldn't be impatient but..."

Isa turned towards the immaculately clean food prep area and started to make a bowl of white rice with shredded chicken. Keith felt his-Lance’s stomach growl. He hadn’t eaten yet today, he hadn’t had the time. Dropping a bit of extra slow-cooked meat into the white Styrofoam box Isa clicked her tongue.

"English! You stick to English. You have to get used to speaking it all the time from now on. You can't switch halfway. What if you do that on a mission to the moon or something and nobody understands your instructions and they crash into an asteroid?"

Lance slid his tongue over his braces fretfully and rubbed at his arm. This was the first memory Keith had been in with the braces. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in a metal cabinet, it was just a flash but he thought they looked about fourteen.

Lance’s body ached from a sudden growth spurt and their limbs felt gangly, too long. Lance didn’t smile the way he did when Keith met him. He smiled like he was desperate not to show his crooked front teeth and the bright blue rubber bands straightening them.
"I know. I’m really trying, I swear!"

Isa faced them and Keith felt a burst of love for her. She was in her twenties in this memory and had her hair tucked up behind a bright yellow bandana. Her frown turned into a small smile as she looked Lance up and down; there was a splash of mustard staining her cheek.

"Good. Try harder. Here, give the water buffalo his food and be polite."

Lance did. He slid the man’s debit card and gave him his food and receipt without another nasty comment. Leaning through the open window of his families food truck Lance stared longingly at the inviting California coastline. He took in a deep breath and Keith could smell the salt air and feel the cool wind blowing in off the blue, blue water. It was so inviting, especially compared to the hellish heat near the truck’s stove.

Isa pushed a sandwich into their hands and Keith felt Lance’s stomach growl. He took a reluctant bite still looking out at the ocean. Some locals were playing an impromptu volleyball game and Lance ached to join them; it looked like so much fun.

Isa leaned next to Lance in the order window following his gaze. When she spoke she did her best to sound casual.

“So, how many hours are you working a week now?”

“The normal…”

“Lance.”

Uh-oh, she was using the “no-nonsense” tone, Keith thought. He had come to recognize that voice well. He had heard it right before he and Lance had thrown up on a roller-coaster and another time when Lance was lying about seeing a movie that was rated R. It was the “I’m onto you” voice. Shiro had one too.

Keith and Y.M. had been moving through Lance’s memories for hours. He had seen, among other things, Lance’s Power Ranger themed seventh birthday party, his first lonely night in the Castle of Lions, the time he broke his arm trying to get a Frisbee off his neighbor’s roof and his family’s last beach trip in Cuba before their move to Los Angeles.

Through it all Keith had felt every emotion under the sun including fear, pain and pure joy. The joy came when Lance got the Red Ranger toy he wanted on that magical seventh birthday. Apparently Lance had always been a fan of the red team member.

Lance took a big bite of his sandwich, it was delicious of course. Everything Lance ever ate seemed delicious to Keith. His family was full of cooks. Keith had grown up on fast food, cold pop tarts and TV dinners. Lance and Keith looked at Isa suspiciously as she fiddled with something in her apron pocket.

“Isa you’re not still smoking are you?”

“Shut-up, I asked you a question first.”

“I’m telling Mama! You said you were quitting!”

A thrill of cold fear filled up Keith and he was inundated with memories of health class videos about the dangers of smoking cigarettes. He had a horrible image of his sister with the rotting tobacco lungs they always showed next to the pink healthy ones. It legitimately scared him.

Isa groaned and put her palm against the front of Lance’s head in a tiny, painless slap.

“I’m quitting tomorrow, how many hours are you working? You’ve been lying to everybody.”

Keith felt Lance’s guilt flood through him and knew immediately they had done something wrong although without context he wasn’t exactly sure what that was.

After some practice Keith had figured out how to push through scrim memories that didn’t seem important. It was easy to tell. The important ones were brighter and usually gave off a soft tone or even a few notes of music.

Even when he only stopped to watch the brighter memories Keith didn’t feel any closer to finding the core. The Young Mother wasn’t exactly sure what it would look like or how they would know it when they saw it. Moving through a memory without stopping took energy from both of them and each hop was getting more and more difficult.

Y.M. couldn’t communicate with him directly during a Viewing; she could only watch the memory with him and give Keith help in the form of energy. The red paladin was the one “driving” so to speak because of his and Lance’s linked quintessence.

Even when he knew it wasn’t the core, Keith would sometimes have to stop and experience a memory to the end. This was happening more and more now; he and Y.M. were exhausted.
Lance counted off on his fingers shrugging his shoulders up as he did. His skin was itchy and irritated from some new pimple cream the family doctor had prescribed. The braces, the pimples and a voice just settling from puberty all combined to make Lance into a strange, shy shell of himself that Keith hardly recognized.

"Monday, I do my paper route, the restaurant opening, school then the guitar shop then homework. Then it’s the same until Wednesday when I help drain and clean the pool at the community center before I help close the restaurant…umm, Friday I do the cart if there’s a soccer game and weekends I do the cart, the restaurant um…Uncle Ramon’s and-"

"Lance. Stop."

Isa held up a hand and Keith just wanted Lance to catch his breath. He was baffled why a kid would want to work that much. Lances memories trickled into Keith in the strange nowhere space he inhabited within the blue paladin’s mind. From these he learned that the entire McClain clan collectively owned a Cuban restaurant called The Paladar Cookhouse. The clunky, old food truck was an extension of the family restaurant, one they could drive to events or just to the beach to make extra income. On top of this, Lance’s Uncle Ramon managed a music shop that specialized in hand made guitars.

Isa made an exasperated sound.

“How are you going to keep this pace up and get good grades, eh?”

Lance glowered at his sandwich, his appetite suddenly gone. Keith felt a clammy ball of guilt and pain in the bottom of their stomach, like a heavy rock made of silly putty.

“I don’t want the family to pay for me to go to the Garrison…”

Isa threw her arms up in the air.

“I KNEW that’s what this was about! Lance, you have to stop this. We all want to send you to the Garrison. It’s all you’ve talked about since you were nine! Mama and Papa told you over and over again that if you kept up your grades they would help you.”

Lance chucked the half-eaten sandwich out on the beach and it was immediately attacked by a flock of screaming seagulls.

“It’s too expensive!! Tuition is too expensive even if I do get a scholarship! But I won’t because I’m too stupid!”

Isa stood up to her full height, not much taller than her brother, and glared at him. Without another word she pulled him by the collar of his t-shirt and yanked the order window closed, flipping the open sign to closed.

"Isa…what."

"Break. Now."

Keith felt his sister grab his hand, tugging him out the back of the food truck; the air outside was heavenly. A light breeze tugging at Lance’s sweat-damp hair as Isa pulled him towards the beach. She pointed decisively to a nearby bench.

“Sit.”

Lance sat. Like Isa he still had his work apron on, his greasy hair sticking to his neck and forehead.

“Lance Charles McClain look at me.”

Lance didn’t look at her. He kept his eyes on the sand in front of him his shoulders hunched. The ball of silly putty in his stomach was expanding. Keith recognized the sensation as stress but didn’t think Lance was old enough to really understand what he was feeling.

Keith hadn’t paid for his Galaxy Garrison tuition; the opposite in fact. He had been paid to go after getting an impossibly high score in a simulator at a recruiting station in El Paso. He had done so well that at first they were sure he had cheated. Once he replicated his results twice in a row they rapidly changed their tune. Keith had broken records, it had been in the local paper and he had even made the news. He hadn’t cared about any of it.

Keith flinched as Isa shouted right into his ear, breaking him out of his thoughts.

“Working yourself to death is not going to help you any!”

“I shouldn’t be going at all! It’s way too expensive! Teo’s college wasn’t half as much and- you should be able to go to college too! You shouldn’t have to work all the time!”

The hard knots in Keith’s stomach tightened and he felt very close to throwing up. Tears started to build in Lance’s eyes, trickling down his face and hitting the stick thin legs poking out of
his shorts.

Isa tutted and put a warm arm around Lance’s shoulders, hugging him close. Keith pushed into her embrace. This moment felt... important. This conflict felt like an essential thing about Lance that he needed to know. Y.M. had warned him that spending a long time Viewing without experience could make you forget yourself and mistake others feelings for your own. This didn’t feel like that, it felt like - like Keith was finally on the correct track to the core... like he had finally started down the right path.

“Lancelot…”

“Everybody in the family shouldn’t have to work just for me! I’m just so stupid and useless!”

The word startled Keith and he wiggled uncomfortably behind Lance’s eyes. Useless, the word he had used on Lance in the training room. A word Lance used to describe himself at his lowest.

Isa leaned her forehead to Lances, knocking them together before she pulled back.

“You aren’t either of those things and everyone in the family is going to help you because they WANT to help you, because they believe in you. We don’t want you getting so upset you barf up your food or quit the swim team because you’re taking extra shifts with Uncle Ramon. You lying about that stuff makes the family more upset than a little bit of money.”

Keith felt the tears coming fast now. He was sobbing openly, in public and he wasn’t even embarrassed. He was just ashamed that his sister had called him out like this. He could have kept up the pace. He was doing fine. He had already saved over six hundred dollars. That was a ton of money.

Lance wiped the back of his hand over his eyes and looked out pensively at the Pacific Ocean.

“I need to help out. I don’t want to be a-”

He searched for the right word in English. That was hard sometimes Keith realized, finding the right word. He wondered if Lance still had trouble with it.

“A burden.”

Lance finally spit out.

“I don’t want to be a burden on everybody...I just want to be a space pilot.”

Pulling her arm away Isa lounged back against the wooden bench. She reached into her apron’s front pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Keith gave her a foul look, his voice still watery with tears.

“I knew you didn’t quit like you told Mama.”

“Yeah? Well you lied to her too so I guess we’re at an impasse, eh?”

Keith had never had siblings. Until Shiro had sort of adopted him as a younger brother he didn’t even know what that kind of relationship felt like. Now along with Shiro he had the rest of the paladins, Allura and Coran, the closest thing he had ever really had to a family. Lance spoke the language of siblings as well as he did Spanish. He was fluent in family and Keith liked how that felt.

“So the first thing you’re gonna do...”

Isa said as she lit her cigarette and took a long drag on it.

“Is quit the paper route and re-join the swim team.”

She let the smoke drift out her nostrils and didn’t even turn her head when Lance squawked in protest. Isa held up a finger and Lance sniffled, still wiping the tears from his face. The putty in his stomach was hot and now Keith felt their limbs beginning to shake.

“Then you’re gonna tell Uncle Ramon you can work ONE day a week. You can keep doing the community pool thing but only because they let you swim free. Restaurant I think you could maybe two shifts and the truck on Saturday with me, but that’s it.”

“Noooooo Isaaaaa...”

The whine was familiar, aside from the little crack in Lance’s voice Keith definitely knew the sound of that whine. Their sister just gave a shrug and shook her head in the same mock sadness Lance had displayed moments earlier with the rude customer. It was probably a mannerism Lance had picked up from her in the first place.

“Them’s the breaks Lancelot. You need to stay healthy and sleep and keep your grades up and maybe have fun sometimes. Stop worrying so much about this money.”

Taking another puff of her cigarette Isa eyed it and blew the smoke away from her brother
before she turned to look at him.

“I tell you what. You do all that and get your GPA to a 4.0 and I’ll quit for real this time.”

Lance’s crying had calmed down to little emotional aftershocks; a hiccup or a snotty inhale. Lance and Keith swallowed and looked at Isa hopefully. She looked more like mama than he did. He had his mom’s pointed face but his father’s heavy-lidded eyes. The “lazy eyes” as his Aunt Verita called them. Lance had gotten his mom’s lovely chestnut hair though and Isa never let him forget how jealous she was of that.

“You…really mean it?”

Isa held out her hand pinky first.

“Promise.”

Keith took it, clenching Isa’s finger with his. He wanted her to quit so badly. Just the thought of her getting sick, of something happening to her…it was the most terrifying thing he could possibly imagine.

“Promise…”

Lance began to calm down in earnest, his brain sluggishly thinking about how much money he could put away with the new schedule. It still felt like a victory, as long as Isa wasn’t smoking anymore he would come out the winner.

“Hey Isa, are you on fire?”

Keith watched his sisters mouth twitch expectantly but she made a show of looking herself over for errant flames, playing right into his joke.

“No, why?”

Lifting his hunched shoulders for the first time Lance pulled a graceful set of finger guns out and fired off a few imaginary shots at Isa.

“Because you are smoking!”

Throwing back her head Isa gave a long genuine laugh and threw her arm around her brother squeezing him to her in a crushing, one-armed hug. Keith couldn’t stop smiling and he laughed with her until the memory faded away.

Memories, Keith found, didn’t really have a definite end, they just came to a point where the edges grew hazy and everything eventually disappeared. It was like Lance had reached a point where whatever he remembered wasn’t as important so the randomizer that put these things in order switched to something else. Keith felt guilty for letting the conversation with Isa spool all the way through. He knew it wasn’t the core from the beginning but he still felt it had been important in some way he didn’t understand quite yet.

So far he had a few educated guesses about the core memory.

For one Keith believed the core memory would have Lance’s whole family in it, not just a few members. The Young Mother said he would probably be very close to his current age. Creating a core memory that the victim believed was real would mean it would have to be close to the events happening around the time the scrim was filled.

Keith didn’t think that the core would involve the paladins, the lions or Voltron. Since they had left earth, Lance had been too homesick or scared to make a memory good enough to be the core. Y. M. argued that the blue paladin’s core memory would have Keith in it but Keith had his doubts.

So Keith was looking for a super happy memory with Lance’s family where he was around seventeen and so far nothing he had seen remotely fit the bill.

The other major hiccup in his and Y. M.’s plan was how they would get Lance’s attention once they found his consciousness in the core. Keith had tried speaking directly to the Lances he had inhabited so far but none had answered. They couldn’t, they were just ghosts, memories; the shadows of things that had been.

The blue world wobbled and shifted as Keith caught a flash of a classroom and mentally focused his energy to push it away. Lance wasn’t huge on school, his core memory wouldn’t be there.

Keith wondered idly how Lance had managed to pay his Garrison tuition. Did he end up getting a scholarship or had his family really supported him all the way? Did Lance know Keith had a full ride? If so it had probably bothered him—another bit of kindling to throw on that rivalry fire. Hunk and Pidge were probably there on merit scholarships, or at least Pidge was before she had to re-enlist under a false name.
A few more minor memories glided by, clearly not important as it took very little energy to keep them moving. Keith saw a flicker of a movie theater and a brief view of an ocean from a high hill Lance had apparently climbed; Small victories, little things in the grand scheme.

Keith took a deep breath and thought he had enough stamina to go a little longer. Every time he was sure his concentration would finally break he could feel the Young Mother pushing him on. She was distant but he felt comforted just knowing she was there.

A memory opened up in front of him and Keith let it, curious. He recognized where he was immediately: the most elaborate of the Garrison training simulators, the Fighter class SIM. Lance was standing over the circular deck where the simulator pod moved and swiveled watching a class of fighter cadets. They appeared to be watching something on the overhead monitors, a student in the middle of an exam from the looks of it.

Lance gazed around uncomfortably and Keith watched him tug at his clothes, felt his nervousness. He was out of place here. He wasn’t wearing the familiar orange of the fighter-class students but rather the dull olive green of the cargo-class.

More shame, fear wove through Lance and thrust needle sharp into Keith as he crouched behind the upper observation deck guard rail his eyes never leaving the monitoring screens that projected what the students inside were seeing. There was something…very familiar about this whole scenario. Not just because it was the Garrison and not just because he was watching fighters in training.

Watching the SIM-pod weave through intricate rock formations effortlessly and duck a surprise shower of icy meteorites Keith knew exactly why this looked so familiar. He was in that pod. He was flying it.

Lance held his breath. The pod jerked wildly up and over a low plateau then dipped into a gorge so narrow the pilot had to turn completely sideways to avoid its rocky walls. Keith watched as he performed flawless maneuver after flawless maneuver and with each victory Lance’s heart would beat a little faster. The blue paladin’s breath caught in his throat and he mumbled to himself, almost tumbling off the edge of the guardrail as he softly cheered Keith on.

He wasn’t there to watch me fail, Keith thought fascinated, he was there to see me fly.

The test ended and the door opened. Keith recognized the engineer and communications officer but for the life of him he couldn’t remember their names.

The Garrison liked pairing him off with different people. Unlike Lance, Keith hadn’t had a permanent crew. Usually the higher-ups had him training with less experienced students who went on to fly in teams with better chemistry. Keith was known for his skill, his scowl and his cold demeanor. Nobody really liked to fly with him.

Again, as with the memory in the training deck, Keith felt the shock of seeing himself emerge from the groaning SIM-pod. He took his praise from the commanding officer with a solemn nod and crossed his arms looking anywhere but the eyes of the students all staring at him. From this distance watching his own body language Keith had to agree with Lance when he muttered to himself under his breath.

“Man, he looks uncomfortable.”

Lance watched Keith’s score flash on the testing screens. He whistled low and a dozen jumbled thoughts went through his brain. Keith felt like he was being smacked in the face with all the different emotions at once; it was like whiplash.

The blue paladin was in awe of his scores, but he was also insanely jealous. He hated himself for having scores nowhere close to Keith’s but at the same time he wanted to show Keith he was just as good. He wanted to punch Keith in the face but in the same heartbeat he knew that he was the coolest, most handsome guy he had ever seen. More than anything Lance just wanted Keith to acknowledge him-notice he was there.

Lance had let his whole family down by landing in cargo-class. He had failed them and they didn’t even realize it. They were happy he had made it in but that wasn’t enough for Lance. Cargo pilots didn’t go on missions to discover new worlds; they refueled ships that went off to discover brave new worlds.

“I am not going to be a deep space-trucker Keith Kogane, you hear me?”

Lance hissed at the orange-clad Keith in the distance. It made total sense why Lance had hated him in the beginning Keith thought. He had dedicated all this time to competing with Keith, thinking about him…having a crush on him. Only to find him in the desert completely aloof and distant: He hadn’t any idea who Lance was at all.

After Keith and the other students had left, Lance crept down to the SIM-pod and tapped in a sequence. He was booting up the same simulation that Keith had just passed with flying colors. The blue paladin climbed into the pilot’s seat unattended. At this point he was breaking at least five cardinal Garrison rules.
For one, cargo pilots weren’t supposed to be flying fighter SIMs. Also it was impossible for Lance to pass this course without a crew and extremely dangerous to be using the testing machinery without a teacher or officer on deck. Keith-Lance, could have been expelled for this; and he knew it.

Keith could have flown this course blindfolded, so watching Lance struggle with it proved to be very interesting. The blue paladin’s piloting style was so different from his. He held the controls too stiffly, his shoulders locked and his back tensed. Instead of focusing on the horizon and feeling out obstacles he focused on what was directly in front of him.

More than ever Keith wished he could speak to a memory Lance. He tried and again found that no matter how loud he “spoke” the swearing, SIM driving cadet Lance paid no attention. Talking out loud had just used more energy Keith couldn’t afford to waste and he berated himself. It was time to move on.

The SIM-pod rattled around him as Lance struggled to keep his ship in the sky. His whole body turning into a jagged line of hot, concentrated rage as Keith left him; pushing back into the cool, empty space between memories. He was glad he didn’t watch the whole thing play out.

The red paladin took a deep mental breath and tried, not for the first time, to reach out to Lance. Wherever his –soul? His awareness, whatever it was resided. He was met with the same pulsing, blue silence.

Come on Lance give me a clue-Keith thought weakly as he watched a Christmas morning float by. It was joined by a dinner at a seafood restaurant, a day at a carnival and a trip to the dentist. A bully pushing ten year old Lance into a trash can caught Keith’s bleary eye as it glided past and he glared at it until it was out of sight.

A particularly strong shade of cyan made Keith pause and he embraced it, curious about the strong musical tone the memory inside gave off. Like the memory of Isa, the bench and the food truck, something about the memory felt important.

Within seconds Keith was floating in a warm pool of crystal water. He stared up at a sky full of the clear, diamond stars. He was-Lance was, sad. It was a heavy sort of sadness that somehow made the stars look dimmer. Keith’s long lanky body floated listlessly in an in-ground swimming pool. The only illumination, besides the stars, came from the watery blue lights around the cement and tile edges of the pool itself.

Lance didn’t stir, didn’t make an effort to swim or steer himself. He just kept staring at the stars and thinking dark thoughts that made Keith uncomfortable. He wondered why this particular memory seemed so big and important in the scrim when a voice interrupted his and Lance’s contemplating.

“The Bennett’s are out of town, eh?”

The voice was so warm and sweet that the sound of it immediately calmed the grief inside Lance’s brain. He briefly glanced up and Keith saw a smiling older woman climbing her way over a tall wooden fence separating the yard with the pool from the hilly countryside around it. She clapped the dirt from her hands and crouched next to the pool with her arms around her knees.

“How’s the water?”

Lance drifted upright and pushed over to her reluctantly, water dripping into his eyes from his shaggy hair. He moved so easily. Keith wasn’t used to being so smooth in the water. The red paladin was not proud of his swimming ability. He did a mean doggie paddle at best and was ok at short distances but anything longer than a pool length and he was struggling. Lance, unsurprisingly, was fast and graceful in the water. He cut through the pool with clean, concise strokes and his every motion seemed elegant in Keith’s eyes.

“Am I in trouble?”

The woman leaning over Lance on the edge of the pool pretended to think about this, her hand on her chin in a very Lance-esqe fashion. She looked like him. Her skin was lighter than Lance’s but her mischievous expression and upturned nose betrayed her as a blood-relation instantly.

“Mmm…I won’t tell the Bennett’s if you don’t. Besides, you’ve been taking care of their pool for how many years now? You clean it more than they actually swim in it. I don’t see why you shouldn’t get to swim when they’re out of town.”

Lance let out a moan of relief.

“I mean, I know they wouldn’t like it mama but I just…”

Lance’s mother, Carmen Keith thought automatically, shrugged up her shoulders and grinned. She sat back and slipped off her worn shoes, wiggled her toes and put her bare feet into the pool with a long, satisfied sigh.

“Well. When the rich people are away the McClain’s use their pool.”
Lance’s mother watched him closely. After a moment she leaned forward and pushed a finger between his eyebrows.

“You have the worry curl. You’ve got the concern brow…”

She looked at him miserably, folding her eyebrows together and pouting out her lip. It was a really spot on Lance impression and Keith couldn’t help but snort. Carmen smiled, turning her head to look into her son’s eyes.

“It was just a practice test, love…”

Lance pulled away like he had been stung and turned in a small circle kicking his feet. He had on a pair of swim trunks that seemed to be a hand-me-down and he kept tugging them up his waist when they started to slip.

“I failed! I did terrible. I only have one more practice test and I can only take the GSA two times! If I fail those…”

Keith had forgotten all about the GSA, the Garrison’s entry exam. In addition to passing a physical test applicants had to have a very high grade point average and do well on a written exam. Keith had taken the exam but his score didn’t matter, he was already accepted on his simulator score alone. Lance flopped back on his back with his head held slightly above the water.

He stared at the sky tracing constellations to keep from breaking down into frustrated tears.

“I’m stupid and skinny. The instructor at the practice test told me I would have trouble even turning a ship. He said it took a lot of strength…”

“Lance. You have been swimming laps and lengths longer than that man has probably worked his job. He is judging you like he thinks he knows you. He doesn’t. Your family knows you and I am confident my boy could turn a ship.”

Keith felt a surge of pure love for his mother. He watched her push to her feet and giggle as she pulled an inflatable pool raft from behind some chairs near a BBQ pit by the pool. Blowing air into it she set it in the water and slipped into the middle. Carmen squealed as she splashed water onto her dry clothes.

Lance couldn’t help but smile.

“Mama the neighbors are gonna hear and call the cops!”

“Mmm well I guess I’ll visit you in jail. I’m too beautiful to be arrested.”

Lance laughed into the water and it bubbled around his mouth. He pushed the inflatable raft to the middle of the large pool and lay on his back again. Carmen lay back as well gripping his hand in the water. Both of them were silent several minutes, staring up at the stars.

Squeezing his hand Lance’s mother gestured up at the sky.

“Someday I’ll be looking for you up there. Telling every person who comes in the restaurant that my son is somewhere in the milky way; bragging like crazy to anyone with ears.”

The last tension melted from Lance’s body as his eyes found the North Star and traced the path of the big dipper.

“I’m not in space yet Mama. I haven’t passed the test or the physical and I still haven’t gotten the last student loan I need.”

“Details. You’ll make it. I’ve already cleared a spot for a big picture of you in your uniform in the living room. When Abuela was your age they didn’t even have people on Mars yet. Now who knows how far you’ll go.”

Keith strained to hear Carmen’s soft voice over the lapping waves around Lance’s ears. Everything was so dreamy; the warm water, his mother’s voice and the stars all combined into the closest thing to tranquility Keith had ever felt. Lance stifled a yawn still holding his mom’s hand as the two of them floated in a languid circle.

“Mama, I really am worried. I don’t know if I’ll make it…and Arizona is so far. Maybe I should just stay here with you. I mean what if Abuela gets sick or Isa gets too busy with Amelia to do the cart on the weekends or…”

“Shhh…Lance. This is your dream. You’ve worked so hard for it. You can’t worry what we need all the time. We’ll be alright. You need to get out there and do what you were meant to do.”

Keith felt himself curling closer to the Lance in the memory trying to speak to him just in case this was the core. Despite all the sadness in the beginning this part felt good enough to be something worth reliving. He got no response.

Carmen looked over the edge of the raft and grinned wrinkling her nose.
“Besides Lancey-Lance, how are you going to find all those cute aliens like Captain Kirk? What were your exact words? I wanna date some space hunks and cosmic cuties? Better bring them all home for dinner with the family.”

“Hah! Mama!”

Lance let go of his mom’s hand as she pulled away and playfully dunked his head under the surface. He went down in a trail of bubbles and swam under the raft poking Carmen through the plastic.

Keith heard her shriek as the raft bobbed and he and Lance surfaced splashing her from the opposite side. She splashed back still laughing and pleading for mercy; In that moment Lance’s stress about the test and the future were pushed aside and temporarily forgotten. Keith was so lost in the memory he barely noticed when he was being pulled out of it and out of the scrim.

Coughing and gasping for air the red paladin pushed himself up reflexively his hands gripping at Lance’s scrim where it sat warm on his bare chest. The migraine hit Keith like a pile of bricks and he gagged, shutting his eyes instinctively against the dim light of the scrim library.

A tendril ghosted over his cheeks and rested on his forehead. When the Young Mother spoke she sounded utterly drained.

<I’m so sorry Keith...I let you stay in way too long. Let me help with the headache.>

Keith croaked his reply his throat dry and dusty. He wanted water so badly.

“You…sure…can do?”

Even talking made the splitting pain in his head worse and Keith had to stop. His body was shaking all over and he wondered if it was from the headache or something else; hopefully he was just dehydrated. Y.M. pressed more gentle tendrils to his head and the sides of his neck.

<I sense Tou in your room waiting. They need to dress you, you've got to get ready for the wedding banquet.>

Keith groaned more in surprise than pain this time. He could feel the warm tingling sensation that meant Y.M. was tinkering with his aura, sucking the pain from it like a huge vacuum cleaner.

Had he really been Viewing the scrim for that long? It had been the equivalent of morning when he went in and the wedding dinner was an evening affair. It didn’t feel like that long but it brought a new and more disturbing realization.

“I wasted…whole day. Didn't find core…”

<Shhh…lie still while I help with the pain. You can’t go to dinner hurting like this.>

The throbbing ache siphoned out slower than the first time the Young Mother treated him. No doubt because of all the energy she had given to help with the Viewing. When the migraine dissipated to a faint twinge Keith was finally able to open his eyes again.

The Y.M. was drooping above him her tendrils sagged and her eyes looked decidedly lackluster. Her skin, which usually had a subtle pearlescent sheen over its off-white surface, had faded to a dull grey.

“Y.M. are you alright?”

Keith’s voice sounded hoarse and panicky. He stood, Lance’s scrim still in hand, as he tried to walk closer to the Young Mother over a mountain of pillows. She collapsed with a muted cooing noise her massive head shaking the floor and rattling the scrim shelves as it hit the ground and she let herself go limp. The impact bounced Keith up a foot into the air and he barely managed to land back on his feet.

The Young Mother’s psychic voice did its best to sound chipper but it didn’t fool Keith for a minute. He finally made his way to a wilted tendril and set the scrim close to it running his hands over the dim appendage worriedly.

“Do I need to get help?”

<Oh no, I’ll be fine! I just…overdid it a bit.>

She made a sound like whale song and her semi-transparent eyelids gradually slid down over her starry eyes. Her breathing evened out, whistling around Keith as she wrapped Lance’s scrim with her tentacles until it was hidden from sight. Y.M. rumbled at Keith affectionately as she started to slip into what he assumed was sleep.

<I just need a nap to recharge…you got so deep…I could feel us…getting closer to....finding….Lance…>
Keith leaned against Y.M. as she drifted off. He patted her smooth skin, leaning his forehead onto her jaw. There was nothing he wanted more than to curl up next to her and join her in a catnap but he knew the princess and the paladins were expecting him.

“Have a good rest Y.M. I’ll be back soon…”

She didn’t answer but she was breathing peacefully and Keith hoped she was being truthful about just needing some sleep. She had certainly earned it.

Tou walked slightly ahead of Keith, guiding him down a series of striking Citadel hallways. The Seed paused to adjust part of the red paladin’s long, clothe train and Keith groaned in embarrassment. Just when he thought the Olim Vell couldn’t dress him in anything worse he was proven terribly wrong.

The outfit he wore now was a mix of burlesque saloon girl, Jedi robe and wedding dress disaster. A grass weave corset was pulled tight around his middle over a thick set of robes. The outermost robe had a heavy, bejeweled train that was so long it was a constant struggle to walk with it.

Keith had dozed off when Tou was working on his hair and by the time he snapped awake he was braided to hell and back. His hair had been oiled, smoothed out and studded with jewels and small white flowers.

“Oh, Master Keith you look so beautiful in your new ceremonial finery!”

Tou gushed for the twelfth time in so many minutes. They tugged and prodded at the corset and the braided lines of gems hanging down Keith’s back from his hair.

“You really do look grand!”

Keith grunted and counted backwards as he took a deep breath.

This year you’re going to be prom queen for sure, the Lance imprint said with confidence.

Squeezing his eyes shut tightly Keith eventually found enough patience to look at Tou again.

“Thanks Tou.”

This was going to suck. Pidge was never going to let him live this down. Hunk would be polite about it and Shiro—God Shiro would rupture something internally to keep from laughing.

Awww, come on Keith lighten up you’re gonna be the belle of the ball. Own it! The imprint said with what sounded like actual sincerity.

Moving around a corner Tou stopped when they spotted a small gathering of Seeds waiting anxiously in front of a large, carved door. Tou surveyed the scene then looked up at Keith reassuringly.

“Um, will you give me a moment Master Keith? I need to see what’s going on.”

“Sure, go for it. I’ll be fine.”

Tou trotted forward and chattered with the Seeds in a chirping, bird-like language the red paladin couldn’t understand. It was funny how much it sounded like a faster, higher-pitched version of the Young Mother’s huge, booming vocalizations. Crossing his arms Keith leaned against the smooth stone hallway and stared idly at a massive oil painting across from him.

The painting showed a Vell Mother that was definitely not his Y.M.. Her appearance was more fierce and her mouth was open showing all of her many teeth. Unlike Keith’s Y.M. who had no color to her tendrils the Mother in the painting’s tendrils were a sickly, neon green. She was writhing through a field of grass, a colossal wormhole opening in front of her.

Keith was still trying to puzzle out what was going on in the painting when strong, gloved hands grabbed him from behind and yanked him backwards. Keith gasped but one of the hands slapped itself over his mouth stifling any noise. Tou and the other Seeds disappeared from sight as Keith was pulled around a corner. The red paladin found fighting back nearly impossible because of the weight of his clothing.

“Please paladin stop wriggling and be quiet!”

Keith jerked his head over his shoulder and caught a brief glimpse of purple. The color combined with the young, shrill voice and velvety glove told him exactly who his attacker was. Duke Nemean let Keith go and grabbed his hand pulling him into a room just down the empty hall. Taking one more peek into the hallway the Galran shut the door behind him carefully and leaned against it gasping for air.
Keith growled under his breath annoyed and confused by Nemean’s surprise kidnapping.

“What the hell is wrong with you!”

He took a quick glance around the room but it didn’t look like anything special; the usual Citadel sitting nook full of scaultrite sculptures and plush sitting areas. Keith stalked over to the Duke and grabbed his shoulder roughly spinning the Galran around to look him in the eye.

The instant he saw Duke’s face every nasty thing he was ready to scream died on Keith’s lips.

Nemean was a mess.

The short, velvety fur under his eyes was stained dark with tears and his usually immaculate hair was a mess. The area on his neck where the young Galran scratched when stressed was bald, raw red and covered in claw marks. Even the Duke’s eyes had become a watery pale yellow rather than the healthy Galra gold.

“Please paladin…I-I need to talk to you alone and there are generals out there…”

Keith eyed him suspiciously but made no move for the door. The Duke looked like he was being honest; in truth he looked like a scared kitten.

“Alright…I’m listening.”

Nemean hesitated looking around the empty room with his ears perked. His body language screamed fear and he moved closer to Keith speaking in a whisper.

“We have to be careful…the Caulis are always listening. Th-they have half the Citadel bugged.”

Scratching at his neck again Keith was alarmed to see his white glove come away with blood on the worn fingertips. The red paladin reached out feeling sympathy welling in his stomach despite himself.

“Hey, you’re bleeding—”

Closing the last of the distance between them the Galran hissed low in Keith’s ear.

“I-your smell. You smell like I can trust you and y-you’re a paladin so you have to at least listen right? I-I know Voltron fights the Empire but I don’t k-know what else to do, who else to talk to. I have no friends here and the Galra have sent generals for the ceremony but they aren’t friends of my family so I-”

Keith put a cautious hand on Duke Nemean’s shoulder, hoping it was reassuring. Comforting a Galra aristocrat shouldn’t have come so naturally but Keith thought of what Hunk or even Lance would do and he squeezed the teenager’s shoulder companionably. Keith reflected on the acceptance he had seen in the McClain family, from Isa and Carmen especially. They wouldn’t turn Nemean away…and he wouldn’t either.

“I am a paladin of Voltron and I defend the universe, which includes you.”

Right on man, good job, the Lance imprint said with pride.

Nemean had started to cry again his ears pinned down as he struggled to get out a word between sobs. He blubbered and wiped uselessly at his face before everything burst out of him.

“M-my brother Tiber is D-dead!”

Keith nodded, he knew exactly what that pain felt like. Despite knowing how little it would help he launched into the speech Iverson had made when he first broke the news about Shiro and the Kerberos mission.

“Your brother knew what he was getting into when he-”

Nemean cut him off eyes going wide as he started to shake.

“NO! no-no…He was executed by the Empire! T-they claimed he was part of some kind of rebel group working against the Empire from inside!”

Keith stopped cold. He blinked and managed a tiny…

“…What?”

“T-they said he sabotaged some processing facility and was h-helping transfer refugees.”

Nemean sat down on the edge of a nearby chair limply his head in his hands. He was quaking so badly Keith could just make out the fine near transparent whiskers around the sides of his head wiggling up and down.

“N-now they suspect my family. They’ve taken my brother Ionis away from his p-post for
questioning and my sister and m-mother are under house arrest.”

The Galra shrank in on himself scratching at his neck again.

“The generals questioned me b-but they know I’ve been here for so long they know I didn’t do anything but…my family. I c-can’t help them! They could be k-killed and I can’t do anything!”

Blood began to flow from the deep marks on Nemean’s neck and he snarled in aimless frustration.

Make him stop that dude! He’s gonna hurt himself really bad! The imprint said hurriedly.

Keith lunged out and grabbed Nemean’s wrists and pulled both his hands back. He kept him restrained and was shocked when the Galran made no move to stop him; he didn’t even hiss. He blinked at Keith and more tears gathered at the corners of his eyes.

“They told me… I’m never leaving Vell. I’m never going to s-see my family again.”

Snot dripped pathetically from Nemean’s flat, cat-like nose and he didn’t even make an effort to sniffle.

Keith stared at him a long moment and after fierce inner debate he sighed and pulled the Galran into a tight hug.

“We’ll figure something out.”

Chapter End Notes

Keith is learning! Hooray!

When I was doing my research on Cuban cooking I found out that in Cuba a “Paladar” is a word used to describe restaurants run by self-employers or families. A Paladar would most likely be a hole in the wall place run by generations of a single family that serves Authentic Cuban food. Which of course is perfect for the McClains.

THANK YOU CJ YOU BEAUTIFUL PROOFREADING GENIUS.
Duke Nemean’s quarters were far from the central hub of the Citadel. Keith remembered Hunk had mentioned how quiet and unpopulated the Vell castle seemed around their guest rooms but now he could see for himself just how desolate the huge place really was. The farther they got from the central heart where the Young Mother resided the dustier and more neglected the hallways became.

The emptiness had a calming effect on Nemean however and by the time he had stopped in front of his door at the end of a darkened hallway he could speak without sniffling. The Galran ducked his head shyly as he pushed into his quarters and held the door open for Keith.

“You may come in if you would like Paladin.”

After Nemean’s outburst in the spare sitting room Keith had offered to walk him back so he could change his clothes. There was blood all down the front of his pressed military uniform and the wound in his neck was still oozing. Keith didn’t like the idea of leaving the Duke alone; he still seemed vulnerable and dazed by grief.

Keith hefted up his clothe-train carefully and followed Nemean through the entryway. He wasn’t sure what he was expecting but it wasn’t what he found. The Duke’s living quarters included a large rectangular living space, a door Keith guessed lead to a bedroom and another door that no doubt went to a bathroom.

Walking through the front half of messy sitting room Keith let his gaze rove over the large, dirty fireplace and filthy carpets. The furniture was covered in piles of clothes, discarded dirty plates and bits of torn paper. Open books were flung to the four corners and perched on a low table was a boxy electronic device that Keith vaguely recognized as something that played music; in short it looked like a teenager’s room. It reminded Keith uncomfortably of Lance’s room.

Nemean made a beeline for one of the back doors his shoulders up. He looked like he was going from the manic phase of shock into the dead-eyed, zombie-walk phase.

“Paladin…I’m going to change.”

Keith nodded, eyes still moving over the room taking in the paintings on the walls. They were not Olim Vell in origin and most depicted members of a lavishly dressed Galran family. Keith spotted Nemean at the center of the largest painting, he was tiny, barely a toddler and sitting in what Keith assumed was his mother’s lap.

When the paladin examined him he immediately understood why his ears had been docked. They were enormous; even bigger than Sendak’s had been. They curled upwards like mini-satellite dishes and were full of unbelievably fluffy fur. If he had kept them natural Keith had trouble imagining he could intimidate anyone, especially compared to the imposing figure of his father. The massive Galran patriarch seemed to be comprised completely of sharp features and judgmental eyes.

Nemean didn’t look like him or the two brutish older males who were probably his brothers (Keith didn’t want to think about which of them was dead). He was the mirror image of his mother who was small and very slender. Her ears were also, noticeably, clipped.

Keith’s attention was finally snapped from the family portrait by a soft—barely there request from the next room.

“Paladin…will you go into the bathing room. There are anti-infection tinctures and bandages there. Can you please bring them out?”

“Yeah…course.”

Tucking his train carefully into the back of his corset Keith padded through the sitting room towards the unopened bathroom door. When he drew close enough his movement automatically activated a large upright scaultrite lamp that illuminated the back half of the main room. Keith paused, eyes wide as he took in the long, stone tables that served as some kind of workspace near the back wall.

Distracted from the task at hand he approached the nearest of the three tables arranged in a horseshoe shape. There were…sculptures on the table. The whole space smelled strongly of fresh clay and dry grass and scattered everywhere he could see twisted bits of wire and the blocky outlines of sculptures in progress.

Approaching a clay bust that Nemean was clearly working on the red paladin could only stop and stare at it in open-mouthed astonishment.

*Man he’s REALLY good,* the Lance imprint said in awe.
He was.

A feminine face was meticulously rendered in the rich burgundy-red clay. It was a Galran, her eyes closed in contemplation, a serene smile resting over her features. Her ears were wonderfully detailed and on each cheek she bore what appeared to be some kind or scarification tattoo embedded through the fur and skin; it was beautiful.

“Did you get the things I asked?”

Keith jumped when the voice came from some distance behind him. He turned to see Nemean looking shaky and pale in the bedroom doorway. The fresh clothing he had pulled on didn’t fit as well as the outfit he had soiled and he had made no effort to adjust his belt or shoulder-pads. He just stared at Keith looking lost.

“Crap, I’m sorry. I got sidetracked by these…”

The red paladin gestured around to the clay sculptures as he walked the rest of the short distance to the bathroom. The Duke trailed after him and sat in front of the half-finished Galra bust staring at it uncomprehendingly. Keith pointed to it watching the Duke over his shoulder.

“Did you make all these?”

The bathroom proved to be even filthier than the sitting room. The tiles and walls were stained red with clay residue and there was a pile of used towels in a corner that looked ready to topple over. Keith couldn’t read any of the labels on the bottles in Nemean’s bathroom but he recognized the smell of disinfectant and grabbed the bottle where it wafted from along with a soft roll of bandages he found on a shelf.

“Yes…”

Nemean said distractedly.

“All of them…”

He gazed at another finished clay bust laid out on the table opposite. It was another female Galran but she was old and wizened her placid features covered in flawlessly rendered wrinkles. Her ears had been shorn off at the root, her skin plastered with scars but despite that and her age Keith still thought she looked stunning.

Holding his hands out awkwardly Keith unbuttoned Duke Nemean’s high shirt collar to get to his scratched and swollen neck. The skin was raw and as he cleaned it the Galran flinched, the fur on the back of his neck rising like an angry cat.

“They’re really good. Like…really, really good.”

The compliment was genuine and Keith hoped talking about the Duke’s art would be a good distraction from his pain. The paladin had never thought about the Galra being anything but blood-thirsty war machines. Seeing one of them actually create something was new and honestly…a bit baffling. He had never met a Galra that wasn’t a one-dimensional, brainwashed lunatic and for awhile he thought Duke Nemean fit that category like a glove.

Nemean bit at his lower lip with the tip of one of his canines as Keith finished cleaning his neck.

“I get bored. I like to make them…It’s just to pass the time.”

“Well…they’re good.”

Nemean scowled at a nearby sculpture of a six-legged deer like animal. It was poised mid-leap and so life-like it seemed like it would jump from the counter-top and across the room at any moment.

“They’re pointless.”

Keith applied some of the cold disinfectant and felt Nemean flinch, his boots scraping the floor as he tried not to move his shoulders.

“I don’t think so…I mean it’s uh…art?”

The Duke gave him a flat, weary look.

“To a true Galran the only worthwhile art is the art of death. To kill ones enemy with absolute conviction and to not rest until complete victory or utter annihilation. Thus must it always be. Vrepit Sa.”

Ooo that didn’t land well. I wouldn’t use the A-word again if I was you. The imprint said with a wince.

Keith shrugged and taped a gauze pad he had found over the damage to the Duke’s neck.
“Who are the women? The faces? Are they your relatives?”

Nemean’s eyes zipped over to the busts guiltily and he chewed at the inside of his mouth before he answered. His immediate reaction to doing something wrong seemed to be self-harm in the form of biting or scratching. It was like a trained impulse, a Pavlovian reflex and Keith wondered if Nemean was even aware he was doing it.

“I shouldn’t have made those…When Zarkon started to expand the Empire he outlawed all mentions of the old faiths. Superstition is harmful to soldiers.”

“Why? Who are they?”

Keith wrapped a soft bandage carefully over the gauze on the Duke’s neck and pulled up his high collared uniform to hide it. Nemean blinked at him then reached down to roll up his sleeve. His arm was covered in oozing, half-closed bites that he had clearly done himself. Keith instantly began to apply more disinfectant. He didn’t comment on the bites or ask where they had come from.

Duke Nemean scrutinized Keith again. He examined him like he was trying to figure out what the paladin’s end game was. After coming to some internal conclusion he just sighed and spoke like every word was draining him.

“They’re the Immortal Vankiri, my Grandmother used to tell me about them. She told me that when a Galra died one of the Vankiri would come for them.”

Looking at him curiously Keith prodded the Duke to continue. Hearing about Galran Mythology…Religion, whatever it was, was as fascinating as seeing one of them make art.

“Really? How many Vankiri are there?”

“Oh…um, There are four. Grandmother said that depending on what kind of life you lived you would be taken into death by one of them; the Mother, the Warrior, the Crone or the Maiden.”

Keith finished bandaging Nemean’s arm and helped him pull his sleeve down. He looked presentable now at least. His face and eyes were still pale and distressed but he could physically pass for his normal, snotty-self.

Returning to the two busts Keith looked down at the one in progress.

“So this is the Maiden? And that’s the Crone, right? What do each of them do? I mean…what do you have to do to get visited by a certain one?”

Nemean’s demeanor brightened somewhat and he trailed after Keith looking at him hopefully.

“You-actually want to know these things paladin? They are Galra stories.”

Keith nodded again glad he was distracting the Duke away from breaking into tears again. Some of the bites on his arm had been old. There were scars there from goodness knows how long. Keith wondered when it had started. When Nemean first got here? Before? It made sense he hated The Young Mother, he thought this whole situation was her fault.

“Well, Zarkon isn’t a fan of them either so they can’t all be bad right?”

The corner of Nemean’s mouth wiggled upward in an almost smile. Adjusting his clothing and brushing his claws through his hair he nodded with his chin towards the bust of the ancient, craggy Galra.

“Grandmother told me that the four Vankiri are the judges of the dead. They look into your quintessence and they can see all the bad and good things you did in your life. The Crone comes for the greedy, the selfish and the spiteful Galra that hurt or kill without just cause. She cut her own ears off so she wouldn’t hear their pleas for mercy. She’s the only one who takes the dead to Veid Sath- that means dire punishment.”

That’s…fun. The Lance imprint said without much conviction.

Nemean pointed to the striking, young face shining from the red clay on his work table.

“The Maiden comes for innocent cubs and separated mates. She has a pleasing voice and when she comes she sings for you. She unites lovers separated by death.”

Ok, I like the Maiden. Definitely a step up, the imprint said with more enthusiasm.

Nemean was getting more into his explanation and he shuffled through a pile of grass weave paper next to the wire skeletons of un-started sculptures. The Duke thrust a few pieces of paper at Keith and the red paladin stared at the wonderfully rendered charcoal sketches of two more faces.

“This…”
Nemean pointed at a bulky muscular Galran head. Her ears were very long and came to sharp, tapered points. Her entire face was a mass of scars and her mouth, curled open in a snarl, showed a jagged, broken fang.

“This is the Warrior! She comes for soldiers, gladiators and those that die in battle. She helps the dead find someone to avenge them if they die without justice. Grandmother said all the Vankiri could possess Galran’s but the Warrior does it the most. She-…”

The enthusiastic tumble of words slowed and Nemean’s eyes started to well with tears again.

“I wonder if she came for Tiber. He was a traitor…and he didn’t die in battle so-“

“What about her?”

Keith pushed the hand in which the Duke held the Warrior sketch aside carefully and took the last piece of paper from him with cautious hands. The sketch showed a gentle, round-faced Galran with large fluffy ears and soft waves of mane-like hair wrapping around her face and neck. She looked peaceful, similar to the Galran in the family painting that Keith assumed was Nemean’s mother.

Nemean sniffled.

“That’s the Mother. She comes for Galran’s that die of sickness or in childbirth or…or when they lose their path. She’s supposed to help Galra that get lost...that feel alone.”

The tears built faster and Keith winced. His plan to distract the Duke had definitely backfired.

“Hey-they’re going to wonder where we are. Maybe we should get to dinner?”

The Duke made no effort to move and Keith set the Mother sketch down on the table gingerly. Nemean set the Warrior sketch next to it, a hot tear falling to soak into the thick paper.

“What you said to me before? In your room? You were right paladin. I will always owe my Mother my life. I just don’t understand her softness towards me and I don’t understand why Tiber would turn against the Empire…I was taught that these things are weakness. Mourning a traitor and missing my family is weakness. I am weakness.”

Keith stared at him and wished with everything in him that Shiro would walk through the Duke’s door. If anyone could give him the talk he really needed it was the black paladin. He had been in the war longer than Keith and had a better understanding of the Galra as a people, as a civilization. Even Allura might have some insight into Nemean’s rebellious sibling.

Just be honest with him, the imprint suggested. Treat him the same way you would treat your friends. He just really needs a friend right now.

Building up his strength Keith put his hand on Duke Nemean’s shoulder guiding him around his workspace and back towards the messy sitting room. He settled him in an overstuffed chair and sat on the puffy ottoman near his knee.

“Nemean…I fight the Galra Empire because I see injustice in it. Maybe your brother saw that and decided he wanted to fight it too. Maybe your mother thought that you could be more than just another military robot…she saw something else in you and tried to protect it.”

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The words came a little easier when Keith looked away from Nemean. He wasn’t used to speaking this openly, least of all with a total stranger; and a Galran one at that.

“Those…those things you mentioned aren’t weakness Nemean. What your family did was really brave. It takes strength to rebel against something bigger than you.”

Duke Nemean looked down at his hands in his lap. His suit, the new one he had put on, was a soft grey. Tiny threads of silver passed through it like stars and they sparkled every time the Galran moved. He rubbed at his eyes and seemed to think this over as he reached into his pocket to pull out a fresh pair of clean leather gloves.

His voice was so soft when he spoke Keith almost didn’t catch it.

“I had never thought that the Empire was good or evil…It simply is. Its rules are final and our roles are inevitable. I was given the same amount of choice for my future as the Young Mother was. We know our responsibilities paladin…I was going to be strong like my father and grandfather-like my brothers. Now my family is in danger but…from the thing I was raised to glorify. ”

It was odd but refreshing to hear the Duke call the Young Mother by her actual title rather than some kind of insult. It seemed like a good sign that he was breaking through the young Galran’s bad attitude. He could see the indoctrination deeply ingrained in the Duke’s thought patterns. Every action was easily categorized into failure or victory with no grey area between.

“My commander, The Champion- Shiro likes to talk about how there are different kinds of strength. Everyone shows it in their own way.”
Nemean brought his fingers up distractedly to scratch at his neck and Keith grabbed them before he reached his collar. The Galran snuffled and took a shaky breath.

“He thought I was a runt but Tiber- I...he was my b-brother I—”

“Make him proud.”

Pale eyes met Keith’s as the Galran’s ears cocked forward curiously.

“Do what he did.” Keith continued.

“Rebel. You don’t have to do it in the same way...Maybe just this...”

The red paladin made a wide gesture to the art and the room at large.

“This is rebelling too.”

Nemean considered this staring into Keith’s face a light igniting behind his eyes. Keith felt the imprint coax him and he took a calming breath still unsure when it came to giving someone else a pep-talk.

“I mean—...just do what you like and don’t be afraid of being weak...Your family. Until we figure out something I think they can survive. You might think your mother is weak but I have a feeling she’s strong too. Just in a different way...like you.”

Nemean made a low, friendly noise in his throat.

“I...can see why you are a Paladin.”

“You can just call me Keith.”

“Then you can call me Nemean.”

“Alright, I can do that.”

The Duke’s smile widened and his shoulders relaxed. Just as he was about to reply there was a knock at his door and he physically recoiled from the sound. A little voice, Keith guessed it was a Seed’s voice, filtered from the other side.

“Master Nemean? Are you there sir? Dinner is set to begin any moment now...”

The Duke adjusted his hair automatically pulling nervously at his ponytail in lieu of touching his neck.

“I’ll be right there. I don’t need an escort Tor. Go ahead without me.”

There was a pause and finally the voice gave a doubtful reply, growing fainter as its owner walked away.

“Very well my lord...I will inform the party.”

Keith groaned and started towards the door surprised when Nemean reached back to help him with his train. The Galran spoke hesitantly.

“Er, Keith? Will you keep the sculptures a secret please? I'm not sure I should be using Vell clay...I might be um...committing some sort of grave offense. Only Tor knows but he's my Valet so he won’t tell anyone.”

Keith nodded holding his breath and adjusting his corset.

“Your secret is safe with me.”

It took the two of them to un-tuck the heavy train and unfurl it carefully so it lay unruffled behind the red paladin’s feet. Keith made sure the stuff in his hair was still in place before he walked next to Nemean who seemed to know where he was going. After a few steps Nemean spoke.

“The blue paladin...”

Keith stood straighter stomach a burning knot.

“What about him?”

“I will not destroy his scrim. You’ve been...kind to me. When I was a Scrivnught to you and really didn’t deserve it.”

Keith had no idea what a Scrivnught was but he had a good idea it had an earth equivalent that Lance wouldn’t have said out loud in front of his mother.

“Thanks Nemean...”
The Duke shook his head.

“Don’t thank me. The Empire is still going to take it from me as soon as the ceremony is over. If I refuse the honor of crushing him someone else will.”

Keith swallowed at that and contemplated the floor in front of his feet, concentrating on avoiding the hem of his robes. They walked on in silence. The Duke seemed lost in his thoughts as well his arms held tight behind his back.

As they came closer to the more populated parts of the Citadel, voices and footsteps could be heard echoing from distant rooms. The loud booming of some creature’s laughter and the small, scampering footsteps of Seeds drew closer. Nemean paused.

He glanced at Keith with perked ears and eyes a much healthier shade of gold. He grasped the red paladin’s shoulders with both hands his voice brimming with conviction.

“One of the Vankiri came for the blue paladin. The Warrior took her own or…maybe the Mother so he would never be alone.”

Keith gave him a surprised, much more earnest smile. This was the Galran trying to comfort him he realized. This was the only way he could express his own sympathy. He was trying in the only way he knew how to be consoling. The red paladin felt his throat threaten to close up and he blurted out the first thing that popped into his mind without thinking.

“The Maiden!”

Nemean cocked his head ears tilting slowly as he parsed what Keith had just said.

“‘The Maiden? But he isn’t a cub…”

The red paladin felt the tell-tale heat in his cheeks spreading to his ears.

Man you could give peanut butter a lesson about being smooth, the imprint said with a snort.

Nemean was still staring and Keith panicked doing what he always did when he had said something embarrassing: he doubled down on it.

“I just think you know…if anyone came for him it would be her. He-likes music?”

Something clicked behind the Duke’s eyes; Keith could almost hear the pieces fitting together in his brain. His eyebrows came together and the Galran made a soft noise in his chest, a puff of air chuffing through his front teeth.

“Keith…I didn’t realize-”

“Master Keith! Master Nemean!”

Keith had never been so glad to see an Olim Vell. He watched Tou skitter towards him their arm’s held out as far as they could reach. Chittering to itself the seed looked the two over and there was palpable relief in their downtrodden expression.

“I was so afraid I lost you Master Keith! I had been scouring the Citadel for you! I was so afraid you had gotten lost. Come! They’re waiting for you!”

Casting one last mortified look at Duke Nemean, Keith let himself be hustled away. The Galran was staring at him with a bemused expression, like the red paladin had just told him that he had Voltron in his back pocket.

The imprint laughed sounding impressed.

Did I say peanut butter? Not smooth enough. You’re giving silk a run for its money.

The Citadel’s formal banqueting hall was, as Keith expected, extravagant, enormous and lavishly decorated. The first thing the red paladin noticed after Tou pushed him through the immense doorway was that half of the room was propped up by an insanely gigantic petrified ribcage. Curling up to the ceiling and embedded partially in the floor were the remains of some creature that gave the Young Mother a run for her money in terms of size. The ribs were a rich mahogany in color and could have been mistaken for wood if not for the knobs of car-sized vertebrae hanging from the ceiling.

On the other side of the room from the rib pillars was a wall that looked like the inside of a geode. Sharp shards of orange crystal jutted outwards in places. The light of the gigantic fireplace at the wall’s center was caught in the stubs of rock crystal and sent a million reflections dancing over the dark stone floor.
At the center of the hall sat a heavy table made of carved quartz the color of smoke. It was covered with hundreds of plates overflowing with food Keith couldn’t even describe. Delicacies that still looked alive and plates of alien fruit in bizarre shapes were served by Seeds on small trolleys. Every part of the crowded room seemed alive with conversation both spoken and mental.

In the center of the table sat the Caulis Imperial’s and to their right were the Galran generals Nemean had mentioned briefly. There were only two of them but Keith had no doubt they were dangerous. There was an empty place near them and the Duke, who had come in behind Keith, was making his way towards it. His face was blank but his manner the epitome of dignified.

Radix drones sat beside the Galra along with a scattering of other important Olim Vell including the Flos-Matriarch who made no move to acknowledge Keith at all; it probably wasn’t safe to do so. On the Caulis Imperial’s left side were two empty places. One, the largest, was probably symbolically left open for Y.M. but the last…

Allura caught Keith’s eye and he could see her visibly fighting the urge to stand and wave him over. Keith felt a flood of affection make his legs go weak and he had to stop himself from running in his fancy ceremonial clothing. Moving as fast as he was able in the stifling robes he spotted Shiro, Hunk and Pidge behind a gigantic three-tiered serving dish covered in hors d’oeuvre’s reminiscent of oversized, pink marshmallows.

Pidge took one look at Keith and he watched as she, predictably, clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle. Hunk was beaming at him and Shiro’s expression was fluctuating wildly between relief and concern, his dark eyes scanned Keith like he was looking for injuries. All of them were back in the bulky vestment robes they had worn their first day on Vell.

The Imperials were so wrapped up in their loud, internal conversation with the Galra they didn’t notice as Keith walked the length of the long table. By the time he sat in the empty chair next to Allura, Pidge’s face was nearly purple from repressed laughter.

“Oh my god, Keith you look like…you look like a sugar plum Geisha.

Allura took Keith’s hand under the table and squeezed it looking into his face worriedly. Her hair was braided as elaborately as the red paladin’s and combined with her crown and clothes she looked like a goddess the Duke would have created out of clay.

Pidge was still trying not to laugh her breath coming in desperate wheezes. Hunk kicked her lightly under the table but that only seemed to make it worse. Allura tightened her grip on Keith’s fingers.

