**The Future Freaks Me Out**

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### Summary

They were the scratched-out afterthoughts of the people who never wanted them in the first place.

They were the black eyes covered up with the wrong shade of foundation, the unheard voices crying out in the night.

They were the products of a system so flawed that it destroyed, beyond repair, everything meant to come after.

They didn't expect to survive.

Keith never expected to survive.

- Keith's had a hard life. It's a struggle to un-learn a worldview that's been the unassailable truth for as long as he can remember. It's even more difficult when you factor in an intergalactic war, being half-alien, embarrassing crushes on people who are obviously straight, and ... some weirder, more unexpected surprises along the way.
Buckle your seatbelts; we're going on an *adventure*.
Someone please just give Keith a hug and some hot chocolate. He's sad and lonely. Even when he isn't.
“Guys, I think they're onto us!” Pidge’s voice crackles through Keith’s comm, followed immediately by the sound of gunfire and a panicked shout.

“Pidge! Are you okay?!” Shiro cries. “Where are you?”

“I’m good! I’m good.” A distant explosion sounds in Keith’s helmet and he cringes. The floor beneath his feet trembles violently, which means Pidge is either nearby or seriously fucked up part of the base. “But we should probably get out of here. I’m in my Lion now.”

“Same!” says Hunk, and Keith curses and turns back towards where he left Red, mission abandoned in favour of getting the hell off this Galra base. It was technically only reconnaissance, anyway. They can use any other ship to steal information. Maybe.

“Well, I'm a little far,” he growls, skidding around a corner so sharply he has to use his hand to support himself. He comes face to face with a Galra soldier. Face to barrel with a gun, actually. Immediately, he recoils and activates his bayard, aiming to stab the soldier through the chest, but the Galra gasps and drops his gun, throwing his arms up in surrender. “Um,” says Keith, frozen with his sword pointed at his heart.

“Don't. Go ahead to your Lion. I'll protect you.”

“What?”
This soldier isn't any Marmora member Keith has met -- and he's sure he's met them all -- nor does he carry their Blade

The metallic clanging of doors opening and footsteps thundering down the hall remind Keith that he doesn't really have the time to be questioning these things. He glares scrutinizingly at the soldier’s face before relenting and retracting his bayard. “Thanks,” is all he says before continuing down the corridor, leaving the Galra soldier to pick his gun up and take off in the opposite direction. It's fishy, but as he watches over his shoulder the soldier doesn't make any move to attack while he has his back turned, just disappears around the corner. Gunfire lights up the corridor. Keith’s suspicion only grows; he exercises extreme caution on his way out of the building, around the outcrop of rock where he's hidden Red. No one comes his way.

The Red Lion lowers her head and lets Keith back into the cockpit. He spends several minutes immobile, hands on the controls, wondering what the hell just happened and waiting for some kind of ambush.

Nothing happens.

Finally, with a frustrated growl, he takes flight and brings Red back to the castle lingering outside the atmosphere. He hears the rest of his team chattering over their comms, all safely back in their Lions and headed for the castle. He almost wants to ask if anyone else caught that interaction, heard his surprise or confusion during their escape, but they're all so caught up in their own worlds none of them have even said a word to him since before he left the Galra ship.

“Paladins, I need you back here now!” Allura’s face pops up beside him, tense and clearly distraught with their mission failure. “The Galra are launching a fleet and it's coming in fast.”

Keith practically crashes Red into her hangar and joins the chorus of “All good”s. He's just sitting down by her front paw and removing his helmet when he feels the ship start a wormhole jump.
doesn't bother to get up and join the others yet, just leans against Red's leg and stares down at the helmet in his hands. “Who the hell was that?” he asks her, but all she does is lay down beside him and rest her head on her paws.

It would appear there are other traitors among the Galra. This is information he should share with his team. He should, but something doesn't feel right. Something … off about that soldier that he can't even comprehend. He flops back with his head on Red's shoulder and groans. His brain hurts. He should be dead right now, he thinks, and that should probably scare him, but he's too preoccupied with who the fuck that soldier was and why he saved him for no apparent reason.

“Keith? Where are you, buddy?” Lance's voice is muffled and almost inaudible. He pulls his helmet back on.

“Sorry, got distracted. I'm on my way up.”

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He dreams about the strange Galra soldier, a distorted face hovering over him, muffled voices speaking to him and distress, pure and immobilizing. When he wakes, his breathing is too fast and he feels genuinely distraught.

It must finally be sinking in that he almost died today, or at least that he could have died.

“What the fuck?” he mumbles, rolling over and out of bed, despite the fact that the clock Pidge modified and mounted on his wall says it's 2:40 in the morning. There's no way he's going back to sleep now, anyway.

Hunk finds him a few hours later, half-awake with his elbows on the kitchen counter and his face almost touching a lukewarm cup of something bitter and greyish that seems to have caffeine in it. “I didn't take you for the kind of person to like coffee. Thought you'd like tea.”

“I don't think this counts either way,” Keith says into his cup, not even raising his head to look at Hunk.

“Keeps you awake, at least,” Hunk says, shrugging and settling into the seat beside Keith with his own cup.

Keith snorts. “I dunno about that.”

“...Want breakfast?” Hunk asks after staring him down analytically for a few moments.

“Please.”

They fall into easy conversation while Hunk cooks, which consists mostly of Hunk talking and Keith nodding and mumbling along until his weird Altean coffee equivalent is gone and he stands to pour another.

“How long have you been up?” Hunk asks, and he just shrugs because he knows it's a little bit ridiculous.

“Couldn't sleep.”
“Did something happen yesterday?”

He wants to tell him, honestly. Wants to, but knows he can't because of the horrible bubble of apprehension that grows in his gut when he thinks about it. “No, I just...you ever think how weird this is?”

“How weird what is?”

“Our whole situation. We just completely disappeared off the face of the Earth -- literally -- and now we’re fighting aliens in space like it’s no big deal.”

“Honestly, I think about that a lot,” Hunk says, turning back to the food he’s preparing. “It’s best to just … take it for what it is, I guess. Remember that one day we’ll all be back home, safe.”

“Optimistic.” Hunk gives him a withering look and he puts his hands up in a mock surrender before turning to take his mug back to the island. “Just think this whole thing’s a little ridiculous, is all.”

“Oh, well, I just ignore that and focus on the future. And not dying. Not dying is a good thing to focus on. I don’t think I want to die in space and then my family will never know what happened to me and ... my poor mom, I mean as it is she probably thinks I’m dead already--”

“Hunk!”

“Yeah?!”

“Calm down. You’re going to be fine.”

He nods frantically for several seconds while pouring their breakfast onto plates. “Yeah, yeah, sure, I mean ... yeah, y’know, just, the vacuum of space, aliens trying to murder us, but yeah, it’s, it’s good.”

“Hunk, seriously. We won’t die out here. Don’t think about it.” Truth be told, he doesn’t quite understand the fear of dying in space and leaving someone behind on Earth, but seeing the pain in Hunk’s eyes, he feels an overwhelming desire to care for one of his closest friends. “Um, tell me about her. Your mom. And your family.”

Hunk slides onto the stool beside him and sets two plates of ... well, something with actual substance on the counter. Definitely plants, which don't really seem like a breakfast food, but at least it isn’t goo. “Well, my mom is really cool. She's the one who wanted me to join the Garrison, and I thought she was crazy. But she insisted I was ‘too smart to waste the opportunity’, and then pretty much dragged me there. She's, uh, kind of intimidating when she's determined. I'm glad she did, though, or I wouldn't have met all you guys. She's hard-working, too. She raised my sister and I by herself, and I don't think I ever heard her complain once. She's … she's great, and I do miss her, but--! But I know that what we're doing here is super important, and even if I could go back in time and change everything, I'd still get in the Blue Lion and come here to defend the universe with everyone.”

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Even as he says it, Keith can see the uncertainty in his eyes, the wistfulness. He doesn't have to wonder what it's like to miss his family, because he's been missing them since his infancy. He just … isn't sure what he's missing. “It's alright. To, y'know.” Keith is deplorable at this heart-to-heart thing, stumbling over his words and moreover, not sure they're even the right words. “To wish things had gone differently. Miss your family. That kinda stuff.” Eloquent, Keith. Worthy of an Oscar. He barely stops himself from dropping his head onto the table in humiliation.

Hunk sighs. “Yeah, I know. But, you get it, right? We all miss someone.”
“Well, I mean. I don’t.”

“What?”

“I don’t miss anyone from Earth,” Keith says through a mouthful of something leafy and delightfully crunchy. Breakfast salad. He likes the concept and the taste.

“What?! Not even your parents?”

Keith raises an eyebrow at him. “No? I don’t have parents. I … thought you all knew that.”

Hunk is gaping at him through a mouthful of half-chewed leaves. He swallows them hastily, very clearly almost choking. “No, we didn’t. At least, I didn’t. Why didn’t you tell anyone? Is that why you were living in the desert alone? What happened to them? Do you have any siblings? Who raised you? Oh my god wait I’m getting invasive you don’t have to answer those if you don’t want I just … I can’t believe I didn’t know I mean I should have guessed but I probably wouldn’t have wanted to jump to conclusions even if I had any clue…”

Keith just calmly munches his breakfast salad and waits for Hunk to finish. Sometimes it's just better to let him wear himself out when he starts babbling. When silence finally falls over them, Hunk is staring at him expectantly. “My dad died when I was a kid. I don't know how. I never asked because I didn't want to think about it. I dunno what happened to my mom. Maybe she died, too. Maybe she just left. No matter what, I don't remember so I can’t really miss them properly.” It’s only kind of a lie. He knows, now, what happened to her, but he isn’t prepared to face that reality any more than he was when it initially happened.

He's really an orphan, now.

“Oh,” says Hunk, contemplative. “I'm … sorry.”

“Don't be,” Keith shrugs, but even as he says it he remember the terrible experiences he had at the orphanage and the foster homes and wonders if, should anyone find out, they'd feel sorry for him anyway. “Some kids just don't have parents. It doesn't really change anything. I just don't have anything distracting me from our mission, honestly.”

Pidge meanders into the kitchen then, rubbing her eyes and yawning widely. She takes a couple minutes to stretch before she sits down. She looks as tired as Keith feels.

“Pidge,” Hunk begins warningly.

Pidge blinks at him a few times, weary and uncomprehending. “What?”

“Where did you sleep last night?”

“...Hangar,” she says sheepishly. “I didn't mean to, though.”

Hunk pinches the bridge of his nose and stands to load a plate of breakfast salad for her. “You should really go to bed at a more reasonable hour. Like, in your actual bed.”

“Eh,” Pidge mumbles, then stuffs her face with food before Hunk can pester her further.

They eat in silence for a couple minutes before Shiro enters the kitchen, significantly more awake and alert than Keith and Pidge. He and Hunk start chatting amicably over their breakfast, a painful juxtaposition to the disheveled and disgruntled state in which Keith and Pidge are shovelling laborious forkfuls of leaves into their mouths.
Allura stops on her way to the dining hall and backtracks, popping her head into the kitchen and raising an inquisitive eyebrow. “Is breakfast…not in the dining hall this morning?”

“Uh.” The four people sitting at the table all exchange looks.

“We just…didn’t get that far, I guess,” Hunk says, and everyone around him nods.

Lance takes the opportunity to perform much the same routine as Allura; his momentum carries him a couple steps beyond the kitchen doorway before he freezeis and turns to where Allura is standing. “What’s happening?”

“Dining room was too far,” Keith mumbles, stabbing his salad weakly.

“It’s like four more steps down the hall.”

“Shut up and sit down.”

Allura has already taken a seat between Shiro and Pidge, helping herself to the food Hunk prepared, so Lance sighs and sits beside Keith. He’s as awake as everyone else, if not more so, all showered and exfoliated and minty-fresh, leaving Keith and Pidge to continue wallowing alone in their exhaustion.

“Where’s Coran?” Lance asks, munching noisily on his breakfast.

As if summoned, Coran saunters through the door with a small tablet-like device in his hand and a stack of books tucked under his arm. “Good morning, Paladins! Princess! I noticed you’ve foregone the actual dining hall this morning in favour of closer facilities.”

“Bingo,” Keith says into his salad, and Pidge snorts.

He sets up an entire study session opposite the rest of the crew, not bothering with food. He delves into his books while Allura and Shiro carry a conversation with him, and as much as Keith would like to envy his multitasking abilities as Coran pulls up several holographic charts and starts layering them over the pages of the books he has open around him, he’s honestly too tired for something like jealousy.

He needs a nap after breakfast.

When they’ve all finished and Coran has begun to clear the table, Keith finds that Hunk is following him down the hall. He turns to face him and Hunk leaps to attention several paces back.

“Did you … need something?”

“I just, uh, I was wondering if you wanted to talk, about…”

Keith stares at him for a couple drawn-out seconds, uncomprehending. “Being an orphan?” he finally says.

“Well, yeah. He’d like that. But the exact things he’d have to talk about pull an enormous dark curtain over the notion, obscuring any desire to participate such a conversation with Hunk. His stomach hurts suddenly. He hasn’t done anything wrong but he can’t help but to feel ashamed.

But Hunk’s sincerity is commendable and more substantially, authentic. Keith smiles at him.
“Thanks, Hunk. Um, maybe not yet, though.”

“No, I get it, yeah. Just, whenever you want.”

Nodding affirmatively, he turns from Hunk and continues towards his room.

*

Ten minutes into his nap (if it can be counted as such this early in the morning) Allura is knocking on his door demanding that he join everyone else for training. He groans exaggeratedly into his pillow, but gets up and leaves the room anyway.

Allura looks him over as he exits the room, rubbing at his eyes to expel the weariness heavy on his eyelids. “Are you feeling alright?”

“Fine. Just didn't get much sleep last night.”

“Have you been having nightmares? I know some of the other Paladins--”

“No, no, nothing like that. I just stayed up late, is all.”

She squints at him but doesn't push it, nudging him towards the training room and going off in search of Pidge.

The Gladiator is on him the moment he sets foot in the training room, overwhelming the nagging thoughts of Galra soldiers and strange dreams that have been plaguing him as adrenaline floods through him. He tucks and rolls, the way they've been practicing; when he stands again his bayard has already been unclipped from his belt and activated. Hunk whistles.

Pidge is in for a surprise when she arrives.

Shiro is on the Gladiator before it's turned fully to where Keith is now crouched in a defensive position, knocking it several metres backwards to where Lance waits with his bayard aimed at its back. It stumbles and nearly overbalances when he shoots it, but catches itself and rounds on Hunk, who is equally prepared and blasts it into the wall.

“Excellent! Spectacular teamwork!” Coran trills, and a panel in the far wall opens to reveal...a second Gladiator.

“Are you kidding?” Keith cries, watching the first Gladiator right itself. They've barely reached a point where they can defeat one! He clashes directly with second robot, almost too preoccupied to notice Pidge enter the training room and immediately join the fray. She actually catapults onto the first Gladiator’s shoulders and tries to cram her bayard between its joints and directly into the sensitive machinery beneath its exterior, but she's knocked off before she can wedge the bayard into its neck. Shiro leaps forward to catch her.

It appears fighting is the only remedy Keith and Pidge have for their exhaustion at present. They're both more alert now than they've been since waking. Even space coffee does nothing in comparison to the energy that Keith feels while battling the Gladiators.

It takes at least an hour for the five of them to defeat both robots, but with the help of Pidge’s bayard they incapacitate them eventually. Coran goes below the training deck to drag them away...
from where they’ve fallen through the floor, grumbling about repairs, and Pidge and Hunk both light up and chase after him.

“I am dead,” Lance gripes from the middle of the room, splayed out on his back with his deactivated bayard laying at his side. “What’s that one Hamlet quote? ‘Oh! I am slain!’”

“I can hardly pity you when dick around quoting Shakespeare.” Keith gives him a look of amusement and simultaneous disdain.

“It’s called melodrama,” Lance corrects him impishly, shooting a shit-eating grin right back at Keith. “And anyway, it feels like my whole body was set on fire.”

Shiro interjects before their banter can escalate into something more, walking between them on his way out. “Look on the bright side: we defeated two Gladiators at once on the first try!”

“It took an hour,” whines Lance.

“We didn’t even have a choice,” adds Keith.

Shiro shakes his head and smiles in the frighteningly fatherly way he always does, and Keith takes the opportunity dash before they can get a lecture on ‘not having a choice who you fight outside of the training room either’. He slips his bayard back into his belt and makes for the door.

“Anyway. I have stuff to do.”

He sleeps until lunch, only waking because Lance comes knocking when he isn’t in the dining hall right away. He feels much better now, but his brain is still pushing this whole “Galra rebel” thing into focus, demanding his attention on the matter. Not that he doesn’t want to know what’s happening; it’s just giving him a lot of horribly anxious feelings, twisting in his gut every time he thinks about it.

He needs a distraction.

After lunch, Keith goes back to the training room and beats the living hell out of the newly-repaired Gladiators. One at a time, because he isn’t fucking crazy (like Coran apparently thinks they all are). He has to take fifteen minutes to sit down and breathe afterwards. At the very least, he stopped thinking about the Galra soldier for a while.

He honestly has no idea why it’s bothering him so much. Telling someone suddenly doesn’t sound like such a terrible idea.

Opportunistically, Shiro enters the training room at that exact moment. “Keith?”

“Shiro,” he says, still seated against the wall and breathing heavily.

“Have you been here since lunch?”

“Hm.”

“Is something bothering you?”

Well, if he doesn’t say it now he’ll lose his nerve. “Yesterday…” he begins, unsure how exactly to phrase this, “while we were escaping that base, there was a Galra--.”

Lance bursts through the doors, howling with laughter, and Pidge a breath behind. They collide when Lance skids to a stop and Pidge doesn’t have time to react properly, resulting in a heap of idiot in the middle of the room. “Sorry, did we interrupt…?” Lance asks from beneath a still-
“No! No, it’s fine,” Shiro tells him, and tilts his head towards the open doorway while looking expectantly at Keith. “Let’s talk outside.”

It’s a damn miracle Shiro understands him so well (but then, Shiro is a freakishly perceptive person). Keith nods wordlessly and gets to his feet, ignoring Lance’s suspicious look as he and Shiro go out into the hall together.

“There was a Galra?” Shiro prompts under his breath while they walk side by side down the corridor, towards the main control room. “What did they do?”

Keith detects the hardness in his voice and shakes his head, throwing his hands out in exasperation. “That’s the thing! He didn’t do anything. He...I think he helped me. He didn’t try to attack me, and I think he fought off the drones that were chasing me.”

Shiro has stopped walking by the time Keith has stopped talking. “So...are you implying this soldier was a rebel?”

“I don’t,” Keith rubs a hand down his face, “I don’t know. It was just so...weird, the whole thing, and it’s been bugging me ever since.”

"With the Blade?" Shiro asks, looking increasingly bemused by this conversation.

"No one we've met. No blade, no insignia, didn't mention anything about who he was or why he wasn't murdering me on the spot!"

“I think we need to have a team meeting.”

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The gears in Pidge’s head are turning so fast, she’s opened her mouth to speak before Keith is even finished relaying his tale to the rest of Team Voltron. “If there are more rebels in the Galra army, they’ll want to form an alliance with us, right? We should do more recon; any of the info we steal could contain hidden messages meant for us.”

“Well, I suppose that would be a possibility, yes.” Allura is standing in the middle of the room, eyes down and lips pursed in thought. “Unfortunately, we haven’t found any sort of hidden messages in the information we’ve already obtained.”

“But now one of the rebels knows that we know about them. So maybe they’ll start slipping stuff in and hoping we steal it,” Hunk suggests.

“I say we target a small base and download as much of their available info as possible before moving on to bigger things. Maybe try the base we were at yesterday?”

It isn’t fondly that Keith remembers their latest reconnaissance mission. He can tell Shiro is in the same boat without even seeing his face. And while Pidge is definitely in the right mindset with this idea of starting where they already know rebels are present...

“That base will be on high alert after the yesterday’s incident, unfortunately. Ideally, we could target a large, secluded base. Coran and I will run some scans on star systems on the outskirts of
the Galra Empire and contact to the Blade to hear their thoughts on this. I assume that, if they were
aware, they would have mentioned something like this to us. For now, please practice your
reconnaissance skills -- that is, being subtle," Allura says pointedly, “and work on your team
bonding. Please.”

They all find themselves seated in a circle twenty minutes later completely against their will,
ridiculous mind-meld headbands jammed on their heads.

“One day you won’t need them at all!” Coran says cheerily in response to Pidge’s blatant
malcontent.

“Oh, yes. I want everyone to be able to look into my head even without a headband,” Lance
grumbles, equally perturbed by the continued use of mind-melding technology.

Keith experiences the misfortune of having all his attention directed elsewhere; that is, the image
of the Galra soldier his dreams had conjured, still distorted and blurred around the edges, and his
distress returns tenfold. He doesn’t even understand why he’s so preoccupied with this.

His focus flickers rapidly between opening his mind, creating an image of his Lion to join the
others, and that damn soldier that’s haunting him -- cycling through the thoughts like a slot
machine. Lance cracks open an eye after perfectly conjuring his own Lion and snorts at him,
which sets Keith off. This never happens to him and he understands the frustration of being
distracted during mind-meld now. “Yeah, so fucking funny, Lance! Not like I could’ve died or
anything!”

“That’s why you can’t concentrate? You’re scared? Chill out; you’re fine!”

It isn’t that, but Keith isn’t sure what else it is. He yanks the headband off and glares at Lance.
“No, it was just weird and confusing, okay? Can I get a break?”

“Lance!” Allura snaps. “You’ve all had difficulties with this at one point or another. You should
be helping Keith to relax and clear his mind, not antagonizing him.”

“Well said,” Shiro replies, eyes open and fixed upon Keith, a reassuring twinkle in his gaze.

Keith rolls his eyes, not because of Shiro, necessarily, but because he’s feeling more than a little
patronized and Lance is too much for him to deal with right now. They haven’t been actively
picking fights as much as usual, and technically this one is all him overreacting, but Lance is the
root of the problem regardless.

True to his nature as a teenager, Lance grunts indignantly and throws his arms out in a gesture that
clearly reads, “What the hell, I didn’t even do anything wrong.” Keith allows himself a smirk at
the sight, which only serves to exacerbate Lance’s contempt.

“Oh, please just bang and get it over with,” Pidge grumbles, pinching the bridge of her nose, and
Hunk snorts so hard Keith is pretty sure he sees snot.

What?

“...What?”

Pidge dissolves into a fit of laughter and Lance is so red Keith wonders if he might lose
consciousness. He honest-to-god doesn’t understand what Pidge is getting at. As though Lance
would ever, on any plane of existence, want to have sex with him. Of course Lance doesn’t like
him that way -- that boy is aggressively straight. “Um … alright then,” Keith says, and snickers a
little to himself as Lance looks progressively more humiliated.
His soul might actually be escaping his body at this point.

“That’d be a lot funnier if he weren’t the straightest person I’ve ever met,” Keith finally manages, and Lance raises both eyebrows at him before flopping backwards onto the floor and covering his face. Pidge topples over onto her elbows at Lance’s reaction, clutching at her stomach.

“Oh my god Pidge, shut your quiznak for once.”

“I don’t think you’re using that word right.”

Allura allows them a few more minutes to cool down and have a laugh with each other at Lance’s expense before insisting they give the headbands another shot. Keith is only minutely more successful this time: he manages to conjure an image of his Lion eventually, which is good enough, and they form Voltron and are immediately sucked into each other’s thoughts (a disaster of sensory overstimulation and general confusion, at least on Keith’s part). He thinks he’s more in Pidge’s head right now than anyone else’s, but Lance seems to be selectively rejecting Keith’s presence so he isn’t surprised this is where he ended up. It’s easier to function as arms, he supposes, when he and Pidge are more in sync than the rest of them.

They take Voltron on a test run around the training room, following Allura’s commands and then Shiro’s. He thinks these commands more than he speaks them. Keith gets a tingle in the front of his head and a picture of Voltron doing a somersault, using the information he’s given to execute the maneuver as well as he can. It doesn’t go perfectly, but they all tried and that’s good enough for Allura, apparently, because she lets them leave with some over-enthusiastic words of praise.

Keith can’t get out of there fast enough.

Pidge catches up with him halfway down the corridor, grinning savagely, and has just opened her mouth to speak when Lance tackles her to the floor and clamps a hand over her mouth. “No.”

“Uhh.” Keith says.

“Just go! I got this!”

Keith has no idea why he’s being asked to leave, but he does it anyway, unwilling to become involved in whatever drama these two are having. He disappears down the winding corridors to the sound of Lance screaming about Pidge licking him.

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“You, uh, you bored over there?” Hunk asks, amusement clear in his voice.

Keith, upside-down with his feet sticking out over the back of the couch, lolls his head towards Hunk and squints at him. “You ever notice there’s nothing to do on this ship except eat, sleep, and train?”

“And fix stuff,” Hunk offers, gesturing casually at the small machine he’s dragged into the room and set on the coffee table.

“Altean tech doesn’t make any sense.” Keith scrunches his nose at the thought. He’d considered himself adept at repairs and handling machinery up until the first time he tried to give Red a tune-
up and found himself entirely confounded, the inner workings of the creature beyond his otherwise wide range of jurisdiction with mechanical and technological skills. Never a master -- a self-taught artist, perhaps, turning any variety of dilapidated components from any variety of apparatus into something functional, the essentials of which only he could understand, mapped out in his brain from weeks and months spent exploring, repairing, rerouting, experimenting, until he felt electricity thunder through his creations as though it really was his own five senses pursuing the path his very neurons, with their own electrical currents, had orchestrated and perfected; heard the oil trickle through the framework because he understood exactly where and why and how.

A disappointment, to say the least, when he found the domain through which he’d so carefully carved his own path suddenly a million steps ahead of where he’d almost been, a new universe’s worth of functions and understandings and necessities to navigate, and brains that could grasp the concepts wholly and unwaveringly and for whom application of theory was child’s play. If nothing else, resentment keeps his hands off of everything that isn’t his own Lion.

Even then, he struggles to understand what to do with Red when she needs repairs.

Out of the well-rounded stubbornness he’s developed throughout his life, and a residual aversion to asking for help, he’s managed thus far. The only time anyone else has prodded around in Red’s innards (as far as he’s aware) was after the wormhole malfunction several months ago, and Keith had been there the whole time, obsessively storing every bit of information he could pick up on as every tech-savvy person on the ship worked together to return her to working order.

“I can help you figure it out if you’re that bored.”

“It doesn’t make sense,” Keith reiterates, taking care not to openly glare at the project Hunk is working on for fun like it’s nothing because of course he specializes in the one thing Keith only received a “satisfactory” in. Well, not that his group participation mark fared any better, in or out of the Garrison, but that doesn’t much matter anymore.

Hunk watches him a moment longer, gaze piercing, like he’s sorting through Keith’s brain, then shrugs and returns to his work.

Keith sighs and slides off the couch head-first, only twisting around to stand when he’s collided bodily with the floor. Surely this gigantic castle has something to do that isn’t training. He’s seen too much of that today (a sentiment he didn’t think could possibly exist until this moment).

As luck would have it, Lance is treading the same waters, shuffling down the corridor whining about how there’s, “Nothing to do on this big-ass ship but eat and sleep and bust my ass learning karate.”

“I see you find yourself without any responsibilities, Paladin,” Coran says before Keith can start mocking Lance’s petulance, sidling out of a storage closet with a crate in his arms. Panic flashes across Lance’s face and he makes eye contact with Keith over Coran’s shoulder, silently begging for help. Encountering Coran in their down-time is like signing their own death warrant. Except the “death” is cleaning duty for the rest of the day.

Not seeking to fall victim to this unfortunate game, Keith smirks and salutes Lance facetiously, backing away as fast as humanly possible before Coran can start his signature tangent about never having enough help around here.

“I have just the thing to remedy that, worry not!” Lance’s soul is making an attempt at absconding for the second time today -- he already looks like he’s withering away just with Coran’s proximity. Coran continues, “Films! I’m not sure how well they’ll work; they’ve been in storage for ten thousand years, after all! But the media room is the level below the Paladins’ quarters, if you’d
like to give them a try.”

He tilts the crate into Lance’s arms, immediately overbalancing him, so that he’s forced to reach out and steady him. “I got it. It’s good,” Lance says in an obviously strained voice.

Coran whacks him on the shoulder merrily, causing Lance to almost drop the crate a second time, and retreats into the closet he’s clearing out. Keith has frozen in the middle of the corridor, halfway through his escape, eyebrows disappearing behind his bangs as he stares after Coran in shock. No cleaning duty? Movies? There must be some kind of disruption in the fabric of the universe.

“I sense a disturbance in the Force,” Lance murmurs weakly from behind the crate full of movies. Keith has no fucking idea what the “force” is, but he steps forward to help him with his burden.

“You wanna watch these with me?”

“Yeah, I guess.” He doesn’t mention that he, too, was searching for something to alleviate his boredom, nor that this is exactly the solution he would’ve hoped for. It seems almost surreal, given that they’re still in the middle of an intergalactic war.

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“I have no quizznaking clue what any of these say,” Lance complains, sifting through the endless box of Altean films with increasing impatience.

“The covers don’t really help much.” Keith can’t tell if the movie he’s holding is a children’s movie or horror film. The lighting and image lean towards horror -- a young Altean girl alone on a battered chair in the middle of an empty room, clutching what must be some kind of stuffed animal, with minimal light. The letters, however, are huge and pink and rounded, like someone smeared bubblegum all over the case and called it a day.

“What’s this one about? What is this? What is wrong with aliens?” Lance is holding five different movies in his arms (Keith doesn’t know which one he’s been so offended by), sprawled out on the floor in a defeated heap.

“Just,” Keith tosses the children’s horror film onto a pile of other incomprehensible bullshit, “just pick a random one and try it.”

Which leads them to their next issue: where the hell is the television? Lance pops open a case to reveal what looks like a Nintendo 64 game. Keith grimaces as he remembers only having two controllers available at the group home, kids always fighting over who got a turn while he watched on enviously, too aware of his inferiority to even consider joining in. He plucks it out of its case to examine it. Reasonably, the only place it can go is the strange pedestal in the centre of the round room.

It does, of course, and the entire room goes dark before blue light bursts forth from the pedestal.

“Um,” says Lance, looking at Keith out of the corner of his eye.

Music starts playing before either of them can react, blasting outwards to fill the entire room. Lance steps noticeably closer to Keith, who’s equally bemused by the entire thing, until a holographic image of a field of flowers springs up all around them, the colour flickering momentarily between blue and multicoloured before finally settling on a vibrant array of green and
“Holy shit,” Keith breathes, stepping back as flowers sway around his feet, until he hits the wall. It vibrates and then folds inwards, leaving a small nook with a cushioned seat. He moves tentatively to sit and Lance follows suit, never removing his gaze from the three-dimensional projection.

“I’ve seen some pretty cool stuff on Earth, but this just…” Lance trails off as a figure appears in the distance, somewhere on the opposite side of the room but somehow further, a slender silhouette approaching from the horizon.

“I know,” is all Keith can say.

The film turns out to be some kind of Nicholas Sparks-esque (or at least that’s how Lance puts it) romance. Keith doesn’t really take issue with that -- he doesn’t have any dislike for particular movie genres, only a slight preference for action films.

The issue he does take, for reasons sitting directly beside him, is that the romance is between two men. Had Keith been alone, there would have been absolutely no problem. Unfortunately, Lance is with him, and when he finally catches on that the focus is the two male protagonists, he makes a horrified noise and noticeably jumps in his seat.

It lasts all of twenty seconds after that.

“We can watch something else. It’s cool if we watch something else, right?” Lance says, red-faced and running to the pedestal to smash buttons until the film freezes on a shot of the boys’ noses touching with their proximity. Blue flashes through briefly throughout the room again as the cartridge is ejected.

Something burns in Keith’s stomach, but he doesn’t think it’s anger.

“Uh. I guess.”

The next movie they try is safer. A comedy, about a group of friends in some kind of school setting. Lance relaxes while it plays, commenting on some of the stranger aspects of the social structure and education system.

They learn a lot more about Altean culture just from watching a couple movies than Coran could probably teach them by forcing them to endure an impromptu lecture.

“Hey, guys?” the doors slides open somewhere on their left and light from the hall outside floods in as Pidge strolls through. “Oh! What the -- Is this a movie projector? We have movies?! What?”

“Yeah, uh,” Lance blinks a couple times in the disorienting light, clearly groggy from their marathon, “Coran just found them today. You wanna watch?”

Pidge, hovering over the pedestal in the middle of the movie (the fifth, not counting the twenty minutes of the first one they started), forgets to respond to him for a moment, muttering something about light sources as she drops to her knees and feels along the bottom edge. “Uh, actually, Coran asked me to look down here for you guys. You missed dinner.”

Now that she mentions it, Keith is exceptionally hungry. And thirsty. And he kind of has to pee.

He meets Lance’s eye and can tell he’s coming to the same realization. They’d been so caught up in something that was vaguely familiar, something Earth-like, that they’d lost track of time.
Maybe Keith does miss Earth, just the slightest bit. Maybe it’s just space-fever. He doesn’t see any reason to go back, regardless.

He has everything he needs here.

“Wanna eat dinner here?” Lance asks.

“Yes,” Keith says, unhesitatingly.

“Wanna race to the kitchen?”

“Hell yes.”

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“Look, it’s totally a trope! I called that during the first movie. That’s exactly the kind of weird shit Alteans would think was funny.” Lance spews green goo on the floor in his excitement.

“Eugh, don’t talk with food in your mouth.”

“I’m just saying,” Lance quips, mouth still full. “It’s just like the idea of a get-along sweater. Or handcuffing people together to make them get along. That kind of idea, y’know.”

Keith is pretty sure there’s some kind of animal Coran mentioned that has its ears conjoined with others of its species. Or maybe they get stuck together? Regardless, Alteans appear to have adopted that bizarre trait as a movie trope for characters who dislike each other, or otherwise have a falling out.

They believe they’ve deduced a method of filtering the comedy from the rest of the bunch (it isn’t perfectly accurate; the second-last film they watched was horror, as apparently the concept of ghosts and the supernatural isn’t Earth-centric). Otherwise they’ve been successful, and Keith’s spirits are higher than he thinks they’ve been since he first left Earth.

Pidge declined their invitation, saying she had important things to do, but Keith is pretty sure she was lying, because she winked at Lance on her way out. He didn’t pry; it’s none of his business.

This is movie number six, and Keith is pretty sure he should be trying to sleep right now, but he’s too content as he is; slowly polishing off a plate of goo, having casual conversation with Lance, enjoying himself. It’s as though all his stress dissipated with his laughter, with his contentment, with Lance’s thigh pressed against his. He smiles broadly to himself and sets his plate aside, settling back against the wall to watch figures prance through the open space before them.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Lance watching him and frowns. “What?” he asks, turning to face him, suddenly hyper-aware of himself. He isn’t particularly fond of being watched.

Lance recoils and glares at him. “Nothing. You’ve got food on your face.”

Keith wipes at his cheek with his sleeve, trying not to blush.

“You got it,” Lance says, tucking his knees under his chin and focusing his attention on the movie again.
Keith follows suit, leaning against the wall behind him and letting the movie pull him back in with its vibrant colours and realistic rendering.

