

Goodnight, Travel Well

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Goodnight, Travel Well

by [europa_report](#)

Summary

There's something wrong with Lance; his blood feels like it's turning to ice, and the nightmares he has feel more like warnings than dreams. The black lion might help, but it's not responding.

"Quit being stressed?" Lance stuttered, disbelief marring his features. "I'm sorry, can we revisit this weeks events? I'm the new black paladin, Allura's pregnant, Pidge just got poisoned by a freaking... Chihuahua, the castle took us to a haunted star system and stopped working, and Keith is... okay, where the hell is Keith?"

"Oh yeah," said Pidge, peering at him through puffy red eyes. "You know that unidentified ship that was hanging around and you were all, don't approach the unidentified ship, well Keith just left the hanger and is approaching the unidentified ship."

OR

When the castle seemingly wormholes itself to a distant star system, the team, with Lance as their newly appointed black paladin, don't think much of it. Until the wormhole returns

to take them the next night, and the next, and they find themselves drawn relentlessly back to a dark pocket of space, where the pull of the sole planet and the cave entrenched within it taunt Lance with the awful truth of his family's past.

Notes

Just wanted Lance to do some cool stuff so here we are

There is graphic violence, but it isn't extreme gore or anything (and I warn you if a chapters going to be harsh)

Edited Note - I started and finished writing this a long time before Shiro was revealed as gay (which is amazing news!), but obviously could not change that, so I'd ask you read this by just appreciating the awesome dynamic Shiro and Allura do have

Please feel free to comment anything and I hope you enjoy this! You can find my tumblr and any fanart in the notes at the end. Thanks for reading, you rock! ;)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

It began two weeks after Shiro's disappearance.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Lance--"

"I said I don't want to talk!"

Lance stared at his hands; they were shaking. His entire body itched with the need to escape his own skin. *Stop staring at me, it's not me.* The bridge was quiet, the scattered circle of paladins watching him intently, waiting.

"She responded to *you*--"

He stood abruptly, scraping his chair along the floor. Five sets of eyes followed him up expectantly, as if he was their goddam leader already. Lance's hands tightened into fists, fingers twitching as he fought to focus.

"Shiro is the black paladin," he said. "And we are going to find him."

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One stupid accident, that's what started it. Just Keith and his hot-headed tendencies, going full on kamikaze on a stray Galra fighter. Lance replayed the morning's events in his head as he sped toward his room. The rest of them had been planet-side, investigating a potential crash site in search of their missing leader, with Keith doing an air sweep. Lance had no idea why they thought that was a good idea, leaving Keith to scout the sky alone in the state he was in. The red paladin had been a mess since Shiro disappeared, whatever bonds he and Lance had built before hand were being put to the test as he simultaneously resisted and took-up responsibility as their leader. The black lion hadn't responded to Keith yet, but Lance got the feeling Keith wasn't responding to it either. He was an emotional time bomb, a loose thread that didn't know how to act accordingly when the only member of their team who really understood the pressure of it was gone. So of course when the lost Galra fighter ship showed up, a remnant from their final battle with Zarkon, Keith took it upon himself to launch into battle without so much as a whisper of warning. And did he stop attacking, once Red took one to many hits? Nope. Keith turned that lion right around and turned suicide bomber, and all they could do was watch as he hurtled toward the surface, taking the ship with him, like a meteorite burning up on its way through the atmosphere.

Lance hadn't been anywhere near Blue; then again, he'd been even further from the black lion. He wanted to think this was simply evidence that the black lion was finally accepting Keith as its new pilot, but instinct was telling him otherwise, as was everyone else. Because it wasn't Blue who landed forcefully in front of him as he ran toward the location of their lions, screaming at Keith over the coms- it was the black lion. Black? Did Shiro ever refer to his lion by a name like that, like Lance did? Lance would've been shocked if that had occurred at any other time, but in the heat of the moment he hadn't thought twice about leaping into the black lion's cockpit and taking off toward the fireball streaking toward the surface. He practically collided with Keith, grabbing the red lion out of the air and flying them to safety as the Galra fighter burst into flames when it smashed into the hard rock. And that was that. Lance had piloted the black lion. The black lion, who'd refused every one of Keith's attempts to bond with it, had let Lance pilot it.

A knock on the door startled him. He groaned, not in the mood for more talking.

“Lance? Are you in there?”

Coran; he could deal with Coran. Lance sighed, running fingers through his tousled hair.

“Yeah, come in.”

The door slid open, revealing Coran. Lance frowned at his feet as the elder Altean came and took a seat beside him on the bed.

“Sorry for running off,” Lance mumbled.

“It’s understandable, my boy.”

Was it? Was anything understandable? The conversation between them all when they returned to the castle *should* have been about Keith. It should have been Allura looking disappointed, it should have been them berating Keith for his recklessness. Instead, all eyes turned to Lance as he stepped from the black lion, the only one ready to give Keith a mouthful. But Keith couldn’t even respond, staring at Lance as if he might’ve grown a third head.

“This just means the black lions responding to Keith, right? Like when Shiro was hurt, and it helped Keith save him.”

Coran sighed, tugging absently on his moustache.

“Coran?”

“You feel it, don’t you?”

“Feel what?”

Coran only waited, he knew Lance wasn’t stupid.

“I can feel all of them.”

All the lions. It was the same energy he’d felt with Blue, but each was so different in its own way; it was overwhelming.

“It’s just, so *much*,” Lance whispered.

And it was. The moment he first felt them, he’d pinned it on adrenaline. He’d been halfway to Keith, barely thinking as he threw the black lion into a sharp accent, when his mind was assaulted by a shockwave of various sentient thoughts. Blue was still there, her voice like a tune on a small radio, muffled, playing off in some other room, but there. But now they were all there, and it was almost dizzying.

Coran rested a hand on his shoulder.

“But you know its true then.”

Lance hunched his shoulders, choosing not to respond. Is this what Shiro had felt? Did this mean Shiro was really dead? He didn’t want this responsibility; he was only nineteen for god’s sake.

“I don’t... its not meant to be me, Coran. I’m not a leader. And Shiro’s not dead.”

Coran sighed, and Lance avoided his pensive gaze.

“Shiro may still be alive, but at the moment he’s not here. We need a pilot for the black lion, and you have shown your ability to lead more times than you think.”

“Shiro picked Keith,” Lance muttered.

“But it’s the lion that makes the final choice.”

Lance didn’t say anymore, he didn’t feel like it.

“Get some sleep,” Coran suggested. “It’s been a long day. We can reconvene in the morning.”

Get some sleep. Yeah, that was a good one. Nothing had Lance cozy-ing into the covers quite like the knowledge that he was supposed to be the new black paladin. *Night Lance, sweet dreams Lance.* He ground his teeth together anxiously, staring up at the dark ceiling. He didn’t believe it. Even if the black lion refused Keith as its new pilot, then surely Allura would be the next choice. She was their leader anyway, Shiro’s equal; in fact, she was who Shiro looked up to. Lance was no leader; the seventh wheel and a nuisance more often than not, and now the black lion had picked *him*? It was a joke. But apparently it was true, according to the others at least. That terrified Lance; he didn’t think he could lead Voltron, let alone give up his beloved Blue. Who would pilot Blue? Lance vowed to speak with his lion in the morning, straighten things up, prove it was all just a mistake. He tossed and turned, eventually managing to drift off to sleep.

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He was underground. This was a different sort of dream, because he knew immediately he was dreaming. He was aware of it, yet he wasn’t in control. There was no preordained knowledge telling him he was underground, it was only what he assumed from the looks of the dark tunnel he stood in, wet clumps of dirt forming an unstable wall around him. Lance shuddered, he hated being underground. Water was his element, it was so freeing, it allowed him to move anywhere. Earth... rock and dirt, darkness, he feared it and the way it could trap one. The memory of a windy day and a dark cave mouth looming before him overtook his mind; a girl’s voice, *Lance*? He shook them away quickly; he didn’t want this to become one of *those* dreams.

He had control over his own body but not the scene around him. That was strange; Lance read that once someone realised they were dreaming, they should have full control of the setting. He sure as hell wasn’t in control of this. The darkness was stifling, but the walls almost glowed a soft grey, casting just enough light to see by. That made it worse. Lance could make out the crumbling dirt walls, the ceiling that looked ready to cave in, the slick wet mud where earthworms wriggled. He could smell it, the stench of damp earth, and felt the clamminess of his own palms as his heart beat faster. Should it be this vivid? His dreams weren’t normally this... real.

He forced himself to breathe evenly, which shouldn’t have been a problem given this was a *dream*. *Stay calm, just figure out where you are.* Lance didn’t want to look around, but he didn’t have much of a choice. He stood at the end of a long tunnel, whose other end disappeared into the darkness hundreds of feet away. And... that was it. Lance swallowed the lump in his throat, feeling very claustrophobic. Stretching both arms out, he could just touch the sides of the wall, but withdrew quickly as his fingers brushed the wet soil. Water leaked from little cracks, and Lance felt ill with fear at how unstable this underground tunnel must be. There were no doors leading out, just the walls, floor, and ceiling, pressing in from all sides. The only way to go was forward, along the tunnel that sloped steadily downwards into... Lance didn’t want to think about what was down there. He already felt in his bones that he was deep down in the earth.

The tunnel didn't look manmade, it was rough and sagging, as if dug out by an animal, except it was much too large. Lance really, really didn't want to investigate any further. *The ghost of a hand around his own, leaving his. Lance?* Sighing, he shuffled around a bit and- was his leg chained to the ground? Lance crouched down to investigate, and found there was indeed a rusted metal clasp around his ankle, bolted to a chain that ran into the ground. He gave the chain a tug; there was nothing holding it to the ground, it just plunged into the soft mud, disappearing. It felt to deeply buried to pull free. *What the hell?* Now Lance was feeling scared. Being underground was one thing, but alone, chained down, trapped, facing off with a dark pit... Lance was starting to panic.

His eyes were wide with fear, staring at the end of the tunnel, trying to see further, deeper. There shouldn't have been a breath of wind down hear, and yet he thought- Lance frowned. That wasn't wind. But there was something. *Whispers.* His stomach lurched, blood rushing to his head and roaring in his ears. His lip trembled, almost whimpering, because he could hear *whispers*. They were almost indistinguishable at first, whips of words that could have been mistaken for the slide of water over dirt or the shuffling of his toes in the mud, but with every passing second they were growing stronger, frantically so, grains of sand gradually budding into a swirling tornado of noise.

It awakens.

It's coming.

Lance tugged on the chain, eyes fixed on the end of the tunnel. He couldn't tell where the voices were coming from, they seemed to sprout from the very walls of the place, a thousand voices and a thousand warnings, all screaming the same thing.

You woke it. It's coming.

So many voices were screaming at him, men, women, children, it became indistinguishable. They sounded so *afraid*, as if each voice was chained down as he was, thrashing, fighting, driven to insanity but the terror that overtook them. Each word was a cry for help, a disaster, a scream too terrible to ignore.

You woke it, its coming, its coming, its coming-

Lance clamped his hands over his ears, but it couldn't stop the noise. A particularly loud voice, like an old woman's, that didn't even shout, just croaked right into his ear in a broken sob.

"It's coming."

He whipped around, but there was no one there. Just him and the voices and the tunnel where... Lance squirmed, trying to twist his ankle out of the clasp. Something was coming up the tunnel. He couldn't see it, couldn't hear it, but he knew. Something ancient, clawing and crawling its way toward him through the dirt and muck. Centuries of isolation, something sinister and otherworldly, dragging itself up from the depths of the cold earth.

It's coming, it's coming.

The voices grew louder, unbearably so. Lance thrashed, pulling on the chain as the dark tunnel beckoned to him, whatever lay within it coming ever closer.

IT'S COMING.

He screamed, the mud quivering beneath his feet.

IT'S COMING IT'S COMING IT AWAKENS IT'S COMING IT'S COMING IT'S COMING IT'S

COMING IT'S COMING IT'S COMING IT'S COMING IT'S COMING IT'S COMING IT'S COMING IT'S COMING IT'S-

Lance gasped, shooting bolt upright in bed. His entire body was shaking, drenched in sweat as his heart beat its way out of his chest. He could barely adjust to his new surroundings though, as the alarm that had woken him was still blaring. Cursing, Lance threw his feet over the bed, standing on shaky legs to move toward the door. Alarm lights flashed along the castle hallway as Lance ran toward the bridge, not having bothered with his armour and feeling severely disorientated. *Could it be Shiro?* He pushed the dream out of his mind, though it hung around at the back, testing him by pushing insistently at his consciousness. He was still scared.

Keith and Pidge were already on the bridge when he arrived, and he could hear Hunk thundering down the hall behind him. They were all still in their pyjamas, save Keith, who looked ready for a fight.

“What’s happening?” Lance demanded, wiping sleep from his eyes and willing the tremble in his hands to stop.

It’s gone, it was just a dream. But it was underground. You promised you’d never go back there.

“The castle’s being weird again,” Pidge muttered, as Allura and Coran raced between various screen displays.

“Like... ghost kinda weird? Cause I’m staying away from any airlocks in that case.”

“That wasn’t ghosts,” he heard Keith mutter, and turned to the other boy.

Keith looked like shit. Lance would usually tell him that to piss him off, as a joke of course- but tonight he really looked awful. His hair was unwashed, hanging over his face in dark bangs, where his eyes were marred with dark circles, lips pulled thin and tight. Had anyone spoken to him about his suicidal nosedive yesterday?

“You look like shit.”

The words were out before Lance could stop them. He was really tired, alright? Keith turned to him, expression sour.

“Perhaps you should take a better look at yourself, jackass.”

Lance faltered, unable to stop himself glancing at his reflection in one of the windows. Okay, kudos to Keith, Lance looked even worse. Why though? He’d skipped one night-time routine cause of all this black paladin nonsense, only one, he shouldn’t look like someone who’d just walked out’ve a goddam horror show. His hair was a mess, forehead still a little sweaty and sticking to the longer strands, and his eyes looked hollow and spent. Some dream, huh.

“Just... what’s up with the castle?”

“The castle!” Coran all but yelled, as Hunk finally made it into the room, “has gone beserk!”

“Calm down, Coran,” Allura muttered, looking in no mood to deal with her advisor’s antics this early in the morning. “It’s just a malfunction.”

“A malfunction Hah! You won’t be saying that when it’s spewing us out into space as we sleep!”

“Is this important or not?” Keith snapped, arms folded tightly across his chest. “I’ve got stuff to

do.”

Lance frowned. “At what? Three in the morning?”

Keith ignored him. “Just tell us what’s happening.”

There was a second there where Keith’s voice broke, but no one chose to mention it. There was hope in that sentence, as much as Keith tried to hide it; he was hoping they’d received news on Shiro. Lance felt a twinge of sadness.

Coran slamming his hand down on the consuls brought them all back to attention.

“*Coran*,” Allura sighed.

“Right!” He said briskly, far too alive and awake for this hour. “The facts are, at some point during the night, the castle has... uh, well, it piloted itself.”

Five pairs of eyes blinked blearily at him.

“Like magic!”

Allura shook her head, moving over to where Coran stood. Lance could have been imagining things, but she looked a little green.

“I’ll explain,” she muttered.

Taking a deep breath and righting herself, Allura prepared for a speech.

“Look out the window.”

They did. Lance frowned; they were within a solar system, a small white star burning fiercely far off.

“Where are we?” Questioned Pidge.

“We don’t know yet,” Allura answered stiffly. “I was woken just a short while ago, with the feeling that something was wrong. It appears the castle brought us here of its own accord, I don’t know why, but we’re far away from where we were before.”

“Like, couple of planets over kinda far, or...” Lance raised a brow.

Allura sighed, pinching her nose. “A couple of light-years kind of far. We... we wormholed here.”

“A wormhole?” Hunk was biting his nail, looking anxious. “But did you open one?”

“No, I didn’t. I was asleep. By all accounts it makes no sense. Coran is trying to find out exactly where we are, but we have no clues as to how the castle got us here.”

“Oh boy,” Lance muttered. “I do not like it when the castle starts getting all freaky on its own.”

“We should go back,” said Keith suddenly. “Wormhole out of here. That last spot we were was the closest to Shiro.”

Allura looked sad suddenly. “I agree, it’s simply that...”

She looked to Coran, who gave a shake of his head.

“Oh, now what?” Mumbled Pidge.

“The castle is broken,” Allura announced. “Its still functioning, but I can’t get it to move. We... for the moment, we’re stuck here.”

Chapter Notes

hiya

Thanks so much for your kudos and comments guys!!

(im trying to get better at replying to comments but i have all the social elegance of teaspoon sorryyyy I do really love comments tho <3)

ya enjoy n all that

(i did add some additional tags mostly related to violence cause this fic might get gory)

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“Do we know if there’s actually anyone on this planet?”

“Nope,” Pidge replied, popping the *p*.

Lance grumbled something non-committal about being too tired to be dealing with this, but steered his lion after the others none-the-less. They’d been up all night trying to reboot the castle, but too no avail. For the moment they were still stuck in the mysterious star-system, not moving at all. They had successfully detected a nearby planet on their scanners, an incredibly small one, a dwarf really. Lance reckoned it was only a quarter of the size of Earth’s moon, yet it showed promising signs of life. So that’s where they were headed, four paladins and Allura, while Coran stayed behind to monitor the castle. It was all in the hopes there were alien beings there who might be able to help repair the castle, or at least give them some indication as to where they were.

Traces of Lance’s strange dream lingered, but they’d been mostly chased away by the events and confusion surrounding the castle. He tried not to dwell on any of it.

“Breathable atmosphere,” Pidge announced over the coms.

“But it’s so small,” Hunk replied as they descended toward the surface.

“Clearly proving that size *doesn’t* matter,” Lance said with a smirk.

“You’d know,” muttered Pidge.

Lance’s shocked stuttering went unnoticed as they came into view of the surface. It was astoundingly green, and as they came closer Lance realised much of the surface was covered in a thick forest.

“Alright paladins, remember, we don’t know what could be down there.”

Lance jumped as Allura spoke right beside him, almost having forgotten she was catching a ride down to the surface in his lion. Why was she in his lion? Because it made sense for her to travel via

Voltron Assembly Piece Number One (read- the black lion). Yup, Lance was back in the black lion. He was trying not to think too much about it; he'd wanted to take Blue, but Allura insisted they see if the black lion would respond to him the same way it had before, but in a less dire situation. Lucky Lance- it had.

"In honour of its bravery and teeny-tiny size, I vote we name this planet Pidge," Lance announced as they descended through the atmosphere.

"Hey!"

"Given your last admission, I was gonna suggest we call it Lance."

Lance's jaw dropped at Keith's snide comment, which had Pidge laughing.

"Alright, haha, listen up guys--"

"We have to acknowledge *all* the universe's tiny things, Lance."

"Okay, you know what, Pidge, you're demoted to second least favourite paladin. Hunk, back me up or what?"

"I'm not defending the size of your, uh..."

"No, no, you're too sweet for this conversation, I'm sorry for dragging you into it."

"If we're quite done," Allura said, without a trace of humour in her voice. "I think I see a place to land."

They set the four lions down in a small clearing, just big enough to accommodate the robotic beasts. Lance whistled as he trundled down the gangway, jokingly offering a hand to Allura to help her down. He frowned when she actually took his hand, refusing to meet his eye but swaying a little on her feet.

"Uh, Allura?"

"I'm fine," she muttered, all the while looking a little nauseous.

Lance decided not to press; Allura's mood had been significantly altered since Shiro's disappearance, but now wasn't the right time to confront her.

"Trees..." Pidge hummed, turning in a slow circle and drinking in the sight of the forest.

Lance turned his attention to the rest of his team and their new location. Tall, deep green trees, similar to pines surrounded them, bushy branches whispering to them softly as a light breeze swept through. Pine needles covered the forest floor, and underneath the earth was soft and dark. *Like your dream. Shut up.*

"Wow," Lance offered, already feeling at ease in the cool shade of the trees.

"Where do we start?"

There was Keith, straight to business.

"I'm thinking picnic in the park, pinecone fight--"

“This is serious.”

“I know, I know,” Lance sighed, searching for any trails leading out of the clearing. “We can still appreciate it.”

“Hey guys,” Hunk called. “Think I found something.”

The other four wondered over to the yellow paladin, eyeing the small trail he’d found through the pine needles.

“Maybe this planet has cats,” Lance said hopefully, following the small disturbance of needles. “Space cats.”

“Is everything *space* for you?”

“Sure is, space friend.”

Ten minutes along the trail and Lance was yet to see any space cats, or any life at all for that matter.

“Coran, any luck with scanning the planet for life forms?”

“Not yet, Princess. But I’m all eyes and nose.”

“Nose?”

“Don’t question it,” muttered Pidge.

“There!”

Up the front of the group, Keith suddenly took off quickly, striding through the pines. They followed hastily, emerging into a small clearing and- Lance swallowed, the air of ease surrounding him evaporating.

“Trust Keith to find the edgy looking cave,” Pidge joked, earning herself a slight but playful push from said paladin.

Lance could barely focus on their conversation; his heartbeat was up in his throat, the rush of blood in his ears drowning out all other noise.

I’ll be right back, Lance. Just- let go, its fine.

“Lance?”

Pidge tapping on his shoulder brought him back to Earth with a crash.

“Y-yeah?”

“Keith made a joke and you didn’t laugh. And you laugh at him even when you’re comatose.”

“Laugh *at* him being the operative word,” Lance said quickly, flashing her a grin as he worked to compose himself.

He could do this, it was fine.

The cave before them wasn’t that daunting, now that he gave it a proper look. It was more of a

large overhang, ferns cascading like a waterfall over the lip of the rock that formed the mouth. Still, Lance couldn't help but feel nervous. *Stupid.*

"We should check it out," Keith was saying. "See if anything lives there."

"Maybe it's the secret space cat dwelling."

Lance couldn't even muster up a smile at Pidge's comment. He hung back as they moved toward the cave, fearing someone might see his expression. *Get yourself under control. What kind of black paladin are you?* Lance jumped as a hand settled on his shoulder.

"You alright?" Hunk asked in a whisper, just enough for Lance alone to hear.

Hunk knew a little; granted, not everything, but enough to know when his friend was being pushed out of his comfort zone.

Lance braved a smile.

"Always."

Hunk looked sceptical, but Lance brushed him off, stepping toward the cave as if to prove his durability. Silently he thanked Hunk for sticking close to his side.

It was the universe's idea of a cruel joke, Lance reckoned, that the blue lion had been hidden in a cave. Of all places, a goddam, underground cave. He supposed he was thankful to Blue for reaching out to his mind even back then, as he wasn't sure he could've followed Keith into that hiding place otherwise. Lance had learnt to control his fear; he'd handled the Balmera well enough. But after that dream... it all seemed fresh, harder to confront.

"You guys, check this out," Pidge called, beckoning him deeper into the cavern.

The entrance was wide enough to flood the front of the cave with natural light, and now that Lance stepped into a shadow of the overhang, he could see it didn't even extend that far back, a hundred feet at most. The walls were hard rock, but the most interesting part of the cave were the drawings carved into said rock.

"Y'know, Keith, you've really got a knack for digging up weird cave paintings," Pidge remarked, stepping closer to the wall and adjusting her glasses.

Curiosity got the better of Lance as he followed his team deeper into the cave, wiping sweaty palms against his armour.

"What is this?"

Everyone seemed equally intrigued by the paintings, which began near the entrance and filed down to the back of the cave. They were drawn with simple black paint that stood out against the brownish rock, and had no mystical glowing blue properties as far as Lance could tell. No new lions here then. Those near the entrance depicted what he guessed was the daily life of the planets inhabitants, not that they'd encountered any. They were pretty basic drawings, but the figures looked largely humanoid, almost entirely human in fact. Scenes of them building villages, cutting down and tending to the pines, interacting with various fauna... it seemed like a pretty peaceful planet.

The paladins moved along the paintings in succession. Here and there were inscriptions in a language of strange symbols he didn't recognise.

"It's almost similar to Altean," Allura hummed.

Pidge immediately began snapping pictures of the text, chatting excitably about how she might be able to translate it back on the ship.

"Um, guys," said Keith from the front of the group, already having moved on to the next set of pictures. "I'm not sure we're gonna find any people here."

"Why not?"

The way he spoke made Lance uneasy. Keith just pointed, waiting for the others to move to where he stood.

"Oh..." murmured Pidge. "Are they... drowning?"

Lance frowned, looking solemnly over the array of darker paintings. The scenes changed drastically, and unfortunately there was no text to explain it, just various upsetting images. They did look like they might be drowning- the once peaceful inhabitants were shown in scenes of disaster, sinking into a dark substance, their blank faces unable to convey their fear, but their body language a sign enough. Entire villages sank into the dark water, families, smaller figures indicating children, all thrashing as they disappeared helplessly into the gloom. Lance couldn't figure it out; he hadn't seen any water when they'd flown over the planet, let alone enough to drown the entire planet.

"Did anyone see any water?" Asked Hunk, voicing his exact thoughts.

"Nope."

"Not a trace," said Allura frowning. "It could be a flood of sorts?"

"There's more," said Pidge from the back of the cave.

She was staring up at the back wall, where the paintings came to an end.

There was a single but large painting here, a circular black hole, like a planet. It was definitely a planet, Lance guessed from the faint details of stars and space around it and what not. All around the drawing, the same set of words was written over and over. He had no idea what they meant, but they had to be important; that was where the paintings concluded, that had to be the explanation, if there was one.

"It's a planet," said Keith. "Is it this planet?"

No one answered. Lance wanted to logically assume it was, but something felt different. The same unease flowed back through his veins, leaving his throat feeling tight.

"Maybe," Allura answered eventually. "Pidge, could you photograph all these, perhaps we can decipher them back on the castle."

"On it."

Lance couldn't tear his eyes away from the last painting. It was stupid to be scared of it, it was just a drawing, but the dark, shapeless planet seemed to be pulling him in. Ice spread through his veins, his breath stuttering for a moment. Darkness, a deep, tangible darkness. Not nothingness, this dark had weight to it. The dark void of space was nothing, the darkest parts of the ocean were nothing; in both those instances you had freedom of movement. This was heavy darkness, the type that

weighed down on one- dirt, rock, actual solid matter, suffocating and inescapable. Lance shuddered, rooted to the spot, eyes boring into the dark painting.

It's coming, screamed the voices in his dream.

But Lance couldn't dwell on it, because just then someone *actually* screamed. Or more accurately- "Fuck!"

He whipped around to see Pidge trampling through the bushes near the cave entrance, hopping about on one leg and kicking back a tiny, furry looking creature.

"Ow, get away, get away!" She yelped, dancing around as the animal snapped at her heels.

Lance could've laughed- the animal attacking her was a little dog like, though no larger than a Chihuahua.

"It bit me!" Pidge cried, darting toward the others.

Keith was first to come to his friends rescue, grabbing the small creature by the scruff of its neck and hoisting it into the air as Pidge jumped to safety atop a small rock. He frowned, holding the animal at arms length as it snarled and snapped at him.

"Looks like your space cat is more of a space dog."

"It's a space demon is what it is!" Pidge cursed.

"What do I do with it?" Keith asked, thrusting the animal toward Lance and Hunk.

It looked like a cross between a bat, dog, and very angry badger. It was kinda cute.

"Do I just throw it away?"

"No!" Hunk yelped. "You can't throw it!"

"Throw it, Keith," Pidge hissed from atop her rock, clutching a bloody ankle.

"No, no, give it here," Hunk gestured for the animal, which Keith handed over carefully, steering clear of its snapping teeth.

"Doubt that things gonna help fix a space ship."

Just as Lance was about to suggest they search somewhere other than the cave, a faint whine escaped Pidge. She swayed, slumping down on the rock and frowning.

"I don't... feel too good."

Keith whipped around faster than light, going to crouch anxiously beside Pidge.

"Pidge?"

"Ugh..." She grumbled, rubbing her eyes and- were her cheeks swelling up?

"I told you I should have thrown it!" Keith snapped, reaching out to steady Pidge before she toppled off the rock.

"Throwing it wouldn't change the fact it already bit her!" Hunk protested.

“Pidge, are you alright?”

Lance stepped closer, grimacing as he caught sight of her puffy red eyes and cheeks.

“Oh, oh no, you look *horrible*.”

“Fuck you too, Lance,” Pidge mumbled, though she was having difficulty enunciating clearly.

“Here, let me see,” Keith grabbed her ankle, unclasping a boot so they could get a proper look at the bite.

The animal's teeth had managed to chew right through the armour, and Pidge had a nice set of marks around her ankle. Hunk grimaced, still holding the furious animal.

“We need to get her back to the ship! Allura-“

A gagging sound made Lance turn around, and he found Allura leaning a hand on the side of the cave, clutching her stomach. She looked unusually pale.

“Are you... oh my god, are you gonna throw up? Cause really that's Hunk's thing.”

“Wash happinf-“ Pidge slurred, her eyes all squinty now that they'd swollen up.

Keith yelped when he turned back to her, not having expected the poison to react so quickly.

“The nes pershon to make shfun of my shface is gonna sear aboush it.”

“I-I don't know what you're saying,” Keith pleaded. “But you look horrible.”

Pidge flipped him off with a swollen finger.

Lance looked helplessly between Pidge and Allura, and now Hunk too, given the creature was trying to fight its way out of his grip.

“Guys, what-“

“*Paladins!*” Coran's voice came through the comms. “*I've detected an unidentified ship within range of our own!*”

“*What?*”

Allura promptly threw up. Lance groaned.

“Cool, everyone just loose you're shit at the same time, doesn't bother me,” he muttered, striding over to where Allura was crouched on the ground.

“We have to get Pidge back to the ship!” Keith yelled, probably overreacting, plucking up the smallest paladin.

“I'm shuper,” Pidge protested. “Shimply peachfy.”

“What do I do with this though?” Hunk asked, hoisting the animal a little higher as it tried to claw at his face.

“Throw it in a hole!”

“That's barbaric!”

“Paladins! Do I engage in combat with the ship?”

“Shmash it,” mumbled Pidge.

“Don’t en-“ Allura doubled over again, gagging.

“Hey, are you okay,” Lance rested a hand on her back, pulling back a ring of her hair as Allura groaned miserably.

“Engaging in combat-“

“What the hell Coran!” Lance yelled. “Don’t engage!”

“I’m gonna throw it if you don’t throw it,” Keith snarled at Hunk, tossing a resentful Pidge over his shoulder.

“I’ll throw *you*!”

“Throw him and you have to shface me.”

“Guys stop fighting!”

“I shwant to die.”

Keith yelped, shaking Pidge. “Don’t die!”

“Shake me and I’ll puke on shoe.”

Allura groaned, and Lance pulled her up gently.

“We- let’s just get back to the lions.”

“I am not receiving an answer from the ship! They could be hostile! I should engage our defences-“

“Coran! Chill out!”

“I’m bringing it with us,” Hunk announced.

“Fucking try it!” Yelled Keith.

“Too late, I’ve named him Puffy.”

“He poisoned Pidge!”

“For the love of-“ Lance grabbed Allura before she fell down to throw up again, steadying her and glaring at the other paladins.

“Keith bring Pidge, Hunk bring Puffy, I’ll take Allura, just get back to your lions!”

“If I could just spare one missile-“

“And Coran, if you shoot at that ship, I’ll- I’ll let Puffy loose on the healing pods! Now let’s go!”

-

Lance landed the black lion unceremoniously in the hanger, glowering as he strode quickly down the gangway. Allura wasn’t looking on the verge of throwing up anymore, but her colour was

definitely off.

“What the hell is happening?” He demanded, bursting through the doors into the bridge.

Hunk and Keith were engaged in a screaming match, Hunk clutching Puffy tearfully while the latter paladin spoon-fed Pidge a brown goop, probably an antidote prescribed by Coran.

“He was just scared!”

“He’s a menace!”

“This tashtes like shfeet,” Pidge mumbled around the spoon.

“I’ve still got those missiles armed and ready if you’ve changed your mind,” Coran piped up cheerfully.

Lance slapped a hand over his forehead. Was this what Shiro had to deal with?

“Enough!”

He could’ve cried at the sound of Allura’s voice. She marched right up to the controls, ordering Coran to stand down. Her face had a slight green tinge to it, but she held herself steadily and fixed them all with a cool stare.

“You are all acting like children! *Lance* is behaving the most mature of all of you.”

“W-was that an insult?”

”Coran, what is this ship you detected?” Allura asked, ignoring his question.

Coran slouched, visibly disappointed that he hadn’t been given free reign to wreck havoc on the vessel.

“I’m not sure, Princess. It appeared on the scanners just a little while ago. I tried hailing it but have had no response.”

“Do we have any visuals on it?”

“Not yet. I was going to ask Pidge for help but-“

“Pidge ish out’ve comishion.”

“Eat your medicine.”

“It tashtes like shfeet *ands* butt.”

Keith shook his head, looking exasperated. “You don’t know what either of those things taste like.”

“Try fme.”

“What do we do?” Lance interrupted. “About the ship?”

Allura rubbed her temples, inhaling sharply. “I don’t know, Lance. What’s your suggestion?”

“M-my suggestion?”

“Yes,” Allura bit out, clearly not in the mood to be dealing with any of this.

“I don’t know. You’re the one with the good ideas.”

“And you have taken on the responsibility of the black paladin.”

“Well, I wouldn’t quite put it like *that*-“

“The black lion responded to you,” Allura snapped.

There was definitely something off about her mood today.

“Hey, I didn’t ask it too. We don’t even know if-“

“Lance, do you have a suggestion or not?”

Lance couldn’t help it, he glared at her.

The past two days had been hard enough with this stupid newfound responsibility being lumped onto his shoulders, he didn’t need a bunch of squabbling paladins, pissy princesses, and dodgy spaceships to add to the chaos.

“No,” he bit out. “I don’t.”

Allura pursed her lips, frustration bubbling up within her, threatening to spill.

“Do we even know what kind of ship it is?”

“Not without the visuals,” announced Coran.

“Do we approach it?”

“Is that not what I just asked you?”

Lance turned back to Allura, who had her own gaze fixed on the panel, tapping away at the screen with a little more force than strictly necessary. Lance felt the eyes of the other paladins on them, looking on nervously.

“Did I do something wrong?” He demanded.

“No,” Allura replied testily. “What gave you that impression?”

He scoffed, planting his arms firmly across his chest. “I didn’t *want* the black lion, if that’s what you’re pissed about.”

“It’s not about that, Lance. I’m just trying to gather your opinion on how to address this, seeing as you were so invested.”

“I don’t know what to do, alright?”

“Perhaps as a new leader, you should at least *try*.”

“I-I’m not... I’m not the leader of this group!”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

“I thought you wanted more responsibility. Was I wrong?”

Lance threw his arms up. "What is with you?"

"Me? The black lion responded to you, Lance! But instead of acknowledging that, you're dancing around the problem."

"That doesn't automatically quality me for anything," Lance insisted.

"So you admit you have nothing to offer?"

Lance expression darkened, and he jabbed a finger in her direction.

"*You're* our leader. Where's your suggestion? I thought you accepted responsibility for this group when you first dragged us into this stupid war!"

That was it; Allura snapped.

"Maybe you haven't stopped to consider," she practically yelled. "That sometimes I need *help*."

Her voice cracked on the last note, an unreadable mix of emotions flooding her face. For a moment no one spoke. Allura dropped her hands from the controls, abruptly dropping his gaze and crossing the room. Without another word she swept through the door, leaving them all stunned.

"So..." mumbled Pidge after a moment. "Whats shappened. Cause I can't shee a all."

Lance cursed, running a hair through his hair.

"I think... you upset her," Hunk offered quietly.

"I know that," Lance snapped, hating that all eyes were now on him.

"The ship--"

"Is it attacking us? Is it even moving?" Lance all but yelled.

Coran jumped, fingers moving swiftly over the screens.

"Uh... no. It's dormant."

"Then just, ugh--" He pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes.

Where was Shiro when they needed him? Probably dead. Lance's heart sank a little; why did it always have to be like this, so difficult?

"Just leave the ship alone. Monitor it, if it does anything or comes any closer then let us know. Let's just... get Pidge fixed up."

Pidge shot him a thumbs up.

"What about Puffy?" Questioned Hunk.

"I'm sure there's an airlock available somewhere," Keith muttered.

"Put him, I don't know, just put him somewhere safe. Away from Pidge. And Keith!" Lance added, as the latter's eyes darkened, glaring at the small animal.

"You're impossible, all of you," he muttered, already making his way toward the door.

“Where are you going?” Called Coran.

“To find Allura,” Lance shouted back. “Try not to kill anyone while I’m gone.”

-

Finding Allura wasn’t as hard as he’d expected. Lance feared she might have a thousand hiding spots all over the castle that they had no idea about, but in the end she was just in her room. He neared the door nervously, trying to hear any sounds from inside. What was he going to say? An apology was needed; there was no need for him to have snapped at her, despite them both acting un-accordingly. But Lance suspected something might be wrong, there had to be a reason Allura was so on edge. Was it Shiro? He sighed deeply, reaching out to knock. Before he could, the door slid open; clearly she’d forgotten to lock it. Lance stepped in without thinking, immediately regretting his decision as he heard the sound of someone crying. *Shit*. He froze, one hand still raised and a guilty look on his face.

Allura was curled up on the floor against her bed, legs pulled up to her chest, looking more vulnerable than Lance could ever have imagined her to be. And, oh yeah, she was crying. The second Allura spotted him she choked on her own voice, scrambling to her feet and rubbing furiously at her eyes, as if there was any way she could hide the fact she’d been crying.

“L-Lance! What are you doing here?”

Lance’s mouth went slack; Allura looked terrible. She’d removed her armour, leaving her in the black shirt and pants of the flight suit. Her hair was coming loose from its usually tidy bun, eyes red rimmed and afraid.

“I’m sorry, I...”

Allura sniffled, and Lance gave in.

“Sorry if I’m overstepping any boundaries but... are you okay?”

She bit her lip to stop it trembling, trying to straighten up, and for a moment Lance was sure she’d snap at him. This was her room after all, he’d just barged in on her in what was probably a very private moment. But then her expression shifted, brows buckling as her eyes flooded with fresh tears. Her voice cracked as she spoke, slumping back onto the floor.

“No.”

Lance was at her side in an instant, the door sliding shut behind him as he settled awkwardly on the floor beside her. He wasn’t sure if she’d welcome any physical comfort, so landed just sitting next to her, hands fidgeting nervously in his lap. Another sob drew a deep, shuddering sigh from Allura, who wiped irritably at her nose as it began to run. Great, Lance hadn’t even brought any tissues.

“So...” he began, feeling increasingly out of his element.

“I’m not in the mood,” Allura muttered.

“What?”

“If you’re going to try and flirt.”

“W-what? No, I’m- I came to apologise.”

“For what,” Allura mumbled, tucking her chin into the crook of her arms.

Lance had never seen her like this; it was kinda terrifying.

“For being a dick. I shouldn’t have snapped at you. I mean, even if you snapped at me.”

Instead of coming up with a retort, Allura drew a broken breath, fingers pinching her arm as she no doubt tried to suppress more tears. Lance flailed; what more did he say?

“So, I totally understand if you don’t wanna tell me...but something’s wrong, isn’t it?”

Allura didn’t reply, but her eyes became more squinty as she tried to stop the flood of tears.

“Is it the black lion?”

Nothing.

“I’m not replacing Shiro, you know. I... none of us could do that. We’re still gonna find him.”

Lance often found himself wondering if there was something more going on Between Allura and Shiro. Is that what this was about?

“A-and I know I haven’t really stepped up to the leadership role yet-“

“Lance, I know you’re trying to help but...”

Allura sucked in a sharp breath, a hiccup of a sob shaking her chest. Lance fell silent, hoping she might speak freely.

“I know something’s wrong,” he said finally, unable to endure the silence.

“Lot’s is wrong. It always is, what’s new?”

She was trying to brush him off, ignore the issue.

“What’s new is that you’re crying alone in your room. Unless you usually go do this every time something marginally inconvenient happens? Which you might, I don’t know, but honestly I don’t think you have the time.”

Allura ground her teeth together, and once again Lance worried she might start berating him. Allura could be pretty scary at times, alright?

Lance tugged nervously at the sleeve of his armour.

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to help, but if you tell me... I mean, if it’s a problem with me-“

“I’m pregnant.”

The next word stuck in Lance’s throat, the rest all crashing into it like a train smash. His mouth opened and closed soundlessly, his brain short circuiting and looping uselessly around those two words.

“R-really?” He blurted, literally too shocked to manage anything else.

Allura was *pregnant*. Allura. Pregnant. Had he heard that right? Her breath hitched and she was crying again, loud, ugly sobs that shook her whole body. That was a yes then. *Good going Lance.*

“Is that why you’re crying?” Lance stuttered, trying to stop his head spinning and comfort Allura instead.

She was pregnant? Whose kid was it? Suddenly Lance’s brain was conjuring up all sorts of ideas, wondering who the father was. Pidge and Coran were out of the question, Hunk *definitely* would have told him, Keith- oh my god, was it Keith? Did Keith and Allura... was Keith *not* gay? He could be bi like Lance, though he’d literally never seen him even give a girl a second glance. Did Keith already know? No, he couldn’t, he barely spoke to Allura anyway. But were they... did they like each other? Did this mean Keith wasn’t-

Lance stopped himself there. This wasn’t about Keith, and it certainly wasn’t about Lance or his own feelings. *Stupid*, he cursed himself as Allura cried harder.

“H-hey,” he reached out, tentatively wrapping an arm around her shoulder as Allura sobbed into her arm. “It’s okay, it...”

What the hell did he say?

“I’m sorry,” Allura whimpered. “You shouldn’t see me like this.”

“I’m gonna stop you right there,” Lance interrupted. “Everyone’s allowed to cry-“

“I’m meant to be leading, setting an example-“

“I’ve literally seen Shiro break down for an hour because he dropped a piece of toast. You’re not the first leader too....uh...”

Lance stopped speaking, because whatever he’d said only had Allura crying harder. She curled in on herself, arms wrapped around her stomach as she simply wept. *Fuck*. Why was he so bad at this? Was it something he said? Was it- oh. *Oh my god. Oh god, oh no, oh my god oh my god oh my god. Shiro*. The sudden rush of understanding was almost disorientating, like that time his sister woke him at quarter to four in the morning by banging all the pots together and screaming about the benefits of dictatorship. Yeah, they hadn’t let her get a hold of whiskey again.

“I’m... just wait here.”

Lance leapt up, stumbling toward the bathroom door in the corner of her room. He grabbed the box of tissues he found there and filled a glass of water before carting them cautiously back toward Allura. She accepted the glass gratefully, downing the water with alarming speed. Jeez, Allura must’ve really been able to liven up the party back in those Altean clubs. *Inappropriate*, his brain supplied.

“So...” Lance said, lowering himself back to the floor and sitting cross-legged beside her.

“You’re pregnant.”

The pair stared at a small stain on the floor in front of them. Allura sniffled, and buried her face into a handful of tissues.

“You are pregnant,” Lance repeated, more to himself than Allura.

“Yes.”

Her voice was horse and still teetering between upset and irritable. She sighed dismally, tears running freely down her cheeks.

“Explains the vomiting,” Lance offered with a hesitant lightness.

Allura didn’t reply.

He gnawed on his lip, eyes darting between Allura and the floor while she stared off into space.

“That is why you’re crying, yeah?”

Allura turned to him with an expression that simply said it all, red-rimmed eyes oozing dissatisfaction.

“Okay,” he held his palms up in defence. “Just checking.”

“I...” Lance gave up, dropping his arms and letting his shoulders sag. “Jeez, Allura, I don’t know what to say.”

“How about, *you’re fucked*,” she offered dryly.

Lance did a double take.

“W-what?”

Allura just turned away, rubbing furiously at her eyes.

“Hang on, I didn’t say this was a bad thing,” Lance amended quickly. “I’m surprised, but... hey, are you like, do you not want this?”

“Do I *want* this?” Allura’s mouth fell open as she stared at him. “Lance, this is terrible!”

Oh.

“Oh.”

“I-I-“ Allura looked flabbergasted, hands gesturing at thin air. “I’m pregnant!”

“We’ve established this; you’re having a baby.”

Allura gasped, as if she hadn’t even stopped to consider the end result. It would have been comical were she not so distressed.

“I’m having a *baby*!”

“That, uh, tends to be the result of pregnancy.”

“Lance!”

“Sorry! I’m- fuck! You’re pregnant, and you’re crying, and I don’t know if its like, cause you’re surprised or you don’t want to be pregnant or-“

Allura whined, dropping her head into her hands.

“You are *not* helping.”

Lance wanted to scream. He settled for tugging at his hair, a nervous habit of his, as if he might pull up the right words to say along with it.

“Why don’t we just... I’m here to listen,” he tried eventually, using a calmer tone. “If you wanna talk. Or, um, explain.”

“What is there to talk about,” Allura grumbled, swiping another tissue.

“There’s always like... whose kid it is.”

Lance grimaced; that was probably the wrong thing to say.

“You really don’t know?”

Allura didn’t sound angry, if anything she sounded a little curious.

“I have guesses,” he mumbled.

Allura’s lip trembled. Lance had to agree with her now; this really wasn’t ideal.

“It’s Shiro, right?”

Allura didn’t respond, but her brows folded in on themselves, face screwing up with emotion.

“I didn’t know you guys were like that,” Lance admitted softly, feeling a pang of pity.

Now the weight of it was sinking in. Allura was pregnant, and Shiro was... Lance’s stomach tightened uneasily. He couldn’t be dead, he just couldn’t, especially not now. Shiro was, *god*, Shiro was going to have a child. With Allura, Allura and Shiro’s child.

“How long have you known?” Lance asked, diverting before he started crying himself.

“I’m...” Allura took a breath to steady herself. “I’m a month in, I think. I had suspicions before but I-“

Her voice cracked suddenly, and Lance didn’t think before wrapping an arm around her again as fresh tears brimmed in Allura’s eyes. “He didn’t know.”

It took a few seconds of crying before she could speak again.

“I was going to tell him after the battle with Zarkon and now-“

Lance flinched as a broken sob wracked Allura’s body. Shiro didn’t know, maybe he’d never know. Perhaps he’d died never knowing he was leaving not only Allura but also their unborn child behind. Lance could understand now, why she couldn’t seem to stop crying.

“And you’re sure?”

Allura peered at him with a frown.

“Are you sure you’re pregnant?”

“How do humans know?”

“Well there’s a couple of subtle signs; nausea is a thing for human women too. But we use tests and stuff. Did you, like, test it?”

Still frowning, Allura straightened up and gripped the base of her flight shirt.

“Signs like this?”

Lance jumped at the sight as she rolled her shirt up just over her stomach.

“Holy shit, no, we do not get signs like that!”

Lance couldn't help but gape at the strange marks that had appeared over Allura's stomach. Pink, just like the markings below her eyes, faint little swirls and spirals.

“Oh,” she mumbled, rolling her shirt back down. “Well, I... I'm definitely sure, anyway. These usually appear a month in.”

The pair was silent for a minute or two, each too enwrapped in their own thoughts.

“What's going to happen?” Allura asked eventually, her voice barely a whisper.

“What do you mean?”

“This is... this was not the plan.”

She sniffled, still stuck on the emotional roller-coaster.

“What now?”

“You're gonna have an awesome baby, that's what's gonna happen now.”

Allura raised a brow, shocked by Lance's tone. He sighed, finally starting to get a feel for the situation.

“It's gonna be alright.”

“We're in a war-“

“We beat Zarkon.”

Lance shook his head, smiling. “He's gone, Allura. We...we won. I know that Shiro is missing, but the dangerous stuff? That's all over. All that's left now is finding Shiro. If you... if you *want* this baby, if starting a family was something you wanted, you... we don't have to be afraid anymore.”

Allura blinked at him owlishly.

“I...”

Lance grinned suddenly, only causing Allura's frown to deepen.

“You're pregnant!”

She grimaced, lip twitching. “I'm pregnant.”

A pause, and then- “I-I'm having a baby.”

“You're having a baby.”

“A-a baby.”

“It's gonna be such a cool baby.”

“Oh-“ Allura gripped her stomach suddenly eyes growing wide. “I-it's half human. What if it-Altean and human, what if that's unhealthy, what if its injured or doesn't develop, Lance, oh quiznak, what if it d-dies, how could I-“

“Wow wow, stop, Allura, calm down,” Lance said hastily as she worked herself into more of a panic.

“I’m being serious!”

“You’re worried about the effects of a human-Altean hybrid?”

“Yes!”

Lance cracked a half smile. “Allura, think of the other alien hybrid you know.”

Allura paused, fingers tightening anxiously around her shirt.

“If Keith can be half *Galra* and still turn out looking the way he does, I don’t think your babies gonna have any problems. Hell, a kid that’s half you and half Shiro, they’re gonna take over the goddam galaxy. But in a good way. Not a Zarkon way. We won’t even need Voltron once this thing’s potty trained.”

Allura’s eyes were still brimming with tears, her brows pinched pensively, but by some miracle she’d stopped to consider his words.

“I... I want this baby,” she murmured after a minute, so softly Lance almost missed it.

He couldn’t help but smile; of all the things, excitement was now beginning to bubble up in his chest.

“I want this baby,” Allura said more firmly.

“Y’know, when we do find Shiro, he’s gonna be so damn happy.”

Allura’s lip twitched, but it wasn’t from a need to cry.

“I... thank you, Lance.”

“I should be thanking you, you’re having a *baby*. I love babies!”

Allura frowned. “You do?”

“Hell yeah. I’m a freaking expert when it comes to kids. Okay, so not an expert, but like, I’d make a decent mid-wife.”

Allura let out a sudden chuckle, causing Lance to look at her. Though her eyes were still red and streaked with tears, Allura was smiling, a weight having lifted from her shoulders.

“What?”

“I hadn’t expected that from you.”

Lance pressed a hand to his chest, mimicking taking offense. “Are you kidding me? Man, my family is huge. Kids everywhere.”

“You helped care for them?”

Care for. That made it sound so easy. *Raised them,* his brain supplied. Lance pushed that detail aside; he had a family, that was more than others on his team had, didn’t matter if they weren’t perfect.

“Y-yeah,” he said quickly, cracking a smile. “I did.”

Whose caring for them now? Lance swallowed thickly, his skin prickling with the sudden reminder. He wondered if his mother was getting by without him; *are you kidding, they were barely scrapping through with you there.*

“So,” Lance said quickly, distracting its mind from that dangerous spiral. “When are you gonna tell the others?”

-

A good couple of hours passed by the time Lance finally emerged from Allura’s room. It had gotten late without them even realising, time slipping away as they simply talked, about Allura and Shiro, about her misplaced fears regarding the pregnancy, about... everything. Allura was having a child, that was so much to take in. Eventually they’d grown tired, and checking the clock, Lance realised most of the others would already be in bed. Thankfully that meant Coran hadn’t launched their full arsenal at that ship yet.

He left her room with a soft smile. Allura admitted she hadn’t been sleeping well, but as he stepped out the door her eyes were already drooping shut; he didn’t think she’d have any trouble sleeping tonight. Success, one team member cheered up. That just left- Lance missed a step when he spotted Keith just down the hall. Each stopped in their tracks, both boys regarding each other with suspicion.

“Hi-“

“Shouldn’t you be sleeping?”

Lance paused, taken back by Keith’s abrupt response.

“Um... so should you?”

Lance’s voice lacked the same venom as Keith’s, and true to it, he didn’t feel like arguing. The red paladin had other ideas. He crossed his arms, eyes sliding from Lance to Allura’s door. His brows furrowed, expression morphing into one Lance didn’t hesitate to label as disgust.

“Seriously, Lance?”

Lance frowned, following Keith’s disapproving gaze. “What?”

Keith just rolled his eyes, turning and taking off in the opposite direction.

“Hey! Wait!” Lance cursed as he took off after Keith, trying to keep his footsteps soft so not to wake the others.

Keith only stopped when Lance grabbed hold of his arm, whipping around to glare at the boy.

“What?” Lance demanded, not looking to start a fight but not liking the attitude Keith was giving him either.

“What’s the matter?” He prompted again, when Keith shifted his glare to the wall as if Lance should just *know*. “Did I do something?”

“You just can’t help yourself, can you?”

“I literally have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Keith scoffed, lips caught halfway between a snarl and a sneer. “Allura’s grieving, Lance. You’re really going to take advantage-“

“*What?* You think-” Lance actually laughed at Keith’s assumption, the sound bubbling from his lips before he could stop it.

Keith looked shocked, caught between yelling at Lance and trying to interpret the boy’s reaction.

“You think me and Allura are... are you serious? I was *talking* to her, Keith.”

“W-what?”

“Talking? You know, it’s when two people communicate, verbally.”

“I know that,” Keith snapped, arms tightening where he had them crossed over his chest. “But your talking to Allura is a lot more flirting and *annoying* Allura.”

Lance stifled a sigh, tilting his head back to gaze up at the ceiling. God, he was tired, couldn’t they do this another time?

“We just talked, Keith, and apologised. That’s another thing people do, say sorry, when they’ve been acting like jerks.”

He raised a brow to see if Keith would get the hint; he didn’t, or at least it didn’t show.

“We should investigate that ship,” Keith said suddenly, expertly dodging the ends of that conversation.

“No.”

Keith’s face was passive, but he had that resting scowl that looked to Lance like he was daring him to disagree.

“Why not?”

“It’s dormant, not a threat-“

“Of course it’s a threat.”

Lance took to mimicking Keith’s guarded pose. “I told Coran to keep an eye on it, if it becomes hostile, we’ll know, but right now we’ve got other problems.”

“Yeah, like what?”

“Pidge.”

Keith stuttered for a second, knowing Lance was right. Pidge was a soft spot for him, one of the very few Lance knew he had. The pair were similar in more ways than one- they’d both been kicked out the Garrison, both lost family, were both arms of Voltron and incorrigibly hot-headed; and not that it mattered much, but as far as Lance knew they were both about as straight as boiled spaghetti. Together they made an intimidating pair, and though their friendship was still in its early stages, Lance could already see the outlines of the bond they’d formed.

“That was a nasty poison,” Lance continued. “Let’s give her some time to recover before we charge into any more dangerous situations.”

Keith squared his jaw; Lance could've torn his hair out at how stubborn the boy was.

"Then I'll check it out myself."

"Um, no. You're staying here."

Keith's gaze darkened. "That's not up to you."

"Actually, it *is*."

Lance really, really didn't want to pull the black paladin card, but Keith wasn't giving him much choice. The boy's eyes were narrowed at him; they hadn't talked about this. They hadn't had the time, between the black lion first responding to Lance and the confusion surrounding the castle's malfunction. Lance realised he had no idea how Keith felt about it, about Lance taking his place. Taking Shiro's place.

"Look," he said quickly, hoping not to drift further down that path. "Pidge is still recovering, Allura's... not in a good place right now, and the whole ships acting weird. We need everyone together right now. Besides, you're not in any shape to be running after that ship."

"Excuse me?"

Lance didn't back down from he and Keith's standoff, though he was suddenly glad for the extra inch or two of height he had over the other boy.

"You heard me, Keith. You shouldn't be piloting anything right now, let alone to engaging in combat."

Keith's expression was... it was very hard to read. Lance had been expecting an immediate outburst, or for Keith to brush him off, but there were a thousand discreet emotions simmering below the surface of his skin. Then Lance realised- no one had spoken to him yet. Between the drama surrounding this new star system, no one had broached the subject of Keith's attempted sacrifice.

Lance had been meaning too, he'd planned on giving Keith an earful; it was more a selfish need, an outlet for his anger and the terror he'd felt thinking Keith was about to throw himself to his own death. He wanted to scream and shout and tear at Keith for everything he'd done wrong, not stopping to consider how the other might've been feeling. But now that that opportunity had been taken away from him, now that he'd had time to cool off...

"You shouldn't have done that."

Keith said nothing, but it was clear he knew what Lance was talking about. Anger burned in the corners of his eyes.

"It's not worth it."

A pause, Keith's brow furrowed. Lance nearly stopped there, afraid of stumbling over the next few words; but Keith needed to hear this.

"One stray Galra fighter isn't worth your life, Keith. Hell, a whole fleet isn't either. You just... you... we're not losing another paladin. Got it?"

Keith blinked, once, twice, the only inclination he'd even heard. Lance didn't like the look he was giving him, it was too much like surprise. As if Keith was surprised Lance didn't want him to die.

The thought sat rather uncomfortably with him.

“Just, uh, get some sleep,” Lance mumbled, waving him away with a hand.

He turned away before Keith could comment, wishing he could wipe that expression from his face. Keith didn’t follow, didn’t speak either, turning his head when Lance cast a glance behind him, disappearing down the hallway toward his own room. Lance was not enjoying this day.

He carried on down the hall to his room, ignoring the way the darkness seeping from the air vents seemed to beckon him. He briefly recalled what he’d told Allura- *the dangerous stuff? That’s all over. We don’t have to be afraid anymore.* Lance wished he could will away the feeling telling him he was wrong.

Chapter Notes

HIYA

thank you so much for your comments and kudos last times guys <3 they're like 40% of my life force

Kinda asking for advice here, I'm wondering if I need to up the rating of this fic to explicit just cause I wrote this chapter and was like wow that was More Violence than I had planned?? Mature is still... idk mature but if u feel i need to up it pls let me know, also feel free to suggest any tags cause I am The Worst at tagging (this is also a warning that this chapter gets gory you'll see it coming from a mile away tho)

but ya thanks for reading

(forgot to add earlier, but title comes from The Killers song, Goodnight Travel Well, which is just as fun and cheery as this fic is gonna be)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

Allura made the announcement at breakfast the next morning. Lance hadn't expected her to open up to the others so soon, but that was Allura's way- get things over with, deal with your problems, move on. Done and dusted, no concerns.

This time there were no tears. She stood confidently before them, hands planted on the table and eyes sparkling as she revealed to the rest of the team she was pregnant. Lance's heart warmed at the smile that tugged at her lips and the subtle touch she placed over her stomach. It was difficult without Shiro there, but what Allura said was true, she did want this baby.

Hunk cried, obviously; it wouldn't be a true team Voltron experience if he didn't. Pidge dropped her spoon, jaw hitting the table as her eyes lit up with excitement. She was still on the road to recovery, but most of the effects of the poison had faded from her system. Coran's reaction was the most touching; their adviser laid a hand on Allura's shoulder, his eyes brimming with pride and unshed tears as the pair regarded each other with silent smiles. No words were needed for those two, it was only too clear how happy Coran was for her.

"Oh man!" Pidge was rambling excitedly, practically jumping up and down in her seat.

A thought struck her and she gasped, turning to Keith. "Keith! You're gonna be, like, an uncle!"

That caught the boy off guard. The red paladin was sitting with a shell-shocked expression on his face, eyes on Allura but not really focused. It was almost laughable.

"W-what?" He stammered, ears prickling with a faint blush. "Shiro and I aren't actually related."

"So?" Pidge nearly shrieked. "That's a minor detail!"

Keith's mouth moved soundlessly, his expression startled but soft. Allura cracked a smile at the lost looking boy.

"I would consider it an honour," she said sincerely, careful to gauge the boy's reaction as she spoke. "If you were to be my child's uncle."

Keith was having trouble responding to that. He didn't seem to be handling the concept of *family* very well, and Lance found himself wondering about the state of Keith's own family. The red paladin had never opened up to any of them regarding that aspect of his life, save perhaps Shiro, and Lance realised he actually had no idea who Keith was related to. Did he have any siblings? It seemed unlikely; he gave the impression of an only child.

"You don't need to look so terrified," Pidge chuckled, elbowing Keith lightly.

Keith's mouth snapped shut as he turned to glare at her. "I'm not scared."

"Dude, I can practically *hear* you stressing about how to hold a baby."

"You've never held a baby?" Lance blurted.

"Um...no?"

It made sense actually, Keith didn't seem like the kind of guy to go around fussing over people newborns.

Hunk gasped, horrified by Keith's confession. "But they're so cute!"

"When they're not puking," Pidge wisely added.

"Or pooping."

"Or crying."

"They tend to be alright when they're sleeping," Lance finished.

Keith frowned. "The negatives are definitely outweighing the positives."

Lance grinned, just the thought of Keith trying to figure out how to interact with a baby providing ample amusement. He'd probably challenge it to knife fight the first time it grabbed for his hair.

"Relax, babies are great. Especially Altean ones. Oh man, do you think it'll have the cute pointy ears?"

"I mean no offence to Shiro's ears," Allura said seriously, "but your human ears are...well..."

"No need to rub it in."

Pidge puffed out her cheeks, eyes widening as another realisation overcame her. "Wow, I can't believe you and Shiro are--"

"-a conversation for another time," Allura interrupted quickly.

"On the topic of small and challenging creatures," Lance said to save Allura from discussing *that*. "What ever happened to our resident space Chihuahua?"

Pidge grimaced, her swollen eye twitching.

"Puffy is in a safe and undisclosed location which I refuse to mention with Keith in the room," Hunk said, pointedly ignoring the dark look Keith shot him.

"As long as you don't let that thing out again."

"Puffy is a good and loyal space dog," Hunk argued. "He just needs to be trained."

Lance was sure he heard Keith mutter something about Puffy needing to taste the cold clutches of the void of space, but wisely ignored it.

"I want everyone's focus to be on restoring the castle today," Allura announced, now that they'd settled over the news regarding her pregnancy. "It's vital we get it up and running so we can continue our search."

She didn't mention Shiro's name, but the others all understood, nodding in agreement.

"Coran," she added. "Any word on the dormant ship?"

"Not a peek, princess."

"Alright, we'll leave it for now. The castle is our first priority."

Lance spared a look at Keith, remembering the boy's eagerness to go chasing after the ship the night before, but Keith was enveloped in his own thoughts, staring pensively at the table as they all got up to continue with their assigned activities. Lance really hoped he'd considered what he'd told him.

-

Lance couldn't shake his nervousness as he stood before Blue in the hangar, not out of actual fear, but rather anticipation. A thousand questions formed in his mind; *was Blue still his lion? Could they still communicate? Who would pilot her? Would she still accept him?* Additional questions regarding his team, discussions rather, which he knew he needed to talk to Blue about. *But will she listen?*

Everyone was working to get the castle up and running, but with Allura's permission, Lance was going to try bonding with the lions. His lion. Lions? Hell, he had no idea what the situation was now, which was exactly why Allura advised him to sort it out. No one knew, he realised, what this meant in regards to the assignment of pilots to lions. Blue's eyes still watched him just like the first time they'd met, and Lance found some relief in that as he approached the lion.

"Hey, Blue," he greeted causally, trying to mask the nerves making his voice brittle.

Nothing. Lance's stomach flipped. Not this, he couldn't just be ignored completely. Blue was still... he needed her right now, some comfort, her familiar presence.

"Don't be like that," he tried to scold, but his voice came out on a quiver.

As if sensing his sudden distress, a low purr sounded in his mind, Blue's way of an apology. Relief hit Lance harder than he'd like. He smiled, stepping up to Blue but-

He frowned, waving a hand to try and catch his lion's attention.

"Yo, Blue, open up."

He could still hear her purring faintly, but Blue made no move to let him in. Lance couldn't ignore

the surge of unease.

“I need to talk, you gonna let me in or what?”

The silence was deafening. Lance scoffed, trying to play it off as a joke.

“Come on, is this cause Sunny stood on your paw last week?” Sunny was the name Lance had jokingly given Hunk’s lion, claiming *Yellow* was too much of a mouthful. “I made Hunk apologise, you know.”

Lance swallowed thickly, fingers itching where his hands were tucked into his pockets.

“Blue?”

Another purr vibrated through his chest, this one with feeling in it. She wasn’t exactly pushing him away but... she was. Lance’s throat tightened. He could sense the struggle Blue was going through herself while trying to turn him away, but it didn’t help that they were both finding this hard. If anything it made it worse.

“I... I know, Blue. I know I need to see the black lion, I will, but I... I just need to talk.”

Lance peered up at his lion with watery eyes, sucking in a sharp breath at the sight of the robot’s indifference. He willed his voice not to crack as he spoke, but Blue and him were close, it was difficult.

“Please. Blue, just this time, I- I need...” *Closure. Confirmation.*

Just one more time.

Lance’s face split into a grin as Blue lowered her head reluctantly, mouth opening to let him in.

“Thanks Blue!” He called, skipping up the gangway and broadcasting the swell of grateful emotions he felt to her.

The cockpit was just as he’d left it, though he hadn’t been in Blue since before the incident with the black lion and Keith. Lance settled comfortably into the pilot’s chair, refraining from kicking his feet up onto the panels in that way Blue hated. Best not to get himself thrown out right now.

Blue sent an inquisitive thought through his head, as if to say, *you wanted to talk, so talk*. Lance sighed; his lion could be so impatient, it was a wonder he was the pilot and not Keith.

“Allura’s pregnant,” he began, deciding that was a good starting point.

“I suppose you know. It’s not like Pidge was running around to all the hangers yelling about it or whatever.”

Lance chuckled fondly, secretly adoring the way the green paladin had reacted. Heck, soon she’d be drawing little *My Family* pictures for Allura to pin up on the fridge.

“She’s handling it really well,” he continued, still keeping the conversation light and simple. “But it’s gonna be hard if we don’t find Shiro soon.”

A pause; that could lead into another conversation, one Lance wasn’t quite ready to have.

“But really, it’s pretty cool. A baby’s something that could bring the team together, if not cause a lot of trouble at the same time. It’s nice, you know, its like... we’re becoming even more of a

family.”

Blue’s conscious hummed in the back of his mind like comforting static, listening, sympathising, and occasionally making fun of him. Could it be like this with Black? No way, each lion was different, this bond with Blue... Lance didn’t want to let it go.

“We need Shiro back,” Lance admitted softly.

They needed to discuss it, the things it hurt to talk about.

“And not just cause of the black lion. He’s a part of this too, it’s not the same without him. He was... everyone has a place in this- this silly family we’ve got going, even if they don’t realise it. I’m sure about it, Blue. And now he’s gonna have a kid, I... we need to find Shiro. But I don’t-“

Lance stopped himself, fingers tapping persistently against his lips. “I don’t know how.”

A pause, a gentle touch against his mind from Blue.

“It’s messing everyone up. Allura’s doing amazing; the father of her child, shit, the man she *loves*, is gone. That’s... I don’t know how she’s holding it together herself, *and* still holding us together. How am I meant to fit into that, Blue? She said she wants help, but I can’t- I don’t know how to do that. I never know what to do.”

Lance frowned as Blue pushed firmly at his mind, as if trying to grab those words away from him.

“It’s true though-“

Another push, and this time Lance was sure he heard her growl.

“Jeez, alright, don’t be such a grouchy cat.”

Lance sighed, slumping forward and resting his chin atop his arms where they sat on the control panels.

“Anyway. It’s messing stuff up. It’s...”

He groaned, frustrated, hiding his face in his arms. “Look what happened with Keith.”

Lance caught two differing reactions from Blue, one sympathetic, one amused. He could interpret the latter well enough.

“Oh I bet Red was pissed. Have you see that lion? Keith stubs his toe and she starts world war four.”

The thought that Blue found Red just as infuriating as Lance found Keith was somewhat entertaining, but it didn’t help how worried Lance actually was.

“I’m worried about him,” he admitted, the sight of Keith and his lion plummeting toward the surface in a fiery arc still plaguing him.

“He nearly died. He *would’ve* died if Black hadn’t... and he knew that, Blue. It wasn’t an accident, he was going to kill himself to get that fighter ship and it’s *not* okay.”

Lance slumped back in his seat, fingers playing with an elastic band he kept around his wrist for exactly the reason of distracting himself with it now.

“No one talked to him. I don’t even... Pidge shouted a bit, but Pidge is a kid. Allura or Coran, or... I should have said more. He can’t do that, doesn’t he understand?”

“He’s been acting so differently since Shiro’s disappearance,” Lance continued, thankful for the comforting images Blue sent him.

“We all are, I know. And he has a good reason too, he and Shiro were close, I *know* that.”

Lance ignored the flicker of jealousy saying that brought out in him, and hoped Blue would to.

“And I don’t think it should be the same, without Shiro of course things are going to be different. Nothing’s going to be right until we get him back, but the rest of us have to keep going.”

Lance huffed, a small smile urging the corner of his lip up. “Like on Earth. You remember that winter I told you about, when mom lost her job? That was the shittiest. But we still held it together, you know? And that Christmas, when we couldn’t even...”

Lance chuckled softly, a warm feeling filling his chest as he opened up his memories to Blue.

“But that was the best Christmas, cause Rosie had us decorate the tree with those dumb drawings she’d done and... I know it’s not the same. But Blue, nothing bad happened *between* us that Christmas. Bad things were happening to us, but no one... no one left that Christmas, and no one fought. And it’s like now, cause its difficult. But I need to hold us together, Blue. Cause if we lose someone else, if Keith gets hurt or *dies*, I-“

The band snapped, slipping from his fingers, but Lance didn’t bother to retrieve it, staring glumly at the panel as Blue sent a pulse of empathy through his mind.

“I can’t lose him.”

Saying that was one thing, *meaning* it was another. It meant feeling the weight of that confession; Lance meant those words with every fibre of his being.

“I-I can’t lose any of them,” he continued come Blue’s questioning prod at his mind. “This team needs to stay together, especially now. But it seems like he doesn’t care enough, or doesn’t think we care, he’s just... throwing himself away.”

Blue was quiet; not despondent, but she mirrored his own wistfulness.

“I don’t know what to do. I’m not... what am I? Am I still your paladin?”

A thousand feelings and images flooded Lance’s mind, memories, bonds, emotions; he’d always be her paladin. But there was a message there too, an apology of sorts. They’d always be bonded, but there were other responsibilities he was meant to take on.

“I’m not exactly black paladin material,” Lance grumbled.

He was hit with a sudden burst of images, specific events he’d either shared with Blue or they’d experience together.

Lance instructing Pidge and Hunk in the simulator at the Garrison, Lance leading them to the castle of lions, sacrificing himself protecting Coran, comforting Hunk after their first encounter with the Galra, reasoning logically with Keith on the Balmera, taking down Sendak, suggesting a change to their battle plan to Shiro, diving after the red lion as it fell-

“Okay I get it, calm down, alright?”

Lance laughed at the cranky thought he got from Blue at that.

“I’m just saying, I kinda have no idea what I’m doing right now. You can’t deny that.”

Blue didn’t, but Lance still got the feeling she was trying to support him.

“What else is new?” He sighed, wondering what other gossip he could discuss with his lion.

“Had a shitty dream the other night, didn’t broadcast that to you did I?”

Blue was both concerned and curious, so he obviously hadn’t accidentally shared those thoughts.

“Yeah, I was underground,” he murmured, confirming his lion’s doubts.

Sometimes Blue knew him a little too well.

“What happened? I don’t know, not much. It was more just this *feeling* I got, like something was coming for me.”

That caught Blue’s attention properly. A low growl rumbled the cockpit, protective almost.

“It was a dream, Blue. Made me uncomfortable about getting stuck here though. I don’t know what it is, I just don’t like it. This star system... that planet was alright until we found the stupid cave. Those drawings make me uneasy, which is dumb.”

A pause, he tried to figure out what Blue was saying; it was tricky when the lion’s didn’t use actual words.

“No, I’m not telling them.”

A sharp prod at his conscience, the equivalent of Blue raising an eyebrow.

“It was a dream! What do you want me to do? Hey Allura, could we put all other problems aside and hightail it out’ve this system because there’s a cave on a planet hundreds of miles away that’s dark and scary?”

There was no comment from Blue. Lance scoffed, appreciating his lion’s sympathy, but once again amused by how unrealistic they could be about the solutions to their paladins’ happiness.

“I’ll handle it, same as always.”

Lance paused as a different sort of question emerged from Blue’s flowing conscience.

“No, she wasn’t there.”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

“Blue...”

His lion didn’t seem convinced, and Lance tugged anxiously at the sleeves of his jacket as Blue’s tangible concern met his stubborn façade.

“If Allita was down there I’d know. It was just me. This wasn’t a memory, Blue, it was just a bad dream.”

Silence. Blue wouldn't argue with that, but Lance felt the warm tendrils of compassion wrapping around his mind.

"Thanks," he mumbled, swiping at his nose to hide the way his expression weakened.

"God," he muttered, already feeling lighter having unloaded some of his problems, but still burdened with a million more. "I just hope they're doing okay."

"I know mom had that new job, and Theo's stuff was going alright, but... I hate not *knowing*. If something happened, if... they don't even know what happened to me, Blue. It's one thing not helping them, but if they think I'm dead that's gonna- how's mami going to deal with that?"

Blue's conscience was like a warm weight embracing him, but it couldn't entirely erase his unease. Still, what would he do without her? Could he ever form a bond with the black lion like this?

"They could be struggling. We've been there before and that's when I was still there to help and-" Lance sucked in a sharp breath, fingers tapping agitatedly against his knees.

"I miss them. I hate not knowing if they're okay."

As much as she wanted, Lance knew there was nothing Blue could do to change that. He did appreciate the comforting images she sent his way; *the ocean, thunderstorms, the thrill of a free-fall*.

"How long do you reckon we'll still be out-"

Lance jumped at the shrill siren that suddenly sprang to life throughout the hangar; Blue projected thoughts just as confused as his own.

"What the hell-"

"*Lance! Where are you? Are you still on board?*" Allura's frantic voice came over the coms.

Lance cocked an eyebrow, and felt Blue's similar reaction. "Yeah, I'm here. I'm in Blue. What's up?"

The answer that came wasn't directed to him, but he still caught wind of it.

"*Then who left?*"

A storm cloud settled over Lance and he grit his teeth, already rising from the pilot's chair.

"Keith."

He was ready to run straight from his lion, but froze with his foot in the door at the last second as Blue suddenly tugged harshly at his mind, as though catching him on the end of a tether.

Wait.

Lance frowned, turning to his lion, hovering just inside the doorway. He waited, but Blue didn't say anything more, almost as if... she felt just as Lance did, suddenly too afraid to speak lest their voices fail them. Lance gripped the doorframe, heart still racing and urged forward by the alarm, but stopping for this one brief moment.

"Blue..." his voice quivered, eyes burning as he swallowed the lump in his throat.

“Thanks Blue.”

A low growl filled his ears, urging him out and toward the bridge with the utmost affection. Lance took off running, sparing one more glance toward his lion as he retreated from the hanger. One word hung between them, untouched and holy, thread on a loom they were spun into anyway.

Goodbye.

-

“For the love of- what’s happening now?”

Lance didn’t mean to come across sounding quite so angry, and regretted making Pidge jump as he came crashing through the doors leading to the bridge; but lately he’d found the room to be in more disarray than he’d like, and this time was no different.

Allura was hunched over the controls, and Lance suddenly reckoned she’d have no trouble parenting this baby at all, given she was currently the sole carer for an additional spaceship full of children. Coran was hovering beside her, nervously spluttering apologies as Allura pointedly ignored him and continued working. Every couple of seconds he’d turn around to shout something at Hunk, who was juggling a number of tools as he tinkered with one of the control boards.

“Oh, Lance, you *are* here,” said Pidge, looking up from her computer.

Was she ever not on that thing?

“Of course I’m-“ Lance yelled, waving his hand at the scene before them. “What’s happening?”

“Wow, stress less dude.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re panicking. Quit being so stressed.”

Lance spluttered, gesturing between Pidge and the chaos encompassing the bridge’s controls.

“Quit being *stressed*? I’m sorry, can we revise this weeks events? I’m the new black paladin, Allura’s pregnant, you just got poisoned by a freaking... Chihuahua, the castle took us to a haunted star system and stopped working, and Keith is... okay, where the hell is Keith?”

“Oh yeah,” said Pidge, peering at him through puffy red eyes. “You know that unidentified ship that was hailing us and you were all, don’t approach the unidentified ship, well Keith just left the hanger and is approaching the unidentified ship.”

Lance slapped a hand over his eyes, groaning. *Of course.*

“No thanks to Coran sending out a *false alarm*,” Allura bit out, finally glancing up long enough to meet Lance’s eye.

“Coraaaaan-“

“I was taking necessary precautions!” The elder man insisted.

“Dragging Keith from training to falsely inform him that we are under attack is not a necessary precaution,” Hunk piped up from where he was being crushed under the weight of a section of electric boards.

“It was a system error! Which exactly why I need you to fix this,” Coran tutted, rapping his knuckles against the faulty bit of panel and sending Hunk toppling over with a yelp.

“Besides, it wasn’t as if I expected him to just run off!”

“It’s Keith! What else did you expect?”

“What...” Lance trailed off helplessly.

“Did you have to get *Keith*?” Pidge continued, looking sceptically at Coran. “You couldn’t have picked anyone less temperamental?”

“Where’s he now?” Lance turned to Allura in the hopes of a straightforward answer.

“Coran falsely relayed a message-“

“-the computers fault, not mine-“

“-and believed we were under attack by the ship on our scanners. Keith’s gone after it.”

“*What?* To do what? Don’t tell me he’s going to try blow himself up again- *shit!*”

“Where are you going?” Hunk called as Lance took off running back toward the doors.

“I’m going after Keith!”

“He’s muted his coms!” Allura warned just before he left the room. “I’m trying to get through but he’s not responding!”

-

“Why’s he always gotta be such an *idiot*!” Lance yelled at no one in particular as he powered up the black lion.

He hadn’t attempted to go to Blue; that goodbye between them didn’t seem like something easily taken back. Black it was then.

Lance grimaced as the machine jolted; he wasn’t accustomed to this lion’s controls yet, nor had they bonded at all.

“Sorry... so, how many times do you end up saving this idiot, huh?”

He was surprised to receive an actual response from the black lion, a couple of images of Black grabbing Red out of near death situations. Maybe they *could* bond over their mutual frustrations.

Lance scoffed, piloting them out into open space. “Too many times.”

The ship could just be seen, quite a far way off, but definitely visible.

“Keith? Can you hear me?”

Nothing. He’d muted his coms, that or he just wasn’t replying. *What a goddam idiot.*

“Keith, you there?”

Lance grit his teeth, kicking the black lion into full power and flying fast toward the ship. He tried to get a visual on the red lion, but they were too far away; the ship itself was no more than a pale

smudge.

“It’s a false alarm!” Lance snapped into the coms, talking consistently in the hopes Keith could at least hear him. “There’s no attack, don’t do anything stupid!”

The black lion differed largely from Blue, but Lance was fairly capable of pushing it into overdrive, zipping through the air with the sole intent of reaching that ship as fast as possible.

“Still just white noise, Allura. He’s not responding.”

“I can’t get through either!”

Lance cursed, loudly. The ship hadn’t proved hostile so far, but if Keith came at it guns blazing, then what? His heart was beating up his throat, the situation all too familiar.

“Keith if you can hear me-“

“This is Keith, I’m coming back.”

Lance’s relief was short lived as renewed anger suddenly overcame him.

“What the hell, Keith! What were you thinking running off?”

“Just go back to the castle. I’m on my way. I’m towing the ship in with me.”

Keith’s voice sounded... different. He didn’t snap, didn’t take the bait; he was barely effected by Lance’s outburst. *What the hell?*

“You and me are having *words*, Keith.”

Lance swore, not caring if the others could hear, trying not to dwell on what Keith’s silence meant as he turned the black lion around and headed back to the castle.

-

Lance was out of his lion in record speed, marching across the room toward the red lion before the others even reached hangar.

Keith had just used Red to set down the ship down within the hangar. It was a surprisingly small vessel, a little over a hundred feet long, small enough for Red to have towed in with her from open space. Lance wasn’t concerned about that though; he trusted Keith not to bring a hostile ship onto the castle, it meant it was either empty or contained allies. Neither of them were even in their armour, he realised, marching toward the red lion with renewed purpose.

“Keith!” He yelled, catching the attention of the red paladin as he stepped from his own lion with- were his legs shaking?

Lance didn’t have time to stop and think about it. His eyes were aflame with anger as he made his way toward the other boy, a thousand curses on the tip of his tongue.

“What the hell?” Were the first words off his lips as he neared Keith.

The other boy was refusing to meet his eye, staring at the ground as Lance strode towards him.

“What *was* that?”

Lance's accusation came with a push. He thrust a hand out, into Keith's chest, expecting the boy the counteract him. That's usually what it was, two equal forces that met each other with matched fury, balancing each other out. He'd shout at Keith, Keith would return the insult. He'd push, like he was now, and Keith would push back. Except this time-

Lance grabbed the front of Keith's shirt before he fell back, not expecting the simple shove to have him falling over. Keith was more than strong enough to withstand a hand on his chest; so why, Lance wondered, did he stumble, hands flying out to grab a hold of Lance's own before he hit the floor.

"You can't do that!" Lance pushed on, desperate to elicit some sort of response.

Taking advantage of the grip he had on Keith's shirt, he shook him, just lightly, trying to extract a reaction. *Fight back*. But Keith welcomed the action, eyes downcast, unable to look at Lance, his body simply following the motion of that action. *Something's wrong*. A little of Lance's anger drained at the sight of him like that, so defeated.

"Keith?"

"Keith!" The sound of the hangar doors opening hailed the arrival of the others.

Lance pressed in, loosening his grip on Keith's shirt, trying to catch his eye.

"Keith?" Softer, but still no response.

Keith's hands were definitely shaking, brows drawn and eyes fixed furiously on the ground. Footsteps were coming toward them but lance ignored that, frowning, trying to figure out what was the matter with his team member.

"Hey, look at me. Keith? Are you hurt?"

Keith's head lifted slowly to look at Lance, and it was like he was peering through a veil, trying to glimpse a proper picture of the boy through the glaze over his eyes. He was looking very pale, even by his standards, and Lance couldn't ignore the slight tremble of his lips. *What did this too you?* Puzzled and battling down the surge of protectiveness, he looked past Keith to the ship. It lay unmoving in the hangar, and didn't *look* damaged, but Lance couldn't be sure. Finally surrendering his hold on Keith, he made to step around him, to approach the ship.

A hand shot out, a gloved palm and bare fingers settling gently against his chest to stop him. Keith was looking at him, his eyes wide and afraid. He was visibly distressed, something in his look *pleading* with Lance. Pleading for what?

"No."

His voice was faint, just a whisper, so entirely unlike the Keith that Lance knew.

"What?"

"Don't go in there," Keith said with a little more conviction, fingers curling into Lance's jacket.

Lance faltered, never having seen the other boy looking so openly defenceless. He'd heard mentions from Shiro, words here and there, shared between him and Allura, regarding how vulnerable the boy could really be. There was one conversation he'd overheard by accident, shortly after their visit to the Marmora headquarters. *Never seen him look like that, Allura... was so scared... should have seen his face...hurting him...saw it in his eyes...* Was this what Shiro meant?

Keith expression nearly broke him; years of his roughly constructed menacing facade fell away in favour of the scared and helpless face Keith held now.

“Why?”

Lance’s feelings were a mess. Anger still bubbled at the surface, but seeing Keith like this had suddenly turned the tides. The boy didn’t respond, shaking his head lightly.

“Why’d you bring the ship back if you don’t want us going in?”

Keith stumbled as Lance took a step forward, refusing to surrender his hold.

“I-I didn’t know what to do,” he admitted quietly, almost drowned out by the clatter as the others reached them. “Please. You don’t-“

But Lance had heard enough. He pried Keith’s fingers from his jacket, pushing past him and walking toward the ship, almost certain the other was following him. He needed to know what had made Keith act like this, what scared him. Was he driven by anger at Keith, or at what had frightened the other boy? Lance wasn’t sure, but he needed to know what was on that ship. The main entrance lay at the back of the ship, the controls easy enough to manually override since the ship’s power appeared dead. It was a carrier ship, which Lance, an ex-cargo pilot, had no trouble figuring out. *Was it a Galra carrier? What was it holding?*

“No, Pidge.”

Keith had found his voice, and Lance heard him ordering the youngest paladin back sharply. Lance glanced over his shoulder as he entered another sequence into the controls- just a few more seconds and he’d have this door open. Keith yanked Pidge back sharply, applying little of the care he usually reserved for her. Whatever was inside, he clearly wasn’t letting Pidge near the ship.

“Lance-“

Had the ship lost pressure or something? Lance knew that could paint an ugly picture, but there were no signs of sudden decompression. A loud hiss- the doors opened. There was an argument taking place between Pidge and Keith, but Lance wasn’t going to dwell on it. Last he saw, Keith was trying to hand the green paladin over to Allura like one might pass back a crying baby; except Pidge was swearing at him, not crying, and demanding to know why she couldn’t follow Lance into the ship.

The first thing to hit him was the smell. Even with good air filtration, things could get smelly in space when you didn’t have the option of opening window. But this was different to the *Hunk forgot the cookies in the oven*, or *Pidge’s experiment backfired exponentially* kind of smell. No, this was- Lance’s stomach flipped, bile rising up in his throat. He clamped a sleeve over his nose and mouth, continuing up the ramp despite the smell burning his throat and literally making his eyes water.

The inside of the ship was stark white with fluorescent blue lighting, clinical almost, though the airlock sat on a slightly lower level, so he couldn’t yet see the full interior. There wasn’t a peep of noise as Lance made his way across the small airlock and started up the stairs leading into the main cabin. His teammates were still arguing outside, though the presence of footsteps on the ramp suggested someone was following him in. He hoped it wasn’t Pidge. He knew it wasn’t Hunk, there was no way that guy could stomach this smell.

What *was* the smell? Lance wanted to believe it was chemical spill, a botanical experiment gone

wrong, but now fully inside the interior of the ship, there was no mistaking it; it smelt of death. Rot and blood and decay, things one could pinpoint without even having experienced the likes of before. It was rancid, and Lance's pace quickened as he reached the top of the steps. He could barely breathe, making it even harder to ready himself before stepping fully into the cabin. *You're going to see something horrible*, he told himself, at least trying to eliminate the element of surprise. *Something that terrified Keith, something he didn't want you to see, and won't let Pidge see*. Lance convinced himself he knew what was coming; this was the duty of the black paladin, the first line of defence.

The second Lance emerged into the cabin, he knew he wasn't prepared. His chest hurt at how hard his heart beat, hammering at the confines of his lungs as if trying to escape the cage it was drowning in. *It's so much worse than you expected*. Lance gasped, forgetting the sickening stench of that air. Keith's gaunt expression, the reserved tone of his voice, his silence over the coms- it all made sense. He knew he'd find death, he knew the picture wouldn't be pretty, but nothing prepared him for the state of the ship's interior.

"Lance..." It was Keith who'd followed him back into the ship, his voice falling flat against the dark stains on the floor.

Dark, *brown*, the blood was too thick and crusted to have retained its crimson colour. Yet on top of it, fresher blood, which stuck to Lance's shoes as he took a shaky step deeper into the room. *Look at them. Look at their faces*. He was barely breathing, body rejecting the air that had been shared with them, with *this*. He wished he'd listened to Keith.

There were maybe fifteen of them, but Lance couldn't be sure; in some cases it was hard to differentiate. He shuddered, forcing himself to look. The group was typical of those they found on Galra slave ships, prompting him to believe this was an abandoned Galra cargo carrier. But Galra hadn't killed them, Galra couldn't have done this. It almost appeared as if they'd done it too themselves.

Spread throughout the cabin, the corpses of all fifteen passengers were crammed messily into any available opening, jammed into narrow spaces so violently it lead Lance to believe that may have been the cause of death of many. He didn't want to look at them, didn't want to accept the sight of their mangled bodies, but he needed to make sense of it. The closest, a humanoid alien, was packed into the space where a sliding door should have retreated into. The gap was no wider than his arm, yet somehow his entire arm, shoulder, and a large section of his chest had been squeezed into the space, in addition to a portion of his leg and- Lance looked away, refusing to acknowledge the state of the man's head. It looked as if he'd died trying to shove himself further into the gap, oblivious to the blood and bits of flesh scraped from his body as he forced himself into the small space. Lance's stomach had tied itself in too many knots to even be ill.

The rest were in a similar state; one being lay crushed beneath the control board, another's body contorted to fill an open air vent, a pair were stuck between a sliding door, their flattened remains almost unrecognisable. Crushed flesh and bone, abundant puddles of blood, like juice squeezed from a piece of fruit. Lance was shaking so hard it was a wonder his legs didn't give out. It was easily the most revolting thing he'd seen. *What did this?* He didn't understand, how anything could have forced all of them into those disgusting positions. In a way it looked like they'd done it to themselves, but they couldn't have, they *couldn't*-

Lance turned around, locking eyes with Keith. Allura had followed them in as well, he noticed, and now the Altean stood with a hand clamped over her mouth, eyes brimming with tears as she drank in the gory sight. Keith was refusing to look; he'd seen it all already, Lance realised. He must have boarded the ship when he first intercepted it, seen this and- *I didn't know what to do*. Lance didn't

know either. Helplessly, he looked to Allura, but she couldn't seem to draw her eyes away from the lifeless hand of an alien crushed beneath a bench.

"W-what happened," he whispered.

Not a word from either of his teammates. Lance hadn't exactly expected an answer. Keith's normally hard gaze was crumbling, as if he was caught on the verge of apologising for ever bringing the ship on board. They needed to get out. Lance didn't know what had happened, but another minute in this ship, surrounded by death and decay, and one of them was going to lose it. In fact, he barely trusted his own ears when he heard the first voice.

Lance turned back toward the interior of the cabin very slowly, Keith's eyes falling from his and following the sound over his shoulder. *Please no, please god no.* It was nothing more than a breath of air at first, a slight disturbance, awoken by the interruption of their own presence. Lance's eyes widened in horror as the alien nearest them drew a breath of air, their chest rattling, flooded with blood and bodily fluid where they were crammed into the gap by the door. How was that possible? Their body was so... his eyes fell to the man's face, or what was left of it. Their lips were moving. A sound, so small and discrete Lance couldn't make it out. On instinct he stepped closer. The man's lips were still moving, forming a word, one word. His eyes... the eye still in tact was fixed on him, on Lance.

"...Lance..."

So quiet it almost slipped away. But, just like the smallest pinprick of a needle will still draw blood, the word hit Lance like a barrelling truck. Not just a word, his *name*.

"Lance."

Lance choked, automatically reaching behind him, grabbing for the others, for someone, anyone. Keith caught a hold of his hand, then his arm, gripping Lance just as tightly, the terrified pair holding onto each other as they watched the corpse-like alien splutter out Lance's name.

"...Lance."

Another. Lance turned faster this time, bumping into Keith, who just held onto him tighter, fingers digging painfully into Lance's arm. *How were they alive? How did they know him?* He looked at them in turn as each alien, no matter the state of their body, came to life, reaching out and calling to him. Lance didn't recognise a single one, so how did they know who he was?

"Lance-" another voice, strained and raspy, from an alien wedged into the small slot of the air vent.

A hand reached out to him and he stumbled back. *How are they alive?* Lance had no idea what to do, too afraid to think of whether they should help, try to extract- no, it was impossible, they were so injured, so horribly disfigured he could barely believe he was hearing them speak. *It's a dream, it's just another dream.* But everything was happening with such clarity; the stench of stale air, the slick blood on the floor, Keith's fingers digging into his arm, his own laboured breaths, and most of all the morbid din, the awful symphony of slurred repetitions of his name. *Lance, Lance, LanceLanceLance-* they bled together, from crooked limbs and bloody lips and pulverised flesh, calling for him, as if scared of him and longing for him all the same.

As if riling each other up, the voices grew louder, until Lance was sure the rest of their team outside could hear. They spluttered, choking on their own blood as they called out to him, nothing else, just his name. Whatever faces were intact all turned to him, their bloodshot eyes boring into

him. There was something so inhuman about it; no cries of pain, no pleas for help, or death even, given the state of their bodies. Limbs that should have been broken lifted to grab for him, chests where broken ribs protruded from heaved with broken breaths, fingers blue from blood loss curled toward him, eyes that bugged from swollen sockets watched him, and from where their mouths should have been silent, sealed shut with crusted blood and mangled skin, came the voices.

“Lance...Lance...Lance...”

Over and over, each individual at their own pace and tone, some barely more than a gurgled sob, others speaking with burning clarity. And Lance couldn't move. The hairs on his neck stood on end, spine rigid and cold, his short breaths turning the rancid air in front of him. His hand stayed slotted firmly in Keith's, each too terrified to move, anchoring themselves to the feel of flesh that didn't match the sight of a dozen decaying bodies.

“Lance-“ a croaked, crooked voice, from the man nearest to them.

He still stood, somewhat, at eye level, half his body wedged into the slot for the door. The arm that wasn't trapped reached out, gnarled fingers tracing the air in front of Lance's face. Lance stayed stuck, as firmly rooted to the spot as the corpses were hammered into their respective places. Such a small distance between him and this man, or whatever remained of the alien. A tug, a bodily thrust forward as the man tried to pull his body free of the gap, reaching for Lance. An inch or so of his shoulder broke free, accompanied by the wet rip of flesh it took to remove that portion of him from the wall. Lance blinked at the fingers that came closer, so close to reaching him, taunting almost, pleading for him to fall into their embrace.

The voices reached their peak, the man's eye widening as he made one last futile attempt to grasp the boy. The tiniest pull on his hand had Lance stepping back, just an inch, putting a breadth more space between them. Then, as suddenly as a chorus of bird calls falls flat as the flock takes flight, the voices died down, fading one by one in a slow decline of rasps and whispers, until nothing remained of their show but the slow drip of blood down the walls from their freshly opened wounds. Lance shook, his body feeling limp and eyes unmoving as he watched the beings settle back into place.

A hand grabbed his arm, then Keith's, and he stumbled as Allura dragged the stunned pair forcefully toward the door. His eyes never left the array of bloody corpses. None of them were breathing now.

Chapter End Notes

(hey wat if u just kept Lance's siblings names the same in all ur fics hey wat if no)

Chapter Notes

hi!

sorry this took so long to update! i've been finishing up my other fic and work was suddenly like... what if we just... fuck her up

Thanks so much for being patient and reading and leaving nice comments :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

The water was scalding hot where it hit Lance's skin, but he couldn't find it in himself to turn the temperature down. No, he *wanted* it to burn. He'd been standing in the shower for well over an hour, and as long as the water was still hot, he had no intention of moving. His skin tingled, burning; *good*. He'd stay until every layer of skin that came in contact with the cursed air in that ship had been burnt away. The air was clogged with steam, so thick he could barely see. He imagined it filling his lungs, chasing out the rot from within. It burned and burned until he was numb, but he still didn't feel clean. Lance shut his eyes, trails of water dripping over his brow as he forced his head under the stream.

After pulling Keith and him from the ship, Allura had wasted no time in ordering Coran to close the hangar off. Lance didn't register what happened after that; flashes of Pidge and Hunk's concerned faces raced through his mind, he knew Keith must've let go of his arm eventually. Allura dispersed them quickly, sending the others off to do god knows what, and hustling herself, Lance, and Keith into a decontamination chamber. He hadn't felt clean after that either. So here he was, trying to burn off actual layers of skin in the showers, distracting himself from whatever was happening outside.

It took a long time for Lance to remove himself from the shower; shutting off the water was one thing, dragging his feet toward the rack of towels to dry himself was another, it was tempting to just stay in the chill of cold air. He sat in his room, alone, for a solid few hours, just staring at his hands, so unresponsive he ignored even Hunk's hesitant knock on his door. At an hour he was sure the rest were in bed, or at least doing whatever the hell they usually were when pretending to be asleep, Lance made his way to the bridge.

He wasn't surprised to find Allura standing before the large window, staring thoughtfully out at the dark folds of space. She spared a glance over her shoulder as Lance made his way toward her, not bothering to announce his presence. Allura's arms were wrapped around her middle protectively, and Lance soon mirrored her pose, gripping his own arms for some kind of comfort.

"I can't sleep," he explained, prompted by Allura's inquisitive look.

"Did you try?"

Lance didn't reply.

“Me neither.”

They fell into uncomfortable silence, ignoring their own harrowed reflections and gazing out at the stars. This system’s star burnt dully in the distance; it was a small star, not very bright, simply a point for the singular planet to orbit about. *Darkness*. The image of that planet in the cave, so dark and foreboding, played into Lance’s thoughts. He knew the two weren’t linked; the cave paintings and ship of dead passengers were separate incidents, but both had Lance shaken. *What did it mean?*

“What did you do with the ship?” Lance asked eventually.

Allura’s gaze never left the window, but her ears twitched at the sound of his voice.

“I had it incinerated.”

“But the passengers...”

“They were dead. After... they’re dead.”

Lance sighed, heavy and drawn out.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t know how to even start.”

Allura tugged on the shawl she had slung over her shoulders.

“Just say anything, whatever you’re thinking. It will help.”

“How did they know me?” Lance blurted, knowing he’d need little to prompt him to talk before he’d be spilling everything.

“I don’t know.”

“And why- why were they like that? Why respond to me? God, Allura, I don’t understand any of it. What *did* that to them?”

Allura was looking at him with- was that pity?

“I wish I knew, Lance. We... all we’ve discovered is that it was a Galra cargo ship. It looked like the prisoners may have been piloting it themselves, so an escape perhaps. Other than that...”

Lance drew a shuddery breath, losing himself in the vast expanse of darkness before them.

“It was so horrible,” he whispered. “It was so awful.”

Allura ducked her head, no doubt disturbed by the memory of those corpses.

“Thank you,” he stuttered. “For getting us out of there, I don’t know what happened, I just, I couldn’t-“

“It’s alright to be afraid.”

“I know, it’s just...” Lance gnawed on his bottom lip, agitated.

“What is it?”

“For a bit, it... it felt like they were blaming me, like *I’d* done that to them.”

“How could that even occur to you, Lance?”

Allura turned to him fully, looking shocked.

“You had nothing to do with that, you can’t possibly think that because they said your name you played any role in...in... something evil did that, Lance. You are not to blame. I don’t know how or why they recognised you, but don’t look at it that way. Please.”

Lance glanced at his feet, the memory of their harrowed voices weighing down on him.

“We should have gone to the ship sooner.”

Allura straightened her shoulders, staring back out the window. “No. I think they were like that already.”

“It still...”

“We’ll find who did this,” said Allura firmly. “We will find them, and we’ll make them pay.”

Lance grimaced, working up the courage to look her in the eye. “But Allura, *what* did that?”

There was no immediate reply, so he pushed on.

“You saw them, what... what could have possibly done that to them? It was- shit, it was *inhuman*.”

Allura looked like she wanted to lie, tell him some distorted version of the truth to comfort him. Instead, she sighed heavily, bravely facing off with the dark void.

“I don’t know.”

Lance worried his lower lip between his teeth, daring himself to look deep into the darkness before them. It was unsettling. Normally, he found solace staring out into space, but since they’d come to this system, he’d been avoiding looking out the window as much as possible. *Why? What’s wrong with you?* There was just something that felt different about this system; perhaps the fact that they’d come here involuntarily, or that he was already frightened by his dream. Regardless, he’d been afraid of this system before they even detected the ship. That fact bothered him.

“Does this place feel strange to you?” Lance asked suddenly, unable to stop himself.

Allura quirked a brow. “It’s not ideal, but, no. Why?”

“I just...” Lance’s fingers curled into tense fists, staring through his reflection at the dark emptiness encasing the star. “I know it’s stupid, a-and I’m overreacting. But it just-“

He sucked in a sharp breath, why was this so hard to admit?

“It feels like there’s something out there. L-like it knows we’re here. It feels like there’s something watching me.”

Lance expected Allura to either brush him off or admit to feeling the exact same thing, but she did neither. A hand settled gently on his arm, forcing him to tear his eyes away from the window.

“You’re frightened, Lance. That’s okay. That ship was a terrible thing to stumble across.”

Lance elected not to mention that he’d felt that way long before they found the ship.

“There’s a lot on your mind. Besides, as the black paladin, you have to adjust to feeling the presence of all five lions. The feeling that something is watching you? It’s the lions, their conscience trying to connecting with yours.”

That... actually made a lot of sense. A little of the worry seeped from Lance’s shoulder’s.

“I know there may be no chance of us getting any sleep, but we’ve all had enough to worry about for the past few days.”

Allura smiled thinly, and there was a trace of that playfulness in her eyes that always made her look a lot younger. Or perhaps just reflected her actual age.

“I managed to dig out an old photo album from Coran’s youth.”

Allura’s grin spread as Lance begin to smile too.

“You wanna see it?”

-

Lance woke to the definite sound of snoring. He came to slowly, chasing away traces of a bad dream he couldn’t quite recall. He remembered drifting off beside Allura on the couch in the common room, snickering wholeheartedly at the collection of Coran’s baby pictures, and now... Yup, someone was definitely snoring, and loudly. Last time Lance checked, he wasn’t a snorer. In addition to that sound there was... laughter? He cracked an eye open, squinting at the castle’s bright lights and trying to sit up groggily. Falling asleep on the couch was definitely not the best idea in terms of comfort. He was dimly aware of someone’s head on his stomach, and drinking in the shock of white hair, he realised it was Allura. *Allura* was snoring like that?

The click of a camera drew Lance back to his senses. He flailed, untangling his arms from where they were awkwardly folded over his chest; he’d been sleeping in a half-sitting position. If the snoring was coming from Allura, then the laughter-

“Our fearless leaders.”

Pidge. Lance turned his attention forward, already glowering at what he knew he’d find. Pidge was still decked out in her pyjamas, but happily sporting a tablet, which she used to snap one more picture. Hunk and Keith were with her too, Hunk hopping from one foot to the other trying not to laugh at the no doubt absurd sight of Lance and Allura asleep on the couch. Keith was... glaring at him? It was too early for this.

“Oh, this ones my favourite,” Pidge announced, swivelling the tablet so Lance could see the picture of himself and Allura.

Her mouth hung open from snoring just the way she still was now, and he was definitely drooling. *Charming.*

“What the hell, Pidge.”

“Sorry,” Hunk said, not sounding sorry, as the youngest paladin just gloated over her photo collection. “We came to wake you guys up, and couldn’t find you until we came here.”

“Pictures Zarkon should never see,” Pidge piped up. “Fearless leaders one and two gracefully asleep.”

Lance glared at her.

“Yeah, well...” he gave Allura a little push, and her snores came to an abrupt stop. “Fearless leader number, I don’t know which you are. Please wake up. You’re crushing me.”

Allura came too with even less grace than Lance, snorting and rubbing her bleary eyes. She stared blankly at a spot on the wall for a few moments, rubbing at a crick in her neck. Lance dared another look at Keith, but now the boy was stubbornly ignoring him. *Why?*

“Not to say that you aren’t, literally always perfect,” said Hunk in reference to Allura. “But when we get back to Earth, you’re gonna freaking love coffee.”

-

Five minutes and a walk down the hall later, Lance stumbled into the interaction he’d been hoping to avoid. This time it was Keith who came after him first. Lance was nearly to his room, going in search of clean clothes and a toothbrush, when Keith stepped into his path, arms crossed stubbornly.

“You need to stop.”

Lance just blinked at him, trying to pat down his fluffy mop of morning hair in case that was the reason Keith was staring at him so intently.

“Uh...”

“Stop lying and acting like you don’t know what I’m talking about.”

Keith looked tired; his whole body was tensed, skin paler than usual and eyes skittish. He didn’t look like he’d slept at all. Lance felt a pang of guilt; it wasn’t just him and Allura who’d seen the horrors on that ship, it was Keith too. Keith *found* them, and no one had come to comfort him.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m saying,” Keith spat, taking an aggressive step forward, “leave Allura alone.”

“Leave A- *what?* Dude, did you get any sleep?”

Keith ignored the trace of genuine concern in Lance’s question, pushing on.

“She’s *pregnant*, Lance. Is that really not enough to stop you?”

“Stop me what? You think I’m flirting with her? You seriously think that?”

“Have you ever not? It’s not a joke anymore, Lance. She’s pregnant, and her and Shiro are together. It’s not fair on her-“

“Wow wow wow, stop. Allura’s my *friend*, Keith, jeez. I’m not tryna take advantage of her, who-what the hell, dude? You seriously don’t think Allura has more self-respect than that?”

“No, I know she does but-“

“Then why are you getting snappy with me?”

Lance could feel the familiar sensation of anger rising within him. He knew he shouldn’t start a fight with Keith, the other clearly wasn’t in a good space, but when he was just so *insistent*-

“Because you pulling shit like that with Allura makes it seem like we’ve given up on Shiro!”

“What the *hell*? Shit like what, like- no, I’m not doing this. I’m not explaining myself to you just cause *you’re* taking things the wrong way. I haven’t given up on Shiro, Allura hasn’t given up on Shiro, no ones... where are you getting this from?”

“Maybe from the fact that you’ve been sneaking in and out of Allura’s room, literally falling asleep together-“

“You have no idea, Keith, *no idea*, how wrongly you’re taking this. And you know what, I’d almost accuse you of being jealous, if you weren’t so obviously in love with Shiro!”

Now came the silence in which one could hear a pin drop. Lance knew he shouldn’t have said it, but Keith had a way edging his fingers under the verbal filter, pulling out the words he otherwise would never have spoken. Sometimes that was a good thing, but right now...

“What did you say?”

Keith’s voice was *cold*. Lance bit his lip, already regretting those words. No taking it back now, he supposed. Besides, it was true. *Wasn’t it?*

“What the hell did you say?”

“Forget it,” Lance muttered, trying to sidestep him.

“You said I’m in love with Shiro?” Keith cut him off, eyes burning with fury.

Shit. There was no easy way out, so Lance met the other’s hostility as he usually did, with more hostility.