“Keith we’ve been so afraid…”

“I’m alright. Hunk told you I was, right?”

“Yes, but I am just happy to see you yourself.”

The look on her face—it reminded him of someone and Keith tried to place who it was. He looked away from her towards Shiro who was leaning across the table as close as he could. Hunk was already shoveling food on Keith’s empty plate telling him what was edible. For a split-second it was like they were back in the Castle kitchen just eating a normal meal. The illusion didn’t last long…not with a family member still so painfully absent.

Allura’s eyes were gleaming with moisture even as the smile on her face grew bigger.

“I do not know why Pidge is laughing. I think you look very beautiful…”

She paused, lips pursed.

“Or no, human males prefer handsome? Shiro is that correct?”

Shiro shrugged and let out a breath he seemed to have been holding deep in his gut.

“Both work honestly, as long as you’re here and healthy and have all your limbs I could care less what they made you wear.”

Keith stared at Allura again and it struck him who she reminded him of. Her concern, her undisguised worry for his well being was Identical to how Isa was on the beach bench when she grilled Lance about his work schedule. The knot in Keith’s stomach tightened and he wondered if he would even be able to choke down food with how full he felt.

He looked from one paladin to another and lowered his voice to a husky whisper staring down at his plate. Helping Nemean had left him feeling vulnerable and when he spoke his guilt burst out of him like word vomit.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry for running towards the Imperials and charging in like an idiot. I…I’m sorry at the market… I didn’t stop—”

He couldn’t bring himself to say Lance’s name but he was sure they knew what he was talking about.
“I'm sorry I haven’t gotten him yet. This whole thing is my fault…all of it.”

They all spoke at once, Hunk stuttering, Pidge squawking, Shiro comforting and Allura rebuking; the sounds were all instantaneous and the consensus was that this was not Keith’s fault.

He hadn’t even meant to let the guilt come spewing out of his mouth, Keith hadn’t even realized how much it had been festering until he saw his friend’s concerned faces. Allura rubbed a thumb over Keith’s knuckles under the table and glanced at the Caulis Imperials before she moved a covert hand to rub at the small of Keith’s back.

“Keith. It is clear that you are under an inordinate amount of stress and I can see you taking the weight upon your shoulders but this situation was beyond your control. It is going to be alright.”

Hunk pushed Keith’s plate a little bit closer, crowding close to Allura from the seat next to her.

“Eat dude, you look pale.”

Managing a small smile Keith just shook his head ready to apologize again when one of the Galra generals rose from the table, banging an eating utensil on a large crystal mug to get the room’s attention.

“Now that we are all finally here we can formally begin the festivities! We come together to celebrate the emblematic Union of Duke Nemean of house Zarkon and the Young Mother of Vell! May her Spur prove an inspiration and her years fruitful to her people!”

All around the table the Olim Vell made a raucous warbling noise, apparently pleased with what the Galra general had to say. He bowed his head to the table, his sharp canines exposed as he turned to look towards the paladins.

The general performing the impromptu toast-speech was the smaller of the Galra dignitaries. He was lean in build and his face was very sharp. It reminded Keith of a fox, the cheeks coming to points, the ears smooth and triangular over narrowed, sly golden eyes. The general continued his cup still held high above his head.

“And a prosperous day it will be! We have such illustrious on-lookers! The last drop of royal Altean blood sits at the same table as a noble of the Zarkon line! What poetry!”

The Caulis Imperials were moving their wide mouths in exaggerated slurping circles making noises like wet fish slapping mud deep in their throats. It took Keith a moment to recognize the sounds as laughter. He eyed the glasses and pitchers in front of the Imperials and the distant conversation with Tou and the Matriarch came rushing back into his brain.

The Imperials were drinking water, a lot of water.

Holy crow, they’re getting drunk off their asses! The Lance imprint said with amusement in its voice.

Keith had no doubt that the Galra had brought the water on purpose; pushing it on the Caulis as a gift, making them easy to control. He wondered if Allura knew what water did to Olim Vell and he cast a brief glance her direction. She sat stone faced her eyes slightly narrowed as she stared a hole through the fox-faced Galra’s head.

He simply smiled back at her.

“This is an evening of eating and rejoicing! As is tradition the groom’s family has provided entertainment as a gift for the court. We hope you will be pleased with our performance honorable Olim Vell.”

The larger, more brutish Galran general took a very large bite from a very raw piece of meat. He chewed with his mouth open and swallowed most of the greasy bite down whole. The Olim were tittering and giggling as Fox-face sat back down, obviously very excited about the prospect of entertainment.

Allura slammed her hands down and stood with a scrape of her chair. She cleared her throat and many, many eyes turned to stare at her in surprise. Apparently it was not the norm for another guest to speak but the Princess seemed unbothered by the uneasy murmuring rising around her.

“My honored Imperials and members of the Vell court, long has Altea been in debt to you. I just want to thank you for allowing us the privilege of seeing the new Mother come into her own. I hope with our red paladin serving as her Royal Retainer and the whole of Voltron here to support her we will have a strong friendship in the years to come.”

There was silence, no clapping or acknowledgement of any kind. Allura bowed her head regally and sat with a rustle of fabric; in the glitter of orange refracted light the blush on her cheeks seemed all the more obvious.

Fox-face swirled his drink watching it glide around the edges of his mug.
“Funny, I had thought there were five paladins Princess Allura. I count only four here, yet you say the whole of Voltron is here to support her?”

The thick, wet slapping sound of the Imperial’s laughter started up again and Keith felt his heart start to pound. He tried to distract himself by stuffing some of whatever was on his plate into his mouth. It tasted like soggy green-beans straight from a rusty metal can.

Allura adjusted herself primly taking this comment in stride.

“You are astute as always General Castellan. I’m afraid our blue paladin has been laid low as of late. I can assure you that he also supports the Young Mother, as much as any other member of Voltron.”

The fox-faced general, Castellan, traced the top of his drink with his index finger letting a long silver note flow from it.

“Perhaps even more.”

Keith felt his shoulders hunch. He couldn’t stand this bizarre political dance going on between the Galran and the Altean. It was something that had been coming to a head in the 10,000 years before he was born, before any of them were. He hated that he and Lance had to be chess pieces in a game started before modern human civilization existed.

Shiro was watching Castellan with a tight, thoughtful expression. Keith couldn’t tell if he was trying to kill him with his eyes or remember ever detail of his smug, hateful face.

Pidge spoke up and looked down the table at Castellan fearlessly.

“So while I got you here can I ask you a question? I wanna settle a bet.”

The larger Galran, still pulling meat off a hunk of gristly bone, cocked an eye brow at the green paladin as she tried to slice through the tension.

“What is your question tiny thing?”

“Yeah, sure, tiny thing- My question is this. That shade of purple you use on everything. Is it magenta or violet? Now I argue it’s more of an amethyst but Coran is adamant it’s magenta and I just think…”

Hunk looked at Pidge in horror but Shiro’s serious expression had cracked slightly. Allura shook her head giving Pidge a long look down her nose.

“Pidge. That is not becoming of a paladin, I don’t know what you are thinking…it’s clearly maroon.”

The Galra’s folded, dog-like ears curled forward in confusion and a thick piece of half-chewed meat fell out of his mouth as he stared at them slack-jawed. Pidge had boldly taken away their power of intimidation and Castellan was visibly irritated. He glared at them taking a sip from his cup.

Duke Nemean spoke softly, peering over at Pidge from behind Castellan’s elbow.

“I always thought it was Magenta…”

Hunk elbowed Pidge loosening up a bit.

“See! He agrees with me and Coran.”

The gorilla-esqe, meat-masticating general pounded his fist on the table and gave a spitty hiss.

“That’s enough of this nonsense. Castellan! Start the entertainment already.”

This caught the attention of the inebriated Imperials and they took up the call pounding the table as they warbled a call. Inside his head Keith could hear them saying “begin!” over and over again joined by a wave of other mental voices from the other Olim. Castellan grinned wide running his tongue over his needle teeth as he stood up and clapped loudly.

“Seeds! Bring it in!”

Keith shoved more food into his mouth and swallowed it down as quickly as he could. He did need to eat something but he had no patience with tasting anything at the table. He let more of the green-beans and sweet tasting rice pilaf slither down his throat as a commotion began at the back of the banquet hall. The red paladin wished that he could just grab Shiro and the others and make a break for it. He wanted to talk to them in private, maybe even get the Matriarch to join them if possible.

Realistically he knew that wasn’t going to happen. Everyone had to sit and smile and pretend they were having a good time. A waste of his time and Lance’s time…Lance’s rapidly depleting time.
There was a sound of metal wheels grinding on stone floor as a line of Seeds pulled a machine covered in black velvet to the front of the room. It completely blocked the light of the roaring fireplace and sent shadows skittering over the table and up the walls.

Pidge leaned forward, the amber-light still flickering from the geode wall moving over her glasses and obscuring her eyes. Allura looked uneasy for the first time since Keith sat down, he debated reaching towards her. Shiro wasn’t looking at the machine; his gaze was still on Castellan.

The larger Galran general, who now that Keith thought about it looked more like a bear than a gorilla, pushed away from the table and sauntered to the front of the room. He pulled the black covering from the machine with a flourish and in the same instant a gigantic screen extended from the top of the device and unfolded so it was lit brightly from behind by the light of the fireplace.

“This is a history of the beginning of the grand reign of Mother Soluto.”

Castellan said as he punched some buttons on the strange console.

“Perhaps the greatest Mother to ever rule over Vell, the Mother whose Auricle was the Emperor of the universe Lord Zarkon.”

The screen started to flicker and Keith watched with interest as shapes emerged, stark like shadow-puppets but made of pixels on the digital screen. They were detailed black silhouettes without color to define them, only the cut out areas where light passed through. They shifted and shuddered each individual pixel that created them breaking apart and joining back with the others to form a kind of writhing, expressive hi-tech marionette.

The first puppet to appear was a Mother, moving and twisting over the screen. She flashed her teeth and wriggled each tentacle in a synchronized wave, gliding over the theater screen in a cacophony of movement.

Castellan stepped back and the Bear-Galra stood ramrod straight, then…he started to hum. It vibrated low in the big creature’s body and he slowly started to thump himself on the chest creating a bizarre rhythm that was half song half war-chant. Castellan nodded in approval and throwing out his arms like a cut-rate magician he started to narrate.

“Some ten thousand long years ago, The Young Mother that would be Soluto found herself friendless and secluded in her own kingdom.”

The shadow Mother floated in sinewy circles and below her another puppet appeared in a wave of black pixels its large pointed ears unmistakably Galran.

“The Galran general Rexa was a lost commander without a fleet. A refugee from the Great Sorrow brought upon the Galra people by the Altean King Alfor and the paladins of Voltron.

Rexa came to Vell and befriended the Young Mother Soluto. Telling her about the plight of his people and the wonders he had beheld as he traveled the universe.”

Pidge leaned towards Allura and asked in a breathy whisper.

“What was the Great Sorrow?”

Allura didn’t take her eyes off the screen answering the paladin with a quick shake of her head and a finger to her lips. Keith watched her body language carefully but she was working to give nothing away.

Castellan continued on his voice singsong, his words falling into tempo with the other general’s bizarre humming.

“Theyir friendship grew and he became her court favorite, in those days there were many in the Citadel from all worlds but they often lied for favors from the current Mother Pradaga and Rexa warned the Young Mother Soluto not to trust them as he cared for her well-being.”

The Young Mother circled around the Galran shadow and the two of them blurred together forming into a number of beautifully complex geometric shapes before they burst into a black sky full of slowly moving stars and planets.

“Rexa told the Young Mother that if she did not send the other ambassadors away and keep the Citadel pure of their influence then she would be in danger and her children would be corrupted.”

Pidge snorted and Keith glanced sideways at her. Hunk was shoving some sort of dessert unhurriedly into his mouth as he stared enraptured at the screen. Shiro was watching as well but he looked on with something like deep concentration. Of all of them he was probably the most familiar with Galra propaganda.

“But…The Mother Pradaga kept the ambassadors and ignored her daughter and Rexa, for she had a serpent within her court. Whispering lies in her ear. Her favorite ambassador, a distant cousin of the cruel king Alfor….”

Castellan moved in front of the screen and as he did it wiped clean and revealed a small Altean woman in silhouette. Despite the lack of detail in her face she bore a strange resemblance to
Allura, her jaw-line, nose and the marks under her eyes the spitting image of the Princesses. Her hair and dress flowed away from her in curving black lines and the ends turned into hooded snakes, their mouths open, fangs bared.

“Lady Addiena, beautiful outside but black within just the same as her cousin. She was worth little to the Altean’s, a forgotten royal, a pestilence on the Empire and on the illustrious house of Vell.”

Keith heard Allura give a small gasp and he watched as she drew her hand to her mouth eyes wide. If Castellan heard her he gave no sign continuing on with his skewed fairytale.

“But now… the Young Mother Soluto could see the Mother Pradaga was growing old. Her once sharp mind unable to commune with the Webblum as it once had. She was in no condition to rule Vell and so the Young one challenged her Mother, determined to listen to the wisdom of general Rexa and help her people.”

Keith didn’t know how much more he could listen too but he stopped and reached out weakly to grab Allura’s free hand in his. He calmed when he felt her squeeze back and he realized he needed to keep his composure: if only for her.

The screen erupted violently as the two Mother’s clashed on screen. The shadows ripped at each other all tendrils, legs and teeth, a titanic Mother and daughter rending one another into pixelated shreds. Allura looked away with a gasp and the entire banquet hall went deathly still as the fight raged on and the general’s humming song picked up pace.

“In the end… the elder Mother Pradaga was defeated.”

The smaller shadow ripped the throat out of the larger one and it flew into the sky in a stream of thin, ribbon-sized pieces leaving the Young Mother alone in a field of waving black grass.

“The Young Mother Soluto prepared for her well-earned Spur. Of course she asked her dear friend General Rexa to be her Auricle, her inspiration. She wished for her children to have his strength and cunning.”

The Rexa puppet bowed to the, now noticeably scarred, Young Mother and she crawled around the edges of the theater screen curling around him.

“But Rexa had told her of Zarkon’s wish to be her Auricle the greatest honor that could be bestowed and she accepted it gladly on the condition he remain as her Retainer. But now the Young Mother faced a problem, how would they ever find a dowry worthy of Zarkon?”

Keith felt his stomach drop hard. He knew exactly who the dowry was, Nemean had already told him exactly how this story ended; not well.

SHIT. You have to get Allura out of here! The imprint whispered anxiously.

Still holding the Princess’s hand in his Keith tried to get Shiro’s attention. She might not let him pull her out of the room but she would definitely let the black paladin.

“By the time Pradaga was beaten the great Zarkon had already destroyed the merciless Alfor and his kingdom. He was triumphant and because of his great bravery the Altean Empire would never harm another planet. Who could the Olim give that could possibly please him? The Emperor would create a generation of Olim Vell the likes of which had never been seen before!”

The fox-faced Galra general held his fist towards the ceiling and clenched his hand into a tight fist. He held the pose a tense moment before pointing out at the audience and then to the screen. The small, sad figure of Lady Addiena stood in its center. The puppet held out her hands and the humming slowed again, becoming grave and deep.

“This forgotten drop of royal blood, what was thought to be the last of the Royal family? What a dowry she would be…”

Allura’s hand was so tight Keith could feel it crushing his fingers, the pain was intense and he could almost feel the bones of his fingers being shattered into fragments. The red paladin bit his lower lip determined not to cry out. Tears were dripping freely down the princesses’ cheeks as she stared at the screen in shock. Shiro looked at her at a loss, unsure if he should try and get her out of the room. Keith tried to rise to his feet but Allura wouldn’t budge.

“The lovely, traitorous Addiena went to the Young Mother Soluto and offered herself as dowry on the condition that the Altean’s would always have access to the lay-lines. It was a truly thoughtless offer, for the Olim would never cut off any from the lines no matter how evil their species. Still, Soluto agreed if only to give the lady comfort promising to always accept Alteans as allies. Perhaps if foolish Addiena had known she was one of the last she would have asked for something else.”

The shadow Addiena swirled and turned into a flickering scrim shaped like a flower in bloom and it fell slowly into the large hands of a new puppet. One made of sharp edges and evil eyes-Zarkon held the memories and dreams of the Altean Lady and then they disappeared in a puff of
digital smoke.

Allura buried her face into Keith’s shoulder finally letting go of his broken hand and Shiro stood with a deafening scrape of chair legs on floor.

Castellan paused and grinned towards them his face full of mock concern.

“I’m sorry paladins…is the Princess not enjoying my historic retelling?”

Shiro sounded terrifyingly calm as he helped Allura to her feet and put a strong arm protectively around her shoulders. The black paladin offered General Castellan a cold smile.

“Oh no. Please continue. I’m afraid the Princess is feeling ill. I’m going to see to her. I can only thank you and the Court for your hospitality.”

The Imperials made sloppy drunken noises their direction and Keith could hear them inside his mind as Shiro started to guide Allura towards the door.

<Please paladin, take her to re-cover only the—the BEST for a guest of the court! You! General continue with the shadow-show!>

Keith rose to join but Shiro looked at him over his shoulder and shook his head firmly. He nodded towards Pidge and Keith noticed for the first time that the green paladin also looked distressed. He moved to Shiro’s now vacant chair next to her as Hunk stroked her back.

Castellan snapped his fingers and the screen and humming both started again. Zarkon stood over the curling shape of the Young Mother Soluto and Keith only half-listened as the Galran recounted the Spur ceremony and the passing of the dowry.

Pidge looked on the verge of tears and she looked at Keith with a whisper.

“That’s Lance. He’s a dowry like Addiena…”

“Not for much longer…not much longer I promise.”

Keith jerked his head up as the Olim Vell all started to make gurgling clapping noises slapping their tendrils together loudly.

<Wonderful Castellan! Wonderful!>

One of the Imperials said loudly as he swayed dangerously in his seat.

<A shame our new Young Mother is not as strong or wise as her Mother before her!>

A hot streak of fire flared in Keith’s chest and he glared at the Caulis who had “spoken.” He was just about to say something he knew he would regret when another voice—sultry, calm and pleasant, spoke in his head. The Matriarch stood from the table holding up a goblet of water to the assembly and the Galra.

<Well…you cannot blame her. You know that tried and true saying. The broodlings may take after the Auricle but the Young Mother always inherits the ways of the dowry.>

Some of the gathered Olim squirmed and made noises that echoed of nervous laughter.

<A final toast then, to the Auricle and to the dowry and to the Young Mother! May her new name suit her and may her children be strong!>

Everyone but the remaining paladin’s raised their glasses but no one seemed to notice. The Matriarch held Keith’s eye meaningfully a moment more before she downed her glass in one long gulp.

Chapter End Notes

Personally I always thought it was Magenta.

Thanks for the proof Grand Master CJ!
Near to my Heart

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

<I don’t remember my Mother very well…We only met a few times.>

The Young Mother gave a long, cavernous yawn and Keith got an excellent look at the blue light blazing up her throat.

“Really?”

<Mhmhm, I was born prematurely by a few years. My Mother was always sickly and by the end of her life the Matriarch hid me from her, said she wasn’t “well.” I found out later that “not well” meant she was losing her mind. I often overheard the Seeds call her the “Mad Mother” but I didn’t understand what that really meant until I was older.>

Adjusting her gargantuan weight on her grass-weave pillows, Y.M. probed Keith’s broken hand with careful tendrils, moving his twisted fingers with tender precision.

<I remember that when I saw her the last time I finally got a good look at her face. She was mostly blind, the few eyes she did have were all milky white and the rest had been scratched out. She had these huge scars all over her body.>

Keith hissed painfully through his teeth as Y.M. started to push at his knuckles.

<Oh no! I’m so sorry, I’m just trying to make sure nothing is out of place when I start to push quintessence in to heal the bones.>

“It’s okay Y.M…thanks for fixing me up.”

The red paladin offered a pained smile and inched closer to one of Y.M.’s large, insectoid legs. He leaned on it for support and sighed when its warmth soaked into him. He could feel The Young Mother overflowing with affection, relief and concern over his broken hand.

He was glad to be back with her even if it had proven difficult to leave Pidge and Hunk. They were still upset by Castellan’s morbid shadow-show but the evening had wound down rapidly and Keith decided it was best to leave before they did; the last thing he wanted was to be stuck alone the rest of the dinner party.

Keith’s biggest regret as he exited the banquet hall was leaving Nemean to fend for himself. The Duke had looked decidedly miserable sandwiched between the intoxicated Caulis Imperials and the gloating Galra generals. Despite his vulnerable position the young Galran had managed a small smile for Keith as he left; his ears pricked up, his hand moving in a subtle wave. Keith had almost turned back to try and save him but in the end he knew he couldn’t.

When Keith made it back to his quarters the golden door to Y.M.’s rooms was already open and Tou was waiting for him. The Seed helped him change into his comfortable grass weave robes and did the best they could to wrap his broken hand. They fussed over him another few minutes and Keith finally allowed Tou to clean his hair and face; if only to make them happy.

After the Seed was finally satisfied the red paladin padded into the Young Mother’s sanctum and found her still sound asleep in the scrim library. Despite the white-hot pain in his poorly tended hand he had curled close to the Young Mother and drifted into a deep sleep fueled by exhaustion.

Now they were both still in the process of waking up.

“What else do you remember about your mother?”

The muscles in Keith’s hand began to feel warm, vibrating in time to his heartbeat. He had become so much more aware of his pulse since his Viewings with Lance’s scrim. At times he would wonder if his heart was keeping time with Lance’s even though their distance and the thought was oddly reassuring.

The Young Mother made a soft noise in her chest.

<What does she have to do with your hand being broken? Why won’t you tell me what really happened?>

Keith blanched guiltily at that. He didn’t know if telling Y.M. about the dinner, the generals or the story of Mother Soluto’s dowry was a good idea. He was still slightly disoriented from his lie-down, once again he was completely unsure how long he and Y.M. had been asleep. It hadn’t felt that long but who could tell. At most they only had a day and a half left to get Lance out and he still hadn’t made contact with him or his core memory.

“I- Allura did it accidentally. She was upset by something that happened.”
The vibrating in Keith’s hand was getting painfully intense and he grimaced, gritting his teeth together to keep from crying out. A tendril stroked his hair tenderly as another wrapped around his waist to keep him still.

<‘I’m almost done! I-er, think. I’ve never done anything like this before…It’s so much different from a headache.’>

Speaking from between his teeth Keith gripped a tendril with his good hand as sweat beaded on his forehead.

“You…didn’t have to. If it’s too hard I mean…”

<‘No! No I want to! It’s actually getting easier the more I do it and I want to be a better healer. They say my grandmother was one of the best Olim healers ever born, she could fix anything. I want to be like her someday.’>

“So if Mother’s can heal why didn’t your Mother just heal herself?”

<‘We can’t heal ourselves. That’s not how it works. When I heal I’m coaxing your quintessence to combine with mine…then I sort of purify yours and give it energy to heal your own injuries. I can’t combine with myself…’>

Keith worried his lower lip trying to think about anything but how much his hand hurt.

“I think that’s kinda of how the healing pods in the castle work. Coran explained it once but I wasn’t really listening…”

What a shocker, the Lance imprint intoned sarcastically.

<‘I’ve heard about healing pods and I saw them in Lance’s memories, but we don’t have them on Vell. I think they only heal physical wounds, a good Mother can heal both physical problems and quintessence.’>

The audible bone-grinding noise in Keith’s hand finally stopped and afterwards the pain started to dissipate. A warm throb of energy spread up the red paladin’s arm and he groaned in relief as his broken bones finished knitting and his hand felt whole again.

<‘Allura must have been pretty upset to have done this to you. She seems so kind when I see her in the scrim. She can be loud at times, sure, but still very nice.’>

“Yes. She can be loud but this wasn’t one of those times it was just… Okay, Y.M.? Basically what happened was the Galra generals told us about your Mother and her dowry—”

<‘The Lady Addiena?’>

Keith looked up at Y.M. surprised.

“You know about her?”

<‘Well I know that my Mother’s dowry was an Altean of royal blood. I—that’s all I really know about her aside from her name.’>

Twisting Keith’s hand this way and that one more time Y.M. patted it proudly and pulled her tendril back.

<‘There! I think you’re all fixed>
<Please! I wanted to talk to you about something I’ve been thinking about. Here…>

She uncurled a tendril and lowered Lance’s scrim into Keith’s arms delicately.

<Bring Lance with us.>

Y.M. struggled to get to her feet. Latching her tendrils onto the wall and ceiling she used them to force herself upwards. Once upright she tottered drunkenly and for a queasy half-second the red paladin was sure she would fall on her side. A wave of pale, shivery fear rolled off of the Young Mother and Keith fought down the urge to run to her. If she fell he sure as hell wouldn’t be able to catch her.

Thankfully, the Young Mother eventually found her footing and took her first lumbering steps out of the scrim library towards the bathing room.

Keith held back the urge to ask her if she was alright again. What if helping him was killing her? What if all this Viewing was hurting her? Lance would…as much as Lance would want to live Keith didn’t think he would want someone to die for him; especially not the Young Mother. Lance would have…Lance would really like her.

Thinking about this made Keith’s chest tighten and he held the blue scrim close as he shuffled forward.There was a weird, rubbery feeling in his legs and he limped for a moment as he remembered what a normal walking gait looked like. Keith guessed this was probably another side-effect of the empathic mental link that Y.M. shared with those around her. She had trouble walking so he did too.

Gazing down at the scrim thoughtfully as they entered the steamy confines of the milk bath Keith debated with himself. There was a question that had been bothering him for awhile now and he decided it was the time to just ask.

“Y.M. do you really need all this stuff to have kids? A dowry and an Auricle? Is it just like… tradition or do you really need it?”

The Young Mother was panting by the time they reached the bath and it disturbed Keith. Her breath bellowed out in gurgling heaves and as she leaned down to lap at the thick, steaming surface of the bath; the gesture seemed desperate. Dozens of eyes closed as the Y.M. sucked in huge mouthfuls of milk her gigantic throat bobbing as she guzzled it down. By the time she seemed satisfied half of the pool was drained.

<Oh. Um…did the Matriarch not give you the talk? About how Olim are born?>

Drinking the grass milk seemed to have revitalized the Young Mother somewhat and her tendrils swayed back and forth in a methodic rocking motion along her enormous spine. She cooed to herself as the bath began to refill automatically from spigots hidden under the lip of the pool.

“No.”

Keith muttered watching the waterfalls of fresh milk.

“She-she did not.”

Haha somebody is about to get an alien birds and bees talk, the imprint said all too gleefully.

Keith’s specially made human sized chair was still near the bath and he strode towards it, pulling it closer to the edge of the pool where he could see Y.M. more clearly. The Young Mother waited until most of the milk had been replenished and dove into the bath with a shocking lack of splash.

Her pleasure at being surrounded by the energizing grass milk was somewhat dampened by a cold embarrassment as she cleared her mental throat and started into her explanation; one teenager giving another a crash course in alien sex-ed.

<So…I. Seeds! Um...There are two kinds of Seeds;barren and f-fertile right?>

“I-Yeah, Tou mentioned they were fertile and Kru said he was barren.”

<Um…well first I…a Young Mother! A-A Young Mother needs quintessence. A lot of it. So during the Spur we take the Auricle and the dowry’s quintessence>

“No. He would just have to stay on course. He would have to keep looking ahead. That’s what Shiro would do.
But Shiro would also look for plan B’s and C’s in case Plan A’s a bust, the imprint reminded him. Keith really didn’t need to be reminded.

<N-no! We don’t take it! We-we clone it. We make a copy of it for ourselves. The Auricle is a living quintessence and the dowry is a dreaming quintessence. The living quintessence helps form broods and…well the Old Flos-Matriarchs story goes that you need dreaming quintessence for the birth of a Young Mother.>

“Yeah… The Matriarch said something about that at the dinner.”

<Flos-Matriarchs help take care of broods and act as midwives. She knows more about this than I do. But anyway um…so once a Young Mother has her quintessence she’s ready to accept a fertile Seed.>

Several thoughts distracted Keith at once and he tried to focus on them and on what Y.M. was saying. If Lady Addiena was Soluto’s dreaming quintessence then this Young Mother was basically part her. Allura should know- Allura would want to know. Also, if that’s how a Spur worked there would (in theory) be a flirty, finger gun throwing Y.M. in ten thousand years unless Keith did something. Unfortunately the dowry was important; he couldn’t just tell her to drop it from the ceremony.

No exchanges or refunds, the imprint said with a sigh.

<N-And then the Seed attaches itself and sacrifices its genetic material so that a new brood will be born.>

Keith tuned back into Y.M.’s reproduction lecture partway through and managed to catch the tail end of whatever explanation she was giving.

“Wait-what? The Seed dies?”

<Oh…yes. They attach themselves to an interior wall of the Mother’s chest cavity and then um…they become viable genetic material?>

“Oh…”

<It’s a huge honor if…if that makes you feel better. They’re really excited to do it. I mean it’s one of the things they’re born to do and not all of them get to.>

Keith wasn’t sure if that made him feel better or not. He tried not to let the whole vampiric process bother him. He was the alien on this planet not the Olim Vell.

“I-It’s just a lot to take in that’s all.”

<Yeah. I wasn’t thrilled when my Matriarch gave me the whole talk either.>

The embarrassment shifted and the Young Mother finally bobbed to the surface of the bath. She peeked over the side blowing a fine spray of milk into the air above her.

<If I’m feeling much better! You should at least try dipping your feet in it. Milk gives you energy and you need it if we’re going to View all day.>

“I had a …not great experience with milk.”

The gooey surface jiggled when Y.M. made a low chuckling noise. Her laugh was so much sweeter than the crude, wet slapping noises the Caulis Imperials made. Keith felt himself smiling at her. It seemed strange that only a few days ago he had thought she was terrifying.

Propping Lance’s scrim against the back of his chair Keith reached down, pulled off his grass weave shoe-socks and rolled up the hem of his pant-legs as far as they would go. Scooting forward he sat down on the edge of the pool and grudgingly dipped his legs into the milk until the warm goo reached just below his knees.

Keith shivered at the sensation of milk squishing between his toes. He felt the Young Mother’s eyes on him and she worked a tendril around him, circling him without touching. Everything inside the red paladin became loose and warm, a purr vibrating up through the floor and into his spine. In Keith’s head Y.M.’s voice was small but clear as crystal.

<I love you, Keith.>

The words caused an instant flux of anxiety Keith couldn’t stop. It was almost like the “L-word” was a live wire touching his bare skin, sending a jolt of electricity through his body. It was not a good sort of shock; it was the kind you needed to do everything to get away from. Keith’s father had never said that word. There had been no home or person in Keith’s life that had said that word out loud and really meant it.

Ice water pushed through the paladin’s veins and he took a deep breath.

“L.”
Y.M. made a small crooning sound as she looked up at him affectionately from where she was still half-submerged in milk.

"It’s okay. You don’t have to say anything back. I just wanted to tell you. I love you. You make me happy. I want to help you and see you happy."

Keith felt heat rise up his neck and up into his cheeks. Her little speech had taken him by surprise and if there was one thing he hated it was being caught defenseless, off guard. Keith finally managed a nod and leaned back with his feet still in the pool. He closed his eyes and took deep breaths trying to let the crashing tide of loud thoughts diminish somewhat.

A conscientious tendril patted his back before sliding into the bath. The Young Mother sank down until only her head remained above the syrupy, viscid surface.

"So I was thinking…"

Y.M. said finally after a good five minutes of quiet.

"About a better way to find Lance."

Keith perked up at this, grateful for not only the subject change but the particular subject Y.M. brought up.

"Yeah?"

"What if instead of trying to find Lance you tried to find your imprint?"

"Find my imprint-like, between the memories?"

"Maybe start looking there? The imprint must be with him or close to him. If you tried to join it or…merge with it?-well I’m not sure WHAT it would do because this is all so new but…maybe it would be a better way to get to him. We’re not going to find him in time if we keep going like we have. There are just too many memories."

The milk was starting to get tingly and uncomfortable at the tips of Keith’s toes but he didn’t budge. If it really was giving him energy he wanted to soak up whatever it would give.

"That sounds like it’s definitely worth a shot."

_Yeah. Shot in the dark is still a shot right?_ The Lance imprint said without much enthusiasm.

Keith wished Allura was here so he could ask her a few questions about imprints. Maybe she would even know why the imprint couldn’t speak when he was Viewing.

_I think her guess is as good as yours buddy_, the imprint said with a verbal shrug.

"I’ll try it as soon as we start the next Viewing."

The Young Mother trilled fretfully and opened her mouth to swallow several more gallons of grass milk.

"I hope it helps…or does something to find him faster."

Another minute, maybe more and Keith had reached the end of his tolerance for the bath. He yanked his feet from the milk with a loud unpleasant "slorp" sound. Wiggling his toes to reassure himself they were still working the paladin wiped the clumps of goo from his legs. He considered his hurt hand then shrugged, rolled up his sleeves and lay on his chest dipping his hands into the bath. A tendril met his fingers just below the surface.

"Y.M. I think—"

Keith swallowed hard his cheeks turning a brighter tomato red.

"You think you lov- feel the way you feel about me because of Lance."

There was a quiet smile in the Young Mother’s reply.

"Than what’s his excuse?"

Keith flushed; he had absolutely no answer for that.

Y.M. insisted their next Viewing be in the meditation room, the dome that overlooked the Citadel and the Vell. It was close to sunset and cool inside the grassy space but Keith would have preferred the library. Something about the scaultrite glass between him and open sky was unnerving. The Young Mother had carried a few pillows up with her this time to give Keith a more comfortable place to lie down and he shivered as he removed his shirt.

As much as he was loath to admit it the milk bath had been good for both of them. The healthy
sheen was back and glossy over Y.M.’s skin and her breathing came easy even when she was climbing into the upper chamber.

Keith stared through the thick dome at the stars above and took deep calming breaths, counting backwards from one hundred as he settled into his makeshift pillow mattress. He had been waiting anxiously to get back to Lance the moment he had left him. Nemean, Allura and the paladins were already slipping to the back of his mind as he thought about returning to the blue paladin’s scrim. He hated to admit it but seeing Isa, Teo, Carmen… the entire family wouldn’t be unwelcome either; in a way he missed them too.

<What are you going to say if you find him?>

The question took Keith by surprise and he cracked open an eye to look at Y.M. uncertainly.

“I guess I would explain what’s going on? Try and help him find a way out.”

The Young Mother leaned her massive head down until the tip of her snout was almost resting against the red paladin’s chest. The closest eye to Keith’s face was easily the size of a golf-cart and he noticed for the first time how similar the colors dancing in the slim, starry pupil were to Princess Allura’s.

<He’ll probably be confused. I don’t know what he’ll remember. I think—I think you might have to shock him a bit. Say something that might snap him out of it.>

“Like what? Tell him he’s the Blue Paladin? Tell him about Zarkon? About Voltron?”

The Young Mother’s tendrils billowed as she made a low chirp in her throat. Her breath was almost overbearingly warm and sweet on Keith’s skin and he flinched when she sighed. Pulling her head back Y.M. lowered Lance’s scrim to Keith’s naked chest.

<You know how I…um, surprised you before in the bath? How it got your attention?>

The scrim’s scaultrite was already warm from Y.M.’s body heat when it touched Keith’s skin. He made no effort to take it, feeling a sudden insane urge to run. He didn’t know if he even could say—that to Lance, even if he wanted to. He hadn’t even understand why Lance felt the way he did about him let alone understand how he felt about Lance. He rubbed at his face and drew an agitated hiss of air through his teeth. Everything had been so focused on getting Lance out of the scrim he hadn’t considered how he was going to handle what he knew after…if there was an after.

“I think I’ll stick to Voltron.”

She’s the giant quintessence expert dude maybe you should listen, the imprint suggested cajolingly.

Keith ignored it, his next words a growl.

“I think telling him he pilots a giant lion in space is shocking enough.”

<guess I can’t argue with that.>

Y.M. moved a tendril over Keith’s forehead and he went pliant at her touch. Other tendrils moved over his shoulders and pressed into the pulse point on his throat.

<This time feel for the imprint. It will feel different from the memories. Oh, I hope this works!>

The Young Mother’s nervous internal voice melted into a muted hum. The red paladin watched the twilight shadows of grass move around him for a minute more before he sank into pitch darkness and reached out for Lance’s heartbeat.

He found it moving disturbingly fast and his own pulse lurched to keep up with the sudden, rabbit-quick pace. Gasping for air Keith went under in a wave of watery blue light and surfaced into the void between memories almost instantly.

Before he even had a chance to think, he was Lance and Lance was screaming.

The cause of Lance’s pounding pulse was evident immediately. Keith found they were running down a beach at top speed speaking in a combination of Spanish and English. He waved his hands angrily at a small group of people hovering near the tide-line.

“STOP THAT!! STOP IT!”

Keith felt his long legs pumping as he raced down a steep hill towards the ocean. He nearly tripped going down a flight of stairs to the beach, then tumbled for a moment as he dashed across a soft dune and through a line of towels and umbrellas. The distance hadn’t been far at all but it felt like miles.

Keith could see now that the small gathering of people on the beach were all teenagers. He had no idea how old he and Lance were in this memory but when he caught a quick view of his own tan-skinned hands he thought they looked tiny; the hands of a young middle-schooler. The beach
was familiar territory; he had seen it before in bursts in some of the blue paladin’s other memories. This was home-turf, near his house and his families’ restaurant.

The teenagers looked up in alarm as Keith bolted towards them, anger crashing through his veins and coming out in his voice. They relaxed somewhat when they saw it was a kid berating them and parted when Lance nearly crashed into a tall beefy looking guy in green Day-Glo trunks.

Lance tried to push past a teenager twice his size and was thrown back hard into the sand for his trouble.

“STOP IT!”

Keith struggled to grasp exactly what was going on until he spotted another teenage boy in an ugly sun-visor yanking a small shark further from the waterline. Sun-visor raised a smart-phone up, flashing a peace sign as he posed near the shark to take a selfie. Lance screeched at the top of his lungs lunging at Day-Glo shorts again.

“PUT HIM BACK IN THE WATER!! YOU’RE HURTING HIM!”

The Shark thrashed weakly in the damp sand. Keith had never been keen on sharks but through Lance’s eyes he could see the beauty in it. Its body was one giant muscle, the thick skin surprisingly blue out of the water. Its fins were so long they were almost wing-like where they slapped furtively at the dry ground. The most striking thing about this shark was its tail, the fin was very long, almost like a flag and it moved in graceful rippling motions as the body struggled.

The nearest teenage boy shoved Lance backwards.

“We’ll put it back after we take some pictures kid. Calm the fuck down.”

Lance was back on his feet pushing the older kid again, shoving his skinny body towards the center of the pack without success. A girl in a bikini was crowding to be part of a shot with sun-visor and the shark; she made a ridiculous, pouty face as she gripped the creature’s tail with flawless press-on nails.

“He’s dying!! Put him back in the water PLEASE!”

Keith felt tears of frustration building in his eyes; he knew-Lance knew that his Father and Mother told him violence wasn’t the answer unless the circumstances were dire but…they seemed dire now.

Drawing back his arm Keith felt his oversized t-shirt flap as he launched his fist at the older boy’s face. He was strong despite his size but he had thrown the punch poorly and only managed to tap the teen’s shoulder. Day-Glo made a half-hearted grab for Lance’s fist scowling at him through a pair of sunglasses.

“What the fuck kid! It’s just a stupid fish!”

The shark’s movements were getting sluggish now, its gills barely moving on either side of its neck. The animal arched its body and tried to slap its tail on the sand but it was still held tight in the hands of the selfie-takers. Keith gave a feral angry scream and tried attacking the boy next to Day-Glo, a teenager in a tank-top advertising a fast-food chain. Lance managed to get a solid hit into the teenager’s stomach knocking some of the air out of him but tank-top retaliated automatically, sending Lance backwards as stars exploded in front of his right eye.

Rage engulfed Keith but Lance just sat back confused, his hand pressed to eye as he shivered.

“You’re killing him…please stop.”

The small boy said in a weaker more confused voice. He sounded at a total loss, the cruelty of the people in front of him something he just could not comprehend. As the shark died so did Lance McClain’s innocent ignorance of what a shitty place the world could be.

There was a sound of pounding feet behind him and Keith looked over just in time to see his brother Teo come ripping into the fray, arms swinging.

“Fuck off you little assholes! If I see your faces again I’m reporting you for assault!”

His swelling eye forgotten, Keith tottered towards the shark grabbing it by the base of its tail as carefully as possible and pulling it towards the water. It had stopped fighting, its gill slits were still pumping feebly but it made no attempt to snap at Teo as he ran around it and helped Lance pull it towards the ocean.

He was wearing a hairnet and a stained white apron which made Keith think they had been working in the food-cart above the beach. Teo looked younger than Keith had seen him before, college age-maybe home on break. The older McClain brother grunted and finally some of the sand gave way allowing them to pull the shark into the shallows.

Lance grabbed the shark by the dorsal fin and tried to move it so water flowed over its gills;
something that utterly baffled Keith. Lance apparently knew more about the ocean than just the color.

“Come on!”
Lance sobbed at the shark.

“You’ve got to move!”
Teo grabbed his brother under the armpits and hefted him up as he started to float further out into the water.

“Come on Lance, you’ve done all you can Cap. You don’t want him turning his teeth on you. If Mama knew I let you maneuver that thing around at all I would be a dead man walking!”

Keith went limp in his brother’s grip watching anxiously from the beach as the shark’s long, limp tail disappeared into darker, deeper water; taken out to sea by a sudden wave.

“He wasn’t moving. I…I don’t know if he was okay. I don’t know if I saved him or not.”
Teo’s arms wrapped tight around Keith, hugging his snugly from behind.

“You did the best you could Captain…”

His brother’s special term of endearment did nothing to placate Lance who was soaking wet up to his bellybutton.

“It was just a little Thresher shark…not even a big one. Why wouldn’t they help it? Why would they do that! I don’t understand!”

Hoisting his little brother like a suitcase Teo propped him under his arm and started to walk back towards a nearby parking lot.

“Because not everyone is as good as you are. Especially not to little things they think don’t matter.”

Keith felt Lance’s heart going at a hummingbird’s pace against his ribs as he looked back at the water again. His vision was cloudy in his newly acquired black eye which was rapidly swelling shut.

“But…”

“Just keep sticking up for little things Captain. Keep being good…Shit, how we gonna explain that eye to Mama…”

Keith tumbled out of the memory and out into darkness feeling extremely disoriented. He couldn’t tell up from down and the shark memory had felt more like an attack than a Viewing.

He tried to settle his nerves as more memories floated past like blue icebergs in a black ocean. He watched a love-struck Lance holding his baby niece Amelia for the first time, the Garrison new recruits induction ceremony and a Halloween party where he got his first kiss dressed, ironically, like a giant Hershey’s kiss.

Keith felt a weirdly jealous desire to see what that memory was about. In the few seconds he gleaned from it as it passed the only thing he knew for sure was that Carmen had made the costume and the kiss was…disappointing. Why was that a relief? Why was he envious of a fourteen year old girl?

Don’t answer that, Keith thought to the Lance imprint that couldn’t answer.

At the thought of imprints, Keith pushed back to the task at hand. He debated the best way to look for his imprint and finally just reached out among the seemingly endless blue sea of memories looking for something red and possibly angry.

Can you hear me? He thought at nothing and no one. You’re a piece of me and I need you back. We need to merge or…do something so I can find Lance.

The direction of Keith’s bodiless drifting altered and it suddenly felt like he was moving down, falling deeper into the rabbit hole. The pressing sensation of Lance was everywhere; his scent, the color of his eyes and even the faint far off sound of his pulse. Keith tried to think only about himself; a tiny spot of blood in a giant bucket of clean water.

Slowly something started to change. Subtly at first but then the memories moved faster, even ones that seemed vivid and important moved too fast for Keith to see. The more he focused on his own thoughts and body the more it felt like he was being drawn magnetically towards what he assumed was his imprint.

The farther he went the brighter the memories shone and Keith realized he had been following a bizarre trail of remembrance crumbs that would have eventually lead him to the core. His
intuition had been right all along. They would have found Lance eventually but it seemed he had found the right shortcut.

And then…

Keith’s chest was a mass of pure pain. There was glass in his lungs and knives in his diaphragm and every small breath was agony. He was having trouble getting his bearings and the pain was so intense he almost lost himself in it entirely. This was Lance’s pain, Keith reminded himself. This is Lance’s pain and Lance’s memory. He hadn’t seen it coming, he hadn’t seen a flicker of anything in advance but this had to be a memory.

He needed to get away from whatever this hurt was. Away from whatever memory this was. Something like this couldn’t possibly hold anything pleasant, anything worth suffering for. The red paladin tried to pull away and reach back into the void between memories where the pain wouldn’t follow him but a fresh tidal wave of scalding hurt distracted him.

Turning his attention back to the blurry darkness that was all Lance could see, Keith tried to feel for the blue paladin’s thoughts but everything was slow, mangled and distorted.

“Lance, I don’t know if you can hear me but hang on okay?”

Shiro’s voice broke through the dark but it was muted, strange. A combination of tinny ringing and irregular whooshing nearly drowned out the black paladin’s comforting words. Keith felt his limbs shaking. He felt so cold. Shock, he was going into shock or maybe he was already in shock.

Screaming, he could hear Shiro screaming in pain. It was more terrifying than the pain or the darkness and Lance made another desperate attempt to open his eyes. The strange sound in his ears wasn’t getting any better. The swishing reminded Keith of an ancient dishwasher in one of his foster mother’s kitchens but over the top of it was a noise like a tight rubber-band being plucked. The pain in his chest was so extreme it almost made the pain in his head and eardrums a tickle in comparison.

He-Keith…finally managed to get his eyes open. At first everything was a blur, a meaningless smear of colors and motion. He made a low, lost noise, staring into the confusion as its movements became more frenzied, more hectic.

“Pidge?”

That was Shiro’s voice…soft, weak. Why was he calling for Pidge? Keith, No…was he Lance? The pain was all there was to him, it was so overwhelming he couldn’t think. Lance and Keith blinked rapidly and stared at the nearest blobby mass as it slowly turned into a person he knew.

They tried to say Shiro’s name and their voice came out as a meaningless jumble of raspy syllables. Movement caught Lance’s attention and Keith spotted something huge move into his narrow line of sight.

It was…a Galra? Why was there a Galran here…he was huge. One of his arms was a halo of glowing purple light and he was wrestling someone. Shiro’s voice muttered indiscernibly through the rush of blood in Lance’s damaged eardrums.

The Galran was trying to hurt something small…and green. Pidge? Yes. Pidge was in trouble, family was in trouble. Keith’s senses screamed through the pain. You have to do something, you have to protect him. Pidge can’t be hurt you have to do something now.

Everything slowed, the pain faded as adrenaline rushed to take its place. Lance’s vision sharpened as he reached shakily for his Bayard, surprised to find it still at his side. The paladin tried to understand what was happening. Shiro was bound, a Galran was here and he vaguely remembered an explosion. He had all the pieces but he just couldn’t put them together. That wasn’t important right now anyway, only Pidge was important.

Keith felt himself lifting the blue Bayard as it transformed in his hands. The pain muted to a dull roar in the back of his mind as he, Lance-the both of them looked down the barrel of the heavy gun. The Galran hadn’t noticed, he was screeching in fury holding a small green paladin roughly in a death grip. Words were coming out of his mouth but Lance couldn’t decipher them.

The fear for Pidge eased the shaking in his hands and with all the strength left in his stringy body Keith-Lance fired. He watched the shot hit and the adrenal fire surging through his brain and broken ribcage suddenly wasn’t enough to keep him upright. Lance slumped backwards, the gun fading from his hands.

He sucked in small bit of air but it didn’t quench the burning in his lungs or the ache behind his eyes. Lance watched from under heavy eyelids as more colors ran into the room, their voices distressed and distant. The room itself faded in and out with each heartbeat and when Keith finally managed to bring himself back to the surface of his awareness he was looking up at…Keith; A memory of himself.

The memory Keith reached out a hand where Lance could see it. Keith brought his hand up
mechanically and gripped it. At first it seemed like this memory red paladin was going to try and make Lance get to his feet but then he went down on one knee his face coming so close Keith could see his-Lance’s face reflected in his own violet eyes.

It all was all a messy blended blur: the explosion- Galran, capture-Shiro and Pidge. Lance still couldn’t put together a complete picture from the slivers of lucid thought. But he knew they had stopped something…they had…

“Lance, Are you okay?”

The voice was so gentle, so full of uncharacteristic concern. Keith stared up disoriented at his memory self trying to raise himself up, squeezing a reply out of his busted insides.

“We did it. We are a good team.”

Lance could barely hear his own voice, barely knew what he was saying. He wondered if what he said made sense. He was only half speaking about whatever had just happened. He knew he was a part of whatever victory they had just scored but more so he was talking about everything. He was talking about forming Voltron. To him that chunk of time and this chunk of time were interchangeable. He just wanted Keith to know that they, all of them and the two of them together, were a good team.

Keith watched a small smile form on his own face still struggling to pull himself out of the blue paladin’s pain and possible concussion. Lance’s body was stuck, he couldn’t make it to his feet and memory Keith was holding him upright. He gagged on a cough stuck in his throat and Keith felt the small smile they had managed slip off Lance’s face.

“Keith….Lance to the infirmary? Pidge …..get the castle back under control ….need Shiro….remove the Galra crystal.”

Allura was speaking but Keith was only getting half the words. He felt arms wrap around him and gave a moan of pain when someone tried to lift him. Voices, shapes and mumbling surrounded him and whatever momentary sense of triumph was eaten by pain. He was being lifted and held against a warm body. Moving…and then he could hear a voice right next to his ear.

“Lance…I need you to stay awake.”

A surge of some raw, foreign emotion took Keith by surprise. He recognized his own voice and the fuzzy contour of his own face when Lance opened his eyes. The red paladin collected and separated himself. He knew this. This was right after they had defeated Sendak; he had carried Lance to the infirmary. He had stayed with him for hours while the new Balmeran crystal was put in place.

“Lance, can you hear me? Shiro thinks you're bleeding inside from the explosion.”

Something fizzled up in Lance’s brain and Keith had no way to describe it other than pink. The blue paladin took a shallow breath reaching a numb hand towards his rescuer’s face.

“Keith…”

“Yeah…it’s me.”

Keith curled closer to his own chest and by now the shock was starting to make the pain in his torso and limbs feel indistinct and cottony. That wasn’t good-had any of them realized how badly Lance had been hurt? Shiro shouldn’t have moved him around the way he had. It had probably only made the bleeding worse.

Keith was aware this was his window to pull away from the memory but the sudden flux of that warm, pink emotion made him pause. The outside Keith, the memory one slowed his pace and tried to put Lance down on something soft. They had reached the infirmary and Lance whined low his rapid breathing growing even faster as he tried to grip memory Keith’s shoulder.

“No…don’t…”

“I’m not gonna leave you I promise. Allura said to get your armor off.”

The intense heat in Keith’s stomach filled his battered chest as Lance closed his eyes, his thoughts slow but fully-formed. Safe, he felt safe. The ringing in his ears was still there and sure the internal bleeding thing was bad but Keith was here and Keith was safety.

Lance shivered and the infirmary bed he had been laid out on compressed underneath him. He could barely feel his armor being pulled away or the blanket that was wrapped around him. Keith muttered as his upper body was pulled up onto a pillow on a very familiar lap. Arms moved around his shoulders, cradling him loosely against an armored chest.

The paladin’s awareness of his surroundings wasn’t the most solid but he knew memory Keith was there and he smiled when he was held. The pink feeling intensified and with it came a flood of other glowing feelings all of them firmly directed at memory Keith. Affection, gratitude and more than anything else there was just…love.
The anxious, outside memory Keith waited for the lights to turn back on and would sporadically talk to Lance about nothing. He would question what everyone was doing or talk vaguely about something from the Garrison. The inside Keith was getting frustrated because this memory of him was doing a lousy job as a caretaker.

"Keith…"

The voice was barely there, a hiss in the silent room. It seemed to have finally dawned on Lance that he was in really bad shape, possibly dying. He didn’t feel afraid just fixated on the red paladin’s arms around his neck. The pink emotion fluttered along with Lance’s sluggish pulse. He was tired but maybe he could just tell Keith…before he went to sleep.

"I…lo-"

The emergency lights flickered and Keith watched himself react, completely ignoring the dying confession from the delirious paladin in his lap.

“They must be trying to get the power working! I’m going to go check alright? I’m just gonna leave you for a second.”

Lance didn’t bother to try again, his vision was tunneling and he was so tired. Keith felt their eyes closing and he sighed low. How could Lance love him so much, with so much intensity? It had felt so good he could see why the Young Mother was drawn to him. Why she thought she loved him too. Keith felt that maybe Lance was wrong. What had he done to even earn this from him? God, why hadn’t he stayed in the infirmary? He had held him, but he could have done more. He should have listened.

The memory started to sputter oddly, the dim infirmary guttering in and out like a candle, the world dropping out frames like a broken film reel. The pink emotion lingered as Keith felt Lance start to lose consciousness but oddly the world did not fade to black.

Instead Keith was looking up into his own face again but his eyes now shone a bright, familiar red. Keith saw every pore in his own skin as the imprint leaned close to Lance’s face.

“I’ve felt and heard you and the big alien in here before. I ignored you because I was scared to leave him alone but- You said you wanted to try merging right?”

Keith saw every pore in his own skin as the imprint leaned close to Lance’s face.

“I hadn’t thought of that. Maybe it could work? I’ve been keeping him from drifting. I can’t convince him to go with her but maybe if you join with me you can. Merged we could be strong enough to bring them together…then maybe she could take him home.”

The imprint sounded distraught running a gloved hand through his hair. It was a motion Keith recognized as distress; He always played with his hair when he was at a loss.

“If he’ll go at all. He gets so lost. I’m not you. I can’t get him to listen because I’m not there. I’m just a voice, I’m not in that memory-but you could try.”

The imprint bit his lower lip and stared at Keith angrily. Nothing he said made any sense but the red paladin was almost afraid to interrupt himself. He knew his own temper too well.

“You’ve got to get him out. It’s not real! I can’t watch him forget anymore…”

Running both hands up through his bangs the imprint growled and pulled at the dark strands in aimless rage. Yeah, Keith thought, this was a part of his quintessence all right.

“We have to save him!”

Pulling his hands slowly from his face the imprint stared at Keith with a scowl, his eyes widening until the entire world seemed bathed in a hot, red light. The imprint reached towards him moving closer until they obstructed everything and Keith found himself expelled back into the void place between memories.

With a choked laugh he gazed down at his hands and saw a solid shape made of bright red
light. He turned it this way and that watching his body leave hazy afterglows in its path.

Taking a step forward Keith avoided the memories around him with ease. It was so much simpler when he had a body to navigate and hands to touch. He just had to keep going forward and…

Keith stopped as a thought struck him and a gentle pull tugged in his chest. Just like that he knew.

He knew where Lance was.

Chapter End Notes

I had to watch the Lance shooting out of a coma scene like an obscene amount of times as I wrote this. I realized after multiple viewings that when he says the line to Keith about being a good team he has NO idea what the hell is going on. From his POV it goes Boom. Coma. WAKE UP. PIDGE IS IN DANGER OH NO! SHOOT! Coma. Wake up. Oh hey Keith is here I love that guy. Coma. And Keith doesn't explain what's happening either because in the next episode Allura actually explains what happened while he was out. That means that the cradling in the arms thing happened after Lance said a line that makes no sense except for being weirdly gay then probably passed out again. Good job Lance.

The shark selfie thing has really happened multiple times. Tourists have killed sharks and dolphins doing it and I doubt Lance would stand by and let it happen.

Thanks for all the comments and Kudos it really keeps me writing. And thanks always to CJ the proofreader extraordinaire.
If you would like to come and talk to me or say hi on tumblr I am here----
>http://blairtrabbit.tumblr.com/
When Keith was enrolled in High School he didn’t care much about it. His life had been aimless before the Garrison and most of his focus had only come after Shiro started to steer him in a better direction.

He had never felt stupid, when he actually made an effort good grades came easily enough, but Keith struggled to find a reason to care about grades. He was too restless to sit for long periods of time and listening had never been his forte. Class participation was meaningless, as was hours of poring over books to learn things Keith didn’t find useful.

Keith didn’t remember much about his senior year, but he did remember his last English course; or at least one day of it. His teacher was named Mr. Akagi and he was a soft-spoken man with a love of mythology. The only time he ever raised his voice or showed any sort of passion was when he was recounting a story of a long dead hero or forgotten god.

Keith liked Mr. Akagi’s class because as long as he kept his eyes open and looked like he was paying some semblance of attention the quiet teacher would mark him as attending and leave him alone. There had been one exception to this- and now, walking through the poorly lit landscape of Lance’s scrim, it was all Keith could think about.

Without any explanation Mr. Akagi had called Keith to the front of the classroom and turned off the lights. He instructed him to walk from one end of the room to the other as slowly as possible. And, Akagi had added, no matter what happened he could not turn around. If Keith managed this simple mission then he would get an automatic A on the assignment and could leave early for the day.

As he walked across the dark room someone followed behind Keith to poke him and make random noises. It had only taken four steps before the paladin had lost his patience, gave in and turned around. Keith was sure that Mr. Akagi had singled him out on purpose; possibly he had heard the rumors about his student’s famously short temper.

The lesson ended up being about some Greek guy named Orpheus who had gone into the underworld-which was basically hell, to get his girlfriend back. The caveat being that the god of death told Orpheus that he had to walk all the way back up to earth without turning around once. He couldn’t check to see if his love was really behind him. Orpheus didn’t make it; He and Keith had that much in common.

As Keith stumbled through firefly swarms of swirling blue memories he had to fight the urge to stop and look at them. Small musical tones and whispery voices called to him on all sides. He had been working so hard to find the core and now that he had a straight path to it he was surprised how difficult it was to ignore each bright memory as it glided by.

