They make a mistake that follows them home.

(Or: Keith becomes an unwitting caretaker to three Galra children, who teach him a great deal about how to take care of himself.)
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

I've never posted on AO3 before, so I hope the formatting looks even remotely close to acceptable!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Keith was beginning to feel like *it wasn’t supposed to go this way* was just the overarching motto of his entire existence, and that he should probably give up on expecting anything to ever play out like he planned, if he didn’t want a prevailing sense of all-consuming disappointment to be the most defining feature of the rest of his life.

Laser gunfire burst overhead, and Keith ducked further behind the cargo container for cover. All he wanted to do was go home. And, yes, he was 110% aware of the irony of that statement, because he was a Galra hunkered down in the middle of a Galra base and what he wanted most was to get back to his human friends and his Altean castle and the blanket he got from the weird giant weaver bird people on Storia 4, so he could pass out in his little bunk and sleep for a thousand years or at least until he didn’t hate the world quite so much, whichever came first. Ha.

Keith returned fire briefly with a gun he’d filched from a drone four hallways back. He didn’t know if the one shooting at him now was a robot or a living being, but well, this wasn’t the kind of mission where it mattered: you didn’t free a world from Galra control by leaving survivors to sound the alarms.

(Shiro is the only one who asks if Keith is all right at the end of these kinds of missions. The rest of them will check to see if he’s injured or if Red sustained damage or if his suit needs repairs, but when Lance or Hunk or Pidge comes across a living enemy in among all the drones and shoots back when shot at, Allura sits down and debriefs with them for a damn hour: *you did the right thing, you did what you had to do.* When Hunk hits something that sprays blood instead of oil after he guns down a whole corridor, Lance leans against him the entire night afterward, soliciting pity laughs from the yellow paladin for shit jokes about food goo and foot juice.

“You okay, Keith?” Shiro asks, and for some reason it’s always the metal hand on Keith’s shoulder—or maybe it just feels like it’s always the metal hand because Keith feels the weight of it even when it isn’t touching him; *he* didn’t make it but people who look like him did and Keith doesn’t believe in God but *please God,* he thinks every time, *don’t let Shiro ever know.*

Shiro isn’t stupid, but he is just this side of unbearably understanding, so every time Keith blatantly lies, “I’m fine,” their leader grips his shoulder once and then lets him go.

“All right. But you can always come talk to me if you need to.”

And the first answer to that is *I always need to* but the second answer to that is *never.*

Keith inevitably goes to his room. He takes off his paladin suit and his under armor and lays on top of the blankets in next to nothing so he can see his pale human skin is still in one piece. He doesn’t look at bruises, when he gets them. He spends at least the next four hours tapping his foot against the cold metallic end of his bed because the noise is nothing like the sound a sword makes when it enters flesh and metal doesn’t give like people do.
In the morning, he always showers away the little spots of blood that snuck under the edge of his visor and brushes his hair the exact same number of strokes as every morning and at breakfast Lance calls him a stone cold son of a—“Lance.” That’s Shiro. “Well, look at him. Unruffled. The most unruffledest. That’s not even normal, man!” That’s Lance. “And I was totally going to say ‘gun’—son of a gun, thank you.”

There’s a party. There’s always a party. It’s always in their honor, because they’re the heroes.

If Keith doesn’t smile, he gets picked on. If he smiles, he gets picked on.

There’s only… what? Thirty billion more planets to save?

He tells himself he can make it that long, at least.

The comm in his helmet exploded with Lance’s voice, “Uh, helllooo? Earth to Red Ranger! Come in, come innnn!”, and Keith was back, suddenly, back in the present, in the black hallway of the Galra base with the power cut, sweat rolling down his temple and the cautious footsteps of his enemy creeping closer to his hiding place. “Ground control to Major Tom!”

“That song sucks,” Keith retorted, not quietly; whoever was shooting at him already knew where he was anyway. A strangled noise crackled on the other end of the comm—either the sound effect to Lance’s pure and utter disgust or he’d actually started strangling someone, and Keith honestly wasn’t sure which was more likely.

“Oh hell no!” Lance shouted, which still didn’t answer the question. “You have a mullet—you do NOT get to hate on David Bowie!”

“Guys,” Pidge cut in, deadpan over the buzz-static of haptic feedback from her light keyboard, “is this the best time?”

“It’s really not,” Hunk confirmed before anyone else could get in a word in edgewise. If he didn’t keep up the momentum of the interruption, Lance would just steamroll right over it and go on snarking until he was unconscious. (Sometimes he would sleep-snark even after falling unconscious—Shiro told Keith that sass was Lance’s “defense mechanism,” but Keith felt pretty sure the distractions were not helping anyone’s defense.)

“Keith.” Shiro sounded a little winded, like he’d run the length of the base twenty times already. Probably had. “Your status report.”

At that very moment, the Galra soldier who’d been steadily creeping closer decided to make his stand and plunged around the edge of the cargo container, gun drawn and spewing light bullets. The shriek of the lasers blasting by Keith’s head became unbearable feedback as it echoed from his helmet to the others’ and back again.

“Keith!” someone shouted over the din.

But Keith was gone—every reflex retuned for battle, every nerve sparked under his skin, and all there was fight, win, refuse to be killed. Keith lunged, closing the distance faster than his own eyes could follow. It was just like piloting. He moved his body the way he moved Red Lion: from somewhere safe, detached inside a steel shell, and just like battlefield debris in space, he didn’t even need to see to dodge; he felt it, the white-blue flame of the lasers passing just a hair on the side of safe distance. His stolen gun was a hindrance at this range, so he abandoned it in favor of his bayard, the shield crashing down on his enemy’s weapon with a savagery that never suited Keith’s size.
You fight like a Galra soldier.

Surprise, surprise.

Keith’s vision went yellow and red at the edges.

The Galra had held this world (with its stupid name like Psch-Kosh or something) for 50 years. It was a tiny, worthless planet really, full of natural resources that only the natives could even use or value. The empire kept it just to keep it, another notch in the belt, another pit stop on the way to bigger prizes. There was only one Galra base to guard the whole thing because there was only one small inhabited island on the whole planet and before the Galra got here, its only residents were placid, arm-sized, talking stick bugs who said “Are you sure that…?” at the beginning of every sentence.

(“Are you sure that we need to liberate this particular planet?” Keith had asked.

“Keith!” Allura gasped. “This world needs to be freed!”

Are you sure?)

But all of that stuff was why Pidge picked this planet as their target, tenth in a string of recent conquests from the empire. Team Voltron was hunting easy prey, places where the Galra hadn’t had—you know—ten thousand years to become entrenched, places that didn’t mean much in the grand scheme of the empire’s brutal resource and slave grab, at the very outskirts of the empire, so that it might be years before the information of the liberations made it into the ears of the top brass back at the central hub.

Every planet they took, the empire shrank. Every planet they took, they got better at taking.

His sword clashed and rang roughshod against the Galra’s gun. How long had it been since this soldier fought anything but a training dummy? Fifty years of nothing but routine patrols and standardized exercises. What did the poor sap do to get sent out here?

The red bayard shredded the air like paper. Despite the unlit gloom of the hallway, Keith saw his opening and took it. He forced the Galra soldier back, at a bad angle; unable to look away from his opponent, the soldier’s boot caught on an uneven metal joint in the floor and he stumbled, keeping to his knees by reflex alone. Keith knocked the laser gun from his enemy’s hand even as the man was already lurching to his feet, but it was over—the bayard was at his throat.

“Surrender,” Keith snarled.

But Galra don’t.

Keith knew the claws were coming, but he’d stretched a bit too far, in a bad stance to dodge and the hallway was too narrow anyway. The first scratch glanced along his upper-arm, gouging a deep scar in the white metal; the paladin armor could take a hit but it wasn’t indestructible, and everything the Galra had was in his bare-handed blows now, lashing out again and again—a cornered tiger.

The soldier roared and, heedless of the sword that tore at his throat, threw himself forward, froth forming at the corner of his mouth, ready to rip Keith’s arm off or his throat out or just go straight through his body like a bullet with claws. In the plunging dark, the Galra’s eyes seemed to leave trails of burning yellow light wherever they moved. Keith got his shield up just in time to block a crippling strike, but the force of it sparked through his whole body and why? He knew they were too proud to give up, but this counterattack wasn’t pride, it was an all-out adrenaline-fueled desperation bid, and it had never been like this before.
There were no insults. There were no taunts about how the empire would consume every sentient planet in the universe, just fang and claw in the blackness, a relentless, unexpected assault. Keith raised his sword high to stop a downward swipe but he was a split second too late on the draw—the Galra’s hand slid along the blade and reached; his slashing grip crushed Keith’s visor. Deep-space glass pierced Keith’s cheek and the vision in one eye went black.

Someone was screaming his name but the comm kept shorting out into static.

The distraction cost him. The Galra soldier slammed into him like a Mack truck, hurling him down the hallway. Keith crashed to a stop against a wall, all breath forced out of him, barely avoiding rolling over onto his own sword. The Galra was on him again in an instant, before he could even get the shield up, and then they were scrambling in the darkness, Keith kicking and twisting to avoid strikes that left massive rents in the metal floor. He got enough space to get his knee up and rammed the Galra in the chest so hard he heard something give, but he might as well not have landed the blow for all the Galra acknowledged what must be unbearable pain. A clawed fist to Keith’s face ground the broken glass in further and he flinched—the very worst choice, the moment of weakness that left him wide open. He saw it, in the dim: the narrowing of gleaming gold eyes, the moment the Galra soldier spotted the open column of his throat, bared and defenseless. If he didn’t move he wouldn’t have a head on his neck anymore—now—if he didn’t move now—

When the blood ran down his hand from where the red bayard was buried in the dead soldier’s chest, it was warm enough Keith felt it through his glove.

He shoved the body off to the side. Off his blade. The exact noise it made would repeat in every one of his nightmares for months. Keith spent a long time leaning against the hallway wall, just breathing deep heaving gasps through his mouth, waiting for his spotty black-red vision to clear. It took a while before his ears stopped ringing enough for him to hear the others frantically calling.

“I’m here,” he finally answered, and just moving his jaw to talk sent blinding pain along one whole side of his face. The blood tickled where it was gathering under his nose and along his ear. He wished the chill of the wall could sink through his armor and into his superheated skin.

“Status report,” Shiro demanded, voice molten as the core of a star.

And, “Alive,” Keith huffed, head falling back against the cold metal wall again. “Tell Coran his visor upgrade was a downgrade and he’d better start running now.” Pidge, or at least he thought it might be Pidge, snorted in disbelief.

“No major injuries?”

“A couple scratches.” All he’d admit to. He didn’t need them running over like chickens with their heads cut off for something even a half-hour in the healing pod would solve.

Hunk “Hmmm”ed over the line, because he absolutely knew a lie when he heard one, but they were all too tired to do anything more.

Finally, Shiro mustered enough breath to order, “Sound off, paladins,” in that particular tone of voice that never failed to trigger a pathological eagerness to please in his tiny space brood. “All areas clear?”

Keith was pretty sure he’d made it to the end of the area he’d been assigned in the original plan. He tried to call up the blueprints of the base in his head, but every thought swam and shifted the moment he concentrated on it. He joined in the chorus of affirmative answers somewhat less
enthusiastically than some of the others.

“Injuries?”

“I’m good!” Pidge announced, which, if you asked Keith, was totally unnecessary, because she’d developed a system of remote control energy bombs and hadn’t had to go near an enemy since.

Hunk laughed in that way that meant he was ducking his head, smiling but not happy. “Um… I might have twisted my ankle a bit ‘cause it’s really dark in here,” a grumble, “thanks Pidge—”

“You’re welcome.”

“—and there’s like… a million pipes sticking out all over the place, but I am so fine! Totally fine.”

Lance hadn’t even managed to say anything and Keith already felt annoyed. Keith could feel the smirk. “Another flawless victory for the blue paladin. I know, I know, you can say it, I’m astounding. Who’s an unstoppable liberation machine? This guy!!”

His mouth was unstoppered, more like.

“Good to hear, Lance,” Shiro said, and because Shiro was some kind of intergalactic miracle worker, that actually shut Lance up.

Allura sounded off next, no small degree of pride buoying her words: “The castle’s defenses held beautifully. No damage sustained.”

Shiro breathed, “Any POWs?” in a military rote, but low, expectant—he asked because it was a routine, comforting habit, even when he already knew the answer.

“None,” Keith reported.

And, “Typical,” Lance muttered, barely audible over the comm. But when it was his turn to give his answer, he had to say “None” too. (Also typical.)

“Casualties?” Shiro’s voice was heavy, solemn, tired. Keith could see the falling slant of his shoulders without needing to see him at all. Shiro was a good person. They tortured him and he still didn’t relish their deaths.

There was a long moment of silence. Pidge finally said “16,” two-thirds of the base’s living population right there, but she did have bombs and she didn’t have to see their faces. (Their eyes are full of light and they fade—just a little, just enough to notice—when they die.)

“Two for me,” Lance said, a little too loud.

Hunk stalled. “I think… there were maybe one or two? I took out a lot of drones with my bayard and it’s kind of hard to tell after…”

“Three,” Keith said. And Shiro didn’t report his own, but he didn’t need to, because the mission briefing from Pidge’s hacked info listed the exact number of Galra personnel living on the base. There were three or maybe four that hadn’t been spoken for, but Keith knew what happened to them anyway.

Keith looked down at the dead man, crumpled heap barely the shape of a person in the dim. There were a whole lot more bodies going just as cold right then. Then Keith looked harder, squinting against the dark even though his night vision was good. The armor on the Galra soldier he’d killed looked odd. It definitely wasn’t standard. It was very light, barely qualified as armor at all, which
might have been the only thing that kept Keith’s sword from glancing off—the only thing that kept Keith alive. Still, strange. He tried to think back to the other two soldiers from earlier. Their armor had been normal, hadn’t it?

“Hey,” he spoke through the comms, talking over whoever else was already speaking. “The armor on the Galra in your areas—does it look standard?”

“Who has time to look at that?” Lance griped. "Stop checking out the enemy, Keith."

But Shiro answered as seriously as he always did on missions: “Yes, it was standard.”

“Weird,” Keith mumbled, mostly to himself.

Pidge couldn’t let a mystery sit without proper examination, of course. “What’s weird? Did you find something new?”

“Looks more like someone’s regular gear was in the laundry.”

“Ha!” Lance crowed. “You got scratched up by a Galra in pajamas?”

Keith didn’t even dignify that with a response, which he felt constituted a remarkable show of personal restraint. Silence—or as silent as a line could really be with six people breathing heavily over it—reigned. The hallway smelled like blood, both Keith’s and the Galra’s, the scent starting to cloy as it clotted on the steel floors.

“That’s it then?” Hunk asked, at the exact time Keith thought it. “Can we go back to the castle now, pleaseee?” The castle. Where Shiro would ask if he was okay. Where Keith would say he was fine. Where he would think about nothing until he could think about anything else again.

“Pidge, do a last sweep for lifeforms. If they have any more prisoners, we don’t want to leave them behind.”

“Roger!”

On the other end, Keith listened to the metallic hum of her machines, but then there was… something else, a tiny noise in his hallway, and he went rigid just as she sucked in a huge breath, then he was hissing over the top of her shout:

“Be quiet, I heard something!”

“—detecting three more Galran lifeforms in your area, Keith! They’re right down the hall from you!”

He was on his feet before he even thought about getting there, and the pounding pain in his cheek went dull again as his heart sped up, one more rush gearing up for the fight. The bayard hummed in his hand, but he’d let the blood sit too long; it wouldn’t all shake off when he flicked the blade.

“Keith, hang back,” Shiro commanded, the comm crackling with the force of his voice. “We’re coming to you now.”

But Keith was already half-way down the hall, his stride silent but sturdy. Shiro didn’t need to come here. Hunk and Lance didn’t need to come here. They were the kind of people who needed to be debriefed when they killed monsters. And Keith was… Well, he wasn’t.

There was only one room at the end of the hall, the door tightly locked. The red bayard punched through the dark steel bolt like air. Keith ripped through the doorway and into the pitch black
room, his shield an eerie glow puncturing the dim. For a long moment, nothing moved. There were no soldiers standing at the ready to trap him, guns drawn and charging. There wasn’t anyone there at all. Then he took another step into the room, and the black thing he thought was a pile of rubbish in the corner recoiled from him. He heard a sound like—a sound like—

Whimpering.

Keith’s stomach bottomed out and then violently rejected its bare contents back up his throat; the bile burned as he fought to swallow it down. He couldn’t tell if his knees turned to stone or if they were a half second from giving out.

A single wide golden eye cracked open to look at him and then slammed shut again, and someone let out a desperately crushed sob; the heap curled even further in on itself, hands clasped over ears, faces buried in knees. He dropped the red bayard. Its clanging as it hit the floor was loud enough to hide a frightened yelp, but the sound of the weapon falling was audible over his comm.

“What is it?” Pidge’s frantic question must have been loud—the Galra flinched again—but to Keith, it was distant, a million miles away, and he struggled to form any semblance of a response.

“There are children,” he heard himself say, at last. “There are children here.”

“Yes.” Allura tried.

“No.” Keith didn’t know how he managed it. “They’re Galra children.”

Silence fell abruptly, this time a total stillness. No one even breathed over the line. Pidge shattered the quiet with a string of curses so vehement Lance actually gasped.

“We’ll be there in a second.” Shiro’s clipped voice was the gladiator’s tone, the soldier’s brutal efficiency he defaulted to when he couldn’t take what was going on around him, when his easy-going façade crumbled because they made him the leader but that didn’t mean he had a damn clue what to do, and the fear cloaked in cold, pragmatic calculation kicked in. Defense mechanisms: Engage. Defeat.

These monsters spread throughout the galaxy like a plague.

A blade unsheathed in the trembling hollows of Keith’s heart. He spun around on his spot and forced the heavy door closed again. “No.” He didn’t even know what he was saying. He didn’t know what he was doing, even as he watched his own bloody hands dragging the largest container on his side of the room over to barricade the door. “Stay away!” he warned, through the helmet but loud enough to make the sobbing from the children redouble.

(There are some bad days, when the Galra hit too hard and too fast, and afterward it’s like Shiro is all made of metal; it’s like every muscle is coiled and ready to snap, and Allura changes her earrings because even a glint of purple from the corner of his eye can make him lash out. Since he came back from the Galra, sometimes Shiro just screams, and the first time it happened Keith was there, the second time it happened he was there, the slow, even voice counting backwards from...
ten, but—but now, when Shiro heaves in breaths that shudder his whole shoulders, when a glowing fist puts dents in the castle wall, Keith goes to his room and locks the door.

Because Shiro deserves to be comforted by someone who isn’t lying to his face.

Because Keith’s not good enough at hiding his feelings to hide when he’s afraid.)

“Don’t come here!” He barely recognized the snarl of his own voice.

“Keith?” Soft and slow from Allura, like when she tried to convince the feral Qwezeni not to bolt. “Please stay calm.”

Somewhere on the other side of the base, Hunk panicked. “Dude! They didn’t do anything! Don’t hurt them!” The translator still broadcasted in his helmet. Keith knew for a fact Galra could practically hear a pin drop at a mile’s distance. “Stop!” Hunk repeated, pleading so loudly Keith couldn’t even make out what Lance screeched from the other end.

Those words were the last straw for the children. The littlest one burst into ear-piercing wails and after a second of failing to quiet him (like silence somehow made them safe), the other two couldn’t rein their own terror in anymore, so a chorus of shrill, gut-wrenching fear rose from both sides, directly into his ringing ears: the children’s howls crashing against the horrified shouting of the paladins, who thought… did they actually think he was going to…

“Keith.” Shiro’s soldier’s voice sliced through the rising wall of noise. “I know you hate the Galra —”

Hate the Galra? He didn’t—of course he did—

It was too much. His bleeding head spun. “SHUT UP!” he roared, and before he knew what happened, his damaged helmet hit the floor and was crushed beneath the heavy heel of his boot. The wires of the comm spewed sparks that skittered over the sheet metal. The children cried even louder, and for a moment he was disoriented, because the timber of their voices changed but he couldn’t figure out why—another stomach-turning jolt when realization finally came: of course. Of course. The translator was hooked to the helmet.

There weren’t words enough in any language to describe how much of a mess this was. (He was.)

Keith had no idea what to do, what would happen from here on out, but he couldn’t even think over all this noise, over the ear-piercing, high wails, so at least he had a passable short-term goal: stop the crying. Just one breath at a time. Slow down, just… slow for a second.

*Patience yields focus,* wasn’t it?

Keith took a long, deep breath and then another. He felt his heart-rate start to even out. The universe wasn’t ending. It was just three kids, not a galactic crisis.

Except it was three kids in a base where every adult they knew had just been violently killed and left in piles on the floor. Which ones were their parents? God, it was three kids and their parents’ murderer here with his hand out while someone screamed in his ear about hating their entire race, and Keith felt sick again when he finally figured it out—that last one, the last Galra in the hall, no armor? Not even a soldier on duty. That was the *babysitter.* That was the babysitter and he’d fought like hell made flesh because he’d thought Keith was coming to kill their children.

*Don’t hurt them!*

Keith’s not that kind of monster.
He knelt down. His muscles screamed because everything under his skin was wound tighter than carbon twine. Every strand of the kids’ fur stood on end. He reached out a tentative hand and tried to move closer without startling them, pretty idiotic when he knew just how sensitive their senses were. “It’s… okay,” he mumbled ineffectually. It was really not okay. “You’re safe.” Mostly true. “I’m not going to hurt you.” More than I already have. He knew the words were meaningless to them, thanks to his stupid stunt with the helmet, but he hoped the calming tone carried across the newly-reinstated language barrier.

It… didn’t seem to be working at all. Keith was able to shuffle closer, but probably only because they were too terrified to move. He crept forward inch by aching inch until he could reach them if he stretched his hand out a little farther, though he knew better than to touch without warning. Even little Galra probably had fangs.

“Oh, hush,” he tried, because that seemed like the thing you did with upset kids, only it just made them shiver so hard he could actually watch the tremble travel from the tips of their ears to their boot-clad toes. Definitely not working.

So Keith tried the only other thing he could think of, remnants of memories dredged from the dark narrow well in the back of his head where he dumped every good thought and feeling he ever had for his mother after he found out the truth, planning very honestly to never examine them again.

It wasn’t supposed to go this way.

There was this noise, a low, rumbling noise like far-off thunder in the desert, that she would make sometimes when he couldn’t sleep, when he cried, when she told him his father was too busy trying to save the universe to come home that month either. He remembered it exactly, thrumming constant like a heartbeat close to his ear, safeguard against all the world.

Keith had no idea how to make that noise. He tried anyway, hunched over near the floor, barely balanced, humming in the pitch dark.

Which turned out to be… a colossal failure. It came out sounding more or less like the time Lance insisted on teaching him how to roll his Rs and it took Keith eight tries to realize that Lance wasn’t interested in Keith learning Spanish—just in listening to his mortifying attempts. Keith wasn’t even sure the children had heard him over the sobbing of their own terror.

He coughed and tried again, and this time the sound settled lower in his throat. That was… a slight improvement? Now it sounded like someone attempting to imitate the rumbling noise from Keith’s memory based entirely on a very bad description of it that they heard once, several years ago, while they were very solidly drunk. But it did at least seem to register as an imitation—the biggest of the children opened first one eye and then the other, peering over the protective curve of her (at least he thought it was a her?) knees. Her fur was matted and streaked with tears, and he barely stopped himself from jumping when he realized a little bit of blood clumped in her fur too from where the claws she’d clenched over her head had cut her ears.

Keith tried the noise again, but she looked more confused than anything else, not the magic cure-all effect he was aiming for. Was making that noise even possible for a human being? Keith struggled to remember what his mother looked like when she hummed to him, but it was always when he was most tired, when his eyes were clouded with disappointed tears. (He tries to remember what his mother looked like and there’s nothing at all really—a smile, a soft hand, the tilt of her chin to press him closer when he hung his head over her shoulder—what color were her eyes? What color was her skin? Aren’t you supposed to know those things about your mother? About yourself?)
Maybe he could… Maybe… Keith turned to glare at the cargo container he’d wedged between the manual latch on the door and the far door jamb. No way would anyone get in unless they blasted a hole—or punched one, if Shiro got here first—but Keith should still have… another three minutes, give or take ten seconds. He knew how fast the others were; he could pace them down to the tick by now.

There was time. He wouldn’t get caught. He’d hear them coming.

He needed to quiet the children down. He needed to convince them he wasn’t there to kill them. That he wasn’t the enemy. (He was, except of course that he wasn’t. Confusing.) He didn’t want to do it this way really, but the universe had never given two Quiznaks what Keith wanted. The brave child of the bunch was still watching him, shaking between her hiccups. Who the hell would care what he wanted anyway when the good guys just collectively orphaned three toddlers after bombing their home? It’d be the absolute least he could do.

So Keith took another deep breath, counted ten seconds, and became a Galra. He didn’t have much experience at this, had done it a grand total of three times in the six months since he found out the truth (once in a panic, once in front of a mirror, once in the middle of battle), but the frightening thing was that it was easy.

When it first happened, he’d expected pain, like being burned by the quintessence, like his body rearranging itself piece-by-piece, like his pale skin splitting, incisors bursting from his gums, but it wasn’t like that at all. It didn’t hurt in the slightest. It was almost instantaneous, like… like stripping out of your work clothes at the end of the day, and only realizing once they were off just how uncomfortable you’d been. It felt like his human skin was a size too small. Like getting over a flu and suddenly being able to smell and taste and see straight again.

It felt right, right from the start. (That was the scary part.)

In the dark bunker, Keith shook his head; when his ears came in, it always felt like he’d worn his helmet too long, that strange relief of brushing hair in directions it didn’t normally go. His ears flicked once and then pinned back, away from the wailing.

The one child who was watching him gasped. The other two jerked their heads up at the sound and then couldn’t stop looking, confusion washing over panic.

Keith tried the low, thrumming noise again and this time it came out perfect, solid and easy and familiar. It echoed in his head, bridged the space between reality and memory, and something thick welled up in Keith’s throat that he had to push down to keep humming. The middle child immediately picked up the strain, cries giving way into the blessedly quieter noise. She rumble-hummed, high and tiny, and then it came from the other two as well, one after another, and Keith was startled by the difference in the tone, by how much nuance just a sound without any words could have—

He said *It’s all right.*

They said *Help me.*

Keith closed the distance at last, infinitely slow stops and starts, hand open, keeping himself low. He touched the top of the middle girl’s head finally, feather-light, careful of his claws. She winced back but she didn’t run or scream. She just watched him, lamplight eyes enormous and sheened over by lingering tears. He could hear their heartbeats now that the shouting had died down, now that he knew what to listen for: they were terrifying fast, like hummingbird wings, but maybe ever so slightly slowing as he listened. He smoothed down the hair between the girl’s ears. The littlest one tried to get closer to him but kept getting pulled back by the bigger girl. Keith kept up his low,
comforting thrum and counted exactly two minutes, the longest he dared, until their breaths were no longer heaving and the crying subsided into trembling hiccups. He patted the closest girl one more time.

There. Not too shabby, right? That was pretty passable comforting, if Keith had to grade himself.

Putting back on his human look was like putting back on his jacket. He braced himself for renewed fear and bewilderment, but they all just stared, maybe too worn-out from their tears to work back up into a panic again. A moment of calm (or close enough to calm that Keith would count it) stole over the room. It was dark and there was no mirror, but he double-checked himself anyway. His hands were pale again, no claws, no fur. His ears were small and rounded. His canine teeth were just normal human sharpness. Safe.

And either Keith’s timing was perfect or the rest of Team Voltron was just that predictable, because there they were, far off, growing louder: three, no, four sets of footsteps pounding down the hall toward him. He felt the children tense again.

Please no more screaming…

Just shouting in the hall instead. That was definitely Shiro pounding on the door, hard enough to shake the cargo container, though not enough to dislodge it. Behind him, Lance spoke so fast Keith could only make out every few words, mostly things like idiot and why me. The huge gasping breaths punctured by loud, unhappy noises must have been Hunk. Probably ran all the way across the base at full tilt to make it there so quickly.

In the kind of calm more frightening than rage, Shiro said, “Keith. What’s going on?” Then a sharp metallic scraping drowned out anything else being said; the black paladin was trying to cut his way into the room with his Galra arm, and Keith was wrong about the kids being too tired to panic.

The littlest one barreled into Keith’s back, almost knocking him over from his crouch, scrabbling with tiny claws, and even if the other two older children were cautious enough not to trust Keith just because he could look Galra, they still made their desperate rumbling hum, instinctively seeking reassurance.

“Just open the door, dude!” Lance shouted on the other side. “What the heck is even with you?”

Keith wondered if the other paladins’ translators were close enough for the children to understand again. “Shut up,” Keith finally grumbled, voice only as loud as it had to be to carry through the door. “You’re scaring them.”

Every noise outside in the hallway stopped. Then he heard Pidge, with a pinch in her voice Keith didn’t know how to name, say: “Scanner says they’re all still there.” A massive crash that might have been Hunk collapsing against the hallway wall echoed through the bunker room, along with a muffled sigh of relief. Lance made some kind of hissing noise like a deflating balloon, not really out of the ordinary for him, Keith thought. All that hot air had to go somewhere.

“Can we come in?” Shiro sounded like Shiro again. Some of the muscles along Keith’s spine that he hadn’t even realized were still wire-tight unwound a little. The smallest Galra’s claws pinprickled into his skin, and he suspected the translators were in range, with the way those claws tightened at Shiro’s words. Keith could imagine what the scene outside looked like perfectly: Shiro leaning on the door, one hand ready to rip it open, Lance pulling at his hair and insulting Keith, Keith’s lion, Keith’s mullet, and the last ten generations of Keith’s family, Pidge with her eyes glued to her portable scanner…

The Galra children weren’t even coping well to his being there. He couldn’t imagine what would happen if the room suddenly flooded with humans. But… not like they could all just sit in a pitch
black alien base for however many weeks it took the kids to adapt to them. They had to leave sooner, rather than later. His face was still sort of bleeding.

Keith weighed his options. Who had been least personally traumatized by the Galra? No, that answer was none of the above. Who would be least uncomfortable and least noisy trying to handle unfriendly alien children? “Hunk can come in,” Keith said, finally.

A moment’s hesitation, then, “Okay,” Shiro conceded, although it came out like a question more than anything else, a little surprised. There was something underneath the word that Keith couldn’t place—like someone gave Shiro’s voice a rough shake before they let it go. The tiniest stagger. Parsing out the meaning was impossible for Keith. Reading people was harder than reading books, so he gave up long ago.

In the hall, he heard Hunk’s confused whisper: “Me?” but the broad paladin seemed to be collecting himself. Keith stood very slowly, so the littlest Galra had time to scramble back and into the other two, still huddled together. Then he crept back across the room and dragged the container away from where it was lodged, just enough for the door to slide. He pushed it open a crack, hoping it was too dark for them to see the gaping cut on his face.

Shiro and the other paladins stared at him like staring at a ghost, and he really had no clue what their problem was. If anything, he should be the one glaring at them, after their joint freak out over the comms that practically left him deaf. A deep furrow formed between Shiro’s brows, and Lance was doing that thing where his eyes narrowed to tiny, suspicious slits, but everyone stepped aside to let Hunk through.

“How?” Keith warned, and Hunk literally tiptoed through the doorway, shoulders up around his ears. Keith shoved the door closed behind him in an instant. The yellow paladin couldn’t see anything at all in the darkness, but his visor wasn’t in pieces on the floor, so he lit the display up and peered cautiously into the room.

“Here.” Keith knelt down again a few feet from the Galra children.

Hunk breathed deep. “Whoa.” He squatted down too, for all that was worth, but the children refused to look at him, clutching each other and rumbling like tiny thunderheads. “Umm…” Hunk whispered from the side of his mouth. “Why are they purring?”

Purring. That’s the word. Keith thought there had to be one he was forgetting. But why did humans have a word for a noise they couldn’t even make? People were weird.

“They’re scared,” Keith muttered, off-hand now. “Is your translator on?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Where’s your—”

Keith pointed to the carnage of his helmet, blood-stained and shattered. Hunk tilted his head as he tried to make out whether that was actually a dirty boot print on the remnants. “I guess Coran will get a second chance at redesigning…”

“Worry about that later.” Keith turned back, moving so he was close enough for Hunk’s translator to pick up his words. “Hey,” he called, trying to be gentle. He knew the translator worked because three pairs of ears swiveled straight toward him, which caused Hunk to make an immediately stifled noise that sounded suspiciously like “Eee!”

“We won’t hurt you,” Keith continued. “You’re safe.” He wondered what those words sounded like, translated into Galran. He wondered what he’d sound like, if he spoke Galran.

“They’re so tiny,” Hunk breathed, as if the kids weren’t huddled right there, listening to every
word. Not that he was wrong—Keith hadn’t seen them standing up, but he doubted any of the kids was over his waist, and was that normal for Galra children? He got momentarily lost in trying to remember the series of height marks his mother made on their doorframe each year—then Keith shook his head to dispel the distraction. There were more important things right now.

In Keith’s silence, Hunk picked up the strain, reining in his normally buoyant enthusiasm in favor of steady comfort. “Yeah, it’s okay little guys. We’ll protec—” The reality of the situation seemed to sink in for Hunk at exactly that moment. Keith watched his face stumble from puzzled to dawning horror to abject misery, his eyebrows and smile sinking in perfect time with each other. The only ones these kids needed protecting from were the paladins of Voltron. Hunk looked at Keith, eyes wide and white, his lip wobbling, and guilt churned in Keith’s stomach. Hunk was gentle and friendly and easy. Stupid Keith. Should have thought... If there was one person in all of space who least deserved to feel horrible for something he could never have predicted, for carrying out his mission the way he had always been encouraged to...

Keith wanted to say... something to reassure Hunk maybe, but he’d never been very good with words and anyway, what would he say? “Don’t worry, we only murdered their parents; I’m sure we’ll be able to make it up to them soon.” That’d go over like a castle on fire.

So he turned his attention back to the children instead. “You can’t stay here anymore. You have to come with us.”

The long moment of quiet filled up with traded stares between the children. Finally, the biggest girl opened her mouth, fangs a little white glint in the darkness, and asked “W-Why?” Her voice was hoarse from crying, huskier than Keith expected.

The worst question possible. Hunk’s bottom lip quivered even worse. Keith skirted the issue as best he could. “Your home’s been destroyed. It’s not safe here now.”

The middle child managed to eke out: “Where is Yedgi? Where is my maman?”

Keith didn’t know what to say any more than Hunk did. The thought of lying—of convincing the children someone else killed their parents—was disgusting. But who would come with them after finding out they’d done? “They’re gone,” Keith finally admitted, all his breath leaving his body with the words, eyes barely able to lift from the floor. But the children just looked lost. Maybe the Galra didn’t have that saying? “We’ll explain everything as soon as we can, but right now we have to go.”

They’d probably have to drag the kids out kicking and screaming—in fact, he could see Hunk bracing for it. Keith shifted carefully to block the door, in case any of them got the idea to run, and the second the paladins made the barest sign of stepping forward, both girls were on their feet, almost too fast to track. The middle girl, for all that she wasn’t much bigger than the smallest, got the tiny child on his feet too.

Now, with the threat of immediate harm taken off the table, a fierce, if wavering, glint formed in the older girl’s eye, her bottom lip jutted out, and it was the most bizarre form of déjà vu the universe had ever concocted because Keith’s mother’s voice laughed in his ear, “Was there ever a more stubborn creature in all the known worlds than you? If your lip poked out any farther, a flagship could land on it!”

“Well I don’t care!”

“That, I think,” (and, in retrospect, how wry), “is the story of your very young life.”

“I don’t want to go!” If they weren’t already in the corner, Keith knew the oldest would have been
Keith got hold of the littlest Galra finally and reeled him in, despite the biggest one’s growling protests. The little boy folded against him like wet paper, boneless and very clearly beyond his limits. The moment Keith got a solid arm around him, his eyes were already drooping, completely worn out from the roller coaster of terror and bewilderment. The middle girl (and Keith tried very hard not to think of them as Small, Medium, and Large, but not like he knew their names, so it was proving a real struggle) looked totally adrift. She stared at the tallest from the corner of her eyes then back at the paladins, then back at the other girl, all in a loop. She knew something wasn’t right. She knew not to trust strangers, but she wasn’t that much bigger than the tiny boy and he could see how afraid she was to resist.

Could Keith feel any worse about himself? Actually, he probably shouldn’t ask.

“Please just come along.” Keith sighed into the tiny head pressed against his chin, rewarded with an ear flick to the eye. “We’re really trying to help.”

Medium wavered for a second before taking a few shuddering steps forward.

“What do I do?!” Keith whispered, trying, probably failing, to be delicate. The yellow paladin’s eyes bugged out of his head for a second and Keith could hear the words “What do I do?!” being beamed directly into his brain, but let’s be real, one of the two adults in the room right then was a sane and logical individual who made sound decisions and weighed the consequences of his actions before he took them. And the other adult in the room was Keith.

“O-Okay,” Hunk muttered to himself. “I can do this.” Then he opened his arms and smiled as disarmingly as he could—which, Keith had discovered for himself, was terrifyingly disarming; you could not be upset when Hunk was grinning at you. Keith had tried.

Still, Keith had to nudge her in Hunk’s direction before she’d go. Hunk didn’t so much hug her as put a few fingers down on her back so lightly she wouldn’t have dented even if she was made of aluminum foil, but his beaming smile softened and she didn’t try to bolt, so Keith was counting it as a win.

Then only one remained, and without her allies, the tallest of the children (really a misnomer—she just barely, barely reached Keith’s hip) was bereft, growling pathetically and puffing up every lock of fur. But she had her claws out and forward, and that part was no joke. Keith stayed put. The boy was basically asleep in his arms, dead weight; he’d weigh Keith down if it came to a struggle.

“Come with us peacefully,” Keith warned, and if he put maybe a little more growl into his own voice than strictly (human) necessary, well, not like he really meant anything by it. “Or we’ll make you.”

Utterly scandalized, Hunk hissed “Keith!”, his hand actually over the other Galra girl’s ears like that would keep her from hearing. “You can’t just say stuff like that!”

“Well I did.”

Large stood her ground for another minute. Inside the room it was dead quiet, but outside in the...
hallway, someone—never mind, Keith knew exactly who—kicked the wall and said “Man, what’s going on in there? This waiting is killing me!” The threat of reinforcements seemed to be the final swaying point. The girl grit her fangs and put her claws down.

Keith didn’t try to touch her, even when she approached him, painfully sluggish, and stood beside him. He just moved to pick up his bayard from the floor, desummoning it, clumsy with one arm still full of sleeping kid. The biggest girl followed him like he’d put her on an invisible tether, but with a shifty look to her eyes. He could almost see the plans brewing between her ears. She was going to run for it the first chance she got.

Keith was actually a little impressed. She had guts at least, even if she was a bit short on commonsense. There was a saying… There was a saying about talking pots and the colors of kettles?

But her ideas of escape seemed to collapse when Hunk peeled back the cargo container and the door and Keith finally ushered the girls out into the hall. Shiro, Lance, and Pidge were all arranged scant feet from the door, and it was one thing to hear others outside and another thing entirely to come face-to-face with Shiro’s muscles, Lance’s gun, and Pidge’s calculating stare. Keith felt, more than saw, the girl slump beside him, all the fight going out of her.

Shiro’s eyes darted around each one of the children and then away. He met Keith’s gaze for about a half second. The black paladin looked… uncomfortable. Like he had something to say. Keith wasn’t such an asshole that he’d tell Shiro not to talk, but this was so far from the time for it that Keith couldn’t be anything but relieved when Shiro backed down, a literal half step back, his human hand settling somewhere near the elbow of his metal arm. Weird gesture, from him. Everything was weird today.

Up to and including Lance, whose face when he saw the children did some sort of bizarre gymnastics and cycled through way too many expressions for Keith to even begin trying to parse out. The pattern seemed to trend toward badly suppressed manic grins, whatever that meant.

And Pidge. Pidge’s stare, directly at him, froze Keith’s boots to the floor for a second before he could recover and before the glow from her portable scanner obscured her eyes behind her visor. Was that anger? Resentment? What made her narrow her eyes like that, like she’d stared at a bug in her script that refused to be resolved? Like she could see right through him? Holy Quiznak on a stick, did she suspect—? That was the absolute last thing Keith needed right now, couldn’t even handle it, so he turned away, trying to look cool and calm and collected. (There’s nothing to see here.) Without a single word, he started off down the hall, hoping to dead-arm any attempts she might make at conversation.

But the moment of distraction cost dearly: he’d forgotten about the body in the hallway, the children’s dead guard, and they were almost upon it before the scent of the blood brought Keith’s attention back.

“Cover their eyes!” he hissed to Hunk, and even though Hunk responded in time, there was nothing to be done about the blood in the air. Under his hand, Keith felt the tallest Galra girl breathing in deep. Even as a human Keith smelled it; to her, it must be overpowering, overwhelming, utterly recognizable. He tensed his arm around her shoulders, ready for the fight—

“AGHH!” Hunk shouted. “She bit me!” And it wasn’t the oldest but the one in the middle; Hunk reeled back, clutching his fingers, and the middle girl was free, a purple and black flash barreling down the rest of the hall before she jerked to a halt like a marionette at the end of its strings.

“Yed…gi…” she breathed once, standing over the dead guard’s body. “YEDGI! YEDGI!” Keith had never heard an animal being tortured before but he knew, knew to the core of every bone in
his body that it sounded like this, her howl rising into decibels that make his head pound, every wet scream tearing at her throat—then Lance crashed past him without warning, and it was like looking at a different person, the way the blue paladin whipped the screaming child up off the floor in half a heartbeat, her kicking legs out behind him, arms pinned against her sides so she couldn’t claw, a hand clapped over her eyes well out of the way of her gnashing fangs.

By some unspoken, mind-meld understanding, the measured pace Keith initially set became an all-out sprint, first Lance then Hunk, blustering apologies through tears, then Shiro and Pidge, all of them dashing toward the lions. Keith moved to follow them, but at his side, the older girl had gone dark, a machine with no power source, completely non-responsive.

She was frozen, barely even breathing. The screams of the other girl echoed down the hall, but she made no noise at all.

Keith shoved her. Keith did what he had to do. He shoved her hard down the corridor, keeping her upright by the strength of one arm, an awkward, halting pace but close enough to a run if he refused to let her fall, and he made sure she couldn’t see when they passed the bombed-out shell of the main hall, where Pidge’s toy left the pieces of 16 people.

Beneath his hand covering her eyes, the Galra girl wept silently the whole way.

Hunk had taken back the other girl by the time Keith arrived. He wasn’t even touching her now, just hovering nervous hands above her shoulders like that somehow fixed anything.

They left Red and Yellow behind (who was still alive to steal them?) and marched the children into Black Lion. There were no seats or belts for more than one. Shiro took it slow. Still, Keith felt… unmoored. That first weightless, terrible moment stepping out into the stars: ship, castle, solid ground falling away. Adrift in an endless space.

All around them, the lion rumbled.

_It’s all right._

_It’s all right._

_It’s all right._

Chapter End Notes

1) Regarding the story itself: This is my first Voltron fic and I’m terribly nervous about posting it! I really don’t think it’s ready for posting but I wanted to at least get it up a fewww minutes before the new season came around to totally joss everything… I always have trouble getting the characters right when I first start in a new fandom, so please bear with me for a few chapters until I get my legs under me. Constructive criticism is always, always appreciated! This story is more self-indulgent that anything I’ve written before, so I hope you’ll bear with me on that as well.

2) Regarding pairings: Um…maybe? At some point? Twenty chapters down the road? Really, this is just an overgrown character study for Keith in light of the Galra!Keith fan theory. I wanted to see a Galra!Keith fic focused less on the “big reveal” and more on Keith himself—how finding out he was Galra would affect his sense of self and how he acts and thinks—so for the most part, pairings would only
be entirely tangential to that. This fic may eventually resolve itself into Klance, my preferred Keith pairing, but don’t expect it any time soon. Shiro/Allura has an extremely high chance of showing up in the background.

3) Regarding Galra ears: Galra ears as they’re drawn in the show actually look very stationary. They don’t seem like they’re liable to fold or flick at all. But considering that completely undermines the evolutionary purpose of having triangular-shaped cat-like/bat-like ears, which are designed to rotate to capture more sound, I have elected to ignore this fact, and Galra ears in this fic will flick and flutter and do all the other cute things that real-life fuzzy ears can do. Rule of adorable is in unironic full effect here.

4) Regarding Pidge’s pronouns: It is my personal headcanon that following the reveal of Pidge’s biological sex, there was never a discussion of whether Pidge wanted to be regarded or referred to as a boy, girl, or anything else. Honestly, I feel Pidge just doesn’t care, ain’t got time for trifling over labels or other people’s perceptions about gender binaries. So, because there was never a discussion, each of the paladins just refers to Pidge by the pronouns they think are most appropriate: Shiro uses “she” because he knew Katie long before he ever knew Pidge, Lance uses “he” because he’s only ever known Pidge Gunderson, not Katie Holt (and also if he admits Pidge is female he’ll have to also admit to all the skeezy things he said about girls in front of Pidge, so). Lance does believe that “he” is the correct pronoun though, given that Pidge still goes by the name Pidge and wears the “male” clothes. Lance probably pats himself on the back, assuming he’s being the most understanding of Pidge’s transition out of everyone. Hunk and Coran don’t use any pronouns at all, just Pidge’s name. If either of them is pressed into a situation in which something other than a name is needed, Hunk will use “they/them,” while Coran will insert any number of silly nicknames like “scamp” and “rascal.” Allura uses “she” because she is desperate for female company among all the stinky boys that have invaded her castle.

Keith uses “she” pronouns for Pidge because he is not socially aware enough to understand that people may choose to go by pronouns different from their biological sex—or why people might want to do so. Of course, if Pidge expressed a preference, Keith would immediately switch the pronouns he uses, but he would be confused about it. Because this story is told largely from Keith’s point of view, Pidge will be referred to as “she” for the most part, but I’d like it to be clear that that’s a statement about Keith’s understanding of the world—not a statement about Pidge’s preference.

5) Come talk Voltron to me on tumblr(!!): echodrops.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

The first in a series of very important conversations that needs to be had.
Please see the endnotes for some info on Allura's characterization in this fic compared to her characterization in season 2.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“All are you sure that’s the best place for them?” Allura asked, hand curled in a loose fist, tapping her bottom lip in anxious thought.

“Where else would we keep them?” The lock on Keith’s door hissed as it sealed. The moment he put something solid between himself and the constellation of their golden eyes, staring up at him from the floor of his darkened room, he felt like he could breathe again. He felt like he’d been deep underwater for half an eternity.

“There is a nursery, you know,” Allura argued, trailing after him as he moved to rejoin Shiro and the other paladins, crowded together and all in each other’s way in the narrow hall. “We don’t have to shut them up in the dark.”

Pidge didn’t even look up from whatever device she was carrying now, just pushed her glasses up with an errant finger. “Yeah, but the nursery was designed for Altean kids, who apparently were allowed to play with live laser grenades.”

Allura blinked; her shoulders hunched the slightest bit and her cheeks puffed out. “Well, they’re Galra children. I’m sure they’d be fine!”

Keith didn’t know how to explain that the dark was the best place to leave them without also having to explain how he knew that. (There’s a small, dark place—pitch black, warm, in the tiny insulated space behind the water heater in their basement. When his mother goes to work, he hides there until the banging on the front door stops, until the concerned neighbors stop trying to rescue him, until his mother’s hand cards through his hair in the dark: You can come out now.) How was he supposed to tell Allura that the dimmest corner of the cramped closet he left open would be far more comforting to the children than the harsh white open space of the castle nursery?

“Just leave it,” he said instead. In principle, a sort of nice, feather-soft feeling settled somewhere under his ribs, because Allura looked ready to fight over this even though they were Galra children and she had every reason not to care. That’s Allura for you, he thought; she was civil, diplomatic, better than that, and on any other day, Keith might have been overwhelmed with gratitude, but today he was just the kind of tired that made everything seem sad. “We have other things to worry about.”

“Like that scratch on your face.” Shiro’s metal hand closed around Keith’s arm, stopping him from stepping past.

The cut wasn’t bleeding anymore, but he wasn’t looking forward to having to pick out the glass. “It’s not a big deal,” Keith muttered. They needed to figure out what to do with the kids, they needed to debrief—talk—someone say something—
Shiro took a deep breath through his nose, the universal sign that he was trying very hard not to sigh or rub his temple instead, because he didn’t want Keith to feel like he’d done or said something wrong, but yes, Keith had done or said something blatantly wrong. “If you don’t use a healing pod,” the black paladin patiently warned, “you’ll end up with a scar on your face.”

Shiro’s hand weighed so much that only one of Keith’s shoulders actually shrugged. “So?”

Literally every single person in the hall turned to stare at him as if he had just said something unbelievably stupid. Coran, Hunk, Allura. Even Pidge. Even Lance.

Keith bristled under the weight of their combined scrutiny. “Shiro has a face scar and no one cares!” The words weren’t even all the way out before he regretted them. Story of your very young life. Keith took an immediate step back, but somehow it felt like he took a step inward as well, withdrawing in more than one way. “Sorry.” He looked at the floor.

“Hey.” Shiro’s voice was gentler than probably anyone in the known universe actually deserved. “Take it from someone who has one—face scars are not all they’re cut up to be.”

A moment of silence. Then Hunk badly whispered, “Was that… supposed to be a joke? You know, because—”

Lance, for once showing all the wisdom he loved to claim, elbowed the yellow paladin and Coran, whose mouth was already open to contribute as well.

“I know we’re all anxious to… sort out what’s happened,” Allura broke in, “but your well-being comes first, Keith. If your wound becomes infected, you could lose an eye. Red Lion requires too much coordination to be piloted with your senses dulled. It won’t take long to heal—I think we could all use a few minutes to collect ourselves.”

Hard to argue with that, although if anyone would dare to try, it’d be Keith. On any other day, in any other situation, he would have just slammed the door in their annoying pity-faces and made do with water and strips of the ugliest piece of donated Altean clothing in his closet. But today was… different. Everything felt upside down, inside out, a million lightyears out of his control. “All right,” Keith surrendered. Shiro’s hand around his arm tightened for a half-second, like a pat, like approval.

-        -       -

The pod took thirty minutes. Clunks of glass lined the bottom when he woke. The cold burrowed in so deep, Keith felt like he’d never be rid of it.

-        -       -

Everyone sat around the dining table, perfectly silent, though not necessarily still. Hunk bounced one of his feet at the ankle over and over without pause, and Lance fiddled with the zipper of his jacket—up and down, up and down, in fits and uneven starts. Keith wasn’t sure who chose this place for their inevitable gathering, but everyone faced someone else and everyone refused to meet eyes. Did they sit here the whole time he was healing, no one knowing where to begin?

Keith knew where. His hands clenched into white-knuckled fists on top of the table. “How about we start with the part where you all thought I was going to kill a bunch of kids?”

Shame fell over Allura and Coran’s faces like a storm, eyes shuttering closed and away, but beside him, Lance just shook an offended finger in front of Keith’s nose.
“Oh no, no, buddy,” Lance declared. “Not our fault—don’t try to pin this all on us! You’re the one who ignored Shiro’s orders and went in bayard-blazing like you were out for blood.” The blue paladin swung a wild hand in emphasis; Hunk ducked to avoid being hit, with perfect timing, which just went to show how often this happened. “You should have heard yourself over the comm, Keith; you sounded crazy!” Lance added a very dramatic pantomime to this: bugging out eyes, hands curled into claws held up high, reaching for them, mouth a ridiculous snarl. “Even crazier than normal Keith, which—I think all the civilized people in this room can agree—is pretty flippin’ crazy!” Keith waited for Pidge to call Lance an idiot, but she didn’t. Instead she shifted uncomfortably when he looked at her, and Hunk just sort of nodded along.

“IT was kinda scary.” Hunk shrugged. “I mean, there’s just a ton of screaming in the background and you’re all: ‘Don’t. Come. Here.’” Here the yellow paladin assumed a bleak, thousand-yard stare, a scowl that might have passed for one of Keith’s moodier expressions, if everyone else in the room squinted. Really hard. “It definitely sounded like you were gonna do something you didn’t want anyone else to see—”

Something he didn’t want anyone else to see. Well. That was one definition for revealing his Galra form. But Keith still couldn’t help the hot spike of offense that poked at his gut. At the time, back there in the dark bunker, kids mewling for help, Shiro demanding answers in his ear, Hunk crying, Lance screeching, blood itching on his face, his thoughts had been at a dead stop. He’d acted on typical Keith instincts alone, making up threats where there were none, building up barricades. But the idea of hurting anyone never even came close to crossing his mind. He’d just felt like… he’d just had to… Stupid! Couldn’t anyone tell he’d been trying to protect the kids, not hurt them?

“I did not sound scary,” was all Keith could come up with in the end, crossing his arms and falling back into his chair with a heavy, pointed thnkk of his armor against the seat.

At least three people sitting at the table rolled their eyes. Shiro, though, held his gaze off to the side before he finally glanced up to meet Keith’s stare, his mouth a thin, down-turned line. He hadn’t looked so hesitant in months, shoulders hunched, neck stiff, leaning low over the table. Keith could see him literally chew on his words before he said them. “I was just a little worried you might do something you’d regret, especially when the comm line suddenly went dead.”

The faintest spring of acid-bright guilt bubbled up in the pit of Keith’s stomach. His impulse control was still a work in progress. How hard would replacing an entire Voltron suit helmet be?

“What I want to know,” Lance interrupted, unintentional rescue, “is why our ‘thorough list of base personnel’ was, you know, not very thorough?!”

Pidge shoved backward on the table, pushing her chair away from them all. “It’s not my fault!” she barked, but it shook badly and her fingers buried in the sleeves of the uniform none of them had bothered to change out of. “I pulled every scrap of intel they had—there weren’t any kids mentioned anywhere!”

“It’s all right, Pidge.” Shiro was quicker than anyone else at reassuring. “We know you didn’t miss anything.”

“Yes.” Allura nodded just once, firm and certain. “If Pidge didn’t find it, I’m sure it just wasn’t there to be found. I doubt Zarkon encourages any form of… distraction. The base personnel probably kept the children off the records to prevent them from being seized by the emperor’s more loyal cronies.”

It didn’t make Keith feel any better to imagine it: the constant deception, the fear every time a supply ship arrived that the children wouldn’t stay hidden, this time they would be seen, the fleet
commander would show up without warning… They’d be taken, hardened, made into weapons to serve the emperor’s endless march, bait for the monsters in the arena, put down like excess livestock…

“The Galra here were pretty much all soldiers, right?” Lance pondered. “Why even take the risk? A military base in the middle of nowhere doesn’t seem like the greatest place for raising kids…”

Coran looked at Lance, but somehow it looked more like seeing through him, seeing something the rest of them couldn’t. His gloves muffled the way he tapped at the table, but even his moustache couldn’t hide the low tilt to one side of his mouth. “The Galra held this world for fifty years. Even if assignments change, some of the soldiers probably served here for decades. After living mostly peacefully in a place for so long, it’s only natural to want to settle down and start families.”

Hunk’s face took on the same greenish tint it turned after a bad flight. “So why didn’t they just surrender? Nobody would have gotten hurt!”

Keith scoffed. “Zarkon wouldn’t show his victims any sympathy. His commanders would make parents beg for mercy and then kill their children in front of them. Why would the Galra expect their enemies to do any different?”

“Because we’re the good guys!” Hunk wailed, wringing his hands because there was nothing else around for him to hold on to.

Even though Shiro whispered, everyone heard it: “Not today.”

No one said anything. Pidge sniffled once in the silence before she could stop herself, rubbing her nose on her forearm. Only because of where he was sitting, somehow in the middle of all this, Keith saw when Allura curled one pure white lock of hair around two of her fingers, twirling and unwinding, dark and light in deep communication.

And then of course Lance tried to rationalize, because that was how he dealt with unpleasant things like accountability. “What else were we supposed to do?” he complained, chin tucked in so far he might as well have been interrogating the table. “There’s no jail on this planet except the one they were running, and it’s not like we could have just put them in our lions or the castle. I hope I’m not the only one with bad memories of the last time we tried to hold a Galra soldier prisoner on our ship.”

Shiro flinched; Keith was the only one who noticed.

“We could have stranded them on a different planet,” Hunk tried, “like Rolo and Nyma.”

“Yeah,” Lance sank in his seat, hand waving freely again, “great plan. Let’s move all the invading Galra from one planet to another and call it day!”

“W-We could have picked an uninhabited planet, duh!”

Coran’s brows furrowed even lower. “I suppose,” he said, “once you put the Galra on it, it wouldn’t be uninhabited anymore, would it?”

Pidge’s fingers twitched in her uniform sleeves; where had her tablet or scanner or laptop gone? It was somehow strange to see her without an electronic device to bury her face in, like a knight with half her suit of armor missing. Vulnerable. “Uninhabited planets are usually uninhabited for a reason.”

“I’m just saying,” Hunk insisted, “we could have found some other way if we knew!”
Keith didn’t mean to say it out loud; the words just slipped out on their own: “Would it really have made that much of a difference? They were shooting at us. We can’t *not* shoot back.”

“That’s not…” Allura shook her head, cascade of cloudy hair murmuring around her shoulders. She met each one of their gazes in turn, and her voice grew steadier with each word: “That’s not true. I refuse to believe that all casualties are inevitable. If we had known, we could have—we would have chosen another way.”

“But there’s no way to know!” Pidge growled. “I triple-checked! I was careful!”

“No one is blaming you, Pidge.” Shiro tried to hold up a quieting hand, but their thoughts raced in so many directions none of them could be quieted now.

“What if this has happened before?” Pidge was working herself up, each breath shorter than the last. “What if we’ve just left children to starve to death without their parents? What if we’re making orphans everywhere we go?!”

Hunk clapped his hands over his ears and screwed his eyes shut. Lance, who could normally be counted on to dismiss anything, looked like he’d just been slapped. Their whole team reeled faster than the streaks of star systems sailing by outside.

“What-ifs are useless,” Keith cut in. A testament to how badly they’d been shaken if he was speaking up as a voice of reason.

And “You’re useless,” Lance retorted mechanically. His mouth’s auto-pilot stayed engaged even while his brain checked out.

“Stop.” Shiro actually stood up, Galra hand lingering on the table, though whether he did it to assert his point or just to give himself something to do other than clenching and unfurling his fists, Keith couldn’t tell. “I made the call. This is my mistake.” And Keith had never wanted to hit Shiro more than in this moment. Contrary to the black paladin’s obvious opinion, there was a limit to how self-sacrificing someone could be before it just became a crippling character flaw. Keith knew a thing or two about crippling flaws, after all.

Shiro stepped back, looked like he was a half second from pacing the length of the room to dull the tension with action. “I,” he began.

And “We,” Keith interjected, refusing to back down, even under the weight of Shiro’s stare.

A fierce battle ensued in the following silence, bladed looks traded between them, hackles up, and only the fact that the others were still in the room kept Keith from shouting his thoughts at Shiro out loud. He wasn’t going to back down on this—Shiro was *not* allowed to take all the blame *again*. Keith would yell if he had to, if that’s what it took to make Shiro admit they failed as a team, just like they succeeded as a team.

_Was there ever a more stubborn creature in all the known worlds than you?_

Finally, finally the black paladin surrendered, ferociously grudging, momentarily not their flawless leader but a confused, tired, angry 24-year-old young man carrying more weight than anyone in any world could bear. “We let the end goal blind us to the means. We’ll have to re-evaluate before we take on any more missions. If violence is our go-to method of beating the enemy, we’re no better than the empire ourselves.”

Everyone at the table knew that was coming, but still it’s like one of Pidge’s bombs went off: the sudden flash, the sudden stillness.
Hunk’s fists knitted with his hair, pulling and clenched too tight in alternate turns; his headband fell, barely held up by the crest of one ear. Lance’s hand found its way to the yellow paladin’s back, slow circles between shoulder blades, and whether Hunk or Lance derived more reassurance from it, Keith couldn’t tell, but there was something about it that pissed him off. Just one more thing the world thought Keith didn’t need—

“We killed their parents,” Hunk moaned. “That’s exactly like Zarkon!”

Keith’s voice came out hotter than he meant it to, the heat-blurred edge of Voltron’s cauterizing blade. “Those Galra were soldiers of the empire just like all the others we’ve fought. They’re not good people just because they’re someone’s parents.”

“That makes it okay?” Pidge sniped.

“That’s not—”

Lance’s face contorted, even more unreadable to Keith than usual. Lance lifted his free hand to his ear like he was sending a comm transmission. “Breaking news at ten!” he declared. “Keith is still incapable of basic human emotion!”

“LANCE!” Shiro roared, but it was too late—Keith leapt his feet, both hands slammed flat on the table, rearing forward. Hunk shrank back but the blue paladin stared up at Keith through slitted eyes, teeth grinding, ready for the fists to fly. When you fight, you don’t have to think. Lance was learning what Keith had long mastered.

“It’s not like they didn’t know the enemy was out there!” Keith snarled. “Their empire is constantly at war—people die all the time!”

“Innocent kids’ parents don’t die all the time!”

It’s like having his head forced under cold, black water. “Yeah,” Keith breathed, “they do.”

Hunk looked mortified, hands falling from his hair to cover his shocked open mouth. “Keith,” he swallowed around the lump in his throat, “don’t listen to Lance—everyone’s just really upset right now—”

Lance had never in his life known when to let well enough alone. He stood up now too, shoulders high, arms open. Come at me. “Then you of all people,” he stabbed a finger in Keith’s direction like a blade, “should be admitting just how badly we screwed up. Those kids are gonna be traumatized for the rest of their lives!”

“It’s not the end of the world!” Because the world was not that kind. “They’ll be fine!”

“Like you turned out?”

This wasn’t Garrison. Keith wasn’t 12 anymore and nobody was laughing at him, but the urge to turn to Shiro for help was still overwhelming, his brain’s innate reaction to hurt, even when seconds ago he’d been at Shiro’s throat. It was embarrassing that he couldn’t stop himself from looking back to the black paladin, just from the corner of his eye. Sometimes there was a gap between the things Keith wanted to say and the things he knew how to; when Shiro spoke up for him, the stuff he said at least made sense.

Now, though, it was Shiro who looked as if words were failing him, stunned by the fissures in their teamwork opening beneath his feet, caught in his position between their impartial leader and Keith’s only friend. Shiro didn’t speak, but after a moment he got control of his stunned
expression and a dark storm began to brew in the crease of Shiro’s brow, the harsh line of his jaw. Lance knew it too—he stiffened in anticipation of the blow, the gutting sensation of Shiro’s disappointment more dangerous than his Galra arm.

“Paladins of Voltron, please!” There was a moment of whirling disorientation because instead of Shiro, it was Allura who shouted. Lance jerked like she’d just thrown a punch at his nose. “Cease these senseless squabbles! I know you are hurting, all of you, but you must remember that your intentions were noble, and that sets you apart. You will never delight in cruelty like Zarkon does, and this pain we are all feeling now is proof of that! You are still good people, and you must never forget it. The lives of millions of others across the universe depend on you believing in yourselves—and in each other.”

The line of Shiro’s shoulders pulled taut as a suspension bridge, held up entirely by tension. He actually took three pacing steps before he could stop himself. “The princess is right,” he declared, measured and exhausted. “We can’t take back what happened today. This is a burden we’ll have to carry our whole lives.” Another straw for the inevitable breaking of their leader’s back. “But Voltron is the only thing standing between Zarkon and total domination of the universe. We can’t lose sight of our purpose, and we can’t lash out just to make ourselves feel better.”

Shiro made very deliberate eye contact with Lance—or would have, if the blue paladin wasn’t busy memorizing the exact pattern of scratches on the pure white surface of the table in front of him. “We’ll talk later, Lance,” Shiro said, polite but pointed.

“No need.” Lance hunched where he stood at the table, so withdrawn Keith couldn’t even see his face through the curtain of his short hair. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. His voice was pale, something heavy dragged over rough silt. “Even I can admit when I’m that far out of line. Sorry, Keith.”

Keith couldn’t remember if Lance had ever apologized to him before. Not even the briefest familiar flicker came to mind at Lance’s words. Keith opened his mouth to answer, but he didn’t actually know what to say. It’s okay? It wasn’t, really. A sort of strangled noise made its way out of him, finally, not exactly an acceptance or denial, but at least Lance didn’t snap at him again.

Shiro’s human hand pressed hard against his own temple now. He took three steps back the other way so he stood behind his own chair again. “Keith may have worded it badly, but I understand what he means. ‘What-ifs’ aren’t solutions. It’s important to feel it, but we can’t let ourselves be paralyzed by guilt over things that are past our ability to change. We can’t go back in time, no matter how much we all want to. It’s true—” he looked at Pidge “—that this might not be our first major mistake. But if we want to make sure this is the last time it ever happens, we need to focus on the future and plan carefully how we’re going to proceed from here out.”

Lance eased back into his seat, and Keith followed, reluctantly. The fight wasn’t over; he could feel it. Was there any real point in sitting down when anger would have him on his feet again in no time?

Coran plucked at the end of his moustache. “I suppose,” he mused, “the first thing we ought to worry about are our young Galra guests.” Guests. Nice word for it.

No one spoke up or even looked at any of the others. Here was the real heart of the problem, wasn’t it, maybe the only real reason they were still all here in the same room when they’d rather be anywhere else: they made a mistake that followed them home.

Pidge, whose patience with people had always been limited, broke the awkward silence. In an absolute matter-of-fact conclusion, she insisted: “Well, obviously, they can’t stay here.”
That answer was very *not* matter-of-fact to Keith, who until that moment had thought—well, he *hadn’t* thought. He had no plan. But still.

“Are you serious?” he heard himself say, before he ever meant to say it.

Pidge scowled at him, less frustration than utter confusion, like she couldn’t quite comprehend how anyone could have a different opinion on this point. “Are *you* serious?” She threw her hands up. “We’re just a bunch of kids ourselves! How are we supposed to know how take care of anyone, let alone *aliens*? We’ll mess everything up!” She looked to Shiro now too, as if Keith outlined some stereotypically insane proposal that needed the ever-present voice of reason.

Lance fidgeted—clearly wanted to interrupt—but the fire of frustration crept up Keith’s throat again and barely a breath after Pidge finished, he snapped, “Are you saying that between all of us here we couldn’t figure something out? Coran probably helped raise Allura—”

“My family is huge!” Lance finally got in edge-wise. “Professional babysitter extraordin—”

“They’re *Galra*!” Pidge shouted, and only because she’d rounded on Lance did she miss the flicker of offense that streaked over Keith’s expression before he could blank it away. Hunk didn’t miss it. The yellow paladin frowned, pure and earnestly concerned.

“I don’t think,” Hunk squeaked out, looking between the others, “all the Galra are bad…”

“That *is not* what I meant.” Pidge’s unnecessary glasses slid, forgotten, down her nose. “I know we can’t categorically label an entire race, thanks for the reminder—I meant we don’t know anything about them. They’re not humans. What if we feed them the wrong food or give them the wrong medicine and it *kills* them?”