“Allura and I are friends, nothing more. Stop accusing me when we both know you’re being hypocritical.”

Keith looked... beyond angry. His face was a mix of fury and hurt, and Lance hated that he was the cause of it. Why did he always do this, make the situation worse? *You should have just explained. He was already upset. You only said that cause you’re jealous.*

“He’s like my *brother*,” Keith spat, gesturing to himself roughly. “And you-“

He cut himself off, too angry to continue.

“I... I’m-.”

Lance held his hard gaze, refusing to back down or apologise. No, Keith had started this.

“He’s my brother and you don’t- you can’t... I’m not in love-“

“*Yo, fearless leader number two and second gayest arm...oh, you too Hunkykins, fearless leader number one wants us on the bridge. We’re rebooting the castle apparently.*”

Lance’s jaw twitched; so much for their argument. Could Pidge see them right now over the cameras, did she interrupt on purpose? He shot Keith one last cold look before turning heel and stalking off toward his room. Yeah, he should go straight to the bridge, but doing that meant walking all that way with Keith. Better to grab a change of clothes and catch up.

Foreseeably, Lance was a few minutes late. Didn't matter, he didn't know how to reboot the castle, rather leave that too the others. He and Keith pointedly ignored each other as the team came together on the bridge. Allura was looking a hell of a lot fresher and awake today; Lance liked to think it was due to what a comfortable pillow he was.

He was looking forward to getting out of this system asap, expecting a quick flick of some buttons, some complex but not impossible manual adjustments to the controls, and a lot of rambling from Coran. The reboot ended up taking far longer than expected though. By early afternoon they were still running through the safety procedures, of all things. Lance should have seen it coming; a full reboot would cut all power, so they had to have a back up plan in case they couldn't get the gravity or, god forbid, oxygen generator running again. So here they were, a bunch of tired, irritable paladins, finally helping Coran run the final checks before a full system reboot.

"Is this gonna take much longer?" Pidge was complaining. "Cause I have things to get back to, like, my life."

"A full system reboot is no joke," Allura corrected, though even she was beginning to show signs of boredom, slouched over the controls.

"Perfection takes time!" Coran informed them all cheerily, tweaking an unknown knob on the control board, which Lance was pretty sure he'd done twelve times already.

"The readings I have here show no faulty signs," Hunk almost pleaded.

"Princess?" Lance looked to Allura over the screen he'd been studying for the last hour, examining it for any sudden influxes in atmospheric pressure.

"I suppose we're good to go," she said quickly, before Coran could get another word in. "Paladins, secure yourselves."

Each of them quickly reached for their chosen stationary object, preparing for the inevitable loss of gravity. Coran and Allura shared a look, and Lance really, really hoped they knew what they were doing.

"Everyone secure?"

Five affirmative answers came rushing back at Coran.

"Puffy is secured too, just by the way," added Hunk.

"Pity," muttered Keith.

"Forgive and forget?" Pidge suggested hopefully.

"You're only saying that cause you don't look like a teletubbie anymore."

"Fuck you, Kogane."

"Full system reboot is beginning."

The others fell silent at Allura's announcement, clinging to various bits of their spaceship and waiting in anticipation.

Coran gave a nervous little twist to his moustache, before punching in the start sequence. "Let's hope this all goes well, shall we?"

The lights were the first to go. The darkness wasn't as complete as they'd feared with the faint glow of the distant star illuminating the bridge. Lance still tensed, especially when he felt his feet lift from the floor, body suddenly turning weightless as the gravity generator shut down. All the controls and screens went dead, not a peep from any of them. If they castle had been quiet before, it was nothing compared to this. They heard the filtration system shut down, and although Coran had assured them that without it running they'd still have air for many hours, Lance couldn't help but feel uneasy. Silence, awful, unbroken silence. Deep within the castle, tiny fragments of noise, echo's in the dark as machine after machine shut down; those little noises made it even worse.

Gripping his chair tightly, Lance used the leverage to swivel and search for his teammates. They were all floating about loosely, holding fast to furniture to keep themselves close to the ground for when gravity did return. No one spoke, each too focused on waiting for life to return to the dormant castle. Coran said it should only take a few minutes- it had only been a few seconds, and Lance wanted it to be over. The darkness and stillness was getting to him. He considered cracking a joke to lighten the mood, but something in the back of his mind told him to stay quiet, almost as if speaking would give his position away. It was ridiculous, he felt like a child again, hiding under the covers of his bed at night, too scared to call out to his parents in the fear the imaginary monsters would hear and get to him first. *That's when she'd be there.* He never had to wait long for Allita, she'd always be close enough to know when he was afraid. *Why are you still waiting?* Lance shook away those thoughts; he didn't need to scare himself more.

He tried to distract himself by staring out at the stars, but even after Allura's comforting words, he couldn't find solace there. If anything, they made him feel worse. It was just this star system, this stupid, stupid system. Once they were out, it would be fine. Lance shut his eyes, but opened them quickly after realising how vulnerable that left him feeling. There was no relief, not when they were surrounded by the dark.

I need you I need you I need you where are you- the deep metallic boom of a machine shutting down somewhere within the castle caused Lance to flinch. He was glad none of the others could see him; their silhouettes wouldn't betray his fear. He tried to ground himself by clinging tighter to the chair, ignoring the cool air tickling his weightless body. Metal, the chair was metal, not rock, not earth, not *cold, damp, slippery granite.*

Without warning, without sympathy, his mind was back in that place. The crash of waves against the shore was growing softer, until the sound of his own breathing in the narrow confines was enough to drown out the muffled drag of water over sand. *It's too dark, I don't like it.* Lance struggled to regulate his breathing, sure the others could hear given how quiet the room had become. This wasn't the time to have a panic attack, it really wasn't. *Please, Allita, I don't like it.* The chair didn't feel right under his fingers, suddenly he was sure he felt the cool dampness of dark rock. The dark confines of the bridge could easily be a cavern, empty, endless black, going down and down- *don't go please don't go.* In his mind his voice sounded childlike, just like it had been back then. *I'll be back, I just want to explore, I'll be back, Lance, I'm coming right back I'm coming back-*

Lance yelped as his feet hit the floor, voice masked by the loud clatter of machines coming to life. He heard someone laugh, along with a couple of other happy exchanges. The lights flickered on, so bright after those dark few minutes, it was almost disorientating. The gravity was back, but Lance didn't surrender his hold on the chair just yet, fearing he might lose his balance.

"Reboot successful!" Coran announced happily.

Lance was breathing hard, trying to get himself under control before anyone noticed. He was shaking, blinking the awful images out of his eyes.

“Lance?”

Lance threw himself at the opportunity that was Hunk, using his friend’s larger form to hide himself momentarily from the others.

“No, no just stay there, I don’t-“ Lance tried desperately, gripping Hunk’s arm to keep him there as a shield.

“Lance? Are you okay?”

“I’m good-“ but he could hardly talk, could hardly breathe. “I’m not good. But don’t let them see-“

Hunk nodded, understanding immediately. He clasped a hand over Lance’s shoulder, simultaneously comforting him and hiding the smaller paladin’s expression from Pidge, who was peeking at the pair inquisitively.

“Deep breaths,” Hunk instructed kindly, face pinched with concern. “I got you.”

“T-thanks buddy,” Lance panted after a minute, the tingling fear finally seeping from his body.

“You want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Lance-“

“Thanks, Hunk. I’m good now, I promise. Just, y’know, being childish again.”

He tried to laugh, but Hunk wasn’t fooled.

“Lance? Hunk?”

The two quickly parted at Allura’s questioning tone.

“Are you two alright?”

“Heck yeah,” Lance replied quickly, before Hunk even got the chance.

“Just got a case of the anti-G legs,” he said with a huff of laughter, giving his trembling leg a shake as if to emphasise the fault of gravity.

Allura hummed, seemingly convinced, and Lance realised she was already focused on the recovering screens.

“It worked?”

“Seems so.”

“The plants!” Pidge shrieked, pulling on Keith’s arm insistently as the thought struck her. “I gotta check on the lab!”

Lance vaguely remembered her mentioning something about trying to grow a little garden in one of the castles labs. He caught Keith’s eye briefly before the red paladin was being tugged from the room by his friend. Lance couldn’t read that expression, it could’ve been anger, or mistrust, or something else entirely, something more akin to concern. He didn’t know, and tried to convince himself he didn’t care either as Pidge and Keith disappeared for the room.

“So we testing out this wormhole or what?”

Lance tried to keep the obvious eagerness out of his voice, but in reality he couldn't wait to be rid of this star system. They could forget about the lonely looking star, the creepy planet and cave, the drawings, the dream, the stray spaceship and its hideous cargo.

“With luck,” Allura replied.

A hush fell over the room as she strode up to the controls, breathing deeply before raising her hands in that all too familiar way. Lance could've cried when the first signs of a wormhole appeared, hearing Hunk and Coran exclaim in similar relief. Not doubt Pidge and Keith were excited too, wherever Pidge had dragged them off too. He'd never been quite so relieved to see that blue light simmering before them as the castle was drawn into the wormhole. It was over too quickly; he didn't even give that ghastly star system a second glance as they followed through, into the rift in space. The wormhole closed behind them and-

“Well, that was easy.”

Lance scoffed at Hunk's comment, but couldn't help but feel like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Looking out the window, he recognised the system they'd been orbiting before they were first whisked away in the middle of the night. He could also see the planet Keith had nearly crashed into. *You need to talk to him.*

“Now that all that nonsense has been sorted, I recommend you all get some rest.”

Coran was back to his usual, bossy self, already chasing Allura away from the controls and insisting she take a break after the poor nights sleep she received the previous evening.

“There'll be time for discussions tomorrow,” their royal adviser insisted.

Lance didn't object much- he was still exhausted. He needed a better night's sleep, and while he doubted the sight of the corpses within that ship would leave him any time soon, he did feel calmer now that they were far, far away. In any case, sleep did come easier.

-

He woke some time later, he didn't know how long, to an insistent tugging on his leg. Lance grumbled, desperate for a few more minutes of sleep, refusing to open his eyes. He grumbled, rolling over and pressing his face into- *dirt?* A jolt of panic shot through him, and Lance's eyes were open in an instant. *Dirt, darkness, earth.* A shout tore away from his mouth; he was back underground, back in the eerie confines of the long, dark tunnel, back in the depth's of the earth.

Lance scrambled to sit up, his fingers slipping through the slick mud that coated his body. It was another dream, it had to be, but that didn't quell his panic. Not this, not again. He was breathing hard, half lying in the thick mud, eyes fixed on the end of the tunnel where it disappeared into the depths. He was just considering trying to pinch himself to wake up, when there was another sharp tug on his leg. Lance looked down and found the chain was still attached to his ankle, the end leading into the mud. That alone didn't surprise him, but when something pulled insistently on it, something buried below the mud, Lance couldn't stop the scream that built in his throat. He tried to stand and run, but another tug had him falling down again, sliding along the mud as more of the chain was tugged beneath the surface, disappearing into the mud. Oh god, was it going to drag him under? Lance yelled, clawing at the mud as he was dragged downwards. He didn't care if this was just a dream, it was terrifying.

He kicked and thrashed, ankle burning where the chain tightened around it, slipping closer to where the mud was sure to envelope him. It never stopped, whatever was down there, pulling him underground, down into the mud as if it were water. Pulling him in, pulling and pulling and- *where?*

Lance shot up in bed, limbs tangled up in the sweaty sheets. There was no alarm this time, it was still the middle of the night, but he *knew*. Flinging the sheets off him, Lance was already stumbling toward the door, heaving in the cool air as sweat dried on his forehead. No one else was awake, leaving him to run for the bridge by himself. He wanted to be wrong, he'd never wanted it so much in his life.

Lance burst through the doors into the bridge, not bothering with the screens, just striding straight up to the window. His ankle tingled, though there was no chain around it, not here in reality. A wave of nausea washed over him as he stared out the window into space. The light of a small, lonely star stared back at him. A singular planet orbited somewhere nearby. Lance's hands tightened into fists, heart beating up his chest. It was the same star system they'd just escaped; they were back.

Chapter End Notes

more klance soon
its slow
but its there

thanks guys, and I'll try update sooner next time

Chapter Notes

consistant?? me??? im sorry

Thanks for reading everyone :D ur comments are great and they make my day

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

“I don’t understand.”

Lance stood tensely before the controls, staring down his five teammates who had gathered around him as though he were leading this discussion, which he supposed he was, given that he was the one who set off the alarm. They looked groggy and still half asleep, despite the obvious weight of the unravelling situation.

“What time is it?” Pidge mumbled, rubbing her eyes.

“Twelve past two, according to the castle’s cycle. I woke up less than ten minutes ago.”

“It’s around the same time we wormholed yesterday,” Allura added, squinting at the bright display of settings she’d pulled up.

“How did it wake you up?”

That was Keith, arms folded crossly over the dark sleep shirt he wore. The guy knew there were more wearable colours than black, right? His hair was wild and tangled, a bit bat-like, somehow detracting from his otherwise intimidating stance.

“A bad feeling.”

Lance didn’t have the time or patience to be embarrassed by that admission. He was past the point of denying how uncomfortable he was. They were back; back in the unnamed star system with its creepy planet and cave, back where they’d discovered the ship and the gory remains of its passengers, back where that awful dream had originated. And no one knew why. His skin itched, the *bad feeling* refusing to leave, and he crossed his arms tightly to stop himself scratching at his own skin.

“There’s clearly a virus in the castle.”

“Shouldn’t the reboot have sorted that out?”

“Possibly.”

Allura pinched her brow, and Lance couldn’t help but think how unfair this was on her. She’d just told them she was pregnant for god’s sake, they should all be happy, not dealing with... whatever this was.

“Are you sure you’re not opening a wormhole in your sleep or something?” Hunk asked.

“Yes I’m sure,” Allura snapped.

“How can it be a virus in the castle if *you’re* the only person who can open wormholes?”

Allura didn’t respond immediately to Pidge’s question, tapping her fingers over the control board anxiously.

“I don’t know. But I know I’m not opening them.”

“New theory,” said Hunk. “We’re in a time loop.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“You ever been in a time loop, Keith?”

“No, but a time loop doesn’t explain how we ended up here in the first place.”

“I bet it was the aliens,” whispered Pidge.

“Dude.”

“Whatever the case, at least the castle is still functioning this time.”

Coran’s statement came as a welcomed surprise, though it didn’t alleviate much of the stress.

“You mean everything’s working? We can wormhole out again?” Lance asked hopefully.

“It would appear so.”

“Awesome,” said Lance, but there was none of the usual cheer in his tone. “What are we waiting for?”

“Not so fast.” Allura held up a hand, cutting him off. “I don’t want to put us at risk. If this virus is affecting the generation of wormholes, we shouldn’t put ourselves in more danger by creating more than necessary.”

“Uh, I’d say getting out of this system is pretty necessary.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You don’t think this place is weird?”

Allura looked conflicted, no doubt recalling their late night conversation.

“Let’s just... see if we can figure it out.”

That was how they ended up spending the rest of the night, or very early morning, sorting through stacks of manuals and scanning the castle’s code, looking for traces of a wormhole generating virus. It didn’t make sense, and Lance didn’t see how they were meant to find anything. A person had to activate the wormhole, not a machine, and Allura was the only one who could do that. There was no way she was lying to them about it, was she? It just made no sense, and that frustration, combined with the urge to get as far away from this star system as possible, had Lance irritable and ready to snap. He was frustrated; more so, he was afraid. And that just made him more angry.

"I'm just saying," mumbled Pidge at about half past eight in the morning, slumped over her chair.
"It could be aliens."

"Pidge," replied Keith, leaning against her chair with his legs splayed out on the floor where he sat.
"How could it not be aliens?"

"It could... be one of us. That isn't you. Or Allura. Or Coran."

"Pidge. In outer space, we're all aliens."

Their slow, slurred speech gave the impression they were just two teens at a sleepover, sharing their alien conspiracy theories. It would've been cute, if Lance weren't, at that moment, ready to slam his head into the nearest wall.

"Wow," echoed Pidge. "I'm an alien."

She snickered, patting Keith's head weakly. "Hey, I'm a gaylien."

Keith might've laughed, but between that and his last statement, he'd fallen asleep.

"Can't we just wormhole somewhere else?" Lance pleaded, though his voice came out sounding a lot pushier than he'd intended.

Oh well, he'd gone a few nights in a row now with little sleep, he wasn't in the mood for this. Those words did give him an idea though.

"Allura, what if it's not something wrong with the castle, but rather the place. How much do we know about the area we were in last night, before we wormholed? I mean, maybe something *there* is sending us *here*."

Allura frowned at him, but he could see the idea taking root in her mind.

"That... could be a possibility. Like how the blue lion first brought you to the castle. Something may want us here."

Lance felt relieved that she at least understood what he was trying to get across.

"We should find out what's here."

Or not.

"Or, um, no. That's not necessarily a good thing. Actually, probably more of a bad thing."

"Or it could be something in need of our help."

"The only thing that could have been in need of our help was that spaceship, which, by the way, we failed to help."

No one could argue there, but Lance almost regretted bringing it up again.

"Maybe something else?" Hunk suggested.

"Something like what? Another spaceship? Not to sound biased or anything, but I'd like to avoid any more confrontations like that. You know, dead people, calling my name."

"Wait, *what*?"

Pidge's loud outcry woke Keith, who jerked awake, blinking blearily at the bright lights.

"What?"

"Don't *what-what* me, y-you just, what did you say?"

Pidge was gawking at him, clutching her seat and looking... confused? Afraid? Hunk was in a similar state. Lance swivelled to look at Allura.

"Wait, you didn't *tell* them?"

"Tell us what?"

Keith, quickly realising what they were talking about, tried to calm his friend.

"You didn't need to know, Pidge, it wasn't right--"

"What isn't right is keeping secrets from the team. What was on that ship?"

"...Dead people," Lance answered uncertainly. "What did you think was on it?"

"Keith said it lost pressure," said Pidge, causing Keith to glance guiltily at his feet.

Lance wasn't angry at him though, he figured he probably would've told Pidge the same thing were he in a better state of mind; right now he was too tired and too focused on getting out of the system, and if telling his teammates the truth, regardless of how awful it was, was the way to convince them they all needed to get the hell out, then so be it. Was it selfish? A little; but Lance had bigger problems right now.

"Allura said that's how they died. Was it...not?" Hunk looked like the cat who knew its curiosity was about to land it in some deep-shit, but was following it anyway.

Now Lance felt guilty. He hadn't meant to give his friends more to worry about. But as Pidge said, secrets were bad, and Lance should disperse this one at least.

"No. I don't know how they died, but it wasn't a loss of pressure."

"Paladins please," Allura tried, though there was no way Pidge and Hunk weren't hearing the end of this story now. "This is hardly something you should trouble yourselves--"

"I want to know what was on the ship!"

"They were just dead, Pidge, i-in a horrible way."

Keith spoke softly, staring at the floor, in a way that wasn't entirely like him. Though nothing about him had been entirely *him* since Shiro's disappearance; it made Lance sad. Nevertheless, he was glad Keith was relaying the story, not him.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't... know. They were..." Keith grimaced, but kept going. "They were shoved into small spaces, like doorways, and air vents, a-and under things. Trying to disappear into them. They were distorted and- anyway, I thought they were dead. But when Lance came into the ship they... they woke up."

When Lance looked up Keith was staring at him, that same funny expression that Lance could

decipher as neither care nor concern.

“They were all just saying his name, until they... they actually died.”

There was a moment of silence, then another. Pidge blinked, as if waiting for Keith to point out the joke he’d just made.

“Nope, no, nonono, no way, that’s some horror movie stuff right there, and I do *not* like horror movies.” Hunk threw his arms up, shaking his head, suddenly very awake. “Sorry princess, but I’m with Lance on this one. We’re booking it out of this system now.”

Pidge was engaged in a furious exchange with Keith, whispering harshly to try and figure out if he was telling the truth. Allura looked a mix between tired and annoyed.

“It was an awful accident, but it shouldn’t influence our decision regarding the wormhole. I know this isn’t ideal.”

“You said you wanted me to help lead,” Lance said softly, but not to oppose her; he and Allura were on the same side. “And this time I just... I don’t know, but it doesn’t feel right here. Why don’t we try go somewhere else. That way we’ll know if it’s a fault with the castle, or the last position we were in.”

Allura looked conflicted, as she often did these days. She looked to Coran.

“Is there any danger moving the castle now? Anything at all, indicating a fault with the generator?”

“None at all, princess.”

Allura sighed, picking herself up and approaching the controls. “Alright. We’ll wormhole again. A different location, further away, and hopefully we’ll break the cycle.”

Lance caught her eye and nodded a silent thanks. The relief wasn’t as fulfilling this time, now that it was tainted by a feeling of doubt, but Lance was still happy to see the wormhole opening for them.

“Where too?” He asked.

“I’m taking us into orbit around a Balmera,” Allura informed as the castle began to move into the wormhole. “Somewhere familiar.”

Familiar. Lance liked that word. He half expected it not to work, terrified by the doubts that had been fed to him. But the trip through the wormhole was as uneventful as ever, and when they emerged on the other side, they were greeted by the sight of a large Balmera.

“I wonder if Shay’s there,” Pidge hinted not so subtly, grinning at the indignant sound Hunk made.

“As much as I’d also love to visit the Balmera,” said Allura with a knowing smile. “It’s a good idea for you to all catch up on some sleep. I’ll be expecting everyone awake and on their toes at half past one sharp tomorrow morning.”

Pidge gawked. “What? *Why?*”

“So we can be prepared in case the castle wormholes again. We know the previous two times have been a little after two in the morning. Plus, having us all there will perhaps confirm to you that I’m not opening them.”

It was fair point, despite Lance already dreading having to wake up that early again. He needed sleep right now. Thankfully, no one stuck around to hear more about their awful spaceship encounter; however curious Hunk and Pidge were, their tiredness won out. They dispersed from the bridge slowly, mumbling a chorus of goodnights despite the clock reading nine am.

Lance was almost tired enough to miss Keith heading off in the opposite direction to their rooms—almost being the operative word. A few long strides and he'd successfully overtaken the boy, placing himself in his path.

"Where are you going?"

Keith glared, realised he didn't actually have a reason to be glaring at Lance, and tried to mask the glower beneath a poorly placed pout.

"To my room."

"Your room is in the other direction."

"How do you even know that?" Keith accused.

"Dude, our rooms are next to each other."

Keith met his eye crossly, peering over Lance's shoulder as if to emphasise that he was in the way.

"Then I'm taking a detour."

"You're going to the training deck."

Keith was back to glaring, not bothering to mask his discontent. With a huff, we made to walk past Lance.

"Goodnight, Lance."

"Nope."

Lance followed his movements, stepping to the side to prevent Keith from getting through. His lip twitched a little, smiling at the shocked noise Keith made when he nearly collided with Lance. If this confrontation had occurred back when they'd first met, Lance would've been running by now. But he knew Keith, and it was going to take a little more than a grumpy face to intimidate him nowadays; maybe if he had his bayard or something, or when he looked all charged up for battle, but right now all Lance could see was his childish pout and mused hair, still a mess from where he'd fallen asleep against Pidge's chair. *Cute*.

Keith took a step to the other side, trying to go around Lance, his fingers curling into fists when Lance moved in front of him again.

"Move."

"Go sleep."

Keith huffed, glaring at Lance, but the look just didn't have the same effect it used to. Lance's smug smirk wavered, but it was only growing bigger. *Oh, this is bad, this is so bad*. Because Keith didn't look scary, he looked cute. He found Keith's anger cute now? What the hell was this? No, because there was a difference between angry Keith, and *angry* Keith. A truly angry red paladin wasn't a joke, but this was... Lance didn't know. What he did know is that he wanted to take

Keith's face in his hands, just to feel his cheeks or some cheesy shit like that. He bet he could make that hair even messier, til it was laughable. It was dark and fluffy and in that second he wanted nothing more than to thread his fingers through it, use it to pull Keith close, press his lips into that ungodly soft mop.

It hadn't occurred to him that much before, but Keith was a nice size. *Cool, good way to objectify your friends, Lance.* But it true. He was just a bit smaller than Lance, the perfect size, so he'd fit nicely in his arms, so if they hugged his face would press snugly into Lance's neck. He really wondered what that would feel like, just holding Keith. Cause although Keith always looked and acted so tough- and yeah, a fight with him wasn't fun, cause that boy had muscle- Lance could also envision him being the type who just... folded. Like a sandcastle, all strong and mighty, but one little prod from the waves and it was crumbling. It was almost as if he developed a sudden *need* to hold Keith, just to see if that was true; the urge to have him clinging to Lance, actually *wanting* Lance, was overwhelming. Lance wasn't smiling anymore.

"I am not doing this with you. Stop being stupid, and get out of my way."

"Ooh, big words."

"None of those words were big."

"You want me to carry you to your room? Because I will."

"You can't *carry me*," Keith scoffed, but took a halted step back anyway when Lance unfurled his arms from behind his back.

"Keith, I need sleep, you need sleep, can't we both just go to sleep?"

Keith arched a brow. "I wasn't aware I was stopping you getting sleep."

"You weren't? Well you are. You're in my way- see?"

Lance pointed to Keith in front of him, indicating that he was the problem.

"*You're in my way!*"

"Uh, I'm the one facing our rooms. So I'm pretty sure you're in the way."

Keith huffed angrily, trying to move around Lance again. It resulted in a crazy standoff, with Lance mimicking his movements to stop Keith getting past.

"Lance, get out of my way!"

That was different, that was more of the anger Lance actually feared. He straightened up, meeting Keith's hard stare as coolly as he could muster. Keith was done playing around, but Lance definitely wasn't finished with this conversation.

"You heard what Allura said, we have to be awake tonight. I know you haven't been sleeping, or at least not last night."

"So what? If you're worried about having to fight, I'm fine. If we encounter any trouble I'll be there like I *always am*."

"I'm not worried about fighting, Keith. Okay, I'm a little worried. But I'm worried about *you*."

"Worried about annoying me?"

“Oh, cut it out,” Lance said, a little louder, a little harsher than before.

Not harsh, just more forcefully. He needed Keith to understand, why was it so hard to get anything to go through his stubborn head?

“What’s up with you? I tell you not to get yourself killed, you fight me. You see me talking to Allura, you fight me. I tell you to get some rest, I tell you I *care* about you, and you fight me? I know this is detracting from searching for Shiro, but it’s just for a day-”

“Don’t bring him into this,” Keith snapped, no doubt recalling their last conversation surrounding Shiro.

“I... I didn’t mean that.”

“Then you shouldn’t have said it.”

Lance glowered at him; he wanted to be stubborn, so, so much. But where would that get him?

“I’m sorry.”

Keith said nothing, dropping his gaze for a second.

“Keep fighting me,” Lance snapped suddenly. “If that helps. Keep fighting me, but stop *destroying* yourself.”

Keith stayed silent; Lance wasn’t sure if it was because Keith was bad with words, or if the other boy really just wanted nothing to do with him.

“Y-you’re making me feel like a goddam parent right now. If I have to tell you to go to bed one more time, I swear.”

Keith was stony silent now, and Lance honestly wasn’t sure if he was about to pass out or punch him.

“Goodnight, Lance.”

It was spoken softly, with a tinge of annoyance, but a resignation none the less. Lance gaped as Keith turned around and stalked off toward their rooms. Hell, who knew if Keith would actually sleep, but at least he’d led the horse to the goddam water.

“Did I win that?” He said to no one in particular, once Keith had disappeared down the hall.

Maybe the mice were listening, and they’d appreciate how he, Lance, had managed to calm down signature bad-boy and resident hot-head Keith Kogane. Lance tried not to smile as he passed Keith’s room on the way to his own. Yup, he was pretty sure he had this one in the bag.

Sleep came easier, as it always did when they weren’t in the presence of some disturbing star system. Though Lance did wonder as he lay in bed, if him drifting off so easily might’ve been helped by the memory of Keith, curled up on the floor beside Pidge’s chair, his expression so unusually serene as he slept.

I need to start coming up with better ways to end chapters than people just falling asleep

Chapter Notes

Hi guys!

Thanks for the kudos and comments! I really appreciate your support :)

Sorry my updates are sort of inconsistent, it just depends on when I'm busy...

Don't worry too much about the chapter numbers yet (there's not actually going to be 400 chapters), it will make sense further on (queen of not planning ahead right here)

yea

happy reading and all <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

Waking up at one am wasn't as bad as Lance had expected, considering he'd already spent the whole day sleeping. The team gathered for a brief dinner (*breakfast?*) before gathering on the bridge to wait out the hopefully uneventful morning. Minutes passed slowly at this time of night, especially since no one was overly talkative. Pidge had brought half her bed along with her, and was currently wrapped up in blankets on the floor, a jealous looking Hunk hovering near her.

Lance surprised himself with how organised he was; along with Keith and Allura, he was already dressed in his armour, not wanting to be caught unprepared, whatever the situation may be. The other's also looked a little surprised, expecting Lance to be the least awake and certainly least prepared. Except Allura, she looked proud, he noticed happily. And like that, they waited.

They had so much going on, so many unanswered questions, regarding both the team and the situation they were currently in. So instead of wondering about all that, Lance wasted time thinking about Keith. Hey, a guy couldn't worry all the time. The other looked a little more rested, prompting Lance to believe he actually had gotten some sleep. If someone asked Lance to pinpoint the moment he'd actually let go of the dumb rivalry he and Keith had going, he wouldn't be able to say. The friendship they'd built had taken time, and a lot of denial on Lance's behalf. He didn't know what the case was with Keith, but he'd enjoyed the eventual revelation that their fights had become nothing more than friendly bickering. Most of the time. That friendship was being tested as of now, with Shiro's disappearance. But Lance McClain was no quitter; if Allura was strong enough to handle pregnancy in Shiro's absence, then he could damn well hold onto the emotional enigma that was Keith.

Asking Lance if he'd thought of Keith as something more than a friend was even harder. Physical attraction was easy; Lance knew he was bi, and he knew Keith was hot. He knew that watching him fight, or seeing him shirtless, or encountering that sly but dangerous smirk, or even hearing his voice all husky and broken in the heat of battle, did things to his body. But how did he feel about *Keith*? Frustrating, endearing, sentimental, hot-headed, kind-hearted, Keith?

"Two am," said Allura, breaking his thought cycle. "Any minute now."

Any minute now nothing would happen, or at least Lance hoped. Any minute now he could go

back to sleep, then back to finding Shiro, and back to working on his relationship with Keith. Another minute slipped away, and Lance felt the familiar sensation of dread settle in his stomach. They wouldn't go back, they couldn't. Allura was right here with them, there was no way she was going to open a wormhole. A virus in the castle didn't make sense; if there was anything, they would have picked it up, and besides, no part of the castle could just create a wormhole. Even Alfor's corrupted spirit had to trick Allura into nearly piloting the ship into a dying star; the castle couldn't do these things alone.

Every second that passed was simultaneously a blessing and a curse; it was one more second they'd remained where they were, but one closer to disaster if that's where they were headed. It wasn't exactly disaster, Lance tried to reckon, if they did wormhole again. They were just back where they were before. But something about it, about that place, just did not sit right with him. Three minutes past two, and Lance's ankle began to tingle. *No*. It was a phantom pain, his imagination and nothing more. Allura gasped. Lance turned faster than light, just as she reached out to steady herself on a chair.

"Princess?"

Coran was by her side in a second, carefully watching the discomfort play out on Allura's face.

"I'm fine," she insisted, though grimacing. "It's fine, I... *no*."

Lance and the others followed her gaze out the window, eyes falling on the bright blue depths of the wormhole opening before them.

"I'm not opening it!" Allura cried, gesturing helplessly around the bridge. "No one is!"

Lance wanted to reply, wanted to assure her he could see it wasn't her fault, but he was transfixed on the wormhole. Three past two in the morning, and here it was again, opening up to take them back. Oddly, he felt he didn't care so much as to how, but more why. Why was it taking them? He swore as the castle moved of its own accord, sucked into the glowing blue light. Everyone reached out for a handhold in case it was a shaky flight, varying degrees of confusion or fear on their faces. Lance felt... anger? He was scared alright, but it was joined by the feel of fury. This was distracting them from searching for Shiro, it was frightening and disrupting the team, it was one more unnecessary obstacle that they did not need. Lance hated it. Allura's hands flew over the controls, but nothing she did seemed to have any reaction.

"It's not responding!" She yelled frantically.

The other's leapt up to help her, but nothing anyone did slowed the castle. The ship rattled as it was pulled along through the rapture in space, drawing them toward their final destination. Lance grit his teeth, helpless, though his blood still boiled. Allura still looked pained, and he wondered if this *was* somehow linked to her. She slumped down in her seat as the castle emerged on the other side of the wormhole. Sure as anything, they were back. Lance drank in the sight of the faint star and the ghastly darkness surrounding it. This system seemed so much further from anything else. He knew it was likely his mind playing tricks on him; all of space was dark and stars lay millions of miles from each other, yet this one just felt... more isolated. It made his skin crawl.

The other's all sat back, defeated. They stared gloomily out the window, no doubt frustrated that they'd been pulled back again, but none sharing Lance's sense of urgency, or fear. A surge of anger coursed through him, his fingers tingling sharply, as if some untapped energy was threatening to burst out of his skin. *Weird*. He didn't want to be back here, he didn't want to be reminded of his dream, or the corpses, or that cave; he didn't want to be in space, he didn't want Shiro to be missing, he didn't want to abandon his family, he didn't want to be the goddam black

paladin, and he did not want *this*. Lance slammed his fist into the control board in frustration, causing the others to jump. It relived a little of the tingling in his fingers, but brought to life a new ache, an all encompassing coldness that crept up his arms like poison. Was this some black paladin deal? Is this what Shiro felt? Lance couldn't worry too much at that moment; he had other things on his mind.

"It's the cave," he snapped, snarled almost.

No one looked like they had any clue what he was talking about, and Lance didn't feel like explaining.

"Where are you going?" Coran asked, sounding concerned as Lance turned suddenly and began making his way toward the door.

"To the planet. Stay here."

"What...?" Pidge echoed, still wrapped in blankets and looking thoroughly confused.

"Lance--"

"Stay here!" He snapped, turning to angle a finger at Hunk, who had begun to get up to follow him.

The last thing he wanted was for his friend to follow him on some stupid feeling. Hunk flinched, sitting down. Lance felt a pang of guilt; he didn't know why he was acting so harshly suddenly, almost as if the ache in his arms was spurring something else within him.

"Just trust me," he called to Allura before storming out of the bridge.

He didn't mean it. She had no reason to trust him on this, he didn't trust himself, and was probably making the wrong decision; but there was no other way to convince her not to follow him, so he misused that trust. Lance had no idea what he planned to do, but there was an urge pulling him toward the planet, and so he was following it. *What a stupid idea*. He stumbled on his way to the hangars, hissing as the frostiness spread through his arms. It felt a little like getting an immunisation shot, he thought dumbly, the odd tingle that came from the vaccine moving through your veins, followed by a cold numbness. Lance shook his arms, trying to relieve the tightness building up within them, but it was to no avail. *What the hell?*

"Lance!"

Great. No time to stop and worry about that; Lance took off walking at an even faster pace, a jog really, when he heard Keith coming up behind him. He did *not* need the other trying to stop him now.

"Hey, wait up!"

Lance just went faster, glad he had longer legs. Despite being longer limbed, he felt somewhat clumsy moving toward the black lion's hangar, as if something was trying to tug him in the other direction. *Blue?* Lance huffed. *What the hell, buddy? Pretty sure we spoke about this*. He was also fairly sure Blue had booted him out, but whatever. The ache in his arms only worsened as he continued toward the black lion.

"*Lance!*"

He hadn't anticipated Keith catching up and grabbing hold of said arm. Lance flinched, ripping his

arm away and turning on Keith with a growl.

“*Don’t* stop me!”

The other boy drew back as though Lance had shocked him, stumbling and- *did he look afraid?* Lance shrunk back when he realised he’s snapped, torn between apologising and threatening Keith to leave him alone.

“I-I’m coming with you,” Keith stuttered, regaining his voice and watching Lance warily.

“No, you’re not.”

The fear vanished from Keith’s face in an instant, replaced by annoyance. “Are you gonna argue all day, or actually do something?”

Lance bit his tongue to stop the harsh retort.

“Try keep up,” he muttered, turning so he wouldn’t have to see Keith’s smirk as they raced toward the hangars.

As fun as it was to tease Keith, Lance hadn’t been joking. He wasn’t waiting for anyone as he powered up the black lion and flew toward the dwarf planet. They should name it, he decided, give it some stupid, laughable name that would detract from how uneasy it made him feel. Even when basked in daylight, the planet hadn’t been particularly bright, orbiting distantly and around such a weak star. But now, with the side housing the cave and their original landing sight cloaked in night, it was even darker. *Super.*

Lance landed without mercy, crushing a tree or two under the paw of the black lion (who had apparently resigned itself to the fact Lance’s piloting was fuelled by just as much resentment as he was). He felt the ground shudder, already springing up from the cockpit. He didn’t have time to see where Keith was landing the red lion, but assumed it was nearby. Even though the atmosphere was breathable, Lance kept his helmet on for the time being. The lights on his suit lit up the way through the pines for him, and he kept an arm held up, the particularly bright torch inbuilt there.

“Lance, slow down,” Keith was panting after running after him.

“Thought I told you to keep up,” Lance replied, trudging ahead, determined to reach the cave.

“Yeah, but you’re being reckless.”

Lance scoffed, swinging his arm left to right to scan the soft ground; *just in case.*

“You’re one to talk.”

Keith couldn’t reply at first, because Lance was right.

“What are you doing?”

“I told you.”

“You said you were going to the planet. We’re here. Now what?”

Lance swatted away the branch of a pine, stumbling out into the next clearing. *How convenient.* He gestured roughly ahead, to the gaping mouth of the cave.

“We’re investigating that.”

He should have been terrified, and he was, a little. But the anger was greater, the ache in his arms clouding his mind like alcohol, pushing him out of his comfort zone without him even realising. There was something more here, something they hadn't uncovered yet, he just knew it.

"In the middle of the night? Lance, we already looked at the cave. What- what's going on?"

Lance couldn't answer that, so he didn't. He stormed toward the cave, too much energy and too many emotions repressed within him. The ground was soft and earthy, and Lance realised this planet didn't even have a moon to help illuminate the night. Keith followed reluctantly, and as much as Lance hesitated to admit, it was probably a good idea having him there. At least when he lost his mind after acknowledging the fact that he'd willingly marched into a cave in the middle of the night, there'd be someone to drag him back to the castle.

"What are you doing?" Keith asked again, carefully punctuating each word.

"I don't know!" Lance didn't mean to snap, or shout, but everything felt so *heightened* at that moment.

His senses were on such high alert he seemed distracted from reality, nothing was as tangible as it should have been. His arms hurt, they were cold, his fingers still tingled. He wanted to hit something. *What's wrong with me?* The shadows flickered as Lance swept the torch along the walls; the drawings were all still there, nothing different, nothing more. He bit down on the inside of his cheek, working himself up to face the dark drawing of the planet.

"Lance, stop."

Keith was beside him again, the blue lights on his suit mingling with red armour casting him in a glowing shade of purple. It felt odd to be like this, Lance felt exposed. They were like bioluminescent creatures in a deep-sea trench, not an inkling of light around them, just the strange glow of their own suits. It was suffocating all on its own, and Lance feared if he removed his helmet he'd drown, the darkness flooding his lungs like water. He shuddered at the painting on the wall, of the village and its inhabitants sinking beneath the floodwater; maybe that's how they'd drowned, in darkness.

"Hey, calm down."

A hand settled cautiously on his arm, and Lance resisted the urge to rip himself away, because even through both layers of armour, Keith felt too hot against the chill that had overcome his arms.

"I am calm," he hissed instead, ignoring the mist clouding up his visor because he was breathing too fast.

"You're not," Keith said, matter-of-factly. "Are you okay? Why are we here?"

"I told you," Lance muttered, squirming in his hold, unable to decide if he wanted more of Keith's touch or to scrape every inch of contact away.

"You're not making sense," Keith said, pleading almost.

He sounded worried. No wonder, Lance realised, to an outsider he must've been acting really off.

"Let's go back to the castle, alright?"

"No!"

Keith drew back, frowning. “Why?”

“Stop-“ Lance wanted to tug at his hair, but had to settle for rapping his hands against the side of his helmet instead. “*Asking* me.”

“I-is something wrong?”

“Is something *wrong*?” Lance scoffed, verging on hysterical. “Yes, something’s wrong. We just wormholed, *again*, with no explanation, back into this... this system, this is-“

“It’s just a castle malfunction,” Keith said when Lance stopped. “We’ll sort it out.”

“How can you think that?”

“Because that’s what it is?”

“It’s *not*,” Lance said.

He didn’t know why he said that, what proof did he have? Now he looked even more delusional in Keith’s eyes.

“It’s not, and it’s not alright. Something’s wrong here, Keith, can’t you feel it?”

Keith just stared at him, shaking his head minutely.

“I think we should go back.”

“Then go back.”

“Lance-“

“No.”

“Lance, I’m trying to help! You haven’t slept or- or something,” Keith snapped, the last bits of his patience beginning to drain. “There’s no reason for you to be out here-“

“You’re trying to help? Funny, because whenever it’s *me* trying to help *you*, you don’t want anything to do with it.”

Keith squared his jaw, trying to keep calm. Good to know Lance’s stubbornness could be just as infuriating as his compassion.

“Allura’s worried. Let’s go back.”

“I already said go back.”

“I’m not leaving you out here!”

“Why not?” Lance snarled. “I’m the black paladin now, pretty sure I can take care of myself.”

“Why are you-“ Keith huffed angrily, straightening his shoulder’s to try bring himself up to Lance’s height.

It didn’t work, especially since Lance stood taller himself, folding his arms and staring Keith down.

“You just took off in the middle of the night to land on a deserted planet and do fuck knows what.

You don't think there's something wrong with that?"

"You don't think there's something wrong with throwing yourself from the stratosphere to take down *one stray fighter*?"

Keith's gaze hardened. God, why were they back to being like this?

"You still giving me shit over that?"

"I don't know Keith, do you still have a death wish?"

"I don't have a death wish!"

"Then why did you do that?"

"Because that's just how it panned out? It was a fight, Lance, dangerous battles happen all the time."

They stood face to face now, the focused pinpoint of light on their suits accentuating the sharper lines of shadows across their cheeks. They'd neared the back of the cave, closer to the drawing of the planet; Lance kept all his attention on Keith, all his anger, fearing what might happen if he was to acknowledge the weight of the drawing before them. His arms burned with a cold ache.

"Not like- dammit, Keith! You should've told us, you should've gotten help! We're a team for a reason, when we try take things on by ourselves we get our asses kicked and you know it. You nearly *died*."

"But I *didn't*. Why are you still so hung up on this?"

"Because you terrified me! Is it that hard to understand?"

"I did what I had to, I took down the Galra ship, can we drop it?"

"No. Because you survive one stupid mishap, and you're on to the next. You approached that ship on your own, you entered that ship on your own, without knowing what was on it. What if it... it could've been worse, for you it could have been worse, Keith, what then?"

"Then I would have *dealt with it*," Keith bit out, stepping closer.

"Or you could have died. What would we do then, huh? If you died, what would Pidge do? What would the team do?"

What would I do?

"We're already missing one paladin, and I am not willing to let us lose another."

"I'm doing the things I am so we can find that paladin!" Keith snapped, something previously withheld, something angry and raw, beginning to dig its way out.

"Maybe you don't understand," Keith continued, his eyes gleaming in the artificial glow of his helmet. "You've never been alone in your life, maybe you don't understand why I need to find him!"

Those words hit hard, but Lance didn't let it show. He wouldn't snap, he wouldn't break- because he did understand. Keith had been abandoned, more than just a few times perhaps, so of course he was upset. So Lance kept a strong stance, and tried to come across calm and even.

“I know you want to find Shiro, I *know*-“

“No you don’t!”

Tears had sprung up in Keith’s eyes, just a small dusting of them, which Lance didn’t dare bring up.

“I would- I *will* do anything,” Keith yelled. “And you won’t *know*. He’s the only family I have, did you know that?”

Lance didn’t know that. He knew one of Keith’s parents was Galra, as to the other... Keith was an orphan? Lance hadn’t known that at all. Lance knew what Keith did last time Shiro had disappeared- got himself thrown out the Garrison, and confined himself to a shack in the desert. Honestly, that should have been a big enough clue, and he couldn’t believe he hadn’t picked up on it then. Of course Keith, reckless, impulsive, sensitive Keith, didn’t have a family. Shiro had left him twice now, of course, *of course*- Lance’s silence and downcast look was an answer enough for the boy, who kept on ranting.

“He’s all I have, and I’m going to find him. So if you’ve got a problem with that-“

“My problem is with losing you!”

“Then get over it.”

Lance froze, dumbfounded. His fingers twitched, something buzzing beneath his skin. *Seriously?*

“Get over it?” He echoed. *Get over you?*

“You’ve always had your family, Lance, so I don’t expect you to know what to do when someone abandons you. But that’s all people ever do, and I’m sick of it!”

Lance tried. He tried to keep his mouth shut, and let Keith rant, and accuse him of whatever he wanted, whatever helped or made him think they understood each other. But at that, it didn’t work.

“Because my family is just *perfect*, right?”

“By the sounds of it, yes!”

Lance took a measured step toward him, slowly, giving Keith time to back down from the accusation he’d thrown between them. But Keith didn’t budge; he stayed put, hands in fists at his sides, glaring stubbornly up at Lance. Wetness still clung to the corners of his eyes, but that look was furious. The energy pulsing through Lance’s fingers screamed at him to either pull Keith closer or push him far, far away. All or nothing, give in to the insanely warm touch, or forget its very existence and accept the terrifying chill that ran through his veins. What the hell was happening to him? His skin felt too tight, too much emotion building up within him, seeking release but not knowing how.

“Let me tell you something, *Keith*. About my family, and about people abandoning you.”

Keith’s gaze flitted away for a second, struggling under the intensity of Lance’s, but he stayed where he was.

“Cause I do know, I know a whole lot more about it than you think. It sucks, to be abandoned. It fucking sucks, to be left behind. Makes you feel forgotten, makes you think maybe there was nothing worthwhile enough about you to stick around for. You feel like that, yeah?”

Keith didn't say anything. His brows furrowed deeply, eyes sliding over Lance's face slowly, taking in his own frown and tight lips and dangerous, underlying rage.

"But you know what also sucks? *Being* the one to abandon someone. Being left behind hurts alright, and it's no good being the victim, but have you ever once considered leaving someone behind?"

Lance felt dizzy, the ache in his arms clouding his judgement.

"No, you haven't. Cause everyone leaves you, Keith, and that's shitty as hell. But you've never thought about what would happen if you were to leave, right? I know what it's like to leave. Cause I left my whole, entire, *perfect* family on Earth. That's what families are to you, perfect, right? *I* was the one who abandoned *them*. You know them, my perfect older brother, who we never see, cause he's always away in the military trying to send money home to us. And my perfect mother, who works two jobs to support us, who raises us all by herself. And my perfect sister, who's last words to me were about how much she *hated* me for leaving them to join the Garrison."

Lance felt himself bristle at the memory, the sting of it, of tears and lies and raw emotion. His arms hurt so, so much, the cold was getting to be too much.

"A-and all my perfect little siblings, who struggle everyday with what the rest of us do to pull them through. And here you are, talking to *perfect* Lance, who left them, just like my perfectly absent father, who abandoned us too. I abandoned them, Keith. I promised I'd get through the Garrison, and that way we wouldn't be struggling *all the goddam time*. And now I've abandoned them; and now they're struggling with more money problems, and one more absent family member, cause they've lost *another* child. And it's all because *I* left *them*."

Keith blinked, slowly, their helmets distorting some of his finer features, even at the distance they stood. What was he going to say? Why the hell did Lance tell him all that in the first place? Suddenly he was filling with regret, fearing the moment Keith would open his mouth.

"W-what I'm trying to tell you, is don't leave us. Cause to know you're the reason other people are hurting, that... that hurts a lot."

Keith's lips parted, shut, he hesitated. Violet eyes watched him uncomfortably, colour emphasised by the eerie glow of the helmet. He was frowning, but it wasn't anger, it was pity. Lance hated pity. He could say a million things right now, he could react in a million ways. But Keith had just one thing to say.

"Another child?"

Lance stomach dropped. *Had he said that? Lost another child*. The silence stretched between them, so easily broken by one honest confession. But Lance withheld.

"I don't know why we're searching this cave, I really don't. I just don't know what else to do."

Lance shrugged his shoulders, trying to brush off the tension that was smothering the pair.

"You want to go back to the ship now, or what?"

Keith looked lost, like he'd forgotten he was the one insisting they leave in the first place.

"I'm-"

"Please don't say anything."

Keith frowned, looking pained. Lance hadn't meant it to be personal; he just really, really regretted losing control like that.

"Lance..."

"I'm sorry, it's not... let's just go back."

He began to turn when it happened, ready to return to his lion and forget any of this night happened, but Keith reached out. Lance saw his hand reaching for his arm out of the corner of his eye, a second before he was hit with the wildest rush of panic and emotion he'd ever felt. He felt the warmth of that touch before Keith even reached him, and compared to the coldness coursing through him, it was too much. The energy in his fingers felt like a bomb was contained within his hands, about to go off. Lance wasn't even aware of what happened, one second Keith's fingers were closing around his arm, the next he was lashing out, *violently, furiously, too much within him, cold and numb, everything was a loud rush, a blur, and it hurt and hurt and hurt-*

Lance blinked, breath shuddering. His hands were held out in front of him, trembling, as though all the tension within them had been ripped away. Ripped away by... Keith, who lay slumped against the wall ten feet away.

What. The. Hell.

Lance nearly choked on his next breath, gasping as Keith shifted where he lay against the wall, thankfully conscious.

"K-Keith?"

Keith shifted slowly, leaning against the wall, which at least seemed to be made of compact dirt, not rock. He stared right back at Lance, eyes wide with fright. *Did he push Keith? Did he hurt him?*

"What was that?" Keith's voice was quiet, and cracked on the last syllable. "What the hell was that?"

Lance couldn't answer. He tried to take a step forward but ended up stumbled back, his arms still held out in front of him as if they carried some infection.

"I'm sorry, I-I'm sorry, Keith, I'm so sorry--"

"W-what the hell..."

"Oh god, are you hurt? Keith, I- I didn't... I'm sorry--"

"It's okay, h-hey, it's okay."

But it wasn't. *You pushed him, you hit him.* He'd hit Keith. *What the hell what the hell what the hell-* Lance whimpered, *horror* filling his chest. He'd pushed Keith and- thrown him ten feet? Disgust, at himself, at what he'd just done, at the sight of Keith struggling to stand where he'd been thrown against the wall. *Help him.* Lance stumbled forward, then froze. *You hurt him you hurt him stay away.*

"I'm okay," came Keith's voice, but it was shallow reassurance.

"I'm--" he gasped, tumbling back.

Lance lunged for him, but Keith had just toppled back into the wall, his arm disappearing into a

small hole where the dirt had given way. Great, because this just needed to get even weirder. Lance's entire chest constricted when Keith pretended not to notice the hand he offered to help him up, as though wary of it.

"What's..." Keith trailed off, standing beside Lance to observe the hole he'd left in the wall.

Before Lance could react, the other boy was reaching out, knocking away more dirt until he'd unearthed a much larger hole near the base of the wall. His body must have broken whatever earth seal was holding the tunnel shut, but now... It wasn't overly big, the entrance at least was a round hole just big enough for a human to crawl into. Which is precisely what Keith began to do. After sharing a short, confused look with Lance, he crouched down as if to enter the tunnel. Without even thinking, Lance grabbed him by the shoulders, wrenching him away.

"What the hell!"

It was yelled by both of them, at the same time.

"What are you *doing*?" Lance shrieked, the tiny tunnel entrance already looking to small and suffocating to be safe for Keith to enter.

"What am *I* doing? You just threw me ten feet into a wall!"

"I... w-what?"

Hearing it out of Keith's mouth somehow made it even more real.

"What the hell was that?"

"I-I don't know. Keith, I don't know. I'm sorry, shit, I- are you hurt? Did... did I hurt you?"

He was torn between taking Keith gently in his hands and looking for whatever injury he may have caused him, or moving even further from the boy, terrified that he was even capable of doing that in the first place.

"I'm not hurt," Keith said quickly, clearly less distressed than Lance.

"But did I- did I hit you? Why... what the hell did I do?"

"You don't... You didn't hit me, Lance, calm down."

"Then how did you end up ten feet away against a *wall*?" Lance pleaded, frantic now.

"I don't know! You... you tried to push me away, but it was like you shocked me or something."

"*Shocked* you? I'm not a freaking lightning bolt, me shocking you couldn't send you ten feet!"

"Not shocked," muttered Keith, as if irritated with himself for not finding the right words. "You just... there was some sort of energy, alright? Why should I know any more than you? You felt cold, and something just... pushed me away. Not even cold, you just felt different."

Lance could have laughed, so close to becoming hysterical he could feel his knees trembling. "I felt different? What the hell does that mean?"

"You felt- *ugh*," Keith gestured roughly toward Lance's chest as if he was meant to know what the hell that meant. "You felt like a storm! Like cold, and rain, Jesus, Lance, I don't know! It was probably just a malfunction with your armour!"

Lance gaped, none of what Keith was saying making any sense. “Do I still feel like that?”

“I’m not sure I want to find out.”

Oh.

Lance instinctively took a step back. The tension and energy and fierce feel of cold was gone from his arms, but that didn’t guarantee there wouldn’t be a repeat of before.

“No, I don’t mean- it didn’t seem like you meant to do that, did you?” Keith asked hesitantly.

“No.”

He hadn’t, he really hadn’t.

“But I still did.”

Either Keith just loved proving Lance wrong, or he was actually affected by the sad pout on his lips, because suddenly he was unbuckling and tugging off his glove.

“Take your helmet off.”

“W-what? Keith that’s-“

“Dude, the atmosphere’s breathable, my visor is literally up, just do it.”

With fumbling fingers Lance detached his helmet, pulling it over his head and gripping it hard enough to turn his knuckles white. The rush of fresh air was somewhat a relief, but Lance ducked away from Keith’s searching hand the second he felt the other’s presence near him. Keith cocked an eyebrow, unamused, his bare hand hovering in front of Lance’s face as he waited for permission.

“It’s either me touching you once, or Pidge prodding you about twelve thousand times to determine why you’re a human lightning bolt.”

Lance was tempted to comment on how he wouldn’t necessarily mind that if their positions were switched, and it was Keith touching him about twelve thousand times, but he wisely kept that thought to himself. He sighed reluctantly, keeping his head still as Keith reached out tentatively to touch his cheek. Lance grimaced just before Keith’s hand came in contact with his skin, fearing the same thing may happen again. *You could hurt him, you threw him-*

Warmth spread through his cheek, and Lance’s eyes fluttered open- he hadn’t realised he’d shut them in anticipation. Keith was watching him, and though he tried to make it look like he was just a man doing his job, Lance caught a hint of fondness in the small smile that tugged at the corner of his lip. His fingers spread across Lance’s cheek, cupping his face. They were warm, but it wasn’t burning, just pleasant. Keith’s hands were soft when they weren’t hidden in gloves, and though his finger’s were a little shorter and stubbier than Lance’s, he had no doubt he’d love the look of them spread across his skin right now. Lance sighed, overwhelmed by relief.

“See?” Keith said softly, with that damn little smile of his, and Lance could’ve sworn his eyes were sparkling- though it could’ve just been the light of his helmet. “No storms here.”

Lance wished he knew what was so damn enduring about the other in that moment; it could’ve been his eyes, peering shyly up at Lance below the dark fringe splayed across his forehead, or the gentle way his fingers pressed just a tad firmer into Lance’s cheek, or the slight smile that was

slowly transforming into a-

“Hey, are you laughing at me?”

“Sorry,” Keith said with an absolute shit-eating grin, and Lance tried not to mourn the loss of his hand as Keith withdrew from his cheek. “You just looked so worried.”

“Because I electrocuted you!”

Lance huffed as Keith laughed at him, not even trying to mask his amusement.

“Fine, that’s the last time I apologise for throwing you into walls.”

Keith seemed to remember something at that, his laughter quickly dying down.

“Oh yeah,” he said, turning back toward the hole in the wall. “We should check that out.”

No.

“Um, it’s late. We should get back, before Allura starts worrying.”

“I followed you onto a deserted planet but you won’t follow me into a hole?” Keith meant it as a joke, and Lance knew that, but he couldn’t make himself laugh.

“Let’s just go back. We can look tomorrow.”

He lied, Lance never wanted to come near this cave again, let alone go exploring down dark tunnels.

“Or we can look now,” Keith said, still not catching on.

He turned, crouching down to get a better look inside. His torch did little to illuminate the way, and they had no idea how long it carried on for. Or, Lance thought, noticing how the ground sloped jaggedly, how deep it went.

“No,” he said firmly, causing Keith to look up. “I’m not going in there.”

“Uh... okay. You stand guard, or whatever. I’ll be back.”

This was bad. This was so horribly, horribly familiar.

“No,” Lance dropped his helmet in favour of grabbing Keith’s arm.

All fear of electrocuting him was forgotten; he’d rather throw him right back to the castle than let Keith crawl into that tunnel.

“Um, Lance?”

“Don’t go in there.”

Keith frowned, testing his arm against Lance’s hold.

“Why?”

“It’s not safe?”

“Looks fine to me.”

“Looks fine-“ Lance gaped at him. “What the hell! What kind of person sees a deep dark tunnel and goes, hm, looks fine to me!”

“What do you think I was doing in the desert for a year?” Keith asked with a half-mast smile.

“Exploring deep dark tunnels, I know. But let’s just... leave this one alone. Please?”

Keith sighed, looking like he might cave under Lance’s request, but abruptly shrugged him off.

“We’re here now, just let me see if there’s more drawings or anything.”

I just want to explore.

“Just wait here.”

Stay here, Lance.

Keith made to pull his arm away, but Lance held fast. He hadn’t even meant to, but his fingers locked automatically around Keith’s arm, preventing him from leaving.

He was holding her arm, a girl his age, Allita. Let go, I’m coming right back. And he did.

Lance held tighter. Keith squirmed, trying to twist out of Lance’s grip.

“Lance? What are you doing? Let go.”

Grey eyes, blue eyes, he never knew. It didn’t matter, not in the dark. Her eyes didn’t belong in the dark. Her hair was straighter than usual that day, the rain had tamed it down. In daylight, her skin glowed such a warm, beautiful brown, Lance used to imagine she’d shine like sun in the dark. She didn’t.

“I’m not letting you go in there,” Lance said, amazed by how steady he managed to keep his voice.

Keith scoffed, though there was no malice in it. If anything, he was looking a little worried himself. “You can’t stop me.”

Lance didn’t reply. He could, and he would. Keith had no idea the things he’d do to stop him entering that cave, he’d do anything. Trying to avoid anything that dramatic, Lance began to reason with him. It sounded more like begging really, but if that’s what was needed, then so be it.

“Don’t go in there, please.”

“Why not?”

He just had to be stubborn about it. This is why Hunk was his best friend, Lance thought absently. You told Hunk not to go into the creepy cave and he’d help you erect a fucking wall around it.

“It’s not safe.”

“It’s fine.”

“Keith-“ Lance was pulled forward abruptly, underestimating Keith’s strength as he pulled himself toward the mouth of the tunnel.

Suddenly Lance was faced with a wall of dirt and a deep tunnel looming before him, threatening to swallow him whole. His heart jumped, stomach clenching and making him feel sick. *You don’t*

understand, what I'll do to stop you. I'd drag you out of here kicking and screaming, I'd knock you unconscious, I'd kiss you, I'd hit you, I'd lie, I'd threaten to shoot my own guts out, I'd bring this whole fucking planet down before I let you go in there. Lance lurched back, taking Keith with him. He could do any of those things, he should, right now. But the sight of that tunnel, of the dark and dirt, it made him weak.

"Please," he stuttered, before Keith could turn on him to snap. "Please, don't go in there."

Keith hesitated, possibly because of how embarrassingly desperate Lance sounded, how wrecked his voice was.

"Lance?"

"Please," he said, whimpered almost, tugging on Keith's arm to pull him further from the mouth of the tunnel. "I-I can't explain, but please don't go in there, Keith. You can't. I won't let you."

"...Okay?"

Lance nearly choked on his relief. "R-really?"

"Yeah, I mean, if you really don't want me to. Are you... Lance, are you alright?"

To hell if Lance knew that. He was heavy in shaky breaths, which would have been embarrassing if he had the energy to even care. His eyes stung- he gasped, was he crying? Possibly, possibly not, didn't matter, as long as Keith stayed away from that tunnel.

"Promise?"

"What?"

"Promise you won't go in there. Please, oh god, please don't Keith, don't."

"Hey," Keith was kneeling before him, gripping Lance's arms to keep him upright. "I promise. I'm not going in there. I'm right here. Breathe, just breathe with me. I'm not going in there."

It took a minute for Lance's heart to return to a somewhat reasonable pace, all the while Keith sat there, gripping his arms and repeating that promise. When Lance met his eye, he regretted how scared the other looked.

"You wanna talk about that?"

Keith looked terrified, and Lance wasn't sure either of them wanted to talk about it.

"No. Let's just..."

He breathed deeply, eyes dropping to the ground to avoid the sight of that tunnel.

"Lance?"

"I-I don't. Can we just go back to the castle? Please?"

Keith looked on the verge of arguing, but at Lance's pleading look, gave in and nodded. "Yeah. Sure. Let's go."

Lance didn't meet his eye as they helped each other stand. There was too much going on in his head. What had Keith said? *You felt like a storm.* What was that supposed to mean? Lance let the

question bother him all the way back to their lions.

Chapter End Notes

stuffs finally starting to happen WOW

someones whos good at talking to girls please ask bex tk if she'll please marry me
please thanks

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all your support guys!! comments give me life

<3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

“Anyone feel like explaining themselves?” Allura asked the second Lance and Keith set foot back in the bridge.

“Um...” The pair had dirt smudges across their armour from the cave, but other than that, there was nothing to indicate something out of the ordinary might have happened.

Aside from Keith’s hair looking a little more rumpled and riled up by static than usual. Lance supposed electrifying someone might do that to them.

“We thought there might be more to those cave paintings, something to explain all this,” Keith said.

He shared a brief look with Lance, just to instil trust. “But we didn’t find anything.”

“Sorry for running off,” Lance added, glad Keith had kept his promise to keep the tunnel a secret.

“I appreciate your concern, but next time lets be more sensible about it.”

“Agreed.”

“Good.” Allura eyed them with something akin to suspicion, but decided not to comment any more on the matter. “In the mean time, Hunk’s been thinking of a way to get us out of this mess.”

“Yeah?” Lance’s face lit up, turning to his friend. “That’s awesome.”

“It’s not that great of an idea,” Hunk babbled, suddenly uncomfortable with everyone’s attention on him.

“If you got us out of a Weblum I’m sure you can get us out of this,” Keith mumbled in way of subtle encouragement.

“So what was the idea?” Lance asked, eager to hear his solution.

“I just thought we should try land the castle on a planet. We can’t wormhole if we’re not in space.”

“It’s obvious,” said Pidge. “But brilliant.”

“That’s... a perfect plan! We should’ve done that straight away.”

Hunk beamed, glad to hear the others agreed.

“Should we leave right away then,” Lance asked hopefully. “That way we’ll see if there’s another time we wormhole, or if its solely after two in the morning.”

“That’s a fair point. I for one see nothing wrong with moving the castle immediately. Coran, is everything still in order with the generator?”

“It would seem so, princess. The generator shows no signs of failure or damage, or a virus for that matter.”

“Good,” said Allura. “Then lets be on our way.”

-

Star date – 33:02:25

Castle Cycle – 10:06

Log – 1

“Is this thing recording? I have literally no idea. Pidge? Pidge! Fuck it, she’s out. Uhm... I think... that thing... means it’s recording? Black, wanna help a buddy out? No? Can I call you Black, like Red is Red, Blue is Blue, Green- you get the point. Did Shiro name you, or was it like... did you already have a name? Oh! Maybe you’ve got no name, like, No Face! Cause you’re dark and mysterious and so far have said literally nothing. You know? Spirited Away? No Face? Ah, forget it.”

The camera shifted a little as Lance slumped back into the pilot’s chair with a huff. A burst of static rained across the recording screen as he reached out to tweak the settings.

“I really think it’s recording, but if its not, then at least there’s no proof of me talking to myself like an idiot.”

Lance frowned, looking a little out of place in the black lion’s cockpit. He folded his legs up on the seat, dressed in a casual shirt and jeans.

“Okay, so, this is Lance McClain, beginning log number one... or something... It’s like a captain’s log; man, that makes it sound way cooler. Captain’s log! Star date 33:02:14! I’m damn glad Pidge gave this thing Earth time settings else I’d be crying myself to sleep every night trying to figure out time. I mean... we’re probably off a few days, but this will work. Allura suggested I start doing this, apparently it’s a good way to bond with the lion, and at the same time just keeps track of all that’s been happening. Which is... a lot.”

Lance drummed his fingers against the chair, glancing away from the camera.

“This feels like a pretty one-sided conversation, Black.”

A deep sigh, Lance clasped his hands together and brought himself to face the camera.

“Okay, I’ll just talk. You reply anytime you want. Yeah? I’m taking the extended silence as a yeah. The planet got weirder. I hate that planet.”

He scrubbed a hand over his eyes, a little lacking in sleep, but otherwise healthy.

“I don’t know what happened down there with Keith. I feel really bad, despite him saying it didn’t matter. We haven’t talked about it at all. I don’t really want to; Keith’s great at avoiding conversation, so that’s good. But I... what was that? I felt weird, but I didn’t expect... It was likely a suit malfunction, like Keith said. But that doesn’t make complete sense. Because I... I felt weird.

Inside, all tingly, and cold. And what Keith said, about how I felt like, like a freaking storm...”
Lance stopped himself with a scoff.

“I guess it kind of makes sense. That is what it felt like. Don’t know what it means though. I just hope it doesn’t happen again, you know, in case I actually hurt someone. I might ask Pidge to look at my suit.”

A moment of silence descended upon the cockpit as Lance stopped to consider this.

“Anyway,” he continued, voice a hint more cheerful. “The planet we’re on now is alright. Just a big ol’ desert, no aliens, no caves, no creepy, unexplained phenomena. Plus it’s far away from that star system. Hunk’s idea was awesome, cause you can’t wormhole when you’re on the ground, right? I’m still scared though, which is stupid. I just... if I knew why we kept wormholing, I think I’d feel better. If we could just find the virus, or if some aliens came forward and admitted it was them cause they needed help or something- hell, even if it was some Galra wanting to put up a fight, I’d prefer that. I just want to know, cause right now my imaginations running a bit wild.”

“Speaking of, Pidge did decipher those inscriptions in the cave. It wasn’t much, most of it was just talking about their day-to-day life, berry picking, how to befriend space dogs, whatnot. There was nothing on the flood, which annoyingly enough is what we most want to know. And the inscriptions at the back, the ones around that drawing of the planet, they weren’t that helpful either. They just said Dark Planet. Over and over. And our translations are a bit iffy, so it could actually be something unexciting like Not Light Planet, or Shady Space Object. But Dark Planet is what we got. Which explains nothing. We don’t even know if it’s referring to the dwarf planet, or if this Dark Planet is a completely separate planet. Allura thought she might know something, but then she just shrugged.”

Lance played with the sleeve of his jacket, looking solemn.

“So anyway, now we’re here, waiting again. And I really hope it works this time. I don’t want to go back there.”

He hesitated, lips pursed.

“I’ve been trying not to think of that ship. If I disassociate from it, then I can handle it. Otherwise... they were saying my name. My name, and it wasn’t some coincidence, they weren’t referring to a different Lance, they were reaching for me. I... god, Black, I have no idea how to feel about that. It was horrific enough that they’d been killed like that, but then they were alive-“

Lance sucked in a sharp breath, shaking some tension from his shoulders.

“There’s nothing we can do about it now. We just keep going, like always. I’m trying not to get too worked up, cause last time that happened... yeah, my freaking suit and its lightening powers acted up. Did that ever happen to Shiro?”

The boy paused, glancing around hopefully, as if Black might finally choose to respond in some way. He sighed.

“I miss him. D-do you? He was your paladin, probably still is, when he comes back. I wish he was here.”

“It’s okay if you don’t want to talk to me yet,” Lance said earnestly. “I feel bad about leaving Blue, she doesn’t have a pilot at all right now. But... I think we need each other, you and me. You need me to pilot you, I need you to help me learn how to lead this team.”

Lance smiled sadly, gazing around the cockpit as though searching for a familiar ghost. "Well, I should get going. I'm gonna keep calling you Black for now though, but let me know if you'd prefer something else; like Paws, or Rex, or maybe Princess, Kittykins, Mister Meow- okay I am aware that you could probably eat me so I'm gonna shut up. But nice chatting, Black. This is... what am I meant to say? Lance? Ending the captain's log? Yeah, that'll do it."

-

No one was as enthused to be woken at one in the morning again, probably because the situation felt less dire this time around. They sat around the bridge, all looking a little grouchy. Hunk, Pidge, and Coran had drifted off back to sleep in their chairs, leaving Lance, Keith, and Allura to monitor the dull array of dormant readings. Allura had powered the castle down, so even if a wormhole opened in the sky, they'd be confined to the ground.

"Any more thoughts on that Dark Planet message?"

Allura pursed her lips. "I'm racking my brain for any mention of it, but coming up with nothing. It's likely a localised thing, of little importance."

Lance hummed, and went back to staring up at the sky from the window. It was actually daytime on this planet, which was a little disorientating, given the castle's cycle was reading just before two in the morning.

"Did we find out anything else about the planet?" Keith asked suddenly.

"Like what?"

"Anything. Like, uh... strange... electricity readings... or something."

Lance shot the red paladin a warning look.

"No..." Allura replied hesitantly. "Why do you ask?"

"I just thought maybe things like that could effect the generation of wormholes," Keith said quickly, as Lance made a violent silencing gesture where he stood behind Allura.

The last thing he needed was her worrying about whatever weird energy had been channelled through his arms.

"I doubt that," said Allura. "Wormholes are more finesse."

Lance reckoned it was because Allura said that, that the wormhole chose to appear. The wormhole that opened above them came three past two showed little of that subtle finesse, as its gaping maw descended upon them.

"It's a little small to swallow the whole planet," Keith tried to joke as the wormhole stretched wider, as if annoyed to find the ship was not in easy orbit, ready to be plucked up.

Lance swallowed nervously. *Of course it's too small.* The trio stepped closer to the window, heads craned upwards to peer into the blue circle of light hovering far above them.

"You know, I think this might just--"

They stumbled as the castle suddenly shuddered, as if struck by a bolt of lightning. A really, really big bolt. Lance reached out to steady himself against the wall, Keith and Allura taking up similar

positions as the ship rumbled. The others woke with a start, scrambling out of their seats as the castle began to shake.

“Everyone stay calm,” Allura instructed, picking her way toward the controls.

Another shudder, and Lance caught sight of a wicked blue strip of light retreating from the outside of the ship.

“Is... is the wormhole doing that?” He asked in disbelief.

“What kind of-“ Pidge yelped as the castle shook violently, throwing her off her feet.

“Oh, quiznak,” muttered Coran, a second before the world tilted, half of the castle lifting abruptly into the air.

A sharp crackle filled the air as they were all thrown sideways, slipping along the floor. Lance grabbed hold of a chair before they went vertical, the castle practically flipped on its side as a violent beam of light wrapped around one of the sections of ship and tried to coax it up into the air.

“Allura, what’s happening?” He yelled over the cries of his teammates, some luckier than others with the handholds they’d managed to find.

“I don’t know!” Came the reply, and he spotted Allura bracing herself between two control panels to keep herself balanced.

“A little help?” Hunk squeaked, from where he was currently clutching a chair, Pidge and Coran dangling from each of his legs.

A moment later the air disappeared from Lance’s lungs as the castle dropped back violently to the ground. His back hit the floor, and he heard the other’s struggling to adjust to the new position again.

“What the hell is it *doing*?” Pidge said angrily, picking herself up off the floor and stomping toward the windows.

“Don’t let go!” Allura shouted at her, bracing herself for a repeat, Lance realised.

He grabbed for Pidge, just getting a hold on her arm before the other end of the castle was struck by a bolt. This time the floor tilted slowly, as though the castle was being lifted with more precision.

“Stop it!” Lance yelled, as he and Pidge began to slip along the steady incline.

He was dangling by one arm in no time at all, Pidge clutching his other hand to avoid falling all the way to the other side of the room.

“This is ridiculous!” Yelled Keith, balanced against the side of a chair.

“I’m reversing the engines,” Allura informed, before the castle went into full drive, trying to push itself back toward solid ground.

“I really don’t think that’s working,” Hunk said, when the castle was only pulled more violently.

Lance risked a glance out of the window and took in the wild sight of desert sand swirling around them like a tornado. Blue light flew from the wormhole, attacking various points of the castles and grabbing on like long, spindly arms. Allura was clearly struggling to keep them down, and Lance

could hear the castle's core straining. Flashes of blue through the haze of orange dust lit up the bridge, which was otherwise darkened by the sandstorm. He glanced down to where Pidge was dangling off his hand; she was staring out the window, wide eyed and terrified. Gritting his teeth, he yanked her higher, helped by Pidge scrambling against the sloped floor until she could also grip the chair.

"Just hold tight," he said, now having to shout to be heard over the violent storm outside and the thrumming of the engine.

Pidge shut her eyes, tucking her head into the safety of her arms, clutching the chair as tightly as she could. Lance threw an arm over her, gripping the other end of the chair to lock her in place. This was going to be a rough few minutes.

"I'm losing it!" Yelled Allura, as the castle began to ascend shakily, wrapped up by the storm.

"Don't risk damaging the ship, princess!" Coran shouted back. "Let it go!"

Allura's expression said it all; she didn't want to let go. Perhaps the star system didn't frighten her like it did Lance, but it was sure getting in her way. A universe to tend to and protect, a future child and it's missing father, four paladins she'd promised to return to Earth- this was putting it all in jeopardy. A cry an anger left her lips as the castle jolted violently, spinning up into the air. Lance screwed his eyes shut and held on, almost crushing Pidge under his arm to keep them in place. Something cracked deep within the castle, various portions of it over used and strained, pushed past their breaking point. The ship rose wildly, spinning, tossing and turning, thrown between the beams of light as if it was nothing more than a leaf in a hurricane. Someone screamed, but in the rush of noise and chaos Lance couldn't tell who it was. His knees hit the deck painfully, as no matter how tightly they held, he and Pidge were still tossed about in the ascent. Too much noise, too many directions, they were coming apart until-

The calm hit without a breath of warning. On minute they were hurtling through the sky, the next they were enveloped in silence. The castle stilled, coming to a stop, and gradually the sounds of the overworked engine died down. Lance cracked an eye open, cautiously releasing Pidge and pushing himself up off the floor. All around him, his teammates were doing the same, groaning at their new bruises. He spotted Keith helping Allura to her feet by the controls, concern spreading across his face when she winced at the weight on her ankle. As soon as their gazes met, everyone looked in sync toward the window. Lance was hardly surprised to see the same dark star system. It hadn't worked, again.

Allura's gaze was furious as she faced the dark window and star beyond it. She was standing awkwardly on one leg, something Lance took immediate note of to get fixed. Her fingers curled into fists and he wondered if she had the same urge to hit something as he did.

"This is bullshit," she said, and with that, stormed out of the bridge.

Chapter End Notes

sorry things are moving kinda slow/might be confusing... it'll make sense really soon, I'll also have something less repetitive than "the gang goes through the wormhole again" to end chapters soon

Thanks for reading :)

Chapter Notes

Thanks for the kudos and comments people! (i love seeing all ur theories)

hope you enjoy this chapter :)

-

The sun of Ursa Machada was hot and heavy, the weight of it's warmth leaving one with leaden limbs and tingling skin. The planet itself didn't have much in the way of life, but they wanted it that way. At least, Allura did.

"I really don't think this is a good idea."

"It's fine, Pidge. Quit worrying."

"Quit worrying? Keith, ideas that you agree with end in capture, extreme injury, and combustible space ships."

Keith huffed, glancing away. Although Lance could see where the red paladin was coming from- it was a good idea and did need to be done, he still agreed with Pidge.

"Are you sure about this, Allura? Shouldn't someone go with you?"

"I'll be perfectly fine on my own, thank you."

"No, it's not that I don't think you can handle it, but we don't know what *it* is. What if something happens and no ones there to help? Do we even know if you can contact us from there?"

"I'll be fine, Lance. Besides, I may not even wormhole."

"I doubt it," muttered Pidge.

"Paladins, please," said Allura, where they stood gathered before the castle's entrance. "I've dealt with far worse situations on my own before."

"Plus this time she'll have me!" Coran added cheerfully.

"Uh, actually, I won't."

"But princess--"

"Coran, the less variables there are the better. You will stay with the paladins and their lions on Ursa Machada, and I alone will take the castle into orbit. Am I understood?"

"What if just one of us goes with you?" Pidge suggested hopefully, disliking that they were going to be splitting up again.

“That would defeat the entire purpose of this experiment. If the castle wormholes, we’ll know it’s an internal error. If it doesn’t wormhole, we’ll know it’s something trying to get a hold of Voltron, and has no use for an empty ship. Now, are we all done arguing about it?”

The five of them nodded solemnly, and surrounded Allura with a chorus of goodbyes and good lucks before she disappeared into the castle. They stepped back toward the line of lions as the castle powered up and took off into the air.

“How long til it’s meant to open?” Asked Pidge.

“About one of your hours now,” Coran answered, watching the castle ascend nervously, clearly anxious to be back on it.

Lance hated this plan, but knew it would help them determine if the problem lay within the castle or not. He just hoped Allura would be alright. He had planned on spending the hour in Black to improve their bond, given there was nothing to do outside but trudge around in the hot desert, but as soon as he was out of earshot from the others, Keith fell into step beside him. Annoyingly, he didn’t say anything, just kept pace with Lance as he walked toward their lions. Usually it would be fine, but right now Lance could almost see the questions waiting to spill from him.

“I was just gonna go chat with Black so-“

“Are we going to talk about it?”

Lance stopped walking, turning to face Keith properly.

“Talk about what?”

Keith stared at him, raising a brow.

“Your memory isn’t *that* bad.”

“Okay...”

Problem was, Lance couldn’t figure out quite what *it* was; it could be the spaceship, or the cave, or his weird electrical outburst, or maybe Keith had finally caught Lance staring at his butt and he was about to be called out on that amidst the other hundred times he’d been staring at Keith’s butt.

“Then no,” Lance said, deciding it didn’t matter which of those things Keith was referring to, because he didn’t want to talk about any. “We’re not talking about it.”

On that note, Lance kept walking, cursing the day he was introduced to the blue set of armour he wore now, which proved no relief from the sweltering sun. The second he stepped into the patch of shade cast by Black, Keith was back beside him, or rather in front of him this time.

“Please.”

Lance frowned. “What?”

Keith looked sheepish, but pushed on determinedly.

“Pidge said I should say please more, when I want stuff. Not just demand it. So please tell me what’s going on with you.”

Lance kept his amusement to himself; though he had to hand it to Pidge, she was really trying.

“Okay, but please is something you say when you want a favour or maybe some of my space goo, it’s not *please Lance won’t you tell me why you electrocuted me and threw me violently into a wall*. That’s... something you should demand, or just hate me over.”

Keith’s expression wavered, but then he folded his arms crossly. “Fine. Lance, why did you electrocute me and throw me into a wall?”

“Keith-“

“I’m not angry about it, if that’s why you’re trying to avoid talking. You didn’t hurt me, alright? Besides, that’s not the only problem.”

“What does that mean?” Lance asked, giving in to the conversation and leaning against Black’s giant paw.

“The ship, Lance. You didn’t forget, did you?”

Keith wasn’t mocking his memory; if anything he sounded concerned, or hurt, like he had when Lance forgot their bonding moment.

“The... they were saying your name.”

“I didn’t forget. How could I forget that?”

“I wouldn’t blame you if you... you know... had blocked it from your memory, or something.”

Lance sighed, pressing his back to the cool metal. He *wished* he could block that from his memory.

“I can’t explain it, Keith. I know you wanna know but I don’t-“

“Actually, I, um...” Keith shifted awkwardly from foot to foot, looking out of place where he stood nervously before Lance. “I don’t expect anyone to explain it. I was just going to ask if you’re okay.”

Lance paused. His immediate thought was no. He could snap- *no, Keith, I’m not okay, does anything look okay?* His next thought was to conceal it, play it off as a joke, as something that didn’t matter. But there was something about the way Keith asked it; he was being so earnest, which Lance knew was uncommon for him. Keith reserved his softer side for people like Shiro, and gradually Pidge, not normally Lance. But here he was, actually asking if Lance was okay, looking concerned, for Lance. Looking vulnerable too, like he knew it was unusual for him, and now he feared what rejection might taste like.

“Are you okay?”

There it was again, hesitant, but genuine. Of course Keith cared about all of them, he risked his life for his teammates all the time, he’d defend them until the very end. But having him care like this, it was nice. So Lance relented, shoving his sweaty fringe away from his forehead and sighing.

“I’m okay, I just don’t understand what’s going on, and that scares me.”

Keith waited patiently, also unusual for him.

“I’m sorry I went off at you when you found that ship. I shouldn’t... I should have checked you were okay.”

“It’s fine,” Keith said quickly, trying to avoid letting the conversation drift back into one revolving

around his own careless actions.

“When you first found the ship,” Lance said with a hint of hesitancy. “Were they... did they do anything? Did you know anyone was alive?”

Keith’s silence was unsettling. He opened his mouth to reply, but bit down on his lip to stop himself, not done thinking his answer through.

“They were dead. I really, really thought... You saw them, it shouldn’t have been possible.”

“What do you think did it?”

“I don’t know.”

Lance swallowed the lump in his throat, watching Keith’s face closely for an honest reaction.

“Do you think I did it?”

The boy’s eyes widened, gaping at Lance. “*You?* No, why would that even occur to you?”

“Because they were saying my name, Keith, and reaching for me.”

“That doesn’t- that doesn’t mean you *killed* them. You saw them, Lance, how could you- there’s no way you’d do that to anyone-“ Keith was rambling, angry with Lance for even suggesting he’d done it.

“How could you? You didn’t even know that ship existed!”

“But what if I haven’t done it *yet*? What if it’s a time loop, I... what if I’m *going* to do that to them? Or in an alternate reality-“

“Lance, stop.”

“I’m serious. How did they know me?”

“It doesn’t matter, you didn’t have any part in that, Lance.”

“Sure, I *hope* I didn’t have any part in it, I don’t *want* to have any part in it, but I didn’t want to hurt you either, and look how that turned out.”

“You didn’t hurt me,” Keith bit out, frustrated. “It’s not such a big deal.”

“Either way, what if I did something without meaning to? What if I hurt more people-“

“Lance, there is no link between that ship and whatever went wrong with your suit!”

“It didn’t *feel* like a malfunction with my suit.”

“What?”

Lance gnawed on his bottom lip, trying to find the words. He flexed his fingers aimlessly in front of Keith, as if a pair of gloved hands could explain what he’d felt.

“I could feel it. Not my suit, *I* could feel it, in my arms. They were cold, they hurt, and after I, y’know, did whatever that was, the feeling was gone.”

“That could still be backlash from your suit, someone should look at it.”

“No, I’m telling you it wasn’t my suit.”

“Then...” Keith looked just as unsure as Lance felt. “Maybe it’s something to do with Black?”

“I tried talking to Black already, she doesn’t want anything to do with me.”

“You could talk to Coran about it?”

“I don’t want to become some weird investigation!” Lance exclaimed, folding his arms protectively across his chest.

He was, he realised, doing something akin to sulking. Oh well, leaders of Voltron were allowed to sulk, weren’t they? Shiro definitely had grumpy days.

“Then what do you want to do?”

Keith was trying, he really was. Trying so hard to keep the conversation from turning south, or just dissipating. Lance slouched against the side of the lion with a huff, pouting. He dared a glance up at Keith, who was watching him indifferently. Dammit, the pout always worked on Hunk. Lance should definitely go to him for sympathy; Keith was just raising a brow.

“I don’t know,” he whined, head hitting the cool metal.

“Talk to Coran.”

“I don’t wanna.”

“*Lance.*”

“Why don’t *you* talk to Coran?”

“Fine, I will.”

“Wait, no don’t!” Lance shot up when Keith made to walk off. “I’ll... talk to him. Or someone. Just not right now, okay?”

Keith looked unconvinced, but eventually a little of Lance’s pleading pout must’ve gotten to him.

“Fine.”

Lance slumped in relief. “Thanks.”

“Will you tell him about the cave-“

“Well will you look at the time? Time to talk to Black, we have a strict schedule you know,” Lance said quickly, turning heel and waking quickly toward the lion’s mouth.

“Lance!”

“Nice chatting, Keithy-boy!” Lance called with a wave over his shoulder.

“We were still talking!”

“See ya later!”

Lance could almost *hear* Keith’s eye roll as he left the other boy standing in the shade of Black’s paw. It was nice talking and all, but Lance didn’t feel like bringing up the incident with the cave.

Not yet, at least. Hiding in Black was a much better way to process his emotions. So that's what he did, at least until he was sure Keith had moved on to do something else, after which he snuck back out to unclog sand from Black's paws; because let's face it, sitting around in the cockpit of an unresponsive lion was a pretty dull way to pass the time.

That's what Lance was still occupied with when Coran called them together to watch what would happen to the castle come wormhole time. Lance wanted to believe there was a way this would work, that without the lions in the castle, it just wouldn't wormhole. Though, he supposed it was important to figure out if someone actually did need their help. They couldn't abandon someone in need just because of his stupid suspicions. The five of them stood around, squinting at the sun in the hopes they'd catch a glimpse of the wormhole opening. Lance wasn't sure if Allura had taken the castle fully into orbit, or if the ship was still within sight. The five lions sat dormant in a loose circle, including Blue, who they'd towed down to the surface for the sake of the experiment.

"Any minute now," Coran reminded them.

Their orange haired advisor looked extremely nervous, no doubt fearing for Allura's safety. Somehow she always managed to sound convincing enough to land herself in the most dangerous of missions. Typical.

Fearful as they should have been, waiting around was actually kind of boring. Lance huffed, digging his boots through the sand, ignoring the sticky trail of sweat creeping down his neck. He and Pidge had just begun shuffling the sand lazily into a small mound with their feet when he felt the first twinge of discomfort. Immediately, he stepped away from the youngest paladin. Pidge didn't notice at first, when Lance froze up, fingers curling to try and curb the feeling before it spread. *Shit. Shit shit shit.* He gasped, more for the sake of fear than discomfort. There was a familiar but unwelcomed tingle in his ankle, and a cold ache blossoming in his wrists.

"I think it's opening!" Coran exclaimed excitedly.

Then he realised what he'd said and reiterated, in a much more serious manner, "Oh, quiznak, it's opening!"

Lance's eyes searched the sky alongside everyone else, hindered by the fact that they, unlike Coran, did not have a convenient Altean brand telescope. He couldn't be sure from this distance, but the faint blue flicker, like lightening high in the sky, certainly looked like the beginnings of a wormhole to him. He hissed at the sudden spread of ice through his veins, more scared now than anything. *Really, is now the time?*

"Lance?"

Pidge was looking at him. She took a step forward, he took three back.

"I-I don't..."

His eyes met Keith's, who had just torn his away from the sky.

"I don't feel good."

Keith's eyes widened, and he moved hastily toward them.

"You look kinda sweaty," Pidge remarked.

"That's cause it's hot," Lance shot back, trying to keep calm.

Because that's what triggered this last time, wasn't it? Stress?

"You're ever sweatier."

She scoffed. "Okay, well you look--"

Which is when Keith yanked her back.

"Hey! What the--"

"Dude, Lance stinks when he's sweaty. I wouldn't get closer."

That is... the worst excuse I've heard in my life, Kogane. Pidge, the little devil, hummed anyway, as if really considering it.

"H-hey! At least my hair looks good when it's sweaty, yours looks like a drowned hamster!"

"I'm not sure if you're referring to me or Keith right now."

"I'm referring to you *both*."

"Wow--"

"Seriously," Keith said, and Lance caught hint of the underlying concern. "He said he wasn't feeling well, if it's a space virus, be careful not to catch it."

"That's it, McClain," said Pidge. "No more breathing."

"Or I could just put my visor up and not infect you."

Pidge was saying something back, another snarky remark, but Lance stopped paying attention. His breath stuttered as he tried to gain control of the feeling in his arms. *Is it the suit?* He glanced up toward the sky again, searching for the ship; this was absolutely not the time for this too be happening. The light had intensified, meaning there was definitely a wormhole opening up somewhere out there. Why was it happening now, was it because he felt endangered? A defence mechanism? *It hurts.* Without thinking, Lance ripped the helmet off his head, tossing it down onto the sand. If this was the suit's doing, he was about to find out.

"Um, I get its hot, but do you have to strip?" Pidge asked, as Lance undid his gloves with trembling fingers, flinging them both, followed by his chest plate, onto the sand.

He tried to make a snide comment out of it, but the ache in his arms and general feeling of discontent within him was too distracting. He was left only in his flight suit and the armour around his legs, yet he could still feel the cold. *Help.*

"I really don't feel well," he breathed, turning to Keith.

The other looked helpless, watching Lance go a little out of his mind.

"Paladins, is everything alright? What are you doing, Lance?"

Coran was walking over to them, the distraction enough to pull him away from watching the opening wormhole.

"I think Lance is sick."

“You okay, buddy?” Hunk stepped forward to lay a hand on his shoulders, and Lance swerved out of his reach.

“F-fine. Cool wormhole, huh?”

“Lance...” Keith trailed off, taking a cautious step toward him. “Is it...”

“Good heavens, boy, shouldn’t you have your armour on?”

Lance ignored Coran’s comment in favour of staring at the sky. The blue light was intensifying, and he wondered if Allura had been pulled through yet. He doubted it, as it still felt like something was pulling. *Oh*. Lance’s heart skipped a beat as the light pulsed, searching, reaching, *pulling*- His eyes snapped to the line of lions, mouth barely forming a warning before a stunning bolt of blue light ricocheted through the air, descending from the sky like a living beast and striking the blue lion. For a moment they were blinded, the light too intense. The violent strike threw sand up into the air, whirling dangerously like the time it had plucked the castle up from the surface. *We didn’t realise, why didn’t we think?* The light burned bright where it took a hold of the blue lion. *Shit*. Keith was the next to realise, second only to Lance. The red paladin lunged for him, screaming, but was beat by the second strike of bright blue lightning, which enveloped Lance with a sharp crack, and burned and burned til the world went black.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the comments and kudos!!! WOW they have been great so thank u <3

this is a pretty chill chapter (yipee)
 please feel free to comment any elements you might like to see in this story bc I am still tryna plan ahead so
 also baby names
 cause
 I got nothing

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

The cold confines of the healing pod should have been familiar to Lance; after all, he'd been in one before. But due recent events, coming to consciousness in a cramped coffin-like structure that chilled him to the bone was nothing but a frightening experience. His last known surroundings were a world of chaos, bright blue light and cold, cold energy creeping through his arms. Was this so different? Panic registered in his system before he could even open his eyes, a sharp spike of urgency that had him gasping for air, stumbling, reaching, searching for a way out of the horrible cold. There had to be something else, a way out of this, something warmer, something living-

His eyes opened as he fell, though it wasn't a long way. Two strong arms caught him, and suddenly he had a face full of shockingly white hair. Allura was warm, he noted happily, arms too weak to hug her back. His mind was reeling from the stress it had been under, and he tried to refocus it; Allura's hair smelt of spiced tea and fresh mountain air, and her arms were so heavenly warm where they wrapped around his back, holding him up, that Lance practically melted. He couldn't see much out of her embrace, flashes of colour here and there, but he was slowly becoming aware that she was talking.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Lance."

Was she crying? Lance frowned, forcing strength into his arm and lifting them weakly to hug Allura back.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed, *definitely crying*.

"s okay," Lance mumbled, confused as to why she was apologising.

A sniffle, and Allura was drawing back, keeping a firm grip on his shoulders while Lance adjusted to standing. Her face was streaked with tears, eyes red and puffy and lined by dark circles. Jeez, what exactly happened?

"Good to see you, princess," he slurred, cracking a grin.

Before Allura could respond, her face scrunching up with tearful relief, an even bigger set of arms

was wrapping around him from behind and hoisting him up into the air. Lance yelped as his feet left the floor entirely, and a flash of yellow sleeve braced over his chest confirmed that it was Hunk who'd scooped him up and was currently swinging him back and forth in a hug. Lance couldn't help it, he laughed, despite the fact that he was being half-crushed to death and must've emerged from a near-death experience judging by the others' reactions.

"Hunk, maybe let him down before you break a rib," Allura suggested, a wobbly smile tugging at her lips.

Lance turned around the moment his feet hit the floor to hug his friend properly.

"You gotta stop doing this to us, man," Hunk said with a snuffle, hugging him back.

Lance kept his smile steady as he pulled back, finally taking better notice of their surroundings. It was just him, Hunk, Allura, and Coran around the healing pods, with Keith and Pidge nowhere in sight.

"The others are in the lab," Allura explained quickly.

Lance tried to ignore the bitter taste of disappointment; *they have other stuff to do, they can't waste hours waiting around a healing pod.*

"But Keith was in here all day yesterday, so no doubt they're on their way."

That thought cheered Lance up, but only for a moment, because-

"Yesterday?"

"And the day before," Hunk added with a huff.

"Wait, how long was I... uh, what happened, again? I'm kinda fuzzy."

Allura's lips were drawn into the thin line; she looked very troubled.

"Guys?"

"You were in the pod for two weeks, Lance," Hunk said softly.

"Two weeks! What..."

The smile vanished from Lance's face; he turned to Allura, whose expression bled sympathy but also guilt.

"What happened?"

"The wormhole, it... I'm so sorry, Lance, I should have known."

"What did it do? Is everyone else okay?"

"That's just it, everyone else is fine. The wormhole took you, Lance. It took the castle, and it took you. But *only* you. It--"

"We got the scan back!"

Allura was cut off by a loud cry from the doorway, as Keith's dishevelled form clattered into the room, Pidge hot on his heels. His hair was unkempt, much like the rest of him, his red jacket tied

around his waist as he waved a tablet triumphantly in the air. Together, Pidge and him made quite the sight. The hand drawn blueprints in Pidge's arms and oversized headphones (which Lance was pretty sure Pidge had gifted to *him* to listen to music with) slung around Keith's next only added to their image.

"Allura, we-" and Keith stopped short, tripping over his own feet.

His bare feet; *for the love of God, Kogane, have you been so caught up in working that you forgot to put your shoes on?*

"Lance?" His voice cracked, tablet clattering to the floor.

"That is *expensive equipment*," Pidge hissed, crouching down to snatch up the tablet before registering what Keith had said and what she was now currently seeing.

She shot up, like an ill-dressed jack-in-the-box, sleep deprived eyes fixated on Lance.

"Holy shit!" With one hand she pointed to Lance, with the other she punched Keith; both tablet and blueprints were lost in between.

Keith didn't waste another second; Lance didn't know whether to be glad or start running for his life when Keith sprinted toward him, Pidge following with an indignant squawk as she was pulled along by his headphones that were somehow connected to a box on her back. It wasn't unlike Keith to run at him, it just usually came with him wielding a sword and a mouthful of curses as he duelled or bodily shoved Lance out the way in the heat of battle. There was no sword this time, just a sleep deprived paladin in a rumpled shirt and a smile wide enough to steal Lance's breath away. Then his breath was actually stolen when Keith collided with him.

One second Lance had been fine standing there, fine with the cool but not freezing temperature in his arms, fine with the knowledge that he was relatively *fine*; the next Keith was on him, his arms around Lance's neck, up on his tiptoes with his head against Lance's shoulder, and suddenly nothing was *fine*, not unless he could keep a hold of the warm body in his arms forever.

Keith, so seldom one for affection, clung to Lance as if he were a lifeboat. And Lance was right: Keith was the perfect size to hug. He turned his face into the mop of black hair, relishing every second they could spend like this before it became weird, especially with the others watching them. Breathing deeply, he felt Keith's own chest heaving with pent up emotion. The press of his arms was so, so warm; so warm Lance almost failed to recall what the chill in his arms had felt like. Though there was definitely something...

"You're shorter without your shoes on," Lance said with a grin, securing Keith in his arms in case the other boy tried to pull away at that comment.

"Shut up," Keith mumbled.

"Oh my god, Keith, *move*."

Lance suppressed a whimper as Keith's warm body was slowly but surely tugged away from him, trying not to appear to desperate by clinging to the boy's sleeve.

"I'm trying to get a hug in here too, you know," Pidge scolded, finally forcing Keith off him so she could attack him next.

"Pidgy!"

Pidge yelled as Lance scooped her up into the air, spinning her around until Pidge was swearing that she'd never hug him again. They were both laughing when he finally set her down, though not after Coran had scolded them thoroughly because, *Lance, really, given the state you're in you shouldn't-*

Of the others, Allura still looked ill with guilt, Hunk just looked happy, and Keith's face was flushed pink. Lance grinned at them, his team, but the smile was short lived as Pidge opened her mouth to speak.

"Allura, we... we got the scan."

Allura's face lit up for a second, but quickly dissolved into horror when the girl's face fell.

"And?" Allura asked, clinging to a shred of hope.

Pidge shook her head. "Keith was right. They were never alive."

-

"I'd like to get this story from the beginning, please. Starting with the *they were never alive* thing is not working wonders for my nerves."

Lance thought his request to be fairly reasonable, and fortunately the others agreed.

"What's the last thing you remember?" Allura asked, her body poised and patient.

They were seated in the dining hall, with Coran trying to press another bowl of food goo toward Lance while the others sat crowded around.

"Um... we were on Ursa Machada, castle was staring to wormhole, I saw the blue lion get zapped and then... I, uh, assume some shit went down."

"You have no idea," Hunk whispered with a shake of his head.

"It's true," said Allura. "The wormhole reached out to grab the blue lion, just like it did with the castle when we grounded it. And then-" she took a deep breath to calm herself; the incident was very clearly still bothering her. "Then the wormhole took you."

"Always knew I was the most irresistible," Lance said with a wink, trying to dissipate the tension.

It didn't work.

"This isn't a joke, Lance. You nearly died."

"But I didn't?" It sounded like more of a question, or something Keith would say.

"Lance, you..." speaking of Keith, the boy was staring at him. "You were really hurt."

The longer Lance looked, the more he saw. His friends were exhausted. *Two weeks*. If any of them had been in a healing pod for two weeks, Lance might've gone out of his mind. Suddenly Keith's dishevelled appearance wasn't as cute or laughable as it had been just a few minutes prior.

"What happened then?" He asked more seriously, watching their faces carefully.

"If you want the details," said Allura, "that wormhole really messed you up. You were struck by a lightening-like force, an *incomprehensible* force, without your armour. You were pulled through an

entire wormhole without cover, without your *helmet*, into open space--“

“Allura,” Lance reached out to take her hand and she drew a deep, stuttering breath.

He must have really frightened her, Lance realised. *She really thought they'd lost you.*

“That wormhole took you, me, the castle, and both the blue and black lions.”

Both lions?

“W-when I got you back inside the castle, you weren't- you weren't breathing. Even once you were in the healing pod I didn't... I wasn't sure...”

Allura met his eye, her own close to tearful, squeezing his hand tighter. She wasn't in her usual armour, hers looked borrowed from somewhere else. Why wouldn't she have her armour? Lance swallowed the nauseating feeling in his throat at the realisation; she'd been wearing her armour when they wormholed. An image came to mind, of Allura retrieving his body from outside, carrying him to the healing pods, so covered in his blood she'd had to dispose of her armour-

“T-thanks,” Lance stuttered, focusing on their clasped hands. “For coming to get me.”

He glanced around at their teammates. “Thanks everyone.”

“Appreciated,” said Pidge. “But it was just Allura.”

Lance's gaze returned immediately to the princess. *No wonder she looks so afraid.* Allura offered up a weak smile before continuing.

“I discovered something about the system. As soon as I got you into the healing pod, I tried to wormhole back to the others, but it didn't work. There's approximately a half hour gap between arriving here before we are able to open a wormhole again. The generator just didn't work during that time, as if its resetting itself. Afterwards, when the others were back, we decided to stay here in this system, in case... well, in case it took you again.”

They gave Lance a moment to absorb all this; the others had all had two weeks, he deserved at least a minute. He blew a tense breath of air through his lips.

“Wow. Well, its good to be alive?”

The others nodded; it wasn't a joke.

“Um, you said it took the lions? The blue and black and... didn't touch the others?” Lance looked over his teammates. “It didn't touch any of you?”

Pidge shook her head solemnly. “It only took you and, I guess, your lions.”

“But Blue's not even... it doesn't feel like *either* are my lion right now. Let alone both. Besides, you can only have one lion.”

“Whether or not you have two lions isn't the problem,” Allura reminded him. “The problem is that it took you, and all the parts of Voltron related to you.”

Lance blinked, mulling over that. “I don't know if I should cry or make a joke right now.”

“I could definitely go for a joke,” said Pidge.

“This is good news though, right?”

The others stared at Lance blankly, waiting for him to actually make a joke of that statement.

“What the fuck,” said Keith, when no joke came forth. “What are you talking about?”

“Well you guys aren’t stuck here. Me and probably Allura, but the rest of you... I mean, this is good news.”

“That’s not good news!” Pidge yelled, throwing her arms up. “Lance! What the hell?”

“What? You guys don’t have to keep coming back here, you could search for Shiro, or go back to Earth-“

“We’re not leaving you here,” Keith snapped, arms folded crossly, like they usually were.

“Dude, we made that musketeers deal ages ago,” said Hunk with a frown. “All for one and one for all? Nobody’s getting left behind.”

“I’m just saying...” Lance trailed off, looking to Allura for guidance.

There was the slightest hint of consideration on her face, a look that said *no, they won’t abandon us now, but if they had to, I would make them.*

“Are you stuck here too?”

She sighed, toying with a strap on her armour. “I think so. Why would it have bothered taking the castle otherwise?”

He’d be dead, Lance realised, if Allura hadn’t been taken through the wormhole. This situation was feeling more uncomfortable by the second.

“So, you and me, huh? What’s so special about us? Aside from the obvious, our good looks and-“

“Lance.”

“Seriously though, why just us? And why both lions, I... did it want the leaders of Voltron? Why take the blue lion then? Why only take a portion of Voltron when you could have it all?”

“And what’s taking you in the first place,” added Pidge. “Wormholes aren’t actually living entity’s, something’s opening it. And getting real selective about it.”

“Whatever this something is,” Allura began, “I don’t think it wants Voltron.”

“Maybe it just wants the black lion?”

“No,” Allura locked eyes with Lance, and there was something older and understanding in her gaze. “I think it wants you.”

“Well that’s a bummer, cause I’m taken.”

“You’re single as fuck.”

“Not what I meant, Pidge.”

“Language, Pidge.”

“Suck a dick, Keith.”

“Maybe I w-“

“Paladins.”

“Sorry,” Lance mumbled, slumping back in his seat. “What if it wants *you*, and I was like, I don’t know, paladin lucky dip. Buy one Altean get a paladin free.”

“It’s time we start linking the evidence,” Allura explained. “That ship and its passengers, they knew your name. I am certain now the two are linked.”

Lance avoided bringing up his dreams or electrical incident, which would only further their belief that this was about him, in favour of sulking and ignoring the problem.

“But *why*? What is it, and, no offense to myself, but what the hell does anything want with me?”

“I don’t know, Lance, this is space, it could be a million reasons. You could’ve made the wrong hand gesture at a diplomatic alien meet for all I know.”

“I don’t think finger guns quite give anything the incentive to butcher a ship full of people for the sake of scaring us.”

“You make a point,” Allura admitted with a pout.

“So what are we going to do?”

“Figure out *what* wants you, obviously,” Pidge said.

“Or we could keep trying to evade the wormhole. You know, avoid an actual confrontation with anyone?”

“No,” Allura said firmly. “We’re not leaving this system again until we are certain it is safe for you to do so.”

“Ugh.”

Lance sunk lower in his seat, tugging at the collar of his shirt in frustration.

“Speaking of the ship...” Pidge said hesitantly, almost as if she was looking for an invitation.

“Oh, yes! What did you find?” Allura asked quickly, though she looked like she already knew the answer.

“Wait,” said Lance, sitting up straighter. “Wait wait wait... Is *this* what you were talking about when you said they were never alive?”

Keith shifted anxiously in his seat, eyes darting between Lance and Pidge.

“Keith, do you wanna...” Pidge tried hopefully.

“Uh, yeah, yeah I’ll explain.”

He refused to look at the others as he began talking, eyes downcast and fingers twisting anxiously at the jacket tied around his waist.

“When I found that ship, with the passengers, I really thought they were dead. Obviously, they weren’t, when I towed it in and Lance boarded. Except they...”