He doesn’t realize he’s fallen asleep until Lance is shaking him awake, bathed in the pale blue light emitting from the pedestal. “Keith, wake up. We gotta --” he yawns widely and excuses himself. “We gotta go to bed.”

Too exhausted to process, Keith closes his eyes again and mumbles confused assent, ready to go back to sleep.

“Nnno ya don’t.” Lance takes his hands and pulls him to his feet, but Keith refuses to acknowledge that he’s even awake, so he just slumps into Lance’s arm. “I’m tired, too.”

True; Lance does sound as tired as Keith feels. That being the case, they might as well just stay here and sleep. It isn’t the most comfortable, but Keith’s had worse.

Lance, unfortunately, has different plans, and starts dragging Keith towards the door. “Fuck you,” Keith growls, relents, and starts moving his feet to help. It takes them all of five minutes to get to their rooms, during which time Lance yawns about eleven times and Keith is pretty sure he momentarily falls asleep again.

“Here.” Lance bumps the door control with his elbow and steadies Keith, hand lingering on his shoulder. “Goodnight,” Lance says absently, and presses a kiss to his forehead.

“Night.” He stumbles into his room and falls into bed, spends a moment sliding his shoes off before pulling the cover over himself.

And suddenly, he’s wide awake and the place Lance’s lips touched his head feels like it’s detached from the rest of him.
Cave In

Chapter Summary

A glimpse into the daily lives of the castleship's inhabitants, plus a glimpse into the past of our grouchy emo boy.

Chapter Notes

Mostly snippets and time-skips, only slightly plot-relevant.
More important things next chapter, but towards the end this chapter is important.
Switches to Lance's POV partway through bc I just really need to let the world see him flirting with more random aliens (or, in this case, being flirted with BY random aliens).

“No, I want pizza! Just give me pizza!” Lance screams, gripping the sides of the food dispenser and using the provided leverage to plant his feet on the wall and do his damnedest to shake the useless piece of goo-filled garbage. “Give me goo one more time and I’m going to smash you! And then we’ll all be starving to death and we’ll have no choice but to go back to Earth where there’s actual good food with actual good texture!” His fingers slip and his entire body hits the floor with a comical thud. “Motherf-- oh! Hi, Keith. How long have you been here?”

Keith waggles his fingers mockingly at him from where he leans against the doorframe. “Long enough. And I don’t think it takes requests.”

“Well, I knew that,” Lance growls, glaring at him as he peels himself off the kitchen floor. “I’m just really desperate because I keep thinking about pizza and how good it tastes and how it doesn’t feel like goo in your mouth and...oh man, I’m making myself even more hungry for pizza. Or even a hot dog. Space sucks, man!”

“I’m sure if you asked, Hunk would...science up some space pizza or whatever he does.”

Lance looks momentarily contemplative. “It...wouldn’t be the same. I think it’d just make me more homesick.”

Keith scoffs, but there isn’t any fire behind it. He doesn’t like the cold feeling that bubbles in his gut at Lance’s distress.

“But...hey,” Lance says, “Wanna go see Red? I mean, I was thinking about visiting Blue today, so if you’re not busy...”
Keith shrugs. “Sure.”

There’s a flood of affection from his Lion as soon as he settles into the pilot’s seat, and he smirks and runs his hand over the dashboard. “Hey,” Keith says.

Red purrs, and Keith can feel questions mingling behind the warmth, regarding the events of the past few days. He conveys silent reassurance and she settles down immediately, the purring reverberating through his head. Instead of concern, the expanse of space opens up behind his eyes.

“Yeah,” he mumbles, “alright. We can fly.”

“Keith?” Lance says over the comm in the cockpit.

“Hm?”

“You heading out?”

“Yeah.”

Lance laughs. “Okay. Cool. We’re coming with. Try to keep up.”

At this, Keith’s competitive spirit blazes anew, and he grips the controls as all of Red’s systems boot up. Her fire is lit alongside his own, and he can feel more than hear the jabs she tosses at Blue as the hangar door slides open and they shoot off into the stars together, Blue trailing further and further behind as the gap between them broadens. “Sorry, what was that?”

“Go quiznak yourself!” Lance squeaks, obviously coming to terms with the fact that Red possesses the advantage in this situation. Blue stands no chance of winning, here.

“I don’t think you’re using that word right,” Keith says offhandedly.

Lance pulls up a vid-comm specifically to blow him an obnoxious raspberry, and Red’s laughter flows through the cockpit before she urges him to turn around, then seizes the limited control she has to tackle Blue backwards through space.

Lance’s ear-splitting shriek almost blows out the speaker on his control panel; Keith laughs uproariously as the two Lions tumble and grapple. They’re still affectionately teasing each other, and he wishes words from their Lions were more distinguishable instead of just a blur of visualizations and feelings.

“Your Lion is the devil! Your Lion is the devil!” Lance cries, and Keith laughs harder.

“Control her!”

“She’s playing. They both are!”

“I feel endangered!”

Red flips Blue over backwards so that she’s sent somersaulting towards the castle. “They feel restless,” Keith retorts. “It probably sucks being stuck in the hangar all the time.”

Lance is too busy screaming with rage to respond.
“Pidge, please, this is the dinner table. Have some respect.”

“Coran is literally doing the same thing,” Pidge points out, not even looking up from the data pad she’s dissecting.

Shiro flops his mouth a little, lacking a counterpoint, then sighs and starts eating his dinner again.

Coran rolls his eyes and slides the...contraption he’s reconstructing under the table, giving Pidge a very expressive look to indicate that she should follow suit.

“Keith tried to kill me today,” Lance says without warning.

“Wha-?” Keith flings his arms into the air, splattering some goo onto Lance’s cheek with the upward motion of his spoon. “I did not!”

“Did, too!” Lance, maturely, sticks his tongue out at him. “Shiro, yell at him.”

“I’m sure Keith didn’t try to kill you,” says a very exasperated Shiro, holding a spoonful of goo halfway to his mouth.

“I definitely could have died.”

“The Lions were playing; stop being such a baby.”

“You scared the f--quiznak out of me!”

“It wasn’t even me!”


“Shut up, Pidge!” Lance hisses, turning bright red.

“Are you telling me you can almost kill yourself crashing a ship and not even bat an eye, but when your Lion decides it wants to play you pee yourself?” Hunk crosses his arms and grins wickedly alongside Pidge, clearly up to involvement with her antics.

Now Lance throws his arms up in exasperation, giving Keith momentary satisfaction at his obvious aggravation. “I don’t even know why I bother trying to get you in trouble anymore!”

Pidge laughs so hard she spews goo out her nose.

*Bam*

“Jesus quiznakking fudge fucking -- cut your nails, Pidge!” Lance rolls off the couch and out
of sight, clutching his bleeding hand and writhing in pain. Pidge sits back smugly, claiming the cards Lance left behind before he can call her out on her unfair win. “Don’t play War with someone who hasn’t trimmed their nails, then.”

Keith...really doesn’t get this game. Everyone seemed very excited about it, but the rules are confusing and there’s a lot of information to process, both in the rules and during the game. He thought if he sat on the sidelines and observed, he’d catch on, but it appears to be yet another thing his brain can’t handle.

Even Shiro is playing, giving the spot Lance disappeared a disapproving frown; though his eyes are sparkling with mirth, and when he glances in Keith’s direction he smiles. “Want to join us now?”

Keith shakes his head. The only games Shiro ever taught him were basics, like Go Fish and Seven Up. These over-complicated card games are hopeless for him, even with Shiro’s patient guidance. He doesn’t even have to try to know that.

“Why am I always the victim in this house?”

“Shut up, Lance,” Pidge and Keith say at the same time; Keith cracks a grin as they turn to look at each other.

Shiro focuses his attention on shuffling the cards (Pidge looks distraught when he takes back the cards she stole). “Why not Seven Up for a bit? You’re less likely to get hurt that way.”

He sets a pile of cards in front of Keith and smiles softly at him, drawing Keith back in with everyone else.

“Look, I didn’t mean to murder Lance’s hand,” Pidge huffs. “C’mon, Shiro, I was winning.”

“You were cheating,” Hunk says flatly.

“Yeah, but I was still winning.”

“It’s foul play. We’re deducting points.”

“What?” Lance reappears instantly, his hair sticking up comically and his hand lined with several raw, red marks. A somewhat guilty look flashes through Pidge’s eyes. “We have a point system?”

“No, genius.” Keith rolls his eyes. “Hunk was making a joke.”

“You are all so cruel. Your Lions are wrong about every last one of you. You’re all evil. Galra spies sent here to torment me…”

Lance goes on like this for several more minutes. They tune him out.

Keith grins openly at Shiro as they start their new game.

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“Why?! Why?!” Lance screams, dragging his blankets over his head as the horrible, awful blaring of the alarm system assaults his poor ears. He just fell asleep. “Stupid aliens! I need sleep!”
He stumbles out of bed and starts dragging his flight suit on, tripping and crashing face-first into the floor. The lights in his room grow slightly brighter as they shift out of night mode to accommodate his actions.

He’s the last person in the control room, still grumbling in aggravation as he stalks through the door.

“Thank you for finally joining us, Lance,” Allura says, not even glancing in his direction as she scans the many projected screens around her. Several are flashing red. “Now, we have two slight emergencies.”

“Two?” Lance interrupts.

“Yes, two. One, a Galra fleet is approaching, albeit slowly. I think they are searching for us, but while they’re aware we’re in the area, they’ve yet to pinpoint our location, which means we could warp out of here before they find us.”

“Okay so, uh, let’s do that,” Hunk says, looking confused. There was no need for them to be awake if all they needed to do was make a wormhole jump.

“That brings me to the second problem. We’re being boarded. Whatever technology the ship is using, it’s interfering with my ability to create wormholes. Temporarily, at least. I cannot override whatever it is from here, so I want you first to go to the lower decks and eliminate the threat. If we can fix this before the Galra arrive, there will be no further need to fight.”

“Got it,” Shiro says.

“Good. You’ll find the ship that has docked directly outside the teludav. If anyone is entering, they’ll come through the repairs tunnel here.” She zooms in on a map of the castle and highlights the tunnels and their access points. “Go down there and detain them if possible. Once we understand what is happening, we’ll determine whether or not it is safe to destroy their ship and whatever technology is preventing the castle from creating a wormhole.”

Shiro sends Hunk and Pidge outside to keep track of the ship that’s blocking the teludav. As Keith, Lance, and Shiro, go tearing down the corridors and into the elevator, they’re provided commentary from their teammates.

“It’s so tiny,” Pidge scoffs, presumably pulling around the side of the castleship where they’ve been docked. “Looks like a pod for one or two people.”

“It doesn’t look very sturdy, either,” Hunk adds. “I wonder how it stays together all the way out here. Where did it come from?”

“Who cares? I can take it out. Allura, let me know when I can blast it.”

“How do they have the technology to freeze the teludav if their ship looks like that?”

Lance spots something moving up the corridor at the same time as Shiro, already ducking into a nook before Shiro’s even given a signal. He activates his bayard and looks up to see Keith squeezed into a nook straight across from him, sword in hand, then tilts his head to watch the intruder working their way through the ship. They seem to have torn open a panel on the wall and are running away with a bundle of pipes and wires in their arms, laughing gleefully. They disappear inside the teludav and suddenly several of the panels come flying out and smash against the wall.

“Shit,” Keith says, and lunges forward before either of them can react, skidding into the
teludav. Lance hears a shriek from the alien and runs after him, hot on Shiro’s heels. Keith is too rash for his own good sometimes. All the time, more like. They don’t even know what this is or what it’s capable of.

Keith, of course, because he has this crazy streak of luck despite his recklessness, is perfectly fine, and has this tiny, squirming, blue alien pinned under him with his knee pressed down between their shoulder blades. He looks up as Shiro enters and straightens his back, awaiting orders.

Shiro bends down and seizes the wriggling creature from under Keith, holding its wrists behind its back. It’s slimy, probably amphibious, and Lance unclips a pair of cuffs from his belt and snaps them on as tightly as possible, since it looks like it could easily slip out of them.

“Keith, go investigate that ship,” Shiro orders, pointing at the open panel to the repair tunnel with his free hand. “Give me a report over the comms when you’ve finished. Lance, come with me to the airlock bay.”

Lance nods and assists Shiro, who remains silent as they nudge along the strange blue alien, even though it struggles and yells at them in another language the whole way. “Shiro, what do we do with it?”

“For now,” Shiro says, opening one of the airlocks, and Lance experiences a brief moment of panic in which he expects Shiro to actually eject the little creature out into space (okay, it really isn’t that tiny, but it’s definitely under five feet), but Shiro just closes it inside and crosses his arms as it turns to face him, somewhat obscured from Lance’s view. “For now, we keep it here. Until we have a better idea of what’s happening. You.”

The alien seems to shift slightly closer to Shiro.

“Who are you? Are you working with the Galra?”

The alien is silent for a moment, then, “My name is Tsogzakomijhogegwin. I am, indeed, working with the Galra. They have come to attack. I have helped them in this.”

“Why have you disabled our ship?”

“Have not,” it replies. “Only the wormhole generator. Makes it easier for the Galra to catch you, right? That is what they’ve asked.”

“Is there anyone else with you?”

“No.”

Shiro hesitates, then sighs and switches the comm back on. “Allura, we’ve detained the intruder. I have them in an airlock. Do you want to--”

“Yes, I’ll be down in a moment. Coran, keep an eye out.”

“Hunk, Pidge,” Shiro says, “we’re gonna need your help in here in a minute. The teludav is in poor shape.”

“Roger that.”

“What happens if we don’t get it fixed before the Galra get here?” Lance asks tentatively.

Shiro sighs. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, I suppose.”
“Guys?” Keith’s voice comes over Lance’s feed. “There was some kind of tube attachment feeding into the teludav. I disconnected it, so I think we’re good to go. There’s a lot of pretty complicated tech in here, though.”

“Disconnected it how?” Lance asks suspiciously. He knows for a fact that neither Keith nor himself could ever qualify as “tech geniuses” the way Pidge and Hunk do. No way could Keith have figured out how to disable fancy tech on an alien spacecraft.

“With my bayard,” Keith says, like it should be obvious.

Shiro tilts his head up towards the ceiling and tries to hide his smirk. “With his...” he mutters, shaking his head. “Alright. I suppose that’s taken care of. Allura, are we destroying this ship?”

“Allura, the Galra are almost here! I want to let the others fix the teludav. Keith and I will...”
“Lance, watch the prisoner!” Allura cries, skidding around the corner with such speed and ferocity that she almost spins out of control. Almost, but she has significantly better reflexes than any of the paladins, who have, in fact, wiped out while turning corners on several occasions. “Do not let them out of your sight!”

“Wha--! Bu--!” Lance gesticulates frantically and gapes at the stunningly blue alien that’s caused literally all of their current problems. It grins cheekily back at him and winks, and maybe Lance is a tiny bit desperate but it (she, he assumes, based on how absolutely gorgeous she is) is very much attractive. He’s had this exact problem before, except he didn’t actually know she was not on his side back then.

This time he’s a little bit more mentally prepared when the alien in the airlock bats eyelashes that are definitely bioluminescent and disturbingly (but attractively) long at him, full lips curling into an even wider smile. “Y’know, I have some...favours with which I could repay you the kindness of releasing me,” she says, and each word has a slight trill to it, bird-like despite the lack of features reminiscent of any bird he’s ever seen. Then again, he’s still stuck in a very Earth-centric mindset.

He feels the faint rumbling of the particle barrier going up.

“If that’s a really not-subtle way of offering me a blowie or something, I think I’m gonna have to pass because as hot as you are, you’re a literal villain.”

“Correction: I am as much a victim as you. I do this and things of the like to survive with the Galra being always in charge, always killing for reasons they make up, always being oppressing all the races.” She looks genuinely angry as she finishes, uneven teeth digging into her lower lip. “I do this and things of the like so they choose to not kill me or otherwise.”

“Well, they’re trying to kill us all, if that makes you happy.”

“I knew you will defeat them anyways,” she says haughtily, rolling her eyes (or at least Lance thinks she is; she has no visible pupils, but the muscles around her eyes contract in such a way he can only assume she’s rolling her eyes at him). “Now I’ll be safe from these Galra longer. They sometimes repay actions of this kind with safety from them.”

Lance actually rolls his eyes at her and looks over her shoulder out the far side of the airlock, where he can see the Black Lion bulldozing through a cluster of Galra ships. This is extraordinarily unfair. He should be out there with the others, fighting. Not babysitting a prisoner like some underappreciated and underpaid security guard. The title is Paladin of Voltron: Defender of the Universe, not Paladin of Voltron: Babysitter of the Petty Criminals. He grumbles something about working in a museum to himself and slams his helmet down so hard on his head that he might have just given himself a concussion.

“All you have to do is make sure I don’t die or anything. I’m sure you can handle that, right?”

“Are you not tasked now with guarding me?” the alien calls as he’s in the middle of storming down the corridor. “I think you might like to know I am very much full of tricks in the sleeve, I think you say it. Though, I do not at current have sleeves, as the heat and humid on the home planet have been quite much.”

Lance watches Keith cause a small explosion among the fleet and groans, grabbing his bayard out of habit. He needs to be involved in this fight. Allura doesn’t need him here to keep an eye on her prisoner. Besides, it’s not like they’re going to keep her here forever; they have to let her leave eventually, probably with a slap on the wrist and a stern warning. “You’re well-secured. If you have to pee, just hold it. If your people even pee. Who even knows with aliens.”
She giggles and flutters her glowing eyelashes at him again.

He takes the elevator up to the same level as the hangar, then makes the laborious journey to his Lion. “Hey, girlie! We’re not supposed to be out there with them, which is stupid, so let’s just keep that between you and me, yeah?” He settles in the pilot’s seat and opens his communications channel again. “Keith, Shiro, I’m headed out to help.”

“Didn’t Allura tell you to stand guard?” Keith growls. As Lance exits the hangar, he watches the Red Lion do a 180 and take out several ships that tried to swoop in behind to attack.

“She’s not going anywhere! She’s stuck in the airlock. It’s all good!” Lance shoots an ice beam straight at a cluster of incoming Galra ships, immobilizing them. “I’m not gonna sit around and do nothing while you try to steal all the glory, Keith.”

“You shouldn’t disobey direct orders, Lance,” Shiro reprimands, and Lance sighs exaggeratedly.

“Listen, I’ll go back and check on her as soon as we’re done. I just don’t want to sit there while there’s a battle happening outside.”

A video feed appears beside Lance, and the moment he sees Allura’s face he throws his head back in frustration and groans, reaching out to cut off the call. “I got this! Geez!”

He watches Keith dive straight into the fray, disappearing amongst several ships, all of which turn to fire on him. As quickly as he descended, he twists Red upwards and sails straight out of the haphazard circle as the ships continue firing, causing them to shoot each other. Black flies right past the ensuing explosion, crushing a ship between her jaws.

He’ll never say it out loud, but that was cool as hell.

He maneuvers Blue forward into the battle, covering both of them (because, honestly, even Shiro is reckless sometimes, just more subtly). By the time Coran announces that the teludav is functional, there are hardly any Galra ships left, but it’s unnecessary to waste time and energy finishing them off right now, so he spins Blue around and heads for his hangar.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spots a little silver pod speeding away, looking as though it hasn’t had repairs in decades. “Oh, quiznak.”

He’s made his mistakes.

“You had one singular instruction, Lance!” Allura bellows, standing in front of the very obviously empty airlock. “And it was explicitly clear and devastatingly simple!”

“Keith did it,” Lance offers weakly, pointing at Keith over his shoulder.

“Okay, you literally cannot blame this on me, I wasn’t even in the castle.”

“Neither was I!”

“You were supposed to be in the castle!” Allura throws her hands up in the air and turns to storm off. “Bathrooms and infirmary, all month. No arguments.”
Lance hangs his head. He doesn’t really want to argue, anyway. He knows he fucked up.

A hand lands on his shoulder as Allura’s footsteps fade away. He expects Coran to be there, all weird pep talks and reassuring smiles and jokes that make zero sense but are still sometimes funny. Instead, he looks up to see Keith at his side. “Wanna go raid the kitchen?” he asks, a tiny smile playing about his lips.

Lance grins, but he knows it must look strained. “Y’know, Hunk made cake. Let’s go give it a try.”

Keith kicks the front of the desk repeatedly, watching the sole of his shoe flop lamely up and down with the motion. He remains resolutely silent despite the searching gaze fixed on him.

“Keith? I asked how you are feeling today.”

He kicks the desk harder, noting with satisfaction that a cup filled with writing utensils tips over and spills with a clatter.

“Are you upset?”

After several more minutes of silence, the lady behind the desk -- Kaitlyn: he knows her well after spending so much time here -- sighs and starts shuffling around in a drawer.

He chances look up and catches her still staring intently at him, droopy brown eyes almost disapproving. Keith immediately drops his head and resumes his assault on the desk.

“Here.” A chart of coloured faces lands in front of him. “Can you show me how you’re feeling?”

It only takes a quick once-over for Keith to pinpoint the exact emotion he’s feeling -- the red face, eyebrows drawn sharply downwards, teeth bared.

“Red,” he whispers.

“Why?” Kaitlyn asks.

Keith touches the bruise on his forehead and that horrible, boiling ache in his stomach resurfaces. “Lars hit me.”

“It was an accident,” Kaitlyn says, softly, like he might lash out again if she pushes it.

It’s never an accident. No one listens when he tells them that.

Kaitlyn waits again before speaking. “You hurt him very badly.”

“He hit me,” Keith reiterates, feeling the urge to cry clogging his throat. “He hi-hit me and said I’m dumb and bad and I can’t play with the normal kids.”

“Did he?”

Keith knows what she’s thinking. Lars isn’t like that. Maybe not with everyone, but he hates Keith.
“Are you sure you weren’t angry about something else and took it out on him?”

He doesn’t know why he even bothers defending himself at this point.

“Keith, Mrs. Ye tells me you’ll be going to a new foster home next week. Not everyone tolerates this kind of behaviour.”

He stands and starts walking towards the door. They never listen anyway. Kaitlyn doesn’t try to stop him anymore. Instead she sighs again and says to the closing door, “I’m very disappointed in you, Keith.”

He doesn’t go to dinner. He hides under his bed and cries, cradling the throbbing bruise on his head, until his roommates start filing in, then rolls out from beneath the bed and gets under the covers.

Lars doesn’t hesitate to throw his baseball at him again, this time catching him across the cheek.

“Turn the lights off, retard,” Lars says, then lays down to sleep.

Keith shuffles across the room to do as he’s told.
Let's Get Fucked Up and Die

Chapter Summary

Nobody is really..."right" in the head.
Right?
Keith Kogane is pretty sure the whole universe is trying to trick him into believing there are people who just function normally. Keith Kogane is no damn fool.

Chapter Notes

Here's that angst I promised. And then some more angst. It's not even heavy but Keith really needs a hug or 5000.
Warning for implied suicidal ideation, implied (very subtly implied) self-harm/self-mutilation, and very heavily referenced child abuse. The snippet from Keith's childhood at the end is the one with the child abuse mentions.
Extra warning for Shiro starting to sort through his PTSD, which is not explicitly mentioned but very much there towards the end.
Also: talk of medication and psychotherapy, Keith being generally angsty, slight dissociation, lots of juicy trauma, bullying, and character injury (Haggar being a ho tbh and Keith getting hurt bc he makes bad choices)

“Bless his soul. I don’t mean that in the sarcastic southern way, either. Literally bless Hunk’s entire being,” Lance moans around a mouthful of horrendous pink fluff that tastes almost exactly like chocolate cake. Kind of dry, more akin to cotton candy in texture, but have mercy, it tastes like happiness and third birthday parties (third specifically, because that’s the only one Keith remembers).

“Is he gonna be mad?” Keith wonders aloud, reclining against the wall behind the counter top (chairs are for nerds).

“Nah,” Lance mumbles, “he’ll be happy someone is trying it. I think it was made specifically for cheering people up.”

“Is it working?” Keith eyes Lance subtly, wondering just how oblivious he is to certain...events, from the other night, which he’s probably concerning himself with way too much.

But, like, the hell? They’ve managed several days without Lance so much as batting an eye and now that they’re alone he’s acting completely normal, so Keith just sighs and finishes off his cotton-candy-chocolate cake.

“Hell yes,” he sighs, and cuts them both another piece. “Hunk is like, the world’s best mom.
Okay, second best, because if my mom heard me say that she’d try to murder me with a shoe. But…” Lance jabs at Keith almost accusingly with his spork. “You can’t tell anyone I said this, but his cooking literally beats hers half the time, and I swear she’s a pro.”

Keith puts his free hand in the air as though swearing an oath. “I, Keith Kogane, promise to never ever tell another soul that you think Hunk is better than your mom at some things.”

“Good.”

“Aww, buddy, you think so?” Hunk strides through the door and scoops Lance up in a suffocating hug. “Is it really that good? I haven’t tried it yet.”

Lance smiles hugely at Keith and Keith honestly can’t stop himself from smiling back as Hunk loosens his grip but keeps his arms around Lance. “Except Hunk. Hunk can know I think that. Here, try.” He stabs into the cake and holds it up for Hunk to try, and it looks so domestic (romantic?) Keith has to look away for a moment.

No way he should feel jealous of them.

He’s never had a friendship like that before, not really, just a pseudo-sibling relationship with Shiro, but he almost wishes he could be that close with someone. He rolls his eyes at himself. He’s a grown man -- he’s just being whiny.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Hunk says, in a mock accent, as he chews the cake contemplatively. “I am the best.”

“That’s right you are!” Lance exclaims, positively glowing.

Keith snorts. Terrible as his impression is… “You sound like my dad.”

At this, Hunk’s jaw drops. He doesn’t say anything. Keith is pretty sure it takes a tremendous amount of effort.

“H-ooh my god. Don’t tell me you’re Texan or something?”

“We are done having this conversation now,” Keith tells Lance, pointedly shovelling the last of his cake into his mouth. “I’m taking some to Pidge and Shiro.”

As he loads cake onto two new plates and digs some clean sporks out of the drawer, Hunk cuffs Lance gently across the top of the head and whispers something about sensitivity. Lance only responds with a bemused and shocked look.

Strangely, he isn’t even upset; mostly amused at how weird his teammates (friends, maybe) are. Pidge tries to trap him in a conversation about the internal mechanics of the datapads (“They’re pretty much just magical.”) but he ducks out of the room with excuses about needing to go see Shiro. Because he’s a great damn teammate, is why. And a great brother. Sort of.

And he owes Shiro a lot, even more than he could ever possibly owe any of the others.

He sits with Shiro awhile, listening to all of his plans for training and team bonding exercises, and his woes about Zarkon and now, Lotor. How will they make the empire crumble, so that no one is available to assume a leadership role in the future? How will they get rid of that witch that Shiro despises?

How will they make sure none of their own are hurt in the process?
“I don’t want this kind of burden to fall on your shoulders, you know that, right?”

Keith is busy wondering why he’s so hung up on a damn forehead kiss, which is, like, the most platonic kind of kiss, and ‘why he can’t be just a tiny bit more straight’ (he doesn’t even try to pretend anymore). “Burden?” he asks, looking up to meet Shiro’s gaze.

“Having this many lives in your hands.”

“Like...the team?”

“Well, yes. As, essentially, my right hand--”

“Literally.”

Shiro chuckles. “Literally, my right hand, but more importantly as a friend, I don’t want you to ever have to feel responsible if...if something happens.”

This man is too selfless for his own good. If Shiro feels the need to take responsibility for the actions of his team, then why should Keith not, if ever he finds himself in a position of leadership? He has, briefly, led Voltron, and spent the entire time worrying constantly over everyone’s well-being. Hell, Pidge sneezed and he had a small heart attack, wondering if she was maybe dying or falling ill or -- oh no what would he do if something went wrong he needed Shiro he needed-.

Try though he might, Shiro could never get this past him.

“You don’t have to be responsible for the actions of others. We’re all competent, grown people.” Keith nudges him with his elbow. “Besides, I already know what it’s like to be in your position. Too late to tell me not to worry.”

Shiro purses his lips. “Hm. I suppose it must be.” He starts scrolling through the datapad on his lap again, absently.

*Good going, Keith. Just make him upset, that’ll sure make him not hate you.*

He closes his eyes and exhales deeply through his nose. “What I’m saying is, if you think it would be bad for me to try to take responsibility for every single person on this ship, you have to realize it’s bad for you, too.”

Shiro fixes him with an intensely world-weary look. There’s something he can’t entirely comprehend in his eyes, and he can’t seem to tear his gaze away, despite his typical aversion to eye contact. “You’re right. It’s just...not that easy.”

“I understand,” Keith blurts, even though he’s barely scraped the surface of that particular emotional abyss.

The vacant look disappears as quickly as it came, and Shiro ruffles his hair like he used to when they were kids. “Alright. I guess you do.” He doesn’t even mean it patronizingly. Keith just lets himself find something bad behind it.

Ah, so it’s going to be that kind of day.

He goes to bed as soon as he leaves the lounge.

*
He dreams about that damn Galra again.

Which is fine, he supposes. All fine and dandy, except he dreams about that damn Galra in his little shack out in the desert, and when he tries to leave Keith feels *panicked*, and then stupid about panicking as the door closes and he’s left...alone?

Maybe not alone.

He can’t turn to look around for anyone else in the room.

Why does he feel like he knows him?

Waking up is not a happy affair, either. The second his eyes are open, he hears someone talking outside of his room. He doesn’t take the time to register what they’re saying, or who it is that’s talking, or stop to think logically -- he just jumps out from under the covers and nearly cracks his head open with the force of throwing himself against the wall.

Something leftover from the red-tinted unease of his dreams and that gnawing fear he has yet to get over from so, so long ago holds him frozen in place until the voices (not even arguing, not that it much matters to his irrational, sleep-deprived thoughts) fade away, and even for several minutes afterwards.

He takes a blanket with him and goes to sleep in Red.

*

“You would sleep through a hurricane, I swear,” Hunk tells him firmly over breakfast.

Keith is still blinking the blur of sleep from his eyes. “Huh?” he responds, eloquently.

“No joke, I spent ten minutes trying to wake you up this morning. Zero response.” Pidge picks a spring out of her hair and flicks it aside. “I was about ready to set off the castle alarms just to see what would happen.”

“Oh. I wasn’t in my room,” Keith says. A millisecond later, he regrets it.

“What did you do, sleep on the training deck?” Lance quips, but that honestly is something Keith has done in the past (accidentally), and he wouldn’t be surprised if someone had noticed.

“Har, har.” He returns to his breakfast.

In retrospect, it was complete nonsense for him to pull a stunt like that. Like Red would make him feel any better? (She did). Regardless, he is *not* such a huge baby that he still needs to run away every time something goes remotely awry.

Really, nothing even *went* awry. He just overreacted to a perfectly normal occurrence. He grimaces.

He couldn’t even use the excuse of bad dreams to defend himself here. There isn’t any correlation
between the dream he had and his reaction to someone talking in the hallway except that, you guessed it: he’s a huge baby.

“You, uh, trying to glare your goo into submission there?” Lance asks, leaning closer to him and grinning slyly, like he’s making such a clever joke.

“Yeah, I just hate sustenance so much,” he retorts.

Lance laughs. “So, listen, we don’t have anything to do after training today and this whole castle is just generally super boring, so if you wanted to watch—”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, why not?”

Lance gives him a dazzling smile and claps him on the shoulder. “Alright! Meet me after training, then.”

*

If Keith is being entirely honest with himself (and he rarely is, so this is nothing short of a miracle) he really, desperately wants to feel appreciated.

Which is stupid, because he’s pretty sure he already is appreciated by Shiro. Sometimes. He hopes. However, he’s also acutely aware of the fact that everything can go wrong in a matter of seconds, so if Lance wants to spend time with him? Thank god.

And if Hunk wants to talk to him during whatever time they find themselves alone? He’ll take it.

And, he tells himself, next time Pidge wants to tell him all about her crazy robotics stuff, he’ll indulge her.

Why should anyone feel obligated to be nice to him if he doesn’t first show them his appreciation?

After showering and dressing, he seats himself against the wall opposite the door to the communal showers and waits for Lance. He did promise, after all.

He’s filled three pages of the tiny sketchbook he keeps in one of his utility pouches before the door opens and Lance steps out, all radiant and bullshit. “You take forever to shower.”

“Listen,” Lance says, channelling all the sass in the universe as he throws a hand out in front of him in a typical ‘talk-to-the-hand’ gesture. “I have a routine.”

“I’m well aware.”

Lance cracks open one eye to glower at him. “I have a routine,” he repeats, “and it is the difference between being ignored by hot alien chicks and being flirted with by hot alien chicks, which -- for the record -- is exactly what happened yesterday, thanks.”

Keith quirks up an eyebrow. “That wasn’t an alien chick.”
“What?”

“That was an alien dude.”

“...What?”

“Yesterday, before Allura started yelling at you? Her and Coran were looking at files on his species and Coran pointed out that ‘the entire species is male’. Were you not listening?” He has to bite his lip to keep from laughing, because he’s pretty sure Lance might explode knowing that a guy was coming on to him.

“Okay,” Lance says, surprisingly calm. “Fine. It’s what makes the hot alien dudes flirt with me. I don’t discriminate.” His breath seems to catch in his throat for a moment after he speaks, but Keith just shrugs and he relaxes.

Contrary to his casual demeanour as he turns to start walking towards the theatre room, his brain is inciting the cognitive equivalent of a New Year’s party (he went to one, once, and it was loud and awful and he got shitfaced). Did Lance just…? But of course, again, Lance is frighteningly straight and is probably just trying to play it cool in front of him.

“Whatever. Anyway, what I was getting at is that my great hygiene and skin care routine gets me the ladies and your...lack thereof is the reason you don’t have a girlfriend.” He almost sounds like he’s prying, but Keith is also paranoid about weird stuff like casual conversation.

He barks out a quiet laugh. Considering the nature of Lance’s apparent confession, it wouldn’t be entirely out of line if he just… “That is not the reason I don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Mm-hm. Personal choice?” Lance hums sarcastically. “If you honestly just like. Used shampoo, or something--”

“Yeah, personal choice, actually. I don’t want a girlfriend,” Keith says vaguely.

Lance falls silent as they enter the theatre room (Lance keeps calling it a “home theatre” but that sounds aggressively like the kind of phrase pretentious rich people use, so Keith refuses to say that).

“So, what is it today?” He crouches in front of the crates and stacks of film cartridges they left by the section of wall that transforms into a seat.

“I could go for horror, I think. Supernatural horror, if you can find more.”

Keith absently salutes him as he scans the piles they’ve sorted all the films into, searching for the horror genre. “This one?” he asks, holding up the first one he finds, and Lance shrugs.

“Yeah, that works.”

Keith concludes, within the hour, that they’re both huge fucking babies. The film credits roll, to Lance curled into the fetal position and crammed into the corner of the bench and Keith pulling his jacket even higher over his ears and head. It’s time like these he wishes it had a hood.

“What the hell?” Lance squeaks, almost inaudible.

“Holy shit,” Keith agrees.
Alteans know their horror.

“I...I don’t think I can sleep tonight.” Slowly, Lance unfurls his legs and stretches them out in front of him. “I don’t think I can sleep ever again.”