He hadn’t thought about Orpheus, the failed test or Mr. Akagi in years. Now, between the warm tug in his chest and the cold fear in his stomach Keith kept wondering if he was going to turn around and watch Lance pulled back into the dark because he couldn’t control himself. It was an utterly irrational thought that he just couldn’t shake.

A fuzzy blue memory the size of Keith’s head floated past at shoulder level and he heard sobbing leak from inside it. He refrained from turning as it flitted away. The red paladin shook his head wearily; he could feel Lance’s Keith imprint curled inside his skull. They were still separated and now it was just a knot of quintessence that couldn’t shove itself back in with the rest of him; a puzzle piece warped by moisture that would never fit quite right.

The body the imprint had given him still glowed faintly with an ethereal, red light; though it faded more with each passing second. Beneath the waning light were Keith’s ordinary, everyday clothes and his usual, non-luminescent body. The red paladin decided never to take for granted having a body again. It was something you missed when you were just a loose bundle of consciousness.

Despite the body and the ability to understand up from down Keith still wasn’t sure what he was walking on. Whenever he looked at his feet he saw a dark stretch of absolute nothing; no ground… not even stars. He decided not to dwell on it.

The memories started to taper off and Keith followed the bug-sized stragglers uneasily, unsure what to expect when he found the core. He actually heard it before he saw it, an immense planet of swirling light animated by Lance’s pulse. The core gave off a whole symphony of chimes, voices and distant music. It shone like a sun in the center of the scrim’s galaxy, all other memories caught in its gravitational pull. The red paladin held his breath as he reached out a careful hand to touch the scrim’s thrumming center.

There was no noise or sensation when Keith laid his fingers on the core. Without any sort of transition or preamble he was simply there, inside the memory. The whole process was
Keith found himself standing on a quiet street in an eerily empty neighborhood. Palm trees rose above him on both sides and each little house looked a bit shabby but extremely well cared for. The sun was just beginning to set, lowering plump and orange below the horizon. It cast a magical shade of amber light over the suburban ghost town which only added to Keith’s uneasiness.

Somewhere an automatic sprinkler system activated and a stray wind blew a half-empty beach ball lazily across the street near the red paladin’s feet. He followed its progress, watching the same breeze tease movement from some dangling swings on a vacant swing set.

The houses were all brightly painted, a range of sea-blues, foam-greens and tangerine oranges. Flowerbeds, wind-chimes and the occasional lawn flamingo ruled the landscape and Keith started to feel a sense of déjà vu as he took it all in. He had seen some of these houses in Lance’s memories; this was definitely his neighborhood.

A screech of music drew Keith’s attention. A heavy bass line began reverberating between the alleys of houses and the sound-dampening cover of mature trees. Moving off the road and onto the sidewalk the red paladin followed the noise. He was just drawing close enough to make out lyrics when the sidewalk emptied out into a cul-de-sac. It would have looked as normal and perfectly residential as the rest of the neighborhood except for one key difference.

In the center of a worn street loaded with potholes sat the Blue Lion of Voltron.

She filled up the entire road from edge to edge, her tail sweeping over the faded paint of the yellow center line. Each of her metal haunches just barely touched the fences of the houses on either side of the street. A chunky jeep had been pushed aside by her left back paw as she struggled to fit herself between manicured lawns and carefully managed drought landscaping.

The Blue Lion was so large that even in a sitting position her head was at least a story above the nearest scruffy ranch-house and her shoulders just brushed a small satellite dish attached to the top of a diminutive pink split-level.

Keith ran through a bed of marigolds and over a tall, recently-stained fence so he could get around to the front of the lion. His breath came in short puffs as he waved his arms to get her attention. The paladin paused mid-motion when he glanced down the street and saw what Blue was staring at.

Just a block away from the massive leg of the defender of the universe was the round end of the cul-de-sac and the answer to the mystery of why the neighborhood was empty. There was a party going on and every person within a five mile radius looked like they were here eating barbecue. A large banner surrounded by silver and blue balloons was hung just above the cul-de-sac entrance and in bold, blue hand-painted letters it proclaimed:

“Congratulations Lance!”

The Blue Lion gave an excited purr and lowered her head towards Keith carefully, her eyes lighting up a bright gold. The paladin tore his attention away from the block party and reached up to rest his palms on the bottom of Blue’s chin in greeting.

“Hey Blue.”

A thousand images accosted Keith and he winced at the sudden unfamiliar pressure of a lion in his head that wasn’t his own. At first he couldn’t understand what she was trying to say. She spoke in the same way Red did, with pictures rather than words, but it was like she spoke with a thick, foreign accent. He wasn’t used to it and deciphering her “words” was not that easy when she spoke a mile a minute.

“Hey, Slow down…I don’t understand you.”

The metal in the Blue Lion’s jaw gave a groan as she clenched it tightly. The light in her eyes dimming and brightening as if she had just blinked very slowly. Her voice in Keith’s brain became quieter and less frantic, the images eventually coming at a rate that he could handle.

He saw a memory of Blue’s old paladin being hurt in a firefight; he was in a coma, and then transferred to a healing pod. After this the view changed to Blue’s P.O.V. and she was in some dark blue place full of shimmering water—the inside of the other Paladin’s head Keith guessed.

At the end of this string of images was a looping clip of Keith and Lance speaking one on one in the hangar; about what Keith couldn’t remember. There was a question in there somewhere and Keith hoped he had decoded it properly.

“I- yes? It’s really me, the real Keith. I’m sorry it took so long to find Lance.”

Keith leaned against Blue’s paw and observed the block party curiously; it looked amazing. The entire extended McClain clan plus all their friends and neighbors had really gone all out.

Blue Christmas lights and streamers hung from the trees and streetlights. Balloons of silver, black and cyan hung everywhere, floating near tables and above mailboxes. The McCain’s food...
truck was parked and giving out platefuls of Cuban home-cooking right next to a gigantic BBQ grill turning out burger after burger. A potluck table groaning under the weight of homemade salads and desserts took up one whole side of the street.

A small stage had been set up in the McClain’s driveway and Keith recognized Teo and a few of his friends up there in a sort of garage band. They were playing for a large group of laughing teenagers. As the sky turned darker one of the smaller children ran past with a sparkler in hand chasing their sibling through a crowd of chatting adults. It was…it was magic.

Keith shook his head.

“It…makes perfect sense that this would be his core memory.”

Blue gave a tired coo in agreement. In her head images of the current paladin’s came followed by memories of Lance’s family. In all these short bursts of soundless thought Lance looked elated just being surrounded by people. He was happiest around his loved ones, and being the center of attention was always a bonus.

The Blue Lion moaned low in her throat and images of a straining chain passed through Keith’s mind’s eye. There was a sense of urgency as she showed him the Castle of Lion’s getting closer from a distance. The message was crystal clear; I can’t hold onto him like this forever, get him to me and I’ll take him home.

Keith hugged himself and shivered at a sudden chill in the air. Outside the warm circle of the well-lit party and the hum of gas powered generators he suddenly realized how cold it was. The street lights hadn’t come on around him and Blue and there wasn’t a house on the street beyond the party with its lights on.

“Why can’t you just go get him? He’s there somewhere right?”

Blue flicked her tail agitated and accidentally broke a nearby picket fence. She growled in frustration and Keith witnessed a parade of harried images; Lance coming to her readily in the secret cave in Arizona, The blue paladin letting go as they flew in formation to create Voltron. I can’t force him, the memories relayed; he has to come to me willingly. So much of a bond between paladin and lion was about complete, unwavering trust. To save him she had to keep that bond rock solid.

Clenching his fists Keith nodded.

“I get it, and this place is a trap. He’s supposed to want to stay here, right? It would probably be impossible for you to get him out by yourself.”

Keith watched Teo accidentally kick his microphone stand down as he tried to do a power move mid-song. Isa was eating a piece of cake and watching a herd of kids giggling as they played fetch with an enthusiastic, elderly Great Dane.

Keith squared his shoulders and took a hesitant step forward unsure why he was suddenly so damn nervous.

“Does he at least know you’re here?”

The robot’s several ton tail twitched again sending a mailbox flying and smashing a nearby birdbath into chunks of ceramic and concrete. She sent only one moving image this time. A beach, a tide-line covered in the tiny footprints of sandpipers and seagulls. One moment the prints were there as obvious indents in the wet sand and a moment later the tide washed in and everything was smooth again; as if the footprints and the birds were never there. It was just like the imprint had said—“I can’t watch him forget anymore.”

Taking a breath so deep his lungs felt ready to pop, Keith fussed with his hair and took a step towards the end of the cul-de-sac. Looking up into Blue’s eyes he put on a sure smile he didn’t feel.

“I’ll get him and bring him back. This will all be over soon. I promise.”

Blue purred low and unsure leaning down to nudge Keith gently with her nose. Her inner “voice” was so much calmer than Red’s; A flame versus flowing water. The red paladin rubbed a hand distractedly over Blue’s chin and nodded.

“Here goes…something.”

Taking measured steps down into the chaos of the party Keith took his surroundings in anxiously. He cast a look behind him and could just see the glisten of the Blue Lion’s eyes through a thick layer of tree branches; her paws and body hidden in the darkness.

The party was in full swing as Keith entered the roundabout and into the ring of lights and lanterns. He kept his hands close to his chest as he navigated the knots of conversing party goers, feeling instantly out of place. Any kind of social gathering was a minefield for the red paladin but something this intimate and family oriented was a special kind of introvert hell.
Making his way to the food table where the crowding wasn’t as bad Keith realized that nobody was paying attention to him. Not because they were purposefully ignoring him to be rude— it was because he didn’t seem to exist in a literal sense. Something else the imprint said floated back up as he watched a dimly familiar uncle open a fresh can of beer.

“ I’m just a voice, I’m not in that memory ”, the imprint had said in a fit of exasperation and Keith understood now. The people here weren’t real, all their behaviors and reactions were dictated by what Lance remembered. They were like an elaborate museum exhibit, a historical diorama rendered in amazing detail.

There was no memory Keith here for the imprint to possess so he could only speak in the blue paladin’s head. Unlike the imprint however, Keith was a real person. He couldn’t interact with the memory itself but he could interact with the only other person who wasn’t a hologram…Lance.

Staring down at a plate of fresh fruit Keith gave a plaintive groan. He couldn’t remember the last time he had tasted ripe cantaloupe. There wasn’t any in the desert and there sure as hell wouldn’t be any in space. The memory food probably wouldn’t taste like anything either, trying it would be a lost cause.

Keith sighed and walked around to the back of the food table where he could get a good look at the lay of the land without being in the way. He wasn’t sure what would happen if he bumped or jostled any of the memory people but he wasn’t in a hurry to find out.

After scanning the crowds for any sign of the blue paladin Keith came up frustratingly empty. This party was for Lance but he seemed distressingly absent from it. Someone stood next to Keith leaning down to cut a chunk from a huge sheet cake. Keith startled when they almost brushed him and he looked up to see Isa licking frosting from her fingers.

Keith couldn’t help but stare at her. He had only seen her from inside Lance’s head and each time she had felt like his sister too. She looked older than the last time he had seen her but the same smile was always around her eyes. She grabbed a knife and expertly flipped it one handed as she examined the next place to cut a piece from the cake.

Even though he knew she couldn’t hear him Keith felt compelled to compliment a good knife trick.

“Nice one. Too bad you never taught Lance that.”

Finally turned his attention from Isa Keith glanced at the grotesquely large bit of pastry. In swirling, frosted letters it read “Good Luck Lance! See you in Space!” Keith drew in a small breath; The Garrison. The banner was congratulating Lance on being accepted into the Garrison. All his years of hard work and good grades and supportive family had lead up to this moment.

Keith felt like an idiot. He hadn’t really thought about what this party was for. The banner said “Congratulations Lance” but he hadn’t thought about what it was congratulating him for. This wasn’t his core memory just because of the party. To Lance this was the party; the cumulative efforts of him and all the people supporting him. Shit.

Y.M. was right about everything except for Keith being here; hot damn their guesses had been right on the money. Shaking his head Keith spoke out loud to Isa again, if only to keep from feeling friendless in a strange place.

“Hey Isa, Do you know where Lance is?”

Isa ignored him, or more accurately she didn’t hear him. She squinted at something in the distance and shouted so loud it made Keith flinch.

“HEY! YOU KIDS GET AWAY FROM THOSE FIREWORKS! Déjalo!”

Plate of cake in hand Isa walked around the table still chewing out the offending kids in rapid Spanish; truly a force to be reckoned with.

Hopping over a cooler and a tangle of extension cords Keith reached out and cautiously touched the side of the McClain food truck. The texture of the truck was…off. The paladin could feel something under his fingertips but it had no real consistency or temperature.

It was just a solid mass that could have been cloth as easily as metal.

The nothing material made Keith’s fingertips prickle and he drew back like he had been zapped. Everything in the memory would probably feel like that to him. When he wasn’t touching things through Lance his brain didn’t seem to know how to interpret them.

The music paused and up on stage Teo stepped aside to let one of his (admittedly more talented) friends take over for him. They played some soft, slow covers Keith half-recognized.

When Teo walked past him Keith felt reassured, the same way he had felt around Isa. He decided to trail after to the older sibling to see where he was going. He hadn’t seen Lance near the stage or the food or with the main gathering so maybe he was in a house or someplace private.
The red paladin hadn’t made it five steps when he heard the all too familiar laugh. It hit him like a kick to the chest and Keith had a moment of panic where he almost turned on his heel and ran in the opposite direction. He thumped himself in the center of his own forehead with the palm of his hand and shook this off. That laugh was the reason he was here in the first place.

Taking a last cautious step after Teo, Keith placed his hand on a nearby tree and peered around it. The tree was the exact same non-existent texture as the food truck and it was off-putting just resting against it. Fighting a shudder Keith spotted a small group of people sitting on an oversized, open front porch.

Situated smack dab in the center of them was Lance in all his lanky glory.

He looked only slightly younger than when Keith had first met him. His hair was cropped very short. The preferred style for new recruits entering their first month of Garrison boot-camp. The rules about hair length were more lax after the first year but Keith had always flouted them whenever possible.

Lit from behind by a friendly, golden porch light and strings of white Christmas lights Lance was smiling brightly at the intimate assembly around him. From what Keith could see and remember from his Viewings Lance was sitting between his Father, his Uncles Ramon and Elon and his fraternal twin cousins on his Mother’s side Coro and Cordaro. Keith remembered the twins very vividly from an incident involving Lance when he was seven, his hair, scissors and some chewed gum.

Ramon patted Lance’s back handing him a package wrapped in plain newspaper. His father, Jack, beamed at him and nodded for him to open it. Keith felt his throat close as he watched the blue paladin from a safe distance, straining to listen to what he was saying. When the words only came to him in small unintelligible snatches Keith inched closer until he was leaning on the porch next to the twins, desperately trying to look inconspicuous.

He needed to talk to Lance when he was alone, he wasn’t sure what would happen if he talked to him around these shadow people but he didn’t want to scare the blue paladin if he could help it.

Lance gave his Uncle Elon a confused look, his eyebrow raised as he held the gift in his hands.

“I thought we weren’t doing presents ‘til midnight?”

Uncle Ramon gave a mysterious shrug.

“Mmm this one must be special. Go on Lance, open it!”

Keith watched with rapt interest as Lance ripped open the top of the package carefully, pulling away a piece of hastily curled ribbon. Lance gasped when he saw what it was and pulled out a piece of familiar clothing reverently. It was his oversized, green jacket, the one Keith rarely saw him take off.

Lance stared at the jacket for long moment his eyes shining. He sniffled and hugged it close to his chest.

“Are you sure? I mean…Isn’t Teo supposed to-”

Teo had snuck up behind his father. He sat next to him on the porch and leaned over his shoulder to smile at his brother.

“I already met Elinor. The magic jacket has done its job, Captain. I bequeath it to you.”

Lance eagerly pulled off the green Galaxy Garrison sweatshirt he was already wearing, tossing it on the porch. He was about to slip an arm into the jacket but his father held up a stern hand.

“Not so fast Lance. There’s a ceremony to these things. Give it here.”

Keith watched Lance hand over the jacket reluctantly, shivering a bit in the cool air. He was wearing a thin black tank-top, his broad shoulders lacking the muscle he would build in the Garrison and as a paladin.

Jack cleared his throat dramatically and held the jacket up where everyone could see it.

“This jacket is a family heirloom going back to…well, me. I met Carmen in this jacket and we had our first kiss while I was wearing it. Then I let Ramon borrow it.”

He handed the jacket to his brother and Ramon held it up like some sacred object giving a very serious nod.

“I was wearing this jacket when Riza ran into me with her bike and the first time she heard me play guitar. First kiss came a few minutes after that.”

The jacket passed hands once more going to Teo. He rubbed the hood fabric fondly between finger and thumb.
“I was wearing this jacket when Elinor held an elevator for me and I asked her out…First kiss, same jacket. She almost spilled a cup of coffee on it mid-kiss tho. Crisis barely avoided.”

Chuckling at the memory Teo handed the jacket back to Lance who accepted it with awe.

“Now the luck is all yours, Cap.”

Lance looked around the circle expectantly.

“So…can I put it on now?”

Jack slapped his son’s back grinning from ear to ear.

“Do it hijo. Put the dang thing on!”

Keith drew in a breath as Lance pulled the jacket around his shoulders. He had no idea such a normal, nondescript object could have that much meaning attached to it. Lance had been wearing it when he first met him during Shiro’s rescue from the military but…had he been wearing it before? Did that time technically count as their first meeting? The red paladin shook his head feeling stupid for thinking about this. He felt his ears turn red and his chest tighten as he monitored Lance and waited for an opening.

His chance came only a few minutes later when Lance’s mother Carmen approached and asked her husband to go for an ice run. They were already running low. The two uncles went with him and Teo wandered back towards the stage with the twins in tow. Lance was left alone on the porch step admiring his new jacket.

Keith ran his hands through his hair a few times feeling implausibly anxious. He kept telling himself it was because he wasn’t sure how Lance was going to react when he saw him but- that wasn’t the whole truth and he knew it. Doing his best to appear casual the red paladin ambled right up to Lance and leaned on the porch railing next to him. He folded his arms, frowned and stared out at nothing in particular.

“Hey- Uh, nice party.”

Lance turned to look at him and Keith met his gaze expectantly, holding his breath in anticipation. The blue paladin’s forehead furrowed for a moment and there was confusion in his eyes as he took Keith in. He examined him from top to bottom and it seemed, if only for a few seconds, that there was recognition in his expression.

He grinned wide at Keith and quirked an eyebrow, his voice mock serious.

“It’s a good thing you showed up because I just got off the phone with your doctor.”

Keith blinked at Lance baffled. He should have been overjoyed that the paladin could see him but he was too busy trying to figure out what the hell he was talking about.

“I- what?...”

Lance lifted a finger and pointed it at Keith clicking his tongue.

“He said you were seriously lacking in vitamin me.”

The blush was all over his cheeks before Keith could contain it. The last thing he had expected was Lance to flirt with him. He wasn’t really surprised that the blue paladin didn’t remember him but he was a little disappointed. Keith rubbed at the back of his neck awkwardly and pondered his next move. If he could get Lance to see the Blue Lion maybe…

“Ha, sorry that was probably dumb. So what’s your name? Are you a new neighbor? I don’t recognize you.”

Keith turned back to Lance and found him on his feet and standing very close.

“Oh, yeah- I’m Keith.”

“I’m Lance!”

“I know.”

Crap, Keith thought, as the words spilled out of his mouth. The blue paladin stared at him suspiciously a minute before he laughed.

“Well, yeah that makes sense. You’re at a party where my name is all over everything.”

“Haha…yeah.”

Lance was so close Keith could feel his body heat and it struck him that…this was really Lance. He had really found him. He was here. The red paladins mouth went dry and he swallowed looking anywhere but Lance, trying to think of something intelligent to say.
“So. The Galaxy Garrison, huh?”

Lance brightened and nodded trying to look Keith in the eye. A blinding, sincere smile plastered over his features.

“Yeah! It took awhile but I made it!”

“I—er—I’m a cadet at the Garrison.”

Keith felt strong hands grab his shoulders and Lance looked into his face beaming like the sun.

“Seriously?! That’s amazing! How long have you been there? You’ll have to show me the ropes! Are you a pilot? Engineer? I’m going to be a pilot! Fighter class of course.”

“Lance…listen.”

Keith licked his lips nervously as a pleasant heat suffused his chest. When he said the blue paladin’s name he stopped babbling and stared at Keith with his eyebrows scrunch. Keith debated how to break the ice, broach the whole—‘you’re a cosmic freedom fighter in a mind cage and I’m here to get you out—subject.’

“You—we’ve gone to the Garrison together before. You and I were both pilots, we still are. Keith Kagone, Hunk Garrett…Pidge Gunderson? Any of those names ring a bell?”

Lance slowly pulled his hands to his chest his expression going from excited to bewildered in a matter of seconds.

“Noo…I’m sorry you must have me confused with some other handsome, talented, Cuban guy.”

He managed a strangled laugh at this trying to make a joke out of everything and Keith knew Lance was expecting him to go along with it, apologize and laugh the whole thing off. Instead the red paladin took a tiny step towards him.

“How about Takashi Shirogone? I bet you’ve heard of him and the Kerberos mission? He and his crew are going to disappear but then…then they come back and we—”

Lance moved away from Keith nearly tripping on a thick extension cord that snaked between two porch railings and out into the damp, grassy lawn. His face had gone pale and he had gradually pressed the hand on his chest over his heart. Keith kept talking.

“And then we found the Lion. Your Lion. Do you remember her?”

Lance’s breath was coming short now and he made a small noise in his throat. Turning on his heel the blue paladin sprinted towards the party and the open Cul-de-sac shouting over his shoulder.

“Leave me alone! I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about!”

Keith followed without thinking, rushing through a crowd of cousins and past a woman who looked like Lance’s Aunt Verita. When he bumped them Keith felt the same smooth, generic nothing. There was no human warmth or brush of skin and not one person reacted when he jostled them.

Lance caught sight of him and started to sprint blindly in no particular direction, eventually ramming into the front of the small stage. His Uncle Ramon was starting into his set; his first song an upbeat sort of tango tune. When Lance yelled up to him he didn’t respond.

Maybe the memories could only perform certain functions, like a computer program. When Lance went off his usual script they wouldn’t react to him like real people. Keith approached the blue paladin cautiously, hating the fear in his eyes. He never wanted Lance to look at him that way.

“Lance…listen to me. I’m your…”

Keith swallowed thickly, hesitated.

“I’m your friend. I’m here to help you.”

All Around Keith people were starting to dance, some in couples others by themselves. Every once in awhile he could feel them bump into his back or push against his sides but he ignored it. Lance’s grip on his chest tightened as he struggled to breathe, his pupils reduced to pinpricks.

“I—It hurts…”

Keith stopped. He put his hands to his sides and felt his own breath catch. His voice was soft but he wished he could make it softer.

“Lance, what hurts?”
“Remembering…it hurts. I don’t…I don’t…”

“You don’t want to remember?”

The music swelled, trembled then moved into a slow song that was like a mixture of waltz and lullaby. The sweet tones of Ramon’s guitar melding with a violin played by another family member. Lance rocked backwards and pushed himself away from the stage as someone called for him. Keith recognized the voice as his mothers; she was asking for a dance. The blue paladin swiveled away without looking back. He followed the path of the stage towards the entrance of the cul-de-sac. Keith chased him trying not to look back when he heard Carmen calling for her son over and over again.

Lance stood on the edge of the gathering looking out into the night-dark neighborhood; he grimaced at Keith as the red paladin caught up to him. There were tears streaming down the blue paladins face but judging by his expression Keith could see he had moved on from scared to angry.

Lance wiped roughly at his nose his body tensing.

“I don’t remember who you are exactly but I **know** your voice! And the longer I look at you the more it **hurts.** You need to go. You need to get away from my family!”

“They aren’t really your family Lance, none of this is **real.** It’s just memories.”

“Shut UP!!!”

Keith wasn’t prepared when Lance lunged at him. One moment he was doubled over shrieking furiously the next he was throwing himself at Keith’s chest. The red paladin sidestepped him easily despite the surprise attack, his training kicking in involuntarily. Keith scowled and bared his teeth in reflex, the response automatic.

“What the hell! I’m trying to help you idiot!”

Lance staggered towards him, shifting between holding his head in his hands and making a concentrated effort to land a punch. He missed by a mile and only managed to make himself more winded.

“So-So what if this is a memory!! My family is here! I’m happy! When I look at you …there isn’t a reason for me to leave is there? It feels like…”

Lance panted and blinked huge, watery eyes at Keith.

“Maybe this isn’t real but it **feels** real. It feels **GOOD.** What does it matter if it’s not real? My family isn’t back there are they? But they’re here!”

Keith clenched and unclenched his fingers and started to walk, attempting to herd Lance towards the empty street where Blue was waiting. They were just beyond the edge of the cul-de-sac now. Balloons and streamers littered the asphalt around their feet and the music and noise of people was becoming more distant and dreamlike.

“Come on Lance. Are you even trying to remember the paladins? Allura and Coran? Voltron?”

Pushing himself up to his full height Lance butted his chest up against Keith’s and stared down at him. His bottom lip jutted out and his face was a mess of tear-trails and snot.

“All I remember is being lonely! I remember feeling hurt and stupid and…. **useless.**”

The last word echoed off the surrounding houses, the street signs and lawn gnomes and there was a ring of finality to it.

Keith choked on anger, overwhelmed by just how **wrong** Lance’s answer was. Bringing his hands up he shoved the blue paladin before he had a chance to think about the implications. Lance stumbled on a well-groomed curb and fell into a large bed of freshly watered blue petunias. He snarled down at Lance unable to stop himself from lashing out.

“Well, why didn’t you tell us? Why didn’t you tell me?? Why didn’t you tell me how you felt! How do you think I feel when I-when you say things like that! How all of us feel! It pisses me off!”

The liquid blue eyes just stared at Keith, misting over with uncertainty and helplessness.

“I don’t want to remember because I know it’s going to hurt.”

“You’re wrong!! You won’t even-”

“But- when I look at you…”

Lance trailed off and sat up with flowers and dirt hanging from his nice, clean jacket. His eyes crinkled around the corners as he scanned Keith warily. He wrung his hands pulling his long legs
up to his chest.

“I feel like I want to remember you...even if it does hurt. Keith, why? Why do I want to remember you even if you scare me so much?”

Keith knelt beside him coming down to his eye level. He knew he was on the verge of tears. He was struggling with his own feelings, with what he wanted to say. He couldn’t form the right words and his whole body felt hot, like his bones were on fire. He finally stared at the tips of Lance’s sneakers, his voice breaking.

“I don’t know how to answer that, I just know that I want you to...want to...remember me...”

Lance shook his head and gave a weak, wet chuckle.

“That’s not enough. You just...I’m going back.”

As the blue paladin tried to stand up Keith grabbed him roughly by the shoulders.

“N-NO...t-that’s not an option!”

Keith was officially out of patience. He tried to get his arm around Lance’s neck, forcing him into a chokehold. He would drag him kicking and screaming to his lion himself it that’s what it took; bonds of trust be damned. Then he stopped. The heat the red paladin felt in his bones had traveled to his head. His entire skull was suddenly blazing with needle-sharp pain, his sight going white from the intensity of it.

Lance was yelling something but Keith didn’t catch it. He pressed his knuckles to his eye sockets desperate for the pain to ease enough for him to just breathe. It felt like he was coming apart at the seams, like he was being physically torn from his own body. It was like being at the bottom of a deep body of water and experiencing a quick change in pressure when you swim for the surface.

Keith felt the ground shaking before he managed to open his eyes.

He had thought that the migraines before had hurt but the one now chewing on his brain with razor teeth put them all to shame. Keith somehow got himself up on all fours before leaning down and retching, bringing up banquet food in painful heaves. The vomiting did nothing to stop the blender currently making a milkshake out of his frontal lobe. Keith managed a few whispered sounds reaching out blindly for a tendril he hoped was there.

“Y...M...?”

The ground had stopped shaking but around him all Keith could feel was the crunchy, scratchy texture of dead grass. The paladin dry-heaved and fell back on his side curling around his head, wishing he would pass out or die—anything to end the sensation of syringes jabbing up his nose and through his temples.

Something huge and warm wrapped slowly around Keith’s neck and head. It was a tendril and it was shaking as badly as he was.

<Keith...I n-need help.>

Healing warmth spread through the shattered remains of Keith’s head and he basked in it, so thankful for the relief it barely dawned on him that Y.M. was in trouble. He leaned into the Young Mother’s touch and second by second the migraine turning his brain to jam became more bearable.

By the time Keith was able to keep more than a single thought process going at once he noticed that the shivers going through the Young Mother’s tendril were getting worse. He pushed at her feebly, the pain in his head now a tolerable ache.

“Y.M. I’m ok...you can stop. What...What’s wrong?”

The tendril didn’t pull away so much as fall away and Keith blinked against the pastel radiance coming through the glass of the meditation dome. It was light out, pale early morning; they had been Viewing for hours. Keith turned his head assaulted by the smell of his own vomit and another stench he could barely describe.

Y.M.’s voice was weak, struggling to be heard in Keith’s head and he had to strain to catch her words.

< I’m scared...want Matriarch. Feel sick...>

Pushing himself precariously to his feet Keith wiped at his mouth and took in his bleary surroundings. He quickly saw that the reason he had barfed was in part because the Young Mother had first; it also accounted for the other horrible smell. A gooey substance that looked like regurgitated grass milk pooled around the edges of his makeshift pillow bed. Unlike his vomit hers was smooth and lacked chunks.
The enormous alien was shaking so hard she rattled the dome’s scaultrite windows and made small tremors run through the dirt floor. Every last stalk of grass in the gigantic room was dead.

“Y.M. I need your help getting down... the door, the drop. Can you move at all?”

Keith tried not to let panic creep into his voice as he made sure Lance’s scrim was still on the mattress near him. He reached for his shirt which, by some miracle, had managed to stay clean.

Instead of using her legs to move the Young Mother pushed herself using only her tendrils. She looked like a colossal spider with millions of fragile, semi-transparent legs.

<Need... get us both... down>

She said in a hurt murmur.

Every movement seemed to cause Y.M. pain and she groaned low in her chest, a steady, reedy whine blowing through her half-open mouth as she struggled.

Keith grabbed Lance’s scrim and held it carefully, trying his best to stay out of the Young Mother’s way as she pushed herself laboriously towards the trap door exit. She pushed it open with the tentacle appendages she wasn’t using to propel herself forward.

Once the door was open she made a noise that was like a giant sob and it filled Keith’s chest until he felt like he was going to burst.

“Y.M. Just... be careful!!”

The Young Mother braced her tendrils on either side of the door and tried to lower herself down. Keith could see, as much as he could feel, that she just didn’t have the strength to carry her own immense body-weight. He watched helplessly as she fell through the gap and down into the main chamber.

Chasing after the last of her body and legs as they disappeared through the opening Keith managed to slide under the heavy door before it slammed shut. Looping one arm around a flailing tendril he braced himself and the scrim for the impact as Y.M. hit the ground.

She hit hard, the force of her body creating a crack in the solid stone floor. She landed on her side and Keith’s fall was cushioned by the soft flesh of her body. He tucked and rolled around the scrim, the shock of the tumble and the gunshot sound of her striking the ground making his mind a temporary blank.

Shaking his head the red paladin came to his senses quickly and crawled on his knees and free hand further up the Young Mother’s body frantically.

“Y.M., Are you hurt!!”

At first the Young Mother lay unnaturally still but after a few agonizing seconds she started to twitch and Keith realized that she had just been stunned. A fresh wave of distress and pain rolled off of her and she burbled halheartedly.

<I’m ok, fall not bad… tougher than that... just... need to get to soothe-room... please. Keith listen.>

“I am. I’m listening, tell me what to do.”

Sliding to the floor through a forest of limp tendrils Keith hit the ground lightly. He jogged towards Y.M.’s head and watched worriedly as she pulled herself upright, her breath rattling hard in her gargantuan lungs.

<Wall... there... see buttons?>

With a few listless tendrils the Young Mother pointed out a far wall close topped by a large mural and framed by two indigo curtains. Just below the wormhole/webhum art was a small square panel nearly hidden in the shadows, inside of it Keith could just make out several tiny rows of jeweled buttons.

<Press... golden button twice... wait... three times.>

“Twice. Wait... Three more times. Got it.”

Scrambling for the wall at full speed Keith nearly dropped the smooth scrim twice pausing a few seconds to adjust its awkward weight. When he finally made it to the panel he glared indignantly at it, moving unhappily from foot to foot as he searched impatiently for the right button.

“Come on... come on... gold...”

Muttering under his breath Keith tried to think through the pressure and lingering head pain. He finally found the golden button between one made of red crystal and one made of grey stone.
The panels size had been deceiving from a distance and Keith had to reach up and use his entire hand just to push the large button inwards.

He entered in the sequence exactly as Y.M. told him to and stood back breathless, unsure of his next move. With what looked like an extreme amount of effort the Young Mother was dragging herself towards one of the closed off rooms at the back of the Inner Sanctum.

The red paladin made no move to follow partially because he had no idea if he was welcome back there and partially because he was abruptly struck by an entire mountain of guilt. He had failed one friend miserably and now he had hurt another.

Leaning on the wall near the button panel Keith stared blankly ahead as the Young Mother made her sluggish, painful way to a door the size of a skyscraper. Scrabbling with her feet and her tendrils Y.M. managed to get the thing open as she gasped for air like a beached whale.

Disappearing beyond a black curtain hanging in front of the room’s entrance, she did not spare a glance backwards as she disappeared into the dark interior; she left the door wide open.

Even though he had no watch Keith would have guessed it took the Matriarch less than ten minutes to appear in the main chamber. She didn’t come through any of the main doors but emerged from behind a random pillar in a nearby corner. She seemed to materialize from the wall and Keith recalled Hunk talking about her knowledge of the Citadel’s hidden passages.

The guilt grew even worse when he remembered she wasn’t supposed to be here at all. They were breaking tradition-Y.M. would have only broken with protocol if she was really hurt.

The Matriarch emerged accompanied by the jangling sounds of bells. The charms and bangles around her robes and wrists caught the light with her every frantic movement. She spotted Keith and scuttled towards him at alarming speed, her mouth hanging open to reveal all her teeth even as she screamed inside his head.

<Where is she!! What is the emergency!! Answer me boy!>  
Keith managed to point towards the room and stutter out an answer.

“There! In the room with the black curtain!”

The Matriarch trilled, narrowing all her eyes at the offending doorway. Keith felt her grip the back of his shirt hefting him up by the collar like a kitten. He hugged the scrim tight eyes widening as he was carried bodily across the room.

<What did you do? What have you been doing that has her so upset?>

“We…we were just Viewing a scrim! “

The Matriarch set him down roughly near the curtained doorway, dropping him butt first on the smooth floor. With a snort and a low growl she pointed downwards and there was no room for argument in her voice.

<Stay. Out. Here. Do not move. I will be back to speak with you.>

Keith stared after the Matriarch blinking stupidly before he curled his legs and arms into his body, holding the scrim against his chest and resting his head on it. He could feel Lance’s pulse traveling a mile a minute under his fingertips and wondered if he had forgotten their entire encounter by now.

The paladin cringed as he mulled over everything he had said to Lance. He had been so good about losing his temper but just ten goddamn minutes with the blue paladin and he had reverted back to his usual toxic bullshit. Grabbing him…pushing him? He should have been honest! He should have…done anything but what he did.

Keith started to calm down after several deep breaths. The guilt and fear over both Y.M. and Lance was exhausting and as he pressed his head to the scrim the paladin felt himself going into a kind of stupor. He just wanted a few minutes to feel nothing.

Hey…Keith. It’s ok, Buddy. You’re trying really hard. Sometimes it’s the only thing you can do. Patience yields other stuff besides focus you know.

Keith opened his eyes partially when he heard the warm sound of the imprint in the back of his brain. He spoke out loud to it muttering to thin air.

“Yeah?...like what?”

Family…patience kinda has to be part of the whole family thing. Patience yields closeness. Love too…patience can yield a lot of that, the imprint whispered low and soothing.

Keith rubbed the warm, pulsing scrim with the palm of his hand and felt Lance’s heartbeat slow, almost like he was responding to the red paladin’s comforting touch.
“He’s been patient with me. Next time…I just have to be honest. I need to stop being a coward.”

Keith jerked upright when the clamoring sound of bells stampeded towards him. He stared up into the Matriarch’s cloudy eyes and she put a kind, long-fingered hand to his cheek.

<She is alright.>

Keith tried and failed to get to his feet, only making it the second time with the Matriarch’s help. He stared at her expectantly trying to hold back dozens of questions at once.

“What happened? Did she get hurt in the fall? Why did…”

The Matriarch hushed him with a wave of her hand and a loud jangle of the silver charms on her sleeve.

<For one she overindulged in grass milk because she is hungry from the fast. Too much can make even a Mother ill. Aside from this she has been expanding enormous amounts of energy on the Viewing of this scrim and your healing apparently. She is drained and overwrought.>

Keith shrank away at this his eyes closed, head hung in shame.

“I’m so sorry-”

The Matriarch shrugged him off briskly, her manner, as always, straight to the point.

<That is her business. She is almost a Mother, she must make her own decisions and I hoped you would guide her in that…in a way you have, although because of you she has been neglecting her meditation which has not helped her health.>

“…”

<As for the fall? Eh. She has been falling from that room since she was a broodling. She will not shatter. Just bruise a bit. The floor suffered more than she did.>

There was actually a hint of laughter in the Matriarch’s voice at this but it was gone as quickly as it appeared.

<She is to rest in the soothe-room the rest of the day. You can join her there and in the evening you will take your leave and take part in the handover with the Auricle before he comes in to share a meal with her and break her fast. You will see her again at the ceremony.>

This was moving too fast and Keith barely had time to realize what this meant before the Matriarch reached out expectantly.

<She does not have the strength for anymore Viewings. Please give me the dowry so I may keep him safe before the Spur.>

Terror coursed through Keith’s whole body and he gaped at her in dismay. With a low growl the Matriarch bared just the tips of her teeth. It wasn’t a threat really it felt more like a parent telling a child they meant business.

<Now, paladin.>

The scrim was in her hands before Keith knew what he was doing. He felt numb as she held Lance close and gave him a curt glance.

<You rest as well. There is still much to do.>

Then she was walking away the blue light of the scrim going with her. Keith just stared- his muscles limp, his brain screaming at him to run after her, to grab Lance and run somewhere, anywhere!

But it was too late and now there wouldn’t be a next time.

He had looked back and Lance was gone.

Chapter End Notes

So close and yet...so far.

Thanks CJ you magical proofreader you <3
Keith staggered past the black curtain and into the room where Y.M. had disappeared. The moment his foot touched the floor he started to slide, narrowly avoiding a perfect split. There was very little resistance to his weight when the red paladin tried to stand. He found the floor was like a solid pillow with the consistency of an oversized water-bed.

The ground was upholstered with a black material that seemed to soak in light rather than reflect it. It was completely smooth, borderline friction-less and made walking impossible. Keith was too numb and tired to puzzle this out and he went down on trembling knees to the eerie, velvety floor. His movements caused ripples in whatever was being used as padding and he held still waiting for them to stop.

It was like being on top of a skating rink but instead of hard, flat ice the smooth surface was curving and waving like a tide pool. When he finally felt stable enough to take a breath, Keith glanced around the room to get a grasp on his surroundings.

The first thing he saw was the tall glowing walls. They looked as soft as the floor felt and what he at first took to be transparency into a watery aquarium environment he soon realized was just some kind of viewing screen; a television made of soft plastic.

Huge jellyfish like animals floated through the screens lazily and behind them dark forests of teal seaweed swayed hypnotically back and forth. In the murky ocean distance swarms of luminescent fish scuttled back and forth. Through all this a hidden speaker was pumping in the soft sounds of white noise and flowing water. The “soothe-room” moniker was very fitting.

The Young Mother was huddled at the far end of the cozy, noticeably corner-less room. She was curled up like a pill-bug, her face and legs hidden. Her tendrils hung nerveless at her sides and she looked like a bizarre, balled-up hedgehog with tentacles instead of spines. Keith didn’t approach her; was unsure if he even could get enough traction to do so on the slick, squashy ground.

The paladin’s thoughts were racing, trying to come up with some new plan to get Lance’s scrim back. He shivered as the seconds ticked on and his chest started to tighten; breathing becoming difficult. It felt like something was constricting his windpipe and his heart was slamming against his ribs with alarming force; it felt like he was dying. After a few unsuccessful attempts to get oxygen to his brain Keith realized he was experiencing all the symptoms of a panic attack.

He had never had one before. He had seen both Hunk and Shiro have them at different times but he had never had one. Keith tried to think about what the other paladins had done when this happened to them but all his thoughts were like a swarm of angry hornets attacking him on all sides. It was so piercing and violent not even the imprints voice could break through-

-Why did he lose his temper with Lance? Why wasn’t he gentler? Why didn’t he stop the Young Mother the first time she was sick? SELFISH- What if she had died? What if she was really hurt? Lance was going to die now and that was his fault. Lance was lost and Voltron was lost and the team was lost and did he even want to pilot anymore if Lance was gone? Would they want him too? Nononono- not without Lance, he couldn’t-Lance- was- gone! -gonegonegone...

Tendrils slipped tenderly around Keith’s chest and circled his waist. They lifted him up and carried him suspended over the slippery padding. The Young Mother unfurled her body like a blooming flower, her legs spreading and sending more ripples through the floor. She lay Keith wordlessly onto the sleek skin of her back and took a deep breath that made her entire body expand like a parade balloon.

Keith opened his eyes and from where he lay on her back he could see the tops of her tendrils waving like the seaweed on the view screens. It felt like he was lying at the bottom of a deep body of warm water, the illusion buoyed up by the ambient sounds in the room.

The red paladin couldn’t feel his fingers. The numbness was spreading up his hands he gasped desperately for air, straining to make his thoughts slow down so he could get a handle on them.

Lance will die- Lance is dying- Lance is gone- You could have saved him if you had told him-you could have saved him! Shiro-Allura- Hunk- Pidge- you let them down you let them down and you killed someone who loved you so much. He loved you and them so much and you hurt him- you HURT him-

<Keith…breathe.>

The waving forest of tendrils curling around Keith embraced his waist and legs, enveloped his shoulders and looped under his armpits. It should have been terrifying, should have added to the stress but Keith found the sudden weight soothing. He gasped again, still trying to draw oxygen
into his burning lungs.

<In…>
The Young Mother said patiently.

_In_ the Lance imprint said more forcefully.

<Out…>

_Out._

For the next minute or so the imprint and Y.M. spoke in tandem bringing Keith slowly back to himself and his aching, adrenaline-saturated body. The red paladin felt sweat roll down his forehead, the skin on his neck and chest clammy to the touch. The cramps in his legs unwound themselves as the heat from Y.M.’s body soaked into his muscles.

<Keith- I’m sorry. I just…>

The Young Mother slid a tendril over Keith’s hair. He tried to answer but his voice just wouldn’t work, he had just enough sense to keep breathing properly but no brainpower beyond that. He was pressed by an exhaustion he usually only experienced after a long intense workout.

<| couldn’t hold the connection anymore. I’m just so tired and my head was hurting so badly. I saw how- Oh, you were so close and it’s my fault…oh grass below!>

Keith felt the immense body beneath him tense and a sound between a sob and a howl escaped the Young Mother. There were so many emotions in that one noise, heartache, disappointment and most of all _guilt._

<If I had just held on even just a little longer…>

“No…”

Keith choked out in a frail, raspy voice.

“It was over before. It was done when I grabbed him. I messed up…not you.”

A fresh wave of anguish came with these words and Keith braced himself for it. He sank his fingers into his shirt as the muscles in his gut clenched; thank god his stomach was already empty.

The Young Mother wiggled beneath him

<If I just, I feel terrible. I feel like I pushed you! Like I’ve been using you!>

Keith raised a painful, skeptical eyebrow at this.

“How? You did nothing but help me. I feel guilty for making you sick. You went beyond for me and Lance and-

Y.M. interrupted him her internal voice teary, her sides heaving as she blubbered.

<| I wanted to help Lance and you so, SO badly but I- I feel like I was also wanted Lance free so he wouldn’t- so I wouldn’t have a dowry. Then I wouldn’t have to…to…>

“Grow up?”

<| I don’t know… I don’t want to change. I’m not sure who I am. I can’t be a leader and I’m not ready for… for KIDS.>

Keith let air fill his chest, held it and let it go in steady, measured increments.

“You and I can’t keep running from these things. I think both of us hurt Lance in different ways but neither of us really meant to…You know he would forgive us.”

<He would, wouldn’t he?>

“Yes, and he would tell us to keep going, help other people. He always knows the right time to just put a hand on your shoulder and say the right thing. It’s…_weird._”

They were both silent and Keith stared up at the sooth-room ceiling. Fake stars were drifting slowly by and it reminded him of the viewing deck back on the Castle of Lions; one of Lance’s favorite spots.

“I feel like I’ve been grown up since…as long as I can remember. It’s not that bad.”

The Young Mother’s somber little throat clicks turned into a warbling chuckle. She curled her body around until her head was resting close to where Keith lay on her back. Her snout parted the waving forest of tendrils and a dozen bright, planetarium eyes shone onto the red paladin.
<Maybe neither of us really knows what being grown up feels like. Maybe you just think you are and I won’t know when I am.>

*You both whine like babies*, the Lance imprint said with affection.

“Maybe…”

Keith reached for the nearest tendril and gave it a friendly squeeze.

“Adult or not my team needs me and your people need you.”

Keith considered if he should talk about the resistance group Hunk had mentioned, the way the Galra were using the Imperials and their waterholic lifestyle to keep the seedy underground scrim trade going. Maybe the Matriarch had kept these things from her for a reason; maybe it wasn’t his place to bring them up at all.

<I know but...I just wish Duke Nemean wasn’t so- so Galran.>

“He’s not bad.”

Y.M. made a loud questioning trill, a knot of confusion rising into Keith’s head like an oversized-bubble. The skin under Keith’s back vibrated and it felt like a colossal, organic massage chair.

“No. I’m serious. He’s a lot like us. He’s got all this pressure on him from his family and the Empire; expectations. But, I don’t think that’s him. He-“

Keith waved his arms around above his head grasping for a way to explain himself; a feat in itself on a good day.

*He makes things. He makes these statues and they’re really good. He told me not to say anything but I think you should ask him about them...and his family. His brother, well he’s really worried. Just-tell him about it ok? I think he needs someone like you...I don’t know, I’m not making sense am I?“*

There was a short silence followed by a low purr that resonated in the red paladin’s spine and worked to untie the nervous knots in his gut.

<Maybe you’re right. He acted like a stuck-up jerk when we first met so I decided I didn’t like him right away.>

“And you never saw me act like a jerk in Lance’s memories?”

The purr grew more intense and the eyes focused on Keith half-closed in pleasure.

<Hah, good point. Maybe I should have tried a little harder to get to know the Duke.>

“I don’t think it’s your fault. Sometimes to protect ourselves we push people away…or lie.”

*Man you are hitting the insightful balls out of the park today dude*, the imprint said with a vocal grin.

Keith let his arms drop out to his sides and lay spread-eagled in the mass of tendrils. He watched the ersatz stars drift overhead and the watery light from the display screens play over Y.M.’s face as she considered him.

<I’ll have time when he comes tonight to eat dinner with me. You’ll see him first…you meet with him to officially give me away.>

The sense of sorrow returned and Y.M. drew the end of her tail into her mouth gnawing on it distractedly. Her lips worried the tendrils, the tips of her teeth barely grazing the soft skin. Keith wondered if this was another habit she should have outgrown long ago.

<Keith?>

The red paladin realized his blinks were lasting longer and longer. He wasn’t even aware he had been dozing off. The panic attack had drained him completely; he felt boneless, barely able to move.

“Mmm?”

<You aren’t giving up are you? On Lance? On getting him back?>

Keith clenched his teeth and with a gargantuan effort he pushed himself onto his side so he was facing the Young Mother. He curled into himself shivering despite Y.M.’s body heat. His voice escaped as a faint murmur.

“No. Course I haven’t but…I don’t know what to do next.”

A tendril moved behind the red paladin’s back supporting him like a body-sized pillow.
Another of the glowing, whitish-appendages pressed carefully to his chest as Y.M. cooed. The light from her eyes dimmed and brightened as she spoke with clear resolve.

"I haven’t given up either."

The Young Mother’s words gave Keith a dull, vague sense of relief. It wasn’t anything concrete. She couldn’t solve his problems and the system was working against her as much as him but... he wasn’t alone. Lance wasn’t alone.

“What can we do... If I take him from the Galra we lose the wormholes, if I take him before... I can’t take your dowry I can’t…”

"Shhh..."

The tendrils on Keith’s chest and back started to sway almost imperceptibly and he was lulled into silence by the comforting rocking motion. Y.M. yawned so wide that for a moment all of the paladin’s peripheral vision was nothing but tongue and teeth.

"You sleep on it and I’ll keep thinking. Right now I have to commune for awhile. The Matriarch only let me bring you in here if I promised you wouldn’t interfere."

The red paladin pondered the word “commune.” He knew he had heard it somewhere before. One of the generals had said it at the wedding dinner but Keith couldn’t quite remember the context.

“Commune? What does that mean?”

"It’s... well, it’s really my most important job outside of popping out brood."

Y.M. turned her drowsy eyes to the ceiling but she seemed to be looking beyond the roof and out further into space.

"I see through the eyes of the Weblum. I listen to them singing. I witness and grieve for the dead planets they eat. They leave trails of quintessence as they travel and that’s how the lay-lines form. Life flourishes in their wake... they spread it all over known space. They move so slowly but they carry existence with them..."

The cadence of her voice was like a bedtime story and Keith listened to it with a small smile.

“Do you talk to them?”

"Course I do."

“Do they listen?”

The Young Mothers eyes closed one after another in a small wave and she gave a faraway, full-body sigh.

"I like to think so. It’s said they listen to some Mother’s more than others. Olim are supposedly distant cousins- so the story goes. There aren’t many Weblum out there and they rarely speak but... they must listen a little when I talk. Their song changes sometimes when I’m telling them how I feel."

It struck Keith that despite the fact Y.M. probably rarely, if ever, left the Citadel she had traveled farther into space then he had; maybe farther than even the Empire. It was an intimidating thing to consider and it was hard to imagine his quiet friend wielding that much power.

“I bet they care about you.”

"Mmm, I’m not even a real Mother yet. I’m sure they notice me like a grass stalk notices a light-bug."

Keith was about argue but it was cut off by a stray yawn. He burrowed into his shirt and felt a tendril caress his shoulder.

"Sleep. I’ve got communing to do."

Keith was aware of muttering something in agreement and despite the dismal fears still streaming on a loop through his brain he found his eyes closing. The last thing he was aware of was his own pulse in his temples; it was very easy to pretend the heartbeat belonged to Lance.

Keith had expected his official hand-over ceremony to be as fancy and crowded as the wedding banquet; he had never been happier to be wrong. It turned out that the Duke was actually allowed to pick his own meeting place and the ceremony was really just a one-sided meal. Keith was to sit and eat his dinner while Nemean sat with him. At the end they would bow and Keith would give the Galran Auricle permission to see the Young Mother and break her fast. Then the wedding ceremony would officially start.
When a Seed Keith didn’t know had lead the red paladin into a bustling kitchen he had just assumed this was where he was going to be prepped and dressed in another obnoxious costume. Instead he spotted Nemean sitting at one of several tiny tables pressed against a back wall near a line of garage-sized ovens. The Seed who had guided him the short distance to the little prep kitchen finally introduced itself as Nemean’s Valet Tor-Cron and gave a deep bow as it briefly explain what was expected.

Keith wanted to ask a few follow up questions but the valet seemed distracted by its own thoughts and turned away without a goodbye. The paladin watched the Seed toddle away with a raised eyebrow. They had asked some random questions when he left his room; was he well rested? Did he need medical assistance? They seemed oddly specific; maybe Tor had been talking to the Matriarch.

Approaching Nemean slowly Keith was careful not to block the path of Seeds running back and forth with baskets of grass and handfuls of other foodstuffs. It was a safe bet they were getting the Y.M.’s big first meal ready, he didn’t envy them in that. To feed a starving alien the size of a city block would not be an easy task.

The Duke was hunched over the table, one arm curled around the back of his head the other sketching on a handmade sketchbook with a grass bound spine. His fur was fluffed up, puffy with the heat from the ovens. He was so engrossed in his drawing he didn’t notice Keith until he sat down in the chair across from him. The Duke blinked up at him and a broad smile spread across his face.

Keith could not help the concerned scowl he gave in return.

“Nemean…what happened?”

The Galran shuddered, ears pressed flat against his scalp. He grunted and clutched a white pencil stub firmly in hand, nearly snapping it in two with his claws. There was a long scratch down his jaw, raw and inflamed. One of his eyes, the left, was swollen shut and weeping. The bandages on his neck were the same ones that Keith had put there. They were scratched, soaked through in places and clearly in need of replacement.

“Nothing paladin, I’m perfectly fine.”

“Bullshit.”

Even if Nemean didn’t understand what the word meant Keith’s tone gave him plenty of context. He flinched and hunched closer to his sketch. Wrapping his free arm around his chest he pulled a thick, blanket-like cloak around his shoulders and burrowed into it to hide his neck.

“The general’s…”

He began hesitantly. Keith leaned towards him, hanging on his every word.

*Give him space dude. Let him think about it.* The Lance imprint reprimanded and Keith sighed forcing himself to stay back.

“I asked the generals about my family. I asked where my brother Ionis is being held; if he was still alive.”

Keith felt his hackles raise, his pulse spike. The edges of his lips pulled up and he couldn’t help the snarl that worked up his throat. There was a weird smell coming off Nemean he couldn’t place. It smelled like frailty and weakness and blood.

“So they did this because you asked a question?”

“No…”

Nemean replied hoarsely his fingers stilling over his sketchbook.

“I think they’re afraid I’m going to turn on them, on the Empire. They did this to remind me why I don’t ask questions. It was stupid to approach them but I was feeling bold.”

A small bronze colored Seed with a pleasant chubby face appeared at Nemean’s side and patted his back daintily offering him a cold compress for his eye. It was a strange cobbled together device made of ice, grass and a slab of frozen animal meat. He took it with a grateful smile.

“Thanks Oro…”

The Seed cast a shy glance at Keith and bowed its head before moving back into the steamy fray of the kitchen. Huge sides of meat and entire freshly slaughtered animals were being shoved into the ovens along with pans and pans of dough. The fragrant odors of baking bread and roasting flesh were overpowering whatever primal smell was wafting off Nemean and Keith was more than a little grateful for that. He sat back into his chair and leaned back to pop his neck.

“You think Castellan and…what’s his name did this out of fear?”
“General Heonar- Yes. If I do something to disrupt this whole thing it reflects badly on them and the Empire. The Imperials want a new Mother and even they could turn against the Galra if they want to. Not even Zarkon can do what an Olim Mother does, not to mention it’s the Druids who want the scrims the most. Even the highest ranking Galran general is afraid of the Druids. They might not say it but they are.”

There was a clatter of dishes and a sound of breaking glass that almost made Keith jump to his feet, reaching for a knife that wasn’t there. He stopped himself mid-crouch, nerves on edge as he ran shaking fingers through his hair.

“So why not demand your family? Use your leverage?”

Nemean gave a hissing chuckle and scratched at his neck absently. He pressed the compress to his eye and when he smiled Keith could see a small chip missing from the point of his left eyetooth.

“I did and…this happened.”

“They are afraid of you.”

The Seed Nemean had called Oro tottered back to the table with a tray in hand. They set it down in front of Keith and burbled something he didn’t understand. The food was unfamiliar- it didn’t look like the “pizza” Y.M. had commissioned but it didn’t look like the banquet fare either. The paladin considered it as his stomach churned. If he didn’t eat he would definitely get a headache and the dregs of his last meal had escaped when he threw up in the meditation room. Still- low blood sugar seemed preferable to whatever he was looking at.

“Er, thank you.”

The Seed puttered off chirping giddily over the attention Keith had directed their way and he couldn’t help but a small half-smile.

“I like it in here. It’s friendlier than the rest of the Citadel.”

Nemean cast his eyes back down to his work, his cloak obscuring the subject matter from Keith’s view. He went back to scratching in details until the shaking in his hand eased off.

“I like it here. It’s the only place I feel safe besides my quarters and even there I feel paranoid at times. I come here to sketch and listen to the Seeds or to sleep. They’re kind even though I insulted them a lot at first…still sometimes do to keep up appearances I guess.”

The Duke leaned closer to the warmth radiating off the ovens and his hair, freed from its usual ponytail, ruffled outward like it had a mind of its own. Keith turned his attention back to his…food, and lifted a spork-like implement from the side of the tray. Whatever he had been given was green and made of small chunks. It sat in a thick gravy broth and Keith was unsure if he was looking at a soup or a sauce.

“The generals weren’t very smart to injure you the day before you’re getting married; especially on your face where everybody can see.”

“That was part of the message, they don’t care who sees. The Olim just want this whole thing over with so the Young Mother can make kids and the only Galra at the ceremony will be the ones who did it in the first place…”

“The paladins will see…the Young Mother.”

The Galran snorted at that raising an incredulous eyebrow at Keith.

“I doubt they think either of those will care much.”

Raising his space spork to his lips Keith grimaced preparing himself to take a sip.

“Well they’re wrong about that.”

The thick soupy substance had a meaty taste. It reminded Keith of the ancient cans of Spagettios he had subsisted on when he was alone in the desert. The chunks added a garlicky-onion aftertaste that was by no means unpleasant and the texture reminded him of the emergency “meal bars” that the Garrison gave them on survival hikes. Once he discovered the food was palatable the red paladin went after it with gusto, doing his best not to wolf everything down in a few huge bites.

Nemean perked a bit from the cocoon of his cloak ears up and curious.

“I…know we are friends now paladin Keith, but the Young Mother and the other paladins don’t care about me.”

From the wavery way he said her name Keith could hear the Duke retraining himself not to call Y.M. by some derogatory nickname. He had probably been doing it for so long it was a hard habit to break but at least he was putting effort into it. Keith barely had time to look down forlornly as
his empty bowl before Oro was there with seconds. The paladin thanked them dazedly, amazed at their preternatural food serving instincts.