He huffed irritably, the situation stressing him out. “I thought it was really odd, that they’d been alive. There was just no reaction from them when it was me. And they looked really, really dead. You- you saw them. I know we incinerated the ship and all, but the castle should have automatically scanned it for life forms when I first brought it in. Pidge and I have been trying to get those scans from the castle’s storage, and today we did.”

Lance didn’t like where this was going, but he could do nothing but sit and listen to Keith, who was growing more agitated by the second.

“The castle did scan the ship, but it didn’t find any life forms.”

A pause.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means from the moment Keith towed that ship in,” continued Pidge, “there was nothing alive on it. They were dead. When Keith found them they were dead, when he towed them in they were still dead, and when they reacted to you they... they were dead.”

The red and green paladin exchanged a nervous glance, waiting to see Lance’s reaction, everyone’s reaction, for that matter.

“You’re telling me we’re dealing with fucking zombies? Or what? What’s the deal? You can’t just fucking tell me that and- and expect, what the fuck?”

Lance was... angry? Scared out of his mind was another way of putting it. He had no idea how he was meant to react to that, to process it.

“They weren’t zombies,” Keith said hastily, snatching one of the blueprints from Pidge’s pile and spreading it across the table. “That would actually be a very different occurrence.”

“Keith, how were they *dead*?” Lance bit out, unable to keep the rise out of his voice.

“Um...” Keith fingers pinned the page down, which was covered in rough outlines of the ship itself and illegible notes. “Ignore this, we had to draw it out to get the castle to recognise the right information log. Here.”

He tapped a finger against a small graph in the corner. “It’s not the most accurate, cause we copied it from the screen. But that’s the energy reading inside the ship.”

“I see a squiggly line.”

“Look here,” said Pidge, butting in beside Keith and spreading her hands across the drawing. “This is advanced stuff, its unlikely to be flawed. Here, you can see there’s nothing, no life detected. That’s when the ship was first towed on. You see where the lines spilt? That’s you, Keith, and Allura entering. And here, this big spike, that’s when everybody started talking to you. After that... it all goes flat again.”

“So they... came back to life? Maybe they were in a dormant state-“

“They were dead, Lance. The energy spike wasn’t them. If they came back to life, they’d have separate lines, like you three had. That’s one big, continuous spike. One entity. They didn’t

recognise you, they were *never alive*. They died hours before we even found them. Something spiked, something recognised you, *something* used them, that's for sure. Like... like a parasite."

"Like zombies."

"They're not zombies!"

Keith stifled a sigh.

"This is really serious, Lance," Pidge snapped.

"I know," he said, voice strained. "I fucking know, believe me. You want me to make a joke about it, or literally break down because I will."

"How is this possible?" Allura whispered, looking to Coran.

"We can sit and debate how it's possible all day," said Keith. "It doesn't change the fact. What we actually need to focus on is doing something."

"Doing what?" Lance asked, gesturing hopelessly to the page. "Something's possessing dead things. Something's opening wormholes and... just..."

"Then we find out what the something is."

-

Lance felt somewhat nervous where he stood outside the lab door. This was Pidge and Hunk's territory, Coran's too, but definitely not Lance's. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was being used as the experiment. That wasn't what this was about, he knew, but still. This was about his suit. Because *someone* (hint: Keith), *might've* (hint: definitely) mentioned to Coran that there was a problem with his armour. Not that it mattered now; his suit had been reduced to bloody smithereens that Lance would prefer not to see, so he needed a new one. That's where Coran came in.

The lab doors slid open automatically as he approached, revealing the scene inside. It was a lot less chaotic than Lance would have thought. Pidge had apparently taken over the castle's past agricultural research centre, except she had taken a far less orderly approach. The result was plantlife everywhere. Lance had to admit, it was nice in the lab, at least at first glance. The air was more humid, which was a great feeling after being exposed to the clinical atmosphere in the other sections of the castle for so long. It smelt of mulch and rainforest, as if he'd stepped into a giant greenhouse, adorned with buckets of alien ferns, lumpy bulbs poking through tubs of black soil, bushy climbers stapled to sections of wall with growth charts drawn on beside them, and plenty of tubs to collect the water dripping from broadleaved shrubbery. It was a good place to catch ones breath.

"Pidge, your *Cactri* is eating my workbench again!"

"Only cause Puffy used it as a litter tray!"

Hunk's voice drifted through the plants as Pidge came into view, lugging a waterlogged pot at least half her size behind her. There was dirt smeared across her cheeks, a notebook shoved into the back of her pants, and a spindly green tentacle reaching out of the pot to tickle her hand.

"Oh. Hi, Lance."

"Hey."

He took a few steps into the room, as Pidge grunted with the effort of trying to move the pot.

“What’cha got there?” He asked, peering into the large pot and grimacing at the slimy blob of plant half-submerged in murky water.

“Oh this,” said Pidge proudly, stopping to uncurl the plant’s tentacle from her hand and giving it a good-natured pat on the head. “This is a *Blood Glump*, they’re responsible for helping produce food goo, you know.”

“*That* makes food goo?”

“No, but it does produce a vital ingredient.”

Lance tried really hard not to think about that.

“Where are the others?”

“Coran should be up the back if you’re looking for him. Hunk’s just around the corner. Watch it though, Puffy’s awake.”

“Wait, you’re keeping the space-cat here?”

“It’s a space-dog. And yeah, Hunk’s trained him well enough. At least, he hasn’t bitten anyone again, so...”

Lance hummed, eyeing the clump of potted bushes in case Puffy decided to make an unwanted appearance.

“Well, good luck with the, uh, *Blood Glump*, and all that.”

“Oh, I’ll be good,” said Pidge, smacking another tentacle off her arm.

It was easy to see which section of the lab belonged to who as Lance made his way through the room. Hunk had set up a section just around the corner and was currently tinkering with some machine Lance couldn’t put a name too.

“What’s up?” He asked upon spotting Lance, shoving the pair of goggles up onto his forehead. “Feeling better?”

“Yeah, thanks. Uh, I just came to see Coran. He’s supposed to fix me up a new suit or something.”

“Oh, right. There’s been a lot’ve explosions from up the back, so, good luck.”

“Are you serious?”

“Nah man,” Hunk said with a chuckle, reaching down to ruffle the hair of the grouchy space-dog Lance now spotted curled up under his desk. “I’m kidding. Have fun.”

Deciding he couldn’t delay anymore without distracting his friends from their work, Lance moved toward the back of the lab, where Coran’s station stood, comprised of god-knows-what. Mostly this section was medical stuff, with lots of instruction manuals, and a few fashion guides for the galaxy’s latest looks. Lance had no doubt their space-pirate getups had come from one of those.

“Lance! Excellent timing, my boy!”

Coran, the man himself, suddenly popped out from behind a mysteriously shaped casket.

“Hey, Coran.”

“Are you ready to try your new armour,” he carried on excitedly, coming at Lance with a measuring tape that was, at this stage, entirely useless, given the suit had already been made.

“Sure am. Though, did you, uh, find any problems with the last one?”

“With what was *left* of the last one? No, not a thing wrong.”

“Oh, that’s good I guess.”

But it wasn’t, not in Lance’s mind, because if it wasn’t the suit... he shook the thought from his head. Rather just focus on getting a new one. Coran was talking animatedly about the slight, *but I promise you hardly noticeable*, changes he’d made. Lance’s attention was somewhere else, namely on the suit that lay in a sad pile under a workbench. *Allura’s suit*. It was barely recognisable, the pink and white patterns drowned beneath the crimson coating of blood, which had by now turned dark and crisp. Lance swallowed, *that’s my blood*. He thought he might’ve been able to make out a handprint on the shoulder, but it was hard to tell with that much blood splattered messily across the armour. *Best not to think about it*. Sparing his thoughts for Allura, he returned his attention to Coran, who looked just about ready for the big reveal.

“Not a whiff of an error on this one, I assure you,” he said, beaming.

Lance returned his smile shakily, turning to the cylindrical pod before them, as Coran whisked away the cover.

“Well, what do you think?”

Lance stared straight ahead, blinking. He couldn’t place the emotion that settled in his stomach.

“Lance?”

He wet his lips, trying to keep his voice steady.

“It’s black.”

Chapter End Notes

I promise the next chapter will be longer... and hopefully more fun? by fun i mean fucked up but again hopefully

thanks for reading!!

Chapter Notes

Oh my goodnesssss thank you for all your nice comments!! Thanks to everyone reading :)

I LOVED your baby name suggestions oh my word, they were so good (and some were hilarious thank u) I've definitely got an idea now but will leave that to be told in the actual fic

BACKSTORY TIME yay

a biiiiiit of a longer chapter too, cause I had a top notch playlist for motivation <3

Enjoy reading!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

Hunched shoulders, clasped hands, Lance sat stiffly on the edge of his bed, brows drawn tightly and his lips forming a thin line. Tension strung him together, so tight it felt he might snap at any second. Of course the armour was going to be black, it should have been obvious, Lance just... forgot. He'd been expecting blue, like he'd had before, that still felt like his colour. But no, here he was, the leader of Voltron, in Shiro's colours; and it felt... Lance didn't know what he felt. Wrong, perhaps, unworthy. He wore the armour now, almost an exact replica's of Shiro's, but altered to fit his narrower form. He'd thanked Coran of course; it was no small feat making Lance a new set of armour, but after that he'd left as soon as possible. So now he was here, hiding in his room again, staring at his harrowed reflection in the small mirror across the room.

He didn't look his usual healthy self, but Lance supposed nearly dying and spending two weeks in the artificial environment of a healing pod might do that to someone. He wondered if Keith would have some harsh things to say to him about that; it hadn't seemed so when he'd hugged him, but after Lance had berated *him* for nearly dying, it seemed to be the next step in the natural order of *me and Keith and our adventures in nearly dying*.

There was also coming to terms with the scar. Lance didn't think the healing pods could leave any mark, but as he'd peeled off his clothes to don the new armour, it was too easy to spot. It could've been a lot worse, given he'd been struck by a *freaking wormhole*, but it was no small thing either. The scar centred on his right shoulder, its jagged white lines slithering over his chest and back, a little like a lightning bolt itself. It didn't hurt, but Lance shuddered as he ran his finger over the raised skin, as if recalling the ghost of the agonising pain it represented. The scar was hidden now, with his suit on. He wondered if any of the others had seen it, besides Allura.

A knock on the door brought him to his feet quickly. He froze up when Allura's voice drifted through, asking if she could come in. *Shit*. Of all the people he didn't want seeing him in the black paladin's armour...

"Uh, yeah, come in."

There was no point in hiding it, get it over now instead of in front of the team. There was a space of a few seconds as Allura first stepped into the room, when both her and Lance tried to mask their true reactions. Lance's shoulders slumped and the spell broke.

"It fits," said Allura, standing rigid just inside the door.

"Yeah."

There'd never been any doubt it would.

"Are you happy with it?"

Lance swallowed. This felt uncomfortably like a test.

"Yes."

Silence, suffocating.

"I don't want to replace him."

Allura sighed, long and suffering, averting her eyes.

"May I sit?"

Lance felt his chest tighten, but gestured to his bed anyways. "Sure."

They sat rather awkwardly beside each other, Lance's hands resting against his knees, Allura's clasped firmly in her lap. This was starting to feel more like a lecture from a Garrison professor than a conversation between two friends.

"I can ask Coran to change--"

"No."

Lance gave Allura a sideways glance, but her eyes remained fixed straight ahead.

"I'm the one who enforced that you were the new black paladin, because you are. It was a duty thrust upon you, and you have done your best to accept."

"Allura, that doesn't mean it's not upsetting--"

"Let me speak."

Lance shut up quickly, fingers tapping nervously against the black plate of armour over his thighs.

"You're not replacing Shiro, you're replacing the black paladin. Not replacing even, you *are* the black paladin. These things go around in cycles; even when Shiro returns, there is no guarantee the black lion will accept him if it has bonded with you. We need to embrace that fact."

Lance stayed very silent, even when Allura turned to meet his eye, an empathetic look on her face.

"You look miserable."

He frowned, only driving her point home.

Allura's expression softened. "I know what you're thinking, Lance, and what you want to talk about. It's true, we could spend hours talking about that, how much it hurts, how much it feels like

this is forgetting him; but you know what, I don't want to. I'm so tired, I don't want to talk about forgetting him, because we're not. I could be sad all the time, and talk about how much I miss him, and how hard it is not having him here, how I hate that he doesn't know about our child, that he may never meet this child. But... I don't want to, Lance. I don't want to be sad *all the time*, because I still have hope that we'll get him back. So no, seeing you in the black paladin's armour does not upset me. It makes me proud."

Lance blinked at her, the corners of his eyes damp. Allura looked away suddenly, a similar situation building up.

"Allura, I..."

"Oh, *quiznak*, this is why I hate having these conversations," she exclaimed suddenly in a rush of air. "Now we're both all teary!"

A wobbly smile fought its way onto Lance's lips as Allura wiped furiously at her eyes.

"I refuse to be sappy right now," she muttered. "Can't we talk about something stupid? Stop being so miserable about it and be glad that everyone's butt looks good in black."

Lance nearly choked on air as he began to laugh. "*What?*"

Allura chuckled dryly, her poised stance fading into a more casual slouch. "Admit it, it's true."

"Well, yeah," said Lance, still heaving with uncertain laughter. "I didn't expect to hear it from the princess of Altea though."

The silence that followed was a comfortable one, the tension in the air having dissipated.

"If you wanna talk about happy stuff," Lance suggested after a minute. "How about telling me how you fell for Shiro?"

"Oh," said Allura with a hum, a small slice of amusement tickling her features. "Definitely when he used Coran's old socks to put on a puppet show for the mice."

Lance swore he wasn't going to survive this conversation.

-

Star date – 33:03:12

Castle Cycle – 21:12

Log – 2

"You know what's worse than being in a healing pod? Being out of a healing pod but doing nothing but wait around in this crappy system all day."

Lance huffed, slouching back in the seat in the black lions cockpit.

"I'm glad I was unconscious for two weeks, cause it's been two days, and I'm already losing it. But no, we can't wormhole out, not yet, not til we're sure Lance won't be sucked up into a wormhole solo again. Which, I get, but given that I am the only one in danger of being kidnapped, wormnapped, Lancenapped? I should get some say."

Lance pouted, running a cloth half-heartedly over the controls.

“Yep, I’m so bored I’ve resorted to polishing you, you happy? You’re gonna be shining like a damn diamond by the time Shiro gets back. What do you think of the suit by the way? I was worried Allura would be upset, but she was actually pretty chuffed, even made a joke. And come one,” Lance chuckled, standing up and bumping his hips ridiculously in front of the camera. “My butt does look great! Is that inappropriate? Can I do that on a captain’s log? Not like anyone can stop me. Except you, which you won’t, cause you just like being a quiet, broody, old lion. Come on, anything? Black? Buddy? Nope, okay. It’s alright, really, I’m just chatty today.”

A pause, where Lance hummed a few lines of an old Earth pop song.

“Wanna know some useless facts about the team? Of course you do. Hunk made Puffy a collar, its yellow and sparkly, I don’t know where he found yellow glitter in space but now I need to know. Keith’s shoes add about an inch of height, which is fucking hilarious. I haven’t had anymore hugs from him which is a damn shame, but he wasn’t angry about this mess, just relived. Pidge tried to do her hair in pigtails yesterday, I laughed at her but now I feel really bad. Best of all, apparently Shiro has three different voices he uses for sock puppets. I know you’re laughing somewhere in there, Black, deep deep down, very, very deep, down... boy, I love these conversations.”

Another minute of silence as Lance polished a section of panel out of view of the camera. When he returned, there was a more solemn look about him.

“So I guess I’m really here cause I couldn’t sleep. Not all true, its not even that late, but I don’t want to try and sleep yet. I don’t know, but since getting out of the healing pod I just feel... cold? Uncomfortable, something. I don’t like falling asleep in this system.”

He sighed heavily, setting the cloth down.

“There’s just a lot happening, I think. I’ll get over it, I know, but... ah, forget it. I’m gonna try sleep. Lance out.”

-

Star date – 33:03:12

Castle Cycle – 22:35

Log – 3

“Guess who can’t sleep? Yup, it me. I wanted to try bother Pidge instead of you but for once she was actually asleep? Ran into Keith and he threatened to put me into comatose if I woke her. Rude, that boy. Can’t believe you let him pilot you that one time. Did you talk to him? Do you talk at all? Oh shit, Black, can you not talk? Am I being rude? I... nah, you know what, I’m pretty sure you’re just ignoring me.”

Lance sighed, bored, jostling his legs up and down and whistling a faint tune.

“I want to sleep. Lance out.”

-

Star date – 33:03:12

Castle Cycle – 23:04

Log – 4

“Opinion time; Altean sleeping pills. Will they help or will I be giving Sleeping Beauty a run for her money because I may be tired but sleeping for a hundred years really isn’t my forte.”

For a minute Lance moved back and forth in front of the camera, his image growing and shrinking on the screen.

“Black, can you see me through this thing?”

-

Star date – 33:03:12

Castle Cycle – 23:13

Log – 5

“I know I said I was going to bed, but I lied, I was just getting a snack.”

Lance waved a bowl of food goo in front of the camera.

“Mm, tempting. What Pidge said fucked me up though. That gross plant thing is an ingredient in this... man, that’s... that’s wrong.”

-

Star date – 33:03:12

Castle Cycle – 23:27

Log – 5

“So I figured out how to pause the logs, just in case Allura wonders why I made sixty separate log entries in one night. Neat, huh. So, uh, this is Log Five continuing.”

Lance mournfully moved the last blob of food goo toward his mouth.

“This is taking a long time to eat. I can’t un-see those tentacles though.”

He chewed slowly, grimacing all the way through. Sleepiness clung to him lightly, obviously hindering the boy.

“Hey Black, do you think Keith likes my hair?”

-

Star date – 33:03:12

Castle Cycle – 23:41

Log – 5

“Just saying, I do spend a lot of time on my hair. We all need validation. Bro... I gotta apologise to Pidge for laughing at her hair. It was cute, I was just a dick. Man. I suck. I mean I don’t, but... aw, you know what I mean.”

-

Star date – 33:03:12

Castle Cycle – 23:58

Log – 5

“Can’t sleep, can’t sleep, can’t sleeeeep. Ugh.”

Lance dropped an armful of blankets and a pillow onto the floor beside his chair, straightening out

his sleep shirt.

“We’re having a campout. I think maybe my bed’s just not comfy. Admittedly, this floor looks even more uncomfortable, but I’m out of options. So, uh, night Black. If you wake me up by snoring I swear to god I will take a sticker book to town on your windshield.”

-

Star date – 33:03:13

Castle Cycle – 00:36

Log – 5

Lance sat in the pilot’s chair, wrapped in a blanket and rubbing his eyes groggily.

“So, still can’t sleep I guess. It’s nicer in here though, thanks for tryna help.”

He fiddled with a small trinket in his hands, tilting it up for the camera to see.

“Sorry to be nosy, but I got bored and dug around and... the fact that Shiro keeps a little photo of Allura in here is actually adorable. That’s goals, man. Damn. I’m gonna cry, I’m too tired for this.”

-

Star date – 33:03:13

Castle Cycle – 00:43

Log – 5

For a minute or two, the camera just played, and Lance said nothing at all. He sat cross-legged in the chair, leaning his chin heavily on his hands, staring dejectedly at the floor.

“Mama sang sometimes. Not to us, just to herself. But you could always hear her from our bedroom, so that put me to sleep.”

He sighed, his voice quivering.

“I miss her.”

-

Star date – 33:03:13

Castle Cycle – 00:49

Log – 5

“I just want to sleep. I’m... I don’t know why I can’t. Something feels wrong. I’m being stupid.”

-

Star date – 33:03:13

Castle Cycle – 01:02

Log – 5

“Why do you think I did that to Keith? It wasn’t my suit, Black, I know it wasn’t. I don’t understand. And the other stuff... no ones as worried, and I- I don’t know. Unexplained things

happen in space, so maybe I shouldn't worry so much."

Lance looked harrowed and exhausted, still recovering from his time in the healing pod.

"I'm trying to do what Allura always does, prepare, but don't panic. But its weird, that something wants me, and my lions. I don't understand, Black, and I'm scared."

He sniffled, pulling the blanket up to his chin.

"I'm really scared."

-

Star date – 33:03:13

Castle Cycle – 01:14

Log – 5

"I don't want to sleep. Don't let me sleep, okay, Black? Something feels wrong. I don't want to sleep."

-

-

Star date – 33:03:13

Castle Cycle – 02:04

Log – 5

The camera stayed on Lance's sleeping form, the slow rise and fall of his chest, a lock of his hair tickling his ear, face pressed between the chair's back and his arm, curled around his knees to hold him together.

The cockpit was silent and empty, just the sound of his breathing.

Rise and fall.

Rise and fall.

Lance sat up. He turned toward the controls, blanket falling from his shoulder, eyes open but unseeing. For a minute he stayed like that, face a blank pallet, still caught in a state of dreaming. His hands gripped the controls, and he powered up the black lion.

-

The world was falling into autumn; there were no red and orange speckled trees to tell tales, but rather a brisk breeze that ruffled the rough sand along the shoreline. It would storm soon; Lance could already see the grey clouds gathering on the horizon, pulled forth by the wind. The waves crashed heavily against the sand, growing angrier each time the breeze teased their crests. Lance breathed deeply, smelling the salt and impending rainstorm. Cliffs rose up to his right, just a narrow stretch of sand between their rocky base and the ocean. *Don't look.* He looked left instead, at the young girl standing beside him.

Allita, ten years old, wasn't fussed by the chill in the air. She stood bared footed in the sand, blue overalls and white t-shirt fluttering against her dark skin as the wind came for her slight form. Her hair hung in little ringlets, her eyes boring into Lance. She didn't speak, her expression was quite blank, but when she grabbed his hand she was as familiar as she always had been. Lance feared she'd turn right, toward the cliffs, but the child began to lead them left, up the narrow path leading off the beach. A glance over his shoulder told Lance the storm was still coming, so he followed quickly; he didn't want them to get caught in that.

The path was steep, but he'd walked it a thousand times before. Tough grass of mellowed green tickled his knees as they waded through the flourish of plant life atop the dunes. They were going home. Lance's heart clenched; he hadn't been home in a long, long time. A tremor passed through him; *neither has Allita.* No, he pushed that thought away, let it be swept up by the hazy warmth encasing his mind. She was here, now, real, they were going home. So they carried on, through the dunes and grass, along the sandy path to where Lance knew their house lay at the end of a little dirt road. This was his favourite place on Earth.

Allita tugged him along insistently and he smiled softly, considering telling her not to be so impatient. He chose not to however, the silence was nice enough. Rain had begun to fall on the ocean by the time their house came into view, its rickety wooden fence and homeliness inviting them in. Lance stopped, his breath catching. He couldn't see any of his family, but the sight of his old home had him weak in the knees. Allita pulled on his hand and he followed. He watched her, still as silent as him, her hair bouncing as she skipped toward the gate, the hopeful little sparkle in her eyes whenever she turned back to see if he was still there. *I'm here,* he thought, as if just thinking it would let her know. *I'm not going this time.*

They drew closer, and Lance began to make out familiar aspects of their old house. He missed this place. Allita released his hand to run along the path leading up to the door, leaving small footprints behind her in the sand. Heat blossomed behind Lance's eyes; he missed even seeing her footprints around the garden. Blinking away the tears building in his eyes, he spotted his sister by the door, hanging off the handle and waiting for him. She stepped inside, and he was sure he could smell things cooking in the kitchen. The wind was getting stronger, colder, it had begun to drizzle; he needed to get inside.

Allita smiled as Lance moved toward the door, up the two little steps leading onto the porch, toward her, toward home. She stood just inside the doorway, beckoning him in. He spied a picture frame on the wall, some shoes by the door, a soccer ball resting on the porch. He was home; perhaps the rest of his family was there, perhaps his father too. *Come on,* Allita seemed to say, her childish features drawn into a happy little smile. Something tickled at the back of Lance's mind, like a voice, but surely he'd imagined it. *Home home home.* Lance stepped forward to close the distance between him and the door and-

Something slammed into him forcefully, and the world around him vanished, like the reflection on a pond as a stone was plunged into its depth. Allita, their house, the beach, it fell away in ripples,

so dizzying it knocked Lance's feet out from under him, or rather-

"What are you doing?"

Keith was screaming. *Keith?* His voice was broken, harrowed and terrified. Was he crying?

"W-what are you doing?"

Reality hit Lance alarming fast; he gasped, mind reeling, trying to gain a sense of his surroundings. He tried to move, but there was a pair of arms around his chest, holding him still where he lay on the ground. Opening his eyes, he couldn't see a thing.

"Keith?" His voice was slurred, confused.

Where am I? Why is Keith shouting? Where is she?

"Lance? Oh my god, Lance. Don't move, don't move, okay, d-don't."

A horrible feeling sprouted in Lance's chest. *Where am I?* Allita's face still swirled in his mind, the beach, they were going home, he was stepping- *I can't see*. A sob tore through him, and the arms around him tightened. *Keith*; Keith was holding him tightly, Lance's back pressed to his chest, but why? *What's happening?* Lance felt his breathing quicken. *What's happening? Where am I? I can't see I can't see what's happening where are we it's so dark-*

"K-Keith, what's happening? Where are we?"

No reply, just Keith's laboured breathing as he adjusted his position and dragged Lance a few inches back. *The ground*. His skin felt clammy, the air felt stuffy; Lance trailed his fingers over the ground and felt rough, wet dirt. Dirt, darkness, the realisation struck him and he cried out. *We're underground*.

"Keith, where are we," he stuttered, beginning to cry.

"What were you doing?" Keith's voice was choked, sounding even more afraid than Lance felt.

"Why were you down here, Lance, why-"

"Where am I?"

He was close to sobbing now, his entire body cringing inwardly at the darkness that surrounded them.

"I can't see, I can't see anything, Keith. I can't see you, o-oh god, where are we, I-I can't see-"

"I'm here, right here, can you feel me?" Keith moved them so they were kneeling, his hands tight on Lance's shoulders.

Lance reached out blindly, hand finding the side of Keith's neck; he took a strong grip on his shoulder, breath spiralling out of control.

"Hold onto me, okay? You have to hold on, Lance."

Keith guided Lance's other hand around his back, pulling him closer so Lance could keep a hold of him. The hands left his shoulder, still wrapped around him but tinkering with something behind his back. A flash, and suddenly a small light had appeared on Keith's wrist. Lance identified it as the emergency wristbands they kept in the lions, which created just a small circle of light, enough to illuminate their faces. Keith's face was streaked with dirt, breathing hard, eyes tracing over Lance's

face as if he couldn't believe the other was awake. His image was blurry in the faint blue glow, but it was *something*. It was a relief for all of two seconds, before Lance regretted having any light at all. Because now he could *see* the dirt. He made a choked sound, slipping along the sloped ground as he struggled.

"Don't move!" Keith voice was sharp and spiked with panic.

His arms flew out to get a grip of Lance, yanking him up as the dirt shifted and crumbled beneath them. A slope, they were on a slope leading to- Lance's breath left his body as his foot slid another inch and suddenly slipped over a ledge.

"Don't move, Lance. Hold on."

And Lance did, tighter than he ever had. Very carefully, Keith brought them both to their feet, hunched over in the close confines. *Oh god, oh god, where are we?* Lance twisted, looking over his shoulder, and felt bile rise in his throat. The illuminated band on Keith's wrist didn't give much light, but it was enough to see the drop before them. The slippery mud suddenly gave way to a deep pit, darker than the night sky, engulfing the cavern they were in. *Was I about to step into that?*

"Where are we?" Lance's voice was barely audible, too wrought with fear.

"The tunnel."

The tunnel; Lance only had to think for a second. The tunnel on the planet, the one they'd discovered when he threw Keith against the cave wall, the one Keith promised not to go into. Lance's legs gave out, the fresh wave of panic leaving him light headed. Keith was speaking, shouting maybe, but Lance couldn't focus. He couldn't form words, his limbs felt heavy, his heartbeat too fast; *we're in the tunnel we're underground I'm going to die*. Arms tugged him along, his feet slipping uselessly against the loose dirt.

"Lance! Lance listen to me!"

He couldn't. They stopped moving, and suddenly Keith's face was right in front of his, the blue light painting his hair like inky trails of a jet-black liquid.

"Hey, look at me," Keith said softly, hands bracketing his face. "Look at me, Lance, focus on *me*."

It was hard not to at this proximity, with the light illuminating his face so sharply. It was like guiding a moth to flame, the only tangible entity in the depth of the tunnel.

"I'm getting you out, so just hold on. Can you do that? We're getting out, just hold onto me."

Lance nodded numbly.

"Okay," Keith said, breathing a sigh of relief.

His eyes fluttered shut for a second, as if sending off some prayer.

"I need my hands, so you just hold on. Close your eyes, Lance."

He did, and felt Keith turn around. Picking up Lance's arms, the red paladin wrapped them tightly around his stomach then let go. Lance dug his fingers into Keith's shirt, shutting his eyes tight and pressing his face into Keith's back. When Keith began walking, Lance held on tightly, tripping and falling over the sloping ground but ultimately getting dragged along by the other boy.

“Nearly there, we’re almost out,” Keith kept murmuring, breathing hard as he fought his way up the slope.

Lance let himself believe anything the other said. It felt as if they walked for hours. Logically, it couldn’t have been more than a few minutes, but every second Lance was forced to stay down there, and with every breath of stale air he took, he felt a step closer to hell. Keith never stopped talking, murmuring reassurances to keep Lance grounded, to distract him from reality. Tears burned his eyes, his throat closing up in panic, but he clung to Keith and kept moving. Because Keith was going to get them out, he promised.

They felt the exit before they saw it; the air was suddenly less stuffy, the taste of dirt and mildew milder. Lance stifled a sob against Keith’s shirt, clinging to him a little tighter in the fear he’d be ripped from him now, now that they were so close to the surface. They’d had to duck and crawl through areas where the ceiling was lower, and now near the entrance they were forced to the ground again. Dirt rained down on their heads whenever one accidentally brushed the sides of the tunnel, and Lance’s heart was beating so fast he thought he might be sick.

He didn’t notice the end of the tunnel until he and Keith were falling through, collapsing in a heap on the floor at the back of the open cave. Despite it still being pitch black, it was lighter than it had been in the tunnel. Lance drew a deep breath, trembling all over, rolling over to try crawl further from the cave. He ended up sitting just to catch his breath, ragged and terrified, the taste of dirt clogging his throat. He only noticed Keith kneeling down in front of him when the light on his wrist flashed brightly in Lance’s eyes, Keith’s hands cupping his face in search of injuries. Lance opened his mouth to speak, but all that came out was a choked whimper.

“What were you doing?” Keith’s voice was rough with emotion, broken and pitchy.

“I don’t know,” Lance slurred, head dropping a little as Keith released his face, still dizzy. “I don’t know. Where- what’s happening?”

“You don’t... you don’t know?”

“I-I was, I just, Keith, I’m scared. What was I doing why, I don’t-“ he stopped himself with a sob.

“Sh, its okay.” Now Keith’s arms were around him again as he whispered those words into Lance’s hair. “We’re safe.”

“But, but I- I was home, A-Allita was there I was home.”

Keith pulled back, wide-eyed, his concern mounting.

“Were you... were you dreaming, Lance?”

A sob shook his body. “I don’t know. I couldn’t sleep, I wasn’t going to sleep because it- I’m scared, Keith. H-how did I get here, why are you here?”

“I...” Keith looked terrified, fingers digging into Lance’s shoulders. “Black woke me up. I-in my head, something was wrong. I checked and you... you and Black left the hangar. I followed you down here but you, god, Lance, you’d crawled into the tunnel. You nearly fell. You didn’t... you didn’t hear me? You wouldn’t stop, Lance, you nearly fell, where were you going?”

Lance whimpered; Keith’s voice was raw, from screaming he now realised. He’d followed Lance, all the way down to the planet, all the way into the tunnel, shouting for him to stop, and Lance had been... what, asleep? Had he really come all that way in his sleep? If Keith hadn’t caught up to him...

“I don’t... I’m sorry, I’m sorry, Keith, I don’t remember, I was...”

That was the tipping point. Lance curled in on himself, sobbing. Darkness, dirt, Allita, the cave, the tunnel, the rain, it was all closing in on him.

“Lance, Lance, its alright,” Keith’s voice was in his ear, soothing, but it wasn’t enough.

Hands secured themselves under his arms, lifting him to his feet. It was still so, so dark; Lance couldn’t stop shaking.

“Come on,” Keith said, taking a few steps toward the cave’s mouth and dragging Lance with him. “Let’s get back to the castle.”

-

They both rode in Red after Keith refused to trust the black lion, rather towing the larger robot in with them. Lance only registered bits and pieces of the journey back, in too much shock to really focus. He and Keith didn’t speak, but the other kept sending him sidelong glances, as if itching to ask Lance if he was alright. He’d have to explain himself eventually, but Lance didn’t think he could. What had he even done? Fallen asleep in the black lion obviously, then what? It seemed as if he’d flown Black down to the planet, and voluntarily begun walking into the tunnel, all in his sleep. The beach, the path... following Allita through his dream, and it had lead him underground. If he’d taken that last step through the door, if Keith hadn’t caught him, he’d have stepped off the ledge into a bottomless chasm. Lance shuddered, prompting Keith to offer another worrisome glance.

“You can’t tell the others.”

Keith’s brows furrowed, fingers tightening around Red’s controls.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Keith,” Lance looked at him, pleading, but also firm. “You can’t tell them.”

“Why were you down there?”

Lance swallowed thickly, shrinking under Keith’s questioning gaze.

“I don’t know.”

“Allura might-“

“No. I don’t want them knowing before I figure it out.”

Keith looked on the verge of arguing; he was frowning, worrying his lower lip between his teeth.

“Fine. I won’t tell them, if you tell me what’s going on with you.”

Lance could’ve laughed; what he wouldn’t give to know what was going on.

“Alright,” was all he said, tearing his eyes away from Keith as they approached the castle.

“And if Allura asks why we both left the hanger in the middle of the night?”

“It was a race,” said Lance, hating tremor in his voice. “I won.”

-

Lance was only half surprised to find Keith waiting for him in his room when he returned from the showers. The dirt had been scrubbed from his skin, the clean clothes on his back sporting no trace of the tunnel, but Lance could still taste mud on his tongue. *You nearly died, you nearly died deep underground, deep in the earth, like her.* He sighed, dropping onto the edge of his bed dejectedly. Keith stood awkwardly in the middle of the room, eyes darting between Lance and the door.

“You gonna stand there all night?”

Keith’s lips twitched, but he didn’t say anything.

“Wait... are you serious?”

“What if you wonder off again?”

“I’m not gonna... you don’t need to worry about me.”

Keith didn’t look convinced, and in all honesty, neither was Lance.

“You said you didn’t know you were doing it, so it could happen again.”

Lance glared at him, but really it was just a disguise to hide the hot tears threatening to spill from his eyes. He could deny it all he wanted, but he was still terrified.

“Fine, but don’t just stand there. I’m going back to sleep and you should too. It’s like... fuck knows what o’clock in the morning.”

“...Okay.” Keith glanced nervously around the room, as if searching for a place to lie down.

“Oh my god- Keith, just come share the bed.”

Lance pushed himself to the other side, patting the space left for Keith. The other boy froze up, staring at the spot on the bed beside Lance like the pillow might jump up and attack him.

“Um...”

“Or, you know, go sleep on the floor over there, where you’ll be super comfy and will definitely notice when I go sleepwalking into a deep dark tunnel again.”

Keith huffed, glaring at him. They were both trying to mask their fear with sarcasm and faux frustration, but Lance could feel his grip on it slipping. He turned his head as warm tears brimmed in his eyes, hiding his reaction from Keith. *Pathetic.* A moment later, Keith padded over to the bed, refusing to look at Lance as he lay down beside him, flat on his back with his arms still crossed.

“Dude, there’s no way you sleep like that.”

It was a mistake to speak, as there was no way Keith would miss the way his voice cracked. Sure enough, a second later the boy was pushing himself up on an elbow, trying to catch a look at Lance’s face as the other rolled angrily away from him.

“Lance?”

“Go to sleep.”

“Can you sleep?”

“What’s it matter if-”

Lance bit his lip to stop a sob escaping, that couldn’t happen now, not with Keith watching so closely. The other wasn’t so easily deterred. Lance squeezed his eyes shut, holding his breath to stop the heaving in his chest, but nothing helped. A hand settled gently on his shoulder and Keith shuffled minutely closer. He didn’t say anything, but at that gesture Lance crumbled. A sob tore from his chest, heavy and pained. The floodgates broke, and suddenly he couldn’t stop crying, chocking on the gush of tears down his face. He pressed a hand to his mouth to muffle the sounds, back trembling violently. Keith let him cry, stroking his back as Lance curled in on himself and just sobbed.

Painful memories fresh in his mind, and the shock of the tunnel slowly leaving his body, Lance cried until his throat felt raw and his eyes burned. Long after the tears stopped he just lay there, his breathing slowly evening out as he focused his senses on Keith’s fingers running gentle lines down his back. His body shook as he sighed, quivering. Keith’s hand left as Lance flopped down onto his back, exposing his red-rimmed eyes to the other. He sniffled, wiping the drying tears off his cheeks. Keith resumed his position lying beside Lance, arms folded timidly across his stomach.

“Sorry,” Lance mumbled, voice shaking.

“It’s okay.”

A pause, the air felt heavy.

“Do you, um, wanna talk?”

Lance sighed; his chest felt lighter from the crying but still under pressure from the sheer amount of pent up fear and sadness. Keith waited, allowed him to weigh up his options, to be truthful or to brush it off. He’d nearly died, he owed Keith some explanation surely, but the other didn’t push. They lay side by side in the silence, staring up at the dark ceiling, which didn’t feel quite as imposing in the company of another.

“I had a twin sister,” said Lance. “Her name was Allita.”

Keith kept very still, only watching Lance from the corner of his eye.

“She died when we were ten.”

It still didn’t feel real, saying that, even to this day. Lance sighed sadly, fresh out of tears. He was too drained, too exhausted to be affected by the story now; it was the best time to tell it then, he supposed.

“We were born less than an hour apart, she was older I think, but our mother claimed she couldn’t remember to stop us fighting.”

Lance’s expression softened, lips forming something close to a smile. It felt right, in that second. Sensing the ease with which he spoke, Keith shifted to lie on his side, facing Lance all the while keeping a safe distance.

“Twins are bad luck in my family, or that’s what all the older adults like to tell you. It’s sort of true though, we were the first twins born in quite a long time. The previous were some great aunts, and they also died pretty young. I was so upset when an older cousin first told me and Allita that; he was being awful and trying to scare us, telling us bad things would happen to us because we were twins. It was so scary, the thought that one of us, or both of us, would die.”

Lance stopped, his eyes stinging despite having no tears left to cry. A small hiccup of a sob shook his chest, and Keith's hand inched a little closer where it rested between them on the bed.

"I-I'm fine, sorry."

A deep breath, and Lance calmed himself enough to continue.

"Allita cried a lot when he first told us, I tried to act brave and tell our cousin off, but I was just as scared. Thing was, she got over it once our mother got a hold of that cousin and gave him a good smack. I didn't, and even though Allita didn't believe it, I was always afraid something would happen. W-which it did."

Deciding neither had anything to lose, Keith's hand found his, giving it a squeeze of reassurance and holding on tight.

"We used to live right by the beach in Cuba, it was a pretty deserted place. Allita and I would go play on that beach, without our other siblings a lot of the time, twins are just like that."

Lance bit down on his lip, clasping Keith's hand even tighter. He could hear it, the wind, the ocean, swishing softly in the back of his mind, drawing him back to that day and age. He spoke slower, carefully, in time with the pictures that played out in his head, ready to flinch away from them at any second.

"There were these cliffs along the shore where our parents told us not to play. We didn't, for the most part, they were scary. On that day though, it started raining. I loved the rain, didn't have a problem, but Allita began to complain. It was a little walk home, but the cliffs were right there, so we went to find shelter. I... I'm not sure who found it, but we stumbled upon this entrance to a cave. God, Keith, I... I wasn't this scared. Back then it- it seemed alright."

When Lance shut his eyes, the soft sounds of Keith breathing beside him almost sounded like waves on the ocean, crashing a million miles away.

"We went into what just looked like a small cave. That was fine, we were out of the rain, but it went further. So we investigated, we found the cave went deeper into the cliffs. I wasn't so sure, it was dark, I was always scared of the dark. Allita though, she insisted. So we went in, we went a long way, til we couldn't see. It just got deeper, and cold, I... I was scared. When it got past the point where if we went any further we wouldn't be able to see the entrance, I told her to stop. Allita she... she never had a problem with the dark, it was all a game to her, an adventure, she was just a child exploring."

Keith was watching him sadly; he knew where the story was going. Lance's chest hurt.

"So she told me to stay where I was, and she'd look a bit deeper. I told her not too, I didn't want to be left alone there. All those stupid things my cousin said were scaring me, but Allita promised. So--"

Lance stumbled, tripping on his words as a sudden wave of guilt and anguish came crashing down on him. He heaved air into his lungs, gripping Keith's fingers so tightly it hurt.

"You don't have to tell me, Lance, it's okay," Keith whispered, somewhere in the darkness and chaos making Lance's mind swim.

"N-no. I'm fine. You- it will help if you know."

Steadying himself, Lance readied himself to finish the story.

“I let her keep going. I stayed there, like a coward, and she went deeper into the cave. I waited, I-I waited for so long, Keith. A few minutes, and I started calling to her, but she didn’t reply. I just *waited* but she didn’t come back.”

Lance coughed dryly, pitiful, drowning in regret.

“I didn’t even look for her. I went a few more steps and I got too scared. I ran out of that cave like a *coward*, crying, because I was scared of the dark. I left her, I just left her. I got my parents, my big brother, they all came down with a torch. They searched that cave, deeper than I went, we... we got the authority’s in, the police searched that cave for weeks, but it... god, it was so deep, they didn’t find her.”

Lance wiped at his eyes, gasping at the pain in his chest.

“We never found her.”

Silence, like a deadweight, suffocating them.

“And you wanna know,” said Lance, before Keith was given the chance. “Do you want to know what the worst part is?”

Keith didn’t reply, and Lance doubted he did.

“She died in pain. Whatever happened, however she died, there is no way she wasn’t in pain. Maybe she fell and broke something, just got lost, starved to death, alone and scared, crying to herself until she, until- she died in pain.”

Keith was watching him, brows drawn, his own eyes wide and pained. What could he say?

“I used to imagine she was still down there, still alive, just wondering lost and afraid, looking for me.”

Keith pressed closer, tugging Lance’s hand toward his chest protectively.

“Thank you for telling me.” Keith’s voice was soft, trying not to scare him off. “And I’m...”

Sorry. The word went unsaid. Lance understood, but Keith knew as well as he did we wasn’t looking to hear another apology. There were a million things Keith could say, but Lance realised he didn’t want to hear any of them. He didn’t want apologies, or to hear she hadn’t deserved that fate, or to hear how tragic it was- he knew, Keith knew, that’s all he wanted, for Keith to *know*.

“It’s not your fault,” the boy whispered, closer now, fingers entwined properly with Lance’s.

“I didn’t-“

“I know.”

Lance sniffled, aching to pull Keith closer, to seek out comfort there. He didn’t, content with holding his hand, an anchor in the dark and misery of his past. He was tired, from dreaming, from crying, from it all.

“I miss her.”

Keith hummed, and Lance knew he knew. The other’s eyes were drooping shut, but he kept his grip tight.

“Nothing bad is going to happen to you, Lance.”

Lying there, with Keith’s body a sturdy barrier between him and the outside world, Lance could believe that.

“Nothing bad is going to happen to you.”

Chapter End Notes

feel free to ask questions if this chapter makes... no sense

I rly appreciate you all reading so thanks!

Chapter Notes

Hello! Thank you thank you thank you for the kudos and comments, they're so great and all of you reading really keeps this story going :)

QUICK NOTE:

Just so you're all aware, I'm backpacking atm, and am gonna be on the move for the next long while, which means chapters won't update quite as regularly. But basically I want to clarify that just because its updating more slowly does not mean I'm losing interest in the story, it simply means I'm camped out in a sheep field somewhere, surviving on rice-crackers with no internet in the foreseeable future. But I will try as often as possible!

thank youuuuuu and pls enjoy

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

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Lance felt remarkably at peace when he woke the next morning, which was odd, considering he'd wasted half the night worrying away, only to sleepwalk into the depths of the earth in search of his long dead sister. Not that he was going to complain about the peaceful few hours he'd ended up with; Lance lived for life's small pleasures, like Keith's sleeping form beside him. Last night's events threatened to overwhelm him in his waking moment, but watching Keith sleep invited in an unexpected calm. Both his hands gripped Lance's hand and wrist respectively, and given that he was still asleep, Keith had an insanely strong grip. *Oh god*, thought Lance, *Keith clings*. That fact was too endearing for him to deal with at such an early hour.

He did take a good few seconds (minutes) to admire Keith as he slept- the black locks of hair that tickled his forehead, mused by sleep, his cheek flushed pink where it was squished into the pillow, the small pout on his lips which contradicted the serene veil over his face. Lance longed to pull him closer, rid them of the empty sheets between them, each too cautious to stray into the others space. Even from this distance, he could feel the warmth radiating from Keith's body, beckoning him, like some infuriating cure to the unpleasant prickle of the cool air.

Lance sighed, deciding he'd spent long enough agonising over Keith. He made to sit up, free hand wiping sleep from his eyes, which felt red and puffy from all of last night's crying. He hadn't meant to wake Keith, but at the slightest movement of his arm the red paladin woke with a start. Not even fully conscious, he grappled for a hold on Lance's arm, mumbling something unintelligible but frantic.

"Hey, calm down," Lance said quickly, patting Keith's shoulder in an effort to get him to remove his nails from Lance's bicep.

Too much clinging. He must've thought Lance was leaving again, sleepwalking.

"I'm not, uh, doing that again. It's morning, dude."

“Hm?”

Keith blinked hazily, sitting up but swaying as if he might just fall back onto the mattress and keep on sleeping. Lance resisted the urge to lean into him when Keith reached up to ruffle the mess of bed hair he had going, because as much as Lance hated to admit it, Keith smelt really good. All of a sudden the moment felt too intimate, too domesticated; hell, Keith was in his bed, waking up beside him, his smell and his sleep-ridden appearance overwhelming Lance’s senses, invading every corner of his consciousness, blaring in his mind like an alarm, *youlikehimyoulikehimyoulike-*

“I’m gonna get breakfast!” Lance squeaked, practically vaulting over Keith and off the bed.

“Thanks for, uh, guarding me and what not. Appreciated. I’m hungry now, um, see you... at breakfast. See you there!”

Keith stared at him, still coming to terms with his surroundings. Seeing him like that had Lance weak in the knees, which was exactly why he legged it too the door, not even bothering to give himself a once over in the mirror before he stumbled out into the hallway, unable to erase the imagine of Keith in his early morning haven.

-

Breakfast was an uneventful affair, completely, utterly, okay, in Lance’s opinion. All fine, except for the fact that Keith was sitting right there *still in his pyjamas hair unbrushed half-asleep picking at his food looking so goddam cute Lance wanted to die who gave him the right*. This was bad, Lance concluded. The fact that they sat across from each other made it very difficult to focus on anything else, especially when the urge to stretch his leg out and tangle it with Keith’s was all too real. *I’m going to die*. He should have been thinking about caves and nearly dying and all those horrible things, but apparently letting it all out embarrassingly last night had left his head clear. *Maybe I’m still in shock*. Lance refrained from doing anything stupid right up to the moment Keith slumped sideways, resting his head on Pidge’s shoulder and promptly going back to sleep.

“He’s not usually like this,” Lance blurted, unable to contain himself.

“Oh, sometimes he is,” Pidge answered nonchalantly. “The more sleep he gets the sleepier he ends up being. It’s a weird relation.”

Half the night spent chasing after Lance and he’d still somehow ended up with more sleep than usual? Lance squinted at the pair, humming, trying to come to terms with this side of Keith. In truth he’d already come to terms with it: he liked it. Now he was just admiring it.

“I think its fun though,” said Pidge with a hint of mischief, reaching up to pat Keith’s cheek before squishing them between her fingers. “Itty bitty Keithy. Look how cute.”

She chuckled when Keith grumbled in annoyance, clearly accustomed to her antics.

“Hello, I’m Keith,” she mimicked, pinching his cheeks in time with the words.

Hunk snorted, spluttering with laughter which Lance couldn’t resist joining in on.

“I like knives and pretty boys and even more knives.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Keith mumbled, but with Pidge pinching his cheeks it came out sounding funny.

Lance chuckled at the display; Keith frowned but still couldn’t be bothered to open his eyes. He

reached blindly for Pidge, capturing her own cheeks by surprise to pull the same prank on her.

"I'm Pidge," he mumbled. "I like robots, robots, and pretty girls who may or may not be robots."

"Fight me," Pidge bit out, her voice also distorted.

Smiling softly, Lance left the pair to their bickering as he cast his eyes over the dining room in search of Allura.

"Where's the princess?" He asked Coran, who was seated at the end of the table with a book, calmly ignoring the paladin's antics.

"Oh, she's training."

"She's skipping breakfast?"

"She's, uh, how would you say, not in the chirpiest of moods."

Lance frowned; was Allura upset?

"Did we do something?"

"Oh no," Coran assured him happily. "But being around you lot each and every tick would drive anyone off the edge."

"But you're with us right now," said Pidge, swatting Keith's hand away from her ear.

"I know," Coran replied calmly, taking a sip of his drink and returning to his book. "I am really, very much aware."

Lance spent the rest of his morning looking for Allura, using the distraction to keep him from thinking about the events of the previous night. Despite his best efforts, the princess made it her mission to not be found. Coran was apparently clued in on her whereabouts, but whenever Lance got there, be it the training deck, hangar, lab, kitchen, pool, or that window seat on the fifth floor, Allura had moved on. Eventually he resigned himself to the fact that she didn't want to be found. So he gave her some space, electing instead to head to the training deck to keep his mind occupied. That was how he ended up sparring with Keith, engaged in a conversation that probably would have been a lot more awkward to have were they not throwing punches at the same time.

"I think it was Black," said Keith, twisting Lance's arm behind his back.

Lance retaliated, spinning to unlock his arm and blocking Keith's elbow. "Pretty sure it was me."

"Have you ever gone sleep walking before?"

"Probably when I was little."

"You piloted the lion," Keith panted, ducking under Lance's fist and coming up behind him.

"So- ow!"

"Get quicker with your defence," Keith scolded, poking his back.

Lance glowered at him, returning to their beginner's stance.

"So what? I probably could pilot a lion in my sleep, we've done it so much."

“I don’t think so,” said Keith, diving in with a kick that Lance narrowly avoided.

“Why would Black put me in danger?”

“Why would you do that to yourself? And what about that dream? Lion’s can- ah!”

“Get quicker with your defence,” Lance mimicked playfully as Keith gasped and rolled his shoulder.

“I was saying,” Keith bit out, hands forming fists, “the lions have the ability to affect our dreams. Black could’ve made you see... whatever you saw. Lead you into the cave.”

Keith was on his toes, posed to move quickly, but he still didn’t anticipate Lance’s move to toss him onto the floor. His back hit the floor hard, Lance kneeling above him with an elbow pressed hard into his sternum. Keith glared.

“Black woke you up.”

“Doesn’t mean anything,” he muttered, shoving Lance away and clambering to his feet.

“Black was trying to protect me.”

“From a situation they got you into!” Keith argued, trying to throw Lance off balance but failing when Lance used his extra bit of height to disrupt Keith’s footing.

Lance was very unlikely to actually win at hand-to-hand combat with Keith; he was doing alright at the moment, but only because Keith was withholding his *I’ll kill you in a heartbeat just you watch catch these legs* type moves that he’d learnt from Allura, which Lance was simultaneously scared of and turned on by. On one hand, Keith could kill him, on the other, getting crushed by his thighs was... not the worst thing that could happen to a man.

“Ow.”

Lance grumbled, rubbing the side of his jaw as Keith’s fist retracted. He definitely deserved that.

“Are you listening?”

“Uh...”

Keith huffed, brushing his sweaty fringe aside, which Lance should *not* have been drawn too, but was anyway. This was ridiculous, he couldn’t focus on Keith, fighting, and this conversation all at once.

“See if you can get through to Black. If there’s a problem between you two-“

“A problem big enough to make her want me dead? Why would she have accepted me if she hated me? Black rejected you, but premeditated murder sure wasn’t in the plan.”

“Don’t trust that lion until you know what’s going on.”

“Should I trust myself though?”

“We can worry about you, Lance,” Keith replied, growing more agitated when Lance evaded his fist. “But you’re the only one who might get through to the black lion.”

“Aw, you worry about me?”

“When you nearly die?” Keith snapped. “Yes.”

“And the rest of the time?” Lance asked with a smirk.

It was a long shot, but if he could just get Keith to blush-

“Well seeing as you’re an idiot most of the time-“

“Hey!”

“You drop your arms whenever you’re distracted,” Keith berated, slapping Lance’s hand as it fell to his side. “Keep your defence up.”

Lance mumbled a complaint, but followed Keith’s lead anyway.

“Figure out what’s up with Black.”

“It wasn’t Black.”

“Lance.”

“But it wasn’t.”

“See what you can find out anyway, blaming yourself is stupid,” Keith reasoned, spinning out of Lance’s reach.

“Blaming my lion is stu-“

Lance yelped as his feet were knocked out from under him, air expelled from his lungs as he hit the floor. Keith smirked, leaning over him triumphantly.

“Talk to Black.”

-

In his defence, Lance did mean to speak to Black. He even made it into the lion’s cockpit to collect the blanket he’d left there last night. Gathering himself to say something, he realised the log was still running. *Log 5*, right there on the screen, the camera blinking up at him. *Oh my god*. Lance scrambled into the chair, hastily ending the log so he could rewind it back to the beginning. His hands were shaking, forwarding through the segments of him speaking, right up until he fell asleep. Jumping through the minutes, nothing appeared off as he slept, tucked into the chair peacefully. Two in the morning, and Lance let the log play. A minute, another... he waited. Four minutes past two in the morning, similar to the time the wormhole opened, and Lance sat up without warning. Watching the recording he almost flinched; he hadn’t shown any signs of stirring.

In the video, Lance eyes were open but unseeing, glazed over as if he were watching something far, far away. Lance shuddered, his own image making him uneasy. What kind of sleepwalking was this? For a minute he just sat there, staring into open space, not awake but alarmingly in control of his body. Lance watched himself reach for the controls, power up the black lion, and take off. He flew mechanically, straight and too the point, none of the fun he usually had. It was a messy landing when he brought the lion to rest on the planet, robotic, as if he were only half aware of what he was doing. Lance watched anxiously as his past self stilled, staring off into space again without moving a muscle. He needed a clue, something to explain why he’d done this. A burst of static overcame the screen, just a spilt second of it, and a moment later Lance stood to exit the lion. Watching the screen, Lance cursed, rewinding just a few seconds to try and get rid of the static.

Great, just what I need. Was it a problem with the video? It looked more like something within the video.

Lance fiddled with the settings, slowing the video down and studying the frame, trying to catch a better glimpse at the bundle of static that engulfed the air around him a second before he stood. Nothing, he couldn't make anything out. Great. Lance glared at the recording, frustrated. He played it again, from the part where he woke up. The blank look on his face and empty eyes awoke some primal fear within him; that didn't look like ordinary sleepwalking. When it became too much, Lance shut off the video and left; he'd talk to Black another day.

-

Come the end of the day, Lance still hadn't encountered Allura. He'd spent his time pretty effectively, training, bickering with his friends, anything to keep his mind off the tunnel. Now that it was becoming time to sleep however... what was he going to do, ask Keith to sleep with him again? Nope, no way, not a chance... despite that being pretty much the only chance of Lance actually managing to get any sleep.

He found himself walking toward the kitchen instead; at least if someone asked why he was still awake he could claim it was because of hunger pangs. Besides, a bowl of space goo at this hour didn't sound like such a bad idea, Lance reckoned, waltzing in through the door only to come face-to-face with-

"Allura?"

The princess looked up slowly from where she was seated at the counter, nursing a cup in her hands glumly.

"Oh," she said, expression souring. "Hello, Lance."

"Um..."

Lance was walking into a few more of these private moments than he'd prepared for, first the pregnancy announcement, and now...

"Are you... wow, Allura are you drinking? Alcohol's super bad if you're pregnant."

Lance moved toward her as Allura stared sadly down at the cup.

"I'm drinking Nunvill," she said mournfully. "Without any Nun."

A sniffle; Allura looked pretty bummed out by that fact. Oh well, at least it wasn't alcoholic.

"It's disgusting."

"I'm... so sorry," Lance offered, hesitantly taking the seat beside her.

"Not to push or anything, but I can't help but notice you look a little down."

Wanna talk about it? Lance was about to offer, but it seemed Allura needed no encouragement this time around.

"I'm not a mom," she all but wailed, dropping her head into her arms.

Okay, so it was another one of those talks. Lance could definitely.... maybe handle this.

“I mean... no, you’re not.”

“I don’t know how to be a mom, I’m just *not*,” Allura continued, picking herself up but leaning her chin heavily on her hand. “Shiro’s a dad. He doesn’t even need to try, that’s the kind of person he is. But I’m... this child would be so much better off having Shiro to raise it, I’m *useless*.”

“Wow, wow, hold up. I think that Vill without the Nun is getting to your brain, because you’re anything but useless Allura. You-“

“I plan battles, I know! I fight the Galran empire, I wield Altean magic and pilot a giant space ship and create wormholes and win over diplomatic alliances. I’m gifted, I’m the princess of Altea, I can do a million things, but hand me a baby and I’m... I have no idea. I don’t know what to do.”

“Hey, that’s alright though,” Lance tried to reason. “Not many people do.”

“No! But those people aren’t pregnant! Lance, I’m not a mom. Mom’s know what to do with babies, a-and children, I can barely handle *teenagers*.”

“First up,” Lance said, holding up a finger. “Teenagers are waaaay worse than babies. Babies are just eat, sleep, poop, cry, cuddle. You got all the steps right there on one hand.”

“You don’t get it,” Allura huffed, pleading with him. “I’ll just... I’ll never be a *mom*. I wasn’t meant to be. So maybe I learn how to change a diaper, that’s not being a mom. I don’t want to be a mom, I want... I want to do all this, what I do now. I want to be all those things I’m amazing at, piloting, leading, saving people and planets and winning this war and-“

“And you think being a mom will change that?”

Allura paused, frowning at him suspiciously. “These conversations are much better when you don’t know how to help.”

“Wha- hey! What’s that mean?”

“It means let me be miserable and drink my non-Nun Nunvill,” Allura mumbled into her cup, sulking.

Lance laughed out loud, earning himself an even darker look from Allura.

“*What?*”

“Oh man, I’m sorry Allura, but you must’ve been such a difficult teenager.”

“Oh, and I suppose you were so much better.”

“I’m still a teenager!”

“Was that meant to prove something?”

Lance opened his mouth, shut it, opened it again.

“Look. Becoming a mom doesn’t erase the rest of your character.”

Allura looked sceptical.

“You really think that? Come on...”

“I’m meant for other things, Lance. I’m not a mom.”

Lance sighed; this might be difficult.

“Allura, when you become a mother it won’t... you won’t change. I mean, yeah you’ll change a little, but in good ways. You’ll learn to love someone more than you ever thought you could love *anything*. Sure, you’ll get ace at changing diapers and whatnot, but *you* won’t change. You don’t just turn into a mother, its not a profession, it’s not replacing everything you already were. You’ll still be our leader, you’ll still be a great fighter and strategist, having a child isn’t taking that away from you.”

Lance paused, looking to confirmation from Allura that she was at least listening.

“Becoming a mother doesn’t erase everything else you are, or what you’re good at. Like my mother. She’s really good at chess.”

“What’s chess?”

“Oh, it’s an Earth board game. To be good at it, you have to be good at strategy, and thinking ahead. My mama has a great mind, she used to play all the time in competitions and stuff. When she had her first child, that didn’t change. Sure, she juggled stuff having a baby and all, but she still kept the things that meant something to her. In fact, she passed on those awesome skills to her kids. That’s gonna be you, Allura. You aren’t defined by this, it’s a new addition, just one more thing about you. You’re a mom, as well as a leader, and a strategist, and a fighter, and the princess of Altea. And you should be proud of it.”

Allura looked to be having a raging internal debate, twirling the cup between her fingers.

“What if I’m not good enough though? What if I do hang onto everything I am, but I forget my child?”

“As if that would ever happen. Allura, you’re the most caring person I’ve met. You do anything and everything to cater to peoples needs and protect them. You go above and beyond all of us. Sometimes you care so much it gets us into trouble, but that’s great! That’s what we need. You’re not alone in this, you’ve got all of us. We’re going to help you raise this child; in fact, you’re probably gonna have to fight us off. All you’ve gotta do is love this kid with all your heart, and Allura, I’m positive that won’t be a problem for you.”

Allura smiled at him, her hands stilling around the cup. She was frowning slightly, a little overcome with emotion.

“Thank you, Lance.”

“Hey, no problem. I’m just telling you the truth here.”

“How come you know so much about babies anyway?”

Lance shrugged. “I just have a big family. Plus, I’d love to have kids someday. If I could support them, you know.”

“Support them?”

“Like, financially, you know? Or maybe Altea had its shit sorted out.”

Allura frowned, puzzled. “It’s... shit... is there a problem with Earth’s toilets--”

“No, no no no, it doesn’t mean that. My family just has a lot of problems with money, trying to support ourselves. My dad ditched us when I was a kid, after we moved countries, and as much as I love my siblings, it’s really hard trying to provide for everyone. I’d only want kids if, you know, I could do that.”

“Oh Lance, I’m so sorry.”

“What?”

“Your father-“

“Hey, don’t worry about it. I’m totally over that.”

Lance forced a smile, hit by the deep look of sympathy in Allura’s eyes and in her words.

“That’s not right,” Allura said with a hint of anger. “A father shouldn’t leave.”

“I don’t even blame him, I mean, I understand why he left. It’s hard to um, uh, to, you know.”

Lose a child.

“Families are hard. But good! Good also,” Lance added hastily when Allura’s frown deepened.

He sighed; it was hard not to want to tell Allura everything when she poured all that empathy into her eyes like that.

“I just worry about them, is all. I hope they’re getting by alright without me.”

Allura took his hand lightly, giving his fingers a squeeze.

“I said I’d get you home to them. And I will.”

Lance’s smile was a little more genuine this time. “Thanks, Allura.”

“We’ll help each others families. That’s a promise.”

-

Lance was in a lighter mood when he returned to his room after bidding goodnight to Allura. His doubts about sleeping weren’t completely forgotten, however, so when he spotted Keith sitting outside his door a whole range of emotions passed through him. Relief, confusion, embarrassment; Lance kind of wanted to run away. Keith scrambled quickly to his feet upon spotting him, his face colouring, movements a little uncertain.

“Um... hi?”

“H-hey.”

A pause; Keith gestured roughly to Lance’s door.

“I was just, waiting.”

“Oh. Okay. For, um, for what?”

“You.”

Lance felt his own ears redden as Keith’s eyes widened, stammering over his next words.

“I-I mean, I was worried, n-not you, but you could wonder off, or something. It’s not safe.”

Lance felt himself smiling at Keith’s complete lack of finesse. “Dude, calm down. You think I’ll go sleepwalking again?”

Keith huffed, the blush about his cheeks completely untamed. “Yes.”

“Stop worrying. I’ll be fine,” Lance assured, giving his shoulder a pat as he moved past Keith toward his door.

“You don’t know that.”

“I know last night was kinda weird-“

“*Kinda weird?* Lance, it was terrifying! You nearly *died*, or did you forget that very important detail?”

“I know that. But we can’t waste time worrying about it-“

“I’m not worrying,” Keith snapped. “I’m taking precautions so it doesn’t happen again.”

“So sleeping with me is a precaution?”

Keith blanked, stuttering wordlessly. Lance nearly smacked himself; you couldn’t say anything around this boy.

“You know what I mean! Not the- you don’t need to babysit me.”

Keith reeled his emotions in quick, folding his arms crossly.

“I’m not babysitting you! I’m making sure you don’t die. And if you don’t want me in your room then I’ll sit out here, I just wanted to let you know.”

Lance groaned, running a hand through his hair. “Fine! Fine, you wanna sleep with- oh my god, stop blushing, do you even know how babies are made, Keith?”

Keith glared at him, but that comment didn’t appear to deter him.

“Next time you’re bringing your own pillow,” Lance muttered as he led them both into his room, then silently cursed himself for suggesting there would be a next time.

Keith was still awkward in his movements around Lance’s room, waiting for Lance to gesture to the bed beside him as if fearing he might be kicked out again. Once he was settled there though, he was comfortable in an instant, latching onto Lance’s hand and curling into a ball on the other side of the bed.

“Um...” Lance stared at their joined hands.

There was still a good amount of space between them, but that didn’t change the fact that Keith was *holding his hand*. It felt a lot weirder than last night.

“Don’t wonder off,” is all Keith said, frowning at Lance lightly before shutting his eyes.

Lance pouted, his emotions all a bit of a mess.

“Don’t think this is gonna be a regular thing,” he grumbled, tugging the blanket over them.

“Night Lance.”

He glared at Keith for minute, despite the others eyes being shut, blaming the warmth in his cheeks and flutter in his stomach on the boy. Lance sighed, resigning himself to the fact that maybe this wasn't *so* bad.

“Night.”

Chapter End Notes

i have so many mixed feeling about the next chapter so sorry

Chapter Notes

I can't even say how awesome you are for all the support I keep getting... thanks so much everyone!! <3

WARNING FOR THIS CHAPTER: It's another one with a little more gore, idk if I need to warn you or not but im gonna do it anyway. It's not very graphic, but possibly still unsettling as contains brief mentions of children
pls read responsibly

LOVE U ALL THANKS FOR READING <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

Lance was underground. Not the tunnel he'd wondered into on the planet below, but the one in his dreams. He knew he was dreaming, that the dark, earthen confines around him weren't real; the chain around his ankle, the gaping maw of the tunnel leading deeper and deeper, it was all part of his dream. But just like every other time, Lance was afraid.

"Leave me alone."

His voice was too loud, too brash in the depths of that hellhole, alerting whatever lay in the dark to his vulnerable presence. Nothing stirred but the slick mud, sliding sown the cavern walls. This was worse than the real tunnel, worse than the cave he'd wondered into on the dwarf planet; here there was no way out, there was no Keith to save him, no light to move toward. This entire world was dirt and darkness; he was sure the mud above him stretched as high as the sky. No air, no surface, no atmosphere, the whole world was a suffocating blanket of earth from which he couldn't escape. That spiked fear within him, so desperate it hurt.

Something's coming. Lance knew it, he didn't need any voices to tell him this time. *What am I meant to do?* Just wait, like juicy bait tied to the end of a string, waiting for its predator to come crawling up from the depths and swallow it whole? Lance tugged on the chain, wondering how deep it ran, wondering if it was fastened to something beneath the mud, or if he could pull it out. But after what had happened last time, with the chain pulling him- Lance tensed, his pace quickening. *Calm down dammit.* He never did, every time he dreamt this the fear became too much. He felt bile rise in his throat, eyeing the mud in the very real fear it would swallow him up.

"Leave me alone," he whispered, tears building up in his eyes as he met the sight of the dark tunnel.

Was he meant to follow it? Why the hell else have such a repetitive dream? There was no way he could; even if he wasn't fastened to the chain, Lance could never bring himself to walk down that tunnel. Something was coming, he could feel it. The urgency of it, the desire to run, it was so great he could feel it even after he woke. Lance tugged on the chain, breathing hard and squeezing his eyes shut to stop the tears. *Help. Wake up.* But he knew the when he did, the threat would still linger. He'd still feel endangered. Still, reality was better than this. Lance grit his teeth, pulling on

the chain, digging his feet into the mud, clawing at the dirt that held the chain fast, twisting and thrashing and pleading until he was brought kicking and panting into the real world.

He sat up with a jolt, sweat on his skin and heartbeat careening from his ribcage. The sheets were tangled around his legs, shirt rumpled and riding up his stomach, all evidence of a bad dream.

“Lance?”

Keith’s slurred voice drifted to him from the dark, and the body on the bed shifted beside him. Lance wasn’t as frightened to discover another person in his bed this time; it had been a week since he’d wondered down into the real tunnel, a week since Keith started sharing his bed to make sure he didn’t unconsciously get himself into another bad situation. He’d never admit it, but Lance was thankful. Although nothing had happened yet, the idea that the same accident or even something worse could happen chilled him to the bone. He didn’t want to die, not like that. Still, of the one or two nightmares he’d had that week, neither had woken Keith. Until now, that is.

“Sorry,” Lance panted, his voice trembling. “Go back to sleep.”

He dug fingers into the mattress after removing his hand from Keith’s, clenching his jaw shut in an effort to muffle his erratic breathing.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine. Sorry... get some sleep.”

But Keith sat up. Lance couldn’t see him that well in the dark, but as his eyes adjusted he could just make out that Keith was frowning.

“Is it the same dream?”

“W-what?”

Keith ducked his head, toiling with the corner of the blanket. Lance resisted gravitating toward his warm chest.

“You’ve been having bad dreams. I ignored them in case you didn’t want to talk but... are you okay?”

So his nightmares *had* woken Keith up. It was bound to happen, Lance was kind of hoping they could go more than a week before having to talk about it though. He sighed, dropping his head into his hands. He was still tired, but addressing it quickly wouldn’t hurt, then they could both get back to sleeping.

“Yeah, it is.”

Keith shifted, sitting cross-legged and facing him. “What is it?”

Why was it so easy to admit things to Keith? Whenever Lance hid something the other seemed to *know*, and the sadness that descended upon his face when Lance subsequently rejected his help was almost laughable, weren’t Lance so fixated on keeping Keith happy.

“I’m in a tunnel,” he admitted wearily. “Underground.”

“The one you walked into?”

“No. This ones... it’s a recurring dream. I first had it when we first wormholed, then the time after

that as well. Now it just comes and goes.”

Keith listened patiently, shivering lightly now that the blanket had fallen from his shoulders.

“In this tunnel, there’s no way out. I don’t know where it is, only that it’s deep, very deep within the earth. I... my ankle, its chained to the ground every time. There’s a wall behind me and from there the tunnel just... keeps going. Down, I don’t know how far, or where, it’s just dark and I-something’s coming.”

Keith frowned, hindered by sleep but doing his best to follow. “What’s coming?”

“I don’t know. But I know it is, up from the tunnel, it’s coming toward me. Every time I’m back in that dream I feel it getting closer.”

The darkness swirled around them as they considered what he’d said. Keith’s hand lay close to his on the bed, but he didn’t reach for it, not yet.

“It’s not real.”

“I know. And when I’m dreaming I know that’s all it is, a dream. But when I wake up, I’m still afraid. It still feels like something’s coming for me, Keith. It knows where I am, and it’s coming for me.”

Lance waited for Keith to tell him he was being stupid, that nothing was coming to get him. He waited so he could tell him he was wrong; because there was something. Lance knew, they all knew, why else did the wormhole take him? Instead Keith grabbed his hand and pushed him back so they were both lying on the bed again.

“Let it come,” he mumbled. “We won’t let it have you.”

Lance blinked at him, baffled, letting Keith pull the blankets back up over them. His hand in Lance’s felt so small, yet it meant so much.

“I think we should find out what’s in that tunnel,” said Keith.

“But I-“

“The real tunnel, not the one in your dream. They might still be linked. Besides, maybe there’s a reason you went down there.”

“No,” Lance said, scared now.

Perhaps it was a mistake telling Keith.

“Y-you promised not to go back there. I can’t go back in-“

“Hey,” Keith squeezed his hand, silencing him. “I’m never letting you go back in there. But if we tell the team, we can figure out if there’s anything important there. We can do it safely; maybe it will solve the wormhole problem.”

“But the others will worry-“

“I won’t tell them that. I won’t tell them we went into the tunnel. I’ll just say I think there’s more; they’ll believe me, they did when it came to finding the blue lion.”

Lance stared up at the dark ceiling, considering this. If the solution to the wormhole did lie in the

tunnel, they needed to find out. What was wrong with the team knowing, as long as Keith kept his secret? Lance sighed, he just didn't want anyone going back near it.

"I still don't like it."

"I know. You don't like it now cause you don't know what's down there. But if we shine a torch down there, it won't be half as bad. Things are always worse when you can't see them."

Lance shuddered at the thought, but the things Keith said made sense.

"I-I guess."

"I know you don't like it, but this could help. I don't want us to be stuck here forever."

"Yeah, me neither. You promise you'll keep the sleepwalking a secret though?"

"I promise. Do we have a deal now?"

"Yeah," Lance said, eyes falling on the outline of Keith's body in the dark. "Yeah, we do."

-

"Remind me why I agreed to this?"

Keith shrugged, dropping his bag of supplies beside Lance where they stood at the entrance to the cave, the rest of their team milling about nearby.

"I honestly didn't think you'd agree to it."

"Great," Lance muttered, his skin crawling with unease.

It was a great day down on the dwarf planet, and by great, Lance meant it wasn't night. The morning following his bad dream, Keith had broached the idea to the team that they should investigate the cave, claiming he and Lance had seen something that looked a little like it may have been a tunnel the last time they'd gone down. The others latched onto the idea quickly, so now they were here just a few hours later, preparing to investigate the cave. This being Lance and Keith's fourth visit to the planet, they were a little less enraptured by the cave paintings than the rest of the team.

"Dark planet," said Pidge, eyeing the large painting at the back of the cave, which sat quite near the tunnel. "I wonder what it's referring to."

"This planet *is* pretty dark at night," Keith offered.

"Yeah, but no one needs to go around making paintings about that."

"I just want to know how they drowned," said Hunk, pointing to the upsetting scene of the village and its inhabitants sinking. "Cause I still haven't seen any water."

"Alright," Allura announced happily, motioning them over. "I think Coran's just about got the communicator working."

"Up and running," Pidge confirmed, eyeing their portable electronics excitedly.

Allura frowned. "It's neither up nor running? What do you mean?"

While those two sorted through their language differences, Lance pulled Keith aside. The red paladin was already preparing himself for the descent, adjusting the harness around his hips and whatnot... because that promise Keith made about never going into the tunnel?

“You promised you wouldn’t go in there,” Lance said stiffly, quietly enough so no one else would hear them.

“I also promised to get us out of this system.”

“Keith-“

“I’m sorry, alright? I am, I know you don’t like this, but it’s going to be fine. Besides, who else is gonna go in there?”

That was a fair point; there was no way Lance could go, Pidge was too young, Allura was pregnant, they needed Coran to lead procedures from the castle, and although Hunk had volunteered, Lance knew from experience there were sections of the tunnel even he struggled to fit through. It had to be Keith. Not that he’d want anyone else going in either, but the whole situation felt wrong. Lance could feel the unease within him, making him woozy. A lump formed in his throat, a tell-tale sign of distress.

“I just- I don’t want you going.”

“I’m coming back, Lance.”

“That’s *exactly* what she said,” Lance bit out, sucking in a breath sharply to disguise the quiver in his voice.

Keith looked at him sadly. He appeared to be debating what to tell Lance in his head. Face set sternly, he hooked his fingers around the clip of the harness, where the rope was meant to attach.

“It’s safe. You guys can literally pull me back at any time. I’ll have light, and a communicator; you can talk to me the entire time. We just need to see if there’s any answers down there.”

Lance knew that, he *knew*, but he still hated it.

“*Time to get started, paladins,*” came Coran’s chirpy voice over the communicator.

Lance panicked; he wanted to reach out and grab Keith, that urge to do anything to stop him surging. Sensing this, Keith suddenly reached for something around his neck. He wasn’t in their usual armour, rather an Altean suit apparently designed for the very purpose of exploring caves with more mobility. The brown overalls were a little baggy, especially on Keith, but they had plenty of pockets for supplies, and the harness sat comfortably around his waist. It was from an inner pocket near his neck that he tugged the red bandana, the one Lance immediately recognised as the disguise he’d worn when they first rescued Shiro from the Garrison. Despite his nerves, he nearly laughed.

“You still have that thing?”

Wordlessly, Keith looped the bandana around Lance’s wrist, tying it off neatly. Lance’s laughter died abruptly.

“This is very important to me,” said Keith, his expression deadly serious. “I want it back.”

Lance looked between him and the piece of red fabric tied into a band around his wrist.

“Um...”

“That means don’t lose it.”

Keith dropped his wrist, turning away to let Pidge attach the rope to his harness. Lance was stumped, staring at the bandana. Keith’s bandana, which he’d just given to Lance; why? To hold onto until he got back? He wanted it back. Suddenly Lance was more fearful of what Keith’s reaction would be if he lost the bandana. *Hang on...* Lance scoffed lightly. It was such a stupid, small reassurance, but it worked, if only a little. Keith was stubborn, Keith was determined, if he said he wanted his bandana back, he’d get it back. Which meant he was coming back. At least, that’s what Lance let himself believe. He clamped down on his fear, a tight lid on the simmering pot that threatened to boil over, and focused his attentions on the bandana around his wrist.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Pidge was saying sternly, planting herself in front of Keith. “If it looks unstable, turn around. Remember what is and isn’t worth it, Kogane.”

Keith nodded solemnly, heeding Pidge’s words. He ducked his head into her hair when Pidge hugged him strongly, and Lance distantly noted that Pidge was slowly but surely getting taller. A hand on his shoulder had him turning around, looking up at Hunk. His friend was smiling, full of excitement at the promise of discovery, but there was also a deeper understanding there.

“Are you okay with this?” Hunk asked softly.

Lance swallowed, clearing his throat.

“I’ll be fine. It’s Keith we gotta worry about.”

“Which is exactly why I asked you,” Hunk said, with half a smirk.

“What’s that mean?”

“*All set, Keith?*” Coran asked over the communicator they’d set up near the back of the cave, tearing Lance and Hunk’s attention away from each other.

“As I ever will be,” the boy answered, straightening the bunched collar of his baggy suit.

They all gravitated toward the tunnel entrance, dragging equipment along with them. Pidge was equal parts eager and anxious, and Lance reckoned she’d be a lot happier if they were sending a droid into the tunnel instead of Keith. Hunk took a hold of coil of rope, feeding a little to Keith so he could crouch down before the tunnel mouth. Pidge did a final check of his harness and the various pieces of equipment attached to his tool belt; a knife, a flare, a backup radio, instruments for climbing and the like. Allura handed him the torch, a circular device that attached above his shoulder and used gravity to always stay pointing ahead. Lance felt useless, trailing his fingers over the bandana. *He’s coming back.*

“Good luck,” said Allura. “And don’t stop talking to us.”

Keith nodded, giving the team a once over before stopping on Lance. With a flicker of a smile, he turned toward the tunnel and crawled into it. Hunk and Pidge nearly knocked heads trying to dive in front of the tunnel mouth to watch him go. Lance came to kneel beside Allura, who was in charge of monitoring things like depth and atmospheric composition. Best not to have Keith wondering into a bubble of toxic gas.

“Well,” said Pidge, sitting back with a sigh. “I guess no ones better at exploring caves than Keith.”

"I do consider it an asset," said Keith's voice over the comms, causing Lance to jump.

"How's it going so far?" Asked Hunk.

"Well. It's a tunnel. There's... dirt."

"Descriptive."

"You were born a poet."

"Alright Pidge, how would you describe dirt?"

Pidge hummed, considering. "Dark, as bountiful as these stars that doth shine upon us, its sensually rich earthiness does awaken the ageless labours of our agricultural roots--"

"Kindly shut up," Hunk pleaded.

"But I was just getting to the part about how it's the underworlds coffee grinder."

"Can we try to stay on task, paladins... princess..." said Coran, just as Allura made to contribute to the dirt discussion.

"What does it look like?" Lance asked, thankful that no one noticed the strange pitch to his voice.

"Aside from dirt," added Pidge.

"Um... it's pretty cramped, I have to crawl a lot. I doubt an animal made it, it's two uneven. Some sections are a bit rocky, and oddly shaped, so too messy for like... a giant mole."

"Yes," said Pidge. "That's definitely what's been giving us grief. A mole rat."

"Still a better theory than the Loch Ness monster."

"I will cut this rope."

"Any more paintings and inscriptions?" Allura asked hopefully.

"No. The tunnel's not right for it, there's no rock walls, just earth. It's pretty loose actually, I'm surprised this thing holds."

"Um... that doesn't sound good," said Hunk, eyes flickering briefly to Lance.

Lance remembered the day he'd told Hunk. It wasn't as much detail as he'd given Keith, but it was an explanation none the less. *I got lost in a cave. I don't go near them anymore. Allura? I don't want to talk about her.*

"It's fine," came Keith's reply.

"You could jump into a volcano and still be *fine*," muttered Pidge.

Lance felt so nervous he might be ill, but having Keith talking to them definitely helped. His voice, the rope, they were tethers that couldn't be cut, or lost. *Lost*. The word made him shudder. The idea that Keith could disappear without a trace, like his sister, another loose end, an unclosed case, it was too awful. Stacks of paper work, pictures of his sisters face, his parents quarrelling late into the night, the looks the other children gave him at school; *that's Lance, he left his sister in a cave and she died. Do you think he did it on purpose? Maybe he killed her. They never found her body.*

Losing people hurt too much, all that life, wasted. They couldn't lose Keith.

"Uh, guys, I've reached a drop-off."

Lance's heart thudded in his chest as Keith's voice drew him back to reality. It was the drop off from the night Lance had wondered into the tunnel, he was sure of it. *That endless black pit*; he hooked his fingers around the bandana.

"How deep is it?" Allura asked, straight to business.

"Not sure. It looks pretty deep, but the torch won't reach the bottom. It's a cavern, I think. I'm not sure if the tunnel continues, I can't see any way around the pit."

"Do you know how big the pit is?" Pidge asked.

"Um...at least fifty metres across I'd say. There might be more tunnels leading out from lower down."

A pause.

"I'm going in."

"Really now-" Allura began.

"That's not a good idea, Keith," said Hunk.

Pidge looked on the verge of considering this. She bit her lip, eyeing the tunnel. "Does it look safe?"

"I've got the equipment," said Keith, sounds of him breathing and shuffling about indicating he was probably already setting said equipment up. *"I want to see if there's a bigger network lower down."*

"Be very careful," Allura instructed tersely, eyeing their portable screen closely.

"Will do."

"Keith, are you sure?"

Keith appeared to hesitate at the sound of Lance's voice, the sounds of him adjusting the harness faltering.

"If there's answers here, we need to know."

Lance nodded, forgetting Keith couldn't see him in his state of worry.

"Alright, I'm beginning descent."

"Did you check the knots?"

"I know how to tie a rope, Pidge."

"Just be careful."

Lance watched fearfully as even more rope was fed into the tunnel, disappearing into the depths as Keith climbed down into the pit. He admired that rope, an Altean design that allowed the material

to bend and flow, so it wouldn't snag on a rock and get stuck. By the sounds of it, the pit was definitely deep enough that a fall would have killed Lance. The thought of Keith slipping, losing his grip, the rope failing... he was fine, Lance tried to reason. Stupidly dangerous missions were Keith's forte.

"How's it going?"

"Easy climbing," Keith said in answer to Allura's question, panting slightly.

"Don't underestimate it. You said the earth was loose, this pit could be too."

"Got it."

Lance felt on edge throughout the descent, leaning in close to Allura to monitor the depth reading. He was going straight down, abseiling into the seemingly bottomless pit.

"I... I think I see the floor."

"Really?"

"It could just be another ledge. This things really deep. Gimme another minute."

They waited as Keith lowered himself a couple more metres. There was a long pause where he stopped moving.

"I can definitely see the bottom. Its... kinda weird. I don't know what it is, a rock of some sort. Looks funny."

"Is it water?" Asked Hunk.

"No. It's definitely solid."

"Make sure its stable before you put any weight on it," Allura instructed. "Otherwise all the readings are good."

"I... I'm still not sure what it is."

The group exchanged a puzzled look.

"Well... what colour is it?" Pidge asked unhelpfully.

A huff.

"I don't know."

"It could be an undiscovered mineral," came Coran's voice through the link to the castle. *"Useful for the castle perhaps. See if you can get a sample."*

"I really don't think its... I'm not sure that's it."

There was something in the way Keith spoke that set Lance even more on edge. He looked at the screen clutched in Allura's hands; all the readings were normal, though Keith hadn't gone any deeper for at least a minute now.

"Just come back," he said, earning himself an odd look from the others.

“Why would he come back now? He’s just getting somewhere.”

“Yeah, but if something’s up-“

“Nothing’s wrong, Lance. I’m going down.”

Lance bit his lip to stop another desperate retort; he needed to stop worrying so much. On the screen, he followed as Keith climbed lower, down into the belly of the pit. He’d stop every few seconds, presumably to study the floor below him.

“What do you see now?” Asked Pidge.

The radio was silent; Lance glanced at the depth reading and saw it hadn’t changed, meaning Keith was stationary.

“Keith?”

More silence, all they could hear was him breathing. Lance gripped the edge of the communicator, placing himself in front of it so he’d be heard easily.

“Keith?”

“I’m at the bottom,” came the reply. *“I’m standing-“*

A sharp breath, Keith cut himself off. His voice didn’t sound right, not to Lance.

“Excellent,” said Allura. “What is it?”

There was no response, just Keith’s breathing steadily growing faster. Lance frowned; that wasn’t right.

“Keith?”

“You gotta talk to us buddy,” said Pidge. “We’re blind up here.”

There was a small sound, like maybe Keith was trying to speak, but it didn’t last. Lance felt his stomach lurch.

“Keith, are you okay?”

“No,” came the very small, very timid response.

Well, no one had quite expected that. They all nearly smashed heads crowding in front of the tunnel entrance, the monitor gripped tightly in Allura’s hands.

“Keith?”

“Shit, are you okay?”

“What’s the matter? Are you injured? Keith, we need to know-“

“Get out of there-”

They could hear him breathing, the short, shallow gasps of someone about to cry.

“Keith?” Lance’s own eyes were stinging, heart racing so fast it was sickening. “What’s wrong, Keith? Please, please talk to us, oh god-“

"I'm at the bottom," Keith repeated, his voice nothing more than a loose quiver. *"I'm standing on them."*

"Standing on what?" Allura asked frantically, her body tensed. She looked ready to dash into the tunnel any second now. "Keith, what's wrong?"

The horrible, though barely audible wet gasp that tore away from Keith made Lance sick.

"I found this planet's inhabitants."

Lance met Allura's eye. Hunk and Pidge looked confused, the latter speculating what that meant, but Lance and Allura... they knew exactly what that meant.

"Keith," said Lance, before anyone else arrived at the same conclusion, before anyone else intervened. "Come back now, please."

"What do you mean?" Pidge interrupted. "Who's there?"

Lance's mind went to the ship they'd discovered, to Keith entering that ship alone, to what would have happened if those things had woken when it was just him, just Keith, to what would happen now-

"Please, get out of there right now, please Keith, please get out."

"I'm standing on them," Keith said again, accompanied by a gasp that indicated he was definitely crying.

"You're..." Pidge frowned, looking to Hunk, who shook his head in warning. "Keith what... what's happening."

"Keith," said Allura calmly. "Please extract yourself now."

"They're dead. Oh my god, they're all dead."

"Keith," Pidge squeaked, moving closer to the tunnel only to have Hunk hold her back. "Who's dead?"

No reply, but the audio relayed a sickening crunch as Keith took a step.

"All of them," he said. *"They're all dead."*

"The planet's inhabitants," Allura hissed, fingers tightening around the monitor. "Keith, return immediately, that's an order."

"There's so many." Keith's voice sounded lost, uncertain, he wasn't really listening.

"What happened to them?" Hunk asked, curiosity getting the better of him, despite the stink eye Allura sent his way.

"It doesn't matter, just *come back now*," Lance pleaded.

"There's children down here," said Keith. *"T-this is a child."*

Lance shut his eyes, trying to keep a clear head. Stay calm, coax Keith out.

"Keith," he said. "Listen to what I'm saying, and come back."

At the mention of a child however, Allura appeared to change her mind.

“What did it?” She asked, anger poisoning the usual honey-sweet tone of her voice. “What happened to them?”

“*I-I don’t know,*” stammered Keith. “*There’s so many, I-*“

He stopped, hyperventilating.

“Allura, he needs to get out of there!” Lance pleaded, listening to Keith’s distressed noises through the speakers.

“No,” she said firmly.

“But you just said-“

“No, because I may know what this is.”

Lance blanked. “*What?*”

“I need you to tell me what you’re seeing,” Allura continued in a commandeering way.

Nothing, just Keith gasping for air, terror seizing him.

“Keith, focus. You’re on a mission, so *stay on task.*”

There was another, longer pause, where Keith appeared to be trying to reel himself in.

“*I-I’m here,*” he stammered.

“Good,” said Allura, her expression poised and focused. “Tell me what you see.”

A deep breath, a small whimper that made Lance’s heart clench, then Keith was speaking.

“*I’m at the bottom of the pit, it... this cavern, its big. T-there’s more tunnels leading out, but they’re also... they’re also... t-the bodies are everywhere.*”

“What bodies?”

“*Humanoid, or Altean, that kind of build. L-like the cave paintings, its this planet’s people.*”

“And you’re sure they’re dead?”

“Yes,” Keith choked out.

“What happened to them? Describe them.”

“*Allura, I don’t, I-I-*“

“It’s okay,” Lance interrupted, hating hearing Keith so afraid. “Leave them, come back.”

“Not yet,” said Allura.

“Allura, its not safe.”

“This could be the answer, Lance. I need him to tell me exactly what he sees.”

Allura turned back to the communicator, sombreness radiating off her. “Keith, tell me.”

“*t’s a child,*” Keith whispered, his voice broken.

More than his voice, his *will* sounded broken. Lance looked at the rope clutched tightly in Hunk’s hands; there wasn’t much left, he wanted to pull Keith straight back to them.

“What is? What’s there?”

“*Its just bodies,*” Keith cried. “*The whole cavern, it- I just see so many of them, w-who did this?*”

“Tell me exactly what’s there,” said Allura, “and I can tell you.”

There was another loud crunch as Keith stepped forward, and Lance’s throat filled with bile at the thought of bones breaking beneath his feet.

“*The floor,*” said Keith, his voice betraying that his whole body was shaking. “*They are the floor. I don’t know how... how deep- shit, shit, A-Allura, there’s so many.*”

“What do they look like?” Allura asked, almost in a whisper.

Her face had gone uncharacteristically pale. The rest of the group waited in silence for Keith to continue, even Coran was silent on the other end of the channel.

“*Is Pidge there?*” Keith asked, his voice wrought. “*I don’t want her to hear this.*”

“I’m not a child,” Pidge insisted, but she didn’t sound so convinced, wrapped in Hunk’s arms as the pair listened in in horror.

Keith made a pained noise; Lance knew Keith knew Pidge was just as capable as the rest of them, and although she was younger, she could handle the worst of situations; the problem was that Keith cared. Pidge wasn’t just a friend to him, she was like a sister. Lance wouldn’t want any one of his younger siblings hearing what Keith was about to describe.

“Just continue,” said Allura.

A pause, a small, muffled sob.

“*They’re mummified. They’re... sort of preserved. They’re c-covered in dirt, like a casing. All...*” Keith bit back a whimper, chest heaving as he tried to draw in air. “*Dry, shrivelled. Like the life’s just... been sucked out of them. Empty husks... I can see their faces, their skin-*” Keith was drifting off again, losing himself to shock.

Allura was very silent as she listened, lips forming a thin line and brows pinched. Hunk hugged Pidge a little tighter, tears gleaming in the younger girl’s eyes. Lance’s mouth felt dry; he could picture Keith down there, alone in a dark cavern, standing on the remains of a civilisation, death and decay threatening to swallow him up.

“Come back,” he whispered, gently, praying softer words would get through to him.

“You said they are covered in dirt,” Allura prompted. “What do you mean?”

“*They’re just... covered in dried mud.*”

A pause, where Keith’s breathing picked up.

“Listen,” he whispered, and took a step.

Lance had to take several deep breaths to stop himself throwing up at the sound of mud, bone, and shrivelled skin all crumbling under Keith’s foot.

“They’re fused,” he murmured.

Lance saw Allura press fingers to her lips, shutting her eyes. “You can come back now, Keith.”

“There’s so many,” Keith said quietly. *“They’re packed so densely. I could be standing on hundreds... there... there could be thousands more, underneath.”*

“Okay,” said Allura, breathing shallowly. “Okay, that’s enough. Come back.”

“So much death,” said Keith, his voice unsettlingly calm.

He’d gone into shock, he must have.

“I know,” Allura whispered. “I know. Now come back.”

“We can’t leave them.”

“Keith, I’m sorry you had to find them.”

“There’s so many, so, so many.”

Keith spoke slower, his breathing evening out. He didn’t sound so frantic or afraid, just hopeless. A sad, overwhelming sense of despair.

“So much death. Everyone’s dead, there... there’s no one.”

“It’s okay,” Pidge said, sniffing. “Don’t think about it, Keith.”

“It’s so empty,” the boy continued, and Lance shuddered at the sound of his voice. *“There’s no one. The whole world... I’m so alone.”*

Lance really didn’t like the way he was speaking. “There’s us. Keith, come back to us.”

“I have to... I have to see.”

“You don’t have to do anything,” Allura said sharply. “Come back right now.”

An awful sound carried through the comms as Keith began to walk, like ice breaking, though Lance knew it wasn’t that at all. It stopped, then a loud cracking indicated he was kneeling.

“Get up,” Lance hissed, before he even knew what Keith was doing. “Keith, get up and come back.”

“Allura, you’re having a baby.”

Allura shared a look with Lance, both of them frowning.

“Yes,” she replied cautiously. “Yes I am. Will you come back now?”

“Like this one.”

Lance stomach dropped. Allura’s face paled, her lips parting.

“Leave it,” Lance said firmly.

“It’s so small,” Keith whispered.

“Why the hell is he talking like this?” Pidge said frantically.

“I... I don’t...” Allura shook her head, horrified. “Keith, its time to leave.”

“Allura,” Keith continued, his voice vacant and hollow. *“You’re having a baby.”*

“I know.”

Allura looked to Lance, helpless.

“There’s a baby here. It’s dead.”

Lance grit his teeth as Allura clamped a hand over her mouth.

“I know,” she whispered. “Don’t look at that, Keith.”

“Why did this happen?”

“Come back,” Allura pleaded, her lip trembling. “And I’ll tell you.”

“No...” Keith mumbled. *“Do you think this will happen to us? To your baby?”*

Allura choked on her next breath, muffling the sound into her sleeve.

“Nothing’s happening to her baby,” Lance interjected, shaken.

“They probably thought the same about this baby.”

“Why would you say that?” Pidge yelled, as Allura sat back in shock. “Why the hell would you say something like that?”

“This isn’t right,” said Hunk, and Lance couldn’t agree more. “Keith, you should come back.”

“Hunk...” Keith replied slowly, thinking out his next words. *“Can you let go of the rope?”*

“No!” The yellow paladin exclaimed, only tightening his hold on what little rope was left.

“Then give some more,” Keith continued. *“I need to go further.”*

Hunk looked mortified, clutching the rope and staring into the tunnel. “N-no. There’s none left. Come back.”

A pause, one that had Lance’s skin crawling. Then-

“I’m untying myself.”

Lance moved on instinct, planting both hands on the communication box and brining it right up to his face. “You stay attached to that rope, Keith! Do you hear me?”

There was no reply, and Lance hurt with the adrenaline pumping through him.

“Oh god, oh god,” Hunk was mumbling, Pidge staring at the tunnel in shock.

“Do not untie that rope,” Lance shouted into the comms. “That’s an order!”

Keith apparently didn’t care for orders.

“*The cavern keeps going,*” he murmured, and Lance could just picture the rope slipping from his waist. “*I need to see how many there are, how many bodies there are.*”

The ground crunched below his feet as Keith walked forward, further away. The tether was broken.

“Keith, get back here!”

“Paladin!” Allura shouted, joining Lance on the comms. “You are not permitted to go further!”

“What’s happening?” Pidge asked desperately. “Something’s wrong with him, something’s wrong with Keith.”

“Keith!”

Lance was growing desperate, heat burning behind his eyes and a lump building in his throat. The bandana burned around his wrist, or rather- his arms, they felt cold. *Shit.*

“You promised!” Lance screamed. “Keith, you promised; stop walking!”

“There’s something in the air,” Allura murmured, her eyes widening as she studied the monitor’s screen. “T-the air is changing. Keith, you need to get out of the pit.”

“Keith, can you hear me?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Pidge yelled. “What are you doing?”

“*This is very unadvisable,*” Coran added.

“Keith,” Lance was trying not to cry, but the fear *the fear the fear-* “Come back. Listen to me, come back, please. D-don’t do this, where ever you’re going, stop.”

“*There’s thousands,*” came Keith’s voice. “*So much death.*”

“Leave it! Don’t think about it!”

“*There’s nothing,*” Keith whispered. “*No one.*”

“That’s not true,” Pidge wailed. “Keith, come back!”

“There’s something in the air,” Allura repeated, her fingers flying over the screen. “I-I don’t know what it is. A gas maybe... Keith, get out of there!”

“I don’t like this,” Hunk whimpered. “No, no, no, I don’t like this.”

“Keith,” Lance tried again, his arms *aching* with how cold they’d grown. “I have your bandana. You need it. Come back.”

“*Why?*” Keith murmured, sounding lost. “*There’s nothing.*”

“What the hell,” Pidge whimpered, starting to cry. “What’s he saying?”

Lance grit his teeth, arms pulsing with cold energy. *You felt like a storm.* And he did; ice, water, electricity, a hurricane pumping through his veins, tearing at his skin, trying to break free.

“Keith, come back.”

“*I don’t...*” A pause, something appeared to distract the boy from whatever he was saying. “*Who a-*”

A sharp burst of static exploded in their ears before the radio fell silent. A second passed; Lance couldn’t hear so much as Keith breathing.

“*KEITH!*”

An explosion of all their voices, calling out to the red paladin. *Nothing*. Pidge ripped herself out of Hunk’s hold, grabbing the communicator.

“Keith! Keith, where are you?”

Lance nearly crushed the edge of the monitor he was holding onto.

“Keith? *Keith?*”

“There’s something in the air,” Hunk whimpered.

“*GOD DAMMIT!*” Lance yelled. “Where are you!”

The bandana around his wrist was searing hot against his frozen skin, but he didn’t care. *I’m coming right back*. Pure terror coursed through his veins, making his chest seize up.

“Keith! Answer me!”

Allura stood, her face set in stone. “I’m going in.”

“No!”

Keith is gone, he’s gone, he’s gone, he’s dead, you lost him, he’s not coming back. Lance was breathing faster and faster, ice fusing his nerves, burning.

“Come back!” He yelled into the communicator, but was met with only dead silence.

He stood, pushing past Allura, walking toward the tunnels entrance. *Cold cold cold...* but ice was better than dirt. Storms were better than dirt; Lance hurt, the pain in his arms clouding his mind. But he wanted something else to hurt. He hurt Keith without meaning too, if he *meant* to hurt someone- Lance strode forward, embracing the numbness that spread through his body.

“*COME BACK!*” He yelled, and slammed his hands against the cave wall.

A bolt of energy passed through him, so strong and abrupt it hurt, almost stopping his heart. The wall shook where his hands landed, planted on either side of the tunnels entrance. Lance opened his eyes, staring the darkness in the face, body trembling, *listening listening listening*. No one spoke, but he could feel their eyes on his back. His fingers closed around the dirt, grabbing fistfuls of the loose wall, *please please please*. The communicator crackled, and Lance whipped around.

“Keith?” Pidge called, dropping to her knees in front of the device.

“*I’m here,*” came Keith’s voice, sounding less dazed, more in touch with reality. “*Sorry, I tripped. I-ah! I’ve cut my hand.*”

Lance nearly collapsed with relief, joining the others in front of the comms. His arms were shaking

and Allura was watching him suspiciously, but she was yet to comment.

“What the hell happened, buddy?”

“*I’m sorry,*” Keith mumbled. “*It was upsetting, I... I’m coming back.*”

Lance could have cried; Hunk and Pidge actually did, collapsing into each other and hugging.

“Thank the stars,” Allura breathed, resting a hand over her heart.

“I could kill you right now,” Pidge muttered.

“*Please don’t,*” came Keith’s weak reply, and Lance realised he still sounded afraid.

“N-no killing,” he promised.

“Just get your dumbass back here,” Pidge said with a snuffle.

The wait as Keith slowly but carefully climbed back out of the pit was excruciating, with Lance expecting him to drop back down and wonder off at any second.

“*I’m out the pit, just the tunnel now,*” came his eventual response, and Lance could’ve jumped with joy.

“Everyone stay well back,” Allura instructed as Keith worked his way up the tunnel, pulling their equipment away from the entrance. “He could be contaminated.”

Everyone wisely stepped back, gathering a few metres away, anxiously watching the entrance as they waited for Keith to emerge. Minutes pasted painfully slowly, and Lance could almost feel his arms beginning to tingle again by the time they finally heard Keith crawling along the last few feet. Lance’s heart beat up into his throat when he spotted Keith’s dark mop of hair appear at the entrance. The boy’s overalls and indeed face were covered in dirt, and his legs shook as he stood.

“H-hi guys,” he mumbled, face shockingly pale.

A nasty gash across his palm dripped blood onto the floor.

“Every one keep your distance,” Allura reminded them.

Keith stumbled a little, and Lance made up his mind.

“Fuck that,” he muttered, ignoring Allura’s cry of warning as he strode toward Keith and yanked to boy into a tight embrace.

Keith fell right into him, managing to wrap his arms weakly around Lance’s shoulders before his legs gave out. The cold tension in Lance’s arms seemed to melt into him as he clutched Keith closer, ignoring the stench of dirt and death that clung to him. Keith’s fingers grappled for his collar, but failed halfway through their mission as the boy’s head lolled back and he passed out. Lance turned to face the others, an armful of unconscious Keith.

“He *is* alive,” Lance informed quickly, before Hunk became the second person to faint.

“What the hell,” Pidge whispered, turning to Allura.

But the princess’s attention was completely on the wall. Lance looked too, carefully scooping Keith up into his arms and turning with him to look at the paintings of the village disappearing into

the dark water. Except...

“They didn’t drown,” he said. “That’s not water.”

The other’s eyes were on him, and Lance swallowed thickly. He felt like screaming, hands tightening protectively around Keith.

“It’s mud.”

Chapter End Notes

next chapter is explanation time yipee

Chapter Notes

I was absolutely overwhelmed by nice comments last time so thank you so so much to everyone!! Your support is amazing and YOU'RE ALL JUST SO NICE bless your beautiful heart <3 <3

I'M SO EXCITED CAUSE CHECK THIS SUPER AMAZING ART!!!!!! It's done by tumblr user peanutbutterfiles (thank you thank you thank you) of the cave and it's 1) terrifyingly accurate, and 2) ACTUALLY FREAKING INCREDIBLE

>>>> <http://peanutbutterfiles.tumblr.com/post/162377020207>

look at that shit bc its so lovely I cry
(it's super accurate and what I was picturing if you're curious and want an actual idea of the cave)

anyway who knows whats happening in this chapter (not me) but thanks for stickin around <3

-

Keith returned to consciousness a little before Allura forced him and Lance into a decontamination chamber; groggy and confused at first, he stayed mostly quiet as the details of the events leading up to him fainting returned. Allura bustled the respectively confused and relieved red and black paladin into the chamber with an exasperated *we use these chambers too damn often*. Stripped of their armour (or in Keith's case the grimy overalls), the pair stood side by side in their flight suits, shivering under the spray of a dozen Altean disinfectants. Lance didn't have to pay much attention to see that Keith was struggling to hold it together. His head was lowered, watery eyes staring blankly at the floor, even after the spray shut off and the chamber announced it was safe for them to leave. Keith wasn't weak, and he didn't fall apart easily, but this was an accident waiting to happen. He swayed lightly, and without thinking, Lance grabbed an arm to steady him. What did he say? *Are you okay?* Of course he wasn't.

The chamber was eerily silent, as though it too was holding its breath in anticipation. Lance knew the others were already in the common room waiting for them, but he knew Keith likely wouldn't get another quiet moment until they'd run all sorts of tests on him. So he let them stand there in the chilly decontamination chamber, neither having much to say or do; but at least they weren't alone. Keith took a deep breath, and Lance didn't miss the choked whimper that escaped.

“Keith-“

It was like the recoil of a spring; the hand on Keith's arm was forced to readjust as Keith turned into him and tucked himself firmly against Lance's chest. Keith didn't hug him, didn't throw arms around him, just rested both hands on his chest, there beside his head, where an ear was pressed to Lance's heart. He was listening, Lance realised with a start, to his heart beat. Carefully, so as not to scare him away, Lance wrapped his arms around Keith's back. He held him as tightly as he dared,

bundled as much of him as he could into that embrace, dropped his head into Keith's hair and breathed him in. The fingers against Lance's chest tightened around his shirt, Keith's eyes fluttering shut, *listening, listening, listening*. This was better than their last hug, this didn't feel desperate; this felt safe.

"We're still here," Keith whispered, barely audible.