Masochistic though he knows it may seem (and he’s never once said he wasn’t), Keith reaches for the next movie on the stack. “Another?”

“Please.”

* 

He looks at life like this: everyone in the world (universe) has a dragon to slay. Not a real one, obviously, because dragons aren’t real. Actually, he can’t even be certain of that anymore, which is great for his weird obsession with cryptids and mythical creatures and aliens and -- well, that’s besides the point.

Everyone in the universe has a dragon to slay, which is just a cooler way of saying they all have a challenge to overcome. Everyone, at some point in their life, is faced with a dragon, and the only way to further the plot of their own story (AKA, live their life to the fullest, or just move on from something) is to slay the dragon, by whatever means necessary.

Bad relationship? Find a way to get over it. See a therapist, spend more time with friends, burn the pictures, find someone else, learn to prioritize loving yourself. Death of a family member? Find closure, visit their grave, turn to other people for support, do something they would have liked to do or to have seen you do.

Get the idea?

Keith’s problem is that he has about 500 dragons.

Ideally, he could just summon physical manifestations of them and punch all of his problems away, but it doesn’t always work that way.

It happened once before, but that was a statistical outlier and it also resulted in a whole bunch of unnecessary bullshit.

As much as he’d like to literally engage in fisticuffs with all of his problems, it’s unrealistic. The unfortunate side of the situation is that a lot of those problems are in his head, which makes the whole dragon slaying business just a touch more difficult.

Not that it really stopped him, initially, from trying to beat the shit out of his own problems with all available resources; that’s just a whole can of worms he doesn’t plan on opening ever again, if he can help it.

Part of the result of that situation (but also of another, bigger problem, which he will also avoid forever) was the therapist who gave him this dragon-slaying metaphor in the first place.

He takes zero credit.

The point, though, is that monster movies are fucking great, and exactly what he's in the mood for, because they essentially give physical form to challenges for people to defeat. So, he’s having a
riot watching every single monster movie the Alteans have on hand.

*What he wouldn’t give to have that luxury…*

Lance, on the other hand, is flip-flopping between whiny disaster and aggressive cheerleader (for the protagonists).

Also, notably, Altean monsters are terrifying. He’s pretty sure he also won’t sleep tonight, but that’s nothing new.

*

Keith watches Shiro with such intensity, he’s surprised the whole team hasn’t noticed. He wouldn’t care if they did. Shiro seems more tired than usual, more unfocused, more easily startled. He knows those kind of days. He’s never seen them on Shiro, weighing down his limbs and making every sound, every movement, and every person dangerous, but he knows them well enough to understand exactly what Shiro needs today.

After dinner, when their team leader has retreated to his room with a mumbled excuse about turning in early, he doesn’t hesitate to follow. Lance asks if he’s going to bed, too. Keith nods hastily on his way out the door.

“Hello?” Shiro calls from the other side of the door when he knocks, sounding particularly hollow and unsettled.

“It’s Keith.”

“Door’s unlocked,” Shiro says after a beat of silence.

The door slides open and Keith strolls inside, taking in the sight of Shiro sitting on his bed in the back of the dark room, knees pulled up to his chest. He doesn’t say anything. He knows.

Making sure to keep his movements slow, he sits on the bed beside him and lifts the blankets over both of them, leaning on Shiro’s shoulder.

“You wanna talk about it?” He can barely hear himself, he says it so quietly.

Shiro doesn’t answer for a few moments. “I’m not even entirely sure what the problem is.”

“That’s okay. I get it.”

His head rises and falls slightly with Shiro’s rhythmic breathing. At least he’s not bordering on a panic attack or something. This is a...strange position to be in.

Usually their roles are reversed.

Usually, though, Keith is a crying, erratic disaster when he hasn’t gone completely apathetic, so it’s not a perfect reversal. Shiro is strangely calm and vacant, but not quite in the way Keith is accustomed to being. It’s new and unsettling.

His own vacancy is quieter and deadlier.
“It’s okay.”
“I know.”
“It’s normal.”
“Doesn’t feel like it.”
“I know,” Keith breathes, turning his face into Shiro’s shoulder. “Feels like shit.”
“But, at least I’m not panicking?” Shiro’s lips quirk up in a half-smile. Like he can read Keith’s mind or something.
“That feels even more like shit.”
Shiro stares at the wall again, expressionless. “Keith,” he says suddenly, like he’s just realized he’s there.
“...Shiro?” he replies, brow wrinkling in confusion.
“You haven’t been taking--”
“Oh,” Keith interrupts. Oh. “I’m fine. I’m doing okay.”
Shiro doesn’t need to know just how long it’s been since he’s taken his medication, or seen Dr. Shival. It’s really better that he assumes he only stopped when they all left Earth, because honestly? It’s been so long he’s amazed he’s still alive.
“That isn’t good for you. Maybe we should get the Alteans to synthesize--”
“No,” he interrupts again, more forceful than he intends. They’d have to explain, and maybe get the other paladins involved, and he’d probably turn into some kind of science experiment for their alien companions because ‘oh, isn’t the human brain just so fragile?’ “No, I’m fine, honestly. I can’t believe you’re worrying about me right now. Be a little bit more selfish once in awhile,” he says lightly, nudging Shiro’s side with his elbow.
Shiro chuckles, and some of the light returns to his eyes, and Keith doesn’t feel quite so bad about lying.

*

Afterwards, when Shiro decides he’s actually going to bed (and reassures Keith a hundred times that he’ll be fine), Keith goes straight down to the airlock bay.

Not for any particular reason. Not at first.

In fact, he’s surprised to look up and find himself there.

The one that Tsugo-whatever (the species name was equally unpronounceable, so he just doesn’t bother) was in still stands open, the inner panel absolutely shredded. Nobody has been by to fix it yet.

Each one has a safety mechanism to prevent the airlock from opening unless it’s intended to.
the castle went apeshit on them all, Coran taught them all how to disable and enable it. By default, it’s always enabled, but when Lance was trapped inside the castle overrode the default settings.

Keith stops in front of the next airlock and disables the safety. He steps inside.

He doesn’t close the door, but he holds his hand over the control for several minutes (maybe hours, he can’t even tell), just to remind himself of the kind of power he has. Eventually, he just opens the outer doors manually, then sits down and stares out into space, watching nebulae and star systems and distant galaxies come and go from within the safety of the secondary chamber.

He sleeps in the cockpit of his Lion again. It doesn’t seem to matter much, anymore.

*

Every time they infiltrate a Galra ship, they risk someone getting captured or killed. None of the Paladins have died yet, though they've all come close.

Keith is, however, completely screwed. He knows what this witch is like -- what she's capable of, what she's going to do to him. It isn't going to be a quick death. He draws his bayard and drops into a fighting stance, rage from their last encounter ignited anew.

She looks him up and down and throws her head back as she laughs.

“You...I remember you. I know what you are.”

“Keith! Keith?!”

Lance followed him again. Of course Lance followed him again. He thinks he can take charge whenever Shiro isn't around; play team leader and become the singular authority. Apparently “don't follow me” was not a clear enough direction from Keith.

He growls at the druid witch and launches himself at her, sword tip aimed where her heart should be.

“I can help you rediscover your true self,” says a gravelly voice in his ear, and before he's even reached the midway point of his forward movement he's thrown backwards by a knee to the stomach. “I can tear Voltron apart with hardly any effort!” she roars.

Keith hits the wall hard enough that he hears several cracks. Pain blossoms out from his back and along his sides. His vision is obscured suddenly by the witch’s face, so close their noses almost touch.

“Do you want to know who you really are?” As she speaks, Keith swings his sword around and hits empty air. Her voice lingers in front of him as though she's still there.

Somewhere to his right he hears Lance’s bayard go off, and a burst of blue light pierces the empty space in front of him.

“This does not concern you!” the witch screams from her perch on the second level of the room.
A small black bubble hits Lance square in the chest and knocks him on his ass, bayard skidding back out the door.

“Lance!” Keith cries, scrambling to his feet, only to be thrown backwards into the wall again. He gasps for air against grating pain in his ribs. When his vision is no longer shrouded by the endless, disorienting white that the feeling brings, he sees the witch in front of him again, towering over him where he’s slumped onto the floor. A *hundred* of her, in fact, form a tight semicircle around him, an impenetrable barrier of glowing eyes and horrible laughter.

Somewhere in his brain, he knows this game -- remembers Shiro and Allura’s anecdotes. At present, he can’t begin to imagine how to put an end to it. His focus is on clutching at a bright spot of pain on his left side, on sucking air into his lungs, on forcing his legs to work so he can stand and fight, on the orange glow that bursts forth from the witch’s hands.

It encapsulates him before he can even blink, warm at first, almost pleasant.

A moment later it’s searing, burning his skin as it wraps tighter around him, an agonizing itch crawling up his arms and exploding against the sides of his head with a steady, pounding ache. He can’t even move to claw at his skin as he so desperately wants to.

The burn becomes so intense, he can’t stop the scream that tears itself from his throat, trying to *move* -- make it *stop* -- but he’s so restricted by the mounting pressure that all he can do is keep screaming, exacerbating the pain in his chest.

It’s gone as suddenly as it began. The relief of the pressure disappearing only lasts as long as it takes him to fall several metres back to the floor. He doesn’t think he’s ever felt pain quite like this, sparking through his whole body as he spasms uncontrollably, like electrical currents are seeping into his muscles and seizing control.

Haggar is gone.

Lance is here, a concerned face bathed in shadow, a quaking voice barely audible over the tiny, gasping whimpers that he can’t stop. He’s somewhat aware of the broken noise he makes when Lance grabs him under his arms and hoists him onto his feet, the movement causing his vision to white out again momentarily. His forward march is unwilling, more a product of Lance’s momentum than of any desire to move on Keith’s part.

Either his brain is choosing to suspend any awareness of his current predicament, or he keeps blacking out, because he blinks and finds himself in Blue’s cockpit, Lance’s hands on his face, then again and he’s in the castle, watching from an awkward angle as Pidge and Lance climb into the Green Lion together, Hunk’s voice somewhere above him trying to reassure him that he’ll be okay. It occurs to him that he must be dying, that the witch must have crushed every bone in his body, pulverized every organ, set his skin on fire…

He gives one last drawn-out whine, wishing it would stop, before everything goes black again.

Keith is seven years old and on his seventh foster home when he meets Takashi Shirogane the first time.
He isn’t allowed to go to school today. Dale is worried the teachers might get suspicious of the black eye on the kid who already “expresses a difficult temperament and some developmental delays”, according to the letter that started a whole day of unnecessarily being yelled at and jostled around by his temperamentally foster parents. It’s almost a relief, anyway -- when he doesn’t go to school, he’s left home alone for the better part of the day. Sherry doesn’t work, as far as he’s aware, but she never seems to spend any time at home anyway.

She’s probably out spending the money they get for fostering him on new clothes and spa treatments.

He knows the drill, now.

Instead of going to school and getting tripped in the playground and whispered about during class, he sits on the steps of the back porch and uses a stick to trace pictures in one of the many patches of barren ground in the yard. He’s just finished drawing himself as a giant superhero, cape flowing behind him as he steps on everyone who has ever been mean to him (including Lars and Dale and that awful Tanya girl in his class who keeps pushing him), when a head pokes through the space where several wood panels are missing in the fence.

“Oh! Hey, I didn’t think anyone was here. Mom didn’t say there were any kids in the neighbourhood, either.”

Keith freezes and grips the stick tighter, staring at the older boy as he shifts around in an attempt to maneuver through the fence.

“Where are your parents?” the boy asks, struggling momentarily when the sleeve of his sweater catches on a splinter of wood before tumbling into the yard, sending up a cloud of dust. “Um, is it cool if I come over here?”

Keith doesn’t answer, just continues to stare. This is new.

The boy shrugs and brushes off the legs of his pants. He remains covered in dry dirt anyway. “Do you live here? I just moved in next door. I’m Takashi Shirogane.”

He holds out his hand. Keith stares vacantly.

“Um.”

Right, he’s supposed to shake people’s hands. Wasn’t that only with grown-ups, though? How old is this kid? He looks like a teenager. Keith drops his stick and places his hand tentatively against Takashi Shirogane’s.

Takashi’s entire face lights up. “Nice to meet you! It’s cool if you call me Shiro, by the way, since all my friends at my old school called me that. What’s your name?”

Keith...tries. He opens his mouth to respond, but his whole chest seizes at the action and he snaps it shut again, dropping his chin. He doesn’t want to talk. He isn’t supposed to, anyway. And this -- this Shiro, he’s a stranger, and he’s intruding, and yes maybe his smile is dazzling and Keith already feels better just from being in his presence, but he can’t be friends with this person. He’s probably going to leave soon, anyway, and go back to the group home (and probably be stuck with stupid Lars again) for who even knows how long.

God, he really hopes he leaves soon. He’s been stuck here too long.

“Can you...talk?”
Keith shakes his head slowly, not even sure if it’s a lie.

“Oh,” Shiro says, then smiles again. “It’s cool. I can still hang out for a bit. I might be, uh,” he lowers his voice, “I *might* be hiding from my mom so she doesn’t make me unpack her knick knacks.”

Keith snorts. Shiro drops down on the step beside him and he feels a hundred times better than he did this morning, even though...even though Shiro is a stranger and he’s intruding and --

It doesn’t matter. Keith likes him already. He keeps scratching pictures into the dirt with his stick. “Who’s that?” Shiro points at the giant stomping on his enemies. Keith blinks owlishly at him. No one really asks him about his pictures. Ever. They mostly just get stomped on or swept away. “Er, sorry. Is it a superhero?”

He shakes his head.

“Is it…” Shiro rubs his chin and squints at the bald hero, whose fists are raised in triumph, a circle drawn around one of his eyes. “Is it you?”

Keith nods excitedly, stick splintering slightly in his grip.

“That’s pretty good, actually. I see the resemblance. What happened to your eye, though?” He points at the black eye on the drawing, and then on Keith’s own face.

Well, he wasn’t ready for this. He just kind of...blinks a couple times, then glares down at his equally brutalized likeness. Stupid Dale hit him because he wasn’t *fast enough* fetching him his cigarettes, *that’s* what happened, and he wants to spit on the memory. Sherry didn’t even say anything this time, just turned and stormed out of the room. She usually tells Dale not to “pull shit like that.”

At this point, he’d rather just be kicked out for some petty or vague reason like usual.

Remembering that Shiro is there, he looks back up and shrugs, then gets a better idea and writes the word “tripped” in the dirt.

Shiro laughs. “One time, I walked right into a doorframe and had a black eye for two whole weeks. I told all the kids at school I got into a fight, but then my mom found and made me tell the truth.”

Keith ... does something that might be considered a laugh. More like a hiss of air between his front teeth (he just lost another, not that it’s very exciting anymore -- he already knows the Tooth Fairy doesn’t exist). He covers his mouth with one hand and watches Shiro for a reaction.

“It was ... really embarrassing,” he says, resting his chin on his hand, smiling nonetheless.

After watching him for a few moments, he bends down again to write his name.

"Keith? That's ... your name?"

He gives Shiro a slow, short nod. Shiro just smiles wider. “I like that name. Anyway, why are you home? Isn’t it a school day?”

Keith has all his lies in line; ready to go at a moment’s notice. He writes “sick”.

“Hmm. You know, I bet if we went over -- in a bit, once she’s done with all her weird ceramic cats -- my mom can make you soup.”
He shakes his head **vigorously**. No way in hell is he getting in trouble over something that simple. He’s going to stay put, and wait for Sherry to come home, and hope she microwaves some pizza or something.

“Right, yeah, I get it. We’re strangers. I promise I’m not trying to kidnap you,” Shiro places a hand over his heart and raises the other into the air, as though swearing an oath. “But maybe once my parents meet yours, we can hang out!”

That would be positively spectacular. Keith has known Shiro for approximately two minutes and he’d probably trust him with his life.

**Ah, but that’s how it always goes, isn’t it?**

Or, at the very least, he’d do anything to get away from his latest foster family for a couple minutes.

These ones just don’t seem as prepared to cart him off, for reasons he can’t even begin to fathom. The previous foster home lasted all of three weeks, two and a half of which he spent listening to the parents argue about his “cognitive abilities” and “social skills” and a bunch of other stuff he didn’t really understand (yet somehow he knew exactly what they were talking about, anyway).

They were creative about getting rid of him, too. He didn’t have anything **technically** wrong with him, aside from aggression, apparently, but he’d been on his best damn behaviour that whole three weeks. He hadn’t **wanted** to be kicked out again.

But his foster father had tricked him; asked Keith to get him a beer from the fridge and then called them and said he caught the kid they sent stealing his alcohol.

Keith had even pulled the parent card on them as he was carried out to the car, kicking and screaming for “mom” and “dad” to help him. No cigar.

Another month in the group home, miraculously Lars-free, and he found himself in this hellhole.

He’d take a whole year of bullshit from Lars and his stupid friends over this.

He can’t even misbehave until they get sick of him, because he’ll just get punished. “Taming,” Dale calls it, like he’s a circus animal. “The kid’s got no discipline.”

Sherry doesn’t like it, but Dale keeps threatening her to keep her quiet, telling her she’ll go down with him for being involved or something.

He can’t make the new counsellor remove him, either, because she’s convinced his sudden bout of mutism is a reaction to instability, and that he just needs a good period of calm in his life, where he isn’t being tossed from one foster home to another. When she comes to visit, he doesn’t talk, and Dale likes it that way, because he thinks Keith will blab if he starts talking again.

He hasn’t said a word in almost a year. He’s only been here for fifteen months.

“He’s convinced himself that it isn’t going to last,” the counsellor had told them, and he still hates her enough that he doesn’t bother to remember her name. “Different children react differently to situations. His last home only lasted a few weeks, because of his behavioural issues, which you already know about. He’s never been in one place for long. He’s just frightened himself into selective mutism because he thinks he’s going to be sent away again.”
“Oh, that’s awful,” Sherry had lied, wrapping an arm around him and squeezing.

He wants to rip her fake eyelashes right off her face sometimes, but...she isn’t actually mean to him, the way Dale is, so she can keep her eyelashes. For now.

“...Keith?”

He straightens up so fast he nearly knocks his head into Shiro’s chin.

“I was just saying, I have to go home before my mom starts freaking out, but I’ll see you around, yeah?”

He nods, wide-eyed.

“And bring your parents over to meet mine later.”

Shiro disappears through the fence before Keith can formulate some kind of farewell.

Sherry comes home with multiple shopping bags and a new hairstyle, which makes Keith want to gag. He’ll not forget anytime soon that Dale had pinned him to the bathroom floor and shaved his head last time he refused to let Sherry trim his hair (the sound of the scissors was awful, but the sound of the razor was infinitely worse). He’d only stopped struggling when it nicked his scalp, and even then he couldn’t breathe for horrid sound and sensation.

That’s just how his hair is done, now.

He scowls at her stupid hair and storms upstairs, going straight under his bed and opening one of the few ratty comic books he’s managed to acquire over the years.

He misses his long hair almost as much as he misses his dad. How dumb is that?

Keith reads his comic and pretends he doesn’t cry when he hears the front door open again.
There’s a tiny moment of clarity, between waking up and the pod seal opening, in which panic
seizes him -- he’s trapped in a small space with no recollection of how he got there, and
consequently jumps to conclusions. Before he can properly begin to panic, the seal hisses open
and he stumbles forward, scrambling to catch himself before he hits the floor. His fall is
interrupted, however, by a solid body. Instinctively, he grabs onto the person that caught him and
clings while his senses return to him.

He lost in a fight, that’s right. Or did he? If he lost to Haggar, shouldn’t he be dead? He feels like
he might as well be, groggy and sore, like the med pod only did half its job.

“-ou with me?” Lance is asking, and there’s a hand on his cheek. Lance caught him before
he fell. What an interesting testament to their newly-developing friendship.

He might feel like shit, but knowing Lance was waiting around when his pod opened brightens
his spirits a little. “I’m...I’m fine. Sorry.”

Relief relaxes Lance’s features, and Keith finds himself ensnared in an uncomfortably tight hug.
“Jesus, don’t scare us like that! Hunk thought you were dead and...and you need to stop being
such a reckless asshole! You’re lucky I was there to drag your ass back to the castle, but the whole
mission was compromised just because you wanted to beat someone up!”
Every word that leaves Lance’s mouth rings in Keith’s ears and he almost recoils, but his legs aren’t going to support his weight anytime soon, so he settles for lowering his head and groaning with aggravation. “Sorry. Sorry, I…” He squeezes his eyes shut and digs his fingers into Lance’s biceps. Haggar is...a legendary obstacle to him; the dragon he must slay to progress his story. Or … so he’s convinced himself. She actively hurt Shiro, the only person he’d ever genuinely cared about before now, and he wanted to be the one to reign vengeance upon her.

Though he was unsuccessful this time, he’s convinced that one day he will kill Haggar, for Shiro’s sake and for the sake of giving himself a dragon to slay, because every other dragon he has is too much for him to face. Bitterness washes over him as he thinks of the ease with which he was defeated by the simplest of monsters he’s determined himself to fight.

“I don’t know why I did that,” he lies, turning his face up toward Lance’s again, so that their noses brush. They both freeze; Keith’s grip on Lance’s arms softens. He can feel his cheeks grow warm, and his sleep-addled brain is whirring out of control trying to recover from the time in the med pod and comprehend his current thought process at the same time. In the end, all it supplies is a whisper about how attractive Lance is that he barely keeps himself from actually voicing, a sonnet about his lips and his freckles and how long Keith has wanted to kiss him banging around between his ears until they, too, turn red.

Lance laughs nervously and shifts backwards barely a millimetre, looking excruciatingly uncertain. Keith’s stomach is screaming with nerves.

“I feel like shit,” he says decidedly, trying to alleviate the encroaching awkwardness of their situation.

Lance snaps back to attention and helps him sit on the steps. “You gotta think before you act,” he says, sounding eerily similar to Shiro. Realistically, those exact words have come out of Shiro’s mouth and Lance is just repeating. “Remember what happened when you tried to fight Zarkon? And when you were going after Lotor? You didn’t stop to think and you could’ve died!”

“I know,” Keith growls. The memories of the wormhole incident resurface, and Shiro’s near-death, and he wonders if it was all preventable all the time. “And it was stupid, and I know that, but I don’t want you lecturing me about it.”

Lance frowns at him for several long moments. “You scared me.”

Well, that’s interesting. Keith is beginning to recover from the grogginess the med pod leaves, but not enough that he can formulate an adequate response to this news. “I’m sorry,” he mumbles again, feeling beyond humiliated. He can’t believe he got himself into such a terrible situation that Lance was scared for him.

“Stop apologizing. It’s weird.”

“Well, what else do you want me to say!??” Keith throws his hands up exasperatedly.

“I dunno! Just stop being all...meek and whatever!”

It occurs to him that Lance’s eyes are sparkling with anger and concern, and Keith recoils altogether, not sure what to do with that information. He crosses his arms over his chest. “Look,” he says, “I didn’t mean to make everyone mad. I -- I don’t know. I hate her. Isn’t that valid enough reason to want her gone?”

“Keith, we weren’t mad, we-” Lance doesn’t finish the thought, interrupted mid-sentence by Hunk bursting into the room.
“Keith!” Keith is off the floor and crushed in Hunk’s enormous embrace before he can even react to the sudden intrusion. “I thought I heard you guys fighting! Are you okay? How do you feel? You must be hungry; I’ll get food.”

He’s gone again, Keith stumbling backwards as his feet hit the floor, and then Lance is lowering him onto the steps again, laughing. “Feels awful on your legs, huh?”

Keith nods and smiles with him. “A bit.”

After polishing off a whole bowl of strange alien fruit, Lance insists that he goes to see his Lion, because apparently Blue hasn’t shut up about how stressed Red is by his predicament and Lance needs a break.

He accompanies Keith, of course, because what else are annoying friends for (and he must think he’s being subtle about the way his hands hover slightly too close). Not that Keith really minds -- he’s still feeling pretty off-balance. Once Keith veers off towards his own Lion, though, Lance backs off and heads over to Blue. A moment later, he can be heard loudly greeting his Lion and insisting that she must have missed him so much.

Keith places a hand on Red’s paw and starts to apologize, but Red’s concern and recollection of the past few days override his attempt.

Is this what it feels like to be scolded by a mother who cares? He tries to seem apologetic, but a warm feeling floods his limbs anyway. Red cares. She’s worried about him.

He raises a hand towards her, and she lowers her nose to brush his palm. “Hey,” he says softly. “I’m … I’m sorry about that. I don’t even know what she did. I thought I could beat her.”

Red doesn’t respond -- can’t really -- but she lies down with her front paws outstretched, encircling Keith, and places her head down beside him. Keith hesitates, then smiles. “Thanks,” he says, sitting down near her paw.

Red begins to purr. It’s jarring and metallic, but distinguishable. For a moment, everything feels pretty okay.

Then Lance ruins it.

“Aw, aren’t you guys adorable,” he coos, and before Keith can lift his head from where he’s flopped back against her paw, he hears the distinct click of a picture being taken on a smartphone.

“...I will kill you,” Keith mumbles, crossing his arms over his chest. The tips of his ears grow warm.

“Oh, please.” Lance rolls his eyes. “It’s not like I can put it on Facebook or something. I just need something to blackmail you with in the future, is all.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s so much better.” Keith rolls his eyes and shoos him away.

Lance doesn’t leave.

“Why are you still here?” Red gives his shoulder a gentle shove with her nose (she tries to be gentle, at least -- she’s still a giant robot and he still topples forward). “What? What’s the problem?”

“I -- I dunno,” Lance sounds uncharacteristically shy. “I just, y’know. I’m worried? That you’re gonna do something stupid again if I don’t keep an eye on you.”
That is not going to fly. He isn’t a toddler. He’s quite capable of handling himself, despite some (several) recent situations that were evidence to the contrary. He’s impulsive, not suicidal … okay, well, technicalities aside, that is. Keith feels his eye twitch. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“That’s not what I meant. Like, I thought you were dead for a good few minutes there, dude. You wouldn’t get it, obviously, but I just want to make sure you’re, you know, alive.”

Keith gestures at himself. “There you go. Still breathing.”

“Okay, so what I’m trying to get at is: do you want to maybe hang out for a bit? Play cards or something?”

“Not babysitting?” He squints suspiciously at Lance.

“Not babysitting. Just two guys hangin’ out, being space power rangers or whatever.” Lance looks like he immediately regrets his word choice, and Keith laughs.

“Okay, as long as you don’t start trying to cook me dinner or make me watch kids’ cartoons.”

“I would love to watch some kids cartoons right now.”

“We can watch a movie,” Keith suggests, and Lance lights up completely.

“Dude, always! That movie projector is the literal coolest!”

Lance slings an arm around his shoulder, and Keith’s heart stutters at how casual it is, then nearly stops when he realizes Lance considers him a friend. He beams and leans into Lance’s side as they leave the med bay together.

* 

He's dying.

There's no other explanation for the explosive pain in his head, as though it's trying to split down the sides, the ringing in his ears, the way everything around him tilts and sways precariously as he tumbles into his room and allows the door to slam shut behind him.

He doesn't even make it to the bed, just collapses on the floor and opens his mouth in a silent scream, tears flooding from his eyes. His limbs are weak, trembling as he puts all his energy into curling his arms over his churning stomach and aching ribs.

He hasn't been feeling well for several days, but this is a new level of torture. Something is seriously wrong, and if it doesn't kill him then the pain it's causing will. He should tell someone, find Allura or Coran, put himself in a med pod, but every time the thought occurs to him it's suspended by memories of all the other times he's asked for help, for attention, of the negative repercussions of thinking that was something he even deserved in the first place; he knows, logically, it isn't right or healthy but that doesn't change the fact that he's terrified of what will happen if he so much as implies that he needs any kind of attention.

It feels like days that he spends lying there, curled up on himself on the floor, before his body finally gives out. He throws up and barely has time to roll in the opposite direction before he passes out.

* 

He's alive, which is a relief, but he's still groggy as hell and a dull ache keeps up a beat in his
head. It also reeks, unsurprisingly. Keith groans and forces himself upright, away from the puddle of vomit by his doorway. A small wave of nausea almost overcomes him again with the motion. He has to remain still with a hand over his mouth until it passes, determined not to make the mess worse.

Twenty minutes pass before he manages to drag himself to his feet. Another ten before his limbs stop shaking and he can move enough to wander back out into the hall, where he finds the closet of cleaning supplies they're all so accustomed to using.

Scrubbing his own vomit off the floor does little to soothe the poor condition of his stomach. He doesn't even take the towels to the wash; he throws them down a trash chute on his way to the washroom.

He brushes his teeth three times, washes his face twice, and slumps over the counter trying to get his thoughts in order. Med pod? No, he already ruled that out. He'll be fine; it will pass.

Though he can't help but recall the battle with the druid witch several days ago. Whatever magic she used on him had left him feeling as terrible as he does now, if not more so, and his time spent in a pod hadn't done much outside of bringing the discomfort down to a more tolerable level. Now that it's back he finds greater cause for concern, and with no clue as to what the hell she did to him, he's lost. There's nothing he can do but pray it doesn't kill him.

Sighing tremulously, he dries his face on his sleeve and leaves the washroom, determined to put something in his stomach as long as he thinks he can hold something down. On his way to the kitchen, he stumbles upon Hunk and Pidge carrying armfuls of computer parts. “Keith! Where have you been? Never mind that, actually, can you help us carry these down to the lab?”

“Uh.”

“Coran gave us a bunch of spare parts for Altean tech -- computers, mostly, but some other equipment; jet packs and stuff,” Hunk explains, at the same time Pidge dumps all the metal and wires she’s transporting into Keith’s unprepared arms. He scrambles to catch everything that’s been passed to him.

“Uh.”

“Thanks!” Pidge disappears back in the direction they just came from.

Keith still hasn’t recovered fully from whatever happened earlier, to be honest, so he blinks a few times in Pidge’s wake and shakes his head to wake himself up more. “What?”

Hunk laughs heartily and bumps shoulders with him. “This way. She’s super excited. She already has plans for all of this stuff.”

He follows them to Pidge’s lab (read: the hangar, remodeled), and dumps the tech in a pile where Hunk tells him to. As he turns to leave, Hunk calls out to him. “Keith, wait.”

“Uh, yeah?”

“Hang out here for a bit, dude. Aren’t you always complaining there’s nothing to do?”

“Um.” Keith glances at the doorway just as Pidge waddles in with scraps up to her ears.

“Great idea!” she says, stepping tentatively around the desk. Keith moves to help her. “I probably need an extra pair of hands for this.”
That’s … new. He wants to stay -- loves the idea of being wanted -- but whatever kind of illness or injury or whatever problem he’s having makes anxiety flare in his chest at the thought. What if they notice? What if he passes out or something? What if it’s contagious?

“I dunno,” he starts, and then Allura interrupts him over the comms.

“Team meeting in the control room, paladins. Your presence is required immediately.”

“Noooo,” Pidge fake-wails, flopping against Hunk, who laughs and catches her around the shoulders, “My nefarious plans, foiled!”

* It isn't a distress beacon (for once) that brings them down to the surface of a luxuriously green planet, Lion’s taking the lead while the castleship lingers just outside the edge of the atmosphere, just in case of suspicious activity. It's something otherwise indistinguishable, weak enough that they almost miss it entirely, but cause enough for concern by Allura’s standards.

Just a frail radio signal wavering in and out of existence, buried somewhere among the intensely harlequin foliage. To investigate, Lance and Pidge approach first, Lance acting as Pidge’s bodyguard, while the rest of the Paladins hover several hundred metres above the tree line and wait for news. The aggressive colour of the planet assaults Keith’s eyes as he scowls after his teammates.

“This is so cool,” Pidge says, as the Green and Blue Lions disappear beneath the trees. “Look, Lance! It's red. I wonder why? You guys have got to see -- Woah!”

Pidge’s shout of surprise interrupts the excited chatter Lance has just started up about “autumn on acid.”

“What the hell?! What is that?” Lance screeches, making Keith’s helmet comm crackle.

“Do you need backup?” Shiro asks worriedly. “Maybe you should get out of there.”

“No, no,” Pidge mumbles off-handedly. “What is that? It kind of looks like a gorilla. I don't think it's dangerous. You guys should come check this place out.”

Allura is immediately all over the idea, insisting there's absolutely no indication that any Galra ships are nearby, and whatever technology is producing the signal they're tracking is clearly much too weak to do them any harm. “Explore the worlds you'll be protecting,” she insists, “Coran and I will stay up here and keep watch. We'll contact you immediately at the first sign of trouble.”

Shiro reluctantly agrees, and the three remaining Paladins descend beneath the canopy of the forest. Pidge, Keith discovers as they dip below the first layer of leaves and branches, was right. Most of the plants down here range from a violent shade of vermillion to a deep sunset orange and it kind of does look like autumn on acid. “Holy shit,” he breathes, and then he's landing and a lumbering black creature is hurtling away from on disturbingly long arms and inversely -- nigh antithetically -- short legs.

Nostalgically similar to a gorilla in appearance, if only Keith had ever had the fortune of visiting a zoo to give way for nostalgia in the first place. Though he has seen pictures and he agrees it’s the best available comparison, especially taking its dark colour into consideration, though it doesn’t seem to have any fur -- just think, leathery skin.

“Should we…follow it? Maybe it has a civilization. They could have weapons. We wouldn’t want to be ambushed,” Hunk says.
“Lighten up, buddy!” Lance laughs, and then he’s *climbing out of his lion* in unfamiliar territory like the idiot he is. Keith physically presses the palm of his hand to his face and sighs.

He may be somewhat reckless (only a tiny bit, obviously) but he’s not stupid. He’s learned his lesson well.

Shiro joins Lance after a second, actually bothering to survey the immediate area before he goes exploring, then Keith and Pidge exit their Lions, and Hunk finally relents and hops out onto the soft red underbrush. “I’m not sure I like this,” Keith says, suspicious of the alien wildlife.

“It’ll be fine!” Shiro claps him on the shoulder and follows Pidge and Hunk through where they’ve disappeared behind a couple of massive trees with smooth, pinkish-white trunks. “We know how to fight if we have to, right?”

“Affirmative,” says Pidge’s disembodied voice somewhere ahead of them.

“We should still be careful, though.” Keith can hear the reprimand in Shiro’s voice, the ‘that means *you.*’

It isn’t that Keith is too concerned with fighting aliens right now, just that he’s concerned with...well, with fighting aliens and *not winning.*

Lance nudges him along through the trees, not willing to let Keith’s mood dampen his own, prattling on with the rest of the team about how cool this planet is. Keith rolls his eyes and tries to hide his smile. He feels *better* today, almost completely fine, though it may be psychosomatic -- it’s the first time since the incident with Haggar that he’s been out on a mission with his team, and that always fills his stomach with a warm exhilaration. There’s still a dull ache along the sides of his head, an uncomfortable tingling in his fingers, an all-encompassing soreness in his body, but it’s all overpowered by Lance’s laughter in his ear and a hand lingering on his back, by Pidge and Hunk several steps ahead, heads bowed together as they discuss the properties of chlorophyll and its mutations, by Shiro just in front of him, gazing at their surroundings in wonderment.

He’s going to be okay, he thinks. They make him feel invincible.

A couple seconds later they encounter another gorilla-like creature, standing in their path and watching them intently as they all slow to a stop. It looks more curious than hostile, but Keith still finds his hand hovering over his bayard.