“The other paladins will listen to me. They trust me. If I tell them I trust you they will too. You have all of Voltron behind you not just me Nemean.”

Keith shoveled more of the Chef Boyarde-esque mess down throat, the unfamiliar sensation of a full stomach taking him by surprise. He reached for the cup of cold water set out for him and drained it in one go. His last round of sleep with Y.M. had lasted until early evening. When he finally woke he was rushed out before what felt like a proper goodbye. Leaving her was much harder then Keith wanted to admit.

A week he thought would drag on went by faster than a healing session in a cryo-pod.

“You say that paladin Keith but I saw how the Princess reacted to General Castellan’s shadow-show. She hates what the Galra did to her family…We have that much in common.”

The Duke snorted shaking his head which only fluffed his mane of hair up further. He must flatten it with something; Keith thought distantly, this is how it looks naturally.

I like it better. More of a dandelion seed look, the imprint said appreciatively.

“Allura knows that one Galran is not all Galrans and I kinda talked to the Young Mother about you already.”

“You talked to her…about me?”

“Yeah. Just…talk to her like you do me. Call her Y.M., she likes that.”

“Y.M…ok.”

Nemean smiled brightly and put down his compress which was now half melted. The swelling on his eye had receded a bit but his face was still a painful mess. He prodded the raised welt on his eyebrow and hissed. Keith wondered if the Young Mother had the strength to heal him right now. Even if she had the desire she probably didn’t have the energy.

“Some of the Olim have been talking about bringing other ambassadors back. Oro is the oldest Seed here and they told me that in the days before Soluto the Citadel was packed with creatures from all sorts of far systems. They told me that ambassadors always brought their families if they wanted…So I…”

Keith winced when he realized where Nemean was going with this.

“You brought it up with the generals.”

“I thought maybe I could compromise with them! I am staying here and if they are going to ostracize the rest of my clan and ban my brother from military service why not just bring them here rather than some prison camp or mining facility or-or…”

Nemean started to fidget uneasily, his lower lip wiggled and he squeezed his good eye shut to keep back tears.

“What damage could they do here…what damage could they do the Emperor…”

Keith stared down at his now empty second plate and felt his eyebrows furrow.

“It’s actually…a good idea.”

The Duke sniffed and wiped at his eye to avoid getting tears on his drawing.

“You…think so?”

“You said so before. They consider you as good as exiled on this planet right? They don’t want to bring you back after the marriage and if your family is suspected of crimes against the Empire why not bring them here where they can be watched by allies?”

With a tiny chuff of breath through his front teeth Nemean nodded energetically.

“That’s what I said to Castellan! The Seeds had given me the idea, they miss having ambassadors to care for; they never shut-up about it.”

The Duke melted back into his cloak the excitement dimming.

“They gave me a lesson in insubordination for presenting the idea. My royal rank means nothing to them nor does my family. They kept spouting nonsense about my brother and some cult…a knife cult.”

“Knife cult?”
Nemean gave a half-hearted shrug.

“I don’t know. It was about dangerous blades. My brother Tiber was part of it…they think Ionis is too.”

A feeling of uneasiness ran through Keith at the thought of a Galra cult that was actually helping people. It seemed…implausible. He was brought out of his thoughts when Oro touched his arm. The Seed set a new plate in front of him. Instead of the same meat-chunk dish he had eaten two helpings of he was looking at some kind of blue-jelly tart. Its crust was tinged green but the filling glistened in a way that was actually sort of appetizing.

“Oh…thank you.”

The Seed beamed and refilled his water glass twittering at him. Nemean rolled his eyes and snorted translating with a sort of anguished expression befitting a teenager.

“Oro thinks you’re very pretty. They want you to know that. They, ugh- like your hair.”

Keith managed a grin at the Seed and tolerated his hair being touched by small stubby fingers.

“Err…thanks…”

Still twittering joyfully the old Seed worked their way through a crowd of Seeds putting the finishing touches on an elaborate plate of mashed…something. They were decorating it with enormous vegetables cut to look like blooming flowers. Poking the tart with his spork Keith pulled absently at the collar of his shirt.

“The Seed who looks after me, Tou, they said something similar.”

“Well yeah, they’re Seeds. They live to pamper and take care of things. Believe me, it becomes aggravating when you’re constantly complimented and fussed over all the time. Eventually they just assigned me one Seed because otherwise they would fight for the privilege of washing my socks.”

Keith glanced up and saw Nemean biting his lower lip with one fang his ears up and his hair puffed as he started drawing again. He didn’t look “aggravated” and Keith had a feeling Nemean enjoyed the attention more than he let on. He wouldn’t hang out in the kitchen otherwise and he clearly trusted his valet.

He’s a bit like Pidge when Hunk makes her eat regular meals. She acts like she hates it but you know she doesn’t hate it, the Lance imprint said in a knowing voice.

Keith hummed in acknowledgement and took a test bite of his tart. It was delicious. It wasn’t blueberry, not even in the same ballpark. It was more like pineapple but not quite. It had a tang that was almost sour but the aftertaste was nothing but sugar.

Nemean tapped the table with an anxious claw and sighed.

“I guess the hand-over meal is almost done…we should just do the technicals and get it over with.”

Wiping at a bit of sticky blue dessert on his face Keith nodded as he swallowed.

“What do we need to do?”

Standing straight Nemean rolled his shoulders and looked directly into Keith’s eyes his ears up and alert. The pupil-less gold of the Galra’s eyes was mesmerizing.

“I, Duke Nemean of the family Grantuk, descendent of the house of Zarkon ask you…”

He gestured at Keith expectantly and the red paladin took the hint.

“Oh, err…Keith Kagone of…Earth?…”

Nemean’s ears pressing forward expectantly as he mimed that Keith could push his intro a bit more.

“Red paladin of Voltron?”

At this the Duke nodded.

“To grant me audience with my betrothed. Do you, Keith of the family Kagone, Nuptial Royal Retainer find me worthy to become Auricle to the next heir of Olim Veil? As her protector and as her guide to Motherhood?”

The young Galran said all this in the most bored voice imaginable and Keith had no doubt he had been required to learn it by rote, repeating the question over and over again in front of a mirror. The paladin cleared his throat importantly before he answered trying to sound formal and professional in his reply.
“I do…grant you permission.”

“I accept.”

Putting his pencil stub away in the inner pocket of his giant cloak Nemean sighed again, deep and melancholy.

“That’s it. So now after you finish I’ll go eat with…Y.M. and tomorrow I’ll become some bizarre symbol in this sham of a ceremony.”

Keith picked at the crumbly remains of his tart crust and even if the food had made him feel physically better his thoughts were already starting to move towards Lance again. Circling over the issue like starving vultures.

There was a sound of ripping paper and Keith watched Nemean pull the drawing he had been fretting over for the last thirty minutes or so out of his sketchbook. He gave it a final once over then regarded Keith’s hands to make sure they weren’t sticky before he handed it to him.

“I- I looked at reference. His wanted posters…they took most of the images from security recordings. I only had one without his helmet so I hope-I hope it is at least a passing resemblance.”

Brows furrowed Keith reached for the paper carefully and his breath caught in his throat as he saw what was drawn on it. It was a beautiful pencil rendering of the blue paladin, his face sketched in careful, reverent detail. It was all there; the thin eyebrows, the narrow chin, the upturned nose and large intelligent eyes. The only thing that was missing was the easy smile. There was a pensive look on Lance’s face, his expression concerned and distant.

Yeah. It’s a pretty damn good resemb-LANCE, the imprint said trying hard to sound chipper.

Keith bit his tongue and just stared at the drawing. It was gorgeous but Lance looked so lost in it…troubled. There was worry in the lines around his eyes and mouth.

Nemean held out a hand like he was ready for Keith to give the picture back.

“Do…do you not like it? I thought you would like to have a picture of your mate. I mean…”

Keith tore his eyes from the portrait to gape at Nemean.

“My mate?”

“Yes? Before when you told me he was with the Maiden I finally understood.”

Checking to see that the busy Seeds weren’t paying attention the Duke lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

“Plus the smell when you were talking about him. I know you probably didn’t realize you were doing it but it’s alright…you clearly shared a deep bond.”

Keith felt his chest tighten and he struggled to get in a deep breath through his nose. Was it worth arguing that Lance wasn’t his mate, that the Duke had made a mistake? Was it something he really wanted to deny anymore?

Maybe smells don’t lie man, the imprint suggested gently.

The red paladin finally managed a smile that felt about as convincing as it probably looked.

“It’s beautiful, thank you Nemean. Lance-the blue paladin…when you see Y.M. I want…”

Keith took in another deeper breath and swallowed against the tightness moving from his chest to his throat. He was having trouble looking at the drawing. That wonderfully rendered reminder of the way Lance had looked right after Kru-Kron had stolen his heart. The same distant, confused look of loss. If the Duke trusted him enough to tell him everything the least he could do was return the favor.

“Ask her about Lance. Tell her I want her to tell you the truth.”

The Duke twisted his head to the side puzzled as he soaked this in. He opened and closed his mouth once as he tried to find something to say but eventually just shrugged and pushed himself to his feet with a groan. He stretched his neck and back before he gave a single, firm nod.

“Very well I will, and you can ask Oro or one of the other Seeds to take you where the other paladins are staying. With the handover done you will no longer be required to stay close to the inner Citadel. If you have anything there it will have already been moved. I will see you tomorrow at the ceremony paladin Keith.”

The news was met with a strange empty feeling in Keith’s otherwise full gut. He was still the “Royal Retainer” but he didn’t have the same access to his friend. The thought was depressing even if it meant he would be back with the paladins; Back and an empty-handed failure.
“Thanks Nemean.”

He reached out and gripped the Duke’s hand tightly. The Galran held it and put his other hand over Keith’s knuckles patting them clumsily.

“No. Thank you my friend.”

The paladins quarters were at the farthest edge of the Citadel and by the time Keith stood at the doorway of their shared common area he was sagging slightly. Sleeping through part of the day had not even made a dent in his exhaustion and his full belly was only exacerbating the problem.

Tou smiled up at him and put a quiet hand on his arm.

“Master Keith?...Do you not want to go in?”

Keith stared at the closed door and wrapped his arms around his upper body. He hugged Nemean’s drawing to his chest and focused his eyes on the intricate, marbled floor tile.

“I…”

They wouldn’t be mad at him. Here he was without Lance or his scrim again and they wouldn’t be mad. They wouldn’t know about his screw up during the Viewing unless he told them but-

“I do- it’s just…”

Tou lowered their voice and tugged at the sleeve of Keith’s woven grass-shirt.

“They don’t monitor here- The Caulis Imperials that is. It’s like your room and the Young Mother’s quarters in the Inner Sanctum. You will have privacy and be able to speak freely inside.”

Keith stared at the Seed sharply but Tou only returned his gaze evenly, a conspiratorial glint in their huge glowing eyes.

“Go on Master Keith…I will see you in the early dawn for your bath and dressing. I am sure you and your companions will have much to talk about.”

“Yeah, ok…”

With a final friendly pat Tou trundled off the way they had come down the wide chasm of dark empty hall. Sucking in a deep breath through his front teeth the red paladin grabbed the enormous, ornate gold handle of the stone door and pulled it open with a grunt.

He blinked against the brighter light inside, temporarily blinded by the change from the dim hallway. He entered a small foyer and saw the layout that Tou had described to him on the way.

Several short hallways branched out to individual bedrooms and straight ahead up a small flight of stairs was an elevated room with a sunken sitting area and a scattering of pillows; a sitting room of sorts that was a larger, more elaborate version of the Dukes quarters.

Keith paused when he heard the sound of many voices, most of them he recognized as the paladins but some were unfamiliar and still others were not speaking out loud; the voices of upper caste Olim.

They had not heard the door, or maybe they were expecting him. Either way Keith approached the steps to the common room, closer to the voices. He struggled to separate them from one another, to parse out the individual words in the steam of babble.

“But how many sentries are we talking about? No offense, but your grass blades don’t sound like they could cut through a birthday cake let alone the metal armor on a Galra security droid.”

That was Pidge. Keith could definitely pinpoint her by the frustration in her tone as he mounted the second step, his body trembling in anticipation.

What he saw at the top of the stairs was enough to make his mouth hang open.

There was barely enough space for all the people and Olim currently occupying the room. In part it was the sheer number but it was also the scale of the Radix and what had to be Folium drones. The Radix Keith recognized from the humming parade that greeted the paladins when they landed. The Folium he had only seen briefly as guests at the banquet.

The Folium were easily the size of the Flos-Matriarch; possibly she was one of them based on the resemblance alone. The Radix were only a few feet and few eyes shorter than the Folium and scampering underfoot below them were the ever familiar presence of a herd of helpful Seeds.

Pidge was arguing with a hunched Radix Drone, pointing wildly at a projection floating above a table scattered with bits of grass paper. It looked from her to the hologram patiently the buzz of its mental voice just there on the periphery of Keith’s brain.
Hunk was towering above a bunch of Seeds in an offset part of the common living area that served as a small kitchenette. Either he was showing them how to make something or vice versa, possibly they were both sharing the food knowledge equally. Either way the yellow paladin looked like he was enjoying himself.

Keith didn’t see Shiro and Allura at first. He took another step into the room and waited to be noticed by someone. He wasn’t in a rush and he didn’t want to disrupt…whatever was going on.

He heard Shiro through the buzz of noise and saw his white tuft of hair from the back. The black paladin was sitting in one of the sunken seating areas, Allura at his side. They were deep in conversation with an ancient looking Radix drone and someone else-

Keith stopped mid-step.

She was here. The Flos-Matriarch herself was speaking silently to Princess Allura. The loud cacophony of her bangles and bracelets filling the void a natural voice would have occupied. Allura had one of the Matriarch’s huge hands in her own, clasping the Olim’s fingers like her life depended on it. The princess’s knuckles were white, her lips pulled into a thin, bloodless frown.

“Keith!!”

Pidge had noticed him finally and the red paladin felt strong, stringy arms squeezing him tight around the torso. He smiled down at her wrenching an arm from his chest to slip around her back.

“Hey, Pidge. Busy in here, huh?”

The green paladin beamed up at him and grabbed his hand pulling him towards the worktable where she and the Radix drone were sitting.

“Strategy meeting, we’ve got a plan of attack for tomorrow but we’re trying to figure out the final details.”

She plopped herself back down in front of the holo-screen and gestured from the Olim drone to Keith distractedly.

“This is Tasa-Fan, she hooked me up with some communication equipment and junk. She’s pretty awesome, good hand-to-hand fighter too!”

Keith nodded to the giant Olim Vell respectfully, he still had to look up to make eye contact despite the fact he was still standing. It was hard for Keith to imagine the Olim in combat; difficult to see them in any situation that involved violence at all. They seemed more like politicians and priests to him and the disbelief must have shown in his expression.

Tasa blinked her bright, starry eyes at him and they squinted in a kind of smile.

<The red paladin doubts her skills? The Radix drones in my Order all learn to fight from a young age. It is part of our meditation.>

Pidge didn’t look up from whatever she was working on, typing furiously into a tiny keypad poised on one knee. She and the rest of paladins were wearing the same dun colored robes Keith had seen Hunk in before. They looked scratchy as potato sacks.

“The Radix are like a kickass Olim Vell version of Shaolin monks…you know like warrior monks from Earth? They do this amazing martial arts stuff but they take a vow of peace so they never use it…until like right now I guess. You have to sit in on one of the classes Keith you would LOVE it. They’ve been teaching Shiro all sorts of moves…”

The green paladin was talking so fast Keith could barely keep up with her. The drone’s smile only deepened and she placed a fond hand over to rest on Pidge’s head before reaching out to Keith.

<Your Aura is tired red paladin. You must be exhausted from your time with our Young Mother. Please won’t you sit and rest?>

Keith debated the cushion next to Pidge. Allura, Shiro and Hunk still hadn’t noticed him in the chaos so he gave in and settled into the soft floor. He was immediately set upon by a gaggle of Seeds with more pillows and a soft blanket. As soon as he seemed comfortable enough they swarmed away to see to whatever else needed their attention.

Keith was still in a bit of shock. Hell, he had been in a bit of shock going on a week now.

<You have questions? But I am sure you can guess why our resistance is here.>

Keith nodded slowly, folding his legs under him and smoothing the edges of the portrait still held face-down against his chest.

“Lance? You’re here to help us save Lance?”

Pidge typed a little faster at the sound of the blue paladin’s name. Her expression darkened
and she pushed her glasses roughly up the bridge of her nose.

“Damn right they are. They’re called the Elati and they’re this group of rebels from like…all the different Olim Vell groups and they want to get rid of the Imperials and take back their planet so the Empire doesn’t take advantage of them anymore.”

The Radix ruffled Pidge’s hair warmly before withdrawing their long fingers and pushing them into the long silky sleeve of their purple robe.

<That is putting it very bluntly paladin Pidge.>

Keith was becoming a bit overwhelmed by all the noise; after spending so much time in the general peace of the Inner Sanctum with only Y.M. for company, the mass of people was working at his frayed nerves.

“So, what? Are you going to kill the generals? Take the wormholes away from the Galra? Fight the empire?”

<Unfortunately we cannot do that. We have made a vow to avoid conflicts of->

“Unless they affect you right? Then it’s different. Suddenly you remember that your karate moves have another purpose!”

Pidge stopped typing gazing at Keith with a pleading look. He knew that look, so many people had given him that look before. It was the “I know you’re going to lose your temper and it’s gonna make everything worse so PLEASE don’t” look.

Keith…

the Lance imprint began slowly.

Keith cut him off.

“I’m sure you can’t wait for Voltron to leap in and help you with your problem, right? So why didn’t you help Lance earlier? Why didn’t you do anything about the scrims before? I bet you all knew about the illegal ones flooding in, the ones that Seeds are killing people to make.”

Tasa-fan looked at him without a trace of anger. There was no pity in her vague expression only a kind of gentle grief. Her large star-filled eyes bored into his and she did not look away or try to argue once through his tirade.

“Your Young Mother is braver than all of you combined. She cares and she’s more willing to…”

Keith struggled to find the words for all his racing, angry thoughts.

“She- she wouldn’t use people! That’s all the Olim seem to do. You don’t want to get involved you just want to use up! Nemean and Lance and…and even Y.M.! You’ll use them for babies or memories or w-whatever, because they don’t matter to you!”

Pidge crawled towards Keith slowly and he realized he was probably getting a little loud. Maybe he was screaming- it was honestly hard to tell.

“You…you’re just like the Galra…”

The room around them had gone silent. Keith stared ahead all focus on his breathing. He wasn’t even sure where the tirade had come from. Maybe it was just the idea that he and Y.M. had been working so hard while the people out here were making their own plans oblivious to how they had been struggling. They could have made it stop; made all of it stop.

The Radix drone looked ready to answer but she suddenly jumped to her feet like she had been scalded and bowed low moving to the side to make way for another Olim. The clinking of silver bracelets told Keith exactly who it was. On the fringe of his vision the red paladin could see even Pidge was bowing. He looked up defiantly and was surprised to see the Matriarch didn’t look angry, she looked…pleased.

<Can Voltron destroy an entire Empire without help? Can they be in every system and on every world and in every village?>

Someone’s arms slipped around Keith’s stiff shoulders but he was so focused on the Olim in front of him he barely registered the touch.

“No…We can’t.”

<The Olim can. We can carry Voltron to those places. We have our part we must play. In the end we must benefit the enemy as well…that is a hard choice and we bear it. The Order must think on it every day in their meditation; it is a price we pay. But at this moment our world is corrupt and our balance suffers. We cannot right it without Voltron paladin.>

Keith lowered his voice to a shaky whisper and hoped no one but the Matriarch could hear.
“We can’t have balance without the blue paladin. We can’t have Voltron without him.”

The arms tightened around Keith’s neck and a firm hand was gripping his shoulder.

_I think they heard you_, the imprint whispered.

The Matriarch lowered her bulky body ponderously into a squatting position and bowed her head to Keith with something like admiration.

_<We have a plan. Tomorrow after the ceremony the Elati will make their move and reclaim the blue paladin. I swear this to you.>_ 

Allura whispered soothing nonsense words in Keith’s ear and Shiro pressed to his side protectively. Hunk probably wasn’t far behind but all the red paladin could do was keep his eyes locked on the Matriarch’s.

“You the plan.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took a bit longer than normal because of the sheer amount of set up that went into it. There are a lot of little things to keep track of and this is definitely the quiet before the storm chapter.

I like dropping little hints about Galra Keith and the fact Nemean’s brothers are/were members of the Blade of Marmora. Those are pretty much just fun easter eggs/background building because all this takes place before Keith finds out about either of those things.

Thanks CJ you beautiful pure proofreader who is too good for this world.
It was good to be outside.

Keith raised his face to the pale, lilac sky and soaked in whatever passed for morning sun on Olim Vell. He sat on a heavy stone bench near the edge of a grassy meadow enjoying a few quiet minutes to himself. Despite his exhaustion the paladin had slept fitfully the night before, his dreams dark and uncomfortable.

When he woke up restless in the middle of the night Hunk had been pressed close to his back and Pidge was curled tight against his chest. He had no memory of either crawling into bed with him but their presence had been soothing and he didn’t question it; Hunk in particular was a like a giant, cuddly heating unit.

Tou had come for him very early, just like they promised. The convoluted pre-ceremony ritual had involved Tou and a veritable mob of other unfamiliar Seeds. They had bathed Keith in milk, scrubbed him in water and rubbed him with enough oil to fry a batch of onion rings. The red paladin’s skin felt so ridiculously clean he wondered if people could see their reflection in it.

After the aggressive cleaning regiment had come the robes. The Spur ritual required a retainer to wear an even more elaborate variation of the embarrassing kimono/ tunic combo Keith had worn to the wedding banquet. After they had slipped the bizarre, layered garment on him the Seeds had brushed the material with tiny combs and draped Keith with enough jewelry to make a British royal blush.
The red paladin’s hair had been brushed, oiled, brushed again and braided with gems the size of an adult man’s fingernails. Everything from Keith’s feet (he wasn’t allowed to wear shoes at the ceremony) to his eyebrows (plucked) were visited and revisited until Keith felt groomed within an inch of his life.

When they seemed satisfied that not one hair was out of place the Seeds had turned Keith loose on the condition he remain pristine. It reminded the red paladin of a memory he had seen during a Viewing. In it Lance had been a ring-bearer at one of his cousin’s weddings.

Immediately after promising his mother he would keep his tiny suit clean the four year old had made a beeline for the most convenient mud puddle. Baby Lance had walked down the aisle filthy, soggy and smiling. Keith was pretty sure that if he pulled a similar stunt it would be straight back to the milk pool; No thank you.

The Spur Ceremony was held outdoors. Tou had said that a Spur always took place in full view of the sky, the sun and the grass. If the rite took place indoors it was bad luck for the Mother and the Vell. Tou also mentioned something about universal quintessence but at that point Keith was in the middle of some overly-enthusiastic braiding from a gushing Seed and he missed most of the lecture.

The slab bench where Keith currently sat was a fair distance from the actual ceremony stage. The Spur stage, shrine…whatever it was- was a hill-sized rock dais that rose naturally over the familiar landscape of grass-stalks and fireflies. The grass in front of it had been cut and trimmed and every few feet giant chunks of rock like the one Keith was using formed a sort of outdoor amphitheater.

The red paladin watched as a scuttling army of Seeds put the finishing touches to the sacred observance grounds. They ran from task to task, adjusting enormous, scaultrite vases full of cut grass and scaultrite lights strung on tall metal poles around the edges of the stone seats. It looked like they were getting ready for some sophisticated Shakespeare in the park instead of an ancient rite of passage.

“Man, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so clean.”

Keith looked up and offered Shiro a weak smile. The black paladin approached with his arms folded over his own meticulously laid vestment clothes, his gaze on the ant-like activities of the distant Seeds.

“Hey. I’m clean. I always shower after training.”

“And you sure as hell don’t exfoliate like you could, the Lance imprint added in a teasing tone.

Shiro sat next to Keith without prompting, carefully pushing his robes beneath him so they wouldn’t wrinkle. Keith had no doubt he had received a firm dressing-down from Allura similar to the one he had gotten from the Seeds. Keep your clothes nice, stay away from anything that stains.

The edges of Shiro’s mouth flickered into a tired smile.

“You lost your fair share of demerits at the Garrison for un-shined boots if I remember correctly.”

Keith snorted, fiddling with a string of priceless garnets hung from the edge of his sleeve.

“The whole Iverson military mentality was weird anyway. Who cares about how shiny boots are in space?”

“It was to teach you discipline. The boots were just part of the process.”

Keith shrugged and looked away from the stage to meet Shiro’s kind, grey eyes.

“I don’t think discipline or shiny boots were ever really my thing.”

Shiro let out a laugh and raised an arm towards Keith. He looked like he wanted to put a hand on the red paladin’s back, maybe a friendly pat on the shoulder but he stopped himself mid-motion.

“Ha, I don’t know if I should risk touching you. I’m afraid I’m going to mess up…all this.”

Shiro waved his hand around Keith’s general area quirking his head slightly. Keith just sighed deeply in reply.

“You gotta keep camera ready Mullet, the imprint chirped.

Shiro glanced around the stone bench he and Keith reclined on, scanning the area to see if there were any eavesdroppers. Keith followed his example restlessly.
The vibe of the day was making him extremely anxious.

The night before in the paladin’s quarters the Olim dissenters and Voltron had all filled Keith in on what he had been missing outside of the Inner Sanctum.

While The Flos-Matriarch was a caretaker and head of the Citadel the Flos-Patriarch was head of “The Order,” a quasi-religious group of drones. The Matriarch held dominion over the Seeds and brood, the Patriarch over the Monks and the Radix/Folium adults. Both of them had long been ignored by the Imperials and shunned by the previous Mother, Soluto.

They were eager to change the status quo.

It was the Matriarch who had approached Allura first; she knew about Y.M.’s…affinity for Lance and openly offering to aid Voltron in their effort to retrieve the blue paladin. Allura was eager to form any kind of alliance on a strange planet among a much venerated people.

The resistance needed them, they had few advantages. The Galra still had a massive warship just sitting in orbit around Olim Vell and the presence of it was very much felt by the Vell’s inhabitants. It made the Caulis Imperials believe themselves untouchable, the Matriarch had told Keith angrily, they had the protection of the Empire above them and monitored the Citadel like paranoid con-men.

So far the Imperials had not disbanded the Order but their greed was well felt by Vell’s aging population of harvesters and weavers. Most of the Olim lived in tight, technology-savvy colonies around the planet but their numbers were dying off in droves. Despite the dwindling population the Caulis made sure a percentage of all precious, harvested scaultrite went to the Galra; a fact that Keith, and by extension Y.M., did not know.

The Olim aware of the power shift were tired of being secret slaves for the Empire just because the upper castes were addicted to luxuries like water. The unrest had ultimately led to the creation of the resistance and the Elati’s plan to overthrow the Caulis.

Allura had explained all this with unfettered anger. Her eyes sparking as she launched into the precise details of why The Citadel dwellers would be most vulnerable during the Spur ceremony. In one fell swoop, the princess explained, they could remove the Imperials, show the Empire that a new, unbiased regime was in charge and get Lance back to Voltron where he belonged.

The final arrangement had sounded alright on paper and Keith had repeated his role in it over and over until ever part of the plan was burned into his memory.

The Young Mother would be escorted to her place on the sanctified dais with Nemean. They would exchange vows and Y.M. would officially receive her adult name. After the naming, the actual Spur would take place and finally the dowry gifting. The gifting was the signal- the moment when the Elati would move on the Caulis Imperials.

Shiro scowled at a hovering Galra ship, his gaze turning stony. Looking around one more time to make sure no one was listening he spoke to Keith in a conspiratorial whisper.

“The Matriarch thinks there are going to be more sentries than we first estimated.”

Keith shrugged, unsurprised.

“I’m still shocked they were bold enough to bring them in the first place.”

The Empire’s scouting vessel lowered onto a nearby swathe of uncut turf, it wasn’t a designated landing space and Keith felt himself shiver involuntarily at the crunch of breaking grass as the landing ramp was extended outwards. From the time spent on Vell he had a pretty good idea just how disrespectful this was. They were crushing something important to an entire race of people near one of the most holy places on the planet; the generals clearly didn’t give two shits.

Nodding distractedly Shiro pointed briefly with his prosthetic hand.

“We’re making them nervous. They seem to know there are Olim who want to overthrow them… but they probably think they’ll be safe during the Spur with the sentries and the cover of a crowd.”

All Olim could attend the Spur. Radix or Folium droids, Barren or Fertile Seeds- It made no difference. In a few hours the amphitheater would be bursting with every citizen of Vell. Only the Galra and their drunken cronies would be cowardly enough to use the civilians as a shield.

An undercover Seed had informed the Matriarch that the generals would be bringing a bodyguard detail with them and this was apparently enough to convince even the most stubbornly pacifist Elatite that violence was unavoidable, cementing their uprising firmly into place. In the face of countless years of peaceful tradition the corrupt Caulis were allowing weapons into a divine place where life was created; an unforgivable crime.

The sentries came down the ramp in lines of two. They looked brand new, their chrome bodies glinting with a just off the assembly line shine. Shiro narrowed his eyes and Keith could see him calculating in his head, counting and re-counting, checking his own mental math as he compared
the Galra’s automated numbers to their own.

It was a stark reminder of how naked they were. The paladin’s had no bayards, no weapons outside their own bodies. It would stay that way for the first ten minutes of fighting at least. Somewhere in the tall grass around the stage was a collection of hidden spears and short-swords. The night before the Spur, the Order had planted weapons in the grass under the guise of purifying the grounds.

Keith grimaced and worried his bottom lip as the sentries made their way to the edges of the stone benches, taking their places with programmed meticulousness. They were between the paladins and the weapons and all of them had guns. Even if things went exactly as planned, even in a smooth, best-case scenario, it would still be at least two to three minutes before any of the rebels were armed. That was plenty of time for a sentry to take them out.

Shiro seemed to read Keith’s thoughts and shook his head slowly his eyes never leaving the Galra droids.

“We’ll have chaos on our side. We still outnumber them five to one and neither the Imperials or the generals will be expecting so many to go after them at once. The Seeds and the Drones are such drastically different sizes Pidge thinks it will confuse their targeting systems.”

“…They’re still going to hit someone.”

Keith answered softly.

He didn’t mean to be so pessimistic but with so many older Olim civilians in the confined space it was a near mathematical certainty there would be casualties and the thought hurt selfishly he was more scared for the other paladins and the Young Mother. What if she was hit by a wild shot? What if she was hurt? She didn’t know what was going to happen the second she handed Lance over to Nemean—Nemean.

The Duke had no idea an all out revolt was coming and Keith couldn’t help but wonder if the generals would pin the mess on him somehow; on his family.

He hadn’t voiced these doubts to the war council. Everyone knew the risks, everyone knew the plan.

None of the paladin’s would be allowed to fight the generals directly but they would be tasked to taking out sentries as best they could. That was a ground rule from the start. No loss of Galran life and no member of Voltron could touch an Imperial. Despite everything the Olim were still desperately trying to keep peace with the Empire. They wanted everyone to see this was strictly a civil conflict and taking out the robots was part of that.

Keith’s role felt so small by comparison. They didn’t expect him to fight at all.

All the red paladin had to do was get Lance and run. Keith’s guilt built to a painful crescendo when he thought of how this would upset the Young Mother.

No. Y.M. would understand why he was doing this …maybe even Nemean would understand if she had explained the situation to him; Lance needed him now.

Shiro’s metal fingers scraped loudly at the rock under his palm and he muttered something under his breath before turning to Keith.

“One more time, tell me the steps.”

Keith almost rolled his eyes but held back. He had already repeated the plan a hundred times so one more review wouldn’t kill him. Taking a deep breath he let the words come with practiced ease.

“Step one, I do my part in the Spur ceremony and wait for the dowry exchange. The exchange is the signal for action against the Imperials. Step two, I get Lance’s scrim and run for the nearest shuttle craft. No stopping, no fighting. Step three, I fly the shuttle back for you and the others and we leave the planet as fast as possible.”

Shiro looked satisfied with Keith’s spiel but kept silent. If he had something to add or correct he kept it to himself.

Pidge had already contacted the Castle of Lions with the shoddy communications equipment her Order friend had acquired. Coran knew they were coming; once they were off planet they would have a wormhole waiting before the orbiting warship could even target them.

Still, even if the black paladin was content Keith’s brain kept returning to the bystanders, the innocents caught in the crossfire.

“What if- what if they try and hurt Y- The Young Mother?”

“They won’t Keith. Protecting her is priority number one for the Olim and the generals might be cruel but they aren’t stupid. With the lay lines at stake the Empire doesn’t want the Mother
dead. They don’t want to lose the wormholes and the generals know that. For them this is all just an intimidation game.”

“We should at least come back in the lions—”

“No.”

Clenching his hands into fists Shiro glowered at the ground near his feet.

“Both the Matriarch and the Patriarch made it crystal clear that we don’t touch the Galra or the Imperials unless there is no way to avoid it. We can’t fight an outside war on neutral soil. We get Lance and we run for it. If everything works out then the Galra will surrender, come to terms with the new leadership and the new Mother. They’ll still have the wormholes but—”

“But they don’t control the whole planet through the Imperials—yeah…”

It made sense but that didn’t mean Keith had to like it. He felt his cheeks color against his will, the blood rushing angrily into his pale skin.

“I get it…I get this is all some political gambit but I still don’t like it.”

“I don’t either—”

Shiro said with a kind of weary resignation.

“—but if Allura can deal with it so can we. We have to respect the Olim. We need them as allies so we have to listen to them. It’s another facet of Voltron we need to get used to. If we do this for them they’ll overlook the scrim thing—try and settle things with the Empire.”

Still tugging fruitlessly at the jewels on his sleeve Keith took a deep breath through his nose.

“I hate leaving Y.M.- The Mother like this. It feels like I’m abandoning her when she really needs me—what if I don’t even get to say goodbye?”

“I think she would understand Keith. From what you’ve told me about her? She seems like she could handle just about anything life throws at her.”

Shiro’s serious expression broke into an honest grin.

“You know…you’ve changed in the last week. I’m proud of how well you handled a difficult situation. You’re acting more like a leader should, more patient.”

Keith shrugged. He wasn’t feeling up to compliments. It seemed like he could have prevented this whole thing if he just gotten Lance out in time. Sure the Elati would still be after the Caulis but…maybe they could have figured out a different way to take the Imperials out. A way where no one would have been hurt; Y.M. wouldn’t be caught in the crossfire of civil strife she was too sheltered to understand.

Plus on top of it all they were still committing a serious offense against the Olim. They were stealing a dowry.

“Hey, Keith- look at me.”

The red paladin hesitated before raising his eyes to Shiro’s. The black paladin found a small area of his Spur outfit that seemed safe to touch. He laid careful fingers on his upper arm, on one of the only spots clear of decoration. Shiro gripped Keith there with his flesh and blood hand, squeezing gently.

“A good soldier and a great leader can’t dwell on what they didn’t accomplish. You do the mission that’s in front of you, the thing you need to do now, the best you possibly can. You focus on failure in the past and it’s going to affect your present. You understand?”

How does he do that? How the hell does he always sound like a wise Jedi master all the time? It’s like he was programmed to know exactly what to say, The imprint marveled.

Keith felt some of the pressure leave his shoulders and a faint smile traced his lips. He could do it because he was Shiro; there was a reason he was the black paladin. He was cool in the face of absolute chaos. Even if he had his own doubts he pushed them aside so his team could thrive.

Shiro examined Keith’s face and whispered urgently.

“The plan, repeat it back to me one more time.”

The red paladin groaned loudly this time, unable to fight the impulse to roll his eyes a second time.

“Shiro. I GOT it.”

“Humor me, one more time.”
Shiro pulled his hand back slowly from Keith’s upper arm. He didn’t break eye contact and Keith felt a nervous thrum of energy run up the back of his neck.

“Step one, do my part in the Spur ceremony and wait for the dowry exchange—”

Keith repeated the steps again perfectly and Shiro turned his attention back to the amphitheater. The first Olim were starting to trickle in and find their seats.

“Whatever happens Keith, whatever you see or hear you don’t stop. You’re our best pilot and only you can get Lance. You have to stick to the plan.”

Keith swallowed at the first nervous lump gathering in his throat.

“I will. I promise.”

There was no rehearsal. There was no preamble of any kind before the ceremony itself. Keith had kind of hoped the Seeds would do a run-through so he would know where to hit his marks or…whatever he was supposed to do but nothing like this happened.

The amphitheater was full to bursting with Olim, some so ridiculously large they formed a living wall of eyes and tendrils on the stone benches farthest from the stage. The Seeds moved like intelligent swarms of insects—collecting and buzzing and separating in huddled groups that could not keep still.

Tou had said The Spur itself happened when Vell’s old, red sun was at its apex above the stage, although to Keith’s untrained eye the planet had no visible change in daylight; just a cycle of different shades of dusk. The morning was the brightest but the sky was always a deep purple and even at its peak the sun never seemed to provide much light; yet another reason time was so confusing here.

Shiro had long left to take his place among the observers when Tou came to bring the red paladin to the stage. The Seed held his hand and Keith didn’t fight it. He felt himself clutching the small fingers back as his heart started to race, his nerves getting the better of him.

Tou lead him past a mass of milling Seeds and a giraffe-sized Radix drone lazily smoking a pipe. They passed scaultrite lamps and an ancient Folium drone stooped with age before finally reaching a carved set of steps that lead to the top of the black-stone dais.

“I can’t accompany you up there Master Keith. Only members of the wedding party itself can stand atop the Spur stone.”

Keith nodded in acknowledgement and let Tou fuss over his outfit one final time, adjusting and readjusting his already flawless robes. The red paladin managed a half-smile as he watched Tou brush imaginary dust from his sleeves. This was probably the last time they would ever speak.

“Er- thanks Tou. For everything.”

The Seed looked caught off guard by the compliment. They clapped their hands, burbling at him with obvious pride.

“It was truly an honor Master Keith! You are a good paladin with a beautiful aura.”

Tou covered their face shyly with both hands when the red paladin leaned down to pat them awkwardly on the back.

Shaking out his hands and bouncing lightly from foot to foot like he was about to go into combat Keith made his way to the stairs and started to scale them. Tou watched him make the short climb, their hands grasped nervously near their chest, their wide, starry eyes slightly teary.

Keith was the second person on the stage area. The first was the Flos-Patriarch who was squatting in an awkward half-bent position, his head bowed like he was in the middle of a prayer—or possibly some sort of meditation. Keith guessed it would be rude to interrupt but he made his way towards the Patriarch anyway, at a loss for where he was supposed to stand.

<Here paladin…your place is at my side.>

The drone didn’t move or open his eyes but his deep bass voice filled Keith’s head, vibrating him brain in the same way the Matriarchs did. It was a different, less pleasant feeling than when the Young Mother spoke. Her voice was always so unobtrusive, gentle; like an extension of Keith’s own thoughts.

“Oh…alright.”

The stone looked dark along the edges but once he was on top Keith could see that the obsidian borders hid the ceremonial rock’s true nature. In the center it was pure scaultrite; smooth, scarcely chipped and partially transparent. It was like walking on an ice-cube warmed by the barely-there sun.
Finding his balance on the odd platform Keith picked his way to the Patriarch and noticed several spots that had been physically worn into the stone; the weight of bodies and the passage of time wearing comfortable grooves into the scaultrite stage. It was similar to the divot in the common room couch that Hunk had made for himself. He always sat in the same spot when he was working on something; unlike Pidge who preferred to migrate and constantly shift positions.

Gradually the Patriarch reclined his curved, anteater-like head to the sky and passively observed the sun. While he seemed outwardly calm the air around him was vibrating restlessly and a strange, nervous smell lingered close to his skin. The red paladin could feel his own palms dripping sweat, his heart going jackrabbit fast behind his gaudily dressed ribs. It wasn’t comforting to find the Olim leader as worked up as he was.

The Patriarch took in the sun’s position and gazed down at the crowd as he shifted his weight upwards. His tendrils tied themselves in loose knots as he considered the sea of limbs and eyes below the dais. Keith felt sure he was looking for something in particular; Probably the Imperials.

“Hey, Patriarch-sir? Can you explain what I’m supposed to do up here? You know during the ceremony?”

The last of the Olim were streaming towards the gathering place. Keith could see the stragglers making their way through the grass from his higher vantage point. Up here he could see everything from the Galran’s nearby shuttle to the edge of the Citadel.

The Patriarch paced a few inches back and forth his thick throat bobbing up and down as he made a low, gravelly moaning noise.

<You observe. You stand at my side and observe in silence. When the Spur ends you will take the scrim and present it to the Auricle during the handover. But Paladin->

The Patriarch cut himself off inching even closer to the edge of the stage. Keith felt his already rapid pulse quicken and licked his dry lips wishing he had a water bottle or something on him. The air was cool but his throat felt like death-valley in June. He didn’t know he held Lance during the ceremony. After the Spur they were going to hand the scrim right to him. All he had to do was make a break for the stairs.

<…>

Off to the edge of the amphitheater the sentries had taken up guard positions every few feet. Keith didn’t bother to count them; it wouldn’t help him, hell it would probably just make him more panicky. Some of the Elati were trying to stand subtly beyond the sentries, striving to go unnoticed. There was a fear that some of the oldest Olim who weren’t part of the resistance would turn on the Order and the paladin’s once they saw them attacking the Caulis.

It was another completely unknown factor. Violence on Vell was like an iceberg in the Sahara; it just didn’t exist. The Patriarch spoke again but it sounded like every word he said was painfully precise- carefully chosen. Like he thought someone outside of their mental link was listening. Hell, for all Keith knew they were.

<… While the preparations for the Spur are complex, the ceremony itself very simple. The Young Mother must do the brunt of the work herself and she has been preparing longer than you have been alive.>

During the planning session the night before the rebels revealed that the Galra would have a vehicle closer than the one the paladins had arrived in; the same shuttle Shiro and Keith had watched land a few hours prior. It had ended up working in their favor.

Keith probably wouldn’t even have to deal with much confrontation between the stairs and the tall grass. It would be easy to outrun the sentries in an enclosed, organic space. They had good targeting systems but were easily bamboozled by natural environments.

It would admittedly be a bit of a struggle running in his ceremonial clothing but Keith would just have to plow through. If worse came to worse the black, stone sides of the dais were sloped. It might be easier to slide down instead of depending on the stairs.

*Bit steep, you could risk a broken leg that way, the Lance imprint said thoughtfully.*

Keith gave an instant almost instinctual shrug at this. That was possible but if he was in a hurry and he stuck the landing right….

Considering the grass between himself and the Galran shuttle Keith debated how much distance he would have to cover when the time came to run. He looked at the positions of the guards around the stairs and pondered on the shortest way that would be met with the least opposition.

There were so many variables. Too many bodies in motion to get a perfect estimate, but ten minutes seemed plausible. Taking into account the crowd, the droids, the robes, the weight of the scrim and the drop to the ground? Ten to fifteen minutes at least.
The Patriarch made a strange barking noise that Keith identified as clearing his throat. Shuffling uncomfortably on his many feet the drone’s prickly demeanor only worsened as he scrutinized the red paladin from face to feet. His mental voice tickled low in Keith’s jawbone like he was trying to go unnoticed.

<Paladin, there is something…I should say.>

“Sir?”

Squirming, the Patriarch’s inner voice turned to a loud roar as he threw all his various appendages high into the air.

<SHE APPROACHES>

Keith winced at the sudden volume change when the Patriarch waved hands and tendrils in the direction of the Citadel. He was “screaming” at the top of his internal voice and the Olim in the audience around them that were outwardly vocal went silent. Even the internal conversations faded as several hundred heads and countless eyes turned expectantly.

It was surreal seeing the Young Mother outside of her rooms. She moved with a ponderous integrity, her head and tendrils held high. Under the pallid sunlight she looked so much paler and, it seemed to Keith, more delicate. Despite being the size of a skyscraper turned on its side her every movement seemed timid. She kept blinking at the grass and the sky as if she had never seen anything so stunning. She smiled in wide-eyed wonder and paused every few skittering steps to gaze at something that had caught her attention.

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It was hard to imagine a time when he couldn’t recognize emotions in the Young Mothers face, a time when he could have mistaken happiness for something threatening; She was so open with her emotions. Keith could almost feel her joy despite the distance.

It struck the red paladin that Shiro and the others had never seen her in person before. To them she must look like a monstrous nightmare. He leaned forward to search the crowd for the paladins, curious about their reactions.

Keith had trouble seeing the first few rows hidden beneath the curve of the raised dais but he could see the largest seats with the best view filled with his fellow paladins, the Galran generals and the decrepit Caulis Imperials.

Being closer to the ground they spotted her a few minutes after he had and the response was…mixed. Pidge nearly stood in her chair to get a better look, her mouth hanging open and her eyes round. Shiro’s hard expression didn’t change— he was too focused on the mission and anything outside of it, no matter how large, didn’t register. Hunk looked bemused, his eyebrows curled, a confused frown ghosting around his lips. It was Allura’s face that made Keith’s stomach dip.

The princess was crying.

She had a hand to her mouth and silent tears were dripping down her cheeks. She was sobbing so quietly that none of the paladin’s seemed to have noticed and while there was definitely grief in her expression Keith was sure he saw something else…something he couldn’t quite identify.

<You know- the Spur is an emblematic marriage of three not just of two.>

“Hmm?”

Keith jerked his attention back to the Patriarch, surprised he was speaking directly to him again. The huge drone was watching Y.M. proudly as she trilled and bowed her head to Nemean. Keith hadn’t even seen the Duke emerge but at some point the Galran had met her on the cleared path to the sacred stone.

Nemean bowed back and they started to move again, the Duke walking slightly ahead on the narrow path.

<The marriage is that of three. Your paladin would be bonded to not only the Mother but to the Galran.>

The Patriarch continued, his mental voice an itchy murmur at the back of Keith’s brain.

The idea of the Lance being attached to Nemean was- weird to say the least. Like the rest of the Elati, the Patriarch had been briefed about the blue paladin’s body waiting in the Castle of Lions. He and the Matriarch had even given Keith advice about what he would need to do- the best way to put mind and body back together. All the experimentation and work Keith and Y.M. had been up to in the past week was supplemented by their insight.

Maybe he was telling Keith this so he could pass it along to Lance? Maybe it would impact the scrim or maybe he was just thinking out loud. The Patriarch, like his female counterpart, was difficult to read.

“Does that really matter? The dowry isn’t really aware of anything. They wouldn’t know they
were married."

Pulling his long gaze away from Y.M. the Patriarch gave Keith a hard look. He opened and shut his mouth several times exposing the long rows of yellowing, dull teeth inside. It looked like he was trying to speak out loud; was that even a thing drones could do? Although the bigger drones would often pantomime speech Keith had only seen Seeds speak vocally.

<Paladin…>

The Patriarch’s eyes flickered to the ground, to the Young Mother. The Matriarch had appeared at her side, walking elbow to elbow with the Duke. They formed a strange parade of Galra, drone and Olim Mother. Compared to the gargantuan creatures around him Duke Nemean looked like a child’s toy; grossly out of place.

The tendrils on the Patriarch’s back rose and fell in agitated waves. The longer he looked at the Duke the more he rankled and bared his teeth.

<The Y.M. spoke her mind- before the ceremony.>

The drones numerous eyes bored into Keith and the Patriarch started to grind his back teeth. He wanted to say speak so badly but something was holding him back.

Something that felt dangerous.

<Remember. The marriage goes in three directions and they might not be the ones you think.>

The red paladin wished he could understand but all he did was nod his head slowly, eyebrows arched towards his hairline.

“Yes…sir?”

Y.M. had reached the stage. In much the same way she pushed herself up into her meditation room she started to climb the side of the smooth rock. Scrunching up like a caterpillar she arched her entire long body upwards and rested her head and front limbs in her designated place inches from Keith.

She was so large there was no way her entire body would fit on top of the scaultrite slab but she solved this by winding her lower half neatly around the back edge of the stage so it was hidden from the view of the awe-stricken crowd.

None of the Olim had made a sound as she took her position, the world silent save for the sounds of wind in the grass. Y.M. looked a bit flushed but much, much healthier than the last time Keith had seen her; the food had done wonders. Little lines of white light flickered down her sides and splotches of glow thrummed over the skin of her underbelly.

She caught Keith’s eyes and her ecstatic smile widened. She looked less nervous than Keith thought she would be. In fact she looked delighted, and the feeling radiating off of her had pride mixed into the obvious joy.

She didn’t say anything, no doubt had been told that wasn’t allowed, but Keith was sure that if she could she would be talking his ear off. The emotions spilling off his friend made what was going to happen even worse. Keith attempted to smile back but it didn’t feel genuine; he hoped that didn’t show.

Nemean made his steady way up the staircase, the Matriarch in his wake with a familiar blue scaultrite shell cradled in her arms. The Duke was in full Galra regalia, his fur brushed to a sleek shine. Keith was pleased, but maybe not that surprised, to see the injuries to his face were fully healed. The swollen eye and bruises banished so thoroughly it was like they had never existed in the first place.

He shot Y.M. a sideways glance and a raised eyebrow. She gave a, considering her size, discreet nod, her jubilant smile going supernova. Yes, the smile said, I did that. I healed him myself.

The Duke met Keith’s eyes and looked equally pleased. He put a folded hand to his chest and bowed slightly as he stood opposite the Young Mother, a long, silken train billowing out behind him.

The Matriarch did not acknowledge Keith in any way. She settled beside the Patriarch, Lance held snugly to her chest. Her usual silver bands and tinkling bells had been replaced by a treasure trove of fancy jewelry. After closer observation Keith could see she was just as on edge as the Patriarch; her tight glare contorting the edges of her mouth into a tight-lipped scowl.

And just like that it started.

Keith could hardly believe it was finally happening. The Patriarch’s first lines of ceremonial gibberish were moving past the red paladin without being absorbed. He couldn’t help but stare at Lance’s scrin.
It looked like they had polished it, the smooth round curves of the shell-shape reflecting every bit of available light. Inside Lance’s pulse was steady, the cool, blue light of his quintessence so achingly close. A few more lines and—

*Pay attention idiot you’re gonna miss the signal. Focus!* The imprint hissed.

The crowd had become distant. Keith felt like the only people in the universe were the ones currently surrounding him. The Patriarch said his lines in a booming voice and it was odd that no matter how loud he was “talking” his voice was still technically soundless.

<We come to observe a child grown. We have come to see she who communes and keeps the bloodlines to our ancients; She who knows the lay-lines and is an impartial witness to life and death through the eyes of the Weblum.>

A breeze teased Keith’s hair. Nemean flicked one ear sharply. Below the stage some of the Olim had started a communal hum.

<Today we see you Young Mother and recognize you as a link in a chain older than worlds. Are you prepared to accept your name?>

The humming grew louder as more Olim joined in. It was the same soft musical white-noise the Order drones had made as they guided the paladins to the Citadel on that first confusing day.

Y.M. bugled low her tendrils moving thoughtfully over her face, drawing small shapes on the smooth rock around her.

<Do you accept this responsibility?>

Nemean stood ramrod straight, took two steps towards the edge of the stage and spoke in a clear, proud voice.

“To become the Young Mother’s Auricle would be a great honor. She is a being of kindness and grace and I have nothing but respect for her and for the people of the Vell. But…I am afraid I cannot accept this tremendous responsibility.”

The Olim’s rhythmic humming stopped instantly.

Holy record scratch batman, the Lance imprint spluttered.

Without missing a beat Nemean continued his voice wavering slightly.

“Af-er much thought and discussion with the Young Mother I have decided that I am not fit to be her Auricle. Vell is a place of peace, the Olim a fair people. Since the beginning of the Auricle tradition it has been considered taboo for an Auricle to be of the same species twice in succession. The Young Mother and I feel this tradition needs to be upheld.”

The shocked silence was turning to ragged, angry muttering. Keith didn’t know what to do. he stared at Nemea-un-blinking until it felt like his eyeballs were drying out. They had gone off-script. *what the hell should he do now?*

Nemean got a read on the crowd and though his ear tips twitched unhappily he continued in the same powerful, self-assured voice.

“I have taken the Young Mother’s offer to become an ambassador on behalf of the Galra Empire. I will stay and advise her in matters as best I can and…in my stead she has given me permission to choose my successor.”

The Caulis Imperials, who were making furious hooting noises stopped when they heard the word successor. All the Olim did. It was just like the Matriarch, the Y.M. -all of them had said. They didn’t care who the auricle was. Not really. They just wanted brood.

Keith could see the generals speaking to each other but he couldn’t see their faces. He was still trying to figure out their next move when Nemean reached out and grabbed one of his hands.

“Paladin Keith descendant of the house of Kagone will you please accept my position? Will you please become this Young Mother’s Auricle?”

Keith’s stared at the Duke’s gloved hand wrapped around his. His chest tightening to the point
that breathing was becoming difficult. His brain was short-circuiting, everything becoming too bright and overwhelming. He was taking too long to answer. He needed to say something right now-

_Say yes_, The Lance imprint urged gently.

“Yes.”

Keith managed, his mind filling in the gaps, everything becoming clear again now that the first answer was out of the way.

“I will be her Auricle.”

Looking up into Nemean’s eyes Keith saw nothing but warmth and encouragement. The Galran, his friend, drew him forward by the hand and lead him the spot he had occupied moments before. He let the red paladin’s hand go and Keith couldn’t help but reach for him a moment, still baffled by this sudden turn of events.

The Matriarch kept going and there was nothing in her voice to suggest that Keith’s entire world had just been turned upside down. There was muttering and arguments in the crowd- they were so remote, distant; He could barely hear them.

The ceremony plowed forward.

<Paladin Keith you have accepted the task. Will you share your life, your quintessence and your heart with this Mother of Vell?>

All of Keith’s attention turned inward, went pinprick small as he felt the first quiet tendril brush his cheek. Would he do those things?

“Yes.”

Of course he would.

<Paladin, human, child of another star- What name do you give to this Mother?>

Name? Name? What the hell could he say to that? He didn’t have a name! He was horrible at naming things!

Y.M. leaned down, down until the very tip of her snout rested against Keith’s chest. He looked at his reflection in the nearest of her eyes. The glow of Lance’s scrim was there in the corner of her vast, nebulous pupils.

Keith glanced back at the scrim and the initial panic of being put on the spot evaporated. He thought about everything he and the Young Mother had experienced through Lance’s memories; how he was the one who brought them all together in the first place. With instant clarity he knew exactly what name she should have.

“Carmen! Her-…Her name is Carmen.”

The Matriarch held two hands in the air the jewels on her wrists clinking against each other lightly.

<Do you accept this name new Mother?>

Y.M. -not so Young anymore, thrummed in deep approval, a rush of warm air venting from between her boulder sized teeth.

<I do accept this name.>

Approaching with her arms still held aloft the Matriarch placed Lance’s scrim on a waiting tendril and stepped away again.

<Declare this the age of the Mother Carmen. Let the Spur begin.>

The crowd, the Matriarch, the grass and purple sky all faded further into the background. Reaching out a hand automatically to the scrim Keith let Carmen guide him. They were both touching Lance, her tendrils wrapping around the red paladin’s neck and waist. They were an unbroken chain. It was so private, intimate and Keith’s breath caught in his throat.

He tried to think about what was next. She was going to- she was going to make a copy of their quintessence right? The red paladin blinked at Mother Carmen stupidly.

He wanted to ask if it was going to hurt. But he couldn’t find his body or remember how to use his voice. The scrim was so warm under Keith’s palm and that solid warmth was traveling gradually up his arm. The red paladin gasped as the heat moved through his shoulder and into his chest.

Following the heat closely were flowing waves of color. They danced and licked at Keith’s pale skin. Red light quivered above his arms and tagged at the blue light circling Lance’s scrim. It
was pulling him from the physical world, from reality and as Keith watched the light of him and the dowry pulled away effortlessly and pushed into the semi-transparent end of Carmen’s nearest tendril.

For a timeless moment nothing happened. Keith’s now visible aura simply sparked and swirled around his body like, he assumed, it always did. The dowry mingled with it but the two colors stayed separate, mixing but never merging; fire red and water blue remaining side by side.

Then the white tendril began to change. The red and blue flowed into it faster and in the process they began to fuse. It felt amazing. It was like becoming three creatures all at once. Keith was the length of a subway train, an immense creature that traveled galaxies in dreams. Keith was a compassionate, insecure Cuban boy light-years from home. Keith was a lost, whip-smart kid out of foster care who was learning how to be loved. He was all of these things and much more.

The sensations of Lance, the smells of his skin and hair that Keith had come to associate with a Viewing were here tenfold. All the essential bits of Lance McClain pouring into the former Young Mother and pulling the red paladin’s accepting aura with them.

One by one the Olim Mother’s white tendrils were stained a beautiful shade of magenta; A hint of blue at each base, a flash of red at each tip. They weren’t the cold purple Keith associated with the Galra and they definitely weren’t the same color as the grass around them.

No. It was a completely new color; a red –violet that was Lance and Keith. The trailing lights on the edges of Carmen’s back flashed, her tendrils filling with the dazzling tint from her head to her tail. A feeling of pure joy – of relief filled Keith’s whole body.

It happened so quickly. The whole process couldn’t have lasted more than a few minutes but it felt like hours had gone by when the sensation of Lance tugging at Keith’s quintessence finally started to fade.

The former Y.M., whose body he had felt from the inside out, let the Matriarch take the dowry back and she caught Keith before he fell to the stage in a nerveless heap; the red paladin could barely feel his legs.

Y.M., Carmen- helped him find his balance and although he was sure she should have been addressing the crowd she would not look away from him.

<I thank my Auricle for his gift of quintessence. To show my love I would offer you my dowry. He is the bond between us but we are the ones in his debt. We will always keep his memory and tell his history.>

Nemean, in the position that Keith would have been in before all...this, stepped forward with Lance in his arms while the Matriarch spoke.

<Do you Auricle, accept the gift of the Mother Carmen’s dowry?>

Keith blinked and gazed stupidly up at the now magenta-indigo Mother. She just smiled back and there was a glint of triumph in her expression.