Memories of Keith's words from within the cavern rung like church bells in his head. *There's nothing. No one.*

"We're alive."

Lance pulled him impossibly closer, hoping he could hear the rapid beat of his heart, gradually slowing as a renewed calmness crept into him.

"You came back," he replied, just as softly.

Keith's shoulders shook. Lance ran a hand down his back, soothing him. *You're alive*. Finger's carded gently through Keith's hair, cupping his neck, trailing along his spine. Every touch made still the crawling in their skin, so each pushed closer; every bit of themselves was there in the others hold, safe. Keith was warmth, and Keith was weight in his arms, and Keith was everything he'd ever wanted. It didn't feel wrong and it didn't feel rushed; they were comfort to each other, for each other, and Lance thought his heart might melt. Keith kept his head against his chest and Lance let him. There was clarity in having Keith there, and there was reassurance in the way he listened. *Alive, we're alive, we're alive.*

It was difficult not to want to hold Keith's hand during their walk to the common room; the most Lance could do was a drape a thin blanket over his shoulders and watch him closely as they walked, worried he might just fall over. Allura spotted them as they made their way around the corner, waiting just outside the door to the common room, where the others were already waiting inside. She gave Keith a warm smile, but caught Lance's arm as he made to follow the red paladin inside.

"A word," she said. "Alone."

There was nothing malicious in the way she spoke, but Lance's stomach flipped anyway. Keith shot him a look, but at Allura's insistence left them to go inside. Lance held his gaze as he stumbled along through the doorway, tracing the downturn of his lips and wishing, *wishing*, he could kiss that look away. Kiss him breathless and stupid and happy in love. That wouldn't happen, he knew that, but god he wanted it.

"Lance?"

His head snapped up, toward Allura.

"What's up?"

Allura was frowning slightly, softly, as if she could work out her answer just by looking at him; talking was only her secondary tactic.

"What did you do?"

The atmosphere in the room shifted; gone was the peace and quiet thrum of Keith's existence, the veil felt ripped off, a splash of cold water that brought Lance back to reality. He blinked, adjusting, willing the fast pace back into his life.

“Um... what did I do?”

Allura sighed, but the look on her face was fond. “What did you do at the tunnel?”

“Uh, I mean, I might’ve cried. But if we could avoid-“

“Lance, you know you can tell me anything, don’t you?”

Lance smiled nervously, itching under her gaze. Had she grown taller? This was intimidating, but in a weirdly kind way.

“Not *anything*,” he tried to joke. “Pretty sure you have negative interest in my incredible sexual escapade-“

“We don’t need secrets, Lance,” Allura interrupted with a smirk. “I could tell you how Shiro-“

“Please god no stop!” Lance shrieked, as Allura raised a brow, amused. “Don’t... no. Jesus Christ. Look, I wish I knew what you were talking about-“

“You did something, when you planted your hands on that tunnel, when you were trying to call Keith back. I saw it. Hunk and Pidge did too, but I suppose they didn’t think much of it.”

“I... punched a wall. Because I was upset.”

A twinge of suspicion crumpled Allura’s brow. *Fuck.*

“Lance.”

It was very, very, very, very, very, difficult to look Allura in the eye and lie. Impossible actually.

“Um.”

“*Lance.*”

“I’ve been making alterations to my suit.”

Keith’s theory was dead fucking wrong, but Lance could still use it as a basis. Allura frowned.

“Alterations?”

“Yeah! You know, cause the blue- black lion has so many cool inbuilt features, so why shouldn’t my suit have some too?”

“I didn’t know engineering was your specialty.”

“It’s not. I... it’s simple stuff. I might’ve stolen some designs from Hunk, but please don’t tell him. It’s nothing dumb, I promise.”

“So what was it you were trying to do by the tunnel?”

“Oh. I was... Mostly I was just freaking out. But the modification is... uh... to do... with electricity. Yes. Electricity, *so*... I hit the wall because... it, I thought it might... do something.”

“Do something.”

Allura folded her arms; *is she angry?*

“Keith wasn’t responding and I freaked out,” Lance said more earnestly.

Allura’s brow lifted, looking more sympathetic.

“I’m not even sure why I did that. I’ve been experimenting with electricity, and I thought maybe if there was a problem with his comm I could reboot it. It doesn’t make sense but I wasn’t thinking. Please, don’t worry about it.”

Allura pursed her lips, thinking hard.

“Okay,” she said, and Lance’s shoulder’s slumped with relief. “But you have to promise to tell me if something is wrong.”

Oh boy, if only she knew.

You could tell her, thought a recently dormant part of Lance’s brain. It would certainly take some of the stress off his own shoulders, but Allura had more than enough to worry about. He wouldn’t tell her unless absolutely necessary, or at least until he’d figured out what was going on himself. Lance smiled thinly.

“Thanks, Allura. I will.”

By the time they finally got to the common room, Keith’s hand was loosely bandaged, but they’d postponed actual medical attention in favour of hearing Allura’s announcement. That was where they sat now, four paladins plus the princess and Coran, all in sullen states of mind.

“I’m sorry for frightening everyone,” Keith began. “I don’t know what came over me.”

He looked weary, pale faced with hands that shook around the cup of water he held. The cut looked bad, but Lance knew they needed to hear what conclusion Allura had come to first.

“That’s okay,” the princess said softly. “Shock does strange things to people. We’re just glad you’re okay; I’m so sorry it’s always you whose discovering these things. I... I can’t imagine what it must have been like.”

Keith nodded, tugging on the thin blanket slung over his shoulders. He hadn’t asked for his bandana back yet, and for the moment Lance was content with it being a substitute to Keith in his arms.

“Do you want to talk any more about it?” Pidge asked, nudging Keith’s arm gently.

He shook his head, fingers tightening around the blanket. That was understandable.

“So,” Lance said, turning toward Allura. “You said you knew what killed those people?”

“Did the planet eat them?” Hunk interrupted. “Cause I gotta say, it looked like the planet ate them. Do carnivorous planets exist? Do you think it would have eaten us? Do-“

“Calm down, Hunk,” Allura instructed kindly, as Lance gave his friend’s shoulder a pat.

The princess looked to Coran, worry lines etched into her brow. Coran gave a curt nod, and she sighed, gathering her hands into her lap.

“I believe I figured it out, yes.”

The others listened patiently, no one daring to interrupt.

"I should have seen it sooner really. This is, after all, linked to Altea."

"What?" Lance blurted.

"It's going to sound confusing at first," Allura confessed. "But listen carefully."

Lance settled in his seat, glancing quickly at his teammates' fearful faces.

"The Dark Planet," said Allura. "I should have recognised that name, but it's been a long time since I heard the story. For the most part, Altea's history has been peaceful."

Lance chose to ignore the fact that Alteans had designed the universes' most powerful weapon in favour of hearing her out.

"We were a peaceful people, our society was stable. There was very little crime, or indeed any form of misconduct. You must understand though, this story originated before I was even born. By the time I heard it, it was already an old myth."

Allura sighed, eyes dropping to the floor.

"Carma and Callio. I... that's what the story was called, the version that was read to me. It's common knowledge that some powerful Alteans possess magical powers and abilities. But not everyone has used these powers for good. There was one such woman, Carma, who in this story abused her connection to the planet."

Coran looked unsettled by this story, and Lance realised he must already know the ending.

"Carma had a sister, Callio, who was sickly from birth. When... when as a young woman, Carma began to exhibit the same symptoms as Callio, they said she went mad with fear. She'd watched her sister suffer, and the thought that she too was to end up like this... Carma grew afraid of dying."

Allura paused, brows drawn. "The story said Carma couldn't bare the thought of dying the way her sister surely would, at a young age, for Alteans at least, in pain. I don't know what her original powers were, only that she channelled them, developed them. She became consumed with fear, and hatred; she wished to live forever. So she... she found a way to steal the life from others."

Lance shuddered, Keith's vacant voice ringing in his ears. *Something sucked the life from them.*

"Carma..." Allura paused again, clasping her hands together tightly. "Carma would take her victims underground and bury them alive. Her powers must have had something to do with the earth, because as they lay there, trapped, dying, rotting away, she would absorb their life force. She had, as barbaric as it was, found a way to live forever."

"That's wrong," Pidge muttered. "That's disgusting."

"That is not the worst of it," said Allura. "When Callio caught wind of what her sister was doing, she was devastated. Carma had abandoned her family, but Callio had just begun her own. Although weak herself, Callio married their town's most respected warrior, a woman named Aryon."

Aryon; Lance hadn't heard that name in any of the Altean history they'd been taught so far, so this was a completely new story. Nor had he heard of Carma and Callio either, he supposed.

"In my story book, Aryon was the... the hero. We'd still hold festivals in her honour, back on Altea. Callio went to Aryon for help, and although they felt sick with betrayal, the two began to

hunt down Carma.”

Lance shuddered; if one of his siblings...

“So Aryon and Callio began searching for Carma. The more they found out about her crimes, the more of her victims they stumbled across... they found some four hundred bodies. My storybook, that was a strong point in it. Four hundred souls found Callio and Aryon, four hundred sufferers, four hundred gone. Hate killed Callio-“

“Callio died?”

Allura raised a brow at Lance’s outburst. “Yes. Carma killed her.”

“Carma killed her own sister?” Pidge asked, frowning.

Allura paused, looking down at her hands.

“In one last attempt to stop her, Callio went to see Carma, and pleaded with her. But Carma, blaming Callio for the disease that had lead her to doing this, killed her.”

Everyone fell into uncomfortable silence for a moment.

“Aryon was devastated,” Allura continued, stating the obvious. “She used her own powers and transported herself and the sisters to the depths of a deserted planet.”

“The Dark Planet,” said Pidge, enraptured by the story.

“Exactly.”

“That dwarf planet down there... is that it?”

Allura pursed her lips, her hands shifting a little closer to her stomach, protectively almost.

“There were many doubts this Dark Planet existed, even in my day. But after Keith found those bodies...”

“What happened?” Lance interrupted. “On the planet, what happened?”

Allura met his eye sadly. “They died. Aryon... with Callio dead, she felt she had no more to loose. She Killed Carma there, finally. But a planet of dirt and darkness was not hell for Carma, it was heaven. As Aryon lay dying, she believed Carma would surely die too. And perhaps she did die, her Altean parts, but she was no longer a pure Altean.”

“She’s a ghost?”

“A spirit. Hell-bent on revenge, on destruction, for what Aryon did to her. Back on Altea, it is not known exactly what happened to the children of Callio and Aryon, or indeed of Carma. But eventually, strange accidents began to befall Aryon’s descendants. Some went missing, some went insane, whatever the case, it seemed a terrible curse had fallen upon them. Many of her relatives fled Altea, believing they would find peace somewhere else. I believe some may have come here, to the dwarf planet, I believe... I believe that was them down there, the bodies Keith found. Perhaps they started a new civilisation here; after all, that writing did look similar to Altean. They began again without realising that that whole time, they’d... they’d resettled on the very planet their ancestor had banished their greatest nemesis too.”

Lance blinked.

“And it killed them?”

Allura sighed, eyes falling on Keith. “As our red paladin said, there is no way of telling how long ago they died. But yes, I believe we have witnessed the final fall of Aryon’s descendants, on the Dark Planet itself.”

“Jeez,” muttered Hunk. “That’s the Dark Planet and we just let Keith wonder into it? Sorry buddy.”

“S cool.”

“That’s some messed up shit,” said Pidge.

Keith frowned. “Language, Pidge.”

“That’s some fucked up stuff.”

Keith glowered at her and Pidge sighed, resigning herself to the reality of being the youngest paladin.

“*Gosh.*”

“The good news,” Allura interrupted, “is that the planet appears to be regenerating itself. Ten thousand years have passed since I even last heard that story, seeing plants growing there and creatures like Puffy... they are good signs, despite its tragic past.”

“Even so,” said Lance. “Can we all stay the hell away from it for the time being?”

Keith was the first to nod, the others following on soon after.

“That place gives me the creeps,” said Hunk. “And knowing what’s down there... its one heck of a big graveyard. And I do not like graveyards.”

“I can’t help but feel this was the reason we were drawn back here,” Allura said, sounding thoughtful.

“Yeah?”

“It’s... as long ago as they may have died, they were still Altean. Though they may have left Altea long before I was even born, they’re still my people. I think they were waiting to be discovered. And as heartbreaking as it is, I’m glad we found them. I would like to pay proper respects to them. Aryon and Callio too... they were heroes. They deserve out respect.”

“Please tell me you’re not thinking of going back down there,” Lance deadpanned.

“No, not at all. But I would like us to prepare some form of commemoration.”

Lance wasn’t sure how to feel about that, more focused on getting his teammates as far from this Dark Planet as possible. Coran, however, laid a hand on the princess’s shoulder.

“That’s very kind of you, princess. I’m sure we will think of something fitting.”

Allura smiled weakly at him, still shaken from the day’s events, but with a new goal in mind.

“I must think this through,” she said. “You’re all dismissed for the moment. Take some time to think and recover. Keith, get that hand fixed up.”

She stood, adjusting her dress.

“I’ll speak to you all this evening.”

Lance stood a second after Allura, following her toward the door before she disappeared.

“Hang on,” he called, catching up.

The others were filtering out behind them, but Lance wanted a few more details.

“Yes?” Allura asked, watching him expectantly.

“This story... how much is a story? And how much is real?”

Allura frowned thoughtfully. “Well... the basis of it remains. Carma did kill people, and in that way. Minor details are always change; hair colours, dialogue, but... if you’re wondering if Carma really killed her sister, or if the Dark Planet is real... it is.”

Lance nodded slowly, stomach unsettled by the idea.

“Its symbol is the star.”

“The star?”

“The star, of seven major points. Fear, murder, the hunt, the confrontation, the martyr, the fall, the curse. Each point was a key event in the story, from Carma’s fear learning she had contracted the disease, to the process of hunting Carma down, Callio’s confrontation, which lead to her subsequent death when she refused to forgive Carma, and finally the curse that has followed Aryon’s descendants, following their fall upon the Dark Planet.”

Allura paused, noticing Lance’s unease.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah it’s just... its not a nice explanation.”

“No,” Allura agreed. “It’s not.”

She sighed. “Don’t overthink it, Lance. What happened to those people was terrible, but it was a very long time ago. We can’t mourn everyone from history.”

Allura’s smile was tight, and Lance wondered if she was thinking how long it would be until Altea faded into history. He returned the smile, though each of theirs meant very little.

“Yeah. I’m glad we know what happened.”

-

Star date – 33:03:19 (373)

Castle Cycle – 19:01

Log – 6

“So... last time I was in here for a chat, I kinda nearly died. If that could not happen this time, that would be awesome.”

Over the log’s video, Lance sighed, drumming his fingers over the panel.

“Keith reckons it was your fault I wondered into the tunnel, but I don’t think so. I think you save me, Black. So thank you.”

He paused, listening, looking for some sign the lion could at least hear him.

“Do you know why I did it? Why I walked into that tunnel? I know it was a week ago, and I should have spoken to you sooner, but... I guess I’ve been scared of coming back in here.”

Lance tugged on his jacket sleeve, vastly uncomfortable.

“There’s just... holy shit, there’s so much I’m trying to keep track of. There’s still so much I don’t understand. Can I list it for you? I’m gonna. One; without fail, if we leave this system, we will wormhole back to this exact spot at the exact same time each day. Two; that wormhole only needs to take me, Allura, you, and Blue. Three; there is something fucking weird happening to me, to my arms, whatever that energy inside me is. Four; I have a recurring dream and I sleepwalk to my death. Five; I think I’m in love with Keith despite the fact I now know I cannot protect him. And six, you don’t talk to me. Blue still calls to me, and its- its so conflicting.”

A worrisome frown decorated Lance’s forehead; he looked tired of not understanding.

“Shall I say more, Black? Can you answer any of that for me?”

A pause, a long one. Lance looked a lot more serious than he usually did; he looked older.

“What do I have to do to get you to talk to me? Huh? What am I meant to do?”

There was a controlled sort of anger in his voice, agitated but orderly. “Are you... are you grieving? Because I’m not just the replacement, you know. We were both put out of place, Black. You lost Shiro, I lost Blue. Being the black lion doesn’t mean the other’s bonds with their lions mean any less. You think I’m just a replacement?”

Lance bit his lip, cringing slightly before continuing to speak.

“Then you’re a replacement too. If it doesn’t feel right with me to pilot you, then I don’t feel right piloting you. If we’re not compatible, I understand. If I’m not right, then don’t accept me. Unless I am absolutely fit to be the black paladin, don’t... don’t fucking play with me. I left my lion for this, to take on this responsibility. But if- if I’m the only one trying, if I’m the only one willing to give up what I had before... then I don’t want this. And I don’t accept this. Because you know what? Paladins have to accept their lions too.”

Lance sat defiantly still in the seat, almost awaiting the onslaught of anger he was sure would come from Black. He was glaring, eyes fixed straight ahead and back rigid. A minute passed, another. Black didn’t react.

Lance shoulders slumped, and he spoke very quietly when he asked, “why is Blue still calling to me?”

When no answer came, Lance resigned himself to just thinking, curling up silently in the chair and tapping his fingers restlessly against his knees. A frown stayed plastered on his face, but the steady hum of the lion’s life-force gradually calmed him, even if he didn’t realise. Nearly ten minutes passed by the time he next spoke.

“What’s happening to me?”

In a flash, Lance went from a brave, sturdy young man, to a scared child, curling into himself,

positioning his arms cautiously around his body.

“What did I do? Earlier, when... when I hit the wall. And- and when I threw Keith. And before the wormhole took me. What is that, Black? It... its so cold. I’m so cold. I can feel it, and it hurts, but I’m not sure it’s bad. Does that make sense? It... it feels like a defence mechanism. When I’m scared, or I think I’m in danger, or when Keith was in danger, that’s when it happens. But I don’t know what it is. Keith was right, it does feel like a storm, and it hurts.”

Lance was frowning, flicking the edge of his sleeve distractedly.

“Keith scared me today. Maybe you won’t talk to me, but I know you care about him, I know you want to hear. I care about him too, at least we’ve got that in common.”

Lance’s frown deepened, staring off vacantly into space.

“That cave, it really got to him. Why’s it always him that finds these things? I... I gotta check on him. He helps, he really, really helps. I’ve been sleeping better with him there, and I think he has been too. Does that mean anything? I don’t know. But, I-I think I need him. I think I... I really like him.”

Lance cheeks flushed a little, and he stuttered a little as he spoke. “It sounds rushed and stupid if I say I love him. But there’s... there’s a lot of ways you can love someone. I love the whole team. I love Hunk so much, he’s my best friend. So why does... why’s it so different and difficult to say I love Keith?”

The dark expression lifted a little, unconsciously, as Lance thought this through.

“When I see him, I... you know those things that sort of cheer you up instantly. The things your eyes go to first. Like... like spotting a friend in a crowd, or... or the first glimpse of the ocean when you’re driving toward it, or seeing a message from that girl you like, or an unexpected A on your test, or... god, I sound so fucking cheesy. But the moment I see him, everything... everything just lights up a little. And I can’t... I want to keep him safe, because he deserves that, he deserves to be happy. God, I... I look forward to seeing him, even just passing him in the passage. He’s everything I look forward to. Does that make any sense?”

Lance was frowning softly, fondly almost.

“I just want to get us all out of this stupid system-“

“Lance, where are you?”

Lance stopped at the sound of Allura’s voice coming in over the comms.

“Uh, I’m in Black. Is it dinner time?”

“No. But have you see Keith or Pidge? Coran too.”

Lance’s eyes darted around the cockpit, almost as if Black would have the answer.

“Uh... no. Last I heard they were in the med-bay to fix Keith’s hand.”

“They’re not there.”

Allura sounded worried; Lance stood from the chair, about to end the log. Moments before his fingers reached the screen, he doubled over, clutching his chest and gasping. His vision swam,

legs stumbling, and then he stopped. For a second, nothing happened, Lance just stood there breathing hard.

“B-Black?” He stuttered, frowning at the controls. “Was that... why did you show me...”

Lance was running before even ending the log.

-

“Black showed you *what*?”

“An airlock on the fourth floor.”

“Why-“

“I don’t know!”

Lance flung his hands up as they ran, him and Allura side by side, headed toward the site Black had showed Lance in his head. So much for one of their rare interactions, he thought bitterly. He was hoping it could be something more touching or heartfelt, but nope, *hi Lance, here’s a picture of an airlock accompanied by an overpowering feel of dread*. It felt so sudden, just like the first time Black had responded to him by landing in front of him and demanding they save Keith. Hadn’t this lion ever heard to taking it slow?

“You think they’re by that airlock?”

“I don’t know, I’ve got Hunk checking all the cameras.”

Lance and Allura raced through the halls, calling to their absent teammates.

“This is not the time for them to be playing games,” Allura muttered. “You said Black was worried?”

“I don’t know, I just saw it and felt really, really scared.”

“You think something’s wrong?”

“I hope not.”

Lance wasn’t even sure where exactly this airlock was, but with the description he’d given Allura, accompanied by weird sense of direction he’d probably acquired from Black, they were getting there. He’d barely rounded the corner when Lance stumbled to a stop at the sight before them, flinching when Allura bumped into him in her haste. *Breath. Be calm. What the hell*. Keith stood with his back to them at the end of the hallway, rigid and still, directly before an open airlock. Not completely open, the lock between them an outer space was shut, but the adjacent lock was open, allowing-

“Keith?”

“Keith,” Allura’s voice was sharp and fierce. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Lance’s heart was beating up into his throat. *What the hell what the hell what the hell*. Keith stood just before the airlock, his back turned to them and dragging Pidge along with him. Pidge, who was bleeding from a gash on her head, and unconscious. Bloody fingers gripped her wrists, dragging her roughly into the airlock, beside Coran, who also lay unconscious on the floor. Lance made a choked noise as he lurched forward, darting toward them. Then Keith turned and he stopped as if

hit by an invisible wall. He heard Allura gasp behind him, while his own heart skipped a beat or two.

“K-Keith?”

Vacant eyes stared back at him. Keith’s expression was so still someone may as well have painted it on. *Oh my god. His eyes.* Keith’s irises were stark white, while the normally white sclera had turned a murky black. It was as if the colours had been inverted, all the colour of his iris bleeding out to fill his eye. Lance stumbled back, shocked.

“What the hell,” he breathed, instinctively reaching for his bayard but finding it wasn’t there.

Keith, or what *looked* like Keith, turned to him fully, momentarily distracted from- Lance’s stomach flipped. *He was going to eject Pidge and Coran into space.* Lance risked a look at the pair; Pidge’s head was bleeding profusely, and while Coran didn’t appear visibly injured, Lance wasn’t close enough to properly assess either of them. *Oh god oh god oh god.*

“You’re not Keith,” Allura hissed, as if that wasn’t obvious enough, stepping up beside Lance.

“Lance.”

Lance shivered at the sound of Keith’s voice. It was him, but it wasn’t. It sounded like he’d picked up an instrument that didn’t belong to him and was trying to play it; the same strings were plucked, but it sounded wrong, the music didn’t fit together or flow. Especially not when he was saying Lance’s name. Those eyes were seriously giving him the creeps; they looked crazed, and so unbelievably wrong.

“Who are you?” Allura spat, angry where Lance was afraid.

But Keith ignored her. Those alarming eyes shifted to Lance, burning into his soul.

“Lance,” he repeated.

Lance was just about ready to sprint away to the furthest corner of the universe and hide, except- if this wasn’t Keith, where *was* Keith? Now he was really scared. Keith released one of Pidge’s wrists to extend a hand, the angle which he held his wrist slightly off.

“Come here.”

Allura grabbed his arm, her face set in stone. “Let her go, and step away from the airlock.”

Lance panicked; Keith still had Pidge, and Coran was already inside the airlock.

“I will kill you,” said Allura. “I will not hesitate.”

The body before them cocked its head; too much, too far, its whole expression and stance was so *wrong*.

“Help.”

Lance nearly threw up at that implication.

“That’s him,” he stammered out to Allura. “That- that’s Keith, that’s his body, he’s- *shit*.”

They couldn’t kill him, they couldn’t hurt him; Lance felt like crying, this was Keith. But something was very, very wrong. Allura’s hands tightened into fists, and both of them flinched

when Keith turned toward the portal. Even though Pidge wasn't inside yet, he could shut the door and eject Coran in an instant.

"Don't!" Lance yelled, desperate to keep this things attention off their vulnerable friends.

What the hell what do I do- Keith picked up both of Pidge's wrists and dragged her another foot into the airlock.

"S-stop," Lance blurted as Allura gasped.

"They'll be gone soon anyway," said this Keith, sounding awfully similar to what Keith had been like in the cave.

Lance's heart jumped to his throat. "Please, don't."

Keith dropped Pidge, staring down at her body with indifference. On impulse, Lance took a step toward him. He *had* asked him to come forward, surely that would help. The problem with this... whatever Keith was, is that there was no way to judge body language. Everything was wrong, everything was off-putting, there wasn't any normality to any of his movements. Lance breathed slowly, shaking.

"Keith, can you hear me?"

No response, Keith didn't care at all that he'd spoken. Lance shuddered; there was blood on his fingers. The body turned once more as Lance drew closer, ignoring Allura's sharp words of warning.

"Keith," he repeated, holding out his palm in way of peace. "Keith, it's me."

"Lance. Come here."

"Lance," Allura warned.

"Allura," said Keith suddenly. "Don't move."

Lance shivered, repulsed by the threat in those words, but he and Allura both froze.

"What do you want?" He stuttered, pleading.

"Lance," said Keith. "I want Lance."

"Why do you want Lance?" Allura snarled, desperate to follow after Lance but abiding by the warning.

"Come away from the airlock," Lance tried. "I'm right here, so come here."

"Help," said Keith, throwing Lance a little off-kilter. "I want Lance."

"Then come here," said Lance, extending a hand of his own.

This was quickly becoming a back and forth battle, with Lance trying to manipulate the others desires to draw them away from their team and the airlock.

"Where are you? Where is Lance?"

Keith sounded almost afraid. This was weird, and very off-putting, because despite the fact it

obviously wasn't Keith speaking, Lance still felt a pang of pain at the way his eyebrows furrowed, similar to the real Keith's where he was frightened. His eyes, they looked blind.

"I'm right here, you can hear me. Come here."

"No, no. Come here, Lance. Help."

Lance shot a look back at Allura, who shook her head vehemently.

"Help," Keith repeated, and there was a strange tone to his voice. "Help, I want- where is Lance?"

Lance was struggling. He knew it wasn't Keith, he *knew*, but this thing still sounded afraid. And maybe it was the familiar expression that tugged his heart strings, but Lance couldn't hurt this thing.

"I think it needs our help," he said to Allura.

"*What?*"

"Lance, come here."

"I said I think its scared. It needs my help," Lance said again, despite Allura's outright shocked expression.

"Have you lost your mind? That thing has Pidge and Coran in an airlock. It's threatening to *kill them*."

"Where are you? Lance?"

Keith's voice was killing him, small and helpless, afraid.

"Lance, don't be stupid, that isn't Keith," Allura hissed.

"I know," he cried, tugging at his hair. "I know, but its scared."

"Help," echoed Keith. "Help. I want Lance. I want- help. Help me."

"What do you want?" Lance asked slowly, despite Allura's visible protests. "Come here, away from the airlock, I can help you."

But Keith just kept stuttering, growing more distressed by the second.

"Help me, help--"

"Stay away from him, Lance!" Allura warned, as Lance began to move cautiously toward Keith.

Lance ignored her, holding out a hand to the boy. "What do you want? We can help you."

Keith's hands hung loosely by his side, Pidge forgotten on the floor in front of him. Those eyes were still so wrong and unsettling, but his expression made it look like he was in pain.

"I want, h..."

"It's okay," Lance said, moving closer.

There were only a few feet of space between them now, and his eyes were more alarming than ever.

“Don’t hurt anyone, don’t hurt them, and I can help you.”

“Lance,” Allura tried in vain, still unwilling to move lest the action cause this thing to hurt Keith.

They stood before each other, blue eyes meeting white. Lance still had his palm raised, and slowly, ever so slowly, Keith began to raise his injured hand. The cut was bloody, ringed by black skin. Timidly, Keith outstretched his palm until his hand met Lance’s, pressed together, curiously almost. White eyes ringed with black studied the space their hands met, fascinated by Keith’s pale fingers reaching just a little short of Lance’s. Lance did his best not to flinch as Keith’s other hand reached for his face, landing gently, if not awkwardly, on his cheek.

“Lance,” Allura, repeated, sounding frightened.

“Lance.”

The way Keith said his name sounded like relief.

“We can help you,” said Lance. “What do you want?”

Those eyes flickered across Lance’s face, just watching him for a long time. Like the reflection of the moon on a murky ocean, one glowing orb in a sea of dark sky and water. Lance didn’t dare pull away, letting this Keith take in all the details of his face.

“I want you to look at him,” Keith began, and Lance held his breath as the boy leaned closer.

There was barely any space between their faces, and Lance could do nothing but stare at those stark white eyes, feeling Keith’s warm breath on his skin.

“I want you to look at him, and see my eyes.”

Lance frowned. The hold on his hand and jaw were growing a little tighter, and he tried to calm the panic rising in his chest.

“I want you to hurt him,” the thing inside of Keith continued, obviously referring to his vessel.

Lance grimaced, trying to pull away, but now the hold was too tight. *Shit.*

“Help me,” said Keith, “help me hurt you.”

Lance’s recollection of the next three seconds was pretty poor. He knew he’d tried to grab Keith to restrain him, but that had pretty obviously failed. Whatever was inside Keith had shoved him back hard, and Lance fell to the floor after tripping over Pidge. Allura ran forward just as Keith stepped back, smashing a fist into the airlocks panel before throwing himself inside beside Coran. The inner doors slammed shut, and Lance heard the distinct sound of a count down starting up.

“NO-“

He leapt to his feet as Allura screamed, their white-haired leader shoving past him and lunging for the panel. Keith stared back at them through the glass, he and Coran trapped inside the airlock with the timer reading fifteen seconds.

“Keith!”

“It’s not opening!” Allura screamed, hysterical, beating her fists against the airlock’s controls, which Keith had effectively smashed before throwing himself inside.

This thing was making him kill himself and Coran. And Lance had tried to help it.

“Stop!” He yelled. “Open it!”

There was no way Keith could now, even if he wanted to.

“*Eleven,*” said the timer. “*Ten.*”

Allura just screamed, throwing herself at the doors and trying to pry them open by hand. Lance stared, dumbstruck, at Pidge’s unconscious and bloody body at his feet, at Allura tearing at the airlock, at Coran asleep inside, at Keith staring straight back at him through the glass. He was saying something, one sentence over and over again, but Lance couldn’t hear. Suddenly it didn’t matter how he lost Keith. In a crash, underground, in a fight, in this airlock... it didn’t matter how or which was more awful, because he couldn’t lose Keith at all.

“*Six. Five.*”

Allura wailed, almost collapsing before picking herself up and digging her fingers into the door, calling to Coran. Keith was still saying the same thing, over and over. Lance’s vision swam, panic searing his nerves; *It’s coming for you.* That’s what he was saying. *It’s coming.*

“*Three.*”

Allura tried for the panel on last time, hitting the button uselessly. *Stop this stop this stop-* Lance shoved her aside, focusing on all his fear, all the hurt, on Keith afraid and alone and *dead-* and slammed his hand into the panel. He didn’t see the spark, but felt it, the electricity ripping through his veins. The countdown cut off abruptly, a red light flickering to life above them indicating a power overload to the airlock. Allura sobbed when the outer doors stayed locked in place, taking hold of the inner doors and finally managing to pry them apart now that the system was dead. Lance stared at his hands; they were shaking. Keith’s voice hit him as soon as Allura created a gap in the door.

“-for you, It’s coming for you, It’s coming... coming for you.”

Lance helped Allura force the door open, the latter ready for a fight. But Keith was fading out, his sentences shortening and slurring, eyes drooping, body swaying, the white in his eyes dispersing. Allura went straight for Coran, leaving Lance to catch Keith as he fell. He only half made it, leaving them both in a crumpled heap on the floor, Keith’s limbs splayed out around him and shaking loosely. Lance pulled his head gingerly into his lap as Keith’s eyelids fluttered, a weak groan surpassing his lips as his head rolled side to side.

“Keith?”

Lance caught hold of his wrists as they hit weakly at the air, reeling them in, his other hand tangling in Keith’s hair, brushing it gently away from his forehead.

“Keith?”

The boy’s eyes opened briefly, and Lance nearly sobbed when he noted they were back to their usual colour. Keith seemed dreadfully confused, writhing about on the floor as if trying to fight someone off him.

“Hey, hey, its alright. It’s me, It’s Lance, I’ve got you.”

Keith clamed down slowly as Lance kept trailing fingers through his hair, soothing cold touches

over his forehead and whispering quiet reassurances. When Lance looked up, Coran was beside them rubbing his head groggily, and Allura was kneeling beside Pidge. She locked eyes with Lance, sharing his thoughts.

“Lance?” Keith mumbled, voice so slurred it was barely decipherable.

“I’m here,” he soothed, as Keith blinked blearily up at him. “You’re okay, we’re all okay.”

At least, he *hoped* Pidge was okay. As if reading his mind again, Allura nodded, scooping up the youngest paladin into her arms.

“Med-bay,” she said. “Now.”

Chapter Notes

THANKS ALL YOU AWESOMES DUDES FOR READING!! all the theories and freak outs from last chapter were so great, thank you so much guys for all your support you are TOO AWESOME FOR WORDS <3

shorter chapter but more soon!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

“Just hold still, it’ll be over in a minute.”

Keith squirmed as Coran injected the needle’s substance into his arm, grimacing.

“There we are,” said their advisor happily, pulling the emptied needle gingerly out. “Now can I-“

Keith slapped a hand over the dot of blood left from the injection before Coran could come at him with a colourful plaster that looked like something out’ ve the third grade vaccination day kit at Altean primary school.

“There,” said Allura, drawing their attention to the screen hovering over the bed in the med-bay. “You can see it already.”

From the way they were all gathered around Keith on the bed, it looked a little like they were awaiting the result of one of Allura’s ultrasounds... but no, no babies here, Lance thought dismally. Just whatever the disgusting black substance creeping through Keith’s bloodstream was.

“What the actual hell?” Lance said, before realising that probably wasn’t the right thing to say to comfort Keith.

Following Allura’s instruction, they’d carted everyone into the med-bay immediately following the incident with the airlock and apparent case of demonic possession. Coran had come to just fine, and was now the one performing the medical examination on Keith. Pidge had been less fortunate; the girl lay on a bed a little way away, a bandage around her head and an Altean medicine in her veins. Coran insisted they not use the healing pods for minor injuries, and fortunately for Pidge, although she was still asleep, her head injury was not critical. They hadn’t quite managed to convince Keith of that.

“What?” Said boy snapped, practically shaking from the tension in his shoulders. “What can you see?”

“Sit still,” Coran repeated for the twenty-fifth time, pushing his chest back.

“Well can you hurry up so we can- so I- this isn’t safe. I need to-“

“We’re not tying you down,” Hunk said, frowning. “You’re not gonna hurt anyone.”

“I just *did*! I nearly killed you, Pidge is unconscious-“

“Which we have already discussed, and know it was not you who did it,” Allura interrupted sternly. “Now please sit still, so we can figure out what *did* do it.”

Keith was breathing erratically in his fit of anger, not at them, but at himself. He was terrified of himself, of what he’d done. Lance caught the boy’s eyes flitting to Pidge again, and he swallowed uncomfortably. He didn’t think he’d ever seen Keith this close to crying.

“I just- I don’t...”

“Its okay, we’re all okay now,” Lance said softly.

He reached for Keith’s hand, trying the same tactic the red paladin used to calm him down, but Keith snatched his hand away just as their fingers brushed. This was bad.

“*Okay*? I nearly killed-“

“Look at this,” Allura said, cutting Keith’s retort short.

She jabbed her finger into the screen, at the projection, which showed the readings from the liquid injected into Keith’s blood. The picture was creating a loose image of his body, or rather just his veins. It was very realistic; Lance could follow the red blood pumping through his body. Which made the appearance of earthy black even stranger.

“What is that?” Keith asked curtly, failing to keep the tremble out of his voice.

God, he sounded so angry. Lance wished he knew how to calm him down.

“This certainly explains it,” Coran said, without explaining, irritating Keith even further.

“There is a presence in your body that doesn’t belong to you,” Allura said, before Keith actually exploded.

“You mean he was *actually* possessed?” Hunk blurted.

“Oh, no,” said Coran, and Keith’s shoulder’s relaxed minutely. “He’s still possessed.”

“*What*?”

Hunk slapped a hand onto Keith’s shoulder to keep him seated.

“Wow, calm down.”

“Would you all stop telling me to calm down? I nearly killed you!”

“It wasn’t you,” Lance insisted.

“Just because I wasn’t in control doesn’t mean it wasn’t me.”

“One problem at a time please,” said Allura. “I believe you may have contracted this in the cave.”

“So one can *contract* possession now,” Lance muttered.

“What did I... I don’t understand.”

“Look,” said Allura, tracing her finger over the screen as she spoke. “These strips of black, they’re

corrupted blood cells. Something's in your blood; think of it as a disease. When we lost contact with you underground for a minute, you must've somehow had this enter your system. That cut on your hand, it... What happened during that minute?"

"Nothing!" Keith insisted hysterically. "I tripped!"

"It didn't take you a full minute to trip and fall over."

"But..." Keith's lip trembled. "I don't understand."

"Diseases generally don't do that to your eyes and make you attack your teammates," Hunk said sceptically. "Oh, or threaten Lance specifically."

Keith met Lance's eye guiltily, and he wished for the hundredth time the boy would just listen to him and accept it wasn't at all his fault. That look was killing Lance.

"No," said Allura. "They don't. This is different. It... it could be a super virus. God knows what was in those vile caverns. Or it could-" she hesitated, frowning. "It could be what we saw aboard the recovered ship. Whatever life force brought those bodies to life has... its infected you."

For a few tense seconds no one dared to speak.

"What does that mean?" Lance blurted, the exact same moment Keith snarled, "*get it out.*"

"I'm afraid I don't know what this means for Keith," Allura said. "As for getting it out..."

"I don't care what you have to do to me," Keith insisted, his eyes fiery. "Just kill it."

Coran cleared his throat, drawing attention to himself. "There isn't a way. Not that I know of."

"What do you mean *isn't a way*," Keith snapped. "You guys have a cure for everything. Just chuck me in a healing pod, or, or... I don't care, but this is *dangerous*."

"Coran is right," Allura said solemnly. "We don't even know what this thing is, a disease or some alien life form capable of possession."

"What if it hurts him?" Lance said, louder than he meant to. "This... it threatened to kill him."

"I threatened to kill you!"

"No," Lance snapped, sick of Keith blaming himself. "The thing inside you, hurting *you*, threatened to kill us."

"How did this happen?" Keith said suddenly, dropping his head into his hands.

"It is unfortunate," Coran remarked.

"We will find a way to cure it," Allura assured him, though she didn't look so sure. "If it hasn't hurt you yet, we can safely as-"

"It tried to kill Pidge and Coran! I would've killed Lance and you too, and Hunk, if I had the chance. I don't give a fuck what it does to me, it's not safe for me to be around you!"

"*You* are not a threat," Lance insisted, then glanced at the others upon receiving less vocal support than he'd expected.

“Well...” said Hunk.

“He’s not!” Lance thrust a hand in Keith’s direction. “That thing hurt him just as much as it hurt us!”

“You’re right,” said Allura. “Keith, this wasn’t your fault. We have no guarantee it will happen again-“

“It could definitely-“

“Listen. We are going to monitor this, keep an eye on it. But under no circumstances will you be isolated. You’re in danger too, its essential we look out for each other.”

Lance relaxed after hearing Allura say that, despite the fact Keith’s face was filled with conflict.

“I don’t want to hurt-“

“*Mierda*, Keith, *you’re* the one who’s possessed. We should be worrying what it might do to *you*.”

“We should be worrying about how to kill it,” Keith hissed, stubborn as ever. “What is it?”

“We don’t know,” Allura said, again.

“Then how can you possibly think its safe for me to be around you?”

“It’s not safe, Keith. I admit it’s a danger. But right now, you are you. You overcame that, whatever it was. Please, stop giving yourself hell over this.”

“There has to be more,” Keith snapped. “There must be more we can do.”

“Suppressants,” said Coran suddenly.

Everyone turned to him, Keith the quickest, and he shared a worrisome look with Allura.

“We have suppressants capable of stopping mutations within the blood. But-“

“Perfect,” said Keith. “Give me those.”

Allura sighed. “While those suppressants may well be capable of ridding you of this... thing, they’re Altean, not suitable for human-“

“Good thing I’m not fully human.”

“Keith, stop,” said Lance. “Don’t put yourself in more danger-“

“It’s in me, I decide,” Keith snapped. “Coran, give me the suppressants. And get rid of it.”

-

Allura forced Lance and Hunk out of the med-bay soon after that, confining them to the hallway where they sat slumped against the wall, sick with worry.

“You think Pidge will be okay?” Hunk asked, for the seventh time that hour.

“Yes.”

“You sure?”

“Hunk, it’s a minor head injury.”

“Head injuries are-“

“Bad, I know. But Coran knows what he’s doing. She’ll be fine.”

A pause, a long one. Hunk seldom annoyed Lance, but the nervous skitter of his fingers across his knees was making the black paladin antsy.

“Do you think Keith will be okay?”

“He *is* okay.”

“Coran said he was still possessed.”

“He’s fine,” Lance snapped. “He’s going to be fine. We’ll get... we’ll get that thing out. It’s a virus, Hunk. A stupid, fucking, alien-“ Lance clamped a hand over his mouth to stop the embarrassingly sudden intake of breath, building its way up to a small sob.

Hunk arm made its way around his shoulder before he even had time to recover, pulling him in close. Lance felt nauseous, curling into his friend and seeking out whatever warmth he could.

“Hey,” Hunk whispered. “Are you okay?”

“They’ve been in there for two hours,” Lance croaked out, shuddering. “What are they doing to him?”

“He’s okay,” Hunk offered, because what else could he say? “It’s going to be okay.”

“What the hell is happening?” Lance whispered, sinking further into Hunk’s arm. “What is all this?”

Hunk sighed. “Space?”

“Fuck space.”

“I thought you liked space.”

“Not when it tries to kill my friends.”

Lance didn’t miss the tangible unease that passed over Hunk’s features.

“I thought we were gonna lose him,” he whispered. “I thought we’d lost Keith in the tunnel.”

“We didn’t.”

“But-“

“You’re terrified of them, I know. Lance...” Hunk paused, turning away and staring fixatedly at the floor.

“Allita died in that cave with you, didn’t she?”

Lance head shot up.

“Who told you that?”

"I guessed," Hunk admitted, glancing at him sadly. "You talked in your sleep, back at the Garrison. I know you hate caves, I know she died, and when we first met after you moved, you were... well, you know. Not yourself. I put two and two together..."

Lance didn't know if he wanted to cry and pull his friend into a hug or shove Hunk away in anger. He cleared his throat, pulling his knees a little closer to his body.

"Yeah. She did."

"How?"

Some may have called Hunk's bluntness rude, but Lance knew by then it was just his way of getting things across.

"I don't know."

A snuffle worried Lance's nose, which he wiped at furiously.

"She got lost, somewhere down there. We never found her body."

Hunk was silent for a long, long time.

"That's why you hate this so much? It reminds you of losing her?"

Lance nodded stiffly, frowning, his face a mask of anger that he didn't really feel.

"And after those bodies I... I can just keep picturing her like that, like Keith described."

"Hey," said Hunk firmly, nudging Lance's shoulder. "Don't."

"It's so difficult," he admitted, on a whim of air, breathless, trying not to cry. "So goddam difficult."

"Shit like that doesn't happen on Earth."

"But the shit that does happen on Earth? Could it have been much better, how she died? I want to think she fell. Jesus, Hunk, you know what's its like to spend hours f-“ Lance cut himself short with a swipe of tongue over dry lips, shaking his head in disgust. “*Fantatising* about your sisters death? Hoping she fucking fell and- and died instantly. Because if she didn't she starved, or, or died slowly. Fuck, *hoping* she died a certain way its- its so wrong. She died in pain, Hunk, she was hurting. I know it.”

Hunk didn't say anything, just tugged Lance a little closer. It felt so awful admitting those things, admitting that he would spend hours wondering how Allita died, wondering if she cried, if she hurt, if she was scared, if she felt betrayed by him. *She was just a kid exploring*, he wished he could say. *Slipped off a ledge without even realising it*. No pain, no fear; she died tragically, but as a naive child, unaware of the unimaginable terrors of this world. But Lance could feel that wasn't true.

"If there's more you want to talk-“

Hunk's offer was cut short by the doors to the med-bay sliding open. Both boys were on their feet in less than a second as Allura, Coran, and Keith appeared at the entrance. The latter was looking nervous, but significantly less riled up than earlier.

"Good news!" Said Coran, before Lance could even open his mouth. "We've suppressed it!"

“S-supressed it?” Lance stammered.

That didn’t sound bad, but it didn’t sound that great either. He glanced at Allura; she too looked pretty solemn, but confident as she lead Keith out.

“The disease, or life form, responded more violently to the suppressant than we’d expected,” said the princess. “It’s... it’s gone.”

Gone. Keith looked absolutely exhausted, and Lance had to wonder just what had happened to those two hours to really get rid of it, if it had really been worth it.

“What was it?”

“We don’t know.”

“Then how can it be safe-“

“We’ll keep Keith on heavy Altean suppressants,” Coran explained. “The disease went into shutdown at the first taste, but I recommend he stay on them for a while, just to make sure his system is clear. They might lower the capabilities of his immune system a bit, but they also control any unwanted activity within the blood stream. It stops his cells from mutating, so to speak.”

“That sounds... weird,” said Hunk.

“Oh, it is.”

“How do you feel?” Lance asked Keith, ignoring Coran’s comment.

“I’m fine,” the boy mumbled distractedly.

Clearly Keith’s mind was on other things. Lance doubted that was true, but he didn’t have time to argue, not with Allura pushing them all down the hallway.

“It’s late,” she ordered. “I want you all well rested tomorrow to help prepare something for the commemoration.”

“Wait, we’re still doing that?”

“You think we shouldn’t?” Allura challenged, physically turning Lance and Hunk toward the door.

“I mean, Keith did get possessed on that planet, so...”

“We shan’t be returning to the planet, but thank you for your concern.”

With that, Allura turned on her heel and hurried off in the opposite direction.

“Sleep. I want fresh brains for using tomorrow.”

“Ya know, it’s really obvious you’re an alien sometimes,” Lance shouted back, before following his friends down the hallway.

-

The real gravity of the situation only set in once they were back at their rooms. Lance fully expected Keith to follow him into his room, as he had every other night that week. It had become significantly less awkward after Lance had accepted that having Keith there was the only way he

could get an ounce of sleep in. But today, Keith stopped a few feet short, in front of his own room. *Huh?* Lance opted for the casual approach, trying to keep the desperate kilter out of his voice when he turned to the other, rocking back and forth on his heels.

“Uh, you want us to sleep in your room tonight?”

Keith glanced at the floor, at the door, then back at Lance, rubbing his arm sheepishly.

“No. Goodnight.”

With that, Keith opened his door, stepped inside, and shut himself in. Lance blinked, hands still shoved into his pockets, hopelessly lost. He glanced down the hall, fearing someone might see his pathetic attempt at getting Keith back. He shuffled toward Keith’s door, staring at it for a few seconds before reaching out to knock. It slid open fast, way too fast, as though Keith had been waiting just on the other side ready for him to come knocking.

“What?” Keith snapped defensively.

“Um...”

Now Lance was at a loss for words. He could see the conflict playing out on Keith’s face, as though the boy was caught between pulling him in and pushing him away.

“So, you remember how we’ve been sleeping tog- in the same bed? For a week?”

“Yes,” Keith answered bluntly.

God, did he really have to spell this out? Lance sighed exasperatedly, hands bunching nervously in his pockets.

“Are we still doing that?”

“No.”

Lance stared, trying hard to unravel Keith’s tone and expression but ultimately failing.

“Can we?”

Keith shifted, hand on the doorframe like he might close it and disappear at any second.

“No.”

Lance hated to try guilt tripping Keith into coming back to bed with him, but desperation made one do strange things. The thought of returning to his room alone, to the dark, empty bed, where he had no way of telling what he might do in his sleep... Lance stomach lurched, and he stepped abruptly closer. It stung when Keith stepped back, re-creating the space between them.

“I’m... what if I wonder off?”

When did you become this scared? Keith sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. He looked exhausted. *He only nearly died today.*

“It’s not safe.”

“Why?”

Keith frowned. "Did you forget what happened today?"

"You nearly died. On multiple occasions."

"I nearly killed Coran and Pidge," Keith said bluntly, his soft frown morphing into something angrier.

"Um, no. You were possessed, by something that tried to kill them and you too."

"I'm not arguing about this," Keith muttered. "I'm not sharing a room with you. Goodnight."

"Hold on," Lance called, jamming his foot into the threshold before Keith could slide the door shut.

This was more than just him feeling scared now; this was about helping Keith. Not that Keith would ever accept that help. If Keith didn't want to share a bed, fine, he didn't want to make him uncomfortable; but if Keith was scared of himself-

"I think it's safer for both of us."

"What?" Keith scoffed. "Sharing a bed? That's hardly a fool proof tactic."

Lance didn't like the tone of his voice; it sounded aggressive. Keith got aggressive when he was scared. The black paladin planted hands on hips, staring pointedly at Keith.

"You didn't have such a problem with it a week ago."

"I wasn't *possessed* a week ago."

"It happened once, Keith. You need to recover, not push yourself away. If you don't want to share a room, I don't mind. But if something's wrong, you can talk to me. If you're scared-"

"I'm not scared!"

"-I can help."

"You can't do shit," Keith snapped, ignoring the way Lance flinched. "Look what happened earlier."

"Oh, but did you see everything that happened earlier?" Lance said, his voice also taking on a cooler tone.

Why did they always resort back to this?

"You did," he insisted, watching the flicker of interest in Keith's eyes. "I know you watched the camera recording, cause you wanted to see what you did. You saw what I did too, didn't you? I stopped the airlock opening by *touching* it."

"You broke it," Keith insisted angrily, subtly trying to slide the door shut but finding it blocked by Lance's foot.

"You'd already broken it."

"Then that's why it didn't open--"

"That's bullshit, Keith, you know it is. It wasn't my fucking suit. It's the same thing that happened

with you and me in that cave-“

“You punched an airlock and it broke, Lance. Not that surprising, you’ve been trained to punch things.”

“Stop ignoring it,” Lance hissed. “I thought you were meant to be the instinctive one. Now I’m telling you, something is wrong.”

“I was fucking possessed,” Keith bit out. “That’s what’s wrong. Nothing that can’t be fixed by throwing me out an airlock.”

Lance expression darkened, storm clouds drawing in over his usually calm eyes.

“It’s not a joke, Kogane.”

“I wasn’t joking,” Keith muttered, seemingly giving up on the idea of sleeping all together as he tried to elbow past Lance. “I’m going to the training deck.”

Lance’s arm shot out before he’d even really thought the action through, trapping Keith inside. He could almost *feel* the heat behind the look Keith gave him, grinding his teeth together.

“Move.”

“You need to *rest*.”

“*Move*.”

“No. What did you see today?”

Keith’s expression morphed into one of disgust. “Why are you being like this?”

“Because something is wrong. What did you see in the pit?”

“Dead bodies. Pretty fucking sure I described them to you, Lance.”

“Not what I meant.”

Keith glared, refusing to back down. His jaw tightened, arms folded tightly over his chest as if he was refraining from smacking Lance out the way.

“I tripped, I fell, I cut my hand.”

“You were out for a full minute.”

“What are you expecting me to say, Lance? I don’t know what happened, but I’d say I was probably getting possessed.”

“Why’d you untie yourself?”

“I don’t know!” Keith insisted angrily. “I wanted to see more.”

“You promised-“

“You have *no* idea, Lance, what it was like down there. You have no idea what it was like seeing those people. So can you please just- drop it.”

“No! Something’s wrong, Keith, can’t you feel it?”

“No.”

“What about the fucking wormhole?” Lance all but yelled, resisting the urge to grab Keith’s arm.

“*Something’s* wrong, yes. But I don’t get why you’re acting like this.”

“I am worried about us, I’m worried about this team. And I-I’m worried about what I might do. Because something is wrong with me,” Lance said slowly, holding Keith’s gaze.

“Maybe its puberty,” the other muttered.

“I’m being serious,” Lance said, surprised by how serious he really did sound. “That’s rare for me. But I’m being serious. What happened with you and me in the cave wasn’t a malfunction of my suit. And neither was that incident with the airlock. And you want to know when you came back to us on the comms today? It was only after I-“

“You’re nineteen fucking years old, Lance,” Keith snapped suddenly, fiercely. “You really need to hold someone’s hand to fall asleep?”

“This isn’t about-“

“You’re the black paladin for Christ’s sake! Go sleep with the light on if you’re that scared of the dark,” Keith spat as Lance drew back suddenly. “I don’t want to share your bed, I don’t want to *hold your hand*, and I don’t need you bothering me with stupid questions. The black paladin should be able to do things for themselves. You know, there might be a reason Black’s not responding to you.”

The last chord of Keith’s voice rung in the air like a bell, resonating around them. Lance’s fingers twitched, heart beating fast. His lips parted slightly, partially in shock, breathing fast, fighting back the burning heat behind his eyes. Keith kept very still, not even having the courtesy to avert his eyes. His face was devoid of emotion, and Lance could feel the painful stutter in his chest. *A reason*. He smirked weakly, causing Keith to frown, darks locks slipping over his eyes. Pushing through the pressure weighing down his chest, Lance took a few long steps back. Keith watched him go, breathing faster and faster as if he might cry himself.

“Sleep well,” Lance said coldly, with a small flick of his hand.

Keith slammed his door shut before Lance even turned around, his feet dragging along the floor back to his room.

Chapter End Notes

im sorryyyyyyyyyyy

ok so apparently that note saying it'll all go to shit soon appears at the end of EVERY chapter, which I did not know or intend bc I can't use this site... but like... I guess thats true??

Chapter Notes

WHOSE DARN EXCITED FOR SEASON 3!!!!

Thank you all so much for your nice comments and for reading <3 <3 <3 <3

BASICALLY obviously this is gonna differ lots from details revealed in season 3 (ie finding out Lance is the youngest siblings - FRICKIN GREAT THAT - but obviously its different in this story so ya)

also I know I should be using Altean measurements of time but... I cannot keep track of that so.... here we go

-

Lance lay in bed for hours after leaving Keith to go back to his own room, tossing and turning and unable to fall asleep. He ended up staring at the ceiling, hot tears burning his eyes and a painful pressure on his chest. Whether it was from fear, or yelling at Keith, or hearing the cruel things Keith had said to him, he didn't know. It was likely a combination of all the factors that left Lance an emotional wreck, tired and hopeless and letting the tears flow freely. He could still feel Keith's weight in his arms, the reassuring press of his head against Lance's chest in the decontamination chamber, listening to his heartbeat. He'd thought that... Lance didn't know what he'd thought. *That Keith liked you?* Lance's chest hurt as he heaved in a breath of air; it tasted stale. He knew he was imagining it, but without Keith there, all his fears were amplified. The walls turned easily to mud, the sheets trapped and held him down, and the air tasted like dirt.

You're the black paladin for Christ's sake! Lance sniffled. It didn't feel like it. He felt like a stupid, scared child. *Go sleep with the light on if you're that scared of the dark.* He'd left the light off, mostly just to spite Keith. He regretted it now though, but felt too paralysed with fear to go for the switch. *You know, there might be a reason Black's not responding to you.* That hurt enough on its own, but the fact that Keith had said it... Lance felt like a coward. Keith thought he was a coward, that he was being stupid. It hurt, knowing Keith didn't believe him, knowing Keith thought that of him. Lance thought in a naïve way the pair might have been finally getting somewhere. *I don't want you I don't want you I don't want you.* More tears slipped down his cheeks as he accepted the facts; he liked Keith. He thought Keith liked him. *He doesn't.* And the things he'd said, they sounded the shit Iverson would berate Lance for. Sure, Keith and him argued, but he'd never gone for the things he *knew* Lance was insecure about. The fact that he meant that little to Keith... Lance swallowed, throat hurting. It hurt a lot more than the fear.

You seriously thought he liked you? Lance squeezed his eyes shut, lungs stuttering. Yes. Keith thought he was an unworthy leader, probably an unworthy person in general now. Someone who couldn't even protect himself, let alone the team. And as much as Lance tried to fight it, tried to tell himself he could be a braver person who didn't need someone there, watching over him as he slept, he just couldn't. The darkness drew in, and he was terrified. The thought of wondering back into the cave in his sleep drove him to crying, twisting and turning and afraid of drifting off. But he would; he would sleep, because he wasn't useless. The angry, bitter, injured part of him wanted to prove Keith wrong. Of course he could sleep by himself. Lance tugged the blanket over him,

almost covering his head.

Keith's bandana was still around his wrist. *Don't die*. Death had always frightened him, the thought of dying in that cave- *don't die. I can't do it*. Grimacing, Lance carefully undid the bandana from around his wrist. Instead of discarding it, he wrapped it around a section of the bed frame near his head. He tied the remaining ends back around his wrist, trapping it against the frame, sniffing and trying to keep quiet. *Don't die*. It was a near to useless tether, but if he moved perhaps the slight resistance would be enough to wake him up. He tried to put on a brave face, tried to calm his mind, tried to stop the tears. Lance tried calling to the black lion, he didn't know what for. *Go to sleep. Don't sleep. Don't die. Go to sleep*. He sobbed a little into his arm, wrapping his free hand around the bandana. It was useless to try, and it was the wrong course of action, but without Black and without Keith and without anyone, he only had one last thing left to try.

"Blue," he whispered. "Blue, please don't let me die. P-please. I miss you, I'm sorry, I miss you. I'm sorry Blue. Don't let me die."

Lance cried harder, scared and alone and hurt by Keith's words.

"Something's wrong with me, Blue."

-

The next morning was possibly one of the worst Lance had experienced aboard the castle. He hadn't died, which he did consider a big plus, but he hadn't slept well either. Neither, apparently, had Keith.

"Nice day today, isn't it," said Coran, lumping a blob of goo onto his plate.

"A artificial climate will do that for you," mumbled Allura, looking sick to her stomach.

It wasn't even eight in the morning, and Lance already regretted existing. His eyes felt puffy from crying, and he seriously hoped no one else noticed. Especially Keith. Speaking of Keith, the other boy hadn't touched his breakfast. A storm cloud hung over his head, and Lance doubted he'd slept at all. *Good. No, not good. Is he okay? Shut up, he's being a dick again. But is he okay?* Despite last night's mess of thoughts, Lance was determined to start the day fresh. Keith had snapped at him, that didn't mean their friendship was over. Yesterday had been awful for a whole number of reasons; he reckoned they could talk it out. At least he had, until he witnessed the interaction between Keith and Pidge.

The latter was back to her healthy self, but her awakening wasn't nearly as joyous as it should have been, not when everyone else was in such a foul mood. Lance hugged Pidge half to death when she woke a few hours prior, but there was something lacking. Lance didn't see or hear whatever brief exchange was shared between the red and green paladin, but he doubted it could've gone too well. Keith deliberately sat away from his usual spot beside Pidge, opting for a spot next to Hunk instead. The atmosphere was tense, and Lance hated to think it was solely he and Keith's dispute causing it. *It's because of you, idiot. It's cause you're usually always talking*.

"The, uh, the space goo's pretty good today," said Hunk, trying to break the silence. "T-thanks Coran."

"You're very welcome, lad."

"Any ideas for the commemoration yet?" Allura tried.

She didn't look much in the mood for conversation herself, probably feeling sick. Still, she was

putting in an effort, so Lance should at least try.

“Sorry princess, nothing yet.”

Allura smiled weakly at him, and for a moment the weight lifted from Lance’s shoulders. Then-

“I’ve been thinking of baby names,” Allura continued, her smile a little more genuine. “Keith, since you’re the baby’s uncle, do you have any ideas?”

Keith pushed at a bit of food goo with his spoon, glaring at the green substance. “I’m not actually the uncle.”

“Oh, come now,” Allura hummed. “Of course you are.”

“No,” said Keith more forcefully, looking up. “I’m not.”

That caught Lance’s attention. He glanced up just as Allura’s smile faltered.

“Well,” she said, determined to remain in good spirits. “You’re still allowed to think of names.”

Keith shrugged nonchalantly, ignoring the way Allura’s expression slowly but surely shifted into something sadder. Lance frowned; sure, Keith and he weren’t on good terms that morning, and perhaps he was in a bad mood, but it was rare for someone to ignore Allura.

“You thinking of Earth or Altean names?” Hunk began, but was swiftly cut off by Keith.

“Are you sure we should be thinking of baby names?”

Lance froze, staring at Keith. Allura was frowning, hands folded neatly under her chin. Keith met her eye fearlessly, raising a brow as if expecting an answer.

“What does that mean?” Allura asked, a hint of confusion in her tone.

Keith didn’t answer, just dropped her gaze and went to fiddling with a strap on his glove.

“What does that mean?” Allura repeated, louder.

“It means, do you think it’s a good idea to be thinking of baby names?”

Pidge dropped her spoon, staring at her friend in shock.

“Keith,” she hissed, picking up on what he meant long before the others.

“What?” The boy asked, oblivious.

Lance could only stare, horrified.

“Keith,” he said. “What does that mean?”

Keith met Lance’s eye, and for a second the malicious look about him wavered. Then Keith’s expression hardened.

“You get attached to things once you name them. I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

Lance’s jaw dropped. The table fell completely silent, and Lance couldn’t even bring himself to look at Allura. He was speechless, watching Keith stand abruptly, a stunned Hunk beside him.

"I'm going to go train," he said, and without another word, walked from the room.

Lance could feel the shock of each and every person, resonating like a loose chord, plucked ugly and skew by Keith's words. Pidge was the first to react, her watery eyes settling on Lance, a look of horror marring her features. Her mouth hung open, twisted painfully into a grimace, a betrayal. She looked angry, and hurt. The chair screeched as she stood up, and after casting one more sympathetic look in Allura's general direction, she took off after Keith, her hands balled into fists. Lance made to follow a second later, but as soon as he stood, Allura spoke up.

"Let them go."

Cautiously, Lance glanced at her. Allura was staring straight ahead, hands folded tightly on the table and her expression one of disbelief.

"The suppressants--"

"The suppressants do not affect one's mood."

Silence. Lance could see her thinking, her quiet way of holding it together. Hunk and Coran looked equally at a loss for words.

"He wasn't... he didn't mean that," Lance said. "He's just scared."

Allura hummed, flashes of anger and hurt in her eyes.

"Keith just doesn't know how to handle this, you know?" Hunk frowned softly, trying to disperse the tension. "He's not used to babies or family."

Lance ignored how that had nothing to do with Keith speculating something might happen to Allura's baby before it was even born.

"We've still got like, seven months to get used to it," said Lance, opting for his usual cheeriness. "I'm sure he'll adjust."

Allura's expression changed, but it wasn't the relief he'd been hoping for. "Seven months? More like five."

"*Five*? I thought you were only a month in when you told me!"

"I was," Allura said, matter-of-factly. "How long did you think I'd be pregnant for?"

"Uh, nine months?"

Allura shook her head, mildly amused. "Altean pregnancies last seven months. Is it not so on Earth?"

"No! Humans are nine months."

"Why are Alteans better at everything," mumbled Hunk.

"Is this a problem?" Allura asked, wary of Lance's shocked expression.

"No," he said quickly, snapping his mouth shut. "No, not at all. That's just... a baby. Two months before I was expecting a baby."

Allura laughed. Lance hadn't expected it, not after what Keith had said, so it was a welcomed

relief.

“I guess you’ll have to think of baby names a bit quicker then.”

-

When they all gathered again later that afternoon to discuss plans for a commemoration for the Altean bodies down on the planet, Lance kept a keen eye out for Keith. He walked into the room behind Pidge, but the two friends didn’t look nearly on good terms. Pidge’s eyes were red, her arms folded and a scowl on her face. Had... had Keith made her *cry*? Lance stared openly at the pair, who quickly walked to opposite ends of the room. *Weird*. Usually Pidge and Keith were side by side in these things, given their opinions usually matched. Keith was scowling too, though he looked less upset, and just moody.

“Pidge,” said Coran, before Lance could approach her to ask what had happened. “Could you lend a hand?”

The youngest paladin forced a neutral veil over her face as she went to help Coran on the computer.

“I have some ideas regarding the commemoration,” Allura began, back to her cheery self.

Apparently Lance’s lack of understanding of the Altean reproductive system was something to be laughed at. He refused to take classes, despite Coran offering.

“But before we begin that, I’m afraid we have a more serious task to attend to.”

Lance resisted groaning, trying to look enthused about paying respects to a planet full of dead people that had almost killed him and Keith.

“As awful as the notion is, it’s possible the Dark Planet isn’t the only one in this system. If... if there were other planets with other populations, the proximity could mean their inhabitants were affected too.”

That caught Lance’s attention. When he glanced at Allura, she was already looking at him. They *were* co-leaders, he remembered.

“You want to scan for other planets?”

“Yes.”

Lance shifted from foot to foot. Keith was staring at him. *Stop staring*. “And if we do find others?”

Allura sighed. “I don’t know. I suppose we’ll have to investigate them.”

“No one is setting foot on any other planet in this system,” said Lance firmly. “On anything, in fact. If we’re in this system, we’re in the castle.”

“That seems excessive.”

Lance swung around slowly as Keith spoke, raising a brow in anticipation of the look he knew Keith would be giving him. *Stupid, stubborn, argumentative*. Keith looked smug, like he knew Lance would go for the bait. He shouldn’t.

“Oh yeah?”

He did.

“Yeah.”

“Well Keith, good thing its up to the *black* paladin to decide these things, huh?”

“Lance,” Allura scolded.

“Sorry princess,” he said, eyes on Keith.

“As I was saying,” Allura muttered, eyeing the pair suspiciously, “its important we find out where the other planets stand. Given how isolated this system is, it’s likely there’s nothing. But I would like us to check. Then... well, I suppose we’ll decide the next course of action from there.”

That wasn’t hard to agree on.

“Alright,” said Lance. “So how do we...”

“Already on it,” said Pidge, tapping away at her computer.

“My tiny techie genius,” Lance said, wondering over to peer over she shoulder as she worked.

Words of encouragement didn’t seem to do much to lighten her mood though. Lance wondered what Keith had said. He couldn’t help feel a twinge of annoyance at the boy. He’d insulted Lance, fine. But Pidge and Allura? It was unnecessary, it was cruel, and very, very unlike him. Keith could be brutally honest and hot-headed, but he wasn’t unkind. Lance wondered if the aftermath of the possession had left him feeling off. Maybe he should cut Keith some slack.

“This should only take a minute,” Pidge informed, as Hunk saddled up beside Lance to monitor her progress.

Coran helped, fingers skimming over the castles controls. Just as Pidge had said, the scan was over in a minute, and they were left staring at a screen of results Lance didn’t really understand.

“Well?”

“Um...” Pidge tapped at the screen. “Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes there’s something.”

“Oh.”

They all pushed closer, Allura moving to the front. Naïve as it may have sounded, Lance hadn’t really expected them to pick up on anything. This system just seemed too distant and alone to have much in the way of other planetary bodies.

“Is it a planet?”

“Uh, I guess.”

“You guess?”

“It’s either that or a Weblum, dude.”

“Please not a Weblum,” whispered Hunk.

“Where is it?” Allura inquired, eyes skimming the screen.

“Uh... well. It’s big... probably a slow orbit... so, not that far, but, like, far.”

“That’s... very unspecific,” said Hunk.

“I’ve *just* discovered it,” Pidge exclaimed.

“What can you tell us about it,” Allura insisted. “Is it within the habitable zone?”

“I’m not sure the usual habitable factors count in this system,” Lance muttered.

Pidge sighed heavily. Lance couldn’t agree more.

“I’m gathering around a fifty-thousand kilometre diameter. Picture Neptune,” she muttered, spying the question on Lance’s lips. “Whether its within the habitable zone... I don’t think so. Our devious, dark, and dwarfish planet down there is. But its got a small eccentricity, and is barely over point zero three astronomical units from the sun so...”

“So...” Lance prompted.

Usually he disliked listening to Pidge rattle on about the details regarding each planet they visited, but this time he felt he should be paying attention.

“That’s super close. The Dark Planet down there orbits in just six days. Red dwarf’s are small and cold, this one especially so. Now I don’t know about this planet’s orbit; if it’s elliptical as hell and is currently at its aphelion-“

“English.”

“If it’s currently at its furthest point from the star, then... still no. It’s too far. Alteans might be tough as nails, but no ones surviving thirty astronomical units from a red dwarf.”

“That’s...”

“Uh, four and a half billion kilometres. Yeah.”

“No life, no death,” Hunk announced happily.

“It’s probably gas,” said Pidge. “Oh, maybe it’s an ice giant!”

“Or maybe its another grave yard for hundreds upon thousands of dead Alteans.”

The excitement vanished from Pidge’s face the instant Keith spoke.

“Why?” Said Lance, turning on him. “Why say that?”

“What? It’s true.”

“It’s not even habitable-“

“I doubt that stopped Alteans living there. Their technology is completely capable. Isn’t that right, Allura?”

Allura looked on the verge of picking Keith up and chucking him all thirty astronomical units out into space to find out for himself.

“My species is incredibly advanced,” she admitted sternly. “But I highly doubt they would have settled on such a distant world.”

“But it’s a possibility?”

There was no reply.

“What?” Keith snapped, glaring back at the team and their solemn expressions. “I thought you wanted to find something?”

“Why would we *want* to find dead Alteans?” Pidge asked.

“What other kind of Alteans would you find-“

“Time out,” Lance called, cutting Keith short.

In two long strides he’d closed the space between them, grabbing Keith by the arm and marching them swiftly toward the door.

“Pidge, find out whatever you can about that planet,” he called, well aware of the outraged look Allura sent after Keith. “We’ll be back in a minute.”

The second they were out in the hall, doors shut behind them, Lance dropped Keith’s arm as if it burned.

“What the hell?” He yelled, all the shock and outrage and confusion spilling out in those three words.

Keith didn’t even flinch.

“What?”

“Don’t *what*- why did you say that? Why have you said *any* of what you did today? O-or last night?”

Keith raised a brow, so detached and indifferent Lance wanted to slap him. “You don’t like honesty?”

“That’s not honest,” Lance spat. “That’s cruel. It’s mean. I thought you were better than that. Scaring Allura about her baby? What the hell man, that’s- I can’t believe you did that.”

“Is there a reason you’re-“

“You made Pidge cry,” Lance snapped, not letting Keith throw him off course. “You insulted Allura, y-you said terrible things about her species, you hurt her.”

You hurt me.

“So what’s this all about, hm? Cause you sure aren’t acting like the Keith I know.”

“The *Keith you know*,” Keith scoffed. “And what do you know, Lance?”

“I know you care about Pidge. I know you have more respect for Allura than any one else in this freaking universe. And I *know* you care about that baby, Keith.”

“And you?” Asked Keith, making him frown. “What to you think I think of you?”

Lance shook his head, “that’s not what this-“

“Isn’t it? Are you sure?”

Lance didn’t like his tone. It was aggressive, and mean, and Lance didn’t trust the things it might say.

“Sure this isn’t just cause I hurt your feelings?”

“You didn’t hurt my feelings-“

“Oh really? Sleep well, Lance?”

“About as well as you did,” he snapped, shutting Keith up for a second.

“Did I do something?” Lance continued, forcing himself not to loose it with Keith, to try and solve whatever was up before being pushed into a fight. “Or is... is something up with you? Are you feeling bad about what happened, about the possession, or-“

“You scared of me?”

“*What?* No!”

“Then stop-“

“You’re acting like a real piece of shit,” Lance snapped.

Keith stopped, staring at him.

“A real pain in the ass. So if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were still pretty fucking upset.”

“I’m not,” Keith hissed.

“What happened on that planet and what happened to you was terrible. And I can’t see any other reason for you to be behaving like this, so if you could just tell me what the matter is-“

“So you can what, Lance? If any one needs help, it’s you. You’re the one who breaks down crying every other second.”

“I’m just trying to understand what’s wrong, Keith! Because clearly something is!”

“Want to know what’s wrong?” Keith sneered, leaning closer. “What’s wrong is you leading this group. What’s wrong is that we’re still missing Shiro. What’s wrong is that curiously enough, *you’re* the only one who’s stuck here in this system. Well, you and Allura. And yet, we all stay here.”

Lance wished he wasn’t looking at Keith’s eyes. He wished he was looking at the stark white iris’s of a boy possessed, whose words wouldn’t matter or hurt. But the dark brown and muted violent left nothing to guess; he was talking to Keith, and just Keith, and these words were true.

“We all stay here, ignoring Shiro, worrying about nothing but *Lance*.”

Keith was all he could see, and Lance wouldn’t look away.

“We all stay here trying to solve *your* problem. If it was up to me...”

Keith paused, and Lance searched his eyes once more. The boys lip quirked, as if he knew Lance was searching for proof he wasn't telling the truth, and that fact somehow amused him.

"I'm not so sure I'd keep wasting my time here."

Lance kept very still as Keith stepped back, watching him with a cruel intensity that made Lance want to cry. It wasn't fair, that he'd been so wrong about Keith. It wasn't fair. Lance let him leave, didn't demand an apology, or that he re-join their teammates. He let Keith disappear down the hall without so much as a word of protest, feeling all the hope he'd gathered for them drain from his body, leaving him leaden and cold. *A waste of time.* Lance took a deep breath, willing his legs to stop shaking. They didn't, but at least they carried him to the door, ready to face the others.

-

"Where's Keith?"

Training," Lance lied, slumping down in a chair before anyone could notice how badly he was shaking.

"Shouldn't he be--"

"He's training."

The others all eyed him sceptically, knowing that wasn't the case. Lance wondered if they'd heard any of the argument.

"Anyway..." said Pidge, clearing her throat. "Thirty astronomical units."

Lance raised a brow, trying to focus on her, on Hunk, on Allura's bracelet, on the chip in his nail, on a faulty light in the panels, anything but Keith *and Keith and he hates you.*

"That's how far from the star we are. Thirty units. Four--"

"We're the same distance out as that other planet?"

"Yeah. So I was thinking we could do a test for habitability--"

"Is this the point the wormhole takes us to?"

Pidge frowned, sharing a look with Hunk. "Uh, yeah."

"Exactly?"

"Yeah."

Lance drummed his fingers against the chair, faster and faster, biting his lip anxiously. *Waste of time waste of time waste-*

"We're practically along its line of orbit."

Lance stood.

"I don't feel well."

And he didn't. He felt cold. Allura moved toward him.

“What’s-“

“We need to wormhole.”

“Wormhole?” Allura blurted. “Lance we haven’t-“

“We haven’t moved since I got hurt, I know. But we need to wormhole.”

“Wha...” Allura’s gaze followed him as he marched up toward the controls, hopelessly lost.

“Not out of this system,” he continued. “I want us... I want... take us one million kilometres further from the sun.”

Allura frowned, as did Pidge, as did everyone else in the room in fact.

“Why?”

“I need to see something.”

“You need to see what’s one million kilometres away?”

“No,” said Lance, already studying the star map they had up on the screen. “I need to see what happens to us, when we are one million kilometres from this exact spot.”

“I...”

“Please, Allura. I’ll be fine. I need us to do this.”

The princess sighed, then simply shrugged. “Alright. Everyone, prepare to wormhole, I guess.”

-

Star date – 33:03:21 (371)

Castle Cycle – 01:37

Log – 7

“It’s nearly two am,” said Lance.

He was shaking. Black’s cockpit looked dark and uninviting, and Lance looked harrowed.

“We’re one million kilometres out from our return point.”

He took a deep breath, hands trembling uncontrollably.

“My arms hurt.”

He jostled his leg restlessly, all his nerves on fire.

“Less than half an hour now. If we go back there...”

Up down up down up down- his leg couldn’t keep still.

“I’ll know its coming.”

Chapter Notes

WHAT IS UP THANKS FOR BEING SO GREAT YOU GUYS

ok so I know Lance's birthday was yesterday but STILL I had to do something so
here's the next chapter a little early

<3 <3 <3 <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

Over the course of his life, Lance had become well adapted to dealing with stress. The births of his younger siblings scared him, his brother's job scared him, the dark scared him, his family's financial problems, his father's absence, the cliffs by their house, the pressure to get into the Garrison, the adversaries Voltron faced... they all scared him. But Lance had become accustomed to dealing with his anxieties; waiting for their ship to wormhole was testing his patience.

"Time check."

"You asked me that *twenty three seconds ago*," Pidge answered tiredly. "It is still, one past two in the morning. Or, if you must know, one past two and forty-eight seconds."

Lance pressed a trembling hand over his mouth, trying to muffle his shortness of breath. *If we wormhole I'll know. It's coming it's coming it's coming.*

"Why are we doing this again?" Hunk asked, slumped over a chair on the verge of falling asleep.

"What's the difference if we're still in the same system?"

"Because he wants to know if we wormhole to this system, or to that exact spot," Allura answered for him, thankfully.

"But *why*?"

"I'm... not sure?"

"You'll see," Lance answered curtly.

Or maybe they wouldn't. He hoped they wouldn't.

"Should we be calling Keith-" Coran began.

"No."

"This seems like a team-"

"I'll call Keith if it's necessary for Keith to be here. Which currently, it is not."

He should call Keith. They should have the whole team there, but Lance didn't much feel like seeing him. Or rather, he did, but that was an urge he was desperately trying to shake. There was no

use agonising over someone who hated you; which he supposed was what their relationship used to be, but now that they'd become friends, going back to that... it was more than that. Keith had never been unkind, but following the things he'd said, Lance was no longer sure.

"We got about... twenty seconds," said Pidge, causing Lance's heart rate to skyrocket.

"Who wants to bet we don't move," mumbled Hunk.

"Five bucks," said Pidge. "And Lance makes us breakfast for keeping us awake."

Lance would make Pidge breakfast every day for the rest of their lives if it meant their ship could stay exactly where it was. He elected not to mention that, just in case. Ten seconds on the clock, and the stress became too much. Lance shut his eyes; the others' reactions would tell him well enough what was happening. *It's coming it's coming it's coming.*

His nails nearly drew blood to his palms when he heard Allura gasp, and a blinding blue light burned through his eyelids. *The wormhole.* He felt the ship shake, heard the dismal protests from the others, heard the rattle of the controls as they were pulled forcefully back through space. He'd known it would happen, he really had; that didn't make it any better. *One million kilometres.* The ship came to a stop, and Lance opened his eyes. Coran looked his usual frustrated self, Pidge and Hunk just looked tired, but Allura... Allura was watching him.

"It's coming," he said, before logic could stop him.

His voice was raw, anxiety eating away at his nerves, leaving him stripped of rationality, untamed as a livewire. There was the truth, there was his secret, out in the open for them all to see.

"It's coming."

"What?" Asked Pidge. "What's coming?"

But Lance didn't have time for answers; the stream of words from his mouth was nothing more than a coping mechanism.

"It's coming," he repeated numbly, stumbling toward Allura, toward the window. "I-I know it. It's coming."

"What's coming?" Allura asked.

Lance came face to face with the window, eyes widening as he took in the dark surrounds and the tiny red dwarf burning away in the distance.

"This is the same spot? Thirty units out?"

No answer, the others looked confused and concerned.

"Answer the question, Pidge."

"Um," the girl stuttered. "Yes."

"The exact spot we have wormholed to every night?"

"Yes."

Lance's hands shook; he bit down on his lip. "It's coming."

“*What* is coming?” Allura asked, growing annoyed. “What are you talking about?”

Lance dug hands into his hair, tugging hard on the short strands. “I need to know exactly- I need...”

“Um...” Pidge trailed off, growing more concerned by the second.

“Lance, buddy,” tried Hunk. “Are you okay?”

“*Exactly?*” Lance asked, almost patronisingly.

“Yes,” Pidge insisted. “I told you.”

“But how far is... how far... I need...” he was pacing, he’d hadn’t realised, arms and legs itching to do something.

“Thirty units out, Lance. Is-“

“And how far is that?” He blurted.

Pidge shifted her glasses a little way up her nose, staring at him. “You want miles instead, or?”

“No, I want...” Lance trailed off.

What do I want? Lance’s fingers tightened where they gripped Pidge’s chair. *Exact. Thirty units. The same the same the same.* They others had apparently given up on what he had to say, but were talking worriedly among themselves. He saw Coran lean into the comms and say something involving *Keith*. Lance only caught snippets of what they were saying, too preoccupied with his own thoughts. *Days.*

“I need days.”

“What?”

Lance jabbed a finger at the screen. “I need that planet’s orbit, and I need the days until it reaches us.”

“Reaches us? Lance, we’re not even on the same-“

“You said we were on its orbital path.”

“I said maybe-“

“Plan its orbit! For gods sake just do it!” Lance snapped, feeling guilty the minute Pidge jumped.

“Please. Sorry, I... I need to know right now.”

Pidge looked on the verge of arguing for Lance’s own sake, but after a moment’s hesitation began tapping away at the computer, gesturing Coran over to help her.

“Lance... what are you doing?” Allura was shaking her head, frowning at him.

He didn’t reply; he didn’t know yet.

“Uh... we do. We do intersect its orbit,” said Pidge.

Her frown deepened, leaning into her computer. Was she starting to understand?

“Why’d you-“

Pidge was cut off as Keith came crashing through the doors to the bridge, breathing hard as though he’d sprinted from the other side of the castle.

“What’s wrong?” He blurted, words escaping him before he could even bring his feet to a stop. “Is everyone okay?”

Lance frowned at the dishevelled boy; for a brief moment, Keith looked genuinely concerned, none of the cold, hard, and hateful exterior he’d shown Lance. His eyes flittered anxiously across the room before finally settling on Lance, blown wide as if he were expecting him to spontaneously combust at any second. Lance glared, not in the mood to forgive Keith for his cruel words, no matter if he looked worried for him.

“Days,” he snapped, turning his back on Keith, who moved toward Hunk for an explanation instead.

“We just wormholed,” Lance heard Hunk mumble. “Lance’s being weird-“

“I need the days, Pidge.”

Now the girl was looking seriously confused. “Days?”

“How long until the planet reaches this spot? Do you have its orbital speed? I need-“

“Give me a goddam minute, jeez...”

Lance ground his teeth together anxiously; from the corner of his eye, he could see Keith talking to Hunk. When he risked a glance, the boy’s expression had gone blank again. Not blank, uncaring. Lance looked away before that picture became ingrained. He hovered over Pidge’s shoulder, too caught up in his search to consider if he was annoying her.

“Do you have it-“

“God, just be patient!”

“This is important-“

“Three hundred and seventy-one days! Happy?”

Lance shut up quickly. His mind was racing.

“How many days have we been here?”

Pidge huffed, angry and annoyed. “I don’t know-“

“Twenty-nine.”

Lance spun toward Allura, meeting the princess’ eye. Her brow was furrowed, fingers playing nervously along a control panel, a hand hovering over her stomach.

“Twenty-nine days.”

Lance’s lip twitched, an all-encompassing dread creeping into his veins, a heart stopping, skin crawling, blood boiling, *dread*. Allura knew; she hadn’t spoken and neither had he, but they looked at each other and they knew. Her hand fumbled for the side of her hip, sheltering her stomach

instinctively. Lance flexed his fingers, trying to chase away the prickling cold thrumming through his veins.

“*Something*,” he said, orderly, contained, while every internal corner of him tore itself apart in mass hysteria. “Is coming.”

Allura blinked, returning to her senses.

“Twenty-nine days ago,” Lance continued. “That planet would have been four hundred days away from us.”

“So what?” Said Pidge.

“The first day we wormholed,” Lance repeated slowly. “That planet was four hundred days away.”

“Four hundred days...” Pidge echoed, on the verge of understanding but still confused.

“Four hundred souls found Callio and Aryon, four hundred sufferers, four hundred gone,” said Lance, repeating the story told by Allura. “Four hundred bodies. Four hundred days. That’s not a coincidence, that’s a fucking *plan*.”

“You can’t possibly link those just because-“

“Don’t you get it?” Lance snapped, turning on the rest of the team. “Dark planet, dark planet, dark planet; those paintings in the cave, this wormhole- that dwarf planet down there doesn’t mean shit. The Dark Planet’s still out there, we’re stuck right in its path. Four hundred days, three hundred and seventy-one now, it’s coming for us.”

The room was silent, Lance’s realisation filtering through to the other’s slowly. Pidge stared numbly at the screen, looking thoroughly shocked. Hunk had his eyes trained on the ground, more serious than Lance had seen him. Coran moved closer to Allura, whose own expression was poised and fearful. Keith ducked his head before Lance could get a look at him, probably concealing whatever reaction he was having.

“H-how can it... what’s coming?” Pidge echoed softly.

This wasn’t fair. Pidge was a child; this wasn’t fair.

“What... whatever’s on the Dark Planet,” said Allura quietly. “I need to sit down.”

-

The common room didn’t seem as comfortable a place as it usually was, not with their team scattered around the room, having left the bridge with knowledge of the Dark Planet weighing them down. Pidge and Keith sat stubbornly on opposite sides of the room, and Lance resisted resenting Keith even more because of it; this was the time they needed each other the most. They were waiting on Allura to speak, as she was usually the one to lead these discussions. Lance was growing concerned though- the princess looked sick with worry. Always confident, always brave, Allura sat as small as she could on the corner of a couch, loose hair concealing much of her face. It terrified him.

“We need to talk about this,” he began, drawing the attention of the others.

Allura lifted her head; her eyes looked tired.

“Where do we start?” Mumbled Pidge.

“With what we know,” Lance replied, determined to hold it together. “The Dark Planet is coming. The wormhole that keeps pulling us back must be linked to it, we just don’t know what’s opening it.”

Lance paused, catching Keith’s eye and stuttering.

“But we’re not, you know, all stuck here.”

“Lance,” Hunk began. “We already discussed-“

“I’m just putting out what we know. Allura, me, Blue, and Black are the only ones this wormhole really needs. If it comes down to it-“

“We’re not leaving-“

“We’re discussing the possibilities, Hunk,” Allura interrupted, pulling herself together to back Lance up. “This could also help with an explanation. Whatever’s pulling us back isn’t doing it randomly.”

“But what *is* pulling us back?”

Lance couldn’t answer that, at least, he didn’t want to believe he could. But facts were facts, and possibilities were limited.

“Lance,” said Allura, reading his expression. “That was ten thousand years ago, longer. Nothing survives on its own that long.”

“Doesn’t it?” Asked Lance. “Didn’t you? How much are you willing to bet?”

“How much am I willing to bet that what? The thing causing us problems, coming for us, is an evil Altean spirit thousands and thousands of years old, confined to a dark planet but still somehow able to effect us? I know it looks like a similar-”

“It killed the Alteans on the dwarf planet.”

“But that was hundreds or thousands of years ago!”

“Those aliens on the ship. They weren’t thousands of years old. How did they die?”

Allura faltered. “They... were crammed into small spaces.”

“Yes. They were possessed, forced to force themselves into the tightest confines, much like they would be forced into the earth. ”

Allura shuddered. “That’s...”

“That makes sense,” said Hunk.

Lance was shaking. “This is... this is...”

“Horrifying?”

“Yes.”

“Why’s it coming after us, though?” The yellow paladin continued.

There was a long moment of silence.

“Allura,” Pidge asked hesitantly. “Are you... related to Aryon?”

“No. Neither is Coran.”

“Perhaps its just after all Altean’s now?” Suggested Hunk.

“That wouldn’t surprise me. But I...”

“Then why did the wormhole take Lance?” Keith asked suddenly, dull violet eyes watching the black paladin inquisitively.

The air felt uncomfortably tense.

“Voltron,” said Allura.

“We already determined-“

“No, but if its after all Alteans, then I can see why it would take a liking to the black paladin. You have the strongest connection to Voltron, which is by far Altea’s greatest invention.”

“Great,” Lance muttered. “This is still very weak reasoning.”

“It’s the only explanation we have,” said Allura. “If this spirit really has been alive for these past few thousand years, feeding off planets like this, it could well be the reason it brought us here after catching whiff of the universes last Alteans. That dwarf planet and its population... it could have sustained this thing for centuries.”

“Can we kill it?” Asked Keith, earning himself a lot of strange looks from the others.

“We don’t even know if it has a physical manifestation,” said Coran.

“So? You saw what it did to all those people, or at least, I told you. We can’t let something like that go free. It’s probably trying to do that same to us.”

Was that why I wondered into the cave? Lance looked to Keith, but the boy was ignoring him.

“Clearly its power is strongest in its own system,” said Allura. “Which is why we keep getting drawn back. We must escape this system. Whether or not we can kill this spirit is a secondary concern.”

“By the spirit,” said Lance. “Do you mean Carma?”

“I... I’m not sure we can still refer to this thing as a person, but... probably. If Carma’s spirit remained all this time, hunting down Aryon’s relatives... it could still be doing much the same with us.”

“We must be careful,” Coran said. “The things it’s done so far, it has accomplished from many miles away. Once the Dark Planet reaches us...”

Lance didn’t want to consider that possibility. “If we can figure out what’s making us wormhole, surely we can cut the connection.”

“But won’t it still-“

“The only way it’s been able to reach or effect us when out of this system is through a wormhole. We have to escape here, then we can approach it from a safer distance if we want to, uh, kill it, or something.”

“So what?” Asked Hunk. “We have three hundred and seventy-one days to figure out how to escape this system while trying not to die, before we definitely die?”

Before I definitely die. Lance glanced up at Allura. *Before Allura definitely dies.* He couldn’t let that happen; they had a duty to protect the team, but also a duty to each other. He was there to protect Allura, and she’d already proven she’d go to all measures to keep him safe. And what of Black and Blue? Was it possible the blue lion was linked to Allura, or was Blue still holding stubbornly to Lance?

“I don’t want to die like that,” Pidge said, very softly.

Keith’s eyes flickered to his friend, and Lance was sure he could see hurt in them. What the hell was up with him?

“You’re not doing to die,” Lance said firmly. “No one’s dying. Yeah, this is a problem, but the wormhole is an obvious solution. We’ve had problems before with far less obvious solutions. Ancient Altean spirit wants its revenge, but too bad. We’ll stop it, kill it or whatever, we always do.”

“Is Carma what possessed Keith?” Hunk blurted suddenly.

Lance froze, eyes shifting to Keith, who curled consciously into his chair.

“Maybe,” said Allura, letting them face the facts. “If it’s what possessed the bodies in the ship, I think so. It may not be the Dark Planet, but the dwarf planet was still the site of a massacre, this spirits powers still reach there. No doubt bits of it linger around this system; I’d say it’s very likely it used Keith to get to us.”

Hunk looked pale, eyes shifting between the red paladin and princess.

“That’s-“

“-fortunate we got rid of it,” Coran interrupted, before Hunk’s no-doubt inappropriate comment.

“How are you feeling?” Allura asked, before anyone else could comment on the matter.

Her voice wasn’t necessarily cold, but there was a warning in it; *don’t test me, Keith.*

“Fine,” the boy replied.

“The suppressants aren’t making you ill-“

“*Fine.*”

Allura looked fed-up and unsatisfied by that answer, but before she could push, Keith stood up.

“Where are you going?” Pidge asked, a little angry.

“To do something.”

“Cause *that’s* specific,” the green paladin muttered.

“I’m going to do something about the wormhole,” Keith snapped. “Instead of sitting around talking about it. The sooner we’re out of this place the better.”

Lance knew what he meant by that last part, but elected to ignore it. Keith wanted to look for Shiro; Lance wondered how much longer he’d stick around.

“We should all start looking for a way out,” he said instead of replying directly to Keith’s remark. “The more we understand about wormholes, and the Dark Planet, the better chance we’ll have.”

“And if we don’t find anything?”

Lance looked to Pidge when she spoke, a hint of fear in her voice.

“We’ve got over three hundred days. We’ll think of something.”

-

Star date – 33:03:21

Castle Cycle – 05:34

Log – 8

“So like, from a strategic point of view, what if we don’t think of something?”

Lance was in Black again, squinting at the recording camera, partially because he hadn’t slept, partially because he was in the process of interrogating it. He was acting abnormally childish for someone who had just learnt their future was likely to be short lived.

“Cause like, if worse comes to worst, we can send the others away, right? But I don’t want to die, and I really, really don’t want Allura to die. Or her baby, for that matter. Or you or Blue; could this thing hurt you? Can it possess lions? Ugh-“

Lance hit his head against the controls, groaning.

“I’m tired,” he mumbled, dragging out the i. “And Keith’s being mean. I thought we were cool, ya know? He’s hugged me like, two, maybe three times now. That’s a lot for Keith. I thought that was true love for sure, ya know? Ugh.”

Lance faced the camera, chin resting on folded arms and pouting. “What did I even do? I bet you twenty five bucks it the suppressants, those aren’t good for him.”

Lance watched absentmindedly as a particle of dust drifted down and settled on Black’s pristine panels. He sniffed.

“Anyway. Carma the ten-thousand year old sibling-killing evil Altean spirit lady wants to kill us. Which I guess is kinda more important to discuss than Keith, but I’m also a big believer in human relations and-“

Lance yelped as a different screen crackled to life, startling him out of his stupor.

“Uh... Black?”

He frowned, leant back, leant forwards, peered at the screen from all angles.

“Are you- oh! Okay, oh, it’s a video. Okay... can you... see this?”

Lance frowned, dragging the other screen forward so it was within view of the recording and holding it at a distance.

“Please don’t be some freaky shit, for the love of all things holy, I cannot handle that right now.”

Lance shifted nervously in his chair as a moving picture fought to form on the screen. The pixels were messy, as if only half complete, but eventually it showed enough of a picture to be recognisable. Lance’s expression softened, just as the volume began.

“Black... where... where did you get this?”

A wave of melancholy washed over his face, wiping away the tense expression.

“That’s... me.”

Lance shifted, and the screen became visible.

“Lance, mijo, look here.”

A small gasp escaped Lance’s lips at the sound of his mother’s voice, and a hand flew to cover his mouth. An old style video recorder held in his mother’s hands captured the scene before them: Lance, not more than a year old, sitting on a colourful picnic blanket in their backyard.

“Laaance, Lance! Hi baby, hello! No, no, the camera’s here, Lance-“

His mother’s hand shot out from behind the camera to steady him as the blue clad baby toppled over, giggling profusely when his mother seated him back on the blanket. Susanna McClain’s laugh rung out loud and clear when her son beamed up at her with toothless gums.

“My little angel, you have a-“

Another burst of laughter as Lance’s smile grew wider, not a tooth in sight.

“A beautiful smile,” Susanna finished with a tender snicker.

A noise off to the side, and suddenly the camera was shaking as Susanna motioned someone over.

“They’ll do it again, I swear!” She insisted cheerily to whoever stood beside her. “Just put her down, they’ve been at it all day.”

Lance could feel tears brimming in his eyes, but he didn’t mind. He didn’t know how Black was managing to project an old family video to him, but at this point he didn’t care. Silent laughter shook his shoulders as a second baby was set down on the blanket beside his younger self, dressed in yellow with an impartial expression on her face. His mother shifted the camera as Allita shoved a tiny fist into her mouth to chew on, thoroughly uninterested.

“Allita,” Susanna tried sweetly, but the baby remained uninterested.

Beside her, her brother watched in fascination, raising a fist to his own mouth but finding he couldn’t fit the whole thing in. Allita’s hair was done up into a ridiculous whale’s tail on the top of her head, and she wriggled her podgy toes against the little socks over her feet.

“Leo,” his mother whined, “get her to stop chewing her fist, please. She needs to look at him. Allita. Allita... no, sweetie, don’t eat- nooo, get that out of her mouth. Yucky, don’t eat dirt. Look! It’s Lance! It’s your brother, look Allita, look!”

“Is she looking? I can’t even tell,” someone murmured off camera, probably their father, Leo.

Sure enough, once Allita turned to Lance she promptly stopped trying to shove handfuls of dirt into her face. He smiled his toothless grin, and suddenly there were two smiling babies. Susanna started chuckling, only spurring her twins to do the same. Lance started it, the little hiccup of a baby’s laugh that immediately set off his sister. Soon they had both children in hysterics, apparently finding something hilarious in the others laugh.

“What is so funny?” Susanna was saying, the camera shaking as she turned to confront her husband.

Seated in the cockpit watching, Lance felt warm tears spill down his cheeks, over his fingers where a hand was still clamped over his mouth. He was smiling through those fingers, chest stuttering through the happy tears. He took in every bit of that recording; his mother’s warm voice, the two podgy babies seated on the mat, laughing as if they were the sun and moon of each others entire year of life. Lance swallowed roughly, trying to compose himself as the video changed suddenly. It was still Allita, but many years later. He recognised the same camera, as well as his mother the second she began speaking.

“Allita, sweetie, how was your first day?”

Allita looked around seven, dressed in a shabby school uniform passed down from their older sister, ignoring Susanna while twirling a lock of dark hair between her fingers.

“Hey,” their mother cooed, trying for a reaction. “How was school?”

Allita shrugged, but an inch of a smile tickled her lip.

“Fun,” she drawled, her voice squeaky and a little lispy.

“Fun! That’s so good! What did you do?”

Allita hummed, eyes skirting the ceiling. She’d always looked distracted, Lance remembered.

“We drew pictures.”

“Mhm, and what else did you do?”

“Some maths.”

“Maths, wow! Did you understand it?”

Allita blinked, staring straight at the camera. “Hm?”

“Did you understand the maths, sweetie?”

The girl paused in playing with her hair, staring at the camera. She was so much like Lance remembered, so alive and so real. The red flush on her cheeks was from just having been playing outside. The chequered dress she wore was brown and blue, with a little pocket sewn into the front. Allita had been a serious child, at least at first glance. Lance was expressive in everything he did, but Allita was so hard to read. She didn’t frown, or pout, she rarely smiled; her emotions were her own, much to their mother’s dismay. Lance always liked to think he understood what she was thinking, but with her eyes boring into him through the camera lens, he felt less sure.

“Did I understand?”

“Yes, did you?”

Lance frowned; Allita was still staring dead into the lens.

“Do you understand?” Allita said.

A sense of unease passed through Lance, the tears drying on his cheeks.

“Do you understand?”

Allita’s finger twirled slowly through her hair, expression like a blank slate. There was something written in her eyes, and the minute quirk of her brow; what is it?

“Do you understand?”

She was talking to him. She was seven years old and a lifetime away, but she was talking to him. A rush of white noise filled Lance’s ears, blanketing all else but her voice.

“What?”

Allita stared, and stared, and stared; Lance could see the ocean in her eyes.

“Do you understand?”

The video cut out.

Chapter End Notes

if i ever mess up times/dates at any point can we just be uuuuuuh ignorant and pretend to ignore it

Chapter Notes

YO SEASON 3 WHAT A FUCKIN GOD TIER CONCEPT WHAT A RIDE WHAT A D E L I G H T

BUT this is just a note to say that I won't have any spoilers for s3 in this story in case you haven't seen it, so you're all good to keep reading. If something does come up and somehow relates to s3 I'll warn you beforehand but it shouldn't so yeah

Thanks again for all your nice comments i LOVE THE HELL OUT'VE THEM you're so wonderful!! keep the theories coming omg and I hope you'll keep enjoying the story

also idk had to mention it at some point, like, I'm not tagging every single violent thing that might happen cause i dont wanna give away the entire story?? i mean i feel like its pretty obvious that we should be prepared for violence and dark themes by now any way but IDK anyway this chapters light as fuckin low fat yogurt so we're all chill ill stop talking now please enjoy

-

A good hour was spent pacing back and forth in front of Allura's door before Lance worked up the courage to knock. It wasn't just that he was nervous, he simply doubted Allura would be awake yet. When he finally did knock, and the door slid open to reveal Allura in her nightgown with a toothbrush poking out her mouth, Lance reckoned he'd picked the perfect time.

"I know you've bsheen pashing outshide for an hour," Allura mumbled, a bit of toothpaste dribbling onto her chin. "The mishe told me."

Lance did not like those mice.

"It was only fifty-two minutes, actually."

Allura raised a brow.

"I didn't want to wake you up."

She shrugged tiredly, hair done up in a flowing bun atop her head. "Somefing wrong?"

"Not really, but I want to talk about the black lion."

Allura considered this for a moment, still brushing her teeth slowly. Then she shrugged, and stepped back to allow him inside. Allura's room was a lot nicer now that neither of them was collapsed on the floor sobbing about babies, and Lance noticed she had a much better collection of creams than he did sitting in his room.

"So what's the matter?" Allura asked, returning from the bathroom minus the toothbrush.

"Um, Black showed me something this morning, when I was making one of the logs."

“Oh?” The caught Allura’s interest. “What was is?”

“That’s the weird part, it... it was a video my mother took when I was a baby. So not bad, but I don’t understand how Black could project that.”

Allura took a seat on the edge of her bed, considering this.

“It wasn’t complete,” Lance added. “It was really bad quality compared to what I’ve seen the lions project before. But, like, recognisable.”

“It’s not unheard of. If a lion has bonded well, or is at least trying to bond with their paladin, they sometimes access parts of their personal life to add emotional ties to the bond.”

“But how did Black get hold of a video my mom took?”

“You’ve seen how the lion’s consciousness can stretch, its very possible Black was able to focus a lot of that energy into collecting pieces of that video from Earth.”

Lance considered this, tapping his feet restlessly.

“Does that... does that mean I could contact my family? Using Black’s mind to-“

“I’m afraid it doesn’t work like that,” Allura replied sadly. “While your lion may be able to weakly tap into Earth’s data, there is no way to establish an actual connection. I’m sorry.”

Lance shrugged. “It’s cool. I wasn’t really expecting anything anyway.”

“The fact that Black showed you this is a very good sign,” Allura said to lighten the mood. “They must really be trying to bond.”

“Are you sure? This is just about the first thing Black’s done. Unless she’s warning me that people are about to die.”

“So Black only reaches out to you when the situation is dire?”

“Yes.”

“Did anything about this feel desperate? What did it show?”

Lance faltered. “Um, just, one of my sisters.”

He ignored the way Allura had looked in that last video, like she didn’t belong there, like she was addressing him directly.

“Nothing serious.”

“Then it’s an improvement,” Allura said happily. “I’m proud of you both.”

Lance tried to buy into her smile, tried to appreciate the encouragement, tried to ignore the itch in his skin that screamed *something is wrong*. He could still picture her staring at him, dark bangs hanging like a veil as she looked right into him. *Do you understand?* She’d said. *No*.

-

Star date – 33:03:25

Castle Cycle – 14:02

“Captain’s log, day... the day that’s on the screen there. This is your captain, the coolest captain, here with some good news. And that good news is that despite my earlier announcement that we’ll all soon be dying, the team has been stunningly optimistic.”

Lance beamed into the camera, in a good mood himself.

“Seriously, they’ve been awesome. I figured out what the Dark Planet was up to, like, four days ago? And everyone’s... they’ve been great.”

A pause, where Lance smiled to himself.

“We’ve been researching!” He continued excitedly. “Wormholes, Dark Planet’s... this is like the Garrison all over again. Except this time, if we don’t solve the problem, we will actually die. But I’m hoping not. Hunk’s tryna build some cool shit, Pidge is... doing Pidge stuff, but I trust that. Even Keith’s doing something. I don’t know what, but it’s something, right?”

For a second his smile faltered, no doubt as he remembered the difficulties he’d been having with Keith.

“He’s shut himself off though. It’s hard. He’s just gone emotionless, and angry, which I guess is Keith’s way of dealing with trauma. But I want to change it, I... I’m not sure how.”

Lance pouted, tracing loose circles over the dashboard.

“Anyway. I’m finding out more about that story, the Carma and Callio one. Allura hasn’t managed to dig up the book yet, but there is a tonne of stuff on the Altean database. I’m actually ashamed we didn’t pick up on this sooner.”

A couple of minutes passed as Lance played around with the second screen, digging up entries from the database to show Black.

“I’m interested in Aryon,” he continued. “Allura said she was a hero. Yeah, she didn’t completely kill this thing, but she must’ve had a pretty good idea to get that far.”

More typing, and suddenly Lance was swivelling the screen around to the camera for a look.

“Aw,” he cooed. “They’re in love.”

On the screen was a photograph taken of two woman; one had a fit, though slightly stocky build, like a fighter, with thick hair that fell straight past her shoulders, as yellowed as a field of daffodils. The woman seated neatly beside her on a bench wore just as bright a smile, though she looked weak. Thin, bony wrists, collarbones that jutted out shockingly, and an overall fragile stance. Her skin looked a richer olive compare to her counterpart, but had paled with illness, much like her hair, where white began to grow from the darker strands. The marriage of Aryon, warrior of the Long Isles, and Callio, of South Pier. Lance let his gaze drift over the photo fondly.

“They look really happy. Callio looks sick as hell, but really happy.”

Lance’s smile wobbled, and he wiped the photo off screen before he actually started crying.

“Ugh, step one to this project, don’t be such a fucking sap. Aryon died, Callio died, they’re all dead, no love. Fuck Carma, man. Seriously, fuck her.”