“Coran, Allura, I’m sending you a picture of something. Can you identify it?” Pidge says over the helmet comms, tinkering with a touchscreen device as he speaks.

“No, that’s nothing I’ve ever seen. Even Alteans didn’t visit this planet in our time, so we have yet to encounter them,” Allura responds immediately, accompanied a sound of assent from Coran.

“On the bright side, that gives you the freedom to name them if they haven’t done so themselves. Do they speak?”

The alien tilts its head inquiringly at them, protuberant black eyes sparkling. It even shuffles forward as Hunk holds out a hand and crouches down to make himself seem as non-threatening as possible. A second, slightly larger alien bounds out of the trees and lands beside it, knocking their arms together a couple times until they make eye contact and chirp nonsensically at each other.

Space is so weird.

“Hi, do you guys talk?” Hunk asks from where he’s still crouched on the ground in a manner...
obviously intended to be as placating as possible.

The aliens continue to stare, uncomprehending. Pidge sighs and speaks into her helmet again. “No, I don’t think so.”

“What do we call them, then?” Keith asks.

“Well, it looks like a gorilla with a flat face and like, no mouth or nose,” Lance muses, hand on his chin. “So my vote is for ‘condom-head gorilla’. Who’s with me?”

Pidge’s hand shoots up so fast she almost knocks Keith’s helmet off. “Me! One thousand percent!”

“What is a … condom?” Allura asks, and Shiro covers his face, muttering “oh my god” under his breath.

“Well, Princess,” Pidge starts, a saccharine smile teasing the corners of her mouth. Shiro, obviously not in the mood for shenanigans, just removes her helmet completely and gives her his signature ‘Disappointed Look.’

“Moving on,” he says pointedly.

“The signal source is close,” Hunk says, diverting attention from destroying Allura’s (probable) innocence. “A couple more meters this way.”

Nobody pushes the issue (thank god), though Allura can be heard whispering the same question to Coran, who responds that he isn’t entirely sure, either. When the group of paladins continues forward, the gorilla-things scurry off into the underbrush and disappear.

There’s a break in the trees directly ahead, leading into a small clearing at the foot of a shallow cliff. Hunk is the first to wade out into the vibrant, tufted grasses, following the directions of the tracker in his hand. A few paces in, he freezes.

“Oh.”

Pidge walks right into him. “W— hey! ‘Oh’ what?” She peers around his side. “Oh my god.”

Keith exchanges a look with Lance, and they both break into a sprint, skidding to a stop just ahead of where Hunk and Pidge are standing, awestruck.

For a second, he can’t figure out what has them so enthralled, and then he zeroes in on the curve of a reflector dish off to their left, near the base of the cliff, and an enormous golden rod protruding straight up from it. It’s folded nearly in half, tip brushing against the top of the grass as it bends in the wind. His heart rate picks up.

There’s no way in hell human technology exists this far out. Unless some other sentient species developed similar tech, and the universe is playing a cruel prank, then there’s only one explanation for the poor, dishevelled probe half-buried in the dirt before them.

“Is that…?” Shiro breathes, and Hunk makes some kind of chokes noise of assent, surging forward and fumbling to clip the tracker to his belt.

“What is it?” Allura’s voice startles Keith out of his reverie. “Are you okay?”

“We’re fine,” Lance starts, “It’s just…”
“Oh my god,” Pidge repeats, “I never thought that I’d ever, in my whole lifetime, get to see Voyager 1 in person.” She, too, carves a path through the clearing to reach the probe, and the rest follow on her heels.

Keith stops to examine one of the magnetometers on the dangling end of the boom. He actually has to stop a scrub at his eyes, convinced that he’s seeing things.

At one of his later foster homes, he kept a small collection of posters taped around his bed, with the Voyagers directly above the headboard.

He used to be obsessed with this spacecraft, spending hours every night reading about it, memorizing every component, tracking its progress.

He can recall with stunning clarity the day that something had gone wrong, and the craft had been lost, and how angry he’d been, because Voyager 1 had been such a reliable part of his everyday life up until that moment.

His whole chest warms as he places a hand over the weathered magnetometer. He would never have even dreamed of this happening. It feels like a reunion.

“Is it okay if I cry?” Hunk asks tremulously, as he lovingly dusts dirt from the antenna and reflector dish. “’Cause I already am.”

“Aww, buddy.” Lance pulls him into a hug, though he, too, is looking at the probe like all his most unachievable dreams are coming true. “It’s okay. I might, too. I used to have a poster of the Voyagers above my bed. All the parts labelled and everything. This is like, everything I could have ever wanted in life.”

“We’re all a bunch of nerds,” Pidge chuckles, but her eyes are watery. “I kept posters of all the best spacecraft around my computer desk when I was little.”

A strange sensation settles in Keith’s gut, drawing him closer to his fellow paladins where they’ve gathered around the reflector dish. He settles in beside Pidge as she runs her hand over the golden record, still intact at the back of the probe.

It’s a sense of community, he realizes, as Pidge takes his hand in her own and guides him to feel the engravings on the record case, as well.

“This is literally the coolest thing,” she whispers.

“We should take a selfie!” Lance exclaims. The illusion shatters.

He doesn’t properly belong here, no matter what the others think. Shiro may be able to find a family with Team Voltron, but Keith knows he isn’t a good fit for whatever they have between them.

He takes a few tentative steps back as Lance opens the camera on his phone (literally of course he’d bring it on a mission) and drags Hunk along to sidle up to Pidge next to the record. Shiro raises an eyebrow.

“C’mon, guys, I’m not holding this pose all day. This is my good angle and if I move I might lose it.” Lance waves Shiro over impatiently.

“A selfie? Really, Lance?” Keith can hear the amusement in Shiro’s tone, even as he moves to stand behind Pidge with a hand on her shoulder.
“Keith, let’s go.” At his continued hesitation, Lance seizes his wrist and yanks him back towards everyone.

He doesn’t let go, even as he glances back and everyone and says, “Okay, say ‘Voltron’!” Keith wonders if he’s afraid he’ll try to back out again.

Keith attributes his bright eyes in the pictures to the same sense of wonderment and overwhelmed satisfaction as everyone else seems to be expressing. When Lance drops his arm, it’s to scroll through his gallery and lean in closer, showing off the pictures to Keith. “Good?”

“How -- oh, yeah,” he says, barely sparing a glance at the phone screen in favour of watching Lance.

“Paladins, is everything alright?” Allura asks, obviously bemused.

Pidge, Hunk, and Lance all start blabbering simultaneously about space probes and childhood dreams and inspirations, and Keith takes advantage of the opportunity to wander back around to the far side of the Voyager.

“Hey,” Shiro says behind him.

He has his helmet tucked under his arm.

“Hey,” Keith replies softly, removing his own helmet and half-heartedly shaking out his hair.

“Something’s wrong.” He says it so pragmatically, Keith can’t even deny it. He just sighs and looks down at the helmet in his hands.

“Does it ever feel weird to you that I’m … not really human?”

“Well, no. Of course not.”

“What?”

“I’ve known you too long to look at you any differently because of something like that.”

Keith dares to meet his steady gaze. “What if you hadn’t?”

“I don’t really think it would change anything. I knew you as a paladin of Voltron and as a person well before prejudices could have gotten in the way. And besides, it doesn’t have much of an effect on my relationship with the Blade members, does it?”

“What about everyone else?” Keith bites his tongue. Physically. He doesn’t need to drag Shiro into this spiral with him. “I mean -- never mind.”

“Keith.” Shiro’s hands close around his cheeks and hold him steady. “What is it?”

He sighs audibly. “I feel like I don’t deserve to have these kind of connections anymore,” he says in a rush. “Like I can’t love the accomplishments of humans anymore, because I’m not really human, not like everyone else, and I never was, so now it feels like -- like it’s a lie, y’know? Like I can’t love the idea of humans doing these great things because it doesn’t belong to me the way it does all of you.”

Shiro contemplates him for a moment, then pulls him into a bruising hug with no forewarning. Keith’s cheek presses painfully against the raised pauldron of his armour, but he squeezes his eyes shut and returns the embrace. Shiro’s hugs are the exact kind of reassurance he craves during his
worst moments. “You know you’re still human, right? A bit of Galra blood doesn’t take the rest away.”

“I … guess, yeah, but…” He tightens his arms around Shiro’s torso, then draws back a bit to look him in the eye again. “I can’t help it. I don’t think even telling me not to worry is going to help. I want to be human, entirely, and now I just feel like a fraud.”

Shiro doesn’t respond for a while, hands still on his shoulders, brow shifting with increasing intensity as he works out a counterpoint to pull Keith back into safer territory. “If it helps any, no one sees you any differently because there isn’t anything to see. Take a look in the mirror tonight. Ask yourself if what you see is human or Galra. If the Galra part of you is a burden, take comfort in knowing that it isn’t something the rest of the universe needs to be aware of, because it isn’t even a large enough part of your heritage to be visible. Okay?”

Keith nods slowly a few times. “… Okay.”

Securing his helmet back in place, Shiro gently nudges Keith back towards everyone else. Pidge’s head pops up at a startling height along the side of the craft, and she laughs as she stares down at something on her side of the dish. “No, no, we should leave it for the aliens, Lance. Just leave it and help Hunk, will you?” She wobbles a bit, latches onto the side of the dish, and pries off a splintered piece with gentle precision, so as not to disturb the rest of the probe. “That’s it! Our only souvenir. Leave the record, Lance!” Her head disappears behind the Voyager again, but not before she offers a quick wave to Shiro and Keith.

“I know we’ve already heard what’s on it, but it’s just so tempting,” Hunk is saying as they approach. “Oh, not you, too.”

“Shiro!” Lance gestures emphatically at the golden record case. “We should take this, right? What are the condom gorillas even gonna do with this? I’m pretty sure they don’t even have mouths. That’s not a very advanced civilization, in my professional opinion.”

“A lack of a mouth is a tragic flaw indicative of an obvious lack of evolutionary advancement,” Hunk adds solemnly, hands clasped at his front and head bowed.

Shiro chuckles. “And I’m sure they’ll evolve beyond that.”

“Oh, not you, too.”

“Shiro!” Lance gestures emphatically at the golden record case. “We should take this, right? What are the condom gorillas even gonna do with this? I’m pretty sure they don’t even have mouths. That’s not a very advanced civilization, in my professional opinion.”

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Shiro chuckles. “And I’m sure they’ll evolve beyond that.”

“Or, y’know, other aliens will find this place,” Keith says. “We did. Anyone could.”

“That’s … not comforting, Keith,” Lance counters, shaking his head.

“Yeah, I really don’t think I want the Galra to find something like this. Earth is in enough danger as it is.” Hunk turns slightly from them to run a finger over the engravings, lost in thought. “I mean, what if they realize Earth is rich in resources and attack it? That’d be--”

Keith doesn’t hear the rest over the roaring in his ears. He feels ill again, suddenly, but his fingers twitch in a telltale sign of anger -- the kind that likes to boil up into something he can’t control. Whether he’s upset to the point of making himself sick, or the strange spell he had earlier is coming back for round two, he isn’t sure. Regardless, he forces himself to relax his body, easing away the tension that seized him at Hunk’s tactless comment, and makes his legs carry him away, back across the clearing, muttering, “I don’t care, do whatever.”

Interestingly, it’s Lance who catches up to him a few metres into the forest.

“Hey, Keith -- hey, man, listen. I know you’re touchy about the whole Galra thing, I get it. I don’t
think Hunk knows that sometimes saying things like that without thinking might upset you. You know he didn’t mean anything by it. He--"

“I don’t care, Lance,” he repeats, “And I’m not touchy about anything! I’m just tired, I’m just going back to the castle because there’s nothing for us on this planet!” That familiar anger boils dangerously close to the point of overflowing, but he holds back the accompanying insults -- swallows them down like burrs -- and stomps on ahead.

“Keith, come on, you’re obviously upset! You should just talk to Hunk about it. He won’t mind.”

Keith whirls around to face him, and Shiro intervenes just in time, Pidge and Hunk following well behind but looking deadly curious. “Keith, hey,” he starts softly, striding past Lance confidently. “That was pretty cool. Remember that time we stayed up late together to listen to every recording?” A hand comes up slowly, softly, tentative fingers securing themselves around his upper arm to guide him towards the Lions again. Shiro’s gently smiling face leads him away from the other paladins, and he’s so tender Keith would almost feel patronized if he weren’t so comforted by his presence.

“Remember when we spent a whole Saturday in the library using the computers to watch videos, even though I had computers at my house, and one of the librarians sat with us to watch some because she thought it was cool?” Shiro prompts, and Keith’s spark of fury starts to die, but the memory kindles something else bitter and unrelenting.

Through numb lips, he can faintly hear himself say, “I … was trying to get away from--”

“She showed us some books we could check out,” Shiro interrupts, smiling growing the tiniest bit desperate, “and you told me you wanted to live there, but…”

“But your house was even better,” Keith finishes for him around the beginning of a smile.

“Right,” Shiro says, his grip on Keith’s forearm loosening. “Because we had fish, and the library didn’t, which made it boring.”

“And besides, who would feed your fish if we lived at the library? Mom said it was your responsibility and if you didn’t take care of them, you couldn’t keep them,” Keith laughs, and he’s momentarily confused when Shiro stops walking.

The Red Lion looms in front of them, tail lashing irritably, and the moment Keith is in range she drops down and opens her mouth, sending several of the gorilla creatures scurrying and screeching through the underbrush.

“Are you okay?” Shiro asks quietly.

Guilt crashes over him, knowing the stress he must put Shiro through all the time, but he breathes deeply and nods. “Sorry. I wasn’t gonna--”

“I know. I just want to help sometimes, anyway. It’s easier to handle strong emotions with a support system, right?”

“You’re more like a distraction system,” Keith says, grinning ear to ear, and Shiro barks out a laugh.

“Try telling that to anyone else on the team.”

Scoffing, Keith turns to walk up the ramp into the cockpit. “They think you’re too cool to be fun.”
He can hear Shiro laughing even as Red closes her mouth and sends him concern through their bond.

“I’m alright,” Keith reassures her, patting the side of the chair. “You have to stop worrying all the time.”

She fires back a burst of indignance before taking to the sky.

It’s an insatiable itch, fluttering under his skin.

(Mostly, it’s in his head.)

When he scratches, he presses his fingers deep in a desperate bid to relieve it.

It leaves a series of gouges patterning his arms and legs.

Keith doesn’t know what started it, really. Frustration? Anger? Eventually, it becomes a habit preceded by his own insistence that he’s a bad person.

Why?

He doesn’t know.

“En garde, filthy aliens!” A cardboard gift-wrap tube swings past Keith’s head, coming within centimetres of knocking off his helmet. Also cardboard: made from multiple cereal boxes and an excess of duct tape, covered in spikes made of aluminum foil.

He is inordinately proud of his craftsmanship.

Keith makes a jab at Shiro with his own sword (Shiro’s mom has forbidden them from pretending to use guns, so they preserve those games for the rare occasion that they play in Keith’s yard) and catches him in the ribs. While Shiro recovers, he dances easily out of the way with his armful of alien figurines.

“I will not go down at the hands of the likes of you!” Shiro cries, pretending to have trouble standing up again.

Keith gives a short, high laugh and throws his entire army of aliens at him.

“Nnno!” Shiro collapses beneath them, waving one hand dramatically in the air on his way down. Seizing the opportunity, Keith crams his sword between Shiro’s arm and side, “pinning” him to the floor. He immediately steps back to bask in the victory, flexing and posing like a superhero.

He doesn’t expect Shiro to tackle him to the floor.

Keith topples with a shrill scream, and he’s pretty sure his heart stops for a second from the shock.

“Never turn your back on the enemy!” Shiro grabs for Keith’s sword and makes a motion as
though to cut his head off.

Not one to disappoint, Keith clutches at his throat and makes gurgling noises for several seconds before going limp and sticking out his tongue, head lolling to the side.

“Haha!” Shiro does his signature victory dance, which mostly involves hopping from one foot to the other, while Keith sits up and removes his helmet. “Once again, the humans have neutralized the alien threat. Captain Shirogane, the coolest, strongest astronaut, has defeated the evil!”

Keith giggled and claps to show his appreciation for Shiro’s commentary.

“Takashi!” Mrs. Shirogane voice carries down the stairs to the basement. “Star Trek will be on in five minutes!”

The two boys exchange a look of utter glee, then scramble towards the door in unison.

*

Keith doesn’t honestly know what overcomes him (or what makes him think he’s even strong enough to do any damage), but he marches right up to Dale, who is lounging at the dining table smoking and reading the paper, and punches him in the stomach. Maybe his earlier escapades have given him a false sense of power.

His immediate reward for this behaviour is a cigarette to the arm. It’s nothing short of a knee-jerk reaction from Dale. He roars with annoyance and swings his arm down and then -- ouch, why did Keith think this was a good idea?

Revenge, honestly.

But, an eight-year-old up against a grown man isn’t … exactly … fair. Or, again; a good idea. At all.

This is followed by a lot of yelling, Sherry storming into the room with a sleep mask tangled in her hair, and being carried to his room, kicking and screaming.

He keeps kicking and screaming even as the closet door slams shut in his face, sliding down so his back rests against the wall as he pummels the door with his feet.

“Fuck you!” he screeches, and they’re the first words he’s said in months and they hurt his throat as much as they feel great to say.

*

He wakes up in his bed three days later with a glass of water on his nightstand and a note from Sherry sternly reminding him that Dale does not tolerate that kind of behaviour. Keith rolls his eyes. If he doesn’t tolerate it, then he shouldn’t perpetrate it.

What dumbasses.

He has to put on a long-sleeved shirt before he goes to Shiro’s, despite the fact that it’s late spring.

“Keith!” Mr. Shirogane is home, which is a rare occurrence. He’s typically on business trips, something Keith is often grateful for. He has mixed feelings about this man -- on the one hand, he isn’t bad, and Keith often misses his own father, who -- being half-Asian -- bore a faint
resemblance to the man sitting before him now. On the other hand … he doesn’t fare so well around grown men lately. Mr. Shirogane smiles down at him. “I hope you’re feeling better. Heard you caught a particularly nasty strain of flu.”

Gaping up at him, Keith nods his head, tentative.

A second later, Shiro slams into him bodily, sending them both skidding across the kitchen. “Keith! You’re alive! I missed you!” Shiro’s backpack goes flying towards his bedroom door; he must have just arrived home from school. He envelopes him in a bone-crushing hug. “I got another fish! Come see! We’ll be back out for dinner, dad.”

Keith is dragged down the hall to Shiro’s room, waving timidly to Mr. Shirogane as he goes, and then Shiro is babbling about the latest addition to his ever-growing collection of pet fish. “I haven’t named him yet. I figured you could help with this one.”

He hands Keith the whiteboard that he keeps in his room, to assist him with communication. Keith stands quietly before the fish tank for a while, watching the new yellow-and-black fish zip back and forth between his new companions. He stops to stare out at Keith several times, then resumes his game, dipping under plants and between the castle spires.

“Data,” Keith writes on the board, and Shiro claps a hand to his forehead.

“That’s right! I knew I was missing someone still.”

Keith has a feeling he left Data out on purpose so Keith could choose which fish would be named after his favourite character. He smiles pleasantly up at Shiro as a warm feeling settles into his stomach. It’s comfortable here. Safe. Shiro is everything he needs and everything he aspires to be.

*  

It’s dark in Shiro’s room when he peers in through the window; the only light source the faint glow of the small bulb in the fish tank. This was a bad idea. This was such a bad idea. He should’ve just stayed in his own room and dealt with his own crap on his own.

But if he gets caught trying to sneak back in … never mind the reaction he’s going to get from Dale in the morning when he finds out he snuck out of the house.

Sleeping outside doesn’t seem like a bad option when he strains his eyes and sees the silhouette of Shiro tucked comfortably into bed, fast asleep. It’s late. He waited up for what must have been several hours after his foster parents went to bed, debating whether or not to just leave and tell Shiro everything. The throbbing in his right arm kept him awake through the emotional turmoil.

There are still tears dripping steadily down his face as he raps on Shiro’s bedroom window with his left hand. Shiro stirs, so he knocks a bit harder, praying he’ll wake up and see him waiting outside. He hurriedly wipes away his tears and clutches his arm a bit tighter to his chest.

Shiro sits up in bed and Keith taps the glass until he gets his attention. Shiro’s up and opening the window in seconds. “Keith! What are you doing here? It’s -- are you crying?” he whispers urgently through the screen.

Keith opens his mouth to respond but chokes on a sob instead, dropping his chin to his chest.

“In a moment, Keith,” Shiro says, and Keith can feel his grin. “Come around back, I’ll let you in.” Shiro disappears from view and it feels for a moment as though the ground has been ripped out from under his feet before he processes what Shiro just said. He runs around the side of the house just as the back doors slides open, and crashes into Shiro without second thought, desperate for comfort. “Hey, hey, it’s okay,” Shiro soothes,
obviously confused by his situation. His hand runs through the short fuzz of regrowing hair atop Keith’s head.

“C .. can I,” Keith starts hoarsely, swallowing when it scratches his throat but relieved to be able to get words out at all. Shiro gapes at him, and Keith remembers through his panic that this is the first time he’s heard him speak. “Can I stay w-with you tonight?”

Shiro nods dumbly at him for several seconds before turning and leading Keith into his room with a hand on his shoulder. “Should I get my parents?” he asks, and Keith shakes his head frantically. They’ll want to know what’s wrong, what happened, why his arm is swollen, who hurt him -- things that might separate him from Shiro, and he doesn’t know when or how Shiro became so important to him that the idea of being apart is physically painful.

“Please don’t. I’m okay.”

“You don’t look okay,” Shiro says as Keith settles onto the edge of the bed. “What happened to your arm?”

Keith seizes up and looks away, wrapping his left hand around his wrist to hide it. All he can do is shrug pathetically and use his shoulder to wipe away more tears.

Shiro spends a while scrutinizing him, as though trying to find answers just by staring, before he relents and grabs an extra pillow from his closet. Keith takes it a crawls under the blankets, tucking himself against the wall as he watches Shiro peek into the hallway and look around. “Stay there.”

He’s gone before Keith can even ask where he’s going, so Keith just relaxes into the pillow and tells himself to take deep breaths, watching the fish swim around in the dimly lit tank as he attempts to calm himself.

Shiro returns moments later toting a plastic bag filled with ice and a tea towel, which he wraps the ice in as he sits on the edge of the bed. When he reaches out to take Keith’s hand, he flinches back so hard that he smacks his head off the wall. Shiro stares at him for a while, calculating, before he slowly holds out the ice for him to take.

“...Thanks,” Keith croaks, feeling immediate relief when he rests the bag of ice on his wrist.

“Are you ... okay?” Shiro asks, seemingly at a loss.

Keith just nods and sniffs, glad to be done with crying. “Tired,” is all he says before closing his eyes and letting himself relax, reassured that he’ll be okay with Shiro nearby.

There’s a brief sensation of a hand ghosting through the regrowing hair on his head, and then the mattress dips below Shiro’s weight as he drapes the covers over both of them and settles back among the pillows.

Tentatively, he reaches out his good hand, sighing when Shiro takes it in his own and squeezes.

“It’ll be alright.”
Whatever Doesn't Make Me Stronger Kills Me

Chapter Summary

What could the effects of druid magic on Keith possibly be?! Tune in at 11 to find out.

Hunk can't keep a secret to save his life, but in his defense, he's Deeply Concerned for his friend's well-being.

Chapter Notes

This is all over the place (a couple POV switches sorry I just love including Lance) but also we really needed some pining Lance here bc it's some good shit. Also it is 10,000 words please appreciate all this damn effort.

So Lance is pining and Keith is freaking out (lol get it?)

TW for:
- Somewhat graphic child abuse
- Implied non-con/sexual abuse (very much implied, can be interpreted as just physical abuse)
- Domestic violence (foster parents fighting)

“Well?” Zarkon says impatiently, claws tapping against the armrest. Haggar inclines her head slightly towards him.

“Their dynamic is still frail as it stands, sire. I believe this revelation will shatter them from within.”

“And the Black paladin?”

“It is my understanding that he has a close relationship with the Red paladin, and that his time in captivity caused irreversible damage. Their leader will be afraid, sire,” she rasps, a wild grin stretching beneath her mask. “We anticipate this, in particular, will become Voltron’s downfall.”

“You understand,” Zarkon begins, finally ceasing his tapping to stretch a hand out to Haggar, who steps forward to take it in her own, “that we must recover the Lions ourselves, before Lotor is able to get his claws in them.”

“I understand, sire,” Haggar whispers, and Zarkon drops her hand.

“How long?”
“The quintessence will begin to affect him immediately, though visible changes will take several quintants. It should take full effect in just over a movement.”

“And the change will not kill the paladin?”

“It did not kill him the first time, sire.”

Zarkon nods slowly, fangs bared in some haunting bastardization of a smirk. “Excellent.”

***

There are no signs of physical injury when Shiro peels Keith’s flight suit away, replacing it with a stark white sleep chamber suit while Hunk assists him, but Shiro’s hands shake nonetheless as he takes in the strained look on Keith’s pallid face and the feeble twitching of his limbs. He doesn’t know what happened -- “The crazy witch lady got him,” was all Lance had said before rushing back out to retrieve Red, who was left behind in their haste to get Keith back safely.

Together, Hunk and Shiro lift Keith as gently as they can manage up and into the pod, which seals with a soft whirring. Then, as quickly as it closed, it opens again, making a tiny, confused series of beeps.

“Um?” Hunk whimpers, looking to Shiro with wide eyes when Keith slumps into their arms again, still trembling and breathing sporadically.

Shiro looks to Coran, who hums in displeasure and spends a few moments frowning at the pod controls as he taps away at the holoscreen.

“What did she do to him?” Shiro asks, and for as much as he tries to keep the fury out of his voice, even he can tell he still sounds absolutely murderous.

Keith is one of the most important people in the universe to him.

“It’s nothing to do with Druid magic,” Coran assures, but he’s still frowning at the screen. “Just some … slight irregularities conflicting with the typical human data we have. I suppose we could attribute that to his apparent Galra ancestry, but … there are some physical irregularities that the sleep chamber is having difficulty comprehending.”

“How so?” Shiro asks, shifting Keith’s weight entirely onto Hunk, who nods and begins attempting to massage the tremors out of Keith’s forearms and hands.

He sidles up to Coran to look over Keith’s scans himself. “Oh,” he murmurs in response to the image projected before him. He can see where Keith has had broken bones that healed wrong. In about six different places on his body. He’s already quite aware of the patches of scar tissue from the house fire that the scan seems befuddled by, but these are a new discovery.

He doesn’t know why this surprises him so much. The scan doesn’t highlight the once-broken right arm Shiro remembers so vividly as an issue, but that can only mean that all these other injuries were left untreated and, likely, ignored.

Honestly, it amazes him Keith has managed to survive this long, sometimes. The guy has zero sense of self-preservation. Absolutely none. “What kind of crazy person runs around with broken ribs?” he says quietly, shaking his head in disbelief. “Of course he would, god, I--” Shiro sighs heavily and runs a hand down his face.

“You humans must have some particularly fragile bones.”
“Well, not necessarily, Keith just…” Shiro’s hands are still shaking, and he glances back to where Hunk is standing, watching them, with Keith convulsing minutely in his arms. “Just log it as his normal physical state, I guess. Let the pod take care of whatever Haggar did to him.”

“The sleep chambers can heal broken bones,” Coran says calmly. “However, not once they have set in new ways. I would suggest that we re-break and re-set them, but since they do not appear to have affected his abilities thus far, it wouldn’t be necessary.”

“No, it’s fine. He probably hasn’t even noticed, knowing him. Or he just didn’t care. Who knows.” Shiro eyes the three different ribs that have been highlighted in the scan and shakes his head again, drawing a slow, calming breath.

“Perhaps we could ask his opinion when he--”

“No!” Shiro interrupts. “Coran, I appreciate the concern about our … ‘fragile human bodies’, I really do, but do not bring this up to Keith. Ever. That goes for you, too, Hunk.”

“O...kay?” Hunk says, and with Coran’s encouragement and Shiro’s assistance, he lifts him back into the pod. Coran spends a couple seconds making adjustments to the settings to accommodate Keith’s mishaps, then it closes again. Shiro can pinpoint the exact moment it puts Keith to sleep; the obvious discomfort drains from his face, his form goes limp, and the shaking stops.

His own hands, however, don’t stop shaking. “He wouldn’t want us to know,” is all he says before leaving the medical bay.

***

Keith Kogane is in hell.

He doesn’t know what he did wrong that landed him here, and he certainly doesn’t remember how he got here, but as he stares at his back in the bathroom mirror he grows increasingly fucking certain that that’s precisely where he is.

His whole back has been itching and burning intensely all night, enough to keep him tossing, turning, and complaining; it’s well past midnight and he hasn’t had a single moment of rest. Now he understands why: creeping up along his spine is a column of purple skin, a pale lavender blossoming outwards, towards his hips and shoulders.

He spends a while trying to rationalize this. He must be having some kind of reaction to something from the planet they visited today.

Yeah, it must be allergies, he thinks, even though he knows, logically, what the truth is. Between his own constant concern over his heritage and Haggar’s unusual spiel as she attacked him, he knows exactly what the hell is going on and he can’t stand it.

He spends a long while sitting in Red’s cockpit, not sleeping, just staring at the darkened glass that hides the hangar from sight, wondering what horrible acts he must have committed in another lifetime to be dealt this hand in this one. He tries to remind himself that the gentle thrum of a sentient, intelligent being around him is comforting, always has been, but when he starts to feel too much like he’s betraying her, he returns to his room and stares at the ceiling instead.

Sometimes, before all of this, he wondered what his mother had looked like. Was his hair the same as hers? Were her eyes the same unusual purple-grey that garnered unwanted attention from too
many people? Was she ever accused of being hot-headed, uncontrollable, *reckless* the way he’s been labelled all his life?

He used to wonder how much of her was part of *him*, and he’s beginning to suspect that it’s a lot more than he bargained for.

* 

Adjusting the collar of his jacket for about the three-hundredth time, Keith turns to look in the mirror again. Thank god his hair is long, or it wouldn’t cover the patch of purple on the back of his neck. The rash -- because that’s *all it is*, he insists -- forms a large purple blotch across his upper back, between his shoulder blades, spreading up toward the back of his head, out toward his shoulders, and tapering down to a point near the base of his spine.

It faintly resembles a cross, and Keith desperately tries to find amusement in this situation.

By now, he’s late to breakfast. Any later and it will be suspicious, so he steels himself, makes one last attempt to steady his shaking hands, and heads down to the dining hall.

He runs into Lance in the doorway.

“Oh, hey. You’re late,” Lance says, turning back towards his own seat. “I was just going to make sure you didn’t die or something.”

“Ha, ha,” Keith says in a monotone voice, rolling his eyes. He settles in beside Lance just as Hunk enters the room, directing Pidge to her seat with a hand hovering by her shoulder.

“And it’s not as though that wasn’t the case; however, I made some adjustments to the algorithm to prevent future data exclusion based on an analysis that *doesn’t* account for time frames,” she’s saying, obviously excited despite her shuffling zombie-walk and drooping eyelids. “Because space and time are wack, y’know?”

Hunk nods encouragingly as she flops down in her chair and closes her eyes. “Space and time are wack, yeah.”

“You, uh -- you tired, there?” Lance asks coyly, raising an eyebrow at Pidge.

“No, just thinking,” she mumbles back at him, even though her head is lolling over onto her shoulder.

“Pidge,” Allura says, a note of warning in her voice. “You cannot wear yourself out like this. You’re a vital part of this team and *we need* you to be in good condition.”

“I’m not,” Pidge sighs. “I’m not *worn out*, I’m just … busy.”

“Pidge, I know how badly you want to find your dad,” Shiro says, gaze soft, “But running yourself into the ground isn’t conducive to your success. Go back to sleep after breakfast. And I mean *sleep.*”

“We better not catch you on that primitive piece of technology,” Coran adds, tugging one end of his mustache. “We won’t have training today to accommodate this, of course, but that doesn’t mean you should waste the day. Go take care of yourselves, you all look like a bunch of Boochikwanishiwag at the Ziigwan-Ghiwedinong Equinox.”
“No clue what you’re talking about, but I’m gonna go mix some new face mask stuff before you guys change your minds.” Lance shrugs and hurries out of the room with his breakfast in tow.

Hunk whisks Pidge away once breakfast is done; Keith passes him in the corridor on his way back to his room, looking exceptionally more weary than he did twenty minutes ago and carrying two and a half Frankenstein-laptop-looking devices under his arm.

Keith would probably be a lot more amused by this without the pressure of certain … circumstances, so he gathers up his training gear and heads back into the corridor to relieve some of that pressure.

*

It’s getting worse. It’s getting so much worse and Keith doesn’t have one single damn clue as to what in the hell he’s supposed to do about this.

How can he possibly hide the fact that he’s turning purple from his team?

At the rate it’s progressing, he’ll be completely fucked over within the next two days.

Which is fine! It’s great. It’s whatever, he forces himself to think as he stalks down the corridor back to his room. He’s not at all prepared to have a run-in with anyone and listen to the inevitable, “Oh, hey Keith, have you noticed your arms are all purple? Like the Galra? Which you are. We’d really hate it if you started looking like them, so maybe don’t do that.”

They’d really hate him if he started looking like them, wouldn’t they?

No, he’s not feeling particularly unnerved, thanks.

Hiding in his room is pretty fucking much his only option at this point, lest he get stuffed in a pod and blasted away from the castle.

No, no; that’s overreacting. That’s ridiculous. They won’t do that.

Of course, he’s been kicked out of places for less extreme reasons before.

He slows his pace and takes a couple yoga breaths, like he’s expected to when he starts getting worked up about something, and is still just long enough to catch Pidge shrieking with laughter from the doorway a few paces ahead him.

Unable to resist the tug of curiosity, he peeks into the room to see the “outdated” Altean equivalent of a television mounted on the wall, Pidge and Lance seated on the floor with their backs to him.

They’re playing that fucking fantasy RPG game again.

Keith really likes that game but never plays it because he always feels like he’s intruding.

“Pidge, you absolute -- ugh, no, gross!” Lance shrieks, swatting at Pidge’s shin. She has one foot pressed against Lance’s cheek and the other on his shoulder, apparently attempting to shove him over sideways as she braces herself against the floor and pushes at his head.

“Stop using your -- oh my god, geez -- stop with the power-ups Lance come on!” Pidge yells back between peals of uproarious laughter.

“Um hell no; I’m losing, I fully deserve to use power-ups because you’re freakishly good at this
game. This is putting us on equal ground.” He grabs Pidge’s ankle and yanks so hard she tips over sideways, controller slipping out of her grasp.

Keith almost -- almost -- steps into the room to join them, drawn in by the huge, genuine smiles lighting up their faces, wanting so desperately to be included in this moment, but …

There’s that twinge of pain up the sides of his head again, and the ever-growing ache in his feet, and the itchy purple spreading down his arms and around his torso. He bites his lip and retreats reluctantly to his room.

It’s probably not too early to sleep, right?