She figured it out.

She had figured out a way for him to get Lance back that was perfectly legitimate. Nemean had figured out a way to get his family back as an ambassador and the two of them had done this for him- for Lance. Nemean pushed the scrim suggestively towards the red paladin eyes crinkled in a radiant smile and Keith reached numb, sweaty hands to accept it.

“I acc-.”

Something hot and wet exploded in Keith’s face. It ran down his cheek, staining the expensive fabric on his chest. He stared at it bewildered; it was a deep, black-red and smelled electric and coppery.

It was blood.

Nemean tilted his head and blinked owlishly, just as baffled as Keith. The Duke took a wobbly step forward and glanced down at his stomach with a perplexed chirp. Blood was pumping from a wound just under his ribs and near his naval. The tip of a long knife that had entered at an upwards angle through his side glinted where the blood was darkest. The Duke stared at it ears pressed down, seemingly at a complete loss for what this meant.

Keith grasped the situation much faster.

Even though his own legs were still partially jelly the red paladin grabbed Nemean as he started to fall forward hugging his body tight and sandwiching Lance’s scrim between them. The blade, which had been thrown from the ground below, was so long it was more short-sword than dagger. It was also Galran, the familiar insignia of the Empire engraved bold into the hilt jutting from Nemean’s back.

Still confused about the blade growing from his middle, Duke Nemean looked at Keith his
voice childlike-pleading.

"K-Keith… help."
Heads up: This chapter has some blood and gore in it. There's some mentions of death it being a war and all. If these things bother you be prepared.

The stage was still. The audience was still. No one seemed to know how to react. The thrown blade and the faulty Spur were met only with an impregnable silence.

Slowly, ponderously, Keith sank down to his knees bringing Nemean with him. The human and the Galran collapsed onto the smooth rock in a puddle of silk and grass-cloth. The sound of the Duke’s frayed breathing filled Keith’s ears and he let Lance’s scrim sink down to rest between his knees as he propped up the hurt Galran’s head.

“Hey, Nemean. It’s alright… it’s going to be alright. I got you.”

The words came spilling out Keith’s mouth despite the very real feeling that everything was not going to be alright. He wanted to put pressure on the wound but was afraid to pull the knife out; some whisper of arcane Garrison training told him that would only make things worse.

Y.M. - Carmen was the first to break the spell that had fallen over the amphitheater. She surged forward with a sharp cry of distress. The soft reddish-purple tips of her tendrils reaching frantically for Nemean and Keith.

“Touch 'em and more will die, your Mother-ship.”

The guttural voice pierced the tense air, cutting through it utterly. Keith stared over the lip of the stage wide-eyed, his hand pressed around the tip of the knife on Nemean’s torso.

One of the Galra generals was walking casually towards the dais. It was the larger, brutish bear general; Heonar- Keith recalled hazily that Nemean had called him Heonar.

He strode through the quiet rows of horror-struck Olim Vell with a swagger in his step; there was an infuriatingly smug grin on his dull, thuggish face.

“Pull back those wigglers, highness.”

Keith glanced between him and Mother Carmen. She was just inches away; her tendrils poised so close to Keith’s shoulders he could feel her body heat. Despite the general’s order she made no move to pull back.

Heonar’s smug smile crinkled with irritation.

“I said pull back. You’ll offer no help to ‘em. That Galran boy must die and I’ve given him a slow death- a leaking death. A traitor to the empire deserves no better than that.”

The Matriarch rushed forward, her tendrils dancing wild and enraged around her neck. She faced Heonar with bared teeth her back to the new Mother, one of her hands moving close to Keith’s shoulder.

<How DARE you! How dare threaten our Mother! How dare you hurt an ambassador of Vell! You desecrate a sacred ceremony->

“Oh, shut up you old hag.”

Heonar pulled back his lips and snarled with a full set of fangs. Despite outweighing him by hundreds of pounds most of the nearest Olim pulled away in fear.

The general just laughed.

The paladins hadn’t moved. Keith tried to make eye contact with Shiro but when he finally found his pale face in the petrified crowd his attention was elsewhere.

Keith followed the black paladin’s line of sight puzzled and realized with dawning horror that at some point every single sentry around the perimeter of the ceremony had activated. They were all aiming at the same target and Keith traced their trajectory, his stomach twisting in horror; every single gun was locked on Carmen.

Heonar’s snuffly, grunting laughter intensified.

“I see the red paladin has noticed. Look around old lady Matriarch. If I give the word my sentries will all unload everything they got into your Worm Queen.”
A murmur, both mental and physical went through the assembly as the rest caught on to the Galran’s betrayal.

Keith’s nostrils were filled with the stink of Nemean’s blood and his vision was starting to turn red at the edges. From the smell or his own rage the red paladin didn’t know. All he knew was a deep, primitive desire to tackle General Heonar and rip out his throat with his bare hands. It was a terrifying sensation but also oddly exhilarating and it took every ounce of willpower Keith had just to stay planted in place.

You have to stay put Keith, the Lance imprint whispered frantically to the part of his brain that hadn’t gone bestial. They could hurt her. They could kill Nemean. It’s not too late to help him.

The Matriarch’s tendrils rubbed against each other fretfully before pressing flat to her skin. She stood to her full height, looking down her nose at the Galran with a disdain so strong it was physically palpable.

<What do you want then. Speak, enemy of Vell.>

This last part: The enemy of Vell part- Obviously meant something very serious. The air of confusion hanging over the crowd started to change. Even the most infirm of the Olim Vell shifted in their seats with uncomfortable nervous energy.

The Patriarch, who had hung back when the Matriarch had first spoken, had disappeared from the stage entirely; slipping away at the first opportunity. Distracted as he was Heonar didn’t seem to have noticed. Keith searched for the Elati he knew were hidden among the onlookers and was not surprised to see most of them were also missing.

Maybe they had all moved towards the hidden weapons the minute the knife had flown from Heonar’s fingers. Maybe even before. The signal they were waiting for never came and now with the Mother in danger an attack would be madness. Keith could only hope the Patriarch was gathering them; looking for an opening, waiting for a distraction.

“We had a deal maggot-neck. I want the blue paladin and we want our scaultrite. The load you owe and the future loads guaranteed.”

The general’s ears pinned back and he drew closer to the stage drawing another knife nearly identical to the first from behind his back. He was wearing a long, thick cape and Keith could see how two swords could have been easily concealed behind it. The Galran’s armored body was so broad and heavy he could have carried any number of weapons without anyone noticing.

Thrusting the long-blade at the Matriarch Heonar spoke in a voice that was half screech.

“The old bindings aren’t budging! And the runt there!-”

The general pointed at Nemean with his knife-tip, his toothy grin growing somehow wider.

“-The runt there is my meat and he’ll receive no healing or final rites. The Empire owns his blood and the Empire can take his life. He showed his true colors when he gave the paladin up. He’s nothing but a gutless traitor just like his brothers!”

The other general Castellan was moving swiftly and silently around the other side of the crowd. Keith caught him in his peripheral vision but made no obvious move to follow his progress. Castellan wasn’t smiling like his counterpart, if anything he looked mildly disturbed by what was going on.

The Matriarch hadn’t seen him yet, all her attention on the larger General at her feet.

<You are a fool. The Mother has made her decision. Without her you have no wormholes. Without her you have no Webhum, no scrims and no scaultrite.>

Heonar gave Mother Carmen a sideways glance and spit at the base of the dais.

“Yeah? I kill her you got no more people. You’re dead. Your planet is dead and then nobody has wormholes. Empire wins. You think you got all the cards maggot-mane you underestimate the Empire. Zarkon’s outgrown you!”

Keith blanched at the sheer disrespect and he could feel the Matriarch tense like an electrified wire, her body vibrating with fury. The Keith from a week ago would have been on his feet and jumping down to meet Heonar with teeth and fists. The Keith from a week ago would have given in to the blind rage and the tantalizing pull of adrenaline and violence.

Keith was fighting to not be that Keith. He couldn’t be stupid… he couldn’t just jump into this. Not with Nemean and Lance in his arms and his friend at gunpoint.

During Heonar and the Matriarch’s exchange General Castellan had moved silently, almost imperceptibly to his companion’s side, his svelte fur damp with sweat. He bowed hastily to the Matriarch, his tone cloying as he tried to take charge of the situation.

“My comrade may be blunt my lady” but the Caulis Imperials have made us promises. Though
Heonar is showing his...dissatisfaction with the situation in a very strong way, his grievances are real. Nemean was promised the Auricle position for nearly two years. We had an arrangement."

Keith felt a low hiss escape him. This was the empire exemplified; a silver-tongued con-man and a bully. They were the worst of the Galra in a nutshell, a stupid show of brute force and a beguiling prick.

Nemean was becoming more delirious with each passing moment and Keith’s robes were saturated with his blood, his hands slippery from trying to staunch the flow. The Duke’s eyelids flickered and he seemed less aware of his surroundings, of what was going on. Keith caught him murmuring for his Mother and his sister by turns. Sometimes even for his grandmother or his brothers.

Distressed by his pain Carmen burbled tenderly, moving her considerable weight ever so slightly. Her limbs stretched in a rather unsubtle move towards her Auricle and ambassador; more focused on the Duke’s suffering than on the threat to her own life.

“Stay still Worm Mother! I have enough weapons aimed at you to make a fair dent.”

As Heonar snapped at her Carmen looked at the Galran with patience he didn’t deserve. Blowing a gentle breath through her teeth she answered evenly. She spoke nobly, reaching out not just to the Galran but to all the Olim Vell around him.

<General, the Caulis Imperials are no longer ruling as my proxy. Now that I have had my Spur I can amend any contracts or deals they have made. Even if he is a subject of the Empire, The Duke is now under my protection and even if he isn’t my Auricle he is still an important and irreplaceable part of my court.>

Slowly, carefully the Mother stretched a placating tendril towards General Heonar. Keith felt the world around them hold its collective breath.

<Please… I know you fee like you have to kill him out of duty to your Emperor but there has to be another way. The Olim Vell do not fight. We can’t give you the dowry or the Duke but we want to preserve our bond with the Galra…please.>

A look of pure relief passed over General Castellan’s face and he seemed more than happy to come to terms. With an oily smile the fox-faced Galran gave a half-bow, his hand gesturing to the confused gaggle of Imperials at his back.

"Of course my lady, of course we should perhaps meet in private with the Caulis in attendance and…"

Heonar drew back slightly as the Mother’s tendril came within arm’s reach, his lips pulled back in a rictus grimace. It happened so quickly Keith barely saw the General raise his arms above his head. In one smooth motion Heonar brought his knife upwards and slashed it down straight through Mother Carmen’s tendril, slicing off a neat, meaty chunk.

The severed end fell to the ground in a boneless, wriggling mass and the Mother let out an unearthly howl. Kicking the end of the detached tendril towards the dais General Heonar raised one brawny arm skyward and shouted to be heard over the Mother’s pained cries.

"THE EMPIRE SUFFERS NO TRAITORS!"

In a matter of seconds everything was utter chaos.

Whatever residual bond that still linked Keith to Mother Carmen lit up like Christmas lights and her pain roared raw through the red paladin’s nerve endings. He barely heard himself screaming, his voice becoming indistinguishable from the gargantuian Olim Mother’s.

This was apparently the final straw for the Olim Vell. Through bleary senses Keith could see the Matriarch near frothing, the sounds coming from her like nothing he had ever heard. Gagging on a throat full of heat and bile Keith watched the Matriarch lunge at Heonar teeth and tendrils first.

The Elati had found their weapons. Out of his peripheral vision Keith caught the frenetic, familiar motions of bodies in combat. Inhuman yowling, the jagged sound of gunfire and the heavy sounds of feet shook the amphitheater. Keith tried to tear his eyes from the violent, full-fledge brawl going on between Heonar and the Matriarch but he couldn’t. He was frozen in something deeper than fear.

The Olim outweighed the Galran by several hundred pounds but she was bulky, cumbersome. He was a trained warrior and she was not. The Matriarch swung a heavy hand, the thin fingers curled claw-like as she tried to grab hold of Heonar with both hands and tendrils. The General seemed unphased; quite the opposite in fact. He seemed ecstatic and as he ducked and weaved away from her clumsy blows the Galran laughed breathlessly.

Heonar reached out with his blade and made a long, slicing cut down the Matriarchs neck. It looked like he was toying with her and enjoying every moment. The Matriarch seemed to realize
this as well and as the General brought the knife down to pierce through the skinny palm of her hand she made a bellowing noise and turned her eyes on Keith, her gaze locking onto his.

<Paladin! Get her to the Citadel! PLEASE.>

Carmen was dazed and bleeding. A sort of dull shock filled her eyes as she watched the fighting around her. She was no longer moving towards Nemean or even reacting to the pain in her ruined tendril. It was the look of complete helplessness in her face that snapped Keith back to himself. With a tinge of guilt Keith set Nemean’s head down onto the smooth stage. He arranged the Duke carefully on his side, speaking to him absently as he tried to stand.

“I’ll be right back Nemean… I’ll be right back- I promise.”

Working through the lingering traces of Carmen’s pain Keith finally managed to take a few wobbly steps towards The Mother. He nearly slipped in a slick pool of her blood; it was semi-transparent, bright blue and almost the same texture as grass milk. It didn’t smell like copper-it smelled earthy and warm; a harsh contrast to human and Galran blood.

The Mother, who still looked young to Keith, stared at the ground like a deer in headlights her breath coming in bellowing gasps. Below the ceremony stage Keith could see Elati fighting desperately against the sentry droids.

There were more than the paladin remembered seeing on the bench with Shiro. Had they called for reinforcements? Had they been hiding in the grass? Keith briefly searched the fray for the rest of the paladin’s but couldn’t see them. He couldn’t see anything but the broken remains of empire droids and dead Olim; there were way too many of the latter.

You don’t have time to look Keith! Talk to Carmen! The imprint screamed through the foggy distress in Keith’s brain. Do what the Matriarch told you!

Laying shaking hands onto the Mother’s heaving side Keith stared in astonishment as her skin lit up around his fingers; the soft flesh igniting into same purplish color as her tendril. He pressed closer until his whole body was leaning into her. He had a feeling that even if he didn’t scream she would hear him just fine.

“Y-Carmen… You have to go. You have to go back to the Citadel while they have the droids distracted.”

The Mother didn’t move a muscle. Pressed near the front of her chest under her neck Keith could feel her panicked heartbeat; His whole body moving up and down with each scared thump.

<I can’t… my people… the Matriarch…>

“Carmen… They’re going to use you to-”

A wild shot buzzed close to the Mother’s face and it was enough to snap her out of her thousand yard stare.

<I’ve got to get Nemean first I…>

Another shot strayed dangerously close. This one whizzing so close to Keith’s ear he could smell where it burned his skin and singed his hair. It scratched Carmen’s shoulder as it passed and a thin line of blood oozed down one of her front legs.

It was too close. It seemed like a purposeful miss, a threat display.

Keith growled, whipping his head around to see a ragged, torn General Heonar standing at the top of the stage stairs. He held his knife loose in one hand and a discarded sentry rifle in the other.

“Go! Run! Get out of the open!”

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He fired again without preamble and this time his aim was right on the money. Keith felt an explosion of phantom pain in his eye and Carmen rose up on her back legs squirming in agony. The red paladin gasped as she surged upwards like a skyscraper, like a mountain above them. Her mouth opened unimaginably wide, all her tendrils curling instinctively to protect her body. She could have crushed them all without any effort but Keith didn’t think she could even if she wanted to. She simply was not programmed with the ability to hurt anyone; and the Galra knew it.

Carmen fell backwards and hit the ground with an earth shattering thud that nearly sent Keith and General Heonar to their knees. The paladin kept his balance and staggered to the edge of the dais as he tried to blink away the ghostly pain in his eye.

“GO CARMEN! GO NOW!!”
More shots were coming from random directions and Carmen barely had time to look back at Keith, one of her smaller eyes closed and bleeding, before she made for the safety of the Citadel. Their gaze had met for only a few seconds but he hoped their cemented connection made her understand everything he was trying to communicate; I’ll take care of Lance and Nemean. I love you. I promise I’ll come back.

“She’s hardly safe in her fancy house boy. We have one of the finest cruisers in the fleet overhead. I give the word and all her useless paintings and fine furniture is a charred heap in a burning field of grass.”

The cloudy shock that Keith attributed mostly to Carmen was clearing more with each passing moment. The red paladin was starting to feel the sharp tang of adrenaline but he knew better than to turn and attack. It would be stupid and Heonar was goading him, daring him to charge. The tint of red was still there at the edges of Keith’s sight but he knew he could ignore it, he could control himself.

The red paladin waited until he saw the last of Mother Carmen’s body disappear into the Citadel’s garden gates before he took a deep contemplative breath. With the lungful of air came more smells and sounds; the battlefield becoming more solid and tangible around him.

Carmen had seen it like it was something viewed in a scrim; ethereal, unreal. Keith experienced it on a completely different level, one gleaned from training and firsthand experience. General Heonar smelled like ozone and animal sweat and he was making his way casually to where Keith had left Nemean and Lance’s scrim. Keith flinched.

Patience. The imprint reminded him. I know its hard buddy but you gotta be patient.

“You did this. Didn’t you?”

Heonar grit angrily.

“…No. You couldn’t have. You’ve only been here a week…how could you have changed everything so quickly.”

Keith moved smoothly to face Heonar. The train of his robe was so saturated in Mother Carmen’s blood it felt like he was dragging heavy bricks behind him as he took a few cautious steps towards the Galran.

Heonar hadn’t come out of the fight with the Matriarch unscathed by any stretch. One of his ear tips was gone, ripped away by grasping claws or sharp teeth. He was bleeding from gashes in his arms and something was wrong with the hand he used to hold his knife. He held it delicately and there was a rough bandage binding his fingers together. Blood dripped from the hilt, down his elbow and onto the stage in a steady torrent.

“What if I did?”

Keith asked as he took in the general’s wounds.

“I think you’ve messed up pretty badly Heonar. Zarkon isn’t going to be happy about the Wormholes.”

General Heonar narrowed his eyes to slits his breathing growing hoarse as he became more agitated. He closed the distance between himself and Nemean staring down at the young Galran in disgust.

“I did what was best for the Empire, boy. Diplomacy is for those who can’t fight.”

The general nudged Nemean with the muzzle of his gun and the Duke’s head lolled easily to the side offering no resistance.

“You weren’t thinking about the wormholes or…the empire. You were just pissed a cub got the best of you…”

Keith startled himself with the truth of his own words and he rewarded the realization with another stop forward. He felt the hair on the back of his neck bristle.

“You made it personal. I don’t think Zarkon would like your dumb grudges-“

“Silence boy! You’re just another child playing at being a warrior. War is no game! The Galra do not show mercy even to children!”

Heonar brought his gun up with difficulty, there was some weakness in his shoulder or back that Keith hadn’t noticed at first; a wound he had missed.

With the gun on Keith the general was forced to drop his knife and it fell to the stage with an echoing clang. The noise of the fighting going on around them had faded to dull background noise as Keith’s focus zeroed in on the enemy in front of him. He watched the knife rock back and forth
before it settled near Heonar’s foot. Not in easy grabbing distance but…

“Ah, there you are you pretty thing.”

Kneeling down the general reached for Lance’s scrim with a bloodied hand. The light inside was swirling manically, like the paladin within could somehow sense what was going on around him. Keith tensed as Heonar struggled to pick the bulky scrim up, his balance thrown off as he tried to keep the gun trained on the red paladin. The shell-shaped hunk of scaultrite and quintessence was an awkward shape; Keith took a quiet step closer.

*Patience…focus.* The imprint whispered cautiously.

Nemean, who had been whispering dazedly to himself in a voice too low to hear suddenly came alive when he felt the scrim jostled from where it rested against his chest. He gripped the polished scaultrite reflexively and pulled it back towards his body, his unfocused eyes staring somewhere over Heonar’s shoulder.

“Ha! Still some life in you yet eh traitor whelp? Happens with a bleeding wound, but don’t worry you’ll die soon enough. Here, lemme help you along!”

Pulling his free hand back from the scrim General Heonar stood upright and brought his boot forward. He kicked viciously into the side of Nemean’s jaw, smashing bone and teeth with a steel-sharp toe.

There. Keith saw an opening. As the general brought his leg down to kick the Duke’s face the tip of his gun flew momentarily skyward. It was only a few seconds but Keith had utilized shorter openings in training hundreds of times.

The paladin wished his roll could have been smoother but the blood-heavy robes screwed with his mobility. Still, it was effective and he threw himself to the ground with so much force the dagger was in his hand before Heonar had even finished recovering from lashing out at Nemean.

With thoughtless, practiced ease Keith braced himself on his knees and cut through the air directly in front of him with surgical precision. There was a satisfying sound of the blade severing the Achilles tendon in the back of Heonar’s ankle; it made a distinctive window-shade snap.

There weren’t many weak points in the general’s armor but just as Keith suspected his boots seemed more for beauty than protection. There was no resistance whatsoever.

The general fired the gun into the air as he fell backwards. He squalled like a dying cat the entire way down but unfortunately kept his iron grip on his weapon. Keith circled back to Nemean’s side, shielding him with his body as he held the stolen Galran blade in front of him; it felt damn good to have a blade again.

“Paladin slag! Furless pink SLUG! I’LL KILL YOU!”

Keith wished he had been able to aim higher. If he had sunk the knife into the general’s torso or done more damage maybe Heonar would have dropped his gun. Now he was writhing on the black stone stage, shots still flying aimlessly into the open sky above him. It would be impossible to wrangle the gun from him when he was shooting like this and it was only matter of time before he regained some composure.

Having a tendon cut was probably unbelievably painful but from Shiro’s descriptions of the training Galra soldiers went through? It wouldn’t take long for the general to recover enough to land an actual shot, especially at such close range.

Keith pushed himself closer to Nemean who was still holding onto Lance’s scrim like his life depended on it. His face was swelling and his voice was weak but crouched down close Keith could make out some of the words.

“…Keith’s mate- Keep safe…safe for when the Maiden comes…”

Duke Nemean coughed feebly, blood dribbling from his broken mouth.

“I’ll tell the Maiden…take him back-“

Biting his lower lip Keith pulled Nemean into his chest his fingers kneading into his hair. It was falling out of its elaborate braid and was shockingly soft against the paladin’s skin. The Duke calmed at his touch, his gloved fingers relaxing their grip on the scrim as he leaned into Keith’s hand, whispering-

“She’s coming for me…”

Foamy spittle had gathered at the corners of Heonar’s mouth his eyes wild with pain and rage. He snapped his canine’s speaking from deep in his chest.

“Kill- you both…”

There was no way out of this. If Keith lunged for the gun there was no way he could reach it
before getting a laser to the neck or face. He could throw the knife, but where? There were no good openings. The general had curled on himself and half his body was obscured by armor or his cloak. Even if Keith aimed for an eye there was only a slim chance it would hit home. The target was too close, the dagger too big and unwieldy.

Shit. The imprint said angrily.

Shit was right. Keith kept his eyes on Heonar desperate for an answer but coming up empty.

As he stared at the general the red paladin had a strange moment of self-reflection. He was going to be killed by a weird doppelganger of himself; a thoughtless, emotion-driven berserker.

He was so much like them… so much like the Galra. It was a shame he was going to die right as he realized he had a problem.

Heonar aimed the gun at Keith’s throat, wiped at a pool of sweat collecting in his eyebrows and gave a dry, humorless laugh.

“’You and the big maggot-mane really got me. Got me good- but I’ll be healed up in a day. You won’t. You’ll be joining her.”

The implication of this made a cold chill run down Keith’s spine. Was the Matriarch dead? Had he actually managed to kill her or was she just badly hurt? For some reason it had never crossed his mind the Matriarch could be killed.

Looking down the sight of the gun Heonar ran his tongue over his bottom teeth still breathing like a winded racehorse.

“Even if Zarkon is angry about the wormholes I’ll be given the highest praise for killing not one paladin of Voltron but two-“

Keith nodded wordlessly and his grip on the blood-drenched knife hilt tightened. He was ready, if he was going to die he would go down fighting. He squared his shoulders and mentally prepared himself to charge, trying to figure out the best way to dodge when-

Heonar began to seize ferociously. He made a noise halfway between a bark and a gasp as he convulsed; sparks of electricity moving up and down his body in waves. Keith closed his eyes for a few seconds, momentarily blinded by the bright light. By the time he looked back the general was unconscious, grey tendrils of smoke drifting from his coarse, scorched fur.

He collapsed heavily to the ground revealing Pidge crouched inches from his back. She had an arm extended, an object that looked like a rudimentary taser held loosely in her hand. The green paladin’s hair was standing almost completely on end and she ran a hand through the fizzy, static strands as she collected herself.

“Wow, the kickback on this is awful. This thing does NOT work like I wanted it too.”

Blinking owlishly at the small, sparking metal box Pidge tapped it unsteadily before offering Keith a wobbly smile. She shouted over her shoulder.

“It’s clear Hunk! I got him!”

The yellow paladin was running towards them from the dais stairs instantly, his expression anxious.

“You’re lucky you didn’t fry your own brain Pidge! I told you that coil was too small deflect the current completely!”

Keith’s body deflated and he took a second to watch the other paladins talk, still processing the fact that he was no longer seconds from death.

That was…shocking, the Lance imprint said lamely, voice apologetic.

Pidge dropped her primitive, handmade weapon next to the general’s body and got to her feet nudging the Galran with her foot.

“Is he dead?”

Keith heard himself blurt out.

Pushing her glasses up her nose the green paladin squinted at Heonar holding a hand over his mouth before she shook her head.

“He’s breathing. Shiro said not to kill the generals before and I don’t think the order has changed despite…everything.”

Hunk kneeled at Keith’s side. He was speaking in the rapid, frantic voice reserved for moments of panic. The Olim were still fighting sentries all around them and Keith had no idea which side was winning. The yellow paladin put his hands on either side of Keith’s face, cupped his cheeks
“Hey, uh- we need to get out of here like now. Are you hurt? Do you need help? Can you make it to the shuttle?”

Keith considered this.

“Yes. I think I can make it by myself. But—”

When Hunk reluctantly pulled his hands away Keith lay a hand on the Duke’s shoulder; the Galran flinched under his palm and moaned. Despite the pain and blood loss the Duke was still semi-conscious and the red paladin took that as a positive.

“Can you carry him? We need to take him with us. He needs a healing pod now.”

Hunk exhaled sharply through his front teeth when he saw the knife still protruding from Nemean’s back.

“Man I saw him get hit but I didn’t actually see the damage…this is…can’t we pull it out?”

Pidge put a hand on top of Hunk’s head peering over his shoulder.

“Heck no! It’s probably the only thing keeping him from bleeding out! We’ll just have be careful not to bump him. Hunk, if you carry Sn-the Galra guy I can carry Lance.”

Pidge’s answer was punctuated by a string of haphazard gunfire near the edge of the stage. It kicked up a fresh sense of urgency and the red paladin nodded.

“That’s fine just, here- just gimme a second…”

Using the Galran knife still clutched in his hand Keith hacked at the bottom of his robes, cutting away the excess material. Tearing some of the dry pieces from the pile of blood-soaked fabric the red paladin pressed it lightly to the exit wound on Nemean’s stomach.

“Ok, let’s go.”

Yanking Lance’s scrim from Nemean’s frail grip Pidge took the lead. She considered her handmade taser as she passed Heonar’s body but finally dismissed it with a defeated sigh.

“I guess it was the best I could do with the junk I had. I’ll be glad to have my Bayard back.”

Keith nodded absently.

“You and me both Pidge.”

Keith navigated the slippery rock carefully pausing as he passed the comatose general. Despite the rush he took the time to hawk as big a loogie as he could manage and spit right on the Galran’s face; he felt extremely vindicated while doing it. Wiping his mouth the red paladin reached down to take the generals gun.

Hunk came last falling in behind the other paladins. He lifted Nemean delicately and held him close to his chest, mindful of his wounds. Nemean murmured something that sounded like a name and pressed weakly into the yellow paladin’s broad chest.

Keith wasn’t great with guns. He was no Lance; His sharpshooting skills were laughable and even close-range he was better throwing knives than shooting guns. Still, having any kind of weapon made him feel a little safer. He held the sentry’s semi-automatic unsteadily as they made their way down from the ceremony stage to the ground. The red paladin was still barefoot but his shortened robes made it much easier to walk.

A dead Olim, an enormous Radix drone, lay close to the bottom of the staircase.

A sentry robot was still held in its grip and its body was so large it nearly provided enough cover from the base of the dais to the edge of the grass fields. Keith couldn’t help but pause as they passed the creatures head. His hands were shaking so badly he nearly dropped his weapon and only pressed on when Hunk nudged his back, whispering low in his ear.

“I know buddy…just keep moving. Just keep looking at the grass.”

Overhead a Galran shuttle, probably chock full of reinforcements, was flying low looking for a space to land. The sound of shots and guttural voices were drowned out by the engines and Pidge broke away from the drone’s body as the docking craft acted as a diversion. She disappeared into the tall grass, her face peeking through the stalks nervously as she waited for Keith to take the plunge.

Shiro had always told him that during any kind of skirmish it was good to be aware of your surroundings but never distracted by them. Keith had always taken this to heart like all of Shiro’s advice but when he broke into a clumsy, sluggish jog to join Pidge he made the mistake of looking behind him, beyond the cover of the Radix drones corpse.
On the dais he had seen the bodies of both allies and enemies but he hadn’t seen the Matriarch. She was easy to see now, her gigantic body sprawled across an empty stone bench. Her beautiful clothes and jewelry scattered around her. She was torn in a dozen places and looking at her Keith felt a scream shoving up his throat that didn’t feel entirely his.

He couldn’t tell if she was breathing, he couldn’t see if her wounds were still bleeding. He couldn’t tell if she was dead.

Robotic footsteps were drawing closer but Keith could only stare vacantly backward, the gun clutched white knuckled and useless in his hands.

“KEITH, PLEASE! MOVE!”

Hunk was shoving against the red paladin as hard as he could with one elbow, attempting to move Keith without his hands. It was his scared voice that brought Keith back more than his pushing. He pulled away, snapped his eyes forward and somehow made it to the grass without stopping.

The rest of the trip to the shuttle was a blur of twilight through grass stalks and the retreating sounds of battle. At any moment it felt like something would stop them, bar their way- but the sentries seemed to be avoiding the grass like Pidge had predicted.

Allura and Shiro were waiting for them and the relief Keith felt when he saw them and the waiting craft was powerful enough to make him drop his gun. He pitched forward as Allura ran to meet him throwing her arms around him and hugging the air from his lungs.

“Oh Keith!…Keith I’m so very, very sorry. We assumed you would meet us here we…we could not reach you right away. We were going to fly back and pick you up but-”

The princess made a small choked noise pressing her face to Keith’s cheek.

“We should not have left you alone. I am never letting you out of my sight again!”

Keith didn’t know how to answer. He was torn in too many directions. Between Nemean, Carmen and the Matriarch it was just too much to process. The red paladin found his arms moving automatically, wrapping around the princess to return her embrace; it grounded him.

“Oh, Keith…your ear is bleeding.”

Allura reached a hand up to the side of Keith’s head and there was a flash of white-hot pain when she brushed her fingers along the top of his left ear. Keith gasped sharply between clenched teeth and she rubbed her hand up and down his back apologetically.

“Oh Keith…I’m so sorry.”

The shot that had come so close to his head had apparently hit and the red paladin hadn’t even noticed. In his defense there was plenty to be distracted by.

Before he had a chance to reply Shiro interrupted.

“Hunk- is that…”

Shuffling headlong past the rest of the group Hunk was the first one into the Shuttle, Nemean held protectively close. He shot Shiro a look that dared him to argue.

“Yes? Keith said we’re taking him and we’re taking him.”

Shiro held up his hands in surrender casting a sidelong glance at the princess. She had gone silent once she noticed the Duke was there. She offered no resistance and looked a bit relieved.

“Good. I’m glad you brought him. He tried to help us.”

With a resolute tug on his sleeve Allura pulled Keith onto the small ship as she continued.

“He is a friend of Voltron and an ambassador to the Mother. He has our protection and aid.”

Based on her tone and Shiro’s shadowed look there seemed to be some chunk of conversation the red paladin had missed out on; something about the Duke or maybe just the Galra in general. He didn’t dwell on it squeezing between Hunk and Pidge in the back while Shiro and Allura sat in front. There was even less space in the sentry shuttle then in the castle pod they had come in; It was a tight fit.

It had only taken a few minutes but apparently Hunk had already decided to adopt Nemean as his own. Keith took that as a good sign. Hunk was a pretty good judge of character. The yellow paladin was stroking the Duke’s cheek, brushing gentle fingers through his downy hair. When he caught Pidge glaring he offered a meek smile.

“Dude…he’s so soft. I didn’t know the Galra were so soft and velvety. He feels like this couch in my grandma’s house that kids weren’t allowed to sit on because it was super expensive.”
The green paladin managed a good-natured eye roll.

“Galra feel like couches. Good to know. For some reason we’ve never really gotten close enough check that out before.”

Shiro launched the shuttle smoothly skyward. There was no way to see the ground as they took off and Keith was a little relieved he wouldn’t have to watch the struggling Olim disappear beneath him.

Pidge clutched Lance’s scrim tight to her chest. It was wider then she was and her fingertips barely touched when she wrapped her arms around it. Keith could see she was shaking slightly. The shuttle was beginning to smell like Nemean’s blood and paladin sweat. Allura was speaking to Shiro in low undertones her eyes flicking between the tired teenagers in back and the exhausted young man at the controls.

As the sky gave way to space and the stars beyond Keith felt his breath catch. The gargantuan Galra battle cruiser was looming in the distance and a wave of automated fighters were spilling from it like starlings from a chimney. The red paladin had nearly forgotten it would be there waiting for them.

Shiro pulled the controls around heading the opposite direction his voice a gruff whisper.

“How long before Coran opens the wormhole Pidge, How long do I need to avoid them?”

“It should be right-“

Before the green paladin gave her full answer there was a tell-tale wiggle in the dark fabric of space. Fortunately it was in the opposite direction of the general’s reinforcements and the second Shiro saw the growing whirlpool of light he pushed the shuttle for it at full throttle.

Bracing himself in the pilot’s seat Shiro began to pull random serpentine evasive maneuvers as came under fire. His arm glowed slightly purple from the stress, shining through the torn sleeve of his vestment robe.

“Everybody hang on!”

There wasn’t much to hang onto but Keith put one arm around Pidge and the other around Hunk pulling them both close as he could. Nemean mumbled incoherently, his eyes slitting open. Hunk curled tight fingers around the back of his head and hips; doing his best to keep the Duke’s body stationary.

Keith heard the green paladin whisper something to Lance’s scrim and he could only hold his breath as the wormhole grew larger with every passing second.

The shuttle’s proximity alarms began to blare, the cockpit lighting up a vicious red as the fighters began to close the distance. There was a minor hit to one wing and the whole shuttle shook, the turbulence vibrating in Keith’s bones.

Shiro sent the shuttle into a deep, controlled dive then rolled it upward and sideways, slamming all the passengers against each other violently. Hunk blanched, face turning pale as he struggled not to throw up and Pidge gripped the scrim tighter her eyes closed, her glasses shoved up sideways on her forehead.

The effervescent, floaty feeling that accompanied wormhole travel took Keith by surprise. One second they were surrounded by the shrieks of shuttlecraft and laser fire and then, as it always was with jumps, they were simply somewhere else.

Shiro didn’t slow down. There were a few stragglers that had managed to fall in behind them but the black paladin took care of these with the shuttles rudimentary light cannons in a matter of seconds. Out maneuvering a few Galran battle AI was easier than a whole goddamn flock.

The red paladin listened as everyone inside the cramped shuttle held still, panting for air. He felt he needed to say something, to break the silence.

“We-“

Only then did Keith turn to look at the scrim in Pidge’s arms. He stared at it as the full scope of what had just happened sank in.

“We did it.”

A panicky laugh escaped his chest.

“We got Lance.”

Pidge joined him with a bout of her own hysterical laughed as she settled her glasses back down on her nose.

“Honestly? It was mostly you. You got him Keith.”
The laughter was contagious and soon everyone in the shuttle was giggling in frenzied relief.

Pidge was the first to regain some composure and she stared down into the blue depths of the shell-scrim. Her lower lip trembled and the green paladin sniffled as her eyes welled up.

"Is he- Lance is really in there?"

Keith nodded and Pidge hesitated before she passed the scrim to the red paladin, tears trickling down her cheeks. She rubbed at them roughly.

"Hey. I guess I should let you hold him. Technically it is your honeymoon."

The rapid pulse inside the scrim calmed when Keith held it close; like magic. A horrible, uncontrollable blush spread over the red paladin’s cheeks and he shook his head.

"Please Pidge, don’t."

The green paladin smirked.

"What? Getting cold feet? Too late now! Man, we didn’t even get to throw you a bachelor’s party."

The blush was working towards nuclear levels now. Keith could feel it going down his neck and up to his hairline.

"Pidge, I’m serious. Don’t."

Allura’s voice was light and unbearably chipper as she piped up.

"There’s nothing to be ashamed of Keith! Your metaphoric marriage to the Mother and Lance will only strengthen our alliance with Vell and Voltron as a whole! It was really quite lovely before-"

Hunk, thankfully, stopped her there. His voice colored with apprehension.

"Hey…Duke Snowball’s breathing is getting really bad. We need to get him into a pod like right now."

Keith cocked an eyebrow resting his chin on the scrim and giving Pidge a hard look.

"Duke Snowball?"

"Yeah, that was kind of our codename for him."

"Ah."

Allura reached for the com to hail Coran and Shiro put on a fresh burst of speed. The Castle of Lion’s floated into sight and Keith didn’t think he had even seen anything so beautiful.

Lance was there. Lance was waiting for him.

You did it. The imprint whispered proudly. Felicidades por la boda.

Chapter End Notes

Alright they did it! Now nothing bad will happen ever again! (haha it will)

Thanks to CJ my beautiful, majestic proofreader
Coran didn’t meet them in the shuttle bay.

Keith didn’t give this too much thought distracted as he was. The red paladin helped Hunk maneuver Nemean out of the cramped shuttle seat, Lance’s scrim held firm to his chest. The wing of the damaged Galra craft was still smoking from the hit it had taken and Pidge was examining it skeptically, wondering aloud if she could cannibalize the ship for parts.

Following Hunk as best he could towards the far end of the bay Keith battled against his own sore body. His muscles were still weak and his legs a bit shaky but the red paladin didn’t want to let the Duke out of his sight. Hunk was leaving a spotty trail of blood in his wake and Shiro kept slightly ahead of him, encouraging him to go faster.

The cold, hard floor was painful on Keith’s bare feet and it was soon clear he wasn’t going to be able to keep pace with the others. The red paladin slowed and leaned on the hull of an anchored escape pod panting for breath. Allura and Pidge stopped with him and Keith was vaguely aware of Allura calling out to Shiro, telling him they would meet him and Hunk in the med-bay.

Keith squinted his eyes shut and rubbed furiously at his temples. It was so damn bright.

Compared to the cool, calming colors of Vell and the warm, muted light of the Mother’s quarters in the Citadel the blinding blue and white of the castle was nauseating. Was it always like this? It felt like Keith’s sensitivity was kicked up to ninety. Taking a moment to compose himself the red paladin pressed his eyelids to the curved surface of the scrim and tried to quiet his nerves.

Maybe it was his latent connection to Carmen causing this. Keith recalled that when he was out in bright light, Kru-kron had worn a pair of ridiculous goggles. If Olim Vell lived on a planet with a dim sun it would make sense intense light hurt their eyes.

Even before meeting Mother Carmen Keith had his own sensitivity issues with noise and light. When Keith was a kid fluorescent bulbs and fireworks often left him anxious or paralyzed by migraines. This wasn’t even the first time he had struggled with the castle lighting but Keith couldn’t remember it being quite this bad before.

The red paladin would have given anything for a simple pair of sunglasses.

A gentle arm found its way around Keith’s shoulders, distracting him from the droning buzz of the castle-ship. That was another thing he hadn’t missed on Vell; The noise of the damn ship, the constant humming and chugging of a powerful machine. He had grown so used to it he almost forgot how much it put him on edge.

Allura spoke smoothly in his ear, her voice a quiet coo.

“Keith. Would you like me to carry Lance for just a little while? You look very pale.”

The red paladin swallowed down a retch and nodded, handing her the scrim warily. It was heavy and he was feeling worn down, like the last few hours—maybe more—were catching up all at once.

“It’s the lights…”

Pidge put a curious hand on Keith’s shoulder, maneuvering him so she could get a good look at his face.

“The castle lights? What about them?”

“I just—they’re so bright…Neon. They bother me. I was used to them before but it was different in the Citadel. Coming back to it kinda…hurts my eyes again.”

Allura’s voice caught; her answer brimming with compassion.

“I did not know you were troubled by the lights Keith. You should have told me! I can easily dim them, especially in your quarters.”

Keith started walking again and found himself supported on either side by Allura and Pidge. He leaned into the princess without thinking. She didn’t seem to notice his added weight.

“No it’s like—I’ll get used to it. It reminds me of when I left the Garrison and went to live in the desert. Things were so much better out there. I didn’t get as many headaches and everything smelled…umm.”
Keith struggled on what he was trying to say and stared down at his naked toes. He grasped bitterly for the right word, irritated with his own inability to communicate. If Lance was here he would have been able to say exactly what Keith was thinking.

“-Cleaner?”

Pidge tried.

“-Better?”

Allura said curiously.

“No—Intense. Everything smelled more intense. Like. It was easier to tell things apart.”

Pidge quirked an eyebrow at him and Keith felt his cheeks color self-consciously.

“That makes me weird doesn’t it?”

The green paladin shook her head immediately, almost violently.

“No. Not weird, just different. Special.”

She tightened her hold on Keith’s arm.

“You know what’s weird? My brother Matt used to sleep with his eyes open. Just flat on his back snoring like a pig, eyes wide open.”

Allura suppressed a snuffling giggle, holding the scrim up to her chin.

“Coran has an adverse reaction to spicy food. If he tastes something too hot he will walk about with his tongue hanging out and a cool cloth over his head and ears. I imagine that is far weirder.”

The tight apprehensive feeling in Keith’s chest eased and he let his muscles relax. It was so difficult for him to trust other people. Years of foster care and absent parents had trained him to think all relationships were brief and temporary. Then Shiro and the other paladins had come along and chucked that idea out the window.

There was nothing fleeting about his marriage to Carmen, his bond with his lion or even his feelings for Lance—Maybe it was time to get used to the idea that his paladin family was a more permanent situation than he was accustomed to.

The elevator doors hissed open when Pidge smacked the call button. Above them were the living quarters and the infirmary and below them—well, below was the Lion’s hangar. Usually Keith could feel at least the bare edges of Red’s consciousness from here but he was mildly distressed to feel nothing but static.

Gazing at the scrim in Allura’s arms Keith wondered if maybe they should take him to visit Blue first. It had been—what, a day? God, barely that, since he had spoken with Blue in Lance’s core memory. She had been so exhausted, her vibrant inner voice begging him to hurry.

No, one thing at a time. Nemean was first. He knew what needed to be done and he had a feeling the Blue Lion did too. Maybe Red was quiet because she was lending Blue her strength. Maybe all the lions were straining to back her up—Maybe Lance was…

The elevator ascended and Keith forced himself to shift his focus before his thoughts turned into a dangerous feedback loop. He leaned backwards on a wall rubbing a hand over his tired, sore eyes.

“It’s good to be home…”

The princess spoke with a satisfied sigh.

She pressed her nose to Lance’s scrim and loose locks of pure white hair tumbled over her forehead, obscuring her face and the lustrous scaultrite. Keith noticed a long, tender cut on her neck that had been hidden before. It was oozing and raw red around the edges.

Pidge was sporting some bruises along her jaw and Keith noticed Hunk had been favoring a spot on his lower back as they got out of the shuttle. They all seemed to have been hurt by the fight with the sentries; no one came out completely unscathed.

The walk to the infirmary seemed to take twice as long as it should have. A tired weight had settled over Keith’s neck and it seemed contagious. Even Pidge was dragging her feet, a worried wrinkle stuck between her eyebrows.

Fresh butterflies filled the red paladin’s gut as the sickbay doors grew closer. He wasn’t sure what to expect but he was glad to hear the bouncy cadence of Coran’s voice.

“There we go lad…that’s the ticket. In and out…”

As they walked into the infirmary Keith searched for Lance immediately and was disappointed
to see the healing pods were nowhere in sight. Keith knew that, like the hibernation pods, the healing pods could be sunk into the Infirmary floor when not immediately needed. Given how much space Nemean and his operating table were taking up this made sense. Lance had to still be here—he was just below their feet.

Coran barely glanced over as Keith, Pidge and Allura came into the room. He was leaning over the Duke and pressing something to his face. It was smooth and covered in small readout screens that hovered over the Galran’s nose and mouth; it looked like an Altean oxygen mask.

Hunk hovered at the side of the sterile, examination table clasping Nemean’s hand. The yellow paladin kept the Duke propped on his side while Shiro kept his legs still. Coran held a pair of thin, scalpel like scissors in hand and muttered mostly to himself as he cut off the Duke’s shirt. He sliced easily through the silky military finery now stained with drying blood.

Hunk swallowed hard, Adam’s apple bobbing uncomfortably as he offered Keith a nauseous smile.

“We got him breathing a little bit better but he’s getting really er-growly.”

Coran pulled the fabric away from the Duke’s body strip by strip, sweat already beading on his forehead.

“That savage, growly behavior is a Galran survival response Number Two! Last ditch attempt for the body to repel attack—afraid he’s gonna get worse before he’s better so keep holding him still for me.”

The advisor nodded towards a haphazard array of surgical instruments on a nearby table.

“Princess, how about you wash up and assist me on the more delicate bits? Keith, if you want to lay out that scrim in that buzzy-box over there we can start checking on Lance’s quintessence. Pidge, I trust you can figure that contraption out. The instructions are in old Altean so you may need that translator program you’ve been working on.”

Keith accepted the scrim from Allura while Pidge gave a quick salute and ran out the door to grab her rig. It was nice to have someone just giving out orders, it was even better to just be able to follow them and not think too much.

The “buzzy box” turned out to be a sharp-edged oblong tower with an empty shelf at its center. Sure enough there was a scanner just above the spongy, pillowed base and Coran had apparently had it ready long before the paladin’s had actually shown up. Delicately, Keith set the scrim into the padded holder and was rewarded with a subtle whirring noise. The tray clicked together and held the smooth shell firmly in place.

Nemean made a shrill, sharp noise as Coran cut the last of his dress shirt away; pulling a mass of blood-stiffened cloth from the tip of the knife in his side. Sometimes on still nights in the desert Keith had heard cougars screeching. The noise had been eerily human and the strident sound Nemean made, even muffled by the oxygen mask, was almost identical to that high-pitched cry of distress.

Shiro winced and squeezed the Galran’s legs in a placating gesture. Keith raised his voice to be heard over the shrieking, moving closer so he could stand next to Hunk.

“Coran, why haven’t you put him in a healing pod yet?”

The older Altean pulled a small tool shaped like a bar of soap from a nearby drawer. As he held it close to the short, velvet fuzz on Nemean’s scrawny midsection it was instantly shaved to the skin. The fur evaporated into thin air, leaving nothing behind but the faint smell of burnt hair.

“Couple problems Number Four; first of all we have to get that blade out. Can’t stick him in and have his insides heal around it. That’ll cause more problems than it fixes!”

Hunk shuddered as Nemean opened his injured jaw and bared his teeth under the breathing mask, growling low and gravelly. The young Galran kept wiggling and it took both the yellow and black paladin’s combined strength to keep him immobile.

For his part the Duke didn’t seem to realize he was being aggressive. He wasn’t awake but he wasn’t quite unconscious either and the fugue state was just like Coran described; a last ditch effort for Nemean’s body to protect itself. Keith was just glad he hadn’t been this “growly” on the shuttle.

Hunk bit his lower lip and leaned his head away from the Galran’s jaws instinctively.

“So yank it out fast! Get it over with!”

“Problem with that plan Number Two...”

Coran reached a gloved hand cautiously over Hunk’s and slipped it under the oxygen mask to pull back Nemean’s upper lip. He gestured with his chin, stroking a finger gingerly over broken teeth.
“His gums are pale, practically white. And look- see the little mottled spots peeking out there?”

Keith noticed them immediately. While the Duke’s gums weren’t exactly something he had paid a lot of attention to the red paladin was fairly sure that he and the other Galra had black or purplish-pink gums. Now that Coran had pointed it out he could see why this color change was a bad thing. It looked downright unhealthy.

“In Galra it shows he’s down several tengtics worth of blood.”

Hunk snorted, blowing hair from his eyes. He, like the other paladins, was still wearing his vestment clothing which included his jeweled circlet. Sweat ran in heavy droplets from under the small crown tangled in the yellow paladin’s dark hair.

“Is a tengtic like a gallon? -Because yeah, he left a couple tengtics between here and Vell puddled all over the place.”

Shiro shook his head.

“It can’t be a gallon Hunk. Humans only have about a gallon of blood and the Galra couldn’t have that much more. A tengtic must be equal to a pint.”

The yellow paladin shuddered.

“It sure felt like gallons.”

Coran readjusted the mask on Neman’s face and his expression darkened.

“Earth adjustments aside, we Altean’s have grades for these sorts of things and he’s hovering around grade three. Grade three blood loss means four tengtics lost and when I remove the dagger I’m afraid the hemorrhage will finish him off. His best chance at survival is a transfusion.”

Allura had ripped the sleeves from her formal wear without a second thought. She stood beside Coran with her arms bare and cleaned to the elbow, instrument tray in hand, waiting for instruction. Pursing her lips she nudged her advisor’s shoulder with her own.

“Could we not create a replacement by cloning the Duke’s own blood? We have the equipment. It may be old but everything else in the castle has been in working condition so I see no reason it wouldn’t be able to do the job.”

Nemean’s muscles stiffened, quivering as he made another terrible mountain-lion moan deep in his chest. Coran waited for the fit to pass before he moved to the Duke’s opposite side to shave the fur around the exposed dagger hilt.

“Oh, no question that the cloning apparatus can get up and running Princess but we’d have to really fiddle with the workings to get it to spit out a Galran sample we can use. Poor lad doesn’t have that kind of time. Afraid best we can do is pull the knife out nice and slow-cauterize it as we go, pop him in a pod and hope for the best.”

Shiro grit his teeth, keeping his prosthetic arm on the Duke as he pulled his circlet off with his other hand, wiping sweat from under the pale tuft of soggy hair stuck to his forehead.

“I wish we didn’t have to do something so risky. Is there no other way around? No possible way for any of us to donate blood?”

Coran lay the strange shaving device down on the tool tray Allura held towards him and shifted his moustache back and forth in thought. Nemean’s pants had slipped down on his hips and Keith couldn’t help but notice the stubby length of tail wagging back and forth at the base of the Duke’s striped spine. Like his ears it looked like it had been docked, cut short at a young age when the Galran was given no choice, no control over his own body.

“Altean’s are a-what’s that word you use...-chameleon! We’re a chameleon species when it comes to our appearance. It’s a survival mechanism for us in strange places, how we blend. Without it we wouldn’t have been such a mobile people and so widely accepted.”

The skin on Coran’s cheeks faded to blue and back to a tan as he spoke, a demonstration or maybe the Altean equivalent of “thinking out loud.”

“The Galra have something that isn’t completely dissimilar even though it attacks the idea of assimilation from, er- a different angle. They have chameleon DNA, blending genes.”

Feeling a bit more confident as Nemean quieted down Hunk scooted closer, running consoling fingers thought the Galran’s hair.

“What does that mean?”

Pidge’s voice floated over from the scanner where Keith had set Lance’s scrim. The red paladin had been so absorbed by Coran’s lecture he hadn’t even noticed she had come back into the infirmary.
“It means they can cross-breed right?”

With a curt nod Coran moved his hand over his instrument tray, wiggling his fingers as he made his choice.

“Oh the nose Number Five! While Alteans can outwardly blend into a population the Galra can become part of it by producing offspring with the native folk.”

Pidge peeked around her computer. She was sitting cross-legged in a chair stolen from some other part of the ship and was rapidly typing away on her laptop. Unlike the rest of the team she had taken a few minutes to change into casual clothing. Her hair was still a tousled, staticy rat’s nest and Keith had no doubt she needed a shower but at least she didn’t have to wrestle with her torn vestment robes.

The green paladin was gazing at Coran her eyes bright with her customary curiosity.

“Is that why they all look so different?”

Allura tilted her head slightly and a tiny smile played over her lips. Keith followed her gaze; she had noticed the Duke’s bob-tail as well.

“Precisely! In fact after so many generations of traveling across the universe it is difficult to say what a “pure” Galran actually looks like. They all have different characteristics from different lines of ancestry that could be traced to a singular planet. Although from what you’ve told me many of them hold characteristics you consider fee-line in nature.”

Coran shrugged. They had all tried and failed to explain what a cat was at one time or another.

“Funny thing is that despite their gift some Galra tend to be picky. Consider most species undesirable to intermingle with as it were. Don’t know about the Empire’s feelings as far as that goes...”

A cold fog moved over Keith. He felt it flowing from his feet, through his chest and up to hover around his brain. The voices around him were still intelligible but now seemed miles away.

The red paladin felt his breathing getting louder, his heart fluttering like a drunken butterfly.

He looked at Coran and practically screamed his next question in a panic-stricken rush.

“What does that have to do with Nemean!?”

Keith felt eyes on him. Coran raised an eyebrow.

“Well... Galra bodies are extremely adaptable and while they can’t be universal blood donors they might be universal recipients. Since we’re in a bind our best option might be human blood—there’s a slim chance that—”

The words were out of Keith’s mouth before he could think, before he could take another breath.

“What about a half-Galra blood?”

The eyes were on him again, now with more intensity. The fog thickened and Keith felt a sort of numb shock that turned all sensation thin and watery.

Funny. Nemean’s voice muttered in his head-You smell different than the others, more trustworthy.

The line repeated over and over again bounding off the edges of Keith’s skull. He thought of his mother, a stranger gone beyond his reach. He turned every moment of over-stimulation and anger over in his mind. The urges he couldn’t explain or control, the way he had looked at General Heonar and seen himself.

Funny.

Nemean whispered in Keith’s consciousness and the red paladin could only think of the young Galran’s smell. When he first met him he had smelled rough and foul like an enemy. When he had come to Keith sobbing and bleeding he had smelled disgusting, weak. Now his smell was vulnerable and warm, like a friend that needed help.

It was like Keith’s perception of him had completely changed his smell. That wasn’t a human thing was it? Smell wasn’t something people talked about.

You smell different than the others.

Nemean’s small, sad voice said more urgently.

Lance’s imprint, which had been quiet since they landed in the Castle, reached out gently and interrupted the unending circle of anxiety ridden thought zipping through Keith’s head.
Hey. Is this really such a big deal? It doesn’t change a damn thing. You’re Keith. Not Keith the Galran or Keith the human you’re Keith the red paladin; the red paladin of Voltron.

Keith’s awareness widened out and he realized Shiro was shaking his shoulders. His mentor, his hero was staring at him in concern and there was fear in his eyes.

“Keith? Keith talk to me.”

“My blood. Coran can use my blood.”

Shiro shook his head slowly from side to side.

“Keith what are you…you aren’t—”

Keith pulled backwards away from Shiro’s reassuring grip. He looked to the Altean advisor as he wiped a trickle of blood from the Duke’s shaved side.

“I- We don’t have time to test. Coran, my blood is going to work. I know it is. Please.”

Everyone was momentarily silent. Even Coran could only open and close his mouth in bewilderment. Keith could not remember a time he had seen the old Altean at a complete loss for words.

Surprisingly, it was Allura that spoke up first. Setting her tray down she strode around the examination table and lead Keith to the nearest infirmary bed; taking control in the silence.

“Coran, I will draw Keith’s blood. You can start prepping the cauterizing implements and finish disinfecting the area. This shouldn’t take long.”

“Er, of course Princess.”

Keith let Allura lead him to the relative privacy of an infirmary bed. He stared dazedly at the ground as she prepped a strange shard of crystalline material that the red paladin took to be an Altean syringe. When Keith glanced back at Nemean he could see Shiro staring at him, his eyebrows knit together in worry.

“You know. I…have long suspected you might not be all human.”

Keith startled, gazing up into Allura’s dirt-smudged face. She pushed her circlet up through sweaty loose strands of hair and fiddled with a clear container, hanging it meticulously from an elevated metal hook on the side of the bed.

“You-what?”

A gallon-or several tengtics of hot shame burned up Keith’s throat and he nearly gagged on it. Did he stick out that much? Yes his social skills weren’t great but did he really seem so off that an alien wouldn’t perceive him as the same species as the other paladins? Allura seemed to sense his thoughts and chuckled.

“Keith, it was not because of any outwardly obvious reasons, it was mostly your quintessence. I have a connection to the lions and by extension my own paladin’s energy and yours was just—”

She wiggled a hand back and forth as she tried to describe it.

“Different, yes but not in a bad way. Do you remember when that Radix drone read your aura? The first day we landed on Vell?”

Keith struggled to recall. He shivered—it seemed like most of his memory was clouded with the same racing panic but he did have an inkling of tendrils that weren’t Carmen’s touching his face and saying something about anger.

“I think so? He said I was angry.”

“He did. But I remember something else vividly. He said you burned like fire for many reasons. He said it was curious. He didn’t say that about the others. They said Shiro was unsure but his aura didn’t seem to mystify them as much as yours did.”

The princess kept talking as she pulled an elastic band from a nearby drawer and tied a tourniquet to the upper part of Keith’s left arm. She prodded his skin at his wrist and the top of his elbow-joint looking for a vein.

“You do burn and that fire has an intensity to it that sets you apart. Galra have an inner strength and focus vastly different than what I’ve seen in humans so your guess about your own ancestry? It doesn’t shock me.”