Hunk’s look of concern redoubled. Killer food still lingered in his nightmares.

“Actually,” Coran cut in, and he didn’t raise his voice much but somehow no one ever tried to talk over him. “After the war began, there was never time to retrofit the castle. All of the settings from when the Galra were Altea’s allies are still accessible.”

“What?”

Lance and Shiro looked just as confused, but “Oh,” Hunk breathed, a heavy, quick relief. “You mean like the ones for the kitchen?”

“Yes,” Coran drawled, counting down on his fingers like illustrating for an audience of children: “*Those* settings for the castle. We can change all sorts of things to suit specific guests—the menus, the lighting, the baths, the training deck, oh, and the toothbrushes, can’t forget about those! Just imagine if we tried to give a Snarblak—”

“What Coran means,” Allura gently interrupted, “is that the castle can easily be made comfortable for guests of any species, though… that might make it slightly less comfortable for us.”

Keith didn’t know how to feel about this information. Curiosity tightened in his ribcage, a brief, faint twinge of… something in the pit of his stomach. What were the training deck settings like for Galra? Would a Galra menu in the kitchen taste better to him than normal food goo? But he forced the thoughts out before they had even a second’s chance to settle in, like shoving closed a door the breeze blew open. He wasn’t uncomfortable right now. He didn’t need to try any other settings.

Keith fully intended to live out the rest of his life as a human being. (Fake it ‘til you make it.)

“So?” the green paladin was saying. “That still doesn’t guarantee——”
“Pidge,” Shiro broke through, balancing one stabilizing hand on the back of his empty chair. “You’re a lot more invested in this than I would have thought. Is something else going on?”

Suddenly reluctant to speak, Pidge fiddled with her glasses, correcting their positioning three times before she managed to force some words out. “My family was attacked and taken by the Galra. They’ve been held by the enemy for so long, I don’t even know if they’re still…” Her breath hitched. “I might never see them again. Now you’re saying you want us to do the same thing—keep someone else’s family prisoner!” Clearly she meant to say more, but her voice couldn’t steady enough to say it, the weight of her own past, fear and anger at years of injustice, swelling her throat closed.

“It isn’t the same.” Maybe it made Keith a bad person to argue with her after that (everyone else looked mildly scandalized), but the situations weren’t identical. He knew it better than anyone else, the galaxy’s distance difference between being stolen from your family and having no one to go home to. “Their families are dead.”

“How do you know that? They could have aunts or uncles or grandparents. Their parents could have been stationed in different places, for all we know!”

Pidge’s logic was infuriating because it made sense and yet it absolutely didn’t, and he couldn’t articulate his thoughts fast enough to present them with the same clarity she could, didn’t even know where to start with all reasons this entire vein of the argument was completely off-track. “So what are you saying we should actually do?” Keith settled on, not even trying to dull the edges of his sharpened words. “Dump them off on the first Galra patrol ship we come across? Hope they get sent back to their actual families, instead of shipped off to a work colony or a combat training camp?

“Or are we supposed to sneak into the heart of the Galra Empire and just ask around until we happen to find the right set of relatives?” Everyone jumped when Keith slapped his palm against the table, louder than he intended but maybe not inaccurate to his feelings. “You know what happens if we send them back to the Galra. They’ll be raised as soldiers. They’ll conquer planets and take other people’s families prisoner. You really want them to become our enemies?”

“They could choose not—”

Shiro muttered, “Zarkon doesn’t let people choose,” and that didn’t solve their problem in any way, but it irrevocably closed the book on the current half of their debate. No one was willing to argue with Shiro when he talked about the Galra.

But no one was ready to surrender just yet either. Pidge squared herself before Keith, drawing up to the very pinnacle of her miniscule height. “What about you, huh?” she snapped at him, eyes just a little too sharp. “You guys claim I’m too invested, but since when has Keith been on the side of the Galra?”

Keith reared back. “I—” he stammered. “I’m not—I’ve never been on the side of the Galra!”

“So why the heck are you so set on them staying here?!”

“B-Because!” He wavered badly, darting a look between Pidge and the others, unable to stop himself from searching for any hint of their thoughts, any hint of suspicion. “I’m being practical! Keeping them here’s the only even slightly reasonable option!”

“Reasonable!”

“Perhaps,” Allura interrupted tentatively, looking between them all, “we could find a family that
would be willing to care for them.”

A foster family. A foster family with no experience raising alien children light years from any home they’d ever known or even close to belonged in. Wasn’t Keith proof enough that that just didn’t work?

Lost in the tangled strains of his arguments, thoughts spinning too wildly to catch on and spit out, Keith almost missed Lance doing the miraculous (read as: taking Keith’s side). “No way, terrible idea!” Lance flapped a frantic hand at the princess. “The Galra Empire’s spreading everywhere! No one’s going to want to adopt a bunch of kids from the army threatening to conquer their planet.”

“Not every world has had contact with the Galra,” Allura said, looking like she might need to pull up the universal map to prove it.

“Uh yeah,” Lance retorted, “because some worlds haven’t made contact with aliens at all. Or they’re stick bugs! Are we just gonna knock on random doors across every star system? ‘Yes, hello, we’re the paladins of Voltron, defenders of the universe, saviors of all the known realms—I know you’re a giant snail, but can we interest you in some furry purple children today?’”

Keith rolled his eyes, but at the tone and not the content, because Lance was right, much as it pained him to even think it. It might take months to find a family on planet with a suitably habitable environment, far enough outside the realm of the Galra, willing and capable enough to adopt three alien children with no promise of reward. What would even be the point of wasting their time and resources scouring across the universe for that long, maybe leading Zarkon’s lackeys right to the few planets they hadn’t tried to capture yet? The war wouldn’t wait for them to find a fitting foster family.

Everyone else seemed to realize the same thing at roughly the same time, if the way they all looked suddenly uncomfortable meant anything. Shiro rubbed at the back of his neck, still not quite convinced. “But what’s our alternative? Is the castle really a safe place for little kids? We’ll be fighting the Galra right in front of them.”

“Uh…” Hunk this time, to Keith’s surprise. “The whole universe is pretty dangerous right now, so long as Zarkon’s around. The fighting could start up on any planet.”

“This is a quintillion more degrees of responsibility than we’re ready for,” Pidge interjected weakly, sensing a losing battle. “How are we going to take care of them and keep up our duties with Voltron? Who’s even going to watch them—”

“We’ll figure it out,” Keith insisted.

“Are you volunteering?” Shiro sort of smiled when he said it, which meant it was supposed to be a joke, but Keith was too tired for jokes, and anyway—

“Fine.” Thought on this? No, he still hadn’t. He had no idea what he was doing. But that was pretty much just his normal state of being and it’d worked all these years so far.

Yes, he was volunteering.

Literally every single person in the dining hall turned to stare at him, eyes saucer-wide, mouths open. For the second time in one day, he had the entire team’s attention on him at once, and Keith shifted uncomfortably, feeling a flush crawl up the back of his neck.

Shiro managed to collect himself first. “Well that’s… Okay.” His expression didn’t really say okay, though. If Keith had to hazard a guess, he would have put it somewhere between abject
terror and morbid fascination, like Shiro had just watched Keith put his lion into another nose dive and was worriedly awaiting the inevitable splat.

What did Shiro know, anyway? (Everything. Almost.)

“Still,” Shiro continued. “We may live here, but the castle doesn’t belong to us. The final decision should be the princess’s.” Maybe he hoped Allura would put her foot down. She looked over at Keith through her lashes, trying to weigh how deeply he was already sold on this matter, whether her words might spark another volley in a fight they were all much too frayed to still be having.

“I… am hesitant to permit any distractions from your training and responsibilities as paladins, especially children, requiring attention and a great deal of time…” She held up a hand to prevent anyone from interrupting her—apparently Keith hadn’t been the only one about to speak.

“I fear, in our inexperience, we may vastly underestimate the effort necessary to care for these charges.” She clasped her hands again, tightening and loosening them in turn. “If our focus slips from the universe, even for just a moment, Zarkon may gain a crucial foothold and undo all the fragile progress we have made.

“But… The more I think these things, the more I am afraid they are an attempt to justify my own hopes of avoiding guilt. The death of those children’s families is our fault, and though it is… very tempting to seek others to assume responsibility in our place, Keith might be right. If we don’t suffer the consequences of our own actions, we may grow callous enough to repeat our mistakes. These children’s lives are in our hands, and it would not do to further mistreat them by making too hasty a choice. Until the moment we are certain of the very best course of action, and the best place for them, I think the only acceptable solution is for the children to remain in our care.”

The heavy line of her frown loosened, and she lowered her hands again to rest more complacently in her lap. “They represent a unique opportunity as well. They are the first Galra children to have stepped foot in the Castle of Lions in more than ten thousand years. I’d like to believe that… if we are dedicated in our efforts, they may serve as the foundation of a renewed free Galran-Altean alliance—and a peaceful universe after so very long.”

Coran nodded solemnly along to Allura’s proclamation, although when she reached the end, even he looked surprised.

An alliance between Altea—that was, Voltron—and peaceful Galra. Keith would never have thought it up on his own, but once the idea slipped in the door, it was…. a nice thought. Could something like that really happen? Now or even ten thousand years in the future?

“So…’ Hunk wondered aloud. “Did we actually just decide? ’Cause there was kind of a lot of back and forth going on here; I just wanna be sure we’re all on the same page.”

“Yes,” Shiro said, in a daze, like he couldn’t believe it either. “We’re settled, for now. Until we can find a better place for them, the kids will stay here in the castle with us.”

“This’ll be one for the history books,” Pidge snarked, under her breath and not under her breath at all.

That seemed to be the closing shot, however. Allura nodded, stately and mostly to herself, confirming the rightness of her decision. “Should we speak to the children tonight?” For some reason, when she asked, she looked at Keith instead of anyone else, and this was precisely the moment he realized he should have thought much, much harder about what he was volunteering for.
At least his first executive decision in their stead was an easy one. “Tomorrow,” he said. “It’s late now.” Hunk backed him up with a well-timed yawn that spread to Lance.

Shiro agreed, and just like that, it was over. Everyone stood up in various degrees of quiet contemplation and adrenalin crash, Lance clinging on Hunk like a four-year-old himself.

Keith made it halfway out the door, behind Shiro who had just gone into the hall, when he heard Lance conferring with Hunk and Pidge. “Are we really putting Keith in charge of a bunch of tiny kids? His motto is literally ‘stab first, ask questions later’! Anyone else would make more sense.”

“You okay?” Shiro looked back a bad time and caught the scowl on Keith’s face.

“I’m fine,” Keith said, which was naturally code for I am the most absolute and complete opposite of fine. The door swished shut behind them way too quietly and kind for Keith’s tastes.

The black paladin clapped Keith’s shoulder and pulled him along so they could walk down the hallway side by side. “I’m proud of you for stepping up back there.”

“But you still don’t think it’s the right choice,” Keith muttered into his collar. If he didn’t look up, he didn’t have to catch the moment when Shiro’s practiced motivational smile became a wince.

“Well…” Shiro was always decent enough to admit his real thoughts when they were demanded, even when they ran contrary to the perfect leader persona he tried to project around the clock. His self-deprecating tone and the way he poked with one nervous finger at his scar where it crossed the top of his cheek somehow mitigated any cutting effect his words might have: “It’s going to try your patience. Probably a lot more than you realize.”

Keith couldn’t even argue. He underestimated everything and everyone but himself.

“But Keith, just know you’re not in this alone. We’ll all pitch in.” Shiro laughed a little, dry and quiet. “It takes a village, right?”

Somehow that didn’t reassure Keith in the slightest. They were quite possibly the most dysfunctional set of villagers that coincidence, mathematics, cosmic meddling, or military might could ever have arranged. Keith was almost more afraid for the children now.

“Things will work out,” Shiro said, cuffing Keith upside the head just enough that his hair went all out of place. The black paladin paused just before the turn-off to his own room, down a different hall, and if his first smile had been a little false, the second one came out as real and indulgent as possible. “Get some rest.”

“You first,” Keith griped, and that was all. If Keith maybe stomped away, instead of strolled, well… Shiro deserved it. Their fearless leader hadn’t quite said what Lance did about Keith’s questionable child-watching abilities, but he hadn’t not said it either.

What were they even going on about, anyway? Clearly Pidge would be a much worse choice.

He didn’t see of the children when he slipped into his room at last, but they were huddled at the back of his closet in the pile of blankets he left there, Keith knew. He methodically peeled off his suit and wriggled back into yesterday’s sleep clothes, still at the top of his laundry basket. His bed was bare of any blankets, seeing as he’d surrendered them all, but he sort of liked it. (Easier to get up, to get out, if he needed.) He thought it might impossible to fall asleep, but the moment his head touched his pillow, the weight of the fighting, the up and down feelings, the whole damn future gathered on his eyelids, drawing him down and under.
Keith woke up, only he didn’t really, the sluggish half-dreaming of being disturbed from deepest sleep. He could feel it wasn’t morning. Some pinprick sensation prickled down his arm, and that thought drifted through his head for a long moment, still wrapped up in the strains of subconsciousness, before anything coalesced. There were claws pawing at his arm and the bottom sheet. Pull, pull, pull. A small repeated noise in the pitch black room swam into his awareness. He didn’t know what it meant, but he knew a word when he heard one.

With his eyes still closed, Keith dragged his arm over the side of his mattress and caught the smallest of the children by the scruff. He lifted the boy up on to the bed and deposited him in the curve of his own body, sheltered by the cage of Keith’s ribs and the wall of one arm, looped over the tiny child’s back. It didn’t feel like letting a stranger close so much as it felt like the first part of an apology. The boy mumbled something Keith couldn’t understand, nuzzled into the folds of Keith’s baggy nightshirt, and went quiet.

A long time passed before Keith got back to sleep. The child curled warm and silent against his chest was no defense against the one he could only hear, still muffling her tears in a blanket in the dark.

-        -        -

At something closer to the appropriate time to wake, Keith was ripped from sleep by the most literal interpretation of caterwauling he’d ever heard: loud, piercing howls right into his ear.

I volunteered, Keith reminded himself, as the temptation to suffocate on his own pillow crested like a tidal wave over his consciousness. The boy squirmed and cried some more. He was apparently aiming to climb over Keith to get out into the room. Keith looped a sleep-heavy, octopus arm around him and rolled over.

He nearly dropped the boy when rolling over brought them face-to-face with the oldest girl, frozen beside the bed, her arms still out in front of her where she’d been trying to help the boy up without touching Keith in any way. She let out a combination of gasp, squeak, and hiss, whirled around, and threw herself back into the closet in the blink of an eye. Which… did absolutely nothing to quiet the boy down. In fact, he just started wailing louder the moment the familiar face disappeared. A headache sprung up behind Keith’s left eye and he hadn’t even been awake 30 seconds.

The kid needed something, and Keith wasn’t a genius like Hunk or Pidge, or good with people like Lance or Allura, but the list of basic survival needs was short enough for even Keith to figure out. Bathroom. Food. Kids needed other stuff to, like toys. Bonding. Some form of mature familial guidance. (Some of those things were more possible than others.) So, Keith was also not the best at prioritizing, but even he could put together a semi-decent plan from here.

His body felt ancient when he tried to climb out of his bed, cured of injuries in the healing pod but just now realizing all the crippling weight of a thousand new responsibilities, bowling him over in ways the training deck, battles with the Galra, hell, even direct combat with Zarkon couldn’t. He put the boy down on the floor, which somehow raised the volume on the crying again, a feat Keith observed with bleak despair. He hadn’t been imagining it the night before, right? The kid could definitely walk on his own. He just didn’t want to.

Keith should probably have picked him back up. Keith wasn’t that nice.

He poked out his toes and gave the toddler on the ground a snail-slow shove, steadily pushing him across the smooth, plastic-y floor toward the bathroom. The kid watched this sudden change in location with wide eyes and quick whirls of his head, but even his interest didn’t lower his volume
The bathroom door, which Keith very intentionally left open last night, was closed, which meant at least one of the girls managed to sneak by him to use the restroom in the night. Phew. One crisis averted. And really... it was sort of strange, Keith thought, as he tipped the boy over the threshold into the bathroom with his big toe, that of all the things selected for convergent innovation, somehow the flush toilet was what made the intercultural galactic jump. You see, once they'd stumbled across a bathroom in a Galra ship and found it completely disorienting in how utterly normal it was; it looked like the bathroom from an edgy neon bar maybe, but the stalls were clean and the automatic sinks were just as bad at registering motion as the ones back at Garrison.

"Bathroom" was obviously the right guess, because the moment he saw the toilet, the kid gave up his helpless act and scrambled to his feet. Which... thank the 33 billion stars streaking past their castleship right now; until this exact moment, not so much as a flicker of recognition had dawned in Keith’s muzzy brain that he might have accidentally volunteered himself for potty-training too.

Have to hand it to the Galra, he thought, though it made him want to knock himself unconscious on the wall. They might be overzealous, bloodthirsty, tyrannical soldiers of a ruthless empire, but they were apparently on point with those parenting milestones.

Keith picked the kid up to help him reach the faucet and wash his hands, a truly shining example of generosity which the boy immediately rewarded... by wiping several sets of wet handprints remorselessly down Keith’s shirt. The Galra had the nerve to smile at him. Keith’s expression flattened. World conquest he could maybe forgive, but this attitude? Pushing it.

Then Keith set the boy down on the floor again, and the second Cold War began.

Faster than Keith could suck in a breath, tiny arms wrapped around his leg in a death grip, nimble and boneless as that demon vine from Shradra that choked the life out of anything it got its feelers on. Keith felt the exact moment the kid turned himself into complete and total dead weight. If Keith moved his foot, he’d drag the boy behind him like a ball and chain. Hmph. Someone was very clearly experienced at getting his way. And someone definitely did not know who he was dealing with.

Keith frog-marched out of the bathroom without an ounce of regret, mopping the tile with the baby Galra every step he took. The kid’s uniform and boots made long, drawn out squeeeeakks along the floor through each drag. Halfway through his room, Keith looked down.

"Had enough yet, weirdo?"

The tiniest Galra lay on his back, staring directly up, more fiercely resolute than Keith had ever seen an alien look, and that was saying a lot because he’d been within fifteen feet of Emperor Zarkon himself and also he owned a mirror. The kid’s eyes were slits thin as sheets of paper; his brow creased so deep Keith thought he might actually crush the bridge of his own nose, and his normally tiny little mouth stretched out in an enormous scowl, ready to fold right off the sides of his chin, wrinkling the fur of his cheeks.

Keith wiggled his trapped leg experimentally, sweeping the boy back and forth across the floor. The kid’s tourniquet grip on Keith’s calf doubled. Needle-fine claws sunk in. Keith jerked then froze, his foot three or four inches off the floor, kid dangling uselessly from his ankle. All fun and games until first blood.

"Let go," Keith growled, like the kid would somehow miraculously understand him if he said it firm enough. Nothing happened, of course, except that the kid somehow dangled harder, clingier than a melted pressure coupling in a shot thermoregulator. Never mind the pain of having his skin
knit on—Keith really couldn’t afford to put too many holes in these pants. He only had one pair of pajamas, and the nearest replacement outlet could be literally millions of lightyears away. Also, being a paladin of Voltron paid a grand total of nothing. Keith glared down his nose, chin jutted out, arms crossed—perfect mirror to the stubborn stone wall staring up from the floor. Their sparking glares clashed, a fierce tug-of-war of wills, neither of them budging an inch, then—“Ahh!” The kid just jabbed his claws in deeper, loosing an explosion of gleeful laughter as Keith yelped.

“You little demon!” Keith hiked up his leg to fling the kid off—He was a Galra, he could take it just fine! And besides, Keith would aim for the mattress!—when a blur of dark motion flickered in the corner of his eye, just in time to stop him. Keith looked up: a huge pair of yellow eyes peeked around the edge of his closet doorframe, ears forward, shrinking back a little the moment she felt his gaze. It was the bigger girl.

Keith always had trouble trying to match people’s expressions to real feelings back on Earth, but the Galra spoke with their whole bodies: hair on end, backs arched, claws working, a scent, a stiffness. She didn’t need irises or pupils or even defined eyebrows for Keith to tell she was as terrified as she was furious, looking between the boy and Keith’s planned attack, chewing on her downturned bottom lip. She clambered a little further out of the closet, reaching out toward the Galra boy with unsteady hands, but daring Keith—with a direct, unblinking stare—to move even an inch.

This girl wasn’t Shiro. There wasn’t anything remotely Shiro-ish about her. She was a tiny waif of a creature, twiggy-limbed and dark purple and trembling in her boots. But still, while Keith looked at her, the horrible, familiar prickling sensation of Shiro’s judging-you eyes lifted all the dark hairs on the back of his neck, and Keith felt a cold sweep of dread blow through him.

Were you really going to throw a baby? Somehow the voice of the metaphorical angel on his shoulder sounded exactly like Shiro that time four years ago when Keith glued all of Iverson’s medals to his office desk and then offered “He’s ugly” as his only defense (to Shiro’s deep, abiding, but ultimately unsurprised disappointment).

Yes, okay, Keith really had been about to throw the baby. Not like it would have caused any lasting damage anyway!

Keith could literally feel Shiro’s frown sinking lower on his stupidly square chin.

He tilted his head back to stare up at the ceiling, pulling in a series of slow breaths and counting the seconds of his exhales. It’s going to try your patience, probably a lot more than you realize. Why did Shiro have to be right about everything? And why, every time he got in over his head, did Keith only have himself to blame? No one else stepped up. Everyone on the whole ship was counting on him in this. There was no way he was going to prove Lance’s doubts right in the first ten minutes of trying to be a Responsible Authority Figure™. He had this. He could definitely do this—without flinging the baby. (No matter how much the kid totally and definitely earned it.)

Keith grit his teeth so hard his jaw squeaked and then leaned down, a pathetic surrender he suspected was just setting the bar for many future instances of Keith being solidly walked all over by a furry purple space brat who couldn’t weigh more than 30 pounds soaking wet. From the edge of his vision, he watched the girl flinch back, force herself a step forward, and then cave in to her nerves and duck back behind the closet doorframe, safely hidden again.

Of course, the very second Keith reached down, the boy’s deadly octopus limbs unwound in a heartbeat, and he poured himself into Keith’s hold, burbling happy Galran words as the red paladin fought to settle him in an unsteady grip. The boy’s soft, hairless palms traced curiously along the back of Keith’s forearm, ruffling the short hairs there. Maybe they were mysterious to
him in their utter uselessness. The boy beamed, a picture of innocence—and then proceeded to
pinch out as many of Keith’s arm hairs as he could get in the grip of his claws at once.

“You’re a monster,” Keith hissed, which made the boy cock his head far to the side, ears up and
forward like if he listened hard, he’d actually understand what Keith was saying. His nose even
kind of twitched a little. …Disgusting. Yes. That’s the word Keith was going with and he’d stick
with it forever because “cute” and “endearing” and “adorable” were the fallbacks of weak-minded
plebeians and Lance and those really annoying girls at the Garrison who used to follow Shiro
around and kept mistaking Keith for one of their own kind.

By the time Keith managed to get the kid settled in a grip that would guard his own arm hairs (a
precarious half-upside-down sort of wrestling hold), his alarm was twenty ticks from blaring. He
shut it off before it could blast, and seconds later, the bright overhead lights popped on, signally
that it was officially morning—or at least when Keith had convinced his room morning was
supposed to start. The boy squinted so hard it screwed up his whole face. Under the lights, Keith
took a long, clear look at him for the first time.

Galra were strange, Keith decided. Human beings were very… standard. They could be tall or
short, broad or thin, dark or light-skinned, eyed, and haired, but in general most had pretty similar
structures: round, small ears, ten fingers, ten toes…

It seemed like the only thing the Galra all had in common was purple-ish skin and yellow eyes.
Some of the Galra had fur, some didn’t; some had ears on the tops of their heads and some on the
side. Some had scales, Keith knew, and some had a mouth full of fangs, while others just had
slightly sharper canines.

Keith hadn’t exactly memorized his own Galran features, but he could tell at a glance that the boy
looked very different from him. Keith’s ears were rounded triangles toward the top of his head,
like… well, like a lion’s, if he said so himself (although he’d never actually seen a real lion in
person or anything). The boy’s ears were closer to the side of his head, far more leaf-shaped—
kind of narrow at the bottom, wide in the middle, narrow again at the tips—and comically large
and floppy. They actually reminded Keith of the ears on the black-tailed deer that were his arch-
emies back at the desert shack on Earth, eating up practically every plant he slaved to grow no
matter how often he tried to chase them away. (There’d be nothing left at all of his hard work by
now, he knew, and the thought was like a window shutting in his throat.)

Anyway, the boy’s fur, a dull gray-ish purple, was weird too, much shorter than Keith’s, like the
universe’s softest suede almost. The “hair” on the kid’s head was just fur of a slightly darker
shade, maybe half an inch longer, giving him a tousled, cowlicked look. His eyes were oddly
round, and a paler yellow than what Keith thought was normal for Galra. Although the boy had a
full set of claws already, his teeth were oddly stubby, no real fangs, and—the oddest of all the
things Keith finally noticed—he had a very small, puffy tail, which was also not unlike Keith’s
nemeses deer.

Keith did not have a tail. Most Galra didn’t have tails? At least Keith thought they didn’t? Maybe
some kept them under their uniforms? What if he was the weird one, and most Galra did have
tails? What could have happened to his tail? These were worrying thoughts.

The boy fidgeted, bored already of Keith’s inspection. He hiccupped something in Galran, but it
wasn’t even coherent consonants and vowel sounds, at least as far as Keith could tell. Far more
understandable was the enormous gurgle of the boy’s stomach, which filled the silence right after
his jumble of almost-words.

Very, very belatedly, Keith remembered he was supposed to be working on a set of Most
Responsible Authority Figure™ tasks to prove Lance (and Shiro and… probably everybody else
too) totally and irrevocably wrong. Even his own stomach churned in anticipation of breakfast, and he had no idea when the children last ate, which meant they were probably all starving.

“I’m gonna get food.”

His prompt and pointless declaration went right over the boy’s head, in both a figurative and a literal sense. Keith hadn’t even leaned an inch forward to set the kid down again when he felt the warning prickle of claws in his side. The boy’s full face stared up at him, still placidly smiling but with a more self-aware air of underlying threat than Keith thought a toddler should ever be capable of, even one raised in a cruel dictatorial military regime. This kid wasn’t going anywhere.

Read as: the kid was going to go absolutely everywhere Keith went. The red paladin sighed.

Schlepping the boy up his side, badly balanced on one hip and already sliding back down, Keith finally wobbled out into the hall, a bit more careful than someone who just been two seconds from hurling a baby had any real right to be.

It was still very early. No one in the castle except Shiro (who basically did not sleep) got up before Keith nowadays. Allura was all about prompt and timely attendance at training sessions, but even she gave up on scheduling anything too early in the morning after record streaks of absences from both of Voltron’s legs. The empty, quiet corridors were no different from any other morning—except that, for once, Keith actually had company—but still, he felt somehow more alone and out of place than ever. There was nothing to hide, no reason for it, but it somehow seemed like he should be tiptoeing, like he should be ducking his head. The long white stretches of hallway bounced the ship’s sharp lighting around; it was no surprise when the boy buried his own face in Keith’s arm to block out the bright. They’d have to change the castle settings soon if they wanted the kids to ever willingly come out from the dark of Keith’s closet.

If they’d ever willingly come out anyway…

The kitchen was just as empty when they arrived. Keith by-passed the food goo dispenser—some things he could only tolerate so much of—and plopped the boy down on the counter before he had a chance to protest.

“You... Don’t. Move.” The finger Keith waggled in front of the kid’s face was straightaway seized and munched on. Shouldddd have seen that coming. Keith ripped his hand back and scrubbed it down the front of his shirt. At this rate, all of his clothes would be tainted unforgivably by the end of the day. “Don’t move,” he repeated—and got the sneaking suspicion that he could have said the words in perfect Galran and still not had a snowball’s chance in hell of being listened to. The boy giggled. Keith’s stink eye got stinkier.

Keith took a single, mistrustful step to the left. The boy watched, head tilted to the side. Keith took another step. The boy blinked, sluggish as old motor oil. A frozen, testing moment passed in which neither of them even twitched. Then Keith took his chances and went for it, one more step toward the dishes and a lightning fast reach up to the cabinets, almost there—

“Wahh!” the Galra announced, as he promptly plunged off the edge of the counter head first. Had a sports recruiter somehow managed to find their way up to space, across thousands of lightyears, onto the Castle of Lions, and into their kitchen at that particular moment, Keith’s saving dive would most certainly have earned him a place in the NFL: he crashed flat on the floor, baby cushioned in his outstretched hands like a football hovering an inch above the endzone.

Keith came out of his miniature heart attack to the sound of the boy’s self-satisfied purring.

“You did that on—” Keith’s voice cracked in disbelief. “You did that on purpose!” Without a care
in the world, the boy rolled out of Keith’s rage-shaking hands and crawled away, his stubby puff of a tail wagging behind him.

“Well!” Keith-the-plank snapped, chin squished up on the tiles, bottom lip jutting out, wobbling his whole head as he sniffed violently. “Good riddance to you too!”

At that exact moment, the Galra boy reached the food goo dispenser, yanked the hose from its reel, and stared directly down the barrel of the nozzle.

Keith scrambled to get his feet under him. “Stop!”

Keith seethed, steam hissing out between clenched teeth as he glared down at the boy, squat on the counter again. The kid’s legs were now pinned under Keith’s middle, a punishment he protested by poking the pointy toes of his boots into every yielding muscle he could find.

“Quit squirming if you want to live.” There was something almost liberating about the language barrier. If Keith maybe threatened to drop the kid off at the nearest intergalactic taxidermist, nobody else in the room understood anyway.

Of course, when he leaned in toward the cabinets ten seconds later and the boy’s little clawed fists tore two gaping holes in his sleep shirt, right over his chest, well, it felt like nothing less than karma.

A discussion about the cabinets was long overdue, Keith decided, grumbling to himself as the box he wanted slipped further out of his reach. Hunk, despite being second tallest, had commandeered all of the lower and more convenient cabinets for himself and Pidge, leaving Keith, Lance, and Shiro to share the ones attached to the irritatingly high ceiling—which honestly wouldn’t have been a problem if Shiro wasn’t like ten feet tall and Lance wasn’t a goddamn squid made of 90% limb who took unreasonable delight in making sure all the boxes with Keith’s name on them somehow ended up at the very back of the freakin’ shelves.

If he had to turn out to be a Galra, couldn’t he have turned out to be a tall Galra? The universe was a cruel, ironic mistress.

Keith stooped to standing on his tiptoes only because no one else was in the room, though it left him open to another volley of boot-jabs from the baby. Dodging shoes, he scraped for the box—only to have it snatched immediately the moment he finally got it down. The boy sniffed it hard, turning the box upside down and over trying to figure out how it opened. Before he got fed up and tore through it like the sad remnants of Keith’s shirt, the paladin slid boy and box down the counter to the dishes, and with only a semi-bloody scuffle over possession, managed to pour two bowls of cereal.

Or the most pathetic excuse for cereal anyone from Earth could have imagined, anyway. For one, they had no milk, seeing as they hadn’t yet managed to find a cow in space. There wasn’t even an Altean milk equivalent; Allura’s exact reaction to their request for a dairy alternative had been, and Keith could quote: “You drink WHAT?!” Second, the cereal—like pretty much everything else the Alteans ate—was an unappealing cacophony of sagey green and jaundice yellow, with a sticky consistency that didn’t come close to matching its grainy appearance. All told, Keith was pretty sure it came from synthetic meat by-product rather than oats, because it somehow fell into the “savory” spectrum, rather than bland sweetness like the crap breakfast cereal singles Garrison used to serve.
The kid didn’t even wait for Keith to get sporks, just reached into the nearest bowl, grabbed two leaking handfuls of flakes and promptly began stuffing his face. So, yeah. Food was a good guess number two. Keith hadn’t thrown or starved the baby. He was already killing this childcare game.

*Eat my dirty socks, Lance.*

The boy munched his way through his bowl and then half of Keith’s. While the flaky cereal substitute flew everywhere, Keith dared to creep away, head craned back over his shoulder, just long enough to filch the bottle of Hunk’s home-made—space-made?—fruit juice, which was an electric blue color this week but tasted like oranges. Grudgingly, Keith held a cup to keep the kid from upending it into his face, but still more than a little of the juice ended up stuck on his furry cheeks and flecked all over the counter. Definitely leaving that for Coran.

“Tastes good, huh?” Keith asked, when he was free to sip his own juice at last, and the kid clearly didn’t understand but he still brightened under the attention, smiling even while stretching out his tongue to try and swipe juice droplets off his face.

Cautiously, stretched to his limits with one hand holding the kid in place on the counter, Keith dug out a tray and loaded it with cups, plates, and bowls, the cereal box, the bottle of juice, and any other easily-opened non-perishables he could find, enough to last a whole day at least. If Pidge asked who took her weird oozy biscuits that tasted like peanuts, Keith would 110% say Lance.

Balancing the kid on his hip and the tray on his free arm at the same time was an exercise in insanity, in gymnastics more fierce than the training deck or the Garrison had ever demanded, contortions and twirls that might have been more at home on the boneless blob people of Zxstrx than on any paladin of Voltron. The boy kept trying to grab at anything within grabbing range, which, given his alarming habit of leaning as far as he could in every direction with no regard for the possibility of falling, was far enough that Keith had to turn the tray about wildly, plates, boxes, and fruit juice sliding from one wobbling end to the other. Keith’s hair was a space rat’s nest, a bruise was blooming on his chin, half his chest was hanging out of his shirt, and the baby had slipped so far out of his grip Keith was mostly balancing him with a *knee.* Please, he begged every mythological being he could name, up to and including the Jersey Devil, *don’t let anyone see me like this.*

Frantic scuffling sounded behind the door to his room when they finally reached it, maybe someone darting back into hiding. Getting in the door without bumping toddler or tray took some of the finest acrobatics Keith had done in weeks. This whole thing was starting to feel like a really unfun version of physical training.

Keith set the boy down on the floor and the tray down on the bed, out of reach. “Stay,” he commanded, entirely uselessly. The kid followed the tip of Keith’s wagging finger with his whole head, bobbing in a circle even as Keith retreated to the bathroom with the black under-suit of his paladin uniform in tow. It was way too drafty in the ship to wear just half a shirt. Keith eyed himself in the mirror on his way back out. Well, better than the ruins of his pajamas. His uniform, at least, was less likely to get torn.

Now for the worst part.

Keith strode across the room, quick and purposeful, and yanked open his closet door like yanking off a band-aid. The biggest girl had every fang bared already, every strand of fur on end, her ears laid so far back he couldn’t even see them in the fluff of her hair. Keith kept his hands up and out of range. Instead he nudged at both girls with one darting foot, the swinging legs of pants on their hangers an added layer of protection from flailing claws.

Both of the girls scrambled out into the room, and Keith slammed the closet door behind them,
palming the auto-lock. With the bathroom door closed as well, there was no place for them to go, not even an open gap below the bed. The second he saw them, the boy cooed out some more of his happy nonsense and went charging into the girls, questing hands and heavy head first; in their already awkward positions, he knocked both of them over, three confused cubs suddenly in a tangled purple heap.

Now presenting: the universe’s most feared race. Keith felt second-hand embarrassed.

He snapped his fingers to catch their attention. “There’s food,” he said, pointing to the tray, trying to be at least a little quiet and nice about it. “Food,” he repeated, pointing harder. The biggest girl darted a look between Keith and the tray, eyes narrowed to tiny golden lines, lip curled. The middle girl… didn’t look like anything. She didn’t make eye contact, didn’t even seem to even the side of the bed right in front of her blank gaze. Her body was limp as a stuffed doll’s. The lamplight shined with nobody home.

(They take him to a place with row after row of metal plaques set into the ground. The dirt where they are standing is disturbed, wet and dark, uprooted clods of grass wilting where they’re half covered in the pile. They tell him his mother is buried here. But it doesn’t smell like his mother at all. When he blinks his eyes shut, it feels like it takes a thousand years to open them again."

“What… was he supposed to do? How could he… What would be the right thing…? Keith startled when he realized he was actually looking left and right, searching for someone to save him from this nosedive: a shield, a substitute, a soft supply of surefire reassurances. But there was no one on his wing. The room was full, but he felt impossibly alone. Keith crushed his eyes shut to still the spinning of his thoughts.

(His replacement mother moves like the white shape of a coyote on a moonless night: an impression rather than a presence, her head low, a lilting voice that chitters like chips of glass. In the blurred back corners of his vision she keeps threat-shifting, pale hands reaching as he shrinks away. The spots of her watery eyes wheel like constellations, like falling stars burning brighter and closer. She says “Stay still,” and even if he understands the words, he does not understand her.)

Keith took a massive mental step back from the situation, from his own heat mirage memories. He
could barely shift any further into his mattress, but in his head it felt like a thousand mile retreat. The battle was over. She wasn’t challenging him. The Galra girl was wound tighter than a warp turbine compressor, but he didn’t have to be.

Very purposefully, Keith channeled every one of Shiro’s gentle reminders, the warning press of his instructor’s pointer finger in the harsh valley of tense shoulder blades: turn the valve. Let the steam off. He let the tension leak from his arms, the rigid line of his spine, his stiff jaw. He breathed deeper and slower. It wasn’t quite right—he’d never gotten to the strange place Shiro called “zen,” where the worries and the weights of his own wire-taut body couldn’t press on him at all—but as his heart rate slowed again, it felt like his head really was clearing a little. This crisis wasn’t impossible navigate.

Piloting new courses in unknown territory was supposedly Keith’s greatest talent, after all.

Logic (he could manage it, sometimes): she had no reason to trust him, no reason to accept anything he gave her. He wouldn’t trust the food of an enemy for so much as bonfire fuel. But they couldn’t let her starve herself to death. That would be torture—whether they managed to stop her or not.

Keith picked up the other bowl of cereal, the one he’d been planning to give to the motionless second girl, and carefully held it out, firm enough in his grip that she wouldn’t be able to knock this one away even if she tried.

“Just eat, please?” he murmured, the meaning lost but the tone a white flag, clearly waving. “I know you’re hungry.” He lowered his eyes to watch the tip of her nose instead of her glare, still hotter than Red Lion’s flamethrower. She didn’t slap at his hand again, but he watched the quick, nervous draughts of her breath. She was too proud to sniff at the food, but he could see the way her throat worked a little around the unavoidable scent.

Thank god his arms were literally his strongest feature, because one long minute of their angry impasse became two and then three and then four, with Keith still holding the cereal bowl straight out, determined not to waver even the tiniest bit. He could do this all day. Probably. Um. Maybe. In retrospect, perhaps he should have swapped some of those gladiator fights for plain old lactic threshold training instead...

In the background, the Galra boy was busy amusing himself by systematically crushing every single loose flake the girl had wasted, coating Keith’s entire floor with an explosion of fine green cereal powder, which the kid may or may not have then attempted to swim through, like a chubby little doughnut hole rolled in rotten powdered sugar. Keith blocked it out with every remaining shred of his determination and dignity. He’d just… deal with that later…

The ticker on his shelf was going on six doboshes of stalemate when the bigger Galra girl finally caved, not a surrender if she made sure to scrape him with every claw as she snatched the second cereal bowl and clutched it to her chest. She didn’t eat right away, not even a taste, just stared at the flakes like she could peer down into their very molecules and identify poison by atomic structure alone. Maybe she could. Keith had seen Galra do some really weird shit. (Case in point: the giggling doughnut hole in the back.)

“It’s not poisoned,” he said, pointless but still trying. She ignored him entirely, or played like she did, eyes unblinking in her fierce inspection and ears turned away. Well, better that than clawing at him, Keith guessed, and anyway she was at least thinking about eating now—more than could be said for the other girl.

What was he supposed to do with her either? Telegraphing his motions, snail slow, Keith scooped up the first bowl from the floor and refilled it. Then he held it out in a tight grip again, just in case
the middle girl got any ideas from (not so) large and in charge sitting right next to her.

But nothing happened. Keith’s arm cramped in protest, but the middle girl wouldn’t reach out and take the food from him. She didn’t have visible irises or pupils, but still Keith could tell that her gaze was unfocused, empty. She wasn’t looking at him or the food or anything, really. Her hands were like dead weights at the end of her motionless arms, prone on the tile. If he put the bowl down in front of her and left it, Keith somehow suspected the only one who’d get any was the littlest cat curiosity forgot to kill over there, who had since given up on coating himself in cereal dust and was now buzzing around the bigger girl’s breakfast like a particularly overgrown mosquito.

For all she pretended to be uninterested in the food, the threat of losing any chance to eat finally spurred the bigger girl to action. She slapped the boy’s hand away and wrapped one entire defensive arm around her bowl. She flicked and flipped the spork between her fingers like a dagger, a last moment’s hesitation before taking the risk. Her first bite was cautious, suspicious… Then she was barely able to rein herself in, pride and gnawing hunger warring for control. Every sporkful overflowed, but she tried to eat them with dignity, gold venom glare leveled at Keith all the while, daring him to laugh.

But Keith just held the other girl’s bowl out awkwardly, tapping the front of her black suit once or twice. She didn’t even flinch, so distant in her own head or so determined to ignore his existence that not even waving the bowl directly in front of her face made her blink.

“You,” Keith muttered to the bigger girl, and she might not have understood the word but being addressed directly was obvious enough. “Give this to her.” He pointed at the bowl in his hand, then at the bigger girl, then at the smaller girl, huge exaggerated pantomimes learned mostly from Lance.

The biggest girl stared at him like he was a particularly fat and ugly spider crawling straight toward her. One of her cheeks was puffed out, full of Altean flakes, poking her thick fur up in weird directions. She gave an enormous swallow. Keith waited a beat, but nothing else happened. He pointed at the bowl again. Pointier this time. Finally, Large nodded so reluctantly it almost looked like it hurt her to do it. Of course she seized the opportunity to claw at him again when she grabbed the second bowl.

Sliding the bowl across the floor, Large whispered something in the motionless child’s ear, low and soft as Galran got, which… was a strange thought to have in the first place, because Keith had never actually heard any Galran before. Everything they listened to on missions filtered through their helmets, through the comms and translators.

Wait. That didn’t make sense. He must have heard Galran before, right? But he didn’t think he— couldn’t remember—

(There’s a mound of bright-colored books spread out before him, open to broad-lined pages and uncertain, sprawling red-crayon scribbles crisscrossed by veins of gold evening light, filtering through the blinds. Someone says “Can you write a K?” then: “Oh no, I meant in English.”

A different place, darker: there’s lines of letters on the other side of the room. Someone covers one of his eyes with a hand in a pale plastic glove. “Can you read them?”

The letters are the size of dust specks. He says, “C, V, G, Shen, Ul—”

“In English,” someone says. “In English.”)

The bigger girl whispered again, and it didn’t sound like Keith thought it should. Their given
names were all harsh consonants, Ks and Xs and Ts, so he’d just assumed the whole language was as guttural and savage as its people. But whatever the girl said was full of delicate V and S sounds, Hs breathed over fangs, and even in a whisper, the syllables swirled one into the other, thrumming like a heartbeat. Could he make any of those sounds correctly with a human tongue?

The bigger girl grabbed the smaller girl’s hand and forced it closed around the spare spork. She manually scooped up a wavering spoonful of flakes and brought it to the girl’s face. To Keith’s surprise, the smaller girl ate—lifelessly, but at least she didn’t have to be forced. The bigger girl kept scooping up more spoonfuls, and the other dutifully, mechanically ate them, heedless of what she was given, dropping as many flakes right back into the bowl as she actually managed to swallow. Still, Keith felt some muscle or organ or just the vacuous black hole of his feelings unwinding under his ribs, a swell of relief almost bowling him over.

No one was going to starve. This… could work. This whole thing really could work. Keith slumped back a little, the last of the fight going out of him, leaning on his stinging hands. It was… strange. He hadn’t beat a new level on the training dummy or unlocked a cool power with Red or won a crucial battle against the forces of evil. But accomplishment glowed like a rising mountain of warm embers in his belly, a rare sense of self-contentment whispering that he’d finally earned this second of rest, instead of just stolen it.

He’d only poured cereal, and he hadn’t even done it well. So why did it feel like the very first time he put on his Galaxy Garrison cadet uniform: like prized perfect creases, gleaming gold buttons? Like that cold desert morning three days before his thirteenth birthday when he’d stood in front of the mirror looking at a version of himself who looked like a stranger, stiff cloth, stiffer back, exhilaration and anxiety at war in his churning stomach. When he ducked his head into his starched high collar and murmured “Will I fit in?” in his smallest voice, praying he wouldn’t be heard, praying he would.

When Shiro smoothed down both his hunched shoulders and answered: “You belong here.”

The uncontainable soaring of his heart pushing out beyond the cage of his ribs.

_We’re all proud of you, Keith._

---

At last the boy got bored of pawing at the older girl and turned his attention to the tray of unclaimed snacks still on the bed. He tumbled forward against the mattress but then could get no further—he seemed to understand the basic mechanics needed to get up and over the edge, but every time he lifted one leg to climb, he unbalanced precariously in the opposite direction, a punching bag wobbling on its stem. Eventually he swayed right into the side of Keith’s leg, and the red paladin took enough pity to hitch the kid clumsily up into his lap, where a cloud of sticky cereal dust promptly coated every inch of his uniform front. Joy. Keith didn’t have fur or thick hide in this form to protect himself from errant claws either; little red scratches sprang up everywhere he wasn’t covered as the boy wiggled like a hungry caterpillar in his hold. Keith grit his teeth and bore it for the sake of their tenuous, wary peace, and a minute later the boy finally flopped over in defeat, settling for gnawing on Keith’s arm instead of on their snacks.

With every child occupied, it felt somehow like a lull in the storm, the slow-rolling seconds between the lightning flash and the thunder clap. While they glumly worked their way through the cereal (and the boy worked his way through Keith’s ulna), Keith took the chance to steal surreptitious glances at the girls. It was harder to inspect them than the boy—something told him out-right staring would just start another fight—but he got good enough looks peeking from the corner of his eye.
Both girls looked a lot more like Keith’s standard image of “Galra” than the boy did, although they were as unique as every other member of the Galra race Team Voltron had ever met. If the bigger girl stood up, Keith thought she’d be about an inch below his waist, and he had no idea how old they all were, but that still seemed way too small. He’d seen fully-grown Galra that made Shiro look like a toothpick. Seven feet tall was like… average. (Keith was not bitter. Okay, Keith was a little bit bitter.) The middle girl was even smaller, too—if he lined them up next to each other, the top of Medium’s ears seemed like they’d barely come above the bigger girl’s chin.

Was something wrong with them? Did growing up on the stick bug planet stunt their growth? Keith spent an entire minute debating whether or not he should be concerned. How would one go about… unstunting children? Maybe he could get Coran to look up appropriate stretches? Or if they could find a cow? Milk helped bones grow, right?

Anyway, even if she was tragically stunted, Keith liked the bigger girl’s color. She was the darkest of all the children, an inky purple that deepened to almost black at her hands, the edges of her cheeks, and the wild nest of fur that haloed her head like curly pixie-cut hair. Keith had never seen a Galra whose ears fluttered about this much—Large’s ears were big and bat-like, thin-furred and even thinner-skinned, latticed with tiny black veins, and from their places near the top of her head, they swiveled at the most minute of noises, maybe even at nothing more than a change in the direction of the air flow. Even mostly hidden behind the cereal bowl she’d tipped up to get every last crumb, Keith could tell her face was dominated by her eyes, not really disproportionate, but enough to make her small, pointy nose and narrow mouth feel like afterthoughts.

Keith paused his sneaky inspection to pour out three cups of Hunk’s space juice, which required a great deal of juggling both juice and baby Galra. He passed the first cup to the boy, to pacify the cavernous hunger of the beast, then held the second out for the bigger girl. She shrank back, barbing her teeth at it.

Keith huffed so hard it fluffed up his bangs. “Are we really gonna do this every time?” But he held the cup out as patiently as he could manage, until she finally caved and snatched it out of his hand, jerking in surprise when the electric blue juice sloshed over the rim. Very, very carefully, Keith put the last cup down on the floor and slid it inch by inch across the tile until it was within the middle girl’s reach. Keith peered out from under his eyelashes at her, waiting to see if she’d take the cup.

Really, the middle girl was pretty. Not pretty in the way that people were, he didn’t mean—pretty in the way that all delicate, detailed things were inherently beautiful. He thought of snowflakes, perfectly-spun spiderwebs, fractal patterns, feather-fine filaments. She looked more like an intricate glass figurine of a Galra than an actual living being. She was colored as Galra as Galra got, just like a purple yam, but each strand of her hair seemed to stand out from the rest: clear, sheer, the swirls of her wavy fur like spiral galaxies. A spattering of pale white spots, crystalline star systems, crossed the bridge of her thin nose. Her wrists looked so narrow the bones inside must have been thin as spiderwebs themselves. On her head, the acute rise of her ears looked more like the points of a crown.

None of them looked anything like Keith did, when he looked Galra. Even among his own kind, was he an oddity?

That thought sparked a confusing flood of emotions Keith couldn’t name—was he sad? Pleased he didn’t blend in easily with the universe’s most oppressive race? Proud? Curious? Frightened? Lonely?

Maybe there wasn’t one word for it. Maybe there weren’t any words at all for the maelstrom that had raged in his heart since he learned the truth of his heritage, every contradictory piece of
himself trapped in the sound-swallowing vortex between two insatiable black holes, being torn apart in polar opposite directions: Where did he belong? (Where did he want to belong?) Keith didn’t know. He didn’t know how to define his feelings any better than he knew how to define himself.

When the announcement came, it swam through the nebulous whorl of his thoughts, a distant whisper he barely caught. Allura’s voice, subdued and suppressed, sighed through the castle speakers: “Keith, I think it would be best to speak to the children now. I’ve sent Hunk and Lance to help you. We’ll meet on the bridge.”

In the sealed space of his barrack, Keith drowned in the strange dichotomy of sitting with the Galra who were his people and were not, waiting for the humans who were his people and were not—suspended in the moment before a knock on his bedroom door could collapse those two dimensions like a wormhole closing.

They’d tell the children the truth and the world wouldn’t end. (The world was not that kind.) Somehow, with the stars, they’d all keep rushing forward.

It felt like déjà vu—a space-time echo of that dawn in front of the Garrison mirror, self-consciously smoothing the folds of the fabric above his thighs, unfamiliar with the clean, pressed, pallid boy reflected in the glass. It felt like the white lines of his first cadet uniform washing into the white light of the open doorway as he trembled on the threshold between the past and his new future.

The very same thought then as in this nervous moment: *Everything is about to change.*

Chapter End Notes

1) Season 2 was a trip! As expected, this story is going to be very, very AU by the end. But I guess not as AU as it could have been?! I feel like I can still work a lot of the new canon material into this fic without making huge stretches. Man, the Galra are cool. <3

2) (Season 2 spoilers, watch out.) Allura's characterization in S2 bothered me a bit—not because I think her feelings of aversion, distrust, and anger were not valid, because they certainly were—but because Allura is the princess of a *nation of diplomats* and ambassadors. She was most certainly trained in being well-mannered, respectful, nonjudgmental, and courtly throughout her entire childhood. Regardless of how much she might hate the Galra, I would have expected a princess from the race that supposedly values peace and civility above all else to show at least a little more decorum when faced with a situation like Keith's. So, all said, the overtly judgmental Allura from S2 will not be present in this fic. I do want to delve significantly into Allura's negative feelings about the Galra in this story, but I hope I'll be do so without needing to compromise on what I feel is an important part of Allura's character integrity.

3) The older girl's appearance is based partly on blossom bats. The boy's appearance is based partly on deer fawns. The middle Galra kiddo has translucent fur. Names and official introductions next chapter!

4) Come talk Voltron to me on tumblr(!!): echodrops
There was no knock on the door. Why the hell did Keith ever expect one?

Instead, two sets of hurried footsteps in the hall became Hunk’s warning, “Lance, whatever you’re about to do—” and Keith had only enough time to tense before:

“Boom baby!” Lance exploded through the doorway, foot first, arms flung wide. “Move over Keith, the real professionals have arrived!”

There were many reasonable things Keith could and probably should have yelled back, like “Don’t just come in without knocking!” or “Did you really kick my door?!” and “You’re upsetting the children!” or even (less articulate but perhaps more to the point): “What the quiznak!”

What Keith actually screamed was “AGGHHHHH!”, because the moment Lance burst into the room, the tiniest Galra panicked and overturned his entire cup of cold space juice straight into Keith’s lap. Keith leapt to his feet, whipping the dripping baby out to arm’s length, electric blue droplets flying far enough off that Hunk actually ducked. Juice ran down Keith pants, pooling sticky and frigid under his toes.

Lance and Hunk froze, owl-staring from under their helmet visors, eyes roaming from the top of Keith to bottom. Like many previous instances in his life, it did not occur to Keith until Lance’s eyebrows tried to soar up off his forehead just how horrifically embarrassing his situation actually was. His hair was a nest fit for the space mice, his face was covered in tiny curious scratches, an enormous bruise was forming on his chin, his entire chest was covered with bright green cereal dust, his hands looked a little like he’d stuck them in a paper shredder, and his crotch was a puddle. Through the open bathroom door, the obviously tattered remains of his pajamas could be seen strewn across the floor, which was, in turn, strewn with the powdery remnants of the cereal like a fine layer of snow. There was an honest to god imprint of the boy in the powder. Both girls were now all the way back at the far wall, and poor Large had added an extra two inches to her height by raising every strand of fur on her head.

There was a moment of silence. Then Lance burst into such raucous laughter, he folded over and had to clutch the doorframe just to stay upright.

“Lanceeee,” Hunk groaned.

But Lance was gone for a solid minute, actual tears of mirth leaking from his eyes. “Blessed,” he crowed through giggles. "I would like to thank not only Allura—” Freaking giggles. “—but also Shiro for this utterly unsurpassable, absolutely flawless blackmail opportunity.” He clenched his hands in mock prayer. “Spirits of the ancient Alteans, I don’t know what I did to deserve this, but I solemnly vow to never let Keith live it down.”

“W-What!”

“Hey!” Lance rounded on Hunk, grin enormous. “Do you think the castle surveillance cameras cover our rooms too? Was this recorded somewhere? Can I convince Pidge to hack the screens so we can play this back whenever Keith—” He finished his sentence with a gesture, rather than words: Lance crossed his arms tight and rearranged his face into a scowl that was half pout, bottom lip poking out. “Huff,” he said, a huge breath that would have ruffled his bangs if he
weren’t wearing his helmet. Hunk, the ever unhelpful and entirely biased, bit his own bottom lip, which did nothing to actually hide his smile.

At any other time, Keith might have bristled, burning with embarrassment and ready to bite back, but instead his thoughts stuttered and stuck, paranoia prickling: Cameras. Were there cameras in their rooms? There couldn’t be—there had to be some kind of privacy—some safe place—

He’d changed forms in his room. He’d stood in front of the mirror naked for an hour trying to catalog everything different about his body, watching in quiet horror the way his fur moved as he tensed, trying to bring his ears under his own control. He’d just stood there, trusting, stupid—there couldn’t be cameras—wouldn’t the alarms have gone off automatically?

_Intruder detected._

They had to live in these rooms and change and wash and sleep. The castle was supposed to be a home. If he couldn’t trust in that, what could he trust in? What was he supposed to do—_shut it down Keith_, he thought. Even if there were cameras, then no one could possibly be reviewing them. Allura or Coran would have said something.

They would have panicked.

_No one’s watching. You’re safe here._

“Well…” Lance waved a hand at him, motion bringing Keith back to his body with a jerk. “For real though, are you okay, man?”

_No!_ Keith was a breath from shouting. “Hold this,” he growled instead, thrusting the juice-sticky Galra boy into Lance’s fumbling arms.

“Whoa, hey—”

“I’m going to change.” But Keith got all of two steps before he realized he had another problem: what in the world was he going to change into? His sleep clothes were wrecked, his paladin suit was soaking. That only left his one Earth outfit and… well, the actual monstrosities in the closet.

None of them left home with anything but the clothes on their backs, obviously, and some of those had already been various degrees of shabby (Keith), too small (Shiro), and ten-year-old hand-me-down (Pidge). Finding out the destined pilots of the universe’s only hope were all from a species she’d never even seen before was certainly upsetting for Allura. Finding out Voltron’s first paladins in 10,000 years were a bunch of sloppy teenagers kind of okay with wearing the same set of clothing every day for the rest of their lives was absolutely horrifying.

Allura put Coran on the task of outfitting them each with a full wardrobe of clothing immediately, practically before even offering them something to eat. Since their very first night in space, in his cabin’s closet and drawers, Keith had been storing enough Altean clothing to go a month without re-wearing anything.

He never wore a stitch of it, except for the pajamas. The rest was just way too… Altean. Bright colors, detailed geometric patterns, layers for days, robes with waist cinches. They’d each accepted the clothing with varying degrees of graciousness, but Keith never saw Shiro, Pidge, or Hunk use a single piece of it (no wait, that was a lie—he’d caught Pidge using a balled up green and bronze robe to mop up thermal grease once.) Though there was Lance… Lance wore everything he was given with all the pompous pride of a preening peacock, robes and jumpsuits and vests and night caps and even an honest to god cape once, which Shiro had blessedly and extravagantly vetoed by stepping down at exactly the right moment: “Oops,” the black paladin
deadpanned, as Lance went over backward, windmilling and screeching.

For a moment, Keith stood rooted to the floor, wavering between the staggering threat to his Earth clothing and the crippling embarrassment of trying on anything else. But if he did put on his red jacket and the kid decided to shred it… Well, Keith could make no promises about his continued existence.

So. Altean clothes. This week couldn’t get any damn weirder. Eying the girls in warning and doing nothing to disguise the grit of his teeth, Keith stalked over to his closet. The room was so narrow, Hunk had to squeeze back against the wall just to let him through. Flicking the lock, Keith grabbed the first wearable-looking outfit on a hanger. He held the clothes at arm’s length like they might actually burn him and stomped into the bathroom to change for the sixth time in 24 hours.

…Well. They were clothes, he admitted, and that was about all he’d give them. High collar, stupidly tight sleeves, weird short traily tails at the back like a fancy dress coat… Honestly he looked like some sort of junior Coran, though instead of blues and whites, the wardrobe they supplied him was reds and purples and soft dove greys. In retrospect, wasn’t that color scheme a little suspicious? Even with the style of the clothes unmistakably Altean, even with his skin pale as winter sunlight against the vibrant hues, as he looked at himself in the bathroom mirror, there was something almost noticeably Galran too. Whose clothes were these, before they’d been pawned off on him? (And was it strange to wonder what his fur would look like against the brilliant red, the cool purple-greys—a coincidental compliment or unfortunate miss-match?)

He expected Lance to laugh when he came out. But for once Lance wasn’t scrutinizing his every move—instead, the blue paladin was totally absorbed with the baby burbling in his grip. “Wahh,” he cooed to the boy in a voice that embarrassed Keith just to hear. “Who’s the cutest grape in the bunch?” He beeped the tiny Galra on the end of his nose; the boy’s face scrunched up andiggled about. Lance gasped. Just a little. “You’re the cutest!” he concluded, bowing low over the baby, grinning his cheeks off like Allura suddenly announced she wanted him to lead Voltron. Hunk was hovering close on the blue paladin’s shoulder, leaning further and further forward. His eyes sparkled with curiosity.

Keith… had no idea what was even going on, a feeling which seemed to be shared by the tiny boy, who stared up at his new captors with huge yellow eyes, silently gumming on one of his own hands while he processed the change in place and voices and smells.

What had Keith missed, in the two minutes it took him to change? “Uh…” he tried to interject.

Lance looked up, fading into the most solemn expression Keith had ever seen on him: lips a flat line, brows sinking, blue eyes resolute as hurricanes. For a second, Keith’s stomach turned. What was wrong—

Into the heavy silence, Lance announced: “I’m keeping this one.”

“Huh?!” Keith balked. His eye may or may not have twitched. “They’re not—they’re not puppies! You can’t just keep one!”

“Wow dude,” Hunk droned, “I’ve heard you say a lot of hypocritical stuff in my time, but really—that takes the cake.”

“What are you talking about? This isn’t something to play around with! We have to be seri—!”

Hunk raised a very skeptical single brow. At precisely that moment, Keith realized he’d crossed his arms, his scowl was in place, and his bangs were in one eye. Damn it!
Lance, for his part, was busy rubbing his cheek against the Galra boy’s... Or trying to, at least. With his helmet in the way, all he really succeeded in doing was rubbing static into the poor kid’s fur—it stood on end, clinging to the white metal. Somehow, even without pupils, the look the kid shot Keith managed to feel desperate, but a thought was slowly dawning in the back of Keith’s head, one that cooled the fire of his frustration: You know, the kid had ruined his pajamas. And clawed his leg. And given him a heart attack. And bruised his chin. And trashed his room. And got his pants soaking wet. And left him stuck in Altean clothes. He observed a cooing transfer of juice-sticky cereal powder from the boy’s scrunched face to long green streaks of mush across Lance’s helmet with mounting revulsion.

Keith promptly opened his mouth to declare “No take backs,” but he barely made it through the first word when another voice rang out.

“Paladins.” Allura’s call chimed in his room and all down the hall. “What is taking so long? I hope you aren’t delaying unnecessarily.”

“Uh-oh.” Hunk cringed. “Guys, we better hurry. She sounds mad.”

“Yeah Keith,” Lance added unhelpfully, shifting the boy from a two-handed grip to a single arm with a smoothness that almost defied the laws of both gravity and physics—just so he could make shooing motions at Keith with a free hand. “Chop, chop! We’re waiting on you!”

Keith was not remotely jealous of the way Lance managed to balance the boy perfectly on his hip. Zero slippage. Zero flop. Keith wouldn’t go so far to say zero embarrassment, but if you compared the way Lance flew his lion to the way he smoothly bounced the kid koala-clinging to his side, his “babysitter extraordinaire” claim was starting to look a lot less bogus than that stupid “tailor” title...

Maybe Shiro was right. Maybe Lance was right.

Maybe Keith really was the worst choice for taking care of anyone.

(“It’s just not going to work, Neuhahn. He’s attacked three people already, unprovoked. Director Breeck is demanding we give up the socialization attempts.”

“We’ve collected DNA and tissue samples and tracked all his vitals. We can’t learn anything more about him from base biological data. We’ve got to get him talking! We still don’t know what his mother’s purpose was here—”

“All the more reason to stop! What if they’re predators? What if they don’t come in peace? We don’t know anything about—”

“Ania... How long do you think they’ll let Keith have even the illusion of freedom if he can’t live with humans? That boy doesn’t deserve to spend the rest of his life in a cage just because he doesn’t understand how this world works. We can’t give up.”

“You know that I’m on your side in this. But Garrison houses children, Neuhahn. Are we really going to gamble with their safety?”

“If he could bond with even one person...”

“What if it’s just not possible? What if he’ll never be able to have healthy relationships with others?”)

What if he can’t...?
“Keith?” A hand touched his shoulder, and dimly Keith registered that Hunk was much closer than he’d been a minute before, places swapped so that Lance peered curiously around the yellow paladin. Hunk’s hand was warm and light, comforting, not restraining. Even Keith knew how to name the feeling on Hunk’s face. It was concern. “We gotta go.”

Keith’s breath hitched. “Yeah, sorry,” he muttered, shaking his head a little—but it was useless. The feeling of wandering in thick fog, sightless and terrified and lost, wouldn’t leave him. “Let’s…” he heard himself say, without realizing he’d even tried to say it. “Let’s get the girls.” He felt as separate from his own body as he did when Red Lion engaged auto-pilot: the right movements were happening, but they were entirely outside his control.

He turned toward the two remaining Galra, silent and tense against the back wall of his room. The bigger girl’s fur had settled in the time they’d spent ignoring her, but her fingers were stiff steel, braced before the slumped smaller girl, ready to lash out.

“We’re leaving now,” Keith declared, waiting for his voice to echo through the translators in Hunk and Lance’s helmets. The bigger girl’s ears swiveled between the sounds from the helmets and Keith himself, bracing for a hint of movement.

“Keithhh,” Lance drawled, scrubbing at his face with his free hand, disbelief and condescension all at once. “That is literally the worst way to do this.”

Keith flinched. (What if he’ll never be able?) “Y-You do it then, if you’re so professional!” Adrift. Wandering. His hands out in front of him but nothing to be a guiding touch—

“Don’t mind if I do!” Lance wormed around Hunk and then Keith, creeping closer to the girls. “Hey little ladies,” he said, false nonchalance and painful bravado. “This is pretty short notice, but we need to explain some stuff, so we’re gonna have a meeting and introduce everyone. You ready to go?”

Lance was barely able to skitter back in time to avoid having a chunk of his pants ripped off by the biggest girl’s swiping claws. “No!” she shouted, and even if Keith hadn’t heard the translation echoing from Lance and Hunk’s helmets he would have known immediately what that meant. “We ain’t goin’ with you!”

Lance pursed his lips. “But this is really important!”

“We wanted to apologize!” Hunk expelled the words like laser bullets directed at himself, eyes clenched shut. “We didn’t mean for—”

Lance cleared his throat, some kind of meaningful glance thrown back over his shoulder. “Let’s hold off on that one. Everyone else wants to say it too.” He turned back to the girls, and it was bizarre to watch him consciously rearrange his face, like a smile was armor to be worn. “You say you don’t want to go,” Lance mused, “but I bet you do, right? You probably have a lot of questions.”

The biggest girl glared hard, even her nose wrinkled up. “No we don’t.”

“Bet you do!”

“No.”

“You do.”

“No!”
“You totallyyy do!”

“Shut up!” Keith snapped, ignoring how Lance looped his free arm around the boy’s head to offer at least a little shelter for his ears like Keith’s shouting was so much worse than his own. “How is this any better than my way???”

Lance half-shrugged. “Uh, ‘cause it’s my way?”

“And you!” Keith went right on growling, turning a stone-hard stare the bigger girl, his spine rigid, shoulders high. “We weren’t asking whether you wanted to come with us.”

Somewhere in the back, Hunk looked horrified, squeaked, “That’s not even right, man!” but Keith just shifted forward. Even from five or six steps away, as far as the room allowed her to retreat, Keith towered over the bigger girl, daring her to argue any further. He could see she wanted to, every ounce of her Galra pride frothing at the bit, lip curled back to show fang. But a few spiteful scratches were one thing; she hadn’t bitten before and he knew she wouldn’t now. (He remembers: his knees skinned, hair tangled, dirt under his fingernails, spitting on the tile. “Do you wanna fight too?! I’ll beat your face in!” Shout louder, look bigger, saying please just leave me alone with fists furled at his side.)

It felt like the pressure of two nuclear stars colliding. His own lip curled back to bare teeth in challenge, making himself taller, sharper, pressing down harder—he thought of Shiro’s clenched jaw, unfailing stare, the bark of his leader-soldier-Champion voice that could make any of them shrink in their boots—

Keith saw her surrender finally, curling in on herself, looking to the side so she no longer had to meet his eyes. There was a strange turn in his chest, a strange sense of something nocking into place. (So what, so what if he never got good at bonding with people? So what if he never made more than one friend? Maybe his replacement mother was right, maybe he couldn’t ever really learn to live with humans. Didn’t matter. These children weren’t human.)