*

“What do you need something?” Keith asks, probably more harshly than is entirely necessary, as he exits the training deck. He’s kind of rushing, yeah, because his arms are all purple and there’s this … bone-deep ache that’s slowing him down at every turn. Hunk probably noticed. Sometimes Keith forgets how observant he is.

Of course, Hunk probably thinks he’s falling ill, if anything.

“Hm!” Hunk squeaks, failing at nonchalance as his eyebrows shoot straight up towards his hairline. “Who, me?” He looks anywhere but Keith -- like he hasn’t been staring at him all morning -- unable to hide the pinch of resolve in his features, like he’s trying to solve the universe’s most complicated Rubik’s cube. “No, not at all, just … ya know, the usual, the same old, hah--”

Keith squints at him, reasonably suspicious, but he really should be going, really can’t stick around here longer than necessary. He has no idea how much time is left, and he’s spent the last few days flitting back and forth between the appropriate amount of social interaction to avoid notice (which, fortunately, is not much) and checking the mirror for a purple rash that decides to spread whenever it wants.

And, of course, his long and agonizing appointments with his bed, or the floor if he can’t make it that far, because whatever is happening, it’s far from painless.

Even now, as he stares up at Hunk with sweat drying under his armour, he feels the ache in his arms sharpen to razor-points as it creeps down his fingers, both hands curling into fists in response to the encroaching pain.

Let Hunk think whatever he wants, Keith decides, turning abruptly and storming off into the corridor. He doesn’t have time to sit around waiting to get caught.

Not that he’s putting much time into problem-solving, either, but that’s besides the point.

No Red anymore; he trusts her, loves her, but isn’t entirely confident in her ability to keep this between them. For as closed off -- and so much like him -- she usually is, her concern for her paladin tends to outweigh everything else, and if she thinks he needs help, then help he will receive.

And, frankly, he doesn’t fucking need it.

Never has, never will.

*
“Hey,” Hunk starts tentatively, not taking his eyes off the dissected communicator in front of him.

“That’s a worried ‘hey’. Pidge,” Lance says, sitting up straighter in the floatie chair he stole from her desk, “that’s a worried ‘hey.’” He pivots around to stare at Hunk -- misjudges the required force, takes another half-spin and almost drops the fruit muffin he’s eating. “What’s wrong, buddy?”

“Whoa, calm down, it’s not that bad.” Hunk holds his hands up placatingly, sufficiently distracted from his project, and sets the screwdriver aside. Or, whatever the Altean equivalent of a screwdriver is. Lance isn’t sure. He usually zones out about 3 milliseconds into the explanations.

“I know you better than that. Spill.”

“Well, I was just, y’know … I was thinking … what do you think Keith’s life was like? Before Voltron, I mean?”

Lance purses his lips, stares down his nose at Hunk, then places a finger on his chin and leans back in the chair. “Hm. Interesting question. Are we going to investigate?”

“How would we even investigate that? Hack into Garrison records from the middle of assfuck nowhere space?” Pidge, who has been silent thus far, pipes up from her Corner of Seclusion (appropriately dubbed by Lance).

“No, we’re going to speculate,” Hunk says, “Because I am dying to know, but there’s no way to find out.”

Lance takes a bite of his muffin and chews it contemplatively. “Bet his parents were bikers. That’s probably where he got that awful jacket from. Bet they taught him he’s better than everyone, and raised him to be a haughty lil prick.”

“Oh, c’mon, Lance. He’s not that bad. You’re biased because you need to use hatred to hide your real feelings.” Pidge waggles her eyebrows at him, and Lance almost throws his muffin at her, but thinks better of it at the last second because that would be an atrocious waste of Hunk’s excellent baking skills.

“Shut up! Next question!” He turns back to Hunk, but Hunk is staring at the wall with a distant expression, obviously uncertain about something. “Hunk?”

“I knew it,” Lance shrieks. He actually does throw the muffin this time, straight at the floor, where it explodes into a dozen moist, delicious, fruity pieces and he immediately regrets it but it’s overshadowed by Hunk’s betrayal. “I knew these were guilt-muffins, I knew from the moment I smelled them. You’ve been keeping secrets!”

Hunk’s hand are up defensively again, and Lance flops back onto his chair (which begins to spin away), mumbling “traitor” under his breath, but when he rights himself he pins Hunk with a deadly serious gaze. “Spill.”

Even Pidge sits up a little straighter as she strains to listen in.

“Okay, like I said, this is not my secret to tell, I just … can’t keep it from you guys, especially since you, Lance, are so quick to judge him for everything.” He pauses, dramatically, and it takes every ounce of strength in Lance’s being not to tell him to just get on with it. “Keith’s an orphan,”
Hunk blurts finally, then claps his hands over his mouth like he hadn’t meant to say that.

“What?” Lance says, tilting his head to the side, not sure he heard right.

“Which is, of course, not a huge deal or anything, but I’m really starting to have my suspicions about the state of his life, like, before all this, and I can only imagine it wasn’t pretty.”

“Oh,” Pidge says from her corner. “That … makes a lot of sense. I can’t believe I missed that. I’ve met a couple system kids; Keith’s just like them, though perhaps to a lesser degree. I don’t think he’s a junkie or anything, I mean, but he’s definitely pretty fucked up.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Lance repeats.

Pidge shoots him a look. “Do I need to provide a dictionary? He doesn’t have parents.”

Lance nods slowly. “Okay, yeah, I’m not dumb, but like … who raised him?”

“Lots of people, Lance, that’s how the foster system works.”

Yeah, unless a family member took him in,” Hunk adds. “But, well, I did ask that, and he didn’t answer, but he did say he didn’t miss anybody from Earth so like, I can reasonably assume that that is not the case. Which brings me back to my original point -- does anyone else think that Keith has seen some seriously messed-up stuff?”

Lance stares at the unfortunate remains of his muffin like they’ve done him a personal affront, knuckles white on the armrest of the chair. “That … sucks,” he mumbles, eloquently. If Keith didn’t have parents, who did he go to when he was upset or hurt? Was it always a foster parent? Lance can’t imagine confiding in anyone but his own mother -- it’s just impossible to replicate that kind of bond. It’s impossible to build that kind of trusting relationship easily, especially if there’s no real relation between two people. Did Shiro help him work through his problems?

How long has Keith known Shiro?

Who held him and told him it would be okay when he had nightmares? Lance pushes his hair off his forehead and sighs.

“Yeah, that would probably explain some stuff. I kinda figured he had some serious trust issues. He’s no good at hiding it, obviously, Mr. Lone Wolf and all.” Pidge reaches behind Hunk and grabs a muffin for herself. “Probably why he acts like his life philosophy is ‘trust no bitch’ -- I’m no expert, but the foster system really messes you up.”

“See, that’s why I’m worried. He’s always so … closed-off.” Hunk throws his arms out in exasperation, smacking his hand off the edge of the desk. “Ow! Ugh, but I’m really trying here, you know, and it’s like every time I try to be closer to him he panics and pulls away more.”

Pidge nods solemnly, nibbling at the muffin. “Yup, abandonment issues will do that.”

“Geez,” Hunk sighs.

Habitually, Lance starts chewing on the inside of his cheek. “You don’t think he really--”

“Yes,” Pidge cuts him off. “Aren’t you supposed to be the expert on all things Keith?”

“Wh-- no, that’s…” Lance groans and leans back in the chair again. “We can’t just assume stuff like, y’know…”
“Literally the second we all started getting along better he turned tail and ran. He spent like, four months with the Blade of Marmora.”

“You really think it was because we were mad at him for taking off all the time?”

Pidge throws a berry at Lance’s face. “Whatever. Come lift this panel so I can rewire the comm system.”

“I have so many questions right now,” Lance whines, sliding off the chair and trudging over to Pidge’s corner to assist her.

“Sure, you better not go ask Keith. He’ll probably run me through with a sword for betraying his trust.” Hunk shudders. Lance rolls his eyes while Pidge adjusts his hold on the panel for him. “Not that I don’t love and trust him, but I’d like to not, y’know, piss him off.”

“Well then you better get asking, because now I need to know!”

“That’s the problem! He won’t talk to me!” The entire array of communicator pieces scatters around him when he uncrosses his legs and slumps onto the floor in defeat. “He’s been hiding in his room way more than usual. He keeps running off mid-conversation. He looks like he’s worried about something all the time. And I know I always worry about everyone way too much, but this is driving me up the wall. Something is wrong.”

Hunk is right. Lance almost drops the panel on Pidge’s head. The training deck is empty way more often than it should be. And they would know, because they’re the people who hide out in the observation room and make sure he doesn’t get himself killed by training bots. Which, no, is not creepy -- Hunk says it’s being a good friend, and Lance agrees, because that boy will let those robots beat the shit out of him and still not relent; one of these days he’s going to end up in the med bay for a week.

Lance has sat up there to keep an eye on him twice in the last week. Movement. Whatever the space word is. As opposed to, oh, say, thirteen times?

“Crap.”

Well, okay, maybe he’s still recovering from whatever Harry Potter bullshit the Galra witch did to him. Maybe he’s just tired. That’s a fair assumption.

“Do you think that magic stuff made him sick?” he tries.

“I hope not,” Pidge’s muffled voice replies. “Because if the healing pod didn’t fix it then we might be screwed.”

Hunk nods. “Exactly. That’s why I was thinking maybe it has something to do with us, or, I guess with not wanting to get close to us? Which is, y’know, alright if that’s really what he wants, but I also really think he needs to be hugged more often. You know?”

Lance squints appraisingly at Hunk for several moments. “Are you proposing … shenanigans?”

“I’d prefer the term operation, but yeah, I am proposing some shenanigans.” Hunk grins broadly and Lance reflects the expressions. “Operation ‘Give Keith More Hugs’?”

“I thought you were just talking about not wanting to get stabbed?” Pidge pipes up, emerging from beneath the panel with her hair sticking up in all directions (more so than usual). She points a pair of wire-clippers accusingly at both of them in turn. “You think surprising him with hugs is conducive to remaining in one piece? That boy has the reflexes of a beast.”
“Okay, okay, that’s fair,” Lance says, stroking his chin pensively as Pidge helps him put the panel back in place. “But offering hugs isn’t bad. We can try that. And if he says no, that’s fine! It’s up to him! Maybe if we keep it up he’ll say yes.”

“And, in the meanwhile, we can start taking better care of him since he clearly doesn’t do much of that himself. Have you seen how tired he is? It looks like someone hit him with a bus. Let’s make sure he’s eating and sleeping enough, first of all.”

“Yeah, and make sure he knows that we really do want him here,” Lance interjects. “Or whatever stupid idea he’s got in his head, so he doesn’t pull another stunt like the Marmora thing again!”

“You gonna tell him you looove him?” Pidge snickers, glasses flashing ominously.

“You know what, Pidge? I have many siblings, but you are one of the worst,” Lance growls, storming across the room and taking his chair with him so he can curl up in it and face the wall.

“Flattered,” Pidge mumbles as she pulls her computer onto her lap and hooks several wires into it.

“Well, to be completely fair, Lance, you gotta do something about that,” Hunk offers tentatively. “I love you, I do, but you spent two nights crying in my room while he was in the pod. Also you haven’t shut up about his eyes in, like, months.”

“What the heck, man!?” Lance screeches from the other side of the room, flailing his arms in rage. “You can’t just throw me under the bus like this! In front of Pidge! Also, no one’s eyes should look like that! It’s not a normal eye colour!”

Hunk and Pidge share a look of pure exasperation. “That’s not what most of your complaining is about,” Hunk says, softly enough that Lance probably can’t even hear.

“I mean, in a completely objective and not smitten way, his eyes are very pretty,” Pidge adds. “Not that I’ve overheard those conversations, of course. Or the ones about your ‘special feelings’.” She includes finger quotations even though Lance obviously can’t see, and Hunk barely masks a giggle behind his hand.

Lance groans and slides melodramatically out of the chair to lie motionless on the floor. “I like girls,” he whines.

Hunk kind of grimaces, looking pointedly at the ceiling. “Well…”

“I mean, like, I’m just supposed to like girls,” Lance clarifies. “This has happened before, I know, Hunk, I can feel you making faces at me. But it’s not fair. Everything is so much easier if it’s a girl.”

“Hey.” Pidge sits up a little straighter, adjusting her glasses. She looks profoundly uncertain as she continues, “You know we … aren’t judging you, right? You can like whoever you want. Has no one … told you that before?” she asks, gaze sliding over to Hunk, who sighs.

“Well, yeah.” Lance drags himself up to sit against the wall, knees to his chest. “But it just makes everything harder this way. First of all, I am a good Catholic boy. Second, if it’s a girl it’s pretty much guaranteed she has the potential to be interested, at least, and no one is ever going to judge us, probably. And then, like, what if I want a family? I mean I get some guys can have kids, obviously, but you know what I mean? Also, again, no guarantee he would ever return any feelings I had for him, because duh, he’s as straight as a ruler.”

Pidge can’t help but laugh at him. Her computer nearly tumbles off of her knees as she flops over
backwards with the force of her laughter. Lance watches her quizzically until the peals of laughter subside, and then Hunk starts smiling.

“I knew it!” he exclaims, leaping to his feet.

“Keith is about as straight as a bendy ruler,” Pidge cackles, still wiping tears from the corners of her eyes. “I mean, geez, I know you’re in denial but have you seen the way he dresses? He may be socially inept but no straight man wears clothes that tight, regardless of what social norms they are or are not aware of. Masculinity is just too fragile.”

Lance turns fire-engine red, impressively fast. “We’ve gotten way off-topic. I’m going to leave now.”

And he does, before either of them can even try to stop him.

*

Yup, there it is.

The moment that he becomes completely, utterly, irreversibly fucked.

The purple patch creeping up the side of his jaw stands out in stark contrast to his typically pale complexion, and he tries pressing at hard for a few seconds to see if it will disappear with the pressure.

No luck.

Scratching it off doesn’t work, either, but does create a bright red patch of irritation around the edges. He keeps scratching anyway, like this is a blemish and not a part of his literal skin.

Sure would be nice to have some makeup on hand. He could always steal something from Allura. Knowing Alteans, it probably has some kind of magical property that automatically matches it to your skin tone.

...Which would just make it turn fucking purple. Damn!

He’d kind of been hoping to have at least one more day of freedom. He eyes his Marmora suit, the sleeve sticking out of the closet where the door remains ajar.

Because that totally wouldn’t be suspicious and weird. No one would question it if he started walking around the castle with a hood and a mask for no reason.

Perhaps it’s high time to contact Kolivan, give Red back to Lance, and book it. Allura will be happy to pilot again. Not that she was upset to step down from the position in the first place -- she had offered, insisting that she preferred a leadership role when Lance had told her he couldn’t take that from her.

It would probably be better that way, because they wouldn’t have to see him like this. They won’t be able to judge him for whatever is happening. Hell, he’ll probably die on a mission and they’ll never need to know.

But he knows he can’t do that. He doesn’t know why, but he can’t bring himself to leave this place. Maybe, ironically -- despite the fact that they’re fighting a literal war -- this has become one of the first places he’s truly felt safe. And that’s … bad.

Bad in the same way he felt after he let his guard down for the first time since his father’s death
and it resulted in him being heartbroken all over again.

Bad in the way that the tension has started to melt out of his body and the uncertainty has started to dissipate from his chest and he feels comfortable with everyone, now, like they’re good for him.

Bad because this is the longest he’s ever lived in the same place, if he doesn’t count the Garrison, and of course something is going to come along and fuck it all up.

He takes a few deep, steadying breaths. This can work, he tells himself. It can be okay. He’ll tough out the rest of whatever this is in his room, and if it isn’t too bad, maybe they won’t get angry about it. After all, he’s met other half-Galra. He’s seen Lotor. If he’s half-Galra, too, he might not look as Galra as he expects. Might not become a source of fear for Shiro or the Alteans, might not cause them to distrust him based on appearance.

If it doesn’t turn out too bad, he might be okay.

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Keith has barely been asleep for half an hour when he’s woken by yelling. Just outside his room, in the hall, Sherry and Dale are screaming at each other, words blurring together in Keith’s sleep-addled brain.

Still, his heart kicks into overdrive and he sits upright, drawing the covers closer around himself. Gazes at the door, unblinking, waiting for it to open and, inevitably …

His ribs ache where Dale kicked him earlier, flaring up at the memory.

“No, what I’m saying is, you never fucking listen when I talk!” Sherry screeches, the sound echoing in the hall. Surely the neighbours can hear them. Surely Shiro’s parents can hear. “I’m trying to help you! I’ve been trying to keep you out of trouble!”

“Stop being so fucking sensitive all the time! Christ, you’re always right, aren’t you? You always have to be right! I’m sick of it!”

“You know what, Dale? I’m done. Threaten me all you want; I’ll call CPS and tell them everything.”

“The fuck are you talking about?”

“I’m going to sleep at my sister’s for the night. Don’t touch me. I’ve tolerated your shit for too long.”

Dale growls audibly, the thump of his fist reverberating through the walls. “That’s it? You’re taking off on me just because you don’t want to fuck?”

“It’s so much more than that. I can’t stand you right now. God, you’re such a fucking idiot, you know that?” Sherry’s voice grows fainter -- Keith can hear the creak of the stairs under her feet. “Don’t try to call, asshole. And you lay a hand on that kid, I’ll kill you myself. Go the hell to sleep and sober up, then we’ll talk.”

The front door slams.
Dale, still lingering outside Keith’s room, starts muttering curses under his breath and kicking the poor, abused wall. This goes on for several minutes as Keith curls further into himself, mouth exceptionally dry.

The real fear sets in when the sound of Dale’s boot hitting the wall ceases, and silence rings throughout the house. In that brief moment, the roaring in Keith’s ears takes over everything, and he stare at the closed door with tears in his eyes.

“You!” Dale bellows, slamming the door open with such force that the knob lodges in the drywall. Keith can’t help the tiny squeak of shock as he frantically tries to get out from the covers and under the bed, like he should have done, but fear had held his limbs paralyzed. “This is all your damn fucking fault!”

A hand closes around his throat; the strength behind the motion toppling him over backwards and pinning him to the bed.

**

He doesn’t bother knocking on Shiro’s window this time. It’s late, but not late enough that the Shirogane household is asleep. This game is dangerous, now, with them awake, and once he’s confirmed that Shiro’s dad isn’t home -- no sleek silver car in the driveway -- and his mom is in the basement, he twists the door handle with more care than he’s probably ever done anything in his life.

Thank god: the door is unlocked. There’s not a chance in hell he’s turning around and going back to that place.

He slips in through the tiniest possible crack in the door, desperate not to make any noise, lest he get caught and questioned. He doesn’t want questions, he just wants to sit in Shiro’s room until he can breathe again, until he feels a little more like himself, whoever that’s supposed to be.

He holds back the tiny gasping breaths and the whimpers as he limps determinedly -- slowly -- past the stairs to the basement, only letting out an agonized puff of air when he’s safely outside Shiro’s room. He can see him sprawled on the bed, legs kicked up in the air headphones on as he does his homework, like a responsible student (Keith stopped doing his work months ago, and only started again when Shiro reminded him that he needs good grades to get into the Galaxy Garrison, though even now Keith is half-assing it). He thinks about how badly he wants that: them, together at the Garrison, using the flight simulators and helping each other with homework and living like normal people. Reminds himself that he has to endure what he does so that he can stay with Shiro, the first person who ever really mattered, even as he braces himself and pushes the door open the rest of the way.

He doesn’t say anything, just walks right in and flops down on the floor beside the bed, too exhausted to do much more. Shiro sits up and pulls his headphones off, asking what’s wrong, why is he crying, does he need anything? Keith just needs to be here, nothing more. He needs a minute to breathe again, calm himself, prepare to go back to … whatever the hell just happened, he isn’t even sure.

His whole body shakes against the side of the bed and he grips his upper arms to steady himself, resting his elbows on his knees.

Shiro’s hands are on his then, prying his fingernails away from where he’s broken skin, trying to talk him down from his panic. Keith’s chest squeezes tighter, tighter, leaving no space for the air he’s desperately trying to suck in. He latches onto Shiro instead, babbling something unintelligible as tears pour from his eyes, something like an apology and a plea mixed together.
Shiro gasps, then, and reaches out to touch the bruises around his throat. “Keith,” he whispers; Keith shies away from the contact -- he doesn’t want anyone’s hands there ever again. “Keith, I can’t--” Shiro’s voice breaks. “I can’t let this happen. I know you don’t want me to tell anyone but I can’t watch this anymore. I can’t let him hurt you anymore.”

Keith tries to cling to him with hands that are still shaking violently, but Shiro disappears from his grasp with ease. Faintly, he can hear him calling out to his mother, telling her to come upstairs, “Keith needs help”…

He can’t let her know. He can’t very well walk anymore, either, so he does the only thing he can think to do. Lifting the edge of Shiro’s blanket where it’s nearly fallen to the floor, he ducks under his bed and lets it fall back into place.

It’s almost easier, here, to control his breathing, and he must, if he doesn’t want to be found.

Quick footsteps reverberate through the floor beneath him, and then Mrs. Shirogane is calling his name. Don’t move, he tells himself, trying to quell the trembling in his aching limbs. Don’t breathe. He clamps a hand over his mouth and nose, feeling his overworked heart fluttering in panic through all the other chaos in his body.

Don’t move, don’t breathe. She won’t find you, he tries to convince himself.

The blanket disappears and light shines under the bed, a shadow shifting into view as Mrs. Shirogane lies down to reach out for him.

“No,” he croaks around the bruises lining his throat. “No, no, no, no, please.”

His limbs twitch spasmodically, dragged this way and that by the fear and anxiety overwhelming him, like a puppet controlled by his panic -- he tenses his body and tries, tries, tries to keep still and make it all go away.

“Keith, come here. I’m not going to hurt you,” Mrs. Shirogane says, voice solemn and resigned. Some kind of horrific squeal escapes him when her hands close around his forearms to pull him forward -- he fights her the whole way, but he’s just so exhausted and sore that it accomplishes nothing besides rugburn on his exposed skin. “It’s okay, Keith. It’s okay.”

It isn’t, he tries to tell her, but all that comes out is a choked sob as he’s lifted onto the bed and the touch disappears.

He glances up to see her hovering over him, examining his body carefully; her gaze hardens and it’s over, she knows. He can’t help the humiliation and disgust that bubble up inside him as he curls further into himself, still wanting to convince himself that it didn’t happen, but the way Mrs. Shirogane is looking at him, torn between pity and rage, just drags him further away from denial.

“That bastard,” she growls, and it’s the first time he’s ever heard her swear, let alone sound so pissed. “I knew I couldn’t trust him. Fucking bastard.” She turns to where Shiro is gaping beside her. “Get me the phone.”

Last time the agency found out a family had hurt him, he’d been sent away -- moved towns, moved schools, and lost contact with the few tentative friends he’d managed to acquire.

He knows, if she calls the cops, or the agency, or anybody, he’s going to lose Shiro, and he wails. “No, please.”

“No, please.” Mrs. Shirogane’s hand settles on the mattress beside him, palm up. “I’m going to pick
you up again, is that okay?"

He responds by simply brushing their fingertips together, voice lost again.

Her hand comes up to rest on his shoulder, and then another on his knee. They slip beneath him and he’s lifted briefly into the air, then settled onto her lap. Her fingers card through his hair. “I’m sorry, Keith,” she whispers. “I should have known. He won’t touch you again, okay?”

Keith nods and wills himself to stop crying. *It’s too late.* No point in crying if he’s going to be sent away anyway. No foster family wants a stupid crybaby to take care of. In his experience, it just makes them hate him faster.

He curls himself up as small as he can possibly be, focusing on keeping his breathing even and deep over the rush of *everything* around him, over Mrs. Shirogane’s voice above him, bitter and cold as she speaks with someone over the phone, the bright light in the room, Shiro somewhere far, far away asking, “Why is he bleeding, mom? He shouldn’t be…”

He wakes up bundled under the soft blankets in Shiro’s bed, light streaming in from the hallway, and wonders for a brief moment if it was all a nightmare.

Then pain from every part of his body overwhelms him as he tries to sit up, and he hisses as he lowers himself back onto the bed.

Shiro’s sitting with his back against the bed, one hand clutching Keith’s, and in the faint light Keith can tell he’s been crying -- and that’s *very* different, because he’s never thought of Shiro as the type of person to cry. Unless, like Keith, he knows to keep it secret, only something to do alone.

Keith hasn’t been following that rule so well, lately. It’s a miracle Shiro is still here, willing to hold his hand in difficult times. He turns to Keith slowly, groggily, and offers him a watery smile.

Someone is talking, out in the hall.

He knows that voice. Sometimes, when she’s around, it’s okay, because she’s supposed to be there to help him, but a lot of the time it’s because he has to leave.

And he’s resigned himself to that fate already, so by the time the door opens and Gwen walks in with Mrs. Shirogane at her side, he’s drawn himself laboriously up into a sitting position.

Mrs. Shirogane still looks pissed, and Gwen looks uncomfortable -- Keith fights a smile at that, since he’s kind of pissed at her, too, for being *useless* to him for so long.

“Keith, buddy,” she says, green eyes sweeping over his battered form as she reaches out to rest a hand on his shoulder. He tenses, and her eyebrows pinch together. “Keith,” she says again, “you have my phone number. You’re supposed to call when something is wrong. Do you remember what my phone number is?”

Keith opens his mouth and tries to say it, but the way he *is* stops him, or maybe it’s the damage to his throat, and all that comes out is a tiny, wretched gasp. He swallows and tries again. “T-t-two, uh,”

“Okay, hey, it’s okay,” Gwen whispers, and her hand runs through his hair, brushing the wisps of his regrowing bangs off of his forehead. “I know you remember, it’s okay. I know you do. Was there a reason you didn’t tell me?”
He nods. He can see the gears in her head turning as she tries to find a way to get answers without making him speak. To save her the time, he points to Shiro, who is hovering by the wall looking uncertain and out of place. He goes still as all eyes turn to him. “D-don’t … wanna leave,” Keith whimpers, and Shiro doesn’t hesitate to approach, then, opening his arms for Keith, who hides his face in Shiro’s shoulder and tries so hard not to cry.

* 

They want to adopt him.

All the group homes in the area are overcrowded, so Keith ends up over an hour out from the Shirogane’s house, but Gwen is smiling while she holds the door open for him to drag his garbage bag full of belongings into the room. One of the sleeping kids sits up and rubs her eyes, curly hair sticking up comically, then grumbles and flops over, facing away from the light.

Keith just left the hospital after several long hours of being prodded and fussed over and asked questions, and he feels uncomfortable and overwhelmed, though he can’t help but smile anyway.

“It’s a process, Keith, so you’ll be here a while, but we’ll make sure they get chances to visit, okay?”

He never, in his whole life, thought he could have a family again. He nods and shoves the torn-up bag under the bottom bunk in the back corner of the room. “Will he be there still?” he whispers back, trying not to let the idea of being Dale’s neighbour ruin his mood.

Gwen sighs and runs a hand through her dark hair, then give Keith a not-so-reassuring smile. “We’ll talk in the morning. Get to sleep.”

He smiles up at the top bunk even though he’s still sore and somewhat angry at Dale, and at Shiro for getting him dragged out of his home like that; the anger can’t last, of course, because he’ll go back soon, and he doesn’t have to be apart from Shiro ever again. Shiro makes him feel safe, his family makes him feel safe, and the security of his situation is starting to relax him in a way he hasn’t been relaxed since his father died.

He didn’t even notice the tension was there until it started disappearing, when Mrs. Shirogane had asked if he wanted to be part of their family, if he wanted to live with them, and be Shiro’s brother.

This family who, just two months ago, helped him celebrate his birthday properly for the first time in years, inviting his classmates to their house and baking him a cake because his foster parents had given the feeble excuse that Dale needed to go out of town and Sherry would be overwhelmed. This is good. This is probably the best thing that’s ever happened to him.

He dreams of returning to the Shirogane household, staying up late watching television with Shiro and playing video games and making up space exploration stories, and what it would be like if his last name was also Shirogane, and of flying through the stars with Shiro at his side.

* 

Good news: None of the kids here are mean to him.

Bad news: Gwen keeps talking about this place called a “court” and asking him if he can help them get Dale put in jail, so he won’t be able to hurt people, but Keith doesn’t want to go anywhere or see Dale again.
Gwen says he has to.

Shiro comes to visit and Keith relays all this information to him while he nods understandingly and holds his hand. “But I guess we won’t have to live by him if he goes to jail, right?”

“Right,” Shiro assures, squeezing his hand. The grown-ups are talking about something in the corner, too serious for his liking, and Mrs. Shirogane keeps sending Keith pitying looks mid-sentence, like he’s dying or something.

They go with him to the “court” place, and then the people there make Keith tell them every horrible thing that’s ever happened to him, which, he realizes as he catches Shiro’s eye across the room, is probably a lot more than most kids are supposed to go through.

*

Shiro’s crying while he holds Keith, and he hasn’t even said anything yet. He’s been anticipating this visit because Gwen is no longer assigned to his case (he’s actually pretty sure she got fired, which he wouldn’t be surprised by, since she’s always been nice but never very helpful). He wanted to tell Shiro about his new social worker -- her name is Naomi and she has big, curly hair and she smiles a lot and sometimes she hugs him even though they “aren’t technically supposed to” which is a stupid rule anyway. He loves hugs, and now Shiro and Naomi both hug him sometimes, and it makes his whole chest feel warm.

Except like this, because Shiro is very obviously upset about something, and it’s starting to scare Keith.

His voice almost doesn’t work. It takes a few tries to speak around his fear. “What happened?” he whispers urgently, looking through the doorway into the corridor and noting that Mrs. Shirogane is looking particularly grave today, more so than during the times he had to go to the court.

Shiro wipes his eyes and pulls Keith down to sit side-by-side with him on the floor of the dining room. “Dad’s sick. He has cancer.”

“Oh,” Keith says under his breath. He knows that. He’s heard of it. He knows what that does when it gets into your body. “Will he…?” He can’t imagine Shiro not having a dad. It’s an easy position for him to be in, now, but for the first few years it was jarring, terrifying, confusing.

“I dunno. I-I don’t think so. But it’s,” Shiro takes a minute to control his breathing. “The treatment for it, to make him better -- it’s so expensive. We can’t really afford anything else. And, adoption is so expensive, too, and even though we’ve already finalized a lot of the paperwork or whatever they said, we haven’t paid anything and we can’t afford to, now. I’m so sorry, Keith,” he murmurs, hiding his tears behind his hands.

“Oh,” Keith says again, glaring at the floor. Maybe he wasn’t meant to have a family, after all. And he can’t get mad about this -- he can’t, Shiro is going through something difficult, Mrs. Shirogane has done her best, this isn’t their fault, but he feels the disappointment heavy in his gut twist slowly around into anger as Shiro apologizes again. “Whatever,” he bites out. “I don’t need to be adopted, anyway. I’m doing fine.”

“Oh,” Keith says again, glaring at the floor. Maybe he wasn’t meant to have a family, after all. And he can’t get mad about this -- he can’t, Shiro is going through something difficult, Mrs. Shirogane has done her best, this isn’t their fault, but he feels the disappointment heavy in his gut twist slowly around into anger as Shiro apologizes again. “Whatever,” he bites out. “I don’t need to be adopted, anyway. I’m doing fine.”

“Wha-- Keith,” Shiro tries as Keith stands and storms into the hall. He follows quickly behind him, stepping carefully around the adults who watch, stunned, as Keith runs past. “We want to adopt you, we really do, but we just--” Keith slams the bedroom door in his face and dives into his bed.

He’s not upset, he’s not, it would be stupid to be upset about this. He should have expected this.
The only other kid in the room hops down off his bunk and scurries out, book in hand, and Keith catches a brief glimpse of Mrs. Shirogane holding Shiro as the door opens and closes again.

He kicks the wall hard enough to leave a dent, then drags his too-big red jacket over his face to muffle his screaming as he makes the hole bigger and bigger.

He has no right to be upset about this.

* 

“Are you excited?” Naomi asks, and Keith can feel the bubbly energy radiating off her as she walks him to the front door of the building. This feels good. It feels normal. Like what having a mom might be like.

Keith doesn’t really remember his own mom. He vaguely remembers confusion that she was gone, and remembers asking dad where she was, and that he missed her warmth and her heartbeat when he fell asleep in her arms -- but he can’t remember what she looked like, and can barely recall the sound of her voice, and often wonders what parts of him look like her.

This will have to do, he thinks.

“Um, I guess, yeah.”

He isn’t sure what to expect. Isn’t sure what a “jiu jitsu” really is, besides a way to fight, but Naomi promises it’s a good way to get his frustrations out and learn to control his emotions better.

Mostly, he’s focused on the fact that he’s supposed to punch things here, apparently so that he doesn’t end up punching things somewhere else that aren’t supposed to be punched.

Like Lars, who showed up at the group home three days ago and immediately fell back into his regular routine of tormenting Keith at every turn. And who Keith punched after he shoved him over on the way to breakfast.

The difference now is, Naomi believes him when he says that Lars is hurting him.

She made him sit in the living room with Keith while they talked and talked about what is so wrong between the two of them.

Apparently, Lars is hung up on the fact that back when Keith was five, the prospective foster family Lars had desperately wanted a place in had taken Keith instead, and then Keith had the gall to fuck it up and get kicked out, even though they would have been the perfect family for any normal kid. Which would probably explain why Lars had been so awful to him the next time they’d seen each other in the group home.

He really hadn’t understood why Lars had been calling him an idiot and always looked so mad at him.

And then Lars had called him names again and Keith had punched him. Again. Right in front of Naomi.

So now he’s in jiu jitsu class, whatever that is, with things that are meant to be punched.

“Here, stop right here,” she says, holding her hand out slowly in front of him to stop him in his tracks. He watches it cautiously. “Turn and face me.” She takes a couple steps back and holds up an old camera, angling it to catch the sign reading Helio Jiu Jitsu in the shot.
Keith rolls his eyes. She’s already taken about thirty pictures of him since he put the uniform on. Still, he smiles when she tells him to and lets her have her fun, since this is really a huge favour she’s doing for him.

But he can’t help but be a little embarrassed that she films his entire first lesson and gushes about what a quick learner he is on the drive back to the group home.

In a very warm, reassured way.

On his third visit, she doesn’t unlock the car door right away to let him out of the back seat, and catches his eye in the rearview mirror. He stares back, confused. “Keith,” she says, in the kind of voice that sounds a little bit worried and a little bit exasperated.

“You,” Keith says, trying the door handle again.

“I want you to understand something.”

“Oh, uh, okay?” Keith rests his hands on his lap and waits patiently for her to continue, watching her owlishly.

Finally, she turns in her seat to face him. “I know that taking these classes will help you release some frustrations, and that they can improve your ability to … control your emotions.”

“….Yeah?” She already told him this, he’s pretty sure.

“I want you to be able to protect yourself,” she tells him, softly. “The world is-- it’s hard sometimes, and it can be especially hard when you’re in the foster system. You aren’t too young to understand this, Keith. You know how difficult the world can be. I want you to be prepared. And I want you to be able to take care of yourself when the situation calls for it. Do you understand?”

Keith nods, dumbfounded. She’s only known him a few weeks and already understands him better than Gwen ever did. Suddenly the jiu jitsu classes are more than just a part of his day -- he’s learning to protect himself, learning how to fight people who think it’s okay to hurt him.