“I-I don’t know why I didn’t figure it out sooner. I’ve always felt weird and now- now I just feel stupid…1…how can you trust me anymore? How can you—”

Keith stopped talking, his vision blurred and his throat clicked when he swallowed. He
shivered harder, overwrought. Allura paused in her search for viable vein and reached tender arms around the red paladin pulling him against her body.

“If you had known about this from the start would you have done anything differently? Would you have stopped your search for Shiro? Would you have turned down your calling as the red paladin?”

Keith choked, shook his head.

“No. I doubt that you would have done anything different. Your blood did not make your decisions for you. The Blue Lion knew as much. Lance’s lion trusted you, called you and I’m sure it could always read the story of your quintessence.”

The princess’s arms squeezed tighter and Keith pushed his forehead into her shoulder as he leaned in closer. The tourniquet was starting to make his arm throb but he barely noticed it.

“I am… imperfect. I know I am your leader as Shiro is but neither of us is infallible. I admit I have extreme prejudices against the Galra—”

The princess glanced over her shoulder towards Coran and Nemean. Hunk was tying a blindfold over the Galran’s eyes while Shiro removed his dirty, bloodstained boots.

“Even now, despite his sacrifice I am still having a bit of difficulty trusting the Duke completely. I want to help him but I— I still struggle against doubt even if is clear that there are indeed good Galra. This is my issue and I shall not make it yours. You are my paladin and I care for you. The team cares for you— very much.”

Keith nodded mutely and Allura patted his back before pulling away from him.

“Now, this may sting for just a moment.”

The needle barely hurt when it punctured Keith’s skin and within seconds the round, clear cylinder connected to the syringe rapidly began to fill with dark blood. Keith lay back against the overlarge infirmary pillow and blinked slowly. Allura made it clear that she would not be taking too much as he was in a state of extreme stress and had suffered an injury, even if it was minor.

Keith caught Shiro staring again, watching him like a hawk as Allura patched the burning graze to Keith’s ear. The red paladin met his leader’s gaze and took a deep breath through his nose. The black paladin looked— scared. Of course he did. His protégé, his second in command was a member of the species that tortured him and took his arm.

“Nothing is proven yet Keith.”

Shiro called from across the infirmary.

“You might be reading into things that aren’t really there.”

Keith shut his eyes. He didn’t have an answer. He already knew it was real.

The red paladin floated in a strange, lukewarm world between his thoughts and the infirmary. His tight muscles loosening when his body started to realize there was no immediate threat.

See. I told you it was gonna be ok buddy. You’re gonna be ok. The imprint promised in Lance’s friendly voice.

The bed tugged at Keith as his adrenaline levels tumbled. The voices of the paladin’s around him started to blend together into a harmonious mush. Hunks trembling baritone, Shiro’s commanding bass and Pidge’s high-pitched tenor. The music of it lulled the red paladin into sleep before he even realized he was dozing.

Keith woke up disoriented in the dimly lit infirmary.

It took him a few minutes to remember where he was and he had to stop himself from calling out for Y.M. involuntarily; he had forgotten she wasn’t even the Young Mother anymore. He was still dressed in his filthy ceremony robes, still covered in the musty stench of dried Galra blood. Someone had removed the heavy jewelry from around his neck but Keith could still feel braided gem chunks digging into his scalp.

Without a data pad at hand it was impossible to know how long he had been asleep. The passing stars outside the slim windows offered no clue but Keith couldn’t hear the other paladin’s anymore so they had probably left to shower and change. He felt shaky, his body cold and his thoughts a trickle rather than the gushing facet they had been before. A headache was building hot between the red paladin’s eyes and for a full minute he considered rolling over and going back to sleep.

No. He needed to see if Nemean was alright. He needed to start helping Lance— god he shouldn’t have fallen asleep, Lance needed him right now.
A rustle and the tap of footsteps told Keith he wasn’t alone. Moving to his bare feet the paladin pushed aside a thin privacy curtain that had been unfolded around him while he was unconscious and peeked into the quiet infirmary.

The healing pods had risen back up from their ports in the floor and a light mist was drifting around them, lit by the glow of two active units. Keith made his way towards them and frowned. He could see the squat, unpleasant shape of Kru-Kron sleeping in the farthest pod.

His eye was completely healed and he looked peaceful enough; certainly more than he deserved. Keith’s frowned deepened as he stood in front of the other tube and realized that it wasn’t Lance inside…it was Nemean.

The Galran was dressed in the familiar tight-fitting, beige healing suit. He was propped upright, his ears lowered in sleep. It was difficult to assess if he looked better or worse. As far as Keith could tell he didn’t look great. His mouth was hanging partially open revealing his chipped canine. His hair was a disheveled, fluffy mess and his eyebrows were creased low; like he was being bothered by troubling dreams.

But he was alive. He was breathing and the wavy lines of his vitals seemed stable as they moved across the surface of the icy, pod door. Keith hugged himself, shuddered and stepped back prepared to panic all over again. Kru-Kron was here. Nemean was here.

_Where was Lance._

“Ah, Keith! You’re awake!”

Keith swiveled at the sound of Coran’s voice and nearly tripped as he staggered towards him in a sloppy run. Gripping at the front of the Altean’s clothing Keith heard his desperate, sleep-hoarse voice.

“Coran! Where’s Lance?? Why isn’t he in his pod?”

Coran dropped the bundle he was carrying to the floor, moustache twitching in surprise as he grabbed for Keith’s hands. He gripped the paladin’s fingers as he struggled to catch his breath.

“Was I too late?! Did he-Is he…”

“Now, now...No reason to get into a tizzy Number Four. Deep in’s and out’s and let me explain, huh?”

The Altean advisor looked exhausted. Keith hadn’t noticed before when they first arrived but now face to face he could see the bruised circles under Coran’s eyes. It made him look older.

Even his friendly crows-feet wrinkles had deepened into something more ominous.

“Now, our Blue paladin is hanging on. I can’t say he’s alright. I just-“

Coran smiled and his entire face softened with it.

“Tell you what. How about you come with me to see em? I just managed to get Shiro to go clean up and I promised I’d watch you. You can come with me and we’ll talk some things out.”

Keith felt his shoulders slump and he managed a nod.

“Ok.”

Coran bent to retrieve the bundle he had dropped, stooping to collect a few medicinal containers and a fluffy oversized towel.

“Alright then! One-two young paladin! Punctuality is the sign of a solid soldier!”

Sparing a glance back at Nemean resting in the healing pod Keith followed Coran through a side door on the far end of the infirmary he had never noticed before. At the touch of a button a thin line of light illuminated the edges of a hexagonal entryway and it slid open with a soft pneumatic whoosh.

It took a few seconds for the lights on the other side of the door to power up and Keith struggled to keep up with Coran as he set off at a blistering pace. They passed down a narrow hallway filled uncomfortably with the buzz of electricity; there was so much energy here that the air tasted prickly on Keith’s tongue.

The red paladin noted that all the lights, including the ones in the infirmary, seemed to have been dimmed down to a more tolerable level. He had no doubt that Allura had done this for him and the thought made his ribcage tighten up around his lungs. The small kindness, even more than the talk, seemed to show that she really wasn’t upset with him.

Coran paused briefly before opening the next door at the end of the hall. His hand lingered over the palm sized button and he cleared his throat roughly.
“Now. He’s going to look rough Number Four but I promise that he’s in the best of care so please don’t t-er…”

Keith snorted scornfully, clenched his hands open and shut until he felt his knuckles pop.

“You think I’m going to freak out. Go feral on you- like a Galra?”

The words came out with a sardonic, panicked edge to them. A venom Keith couldn’t keep out of his voice. The energy laden air was making his head hurt. His heart pounded and his back teeth buzzed.

“The blood worked. It was half wasn’t it? I saw Nemean back there-you…you got the blade out.”

Coran hung his head and his shoulders stiffened. He twisted around in the tight entryway and gave Keith a long look he had never seen on the Altean’s face before. He looked-what? Irritated? Mad? No, there was something deeper than that; He looked frightened.

The red paladin felt the blood drain from his face.

“Coran are-are you afraid of me?”

The way Coran’s moustache practically quivered when Keith asked this would have been funny if the timing wasn’t so bad. The advisor shifted what he was carrying and reached out a hand to clasp Keith’s shoulder.

“My boy, there is no scenario in which I can imagine ever fearing you. Ever.”

He stressed every syllable as he spoke, dotting every I and crossing every T until the words were burned into the air between them. Coran pressed forward.

“What you did was true bravery. If you hadn’t volunteered your aid that kind Galran would have died. We would have lost an ally-a friend. And a true paladin always helps a friend.”

Keith let out a breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding and managed a fragile smile.

“Thanks Coran.”

The Altean struggled, his voice going ragged and wavery; like he was trying valiantly to hold back tears. He gave Keith a stiff pat on the shoulder and wiped at one eye with a pinky getting back his composure with a smart spin back to the door.

“I simply meant that our blue paladin looks a bit of a fright in his current condition and I don’t want you startled by it. But enough chit chat!”

The final doorway opened with a rush of cool air and a host of new smells and sounds greeted Keith’s senses. The new room looked empty at first glance. It was small and lit with an odd orange-pink light that drastically clashed with the rest of the castles blue-white color scheme. There was a single console against the back wall and a lot of empty floor lined with glowing orange cracks. The only other thing in the place was an odd curve of round metal sticking out of the floor. It looked like the wall of a futuristic ice-skating rink that had been set up for no discernible reason.

Coran ran his free hand over the keys of the console board and squinted at a light screen he had apparently summoned with his actions. The advisor mumbled distractedly as he entered in a long sequence of commands.

“Keep close to me Number Four…”

Keith jumped closer to Coran as a low part of the wall slid forward. A section of panel the size of a king size bed whispered across a hidden track on the ground and attached itself to the seemingly pointless rounded wall at the center of the room. It was shaped like a hockey puck and came up to Keith’s waist. The sides were made of whatever lightweight metal alloy the majority of the castle was constructed from but the top was transparent. It was like a huge, flat version of a healing pod.

Coran trotted to the strange device and pressed something on the lip of it. The moment he did the lid parted in the center and a cloud of warm steam spilled out, obscuring the far ends of the rosy-orange room in a thin fog. Keith could feel heat rushing over his skin and smelt a strange mix of chemicals and hot water.

Once open the hockey puck was more of a hot tub and at its heart in a nest of wires and tubing was Lance. Keith froze, wide-eyed and unsure how to react. So far his time in the Castle of Lion’s had proven strange but none of their tech could really be described as sinister- until now.

Huddled inside the round, Keith wanted to call it a pod, Lance floated listlessly in an orange liquid more or less the same consistency as grass milk. Aside from his face every part of the blue paladin’s body was submerged, some weighted down or held loosely in padded shackles.
Lance’s nose and mouth were obscured by a breathing mask that looped around the back of his head. An apparatus that was part sleeping mask and part headphones hid the rest of Lance’s face and added to the overall unnatural look of whatever was going on.

Keith swallowed so hard his throat caught and held out his hands, walking forward until they met the edge of the bizarre bath-pod.

“Coran-what…W-what is this?”

The amber fluid, whatever it was, started to drain from the pod and Lance’s body was pushed up into the open air. His hair clung to his face and his body flattened against the bare platform at his back. Coran rushed to his side and used the large towel he had brought to rub some of the remaining goop from the blue paladin’s skin.

“There are hibernation pods and healing pods right? Different pods, different functions Number Four. Lance wouldn’t benefit from either of them. The cold sleep would probably kill him and the healing pod can’t do much of anything without quintessence. Only option I had left was the old S-pod; an emergency survival pod.”

Under all the runny orange fluid Keith had missed the blue glow of the dowry scrim. Now it stood out with shocking clarity pressed between Lance’s side and the wall of the survival pod.

Coran folded up his now dripping towel and set it on the ground.

“Blood pressure just kept dropping. He couldn’t breathe on his own and his quintessence was out of reach. If I’d kept him in the cold he probably would have lost life or limb- eventually both I wager.”

Unlike the beige-white suits worn in the healing pod Lance was dressed in a tight fitting orange outfit that looked like a sci-fi wetsuit. Concentric patterns crossed the front and studs of gold metal sat above what Keith assumed to be important points on Lance’s body; things like organs, blood vessels or nerve endings.

“-Limb?”

Keith finally felt himself ask. His mouth was so dry and he couldn’t tear his eyes from Lance’s face-what little of it he could see.

“No pulse, no circulation and no blood getting to his extremities. I’ve been trying to keep his body the right temperature. S-pod does that in part but every few hours I have to come in and massage some life back into his muscles. Don’t want anything to atrophy!”

Coran removed his gloves with a flourish and demonstrated by kneading his fingertips into one of Lance’s limp hands. The advisor gave a genuine smile his eyes nearly disappearing into the wrinkles at corner’s of his eyes as he examined Lance fondly.

“Isn’t that right m’lad? Got to keep you on course just a little bit longer…can’t have you conking out now.”

The blue paladin didn’t respond and for a long time Keith stood and just watched his chest rise and fall weakly; reveling in the fact that he was still alive. Lance’s breathing was harsh and orchestrated mostly by his oxygen mask. His skin looked off; pale to the point the caramel brown was more a chalky grey.

Coran handed Keith a tube of what turned out to be a sweet-smelling, warming ointment and gestured to Lance’s opposite side.

“How about lending me a hand with his hand?”

The red paladin nodded meekly.

“Yeah, yeah ok.”

Copying Coran Keith lifted up Lance’s hand carefully and began to massage the muscle and tendons from the wrist up to the fingertips. It was disturbing how cold and stiff Lance felt, like rigor mortis had already begun to take hold. Without Coran’s constant vigilance it would have already been too late.

Slow thoughts turned over in Keith’s head. He shouldn’t have fallen asleep. He should have asked to see Lance right away. He should have gone to see Blue first, he-

_Nemean needed you. One thing at a time_, the imprint reminded him and it was surreal to hear Lance’s voice when Lance himself was a lifeless heap right there in front of him.

At some point Keith stopped massaging Lance’s hand and just held it.

“You put the scrim in here with him. Did Pidge run the diagnostics on it?”

As he manipulated the muscle around the Blue paladin’s left shoulder Coran hummed.
"I thought perhaps it might help but he didn’t react to it. His quintessence signature is still in the scrim but I fear…Shiro told me you had some insight on how to get him out?"

The night before the Spur ceremony Keith had given a full report to the other paladins; Or at least as full as he wanted to make it. He had left out some key details like pushing Lance down in the core or spying on some of his more sensitive memories. He had given the broad brushstrokes while omitting the more embarrassing tidbits.

He had explained that he would definitely be able to find the core memory again with the help of the him-print but…he didn’t know how long he could hold on to a Viewing without Carmen acting as his psychic battery. Without her who knew if he would have the time he needed to convince Lance to reunite with the Blue Lion.

It was the Matriarch that had pointed out the obvious. He already had a powerful battery waiting impatiently back at the Castle. The Matriarch seemed certain that Voltron-the lions could not only make the connection smoother for Keith but sustain it longer; perhaps even longer than Mother Carmen could.

Keith tried not to think about the Matriarch now. He tried not to think of her body, lonely and bleeding in the empty amphitheater; he tried and ultimately he failed.

“I know what to do for the most part. The Mother and I figured out most of the problems and the Matriarch filled in some gaps but…”

Keith moved his hand down to massage half-heartedly at Lance’s skinny wrist.

“She, Mother Carmen, wasn’t sure it would work. She said that no one had ever come back from a scrim before. Lance was the first to even survive this long.”

Coran finished exercising the muscles in Lance’s shoulders and move down to work on his feet clucking with his tongue as he did so.

“Would, should and could are all close cousins Keith m’lad! He’s already bucked the odds so far, now we just have to press on to the finish.”

“What if something happens to his quintessence? I mean- I know how to get his…him back but getting his heart back in his body? I’m not sure it’s just going to go automatically. I don’t know if-“

Keith shook his head and stared longingly at Lance. He fought back the urge to climb into the gooey interior of the survival pod with him. All he wanted to do in that moment was squeeze as close as possible and cling to him, curl up close until Lance woke up healthy and all in one piece on his own.

“I might not have more than one shot at this Coran…you’ll have to take him out of here when I do try and get him back. He and I need to be near the lions.”

This news was jarring enough that Coran stopped mid-massage but the advisor managed to keep his voice level when he answered.

“Then we’ll just have to get it all squared away the first time. For now however we’re going to finish up here, get you something to eat and figure out our next move. Discuss strategy with the Princess and the other paladins. If we put our heads together we can probably hammer out the rough edges.”

Keith stroked the softer skin on the underside of Lance’s arm absently. How were Pidge and Hunk going to treat him now? Shiro? Allura seemed so sure they would treat him exactly the same but things were different; fractured.

At least they could all agree on helping Lance. In some strange way Keith was thankful that despite his absence Lance was still inspiring the team to work together, uniting them. He was so damn good at that.

“Alright, I should go over everything again anyway. I mean- I told them this wouldn’t be fixed instantly but…I…”

The thought flickered away before Keith could finish it. He didn’t feel up to talking, it was just too much work and he was still so tired.

Coran didn’t press him but he did watch out of the corner of his eye when Keith stretched forward to lay a hand on the side of Lance’s neck. The red paladin ran questing fingers over Lance’s cheekbone, sliding a thumb thoughtfully down the line of his jaw.

It was soothing to Keith’s jangled nerves.

Coran moved the blue paladin’s long legs in a practiced cycle, folding each at the knee until he was satisfied by the amount of movement he was getting out of each rotation. Cracking his neck the Altean stretched, shaking the feeling back into his fingers.
“I'm glad to see you two finally getting along Number Four.”

Keith swept some of Lance’s damp hair from his face, lifting the thin strands from where they lay plastered to his forehead. Golden warmth he had almost forgotten about pooled in his stomach.

“Yeah. Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

Haha! I said i put those hints and clues in for no reason and I lied! HAHA.

Ever since the Half-blood Keith reveal and Allura's reaction in the show I wanted to write an alternate version. Rather than knife staring and Blade fighting I wanted to show a more gentle way for Keith to come to terms with his roots. Maybe by seeing another Galra he can relate to he can understand they aren't all bad. (and so can Allura)

This chapter also highlights one of my pet theories about why the Galra all look different but are technically the same species. I like to think Lotor's generals are all the products of unions with "undesirable" species but he feels for them being the product of a rare pairing himself.

Lance next chapter. So much Lance. Thanks CJ you proofreader supreme!
Set My Heart Free

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Hunk adjusted the makeshift bed on the floor of the Lion’s hangar fretfully. Over the last twenty minutes or so Keith had watched the yellow paladin take apart the nest of blankets and pillows then put them back together again in slightly different configurations. Hunk had done this at least a dozen times but no matter what order the fluffy pile was stacked nothing seemed to please him.

“Hunk. That works fine.”

The yellow paladin held a pillow between his hands and whimpered, giving Keith an anxious look.

“Sorry. Sorry, you’re right. I just- I wish I could be more helpful. I wish there was more I could do, you know?”

Keith knew that feeling well and he reached out to give Hunk an awkward pat on the back. He had spent the last few hours trying to get all the paladins on the same page of his “rescue Lance” playbook. It had been extremely frustrating. Everybody knew different parts of the story but not the whole and there were only so many repeat questions Keith could take before he started to get annoyed.

Pidge had kept interrupting him to ask about the inside of the scrim and how Viewings worked. Hunk had stammered out teary inquiries about how Lance looked and Allura would ponder out loud about the imprints and their connections between paladins.

The princess hadn’t even explained what an imprint was so that was another long tangent Keith had to delve into. Imprints, core memories, Viewings- the red paladin had gone over everything so many times his voice had grown husky from overuse.

Hunk was still fiddling with the tangle of pillows and blankets he had placed between the outstretched paws of Red and Blue. The lions stared blankly at the two of them, their massive eyes dim. They had been posed to look down on the crude bed; their necks curled and foreheads pressed close together.

The configuration had been purposeful, something calculated by Coran to feed Keith as much power as possible when he contacted Lance.

“So-er…Keith.”

Hunk tapped the tips of his fingers together and leaned against the Blue Lion in a way he seemed to think looked nonchalant.

“Yeah?”

Before Hunk had a chance to reconsider his setup Keith took a wobbly step towards the bed and sank down to sit on top of it. The yellow paladin sighed and plopped next to him, sitting cross-legged in a mess of multi-colored sheets.

“You didn’t- I mean. When you explained everything you didn’t talk about what you…you know. What you told me before…”

“Before?”

“Yeah, back on Vell. Remember? You told me about his memories and how you found out he- you know, likes you.”

Keith felt his face turn a scalding red and he ducked his head. He pulled inattentively at a threadbare bit of pillowcase.

“I didn’t think that was important to the mission so I-”

“You like him back.”

This wasn’t a question as much as a statement and Hunk looked ready to stand behind it. Keith flicked his eyes up to meet his friends and then down to stare at his hands. He didn’t have to admit anything. Hunk took his silence in stride and muttered something Keith didn’t catch before he continued.

“If you didn’t like him back I don’t think he would have the print thing in his head. I’ve been thinking real hard about it ever since you and Allura talked about it. It’s like-“

Sucking in a loud breath in through his nose Hunk let it out through his mouth in a long
whistle. Keith just stared up into the vacant eyes of the Blue Lion. Neither she nor Red had “spoken” to him since he had entered the hangar bay.

That uncomfortable static that had brushed up against the red paladin’s brain in the elevator earlier had only gotten louder. Blue especially seemed incapable of reaching out; she felt distant and was no doubt exhausted.

“-It’s like you and him needed to protect each other but you couldn’t actually…you didn’t think you could…you just- Ok let me start over!”

Hunk’s lower lip jutted out and his eyebrows furrowed as he struggled to parse out his thoughts. The yellow paladin had changed back into his regular clothes but for some reason hadn’t put his headband back on. Keith wondered if it had something to do with the circlet; maybe his skin was rubbed raw and sensitive from wearing it. Either way the big paladin looked practically naked with his hair hanging around his face, smooth and still damp from a recent shower.

“So, say you have two machines that aren’t hardware compatible with each other but still want to communicate. That’s you and Lance when you first met. The imprint thing fixes the problem by being this kind of software program written by your quintessence. Now you two can communicate and help each even if you aren’t capable of physical interaction- I mean! You two are super capable of it- oh geeze, n-not in that way! But like, you know, talking and stuff!”

Keith glanced at Hunk who was growing more flustered by the second. He managed a small nod and a smaller smile.

“I guess you could look at it that way.”

“I think it explains why you two got it first. You needed an outlet for like-”

Hunk held his hands out in front of him an inch apart and brought them down forcefully.

“-for the feelings.”

Keith yanked at the collar of his overlarge Altean pajama top. Coran had insisted he wear loose clothing and he agreed. Mostly because he was too drained and distracted to argue.

“So you think we developed imprints out of frustration?”

Hunk turned his head slowly to the side and squinted his eyes as he considered Keith’s answer.

“Yes? I guess? I just don’t think it was a fluke. You were freaked out when you found out how he felt but like…maybe part of you wasn’t surprised at all.”

“Was it the same brainless part that knew and didn’t know about being half Galra?”

The yellow paladin snapped his head up and glared at Keith.

“Dude. Don’t-“

A snarling reply was working its way up Keith’s throat when he heard the elevator slip open and leapt to his feet. He could smell Lance before he actually saw him. He smelled like cold metal, sweat and fever.

Shiro held the blue paladin bridal style, close to his chest. He was wrapped from neck to toes in thick, insulating blankets and was breathing through a different kind of oxygen mask than Keith had seen him wear in the Survival pod. This one had only a single tube attached and it disappeared into the blanket pulled tight over Lance’s chest.

Coran was fussing with a strange sort of swim-cap covering on Lance’s scalp. The Altean was tucking his hair into it even as he struggled to keep up with Shiro’s rapid pace. The rest of the team was hot on their heels.

Pidge almost stumbled over her own feet as she divided her attention between walking and her handheld data-pad. She was typing frantically with both thumbs, her mouth moving silently as it always did when she was dissecting some new and overwhelming problem.

Allura held Lance’s scrim tightly to her body, staring daggers at the back of Shiro’s head as she marched behind him. Keith cringed when he saw her expression. He had no doubt that look had something to do with him.

Out of all the paladins Shiro had taken the revelation about Keith’s heritage the hardest but not in the way Keith expected. Shiro had seemed upset at himself.

When Keith had shuffled into the common room to face his team mates post-blood transfusion they had first reacted with forced cheeriness. This was followed by assurances that they weren’t upset, that no one was angry and nothing had changed. Then they had embraced him one at a time. Hunk in particular had hugged Keith bone-crushingly tight, squeezing him until he seemed sure the red paladin understood his genetics made absolutely no difference to anyone.
Shiro had been oddly silent through all this. Watching Keith cautiously—like he was waiting for him to shatter. He had kept up the stoic, silent façade all through the long scrim Q and A and had been quick to volunteer to get Lance while Hunk and Keith prepped the bay for the Viewing.

Still, the avoidance and the weird behavior that went with it didn’t read like fear exactly. Shiro was like this when he failed at a mission. In fact Keith could remember another time he had seen Shiro act like this around a paladin. Lance—he had been like this after Lance’s near death experience in the castle explosion. He was feeling guilty.

For some inexplicable reason Takashi Shiro felt responsible for Keith’s dad’s weird taste in women.

They would have to talk it out when there was more time.

The black paladin stood over Hunk’s pillow nest and regarded Red and Blue. He brought Lance closer to his chest and everyone watched silently as he buried his face in Lance’s neck, hugging him carefully. Keith didn’t want to admit how much it looked like a goodbye.

Moving lightly around Shiro, Allura shifted Lance’s scrim in her arms. She held it up and offered Blue a good, long look before she laid it on a plump, well-situated pillow.

Turning to Keith the princess reached out and squeezed his shoulders.

“Are you ready?”

“I…”

Keith hesitated listening to Lance’s labored breathing. He could feel the worried expressions of his team, the weight of Allura’s hands on his shoulders and the heavier weight of Blue’s expectations. Worse than all these things combined he could feel his own desperation.

Instead of answering with words Keith pulled away from the princess and took his place on the pile of blankets. Taking a deep, even breath he lay on his side expectantly.

Shiro arranged Lance next to him, the scrim sandwiched between them. Pushing aside his embarrassment Keith lifted his shirt and adjusted his position so his bare chest was resting against the scrim. He reached out and looped his free hand around Lance’s shoulder.

The blue paladin felt cold through his blankets and his pale face was lax behind his breathing mask. His expression wasn’t one that reminded Keith of sleep, it was too loose and dreamless.

Placing Lance’s nerveless hand against his own scrim Keith pushed even closer. His friend’s unsettling, dead expression moving out of Keith’s periphery as the red paladin pressed their foreheads together; the bridge of his nose just butting up against the curve of the oxygen mask.

As he started to let go Keith heard the paladin’s voices drowned out by the strange metal against metal sound he associated with the lions. A hard, metal surface pushed flat against Keith’s shoulder blades and he was just cognizant to realize Red had bent her head down to touch her nose to his back.

It wasn’t the same as a Viewing with Carmen.

The Mother’s warm voice in his head was replaced by the occasional frantic buzz of white noise and some distant blurred memories—like he was stuck in a one-sided conversation. The tendrils and gentle caresses that had helped lull him into a receptive state were gone; replaced by cool sheets and the harsh rattling of Lance’s breathing.

Keith focused on the heartbeat in the scrim; the way it thudded against his chest and connected to his pulse. He fell towards it losing track of the hangar lights and the ever present chug of the castle ship. It happened almost automatically— the lazy, slow descent from the tactile world to the inside of Lance’s memories.

One moment he was there and then—

Keith opened his eyes and saw himself.

He looked uncomfortable—sick, curled up tightly on a couch in the ships common room. The lights were off but he could still see the outlines of his own face lit by passing stars.

Pink emotion shot through his entire body, flooding his chest and brain. Pink fog enveloped his senses and doused everything in a pheromone addled haze. He wanted to walk over and ask himself if he was ok; at least offer a blanket…but—

He—Lance stared a minute more then methodically backed out the way he had come. They stood in the hallway hands hanging to their sides feeling momentarily lost then painfully embarrassed.
Keith struggled to get back into the swing of being inside Lance’s head. He felt a brief rush of fear when he realized he was disembodied but soon tamped it down. This was normal; he usually burst right into a random memory at the start. The Keith imprint just hadn’t found him yet.

“Idiot.”

Lance muttered to himself before he stalked down the hall. Keith let himself lean into the memory a bit, trying to place when this was. It seemed very recent. He could tell by the way Lance moved his shoulders; there was a slight tug of scar tissue down their back that hadn’t appeared until after the battle with Sendak.

There was also some pain in their left leg and that gave Keith an even better idea of when he was. Not long before the unfortunate meeting with Kru-Kron Lance had gotten struck by a bit of droid shrapnel on a recon mission but hadn’t bothered to mention it until the pain became debilitating.

Whenever this was it had to be very close to when Shiro reprimanded Lance for not reporting his knee injury: so…about a month ago? Keith thought that sounded like a fair estimate.

“Why don’t you just talk to him…Cabron…?”

Lance mumbled under his breath in Spanish, drawing a sharp breath through his teeth as pain buzzed through his nerves. He limped slightly now that no one was watching and Keith wanted to cuff him from the inside. Why hadn’t he just told someone it hurt this bad?

They made it into the kitchen and Keith stared despondently at the nutrient paste—“food goo” dispenser. He was hungry but the flavorless green goop was about as appealing as lukewarm, week old tapioca pudding.

Sitting on a low countertop at the far end of the kitchen Lance leaned against an oversized refrigeration unit until his cheek was smashed against the buzzing metal. Keith had never realized how warm the thing was. It reminded him painfully of his handover meal with Nemean.

“Lance?”

Shiro ambled into the room and Keith looked up at him startled. The black paladin hadn’t noticed them at first, all his attention on some electronic device in his hand. He wiped sweat from the back of his neck with a towel and Lance’s first instinct was to freeze.

Keith assumed his working theory here was that if he didn’t move Shiro wouldn’t notice him. He was acting like a guilty kid and it seemed like there was more than the hurt knee weighing on him.

Shiro glanced up from the beeping box in his hand and flashed a sincere smile.

“Hey buddy, you looking for a snack? You didn’t seem have much of an appetite during dinner.”

“Yeah. Sorry boss man I-I wasn’t feeling food then but I’ve got a hankering for anything that isn’t green now.”

Keith felt his guts curl up, his chest hurt; pain that was in no way related to his shrapnel wound.

Shiro reached into a pantry near Lance’s perch and retrieved a jar of something that resembled jerky. Plopping the jar in front of Lance he pulled off the lid with his prosthetic and handed the blue paladin a meaty circle the size of a slice of bread.

“I know that feeling. Here, I’ll share if you don’t tell anybody about my private stash. One of those little pink guys on the last planet we liberated gave me these; locally made, pretty tasty.”

Accepting the jerky Keith nibbled at it and was surprised by the texture. It tasted an awful lot like the wild quail he had hunted and cooked in the desert. Not bad but definitely foreign.

“Hey Shiro? Er, you notice something up with Keith?”

The black paladin stopped mid-chew and swallowed thoughtfully.

“No. He hasn’t been slacking on training and his focus has been alright during drills…”

Jerky crumbs spewed out of Keith- Lance’s mouth as he replied and his tone was one of concern. The pink feeling inside them shuddered and intensified, echoing the blue paladin’s distress.

“I don’t mean up with Voltron stuff. I mean… Have you noticed he rubs his forehead and the bridge of his nose all the time? I think he gets headaches. My sister used to do that when she got headaches.”

Lance paused waiting to see if Shiro would stop him or argue but he just nodded
encouragingly pulling the towel from around his shoulders so he could use it to dry his hair.

“What else?”

Keith let out a long, dry breath he hadn’t realized Lance had been holding and felt the tension ease from his scarred shoulders.

“Oh, so he squints too. Like, especially at breakfast and around bright screens. It reminds me of right before my Uncle Ramon admitted he needed glasses. Maybe Keith needs glasses? Or maybe the light is bad for his eyes? Either way I noticed he doesn’t squint when he’s piloting Red. So the light in Red’s cockpit probably doesn’t bother him—”

Shiro stopped fussing with his communication device, muting it before he set it down on the counter to give Lance his full attention. Keith was at a loss. He barely noticed these things himself; he scarcely gave the headaches a second thought.

Lance continued finding his stride and feeling a bit more confident now that he had his leader’s full attention.

“He also startles all the time like…like a jumpy cat. The other day when Hunk dropped a plate in the kitchen? He jumped up with his hands out like he was about to do a karate move. ”

Keith felt Lance try to illustrate with his arms out over the counter, his legs curled the edge to support their weight as he leaned forward.

“He does it all the time. It’s like he’s super tensed up. I know we’re fighting a war and everything? But he doesn’t do it during training or actual fighting; just when he’s around us. It probably doesn’t help the headaches…being stressed out.”

Lance lowered his hands back down to the counter, his nibbled jerky still in hand.

“I wish we didn’t stress him out.”

You don’t… Keith wanted to say to the memory Lance. I lived in the desert alone. I’m half-alien. I’m a freak. This isn’t you…it’s me.

Shiro reached out with his flesh and blood hand and grasped Lance’s knuckles. Keith looked up at him surprised by the pride shining from the black paladin’s face.

“I’m glad you told me this Lance. I like to think I know Keith pretty well but I had to admit I didn’t notice some of the stuff you mentioned.”

Shiro tapped a metal finger on the countertop and his gaze grew more intense.

“Keith is… fragile.”

Lance and Keith both looked at Shiro in surprise. The red paladin stared at the memory of his mentor from behind Lance’s eyes. He had been called many things over the years by foster parents and classmates and even Garrison instructors; cold, quiet, calculating, gifted and most of all private. No one had ever called him fragile.

“He puts on the tough act and most people don’t see through it.”

Shiro continued.

“It’s this mask he wears to protect himself. I think he’s separated himself so far that being close to people makes him- to use your word, jumpy. That’s not stress Lance it’s just…Keith trying to figure things out.”

Keith glowered at the counter.

“If you say so boss man.”

“It took awhile for him to warm up to me you know.”

“Really?”

Lance’s voice sounded almost hopeful and Keith cringed. Shiro wasn’t kidding. It had taken weeks of failed attempts for him to even give Shiro the time of day. Keith had never been good with authority figures of any kind. Maybe his time in the foster system had made him naturally distrustful of over-friendly people. Shiro’s gracious comments on his high simulator scores were pretty much rebuffed from the start.

But the older cadet had been persistent and patient. So much so that Keith had finally given up and started talking to him about three months after their initial meeting. The red paladin still didn’t understand what Shiro had seen in him but then…he didn’t understand what Lance saw in him either.

The black paladin kneeled in front of Lance so they were seeing eye to eye and Keith felt Shiro’s hands on his shoulders. It was a sensation he had experienced many times but Lance
seemed shocked by the contact, flinching reflexively.

“You seem to care a lot about Keith.”

Keith felt his- Lance’s body grow hot with embarrassment and he squirmed, picking apart his jerky with restless fingers. He avoided Shiro’s gaze, all his attention on his hands.

“I mean…he’s ok, he’s my teammate-”

“Lance, caring about him is good. Paying attention when he isn’t feeling hot? That’s commendable. It means you’re a good member of the crew and I’m proud of you.”

“I want to help him!”

Keith- Lance blurted out, the words coming out in a tumbling rush.

“I want him to not be jumpy around me…I want to maybe not fight so much. I know I’m not in his league and I’m not…I’m not as valuable but-”

Shiro gave Lance’s shoulders a light shake, lighter than Keith would have given if he heard Lance talking like that. It was the same sort of language he used around his sister- his family; that weird absence of self-esteem in a guy that, on first glance, seemed to have a surplus. Shiro probably figured the blue paladin out right away just like he had Keith when they first met.

“Lance you are **irreplaceable**. You are essential and without you this team would not fly. Am I- Hey, look at me.”

Reluctantly Keith raised his eyes, his lower lip quivering as he sucked in a hard breath. Shiro smiled.

“There you are. I have to make sure your paying attention. Are you listening?”

Lance nodded and Keith felt, not for the first time, like the backseat driver he was. Observing this weird moment between two people he cared about that was also somehow about him. He wished, also not for the first time, that he had been more aware of Lance’s struggles.

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“You are the blue paladin and you are important, respected and loved by this team.”

Keith sniffled rubbed furiously at his eyes. It felt different when Lance cried; less restrained, like his body was used to it.

“…even Keith?”

Shiro pursed his lips and looked at the ceiling. He pretended to consider it seriously before he answered.

“I would go out on a limb and say especially Keith.”

“I’m having a tough time buying that boss man.”

Rising to his feet Shiro stretched, took two more pieces of jerky from his stash and placed the jar back in its hiding place. He handed the extra piece to Lance.

“Well you can help me out. Keep watching him like you have been. I’m not going to approach him about the headaches just yet. Let’s gather more intel first. Maybe you could try and get a little closer to him. See if he brings it up. “

The pink feeling bubbled hopefully and Keith couldn’t help but savor it. The crush, infatuation- whatever it was Lance had for him; that all-infusing glow that was always there under blue paladin’s sternum just between his stomach and his heart.

Shiro folded his arms and looked towards the kitchen door as he delivered his final orders.

“Next time we go on a non-essential mission maybe you could volunteer to spend time with him. He doesn’t need to know.”

“Yeah. Yeah I can do that! But, I **really** don’t think he’s gonna like it. I don’t wanna argue with the head of Voltron or anything but I think Keith…isn’t ole Lancelot’s biggest fan.”

**Stop…that’s not true that’s not…**

The kitchen disappeared and Shiro went with it.

Molecule by molecule, cell by cell Keith felt his body form. He hadn’t seen the imprint this time but the empty space where the castle kitchen once stood was filled with a red half-light. It looked like the glow of Christmas lights under snow, the flare of an emergency light in a black hallway; muffled and barely perceptible.
Keith held his newly formed hand in front of his face and flexed his fingers distractedly his thoughts coming in slow, methodic drips. Taking a few experimental steps with his brand new legs the red paladin took off in a determined sprint.

He passed through fields of memories, floating bubbles of Lance’s past that called out with lost voices. Keith didn’t look at them, wasn’t even tempted like he had been before. There was no Orpheus pull this time around. The past didn’t matter, who needed it when he could go and find the real thing.

The Keith imprint guided the red paladin to the core memory in the space of heartbeats and he reached for it without a second thought. The shock of appearing instantly in Lance’s neighborhood barely slowed Keith’s pace. The soles of his shoes barely skimmed the sidewalk as he ran through pristine flowerbeds and lovingly tended lawns. He was going at such a fast clip he nearly ran into the Blue Lion’s back paw as he rounded a corner.

She didn’t respond to his touch, didn’t twist her head of even make a purr of acknowledgement. The fear in Keith’s gut sliced up like a sharp knife through his diaphragm and he picked up so much speed darting towards the blue lion’s head he had to screech to a stop, gasping for breath.

“Blue!”

The first time he had seen the blue lion in Lance’s core memory she had been standing like a sphinx, tired but alert. Now she didn’t even lift her head when he said her name. The fences she had tried so hard not to jostle were now crushed under her weight and clumps of torn grass clung to the spaces between her claws.

Keith pressed his hands to her jaw and spoke around the tightness in his throat.

“Blue… please answer me, please.”

After a beat of raw quiet Blue’s dim eyes finally lit up, sparking golden in the dark. Keith let out a relieved gasp and pressed closer trying to move where she could see him.

“Blue- Blue I’m going to get him…I’m going to get him for sure this time. Can- can you move?”

Images moved sluggishly over the surface of Keith’s brain; Blue’s “voice” little more than a whisper of thoughts as she answered. The red paladin saw a memory, one of Lance’s, of a toy running out of batteries. An electronic dog made a bark sound that was more of a grainy screech as its double A’s gave up the ghost. Added to this was an image of the Blue lion floating motionless in space. She had been severely damaged in an asteroid belt; energy depleted, frozen in place.

Keith shook his head desperately.

“I know…I know I’m so sorry Blue. I’m so sorry I took so long. I-”

She interrupted him with a gentle growl. The tinny sound reverberated in the pavement and Keith felt a soft breeze blow over him and through the surrounding trees. The blue lion sent more images. The other lions were pushing her out of the asteroid belt. Yellow and Green were pressing to her sides and Red was a pulsing ball of anger and frustration. Black was the conduit and a constant anchor. After this Keith could clearly see another memory of Lance’s. A tree, blooming with new spring leaves after lying dormant for a long cold winter. The other lions were the roots and the leaves of Blue’s tree. She had been saving her strength. She had been waiting for this.

She had been waiting for *him*.

Keith leaned against Blue’s nose his temporary imprint body quaking with relief and pent-up anxiety.

“No more waiting. I’m bringing him back this time. I just-”

A dry, hoarse chuckle that wasn’t even a real laugh escaped Keith and he banged his head lightly against the metal of Blue’s face.

“All this- All the alien tech and fighting and the politics and Lance- saving Lance…it all comes down to me saying something I’ve been avoiding. Something it took him almost dying for me to realize. Now I know what I have to do and I’m still- I’m so nervous.”

Blue cooed in sympathy. Despite all the agony she had been through keeping her paladin’s mind and body together in one piece she didn’t seem angry at all. She seemed to be doing her best to understand every word from Keith’s mouth, looking for a way to help him regardless of her pain. She really had picked her pilot well.

“Blue. I’m scared of him. I-”

Keith growled and clenched his teeth trying to organize his thoughts and figure out exactly what he was trying to say. What he had wanted to try and make Hunk and Shiro and even Mother
“I’m not scared of him hurting my body…I can always handle that. Pain doesn’t scare me. That’s why charging in… it works because I’m not afraid. I’m- I’m afraid of him because of what he means to me. What losing him would be like; I- am I crazy? Does that make sense? When I do this it’s not something I can take back…something I even want to take back and he doesn’t know I’m half-Galra! What if he…”

Blue purred low and she sent a simple memory of Lance from her point of view. He was standing in the hangar bay watching Keith from a distance a hand pressed to his armored chest. He looked enamored but that was only on the surface. Beneath it there was pride and a kind of adoration. It was the look of someone smitten and it was there in the open for anyone with eyes.

Stop worrying so much. Blue seemed to say. Go get him.

The lion pulled her head from Keith with a tired groan. She pulled her paws from the manicured lawns around her and shook a mailbox from her tail. Glancing out into the darkness beyond the trees she rumbled, taking up her sentinel watch. Keith took the hint.

“Don’t go anywhere.”

He said half to Blue and half to himself.

“I’ll be back.”

Blue’s comforting purr faded as Keith made his way down the cracked and broken street. He passed under Lance’s congratulations banner without looking at it; his heart pounding in his ears as he reached the milling crowd, the music stage and the smells of food.

Everything in the memory was identical to the first time he had been here. There were Teo’s musical friends on stage for their set. He could see kids playing with sparklers, adults laughing and talking over barbecue and lite beer. Cousins, aunts, uncles and neighbors caroused, joked and celebrated one of their own finally making it.

Lance McClain the skinny boy next door was going to space.

Keith searched the happy faces around him trying to spot his- well…they might as well have been his by now-immediate family. If he could find Carmen, Teo or Jack than there was a good chance Lance was nearby.

“HEY! YOU KIDS GET AWAY FROM THOSE FIREWORKS! Déjalo!”

Keith twisted his head towards the familiar shout. Isa was poised over the desserts cutting a fat slab off the celebratory sheet cake. She walked around the food table cake in hand, face pinched in a frustrated scowl and Keith had an immediate sense of déjà vu.

He had entered the core memory at almost this exact moment the first time. Maybe that’s just how it worked? Maybe it dropped you in a certain spot every time and Lance wasn’t aware of time passing. Keith knew from experience that the memories had definite beginnings and endings but maybe a core memory worked differently. Either way at least he knew where Lance was now.

Sucking in a breath through clenched teeth Keith took his time. He counted backwards and looked himself over, suddenly very concerned about his appearance. Making his way cautiously to the McClain’s food truck Keith fussed with his jacket, tucked in his shirt and ran his fingers through his hair. He wished he could check his reflection but somehow doubted that this body would even have one in a memory.

The way back to the porch where Keith was probably just opening his brand new family heirloom came like muscle memory. The red paladin found the exact same tree he had hidden behind the first time and fidgeted as he watched the heartwarming scene unfold in front of him a second time.

The all important jacket was currently in Teo’s possession. He rubbed the fabric fondly and said his line.

“I was wearing this jacket when Elinor held an elevator for me and I asked her out…First kiss, same jacket. She almost spilled a cup of coffee on it mid-kiss tho. Crisis barely avoided.”

Lance took the jacket back from his brother the same sense of wonder scribbled over his features. How many times had he done this since he’d been sucked into the scrim; Hundreds? Thousands? No wonder his memory was so short.

“So…can I put it on now?”

Jack gave his son a hearty, good-natured slap on the back.

“Do it hijo. Put the dang thing on!”

It was almost time. Pretty soon everyone was going to split their separate ways and then…
Keith swallowed at what felt like a baseball in his esophagus. How could he start this? He needed to be smoother than last time that was for sure. He couldn’t just lunge in spewing the names of people Lance didn’t remember. Where was the imprint when he needed him the most? What would Lance do in this situation?

Carmen was asking Jack to go for ice. He and the uncles were walking away. Teo was going to the stage with the twins. Keith felt sweat drip down into his collar. This was worse than when Heonar had a gun aimed at his head. God, at least then the worst that could happen was him being dead. That wasn’t nearly as hard.

Lance sat with a little smile on his face as he surveyed the party-goers quietly from the huge porch. He rubbed at the hem of his jacket sleeve looking practically blissful. There. Now. Go.

“So. Was it really painful?”

Lance looked over in surprise at Keith’s voice. He raised a confused eyebrow and snorted as he replied.

“What?”

Keith stuck his hands in his pockets and leaned on the porch railing near the stairs where Lance sat.

“You know. Did it hurt- when you fell? Because you’re an angel…from heaven…because you-wait.”

Lance’s eyes grew wide reflecting all the small pinpricks of light from the Christmas lights around him. It looked like his blue eyes were full of individual stars. It reminded Keith of the Mother’s eyes. He stuttered and backtracked wondering if he should just start over. Maybe he could wait until the memory started over and Lance forgot how bad he had just screwed up.

“Oh my god.”

Lance murmured and stared down at his jacket.

“This thing really works!”

The blue paladin beamed at Keith with unrestrained excitement.

“I have it on for five minutes and the hottest guy I’ve ever seen just walks over and hits on me? I kinda thought dad was pulling my leg about this being a lucky jacket but damn!”

Keith felt his entire face, no his entire being, turn bright, tomato red. From his toes to his hairline every inch of him was quite literally the red paladin. Lance stopped laughing and gave him a sympathetic look.

“Hey man a good pick up line takes years to perfect. You get an A for effort! My name is Lance! You new to the neighborhood?”

Clearing his throat Keith nodded mutely, unsure what to say next. Luckily Lance just took this as nervousness and his blinding smile grew even brighter.

“You probably already knew who I was right? I mean- I think there are cupcakes with little pictures of me on the food table. Mom went a bit overboard. What’s your name?”

“Keith…My name is Keith Kogane”

Keith wondered if this was how their first meeting at the Garrison would have been like if he had been paying more attention. If he had tried to reach out more, maybe he would have noticed there was something amazing right there waiting for him.

“Keith?”

Lance considered this leaning back on the porch as he eyed Keith up and down appraisingly.

“You know…that’s not a name you hear that often. I like it.”

A fine, dark blush had spread over Lance’s cheeks and he fiddled with his zipper as his eyes met Keith’s again.

“I like your hair. You look a little like Kurt Russell in Escape from New York.”

“Escape from…what?”

“Whaaat! You’ve never seen Escape from New York? It’s one of my brother’s favorite movies so I’ve seen it like a million times. There was even a sequel.”

Keith didn’t know which stunned him more. The easy-going way Lance spoke to him without snarky insults, the fact he had received a compliment on his hair or how right all this felt; like it was a long time coming.
Patting the space next to him on the porch Lance made room for Keith to sit. The red paladin did so reluctantly wondering how he was doing on time. Time outside the memory passed differently. During a Viewing what felt like seconds could be an hour or longer outside the scrim.

Still, he couldn’t rush too much or Lance would get scared again. Keith sat and felt the nothing texture of what should have been porch wood under his hands.

“So, Kurt Russell right? He plays this guy called Snake Plissken and he’s an ex-super soldier and he has to save the president from-wait back up…so like, it’s the future-”

Warmth spread through Keith’s chest and he couldn’t stop smiling. He could smell the Aloe Vera Lance smell and feel his body heat. While Lance talked the red paladin would only interject with the odd question or comment, all of which made Lance laugh until he was practically glowing.

After a few animated minutes of explaining the downright bizarre plot of the movie Lance paused. He just stared at Keith and something flickered in his pupils, recognition briefly ghosting over his features.

“Keith. This is going to sound crazy but… I swear we’ve met before.”

“Mmm. That doesn’t sound crazy to me.”

“H-have we met before?”

Before Keith could answer he was interrupted by the sound of a woman’s voice calling Lance’s name. The band had stopped and he could hear Uncle Ramon tuning his guitar so it had to be Carmen. She was looking for Lance so they could have a dance together.

The last time this sequence of events had been put into motion Keith had been chasing Lance out of the cul-de-sac. He had to speed things up. Who knew how much time he had left before the memory looped back and all his progress was lost.

“Lance…”

“I-I should go dance with my mom. I promised her I would.”

As Lance stood Keith took a chance and reached out grabbing his warm, real hand.

“I know you don’t remember but…Lance.”

Sucking in a breath Keith gathered his courage and stood straight taking Lances hand in both of his.

“Not that long ago you told me I owed you a dance. You said that you would ask for it when I least expected it…you probably don’t remember that but-”

Lance look at him expectantly, leaning in a bit closer when the red paladin lowered his voice.

“Maybe now would be a good time to-”

The blue paladin didn’t even let Keith finish he was already pulling him towards the stage as the words spilled out of his mouth.

“Yes! Keith dance with me!”

Carmen had stopped calling for Lance by the time they had made it to the middle of the cul-de-sac where other couples were dancing. The slow waltz-ish song Keith half-remembered from before was just ending.

The red paladin couldn’t help contemplating how they had just thrown off the timeline. Obviously Lance was supposed to dance with his mom but that hadn’t happened. Hopefully she had just passed onto the next thing she was programmed to do- maybe…

Uncle Ramon started into a new song, slow but a bit more playful than the last. Lance, who had been pulling Keith’s arm off just to get to the street turned suddenly shy. He stood there staring at the red paladin and pulled his hands to his chest to wipe them on his shirt.

“Hah…sweaty-”

Flustered, Keith wasn’t sure what to do now. He had never been to a school dance, never bothered with prom. He trusted Lance to know what to do in any kind of social situation, especially something like this.

“I…”

“Here.”

Lance slipped Keith’s hands to sit on his shoulders and carefully put his hands on Keith’s hips.
He started to move them in a slow circle in time to the music and Keith stared at his own feet in amazement as he figured out the steps. It wasn’t that different than any other training exercise really… once you found the rhythm.

“You aren’t supposed to be here… are you?”

Keith felt his body stiffen but when he tried to pull back Lance only pulled him closer. The blue paladin pressed his forehead to Keith’s as his breath coming faster. His smell was soothing and Keith let it soak his senses calming some primal, protective urge in him that was probably Galran.

“Neither of us are supposed to be here. Not me or you.”

“I… I know you Keith. I know your voice. The longer I look at you the more it hurts.”

Lowering his hands from Lance’s shoulders Keith wrapped them around his back. The music faded into the background, the noise of the fake people around them going with it.

“I’m sorry. I had to come get you. Everyone misses you.”

Losing a step Lance stumbled, gasping as tears starting to drip down his face.

“My family isn’t out there are they? Its- the others, I think I remember them a little.”

Keith could feel Lance shaking and he growled low curling his fingers into the back of the lucky jacket. They continued to move in a smooth circle dancing even as Lance sobbed breathlessly: gliding through a ghostly mass of acquaintances and family.

Out of the corner of his eye Keith noticed the memory people were all beginning to become more transparent, the neighborhood itself getting misty and unreal. It was like the core memory was breaking down.

Trying not to let himself get too excited Keith pulled his head back from Lance and caught his eyes, hoping he wouldn’t notice the world fading from existence around them.

Lance sniffled and spoke a bit more firmly.

“You’ve been trying to talk to me… I know you. It hurts but I want you here. I think I’ve missed you.”

Lance dropped his head down and let it sink into Keith’s collar. The red paladin stared over his shoulder hopefully to see more and more of the congratulations party disappear into nothing. A black void swallowed trees on the periphery and soon it was moving towards the refreshment tables, the houses and the decorations.

“Everyone is going to be so glad to have you back. We need you.”

The encroaching darkness paused and the guitar music grew suddenly louder. The party-goers, who had started to freeze in place, jumped into jerky pre-planned movements again. Shit.

Lance’s voice rose above the reanimated memory wobbly and full of fresh tears.

“How could anyone need me? I’m so useless…”

Keith stopped dancing.

He stood straight and waited for Lance to lift his head. Every nagging thought, every ounce of fear or self-doubt was gone. The Mother had told him that Lance would be confused- lost. He needed a shock to his system.

“You are not useless…”

Leaning forward Keith pressed his lips clumsily to the blue paladin’s.

It wasn’t a great kiss, at least not at first. Their teeth banged together as he caught Lance off guard and both of their mouths were so dry from nerves it was a bit like rubbing sand on stone. Then Lance seemed to wake up and his hands looped around Keith’s back grabbing roughly at his hair to keep him from pulling away.

Separating long enough to lick his lips Lance dove back in moving his head to the side until they were both in a better position. Keith closed his eyes and felt little blue fireworks go off in his brain.

There was dampness on his face from the tears still dribbling down Lance’s cheeks. He could smell the salt in them before they finally broke apart; both of them gasping for air.

Still panting and flushed stop-light red Keith bared his teeth and held Lance tightly.

“I love you.”

The blue paladin’s heart fluttered and jumped against Keith’s chest and Lance didn’t seem to
know how to react or where to look. Finally he blinked a few times and his face turned pale. His eyes swept over Keith like he was just seeing him for the first time.

“Keith—where? Where are we?”

The party was gone. The cul-de-sac was gone. All of the extended McClain clan had been swallowed by the absolute emptiness that existed in the space between memories. Lance looked older, the age he was on the outside, and his body shone a soft blue. Keith was glowing as well; the same red as his imprint, as his aura. Lance’s lanky body trembled and he started to panic before Keith had a chance to explain.

“Where’s Hunk? Or Shiro or C-Coran? Are we dead?! DID WE DIE?”

“Lance, Calm down!”

Pulling forcefully away from Keith Lance turned in a tiny circle, searching the dark expanse in pure terror. He wrapped his arms around his torso and folded in half his breathing coming in frantic, difficult gasps.

“Ah—-it HURTS…It hurts so bad—”

Lance sank down to his knees and Keith crouched next to him in alarm. The only light in the empty space was coming from the two of them making it difficult to see.

“We- we aren’t dead ok? Trust me. I know you can’t remember but—”

Making a loud retching sound Lance dry-heaved onto the flat plane of black under his knees.

“I think –I think you’re just feeling your body.”

Keith said under his breath. He rubbed Lance’s back fruitlessly as the dry-heaving grew worse and the shaking more violent.

“I’ve got you Lance —”

Out of nowhere the blue lion leaned her head down to their level. Her eyes were shining so brightly it was made Keith wince. Opening her mouth the robot let out a loud triumphant roar. She didn’t wait for Lance to acknowledge her, she opened her jaws wide and the ramp to her cockpit descended inches from the two paladins.

Lance gagged and spat staring up at his lion weakly.

“Blue- coming…”

He tried to get to his feet, to get closer- his spindly legs quivering under him. Keith didn’t wait for him to ask for help. Placing one of the blue paladin’s arms around his shoulders Keith hefted him and half walked, half carried him up the ramp into his lion.

The last thing Keith could sense was Blue moving. She slammed the door behind them, shuddering as she took flight. Lance muttered something unintelligible, his voice full of pain and then…

Everything was dark, dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Keith used the worst pick-up line I could think of. Its probably one he heard in a movie once but he just couldn't get through it.

This chapter was difficult. I had to put some long overdue pay-off in there and I wanted to suggest that Lance was aware something wasn't right with Keith before anybody else. There are a few call-backs to the very first chapter as well as the chapter where Keith first enters the core memory.

If this chapter accomplishes anything I hope its making some of you look up what Kurt Russell looks like in Escape from New York. Lance had a crush on Mr. Russell when he was in middle school.

THANK YOU CI MY PROOFREADING DAWG.
Losing Heart

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Allura put a gentle hand to Lance’s face rubbing her thumb over his cheek and the bridge of his nose.

“Lance… Tarshgol? Can you hear me?”

She had taken to calling him that strange Altean word a lot in the last few hours. When Keith had asked Coran what it meant he had a difficult time explaining it. The red paladin gleaned that it was a diminutive, a pet name that Altean’s used to address the very ill.

Unlike humans who really only used sweet nicknames for loved ones or children, Altean’s had names reserved for all sorts of occasions. They had special pet names only spoken to siblings, peers who worked with you on starships and even the dying. When roughly translated Tarshgol meant “A star that suffers no pain”.

Lance’s breathing was ragged and broken, every small inhalation choppy and full of desperate, harsh rasping. He sounded like he was drowning despite the aid of an Altean breathing mask. His skin was waxy, cold to the touch and tinged with grey. His eyelids were swollen and he was having a hard time opening his eyes more than halfway.

There was an unfamiliar smell on his breath that made Keith feel queasy. It was cloying… sickly sweet and Keith tried to convince himself it wasn’t a dying smell.

The blue paladin didn’t react to the princess’s touch at all and Keith didn’t know if he was relieved the blue paladin was finally resting or scared that he wasn’t responding. Lance had to be exhausted; he had been thrashing and screaming for thirty minutes straight.

Keith had come out of the Viewing with a migraine like razors in the soft tissue of his brain and Lance’s hoarse, pained screeches scratching at his eardrums. From the moment he had woken up Lance had been inconsolable and unreachable. Whatever was happening to his mind and body after being reunited was anyone’s guess and Mother Carmen’s doubts about his survival kept coming back to Keith in panicked waves.