Why did this feel so much like the time Red swatted him hard enough he rolled half way across the hangar? What had Red sent him then, that image?

A great silvery-black cat, stained with the blood of a kill, knocking down its mewling, persistent—

“Pesky cub,” he whispered, and it was too quiet to trigger the translators in the other paladins’ helmets but somehow the Galra girl seemed to grasp the words anyway. Her ears sank; she ground one nervous boot into the floor.

“Hunk,” Keith said, releasing the rest of his tension in one big sigh. “Take her.”

The yellow paladin backed up a step, hands flailing. “Uhh, me? Are you sure? I mean, she looks kinda—” His eyes darted around. “Couldn’t Lance—”

“Sorry buddy, no can do.” Lance wiggled the tiny boy’s hand in a forced, boneless wave. “These arms are already busy cradling someone else!”

Why did everything Lance say somehow boil down to a dig at Keith?!

Keith ground his teeth and turned back to Hunk. “Would you rather take the one who bit you?”

It was strange, seeing Hunk’s dark skin somehow go pale. “Nope, nope, I would definitely prefer to not be bitten again, thanks!” He shifted apologetically, trying to make himself smaller in the overcrowded space so he could eke past the roadblock of Keith and Lance. Keith had never really thought twice about his room or the fact that even two people in it at a time was a stretch; it wasn’t
like he’d ever planned for 3/5s of Voltron and three children trying to squeeze in all at once.

(There are much bigger rooms on the ship, spacious quarters with opaque panels that the touch of a button can turn translucent, entire walls becoming clear window vistas of the swirling galaxies through which the castle ship sails—rooms with gold embroidered bedspreads and mirror frames that sparkle with minute star spiral patterns of crystals in a hundred thousand different shades. There were rooms for guests, for foreign dignitaries, for long-gone ball-goers and princesses and kings. Allura says they can have them now; the need for those rooms, like the people who once occupied them, is long gone. But they’re all carrying enough ghosts around with them already, and there’s something about the tiny, utilitarian crew’s berths, the cramped beds, the awkward maneuvering it takes to get in front of the bathroom sinks in their tiny cabins that feels exactly like Galaxy Garrison—that feels, in short, like home.)

After Lance’s near miss with the eager claws and his own experience with the sharpness of their fangs, Hunk was more than a little hesitant to reach toward the girl, but looming over her was even worse, his hands awkwardly fluttering, unsure whether to bend down or stand tall.

Hunk finally worked up the nerve to stick a hand out (his left one, the uninjured one). The girl’s nose wrinkled like something slippery and foul was being held under her face. Ridiculous. Of all the paladins, Keith knew Hunk definitely smelled the best—sharp spice and earthy root plants, jet flame and metal polish. She looked very much like she’d rather cut off her own arm than take Hunk’s.

Disentangling herself from the smaller girl, Large stood on her own, nose high. Keith kept a stink eye on her, caught her stare and let her know that whatever nonsense she was most definitely planning was absolutely out of the picture. Growling under her breath, she took a grudging couple of steps closer to Hunk.

“Don’t touch me,” she spat in warning, leaving Hunk frozen in the odd hover-hand pose, trying to make sure she couldn’t run and trying to keep all his fingers intact at the same time. He shuffled and she stomped closer to the door, leaving the middle girl alone.

And it was her, the smaller girl, who was actually dangerous—silent now, innocuous, but with a track record for violence. If Hunk hadn’t spent time in the healing pod for his own injury, then his palm was definitely still a bruised mess. Keith didn’t trust the second girl as far as he could throw her, and given that she looked like a lump of thin spun sugar, he could probably throw her pretty far. She showed no sign of hearing as he approached, still as catatonic as she’d been the entire morning, but Keith wouldn’t be lulled into any false security by that. The moment she sensed weakness, she would exploit it.

For the best, Keith decided. When it came to combat at least, he trusted himself more than anyone but Shiro, and if the smaller girl got it in her head to attack them and run again, he’d rather be the one to deal with it, no matter how weirdly talented Lance seemed to be in the art of child wrangling.

Quick as a snake strike, Keith leaned forward and snatched the back of the middle girl’s black suit, lifting her to her feet. She made no move to take her own weight. If he let go, she’d fall right back to the floor.

“Niresh,” the bigger girl snapped from the doorway, “you’d better walk if you don’t want ‘em to touch you!”

That sparked something—the middle girl stumbled a little but at least took her own weight, managed her own wobbling steps.
“Paladins!” Allura’s clipped voice rang through the speakers again, making them all cringe. “If you don’t hurry, I’m sending Coran!”

Coran squawked. “You know Princess, if you’d just sent me from the beginning—!”

“We’re coming, we’re coming!” Lance whined.

They made it half way to the bridge before Lance finally noticed.

“Holy crow, what are you wearing?!?”

Time in space would never cease to be absurd, because it felt like they went nowhere and yet suddenly they’d arrived, the main bridge doors sliding open with their quiet, familiar \textit{whsshh}. Keith’s eyes immediately found Shiro’s, just beside the drive console, unconsciously in parade-rest, his arms loosely folded behind his back. Shiro nodded, but he barely got through the motion before he was already looking at the children, cataloging details like they were still out on mission. Not like Keith could blame him, but a sort of second-hand discomfort snarled below his ribs: it felt like being under the microscope himself, like a problem to be solved. (\textit{Somewhere his replacement mother saying, “This is our last chance. Are you sure Shirogane is the right—” and somewhere his replacement father, “I don’t know. But I’d prefer not to use Breeck’s ‘alternative methods’…”})

But it was Allura who really stopped Keith in his tracks. She wasn’t looking at the children—she stared at Keith and only at him, not like you’d stare at a person but like you’d peer unseeing at the surface of a dark mirror, like memories made of light swimming in a glass tube, like ghosts called up from far-flung eons. She wasn’t seeing him. She was seeing the shade of the person who used to fill his borrowed clothes, and it hurt that the last time he’d seen that look of distant dreaming was behind a corrupted barrier, backlit by a dying star: \textit{I see Altea, Father! We’re going home!}

Allura recoiled, her arm rising protectively across her chest. In the second it took for her to regain control of her expression, the half-tick before she broke her gaze on him to stare at the floor, Keith could not miss the wide-eyed, unmitigated horror that flashed across her face. Coran’s hand steadied her at the elbow, without a word, and it seemed like no one else really noticed—Pidge sat on the top step, engrossed in her (heavily upgraded) laptop, Hunk watched his own feet to make sure he wouldn’t step on any tiny toes...

What memory was it that put that look on her face?

The horror of loss or the horror of hatred?

\textit{There was something almost noticeably Galran…}

“You’re late,” Allura declared, and if her voice wavered, just the smallest bit, no one but Keith could have guessed the reason.

“Keith’s fault!” Lance announced without a shred of hesitation, lunging up the steps toward the central console with what Keith could only describe as an unnecessary degree of baby bouncing. The boy’s enormous ears flapped up and down like wings trying to take flight, almost in time to the blinking of his curious eyes. At the last step, he let out a tiny noise, like a hiccup really, and it irked Keith to no end that it was a \textit{happy} noise, rather than a \textit{far} more appropriate whine of complaint.

“I guess there’s a first time for everything,” Pidge intoned, without looking up from her tech.
Lance sniffed, bottom lip jutting out. “I resent that remark.” It escaped the blue paladin’s notice, but not Keith’s, when the little boy, dedicatedly watching his captor, proceeded to poke his own bottom lip out too.

“Well, if we’ve got our usual round of repartee done for the morning,” Coran rallied to Lance’s aid, “I say we get down to business! These little ones must be eagerly awaiting our explanations—and a good old-fashioned Castle of Lions breakfast too!”

Keith didn’t have the heart to tell Coran the children weren’t eagerly awaiting either of those things—that they weren’t eagerly awaiting anything from the paladins or the Alteans in the slightest.

“Thank you, Coran,” Allura said as she reached out to collect a thin hinged box from its place balanced on the console. “Let’s start with these.” She lifted the lid of the box to reveal eight colored stones, nestled on a cushion of pale blue fabric.

She held the box out to Shiro, standing closest to her, and it wasn’t especially hard to guess which stone he needed to take. Shiro picked out the glassy black one, carefully holding it between the thumb and forefinger of his human hand. He inspected it curiously, bringing it close up to one eye.

Lance took the blue gem, and then, at Allura’s urging, scooped up a purple gem as well, for the boy in his hold. Keith tried not to be visibly smug at the way Lance valiantly flailed and struggled to keep either stone from ending up in the curious toddler’s mouth. Pidge reached up to Allura’s box and fished around until she nabbed the bright green gem, flipping and catching it like a coin.

Hunk took the yellow rock and the second purple one, leaving only Keith’s softly glowing red and the final purple stone, both of which felt smooth and cool against the curled up tips of his fingers. As Allura stood before him, closer maybe than she really needed to, she looked like she wanted to say something, her lips just slightly parted. But the moment passed, and she stepped away, closing the box with a resolute click.

“These,” she clarified at last, pointing to her own ubiquitous purple earrings, “are portable Altean translation devices. They can translate from any spoken language you hear—"

“And a few that your human ears can’t hear at all!” Coran helpfully chimed.

“Yes, from any spoken language into the language of your choice, entirely automatically, with very few inaccuracies. Of course there are concepts and words which are untranslatable—"

“Quiznak,” Pidge groused, and “Quiznak,” Lance sagely agreed.

“—but on the whole,” Allura insisted over them, “these will make it possible to speak to the Galran children at all times, regardless of where you are in the castle, without needing to wear your paladin suits.”

“Waittt…” Shiro mused. “Why have we wear our suits to every celebration banquet when we could have just worn these instead?”

Allura developed a sudden fascination with the unique shapes her shadow cast on the closest wall. “Well,” she sniffed imperiously, “the paladin suits are your official uniform for all diplomatic events. You must always look the part, of course.”

Shiro looked like he smelled a space rat, but they’d all learned well by now that when Allura wanted to stone wall on something, there was no getting around, under, or through her defenses. Shiro shrugged.
“Okay, but why stones?” Hunk muttered, watching the way the blue and white light of the room reflected in strange patterns off the gem turning between his two fingers. “Why not just install whatever process is in these little puppies throughout the whole castle? Seems like a real waste of time to set one up for every single person living in a busy palace.”

“There are some areas of the castle where automatic translators have been installed. The main hall for entertaining, of course,” Allura admitted, “and in the wings reserved for guests. But…” She touched one of her earrings, just the barest brush. “Even in the Castle of Lions, even though Altea’s rulers have always espoused a need for transparency between nations, there are times when… there are certain conversations that must be kept… private.”

Lance nodded in perfect, serene understanding, which did not instill a great deal of confidence in Keith. Even if you left out the unintelligible grumbled insults Lance sputtered under his breath (read as: always), Keith was pretty sure that Lance, Hunk, and Pidge were all in the know on the same utterly stupid secret code; they had to be, because there was nothing inherently funny about stringing together unrelated words into even more irrational phrases, but Keith had definitely heard “man door hand hook car door,” “do it for the vine—RIP!” and “lit A-F” (whatever A-F stood for) more than once in the last few months without the slightest effort on anyone’s part to clue him into their meaning.

Keith eyed the little red stone in his palm, disgruntled, not even bothering to hide the suspicious scowl on his face. Something told him that 99% of the nonsense said on this ship was going to come up as “untranslatable.” “But what,” he asked, poking at his stone with one mistrustful finger, “are we supposed to do with them now?”

Allura gestured to her earrings again, both hands cupped behind them this time. “You can affix your translators anywhere you choose, just like this.”

Pidge rambled: “Yeah, I’ve been meaning to ask how they just float like that—is there some form of micro anti-grav drive installed or—”

Shiro turned his stone over in his hand. “Are there specific places that will or won’t work?”

“Generally they’ll translate more effectively when they’re in closer proximity to your voice, but if you’re not inclined to wear them as earrings, they’ll work from anywhere relatively nearby.”

Just outside her field of vision, Hunk burst into silent giggles when Lance feigned attaching his stone to his nose like a giant piercing. It was absolutely not funny. Keith would not smile. He refused.

“So we just…” Shiro held his stone up to his vest, right where you’d put a name tag on your shirt. (Right where Shiro put his military medals, the day he’d worn his Garrison dress uniform out on the tarmac to smile for the flashes of the press cameras—the day he’d left for Kerberos— and Keith’s stomach turned over under his skin, because where did that uniform go? Which Galra soldier stripped Shiro’s bars and tossed the proof of his tireless service into some trash compactor to be crushed down into nothing?) He went through the motions of attaching the translator just like he might a pin. Sure enough, when he gingerly let go and took his hand away, the stone was stuck there, just where’d he’d set it, a completely normal decoration on his otherwise austere black top. From where Keith stood, the stone looked firmly attached, but he was willing to bet if he looked closer, there’d be a centimeter of empty air between it and Shiro’s shirt.

Without needing any more example, Pidge slid her stone over the irrepressible floof of her hair just above one ear, where it settled like any other shiny hair clip. Hunk attached his to the thick, upturned collar of his jacket, then got down on one knee so he could try to figure out how (and
where) to put on the bigger Galra girl’s stone without getting bit. Lance’s blue stone already
hanged from one ear, for all the world like the single version of Allura’s look. He was busy
struggling with the tiny boy in his arms; a furrow of consternation formed between his pencil thin
brows, eyes squinting. Everywhere Lance attempted to hang the Galra boy’s translator, the child
immediately snatched at it, threatening to peel the translator right back off the second Lance let go.
Trying to hang it on one of his flopping ears just made the appendage beat about like the boy was
trying to flick away a pesky bug. Lance aimed next for the chest of his black suit, but the boy
clawed at it before the blue paladin even got his hand out of the way.

"Ouch, ow, ow, wait—" Lance tried to put it on the kid’s sleeve... andddd the boy promptly
stretched his arm as close as he could to bite at the stone. "No, come onnn, don't do that!"

Keith practically felt the kid's agitation levels rising. If his own ears were out, they'd be pining
back in anticipation; he knew just how capable and willing the kid was to scream the stars out of
the sky. When Lance tried to turn the boy over and attach the stone right between his shoulder
blades, where he'd have a hell of a time trying to reach it, Keith braced himself.

The boy gulped in a giant breath, whole body tensing up… and then Pidge bravely clapped a
hand smack dab over his mouth—and, although it was a bit more of a stretch—right over Lance's
too.

"Maybe if you explained first, before sticking weird things on people, this wouldn't be such a
struggle!!" she griped. Lance let out a volley of muffled squawks, which Pidge resolutely ignored.
She sort of leaned over the tiny kid and sort of kept her space like she thought he had cooties. (Or
maybe she thought Lance had cooties, in which case, Keith 110% agreed.) "Hey there little guy,”
she started—and that was as far as she got. Maybe it was something in the way the light overhead
glinted off her glasses; maybe it was just too many unfamiliar faces too close at once, but the kid’s
face crumpled like paper and it was all over after that. His wail echoed like the shriek of shuttle
engine in the open space of the bridge, and Keith had to use one hand to hold the middle girl, so
he couldn’t even cover both ears.

Pidge jumped back like Hunk just dropped a central drive shaft on her foot. “Not my fault!” she
insisted, but the words got swallowed up in the din in both Lance’s and Hunk’s rushed
attempts to fuss and croon and plead the kid down. Allura looked like something particularly
hideous just crawled out of the floor seams, like she might have to take off running at any second.
All of the sudden it occurred to Keith that he—for some utterly unfounded reason—had expected
Allura to be good with children. He couldn’t think of why he was under that impression at all,
except… ("We're a long way from home, aren't we?" Except he clung to slivers of a vision, not
even a whole dream, an old photograph taken through a blurry lens: dark and cold, wheeling
yellow constellations reflected in the sea of red star-shaped flowers all around them, faces
upturned, his mother’s shoulder, her words turning to silver mist, hanging in the air: “We're a
long way from home, aren’t we?” In the moonlight, the soft cloud of her hair where he hides his
face from the frost looks white as snow.)

Keith felt as if he actually jerked his own brain back into reality. Why had he thought… Well, it
hadn’t been a thought really, had it, just some unconscious assumption that Allura was warm and
kind and responsible and strong: all the things that good mothers should be.

Was it just because she was a girl? That was pretty ridiculous—made all the more ridiculous by
how obviously out of her element Allura now appeared: she’d inched her way behind Shiro, who
looked like he had equally no clue in this situation; he just sort of cringed, a guilty hunch to his
shoulders like he knew he was supposed to do something, as their designated "adult," but beyond
sort of lifting a nervous (human) hand up, he didn't get anywhere.

Coran was the real surprise. Somehow Keith expected him to jump right in to making silly noises
and even sillier faces, but maybe that wasn’t giving him enough credit; something told Keith he wasn’t wrong about Coran having a hand in raising Allura. If he had to raise someone capable of being so prickly herself, maybe he knew better than anyone in the room when too many strangers was just too much. He hung back, a distant look on his face—maybe engrossed in memories of his own.

But the crying didn’t stop. Keith fumed through his teeth. "Don't bite me," he warned, leaning down to the tiny girl beside him, stiller than space dust. "Head up," he demanded, aware he was rushing too fast, asking too much for her to bare her throat to him, but neither Lance nor Hunk were making any progress and Pidge looked about two seconds from wailing herself.

The Galra girl tipped her chin up just enough for him to get at her neck and fasten the purple gem there, drifting above the thin fur of her throat like a pendant on a choker chain. He did the same with his own without much thought (no sense putting it on these clothes, since he planned on absolutely never wearing them ever again), and then he nudged the girl forward.

The moment the boy caught sight of them again, he unfurled his thin little arms in Keith's direction, pawing at the air. The absolutely scandalized look on Lance's face when Keith took the kid and he immediately buried his face in Keith's collar was so, soooo worth it.

"Wha-What—"

Keith didn't even try to hide his smirk. "So much for ‘professional.’"

Lance's eyes narrowed to tiny lines. "Witchcraft," he hissed.

Might was well be. Keith may not know a thing about taking care of children, but he had one huge unfair advantage with this bunch. Despite his human looks, the kid knew something that Lance didn’t, and it was that exact something that made him knead on Keith’s shoulder, purring his demands for reassurance, more felt than heard. Keith hummed back, not the right noise but the right sort of rumble in his throat, which the boy could surely feel.

When the kid quieted down finally, dead silence hung over the bridge. Keith looked up. It wasn’t just Lance staring at him like he’d grown a second head. Everyone stared. Allura actually openly gaped, probably the most unprincess-like expression he’d ever seen on her face—even if you counted the time Lance tried “You must be the speed of light, ’cause when I look at you, time stops” on her while the ship was taking heavy laser fire from hostile locals in the Lylat system.

"What?" Keith grumbled to the frozen room, but no one said a word, except Hunk who cooed something like “That’s so precious,” which Keith was not going to justify with a response so no one said a word. Keith snatched the purple gem out of Lance’s loose hand, tapped it down on the kid’s back, right between his shoulders (“That was so my idea!” Lance broke the silence to flail and complain), and proceeded to glare a hole in the floor so he didn’t have to actually look anyone else in the eye. Beside him, he felt more than saw Hunk kneeling down again to hang the last translator from the bigger girl’s ear.

Keith slid his gaze up a few inches to watch her reaction from the corner of his eye, waiting for even the slightest hint of aggression. But though she still looked as fiercely disgusted as she did back in his room, she let Hunk fit the translator on. Almost pragmatic of her, Keith thought. Always better to understand everything your enemy is saying, even when you don’t want to listen to a word. The translator gleamed on her ear, a perfect imitation of Allura’s own purple earrings. Even though it floated in the air and didn’t actually touch the girl, she flicked the ear in irritation and the stone somehow, impossible as anything, danced along.

“W-Well,” Allura collected herself, patting down her dress as though it had been rumpled
somehow. “Now that that is settled… finally… We should begin what we actually gathered here for.” She gestured lightly, and Keith found himself obeying, pushing the middle girl forward so she stood before him, next to the taller girl, where Allura and Coran could easily see them.

Allura gave them both a winsome smile that they made not the slightest effort to return. In fact, the biggest girl just scowled harder, lacing one hand around the middle girl’s wrist, for solidarity or maybe because she was still planning to bolt. The princess straightened her back, lifted her head, and arranged her hands delicately, the very picture of courtly diplomacy. “I,” she said, “am Princess Allura of Altea, and these,” she indicated them all, “are the paladins of Voltron.” A pause. She expected some reaction, but both girls just turned closer to each other, angling away.

Allura’s momentum stalled. “Have you… heard of Voltron?”

Neither girl answered. The older girl turned her head completely, earring flashing along behind her close-tucked ear.

The boy, however, perked back up, scrubbing his wet face on Keith’s sleeve and turning. “Boltron?” he burbled. “Boltron!”

Allura’s smile regained some of its glow. “Yes! Voltron! Do you know anything about it?”

The tallest girl seemed unable to hold herself back any longer. She crossed her free arm over her chest and stomped one boot hard as she could into the floor, only very narrowly missing Hunk’s toes. “We don’ wanna to talk to you!” she shouted, and even through the crisp new translators, her voice had a strange—and strangely familiar—accent to it, warm, lilting, almost twangy. From the country. From the South. (From his memories: “Keith, you should’ve told yer mother where you were goin’. We were worried, son.”)

On some level, of course, Keith always knew the Altean translators approximated accents—Allura definitely wasn’t from Britain, after all—but it was strange to hear it from a Galra, when all the soldiers they fought sounded so… standard. Belatedly, a thought: was that on purpose? Was everyone trained the same way, toward the same evil end, with the same sets of equipment, the same standard, impersonal military-grade translators, even on different sides of the universe?

Did they all sound alike because Zarkon wanted to keep them indistinguishable? Replaceable?

Allura floundered just the tiniest bit; she didn’t look for help from anyone else in the room but Keith could see the cogs turning in her head, trying hard to find a peaceful solution to perhaps the most unenviable dilemma they’d ever gotten themselves into, including that time Lance was put on trial and sentenced to execution on the planet Plenerie for eating an alien god. (In Lance’s defense, the alien god had been a completely normal banana. Space banana. Sort of a banana.)

“I know,” Allura murmured, folding her skirts under her knees as she lowered herself closer to the children’s level, “I know you have no reason to want to hear the things we have to say, nor to believe anything we tell you, but we do owe you the truth, and you don’t deserve to be left in any confusion or fear for your futures. I won’t ask you to accept any of the things I say, but please listen, at least for right now.” Neither of the girls answered or gave any sign of acquiescence, but the older girl bit her tongue and tugged at the sleeve of her uniform.

Allura took a steadying breath and began again. “I am Allura of Altea, the ruler of this ship, the Castle of Lions. This,” she waved an even hand, “is my advisor, Coran. The paladins of Voltron,” another imperial sweep of her hand, “are Shiro, of Black Lion, Pidge of Green, Lance of Blue, Hunk of Yellow, and Keith of Red.” Each of the paladins gave a sign when named, in various degrees of awkwardness, Shiro’s just the barest straightening of his stance, Hunk’s an odd-looking, half-stifled wave, like he wasn’t sure if that was appropriate but couldn’t decide on any
other alternatives.

“Together,” Allura continued, “the five paladins can combine their individual power to form the universe’s greatest defender: Voltron.” As she was introducing them, Coran had been fiddling with the display on the central console; now, as she said it, a miniature projection of Voltron flickered into being between them all, every angle and beam faithfully replicated. (Truth be told, Keith is an arm and he still finds it sort of strange and silly for the universe’s greatest defender to have cat faces for hands.)

The Galra boy turned all the way in Keith’s hold, ears pricked forward, reaching out for the hologram as it drifted past.

“Boltron!” he cheered.

_Huh_. So maybe they did recognize it.

“A very, very long time ago, my people, the Alteans, and your people, the Galra,” Allura addressed the children, “were steadfast allies, dedicated together to the common mission of protecting people who could not protect themselves. Voltron and its paladins, including your emperor Zarkon, were sworn to be defenders of the universe.”

Keith wasn’t the only one whose curiosity had been piqued. The older girl didn’t shift from her position, eyes as far from Allura as possible, but the ear bedecked with her translator turned straight forward, waiting to catch every word.

“Unfortunately, there was a… a disagreement that could not be resolved, and the grievances between our peoples grew irreconcilable. We were—” Allura stopped herself. Keith knew the story, knew the story as far as Allura told it: the Alteans were deceived, support for their cause eroded from the inside, utterly unprepared for the first crushing mutiny which destroyed the paladins’ bonds and rendered Voltron useless when it was needed most. Allura was going to say _we were betrayed_. But their own hands were red now. Poor showing of sensitivity to lay blame when they were so far from blameless themselves.

Instead she said, matter-of-factly as she could make herself say it: “When the Galra declared war on Altea, my planet was destroyed. The Alteans were wiped out. Coran and I survived abroad this ship, in cryostasis, but the lions of Voltron were scattered across the universe. For the 10,000 years since the fall of Altea, Zarkon has been ruling unopposed, extending his power by seizing and colonizing entire galaxies, crushing all those who would resist Galran invasion.”

Well, points for going at least five minutes before offending their unwilling guests.

“_Liar_!” The older girl couldn’t hold her tongue anymore. “_You’re_ the bad ones, not the Galra!”

“What?” Shiro said it, a quiet disbelief he maybe didn’t mean to let slip out. Keith’s stomach churned.

“You’re telling a totally different story!” the girl accused, fangs flashing, fur bristling. “Some made-up version where the Galra are the villains instead of _you_! Course we know about Voltron! Course we know the story of the empire. Everybody knows how the Alteans betrayed _us_!”

Allura fought to form words, shock flickering in her wide, shifting eyes.

“The Alteans infected the Galra home planet with a plague! While you dirty, two-faced shapeshifters pretended to be our allies, thousands and thousands of Galra died! It was your king said it wasn’t safe to take in our people! Course we fought! You can’t complain the Galra destroyed your planet, after you destroyed ours first!”
“That’s not true! None of that is—”

“Young king knew our planet was full of sick children and he still blew it to pieces! The Alteans were monsters. Zarkon had to stop them. They threatened every peaceful world!”

Fury built on Allura’s face, in the pale-knuckled clenching of her fist on the floor. “My father was a good man who would never have betrayed an ally! Leave it to the Galra to spread such ugly lies… I suppose there’s some positive spin for the empire too! Some good reason Zarkon needed to seize control of half the known universe?”

Keith felt… nervous. Restless. Some amalgamation of strain and guilt and chaotic confusion, warring for position. Leave it to the Galra… His heart beat out of time, spiking, and he felt like speaking but what the hell could he possibly say? It wasn’t true. It couldn’t be.

But… There are certain conversations that must be kept… private.

“Where were the Galra supposed to go?!?” the girl snarled. “They didn’t have no home world anymore, and nobody would let ‘em in, even though they had nothing, so course they had to fight for places to live! But we made all those places better! Galra are smart and strong—we make things nobody else can and protect creatures who can’t protect themselves. There are no more wars anywhere in the empire; everybody gets along now, thanks to the emperor! He brought peace, not your stolen Voltron! The Galra are the real defenders of the universe!”

Tense silence followed her proclamation, broken only by her fierce panting.

That was—it had to be propaganda. Nothing she said lined up with anything Keith knew about the Galra Empire, nothing he’d been told and nothing he’d seen with his own two eyes. The Galra were invaders, oppressors, destroyers, a blight on every planet they touched, universally loathed by anyone and everyone who wasn’t Galran. They didn’t give; they only knew how to take.

Right? That’s what Allura said. That’s what Shiro said.

There were no wars inside the empire because Zarkon ruthlessly and without hesitation ground every hint of opposition into dust beneath his heels. Not even rumors of rebellion were permitted to percolate.

And that was exactly it, huh? Zarkon had such a firm grasp on every single being that lived and breathed beneath him that the only views inside the Galra Empire were those he let be seen. The empire was like their training deck maze: some people could pass through it without even knowing the walls existed, while others were tortured with every step…

For a moment, an overbearing sense of despair swelled over Keith, the bleakness of being lost in the belly of a Galran warship, every path forward the same indistinguishable march toward failure or death. Even if they did defeat Zarkon, kill him, imprison him, crush his fleets, what then? You can defeat a living being, but how do you defeat the idea he’s sold to billions of people across uncountable lightyears? Who would be the one to face down thousands of Galra colonies and tell them everything they’d known for 10,000 years was wrong? That everything they’d built must be torn down? When Voltron liberated all the planets, where would they put the invaders—the children of the invaders, who’d committed no crimes of their own?

Keith thought something he’d never thought before, that he didn’t ever plan on sharing: Even if the paladins of Voltron could save the universe, how were they supposed to save the Galra?

A voice cut through Keith’s fears as fast as his bayard blade, soft, smooth the way a sheath is: hiding edges. It was Hunk. “The Galra are the defenders of the universe?” he repeated, his head
down, expression hidden. “Tell that to Shay and the Balmerans. To the Wersail. To Pidge’s family, who were taken prisoner for nothing. To Shiro, who fought for his life in their slave pits.”

“There’s no such thing!”

“We’ve seen them,” Lance muttered.

“You’re all—” the girl’s translator hitched, stumbling to convert a Galran idiom into something they could relate to, “—worms that hide in pretty apples! You think you can fool us? Our base didn’t have nothing like that!”

“Why did your base need a prison, if you’re so peaceful?” Pidge retaliated, unable to stop herself.

“So the ones who do bad things can’t keep doing them!”

The yellow paladin’s hands fisted at his side. The girl stood directly in front of him; she wasn’t looking at him but Keith knew she was keenly aware of his presence, her unadorned ear sliding back again and again at the slightest hints of his motion. “How come not even one person in your prison was Galra, then?”

“Because we’re good people!” she cried.

“Hunk,” Shiro interrupted, and though he didn’t say anything else, the look he shared with the yellow paladin spoke volumes, although what exactly they said without saying anything at all, Keith didn’t fully understand. He could see the jut of Shiro’s chin, the perfect straight-edge of his shoulders. Hunk quieted down, though he still seemed deeply unsettled, hunched in on himself.

The other children were getting worked up by the eldest’s frustration; the middle girl clawed nervously at her own pant legs, her first sign of life, and the boy fussed and squirmed in Keith’s hold.

"It was not…” The princess struggled. “It was not my intention to upset you this way.” The girl gaped at Allura like she’d never heard a more flagrant lie. "I only wanted to explain who we are and why we came to this planet."

"To attack us!"

Keith felt a surge of conflicting feelings for Allura: sympathy for the impossible task she undertook, where every word, no matter how innocuous she tried to make them, dug the pitfall deeper—and discomfort, something that made his skin prickle, that made him want to put his back to a wall, made him feel small and uncertain and hunted.

What did the girl mean, when she said “stolen” Voltron?

"I—" Allura paused to find the right words, or as close as she could get. "The paladins of Voltron and those in the service of the Castle of Lions are solemnly sworn to defend the freedom of all peoples across the universe. This includes liberating planets from... invading forces. That was our mission here."

The bigger girl shook. "We're not invaders! This is our planet!"

Quietly, with the air of reciting textbook knowledge, Coran interjected: "The only native species of this planet are the Pishkerians."

"But," and for the first time that day, the girl's voice wavered, bottom lip caught on her fangs, eyes shifting like liquid gold, "I was born here. It’s my home."
An unsettled undercurrent rippled through the room, Hunk sinking even more, shoulders around his ears, Lance leaning back on his heels, Pidge pulling at the end of her sleeve. Home was a word that haunted them all.

"It's my home," the girl repeated, quieter, "and you invaded it."

Her words didn't change anything about what happened, but knowing they'd caused pain and seeing it, seeing the rough shallow of her throat as she tried to choke back a sob, seeing the way the middle girl shrank, the way her knees shook, the way she needed someone to hold her up but wouldn't—couldn't reach out to Keith right beside her… Even Keith, who fought to be the voice of reason, who'd said they couldn’t not shoot back—even Keith who above all understood the pragmatism of their fight, the necessity of their actions, felt the bitter, metallic taste of regret welling in the back of his throat.

“I’m sorry,” Allura said, and the words seem to fall from her like they weighed 10,000 pounds. Like 10,000 years of the universe crying out. Allura’s hand trembled where it rested on her knee.

“We’re all sorry,” Lance said, head bowed.

Pidge shifted where she stood. “I know better than anyone what it’s like, and still, I…”

Shiro was meticulously trying to loosen every tense line of his body, fingers consciously unfurling. “We won’t lie to you. Voltron is at war with Zarkon. The Galra Empire is our enemy. We came here to free the Pishkerians by defeating the emperor’s soldiers and destroying their military base. We believed we were doing the right thing. But—” he softened, “—we didn’t know this place was anyone’s home. We never intended to hurt civilians.”

(That’s what war is though, isn’t it? Every soldier is someone’s son, daughter, brother, mother, friend. Every soldier is someone.

There was a class on this in Garrison, six weeks of long, dry lectures in the hot, dark desert evenings before they would let cadets into any of the combat pilot classes. Before they trained them not to hesitate in pulling the trigger. Six weeks of learning to put walls around the tight hot cores at the backs of their brains which their textbook called the empathy center.

Their commanding officer said all the right things in the right tone of voice, with no other implications hiding in the corners of her laconic recitations. By the book. Above the board. United Nations’ standards.

What Keith really learned was this: The battlefield is a place that is separate from reality. The enemy lives there and nowhere else. Fight, shoot, swing. Only the one who wins gets to leave.

But the blood on your hands stands on your porch. It knocks on your front door. It comes in uninvited.)

“We know,” Shiro was still speaking, “that no amount of apologizing will ever make up for what we’ve done. We’re not asking you to forgive us. But we want you to know that we are taking responsibility for our actions. We’re going to make sure you’re cared for and safe, unconditionally.”

“Taking responsibility,” the girl ground out between her teeth, “for ‘what you’ve done’? You won’t even say what you really did! You think we’re stupid, don’t you?! Xerci is too little and slow to understand, but Niresh and me know what really happened! You killed our families!” she snarled through the thickness in her throat. “You killed my mother. You killed Xerci’s father. You killed Niresh’s parents. You killed Yedgi. Everyone is…” Keith thought she’d left all the tears she
could shed in the corner of his closet in the dark. He was wrong. “Everyone is dead.”

Shiro shut his eyes. Lance murmured “Sorry, sorry, I’m so sorry” over and over again like he didn’t know how to stop.

“You say you’re going to care for us…” she forced through her tears. “That’s the same as saying we’re your prisoners!”

“No,” Allura breathed, “you’re not prisoners at all!”

“Then let us leave.”

The silence was heavy. “You can’t go back to the base,” Keith said, and his voice sounded strange, alone by itself in the emptiness. “It’s been damaged too much to stay there.”

“We’ll send a distress signal. Someone from the empire will come get us soon.”

She’s right. That was the problem: Galra soldiers would come collect their own, and if the paladins ever met her again, it would be on opposite sides of a battle to the death because they let an uninformed child walk herself back into the arms of evil, walk herself back into the ranks of slavers, pillagers, imperialists.

If there was even the barest sliver of a chance that they could keep her from growing up into the type of cruel that cheered on slaves ripping each other apart, there was no way, not in any galaxy, that Keith wouldn’t seize that chance.

What they did to the Galra was horrible. But what the Galra Empire could do to her was still worse.

No one spoke.

“So we are prisoners then,” the girl said at last, and no one could refute her.

“I know,” Allura whispered, “we don’t have a right to ask anything of you, but could you please tell us who you are? You deserve to be called by name, if we can do nothing else.”

The girl’s glare could cut diamond, it was that sharp. She lifted her head, chin up, regal even through the stain of her tears. “I am Dulsara Kes, daughter of SK16th Division Lieutenant Ulzrani Vekshar. You’d better remember those names—‘specially the one you wiped out.”

Keith had a million questions, a million thoughts and concerns swirling and crashing against the inside of his skull in an indistinguishable storm of misery and confusion. There were so many things he wanted to ask—but Dulsara couldn’t take anymore. She was at the limits of both her composure and her courage. She was shaking, and most of it was rage but some of it, he knew, was fear.

For now, they’d said enough.

For a long moment, no one moved. Then Dulsara stepped forward and away, determinedly making for the door, dragging the other girl behind her by the wrist. The door wouldn’t open for her though, even when she kicked it so ferociously the entire huge metal panel shook in its frame.

Keith sighed. “I’ll take them back to the room.”

As he passed her, Pidge leveled a somber, fierce look in his direction, half hidden by the white shine of the overhead lights on her glasses. “Still think making them stay with the people who
“Killed their parents is the best idea?”

“At least we care enough to try to fix it,” Keith snapped. “Still better than the rest of the universe— which won’t care at all.”

Chapter End Notes

1) "History is a set of lies agreed upon." Everyone is telling the truth as they know it, but no one knows the whole truth.

2) Some ages for the children, since they won't be discussed in the story for a rather long time: Dulsara is about 12 Earth years old, Niresh is 7, and Xerci is only 20 months. Niresh, btw, is pronounced like "Knee-resh" or "Near-esh," not like "Nighresh." Xerci rhymes with the English pronunciation of "Circe."

3) Yes, they have southern accents. (Season 2 spoilers.) I actually decided this before season 2 came out (back when I was working on this project for NaNoWriMo) and about lost my mind when I heard Keith's father's voice. My personal headcanon—possibly supported by the actual clips we saw in season 2(?!?)—was that the Galra home world had two distinct climate zones: one exceedingly hot and the other exceedingly cold, and that was why there was such strongly divergent evolution among the Galra, as one subspecies evolved thick scale-like armadillo hide to protect them from the intense sun, while another subspecies evolved thick fur to protect from the cold of their region. In season 2, the southern half of the Galra planet(?) is completely in the shade of the enormous crust of the northern half of the planet, which would feasibly make it very, very, very cold. All three children are vaguely from strains of cold-region Galra and have some trace elements of their ancestral southern accents, which the Altean translator is doing its best to preserve. The empire's translators do not approximate accents in the same way, so most soldiers of the empire sound very similar to each other. Except for Sendak whose voice is just too damn good to suppress.

4) Updates are probably going to slow down a bit from here on out— I'm getting into the stuff I wrote later in November and it is very, very bad and needs to be fixed in every way. v_v

5) Come talk Voltron to me on tumblr: echodrops
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so, so much for all the kudos, bookmarks, and comments! I’m really floored by the response this story has received and amazed by the fact so many people seem to be enjoying it. I’m so happy I could pop like a balloon. Thank you very much for sticking with me so far!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They consumed themselves with the practicalities. They retrieved Red and Yellow. They refused the talking stick bugs’ offer to host a banquet in their honor. (“Are you sure?” Not this time.)

They fought for hours about what to do with the bodies, a conversation they’d never had before. Their MO of reducing bases to smoldering rubble was almost like burial, right? Keith kept thinking thoughts he couldn’t unthink. How many mothers, how many husbands, how many siblings got maybe a medal in a box, just a short transmission: We regret to inform you that your son/wife/brother has died in the line of duty, honorably engaged in combat against those seeking to defile our great empire. Even in the face of death under the combined might of the vile paladins of Voltron, your son/wife/brother remained a steadfast defender of the Galra people. Regrettably, his/her remains could not be recovered.

How many Galra graves were there now, full of empty space where bodies should be?

“We can’t just bury them!” Pidge argued. “Not without asking if that’s even what the kids want us to do! What if burials in the ground are an insult in Galra culture?”

Everyone looked at Keith (a moment of panic: do they expect me to know?!), and that was how he found himself staring down at Dulsara, stumbling through the question. Her ears fell, her gaze sank, but her voice was a poisoned razorblade between his ribs. “Why don’t you ask your Alteans what we do when Galra die?”

According to Coran, what the Galra did 10,000 years ago was this: shroud the bodies, tell their stories, reduce the remains to quintessence, deliver them to cloudy nebulae, just beginning to birth their first stars.

“So souls of the elders,” he recited, “make the worlds of the children.”

They fought again about who would go (who would pick up the pieces) when Shiro said that Pidge had to stay behind—too young for this kind of work.

“What part of this war am I old enough for?” she asked.

Pidge went. Hunk stayed.

Recovering the bodies was tough, stiff work, the blood gone thick and only half-dry, rubble shifting all around them. It was impossible not to look, impossible not to know: a woman who looked like Dulsara, the same dark edges to her face, lay against a wall down an unfamiliar hallway. Her only wound was a pair of burnt-black laser bullet holes right where the heart would be in a human. Where it must be in Galra too.
Keith turned to look back into the gaping gloom of the corridor. Imagined the warnings echoing in metallic comms: *Intruders detected. All personnel engage.* Imagined staring, unwavering, down the barrel of Lance’s bayard, nowhere to hide, no option to run. What did Lance’s face look like over the sights of his gun, sweat in his eyes, alternatively squinting or wide and white, lips trembling so his hands wouldn’t? A false smile or a scowl? Carefully blank? He didn’t know.

For some reason, when Keith tried to picture a Galra in the crosshairs, he could only imagine himself.

- - -

Did Galra grieve differently than humans? Keith didn’t know that either. No one taught him to mourn right for either race; he just stumbled through the loss of his mother until one day he stopped waking up from nightmares calling out for her.

They wrapped the bodies in thick, dark bolts of cloth that might have been curtains or tablecloths. Keith hoped so. Otherwise, the Castle of Lions had been prepared for mass funerals 10,000 years ago.

How do you leave enough space without leaving room to run? How fucked up was it that they had to be more concerned with blocking the kids’ escape routes than paying respects? *(Who said you deserve a chance to pay respects?)* They stood back. It wasn’t far enough.

The children didn’t need to see the dead to know who was who. Scents lingered a long time. When Dulsara found her mother, she made a sound that carried for miles in the still evening air, not a cry but a low, long croon that echoed and echoed again. It had no words, but still Keith knew its meaning, knew it like he knew how to find the North Star without looking, in the empty-bright nights of the desert:

*Come back. Come back. Come back.*

Keith thought he’d made that noise once, long ago, the feel of it shivering in the hollow spaces of his chest like notes of a faint, old song suddenly remembered.

They didn’t know which ones were Niresh’s parents. They hadn’t put them together. She paced between their two shrouded bodies, having to turn her back on first one then the other, panting half-voiced whimpers of mounting distress until Shiro and Coran ran over to move them closer. Then her high, reedy voice joined Dulsara’s mournful call, catching the boy up as well. Their three tones rang counterpoint to each other, rising and falling with their choked breaths, cracks in their voices, heads tipped back, while the world that wasn’t theirs slipped into its dusky green night.

They didn’t have the Galra technology here to draw out quintessence. They had to build a pyre instead. Through the smoke, far off at the fading edges of the orange light, Keith watched the native Pishkerians gather in pairs, then trios, then whole flocks, cheering, maybe, to the first bonfire of their freedom. Some of them, too, had never known life without the Galra on their planet.

Keith felt like his skin moved one way while his bones moved another. Everything inside was cramped, crushed, shifting out of place.

Dulsara began to speak, and Keith hadn’t even processed the words, hadn’t grasped them yet over the crackle and rush of the flame, when Lance went stiff where he stood.

“Turn them off,” Lance whispered, frantic, the words hitching in his throat. “Turn your translators
off.” He jerked toward Hunk, hands darting toward his comm. “This isn’t for us,” he pled, pulling at Pidge now. “Don’t listen.”

Keith tore his translator off, but almost worse to hear Galran: more real, more personal, the cresting cadence of her voice a firelight illusion of his mother’s, telling a bedtime tale he only remembered the sound of: a soft susurrus of story, a slow, constant heartbeat made into language.

It was cold and late and quiet when she finished, Niresh and Xerci asleep against her sides, Hunk whisper-snoring on Shiro’s shoulder. The fire would burn all night. In the morning, they’d put the ashes in spare memory jars and Black Lion would take them far beyond this galaxy, to a nebula that glowed purple-gold, where thousands of blue stars were just beginning to form.

Pictures of the hundreds of shimmering nebulae they studied at Garrison kept coming to mind.

Which one, he couldn’t unthink, would have suited his mother?

-        -        -

Still a war. Still a need for practicalities.

They took everything the base had. Pidge and Shiro went to extract data from all the remaining terminals, and normally there’d be chatter, but Pidge only remarked on the strangeness of having all the time they needed to gather intel, instead of desperately snatching what they could between barrages of laser fire and drones. No one knew what to say to that, so no one said anything.

Keith went back the way he’d come during the raid. He pried open every door in that hallway and near it until he finally found the children’s rooms, subsets of bigger quarters, almost like out-of-the-way storage areas repurposed. Only someone looking for them would have found them.

There weren’t many things, mostly just odds and ends easily smuggled. One of the rooms had cut-out metal stars and Galra ships pinned to the walls. There was something that looked like a distorted Rubik’s cube, with squares that came apart and floated around each other in smooth circles when he touched it. A strange hunched little toy on a tabletop turned out to be a miniature metalwork dog (something like a dog?) that lit up blue-purple when Keith approached and walked around in quick figure-eights, saying “Yup, yup.” There were clothes which, on closer inspection, were obviously cobbled together from the salvage of adults’ suits, nice even stitches but still handmade. On one of the low, plush mounds of blanket and pillow Keith thought were supposed to be beds, there was a stuffed animal made of cloud-light material. It didn’t resemble any creature from Earth.

There were books. Not books like on Earth but paper thin glass plates stacked neatly, one atop the next, on a shelf. They glowed, content printed on the surface of each pane as clear as any computer screen, and changed pages every time he tapped. Some he could tell nothing about, just long strings of mostly unintelligible Galra letters. But there were picture books too, with strange boggle-eyed beings in brilliant colors splashed across the pane, moving on the surface of the screen, acting out this or that heroic feat on loop. Some of the drawings were detailed and fine and beautiful to look at, stylized and delicate as watercolor paintings. Keith leaned back against the wall and looked and looked. One of the books seemed to tell the story of a lost Galran child who met every manner of odd-looking alien before making it back safely to his bumbling, busy father.

This was someone’s job. Somewhere in the universe, there were Galra who made their living making children’s books.

Keith put a glass book illustrating the letters of the Galran alphabet, all 42 of them, on top of the growing, careful pile of things in his hover container.
They took everything the base had.

A thousand other practical matters had to be worked out. When Keith got back from the base, headed to his room with all the children’s things, he found the entire hallway blocked by container after container, all different sizes and colors and shapes—most of them not from the castle itself but from the many odd worlds they’d visited. There was a giant clam shell that couldn’t have come from anywhere but the weird mermaid planet, and a collection of colored glass bottles shining from the shards of Balmeran crystal stored in each one. There were knit bags from Storia 4, glittering gold and silver cases from Xydah, and a clear plastic bag that looked like it contained heaps of concerningly sheer clothes, maybe from IV17.

“What the—”

Lance poked his head around a mountain of boxes. “Took you long enough,” he groused. “The little guy’s been crying and he doesn’t want me or Hunk.” The note of disbelief—that anyone in the universe might be able to resist Hunk—was rather understandable.

“What’s all this junk?”

Lance sniffed, nose in the air. “Not junk! These are my justly reaped rewards, thank you!”

“All of this is… yours?” Keith blinked. No way it fit in Lance’s room, right? Not like Keith had ever been in there, but if everything spilling out over the hall was crammed in Lance’s tiny cabin, there wouldn’t be any room to move! Sure, Keith kept a knickknack or two, curiosities that caught his eye from world to world, but it looked like Lance still had every single thing he’d ever been offered as a reward for saving planets and then some extra on top of that.

“Uh yeah,” Lance was saying. “What kind of heathen refuses gifts from his adoring fans?!”

Keith refused the gifts all the time. Wasn’t it more polite to not take things from people just freed from horrible oppression? Was that… not right?

Before Keith could philosophize on the ethical implications, Hunk trudged out of Lance’s room, mostly hidden behind another towering stack of crates. “I think we’re almost to the last third of it,” he groaned.

Lance frowned. “Are you sure? I don’t see—”

“But what are you doing?” Keith interrupted.

The blue paladin arched a particularly unimpressed brow. “What does it look like, mullet? I’m moving.”

Moving? Lance pitched such a fuss when he found out their rooms were right next to each other that Keith had almost moved at the very start just to shut him up. He’d gone on and on about how, since it was his lion who’d found the castle, and him who’d found their rooms first, it should totally be Keith who mosey’d off to literally any other available cranny, preferably a supply closet on the entire opposite side of the castle. What in the free universe could have convinced him give up his “top secret headquarters” (no Keiths allowed) now?

Keith couldn’t understand Lance on the best of days, but this just felt like whiplash. What happened between now and yesterday morning, when Lance tried to run off into the metaphorical sunset with the Galra baby? Uff. Frustrating. Keith hated constantly feeling like he was missing something.
“Thought you were going to show me how it’s done, babysitter extraordinaire.”

“Yeah well,” Lance huffed, ducking behind the mountain of junk again, where Keith couldn’t see his face. “Since it seems like you’ve got it sooo under control, couldn’t possibly need the help of someone infinitely more experienced, I figured I’d just get out of your fur.”

Before Keith could argue, Hunk dropped his crates with a heave and a crash.

“Hey!” Lance screeched.

“Coran thought it would be better if the kids stayed nearby, instead of in some other hall.” Hunk clapped the dust off his gloves. “Lance nobly volunteered to move. And then volunteered me to do the actual moving.”

“I was going to say ‘I love you buddy,’ but I think you just broke the bottle of centennial-blooming Red Phlox perfume the Silesian princess gave me and I’m pretty sure that’s actually irreplaceable, so like… we can’t even be friends anymore.”

“Oh nooooo,” Hunk droned, hands up in supplication. “Whatever shall I do with myself if I can’t lug around thousand pound boxes all day? Now that my dearest friend has abandoned me in his time of greatest need, I can’t think of any way to better spend my precious hours! Except, y’know… take a nap. Or make macarons. Mmm, macarons.”

“I like macarons,” Keith said helpfully. He did not, in fact, know what a “macaron” was, but pissing off Lance felt like pretty good payback for this sudden betrayal. He’d only barely realized, and wouldn’t admit it even if Zarkon put the black bayard to his throat, but he’d maybe, kind of, a little bit taken for granted the idea that Lance would be right next door through this. Just, you know. In the event of emergencies. (Keith was not optimistic enough to believe there wouldn’t be plenty of emergencies.)

“Hunk!” Lance clambered to the top of the tallest pile to peer down at them desperately. “You wouldn’t really leave me like this!”

“Maybe, if we condensed the food goo just right…”

“HUNKKK!”

So they moved the children in next door, after Allura and Coran did whatever Altean magic it took to reconfigure the walls and fit two extra beds in there.

Pidge and Coran worked together to re-program the corridors so that the children could access only a certain set of doors: their room, Keith’s, and the nursery (minus the live laser grenades and just about everything else too), among others. Keith added the Galra books to the small library in their hall. They slotted onto the shelves, barely indistinguishable from the Altean tablets—a little thinner, less filigree. In the rec room, there was a projector and a host of old Altean film-equivalents in various degrees of dubious quality. Keith thought maybe he should screen them all first, but even with the help of the translators he couldn’t make enough heads or tails of their plots to tell whether they were appropriate for children in the first place.

The end of their hallway let out on to a broad viewing deck, where the kids could watch space passing by. The main bridge, the dining hall, and the officer’s lounge doors were all set to open if at least one paladin (or one Altean) was inside.
The lights turned down low when the Galra children went through and brightened a little when anyone else entered a room.

At best he could call it functional. The kids had… a place. A safe zone. There was a bit of room to roam, some things to see and do. Shiro said the most respectful thing would be to leave them alone for a while. Adjustment period. They needed space.

So why did it feel more like drawing a line in the sand? Do not cross. This side of the castle for paladins, this side for Galra. If no one pushed the boundaries, was it less like a cage?

Keith stood on the invisible border, looking in, looking out.

---

He didn’t see the children again for three days. The food trays disappeared. Sometimes things in one of their shared rooms looked a bit out of place, but if they ever came out when he was awake, they were better at hiding in the castle than in their own base.

He slept uneasily, woke early. A chilly shower in the morning usually shocked fatigue from his system, but today the haze of interrupted dreams lingered even as he shuffled around his room, dressing slow. His eyes kept sliding closed again and sticking there. He half-dozed, leaned dangerously far forward at the edge of his bed, trying to put on his socks, when a sound accomplished what freezing hair dripping down his neck hadn’t: Keith jerked upright. What was—what was that? He listened hard and there it came again: a high, piercing trill. Sounded like… a bird?

The chirp rang once more and Keith’s heartbeat spiked, strange sense of adrenalin-urgency making his teeth grit, every muscle along his spine tense.

Find the noise. Find the noise, make it stop.

Keith plunged toward his door, vaulting into the hallway. Here the sound was even louder; Keith wanted to slap his hands over his ears, but that might make it harder to find the source. The hallway was empty. The noise rang again. Keith took one faltering step and then broke into a run.

Find the noise, make it stop. Fast. Now.

He’d thrown open the door before he realized, and then he was in Lance’s room—the Galra children’s room—and the sound here was ear-splitting, enough to make him squint in pain.

It was Xerci. The moment he spotted Keith, he made the shattering chirp and reached for him, desperate enough to actually struggle to his own two feet.

Dulsara snatched him back. “Don’t! That’s not your papan!”

Keith reached out a tentative hand, held at bay by the molten ferocity of Dulsara’s glare and Niresh’s quiet anxiety, tucking herself further and further away from him.

“Is there… Is there something wrong? Is he—” Keith stumbled. Xerci pulled against the bigger girl, clawing at her hold, mounting mewls of displeasure tugging at Keith as harshly as his call. Dulsara snarled when Keith took another step forward.

“He’s looking,” she spat, “for his father.”

Oh. Oh god. Keith wavered between stepping forward and shrinking back, tried to form words and failed. Did he… did the boy not understand… Did he still not know? “Maybe just let me calm
“Did you touch him down?”

She stared at Keith without blinking, deadly still. “If you touch him now, I’ll bite through my tongue and die.”

Keith jerked as if he’d been slapped, had been slapped. Bluffing. She had to be—she wouldn’t leave the other two behind, no line of defense, but even if it was a bluff, what could he do? Couldn’t test it. She’d learned from being cowed by him the other day; smart, vicious, terrible as all the Galra were, she seized on the one threat he couldn’t bowl through with brute strength.

Her curled lip, raised hackles dared him: Try me.

Keith’s outstretched hand fell. Xerci chirped, frantic and louder, triggering—what, some sort of weird ass instinct Keith hadn’t even known he had? Something that made his blood roar.

“Just leave us alone,” she said. “No one needs you here.”

And he thought that was a lie, but what proof could he offer instead?

---

No one came down their hallway anymore. Keith never really had many visitors—Lance’s room was the only one near his, and Shiro knew to look for Keith on the training deck long before checking his cabin. But the corridor had never been empty really, Hunk or Pidge or Coran hunting for Lance at all hours, the blur of happy voices and full-throated laughter through the thin metal, and then sometimes Lance’s bitter need to compete over who could be the worse neighbor: hurling things from both sides at their shared wall, singing bad songs off-key at 3am in the morning, setting the blaring alarm ticker to ring at every. single. varga. of the night...

When Lance left, so did his friends. Even Coran’s footsteps whispered when he brought the children’s meals and took the dishes away.

Stepping into his hallway at the end of the night each day was like leaping from his lion without the protection of his paladin uniform, the titanic pressure of a freezing vacuum sealing up his lungs.

Keith tiptoed in his own room now.

One week became two.

It was very quiet.

---

The food was a problem.

Hunk swore by the kitchen’s database, which he’d discovered and decoded with Coran’s help months ago, but Keith didn’t understand it and therefore didn’t trust it. According to the yellow paladin, the database was the only thing standing between all the humans and violent deaths by poisoning from the very alien ingredients Hunk gathered from every corner of the universe.

“It works like this,” Hunk said, and then went off on a twenty minute long sparkly-eyed technical explanation peppered with tangents about clone-by-clone genome sequencing, unmethylated thymine, and the elegance of A-form geometry. Keith nodded along, but Hunk might as well have been speaking Altean for all Keith actually understood. He’d gotten an A in the one required biology class on the pilot track at Garrison, yeah, but he didn’t have the mind to really retain that
sort of information—just long enough between study guide and test to appease the professor. (What is it like, he wondered, to be Hunk and Pidge, to have the kind of brains that stored specifics for years without decay, when Keith could barely keep hold of his own memories, slipping through the cage of his skull, leaving black spots for faces, skipping records for voices?)

**Basically,** Coran said while he pat poor Keith pityingly on the head, it boiled down to the kitchen being capable of scanning any alien species’ genetic make-up and determining, on the spot, whether or not a particular fruit, vegetable, meat, or… other space oddity would be harmful to that person. The kitchen had a mile long database of every alien species the castle had ever scanned too, a veritable dictionary of what *not* to feed and to whom. Work of genius and all that.

Keith was inevitably suspicious. How could it possibly know everything that humans (that Galra) might get sick from, just from scanning one person? How did it distinguish between personal allergies and species wide no-go items? And just because someone could eat something, that didn’t mean it tasted even close to tolerable. Was there any indication of that in the database, what tasted good or didn’t? There was a lot more going on with this system than Hunk or Coran bothered to explain. It worked, like everything did in the castle, so why worry about it? Keith worried about everything.

“Maybe you shouldn’t put that in there,” he muttered, standing on tiptoe to peer over Hunk’s shoulder into his cooking pot for the tenth time since the children were brought on board.

Hunk blinked and held the blue carrot-looking vegetable up to inspect it. He gave it a cautious sniff, but it seemed to pass his strict scrutiny. “Uh, what’s wrong with it?”

Lightning flashes of nerves rooted Keith’s boots to the floor. He back-peddled, gaze darting around. “Food just shouldn’t be that shade of blue,” was all he could think of in the end.

Hunk’s eyebrows did a strange dance under his headband. He eyed the blue carrot-thing like it might be hiding a desire to murder his first-born child or something—distinctly betrayed. According to the system, this one was super healthy for humans and Galra alike. “It tastes so good though?”

Keith shuffled, looked away. “But it… looks gross,” he finished, lamely. He couldn’t exactly say he knew the kids would hate it because the last time Team Voltron ate it, while everyone else raved about the flavor, Keith was fighting desperately to keep from being violently ill: it tasted like soap and soured milk at the same time in his mouth.

He couldn’t exactly say he knew what things would bother the children because he was, you know, Galra.

Hunk scoffed. “You can’t judge a veg by its looks, man! There are untold riches in these limp blue limbs!”

“Just… trust me. They won’t eat anything if you put that in there.”

So the blue carrots were grudgingly vetoed, just like the bismol pink berries before them, the chocolately-colored but antifreeze-tasting paste, and some nut from a tree that was sentient enough to demand they pay by the pound for anything they took.

(Just like the little stretchy tubers Hunk tried to garnish Keith’s space pasta with, during that very first non-food-goo meal on Arus, or the shellfish from Isenkehr that had tasted wonderful but then laid Keith low for a week after eating it. Lance teased Keith endlessly for being a picky eater, but Keith was too busy their first few weeks in space trying not to usurp Hunk’s role as the barfy
paladin to even muster the slightest bit of shame for his so-called “delicate constitution.” On Earth, he’d long since learned what he could and could not eat. In space, literally everything was new. And it sucked, being the only one getting sick. Then he learned why, which sucked worse.)

“No, don’t put that in either.”

Hunk sighed. “You are really cramping my style.”

---

Three weeks.

Keith came back from the training deck very late one night, later than he had since they’d taken the children. Maybe being exhausted would make it easier to sleep, easier to ignore the inescapable desire to strain his ears all night, listening for the slightest hint of movement outside his door.

But his bed wasn’t empty. In a tangled nest of all Keith’s covers and sheets, the tiny Galra boy was fast asleep. One of his strange feet, more like dainty cloven hooves than claws, poked out from the cloth and twitched in time to whatever dream he was dreaming. How he’d gotten away from Dulsara, who knew, but if he took Xerci back to her now, she’d just hiss and spit herself blue instead of purple in the face until morning.

Keith was tired.

He put on his new pajamas, curled up in the free space left at the edge of the mattress.

“Papan?” the boy whispered, questing with his nose, moving closer blindly, too sleepy to open heavy eyes.

Keith didn’t touch him. The boy went still.

He just felt so tired all the time now.

---

It was an accident, when he ran into Niresh alone. Curiosity picked at him, a cautious thought, barely daring to form: had his mother ever made him a book like that, like the one with pretty sketches of the Galran alphabet, thin swirling edges, stars in place of dotted letters?

Would any of it… would any of it be familiar if he really looked?

Of course there was no one to see him, but Keith still peered left and right down the empty hall. (Not that anyone could tell what he was up to, even if they did come by. Or that he didn’t have a right to look at any book he wanted, thanks, but just. You know. In case.)

He crept down the hall to the rec room, and even in his head he felt silly—there was no reason sneak around, nothing covert about this operation, but he couldn’t really help feeling like he needed to stick close to the wall, silence his footsteps. He’d crossed the invisible line between the paladin half of the castleship and the Galra’s small carved out territory: a scout in a foreign, uncharted military zone. He might step on a landmine at any moment.

Keith sighed relief when he made it to the rec room, and slid through the door quick as he could. The door panel whooshing closed behind him almost drowned out the gasp and clatter in front. Almost.
Niresh was *right there*, two steps inside the rec room, barely a foot from Keith. The four glass tablet books she’d been holding—framed in gold, not the Galra books but Altean ones, although according to Allura they could display in any number of universal languages—fell to the floor, scattered between her feet and Keith’s.

She looked about as shocked as he did to find her there. She shrank under his continued stare, ears sinking. It was strange to watch her purple skin go pale under her glassy fur.

No one dared to move.

“Uh, hello,” Keith peeped. Niresh flinched and Keith cringed: he wasn’t wearing his translator and neither was she.

This was fine. They’d managed before. Slow and steady and quiet and they could get along okay. At a speed easily outstripped by snails, Keith knelt down. The Galra girl was four feet back before he even blinked, all her limbs pulled in close, defensive and small but ready. Keith gathered up all four of the glass tablets and held them out, humming some noise he hoped sounded inviting. She watched, looking between the books and Keith and back, but didn’t come closer.

Keith tipped his head, weighed his options—then sat down right in front of the door. He had nothing better to do, and there was no way the spirit of Shiro’s responsibility that camped out unwelcome in the back of Keith’s head could take issue with simply sitting. Sure, he’d just actively trapped Niresh in the room, but he meant well after all.

Keith put one of the books down on the floor and kicked it gently with his foot. It slid across the tile until it tapped into the toe of her boot. The girl watched it, watched his outstretched foot retreat, and surveyed the line of his shoulders for even a fraction of movement. It took her a minute, but finally she leaned half way down, paused, then scooped the book up and held it close. He barely bumped the next book, so it made it maybe two feet, perfectly centered between them.

The flash of recognition on her face—then frustration: she actually pursed her lips and wrinkled her nose—was reward in and of itself. Smart girl. She knew exactly what Keith planned, where this whole thing would end up. But would she play along? (Be brave enough for this, this little thing that wasn’t little at all?)

Niresh contemplated the book on the floor. He actually could see the moment she deflated. She stepped forward and snatched the book rattlesnake fast. Keith squished down his smile to keep it from growing.

She was waiting for it, when he put the third book down and scooted it scant inches from his own boots. The breath she let out had sharp edges. This was, Keith suddenly remembered, the only one of the children who actually attacked a paladin of Voltron without hesitation. Maybe he should be more careful?

Ha. Yeah right.

She met his eye again, assessing, and then made her move: he almost choked on a laugh when she refused to lean down so close to him—instead she stepped on the tablet’s frame, flipping the glass pane up with a flick of her foot and catching it in one smooth motion. He’d done the exact same thing with dropped knives a million times, practiced and too cool and way harder than it looked. Respect.

He didn’t put the last book down. He just sat up straight and held it out, but she didn’t move. Waiting him out? Well, Keith wasn’t exactly known for his patience, so maybe she could have, if
it wasn’t for the fact that just looking at such a small Galra was still sort of fascinating.

He hadn’t seen her at all in the last two weeks, not even a glimpse in passing as she high-tailed it away. No major signs of trouble, it didn’t look like she’d lost weight or anything, but there was something… Her fur looked a bit more matted maybe? Around her eyes was puffy. Not sleeping right?

When her dainty little hand finally reached out for the book, stopping and then bravely starting again, Keith realized her claws were getting long.

She only took two steps back when he stood up, brushing nonexistent dust from the back of his pants. She clutched the books against her black uniform while Keith loomed there awkwardly, his own errand long forgotten. “Have a good night, I guess?” was all he could think to say, lame and pointless and not even all that accurate given it felt like mid-afternoon, but hey, still not as weird as just walking away without a word, right? Scratching at the back of his head, Keith surrendered the doorway.

He made it almost to his own room when the sound of boots stopped him.

Niresh stood at the end of the hall, staring after him. “A-Avahdit,” she said, in the tiniest voice. Keith didn’t speak Galran, but he thought he could figure out her meaning anyway.

It was the first time she’d ever willingly spoken to him.

---

Life outside his tense corridor went on. They stopped on peaceful worlds. They restocked supplies, they bartered for better, they poured words of hope into the ears of every people they met. But they didn’t liberate any more planets. Not yet, not without some better plan in place. (Only no one wanted to talk about planning attacks anymore. No one wanted to talk about contingencies.)

Dulsara made an escape attempt on the third world they visited, a clever tactic of abusing the length of time it took the castle’s automatic doors to close behind people and all the manners of things that could be done to slow them down. She actually dismantled the interior hydraulic system in one of corridors without attracting any attention, which was pretty damn impressive, all said. But her disadvantages were too great, and she knew it: Niresh was quick on her feet but timid, and Xerci needed to be carried. She’d never leave them behind, but breaking out three people was infinitely harder and slower than one.

Black Lion caught the children before they were even a hundred yards from the castle ship.

They got more careful about the doors. She didn’t try again.

Team Voltron ate, they slept, they trained, they practiced with their lions, they played weird Altean board games whose winners always felt entirely arbitrary. Keith and Lance bickered, Allura and Coran revitalized this system and that, Pidge built a hover board which was confiscated by Shiro after she crashed it into a priceless pre-war heirloom Altean vase.

It felt, somehow, like putting on a show. Like dancing around the elephant in the room. A cold, tingling circuit of nervous energy swam under everything they did, made the fine hair on the back of his neck stand up. Keith kept looking over his shoulder like he expected someone else to be there. Lance and Hunk talked quieter, as if someone might be listening in.

When he returned to his room some nights, all he could hear were pattering footsteps on the other side of the wall. Ssshh, sshh whispers. Skittering claws.
It was like… living with three more space mice. The children were there; they were always there, but when he turned his back, when he couldn’t hear them, they were ghosts, nothing more than quick little shadows in the corners of his eyes. Where they went when he couldn’t see them, what they did when he wasn’t in—Keith had no idea.

A month. Then a month and a half. Shiro said give them time, but it started to feel like “them” meant someone other than the children. They handled things exactly as hands-off as Dulsara wanted, but somehow Keith couldn’t shake the feeling they were going horribly wrong.