Naomi knows that’s what he needs. He’s armed with volatility, and cautiousness, and with her phone number drilled into his brain, and all the information he needs to know to keep himself safe.

And now, he’ll be armed with the ability to fight his way through life, the right way.

“Thank you,” he whispers, and she smiles at him and unlocks the door.

*

The next couple months pass in a simple routine: school, jiu jitsu, therapy. Throw in the occasional argument with Lars, who just can seem to fucking get over it, and it’s something he quickly becomes accustomed to.

No visits from Shiro, recently, and Keith tries his best to be angry about that, but he knows it’s his fault for refusing to see him.

The therapist lady wants him to talk to her about his feelings. He always tells her he feels red, even when he’s pretty sure he’s further into the blue range, with the over-dramatically crying face. He has to talk to her three times a week.
They want him to be “normal” before they send him to a new home.

Well, Naomi doesn’t say that, and neither does Miss Renaud, the therapy lady, but that’s what Lars keeps telling him and that makes sense. He wants to be more like the kids at school, who make friends easily, who are happy to participate, who don’t flinch away when someone moves suddenly or start breathing too quickly when someone grabs them at recess.

He doesn’t understand how Miss Renaud telling him that this isn’t his fault is supposed to help him be normal, but sometimes she teaches him things to help him calm down when he’s mad and that can be pretty useful.

Of course, when Naomi asks if he’s ready to try a foster home, he answers honestly. He doesn’t know. What qualifies as being “ready”? He’s never been ready for any of the other shit that’s happened in his life, so what makes this any different? She gives him a long, pensive look and pulls him slowly into a one-armed hug.

“Would you like to try, at least?”

After a moment, Keith nods. If Naomi trusts a family to take care of him, he trusts her judgment.
The Air Begins to Feel a Little Thin

Chapter Summary

Keith is NOT happy about the involuntary makeover he’s received.

Chapter Notes

Hmm gee I wonder?? What Haggar did to Keith? What a mystery.

Everything is very … loud.

Or bright.

Or just plain overwhelming.

Keith is reminded of grade school, of the bothersome hum of the fluorescent lights that hurt his eyes, blending in with the uproar of twenty-some-odd students chattering excitedly about a million different things. Or going to the gymnasium where everything echoed too much and he couldn’t get the smell of musty sports equipment and sweaty twelve-year-olds out of his nose, no matter how long he tried to hold his breath.

Except now, he’s alone on a spaceship that would otherwise be virtually silent.

Sure, the distant rumble of the engines has always been background noise, and the occasional shout can be heard from the depths of the castle as team Voltron goes about their lives. And, yeah: he’s always been a bit sensitive to the sounds around him. Like the rustle of fabric as he shoves the blanket away, or his own heartbeat, or footsteps passing outside his bedroom door.

Just not this sensitive.

The clink of his Marmora blade hitting the floor when it slips out from beneath his pillow is like a gunshot, aggravating his already aching ears. He brings his hands up to cover them, glaring at the dagger like it’s done him a personal affront. Really, it has.

“Fucking … shit,” he says under his breath after a few moments.

The lights in his room, automated to follow a night-day pattern, have been growing steadily brighter to simulate a sunrise, and it feels like it’s stabbing straight through into his brain. He stumbles out of bed, trying to tune out the tapping of his feet against the floor, which is about a thousand times louder than it has any business being, and turns the lights down to their lowest possible setting, switching that to the default.

Intense bursts of pain have begun shooting up the sides of his head again, as though someone is attempting to shred his ears with a rake, and the squeezing pressure on his now-purple fingertips is
becoming more pronounced, and honestly? He just woke up; it’s way too early for this shit. Quite aware of where this is going, he collapses back onto his bed to just wait it out.

“Shit,” he grumbles again, reaching down to grab at his foot and ankle as the pain starts building there, too. He swears his bones are trying to rearrange themselves or some bullshit. He’s broken plenty of bones and none of them ever hurt as much as this.

It’s about two hours later that he’s convinced himself that he’s dying. He hasn’t been able to move since he turned the lights down, just lying there, tense and clutching alternately at different parts of his body as pain flares up.

It’s another hour after that when the footfalls stop dead outside his door, and he barely suppresses a hiss when the person on the other side knocks loudly. It sends a crackle like static through his eardrums and makes his eyes water.

“Keith?” Lance’s voice calls through the door, equally loud and abrasive. “You in there?”

Keith holds his breath, even though logically he knows Lance can’t hear him.

“Keith?” He knocks again, with more force. “You missed breakfast and you aren’t on the training deck, so my best guess is you’re still in here. Are you alive?”

A second set of steps resonates through the wall as they approach his door. “No luck?” Hunk asks, worry lacing his voice.

God, this would be so much easier if they just worried less, wouldn’t it? Keith yanks the blanket over his head in a desperate effort to muffle the conversation.

“There are only like, three places in this whole castleship he’d ever be, Hunk. You and I both know Keith Kogane is a creature of habit, so where the heck else could he have gone?” Keith is pretty sure he can hear the way Lance is flailing his arms about in exasperation, oddly enough. He peeks out from under the covers to check that the door is locked, red indicator light shining above the pressure pad that controls the door.

Well, no matter how desperate they get, at least they can’t get in here to bother him.

“Let’s go see Red,” Hunk suggests softly, and Lance grumbles some nonsense about an early grave as he trudges off down the hall.

Keith exhales heavily, rolling over to face the wall. He hasn’t actually looked at his body all morning, making a point of hiding himself under the blanket.

Clearly there’s no happy ending to the transformations he’s going through. Full Galra is obviously the goal. He doesn’t want to see it.

He definitely doesn’t want everyone else to see it.

He’s tired of going over his options. He’s tired, and in a lot of pain, and stressed beyond what he can handle. In all honesty, he’s kind of blocked out everything that’s happening and is planning to ignore it until the problem resolves itself.

Regardless, he has half a mind to sneak some of Coran’s unbelievably strong Altean liquor into his room and get totally sloshed to forget about all of this bullshit.

He opts to stare numbly at the door for several more hours instead.
“This is stalker behaviour. Let the boy have some privacy.” Pidge kicks Lance in the thigh to emphasize the word.

“Ow, hey!” Glaring at her and rubbing his now-bruised leg with one hand, Lance flips her off with the other. “It is not stalker behaviour. It is friendly teammate-related concern.”

“You guys seriously think I told? I haven’t even seen him in like, a full day. Stop being a stalker. Hunk, stop being an enabler. Let me work in peace.”

Pidge shoves her glasses up her forehead to rub her eyes. “You guys seriously think I told? I haven’t even seen him in like, a full day. Stop being a stalker. Hunk, stop being an enabler. Let me work in peace.”

Hunk is already standing from the couch and stretching, and Lance follows suit, which gives Pidge the freedom to wiggle down further on the armrest and stretch her legs out across the cushions. “Well,” Hunk starts, “I was hoping to make dinner soon, anyway. Any requests?”

“Food,” Pidge supplies helpfully.

“Duly noted,” says Hunk, shaking his head with a smile on his face as he trudges out of the room, Lance on his heels.

Shiro is seated at the kitchen counter when they arrive, squinting down at a holopad as he scrolls through some kind of galaxy map projected on the screen. It’s one of Pidge’s spectacular colour-coded models, ever-changing as different areas are reclaimed by rebels and new battles spring up around different star systems.

“Hey, Shiro. Dinner ideas?” Hunk asks, at the same time Lance says, “Hey, Shiro. Have you seen Keith?”

He blinks at them uncertainly for several seconds. “A stew would be nice. And no, I haven’t. I thought you said he was probably training when he missed breakfast. Did he not come out to grab himself lunch, either?”

“He did not, and now Pidge is calling me a stalker. I’m not a stalker, right?”

“No, Lance, you’re not a stalker,” Shiro assures him, turning his attention back to his map. “Maybe you just missed him during lunch. I know we don’t usually eat together in the middle of the day anymore, so I wouldn’t be surprised if he just took some leftovers to his room.”

The gears in Lance’s head go into overdrive for a second. He has a plan. To assist in the
execution of Operation ‘Give Keith More Hugs’, of course. “Hey, about that. Wouldn’t it be better for team bonding if we started scheduling a proper lunch again? I mean, Hunk here misses cooking a good hearty lunch for everyone, right buddy?”

“Sure do,” Hunk says, pulling cookware out of the cupboards. “I miss having lunch with everyone. I get we’re all busy, and everyone has different things to attend to, but it wouldn’t kill us to take half an hour out of our schedules to sit together for a meal like a proper family.”

Shiro hums thoughtfully, pulling up a second window to add notes to the map. “You’re right. I personally feel much better when we spend our meals together. I’ll talk to Allura and Coran.”

“Excellent,” Lance says deviously, and Hunk whacks him lightly on the shoulder with a ladle.

“Grab your apron. Someone needs to chop these vegetables.”

Shiro sits by and observes as they cook, occasionally requesting input on his planning for the next few weeks. They need to develop some new approaches to training to help bring everyone closer to “equal ground” in terms of skill sets. Of course, not everyone can be a genius or a ninja, but they all need to be equally prepared for all situations. As Shiro puts it: “It won’t always be Pidge who ends up in a situation where a puzzle needs to be solved.”

“Well, I mean there was that one time, with the pyramid guy and the pearl?” Lance looks to Hunk for confirmation that he’s recalling that particular fiasco correctly. Hunk nods solemnly.

“Yup. It usually is Pidge who ends up getting stuck with all the puzzle stuff. Also I think that was a sphinx. I’m kinda foggy on the details.”

Shiro exhales heavily and shakes his head, but they can both see the smile on his face as he scribbles something on one of the notepads they bought at the space mall. He rips out the page, strolls over to the wall by the fridge … thing, and slips the paper under one of the plain black, boring magnets.

‘BE PREPARED -- FOR ALL POSSIBILITIES,’ it reads, in even, blockish writing.

Lance snorts and grabs one of the big, fancy magnets with Olkari designs to replace the black one.

“Much better,” he says, nodding approvingly as he returns to chopping vegetables for Hunk.

Shiro really laughs this time, retreating back to his seat while Lance watches brightly. “You never know when you might get stuck solving puzzles or hacking into databases on a mission, Lance.”

“I’m gonna be straight with you,” Lance starts, hands on his hips -- Hunk snickers loudly behind him and slaps the counter in a not-so-subtle attempt to hide his laughter. “If I have to hack into any databases on a mission, we are beyond screwed.”

“I think that’s the point,” Hunk says, taking the cutting board right out from under Lance’s hands to dump it into a massive pot of broth he’s got boiling on the stove. “Y’know, that we don’t get screwed.”

“Now, Hunk, my buddy. My man.” Lance takes one of Hunk’s hands in his own, and Hunk looks momentarily confused before he catches sight of the playful smirk. “Who doesn’t wanna get screwed?”

“I just remembered that I need to be somewhere else.” Shiro gathers everything he was working on into his arms at once and disappears before either of them can react.
“Oh,” Lance says.

“Oh,” Hunk agrees.

“Shiro’s shy.”

“Ooor, he doesn’t want to hear someone your age talk about, uh, that,” Hunk tries.

“Welp.” Lance unties his apron, hangs it by the door, and grabs a bag of the Galra equivalent of potato chips from the cupboard. “Do you think he’s actually gonna make us do puzzles and stuff instead of fighting robots?” he asks, reclining in the chair Shiro just abandoned and cramming a handful of chips in his mouth.

*  

“Keith, you better be alive in there, I swear!” Pidge hasn’t stopped banging on the door for upwards of a minute now. Keith wants to scream. “Lance will not stop whining to me about how bored he is without you or whatever. Quit being a drama queen and come eat dinner.”

She keeps it up for about another minute, during which time Keith’s ears start ringing so loudly he can barely make out the incessant knocking. Which is probably a bad thing.

“Keith!”

“I’m fine!” he finally snaps back, searching the floor for his discarded boot and throwing it at the door. “I’m not hungry! Tell Lance to shut up!”

“I have been! Just get out here and eat some food so everyone can stop worrying.”

Keith falls silent, waiting and hoping that Pidge will just give up and leave, but after a few ticks she tries again. “Keith?”

“I’m fine. Just go!”

“No, you aren’t! You haven’t left your room yet today.” He can hear Pidge fucking around with the door control, then a frustrated growl and her open hand slamming into the wall outside. “So help me God, Keith, I will break into your room!”

He could swear his heart stops beating, just for a split second, before kicking into overdrive. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh, I would.” The menace in her voice barely masks the concern that still lingers. “You have five seconds to unlock this door, or I’m going to start hacking some shit.”

“Pidge,” he starts, on the verge of whining, as he tenderly removes the blanket cocoon he’s bundled himself into and sets his aching feet on the floor, attempting to suppress a pained grunt when he drags himself into a sitting position.

“Five.”

“Christ, Pidge, give me a sec.” His knife. Where’s his knife? It’s usually under his pillow. Shit. He hauls himself to his feet and almost immediately kicks the blade where it’s still laying on the floor. On the wrong end, of course, and a steady trickle of blood starts running from the gash by his
On the wrong end, of course, and a steady trickle of blood starts running from the gash by his ankle. Well, there’s his stupid knife. “Four!”

Double shit. He thinks he’s freaking out, but he’s been so far removed from his situation all day that he’s not quite positive about that. His extremities feel like they have ice in them and his heart feels like it’s trying to squeeze itself to death, so that’s probably confirmation enough, even though he chooses to ignore it. He cannot let Pidge see him like this. Whatever “this” is -- his foot is purple, that’s for sure, and it isn’t so much the blood dripping onto the floor as it is the lavender hue of his skin that makes his stomach turn -- the new shape that his once human foot has taken, which makes his head spin for a second. Not a foot: a paw.

There’s no way in hell he’s letting anyone see this. “Three!”

Adrenaline dulls the flares of pain through his body as he crouches to grab the blade and hurries over to the door. “Sorry, Pidge,” he mumbles -- she probably can’t hear him, but he has to swallow a lot of guilt for locking her out. He brings the knife up over his shoulder, takes careful aim, and jams it sideways into the door so that the point pierces into the frame and prevents the door from opening. “Two! Don’t make me do it, Kogane!”

He takes a couple stumbling steps back from the door and just barely manages to land on the bed when he flops over backwards. Well, now he’s fucked. “One!” There’s a short silence, during which time Keith stares at the door and holds his breath. “Fine, you asked for it!” He distinctly hears her turn on her heel and stomp off down the hall.

Great. Excellent. This isn’t suspicious at all.

Keith groans and slams his head back against the mattress a few times, but that only exacerbates the ringing in his ears and makes his brain feel like it’s being rattled around in his skull. “Quiznak.”

He’s woken a short while later by the mechanism in the door whirring aggravationally. It ceases for a second, then starts up again, louder this time. God, why him? He pulls his pillow up around his ears and tries to tune out the whirring and clinking of the door trying its hardest to obey Pidge’s command. It’s … pretty much impossible.

WwwwhhhzzZZZZZZZZZRRRRRRR

“Come on!” he growls to himself. He has such a bad headache. “Keith, what the hell did you do to your door?!”

“Nothing! Leave it!”

“It’s malfunctioning like a motherfucker!”

“Pidge!”
Oh, great, that’s Shiro. Great. Why don’t they just throw a party right outside his room while they’re at it?

Life just has to be so hard, all the time, doesn’t it?

“What are you doing?”

“Breaking into Keith’s room. What else would I possibly be wasting this lovely evening on?” Pidge’s fingernails click fervently against the keys of her laptop, and the sound should not be that clear from here, but alas -- Keith has pretty much been cursed with super-senses.

There’s momentary silence. Then, “Do you … have Keith’s permission to break into his room?”

“No, because he’s being. A. Stubborn. Ass.” She punctuates each word with a kick to the door. It starts whirring again. It’s beginning to sound like that time they had to get up close and personal with the castle’s engines for repairs. He really hopes the luxite in that blade is as tough as everyone makes it out to be.

Rather than take the bait, he just huffs and crosses his arms over his chest, pillow forgotten as he glares at the door, like Pidge will see him and back off.

“…Okay? Why are you hacking into his room?”

“Same reason.” Pidge starts typing again; the door starts groaning under the strain of two apparently opposing forces (knife vs hacker) both attempting to work towards a different outcome. It’s starting to sound like something might burst into flames at some point, or maybe explode.

“Pidge.”

“Shiro. I respect that you’re our leader, and you know what’s best, and you know the team best, and all that jazz. But he hasn’t left his room all day. That isn’t good for him.” She whispers, like an afterthought (and probably anticipating that Keith shouldn’t be able to hear her), “And I’m kinda worried he might be up to something, or maybe he’s hurt and he isn’t telling us. Because, y’know, it’s Keith and he’s a strong independent half-alien or whatever.”

“I’m fine,” Keith relents, and he starts bundling himself back into the blanket cocoon again.

“Then open the door!” She kicks it again, hard enough to actually rattle it in its frame.

“Pidge, let it be,” Shiro says softly, and Pidge huffs but doesn’t fight him on it. Some shuffling, the sound of a laptop slamming shut and the pressure pad clicking back into place, and she’s trudging off down the hall.

Shiro, however, lingers. Keith sighs heavily.

The absolute last thing he needs is for Shiro to see him and be reminded of the Galra who hurt him while he was a prisoner. He can’t do that to Shiro. But he’s stuck looking (presumably) just like the Galra soldiers who held his friend captive and he knows how bad that is for Shiro’s mind to have to deal with.

“Keith? Are you okay?”

“I said I’m fine.”

“Is something wrong?”
He listens to the sound of Shiro’s metal hand scraping against the pressure pad and suddenly he’s fighting tears, and the headache is building in intensity, and he just wants everything to be normal. “No,” he says around the lump in his throat. “I’m just … I’m just tired, and Lance won’t stop bothering me, so I came here for some peace.”

“Keith, I’m being serious. This isn’t okay. Do you need something?”

Why does Shiro have to be so concerned and … attentive all the time? The guilt of hiding from the people he cares about is eating away at him, and the stress of the situation is turning into ugly, ugly anger the longer it festers. “No. Just go away. Let me sleep.” There’s a quiet itch starting up along his arms and legs, aching like it’s trapped somewhere beneath his skin, and the longer he lies here wallowing, the harder it becomes to ignore.

“…You have until the morning to come out of there. You will join us for breakfast. I don’t want to hear complaints -- you’re going to make everyone worried. And I’ll be back later to check on you.”

He knows this feeling, almost too well. But his fingernails are more like claws now, sharper and faintly tapered, and when he tries to relieve the itch he leaves deep purple marks on his now-lavender skin, which breaks in some places. He watches numbly as tiny droplets of blood swell up out of the wounds. “Fine,” he says, even though he doesn’t want that.

*

“Keeeeth!”

“Stop!”

“Keeeeth!” Lance whines again, slapping the palm of his hand halfheartedly against the door. “I’m so booored.”

“I’m busy. Go find Hunk.”

Lance scoffs. “Hunk doesn’t like scary movies. I’m not going to subject my poor buddy to that.”

Keith rubs his temples and squeezes his eyes shut. He needs a break.

He needs a drink.

Why is everyone suddenly so interested in his life? Don’t they have stuff they need to be doing? They’ve never given this much of a damn before, have they?

Of course it’s gotta be now that they all start worrying after him.

He sighs, and as he sucks in a deep breath he realizes how heightened his sense of smell has also become and wrinkles his nose at the onslaught of scents that he obviously hadn’t been paying attention to before. He can smell Lance through the door, which is extra weird, but he can definitely tell it’s Lance because they train together and fall asleep watching movies together; it would be weird if he didn’t know what Lance smelled like.

“Later.”
“I’m bored now.” He’s pretty sure Lance starts smacking his forehead against the door, too, at this point.

“Are you five? Go watch it yourself.”

“Yes, I am. Let’s go.”

“Later.”

“Now.”

“Oh my god,” Keith grumbles, rolling his eyes and kicking at the blankets bunched around him, trying to trap whatever warmth they provide. It’s so cold in here, today, and usually the temperature is pretty comfortable throughout the whole castle, but he can’t seem to stay warm no matter how much he bundles himself up and hides himself under the covers. “Now I understand why people become alcoholics.”

“Keeeeeih!”

“Lance, stop!”

They go back and forth for probably half an hour -- varga? Whatever -- before Lance relents and sulks off to watch his movie alone. Keith starts shivering despite the fourth blanket he’s dragged out of the closet and added to the mess on his bed.

*

Keith is deeply confused when he wakes up in the middle of the night for seemingly no reason. He’s even more confused when he realizes he’s stopped hurting everywhere.

Well, it certainly could have been worse. Not that a few tears were not shed over the course of the past couple days, but he’s definitely been through worse.

Oh, wait, he’s awake because he really has to pee.

He spends probably an obscene amount of time detangling himself from the blanket before he sprints to the bathroom. It’s only as he’s washes his hands that he happens to glance up at his reflection in the mirror and his breath catches.

Oh, fuck.

That’s why his ears and head have been bothering him so much.

Cat ears.

Not … quite -- a bit lower than cat ears would probably be, and not exactly the same shape, but fuck him if he doesn’t have a pair of fluffy little cat ears sticking out of his head, matching almost perfectly with his (apparently dark purple) hair.

Okay, yeah, those are technically Galra ears, not cat ears, but whatever they are, they’re definitely not human.

The anger he barely managed to repress while he was talking to Shiro -- the kind that springs up in
place of other, more vulnerable emotions -- hits him like a transport truck, in the same instant that panic takes over.

Because, holy fuck, he is very decidedly not human anymore and that’s bad.

He hits the mirror and watches the shards scatter across the countertop and floor like they’ll take the image with them, but now it’s seared into his brain. That’s what he looks like now.

Galra.

Yellow eyes and all.

At least he still has pupils, which makes the yellow less frightening, but fuck.

“Fuck.” There are glass shards embedded in his hand and blood dripping steadily from his closed fist into the sink. More glass sinks into the pads on the bottom of his feet when he shifts forward to turn the water back on, and he bites his lip to hold back the pained cry it almost produces. The scent of blood floods his nose, so strong it makes his eyes water.

That was so stupid. Honestly, this whole situation is stupid, considering that he’s standing half-naked in his bathroom, purple, bleeding, and hiding from his team for fear of … what?

Rejection?

As though that would really affect him anymore. Certainly, the idea of rejection from his team is agonizing, but he can’t let himself be afraid of it. He has to work with the idea, because it will no doubt become a reality.

He’s already established that he cannot go back to the Blades, not of his own volition, so the only other option is to simply allow them to reject him as though it were the natural course of things. It is, in a way, the natural course -- he can count on one hand the number of people who haven’t rejected him, and only one of those people is still present today. The safest route to take in any situation is that which carries him along on the assumption that it will happen eventually. Otherwise, he risks heartbreak.

He assumed right, this time. Even though he tried to be better just for the sake of not losing whatever he’s built here, something else had to come along and ruin it.

And now he’s going to be kicked out, eventually, if not by Shiro then by Allura, for becoming the one thing the universe is specifically united against. He’s going to be forced to go back to the Blade of Marmora, where he was stuck aching for his team, cold and alone and longing to go back to a place he had tentatively begun to consider home. Only this time, it will be worse, because he’ll be trapped there knowing there is no hope of return.

He’s going to be forced back into the service of the Blade, and he’s probably going to die there knowing that no one in the whole universe cares that he’ll be gone.

He runs warm water over his hand and attempts to pick out the glass with shaking fingers, ignoring the tears that have begun to leak steadily from his eyes, mixing with the blood and water in the sink.

Once some of the glass is out, he gives up and gets back into bed, limping heavily as he tries not to push glass shards deeper into his feet. It’s a long while that he spends lying atop the blankets and watching the unchanging ceiling while pain radiates through his limbs, incessant.

It’s his own fault that it hurts.
There’s a gentle tapping on the door, and Shiro’s voice and scent reach him through the wall. “Keith? Are you awake?”

He squeezes his eyes shut and wills his voice to remain steady. He can’t let Shiro worry more than he already is. It isn’t right. He’s already stressed about so much. “Uh,” he clears his throat quietly, “yeah. I am.”

“...Can you let me in?”

Keith sniffs a few times, cradling his injured hand against his chest as he gazes at the red light beside the door. “No.”

“...Keith--”

“I’m alright. Go back to bed.”

He listens as Shiro sighs, then rests his forehead on the door. “Not until you--”

“I’ll come out for breakfast. Just go to bed.”

It’s several long seconds before Shiro replies. “Okay,” he says. “Okay. I’m taking your word for that.”

*

The edge of everything is distorted, a translucent white shroud softening the corners of the world. The pale grey wall is plastered with pictures he can’t quite make out; there’s a bundle of blankets and pillows strewn across the futon beside him ... someone has his hand in theirs. Keith turns his head to the side and in the same moment he realizes he’s had this dream before, a face materializes before him, smiling down at him with sharp teeth.

And purple skin.

And distinct, pointed ears.

“Hello, nichimoos,” she whispers, voice raw, though the quality of a dream causes it to warble. Keith reaches a hand out to her cheek, a few shades lighter than her skin, and the first tear falls as soon as they come into contact. “Can you be brave for me?”

He nods, even though he’s scared.

“I have to let go. I’ll be right beside you the whole time. I love you.”

He nods again, allowing his mother to release his other hand and take a step back. Her friend is a blurry face and distorted silhouette beside her, conjuring a flickering orange glow between her hands before moving in closer to Keith and--

It hurts. It hurts a lot but mama wanted him to be brave, so he tries hard not to scream even though it feels like his ears and his hands and his skin are melting in fire.

When he finally gives in and open his mouth to scream, it’s like the world falls out from under him, and when he sees her again it’s her retreating back against the endless expanse of desert.
The thrum of music blasts through the air, yanking Keith out of his restless sleep and sending him flying out of bed, reaching for the dagger under his pillow.

Three things occur to him at once.

One, there are still glass fragments embedded in his feet (he realizes upon landing heavily and pushing some of them deeper).

Two, his Marmora blade is not under his pillow -- it’s jammed into the door, keeping his team at a safe distance from the hybrid monstrosity he’s become.

Three, somebody is playing All Star by Smash Mouth at max volume over the castle loudspeakers. Pretty obvious who that might be.

He sinks back onto the bed with a whimper, grabbing at his ankle while fresh blood starts seeping out of the wounds that he just made worse. The music is relentless -- he can’t do anything to block the sound from his too-sensitive ears and between that and the little spikes of pain through his feet, his eyes are watering again.

For fuck's sake, Pidge.

The music cuts off abruptly, with a burst of static welcoming the castle back into peaceful (relative) silence, then Pidge’s voice rings through the speakers loud and clear. “Whoops, sorry about that. Just testing the alarm system. You know how it is.” She doesn’t sound remotely sorry, and if anything it sounds like she did that completely intentionally. She barely suppresses laughter at her genius idea as she continues, “But hey, now that everyone’s awake -- breakfast is ready. So everyone come on down to the dining hall. I mean everyone ... Keith.”

“Way to be subtle, Pidge.” God -- his heart won’t stop pounding. That music scared the hell out of him. It was definitely way louder than necessary.

That, on top of everything else.

Oh, and he’s hungry as hell, but is he going to go out there and eat breakfast with everyone? Not a chance.

He picks up his jacket and wraps it tightly around himself, mindful of the unpleasant sting as he uncurls the fingers of his right hand. Ugh, this jacket definitely needs to be washed. Soon.

While he has synthesized a few copies for himself, none of the replicas can even begin to compare to the real thing: soft, well-fitted, worn down in just the right places, usually smelling like comfort and security.

Now it smells like he’s barely taken it off for the last three days.

Because he barely has. Not even to sleep.

The other jackets smell better, but they don’t feel right, and that’s what matters the most right now. If he’s going to be stuck in here, dealing with this alone, then he’ll be damned if he does it without
the comforting weight of one of the only possessions that’s stayed with him his whole life on his shoulders.

It’s barely fifteen minutes after Pidge’s unfortunate wake-up call that someone is pounding on the door again.

“**Akira Keith Kogane!**” Shiro shouts at him, louder than is entirely necessary. “Open this door, now.”

“Ugh,” Keith rolls his eyes and tries not to let the guilt bother him too much as he eases himself down onto his side, facing the wall.

“Wait, his first name is--?” Keith hears Lance start to say, but it’s drowned out by another round of knocking, this time more vigorous.

“Keith?”

“I’m alive, Shiro. Go eat breakfast.”

Would it honestly kill them to get off his back? Hell, he’s disappeared into the woods for several days on end and dealt with less of a fiasco than this. Mind, those were not the most attentive foster parents, and they definitely disliked him, so who could blame them for not caring if he froze to death in the forest?

Like, at least he’s still in the castle. It isn’t as though he’s taken off to some uninhabited planet to live out the rest of his days in misery.

...That doesn’t sound like a bad idea.

Point is, he’s never had to deal with so much *fuss* about isolating himself before. No one gave two shits when the Garrison kicked him out and he was left alone in the desert to test his survival skills. Now he’s lying here, perfectly safe within the walls of the best-defended castle in the universe, and people are mad?

What the hell?

“I will not. Get out here. Now.”

*Whhhhhhrzzzhhzzhhhh.*

Someone is trying to break in again. Lovely.

“Coran and Pidge will get the door open if you don’t do it yourself this instant.”

Ughhh, why does he have to be so angry about it? He’s fine, relatively speaking; he’s *proven* that he’s alive and (sort of) well, so what else do they want?

“Shiro, I’m serious, just leave.” He rolls over specifically to snatch up his other boot and whips it at the door with his uninjured hand.

The knocking ceases, but the horrible engine-like whirring doesn’t stop for several seconds.

“Keith,” Shiro’s voice is dangerously low -- Keith trusts him, *adores* him, considers him *family*, but he would really prefer if his team leader would fuck off right now, before Keith does something stupid, like get upset or tell him what happened. “What did you do to yourself?”

Keith is just in the process of formulating an adequate response (and another invitation to leave),
aiming for something along the lines of, ‘Nothing, stop babying me,’ when the actual alarms go off.

"Proximity alarm was triggered," Coran announces as the red flashing fades out. "It appears there is a Galra fleet approaching. We don’t have the time to make a wormhole jump without being followed. Paladins, to your Lions."

“Keith, let’s go,” Lance yells. “Time to kick some Galra as-- butt. Don’t look at me like that. I’m an adult.”

Shiro takes several carefully measured breaths, then kicks the door and starts muttering something about his heart and his stress levels. If Keith had any shoes left by his bedside he’d reciprocate. Instead he starts smacking his head against his pillow again -- if he hits hard enough, he might knock himself out and then he won’t have to deal with all this.

Three sets of footsteps scurry off down the hall -- he can distinctly smell Hunk behind everything else, too -- and Keith sighs.

They can probably handle a fleet without him.

“Keith! Zarkon’s got a stupid Command Ship out here trying to blow us up, and Red won’t let me in and Blue won’t let Allura in, so would it honestly, really kill you to leave your room?!” Lance screeches at him over the comms. There is no need for that volume level.

Lance’s loudness aside, what in the hell does Zarkon want from them? Besides the Lions, obviously. This seems like a pretty random time to be attacking the castleship. It isn’t as though the Galra have had a chance to weaken their defenses first.

Wait a second.

...Those fuckers. They did this to him on purpose so they could get a shot in while the team was weakened. Not physically, but mentally. Everyone is on edge, Keith is struggling to walk, let alone leave his room, and there’s just the slightest fracture in the trust between them after this stunt he’s pulled -- enough to feel, maybe enough to affect Voltron.

Over his dead body. Keith throws off the blankets and fishes the oversized hoodie he synthesized for himself last month out of the closet, flipping the hood up over his ears. He can’t seem to get his boots onto his … paws, especially not with the glass, so he forgoes shoes and limps hurriedly out into the corridor, wrenching the luxite blade from the doorframe and sending a “thank you” to the stars when the door still opens.

Empty. Thank god.

He was worried for a second that this was some kind of trick, but a blast to the particle barrier rocks the floor beneath him and he bolts in the direction of the armory.

Miraculously, his suit takes no issue moulding itself to his altered physiology, supplying extra space to accommodate his huge ears after a few seconds of discomfort, and Red seems more than eager to see him when he finally makes his way into the hangar.

“I’m on my way,” he announces, settling himself into the pilot’s seat (to the relief of his poor feet). His hand, unfortunately, protests its new task of utilizing the steering mechanism, but he ignores the pain and directs Red quickly out into open space.
“Finally,” Pidge mumbles exasperatedly, “Can we form Voltron and get the heck out of here now?”

A video feed blinks into view beside Keith, and he reflexively slams his good hand down on the call button to end it, fumbling to find the switch on his helmet that adjusts visor opacity as it slides down to cover the bottom half of his face. He sets the tint to fully opaque and the visibility to 100%, thanking his lucky stars for the versatility of Altean tech. No one can see his face, but he can see everything just fine.

“Jesus,” he breathes, heart pounding, and whoever tried to call doesn’t mention that he just hung up on them, but he suspects it was Shiro trying to check up on him and he’ll get a lecture or something later.

“Form Voltron!” Shiro calls out, but it doesn’t have the usual force behind it. Regardless, and despite Keith’s apprehension, they manage to form Voltron after a second attempt.

It lasts long enough for them to blast a hole in the ship with the shoulder cannon before Keith’s panic rends them apart and sends everyone flying off in different directions.

“Who did that?” Hunk cries. “I was about to break it in half!”

“Oh, gee, I wonder who did it,” Lance replies sarcastically. “Mr. Grumpy-Gills Mullet-Face is ruining everything, big surprise!”

Now Lance is mad at him again. Fuck. He’d been doing so well with this whole “making friends” thing and now he’s gone and ruined it all. Fuck. If his visor wasn’t in full coverage mode he’d rub the wetness from his eyes.

“It wasn’t my fault!” Keith snaps, and he’s barely in control when Red opens her jaw and spits a stream of fire over the section of the command ship she’s floating past. Was that him? Or is she just helping him deal with their problem?

“Paladins!” Coran calls out to them. “The Princess has almost prepared a wormhole, but we can only make one jump at present. We mustn’t allow Zarkon’s ship to follow us through.”

“What’s the plan, Coran?” Shiro asks, and Keith is vaguely aware of Lance and Hunk giggling about something, anger at Keith apparently forgotten.

“On my command, you must follow the castle through the wormhole. Not a second later. She will seal it off immediately afterwards to prevent any ships following us.”

“So, don’t get left behind?” Pidge says, and out of the corner of his eye Keith sees Green trailing closely behind Yellow and shredding vessels between her claws.

“Don’t get left behind,” Coran confirms solemnly.

A veritable wall of fighters rises up in front of Keith, and another jet of flame erupts for Red’s mouth as he maneuvers through them, back towards the castleship.

The fleet must catch on to the fact that they’re making an escape, because their Lions are quickly overwhelmed by Galra vessels of various sizes trying to hold them back. Keith makes quick work of clearing the way for Shiro and Hunk on either side of him, and just as the two of them reach the castle, Coran tells them to get ready.

“Um,” is all Pidge has a chance to say before she’s knocked back by multiple vessels crowding her Lion at once. Keith spins Red around and plows through them, scattering debris across the
void of space around him, and he can see the crushed remnants on the command ship’s ion cannon flickering a dangerous shade of purple out of the corner of his eye.

He remembers all too well what happened last time they were in this position, and he’s not about to let it happen again.