Lance cleared his throat roughly before continuing, delving deeper into the mass of Altean knowledge.

“Man, I love how Allura’s definition of an ‘old myth’ means written long ago, but hey we still have photos! Anyway, this stuff looks like it’s just the basics. There we are, Aryon, warrior of the Long Isles, Dame of... something I can’t pronounce, and honorary citizen of Bastrea.”

Lance’s eyebrows shot up. “Man, she did a lot. Oh, look here, she was a super cool Altean. It says Aryon, esteemed scholar, is said to have channelled her powers to spread peace. She was a dealer of empathy, whose physicality and mind were able to flow through other’s, and... more Altean descriptive words I can’t pronounce... which is how she- aw man. How am I meant to read this fucking thing? Which is how she came to meet her wife, Callio, by catching a hint of the other troubles, and thus becoming the only person who could truly understand Callio’s suffering- this sounds like a goddam fucking soap opera. I’m gonna cry, this is fucking ridiculous.”

Lance huffed, rubbing at his eyes.

“Stupid... love,” he muttered, glaring at the floor. “Stupid.”

Pushing through the information on Aryon’s past, he gradually drew closer to the actual story.

“Seven pointed star,” he mumbled, staring at the illustration on the screen. “Allura talked about that. With the whole... there’s a list somewhere. Here; fear, murder, the hunt, the confrontation, the martyr, the fall, the curse. The seven unchangeable facts, the seven pivotal points to the story.”

Lance frowned, tracing a finger over the star. “Fear the illness, murder the people, hunt the killer, confront the killer, get killed for not joining the killer... there’s a lot of killing in here. Descend to the Dark Planet, get your family cursed for generations to come. Sounds neat.”

Lance’s eyebrows knit together, pondering the text. “Why’d Aryon take them to the Dark Planet? I mean, that sounds like a dumb idea. But what would I know. I’m assuming that was part of her whole flowing mind and physicality power.”

A pause, where Lance’s eyes glazed over sadly. “You think... you think she felt Callio die?”

He sat back abruptly, blinking away the haze in his eyes. “Anyway. The confrontation and the martyr, those are my worst. I don’t understand what happened to make Carma kill her sister. How could she... how could she hate her that much. Hate- how can hatred run that deep?”

The cockpit fell silent, the bright light of the screen chasing away the shadows of Lance’s face.

“I don’t understand,” he said softly, to Black, to Allita, to anything. “I don’t understand at all.”

-

The training deck smelt of sweat, musty Altean linoleum, and more sweat. A full week since the discovery of the real Dark Planet, and the team had upped their training. The four paladins gathered in the training deck, warding off the advances from a series of hovering drones, much like one of their very first team exercises. They were each watching another’s back; Lance had Hunk, Hunk had Keith, Keith had Pidge, and finally it circled back to Pidge watching Lance’s back as they were shot at relentlessly.

“Lance, they keep going for my feet!” Hunk called, hopping from one foot to the other to avoid a shot from the drone.

“Gotcha,” Lance shouted back, moving swiftly with his shield once he realised the drones were trying to throw Hunk off balance.

This was harder than their original training; in addition to using shields to ward off the drones, they were each armed with standard Altean pistols, to fire at moving targets. Lance’s shot tended to be the best, but Allura suggested the others should improve their long-distance fighting skills. Keith was struggling the most, least skilled in the art of precision, but as usual, he put all his effort in and learnt fast. He still wasn’t back to his usual self, however.

“Pidge,” the red paladin called, “watch your footwork!”

“I’m trying,” she bit out, lunging forward to block a shot headed toward Lance’s shoulder blades.

“Try harder.”

Lance failed to block their conversation, even in the heat of battle. Pidge and Keith had been at odds ever since the latter’s possession. Lance knew Pidge held nothing against her friend for hurting her in that state; she’d tried talking it out with him, but apparently Keith hadn’t listened. Now they seemed constantly angry at each other, which subsequently left them grumpy and snappish.

“Maybe you should block more!”

“I’m blocking them all,” Keith spat, “but its no use if I can’t predict your position.”

“Predict my position, why-“

Lance barrelled into Pidge to avoid both of them getting hit when the drone fired.

“Focus, Keith!” He snapped, righting Pidge before returning swiftly to his position to carry on defending Hunk.

Keith glowered, but raised his shield to carry on defending Pidge. They had a blissful few seconds of silence and focus before the pair was back to bickering.

“Just because I’m blocking them, doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be aware of where the shots are coming from!” Keith snapped, batting off a series of shots headed for Pidge, before spinning and blocking a stray one Hunk had failed to see.

“I think you’re missing the point of this exercise,” Pidge muttered.

“Cut it out you two,” Lance called over his shoulder.

“Yeah guys,” said Hunk. “This is a team exercise.”

“Pidge needs to focus.”

“Keith needs to do his damn job!”

“I am! But I can’t be your only defence!”

“Dude,” Hunk muttered, dropping his shield for a second then flinging it back up when Keith cursed at the volley of shots coming his way. “Is this some pent up anger from our last battle or-“

“You need to be able to defend yourself!” Keith snapped, ignoring Hunk.

“Oh, cause you’re so good at defending *your* self.”

“Watch what’s coming at you, Pidge!”

“How do you know I’m not-“

There was a sharp yelp as a shot hit Pidge square in the back. The simulation shut off in an instant, all the drones powering down as Pidge collapsed onto the floor with a hiss of pain. Lance dropped his shield, crouching down beside the green paladin with a frightful expression.

“Pidge! Pidge, are you alright?”

Pidge groaned, sitting up shakily and feeling for her back with a hand. Hunk appeared beside Lance, helping her sit.

“What the hell, Keith?” Lance snapped, turning on their fourth companion, who was still standing a few feet back, shield dangling loosely from his hand. “You let her get hit!”

“Are you okay?” Hunk asked again, peering nervously at Pidge’s back.

“Fine,” the girl said grittily, trying to maintain an air of anger even as tears burned at her eyes. “It’s just a stupid simulation.”

Lance was still staring at Keith, mortified by the boy’s indifference to his friend’s injury, an injury *he* was responsible for.

“Keith, why did you do that?”

“She needs to learn to defend herself.”

“The *point* of this simulation-“

“What’s the *point* of simulations if they don’t even mimic a real battle? If I’m not there, she needs to be able to watch her own back-“

“But you *were* there,” Lance growled, rising to his feet and leaving Hunk to help the youngest paladin up. “And you let her get hit.”

“Yeah,” said Keith. “I did.”

Lance felt anger rearing its ugly head in his gut, clenching his fists and staring openly at Keith. This was too far, letting Pidge get hurt was too much.

“What is wrong with you?”

“I’m trying to help her-“

“God, Keith,” said Pidge, interrupting them both. “Just shut up.”

She was standing on shaky legs, gripping Hunk’s hand and wiping tears furiously from her cheeks.

“You’ve *helped* enough.”

Hunk shot Keith a look a lot harsher than he’d ever seen out of his friend.

“Come on,” he mumbled. “You need a rest.”

The pair hobbled slowly toward the door, leaving Lance and Keith alone in the middle of the training room. Lance felt he had a million things to say, yet nothing came out. He couldn't believe it, truly, that Keith could act like that. He felt hurt, and sick to his stomach; he felt like crying himself. He hated Keith in that moment; he hated him, and his actions, and his cold exterior, and his cruel words, and his stubbornness. He hated what he'd said to Allura, and he hated how he'd treated Pidge, and Lance hated the things he'd said to him. He hated that Keith might leave them at the drop of a hat. But he hadn't always hated him, and it didn't feel absolute. There was something more, there had to be. Because Keith was more than this, so much more.

Keith was the only one who could wake Pidge up in the mornings with a smile, Keith was the one who nearly broke down crying with happiness when he learnt Allura was pregnant, and he was the one who could shock Hunk out of a scared stupor. Keith held Lance's hand when he was afraid, he talked him through nightmares, he took him up on his stupid challenges, he sacrificed life and limb for his team, and he trusted them with his life. He faced the things Lance was too afraid to do, he walked into literal hell to keep him safe, and he held onto him in that chamber as if Lance meant a small amount more than the world to him. So something, Lance reasoned, was wrong. Instead of yelling, instead of letting his anger fly, the anger he could feel freezing in his arms, he pleaded.

"What's wrong?"

Keith didn't reply. Lance searched his eyes, knowing he must look a mess to Keith, angry and confused and upset.

"Please, Keith. Tell me what's wrong."

A pause, one that set the air electric, a tension so thick Lance felt like he was suffocating. It hurt, because Keith *looked* like he wanted to say. He struggled to hold up that indifference with Lance watching him, heart beating fast but not from the training. *Come on*, Lance thought, *tell me*.

"I already told you," Keith said coldly.

The illusion shattered, along with the hope that he'd let it slip. Lance let all Keith's words come crashing down on him like an rock fall, hit again and again until it all became too much and he buckled under the weight of a thousand roughened stones. *I'm not so sure I'd keep wasting my time here.*

-

Going to see Pidge in the lab the next day proved to be both a good and bad idea. It was good to see she was alright, back to work despite the hit she had taken the previous day. Bad because...

"What do *you* want?"

"Is Hunk actually the only one left who's in a good mood," Lance muttered, plonking down on an over turned pot plant.

Pidge glared, adjusting her glasses and returning to her notebook with an indignant huff. Lance sighed deeply; Pidge wasn't very good at hiding her emotions.

"How're you feeling?"

"Peachy."

"That cause you're tryna grow peaches?"

“You only think you’re funny, Lance.”

“Nah, but seriously. How’s your back?”

Pidge clenched her fists, oversized garden gloves and all.

“Fine.”

“It’s not-“

“It’s really fine,” she said, a tad less irritable. “But thanks for checking.”

Lance drummed fingers against the pot as Pidge went back to her work, content to have him there to keep her company. Lance knew Keith used to come in here to keep them both occupied as she worked; he wondered when the last time he visited was. He’d been enveloped in his own project, and rudely rejected anyone’s request to help out or see it.

“So,” Lance began slowly.

“You’re about to ask me about Keith.”

“Um. Yes. Do you know what’s wrong?”

“Uh, I know he’s being a huge dick.”

“Yeah, but that’s not normal. He’s not just... do you know why he’s acting like that?”

Pidge paused with her hand around a shrub, thinking hard.

“I don’t know. But it doesn’t excuse him.”

Lance couldn’t disagree with that. Pidge sniffled, shoving the shrub into a pot and snapping her notebook shut.

“I think he’s scared. I think he saw some really fucked up things in that tunnel and he’s scared out’ve his mind. But you know what? I’m scared too.”

Pidge clenched her fists, raising her chin a little to make herself seem taller. “I’m really scared, but not just for me. I’m worried about you, and Allura, and everyone. And him. But I’m not treating him like shit.”

“And if it’s more than that?” Lance prompted, though Pidge’s words resounded within him. “If it’s something to do with Shiro?”

“He’s not the only one missing a brother,” Pidge said evenly, keeping her expression neutral.

Her words hit Lance hard; he blinked a couple of times. “I’m sorry, Pidge.”

The girl nodded tightly. “And you know what the funny thing is? When Keith’s not being awful, it’s like he’s my brother. I thought we helped each other that way. But Matt doesn’t treat me like this.”

“Pidge-“

“I’m alright. I just... it’s frustrating, you know?”

Lance nodded, brows knitted together.

“I don’t understand.”

“Me neither.”

“I don’t understand and it’s... its shitty. It’s really shitty.”

“I know,” Lance murmured.

No more words were exchanged once Pidge went back to work. The pair sat in glum silence, wondering what had happened to their team. *I still don’t understand*, thought Lance. *Not one bit of it.*

Chapter Notes

what is UP my dudes anyway I've been super inspired to write at the moment bc of some stuff so here's the next chapter a teeny bit early <3 <3 <3

Thank you so much for your lovely comments as always!! They really help keep this story going... I loved your reaction to the days counting down, and am also like... concerned/amazed by the number of threats to punch keith, he's a smol dude he can't catch all these hands guys

ANYHOW THANKS SO MUCH PLEASE ENJOY THE CHAPTER

just be aware there's a bigger time jump than usual here (god i hope it reads alright, if not please feel free to let me know,,, i actually do appreciate constructive criticism, as friggin nice as literally all of you are!!)

ONE MORE POINT SORRY not really a point, but just to say there will be action soon! I realised the last chapters have been very conversational based, so like, i promise more will happen soon!! thanks for reading <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

The dream felt worse this time. It always worsened, the closer the Dark Planet drew. Lance knew where he was, and he knew what was coming, and he'd experience it over and over again, but the fear never faded. The air was still stuffy yet cold, the mud still slithered over his skin, the chain still burned around his ankle, *he* still burned. He burned with ice, with electricity, with the chill of an arctic ocean or the intensity of lightning splitting the air. Somewhere, a section of his consciousness told him he was still in bed, thrashing about in the sheets with a more permanent rope tying his wrist to the corner of the bed.

It had been over a month. Over a month since Keith was possessed, since Keith stopped sharing his bed. For over a month, Lance had meticulously tied the rope from his wrist to his bed, for over a month he'd slept like that, fear of slipping away in his sleep, of wondering out of his bed, his room, out of the castle, back into the cave, haunting his every waking moment. For over a month, Lance untied that rope each morning, sending a prayer to any god that would listen, thanking them for keeping him alive. For over a month Lance would join his team and pretend he wouldn't cry himself to sleep, that he wouldn't tie that rope so tight he'd wake up with purple fingers and a burn around his wrist. For over a month he would try to look Keith in the eye, but the other would refuse, and they'd each go on pretending the other was okay. For over a month he'd been fearing this dream.

Hands grappled with slippery walls, ankles dragged through the mud, fingers fought the chain around his ankle, loosing their grip as the mud smothered every surface. Lance could scream, but it would hear him. Would it come faster? There was nothing in his dream to protect him, and once he woke, there was still nothing. He wouldn't burden the others with his dream, or his worries. Keith had discovered by accident, and perhaps it was accident too that Lance discovered Keith helped.

Not anymore. This dream felt different, he could feel his own frustration feeding the chill that enveloped his hands. The chain, the problem was the chain.

Sweating from exertion, fingers stinging where they became trapped in the small metal chinks, Lance pulled on the chain with all his mite to try and tear it free from the earth. He cried out in frustration, falling back again and again, unable to find a hold on the slippery ground. Mud entered his mouth, soaked through his clothing, smothering his hair and stinging his eyes, but he kept fighting with the chain. He had to tear himself free, he just had too. And go where? There was only one way out of the tunnel, and it was the last route Lance would ever take. That was a secondary concern though; first was the chain.

He grew colder and colder as he fought against it, thoughts and conflicts creating a violent uproar of emotion in his head. *There's no escape*, said a part of him. There was no way out of the tunnel, and while he could wake from the dream, what waited for him on the other side? More darkness, more loneliness, more longing for a comfort he'd lost, and more fear. He wished Keith had never helped him, so he'd never have known what the difference was. The memory of having the boy there hurt, because it was all gone, and Lance felt cold.

He clawed at the mud, wrapping the chain around his arm and *pulling*. Falling back, he was too caught up in his act to notice if that chain came with him. Everything was mud and metal, all of it freezing, and the more he pulled the more the world fell to chaos. It must have been working, surely. Lance wiped tears away, gritting his teeth as the mud on his hands stung his eyes, blinding him. He was drowning in regrets and anger and frustration, and he'd do anything to end it. He hated this tunnel, and he hated Altea, and he hated Keith. *I miss you*. Lance sobbed in frustration, yanking the chain free from the mud. The air felt electric, buzzing with angry energy, and he wondered if he was doing it. *Keith's fingers curled around his, soft in their approach but calloused to the touch. His voice murmured reassurances into the pillow beside Lance's head, pressing their palm's together. A hand carded gently through his hair, thinking he was asleep, and when Keith brought them together in that chamber, he was warm.* He was warm, and in the absence of his affection, it was all too much.

Another link in the chain, more mud on his hands. *Too much, too much, it's too much*. The chill was growing stronger, fiercer, and he'd never felt it like this before in a dream. Lance tore blindly at the mud, at the chain, digging and pulling as all his emotions came undone. He couldn't think, he felt too much, his entire existence seemed tethered to a merry-go-round, speeding up faster and faster until everything passed in a painful blur. *I miss you*. Lance's fingers met cold flesh. His hand closed around the fingers of another, slick with mud and swollen from the tightening chain. Not in his mind, not Keith; a hand. Lance screamed loud enough to tear himself free from the dream.

He bolted upright in bed, chest heaving, sweating, and- *what the hell?* That didn't seem right. Lance touched his shirt; it was soaking. He might've been sweating, but not that much, his shirt was soaked through and cold. *Water*. As his senses slowly returned, eyes blinking blindly in the darkness, Lance felt something was off. The sound... his room, usually so quiet, was filled with a soft hissing. Still breathing fast, Lance swung his feet out of bed, grimacing as they landed in a wet patch on the floor. *What's going on?* He stumbled toward the door, to the light switch, the faint hiss filling his ears. Light, bright and blinding, flooded the room, and Lance's heart skipped a beat.

I did this, was his very first thought. He remembered how angry and frustrated he felt in the dream, how his arms burned, how they felt better now. His room looked like a bomb had hit it; any bit of clothing that had been lying loose on the floor had been thrown against the wall, the papers and tablet he'd been using for research were similarly smashed against his cupboard. The real problem came from the bathroom. The hissing noise wasn't coming from an animal, but from the spray of water from a burst pipe. Lance stared at the state of his room in shock. He padded cautiously

toward the bathroom, around the long line of spray that was soaking a section of his bed and floor.

The inside was a mess. Pipes had been pulled viciously from the wall, dents in their metal spewing water onto the tiles. The light kept flickering, its circuit faulty. Lance climbed shakily onto the small counter and pressed fingers to the bulb, which quickly fizzled out. He stood again, in the darkness, in the chaos of his room, where multiple mutilated pipes were all bent inwards, toward his bed, toward him.

“What did I do?” He asked the darkness.

There was no reply.

-

Star date – 33:04:30

Castle Cycle – 04:16

Log – 11

Lance looked tired; his hair was mused and damp from the water that had soaked his room, and he was dressed fairly shabbily. It was barely past four in the morning, but Lance was used to the minimal sleep by now. He sighed heavily, rubbing at the circles under his eyes.

“Hey Black.”

There was no visible response, but Lance was cued in enough to acknowledge the calming thrum of his lion’s life force. He didn’t know what was wrong with Black, or why the lion so rarely communicated; but he didn’t think Black hated him.

“Sorry for not talking for a while. Well, not properly. I’ve just been busy I guess.”

A yawn shook his shoulders, the crooked smile he gave his lion little more than a flag of surrender.

“I should, uh, tell you what’s been happening I guess.”

Another yawn.

“It was Pidge’s birthday a few weeks ago. That was kinda nice. I say kinda, but she really enjoyed it. Hunk made a cake, we even wormholed out’ve this stupid system for a day, took her to a nice forest.”

Lance sighed, running fingers through his hair, exhausted.

“Someone left a book about the plant life that grows on Weblums on her bed, but no one fessed up. I think it was Keith. But... they don’t speak.”

If possible, Lance’s face lost even more of its liveliness, paling like the shadows in the corners of the cockpit.

“We’ve tried everything,” he continued, shaking himself out of his daze. “With the wormhole, I mean. We’ve gone everywhere.”

Lance’s fingers traced the fabric around his wrist; Keith’s bandana. He’d never asked for it back, and it helped hide the lines the rope left at night.

“Places I’ve never seen before, more distant than I ever could have imagined. The wormhole still finds us. We tried returning to the site of Altea, that wasn’t fun. We’ve tied the castle down, but it

ends up taking sections of the planet with it. We've tried ditching the castle even, but that just resulted in another deadly situation. Me, you, Allura, Blue... it takes us back, and if we aren't in the castle, we have no way of getting out at all. The other's had to come fetch us, which... it was just a shit show. Made Allura really sick too. I don't know what to do, Black, we've tried everything I've thought of."

Lance was frowning heavily, looking despondent. It was the expression people hated to see on him, the one that looked tired and hopeless and thoroughly upset. It was the one he never let his family see, reserved only for when he was truly miserable. Yet it would've had his mother gushing over him the second she saw it, which is precisely why she never did.

"We're having problems with the team," he said.

Team. They way he said it sounded forced.

"By the team, I mean Keith."

Lance ran hands over his face, sighing.

"Allura doesn't trust him. Pidge isn't talking to him. Coran's sided with Allura, and Hunk hasn't had any luck getting through. And I- I keep trying, but he... he doesn't want to be a part of this team, Black. Not anymore, not with Shiro gone. He fights with everyone, or ignores everyone, trains by himself, overworks himself. I don't-"

Lance choked on his words, taking a few moments to calm himself down.

"I don't know what to do. He wants to go, but I don't want to loose him. That's not selfish, is it? I'm... trying to protect him. But he's- he's giving up on us. And as the leader of this team, I... I cannot trust someone who won't collaborate."

Black's life force could only provide so much comfort; Lance dropped his head into his hands, overcome with exhaustion.

"Even though there is nothing I want more than to see him happy again. Because I don't understand what happened. If it's trauma from what he saw in the cave, if it's the suppressants, I don't know, because he won't tell me. Because he hates me. Because me not protecting him, and this team, makes me unworthy to lead this team. And without that I... he has nothing to wait around for."

Lance huffed dryly, staring off into space.

"And I thought he was different, and I thought he cared. But that was my mistake. I was selfish to fall for him, and I'm being selfish now, not letting him go. It's stupid, Black, I'm stupid, because no matter how mean he is, I still care about him. Which... that's disregarding the rest of the team. But I want him to change, and he won't, but I want him back. B-because, I think he was happier too, when he believed in me. And I'm sorry."

Lance lost focus for a minute, blinking through hazy eyes, lip quivering.

"This sucks," he muttered, all watery. "And I'm still damp."

And angry huff, and Lance repositioned himself in his chair, composing himself.

"I destroyed my room this morning. Which was definitely, you know, my suits fault."

His sarcasm was tangible, but it was also fed-up of being disregarded.

“So I gotta clean that up. And then I gotta figure out how the fuck I did that. And then I gotta stop myself accidentally electrocuting a team member. It’s a full day.”

Lance sniffled angrily, wiping at his nose and starting to shiver in the cool cockpit.

“You got any ideas, wise guy? Nope? Didn’t think so. Oh, and if you’re thinking of showing me another Allita video, don’t. That shit’s upsetting.”

More sighs, Lance was looking really down.

“I gotta go,” he said. “And sort shit out. Nice chatting to you, Black. I’ll... I’ll let you know, stuff. This is Lance out, or something.”

He reached forward to shut off the log.

-

“You can feel it!”

“No you can’t-“

“AAH! I felt it, oh my god, oh my god, Lance! Lance get over here it- *EEE!*”

The voices Lance heard on his way to the dining hall were almost frightful at first, right up until he realised Hunk was screaming with excitement, not terror.

“Um?”

He poked his head around the door cautiously, wary of what might be happening.

“Lance!” Hunk exclaimed, dancing circles around Allura, who was chuckling and shaking her head in exasperation. “You can see the bump!”

“It’s *tiny*,” Allura insisted, laughing softly. “No you can’t!”

“No, no you’re definitely bigger,” Pidge said from her spot at the table, earning herself a playful glower from Allura.

“You can see the baby?” Lance asked, starting to smile.

“Not the actual baby, dumb-“

“You know what I mean!”

The worrying events of that morning forgotten, Lance bounded over to Allura, who was trying to study her reflection against the shiny surface of the refrigerator, running hands over her stomach.

“I guess there’s a *little* bump. Nothing to get excited-”

She was cut off by both Lance and Hunk leaping at her, staring at her stomach with unrivalled intensity.

“Is it kicking,” Lance hissed, fascinated.

“Dude, do you think it can like, hear us?”

“Guys, I think you’re making her uncomfortable,” Pidge called.

“It’s fine,” Allura chuckled, as both boys scooted back from her stomach sheepishly.

“This might sound really weird in Altean terms,” Hunk began. “But can I please touch your stomach?”

Allura looked only slightly confused, but nodded nonetheless. Nearly jumping up and down with excitement, Hunk gently extended a hand to rest his palm over Allura’s tiny baby bump.

“This is amazing,” he whispered, eyes brimming with tears.

Even Pidge was up from her seat and peering over his shoulder, her expression softening.

“Is it kicking?” Lance asked again, desperate to know. “This baby’s gonna be strong as f- heck.”

“I don’t think the babies gonna pick up swear words from *within* the womb,” Pidge joked.

“Shut up,” Lance mumbled, gently laying a hand beside Hunk’s.

He was grinning ear to ear, despite not feeling any movement. The fact that the baby was there, the little bump, the idea of its existence... Lance laughed without even realising.”

“Oh, Pidge!” Allura exclaimed. “Would you like a tissue?”

“No,” the girl whimpered, fitting her tiny hand against the side of Allura’s stomach. “No, I’m fine.”

Lance laughed louder, slinging his free arm around Pidge’s shoulders and bringing her in for a cuddle.

“Pidgey! You’re crying!”

“I’m not,” Pidge sobbed. “I just- I j-just love this baby so much.”

“Princess, I-“ They all looked up at the sound of Coran’s voice as he entered the room.

“Um...” Their advisor took in the sight of the three paladins kneeling around Allura with their hands on her stomach. “Is everyone alright?”

Allura was the first to laugh at Coran’s puzzled expression.

“It’s an Earth custom,” she explained. “They’re trying to feel the baby kick.”

“This is the most beautiful moment of my life,” mumbled Pidge.

“We broke Pidge,” Hunk whispered.

Lance only just made it too his feet when he noticed the second person that had entered the room.

“Keith!” Hunk shrieked, oblivious to the sudden tension. “You can feel the baby!”

Keith’s face paled a little more, if that was even possible. He looked a wreck, a shattered artefact who had put himself neatly together for the sole purpose of intimidating the world around him with thoughts of what he used to be. Lance swallowed nervously as Hunk bounded toward the red paladin, chattering excitably. Keith flinched when Hunk grabbed a gloved hand, but was helpless

as the larger boy dragged him toward Allura and the others.

“Hunk-“ he stuttered. “I’m not sure-“

“You can feel the baby,” Hunk interrupted. “You gotta touch her stomach, man.”

Keith looked on the verge of being ill. His hair had lost its natural spring, and if anything, he looked weaker. Despite all his training, Keith stumbled as Hunk yanked him forward, and his clothes hung off his body in a way that frightened Lance. He realised with painful clarity that he hadn’t seen Keith without a jacket in weeks. Today he wore a long shirt whose sleeves fell over his fingers; Lance wondered if the state of his poor health would be even more apparent without it.

“Hunk-“ Keith protested, as they came to a stop in front of Allura.

Lance was sure she’d be as opposed to seeing Keith as he was, but Allura’s expression softened at the sight of the boy’s petrified face.

“It won’t bite,” she said kindly. “It’s just a baby bump.”

Keith frowned, squirming and trying to pull his hand free from Hunk. Lance was on the verge of intervening when Allura took Keith’s hand in her own.

“Just put it here,” she said softly, laying both their hands over her stomach. “Like this.”

Keith froze, blinking rapidly, eyes on his hand resting cautiously on Allura’s stomach. Lance breathed out slowly, watching as slowly but surely the tension slipped from Keith’s shoulders. His eyes were still wide, poised so at any moment he might- the boy gasped, snatching his hand away. Lance’s heart leapt to his throat, but Allura just laughed.

“I-it, I,” Keith stammered, heart hammering. “I f-felt it.”

“They’re kicking,” Allura explained, a huge smile decorating her face as her own hand dropped to the spot. “They must like you.”

Very carefully, almost as if he couldn’t help himself, Keith moved his hand back to the spot. He waited, fingers resting feather light against Allura’s shirt. Lance lost his breath when he caught sight of the small smile that appeared on Keith’s lips. The boy’s taught expression softened, his fingers relaxing when he felt the baby kick.

“Is- is that normal?” He murmured, eyes meeting Allura’s.

“For Altean babies, certainly,” she replied, smiling giddily.

From where he stood, Keith’s eyes wondered until they landed on Lance. It was by accident, almost, but as soon as they were watching each other, Lance found he couldn’t look away. Keith’s smile was so hesitant Lance could feel the slow spread of it through his veins. For a minute, their fighting, Keith’s hostility, the tension that surrounded them, it all meant nothing. For one blissful minute, they were friends, they were people who cared more for each other than anything else in the world; and most of all they had a future. Lance felt weak, Keith’s smile like a punch to the stomach. But it didn’t hurt; it knocked the air from him and left him breathless and giddy, but nothing hurt at all.

The harder Lance wished for that moment to stay, the quicker it slipped away. Keith’s eyes drifted from his back up to Allura, and he stepped back hesitantly, clutching his hand close as if treasuring the small sum of happiness it held.

“That’s nice,” he said, very quietly.

And with a curt nod in Allura’s direction, he left the room.

-

“Hunk. Hunk? HUUUUUUUUU-“

“What?” Hunk asked, slipping the mufflers off his ears.

“Hey.”

The yellow paladin raised a brow in question.

“Lance, as much as I love you, I’m kinda in the middle of something. Something that is trying to save our lives?”

As if to emphasise his point, Hunk lifted the bit of machinery he was tinkering with, and gestured to the mess of bolt and wires around them. They were in the lab, Hunk at his worktable, Lance perched on an old bit of refrigerator to avoid Puffy, who was sleeping by the other boy’s feet.

“But I’m sad,” Lance insisted, pouting.

“Oh. Can I make you some food?”

“Nah.”

“A hug?”

“Nah.”

“Wanna watch a movie?”

“Nah.”

“Well,” Hunk said, raising his hands. “I’m officially out of ideas.”

“I want to talk.”

“Oh, right. About what?”

Lance sighed, slumping over the refrigerator dejectedly. He dropped his head against the cool metal when he spoke, muffling his words.

“What did you say?”

“Kff.”

“I still can’t hear-“

“Keith!”

“Oh.”

Hunk’s expression changed, eyes widening in alarm and his whole posture morphing.

“Ooooh.”

“What?”

“What?”

Lance narrowed his eyes. “You’re trying to act casual, and in doing so are really, really not. Acting casual, that is.”

“A-acting? Nah dude, I’m chill, I’m casual as can be, I’m a frickin- um, yeah I know you like Keith.”

Lance scrambled to get upright. “*What?* No, that’s-”

Hunk flinched when his friend went toppling off the refrigerator, landing with a loud *whump* on the floor.

“Yeah, that disproved the theory,” he muttered, as Lance picked himself up sheepishly and went back to sitting more cautiously.

His friend cleared his throat, trying to regain some dignity. “I *did* like Keith.”

“What, you don’t still?”

Lance pouted again, shoulders drooping. “I’m trying not to.”

“*This* is what you’re upset about?”

“I know the black paladin’s supposed to be more mature and shit but... yeah.”

“Hey, that’s alright though. What’s wrong? Why are you trying not too?”

“Cause he hates me!”

“Pretty sure Keith stopped hating you about twelve decades ago.”

“Well maybe he did, but its come back. And you’ve seen how he’s been acting, Hunk, he’s bad for the team. And I’ve tried helping, and I can’t. And I just- I just...”

Lance stopped, burying his head in his hands and tearing up. Hunk’s eyes widened, realising there was more to the situation than he’d thought.

“Wow, you okay?”

“No,” Lance mumbled.

“Did... something happen?”

A pause, one long enough to make Hunk suspicious.

“Sort of.”

Hunk sighed, setting down his tools and lifting the goggles from his eyes. “How about you tell me what happened?”

Lance sighed heavily, leaning his chin on his palm and staring off into space.

“I figured out I liked him,” he began, accepting the slightly greasy cloth Hunk handed to him.

“Like, more than a friend.”

“And then...” Lance paused; how much *did* he want to tell Hunk?

He wanted to talk about Keith, sure; but the things leading up to what happened between them? Not so much. So Lance improvised.

“I, um, started having bad nightmares after we first wormholed. Maybe it was cause of the cave on the planet, or, I don’t know. But when I, um, I... couldn’t sleep, Keith, uh, shared my bed. Cause he reckoned that would help. With the nightmares. Ya know?”

Hunk blanched. “Wait, you and Keith have been sharing a bed?”

“Not *recently*,” Lance whined. “He thought it would help-“

“Oh my god. Oh my god, I never knew Keith was that smooth-“

“What are you talking about?” Lance snapped.

Hunk was laughing, despite his friend’s misery. “Are we talking about the same Keith? Oh no, the guy I like has bad dreams, and the *only* way to help is to sleep with him? That’s *so* smooth, I’m almost-“

“Shut up! It wasn’t like that!”

“Hm.”

“Keith doesn’t like me that way, h-he doesn’t-“

“Hm.”

“Hunk! Just *listen*.”

“Alright,” Hunk sighed, admitting defeat. “What happened after you started sleeping with Keith? By the way, can I tell Pidge-“

Lance’s foul expression stopped whatever he was about to say.

“We weren’t *sleeping*-“ Lance grit his teeth, glowering. “Nothing happened. We’d share a bed, and it helped with my nightmares.”

“And... now you’re not?”

Lance sighed, the dismal air returning. “No. After he got possessed he refused. I thought it was cause he was scared, but then he... he said some awful things.”

Hunk’s expression changed, growing more concerned. “What things?”

“How I... how I wasn’t a good leader, and stuff. Which, I guess is true. He’s upset that we’re stuck here instead of looking for Shiro. And I understand-“

“Not a good leader? What the hell! You’re an awesome leader.”

Lance smiled wryly at his friend. “Thanks buddy. But Keith’s still-“

“Keith’s wrong, okay? You can’t buy into that nonsense. You know how he gets when he’s worried.”

“Yeah, yeah... but that wasn’t what upset me most. It’s so stupid, but what hurt me was that he... um... he said he didn’t want me.”

Lance averted his eyes, staring glumly at the floor and making Hunk’s heart sink.

“Didn’t want to share a bed, or-or hold my hand. Didn’t want to be near me. And I don’t know, but after all that I guess... I guess I thought he liked me. Cause me, I really liked him. I- I sort of love him, Hunk. But now I’m left standing here like an idiot, who fell too hard and too fast, who can’t shake the feeling that we both lost out.”

Silence; Hunk lay a hand gently on Lance’s shoulder, a small but appreciated gesture. Lance sucked air in through his teeth, frowning.

“I just... I just wanted it to be him. And you can say I’m stupid, and young, and that everybody changes and we’ll all find someone new but... I wanted it to be him. And nothing will change the fact that we made each other happy.”

Lance sighed as Hunk squeezed his shoulder, empathising with his friend’s pain.

“I’m sorry, Lance.”

“Thanks,” he mumbled. “I guess I just wanted to get that off my chest.”

“Are you still having nightmares?” Hunk asked cautiously. “Cause I’m sure you could share a room with someone else-“

“Thanks, bud, but I’m all good now.”

Lance smiled; maybe sharing a room with another member of the team would help, but he didn’t want to frighten them with his nightmares.

“Well, mostly good. I’m upset about Keith, but I’ll get over it.”

He paused, looking unsure of himself.

“I guess.”

“Hey,” said Hunk. “I don’t think Keith hates you. He’s just being weird with everyone at the moment.”

Lance head shot up. “Wait. Has he said anything horrid to you?”

Hunk shrugged nonchalantly. “Not really.”

“Not *really*?”

“I don’t trust him at the moment, is what I mean to say. He scares me. And if my life were in his hands-“

Lance had heard enough.

“Has he threatened you?”

“What? No, of course he hasn’t.”

“But he makes you uncomfortable?”

“I’m worried about-“

“Hunk.”

“Kind of. Yes, it’s like we’re his secondary concern. And when it comes to Voltron, and protecting the team and stuff, that’s not very good.”

“No, Lance muttered, already setting himself back on the floor. “It’s not.”

-

It wasn’t hard to find Keith. He was always in one of three places; the training deck, his room, or an abandoned section of the lab, where he was supposedly working on something to help them escape the wormhole. Lance had his doubts. Whenever he tried to find Keith there, the other shooed him away. Just because Lance wouldn’t understand the workings of whatever he was making, didn’t mean he had to such an ass about it. Then again, Keith wasn’t that great at engineering himself, so maybe he was just worried his invention wouldn’t work.

Lance found the boy in the first location, the sounds of a gladiator fight resonating through the walls just outside the training deck. He steeled himself for whatever was to come, before stepping through the doors. Keith was caught up in an intense fight with the gladiator, but something about the way he fought was off. He wasn’t being cocky, he didn’t even look angry; he fought desperately. Lance’s first thought was that the gladiator had gone rogue again, but as he stood there watching Keith fight, he realised the boy was simply exhausted. Keith cried out as the machine landed a hit, clutching his ribs and stumbling. He hissed, squeezing his eyes shut at the pain that overcame his body. Something lurched in Lance’s chest, a sickening feeling; he didn’t like seeing Keith hurt.

Keith threw himself back into the fight, but slower than usual. He ran at the gladiator a little skew, his free hand bracing the side of his stomach. Lance followed his progress with mounting concern. The gladiator struck him again, and this time Keith didn’t just fall over, he went flying. His body hit the deck a good ten feet back, a pained sob exhaled from his chest.

“End training sequence,” Lance called, striding forward into the room.

Keith, who’d looked content enough to lie there on the floor forever, was suddenly scrambling to get to his feet, bayard raised.

“Why’d you end it,” he snapped, the second he spotted Lance coming toward him.

“Because,” Lance muttered, deciding not to point out the fact that Keith looked a step away from comatose, and was barely managing to stand. “How long have you been in here?”

“As long as I usually am.”

“Yeah? You look sick.”

Keith glared, sheathing his bayard but holding a fighting stance none-the-less.

“What’s up?”

Keith blinked. “What’s *up*?”

“Yeah.”

The pair stared at each other, at a loss for words. Neither looked in the mood for such a casual question.

“Nothing,” said Keith. “Bye.”

“Hey, hang on,” Lance called, before Keith could turn away. “We need to talk.”

“Here we go again,” muttered Keith, immediately rubbing Lance the wrong way.

“What do you mean *here we go again*? You’re making the rest of the team worried.”

Sure, Keith was allowed to annoy him; but Hunk was his best friend, and he didn’t deserve this shitty treatment.

“It’s kinda my job to figure out what’s going on.”

Keith frowned, but stayed where he was. “Why am I making the team worried?”

“Uh, lets start with how you’re ignoring everyone? You got Pidge hurt, you insult people, you’re isolating yourself, Keith. And it’s been going on for a bit too long.”

“Oh yeah,” Keith said coldly. “Well it’s going to keep going on.”

Lance frowned, but elected to ignore that comment. “I think we should take you off the suppressants-“

Keith scoffed. “I’ve been off the suppressants for a week, Lance.”

“What?”

“Oh? Did the leader of Voltron not realise?”

“Cut the shit, Keith. Can’t we just have a conversation?”

Keith sobered up for a second, crossing his arms and scowling, but ready to hear Lance out. Lance sighed, determination mingling with self-doubt. In some twisted way, he still cared what Keith thought of him, and it still hurt to see Keith dismiss him.

“You keep denying it, and I know that if I ask now you’ll deny it again, but I *know* that something is wrong, Keith. You told me you didn’t want to be here, stuck in this system, because you want to find Shiro, and I can understand that-“

“No you-“

“Just listen, please.”

Keith huffed irritably, but Lance didn’t miss the way he shifted from one foot to the next, as if trying to alleviate some pain in his leg.

“But wanting to find Shiro doesn’t explain why you’ve been treating the team like this.”

Keith’s eye twitched, but he didn’t interrupt.

“I don’t understand why you’re fighting with Pidge, or why Hunk feels he can’t trust you. It’s... this team is our family, and you’re a part of that. And I didn’t think your only connection to us was through Shiro, so... I guess, I don’t know, Keith. If it’s me, if it’s something else, can you- could

you please just tell me? Just tell me, and even if I can't help, we can--

"Why?" Keith said suddenly, eyes wide. "*Why* are you so persistent?"

"P-persistent?"

"Just leave me alone, Lance! Why are you always- why are you still trying to talk, h-haven't I, aren't you--"

Lance face morphed into one of puzzlement as Keith stuttered through his sentence. He gestured wildly, speechlessly, like someone caught in disbelief.

"Because I care about you?" He answered, once Keith had given up trying to form words. "What the hell, Keith, I think we've discussed this before."

"I don't," Keith said defiantly, almost childishly.

"What?"

"I don't care about you."

"Too bad."

Keith's mouth hung open. "Wh..."

"I'm not here to discuss personal politics, Keith. I'm the black paladin, whether you like it or not, and *you* are tearing this team apart."

"I--"

"Stop arguing with me, you know I'm right! You changed, Keith, after that cave."

"I came to my senses," Keith hissed.

"What absolute bullshit," Lance bit back. "You've never been further from yourself."

"What are you trying to achieve, Lance? How would you know what I--"

"Cause I've seen you happy," Lance snapped, his voice catching. "And it's not this."

"That's--"

"I'm not an idiot, Keith," Lance cried, furious at the tears that burned at the corners of his eyes.

"I'm *not* an idiot. I saw the way you acted around me, I-I know how you felt. I'm not stupid. And if all that just... if it just vanished, t-that's fine. But it doesn't explain- your treatment of the team doesn't depend on your feelings toward me."

He was breathing too fast, throat tightening, eyes brimming with tears, and heart shattering under the look Keith was giving him. Keith's expression was hard to read, impossible really. His lips were parted slightly, and if Lance didn't know any better, he'd say it was shock.

"I *miss* you," Lance stammered, because he'd already gone this far. "I miss talking, a-and training, I-I just miss you."

Keith stayed speechless, breathless, his gaze as constant and uncompromising as the daylight, drowning Lance in its intensity.

“Say something,” Lance breathed. “Please?”

The seconds stretched, as did the silence, and Lance couldn’t even find it in himself to be embarrassed when the first tears fell. The rope burn around his wrist, the cold, the loneliness, the absence left by Keith; it hurt.

“Please?”

Keith said nothing. Slowly, so, so slowly, his eyes left Lance, falling to the floor, then behind his shoulder. Keith tucked his bayard away, movements stiff and mechanical. Lance failed to stop the sob that bubbled up his throat when Keith turned, still trapped in a state of shell-shock. *I miss you.* What a stupid thing to say. As Keith walked away, his answer was left plainly in his wake; *I don’t.*

Chapter End Notes

COMING SOON TO A FIC NEAR YOU: A CHAPTER THAT CONTAINS MORE
THAN SAPPY CONVERSATIONS IM SO SORRY

Chapter Notes

YO THANKS FOR BEING SO PATIENT that thing i said about being in the middle of nowhere and not being able to update YEAH but thanks for waiting <3 <3
AND FOR YOUR LOVELY COMMENTS!! Sorry I've been so slack at replying, I've been super busy, but I appreciate each and every one so much, thank you all for your ongoing support!!

ALSO had to split this chapter so next has action and hopefully I can post it sooner!
Thanks guys! <3

-

“Fraction formation!”

Lance leapt sideways, nearly colliding with Pidge as the group of paladins struggled to follow Allura’s fast set of training instructions.

“I said fraction formation!” She yelled, watching them from the sidelines. “Let them spilt you, but follow the pattern!”

Another minute of wildly swerving around the swarm of drones, and everyone was on the verge of collapsing. With a deep sigh, Allura called off the training bots.

“Enough! We’ll go through this step by step another day.”

Lance dropped onto the ground, panting, meeting the small fist bump Pidge offered him. They might suck by Allura standards, but Lance reckoned they were improving pretty well.

“What are you doing?” Allura snapped at the four paladins seated on the mat. “Up! Training isn’t over!”

With a resounding groan, Lance pushed himself to his feet. Curiously, Keith was last up, grimacing lightly as he stood up awkwardly. Lance frowned, but elected not to comment. He was getting tired of rejection, and so, it seemed, was everyone else. They’d been training all morning; it was obvious that this was Allura’s way of relieving stress. The better prepared her paladins were, the less she had to worry about the impending threat of the Dark Planet.

“I’d like some weapons training,” the princess announced.

She was dressed in a different sort of armour, one that Lance guessed could more appropriately accommodate the small baby bump.

“Lance,” she said, drawing his attention.

“Yeah?” He asked, as Allura beckoned him over.

The other paladins were retrieving their bayards, but as Lance went for the blue one, Allura

stopped him.

“I realise this will be an experimental sort of session,” she explained. “But you’re yet to use the black bayard.”

Lance froze. *Oh*. There he was, in a black set of armour, pilot of the black lion, and he didn’t even know what the bayard would do for him. The thought was a little daft, but exciting nonetheless. Watching the emotions play out on Allura’s face, however, made him wonder if there was a reason she’d held onto it for so long. It was one step at a time for Allura, and the ever-growing bump of her stomach was a constant reminder of how little time they had to find Shiro.

“Allura,” Lance said softly, so the others wouldn’t hear. “I’m fine with the blue bayard, you know.”

Allura’s smile wavered, but she stayed certain in her decision. “I can’t hold onto it forever. It was made to be used. If retrieving it was the last thing he did, I... you’ll do him justice, I know.”

That was a heavy expectation, but acknowledging the hope and trust within Allura’s eyes, Lance took the bayard from her outstretched hand. He stepped back, black bayard in hand, watching it without blinking. The eyes of the other paladins were on him now, their own bayards already formed and ready to begin training. Lance’s eyes grew wider, feeling the bayards energy thrumming through his hand, and then-

Nothing.

Pidge cleared her throat. “You gonna activate it, or what?”

Lance gave the bayard a little shake. Allura was still watching him intently, full of hope. A horrible, horrible feeling clawed its way up Lance’s throat when the bayard stopped thrumming all together. He stood there, nudging at Black with his mind, but the bayard did nothing. It stayed in its basic form in his hand, refusing to transform into a weapon.

“Lance?”

“I, uh, I’m trying.”

He frowned, urging to bayard to do something, *anything*. He’d accept it turning into a children’s sponge sword at the moment, as long as it did something. Keith’s eyes were burning into his back, and Lance could feel the disapproval; as if he needed one more reason to doubt Lance’s leadership. Allura’s smile was shrinking, her brows furrowing, looking between him and the bayard doubtfully. Lance huffed angrily, switching hands, squeezing the bayard and willing it forth with all his might. Nothing happened; his shoulders slumped.

“I... I’m sorry, Allura. I don’t know what to do.”

Allura took a long moment to reply, her mind a million miles away, but when she did, she still forced a smile. “Don’t worry about it. The black lion has taken time to respond, perhaps the bayard will too.”

“Maybe Zarkon broke it,” Pidge suggested.

Keith, thankfully, chose not to comment. Lance wasn’t sure he could handle that right now.

“I’ll, um, train with the blue bayard today.”

Moving away, Lance wished the floor would swallow him whole, save him the disgrace of dragging his feet back toward the blue bayard. Black rejecting him? Sure. But a goddam bayard? That didn't happen, at least it shouldn't. Black didn't hate him, he was certain, so why did things like this keep happening? Sighing, he set the black bayard down, and plucked up the blue one beside it. He swung it, ready to catch- Lance's hands met thin air. He stared at the unformed bayard in his hands, definitely blue, definitely his, but not forming a gun.

"What the fuck?" He said, before the others even had time to notice the problem. "What the *fuck*?"

"What is it?" Allura asked.

"My bayards not forming."

"The blue one?" Hunk blurted.

"Yes the blue one. It's not making a goddam gun, or anything."

The rest of his team stared, shifting closer as if to clarify it definitely was the blue bayard he was holding. Lance wanted to cry, or scream, or hit something, preferably with his bayard, which unfortunately was not possible.

"What the hell?"

"This is... unexpected," said Allura.

"Why's it not forming?"

The princess simply shook her head, puzzled. "I don't- I'm sorry, Lance, I don't know."

"Coran?" Lance asked softly, looking to the control box watching over the training deck.

There was no reply; Coran didn't know either. Instead of amazement, the others were now watching him with pity.

"Maybe it needs some warming up," Hunk said, trying to sooth the sting.

Lance nodded, but they all knew that wasn't true.

"I might, uh..." His face was burning, too hot, too much, he wished they'd all stop staring at him. "I'll skip this one, guys."

"Lance--"

"Just, I, I gotta do some stuff anyway. I'll catch you later."

Lance dropped his head, ignoring Allura's pitiful gaze as he walked from the training deck.

-

"Alright!"

Lance tossed the blue bayard down at the feet of the blue and black lions, flinching as it skittered across the floor, but too angry to care.

"Listen up you stupid lions!"

He angled a finger at the bayard, the blue lion on his left, the black on his right, both robots unsubtly ignoring his presence.

“Would any of you like to explain,” Lance said, seething. “Why my bayard doesn’t work? And I don’t mean the black bayard, oh no, this is on you too, Blue. What’s up with this?”

Lance paced back and forth, eyeing both lion’s angrily, never mind he was a hundredth of their size.

“I left this choice to *you*,” he said, pointing to each of them. “I let you choose who I was meant to pilot, and I didn’t object. So this? Neither of the bayards working? What the hell, guys?”

He dropped his arms in defeat, standing between the pair of unresponsive lions.

“Guys?”

Another sigh, deep enough to feel it in his core.

“Blue? Black? Come on, I... I don’t know what to do. I don’t get it.”

Lance looked for light in either of the lion’s eyes, the familiar twinkle of Blue’s, or just a spark of life in Black’s, but found nothing. Frustrated, mildly upset, Lance began pacing. He was only half aware of the words that left his mouth in a stream, cursing, begging, trying to reason with the lions. His movements became exaggerated, too caught up in his own thoughts to really be speaking to the lions’. If he stopped rambling for just a short few seconds, he’d notice the slight inclination of each robot’s head and the dull light that sparked behind their eyes. If Lance had been paying more attention, he’d have noticed the projection before he walked smack into it.

Noise, like a wave, came crashing over him. Lance gasped, feeling for his chest as the world spun around him. There was noise, and light, and it threw him into a state of confusion. As he returned to his senses, he realised he was still in the hangar, but all around him was a projection. A video recording. *Mom*. Lance knew what this was; just like the video Black had shown him of he and Allita a while back, this was a projection of an old family recording. Except this time it felt a whole lot more real. Instead of blurry pixels and disjointed bits of sound, this was crystal clear, holographic almost, encasing him. Black and Blue’s eyes were glowing bright, both of them feeding the video.

Lance stumbled back, out of the centre of the projection, trying to gain an actual view of what was happening. He blinked, clearing his vision, making sense of the scene before him.

“I want the yellow one.”

That was Allita’s voice. Lance spun; everything was a blur of colour and he struggled to find his place within it.

“I want the yellow one...” prompted Susanna, his mother.

“Please,” came the response, just as Lance came to a stop.

He was facing the kitchen table in their old home, long before Allita’s death. The girl in question looked about six, and Lance spotted his own younger self beside her. Their mother was filming again, by the looks of it, seated at the far end of the table. They had a few tubs of play dough spread across the table, playing happily as their older sister, only twelve at the time, stood baking something in the background.

“Where is the brown?” Lance drawled, bouncing about in his seat.

“There’s isn’t a brown one, sweetie,” his mother replied.

“But I need brown.”

“Can you try make some?”

“Mami,” their older sister complained, clearly eavesdropping. “He’ll mess them all up.”

“Just let them play, Lily. What are you cooking?”

“Stuff,” Lily answered quickly, not actually interested in being filmed.

Meanwhile, six-year-old Lance was enthusiastically lumping bits of multi-coloured play dough together, trying to get the right colour for the disfigured sculpture he was creating. Actual Lance followed the video fondly, though suspiciously. It was frightfully clear, and he wondered if it was because both lions were contributing to the projection. Allita was much more careful about her sculpture, though it didn’t look any better than Lance’s.

“What are you making?” Susanna asked her twins, who were currently the youngest two members of the family.

“I’m making Allita!” Lance announced loudly and happily, slamming his sculpture down on the table, denting it even more.

“Oh!” Susanna exclaimed, eyeing the very ugly lump of colours, topped with a slither of brownish play dough that was likely meant to be his sister’s hair. “How nice.”

“Wow,” Allita drawled, taking the sculpture of herself gingerly into her hands. “It’s so nice.”

Lance’s face lit up, jumping up and down. “Do you like it?”

“Yeah,” Allita said, though her face stayed neutral. “Wow.”

Lance was grinning ear to ear, making sure to flash his mother a smile too.

“And you, Allita, what did you make?”

“Um...” Allita prodded her own sculpture. “A fish.”

Lance frowned, sticking his nose right up to the lump of play dough.

“That doesn’t look like a fish.”

“Yes it does,” Susanna quickly amended. “Look, there’s its tail.”

“I don’t see it,” Lance mumbled, just as Allita squeaked, “That’s its head, mami!”

“It looks more... like a rock,” Lance said, making his older-self smile slightly.

Allita frowned, eyeing Lance’s own sculpture. Her brother chuckled to himself, and in a flash, she slammed her tiny fist down on top of his model of her.

“Allita!” Their mother scolded, as Lance gasped. “That’s not very nice!”

“Allita,” Lance whined, staring dismally at his squished sculpture. “You *broke* it.”

Allita looked between her mother and brother guiltily.

“Say sorry, Allita,” Susanna said, as Lance sniffled.

A sigh.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled.

Then, coming up with a better idea, held up her fish. “You can break mine.”

“I don’t wanna,” Lance mumbled, laying his head against the table in an all too dramatic way.

“Break it,” Allita insisted.

“No.”

“But Lancey Laaance-“

“Nooo-“

“Break it,” Allita said again, firmer, and this time in felt different.

Lance swallowed, watching the video around him carefully. It was starting to feel much like it had the first time, but this time the feeling was more vivid, more distinct. His mother, Lily, the kitchen, they were all starting to fade, leaving just him and Allita. He looked around in desperation, trying to see more of their home, not wanting the video to change. The sounds around him blurred into a buzz, everything coming together, muffled.

“Break it,” Allita said, her voice closer than he’d expected.

When Lance looked toward the table, she was right in front of him. He didn’t even know if the others were still there, because all he could focus on was his sister, holding out her sculpture to *him*. Not the camera, not their mother, not his six-year-old self, *him*.

“Don’t make me do it,” Allita said, looking him dead in the eye.

Lance shivered. He stretched a hand out, trying to touch her, by his hand drifted through thin air and the projection crackled.

“Don’t make me do it.”

“Do what?” He asked, and immediately felt stupid when she couldn’t hear him.

This was a video. *Then why does it feel like this?* Lance shook his head, trying to clear his mind. Allita was still there, watching him, holding out her creation.

“Break it,” she said. “Don’t make me do it.”

Lance couldn’t do anything but stare, enwrapped by the strange video. Allita’s eyes were burning; they looked angry. *Break it. Do you understand?* In a blink, she crushed the small model in her fist, slamming her hand down on it, as the world around them erupted in bright light. Lance fell back, white light burning his eyes. He landed flat on his ass, gasping, the video falling to pieces around him until all he could hear was his own breathing. The hangar remained untouched, the light slowly going out from the lion’s eyes.

“What the hell,” he breathed, though he didn’t expect the lions to tell him.

Break it.

“What the hell?”

-

Lance had a plan. He didn't like the plan, because it involved talking to Allura, and he knew once Allura managed to get one secret out of him... well, she'd probably end up getting them all. Lance wasn't sure he was ready for that. Still, it felt like the visions of Allura the lions had shown him demanded attention, and he had no idea where to even begin. Solution: Allura.

The others should have just finished up on the training deck, so he was hoping to catch her there. His feet nearly turned him around many times on the way there, but Lance persevered. He was nearly at the doors when he heard the voices; neither was Allura.

“No! Bitch about it all you want, Keith, I deserve an explanation.”

Pidge. Lance slowed his steps, inching up to the corner. He really shouldn't be eavesdropping, but curiosity got the better of him.

“An explanation for what?” Keith snapped.

Both friends sounded angry, like they'd been fighting for a while. Lance knew they weren't getting on, much like him and Keith, but save the grouchiness and sidelong glances, he hadn't actually heard Pidge and Keith arguing before.

“Oh my *god*, you- stop treating me like an idiot! It hurts, don't you get it? You've been treating everyone awfully.”

“I've been-“

“It hurt, Keith! You let me get hurt, and you ignore me, and then y-you just- just stop it, alright.”

Pidge was losing composure quickly. Lance risked a glance around the corner, staying hidden in the shadows. The pair stood about five feet apart, Keith's arms crossed tightly, Pidge's fists clenched and pointed accusingly. The short ponytail she'd scraped her sweaty hair into was falling apart, much like the rest of her. Lance couldn't see her face, only her expressive gestures. She'd stripped down to a singlet after training, and Lance could see a fresh cut on her upper arm. He wondered if that was another training accident.

“What are you trying to say?” Keith demanded, both of them raising their voices.

“Why?” Pidge yelled. “Why are you being like this? Christ, Keith, it's not that hard to be *decent*. You keep giving me shit and it's not alright.”

“Oh,” Keith sneered. “I'm giving you shit? For what? Teaching you how to defend yourself-“

“Shut up! I can fight and defend myself fine! I've saved this team on multiple occasions, so don't give me that crap, because you do not- you have no right.”

Pidge was on the verge of hysterics, and Lance could hear her voice wobbling. Keith stayed exactly as he was, silent, eyes aflame with anger, letting Pidge go off.

“We're all scared! We're all confused, that doesn't give you the right to act like this. If you- if you c-can't be a friend to me, then stay away from me. I'm tired of this, this is *shit*.”

Keith flinched, arms unravelling as if Pidge's words had shocked him.

"I can't- I cannot deal with you. So go a-and say whatever shit you want about me, but I can't handle this anymore. Until you've stopped this- w-whatever this is, and you apologise, and you explain, s-stay away from me, Keith."

Pidge was crying, Lance didn't need to see her face to know that. Her voice broke, fiery anger and heartbreak spewing from her mouth. And Keith- Lance blinked, Keith was crying too. Not much, and he didn't look sad as such, more so, Lance had never see him so hurt, or angry. No sniffing, no sobbing, but tears ran freely from his eyes, betraying him.

"I-" Keith faltered, choking on his words, so much pent up emotion threatening to spill.

"I don't need to apologise!" He yelled, as raw and devastated as Pidge.

Pidge shook her head, wiping at her eyes angrily. "Fuck you."

Keith was breathing fast, probably trying to refrain from completely breaking down like Pidge.

"That all you had to say-"

"Fuck you!" Lance flinched when Pidge shouted, but Keith just let it come. "Stay away from me!"

"*Fine!*"

"I *hate* y-" Pidge cut herself off with a sob, muffling it with her hand. "Stay away from me."

Keith was trembling, staring straight ahead and refusing to acknowledge Pidge as she turned away. The girl was failing any attempts at composing herself, so instead she chose to flee. Lance ducked deeper into the shadows as Pidge passed in a hurry, the echo of her foots steps down the passage the only sound. Lance stayed motionless, listening, his heart beating fast. Slowly, so slowly, he turned and peered back around the corner, he didn't know what for, closure maybe.

Keith stood alone in the hallway, his arms hanging limply by his sides, staring at the space Pidge had disappeared into. He didn't move, save the fast rise and fall of his chest, and the flutter of his eyelids, churning out tears. Lance held his breath, watching Keith's face closely, confused because- *where is the anger?* Keith had been so, so angry, he was sure of it. Lance saw it, heard it, the cruel indifference he'd shown Pidge, the harsh words, the fiery glare and clenched fists. But now? Keith didn't look angry at all; all that emotion vanished, like a spark snuffed out by the weight of an entire ocean, an all-encompassing flood of new emotion. *Devastation.*

It was unsettling, watching Keith Kogane break. It was hard to know what to compare it to. It certainly wasn't a window shattering; that was loud and abrupt, and over too soon. It wasn't a building crumbling, that was too slow, too well distributed. It wasn't nails cracking wood, or chains snapping, or light bulbs exploding, or even a violent volcanic eruption. It wasn't wind breaking branches off trees, or fire eating paper, or plates smashing, or tires crushing gravel under their weight. No forest fires, or hurricanes, or damn walls. Keith was the end of an ice age.

Keith was millennia of ice and cold, he was a new world order, a change in the very definition of ones being. Lance could see it, a million years and layers of ice, melting, breaking apart. Oceans rose, glaciers melted, leaving colossal valleys in their wake. The whole world was forced to change. A wounded gasp tore away from Keith's chest as he fell to his knees, hollow and broken. He retracted, like ice retreating from arable land, sinking down against the wall, arms resting weakly on the floor. Harsh icicles melted into fluid rivers, as all his muscles went lax. Keith wasn't a pretty crier, and he'd perfected the art of crying in silence. Lance had seen very few people cry

like that, like they had just lost their last tether to reality. Keith curled into himself, doubled over and hunched against the wall. Lance's stomach twisted uncomfortably at the sight; he'd never seen Keith like this.

Once he started he couldn't stop. The boy cried uncontrollably into his arms, gasping for air and making low, pained noises that chilled Lance to the bone. *Go to him*, every instinct in his body screamed. Go hold him, talk to him, do something. Lance shifted, about to take a step forward, but stopped himself. Keith's chest was heaving with sobs, so violent he looked like he might be ill. But what would he do if he knew Lance was there? Lance grit his teeth; Keith was hurting, that much was obvious, and it sure as hell didn't make sense, but it wasn't as if he was suddenly going to want Lance's help. *Help him*, his mind screamed. *Hold him*.

Lance stepped back, away from the corner, slowly backing away from that hallway. Keith's muffled sobs were like stab wounds, puncturing him deeper with every inch he retreated. Keith didn't want his help, he'd made that much clear already. They'd stopped helping each other quite some time ago. That thought didn't relieve the guilt Lance felt at all.

Chapter Notes

As promised next chapter a teeny bit early WOW OH MY GOD 10000 HITS YOU
ALL ARE AMAZING HOLY SHIT
THANK YOU SO SO MUCH EVERYONE!! And thanks for the lovely comments as
always <3 <3 <3 <3

HI WARNING DARKER THEMES IN THIS CHAPTER BUT LIKE THATS THIS
WHOLE STORY SO idk
if u worried u can always message me

ta <3

-

There is a certain hour of the morning during which people are least aware of their surroundings. Lance was sure it was meant to be two, but since the wormhole, for him that time was a little before three. By three in the morning, the wormhole was long over; there was nothing left to worry about but the inevitable. He could never quite tell if he was dreaming at that time, which is why, when his door opened a little before three, Lance didn't wake.

He didn't stir at all, not until a weight lowered itself gingerly onto the mattress beside him. Silence. Lance was barely awake, sighing deeply and curling into the warmth of his blanket. The person seated on the edge of his mattress froze, but Lance kept on sleeping. He was vaguely aware of a hand settling in his hair, brushing the strands back from his forehead ever so gently. It felt nice; Lance rolled toward the warmth, grumbling slightly when the hand in his hair grew tense. For a moment, nothing happened, but gradually the hand began carding through his hair, soothing him back to sleep.

It's a dream. Lance found he didn't care, it was comforting, and warm, and he couldn't bring himself to a high enough level of consciousness to figure out what was actually happening. The warmth spread as a body leant toward him, hovering over him tentatively. A hand settled delicately over his chest, over his heart, and something clicked in Lance's head. *Keith.* Lance sighed softly, curling toward the warmth. *It's a dream.* He was too tired to care.

The fingers in his hair tightened minutely, cupping his face protectively. There was someone *right* over him, Lance realised, even in his sleep-ridden state. Was it Keith? *Wake up.* Another pull of feather light fingers through his hair, and Lance forgot how to open his eyes. A thumb traced his jaw, rubbed softly at his cheeks, before drifting over his lips. Lance mind was slowly, slowly catching on to reality. He fought to keep his breathing even as he came closer to consciousness, trying not to frighten away whoever it was.

It might've been due to the fact that he was still half asleep that Lance didn't immediately jump to his own defence, or it may have been that whoever it was touching him was doing it with such care and tenderness that he was fine to stay like that for as long as time would permit. As Lance came slowly to his senses, he became more aware of whoever was there in his room. A quiet snuffle, like

someone trying not to cry, the warmth of their body seeping through the blankets to him. A hand caressed his face, and Lance could feel the warm puff of someone's breath across his skin. Hair tickled his cheeks, and that was all the confirmation he needed. *Keith.*

Lance kept absolutely still as Keith's finger explored his face, so soft Lance was surprised they'd woken him at all. He didn't really know what was happening, or why, but he was too tired and too comfortable to question it. He was, by this stage, almost entirely certain it was Keith, but for the life of him, Lance couldn't seem to remember what was wrong with that. Were they sharing a bed again? This felt more intimate than that.

The more puzzling thoughts clouded his brain, the further Lance was pulled from his sleep. The next time Keith's fingers settled on his lips, Lance nearly stopped breathing all together. *What's he doing?* He didn't dare let on to the fact he was awake; the soothing fingers Keith kept running through his hair easily lulled him back into a trance anyway. The warmth of Keith's breath against his lips was enough to shock him into some sort of awareness, though. Lance exhaled very slowly, his motionless fingers itching to reach up and grab him. *It's a dream.* But was it? Lance didn't want it to be, but there was no plausible reality in which Keith would be doing this, gently handling Lance as he slept, soothing out any frown lines, hovering so near Lance could tilt his head up and be kissing him. That thought made his heart stutter; was Keith- was Keith going to kiss him?

He was *right* there, it would be so easy. And then what? What was Keith even doing there? Dream or not, Lance refused to do anything that might shatter this illusion. He kept absolutely still as Keith paused with just a few centimetres between them, seemingly debating the next course of action himself. A quiet sigh, barely audible, with a hiccup of emotion. His forehead dropped against Lance's lightly, so softly it wouldn't have woken Lance weren't he already awake. *Open your eyes,* but he didn't want to break this moment. Keith inhaled sharply, tearfully, probably louder than he'd meant to. A drop of water settled on Lance's cheek; Keith was crying.

It was driving him up the wall, lying there, not moving, as Keith kept him safe and close. *Why's he crying?* They fought, Lance was remembering, Keith hated him. It didn't feel like it now, not when Keith leant in, pressing his lips to the corner of Lance's, just out of reach of an actual kiss. It was so soft, barely there at all, but Lance's thoughts scattered. He could hear his heart beating, a dull rush of white noise filling his ears. The hands, they were gone. The weight lifted from his mattress, and Lance strained to hear his door opening. Nothing, no sounds of footsteps or doors closing. Had he imagined it?

Lance's eyes fluttered open, staring up at the dark ceiling. Slowly, cautiously, he sat up, scanning the dark room. Though full of shadows, it was definitely empty. *It's a dream.* Lance's heart sank, reaching out to touch his cheek, where he was *sure* he could still feel Keith's lips lingering. Even so, as he lay back down in bed, trying to convince himself he'd imagined it, the feeling didn't fade.

-

Lance left his room with purpose the next morning. His hand kept going to his cheek, as if trying to feel for the damp tears he knew had been there. He didn't know if it had all been a dream, but he was going to find out. Keith was a terrible liar; even if he was stubborn about it, one question about a pre-dawn visit to Lance's room, and he'd have his answer. He entered the dining room with questions burning on the tip of his tongue, but- Lance paused, frowning, spinning in a little circle. There was no one there. *Huh?* Lance checked around the kitchen just to be sure, but the whole place was eerily silent.

He returned to the hallway, making his way toward the bridge. That was the only other place he could think of; surely the others were awake by now. Lance listened for voices on his walk, but no

one else was wondering the halls. *Weird*. Pushing aside the uneasy feeling, he picked up pace toward the bridge.

The sounds of voices came to him through the walls, existent, but too quiet to be understood. Nearly to the doors now, Lance wondered why no one was having breakfast. The doors sat before him; he pushed them aside, and stopped dead in his tracks. The others were there alright, but he could tell in the first second something was wrong. Allura looked up when he entered, her eyes red rimmed and angry. Lance took cautious steps into the room, feeling like he was stepping into the aftermath of an explosion.

“Where have you been?” Allura asked, and there was no time for excuses in her tone.

Lance blinked, stunned.

“Asleep,” he answered slowly. “What the hell is happening?”

At the sound of his voice, Pidge looked up. She was seated on the short step up to the controls, curled into a ball, her eyes red and harrowed from crying. She didn’t say anything, not yet, her expression devoid of feeling. Hunk sat a little to her left, glaring at his feet. Coran was muttering to himself angrily, punching digits into his tablet far more forcefully than necessary. And Keith-Lance’s stomach dropped.

“Where’s Keith?”

“You didn’t hear?” Pidge said, her voice raw from crying. She sounded bitter. “You just missed him.”

No. *No no no*. Lance’s pulse picked up, looking around the room in search of the red paladin, refusing to believe what Pidge had said.

“What’s happening?” He asked Allura, quickly devolving into a state of alarm. “Where is he?”

Allura took a steady breath, she looked *furios*.

“Keith has left us,” she said tightly. “To go search for Shiro.”

“Left us,” Lance echoed, her words reverberating through his head like church bells, overlapping and growing louder and louder until it was one swarm of chilling truth.

Keith left them.

“And if Pidge, Hunk, or Coran,” Hunk spat out bitterly. “Decide they would also like to live, they should consider a similar course of action.”

Lance stood dead still, flinching when Pidge broke down into a horrible fit of tears. Hunk didn’t even reach out to comfort her; at first Lance thought Pidge must have rejected his help, but he soon realised his friend looked angry with her too. Hunk’s gaze shifted to the younger paladin, hurt, but firm. What the hell was this? Lance stumbled forward, in a state of shock for sure, but unable to bear the sight of Pidge crying like that.

“Hey,” he said, kneeling before her.

“She wanted to go with him,” Hunk said suddenly, coldly, causing Lance to look up.

Allura looked angry too; were they seriously blaming Pidge for wanting to escape this stupid

system? Lance returned his attention to the youngest paladin, who sobbed harder into her sleeve.

“I-I-I d-didn’t want t-t-“ she stopped, stuttering, regaining her breath. “-leave you, Lance. I didn’t want to l-leave, I’m s-so s-sorry.”

“Hey,” he tried. “Pidge, it’s alright-“

“It’s my f-fault,” she stammered. “T-told him to s-stay away.”

Pidge was on the verge of a panic attack, and Lance’s eyes widened the heavier her crying became.

“I didn’t mean it,” she wailed, gasping for air. “I d-didn’t mean it, I-I-I-“

Lance scooped her into a hug. He didn’t know if it would comfort her much, but the cold looks everyone else was giving her couldn’t be helping either. Pidge sobbed into his shirt, wrapping her arms so tightly around his neck Lance thought he might suffocate. He could feel pieces of his heart flaking off one by one, pooling at his feet as he held Pidge and came to accept what was the new reality. Lance wanted to be angry, he wanted to hate Keith. And he did, a little, for making Pidge cry. But did he blame him for leaving to find Shiro? Not even a little. He didn’t blame Keith, he didn’t resent him, but that didn’t mean it didn’t hurt. No, it hurt more than Lance could have imagined. He felt dizzy, a nauseous, and when he focused on the steady beating in his chest, his heart *hurt*. A crushing pressure surrounded it, and it really, really hurt.

He hadn’t even said goodbye. Lance needed to do something, he didn’t know what. He wasn’t about to try and stop Keith leaving, but he... he just wanted to *know*.

“Pidge, I...” he trailed off as Pidge hugged him harder, her body shaking with silent sobs.

Relenting, he scooped the smallest paladin up as he stood, finding Pidge wasn’t much harder to carry around than one of his little cousins. Hunk shot him a dark look, but Lance ignored it. Everyone was bound to have their own opinion on an issue like this, best to let everyone calm down before they started a fight.

“How long ago did he leave?” He asked, turning to Allura with Pidge piled awkwardly in his arms.

“Ten minutes,” the princess replied snappishly.

You *just* missed him. Lance knew where her anger was coming from. Allura agreed with him on the point of sending the others away. If they failed to find a way out, they were adamant that the rest should leave. But this, Keith leaving *now*... One of four prized paladins, deserting the rest of his team. Allura wanted to search for Shiro too, he could see how it was hurting her. Keith abandoning the rest of his team for the sake of just one person... Lance didn’t share her anger, but he understood.

“Why did no one call me?” He demanded, trying to awkwardly balance Pidge’s weight against his hip.

She was kinda heavy, but there was no way Lance was setting her down looking so despondent and guilty.

“I did,” Allura said. “Many times. Didn’t you hear?”

Lance frowned. “No.”

An awful thought crept into his mind, of Keith in his room, of Keith tampering with the comms

there. He didn't want Lance finding out he was leaving until he was long gone.

"Are we tracking him?" Lance asked, starting to get worried.

Allura waved a hand dismissively toward one of the screens, and Lance meandered over, jostling Pidge, who just sniffled and tucked her nose into his shirt. Gross? Maybe; but his cousins were worse. He peered over the display, searching for the blinking dot bound to indicate Keith's location. He hadn't taken Red, just a plain pod; this was final then. He was leaving them, he was leaving *Voltron*, he was- Lance froze, following the path of the blinking dot.

"He's going to find Shiro?" He asked.

No one replied, either they didn't care enough, or were too caught up in their own irate thoughts. Pidge whimpered quietly, muffling the sound with her palm.

"He's going to find Shiro?" Lance repeated, loud and demanding.

"Yes," Allura snapped, glaring.

No. Lance stared at the screen, following its path one more time, just to be sure. *Please*, he thought, *please, not this, not this.*

"Pidge," he stammered, trying to lower the girl to the ground. "Let go."

She made a questioning noise, unwrapping her arms from Lance's neck as he set her feet down. "You need to let go."

"What?" Allura asked, still angry, but somewhat suspicious of Lance's behaviour.

Lance was burning with anger, not at Keith, but at the team, at himself. *Stupid stupid stupid.* Pidge flinched, retracting her arms quickly and stumbling away from him.

"Lance, you're... really cold."

"Fuck," Lance muttered, already retreating from the screen, turning toward the door. "Fuck, *fuck.*"

Eyes followed him toward the door, all of them confused.

"Lance, what-"

"Look at the screen!" He yelled, picking up pace as his feet carried him toward the door. "Look at the fucking screen!"

Keith wasn't going to find Shiro. Keith was headed directly for the dwarf planet.

-

No matter how fast he ran, it wasn't enough.

"Black!" Lance screamed, trying to summon the lion.

He didn't have his armour, or a bayard, not that those would help anyway at the moment; Black was his only hope of getting to Keith in time. Lance's lungs screamed as he ran, pushing himself to the absolute limit, tearing down the hallway toward the hanger of lions. His feet hammered along the final passage, all of it loud enough to drown out whatever was being said to him over the comms. If the others hadn't figured it out by now, they would soon. Lance couldn't wait around.

By some miracle, Black was waiting for him with an open mouth. Lance sprinted toward her, flying up the ramp before slamming into the side of the cockpit in his haste. The black lion was up in an instant, wasting no time in launching them into space. Lance gasped for air, head spinning. *No no no no.*

“Come on!” He yelled, throwing Black into full gear. “*COME ON!*”

He had no idea what Keith was planning, but it couldn’t be good. In fact, Lance had never feared for the other this much in his life. *It’s not a dream*, said a quiet part of his mind, *it’s goodbye*. He should have woken up, he should have grabbed him, held him, stopped him leaving like he wanted to. Lance grit his teeth, plunging through space, toward the planet.

“*Lance? Lance, answer me, please!*”

Allura.

“Right here, princess,” he bit out, the sun growing larger in his window.

“*Are you following Keith?*”

“Yes.”

“*He’s headed toward the dwarf planet, Lance, I-I didn’t realise, I don’t know what’s going on.*”

“Me neither, but it’s not good.”

“*He’s-*” Allura paused, sucking in a sharp breath. “*He’s reached the surface. I don’t know what he’s doing, but he’s already there.*”

Lance shivered, pushing uselessly at Black’s controls, trying to go faster.

“*Hurry,*” said Allura.

“I am.”

It was impossible to tell, in the vastness of space, how fast he was moving, but it all seemed to slow as the dwarf planet came into view. Lance knew he should slow down, land safely, but all he could think about was getting to Keith. *Danger*, screamed his mind. *He’s in danger*. Why did he leave them? Why lie? Lance didn’t have time to consider as he came crashing through the planet’s atmosphere, careening toward the surface. The forest below was vast, but there was no question as to where Keith would be.

Pine trees shattered under the weight of the black lion as Lance slammed the machine down. His landing was a little off, not as near to the cave as he would have liked. No time for corrections, he was out of his seat and scrambling toward the exit before Black had even lowered her head. Lance could feel every second getting the better of him as he ran toward where the cave and tunnel should be, swatting away the branches of prickly trees. *Please be alright, please be alive, please-*

He burst into the clearing, heart just about crawling up out of his throat. For a split second, the world stood still. There was Keith, standing just beneath the lip of the cave, eyes shut, head craned toward the faint sun filtering down. In that moment, everything looked alright. It was peaceful, almost. Lance heard the faint whisper of the pines around him, the dappled red light shifting around Keith’s feet. He didn’t have armour, just his plain long shirt and the pants belonging to his flight suit. *Defenceless*. He looked completely at peace, not even aware that Lance was standing there. Eyes still closed, face inclined toward the sky, his palm tightened around something.

Lance eye's fell to the device in Keith's hand, and followed what it lead to. A deep inhale, and Keith squeezed his palm shut. Lance's illusion of peace shattered. It made sense, then and there, all of it. Keith's lie, his whole secret project, the device he'd been building he claimed would help them. *Bomb*, Lance's mind supplied numbly. *That's a bomb*. Keith let go of the breath he'd been holding, one last breath, as his fingers loosened to release trigger, and Lance snapped.

He must've screamed Keith's name, but he couldn't even hear his own voice; he couldn't hear anything. Lance ran, not away, but towards. Towards Keith, toward the cave, toward the bomb on the very verge of exploding. Lance could feel it, the pressurised, scorching heat that so strongly opposed the freezing feeling within his arms. *Save him*. Lance didn't think twice about running straight toward the explosion, not when he heard the crackle in the air, not when he caught scent of the heat rushing toward them. Because all he could focus on was Keith, and the cold, cold feeling enveloping him.

Lance stopped thinking, reaching for that feeling, embracing it, pulling it toward him. *You have to take it*, said a voice in his mind; whether it was his own or the black lion's, he didn't know. Ice, water, electricity, a storm; cold enough, fierce enough, to quell an explosion. *Water*. The world moved slowly around him as he reached out, running, falling over his own feet, heading for Keith. *Water*. He could hear it, the mechanism's within the metal chunk of machinery coming to life, *igniting*. Lance threw himself forward, reaching, reaching, *reaching*-

The rainforest made all his thoughts fall silent. Lance blinked up at the tall trees, leaves a deeper, more vibrant green than he had ever seen. Palms with wickedly wide leaves clustered at the top of the greenhouse. Lance inhaled, letting the smell of damp greenery and fresh mulch engulf him. All around him were ferns, rows of hanging flowers, healthy succulents and towering palms. The humid atmosphere left streaks of water to dribble along the broad leaves, collecting in pools and soaking back into the soil. Into the soil, into the trees, into the air, repeat. Lance could feel it. Like blood ran through his veins, he felt the water coursing through the roots, through the stems of the plants around him, feeding them. Can you feel it? No, Lance, don't be silly. But I feel it, Lily, I can feel it.

The forest. Lance grabbed a hold of that feeling; he sought out their veins, their life force. Heat blossomed from the bomb, as Lance focused all the energy in his arms into ripping the traces of water toward him. It came to him, bursting from every trunk, sliding from the thin pine needles, seeping from the roots buried in the ground. He reached for every drop of water within those trees, pulling it toward him. The spray from a thousand living things, water ripped from its rightful place. Lance drew it all toward himself, slamming into Keith as the world was engulfed in a burning fireball.

Heat, like he'd never felt. No sooner had Lance hit the ground, crushing Keith beneath him, when the force of a massive explosion was flinging him back. *Water. Hold it*. Fire engulfed them, hot enough to melt bone, to reduce a being to dust- but it didn't touch them. Lance bit down on his tongue to stop himself screaming, cringing as the fire burned at the shield of water around him and Keith. It hurt, it was disorientating beyond belief. Lance didn't dare open his eyes, fearing the fierce heat would burn them, or the blinding light would simply be too much. He couldn't breathe, couldn't think, just held onto Keith as tightly as he could and prayed the water would surround them both, that he wouldn't be left grasping at the dust of a person who was once- Lance stopped himself, or rather, the agonising roar of fire in his ears did.

He was dimly aware of Keith gripping him, clinging to Lance so tightly it hurt, until the heat burned too intensely and he couldn't tell which stretches of skin and clothing belonged to whom. Lance didn't think about what he was doing, or why, he just thought of cool rainforests and green ferns and shady palms and all the places water ran from. It hurt, and hurt, and hurt, as the water

around them evaporated into the flames, which burst forth from the cave, decimating the remains of the nearby trees, racing down the tunnel deep into the earth, reducing the remains that lay down there to dust. It was absolute, and deafening, and terrifying; *the whole world is fire*, thought Lance. He could hear it, the wild winds it created, the matter it turned to dust and smoke, crackling and popping, screaming, roaring, tearing at them and at everything.

Keith went slack in his hold, arms slipping from around Lance's back. He was left holding a lifeless body, *you're not dead, you can't be dead*. He wanted it to end, why wouldn't it end? Lance didn't know how much longer he could keep this up; Keith felt smaller, lighter in his arms, as if their very own bodies were burning away to ash. The roar in his ears died abruptly, replaced by a shrill and muffled ringing. Lance screamed as the water around them evaporated and scorching air rushed over them. He clung to Keith, trying to shield his body from the burning heat. There was no more fireball, but the air *burned*. It went on, and on, and on, until Lance thought he might just pass out.

There was no sudden relief, no room to breath, just a gradual decline in temperature. Lance felt raw and exposed, like all his skin was still aflame, melded to his clothes. He couldn't breath; the air was hot and suffocating, and thick ash coated his tongue. He coughed, hands scrabbling for purchase on the boiling rock as he tried to raise himself up. There was a body under him, Keith's body; Lance didn't want to look. A sob shook his body, he wanted to vomit, pain coursing through every nerve. Lance made it to his knees, doubled over, his body still bracketing Keith's. He didn't want to look.

A ragged gasp, one that didn't come from him. A dry, heaving sob had Lance falling forward, his forehead dropping to Keith's chest, where the erratic stuttering of his lungs proved he was at least alive. Another gasp; Keith's limbs convulsed on the ground as boiling, polluted air filled his lungs. This didn't feel like relief; *there is no relief*. Keith sounded in pain, squirming weakly beneath Lance. The latter opened his eyes, blinking through the thick cloud of dirt and ash encasing them. He could barely see more than two feet, but it was enough to see Keith lying on the ground, his skin flushed dark red from the heat, blisters on his exposed arms. This wasn't relief.

Keith coughed violently, pathetically weak but fighting desperately for air. Lance was crying, not with tears, his eyes stung too much, but his shoulders shook and he couldn't seem to catch his breath. *We're alive*. But there was no relief. He grappled weakly for Keith, raising his head to help him breath, grimacing when his fingers brushed blisters along Keith's neck, and the boy cried. Lance stomach heaved, and his breathing shallowed out as he tried not to vomit at the taste of charred blood. A dull ringing filled his ears, the pained noises Keith was making passed through a cloudbank before finally registering in his mind. He was trying to speak, Lance realised after an extended moment, where a dizzy spell left him falling forward, Keith's heart beat the only constant in his state of confusion. He tried to raise his head, he had to see Keith, he had to listen.

"-no, no, n-no," Keith mumbled weakly, his voice strained and spread thin.

Lance cried soundlessly, dropping his head into the crook of Keith's neck, gripping his hair and shoulder. His mind was too shaken and scattered to form any coherent thought, like why, *why why why*. Black ash coated their skin; Keith smelt of charred wood- not the good smell, but blackened, burnt, dead. He couldn't breath, smothered by airborne dirt and sheltered by Lance's own body. Keith's fingers tried to seek the other out, but ended up twitching uselessly against the rock where he lay, useless and disorientated as he choked on that one word, crying.

Lance had never hated any moment of his life so much. He couldn't let go, fearing Keith might crumble to ash if his fingers loosened. The dirt in the air around them was beginning to settle, air drafts carrying away the thickest smog. The rest sat heavy in the air, still dry and boiling from the

fire. Lance still couldn't see past their immediate area; he and Keith lay near a collapsed section of cave wall, and though the air above was thick with dirt and dark, he felt they were out in the open.

Scorching gravel dug into his palms as Lance tried to push himself off Keith. His back felt like it was still on fire, and he didn't want to know the state of the skin there; it felt blistered and bloody, but it could've just been his imagination. Lance nearly screamed when he fell sideways off Keith, shuffling weakly across the ground to lie beside him. Keith was still crying. Lance threw an arm over him, dabbing weakly at Keith's cheek with his palm. Fingers drifted over Lance's shoulder as Keith felt for the scar there, the one left by the wormhole. He sounded hurt, he wheezed, breathing raggedly. His fingers came away from Lance's back covered in blood.

They could die like this, Lance thought. They could die right here, lying side by side, breathing in the toxic dust and destruction until it buried and consumed them. Keith's bandana was around his wrist; Lance used it to scrape dirt away from Keith's eyes. More dirt settled in its place- they really were going to be buried by the downfall of airborne ash. *No*. They couldn't be, he couldn't let them; fear spread through Lance so quickly it hurt. Pulling weakly on Keith's shoulder, he tried to entice a reaction from the dazed boy.

"K-Keith?" His voice was wrecked. "Keith?"

Violet eyes found his in the swirl of ash around them, blinking weakly. Keith's lips parted, but he couldn't say anything. His eyes began to droop, and Lance shook him harder. He hadn't done all that for them to die now.

"Keith."

No reply from Keith, but Lance began to detect a different noise. He pushed himself up on his elbows, lying on his stomach, too afraid to test the state of his back. All around them, the air was dark, but ahead... the tunnel. Or whatever remained of it. The darkness looked larger, more complete, and it made Lance shiver. He tugged on Keith's shoulder, trying to get him up. The boy whined weakly, going slack. Lance's blood ran cold as a breath of wind drifted through the stagnant air toward him, carrying whispers on the end of its reach.

"K-Keith," he stammered, forcing himself to his knees.

He grabbed Keith's shoulders, too weak to lift him, but trying anyway. Noises echoed from the dark remains of the cave, too quiet to be heard, but too loud to go unnoticed. Lance's eyes widened, sure he could see shadows moving through the dark.

"Keith, Keith, get u-up."

Lance hooked an arm around his upper back when he refused, flinching when Keith hissed in pain.

"C'mon, Keith, p-please."

The shadows were descending on them, Lance could feel it. There was absolutely no strength left within him, but he somehow brought Keith to a sitting position, tapping the boy's face lightly to keep him conscious.

"K-Keith--"

Lance gasped as a heavy boom shook the ground. Another, then another, like the footsteps of a giant. *Black*. The lion's head descended toward them through the haze, mouth open, blue lights glowing dimly in the dark atmosphere. Lance nearly sobbed, heaving Keith up, dragging him, ignoring the way his back screamed and his knees gave out every step or so. He would get Keith to

that lion if it was the last thing he ever did. Black's mouth snapped shut the second they set foot onto the ramp, sending both boys tumbling into the cockpit. Lance collapsed on the floor beside Keith, whose eyes were drooping shut.

"Please," he mumbled, begging Black to fly them out.

Miraculously, the lion obeyed, and Lance grimaced as the floor shook and they began to ascend. He turned weakly to Keith, arm flailing to reach him, trying to keep him awake.

"Keith," he murmured, fingers sliding uselessly across Keith's chest. "Stay with me, s-stay."

The boy's head lolled to the side, tears marking clean streaks through the ash on his cheeks. Lance pushed weakly at his face, trying for a reaction. A strained exhale made it past Keith's lips, but he didn't respond.

"Why'd you do it," Lance choked out. His hands were trembling where they reached out to stroke the dirt off Keith's flushed skin. "Why?"

Keith didn't respond, but he kept breathing; in, out, in, out, making Lance seize up in terror each time the rhythm ground to a halt. This wasn't relief.

Chapter Notes

HEY HI HELLO I'VE BEEN WANTING TO UPDATE ALL WEEK BUT C O U L
D N T AAAAAAAAAAAAAAA anyway thank you guys so so much for all your
lovely comments last chapter!! They were so nice <3 <3 honestly you people are great
its so fun writing this when I get comments that are a) hilarious b) so fuckin nice i cry
and c) tHEORIES thanks peoples

ALSO just to make a note I guess, I realise this story is getting pretty long, but want to
reassure you guys I do know what I'm doing, there is a plan and an end, I'm not just
wondering into the dark here, the writing just gets dragged out a lot bc surprise I like
writing. But ya thanks for sticking through this SUPER LONG FIC I promise there is
a plan.

please enjoy this chapter i rewrote 75 times <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

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The walk down the ramp from the black lion felt like a funeral procession. One step, pull Keith forward, another step, stop, breathe. Lance had the red paladin's arm slung across his shoulders, supporting the dazed boy as the pair shuffled very slowly out of Black. Keith had regained just enough consciousness to stand, though not without Lance's help. He hadn't said a single word, and Lance's throat felt too tight to prompt him.

Keith's face had gone shockingly pale; what skin wasn't red and blistered was white as a blizzard, an alarming contrast to the dark ash splattered across his body. He looked dazed, head lolling to the side every couple of seconds, before Lance gave his waist a tight squeeze to wake him up, forcing them forward a few more steps. His own back was burning up, and now he could feel the slick blood staining what little remained of his shirt and dripping down his hips. His right sleeve had been burnt mostly to scrap, leaving the jagged lightning scar the wormhole had left him with on full display. Keith dropped his head to Lance's shoulder, bringing them to a stop as he twisted toward him. He pressed his cheek to the scar, then his lips. Lance pushed him away, adjusting his hold on Keith's wrist and dragging them forward, his face set in stone.

The ramp groaned as they finally stumbled off the end, after which Black shut her mouth but refused to retreat. Lance realised why; he reckoned he loved that lion. Allura was breathing fast, her eyes wild and blown wide with fear. She had a gun pointed at Keith. Lance sniffed dryly, bringing himself to full height despite the skin on his back screaming at him to buckle. The rest of their team stood silently at the doorway to the hanger, eyes trained nervously on Allura and the newly arrived paladins. Lance's eyes couldn't focus enough to make out their faces, only Allura's; and she looked *furios*.

"Allura."

"Step away from him, Lance."

The air stood still around them, broken only by Keith's ragged breathing where he hung off Lance's shoulder. Lance brought him closer, angling them to put himself between Keith and Allura.

"Put that down," he said, calmly, orderly.

In truth, Lance was past the point of reason. He was past listening to the last month's worth of Keith's lies and excuses, past being polite, and patient, past putting the other's life in danger.

"I said," Allura replied through clenched teeth, "step away from him."

Lance breathed deeply. He could feel the blood coursing through her, his own blood, Keith's blood; *water*. That forest, it hadn't looked the same after that explosion, but it wasn't because of the fire. *I did that*. Lance could feel it now, the rush he'd felt as he pulled every drop of water from those trees. He stepped forward, taking Keith with him, stopping when Allura levelled the gun.

"Don't be stupid," he hissed.

Allura blinked, shaking. She wasn't staring at him. Keith raised his head a fraction, falling against Lance, who heard a small gasp from the spectators at the doorway.

"He needs a healing pod," Lance said.

"Put him down," Allura warned.

Lance laughed dryly, the action soon morphing into a fit of coughing.

"You're gonna shoot him?"

He spoke with a sneer, but there was a fierce warning to his remark. Keith folded easily as Lance pulled him closer, tucking him just out of Allura's range.

"He needs to be contained."

"Put the *fucking* gun away, Allura."

Their leader's fingers twitched, dancing around the trigger. Lance saw the way she stood, barricading the rest of the team, protecting them from Keith.

"How did you survive that explosion?"

Lance wet his lips, teetering, struggling to maintain his strength.

"I got us out."

Allura's expression morphed, disbelief, anger, all of them playing shamelessly across her face.

"You got out," she spat, voice quivering.

Lance tightened his hold; she was about to shout. And she did.

"You *got out*?" She screamed. "Of an explosion that did *this*?"

The world around them erupted as Allura slammed her hands together, eyes screwed shut with focus, summoning the hologram from the small device in her hand. The gun hung loosely from her fingers, but Lance wouldn't try disarm her anyway. Darkness. Lance blinked, drawing back in fear,

thinking he was back on the planet. It was an aerial view, taken by one of the castle's drones. Dirt, dust, ash... the atmosphere was clogged with the stuff. Down on the surface, Lance could make out sections of land erupting periodically, gradually tearing the planet apart. He shuddered. *They could die there, just lying there.* Keith's lips settled gently against his shoulder, mumbling his words into Lance's skin.

"I'm sorry. Lance, s... sorry."

Lance shuddered, eyes drinking in the mass-destruction taking place before him. Surely one bomb couldn't have done that. The image vanished as quickly as it appeared, and he was left staring at Allura, both of them panting. She shook her head violently, eyes burning where they settled on Keith.

"Murderer," she muttered. "*Murderer!*"

Lance kept very still as he simply said, "he needs a healing pod."

"Coran," said Allura, and her advisor left the sides of Hunk and Pidge to come to her. "Please escort Keith to the holding cells--"

"He's not going into a fucking *holding cell*," Lance yelled, regretfully jostling Keith, who just whined softly.

"Don't argue with me, Lance--"

"Oh, I am going to argue," he spat, taking a defiant step forward. "He needs a healing pod. *Now*. So put the gun down, and either help me, or get out of my way."

Allura's fury spread across him like a chilling wind, and Lance struggled not to cower.

"That was an order."

"Here's an order," said Lance. "Get out of my way."

He didn't want to fight with Allura, he truly didn't. Not only was he likely to lose, but the risk of upsetting her, damaging their trust and friendship, it wasn't one worth taking. But Keith was growing weaker in his arms, and Lance didn't even know what was wrong with him. He could have internal bleeding, an injury Lance wasn't aware of; hell, he'd just tried to kill himself. Urgency awoke something harsh within him.

"Excuse me?" Said Allura, her voice dangerously low.

Lance swallowed thickly. "We can talk about this later. Right now he needs--"

"Who do you think you're talking to?" Allura exclaimed loudly. "I said *put him down*. Else we will be escorting not one, but two paladins to the holding cells."

Lance should have shut up then. He should have read the warning in Allura's tone, and let her order be the one that went ahead.

"Try," he said, instead.

Coran stepped closer to the princess, but she ignored him and kept all her attention on Lance. She looked shocked, offended, and for a second Lance feared that look alone would tear him to shreds.

"He destroyed a planet," Allura said, her voice like ice. "A *planet*. He is a threat to these people.

He is a threat to me and you. *Put him down.*”

Lance refused, hugging the supposed threat tighter.

“He set off one bomb-“

“And look what it has done!” Allura’s voice was loud and absolute; there was no hiding from it, or the truth it procured.

“I will not let him *die*.”

“I will not allow him to put this team in danger-“

“He’s not putting them in danger!”

Allura shook her head furiously. “What did you do?”

Keith couldn’t even raise his head to acknowledge her question.

“*WHAT DID YOU DO?*”

Allura was an avalanche, a landslide, a meteorite crashing to earth, her presence, her *anger*, overpowering. Pidge and Hunk retreated a little from the doorway, moving closer together.

“You destroyed it!” She yelled. “A planet! A healing planet! There’s was *life*, there- the remains of my people, *my people*, you have- you have caused *devastation*.”

Lance was breathing fast from exerting himself, Allura pulling dangerously at the threads holding him together. Keith slipped lower; Lance really couldn’t hold him much longer. Allura met his eye, and for a second, they understood each other. Keith had destroyed a planet, Keith had destroyed the remains of Alteans. For no reason, with no explanation; he was dangerous. Lance hugged him tighter, refusing to believe that, refusing to belief Keith acted without a cause, or the right cause.

“He’s not our enemy,” Lance bit out.

“My order,” said Allura harshly, “is to contain him.”

“And my order is not to,” Lance replied, just as fiercely. “He’s a paladin of Voltron, he’s *Keith*-“

“This won’t be the first time a paladin has chosen the wrong side,” Allura warned bitterly.

Lance grit his teeth; his back hurt so badly it was making him dizzy, and rash.

“If he dies? If you put him in that cell and he dies, what then?”

“I will have Coran tend to him, I will-“

“That’s not enough!” Lance yelled. “Stop treating him like a weapon!”

“Not a weapon, a *threat*.”

“Look at him!” Lance’s voice was trembling. “Look at him, Allura. He’s hurt-“

“Enough of this,” Allura said with a shake of her head.

She raised the gun, and Lance yanked Keith back instinctively.

“Allura-“ Pidge warned.

“It is my duty to protect this universe,” Allura said steadily, though her eyes were damp.

“*Our* duty is to this team-“

“I will not argue with you, Lance!”

“I don’t *want* to fight with you, put if you don’t drop that fucking gun-“

“Am I not clear?”

“I’m not letting him die!”

“You will do as I tell you-“

“I won’t do shit!” Lance was breathing fast, ready to explode. “I will protect this team, and he is a part of it.”

“He has destroyed a *planet*-“

“A planet that was already dead-“

“*ENOUGH!*” Allura yelled, loud enough to shake him.

An invisible shock wave went through him, and Lance was reminded that Allura had powers too. Strong powers, Altean powers, better practised and understood than his.

“No,” said Lance, before he allowed the hopelessness to swallow him. “No, I won’t-“

In hindsight, he should have seen it coming. Though in present, he somewhat did. Allura fired. Not directly at them, but a warning shot. The gun crackled, a bolt of stunning energy exploding from the end. As it raced toward them, Lance could feel it; and so he reached for it.

For a brief second, the hanger was lit by a flash of electric blue light, the burst of electricity spasming brilliantly around Lance’s hand. He stared, transfixed, at the hand he’d extended to meet the shot. It didn’t hurt, not one bit. *You felt like a storm. Like lightning.* Lance spread his fingers and the rabid orb of light orbiting his hand exploded. It crackled, scattering across the hangar. Lance heard Allura gasp, and it was like a punch to his stomach, drawing him back into reality.

In the silence of the hanger, one could hear a pin drop. Pidge and Hunk were cowered by the doorway, Allura and Coran in much the same position, but much closer. Silence, *dead* silence. Lance’s head was throbbing; it was too much, he was too weak. All that energy he’d expended in surrounding them in water, and now- his vision filled with black spots for a moment, and he blinked them away quickly.

“Needs a healing pod,” Lance slurred, as the other’s faces contorted with horror.

Allura said something, emerging from the arms Coran had thrown around her, but Lance couldn’t make it out for the life of him. He blinked, swaying, Keith slipping from his grasp. *I shouldn’t have done that*, some slow moving part of his brain repeated mechanically. He felt so *hopeless*. The colours in his vision ran, like watery paint down a page.

“What was that?”

Allura’s words faded in and out. Lance spoke. *I don’t know*, he said, but he couldn’t hear himself.

Keith's lips had felt nice against the scar on his shoulder, they felt right. Lance's eyes were filling with tears he was so afraid, for himself, for Keith, for Allura, for their fate. The red paladin sagged against him, losing consciousness entirely. Lance's ears were ringing; his vision blurred, until he was looking at Allita instead of Allura, and the blood running down his calves felt like water.

"He needs a healing--"

"What was that?"

Allita was- no, that was Allura. His vision swam. She was shouting at him; she was scared, he was scared. Lance opened his mouth, shaking. He wasn't wearing his armour; the air still buzzed from his outburst.

"Don't hurt him," he mumbled, lips going numb. "Don't do that."

He couldn't lose Keith. Neither of them was going to last, it was obvious as the black spots taunted Lance's vision again. He tried to listen to what Allura was saying, desperately trying to make sense of the situation, to protect Keith.

"Please don't hurt him," he slurred, unsure if anyone could even hear him.

A second later he was tucking Keith's head against his chest to cradle it as they both fell to the floor, the will of his body deserting him as it should have done the moment the explosion struck.

-

The room felt cold. Returning to consciousness hadn't been pleasant, not in the slightest. Every inch of Lance's body hurt; they hadn't placed him in a healing pod for reasons he could definitely understand. He was a threat they could not comprehend. No one had been there when he woke, save Coran, and their advisor had done little to calm him. *Keith's alive*, he'd said. The red paladin had been denied a healing pod also, but was apparently in a stable condition. Why would they allow two people who posed a threat to the team something that made them stronger? Allura would want to talk to him in the morning; Lance didn't know what he was going to say.

He thumbed the thick bandages wrapped around his torso, repairing the blistered skin on his back. He looked a mess. Black lines of ash still lingered around his hairline and in-between the folds of his skin, the places he hadn't managed to get to with the washcloth. Red, bloody blisters dotted his arms and absolutely covered his back, fierce burn marks he doubted would fade completely, even with the help of Altean medicine. *This isn't relief*. Since they'd deposited Keith in a holding cell after Lance fainted, he hadn't seen him. He was going to now.

Lance tugged a shirt over his head, flinching as it settled over the bandages. His fingers felt numb and sore, and all his muscles hurt. Ash and dirt burned bitter on his tongue, his hair in disarray, eyes carrying around a weight far heavier than he should have to bear. His whole body felt numb, disassociated. His face was so devoid of feeling he couldn't bring himself to look in the mirror, hating what he had become. Lance pressed fingers to the scar on his shoulder and recalled how Keith's lips felt pressed to the mark, hating how they felt like an apology. He plucked up his jacket from the bed, leaving his room without bothering to see if the door shut behind him.

He'd been warned not to go near the holding cells, technically he wasn't even supposed to leave his room. They couldn't actually contain him- he'd done nothing wrong. Lance didn't care much for that warning. If Keith was awake, he needed to see. He needed to *know*. It was evening now, the others should be asleep. Lance knew they probably weren't; who was going to sleep after a day like that? It didn't matter though, all that mattered was speaking to Keith.

The holding cells were all empty, save Keith's, a single blue light illuminating the passage from the other end. Lance moved toward it, hands shoved into his pockets to conceal how badly they were shaking. He doubted the boy could hear him approaching, and in any case, when he arrived, Keith was curled into a ball in the corner of his cell. Lance's heart stuttered painfully; the sight of him was pathetic. He looked asleep, but Lance knew better than that.

Dark mop of hair tucked into his arms, Keith hid his face from the world. Barely any movement came from the boy, just the slight rise and fall of his shoulders as he breathed. He was still dressed in the same long blacks he'd stood in during the explosion, which hadn't been charred to a crisp like Lance's clothes. Still, he couldn't be comfortable. A bandage here and there, Coran had done what he could before Keith had refused his help. Lance wondered why.

He settled heavily into the chair outside the cell, staring through the glossy glass that separated him and Keith. The blue light of the cell made the other look even paler; *he looks like death*. The sound of Lance collapsing into the chair alerted Keith to his presence. He raised his head slowly, eyes red-rimmed and mouth downturned. He looked stripped of everything; his emotions, his dignity, his hope, his own self. Hollow and alone, nothing like the Keith Lance knew.

For a while, they just stared at each other. Lance watched the other's eyes scan for the scar on his shoulder, then fall to the bandage peeking out beneath his shirt. Lance tugged the fabric down, concealing it. It was so soundless in this part of the castle, even the air vents stood still. He hated this, hated the heavy silence and departing tangibility of hope. It was stiff and unnatural, but it was quickly morphing into their new reality.

"Why are you here?"

Keith's voice was monotonous, a little raspy from the explosion. Lance's fingers tightened around the bundle in his pocket; it was now or never. He dumped the stack of letters down at his feet. Keith didn't even bat an eye.

"I found these in your room."

Keith blinked at the neat stack of letters, the top one labelled *Lance*. He knew the one under it read *Katie*, and so on.

"Did you read them?"

Lance fought to keep his voice as level as Keith's. "No."

A deep breath; Keith never took his eyes off the letters.

"Because I want you to tell me what's written on them."

Keith kept his expression very neutral, though Lance had no idea how.

"If you don't, I still won't read them."

Lance didn't want to force a confession, he wanted it to be a choice. Keith had his wrists crossed over his legs, pulling himself into a small ball.

"Please, Keith."

A tear slid down the boy's cheek, but he didn't say anything. Lance's chest heaved; *it can't end like this*.

“Allura wants to question you,” he said. “I don’t want her too, but if... if you don’t talk to me, I-I might not have a choice.”

Keith’s eyes were doing that thing again, where they looked at him and tried to restrain so much, like they might spill his secret right on their own. This felt more like an interrogation than a discussion.

“Just so I can understand,” Lance said with difficulty. “Do those letters... do they explain it? Why you’ve been pushing us away, and lashing out, a-and why you destroyed that planet and... and, w... why you tried to kill yourself?”

Keith ducked his head, unable to meet Lance’s eye any longer. At least he was having some sort of reaction.

“Keith, please. Please tell me, please... let me help you.”

“You shouldn’t have stopped me.”

The words were out, spoken quickly and firmly and without regret. Lance blinked, trying to clear his head.

“What?”

“You shouldn’t have stopped me,” Keith said, louder, harsher, meeting Lance’s eye fearlessly.

Now it was a standoff, a dare, each waiting for the other to look away, but neither did.

“I shouldn’t have stopped you?” Lance echoed. “From killing yourself?”

Keith scrapped fingers through his hair, the longer ends frayed by fire.