Under everything, the electric-bright current of tension continued to writhe.

It felt like the whole castle was holding its breath. Something had to give.

-        -        -

It did, of course, though with far fewer theatrics than Keith expected.

On the training deck, Keith was working his way through the gladiator’s tenth level of difficulty. (“There are actually 250 different difficulty levels,” Allura tells them, grinning like a shark. “Altean teenagers weren’t even allowed to graduate from the academy until they could beat at least level 200. You paladins are lagging terribly!” But maybe it’s just that humans lag behind Alteans badly—only Shiro, at level 12 and Keith, winding down 10, have even made it above level 6, and both of them have unfair advantages: Shiro with his year of combat experience against vicious aliens in the gladiator ring and Keith, who… probably just qualifies as a vicious alien.)

Keith ducked under a sideways slice from the gladiator’s staff, turning immediately to protect his shoulders from a backward thrust. He’d practically memorized this level’s pattern of strikes now; he knew it would feint left before it came in with a quick jab to his right side. Keith leapt right, plunging forward, all his strength behind a downward swipe at its back, but the gladiator could move in ways people couldn’t. It rotated its torso in a complete circle to bring its staff up and block, a move that would have required Keith to break his spine if he wanted to get close to replicating.

The gladiator recovered easily from its failed feint and threw Keith off like his whole weight amounted to a sheet of paper. The red bayard howled as metal clashed, his blade screeching down the staff and glancing away. Keith leapt back, trying to gain some space, but it was hopeless—the droid was on him again in an instant, weaving through a flurry of blows so fast even Keith’s notorious speed could barely keep up. He blocked high, low, to the side, to the face, his wrist ringing with pain under the staggering power of each strike.

Sweat fell from his temple into the corner of his eye, an annoyance he couldn’t pause to address. His hair was glued to the back of his neck. Keith spun, quartering away from the robot to plant his foot and pivot: if he could get under the staff, he could disarm the gladiator just by digging the red bayard into the joints at its wrist. This might be his only chance to beat this level, the longest he’d lasted without being knocked down and out. The gladiator sped up again—

In the corner of his eye, purple flashed, and the split second of confusion (fear-shock-hyperawareness is the enemy here) was all the delay the gladiator needed. Its staff struck him directly in the ribs and Keith went tumbling end-over-end, the red bayard skittering away across the training deck floor. The far wall interrupted Keith’s spill, an abrupt stop as he barely avoided slamming his head into the hallway doorframe.

Half upside-down, Keith frantically hunted for the sheen of purple that distracted him, and—there was Niresh, leaning on the wall nearest the door, both her hands behind her back. When she saw
him looking, she sidled three more steps away, sliding along the metal wall like someone had bodily shoved her over. She looked stunningly out of place, a tentative dark mark in the overwhelmingly white room. She didn’t want to meet his stare, kept looking at him and then looking away, but one of her eyes narrowed more than the other, a sort of sidelong squint, and her mouth was just barely open, quick flicker of fang. Was that confusion maybe? Or disbelief?

The gladiator waited out its requisite pause for a floored opponent, then took a decisive step forward. Niresh cocked her head to the side and watched its advance. A sudden nervous tingle sparked under Keith’s skin, and the thought I should have gotten up as soon as I fell had just enough time to run through his head, complete with unpleasant images of exactly what could happen if the gladiator mistook Niresh for its target—and then there was no time at all to think anymore, because Niresh stepped away from the wall and slid into a full combat stance, knees apart, balance centered, and there was a massive difference between being mistaken for a target and making yourself a target—

Keith scrambled to his feet, but too late to make a difference: Niresh bolted across the floor, from zero to a hundred in a split second, her boots machine gun tpp-tpp-tpp-ing on the tile.

“End train—”

She swooped under the gladiator’s strike and leapt straight up, crashing like a freight train feet first into the robot’s chest. The tiny Galra girl didn’t weigh anything, but it was enough kinetic energy to tip the gladiator’s torso back, and that was all she was aiming for apparently; her hand struck out at the droid once, twice, three times, seeking strange places: at its throat just under its chin, in the groove between its chest plate and abdomen, in the crook of one arm.

Niresh landed perfectly steady on her feet. The gladiator’s single blue lamp eye flickered and went dark before the robot dissolved in a shower of pixels.

“Level 10 exercise clear,” the training deck’s digital voice declared.

Just like that. Something he’d been working toward for weeks. She wasn’t even taller than his hip. Like… seven years old, max. (Another late thought: if peace-loving Altean kids could defeat the gladiator droid, what could military-born Galra children do?)

But there had to be limits!

“Did you—did you cheat?!” Keith croaked, throwing his arms out because he had no idea what else to do with himself at the moment.

The Galra girl glanced at him, her head still cocked far to the side, and if she’d maybe looked a little disbelieving before, now she looked completely taken aback: huge round eyes and ears angling away. Her chin wrinkled a little.

“I didn’t cheat,” she murmured back, cautious and faltering. The translator glinted at her throat; Keith’s was still in his room, on the little shelf-desk, gathering dust. At least one of them could be semi-responsible. Niresh’s voice was practically flat in comparison to Dulsara’s, high and reedier, but with that same familiar Southern accent. “That’s how you’re supposed to do it,” she whispered.

“No it isn’t,” he snapped, crossing his arms even though he knew he shouldn’t and huffing out a breath that barely lifted his sweaty bangs off his forehead. Seriously? He’d wasted weeks on something a kid was smart enough to figure out with a look?

Softly, the ghost of Shiro’s responsibility warned him: Be nice. Be gentle.

“Yes, it is?” the girl tried, almost boxing up the words and poking them across the space between them. She shifted in a strange way, as if her body was a weight she had to carry around, instead of something integral to herself. “Why would you fight nice when there’s a faster way to win?”

*Why would you fight nice?*

There it was: the cold, predatory practicality that made the Galra a uniformly unstoppable force, dominating everything and everyone they came across in the vastness of space. Seize upon each and any means to win. Find the weakness and exploit it. Merciless. Relentless.

(Are you any different?)

But was she wrong? Practicality. Pragmatism. Plasticity. Maybe *that* was exactly what the Altean training exercise *was* trying to teach. Even a foe more skilled than yourself could be beat by strong strategy and clear thought? Kind of simple, but then again, if this *was* designed for kids…

Then Keith realized: was every level like that? Was there some easy way to do every single one of these things, simple enough that Altean and Galran children could do them in their sleep? Had Keith just been crashing his way through the training levels like a bull in a china shop, relying on brute strength instead careful strategy?

Hint: yes.

“How did you even know where to hit to disable it?”

The girl made a strange gesture, balling up one hand and then pretending to throw it over her shoulder like a piece of trash. Keith only realized this was the Galra equivalent of a shrug when she mumbled: “It’s the same as our training.”

What? *How?* Keith sagged back down against the wall, the fight going out of him in one long, pathetic exhale as he slid down the surface to sit at its base. Niresh tracked his movement, and then, to Keith’s shock, she walked back to him—at least closer to him, six feet or seven feet away. She leaned on the wall again and didn’t say anything more.

What was she doing here? Was she waiting for him to say something, or working up the courage to say something herself? Keith couldn’t read her at all right now, her expression closed off and carefully blank, body turned mostly away.

More than that, he thought, how did she get in? The training deck was definitely *not* on the list of approved rooms for the children, and Keith knew the room locked behind him. Even with Coran and Allura watching close, had Dulsara managed to do something else with the doors? He almost wanted to ask her about it, but when he peeked up at her from the corner of his eye, her expression killed the words on his tongue. The closer he looked, the more she just seemed… sad. Not the same way Dulsara did, face watery and fangs bared, but a sort of quiet shutting down, chin tucked in, eyes half-lidded. Her arms fidgeted behind her back. To Keith’s amazement, she suddenly scooted along the wall a step closer to him.

It was silent. He had no idea what was going on.

“You’re not…” she whispered, paused. Keith waited. “You’re not a spy for the Galra, are yah?”

*What?* Keith couldn’t even get any farther in his thoughts than that, just a confused tumble of *huh*—where did—why?
“Thought you could be,” Niresh clarified when he didn’t answer, “cause you don’t show nobody you’re Galra.”

The tumult of unsure thoughts settled into a single, repeated phrase: Oh shit. Oh shit. Oh shit. One thing for the kids to know and another thing for them to know he was hiding. All it would take was one vindictive second to announce it to the whole castle and even if Shiro and the rest of the paladins didn’t believe it, Allura the uncontrollably curious wouldn’t be able to get the idea out of her head until she found a way to prove it false, and then she wouldn’t be able to prove it false—

How he could tell Niresh was looking at him from the corner of her eye, Keith didn’t know, but she was, surveying his pale, frozen face and waiting for something. “But you’re not a spy,” she repeated, reluctant—hoping he’d correct her, tell her that actually he was a deep undercover agent sent by Zarkon to track the Empire’s enemies, relay their weaknesses, poison Voltron from the inside out…

“I’m not,” he admitted. Why did it feel like admitting he’d done something wrong? It didn’t sit well with him, heavy as a brick on his tongue. For certainty, for reassurance, he added: “I’m a paladin of Voltron.”

When Niresh spoke again, her voice hitched, less a stutter than engine chambers flooding. “Why?” She ground one boot against the wall behind her. “Why do you hurt Galra if you’re Galra too?

What did he fucking say to that? He’d never had to justify being a defender of the universe.

“Because…” he stumbled, plucking his sweat-stained shirt from his chest. “Because Voltron is a force for good. I know it. It’s what we have to do to bring peace.”

“How do you know?” she asked, not an accusation like Dulsara would make but searching and searching for something.

But how could he prove goodness? What words could he use to make her feel Hunk’s kindness, Lance’s self-sacrifice, Pidge’s exuberance, Shiro’s gentle leadership? How could he explain the way it felt to watch the Arusians imitate Voltron’s victory, to see the sun rise over the crystalline back of the Balmera with Shay and her freed people? The way it felt to meet the faces of aliens from worlds lightyears apart and say, “Yes, you’re safe now. We’re here; you’re safe now”? Keith had never been good at talking without the pressure of describing feelings for which there weren’t even words, let alone when his answer might make the difference between building trust and sowing more hatred.

“It’s,” he mumbled at last, “it’s not something I can explain. There’s… so many reasons. I think… if you watch, maybe you’ll just see it?” It felt incurably pathetic, too weak an answer for so serious a situation. Keith bit the inside of his cheek, his throat working hard to swallow the feeling of failing miserably.

“Okay,” Niresh said to the rest of the empty room, and that was all.

She lingered there a moment longer, then pushed off the wall and left, the door swishing closed softly behind her. Keith watched her go, confused, unhappy. He wiped his brow and picked up his bayard.

“Begin training sequence 11,” he said.

- - -

It was three minutes of conversation. Three minutes of confusing, unconvincing conversation, not
even close to enough to change anything, to magically make her trust him. But it was something, at least. A chink in the silent, solid barrier between the Galra children and the paladins, a light under the door Dulsara kept irrevocably closed.

And something was always better than nothing, even if it felt like moving a centimeter forward with ten thousand miles still to cross. Patience and tiny steps and more patience. That’s all they could even reasonably hope for.

So of course it came as an absolute shock when, the very next morning, he opened his hallway door and found Niresh waiting.

She skittered back as he stepped into the hall, knitting at the sides of her black suit. There was a war going on on her face, in her body language, ready to run but forcing herself to stay.

(“Keith, it’s okay. We won’t hurt you, I promise. You can come closer.” Somewhere his replacement mother’s hand, inching. “Look, I have a treat. Do you want it? Come take it gentle, okay? That’s a good boy.”)

Keith closed his mouth. Reeled himself in. A million things he wanted to do, but instead of trying to push her, he just nodded his acknowledgment and went on with his business: heading back to the training room for an early go because he’d almost passed Shiro last night and couldn’t wait to see the sour look on the black paladin’s face when he fell to second place.

Without a word, she followed him, exactly ten paces behind, no more and no less.

-        -        -

She watched him train. She trailed after him every morning that week, stood far off, silent, observing, and disappeared as quiet as she showed up.

Would seeing him fight really help her learn anything about Team Voltron? Could she determine the righteousness of their cause by watching him get knocked on his ass every ten minutes for two hours a day? Keith doubted his consistent failures would ever prove he meant well. But it was better than living with mice, than living for rare, fleeting glimpses of the children like split-second sightings of mythical creatures in dense woods. And anyway, even if she was no closer to judging the worth of Voltron, she was judging something as she stood there.

On the fourth day, Niresh’s hands came out from behind her back to curl into fists at her side. One of her fangs hung over her bottom lip, cutting up any words before they could escape.

On the fifth day, she sighed.

On the sixth day, she could apparently not take it anymore. As Keith crashed past her, rolling across the training deck floor at break-neck speed and losing every ounce of air in his lungs, she lifted her claws like she intended to swat him, but with the most perplexed expression on her face: lip curled, eyes squashed narrow.

“I told you, didn’t I?” she said (although it came across to Keith more like: “I tolled yuh, didden I?”), the words getting away from her before she could remember there were reasons for her silence. She wasn’t angry, didn’t raise her voice above the bare breath it took to whisper the words, but she was unmistakably dissatisfied. “Training’s not a test of strength; it’s a test of strategy. Why don’t you pay no attention?”

“What am I supposed to be paying attention to?!” Keith growled, righting himself just in time for the gladiator’s next attack. He looked for puzzles at the start of this level—he’d looked for anything new or different about the arena or the droid or the situation and there hadn’t been
anything, just an all-out relentless assault right from the start.

Niresh’s gaze darted away; one of her boots tapped loudly on the trim of the wall behind her.

It took Keith another half hour of being thrashed to realize that she’d been tapping in time to the gladiator’s swings, and that the long pause between two brutal forward thrusts was a ruse for the split-second gap between the pair of swallow cuts, *tpp-tpp*, when a feint at exactly the right angle would cause the robot to fall on its own blade.

In retrospect, how straightforward everything seemed. Today’s lesson: Vigilance. The opening may come when least expected.

(“*And someday, the blade I carried will be the one to strike at the very heart of the empire.*”

“You say that a lot, Momma.”

“*Because I need you to remember it.*”

But it’s strange, how memory works. How the elliptical orbit of comets means they never fail in fading away.)

“It’s Level 13 exercise complete.”

Niresh didn’t smile, but something in her face, in the tense lines of her stance, had changed.

---

It wasn’t surprising to see Niresh outside his door the next morning. It was surprising to see Xerci, the tiny boy balanced on the tiny girl's hip, overwhelming her with his wriggling and poking. Her ears lay flat against her head, away from his grabby hands. Keith was no expert on Galra, but even to him, the throaty rumble Niresh vented between grit teeth spoke plainly how exasperated she was, leaning far over just to keep Xerci from sliding down her leg. Keith wondered how long she’d been waiting.

"Good to… see you again?" he began. Niresh’s flat expression went even flatter, and she gave no hint of acknowledging the greeting. Instead, Xerci spun around when he noticed Keith, beaming a huge, doe-eyed smile in the red paladin's direction. The boy let go of Niresh, balancing precariously, to throw his arms out toward Keith.

"Up!" he declared, with all the confident enthusiasm of a favorite word. "Up! Up!"

Keith leaned to grab him (and earned tiny claws and fingers burying themselves in his hair, *ugh ow please stop don't do this why me*). Xerci babbled broken sentences in Keith's ear, punctuated by noises that weren't even trying to be words, just pleased little grunts and growls.

"Do you..." Keith stared at Niresh. “Want me to do something with him?”

"Dulsara is still asleep," she said, as if that explained everything.

"Okay?"

"She'll be mad when she wakes up," Niresh added, like that was somehow clarification.

Maybe, in a way, it was. Dulsara was definitely the leader, and if she wouldn’t speak to any of the paladins, then no way did she want Niresh or Xerci doing it. Even if Niresh consented to Keith’s dumb idea of *watching* Team Voltron, even if Xerci seemed to be putting up a hell of a fight to get
into Keith’s room at night, neither of them were free except when Dulsara literally couldn’t stop them.

And what was he supposed to do about it? Tell Niresh he’d talk with Dulsara and get her to stop being so bossy? Yeah, right. She was doing exactly what Keith would do in her place—no, probably even less than he’d do in her place. The fact that she wasn’t sleeping in front of the door to barricade it and using the bedsheets to tie a leash on Xerci frankly stunned him.

If the story was the other way around… If Team Voltron had been caught by the Galra, what would Keith really, honestly do?

Fight with every fiber of his being. Tear off any hand that so much as threatened to touch his comrades. Be the sword and shield with even Shiro behind him because he would never, never let the enemy have anyone he—

How was he supposed to tell her to stop when he understood?

Dulsara was a good girl, doing her best.

"Maybe..." Keith scrubbed at his hair with his free hand and trying not to wince when he pulled it out of Xerci’s claws. "We should skip morning training today.” One thing for Dulsara to catch them wandering around, another thing to get caught with a weapon in his hand. Keith didn’t think Galra could spit acid or rain brimstone, but there were some things he wasn’t willing to risk testing. “Do you want to go eat?” he tried instead.

Niresh didn’t exactly say yes, but she didn’t say no either. She just watched him, impassively, taking in the way he held Xerci tight and close (not just copying Lance, thank you!) to keep him from wiggling around.

Okay then. Keith set off down the hall, and just like the mornings before, Niresh followed behind, trailing back almost as she didn’t quite want to be associated with his presence; they were travelers down the same hallway, but they weren’t necessarily travelling together.

By the time they made it to the kitchen though, she’d closed the gap, almost stepping on the backs of his feet she was so close to his legs. It took Keith a long second to grasp: she’d never been this way before. She didn’t know where he was leading her or what they’d encounter, and maybe she wanted to keep her distance when he was the only threat in the room, but when anyone else could be lurking around the next corner, seemed like she’d rather take her chances with Keith.

Something cold crawled up the back of Keith’s throat. If she knew how sweet Hunk was, how excited Lance was, she’d be much more comfortable with them than Keith, who had no idea what he was doing. Just because he was Galra didn’t make him a good choice. (Underneath that, another thought Keith burst like a blister and still couldn’t drain away: There’s nothing good about being Galra.)

The kitchen doors opened with a swoosh, and Keith slunk inside (as much as one could slink, holding a baby who seemed to think folding his spine in a U around one’s arm constituted reasonable or healthy practices). It was early still, so no way that anyone would actually be awake—and of course, because the summary of his life was still that he should stop expecting anything to ever go his way, there stood Hunk, flitting between a baking sheet and the cutting board. He hummed under his breath, a bouncy tune Keith didn’t recognize. He most definitely hadn’t heard them come in.

When Keith cleared his throat, Hunk jumped four feet straight up in the air and whirled,
brandishing the knife he was using to cut... something that maybe looked like a vegetable. Niresh clung to Keith’s leg, hiding herself completely behind him.


“Holy crow,” Hunk wheezed, lowering the knife enough that he could cover his racing heart. “You scared the heck out of—” Then he noticed Xerci and Niresh, peeking just the barest bit around Keith’s leg. “Oh,” he squeaked. He looked down at the knife still in his hand and flung it on the counter as if it had suddenly caught fire. “Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry! I had no idea everyone was coming!”

Keith braced, pressing back into Niresh’s prickling grip, to be bastion against panic from either side of the room. “I didn’t expect anyone else to be up this early.”

Irritation outweighed Hunk’s nerves, apparently. “I know,” he moaned, slumping over. “Trust me, I am not a morning juniberry. But Lance was like ‘Dude, that cheese stuff we got on Llenox-5 looks so good; you should totally make quiche!’ and I was all ‘But we have no dough. And no eggs. And it’s only sort of cheese!’ and then he was all ‘Gordon Ramsay could do it’ and I just...” His eyes narrowed. One fist clenched. “Couldn’t let that stand.”

“So... Lance was Lance, and you fell for it again.”

Hunk heaved an aching sigh over his jutted bottom lip. His bangs skittered around his face. “He did the eyelash flutter, man.”

It was 110% nerve-wracking that Keith didn’t need to watch Hunk clasp his hands, make pouty lips, and blink twenty times in a row to know exactly what the “eyelash flutter” looked like. He could even hear the drawn out whine of Lance’s “Pleaseee?” in a perfect echo of the blue paladin’s voice because yeah, Voltron’s mind-meld was actually kind of creepy and that’s why they never talked about it.

In his arms, Xerci got bored of trying to stare at the ground over his own back and moved on to trying to find all the squishy places between each of Keith’s ribs with the pointy toe of one boot. This was where Keith would have turned the boy around and left his feet to dangle, if he had any skill with children. But he didn’t. So instead, Keith pretended he was not under painful assault, ignored Hunk’s concerned stare (“Uh, do you maybe want to...”), and prodded: “So you’re really making quiche?” Quiche. He’d had that before. Maybe?

Hunk grinned, nose up. “Well, I don’t mean to brag, but—"

Keith crept a little closer, though not close enough to put the food in danger of disappearing into Xerci’s bottomless pit of a stomach. Niresh didn’t follow. She shuffled a step or two to the side, keeping Keith between herself and Hunk, and then thought better of standing there in the open: without a word, she darted around the kitchen island, completely hidden from view. A piping little warning growl made Xerci shrink in Keith’s hold.

Then, of course, it got awkward. Hunk looked like he wanted to say something, eyes darting between Keith and the kitchen island while he also tried to go back to chopping at the little green stalks on the cutting board. The slip of the knife close and closer to his fidgeting fingers made Keith sweat.

It didn’t help that Niresh was the one who bit Hunk. Or that Hunk was the one who tried to take her from the base in the first place. Lovely first impressions all around.

“Come out,” Keith insisted, patience in the wind. “You won’t learn anything from there.”
Niresh growled again. Xerci turned his whole upper body to chirp back at her.

“You don’t have to come close,” Keith huffed, “just come out.” Keith was born in the desert. He’d seen a western movie once. A tumbleweed might as well have blown through the kitchen for as long as their stand-off lasted.

Finally, Niresh poked one eye around the island, followed by one arm and one boot. She seemed convinced that qualified as coming out, seeing as she didn’t move a step farther.

Well, good enough. When Keith shrugged, it unsettled Xerci, and the boy wobbled ninety degrees to the side before Keith could catch him. The little bugger laughed.

Collecting himself, Xerci, and maybe the two remaining shreds of his pride still left, Keith pointed at the yellow paladin. Xerci seized and gnawed on the extended finger in a flash, which Keith patently ignored. “You should be nice to him. Hunk’s the one who’s been cooking all your food.” Well, at least all the food that wasn’t space goo. Their fresh supplies weren’t limitless.

Niresh considered at Hunk, wary and mistrusting. She still didn’t speak out loud, but finally she crossed one fist over her chest and gave him a shallow nod.

Hunk’s smile wobbled a little. The last time they’d seen that Galra gesture of respect, it’d been on an army of drones marching out to war against them. “No problem!” he babbled. “None at all! I just hope everything was okay, like if anything was bad, just tell me and I’ll make sure I get it down, no more of whatever it is. We totally don’t want to make you eat something you don’t like and—” Hunk’s breath wound to a trickle as he rambled, and he shook his head so hard his bandana tails whipped around. Keith could feel the rising tension radiating off of him again, making his own skin prickle as it washed over to Niresh and especially Xerci, who began to fuss.

“Yeah, that’s… great,” Keith interrupted, stalling for time so he could find something, anything to distract everyone. He hit upon something finally: “Why don’t you just… explain what you’re doing? The military doesn’t make any food from scratch, right?” He glanced to Niresh for confirmation, and she nodded, albeit reluctantly, almost her whole face disappearing behind the island again so that all Keith saw was the dip of one ear. They’d never actually strolled around a Galra battle cruiser long enough to confirm, but Keith would bet their starship canteens offered nothing much fancier than the castle’s food goo. Resources were short in space, and goo apparently infinitely replicable. It’d be entirely magical if it weren’t for the fact that it was so unsatisfying...

Honestly, Keith didn't know much about cooking either. Maybe he should have, after living alone in the shack in the desert for a year, but actually he'd just survived off rejected MREs from Garrison that got dumped at a recycling facility not that far from his hidden home. The guys who ran the factory couldn't do anything with packets still full of food; they just trashed it otherwise. And when the MREs ran out between shipments, he took the hour's hoverbike flight to the nearest town and washed dishes at the diner for leftovers. He wasn’t particularly proud of it, in retrospect, not a story he'd ever share with Shiro, but he had no money. Garrison was his school, his employment, and his guardians all rolled into one. He didn't even know his social security number (if he ever had one), so not like he could have gotten a real job even if he tried...

(“Okay, well then, what's your permanent address?”

"I don't have one."

"And your phone number?"

"I don't have one."
"A parent or guardian's number we could use instead?"

"Don't have one.")

Well, that wasn’t about food anymore, was it?

Hunk stared askance at him, one brow scrunched lower than the other. Worried? Frustrated? Both? It wasn’t always easy to tell. Then the yellow paladin shrugged. “Well, far be it from me to dissuade you witnessing an artiste in action.” He peeked over at Niresh. "But if it gets boring, you can totally leave. Won’t hurt my feelings. Okay, it might kinda hurt if I’m being honest, but…”

Niresh crept out from behind the island a half step further. She didn’t give any other sign of acknowledgement, not even a hint of eye contact with Hunk, but the moment he turned back to the counter, she fixed her gaze on his every minute twitch.

"So!" Hunk cleared his throat, some of the tension slipping away in favor of the comfort of expertise. "These things,” he pointed, “are kind of like eggs. They’re not egg-eggs because I mean I love eggs and all, but I am not down with trying to figure which alien eggs are good for eating and which will instead infest our bodies with hideous chestburs—"

Perhaps for the best, Hunk was interrupted by Xerci cheering: "Egg! Egg!" The boy squirmed in Keith's hold, reaching with both hands for the basket of tan spheres on the counter. "Fuuuuuwhooo, fuuuwhoooolijiiiii!" he squawked.

"What are you trying to tell us, adorable baby xenomorph? Speak your wisdom!" Hunk was dead serious, his ear craned down like if he listened a little harder he'd figure out the secrets of the universe or decode some fascinating ancient prophecy from Xerci's babbles. From the corner of his eye, Keith watched Niresh fluff every hair on her head and then lay it flat again all at once, the skin of her face darkening under her glass fur. Embarrassed? Her nose wrinkled. "Come on," Hunk urged. "Say it again, little guy!

"Fuuuuuwhoooolijiiiii!" Xerci complied.

"It's the sound a Ghurty makes," Niresh mumbled at last, unenthusiastic, almost too quiet for anyone to hear. "They're big, blue..." Her translator hitched, bridging the gap between human terms and what existed out in the universe. "...birds" it settled on. "You can eat the eggs." That was all she was willing to eke out; her lips pressed down into a firm sealed line.

"Huh," Hunk mused. "We ever seen anything like that?" Keith thought back, then shook his head. Big blue chickens, probably hard to miss.

Speaking of, where did the kids know them from? Military space bases weren’t exactly legendary for their livestock populations. (From a book, he thought, too late to stop it. From a children’s book, from bright, happy inhuman shapes splashing crowing over a glass page, drawn with care for the curious.)

“Anyway, we’re tragically Ghurty-less, so these are not really eggs,” Hunk went on, picking up one of the spheres and rolling it a bit. It jiggled grotesquely. “They’re more like loosely condensed strands of conjugated proteins? I picked them up at the last trading post. I think they were originally designed as supplementary rations for carnivorous species on extended space flights, but they have a similar viscosity to soft-boiled eggs and the taste isn’t bad so they should be able to fill in for the real thing…” He frowned. “Hopefully.” He moved down the counter. Behind Keith, Niresh had to move three steps for Hunk’s one just to keep him in her line of sight around the island. If she was maybe drifting forward a little too, closer to them, well, Keith wasn’t going to mention it.
“And this is the cheese that Lance was going all crazy about.” A blocky mound of white took up a whole square of the counter, with a small mountain already grated beside. It certainly looked like cheese—and smelled like it too. Xerci sneezed ferociously when they leaned a little closer. (Hm. Cheese. Kind of like milk, wasn’t it? Maybe this could help with the whole unstunting thing.)

Niresh shifted her weight. She wanted to say something; she didn’t want to say anything. Maybe she was willing to watch, maybe she wanted to know the truth of what really happened and why and how to go on living from here out, but that didn’t mean she wanted to be friendly or forget. A literal battle waged on her face, in the sharp angles of her posture, between her desire to understand and control the things around her and her desire not to ask for any help from anyone.

“Never heard of cheese?” Keith guessed. She stared at her boots.

“No cheese?” Hunk mourned. “How have the Galra not conquered a cheese planet yet?” Keith bit down his warning growl because the yellow paladin was already shearing off small pieces of the cheese with his knife. The first one didn’t even make it to Keith before Xerci snagged it and sniffed it all over, squishing it a bit too hard between his fingers. For once, the boy didn’t immediately shove the food in his mouth.

“I know it smells weird,” Keith laughed, “but it tastes good.” Whether or not Xerci understood his whole statement, the boy overcame his reservations and gobbled up the cheese. He made a strange face for a second, his mouth puckered, eyes shut tight, but then he swallowed and licked his lips.

“Yummy!” he proclaimed his final judgment. Hunk’s watery smile dissolved into a real one, and he passed the second nibble of cheese to Keith high over Xerci’s head. Niresh was closer now than she had been a minute before, hidden behind Keith again. After a long hesitation, she took the sliver of cheese he offered, plucking it from his fingers like a delicate bird and just sort of holding on to it, like despite Xerci’s endorsement—and his desperate attempts to escape Keith’s arms to steal more—it still might somehow taste intolerable. Poisoned, maybe.

She finally resolved to eat it, gingerly closing her fangs over it. She rolled the cheese from one cheek to the other. When she finally swallowed it down, there was no measurable change in her expression. She just stared at Keith’s legs in front of her, same as before.

“Was it… okay?” Hunk asked.

She met his eyes for the first time, face perfectly flat, and nodded, only once, before she turned away again.

“R-Right then.” He struggled to recover. “So that’s cheese! It’s made in a really interesting way, and from what I can tell, it’s made the same way on other planets as it is on Earth, which is kinda crazy when you think of all the things that totally aren’t made the same way, like neutrino recyclers, and also why were we able to find cheese but not milk? It doesn’t make sense!”

“Hunk,” Keith sighed.

“Oh, rambling. I was totally rambling, wasn’t I? Sorry, super sorry. These,” he pointed at the reddish pile of diced lumps next to the cheese, “are space potatoes, and these are—not for you!” the yellow paladin yelped, making his body a wall where Xerci reached for a pile of green leaves on the counter nearest them. Hunk made an X with his arms. “Those aren’t good for Galra, so don’t even think about it!”

Keith was inclined to very much not think about it. Spinach was the food of the devil himself and people who willingly ate lettuce just needed better things to do with their lives.
“Normally you’d add cream,” Hunk had continued without Keith’s attention, “but seeing as we have cheese but no milk, we don’t have any, so I’m using juice from this thing that’s kind of like a coconut; no idea how that’s gonna taste...” So long as anyone but Coran or Shiro was cooking it, Keith would bet on solidly on “great.” Then: did the coconut come from the same world as the banana god?

“You put all that in these little crusts, bake at 2000 Celsius for three seconds, and tada, quiche.” Hunk gestured toward the two baking trays, already laid out with even rows of tiny bread-looking cups. They weren’t quite the right color, too dark, but if Hunk said they were crusts, probably close enough. “Then we’ll garnish with a dash of mystery spice and these.” The yellow paladin finally reached the cutting board and the thin green stalks he was chopping. Hunk pondered the vegetable for a long second. “Well, I have no idea what they’re actually called, so I dub thee space spring onions from now on, I guess.” He flourished his hands just a little over the organized spread of his work, chin up and chest out. “It’s pretty simple stuff, really.”

Simple. Yeah. Keith thought he’d have better luck jumping off a cliff without a jet pack than trying to successfully turn all this weird stuff into a single edible dish. There’d be significantly less danger involved for everyone else if he didn’t touch the crazy, probably-nuclear Altean stove, anyway.

So of course, “You guys wanna help?” Hunk asked.

Whether Keith or Niresh shook their head faster, or which of them shook their head more vehemently, was a photo finish. No thanks, just no; Keith wanted to actually be able to eat today. As for Niresh, Keith wasn’t sure if she thought she wouldn’t be able to help or if she was just unwilling, but there was no need to push it either way. The fact that she was willing to at least sort of interact with Hunk without trying to, you know, bite him was a really good sign. In Keith’s admittedly questionable books of conduct, anyway.

So Hunk went back to putting about, mixing this and that, whipping egg-things and shredding more cheese and chopping the space spring onions, while all Keith, Niresh, and Xerci did was… well, stand there. But it wasn't awkward, really. Hunk started lightly humming again, maybe a little bit louder than before, less to himself and more for the whole room. The sounds of whatever song he repeated rose and fell with the pace of his work, lilting and lulling. When Keith retired to one of the stools around the island, Xerci curled down against Keith's chest, humming too, off-time and off-key. Though it took her another five minutes, Niresh finally joined them.

She sat in the stool farthest from any of them, the island in between, observing every single move Hunk made.

She didn't necessarily look curious, but Keith thought he knew better. Dulsara was expressive and straightforward—there was something about Niresh more withdrawn, more internal and more cautious. She watched deliberately, as if collecting reconnaissance for a vital mission, each moment more important to her work than the one before. And she'd thought he was a spy. Keith entertained the idea for the moment that it might be the opposite: that she might have come to him intentionally, maybe even at Dulsara's demand, so that the Galra children could start gathering data to release to Zarkon and the empire at their first opportunity. That... Well, wasn’t necessarily an alarming thought but it was the kind of thing he needed to keep in mind, the kind to watch out for down the road. It would make perfect sense to send Niresh, wouldn’t it? The quiet one, the one who hadn’t shouted back at Allura...

Then again, what kind of recon could be gained from watching breakfast? The special little locus in his brain reserved for conspiracies flashed bright. Breakfast could be useful info, couldn’t it? Because it meant the paladins didn't always rely on self-contained systems, housed within the protected Castle of Lions. They would eat things from other planets, from other people. A
poisoned vegetable in the right place could make it on board and kill them all.

Note to self: Double-check the coconuts from now on. And the cheese. And the conjugated protein egg things.

The quiche was done long before Keith expected it, not in the least part because the Altean stove worked as weird as the rest of the castle, and could super heat without burning so everything cooked in about two seconds flat. Woe be on Shiro, who always took his attempts at food out exactly 1.5 seconds too late and had nothing to show for his work but charcoal. He was trying. Keep trying, sad giant paladin.

In this, of all things, Hunk was speedier and more prepared than their fearless leader. He took the quiche out at exactly the right second, exactly the right temperature, and exactly the right degree of done. The heavenly smell of warm cheese and dough wafted throughout the room, and Keith was only a little embarrassed to notice he, Niresh, and Xerci were all sniffing in exactly the same noisy manner.

Keith had never noticed before, but Hunk’s oven mitts were shaped like Yellow Lion. The corresponding paladin juggled his two trays of quiche expertly, setting them under the embedded blade-less fan to cool. And because this was the Castle of Lions, of course, the fan got the quiche to edible temperature in mere seconds and then left them exactly there, not cooling one degree below optimal. Magic, for sure.

Hunk whipped the quiche off the baking trays and onto two different serving trays speedily as any professional chef. “These are for us,” he said as he set aside the quiche with the disgusting-looking green leaves in them. “Andd these are for you all,” he concluded over the other batch. Keith was just about to fetch some plates so they could eat at the island together (something, he thought, something about eating together felt important, and he couldn’t tell whether it was an older feeling, from the back of his head where the memories flit about like dragonflies, or something more recent, maybe even an artefact of Allura’s crazy bonding techniques, food goo fights and paladin lunches taking their toll)—anyway, he was about to get up for plates when the far door of the kitchen whshed open, admitting a bleary-eyed green paladin and a radiant Allura and Coran, already chatting exuberantly about where to head next.

From the corner of his eye, Keith saw Niresh stiffen in her seat. Too many people at once, way too many people in way too small a space. Swift but purposefully, Keith stood, bringing Xerci with him. He gestured for Niresh to grab the tray of Galra-safe quiche and stepped between her, Pidge, and the Alteans, who stalled in the doorway, equal bug-eyed blinking on all their faces.

“Um,” Hunk squeaked, articulately. “Hi everybody?”

Keith ushered Niresh across the room. “We’re,” he managed in lieu of a greeting, “just gonna go.” Xerci waved excitedly around Keith’s shoulder as the near door closed behind them. Niresh took a quick, deep breath as soon as they were safe in the empty hall.

“Let’s go eat,” Keith suggested, because the quiche weren’t getting any more ready, and honestly he was too hungry for any of this nonsense.

“Okay,” Niresh said, her voice just a shade louder now that only Keith and Xerci could hear her. Relieved, maybe. And that relief lasted all of the four minutes it took to walk back to their corridor, where the hallway door whipped open and emitted Dulsara, practically spitting fire.

“Where did you take Niresh and Xerci?!!” she demanded, fists ball ed up so hard Keith worried she’d cut herself on her own claws.
“Pipe down,” he warned, four minutes hungrier than the last time he resolved to be too hungry to deal with nonsense. “We just went to get breakfast.”

Dulsara made a valiant, valiant effort to not sniff at the quiche. Keith saw it happen anyway, and the accompanying barest flicker of interest before she could hide it away again, her nose tiny-twitching in a tell-tale giveaway. “We don’t want your stupid food anyway! That looks gross!”

“It’s good,” Niresh said, not arguing, just a matter-of-fact interjection. Dulsara scowled like she’d been stabbed in the back by her closest ally.

“If you don’t want it,” Keith droned, ducking around her where she stood like a miniature monolith in the middle of hallway, “I’ll eat yours too.” From the edge of his vision, he caught her split second of wide-eyed regret. “And if it’s so stupid, I’ll make sure Hunk doesn’t make anything else like this for you. You can have food goo, since that’s better.”

She was too smart to fall for his needling and too proud to admit the threat made her nervous for even a second, but nevertheless she stomped along after them, muttering unhappy insults under her breath. Keith knew better than to really listen, but he caught “Of course a race traitor would —” and that… it was an automatic reaction to recoil from that, to want to turn and shout her down, because what did that even mean for him—a traitor? To whom? To the Galra, who betrayed Altea? Who betrayed everyone in the universe they built Voltron to protect?

Did he even count? Were the Galra even really his race if he was raised mostly by humans, on a human world, in human ways?

Maybe he would eat her quiche after all.

Niresh gave him a side-eye like she knew exactly what he was thinking.

- - -

Much later, alone in the showers on the training deck, the ring of the spray on the smooth floor echoed out any other hints of sound, and something occurred to Keith. Something occurred to Keith that turned his spine into a steel rod, made him suddenly flash freeze even under the heat of the water.

Hunk gave Keith the Galra quiche too. He’d never even suggested that Keith should take some of the batch meant for the rest of the paladins.

“These are for us,” he’d said, “and these are for you all.”

Chapter End Notes

1) Lost baby Galra make strange noises. You probably shouldn’t let them get too hungry either.

2) I apologize for the long delay. Still not really happy with where this is at, but had to remind myself if I brood over it anymore right now it's just going to get worse not better. Writing interactions between characters who have good reasons not to interact with each other is difficult!

3) Come talk Voltron to me on tumblr(!!): echodrops
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long delay; this chapter was just... very difficult.

It occurred to me that I don't know AO3’s comment etiquette, so if you would like a response to your wonderful comments, please just let me know or ask a direct question and I will do my best to give you good responses!

The working title of this document was Keith is Suffering™.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lunch in the castle was a casual affair: come when hungry, eat when free, so it wasn’t particularly surprising that no one encountered the red paladin then. But Keith didn’t show up for dinner either.

He’d never been an especially lively conversationalist, even on the best of days, but his absence made everyone else quieter. Lance sullenly swallowed remnants of the morning’s quiche, scowling around his spork. Everyone else shot furtive glances at the empty seat beside Lance as if Keith might suddenly appear when their eyes were turned away.

“Has anyone talked to Keith today?” Shiro asked finally.

Pidge shoved goo around a plate. “Allura, Coran, and I saw him in the kitchen this morning, but he left in a hurry...”

“I talked to him!” Hunk stumbled over himself getting the words out. “He seemed fine?” Shiro arched an eyebrow. “Definitely fine! Nothing out of the ordinary! Unless you count like, two adorable purple alien babies, in which case—”

Shiro blinked, leaning forward in his seat. “He was with the Galra?” Lance watched Shiro’s metal arm, tightening around the neck of his utensil.

Allura wasn’t done eating but she stood abruptly anyway, hands braced on the table. “No one’s seen him since breakfast and none of you thought to be concerned? Something could have happened!”

“But it’s Keith.” Pidge shrugged. “He’s always hanging out by himself.”

“This time,” Allura bit, “he is not by himself: They may be children, but they were still raised within the Galra military—”

“You can’t possibly believe the kids did something terrible to Keith.” Shiro’s bemused expression, almost a smile, underlined a quiet scoff. He flipped his spork back and forth as he thought. “I’m surprised they’re even talking to him already. Did he mention that to anyone?”

“Nope, not a once,” Coran said. He stroked his moustache dubiously. “But I did notice young Xerci peeking into Keith’s room a few quintants ago. I thought our littlest guest was out for a look-see with no one else around, but perhaps he was hunting for the elusive red paladin all
Allura was still standing. One of the space mice took advantage of her distraction to sneak clumps of goo off the edge of her plate. “Regardless of what is keeping him,” she insisted, “we should check on Keith immediately. If he isn’t in danger, there’s no reason not to be here. Teamwork is too important to forming Voltron for any of you to skulk off by yourselves.”

“Thought he wasn’t ‘by himself’,” Pidge muttered, side-mouth, to Hunk. Allura fixed them both with a warning eye and a jutted lip.

“Orrrr,” Lance dragged out, “we could not check on Keith? I mean, I’m perfectly happy with him gone. No interruptions from the sarcastic quadrant of the peanut galaxy, no ‘Sorry, I just came from training again because that’s literally all I do’ reek of sweat, no radiating murder vibes when I get the last—” Lance stared askance at the big pink and yellow marshmallow on his spork, then flung his arm up in abandon, “—whatever these things are!”

“Muscle Puffs!” chimed Coran, very helpfully.

Lance stuffed the Muscle Puff into his mouth whole, then struggled to speak around it: “Awl ‘m sayin’ is, whoo cares? Leave him alone. He’ll get bored of moping and come back way too soon anyway.” He leaned back in his seat, arms behind his head. “Probably when he finally recognizes just how desperately he needs my sage advice on—”

“What Lance actually means,” Hunk droned, interrupting the warning clearly on the tip of Shiro’s tongue, “is maybe we shouldn’t bother Keith, because he’s probably got plenty of good reasons for not being here that aren’t death by cute widdle baby claws and we are almost mature adults who can definitely respect that! Uh, the plenty of good reasons, I mean, not the death by cute widdle baby claws, because—”

Behind bright glasses, one of Pidge’s eyes twitched. “Since when have you respected anyone’s space?”

Hunk gasped, hand to heart. His bottom lip wobbled around his spork. “You wound me!”

“You read my diary!”

“Oh yeah. Totally forgot about that. Man, time passes so fast in space.”

“Actually,” Coran began, “it passes one wiltick of a—”

“Maybe you’re right,” Shiro said, instantly silencing all other conversation. He looked off to the side, mulling something over. “If Keith really is making progress with the Galra children, it might be important not to disrupt him. We don’t want to risk setting them back, when he’s definitely doing better than any of us have.”

“But!”

“Princess,” Shiro continued, “I’m sure when Keith has something solid to report, he’ll let us know. Until then, let’s trust him to do what he thinks is best.”

Lance flapped a hand, perfectly dismissive. “Yeah, don’t even worry about that guy, Allura. Everything’s fine.”

Everything is ruined! Keith thought for about the ten millionth time since he realized what Hunk
said. He rolled on to his other side, tangling the already mangled sheets even tighter around his knees and clutching the edge of the pillow under his face with white knuckles. He couldn’t sleep, of course. It was late, going on midnight; he knew that fact even without cracking his heavy eyes open to check the ticker. Just the thought of its glaring neon light made Keith cringe, grinding in the pressure of his furrowed brow and the migraine forming behind his clenched eyelids.

*Hunk knows.* The words repeated over and over in a vicious cycle with every anxious hummingbird-beat of his heart. His teeth ground together so hard the scraping seemed to echo through his whole aching skull. *Hunk knows.*

He couldn’t get past that thought, stuttering over the thousand other questions it raised without any resolutions: How? How did he find out? Was it something Keith said or did? Were there really cameras after all? And Hunk was terrible at keeping secrets. Had he told anyone? Had he told everyone?

Keith avoided him all day and was still no closer to solving the only question that really mattered in the end, the red line every one of his runaway trains of thought sped toward: *What do I do now?*

He tossed again, curled up tight. The top blanket made its trembling way past his ears, two fraying threads of pride away from hiding his whole head. His eyes stung.

He couldn’t avoid Hunk forever. Even if they never came looking for him, they’d need Voltron eventually.

How long? How long did he have left before…

Before Lance said he’d known all along there was something wrong with Keith, before Pidge threw his hypocrisy back in his face: *no secrets between paladins, huh?* Before Allura turned her back on him. Before Shiro couldn’t, and Keith had to meet his eyes, watch betrayal dawn white-star bright and burning.

*What do I do?*

His only answer was the ticker in the darkness, counting down.

---

In the earliest and ugliest of the (fake) morning hours, a feather-light knock brushed Keith’s door. He wasn’t asleep, not quite—somewhere between restless flicker-dreams and the sluggish misery of unconquerable insomnia. Normally Keith could jump from a dead sleep to armed and dangerous in a quarter tick, but no intruder alarms were sounding. An enemy soldier probably wouldn’t be knocking politely on his door at 3 a.m. (But an enemy soldier might be *easier,* right? Easier than opening the door and finding a fellow paladin whose trust he’d shattered just to protect himself. Selfish, he was always—)

The hesitant knock came again, and a staggering wave of relief swept over Keith as he sat up. The noise wasn’t just quiet; it was *tiny,* had to be coming from an equally tiny hand. Not one of the paladins or the Alteans. It was just one of the Galra children.

(*Just one of the Galra, Keith thought, as his heartbeat calmed and he swallowed down the rock of anxiety blocking his throat so he could breathe again.*)

“Xerciii,” he groaned as he stumbled out of bed, pressing on his eyes to crush the headache behind them. He fumbled to find the door panel. But when the door finally swished open, it wasn’t Xerci tipping over the threshold. It was Niresh, hunched in on herself, cheeks wet, fingers
folding deep gouges into the soft grey suit of her night clothes.

Keith gasped. “Nir—?” But she just flinched, digging the heavy claws of one bare foot into the tile.

_Are you okay?_ That was where you were supposed to start, right? It might have been the proper thing to ask, but, you know, Keith _knew_ that look, one of the rare few he could identify on any face: haunted, vulnerable, pursued by monsters (real or imagined).

She was looking for help.

Keith stepped out of the doorway to let her through. When the door slid closed again, the room fell pitch black, punctuated only by the blue glow from the clock. Its dim light shined on the corners of her wet eyes, reflecting a sickly shade of green. She stared up at him from the threshold of the room, unmoving. He didn’t even need to stand near her to know every one of her muscles was tensed. Her arms were locked like a steel trap around her chest. He could _feel_ the anxiety spider-leg crawling on the back of his neck.

“Did you have a nightmare?” No matter how quiet he tried to be, his voice seemed to cut. Niresh shook her head, but Keith knew enough about how lies looked to know a lie when he saw one. She bit her tongue, shifting her weight from one foot to another. "Okay," he agreed, and nothing else for a long minute. Prying got nowhere with Keith either, after all.

He eased back to sit down on the edge of his bed. After a few seconds of contemplation, he patted the empty space next to him. The kind of invitation Shiro would give. (Had given.)

She wouldn’t sit down at first. She looked at everything in the room but him: at the silvery-edged blade hung on the far wall, with its deep red decorative fuller, the only thing he’d kept from the Krikira delegation; at the crude stone approximation of his lion, formed by one of the children on Balmera; the last few _Two Moon Lilies_ from Æcen, dried and threatening to crumble on the shelf now but still as pretty smelling as they’d been the night of the celebration, plucked and pinned glittering to his uniform.

Niresh looked at the floor, burying her chin in her tensed up collar. "I don't think..." she finally whispered, the airy piping of a pan flute, "I don't think everything Dulsara says 'bout the empire is right."

What?

That’s the last thing Keith would have expected to hear in the dark of his room from a kidnapped Galra orphan with tear streaks on her face.

She leaned away from him. When her eyes shut, it was like two moons in eclipse. "But my maman and papan read me stories every night and let me help ‘em with their work. Some people who come to our base make fun of me ‘cause of how I look, but my family don’t care ‘bout that —"

How she looked? She didn’t look much different than any other furred Galra female Keith had ever seen (admittedly not a very large comparison pool, but still), even if she was ridiculously small. Maybe _because_ she was small? The runt of the litter or something? Except Dulsara was clearly several years older than Niresh and not _that_ much taller, and Xerci was like… a slightly overgrown football, so she came in about average, as far as Keith's examples of Galra children went. In fact, she looked far more "normal" than Dulsara and Xerci did, if there even was an average for Galra. She definitely looked more normal than Keith, anyway...

Niresh spoke again, smaller and smaller: "Dulsara says that the Galra are good and y’all’re the bad
“ones, but...” She trailed off. Her ears trembled. "But I don’t think..." He had to lean forward just to hear her now, the words little more than wisps. “I don’t know…” She practically choked.

“Stop,” Keith interrupted. “Just uh… breathe for a second?” He mimed taking a deep, full breath and then let it out slowly, loudly, through his mouth. She mimicked him, one huge breath and then another, each one a little slower and less shaky than the last.

“That better?” he ventured, when it seemed she’d gotten things under control. “Start again. Take it slow.”

Niresh didn’t nod or answer, but she took a halting step toward him. On the floor, her claws sounded like dry husks dragging, the wind-rustle of the dying corn late in the summer of the year Shiro disappeared, when the world kept turning but Keith’s future stood still.

She didn’t try to talk again for a long time. Then, one word after another, still crumbling, lost in the translation between feelings and language, she whispered: “My maman is in charge of getting information from the prisoners on our base. And listening to the information from the rest of the empire.”

Keith’s stomach sank.

“Sometimes when I went with my maman to work she told me to wait outside, ‘specially when she got transmissions from other bases and ships. But I still heard. I still heard lots of things, and sometimes what the commanders said was really... Maman made me promise not to talk to nobody ‘bout what I heard, not even Xerci. So Dulsara doesn’t know any of the bad stuff! That’s why…”

Niresh met his eyes at last. “Everybody’s always saying ‘the empire is powerful; the empire is perfect!’ but even I know those ain’t the same thing. When my maman played the transmissions there was… there was jus’ screaming sometimes. ‘Please don’t hurt me again, please no more!’”

She didn’t quite mime the transmission’s voice but her tone fell a shade, just enough to know she drew from a specific memory, the record of those pleas playing over and over in her head.

“Sometimes, the commanders laugh about destroying people’s temples and cities,” she went on, most he’d ever heard her speak. “And say the emperor’ll reward them more ‘cause they captured more prisoners than the others did. I thought maybe it was just ‘cause they were fightin’ evil people. But…” She faltered. “Can there really be that many bad people in the universe?”

Shapes had resolved themselves out of the darkness now, the gloom in his cabin sharpening into shades of gray as his eyes adjusted. The light of the ticker swam across her wet eyes. (Almost irritating, this in-between vision he had: better than a human’s should be, but worse than he knew he could have, if he just...)

Can there be that many bad people in the universe?

Why did people ask him questions like that, questions he had no idea how to answer? Back on Earth, he would have said no, no, good and bad were just stupid, simplistic, laughable ideals, guidelines for the weak-minded to fit themselves to society’s mold—but now he was a defender of the universe. Now finding every rotten core, every hive of scum and villainy was how he paid his dividends to reality simply for his continued existence.

How long would he have to defend the universe? How much bad could there be in an uncountable number of galaxies?

Maybe evil was as infinite as space itself. Maybe the war would never end. Maybe this war would end just in time for another to begin, ad nauseam, forever, and Team Voltron’s contributions were
nothing more than drops in the leaking pail, poor patches to stem the endless tide.

_That's not how a paladin thinks._ That's not how a paladin could _let_ himself think.

"There's more good than bad in the universe," Keith said at last, not insisting, not that certain, but like faith alone might make it true.

Niresh shook her head again, but the gesture was confused, a shake where she meant to nod: "I think... I think so too. That's why... I said maybe Dulsara ain't right."

She looked about two seconds from collapsing.

"Come here." Keith didn't throw his arms out, but the invitation was there; he shifted over, leaving plenty of space for her to join him on the edge of the bed. Niresh seemed to physically debate—a backward and forward sway—want for comfort, fear of hurt. Finally, she sat, not close enough to touch his side but close enough that he could reach out, put an arm around her back if he wanted.

He didn't. He knew all about how it felt to be touched without permission, to be steered by one shoulder, fingers on the back of his neck, hands under his clothes—"*Heart rate's 170, but blood pressure's only 89/50. Mark it to test for correlation later.*"

It wasn’t quiet, exactly; her breathing hitched and jumped, a little too loud now, a little too long. He watched her from the corner of his eye. "You didn't laugh," she mumbled, a ghost in voice and presence, barely heavy enough to dip the mattress. "When you destroyed our base. You didn't laugh 'bout killing our families. Dulsara doesn't believe you're really sorry, but... the commanders never say sorry at all. They're always happy to win, no matter what. Were you... happy that you won against us?"

Keith’s shoulders sank right along with his stomach. "No," he breathed. "It wasn't a victory. It was..." saying a mistake made it sound so trivial, like something that wouldn’t matter a month from now. "It was wrong," he admitted instead.

"That lady almost cried. The one who said she’s Altean." Niresh knitted at Keith’s sheets, plucking out threads, and he couldn’t find it in himself to care. “Are you sad about what happened?”

Sad? Not the word. Overwhelming regret, gnawing horror at what they had done, what they had almost done—that was closer. Keith didn’t really think there were words for what he felt when he thought about the way the blood had been warm even through his glove, the sound of Niresh’s screams in the air that smelled like dead things. He didn’t ever talk about his feelings because _he didn’t know how_; he didn’t know the names of the things that lived in the hollow, howling spaces inside him—

“I feel...” The words slipped out of him without conscious thought. “Afraid.”

She gaped at him, mouth open enough he could see her bottom fangs. “You’re afraid? Why?”

“I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to make up for what we did.” He dropped his head, hair falling in his eyes. “And I don’t know what we’re going to do now, because we _have_ to fight. We have to defeat Zarkon to save the universe. It wasn’t a problem before, but... The Galra are _people_. They’re not just...” _Monsters_. He couldn’t say that, not to her. “The enemy."

Maybe she heard the unspoken word anyway. The furrow of her brow made the clear fur around her eyes shine golden and misty where it reflected their light. “But you’re Galra.”

“I-I know, but—”
She stared down at her knees under her clenched hands. The silence ached like an open wound. There was something she thought but couldn’t say either.

*Do you hate the Galra? Do you hate being Galra?*

He was glad she didn’t ask.

Instead she murmured, “The green paladin was mad you kept us here, ‘stead of sendin’ us away.”

Keith flinched and hid it by leaning back to brace against the wall at the head of his bed. “Pidge—the green paladin—her father and brother were taken prisoner by the Galra. They were tortured for information they didn’t have and then almost thrown into the gladiator pits to fight for their lives against beasts and other people. Taking innocent prisoners, holding them against their will… Pidge doesn’t want that on her conscience.”

Niresh kicked her bare feet against the side of his bed. (Galra feet were weird, Keith knew from experience. He didn’t want to say they looked like paws, but they did look like paws. No cure for basic fact, no matter how embarrassing.) “Dulsara still wants to go back to the empire. But it’s true that prisoners of Voltron get treated better than prisoners of the Galra.”

Keith kept silent this time. She was going somewhere he needed to follow.

“So when you said the empire’s bad but Voltron’s good… I just thought maybe that’s… maybe that’s a little bit true too.” She shuddered, watching the dark floor like her admittance might make it crumble away under their feet. “B-But… In the mornings Papan brushed me ‘til my fur’s soft and when Maman got free days sometimes she took me and Dulsara exploring and helped us build a secret base in the woods and my papan knows the name of every animal in the whole empire and he can make Xerci laugh by doing all their noises and—and—”

She curled up her legs to bury her face in her knees with a choked sob. “They were good. They were part of the empire but they love me! I d-don’t understand. How can we be bad people? How come—” Her blade-thin voice broke. “How come my family had to die?”

“Hey,” Keith’s voice wavered, but he had to catch her attention, to show her that his arms were open, that he wouldn’t touch without permission but he also knew what it was to need someone there, someone solid when everything else turned to ash and shadow around you, then—

She threw herself at him, face hidden in his pajama shirt, and her hands shivered against his back even though she tried hard not to scratch him. “What did I…” She cried into his shirt, tears heating his skin. “What did I do wrong?”

Keith dropped his hands to her shoulder and the top of her head, brushing back slow and gentle, her ears folding under his hand and then rising again, over and over. He didn’t have a clue about the right thing to say, but he couldn’t let this go by. “It’s not your fault. Listen—”

Her ears stirred under his hand. He heaved in a rough breath. How could he explain a lesson he was still struggling to learn himself? ”You didn’t do anything wrong. Even your parents… It’s not that simple. Bad people can still do good things. And good people can do horrible things.”

Wasn’t the proof of that right here in his hold?

“Sometimes you can…” His words tangled in his throat. His pulse keep jumping, faster and faster. He was going to mess up. He was going to ruin everything. Lance’s furious whisper echoed in the back of his head: *Anyone else would make more sense for this than Keith!* “That’s… It’s possible to hate someone else and still care about your family, I-I think. Nobody’s all good all the time.
And maybe... nobody's all bad either. Everyone's... more than one thing. So with your parents, y-you know—it's the same—"

This wasn't coming out right. He wasn't helping. Keith bit the inside of his cheek. The dark of the room was a comfort; at least she couldn't see the high flush of shame and frustration on his face. Lack of sleep weighed like a star's gravity on his shoulders. "I just mean that... good or bad... It's not always black and white."

Niresh hiccupped, a motion that made her shrink under his hands. "Once I made fun of Dulsara so bad she cried," she whispered. "An' sometimes I do the opposite a' what Yedgi says, jus' 'cause I want to."

"Yeah," Keith managed, desperately trying to keep up. "It's like that. You don’t realize it’s bad—not until later? Or until it happens to you. Maybe your parents were only with the empire because nobody ever showed them how wrong it is."

"So why didn't you show them? Why did you have to fight instead?"

Keith shivered too. It felt frigid in the room everywhere she wasn't. "I guess because... nobody told us better either. If someone showed me a different way then I think—I would have tried to learned." He repeated it, thick, stuck in his throat, desperate to convince himself. Listening was never a talent of his, a not even close to decent-level skill. But if there was a way to stop the blood flowing down his glove, the sound a sword made when it struck bone, the way her breath came in pieces between the shocks her sobs, then he definitely would have...

He wouldn't have ignored it, right? He wouldn't choose killing, he—wouldn’t.

"But you listened to me," she murmured. "So now you can do better."

It's not that simple.

His hands tightened, fingers carding in the glassy down of her fur. "I'm going to try."

But Niresh trembled in his hug, and the curve of his ribs where she buried her tears was still not dry. Did this even count as comforting? Was he just making her unhappier? Even less certain? One lost child was leading another in ever-wider circles. How could he offer help with no one to help him?

You can do better.

He squinted at the light of the ticker. Still four hours before even Shiro would be up. The door was locked. Only Allura or Coran could overwrite it, and they never had. No one will see, he told himself. And then, quieter: Does it matter? Hunk knew. Maybe everyone already knew. Niresh needed more than words, more than a pat on the head. She needed the kind of comforting she understood, familiar and safe. If it was for a very good reason, then...

But it was for him, more than her, in the end. (Selfish, always—)

The dark thoughts in the back of his head unfurled, digging their claws in. The gap between the things he could say and the things he couldn't became a crumbling, mile-wide abyss. About her, about himself.

Good or bad. It's not always black and white.

Do you hate being—
You didn’t do anything wrong.

(“Look,” his mother breathes into the nest of his hair, tickling his ear. He squirms a half inch away, not far enough to unfurl the shared blanket around their shoulders, not enough to let the night chill in, and he follows the line of her extended arm with his eyes, to where her long dark finger traces infinity loops around a square of the inky sky. “Look,” she teases, “that's you.”

“That’s a star, Momma.”

“That’s also you!” She points to another star, brighter, orange-cast, and her cascade of hair curls tangled around them, mirroring the wisps of pale cloud above.

“That’s a star too.”

“There you are again!” Orion’s belt. The Southern Cross. Polaris. Dad keeps making him study.

He huffs a breath into the cold that mist-clouds back into his face. “I’m not a star.”

The hand that stirred the sky falls to tap at the tip of his red nose, trace the rise of his cheek, the backs of her fingers pressing soft to the side of his face. Silhouetted against the dark as he looks up, her golden eyes are another familiar constellation.

“You,” she smiles, “are all the stars in all the skies to me, my beautiful, impossible son.”

“Gross.”

Her laughing twinkles like far-off silvery lights.)

Everyone is more than one thing.

He wasn’t just pale-skinned, dark-eyed Keith. He was something else, underneath.

My mother was Galra. And she loved me.

As instantaneous as ever, the fluid rush of form-shifting overtook him. Short, warm fur rippled over his skin; fangs pressed solid against the inside of his lip. The room brightened, every detail leaping into grey-tinged focus. Mindful of his claws, he went back to stroking Niresh’s hair. Over the side of the bed, his strange paw-feet flexed and then unfurled, heavy dark claws rasping on the tile. He couldn’t feel the chill of the floor anymore through the thick pads on his toes and heels.

Keith purred his reassurances. It’s all right. The thrumming echoed in his whole chest, thunder in a bottle. Niresh jerked, gasped when she looked up, and immediately purred out her own desperations. That, he expected. But then she leaned as far into him as she could, softly bunting her forehead against his chest once and then again, pressing into his shirt where she could feel the tremors of sound as much as she heard them. She bumped at him again, her rumbling chirr hitching.

What? She wanted something, but wha—and then Keith remembered what this same thing felt like in reverse, curled against his father’s side, weak pleas interrupted by the remnants of heavy crying, urgently nuzzling at his father’s shoulder until finally his father leaned down and met him, cheek to wet cheek, a brush of soft hair against Keith’s tear-spotted face as desperately needed as air and light. He pressed his forehead to Keith’s, swept along Keith’s temple and bumped noses, tilted his head to tuck Keith under his chin, close and warm, humming with overwhelming affection. His father’s presence was safe, solid, all around him—

(His father is making an oath, voice resonating through the firm juncture of neck and shoulder
where Keith buried his sticky face: “It won’t be forever, son, I promise.”

Somewhere his mother says, “Your father will come back to us soon.”

But he doesn’t, does he? He vanishes without a word, like a star’s light finally fading long after it’s already died.

Keith understood. He let his loose hand fall to join the arm around her shoulders in a closer, safer hold. In the stillness, the sound of her reedy little rumbling was a familiar song, a warm blanket shared, stretched around his shoulders. He leaned down to meet her, pressed forehead to forehead, then cheek to wet cheek. The stroke of his lilac fur against the long clear strands gathered near her ears felt like two clouds passing, made nerves light under his skin with a steady, content thrum. He had to stop her nuzzling to tuck her head under his chin; her trapped ear flicked reflexively once and then lay still. It was almost enough to convince Keith to relax. Almost.

Niresh kept crying, but somehow it felt different now.

Eventually she fell asleep, leaned against his side in an impossibly uncomfortable position, her head at an angle that made his neck want to cramp just looking at it. Carefully, millimeter by millimeter, he shuffled her away and laid her down, sacrificing his pillow pushed up against the wall so he had a place to rest her head. He laid down again too, back to her back, last remnants of his low purrs still ringing through that place of contact. His white hair fanned out, lost among the pale threads of his sheets.

A strange thought from an even more unfamiliar fold of his brain slipped by: Xerci and Dulsara should be here too, here where he could see them, to make sure they slept well, lay warm, breathed safe.

For the first time that night, Keith made it all the way to dreaming.

An hour later, he awoke with a line of fire and agony tearing down his back. He threw himself away from the attack, instantly seeking his blade beneath the pillow, but—the dagger wavered in his hand. It wasn’t an enemy. It was Niresh. She’d turned inward, knees tight to her chest, kicking and thrashing. A weak moan, half muffled by Keith’s pillow, wormed free. Her eyes were screwed shut; every line of her face clenched. Keith’s back stung ferociously, but he couldn’t focus; the haze of broken sleep, an overworked mind, and hours of anxiety made his foggy thoughts refuse to coalesce, even when beads of blood gathered in the valley of his spine.

What’s… happening?

Niresh flinched bodily, her cricked hands clawing straight through Keith’s sheet, and a high, piercing keen escaped between her gritted fangs.

Nightmare. The thought lanced through Keith’s clouded head space like a frozen nail through his skull. This was what nightmares looked like on the Galra: a war, a losing battle. Her hackles raised and her back arched even while she tossed and turned. Muddled cries of distress bled into caustic warning hisses. He could smell her anxiety, sharp, metallic—

Keith knew better than to touch. “Niresh,” he called, half whisper. “Niresh, wake up.” She stirred, murmured some almost-words too quiet for the translator to pick up, but didn’t snap out of it. “Niresh,” he tried again, louder, and finally her eyes opened.

Her eyes opened, but she wasn’t awake, wasn’t free of the thick chains of fear-dreaming—she just slipped from one frozen moment of her nightmare to the next, from footsteps echoing closer down
the hall of the black Galra base to now: the shape of her parents’ murderer in the dark, looming above her with a knife, while the cloying scent of blood pursued her from memory into half-woken horror.

Niresh looked up at him and *screamed*. She hit decibels in ultrasound, shattering, and Keith flung his dagger away so he could slam his hands down around his ears. It did nothing to curb the agony of the howl, so high and loud his teeth shivered in his jaw. He had to stop it, had to get through to her, had to do something, but *what*? What could he say—“Calm down, it’s just me”? Ha. Right.

Her scream finally snapped in half and dwindled to a breathless rumble, half moan, half snarl, already going hoarse and graveled at the ends. But there was something worse about this quiet sound than her shriek. Was she too terrified to even inhale enough air to keep howling? She jerked away from him, making ribbons of the blankets as she scrambled to pin her back against the wall in the corner. When he accidentally swayed just a half centimeter forward, almost imperceptible, she flung up her hand; in the dark, her claws were hidden, but the threat was not.

There was no light of recognition in her eyes. As tears turned her fur opaque and dark again, their scent a sharp bite, she looked at him as if he were a perfect stranger, a monster slipped out from underneath her bed with no one near to save her. Awake or bad dreaming, what difference did it make?

Her reality *was* a nightmare.

Helplessness coiled in Keith’s stomach, vice-tightened around his lungs. How—how could he fix —

A noise even more choked than her own was wrung from him, barely audible and yet thunderous enough to draw every molecule of air from the room.