They had been too afraid to sedate him. By the time Keith and the others had made it out of the hangar bay and into the infirmary Lance was gibbering nonsense in Spanish, shouting names that Keith recognized from his memories. The blue paladin didn’t seem to have any idea where the hell he was and for the next four hours he was unconscious, screaming or semi-coherent by turns.

Keith didn’t mention his migraine, the only thing that mattered right now was sitting at the end of Lance’s infirmary bed and clutching his legs like a security blanket. Hunk sat at the head of the bed close to his friend’s ear and muttered to him endlessly, babbling comforting words.

During one of Lance’s brief quiet, conscious spells the yellow paladin had tried in vain to get him to eat. Lance managed to choke down a spoonful of the familiar green nutritional paste but he had immediately brought it back up, apologizing deliriously before the pain was on him again.

Shiro was practically curled around Lance’s head pushing cool metal fingers through his hair while Hunk rubbed small circles on his sunken stomach hoping to soothe it enough that Lance could keep some food down. Pidge sat on the ground leaning against the bed frame. She held Lance’s hand and rubbed at his bony knuckles as she concentrated on her computer; trying fruitlessly to find some answers in the results of Coran’s medical tests.

Keith wished selfishly he could just have Lance to himself for a moment. He wanted to be close to him, wait for him to wake up and try to…try to do what? What could he do? He couldn’t do a fucking thing and to make matters worse the Lance imprint seemed to have gone completely silent. He couldn’t even ask the voice in his head for advice.

Coran ran frantically between three machines as he fed the blue paladin’s vitals into them, checking and re-checking readouts as his scowl deepened.

“Allura gave up on Lance answering her and kneeled near Hunk around the crowded med-bay bed. She lay her head gingerly on Lance’s chest, her hair piling under the paladin’s chin. Keith watched the soft white strands shaking rise and fall as Lance struggled for air. Allura, exhausted as the rest of them, hummed under her breath, stroking a finger along the length of Lance’s nose.

“My poor paladin…”

Silently, the paladins and the princess sat with their own thoughts, each stewing in their own misery. It was unbearable and despite knowing he really had done everything humanly and galranly possible Keith still felt like he had let everyone down; he had failed.
“Paladins…I-”

Everyone jumped and turned as a group to ogle Coran like they just remembered he existed. The Altean advisor avoided everyone’s eyes, staring down at his boots as his moustache quivered.

“Number three- Lance is…”

Coran cleared his throat looking up at the ceiling as he held his hands tight behind his back.

“His organs are failing.”

The room was still, soundless for a long moment—most of the paladin’s, Keith included, just gaped at Coran in open bewilderment unable to process what he had just told them. Pidge squeezed Lance’s hand tighter, her hair tousled and her glasses askew. She had the flushed look of a kid trying to hold back a tear-filled temper tantrum.

“That doesn’t make sense. Keith got him back…”

Pidge’s voice grew higher in pitch as she started to panic.

“I don’t even see anything wrong with him! If he’s that hurt let’s just put him in a healing pod!”

Keith winced against the shrillness in the green paladin’s voice, the sharp edge of desperation fed by her fear. Shiro pulled away from Lance and reached down wordlessly to put his hands on Pidge’s shoulders. The black paladin was trying very hard to sound like the leader he needed to be in the moment as he consoled her.

“If a healing pod would fix what was wrong he would be in one by now, Pidge. Let’s hear the rest of what Coran has to say. I’m sure together we can figure something out.”

Keith was still so overwhelmed to hear the words “organ failure” everything seemed to have turned grainy and distant. The red paladin pulled Lance’s legs closer to his chest and powered through the shock and headache to focus on the conversation. This was not the time to feel numb.

Coran took a deep lungful of air lifting his hands up to his chest and pushing them down to his diaphragm as he let the breath out.

“Before, I popped Lance into the S-pod because it was the only way to keep him going. Healing pods can’t work without proper quintessence and with Lance losing his I had to find other means. Can’t fly a ship without fuel ya’ see.”

Pidge looked ready to throw another barrage of questions out but she stopped herself, biting down hard on her lower lip. Coran took another steadying breath and continued.

“But S-pods can’t work forever and the blue paladin’s— well his brains are back but far as I can tell from the tests only little nibbles of his quintessence came with him; shards of the glass but not the whole mirror. His ticker seems to be halfway there but only working at half-speed and without quintessence…”

Keith finished for him but regretted it immediately. Talking hurt, every word out of his mouth caused an ice-pick stab in his frontal lobe.

“Pods don’t work without quintessence.”

Coran nodded and started to pace back and forth wringing his gloved hands.

“With Lance’s quintessence in bits and pieces the pod could hurt more than heal him. Cure is worse than the cause in this case.”

Pidge shook her head wrenching a shoulder away from Shiro’s grounding grip on her.

“Ok? So what do we do next? Where can we take him to get better?”

The Black paladin spoke out in a commanding voice that didn’t fool anyone and Keith winced at his answer wishing that his pounding migraine wasn’t making him so slow to speak up.

“Pidge…the only thing we can do now is make him comfortable as possible.”

This was the absolute wrong thing to say and Pidge went off like a proverbial time-bomb.

“We can’t give up on him after all this! After all this work! We just g-got him back!”

The green paladin’s voice set off a string of landmines up the back of Keith’s neck and he could almost hear his vertebrae grinding against one another as he lowered his head and raised his shoulders.

Allura glanced in his direction and raised her head speaking to Pidge in gentle whisper.

“Pidge- please…I’m sure Shiro didn’t mean that we give up on Lance…”
“YES HE DID! HE’S GIVEN UP- YOU’VE ALL GIVEN UP!”

Pidge leapt to her feet her laptop clattering to the floor as she pulled herself away from the bed. Hunk looked from her to Lance at a loss for who to help but Shiro held his ground.

“Losing control won’t help us Pidge…we just—”

The black paladin stopped mid-sentence when Lance made a soft sound of protest. He had noticed Pidge’s absence, felt her pull her hand away. He tried to find her but the green paladin was already out of his reach. She watched him wide-eyed, breathing shallowly as she clutched white-knuckled at the front of her shirt.

Lance’s chest heaved as he tried to open his eyes his fingers flexing, still searching for Pidge’s warm hand. He babbled in a rough, unhappy voice his words spilling out in a Spanish-English mush.

Keith froze unsure what to do, afraid that if he or anyone else moved Lance would start to scream again. Everyone followed his example and even Hunk’s hand had gone still on Lance’s stomach; one wrong move and the pain-fueled hysterics would start all over again.

It was Shiro who acted first. He drew closer one meticulous inch at a time, leaning in until his forehead was pressed flush with Lance’s. Placing metal fingers on the side of Lance’s head to steady his shaking Shiro whispered to him softly; Keith couldn’t make out the words through the buzzing in his skull.

After a few anxious seconds Lance started to calm down, switching to English as he became more coherent.

“Shiro…m’cold. Mmm…I want- I want…”

The blue paladin sucked at his Altean breathing mask and Shiro kept murmuring to him, his white hair streak draped across the blue paladin’s forehead.

“Take it slow Lance. It’s ok, we’re all right here. We’re not going to leave you. I’m going to get you more blankets and warm you right up—”

Lance smiled, pleased by this, his eyes closing to slits.

“Is Keith here yet…..I miss Keith.”

Keith jumped at the sound of his name a zap of electricity hitting him right in the chest. Carefully the red paladin scooted up towards the front of the bed placing Lance’s long legs aside as he reached for the hand Pidge left empty. He tried again to speak and after a few failures muscled through the pain enough to scrape out a few words.

“Here…m’here Lance.”

Somehow despite the oxygen mask and the obvious pain Lance smiled wide and visibly relaxed when he felt Keith take his hand. His fingers were freezing. Struggling to get his eyes to focus the blue paladin squinted at Shiro.

“Shiro-Shiro I was gone. I went back home.”

“I know buddy. You told me you were going. Remember? You told Keith you were sorry you had to go. I hope you had a good visit but you have to stick around here now alright?”

Hunk sniffled noisily and continued rubbing his hand over Lance’s stomach. The blue paladin seemed to consider what Shiro had told him- his crackly breathing stuck in his chest for a terrifying second before he spoke again.

“Sorry…sick. When I get better…do all the chores.”

Shiro pressed his nose to Lance’s cheek and shook his head. Keith didn’t think Lance could even feel him there. He wondered how much of the world outside his own head he could comprehend.

“I know- I know you will. It’s not your fault. You don’t need to apologize.”

The brief exchange seemed to have worn Lance out. His voice shrank to nothing and was nearly lost among all the mechanical buzzes and ticks of the infirmary.

“Teo…I think Papa needs help…in the restaurant today.”

Shiro winced at this his eyes tearing up but he didn’t let it show in his voice.

“I’ll check, I can handle it. Is there anything you want Lance? How about some water?”

Pidge had settled down close to Lance again. She gripped the side of the bed tears sliding down her face as she stared vacantly into the distance.
“Can I…sleep on the sofa?”

Lance mumbled eyes closing.

“Don’t…wanna be in m’room. It’s too quiet. I wanna be where e-everybody else is…living room sofa.”

In a flash of black and white Shiro was on his feet a hand clapped on his mouth. Keith watched in dismay as the seemingly unflappable leader of Voltron made his way over to an infirmary wastebasket and vomited. Even during the most intense SIM training Keith had never seen Takashi Shirogane throw up.

Hunk looked over in alarm but kept his voice even, picking up where Shiro had left off.

“Sure thing bud- We’ll get you in there and get you warmed up. We’ll get you feeling much better ok?”

“Mmhm…Thanks …Teo.”

Lance went limp as he drifted off again, his brief moment of lucidity lost. Coran trotted over hurriedly to help Shiro who hadn’t lifted his head from the trash bin. His shoulders were shaking but Keith couldn’t tell if he was crying.

Taking a deep, pained breath Hunk adjusted Lance’s upper body on his pillows until his breathing became less strained and nodded satisfied.

“Allura, do we have more blankets in here? Should I go get some from his room-”

Pidge cut him off with sneer, jerking her thumb over her shoulder.

“Are we just going to pretend Shiro isn’t stress vomiting right now!?”

Keith could not really remember a time he had seen Hunk really angry. He had seen him go through a gamut of emotions from determined to peeved but never truly angry. The look he was giving Pidge right now could only be described as pissed. He gestured over Lance with raised eyebrows his voice low but practically curdling with rage.

“Are you trying to wake him up again? Stop screaming!”

Pidge took a step back throwing both hands in the air in pure exasperation. She made no effort to lower her voice and now she was spitting as much venom as Hunk was throwing her way.

“I’m not screaming! I just want to figure out-”

“You ARE!”

Keith gaped in open-mouthed astonishment as Hunk and Pidge got into a full out mid-volume screaming match that was only interrupted by Allura. The Princess had moved to stand at a distance while Lance was awake but now she was pushing into the fray; her tear-stained face lit up angrily as she wrapped her arms around Pidge’s shoulders. Their battle of inside voices was accentuated by Shiro gasping for breath between retches and Coran’s failing attempts to gain any semblance of order.

Keith looked into Lance’s sleeping face for inspiration and braced himself knowing how much the next few minutes were going to hurt. Breathing through his teeth he tried not to think about the white hot rods of pain in his sinuses as he cleared his throat and spoke loud enough to be heard above the noise.

“Stop. Everybody stop…please.”

Much to the red paladin’s surprise they did stop; Hunk first, then Pidge and soon every pair of eyes was on him. Keith’s forehead was one big throb as he nodded and pressed on with indignant resolve.

“Y.M. -Mother…Carmen- She can fix quintessence.”

Pidge’s eyes widened and Hunk looked transfixed by his every wavery word.

“We…get Lance back to her…she’ll help.-”

Allura took a step towards him her eyebrows furrowed. She opened her mouth to ask a question Keith didn’t think he had the energy to answer. The red paladin gazed at her imploringly so she would give him time to finish and she did so with a nod.

“We have to get back…to Vell. Mother will help Lance…loves him.”

That was all he could manage. Keith didn’t want to do anything now but lie down. The only thing keeping him upright was the fact Lance’s bed looked too small for him to squeeze into. His fear of leaving the blue paladin alone only slightly outweighed the fact he was on the verge of
Shiro still hadn’t addressed him directly since finding out about his Galra parentage; Keith was sure the only reason he was tolerating him right now was Lance. Really, without Lance they were bound to fall apart like this sooner or later. They had come close before and it was the blue paladin who always said the right thing or made the right joke that eased the tension. Too bad he was the tension this time.

A cool hand touched the back of Keith’s neck. He hadn’t even realized how hot his skin was. Allura kneaded her fingers into the muscle around the base of his skull and it felt so good Keith was sure he let out an accidental purr.

“Keith, the way you’re speaking—You must be hurting from the—what do you call it? Viewing? I apologize. I didn’t even think to ask.”

With a regained air of authority the Princess gestured to Pidge. She spoke at milder volume and with more composure. Thankfully Lance hadn’t been bothered by the paladin’s short-lived, shouting skirmish.

“Pidge, you have a friendly contact on Vell, yes? The Elati who provided the equipment you used to contact Coran?”

Pidge nodded bemused and wiped at her eyes behind her glasses.

“Tasa-Fan— the Radix drone…She worked with radio equipment.”

“Do you think it’s possible to contact her? The frequency she called from should be on record within the ships system. If Coran used it to get in touch with us then you could warn Tasa-Fan or another Elati of our predicament.”

Shiro had managed to get back to his feet. Coran kept a steadying hand on his back as the Black paladin staggered slightly, wiping roughly at his mouth. Keith watched him in wide-eyed concern. His reaction had been so extreme. Shiro was under pressure constantly, he usually thrived under it. This breakdown was like seeing a scuff in the paint…a crack in the veneer created by Galran cruelty.

Pidge cast a distracted look Shiro’s way, kneeling down to collect her computer from the infirmary floor.

“What—What if she’s dead? What if they’re all dead? I mean…you saw what happened before we left. They kept telling us not to fight the Galra for them…Do we ignore that?”

Allura kept massaging the tight muscles near Keith’s jaw and he let her, unwilling or unable to do anything to protest. She seemed unfazed at Pidge’s question— or at least was holding up a solid front.

“The call is a courtesy— we will be fighting with or without approval. We all knew we would have to go back to Vell. Voltron can’t leave its people helpless. Now with our blue paladin’s health to consider we have even more reason to return with all speed.”

Shiro took a wobbly step towards Lance. He smelled like sick and adrenaline and the stench made Keith scrunch up his nose involuntarily. Despite this and the fact he had been heaving into a trash can moments before the Black paladin kept his voice level.

“We’ll prep the Lions then. I know the Olim didn’t want us to interfere but— I think it’s out of their hands now. We have to take out that battleship.”

Hunk spoke up weakly a trickle of fear in his shaky tone.

“How can we do that? We can’t form Voltron without Lance and there were a lot of ships out there! Not to mention the size of that cruiser?”

Shiro folded his arms around his chest and Keith could see him trying to look more confident than he felt; a classic Shiro move.

“We get Lance through this first. Keith, you should take him. The Mother knows you and you’re our fastest pilot. If we distract the Galra can you get Lance to Carmen? The Citadel is probably going to be overwhelmed but I don’t think we can spare someone to go with you. We’ll need all the air support possible.”

Keith tried not to look surprised when Shiro gave him an exhausted grin. He tried to return it but it felt more like a grimace than a smile. He didn’t think he had it in him to answer with words but managed a quick sentence that made the edges of his vision flash white.

“No Lion—stands out. Should use Galra shuttle…sneak in?”

Shiro nodded in agreement and pride showed on his pale face.

“Good call. That’s smart and if we’re distracting them you’ll be able to get closer to the
Lance’s breathing hit a snag and Keith could only squeeze his hand and will him to keep going; shaking as he finally did. Allura pointed purposefully to each paladin in turn as she gave out instructions.

“Hunk. We need that Shuttle running like new; perhaps faster if you can. Pidge, you help Hunk and try to get in contact with our allies on Vell. It would be good to have a status update and aid on the ground. We need them to know we’re coming if possible. Shiro, I think you should take a brief moment to compose yourself before you plan any battle strategy.”

Shiro looked like he was about to argue but finally nodded, wiping at his mouth again nervously. Coran still had a firm hand on his back and was eyeing up Lance with furrowed eyebrows.

“What about—”

Allura answered her advisor before the question was out of his mouth.

“I’m going to take care of Lance.”

Hunk gazed up at her mournfully. He spoke in a voice so blubbery and broken by tears it was almost impossible to understand what the yellow paladin was saying.

“Mmm… H-how? Wuh-what if h-he duh-doesn’t make it muh-much longer? W-what if he doesn’t luh-last long enough-t-to get back to V-Vuh-Vell?”

Keith let out a disappointed groan when Allura moved her hand from his neck to wrap her arms around Hunk. The yellow paladin shook with barely repressed sobs as she squeezed his shoulders snugly.

“I have a measure that should prove a sufficient stop-gap. I’m going to temporarily enforce what quintessence he has left with my own. It should be similar to the help I gave the Balmera.”

Hunk pulled back slightly and regarded her with shining eyes.

“Cuh-can’t you just fix his quintessence then?”

Allura looked wistfully at Lance and pulled her hands to her chest staring down reproachfully at her own fingers.

“No. I can only perform a ceremony of rejuvenation- It’s different from a rite of healing. I was filling the quintessence of the Balmera with power not fixing the stray shards of its broken life-force.”

The princess held her hands out consolingly when it looked like Hunk was about to lose his composure again and spoke quickly, trying to correct herself.

“But! If I lend him some energy I can alleviate his pain and keep him—”

She searched for a kind word and Pidge just spit out what everyone was thinking.

“Alive. You’ll keep him alive until the Mother thing can fix him… IF she can fix him.”

Keith glared at the green paladin, turning the full force of his scowl her way. He growled out two words and the effort was almost worth the look on her face.

“She will.”

Standing stiffly the yellow paladin reached up and pushed a swath of dirty hair from Lance’s face and took a moment to study him.

“Hold on buddy… we’re gonna get you all fixed up ok?”

Lance didn’t stir. The deep protective urge Keith felt whenever he looked at the blue paladin raised its head and sharpened its imaginary claws. It didn’t matter what the odds, Lance was his; his responsibility, his to protect and he was going to do whatever it took to make him whole again; not that anybody needed to hear that out loud.

Everyone was reluctant to leave the infirmary but thankfully Shiro started to usher them out one at a time. Pidge had to be pushed by Hunk who wouldn’t stop glancing over her shoulder until the infirmary was out of sight.

After some urging from Allura, Coran went with them to supervise the shuttle repair. The more hands on that the better. Not even Pidge knew the full extent of the damage after their narrow escape.

Shiro stood a moment more with his full-trash bin in hand. He stared at it sheepishly before offering Keith another small, pale smile.
Keith gripped Lance’s hand tighter and tried to evade the black paladin’s gaze. Some instinct kept telling him to bow his head and hunch his shoulders. It reminded him of the submissive posture Duke Nemean used around the generals. Body language that deferred to a superior, apologized for past mistakes.

Allura seemed to sense that whatever Shiro wanted to say in that moment was private and she ducked away with the excuse of checking on Nemean’s progress. Keith wished he could have telepathically begged her to stay but unfortunately she wasn’t Mother Carmen.

Shiro didn’t budge. He stood awkwardly with a metal can full of his own barf and gave the red paladin a look that screamed guilt.

“Keith, before I-”

Shiro was shaking, his smell foul but utterly familiar. If PTSD had a scent it must have smelled exactly like the black paladin.

“…Before I go… I wanted to apologize. Lance came to me and told me that you were… He just knew something was off.”

Keith blinked against the light behind Shiro. He was shocked not just by the apology but by the fact he knew what Shiro was talking about. He had seen it—hell, maybe Lance’s Keith imprint had showed it to him on purpose.

The red paladin winced, coughing out some stinging words as he gestured to himself dismissively.

“Lance… knew about alien DNA?”

Shiro managed a laugh.

“He didn’t know about that specifically but he knew something was bothering you. I thought he might have been overreacting. I didn’t do enough and I failed to help you…I’m sorry.”

The black paladin snapped his head up looking at Keith concerned. Sweat was dripping down his jaw and the stress smell on him was getting worse. Keith could practically hear his rapid pulse from Lance’s infirmary bed.

Shiro shuffled his feet.

“You don’t need to say anything Keith. I just wanted to apologize. I wanted to tell you that nothing has changed. I trust you just as much as I always have.”

Keith cracked an honest smile this time. Carefully pulling himself away from the blue paladin he approached Shiro with his head bowed. The trauma smell grew nearly unbearable but the hand on the red paladin’s shoulder made the near sensory overload worth it.

After a deep internal struggle with his pounding temples Keith looked into his friend’s grey eyes and managed a few rumbling syllables.

“Thanks Shiro…”

Shiro put his flesh and blood hand on the back of Keith’s head and pressed their foreheads together for a few seconds before he turned and headed for the door, his garbage can in tow. The black paladin addressed Allura at the threshold hesitating despite his quaking knees and obvious need for a time out.

“You sure you can handle Lance alone Princess? I-”

Allura shooed him away tutting peevishly.

“I have everything well in hand and I have Keith. Go and take a shower. Not to be vulgar Shiro but you smell dreadful.”

Keith raised a tender, confused eyebrow in response and Allura chuckled, her body starting to shift and stretch upwards, growing four inches taller in a matter of seconds.

“First, we’ll find some extra blankets and then- well, I have a place in mind.”
terms of height. Wrapping Lance up in mass of blankets she carried the blue paladin and the small machine helping him breathe down a dark hall of the castle Keith didn’t recognize.

The red paladin pressed close to her side holding Lances supposedly empty scrim. While Lance’s blood pressure had improved slightly his circulation was still poor and only compounded the issues with his body. They had decided to keep his scrim close even if there was no evidence it was doing anything to help. It was better to be safe than sorry.

It was difficult to keep walking straight while keeping a constant eye on Lance. Keith’s migraine was somehow getting steadily worse despite the painkiller the princess had given him before they left the infirmary.

Allura halted in front of a darkened door, pushing Lance into the crook of one arm as she tapped numbers into a button-pad high up on the metal doorframe. The blue paladin started to whimper like a fussy baby and the hair on the back of Keith’s neck stood on end. Lance had made similar noises right before his last screaming spell and he was about due for another explosion.

The Princess seemed to realize this as well and hurried through the door the instant it hissed open. Keith followed her and misjudged his own equilibrium, nearly toppling over as he entered the cool, echoing room. It smelled old and neglected but in a different way than the chamber that held the survival pods.

Rocking Lance back and forth soothingly Allura surveyed the empty space around them.

“Shhh…There, there Tarshgol…there now. It will be alright.”

As far as Keith could make out the room held nothing whatsoever. There wasn’t even a control console or the outlines of a sunken pod in the floor. This didn’t bother the princess and she strode purposefully to a near invisible panel embedded in the opposite wall. Allura pressed one massive hand against some hidden catch and the panel sunk inwards to reveal a line of darkened shelves.

Keith felt guilty they hadn’t told Shiro or the other’s they were taking Lance out of the infirmary but Allura’s confidence in her decision put the red paladin somewhat at ease. He trusted that the Altean knew what she was doing. She fiddled with something inside the panel and crowed in delight as something clicked.

“Ah! Good it’s still in working order. Keith, sit there on the floor if you would.”

Keith did as he was told. Moving to the spot Allura had pointed out he eased himself to the ground trying hard not to jostle his head too much. Every swift movement made it feel like his brain was being rammed into the sides of his skull. He snarled to himself once his butt was firmly on the hard floor and tried, not for the first time, to massage the pain away at his temples. It did absolutely nothing.

Allura sat cross-legged in front of him and the scrim. Her body was so gigantic that she was able to lay Lance across her lap with room to spare.

Keith was disturbed to see the blue paladin’s glazed eyes open a little as he began to ramble; he was begging for his mother- pleading for her to make the pain stop. His voice was growing ever louder and Keith braced himself in case the muttering turned to screaming.

“This won’t hurt Tarshgol…I promise.”

Lance’s cries weren’t as strong as before and Keith hated to admit it but the blue paladin’s condition was steadily, visibly deteriorating. Lance began to sob in earnest as Allura placed something on his head. Keith had seen her remove it from the wall alcove but wasn’t sure what it was at first. Now that he had a better look Keith croaked out a jittery question.

“Is that…training headset?”

Allura didn’t look away from Lance as she nodded worrying her lower lip in concentration.

“It’s very similar. This room we’re in is a memory chamber like the one where my…”

The princess sighed sadly.

“-my father’s memory, his projection, was kept in a chamber like this one; but it can have other purposes. This headset projects memories much like the one you use for pilot training, but here it works in a different capacity.”

Allura pushed her hand under Lance and lifted his skinny frame effortlessly. He looked like a child because of the bizarre size difference. Supporting his body against her chest with one arm Allura pressed her palm to the blue paladin’s forehead and closed her eyes.

Keith flinched uncomfortably as the air in the room began to change, a pressure that hadn’t been there moments before pressing inward against his back and shoulders.

Lance’s breathing grew faster, shallower-he started to cough harshly blood oozing from the corners of his mouth to collect at the edges of his oxygen mask. Keith fought back the urge to rip
him out of Allura’s grip and run…somewhere? Galra urges were strong but not very specific.

White light spilled from the Altean’s palm and Lance’s eyes widened, his iris’s glowing an unearthly blue under tear-damp lashes. The blue paladin’s voice echoed tiny and disconnected inside his own chest when he spoke.

“…Mama-”

Tendrils of white light traced the blood vessels in Lance’s neck and cheeks. Illuminating every vein and moving down the paths of hidden arteries under his healing suit. He arched his back and thrust his hand out of the cocoon of blankets around his shoulders, grappling blindly for something to grasp onto.

Keith threw his arm out without thinking and took the blue paladin’s hand in his. His fingers felt warmer as the light of Allura’s quintessence coursed through them. Lance gripped Keith’s hand, his nails biting into the skin of his palm.

Allura’s struggled to speak, sweat rolling down her forehead as she offered Lance her energy. Keith wondered if he should stop her—if she knew when she had given too much. On Balmera she had the help of the community and her advisor’s experience; here she had no one but him.

The princess thrummed with quintessence even as she gasped for air.

“Lance…can you hear me?”

The blue paladin whimpered his eyes flickering as his head sagged in the Altean’s direction.

“Y-yes…”

Keith allowed himself to feel a tiny shred of hope. The blue paladin looked more alert than he had before. There was a flush to his cheeks and color returning to his golden skin. White energy continued to trace pathways down Lance’s legs and over his torso; the light just visible through the heavy material of his blanket pile. Allura pulled his head around so she could stare directly into his illuminated eyes.

“Can you remember what your…er- What did you call it? Oh yes, a living room! Can you remember what your living room looked like?”

A crooked grin stretched over Lance’s chapped lips.

“My living room- In my house?-yeah…course I can.”

Keith nearly lurched to his feet as a cascade of square shaped light particles came bursting from the walls and floor of the memory chamber. The danced around each other and combined into liquid shapes and shaky holographic projections. Allura didn’t pay them any mind so Keith guessed this was supposed to happen. The princess drew her hand away from Lance’s forehead and the band she had placed around it. Small flickers of white energy jumped between her fingertips.

“Tell me about it. Please?”

Lance’s hair fluttered around his face the light fading from under his skin.

“Walls were…green; Sea green. Mama loved that color-”

The headband flashed and walls of the memory chamber sputtered, solidifying into a cool shade of green the color of a tropical ocean. Dark wood moulding traced the wall-tops and Keith watched in awe as an old light fixture sprouted above his head; something that looked straight out of the 1970’s.

As the green walls set firmly into place framed pictures burst out of them like flowers-explooding from the chipped paint and expanding all the way to a large picture window that hadn’t been there a moment before. Outside the window was a familiar street Keith had only seen in the evening, on the night of a very important party.

“What else Tarshgol- what else was there?”

“There was-sofa…warm and really big-“

As soon as Lance muttered this sentence fondly a side-table thrust itself out of the floor near the sofa and a cracked ceramic lamp shaped like a serene, floating swan popped out of its worn
Keith grabbed the scrim and scooted back before he was shoved aside by a hint of floor just forming itself into a coffee table. Like everything else in the room it was old—probably taken from a rummage sale; covered end to end with rings from dripping cups and outdated copies of National Geographic.

Lance whispered little details to Allura under his breath his eyes half-lidded again. He told her about the flower curtains, the crocheted blankets and the tacky, wooden clock carved like an owl. An old television, a collection of movies in an unorganized shelf mixed with an odd assortment of dusty knick-knacks and well-read books.

Keith watched as each new element emerged and added to the tapestry of the McClain household. Dust motes danced in a sunbeam from the window and in the kitchen Keith could hear the rhythmic thrum of an ancient washing machine. It mingled with the ticking of the owl clock and the distant, ghostly laughter of children playing in the street outside.

Allura looked around with a bright curiosity hampered somewhat by exhaustion. Keith couldn’t even imagine how much energy she had just given Lance but she had managed to tame the rasp in his breathing down to a barely there rattle.

For the time being at least he was better.

“Oh, Lance, it’s lovely. Thank you.”

Easing herself up off the sofa Allura lay a now calm Lance carefully onto the cushions. She re-adjusted his blankets around him, folding one under his head so it was slightly elevated. The blue paladin smirked and let out a long, smooth breath reaching lazily for Allura before his hand was tangled in his blankets.

“Lura...”

Lance tried and failed to push himself upright as he touched his breathing mask with bleary confusion. The princess pressed him down with a hand the width of his chest.

“I’m here. You need to rest and save your strength.”

Blinking dreamily Lance just smiled at her.

“Ok.”

With reluctant steps Keith made his way towards the sofa setting the smooth scrim on top of the old coffee table. When his fingers brushed the stained wood top he could only feel the cool texture of metal and it hit him that the room really was nothing but a hologram.

The projected room seemed to work in much the same way as the celebratory neighborhood barbeque in Lance’s core memory. The only difference was that Lance wouldn’t be able to feel or taste anything. He was stuck in a world that only went skin deep.

The click of scaultrite on metal drew Lance’s attention away from Allura and his demeanor changed the minute he caught sight of Keith. The misty tone of his voice turning desperate as the blue paladin tried to get to Keith; completely forgetting his just made promise to relax.

“Keith...”

Lance fought against the blankets and the sofa his vision laser focused on the red paladin. Keith tried and failed to stop the growl in his chest and rushed to grab Lance before he wiggled lose and toppled the short distance to the floor.

Arms were around Keith’s shoulders and the oxygen masked pressed so hard into his neck it hurt. Keith sank down, one knee on the edge of the fake sofa as he pulled the blue paladin to him and held him with trembling arms.

Lance’s voice nattered on in his ear speaking his name over and over again restlessly. The blue paladin kept yanking at the back of the Altean pajama top Keith was still wearing. It was like he was trying to close some distance between them that no longer existed; like he couldn’t press close enough.

Keith spared a glance over his shoulder and Allura offered him a knowing nod before backing away towards the exit.

“I trust you to look after him. I’ll check on you after I take a brief rest...”

The red paladin could only nod gratefully, wishing he could thank the princess for giving them a moment alone. Really that had probably been her plan all along.

Lance’s grip loosened as he struggled to keep upright and Keith followed him as he lay back, moving to lie down next to him. The memory chamber floor that had formed the sofa had changed its texture to something softer, morphing into the same spongy foam-like material on the beds in
the paladin’s quarters. Although there was still a disconnect between what he saw and what he felt
Keith was relieved to find them lying on more than hard metal.

Lance scarcely gave Keith a chance to adjust his position so they could both fit comfortably on
the false sofa cushions. The blue paladin lay on his side facing Keith his long arms looped around
his waist and his head pressed under the other paladin’s chin.

For his part Keith was utterly overwhelmed by Lance’s smell. If it had been bad before when
he was just sitting close to him in the infirmary holding him was a whole new level. The protective
urge that had been ripping at his guts for god knows how long suddenly found itself inexplicably
satisfied. Lance was here. He was holding him.

His voice half smothered by Keith’s shoulder Lance asked a tentative question in a severely
bewildered voice.

“You kissed me…was that a dream?”

The tears came in a trickle at first. Keith did nothing to stop them. It felt like all the pressure, all
the pain in his head was slipping out through the corners of his eyes. Lance still felt fragile as he
held him; small and breakable and only temporarily sound.

“-Not a dream.”

The tears came faster and they felt good. A release of something he had been holding for
weeks…maybe months, maybe longer. He nodded and let all his senses drown in the aloe-vera
Lance smell.

“Keith I can’t remember- We were sparring and then…and then I was home.”

The foggy confusion was returning to Lance in increments and Keith didn’t know what to say.
He didn’t have the strength to explain and even if he did he didn’t think Lance would understand
or even remember. Not when he was still so broken.

Keith gave a guttural sob and Lance drew out of his shoulder to look at him. The sounds of his
childhood house filled the air and streams of late afternoon sunlight washed over the blue paladin
as he moved a hand to rest on the back of Keith’s neck.

Lance waited patiently for the red paladin to get out all the shuddering anxiety currently
streaming down his cheeks, watching with cloudy eyes as Keith came down from whatever
emotional cliff he had been stuck on.

The petting, and really that’s what it was, helped. Lance stroking the long hair on the back of
his head was doing something that Keith barely had words for; the Galra probably did but he
didn’t.

Keith closed his eyes as the throbbing in his skull started to subside. He didn’t want to fall
asleep but he knew it was coming and Lance probably wasn’t far behind him.

Skinny fingers wove themselves into the downy hair around the nape of Keith’s neck and the
blue paladin’s dazed little voice reached him from a great distance.

“Don’t cry Keith. I’ll look after you.”

Chapter End Notes

Poor ole Lance.

Thanks to all the people who had left me sweet and encouraging comments <3 You
are the reason I keep writing.
THANKS TO CJ THE PROOFREADER TO RULE THEM ALL.
Purple Heart

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Ugh, why are these lights so bright?”

Duke Nemean rubbed a soft, padded palm over his eyes and leaned back against the hangar bay wall. He relaxed when he found a patch of shadow cast by the wing of the Altean escape shuttle Pidge was tearing up for parts.

“It takes time to adjust but it’s not as bright as it used to be. Coran dimmed it for us.”

Keith sat close watching his Galra friend curl deeper into a thick blanket Coran had let him take from the infirmary. The red paladin got the feeling the blanket was just as much for Nemean’s peace of mind as for warmth.

“The light on Vell was good for Galran eyes—”

Nemean replied as he wiped moisture from his eyelashes.

“You have half-blood eyes friend Keith so they aren’t as sensitive but- did you not feel more at ease in the natural lights of the Empire ships?”

“That purple-magenta…whatever color it is?”

“Mmm, we keep our ships that shade for a reason. It’s soothing.”

The red paladin shrugged.

“I guess I never really paid attention. It’s hard to stop and enjoy the lighting in enemy territory.”

“Yes. I guess that’s true.”

The conversation ebbed out and Keith let the companionable silence sit between them. Nemean pulled his blanket up over his head until all that was visible was part of his face and wisps of fluffy hair. He stared balefully at the surrounding hangar, sniffing miserably through drippy sinuses; congested in the aftermath of his time in statis. Keith dealt with similar symptoms after a healing session.

The Red paladin hadn’t been in there when Nemean had emerged from his healing pod and felt more than a bit guilty about it. Once out the Duke had taken one look at his strange surroundings and had, as Coran had put it, tried to make a run for it.

The Galran’s wobbly, pod-frozen legs had gotten him about two steps before he had fallen into Shiro’s arms. The black paladin and Altean advisor had been the only ones present at the time. They had been in the infirmary to take Lance back to the survival pods. Keith hadn’t been allowed to go with them.

Nemean made a small, fretful twittering noise, his claws tapping the floor near Keith’s legs.

“Friend Keith, is the Champion- er, the large, black paladin- is he…angry with me?”

“Shiro isn’t mad at you. He’s, just…getting used to you.”

“Oh. I suppose that’s true.”

Nemean shrank further into himself. He pulled his knees close to his chest and the red paladin could tell from the way he held himself the Duke was sore; the area around his knife wound still raw and sensitive to the touch. Nemean had come out of the pod so fast… it was just another reminder that the Galra were so much stronger than human beings. Even someone as outwardly fragile as the Duke possessed astonishing resilience.

“It’s very confusing- the black paladin was so kind. He embraced me and said kind words but now he won’t even look at me.”

Shiro had caught Nemean when he came out of the pod and the young Galran, as Coran told it, took one look at the former Champion and started bawling like a baby. Keith had a hard time picturing Shiro’s reaction- his mentor and renowned pilot just standing there with his arms full of sobbing Galran royalty.

Unsurprisingly, Shiro had done what he would have done if any kid collapsed on him in tears; he helped them. Maybe that was why he was the leader, why the black lion had chosen him. His own past and biases just didn’t factor in when someone needed help.

Running nervous claws through the tufts of fur along his jaw Nemean made a thoughtful
rumble deep in his throat.

“He made me feel safe. Even his smell made me feel protected. After what happened to him in
the pits...How could the Champion do anything but hate me for being Galra?”

There was a subtle pang of melancholy in Nemean’s voice, something akin to grief. Keith
marveled that he was able to pick up on it. There was always something in the air around the
Duke, an electric current – a smell that let Keith read him like a book. It was especially obvious
when Nemean was vulnerable or hurt.

It was different than interacting with humans. Humans might put out the same sort of scents
and impulses but they weren’t nearly as strong. While the red paladin could pick up on verbal or
physical cues if he was really paying attention the more understated emotions always escaped him.
Or maybe…maybe Keith just spoke a slightly different language than the people around him.
Maybe for the first time in his life he was having an actual conversation with all of his senses.

“I’m not the one to ask this stuff Nemean. Maybe you should tell Shiro you’re sorry he went
through all that- or…I don’t know. You didn’t put him in the pit or take his arm. He has no reason
to be mad at you.”

Keith moved a hand over his eyes grinding a thumb into the hard skull between his brows. His
headache was better; his heartache was worse.

He and Lance had slept in a ball of warmth and limbs for what seemed like no time at all. In
truth nearly a day had passed and by the time Keith woke up the effects of Allura’s energy
injection were starting to wear thin. The blue paladin’s pain seemed manageable but his confusion
was back in spades. He kept asking for family on earth, kept begging for Keith as the red paladin
held him.

It was Coran who came to collect Lance from the memory chamber. Despite Keith’s snarling
arguments the advisor wanted to put him back into a survival pod; Put him away  like a piece of
meat in a sealed Tupperware container.

Keith had…argued against it.

The red paladin pressed the thumb up and down the center of his forehead until it hurt.

“If Shiro should be mad at anyone it should be me.”

Pushing a hand from his warm blanket cocoon Nemean used a claw-tip to trace shapes on the
floor over and over again; sketching invisible pictures on the scuffed metal. Keith watched him
dazedly, his foggy brain trying to figure out why the pattern seemed familiar.

The Duke gave Keith a puzzled look.

“Why would he be mad at you?”

“T-"

Keith winced struggling to get the words out.

“-I tried to bite him.”

The Duke let this out in a soft chuff of breath through his nose and peered at Keith
sympathetically his golden eyes clouded.

“Your mate, the blue paladin, the Cha- the black paladin separated you?”

“T-"

“When I woke up I saw the old Altean taking him to another room for healing. He smelled
sick. Everything the Mother told me about him being alive outside the scrim was true.”

Keith could only stare at Nemean as he continued his body language taut and apologetic.

“You obviously didn’t want to hurt your commander. You were being protective, it happens all
the time with Galra; Friends, mates, cubs and parents-

The Galran shrugged his blanket up around his ears.

“Temper blaze and bites happen.”

Nemean acted like Keith had just told him something mundane; shrugging off the incident
like it wasn’t strange at all; like Keith had spilled a cup of coffee. The paladin shook his head and
gestured towards some imperceptible idea just out of his reach.

“Not with humans. Human’s don’t bite like that.”

Nemean hummed and continued to doodle, his claws actually making little cuts in the brushed
metal. Keith didn’t stop him, a few sketches on the hangar floor wouldn’t destroy the Castle;
chances were nobody would notice anyway.

“But you told me they know you aren’t all human, right?”

Keith swallowed hard trying to shove down an involuntary growl. He didn’t answer the question he just looked across the Hangar. Hunk was hammering away at the wing of the shuttle while Pidge tapped at her laptop near his feet.

Talking wasn’t painful like it had been right after the Viewing but with Lance out of his sight again the restlessness of separation scratched inside Keith’s ribs. On top of this he felt oddly feverish and more than a little groggy. He had attempted to help fix the Galra shuttle but the green and yellow paladins had banished him to sit in the time out corner with the Duke after he accidentally dropped a scrapped panel on top of Hunk’s foot.

“I’m sorry your mate is sick friend Keith. I-I tried to help him- to help you. I understand the separation can be agonizing.”

Keith blinked at Nemean, leaning over to look into his face at the center of his blanket shroud. This Galra, his friend, could actually tell him about his body; maybe explain why he was feeling what he was feeling. Keith felt stupid for not realizing it before; he had an actual member of the species to ask all the questions he wanted. The biting thing was just the tip of an unknown hereditary iceberg.

Nemean’s eyes flickered towards Keith’s and he raised his eyebrows. The gold of his sclera dilated and lightened at the center of each eye.

“Friend Keith?”

Where should he start? Where could he start? The smells, the headaches, the sounds he had started making, the weird shit he had done alone in the desert? No. Keith knew what he needed to ask about first, the most important thing.

“So, mates. I don’t understand how they work. Can you explain?”

Nemean’s ears pushed at the material of the blanket over his head as he considered.

“Well…the Empire claims mates are an old-fashioned idea but Zarkon uses them as a sort of reward for soldiers. Aristocrats like my family take part in arranged marriages so my parents and other relatives don’t have mates. Rank and file are allowed but…”

Nemean gazed out at the shuttle hangar wistfully. He lowered his voice to a conspiratory undertone like he was afraid Zarkon himself was still listening.

“My grandmother had one. Not my blood grandfather- she had a mate before they were married. Nobody in the family talked about it but…I was curious and I asked her.”

Keith thought back to the story the Duke had told him in his Citadel quarters and a memory struck him; something Nemean had said as he showed off his sculptures.

“Is this the same grandmother who told you about Vankiri?”

At the mention of the Vankiri the Duke immediately, impulsively reached up to scratch at his neck. Keith grabbed his hand drawing his claws back from exposed skin.

“Nemean… we don’t have to talk about this-”

Pulling his hand away from his throat Nemean curled his fingers unhappily. Keith only let go of him when it was clear he wasn’t going to hurt himself. The pod had cured the sore spots Mother Carmen hadn’t already healed but neither she nor the healing chamber had grown back the bald patches on the young Galran’s neck; they couldn’t hide the old scars.

“No! I want to answer your questions. I want to help- I want to help you and the other paladins any way I can.”

Aside from Shiro the other paladins had largely ignored Nemean since he had come out of the pod. Keith would catch Hunk and Pidge stealing curious glances their direction but they hadn’t approached yet. Shiro had comforted Nemean before handing him off to Coran who had in turn handed off him to Keith. After that the Galran teenager had stuck to the red paladin like superglue.

“Well, I need your help with this. I don’t know anything about…myself.”

Keith glanced down at his hands, currently gloveless, clenching and unclenching his fingers. There were no outward signs of his Galra nature there, no claws or paw-pads to speak of; it was almost worse to have all the differences be internal. He could keep ignoring the alien part of his genes if he really wanted to; maybe.

“I mean the Galra side of myself.”

Nemean inched closer to Keith until their shoulders brushed and made a pleasant noise in the
back of his throat. He faltered a moment more before he began to speak in a gentle, singsong voice.

“So…in the old days, the ancient days of the Galra, the Vankiri weren’t equals like they are now. My grandmother told me that before she cut off her ears and punished the deserving the Crone had been Emperor of all the Galra and the other Vankiri were her three daughters -oldest, middle and youngest.”

“What does this have to do with—”

Nemean held up a hand for patience and Keith shut his mouth curiosity getting the better of him. With an air of aristocratic importance the Duke continued.

“Before the Galra spread out to conquer worlds they had only one small planet and they fought all the time. The Emperor saw this and asked her daughters to help her unite their people. She tasked each of them with giving the Galran people a sacred gift.”

The cadence of the Duke’s voice had a lulling quality to it as he continued to make the gruff hum in his chest. It was similar to the sound that Heonar had made during the story told at the wedding banquet. Maybe this was just how the Galra told stories. Keith wasn’t sure if they were singers but they weren’t bad when it came to…whatever this was.

“The three daughters traveled in the first starships out beyond their home world to find gifts that would make the Galra the most powerful people in the universe.”

Keith was so focused on Nemean he almost didn’t notice that the hammering and banging had stopped. Casting a sideways glance towards Hunk he was surprised to see the yellow paladin leaning forward, his ear cocked to the side. Nemean didn’t notice the extra attention, his mind on his Galran fairytale.

“The oldest daughter, The Warrior, traveled to the outer edges of the universe and killed a creature older than time. Its blood was a fire that could not be destroyed and she presented the flame to the Emperor as her gift.”

“She killed a monster with fire blood…in space; sounds totally credible.”

Both Keith and Nemean startled at the deeply sarcastic voice and the red paladin realized it was Pidge who had spoken. She was watching the Duke with narrowed eyes, her hands hovering motionless over her laptop. Hunk was leaning on the side of the Galra shuttle his arms crossed over his chest.

“Also, older than time, seriously? This space monster must have been super bored waiting for the big bang to happen.”

Hissing uncertainly through his front teeth Nemean looked to Keith for help, unsure if he should continue. Pidge urged him on before Keith could even open his mouth.

“So…what did her mom do with the fire?”

Nemean twisted his head to the side and continued, hesitantly at first but encouraged when Pidge didn’t interrupt right away. How long had she and Hunk been eavesdropping?

“Er, The Emperor took the fire and she lit a torch at the top of a mountain. She told her people that only one strong enough in battle could re-light the torch with the monsters fire and be a true leader of the people. So the first gift of the Vankiri was the assurance our Emperor would always be strong.”

Hunk frowned at this and took a tentative step towards Keith and the Duke. Pidge got to her feet with a grunt and rubbed at her lower-back, her laptop tucked under one arm. Keith couldn’t help but notice how exhausted they both looked. The shuttle was practically fixed but despite her best efforts Pidge had yet to hear anything from Vell. None of the Elati had answered any of her messages.

“Ok- but leaders should be more than strong—”

Hunk muttered as he closed the distance between himself and Nemean. The Galra melted back from him pressing closer into Keith’s side as he tugged the blanket even tighter around his skinny body. He opened his mouth to argue but Pidge just gave Hunk a light punch on the arm and plopped down in front of Keith.

“Well maybe there’s more to it. I wanna hear what happens.”

Nemean eyed Pidge warily.

“You…want to listen?”

Hunk eased himself down between Pidge and Nemean and offered a warm, sleepy smile.

“ Heck yeah, sounds cool.”
The yellow paladin’s presence seemed to ease the Duke’s nerves and he pulled the blanket down from his head, letting his hair escape into a wild frizz of downy strands. Keith wondered idly if Hunk smelled the same to him as he did to Nemean. Did he get a whiff of that comforting cinnamon cookie scent and immediately realize Hunk was safe? It seemed plausible.

Pidge leaned her back against Hunk’s side using him like a giant pillow as she made herself comfortable. She put her laptop on her knees and opened it so she could see the screen but made no move to type anything.

She asked her next question more gently, without a trace of her trademark sarcasm.

“What are the Van-Vankiri?”

The Duke’s ears perked up and he looked away from Hunk and Pidge shyly as he explained. Keith stared ahead and tried not to let anxiety build. Just sitting here while Lance languished in a survival pod felt counterproductive but his friends weren’t robots. They were worn out and they needed a break.

Hunk’s kindness towards Nemean wasn’t really a surprise to the red paladin. He seemed to have let himself fall a little bit in love when he took care of the Galran during his emergency surgery. Pidge’s benevolence was a bit more of a shock.

“So- the second daughter’s gift…”

Keith snapped back to himself as Nemean finished whatever explanation he had given. Pidge had switched to one of her smaller hand held devices and was rapidly tapping short-hand notes as the Duke continued.

“The second daughter, the Mother, traveled to a planet covered with plants and trees. In the middle of a forest, at the center of a deep lake she found a magnificent, winged creature with a gorgeous voice. She brought it to the Emperor as her gift…”

Hunk beamed eyes sparkling,

“Aww…”

Nemean gestured with both hands returning the smile.

“And the Emperor ate it.”

Hunk’s face froze in horror.

“Umm…”

“And because of the Mother’s gift the Galra have beautiful voices and mother’s can soothe their cubs. The gift made the Galra stronger through their voices and their children.”

Nemean made a small chirp as if in demonstration the sound oscillating in a way that sounded almost birdlike.

Pidge pursed her lips and Keith could see her visibly struggling against the urge to argue. This, like the Vankiri, was a folklore-mythology and the red paladin had no doubt Pidge struggled with human fairytale logic as much as Galran. She had probably been a tough kid to raise.

“So then it was the youngest daughter, the Maiden’s turn and she looked everywhere for the last gift but she couldn’t find anything special enough. She returned to the Galra and as she was out walking she saw two of her people embracing in a clearing.”

It dawned on Keith then that this whole thing had started out as a way to explain the concept of mates; possibly something about his relationship with Lance. The red paladin had been so distracted by Hunk and Pidge’s sudden interest in Nemean he had completely forgotten that the impetus for the story was something incredibly personal and extraordinarily embarrassing.

“My grandmother told me that no two Galra had ever looked so in love as those the Maiden saw and she was so happy for them that she pulled a single hair from her long, beautiful tail and wrapped it around their wrists, binding them together forever. They were the first Galran mates.”

Hunk narrowed his eyes and let out a more guarded-

“Awww?”

Nemean actually chuckled ears pointed straight in anticipation.

“So the Maiden cut off her tail and gave it to the Emperor as her gift.”

Hunk threw up his hands in exasperation and Pidge couldn’t help but let a giggle sneak out. Keith felt his cheeks color- they had heard the beginning of the story. Had they been listening in before? Had they heard him say the m-word?
Nemean reached up and pulled out one of his own hairs to illustrate. He turned it this way and that in his claws before blowing the silky thread away with a puff of breath. Keith watched in horror as the Duke turned to address him directly.

“They used to say that the deepest bonds are tied together with a Maiden’s hair. That’s how she protects them. Biologically my grandmother told me there are other signs. Your smell changes... It’s hard to describe but you smell like two at once. Like another has rubbed their scent on you but it never comes off. The smell is very loud.”

Pidge stopped laughing and Hunk’s look of disgust at the chopped tail part of the story melted away. Both of the paladins turned with measured slowness to stare at Keith wide-eyed.

Nemean prattled on oblivious.

“Your scent is like my grandmother’s and its especially noticeable when you speak about your mate. Even when they had been separated for many, many years my grandmother still carried his smell. She told me that when she was with him it satisfied a deep pain that she carried by herself. A longing- like she was missing part of herself.”

Keith couldn’t face the mounting excitement being leveled at him by Hunk and Pidge. He wanted to crawl into a hole. He wanted to melt into the floor and implode in the vacuum of space. He thrust his face into his hand and moaned as his cheeks burned.

“There are rumors some mates can feel each other’s pain? I don’t know if that’s true though. But it is very calming to be around a mate. Zarkon approved of lower ranks having them because it kept fights to a minimum and he had the upper hand. You have leverage over a Galra once you know who their mate is.”

Keith nearly jumped out of his skin when Pidge reached over and grabbed his hand pulling it this way and that to examine his knuckles and wrist. Hunk scrutinized over her shoulder, his face in a serious pout.

“See any hair?”

Pidge shook her head as she gave Keith’s hand another exaggerated once over.

“Probably invisible. It is magic hair.”

Keith groaned low as Nemean rankled and came to his defense. The Galran teenager puffed out his chest and snatched Keith’s hand back holding it protectively. He shook a little as he defended his friend.

“Perhaps- If I had not failed the blue paladin the bond would be a good thing. I-I don’t deserve the second chance I’ve been given.”

Blush still burning his face, Keith reached out and put a hand on top of Nemean’s head, his palm pressed firmly between his ears; trying to reassure him with touch. The red paladin attempted a smile but the muscles in his mouth just wouldn’t cooperate.

“IT’S GOOD. It’s a good thing!”

Keith had to admit that Pidge had actually soothed the shame in him somewhat. Pretending his feelings weren’t there wasn’t helpful. He didn’t need to tell his teammates that he had openly declared his love in front of an imaginary crowd of Lance’s friends and family but...acting like there was nothing between the two of them was stupid and counterproductive.

Nemean’s ears drooped visibly and the humming purr in his chest came to a dead stop.

“Perhaps- If I had not failed the blue paladin the bond would be a good thing. I-I don’t deserve the second chance I’ve been given.”

Blush still burning his face, Keith reached out and put a hand on top of Nemean’s head, his palm pressed firmly between his ears; trying to reassure him with touch. The red paladin attempted a smile but the muscles in his mouth just wouldn’t cooperate.

Hunk scooted closer and put a friendly hand on Nemean’s shoulder.

“You stuck your neck out for us dude. You tried the best you could! Course you deserve
another chance.”

“But I am Galra and I failed—”

Nemean spoke in a wilted voice, his head somehow drooping farther down his chest.

“I failed friend Keith, the Mother, my family and the paladins of Voltron.”

The words came out with that same weak whine that made Nemean sound so young. Pidge reached out and poked the end of Nemean’s nose to get his attention.

“Hey. Lance is gonna be ok. We’re gonna get him back to Vell and the Mother will help him. Keith said so, right Keith?”

The red paladin felt his stomach clench when Nemean gazed at him hopefully. The pain in his head sparked to life as thoughts of Lance screaming, struggling alone in a survival pod came rushing back. Lance could die— he could really die. Keith couldn’t think about it— he couldn’t… no no no—

“Yeah…”

Keith said in a tone he hoped disguised his mounting panic.

“Carmen will help. Once we get to her.”

For a long minute the small group sat in silence. Nemean relaxed in the huddle of bodies, his ears going lax, the course bristly hair on the back of his neck flattening in what Keith took to be a sign of trust.

Hunk yawned until there were tears in his eyes and gave the Duke a hefty pat on the back.

“You know, having you around is gonna be super helpful. You can tell me about what the Galra eat so we can feed Keith right.”

The young Galran grinned until his chipped fang showed staring at Hunk with adoration.

“I would like to help friend Keith in any way I can.”

Pidge interjected trying to look casual as she picked up her laptop again.

“I actually didn’t mind that Vankiri story either…I mean it’s interesting, you know. You have more stories like that?”

“Oh, yes. My grandmother told me many such stories.”

Calming his breathing Keith tried to tear his mind away from his fears about Lance. Worrying would do nothing to help the situation. With an effort the red paladin got to his feet. He still felt stiff from sleeping on the fake couch in the memory chamber and the pain in his head seemed to get worse at random. He searched for a distraction and landed on food.

“Are you hungry Nemean?”

The Duke nodded slowly watching as Pidge leapt to her feet and Hunk followed offering the Galran a hand to help him up.

“Come on Snowball. I’ll bake you some cookies!”

Nemean made a pleased coo as he accepted Hunk’s hand.

“Snowball? …What a lovely name.”

Allura leaned back in Lance’s paladin chair on the flight deck as she pondered the holo-screen before her.

“The call is not from the rebel channel.”

Keith leaned against one arm of his own paladin seat, eyes on the princess. She steepled her fingers and took a deep breath.

“The Elati have not contacted Pidge and this call is from the main Citadel source, not an outside line. It must be a call from the Galra.”

Shiro paced in a quiet circle his real fingers tapping nervously on his metal arm. Keith couldn’t bring himself to look at Shiro after the near bite in the med-bay. There was no question he and Coran would empathize but…he had nearly snapped his mentor’s fingers off. How do you even begin to apologize for that?

“Why would the generals be contacting us? There’s nothing they want from us-unless…”
The black paladin looked across the room to where Duke Nemean sat at the side of Hunk’s seat. The Duke had grown more comfortable in the other paladin’s company but was still skittish when attention was on him. He scratched at his neck in agitation until Keith gave him a measured scowl.

Nemean clasped his fingers together and shook his head.

“Paladins, princess- I don’t think they even know I am alive. I don’t think they would go to the trouble of contacting you to find out.”

Shiro nodded and turned back to the princess his jaw set in a grim line. They hadn’t heard anything from Vell in over two days. The shuttle was fixed and Lance had been through two of Allura’s quintessence treatments to keep him stable. The castle was getting edgy and even the lion’s seemed ready for action.

“I think we should answer the call,”

Shiro said sullenly.

“Maybe a Seed or Drone is trying to contact us through the main line because all private communications are down.”

Hunk leaned over the side of his chair and put a hand on Nemean’s head; he rubbed the soft hair nervously, looking for some way to alleviate his anxiety. The Duke didn’t flinch and Keith couldn’t help being briefly proud of both him and Hunk.

“What if we call at a bad time and get them caught?”

Coran popped up from under a communications board he had been fiddling with pulling at his moustache thoughtfully; mulling the yellow paladin’s question over.

“Any intel is better than no intel at all I say.”

Collapsing backwards Allura massaged her temples. She looked worn-thin, her eyes dull and skin lackluster from her sessions with Lance. She couldn’t keep him going forever and they all knew it.

“Coran is right. I think we should take the chance and open up the channel. When we left Vell the Citadel hadn’t fallen yet. Perhaps the Olim were able to barricade themselves in and the fleet has yet to make a move against them. Zarkon could have intervened with Heonar’s madness.”

Pidge made her way over to Coran and checked his handiwork, her fingers tracing over a veritable rats nest of wires piled under the exchange console. The advisor had explained that he was trying to enforce their jamming signal. If they reached out to the Olim without taking proper precautions the Galra could easily track them and attack almost instantaneously.

The green paladin tapped a few keys and pushed her glasses up her nose.