“Fuck, Lance, you have no idea what you’ve done!”

“What *I’ve* done?” Lance stammered, hopelessly lost.

“Yes!” Keith snapped, sitting up properly now. “Why did you- you shouldn’t have interfered!”

“You just... you... you destroyed a planet, Keith. With a bomb, that you were going to let kill you too, I-“

“You shouldn’t have stopped it!” Keith yelled, and Lance rose quickly to his feet as Keith did.

“Pretty sure your bomb still destroyed that dwarf, if that was what you wanted.”

Keith scoffed, shaking his head, though his eyes were watering. “Why’d you stop me, Lance?”

“Because you- you tried to blow yourself up!”

“You shouldn’t have stopped it!” He yelled, drawing closer to the glass.

Lance was at a loss for words. “Why? Why, Keith, tell me why I shouldn’t have stopped *that*?”

“You-“ Keith cut himself off in frustration, pulling at his hair. “I was going to stop it! I-I- you, why, why did you do that?”

“Stop what?”

“You fucking stopped it,” Keith sobbed. “*Why?*”

“What did I stop, I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Keith grit his teeth, pressing both hands to his temple as though trying to keep his head from exploding.

“You destroyed the planet, Keith! Is that what you wanted?”

“It’s not enough,” Keith muttered to himself, swaying sightly where he stood. “It’s not enough!”

“What isn’t?”

“Shut *up!*” He yelled, making Lance flinch. “You don’t know, y-you don’t-“

Lance watched helplessly as Keith dissolved before him, in so much conflict with himself it was frightening. Maybe Allura was right; Keith was a threat.

“You destroyed a planet. I want to trust you, Keith, and believe you, but you did that and you-“

“It’s worse now,” Keith said, shaking his head. “It’s worse, it’s worse, oh *g-god*, n-no, no, no, no-“

“Keith?”

“No!” The boy wailed. “I-it, I- no, Lance, n-no.”

Lance was frozen, not sure whether he should run away or try and coax the boy before him out’ve this state; Keith’s behaviour had gone from shady to downright weird. It was upsetting to watch him come undone, but Lance didn’t understand what he was meant to do to change it.

“Keith-“

“You stopped me!” He yelled, throwing a fist into the glass.

“Of course I did! What the fuck, Keith?”

A wave of terrifying calmness washed over the boys face, soothing over his frown lines, though his cheeks stayed wet with tears. Keith ground his fist into the glass hard enough to bruise, but he didn’t even notice.

“Kill me,” he said, his voice suddenly still and serious. “Will you do it, Lance? Please?”

Lance stumbled back as if Keith had shocked him. His mouth fell open, stuttering soundlessly.

“Do it, Lance! Do it, it’s what right-“

“S-stop.” Lance was reeling, certain that what he was hearing couldn’t be true. “Keith, stop it.”

“Please!” Tears were streaming down Keith’s face; it was like watching a natural disaster unfold.

“No! *No*, Keith, why would you- why-“

Keith hit the glass hard enough to shatter the skin of his knuckles, leaving a bloody smear in their wake.

“Do it!”

“I’m not going to fucking kill you!” Lance yelled back, but Keith’s didn’t back down one inch.

He ground bloody knuckles into the glass, panting it with his blood, his face screwed up in mental agony as he spoke.

“Allura would look so pretty,” he said shakily, voice taugth, driving those knuckles in harder. “If she was burning.”

Lance’s eyes widened, stepping back from the glass. “Keith-“

“You should burn her,” Keith spat, like he was reciting some script to Lance, one he was all too familiar with. “Burn her, Keith.”

Lance considered calling someone else, but Keith looked up. His eyes were open, and they were his own, brimming with tears. This was a confession. *This* was his cry for help. Keith was... explaining himself?

“A-and Hunk,” Keith stammered, looking so angry at his own words. “You should kill him. Kill him, kill him, *kill him*. Imagine their faces, don’t you want to see their faces? Kill him, Keith. T-take the old one, take the Altean, and gut him. You know how, Keith, be good, Keith, kill them. Don’t you want to?”

Lance couldn’t speak, transfixed by Keith’s horrific outburst. He flinched when the boy’s eyes turned on him, looking straight at him.

“Hurt him,” Keith whispered, and he wasn’t talking about Coran anymore. “Hurt him, hurt him, hurt him, he deserves it.”

Keith’s voice was deteriorating as he spoke, his hand against the glass helping to hold him up. He was talking about Lance.

“Hurt him,” he rasped, starting to shout. “Hurt him, hurt him, hurt him! Every day, Lance, all fucking day! At night, I can’t sleep, I can’t think about anything else because if I do it- *fuck*.”

He voice broke; it was growing louder, unhinged. There was a month’s worth of suffering sewn into it.

“Hurt him!” He yelled, throwing his fist at the glass again, a splatter of blood clouding the pane between them. “*Hurt him*. Hurt him, Keith, or the next time you and Katie are alone I’ll make you, I-I-I, I’ll make, I-“ Keith cried out, gasping for air, his own distress drowning him.

A trembling sob tore away from him, shaking his body. Lance looked on in shock as Keith fell to his knees, weeping, words and thoughts overwhelming him. He looked in actual pain, face all screwed with disbelief at his own words. Hyperventilating, grasping uselessly at the flat plain of glass, Keith shook as those admissions rung loud and true in their ears. It made sense, such awful, clear sense.

“Sh- shouldn’t have told,” he stuttered soundlessly, more to himself than to Lance. “Shouldn’t tell you, sh-shouldn’t k-know-“

“Keith,” Lance breathed, his stomach turning as the boy whimpered around his bloody knuckles. “Keith. I won’t kill-”

“It’s still *in me*,” Keith yelled, his voice ricocheting through the cell like a bullet.

A second passed, another. Lance's lips were parted, frozen. Keith buckled, doubling over with a pained sob, clutching his sides.

"It's still in me," he rasped into the silent cell.

Lance couldn't breathe. Keith had one hand braced against the glass; he was still wearing those stupid gloves.

"Keith," Lance whispered numbly.

A ragged sob tore away from the boy.

"It's in you." It wasn't a question. "T-that thing, it's in you."

Keith grit his teeth, fingers forming fists. Lance wanted to cry.

"Why didn't you tell me? The suppressants--"

Keith laughed bitterly, face screwed up with pain. He forced his eyes shut, breathing shallowly.

"Shouldn't have- shouldn't have told you. Y-you have to k-kill- before I--"

Lance didn't even think before reaching out to the glass, placing his palm against the reader so it all fell away.

"No!" Keith screamed when he realised what Lance had done, scooting backwards, away from him. "NO!"

"Hey," Lance tried softly as he stepped forward into the open cell. "Keith... Keith, it's alright."

"No!" Keith screamed, flinging himself back against the furthest wall hard enough to bruise, curling in on himself, away from Lance. "No, no, *n-no*."

Lance could feel his heart shattering at the boy's display. He slowed his approach, crouching down to be level with the other, drawing back when Keith cringed away.

"I'm not going to hurt you--"

"I am!" Keith yelled, as Lance inched forward. "I-I am, L-Lance, no, no, no. It's angry, it's- no!"

"You're not," said Lance. "I'd stop you. I can stop you if you try. It's alright, Keith."

Lance extended a hand, just a few feet of space between them. He didn't know what his plan was, but this... this wasn't right.

"Keith," he said softly, coaxing the boy's arm away from his face. "Keith, it's okay now."

"It's not," Keith whined, shrinking back. "N-no."

Lance felt tears stinging his eyes. "Are you scared of me?"

"No," Keith wailed. "I'm going to hurt you!"

Mind made up, Lance grabbed for him in one quick lunge. Keith fought for all of two seconds as Lance pulled him against his chest, holding him tight. In those two seconds he feared it was the wrong decision, until Keith went slack, dissolving into tears in his arms. Arms wound around

Lance's neck, but not in the lethal way Keith feared. They anchored him to Lance as he cried his heart out into the black paladin's shirt. Lance let him, wrapping arms around Keith's back, pulling him into his lap and gripping Keith's shoulders as they shook. It was a new kind of torture, hearing Keith cry like that. And yet- there was relief in it. This was *Keith*. This was the Keith who loved his friends, who valued all their lives. This was the Keith who'd been *hurting*.

It didn't matter that Keith's hold made the burns on his back explode with pain, it didn't matter how tightly he clung to Lance, or how much he cried. Lance would hold him forever, let Keith do anything before he- Keith wanted Lance to kill him? Pushing them away, lying, blowing himself up, all of it to erase the threat within him? Lance caught his breath, gathering Keith up in his arms in a desperate attempt to keep him close and safe. A thousand words gathered on the tip of his tongue. *I will never hurt you, I will never loose you, I will protect you-* but it felt as if he'd failed already.

"You're okay," he whispered instead. "I've got you."

But it wasn't okay, was it? Keith was still possessed. All this time, and they hadn't even suspected. He'd blamed it on the stupid suppressants, on Keith being scared, on Keith wanting to search for Shiro, never once considering the true motive. Lance felt sick to his stomach. He held his breath, steeling himself as he trailed a hand down Keith's back, peeling up the hem of the boy's shirt. Lance tensed, as did Keith, his arms tightening around Lance's neck.

"Keith..." he murmured, drinking in the sight of black, bruised looking skin.

He raised Keith's shirt higher, revealing the black splotches all over his back, unhealthy and unnatural, curling around his sides and toward his neck. Keith grabbed his hand, forcing him to lower the shirt. Lance pulled back slightly, meeting his eye sadly. Keith's eyes were brimming his tears, and he bit down hard on his lip to stop himself crying. Lance reached for his hand, a very specific hand, unwinding it from around his neck and bringing it into his lap.

Keith was refusing to look at him, eyes fixed on a point over Lance's shoulder. He bit down harder as Lance peeled back the strap on his glove, rolling Keith's sleeve back. Lance paused for a second, getting his breathing under control. *Why didn't you notice? Why didn't you help?* He peeled the glove from Keith's hand, flinching in time with the other at the sight of the unhealed gash on his hand. A shaky breath, and Lance pushed the sleeve away from Keith's forearm. What looked like deep, black bruises spread from the cut, running up Keith's arm, over his chest, hiding beneath his collarbone.

"Shouldn't have told you," Keith choked out, and in an instant Lance was dropping his hand and pulling Keith back against his chest.

"I've got you," he said again, because what else was he meant to say?

It made sense now, the long shirts he'd been wearing, his weariness and sudden weakness, the way he'd been struggling in their training sessions... Keith was still possessed, his body was deteriorating and Lance hadn't even noticed. Keith sighed softly as Lance ran hands up his back, melting into him when fingers reached under his shirt, soothing the angry black marks. Tears flowed freely but Keith began to win back control of his breath, gradually letting an unacquainted *calm* settle in his bones. A small gasp of relief escaped when Lance pressed fingers to one of the marks, pushing with the same energy that he'd used in summoning the water. If it had repelled every other awful thing that had come along to harm them, why shouldn't it help now?

"Does that help?" He whispered.

In response, Keith curled into him, sighing. He folded around Lance, fully in his lap as the latter ran hands down his back, soothing the blackened patches of his skin with cool touches.

"I'm sorry," Keith whispered, trying to get hold of as much of Lance as possible. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it."

It was like the plug had been pulled, the final barrier between them and the truth, all the water thick with lies and guilt draining away and leaving them bare. Barely a minute ago they'd been shouting viciously, noise and rage and fear all meeting in a violent clash. Now there was just... nothing. The tsunami had been through and swept away the entire city; houses, streets, fences, trees... all the filth and garbage and stains off that high-rise forest had been dragged back into the ocean, kicking and screaming, their voices turning into waterlogged, garbling whirlpools, until nothing remained but the turbid surface, lapping at the shores of a barren land. And there was Keith, and there was Lance, and there wasn't one shadow left to hide in.

"Shh," Lance ran fingers through his hair, trying to calm him down, but Keith was having none of it.

"Didn't mean it," he mumbled into Lance's neck. "I don't hate you, Lance. I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Lance squeezed his eyes shut, trying not to cry.

"I'm sorry too, Keith. I should have known, I should have helped you--"

"No," Keith insisted, holding him closer, tighter. "No, I didn't mean it."

"Keith--"

"You're not stupid," Keith said, and it would've sounded harsh, weren't it enforcing the opposite. "You deserve to be the black paladin, Lance, a-and you're not stupid. You have to listen to me, please."

Lance's breath stuttered as those words settled against his skin, from soft lips pressed to his neck as if Keith feared they'd be lost unless spoken *directly* to him. *Please*; Lance didn't even hear that word, only felt it mouthed against his neck. *Please please please*- he tightened his arms around Keith's torso to ground himself, head spinning.

"I remember *every word*," Keith whispered, chilling and warm at the same time. "And it wasn't true. I know everything I said to you, Lance, because it wasn't- it's not..."

Keith buried his face into Lance's neck, sniffing softly and dragging his lips openly across his skin.

"It's not true," he slurred, disorientated. "There's... a thousand reason Black's not responding, Lance."

A hiccup of a sob, and he wrapped arms around Lance's head as if to protect him from the very air around them. His knuckles were caked with blood, a boy birthed from the discarded shards out a wood-chipper, roughed-up, spat-out, left to pick himself up from the wreckage. That was Keith, Lance supposed; born from battle, into battle, *for* battle, trying constantly to pick his way out of the fray. Because red was his colour and blood was his legacy and in battle he drove forth with a sword, with brute force, bare-handed, to kill and intimidate, because swords were sharp and so was he. But Keith was fighting that, he was fighting it right now, because sometimes red meant love and sometimes blood meant life, and to have the ability to fight with your all meant sometimes you were able to love with your all. So Keith fought to stop fighting, to pull himself free from the

sinking pit; and he did so by holding to Lance, and forming his words, and trying *trying trying* to be honest, to be brave. Fear was so, so easy to fight against. But now he looked in right in the face, and he reached right through it, searching and searching like a lantern through the mist for a helping hand that if he didn't find he'd fall.

"It's not your fault," Keith whispered.

He'd never been good with words or apologies, but when he really had nothing left to speak of, it wasn't as hard.

"I w-wanted you to leave me alone, because I'll hurt you, it'll make me hurt you. I... I'm *so sorry*."

"Hey," Lance began, his voice quivering, thrown by the fact Keith could feel every vibration of his throat. "Calm- calm down, I believe y--"

He gasped when Keith's lips found his neck properly, pressing wet, open mouthed kisses to the skin. His arms tightened around Keith, drawing an appreciative hum from the other, who let his lips slide down Lance's neck, pooling kisses in the junction between his shoulder.

"m sorry. I wouldn't leave you," Keith mumbled between kisses, unaware of Lance practically falling to pieces around him. "I'd never leave you, didn't want to leave you. W-wouldn't abandon you."

"Keith--"

Lance's head was spinning. Keith's cheeks were wet with tears where they pressed against his neck, following the trail left by the boy's lips. Lance flailed, thoughts scattered to the wind. Keith raked fingers through his hair, moving up toward Lance's jaw, and he lost all coherent thought.

"Keith," he stammered. "Wait."

The boy froze, breathing against Lance's neck before retreating hastily.

"I'm sorry," Keith stammered, out of breath. "I shouldn't have, I'm sorry--"

"Don't," Lance had to take a deep breath to compose himself, drinking in the shining wetness on Keith's cheeks, and now his lips. "Please, don't apologise. I- I want... um. I do, want that, it's... you're hurting, Keith."

Even just saying those words brought him to his senses. Keith was in his lap, Keith was kissing him, but Keith was also half-passed out and riddled with pain.

"You're hurting," Lance breathed, stroking his arm.

"You *help*," Keith insisted desperately, pushing forward, nuzzling into Lance's collarbone.

"Hey," he breathed, pushing Keith back gently. "Hey, we need to talk."

There was a small noise of protest, but Keith settled down once Lance kept running hands down his back. His neck tingled with the memory of Keith's lips, the urge to pull him back in almost consuming him. But there was too much else to focus on, it wasn't right, not when they were in a state like this. Lance took Keith's injured hand gently in his own, rubbing a thumb over the blackened knuckles. The marks looked like bruises, like dark rot, a substance in his body, infecting him, poisoning him- Lance's hand shook as he covered Keith's fingers with his own, hiding them.

“Did you know? From the start, did you know it was in you?”

Keith sighed deeply, melting against Lance as all the tension, all the frustration and fear, the lies from the past month all seeped out. He looked exhausted, *felt* exhausted, barely enough strength to keep himself toppling over.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “I-in the middle of talking to you. You wanted us to share a room and I-“ he stopped, sniffing. “I could feel it.”

Lance pulled him closer, as much as was possible at that point.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled, swiping the pad of his thumb over Keith’s fingers. “God, Keith, I... if I’d known... I should have known.”

“No,” Keith was shaking his head. “No, you shouldn’t know. It didn’t want you to know. And I- I didn’t mean it. Whatever I said to you, Lance, I didn’t mean it.”

Lance blinked back the tears in his eyes. As awful as it was, that Keith was hurting, that he was in danger, all of it, there was relief to be found. *We’re still friends*, his mind supplied happily.

“Do you believe me?”

Keith was watching him with breathtaking intensity, so close and so focused, all of his attention on Lance alone.

“Yeah,” he said numbly, though his eyes were burning.

“I didn’t mean it,” Keith whispered, cupping Lance’s face. “I-I want to be around you, and the others. I’m not leaving, I’d never leave.”

The desperation in his words hurt. *Never. Please.*

A thumb grazed Lance’s lower lip, Keith’s eyes watching the action religiously. “I wouldn’t.”

Lance was the black paladin, the leader of Voltron; he knew he should focus only on getting the details from Keith. But staring at him, drinking in the intensity of his gaze, Lance could drown in it. He swallowed thickly, remembering just how much shit they were currently in.

“Why’d you do it?”

Keith froze up, fingers playing idly at the base of Lance’s neck.

“You pushed me away,” Lance whispered, ignoring how much it still hurt. “Pushed everyone away. Pidge, Allura, Hunk... you said you didn’t mean it. Was that to protect us, Keith?”

Fresh tears brimmed in the corners of Keith’s eyes, his face screwed up with pain. “I- the things it said, Lance. Y-you...”

Keith gasped, reaching for him, holding him. Lance tried to imagine it. Over a month they’d been buying into Keith’s behaviour, blaming it on suppressants, on fear, on his own self. And all the while... Lance squeezed him tighter, trying to convey how sorry he was.

“It wants to hurt you so much,” Keith whispered, a little choked up. “Lance, it wants you.”

“What is it?”

Keith heaved in a breath, fingers tightening around Lance's collar.

"Is it Carma?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I... I think so. I d-don't know, hasn't exactly told me its name. But it wants you, Lance."

Keith was trembling, pulling Lance even tighter into his arms.

"I shouldn't have told you, I shouldn't have--"

"Hey, it's alright. It's okay, Keith. I'm gonna help you."

"Why does it want you?" Keith asked softly.

"I don't know."

That was the truth to it, the very cold, ugly truth. Not even Keith knew, not with it inside him.

"Why'd you..." Lance's voice fell away into a stutter. "The planet, a-and you..."

"To stop it," Keith said, his voice breaking. "It..."

Lance tucked his head into the crook of Keith's neck, clinging to him as Keith broke down again, trying to suppress the tears.

"Didn't want me to do it. I could f-feel it. You shouldn't--"

"If you say I shouldn't have stopped you," Lance interrupted, "you're wrong. There's no debate."

Keith said nothing, but his shoulders shook as he shrunk into Lance's embrace. Lance let him cry for a while, stroking his back. Whatever the cold energy in his hands was, it seemed to soothe the boy.

"Allura hates me," Keith mumbled after a while.

"Only cause she doesn't know. We're gonna talk to her, Keith. When we're done, we're gonna talk to her. Okay?"

"I d-didn't mean it. I scared her, I-I hurt her, she didn't deserve--"

"Hey... hey, calm down. Calm down."

A sniffle. "She won't understand. I k-killed the planet, I didn't mean to, I--"

Lance just held him, but a different thought soon came to mind. "What were you trying to do? What... how much was the bomb meant to destroy?"

Keith sighed deeply, trying to breathe normally.

"To kill it."

"That's not the Dark Planet, Keith."

“There’s pieces of it down there. That’s where it infected me, pieces are there, I-I know it. I had to, Lance. I had to destroy the tunnel, I, I didn’t think it would go that far, I-I-“

“It’s okay,” Lance murmured, burying fingers in Keith’s hair. “Shh, it’s alright, Keith.”

He remembered the short recording Allura had shown them in her anger, of the planet rocking with explosions, clouds of dust filling the atmosphere. Keith couldn’t have done all that, one bomb couldn’t do that. Had it begun a chain reaction of some sorts? Lance felt there was more to that planet than they’d thought.

“I’m not safe,” Keith whispered.

“That doesn’t mean you- you would’ve died, Keith. You... you can’t die.”

Keith sniffled weakly.

“It’s killing me already, what’s the difference?”

Lance pulled away sharply, forcing Keith to look him in the eye.

“What’s the difference?” he repeated angrily. “Keith, you were going to blow yourself up. That- that’s suicide.”

“I had to kill it-“

“By killing yourself? Jesus, Keith... *no*. If you died, I’d- this team would fall apart, Keith. You... you’re *precious*. So... I... p-please, you can’t die.”

Keith paused in his movements, eyes dropping to the floor. Still situated in Lance’s lap, it was very difficult to ignore him. Despite all the stress, his eyes kept drooping shut; Lance wondered when the last time he slept was. Or ate a proper meal, or had a normal human interaction.

“All the time it’s in my head and i-it’s threatening to do things, but I can’t even... I want to know more about her, about Carma, but it’s, I-I can’t fight it, Lance.”

“But you have been,” Lance insisted, pressing a little firmer on a particularly large mark on Keith’s back, making him go slack. “Did Carma want you to blow up that planet?”

“No,” Keith admitted.

He paused, grimacing.

“It’s angry.”

That statement didn’t sit well with Lance.

“Does it hurt you?” He asked suddenly, though going by Keith’s pained expression, that was a bit of a dumb question.

“You help,” is all the boy said, pressing his injured hand to Lance’s chest and breathing deeply.

A pause.

“What happened in the cave? In the explosion?”

Now it was Lance’s turn to hesitate.

“I don’t know.”

“But what happened?”

Lance took a long moment before he responded, debating with himself. He should tell Keith the truth, all of it; Keith had done the same, hadn’t he? Keith went boneless against him the longer Lance kept touching him, looking like he might possibly fall asleep. Had he been sleeping at all? From what he’d said, probably not. *All day, all night, I can’t think of anything else, or it will- what?* Take Keith over? Lance let him sink into his chest, trying to let him rest.

“You remember what happened one of the first times in the cave, when I pushed you?”

Keith hummed softly, his eyes drooping shut.

“You said I felt like a storm. We didn’t know what it was, you said it was my suit, but it wasn’t. It happened again, before the wormhole took me, and when you were in the cave, a-and, and just whenever I’m scared. I know you don’t believe me-“

“I do,” Keith insisted weakly, pushing at his chest with all the strength he could muster. “I did, I did believe you, I’m sorry.”

“O-oh,” said Lance, coming to terms with that. “Okay. Well then I- I don’t know what it is, Keith. I don’t know how I do it, or how to control it, but if I’m scared I can feel it in my arms. It’s like an energy, its so, so cold, and when I- it is like a storm. Like water, and electricity. I kinda destroyed my room a while back-“

Keith shifted, peering up at him from where his face was smushed against Lance’s shoulder.

“*What?*”

“I burst the pipes and stuff in my sleep, okay? I... had a bad dream.”

Keith’s lip quivered. “I’m sorry-“

“Please don’t be-“

“Did you get hurt? Did you wonder off or-“

“No,” Lance assured him quickly. “No. I... have kinda been tying myself to my bed anyway- hey!”

He pushed Keith down slowly as the boy tried to sit up straight; he didn’t have enough energy for it, and besides, it wasn’t Keith’s fault.

“Don’t... blame yourself, okay? No one knows what’s happening, Keith. You not being there at night isn’t- I’m sorry I gave you shit over it.”

Keith sniffled, pressing his nose into Lance’s neck.

“How’d you burst the pipes?”

“Same as I electrocuted you. I don’t know. But then on the planet, I saw the bomb and *you*, and I-“

Lance sucked in a deep breath; he hated remembering this. “I couldn’t even- I couldn’t *think*. You were going to die and I just- I couldn’t let you. And I felt it, Keith. In the trees, I felt the water in them. I felt it, don’t ask me how, and I took it. We... the water just... surrounded us. Protected us. I don’t know how.”

A moment passed, a quiet one.

“I don’t know what’s happening to me.”

Keith hugged him tight, before his arms went slack, falling loosely around Lance’s waist.

“Keith?”

The boy sighed softly, trying to grip Lance’s shirt but lacking the strength.

“When’s the last time you slept?”

No reply.

“Keith?”

Lance stilled as Keith went completely slack against his chest, his breathing evening out. The holding cell really wasn’t the most comfortable place to sleep, but Lance carefully adjusted himself so he was leaning against the wall, cradling Keith against him, letting the boy’s head drop to his chest. His arms hung loosely by his sides, dark fringe flopping over his eyes. Lance sighed deeply, wrapping arms around Keith to keep him warm. There was no way he’d sleep like this, against a hard wall with Keith all but crushing him, but Lance would be damned if he was going to move. If Keith was tired enough to pass out, then Lance was going to make sure he got some rest.

His brain was practically burning up with overworking itself. Lance stared up at the dark ceiling, carding fingers through Keith’s hair idly. They’d go to Allura in the morning, he decided, whether or not she wanted to see them. Keith had some explaining to do, and so did he. Allura would know what to do, she always did. Lance sighed, bracketing Keith’s sleeping form with his body. In the morning, he vowed, ignoring the slither of doubt telling him he was already too late.

Chapter End Notes

(remembers theres supposed to be a romantic element to this story) oh right oh yeah u should probably ADDRESS THE THING THAT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE THERE
10 CHAPTERS AGO

Chapter Notes

Thank you so so much for the kudos and comments everyone!! I really appreciate it <3
<3 <3 <3 <3

-

They showed up outside Allura's door at four am sharp. Lance felt like he was coming to deliver the morning paper, the daily news, and the front-page story was the half-conscious Keith he was carting along. He wanted them to catch Allura before the rest of the castle woke.

Keith was bundled up in Lance's jacket, shaking lightly and blinking blearily at the dim lights. He leaned heavily against Lance, weak and tired, but in less of a state than yesterday. They'd exchanged a few more words, apologies mostly, repeats of conversations from the past month, addressing things the way they should originally been done. They hadn't discussed the kiss. Both boys dragged their feet on their way to Allura, neither eager to see her and face up to their faults. Lance felt terrible for the argument they'd had, but this needed to be done.

Allura's eyes were tired when she opened the door to them; she'd been asleep, obviously, but not for very long. Her eyes widened as she took in the sight of Keith, bundled up and staring at his feet, Lance's arm wrapped protectively around his shoulders. Lance cut her off just as she opened her mouth to protest.

"He's still possessed."

Allura froze, frowning softly.

"What?" She echoed, knuckles white where she gripped the doorframe.

"It's still in him," Lance said. "We need to talk."

-

Whatever Keith and Allura were talking about, it was taking a long time. Lance sighed, drumming his fingers restlessly against the wall just inside the med-bay. He wasn't spying; technically they'd never asked for the conversation to be private, but he'd given his two teammates some space while Keith struggled to form his apology to Allura. Lance had stuck around to explain the initial situation, doubting Keith had enough energy to, but had quickly moved off when the pair delved into the details of how Keith had been treating Allura.

They both looked pretty teary, seated on an empty bed and talking quietly. There was lots of nodding, lots of averted eyes, lots of hands covering mouths... as touching as it was, Lance was kinda getting impatient. When Allura finally pulled Keith into a long hug, he reckoned it was probably all right for him to re-enter. Keith was sniffing lightly, his smile all wobbly as he tried to return the one Allura was giving him. Lance took a seat quietly on the adjacent bed as Keith mumbled out one more thing.

“Shiro’s parents were Hiroshi and Keiko,” Keith said softly, his voice trembling.

Allura was watching him intently, her eyes watery and expression subdued.

“I th... I think those would be nice baby names.”

The second Keith and Allura’s eyes met they were gone. She reached out to grab his hand, giving it a tight squeeze as both their eyes overflowed with tears.

“Oh, Keith...”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, though judging by Allura’s reaction, he’d already apologised a thousand times over.

Lance cleared his throat before the pair were both babbling; as sweet as it was, they had another problem.

“So,” he said. “Any ideas?”

Allura coughed, swiping at tears on her cheeks. “I, um, it’s definitely still in him. I... I’m sorry-“

“I think we’ve all agreed we are very, very, like, exceptionally sorry.”

Allura chuckled weakly; Lance’s tone was joking.

“I don’t know what to do,” she admitted.

Fuck.

“If the suppressants had no effect, I can’t imagine anything else will. The fact that Keith has managed to withhold... it’s incredible. He’s done incredibly well. But no more isolating yourself.”

Allura met the paladin’s eye seriously.

“I mean it, Keith. You may be managing to resist the possession, but your body is weak. These health results... you’ve lost weight, and muscle. Have you been eating?”

Keith said nothing.

“Sleeping?”

The boy sighed. “Look, a little-“

“A little isn’t enough. If you can’t sleep by yourself, I can prescribe pills.”

Keith’s face paled a little at that idea.

“You need to start attending all meals,” Allura continued sternly. “If you’re feeling unwell, talk to me, talk to Lance, anyone on this castle is willing to listen if you are willing to open up.”

Keith swallowed, a little uncomfortable, but appreciated her words nevertheless.

“As for the danger you pose...”

Lance tensed and Keith shrunk a little where he sat.

“I can see it’s worrying you,” the princess said earnestly. “If you are scared of what you might do,

we will be looking out for you. We won't leave you alone, or in the company of only one person, if you don't want that. I don't believe you will hurt us, Keith. You've torn yourself apart trying to protect us. We care about you too. We all watch out for each other, Keith. No one is going to get hurt."

Keith was trying not to cry again, but it wasn't working out very well for him. He nodded, an answer Allura seemed satisfied with. She sighed deeply.

"We still have much to discuss. I will brief the team when they wake, if you are alright with that?"

Another nod; Keith didn't trust himself to speak.

"I expect you both at breakfast," Allura said. "But first, for the love of my own sanity, would both of you please take a shower? You smell like Coran's marsh boots in summer."

-

Although they had showers in their respective rooms, Lance and Keith headed to the ones in the training deck, as operation *don't leave Keith alone*, had apparently already begun.

"Stop, *splashing me*."

"Dude," Lance chuckled, loping another palm-full of cold water over the divider between their shower stalls. "You're already wet."

"Stop with the cold water!" Keith shrieked.

"It's refreshing!"

"Stop being an ass!"

Lance just laughed, nearly jumping up and down when an idea hit him. He spread his palms, focusing on the droplets pouring from the showerhead and willing them to float. How hard could it be? He'd created a whole water shield in the space of a second, this should be *easy*. Lance bit his tongue to stop his giggles; the thought of dropping a bucket's worth of cold water on Keith's head was making it difficult to focus on *actually* dropping a bucket of water on him.

"Dude," said Keith, his voice strained with how hard he was trying not to laugh. "I can practically *hear* you trying to move the water."

Lance tried grumbling, but it quickly dissolved into giggles when Keith flicked a palm-full of water right back at him. He wasn't moving a single drop. He was still laughing to himself when Keith emerged from his shower, glowering, wrapped in a towel and begrudgingly pulling a clean shirt over his head. He opened his mouth to make a snide comment, Lance ready to reply- but they both froze up. Keith's shirt had short sleeves, Lance wore no shirt at all; the various wounds that littered their bodies were now on full display. Lance didn't miss the way the other grimaced as his eyes passed over the burnt skin edging around Lance's shoulders, tucking his own arms together to hide the ugly black marks.

"Keith--"

"I'm gonna go fetch my jacket," he said, quickly turning away from Lance.

The black paladin tried to lighten up Keith's mood again on their walk to their room, but he didn't seem to be feeling very well.

“Can you, um, feel it now?”

“No,” Keith said, and Lance honestly couldn’t tell if he was lying.

“Before I told you, when I was trying to, it was angry. It didn’t want me to. But as soon as I did, it... just went silent.”

Lance frowned. “You think telling me helped suppress it?”

Keith shrugged. “Dunno.”

They walked on in silence. Lance tried popping his head in after Keith when they arrived at the red paladin’s room, partially because of the *don’t abandon Keith* plan, partially because he’d never seen the inside of his room. Keith stopped him at the door, sensing Lance’s curiosity.

“I’m fetching a jacket, dude. You can wait out here.”

“I wasn’t...” Keith smirked and Lance’s words died on his tongue.

He grumbled as Keith slipped into his room, tossing himself against the wall and waiting. Ten seconds, that’s how long it should take to fetch his jacket, twenty if he’d placed it somewhere and forgotten. A minute went by. Lance rapped his knuckles against the door.

“You doing your hair or something?”

There was no reply. Lance swallowed the lump of unease in his throat, knocking a little louder.

“Yo, Keith?”

The feeling of discomfort grew as Lance listened intently by the door, waiting.

“Keith? I’m coming in, alright?”

Lance cursed softly when again there was no answer, shoving the door aside and stepping cautiously into the room. He half expected Keith to be standing there, ready to throw something at him for coming in, but the second Lance entered, all his attention zeroed in on the boy lying lifeless on the floor. Keith hadn’t made it to his jacket, which lay on an unmade bed not three feet away. He lay sprawled on the floor, a thin trickle of black liquid seeping from his lips, eyes open and unseeing.

A choked noise tore away from Lance’s lips as he staggered into the room, knees hitting the ground as he collapsed beside Keith, reaching for his pulse, shaking his shoulders, tilting him on his side to clear the thick black fluid from his lungs.

“Keith?” he yelled, shaking him roughly.

His eyes fluttered shut, rolling back in his head.

“Keith!”

In the space of a second, Lance was heaving Keith’s lifeless body up off the floor, nearly tripping over his own feet in his haste to get to the door. Keith was light, way too light.

“Help!” Lance yelled, taking off running as fast as he could toward the other’s rooms. “*HELP!*”

He nearly smashed into Coran rounding the corner.

“Lan-“

“Help him! H-help, he’s, he-“

Coran’s eyes widened as he took in the sight of Keith hanging limply from Lance’s arms with black liquid staining his lips.

“Lance!”

Allura was running toward them, her advisor stuttering wordlessly at the sight of the red paladin.

“Lance, what happened?”

“H-he, he just-“ Lance was panicking, realising he couldn’t feel Keith’s pulse at all. “W-went into his room to fetch his jacket. A-and I found him, just, I-like this.”

The pair of Alteans looked just as scared as him, but Allura was quick to spur them into action.

“Come on!” She yelled, already pulling them in the direction of the med-bay.

“I t-told you he needed a healing pod, we should-“

“This isn’t from an injury!” Allura yelled, running ahead of him.

Lance was already moving toward the pods as soon as they entered the bay, but Allura tugged him harshly to the side, practically grabbing Keith out of his arms and dropping the boy onto a bed.

“Coran!” She ordered, as Lance stumbled back in shock.

The elder Altean was there in an instant, pushing Lance aside.

“The dissolvent,” Allura said, thrusting out her hand, the one that wasn’t braced on Keith’s chest. “I need it.”

“Princess, that will-“

“Give it to me!”

Allura’s tone left no room for argument; as much as Lance felt he should help, he was suddenly too afraid to interfere. The princess seemed very certain of what she was doing. With trembling hands, Coran held out a small, packaged pill to her. Then came a second where Allura hesitated, pill in hand, hovering over Keith’s mouth.

“I’m sorry, Keith,” she murmured to herself.

Before Lance could interject, Allura forced the pill into the boy’s parted lips, and clamped her hands over his mouth.

“Hold him!” She yelled at her stunned spectators, locking an elbow over Keith’s chest for leverage.

Lance lunged for Keith’s arms, a second before his body convulsed, arching up against the many arms holding him down. Allura grit her teeth, forcing Keith’s mouth shut even as his head twisted side to side, eyes flickering wildly beneath closed lids. It wasn’t hard to see he was in pain, but Lance didn’t dare contradict Allura now. The trio worked together to hold the red paladin down, no matter how much he twisted and thrashed about, something awful moving down his throat.

The moment his eyes opened, Allura ordered them off. Lance stepped back quickly, giving Keith room to breath, or to try. He pushed weakly at Allura's hands, losing consciousness. She released him in an instant, helping the boy roll onto his side, heaving and gasping and gripping the bedside with white knuckles. Lance and Coran stood standby in shock, looking for signs on Allura's face as she crouched down to be level with Keith, gripping the corner of the sheet to wipe gingerly at the black stains around his mouth. Keith was shaking, curling into himself and gasping as if he couldn't breath.

"Deep breaths," Allura instructed calmly, though there was pain in her eyes from seeing him that way. "You're alright now, Keith, breathe."

He was trying, hanging his head low and taking slow breathes of air into his lungs, as though it hurt to do so. Allura helped him through it, brushing hair away from his face.

"What was that?" Lance asked quietly.

"A dissolvent," Coran replied, as Allura kept speaking softly to Keith. "Dissolved whatever that was inside him. Also injures much of... well, everything else inside him."

Lance wanted to cry, hearing the broken sounds coming from Keith as Allura soothed over his forehead with a cloth.

"Just keep breathing," she reminded gently, helping him lie back against the bed.

There were tears streaking down Keith's cheeks, and fresh blood around his lips. Panting, he shut his eyes to the bright lights above them, trying to bring about some control over his body. Coran's face was a mask of horror, and Lance didn't think he looked any better. He inched closer to the bed, tentatively running a thumb over Keith's hand where it rested feebly on the mattress. The boy's lip quirked, though his eyes remained shut. Whatever sleep he'd gotten in that cell with Lance clearly wasn't enough, especially not after this.

"Don't think it wanted me to tell you," he rasped out, despite Allura's immediate insistence that he not speak.

"Yeah," Lance breathed, his voice quivering. "Don't think so, man."

Keith inclined his head slightly toward Allura, cracking an eye open.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"Stop talking," is all she said, but it was laden with emotion.

"So," said Coran, suddenly reminding them all that there was one person in the room who had absolutely no idea what was happening. "Does either of you three want to explain?"

-

Allura explained, to the entire team in fact. Pidge and Hunk hadn't taken the news well, so the morning had been a mess of emotions. No one had let their guard down around Keith since, but it was for his own sake. Thus, they were still in the med-bay, everyone save Keith and Pidge gathered around near the doorway. The missing pair of paladins were still in sight, seated on Keith's bed and talking in hushed voices that none of the others could hear. Keith hadn't stopped crying since Pidge had first barged into the room, Allura's explanation fresh in her mind. She'd marched up to him threatening violence, but subsequently hadn't stopped hugging him until Hunk was forced to pry the green paladin off, probably fearing for Keith's state of health.

“What do you think it means?” Hunk was saying, looking at the tablet in Allura’s hands.

Lance tore his eyes away from the tearful pair of friends, returning to the matter the rest of them were in the process of addressing. Namely, the dwarf planet.

“I don’t know,” Allura answered on everyone’s behalf. “It doesn’t look any worse.”

“Doesn’t look great either,” Lance muttered.

The once green planet was shrouded in brown fog, likely dirt; the aftermath of the explosions was no small matter.

“What did Keith say again?”

“He didn’t mean to destroy the whole planet,” Lance answered, glancing over at Pidge and Keith, who were nodding along to whatever the other was saying, hands wrapped tightly together. “Just the cave. Neither of us know why it had such a big effect.”

“My guess is on gasses deeper within the ground,” Allura said, gazing solemnly over the screen. “One explosion might not have done much, but if it ignited flammable gas within the caves, that could have set off a chain reaction.”

“Enough to tear the planet apart?”

“I fear there are many aspects of that planet we do not understand. Besides, with that many decomposing bodies...”

“Why’d he wanna destroy the cave so bad?” Hunk whispered, even though Keith was well out of hearing range.

Lance shifted his weight uncomfortably. He felt different now, knowing how Keith sounded when he was most upset, knowing how he sounded in that much pain, knowing how he looked that close to death.

“He wanted to destroy whatever bits of this Carma spirit were down there. And figured blowing himself up at the same time would get rid of the piece that was possessing him.”

Silence descended upon the group for a moment, and Hunk’s eyes shifted to Keith, who was now hugging it out with Pidge. Lance hoped they could go back to being friends; they’d exchanged some awful words.

“In any case,” Lance continued. “The dwarf planet isn’t the thing we have to worry about. If that thing finds a way to use Keith any more than it already has, we’re in trouble. Time’s already running out, but in addition to finding a way out of this stupid place, we need to get him under control.”

“Did the suppressants-“

“The suppressants were useless. The only thing restraining that thing is Keith himself, and look what that’s doing to him.”

Another look at Keith and the sickening black bruises down his arms. He looked weaker too, thinner, paler; Lance hoped that was simply because he’d been avoiding taking care of himself.

“Okay,” said Hunk. “So what do we do?”

“Watch him,” said Allura. “He’s managed thus far, he’s not about to go off at any second-“

“He did literally think the only solution was to blow himself up,” Lance reminded them.

“Then we must be there to remind him otherwise,” said Allura. “Look, we may not have a solution to get it out of him, but that doesn’t mean we can’t improve the situation. For starters, his health deteriorating is much his own fault. Get him to eat more, sleep more, not overtrain, and we’re already a step of the way there. Healthy interactions, reassurances... don’t let him push us away again. Get him to talk, listen, and if *anything* changes, we let each other know.”

They all nodded solemnly.

“As for sleeping arrangements... I doubt he would be comfortable having anyone watching him sleep, but I can set up sensors in his room. If he moves, gets up, if anything about him becomes irregular, it will trigger an alarm.”

“That sounds kinda...”

“Like I’m babysitting him? Yes. But it’s necessary, wouldn’t you say?”

Lance sighed, remembering the ease with which Keith had fallen asleep curled up against him. He’d taken away some pain, somehow, without explanation he’d stopped it. *Like you stopped the explosion consuming you. And the airlock opening. And-*

“Yeah.”

“We can do this,” Allura assured them. “It will be alright.”

“Look on the bright side,” said Hunk. “Keith isn’t actually a huge dick.”

Allura’s brows furrowed. “But Keith isn’t-“

“It’s a saying!” Lance amended quickly, then grimaced when the sudden movement pinched the skin on his back.

Allura’s frown deepened. “I know you’re worried, Lance, but we really ought to get you into a healing pod.”

“I’m fine-“

“Uh, you’re really not,” said Hunk. “I can see blood on your shirt. And it’s super gross.”

“Hey!”

“Just for a little while-“

“Only if Keith goes in one too.”

Allura sighed. “We’ve already discussed why that isn’t a good idea. It might heal some minor injuries, but it won’t rid him of the possession. It could make Carma stronger.”

Lance gnawed on his lip, glancing in Keith’s direction again. The boy was still wrapped up in a Pidge-hug, but his eyes met Lance’s briefly.

“Two hours,” said Lance. “At most.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Allura muttered, already dragging him toward the pods. “Oh, and when you come out, we need to talk.”

“Okay,” said Lance. “Five hours is fine.”

Allura just scoffed.

Chapter Notes

Hey!! Sorry for taking so long to get back to all your comments but DAMN THANKS SO MUCH FOR SAID COMMENTS!! they're such great motivation thanks everyone and thanks for reading <3 <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

The atmosphere of the room wasn't awkward, but Lance was hardly comfortable. Allura was watching him inquisitively, her hands clasped together and resting on the table between them. There shouldn't be anyone in this part of the castle, some old abandoned study room, making it the perfect place to talk.

"I'm not angry."

That was always a good start. Lance rolled his shoulders slowly, relieved at the lack of pain. He was still a bit achy and red, but the worst of the burns and blisters had been addressed by the healing pod. It made him feel even worse for Keith, who'd been denied one on the basis it could make the spirit within him stronger.

"That's... good."

Allura raised a brow. "I still want an explanation."

Lance squirmed in his seat, fingers knitted tightly together in his lap. "Could you, uh, be a bit more specific?"

Allura sighed. "You haven't done anything to your suit, have you?"

Lance hesitated for a second, before deciding lying was practically useless at this point. "No."

"Tell me what's going on, Lance. I can help."

Difficult as it was to come clean to Allura, Lance could imagine her frustration; he'd asked the same of Keith over and over again.

"I don't really know," he began. "I know you're talking about the lightening in the hanger yesterday but there's... there's more than that."

"I know."

Startled, Lance looked up. "You do?"

"The cave, Lance. When Keith disappeared, you did something. When they were stuck in the airlock, there again. I was so relieved, I'd forgotten how we'd even managed to open it. But now... I... I imagine this is somewhat linked to that explosion too?"

Allura's eyes were piercing; kind, but holy hell, impossible to look away from. How the fuck did Shiro ever manage to win her over without crying? Probably because Shiro also had the looks of a god and their baby was going to kick-ass. Or he just cried, a lot.

"Yeah..." Lance mumbled, digging his fingers a little too hard into the table top. "It, uh, the first time it happened was with Keith. When we went down to the planet, just the two of us?"

"I remember."

"Well, we were having a fight. And I could feel this weird energy in my arms, getting stronger, and tighter, and colder. It's cold, like, really, really cold. Anyway, I got upset, we were shouting and stuff. When Keith reached out to comfort me, I- Lance gave his head an abrupt shake; it still felt so surreal.

"He touched me," he continued. "And I shocked him. Not a static sort of thing, I *really*- I threw him back more than ten feet. That's how we found the tunnel, I threw him into the wall. I didn't even know what had happened until I saw him lying there, I thought- I don't know. I still don't know."

Allura was watching him intensely, frowning slightly and clearly thinking deeply over what he had to say.

"And the next time," she asked. "Did it feel the same?"

"Yeah. Next was when we were on the desert planet, when I nearly died. You were in the castle and we were on the planet, and just before that wormhole, I could feel it starting. Keith said he thought it was my suit doing it, that's why I took my armour off, why I got so hurt."

Now Allura was looking very serious, not interrupting, rather waiting to hear it all.

"It just keeps happening," Lance said, finding the more he spilt the easier it became, the more the words flowed. "When I'm scared for myself, or for the team, it's there. When we lost Keith in the cave, when they were in the airlock, when we wormholed back- I can't control it. I can't stop it. And it's not just cold, or lightening, it... Keith said I felt like a storm. And he's right. It's ice, and water, and electricity. I destroyed the pipes in my room, I ripped them from the wall in my sleep. And when I got down to the dwarf planet, and Keith was standing there about to blow himself up... I *took* it. I took the water around us. In the trees, in their roots, in the ground, every drop of it I could feel, I took. That's how we survived, Allura. I surrounded us in water. I don't know how, I don't know what made it impossible, or- and in the hanger, when I grabbed that shot? I didn't even *feel* it. It was a part of me, like my own *hand*."

The silence that stretched between them was daunting.

"I wish I could tell you what it is, Allura. I didn't tell you sooner because I hoped I'd have it figured out by now. But I don't. And it scares me, but at the same time, it helps. It defends me, and the team, and it- when I touched the bruises, or whatever they are on Keith's skin, I could take some of that pain away. But I don't understand."

For a second, the pair at the table weren't so important, they weren't the black paladin and the heir to Alteia, they were who they should've been, without a war and without corruption. Two friends, two partners, two people who understood each other but never the world around them.

"I don't know either," Allura admitted.

"I didn't want to tell the team, I didn't want to worry them-"

“And I agree.”

Lance faltered. “Y-you do?”

“Yes. Which is why I already told them it was the black lion, not you.”

Lance stared, stunned.

“I don’t want them worrying over more things than they already have to. Besides, it is a possibility. The black lion could be channelling energy through you to protect you.”

Lance scoffed lightly. “Do you really think that, or do you just have no other options?”

Allura smiled thinly. “A bit of both.”

She shook her head fondly, sharing in his thoughts.

“This is absurd.”

“You’re telling me...”

“Is there anything else I should know?”

Lance’s face twitched. “No.”

The dreams, the cave, Allura- “I’m just worried about Keith.”

Allura’s shoulders slumped. “Me too.”

“And Shiro.”

She said nothing, but her gaze dropped to the floor, and the hand nearest her stomach inched a fraction closer.

“We’re going to find him,” Lance quickly amended. “But Keith made up that lie for a reason- *it is* frustrating not being able to search right now.”

Allura hummed thoughtfully, her eyes somewhere distant. Lance’s stomach lurched at the memory of the fight they’d had, but he supposed now was as good a time as any to address it.

“By the way,” he began, hating that Allura’s head shot up immediately, as if she knew what he was talking about already. “I... I’m really sorry, for the things I said when I... when we got back from the dwarf planet.”

Allura waited, holding back. Lance’s fingers tingled a little, but he pushed on.

“I was rude, and arrogant, and I know I said hurtful things. I won’t say I didn’t mean them, because in that moment I did. Keith was- he was so hurt, Allura. Picking him up of that planet, *mierda*, he nearly died, and having him there but not knowing how bad he was hurt, I- I w-would’ve done anything, to make sure he was safe. Which is why I shouted, and argued, and... I don’t expect you to forgive me, and I don’t regret trying to protect him, but Allura, I am so, so sorry for the things I said to you.”

Allura had grown very serious; there certainly wasn’t any instant forgiveness to be had, but there wasn’t hatred either.

"I understand," she said.

I don't forgive you, but I do understand. Really, that was all Lance wanted.

"And I'm sorry too, Lance. I'm sorry for threatening him, I- the thought of him harming anyone in this team... I realise I was wrong. But it still hurt, those bodies on the planet, I know they were dead but, they were *Altean*."

Allura paused, shaking her head softly. "I don't know what I wanted. Closure, maybe. They're dead, they've been dead for centuries, but the fact that they were *Altean*, that somewhere out there..."

"I understand," said Lance.

Allura met his eye; they were both sorry.

"You have to promise to tell me," Allura went on, changing the tone of their conversation again. "Next time it happens. Whenever the cold feeling starts, maybe we can do something."

Lance nodded solemnly.

"And I know you've dismissed it, but the answer could well lie with the black lion. Black could be projecting onto you, or it could be a thing of inheritance involving the black paladin we are yet to uncover. Else, it could be similar to the force that is possessing Keith--"

"No."

"What?"

Lance shook his head firmly. "It's not that. This helps us, I'm sure of it. That thing in Keith only hurts him. This energy or whatever it is, it... it helps him, and us, and... they can't be the same."

Allura looked on the verge of refuting those words, but decided against it.

"Okay," she said eventually, a little overwhelmed by everything they'd discussed.

She sighed, her eyes leaving Lance to skirt the walls in search of an answer.

"Thank you for telling me."

"Thanks for listening, I guess."

More silence, the air felt dismal, despite the weight that had been lifted by telling Allura.

"Promise you'll tell me, Lance."

"I will."

Allura looked him dead in the eye, her expression like stone. "Don't let things slide. Don't let strange feelings get the better of you."

Lance swallowed thickly, gripping his shirt to stop himself fidgeting.

"Figure out these feelings, Lance. Don't stop paying attention."

Star date – 33:05:13

Castle Cycle – 20:30

Log – 12

“Good evening, Black!” Lance began happily, plonking down in the seat before the camera. “This is Lance on the captain’s log, except this time its captain’s log with a twist, because-“

“Are you always this dramatic?”

Lance slouched, pouting and glaring off to his right. “Our very exciting twist-“

He tugged the camera harshly to re-angle it, inviting a second person into the shot.

“Keef.”

Keith ignored the camera, eyes trained on Lance. “Just saying, you sound like one of those irritating Youtubers-“

“Dude! I do not!”

“Definitely do.”

“How do you even know what Youtube is- oh wait, I know, half the views on Top Ten Cryptid Sightings come from you-“

“I’ll leave,” Keith said suddenly, crossing arms.

Lance huffed, but chose to refrain from commenting. Keith sat beside him in a chair they’d dragged in from outside, wrapped in a blanket because of the weak state he was in.

“You’re such a buzz kill,” Lance grumbled.

“My lion is literally the spirit of adrenaline-“

“Okay, alright! Can we make this damn log, please?”

Keith’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Isn’t this what you were doing when you fell asleep and wandered into the cave?”

“Yes?”

“And you’re still doing it?”

“This isn’t- that wasn’t Black’s fault! Now can we please have an actual conversation as to whose fault it was?”

Keith appeared to ponder this, sinking into the blanket until all that was visible were a pair of angry eyes. Lance sighed, exasperated.

“Man, get out of there.”

Keith didn’t budge.

“Fine. Hey Black,” Lance chimed forcefully, tugging the blanket down so they could at least see Keith’s face. “This is Keith. You already know that, cause he’s the one you and me spend half our lives flying around to save.”

Lance's façade faltered a second when Keith neither scoffed nor protested that. The other boy had shrunk a little into his seat, eyes fixed on the floor.

"No, Keith, I didn't..."

Lance turned to his friend, concern dashing his features.

"I didn't mean the explosion," he said softly. "I don't... you're not a burden. I was joking."

Keith sighed shakily, blinking rapidly before speaking. "Uh, yeah. Yeah let's just... what did you want me to say on here?"

Lance hesitated before continuing, his eyes lingering on his friend. "Um. Yeah. I just... wanted us to talk to Black together, so we could put together what we know. If that's alright?"

Composing himself quickly, Keith nodded, sitting a little straighter and actually looking into the camera. "Yeah, no, that's a good idea."

"Yeah, no?"

"Shut up."

Lance chuckled lightly. "Anyway, my theory is definitely that Carma is what made me wonder into the cave."

"Yeah, mine too," said Keith. "But I don't know why."

"Maybe she wanted to possess me instead of you, so wanted me down there with the bodies. Or she just wanted to kill me."

"I don't think it wants to kill you."

Lance head shot up. "What makes you say that?"

"Uh, it doesn't yet."

"That is so not reassuring, man."

"What?" Keith protested. "I thought you wanted me to be honest."

"No, I do, I... yeah, keep going."

"It keeps..." Keith fisted a corner of the blanket angrily. "It tells me to kill them, everyone else. But never you or Allura."

"Wait, Allura too?"

"Y-yeah."

"But I thought it told you to burn her?"

Keith shifted uncomfortably, recoiling. "It does. But, um, her legs. H-her hair. Hurt her, but don't... kill her."

Lance was frowning heavily, watching Keith with equals level pity and disgust. "That's awful."

"You should hear what it wants to do to you," Keith said, then flinched as if he immediately

regretted it. "Sorry, fuck, I shouldn't have said that."

"No, it's alright," Lance said, though his face had paled.

"No it's not," Keith insisted suddenly, sitting up straighter.

Lance's eyes darted to the blanket when it slipped from his shoulder, as though he were considering pulling it back up to keep Keith warm.

"You keep saying it's alright, but it's not."

"No, I know that, sorry, I... I don't mind that you said that, Keith. The more honest you are, the more it's gonna help."

Keith didn't look very convinced by that, teeth digging into his bottom lip, but he trusted Lance enough to go by his words.

"It's just horrible," he said. "It sucks."

Lance's brows furrowed with concern for his friend. "But it doesn't want to kill us?"

"Not you or Allura, no."

"Yet we're the ones the wormhole takes."

"That..." Keith paused, regarding his own words with mild discomfort. "That countdown, four hundred days until the planet reaches us..."

"Three seventeen, now," Lance added glumly.

"That's when it's going to kill you."

"Huh?"

"When the Dark Planet reaches us, that's when it will kill you. Until then, it just wants you to hurt, I guess. This really does feel like revenge."

Lance had gone quite still; Keith's words made sense.

"That's not reassuring."

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"What, can you think of another reason it would not be killing you? The things it wants to do to you, Lance... it's just trying to make your death as painful as possible, don't you see?"

"I'm not sure I want to see, no."

Keith sighed. "I bet Carma's giving you bad dreams."

"You can't-"

"I bet Carma made you wander into that planet, I bet she's opening the wormhole, I'd say she was the one giving you that cold energy, except it- it's the only thing that repels her, so why-"

“Wait, what?”

Keith blinked. “What?”

“The only thing that repels her? What the hell does that mean?”

Keith was frowning. “Why’d you think I fell asleep on you, Lance. You were cold and it kinda... it didn’t feel as strong.”

Holy shit holy shit holy shit, Lance’s head was spinning.

“So it actually helped, when I touched you?”

“When... yeah, when I was sleeping.”

“No, no but when I was actually focusing, and touching the bruises...”

“Touching...” Keith’s expression scrunched up, confused. “I... don’t remember.”

“In the cell.”

“I don’t remember what happened in the cell. I was gonna ask you later.”

Lance’s world came to a grinding halt.

“What?”

“I mean, I know you came to see me and stuff, but I don’t remember. I was wiped out, okay?”

“You don’t remember.”

“Yeah, I just said-“

“Like, you don’t remember? What don’t you remember? You forgot all of it, just some of it, what?”

Keith was frowning, looking a little concerned at Lance’s sudden meltdown. The words were almost visible they stormed so violently in Lance’s head. The kiss does he remember the kiss does he remember-

“Um... I know I told you Carma was in me. I- I apologised, right? I should’ve-“

“Yeah you apologised, like, a lot,” Lance rushed. “But do you remember what you did?”

“What I did?” Keith’s face paled. “What did I do?”

“You don’t remember?”

“I don’t know what I’m meant to be remembering!”

“With your-“ Lance bit his tongue, waving his hands around.

There was always the possibility Keith was just having a Keith moment where he assumed making out with Lance’s neck meant no big deal.

“With my... your...” Lance whined, really not wanting to have to spell it out.

Keith was watching him with wide eyes.

"With my neck!" Lance squeaked. "What you did? Y'know, my neck, your... the general... vicinity... of your face."

Keith tilted his head slightly, hopelessly lost. "Did I hurt you?"

"No!" Lance smacked a hand against his own forehead hard enough to make Keith flinch. "No you didn't- god, I had this coming I deserved this this is all because of the stupid fucking bonding fucking isn't it fuck who even thinks this is funny-"

"Lance? You okay?"

"Fine," Lance wheezed, looking ready to drop through the floor and disappear, much in the style of the black paladin. "I just... yeah, I understand. You were, upset and stuff, if it was gonna comfort you-"

"What the hell did I do!" Keith almost yelled, snapping Lance back to present.

"Nothing," he said quickly.

"Why are you going on about your neck-"

"You just cried a lot! Onto my shirt, it was really gross by the way. You're a really ugly crier."

Keith's frown transformed into a glare. "No one forced you to-"

"You're right, next time I'll let Keithykins cry himself to sleep alone."

Keith's expression was quickly morphing into something upset.

"Hey, I'm kidding. I just didn't know you'd forgotten cause we talked about some heavy stuff. What Carma was telling you to do, and why you tried to blow your self up... everything. And you did apologise, lots, for stuff that wasn't your fault. So because you've forgotten, I'm sorry too."

"Lance-"

"No. I'm sorry I didn't realise sooner. I'm sorry we let you push yourself away. You shouldn't have been hurting by yourself all that time."

Keith's eyes were downcast, but very slowly he brought them back up to meet Lance's. The black paladin offered him a timid smile, which Keith managed to return.

"Thanks," he said softly. "For coming to get me."

It took Lance a moment to figure out what he meant.

"Of course we-"

"Just thank you," Keith said. "I... I was so scared. I was scared of dying. Thank you."

Lance's lip quivered; he looked like he'd forgotten about the recording all-together.

"Anyway," said Keith. "What else was there to talk about?"

"Oh." The kiss. "Um... what... do you think is wrong with me?"

"Didn't Allura have the solution? Wait, you have told Allura, right?"

“Yeah, about my arms.”

“What about the dreams, and Allita?”

“Well no. There’s no need for her to know-“

“Lance-“

“She’s pregnant and already stressing out, okay? Its not like she’ll magically have a solution, so why worry her?”

Keith huffed angrily. “What did she say?”

“She didn’t know what was up with the energy. She told you guys it was the black lion channelling stuff through me, but she’s not so sure. We’re all fucking clueless.”

They sat in anxious silence for a minute.

“So... if this thing is Carma,” said Keith. “Why is she taking her revenge out on you and Allura?”

“Could be the Altean thing-“

“But that’s completely ignoring Coran!”

Lance paused. “True.”

“You, Allura, Black, and even Blue. Why Blue? It’s either one or the other, not both lions.”

Lance hummed, but the sound stopped halfway. Keith was still talking, but a new thought had come to him.

“Both...” he echoed. “Black and Blue.”

“Yeah,” Keith said distractedly. “If it’s linked to the black paladin, why bother with the blue lion-“

“Both!” Lance exclaimed, leaping up out of his chair and startling his companion.

“Lance?”

Lance laughed out loud. “It’s both, it’s- the video, the wormhole, it’s fucking both of them, there’s two!”

“What... the fuck are you on-“ Keith yelled as Lance tugged him out of the chair, blanket and all.

“I understand!” He shouted happily, and grabbed hold of Keith’s face. “You genius, you genius! I love you!”

Keith face flushed crimson, stuttering breathlessly while Lance remained oblivious, practically dancing them in circles.

“Come on!” He exclaimed suddenly, dropping Keith’s face only to latch onto hand.

“Where are we-“

“I gotta get my bayard!” Lance yelled, already tugging them toward the door.

“Your...bayard?” Keith trailed off, tripping over his own feet as Lance tugged on his hand insistently, casting on more look toward the camera.

“I’ll explain later we just gotta go,” Lance said, and with one final hard tug had Keith following him.

“It’s fucking both!” He could be heard yelling on their way down the gangway. “Both of them!”

-

“Lance, *what* are you doing?”

Keith’s voice eventually managed to snap him out of his excitable trance, too caught up in the realisation of what was happening to stop and explain it.

“Black and blue,” Lance panted, still running, still holding Keith’s hand in his. “Electricity *and* water. There’s always been two, it’s- the storm, that’s what it is.”

“What?” Keith stumbled as they ran, bumping into Lance as he came to a sudden halt before the training room doors.

“It’s black and blue,” Lance continued, striding over to the rack of bayards, where the black one lay all by itself. “*Black and Blue.*”

He plucked it up in his spare hand, remembering the blue one still lay back with the lions. *Perfect.* That’s where he needed to be anyway. Keith either gave in to being pulled along, or didn’t have the strength to stop Lance. That thought made him slow his steps a little, giving Keith a chance to catch his breath as they headed toward the hangar with the black bayard in tow. Lance was shaking; *what if you’re wrong?* Then he was officially out of ideas.

Remnants of their conversation still lingered in his head, Keith saying he didn’t remember. Lance’s stomach clenched; it hurt, he wasn’t going to deny it. Is this how Keith felt when Lance had denied the bonding moment? Surely not, this was worse, this meant more. He’d kissed him, it was kind of a one-way thing, but Keith had *done that*. Lance was ready to what? Kiss him back? Kiss him properly? Kiss him again? Pick him up and spin him in circles and smile and shout to the whole wide world about how happy he was that Keith, amid tragedy and loss and pain, had still shown him affection? Sounded too good to be true. And apparently it was.

Lance could understand, he really could; Keith *had* been hurting, and whether or not *Lance* had anything to do with it, the energy in his hands had helped. Keith was hurting, Lance helped. Emotions, everything, was running wild. Maybe it was out of pity, or thankfulness, or an apology, or just sheer relief; either way, Lance shouldn’t have read so much into it. *Keith kissed you.* And then he forgot. It didn’t matter, at least, not as much as having him there, safe and alive did.

It was unsettling also, what Keith had said about Carma’s thoughts regarding him. *Help me hurt you.* Was possessing Keith a double tactic, a way to hurt Lance as well as him? Because it was working. He squeezed Keith’s hand tightly as they came stumbling into the hanger, thumb swiping over the clean bandage hiding the infected gash across his palm.

“The blue bayard,” Lance said, reluctantly releasing Keith’s hand. “I left it here, we gotta find it.”

Keith was still looking largely unsure, but moved off to look for it. The two lions loomed above them, and Lance felt as if they might be watching them, waiting.

“Here,” called Keith, just before Lance started clambering over Blue’s paw in search of the bayard

he'd tossed away. "Got it."

Lance practically launched himself at Keith, black bayard in hand, hesitating before he took the blue one from the paladin's outstretched hand.

"Okay," he breathed, glancing up at Black and Blue. "Please, please let this be it."

Lance took the blue bayard. He stepped back, a bayard in each hand, waiting. Please. He felt it before he saw it, the familiar thrum of energy through the blue bayard, and then, amazingly, the black. Light surrounded them briefly, and Lance fought not to avert his eyes as the two weapons transformed in his hands in a blinding display.

"Holy shit," Keith breathed.

Lance laughed aloud, the action shaking his hands, and subsequently the pair of dual pistols he now held.

"Fucking yes!" He shouted happily, as Keith's face transformed from confusion to shock to awe.

It's both. Lance couldn't stop smiling, testing the weight of each gun in his hand. Black on the right, blue on the left, smaller than his usual gun, but elegant and precise.

"It worked," he breathed, beaming at Keith, who eagerly returned the smile. "Blue and black."

Lance laughed again, grinning up at his lions, both his lions, slowly awakening to his realisation. He caught a twinkle of light in Blue's eye, then Black's, before the force of their full consciousness was knocking him back like a tidal wave.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter was kinda a filler so next one will probably (?) be up a bit sooner and also have more content THANKS FOR READING GUYS!!

Chapter Notes

HI HELLO THANKS AGAIN YOU AMAZING PEOPLE!!! Your comments are wonderful, thank you so so very much, I'm constantly shocked by all your support its so lovely thank you!!