Niresh went quiet. Her shoulders hitched as she finally turned her unfocused eyes to his, desperately searching: “Please,” she plead around silent sobs, “*please* don’t kill my family.”

There was no space.

The room was too small, getting smaller every time his lungs strained and caught nothing. Keith couldn’t breathe. His vision kept going dark at the edges. Why—why did this have to— The whole world felt unstable, as if his body suddenly realized they really *were* hurtling through the void: up, down, every cardinal direction unmoored and meaningless. The force of the whole ship’s flight seemed to slam into him, bowl him over. He was plunging over the side of an endless chasm.

Keith shuddered back a step. He moved back one step and that was *it*, that was all, the millisecond opening it took for the tidal wave of *fear*confusion*regret* to drown him. He had to get away. He *was* hurting her. He was hurting. He had to—

Keith didn’t even feel it when he crashed shoulder first into his door, when he practically tore his nails scratching down the wall for the lock. When Dulsara, already trying to get in from the other side, leapt out of his way with a snarl.

“Where are you going?” she shouted. “What did you do?!”

But Keith didn’t hear her. His hands tangled in his hair over his ears, pulling to drown out the rush of his self-accusations with pain. *Your fault, you did this, monster, thought you could play hero—what if he can’t—what if he can’t ever live with—*
Where he was going? Keith couldn’t focus enough to tell one identical hallway from the next. Pale doors and black windows blinked past in the corners of his eyes, monochrome, whirling, disorienting colors. Help. He needed—even the thoughts felt breathless in his head—he had to get out, but couldn’t: there was no out in space. He needed help, just—

Keith skidded to a stop and pounded on the door in front of him before he even realized what he was doing. Where? He should know this place, but nothing would stay still: his heart beat double time to every smash of his fist. He felt sweat wick down his neck but chills trembling down his spine relentlessly. The metal shivered under his blows, and his hammering nearly became an attack when the door whipped open.

Shiro stood in the doorway, squinting, heavy with sleep. His metal arm propped him up on the sill as he reached for alertness through crippling exhaustion. Too many nights interrupted by his own bad dreaming? Selfish, Keith thought. I’m always— Shiro’s shock of white hair was mangled, half folded back and looped over itself.

Keith heaved in heavy breaths as Shiro finally focused enough to look at him—like he had never seen Keith before. Like seeing a ghost. Shiro reared back. His eyes flew wide, jaw going slack. Something hunted and volatile beat its dark wings in the black paladin’s eyes. His prosthetic on the doorframe began to hum.

Something snapped, and Keith came back to himself with a horrible lurch. The floor tiles seemed to toss and roll underneath him as his soul-mind-self-whatever crashed back into his body. One thought, pain-bright, lanced through his tempest-torn brain: What do I look like right now?

He had no idea what form he was currently in. Had he had defaulted to human in his sleep or was he actually standing on Shiro’s doorstep in full Galra colors, yellow-eyed and claws up?

Time stood still.

His stomach rolled. Every one of his muscles froze. Be human, he begged. Be human. But Keith felt something shift.

Shiro clenched his eyes shut and dropped his head so far Keith couldn’t see beyond his forelock. If this were anything other than the castle ship, the metal under Shiro’s silver fingers would already be mangled scrap.

Shiro pulled in one deep, loud breath through his nose. When he opened his eyes again just seconds later, he roamed Keith’s face, searching—and the relief that dawned over him was palpable. “Keith? Is that...?” Shiro shook his head as if that might clear it. “Sorry, guess I was still dreaming. What do you nee—”

At that exact moment, Shiro realized the person standing in his doorway was not only not the invading Galra of his nightmares, but actually a very miserable-looking teenage boy, shrinking back and shifting away, even as the dim blue light of the hallway turned the terrible red on Keith’s pale face into a familiar purple hue.

(There’s another Keith in his memory, another Keith in another grey hallway: a foot shorter but wild dark hair the same rat’s nest around his blotchy face, too proud to let go of the tears swimming on the surface of wide, white eyes, with thin little fists shivering on the ends of thin little arms.

His lip is split, partly swollen. There’s a bruise dripping down his chin. He won’t meet Shiro’s eyes but he won’t go away either. Shiro wonders how bad the other kid looks.
“They took my knife,” this Keith whispers finally, every word a new stumbling block. Indignant, terrified. “My mom’s knife. Neuhahn couldn’t—” He wavers on his feet like the words are enough to knock him down. “He couldn’t tell me if—if they’ll give it back.” His feet are bare. It’s a thousand years past curfew. When he trembles, the loose hem of his night shirt trembles too.

“Need a hug?” Shiro asks from the doorway.

And “No,” Keith says, but he’s already falling into Shiro’s hold.)

“Shiro,” Keith choked, less a word than a helpless flood of feeling. The loose sleeves of his night shirt shivered; he crossed his arms, holding tight. Holding back. He wanted to say something else, but the words wouldn’t leave the cage of his tongue. Beneath the mop of his black bangs, Keith’s face warred—a frown, a fear, the pinch of pre-tears. In the dark, it was hard to meet his black eyes but impossible to look away.

(There’s another Keith in his memory: desert dust a red veil on his hair, blistered palms, torn jeans, whole face curved around an enormous grin. “Six miles before they caught me!” he laughs. He’s missing a baby tooth.)

Shiro felt tired in a way that clung to his bones. How much harder would they have to fight to earn a moment’s rest? How much longer? How could he defend the universe and still be powerless to protect what really mattered?

In the frozen, early hours of their arbitrary morning, Shiro opened his arms. “Need a hug?”

And “Yeah,” Keith croaked as he let himself collapse into someone else’s care.

By now Shiro’s room was a familiar hiding hole, a safe house for Keith; it smelled of Shiro and looked like him: Spartan, cleaner than Keith’s, military corners folded onto the lone sheet on the bed. In the hamper, even Shiro’s dirty laundry was neatly pressed. Nothing hung on the walls, but neat stacks of Altean tablet books covered every inch of his shelf space. (Their translations to English were still deficient at best, but what better than vague meanings to distract from harsh truths?)

Shiro had no chairs, none of them did really. Keith sank roughly onto the foot of the black paladin’s bed, putting creases into the perfect, unwrinkled surface of the sheet. (But hadn’t Shiro been sleeping before Keith got here?) Around his shoulders, Shiro’s Galra arm was a comfort and a curse: heavy, always warmer than anything else. Shiro brushed the valley between Keith’s shoulder blades and back up, easy as if he were smoothing down fur. But Keith just felt like Niresh: lost, desperate for a lifeline even while he was being bundled close. Comforted, but with the horror still black rot aching under his skin. His heart was still racing. He could see, feel, think again, but it was jumbled as a sudden stop after spinning in circles. The whole world kept whirling on without him. Keith breathed quiet but hard.

Shiro waited, infinitely more patient than Keith could ever be, coaxing Keith’s locked up spine to untense and his balled-up fists to unwind. Keith dropped his head, hair in his eyes, so he didn’t have to keep meeting Shiro’s concerned stare, worried frown.

He opened his mouth to speak several times, but nothing came. Only when the silence stretched so long Keith feared Shiro might fall back to sleep, he finally forced out: “I made a huge mistake.”

Shiro smoothed another circle on Keith’s back. The air was so still in Shiro’s room that every rustle of movement Keith made seemed to echo, felt so much bigger than it should have, so that Keith, in turn, felt smaller and smaller.
"The Galra—we shouldn’t—" Keith’s words came before his thoughts; only when he spoke did the whirlwind in his head narrow to a single identifiable idea: "Pidge was right. I should have listened."

"To?" Shiro finally asked.

Keith hissed through clenched teeth. His hands gripped so hard on his knees he thought for a second he might dislocate the kneecaps. Shiro nudged one of Keith’s abused knees with his own, a gentle but unmistakable order to ease up. Keith flexed his fingers, tried to let go. The sweat drying under his bangs was uncomfortable, but he could barely feel it. "Pidge told me keeping them here was a bad idea," he said, "but I thought—I just figured it would be better…"

For who? the cold, slithering thought intruded. Better for who? Did he really think keeping the Galra children was the right thing to do for them?

Or was it just the right thing to do for himself?

The idea was so ugly (too sharp, so close to home) Keith almost leapt up and ran away again. His stomach churned. He fought the urge to pace and scream by hunching lower over his knees, screwing his eyes shut tight enough that red fireworks exploded inside his eyelids. Shiro’s hand sank with him, refusing to let go.

He’d fought to keep the Galra children here. He’d made up all kinds of reasons they couldn’t go somewhere else. Because no one would want them. Because no one would care for them properly. Because they’d end up with the empire. Because the castle of lions was still safer than the surface of some random backwater planet at end of the universe. Because Team Voltron had to make up for what they’d done.

But what’s the real reason? Keith couldn’t stop the thought, scalpel-lancing into the most hidden corners of his head. His throat burned. A wave of nausea swept over him. Shiro was still close, solid and real, but Keith barely recognized the weight beside him anymore. He felt frozen all over.

What’s the real reason?

Because Keith had never gotten the chance to talk to other Galra? Because he couldn’t remember what his mother’s fur felt like, pressed against his cheek? Because he’d been crumbling under the weight of his own secret? Because he’d felt so goddamn alone?

Beneath his skin, every one of his nerves writhed, revolted, as if they couldn’t even stand being part of something like him.

That’s who you are underneath, Keith’s own voice told him. Someone who’ll even use defenseless kids to make himself feel better.

There it was: the cold, predatory practicality that made the Galra an unstoppable force——

"Keith!" Shiro barked, all commanding officer voice, military rigid and gunshot loud in the silent room. Keith snapped back to attention, jerking out from under Shiro’s hand.

Shiro’s expression didn’t match his tone; he’d gone pale, tense around the eyes. His jaw was set and stiff, and his scar creased across the bridge of his nose from how deeply his brow as furrowed. "Focus. Something’s got you spooked. Start there."

Short, simple directives. Keith could handle that. He looked at the crumpled white sheet under his thigh. He looked at Shiro’s laundry, folded stick straight, hard to see in the dark with his human eyes. When he felt like he had control of his body again, Keith forced himself to inhale as deep as
he could and let it out slow as possible. The sound of it was strange, rattling, but it was enough to
make Shiro relax a fraction of an inch, so he loomed a little less.

Keith kept it matter-of-fact, detached. He was back at Garrison, delivering another incident report
(chin-high, arms locked, daring Iverson with his eyes to doubt him even while his voice droned on
in military rote): “One of the Galra children, Niresh, had a nightmare. She came to my room, so I
let her stay.”

Shiro looked puzzled. “Isn’t it good that she trusts you enough to—”

“That’s—the thing is—I don’t think she does, Shiro.” Only ten seconds and his fragile composure
was already cracking. He couldn’t handle this, any of it. His voice broke and rallied and broke
again. “She doesn’t trust me; she’s just grabbing at straws! She’s really little. I know she’s Galra,
but she’s just a little kid, looking for help anywhere. She needs an adult.”

Shiro stiffened. “Sorry,” he said. “If I’d known you were having trouble handling this on your
own, I would have—”

“I didn’t mean you!” Keith shook his head hard. Anyone but Shiro

Hypocrite, what are you doing right now?

Shiro had the kind of ticker that made real noise, a slow, steady beep, beep, beep. Keith timed his
breath to it, an anchor in the cold, perfect silence of a room that felt somehow lightyears too big.
went back to sleep, she had another nightmare. The same one, maybe.” He dared to look up at
Shiro through the mess of his bangs. “She dreamed she was back at the base. She begged me not
to kill her family.”

“Keith…”

Keith flinched but kept going. “I thought it would be better to keep them here, where at least
everyone would… treat them okay. But Pidge was right. Forcing them to stay here is wrong. They
need help. They need people who can comfort them and make it better and… how can that be any
of us?” He was talking too fast now, a muddled blur, but he couldn’t stop. If he didn’t finish, the
words would all fall apart. He’d never be able to say what he meant, what he needed to: “I don’t
know how to help her when I’m the one who hurt her. I made a huge mistake. W-We can’t keep
them here. We have to find somewhere else for the kids to go.”

Shiro went silent for a long time, watching the floor under their feet. He tapped the cold tile with
one heel. Finally, he said, “Did you ask her?”

“What?” Keith blinked.

Shiro leaned back, sliding his palms along the mattress to prop himself up. One of them made a
deeper indent than the other. Keith had to turn sideways just to keep all of him in view. Shiro
wasn’t looking at Keith though; he’d turned his head up, staring at the low ceiling over his bed.
Maybe it had all the answers they lacked. “Did you ask her,” Shiro repeated, “if that’s what she
wants? Being sent somewhere else?”

“Why would she want to stay—”

From the corner of one angular eye, Shiro looked at him, quiet, assessing. After a moment, Keith
squirmed. It felt like he was on the judgment scales. Had he said something wrong? Shiro looked
up at the ceiling again, offering it a sound not quite a sigh, though felt like one.
“I still don’t remember it well,” he began; Keith jolted to attention. “But when I was a prisoner of the Galra, the thing I hated most wasn’t fighting. It wasn’t being shut up in the dark. It was feeling absolutely **powerless**. I had no control —” He paused to collect himself. “I had no control over anything. Who I’d fight, when I could sleep, what I had to eat, what I was allowed to say, or see, or touch. **Everything** was decided for me.”

Keith watched Shiro’s metal fingers curl in a way human digits never could. When they disappeared into folds pressed into the sheet, Keith felt like he was seeing—hearing—something he shouldn’t. This wasn’t the first time in the hushed dark Shiro had shared what few memories he had of being a prisoner, but this felt different: closer to the deep down hidden live wire, a cut opening all the way to bone.

“Maybe you’re right,” Shiro went on. “I worried about this from the start. Sending them to someone else does seem like the healthier thing to do. But if I was her—if it was me—right now, what I’d want most is the power to make my own choices.”

“But what if—” Keith struggled.

“Whatever choice she makes, we can live with it.” Shiro actually reached out and ruffled Keith’s already disastrous hair, maybe some sad attempt at lightening the black hole heavy mood. Keith didn’t even bat his hand away as he normally would, just shrank under Shiro’s touch, like worry took all the bones out of him. He bit his lip, then licked at it nervously. Bit it again.

“How do you live with it?” Keith asked at last.

“Hm?”

Keith hesitated. The ticker beep, beep, beeped in the cool, unbroken darkness. You can’t just ask whatever you want! his brain revolted, even as Shiro’s offer repeated in the back of his head: “You can come talk to me any time. I know this place is different than Garrison, but don’t shut me out. Everyone’s going to have to rely on each other if we want this team to work.”

And in the sea of so many other regrets (Niresh’s face tear-spotted in the dark—Please don’t kill my family), what was one more thing to feel guilty about?

“When you were in the ring,” Keith asked, slow, carefully prodding the words across the space between them, “it wasn’t always monsters you had to fight, was it? Sometimes it was—”

Shiro’s human hand fiddled with the place where his nightshirt’s short sleeve fell on his prosthetic. “Sometimes,” he admitted, “it was other slaves.” It felt like ripping the bandage off an infected wound, exposing the gangrenous tissue to the light. His fingers lifted the sleeve almost up to where metal met flesh. Keith hadn’t seen the bare skin there, the scarring, since their last night on Earth.

“It’s still mostly just empty space in my head. Blanked out, probably for a reason,” Shiro was saying, his own voice reaching for that impersonal military clip. “Sometimes the people I was told to fight were completely defenseless. I remember one didn’t even know how to hold a Galra weapon. But there was no way for both parties to win in the ring. It was my life or theirs. I made the selfish choice.”

“It wasn’t selfish! You were fighting for your life! You already said you had no choice!”

Shiro’s smile was so wry, it hurt to look at. “How is that any different than what happened in the Galra base? You can’t excuse what I’ve done and then make yourself out like a monster for the very same thing.”
“It’s not the same!” Keith barked, but also it was? But the guilt was the same, because the Galra children didn’t deserve what they’d done any more than Shiro’s opponents did? Keith’s thoughts were getting tangled up in irreparable knots again. How could he make Shiro understand? It’s hard. He’d never tried to talk about this kind of thing before. “But, I mean… We were trying to do the right thing, and people still got hurt. Innocent people, not soldiers. If the kids decide to stay, how am I—how are we supposed to keep going, really knowing what we did?” He felt like pacing, like he could wear his regret out with the last of his anxious energy. “Pidge tried to warn me. You did too. But I thought it wouldn’t be hard to deal with because we’re at war. Causalities happen. Good guys kill bad guys. I know what being a soldier means—”

“No you don’t,” Shiro asked, shattering Keith’s certainty like a bullet. “You, Lance, Hunk, Pidge… You’re still kids yourselves.”

“Garrison trained us for—”

Shiro cocked an eyebrow. “You mean the program you didn’t finish? Even Lance got a year more schooling than you.” He held up a hand to forestall Keith’s inevitable argument. “The expectations piling up on you—on all of us—are massive. We’re seven people trying to defend the entire universe. And even inside the team, I know we have a tendency to expect you’ll always be ready to go. The red paladin, with the hardest lion to master. The ace pilot who’s not afraid to charge into any danger, no matter how big. What did Lance say? Our ‘samurai’?”

Keith cringed.

“But you’re Keith Kogane before any of those things. And it’s okay for Keith to not have everything under control. Some days the universe is going to ask more from you than you have to give. War is not easy, even for the best soldiers. Remorse and doubt—those are normal human feelings, not problems with a quick fix.”

Normal human feelings. But I’m not a normal human. Keith’s eyes were downcast, half-lidded, heavy with missing sleep, missing rest.

“You were trying to ask me how I lived with the guilt from the arena,” Shiro said.

“You don’t have to answer,” Keith hurried.

“I wish I had a better answer to give. But I’m doing the only thing I know how: I just… keep going.” He sounded so tired. “I get up every day and my do my best to be a better person. I try hard to lead the team. I pilot my lion to save as many people as I can. Sometimes the only way to make it through the day is to remember that the people we’ve rescued might not be here if I’d died in the gladiator ring.”

They wouldn’t. None of them would be here if Shiro had died. Not Keith, not Lance or Hunk—no Allura, no Coran, no Voltron. Entire planets still existed simply because Shiro had lived.

And if something so good could come from what Shiro still called a selfish choice, then… Keith could keep going too. He could wake up tomorrow and be a better person than today.

Whatever choices the kids made, he could carry through to the end of the line, because they were not a problem with a quick fix, and he could live with that.

Somehow, it felt like a warship’s weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Somehow, that was how it always felt, when he relied on Shiro.

“I’m sorry I haven’t come talk to you lately,” Keith said finally, soft and low.
Shiro gave Keith a playful shoulder shove; even though he was obviously going light, it was still
the Galra arm, and Keith, who hadn’t braced for it, found himself practically bowled over onto his
side. “Well,” Shiro said, “don’t do it again, and I think I can let it slide. Just this once.”

“Thanks.” Keith huffed a laugh and fell further over on to his back, rather than bothering to sit up.
The metal at the foot of Shiro’s bed felt cool against the back of his head, still sticky from cold
sweat.

“You’re welcome. But not so welcome that I won’t still throw you under the bus tomorrow when
Allura rakes us over the coals for falling asleep trying to form Voltron.”

“You’re the one still talking,” Keith drawled, shutting his eyes and burrowing a mountain range of
wrinkles into the sheet over the foot of Shiro’s bed. “I thought that older people needed more
sleep.” He picked up both his legs and stretched them right out, over the top of Shiro’s knees;
Keith didn’t even have to open his eyes to feel the black paladin’s incredulous stare.

“Oh, is that how it’s going to be?”

“Yeah.” Keith dared the palest smile. “I heard the floor’s pretty comfy actually. Altean tech, you
know. Might be good for your back, Grandpa.”

Shiro hummed a contemplative note, tapped his chin in thought—and then promptly rolled over,
flinging Keith’s legs off on in the process. With an entirely too self-satisfied look, Shiro dropped
his head on his pillow and stretched out to his maximum height, which was grotesquely tall, if you
asked Keith. The utilitarian bed was hardly big enough for Shiro on a good day; now, even as
Keith slithered to the edge of the mattress to escape being squashed, they were two shoes in a
shoebox, facing opposite directions on diagonals and still just barely making the fit.

“Reminds me of Garrison.” Shiro yawned the words, a sleepy burr finally stealing back into his
voice.

Keith cracked an eye open to poke at the bone pale toes hovering dangerously near his slice of
space. “Your feet smell even worse than back then.”

“Oh really?” Keith’s only warning was the glint of a wicked grin before Shiro’s huge feet were
pressed and wiggling all over his face.

“Nooo, gross! STOP!”

Shiro’s laughter was clean and light and achingly familiar.

- - -

Keith woke up on the floor three hours later and was not surprised. Takashi Shirogane might be
unshakably good, but his Nice Guy™ routine was a goddamn charlatan act.

- - -

No matter how much he’d resolved to talk to her, Keith didn’t see Niresh again for two days. No
Xerci either, for that matter, which meant Dulsara probably had something to do with it. But…
maybe not? He didn’t want to go looking for her, just in case. What if he intruded again where he
wasn’t wanted?

So Keith waited, instead, though he wasn’t sure what he was waiting for. Shiro said to give her
the choice. What if she chose to never talk to him again? What if she didn’t like the family they
found for her?
He went through the motions, lurking in his hallway as often as he could, on the off chance he’d see her (conveniently, this also kept him out of Hunk’s general path). Keith was so lost in his own thoughts, practicing exactly what he’s say to her, that he didn’t actually notice Niresh at all when she turned up two mornings later: he stepped out of his room and nearly stepped right on her. She scrambled out of the way in time to avoid tripping him, but only barely. Keith windmilled before he found his footing—mentally, as much as physically.

“H-Hi,” he offered, every carefully practiced line about freedom of choice flying right out of his head.

She opened her mouth to answer, flicker of pink tongue, white fang, but then she clammed up again, dropped her eyes to the floor. She scuffed the floor with one boot. The scratching noise it made was the only sound in their whole hallway.

Then: “I’m sorry,” she peeped into the collar of her black suit.


“You got scratched again when I had the nightmare. I smelled yer blood.”

“Hey, that’s…” He dropped to one knee to get closer to her level, closer to where he could meet her eyes; maybe she could see how serious he was, since he already knew anything he said would be useless to convey it. She flinched a little, but didn’t step away. “You don’t have to apologize. It was my fault. Uh, mostly? It didn’t hurt anyway, so there’s nothing to… What I mean is, um—”

What would Shiro say? He was supposed to be giving her options, making her realize she didn’t owe them anything, especially not apologies. He’d worked out this whole deep, inspirational declaration!

But in the end, “You can choose!” was all Keith actually managed to declare.

Niresh tilted her head to the side, one eye squinted, the universal symbol for utter confusion.

“Ugh!” He dropped his head into his hands. How the hell was he supposed to make this make sense to her when it barely even made sense to him? “What I’m trying to say is that you don’t have to apologize! It’s me who should apologize to you. I wanted all of you to stay here because I thought we’d be able to make up at least a little for what we did. But my reasons were wrong. You weren’t supposed to be p-prisoners. So, from here on… You can choose what happens.”

“Like what?” In the long, empty hallway, her voice seemed even smaller, even more like the uneasy murmurations of fading ghosts.

“Like… If you want to go live with someone else. We’ll find you a safe place to stay.”

She considered this for a long time, withdrawn and unmoving. The castle ship never made any noise or engine-rumbles from the inside, but still Keith felt like the floor beneath his knee was trembling, a rapid hum-hum in time with his heart.

Finally, with her shoulders slumped, her ears low, Niresh whispered, “The ‘somebody else…’ they won’t be Galra, will they?”

Keith felt the air sinking out of his lungs, impossible to recapture as water through fingers. Keith bit the inside of his cheek to stifle a sigh. “No,” he admitted reluctantly. “Probably not.” Finding a good foster family for Galra children would be hard enough. Finding Galra who were not part of the Empire? Did they exist at all? Hell, even if they did, chances are they really wouldn’t want to be found…
Niresh turned her back on him. She didn’t step away, but somehow it felt like the distance between them had exponentially grown, two moons of a dead planet drifting further and further off orbit, time and spacing stretching out and outward. Keith felt cold, the chill of the tile seeping through his pants, through his skin, through his bones. Niresh’s hands trembled at her side.

Was it hard for her to say it? That she wanted to go?

Keith tried to imagine what kind of family they would find for her. Quiet, close knit, understanding, smart. People who liked to read. Who wouldn’t be embarrassed imitating space animal noises. Who wouldn’t look at her and see the enemy. Gentle. Kind.

(You are all the stars to me.)

Niresh took a deep breath that shook at its beginning and end. She squared her shoulders. Her little black suit showed every line of her tense limbs. He couldn’t see her eyes, but she tipped her head enough that he could see her fangs when she opened her mouth.

“I want to stay here,” Niresh said, resolute, final, as if it made any sort of sense.

“W-What?” He actually gaped, open mouthed and owl-blinking.

She shrunk under the weight of his surprise, stared hard down at her boots as she turned back toward him. Her claws plucked nervously at the back of her other hand, leaving valleys and mountains in her fur. The moment felt like glass, like if he even shivered it would break.

“I don’t wanna go live with someone who don’t understand,” she mumbled.

Understand what? What had happened? Where she had come from? What it meant to be Galra? Just about any space-faring race in the universe would know more about how to be Galra than Keith did.

“But I don’t under—”

“You understand this.” Niresh stepped forward into the circle of his reach and leaned, pressing her forehead to the underside of his chin. The feather-soft brush of her hair and ears that made him instantly bow his head to meet her, contact stardust-light and so well-known, echoing back from all his fondest half-dream memories. “That’s enough.”

She stepped back and Keith just stared, for too long probably, silent and confused and every hollow in his body rattling with some feeling he couldn’t even name: the nervous, fluttering stretch of walking while weightless, adrift, in the dark. It felt like he’d been holding his breath for hours and only now let it go.

But he hadn’t planned for this. What was he supposed to do?

Niresh wanted to stay.

Whatever choice she makes, we can live with it.

“Okay,” he squeaked—and realized a second later (when she just looked at him as if he peerlessly stupid) that Okay was about the least respectful answer to her decision that any creature could give, up to and including the Pishkerian stick bugs, whose ever-present Are you sure? still seemed somehow better suited.

He fiddled with the hem of his jacket, something to do with his hands other than flap them uselessly as he floundered his way through: “I mean you’re welcome to stay, but—” options “—
you don’t have to. If you find somewhere you like better, then… I guess you can just say? And I
know I said to watch the team, but if you don’t wanna do that either, that’s okay too. If you’re
scared of me, you don’t have to keep coming around or anything; you can just—”

But she was shrinking with every word: head bowing, ears sinking, folding her lips in tight.

She looked too thin, too small to be real. She could run rings around him with her hands tied
behind her back, Keith knew, but seeing her like this—drawing again, aching—felt like the
whole world turning on its side. She was purple and covered in honest to god clear fur and her
pupils were lost in the sea of her yellow eyes, but he’d said it to Shiro and here was the proof: she
was just a little kid. Galra, Human, Altean—it didn’t matter. She was a tiny girl in an
overwhelming new world, and just for once, Keith thought, he’d like to make her smile instead of
cry.

“Maybe it’d work better if you just told me what you want?”

Niresh blinked at him, startled, gazing away down the hall and back as if someone might appear
and answer for her. “What… I want?!” She turned her head to the side, hiding without running,
and went back to scuffing the floor. Keith was not Shiro; he was not wise or practiced or patient.
But even he knew when the only right choice was to wait.

Niresh mumbled something in a voice too small for him to distinguish. After a moment, she tried
again: “I jus’ don’ wanna be alone no more. Dulsara’s sad and angry all the time now. She don’
talk to me like she used to. It’s real quiet. Do you not wanna talk to me neither?"

You can do better.

“I’m not very good at talking,” Keith admitted, “but if that’s what you want, I’ll try hard.”

Niresh paused, peeked back at him with one considering eye. Finally, in a voice so flat, fake-low,
and imitational that he couldn’t take it as anything short of cheeky, she said “Okay,” and that was
all.

“Not funny,” Keith retorted, but he had to bite his grin to kill it.

They took a walk. After that brief but emotional roller coaster of a morning, skipping early
training seemed safest, and no way was he risking slipping into the kitchen for a late breakfast—
he was going to keep avoiding Hunk until Shiro boxed his ears and made him come back to group
trainings, thank you.

They didn’t head anywhere in particular, just wandered up and down the halls, past one-way
windows full of galaxies and star clusters and, when they got especially close, planets of every
shade and constitution, some with enormous metallic structures orbiting them like rings or moons.
Every once in a rare, rare while, another craft hurtled distantly across the void. No matter how
heavy her boots were, Niresh, Keith discovered, could walk without making a single sliver of
sound.

Little by little, Keith thought of things to say: about other stars, about planets he knew better,
about the single silvery moon of Earth, the dryness of the desert, the way rain smelled when it fell
on parched sandstone, the tentative press of human technology against the scale of the universe,
meaningless gestures into the emptiness of space—or what they had hoped would be emptiness.

Somewhere in the middle of their third hour, somewhere in the middle of sharing memories he
hadn’t even known he had in him to care about, Niresh dared a question: "How come yah look
like that if you're Galra?"

"Look like what?"

"The people from that planet. Earth people."

"Humans," Keith corrected, and then trailed off. "I was born on Earth. I'm part human."

But Niresh didn't look convinced. She swept her eyes from the top of his head to his toes, a motion that made her head nod enormously. "Can all humans change shape, like you?"

"Uh, no." Keith huffed a laugh. "Humans definitely can't change shapes."

Very slowly, like she thought he might need a little extra time to follow along, she said, "But Galra can't either."

Yes, thanks, of course Keith knew that Galra couldn't just—

Wait. If Galra couldn't change shapes, and humans definitely couldn't change shapes, then…

How could Keith?

He stopped walking. Niresh kept going a step or two, and then had to lean to look back at him. "First I thought maybe you were wearin' morph gear, but you'd hafta turn it off by now. Are you a druid?" Her head cocked to the side again; she did that far more often than Dulsara or Xerci, whose ears were more flexible. "The only Galra I know that change shapes are the druids."

"I don't… think so?" he squeaked. No way. Druids were terrifying, inhuman in a way even the most scaly and ugly of the Galra still weren't, abominations of crippling dark magic, overflowing power, slipping through space and time. They were wrongness made flesh, copper-tasting corruption and black acid. He'd only met the one, but that one was more than enough. The druids were like an antithesis to life itself, black holes with spider's legs for fingers. Keith was just… absolutely not like that.

Niresh stared out the nearest window. A comet was streaking by, far off. "A druid came to our base once," she murmured. "Yedgi told us to hide, 'cause druids can sense quintessence. If the druid reported us, our parents woulda been in big trouble. But Dulsara wanted to see. She made me come with her to spy on the transport. I think it saw us. It looked up at the ledge where we were hidin', but it didn't say nothin'. It was still kinda scary though."

Kind of scary. Small words for what druids were.

Keith had never thought about why he could change between human and Galra. He'd been so caught up in the whole Surprise, you're purple underneath! thing and trying to make sure no one else found out that he'd never had time to wonder whether swapping between one and the other was normal. Nothing about being part alien was normal anyway, so he'd just assumed it was a basic fact of his being. Changing shape felt no different than changing clothes, one disguise coming off in favor of another.

He couldn't be connected to the druids. That was just… His mother was bright and warm, nothing like a black-light nightmare. Keith's memory of his father was shakier, but every bit of it was still gentleness and worry and patience.

He could believe in good Galra and Galra who made great parents. But a druid being either of those things? Unbelievable as Zarkon surrendering the war tomorrow.
“Maybe,” Niresh was saying from somewhere in front of him, “you’re a—” the translator jumped, “—dilute.”

The word itself sounded insulting, even if the way she said it didn’t. “What’s that?” Keith asked suspiciously.

She looked at him funny, nose wrinkled, mouth canted far to one side. Seeing the way her skin folded under transparent fur would never stop being strange. “Somebody who’s more than one thing,” she offered. “Like Xerci and Dulsara.”

“More than one thing? You mean they’re not full Galra?” Sure, he obviously knew it was possible, but…

“Most people aren’t.” Niresh Galra-shrugged again, something thrown away over one shoulder. “Dulsara told the truth about Daibazaal’s sickness. A lot of Galra died even ‘fore the planet was destroyed, and afterward everybody went to live in lotsa different places. Most people had to find a—” there was just a flat gap in the translation for a second, long enough for Keith to hear the Galran word instead: Khalverseri, before the translator finally spit out its best guess, “—All Else who wasn’t Galra.”

Not a very useful guess. By context, Keith assumed she meant the Galra intermarried on every world they colonized, ten thousand years of hybridization, which, yeah, went a long way toward explaining why none of them looked like they actually belonged to the same species at all—maybe even why none of the children looked similar to each other.

“So Dulsara and Xerci are mixed?”

“Xerci’s maman was Ixillis,” she said, like that meant anything to Keith, “but Xerci’s papan was Galra, so of course he brought Xerci with him when he changed bases. And Dulsara’s papan was from Yulsharaj, but if you ask her, she’ll lie and tell yah he was from High Tempela ‘cause she’s embarrassed. My grandmaman’s grandmaman was Gulfwher’ue but everybody else in my line’s been Galra, so that’s why I am the way I am.”

That’s the most I’ve ever heard her say without crying, Keith thought. Half of it didn’t mean a thing to him, but she seemed… different now that he’d offered the choice to speak, more alive, bouncing from one foot to the other, arms loose at her side. Like a closed fist opening up. He didn’t want to interrupt. When it came to her own history, she was on sure footing, which was more than he could say, by far.

“So, what? You think I can change shapes because I’ve got something else mixed in too?”

“Maybe,” Niresh pondered, frowning, one fang out. “There are some aliens can do that. The Morghar can, but they’re big ‘n’ ugly and have plants growin’ on their backs so I don’t think yer mixed with a Morghar.”

Keith hoped not as well.

“And the Zilfi can but in their normal forms they’re only this tall—” she held one hand only a little above her own head, Keith’s bottom rib, “—and they play mean tricks all the time and their language can’t translate by any translator, so I don’t think any Galra would have ‘em for a pardner.”

Sounds more like a fairy than an alien.

Niresh went quiet for a while, turning her back on him to stare out the window again. She laced her hands behind her back and twisted idly a bit from side to side. Finally, after Keith thought the
conversation might be over, she mumbled, “Are that lady and the man with the weird fur color really Alteans?”

“Yeah?”

“But everybody told me they all got killed in the war. Are yah really sure?”

Keith huffed a breath. Then, darkly: “Not like I can meet any other Alteans to check.”

Niresh frowned again. Her open posture was gone; she tucked her hands tighter against her back. “Dulsara used to tell scary stories ’bout spirits of ancient Alteans coming back to poison Galra children again. I don’t wanna meet more Alteans.”

“Allura and Coran—” Leave it to the Galra to spread such ugly lies—they have a little trouble with Galra too. But they won’t hurt you.”

“There’s an insult, in Galran: You lie like an Altean,” she mumbled. “It means nothin’ you say can be trusted.”

Keith felt… agitated. Hair up. Some narrow-eyed feeling between defensive and apprehensive. “Yeah well, you don’t believe everything the Galra tell you either. The Empire’s not so perfect, huh?”

He saw her reflection blink. “Oh…” In the dark glass, her face lost shape and color, faded out to just two more yellow spots in a sea of stars. “I guess that’s true.”

No one said anything for a while. Outside, a galaxy swam past in what felt like slow motion, spiral arms casting cloudy blue-gold dust out across the void.

Apropos of nothing, looking back over her shoulder with pale tufts of her fur outlining the near invisible line of her black suit, she said, “Well, it don’t matter if yer diluted. Even if you’re only a little bit Galra, you’ll still get counted as all-Galra. Don’t matter if you ever find the other parts out.”

Was that a strange thing for a conquering species to say or not? All the commanders they’d fought went on and on about the superiority of the Galra race. But apparently anybody with purple skin qualified as a member of that race? Kind of generous.

That’s one way to win a war though, Keith thought. Just make everyone a member of your side.

And that was when, without the slightest hint of warning, the grate of the nearest air vent broke from the ceiling and Pidge crashed down onto the floor just inches in front of them. Niresh’s fur stood all on end, her claws flung out in front of her and ready.

“Quiznak!” Pidge cursed, clambering to her feet and brushing off copious clouds of grit that made Keith wrinkle his nose against a sneeze.

“Oh, Pidge?”

The green paladin spun around on her heel, glasses askew. “OH! HI! I—didn’t see you there!”

Keith’s blood ran very, very cold. Every muscle in his body turned to metal under his skin. “What were you doing in the air vents? Were you eavesdropping?!”

Even if you’re only a little bit Galra…
Pidge looked scandalized. Her jaw dropped; her eyes bugged behind her glasses. “No, I wasn’t! And frankly,” she dropped her hands to her hips, “I’m insulted you’d think for a second I’d stoop to such a low-tech method of information gathering. Really, come on, who needs to lurk around in air vents anymore when I could just reprogram the comm speakers in your room to voice capture? Or download the echo data from your translation crystals? Or get Coran to disable the sound dampening protocols? Or just ask Hunk? I mean, in terms of efficiency—”

“If you weren’t eavesdropping, what were you doing in the vents?” Keith cut her off, slicing with his voice like it was his bayard.

Pidge flinched, shoulders hunching. “I was just… taking a walk?”

Even Niresh looked embarrassed by the lameness of that excuse. She stared at Pidge with blatant doubt, shaking her head a little.

“You were taking a walk in the air vents?” Keith might not have been a genius, but he wasn’t blind, deaf, and dumb. He wouldn’t have fallen for that ridiculous of a story even if he was Xerci’s age.

Pidge looked shifty as hell, her eyes darting this way and that. “All right, fine,” she finally caved, heaving a sigh that actually made her slump as the air went out of her lungs. “Chuchule has a bolt fitting that I need to finish up the new stock to brace our modified ion cannon on the aft-side of the castle. I’ve been chasing that dratted mouse around all morning.”

Plausible? Not plausible? Keith couldn’t tell. Pidge was a genius, but he’d never thought she made a very convincing liar. He’d smelled the girl thing a mile away. But it might not even matter—if their voices echoed in the vents, then she didn’t have to be intentionally eavesdropping to hear. She could have caught the whole conversation just by accident—

“How long were you there?” he demanded, before he realized how self-incriminating it might sound. “What did you hear?” Niresh was shaking her head at him now.

Pidge glasses flashed as she craned her head to look at him. “What’re you worried about?” she drawled. “Is there something you don’t want me to hear?”

Pidge was a genius, after all.

“N-No! It’s just—annoying! You didn’t like it when Hunk spied on you!”

“I wasn’t spying!” Pidge hissed, flailing more dust clouds into the air. “I told you, I was chasing a no-good thieving space mouse!”

“That doesn’t sound like the space mice…” Keith insisted, eyes narrowed to suspicious little slits. His lip poked out dangerously far. The mice adored Pidge, didn’t they? Next to Allura, Keith thought Pidge was the mice’s favorite, especially since they literally wouldn’t come anywhere near him, Hunk was still kind of nervous around rodents, Shiro accidentally stepped on the skinny long one’s tail once and it was holding a grudge, and Lance… Keith had no idea what Lance’s relationship with the mice was like, actually. Keith didn’t spend a lot of time with Lance.

Keith crossed his arms, tapped his toes. “And what exactly did you do to tick them off?”

“Nothing!” Pidge snapped, so sharp it made Niresh shrink back, which Pidge didn’t miss, even with her glasses hanging off one ear. Pidge took a long, steadying breath. “I was working in the hangar earlier and they were playing around. I told them to scram because their chattering was distracting, so they all took off. But they took off with a bunch of my stuff too! I’ve got everything back but the bolt now, but that pesky bugger is fast!” Pidge fished out a handful of what looked
like junk out of her shorts pocket and held it out for inspection like Keith could make something out of the little pile of alien metal bits. He’d been on the pilot’s course at Garrison; he’d never taken anything but the couple of required mechanics classes, and those had focused mostly on, you know, preventing your ship from exploding in deep space, not building ion cannons, so…

Niresh looked interested though, in that blank-faced way she maintained every time she met someone other than Keith. She sniffed toward Pidge’s hand, and the green paladin eyed her warily.

“You have vermins on your ship?” Niresh finally spat out, too surprised to be reluctant to speak.

Pidge scoffed. “They’re psychic space mice; they’re not vermin.” Just under her breath, Keith heard “Most of the time,” tacked on.

“But why did they take your stuff?” Keith asked, because if he asked about that, he could pretend she really hadn’t heard anything, at least for now. (What was one more person to avoid for the rest of his life, anyway?) But really, if Pidge was telling the truth, she was trying to do something important for the castle ship. Why would the mice try to stop her? Was there some sort of game she wasn’t in on? Something Allura set the mice up to? Or... "Did Shiro tell you to stop playing around and take a break for once, and you didn't listen?"

"Ergh!" Pidge's caught-red-handed face was pretty funny: her lips beaked out; her eyes squinted in frustration. "Okay," she confessed, "he might have sort of said something like that, once. Maybe twice. But! The mice did not hear him. They were not in on it. They wouldn't do his bidding; he's not that good at bribery!"

That's what you think.

"Uh-huh," Keith muttered, skeptical, doing that one eyebrow thing that reminded him so much of Lance he stopped as soon as he started and may or may not have surreptitiously attempted to press said eyebrow down flat again, just to be safe.

"Really!" Pidge insisted, leaning up into his space, waving her metal cannon bits around wildly. "Something else is going on!"

Something else… Something missing...

“Wait. Where’s—"

The window in front of Keith was unblocked, a wide open view of the billion stars. There was no one clinging to his legs. No nervous yellow glances. No dark shadow of a tiny black suit in a corner. On either side of Keith and Pidge, the pure white hallway was absolutely, totally barren.

Niresh was gone.

Chapter End Notes

1) Blade of Marmora confirmed, Galra got weird feet. They actually remind me of armadillo feet, which is convenient because Zarkon reminds me of a giant armadillo.

2) Personal headcanon: Although they have a reputation among other races for being cold and stand-offish, among their own kind and those they're comfortable with,
Galra are hardcore nuzzlers. Cuddle champions of the universe.

3) Some world-building: Ixillis are a race of faun-like humanoids who also bear strong resemblance to the white-tailed deer of Earth. They had zero native predators and natural hazards on their planet (even the Galra colony there is essentially peaceful), so they're basically pretty hippies, lax parents at best, and their infants tend to mature very slowly. Although Xerci looks more like his father, his mental development is closer to an Ixillis, so he is less aware and verbal than other Galra children would be at his age. Dulsara's father was a traveling trader from Yulsharaj, which is home to a race of large, bipedal (but not especially humanoid) bat-like people who fold their wings like cloaks and speak telepathically. Dulsara is embarrassed because, regardless of the fact that the Yulsharaji are a highly advanced and extremely intelligent race, their appearances toe the line of being just a little "too beastly" to be socially acceptable partners of the Galra. Dulsara's mother was a bit of a wild child.

4) Cultural assimilation is the most effective means of conquering. If you make everyone join your side, there's no one left to be your enemies.

5) Come talk Voltron to me on tumblr--and have a mini "deleted scene" of Keith's past I cut from this chapter because it was already like 5000 words too long...
Chapter Notes

Hey all, this is a double post, so enjoy this chapter and then go read the next one too!

This was supposed to be a breather chapter, but apparently I don't know how to give Keith a break. It's finally Dulsara's time to... well, she won't shine, but be more gentle on her than Keith is, okay guys?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Niresh was gone. Why? Is she scared of Pidge? Did she go back to her room? That would have been okay, wouldn’t it, except… He and Niresh had been wandering the dimmest, most unused, unmapped hallways of the castle ship for the last three hours and now were probably several miles from Lance’s old room.

Did she know her way back? Would she remember where they’d turned? Keith’s sense of direction was pretty dismal if he didn’t have a map. Was that a Galra thing? Is that why robot sentries did all their patrolling? Was she going to be lost in the bizarre, twisting underbelly of the Castle of Lions for hours—for days?

“Uhhh,” Pidge said. “Just for the record: Keith lost the kid. It was all Keith. Pidge was in no way, shape, or form related to losing an alien child.”

“Are you kidding me?!” Keith croaked. “We were fine until you fell out of the ceiling!”

“Well you were the one who made a big deal out of it! I could have just gone on my way if you hadn’t freaked out!”

“You were taking a walk in the air vents, and I’m the freak?!”

Pidge held her hands up. “Hey man, I don’t judge your recreational pursu—”

“Agh, we don’t have time for this! Just help me find her. Go that way!” He flung an arm out to point down the hall, where he and Niresh had been heading. He’d follow the path back to Lance’s room (provided he could still remember it, actually) and probably find her on the way. Right? She couldn’t have gotten too far...

Okay, good joke. Niresh was a military-born Galra child who could apparently wipe the training deck floor with the bot it took Keith months to figure out, with proven access to places she definitely shouldn’t be in. If she didn’t follow the straightest course back (which he totally didn’t remember, shit), it might take ages to find her.

If they ever did. Altean tech was legitimately scary, and there were some places in the castle where a body could just...

Keith took off running, leaving Pidge gawking after.

The hallways all looked exactly the damn same. White and blue, white and blue… He hadn’t thought about how they’d get back when they just wandered off; he assumed all the passages
looped around eventually. Easy to forget the Castle of Lions was massive when he spent 95% of his time in just five rooms.

They’d turned left in this hall (maybe?), so now he should take a right here (maybe?). Keith crashed through one doorway and the next, up stairs and down, taking any turn that looked vaguely familiar (which was just about every turn, because they all looked familiar!), and paused only when he’d completely run out of breath—and into a complete dead end.

Who even built a hallway just to dead-end it?!! And where do I go from here? Somehow, it felt like he was getting farther from their rooms, not closer! Keith breathed in deep through his nose and exhaled through his mouth. He could do this. Worst case, he took the biggest hallways back to the main bridge and—

Sudden pressure brushed his mind: a warm, rolling desert wind, and the undercurrent of rumbling concern that prodded at his brain (maroon spots flashing in his eyes, the scent of lemons) stuck his feet to the floor.

“I’m okay, Red,” Keith said, at the same time as he thought it hard in his lion’s direction.

Red sent back a spark of dubiousness (spearmint, ducking lower in tall grass) that did nothing for Keith’s self-esteem, but then Red’s signature call rang out, that same firelight dancing power that guided Keith on the warship way back when, and he felt a wave of relief. He could find Red’s energy from anywhere.

All right. Keith grinned. He knew the way between Red’s hangar and his room with his eyes closed. Get to the lion, get to the Galra.

By the time Red’s presence grew from flicker to a blaze, Keith knew where he was, and he sprinted with renewed urgency toward Lance’s old room. Skidding to a halt, Keith muscled his way through the door before it even finished opening.

“Niresh!” he made the mistake of calling.

Xerci chirred at the top of his lungs and promptly fell over himself trying to clamber to Keith. Stretched out on her belly on her bed, Dulsara looked up from a tablet (one of the Galra books, not Altean) and shot Keith the most put-upon look he’d ever seen on a Galra face, nose wrinkled in perfect disgust.

“What do you want?”

“Has Niresh been back here?” he panted.

“No… Hey! Wait!”

But Keith took off again without explaining. He’d only get yelled at anyway, which wouldn’t find Niresh any faster. She hadn’t gone back to their room. Or she hadn’t made it back to their room? In either case, that meant she could be anywhere, getting into any kind of trouble or danger or more and more scared by the minute. What if she got stuck in an airlock? Or triggered some weird Altean defense mechanism? Or fell down a maintenance shaft? Or—

Keith made it half way down the hall before he realized he was being followed. Dulsara plowed after him, catching up much faster than he was proud of.

"What happened to Niresh? Did you lose—"

"She wandered off!" Keith insisted. "I was just talking with Pidge and she vanished!"
"You probably said something horrible!" It was kind of miraculous how Dulsara could put her nose in the air even while full out running.

Keith did not, in fact, think he said anything horrible, but it occurred to him suddenly that saying something now might help. "Niresh!" Keith bellowed, hands around his mouth, making Dulsara's ears pin back flat, almost hidden in her curly nest of hair. "Niresh!"

"Stop shouting!" Dulsara bellowed right back. "You can just say it normal and Niresh will still hear you!"

Right. Their hearing was incredible. Keith knew that, of course, but he was sporting human ears currently, had dealt with human ears his whole life, and he’d never admit to anyone on pain of death, but he was maybe, just a little bit, starting to panic here.

“Niresh!” Keith called again, only a little quieter. Dulsara pulled ahead by just enough to kick Keith in the shin and then keep running. Impressive multi-tasking.

But when they blew through two, three, four more hallways, far enough to have looped around every branching path the children could access, Keith was beginning to get both very winded and very, very worried.

They started peeking into every single side room. All the doors opened for Dulsara—even the ones that definitely shouldn’t. No quizznaking way the kids got access to the north-wing armory by anything other than nefarious means. Keith glared at the back of Dulsara’s fluffy head, all the fluffier with her fur’s nervous puffing.

Another corridor blurred past. It started to feel like they were running in ever-growing circles, though that shouldn’t be geometrically possible in a vertically-oriented conical spaceship?

Then again, Alteans…

Sure enough, Keith recognized the shape of that window. If they didn’t take a different turn up ahead, they’d end up right back in their own hall, and—at the crossroads, Pidge went barreling past, a green and tawny flash, gone again before Keith could shout. Something screeched (her sneakers on the floor?), and then Pidge whirled around the corner back toward them, waving her handheld scanner.

"Keith, she’s this way!"

Immediately, Dulsara charged past him and straight to Pidge, up on her toes to make herself bigger. “Where?!” she demanded.

Pidge blinked down at her. “Uhh, that way?” Dulsara vanished around the corner without another word, and with a sigh, Keith followed. At least Pidge had to struggle to keep up with them. (He’d take small comforts where he could.) “Turn left up ahead,” Pidge announced, nose buried in her scanner. “Then right, then the third left!”

Wait… Left, right, third left from Keith’s hall got you to… Lightning struck down every vertebra of Keith’s spine, made him lunge forward so he actually passed Dulsara.

Left, right, third left got you from Keith’s room to Shiro’s.

Why would Niresh be down Shiro’s hallway? That was almost worse than the armory. What if she was bothering him? What if Shiro… What if Shiro mistook her for…
They whipped around the final corner en masse, and of course, there she was, hunched up right in front of Shiro’s door, claws out, back to them and her head low.

Keith skidded to a stop; Pidge avoided crashing into his back by a hair.

Niresh loomed over Shiro’s doorstep, dangerously still, poised to pounce—because she was staring down four nervous space mice trapped at her feet. She looked up when Keith, Pidge, and Dulsara screeched to a stop. “I caught yer vermins,” she mumbled, and then stomped hard to keep her prey from bolting.

Keith buried his face in his palm. “Let them go,” he groaned.

Behind him, Dulsara gasped: “Yer ship has vermins?”

Keith sighed again.

Niresh frowned. “You don’ want yer bolt?” She poked one too-long claw at the mice, who were millimeter by millimeter trying to creep away. Caught out, they hunkered down even smaller; the tall skinny one used Pidge’s bolt as a shield.

“Let them go,” Keith repeated, a little firmer. Niresh crossed her arms and looked between Keith and Dulsara like she might get better instructions if she waited a minute longer, but even Dulsara, braced for a fight that wasn’t coming, seemed at a loss for what to do. Finally, grudgingly, Niresh took a tiny step to the side. The mice streamed past her (and Keith) and happily hurled themselves into Pidge’s waiting arms. The forgotten bolt fell to the floor as all four mice began squeaking over each other, each trying to be first to regale Pidge with their traumatic tale of woe and indignation. If you asked Keith, they were definitely hamming it up. None of them looked even the tiniest bit hurt. Crybabies.

Beside him, Keith felt a shift; in the corner of his eye, he watched Dulsara begin slowly backing away from Pidge and her armful of mice. Her eyes were huge, and Keith would have found her jerky little backward bunny-hops extremely funny, if they weren’t all in Shiro’s hallway, being loud and squeaky and purple and just in general an absolute mess. (Who, by the way, was watching Xerci?)

To Keith’s surprise, Niresh did the opposite of Dulsara: she crept closer, inch by cautious inch. Some of the predator-stalking-victims lingered; she was utterly silent. Not even her breathing made a noise Keith could trace.

Emboldened by their safe harbor in Pidge’s unruly hair, the space mice turned and insulted Niresh in chorus, with angry chittering and honest to god wagging fingers. Keith didn’t even know mice had fingers that could be wagged. Niresh tilted her head far to the side as she surveyed them, while poor Pidge squirmed in place, stuck in the middle of the tiniest and most ridiculous battleground the castle had probably ever seen.

Then again, Alteans…

“Are they yellin’ at me?”

“You deserve it,” Keith replied. Were they really going to have to put “No hunting small animals” on the list of castle rules? (For that matter, why did they not already have a list of castle rules?)

It was hard to tell without seeing her pupils, but Keith was pretty sure Niresh’s eyes tracked every tiny move the space mice made as they ducked into and out of the shelter of Pidge’s hair. “I think if they don’ wanna be chased,” Niresh sniffed, “they shouldn’t run.”
Well, that’s... one way of looking at things.

The biggest of the space mice leaned far over Pidge’s forehead, still whining (now with accusatory gestures straight at Niresh) as if Pidge understood a word being cheeped at her. Well... Maybe she did? Wouldn’t it past her to hack her translator to cover mouse too.

Keith pinched the bridge of his nose. “Will you just apologize, so we don’t have to hear about this for the next three months?” The space mice’s grudge-bearing capacity far exceeded human levels, if the number of times Shiro found his sock drawer emptied across ten different hallways after stepping on the grey one’s tail was proof. Keith did not want to be anywhere near that again.

Somewhere behind them, Dulsara huffed in indignation, but Niresh seemed to contemplate the request, weighing the degree of humility required to apologize to a pack of rodents against the novelty of doing so, stacked up with the curiosity of what might happen if she did. Or at least Keith thought that’s what the tremble of her ears meant, the way her nose wrinkled a little as she sniffed at them.

Finally, Niresh relented. “I’m sorry yah were too slow to escape,” she said, which was… not really an apology at all. But the word “sorry” was said, and that’s half the battle, right? Keith would count it. Work in progress.

The space mice conferred on the crown of Pidge’s head. She had to crane her neck out to balance them, and every second they dragged out their delegation, her face sank further, until her eyes were two perfectly straight lines and her mouth folded into a scowl so sharp it became a perfect ^.

The mice just ducked their heads together as they whispered, ears for umbrella shields.

At last they broke apart, and the sleek silver mouse, the feistiest, trotted forward (Pidge had to crane her neck out even farther). The mouse nodded his head once, very firmly. Apology accepted. Crisis averted. Thank Quiznak.

Somewhere in the background, Dulsara grumbled under her breath; Keith only caught snippets “—any pride—” and “—dirty primitives—”, but he thought he could guess the rest. He glared over his shoulder, but it rolled off her back without the slightest impact, seeing as she gave exactly as good as she got, and her glare had the unfair advantage of looking like every one of their enemy soldier’s. Keith didn’t want to surrender; he glowered harder. Without meaning to, he found himself leaning down, towering over her. She curled her lip to bare fang—

And then Pidge broke their staring contest with an unrepentant jab to Keith’s side. When he whipped back to snap at her (“What?!”), she just pointed.

Niresh was a few feet from where he’d left her, inspecting Pidge’s bolt very seriously. “Oh,” she said, and that was all.

“’Oh’ what?” Keith prodded.

But Niresh didn’t seem interested in answering. She darted a wary glance at Pidge, then at Keith, then took a few reluctant steps closer, keeping Keith half way between herself and the green paladin. Very, very slowly, she reached around Keith’s leg to present the bolt to Pidge. She held it between the outer tips of her thumb and index finger, far away from herself as she could stretch.

This did nothing to protect her when, Pidge reached out to take the bolt, and the soft pink mouse skittered down her arm so it could give Niresh’s hand the tiniest, quickest sniff, ready to flee any second. Niresh froze. She watched the mouse without blinking. For a long moment, nothing happened.
Cautiously, one paw at a time, the mouse leaned out and patted Niresh’s claw. It was less than a millisecond, but Keith still caught the faintest hint of wonder in the way Niresh blinked three times, the way she leaned in minutely. And the mice saw it too.

One after another, the others crept down Pidge’s arm, hunkering together strategically. Niresh dropped the bolt into Pidge’s open hand, which made them all rear back, but none of them ran for cover just yet.

Niresh looked up at Keith very seriously and mumbled, “Vermins carry diseases.” She sounded like she was parroting a textbook. Maybe the military base protocol handbooks? Niresh eyed Pidge and the mice again suspiciously, scooted a half-inch closer to Keith’s side. “Won’t we… get sick?”

Keith shook his head. “These guys spent 10,000 years frozen in a healing pod. I don’t think they’ll ever get sick.”

From her place pressed against the hallway wall, trying hard to look nonchalant, Dulsara scoffed. “10,000 years is older than the empire. I think yer lying.”

“Are yah sure?” Niresh squinted at him.

“Dead.”

There was a beat. Her forehead wrinkled. “That don’t seem like bein’ sure?”

Pidge snorted. “It’s a human thing.”

“Bein’ dead?”

“Being sure,” Keith interrupted before the chain of miscommunication could spiral any further. Pidge was actually trembling under the pressure of keeping her arm up for the mice.

"Okay," Niresh said, and slowly extended her pointer finger. The pink mouse stretched farther than Keith thought physically possible, and then, in an instant, leapt onto Niresh’s outstretched finger. Niresh's eyes flew open wide and even wider when the pink mouse was shoved from its perch by the other three, piling onto her hand. They skittered up her arm as she stood motionless (except for her ears, butterfly fluttering), and made their way to her head in quick little hops, where they rolled in the longer fur alongside her crest. Left behind, the pink one nuzzled against her thumb, investigating the velvety furless skin there.

Finally free of her chittering burdens, Pidge deflated with an explosive sigh. Niresh made a noise not unlike a space mouse herself, the tiniest "Eek." Then: "It’s soft," she whispered, wonder and surprise, as she ran one nervous finger over the belly of the mouse stretching luxuriously in her hand. "Whyda they have claws if they’re too small to scratch nothing?"

Probably shouldn’t ruin the moment by admitting he had no clue, right? Even in the Castle of Lions, Keith had never touched a mouse in his life. His mother’s house never had any (natural aversion to Galra?) and it wasn’t like Garrison was open to rodents living in their walls. The advanced biochemistry class did some experiments with little white mice, Keith thought, but he’d left Garrison before then. In the desert, he’d seen something like a mouse once, only it had huge back feet and a long fuzzy tip on its tail, so maybe it was something else? Anyway, it just bounced away the second he saw it, so he’d never got that good of a look.

They were kind of cute, weren’t they? Keith reached out and poked the biggest one on Niresh’s head. It rubbed its cheek against his finger, and Keith felt a tinge of regret for skipping out on
trying to befriend them from the start. Kinda made sense now why Shiro was so heart-broken over being space-mouse rejected…

Keith caught a shuffle at the edge of his vision: Dulsara crossing her arms, bottom lip poked out, and (Keith could just tell) glaring at them from the corner of her eye, while she turned her head furiously away. But her ears couldn’t lie; they swiveled directly toward Niresh and the space mice.

Keith rolled his eyes. "Just come here if you want to pet them."

"Why would I want to pet something like that?! They're dirty and they bite!"

"They don’ bite," Niresh peeped. Held them for 30 seconds and she’s already an expert, apparently.

"They're still dirty!"

"They don’ smell dirty." Niresh brought the pink mouse to her nose for a sniff, but ended up getting tickled away by its tail. She contemplated the mouse, then considered Dulsara. Keith thought she might hold the mouse out to her friend—but she just cradled it closer to her chest instead, petting it with long, slow strokes.

Dulsara grit her teeth. He could see her warring with herself. Her ears flicked in Pidge’s direction before she looked away again. “I don’t want to pet your stupid vermins!” she growled at last, crossing her arms tighter so her hands wouldn’t betray her. Impressive resolve. To Keith, it felt uncomfortably like looking at himself: fierce in his determination to be fiercely unhappy.

Keith held his hand out and the big yellow-green mouse rolled into his palm obligingly. In two big steps, he transferred the mouse from Niresh’s head to Dulsara’s.

Dulsara went motionless. Then: “Get it off!” she cried, ducking. “I don’t want it; get it off!” But she had kicked him in the shin. Keith watched the mouse scurry down from her tossing head to her hiked-up shoulder, where it cozied up to her cheek and nestled in her dark, puffed out fur.

Niresh rolled her eyes. Or, well, Keith thought she did. Kind of looked like it? Did Galra even roll their eyes, or was that a human-only thing? No, he’d definitely seen Allura roll her eyes so hard at Lance she could have got them stuck. Hm. A little weird, wasn’t it, that some behaviors were exactly the same across species but others totally weren’t? How did that even happen?

While Keith was lost in thought, the ruckus in the hallway went on without him. Dulsara gained another mouse, the cheeky silver one, who took inordinate delight in scampering along her flailing arms and clinging stubbornly to the back of her suit despite her best attempts to fling it off. In Niresh’s hand, the pink and blue mice were now squabbling over… actually, hell if anyone could tell; they chattered away to Niresh, gesturing elaborate charades, but she just stared at them with a deep and serene lack of comprehension.

To be fair, Pidge tried to interrupt the chaos.

“Uh—” Pidge started. Then, “Um—”

Maybe some physical behaviors developed naturally, just as a result of having two arms and two legs and two eyes and two ears? There was a name for that, wasn’t there? Covalent evolution? Convalescent evolution? No...

Dulsara ran in blind circles, yowling and thrashing as the mice scampered from one limb to the next.
Pidge tried again. “Hang on—”

That’s when Shiro's door whisked opened and the black paladin leaned around the doorframe, peering sharply into the hall. He looked very ready for a fight, except that Pidge’s headphones were still half on his head, covering one ear.

Shiro blinked at Dulsara, frozen in wide-eyed terror on his doorstep, then at Keith, then Pidge, then Niresh, who clutched her mice like weapons, one in each hand. "What's... going on out here?"

"We were just leaving!" Keith declared, abruptly clapping a hand on Pidge's back and hooking a foot around Dulsara's leg to flick her in the right direction—that was, away. “Sorry we bothered you,” Keith shot back over his shoulder, even while he strong-armed three girls and four mice down the hallway and around several corners until they couldn’t possibly be close enough to prevent Shiro from getting back to his desperately needed moment of relaxation. When was the last time Keith had seen him out of armor in the middle of the day?

Invading his room at night was bad enough. Shiro didn’t need to lose any more rest because of the Galra. Any Galra.

When they finally stopped, Pidge batted his hand away. “You coulda just asked me to move,” she griped. “I don’t appreciate being man-handled!”

Keith thought that was kind of a weird choice of words, because he couldn’t handle anything. Also, Dulsara just kicked him in the shin again.

(Two corridors over, Shiro stared blankly into the hallway that just went from clogged with people to barren as a ghost town.

He shrugged, then very purposefully closed his door.)

Thoroughly distracted by her sudden kidnapping, Dulsara forgot there were mice crawling in her fur; when realization returned, she flinched, but the moment of acceptable panic had passed; with both mice curled up cozy on her shoulders like a pair of epaulettes, it would look very silly indeed to start flailing again.

Dulsara craned her head far away from her own shoulders as she could get, but nothing happened of course, except the big mouse cuddled closer. Little by little, covertly watching Niresh's calm, flat face the whole time, Dulsara admitted defeat.

Glumly, she jabbed at the silver mouse, a half-hearted attempt to bump it off its perch. But the feisty mouse simply caught her offending finger and gave it a hearty greeting shake, while the other one clapped in congratulations for her bravery.

Dulsara turned her nose up. "Well, I still think it's disgusting to have vermins in your ship."

"They're not vermins," Niresh objected, with all the sage wisdom of an over-informed seven-year-old. "They're mouses."

Keith laughed. “Mice.”

“That's what I said.”

“One is mouse, more is mice,” Pidge corrected. She fiddled with the bolt Niresh rescued, threading it between her fingers with an admirable degree of dexterity. (Hm. Possible knife fight training partner? Keith mused. Note to self.)
But Niresh frowned. “Yah keep sayin’ the same word twice.”

Keith didn’t get it. “Mice” and “mouse” sounded totally different—but “Ah!” Pidge tapped one fist against her palm in rapt realization. Her eyes sparkled behind her glasses. “What’s the plural of fish?”

“Fishes, obviously,” Dulsara interrupted.

“And the plural of knife?”

“Knifes. I didn’t think you were that dumb!”

Talk about dumb. Someone here was a kettle or a pot or however that saying went. Pidge stomped on his toes to keep Keith’s mouth shut.

“Apparently,” Pidge gushed, adjusting her glasses to peer closer at Niresh (who shrank away), “the Galra don’t have irregular plural nouns!”

“Huh?” Keith blinked.

“Goose, geese; mouse, mice; octopus, octopodes—although now that I think about, I think they said the correct plural of octopus is octopuses, but c’mon, where’s the fun in that? I mean, ‘octopodes’ is obviously superior from an etymological standpoint, but even if debating semantics is kind of the point here, what I’m actually saying is it’s a huge deal I’ve never noticed this with the Galra soldiers we’ve fought before! Think about what this means for our understanding of Galra tech!”

Keith’s eye twitched. “Uh… what?” Both Dulsara and Niresh gave him identical Galra shrugs.

Pidge heaved a huge sigh. Her face was so unimpressed, Keith could actually see her wishing Hunk was there instead. “All the Galra we encounter normally, from the empire,” she began, teaching finger in the air, “are utilizing up-to-date Galra technology. The Altean translators Allura gave us are making mistakes that the regulation Galra translators aren’t! This whole time, I’ve been flipping out over the Altean stuff, and it’s all still so similar that of course I didn’t even think about how much of a difference there might be—"

Keith still didn’t quite follow, and Pidge could tell. Very slowly, she tried, “It took me and Hunk months to map even the most basic Altean systems to theories that make sense with human physics. Altean tech is actually thousands of years ahead of the technology we have on Earth. Half of it operates under laws of matter Earth hasn’t even discovered yet. Give most humans another two millennia or something without outside help and they might just be figuring out the science behind stabilizing spaceship cockpits so actual warp drive doesn’t turn our pilots into big red stains on their flight seats.”

Dulsara laughed a little too gleefully for Keith’s taste.

“We know the Alteans shared tech with the Galra before the war. I was so focused on how I could use what I learned about Altean systems to hack into Galra ports too, that it didn’t really hit me…” She fell silent, an anxious, thick pause.

“What?” Dulsara prodded.

Pidge met Keith’s eyes and held him there. “The castle ship, the wormholes, our cloaking and navigation systems, even food goo—everything we’re bug-eyed over is ancient history to the Galra. Their civilization’s had ten thousand more years than the Alteans to learn and invent. I
don’t know who else’s out there, but Zarkon can’t be winning fights everywhere he goes on brute force alone. The Galra might not just be an advanced race… We might be fighting the most advanced race in the universe right now.”