“What about the huge flagship? Wouldn’t the Citadel surrender to it immediately? I mean it was full of ships and sentries. The Olim barely had enough drones to form a baseball team let alone an army. Heck- they didn’t even have their own ships...”

Nemean, who had taken to his Snowball nickname immediately, gave a soft, shy reply from his place at Hunk’s elbow.

“They have ships. You just didn’t see them and that’s not how the Olim fight anyway. They-“

Pidge blew an impatient breath through her nose.

“Yeah, yeah they take away the wormholes I get it- I don’t get how they do it exactly-“

Nemean interrupted reluctantly his voice rising only when Pidge paused.

“The Mother- The Mother talks to the Webllum who control the lay-lines. No one else can do what she does and the flagship? It’s a not a warship...it has defenses and large bays for battle vessels in stow but it’s just a Domain vessel...”

Shiro took a step towards Nemean, his harsh expression softening.

“You can explain what you mean by Domain vessel, Nemean?”

Keith watched his Galran friend’s body language as the leader of Voltron addressed him. Shiro scared –no, intimidated him even after the peculiar bonding experience they shared in the med-bay. Keith thought that if he had seen Shiro fighting in the pits...maybe he would see his mentor a bit differently too.

“Well-“

Nemean looked to Keith for support before he started. The red paladin tried and failed to smile for what felt like the hundredth time in so many hours. It felt like his face had completely forgotten
what a smile even looked like.

“In the Empire when a new area is marked for conquest a Domain vessel is sent as a base. It is like a very small planet in itself and has its own chain of command. It is self-sustaining in case supply lines are cut...that way if a Domain ship can’t communicate with the Empire it can continue on its mission…but-”

The sharp ears folded back, jittering at the tips. Nemean’s fingers hovered over his neck, flexing just above the hairless skin.

“This is very sensitive information I...If I tell you-“

“You are already considered a traitor by the empire, surely one more secret would not make much difference.”

Allura was brisk in her reply, so much so that even Pidge gave her a dirty look. The Duke only nodded, his golden gaze still downcast.

“Yes- well. My Father was once in the high command on a Domain vessel...they are protected by powerful ships but their own defenses are weak; focused on shields and barricades. The Domain ship over Vell is decommissioned. Its shields are weak, its defenses old and it is run entirely by outdated A.I. The ships around it pose more threat but they are nothing Voltron has not dealt with before if rumors are true.”

Keith closed his eyes and took a deep calming breath. His first impressions of the ship over Vell were completely correct. It was nothing more than a threat display, an intimidation tactic. It made all of General Heonar’s chaotic posturing all the more infuriating.

“There are still the regular fleet warships.”

Shiro said as his pacing grew faster.

“The Domain ship might not be the threat we thought it was but we can’t form Voltron and without Keith we’ll only have three lions in the fight.”

Allura was not her usual self; her patience worn thin from what Keith assumed was fatigue. She nearly snapped at Shiro her fingers massaging weakly at her temples; a gesture Keith was all too familiar with.

“We call then, but no matter what the outcome I say we don’t wait more than another day to move on Vell. I doubt I’ll have the strength to help Lance much longer...one more healing and I-I think I have reached my limit.”

Fear rose sharp, painful in Keith’s guts and he had to bend over his knees for just a moment to collect himself. The swirling mass of dread was always there now. Every minute he had to force himself to stand still, to ignore the screaming urge to rip Lance out of his S-pod just so he could see his face and know he was still there.

The red paladin pushed his hands through his hair, yanking sharply at his bangs. Even if his capacity for patience had grown he was still only half-human.

“Coran...just hail them. Please.”

The Altean advisor looked to Allura and Shiro once more for confirmation and they traded a quick look before nodding silently.

A tense fifteen minutes followed mostly spent in agitated silence. Coran warned the room, though Keith thought the Altean focused on him in particular, that it was very unlikely they would get a reply for quite some time. They first time they had reached out to Vell they had not responded for hours and now they had no idea who was even manning the line planet-side.

Coran was still explaining this even as the holo-screens lit up green to signal an incoming transmission. His eyebrows shooting half-way up his head Coran brought his fist down hurriedly on his communication console. There was no visual feed only a desperate, hoarse voice drifting from galaxies away.

“Paladins? Am I speaking with the paladin’s of Voltron?”

Instantly all the hair on the back of Keith’s hair stood on end and he barely tamped down a hiss. Nemean recognized the voice almost as quickly and bared his teeth, his ears laid flat against his skull.

Allura thumped a palm flat on the edge of the blue paladin’s seat eyes growing wide.

“...General Castellan?”

The communication line fizzled, static buzzing as something on the other end fidgeted- making adjustments.
“Princess Allura. Yes, this is General Castellan.”

The wheedling tone was unmistakable. Even distorted by the bad connection Castellan’s whispered whining made Keith grind his teeth in anger. He barked out a question pushing forward violently.

“What do you want? Why did you contact us?”

The general’s breathing grew louder, his tone hollow as he lowered his voice another octave.

“I want amnesty. Once Zarkon learns of Heonar’s actions I have no doubt he will punish him for how he handled this situation.”

Allura pulled at a lock of her hair and squinted at the heads up display in front of her; the general’s voice appeared as a scattering of wavy lines

“So you fear being punished alongside him. You know what Zarkon will do to you when he finds out you lost the support of Vell, the scaultrite and the lay lines.”

Submission oozed out of every syllable as General Castellan properly laid his life at Voltron’s feet.

“Zarkon will kill Heonar. Everything has come undone. The Caulis are dead. I don’t know if Heonar thinks controlling the Mother will make him invaluable to the Emperor or…perhaps he has just gone insane. It doesn’t matter. Zarkon will come and his advisors will tell him that making peace with the Vell is the only option- if Heonar does not do something unthinkable first.”

Allura looked surprisingly calm given this new information. Shiro walked behind her and put a supportive hand on her shoulder. Keith kept back everything inside him bristling and ready for a fight.

The princess sighed.

“So you want to help The Mother and us in return for safety?”

“I want a promise of protection until I can get somewhere out of reach. I have resources out of this system but I need to get off planet before the Empire or the Vell retaliates.”

Keith was getting dizzy. He hadn’t even realized how hard and shallow his breathing had become until a heavy hand rubbed small circles between his shoulder blades-grounding him.

Hunk whispered something the red paladin didn’t catch and felt sweat run in cold beads down his neck.

Shiro quirked an eyebrow at the screen voice stone cold when he spoke.

“The Vell retaliates? The Vell has already gone to war-”

“No, the Drones have attempted to protect their Mother but she is the dangerous one. Heonar is a fool. He thinks he has control because he has no idea what he is dealing with; I do.”

Keith caught Allura exchanging a confused look with Coran. The advisor looked equally puzzled and gave a shrug. Allura did not let her uncertainty show in her voice.

“So how will you aid us? I trust you have some plan to earn your reprieve?”

“Princess, I am here on behalf of Mother Carmen. I earn my forgiveness by relaying her words.”

Every muscle in Keith’s body tightened when Castellan said the Mother’s full name.

A hand wrapped around the red paladin’s and Keith bared his teeth angrily trying to pull away. Without his gloves Keith could feel the small leather skin-pads on the tips of Nemean’s fingers. Hunk had moved to put his hand on Keith’s shoulder, holding him in place. The yellow paladin was so damn strong.

Shiro scratched at the back of his neck his body swaying. He looked skeptical and Keith didn’t blame him.

“How do we know this isn’t a trap? How do we know General Heonar didn’t put you up this?”

Castellan sniveling tone grew somehow more desperate, the groveling kicked up another notch.

“My good paladin’s, defenders of the stars, I assure you that Heonar would not have the intelligence to plan something so elaborate and I truly do not want to die at the hands of the Empire. I wish to aid the Mother- to speak to her Auricle. Naturally, she cannot speak over a communication array. Her speech is restricted as- “

Allura’s already short fuse was growing smaller by the minute and she snapped in a way Keith
had never heard before.

“I am aware and I believe you would do anything to insure your own survival. Please get on with it Castellan- your saccharine words are not endearing. If you have a message to pass on to us...if you have something to help the Vell, than say it and save your own sorry skin.”

Static crackled, the line sizzled and jumped for a nerve-wracking moment. Sounds, creaks and faraway voices could be heard somewhere in the white noise before the General answered; he had the decency to sound a little bit ashamed.

“The Mother believes her dowry is still alive in body as well as mind.”

Pidge snapped at the screen her glasses falling down her nose; she made no effort to adjust them.

"Maybe Lance is alive. What about it?"

The general made a disconcerting half-whistle sound and Keith was surprised that he actually recognized the intonation. Nemean had made similar noises when he was impressed.

“My, paladin’s really are difficult to kill. No wonder the Emperor fears you. The Mother seemed sure her dowry was alive and confided in me as much. She also believes him ailing…I assume this is also true?”

Shiro thumped his metal hand down had on the back of Allura’s chair making everyone jump.

“Yes! That’s why we need to get him to the Mother now! Just tell us what to do!”

There was more rumbling over the line, more static and Castellan came back speaking low and insistent.

“The Mother rarely leaves her chambers. She is in mourning for the Matriarch and for the Duke, whose death has caused her much guilt.”

Nemean looked ready to say something but Pidge leaned around Hunk and swatted his arm lightly shaking her head. Keith shivered in disbelief and tried to rein in the erratic emotions jumping inside his skin. He tried to focus on his friends touch. The Matriarch was really dead...Heonar had really killed her.

“She spends hours in meditation and so far has agreed to keep the wormholes open to all-including the Galra. To keep her obedient General Heonar forces her out into the gardens under heavy sentry guard in the early morning. He does this to show the Olim that he has their Mother under his control so they make no move against him.”

Keith leaned back against Hunk trying not to hyperventilate. Nemean gripped his hand so tightly that the tips of his claws threatened to break the skin.

Castellan paused before his cowed voice gave them their instructions.

“Tomorrow at 10-06 Vell time Heonar will walk the Mother around the Citadel. She told me that her Auricle and her Dowry must meet her there as soon as the sun rises. No paladin should be near an Empire ship when they reach her. Do you hear me Auricle?”

Keith choked on a growl his shoulders so rigid it was painful. He forced his answer through bared teeth.

“I hear you.”

“Good.”

Castellan said with surprising solemnity.

“Go right to the Mother. Do not stop for anything. Do not let anything stop you. Ignore obstacles and General Heonar. If you value your Dowry’s life get him to the Mother...Now- I can’t risk being seen. I must go. Remember paladin’s we have a deal-”

The line went dead, the connection broken and all eyes went to Keith. He met Allura’s weary gaze and she lay her head heavily on her hand as she spoke.

“No plans for now- I want everyone to rest. In the early morning we’ll talk and then...we leave for Vell.”

Chapter End Notes
Nemean is a good boy.
I like to imagine all Galran Myths and fairy tales are just grotesquely violent. Even the ones they think are charming or for little kids. Like how we think Hansel and Gretel is a great kids story despite the old woman arson? The Galra would pump that part up to 5.

HOORAY FOR CJ. THE PROOFREADER I ADORE.
“You know—I don’t think I did a very good job capturing him at all.”

Keith glanced over his shoulder from the cockpit of the repaired Galran shuttle. Duke Nemean was on the floor in the area behind and adjacent to the pilot’s seat, Lance curled against his chest. The Galran was examining the blue paladin’s face attentively, ears pricked. It took the Keith a moment to realize what Nemean was referring to.

“Oh, in the drawing you gave me?”

The loose fur around Nemean’s ears fluffed as Lance made a small noise in his sleep. The Duke chirped in reply and curled his body protectively around the blue paladin’s; Lance instinctively pushed into the warm patchy fur on Nemean’s neck.

“Mmhmm. I was right. The wanted posters are a terrible likeness. They made his mouth and eyes small; makes him look mean.”

Keith turned in his seat and kept his eyes on the space unraveling in front of him. Allura had opened up a wormhole nearly an hour’s journey from Vell to avoid immediate detection. Under the guise of a patrol Keith was attempting to fly their stolen ship back to subtly rejoin the rest of the fleet. The red paladin performed low, near leisurely maneuvers as they made their way into enemy airspace.

Pidge had taken the extra precaution of making sure the ship was on the same broadcast frequency as the Galra. She had even recorded some audible radio chatter between drone pilots and every fifteen minutes or so it would loop out to the nearest Galran ship to give the appearance of a check-in. Droids weren’t smart and the green paladin was confident she had efficiently cloaked their presence.

Keith triple-checked his coordinates to make sure they were on course before engaging in nervous small-talk. It would be good to be distracted.

“You know- I managed to smuggle that picture you made me all the way to the Castle. I still like it.”

Nemean snorted in a way that spoke of his aristocratic roots, it felt like an eye-roll in sound form.

“I need to do a brand new one now that I’ve actually seen him. I can do much better with a real model… I mean. I didn’t even realize he had sun-spots. They weren’t in the poster at all!”

Keith shifted in his seat and wished that he could bring Lance up to the front with him. It wasn’t smart or in the plan but it’s what his brain wanted—desperately. The red paladin folded his arms tight to his chest and eyed Nemean; idly scrutinizing his every movement.

“Sun-spots?”

The Galran hummed in confirmation and brought Lance’s pale face away from his neck for just a moment to point out a faint dusting of freckles on the blue paladin’s cheek just above the breathing mask he was wearing.

“Yes. Like the spots on a sun. They are spots on the fur in Galra…I did not know your species could have them as well.”

Keith felt his lips twitch in an accidental smile.

“Not all humans have them. We call them freckles.”

Nemean considered the word and rolled it around on his tongue, tasting it.

“Frec-kles…FRECK-les. Mmm. I like it. Human’s have many appealing words.”

Lance didn’t stir, didn’t make a sound as the Duke ran distracted claws through his hair. He hadn’t been conscious for more than a few minutes at a time since coming out of the survival pod. He had only said a few stilted words to Allura after his last round of quintessence therapy.

He was barely keeping his head above water and everyone could see it.

The blue paladin was still on oxygen and once they got planet side Keith worried the air canister would be cumbersome; he was scared they might have to leave it behind. What would they do if that happened? Lance was struggling as it was and Keith had no idea how long it would take to get him to Carmen. If the Duke hadn’t agreed to come-
The Galran teenager looked at Keith wide eyed, expectant. In the short time he had spent on the Castle ship he seemed to have gained a bit of unexpected confidence. Or maybe it was just a new sense of purpose.

“Yes, friend Keith?”

Taking in a deep breath and letting it out through his nose Keith tried to relax into his paladin armor. It felt unnaturally restrictive for some reason; maybe because he had spent such a long time without wearing it.

“You didn’t have to come with me. I just wanted to say…Thanks.”

The Duke offered Keith a shy, crooked grin.

“You saved my life. As friend Hunk would say it is- no problem dude.”

Nemean had gone to Shiro himself to ask if he could help Keith. Approaching the Black Paladin in a remarkable act of bravery the Duke had offered to accompany Keith to Vell and help get Lance to Mother Carmen.

Despite the fact that Heonar had very nearly killed him and still had control over his remaining family Duke Nemean could not be dissuaded. He had pointed out the obvious: Keith could barely carry both Lance and his scrim -how was he supposed to fight with his hands full and no paladins to aid him?

Shiro couldn’t argue with sound logic like that and received no arguments from the others; in the end despite her misgivings even Allura had approved.

So a pure-blood, alien aristocrat now crouched in the back of the re-fitted shuttle. He was dressed in a suit of plain, protective white armor, his frizzy hair pulled into a tight bun. They had given the Galran a more generic version of the traditional paladin uniform. It didn’t have any fancy insignias but it would do its job.

They hadn’t dressed Lance in armor at all. He wore his flexible, black body-suit but nothing heavier for fear it would restrict his breathing more than it already was. This made Keith even more nervous. He didn’t want the blue paladin encumbered by pounds of gear he didn’t need but in just his under-armor he was so…vulnerable. A stray shot, a bad fall anything could-

Nemean interrupted the red paladin’s spiraling thoughts with a question. His voice airy and obviously distracted.

“How close do you think we’ll need to be to speak to the Mother?”

Keith hadn’t even thought of that. He had never considered how close Carmen had to be before it was possible to communicate with her. This opened up a whole area he hadn’t even contemplated. If he could speak to Carmen she could help guide them to her location without Heonar knowing.

The red paladin tapped a fingered against the edge of his seat, chest rumbling in a low growl.

“Maybe we should keep trying to talk to her as soon as we get planet side.”

“Yes, a good plan! I hope General Castellan has told her we’re coming- you at least. She still thinks I’m dead.”

Keith hummed in reply his hackles rising as Lance whispered something unintelligible. He was probably asking for his mother or just generally calling for help in Spanish. Nemean crooned to him and the rambling stopped.

The shuttle fell into silence and Keith tried to cool down and center himself. It wasn’t helpful to go into an operation all tensed up. The Garrison had drilled that into him from day one. Keith did what Shiro had taught him, what he had done a hundred times before when prepping for any mission.

Push out all distractions, focus on the goal and remember the plan. It usually helped if he thought of the mission as a map separated into sections; right now it wasn’t doing a damn thing. Every time the red paladin thought he was focused he caught himself turning around to check on Lance, convinced there had been some conspicuous hitch in his breathing.

Vell appeared in the distance; a soft burgundy jewel surrounded by its three blue moons. The Galran fleet appeared as well and Nemean spoke quietly as he regarded it.

“I don’t see any new ships…I would guess Heonar hasn’t told Zarkon about his takeover.”

Keith nodded slowly contemplating the comings and goings of other shuttles from the massive
cruiser and its surrounding automated warships. The Duke was right; it didn’t look like the small flotilla had gained new members.

Easing the pilot chair forward Keith wrapped his hands tighter around the shuttle’s steering wheel. He didn’t want to attract attention so it would be better to keep flying smooth; he needed to drive like an autopilot; ostensibly without a real goal.

“I think he’s afraid to. But if the wormholes weren’t working for the Galra Zarkon would be here. That means Carmen is holding her ground or…Heonar is threatening her.”

Nemean made a low unhappy spitting sound between his front teeth.

“I would assume both.”

The shuttle’s radio fizzled and a robotic voice hailed them asking for identification. Pidge’s automatic response answered immediately but Keith still held his breath as the other end of the line processed the reply. They did so without suspicion.

“Ok…duck down and out of sight. I’m going to land as close to the Citadel as I can.”

The Duke gave a nod that Keith could just see out the corner of his eye then disappeared as he crouched low on the floor behind the cockpit. Keith hovered near the main warship and watched a long line of ships seemingly drift about at random.

It was odd to see a Galra fleet so disorganized; the generals were probably too distracted with problems on Vell to really give their military force something specific to do besides “patrol” and “fight enemies.”

It appeared sloppy but Keith had a feeling everything could be corrected at a moment’s notice. All it took was one command and he would be grossly outnumbered.

Doing a random circuit of the massive cruiser to keep up pretenses the red paladin angled his shuttle down and tried to blend in with a larger command shuttle making its way towards the planet’s surface. As they hit the first bumpy layer of atmosphere the bigger vessel split off and Keith slowed his descent to a speed he prayed looked casual.

The red paladin checked his read-out’s again wary of the time; they would need to land near the Citadel’s damn doorstep for everything to work. The plan was dependent on precision. Any misstep could cause a chain reaction that let everything fall apart.

Keith bit his lower lip as he swooped down onto a landing pad the Galra drones had carved into a swath of grass. It was very close to a smooth trail of scaultrite left by some long-gone Weblum larvae. Keith felt a rush of relief when he recognized it as the same path Pidge had asked the Radix about an eternity ago; when they had first landed on Vell.

The Galra mapped planets differently than Alteans; they had run into this problem before during Intel gathering missions. Pidge and Coran had always found a way to translate Galran maps so they could be navigated accurately but they hadn’t had much time to convert the shuttle maps of Vell. Keith could only decipher about half of them; it was a miracle they had found the right spot so quickly.

They waited on the landing pad for another soundless minute but none of the drones approached the shuttle. That might not last long- if a robot didn’t get out of their ship and check-in the others would probably come to see what the hold-up was.

Keith tapped his helmet, waited for the comm-link to buzz and spoke in a hoarse whisper to the waiting paladins.

“We’ve landed. If we don’t contact you in ten minutes start the attack.”

Shiro, despite the fact he was still light-years away, whispered in response his voice hushed on the other end of the comm.

“Roger that. Good luck.”

Gazing around the outside of the shuttle cautiously Keith made his first move. From his higher vantage point on the landing platform he could see three patrolling drones but knew there were more. Pidge had hacked a surveillance camera mounted onto a patrol shuttle to get a general idea of what they would be dealing with and she had counted roughly fifty guards circling the perimeter of the Citadel.

Crawling into the back of the shuttle next to Nemean as slowly as he could Keith pulled Lance’s scrim from under his seat and scrambled to pull on the harness Hunk had thrown together. Keith needed his hands free so Hunk had rigged up a device that would keep the scrim strapped to the red paladin’s back. He had modeled it on the carrier a parent used to hold a newborn baby.

The Duke helped him get it on wordlessly, leaning Lance against his chest as he checked and doubled checked the buckles keeping the smooth scrim in place. Keith thought it felt a bit like a heavy backpack but when he stood to open the side door of the shuttle his balance didn’t feel
thrown by the added weight; Hunk was one hell of an engineer, even when he was putting things together on the fly.

Keith gave the outside one last sweep before he nodded to the Duke to make sure he was ready. Nemean adjusted Lance’s weight, checked his breathing mask, his oxygen. He grimaced anxiously when Lance squirmed feebly, muttered something then stilled again.

They were as ready as they were going to be.

Opening the shuttle door a few cautious inches at a time Keith tired to gauge how big of a gap they needed to squeeze everyone through. They were exiting out towards the grass on the side opposite the Citadel. That meant it was only a few steps and they would have cover in the nearest field. Next part of the plan; get to the grass without causing an alarm. Avoid being seen or heard.

Keith slid out the bottom of the shuttle door without opening it the entire way and held it open for Nemean as he followed suit. Shutting the door after them with a soft click the red paladin lay a hand on his Bayard but didn’t draw it. There wasn’t a reason yet and the noise could draw sentries.

With his index and middle fingers Keith gestured for the Duke to go ahead of him. The elevated landing pad had only set of stairs and they were located on the side with droids; they would have to a risk a jump down. The red paladin glanced over the lip of the landing pad at the waving grass that was almost level with his feet. It didn’t look far.

Nemean frowned down at Lance and considered the edge carefully. He seemed to be gauging the smoothest way to land without disturbing the paladin in his arms. While Keith appreciated the sentiment standing out in the open was making him extremely jumpy and the Duke’s caution was well-meaning but not a good idea with so much at stake.

He nudged the Galran a bit, tipping him forward until he stopped hesitating and took the plunge into the waving sea of grass, his upper body bent around Lance to shield him. The grass sighed as he entered it and Keith heard him hit the ground with a heavy thud. The red paladin winced- it didn’t sound like a very elegant landing.

With one hand on his Bayard the other hanging onto a scrim strap on his shoulder Keith slipped into the grass after Nemean. He felt it whisper around his helmet and tap rhythmically at his armor. It was almost like being underwater.

Hitting the ground lightly Keith kicked up a small cloud of loose sod. He immediately went down on all fours and moved deeper into the field, away from the landing pad. Near the ground the grass stalks thinned somewhat and Keith found Nemean hunkered down in the wine-red dirt rubbing consoling circles into Lance’s back.

Aside from some dirt stains neither looked the worse for wear but the Duke shot Keith a nasty look that was part pout and part frustration. He whispered low into his helmet’s comm-link and irritation sizzled in Keith’s eardrum.

“Don’t shove me! I could have dropped the paladin!”

Keith flushed and tamped down the urge to tell Nemean off. Snapping at the Galran was only going to make him tenser. Keith whispered an apology knowing the others could hear them on the shared line.

“I’m Sorry- I was just afraid we would be seen.”

Nemean accepted the explanation graciously, eyes closed as he nodded in reply.

Keith barely paid attention. He was having trouble tearing his gaze from Lance. Seeing him out in the open, sick and helpless was doing things to Keith that he neither liked nor understood. Every nerve ending and muscle fiber in his body was screaming to grab his ma- grab Lance and run him to safety. It was the same instincts he had been experiencing since they had gotten his scrim back but somehow even more intense.

Pounding a fist into the ground Keith moaned miserably as his body shook. Holding back the stress was like trying to hold back vomit. He was managing it but it the end result felt unavoidable. Shiro’s voice brought the red paladin out of his own head again, stern and on task.

“Are you under cover? Give the word and we’ll start.”

Keith gritted out an answer through clenched teeth.

“We’re ready Shiro. Get them out of our hair.”

The Black paladin chuckled dryly and Hunk answered for all of them.

“Allura is opening the wormhole. We’ll be there in five!”

Keith glanced up into the dusk colored sky, squinting into the thin cloud cover. He could see a few scattered points of light that might have been stars or the lights from passing shuttles; it was
impossible to tell. The fleet and its gargantuan cruiser, the one Nemean called a “Domain vessel,” were currently too far into the upper atmosphere of Vell to see with the naked eye.

Somewhere up there Allura was opening a wormhole almost directly on top of General Heonar’s forces. The Black, Yellow and Green Lions would spill out causing chaos and distraction. The red paladin held his breath waiting for a sign, something concrete to signal it was time to start moving.

He didn’t have to wait long.

A wailing alarm rose in the distance and guided by their programming the droids and shuttles started to leave Vell’s surface en masse to confront the lions fighting the main fleet. Ships took flight in a hectic flock and in a matter of minutes the alarm had shut down and the world felt a whole lot quieter.

There would be guards left of course, but not nearly as many and Keith was optimistic he could handle the remainder. Nemean had been timid when it came to wielding a weapon. The Duke told Keith that he had undergone all the combat training mandatory to a Galran education but, probably to the chagrin of his family, he hated guns. In the end the Duke had opted to go weaponless which was probably a massive oversight.

Then again- taking into account how hard the Galran was quivering there was no way he could have hit a target unless it was inches from his nose.

Keith eyeballed the immediate area around them before he moved from their hiding space and backtracked towards the Citadel. The red paladin checked a small readout programmed to sit at the edge of his helmet casing. Pidge had put it there to help him keep track of the time. It was 09-44— they had just under twenty minutes to meet Castellan’s deadline. Vell was basking in a pale, post-dawn haze as the planet’s muted sun climbed into the sky.

Keith began to walk speaking to Nemean in a rough murmur as he found the smoothest path through the grass.

“We may need to run- can you do that holding Lance?”

The Galran picked up speed silently to show that he could and Keith broke into a light jog to keep pace with him. Moving through the grass made keeping a straight path difficult. Every few feet Keith would stop and check to make sure they were heading west; the direction of the Citadel from their landing point.

There were no landmarks visible above the rustling sea of purple stalks. Blades of grass were getting caught in the joints of Keith’s armor and often he would jump when a clump of dry stems smacked the front of his helmet. The scrim’s bindings would catch grass easily and torn pieces hung from the red paladin’s back; souvenirs from the many times he had to tug himself free.

What Keith thought was muddy ground at the base of the grass turned out to be milk ground. Thick rivulets of grass milk formed gooey, slippery patches that were difficult to spot and impossible to avoid. Nemean nearly fell multiple times. Encumbered by Lance he couldn’t see where he was walking.

The blue paladin had gone disturbingly silent and Keith wasn’t even aware of the low-pitched whine of distress he was making in response until the Duke said something reassuring over the comm-line.

“He’s still breathing- it’s alright…You need to be careful not to er, do that. Heonar has good ears.”

Keith startled but managed a nod as the noise reverberating in his chest and throat stilled. He felt stupid but Nemean seemed to realize whatever the hell he was doing he was doing involuntarily.

When they reached the plane of scaultrite glass there was absolutely no cover. Despite this Keith started to cross, making his way over the exposed plateau towards the magenta-colored field opposite; somehow the grass there was even taller than the stuff they had been moving through.

“The Citadel is beyond the birthing ground…where the grass is at its peak” The Radix drone had said something close to that according to Pidge. Keith had been so distracted that first meeting with the Olim he barely remembered. Either way the scaultrite meant they were on the right track.

“The clock in the corner of Keith’s vision read 10-10 by the time they had made it past the slick Webulum larva trail and the Citadel was finally in sight. So far they hadn’t run into a single sentry and thankfully there was no wall around the Mother’s palace. Why would there be, Keith thought distractedly, supposedly she had no enemies.

While there wasn’t a fence there was a bald gap between the grass outside the Citadel and the carefully manicured grass of the gardens. Keith paused on the purple periphery to catch his breath, he felt Nemean press close and resisted the urge to reach back and place a hand on Lance to check he was there, that he was safe.
A swarm of fireflies burst from the ground when Nemean went down on one knee next to Keith and the red paladin sunk back hoping that no one had noticed the sudden cloud of orange light. Thankfully, the grounds were perfectly still. The only thing Keith could hear was the wind and the thick gurgling of ornamental fountains full of grass milk.

Keith let out a shaky sigh of relief and wished he could remove his helmet long enough to wipe the sweat out of his eyes. His bangs were damp with it and it was mostly from nerves.

Nemean leaned back gasping for air- he seemed out of breath from exertion as well as stress: He probably hadn’t done a lot of physical training as an Auricle-to-be.

“Friend Keith…I’ve been trying to reach out to the Mother but she hasn’t answered. Have you heard her yet?”

Heat rose from Keith’s collar and he flinched at the Galran’s question. He had been so caught up in keeping out of sight he had forgotten what he had Nemean had talked about in the shuttle before they landed. He had made no effort to reach out and “talk” to Carmen at all.

“No- I…”

“You should try. Your connection to her is stronger as her Auricle.”

Swallowing at the tightness in his throat Keith shuddered unsure how to even start reaching out to Carmen. He had always spoken out loud to her even if her side of the conversation was telepathic. He paused and thought about how he held “conversations” with the Red Lion. Maybe that was the way to reach her? It was worth a shot.

Taking in his usual calming breaths through his nose and letting them out his mouth Keith pulled tentatively at his own thoughts. He imagined reaching out an invisible hand past the border of the garden and out into the air. His flesh and blood hand drifted as well until, unconsciously, it rested on Lance’s shoulder.

The touch made the red paladin feel a bit more confident and he condensed his feelings into a simple question; Are you there Mother?

He didn’t expect it to work almost instantly.

<Keith?>

The warm voice made the red paladin’s heart skip a beat and he went ramrod straight, eyes-wide. Mother Carmen sounded faint and a bit foggy but she was there; filling up an empty space inside him he was hardly aware of. Nemean didn’t seem to hear her at all but he watched Keith expectantly when his posture changed.

“Nemean, I can hear Carmen- The Mother. She answered!”

The Galran grinned and opened his mouth to answer only to be cut off by Pidge. The green paladin’s disembodied voice was frazzled, her tone stiff.

“Great! Can you ask her how much longer we have to hold them off? We’re getting pounded up here and the big ship is moving past us! I think its heading towards the Citadel!”

Keith stared skyward gasping raggedly.

“What?”

Shiro popped onto the comm-line sounding significantly calmer than Pidge but Keith could hear a sharp, uneasy edge to his words that he was trying very hard to hide.

“Don’t panic Keith. We’re keeping its attention and Castellan told us we only have to keep fighting until you get to the Mother. Do have a visual on her yet?”

Keith yanked his hand back from Lance’s shoulder and any peace he found in the contact gave way to icy dread.

“No- I just heard her. We’re on the edge of the Citadel garden now but I did -”

Pidge jumped in again and behind her Keith could just make the sounds the Green Lion’s cockpit. There was a cacophony of different blaring electronic sounds, some of which the red paladin recognized; none of those were good.

“Hurry up! More ships keep pouring out of that thing and we’ve hardly made a dent!”

Hunk piped up sounding just as harried as Pidge.

“I almost got hit by the big gun on the flagship but-”

Keith scowled eyes on the Duke.

“Wait, the flagship- Nemean you said it just had shields…”
The Galran shook his head until his helmet rattled.  
"They usually do! It’s not standard for a Domain Vessel to be equipped with canons!"

Thinking back to his fight with Heonar in the chaos after the Spur Keith could just recall Heonar threatening the Mother—threatening to turn her home into a smoking crater. His feet were moving before his brain caught up with them.  
"I think Heonar made sure this one did."

Carmen’s voice reached out again as Keith left the safety of the tall grass and entered the Citadel gardens with Nemean hot on his heels. There was a note of hope in her voice now and a rush of new emotions crashed into the red paladin’s brain.  
<Keith you feel close…are you close? Is- is Lance with you?>

The Mother felt…disheveled. Keith wasn’t really sure how else to describe it. Her feelings were scattered and dissonant. Her grief was a bottomless, leeching wound but the joy she felt when she heard the red paladin was equally intense. Keith didn’t know how she could feel two conflicting things with equal passion like that without exploding.  
"I—"

Keith tried to answer Carmen inside his head but found he just couldn’t keep his mouth from forming the words in tandem. He muttered to Carmen and hoped that the others would recognize his one-sided conversation over the comm-link for what it was; or better yet not hear it at all, he knew his voice was shaking.  
"I—I’m close. I’m coming. Lance and Nemean and I are all close. We’re in the garden at the Citadel entrance…where are you? What’s going on?"

Carmen’s emotional butterflies flit in frantic circles around Keith’s skull. When she heard about Nemean and Lance they gained momentum; It made the red paladin feel light-headed, giddy…almost like he was drunk.  
<The Duke is alive?! He didn’t die! Oh Keith I’m so happy. I’ve been so worried about Lance…about you!..I-I thought.>

Keith paused beside a slab of black scaultrite carved into a bench to get his bearings. The Citadel gardens were as meandering and massive as the building itself and it was easy to get lost among the hedgerows and scattered pathways.  
Nemean made a soft noise of distress, growling up at the sky as a loud boom echoed overhead. It sounded like thunder but Keith knew better; the battle was getting closer as the paladins followed the Domain ship’s progress towards the planet’s surface.  
"Carmen. Where are you? I’m…we’re near the, uh—"

Squinting around his immediate surroundings Keith tried to think them at the Mother rather than verbally describe them. He pointed the images her direction. He was by some scaultrite columns. There was a bench at his back and a milk-fountain shaped like a Radix drone to his left.  
Carmen answered without hesitating, as if she saw everything he was looking at in real-time.  
<There is a path made of yellow stone. Do you see it? It leads to the dreaming field. That’s where I am.>

"How close is Heonar? Can we get to you without him noticing?"

<He didn’t think so. He and General Castellan are fighting.>  
"Fight? Castellan?"

The yellow path wasn’t difficult to find. It branched away from a smooth, oval-shaped pavilion decorated with a mural of some planetary system Keith didn’t recognize. There were a number of multi-colored, stone trails leading to different areas of the gardens and the red paladin was grateful to have a solid direction.  
Scrabbling into the shadow of a twisted metal awning covered in trailing vines Keith waited for Nemean to catch up. The young Galra didn’t seem to know where to keep his gaze. He scanned his surroundings repeatedly; the bronze-orange centers of his golden eyes throbbing in time with his frenzied pulse.  

Above them the first Galra ships were starting to appear, their colors faded and indistinct by the atmosphere. The Domain Vessel breached a violet cloudbank like an actual ship plowing through an ocean wave. It was so massive Keith had a difficult time deciphering just how close it was. He was starting to wish they had brought the Castle of Lions for back up—though he doubted they would have been able to do much against a ship so large.
Keith eyed Nemean and felt his fingers itch, his heart squirming in his chest as his gaze fell on Lance. He didn’t think he was going to be able to fight the urge to grab him much longer. He pulled the scrim higher up on his shoulders and growled low when he saw the pale-grey tinge on the blue paladin’s cheeks.

It made the threat of the planet-sized ship feel less important.

“Nemean- get in front of me and start walking; fast as you can. I know which way we’re supposed to go.”

For a moment the Duke seemed frozen in place as the sound of distant canon fire disturbed the quiet morning air. He was panting like an overheated housecat and holding Lance so tightly Keith worried it would affect his breathing.

Falling back Keith put a hand on either side of the Duke’s helmet and pulled his face around so he were eye to eye. The Mother’s emotions were bleeding into his own to the point the red paladin was beginning to feel slightly nauseous.

Having his attention torn between her, the battle above them and Lance’s vulnerability was becoming overwhelming and Keith knew he wouldn’t be able to keep his cool much longer.

“Nemean! Come on. Don’t pay attention to that. Pay attention to what we’re doing here. Our mission.”

The Duke shivered and if his hands hadn’t been full Keith was sure he would have been scratching the skin off his neck.

“I can h-hear them I...”

Focusing on the comm-link for a moment Keith realized that Pidge, Hunk and Shiro’s voices were just audible on the shared line. They flickered in and out as the lion’s zipped between ships, shouting orders or bits of encouragement. He had been so intently focused on speaking to Carmen he hadn’t even noticed.

“They’re doing their own mission and we have to do ours. See the yellow path?”

Nemean nodded dumbly trying to snatch another look up at the sky. Keith gripped his head tight and shook it lightly baring his teeth.

“Don’t look up there. You look at the path or me. Alright? We clear?”

Nemean focused on the red paladins face his eyes narrowing as his breathing calmed a bit.

Keith wished he could have told the Galran to mute his helmet comm but he needed the direct line to him if they were separated. They were getting less stealthy by the minute and it felt like he was fast losing control of the situation.

Shifting Nemean in front of him Keith pressed him forward as fast as he could manage without jostling Lance too badly. The yellow path, flushed dark gold in the saturated morning light, wound through more sculpture gardens and small, greenhouse-like boxes filled individually with plants that were obviously not-native. More fireflies scattered as they passed through a tunnel like gazebo and under a series of towering, crystal gates.

A voice carried over the still air. It was more snarl than sentence and Keith, alarmed, came to a sudden stop. He grabbed the collar of Nemean’s armor to jerk him backward and pressed both of them against a fence-like structure made of twisting shards of black rock. It wasn’t much taller than the red paladin and just over the edge Keith could make out another well kept field of grass.

In the center of the field General Heonar was screaming.

“You’re the worst of our race, a sniveling, water-for-blood politician!”

A softer, more urgent voice answered its words almost lost in the windswept grass.

“Send it back Heonar! Send the ship back!”

Keith recognized Castellan’s voice despite the strange rasp in it. He sounded like he was in pain.

Crouching low the ground the red paladin crept towards the end of the stone fence and peered around at the open field beyond. The first thing that caught his attention was Carmen. The Mother was a fair distance from him, her massive body curled tightly in on itself.

She was surrounded on all sides by a curved hillside of grass that looked out over the rest of Vell’s grasslands. The red paladin had hardly realized he and Nemean had been climbing a hill as they made their way here- It seemed to be one of the highest points Keith had seen on Vell which was mostly flat. Carmen had called it the dreaming field with good reason: the view was breathtaking.
Keith only tore his eyes from Carmen when he spotted Heonar and Castellan a few feet from her head. The Mother hadn’t exaggerated when she said the Galra were fighting. They were both up to their waists in the waving sea of grass, circling each other like alley-cats.

General Castellan had a sword clasped in his hands but his stance was terrible, his posture slumped. He was limping and favoring his left leg but there was resolute look on his face as he watched his opponent; He wasn’t going down without a fight.

Heonar looked—Keith didn’t know any other way to describe it—Heonar looked insane. The General wasn’t wearing any clothing on his upper body, he could have been naked for all Keith knew, he couldn’t see below the General’s waist. Sweat was soaking the Galran’s thick fur to his body and thick foam was dripping from his lips. The spittle combined with his too-wide eyes gave the overall impression that Heonar was totally out of his mind.

Breathing loudly the General held his sword with more confidence but his rabid appearance showed he had only a tenuous grasp on what was going on. He threw more insults at Castellan jerking his sword back and forth with mad intensity, gesturing around himself as if swinging at enemies only he could see.

<Keith, I feel you. You’re very close…>

Afraid to speak even at a whisper Keith thought back as hard as he could and moved his upper body out from behind the stone fence a few more inches so Carmen could catch a glimpse of him.

Her throat expanded as she took in a huge billowing breath. The newly colored ends of the Mother’s tendrils lit up as elation filled her chest. Keith winced and shook his head hoping that Heonar was distracted enough not to notice. She took the hint and curled her head backwards into her neck the edges of her tendrils curling like ferns as she tried to appear as miserable as she had a moment before.

Nemean padded up behind Keith his scared breathing loud near the red paladin’s ear. The Duke pressed to his back and Lance was sandwiched between them, the noise from his breathing mask a low, low hiss.

Keith let him get close as he took in the lay of the land. He was shocked to see only a single drone standing guard. It lingered near Carmen, it’s gun aimed directly at her throat. One droid was nothing—one robot was tutorial mode on the simulator. Heonar wasn’t thinking straight at all; he must have sent all his sentries to fight the lions.

A low hum, which Keith hadn’t noticed before, started to grow more intense. It didn’t take long for the red paladin to figure out Carmen was making it. She ratcheted the volume another level as she reached out to Keith with instructions.

<Keith, please tell the other paladin’s to stop fighting. They need to get out of here. Tell them to get as far from Heonar’s ships as they possibly can.>

Above the dream field the Domain ship was now perfectly visible and so close to the Vell’s surface that it seemed roughly the same size as the Citadel it was hovering over. At this distance the sound of the Lion’s roars was just discernable over the Mother’s humming and intermittent explosions would cause flashes of lightening like light over the fields.

To send the rest of Voltron away right now seemed like a very bad idea despite it being part of the original plan. If the Lions left now the Domain ship would only come faster. Keith felt his lips form an automatic and silent—but… of protest. The Mother answered as if he had screamed it at the top of his lungs.

<Please trust me. This is all going to be over soon I promise. Get to me. Get to me as quickly as you can and tell the others to get away from the Galra—very far.>

Closing his eyes and gritting his teeth Keith looked from the dogfight above to the battling Generals below. If he could come up with a better plan—maybe if the lions landed and just took out Heonar maybe they could get the Castle and—

Do what she says dude. Let’s end this.

The imprint sounded weak—exhausted. It was like reaching out to Keith had taken the last of its strength but the words were still so affectionate. Maybe as Lance…faded, his imprint was too.

Keith craned his neck to look at Lance over his shoulder. He was completely ragdoll in Nemean’s arms and the fogging condensation on his breathing mask was barely detectable; the rise and fall of his chest easy to miss at first glance. His skin was pale and waxy and to the point he looked-unreal, mannequin-like. Allura’s last dose of quintessence boost had barely lasted an hour.

He had to trust Carmen. He had seen her going through so many bouts of fear, of lack of confidence in herself but that wasn’t the case now. She was self-assured despite her inexperience and he trusted her.

He trusted her and he trusted Lance.
Pushing close to the comm in his Helmet Keith whispered just loud enough that he was sure the other paladins could hear him.

“Shiro. We’re here- evacuate.”

Shiro answered immediately voice agitated, his breathing strained.

“Keith-I-I know we have a plan but I’m not sure we should-“

“Trust me, Shiro. Carmen says to withdraw-go as far as you can.”

Shiro paused, considering. Hunk popped on to argue and Pidge followed suit their protests chattering on the line; they were also having doubts. They wanted to land- to evacuate who they could. To help who they could before the colossal ship was in firing range. There was no way anyone could beat this thing before it closed in on Vell.

With a decisive word the black paladin silenced them.

“Keith. I trust you and you trust the Mother…tell her to give us five minute buffer if she can.”

Five minutes. Keith figured it would take five minutes just to get across the field to Carmen.

“Shiro…we need to go stealth. I’m going to mute our comms.”

“Alright…Keep safe Keith.”

The red paladin sucked in a sharp breath through his front teeth and reached to silence his comm as he replied.

“You too. I’ll see you soon.”

Nemean barely noticed when Keith reached over to turn off his comm his eyes glued to the ship above their heads. Prodding him Keith debated taking Lance and making his way to The Mother on his own but it wasn’t the smart thing; the odds were better if Nemean went with him and he had his hands free.

He tapped the side of the Duke’s helmet carefully to get his attention mouthing an almost silent message to Carmen as he did to save time.

“The Lions are leaving. They need five minutes…”

<Got it. Hurry over to me. I feel Lance…he feels…>

She didn’t have to finish the thought Keith knew what she was trying to say; he feels close to death. He feels like he’s fading.

With the comms muted Keith couldn’t talk to Nemean without raising his voice. Making a quick decision he slid his helmet off and latched it to a magnetic hook on his belt before helping the Galran do the same. The smell of rank sweat billowed from the Duke’s fur. He reeked of fear and Keith couldn’t help but wrinkle his nose at how strong the stench was.

He managed to keep his voice soft despite his disgust.

“Nemean…can you carry Lance and stay close to the ground? We could crawl but-“

The Duke swallowed hard his scarred throat bobbing. His arms were quaking but it seemed more from nerves than strain.

“You lead. I’ve got him.”

Keith gave the Duke’s arm one last encouraging squeeze before he slid into the purple grass with a satiny hiss of air. He could hear the General’s fighting in earnest now their swords clipping each other as they each gasped for air and screeched at each other.

“If I die then I’ll take you with me! I will not leave a witness to my death!”

Heonar’s voice sounded bubbly, wet and every few seconds he would spit like something was filling his mouth. Castellan must have landed a good hit. The red paladin sensed the struggling Galra draw closer, the grass betraying their movements. He paused, waiting for them to move away; it gave him too much time to actually hear Heonar’s threats.

Hacking on something in his throat the general raved on like a creature suffering from a fever.

“The Empire will remember that I killed a great enemy! That I destroyed-“

“Heonar! The Olim Vell are no enemy of the Empire! The Mother is neutral-“

“ALL THAT ARE NOT EMPIRE ARE ENEMIES AND I WILL DESTROY THEM. YOU, ME AND THAT WORM QUEEN WILL NOT SEE ANOTHER SUNRISE.”
Castellan, as much as Keith disliked him, was still bravely trying to talk sense into his larger counterpart; that was worthy of respect even if the Galran was just trying to save his own skin. It was now perfectly clear that by calling the Domain ship down to the Citadel Heonar intended to go out in a blaze of glory and take the Mother and her people with him.

*He really has gone out of his fucking gourd* the Lance Imprint muttered in its ghost of a voice.

The frenetic footsteps of the swordfight retreated and checking to make sure Nemean was still behind him Keith pushed onward as fast as he was able. The scrim was starting to cause an ache between his shoulder blades and aside from the humming Carmen had gone oddly silent.

The red paladin could see the Mother’s body just ahead through the grass. Her sides were heaving as if she had just done something physically strenuous but Keith knew from the strange empathic connection they shared she wasn’t breathing hard out of fear. If anything she felt strangely calm.

From his low vantage point Keith couldn’t make out where the one droid in the field was positioned so he hoped that when he and Nemean surfaced they wouldn’t be looking directly down the barrel of a gun. Ignoring the burning in his legs from walking in the strange bowlegged stance near the ground Keith drew his Bayard and held his breath.

Four more steps and he could just reach out and touch Carmen- Lance was almost there he was-

In an instant the clanging of swords was replaced by one of the Galran’s making a breathless grunt of pain before falling to the ground with a dull thump. Mother Carmen roared; the anguish rolling off her and shaking the fields to its foundations.

Nemean whimpered and Keith waited eyes still fixated on the huge soft flesh of Carmen’s side. She gave a shrill keening wail that made the inside of Keith’s head buzz and ran sharp fingernails against his cardrums. The air was suddenly heavy with the sharp iron smell of blood.

Heonar spoke- or he laughed really- the cackle grotesque and gurgling in his throat.

“And so passes the General Orinn Castellan; the last of his simpering, inborn bloodline.”

Nemean had stopped moving, frozen in the grass just behind Keith. The red paladin could see his nostrils quivering as he caught the scent of Castellan’s blood on the air. He had fallen back on his haunches, his entire body trembling as tears trickled down his cheeks.

He was muttering to himself and Lance his words too mangled for Keith to understand. Castellan had been no friend of the Duke’s but Keith doubted he had ever been around death before; especially a death that sounded and smelled so brutal.

Nemean was reacting with something like shell-shock; pure panic. Before Keith could stop him the Galran stood his full height and started to run pell-mell for Carmen, Lance pressed flush with his chest. He sprinted the remaining distance as fast as his legs could carry him nearly tripped over the red paladin as he passed him, howling to get the Mother’s attention as he picked up speed.

Keith leapt to his feet as well Bayard flashing into a sword as he saw Heonar turn and catch sight of Nemean. He looked dazed for only a moment before he was after him the front of his uniform a gory, blood-splattered mess.

Despite himself Keith hesitated unsure what the best course of action was in the split-second he had an opening. He could reach Carmen- but would he have to defend her there? Was it better to intercept Heonar despite the warnings?

It was the single droid guard who answered his question for him. Keith heard the low-hum of a laser gun getting ready to fire and his feet were moving before his brain had fully grasped what he was doing. Swerving mid-step Keith threw his sword at the drone as it took aim at Nemean. There was a satisfying crunch of metal followed by sizzling circuits as the Bayard sank up to its hilt in the robot’s chest.

It took a only a moment for the red paladin to retrieve his Bayard and as he turned Keith could see Heonar closing the distance between himself and Nemean. Although the Duke was closer to the Mother he was slower, weighed down by Lance and for a horrifying instant Keith was sure that he wasn’t going to make it; Heonar was hurt but he was still fast-

Then the sky *split in half.*

Heonar stared up eyes-wide and Keith could only do the same. A wormhole had opened near the Domain ship and something indescribably massive was sliding, sinuously out of it. It was a monstrous...*creature* and its long, segmented body escaped the wormhole like a whale breaching from the ocean.

Weaving its way through the sky with absolute grace the creature turned green eyes the size of small moons on the Galran warship still heading towards Vell and opened its cavernous, endless mouth. The sound that came from it was more a feeling than a noise. It made all the skin on Keith’s body crawl, the sunken-pitch liquefying his insides.
Keith’s body crawled, the sunken-pitch liquefying his insides. The Mother returned that monster’s call joyously and for once she looked...small. She was so elated by the spiky, system-sized space worm’s appearance that Keith couldn’t help but smile with her even if he didn’t quite understand what was happening. Any other time seeing something so incredibly enormous and alien should have been nothing short of horrifying but Keith’s chest was filling with warmth and his smile widened when the thing took out a line of Galran shuttles with a tiny flick of its tail.

<Keith! They came Keith!! They-I-I can’t believe it.>

“Carmen is that...”

She cooed and called out again her voice ringing over the field and beyond.

<They are my Ancestor, my friend, my family; Weblum!>

The red paladin took his eyes off the very one-sided battle in the sky to make sure Nemean was alright. It was not a surprise to see Heonar had stopped watching as well his attention back on the enemies he could reach.

Nemean had made it to Carmen and Keith was only inches away. He stood between Heonar and the Mother, Bayard raised and body tensed. Carmen had pulled the Duke onto her back, safe in her tendrils. She reached out and wrapped a comforting soft appendage around Keith’s chest as something exploded above them and the sky flashed a dark shade of reddish-purple.

Heonar’s eyes flashed in the haze and he stared at them with something beyond anger, beyond insanity—something that had disturbed Keith down to his core. When the general spoke the growling spitting rage was gone replaced by a quieter sort of fury.

Blood dribbled from his lips as the Galran spoke.

“You, Paladin whelp. How did you do this?”

Keith felt himself being lifted up into the air and he glanced back at Carmen who was still smiling. She didn’t even let the red paladin answer she held him close to the side of her head near her eyes; one of which was now milky pale and sightless.

<You should have listened to your fellow General. He warned you of what a Vell Mother is capable of.>

Keith struggled against Carmen’s grip when he saw Heonar looking for somewhere to strike her. She seemed unfazed even as he took a shambling step closer.

<Galran, the Olim do not kill unless we absolutely must. The Mother above all has long vowed that all life and all quintessence is sacred...or at least I had been taught as much. I guess I should thank you for interrupting the scrim cycle...for bringing the corruption to my attention.>

In a gentle fluid motion that was almost like a dance Mother Carmen deftly unhooked Lance’s scrim from Keith’s back and pulled the blue paladin’s limp body from Nemean’s nerveless grip. The Duke let her and Keith could hear him sobbing, possibly from relief.

Holding Lance carefully with several tendrils the Mother pressed his hair away from his face and removing his oxygen mask with daintiness that seemed impossible for her size. Keith felt his heart drop into his stomach; it looked like they were too late. It didn’t even look like Lance was breathing.

The explosions above were lessening in intensity. Bits of debris were falling like shooting stars into the outlying plains. A brief glimpse upwards was enough for the red paladin to know why Carmen had wanted to Lions out of the way. The Weblum destroyed indiscriminately, wrecking anything that remotely posed a threat to its birthplace.

It was also the only thing keeping Heonar from striking. His ears flicked skyward and he kept shooting glances up as he made steady progress towards the Mother.

He licked bloody lips as he sized Carmen up, muttering like a lunatic under his breath.

“You’ll be hard to kill but I’ll find a way...Size means nothing to a Galra—”

Keith couldn’t think—he could barely breathe. He still had his Bayard clenched white-knuckled in his hand but it was hard to parse out anything but Lance. His panicked thoughts started to loop repeating: _too late, too late over and over again._ Carmen was holding Lance but he was still death-pale, death-still...death-

<Take your life Heonar but only because I know that if I do not you will hurt the ones I love...you already took someone important from me and I can’t allow you to do it again but...I thank you for the help your about to give...and I apologize.>

Lifting Lance up to slightly in front of her face where she and Keith could see him the Mother took a deep breath; her entire body puffing up from the effort. Her tendrils undulated out around
her body then dropped down spearing into the dirt and grass around her like tent poles. Heonar had to jump to avoid one a confused look coming over his cruel face as he watched Carmen twist her tendrils into the ground.

He raised his sword and tensed to spring but was immediately preoccupied as the ground around Carmen illuminated, vibrating along with the hum emanating from low in her enormous abdomen.

The Weblum sang a single warbling note to the Mother and Keith watched in awe as auras of shimmering light appeared around every living object for miles around. The grass, the fireflies and General Heonar all glowed with dramatically different colors; the grass in shades of gold and lavender, the Galran in a violet so dark it was nearly black.

Keith noted that he and Carmen were not glowing and he assumed Nemean, who he couldn’t see from where he was pressed to the Mother’s jaw, wasn’t either. It wasn’t hard to guess what he was seeing, the swirling mass of pulsing light looked similar to what he saw during Allura’s healing stints with Lance; it was quintessence and the Mother was calling to it.

Tendrils ran over Lance’s legs and arms, his neck and forehead. More of the soft, pliable tentacles lowered the dormant scrim to his chest and wound around him so it would not budge. Carmen’s humming song grew steadily in strength until it was almost painful but Keith didn’t notice. He watched enraptured as the quintessence started to move out of the grass in the dreaming field, streaming in an orderly fashion towards the Mother.

Little rivulets of light trickled into larger tributaries until rivers of gold, lilac and orange were rushing forward. They moved up through the Mother’s feet, through her tendrils and directly into Lance’s limp body. Using herself as a conduit Carmen channeled what had to be an insane amount of energy out of the Vell and into the blue paladin until his body was barely visible at the center of a super-nova of prismatic light.

It was just like the meditation room, the grass-filled dome in Carmen’s quarters in the Citadel. When she had healed him Keith could recall waking up in a swathe of dead grass and now he understood why. As she drained every last drop of quintessence from each blade of grass it would droop and fall to the ground, a dry, lifeless husk.

To heal something small like a broken bone or a headache it wouldn’t take too much quintessence but this- what Lance had been through…

Keith snapped his gaze down to Heonar as the first shriek ripped from his chest. His deep, reddish-purple quintessence was being sucked from his body like he was just another blade of grass. The fur on his cheeks and ears turned silver, then white and his muscles collapsed on themselves as he sagged; aging decades in a matter of seconds. He dropped his sword and went down on his knees yowling as his joints betrayed him.

Grinding his teeth together Keith forced himself to look away. It was a shitty way to go even if Heonar deserved every agonizing second of it. The red paladin looked at Lance instead marveling as an endless torrent of quintessence flooded every inch of his lanky body; illuminating him like a tiny sun.

It didn’t take long for Heonar’s screams to stop and not long after the surge of quintessence slowed to a trickle and finally stopped. Keith hoped that no one else had been caught in the- whatever had just happened. He had a feeling The Mother had made sure all her subjects were a safe distance away just like she had with the paladins.

The Weblum, now seemingly done with its rampage, had utterly destroyed every last trace of Heonar’s ship and the Galran fleet accompanying it. With a last unintelligible cry to Mother Carmen the creature slowly turned in a languid somersault and opened a wormhole effortlessly. Sinking out of sight and leaving behind a complete and jarring silence.

Vell looked like a wasteland.

The remains’ of Heonar and Castellan remained where they had fallen, half hidden by dead grass. Pieces of crashed ship pocked the hopeless, empty landscape and Keith felt guilt well up inside. It felt like he had done this…brought this here. Even if that wasn’t the truth he still felt responsible somehow.

Mother Carmen crooned, lowering him and Lance to the ground at the same time.

<It’s alright Keith. The grass will grow back…it always does.>

Propping Lance and his dull, empty scrim against her chest Carmen set the red paladin at his side. She sounded exhausted but very content, almost blissful. Keith held his hands towards Lance but fear made him pause. The blue paladin’s eyes were still closed but his skin was no longer pale and his expression was-

A shy tendril nudged Lance’s cheek.

<Lance? Wake up sweetheart.>
Lance stirred, took in a deep easy breath and yawned wide. Keith felt his heart stop, his eyes well with tears. The blue paladin struggled to get his eyes open mumbling something about sleeping in on Saturday but stopped when he saw Keith hovering above him.

Frowning Lance reached up to put a concerned hand on the red paladin’s shoulder.

“Keith… You ok?”

Chapter End Notes

This took… so long to write. It was one long string of action that was the culmination of chapters and chapters of setup. I wanted an action-packed and hopefully satisfying solution to the whole Lance has been dying for 19 chapters problem. Some epilogue is all we got left folks!

Also. A tidbit I didn’t mention previously. An Auricle is not only another name for the atrium part of the human heart it is an interior part of a blade of grass. The meaning of the position was kind of in the name the whole time.

ALL THANKS TO CJ MY BETA BLASTER.

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