I really liked writing this chapter so idk I hope u like reading it

~~~~ALSO ALSO ALSO~~~~

THANK YOU SO SO MUCH PAFFUZ FOR MAKING THIS A M A Z I N G ART YOU CAN CHECK OUT!!

twitter: <https://twitter.com/FraguasMarina/status/909623241655951360>

tumblr: <https://paffuz.tumblr.com/post/165464396057/long-time-no-post-i-did-this-fanart-for>

sorry im bad at linking stuff but GO CHECK OUT THEIR ART ITS AWESOME  
thank you so much bud I absolutely love this <3 <3 <3 <3 <3 <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

It was blinding, and brilliant. It hurt, but not enough to discourage him. For the first time in months, Lance could *breathe*. Black's consciousness wasn't cold or loveless or detached, it was *everything*. It wasn't the rejection he'd felt every time Black failed to respond, instead it was every micro trace of compassion the lion had shown him, but without restraint. *Nice to meet you*, Lance thought, as warmth and welcome engulfed him.

In hindsight, it had always been both of them. Blue had never really let go, Black had never really opened up. The more Lance tried to push at one and pull at another, the more firmly stuck they'd become, magnets he couldn't force apart. Lance had no idea what this made him, whether they should call him the blue or black paladin, but he could *feel* it. It didn't have a name, but the dual pistols in his hands and the two lions towering above him spelt it out without words. *Like twins*. A perfect pair. Lance swallowed thickly, refusing to let that thought taint his revelation.

It made so much sense in that moment, why Black hadn't been able to get through, Blue either. The projections had been fuzzy, glitchy, but when both lions worked together it was clearer. Two pieces coming together, and suddenly Lance had the whole picture. He felt so *happy*. *Finally*.

"-nce? Lance?"

Keith was calling too him, and Lance realised he'd probably been staring at the pistols for a solid five minutes now, bathing in the brilliance of his lions' existence.

"I can feel them," he breathed.

Keith looked pretty happy himself, but there was doubt there too. "Feel them?"

“My lions! Black- both of them, they’re both responding.”

Keith’s eyes widened. “Black’s talking to you?”

“They both are, they... They say you have a bad hair cut.”

Keith’s mouth dropped. “There’s no way-“

“Of course I’m joking! They aren’t talking, but I can...” Lance laughed, shaking his head. “It’s been so quiet, Keith. I can feel them, I- I’m so happy.”

Keith’s hesitant smile grew wider.

“What does this... which paladin are you?”

“I don’t know? But it feels right.”

Keith grinned, and Lance grew even more cheerful.

“Dude! We gotta show the others!”

“The lions, or-“

“Nah man,” Lance said, hoisting the pair of pistols up. “Just my *sick guns*.”

Keith scoffed. “Is that seriously what you’re most excited about?”

“Uh, hell yeah? Have you seen these?” Lance asked, waving the blue pistol in his face. “Woo! Fuckin *sick*.”

Keith laughed, but wisely ducked under the wide arc Lance swung the guns in.

“I’m gonna fetch the others.”

-

“What the shit?” Pidge was practically jumping up and down, tugging on Lance’s arm to get a closer look at the black pistol. “This is so cool!”

Lance grinned wildly. “Mhm.”

“You only just figured it out?” Allura asked.

“Yep,” Lance replied proudly, dropping the blue gun into Hunk’s hand so his friend could examine it.

“It’s so tiny,” Hunk whispered, clutching it carefully.

“Have you tried them yet?” Pidge asked, mouth agape.

Lance gasped, coming to the realisation at the same time. “No!”

“Now now,” Coran began, as Lance snatched his guns up and aimed them at the far wall.

Their adviser’s advice was not heeded, and Lance squeezed the trigger of the blue pistol. A brilliant blue streak tore away from it, much like his original bayard had done, bursting against the wall in a chilling display.

“Wow!” Pidge, Hunk, and Keith exclaimed in sync, while Coran leapt about a foot into the air.

“Dude, that’s ice!” Pidge yelled.

“Do the other one,” Keith prompted eagerly, causing Lance to raise the black bayard.

He took a deep breath, stilling his arm before firing at the far wall. A sharp crackle filled their ears as a blinding bolt of electricity raced through the air, smashing into the wall and making the hanger shudder.

“No firing indoors!” Allura quickly exclaimed, though her eyes were fixated on the black pistol.

Lance was staring wide-eyed at his new bayards; he could feel the energy within them, they felt like the same energy in his arms. A storm. Brilliant, blue, and cold from one, loud and electric from the other, lightning so intense it almost appeared black. Ocean and sky, water and electricity, blue and black, a storm. Lance laughed shakily, admiring the guns. They were small, not overly so, but compact, easy enough to fit one in each hand. He hadn’t thought that would be practical, but something told him otherwise. *You control the lightening, and the water.* He had the distinct feeling it would take a little more than good aim to control these new bayards.

“Oh, it’s wonderful,” Coran was saying, looking like he might just tear up.

“What about the lions themselves,” Allura asked. “Are they responding properly?”

“Clearer than they ever have,” Lance answered confidently. “Its like a full picture, like when I was just trying to connect to one I was missing half the story. Now... they’re there. And I feel them both, properly.”

Allura was drinking in every word, her expression going from inquisitive to downright joyful.

“This must mean something,” she exclaimed.

“Maybe the lions realised there was no one else fit to pilot them,” Pidge suggested. “So they had to share Lance.”

“Always knew I was the best paladin,” Lance joked smugly.

“Or maybe they’re half as difficult to pilot as the others,” Keith said with a flicker of humour.

“Oh haha, *spirit of adrenaline.*”

“That’s kinda a good point though,” said Hunk. “How are you going to fly two lions?”

Lance paused. “Uhhh. Dunno.”

“Maybe they combine into one super lion!” Said Pidge.

“Maybe they combine into a weird looking head with one leg.”

“Must you suck the fun from everything, Keith?”

“Come on, that would look funny.”

“He’s right. I really hope they look like that.”

“Not you too, Hunk!”

“There’s only one way to find out,” Allura said.

“Hey, given it’s only taken me a little over two months to figure out the bayards, I’m sure flying the lions will be easy-peasy.”

“Yeah- oh you’re being sarcastic,” mumbled Hunk.

“Chins up, paladins,” said Coran. “This is a massive breakthrough. Things are bound to get easier now that we know Lance is the... uh... which paladin are you?”

The team paused, looking thoughtful.

“The bluk,” Lance said with a snicker.

“I’m not referring to our leader as the blook paladin,” Pidge deadpanned.

“Aw...”

Hunk and Pidge both frowned, beginning to brainstorm ideas. “The dark blue paladin?”

“Bluish? Blackish? Blukish-“

“Stop.”

“Blacue?”

“That sounds vaguely French.”

“Bloob.”

“Sounds too much like boob.”

“Black-attack-“

“What about the storm paladin?” Said Keith, cutting Pidge’s ridiculous idea short.

The others frowned, but Lance’s eyes lit up.

“Why that?” Asked Pidge.

“I mean-“ Keith faltered, but Lance’s smile grew wider so he continued. “It makes sense, right? Black and blue, water and sky. Like a storm. Maybe we should divert from colours. Besides, he’s kind of the guardian spirit of both those things now.”

“I like it!” Lance announced, before anyone else had the chance to put the idea down.

He gazed down at the pistols, then at the lions above them. “The storm paladin. I can definitely be the storm paladin.”

“I don’t know,” said Hunk. “Blook had a nice ring to it.”

“Do you think the lions will respond to you now?” Allura asked.

“I don’t see why not.”

Lance turned to the pair of lions, tucking the bayards away and peering up into their dull eyes.

“Heya lions,” he called. “You guys up for a cool trick or something?”

There was no response at first, but he didn’t let that discourage him.

“Lions,” he drawled, waving a hand in front of them.

Blue’s head twitched, like a dog picking up on a faint sound.

“That’s it, Blue-“

A deep growl resonated through the hanger, deep enough to feel in their bones. Lance frowned, lowering his arm.

“Wow there, Blue, it’s just us-“

He was cut off as the blue lion stood abruptly, nose pointed toward the hanger doors. If a metallic robot could bristle, Lance reckoned Blue was doing a pretty good job of it.

“Um,” he mumbled as the others took a step back, but Blue wasn’t focused on them.

A split second later, the black lion was rising, placing a gigantic paw beside their group, as if to hide them.

“What are they doing?” Allura asked, as both lion’s posed themselves like guard dogs above the team.

“Yeah, are they usually-“

“Sh!” Lance cut Hunk off with a sharp hiss, holding up a hand to silence the others. “Everyone quiet.”

“Lance?” Pidge asked quietly.

The lions growled in sync, crouching down as if readying themselves to pounce. Lance took an inquisitive step forward, peering at their glowing eyes. *Why the sudden change?*

“Are they-“

“Quiet,” Lance repeated, though this time he made the effort to actually listen.

They were all there in the hanger, all the pilots, all the lions, so what were they responding too? Blue and Black stopped growling, as if they were listening too. Breathe in, breathe out, *what’s wrong?* Lance scanned the hangar, wondering what had spooked his lions. There was no movement, and no noise. It was almost too quiet.

“Lance.”

He turned back to the team, raising a brow in question, but no one had anything to say. He turned back to his lions, to the doorway, taking a few more steps to see if the lions would react to his movement.

“Lance.”

He spun around again, huffing.

“What?”

The others blinked back at him, all staying obediently silent. Still, someone kept saying his name. His eyes fell to Keith; he seemed most likely.

“What?”

Lance frowned when Keith just shrugged.

“Who said my name?”

The others shared a look amongst themselves, but no one came forward.

“Lance.”

A bolt of fear shot up Lance’s spine, searching the others’ lips for movement but finding none.

“Who the fuck said my name?”

Everyone looked at someone else, starting to frown.

“It wasn’t me,” Allura said, and the others quickly followed suit.

“You heard that though, right?” Lance asked, his face paling.

“Lance.”

Hunk jumped, diving behind Pidge. “Oh, nope, no no no, I heard that.”

“It’s coming over the comms,” Allura said suddenly, her eyes flying to the ceiling.

Suddenly they were drawing into a circle, everyone raising bayards as a voice filtered softly from the comms. It was quiet, indistinguishable, easy to be mistaken as a whisper from one of their teammates. Black and Blue tensed, their legs bracketing the group.

“What is that?” Keith hissed, scanning the hangar.

“Who’s voice is it?” Whispered Pidge.

Lance wasn’t sure. He hadn’t been able to pin it on any of the team, and now...

“*Lance.*”

He shivered. It was soft; gentle, but inquisitive. It sounded a little like a child, genderless, without accent or identity, just a breath of air, or static.

“What’s happening?” Hunk whispered, activating his bayard and taking a step toward the others.

“Stay calm,” Allura instructed, yet she summoned her own staff.

“*Lance.*”

“God,” Lance muttered, trying to disperse the tension. “We get it.”

“Really?” Said Keith. “You’re gonna make a joke?”

“What? I just wish that whenever creepy things started saying my name they could sometimes say something helpful too, you know?”



Keith shook his head, but there was a wobbly smile gracing his lips, so Lance considered it a success. Then the lights went out.

“Oh come on!”

“Aaaand we’re gonna die.”

“Nah, this is too stereotypical a way for us to die.”

“Would everyone be quiet!” Allura snapped.

“Princess,” Coran whispered, his face suddenly illuminated in blue from the tablet he held. “Take a look at the planet.”

Their team quickly crowded around Coran, glancing suspiciously off into the dark hangar. The tablet had diagnostics up for the dwarf planet.

“What the hell’s it doing?” Lance asked.

Allura took hold of the corner of the tablet, bringing it up to her face.

“That is peculiar.”

“What is?”

“The planet’s sending out waves, pulses.”

Lance frowned, drinking in the others expressions in the pale light of the tablet.

“They’re interfering with the castle’s operating system.”

“The lights?”

“Yes, amongst other things.”

“Other things like the voice? You know, the one over the comms right now, saying my name?”

Allura pouted. “Um...”

As if on cue, the speakers somewhere above them in the dark crackled again, Lance’s name coming through loud and clear. Keith tensed beside him where the team were all bunched together. Their eyes passed uselessly across the shadowy hanger, pitch black save Coran’s tablet and the glowing eyes of Black and Blue. Lance grew tense as the lion’s eyes flickered.

“Not to create panic or anything, but I think the waves are effecting the lions.”

“Dammit,” Keith hissed.

“Okay,” said Allura. “I have a plan-“

She was cut off by a sudden burst of static from over the comms, followed by-

“*Pigde.*”

“Oh hell fucking *no*,” the green paladin exclaimed, grabbing hold of Hunk’s arm.

Lance’s fear intensified, and he moved minutely closer to Pidge.

“What’s going on-“

“-tion. Fra- n- form- nti- pala- s.”

“Is that saying, fraction formation paladins?” Hunk asked slowly.

“Pid- ge. Sharp- ight, ri- t.”

Lance nearly leapt out of his skin when Allura burst into laughter.

“It’s the recordings,” she said, laughing wildly, probably due to nerves. “The waves must be messing with our recordings from past battles. It’s just relaying recordings of our voices.”

Lance frowned as the others laughed hesitantly, but when the next message came across, he began to understand.

“-see anyth-ng. -o beginning, des- nt.”

He huffed dryly, letting the tension seep from his shoulders.

“Holy shit,” he breathed, as Pidge jostled his arm playfully. “That fucking scared me.”

As much as Lance still hated being stuck in the dark, the team quickly swallowed their fear.

“Alright,” Allura said, still shaking a little from nerves. “Let’s just get back to the bridge, and throw up the particle barrier. That should block the waves for a while; if it’s a natural release from the planet they shouldn’t last too long.”

“Gotcha,” said Pidge, sounding immensely relieved that her name wasn’t actually being dragged into some murder plot.

“Princess,” said Coran. “If it’s taken down the other systems, we may not be able to get the particle barrier up.”

“I’m aware. Still, these waves shouldn’t have any effect on the crystal itself, just it’s emissions. We’ll need to manually send a power boost through to the bridge. Hopefully a power increase like that can bypass the jumbled consul system for long enough to activate the barrier.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Lance, keeping his eyes fixed on the tablet and the animated waves pulsating from the point of the dwarf planet to avoid the darkness surrounding them. “What do we do?”

“I want Pidge and Coran on the bridge to oversee operations there. You’ll have to be anticipating the energy spike, so we can act at the right moment. Lance and Hunk, you two tend to the crystal. Lance, lend Hunk whatever support he needs to create an energy spike.”

The pair nodded quickly, though secretly Lance already feared trekking into the castle’s core in the dark.

“Keith and myself will tend to a section of grid, fit it for handling a sudden energy spike, while blocking off other routes.”

“You sure Keith should be doing that?” Hunk asked kindly. “That sounds kinda technical.”

*That sounds kinda like leaving the possessed paladin alone, Lance knew he really meant.*

"I can instruct him," Allura answered. "But I need someone small and agile."

"I'm taller than you," Keith insisted.

"Only sometimes. Besides," Allura patted her stomach smugly. "Are you pregnant?"

The team dispersed quickly after that, moving off toward their respective stations, which was harder now that they had no light. The castle seemed a lot bigger in the dark, when they were less easily able to navigate around, especially since every minute or so a name or piece of recording from battle would drift down from the comms.

"That shit is so unsettling," Lance muttered, sticking closer than strictly necessary to Hunk as they stumbled down the dark hallways toward the castle's core and crystal.

"At least we'll have light once we reach the crystal," Hunk tried, but he was sounding pretty antsy himself.

"Wish we had Pidge's job, at least they'll have some light through the windows."

"Dude, at least we're not crawling through air vents."

Lance shivered; Keith trying to navigate through a cramped vent in the dark felt a little too similar to Keith navigating a tunnel in the dark. Still, Allura couldn't exactly go crawling around on her stomach to reach the concealed grid they apparently needed to tinker with.

"I hate this," he muttered. "Stupid planet."

"It could be worse--"

"Hunk, its dark and terrifying and the recordings are creepy and you're practically about to pee yourself."

Hunk sighed. "Yeah."

"Let's get this over with as quick as possible."

Technically it depended on how fast Allura and Keith could work, only once they'd realigned the grid could Lance and Hunk set off a power surge. Still, they had to be ready.

*"Are everyone's comms still working?"* Coran's voice drifted down to them.

They didn't have suits, but the castle's main announcement system was still up and running.

"Yep," Lance muttered, knowing they'd cranked up the audio detectors to pick up on any talking.

He hadn't known the castle could do that; next time he went and babbled to Hunk about Keith, he should probably keep his voice down.

*"We're all good here,"* came Allura's voice. *"Keith's getting ready to enter the vents."*

"Great," Lance muttered.

*"What was that?"*

"I said I hope he gets stuck."

*"I can hear you, asshole."*

Lance chuckled.

"Anyway. We'll be ready by the crystal."

Lance cursed as he stumbled over a divider; he and Hunk had absolutely no light moving through the halls. Going to get their armour would have meant an even longer detour that they didn't have time for. Small emergency lights flickered weakly along the floor, but mostly they were relying on their knowledge of the castle to get them to the crystal.

"Hey," said Hunk. "You ever worry about the baby coming too soon?"

Lance frowned. "No."

"Cause seven months is fine for Alteans, right? But humans need--"

*"You idiots know we can all still hear you,"* said Pidge, and there was a clear warning to her tone; *Don't scare Allura.*

"Fine," said Lance, quick to jump on their mistake. "Don't worry about how we still haven't thought of a name. You better all be ready for Tiny Takashi."

Allura scoffed, the sound making static of the speakers. *"That is not going to be their name."*

"What! But it's great!"

*"Allura, I kinda need help here,"* said Keith, reminding them all that they were meant to be working.

*"Oh! Sorry. Everyone stay on task."*

The thing was, Lance hated the silence. The old recordings had thankfully appeared to come to a stop, but the lights were still off, and at times the air even felt like it wasn't filtering properly. The quicker they got the castle up and running the better. Lance could've started a conversation with Hunk, but he didn't really want everyone else listening in. Especially since it would likely devolve into his crush on Keith. Eventually Hunk began humming to himself, which was somewhat calming, especially once they got deeper into the castle. Lance nearly cried when he saw the crystal's light dimly illuminating the way ahead. He and Hunk stumbled blearily toward it, basking in the blue light.

"All-righty," Lance said, glancing around the room. "What now--"

*"Lance, report to the bridge."*

Both boys frowned at the sound of Allura's request.

"But Hunk and I just got to the crystal--"

*"Immediately, Lance!"*

Allura didn't sound scared, but it was urgent nonetheless.

"Look," said Hunk. "I can manage the crystal by myself."

Lance gnawed nervously on his bottom lip. "You sure?"

“Of course. I’ll just miss your positivity is all.”

“Aw, Hunky.”

“Go help Allura before you get yelled at.”

“Yeah, alright,” Lance sighed.

He cast one more look in the direction of his friend and the glowing crystal before plunging back into the darkness. *By yourself.* Lance swallowed nervously, keeping his vision and focus trained straight ahead, ignoring the call of the dark and endless passages around him. *Get to the bridge, let Hunk sort out the crystal, get the lights back on.* It sounded easy, but Lance had never been able to focus in the dark. He remembered sitting in bed beside Allura during blackouts, whimpering and holding her hand tight enough to bruise. *Don’t be scared of the dark,* she used to tell him. *But I can’t see anything.* Then Allura would smile, squeezing his hand so he knew she wasn’t worried. *And it can’t see you.*

*It can damn well hear me though,* Lance thought grumpily as he trampled down the hallway, taking large steps to avoid tripping over anything on the floor. The castle felt like a dark jungle, thrumming with energy and secrets, trying to mislead him. Lance didn’t like this at all. He tired humming to himself, but fear got the better of him.

“*I need some help.*”

Lance paused; that was Pidge’s voice. She was probably talking to Coran.

“*Hey! I can’t do this by myself!*”

“Guys, someone lend Pidge a hand.”

“*Help! It’s—*”

Lance came to a standstill; that didn’t sound right.

“Pidge, are you okay?”

There was no reply, just the dull hiss of air from the vents around him. It was disorientating, all this darkness.

“Hey, what’s happening?”

“*Lance, can you hurry up!*”

Pidge again, and Lance picked up his pace.

“Jeez, alright, sorry.”

He’d barely made it six steps before the speakers came to life again. Heavy breathing filled the room, before Hunk spoke.

“*Something’s wrong,*” he stammered. “*Is anyone there?*”

“Hunk?” Lance’s heart was beating faster. “You okay buddy, what’s—”

“*I’m losing control, my lion’s—*”

Lance huffed, his fear suddenly dispersing as he crossed his arms.

“Fuck you,” he muttered irritably at the speakers. “Guys, the recordings are acting up again. Could you please clarify when it’s actually you talking, and not some pre-recorded bullshit?”

There was no reply, and Lance could feel himself growing annoyed. “Yo, my dudes, I don’t know if you want me on the bridge or crystal. The recordings are fucking things up.”

“*Lance,*” came Allura’s voice. “*What are you doing away from the crystal?*”

Lance nearly slapped a hand over his forehead.

“Because you told me- look, everyone just clarify that you’re actually talking current time, alright?”

“*Oh I’m talking current time,*” Allura said snappily. “*Now get back to work.*”

Lance huffed, turning heel and stalking back toward the core, muttering to himself.

“*Lance.*”

He ignored it and kept walking. Keith better get a move on with that grid. Speaking of-

“*Lance, are you there?*”

“Yeah Keith, what’s up?”

“*Where’s Lance? Where are you?*”

Lance froze, his body tingling.

“Keith, please confirm this is actually you talking.”

Nothing came through, so it had to be another recording. Still, it made Lance feel uneasy; he knew where those words came from.

“How’s it holding up, Hunk?”

The speakers crackled, a long burst of static coming through before he could identify Hunk’s voice.

“*-ah. All g- od here.*”

“Cool, I’m on my way back anyway.”

He picked up his pace, eager to be back in the presence of another person.

“*Got those readings I sent, number five?*”

“*Yeah, they’re loading.*”

“*No, back where your foot is. Do not- stop kicking me!*”

Sounds of his teammates at work drifted to Lance through the castle, mostly Coran and Pidge, talking to themselves as they worked but helping each other out all the same. Lance navigated the final turn toward the heart of the castle.

*“Allura?”*

That was Keith’s voice; it could’ve been a recording or the real thing.

*“Allura!”*

His voice dissolved into mounds of rough static, and Lance ignored it. A few more metres and he should start to see light. The speakers crackled, disjointed bits of sound falling through.

*“-one! Someone help, please! Allura!”*

Lance paused again at the sound of Keith’s voice, hating that he did. It was a recording, surely.

“Keith, how’s it going with you guys?”

*“Lance! Get- elp! Help! Allura- o- sto... som- hing took Al- r- Lance!”*

“Is this a recording-“

*“Allura!”* Keith sobbed, and Lance’s stomach tied itself into a thousand knots. *“Lance hel-“*

He was cut off by a scream that the static soon swallowed, leaving Lance alone in the silence, trembling.

“Keith?” He asked. “Allura?”

*It’s just the recording.* Lance couldn’t accept that. Without a second thought, he started running. It occurred to him he wasn’t familiar with the location of the grid, and had only a rough idea of where the other two were. He shouted their names as he ran down the hall, waiting for anyone to respond. The waves must have been interfering with their actual communication system. *It’s a recording*, he told himself over and over, but Lance couldn’t help the fear he felt.

*“Where are you?”* Now it was Pidge’s voice.

Lance ignored it, he couldn’t respond to every fake call.

*“I shouldn’t have come here.”*

“Pidge, watch what the recordings are saying!”

*“Hunk! Hunk, I’m coming, stay where you are-“*

That sounded like Allura.

“Allura! Allura, can you hear me?”

Lance rounded a corner, picking up speed, losing his fear of the dark to how desperate Keith had sounded. False or not, he couldn’t ignore it.

“Keith!” He yelled. “I need you to confirm you’re okay!”

*“What’s up with Keith?”* Hunk asked.

“Hunk! Oh my god, the recordings are acting up and it’s freaking me out. Have you heard from Keith or Allura?”

*“Well, yeah... Allura was talking to me like half a minute ago.”*

“What?”

“Dude,” said Hunk. “Are you okay?”

“Fine. But it sounded like those two were in trouble-“

“Keith literally just told me he was fine.”

“O-oh.”

“I don’t think we’re hearing the same thing. I reckon the recordings are messing with your area of the castle. Where are you?”

“Um...” Lance looked around, which was useless. “I was trying to get to the grid they’re at.”

“What? Just get back to the crystal Lance, it’s fine-“ Hunk’s voice was lost in a wave of static.

“Hunk? Hey, you there?” Lance cursed, but Hunk’s reassurance had left him feeling better.

Still... he ended up just standing in the middle of the hall, debating which way to go. Keith was fine, Allura was fine, Hunk had just said so. But the way he’d *screamed*- Lance stuffed his hands into his pockets, stomping off toward the castle’s core irritably.

“I’m in the hangar,” said Pidge, but Lance ignored it. “Dude, where are you?”

“Running diagnostics,” said Allura.

“Fighter on your six,” said Keith.

“For a number of deca-“ Coran began, swallowed up by static.

Recordings of his teammates voices from countless battles and castle based activities, hours upon hours of records scrambled by the planet’s magnetic waves.

“Lance,” said Pidge. “Where the hell are you?”

Turning down what he hoped was the right hall, Lance tugged on his collar. It was heating up, he was sure of it; the castle’s thermostat must have been affected too.

“No, all’s good here on the bridge,” said Pidge.

Then, a second later. “Coran? He’s not here. I don’t know why he called me.”

Those were two different Pidge’s speaking, but Lance had a fairly good idea which was the current one. God knows how many times Pidge had gone looking for him in the hangar. He shrugged his jacket off, sweating, tying it off around his waist.

“Coran? I can’t hear you. Hello? Fuck, stupid- Lance, I’m going back to the bridge. Lance?”

“Yeah, I’m getting the readings alright. Could you turn up the frequency a little? No- no that other one.”

“Lance, is that you? I can’t see anything, idiot.”

Lance slowed his steps.

“Pidge?”



*"Dude, what the fuck, where are you?"*

*"Near the crystal?"*

*"Oh, that's cool,"* said Pidge. *"Yeah, I'm still on the bridge. Hang on, I'm doing a scan."*

*"But you're in the hangar?"* Said Pidge, again.

Lane hated this, two conflicting voices, coming from the same person. "Pidge, where are you?"

*"The bridge."*

*"The hangar, like you told me."*

"Coran, where is Pidge?"

*"I thought she was with you?"*

*"She's right by the star map-"*

"Fuck, guys, please confirm if it's actually you talking!"

*"Lance, shut up! Are you here or not? Stop being an idiot!"*

"I'm not in the hangar," Lance snapped back at the green paladin. "Are you?"

"Coran," said Pidge. *"Look at these readings I'm getting."*

"Very nice," said Coran.

"Where the fuck are you, Pidge?"

*"I'm literally looking at you, Lance."*

Lance spun around quickly, eyes raking through the dark, looking for disturbances amid the faint emergency lights.

"You're... not," he said dumbly. "I'm not in the hangar."

*"Then who's..."*

*"Hey Coran, could you translate this?"*

"Pidge?" Asked Lance. "Where are you right now?"

*"God, Lance!"* Pidge snapped. *"We're all on the bridge waiting for you!"*

*"But... I'm looking at you."*

"Is it dark, Pidge?"

"Yes."

"But you're looking at me?"

*"Oh, good one, Pidge."* Said Coran. *"No, type in the co-ordinates over there."*

"*Lance,*" said Pidge, very softly. "*Where are you?*"

"I'm by the crystal," he said.

"*Lance,*" she said. "*Who's that?*"

Lance could feel the tension gathering in his arms, the cold, the pressure, the *fear*.

"Pidge, get out of the hangar."

"*Yep, everyone's accounted for. Good mission guys.*"

"*Hey, I think I saw Pidge by the kitchen,*" came Keith's voice.

"*Dude, call me Pidget again-*"

"Coran," Lance called loudly. "Where is Pidge?"

"*Keith, touch that machine again and I will beat your ass-*"

"*No, no, she's right here.*"

"*Pidge is on the bridge, Lance,*" said Allura. "*I thought I told you to get here?*"

Lance was starting to breathe faster and faster, his palms clammy. "Pidge? Guys I don't- I don't know where you are."

"*Pidge?*" Said Coran. "*Please respond.*"

A jagged burst of static overtook the speakers.

"*Lance,*" someone rasped.

Keith.

"*Help.*"

"*Keith,*" said Allura. "*Can you see it?*"

"*Lance,*" the boy said, wheezing. "*P-please, someone.*"

"*Yeah, princess. Give me a minute.*"

"*Remember, purple before yellow.*"

"*Gotcha,*" said Keith. "*Bingo.*"

Lance forced himself to breath. *Everything is fine, everyone is fine. It's dark, but it's just the recording.*

"*Please help me,*" Keith rasped, speaking wetly, as though water was clogging his lungs. "*A-Allura, oh my god, p-please-.*"

"Shut up," Lance hissed. "Everyone shut up."

"*You good, Lance?*" Asked Hunk.

“No, I’m not-“

*“I’ve got your back, just go straight for the drop zone.”*

Lance grit his teeth in frustration, the dark pressing in on him.

“Can anyone actually hear me?” He yelled. “Where is Pidge?”

“*Lance,*” said the girl, her voice but a whisper. *“There’s someone here.”*

“Pidge, where are you?”

*“If you could take a look at these readings-“*

Lance nearly screamed, grasping the roots of his hair in frustration.

“Can anyone-“

A scream cut through the air, loud and piercing. It didn’t come from the comms. Lance’s heart stopped; he dropped his hands from his head, turning toward the sound, letting the shrill noise rattle his bones.

“Allura,” he breathed, taking half a step forward.

There was no reply, but the castle wasn’t silent. The air was growing hot, humid. The buzz of voices from elsewhere reached him like the dull noise of distant traffic, everything merging together in the darkness, and suddenly the jungle was a swamp. Lance didn’t even care for the dark, not when he started running.

“*ALLURA!*”

Running through the castle felt like running through the emptiness of space; there was no direction, no up or down, just swirling darkness, the faint emergency lights nothing but distant stars. Lance kept yelling for Allura, for anyone, but all he got was the useless churn out of recordings.

“*Oh god,*” said Pidge. *“Oh god, oh god.”*

“*What are we looking for again, Coran?*” Said Keith.

“*No,*” said Allura. *“We need to focus.”*

“*Yeah, I think I got it now,*” said Hunk. *“Wait, what’s that?”*

“Allura!” Lance screamed, because that’s all he knew was real.

Keith’s voice, Pidge, Coran, even Hunk, he couldn’t trust any of them. But Allura had screamed, that was no illusion. He vaulted over known obstacles, trying to keep his arms ahead of him as he sprinted through the dark corridors, trying to find the source of the cry. He was sweating; the castle was definitely growing hotter.

“*I c-can’t-*“ came Keith’s voice. *“I can’t breathe.”*

The world was spinning out of control, there was too much darkness. Faster, run faster, Lance pushed himself to move. Don’t trip, don’t fall, don’t waste time. Allura’s voice played over in his head, urging him forward faster; *keep paying attention.*

Lance hit the wall hard enough to knock himself flat onto the ground. Stars exploded in his vision, forehead throbbing as his head hit the floor. The world tilted on his axis, he couldn't even think straight. Pain exploded behind his eyes, but Lance forced himself to his elbows, groaning. *Which way was I going?* There could've been blood on his forehead, but he didn't care.

"Allura," he slurred, tripping and falling back to his knees, desperate for his head to stop spinning. "Where are you?"

*"I called you here ten minutes ago,"* came Allura's voice over the speakers. *"Where are you?"*

"Lying," Lance murmured, groaning and holding a hand to his head.

*Which way?*

"You're lying. Where are you?"

*"Lance, I thought you were coming back to the crystal. Something's wrong--"*

"Stop!" Pidge screamed. "STOP!"

*"Yeah, seems to be working,"* said Keith.

*"Two more turns on that one, Pidge,"* said Coran. *"You've got it."*

*"Are you sure that's it?"* Said Allura.

*"I can't hold them off!"* Coran yelled. *"Where are you? Paladins? Princess?"*

*"Where are you?"* Said Keith.

*"Lance, where are you?"*

*"I thought you were coming back."*

*"Lance?"*

Lance grit his teeth, forcing himself to his feet.

"Can anyone hear me?"

*"Please,"* said Keith, with a lump in his throat. *"I'm s-stuck, I can't breathe."*

"Where are you? Where is Allura?"

*"Oh my god,"* he stuttered. *"It's- it's h-here."*

"Keith?"

*"Leave me alone!"* The boy yelled, his voice cracking. *"No! No, don't touch me- NO!"*

"Keith?"

"Stop!" Pidge screamed.

"What's happening?" Lance cried desperately, his world spinning, head aching.

*"Nearly done,"* said Coran.

Keith screamed, so loud and piercing it turned the speakers to static. Lance's heart leapt to his throat.

"Keith!"

He had to run, had to do something. Lance took off in the direction he thought Allura's scream had come from, his arms tingling with a familiar chill. *What's happening?* They should have been safe, they should all be safe. Lance called to all of them as he ran, but the replies were nonsensical. Keith's cries rung in his ears, Pidge kept screaming for help, Hunk was scared and confused; Coran sounded fine one second, then he was pleading for help the next, then Keith was joking, then he was sobbing, Allura gave out instructions, but when he called to her she never replied. Lance wanted to scream, but all he could do was keep running, He needed to find them, all of them.

The air was growing hotter, he could feel sweat dripping down his arms. In the dark, stuffy hallway, he began to feel he was in the tunnel in his dreams.

"*Lance!*" Keith screamed.

"*I don't know what's happening,*" Hunk cried. "*What's happening?*"

"*We're almost ready to go,*" said Pidge.

"*Allura,*" someone rasped.

Lance stopped dead, resting a palm against the wall to steady himself. That was different voice, a new voice, but not unfamiliar.

"*Please, I... where am I,*" said the voice, and Lance's spine tingled. "*I'm hurt.*"

He raised his head slowly, seeking out the sound spilling from the comms, breathing hard.

"*Please help me.*"

Lance's breath caught, a thousand voices and a thousand requests assaulting him, but that one standing out the sharpest.

"*Please,*" said the voice. "*Please.*"

"Shiro?"

Chapter End Notes

:)

## Chapter Notes

Hi hi, sorry for taking so long to respond/not responding to your guys comments, they're so so nice and I love everyone, but sometimes theres so many and I'm so busy so sorry about that, but god thanks for being so wonderful with what you comment!!

but ya please enjoy this chapters thanks for being the best readers ever <3 <3 <3 <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

The walls were wet beneath Lance's hands, though it could've just been his own sweat. His head hurt, and his chest felt tight, and tears threatened to burden his eyes. Worst of all? He was lost.

"Keith!" He called, stumbling down the hall, trying not to succumb to the humidity that had overtaken the castle. "Allura!"

Lance tripped, his shoulder catching on a corner. He grit his teeth, forcing himself to keep moving. Half an hour, it had been half an hour since he'd heard a voice he could trust. Lack of water was making him delirious; it had to be a good forty degrees.

"Pidge!"

"*Everyone to the hangar,*" said Allura.

"*You've got a tail-gater,*" said Keith.

"*Why would you need the square route of fifty-*"

Lance bit his tongue to stop himself screaming. If he assumed the best, Pidge and Coran were working peacefully on the bridge, Hunk was stressing a little but managing fine with the crystal, and Keith and Allura were characteristically keeping to themselves and their work. If he assumed the worst, Coran was pleading for help on the bridge, Pidge was M.I.A, Allura was in danger, there was something interfering with Hunk's work, and Keith was suffocating and- Lance didn't even know what else. Oh, and Shiro was bleeding out in the hangar.

"*We'll have it up and running in a tick,*" said Coran cheerily.

And then, a moment later, from the very same man, "*I can't hold them! Don't come to the bridge, stay away from-*"

"*It's coming!*" Pidge screamed. "*Where are you?*"

"*Am I connecting the right thing here?*" Asked Keith calmly.

"*Done and done,*" said Pidge. "*Hey Coran, how does this look?*"

"*Keith,*" said Allura. "*Do you think you can reach the orange cable?*"

A burst of static, and Keith's ragged breathing filled the air.

"Stop," he wheezed, making a pained noise in the back of his throat. "*P-please, I didn't mean t- n- no, no, I didn't-*"

Lance clenched his eyes shut as the boy screamed.

"What's happening," he muttered to himself under his breath. "What's happening, what's happening--"

"Allura," said Shiro.

He sounded weak, he sounded like he was dying.

"*I don't know... I need to tell you-*"

"Shiro!" Lance yelled. "Can you hear me?"

"*I c-can't see,*" Shiro stammered. "*I- ah, where am I?*"

"Shiro, it's Lance, if you can hear me, please respond."

"Lance," Keith sobbed. "*I'm sorry.*"

"Blue?" Said Shiro. "*I can't see. It h-hurts.*"

"Paladins!" Coran called. "*There's something-*"

He was cut off by a loud bang.

"*Stay away! There's something here! There's something in the-*"

Lance pushed their voices from his head, *keep moving, keep moving, find them*. The problem was, he had no idea where to start. His head hurt, and the directions in his brain were scrambled. He had a vague idea of where he was, but absolutely no sense of direction. Was Allura to the left or right? Where was the hanger? Was this the way to the bridge? Who did he look for first?

"I can't see!" Lance screamed in frustration, another of Keith's pained whimpers setting his nerves alight.

"Lance?" Hunk asked. "*Lance!*"

"I know you're fake!"

"Lance, no, it's me," Hunk said, shaking. "*Right now, I'm by the crystal.*"

"Hunk?" Lance choked. "Oh my god, what's happening?"

"*I don't know, I don't know, Lance, there's something here.*"

"What?"

"*I can h-hear it,*" Hunk stammered, terrified. "*I closed off the doors to the room because it- oh my god, Lance, I'm so scared.*"

"Keep the doors closed, Hunk. We need to get the castle back online, okay? I don't know where the others are. Is anyone talking to you?"

*“I don’t know! There’s so many different sounds! Keith sounds hurt, but then I ask and he says he’s fine, and Pidge is- I don’t know what’s real or not.”*

Lance took a deep breath to calm his nerves; *you’re the black paladin, blue paladin, storm or whatever, think*. “Hunk, you need to listen. I’m lost. I hit a wall, lost my sense of direction. I’m trying to look for the others, but we need you to get that power surge.”

*“I don’t think I can do it-“*

“Hunk! You’re the only person responding. I need you to send a power surge from that crystal.”

*“But the grid, and what if Coran isn’t-“*

“Coran’s on the bridge, whether something is wrong or not. All the voices say that.”

*“Okay,”* Hunk breathed. *“Okay, okay. What about the grid?”*

“Either Keith’s fine and he’s fixed it, or I’m going to find him and do it myself. Just keep sending surges. Once you figure it out, send as many as you can.”

*“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”*

“I don’t know what’s going on, Hunk, but it feels wrong. I need you to get us power.”

*“Okay,”* said Hunk, though his voice was trembling.

“You alright, buddy?”

*“No.”*

“Me neither. But you and me? We’re gonna fix this, okay?”

*“Okay.”*

“Don’t open that door. I don’t care what you hear, you stay in there and work on the crystal, and ignore everything, yeah? If it’s actually me talking to you, I’ll say Code Sunny, ‘kay?”

*“Yeah,”* Hunk breathed. *“Code Sunny, I got it. And Lance?”*

*“Yeah?”*

*“Be careful.”*

“You too, big guy.”

Lance breathed deeply, calming himself, replaying Hunk’s voice. No more rushing, no more panic, he was fixing this. Keith screamed over the comms, and Lance shut his eyes.

“Where are you?” he whispered.

He pictured Keith in the cave, in the tunnel, where he’d untied himself. But Lance had found him, Lance had sent energy through the earth and found him. The bomb, the explosion, Keith’s life-force, the water, he’d felt it, and he’d found it. Standing in the hangar after the explosion with a gun trained on them, Lance could feel his own heart beat, his own blood pulsing through his veins, Keith’s blood. *Blood. Water.*



He extended his hands, reaching. *Where are you where are you where are you?* Black tugged at his mind, but he went for his other lion, for Blue. Lance forced the other's voices out of his minds, ignoring Coran's pleas and Pidge's senseless babbling and the overwhelming conflict between everyone's voices. *Blue. Water. Blood.* He tried to picture his lion, the essence of it. A swirl of blue filled his mind, moving like a cloud, a swish of a tail that mimicked the grace of a lion. *Where are you?* Lance reached out, urging the swirling blue mass forward. The lion leapt forward, scouring its dark surrounds, stalking its prey. *Where are you?*

Lance could feel it, every drop of water they passed. The humidity was disorientating, like wading through a swamp in search of a small spring, but he pushed on. Pipes in the walls called to him, but Lance ignored them. *Keith, where is Keith?* Pidge yelled something about him over the comms, but Lance ignored it. On and on the lion went, searching. Lance stayed where he was, urging the cloud of blue onwards, further and further until- he gasped. *Keith.* Lance could feel it, the difference there. A small trickle of water, *tears.* Keith was crying. There was more; he could feel sweat as it trickled along his skin, beading on his forehead, his body coated in the stuff. Lance could feel his blood and it coursed through his veins, stumbling upon the points of irregularity; Keith was bleeding. He breathed deep, forcing himself to stay calm, to keep a pinpoint on the boy's location. *There you are.* Lance took off running.

The further he ran and the more time passed, the more frightful the difference in the voices he heard became. One second Coran and Pidge were chatting happily, the next their advisor was scrambling to barricade the bridge, and Pidge was crying. A moment after Keith made some playful comment, he was choking on his own breath, begging someone to put a stop to whatever was happening to him. And after Allura's neutral instructions were passed out, she simply fell quiet, her absence like an empty chasm that Lance teetered on the edge of.

"*I can't see,*" Shiro whispered. "*Where am I?*"

"Code Sunny," Lance panted, trying to see if he could get through to Hunk.

"*Code Sunny,*" came the wobbly response.

"I know where Keith is, I'm on my way to the grid. How's the crystal?"

"*I think I got it,*" said Hunk, then paused. "*There's something at the door, Lance.*"

Lance grit his teeth, forcing himself to run faster. "Ignore it."

Whatever Hunk's response was, it didn't come through. Lance couldn't afford to lose any time waiting around, skidding around a corner, sweat streaming down his arms. The humidity was rising, making his skin prickle and his lungs work harder. Briefly, an image of Keith surfaced in his mind, trapped in the tight confines of a stuffy air vent, the metal heating up around him, affording him no room to breathe, sweat-slicked finger scratching uselessly at the smooth metal. *Hang on, Keith.*

Lance came to a stop before a dark passageway, breathing hard. Keith was close, he could feel it. He called out to him just in case, to Allura too, but all he got in response was the echo of his own voice skittering along the metal. Steeling himself for the worst, Lance activated the black bayard in his hand, extending the pistol and firing a shot into the darkness. The flair of bright electricity illuminated the passage for a brief second; *I should have done that sooner.* Lance had little time to dwell on it though once he saw what lay ahead.

In the brief burst of light, he caught sight of an opening in the wall, a largish, open vent. *Bingo.* That had to be the entrance to access the grid. Lance moved toward it with limited caution, too

caught up in finding his friends to be afraid.

“Allura?” he called, firing another shot down to end of the passage in search of life.

Nothing. The light fizzled out, leaving him in darkness. Lance couched before the vent, which was situated low in the wall, feeling for its opening. His breath caught before picking up rapidly, hands skirting the edges of the hole. *Don't go in there*. Lance froze up for a second, blinking sweat and tears out of his eyes. The air from the vent already tasted hot and stale, suffocating, urging him away. *Keith's in there*. As was the grid, the answer to all their problems. Lance stifled a sob, wishing there was someone there with him.

Curiously enough, as he set his hands down within the vent, it was images of Allita that comforted him. *She's a strange child*, their aunt had once said, *not quite right*. But to Lance, she was perfect. Easily distracted, easily bored, slow to show emotion; but she was his sister. His *twin* sister. Lance held his breath, then quickly forced himself to breathe, hitching a knee up to crawl into the vent. He stopped just inside, getting his breathing under control. The walls already felt too tight, and the ceiling was getting lower, crushing him.

“God Allita,” he breathed. “What would you say about all this?”

Despite his fear, Lance found himself smiling. That helped, talking to her.

“I reckon you'd be a good paladin, huh sis?”

Lance crawled forward, stifling a whimper as his back brushed the top of the vent and he was forced down onto his stomach.

“Maybe that's why I got two lions, one was meant to be yours.”

Lance inched forward, elbows knocking the sides of the vent, clothing sticking to his sweaty skin.

“You've got the nerve for it, that's for damn sure. And the looks. We'd be an awesome team.”

Panic threatened to overwhelm him once he realised he could no longer turn around. He took three quick breaths and kept talking, distracting himself.

“Your bayard would be something cool. Maybe a staff like Allura. You could give the Galra a good run for their money, alright.”

Slowly, painfully, Lance shuffled forward, breathing in the rancid hot air.

“You'd love Hunk. Pity you never met him. He'd make you smile, I know it. And Keith? I don't know. But if I love him, you'd learn to. To be honest, you and Pidge would probably hate each other's guts at first.”

Lance heaved himself forward another few feet, feeling for a turn in the vent.

“But you'd learn to love her enough to die for her, we all do. And man, you'd be all over Allura. She'd be your role model. Coran would just make you laugh. I think he'd even prefer you over me.”

Lance chuckled lightly, but it soon developed into a fit of coughing as he fought for fresh air.

“But you and me,” he wheezed. “We'd be inseparable. You and me, *hermanita*, we'd be two and two together. Fuck, I- we could talk all the time. Like we did at home, about our family. They're

not the same, Allita, no one can compare to you.”

Lance gasped, tears running down his cheeks as he squeezed himself around a tight corner. Allura was right, they’d needed someone as small and agile as Keith for this job.

“You’re still my favourite, always will be. Still my best girl. Even if- *ah*- If Theo said you had no sense of humour. And Lily thought you were mean. You were never mean to me, were you?”

Lance whined low in his throat, hand slipping against the metal and trying to wipe the sweat from his face. It hurt, everything just hurt so much, fear clouding his sensibilities, but he had to keep going.

“You were a different kind of nice, huh? A quiet kind. I miss you, *hermana*, lots. You’re still helping me though, aren’t you?”

Come on, how long did this vent go on for? Lance’s shoulders felt trapped, legs trailing uselessly after him.

“Should have searched for you like this,” he whispered. “Should have looked.”

He bit back a cry, skin tingling and throat constricting in the stuffy vent.

“I love you, Ali. I love you so much. I’m sorry we couldn’t stay together. I should never have- oh my god, I shouldn’t have let you go. I could die like this, in here, would that be fair?”

Lance grit his teeth, squeezing his eyes shut to stop the sting of sweat.

“No, no you wouldn’t want that. It’s okay, Lance. You said it’s okay. I’m sorry you were hurting, I’m sorry you were in pain. I’m so sorry, Ali.”

Another shortened breath, another shrunk vent; Lance was reaching the end of the tether. He sobbed, reaching forward into the darkness, trying not to picture every horror his mind managed to conjure up that might be waiting for him. His hand hit a mess of wire, and Lance flinched.

“Oh god,” he breathed, fingers closing around the tangled lump.

His fingers scratched along the wall, reaching for- Lance grabbed the thin panel, peeling it off the wall. A small red light blinked back at him. *The grid*.

“Yes,” Lance nearly laughed. “Yes! Allita we found-“

A raw scream drifted to him through the vents, and every muscle in his body froze.

“Keith?” Lance whispered.

That scream hadn’t come over the comms. It was like all his fears solidified at once. Lance dropped the panel, head craning upward, listening. Another scream, distant, but undeniably Keith.

“Fuck,” Lance cursed, glancing at the grid. “Fuck.”

He realised now he had no idea what to do with it. He didn’t even know if Hunk had begun sending energy surges yet.

“Code Sunny?” He tried hopelessly, panting into the stuffy vent.

The only answer was a long, resounding cry from Keith. He was in some serious pain. *What do I*

*do?* Lance was on the verge of crying, torn between the grid and Keith. Another cry, one that fell away into a sob, and Lance made up his mind. He began shuffling forward, leaving the grid be; he didn't know what to do with it anyway, Keith was his first concern. Another thought came to him, one that sent a chill through his body; *what's hurting him?* He tried to move forward quietly, sliding along the vent and- Lance grimaced, warm liquid staining his hand. *No.* Cautiously, he brought the hand up to his face; it was blood.

"Keith," he whispered, forcing himself to continue along, his skin coming into contact with the blood smeared all along the side of the vent.

He'd been dragged along here, Lance could tell by feeling for the streaks of blood. *Jesus. Don't hurt him.* The cries grew louder the further Lance progressed, almost making him forget his fear of the dark and tight vent, caring only for Keith. He didn't have to guess the next turn; Keith's trail of blood marked it well enough. Lance shuddered, his mind filling with gruesome images. The vents grew slightly wider again, enough for him to breath. He pulled himself forward, shuffling, crawling, until the screams sounded much, much closer. Heart stilling, he crept forward toward the rush of fresh air ahead. A wrought cry shook him to his core; someone was hurting Keith, and badly. Lance's stomach threatened to turn over its contents at that thought. *Please no.*

He inched forward, trying to keep quiet, until he reached the place where a grid should be. Instead there was an open hole in the vent, looking down at the room beneath. Lance's breath stuck in his throat at the sight. It was one of the castle's seldom-used rooms, an old observation deck with a large window, large enough to bathe the room in the star's dull light; enough light to see its occupants.

Keith lay spread eagle on the floor, the trail of blood leading all the way from Lance's fingertips to the long gashes on his legs, which had torn the clothing around his calves to shreds. He was crying, head rocking side to side as he tried to escape. Escape from... Lance's fingers tightened around the metal lip of the vent, blinking rapidly to try and make sense of what he was seeing. There was a dark figure crouched over Keith, pinning him down. An additional, smaller figure was leaning over Keith's head, helping hold down his arms. The larger body, the one straddling him, leant closer, it's hand playing along Keith's side until the boy *screamed*. Lance nearly cried at the unhinged sound. Keith bucked wildly, thrashing about before he fell flat, not an ounce of energy left within him.

He gasped, choking, as something was withdrawn from his side with a wet rip. Lance felt bile rise in his throat as the shadowy figure leant forward and took Keith's face into its hands, covering him completely. The figure moved like a shadow, a dark blanket draping itself over Keith, drowning him. The boy whimpered, his voice echoing around the large, empty room. Lance needed to act *now*. Ignoring the low whines spilling from Keith, he clambered forward, positioning himself so he could fit his feet through the gap. He followed with his legs and hips, sliding his whole body through the space until he was dangling from the ceiling by his fingers. From his vantage point, Lance was masked in shadows. He let go, dropping soundlessly to the floor; sneaking out back in their Garrison days had had more than one advantage.

Keith hadn't noticed him, nor had either of the shadowy figures. Lance squinted into the dark, trying to determine what he was dealing with. It was no use running straight into a fight he had no hopes of winning. The bodies were definitely humanoid, but something seemed dreadfully *off* about them. The dark made Lance's vision swim, distorting the images he saw, bodies and shapes shifting and merging together. He inched forward slowly, using the noises Keith made to mask the sound of his footsteps. He stopped dead when the figure crouched over Keith began to talk.

It was just a whisper, too soft for Lance to hear. Hissing, like a running tap, little flakes of

disjointed noise that made Keith squirm. It looked like a man's body, its head tucked against Keith's neck and muttering foul little smatterings of noise that Lance couldn't for the life of him make sense of.

Lance's eyes widened as bony hands crept along Keith's arms, disgust mounting when needle like fingers scratched at his wrists. He could feel the blood that followed, his senses still honed in on Keith's body. More tears sprung to his eyes, dripping down his cheeks and pooling in his ears. There was something wrong with the way the man spoke, like something was preventing him from forming the words properly. A million questions flooded Lance's mind, like who the man was, why he was hurting Keith... the boy whimpered, and Lance had to stop himself firing immediately. He needed to know who it was, he needed to know what it was capable of; if he got captured or killed, who knew what they'd do to Keith.

"I'm sorry," Keith sobbed in answer to whatever was being said to him, shaking.

He tried to twist his head away, but the person holding his arms down, a young child by the looks of it, forced his head back. *What the hell?* Problem number two, Lance couldn't just shoot a child. Keith, seemingly anticipating what was about to happen, began thrashing about, begging and pleading to stop the inevitable. Lance flinched as something was driven into Keith's side again, something sharp and slow, something that left a hole where Lance could feel his blood rushing toward. Keith threw his head back and screamed his throat raw, bucking uselessly against the weight holding him down, eyes rolling back in his head when the figure withdrew- Lance caught his breath. In the dim light, he watched the man withdraw his own fingers from Keith's side.

Lance dropped to a crouch, creeping forward, eyes trained on the figure. This was wrong, in a thousand ways, it was wrong. *Fingers*. Shadows hid plenty, but the fingers of the man holding Keith down were undeniably little more than bone.

"I didn't," Keith cried, as hands slid along his arms, bony knees tightened around his hips, and the man's bald skull knocked against his temple, smelling him.

He kept muttering, one long stream of repetitive words that Lance still couldn't decipher. Keith began to cry properly; no more sudden screams or strained whimpers, he lay back against the floor and wept. Lance stopped caring, abruptly, about the consequences of attacking; his only concern was getting Keith out, away from that dark figure and its invasive hands. He looked closer, for details. That man was too thin. The child hovering over Keith had no hair. Their bones stuck out like jagged mountain peaks, stretching their paper-thin skin. *There's hundreds*, Keith had said. *Hundreds of bodies down here*. The way Carma had possessed the dead bodies aboard the spaceship, the ill looking figures surrounding Keith now; Lance clamped a hand over his mouth to mask the sound of his trembling breath.

"I didn't," Keith wept, his voice a breathy whine that was strung thin by exertion. "Please."

Bony fingers raked down his arms, drawing blood, and Keith cried out. *Do something*. Lance stumbled forward, keeping low, trying to make sense of what was happening. Carma, it had to be Carma. Carma was possessing... what? The bodies of those they'd found down on the planet? Except Keith had burnt all of that-

"Oh," Lance whispered on a breath.

He could smell it now, charred skin and bone, decaying human remains, the stench of burnt, dead bodied. Lance nearly gagged, slowly withdrawing his bayards. The man hissed, and this time Lance could see the flaking skin around his mouth fan out as he spoke, barely clinging to his face. *Skin*. He was saying skin. A charred hand reached for Keith's face, stroking along his cheek,

leaving flakes of ash and gore in its wake. Petrified, decaying flesh, rotted remains of hands ran over Keith's body as though feeling for his own tactile skin, young and alive and warm with blood. Lance held his breath, extending an arm with the blue bayard in tow.

What if he missed? Would it kill Keith? Lance tried to get closer, but the shadows ended; it was either shoot now or reveal himself. A hand trailed to Keith's stomach, where his shirt was already ripped and bloody, and began to burrow jagged fingers into his flesh. A scream began in his throat, cut off abruptly when Lance fired, a freezing blue streak tearing through the air and into the figure atop Keith. The shot collided with their body violently, throwing blue light across the room as it crackled as enveloped the man's charred remains.

Keith gasped, kicking his legs weakly to remove the sizzling remains, the man's smoking body crumbling to the floor and falling apart. He grit his teeth, trying to throw the smaller figure off as tiny hands dug into his wrists. Lance's second shot met its mark, and he grimaced at the child's head was reduced to smouldering fragments. Lance had all of two seconds to appreciate Keith's look of bewilderment as the boy struggled to sit, his head swimming from blood loss; then the shrieking started.

"I got you-" Lance began, only to be cut off by an ungodly wail from the dark corners of the room.

Keith backpedalled, hands slipping in his own blood as Lance stumbled toward him, bayards raised and eyes raking across the room.

"Shit," he muttered, as at least two-dozen bodies materialised from the shadows. "Shit!"

Keith grabbed the hand Lance offered hastily, allowing himself to be pulled to his feet. His arm immediately went around Lance's shoulder to steady himself, breathing hard, blinking sweat out of his eyes.

"What the hell is happening?" Lance yelled as he retreated toward the window with Keith in tow, trying to ignore all the blood he could feel soaking into his shirt where they came into contact.

"It's using bodies," Keith wheezed, his free hand closing around a fair sized hole in his abdomen.

Lance juggled his hold on Keith, raising the black bayard and firing a blazing shot toward the group of bodies moving toward them.

"Why?"

Keith frowned, blood loss confusing his senses. "For afternoon tea. Why do you think?"

Lance huffed, firing another shot and wishing he could see where he was aiming. "Funny. Bayard?"

"Lost it in the vent."

Lance tossed Keith's near deadweight down on the window ledge, ensuring he was sitting upright before forcing his fingers into the hold of the black bayard.

"I need light, keep firing at the ceiling."

"Can't you do your cool thing," Keith mumbled, leaning a little too heavily against the pane.

"Hey!" Lance snapped fingers in front of his face. "Stay awake!"

“Don’t want it...” Keith slurred. “Stop touching me.”

“That things gone, Keith,” Lance said, ignoring the thirty odd figures moving toward them who were all capable of doing much the same to Keith. “Please, take the gun.”

Keith muttered something to himself, eyes drooping, but fired a careless shot at the ceiling. The blinding beam of electricity lit the room for a precious few second, and Lance turned and fired. He nearly lost his nerve just looking at the beings; they were the bodies from the dwarf planet, he had absolutely no doubt. If they had been in poor shape when Keith found them, they were horrific now. No eyes, no hair; their heads were shrivelled and shrunken, their mummified skin stretched thin over hollow skulls, teeth too prominent and fingers too pointed. Lance was almost glad when the light fizzled out, but Keith quickly fired another shot. This time he aimed for the group, and the light scattered when it hit one of the bodies, giving Lance enough light to keep aiming and firing.

“They keep coming!” Lance yelled, trying to take out the figures before they got too close.

“Not shit,” Keith mumbled, barely conscious.

“Right,” Lance fired off five more shots in quick succession, before moving back to Keith and hauling up.

“No,” Keith garbled and hit at him weakly, fingers curling uncomfortably. “Don’t touch me.”

“It’s me,” Lance said, pulling him toward a grid in the floor.

“Oh.” Keith’s head dropped against his shoulder, his fringe all sticky with sweat. “Okay.”

“You gotta walk, dude,” Lance complained, firing blindly while trying to support Keith.

“Don’t wanna.”

“Keith!”

He tripped, sending them both crashing to the floor. Keith protested weakly, clinging to the cuts on his body. Lance grabbed his bayard away, yanking Keith up and pulling them both toward the grid.

“Fuck!” He yelled, as something grabbed his shirt, pulling.

“Don’t touch him,” Keith fought weakly, removing himself from Lance’s side to try and throw a punch.

Lance did him the favour of catching him before Keith face planted onto the floor.

“You’re incorrigible. Now hold on.”

Keith was pouting, he was sure of it, but he kept his arms tight around Lance’s waist when instructed. Lance took a deep breath to steady himself, before firing at the grid under their feet. Falling through a grid down to the next floor and then the next, really hurt, but, Lance reasoned, it was infinitely better than being torn apart by Carma’s possessed pack of zombie-like corpses.

“Ow,” Keith grumbled, not doing the decency of picking himself up off of Lance.

“Keith,” he wheezed, pushing at his shoulders. “We gotta go.”

“Don’t wanna,” Keith said softly, and this time there was more vulnerability than sarcasm in his tone.

He was in shock. Lance couldn't guess everything Carma- or those bodies, had done to him, but the evidence on him didn't look good.

"Come on," Lance said more gently, despite the many pairs of feet he could hear shuffling toward the hole in the ceiling above them. "I got you, come on. We need to find Pidge."

That got Keith's attention. He forced himself up groggily, even offered a hand to Lance to help him stand, which the latter wisely refused. He did end up taking a hold of Keith's bloody wrist to pull him along in the direction he hoped the hangar was.

"What happened?" He asked, as soon as he felt they were far enough from the initial hoard of undead corpses. "Where's Allura?"

Keith tripped a little, prompting Lance to worry about just how much blood he'd lost, and was still losing.

"I don't know. She- she was behind me, back by the entrance, said she heard something. And something just grabbed her. Lance, is she--"

"We're going to find her. Everyone. Just stick together, yeah?"

*"Coran, does this mean toothbrush or sandwich?"*

Keith jumped at the sound of Pidge's voice coming over the comms.

"And ignore that."

"Where's Pidge?"

"I'm not sure."

"But--"

"Code Sunny," Lance interrupted.

*"Code Sunny,"* came Hunk's reply.

"I found Keith," said Lance, tugging said boy around a corner and continuing to run.

*"Keith! Is he okay?"*

"Uh..." Keith frowned, looking at a loss for words for a seconds.

*Shit,* thought Lance. He'd lost a lot of blood.

"Been better?"

"You sure have."

*"Where are you guys?"*

"Heading to the hangar, hopefully. How's the crystal?"

*"I'm trying to send it, but its not going through yet. I'm nearly there though, I just... keep getting distracted."*

"Hunk," said Lance very seriously. "Carma's possessing some messed up shit right now. Do not



open that door.”

“*Wasn’t planning on it,*” Hunk squeaked.

“Have you heard anything from Allura? Hunk? Hey, can you hear me? Code Sunny?”

Lance cursed softly, turning blinding in the direction he hoped they were meant to be going.

“What’s happening?” Keith asked, regaining a little of his sense of urgency.

“No idea. The recordings went nuts, lead us away from each other. Now there’s- what the fuck was that attacking you?”

Keith went silent, his grip on Lance’s hand a little too weak.

“Hey,” Lance slowed for a second, trying to see Keith’s expression in the dark. “Are you alright?”

Keith huffed, turning his head away despite the darkness already masking him.

“Keith?”

“I’ll be good,” he said quickly, tightly.

Lance reached out tentatively, his fingers feeling around the bloody imprints of nails on his shoulder.

“Carma,” he said. “She did this because you destroyed the planet?”

Keith sniffled, and Lance wished it were appropriate to hug him right then. “Yeah.”

A suspicious clatter sounded just down the hall, and Lance withdrew his hand. “We gotta keep going-“

“Lance!” Keith called, pulling him to a stop just before they took off running again.

“Yeah?”

A pause.

“If... if they try and take me-“

Lance’s hand clenched around the bayard, the other squeezing Keith’s wrist gently.

“Nothing’s gonna touch you. Now let’s go get Pidge.”

Going to get Pidge wasn’t as easy as Lance had hopped, and his expectations were already pretty low. They were headed in the right direction now, he was sure of it, all the while the recordings plagued the halls around them.

“Keith,” said Allura. “*Where have you gone?*”

“*They’re in the hangar!*” Yelled Coran.

“*I’ve taken a hit guys,*” said Hunk.

“*Adjust that one three decabeats to the left,*” said Coran.

"Matt?" Asked Pidge. "No, n-not M-"

"I don't know. That's just what the manual said."

"Not this," said Pidge.

She was crying. Lance explained very briefly to a terrified Keith as they ran, relaying what he'd heard, that no one could locate the green paladin; he didn't bring up Shiro. He'd said he was in the hangar too, hadn't he? He'd mentioned Blue; was that a lie too?

"Where did it take Allura?" Keith kept mumbling.

"I don't--"

Lance stopped short when an all-encompassing *boom* shook the castle. The hallway shook, vents groaning and walls shuddering as a massive surge of energy shot through the castle. The lights above their heads erupted, bathing them in brilliantly bright light for all of five seconds, before they were plunged into an even more complete darkness. Lance blinked, now aware of the body thrown over him. Keith slowly retraced his arms from over Lance's head, like a shield, blinking away the spots of light dancing in his vision.

"What..."

"Hunk's started the energy pulses," Lance said, coming to an understanding when they heard another section of the castle shake and shudder. "This is gonna be fun."

Whatever Hunk was doing, he didn't stop. Lance flinched every time the lights above them flickered violently to life, too much, too bright, dazzling the barren hallways in light before they were plunged back into darkness. Lance tried to make the most of the brief energy surges to see where they were going, but often it was too bright to see, and if the surge was violent enough, he was tackled to the floor by Keith before even getting a proper look around.

In the very least, the surges appeared to be disrupting the recordings. It also meant Hunk wasn't responding to any of Lance's calls, but he'd rather that than the sounds of his teammates suffering. They kept running, tripping, stumbling, disorientated, pulling each other along and shielding each other from violent bursts of electricity from the walls. One surge made the nearest grid explode, pushing out sections of wall as they ran past, showering them in sparks. Lance threw up an arm to shield them before yanking Keith onwards, toward the hangar.

Hearing nothing from Pidge was suddenly making Lance more worried; at least when she'd been afraid, she'd also been fighting. The silence was terrifying. The ground shook beneath their feet as they came to the hangar doors, jammed shut by the looks of it. Keith immediately darted forward, using his dagger to try and pry the doors apart. The energy thrumming through the ship, the disjointed bits of noise over the comms, the explosions and quakes, it was almost deafeningly loud.

"Get back!" Lance yelled at his companion, moving toward the door panel.

He breathed deep, ensuring Keith had stepped back before placing his hand over the panel. *Come on, Black*. The doors hissed as they opened, and neither boy wasted a moment on relief before dashing toward the dark entrance, all the noises from within spilling out.

It was like being hit by a wave; a whole new set of noises joined the chaos already surrounding them. Banging, hissing, the chatter of lost voices and sounds of a fight. Screaming, *Pidge's* voice screaming, shouting curses and pleas.

“Pidge!” Keith screamed, before plunging into the darkness.

“Keith- shit!” Lance ran after him, almost immediately slamming into a divider.

He picked himself up, head swivelling left and right for signs of his friends.

“Keith!” Pidge screamed back, but in the disorientating chaos, her voice sounded like it came from every corner. “Help!”

Lance preferred the silence over this; this was disaster.

“Pidge?”

“Lance!”

“There’s- no! Shit!”

Lance followed the sound of Keith’s voice, tripping over something on the floor and falling into a pile of sharp objects.

“What the hell,” he muttered, picking himself up, cringing at the new cut on his hand. “What’s happening?”

“They’re-“ Pidge gasped, like she’d been knocked back.

“Pidge!”

The sounds of fighting filled his ears, of Keith fighting, grunting as he drove his dagger into something. “Lance! Light!”

Still in a daze, Lance fumbled for the black bayard, but before he even had a chance to raise it, another energy surge lit the hangar like the sun. Pidge screamed, and Lance shielded his eyes, blinking through the haze to try and see what was happening. White light, surgical, washing the colour from everything. Keith was hunched over, hands pressed over his eyes, the blood on his skin glinting in the blinding display, a half-decomposed body at his feet.

“K-“

Lance stopped, catching sight of Pidge at the far end of the room, similarly beat up and fighting against the shadowy figure with arms around her neck. The lights went out, and the fight resumed. Lance sprinted toward Pidge, tripping over more carcasses on the floor, firing blinding in the direction he knew neither teammate would be.

A pained cry tore through Pidge, but before Lance could reach her, a body barrelled into him. The lights exploded as his head hit the floor, and he caught sight of a massive, hulking being above him, thin bits of skin stringing its bones together as it leant over him. Lance kicked, both feet connecting with the being’s chest; worse, going through its chest. He yelled, ripping his legs back and scrambling to get back on his feet as the lights died abruptly. Lance scrambled back, fumbling with his bayard before shooting the person bearing down on him.

An explosion tore through the wall as another grid went up in flames, tossing a few bodies back, and silhouetting Keith’s form as he ran toward Pidge. Lance barely made it too his feet before he was swamped by shadows, spindly fingers reaching for his clothes, snagging onto him, touching, pulling. Lance used the hilt of his gun to beat them off; while Carma might be possessing a large number of the bodies, it was evident her control was spread thin. The Dark Planet was still a long

way away, and Lance guessed the corpses slow movements were due to a difficulty on her behalf. Still, the sheer numbers were beginning to overwhelm him.

Lance began fighting blinding. He was so heavily surrounded, it didn't matter which direction he shot in, he was bound to hit something. He tried willing forth the familiar energy, but, *typical*, thought Lance, it wasn't there to be found. He lost sense of direction, hitting and firing, hoping the others were holding their own, until he heard Pidge scream. Before either he or Keith could respond to the call, a voice carried through the hangar, a quiet whisper that despite the noise of all that around them.

"Leave him."

A small voice, like a child's, crawling through the mass of bodies crowding them. Lance stumbled, too many voices and only one that made sense.

"Or become me."

He heard Pidge whimper, and Keith shouted for his friend.

"Leave him," said the voice, so *quiet* but so clear.

*Where was it coming from?* The lights exploded, white light bathing the hangar.

"Or become me."

Lance saw Pidge pinned to the floor some hundred feet away, held down in much the same way Keith had been, except...

"Leave him," said the girl holding her, and Lance was sure it was a girl.

He was sure it was a girl, he was sure around Pidge's age, he was sure that in life they must have shared a dozen similarities. He knew the message Carma was trying to send. The corpse's mouth dipped lower when it spoke, right up in Pidge's face, forcing her to face the horror that lingered above her.

"Or become me."

There could have been as many as fifty people in that hangar, but *me* referred to only one; the girl pinning Pidge, so similar to Pidge, an image of what could become of her if she didn't-

"Leave him."

The lights went out as the girl's fingers went for Pidge's eyes. A deafening cry of Pidge's name went up, when Keith tore himself free from the figures holding him, and made a beeline for the girl. Lance fired, blind to everything but their voices, and the chilling shuffle of the corpses around them. Electricity flashed briefly, snapping shadows in place, little frozen pictures that changed every time his bayard fired. Pidge whined, a low sound that quickly escalated until she was about to scream.

"Or becom--"

Lights flared as Keith slammed into the girl atop Pidge, driving his dagger through it's fragile skull, both of them toppling to the ground. *Darkness*; Pidge gasped, Lance ran for the pair, tripping and stumbling and knocking the bodies back.

“Pidge!” Keith called.

“I c-cant- I got you,” came Pidge’s response, sounding distraught.

*Do something. Don’t let them have me. Don’t let them touch me.*

“Keith!” Lance yelled, clenching his fists, willing in the cold, willing in the energy, willing in the storm.

“I can’t-“ he choked, somewhere in the distance. “My leg!”

“Come on,” Lance hissed, taking down more bodies, trying to reach his friends. “Come on, come on-“

*Allita jumped beside him when lightning and thunder tore through the sky, hiding under the blankets before their bedroom window. Stop it, she whined, but Lance didn’t want it to stop. Thunder boomed, and a flash of lightening lit their bedroom in electric blue. He gasped, revelling in the spilt second of brilliant light, which banished every shadow, every smidgeon of darkness he feared. A snap, a crackle, a jagged bolt of electricity carving its way through the clouds.*

“Lance!”

“I got you!” Lance almost fell into Pidge, knocking the green paladin over and onto Keith.

He yelped in pain, making Lance grimace, reaching for each of his friends.

“No!” Pidge squirmed in his hold, trying to fight her way out. “Let go! They’re coming, we gotta-“

“Just hold onto me,” Lance yelled, gathering her and Keith into his arms, praying whatever he was about to do wouldn’t hurt them.

*Light, blinding, electric.*

“You’re cold,” Keith whispered against his arm.

“That’s the point.”

*He could always feel it, the moment before the lightning struck, that humming in the air .*

Something grappled at Lance’s back, nails, bony fingers, he didn’t know.

“No!” Keith yelled as something grabbed for him, and Lance tightened his hold on the boy as something tried to tug him away. “No! No, let go!”

They were being overwhelmed, bodies moving toward them rapidly, pressing in from all sides. *If they try and take me-* Lance grit his teeth; winding his arms as tightly as he could around Keith and Pidge’s chests, shutting his eyes, and angling the black bayard toward himself, he took one deep breath before firing a shot directly at his own chest.

*Lightning was beautiful, and bright, but it was powerful too. Lance saw that from afar, the way it spilt the clouds apart and tore the sky to pieces. He saw it up close, when it struck a tree in their backyard, splitting the bark open like a knife through butter, blackening the wood with ease. Nothing could outrun it, or hide from it; it was truth, and nothing was excused from its light.*

Lance was sure he was being torn apart, every one of his nerves felt like they were on fire, detached and wary of the others, so his whole being was left to hang in the balance. He was

vaguely aware of light encasing them, burning out from him, orbiting them. Burning, blinding, everything. The world erupted, over and over, until suddenly, it didn't.

The trio lay there panting, a muffled ringing in their ears and the taste of charred *everything* on their tongues. Pidge coughed a little, Lance stuck his tongue out, seeing if that would alleviate the bad taste. Keith kept blinking the smatterings of bright light from his eyes, content where he was curled against Lance.

"Um," said Pidge, crinkling her nose as the smell of burning flesh assaulted her. "What was that?"

"Cool trick my bayard does," Lance wheezed, clearing his throat to bring some stability to his voice.

"Oh," said the green paladin, a little dazed. "Cool."

Her voice quivered, just like all of theirs. Lance refused to think what repercussions this would have.

"Mm."

He could taste blood on his tongue, but didn't think much of it. Keith and Pidge were kind of crushing his arms, but he didn't mind.

"We need to go."

Pidge hummed, and Keith just tucked his head into Lance's shoulder.

"My tongue feels funny," mumbled Pidge.

"Probably cause you're breathing in dead people," Keith said.

"Eew, *Keith*."

"Come on," Lance gave both of them a nudge to try get them off. "The others still need help."

"Oh," Keith sat up a little unsteadily, rubbing his eyes.

Somehow the three managed to get to their feet, despite Keith's hiss of pain when he stepped forward.

"Your legs are bad, huh?" Asked Pidge, trying to inspect him in the heavy darkness.

"Something like that."

"Can we, uh, get out of here?" Lance asked.

"Yeah. Good plan."

They managed to make it to the hangar doors without too much incident, helping each other limp along, stumbling over piles of smoking remains. The lights continued to flicker on and off violently, making the castle shudder. Lance was beginning to wonder if it was the right idea telling Hunk to keep sending pulses, or if they were tearing the castle apart. Pidge had gone uncomfortably quiet where she limped along beside him, drawing into herself. Keith was in much the same way, but he at least appeared to find comfort in the hand Lance laid on his arm.

"You guys think you can make it to the bridge?" Lance asked, as soon as they were free of the

hangar.

The hallway was still dark and uninviting, but at least it hadn't been crawling with possessed corpses. He sighed a little when neither answered him.

"I gotta- we need to get the particle barrier up. I'm going to head back to the grid--"

"Lance--" Keith began.

"It's okay, I... I know where it is."

"Do you know what to do?"

"No, so you'll have to tell me. No offence, you don't really look in a good enough state to go crawling in there."

He might not be able to see Keith's face, but Lance could tell he was thinking hard.

"I have no idea what's happening on the bridge," Lance continued, in order to sway him before he could argue. "But Coran's in trouble. If you guys can handle that, I can get Hunk and fix the grid."

"Where's Allura?" Pidge asked suddenly.

Lance swallowed the bitter taste in his mouth, but it didn't fade.

"I don't know."

"Something took her," Keith said softly.

"*What?*"

"We're going to--"

"W-we can split up," said Pidge, her voice shaking. "I'll look for Allura."

"No."

"But Lance--"

"No, Pidge. Look at you, you're in shock. Keith can barely stand. I need you two to get each other to the bridge, get Coran, and stay safe."

"I'm not gonna sit around--"

"Pidge," Lance laid a hand gently on her shoulder, feeling for her cheek in the dark.

They were wet with tears.

"Hey." He tried swiping some of the tears away, but they just kept falling. "We need you on the bridge. Allura needs you there, to help when the power surge comes through. Yeah?"

Pidge sniffled, before throwing her arms around his waist. Lance hugged her back tightly, patting down the wild strands of her hair that were standing up in every direction. There was blood all over her, he could feel it. This shouldn't be happening, not to Pidge.

"You got your bayard," He asked, pulling back.

"I'm not a kid," Pidge mumbled with no real bite.

*Yes you are*, thought Lance. As soon as he released her shoulders, Pidge was readying herself with her bayard, shuffling back to retie her ponytail, preparing. Before Lance even turned around, Keith was up in his space.

"The grid," he said, his voice rough from screaming. "I did most of it, you just need to reattach two of the cables. You won't have light, but if you feel for the fifth wire up on the left, and the third on the right, those need to be joined in the central consul."

Keith spoke quickly, mechanically, as if it were just something he needed to get out the way before arriving at the point he was actually trying to make. He stepped closer, and Lance figured that assumption was correct. He breathed in, out, matching Keith. Arms went around his shoulders, awkwardly at first, as was Keith's style. Lance huffed, trying to mask the way his throat constricted as he tugged Keith toward him in a proper hug.

"Stay safe," he mumbled into a mop of bloody, raven hair.

But Keith had a lot more to say than that.

"There's things in the vents," he whispered, raising the hairs on the back of Lance's neck.

He froze up a little, mind on the trail of blood he'd followed through the vents. It must have been some new kind of hell for Keith, getting dragged violently through that stuffy metal maze by a nightmarish creatures that tore at him and made him bleed. Could he go back in there, Lance wondered suddenly, with the knowledge that he could come face to face with such a thing without even realising in the dark confines?

"Lance?" Keith pulled back, but kept his hands on Lance's shoulders, and the others arms around his waist.

"I know."

Lance ducked his head into the crook of Keith's neck, uninterested in whether that was too intimate for the situation. Keith didn't seem to mind, so he found no problem in it.

"I know," he whispered again, gripping Keith's hips to stop the shaking in his hands.

*Darkness, it was everywhere, dizzying.* He could already picture the vent before him, the hot, stale air, which would only be worse by now. Right there, in that moment with Keith, he could manage. Lance let his hands trail from Keith's hips to his back, up to his shoulders, his arms, feeling, *remembering*.

"What are you doing?" Keith asked quietly, but it wasn't a request to stop, it was just... curious.

*Concerned.* Lance shivered at the thought of the vent, drawing more of Keith into his arms and breathing deeply.

"I just... need to know."

Either Pidge was respectfully giving them a private moment, or she was too anxious to pay any attention to the pair wrapped up in each other. Lance was thankful either way. Keith ran fingers through his hair and Lance's eyes fell shut.

"Know what?"



He ran one hand down Keith's side, the other settling on the small of his back.

"Exactly what you feel like," Lance said honestly, embarrassingly almost.

He could've laughed at how easy it was to come undone when Keith was holding him.

"Before I go back in there."

Keith pulled back slightly, and Lance panicked. *Too much you're too much I don't want*- then Keith cupped his cheek, and he realised it was only to bring them face to face.

"Hey," he breathed, close enough for Lance to *feel* his words.

They stayed like that for a long moment, arms encircling each other, fingers tugging minutely on clothing and tending to bruises. Keith was warm and Keith was safe, and with him Lance could forget the darkness swirling around them. The lights flickered to life for a brief second, accompanied by a loud boom, and Lance saw Keith's eyes staring fixatedly into his. They were plunged back into darkness not a second later, and Lance let his forehead knock against Keith's.

It was too intimate; he almost wanted to pull away, save them from the burden of that moment. Except he really, really didn't want to. They were close now, pressed up against each other in the dark, where no one could see them, not even themselves. This was a bit more than a hug, Lance realised slowly, when Keith tilted his head and let Lance nuzzle into the side of his neck, gripping his shoulders tight enough to bruise. No, not quite that tight, not enough to hurt, just enough to convey his subtle desperation. His lips hovered over the shell of Keith's ear, but they didn't quite touch. Keith didn't remember the holding cell, did he? That didn't mean they couldn't have this.

Keith's fingers carded through his hair in a way Lance could not describe as anything but *lovingly*, the thought of that and the feel of it made him melt. It was as if all their barriers were lost in the dark, they couldn't see the walls they'd built for themselves, so they ignored them. A hand on Keith's hip, around his waist, Lance could pull him closer and he wouldn't object. A hand on his neck, fingers on his chest, Keith drew him in, promoting Lance to bow his head and simply fall into him. They were breathing in sync now, so close and so warm that it was dizzying, and Lance ached to just press closer, with his body, with his arms, with his lips.

They were two magnets out of alignment, twisting and turning to find the right angle. Noses brushed, cheeks too; Keith sighed softly when Lance rubbed against his neck, inhaling sharply when the other yanked him closer, tighter, holding every bit of him together and in place. Pidge was going to interrupt them any second, but Lance went on, pressing gently on the bruises littering Keith's back, leaving his lips to rest against the curve of his jaw.

"I don't-"

Lance went absolutely still, Keith's voice quiet but meaningful. He let Keith find a hold on his back, let him tug softly at the hairs at the nape of his neck before continuing.

"I don't want it to use us against each other," Keith said softly, earnestly, with a pinch with regret.

Lance was dizzy with the need to kiss him. He leant in, head spinning as Keith's breath settled against his skin.

"Lance."

Then he processed what Keith had said. His hands stilled, his head lifted; Keith was watching him, even if he couldn't see a thing.

“Oh.”

“I-“

“We need to go,” said Pidge.

There it was.

“Y-yeah,” Lance stammered, slowly unwinding his arms from around Keith.

The other squeezed his hand before it left his hip, making Lance’s heart jump. He could still do this. Letting go of Keith was the worst decision he’d made all day. The lights flickered as the pair parted ways, Keith stepping toward Pidge, Lance backing into the dark hallway.

“You guys stay safe, alright?”

“Yeah,” said Keith. “You too.”

“You come right back to us, McClain,” said Pidge.

“Yeah, yeah I will.”

Lance smiled shakily, before remembering they couldn’t see him and letting his face fall.

“See you on the bridge.”

“See you.”

Lance waited for their footsteps to fade down the passage before he even started along his own way, clinging to the last echoes of their existence. *We’re getting through this.* He inhaled sharply, and started back in the direction of the vent. It was definitely worse this time round, now that the air would be hotter and he was burdened with the knowledge of what might be waiting for him in the vents. *She wants to hurt you.* Lance didn’t want to imagine the things Carma could do to him.

The metal felt warm when he set his hands down inside the vent, the rumble of an electric pulse making the metal quiver beneath his fingers. *I can’t do this.* Lance squeezed his eyes shut, picturing Keith with him, wrapped in his arms. He’d been warmer too, a different, nicer kind. Keith was a soft warmth, that responded to him just as well as he did to the other, unlike this metal, which was hard and uncompromising and suffocating. Still, he could pretend. He knew roughly how Keith’s body felt, when he’d let him run hands down his side and over his back and along his arms. That could comfort him now, the memory of it at least.

Lance plunged head first into the vent. He fought to remember everyone he was acting for, his team, his family, the pieces of both they’d lost. Where was Allura? Lance grit his teeth, already doused in sweat and struggling to breathe. *Don’t even think about it.* So he thought of Keith and his company and his small but steady smile, his pout when he encountered something he didn’t understand, his daring smirk when he entered a battle he already knew he’d won. Lance could barely breath, the heat sucking all the air out of him, compressing his lungs. So he pictured the other times he couldn’t breath, when Keith hugged him so tightly it hurt, or when he flashed Lance a smile meant only for him, and he couldn’t quite seem to catch his breath. In the holding cell, kissing his neck, when breathing didn’t even matter, nothing did; the whole world revolved around Keith and his lips, and the ease with which all else was forgotten was unrivalled.

Unsettling bits of noise drifted down the dark vents, metal groaning, filling with dents, curving, heating up; Lance didn’t want to consider what else was crawling its way through this maze toward

him. He was nauseous by the time he reached the grid, stomach twisted into anxious knots and sweat pouring down his skin. Lance muttered to himself as he worked to mask the sounds gradually making their way toward him. Fingers slipped against the metal, his head too hot and irritated to efficiently think his way through the mangled wires. Keith's instructions were clear in his mind, but without any light, and with stuffy air forcing its way into his chest, Lance was struggling to focus. *Think, breath.* But he couldn't and the more agitated he became, the harder it was to distinguish between the wires.

"Five up," Lance muttered, edging his fingers along the grooves. "Three up."

He dragged fingers along the wires, searching for the ends. His knuckles knocked against a knobbled surface, what he assumed was the central consol. How to attach them? Lance had no idea, feeling blindly for appendages on the consol. His shoulders felt too constricted, elbows jammed against the hot metal; he was beyond uncomfortable. Lance didn't realise he was crying until the salty tears were dripping over his lips, a different taste to the sweat gathered on his brow.

"Hate you," he muttered, at no one in particular. "Hate you, hate you, hate you."

He wanted to scream, to sob, but he didn't have enough air. Lance sniffled weakly, gasping for some sort of relief. The vent shook as a pulse went through the castle, but nothing passed through the grid before him. He was stuck, he was sure of it, shoulder's too broad for the position he was in, twisted uncomfortably toward the grid. That little red light kept blinking at him, taunting him, piercing his eyes and bathing what little tangible bit of existence he had in a blood red varnish.

Lance was halfway through jamming his fingers into various sections of consol when he felt it, the beginnings of a pulse awakening the sections of wire. He breathed deep, calming himself. *Of course.* He found Keith using his blood, why couldn't he find a pulse of electricity? It was a bad idea, Lance knew the instant he set his hands over the mass of wires, reaching into the grid. This time he sought the black lion, a dark storm cloud, a shadow over land, bringing with it the promise of untamed energy. *What if it kills you?* His mother's warnings registered briefly in his mind, simple instructions to not go sticking forks into toasters, or fly kites around electricity poles. Lance grit his teeth, focusing hard, ignoring the streaks of sweat moving down his brow and pooling at various points.

The castle shook dangerously, and he latched onto it. It seemed to move slower now, now that he had a harness on it. Eyes shut tight, fingers wrapped around each end of wire, Lance brought all his attention to the fierce pulse of electricity racing toward them. Lightning, bright and blinding, burning, cleansing. The instinct to pull away, to flinch, was overwhelming, but Lance held fast. The closer it got, the more afraid he became, as if he were standing in the way of a flaming barrel, accelerating down a hill toward him, hot and fiery. His breath was picking up, hairs standing on end, the whole vent beginning to hum. He should get back, far back, out of the vent itself, but Lance clung to the grid and kept his tether on that pulse. *Closer, faster, hotter;* his breath caught, goosebumps rising on his arms and a buzz filling his ears. The electricity struck.

Everything was white, burning away at his eyes. He was stuck, caught in the second of *nothingness* before an immense amount of pain. Lance waited, and waited, waited for his nerves to kick in, for the signals to reach his brain, telling him raw energy was eating away at his hands. But he stayed stuck, no air entering or leaving his lungs, nothing but white light reaching his eyes, nothing to feel but *nothing*. He was the lightning itself, so stripped down to pure energy that every sense, every feeling, simply fell away.

*Think, think, think, direct it.* He couldn't feel the wires in his hands, nor the metal walls pressing in on him, just the flow of electricity from wire, to skin, to bone. Lance breathed, and the energy

scattered. He lunged for it, absolutely stationary, trying to wrap it around him. The bridge, that's where he needed it. So Lance began to search, pushing gently, urging the blinding light forward. He didn't understand what was happening, he could barely think at all, the intensity of that light scorching every corner of his mind, reducing his thoughts to dust. Nothing survived this; he wasn't sure he would.

Lance lost himself, somewhere between the energy striking and slowly deserting him, directing it like a rock in a damn wall, staying put long after his mind had ground to a halt, too exposed to handle the constant assault. The first breath he drew, that he *really* drew, brought him back to his senses. His hands tingled, and he wondered idly if his fingers were still there. An insistent knocking made him raise his head, and he realised it was his own foot, twitching against the side of the vent. The red light stared back at him, so ordinary and dull in comparison to the hot, scorching light that had surrounded him not a minute earlier. Lance blinked, blind, curling his fingers. His brain felt fried, and he was fairly certain his hair was standing on end.

He coughed, and a stuttering sound filled the vents. A moment later, he flinched at the touch of cool air, streaming through the stuffy space in a rush of wind. *Did it work?* Lance shuffled back an inch, relieved to find all bits of his body still attached and not melded to the grid. There were no lights in the vents, so it was impossible to tell if they were up and running, but fresh air coursed through the narrow spaces, bringing life to the dismal place. Lance listened intently, but failed to pick up on any pulses moving through the castle. He was going to cry, and awful tightness wrapping itself around his throat. *Get out.*

Shuffling backwards out of the vents was made only mildly more tolerable now that there was fresh air to allow him breath. He grimaced every time he hit the wall or ceiling, feeling as though it was closing in on him. Gradually though, the air grew somewhat lighter. His body blocked much of the light coming from the entrance, but from the spaces in-between, the air looked lighter. He was crying in earnest when his feet fell out the vent, scooting back until he laid sprawled on the floor in the brightly lit hallway.

Lance laughed, crying, too many emotions making his chest seize up. There was no noise coming over the comms, but the halls were brightly lit, and he could hear the faint sigh of the air filtration system kicking in. Lance made it to his knees, then his feet, walking shakily down the hall, blinking at the lights. Footsteps down the hall had him limping faster, too hopeful to even go for his bayard. A strangled sob escaped Lance when he saw Hunk appear at the end of the hall, stumbling along in a similar dazed fashion, with Allura leaning heavily on his side.

"Hunk-" his voice was raw and terrified.

Hunk's face split into a half-grin half-grimace, extended his free arm as Lance ran toward his friends. In the best moment of his life, he had Hunk's arm pulling him into a tight hug, both of them crying and clinging to the other. Lance's feet lifted slightly from the ground, and he let them, gripping onto his friend as if their lives depended on it. Their sanity did, in any case. Allura raised her head, eyeing Lance with no nameable emotion. There was blood on her brow, and a haze over her eyes. Lance cried harder.

"It's okay," Hunk was whispering, over and over again.

The trio just stood in the empty hallway, crying and holding onto each other, the lights shining above them and the air drifting steadily through clogged and overheated vents.

no cliffhangers yaaay

fucking god if i ever have to italicise so many lines again i will cry

## Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for the nice comments guys!! You're all amazing, please enjoy the next chapter!

Super short chapter between a couple of rly long ones, but its time for some hugs

-

It had been hours since the last corpse had fallen silent, but Keith still would not stop touching his hair. He'd set his hands in it the minute they were back together on the bridge; trembling fingers trailed over Lance's blackened cheeks, caked in dirt and charred matter, settling in his electrified shock of hair, all of it standing on end. He'd kept them there, inconveniently at times, as if clinging to the proof that this was the worst a fatal strike of electricity could do to his fellow paladin. That was alright; Lance couldn't stop touching Keith either. No one, it seemed, could bear being on their own. They sat on the floor, leaning against the couch which hadn't provided enough space for them to sit like this, with Pidge between his legs and Keith against his side, as close as they could all get to each other. Lance's skin was crawling, everywhere save the patches in contact with the others.

Hunk, Coran, and Allura had done a little better, well balanced enough to seat themselves on the other couch. Allura was pressed in between them, almost disappearing into Hunk's embrace, while Coran kept a tight hold on her hand. She stared straight ahead, not a word, not a clue as to what she was feeling or thinking. Her hair hung around her face like a damp veil, a few bloody strands clinging to her cheeks.

Everyone was bloody, everyone was traumatised, and everyone needed healing. But no one wanted to do anything but hold onto each other. *They swarmed the bridge*, Coran had explained. *They lured Pidge to the hangar, they swarmed the bridge, they trapped Hunk in the core, they beat Allura bloody and left her hanging unconscious from a rib in the ceiling*. Lance felt sick. He pressed another kiss into Pidge's mop of hair, tugging her even closer, bracketing legs around her. Then his lips went to Keith's hair, to his temple, his left arm curling around him, holding him. It was pathetic; Lance had never felt this weakened by the near loss of someone.

Keith's eyes were wounded, scratches down his arms and the butchered skin on his legs evidence of the atrocity he'd gone through. One of his hands was pressed tightly to the hole in his stomach; Lance knew they should get to healing him soon. He seemed averse to touch, but craving it all the same. Nothing unexpected, nothing that frightened him, but he let Lance nestle into him and arrange their limbs to be close, to be touchable. Keith's free arm wound around Lance's neck, his hand patting insistently at Lance's hair, still standing on end from the electricity. Keith didn't meet his eye, too stunned and subdued, but he let himself be handled and reached for whatever scrap of contact he was given.

And Lance couldn't let go. He was too harrowed to feel doubt or rationality. Keith was there, alive and warm and *alive*. Breathing; Lance kept running his hand over Keith's heart, forgetting his worries one by one as he pressed kisses into Keith's hair. *I love you I love you I love you-* it didn't

matter if he didn't say it out loud. He pulled Keith closer and Keith came easily along, angling himself into Lance. He felt shaken, all his nerves fizzling and unfastened, so he kept pulling at Keith and soothing the quiver in the red paladin's hands, and he thought he'd like to stay there forever.

When finally Keith and Pidge had fallen asleep, Lance laid them on the couch together, prying Keith's fingers from his shirt painstakingly slowly. It hurt already, to not be touching him. Lance didn't know what time it was, some time in the morning he supposed. It had been some hours since he'd gotten the lights back on; this was the calm period. Hunk sat watch over Keith and Pidge, while Coran had disappeared into the med bay with Allura. Lance sat before a screen on the bridge, headphones covering his ears, his eyes tracking the movements on the castle's cameras. He was utterly exhausted, eyes itching with the need to shut, his head foggy and limbs heavy.

He tried to think, to keep his head clear, categorise everything that had happened. The particle barrier was up, though the waves coming from the planet had seemingly stopped. In the hangar, and here and there in the hallways, were piles of crumpled bodies. Lance flicked methodically through the cameras, searching for movement. The bridge was barricaded up still; once they'd gotten everyone back inside, side-stepping the bodies that had simply collapsed when the barrier went up, they'd closed it up again. Lance's eyes drifted over Keith and Pidge asleep on the couch at the other end of the room, and Hunk beginning to nod off beside them.

He checked the camera on the hall outside the bridge. At least twenty bodies lay in a pile there, their skin like leather, yellow teeth and nail protruding from curled flesh. The next hall, nothing. The common room, nothing. His room, nothing. The dining hall, nothing. One section of the hangar, a couple of scattered bones. Second section, more bodies. Third section, blood. Blood. *Blood.* Lance's jaw felt tight, and he realised he'd been grinding his teeth together anxiously. *Dead bodies don't bleed.* He flicked to the next camera. Med bay, Allura lying in bed asleep, Coran shuffling about aimlessly.

Steeling himself, Lance clicked rewind on the cameras, until all he saw was darkness. He fast-forwarded, until the recordings began to feel the effects of the electric pulses, and the hallways were lit brightly from time to time. He caught himself and Keith running. He caught bodies clawing at the entrance to the bridge, barricaded shut by Coran. He caught corpses swarming Pidge in the hangar. He caught the dark silhouette of Allura dangling upside-down from the ceiling, her hair mingling with the blood that ran down her head. Lance looked away. He changed the camera.

The hangar. Dark. Light. No blood. Dark. Light. Blood. Lance rubbed at tired eyes, so anxious it was eating at him. He focused on that one camera shot alone, in a secluded section of hangar near an emergency airlock. Lights flashed, showing nothing but a strip of clean flooring, then darkness. A minute passed, maybe two. When the lights lit that area again, there was a dark smear of blood across the floor, a large smear. Lance stood, gathered his bayards, and made for the exit.

The hallways weren't nearly as daunting in the light, but Lance was terrified anyway. He kept both bayards in hand, glancing over his shoulder far more often than strictly necessary. His footsteps were the only sound. Nothing came to stop him, none of the bodies he passed moved. In the hangar, the piles of dead stayed as they were. He sidestepped them, refusing to look at their mangled faces, making his way to the far end of the hangar, where that section of video was focused on.

Lance moved cautiously toward it, around a divider, gritting his teeth in preparation for what he might find. He spotted the dark smear of blood across the floor, and then some more. The main part of it was a good metre in length, as though someone had lain there bleeding out. Then it moved off. Lance's eyes tracked the blood, a long smear across the floor, disappearing out the airlock. His

stomach lurched, and he stood. He half expected a body on the other side of that airlock, bloated and staring back at him lifelessly from the vacuum. But there was nothing. No body, no more blood, no warning. *No Shiro*. Lance looked around. He could see the tip of Blue's ear poking up from past the divider. *Blue*, Shiro had said. Shiro had said Blue in a million previous circumstances, it didn't mean anything. Then where'd it come from, Lance thought, eyeing the blood, and the trail it left to the airlock. *Whose is it?*

-

The med-bay was silent, despite the presence of two Alteans. Lance padded cautiously into the room, eyeing his surrounds with suspicion. Allura lay in bed on the other side of the room, Coran asleep in a chair a few feet away. Lance approached quietly, not wanting to wake either of them. He made it within ten feet before Allura turned her head; she'd never been asleep.

For a full minute, they stood and lay there and just watched each other. Lance's throat felt tight. Allura's face was shockingly pale, and he wondered if Alteans could pale even more than humans. It was sickening. The blood had been washed from her hair, and a small line of stitches were neatly working a gash on her brow back together.

"Hi," said Lance.

Allura stayed quiet, watching him blankly. It was terrifying, how coolly unresponsive she was. Her eyes shifted slowly over him, drinking in the various injuries. Lance approached slowly, pulling up a chair and sitting down quietly so not to wake Coran. Allura's hands rested atop the blanket, fingers motionless and sad, like the rest of her.

"How are you feeling?"

A long moment went by.

"Hopeless."

Lance took her hand; it was trembling. He had to ask, he didn't want to but he had to ask.

"The baby?"

Allura's brows were furrowed softly, her lips downturned. She was a frozen lake, the spine of a leaf, dust in an attic, winter. She didn't speak. Lance began to breath faster, eyes watering, squeezing her hand hard enough to merit a reaction.

"Baby's fine."

He lost his breath, head dropping into his spare hand as he heaved in air. This was a risky sort of relief. *Thank god*.

"Are you?"

"No."

That response came quickly.

"What did they do?"

Allura breathed deeply, tugging on the blanket covering her.

"What did they do to all of us?"



“Hurt us.”

“It was to scare us.”

“They would have killed the others.”

“And me and you?”

Lance bit his lip, meeting her eye. There was life in them still; she wasn't as hopeless as she said.

“Why is she doing this?”

“Revenge. I don't know.”

“How did she...”

Allura just shook her head.

“It's wrong,” she said. “It's so wrong. Those were people.”

“I know.”

“A whole planet, Lance. People and children.”

He didn't know what to say. Coran guessed the wave pulses were some form of Carma's consciousness or power. She could've brought the bodies across via the black lion after the explosion, or by some other means they weren't aware of. She used those corpses, again and again, abusing them as much in death as she had in life.

“Allura,” he said. “We need help.”

Her eyes found his quickly; she didn't look agreeable at all.

“We don't know what we're dealing with, or how to get out of here. I think we should make contact with another planet-“

“No.”

“What? Why?”

“There are a thousand reason why,” Allura said, looking horrified. “What if Carma turns her attention to that planet as well?”

Lance stopped, thinking.

“Oh.”

“I will not drag anyone else into this. It's bad enough having the whole team staying to help, I will absolutely not allow Carma to fixate upon anyone else.”

“What's more,” Allura continued, before Lance had the chance to speak. “We are in a vulnerable position.”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“We are stuck here, Lance. Voltron is stuck, useless. What if someone was to find out? As far as anyone knows, we're off in some other part of the galaxy, doing our work defending the universe.

What if they found out that wasn't the case? What if they discovered we were sitting ducks, our defences and our team weakened, too preoccupied with trying to defend ourselves from the Dark Planet to protect anyone else or ward off an outside attack on us?"

Lance twisted his fingers together anxiously. "I hadn't thought about that."

"Zarkon may be compromised," Allura said. "But that will hardly be the end of it. Everyone thinks we are still out there. If we don't show our faces for a while, they may wonder, or worry, but as long as they don't know the truth..."

"And you think if we reach out for help, we'll be discovered? What if we go to a planet we can trust, the Balmerans-"

"No, the risk is still there. All it takes is one person carrying news of our situation into enemy hands, just one person. Besides, my first point stands. What would you do if Carma reduced that Balmera to dust like she has this dwarf planet?"

Lance's throat constricted. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"I see where you're coming from. I just... I don't know what to do. The Dark Planet's coming, Allura. Even the dwarf planet's enough of a threat, what are we going to do when the real thing arrives?"

"We will do what we always do," Allura said. "We'll end this."

"How?"

"Somehow."

"That's not the answer I was hoping for."

"You know both lions are responding, Lance. You know you are stronger because of that. We are going to put an end to it."

"I think we should send the team away."

"No."

"Why not?"

"They won't leave us."

"Allura..."

"I know it's scary," she said, and her eyes were watering. "I know. But you and me can't fix this alone."

"At least we know why the wormhole takes both lions," Lance mumbled dismally.

"At least we know that."

"Why doesn't it take Coran?"

Allura sighed deeply. "Honestly? I don't know why it wants us, Lance. Just you and me; it doesn't

make sense.”

“No,” he agreed. “Not really.”

A long moment of silence, broken only by Coran’s soft snoring.

“This was retaliation, for what Keith did to the planet. They were going to rip him apart.”

“That’s not the only reason.”

“No. I think she’s trying to separate us. Either kill the others, or make them leave. The way Pidge got treated...”

“We were unprepared.”

“We always are.”

Allura started to say something, but cut herself off quickly. When Lance looked over, she was crying.

“Are you alright? What about a healing pod-“

Allura shook her head sharply, wiping at the tears and trying to stifle the noise.

“Allura-“

“It’s a threat.”

“What?”

She huffed tearfully, shoving the blanket down and lifting her shirt. Lance flinched. There was a bloody, seven pointed star scratched into her stomach. Allura sniffled, refusing to look at the fresh mark. Lance could hear his heartbeat, eyeing the star that stretched over a good half of her stomach, violently slashed through the delicate pink markings on her skin.

“Allura...”

“That’s what they did to me,” she said tightly, tugging her shirt back down. “It’s a threat.”

“They’re not going to-“

“Hurt my baby? Aren’t they? They cut that into my stomach, but they’re not going to hurt us?”

Lance said nothing; if he did, he felt it would be a lie.

“I don’t want this,” said Allura. “I don’t want this.”

“We’ll stop it.”

“You just said-“

“I’ll do it. We’re not- nothing’s going to happen to your baby.”

“It already has,” Allura muttered, and let her head drop back against the pillows. “I’m tired.”

Lance should mention Shiro. But it really wasn’t the time; Allura already looked so worn-out. Still...

“When, um... when the recordings were-“

“I heard him too, Lance.”

He froze. Allura wasn't looking at him; her eyes were far off.

“It wasn't real.”

“But I think-“

“Don't,” she said. “Please. Not right now. I just... would like to be alone, please.”

Lance was itching with questions and suspicions. He stood, giving Allura's hand one more squeeze.

“Get some rest.”

She didn't reply, tears slipping slowly off her cheeks.

“I'll... see you later.”

Lance felt ill walking out of that room. Allura would be fine, eventually, as long as he kept his promise. They'd all be fine eventually, right? Lance made himself believe that. It softened his doubts when he returned to see the rest of his friends asleep on the bridge. It was already morning, but they deserved the rest. Knowing he wouldn't be able to sleep, Lance sat himself down at the controls and booted up the castle's automated cleaning system. Time to get rid of those corpses.

## Chapter Notes

SORRY FOR THE SLIGHTLY LONGER UPDATE TIME AND THAT I HAVENT  
 REPLIED TO ANY COMMENTS BUT THEY'RE SO NICE YOU ARE ALL SO  
 NICE THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU  
 seriously thank you so fucking much

HAVE FUN WATCHING SEASON 4!!!!!!!

-

The one small mercy afforded to Lance, was that he always knew when he was dreaming. To be unable to distinguish between reality and falsehood... that would drive him insane. But this was a dream, and it felt alright. Somewhere in his consciousness he knew he was tethered to his own bed in the castle, long after ensuring everyone else was safely to their rooms. That was reality. In the dream...

In this dream he was at home; not that surprising really. This was their old house, back in Cuba, he knew from where he sat on the windowsill of his- of their room. It was warm out, and he heard the curtains behind him flutter softly; he could smell the sea. Lance shut his eyes, breathing in deeply and letting his hands rest loosely in his lap. There was someone there with him, he heard them breathing from where they sat across from him on the windowsill. Unconcerned, Lance turned slowly, blinking at them in the dark realms of the night.

He looked at her for a full minute before recognition set in. Lance stopped breathing, the air solidifying in his lungs, a concrete blockage to stop his heart. His mouth fell open, the strangled mess of his voice only gasping. Something lodged itself in Lance's chest, drawing a wet wheeze from him, his vision blurring.

"Allita," he said.

She looked up. Her hair was cropped just above her shoulders, straightened so not a single strand of frizz stood out. She met his eye. She was sixteen years old. Lance couldn't breathe, it was her, *it was her*. She looked like a character from a renaissance painting in the dull light of a clouded moon. The window was her frame, her hair and skin like fresh varnish, the polished wood of grand chapels, gleaming like layered paint, tinged with subtle red. She was sixteen. He was sixteen. Allita died at ten.

"Yeah?"

That was her voice. That was the voice of a girl who hadn't been robbed of the past six years. Lance shouldn't be here, not in this house, not in this country, not with his sister. She was beautiful, she was so absolutely beautiful it took his breath away. Not just by convention, but by how alive she was. She breathed, her shoulders rose and fell slightly, she brushed back the hair that flooded her face, she pursed her lips lightly. She was sixteen, and she was every possibility, probability, and reality two siblings should have had.

“Lance?” she said.

She sounded worried. She *looked* worried. She drew her brows and leant forwards and crossed her ankle over her leg and she was *alive*.

“What’s wrong?”

She spoke in Spanish, her voice familiar and vastly different all the same. All of this was familiar; a familiar language, a familiar country, a familiar home and a familiar sister.

“Nothing,” he said.

He wasn’t lying. A faint warning resounded in his head, of the last dream he’d had of Allita, of wondering into the cave. *It’s okay*. He was okay, and he knew it.

“Mhm,” said Allita. “That’s not true.”

She frowned. She looked like him; of course she did, she always had. Her face was a little rounder, and she wasn’t quite as lean or gangly.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing,” Lance breathed.

Hot tears spilt down his cheeks, mouth still agape as he simply stared into the eyes of his sister. They widened.

“Hey, hey what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

Allita frowned darkly.

“You cry for fun?”

Lance shook his head, starting to smile. He couldn’t stop, grinning so widely it hurt.

“You look a little crazy, man, you know that?”

He nodded, sniffing and gulping for air. “Yeah.”

“Seriously, Lance, what’s up?”

“This is nice,” he said, before he could stop himself.

And it was. There was a book sitting between them on the windowsill, two empty mugs of cocoa balanced on the roof, a pair of earphones slung around Allita’s neck. They were sixteen, like they should have been. Like they could have been. *Bittersweet*. The word might as well have etched itself into his skull, it stung enough already.

“Is it cause of exams?”

“Yeah,” Lance said, meeting his sister’s eye.

It wasn’t hard. Talking to her wasn’t hard, nor was being around her. This was a nice dream.

“Yeah,” he said, losing himself for a minute. “Worried about... stuff.”

“Garrison’s gonna be lucky to have us,” Allita said, leaning back against her side of the window frame.

“Us,” Lance breathed.

“But that last physics final,” Allita went on, missing his comment. “I didn’t understand it.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re being very singular syllable tonight.”

“I’m becoming you,” Lance said, finding it was easy to joke.

Allita thought about that for a second, trying to figure out what he meant, before a hesitant smile split her face, and Lance’s heart clenched. This was it. This was everything he’d ever wanted; their home, their country, their-

“Did-“ Lance bit his tongue. “Did you see papi earlier?”

“When... he brought us cocoa?” Allita asked, frowning. “An hour ago?”

“O-oh.” Lance’s heart was going supernova. “I forgot.”

Allita hummed, tapping her pen against the notebook cradled in her lap. What was that, maths? Of course it was maths, she was probably top of the class, clever girl.

“You think they’ll let us share a dorm?”

“Huh?” Lance said, trying to act nonchalant, trying to fit into this dream he so badly wished was reality.

He’d imagined scenes like this, over and over, on days when he had nothing else to do but squander the misgivings of his past. This dream fit so well; of course it did, he’d created it, hadn’t he? He and Allita being best friends, going to the Garrison together, everything.

“Once we get to the Garrison. I know there’s gonna be a whole girls-only, boys-only policy, but we’re siblings, right? So if everyone else at the Garrison is an asshole, d’you think we can be roommates?”

“Why would you wanna board with me?” Lance croaked, worried that if he stopped speaking the dream would disperse. “You can go make friends.”

Allita was quiet for a minute, watching him thoughtfully. The pen tapped along the binder, little droplets of noise like rain into the night.

“Garrison doesn’t have night-lights,” she said evenly.

*Oh.* Lance’s face did a funny thing, screwing up and loosening all the same. Of course. The dark was never as scary when Allita was there.

“Oh,” he said; at least his lips formed the word, no sound came out.

“Lighten up, Lancey,” Allita said, nudging his knee with her foot and returning to her note book. “If you fail we can always switch, you take my place in some classes. No one will notice. We’re twins.”

Lance laughed despite himself, loud and free, a burst of noise leaving his lips and filling the night. Allita's lip quirked. She glanced out at the dark night and back to Lance's teary face.

"Want to go for a walk?"

"Yeah."

The sand was soft between his toes; Lance had always had vivid dreams, but since the lions and the wormhole... something was making them stronger. The night was warm and easy to breathe in, that small breeze tempting the dune grass to wrap around their ankles as they strolled along the top of the shore. Waves were crashing along the sand, slivers of silver moon catching on their crests. Neither sibling said much; despite the fact it was just a dream, Lance felt so overworked by emotions. This was nice. Allita was nice. He sighed, tasting salt in the wind. How things should have been was nice.

The light was softer down by the water, and he studied Allita as she walked a few steps ahead of him. Was this really how she would have looked, or was it just his guess? There was no knowing, was there. He'd never know what she looked like at eleven, or sixteen, or twenty-five, or seventy. It was all a guess; that thought made his heart sink. Despite their similarities, Allita was a little shorter than him. She clearly cared for her appearance, her hair was neat and cut to precision. A threaded necklace hung around her neck, one Lance didn't recognise, though it fit with the woven bracelet around her wrist. Her shirt was loose and red and flowed like ink, the hem of her pants dancing around her bare ankles. *Lily*; he was piecing bits of his older sister together with what he already knew of Allita, forming an image of her. She was as at home with the beach as he was.

Lance stumbled along after her, watching his sister over minutes that felt serene. She crouched down to pick up shells, dusting them off before launching them into the sea. There was no one down here, there wouldn't be this time of night. It was peaceful, the darkness didn't feel imposing. Would they really have done this, Lance wondered, had she stayed alive? Of course. This beach was theirs. Two twins, two best friends; the world would have been theirs.

"Allita," he called in a teasing voice, brushing off the shell of a crab. "Catch!"

The girl shrieked, dodging the crab shell and dropping down to study it intently where it landed. It took her a second to catch on to what it was, but when she did she started smiling, kicking sand in his direction and taking wide steps around the carcass.

Time was meaningless in this dream; they could stay here forever. It felt like he knew her, like they'd always been together. Allita was like retuning to an old friend and picking up right where they'd left off. He followed her down the beach at a slow pace, revelling in all aspects of that dream.

"Come on," she said suddenly, drawing his attention.

Allita had started up the beach. Lance's eyes followed her, all along the sand, the rocks, the tall cliffs and-

"Allita," he said, stumbling forward before his muscles could lock up.

A siren went off in his head, time returning, consequences lingering. "Allita."

His sister was walking steadily toward the narrow crack in the cliff face, the entrance to a cave as dark as the void of space.

"Allita!" Lance picked up pace, running toward her.



“Hey...” Allita frowned when he grabbed her arm, eyes flitting between his face and the death grip he had on her wrist.

“Don’t go there.”

Allita shook her wrist, trying to shake him off. “Chill. I want to sit on the rocks.”

That didn’t matter. They needed to go, they needed to get away.

“We’re going home,” Lance said, pulling on her arm.

“Lance!” Allita snapped, sounding angry. “Let go- ow!”

Lance loosened his grip minutely, but gave her arm a harsh tug nonetheless.

“We have to go.”

“What the hell? Why?”

Lance couldn’t answer; he was hyper aware of the dark cave mouth just metres from them, *waiting*.

“Lance! You’re hurting me, let go!”

“W-we gotta go,” he mumbled, stumbling through the sand.

This was a bad idea; they should never have gone to the beach. He thought he could taste dirt. He should let go of Allita’s arm, explain himself, but this was just a dream, and all that mattered was getting away.

“Lance.” Allita’s nails dug into his arm. “Stop. Stop, we have to go back.”

“No, no, we’re going home.”

“Lance,” Allita said, sounding desperate now. “Please, stop, stop walking. You’re hurting me.”

She dug her heels into the sand, nails digging deeper into his arm, but he was stronger.

“Stop walking!” She yelled, making Lance flinch.

His heart was beating too fast, his head thick with fog. “We have to go, you can’t go there.”

“Lance!”

Allita pulled back roughly, trying to tug him toward the cave. It was a battle now, a tug-of-war that Lance was swiftly winning.

“Stop!” His sister yelled.

He couldn’t look at her face, couldn’t look if she was angry or sad or frightened. It didn’t matter, she wasn’t real.

“Lance!”

It hurt now, how tightly her nails were entrenched in his arm. She grabbed his shoulder, trying to turn his head toward her.

“Stop! You have to stop! Lance, stop!”

“You can’t,” Lance repeated senselessly. “You can’t go there, you can’t-“

“Stop, please stop! Lance!”

He shut his eyes, walking blindly, gritting his teeth as Allita hit as his shoulder and tightened her fingers digging into his arm.

“Cant go there, can’t go there-“

“Lance!” She yelled, her voice too loud and too distressed. “Stop, stop, don’t go- Lance! Don’t go, don’t go-”

Lance woke violently. He jerked upright, his head hitting the wall. There was a throbbing in his arm where Allita’s nails had been and a- he flinched, legs twisted uncomfortably on the cold floor. The floor. Why was he on the floor, why did his arm hurt, why- a cry of pain tore away from his throat when he tried to move his arm. Lance gasped, panting, feeling for the wall with his free arm. *Where am I? Shit shit shit-* He was kneeling on the floor, crammed up against the wall, his head spinning. Sweat trickled down his neck, and his left arm... Lance whined, a sharp sting encasing his upper arm and a crushing pressure around his forearm. *What’s happening?*

The realisation that hit him had his heart beating up his throat; he couldn’t move his arm. It was trapped between something and the wall. Lance felt for the gap, a narrow space between- his closet? The wall and his closet, conveniently bolted to the floor to hold them all in place. Frayed fabric rubbed against his free wrist; the rope, it was broken. Lance cried out, starting to panic. He felt for his arm, the one trapped between wall and closet. It stung, and he could feel blood where metal met flesh. His eyes burned; had he been trying to... he gasped for breath, retching though there was nothing in his stomach. He’d been trying to shove himself into that narrow space. Like the bodies aboard the ship, like- Lance took fast breaths, choking as he started to cry.

The room was so dark, he couldn’t even see his own hand. He was afloat in a sea of nothingness, the only real sensation the crushing pressure around his arm. Lance gave it a sharp tug, and screamed as the tight metal scraped skin off his bicep. He cried harder, gasping for air now. *Help, call for help.* He wanted to call for Allita, stupidly enough. Call for his dead sister who had never failed to be there until she wasn’t. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. *Fear. It will hear you.* Lance whimpered softly, hating that he did, trying to stifle the broken noises into his sweaty shoulder. The same stupid childhood fear he’d always had, that calling into the darkness would betray his position. This room was so, so dark.

Crying softly, Lance began to wriggle his arm, trying to twist it out of the gap he’d jammed it into. It hurt, he could feel new scratches forming along his bloody arm as he dragged it out. Skin peeled from his bicep, his arm aching from the pressure around it. Lance didn’t dare think of how he’d gotten it in there. Allita’s nails had dug into the spot where there was now a bloody ring of cut up flesh, the blunt metal tight enough to spilt his skin open. Lance gasped soundlessly as his arm began to slip free, throbbing. His head was spinning, the darkness around him disorientating and the pain making him ill. *Help.*

He whimpered, drawing his arm toward him cradling it against his chest. More tears fell, his throat closing up. *Help.* Lance made it to his knees, swaying, before forcing himself up and staggering in the direction he thought the door was. It hurt, fear as sharp as a knife. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, his world shrinking, the darkness wrapping around him like a blanket and smothering him. Lance hit the wall, and a moment later the door slid open, bathing him in the dull light of the hallway. It wasn’t enough.

Crying, hyperventilating almost, Lance stumbled into the hall with his arm held to his chest, his

sanity coming apart in his arms. The door he came to didn't register as anything significant, but Lance had gone there on instinct. His shoulder banged into the metal.

"Help," he croaked, running out of air. "Help."

His ears were ringing, vision blurred with tears; he was cold, so, so cold that it hurt. There was no one, nothing- The door slide open, revealing Keith in his pyjamas, blinking blearily into the light. His eyes widened when he saw Lance, leaning heavily on his doorframe, bloody and dishevelled, tears streaking down his cheeks and lips parted as he wheezed, failing to draw breath. Lance lunged for him, dropping his arm to throw himself at Keith. The boy caught him easily, looking a little more than stunned.

"H-help," Lance stuttered, grabbing for him, reaching for his shoulders, arms, anything. "Please."

Keith grabbed him when Lance's knees gave out; warmth flooded into him, but it wasn't enough. Lance was crying hysterically now, something he'd be embarrassed about weren't he so afraid.

"-nce? Lance? Are you okay, what's wrong, Lance?"

Keith was speaking to him, his voice a secondary factor after the warmth that emitted from his arms and chest. Lance shuddered, gasping for air and locking an arm around Keith's neck.

"Was gonna-" he slurred, shaking uncontrollably. "Was gonna-"

"You're bleeding!" Keith tried to pull back. "Lance, what's-"

He forced himself forward, more into Keith's space.

"N-no," he stuttered. "Hold me, it h-hurts, please, p-please-"

The arms around him tightened, drawing him away from the door, into the room where suddenly a light was flicked on. Lance blinked into it, mind reeling, fixing his attention on the warmth radiating off Keith. The red paladin was agonising between just holding him or addressing the blood dripping down the circular cut around Lance's arm.

"Was trying-" Lance gasped, his voice breaking. "The ship, like the s-ship, K-Keith, my arm-"

Keith's breath hitched, going tense.

"Calm down," he whispered into Lance's hair, though it didn't sound very reassuring.

Keith sounded like he was trying not to panic for the sake of both of them.

"It's okay," he stuttered, reciting whatever words he could remember Lance saying to him to calm him down. "You're okay."

Somehow that fact, that it was Keith, struggling with words, struggling to know what to say, steadied him. Lance drew what felt like a big enough breathe of air, his senses gradually returning like a stagnant pool ebbing into a current. One of Keith's hands perched awkwardly between his shoulder blades, the other encircling his head and stroking his hair as Lance breathed heavily into his shoulder.

"What happened?" He whispered.

"Had a dream, it-"

Lance jumped as a shrill chime cut through the air.

*“Keith!”*

Allura?

*“Keith, respond!”*

Lance frowned, his heart racing a little too fast, but Keith just pulled him in closer and sighed.

“I’m alright, Allura.”

*“Are you sure?”* The princess’ voice carried down from the speakers. *“Why did you set off the trigger, are you-“*

“I’m fine,” Keith confirmed. “I just couldn’t sleep.”

It clicked in Lance’s head then, the sensors Allura promised to set up in Keith’s room to pick up on any abnormal activity. They must’ve been set to wake her, and by the sounds of it, this wasn’t the first time they’d been triggered.

*“Why not? Is-“*

“It’s okay, Allura,” said Lance, trying to keep the tremble out of his voice.

The transmission should hide it.

*“Lance?”*

“Uh... yeah, I... Keith’s fine. I just, wanted to talk to him.”

There was a pause.

*“What... why? Are you alright?”*

Lance sighed fondly. Allura’s care and concern grounded him. “We’re fine, I promise. Sorry for waking you. I... just go back to bed. We’re good.”

Lance could envision Allura debating this.

*“Alright,”* she said. *“But call me if something is wrong.”*

“Will do, princess. Go get some beauty sleep.”

The speakers crackled as Allura scoffed. *“Take care.”*

The speakers shut off and Lance huffed, sighing deeply. The world felt more tangible now; somehow that interruption had calmed him down. He and Keith stood holding each other awkwardly, nothing but the sounds of their breathing filling the room. The tension had dispersed a little, and Lance was thinking more clearly. Thinking specifically about how he was clinging embarrassingly tight to Keith, his nose buried into his shoulder.

“Um...” Lance mumbled, eyeing the damp patch of tears he’d left of Keith’s shirt. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Keith said quietly, wrapping arms around his shoulders to hold him in place.

Lance sniffled, clinging to Keith to make the most of the warmth emitting off him. Keith pulled

back slowly, keeping a hold on Lance's arms as though fearing he'd run off if he let go completely. Lance swallowed the lump in his throat when Keith's fingers drifted toward the worst of the cuts on his arm, namely the circular gash where his arm had become stuck. Looking at it now, it wasn't as bad as Lance had feared. The cut was shallow, his skin grazed and bruised, but it had already stopped bleeding. That didn't appear to reassure Keith.

"What happened?" He whispered.

Lance opened his mouth to reply but all that came out was a choked whimper, his composure crumbling once again. Keith's expression softened, and, taking his arm, he led Lance toward the bathroom.

Five minutes later, Lance sat perched on the counter beside the sink, eyeing the cloth Keith was using to gingerly clean the worst of the wounds on his arm. He grimaced at the cup of water Keith offered him, but reluctantly took it when the boy pressed forward insistently, his eyes never leaving Lance. He hadn't said anything yet; he was probably waiting for Lance to talk first.

"Can't believe you stash your own first-aid kit in your room," Lance said, shocked by how considerably his voice wavered.

"Saves bothering Coran every time I go too hard on the training deck," He replied, taking the cup from Lance, checking how much he'd drunk, then passing it back.

Lance snorted, rubbing at his eyes, which felt puffy and tired. "That's why you got so many scars. No regard for health *or* skincare."

Keith smiled, but Lance could see it was just a façade, that really he was nervous. He had injuries of his own, remnants from their prior battle that couldn't be addressed by the healing pod lest they make Carma's presence any stronger. He gestured for Lance's wrist, taking it and running a finger alongside the rope wrapped tightly around it. It may have broken, but in the process the length still around his wrist had tightened dangerously. Keith frowned, rummaging around in the med-kit until he produced a small knife. Lance thought of making some snide comment about him keeping knives everywhere, but stashed it when Keith began to cut away at the rope, taking good care not to nick Lance. The rope fell away but he didn't let go, setting the knife down and turning Lance's wrist over gently between his fingers. He traced the vicious red line, and the aged bruises from all the times the rope had grown too tight. Lance thought he saw his lip quiver.

"Was is a dream?" He asked quietly.

Lance nodded.

"About Allita?"

He bit his lip. "It was different."

"How?"

Deep breath in, long breath out; Lance focused on a loose thread on Keith's collar to stop his thoughts from spiralling. Keith ran his finger up to the junction of Lance's elbow, then back down, leaving goose bumps in his wake. He was still watching him, eyes alarmingly bright at this hour of the morning.

"I don't know," Lance replied eventually.

Keith turned his hand over, drawing circles on his palm.

“We were sixteen,” said Lance. “We were- like everything I wanted.”

Keith frowned softly. “But she lead you...”

“She didn’t. We went to the cave, and I stopped her. I was dragging her away, and she was shouting at me. And I... I woke up, trying to p-put my arm between the wall and closet.”

Keith was watching him with unrivalled intensity, fingers slowing where they drifted over Lance’s hand.

“Has this... happened before?”

“No. Not since- you know.”

Since he’d wandered into the tunnel, since Keith had retrieved him from the depths of that hellish cave.

“Why now?”

“Why ever?”

Keith thought on that, his eyes somehow never leaving Lance’s. Jesus, didn’t he blink? Problem number five-fucking-hundred, Keith had really pretty eyes.

“I should get Allura,” Keith said.

Lance grabbed his arm, though he hadn’t made any move yet. “No, don’t.”

“It’s for your own good, Lance.”

“But not for hers,” Lance begged, trying to put on as much of a pleading face as he could muster.

Keith frowned. *Dammit*. That face always worked on Hunk.

“Then I’ll get Hunk, or someone.”

Now it was Lance’s turn to frown. “Why would you get Hunk? He’s asleep-“

“You’re not going back to sleep by yourself, are you?”

*Oh*. Lance looked at the floor sheepishly.

“No. But don’t bother Hunk.”