“Well obviously!” Dulsara growled, the effect of her hands on her hips ruined entirely by the mice miming her pose on both shoulders. “We got biometrically coded metals that surpass mass-energy conversion limitations! Our artificial intelligence agents got sentience 8,000 years ago! We reversed the propulsion of dark energy, yah know!”

“You reversed what?!” Pidge spluttered, limbs akimbo. Keith ducked to avoid a windmilling arm.

“While yer primitive Altean castle still needs fixin’ with bolts,” Dulsara pointed, “even our regular fighter drones get repaired with micro fusion reactors—”

“That’s how the Galra are so fast at fixing things! It all makes sense now!”

“Pidge,” Keith cut in before she could start again. “Didn’t you actually need that bolt for something important?”

She cringed, cradling the troublesome piece of hardware a little closer. “Erk, right…”

And “Oh,” Niresh whispered at the same time. Though she spoke to Pidge, she kept her head down, staring at her feet. “D-Don’ use that bolt, ’s got a fault.”

"What the?!" Pidge cursed, bringing the bolt right up on her glasses, so close Keith had no idea how she could see it. "When did it get scored like this? If Lance was playing around in my stuff again!”

Keith tuned her out and nudged Niresh instead for a better explanation. "If you try an’ use a bolt like that, ’ll wobble in the socket. If it’s fer a cannon, yer trajectory will all be off. The mouses noticed the fault."

Kind of bizarre, hearing "mouses" right after "trajectory;” Keith wasn’t sure if that said more about the Altean translator’s failures or the Galra’s priorities in educating their children.

Dulsara crowded up on Niresh, eyes thin as flat gold coins. "Why are you helpin’ them?! They’re gonna use their cannons to shoot Galra ships!"

Niresh didn’t want to fight with her. She shrunk under Dulsara’s dominating gaze, ears sinking, shoulders slumped. Didn't say anything to defend herself.

"Don’ you care?!" Dulsara snarled.

Finally, in her tiniest, reediest voice, Niresh murmured: "Nobody knows we’re here. If this ship don’t win when it fights, we’ll die too."

Brutal pragmatism, to the end. Dulsara looked floored; her mouth fell open.

An unsettled feeling frog-hopped in Keith’s stomach too. It wouldn’t just their lives on the line if they came across the Galra now. Because of Team Voltron, the children were in danger from their own people.

Of course, he’d known that from the beginning. Not like he could exactly overlook the fact they were keeping three kids at the epicenter of the empire’s bloodiest rebellion. But thinking about it, really thinking about it, felt… different. He knew their names now, their faces, the way it sounded when they cried, what it looked like when they thought of people they loved. Desperately trying
to protect the faceless masses of an unexplored planet was another feeling entirely.

*It's scarier when it's someone you know.*

That spider-leg crawling on the back of his neck? That was fear. Worry. Unease.

Next time he fought, he wouldn't just have his team to watch out for. There were other people counting on him now, other people who couldn't protect themselves, not from ion cannons or laser guns or even the sharp, swift sides of swords.

Was this what Lance felt, when he thought of his family on Earth?

Was this what Shiro felt, giving everything he had to save everyone he could?

Keith hunted for the feeling—a nerve-wracking desire to protect, anxiety-inducing sudden sense of responsibility—in his fragmented memories, the furthest back he could remember. But it wasn't there. He didn't have any comparison for this.

His mother, his father, Neuhahn, Ania, Shiro... He had always been protected.

*It's different now.*

“*So?*” Dulsara was growling, hackles up. “You’d rather save yer own skin than protect our soldiers?!” The mice on Niresh’s shoulders chattered warnings, tiny paws balled up in fists.

“You can yell later,” Pidge interjected. She waved a dismissive hand Dulsara looked very tempted to bite. Pidge leaned over Niresh, glasses glinting; her face curled in a suspicious moue. “How did you know to look for a flaw on the bolt? And how did you know just how bad it would mess up the aim of our ion cannon, *hmm*?”

“Because!” The voice was cold fire, but it was not Niresh’s. Dulsara’s eyes blazed as she stared between Keith, Pidge, and Niresh like it was still that first meeting, where she hurled the truth at their feet, demanded her freedom, and met silence. “*Because,*” she snarled, “Niresh’s father was Chief Engineering Officer Kahzul—before you killed him.” She pinned Niresh squirming beneath her glare. “If you betray the memory of yer line any more, no Galra will ever forgive you.”

Niresh’s whole spine bowed like her body weighed too much for her to carry. She was a step or two from curling up in the smallest ball she could manage.

“Hey—” Keith tried to interrupt.

“Quiet you!” Dulsara swiped at him, claws on display. “Traitors don’t get to talk!”

Keith wasn’t stupid enough to slap his hand over her mouth, but he fought hard not to. With slit eyes, furrowed brow, bared teeth, he silently screamed at her not to say another word. Whatever Hunk might know, there were two humans on board this ship who *couldn’t* find out Keith’s secret, and one of them stood right there, clumsily twiddling her thumbs, attention politely (if too conspicuously) averted.

If Pidge found out, it might be worse than Shiro. Pidge lost half her family to the Galra and they still hadn’t come back. They might be dead. This whole fight she’d gotten embroiled in was to save them, to defeat the monsters who hurt those she held most dear…

It was one thing to ask Pidge to accept three tiny kids who suffered trauma she could sympathize with on a personal level… Another thing entirely to ask her to fight beside a person who looked just like the abductors of her father and brother. To accept that Keith knew the truth and hid it
from her—hid it down so deep that not even when their minds were one had he let her find it.

There were no secrets in Voltron.

Except this one.

But he was trapped. He couldn’t say anything. Dulsara might spill the beans right now, and there was absolutely nothing he could do to prevent it, because Pidge was a genius. If he made it any more obvious he had something to hide, there wouldn’t be a secret left to keep.

Except… when Dulsara figured out just how badly Keith wanted it to stay hidden, she’d leverage his secret for every inch. The Galra were savagely practical. Keith knew. Their children were no exception.

Dulsara saw the exact moment it hit him—the moment he realized just how much power his secret had given her. She grinned, bright, curl-lipped, and vicious.

Quiznak on a stick. He was going to be blackmailed by someone who barely reached his hip.

This would be pretty damn impressive, if it weren’t happening to him.

Keith shook his head. Don’t you dare do it. The malicious glee in her grin doubled, and Dulsara lifted her head very high, her own brand of brutal warning.

“Come here, Niresh,” she snapped suddenly, spinning to grab the other girl’s wrist and tug her, hard. “We’re leaving. I don’t want to even look at these monsters anymore.”

The mice abandoned ship, scrambling down the departing Galra as quick as they could, though not before Dulsara got a string of offended cheeps hurled in her general direction. Niresh stumbled down the hall, not even lifting her eyes off the floor.

Keith let them go. They were only two hallways from their own room, and seeing as Dulsara could apparently get into any place she damn well pleased, not like watching them now would do any good.

“Hey,” Pidge called out. “Uh, thanks… for helping!”

Niresh flinched like she’d been stabbed. She didn’t turn around. Dulsara pulled harder.

The door at the end of hall slid open and closed. It was quiet. Not even the space mice stirred.

“So oo…” Pidge drawled finally. “That was awkward. That was definitely awkward, right? Not just me?”

Keith shrugged. What the hell else was he supposed to do?

Somehow it felt like they’d gone one step forward, two steps back.

- - -

Then they were back to the brittle silence, the shut doors. He didn’t hear from Niresh for days, but Xerci’s wailing through the wall got worse and worse, until only the thought of how Dulsara might exact her revenge kept Keith from kicking their door open and taking the kid by force to calm him down.

Keith slept with his pillow smashed over his ears and it did absolutely nothing to help.
Keith went back to the team trainings, finally. If he maybe couldn’t quite look Hunk in the eyes—if he maybe watched what he said around Pidge a little closer, didn’t ask Shiro to stick around for extra flight formation practice—well, they were nice enough (or oblivious enough) to not mention it.

Even on the crowded bridge in the middle of the day, it felt like being alone.

Which... shouldn’t be surprising or uncomfortable, really, because that was Keith's normal state of being, but somehow this kind of alone felt full of nervous backward glances, silence that sat stone heavy in his throat. Like the desert the first night after he’d escaped from Garrison, combing the sands for the path long carved by his half-stolen hoverbike, lost in the dark and cold.

So what if Xerci kept sneaking into Keith's room? So what if Niresh wanted to stay?

Dulsara was the one in charge, and as long as she had him at knife point, they’d go backward and forward and get nowhere forever.

Yet another problem he had no idea how to fix. How could he help her to see what Niresh did, suspect what Niresh knew about the empire? And if not that, what could he say to get her to at least let Xerci and Niresh make up their own minds?

Would it even be right, trying to convince her they weren’t the villains? In her story, they were.

Dulsara wasn’t the strange one. She’s just being too stubborn. Niresh and Xerci’s willingness to adapt only made it feel that way—made it easy to conveniently forget their bonds with Keith were fueled by necessity, desperate loneliness, and every unhealthy coping mechanism on the books.

Keith was pretty sure Xerci couldn’t even tell him apart from his actual father.

It wasn’t normal forgive the murderers of your mother. No matter the circumstances (excuses).

He knew that, okay? He knew, but still… No one had ever accused Keith of being patient. Or understanding.

(“Too much like yer mother,” his father laughs over the gawky bandaid patch covering half Keith’s scraped forehead. He doesn’t make any effort to whisper so she won’t hear, even cuts a sly eye along the couch to catch her half-lidded gaze. “Ain’t no world in the universe spinnin’ fast enough to suit you.”

His mother stretches indelicately, digging her heels into his father’s side on her way to tickling Keith’s knee with her toes. One of the throw pillows leaks out from under her head and pmphs on the unvacuumed rug. “And even if you found one,” his mother purrs, “I’d only complain it made me dizzy.”

“Well,” his father settles, arm falling from the back of the couch to nip at her bare calf, “I’ll keep lookin’ anyway, yer highness.”)

Keith wanted the castle to feel (like that) less like a Cold War zone and more like Garrison—like home—again. He wanted the team where he could see them and the kids where he could see them, and yes, he knew that stupid saying about having cake and eating it too because Shiro was a walking proverb generator, but really, it couldn’t go on like this.

He had to find a way to make progress with Dulsara—before she found her way back to the Empire.

Or found a way to ruin him.
Sometimes the world found ways for him. (He should probably give up expecting anything to ever play out the way he plans.)

It happened like this: Allura called a team meeting a week after the mouse-hunt misadventure. Shiro and Lance were already there when Keith arrived, arranged on the sunken sofas in laughably predictable ways: Shiro sat with knees even, back unbowing like he had an uniform to keep from wrinkling, while Lance sprawled upside down, his sneakers (getting ratty now) hung over the back of the couch. He squinted up at Keith, wrinkled his nose, then waved a grudging hand.

Keith sat right beside him just to piss him off, dropping his heavy boots a millimeter from Lance’s upturned (downturned?) nose.

“Hey, watch it!” Lance flailed, half inch from flinging himself off the couch.

“Are you going to do something worth watching this time?”

“Boys,” Shiro warned before Lance got a chance to retort. When Shiro pinched the bridge of his nose, his scar looked like a bunched-up fold, as if his skin was a disguise one size too big. Well, Keith knew that feeling, didn’t he?

Lance’s mouth snapped closed, and his bottom lip jutted so far his chin became a valley of wrinkles. He crossed his arms tight, an utterly ridiculous look with his head still near the floor. Although he knew better than to speak again, the pointy glare he hurled at Keith said plenty: this is your fault, Lance accused.

Keith shrugged. Hard to care around the strange swell of relief welling in his belly. How was this kind of thing made him feel normal? Being griped at and being scolded, coming a half inch from a kick in the face when Lance flung himself carelessly upright, the watchful weight of Shiro’s eyes, a room that wasn’t quiet even when no one was talking…

Relief. That cool, unspooling feeling was relief, because this kind of stupid, typical thing (this exact stupid, typical thing) hadn’t happened in a while. Not since the kids came. Not since—

Keith jolted.

When was the last time he and Lance had fought? When was the last time they’d been in the same room together outside of dinner and mandatory team training? Sure, they always went out of their ways to spend as little time together as necessary, but they’d never really succeeded in the past. Somehow, despite the castle being a hundred times bigger than a skyscraper, they always ended up crossing paths, getting in each other’s faces, working up into more and more idiotic dares, fighting for the best training deck shower, the one that kept the hot water on way longer—

When was the last time Lance interrupted team workout, insisting on a “mano-a-mano” duel to prove his oh-so-obvious superiority?

When was the last time they’d even aggressively bumped shoulders in the hall?

What does it look like, Mullet? I’m moving.

Keith’s cool relief cracked; something colder oozed out of the remains.

How long, exactly, had Lance been deliberately avoiding him? And a worse thought: Why?
Keith craned his head suspiciously, trying to burn a hole through Lance’s temple with his questioning glare. In return, Lance leaned away as if Keith was trying to pass on some horrific contagious disease.

Keith opened his mouth to say—what? Does ignoring me instead of picking fights mean you hate me more or less now? But the lounge doors breezed open and Coran waltzed in, with Allura and a severely sleep-deprived Hunk and Pidge. Apparently work on the ion cannon was not going well.

Pidge tumbled over the edge of the sunken couch and found Shiro’s shoulder like a magnet finds iron filings. She molded to their amused leader in an instant and groaned: “Next time I see a Sèquillien Woerl, I’m hurling it into a wormhole.”

Keith shared a quizzical look with Shiro. Neither of them had any idea what a Sèquillien Woerl was. Also normal.

“I agree with Pidge,” Hunk announced, collapsing on the other side of Lance, melting down so he could lean his head over the back of the couch cushion. “No more Squiggly Whorls.”

“Oh come on, paladins!” Coran rallied. “That was a routine maintenance procedure Alteans could do with their eyes closed! And it went right as rain, anyway.”

Lance snorted. “Uh Coran, you told me ‘rain’ on Altea was made of flaming rocks.”

What?!

“That it was, Lance,” Coran sighed. “That it was.”

Allura stifled a laugh. “Let’s wax nostalgic later Coran. For now, I have something important to share with you all.”

"What is it, Princess?" Shiro liked that word, didn't he? No matter how many times they discussed (behind closed doors, down distant hallways) how there wasn't really an Altea left for Allura to be princess of, Shiro nevertheless insisted on honoring her royalty to the letter.

Princess this, your highness that…

According to Lance, Shiro meant "absolutely, positively nuh-thing" by it and anyway "Allura was totally making eyes at me last week!" (It was true that Allura had eyes and sometimes did use them to glare at Lance, Keith could grant.)

Hunk, who craved gossip like most humans craved air, patted Lance on the back and shot him in the foot at the same time: "No, nope, definitely means something, man," though what something it supposedly meant was never explicated enough for Keith to comprehend.

Pidge simply waggled her large, fuzzy eyebrows. This too was enigmatic.

But Keith, who had the unfair advantage of having known Takashi Shirogane since their leader was a fresh-faced 16-year-old Garrison cadet with a bad bowl cut and the perpetually half-finished biography of Napoleon Bonaparte tucked under one arm—Keith, who remembered every word of “The Tale of Princess Kaguya” because Shiro’s told it to him 185608475903 times, had his own theory that began with Inside her, this princess carried all the pure silver light of the moon and ended with “If he is true in his word and heart, there is nothing he will not do for me.”

Voltron did feel like living a fairytale, sometimes.
Allura was still speaking. “—when Altea was in active contact with their people, it was far easier, but—”

“Sorry,” Keith interrupted, hand poked up like a grade-school student. “Could you start over?”

Lance snorted. Allura gave him a very flat look, but began again: “As Coran and I were doing routine scans for Galra activity in the castle’s vicinity this morning, we came across something unexpected: the energy signal from a colony of Fripik. They’re a nomadic species of partially organic and partially mineral make-up. In our time, they were extremely well-known for their ability to colonize uninhabitable planets and modify their atmospheres and environments to make them hospitable for other lifeforms.”

“Basically,” Coran chimed, “they’re the universe’s favorite pests! Everyone loves a good Fripik infestation in the neighborhood!”

“Unfortunately,” Allura steam-rolled on, “they tend to be rather difficult to track, and I’m sure any contact they’ve had with the Galra Empire over the last 10,000 years won’t have helped. When my father was alive, Altea maintained lines of communication with several of their largest colonies, but…” Her eyes fell. “It seems none of those survived the long years. The Fripik our scanners picked up this morning are a new group, and I thought it would be a nice treat if we all took a short break from your paladin exercises to meet with their chieftains and rekindle one of Altea’s closest alliances.”

Lance hummed suspiciously. “Is this a real break or another one of those ‘you’re released from lion cleaning duty because I need you to battle the highly trained group of alien assassins who just rudely popped out of this supposedly-celebratory space cake we were offered for saving their ungrateful planet’ scenarios?”

“That only happened once!”

Hunk whined. “Once is enough for me. All that wasted cake…”

Next to Shiro, Pidge perked up. “When you say partially mineral—”

But Keith had a question of his own, and hopefully he’d be pardoned for thinking it was a little more important. “Are all of us supposed to go down to their colony?”

“Well, that was the plan, yes,” Allura said.

“Okay, but what about the kids?” Keith asked, and was met with perfect silence.

“We shouldn’t be gone more than a few vargas.” Coran shrugged finally. “There’s only so much trouble the little itshoos can get up to in just one wing of the castle!”

“Yeah… about that…” Keith hedged. “Niresh got onto the training deck a while ago, and Dulsara got into the armory. Whatever you did to supposedly keep them in their part of the castle, it didn’t work.”

“What?” Allura squawked, rounding on him, poise forgotten. “Why didn’t you tell us sooner? They could have sabotaged vital systems—”

“Oh come on,” Pidge griped. She poked pointy fingers into Shiro’s side until he budged over, so she had enough room to lean farther forward, into Allura’s space. Was she… really defending the Galra children? Since when was that a thing Pidge did? “They’re smart enough to figure out if this ship goes down, they’re dead in the water too.”
“Also,” Hunk added, “I’d like to just remind everyone here that some people in this room were totally cool with giving Galra kids access to laser grenades.”

“Yes, but those were made for children!”

Under his breath, Lance mumbled to himself, “Alteans are scary.” When he noticed Keith giving him a sidelong stare, however, he stopped biting his lip to give a toothy smirk instead. “The exact kind of scary I’m into.”

“Eugh!” Keith jerked away, bug-eyed and mildly scandalized, though at this point, nothing Lance said should ever surprise him. The bigger surprise was always, of course, that Lance shared these kind of stupid things with Keith in the first place, like it was somehow important for Keith to know Lance liked swordfish more than mahi-mahi (another fish?) or that he thought the cutest animal on Earth was “hands down” the platypus (not a fish)—even while he didn’t seem to think it was important for them to just get along, given that half the time he followed these random comments with one-two insults (“Why am I bothering to talk about this with Keith? You wouldn’t know good seafood if it bit you!” Keith thought if the fish bit him, he’d be the good seafood, right?)

Annoying. Nothing Lance did ever made any sense. First you avoid me without saying anything and now you want to chit-chat about how much you like Allura? Keith almost opened his mouth to say—what? “Make up your mind!”?

But Coran’s concerned hmmm cut him off. The older man twiddled one end of his moustache as he contemplatated the floor beneath his pacing boots. “No, no,” he muttered under his breath, “that just doesn’t make sense.”

“What doesn’t?” Shiro asked.

“We ran diagnostics on the castle’s security systems two quintants ago. Everything’s in top shape. Except for the rooms we left open for the children, the castle should be blocking all Galra access.”

Keith felt the air punched out of his lungs. “Wait… what?”

“Keep up, Number Four! The castle’s clearance levels can be bioquintessence-locked to exclude unwelcome species. These doors shouldn’t open for any Galra, let alone our current bunch!”

Coran went back to pacing, gawky sharp movements belying his frustration. (A thousand errors too many on this ship since they’d awoken. He felt like a crumbling relic in a crumbling relic sometimes.) “The castle should have detected any malfunction…”

They tried to set the entire castle to lock out Galra? Would that… work on Keith? The empire’s ships recognized him as Galra. Would the castle?

Oh god, what if it had? Was a lucky malfunction the only thing coming between Keith and being locked in his own bedroom like a prisoner for however long it took them to realize and let him out? (To realize and never let him out again?)

Cinderblocks weighed down his chest. What if they fix it? What if they fixed it right now and he couldn’t even get out of this room—

Allura shifted from side to side; the rustle of her skirt sounded deafening to Keith. Her voice was like a cold blade, all edges: “It is possible someone has activated a security override.”

The sudden tight set of Shiro’s jaw was more frightening than a weapon being drawn. “Who has the clearance to do that?”
“Only the princess and I!” Coran insisted—before promptly deflating, wind knocked out of him as hard as it had from Keith. He leveled a quiet, steely look on each of them in turn. “Or any of you paladins, I suppose.”

In light of the previous black paladin’s total and utter betrayal, that seemed like a glaring design flaw. Somebody should probably fix that. Preferably after Keith found another planet in the farthest backwater edge of the universe to hide out on until he died, if that’s what it took to keep his stupid secr—

“Look!” Lance exploded suddenly, stiff in his seat, two decibels louder than appropriate for the situation. “Let’s worry about the override and which one of us did it later! I want to get back to vacation talk. If we can’t leave the Galra kids here for now, let’s just bring them with us? I mean, keeping them locked up here while we go have fun would be kinda…”


“Language, please,” their long-suffering leader begged. Pidge, not at all repentant, merely rolled her eyes.

Keith, still reeling from the terrible thought that he could hide his secret from people but machines, weighed one awful alternative against the other. Even if leaving them here was impossible, would bringing them along really… “Niresh would be fine,” Keith cut through whatever discussion was going on without him. “And Xerci if we keep an eye on him. But Dulsara… We can’t trust her. She’s gone the second she gets the chance.”

“Don’t even worry,” Lance crooned, possibly the most worrisome words he’d ever said. “I have a plan.”

Chapter End Notes

1) First, the most exciting news!! Particle13 drew an amazing sketch of Keith from chapter five! I am so overwhelmed and excited and buzzing with joy that someone liked the story enough to draw something from it, so please go and like and retweet their work! <3 <3 <3

2) Some Galra world-building: Having a terrible sense of direction is not a Galra thing. In fact, they are extremely attuned to their environments and can even sense magnetic fields, making it easy for Galra to find their way home. Keith is a Galra operating with a human body; his brain is trying to navigate using senses that human beings don't have. Keith really appreciates their helmets' HUD being able to display maps.

3) Shiro believes the space mice dislike him because he stepped on one of their tails once. The real reason is that they are terribly jealous of the large amount of Allura's time that Shiro monopolizes.

4) Unlike season 2, I mightttt just have a plot-related reason for keeping Lance out of the limelight so far. >>

4) According to the paladin quiz on the Voltron website, Shiro's favorite subject in school was history. Although it might not ever come up in the actual fic, in this universe, Matt Holt exploited Shiro's love of military history to convince Shiro to
apply to Garrison with him. Shiro is also very big on historical folklore, to young Keith's utter boredom.

5) Lance's favorite animal is the platypus. Keith has never seen a platypus and is convinced that Lance just made them up.
This is the second half of a double post, so make sure you've read chapter six before starting this one!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Keith did not think this was a good plan. Then again, Keith’s planning skills were notoriously poor. So poor, in fact, that even the worst of Lance’s plans was usually an improvement on whatever Keith came up with, so maybe he shouldn’t really—

“This ain’t a good plan,” Niresh said, and yup, now Keith was starting to get worried.

Because while they discussed, Dulsara clawed violently at her wrist, hissing and spitting as she attempted to pry apart the glowing Altean handcuff with her nails after her teeth failed to do the job. On the other end of the blue-light tether, Keith gave a mournful tug. Dulsara did not budge at all, except to kick at him ferociously.

This felt less like being leashed to a young child and more like being chained to an extremely angry elephant. Keith dodged another kick.

“Get this thing offa me, you—” Dulsara dissolved into a fit of cursing, half guttural snarls, either too crude for the translator or just too furious. Galran was a surprisingly soft-spoken tongue, but she seemed to pick the most hideous sounding words in the whole language; even Niresh flinched and covered Xerci’s ears, though he clearly couldn’t follow Dulsara’s outburst either: he frantically looked back and forth between them, ears flapping ridiculously.

“Uh, so…” Lance’s voice filtered through closed door to the hall. “Are you like dead in there? Because we’re all getting tired of waiting out here!”

“Just come on,” Keith seethed to Dulsara, at the end of his literal chain. “We wouldn’t even have to do this if you’d just agreed!”

“I don’t want to go!” she howled. “You can’t make me!”

Keith’s eye twitched violently, and not just because her fuss kicked up about a billion loose hairs and he definitely had a handful now swimming across one cornea. “Niresh and Xerci want to go,” he hissed through bared teeth, summoning every ounce of patience he’d ever possessed (about two, if you were wondering). “You can’t stay here by yourself. Don’t ruin it for everyone.”

“You ruined our lives! Niresh told me all ‘bout how you said yer gonna let us choose—” She rounded on the younger Galra girl, ripping Keith’s cuffed arm along with her. “Now you see, doncha?! Didn’t I tell yah it was jus’ more lies?!"

“I don’ think…” Niresh tried.

“You knew you don’!” Dulsara hurled at her, before turning the boiling gold of her glare back on Keith. “Maybe it’s jus’ Niresh an’ Xerci, huh? That’s it, ain’t it, ‘cause they cuddled up to yah like their new co’lition—I don’ get ta choose ‘cause I don’t like you?”
Keith apologized to his parents, to Neuhahn, to Ania, to Shiro, even to godforsaken Commander Iverson, because he spent every formative year of his young life on the opposite end of this exchange, in Dulsara’s exact spot, with the very same jut to his stubborn chin, whirling fists, no indoor voice, and every single time, he’d been utterly convinced he was the only logical, fair party in the argument, because everyone else around him was so obviously wrong. The taste of his own medicine was extremely bitter.

“Look,” he managed, “it’s a planet you’ve never visited before, full of stuff you’ll probably never see again, and you haven’t been out of this stupid ship in weeks. Why are you arguing about this? We’re going.” By heaving with all his weight, Keith finally managed to budge her a foot toward the door, then one more. She couldn’t match him pound for pound, but Galra muscles were insanely different from humans’, tensile as coiled wire. The more he pulled, the less she moved. Xerci made a low, continuous keening noise that helped no one’s patience.

When Dulsara finally hauled back on the tether, a foot from the door, Keith nearly bowled over. Quiet, so quiet he could barely hear it, she spat, “If you make me go out there, I’ll tell ‘em the truth. Underneath that ugly skin, yer blood runs Galra colors.”

Keith felt like he’d hit by Red and Blue all at once, iced over and blazing. Utter terror and blind rage clashed catastrophically. How dare—how could he stop this—he couldn’t let this happen —

“Keith, are you okay?” Shiro sounded dangerously close to the door.

“Uh… Y-Yeah? We're…”

Dulsara grinned and siren lights flashed in his head. Keith darted forward to try to slap his hand over her mouth; he could see her drawing in a huge breath, all she needed to shout his secret through the door at the top of her lungs, and Shiro was close, too close—

Dulsara went down like paper crumpling. Keith hadn’t even seen Niresh move, but there she was, heavy boot digging into Dulsara’s chest, one hand flat as a blade at her throat. Xerci scrambled behind Keith.

“Enough,” Niresh snarled, tiny voice full of gravel. “Use yer head, ugly rock worm. If they punish Keeth fer being Galra, they’ll punish us too! Cuttin’ yerself an’ expectin’ yer enemies to bleed—yer maman would be embarrassed to raise somebody so stupid!”

Dulsara had frozen in utter shock, as stunned by Niresh’s unexpected attack as Keith, but now her face curled in rage. “Don’ you say a word ‘bout my mother.” She swept Niresh’s foot off her chest in one violent twist and threw herself easily back on her feet; having one arm still tied to Keith’s meant nothing to her balance. Before Keith could say anything, she used every meager inch of her height to tower over Niresh, straining at the end of the cuff tether to get at the other girl. “Least my maman didn’t birth a—” The translator failed. The word Dulsara said in Galran sounded like pour-rye-ran, but Keith had no context to guess its real meaning. Obviously it was bad: Niresh gasped, actually choked on air for a moment.

“Take it back.” Niresh grit her fangs, tightened her fists. “Take it back, Dulsara Kes. You ain’t been right since Yedgi died, but that’s too much, even fer a lion! I don’ wanna fight, but I will!”

“Uh, no.” Keith finally managed to get his bearings and snatched both girls by the backs of their necks, hauling them apart. “No one is fighting anyone! Everybody just calm down!” Hypocritical, of course: Keith fumed, furious now with everybody in the room and everyone outside of it too, because he didn’t even want to go on this stupid vacation in the first place, couldn’t care less about these weird Fripik aliens, and even if ugly rock worm Lance was right and the kids did need fresh
air, if it was going to turn out like this, Keith would happily put the stubborn, cranky girls in time out on opposite sides of the castle and go take a nap with poor Xerci instead, who hiccupped nervously into the back of Keith’s calf.

Though they both went limp when he cuffed them, Dulsara’s whole body still heaved with angry breath, and Niresh was viper-still, her familiar (dangerous) false quiet. Keith sighed so hard it actually hurt. He shook Dulsara a little. “I don’t care if you don’t like me, but apologize to Niresh. Whatever you said crossed the line.”

Dulsara looked away from them both, ears low and lips pursed.

Niresh shrank in her skin, quite literally, so Keith’s grip on her neck and shoulder became nothing more than a fold of thick fur. “I don’t want no apology no more,” she muttered, kneeling at the sides of her black suit. She shot a calculating look through her pale eyelashes at the older girl. “I jus’ wanna go outside now.” Clever.

Keith glared at Dulsara, desperately trying to rearrange his face into something close to Shiro’s crushing You Have Disappointed Me glower. It went like... Eyes down, lips pressed into a capital I, chin stiff—oh, he could call it up from memory perfectly, but he’d only ever been on the receiving end; it was actually kind of hard...

(There was the small issue of Galra showing disappointment in entirely different ways too, which Keith had unfortunately forgotten. As it stood, Dulsara just thought he was getting ready to yell very loudly in her ear, a not-entirely-unfitting punishment which she nonetheless would go to great lengths to avoid.)

Finally, Dulsara sank in his hold too, with a big, long breath hissing out between her clenched teeth. Her sharp edges rounded out, and Keith’s cuffed arm fell when she dropped her claws.

"Fine," she growled. "I won't say nothin'."

"On yer line's honor?" Niresh shot back.

Dulsara shut her mouth with a click of teeth. "I said fine, didn' I? I ain't a liar like everybody else here!" Then, to Keith: "'Specially you. This still don' mean I like you!" she barked, but Keith was already hustling them toward the door, Niresh in one hand and Dulsara in the other. Dulsara dragged her boots on the floor every step of the way, while Keith scooted Xerci along with one wobbling foot. The boy immediately started poking, looking for a way to climb into Keith’s hold.

What did he look like when the door finally opened and they squeezed out into the hall? Exhausted? Bedraggled? A hair trigger from exploding? Xerci made it almost to Keith's hip, monkey-hopping upward (if monkeys had velociraptor talons).

Shiro snorted. Not nice. "Need some help there?"

And of course the answer to that was yes, but... Keith's hand tightened on Niresh's shoulder, just a little, before he could stop himself.

"No, no, sorry, nope! I totally called dibs." Lance wagged a finger at Shiro as he muscled around Hunk to get to Keith and the kids. "Baby me, bro," he demanded, grabby hands out.

Somewhere behind Hunk, only the edge of her enormous science equipment pack visible, Pidge said, "That's probably the weirdest thing I've heard out of Lance since the 'What is a god to an eater of bananas?!' thing on the plant people planet."

Lance jerked like he'd been hit with a bright red arrow to the back. "Ugh! Drop the dumb Plenerie
incident already. I apologized to them! A whole bunch of times!"

"Yeah," Hunk snickered, "a whole bunch of times."

"No plantain puns!"

"And not until after you gushed for ten minutes about how Great Lord Slogogo was almost as delicious as your mom's tostones." Pidge iced the cake.

Lance's eyes narrowed. "Very funny. Can we get back to our regularly scheduled roast of Keith now, please?"

"...Regularly scheduled?" But before Keith could form a single proper protest, Lance had Xerci out of his lop-sided grip and was already half way down the hall. Xerci peered back tragically over Lance's shoulder.

Shiro made zero effort to hide his laughter. Eventually though, he did take enough pity to call out, "All right Coran, Princess, let's get this ship on the ground."

"Way ahead of you—landing sequence already engaged!"

-        -       -

When the landing pod descended from the castle, Keith had no idea what he was looking at. All around them, grains of gray-pink sands whirled from the commotion of their arrival, but maybe fifty yards ahead, the rocky desert abruptly cut off and became a verdant jungle. Trees with elephant-ear-shaped leaves towered hundreds of feet up, covered in miles of trailing vines, with jewel-bright flowers growing everywhere, even clinging to the bark of the massive trunks.

Keith looked behind them. Nothing but sand. A barren, uninhabitable planet. But the forest ahead? It seemed incredibly healthy. Even the boulders and fallen trees were carpeted with lime-colored moss. Strange noises drifted out on the warm wind: whistles, piping, whoops, and snatches of... a song?

“We're in luck,” Coran announced. “This looks like a thriving colony!”

But a colony of what? Keith couldn’t see any people or animals, just faintly shivering leaves, and when the team stepped under the shade of the canopy, the ringing noises went suddenly silent. Keith’s fingers danced over his thigh armor, aching for the comforting weight of his bayard. A few feet away, Shiro’s Galra arm faintly buzzed. Dulsara’s ears fluttered in every direction, hunting for signs of life—or attack.

“Hello everyone!” Allura called into the forest. “We are the paladins of Voltron, a-and… company! It’s our great pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

For a moment, nothing happened. No movement. Not even a distant twig snapped. Keith held his breath. Then the entire jungle exploded into a whirlwind of colors and shapes, a tidal wave of life rushing straight toward them.

“Whoa!” Hunk wailed and ducked behind Lance, who clutched whining Xerci to his chest with one hand and his bayard in the other. But where to aim it?! Everything was moving!

*Everything* was moving, Keith realized. It wasn't some giant animal swooping down, but the *entire forest* lurching toward them. Flowers crawled down the trunks of trees, leaves picked themselves off bushes and fluttered closer, a million tiny stones on the forest floor jittered nearer, while moss dripped down from limbs above—
“They’re people!” Pidge exclaimed. “They’re tiny people!”

_Holy shit._ Keith had seen many strange things in space since forming Voltron (hell, he _was_ a strange thing in space), but very little compared to a brilliant fuchsia flower skittering its way down the nearest tree to exactly his eye level and then _unfurling_ in a flourish of petals, revealing a face no bigger than the nail of his pinky finger. Its... arms were thin as his veins, while root-wrinkled legs burrowed through the tree's bark for grip. Its speck eyes glittered like brilliant blue-pink gemstones, and when the alien opened its tiny, pointy mouth, a glimmer of green light shined out.

The entire jungle was _teeming_ with them. The thick cord that swung down right in front of Lance’s stunned face beckoned at him, not moss but a chain of spongy, ribbon-thin aliens holding tight to each other while waving excitedly with an uncountable number of extra limbs. Niresh almost crawled on top of Keith’s boots when the stones at her feet stuck out their hairy spider legs and beady beetle-blue eyes and started stroking the tip of her shoes.

“Ewww, get away!” Dulsara flailed as an enormous leaf beside her bowed over and revealed its underside, coated with a thousand peering green faces, veined as the leaf itself.

“_Oh! Oh!_” the entire forest chanted. “But _we_ are so happy to _meet_ you!” Every one of their glowing mouths flickered in the shade of the trees, rolling waves of soft green fairy lights.

Lance made a noise half laugh, half breathless wonder. “They look like fireflies!” When his bayard dissolved in a shimmer of blue sparkles, the tiny aliens laughed too, applauded the trick, and begged him to do it again. But Lance was already holding his hand out so a flurry of the flower Fripik could rustle up to his shoulder, a twirling storm of blue, lilac, white, orange petal bodies. A bold one, sorta like a… what were they called, orkids? settled itself on Xerci’s nose and knit its thread fingers in his fur. His eyes went round as two gold coins, and he sneezed fiercely.

The Fripik tumbled off; Hunk lunged to catch it before it could hit the ground, balancing on the only clear patch of ground he could find. Instead of fear or anger, the Fripik peeped in what sounded like utter delight, flinging its arms up. This encouraged the whole lot of them, who swarmed over each other to be the next flung off a terribly confused Xerci.

Pidge went down cackling when a whole shrub of the leaf Fripik rolled over her, only her flailing hands and feet visible under the shuddering mass of living leaves. “Ahh haa, that tickles!”

Tense, slow, Niresh leaned down to sniff at the mossy rock Fripik, who were piling themselves up into a tower. When one slipped, she reflexively caught it—terrible mistake. They all seized on the invitation and began scaling her legs, squeaking frantic hellos, mouth lights strobe flashing. Dulsara jerked toward her, then thought better of it. “Hmph!” She crossed her arms instead, dragging Keith aside.

Shiro stuck out one finger to shake the entire hand of a woodchip-shaped creature, balanced on the delicate tip of a fern.

“You _are_ the _first_ visitors! This world’s _first_ visitors _are_!” the Fripik cheered as one. “Are you _in need_ of a planet? We _are_ not finished _with_ this one, but _soon_!”

“No, no planets for us at the moment,” Allura insisted. The forest cried out in disappointment, firefly flashes from every shadow.
She waved a consoling hand. Something that looked like a black earthworm wound between her fingers. A crown of palm frond and bright yellow berry Fripik settled in a halo around her head. “Actually,” she announced, “I am Princess Allura of Altea. My advisor Coran and I are all that remain of the royal council that once had very strong ties to your people.”

High notes sang through the forest. “Alte?” they murmured to each other. It was eerie, half uncomprehending, the way you’d say the name of a place you heard about long ago in a bedtime story.

“I heard of creatures like these before,” Dulsara whispered. “Overwhelm their prey with big numbers.”

“That’s bullshit,” Keith whispered back.

“What’s Kaltenecker poo have ta do with anythin’?” Niresh stopped rolling one of the rock aliens around in her hands. It wailed in protest.

Undaunted, Allura continued. “We’ve come here in hopes of rekindling the wonderful alliance that once existed between Altea and the Fripik. Might we speak to your chieftains as soon as they are free?”

“You want to speak to the great builders?” the Fripik harmonized, reed flutes and birdsong from the dirt beneath their feet to the canopy hundreds of feet above. “Yes, right away, you must! Come this way!”

The jungle curled; what Keith had mistaken for giant bushes, tree stumps, and boulders crumbled away into a million more skittering bodies, making room—a path. A tree-lined corridor opened into the dark heart of the jungle, where it trailed off into ghostly swaths of mist and deeper shadow.

“This way,” the forest breathed.

Allura, being Allura, gave a gracious nod of her head and a “Thank you so much,” then took off down the fairy road without the slightest hesitation. Although she watched her feet carefully, there was a bounce in her step, a sparkly-eyed eagerness. (Ten thousand years had taken her kingdom but not this. Not everything.)

When the Fripik made to close their path behind Allura, vine bodies dripping back down like curtains closing, Shiro’s prudent caution reared its fierce head. “Ah, Princess,” he called, trotting after. “I’ll go with you!”

The last Keith saw of either of them was the arch of Allura’s unimpressed brow and Shiro’s hands up in sheepish, if unyielding, consolation, before a flutter of the Fripik formed a new fern and the jungle closed around them like it never opened.

“Isolatin’ their prey,” Dulsara whispered.

Niresh contemplated an alien that resembled a fist-sized silver fungus. “I think ther… kinda cute?” The Fripik tweeted at her in glee. Its eyes and mouth were on completely opposite sides of its body.

Unease roiled in Keith’s stomach. Dulsara was exaggerating. She was just trying to psych him out. They were definitely not cute, but they used to allies with—

Wait, where was Coran going? The older Atlean strode away in the opposite direction, beaming
beneath his moustache, out of which several especially small Fripik were peeking. Around his heels, an ocean of pebble and twig aliens flowed, crashing into and over each other to make room for his feet. “Tell me,” Coran said, “have you managed to mine any bylrite from this old rock? We’ve got a loose goo generator that could use a good sticking!”

“Oh yes,” his Fripik hummed. “Much much! Come this way!” And then the forest closed around him too, even the sound of his voice swallowed up immediately.

“Told yah,” Dulsara whispered.

Don’t fall for it. Lance still teased him about trying to fight that one weird Arusian (Klizip? Klaizap?)—bristling at an army of flowers would be even worse. She might as well have read his thoughts. “Use their weak appear’nces ta fool yah. Make dumb blinndars like Niresh think ther ‘cute,’ then—” She snapped her teeth.

“Cut it out,” Keith warned. But he couldn’t quite shake the feeling…

“All right!” Lance crowed. “Pidge, Hunk,” he looked at Xerci, “Purple People Eater, you’re with me! That river over there has been calling to me for at least five minutes.”

The river was, in fact, calling to Lance. Keith hadn’t even noticed the water, but sure enough, now there was a wide, ambling stream peeking through nearby trees. A host of pretty pink aquatic fronds perked up out of the brook and waved to Lance coquettishly, while a hundred pairs of pearl eyes fluttered in the blue paladin’s direction. Lance winked back. The Fripik squealed. Keith never thought he’d describe a blade of grass as swooning in his entire life, but there it was.

Niresh peered wide-eyed in the river’s direction, leaning around so she could see more. She definitely wanted to check it out. And even if the Fripik weren’t dangerous (because they really weren’t, Dulsara was just a brat… right?), staying together in a bigger group never hurt. Except…

Except only Pidge, Hunk, and Xerci had been invited.

Not out of the ordinary: Keith was often an afterthought during outings. Lance, Hunk, and Pidge were friends and Shiro was just, well, busy. It made sense.

But here… Every step the others took away stung a little. He knew it had nothing to do with being Galra: Lance carried Xerci easily on his shoulders, little claws curiously tugging at brown hair.

But that was somehow worse. If it wasn’t about the Galra, then it was about Keith.

(How long, exactly, had Lance been deliberately avoiding him?)

On the other side of the clearing, Pidge gushed, “Wow. look at that one!” She scurried out of sight, scrabbling up and over an enormous fallen trunk. “It’s totally unique from the others!” Next to Keith, Niresh leaned even farther, on tiptoe to keep her balance. She took a couple cautious steps in the direction Pidge vanished. She really liked little animals, huh? (“My papan knows the name of every animal in the whole empire.”)

“You’re all seeing this, right?” Hunk gasped. “I’m not just making it up? The cellular elasticity it would take to make this kind of articulation possible is insane. We’re talking about adenosine triphosphate cycling on a level life on Earth couldn’t even hope to imitate!” He was surprisingly nimble following Pidge over the tree.

Niresh crept after him, just a little.
"Wait up!" Lance called, hurrying after.

Dulsara jumped forward and pulled Keith along with her. "Hey! I don’t care if you wanna die, but don’t just take Xerci too!"

Too slow. The blue paladin squeezed through a gap between a low hill and an enormous fern, ducking to slide Xerci under the fronds, and vanished as quickly the others.

"Argh! Come back!"

Half way between fuming Dulsara and the gap where Lance disappeared, Niresh’s nose wrinkled. She watched flat stone Fripik skipping themselves across the bend of the river, and tried, "Maybe we oughta go with Xerci—"

"It’s already too late!" Dulsara shouted. "Even great Emperor Zarkon won’t fight ‘gainst monsters like these without ten whole fleets for back-up!"

Keith threw his hands out. "You’re just making things up now!"

"Oh really?" Dulsara jerked her cuffed hand back so she could cross her arms again. When a dirt clod Fripik tried to attach itself to her boot, she kicked it. It went sailing away, sighing happily.

"Where’d yer friends go then? How come we can’t even hear ‘em no more? They got led off an’ eaten! I warned you!"

"Maybe we should go find Xerci?" Niresh suggested, very quietly.

Too quiet—Keith didn’t notice, talked right over her: "They’re fine! We all have our helmets; I’ll just raise them on the comms right now and prove it."


Keith gave the thought command that opened his comm line. The familiar buzz of radio waves or whatever waves Altean tech used came online. "Shiro," he hailed, "can you hear me?"

The line erupted in static. Keith nearly ripped his helmet off to escape the high-pitched hiss. Static flared and broke; for a second, Keith thought he heard faint strains of song in the white noise. "What the—Shiro, are you there?!"

"—ith? Is that—" Shiro’s voice sounded a thousand miles away. "Can’t hear—kind of interference—not a good time—we—"

Even more distant than Shiro, echo of an echo, Keith heard Allura gasp. "—allied with Zarkon?!" Her voice cut out.

Keith’s choked on his breath. The Fripik were working for the empire?! Even Dulsara jolted where she stood.

"Pidge, Hunk, Lance!" Keith bellowed, opening the comms wider. "Come in! Are you under attack?! These aliens are helping Zarkon!"

Hunk yelped suddenly between bursts of static. "—swarming—"

"—he’ll drown!" Lance shrieked. There was no sound from Pidge at all.

A long scream suddenly ripped through the hissing: Coran’s unmistakable wail.

And then silence.
And then silence. Keith tried again, but other than faint flute notes between shocks of electric noise, there was nothing at all.

“I told yah!” Dulsara whispered, her breath stuttering. She took a step back. Twenty of the mossy ground Fripik scurried out from under her boot. There weren’t that many there a second ago… “I heard they can eat the flesh off yer bones in ten ticks, and now they think we’re with you!” She cast a jittery gaze among the Fripik and announced with her full breath, “We’re with the empire! Xerci ‘n’ me ‘n’ Niresh—” Her eyes blew wide. “Niresh? Niresh!”

Except for the Fripiks, the rest of the clearing was empty. Niresh was gone.

Keith and Dulsara were alone.

_Danger, danger, danger_, alarm bells rang in his head. With a shiver from toe to head, Keith felt his whole body coil up, _ready_.

Everyone was under attack. Niresh chased after Xerci (and the Fripiks’ lure) only to disappear too. The aliens were allied with their enemies, probably deliberately let themselves be picked up on the scanners just to lure Team Voltron here and take them down one-by-one. Keith was the only one still free. He couldn’t get taken out. He had to fight his way to the others, help them escape, get back to the castle ship and the lions. He needed a plan—

But there was no time to think, because Keith and Dulsara were _not_ alone. The forest turned to face them. Fripik poured out of the woodwork, literally: the tree next to them blinked with a thousand different eyes; Keith realized too late it wasn’t covered in bark but in _beings_, craggy faces peeling themselves away from the bare wood below. Then the whole living, breathing jungle slithered toward them, palms shedding their fronds, stone bellies scraping and scratching, roots under the earth stretching up to touch—

“But fear,” the Fripik sang, sharp teeth backlit by their eerie inner glow. “We only want to show you. Many things. Yes, come this way.” The million fragments of the forest _reached_ for them.

“AHHHH!” Dulsara bolted.

Dulsara bolted in a pure self-preservational panic, and Keith suddenly remembered why, exactly, handcuffing oneself to a Galra was a terrible idea.

Might as well get chained to a rocket and hope for the best.

He nearly crashed down just trying to keep his legs under him, let alone find the right pace. Her sprint was breakneck, insanely fluid; she never stumbled once as she flowed over the constantly shifting stone, plant, and debris aliens swarming around her feet. Leap, lean, aerial cartwheel over a boulder made of a thousand crawling half-calcified bodies—nothing slowed her except Keith, counterweight dragging at the end of their tether but not even close to stopping the charge.

“Faster!” she hissed.

“We have to help the others!”

“No way!” Dulsara hauled him forward again.

Keith barely stuck the vault over a jutting ridge and almost caught up to her. Being tied to someone at least two and a half feet shorter destroyed his balance, but by straining his muscles to
their limits, he found the rhythm of her run—two steps to every one of his.

Behind them, in front, under, above, the jungle shook with Fripik flooding toward them. Keith flicked down his leg to summon the red bayard, but the aliens were so small and liquid-boneless, they just parted around the blade then regrouped in an instant. Cutting at the vines whipping around them did nothing; the Fripik oozed back together before he even finished the swing.

“Where *where*?” they whistled as one, firefly pulsing. “Where are you *you* going *going*?”

Keith turned his wrist and swung the flat of the bayard’s blade like a baseball bat. It caught a hoard of spiky flower faces and flung them far off, but they just burst into creepy whooping, tiny shark sharp mouths twisted into grim specters of delight.

The ground heaved under them as thread worms and clods of grass ripped themselves out of the earth to grip at their ankles. Dulsara kicked and lashed out and kept going.

“We can’t just run away!” he shouted, barely clearing the space between two trees. A dozen bark Fripik clung onto his shoulders as he passed. Keith frantically thrashed to throw them off, which caused him to miss the ditch Dulsara just cleared without warning him. He windmilled desperately, while Dulsara gave another spiteful heave on the tether. His knee brushed the ground; instead of a dirt stain, a Fripik shaped like hairy fungus clung tenaciously to his knee cap. It peered up at Keith with huge leaky eyes for the split second before Keith peeled it off and hurled it as far as he could. It actually laughed as it hurtled away.

“We ain’t no good for savin’ nobody if we can’t save ourselves!” She snatched an encroaching fern Fripik from the air and tossed it—straight back into Keith’s face, of course. He spluttered. “I thought the Galra motto was ‘Victory or death’!”

“Yeah, but I ain’t dumb enough to pick ‘or death’!”

“I’m *not* leaving my team!” Keith insisted; a flurry of sword swings cleared the air a little, for a second at least. Something with about two thousand legs too many was scurrying in the corner of his eyesight. “We’re going back!”

Finally, Dulsara stopped dead. Her chest heaved. Her mane was a rat’s nest around her face, fur on end. “Look around, stupid! Back *where*?”

Dread clogged Keith’s throat. Behind them, there was no path. The forest was constantly shifting, entire trunks, shrubs, and boulders getting up and stumbling toward them, every potential landmark in frantic flux. A whole hill of dirt, brimming with glowing green mouths and shiny stone eyes, was building itself up directly behind them. There was no sign of which directions the others had gone, no sign of where they should go to get back to them. The writhing canopy blocked the sky, so Keith couldn’t even judge their position. (Wait, did this planet even revolve east to west?)

“That way!” Keith pointed with his bayard. To their left, a murky stripe cut the jungle like a scar: another fold of the river. Maybe some of the land Fripik wouldn’t be able to follow if they waded out—anything to gain a little space, a moment to reorient.

Dulsara seemed to understand. She leapt forward, batting aside skittering chains of flowers that brushed at every bit of her they could touch. Keith and Dulsara charged for the dark stream at a breakneck pace, the red bayard ringing as Keith beat back the swarm. Then—then Keith jerked and tried fiercely to reverse.
The river wasn’t just burbling, it was _babbling_. What he’d mistaken for water burst into an uncountable number of perfectly clear gelatinous bodies, billions of living droplets turning gooey bubble eyes on them. When the Fripik opened their mouths to speak, the entire “river” shined brilliant green.

“Oh no, not this way!”

But it was too late. Keith and Dulsara plunged into the shallows and _fell_.

There was no solid ground beneath the water Fripik. Keith and Dulsara sank through their glassy bodies, through a thin layer of river stone Fripik dancing around each other underneath, and then burst out into empty air.

As they dropped straight down with nothing to catch them, Keith realized that maybe, just maybe, when the Fripik said “not this way,” they meant it.

Then they hit ground that exploded around them, an enormous cloud of fine sand spraying up and over them. Before Keith could even catch his bearings, even think about injuries, their precarious perch overbalanced and slid out from underneath them. With every ounce of adrenaline, Keith willed his baynard away and snatched Dulsara to his chest. Then they were rolling end over end down a near-vertical slope, picking up speed, an avalanche of sand roaring down with them.

Probably less than a minute passed, but still it felt like an eternity of being flung around in the G Force generator at Garrison before they hit the bottom, a mountain of grit burying them deep. Keith clawed his battered way to the surface and hauled Dulsara up after him. She coughed violently and scrubbed at her face with both hands.

“You okay?” Keith croaked.

“You know how ta ask anything but stupid questions?”

“So you’re fine.”

She glared up at him through watery, sand-rimmed eyes. “Yer answers are even stupider.”

Keith let it go in favor of more serious issues. What the hell had just happened? They fell _through_ a river? They fell _off_ a cliff? He looked up, squinting against the orange sun’s light. _Well, that’s… okay._

Apparently, they fell _through_ a river hanging _over_ the edge of a cliff. Far above them, the clear jelly bodies of the water Fripik hung suspended in the air, by their polarity or their stickiness or some uncountable number of invisible arms. Keith was willing to believe just about anything at this point.

So _where are we now?_

At the bottom of a steep, narrow ravine, it looked like. On both sides, mile high canyon walls crowded in close. Not made of rough rocks, but pillars of smooth orange-white sand? Gravity seemed to work differently on the sand: instead of oozing down to fill the empty space, it stood up almost perfectly straight, sandcastle style. Very, very distantly, a strain of mournful song drifted down from the Fripik still gathered on (over) the cliff edge.

Groaning, stumbling for purchase in the deep sand, Keith dragged them closer to the canyon wall. When he touched it to test for sturdiness, the sand crumbled away beneath his fingers. No handholds. No jutting rocks for stepping stones. They weren’t climbing out of here. Dulsara knew
it too. She kneed the sand wall hard—and was rewarded by more dust pouring down over her head. Her ears flapped wildly.

They needed to get back to the others. No way the rest of Team Voltron got defeated by a swarm of bugs, even if there were millions. Shiro and Allura were seasoned fighters, and Pidge, Hunk, and Lance were clever. But if they were still trapped in the forest, still fighting... Keith clawed at that the sand wall again in frustration, kicking up powder that made him cough and hack.

What can I do? If he could find a way out of here, quick... If he could just reach the other paladins...

Wait. Maybe now, outside the forest, the signal would go through? "Shiro," Keith hailed desperately over the comm, "can you hear me?"

"Oh, you're loud and clear now," Shiro answered immediately, calm as anything. He did not sound as if he were fending off a vicious alien assault. In fact, "Are you okay, Keith?" he had the nerve to ask. "You sound like you've been running."

"Of course I was running—we were attacked!"

"Attacked?" Shiro demanded, up in arms in an instant. "By who?"

"By the Fri-whatevers! They led everyone off separately and then lunged!"

Allura's voice joined Shiro's over the comm; she must have standing close. "Attacked by the Fripik? Impossible. They're a perfectly harmless race."

"You said they were allied with the empire! And they chased us off a cliff!"

"A cliff?" Shiro balked. "Are you injured?"

"Well..." For the first time since falling, Keith took better stock of himself. Legs, arms, and lungs working, no blurry vision. "Nothing major," Keith was forced to admit. The sand was pretty soft. "But if they're in league with Zarkon—"

"Yes, about that," Shiro cut in. "I'll fill you in on the details when we get back. The situation is... interesting, but it's not what you're thinking."

Like that's not suspicious! Keith hmmmmed. "How do I know you're not being forced to say that?"

A beat. "How do I know you're even really Shiro? They were messing with the comms before. Tell me something only you'd know."

Shiro snorted. "Remember the time you ran off when you were nine and brought me back a Gila monster as a present?"

"It reminded me of you!" Keith retorted.

"Wha—15 extra laps at training tomorrow for that one."

"What's a 'heela monster'?" Allura muttered in the background.

Okay so fine, it really was Shiro. And he really was okay, still apparently with the Fripiks, and not under attack? What the hell?

Allura spoke again, closer than before (Shiro made a very small "Eep"), "You said the Fripik led everyone away? Coran?" she called, opening up the comm channel. "Are you doing well?"
"Better than, Princess!" Coran chimed, boisterous and buoyant as ever. "With the help of our new friends, I found an entire cargo bay worth of bylrite!"

"Bylrite?! Well done, Coran! That will certainly come in handy for—"

"But I heard you scream," Keith griped.

"Well you—you—" Coran blustered, “—called at a bad time is all! My ankle might have gotten the slightest bit stuck in a billg hole and I might—not saying I did, just might!—have been in the process of falling over. Some.”

Under their chatter, Shiro reached out further: "Pidge, Lance, Hunk, status report?"

"Relaxed," Hunk drawled. The sound of actual water burbled near his helmet, with the voices of several Fripik chittering brightly. "We should definitely take more vacations."

Lance laughed. The absolute carefree sound of it made Keith grind his teeth. "You guys have to check out this river! The water is warm as a jacuzzi!"

"You shouted about drowning!" Keith snapped.

"Oh, yeah." His voice sounded distant, actually. Wasn't he even wearing his helmet? (And somehow I'm too risky!?) "But it turns out Galra are great swimmers, so nothing to worry about here!"

*Turns out...?* Had they dropped Xerci in the river?!

"Might be something to worry about if we end up on another water planet, though," Pidge interrupted. "It's actually kind of fascinating; I had no idea the structure of their fur would allow that!"

"Uh, that reminds me, where is the little gu—whoa, no, spit that out!" Lance suddenly wailed. "It's alive and you're hurting its feelings!"

*Among other things!* Hunk yelped. There was a great deal of splashing in the background.

If the canyon wall wasn't made of dust and therefore too soft to cause him any form of real injury, Keith would definitely have beat his head against it. He wasn't sure who to be most mad at (although the top contender was, as always, himself).

*AGH! So none of you got swarmed and chased?!* He might have stomped his foot. Some.

"Oh, we definitely got swarmed." Pidge's voice *shrugged* somehow. "But why would you run? They're so cute and cuddly!" Whatever love she showered the Fripik with seemed readily returned; there was a great deal of high-pitched cooing directly into her comm mic. Dulsara cringed.

On the other end, Shiro breathed a sigh part amusement, part relief, part fond exasperation. "They're a bit 'in your face,' I agree, but seems like it's all in a good spirit. There's nothing to worry about, Keith."

*Could you have said that before I jumped off a cliff?!* 

"Okay," Keith argued, "then why do they have a mouth full of fangs?"

Coran cleared his throat to put on his teacher voice. "Fripiks use their sharp teeth to grind up
heavy metals and rocky material on the surface of barren planets, which they leave behind as a very fine dust—"

Keith looked at Dulsara, a purple cotton ball powdered in sand. Dulsara looked at Keith, with every white inch of his paladin armor dyed brown.

"EWWWW!"

"EUGHHHH!"

"—don’t actually need anything to live except carbon dioxide, which they pull out of inhospitable atmospheres and replace with more breathable gases, such as oxygen, nitrogen, and zanthilaformigen—"

"Uh, run that last one by me again, Coran?" Lance asked.

"Zanthil—"

"I hope you didn't end up too far way," Shiro turned his attention back to Keith, muffling the sound of the other comms. "Are you in good enough shape to make it back okay?"

Ugh, back. To the creepy Fripik. "We’re stuck in a canyon right now. The walls are too loose to climb."

"Can you jetpack out?"

Keith gave the small shrug of his shoulders necessary to fire up his jetpack, but it only sputtered and coughed dust. "Looks like it's clogged."

There was a moment of silence. "With wha—"

"Don't. Ask."

"We’ll come get you right now. Their leaders are waiting patiently right now; I’m sure they wouldn’t mind a few more minutes."

Keith felt the back of his neck heating up. Rescued from his own stupidity by Shiro again? Really? He slanted his gaze down at Dulsara; her ears laid exactly as flat as her glare. “No, don’t come,” Keith mumbled finally. “I think—I think I see a path back up close by. We’ll see you guys in a bit.”

“Are you sur—”

But Keith cut off the line. Dulsara’s ears sank even lower. “Yer an idiot,” she said.

*Fair.*

There was, in fact, no path, at least in their immediate vicinity, but distantly, off to their left, Keith thought he saw a lighter line that might be the canyon walls sloping less steeply. Not that he wanted to *walk* back up the waste product mountain, but sulking in a valley of it until Shiro hauled them out of the literal mess they’d landed in wasn’t especially appealing either.

“Come on,” he groaned, tugging on the cuffs’ tether, which glowed bright as ever, “let’s just go.”

Dulsara made a sound right at home on a rattlesnake, but she stumbled along through the thick sand after him to avoid being dragged.
They walked in silence for a long time. It wasn’t the comfortable kind of silence that Keith was used to, when there was no one there, or even when there was, but nothing really needed to be said. It was the awkward kind of quiet that settled heavy on his shoulders, two hands pushing down and down until his head sunk and his back hunched and he would have given anything for even a stray burst of Fripik song to put some form of sound in the air.

Dulsara huffed. A few more minutes passed. She huffed again, a little louder.

Somehow, Keith felt like she expected something. But what? He had almost no experience with kids. Or girls. Or Galra. Three strikes, you’re out. So Keith stuck with the plan that had seen him through a very large number of particularly sticky situations in which something important was expected of him, but in which it was also not socially acceptable to stab the expectant other person: he ignored her and keep going about his own business, which mostly involved stomping angrily forward while more and more uncomfortable grit slipped into the cracks between his undersuit and his leg armor.

Silence reigned a while longer. Then, finally, Dulsara couldn’t take it anymore. In a teasing singsong, she said, “I can’t believe yah got scared and ran away from of a bunch of harmless little bugs.”

“What?!” Keith wheeled around. “You were the one who said ‘Zarkon wouldn’t face them without ten whole fleets for back-up’! And “They can stripe all the flesh off your bones in ten ticks!’ You were the one who ran first!”

She tapped her chin, brushing the very bottom edge of her pointy smirk. “Nope, I fer sure remember it bein’ you.”

“It was not!” Keith’s voice did not crack, thank you for asking! “I was following you!”

“Couldn’ even find yer own way to run? Pa-thet-ic.”

“We’re tied together!” Keith yanked on the cuff as if she needed demonstration.

“So?” Dulsara demanded, free hand on her hip. “They’re yer cuffs, ain’t they? Yah coulda taken ‘em off!”

Except for the small part about how they weren’t his cuffs; they were Coran’s, or the castle’s, or whatever, and Keith didn’t actually know how to remove them. Hadn’t seemed like a big deal when Coran and Allura were standing right beside him. As valiantly as Keith struggled to keep this information off his face, it must have shown through; her smirk fell into a slack-jawed gape.

“Yah don’ even have the key code? What—that’s—how useless are you?! What if we can’ get these off?! What if we get stuck like this ferever?!” She pulled back hard on the tether, the start of a vicious tug-of-war where the uneven, shifting sands gave advantages and took them away just as quickly.

“We’re not stuck! If you’d stop messing around, we could get back to Coran and get them off as soon as we need to!” Keith shouted back, fully aware this accomplished nothing and also that this probably wasn’t how you were supposed to treat children, even awful ones who made it their sole goal in life to get on your every. single. nerve. “We wouldn’t even need them if you just behaved, like Niresh!”

Dulsara stopped in her tracks. The fur of her cheek folded around her curled lip. “You don’ know nothin’ ‘bout Niresh. Yah think hearin’ one or two things suddenly means you understand? That yer all forgiven, jus’ like that? Sorry to carry the oil, but you might wanna keep it in mind:
Niresh’s got twice as much Galra blood as you or me.”

“So what? That doesn’t make any difference!”

“You sure?” she needled. “You say that like you trust the Galra. Wonder what yer friends would think a’ that?”

Keith saw red. He was so sick of being scared by his own blood. He was so fucking sick of waiting for the other shoe to drop. For his world to end. “Shut up!” Keith roared and pulled hard. Too hard. The ground was loose and the attack unexpected: Dulsara went down face first into the disgusting dirt. It was soft, he knew, but still, her rough jerk, the sight of her falling, killed every hint of anger, made his stomach turn instantly.

What is wrong with me?! Why can’t I handle anything like a normal person?

He crossed the two or three feet between them instantly. “Are you okay?”

But she slapped away his outstretched hand, claws cutting the material of his glove. He’d seen plenty of poisonous glares from her already, but when she lifted her head from the dirt, spitting sand, her stunned face was the Gila monster’s bite, dripping with acid-vicious loathing. “Don’t touch me! I don’ want yer help!” Her voice rose and broke, a tick from furious tears. She clawed deep rents in the dust. “I don’ want nothin’ to do with you! I HATE YOU more than anythin’ in the whole universe!”

Keith took his hand back. Felt like it weighed a ton when it fell to his side. “I-I know,” he mumbled. “Let’s just… go back to the castle, okay? Then you… don’t have to see me anymore.”

“There or here, what’s it matter?” Dulsara choked. She crumpled from her knees to sit in the dirt. “I’m a prisoner no matter where I go.” Her voice trailed to near nothing. “No matter where…” Then a realization seemed to dawn on her, slow and terrible. Her shivering eyes widened, her mouth fell, her breath stopped. She looked up at him suddenly, silently horrified, and lifted the cuff until the blue light of the tether shined across her brittle expression. “Is this… it? Is this the rest of my whole life? At the end of a leash on wherever planet yah feel like draggin’ me to?”

No, the answer to that was of course not, but… How long would they have kept doing this, stopping her from running by chaining her to whoever was most convenient?

Until she fought back?

Would they just keep trading up: to Hunk, to Shiro’s Galra arm, to Allura?

The rest of my whole life. He’d never thought that far ahead—with his own life or anyone else’s.

Keith couldn’t find any words, so he just turned away, stood still as an awkwardly-posed statue. Should he… wait? How long? Too short and he’d be heartless; too long and he’d collapse under the weight of the guilty silence. Eventually, thin tugs on the cuff betrayed Dulsara climbing to her feet. Keith stepped forward cautiously, expecting resistance, but Dulsara came along without a sound, miserable and mechanical.

Time seemed to trickle; the canyon might as well have been a giant hourglass. They were getting closer to the upward slope, but the feeling of two steps back wouldn’t leave him.

He’d never thought about what they would do with the Galra children after the war. (What he’d do after the war.) So many things had happened that he’d never planned on…

Even lost in his own thoughts, Keith heard Dulsara’s unexpected murmur: “My maman was
almost finished gettin’ the forged documents so I could be registered fer real.” Her voice was colorless and muffled as she hung her head into her collar. The *shurh-shurhing* of the sand under their feet filled the air. Dulsara breathed softly. “I was gonna go to the Imperial Academy next cycle.”

Next cycle. Next year. Unbidden, an image of Dulsara in something like a Garrison cadet uniform sprang to mind, clutching a school tablet, laughing with other Galra children her age. Keith stumbled, pulling her forward on accident. Dulsara crashed into his back and stayed there, too defeated to even retreat.

After talking to Shiro, he’d been so sure he could handle this. The children were not a problem with a quick fix, and Keith figured he could live with that, no matter how hard guilt clung on him when he was reminded of the families they’d torn apart.

But this…

He’d never thought of this, never realized that it *wasn’t* only the past and present Voltron took from the children. Dulsara and even Niresh… They must have had plans and hopes for the rest of their lives.

When I grow up, I want to be—

And that was all over now. There would be no Imperial Academy. Whatever future Dulsara dreamed of died with her mother and was scattered among the stars.

They’d taken her life, no different than if they had killed her.

Shiro’s voice drifted back to him: “But if I was her—if it was me—right now, what I’d want most is the power to make my own choices.”