Who honestly cares if he ends up captured or killed.

“Now!” Coran cries, and Keith braces Red to give Green a massive push in the direction of the castle, where she shoots upwards right on Blue’s tail.

There’s an approaching purple glow behind his Lion as he wills her to move faster, faster -- an oppressive force rattles him to his very core and he can feel Red suppressing a cry of agony just as the wormhole snaps shuts behind them, the blast of energy that had almost destroyed them fizzling out to nothing in its wake.

Red, are you okay? He tries his best to convey all his concern for her well-being through his thoughts, and receives reassurance and a deep, metallic purr in response.

“--could’ve gotten yourself killed!” Shiro is yelling, but Keith ignores him as Red drifts back into the hangar and opens her jaw. He’s racing against time right now.

Time, and six other people who will stop at nothing to chase him down and probably yell at him.

He runs like there’s a pissed-off Krelshi on his heels, and doesn’t bother to slow down until he’s reached the corridor of the paladins’ sleeping quarters. Gasping for breath, he tries not to put too much weight on his feet -- no, paws, still paws, ugh -- as he makes a beeline for his own door.

“Don’t you dare!” Lance shrieks from somewhere behind him, footsteps pounding across the floor.

Dammit!

He starts hobbling just a bit faster down the hall, too drained to sprint the last few metres, adrenaline finally fading out of his system.

“I will flay you, so help me god!”

“Leave me alone!” Keith screams over his shoulder. He’s so damn fed up with everything. He’s so done with everything right now.

“First of all, you do not get to just hide away for days on end and refuse to give anyone answers!” Lance catches up to him just outside his door and grabs his arm; Keith whips around to face him and watches shock cross Lance’s face at the black mask that greets him. “Second,” he continues after a moment to process, “you definitely don’t get to put your life and your Lion at risk like that! Pidge was doing perfectly fine on her own and probably would have made it through the wormhole with or without your help. Making everyone worried isn’t doing anyone any good!”

Lance crosses his arms and stares him down for a long moment, and Keith glares back even though he knows Lance can’t see it. They both know she wouldn’t have.

“Are you done?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” Keith turns back to his door and raises his hand to the control panel, ignoring Lance’s
spluttered protests behind him.

Fingers hook onto the rim of his helmet, just below his jaw, and he doesn’t get a chance to react appropriately -- maybe, *hold it in place* or something actually smart like that -- before it’s yanked off his head.

Oh.

*Oh no.*

He turns, wide-eyed, against his better judgment, to gauge Lance’s reaction. For the second time in the span of a few ticks Lance looks undeniably shocked, and Keith snatches his helmet back and slams his hand down on the control panel, heart pounding.

*He saw,* a voice screams at him as he stumbles into his room and drops the helmet beside the bed. *He knows.* The tips of his new ears begin to tremble with apprehension, and he gasps for air for a few seconds, trying to find ways around his problem.

He already knew he couldn’t hide forever.

Why the hell did he have to stop for Lance? Why didn’t he just slink back into his room and ignore his stupid teammate and his stupid lecture?

The door hasn’t closed all the way when Lance jams his foot into its path and a loud exclamation of pain bursts forth from him as it nearly crushes his ankle. “What the heck, Keith?”

Keith turns on him, ears flicking back flat against his head and teeth bared. “Get out.”

“Talk to me, man. What’s going on?”

“Get out!” He resists the urge to lunge forward and shove Lance out into the corridor, curling his hands into shaking fists at his sides instead and attempting to steady his breathing.

Too bad for him, his throat feels like it’s closing, and his mouth seems to be attempting to force him into silence, an unfortunately familiar sensation.

If he’s scared enough, his body mutes him on its own.

He gets hurt less if he doesn’t talk back.

*I’m not fucking scared.*

“Allura,” Lance is saying, quietly, and Keith’s body seizes when he realizes he’s opened a private channel and is calling the *Princess,* of all people. “I need you. Keith’s room. Come quick.”

He is *not fucking scared,* he tells himself, even as his shoulders curl inward and he wraps his arms around his frame as tightly as he can. He barely has the sense to remove the boots and his chestplate as he drops his weight onto the mattress, eyes unfocused and breathing shallow.

He doesn’t get *scared.*
Keith is terrified.

If he wasn’t so uncertain about his own relationships with people, he’d probably be clinging to Naomi like a frightened child. Which he is, he supposes, but he’s not so presumptuous as to push boundaries he isn’t even sure about.

A couple of strangers loom over him, all big smiles and friendly voices -- probably a load of bullshit. And he’s accustomed to this by now (this is his sixth foster home in four years; he better be accustomed to this) but that doesn’t make it any less scary when the man reaches a hand out to him.

He takes several quick steps backwards and ends up with his back against the front door. He bites his lip and looks up to Naomi. Don’t leave me here, he wants to tell her, but he’s so scared he can’t even talk so the most he’s able to do is shoot her a look he hopes conveys just how freaked out he is.

He is absolutely, definitely not ready for another foster home. He never thought he’d ever feel safe at a group home, but he’d give anything to be back there now, hiding out on his assigned bunk and reading one of the battered old donated books he’s stashed under his mattress.

“We’ve talked about this already, Keith,” Naomi says softly, kneeling in front of him and holding a hand out for him to take. “Melanie and Chris are close friends of mine. They’re lovely people. I promise you it’s safe here.”

Keith pinches his lips together until they turn white, fighting the urge to vomit. He shakes his head sharply at her, gaze creeping back up over her shoulder to the people standing in their living room, still smiling at him. Tears prick his eyes and he panics even more, because he’s going to ruin this before it even starts and he isn’t even sure he’d be upset about that. They won’t like him at all if he starts crying now.

But what’s his alternative? Naomi will just find him a different home, with different people, maybe people she doesn’t know quite so well.

“Would you like to meet our children?” Melanie asks, and Keith starts shaking his head again, but Naomi gives him a stern look and he nods instead.

Melanie disappears through a doorway and Chris settles himself on a couch and turns on the television, turning down the volume. “You’re welcome to stay for a while, Naomi. Until Keith here feels more comfortable.”

Chris smiles at him again and Keith wants to vomit again.

“Come sit with us,” Naomi urges, giving his hand a gentle tug as she stands and walks into the room to sit opposite Chris.

Keith just stands there, back to the door, and watches them with wide eyes as Chris hands her a bowl of assorted snacks and they fall into easy conversation. He doesn’t miss the way she keeps glancing over at him, tilting her head like she’s inviting him to get his ass in gear, or the way Chris just doesn’t stop smiling. Obviously he’s hiding something.

Obviously he’s just pretending.

Melanie returns to the room with a toddler plodding along at her heels, fluffy hair full of pieces of crayon wrapper, and a yellow bundle of blankets in her arms. “Keith, this is Thomas,” Melanie offers, and Thomas waves at him with a handful of crumpled construction paper, then pulls a pink
crayon out of the front pocket of his overalls, plops down on the floor, and starts scribbling on the paper. Melanie laughs lightly. "He loves to colour."

She takes a few steps towards him, and out of the corner of his eye he can see that Naomi is watching him intently, her body angled towards them. He tenses involuntarily and Melanie stops where she is, kneels, and smiles at him again.

_It’s fake, it has to be._ He folds his arms over his chest and presses his nails as deep into the skin of his upper arms as they’ll go without making him bleed, trying to ground himself.

“This is Norah,” she says, holding the baby out slightly towards him so he can see her sleeping face. “She’s new. She’s only about six months old.”

Keith presses down harder with his nails.

“Would you like to hold her?”

His head snaps up so fast that his neck cracks. “Huh?”

“The baby. Would you like to hold her?”

That’s not right. He frowns and tries to figure out where the trick is. He’s the _bad_ kid. He’s the kid who’s too violent and too aggressive and too unpredictable, and he’s not supposed to be allowed around the younger kids at all, let alone live in a foster home with two of them. He’s the kid who’s always stuck sitting against the wall during outside play, who keeps getting shuffled between classrooms, who ends up in the principal’s office daily, who books it down the street the second one of the social workers isn’t looking.

He is _not_ supposed to be holding babies, but even though he knows that, and Naomi is watching him, he’s _so curious_. He bites his lip, focuses on Melanie’s face, and nods.

“Here, come sit.” She tucks Norah close to her chest and gestures for Keith to follow her to the couch. He does so after a moment’s hesitation, and sits as close to Naomi as he thinks he’s allowed. Naomi sets a pillow on his lap and shows him how to position his arms to hold her securely, and then Melanie is very carefully placing the baby on top of the cushion and for a second, Keith freaks out again.

But Naomi whispers that she’s proud of him, and a little spark of courage lights up in his heart again. He looks down at the sleeping baby and watches her stir as the movement wakes her up. She has dark skin like Melanie, but her hair is lighter like her father’s, and when she blinks hazel eyes open and looks up at him she doesn’t start crying like he expects. She smiles and laughs as she paddles her feet, reaches up to grab a strand of hair that’s hanging over his eyes and _yanks_.

He laughs, too, quietly, and looks up in time to see Melanie and Chris smile serenely at each other.

This house will probably be better for him than the noisy group home full of kids bigger than him. Besides, he can’t really do worse than Dale, can he?

A few hours later, when Naomi is repeatedly asking if he’s going to be okay -- “I can stay the night if you need, Keith, you know I don’t want you to do anything you don’t feel comfortable with” -- he assures her that he’s fine, and he likes this family.

Thomas is already asking if that’s his brother, and if they can play dinosaurs together.
“You want to keep your eye on the ball. Don’t look at the bat, not even at the last second. If you follow the trajectory of the ball all the way through, your brain will know where to move your arms to make sure you hit. Okay?”

Keith nods, positioning his body the way Chris showed him and bending his elbows up to rest the bat over his shoulder. “Okay.”

“Alright, get ready.” Chris lobs the baseball in his direction, and finally, the bat connects with the ball when Keith swings, sending it rolling across the yard. He tosses the bat aside and whoops loudly, jumping in a circle.

Chris is jumping, too, swinging his hat in his hand. “Alright! Good job!” He holds both hands up in invitation, and Keith dashes forward to high five him.

“Is my turn, now,” Thomas announces loudly, hands on his hips. His curly hair has been flattened down around his ears by an oversized baseball cap, and his little plastic bat is already lying beside the baseball tee they dug out of the shed.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Keith sighs, pretending to be annoyed as he picks up one of the plastic balls from the grass and sets it on the tee. “I guess you can have a turn. C’mere.”

He shows Thomas where to put his feet, then adjusts his arms and bends his elbows to a satisfactory degree, while Thomas complains impatiently about wanting to get a home run. Keith steps back and gives him a thumbs up. “Good to go.”

Thomas swings and hits the top half of the tee, knocking it over. The ball rolls a short, pitiful distance away.

“Home run!” Thomas screams, throwing the bat (it hits Keith in the thigh) and taking off running around the yard with seemingly no direction. He tags the fence, the swingset, and the shed before running straight through the “diamond” and tagging the back door and patio table. He almost knocks over a flower pot before his dad catches him and starts tickling him.

* 

Keith sits upright, pulling his blanket up over his mouth to muffle the dying end of a scream as he wakes up. His dream is already gone, fading into the darkness of the room around him, but the panic it inspired grips him tightly. He gasps for breath and his gaze darts around the room, brain too glossed over with fear for him to figure out what’s happening. He can’t even remember where he is, who he’s with, who might have heard him. Will they be mad?

It’s the middle of the night; of course they’ll be mad.

He tucks his nose under the edge of the blanket in an attempt to hide his heavy breathing as he hears quick footsteps approach down the hallway. Crap. He didn’t mean to wake anyone up.

He squeezes his eyes shut and mutters reassurances to himself -- kind of wishes he could fall asleep again so he doesn’t have to deal with the aftermath of waking the household.
The bedroom door swings open and he squints one eye open to watch the silhouette approach his bed. His legs go tense, like they’re preparing to leap out of bed and run for it.

“Keith, hey--” a hand grabs his upper arm and he lunges, smashing a fist into the person’s face and scrambling out from under the blankets.

As he runs out the door and collides with the wall opposite, he can faintly hear the sound of a baby crying over his pounding heart and rapid breathing, but he’s too busy running away to stop and pinpoint the source. He just turns on his heel and heads for where he’s pretty sure the front door is.

Naomi finds him several hours later, curled up in a ball to protect himself against the cold night air. He looks up at her, teeth chattering, and she leans against the picket fence in front of some random suburban home where his legs finally gave out. She looks sad. Keith feels guilty for doing that.

“They don’t want me anymore,” he says simply. It only took a couple minutes after he collapsed here to remember why he shouldn’t have been scared in the first place.

Naomi smiles, but it’s forced. She holds a hand out to him. “Your stuff is in the car. Let’s get you warmed up.”
Keith is not handling this well. He is not handling this well at all.

The Team Reacts to: Keith's Galra Transformation (Special Episode!)

I'm so tired and I don't even LIKE this chapter but! It was the first thing I ever wrote for this fic, way back in the year 2k16, if you'd believe it. It has obviously undergone several revisions since then, but without my desire to make Keith have at least two panic attacks in a single chapter of SOMETHING, this whole fic would never have even happened. So, everyone take a moment to thank my need to torment Keith for this whole journey. Enjoy!

Keith has reverted back to his old habit of remaining completely silent at all times. He knows Shiro will probably be disappointed, having been so proud when Keith opened up to him so many years ago. He knows it's childish, as well, but it's a defense mechanism he's accustomed to, one that didn't necessarily do him any good the first time around but it sure circumvented a lot of potential harm. He retreats into his own mind and doesn't speak.

He's just so overwhelmingly stressed with everything that's happening that his brain decides for him: this is the only way to cope.

The rest of Team Voltron are gathered in the room around him, Lance and Allura working together to explain what they know so far to Shiro and Coran, Pidge hunkered down in the corner gazing analytically at him, Hunk hovering a few metres away, wringing his hands and occasionally shuffling forward a bit, clearly deep in thought.

Keith has Lance’s jacket over his shoulders. He doesn't remember how it got there. He doesn't remember much after Allura walked through his bedroom door and started to ask questions, and his brain short-circuited. He pulls the jacket tighter, still marvelling at his heightened sense of smell -- only because Lance smells so nice, somehow, even though so many other scents have been bothering the hell out of him for the past couple days. Hiding behind the comfort it provides, he stares despondently at the floor, chin on his knees.

“-and now he's refusing to speak,” Allura is saying, panic and confusion barely contained as she tries to remain calm despite her lack of understanding. “Lance and I told him we were calling everyone into the room and he didn't react at all.”
Keith’s heart seizes and he shuffles backwards until his shoulder blades dig into the wall, eyes wide. He should have left when he had the chance. He shouldn’t have been here in the first place. He should’ve mouthed off to Dale until he killed him, should’ve died a long time ago to save everyone the trouble of having to deal with him, should’ve just offed himself, really; he’s tried it before, the first time everything went bad (worse than usual). Considered it several times since then -- when he was alone in that shack after losing everything, too afraid to return home, too ashamed to seek comfort and sanctuary with any family, stuck ... he's stuck again.

He’s stuck like this, like the enemy, something evil forced upon him until it buried itself into his skin, and he can never look Shiro in the eye again, shouldn't even be in the same room as him. He's going to ruin Shiro, traumatize him all over again, and his gut twists at the thought of inflicting pain upon someone who's shown him such kindness.

Pulling the hood of Lance’s jacket down over the top half of his face, unconcerned with stretching the material, he delves deeper into the abyss of self-loathing he's spent his whole life digging.

“Keith?” Hunk whispers tentatively, suddenly much closer, and he curls his arms over his head to hold the fabric down and block out more sound, aware of how rapid his breathing is becoming. Go away, he wants to tell him, but his brain has glued his mouth shut.

Everything sounds like it's happening underwater as everyone else starts talking, too, the thrumming of his heart filling his ears. He wants them all gone; he wants to be left alone, can't they see that? He locked himself away because he wants to be alone.

“.....two, three, four,” Shiro’s voice says above him, calm and steady, just like before, just like before -- he doesn't want to think about it. “Out: one, two, three, four.”

A hand touches his shoulder -- he flinches, but then the touch is grounding him, applying gentle pressure, and he can distinctly smell Shiro around Lance’s jacket -- metallic; sea-salt and iron, but warm. As he comes back to his senses, a tear trickles down his cheek, reassured by Shiro's presence as much as he is terrified. It's okay to cry in front of Shiro, it always has been, so he has no qualms about it now, while he's trying to deal with such contrasting torrential emotions.

“Keith?”

He wrenches Shiro’s hand from his shoulder and tries to bury himself further into a wall with no give. He's desperate to run, be free from here, maybe escape the ship in a pod before anyone can catch him, but his panic has left his body barely responsive; he doesn't have the strength to run away right now.

“Keith, please talk to me.”

Even if he could, he doesn't want to. He needs Shiro to leave, to avoid him altogether, spare himself the pain. Not feign sympathy when he has every right to be disgusted and afraid. Keith won't deny him that. In fact, he wants Shiro to despise him as much as he despises himself. His jaw works fervently as he fights to speak, to tell Shiro it's okay for him to just leave and never look back.

In the end he just cries harder and tears holes in the jacket with his claws, remembering, with the sound of fabric ripping, that this isn't his, he doesn't deserve this -- doesn't deserve them. He throws it to the floor furiously in favour of gathering the blankets (which he also does not consider himself entitled to) into a messy heap over and around his body.

“Don't do this again. You're safe here, it's alright. It's just us.”
That isn't the problem. Keith whimpers, as desperate to relay that message to Shiro as he is for Shiro to just tell him how awful he is and get it over with.

Shiro stays for a while longer, trying to coax an explanation out of him, until he finally gets the hint and leaves. For a moment, Keith thinks he's alone, freeing his arms from the prison of blankets and starting to scratch again, but Lance’s scent rolls softly through the room as he stands from his spot on the floor.

“I'm sorry,” he mumbles, soft and sheepish and a little broken. “I just wanted to get you help. I'm sure … I'm sure Allura and Coran can figure something out. I didn't know it would-- look, you're my friend, I want to take care of you! I want you to be happy! Please let us help.”

This whole ordeal was tolerable until Lance decided to meddle with it. Keith glares menacingly at him at the same time that he digs his dangerously hooked claws into his own forearm.

Rather than go the fuck away like he wants, Lance surges forward and seizes him around the wrists. “Keith! What the hell?!”

He tries to kick Lance off, but he still hasn't recovered and the kick is feeble, glancing off his chest, barely knocking any air from him. Go away go awaygoawaygoaway. Lance maintains his grip on his arms and moves to sit beside him.

“What do you think that's gonna do?”

Get it out, Keith thinks but doesn't say, not even attempting to fight him anymore. He flops limply onto his mattress and lays still, staring up at the ceiling as blood trickles down his arm slowly. It'll never work, he already knows, but now he can't stop because it's how he's been dealing with this from the start. He knows habits like these are severely unhealthy, but since when has he ever been bothered about his health and safety?

“What do you think that's gonna do?”

Keith turns to look him in the eye, glad to be done with the embarrassment of crying in front of someone who isn't Shiro, and frowns. He knows Lance is sincere, but all he really wants is to not be like this. He's come to terms with the fact that this … Galra thing is something permanent. He doesn't need any fancy diagnostics from the cryopods. Unless Allura can somehow figure out how to use quintessence to change the physiology of someone else, he’s screwed.

What does he want? To be normal. Lance can't help him with that.

He wants to not be something straight from Shiro’s nightmares, to not be the same monster they’ve been fighting for ages. He can't have that.

Lance can't provide that.

The only thing he can provide is comfort and companionship. He's less likely to loathe the way Keith looks than Shiro, which is good enough for now.

“I'll…” Lance starts after Keith is silent for a while. “I'll leave you alone. Sorry.”

He shifts to get off the bed and Keith grabs at his hand before Lance can let go of him. Lance pauses and stares inquiringly at him, and then embarrassment floods through him again and he looks back to the ceiling as he tugs lightly on his arm, urging him to sit back on the bed.
He's sure his cheeks are red, or purple, or whatever colour the Galra turn when they feel humiliated (or infantile). Lance leans against the wall as Keith bundles the blankets around himself hurriedly, moving to sit beside him. He breathes deep, feels Lance slide sideways -- their shoulders bump together and Keith glances up at him questioningly. “I’m a big brother, y’know. I’ve been told I have a very comfy shoulder for napping on.” He flashes a tentative smile and Keith considers him for a moment, then scoots closer, too, until his head is cushioned against Lance’s shoulder, trying not to think about how strange this is. He’s fallen asleep against Lance like this several times before, during late movie nights, and it feels good. It’s comforting, and the more often something like this happens, the less his skin feels fragile as a butterfly’s wings when he’s in prolonged contact with anyone. Which, to be fair, isn’t very often.

He’s begun to crave physical contact, and the period of isolation in his room has done nothing to help his cause.

Lance’s cheek rests on the crown of his head and his ear flicks contentedly, earning him a surprised noise, followed immediately by a laugh that makes him feel both giddy and relaxed.

*L*

Lance’s jacket is gone when he wakes up, and so is Lance himself, but Keith can still smell him and as strange as he knows that is, it's nice. When he moves to stretch he finds that his arms have been completely bandaged, white gauze wrapped from his wrists to his elbows, then his elbows to his shoulders. His fingers and hands are covered in a delicate layer of gauze as well, the careful job still allowing him free movement of all his joints. There's no longer any glass embedded in his skin, and as he sits up and shoves the blankets away, he finds his feet to be in similar condition.

He isn't sure whether to laugh or cry. Someone must have spent hours laboriously patching him up, removing splinters and cleaning scratches, and if he had to guess, it was probably Lance. Keith doesn't deserve this at all.

He finds a small patch of gauze over a particularly deep scratch on his cheek, and a few across his chest, which means ... well, they've all seen each other shirtless before, but the fact that Lance managed all this without waking him is astounding. Why the hell did he even bother? He should know as well as Keith does that he doesn't deserve this kind of treatment. What could he possibly want from Keith that he'd go to all this trouble?

Wearing the largest hoodie he can find, gloves, and long pants, he sneaks into the kitchen to steal some food goo, then dashes back to his room.

He triple checks the lock on his door before settling into bed to eat.

Isolating himself with his thoughts is probably not the brightest right now, with the added stress of everyone important to him knowing he's essentially turned into the enemy, but he's managed thus far.

Albeit, managed is perhaps not the ideal way to describe his several-day-long breakdown.

He’s alive, for what it’s worth.
After finishing his breakfast (rather, taking three bites and then barely preventing himself from puking), he sits on his bed for at least an hour, examining the bandages all over his body and thinking about just how terrible he feels that Lance is still trying to be nice to him. There’s no reason for him to treat Keith with civility, let alone outright kindness, but clearly something is wrong with Lance’s head, since he not only let Keith cuddle him like some kind of particularly emotional child, but proceeded to patch him up.

And all those wounds were self-inflicted, to make matters worse. Now he just feels bothersome, and Lance is obviously only trying so hard so he can somehow benefit from this, and … Keith has to remind himself to breathe. He starts tearing the bandages off, furious at himself for causing this damage and at Lance for playing stupid mind games with him, at the stupid Galra witch for causing this to happen, and then at himself again for looking the way he does and being what he is.

Someone knocks on his door. He doesn’t respond, just freezes with a wad of pink-tinged gauze bunched in his fist and stares at the door, ears flicking wildly above his head as he tries to determine who’s come to bother him this time while his nose is again clogged by the smell of blood. He doesn’t have to listen for long.

“Hey, can you unlock the door? I brought food,” Lance says, gently tapping the door again. Keith grimaces at the practically untouched bowl of goo on the floor and his stomach turns. He doesn’t open the door. Lance will leave eventually.

Except, he doesn’t.

After about five minutes, Keith hears the distinct thump of Lance sitting on the floor outside his room. As much as he wants to be resentful that Lance thinks it’s okay to force Keith to be in his company, he can’t bring himself to be.

“Um … Hunk and Coran were talking all night about how to bring you back to normal … like, not purple, I mean. I think they wanted to reprogram one of the cryopods to run some kind of tests and then try to reverse whatever happened. But, they don’t really know what happened, so you kinda have to talk to them, but I said, y’know, maybe when that witch lady, uh, Hagrid? Whatever her name is. When she was fighting you, maybe she did something that turned you into a Galra, too.” Lance sighs and Keith hears his head hit the wall. Very faintly, Keith can smell him, and he inches off the bed to tiptoe to the door.

He wants to tell Lance he already knows there’s nothing they can do. Instead, he opens the door and then bolts back to his bed before anything can happen, pushing himself into the corner and pulling his hood down over his face so Lance won’t have to look at him. A few seconds later, Lance walks into the room and the door slides shut behind him. Something Hunk cooked is in his hands, giving off a smell that is simultaneously delectable and, to his severely unsettled stomach, nauseous.

“You okay?” Lance asks softly, the mattress shifting as he sits beside Keith. “I mean, that’s a dumb question, but are you at least feeling better today?”

Keith knows he’s still being childish, but he presses his lips together so hard they feel numb. He feels like shit, maybe even more so than usual.

“Do you want to talk now?”

Frustrated with himself, Keith shakes his head slightly, and Lance holds the bowl of food out to him. He shakes his head again.
“Oh,” says Lance, and then, “Oh.” He must’ve seen the full bowl of goo on the floor. “Keith, you know you can’t just let yourself starve to death. I mean, when was the last time you actually ate something? You’ve been hiding out in here for days. You can’t just do that to your body.”

Part of the reason he’s having so much difficulty with eating today is probably due to the fact that his stomach hasn’t seen a proper meal since he first started turning purple. He grimaces at the thought, then reaches out and plucks something with a tentacle from the bowl to nibble on.

“....Thanks.” Lance sounds relieved, and Keith doesn’t have to see him to know he’s watching him. “Um, what do you want me to do?”

Keith wants a shower, more than anything. He feels filthy, in several ways. He isn’t sure how to relay that idea to Lance. The lack of private showers in the paladins’ quarters is not conducive to him maintaining his hygiene while he’s trying to hide.

“I can get Shiro to come by, if you want. He seems really worried…”

Keith shakes his head more forcefully this time. He absolutely, unconditionally cannot handle being around Shiro right now. Opening his mouth and trying to force words out still doesn’t work, so he peels himself off the bed and opens a drawer to grab clean clothes, pulling his gloves back on in the process, and his hood lower over his face. Lance watches intently until he stops by the door, eyes lowered, shifting his weight between his feet.

“You wanna … change clothes? Oh! Shower? But … but you probably don’t want anyone to come in while you’re-- Okay! I can do that. I’ll be your bodyguard.” Lance smirks and reaches out, presumably to knock Keith playfully on the shoulder or something to that effect, but Keith’s body reacts before he can catch up: he reels back so hard his head hits the wall, arms coming up to cross in front of his face as he curls his shoulders downward and tucks his chin towards his chest. The bundle of clothes he was holding scatters at his feet.

Lance freezes with his hand a few centimetres from Keith’s arm, and mortification floods through Keith from his chest outward. He catches the heartbreak on Lance’s face even when he only momentarily gathers the courage to meet his gaze, eyes flicking immediately downwards again. To avoid making a big deal of a conditioned reaction, he hurries to pick up his clothes and open the door, fidgeting as he makes sure as much of his skin is covered as possible.

Lance doesn’t say anything the whole way to the washroom, just hovers at Keith’s shoulder. He leans against the counter by the door as Keith maneuvers into a shower stall.

“I’ll make sure no one bugs you,” he reiterates to a still-humiliated Keith.

Keith can hear him banging around in the cupboards and drawers the whole time he’s in the shower. He feels bad making Lance wait so long, but his guilt conflicts with his desire to stay hidden in here forever and his need to scrub the purple out of his skin (as well as several days worth of grime). Eventually, he drags himself out and starts layering clothes on again.

Just as he’s pulling his shirt over his head, Lance knocks on the door of the stall. “Hey,” he says softly, “don’t get dressed yet.”

In boxers and a T-shirt, Keith opens the door a crack and peeks out. Lance beams at him and slides a first aid kit into view. He raises an eyebrow. He doesn’t need that.

Well, he does, but he already feels guilty about what he did to the last bandages Lance used.

“Come on, I don’t mind. I need the practice, to be honest. I’m used to always having injury-prone
siblings running all over the place, y’know? I feel like I haven’t been honing my incredible nursing skills lately.” Keith can detect a hint of longing in his voice, under the gently reassuring and playful tone. He opens the door and steps outside cautiously.

Lance guides him to the counter and asks him to sit, setting the first aid kit beside him. Keith digs his claws into the countertop. He really hates the way this whole situation sits in his stomach.

“Can I … ask something kinda personal?” Lance asks as he digs around for something to pour disinfectant onto. He doesn’t wait for Keith’s lack of response, just plows on, “Shiro said something about, um, how you used to not talk when you were a kid. And I don’t really know anything about your life or your … family. But -- you don’t have to answer, I guess, I just wanna know. Did … did someone hurt you?” He pauses in his search, hand resting limply among the disaster the first aid kit has become as he’s unpacked it.

Keith’s heart feels like it’s actively trying to escape his chest as much as it feels like someone is crushing his ribs. He was afraid Lance would ask. He’s always afraid someone will ask. It was easier to maintain a cool façade before his life went to shit and he turned into a Galra, but even then he’d always faced that relentless concern in his head, wondering whether or not someone would realize he’s not normal, not as emotionally responsive, not as tactile, not as capable of self-regulation.

His ears fold back against the top of his head of their own accord, and it makes discomfort explode in his gut all over again. Rather than respond, he stares off into space and waits for Lance to move on. Eventually a hand settles over his own, lifts it, and then a wet cloth brushes over his skin, the smell of disinfectant strong in the air.

“It’s okay, you know,” Lance says, starting to wipe the cuts on his other arm down with disinfectant. “I get it. Well, I mean, I don’t … get it. But it’s okay. It wasn’t your fault.”

He shifts to put his hand on Keith’s thigh, then pauses, looking questioningly up at him. Keith nods haltingly.

“I’m just saying, there’s nothing to feel bad about. It … it isn’t right for an adult to hurt a kid. Not badly. I -- sorry, am I making it worse? I can shut up.”

Keith shakes his head. The last thing he wants is for Lance to stop talking. There are few things he finds as soothing as his voice right now, quiet and comforting, like he knows Keith is struggling with being constantly scared and overwhelmed by sensory stimulation. Lance takes a couple steps backwards and lifts Keith’s leg so he can wipe at the lacerations along the bottom of his foot and - - oh no, no, shit; Keith is ticklish. His leg jerks violently and a loud snort escapes him before he can cover his face with his hand to muffle it.

Lance gives him an astonished look before he breaks out into a massive grin. “Oh my god,” he laughs. “You’re ticklish.”

Keith doesn’t get a chance to confirm or deny the accusation before Lance runs the cloth over his foot again and he actually giggles as he tries to squirm away, unsuccessfully. Within a couple seconds -- much to his chagrin, because it’s embarrassing -- he’s been reduced to a giggling mess on the countertop, kicking at Lance with minimal coordination as he tries to hide his laughter behind his hands.

Eventually Lance relents, and Keith takes several deep breaths, troubles temporarily forgotten as he smiles and pushes himself upright again. Lance is staring at him, eyes sparkling, looking entirely awestruck, and Keith returns his stare with a quizzical look.
“I, uh,” Lance shakes his head. “Sorry. I still have to wipe off your other leg.” He doesn’t look very sorry. Keith rolls his eyes and pulls the hem of his boxers up to reveal a long, three-pronged wound up his right thigh.

If he didn’t know any better, Keith would think Lance was blushing. Surely he hasn’t done anything to embarrass him?

The sting of disinfectant brings his thoughts back to his situation, and he puffs a breath of air out from between his teeth as Lance carefully cleans out the scratch on his thigh.

“Better when it tickles?” Lance asks cheekily, and Keith -- being a mature adult -- sticks his tongue out at him.

The door opens and Shiro strolls in, and all it takes for Keith to react is the minute tensing of his shoulders. With agility beyond what he’s ever previously been capable of, he soars off the counter and is locking the door of the shower stall he just exited before he comes back to his senses. His heart feels like a hummingbird and he scrambles back onto the bench and curls up as Shiro calls his name softly. The tap-tap of footfalls moves closer to the stall and he grinds his teeth together, focusing on pressing hard enough that the points scrape his gums.

Shiro doesn’t deserve this. He’s only ever been kind and helpful and perfect. It’s not fair for Keith to make him live with this, Shiro doesn’t need that kind of stress, Shiro can’t handle it. Shiro needs help. Shiro needs rest. Shiro doesn’t like him.

“Keith?” he says again, clearly distraught. Lance’s footsteps move towards him as well, and holy shit, it’s too much; fabric rustling, all of them breathing, the soft grating of Keith’s claws against the foreign metal of the bench.

“I got it,” Lance whispers, maybe thinking Keith won’t hear. “He’s not…” Fabric rustling.

“I know, but--” Shiro’s voice breaks. His shoe slides a few centimetres forward.

Keith raises both hands and presses down on his ears, hard. His skin is buzzing with sensitivity and panic.

“...make me crawl under the door like a little kid,” Lance is grumbling, suddenly much closer, and Keith whips his head around to see Lance wriggling through the gap under the stall door, the playfulness in his gaze overlaid with concern. “Which is frankly offensive and also super gross because I’ve barely been putting effort into washing the floor when it’s my turn to clean the showers, because, like, hello -- they get clean when we drip water all over them. Technically. In hindsight, it feels gross to crawl on this floor, so I should mop.” He hauls himself upright and brushes off his knees melodramatically, like he’s covered in mud or something, grimacing the whole time.

Then he unlocks the door and swings it open to reveal … nothing. Shiro is gone. When did Shiro leave? How long has he been sitting here like this? There’s still a roaring in his ears and his vision is slightly blurred from his rapid and uneven breathing, but Lance just smiles down at him like nothing is wrong, except that his gaze is a little too calculating, a wrinkle on his forehead as he appears to assess the situation.

“We’re not done yet,” he quips finally, gesturing for Keith to exit the stall, which he does -- cautiously.

Shiro’s scent is already fading away, overtaken by the smell of the open bottle of disinfectant, and
Keith jumps slightly when Lance strides past him to pat the spot on the counter again. He can’t hold back anymore.

Keith tilts his head to the side as the question that’s been plaguing him finally bubbles up to the surface, unhindered. “Why are you helping me?” he rasps, then clears his throat and glances sheepishly up at Lance, all too aware of how pretty-much-naked he is, standing in the middle of a large, open room. He wraps his arms so tightly around himself that he feels like he might bruise his own ribs.

“What do you mean?” Lance asks, hand falling still against the countertop.

It takes a couple seconds for Keith to continue, but he’s dealt with the issue of his brain not wanting to talk so many times before that he’s better able to force it when need be. “What do you want?”

Lance just looks more confused. “I want … to help?”

“In exchange for what?”

“What?”

“What do you want, Lance?” he growls, voice much steadier now. “From me? What are you trying to get?”

Lance’s jaw drops, then indignance floods his features. “Nothing!” he splutters, crossing his arms over his chest. “Do you really think I’m that selfish?” There’s no real conviction behind his question, though he’s clearly trying to sound bothered.

Like he isn’t sure if Keith is serious or just trying to pick a fight.