“Do you…” Keith struggled. His voice felt a hundred times too loud. “Do you want to go to school?”

Dulsara didn’t answer for a long time. Then she whispered to the ground, “I want to go *home*.”

Though it felt like every muscle gave out, every bone in his body splintered, Keith kept walking. He couldn’t stop. Stopping didn’t just mean waiting for Shiro anymore. Somehow, it meant some kind of unnamable, unforgiveable failure.

Before even thinking the words, he heard himself say, “Home doesn’t always last forever. Sometimes it falls apart. Or it gets taken away.” He stared straight ahead, refusing to let his voice waver. “Once it’s gone, you can’t go back. The people who made it a home aren’t waiting there for you anymore.”

*(You are the all the stars in all the skies to me, my beautiful, impossible son.)*

“Somebody like you, a traitor to yer line…” Dulsara muttered. “Don’t talk like yah know how it feels, losin’ everything, gettin’ trapped with the people who hurt you.”

The ground beneath their feet definitely sloped up now, the steepness of the canyon walls giving way to steppes and angles more suited to the desert Keith knew. Above them, the overgrown emerald edge of the jungle swam closer into view. Keith counted the seconds of his breath. 1, 2, 3… Closed his eyes. Felt the warm rise of the earth shifting with him.

He didn’t mean to tell her, but the words wormed free without permission: “My mom died when I was seven.” Seven what? She wouldn’t know. “About as old as Niresh. My dad already left by
then. Ran off when things finally got too tough, I guess.” He tried to end it there—too much, too close to home, too hard to talk about himself—but the weight of the unspoken words made his tongue feel swollen, made his throat close and work. “People came to the house. Said they were Child Protective Services, to rescue me. But I’m pretty sure now they were lying. Even if I knew better then, I didn’t get to choose. They made me go.”

Dulsara stopped walking. Keith looked back her, squinting against the bright light of the tangerine sun on the sand. “Am I supposed ta pity you?” she said.

“I don’t know,” he answered truthfully. “Do you want me to pity you?”

She stepped around him, further up the hill, until the tether pulled tight and her hand hung backward in the space between them like a dead thing.

“I was gonna go to the Imperial Academy and study to be a soldier jus’ like my maman,” she said, without turning around. Her voice wore a mask, haggard under the gold-gilt of pride. “I was gonna be so good, they’d gimme a spot at high command soon as I graduated. I wanted ta send a whole buncha GAC to my mother so she could buy a transfer somewhere nice.”

A gust of warm, dry wind whirled in the sand, and brought Keith a rush of nostalgia, of longing and memory: the Mojave Desert shimmering under an early morning heat, sun rising from a mirage-ocean, washing the red sides of his hoverbike in gold as he streamed toward the shadow of distant hills, toward the towering watery presence in the back of his mind that said without words Come find me.

Somewhere nice.

I want to go…

“W-Where?” The word broke out of him. “Where did she want to transfer?”

Dulsara looked back of her shoulder, close to Keith’s eye level from the slope of the hill. He couldn’t guess her thoughts as she surveyed him, tired and slumped forward to keep from falling back. Finally, she murmured, ‘Maman was always talkin’ ‘bout a planet she visited with cadets in her co’lition: Miune, that orbits the bluest star… She said in Kevmer there, the wind blows smells from fruit flowers outta the mountains but the sea’s so still the white birds on it look same ‘s clouds in the sky.’”

She looked away, shivered with her whole body. When she worried her lip, her fangs looked very white against the dust-covered dark of her fur. “I was gonna go there ‘n’ see that with my mother. Now what? Now where do I go? What do I do?”

Keith reached out before his meager supply of self-preservation could stop him. His hand closed over her arm, just above the cuff, but he had no idea what to do when she didn’t immediately shake him off. What would be helpful? What was too far? Keith floundered, settled for just squeezing stupidly in the hopes it might come across as comforting. Dulsara didn’t move. Under his hand, her fur was warm but rougher than he remembered.

“You’re not—you’re not alone,” he tried, hesitant. “Niresh and Xerci are here. You can still… You can make a new home, eventually.”


He’d never put it in words, not even really into thought, but… The feeling was there, of course: in his anger when Pidge tried to leave, his hurt when Lance forgot admitting they made a good team,
the clean joy of being picked by Hunk for extra cookies, the way he still—always—needed Shiro’s shoulder to lean on, even while Shiro was busy shouldering the rest of the entire universe too.

Maybe the idea of family lurked even in his fear—that the moment the truth came out, he’d lose all those things, like he’d lost everything before.

As if she could read his thoughts, Dulsara shook her head. The wild curls of her tangled mane bounced around her furrowed face. Though she didn’t yell, her voice cut through him cold-steel clean: “What kinda home is that, when they don’ even want you for what you really are?”

He had no answer.

They kept walking. The sand hill grew very steep as they made it higher. When Keith looked back, the floor of the canyon sloped away behind and beneath them. They were almost back up to the top, if they could keep their footing.

Dulsara dug the sharp toe of her boot to the sand to stop sliding back and braced her free hand in case she needed to catch herself. Just ahead of her, the sand came to a run-off point, the very top of the hill, which was fringed with overgrown grass and the first tendrils of the jungle reaching out into the empty air.

Dulsara heaved herself up with typical Galra grace, somehow a perfectly smooth motion despite the lack of solid ground. Even so small, it was amazing to watch the corded muscles of her legs spring and shift. Was that something you had to be taught? Keith definitely didn’t feel that nimble on his feet, even in Galra form.

Dulsara made a sudden noise, half way between a growl and a sigh.

“What?” Keith asked, but she was already cresting the cliff, disappearing over the rim in a way that pulled awkwardly on their tether. Keith scrambled to catch up, knee on the edge of the cliff for balance. “What was that abou—”

The Fripik were waiting. An enormous cloud of them buzzed and bustled at the tree line, waving their spider-thin limbs and flashing their inner light in frantic Morse code. A dizzying swirl of pink-blue-white-purple flowers fluttered through the air and climbed the blinking trees, while tall patches of grass with eyes along their stalks bent in their direction.

“We are so glad you are uninjured!”

“I bet,” Keith deadpanned.

The Fripik had learned nothing. The moment Dulsara gave up batting at them, they swarmed her, making chains of flowers to crown her head. Enough moss Fripik attached themselves to Keith’s back, he might as well have been wearing a cape. “Come this way; your friends are this way!” And then, a slightly different tone from a slightly different spot, though Keith could not tell which of them was actually doing the speaking: “And please don’t run! If you fall again, you might be hurt!”

Dulsara pursed her dusty lips, arched a dirty brow.

“I bet,” Keith repeated, even flatter than before.
Because it was that type of day, Keith found everyone waiting exactly where they’d left him, at the very first clearing—or at least the Fripik rearranged themselves so it looked the same. Allura and Coran were still engaged in conversation with an enormous Fripik, bigger than Coran’s head, that seemed to be a cross between fungus and flower. It was bright red, with petals shaped like a grade schooler’s drawing of a flower, but its middle was with a gaping hole full of sharp spikes. No thanks. Behind them, Lance, Hunk, and Pidge swung Xerci on a vine made of ivy Fripik. “Up!” the Galra boy giggled. The Fripiks’ squashed-flat faces underneath him gave Keith a refreshing dash of Schadenfreude.

Closest to them, with his back turned, Shiro watched over the flock with restless vigilance. Though his stance was relaxed, long years of acquaintance told Keith he was one degree of self-discipline away from pacing.

Pidge saw them first. “Hey, you’re back!”

The weight of the team’s eyes fell on them, then the eyes of a hundred thousand other living beings. The clearing turned its myriad heads to watch their arrival. While the Fripik who accompanied them bustled away to join their brethren, Keith stood stone still, excruciatingly self-conscious of how dirty and bedraggled he must look—

Xerci chirped in ear-shattering excitement and flung himself from the vine toward Keith. Only Hunk’s quick snatch prevented him from face-planting into the dirt.

“Keith!” Shiro gave him a quick, comforting grip on the upper arm. “Glad you made it back in one piece.”

“Yeah well,” Keith huffed. “Turns out the biggest danger was tying the two of us,” he pulled lightly on the cuff, “together.”

Dulsara’s expected protest never came. Her gaze darted around the clearing and each person in it. “Where,” she demanded, “is Niresh?”

“Wait,” Lance blinked, “she wasn’t with you?”

Keith’s blood flash froze. “No,” he ground out. “She wandered off behind you.”

“Whoa, don’t pin this on me, buddy! She wasn’t ever with us, right?” Lance leaned on Hunk and Pidge. Both of them shook their heads.

“Don’t worry,” Allura said. “I’m sure she only wandered off to meet more of our new friends. The Fripik know everything that goes on within their colony. They can find her in no time.”

There was a chorus of shrill birdsong from the thousands of aliens that surrounded them, petal wings, fronds, and leaves whipping about. One by one, the Fripik began to hum, shark-sharp mouths open so the whole clearing glowed with brilliant green pinpricks of light. Even the giant Fripik, in Allura’s arms now, hummed with a deep, resonant voice.

Then, just as abruptly as it began, every one of the Fripik fell coldly, darkly silent.

“The one you seek,” they spoke in one voice, “is not within the forest.”

“AGAIN?!” Pidge groaned, throwing her arms up.

Shiro waved her down. “It’s fine. She may have gotten separated from everyone and decided to go back to the castle to wait for us. Let’s check there first. If she isn’t there, we can use the ship’s scanners to—”
An explosion shook the air, shook the breath in Keith’s lungs. The whole planet seemed to shiver under his feet, knocking floating Fripiks out of the sky. A high, piercing whistle filled his hearing; Dulsara and Xerci snatched at their ears to press them closed.

It was impossible to mistake that sound. Every recruit at Garrison had heard it enough times to replay it in their nightmares.

That was the sound of an uncontrolled spacecraft entering the atmosphere, plunging unchecked toward the defenseless surface before.

Shiro met Allura’s stunned gaze, and then everyone burst into action. They sprinted toward the castle ship, toward the wide open vista of the desert. Without the canopy of trees above them, Keith could see a blazing white light streaking across the sky—then a blinding flare, followed eerily late by the roar of the explosion as the ship hit ground. They braced for impact against the oncoming cloud of debris and grit.

Even before the dust fully cleared, everyone knew what had come. Miles out, towering over the desert, the black-purple-red lines of the Galra transport began to stir. Inside, a robeast was already waking.

“Paladins!” Allura roared. “To your lions!”

Chapter End Notes

1) Niresh can't manage to stay in one spot for more than five minutes, and Dulsara knows a lot more about Niresh than anyone else...

2) That might have been an Eddie Izzard reference.

3) Shiro does not in any way resemble a Gila monster.

4) Some Galra world-building: Galra are very capable swimmers; for those with fur, the fur actually seals in close (like penguin feathers) to make it easier for the undercoat to stay dry.

   - "Sorry to carry the oil" is a very, very old Galra idiom that basically means "Sorry to be the bearer of bad news." Although the origin of the phrase is no longer common knowledge and Dulsara doesn't know it, it actually stems from a pre-space flight (i.e. Medieval period) Galra torture technique in which the victim's most trusted ally was forced to carry in the vat hot oil that would be used to scald the victim.

   - Although receiving a placement at high command is based on power and blood-thirstiness, it's common practice among the lower ranks to save money for years to bribe higher-ups into approving transfers to more desirable bases.

   - The modern Galra calendar does not have seasons (when you own half the universe, it's always summer somewhere). Instead, it's broken up into three different portions denoting the beginning, middle, and end of the year. Kevmer is the beginning phase of the Galran year. The Galran year, if mapped to Earth time, would begin in May and span only nine Earth months.
5) Come talk Voltron with me on tumblr!
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I apologize sincerely for the incredibly long break between chapters. There's an explanation on my tumblr.

Also, I am very aware that this is not how the paladin bond works in the show, and frankly my dears, I don't give a damn.

First part of another double post!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Paladins,” Allura roared, “to your lions!”

Ten yards ahead of her already, Coran shadow-boxed the air. “The castle defenses will send this beastie packing in a wiltick!” Pidge and Hunk plowed after him, leaving Lance struggling to get his helmet back on with one free hand. Xerci mewled and squirmed in his other arm.

“It’s okay, little buddy!” Lance’s croon was muffled by the padding of his helmet, on half sideways now. “We’re just gonna go back to the castle and—” A distant, piercing wail cut him off, then, with a resounding crash, the Galra transport’s walls finally fell away, leaving the Robeast entirely free to move. “O-Okay, we’re gonna go back a little faster!” Lance sprinted, with his crooked helmet blocking one eye and Xerci tucked under his arm like a football.

Shiro’s command echoed next to Keith and through his skin-close comm speakers too: “I want all eyes on the target in 30 ticks!”

An order. Clear, unmistakable, easy to follow.

But Keith couldn’t move. He stood rooted to the dust, swaying on his feet.

Dulsara hauled back on their handcuffs. “What about Niresh?!”

They had to go. They had to get to the lions. If they didn’t, there wouldn’t be a planet left for them to search. But Keith remembered the Robeast with the fifty eyes, lasers that carved apart the surface of the Balmera, collapsing caves, crumbling stone. Niresh was somewhere out here, in the air-light sands, with no defense.

The dark shape of the monster unfurled on the horizon. There wasn’t any time.

“Shiro,” Keith breathed. “Niresh—the other girl—”

Shiro gripped Keith’s elbow hard. Why? To stop him from bolting? “We need Voltron now.”

I know.

I know, but...

Dulsara watched him, her eyes wide, ears trembling.
The fingers of his cuffed hand buried in Dulsara’s shoulder. “We have to defeat the monster first. Then we'll find her.”

“We can’t just—”

“You’re the one who said it: we can’t save anybody if we don’t save ourselves first.”

“This is different!” The Robeast screamed in the distance, but Keith couldn’t look. Dulsara flinched under his hand. “And you don’t even care! Yer just gonna… Yer just gonna fly away and leave Niresh!”

“No, I’m not.” Keith held her tighter. “But I won’t risk you too.” Every word felt like a new cut. Dulsara’s gold-coin eyes shivered, disbelieving and terribly open. Keith fought to remember to breathe. “We need Voltron, but we’re not leaving her behind. The second this is over, we’ll find Niresh. I promise.” Dulsara half pulled away, then froze when he added: “On my line’s honor.”

Urgently, Shiro warned: “Keith, we have to—”

But a fire was already rising in his belly, black-orange coals stoked to life by a blunt hand. Embers jumped in his lungs; boiling blood streamed to the ends of his veins.

Red was awake in his hangar. Awake and calling for him. Keith ran, Dulsara flapping out behind him.

“Coran!” Keith bellowed as he plowed toward the landing pod. Lance, Hunk, and Pidge were gone—probably already in their lions by now, or almost there. Over Allura’s shouting to Shiro, Keith thought he heard the vacuum rush of bay doors opening. He skidded to a halt, clouds of dust billowing around them. “Coran, we need these cuffs off now!”

But Coran’s arms were already full—with Xerci, who twisted and kicked against his captor, clawing the air toward Keith. His cry was so piercing, tears sprung uncontrollably to Keith’s already dust-stung eyes. But Keith couldn’t help Xerci, not right now. “Hurry,” he barked, throwing his and Dulsara’s linked hands out. “I can’t fly my lion like this!”

“Let me!” Allura reached for them—to find her hold suddenly filled with the squirming Galra baby, unceremoniously tossed from one Altean to the next. Big blue-pink and yellow eyes blinked at each other, enormously slow.

“No worries!” Coran was a flurry of action so fast even Keith couldn’t keep up. “I’ll have these cuffs off in a jiffy!” (One day he was going to say it right, Pidge swore, but not today and probably not tomorrow and next week wasn’t looking great either, and honestly, did it even really matter, given no one knew what the hell a jiffy was supposed to be anyway? Wait, did other people know what jiffies were? Was that another thing Keith was just supposed to know?)

Behind the blur of Coran, Allura cringed. It looked less like she was holding a baby and more like she was holding a bomb. “All right, yes, of course,” she said to herself as she watched Xerci, her eye actually twitching. “Nothing I can’t handle! It’s only a Galra child, not—”

The Blue and Yellow Lions exploded from their hangars above, and Xerci wailed.

But the cuffs were off, and Keith darted for the launch with Shiro crowding after him. The time it took to shout “Take care of Dulsara!” was all the time they had left to linger.

Coran saluted. “Fight well, paladins!”

“Always do.” Shiro’s smile made it all the way to his voice.
Then: “Don’t leave me with Alteans!” Dulsara howled, but Keith was already gone, whisked into the darker hallways of the Castle’s depths on the way to Red. The flames of his lion’s impatience rang through his body; the air in his lungs felt heat-heavy. A taste of grapefruit, wet breaths, sudden memory-crisp image of fangs slippery red with blood, beading stains on dark fur—Come! Red said, in that voice that was no voice at all, just strands of reality plucked and shivering in the synapses of his brain.

Keith and the Red Lion burst from his hangar with a shattering roar, crossing the miles between the Castle and the Robeast in an eye-blink. Within a second, he caught up to the rest of the lions, all of them darting around the beast in wary circles, awaiting a battle plan.

“Man,” Lance groaned, “how do they keep finding us? There aren’t even any Galra stations in this quadrant! Coran, Allura, are you guys picking up any other Galra activity?”

There was no answer.

“…Allura? Coran? Come in?”

A burst of static over the line. “—too close—colony—signal is—the distance—”

“Oh-oh,” Hunk peeped, to Lance’s “Looks like we’re without the castle for now.”

“Sure that’s a problem and all,” Pidge’s voice pinged over the top, “but first things first… What are we even looking at here?”

Keith honestly didn’t know. At least the previous Robeasts they’d fought had made anatomical sense. This thing was... something else entirely.

The monster was built for flying. In some ways it resembled one of those soaring dinosaurs, terradittles or whatever, a triangular torpedo with narrow, fleshy wings, a stubby tail, and a rail thin neck. But there was something horribly wrong about it. Its skin was a sick greyish color, almost... baggy? It sagged deeply in several places, oozing and flapping as the monster beat its wings to lunge higher. Purple-red electricity arced and crackled in the air all around it, a hum of charged ions that Keith could feel even from inside the safety of his lion. Everywhere along its body, thick black wiring, veined with the nauseating purple of Galra-refined power, burst out of its skin and back into it like nightmare stitches. At every joint, clusters of towering metal rods wormed out of the flesh, channeling the raging current of electrical power.

The claws at the fore of its wings and its feet were disproportionately long, wicked sharp spider legs trailing beneath it. And its head… Honestly, “grotesquely misshapen” felt like too much of a compliment. Bulbous at the base but dwindling to nothing at the neck, its throat seemed too narrow to ever support the protuberant mass of its lumpy braincase. Its eyes were glassed over, sunken in, impacting the skull so much there couldn’t have been room for half the grey matter it needed to power a body so big, and its loose, lipless mouth gapped, with the teeth actually slapping as if it had no jawbone—no, wait. Red Lion’s visuals locked on and zoomed in and Keith’s stomach abruptly turned. There was another mouth under the first. There was a whole other face under the dripping grey skin, hidden beneath the folds of dead flesh, and this face was alert, alive, spittle roping between its uneven but firmly moored fangs, while lightning-purple sparks inside its mouth lit up the backside of a swollen black tongue.

“Did anyone else see that?” Keith’s voice shuddered for him.

“I can’t unsee it!” Hunk moaned. “It’s like the monster’s wearing some kind of second skin!”

Like it had crawled into the corpse of one of its own kind and made itself at home…
Shiro rallied. “All right, team. We don’t know what this thing is capable of or what kind of defensive abilities that second skin will give it. We need to keep it away from the Fripi colony and the Castle. Engage with caution. Let’s see if we can’t draw out some of its secret weapons before we form Voltron.”

“With caution” was so very unspecific.

At the barest mental prodding, Red dove for the back of the Robeast’s pencil-thin neck. Somewhere, in the depths of his head, Keith thought he heard someone shouting at him.

Too late now.

Red Lion’s jaw closed over the beast’s pencil neck and he ripped his head back viciously, crunching, tearing—nothing but air. The Robeast was gone.

“Where’d it go?” Pidge had time to squawk before an enormous dark shape rocketed past the Green Lion, nearly blowing it over from sheer speed.

Fast. Really fast. Even Red’s sensors struggled to keep track of it, locking on and losing target again instantly. This might have been the most fragile-looking Robeast they’d ever fought, but whatever it lacked in bulk, it more than made up for in agility.

Lance and Blue gave it a shot, diving after the beast from above and firing volley after volley of laser bursts, a hail of blue-white gunfire that Hunk and Shiro had to swerve to stay out of. But even with Lance’s aim, nothing connected: the Robeast wove between the cannon blasts, easy as a needle through silk. Keith retreated a hundred feet or so, just to give the others more room to maneuver, then spurred Red on with a thought-image (grey-green, a shattered bone, the cloying scent of mud beneath a tropic heat); Red released his own laser shots, tearing fiery lines across the sky as his sights pursued the monster.

Black Lion joined in, then Yellow and Green, a plan without even needing words: see just how much it could actually dodge. Red leapt higher, angling to cut off escape from above, and Shiro understood; Black dove, blocking the low ground with wings spread. Lance, Pidge, and Hunk harried the monster in tighter and tighter circles. There was no way it could avoid the crossfire entirely—

Lance’s shot hit, grazing the monster from shoulder to leg. Keith thought there was some explosion, some blowback from the electricity lightning-leaping and cracking, but he didn’t get to see the full impact: beneath its dead skin, the monster’s second mouth ripped open and it shrieked, a wall of sound so percussive Keith could feel it, every plate of Red’s armor vibrating, his heart shaking in his chest. He could almost see the atmosphere warp before his eyes slammed shut, Red’s display static-filled and screaming.

The force of the noise, even through his helmet, struck Keith like a physical blow. His hands ripped free of Red’s control throttles to press against his head, leaving the lion to fend for himself; Keith curled instinctively, as if hiding in his knees would somehow stop the ringing, stop the feeling that his brain had just been violently blown out both his ears. There was something wet inside helmet. He didn’t want to think about it. The pain was so intense, his teeth creaked like glass chips as they ground against each other.

“Keith!” Shiro called through the comms, and for some reason he sounded a hundred miles away. “Are you okay? Did you get hit?”

“That blast…” he forced out between his clenched jaws, too loud or too soft, he couldn’t tell. “It’s some kind of ultrasound or something. It even disrupted Red’s sensors. Don’t get hit by it.”
“Lance said the same thing.” He had? When? Keith hadn’t heard—“Copy that everyone, avoid the head. Sound cannons are nasty business. Don’t get caught in the direct path of the beam.”

“Uh, kinda difficult when we can’t even see the beam,” Hunk groaned, hurling Yellow away from the monster’s line of sight. Then: “Whoa, wait. I think my lion’s going to—oh, now that is cool! Thanks boy!”

“What’s so cool?” Pidge griped, the words matched by the feedback of another laser blast from Green’s tail cannon.

“Yellow Lion’s got a vibration detection mode! I mean, I don’t think it’s perfect; it looks like it’s meant to be used underground, but I can totally see where our blasts are disturbing the air particles and—watch out!”

The beast reared back its head and roared again, away from Keith this time, thank god, but Black had to nosedive to avoid the assault. Even from behind, the boom was like a gun, a real, old-fashioned bullet gun, going off a hair from Keith’s right ear.

Sweat and whatever from under his helmet crept down his neck, matting in the dust-clogged curls of his hair.

“Is it just me or was that blast even stronger?! Pidge shouted.

“Hunk, will you be able to give us a heads-up on the next one?”

“Uh, I think so? Just before it roars, it takes a deep breath that shows up on—”

“Okay but,” Lance cut in, trying to get the jump on the monster by riding in what might have been its blind spot. Maybe. If those big corpse eyes were even what it used to actually see. “You guys saw me hit it, right? I’m not crazy? It definitely connected. Where was the damage, the smoke, the pshhhewwww?”

Lance was right. Keith whipped Red around to get sights on the beast’s left flank, where Lance’s laser had strafed. There was no wound, not even a single scratch. The dead flesh wasn’t torn, burnt, or marked in any way.

“Are you kidding me?” Lance complained. “It completely deflected Blue’s shot?”

Green stopped dead in the air for a moment, and the monster seized the opportunity to fold in its wings and swoop through the narrow gap.

“Whoa, follow it!”

“Pidge,” Shiro barked, “is something wrong?”

But Pidge didn’t answer him, at least not directly. Instead, Green rounded on Yellow. “Lance’s shot wasn’t deflected. One of us would have been in its path if it was.” Pidge sounded breathless. “So if it wasn’t deflected and it didn’t do damage…” Yellow Lion balked, but before Hunk could say anything, Pidge barreled on: "Hunk, experiment time! Everyone else, get ready to dodge!"

With a whirl, Green Lion frolicked across the sky, a sort of carefree ferocity that Keith almost envied, that Red was too terribly earnest to ever imitate. Pidge easily overtook Black and Blue; though Green was not as fast as Red, they were siblings in build, nimble and tricky in the air. (And Pidge had no piloting experience before Voltron? Really?) Almost spring-boarding off Blue—Lance squawked—Green Lion bridged the last gap between them and the monster’s exposed
tail, opened her mouth, and fired a long beam straight at the Robeast’s back.

Its disgusting, rope-thin neck swiveled. Keith saw the mouth beneath the mouth distend. Red Lion rolled, and behind him, Blue arced up and away.

*This sucks.* Not being able to see the shot threw everything off; how far should he dodge, at what angle, when would be too late... Red’s throaty hum pressed at the base of his skull, warm and wet and rough like being licked. Spots of grass green swam in Keith’s eyes. Dandelion seeds disturbed by a passing paw puffed and drifted. *Trust me,* Red meant.

Keith huffed. Of course he trusted him. That didn’t make anything about this suck any less.

“Hunk! How many more gigahertz was that?!” Pidge’s call over the comm sounded watery, muffled. Keith tilted his head and the warm wetness inside his helmet pooled around his right ear. *That... doesn’t seem good.* But there was no time to worry about it.

“Uh, *way* worse; try *tera*hertz, and about *fifty*!”

“Quiznak,” Pidge cursed. “That’s at least three factors higher!”

While the Blue Lion tailed the Robeast, Lance groaned. “I appreciate the flashbacks to junior year physics lab and all, but can the rest of us get the study guide, *please?*”

Hunk beat Pidge to it: “The monster isn’t reflecting or negating our lasers, it’s just absorbing them and using them to power up its own blasts. Every time we hit it, that sound cannon’s going to get three times stronger.”

Keith said a worse word than Quiznak. Hunk sniffed imperiously.

Then the Black Lion rumbled, rough and dry, and Keith didn’t know if that was its frustration or Shiro’s. “So we can’t use lasers,” Shiro said. “Let’s keep herding it away from the castle and the Fripik while we think up a plan.”

But what was there to think about? They only had so many options, whether they formed Voltron or not: the lions’ jawblades, Red’s flamethrower or Blue’s ice, Voltron’s sword—but what good would forming the sword be, if they couldn’t hit it with a jawblade? Keith wasn’t a scientist, but this still seemed like too many unknown variables. The way to figure out the best plan would just be to try everything, right? First they had to see what stuck. That just made sense.

“Kei—Keith! What are you doing?!” Shiro’s shout fell on deaf ears (literally). The Red Lion broke formation and rocketed ahead, pounding through the air, no muscles but the smooth, fierce glide of piston and plate, fast—faster—

Send a thousand monsters, Zarkon, it wouldn’t matter: in every world, in every universe, the lion is still king of the beasts.

Red’s earth-shattering roar sang in Keith’s heart, in his throat, shook in his very lungs as they plunged after their prey. The Robeast beat its wings, flipped upside down, then jerked upward in a single smooth loop to get above him. Silhouetted against the pale light of the planet’s distant sun, the monster seemed to be taunting them, and Red’s rage was Keith’s (or his Red’s); in a half instant, Red launched himself faster than Keith thought possible, every cylinder firing, and he knew beyond any doubt that *this time* they had it.

Red’s jawblade shimmered to life as he whipped his head back in a violent arc. The blade made contact—and Keith’s world erupted in a firestorm. Red hurtled backward through the sky, end-over-end, upside down, powerlessly rolling through the air. Keith couldn’t see; red-green-purple
after-bursts of an explosion swam across his eyes, as if lightning had struck in an inch from his face, the pulse of light blinding everything. Electric static-crackling screamed in Keith’s head and he didn’t know if that was just the echoes or if the explosion’s sound hadn’t stopped. The gravity stabilizers kept him in his seat, but Keith didn’t need to see to feel that he—they—were plummeting toward the ground, uncontrolled and boneless.

His breath staggered in his chest.

Red’s presence, the weight of his soul inside Keith’s body, was gone.

“I got you, Keith!” someone yelled; whose voice, he didn’t even try to decipher.

Red? he shouted. Red? The white of magnesium fires. A thin, grey dove flushed from her nest. His vision was clearing but the HUD in front of him was dark and lifeless. Keith choked, throat hot, locked up. He wasn’t responding. Red couldn’t hear him. Red was nowhere, not with him, gone—

(There’s a small black box in the bottom drawer of his mother’s dresser, underneath her messy skirts. He’s been told not to touch this box, no matter how badly he might want to. The item it contains is too dangerous to be used except for the worst emergencies. Loneliness is not an emergency, his mother says, no matter how much it hurts.

Keith leans his burning forehead against the cool wood of the dresser. It hurts.

He opens the box. Inside, the tiny black phone—not quite a phone—looks harmless. Keith’s hand shakes when he picks it up and presses the only button.

“D-Dad?” His voice wavers. “Are you there? Please answer. Mom’s not waking up. I don’t know what to do. Why—” He coughs. The words, like his breath, keep getting stuck. “Why aren't you coming back?”

There’s no response.

The house is a kind of quiet it’s never been before.)

Frantically, without even being able to think, Keith called. Not with words, not even with his voice, just mental noise, pushed out far beyond the limits of his shaken brain.

It was the same shattering cry Xerci made, desperately searching for someone who’d never come back.

Keith’s plea echoed in the empty space Red normally occupied in his mind; it crossed the narrow doorway their bond had built into his soul and pierced the sudden emptiness within, where Red’s overwhelming presence should have been. There was no rolling heat, no throaty, reassuring rumble.

“—ith, you—all right—?”

The Red Lion was not where Keith needed him.

Keith called.

“—ith, answer us!”

Please answer.
Deep within, there was the *chink* of flint against steel, hissing sparks, a silvery curl of smoke. Behind Keith’s clenched-shut eyelids, a metallic beat drummed once—and then the dark of Keith’s head space exploded with light and color, jewel-bright greens and blues and pure glossy whites. Before he even realized he was actually *seeing* something, the reeds around him, high as his shoulders, burst to rattling life, and a thousand birds with long, curved black bills and snowy wings wheeled as one into the red-gold evening sky, dotting it with white stars.

*Pretty,* Keith thought, then: *Wait, what? Where… was he?*

A vision. This had to be a vision, right? The same kind Red sent him all the time, plucking at Keith’s grey matter, making pictures pop like fireworks across his consciousness. This felt the same: hot, humid, still-aired, and dreamy, with that now-familiar hint of burnt spice and perfect soundlessness.

Between the brilliant green of the reeds, clear blue water—an enormous river—silently carried thousands of delicate flowers down its stream. They gathered around Keith’s thighs—oh, he was *in* the river? The flower petals were pale pink as flushed faces, each one perfect, without a single spot of wither or decay.

Was this really a vision from Red? Keith had never been given more than snapshots before, tiny flashes, only what was absolutely necessary to convey a particular feeling or piece of information.

If this was Red (*please*), what feeling was he even trying to convey? The river, the reeds, the birds, the waterlilies were all lovely, but they didn’t feel… like anything, really. They didn’t feel alive. There wasn’t a peaceful vibe or an ominous vibe or even a *vibe* at all.

Almost like… a scene in a movie. Keith was standing in the middle of it, but that didn’t mean it felt *real.*

Someone laughed behind him, the only sound in the absolute silence. Keith whirled, made a splash but not a noise, and nearly tripped on the first step of a flight of gleaming tiled stairs that spilled straight into the river, white with red, gold, and iridescent inlay in patterns and shapes Keith was sure humans had no names for. Another laugh.

There was a woman at the top of the stairs. Or… There was a lion at the top of the stairs? Or… There was a woman who also a lion at the top of the stairs? Keith’s head spun; his vision kept slanting off in different directions, impossible to hold it where he wanted. He tried to look directly at her, but it didn’t work. From the corner of one eye, he saw a dark-skinned woman with long, tawny hair twisted in a thousand intricate, intertwined braids, bare-footed, with gold in-laid on the paint of her long, sharp nails. From the other eye, he saw an enormous winged lioness, five times the size of a lion of Earth, reclining regal and watchful on the top step, her golden feathers spilling across the tile like shards of the mosaic sprung to life.

Keith looked down but straight forward, peering through his bangs, and the views became one: at the top of the stairs, staring back at him, was a woman clad in a sea of crimson fabric, her bare arms lined with scars painted over in black and gold dust until her spotted skin shimmered. Above her shoulders, she had the head and face of a lioness, sharp yellow eyes over a broad muzzle. Her round cat’s ears, framed by soft white guard hairs, canted away from him. Dismissive or dominant, Keith couldn’t tell, only that when her head moved, there was the chiming of a hundred tiny bells from miniscule shards of crystal, woven between uncountable metal rings pierced in the velvety trim of her ears.

The enormous red sun was a halo setting behind her head, casting everything into a shadow from which her golden eyes burned, ferocious, bright, and unblinking. She felt like nothing that could ever be or should be, and like she had no name he’d ever know, but that he should have known
her nonetheless. Like there was nothing under his skin she couldn’t see.

Keith trembled and couldn’t stop himself.

She didn’t speak, exactly, but her whiskers bent, black lips parted over ivory fang, and then the idea was in his head, in his own inner-voice, as if he’d willingly thought it:

Come closer.

Keith couldn’t have disobeyed even if he wanted to. Waterlily petals and diamond-clear drops followed him up the stairs. He couldn’t reach the top; every time he blinked, he lost sight of the lion-headed woman and found the winged lion or the dark-skinned lady gazing down at him instead. The lion’s tail formed a barrier Keith did not dare to cross, even when he couldn’t see it.

He thought she was smiling, a glint of fang, of rough red tongue, but the closer he came, the more uncomfortable looking directly at her was, until his head bowed without his permission, and he stared at the fall of her brilliant red dress instead, drifting in a wind he couldn’t feel.

She held a hand—paw—hand out. In the folds of her palm—pad—a mound of silvery ash surrounded a single, glowing orange ember. It pulsed softly, surviving on dredges.

The sight of it filled Keith with both terrible dread and fierce longing, neither of which he could really explain.

From the corner of his left eye, Keith saw the golden feathers of the lioness’s wings closing around him. He felt the weight of a beast king’s eyes: solemn, hungry, and endless.

Take heed, Guardian Spirit, Keith’s voice said, though it was not him speaking.

The ash drained like hourglass sand between her fingers—claws—fingers, and Keith lunged to catch it before he realized what he was doing. Before he thought about what it might do to him.

But the ember wasn’t hot in his gloves. It just throbbed, like a heart. Keith lifted his hands to look closer, transfixed by the slow writhing of the cinder.

The Sacred Flame is not like the others, she warned—he thought. Tend it sweetly, or you will both be devoured.

Keith’s hushed breath fell on the spark, and the world erupted in flame.

Even through the agony of his spinning head, a sweep of nausea, his pounding ears, Keith heard the Red Lion roar to life, felt the hum of mechanical systems buzzing back into being, both in Red’s metal shell and in the place he filled in Keith’s head, warm, alive and—a flash of lip curled, the smell of burnt metal—angry beyond words.

“Red,” Keith half-breathed through his sigh of relief. The screens in front of his swimming vision flickered twice and then stabilized. His hands tightened then relaxed on the drive shafts.

What… was that weird vision? Mother Hen and reassuring as a giant ship could get, Red just purred and purred.

Which was not an answer.

“Whoa!” Someone shouted (Pidge?) as Red gave a full body shiver and took his own weight again, thrusters flaring to bring him back aloft.
“Keith, are you all right?!” Shiro. How long had he…?

“I’m okay,” Keith croaked. His voice was beyond raw. “I just… lost contact with Red, and then…”

Green Lion pulled level with Red, eyes to eyes. Pidge’s voice bounced around the cabin but he still had to strain to hear her. “About that. The moment your jawblade hit, there was some kind of crazy energy backlash. You must have shorted out Red’s primary drive circuit when you came in contact with the charged barrier around the monster and—”

“Uh, guys? Little help here?!” Lance squawked. “Me and Hunk can’t hold this thing off forever!”

“Yeah, I think it’s starting to get kinda mad!”

There was an unholy shriek somewhere far away. Keith squinted as he tried to bring the world outside Red’s cockpit back into focus. It didn’t do much.

*Sorry*, he whispered to his lion, *but I need you to take the lead for a bit*. Red needed no encouragement. With all his renewed fire, he bounded after the others, bee-lining back into combat.

Green Lion jerked in surprise and then leapt after, nudging at Red’s heels. “Sheesh,” Pidge griped, “I don’t even get a ‘thank you’? Not like I kept you from plummeting to your premature death or anything.”

It was hard to feel guilty with how busy he was just feeling pain. “Thanks, Pidge.”

“Don’t mention it,” she drawled sarcastically.

Ahead of them, Blue Lion did an entirely unnecessary loop and feinted at the monster, which barely bothered to evade. The monster knew. It damn well *knew* they couldn’t touch it—

“You’re not off the hook for that stunt Keith, but at least we know that we won’t be able to make surface contact with it,” Shiro said. “Jawblades and direct assaults are out of the picture.”

“Voltron’s sword won’t work either then,” Hunk added.

Over the comms, Lance still managed to somehow sulk. “I’m calling hacks! Zarkon’s not allowed to have monsters we can’t beat!” He then had to promptly plunge out of the way as the Robeast dove on him, slashing with its grotesque claws. “RUDE!”

Black darted nearer to Yellow to avoid another spiraling assault from the beast. “Maybe Red’s flamethrower?”

Pidge squawked, just a garbled bird-like honk in Keith’s ruined ears. “No, no, absolutely not! Hitting the absorption barrier with that much thermal energy’s a one way ticket to another explosion.”

“Okay, *fine,*” Lance muttered. “If it can’t take the heat, then how about something with a little more *chill*?”

A beam of nitrogen-cold ice blasted mere inches past Red Lion’s muzzle, past Keith’s still spinning vision. "Watch where you’re aiming!"

"Aren’t you normally faster on the draw?"
Blue’s beam struck the monster dead in the face (of course it did; Lance barely knew how to miss anymore) and massive ice flowers bloomed all down its front, spreading crystalline hoarfrost along the buzzing shield, the wiring, the joints of all its limbs. The monster plummeted, wings frozen, and everyone else cheered.

But they were celebrating too early. Sick purple power in the clear parts of the wiring rippled, blood or bile suddenly pumping, and the electric barrier shrieked with black-red bolts arcing in all directions.

The ice coating the monster shattered into fine, sparkling blue powder and sluffed off, leaving no trace. It righted itself immediately with one fierce beat of its freed wings.

Except… Except it hadn’t freed its head? The Robeast frantically swung its sagging jowls side-to-side, dropping ropes of frothy drool and keening in rage—it couldn’t close its mouth to crack the crystals caught there.

"Ha, whatcha gonna do now?!"

Keith snorted, rolled his head back against his pilot chair and closed his eyes for just a second. Less than a second. He just needed… "Don't get too cocky."

"Dude," Lance's offense was somehow reassuring; the banter the same as every other time they'd fought and lived to tell the tale. "You of all people do not get to talk about being cocky. You are still 10,000 points in the pit for deciding you're hot shot enough to take on ZARKON ALL BY YOURSELF—"

Never going to live that one down. Thankfully (or maybe not), he was spared from having to come up with any reasonable answer by the monster getting smart: its head rammed forward, and a pulsating blast of its voice shattered the ice—crystal shrapnel splintered off in every direction, peppering the sands below them with towering spikes.

Keith shuddered. Please be anywhere but near here, Niresh.

The Robeast screamed in fury, trembling in its second skin, and then it lunged. There was little more than a blur in the corner of Red’s eye, before Black Lion went down with a concussive howl, the monster’s twenty-foot-long metal claws raking the lion’s back, full force of its body dropping like a twenty-ton stone out of the sky.

“SHIRO!” Keith heard himself scream, even as Black Lion twisted below the monster, paws up and slashing at the abomination, spraying screaming bolts of red-black lightning everywhere it struck. Another blur, brighter: the brilliant side of Yellow Lion streaking past, head lowered. There wasn’t even time to warn him before Yellow barreled shoulder first into the beast, hurling them both away from Shiro. Fierce white light flashed as they collided; Keith had to look away. When he dared to look back, the monster was already swooping away, while Yellow shuddered, curled in on himself as if in his pain. The light in his eyes flickered, died—then flickered again, weak but alive at least, nothing like the scare Keith got from his own lion.

Sheesh, was Yellow’s armor really that much better than Red’s?

The Red Lion splashed lime green all across the back of Keith’s head, his personal color for affront. Keith patted the arm of his pilot’s seat.

Hunk’s sigh of relief was enormous but tinny and distant through the helmet. “Whoa man, that was weird. I thought Keith shorted Red out on the electricity through the blade, but just touching that thing sapped Yellow dry for a second there. Systems are back up online now, but I’m not
gonna try that one again any time soon.”

“I appreciate it.” Shiro righted his lion. Sparks sprayed from the crevices along Black’s back where the joints joined, but it didn’t struggle to stay upright, so the damage couldn’t be too bad.

Green pussyfooted in place, a wary dance in the sky. “What’s the plan? Lance’s ice is the only thing we have that can even hit it and even that didn’t put a scratch in it. How are we gonna stop this thing?”

“We’ll have to—"

Plink. A single drop of water hit the surface of a deep, motionless well. That old feeling of resonance and ripples rang in Keith’s chest. It was the sound of Blue speaking, the almost-voice he’d always been able to hear (even though he wasn’t supposed to, even though he never really could understand). “Shiro, wait,” Lance interrupted. “Let’s get some distance for a sec! Blue says we should form Voltron.” Even he sounded a bit confused. “I think… she wants me to use my bayard!”

“Will it work?” Pidge asked.

The Blue Lion roared—Lance’s indignation or her own, who knew. “Blue would know better than we would, doncha think?”

“All right then team, pull back.” Over the comms and inside his own head as their link began to open, Keith heard Shiro’s call echo: "Let’s form Voltron!"

It was always a little like being dissolved, like sinking beneath the surface of a churning wave or a unstoppable lava flow, like being buried, like breaking down then being reformed into something bigger, larger, better. It was terrifying and not, inhuman and unintelligible and yet still somehow warm and familiar. He lost the feeling in his fingers and toes, a numb emptying of his own body that rose through his limbs until it felt more like being thought and light itself than anything made of flesh and blood.

His body was still there, of course; he could even see himself if he concentrated, but he couldn’t see with his own eyes, only through Red’s, through Pidge’s or Shiro’s or Lance’s somehow. Through Voltron’s. His body responded without being willed, moving smooth through the series of motions to transform—pistons joining, metal joints realigning, his body, not his body, the same, all at once, everything and all reality—but they weren’t his movements; Keith, the bundle of bright nerves and the blue glow of self or something, was no more in control of the red paladin’s limbs than he was of the yellow paladin’s, the black paladin’s: every blink, every breath was a perfect collective motion, the force of five minds centered on a single idea, lost in the rush and swell of each other.

They weren’t just five people combined; rather, it felt like being a stranger, like a whole different being was born when they connected, thought to thought, pulse to pulse, becoming blood flow or quintessence or just sound and fury in Voltron’s veins, a circular, singular system of soul. Keith never really knew where he began or ended like this, a sea of other feelings tidal-pushing at him—"I finally got my letter!” A shriek of joy—someone else’s memory, faceless and jumbled but full of a rush of pride that Keith thought was probably not his own. It should have felt invasive to be so open (so open with so much that he’s not saying), but there was a strange anonymity in it as well, nothing named or labelled, just a mercurial blend of all their thoughts at once. Formless whispers. Snippets of old songs. Sensations comforting but utterly unfamiliar.

The last pneumatic hiss and crash brought Voltron together, and with it the terrible responsibility of being the right hand, the weapon.
“Lance, you ready?” Keith wasn’t sure whose voice that was really, Shiro’s or Pidge’s or even his own. (They don’t talk like themselves when they speak through the meld, through each other. Sometimes the others will claim Keith said something when he knows for a fact the words were said with Hunk’s intonation.)

“Way ahead of you!” Outside himself, outside Lance even, Keith saw the Blue Lion’s bayard bank rise from the console, blinking blue and open, then felt—excitementpridecuriositynervesanticipationhowlingjoy—Lance’s bayard lock into place and turn.

Voltron’s limitless power roared, ions and energy, and in a flare of blue-light flame, something heavy and cold settled onto the Red Lion’s back.

“Whoa,” one of their voices breathed. “What the heck is this thing?”

Then, unmistakably, Shiro’s awed response: “It’s a ballista. They’re a type of ancient missile launcher that helped the Roman Empire on Earth achieve unprecedented conquest.” Because only he would know the name of every obscure piece of medieval siege warfare machinery known to mankind.

Nerd.

Which one of you said that? The thought swam back through their bond, eyebrow-arched and prickly, but for once no one picked up the banter, too curious to see from Voltron’s eyes.

The weapon locked on to Voltron’s right forearm looked like nothing less than an enormous crossbow, sleek silver and deep blue frame curved before a fiery, undrawn wire, more like a beam of shimmering light than any bowstring ever invented on Earth. It looked like it was built to hurl bolts as long as one of the lions; he didn’t need to hear Blue’s voice to know it would hit with deadly accuracy and terrible speed, like it was built to kill things and look good doing it. Keith would have been impressed, if there weren’t one very noticeable issue…

“Where’s the ammunition? There’s no arrows.”

Someone growled. “Blue says just draw it already!”

Did Keith comply or someone else? No way to tell; Keith was never really sure how moving Voltron worked anymore, just that he never wondered where he needed to be, never fell out of sync with the torso, with Pidge, with Voltron’s mile-spanning gait. He saw the motions in his head moments before they were made, and every lion moved in perfect tandem.

With a smooth hiss of shifting metal and machinery, the ballista’s winch pulled, drawing the shining bowstring.

Red Lion’s sensors rang out frantically as the temperature around Voltron plummeted. Flowers of frost bloomed at the edges of Red’s eye windows, and the air cracked as if it were made of glass. Through Shiro’s eyes or Voltron’s, Keith watched shards of glowing rime materialize, crunch, and adhere in the ballista’s firing groove, forming a towering bolt of pure ice, misty tendrils of snowflakes drifting all around it.

Though Keith was fairly sure it was not his doing, the Red Lion took aim at the monster, wisely winging away from them. The frigid bolt notched into place.

“Fire!”
The ice arrow tore through the sky, shrieking, and suddenly splintered into three smaller, sharper bolts. Glass-jagged edges glinted in the orange light as the shards streaked toward the Robeast, flash-freezing the humid air around them so beads of crystallized water cascaded from their paths.

Each shot found its target as easily as if it had been laser-guided: the head, the heart, the base of the spine. They plunged into the Robeast with an unholy roar (the sound of a glacier crumbling, Keith thought, but he had never heard a glacier crumbling before, so who…?) and burst, immense spires of ice erupting all over its sagging, sewn-up flesh. The monster crumpled and dropped like a stone, swallowed in a thousand-foot spray of sand when it finally hit the surface.

The chorus of cheers echoed and echoed back.

“Okay, yup, it’s official: the rest of you can go home; Blue Lion, undisputed coolest.”

Lance.

The chorus of groans echoed too.

“All right already, let’s just go hit this thing again before it gets up.”

As one being, Voltron surged forward, high enough above the surface to avoid kicking up any more dust but close and tight, all of them wary. Red Lion steadied the ballista at the cloud where the monster fell, while Green remained cocked, ready to raise the shield at any moment. The wall of sand fell slowly, no real wind to blow it away. In the meld, Keith’s sight was as stable as Shiro’s, as Pidge’s falcon-sharp eye, and they surveyed the swirling orange haze with a united, impossible field of vision, hunting for signs of movement within.

“Uh, whoa, whoa!” Someone—Hunk—shouted, and Voltron lurched out of the way a half second before the monster’s sound cannon tore a hole through the cloud. “It’s up!”

“Pidge, the shield!” In a sizzle-crackle-scream, the monster was on them, whirling beats of wings looming out of the haze, blowing spiraling sand directly in all their lions’ eyes. The roaring explosion of it crashing against Voltron’s shield lit the whole dust cloud up, silhouetting the Robeast’s misshapen form before both it and Voltron were forced away by the blast; Voltron rocketed backward through the air, barely getting Blue and Yellow’s thrusters underneath them in time to keep from crashing into the ground.

“Where did it go?”

“More importantly, is it wishful thinking, or was that last blast way weaker?” A sudden gale—the monster tearing past them—shoved Voltron down a hundred feet before Lance and Hunk could correct for the onslaught. “That shield it’s using must take an insane amount of power to maintain. Maybe it doesn’t have enough energy to use its sound blasts without siphoning from an outside source. If we go on the defensive and keep it from absorbing any more energy, it might even be forced to divert power from its shield to attack—"

And that’ll be our chance. Keith didn’t even need to say it; the moment he thought it, they thought it, or maybe it was born of all their thinking together at once, a blurred combination of perspectives overlapping.

“Got it!” everyone said at once. “All we have to do is outlast!”

Which was always easier said than done. But at least it was sort of a plan, and forming Voltron made it easier to avoid damage, with only one target for the Robeast to attack and five minds dedicated to its protection. The monster couldn’t get above or behind them without one of them noticing and turning everyone else to defend. Another two shots from the ballista slammed the
monster hard but didn’t shake it out of the sky again.

Instead it sliced through the air, maneuverable in ways Keith could only envy, doubling over itself like it was made of putty rather than a hideous amalgam of living things and sparking electrical systems. The monster darted around them, forcing Voltron to turn steadily to keep it in their sights. Green Lion balanced the shield, always facing forward, pushing for any advantage. Maybe Pidge knew what to look for? What the final sign would be that its shield was weakening? Keith tried to reach through them, the bridge between their minds, looking for any hints, but found nothing solid, just a low-grade anxious determination ringing back and forth between them all, the knowledge that they needed to win beating up against the fact that they were still just guessing at how.

Even though it was easier to defend as one unit, it also gave the monster a single target for all its attention. The Robeast grew relentless in its assault, diving, slashing, doing everything it could to try and make contact with Voltron’s surface behind the shield, where it could siphon off the robot’s boundless quintessence. Its sagging grey outer-skin belled and heaved as they both spiraled higher, each trying to reclaim the most defensive position. It plunged in close suddenly and its snake head whipped around to peer directly into Voltron’s face. The bolt of terror and alarm that lanced through their bond had Shiro moving even before the monster’s dripping double-mouth opened wide to shriek—but even if Shiro had taken the hit straight on, he might have been fine. That roar was definitely weaker.

Keith felt more than saw the Green Lion lashing out, the shield on Green’s back slamming into the pylons on the monster's chest, a hail of electricity arcing between them, leaving trails of black and red lights across their vision as he—they—tried to keep eyes on what was happening. The force from their collision pushed it just far enough back that Keith was able to sink another ice arrow directly into its chest. Frozen pillars boomed over the surface of the shield, which shivered and sparked but looked maybe, maybe just the slightest bit less bright than before?

It’s working.

Keith slipped into routine: shoot, swing, balance on repeat, dodging whirling claws and managing the distribution of weight even as Green’s incredible shock absorption struggled to keep her cockpit from jarring with every hit. It wasn’t that much different from fighting the gladiator, reaching that zone where his body reacted far faster than his mind could, where thinking things through might have been a hindrance rather than a help. Maybe Shiro just did the thinking for them, impossible to really find the fuzzy lines where one consciousness met another, though Keith could feel Lance moving in perfect time with him, counter-point to his rapid shots, a steady, unwavering base whenever Keith aimed.

Even so, little by little, Keith could feel they were being driven away, hurled through the air with each crash of the monster against Pidge’s shield, with each dive they had to make to avoid its wild lunges, no matter how hard Hunk and Lance fought to keep Voltron pushing forward. But the monster was weakening. It had to be: maybe he was imagining, but it really felt like there was more give when the ballista struck again, less explosive concussion. It seemed a little bit less like punching into a brick wall now, at least.

We’re getting somewhere!

No, Keith realized, they all realized at once, in a sharp, joint horror: they weren’t just getting somewhere. They were going somewhere. While they labored under the impression of having the situation in control, something else was going on without their noticing. Those random attacks weren’t random. When the monster turned tail, it wasn’t running. It was worse than that.

This whole time, it hadn’t just been pushing them—it had been pushing them back, slowly but
purposefully, because they weren’t just lost in the empty dust dunes of the planet now; they were right back where they started, where the monster first crashed into the planet’s surface, its transport a dark stain below, the Castle of Lions looming large on the horizon.

Keith knew Robeasts were alive, but he never thought they were smart; they were like mindless killing machines, attacking whatever they could get their claws or fangs around, no aim to their destruction or rage. But even if they were monsters, they were still also machines. And machines could be programmed.

Were they… being herded? What was it really after?

It hit Lance (then all of them) like a fist to the gut: the monster wanted raw, unadulterated power. It had a proven ability to absorb ions from their tech.

Zarkon sent this beast, or his witch did. Shiro might be the head of Voltron, but Zarkon knew very well who the heart of Voltron was, where the heart of Voltron lived: with Princess Allura of Altea in the Castle of Lions—in their home.

Less a coherent scream than a torrent of outrage tore through them: “We have to stop it!” Keith didn’t know if it came from himself or Shiro, the revolting sensation of fear and anger crawling under his skin, a thousand writhing nerves locking up his muscles. The moment the castle entered range, the monster slashed at them and bolted overhead, blowing them back another twenty yards.

“Alladins!” Allura’s voice broke in, tinny but growing clearer as Voltron hurtled after the Robeast, closer and closer to the castle. “I’m sorry we weren’t able to help. The castle’s proximity to the Fripik colony disrupted the long-range communications. We could hear what you were saying but couldn’t reply. Do you think you’ve weakened the Robeast’s shields enough that we could pierce it with the ion cannon? We are prepared to provide suppressive fire!”

“Hold the attack!” Most definitely Shiro. “There’s no guarantee the shield’s been depleted far enough to break. If we’re misjudging, the cannon will just give it more fire power.”

Allura tsked. “Then how can we be of help to yo—”

Keith didn’t let her finish. The world was going static and white around the edges, his focus slipping dangerously: it’s not just the cannon the monster can use. Not just the cannon—it could use the whole ship, humming with its own powerful, permanent barrier, picnic ground for the monster, which only had to touch it to begin draining it away, crushing their defense to bolster its own.

And not even just the cannon or the shield, but also what was inside, the incredible power that made the Castle of Lions live and hum around them, that gave it the strength to rip open wormholes in space, defying every law of physics and time.

If it got to Allura, it could destroy Voltron from the inside out.

“Get the castle back into orbit! GET OUT OF HERE!” Keith roared, his vision shaking, Red howling in warning in the back of his head as his consciousness began to solidify within the confines of the mental bond. “It’s after the particle barrier and you!”

Pidge or someone who sounded like her at the moment swore vividly. “Can you lower the castle defenses?”

Coran’s voice burst in finally, sounding like he was glad to get a word in edgewise: “If we do, we’re sitting cengers! That Robeast could punch through our hull in half a tick!”
“You’ve got to get away,” Shiro said above the din of their frantic, racing thoughts.

“Get its attention,” Allura commanded, “and we’ll look for an opening to take off!”

“Voltron!” Shiro’s voice overlaid everyone else’s mental clamoring—everyone’s except Keith—four of the five them still in perfect harmony. (He felt walls rising in his head, but that was nothing unusual, really, right?) “We’ve got to keep the monster off the Castleship—if it draws energy from the castle’s shields, we’ll have to deal with a super-powered blast! Let’s go!”

But what could they do? The blue bayard’s ice barely slowed it down. They couldn’t blast it or stab it. Desperately, Keith fired a volley of bolt after bolt, ten, twelve, sixteen shots detonating on the red-purple shield, sheer weight of ice formations driving the monster down. But it was back immediately, in a flurry of claws. Its bulbous head strained toward the castle, eyes roving in their sockets, rolling back white-yellow sometimes like the sharks Keith saw through what must be Lance’s eyes, in the ocean, where he had never been, the water buffeting the cage him, scuba mask steamy and a few too many drops of water inside, salt stinging in his eyes, as the sharks blindly lunged at his brother’s bait—

They couldn’t take it down to the ground, which meant they couldn’t pin it in place, and they couldn’t give it enough time to sink its claws into them, which meant they couldn’t just grab it and hold on; one clever dive-roll and it was past them.

Keith’s stomach plunged as he saw the Robeast slam into the Castleship’s shield. The rods bursting from its corpse-skin shivered as it crashed against the particle barrier and began to absorb the charged ions. The entire castle shook under the sudden weight, tremoring with each beat of the monster’s giant wings as it clung on, looking for a weak link in the castle’s shielding to sink its claws in. Keith couldn’t imagine what it must feel like on the ship, the enormous screech of its body against the defenses, shrieking, scraping, shuddering.

“The castle’s shields have been compromised!” Coran barked. “Forward shielding power is dropping fast: 80%, 70%, 60%!”

How could they stop—

The air around them suddenly lit up fuchsia, a dreadful, familiar shade, and Keith’s mind revolted (felt the entire paladin bond shake in shockhorrorhatred), because he knew that light, but it couldn’t be, couldn’t—why now, how could now be the time the Galra finally chose to get as smart as they claimed and send back up to aid their beast?

The sickly glare of a Galra battlecruiser’s tractor beam swept directly toward them. Voltron braced for its terrible, weightless tugging.

But… But then the beam didn’t stop? It swept around Voltron and locked on to the Robeast, unwavering and relentless. The monster jerked as it fought the pull, but there were no cracks in the Castleship’s barrier yet to cling on to. Slowly, in a mockery of gravity, it was peeled away from the castle’s particle barrier.

What in the world? What was going on? Keith’s brain reeled in confusion, and trying to force his view back into Voltron’s, back out of his own body, pounded painfully, even in his metaphorical, rather than physical, headspace.

Why would the Galra attack their own…

But the beam wasn’t coming from the sky. When Voltron turned to search for a new enemy, the air and upper atmosphere were empty of ships, and the tractor beam’s line of light erupted not
from a descending battlecruiser but… from the sand?

“A hidden base?!”

“Impossible!” Allura said. “The Fripek would definitely have warned us if the planet was occupied in any way!”

“You said they were allied with Zarkon!”

“No, it’s—it is a ship!” someone shouted.

The lions’ views turned as one, scanning the sands that swirled in symmetric veins around the origin of the tractor beam, buried but being inch-by-inch uncovered as the dust was pulled away, purple glow dim and eerie as it lit up beneath the earth. There was a battlecruiser under the dunes.

But why was it reacting now? If there weren’t any Galra, then who—

Keith’s heart pressed so hard against his lungs he couldn’t breathe.

The joint image in their heads’-up display zoomed, adjusting for vibration, but even before it cleared, he knew, he knew.

“NIRESH!”

The tiny girl clung to the bared tip of the battlecruiser, bathed in the pink glare of the beam; even in the jumping, pixelated vision of their far zoom, even through the haze of the spiraling dust, he could see her, staring resolute and unshaking as the Robeast was drawn closer and closer toward her.

Keith could feel it, separate from his own, the change in Voltron’s mood. Four against one, a sudden influx of determination, certainty, exhilaration: now that the monster was away from the Castleship, they could do it! They could beat it with one good push, one rally—

Keith howled without a voice, overwhelmed by feelings from the meld that did not match his own, that buzzed excitedly and drowned out his horrorindecisionpanic. It had already absorbed almost half the Castleship’s particle barrier. Who knew if the tractor beam was powering it up too?

They couldn’t let the Robeast get to Niresh; they couldn’t let it get any nearer to Niresh. But if they stopped the beam, it would get the castle instead. It would get Allura. It would get Dulsara and Xerci.

Couldn’t touch. Couldn’t hit. Couldn’t break. What could they do, what could they—what—

“Oh God, what is it doing?! That’s disgusting!”

“I’m gonna hurl. Yup, definitely, I’m gonna hurl.”

Something was happening to the Robeast. Inside the hard glow, it seized, jerked, moved under its own skin, bones jabbing, joints distending grey flesh from beneath like those horror movies Matt snuck him into ages ago.

(“What are you worried about, Shiro? None of us are gonna blab, right, Keith?”
“Snitches get stitches!”

A clenched fist. A teary sniff. “That’s my boy!”

Shiro looks back over his shoulder from where he is triple-checking the hall. “I regret every decision I have ever made that has led me to this moment in life.”

Someone’s head supplied him with images of parasitic maggots emerging from bleeding flesh, of wasp larvae bursting from their host, of a grainy B-movie about Satan spawn, hands clawing at swollen skin from the inside, trying to get out.

The Robeast’s limbs went limp, and Keith realized what was happening only as its throat began to bloat and writhe. More than one person screamed. The Robeast’s wings, its real wings, erupted out of its curling-back mouth, folding open and open. Nothing on Earth had ever sounded like that. Keith felt four other people’s sickness on top of his own. The electric barrier warped and jumped as the monster crawled inch-by-inch out of its own false skin, slick and bright purple-black in the eerie light, splitting in two until the real monster finally slid free of its shell.

Only that second skin wasn’t a shell, because the inside-out flesh was still attached, still moving. “It’s a tail! It was hiding inside its own prehensile tail for defense!” someone—Pidge?—shouted, but it didn’t matter; all that mattered was what it was doing: the voluminous tail folded out of the tractor beam, hit the earth and clung, and in an instant, screaming with rage, the Robeast tore itself free of the beam.

And hurtled in two different directions at once.

The real Robeast leapt toward the Castleship and Keith felt Voltron’s compulsion to follow, a stagger step forward, but they couldn’t, they couldn’t because the tail was still unfurling, flung toward the half-buried battlecruiser to destroy the tractor beam, six-inch-long false teeth raised to rake and ruin. There was nowhere for Niresh to run, no time to reach a safe distance. It was going to hit the battlecruiser; it was going to hit her—it would kill—

We’re not leaving Niresh behind.

The ballista dissolved in a shower of brilliant blue-white sparkles as Red Lion rejected it, threw off the hindering weight to throw himself.

“Whoa, what?! Blue spat back my bayard!”

The second this is over…

Keith couldn’t breathe, his head pounded. He was pulled in four ways at once, felt like he was sliding sideways out of his own body, into someone else, someplace else, thoughts that weren’t his own fingernail-burying in his brain. There wasn’t time, there wasn’t any time to explain; it felt like agony to move his own right arm, but still he slammed the red bayard home and turned. The familiar, burning weight of Voltron’s sword fell into his grip, a searing brand of clarity.

We’ll find her.

“What are you doing?!”

On my line’s honor.

Keith swung, desperately, all other thoughts drowned beneath the single mindless charge forward, heedless of his own danger, because he had to protect, he couldn’t—
The strike connected. The monster’s shield exploded under Voltron’s sword. Keith’s head hit Red’s console hard. The world roiled. He tasted metal. He couldn’t see; he couldn’t feel anything. It was so bright, but gaping black and red circles swam across his eyes. Everything seemed like it was happening in slow motion, every sound muffled, far away. Confusion outrages sympathy poured through him but it was someone else’s; someone else was speaking, calling his name.

Did he… Did he stop it?

Voltron’s sword pierced the dunes a hundred yards away, blackened with electrical burns and ichorous blood. The battlecruiser was intact, untouched. He couldn’t see her; still, Niresh had to be there. Safe. Alive.

But where was the Robeast?

“We’re under attack!” Allura yelled. Bile burned in Keith’s throat as he tried to turn his head, as Voltron turned to look up. The Castleship was all the way into the planet’s upper atmosphere but sinking fast as the beast tore into the particle barrier again, beams of ball lightning flashing all along its body as it sought any crevice, any way in.

“Our shields are dropping again!” Coran warned. The ship quaked under the brutal assault. “50%, 40%!”

Behind Coran’s shouting, another voice spoke fast, high: “What is that thing?! What’s happening?”

Voltron lurched forward, no strategy, no pause.

“30%! 20%!”

Someone was crying. Muffled crying filtered over the comm and Keith nearly woke from the fragments of the mind meld as quickly, as terribly as if he were ripped out, his consciousness jerking to the forefront, his thoughts overpowering all else: That’s Xerci. Xerci was crying where the communicators on the bridge could hear him. Xerci and Dulsara were on the bridge exactly where the monster was trying to pierce.

Allura’s voice was firm, even, unbowed: “Don’t worry,” she said. “You’re safe. Voltron will not fail us.”

They tore toward the ship. Hunk and Lance accelerated as fast as they could, but the Robeast reared, its head disgustingly far back on its craned, stick-thin neck, and without the added protection of its thick defensive skin, they could actually watch the power gathering, veins of light flowing into the swell of its vacuous mouth, lightning glittering off the froth of its spit.

They wouldn’t reach it in time; they couldn’t cover that height, but still, Keith reached, Red Lion’s fangs bared in furious rejection.

The monster’s devastating blast of sound struck everything in its path.

Voltron will not fail us.

“Our shields have been completely drained!” Coran’s voice echoed in Keith’s head an infinite number of times, like his skull was a broken mirror bouncing light around. “The hull’s been breached!”

Allura, farther, strained now: “We won’t be able to enter orbit like this. You must stop it here!”
Keith struggled to right the world, braced over the console, his eyes impossible to keep open. There was wet in his helmet again. Red snarled, hot blood on yellow fangs, storm clouds on a green horizon: concern flowing at him from their connection.

“Keith, are you all right?!?”

But he couldn’t concentrate with all these voices; he couldn’t concentrate with half his soul stuck in the bond, the backlash of others’ emotions drowning his thoughts, his very existence… Could the ringing just stop, could everyone just stop so he could see—

The monster slithered over the surface of the castle itself, and it knew where it was going, where the power was concentrated. Its claws punctured the main column, then its head rose, power gathering again already. It shivered with the fierce charge of the castle’s defenses absorbed beneath its skin.

“It’s going to fire again!” someone roared.

“The bridge won’t survive a direct hit. Paladins, do something!”

But they had nothing; if they touched it, it would just detonate on contact. There were no weaknesses. There was no way in—

In… If there was no way in, how were the blasts getting out?

*Glint of ice crystals bursting in the orange light, on the mouth that couldn’t close.*

*Don’t get too cocky.*

The monster’s entire head glowed with the force of the power it gathered, but everything was so quiet; it was so quiet that Keith knew his eardrums had burst and he just couldn’t hear it, nothing but the rattle of his own breath in his chest, too slow. Time wasn’t passing right; everything distorted.

The comm erupted in screams, not Team Voltron’s or Allura or Coran’s, just Xerci and Dulsara’s, on the bridge, staring down the monster’s ripping mouth, the charging blast, the dark gullet working through the broken window. Xerci and Dulsara, God, probably even Niresh in the sand, all of them crying out in terror, because he brought them here, because he brought them, because he made a mistake, because *Voltron will not fail us* (but they already had).

The sound wasn’t in his ears, it was in his head, in the core of his broken brain, pounding, growing, swelling under his skin, tearing him apart. Keith saw red, nothing but red and white warning lights in the darkness, and his body wouldn’t move except it was; his body was moving but he’d been ripped apart from it, mind-soul-self outside, choking, collapsing. A rope around his throat pulled him back and back.

Screaming, just—

Something snapped and Voltron exploded outward, not one being suddenly but five lions, shuddering, and the vacuous place where their mind meld just was ached like an unsealed stab wound, gushing blood, but Keith kept moving; he couldn’t stop.

Red Lion slammed himself into the narrow gap between the monster’s head and the hull of the Castle ship and roared in unbroken, unmitigated defiance, staring down the monster’s spitting mouth without the slightest waver. A shimmer of red light, a force urged him forward, push, turn the console drive…
Ha, whatcha gonna do now?!

Keith jammed Red Lion’s enormous back cannon down the monster’s throat, barrel to blast zone.

“KEITH, NO!” someone howled, but all he could hear was I won’t risk you too.

Keith fired. The monster screamed.

Red and white warning lights and then just darkness.

- - -

It wasn’t really waking up so much as becoming almost conscious. He tipped forward, the cold seeping into his bones, breath like mist around his face. Someone spoke to him softly; someone held him upright and smoothed back his hair from his face.

“Shiro?” he croaked, eyelids too heavy to lift more than a millimeter. Through the cage of his eyelashes, he made out moving shapes, more than one, but it was impossible to track them, too much effort to figure out which blur was who.

A comforting voice rumbled above his head; he couldn’t make out the words, but the sound itself was reassuring. They were moving, going somewhere, and he couldn’t even be bothered to worry about where. His head sank. He was so tired. He stumbled over his own feet and was carefully righted.

Hallway doors whooshed open and closed as they made slow progress. The sound was familiar in a way he felt he should remember, then they stopped and someone said something, barely a whisper. The words took a long time to process in his head: “Keith, can you open the door? It’s locked.”

His room. They made it to his room. He poked out pathetically for the pad to open the door. He didn’t remember locking it.

The door slid open and the darkness inside was warm and welcoming, the scent of his things and his bed and the children—

The kids? Keith didn’t even need to open his eyes to know they were there, all three of them, distressed and muzzled from sleep. Shiro helped him to his bed. There was an enormous degree of shuffling, the blankets pulled in three different directions at once to make room, but he couldn’t even be bothered to worry about how any of this happened the moment his head hit his pillow.

Keith heard the door close but only distantly, under the rustle of Niresh tucking her head under his chin, ears flicking reflexively, of Xerci clawing over Keith’s side to squeeze his way between them, of Dulsara’s curled up knees digging into the small of his back.

He fell asleep again to the quiet, comforting sound of their purrs.

Chapter End Notes

1) This chapter exists solely from a deep personal desire to see Voltron fight a suped-up version of Rodan.
2) **A personal headcanon/world-building thing:** The lions each "speak" to their paladins in unique ways, tailored to the individual paladin. Red does not use words; rather, he invokes images, smells, and colors in Keith's mind that are associated with the feelings and information he is trying to convey. Keith, whose thought process is naturally more visual and scent-based, can easily understand this method of communication, although no one else on the ship would get it at all.

3) I'm not saying Keith met Sekhmet, but Keith probably met Sekhmet.

4) **Ballistas** are cool.

5) The movie Matt snuck Keith into was **Aliens**, because Matt thinks he's got jokes.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

So I heard you like emotional rollercoasters...

Chapter Notes

The second half of another double post! Make sure you go read chapter 8 before starting this one!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When he woke up for real, sometime later, Keith was starving and being jabbed by more than one set of elbows, but it was so warm he almost didn’t want to move. The moment was ruined when his stomach growled loud enough to make Dulsara jerk upright, ears at attention, so there was no point to putting it off anymore. Keith sat up gingerly, but nothing hurt. Someone had wiped the blood away from his ears. He felt sluggish, like his head had woken up but his body hadn’t quite made it there yet.

Something smelled delicious. No one was around, so Keith searched with his nose, sniffing out the source: under one of those Altean miracle-warmers, he found a plate of Hunk’s cooking, some concoction of food goo but with a clear strain of spices and chunks of something that smelled a little like the remnants of the not-cheese, melted perfectly over the top. A miracle Xerci hadn’t woken up already to liberate the meal from its long wait.

The other two woke up when Keith moved to nab the plate, Niresh blinking slow, then yawning enormously, needle-point fangs glinting in the low light. Xerci mewled at being so rudely awoken, but then stopped immediately in favor of sniffing hard.

“Want some?” Keith murmured, pointing with his spork. They were hungry, if that certain spark of concentration as they surveyed the food meant anything, but both Niresh and Dulsara shook their heads.

Predictably, Xerci chirruped and promptly smashed both fists into the goo and cheese at the edge of the plate. Keith mourned his clean sheets, but then dug in with barely less fervor. In the end, Xerci hardly got anything; Keith felt like he hadn’t eaten in a week, and he’d never been one for food goo, but hell if he wasn’t so hungry that this tasted like the most scrumptious thing he’d eaten since well before leaving Earth.

When everything was eaten, Keith took a very long, very deep breath. “What… happened?” he finally steeled himself enough to ask.

Niresh and Dulsara started speaking at the same time.

“I found a Galra ship.”

“Where did that thing come from?! What the quiznak was it anyway?”
Xerci cooed.

Keith felt like he might still be a bit too tired for all this, and barely repressed the urge to sigh. *First things first…* “Dulsara, watch your mouth. Your mom probably taught you better.”

Dulsara’s grin was basically evil itself. “Oh, she taught me a whole lot more than ‘quiznak.’ For example—” Niresh slapped a hand over her mouth.

“*Yedgi* taught you better than that.”

Her ears went low and her eyes slit, but Dulsara fell silent and fumed with pursed lips when Keith said “Okay, one at a time” and Niresh started speaking without even waiting for him to take another breath.

“When we got separated, back in the forest, it’s ‘cause the Fripiks wanted me to go see the Galra ship. I thought y’all were right behind me, but when I turned ‘round, nobody was there. They told me yah’d catch up… They wanted to see if we could move the ship fer ‘em ‘cause it’s made of a metal they can’t eat through. But after the fight was over, Hunk an’ Lance came an’ got me, so the ship’s still in the sand.”

Keith had so many questions. “How did a Galra ship get here in the first place? Allura said there’s no Galra activity in this entire quadrant.”

Niresh frowned. “I dunno. I think it’s been here a *long* time. It’s really, really old. I didn’t know if it would still work, but the crystal inside’s all blue and it still has lotsa power.”

“So you turned on the tractor beam to draw the monster off the castle? Clever.” His hand fit right between her ears, which folded soft as velvet under his palm when he ruffled her glassy hair. Her eyes closed as she leaned up into his hand. “But,” he flicked her ear, “if I told you to never do it again, would you listen?”

Dulsara crossed her arms. “Niresh ain’t never listened even one time.”

“Don’ confuse me with yerself, Dulsara Kes.”

“Anyway!” Dulsara griped. “I don’t care ‘bout where the Galra ship came from. Where’d that giant monster come from? You were in the healer for three days and nobody said a word about it!”

“’Cause you didn’t wanna ask none of ‘em,” Niresh needled.

“You didn’ ask nobody neither!”

Keith put a blocking hand right between their two growly faces. “Don’t even start it.” He yawned. “I’m too tired.” Xerci keened nervously, bumbling into Keith’s lap and burying his face in Keith’s pod suit. Keith didn’t know whether to be relieved or annoyed no one had bothered to change him into real pajamas. “I have to go talk to Shiro and the others. I’ll get the whole story there.” He needed to find out what actually happened at the end, how they got back into the Castle, what happened to the monster…

“We’re going too!” Dulsara insisted without warning, stiff and determined like she thought he might say no.

Keith blinked. “Okay?”
She wasn’t expecting it, maybe; her mouth fell open just a little, then she huffed and looked away, her cheeks belled out a bit. It made her fur look funny, jutting up in weird ways. Keith bit down his smile, or tried to, but he saw her pout fold into a scowl and knew he was caught.

Scooping up Xerci, who squeaked in delight, Keith crossed the meager distance to his closet. His paladin suit was gone, who knew where or what damage it was recovering from. Keith stared thoughtfully into his closet, weighing the alternatives. He looked down at Xerci, curled up very sweetly in the crook of one arm, nuzzling close and quiet and deceptively non-dangerous. “Can I trust you not to ruin everything I own?”

Dulsara leaned far over to poke Xerci hard in the dangling foot. “Say ‘yes,’” she commanded.

“Yes!” Xerci repeated obediently, sounding like he meant not a letter of it. Keith’s expression fell flat. That was… about as trustworthy as leaving Pidge unattended with alien tech. But… The other option was Altean clothes. Keith winced.

And winced harder when, a few minutes later, he finally, daringly pulled his red jacket on. It felt like coming home, but also like his home was in the imminent path of an oncoming tornado, category: toddler.

Speaking of, the kids were all in their pajamas too.

“Go get dressed if you’re coming.” Keith tried to hand Xerci off to Dulsara, but he wasn’t having a lick of it.

“Nooo,” Xerci crooned, sounding like he knew exactly what that word meant. (Hearing something ten million times would do that to you, Keith thought.)

“You don’t care about getting dressed?”

“I care.” Niresh laughed a little, a teeny-tiny dry sound.

“Hurry up then,” Dulsara complained, even though she was further from the door. “Let’s go.”

The hallways were strangely quiet, no one out and about. He stopped to look in on the training room, the kitchen, the dining room, one of Pidge’s mad laboratories, but no one was around. Is it that early?

But when Keith poked his head around the door to the lounge, he ducked back immediately, shushing the children.

“What?” Dulsara hissed.

The rec room was only mostly empty—except for Shiro and Allura, sitting strangely close together, pouring over the same holo tablet. Keith eased forward to peek around the edge of the doorframe, silently surveying. They weren’t saying anything for the moment, both of their heads low, locked on whatever showed on the device. They weren’t touching exactly, not quite that close, just closer than Keith had ever seen them in any of the team meetings. Allura’s hair spilled over Shiro’s Galra arm. Normally, he would have plowed right in, but there was something… strange in the air today, a brittle feeling that made him anxious, that made him feel like he might be intruding somewhere he wasn’t wanted.

Since when did Shiro get used to sitting that near to anyone he hadn’t known for years?
Keith stomped harshly on the uneasy hiccup in his feelings, the nervous, aimless anger that made his throat close and his stomach churn. Just because Shiro was his only real friend... He’d never had a monopoly, never been Shiro’s only friend, and Keith knew that. It was okay for Shiro to be close to Matt at Garrison; it was okay for Shiro to be close to other people anywhere.

Shiro wasn’t sick of him. Shiro wasn’t going to stop being his friend out of nowhere.

But they were sitting very close. And Keith hadn’t talked to Shiro much lately. He’d been stupid in the fight with the Robeast, hadn’t listened to a single order. And Allura was... Allura was smart, thoughtful, collected. She knew a ton about being a leader, got along with things that couldn’t even talk, even space mice, and she lost a lot, same as Shiro had and...

Well, Keith always tried not to get too comfortable. Shiro stuck around longer than his dad (Shiro came back), but there’s still no rule that said he had to stay forever.

“Is it... normal?” Shiro murmured suddenly, seemingly apropos of nothing, but Keith knew exactly what it sounded like when something had been eating Shiro up from the inside out for hours, days, when he didn’t think talking about it would do anything, but he’d run out of any and all alternatives. “What’s happening with the Black Lion?”

Allura sighed. She put down the tablet they were looking at. “I wish I knew. I’m sorry Shiro, but my father’s team built them before I was even born. I know that the alchemy involved was centuphoebs beyond anything else Altea had developed at the time, but the bond between a paladin and lion... It was never explained in a way I could fully understand. I’m not sure it’s even possible to explain such a thing to anyone who hasn’t... experienced it for themselves.”

Shiro grit his teeth; Keith could hear it from all the way out in the hall. “Normally, I’d agree with that,” he admitted, “but I’m starting to worry that I’ve never experienced it myself. That’s twice now I’ve lost control of Black.”

Lost control of Black? What? When?

“Well...” Shiro’s shoulders were taut, rolling in that almost imperceptible way that meant he was clenching his fists hard on top of his knees. “Maybe I’m not the right fit to lead Voltron.”

“Shiro, don’t—”

“What are we hiding from?” Dulsara “whispered;” that is, she made essentially no attempt to lower her voice at all.

Shiro turned around like a shot, so fast his bangs flared, shocked cat fur style, and Keith couldn’t even try to duck back behind the doorframe because they were so clearly caught.

The strange thing about Allura was that she was unpredictable, so utterly alien that everything he’d learned about reading human expressions was completely useless with her. He’d never felt she was an especially convincing liar, but the easy smile she let grace her face when she spotted Keith in the doorway betrayed not a single ounce of the worry Keith thought he ought to find there.

What had happened? What the hell had happened to shake Shiro—their bastion, the leader, the calm at the heart of the storm?

Not the right fit for the Black Lion? Who else could even dream of coming close?

“Keith, you’re awake!” Shiro was up and over the back of the sunken couch in a second, less talented at quickly hiding his strain but more genuine in his smile. “You feeling all right?”
Xerci didn’t seem to mind Shiro, eyed him curiously with his ears tilted forward even, but Niresh and especially Dulsara stood back. They hadn’t really met Shiro; he towered over them, sharp without ever thinking about it, in a way that Hunk never was, and Keith understood their hesitance. It was impossible to know how kind Shiro was just from the way he looked, especially with his weaponized Galra arm doing its quiet, almost unnoticeable yet ever-present humming.

But Keith wasn’t going to encourage them to get to know him. Shiro was generous and forgiving beyond all measure, so he agreed to Keith’s ridiculous plan of letting the children stay, but… but especially if he was worried about the team, if he was having trouble with Black, if he was struggling with trying to lead them, he didn’t deserve to be burdened even more. He shouldn’t have to go out of his way for a Galra ever again.

Shiro did a bit of an odd dance as he tried to look around Keith to the girls hiding behind him, but Keith made no effort to move out of the way.

“Where is everyone?” he asked instead, eyes sliding to Allura, already back to being engrossed in her tablet.

“The other paladins are working on the Red Lion,” she commented, too mildly, and a wave of her hand made an enormous holo screen bloom to life in the middle of the room. Keith watched Pidge tapping away on her laptop, coils of wires feeding from her modified ports to the hulking form of Red Lion in the background, where Lance held a spindly ladder for Hunk, welding away at a gaping wound in Red’s forearm with a blowtorch tipped by green-purple flame.

“Guys,” Shiro called. It wasn’t even loud, more like they were all in the same room, but Pidge and Lance’s faces still darted up immediately; the screen must have appeared on their end now too. “Keith’s awake.”

Keith had to look away. Pidge, Lance, and even Hunk, tipping back his welding mask, all wore looks so genuinely relieved that Keith’s stomach turned—flattered but uncomfortable, unsure how to respond to care he hadn’t earned.

“Aye aye, mon capitaine!” Lance saluted, wobbling the ladder precariously enough that Hunk nearly dropped the blowtorch right down on to Lance’s head. Pidge just rolled her eyes.

Allura closed the holo screen, and it was a quiet for the two minutes or so before the rest of the paladins arrived, while Shiro looked torn between scolding Keith and scolding himself, while Keith teetered between asking what happened with Black and feeling like he should maybe just turn tail and leave. Before he could decide, the rest of the crew piled their way into the hallway, squeezing around Keith and Shiro where they still blocked the door. Hunk waved gently to Niresh and Lance fluffed up Xerci’s hair as he passed, earning himself a surprised but not unhappy chirrup. Shiro looked even more confused now, since every paladin seemed to have somehow become cordial with their Galra guests but him.

“Are you coming in,” Pidge snarked at Keith, “or are we going to have another conversation about you without you?”

Another conversation… about him? Why did not that not instill any particular degree of confidence in Keith?

Still, he scooted into the room, taking up the one curved couch they all left deliberately empty. Dulsara didn’t intend to get comfortable at all; she stood beside the couch instead of sitting, arms crossed, her ears all the way back. Honestly Keith thought they’d just get stuck that way pretty soon. Niresh, meanwhile, settled onto the couch right beside Keith and Xerci. Her tiny feet were
about a mile from the floor.

Originally, Keith just wanted to ask what happened at the end of the fight, but now what he’d seen (and overheard) made something else more pressing: “What happened to Red?”

If Shiro were any less benevolent, if he hadn’t just done the hard work of helping save Keith’s life, the look he shot the red paladin might actually have killed him. “What you did was extremely risky, Keith. You jeopardized not only your own safety, but the safety of your fellow pilots too.”

The problem was Keith didn’t actually know what he’d done, though somehow that still didn’t save him from sinking under the crushing guilt. Just the tone of Shiro’s voice alone made his shoulders hunch up around his ears. Niresh peeked up at him from under the shadow of her own, a little concerned maybe.

Keith cringed. “But what happened? I was kind of… out of it at the end…”

“What happened,” Lance growled, “is you becoming the backseat driver from heck and deciding you were gonna lead the whole team, which—by the way—absolutely none of us agreed on! And when it didn’t work, because hey, duh, Black Lion forms the head for a reason, you just straight up tore all of Voltron apart by sabotaging our mind meld from the inside!” He was breathing heavy by the time he finished, arms up and flapping.

“What?” Keith said dumbly. That was… impossible. He’d been out of it, but he hadn’t been that out of it, had he? He would have remembered trying to take control of... He didn’t even know how someone could take control of Voltron from inside the mental bond, so how was he supposed to have actually done it?! And he wouldn’t anyway! Shiro was the leader. Shiro was the pilot of the Black Lion and Keith respected—

When he tried to meet the black paladin’s eyes, Shiro looked away, a more terrible, honest confirmation than anyone else could ever have given. Keith felt like he’d been stabbed between the ribs, like his lungs were gushing air from open holes and he couldn’t keep enough breath in to go on living.

He hadn’t meant to. He hadn’t meant to. Shiro knew that, right, he had to; he couldn’t possibly think that Keith snatched control because he didn’t… because he didn’t trust Shiro as a leader, right?

(But then why had he taken control? Why else, except that somewhere, in some dark, horrible corner of his mind, he must have thought he could do it better?)

“It’s true!” Coran’s voice sailed into the room before he did, one finger already up and pointing. With an air of nonchalance that seemed particularly targeted, he added: “Why, a tribe of starving Kuttevins couldn’t have torn that bond apart as fast as you!”

“I didn’t”—He wanted to say he didn’t mean for it to happen, but they’re experienced paladins now; they’re pros at keeping Voltron together. Nothing short of a total mental collapse could have ruined their meld and he couldn’t pretend not to know that. “How could—”

Behind Shiro, Allura surveyed him more calmly than he expected, no harsh analysis of his failure, no demands for immediate improvement, just a strange, inscrutable stare with too few blinks to be human. There was no tell on her face, nothing specific, but she… She must be disappointed. They’d trained so hard under her watchful eye. They’d perfected forming Voltron. They’d followed her orders and learned to work as a team. They’d held together through fights before, except Keith just couldn’t stop ruining it, could he? Keith couldn’t stick to the plan, couldn’t be trusted to follow commands, Keith kept getting everyone else into trouble. Keith couldn’t play
well with the rest of the team.


Keith looked down at his lap, but even there he couldn’t hide: Xerci stared back, tight-eyed, frowning, his bottom lip wobbling. Keith realized he was gripping the back of Xerci’s jumpsuit hard, transferring his tension straight into the kid. But jerking his hand away also spooked Xerci, who flinched in Keith’s loosened hold and lip-wobbled harder, threatening tears.

Keith could still feel Allura’s stare, a heavy weight on his shoulders, but it was Coran, not Allura, not Shiro, who stepped forward to deliver the unavoidable lecture. “You lost focus in this fight, Keith, and it put your team in danger,” he began, and there was something… off about his voice, like he’d nearly said a different name. His words sounded almost too familiar, as if he knew them by heart, was giving this same exact lecture for the two-thousandth time as he leveled an oddly practiced glare where Keith hid behind Xerci.

(But who would he have said something like this to before? Coran was Altea’s royal advisor, and royals were not irresponsible and impulsive.)

“You prioritized your own plan above the group’s decision-making so much that you actually separated your consciousness from your fellow pilots, destabilizing the paladin bond badly enough Red Lion could no longer maintain the combination. The public—” What public? “—are relying on you to lead by example, and instead you left your teammates adrift to throw yourself into the fight without a plan or guidance to any of the other paladins, tearing the mind meld apart and scattering Voltron to pieces. Just because you achieved the best case ending this time, doesn’t mean you’ll be half so lucky in the next fight.

“I’ve seen Voltron in some truly tough pleckeries in my time, but that was as rough as I’ve ever seen it! You didn’t listen to your comrades, you didn’t trust that they’d see eye-to-eye with you, and!” Coran paused, a strange waver of worry in his voice that Keith had never heard directed at himself before. “You disregarded your own safety without thinking about any of the people who count on you, not the least of whom is your dau—” The Altean actually jerked, peered around the room for a moment with a look so disoriented Keith worried. Coran had to clear his throat twice before he could begin again. “Not the least of whom are your charges,” Dulsara scoffed, “who need you to remember that no matter how many people you save, it’s not a victory unless you also come home safe.”

Keith bowed his head farther. He’d had worse tongue lashings before, all of them at Garrison, but this was the only situation in which he’d succeeded in achieving everything he needed to and yet still somehow came out feeling horrible, like he’d made the worst decision possible.

He’d saved the ship though. No one had died. Voltron was fine. Allura was still in one piece. None of the Galra children had gotten harmed. His injuries were already healed, no lasting damage at all. So why was everyone looking at him like he committed some… some heinous crime of something?!

“Just…” Lance actually shivered, wrapped an arm across his chest to clutch his elbow. “Don’t ever do that again!” he hissed. “I felt like my right arm was ripping itself off my body. I thought I actually lost it for a second, it hurt so flippin’ bad in my head!”

Hurt. Pulling away from the bond on purpose had hurt them? Hunk and Pidge nodded along to Lance’s comment, both them unconsciously clinging to their own right arms, fingers buried deep in their sleeves.

But the real impact, the real weight of what he had done did not set in until Keith glanced up at
Shiro and realized.

The sensation of having his right arm torn off wasn’t a hallucination for Shiro. It was a memory.

It was a memory Keith awoke, a horror he’d forced right back into Shiro’s head, threw in his face without thought or care for what it might feel like, how it might haunt him… Keith’s eyes darted to the Galra tech arm, couldn’t help it, and a wave of nausea threatened to swamp him.

He’d hurt everyone. He’d hurt Shiro again, Shiro who kept suffering for him, for them all, without complaint. Shiro, who fought so hard to protect him. Why? Why was Keith nothing but a burden on everyone he cared about? Why couldn’t he just stop—

There was a sharp, quick little stab at the patch of skin exposed by the back of his glove. Keith glanced over to discover that Niresh had very intentionally jabbed him with one of her claws, her face a cross of concern and frustration. She didn’t say anything, but he could read the tension in the minute trembling of her ears. She—and all the kids, if how stiff Dulsara stood was any indication—were picking up on his distress and mirroring it right back.

Keith took a deep breath. Then another one, for good measure. There wasn’t anything he could do to take back what he’d done. Feeling bad about it wasn’t going to make it like it never happened. So just… He had to just put that aside. Now he knew better, now he knew what he could do to Voltron if he wasn’t careful, and now he knew what happened to the people left behind in a shattered bond. He’d try incredibly hard to never do it again. “I’m sorry,” he said, and it wasn’t even close to enough, but he didn’t know what to say that would be.

(Because he couldn’t promise he’d succeed, or that he’d never mess up their bond again. That he wouldn’t just do what he thought needed to be done. Even if it had been horrible, even if it had hurt, it had saved the ship. Saved Allura and Coran. Saved the children. And he couldn’t regret that part.)

“I just… saw the weakness and thought there wasn’t enough time to stop it as Voltron. There wasn’t time to explain; I had to go for it or the Robeast would have gotten in another shot. I didn’t want someone to get hurt.”

“Keith…” Shiro’s voice was the knife still in his lungs, still cutting. “You’re ‘someone’ too, you know. You got hurt. That's not any better.”

“You fractured your skull in three places, to be exact!” Coran interrupted, and he’d rallied or was pretending he had, back to being just this side of terrifyingly blasé. “Which caused massive brain hemorrhaging! And you burst both your ear drums and bit through your tongue and your aorta and right lung collapsed from the pressure of the combined blasts!”

“You nearly died,” Shiro murmured, jaw tight.

On a theoretical level, Keith understood he was supposed to care about this, that the team was… staging some kind of intervention here, and he should probably be “coming to his senses,” but he couldn’t find it in himself to be that worried. A fractured skull, a collapsed lung? Kind of meaningless when their healing technology could keep people alive untouched for 10,000 years. He hadn’t died. No one had died. They’d won. That’s what matters. Keith felt a stubborn pout stealing over his face, but he was too unsettled to do anything about it.

“Besides,” Pidge jabbed, looking at Keith like he was a very slow, very stupid little bug she’d guided to safety ten times already today and which she was now seriously contemplating just putting out of its abject misery. How the hell she managed the look while standing at least foot shorter than him, Keith would never figure out. “We were sharing mental real estate, you know?
If you hadn’t shut down the mind meld, you wouldn’t have had to explain. We would have all been on the same page, and we could have stopped it together!"

“I…” He didn’t know what to say. How could he explain the panic, the confusion, his complete terror at the threat losing something—so many things—important to him all at once? Allura. Coran. Their home. Their safe place. The only things they had left to them in all the vastness of space.

What was he supposed to say about the guilt of exposing the Galra children to danger they never deserved? How to convey the way their screaming sounded, echoing in his broken skull? The possibility of failing to live up to Allura’s conviction that Voltron would never fail?

_I was afraid. I couldn’t hold on to the bond because I had things other than the universe to protect._

But when he tried to say that, what came out instead was: “I just did it without thinking,” because that was easier, smaller, stupider, and farther from the white-hot electric core of complicated feelings he had for everyone and for himself, hidden deep down where no one could touch it.

“Typical!” Lance snarled, throwing his hands up. Hunk patted the blue paladin on the back like he was somehow the one who needed consolation.

Shiro… stared at Keith in a way that frustratingly piteous, because he knew Keith was lying, like he might even know how much had gone unsaid. “Just swear you’ll work with us first next time, okay?”

Keith recoiled. He never made promises he didn’t intend to keep, and Shiro knew that, which was exactly why he was trying to pin Keith down here now, while they had him in such a compromised position. Where he couldn’t say no. “I’ll try,” he muttered, finally, all the concession he was willing to make. He would try. It was just… somewhat unlikely he’d succeed. (Keith aimed to be, above all else, at least a little realistic in his outlooks.)

Before the dust had even settled on that, Hunk interjected by literally raising his hand to speak. “About the Red Lion…” He fidgeted in place. Keith’s stomach dropped another foot. “It’s in pretty bad shape.”

Allura raised the holo screen again. The picture was closer to Red now and worse for it. Entire panels of Red’s outer armor were torn almost completely free, and his yellow glass eyes were cracked in multiple places. He was dim, completely powered down—by choice, Keith hoped. Enormous gashes ran along his front limbs, splits in the metal all the way into the dark corridors that made up the interior, wiring like severed veins leaking out everywhere. His left forepaw was almost completely disconnected, held in place currently by something like the space equivalent of scaffolding and braces. In the background, both Yellow and Blue stood vigil, eyes equally silent and dark, but solid in their presence.

Keith felt sick all over again. The tally sheet of his own injuries was meaningless, but seeing Red get hurt… A few days in the healing pod could fix a living being up like nothing happened; it looked like even days and days of work wouldn’t be enough to put Red back to his beautiful working form.

Hunk was still speaking. “We think it’ll be about three weeks of repairs before he can fly again, and that’s if we’ve got all the stuff we need on-board. Otherwise we’ll have to wait until after the castle’s hull’s been fully repaired up so we can find a trading port with the things we need. Kinda hard, finding parts for a 10,000-year-old mythical sentient cat ship.”
Keith flinched. “Kinda hard” was probably the understatement of the century. Who would even be making things compatible with the tech from a planet destroyed ten millennia ago?

Hunk winced too, as empathetic as ever. “It’ll be okay though. Totally. Coran said the lions have recovered from worse damage in the past.”

Coran looked ready to launch into that exact story, in all its gory details, but Shiro blessedly stepped in before that steam engine could leave the station, and instead started in on his own plans: “Red being down means you’re grounded until we can get him operational again, so as soon as you’re feeling up to it, you’ll be coming with me to investigate that Galra battlecruiser. We need to know how it got here and why. Allura and Coran are planning to finish up our diplomatic mission planet-side with the Fripik. Lance,” Shiro looked up, making Lance jump, “why don’t you tag along with them?”

“Oh, uh, sure?” Lance seemed a little surprised to be called on, peeking over his shoulder like there might be someone else there for Shiro to talk to.

“Hunk, Pidge, you’ll be on material-gathering duty. You two already know what we need to fix up the damage to the castle’s hull and Red, so do what you can to find what we can use here.”

Orders. A mission. Okay, Keith could handle that; it felt like moving forward. Not quite like forgiving and forgetting, but almost there. (All he needed, really. A goal to keep his eyes forward, so he could avoid looking back.)

“Uh, no!” Dulsara interrupted, so completely without warning that even Keith startled. She flung out a clawed paw in frustration. “I been quiet and let you do your yellin’, but I ain’t leavin’ this room without a real explanation! Why is nobody talkin’ about the monster! What was it? Where did it come from?!”

They weren’t talking about it because they already knew, because abominations appearing out of the void and wreaking havoc was just something they dealt with from time to time. Of all the things to be routine in his life...

“That monster was a Robeast,” Allura declared, and with a gesture, the holo screen which previously showed Red dissolved into a series of blue-light figures, one for every Robeast they’d fought, in all their gross glory, twitching and roaring silently, the fifty eyes of the chameleon from the Balmera roving aimlessly around the room. “They’re monstrous chimeras of flesh and machine, made possible by the quintessence manipulation magic of Galra Druids.”

Dulsara reeled back, shoulders pulling taut with offense. “What? That’s not possible—”

“Does the architecture of these transports look familiar?” The sharp-edged shape of the black and purple transports for the Robeasts manifested next, still as ominous in miniature as it was in reality, like some new hideous creation might burst free of it right here in the rec room.

“That’s a Galra transport, I know, but…” She faltered. “I never saw any kinda monster like that! I never heard of ‘Robeasts’! And Galra don’t have ‘magic’!”

“The empire is…probably a lot bigger than you know.” Shiro sighed. “I’m sure there are many things Zarkon’s hiding from his people.”

The fur on the back of Dulsara’s neck was standing on end, Keith could see it. “But why would the empire make monsters? There’s no one Zarkon can’t already defeat with just our soldiers. Nobody fights like Galra do!” But something seemed to dawn on her suddenly; her mouth fell open a little and she darted a stunned look around the room, at all of them in turn. “‘cept you. ‘cept
you all that keep destroying bases out of nowhere, an’ you’ve probably blown up a hundred whole fleets already with your robot! Are they sending monsters to stop you ‘cause you killed so many Galra? Maybe the emperor and the generals don’t want anyone else to die, so now they’re sending robot beasts to fight you instead?! In that case, you deserve it!”

“Did the people of this planet deserve it?” Keith snapped. “How many of them would have died if we hadn’t been able to stop that monster?”

“But the emperor wouldn’a sent a monster here at all if you didn’ land on this planet! Why is it always the Galra’s fault automatically? Who picked this world with no defenses as a landing place, even knowin’ you got enemies who can find you all the time? Emperor Zarkon didn’t make you land here and risk those weird Friptiks! That’s on you!”

“And what about Niresh, huh?” Keith bit back, before anyone else could get a word in, his own hackles rising. “She helped just to keep you safe and the monster tried to kill her for it.”

“Yeah, only ‘cause everywhere you go, bad things happen! Your war is following you, and you got me an’ Niresh an’ Xerci right in the middle of it!”

He just wanted Dulsara to understand. She wasn’t stupid; he knew she’d figure out what was right if she’d just stop and listen, if she just agreed with them. Why can’t she see—

“Don’t try to act like Zarkon’s blameless here! All he cares about is getting Voltron back for the Galra. Every single living being who doesn’t side with his quest is an expendable sacrifice. All the aliens on this planet, all the lives of the free people still left in the universe… they wouldn’t even register as collateral damage.”

“And how are you any different?” Dulsara actually snarled. “You say the emperor wants Voltron more than anythin’ else. That he’ll kill anybody he has to ta get it? You know that, and you still brought it here, to a peaceful planet that had nothing to do with your war, that’s allied with the empire even! I’m sick of your lyin’ all over the place!” She pointed sharply at Allura. Her hand was shaking a little though. “You wanted to make allies here, get ‘em to join your resistance even though you claim Zarkon crushes anybody who stands up against ‘im! So it’s okay to endanger people as long as you can benefit off ‘em? That’s no different from what you’re sayin’ about the emperor!”

Hunk’s face screwed up. Keith thought he might actually be offended. “Hey, I think the logic there is a little—”

But Allura interrupted him, threw a hand of her own out in front of his face to request silence. “You are right, Dulsara. We are one half of a war in which we cannot choose when and where we may be attacked. Our very presence in a galaxy is dangerous to all those who inhabit any neighboring systems. To blithely traverse the stars and take advantage of the kindness of our hosts to distract our enemies would be horrific indeed. But that is not who we are, nor how we ever endeavor to behave.”

Her dress made an eerie noise in the perfect quiet of the rec room as she crossed the floor.

“We are always, before all else, honest with every people who open their worlds to us—honest about the dangers we represent and about the future we are trying to achieve. Everywhere we go, we bring hope and faith that someday soon the free worlds of the universe will no longer have to watch their skies, fearing at any moment monsters might rain from their atmospheres, or that a cruel conqueror might seize all that they know and love. We reach out to others not only for allies, but to remind everyone we can that Voltron is no children’s tale—that we are here, and we are fighting not only for ourselves, but for them, for peace and for freedom.
“You must see the difference between us and Zarkon, between someone who believes the loss of thousands of civilian lives is justified simply to seek a stronger weapon, and the paladins of Voltron, who mourn every life claimed in our pursuit of justice. Our intentions are not the same. We are not the same.”

Dulsara was quiet. She chose to stare at the floor, instead of baring her throat by looking up at Allura. At last, she said: “Your words are prettier, but your war is still a war. A lotta people who didn’t deserve to die are going to die ‘cause of you. Is mourning ‘em enough? Just knowin’ that’s supposed to make me trust you? Even if the emperor is as bad as you say, just bein’ better than him still don’t automatically make you good.”

“That’s true,” Allura began again. ”What you are saying is true, but—”

“Just stop,” Keith cut in, surprised at himself and yet not, because... how to explain it? There was something written on Dulsara's face that he felt only he could read, something in the way her jaw clenched tight, her ears pinned down safe and low against her head, how her eyes looked downcast even without pupil or iris—it was on a different face, but the expression, the feeling driving the expression, was one he knew deeply, harshly, personally.

For all the pointed and important things she said out loud, there was something even more important to her that she hadn’t said at all.

"What is it," he asked, "that you really want to hear?"

There was a long beat of silence. He could feel the combined weight of Hunk, Pidge, and Lance's confused gazes on him. Niresh tensed beside him; Xerci tucked in close under his chin like a tiny wall against the rest of the world. Dulsara didn't say anything for a long time. In fact, she didn’t seem to know what to do with herself; she stepped away from him, then back, then sat down a few feet away finally, her feet still an inch off the floor, hands tight around her knobby knees.

"I don’t want...” She struggled, her voice as torn as the scarred hull of the Red Lion. “I don’t want to hear about ‘mournin’ casualties’ like your fight’s so much bigger than all the people involved in it. Like people are jus’ Reni cards—some made to be sacrificed in order to succeed. You're tryin’ to say there's a war with two sides and one of 'em's bad and one of 'em's good, but it all... It all sounds the same to me. Your Voltron fights for peace? For who? Not for my maman. Not for me.”

She locked eyes defiantly with Allura. “In a fight, all anybody cares about is winning. Your giant robot ain’t a guardian—it’s a weapon. I don’t wanna hear about your justice or your hope. You want me to believe yer the heroes? That you really do want a universe where we all live happily ever after? Then prove it—prove my maman’s death wasn’t meaningless to you. That the Galra aren’t meaningless to you. That your freedom ain’t reserved just for the people you like.”

“We would not—” Allura started, but Keith had had enough of listening, his own retorts burning on his tongue.

Not like he really understood her better than anyone else in the room; just because he was also Galra didn’t mean he’d experienced anything close to what she had, that he knew any of the things she’d grown up knowing. But... But still. Her story wasn’t unfamiliar to him: both orphans living with people who couldn’t—maybe who wouldn’t—understand them, fish out of water, caught up in a war they had nothing to do with, resenting their circumstances, maybe even resenting everyone around them, who’d never know what it felt like to be hated for the actions of people they couldn’t control.

“You know we’re not like that. You’ve been here long enough to understand that Allura means
what she says. None of us would be here if we didn’t believe we’re doing the right thing.”

“Just ‘cause you think it’s the right thing—”

“Are you afraid of what it would mean to agree with us?” Shiro’s sudden interruption made just about everyone jump.

Dulsara actually clawed a hole into the couch cushion. “I ain’t afraid of nothin’!” she spat.

Shiro stepped a little closer, to stand next to Allura. Keith didn’t like it, too many people lurking over them, but Shiro continued as gently as if Dulsara hadn’t spoken, so really this wasn’t the right time for Keith to be weird.

“I think I’d be afraid,” Shiro said. “When someone tells you that something you believe in with your whole heart is wrong… that’s pretty scary. Even worse when it feels like everyone else is pushing you to change sides. But that’s not what we’re trying to do, I promise. No one’s asking that of you, okay?” He glanced up to meet Keith’s eyes, and it felt a little bit like a warning.

Then Shiro stared at the top of her head again, the mess of curls falling all around. “And you’re right. This fight’s not the kind of black-and-white where one side’s perfect and the whole other side’s entirely evil—being around you guys is making that abundantly clear to us.”

“Y-Yeah!” Lance managed to squeeze in. “Just because we hate Zarkon doesn’t mean we, like, hate all Galra or anything. You guys are pretty cool, at least.”

Keith didn’t know what to feel about that, didn’t know how to get too near that idea without getting burned, so he put it very carefully in his Things to Think About Later mental folder, the one he somehow managed to avoid ever coming back to in time.

Shiro was nodding along to Lance. (So was everyone else, for that matter, even Coran, though not really Allura.) “Exactly, Lance.” Shiro smiled in that sad way he did sometimes that softened his whole face. “It’s not an all-or-nothing situation. You can still see some good in us without turning your back on the Galra or your mother. Acknowledging that Voltron is aiming to help the universe isn’t an insult to her memory. We’re trying to do what’s right. But that doesn’t mean you’re doing anything wrong.”

Keith saw the moment Dulsara’s face crumpled, beyond tears, just lost and miserable and raw. “But I…” she sobbed. “But I don’t know what to do!” Keith had never been a big hugger—not because he disliked it, really, just that besides his parents and Shiro, no one had ever seemed very interested in hugging him, so it didn’t occur to Keith what he should do until, from his other side, Niresh pushed him hard enough to knock him into Dulsara so he sort of had to hug her, had to open his arms to not fall on her at least, and she ended as close as she could get to him with Xerci still squashed in between. Niresh made a little noise of approval behind him, even though Dulsara didn’t actually return the gesture, just stared up at Keith with that same desperately seeking expression, adrift in space.

“I know the empire sendin’ that monster was wrong.” Her breath hitched. “It only wanted to hurt people, no matter who… I know there’s things going on that I don’t know about; Niresh’s been tellin’ me, but I didn’t wanna listen… You protected Niresh even though yer ship got hurt ‘cause of it and you say that you’re just here to guard people, but I… I don’t want to fight the Galra! I don’t wanna see anybody else get hurt! Even if there are evil Galra, there’s lots of people just doing what they’re told to do by the emperor! Just like my maman! I don’t want to watch you hurt my people, even if… you are the heroes.”

“Oh,” Allura breathed, “no, no we would never ask that of you. Our fight against the empire is
ours alone, and we would never put you in a position in which you had to participate, not on purpose. Or if you’d prefer… If you would prefer to be away, we could find another place for you to—"

“But I’ll still know. Even if I leave, now I know there’s a war. That you’re gonna be out here all the time, killin’ people like my mother.”

“Then maybe there is something you can do,” Shiro said, slow and thoughtful, like he was forming the plan at the same time he was forming the words. “Help us learn the difference. Help us understand the empire the way you do, so we fight only who we need to and people like your mother don’t get hurt anymore.”

“How can I help? I don’ know what you—"

The tension making Allura’s spine rigid began to dissolve. She closed her eyes to take a deep breath. “The Galra were steadfast allies of Altea before the war began, and we know much about Zarkon, but 10,000 years have passed since we last had any close connection with the Galra themselves. I’m sure there are many things you can teach us about what it is like to live in the empire and how we can distinguish between Galra who are loyal to Zarkon’s cruel cause and those who are serving with… less fervor.

“The Galra people who are alive today are very different than those we knew in the past—you and your companions are proof enough of that. I know that we have no right to ask anything of you, nor to involve you any further than we already have. But if you would find meaning by aiding us in this way, we will accept all assistance with gratitude.”

“I…” Dulsara wavered. This was still not what she really needed to hear, Keith realized. More options, more possibilities, more what-ifs, still no answers, nothing safe or simple.

“Just stay with us,” Keith said. “When we’re doing something wrong, tell us. Stop us if we’re going to make a mistake. When there’s a safer way, a way that’s better for everyone, just say so. Fight for the Galra, from here.”

Then, in such a whisper that Keith doubted most of the others in the room could even hear it, Niresh murmured: “Not everybody loves the emperor. My papan got made to join the military ‘cause of our line. Some Galra are prisoners too.”

“Fight for the Galra…” Dulsara tried the words out, tentative. After a moment of hesitation longer, she looked up, her brow furrowed, her mouth a resolute line. “Will you really listen to me, when I tell yah to stop?”

“We’ll listen,” Shiro answered without pause. “You have our word.”

Dulsara sighed, not exactly relief but something almost like it, letting pent up steam escape. “All right. I’ll stay with you—to protect the Galra.”

Beside them both, Niresh sat up straighter; her expression as reserved as it ever was in public, but a pleased part eked through, a tiny, loose upward curl of her mouth.

Allura was far less reserved in her relief; she beamed at them so brilliantly even Keith could see how much of a weight Dulsara’s decision lifted from her shoulders. “Xerci,” the princess said, leaning forward even more so she was closer to his view, hands on the knees of her skirt. “Will you help us too?”

Xerci cheered nonsense in response, no filter on his volume level yet. How in the world his father kept him quiet enough to avoid notice by visiting fleet ships and commanders, Keith had no idea.
"Help!" the boy declared, though whether he knew what it meant or was just imitating was anyone’s guess. He bumped his head happily against the underside of Keith’s chin. "Help! Kee-ith!"

Everyone else stared quizzically, eyebrows raised. "Key-ith?" he saw Hunk mouthing in the background, to Lance's shrug.

Somewhere Allura was saying: "You mean Keith, right?"

"Keeith!" the boy proudly crowed again, reaching up to squash both his stubby hands onto Keith’s cheeks. It was cute. Even sort of cute how Allura’s gaze softened like warm butter, her bottom lip actually wobbling a little.

But Keith wasn’t in a place to notice those things right now. He wasn’t in a place to notice anything happening in reality, really—too far gone, backward as if through a wormhole, time and space blurring around him until there was only the soft, half-breathed chuckle of his mother in his ear, in the early morning, still too cold to poke his nose out from under the thread-bare cover. "Kee-ith," she whispers, "my little one, wake up. Wake up."

He couldn’t. It’s lucid dreaming; he knew it wasn’t real, not anymore, but still he couldn’t focus his eyes, couldn’t see past the fall of her hair in the pale morning light, the soft gold (Gold? Is it? Or some other color? What’s memory, what’s imagination, looking back?) of her eyes luminous against the reflection of the pre-dawn horizon in the old mirror, and she smiles like the moon rising. "Wake up, Kee-ith. There’s so much to learn today."

It was like biting into bitter fruit, the taste of his own eagerness thick and cloying in his throat; how exciting the world had seemed from the safety of her hold, how interesting the sharpness of the sunlight, the swirls of the red earth dust, the path of a rushing lizard between the rocks—how much more alive the world had been, in memory.

Xerci badly burbled the name, and his voice bore no resemblance to Keith’s mother, but his name echoed in the same way, two syllables where there should be only one, sounds where there should be silence, feelings where there should be empty space—

Xerci patted both his cheeks, a little too hard to still be cute. "Like Keeith!" the Galra boy announced, to be met, very naturally, by Lance's face scrunching up, lip curling, brows pinched.

“Ooh,” Coran cooed too. “You really have taken a shine to our red paladin, haven’t you, scamp?”

"It's just a phase!" the blue paladin insisted to the whole room. "He’ll grow out of it!" Pidge snorted, ducking her chin into the high collar of her shirt to give her at least a little plausible deniability in case Lance ever tried to claim she actually did laugh at his jokes. (A snort is not a laugh anyway. There's ostensibly enough difference to make the claim, at least.)

Kee-ith, two sounds. He hadn't heard his name said like that in years, not since his replacement parents made him write down the spelling in English and told him very plainly that he was saying his own name wrong, that it was "Keith," one syllable, over and done, and that it meant that he came from the woods, even though he had never seen a "woods" and didn't know if his parents had either.

Only Shiro seemed to notice Keith’s shaking. “Something wrong?” he asked, low enough that no one except Allura noticed over Lance’s bombastic insinences that soon Xerci would see the error of his ways and come to idolize the clearly superior blue paladin.

“No, I…” Keith stopped. He felt like he was swimming, everything moving by him just a little too
quickly. If it weren’t for that fact that he knew healing pods were literally perfect healers, Keith might wonder if some of the brain damage wasn’t still lingering around. “I’m fine.”

Shiro had that flat look on his face which meant he was trying to tell Keith with his eyes alone how absolutely obvious that lie was. But Keith was immune to that look, having seen it so many damn times before.

Shiro opened his mouth to get the final word in, but Allura beat him to the punch: “If we’re all in better agreement now, I think we should get back to work. The repairs on the castle must be completed as quickly as possible, in case we need to seek parts for Red Lion’s repair. And our conversation with the Fripik still isn’t finished. Coran, Lance, and I may be able to enlist their help in procuring more resources to fix the damage.”

“I’m game,” Lance offered, to nods from Pidge, Hunk, Coran and, reluctantly, Shiro, darting one last look at Keith to let him know he wasn’t off the hook in the slightest.

Allura clapped her hands together, pleased by the uncharacteristic lack of dissension. Her bracelets jangled. “Dulsara, Niresh, if you’re sure in your decision to stay with us, then I’d like to extend the invitation to you as well. If you are interested in learning more about the universe and life on other planets, I would like to help you see it.”

Dulsara glared across Keith to Niresh, a silent conversation passing between them. Keith couldn’t tell what, exactly, they argued about, just that Niresh resoundingly won by turning on some of the fiercest puppy eyes Keith had ever seen (and he used to know Matt Holt). Finally, Dulsara surrendered, with conditions: “Fine, we’ll go. But only if Xerci can come too.”

(Maybe she thought that would be enough to convince Allura to rescind her invitation. Ha. She just didn’t know Allura very well yet. Galra soldiers might not surrender, but Altean princesses never back down.)

“Of course,” Allura nodded along, though she working very hard to disguise a sudden bout of shifty-eye. Couldn’t blame her: the thought of tiny aliens around Xerci’s curious paws again was nerve-wracking. But Lance and Coran could probably keep an eye on him. (Or he might learn a valuable lesson about not gnawing on anything that fit into his mouth if he bit into a rock alien down below…)

Coran straightened up and waved for attention. “Right then, let’s get a move on, shall we? This old castle won’t repair itself!”

Pidge flailed. “That’s not true and you know it! Just the other day you were teaching us all about —”

Though he tapped both Dulsara and Niresh’s ankles with his boot to get them moving, Keith was barely on his own feet when Allura stopped him.

“Would you… mind staying a moment more? There’s something I’d like to speak with you about.”

Lance halted in his tracks. “Waitttt, what? What could you possibly want to talk about with Keith of all people?” He said it like the very idea of having a whole conversation with Keith, let alone a private one, was unthinkable.

Keith would have been offended if he weren’t so busy being terrified. What could Allura possibly want to talk about? Options flew left and right through his mind: she was going to punish him for his stunt with Voltron, she was going to order him to take over Lance’s cleaning shifts with
Coran, she was going to force him to listen to Shiro’s lecture on self-preservation and sane use of flight equipment for the ten-hundred millionth time, she was going to ask him why in the world the children were so attached to him.

No, worse. Someone had suspicions. Someone had brought suspicions to her and now she was going to confront him while everyone else was distracted—Hunk or Pidge knew, they knew and they’d told—

“That,” Allura was busy drawling, stone-faced, to Lance, “is none of your business in the slightest.”

“Oooh,” Pidge needled, catty and evil. “Allura’s gonna talk to Keith in private! On a scale of one to strawberry jam, how jelly are you, Lance?”

Hunk’s offended, “Uh, technically jam and jelly are completely differ—” was completely swamped by Lance’s screeching.

“I am not jelly! I am the least—I am the complete opposite of jelly! I’m like… concrete! Dry concrete!”

Keith had no idea what was going on anymore. Actually, that “anymore”? Probably superfluous, because he’d never any clue what was going on on this ship from day one. Nothing out of the ordinary here folks, just move along.

Somewhere in the background, Pidge sidled up to Shiro, all smooth like, her bushy eyebrows two orange caterpillars dancing on her forehead. “Allura’s gonna talk to Keith in private,” she stage whispered, mouth poking out from behind her hand. “On a scale of one to ‘dry concrete,’ how jelly are you?”

“That’s creepy,” Shiro deadpanned, cuffing her collar and gently dragging her toward the door, followed by Lance and Hunk, still bickering amongst each other, even though they weren’t at all talking about the same thing.

“I’m just saying, jelly is far superior—”

“—probably wants to tell him he’s grounded forever. Hey! Maybe now I can get promoted to an arm!”

And then they’re gone, and it’s just Keith, the Galra children, and the Alteans. Actually, didn’t that just mean all the aliens were left? Coran cleared his throat as loud as he possibly could.

“Uh,” Keith said, very intelligently. He may or may not have been attempting to use Xerci as a living shield from this entire conversation. Too bad the kid didn’t seem inclined in the slightest to protect him.

“Coran, would you mind escorting the children back to their room?” Allura suggested, in that royal manner in which everything she said was rote law and not a suggestion at all, no matter how pleasantly it came across. Keith maybe, just maybe, clung to Xerci a little tighter.

For his part, Coran was more game than Keith expected—he’d brought the children’s food trays to their room this whole time, but other than that, it didn’t seem he’d made much of an attempt to befriend them. (Only logical, really, with the whole “Galra blew up my planet” business.) Seeing him approach without a second’s hesitation, hands out and face open, Keith felt a little… overwhelmed. Not a happy feeling really or sad, just… Allura and Coran were incredible people. If they were testament to what all Alteans were like, how much harder to stomach that their world no longer existed, that what he was had a hand in unmaking all of what they were.
Xerci fussed when Coran pulled him from Keith's hold, long before Keith was ready to be divested of his fuzzy purple shield, but Coran had a good handle on the kid, expertly balancing him on his hip with a steady little bounce that Keith was just starting to learn how to do. The girls looked between all of them for a second before moving closer to Coran—not close enough to touch the Altean, definitely not, but close enough for him to know they’d follow. Dulsara grumbled about it under her breath every step they took, but Niresh waved just a little to Keith on their way out.

And then only the two of them remained, Allura focused on him and Keith not quite able to meet her eyes, staring at her shoulder, at the wisps of her white hair spilling over the pale sleeve of her dress in a way that felt so much more familiar than he knew what to do with.

It was quiet. He had no idea what she wanted, so he had no idea what would happen or whether she somehow expected him to start. If that's what she was after, they’d stand here all night, because Keith had absolutely nothing.

Then, finally, like water boiling over in a pot, Allura unlinked her fingers, smoothed down her skirt. "Keith," she said, "Shiro and your fellow paladins were right to scold you. You put yourself in incredible danger and badly damaged the Red Lion in a risky maneuver that could have cost us all of Voltron if you had failed."

Keith flinched. Just more of the lecture, really? Well... could be worse. (She could have said she was throwing him and all the other invading Galra off her ship because there was something horrific about the Galra now outnumbering the Alteans on board.) A lecture was livable, at least.

"So..." She continued, suddenly reluctant. “So, of course, when Shiro tells you that you must never do it again, please understand how earnestly we all hope you won’t ever risk your life so heedlessly."

She saw the moment he opened his mouth to argue, always chaffing under the auspices of other people's authority. "No," she chided, "let me finish. Let me begin, honestly. Shiro is not wrong in wanting you to value your life more highly. You are a paladin, one of an exceedingly small number of warriors chosen by beings whose very existence makes freedom possible in this universe. You are not replaceable, Keith. You are important to the people who need Voltron, and... and to us, your friends."

She seemed to brace herself. "But." The word hung heavy in the air. “But even if I know all that is true, I still... want to thank you, Keith. Your selfless actions saved the Castle, the children, and Coran and I. You risked everything in order to protect what was important to you, even if it meant going against the will of all your fellow paladins."

Not where he expected a lecture to go. What is she trying to...?

"Your conversation with Shiro and the others isn’t over. I’m sure you’ll soon face more scrutiny for what happened. Everyone was... badly shaken by the failure of your mind meld. You all know now, that the only other person who has ever seized control of the Black Lion and disrupted the paladin bond is... is Zarkon."

Keith felt the blood freeze in his veins. He hadn’t even thought about—that’s twice I’ve lost control of the Black Lion—he hadn’t thought—he’d put Shiro through the same pain as Zarkon had, not just the arm but everything: stolen his lion, left him helpless—If it was me, what I’d want most is the power to make my own choices—not normal, nobody else had this problem! Because who else was like—
“I’m nothing like Zarkon!” Keith shouted, too loud, too fast, too insistent.

But, “I know that!” Allura barked back, teeth bared as she took a step closer without thinking about it. “That is not what I was trying to say at all! I meant the very opposite!”

What?

“What I was saying is…” She got quiet again, consciously unfurled her clenched fingers. “What I wanted to tell you was that no matter how your actions are received by your fellow pilots now, when I saw what you had done, the only person I could think of was the original red paladin.”

He was stunned. Keith had never heard much about the original paladins; they hadn’t even known until it was almost too late that Zarkon was once the head of Voltron. Allura never shared anything at all about the others, outside of how they’d been so much better at bonding and beating the enemy than their new team was. Coran said more about them than Allura, if only through his occasional inscrutable anecdotes, and even then, nothing specific.

It never struck Keith as particularly odd until this moment; ten thousand years was a really long time ago. But even so, wasn’t it a little strange? Allura surely lived in the castle that housed the lions. She must have known the original paladins—she clearly knew a lot about how they had trained and fought together. So why wouldn’t she share that information left and right? Why had she never told them anything about what the previous paladins could actually do with Voltron, instead of letting her new bunch flounder their way through battles, suddenly discovering new powers without any warning?

“I can see your thoughts written on your face,” she murmured, and the way she smiled was utterly indecipherable to Keith. “You’re suspicious of the fact I’ve never talked about the paladins before.”

“Well, it’s kind of ancient history now anyway, I guess.”

“For you.” Her hand looked dark, closing slowly in the pale fabric below her heart. “But not for me. Ten thousand years passed for the rest of the universe, while I slept frozen, outside of time… For me, your ancient history is recent memory. Ten thousand years have gone by since the previous red paladin lived, but I… I stood beside him in this very room less a year ago. I still remember exactly what he said and how he sounded on that day. It’s hard to talk about people you’ve lost when the rest of the universe has had ten millennia to mourn and no longer cares.”

“Allura…”

“It’s all right. I’ve shed all the tears we have time for. I just thought that if I didn’t say something I’d be doing a disservice not only to you but to him as well. Your stunt was dangerous and foolhardy—but it was also exceedingly brave. My father, the original red paladin, was,” she huffed a laugh, “impulsive and prone to charging in. But he was also, beyond any person I have ever known, ferociously courageous and unwaveringly loyal. Keith, you are an honor to his legacy, and I am so grateful that you are here with us.”

There was just a black hole where Keith’s thoughts should have been, complete and total system collapse. He managed several starts to almost-thoughts like Hu- and Wha- and No- but it took a long time for Keith to muster up actual words, let alone in a tone of voice comprehensible to any translator in all of space. “Your father?” he choked finally. “King Alfor was the original red paladin?”

The glimmer on her face wasn’t just unshed tears; Allura was pleased to catch him by surprise. She took the last two steps so they could stand eye-to-eye. It felt, somehow, like being fixed under
the watchful eye of the woman in the dying gold light of the vision.

“I take it you never checked the Red Lion’s prior flight logs?”

Keith might have shaken his head. Maybe he managed that much.

Her face was soft. The scales under her eyes rose with the smile that folded the edge of her eyes. “My father was pivotal in the design and construction of the lions, but believe it or not, even he felt his leadership style was a bit too reckless for something as important as Voltron. He was perfectly suited to the Red Lion’s fiery spirit, as deeply dedicated to his allies as he was wondrous in battle. And yet… somehow always managing to earn himself a new lecture from Coran or his fellow paladins—or worse, Mother. In times like these, watching you be scolded for just such a rash but splendid show of courage, you reminded me very much of him, Keith.”

How was he supposed to… react…?

No one had said something that nice to him in years, not since Shiro realized how uncomfortable direct compliments made him, when he was nine and still mixed up “Thank you” and “I’m sorry” every other time. Her words burned somewhere in the pit of his stomach, tossing and turning so badly he swallowed reflexively to keep his feelings down. He didn’t know what to do with his hands, fingers furled up, then limp, then fidgeting for something to hold. He pressed his thumbs. Keith felt… embarrassed, nervous, afraid of the expectatations hiding behind that praise. Reeling and laid open.

I’m so grateful you’re here with us.

“T-Thanks,” he said finally, half-choking on just that word alone. It seemed to sit there in the air, a solid, useless lump, pathetically incapable of encompassing the staggering depth of his gratitude. “Um, really,” he added, which didn’t help in the slightest.

Still, Allura understood. She shifted aside, balancing a folded, nonchalant hand on one hip. The slow smile on her face tinted with faint amusement, half her mouth curling up as if the other side couldn’t decide whether or not he was serious.

He felt… itchy. Antsy. Like maybe he could out-run the obnoxious blush on his face only if he left immediately and didn’t stop sprinting for the next ten hours. “I think I’m just… gonna go…”

“Yes, of course,” Allura agreed, though she gave no signs of leaving. “I’m sure we’re holding everyone else up by now.”

Keith made it all the way to the door on his own before she stopped him, her voice like a hand, holding him gentle but fast: “Oh, since you really haven’t checked your ship logs, I suppose it’s up to me to remind you of this too: the Red Lion has only ever had two pilots in all its millennia of existence. Zarkon must certainly have delighted in holding my father’s lion captive, and I’m sure he immediately tried to force it to accept a new paladin, loyal to the Galra Empire, but instead the lion waited 10,000 years—for you. I don’t think, even if we’d had the choice of the whole universe, we could have found any being more suited to the role of red paladin than you, Keith. The Red Lion may be grounded for the moment, but I am sure—absolutely sure—that he is as proud of you as I am.”

Some things Keith could handle and some things he couldn’t, and that was very, very squarely in the “cannot manage” category. He turned away completely, hiding his face with the desperate hope she wouldn’t see how violently red he’d become. What in the world had he actually done to deserve this? Threw himself in the line of fire like an absolute idiot with no regard for his team, and now a princess saying things like “I’m proud of you”?
Keith wished the lounge came with the same features as the training deck, so the floor could literally swallow him whole. He couldn’t even make his feet work right to leave, because how could you just leave after someone said something like that? He had to say something back, right, he had to, but his tongue was lead, nothing came to mind, all he got when he tried to put into words how incredibly much her words meant to him was just a stream of nonsense, and he wasn’t quite far enough gone to start babbling, even though he was terrifyingly close. He might actually have shook in his boots, just a little.

Finally, sounding far too self-satisfied for her own good, Allura took pity: “You are dismissed, paladin.”

Keith hadn’t left a castle room so fast since the time he ran from the possessed gladiator.

In fact, he was in such a hurry, he completely missed Shiro, tucked in the very corner of the otherwise empty hall, nearest the door. The black paladin jogged five or six steps to catch up with him, and even when he caught Keith’s elbow, all that forward momentum carried them two bumbling steps more, swung Keith around in a clumsy circle until he was standing front and center before Shiro like a line-up at Garrison, too confused to be embarrassed yet.

“Shiro?” His voice, still choked-up, stumbled over itself in surprise.

The black paladin stared at him—at Keith’s blotchy face, bitten bottom lip, chin crinkled as he battled to school his face into any expression other than overwhelmed, eyelashes wet with tears he fiercely fought to keep from fully forming—with a look so concerned that Keith only felt even more overcome, growing increasingly bewildered by the silent second.

Why was Shiro still here? Why was he lurking outside? Why was his brow furrowed deep enough to wrinkle his scar?

“Keith, are you all right?” Shiro demanded. Why did his voice sound so much like grit in the turbine of a hoverbike?

Keith felt like he was still caught in their whirl, head not done spinning, unable to quite grasp a hold of the big picture here.

His throat was bound up tight. Keith swallowed hard to get the words out: “I’m fine.”

The wrong thing to say.

(There’s yellow light coming in under the door, but his room is all dark today. Outside, in the hall, his replacement mother speaks too fast. He hears things through the metal but the sounds keep getting to his head too late to understand them. Everything blurs. The world tilts sideways. Keith fights to keep his eyes open. The medicine they’ve been giving him lately keeps making him sleepier and sleepier. Keith has to take the shots even though he isn’t sick. “I’m sorry Shirogane,” Ania says, “but I’ve told you already, Keith isn’t feeling well enough to spend time with you today. You need to leave.”

“I apologize professor, but are you sure? He was running circles around us yesterday; he didn’t seem ill at all—”

Their shoes are squeaking on the floor. It’s too loud. Everything’s too loud. Keith paws at his doorknob in the dark. It’s the day before Shiro doesn’t come for two days in a row. Shiro can’t leave now. Three days is a long time.

There’s another set of shoes, his replacement father’s. The footsteps are like rocks smashed against
Keith’s head. His eyes shut and it takes a long time for him to get them to open again. “I hate to pull rank, cadet,” Neuhahn murmurs. But it’s sharp, like a small knife. “You’ve been given an order though, and I would hate to write you up for disobedience. Thanks for checking on him, but today’s just not a good day. We’ll let you know as soon as Keith is feeling better, all right?”

Shiro’s uniform makes a strange kind of shrr-shrr as he shifts. As he steps back.

Keith pulls harder at the doorknob, until the handle finally gives, and he gets one arm out clumsily through the crack in the doorway and then one shoulder, until he stumble-slithers his way almost into the hall. He has to cling hard to the door, still half in the dark, to keep from falling down, because his legs are like Playdoh stretched too much.

The hallway light is agony, ten thousand times brighter than normal, but he can’t get his eyes to squint right so they just make tears of pain instead.

“’m fine,” Keith slurs. “Pleas’ let me play wi’h Sh’ro today. ‘m fine.”

But through the blurry white haloes of the overhead lamps, Shiro looks confused, then scared, then angry. The angry face looks exactly like how they practiced, like Shiro showed him over and over until he could understand.

“His eyes are dilated. What did you give hi—”

“You’ve received an order, cadet,” Neuhahn repeats, before he turns and leans down to catch Keith under both arms, pulling him up straighter, guiding him backward into the lightless room, blocking his swimming view. The sway of Neuhahn’s long coat, too white, too fast, makes Keith’s stomach do strange movements inside.

Ania moves toward Shiro. Her voice is very, very even: “Keith is not feeling well enough to play today. It’s time for you to leave.”

The wall of his black room is cold against Keith’s face. Their shadows all move away, along the line of light beneath the door.)

Shiro’s other hand, the metal one, came up to grip Keith’s arm. He searched Keith’s breathless, gutted expression desperately. For what? For—

“What did Allura say to you, Keith?”

Why would he ask that?

“If she said anything that made you uncomfortable, tell me now. I heard her compare you to Zarkon.”

Why did he look so anxious? Uncomfortable about…? Shiro’s hand gripped Keith’s arm too tight.

“Even if she’s Altean, she should know that who your family is has no bearing on your loyalties to this team or how we feel about you. Voltron needs you. You’re our red paladin, no matter what.”

My loyalties. My family? Has no bearing on how we feel about you. Keith stopped breathing.

“We’ve all agreed, there’s nothing wrong with you being—”

“Don’t!” Keith howled, flinching out of Shiro’s hold. Every dim glimmer of warmth and wonder he’d gained, the first tentative touches of pride—you are an honor to his legacy—turned to dead
ash and acid under Keith’s ribs. He couldn’t keep any air in. His hand clenched in his shirt over his chest, and there was no wound but he could feel it: everything spilling out, everything falling apart.

The aching line of light beneath the door. Footsteps, walking away. The whole world sliding sideways into the darkness.

Shiro knew. Shiro knew Keith was—

“Don’t,” Keith begged. “Please don’t say it.”

He staggered out of Shiro’s reach, one step, then two, then he couldn’t stop, not even after ten hallway doors shut behind him, not even after the air in the corridors went still and lifeless and centuries-untouched.

Keith ran until he couldn’t run anymore, directionless and destroyed.

Chapter End Notes

1) The kids have official bios now! Check them out here: Dulsara, Niresh, and Xerci. Be careful--Niresh's bio has a backstory spoiler and Xerci’s is a tad spoilery in general because it makes mention of events that will happen after the end of this story.

2) Just as a head’s up in advance, the next chapter is going to be introducing the side plot(!!), so um... we'll just leave this dramatic ending where it is for a bit... Good news is, I've already written about 2500 of the estimated 10,000-12,000 words for the next chapter. I can't promise it will be up super soon because I still have to do all my end of semester grading, but I plan to have it up before the end of December. Please check my tumblr for information about the delayed updates.

3) Dulsara doesn't actually know the word "quiznak;" the Altean translator is translating the Galra-language equivalent into something more familiar. By the way, as a character-establishing aside, Hunk is religious and uncomfortable with cursing, which is why Lance never curses.

4) The idea that the marks on Altean faces are scales is definitely not mine. I've seen it in a few fics now; I read it a long time ago in an Allura-centric fic whose title and author I can no longer remember, but I loved it since the moment I read it, so now it's here too.

5) Come talk Voltron to me on tumblr!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!