Keith sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose, accidentally stabbing himself in the cheek with a claw. “I’m not stupid, Lance. People don’t just do things for other people for no reason, so I’m asking, what are you trying to get from me? It’s easier to just ask than to waste your time. So what is it? What could you possibly need? Money? Favours? Sex? What?”

Lance flushes bright red at the same time his eyes go wide with horror, and it would be really funny if Keith weren’t despairing over the loss of a potential friend. He can’t believe he was so naive as to think someone actually wanted to just be nice to him, even for a short while.

Guess movie nights are over and done with if Lance just tells him what he’s after.

“Friendship, Keith! I am trying to be your friend. Oh my god.” Lance digs the heels of his palms into his eyes and rubs, then throws his head back to huff at the ceiling. “What the heck makes you think I’m trying to get something from you?”

Keith knows he shouldn’t be angry -- and really, he isn’t, he’s just actively misdirecting his emotions into something that will ruin this before he gets attached. Mostly, he’s scared because he’s already grown so attached to his entire team and he can’t let stuff like this happen again.

“Because that’s how people are, Lance! I’m not stupid! People aren’t nice to you just because -- they’re nice when they want something, and then when they’re done with you, they leave! So stop making it harder!”

Lance sinks down into Keith’s spot on the counter and puts his head in his hands. “Jesus. Jesus, Keith, come on! You know that’s not how that works.” He looks up at Keith through his fingers, eyes wide. “…Right?”
Keith scoffs. “Obviously it is. The only person who isn’t really like that is Shiro, and even then I’m sure there’s something he wants and I’ll find out eventually.” He crosses his arms again and glares at Lance. “So save yourself the trouble. I don’t need to be coddled.”

“What the fuck,” Lance mumbles, covering his eyes again. “What the fuck? Okay, clearly, you have not been interacting with the right people.”

Keith scoffs again and rolls his eyes.

“Let’s try this again.” He hops down from the counter, approaches Keith, and holds out a hand. Keith eyes it warily, then raises an eyebrow at him before shaking his hand. “Hi, I’m Lance. I’m not a dick, and I don’t have ulterior motives, and I don’t want sex or money, and I’d like to be your friend. Like, a normal friend. Not even your rival anymore. I think we’re past that, so a friend. Who doesn’t just want to take something and then leave. Just, like, watch weird alien movies and maybe bake cookies together and fight in a space war together. That kind of stuff.” He still hasn’t let go of Keith’s hand, and Keith squints up at him suspiciously. “And if I ever do need something from you, I’ll ask, and if you ever need something from me, just ask. Because that’s how friendship is supposed to work.”

He finally relinquishes his grip and takes a step back, then gestures at the bathroom counter again.

“Like, for example, some quality nursing skills. I am happy to provide.”

Keith crosses his arms again and watches Lance intently as he takes a few hesitant steps forward. “Are you … sure? You don’t have to.”

“I want to. Because we’re friends, and that’s what friends do. Unless you don’t want me to.”

Well, he really does need to get these cleaned and bandaged properly if they’re going to heal right without another trip to the sleep chambers, and it seems like Lance is being pretty honest. He could do it himself, but he already knows he won’t. So he hops up onto the counter again and sticks his leg out for Lance, who “accidentally” grabs his foot and tickles him again, causing Keith to actually accidentally kick his side in surprise.

“Sorry!” he cries, hands hovering uncertainly over him as Lance hunches over and wheezes. “Sorry! Um, are you okay?”

“My bad,” Lance gasps. “Never surprise a space ninja. Lesson learned.”

Keith hides his grin behind his hand as Lance pretends to die on the shower room floor, then leaps back up when he remembers that he never cleans it properly and starts frantically wiping invisible dirt away again.

“How do you do that?” he blurs.

“Hm?” Lance glances up from where he’s shaking out his jacket like a rug.

“Make people feel better so fast?”

Lance brightens and grins at him, chest puffed out proudly. “It’s just my natural charm.”

Keith raises an eyebrow and he can feel one of his oversized ears tilt downwards to mimic the motion.

“Really!” He’s indignant before Keith even says anything, crossing his arms and pouting. “I was born great!”
“No, I’m … I’m pretty sure this little yellow hanging piece is supposed to be off-limits,” Lance murmurs, squinting at the game board and what appears to be a yellow pendulum hanging off of one of the raised spires in the middle.

“‘Pretty sure’? Really?”

Lance pouts. “Well, I dunno, Keith, can you read Altean?” He tosses the instruction booklet, which is less off a booklet and more of a small encyclopedia in size, across the bed.

Keith stares blankly at it for several seconds, then sighs. “Can’t aliens just have normal games like checkers?”

“Hey, wait,” Lance says suddenly. “Screw the rules. Have you ever played Mouse Trap?”

He’s … pretty sure that one of his grade school classrooms had a shelf of board games, and he vaguely recalls playing them during indoor recesses or free time. “I … think so?”

“Okay, well,” Lance tries again. “We have all the supplies we need to turn this dumb, boring game into a super cool alien version of Mouse Trap.” He leans forward, eyes shining. “Including real, live space mice,” he whispers excitedly.

“Holy shit.”

“Holy shit, indeed.”

Chulatt perches confidently at the head of the dining table, analyzing the obstacles laid out in front of her with perception well beyond what a mouse should be capable of.

It was surprisingly easy to get the mice to agree to their game.

Which is probably another thing mice shouldn’t be capable of.

Regardless, the poor creatures must be bored out of their minds if they’re willing to participate in Keith and Lance’s weird shenanigans. Shenanigans that, somewhere along the line, also became Pidge and Hunk’s shenanigans.

And now each mouse has been assigned to a paladin and they’re all betting GAC and various trinkets on mice.

“You ever think about weird our lives are?” Lance asks, and Keith nods.

“Yeah, I was just thinking about that.”

“Okay,” Pidge starts from the far end of the table. “I think the obstacle course is organized to optimize the performance of all four mice. They should all have advantages and disadvantages in certain areas, taking into account agility, size, strength, and intelligence level.”

“Wait, are you implying that some of the mice are stupid?” Hunk asks, looking genuinely
offended.

Pidge stares impassively at him. “Their levels of intelligence in different areas, Hunk. Like logical reasoning, planning ahead, cause and effect--”

“Okay.” Hunk holds his hands up in surrender. “Okay. As long as you’re not insulting them.”

Pidge rolls her eyes, but even Keith can see the fond smile. “Anyway. I’ll keep time and score on this datapad. Each mouse gets two attempts, not consecutively. Are you ready?”

The other three paladins nod.

“Chulatt?”

Chulatt puffs her chest out proudly and strokes her whiskers.

“Ready, set,” Pidge starts the timer, “Go!”

Twenty minutes later, the whole fiasco has devolved into an argument. Keith sighs deeply while Lance and Hunk bicker over Platt’s “strategy” -- which was knocking down anything that might potentially trap him before it got the chance.

Lance thinks points should be deducted for interfering with obstacles. Hunk thinks his mouse is the smartest creature in the universe and used his strength to his advantage to save his own ass at the expense of fucking up the course just a little, which deserves bonus points.

Pidge makes eye contact with him and sighs, too. Chulatt and Platt are both perched on her shoulder, watching her scroll through old documents on the datapad while they all wait for the argument to resolve itself.

“Plachu obviously deserves to win because he completed the course like he was supposed to! He didn’t Godzilla his way through it!”

Keith usually doesn’t have a problem with this. The castleship is generally a loud and boisterous place, considering its inhabitants, but somehow it’s worse this time.

He understands he’s had kind of a rough week -- that isn’t a good enough reason for the way his heart pounds and his legs start to shake. The blatantly curious stares from Hunk and Pidge have been sending his way have been aggravating him little by little, like mosquito bites. He doesn't need a reminder about his appearance, and people looking at him is setting him off, because he knows all they see is what he is now and he hates it.

In hindsight, he would have been better off staying in his room. But Lance had been insistent, pouting and trying to give him sad puppy eyes when he refused to interact with other people, and he'd reassured him that Shiro would know not to come in the room while they were here. He's beginning to regret giving in to Lance. That never should have happened in the first place. It isn't something he'd typically do, but he supposes that if Lance wants to do nice things for him, he'll take what he can get, because he really does enjoy his company -- even if he can't stop the nagging suspicion that Lance is expecting Keith to owe him something in the end.

He wants to go back to his room and hide under his blankets, away from noise and people, and sleep. Unfortunately, he doesn’t think he can even make it that far. Instead, he shuffles backwards a few steps and settles into one of the dining chairs. Though his control over his new ears is limited, he finds that if he puts in the effort to twist them back flat against the side of his head, the
noise isn’t as overwhelming.

It might be a little too late for it to help anything, though. He takes a deep, shuddering breath and leans forward, hands over his face.

This is too much, too fast. He was having fun a couple minutes ago and now the yelling is just…

They’re not even really mad at each other, and he can tell, but the yelling is setting him off, because he’s probably in a “fragile mental state” or something ridiculous and stupid like that. He heaves a world-weary sigh and prays his heart stops doing furious little rabbit-kicks in his chest, lest it kill him.

He’s fine.

“Tell him you think he’s fat and destructive, Lance!” Hunk shouts. “Look right in his big, cute eyes and tell him that.”

Keith is pretty sure the little huff of laughter comes out more like a sob.

“Hey.” A hand touches his shoulder and he stands up so fast that the chair topples over and clatters to the floor.

“What?”

Pidge is standing in front of him looking startled, eyes wide behind her glasses and hands up defensively. “Hey,” she says again. Chuchule is clawing her way up her sleeve, head poking cautiously around her arm to peer at Keith. “Are you okay?”

“I’m…” he starts, glancing up where Hunk and Lance are staring. Blatantly.

And he’s purple. And he’s out in the open in a brightly-lit room and he looks like the enemy. How do they not hate him? How can they stand this?

How did he let this happen in the first place?

He was right -- he should’ve stayed in his stupid bedroom, alone.

Because Shiro pokes his head through the doorway like he’s subtly trying to check out all the commotion, and he’d probably get away with it if Keith wasn’t able to pick up the sound of his prosthetic scraping against the wall or the faint burst of a distinctly metallic scent that wafts into the room.

Their gazes meet and Shiro looks like a deer in the headlights. Keith probably looks the same, if he’s being honest with himself, but the way Shiro looks at him sends him running.

He exits the room through the opposite door and bolts down the hall. There’s not a chance in hell any of his teammates are going to catch up to him at the speed he’s moving.

At an intersection of two corridors, he stumbles and almost stops, because for a second his brain reminds him that the elevators are down the corridor to his right, and if he takes the elevator down to a lower level he’ll be at the airlocks and--

He sucks in a gasping breath and continues on straight ahead, towards the hall that will lead to the Paladins’ quarters.

It’s like he blinks and suddenly he’s in his bed, curled up on his side and tugging the blankets over
his head. The pieces of the board game that he and Lance didn’t transfer into the dining hall for their Mouse Trap disaster dig into his legs.

He wants to go back in time and undo this whole week.

If he could, he’d go back and undo his whole life; try to pinpoint the very first time everything went wrong, really wrong, and work from there to fix it all.

Probably when his dad died.

Maybe when his mom left.

Maybe his whole existence was just doomed from the start.

He can’t do anything without fucking it up. He can’t live anywhere without ruining it. He can’t get attached to anyone without them dying, or at the very least, disappearing for a significant amount of time.

And then, sometimes, dying once he finally gets them back.

In the very brief period of time he knew his mother, there are a million questions he should have asked. But the shock, and betrayal, the need to express that -- “Do you have any idea what happened to me?” -- those thoughts and feelings overrode logic and now he’s left floundering because he took something good for granted.

“You’re an idiot,” he tells himself, and then someone is knocking on his door -- loudly.

“I don’t need to be babysat!” he yells.

“Why’d you run away?” Lance asks, like Keith didn’t even speak.

He rolls his eyes. “I’m my own person. I can do what I want.”

“What’s wrong with seeing Shiro?”

God, how does he even know to ask that? It’s not like Keith was subtle, but how did he make the connection that fast? He breathes deeply a couple times. “Your dumb board game pieces are still all over the place.”

“Ugh, fine, I’ll deal with them.”

That’s right. Keith didn’t lock the door. Lance strolls in with his hands in his pockets, looking miffed, and stops a few steps into the room to stare Keith down. Keith stares back, then sighs and lets his gaze drift to the wall behind him. In his peripheral vision, he can see Lance move closer to the bed, and then the mattress dips under his weight.

“You’re lying on the dumb board game pieces,” he stage-whispers, and Keith snorts and rolls over, taking the blanket with him, so that his forehead is pressed against the cold wall along the edge of the bed.

“Thanks.”

Keith shrugs.

It’s astonishing how quickly the fire is doused when he’s faced with reality again.

“You didn’t really talk around Pidge and Hunk. You okay?” Lance asks, over the soft clatter of
the metal and crystal game pieces he’s collecting.

Keith sighs and flicks an ear at him, hoping that’s answer enough.

Lance hums, and the silence that follows is filled with the sound of their abandoned game being shoved into his pockets. “It’s probably hard to be around people right now.”

He doesn’t mean to, but his ears perk up with interest. Lance is right; his body doesn’t have to betray him by acknowledging that, though.

“At least, that’s what Hunk said. And I mean, I kind of figured.” The weight beside him disappears and the mattress levels out again. “So, I’ll give you some peace and quiet, if that’s what you really need.”

Keith cranes his neck to see Lance’s face, and Lance is just hovering close by, giving him a hopeful smile. “Sure,” he mumbles.


“Oh, my god.” Keith rolls his eyes and flops back over. This guy is freakin’ impossible sometimes. No wonder they bicker so much that Shiro and Coran keep forcing them to do “team bonding” exercises.

“Let me finish!” Something tiny, soft, and warm lands on top of him, then starts wriggling and squeaking. “You probably don’t want to be around people, because people are judgmental. I mean, really, humans are assholes.”

He bites his lip to hide his grin even though Lance wouldn’t see it anyway. “True.”

“Thank you, I thought you might agree with me. Space mice, however, don’t judge us for anything other than whether or not we have snacks for them. So.” Another mouse is placed on the blanket, right near his head. “Here’s some company, so you don’t feel lonely hiding in your room all day. There are crackers at the foot of the bed and a holopad with one of the video games Pidge is programming uploaded already. Anything you need?”

“…This is a lot, Lance.”

There’s a rustling of fabric as Lance shrugs. “Meh. Not really. Just being a pal.”

“I’m gonna owe--” he cuts himself off, because Lance doesn’t think like that.

Lance isn’t the type of person who believes in an eye for an eye when it comes to kindness. He isn’t the type of person who believes in increasing debts tenfold for every favour ever done, or everything ever given -- whether or not it’s wanted. And he definitely isn’t the type of person who takes what he feel is owed when he wants, how he wants.

But Keith has been around those people enough, and he can’t shake the feeling of apprehension at accepting help, still. No matter how many times Lance explicitly tells him that he only does things for him because they’re friends, he doesn’t think the feeling will ever go away.

A tiny nose pokes under the blanket right beside his cheek and snuffles loudly. He reaches up and plucks Chuchule off his shoulder, setting her down on the bed between himself and the wall instead. Plachu scampers over and cuddles up against her side almost immediately.

“I get homesick sometimes,” Lance says suddenly, as Keith watches Chuchule start grooming Plachu’s ears and fussing with his whiskers. “More like … a lot of the time. And Hunk is my best
friend, so if I’m sad, I go to him. If I’m sad, or if I miss my mom, or if I just need a hug, Hunk’s got what I need. And it works the other way around, too. He doesn’t want me to repay him for anything he does for me because he’s my bestie, and we can’t live without each other. We have each other’s backs. You and I? I like when you let me hang out on the training deck with you, and I really like that you handle horror movies about as well as I do, and I know we fight all the time but it’s kinda fun arguing with you.”

He pauses, probably waiting for Keith to respond, but he’s busy processing so Lance sighs and keeps going. “You’re sad. Or hurting. Or something. Something is wrong, Keith. And I get that stuff is different and weird right now and it’s probably freaking you out. So take your video game, and your space crackers, and your mouse buddies, and when you feel better, come find me and we can … I dunno, we can go watch a movie, or play ping-pong, or raid the fridge!”

Lance is good. Lance is one of the good people, who does things just to be kind. To be genuine. Keith sits up so suddenly he scares himself -- Lance visibly jumps.

Something is wrong, and he’ll get over it on his own eventually, but he isn’t going to let his problems affect the good things in his life. “Let’s do something, then,” he says, careful not to jostle the mice engaged in a grooming session as he untangles himself from under the covers.

“I can … stay?”

“You can stay, Lance. People aren’t the problem. It’s the way everyone looks at me; like something is different. Which it is, I know,” he adds, when Lance opens his mouth to say something else. “But you aren’t staring at me like I’m an experiment, or like I might snap and murder you any second, or like I held you pr--” Keith clears his throat and exhales slowly. “You have been looking at me like I’m still me. So, yeah, you can stay, because you’re acting a hell of a lot different than everyone else and it isn’t freaking me out.”

“...Okay!” Lance chirps. “Um, want me to go snag Pidge’s laptop so we can marathon Star Wars?”

A mouse scampers across the bed and up his sleeve as he squints up at Lance. “What about Star Trek?” he asks, helping Chuchule onto his shoulder.

“Oh, Star Wars is obviously the superior choice, my dude. Way more action, a reasonable amount of episodes, light sabers.” Lance raises both eyebrows at him and plants his hands on his hips. “I bet Pidge doesn’t even have Star Trek on her computer.”

Oh, so it’s gonna be like that? “You can have your mice back,” Keith tells him bluntly, and for a second Lance gapes at him, then the understanding takes over and he grins.

“You’re going down, pal.” He turns on his heel and disappears into the corridor, leaving Keith stunned.

“Where the hell are you going?”

“Scoot over,” Lance demands as soon as the door opens.

“Wha--? Oh. You actually took her computer.”

Lance nods. “Scoot over,” he says again.
Rolling his eyes, Keith scoops up the two space mice, who are now sleeping curled around each other, and shoves the pillows back against the wall for them to lean on. Lance hands him the laptop and leaps into the bed, snatching one of Keith’s three blankets -- when the hell did he even take another out of the closet, what the hell? -- and draping it over himself. There’s an air of mischief about him, and Keith gives him an inquisitive look (he can feel one of his ears tilt downward involuntarily and tries valiantly to ignore the discomfort it causes) and Lance snickers, producing several containers and pouches from the pockets of his jacket and jeans. “I raided the fridge, too. And the snack cupboard.”


“I’m going to pretend I can’t hear how sarcastic you’re being.” He snatches the laptop back and opens it, letting it power up. “If we’re going to have a Star Wars marathon, we are doing it right, and that means enough snack food to kill a lesser being.”

Keith is about to protest -- obviously, they’re having a Star Trek marathon; fuck Lance’s idea -- when Lance starts typing in the password. And typing. And typing. “Um, what the heck?”

“Hm?”

“First of all, why do you know Pidge’s password. Second of all, why is it so long?” He leans in closer to get a better look at the keys Lance is pressing, but just then he hits enter and several windows open up all over the screen.

“Excuse you, I am a certifiable genius, and I can solve any problem you throw at me. And it’s the first thirty-three digits of Pi, obviously.”

“Oh.”

“Yup.”

“That’s very … Pidge-like,” Keith concedes, settling back down into his own spot, which is a fair distance from Lance. He knows they … cuddled the other day, or whatever. Obviously he knows. But that was a fluke, and Keith was having a rough time, and this is very, very different. He hasn’t fallen asleep, he isn’t being comforted, and he’s in a relatively stable state of mind, so he has no freaking clue where the boundaries are supposed to be right now. “How’d you even figure that out?”

“Because I’m smartsicles, Keith, keep up.” Focused on scrolling through Pidge’s apparently gargantuan Film folder, he waves a hand dismissively at him. Keith scoffs. “Yeah, in one of Slav’s alternate realities, maybe.”

“Fine! I watched her type it in a couple times and connected the dots. Which is still a pretty impressive feat, you jerk.”

“Yeah, but it’s not exactly ‘smartsicles’.”

Lance makes a noise like a dying Badjyakduril (Keith would know; Alteans have the alien equivalent of nature documentaries, filmed on various planets they used to explore, and he’s watched nearly all of them) and flips him off. “You don’t even get a say in what we watch now, just for that.”

About a millisecond later, he whoops enthusiastically. Keith jumps back in surprise at the sudden outburst. “I win! Star Wars, heck yeah! C’mon, c’mon!” He beckons frantically for Keith to move
closer. “Sit here so I can put the computer on both our legs.”

Well, that solves his boundary problem, Keith supposes, shifting a tiny bit closer so Lance can set the laptop down across both of their laps. He sets the sleeping mice down between them to ensure he doesn’t have a chance to get too close on accident. His skin still does that horrible crawly, staticky thing when he gets too much physical contact, and he’s worried that if it becomes overwhelming he might shove Lance away without being able to explain himself.

“Star Trek is better,” he grumbles, mostly to himself, as Lance shoves a bag of chips from the space mall into his hands.

“You will understand how wrong you are soon,” Lance taunts. He starts fiddling with the volume control, but his gaze lingers on Keith.

Probably gauging his reaction. And honestly, Keith does like both franchises. They were some of the only shows and films he ever bothered watching as a kid, besides the odd kids’ film with foster siblings, at their insistence. *Star Trek* may hold a slightly more special place in his heart because it used to be his and Shiro’s thing, but he still likes *Star Wars* just about as much and doesn’t see why there ever needed to be a big stink about superiority. He can tell, somehow, that Lance is just screwing with him, too, likely for the sake of maintaining an argument. So he continues to play along. “If I don’t fall asleep five minutes into the first one.”

Lance gasps indignantly, and Keith smirks to himself and pops open the bag of chips. Oh, man; it’s his favourite flavour. His stomach can screw off with its refusal to tolerate anything substantial -- he grabs a handful and shoves it in his mouth. It takes a second for him to realize Lance hasn’t tried to defend himself yet, and he peers over to find that he’s being watched, very intently. A petite smile works its way onto Lance’s face as he turns back to the computer screen and starts playing the film.

He wasn’t just making sure he was getting a rise out of Keith.

He was making sure Keith ate something. Because it’s been a couple days and Lance hasn’t shut up about how unhealthy that is yet. He freezes in the middle of chewing the space chips to gape at him, openly.

That clever bastard.

Maybe Lance is a little bit ‘smartsicles’, after all.

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“Abby! It’s Saturday!” Keith listens to the clunk-clunk of Leandra’s dance shoes on the stairs. “Keith, that means you, too!”

He sticks his head around the doorway to peer at Leandra as she hurries past, arms full of makeup cases and beauty paraphernalia. “What?”

“It’s beauty day. No one gets out of beauty day!”
“Oh.” He’s only been here for two weeks, but he’s already quite aware of what Saturday means; Leandra owns enough nail polish and makeup and other stuff Keith can’t even put names to that she might as well be running a business. At the same time, he’s only been here for two weeks, and they’re already asking him to participate in their ‘special days’?

He must be doing something right this time. Even though he’s been mostly hiding in his room reading comic books.

Abby comes flying past, too, and offers a hand to Keith on her way. Hesitantly, he grabs it, and she giggles and drags him along to the living room. It’s like a static shock travels up his arm. He isn’t used to being able to just hold someone’s hand anymore. “Beauty day!” she cheers, swinging his hand.

Keith laughs behind his free hand. He really likes Abby. Not in the way he knows some kids at school talk about having a crush, but he keeps thinking that if he could have a real sister, in a real family, he’d want it to be someone like Abby. She’s bubbly and excitable and smiles nonstop, but she’s extremely considerate of him, too. The first time she hugged him and he told her not to, she agreed not to do it again, and she hasn’t since.

He doesn’t get that often.

They’ve also been in school together for the past couple weeks, and he’s become more protective of her than he can remember being towards anyone, ever. The same kind of whiny, annoying jerks who would call him a ‘retard’ at all his other schools do the same to her, and while he may be two years younger and petite, he can fight, and he’s done just enough damage to scare them away without getting in trouble. Abby seems to be attached to him, too.

“Can we do your makeup?” she asks as they tumble into the living room together. Leandra already has her mini beauty parlour spread out over the coffee table.

“What, like, on my face?”

Leandra rolls her eyes. “Duh. What, are we gonna put eyeshadow on your ears?”

Keith considers this for awhile. He isn’t very fond of the idea of people touching his face, even if it is these two. And while Leandra is a whole twelve years old (practically an adult in his eyes), he’s not sure he trusts her not to poke his eyes out by accident. She can be kind of aggressive sometimes.

Most of the time.

“Um,” he says, glancing at Abby, who’s already sat at the table opposite Leandra and is bouncing excitedly while she digs through the bucket of nail polish. “I don’t really like when people touch my face. Can I just paint my nails?”

“No, but I’ll paint your nails.” Leandra puffs her chest out proudly. “After Abby’s, though. Abby always gets her turn first.”

Abby, engrossed in picking out the perfect colour, just hums her assent.

“Are you sure?” Leandra tries again, holding a makeup palette up way too close to his face. “This shade of red would look really pretty on you.”

She’s pouting at him, like that will make him cave or something.

“Leandra.” Maria, their foster mom, appears in the doorway, hands on her hips, and even though
she *sounds* stern, she’s smiling at them. “Remember what we said about forcing people to submit to makeovers?”

Leandra visibly deflates and drops the makeup back onto the table. Keith feels a little bad about how disappointed she looks, so he reaches past Abby’s hands and picks up a bottle of bright red nail polish. “Here, um, you can make my nails red, then,” he offers.

She eyes at the bottle appraisingly for a moment, then nods and takes it from him. “Good enough.”

“Good.” Maria turns and disappears down the hall again. It’s commonplace for the kids in the house to have a lot of free time away from adults. Really, they’re all *old enough* to kind of take care of themselves, even if Leandra is technically babysitting them since she’s the oldest.

Maria *did* hover for the first week Keith was there, though, and he definitely noticed. But as soon as he started actually *talking*, and he and Abby started spending time together, she gave him space.

If Keith could have Abby (and, he supposes, Leandra) for a real sister, he’d want Maria for a real mom.

“Got it!” Abby cheers triumphantly, holding out robin’s egg blue nail polish for Leandra to take.

“This one again?” Leandra asks, laughing. “You still have some left on your nails from last week.”

“I like it. It’s pretty,” Abby explains, and she offers her outstretched hands to her foster sister.

Keith sits patiently and watches Leandra paint Abby’s nails. They talk about school for a while, and how much Leandra hates rotary classes, and how Abby better find herself a good “K-8” school to avoid the hassle. “You, too, Keith,” Leandra adds, waving the polish brush at him and splattering a few drops of blue on the newspapers she laid out to avoid a mess. “Just save yourself the trouble. Like, every hour I have to move to a new classroom and start all over again. Middle school is so *dumb*.”

“I thought I wasn’t allowed to go to middle school, anyway,” Abby butts in.

“Why not?”

“Well, Mikey and his friends said that kids with Down Syndrome have to stay in grade school forever,” she explains, shrugging, like it isn’t even a big deal.

Keith feels a little spark of anger at the mention of Mikey, the little rat-faced bastard. “Don’t listen to him.”

“Well, he’s probably right,” Abby grumbles, resting her chin on her hand. “I can’t keep up with my homework or *anything*.”

“Well, he’s just an asshole who’s mean just to be mean. Don’t listen to him.”

“*Keith*, no swearing during beauty day. Abby, Keith’s right. He’s just being an asshole.” Leandra shakes her head and snatches Abby’s hand back to fix the nail polish she just smudged. Keith rolls his eyes and mutters ‘hypocrite’ under his breath. “You’re going to move up to the next grade because you *have* to, and you’re definitely smart enough to, and Keith and I are gonna help you with your homework if it’s too much.”

“Um, wait, I can’t help with her homework, she’s ten. I’m eight.”
Leandra waves him off dismissively. “Extra practice. You’ll figure it out.”

“You can’t make me do someone else’s homework.”

“I’ll put mascara on you if you don’t.”

Keith huffs and crosses his arms.

He’s changed his mind -- having sisters sucks.

“Hey, can you put a movie in?” Abby asks, once again smudging her nail polish by moving around too much. Leandra sighs and holds her wrist still.

“Sure, uh, which one?” Keith stands and wanders over to the television stand, inside of which is a huge collection of DVDs and VHS tapes.

He’s never seen a film collection so extensive in his life, and to top it off he’s barely even watched movies before, so he’s been impressed with it since day one.

Leandra shrugs. “We watched Fly Away Home last weekend, so not that one. Do sci-fi or something.”

“Do you have any Star Trek?” Keith asks before he can stop himself.

“No,” Leandra snorts. “We only have kids’ movies. Try Meet the Robinsons or something like that.”

An hour into the movie (they are all very prone to distractions), Keith’s nails are shining with a vibrant red colour and he keeps staring at them, mesmerized. “Y’know, I can make your face look nice, too,” Leandra reminds him cheekily.

“My face looks fine,” Keith pouts, barely preventing himself from crossing his arms. The nail polish is dry already, but he still keeps worrying about ruining it. Leandra did a very nice job and he’d hate for her hard work to go to waste.

*

Keith is new at this school.

Or, at least, relatively new. He’s still the one with the “new kid” title, and that title comes with a several-metre radius of general avoidance and curious stares.

And whispers.

And the occasional question from across the classroom during lunch, about where he moved from or what his parents do or “What kind of name is Akira?” because the teacher screwed up reading the attendance even though the agency lists his first name as “Keith” in most documentation.

Sometimes there’s a mix-up with a school board and they put his real name as his first name.

So his teacher called him Akira on his first day and several of his classmates still haven’t gotten over it.
But here’s the thing: avoidance is so much better than the alternative. He’s been through enough homes and enough schools that he’s been every kind of target. He’s been the weird new kid, the weak crybaby, the quiet freak, the only Asian kid, the kid who’s always pulled out of class for appointments, the one who shows up covered in bruises all the time, or misses class because the bruises are so bad, and always, always the kid with serious social incompetence and aggressive tendencies.

He’d rather the other kids keep their distance than start up with the usual teasing and tormenting.

He’s new, but he knows the look of the kids who would give him trouble, and he knows the people they’ll give trouble to.

Mikey is one of those entitled asshole kids who thinks putting other people down makes him look cool, and Abby is one of those meek, soft-hearted kids who just takes it, because it’s something she’s become accustomed to.

And Keith?

Keith is a kid who knows how to throw a proper punch, and who always roots for the underdog.

He wants to teach Abby how to fight. Abby thinks fighting is bad, and mean, and that problems can be solved with some kind words and a hug. Keith is almost nine, though, and he knows how the world really is. He knows that some people need a little bit more protection and a little bit more help. He knows anyone who hurts the good people deserves a broken nose or a couple solid kicks to the abdomen.

Anyone who hurts the bad people is just doing it for the greater good.

Abby is his sister, as much as he’s ever had a sister. She likes the blue nail polish and she snuck the red out of Leandra’s makeup case so Keith could practice painting his own nails. She likes to hold hands and give really long hugs. She helps Maria bake cookies and brings them up to Keith’s room with new comic books she bought for him, with money she made helping the neighbours cut the grass.

She’s one of the good people. He can’t sit idly by and watch the world try to ruin that.

He definitely isn’t going to sit around while Mikey shoves her over into a mud puddle and laughs while she cries.

It’s as though he’s on autopilot for a few seconds. He abandons the nook he was hiding in (away from the boisterous noise of the playground), drops the comic book he was reading somewhere on the asphalt, and then he’s standing right in front of Mikey’s ugly, sneering face, and his fingers are curling into a fist while his elbow twists back to prepare for the blow.

Mikey’s glasses snap under the force of the punch, and he topples to the ground with a swine-like squeal.

“That’s her favourite shirt, you asshole!” Keith shouts. It’s the boldest he’s been yet at this school, and the thrill of it thrums just under his skin, pressing him for more, more; make him pay for what he did.

He turns instead to help Abby to her feet, and she holds onto him while she cries about the horrible stains all over her best pink unicorn shirt. Keith pats her back awkwardly and glares at Mikey, who is struggling to stand while his little group of cronies stand around and stare in unmitigated shock.
There are fat tears rolling down his cheeks and a steady stream of blood gushing from his nose. His glasses are in several pieces, half-buried in the mud beneath them.

“Who cares?” he retorts, obviously trying to keep his tone level and taunting despite the pain he’s in. “She’s a retard, it doesn’t matter.”

He launches himself at Mikey again without thinking, and they go down together, rolling across the partially-flooded field while Mikey tries to defend himself and Keith lands several more hits to his face and chest. “Leave her alone!” he screams, and he’s just going for the pressure point near the top of Mikey’s shoulder when a much larger person grabs him from behind and drags him from his target.

His brain shuts down for a split second and he forgets where he is, crying out and kicking his feet to get the person off. An exclamation of pain precedes his fall back to the ground, where the cold mud on his hands and knees reminds him where he is and what just happened. He whips around to stare at the teacher who just tried to pick him up. He doesn’t really know the guy, but he’s seen him around and he’s pretty sure he teaches at Abby and Mikey’s grade level. He looks a little dazed, clutching at his shin where Keith must have kicked him.

Keith’s lip wobbles and he scrunches up his face to hold back the tears. He didn’t mean to hurt him. He didn’t realize who he was.

“We all read his file when they enrolled him, are you dense?”

The kindergarten teacher, Miss Gonzalez (Keith knows her; he likes her, because she always makes a point of greeting him on his way off the bus in the morning and checking up on him throughout the day, always with a smile) has dragged the teacher who grabbed him into the principal’s office, not Keith, which is a whole new twist on his usual trips to the office.

Maybe this time will be different. Maybe this time he won’t be expelled, or even suspended.

He sits on the chair directly across from the door and watches it swing shut while Miss Gonzalez paces and gesticulates wildly behind the desk. The principal looks only slightly less perplexed than the grade five teacher who is cowering in the corner.

“You never, ever touch a child who’s been--”

The door clicks shut and everything on the other side becomes muffled. Keith swings his legs back and forth so that his wet shoes squeak against the tile.

They sent Mikey for first aid, and Abby is to get a change of clothes from her locker and go see her special education teacher before anything else. That leaves Keith alone in the corridor to await the verdict.

* 

“I didn’t mean to get expelled,” Keith explains, almost inaudibly, as Naomi pulls out of the driveway. Abby is sitting on the front step, crying, and Leandra has an arm around her shoulders. He doesn’t have the heart to wave goodbye.

Naomi is silent for a few moments, then she looks over at him and gives him a soft smile. “I know you didn’t.”
“He was being mean to Abby, and she wasn’t standing up for herself, so … so someone had to do it for her,” he continues, like that will undo everything. He’s been here for so long, he’d almost forgotten about the very real possibility of it all being taken away again. In the grand scheme of things, four months isn’t very long, but with the amount of foster homes he’s only been in for a few weeks, it felt like a lifetime.

He shouldn’t have let himself get attached.

“I don’t want to leave,” he admits quietly, hanging his head.

“I know,” Naomi says, holding out a hand towards him.

He sets the two bottles of nail polish -- bright red and pale blue -- on his lap, staring dejectedly out the window onto the road ahead, then takes Naomi’s hand in his own and squeezes like the contact will make it stop hurting.

It doesn’t.

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