“Then Coran-“

“Don’t... I don’t want them to worry.”

“What makes me so different?” Keith asked.

It was a genuine question, one that made Lance’s face heat up.

“You, uh, already know.”

Keith released his hand, stepping back and crossing his arms.

“I am the worst person for you to sleep with. I’m possessed, Lance.”

“Yeah, I know, I...uh...” Lance wrung his fingers together anxiously. “You, um....”

*You have pretty eyes, and you make me feel safe, and I trust you. You do so much for me, and I love you, and you're the only one who really helps, and-*

“You’re... warm,” Lance said dumbly.

Keith raised a brow. “I’m warm?”

Lance was just about ready to fall back into the sink and be washed down the drainpipe. “Yeah.”

Keith was watching him sceptically, and Lance panicked at the thought of being separated from him.

“I j-just, you really help. Like... how I help the, the stuff, those marks from Carma. You help. And you know, and... please, Keith. I-if you really don’t want me to stay, then I can go, but I’m, I-I’m really scared. I’m so scared.”

Keith’s expression changed suddenly, afraid of the fear radiating off Lance. He sighed; Keith was exhausted too, from the force possessing him, from their skirmish the other day, from the worry weighing them down. Lance felt a pinch of guilt; Keith should be resting, not wasting precious hours comforting him.

“What if I hurt you?”

Keith meant it as a deterrent, but his voice came out weaker, more vulnerable than he’d intended.

“I can stop you,” Lance said, *promised*.

He reached for Keith’s hand, unfurling it from his crossed arms to bring the dark cut on his palm into view. It still looked bad.

“I’ll stop you.”

Keith huffed, finally breaking Lance’s gaze.

“This is a bad idea.”

“Worse than me losing my arm in a confined space?”

Keith glared. “Yes. I could kill you, Lance.”

Lance scooted forward on the counter, taking Keith’s injured hand and laying it over his bare chest. Face flushed, Keith looked away, still maintaining that stormy expression. Lance thought of the way he’d helped back in the holding cell, holding Keith’s hand firmly to his chest.

“What’s Carma saying?” He asked, pushing forward with the distant cold flutter in his blood.

“What’s she saying right now?”

Keith’s brow furrowed, lips held in a firm line. “Nothing.”

“If you’re scared, I’ll go,” said Lance. “I don’t want to force you to deal with me, o-or stress you out. I’ll go find Hunk, I promise. Just say no and I’ll go. It’s alright.”

Keith shuffled restlessly, gnawing on his lip.

“I think we help each other,” said Lance.

Another few seconds of viciously debating it, and Keith gave in.

“Fine,” he snapped, though there was an odd sort of relief written across his own features.

He snatched his hand away, turning to hide the blush on his cheeks. “Just... let me get you a shirt. Yours is all bloody.”

Lance tried not to let relief smother all his senses; he’d made a promise now. If Keith got himself hurt, or if he hurt Lance, he’d never forgive himself. Lance wouldn’t burden him with that. This was to help both of them, and if Keith could protect him, then he damned well better do the same.

Lance’s legs were all shaky when he tried to walk, finding he had to lean against Keith to even get to bed. His arm hurt badly, but it felt better all bandaged up and clean. Exhaustion was taking hold now, the type that came after a good cry, once one was safe and warm and sane again. He collapsed into bed beside Keith, but yelped when the other boy grabbed him, pulling Lance toward him so he was half sprawled over Keith and locking arms around his waist.

“Um,” said Lance, blinking through the dark at Keith’s shoulder, now right up in his face.

“So you don’t get away, idiot,” Keith muttered, sounding suspiciously defensive.

“I, uh, yeah. That’d do it,” Lance said, adjusting himself so he wasn’t actually crushing Keith and laying an arm over his stomach.

They were silent for a minute, while Lance tried to calm the furious blush on his cheeks. Thank god for the dark, for once.

“Warm enough?” Keith snickered.

“Don’t be an ass.”

Lance glared at him in the dark, but settled against his chest with little protest. A pause.

“I am,” he said. “By the way.”

A longer pause, which gave Keith time to begin rubbing little circles into his back.

“Thanks,” Lance whispered.

Keith’s voice was tight when he spoke, pulling Lance closer.

“No problem.”

Lance sniffled. “G’night, Keith.”

“Night.”

He hugged Keith as tightly as he dared, finally breathing easy, falling into the relief of how much he’d missed this.

-

When Lance woke up, he was extremely comfortable. A welcomed relief after the first time he’d woken in the early hours of that day, with his arm jammed into a narrow space and the taste of a



dream turned nightmare on his tongue. He was also incredibly warm. There was something familiar about waking up in the same bed as Keith, something he'd missed over the past month or so they'd stayed apart. But there was something different too. Different referring to their proximity. Sure they'd shared a bed, hugged a couple of times, *kissed and forgotten*, Lance thought bitterly; but all Keith had ever done in this situation was hold his hand. Now though they were completely wrapped up in each other, Keith's arms encircling him from underneath, so completely covered Lance was sure he should be suffocating. He appeared to still be breathing though, so perhaps not.

Lance raised his head groggily from where it rested on Keith's chest, blinking into the light. It was daytime then, probably way too late in the morning, but he didn't care. They both deserved some sleep. He glanced down; Keith was still asleep, looking oh-so-peaceful despite the weight that was certainly crushing him. He looked so *nice* when he was sleeping, all rosy cheeks and mused hair pouty. Lance's stomach swooped a little, leaving him feeling light. He wished it was Earth, right then and there, wished so badly his body tingled for the feel of a place they weren't in. He wished that was real sunlight pouring through the window, that this was a normal bed in a normal house, where he and Keith could wake up together and go about their normal day. Lance sighed, dropping his head against Keith's chest.

He had absolutely no interest in getting up, responsibilities be damned. If they needed him, they'd call him. Lance drew idle circles on the pillow besides Keith's head; if his hand drifted into the boy's hair once or twice, nobody needed to know. When he felt conscious enough to actually move, he raised his head again, getting a look at Keith's room this time. It had been too dark to see last night, and the time before that... Lance didn't want to think about it. He shifted slightly, looking around, a wicked smile growing over his lips. Keith grumbled softly beneath him, slowly waking. *Perfect timing*. Lance snickered.

"You have a rock collection."

Without even opening his eyes, Keith's once serene expression morphed into a scowl. Could you glare at someone with your eyes shut? He was doing a pretty good job of it. Lance sniggered, drinking in the various rocks scattered about Keith's room. Oh, and the pin-up board. *Fucking hell*.

"Shut. Up." Keith hissed, feeling the vibrations of Lance's laugh in his chest.

"Have you named them?" Lance teased, grinning down at Keith.

The boy cracked open an eye, conveying to Lance how far-too-early it was for this shit.

"It's for science," he grumbled, voice raspy with sleep.

"Mhm. Nerd."

Keith's frown deepened, still struggling to open his eyes. He was so not a morning person.

"Get off."

"Nope," said Lance. "Not until you tell me the name of your favourite rock."

"They don't have names!"

"I gotta say, I thought it would be knives. Rocks are unexpected."

"Lance-" Keith forced his eyes open, violet and intense despite how sleepy the rest of him might be. "There are worse things to collect than rocks!"

“No, you’re right. There’s always stamps.”

Keith’s glare darkened. Lance sat up a little, leaning forward as his eyes widened.

“Oh, you don’t. No, Keith, you don’t... you don’t collect *stamps*, do you?”

“Get. Off.”

Lance began to chuckle low in his throat, working himself up until he was outright laughing.

“I gotta know,” he said. “What the attraction is.”

Keith shoved half-heartedly at his shoulder, but Lance didn’t budge.

“Is it those old-timey English ones? Beared aristocrat busts? Oh, do you have a thing for Queen Elizab-“

Instead of finishing that sentence, Lance got a mouthful of pillow. He spluttered, sitting up as Keith assaulted him. Instead of backing down though, Lance took the next step.

“It’s Elizabeth, isn’t it?”

He shrieked when Keith swung the pillow again, falling off him back onto the bed, scrambling for the second pillow to defend himself.

“Shut the fuck up!” Keith yelled, but he was starting to laugh.

“What is it,” Lance teased, dodging the pillow. “Her hair? Nose- oof!”

“Why. Are. You. Like this!” Keith said, whacking Lance with a pillow between each word.

“Stop!” He spluttered, now the one pinned beneath Keith, holding his pillow up like a shield. “I’m only trying to help you come to terms with your apparent infatuation with her majesty!”

The next pillow hit his square in the face, while he was laughing so hard he could barely breath. It didn’t even matter that his arm hurt. Lance was grinning madly, hitting weakly at Keith and making whatever jab he could come up with.

“This is why would wouldn’t let me into your room?” He wheezed. “You have a rock fetish-“

“Oh my god, shut up!”

Lance laughed louder.

“Keith loves *rocks*,” he jeered. “Hoo boy, don’t tell Hunk, he’ll be jealous-“

“Yo Keith-“

Lance froze when the door slid open, Keith arms raised above his head with a pillow in tow.

“Wake the fuck up, it’s late o’clock in thuuuh-“

The sound of a mug shattering as it slipped from Pidge’s fingers made both boys freeze up.

“Um.”

The green paladin stood there in her pyjamas, her hand outstretched where it should have still been

holding the mug. She blinked, staring at her friend as he practically straddled Lance, their hair and clothing dishevelled, skin flushed and breathing fast and-

“Lance,” said Pidge.

“Pidge,” said Lance, sitting bolt upright and in doing so throwing Keith right off the bed, where he landed with a resounding *thump* on the floor.

“Pidge!” Said Keith, ripping the blanket off from where it had landed on his head.

“Keith,” said Pidge.

“It’s not what it looks like,” said Keith, his eyes wide enough to be considered viable for target practice.

“S-sorry for interrupting,” Pidge stammered, her eyes just as wide. “I’ll just, go.”

“Pidge, wait!” Keith cried, trying to stand up but catching his foot on the blanket.

“No, no, sorry, I didn’t mean to,” Pidge said, already turning toward the door. “Keep- I’m sorry!”

“Pidge!” Keith called out, but the girl was already out the door.

Lance just stared, mouth hanging open. Keith met his eye wildly, panting. All the colour had drained from his face. Before Lance could get a word in he was up and heading for the door, stumbling into the hallway and calling after Pidge. In the space of two seconds, Lance was left alone in the room, dizzy from commotion. He stared into the empty space, dumbstruck, puffing out his cheeks with a breath of air.

“Alright,” he said. “This is... fine.”

The only downside to spending the night in Keith’s room was having to leave Keith’s room without looking super suspicious. It didn’t help at all that he was wearing one of Keith’s shirts; that fact was obvious too, it was too tight and too loose in all the wrong places. Lance searched dismally for his own shirt, but by the looks of it the bloodied up fabric had already been disposed of. Thus, he was left to tiptoe through the halls, praying no one crossed ways with him until he made it to his room. They were very close together, thankfully, he just had to pass one hallway, which is where he heard the voices.

“Pidge, i-it wasn’t- it’s not like that.”

That was Keith. Lance poked his head around the corner, more than accustomed to eavesdropping on the pair by now. Pidge still looked a little shocked, but she was holding it together better than Keith, who looked like he’d been put through a tumble dryer, his hair and general appearance in absolute disarray.

“Hey,” said Pidge. “It’s alright, Keith. It’s none of my business, and it was my fault for barging in.”

“No, but you don’t-“ Keith grabbed at his hair, making wild gestures with his hand. “We’re not- it was just a bad dream! We’re not together, we-“

“Keith,” said Pidge, the shock gone from her face now, replaced with a kind sort of concern for her friend. “It doesn’t matter.”

“But-“

“If it’s nothing, then it’s nothing. But if it’s something, that’s fine. You don’t have to explain yourself, I’m not gonna tell anyone.”

Keith paused, one hand still buried in his hair. “You... you’re not?”

Pidge frowned. “Uh, no? It’s none of my damn business. Don’t worry so much.”

Keith looked like he might just melt into a puddle of relief on the spot.

“Oh.”

Pidge smiled lightly, but there was a bit of underlying concern there.

“I’m your friend, Keith. I’m not gonna force you talk about anything. As long as you’re alright.”

Keith’s shoulders slumped, breathing more evenly. “Thanks.”

Lance ducked around the hallway and kept walking before he could hear whatever Pidge said next.

-

Just because Lance had felt too guilty to keep eavesdropping, it didn’t mean he was going to drop the matter all together. That was how he found himself back in the lab later that day, sitting as nonchalantly as possible on a pot beside Pidge’s desk, the picture of innocence, absolutely content (see: not at all content) with staying quiet and simply keeping her company. Pidge scribbled something in her notebook, stopped, erased it, wrote it again.

“Am I making it hard to focus?”

Pidge looked up, looked at Lance, glared, and looked back down.

“Not at all.”

He hummed, crossing his arms and leaning against the roots of a monstrous succulent that was creeping ever closer to Pidge’s desk. There was a clock ticking somewhere, which was dumb, why would anyone on this castle need a ticking clock? Maybe it imitated the feel of a classroom or lab back on Earth. Or maybe Hunk just liked fucking around with gadgets.

“Does this feel awkward to you?” Pidge said suddenly, dropping her work all together. “It feels awkward to me.”

Lance blinked. “Not at all.”

Pidge’s frown deepened.

“I’m trying not to go about sticking my nose into your and Keith’s business, because a, that’s rude, and b, I don’t care. But holy god above, you two are making it difficult.”

“Um... that means what, exactly?”

“It means if you’re here with a boy problem, like it seems one of you is every second day, please get on with it. I have work to do.”

“Oh,” said Lance. “Okay.”

He paused, tapping fingers anxiously against the pot. Pidge raised a brow.

“If I ever fall in love, you gotta tell me if I’m being this stupid about it.”

“Hey! I’m not s- uh, in...”

“Not stupid or not falling in love? You can only deny one.”

Lance pouted. “Why are you being so mean?”

“I’m not...” Pidge paused, re-evaluating. “Sorry. I’m just kinda tired.”

“Oh, I, uh, I can go. It’s alright-“

“Lance, just tell me what your problem is!”

“Fine, jeez,” he muttered, holding up his hands in surrender. “My problem’s Keith.”

“I figured that much.”

He sighed, still pouting. “Am I attractive to men?”

“Dude, I am literally the only person on this ship *not* attracted to men. Why are you asking me?”

“Because you... know Keith.”

“Would you like to rephrase your question as *am I attractive to Keith?*”

Lance grumbled something inaudible, eliciting a short laugh from Pidge.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “He likes your butt and fancy hair. I know, I read his diary.”

“Wait- he really said that?”

“No, dude, that’s a *Lilo and Stitch* quote.”

“Oh.”

Pidge sighed, taking a seat and peering up at him.

“What’s got you down?”

Pidge could be sarcastic at times, but she cared, really. Lance lowered his gaze.

“He kissed me and forgot. Except then he kissed me and kinda didn’t forget but-“

“*What? Keith kissed you?*”

“Kind of... like, you know when we were in the holding cell?”

“Yeah.”

“When Keith admitted what he’d done?”

“Yeah.”

“Well anyway, in the middle of that he started kissing my neck, but then he didn’t remember.”

Pidge nodded seriously, but a second later she broke into a grin. “You see the irony-“

“Don’t,” Lance warned. “Do not. Don’t antagonize me.”

“Fine, fine, alright. What happened next?”

“Well before that, and this is the shitty part. Before he... you know, left.”

Pidge’s expression faltered.

“I’m sorry, this is... this isn’t important, not with shit like that happening-“

“Lance,” said Pidge. “It’s okay. We have to focus on the small things too, you know? Else we lose ourselves.”

He paused a moment, looking into eyes of someone too young to have been thrown into a mess like this.

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re right.”

Pidge hummed.

“Well he kissed me then,” said Lance. “When he thought I was asleep. Not properly, but... not like it meant nothing. And then just now, with the corpses and shit. You were there, actually; I was so close to kissing him. But he said-“

“I don’t want it to use us against each other,” Pidge completed. “I heard that bit.”

Lance sighed. “Yeah.”

Pidge paused, thinking over all this.

“Keith is... you love him, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Lance admitted softly.

“Don’t worry, I don’t doubt that. It’s just that... Keith won’t love someone unless he can’t help it.”

Lance frowned. “But Keith likes loads of people-“

“Keith’s kind, sure. But he doesn’t grow attached.”

“Why?”

“Cause people are shitty, Lance. They leave. And when his mom and dad left-“

“I thought his dad died?”

Pidge paused. “Uh... no. His dad just, left. Maybe it was to protect him, I don’t know. I don’t doubt he likes you, Lance, maybe even loves you. But you gotta give him time. You gotta give him time, and not go anywhere.”

Lance thought about that a lot when he went to bed the next night, back in Keith’s room because they were both too terrified to be on their own. He thought about it when Keith took his hand, just like he had before, holding it close to his chest as he shut his eyes. He thought about it for hours before sleep took him, watching Keith through the shadowy darkness, close enough to hear him

breathing, the small bit of distance between them made enduring by the way Keith made all he could of the one hand allotted to him. What Pidge said was wrong, Lance thought to himself; the point wasn't to not go. The point was to *follow*. Because Lance would go anywhere, everywhere, through anything, if it meant staying a little closer to Keith.

## Chapter Notes

HEY SO I'VE BEEN BUSY AS F U C K BUT WANTED TO UPDATE FOR YOU  
 GUYS BC I'M GONNA BE GONE SO THERE WON'T BE AN UPDATE FOR AT  
 LEAST 10 DAYS AND I HAVENT REPLIED TO ANY COMMENTS BUT  
 THANKS  
 THANK YOU  
 YOU'RE ALL SO NICE  
 THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK U

please enjoy the chapter <3 <3 <3

ALSO just be aware there's a bigger time jump again here

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

**Star date – 33:06:14 Castle Cycle – 07:15**

**Log – 15**

*“Good morning, Black!”*

*Lance sat himself happily in the pilot’s chair, legs crossed and looking in much better shape than the last time the log had seen him. It had been nearly a month since the attack on the castle; evidence of his wounds had faded, and his eyes were fuller, brighter, as though he was finally beginning to catch up on weeks of sleepless nights.*

*“I know it’s been a while, again. I gave you that short update after the night of the living dead, but we didn’t really chat, you know?”*

*Lance drummed his fingers along the control panel, still dressed in his sleep shirt.*

*“That shits cleared up now. Automated cleaning system and all; I’m glad we didn’t have to go about, you know, sweeping them up or something. Still feels kinda gross in some of those hallways, I think just knowing what was there. But, what can you do?”*

*Lance hummed, drawing idle patterns on the consul. “Allura’s doing a lot better. The, uh... it scarred. W-what Carma made those things draw on her stomach, the seven pointed star. But, um, she’s okay. We’re all okay, I think.”*

*A pause.*

*“I haven’t brought up Shiro again. It... Allura was pretty upset when I did. I think it’s better to, uh, not. A-at least until I understand. There was blood in the hangar, but I mean, how did it get there? If... if it was Shiro, how did...”*

*Lance sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. “I just want it to be him, you know? L-like I don’t, but*



*I do. I just want to know where he is, and bring him back, and Allura... Allura is doing so well. But she doesn't deserve this. None of them do."*

*Another heavy sigh, before Lance offered up a weak smile. "At least we figured out the lions. I've been training with my bayards, they're pretty cool. I look pretty cool using them, heh. Blue's been eavesdropping on these logs, I think. But I know she's a sensitive soul, so no bringing it up."*

*Lance's smile grew a little more genuine. "Don't know what the situation is with flying them. I've just been coming to you, though sometimes Blue follows us like a lost puppy or something."*

*He scoffed. "For a bunch of sentient lions, you guys are ridiculous. But thanks for not combining into a weird leg and head."*

*Lance paused, humming to himself thoughtfully.*

*"What's new," he mumbled. "What's new, what's new... I had to leave a note for Keith this morning. It's really weird, having someone whose gonna care if they wake up and you're not there. First time I got up without telling him he freaked. Thought I'd wondered off to kill myself or something. It's not my fault he's fucking nocturnal and would sleep all day if Pidge let him. That can't be healthy, by the way. But I, uh, guess he's been helping a lot. We haven't talked about it, the fact that we nearly kissed. Which is mostly my fault but... I mean, he said he didn't want Carma using us against each other. Which I took as him not really wanting us to be together, you know? Maybe you don't. Maybe lions don't have these kind of problems."*

*Lance sighed. "So yeah, no incidents yet, from either of us. I think I was right, I think we help each other. At the same time, I don't wanna speak too soon."*

*Lance's expression faltered for a second. "It's only a matter of time, right? Until one of us... does something. He's still getting weaker. It's not as rapid a decline now that he's eating and sleeping and being normal. But... he is getting weaker."*

*Lance bit his tongue, shifting anxiously.*

*"I wake up sometimes, in the night." He paused, digging nails into his palms. "It looks like he isn't breathing. H-he acts like it doesn't bother him, but I... think it's hurting him. He cries in his sleep, I-"*

*Lance muffled the crack in his voice into his hand, clearing his throat roughly. A warm purr resounded through the cockpit, and Lance pulled himself together with a firm nod.*

*"We're gonna fix it. We're going to fix it. But we still don't have any ideas. A whole fucking month, and nothing. Wormhole still gets us. I... it's so frustrating, Black. And despite me getting better with the bayards, and talking to Blue again... it feels like I'm wasting time. Two hundred and eighty-five days, that's how long until that planet reaches us. And I'm worried we've got nothing. This thing wipes out planets. It's not something banding together and forming Voltron is gonna fix."*

*Lance rubbed at his eyes and sighed unconsciously into the bandana that stayed around his wrist as almost a permanent fixture now. Keith had never asked for it back. He pulled back, eyeing the cloth. There was a little A.K. stitched into the corner of it. He made a mental note to ask Keith what that meant.*

*"We've got other problems," said Lance. "We've been avoiding populated planets during all our wormhole experiments, because as Allura said, we don't want to drag anyone else in. But last time*

*we got close enough to one, and we picked up a transmission.”*

*He paused, staring into the camera, his eyes darker than usual in the cockpits strange light.*

*“People are wondering where Voltron went. No one’s seen us for... about four months now. Worse, it sounds like there’s a new presence in the Galra ranks, they’re rebuilding. Galra are growing stronger, the universe is losing hope again, and we’re just fucking sitting here.”*

*Lance huffed angrily, glaring at the dash. “This is bad, Black, and I have no idea what to do.”*

*Black purred, sending a wave of reassurance at Lance, something that happened a lot more now that he kept his mind open to both lions.*

*“Thanks buddy,” Lance mumbled. “But I need ideas.”*

*A pause, Black pushed with all number of emotions.*

*“It’s like you know stuff,” said Lance. “But you don’t know you know it. Or you don’t know how to tell me. Like the answer’s somewhere there, stuck between us, and neither of us knows how to reach it. Like we’re both reaching for something stuck in the middle of a stream, and you’re pushing it, and I’m trying to pull it in, but we’re just not reaching it, right?”*

*The lion purred deeply, and Lance shook his head fondly. “Yeah, that’s the image.”*

*He shifted, sitting up straighter and checking the time. “Well buddy, I gotta go. Stuff to do. Yeah I know you’ll miss me, but a guy like me’s gotta be shared.”*

*He patted the consul fondly before jumping up and straightening out his sleep shirt. “See ya later, Black. I’ve got a breakfast date.”*

-

“Wait,” said Allura. “You mean you just collect two more million for what, passing an insignificant point on the board?”

“But it’s not insignificant,” Lance argued. “It’s *Go*.”

“But what is *Go*? Is, is there such a significant occasion in a human’s life?”

“Is there- no, no it’s just part of the game.”

“But I thought the game was meant to mimic real life business-“

“Okay,” Lance held up a hand, cutting Allura off. “Monopoly is not an accurate portrayal of business dealings in real life.”

Allura’s frown deepened, though there was still something amusing about their conversation. They sat across from each other at the breakfast table, the only two there at that time. Neither had bothered to change out of their pyjamas, and Allura’s hair was done up in a messy bun, the pink makings on her face glowing just a little brighter than usual. Lance wondered if that had something to do with pregnancy, if Alteans had a literal glow. Her stomach had grown bigger too, something that sometimes evaded Lance’s notice as the days dragged on. She’d started seeking out her mother’s old clothes, many of her old garments becoming too tight.

“How?” Allura asked, stirring a spoon through her cereal, which Hunk had managed to make a batch of after they snuck some ingredients from a planet during a wormhole experiment.

“For starters,” said Lance. “Everyone in monopoly starts off with the same privileges.”

“And that’s not so on Earth?”

“Not even close. I mean, the planet’s better than it used to be, sure. But some people are still hugely disadvantaged. In monopoly, every one starts off equal. *Then* it’s kill or be killed.”

“You *kill* people in monopoly?”

“What? No you-“ Lance stopped, chuckling. “We’re gonna have to just play it back on Earth. I could never explain it.”

Allura shook her head. “I do not understand these Earth customs.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. You’re gonna *love* Earth.”

Allura hummed. “Will I fit in though?”

“Maybe not. Doesn’t matter. We’ll find a way.”

Allura nodded, thinking to herself.

“Is there more of that cereal,” she asked after a moment, looking around. “I’m *starving*.”

“I noticed,” Lance said with a scoff. “That’s like, your forth bowl.”

“I am eating for two, aren’t I?”

“More like three,” he joked, scooping another spoonful of what closely resembled corn flakes into his mouth.

“Three,” Allura echoed, but Lance didn’t look up.

At least, not until she dropped her spoon. He raised a brow; Allura looked like she’d seen a ghost.

“You good?”

“Three,” she said.

Her hand went to her stomach, eyes on Lance, looking like she was about to be ill. “F-for three?”

“Uh,” said Lance, slowly lowering his spoon. “Having twins wouldn’t be bad, you know.”

“Not twins,” Allura cried, shaking her head violently.

Was... was she about to cry?

“Three, Lance,” she said, breathing faster and faster. “For t-three.”

“For...” Lance’s hand froze on the table, staring into Allura’s frightened eyes. “Oh- oh my god.”

She stood abruptly and Lance followed a second later, dashing around to Allura’s side of the table. She was almost on the point of hyperventilating now, clutching her stomach and gasping for breath.

“The wormhole,” she gasped. “It n-needs an Altean. Lance it- it’s using, my baby, m-my baby.”

Lance took hold of her arm, his heart beating so loud in his ears he could barely hear her.

“Come on, c-come on.”

He grabbed the comm by the door though Allura had already begun to run.

“Coran,” he yelled into the speaker. “We need you in the med bay, *now*.”

Dropping the device in his haste, Lance took off with Allura, trying to keep his own mind clear as panic roared in his ears like a beast broken free of its chains.

-

“Are they hurt?”

Allura’s voice was loud and panicky; she hadn’t calmed down one bit since arriving in the med-bay. Coran was already there; it was as if the man lived there sometimes.

“No, no, just keep still,” he instructed, laying a hand on Allura’s shoulder to keep her lying on the bed.

“But are they?” Lance insisted for her, gripping Allura’s hand tightly.

“No,” said Coran. “Not by the looks of it.”

“Let me see,” Allura snapped, paying little attention to the device Coran was moving over her swollen stomach.

Their advisor brought up a screen over the bed, moving it into view of Lance and Allura. Lance blinked at the ultrasound. It was under two months until the baby was due, he realised; he could see the infant quite clearly.

“The baby is fine,” Coran said.

Allura’s fingers tightened around Lance’s. “What is *that*?”

She wasn’t referring to the baby.

“I...” Coran stared glumly at the screen.

Allura’s eyes were filling with tears. Lance’s gaze drifted to the seven-pointed star scarring her stomach. *It’s a threat.*

“Is it hurting them?” Allura whispered.

“I don’t know,” said Coran.

“Just tell me!” She yelled, tears burning her eyes.

“Y-your baby is fine,” Coran stuttered.

Lance had never seen him like this, so downcast and afraid.

“But it... it would appear, they are under a significant amount of stress.”

Lance shivered when Allura’s head fell back against the pillow, crying bitterly. He stared at the ultra-sound, the small form of a baby and the disconcerting irregularities in the liquid around it.

Like Keith's blood, he recalled. *There's a presence in your body that doesn't belong to you.*

"Can we do anything?" He asked.

"Not without... no," said Coran.

"My baby," Allura whispered, her eyes fiery and hopeless all at once. "It's using my baby. It's *hurting*-"

Her voice caught, and Coran's eyes fell to the floor.

"I'm so sorry, dear girl," he murmured, laying a hand on her shoulder. "I'm so sorry."

A small sound by the doorway made Lance look up. There were three paladins gathered there, looking in nervously. He glanced back at Allura, who had curled in on herself, crying into Coran's arm. Lance stood, reaching out to her but stopping at the last second. He turned away from the pair of Alteans, moving toward the rest of the team. Keith caught his eye, his own wide and filled with fear.

"Come on guys," Lance murmured, herding them away from the med-bay. "I gotta tell you something."

-

It wasn't until much later that afternoon that Lance found any time to himself. After leaving Allura in the care of Coran in the med-bay, he'd explained the situation to the others. The situation being Carma using Allura's unborn child to open the wormholes. Evidently, they'd inherited her ability. How an unborn child could be used to do that... Lance didn't want to think about it. *Under an incredible amount of stress*, Coran had said. They hadn't even been born, and Carma was already using them, hurting them. He felt sick to his core; he couldn't even imagine how Allura felt. The timing made more sense now, he supposed. Allura's pregnancy had finally given Carma a defenceless Altean to latch onto, to use to draw them in.

Lance shook his hands, trying to rid them of the cold tension gathering. Now wasn't the time. Or perhaps it was; he was heading to the training deck anyway. This was too much, exploiting an unborn *baby*- Lance shuddered. He kicked irritably at the wall as he rounded the corner, nearing the training deck. A noise stopped him just before the doors though. Lance poked his head in cautiously, finding the training room was already occupied.

Allura stood dead centre, dressed in her altered armour, staff in hand. Lance was close enough to see the snarl on her face as she struck out with the staff, decimating the gladiator that stood in her way. It probably wasn't that good for her to be training so intensely, but if Lance was angry enough to barely be thinking, then Allura... well, Allura was past reconciliation. She yelled, striking again with her staff, channelling energy through it in a blinding pink arc of light. Lance flinched back; he could feel the energy in it from where he stood. A thought struck him then, a small inkling of an idea. He frowned, watching Allura fight, watching the way she harnessed whatever Altean ability she'd inherited. Something in Lance's stomach fluttered nervously. He backed away, heading toward the hangar.

-

**Star date – 33:06:14**

Castle Cycle – 18:02

Log – 16

*Lance sat stationary in the seat of the black lion's cockpit, his forefinger anxiously orbiting his thumb, but otherwise motionless. He was staring off into thin-air, frowning, a thousand unanswered questions flooding his head.*

*"So-" he huffed, tension keeping his muscles taught. "Why... is Carma after us?"*

*Lance bit his nails anxiously, avoiding looking directly at the camera. "Why not... anyone else?"*

*A good few minutes passed while he sat there thinking.*

*"What if we-" Lance bit his lip.*

*He was having significant trouble putting words together without the doubt becoming too much.*

*"If... assuming, Carma is only taking Allura through the wormhole because she's using her baby, that would... that would mean the only person she's taking just to- to take..."*

*Black had gone very quiet, Lance could sense the lion's concern. He ran a hand through his hair, dark lines filling the space under his eyes.*

*"Is me. She's only taking me."*

*He took a deep breath, stuttering over it.*

*"Why?"*

*It was deathly silent inside that cockpit; Lance looked smaller than ever.*

*"Why me?"*

*Minutes passed then, as if Lance had forgotten the meaning of time or the log, internalising all his thoughts. When he next moved, it was to reach for the consul. He began typing, pulling something up on the screen. Lance frowned, flicking through paragraphs of text until he found what he was looking for.*

*"Bad things happened to Aryon's descendants, right? Like the part of Carma that wasn't entirely dead was still out to get them."*

*Lance tapped away at the screen, his eyes skimming over more text.*

*"So Aryon and Callio had... one kid? Two kids? I don't know, some kids, I guess using Altean technology and whatever. Doesn't say how old they were when their moms fucked off to the Dark Planet and died. Sorry, that was... not a nice way of saying that. I'm stressing out, man. Looks like those kids were fine, but here, stuff starts happening, relatives going missing and what not. So Carma... came for their descendants."*

*Lance flicked slowly through the next few paragraphs, his expression one of disgust. "So you kill your sister because you fall ill with her disease... sister's wife kills you for killing said sister, and for killing some other people.... And that, is reason enough, for you to torment the next however many generation's of sister and sister's wife's kids. Fuck."*

*Leaning forward in his chair, Lance began searching through the files. "I want to see her. I saw Callio and Aryon. I want to see Carma."*

*It took him a minute, an anxious one of searching impatiently. Lance sat back from the screen, seemingly remembering the log and tilting the screen before him so it was in view of the camera.*

*There was an old photograph filling the screen, but this time there were three women. Lance stared at it, and stared and stared and stared. Callio and Aryon looked much the same; the figure flanking Callio was new. Carma stood beside where her sister sat, hands clasped behind her back, staring straight into the camera.*

*Lance wasn't sure what he'd expected. Perhaps for Carma to look terrifying, to look cruel and capable of murder, to look detached and unstable and sinister. He stared at her for a very long time, her eyes so alert they could almost have been looking right back at him. Carma was beautiful. Her and Callio weren't identical, but they shared familiar traits; Carma was all that Callio should have looked without the illness. She was a strong young woman, squared-jawed with piercing dark eyes. Her skin was a healthier, fuller brown than Callio's, and her hair fell in dark ringlets to her shoulders. A small curve dislodged the corner of her lip, as if she knew something Lance did not, but that knowledge did not sit well with her. It was infuriating. Her aura shone like the sun. Eyes falling to the caption beneath the picture, Lance drew a sharp breath.*

*"Aryon," he read. "With sisters Callio and Carma, on the eve of their birthday."*

*Lance couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from that.*

*"Their birthday," he repeated, drinking in the words. "They were... they were twins."*

*A long pause, one even Black grew impatient off.*

*"Carma and Callio were twins," said Lance.*

*He read that line over and over again, staring into the eyes of Carma, studying her sister's unassuming smile.*

*"They were twins."*

*He wanted to know why that fact bothered him. Lance scrubbed a hand over his face, covering his eyes.*

*"Fuck," he whispered. "Fuck this."*

*He looked up, determination overruling the fear. He began scrolling through more pictures, random collections of the twins. Gradually, there was a change in Carma's appearance. She was beginning to look more like Callio, she was falling ill. Side by side, near the end, they didn't look that different anymore.*

*"Aryon's descendants fled Altea," Lance said. "That's a fact. Some came here, to the dwarf planet."*

*He dropped his fingers to the screen, typing furiously. "Where else did they go?"*

*Lance was only half paying attention to the log, reading through lines and lines of translated text.*

*"Carma came for us specifically," he mumbled to himself. "Carma is drawing me back here. Not Coran, she's only using Allura, me. Why me? Why do I have powers, why can I do similar things to Allura, why... how far did Aryon's descendants flee?"*

*Lance may have been reasoning calmly, but he looked frantic. His eyes skimmed the text faster and faster, until it was all just a blur. He sat back, head spinning, a whole world of daunting secrets before him.*

*“Am I...” He paused, grinding his teeth anxiously.*

*“Did... could Aryon’s descendants have come to Earth?”*

*Lance looked around the cockpit, hoping for some input from Black. He looked back at the screen, pulled up the picture of Aryon and the twins, thinking and thinking and thinking. Lance drew a breath, held it; his fingers clasped the chair tightly.*

*“Am I Altean?”*

-

The training deck was empty at that time of night, not even Keith was out and about, having been strictly ordered to bed by Pidge. Lance would join him soon, he’d promised, but first he needed to work this out. He felt a little daft, setting a bucket of water down in the centre of the deck. Lance breathed deep, stepping back from the bucket so there were a good few feet between him and the water. He pictured the way Allura had stood, balanced and strong, planting his feet firmly apart and raising his arms toward the bucket. This still felt stupid, but Lance did his all to quell that feeling.

“Activate swarm,” he said. “Single drone.”

A measly drone was released from the wall, the tennis ball-sized gadget bumbling through the air toward him. Lance shut his eyes, blocking its irritating hum from his head. The drone began to circle him, as though curious as to what he was doing. Lance breathed in through his nose, out through his mouth, reaching for the water, like he’d done in the cave, and in search of Keith’s pulse. It wasn’t easy. *Think*. What had he done the other times? He’d been scared. That wouldn’t work; he needed a better motivation than fear.

Lance pictured Allura’s baby, small and weak and defenceless, surrounded by the dark, manipulative power of a spirit. He pictured Keith convulsing on the floor, whimpering in his sleep, scratching at the bruises on his skin, crying to himself in the bathroom when he thought Lance couldn’t hear. He pictured Allura’s face, eyes screwed shut and leaking tears as she came to terms with what was happening to her baby. He saw Hunk’s petrified face emerging from the core of the castle, heard Pidge wailing when she thought Keith had left them, saw Coran loosing his charm as he looked on sadly while the team fell apart. *Hatred*. That would do it.

Lance grit his teeth, frowning heavily. He hated Carma, he hated what she’d done to them, he hated and hated and hated. *More*. Lance hated caves. Lance hated leaving Cuba. He hated his father, he hated people leaving, he hated that no one ever followed. He hated his mother’s shitty job, he hated the way his family had deteriorated, he *hated* it. He hated that no one ever liked Allura, he hated that Lily always called her rude, he hated that it felt like they preferred him. He hated the loss. Lance was trembling, biting down hard. The water hadn’t budged. Lance hated Carma, he hated that she hated Callio, he hated that she’d killed her sister. *Hatred, hatred, hatred*; it killed.

*It won’t work.*

Lance flinched, his eyes flying open. He’d heard it, like a voice. Black or Blue, it had to be. He glared. *It will*. But it wasn’t. Hatred wasn’t working, anger wasn’t unlocking anything. Lance stormed off the training deck, searching for another motivation but coming up empty.



hope you enjoyed somewhat of an explanation finally?? so many of u were so close to the baby idea mAN

## Chapter Notes

Hey guys thanks for being so patient with this chapter taking ages to upload... and apologies for not replying to comments, I love them so so much, thanks a million to all of you who leave a comment!!! I promise I read and adore all of them, but I've just been kinda too busy to respond but thank you thank you thank you!!!!

Hope you enjoy the chapter <3 <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

Another dream, another nightmare, Lance wasn't sure yet. He'd just arrived, a newcomer, stepping from the train into a swirling mess of blues and greys. *The beach*. The air smelt of rain and salt, and he felt drizzle settle against his skin. It was... Lance grew uneasy. It was a day like that day. He looked around, the air heavy with the promise of a storm. Grey clouds gathered across the sky, blocking out the light, descending on the world like the lid lowering on a casket. Lance loved storms, but today was a different day. The waves were growing wilder near to where he stood, racing up the beach and crashing violently on the rocks. Rocks meant cliffs, and cliffs...

Lance turned, looking up the beach. The drizzle was blurring out the finer details of the landscape, but it couldn't hide the shapes of two children dashing along the shore. Lance's blood ran cold. This was a *memory*.

"No," he mumbled, or tried.

His voice was gone, no sound came out at all. He started up the beach, toward the children and toward the cliffs. *No, no*. Now would be a good time to wake, he thought. Now would be a good time to open his eyes and curl a little closer into Keith. Warmth didn't exist at all in this memory. It was starting to rain in earnest now, and he heard childish shrieks from the twins as they clamoured clumsily over the rocks. He was too far away; he wasn't going to make it. Lance started to run, picking up pace until he was sprinting down the beach. He could see Allita picking her way toward the cliff, sheltering her face from the rain. His own ten-year-old self was hot on her tail, stomping along playfully through the wet sand.

*Allita*- He yelled, his mouth opening soundlessly, voice whisked away by the storm.

How could she hear him anyway? He wasn't there. Well, he was; his ten-year-old self, at least. The Lance of now didn't belong in this memory, Lance who knew better was nowhere in sight. Still he ran, rain hitting his face and soaking his clothes, muffling his cries, which fell on the deaf ears of the twins.

*Stop*.

He could see it now, the sinister crack in the rock, splitting the cliff face in two. Everything was grey, black, and blue, the rain dislodging bits of reality and bleeding the shapes into each other. The shapes of the siblings wavered before the cave mouth for a second, before disappearing into

the darkness. Lance tried not to scream, ignoring the sting of rocks under his feet as he ran. The rocks were slippery and sharp when he neared the cave mouth, breathing hard and scrambling over the rough surface toward the cave. He didn't even hesitate.

The rain stopped hitting him the second he slipped through entrance, blinking into the still darkness before him. There was enough light from the mouth of the cave to dimly light the first few feet.

"Allita!" His voice was audible now, out of the rain. "Lance!"

There was no reply, just the drip of water off the walls and rain falling from the lip of the cave. Lance wandered clumsily into the darkness, fear eating away at his nerves.

"Allita," he called shakily, feeling no bigger than the child he'd been when they'd first come in here.

*Where were they?* They'd only disappeared a minute ago, he was sure of it. Lance went deeper, his eyes slowly adjusting to the poor light. His throat felt tight; *it's just a dream*. Then where were they?

"Where are you?" Lance called, edging his way around a rock. "Where--"

His steps slowed to a stop, and he panted softly into the cold air. Lance blinked through the darkness, willing his eyes to adjust. There were two figures on the floor, two small figures, child-sized. Lance took another step, before his body seized up entirely. He stopped breathing, listening for the rain or the waves or the storm, but finding he couldn't hear a single thing. It all felt so silent. It all became irrelevant.

He was crouched on the ground facing Lance, the ten-year-old version of himself, staring at him like he knew Lance was there, watching them in the dream. Allita lay on the floor before him, motionless. Waves hit at the dunes and wind whipped sand across the rocks, but Lance heard none of it. The storm raged and from a house in the valley their mother peered through the window and began to wonder where they'd gone. Water dripped from a crack in the ceiling and their footprints smeared sand along the dark floor. His own eyes, young and fearless, stared back at him, and Lance was lost. He lost a piece of himself he was never going to find, not in the depth of that dream and that cave. His younger self withdrew his fingers from around Allita's neck, staring at Lance with the same intensity of Carma's eyes in that cursed photograph. He curled them into a fist one at a time, fingers that had been around Allita's neck. Allita; who was dead.

Lance *screamed*.

He kept screaming, even once the feel of rock became a soft sheet, and the distant waves became the sound of a voice, and the cold air within that cave became the dull, automated temperature of the castle. Lance woke wailing, kicking the blanket away from him, hands scrambling over the bed, off, onto the floor. Someone reached for him, but he wrenched himself away. Darkness engulfed him, tricking his sense of direction as he stumbled away from the bed, screaming and screaming and screaming. It was too much. He curled into himself on the floor, grabbing his head, trying to crush it between his hands. Every fibre of his being was an icicle, burning. It was too much. Lance cried from deep within, as if he screamed loud enough it would expel his very soul.

A light flicked on; Lance's nails dug into his head. He needed to tear himself apart. Hands grabbed his arms, trying to wrestle them away from his head, where Lance was scratching at his skull. It was too much. He screamed, his fingers drawing blood, fingers that had held his sister down, that-

“*LANCE!*”

His arms were ripped away from his head, held down as someone wrapped arms around him. Lance tried to throw them off, convulsing on the floor, but Keith held tight. He pulled Lance back against his chest, hiding his face in his shoulder blades as the boy kicked and screamed and tried to pull his arms free from where Keith had them pinned to his sides. Lance fought as much as he could, screaming his throat raw, until he ran out of air and collapsed against Keith, gasping for breath and crying pitifully.

Minutes passed, or maybe hours. When he was sure Lance was done throwing a fit, Keith moved one hand to his shoulder, whispering things, whispering *nothing* into the other’s back, trying to get him to calm down.

“It’s a dream,” he said, over and over. “It’s just a dream.”

Lance only cried. How long passed? An hour, two? He didn’t know. He cried until he physically couldn’t make another sound, whimpering soundlessly into the arm braced across his chest. Keith let him, didn’t retract an inch, holding Lance steady until all the emotion’s passed, and he was nothing more than the empty body of a boy, with an empty future, and an empty past.

When Keith retracted his arms, they were stiff and sore from holding on for so long. He adjusted them around Lance, hooking an arm under his shoulders and hauling him to his feet. Lance couldn’t think, couldn’t feel. He realised he was shivering when Keith placed him back on the bed, setting Lance between his legs and pulling him back against his chest, wrapping the blanket around them both. He held fast, more in way of a hug than a restraint now. Keith was shorter than him, but he managed to lay his cheek against Lance’s shoulder, whispering reassurances into his neck and rocking him gently side to side. It lulled him into a sort of trance, giving Lance’s thoughts time to venture back into his head, filling the void of space since they’d all been scattered.

One minute, two minutes. His tongue felt numb.

“Did I kill my sister?”

The words were out, crooked and choked, leaving an even more disjointed boy behind.

“No,” said Keith. “Of course you didn’t.”

The light was still on. Lance stared blankly at the adjacent wall, swaying slowly in Keith’s embrace.

“Did I kill my sister?”

“It was a dream, Lance. A horrible dream.”

More tears spilt down his cheeks; he didn’t think he had any left. Keith shushed him, wiping away tears and soothing the shakes in his arms.

“Did I, I-I-“

“You didn’t kill her. You haven’t killed anyone. You never would, never.”

Lance fell into trance completely then, losing his thoughts in Keith’s warm embrace. His voice was little more than a whisper the next time he spoke, by which time Keith’s eyes were beginning to droop shut.

“I need to talk to Allura.”

-

His dream had occurred near the same time as the wormhole. Lance would've thought that interesting, were he capable of thinking anything at all. All that circulated through his brain right then was how similar he and Allura looked; furrowed brows, pinched lips, tense shoulders, and harrowed eyes. They sat facing each other, equally as burdened. Keith sat on his right, one of Lance's hands clasped in his own, running a thumb repetitively over his knuckles. It would've felt nice, were Lance *feeling* anything.

“Keith,” said Allura. “Would you fetch Coran, please?”

The boy nodded. He turned Lance's palm over, running his fingers across the skin in way of reassurance. Then he was letting go, hopping up from Allura's bedside and disappearing out the door. In the silence that followed, Lance and Allura studied each other.

“He's being awfully friendly,” said Allura.

It was a distraction, to keep them from bringing up what he'd told her; *everything* he'd told her.

“He's a friendly guy.”

Lance voice sounded flat; his throat hurt from screaming. *I have dreams*. That's the first thing he'd told Allura. He told her about the dream of the tunnel and the chain and the hand at the other end, and then he told her about Allura. He told her all about his dead sister, and then he'd told her about all his other dreams. He told her about wondering into the cave, about Keith saving him, about trapping his arm against the wall. He told her the full story of what the lions had showed him, he told her again about his powers. And then he said something neither of them could ignore or forget. *I think Carma's coming for me*, said Lance. I think I'm descended from Aryon.

Allura hadn't said anything throughout all that, not one word. Then Lance said, *I think I killed my sister. And she said no. No you didn't. He didn't like it, that the others thought they knew him better than himself*.

“You help each other, then?”

“Yeah.”

“Has he hurt you?”

“Carma hasn't,” said Lance. “No. And I haven't wandered off.”

“Good.”

Allura sat very still on the chair, poised like royalty.

“What's Coran gonna do?”

“He's going to take a blood sample.”

“Which will...”

“It will tell us if you have Altean blood, Lance.”

“And if I do?”

*Allura met his eye. "Well. I suppose that would explain some things."*

*For the first time in his life, Keith had been the most talkative person in the room. He'd confirmed everything Lance said, even pushed the point to Allura. It makes sense, he'd said, over and over. Only Lance is getting these side effects, Carma wants to hurt him, she's using you for your baby, but not you specifically. Lance and Allita were twins, so were Carma and Callio. Bad things have happened to twins in his family for centuries. It's part of Carma's revenge, it makes sense. Now in Keith's absence, they were finding it hard to speak.*

*The things he'd said stayed at the for-front of Lance's mind. Lance and Allita were twins, so were Carma and Callio. Evidently Carma didn't like twins, not after what happened between her and her sister. So what? They'd become the target group? Lance thought back to all the stories of twins in his family, of untimely deaths and disappearances. Allita was just the first to go. He shook his head; how would that work? Could Carma reach Earth? The lions could, but they had a connection. Then again, Allita, none of the twins in their family actually, had their deaths dragged on like this. Accidents, bad luck; no one was tortured and tormented for months beforehand. So maybe it was just coincidence. Or maybe, Lance thought uncomfortably, that was simply the best she could do; at least until a twin came wondering right into her territory.*

*"They're in here."*

*Keith's voice sounded outside the door a second before it opened, revealing a very alert looking Coran. At least someone was in the mood for a blood test this early in the morning.*

*"Good morning, Princess," he said chirpily, though his eyes lingered warily on their gloomy faces. "Lance."*

*Allura nodded in response, as Coran set down a compact kit on the corner of her bed. With Lance's permission, he began preparing his arm, dabbing cool disinfectant over the area around his vein.*

*"You should just feel a small pinch," Coran informed, before nervously going about drawing blood.*

*Lance stared at the small red vial, his own blood more foreign to him than anyone else's. He should be cracking a joke, making a fuss of sharing in the Altean bloodline, or being part-alien; but Lance was terrified. Coran inserted the vial into some Altean device Lance had never seen; he wasn't going to question it, Altean tech was always better.*

*"So how far back are we, uh-"*

*"Centuries," said Allura. "Before the fall of Altea."*

*"Can we even pick up on that?" Asked Keith. "If... if one of Aryon's descendants fled to Earth that long ago. Lance is human, like, entirely."*

*"You're right," said Allura. "Control over water and electricity is a skill many humans possess."*

*Keith frowned. "That's not... I'm half-Galran, and even I display barely any traits. We're talking about one Altean entering Lance's bloodline thousands of years ago. You can't- he's not any fraction Altean, it... it's too far back."*

*"I understand what you're saying," said Allura. "And it depends on a number of factors. Altean genes are generally more dominant. Whereas with the Galra, as you've seen, any combination decimates the active Galra genes dramatically. Keith, you may display, or at least internalise,*

*some aspects of Galra identity, but your children would be virtually indistinguishable from other humans."*

*"But we're talking centuries, that's too much-"*

*"I agree, that's not the sole reason. Other options include a much more recent injection of Altean genes. Say one of Aryon's descendants put themselves into cryo-sleep much like myself, they could have arrived at Earth at a much later date. Though I'd say that option is unlikely, given Lance's lack of general..."*

*Allura waved a hand at him.*

*"She's talking about my ugly ears," Lance pseudo-whispered, his first attempt at humour.*

*Keith smiled. Success. Allura huffed, but looked somewhat amused anyway.*

*"Yes. You don't look Altean. Therefore I'd say it's far more likely this is a combination of two things. One; what I like to call the homing gene."*

*"Homing gene?"*

*Lance smiled fondly at the boy beside him; Keith was more worried about this than he was. Allura was talking, and he should probably be paying attention, but watching Keith was so much nicer than involving himself with reality. He really had very nice hair; did Galra genes have something to do with that? Combine human and Galra, and you get the best hair in the Milky Way? Could be it. His eyes were pretty nice too, so maybe the human-Galra combination just made the best everything.*

*"I missed the last three sentences," Lance said suddenly.*

*Allura paused, but didn't berate him; benefits of being in shock.*

*"I said the homing gene," she repeated. "Is an Altean gene that is passed onto the host's offspring in ninety-nine percent of cases. All pure-blooded Alteans carry it, and it's extremely unlikely that the gene is lost between parent and child, even if neither parent is fully Altean themselves."*

*"So you think I'm still carrying that gene? Even if its original carrier passed it on centuries ago?"*

*"Yes. It would make sense. The homing gene is what controls Alteans' connection to their planet."*

*"That... sounds weird."*

*"To you, I'm sure it does. We may look similar, but the make up of Alteans is very different to that of humans."*

*"So... your baby's probably gonna be more Altean?" Asked Keith.*

*"Unless Shiro's genes somehow out-match Altean ones, yes."*

*"His cousins are all pretty identical," Keith mumbled, mostly to himself.*

*"I don't get the whole planet connection," Lance interrupted, nervously eyeing the device Coran was hunched over.*

*"Oh. It's... what makes us Altean. We already know my child has inherited it, demonstrated by the fact Carma can manipulate them to open a wormhole."*

*It was all starting to click together in his head; Lance didn't like it.*

*"Tell me," said Allura. "Your family is fond of nature, are they not?"*

*"Well... yeah. Most people are."*

*"Very fond of nature."*

*Lance thought back to all their time his family spent on the beach, out in the wilderness, the way his mother had developed their appreciation of the outdoors. Now that he thought about it, it made even more sense. The twins who had unfortunate things happen to them all came from his mother's side.*

*"I guess."*

*"Alteans have always felt very strongly for their planet. I don't suppose you feel anything for Altea, or that you would if you ever had seen it. Because your homing gene has adapted itself to Earth. It's why you miss the planet the most, Lance. You are connected to it in a way regular humans cannot understand."*

*"Connected..." Lance echoed. "Allura, your powers-"*

*"Altean," she said. "A part of Altean life. All our powers connect to the planet in some way. Mine were drawn from a dying star."*

*"A star?"*

*"On Altea, when a star dies in the sky, it appears pink through our atmosphere," Allura said, sounding wistful. "It's why pink is the colour we use to honour our dead. All stars are pink in their final moments. You've seen me use this ability, yes?"*

*"Yeah. It's pink lightning."*

*"Not lightning. It's... difficult to explain. It's useful in a fight yes, but there is more meaning to it to that. It's the end of things, Lance, it... brings an end to conflict. When I struck Haggar, it revealed her to be Altean. Subsequently, we stopped fighting."*

*Lance's fingers were clasped together tightly. He wanted to reach for Keith's hand, but it wouldn't be right.*

*"And I'm..."*

*"What was it Keith called you?"*

*"The storm paladin," Keith said slowly.*

*"Sounds kinda dumb," Lance said with a soft laugh.*

*"But very true," said Allura. "I don't think you're connected to Altea, Lance. I think you are connected to Earth, and your Altean genes have granted you the ability to develop powers around the planet you feel connected to. I think your powers are drawn from a storm."*

*The room fell silent for a moment.*

*"Makes sense," said Keith.*



*Lance wanted to cry. He should be happy; happy he'd uncovered his connection to Altea, that all the trouble they'd been through made sense. But there was only more trouble lying in wait.*

*"The results-"*

*"Wait," said Lance, interrupting Coran.*

*He didn't want this to be confirmed, not yet.*

*"You said there were two things; the homing gene was only one."*

*"Oh," said Allura. "Y-yes. The other thing affecting this is... well, it's Carma. It's revenge. It doesn't matter how little Altean may be left in you, not if this... this thing she has become, is still bent on revenge. Altean or not, any twin with a relation to it, is, uh..."*

*"Fucked."*

*Allura narrowed her eyes. "Uh..."*

*"Quiznacked," said Keith.*

*"I don't think you're using that word correctly," Lance whispered.*

*"What? It means fuck."*

*"No it doesn't!"*

*"Yes it does?" Keith said, offended. "What else would it be?"*

*"Uh, shit?"*

*"Shut your shit? I don't think you ever grasped the meaning of this."*

*"Shut up..."*

*"It means you're still in a lot of trouble," said Keith. "Altean or not."*

*"About that," said Coran.*

*Lance stomach dropped, wrestled away from his distraction.*

*"Yes?" Said Allura, sitting forward.*

*"It appears he does, have Altean blood."*

*Coran looked up, meeting Lance's eye. Everyone was staring at him. Three sets of eyes boring into him, judging.*

*"Granted," Coran was saying. "It's a very small amount, though he is still a carrier-"*

*Lance stood abruptly.*

*"Lance," said Keith.*

*"Let's think about this," said Allura.*

*Lance didn't want to. It was one thing talking and joking about the possibilities, but now Coran*

*was turning that device toward him, and everyone was serious, and everyone was staring, and- he made it halfway to the doorway before Keith was calling his name.*

*Give him time- that was Allura, holding the red paladin back. Give him some time. Lance stumbled through the door, away from that room and that conversation, where suddenly he couldn't breathe. I'm Altean, Altean, Altean- Carma was after him. Carma... killed Allita. Carma killed his sister. Lance started walking. He didn't stop.*

*Hallways passed in quick succession, and Lance didn't pay enough attention to see if anyone was following him. I'm Altean. No, no he wasn't. He was human. His home was Earth. Allura said so herself; Earth was his home, the planet he was connected to, and the planet he loved. But he had Altean blood, the Altean homing gene; somewhere along the line, an Altean had made Earth their home. And now... now Lance was roped into a centuries old murder scheme. He felt sick to his stomach. Carma killed Allita. He had no proof, of course, but Lance didn't ignore facts. Allita died in a cave, underground, and the more Lance thought about it the more awful he felt.*

*He could see the bodies Keith had described to him down on the dwarf planet, soulless and lifeless, mummified and left to rot in the earth forever. Had that happened to- Lance bit down on his tongue, a wretched sob clawing its way up his throat. He couldn't help it, he was picturing Allita. Allita, whose skin was like sunshine and whose presence was a whole perfect half of him, who should have lived to ninety, who should never have felt a pain greater than a sprained ankle on the sports field. She died in pain. She died a child, alone and afraid, left to rot in the earth, where over time it filled her mouth and the divots of her eyes and- Lance doubled over, dry-heaving, hands sliding against the wall in search of purchase. He dropped to a crouch, head bowed, gasping for air. Carma killed his sister; and now she was coming for him. Lance shook his head, trying to rid himself of those ghastly images.*

*It took him a good few minutes to find his breath, and even longer to find his legs. He looked around, half hoping Keith had followed him so he'd have someone to help him walk. Lance frowned. Where was he? He'd walked aimlessly, he realised, trying to avoid all the places he knew. So he'd ended up... he didn't know. This part of the castle didn't look as well maintained; the walls were almost grimy. Lance grimaced, drawing back. Well, ten thousand years would do that. He stood fully, shaking out his limbs and breathing deeply. He should get back to the others, this wasn't something he could internalise.*

*Lance turned back toward the hall, but paused. There was an air vent just a few feet back, except the grid was open and laying on the floor. Had it been like that before? Lance felt queasy, but wandered a little closer nevertheless. Creeping forward as quietly as possible, he took slow-steps toward the open vent. He and Keith had both maintained a wariness of vents since... well, since they'd been crawling with bits of possessed bodies. Better to know though, he supposed. Nothing came jumping out at him when Lance crouched down before the open vent, so a good start. It was dark, unsettling in the sense it brought back memories of crawling through this very castle in search of the electricity grid. Lance shuddered. He plucked up the fallen grate, fitting it carefully over the entrance to the vent, giving it a pat just to make sure it was securely in place. Good. No fallen grids to freak people out.*

*He stood, dusting the grime off his hands and continuing along the hallway. Ten steps down the hall, a sharp clattering made him freeze. Lance whipped around; the grate had fallen back down. He stifled a sigh, hands forming fists as he fought to ignore the squeamishness in his stomach. Fuck you, he mouthed at the fallen grate, striding back toward it and picking the grid of metal up with renewed purpose. Now this was a mission; a faulty bit of vent covering was not going to get the better of him.*

*Crouching down before the dark opening, Lance's breath felt short and uneven in his lungs. He stared unmoving into the darkness, the eerie silence of the vent drifting out and washing over straining ears. Lance jammed the grate back into the wall, pressing against the corners to ensure they were locked in place. It was dark in there; he didn't like it. Stepping back, Lance was pleased to find he was only shaking a little.*

*"Stay," he said, angling a finger at the grate.*

*It did, but Lance still stared at it. Stared at the grimy walls, and the filth clotting the fillings, and the muck gathered in the tightest corners of the corridor. It was almost as if this hallway really hadn't been cleaned in ten-thousand years, like the automated cleaning system didn't work here. Huh. A thought struck Lance, but he didn't have much time to mull over it. All his thoughts were quite abruptly cut short, in favour of diverting his attention to the set of spindly, black fingers slithering through the holes in the grid. Lance watched for an absurd amount of time as they wrapped themselves around the metal, before slowly pushing the grid back so it clattered to the floor.*

*"Oh," he breathed, before the charred head of what was once a person was poking through the hole in the wall.*

*It reminded him of a crab really, retracting into and emerging from the vent like a crustacean, one with mummified skin and yellowed teeth. Lance really wished he'd stayed with the others. He made to run, but his limbs spurred into action a second too late. When it latched onto his legs, Lance screamed, before he was brought to the floor and the air expelled violently from his lungs. He scrambled for the floor, for the wall, but one sharp yank and he was dragged back toward the vent, his head knocking against hard metal on his way in. Darkness, engulfing him and quickly diminishing the rectangle of light as it grew further from reach. Lance screamed, kicked and yelled and tried to grab at the slippery walls of the vent as the body dragged him deeper into the dark like a spider retreating with its prey.*

*He was pulled violently around a corner, smacking into the metal hard enough to draw a pained gasp from him. Lance fought for all he was worth, but he was trapped. It was like being washed away down a drainpipe, tossed this way and that at alarming speed, his senses in disarray as the creature scuttled away. Lance thrashed, trying to shake his ankles free, but finding he had no leverage.*

*"Help!" He screamed, before they rounded a corner and he threw arms around his head to avoid splitting his skull on the sharp edge.*

*His vision was gone, but a breath of air and flash of light alluded to an opening in the vent. Lance threw his arms out, screaming when his fingers caught in the metal, nearly snapping them when the creature pulled violently on his legs.*

*"Help!"*

*"Lance!"*

*Keith.*

*"KEITH!"*

*Lance strained to see through the grid he was clinging to, gritting his teeth before giving in and screaming when the metal cut into his fingers. The creature pulled harder, and Lance was forced to retract fingers before they were actually torn off.*

*“Lance!”*

*“Help!” He yelled, catching sight of a blur of red and black through the grid before he was ripped away and carried down the vent.*

*This time though, he was sure he could hear footsteps thundering down the hall beside them.*

*“H-“*

*Lance smacked into a wall, his head exploding with pain before going numb. He couldn't see, couldn't breath, head dragging along the hard vent. Another turn, another twist; someone was yelling for him through the walls. Without warning, a sword slashed though the vent before them, eliciting some unholy shriek from the body before light split the darkness and a section of vent was torn away. Keith just grabbed for his hand before Lance was pulled on violently. The paladin screamed, losing his hold on Lance through the hole in the wall as he was pulled harder away. His cries could be heard echoing down the vent, following Lance and whatever was pulling him onwards.*

*What's it going to do? he wondered vaguely, his head swimming. Carma wants to hurt you, Keith had said. So, so bad. Lance screamed with renewed vigour, trying to slow their movement by jamming his elbows into the walls. He grit his teeth when the drag of metal against skin left raw burns on his arms, but didn't give in. The next time a sword was plunged into the wall, Lance grabbed for the flaking panels before Keith even got to him.*

*“Keith!” He yelled.*

*A section of panelling was ripped away, and Keith's furious face stared back at him. They lunged for each other, Keith pulling hard to counteract the body tugging Lance in the opposite direction. He screamed again when bony fingers dug into his ankles, wrapping arms around Keith's waist to hold himself steady when the red paladin went for his sword. The slice of metal through air, then bone, and Lance fell forward, out of the vent and into Keith.*

*They collapsed on the floor in a mass of sweat, blood, and trembling limbs, pulling all of Lance free from the vent before even stopping to consider each other. His skin was crawling. Lance shuddered, scrambling along the floor away from the hole in the wall, where the body lay motionless. Keith helped him along, edging them back along the floor until Lance felt he was far enough from the vent to actually breath. Their eyes met.*

*Keith was breathing hard, eyes alive and aflame and furious, one hand still gripping his bayard, the other tight around Lance's shirt. Lance was knelt between his legs, holding onto Keith's arm like it was the handrail separating him from a thousand foot drop. His ankles were stinging madly and no doubt bleeding all over the place, but he couldn't think about that right now. Keith's hair was wild from sprinting down the halls after him, brows furrowed and face angry in the way Lance liked.*

*“Stop trying to die,” said Keith.*

*Lance tried to speak, but his voice refused. He huffed, his lip caught between a grimace and a smirk.*

*“Sorry,” he said, before he locked an arm around Keith's neck, and pulled him into the most long-awaited kiss of his life.*

## Chapter End Notes

enjoy the poorly written get together that was intended to happen 80000 words ago

## Chapter Notes

first things first THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR YOUR SUPPORT GUYS

Real real stuff for a second here, the fact that the comment count nearly rivals the kudos count is testament to just how amazing all you readers are, and how thoughtful you've all been because lemme tell you these comments are seriously amazing. You guys who leave cute lil exclamations and short notes at the end of every chapter? AMAZING! You guys who leave like.... essays?? AMAZING (idk how you even find the time but holy shit thank you??)

thanks so much everyone you really help motivate me to write this <3

-

Lance had spent weeks, months maybe, agonising over all the time he'd spent *not kissing Keith*. He realised now, with the others arms wound around him and with Keith pushing insistently at his lips, that he would have waited forever; he would have waited eternity and then some just for that one kiss. That sounded dramatically far-fetched, even by Lance's standards, but it wasn't due to the nature of the kiss, of how passionate or breathtaking or mind-blowing it might have been (which, he might add, it wasn't); it was due to the fact it was *Keith*.

It didn't matter that Keith held him clumsily, like he had no idea what to do with the existence of Lance suddenly in his lap, or that he kissed like he didn't know how, because Keith kissed him like he *wanted* him. Keith kissed him as if the significance of throwing himself into danger repetitively, and dedicating his time to providing comfort, and risking life and limb for Lance just came as an afterthought, a small *oh, I suppose*, in the grand scheme of everything he did. Keith kissed as if giving his heart and soul to the other had been written in his will from the start.

It took him less than a second to kiss Lance back, to secure both arms around his waist and to let himself be pulled upwards and respond to the lips moving desperately against his own. Their first kiss was rushed; not short by any means, but hard and fast and clumsy, and introduction to the surface traits of their relationship. It was limbs finding their place around the other, and eyes shutting tight, it was hands in hair and out of breath and demanding. Then Lance pulled back, knocking his forehead against Keith's and breathing shakily, trying to stop himself kissing the other again before he could form a single word.

"Thanks," he whispered.

"Huh?" Said Keith, his eyes shut and parted lips seeking out the sound of Lance's voice.

"For not letting me die?" Lance prompted, smirking.

His breath caught when Keith's eyes fluttered open, dazed, blinking slowly until they settled on Lance.

"What?"

This was going to be like talking to a brick wall. Lance couldn't make the effort. Instead he leant back in, dipped his head, and captured Keith's lips in another kiss. It was a little uncomfortable, kneeling on the floor between Keith's legs, craning his neck down to even meet his lips, but Lance did not give one fraction of a fuck. He forced this kiss down to a slower pace, trapping Keith's lip between his teeth and nipping at it gently before the boy's lips parted and Lance could kiss him deeply. Keith promptly forgot what little structure he'd had going, clinging to Lance's shirt and sighing, fucking *sighing*, at the feel of that kiss.

Lance reached for his hair, burying his fingers in the dark locks because this time there was nothing to stop him, no sensible side to Keith asking what he was doing, no fearing the other would wake...

"Carma-" Keith stuttered, trying to pull away abruptly.

Lance caught his chin, holding him close and steady, at least until he could offer his one defence. "I'm not scared."

Keith blinked at him, fingers curling around Lance's collar.

"I'm not scared," he repeated, firm but kind, fearless, loving.

Keith kissed him, and Lance could've sworn he was weightless. This was *nice*.

"Oh thank god!"

His lips faltered against Keith's at the sound of Hunk's voice, and Lance became vaguely aware that his friend had appeared at the end of the hall.

"It's all good guys," he yelled. "No ones dead, they're just making out!"

"Who's making out?"

"Coran and Kalternecker- who do you *think*, Pidge?"

Lance chuckled softly when Keith jerked back, blushing furiously. He didn't go very far, embarrassed or not, smiling shyly into Lance's collar. That smile grew giddy when Lance met his eye, pushing back the hair that had fallen over Keith's eyes as the rest of their team emerged.

"Oh *them*," said Pidge, finally meriting a response from Lance.

"What do you mean, *them*?" he scoffed, looking up in time to see all four teammates gather in the hall.

Allura in particular looked a little frantic, though all of them were disorganised and dressed in pyjamas.

"Sirens blaring, people yelling, all cause they were making out? Jeez," Pidge muttered. "I'm going back to bed."

"Hey! I nearly died," Lance insisted, picking himself and Keith up off the floor.

As happy as he would have been for them to stay there all day, they kind of had other matters to attend to.

"And I nearly got a solid seven hours."

“Oh Lance!” Allura exclaimed, before he could tackle Pidge. “You’re bleeding!”

“Wow,” Hunk’s eyes widened at the sight of his scratched up ankles. “Wow, yep, that is- that’s a lot of blood.”

“You should be- you can’t be kissing right now,” Allura said, horrified. “Unless that’s a human form of healing-“

“Oh absolutely,” Lance said. “You should try it first thing on Shiro when we get him back. Won’t even need a healing pod.”

Keith elbowed him lightly as if to say *stop being stupid*.

“Fine,” said Lance. “I am, uh, actually bleeding out. A healing pod would definitely be nice.”

Allura shook her head in feigned exasperation as Hunk moved forward to help Keith drag the injured paladin between them.

“By the way,” Lance said, clicking his fingers at Coran as he was carted toward the med-bay. “Automated-cleaning in hallway F-09? Doesn’t work.”

-

It had only taken a brief trip to the healing pods before Lance was up and running, then a not-so-brief explanation to the team as to what exactly had happened. The castle’s automatic cleaning system was all well and good for cleaning up and incinerating possessed corpses, granted it was working in all areas of the castle. Which it was not. What followed then was a definitely-not-brief analysis of the whole castle’s cleaning system, which involved manually scouring every nook and cranny, every air-vent and un-used room, and every lonely corridor that hadn’t seen the light of, well, anything, for ten-thousand years. They’d spent hours flicking through cameras, running tests on cleaning equipment, and all in all being boring. Lance, at least, was bored.

It wasn’t until afternoon that Lance got a moment to himself again, which after tactfully avoiding talking to Allura about his heritage, evading more of Coran’s cleaning workshops, and assuring Hunk and Pidge that yes, he could walk just fine, he used to whisk Keith away to their room, throw him on the bed, and kiss him senseless. See, that was the great thing about kissing Keith once; Lance could kiss him again. And again. And again- so he did. Part of his brain had been holding stubbornly to the fear that kissing Keith once meant that was it, one shot and you’re out, game over. Any more than that and it became too good to be true, right? Lance had never been so happy to be wrong in his life.

He wondered idly, half-way through a kiss that had Keith squirming beneath him and pushing fingers into his hair, when he’d started referring to Keith’s room as *their* room; because it wasn’t as if they were a couple. Well, now perhaps there was a chance, but before. Lance guessed it was when he’d become too afraid of his own room to even set foot inside, when slowly but surely his belongings began to migrate across to Keith’s over the past month. That was nice, the sort of made-up domesticity they’d adopted. This was nicer.

Keith whined a little into the kiss, refocusing Lance’s thoughts entirely. He used the hand not propping himself up to press a little firmer on Keith’s wrist, against the dark lines left by the possession there. A hand curling around his cheek and the soft drag of teeth over his lips was what he got in thanks, though Lance would have summoned a hurricane unprompted if it meant making Keith feel better. Kissing him was nice, holding him and touching him and keeping him close were all things Lance had wanted but never really believed in. Keith’s lips weren’t as soft as his own, but



now, red and bruised from kissing him, Lance had never felt anything better.

He liked the hazy, blissed-out look in Keith's eyes the longer they kissed, liked the way his skin became flushed and his hair became mused, liked the small sounds he'd make if Lance stopped kissing him, but liked even better the soft, muffled moans when Lance dove back in to kiss him again. He liked the way Keith's fingers caressed his face and drove shivers down his spine, how they raked through his hair and held to his clothing and hesitantly explored across his skin. He liked the dent his body made in the mattress, the way the sheets gathered around Keith's shape the more he twisted about under Lance. He liked that they smelt of him, and he liked that even once they parted, he knew his clothing would smell of Keith too. Lance just... really liked him.

"So what," Lance rasped, trying to come up for air but finding himself pulled down again and again. "Was so- mmf, difficult, about just kissing me one of the first three times?"

"Hm?" Keith hummed, freeing his other wrist to wrap them both around Lance's shoulders.

He was really, very incoherent. It was almost concerning. Lance smiled giddily, leaning over Keith and planting an annoying patter of kisses along his cheeks until he was forced to open his eyes.

"Earth to Keith?"

Keith glared, or tried to. Lance wasn't too sure what his face was doing, most of it probably still trying to kiss him.

"What times?" Keith mumbled, curling a foot around Lance's ankle, which somehow succeeded in making the moment more intimate, but don't ask Lance how.

"You know," Lance drawled, now drawn to a particularly pink patch on Keith's cheek that he hadn't kissed yet. "All the times you *nearly* kissed me."

"I nearly kissed you once," Keith stated matter-of-factly, his eyes drifting shut as he tried to pull Lance down for another kiss.

"Oh yeah, which of the three times was that?"

Keith huffed, and Lance couldn't help but smile at his display of impatience.

"Before you went to realign the grid."

Lance was just impressed Keith managed to say a word consisting of three full syllables.

"Hm, that was the most recent one."

"The most- what? What are you talking about?"

Lance smiled into his shoulder, lightly peppering the skin with kisses. "No memories?"

"No? What-" Keith froze, and Lance couldn't help the small laugh that bubbled from his throat.

When he raised his head, Keith was staring at him with wide eyes, quite forgetting the happy daze he'd been in.

"The h-holding cell?" He squeaked, voice going up a pitch.

"The holding cell," Lance confirmed, grinning at the blush consuming Keith's face.

His voice cracked when he stuttered, “I kissed you?”

“And forgot.”

“I *kissed* you?”

“Only kinda,” Lance reassured, twisting a lock of Keith’s hair around his finger.

“*Kinda?*”

“You did this,” Lance hummed, before leaning down to press a series of slow kisses into Keith’s neck.

That just about closed up shop on that point. Keith melted, dissolving into Lance’s embrace with barely enough co-ordination left in him to cling to Lance’s shoulders and guide him to where Keith wanted him.

“s only, two times,” he slurred somewhere between Lance kissing from his jaw to his ear.

“Uh, no, cause I know you’re definitely lying about not knowing about the first time,” Lance scoffed, pulling back to glare at him jokingly. “Keith-*I-kiss-boys-while-they-sleep*-Kogane.”

Keith’s mouth dropped open in a way that was almost comical.

“I-“ he stuttered. “You were asleep!”

“Exactly!”

“But you weren’t!”

“*Exactly.*”

Lance laughed when Keith’s face flushed crimson.

“That’s how you get ‘em, wait til they’re sleeping-“

“I didn’t!” Keith shoved at his shoulder. “I-I- you should have stopped me!”

“Hey, I didn’t say there was anything *wrong* with it.”

“There’s-“

“Scared I’d run away?”

“I didn’t, I- I thought I wasn’t going to see you again,” Keith defended weakly, but come the end of the sentence his words had picked up more meaning than he’d intended.

His breath caught, eyes suddenly a little too watery for Lance’s liking.

“I thought...”

Lance pulled him into a hug before Keith could finish that sentence, trapping him in his arms and stealing the sharp edge of terror out of his voice.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered into Keith’s hair.

“Why are *you* sorry?” came the response, a little muffled, a little choked up.

"I just... want to keep you safe all the time."

A small, amused sigh came from Keith. "We're in space. Space isn't safe."

"Hey, a guy can try."

"A guy's been doing pretty well."

"I'm glad you think so."

The small, tender smile gracing Keith's lips when Lance pulled back was enough to have him reaching for the stars, determined to pull one down to give to the boy in his arms. *Wow, McClain*; he could almost picture Hunk rolling his eyes.

"So what are we now," he blurted, because really he'd been waiting all day to know.

Keith frowned.

"I think... you're still human, the presence of Altean--"

Lance burst into laughter, stopping him short.

"What?"

"I meant *us*, Keith, you and me, not--" he paused, shaking his head. "I'm not talking about what species we are."

"Uh..." said Keith. "Us?"

He wasn't gonna get it; that was alright.

"Wanna be my boyfriend?"

"Um..."

"Dude, your vocabulary is *shot*."

"You're a... shot... a sharp shot."

Keith frowned, clearly that wasn't the insult he'd been looking for.

"Do you mean sharpshooter?"

"No," he lied.

Lance was having fun.

"So the answer to that question is..."

"What if I say no?" Keith said smugly, as if he really had the upper hand.

"Then *you* miss out on being *my* boyfriend."

He hummed thoughtfully. "I can live with that."

"*Keiiiith*."

A brilliant smile lit up Keith's face, his eyes sparkling and hair thrown back and suddenly Lance was weak at the knees, and he was very glad for the bed propping him up and the hand on his shoulder to keep him anchored, because despite his jokes and teasing, the way Keith looked at him and the way Keith *looked* left him dizzy and elated and when it all came down to it-

"Please," said Lance quietly. "Please say yes."

Keith's playful expression softened, until they were two vulnerable people taking small steps in the direction of unwavering trust.

"Of course," he said. "Of course I wanna be yours."

Lance just about died on the spot.

"Don't- *ugh*," he muttered, dropping his head against Keith's chest. "Don't just *say* that."

Keith laughed nervously. "What?"

"You just... consider keeping my lungs in tact, maybe?"

"I don't get how that effects your lungs-"

"Sh," Lance cut him off with a quick kiss. "Sh, just kiss me."

So he did.

-

"No comment," Lance said, when he took a seat across from Allura after dinner that evening. "Not from you, not from me."

She was smirking. If anyone had a more devilish smirk than Lance, it was Allura.

"I'm happy for you-"

"Uh, that sounds like a comment."

She shook her head in exasperation. "Fine, no comments. Not one. Just wishing you well, all the best, for your very happy future-"

"*Alluraaaa*," Lance whined. "You're worse than Hunk."

"You got caught making out in a hallway after a near death experience, you really expect us not to poke a little fun?"

Lance glowered, staring stubbornly at the table. This... he expected this.

"So what's up?" Asked Allura, toning down the teasing in favour of actually having a conversation.

"It's been a long day, huh?" She prompted when he remained silent and broody, causing Lance to slowly raise his head.

"Yeah," he echoed.

It was strange to think of all that had happened that day. It started with a dream of him killing his

sister, for god's sake. Since then he'd unlocked the key to his Altean heritage and powers, been taken on a death ride through the air vents, and spent a good three hours making out with the boy he was pretty sure he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

"How are you feeling about it?"

"Which part?" Lance scoffed.

Allura hummed, smiling lightly. "The Altean part."

"Honestly? I'm not as surprised as I thought. I guess it... it doesn't change anything dramatically about me, it just... explains things."

"That's good."

"Is it though? The things it explains... I mean, Carma wants to kill me, right? We knew before, but now we know why and- anyway. We've talked about this before. I actually wanted to talk about Shiro."

Allura's lip twitched. "Shiro?"

Lance met her eyes cautiously, conveying how serious he was. "Yeah."

"Okay," she said. "What about him?"

"Well first I... I wanted to check how you're feeling."

"You mean the baby?"

"Yeah, but you too. How's it... how are you?"

Allura shrugged. "I'm terrified."

Lance wished he could do that, admit to being scared and just shrug. Allura really was something else.

"I hate it, Lance. I hate it more than I've... than I've ever hated something in my life."

"More than the Galra?"

Allura paused. "I think... this is a different kind of hatred. If... if I had Carma right in front of me, right now, I... I would kill her, Lance. There's no- there is nothing to understand, or forgive. I just hate her so much it *burns*."

Lance held her gaze; Allura looked troubled admitting this, but Lance leant her his own confidence.

"It's hurting my *child*. I didn't ever imagine- I've never felt this angry, like... a patient anger. I will wait, and I'll *wait*, as long as I- I kill her."

Lance didn't say anything for a while, just listening to her, and the silence that followed, letting them absorb those words.

"I promise you," he said. "I promise you're going to have a future."

"We don't always get what we deserve--"

“We do if we fight hard enough.”

“Lance...” Allura sighed. “Alright.”

“Alright?”

“Alright.”

“We’re all alright,” Lance hummed. “Yeah right.”

Allura scoffed. “What were you going to say?”

Lance paused; his tongue felt heavy. “Well I...”

Oh, this was going to be hard.

“I’ve just been thinking,” he said. “About why now.”

Allura tilted her head in question.

“Why has Carma come for us *now*? I mean we’ve... we’ve been in space for months, at points I think far closer to this system than when it first picked us up. So it’s not proximity, at least not entirely. And it’s not... I was trying to compare myself and Allura to those twins but, there’s no similarities. We’re not the same age, or anything. So... I was just thinking.”

Allura’s expression had become very serious.

“Thinking,” she echoed. “About what?”

“About how it... *found* us,” Lance bit out, grimacing a little.

He really, really didn’t want to bring this to light.

“The timing,” he continued. “Is strange. This thing started... it’s able to open wormholes using your baby, but is that... H-hear me out. You fall pregnant with Shiro’s child. A short while later, Shiro disappears. We don’t know where he’s gone, we... he could be anywhere in the universe, right? If Coran’s theory on a large-scale malfunction within the black lion, combined with quintessence and whatever shit- Shiro could have been transported anywhere, right?”

Allura nodded stiffly.

“Thing is...” Lance drew a sharp breath. “This thing didn’t find us through *me*. It found us through your baby, because that’s how it opened the wormhole. Which raises the question, how it did that. And I... I can’t help but wonder, if it already had a scent.”

Allura was very still, her face a blank canvas.

“What are you saying?” She said.

Lance bit down on his lip. “What if it found your baby because it had a scent to follow? This thing has followed my family’s lineage for centuries, its gotta be good with picking out bloodlines, right? What if it could find your baby because it knew the scent, or- or whatever it uses, of... of Shiro, if... if Shiro had been transported here.”

Allura had turned to stone. Her hair, shoulders, face, her entire body was still as stone, a sculpture, and all it would take was one hit from a hammer to shatter it.

“You think it killed Shiro?”

There was accusation in her tone.

“No,” said Lance. “But I think it has Shiro.”

“*Has-*“

“Listen. The other night, when the castle shut down, with the corpses and recordings-“

“That wasn’t-“

“I know, Allura. I know it may not have been real. They were playing recordings of all our voices, but-“ Lance sighed. “I heard him say something about Blue. And later, when I checked the cameras, this... this patch of blood appeared on the floor in Blue’s hangar. There was no explanation for it. One second it wasn’t there, then it went dark for a minute, and when the lights returned to that part of the castle, there was blood. I investigated it after but... there was nothing there. Just a trail of blood leading to the airlock, and no body.”

In the silence that followed, Lance found himself wishing for a distraction, an alarm, a fellow teammate, anything to draw them from the vortex of bad feelings swirling around them.

“I didn’t want to bring it up to you,” he continued. “But then I realised I hadn’t wanted to bring up any of this. I delayed telling you everything else, but I couldn’t wait on this.”

Allura blinked hard, as if coming out of a trance.

“And if it does have him?”

Lance faltered; he hadn’t expected a question like that.

“I, uh, I don’t know.”

Allura’s expression was tight. “Why did you tell me, if just to scare me?”

“It wasn’t-“ Lance shifted uncomfortably. “I told you so we can prepare. So if that thing decides to use Shiro, like it’s used Keith, and it’s used you and your child, we can stop it. Don’t stop paying attention, that’s what you told me. Don’t ignore things, and maybe we can get through this.”

## Chapter Notes

oooooh my god guys sorry for taking so long to update, but here it is finally!!!  
 I've been kinda swamped with stuff hence haven't been responding to comments which  
 I feel really bad about so please accept this apology and know that I LOVE them...  
 you're all supportive, and I'm so thankful you're reading this story...

ON A HAPPY NOTE- CHECK OUT THIS AMAZING FANART!!!

<http://serenephenix.tumblr.com/post/168028334390/i-am-beat-but-i-wanted-to-finish-this-before-i>

It's by serenephenix from last chapter, and now it's in colour!! Please check it out  
 cause its so soft n I love it... thank you so much for drawing this scene <3 <3 <3

now yaaaaaay please enjoy this very late chapter I love u all

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

**Star date – 33:06:28**

Castle Cycle – 08:03

Log – 17

*The cockpit of the black lion looked bright that morning, as Lance sat playing with an elastic band around his wrist, not anxiously, just... thoughtfully.*

*“So,” he said. “This week’s been weird.”*

*Around him, Black hummed thoughtfully. There was something else, a second presence.*

*“Blue,” said Lance. “I can hear you eavesdropping.”*

*He paused, listening. “Is it allowed? Uh, no, of course not? This is captain’s log. You, light of my life, are still just a leg. Oh, I hurt your feelings? How about that time you ignored me for- okay, fine, you know what, listen in. But don’t go tattling to any of the other lions!”*

*Lance frowned. “Anyway. Weird week. I guess I thought stuff would change, after that whole Lance-is-Altean revelation. Also the Maybe-Carma-Killed-Shiro revelation and the fact that Keith kisses me daily now. Hm. Weird week.”*

*He tugged at the elastic, looking a little cold in just a t-shirt.*

*“Had a good talk to Allura about that, the Altean thing. It’s... I still feel human, cause I am human. Earth is my home, and... I want to feel some bigger connection to Altea now, but I guess I don’t. It has made me feel closer to Allura, weirdly. Kinda like she became so attached to the bodies on that planet, I guess anything remotely Altean is a relief. It’s a surprise, for her, just a*



*tiny something she can hold onto. I guess I do the same with things from Earth, huh?"*

*Lance huffed. "The Carma thing is less ideal. I'm cool with having Altean heritage, but not when it means some ancient spirit has beef with my family. I mean she... that's why Allita died, right? And... my great aunts? Everyone, all the twins, which makes me wonder if like, if I don't stop this, is it going to keep happening? If we all die, Carma, she'll... she'll keep going for twins, right? Even more generations turning out like me and Allita, I don't want that to happen. What if one of my siblings has twins? They'll... I don't want them to have this life, I..."*

*Lance trailed off, staring glumly at the floor. "I don't want anymore death."*

*"Which brings me to Shiro," he said suddenly. "Allura doesn't want to believe me. And hell, I agree, it's a far-fetched theory. But why... why else would it be now? Okay, the baby can open wormholes, that's convenient, but I don't see how this thing could have found baby without a- I don't know, a scent, something. Shiro is the answer. And I hate that, I hate it, and there's no way I'm telling Keith, but Allura deserved to know what I thought."*

*Lance sighed heavily, arms curled around himself; he looked cold. "I hope I'm wrong. God, I hope so. But if I'm not I... I'm not letting this thing hurt people who aren't even involved. Keith, Allura, Shiro, their child... they're not part of this. They're only getting hurt cause of me, cause they're stuck with me, and I can't allow that, I can't let it keep happening when--"*

*Lance faltered when the door to the cockpit slid open, quickly swallowing his words when a very sleep looking Keith came wondering in.*

*"Oh, hey Keith!" He stammered, shoving aside the screens of Altean history detailing Carma's story.*

*His face lit up in an instant, all traces of his dismal mood gone; Keith looked far less enthused to even be alive at that hour as he stumbled blearily into the small room and found his way into Lance's lap.*

*"I-is that my jacket?" Lance squeaked, wrapping arms around Keith to keep him from toppling off the chair.*

*Keith just curled around him, draping his arms, which were indeed covered by Lance's jacket, around his neck and dropping his cheek against Lance's chest. Half-shocked, half-relieved, Lance pulled him awkwardly closer as he tried to continue with the log.*

*"I, uh, I'm trying to make a captain's log."*

*Keith grumbled, as if to say so?*

*"Which means I, uh..." Lance's protests died on his tongue as he glanced down at Keith asleep against his chest.*

*"What are the historians gonna say about this when they watch my logs, huh?" He insisted weakly, stroking Keith's hair.*

*"Room felt weird," Keith mumbled, causing Lance to frown.*

*"Weird? What kind of weird? Like Carma is about to possess me weird? Castle been overrun--"*

*"Just weird without you," Keith interrupted, and Lance's expression crumbled in about twelve different ways.*

*“O-oh. That’s... nice. You can stay. I guess. We were just... uh...”*

*Lance faltered when Keith pressed a kiss to his shoulder.*

*“What were we talking about, Black?”*

*The lion broadcast an emotion that felt largely like amusement.*

*“Crystals!” Lance squeaked. “Today’s plan! We... we’re gonna go hide out in some crystals. Which is... um...”*

*His eyes fluttered shut, giving in for a moment to the warm body wrapped around him and the soft kisses layering themselves onto his skin.*

*“A good idea,” Lance breathed.*

*“Did you talk about the crystal cluster yet?” Keith asked suddenly, as if it was all back to business.*

*“No, I got side-tracked.”*

*“How’d you get side-tracked talking to a sentient robot lion-“*

*“By you, dumbass,” Lance muttered, fingers following a bruise that had been gradually creeping up Keith’s neck like an ink-stain.*

*“Sorry,” said Keith, not sounding sorry in the slightest.*

*Lance huffed, hugging Keith tight to stop the kisses so Lance could actually speak.*

*“So I’m really excited today,” Lance said quickly, glaring at the boy in his arms who had chosen to attack his hair and mess it up now that he’d been denied the right to keep kissing. “Because I have an idea. Okay, so really Hunk had the idea, but I get the privilege of telling you the idea. It came when we were talking about the Blade of Marmora, right? We were just wondering what they were up to, when bam, the crystal cluster. You know, the one Ulaz had that base hidden in? Zarkon couldn’t detect him in that thing, not even with all his creepy druid magic. So then Hunk, right, was like, well, what if we take the castle into a cluster like that before we wormhole? Cause if Zarkon couldn’t detect a ship hidden in there, then why should Carma?”*

*Lance was beaming now, and even Keith stopped harassing him to gaze up at him fondly.*

*“It’s brilliant, right? I mean come on, Zarkon’s detection powers were unheard of. Carma, if I’m correct, needed the baby’s scent to-uh.” He glanced down at Keith, before quickly amending his words. “You know. So a bunch of crystals between us and this stupid system? She isn’t gonna stand a chance.”*

*“At least we hope so,” Keith mumbled.*

*“Dude, don’t dampen the mood.”*

*“I’m being realistic-“*

*“Uh, no, nope,” Lance slapped a hand over his mouth. “I don’t appreciate pessimism at this hour of the morning. Besides, you can’t talk about being realistic, you think Mothman’s real.”*

*“Ffff-“ is all Keith managed in response, trying to pry the hand away from his mouth but finding*

*his arms were trapped now that Lance had taken advantage of the hold he had on him.*

*“Pessimists are never disappointed,” Keith managed, when he finally succeeded in jabbing an elbow into Lance’s stomach.*

*“On the contrary, pessimists are always disappointed.”*

*“If you expect the worse-“*

*“That’s such an unhealthy way of thinking!”*

*“Well I’m not a pessimist anyway! I’m a realist-“*

*“Shh!” Lance mumbled against his lips, raising Keith’s head to kiss him.*

*“What will the historians think when they watch this?” Keith teased, though didn’t object to the next kiss.*

*“They’ll think damn,” said Lance, softening his voice for a second. “That’s the luckiest guy in the world.”*

*Keith flushed pink unintentionally, staring up at the boy above him with something akin to bewilderment. Then Lance smirked.*

*“I mean, getting to kiss Lance McClain-“*

*“Idiot!”*

*“Your face-“*

*“You can sleep on the floor.”*

*“Keith, no, come back!” Lance called after the red paladin as he got up from his lap and headed toward the door. “I need my jacket, I’m cold!”*

*Keith just laughed, already out the cockpit, his voice echoing up the ramp.*

*“You can have it back at breakfast!”*

*Lance swore jokingly, glancing between the camera and the doorway that Keith had disappeared through. He seemed to debate it a moment, before shooting a quick wave at Black, and taking off after Keith with a soft smile on his face.*

-

*“That looks... difficult to get into,” Pidge remarked, seated at her spot on the bridge, staring out at the field of bright blue crystals before them.*

*“There’s no way we’re getting through,” said Hunk. “We’ll be like boulders in a baking sieve.”*

*“We’re gonna be flattened,” said Pidge.*

*“Pulverised.”*

*“Reduced to ashes.”*

*“Steam rolled.”*

“Since they explode, technically we couldn’t be steam-“

“Or,” said Allura. “We can draw some of the crystals carefully out, work our way in, and cover up our tracks.”

“That does sound a better idea than barging right in,” Hunk said thoughtfully.

“As fun as the bull in a china shop approach could be,” Pidge added wistfully.

“Okay, but how do we do that?” Lance asked.

He was stood beside Coran as the elder Altean tried to bring up some sort of map of the crystal cluster before them. Unsurprisingly, it didn’t scan very well.

“With magnetism, of sorts,” the princess answered.

“It will be a slow process, but we have to play this safe, we’ve seen very well what these crystals do. If we attach magnets to specific crystals, we should be able to slowly draw them out, thus allowing us is.”

The team all groaned, already envisioning how much work that was going to be.

“Come now paladins,” Coran said with a wave of his finger. “It’s better than dying now, isn’t it?”

It was barely, thought Lance, five hours into their mission, better than dying. It wasn’t just the time it took to go about attaching magnets to the crystals, it was how absolutely nerve-wracking the whole process was. If anyone accidentally bumped a crystal, or if they moved them in the wrong order, it would unleash some grisly consequences. He was sweating out of actual fear, hovering motionlessly in his space suit while setting up surfaces on the crystal that the magnets would be able to cling too. It was a whole team effort, and the four paladins spent hours moving slowly through the narrow spaces between the crystals, attaching magnets and reporting back to Coran about the order the crystals could be moved in.

When they finally dragged themselves back inside, it was another couple of hours watching with intense focus as the magnets on the crystals were activated and deactivated respectively, and they inched each structure from its place among the crowd. Come evening, they had a sort of tunnel burrowed deep into the cluster; the perfect hiding place, if Lance were in a perky enough mood to actually be proud of it. Allura was the one to pilot the castle carefully into their dangerous hideout, the tunnel just big enough for the castle to slip into. Then it was back to the beginning, drawing the crystals back one by one until were boxed in, undetectable to the outside world. Lance tried to ignore the claustrophobia clawing at his throat.

“Perfect,” said Allura, peering out the window at the crystals pressing in on them.

It was brighter and darker all the same. Blue light poured in through the windows, glossy and beautiful yet somehow emphasising the black shadows buried in the tight corners where crystals met.

“No offense to the castle or anything, but those Marmora guys had some real good ideas. As in, easier ideas than moving a hundred highly volatile crystals.”

Lance nodded in agreement with Pidge, and idly wondered if they could consider seeking out the Blade for help. Allura had turned down his idea of seeking out other species to help them, in case Carma took an interest in hurting them too, but the Blade was bred for conflict. Besides, maybe being Galra got you brownie points with an Altean-hating spirit. Still, as intensive as the work had

been, if this worked...

“What if it doesn’t work?”

“Thought you were all about optimism?” Keith remarked.

Lance shuffled nervously from foot to foot. “Yeah, but now that we’re here...”

Now that they were there, it looked more daunting. If a wormhole did open now, when they were buried in these crystals, would that be dangerous? Even worse, it would mean the plan hadn’t worked.

“I’m feeling confident about this,” Allura said. “We all trust Hunk’s ingenuity.”

“Yeah,” Lance muttered, trying to swallow his doubt.

“Hey,” Keith said quietly beside him. “We’ll be alright.”

Lance wanted desperately to believe that.

“How long til the wormhole?”

“Four hours,” said Pidge. “Then we’ll see, I guess.”

-

It was different now, staring out the window. Lance took every opportunity he could when they were out of that star system to gaze out at the stars and see better times and better places. There were no stars to be seen here, but he watched the crystals restlessly, eyes burning at how bright they were, seeking out the spaces between them, trying to find a way out to open space. He didn’t want a way out, because a way out meant a way in for Carma. Those four hours weren’t that long really, not when he could lose himself to the vast field of crystals encasing them.

A hand settling on his shoulder broke him from his trance.

“Lance.”

It was Allura.

“It’s two am.”

“Oh.”

He uncrossed his legs; they were stiff from sitting, and his vision blurry from staying fixed on the crystals.

“Already?”

Allura smiled thinly.

“This will work.”

“Yeah. It will.”

Lance followed her to the centre of the room, where the rest of the team was gathered around anxiously.

“Everyone ready?” Allura asked.

Pidge frowned. “For what?”

“I... don’t know.”

“For nothing to happen,” said Keith with unrivalled confidence. “These crystals blocked out Zarkon.”

“Zarkon wasn’t... no, you’re right,” said Hunk, shaking the doubt from his own mind.

Allura’s hand settled over her stomach, bracing herself against a chair; *just in case*. Lance inched a little closer to her, keeping a watchful eye on the princess. Now that she knew it was her baby being used to open the wormholes, she was adamant that she move them before Carma got the chance to exploit the child. Her worry wasn’t misplaced; Coran had said that the baby was under stress.

“It’s three past two,” said Pidge.

Lance blinked. His hands were trembling. *Where is it?*

“Exactly?”

“We’re ten seconds in.”

“Where is it?”

“Everyone quiet,” said Allura.

The bridge fell silent and they gathered into a small circle, peering anxiously out at the crystals. Lance hardly dared to breath. Three past two, that was the time it always opened. The seconds dragged on forever, until he wasn’t sure he could take it.

“Come on,” Lance hissed.

“Quiet.”

“Allura-“

“Pidge, quiet-“

“But it’s... it’s four past.”

Lance stopped breathing. His head whipped to the small timer Pidge was holding. Their gaze met, and he saw hope gathering in Pidge’s eyes as the girl’s fingers tightened around the clock.

“Is it?”

“Four minutes past,” Coran confirmed.

“Oh my god,” Hunk whispered. “Did it...”

“Just, let’s be patient,” said Allura, but she sounded hopeful.

“It’s not here,” Lance breathed.

He looked around at each of his teammates, as if to confirm they were all experiencing the same

thing.

“F-five minutes past,” Pidge stuttered, a small smile curling her lip. “That’s two minutes past the usual time, that- it’s never taken this long.”

Despite the nerves making a mess of his senses, Lance found himself starting to smile.

“Holy shit,” he said shakily.

Somehow the sight of Hunk was the funniest of all. His friend stood with his mouth hanging open, watching the seconds tick by on Pidge’s clock in disbelief. He met Lance’s eye, but his stunned expression didn’t change.

“This is…” Allura shook her head, staring out at the crystals. “We can- we can do something with this. We can modify the crystals, construct a shield of sorts or- there are *possibilities*.”

Her relief was almost tangible. Lance found himself staring, caught off guard by how young Allura looked, how hopeful, her eyes coming alive and her whole posture shifting to accommodate this new-found courage. Finally, a step in the right direction, and a step-back into the Allura she was before. That was foreseeably when Keith collapsed.

Lance turned faster than light at the sound of Pidge’s warning cry, just in time to catch the red paladin falling to his knees, hands clamped over his ears, eyes wide and terrified.

“Everyone back!” Allura ordered, even as Lance and Pidge both moved toward him.

“Keith?” Pidge dropped to the ground beside him, raising a hand cautiously to hover over his shoulder.

Keith had begun to whine low in his throat, almost inaudible, his lips moving around gritted teeth, whispering something. *Shit*.

“Keith.”

Lance knelt before him, hands raised so the red paladin could see them, slowly moving them to cover his own. Keith’s nails dug into his skull, covering his ears as if to block out some deafening sound.

“Keith, look at me,” Lance said softly, hands settling on Keith’s. “Look at me, can you hear me?”

“Lance,” Pidge said, looking scared. “What’s wrong? What’s he hearing?”

“Come away, Pidge,” Coran urged, hand on Allura’s shoulder to hold her back.

“But it’s her,” said Pidge. “Isn’t it? How’s she here?”

“Keith,” Lance repeated.

Nothing. The boy bit down on his lip, mumbling words too quiet to hear, eyes boring holes into the floor, his whole face screwed up in pain.

“Keith, listen, focus on me.”

Lance tightened his hold on Keith’s hands, slowly trying to pry them away from his head. His nails were beginning to draw blood; Lance could feel it sticking to his hair.

“Hey,” he said. “Stop. Stop it, you’re hurting yourself.”

“Be careful Lance,” Hunk called, but all Lance’s attention was on his teammate.

“Keith,” Pidge pleaded, reaching out to pull his fingers away from his head. “That’s too tight, please, come on, let go.”

Sweat was beading on Keith’s forehead, lips moving frantically, forming too many words for Lance to keep track of.

“Come on,” he hissed, pulling harder on Keith’s hands.

The boy jerked back with a stuttering cry, digging his nails deeper, hands closing tighter around his head.

“Dammit, hold him still, Pidge!”

The younger paladin lunged for her friend, locking arms around Keith’s middle as Lance came for his hands while trying desperately to meet Keith’s eye.

“Lance, are you sure you should be doing that?” Allura asked, sounding very wary.

“He’s hurting himself, he- stop moving, Keith, let go!”

“Let me-“

“Stay back, Hunk, I might need you, j-just-“ Lance grabbed Keith’s hands, gritting his teeth as he twisted the red paladin’s finger’s away from his head.

“Oh, this is bad,” Hunk was mumbling, but Lance *could not focus*, because Keith was digging nails in hard enough to make himself bleed, and no matter how tight Pidge was holding him Lance couldn’t get a grip and Keith was going to keep bleeding and keep suffering and keep *hearing-*

He ripped Keith’s hands away from his ears, trapping the bloody fingers with his own for less than a second before all the words came pouring from Keith’s mouth, loud and afraid and desperate, whispers of a thousand voices amplified, taking flight, tearing away from the prison Keith had been holding them in.

*“Shouldn’t have shouldn’t have you shouldn’t don’t do it, wrong of you wrong of you wrong of you how could you-“*

An endless stream for which he didn’t draw breath, so strong and accusing Lance fell back. Pidge yelped, her hold on Keith faltering as he sat up straight, arms hanging limply by his sides, bearing traces of the blood he’d left smeared down his ears.

*“Hide from me did me wrong shouldn’t have don’t do it don’t do it don’t-“*

“Lance, do something!” Pidge yelled, as Keith grew more and more aggressive, raising his voice and beginning to strain against the hold she had on him.

Lance could only stare, at the blood streaking down Keith’s ears, and the terrified expression on Pidge’s face, at Allura in the corner of his eyes, who’d fallen silent, a choked gasp escaping as she doubled over, gripping her stomach. He looked at Keith’s lips, moving endlessly with words.

*“Don’t do it don’t do it don’t do it don’t do it don’t-“*



Lance flinched when Keith's eyes snapped up to meet his.

"Don't hide from me."

*Me.* The word left his lips, and the world imploded. Space was silent as the ship collided. Space was silent, as crystal after crystal ploughed into the castle. Space was silent, not a whisper, not a word, a pure, untouched vacuum as the field around them erupted in violent explosions, enough to deafen if anyone could hear, which they couldn't, because the dark and the cold and the treacherous expanse of *nothingness* stole it all.

Space was silent, but within the castle, the roar of a hundred volatile crystals erupting against their ship filled the very air the paladin's breathed. Lance was thrown back from Keith as the castle jerked violently, with enough force to slam him against the controls. He couldn't even find a second to catch his breath, gasping at the pain that shot through his back, before the ship shook and careened sideways, knocking into more crystals on its way.

"Hold!" Allura yelled, but her voice was tight and her words disappeared into the explosion that overtook the side of the ship.

Blinding blue light engulfed them like a tsunami, crashing down on them from every angle. It rattled the bridge and sent the lights haywire. Lance hit the floor as the ground shifted, the whole room shaking as they were tugged harshly toward through the crystals.

"Hold on!" He yelled, though that wouldn't be any help to them if the ship blew up.

He didn't need to see or say it to know; a bright blue light had infiltrated its way through the crystals, a different, deeper blue to the structures themselves. *The wormhole.* Lance grit his teeth, forcing himself to his knees, head spinning as they room spun with them, the castle spiralling out of control.

"Allura!" He called, only for the words to lodge in his throat at the sight of the princess doubled over on the floor, gasping for air.

Lance half-stumbled, half-crawled toward her, staggering over the trembling ground, his eyes widening as blinding light overtook the room, and the crystals began cracking, shattering, exploding.

"Ke-"

Pidge gasped sharply, and Lance forced himself around to look. His blood ran cold, pulse stopping suddenly at the sight. Keith had grabbed Pidge by the neck, his eyes burning an inverted black and white as he pinned her to the floor. The girl's eyes widened, her hands flying to and clawing at the hand that had closed around her throat. The whole world was shaking, blurring, distorting Lance's vision.

"Keith!"

The boy's head snapped up, locking eyes with Lance as he dug fingers into Pidge's neck, never letting up no matter how much she scratched at him and kicked about. They weren't his eyes; stark white iris's stared back at Lance, surrounded by murky black that seemed to bleed from Keith's eyes into the dark patches over his skin.

"Lance," he said.

The castle shuddered violently, drawing back toward open space, knocking into crystal after crystal

on its way. Lance could barely see the room was shaking so violently. Pidge's back arched, trying to tear Keith's hand from her throat, but losing oxygen fast.

"Lance!"

Hunk was behind him, crawling across the floor toward Allura, whose head was bowed as she gasped soundlessly. *Pained.*

"Lance," said Keith, as Lance tried to get to his feet, tried moving toward them. "Don't hide."

An explosion ripped through the side of the castle, a dozen alarms going off as air was sucked violently into space.

"Shit!" Lance screamed, falling before even making it a step.

The floor lurched toward him, then back down, the ship turning this way and that as it was pulled from hiding, battered and thrown about by the force of exploding crystals.

"Stop!"

Keith's face was blank, emotionless. The world was coming apart around them, but Lance could still see his face, and his fingers as they dug harder into Pidge's neck, silencing the girl's weak cries of protest. Another second, and they'd be in the disorientating storm of a wormhole. Lance threw himself forward with Keith's eyes burning into him.

He collided with the boy as an explosion tore through another section of the ship, the castle going into an uncontrolled spin as it entered open space, bringing shards of crystal along with it. He threw them both to the floor with enough force to separate Keith from Pidge, locking his arms around the boy to keep him from moving. Through all the shaking, the chaos, and noise, and movement, Lance could still feel Keith thrashing about in his arms, kicking at his legs that were splayed on the floor, twisting and bucking, trying to distance himself from Lance's chest, and the arms holding him down. Lance shut his eyes, and just held on.

Light flared behind his lids, vibrations within the castle too deep to be heard, only felt. Other, audible sounds, shrill alarms and metal tearing, walls bursting open, air streaming out from punctures in the vessel. Cries from his teammates filled the air, disjointed and disorganised, some pained, all desperate. Smaller hands found their way around Lance's waist as Pidge sought out a way to hold herself to him and Keith. The floor hurt when they collided with it over and over again, tossed about carelessly as the castle kept spinning, no gravity or friction to slow it. Lance just held tight, wrapping himself around the possessed body of Keith, ignoring the words spilling from him, or the weak cries from the smaller paladin clinging to his waist.

The castle kept spinning, faster, faster, and Lance feared he might lose consciousness. The light had faded from his vision, but he couldn't tell if they were still in the wormhole. The world just kept going around and around and around- a deep boom resonated from the engines, and he feared they were about to be consumed by flames. Instead, the spinning began to slow. Lance kept his eyes shut, focusing on the queasy feeling in his chest, and the body in his arms that was slowly starting to still. Despite the fact they were already sprawled across the floor, Lance felt like collapsing, all his limbs leaden and disorientated, head throbbing and lolling against the floor. He managed to convince his fingers to keep hold of Keith, but now the boy had stopped fighting, and was shaking in his arms.

"No one move."

That was Coran's voice. He sounded... Lance felt like curling up and dying; he sounded *wrecked*.

"No one move just yet," their advisor called, somewhere in the disaster of that room.

Lance heard someone hunch over and puke; he was about five hundred percent sure it was Hunk.

Keith stirred very weakly in Lance's arms, before asking in the smallest, tiredest, most hesitant voice, "Pidge?"

"Present," the girl clinging to Lance's waist croaked, raising a hand and trying to reach over him to Keith.

She ended up slapping Lance in the face before collapsing back against the floor. Keith started crying; Lance felt it more than he heard, the back pressed to his chest beginning to shake. He hugged Keith tighter, no longer pinning his arms to his side, rather gathering him up in way of comfort.

"S'okay."

It wasn't. He pressed a kiss to the back of Keith's neck.

"Sh, we're okay."

His stomach felt uneasy, throat closing up as a nauseating feeling clawed its way up. His head was still stuck on a merry-go round, brain bashing into the sides of his skull as it was thrown around and around. The castle had stopped moving, probably. Lance groaned, his vision swimming when he tried to open his eyes.

"Just lie still," Coran said again. "We're all a bit dizzy."

"Is everyone alright?"

That was Allura, sounding thoroughly beat. Various, ill sounding groans filled the air.

"I've counteracted the spin," Coran informed. "We're slowing down now."

"Where are we?" Lance slurred.

Keith was crying weakly in his arms; he hugged him tighter.

"Same as ever, my boy."

"Except we..."

"Hit the crystals, yes. Went into an uncontrolled spin. And uh..."

"Broke the castle," Allura guessed.

Lance cracked open an eye. She was lying flat on the floor, staring up at the ceiling with her hair splayed all around. She was paler than usual, tears streaking her cheeks, but she seemed to be alright. Hunk was curled in a ball beside her, whimpering. An explosion sounded somewhere deep in the castle, followed by a suspicious whirling sound.

"Oh good," said Allura. "There goes our water."

Chapter End Notes

boi

## Chapter Notes

We are back on schedule yaaaaaaaay!!

Thanks so much to everyone reading, and especially to your comments they are!! So nice!!! (but just to confirm THAT WAS THE CASTLES WATER SUPPLY BREAKING AT THE END OF LAST CHAPTER N O T ALLURA'S HOLY SHIT SORRY I DIDN'T REALISE THAT WOULD COME OUT SOUNDING LIKE THAT we are all good there are no babies on the way yet)

this chapters just,,,,, 8000 words of cheesy shit im sorry  
some sad stuff too but the cheese far outnumbered it

thanks guys enjoy! this is extremely unedited I'm sorry!!! <3  
ALSO just be aware more time passes then usual over the course of this chapter  
CHEERS

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

**Star date – 33:07:04**

**Castle Cycle – 12:34**

**Log – 18**

*When the recording began, the first thing to pop onto screen was a very grubby hand clutching a wrench. Lance followed soon after, tinkering with something near the camera before drawing back and collapsing into his chair.*

*“Captain’s log!” he announced, pushing back hair from his forehead, which was smothered in dark grease. “If this recording is actually working. The, uh, the crystals didn’t work. In fact, they un-worked so epically we practically destroyed the castle.”*

*Lance hoisted the wrench up in the air. His whole body was covered in engine grease and dirt. Dressed in his scrappiest shirt and jeans, his hair stood on end, and his usually immaculate nails were caked with black goo.*

*“Yeah,” he said, rubbing at a grease smear under his eyes. “Castle’s fucked.”*

*Strangely, he laughed. When his eyes locked with the camera, they didn’t look as fearful or haunted as other times.*

*“It’s not funny. But I’m not taking this too seriously, because if I do, I’m going to lose my freaking mind.”*

*He puffed out his cheeks, legs swinging restlessly, skirting the floor.*

*“’S been a few days since the crystals experiment. Um, everyone’s fine. We all threw up for a couple of hours after that whole spin, but we’re good now. Coran managed to slow us, luckily, else*

*we might've just kept spinning until we died or something. Uh... Allura's alright. She said she was in a lot of pain, and of course she freaked because that was her baby opening the wormhole again. Pidge is a bit bruised, but good. Keith was like, super fucking upset. Like... super, fucking upset. He tried to do the whole run away and hide since he nearly strangled Pidge, but then she kinda decked him and told him to get over himself because hiding from her was only making it worse. So they're... good? Man, I don't understand that friendship. Me and Hunk just hug these things out, you know? Like when those freaky mermaid hypnotised him? Hugs."*

*Lance sighed, gazing absentmindedly around the cockpit.*

*"I gotta get back to work soon," he said, shaking the wrench for emphasis. "This isn't actually my wrench. I stole it from Hunk because it makes me look productive. In actual fact Allura's been telling me to stick my fingers into electrical outputs all day. Which is a detail I'm not sharing with my mom, ever. But it works, I mean, I'm great at fixing that stuff. Since I can't be electrocuted apparently."*

*Lance shrugged, studying his blackened fingers as if expecting them to catch fire.*

*"It's pretty neat. But the castle's really in a bad way. We've got really limited water since that all went flying into space. I haven't showered in too long, dude. Too long. Lights keep cutting out. West wing's been eradicated. Literally, the entire side of the castle is gone. Don't know exactly what our oxygen generators are doing, but we're getting it back together slowly."*

*Lance nodded to himself slowly, compiling a mental list of everything they had to fix.*

*"Good news is," he said. "Allura agrees with me. One thing is now very, very clear."*

*He sighed, staring into the camera somewhat exasperatedly.*

*"We need help."*

-

**Star date – 33:07:07**

**Castle Cycle – 10:40**

**Log – 19**

*"Dude."*

*"Dude?"*

*"Is that a... to do list?"*

*Pidge scribbled another line down in her notebook.*

*"Yup."*

*"Nice."*

*"Mm."*

*Lance peered over Pidge's shoulder, both of them seated in the black lion's cockpit.*

*"So," said Lance. "What we gotta do?"*

*"Stuff."*

*“Wow.”*

*“I know.”*

*Lance nodded his head slowly, clutching a piece of machinery Coran had tasked him with fixing but he'd clearly gotten bored of.*

*“Seriously though, you gonna tell me?”*

*Pidge cleared her throat, holding up the list with purpose and adjusting her glasses.*

*“Find Shiro,” she read.*

*“Nice.”*

*“Find Matt.”*

*Lance nodded appreciatively. “Also nice.”*

*“Hug the shit out of Allura and Shiro's baby when this thing is born.”*

*“Erase the swear.”*

*“I'm sixteen.”*

*“Erase it.”*

*Pidge scribbled angrily at her notebook.*

*“Hug the heckie out of Allura and Shiro's baby when this thing is born.”*

*“Better.”*

*Pidge paused, glancing at Lance nervously. “Learn... how to hug a baby?”*

*“I have faith in you, Pidge.”*

*“You're doing the diapers though, not me.”*

*Lance grimaced. “Can't that be Coran's job?”*

*“Pretty sure he already made us up a chore chart, so... anyway. Next on the list is keeping Keith alive.”*

*Lance nodded enthusiastically. “That one's tough.”*

*Pidge made half an eye roll as if to say don't I know it.*

*“What's next?”*

*“Kick Carma's ass.”*

*“Super.”*

*“Get home.”*

*Lance nodded, but didn't say anything. Neither did Pidge. The former cleared his throat.*

*“There’s one more point there, I can see it.”*

*Pidge’s fingers tightened around the book. Lance’s gaze grew questioning, but he didn’t comment yet.*

*“Keep Lance safe,” read Pidge. “He doesn’t deserve to die here.”*

*Lance’s expression softened, while Pidge’s fingers remained just as tight around the book, glaring at the floor. He glanced down at his feet, then across to Pidge.*

*“That’s a nice list.”*

*Pidge nodded stiffly.*

*“Can I add one?”*

*“...Yeah?”*

*Gently, Lance pried the notebook from her hands, thinking for a second before writing down one more point. Pidge glanced at it as he handed it back, a wobbly smile briefly flashing across her face*

*“Take Pidge to the circus or something,” she read. “She needs to laugh.”*

*Pidge did laugh then, just a small, half-hearted chuckle, with a hint of genuine appreciation.*

*“Thanks, Lance,” she said, and he smiled back. “We could both do with that.”*

-

**Star date – 33:07:09**

**Castle Cycle – 17:46**

**Log – 20**

*“What do you wash your hair with, by the way?”*

*Keith glanced up from his place in the corner of the cockpit, some tools in hand as he rewired the piece of panel laid out before him.*

*“What?”*

*“Your hair, what shampoo do you use, cause it’s really nice.”*

*Keith shrugged, returning to his project. “I don’t know, three-in-one or something.”*

*Lance gasped loudly enough to startle his boyfriend out of his work.*

*“What? You use what?”*

*“Is there... a problem?”*

*“Is there a problem? You’re telling me you wash your hair and body with the same gel?”*

*Keith frowned. “Yeah?”*

*Lance buried his face in his hands where he was sprawled across the pilot’s chair.*



*“Nooo! What are you?”*

*“Is that... is that a rhetorical question?”*

*“You know I’m seriously debating it.”*

*“It’s not like it’s your hair,” Keith said snappily. “Why’d you even care?”*

*“Because I...” Lance grasped at thin air as if in search of an answer. “Like your hair?”*

*“Then why is this a problem?”*

*“It’s a matter of principle! How am I- how can... as a prime investor in your hair-“*

*“What does that even mean-“*

*“It’s in both of our best interests to take into account my statement of recommendation-“*

*“You’re ridiculous-“*

*“That you consider using shampoo, conditioner, and soap, as three separate entities.”*

*“If you like my hair,” said Keith bluntly, “then what’s the problem?”*

*“I don’t want you going bald before we’re even thirty!”*

*“I’m not gonna- how’d you know three-in-one doesn’t work better on Galra hair?”*

*“Your hair isn’t Galra!”*

*“Yes it is!”*

*“If it was Galra, it’d be purple. Is it? N-“ Lance cut himself off, squinting seriously at Keith’s hair.  
“...No?”*

*Keith scoffed in amusement, turning away to continue with his work. “Don’t you have actual stuff to do?”*

*“Well yeah, but it’s paperwork,” Lance grumbled. “Why can’t Coran do the system report?”*

*“I’m sure if you ask nicely he’ll exchange jobs.”*

*“Sweet! Wait, what’s Coran doing?”*

*“Fixing the sewage system,” Keith said with a smirk.*

*“Forget I asked!” Lance yelled as Keith dissolved into laughter in the background.*

-

**Star date – 33:07:14**

**Castle Cycle – 08:03**

**Log – 21**

*Two pale faces stared straight back into the camera lens, both frowning lightly.*

*“Why does he record, like, everything?” Pidge asked, sticking her nose so close she nearly mushed*

*it into the screen.*

*“Beats me,” muttered Keith, tapping at the corner of the camera.*

*“You guys better not be fucking with the recording!” Lance’s voice shouted from somewhere out of sight, over the sound of music blaring through the cockpit.*

*“Chill, we’re just looking,” Pidge shouted back. “Why’d you always have the log on, though?”*

*“To bond,” Lance yelled.*

*He poked his head and upper torso out, upside-down from an opening in the ceiling a second after Keith’s obvious eye roll.*

*“Me and Black are tight,” he said, crossing two fingers together. “Gotta include ‘em in the conversation.”*

*“And Blue?”*

*“Blue eavesdrops,” Lance said through a strained breath as he reached back up into the ceiling for something.*

*He paused, frowning at the music.*

*“Is this Blondie?”*

*“Mm,” said Pidge. “One Way Or Another is kinda Carma’s jam, don’t you think?”*

*“Pidge,” Lance deadpanned. “Not helping.”*

*“Keith thought it was funny.”*

*“What? I don’t even know who Blondie is!”*

*“Yeah, but you suggested the song might sound like something-“*

*“Lemme know when you guys are done assigning a theme song to my arch nemesis,” said Lance, ducking back up into the ceiling.*

*“My talents are wasted here,” Pidge mumbled.*

*She and Keith both jumped about a foot into the air as Lance suddenly dropped his upper body back through the hole, with an animated, “Keith!”*

*“What?” The red paladin snapped, shocked by Lance’s sudden enthusiasm.*

*“Do the Spiderman kiss!”*

*Keith stared at him blankly. “What?”*

*“You know! Mary-Jane, Spidey, hanging upside down in the rain? Come on, dude,” Lance exclaimed, gesturing proudly to his own-self hanging upside down. “It’s perfect!”*

*Keith shook his head, confusing marring his features. “I don’t... what even is that?”*

*“Spiderman One? Toby Maguire? Dude.”*

*Lance locked eyes with Pidge. “Dude. You never showed him Spiderman?”*

*“I can’t be responsible for showing him every movie,” Pidge argued.*

*“But it’s Spiderman!”*

*“You show him Spiderman, especially if it’s just for the dumb kiss scene.”*

*“Not dumb, it’s genius, it’s romantic, it’s- yo yo yo! Pidge! Your elbow-” Lance’s squeak was cut short as Pidge’s arm accidentally knocked into the elaborate recording set up and the video cut out.*

-

**Star date – 33:07:14**

**Castle Cycle – 17:46**

**Log – 22**

*“Black? Blaaaaack? C’mon buddy, can you hear me? Helloooooo?”*

*The camera was blocked by Lance’s body, shifting around in front of it as he tried to reconnect all its components.*

*“I kicked the others out, I’m sorry they knocked this over, I know that wormhole put you through a blender, Bla- oh! Oh I see the recording light! Are you working? You’re working!”*

*Lance pulled back, beaming.*

*“Black! Sorry buddy, Pidge knocked my set-up over. It’s very delicate right now, you still need a lot of fixing.”*

*Hands planted on hips, Lance looked over the recording set-up.*

*“That should do it. Anyway, it’s breakfast time. So... see ya!”*

-

**Star date – 33:07:20**

**Castle Cycle – 15:09**

**Log – 23**

*“Did I ever even introduce you on the log?”*

*Hunk pursed his lips, lying back on the pilot’s chair with a green goop coating his face and two circles of a suspicious looking fruit laid over his eyes.*

*“No, I don’t think so.”*

*“Wow,” said Lance, draped over the chair beside him in much the same state. “I’m so rude.”*

*“Yeah,” said Hunk. “You’re the worst.”*

*Lance hummed, fingers fidgeting slightly where they rested over his stomach.*

*“Yours dry yet?”*

*Hunk reached out to poke a finger at his facemask. “Nope.”*

*“Ugh, they’re taking forever.”*

*“Mm.”*

*The two lay in silence for a minute, basking in the cosy confines of Black’s cockpit.*

*“So, d’you hear about Coran’s moustache?”*

*Lance raised a brow, adjusting the fruit over his eye. “What about his moustache?”*

*“That he was born with it?”*

*“What? There’s no way he was born with a moustache.”*

*“Was too,” Hunk argued. “Allura told me.”*

*Lance frowned. “Allura wasn’t even around when Coran was born. He must’ve been ancient already when she was a baby.”*

*“Dude, didn’t she show you his baby photos?”*

*“Yeah but... that was his hair.”*

*“That’s where you’re wrong. It was his moustache.”*

*“No...” Lance muttered, crinkling his nose. “No.”*

*“Yep.”*

*“Noooo-“*

*“It is.”*

*“What did it do? Migrate down his face? Wait, can it- do you think?”*

*Now it was Hunk’s turn to frown. “Oh. I really hadn’t thought about it.”*

*The two shared a moment of disgust.*

*“That’s...”*

*“Whack.”*

*“Yeah.”*

*“Tell me about it. I haven’t stopped looking at it since.”*

*Lance just shook his head.*

*“Five more minutes with these,” he said, rubbing at the goo on his face. “If they haven’t dried, we’re trying another recipe.”*

-

**Star date – 33:07:25**

**Castle Cycle – 10:30**

**Log – 24**

*“This one!”*

*“Oh, nice. Hang on, show Black, you gotta go by the camera.”*

*Allura spun into view of the camera, resting an elbow on and leaning against the pilot’s chair.*

*“A bit puffy around the ankles,” she muttered, tugging at the dress she wore, her mother’s.*

*“The colours nice. It’s kinda fun. Besides, it fits.”*

*“Hm.”*

*Allura frowned slightly, prodding the sides of the dress, which fit snugly around the growing bump of her stomach.*

*“I’ll try the other one, then decide.”*

*“Sounds good,” Lance said, walking past with a roll of duck tape and scissors.*

*Allura disappeared from view, but her voice could still be heard as she called across the cockpit to Lance.*

*“How are the repairs on the lion going?”*

*“Good,” Lance called back. “Nearly done. She was real bashed up though.”*

*“Good,” Allura said, voice muffled by the fabric of the dress she was tugging over her head.*

*A second later she remerged, brows knitting together.*

*“Uh...”*

*Lance poked his head in at the sound of her hesitation.*

*“No,” he said, before Allura could comment.*

*“It... fits?”*

*“You look like a transformer.”*

*“And I suppose that is not a desirable look.”*

*“It’s... a lot like Voltron actually.”*

*Lance paused, frowning.*

*“But no. How are you not super uncomfortable already?”*

*“I sort of am.”*

*“The first dress works.”*

*“It does.”*

*“Wanna watch Transformers?”*

*“I suppose.”*

-

**Star date – 33:07:25**

**Castle Cycle – 11:51**

**Log – 24**

*“This movie,” said Allura, arms looped around her knees. “I don’t like it. These robots aren’t big enough.”*

*Lance nodded slowly along with her, flashes of light from the movie playing on the screen illuminating their faces.*

*“Yeah, this kinda looks a lot less impressive after Voltron.”*

*He shrugged.*

*“I never really liked Transformers. Wanna watch Star Wars?”*

-

**Star date – 33:07:25**

**Castle Cycle – 15:55**

**Log – 24**

*“What! How was I- no of course I didn’t know the image of Yoda was going to insult the... the whatever-“*

*“The Morzion’s!” Allura exclaimed angrily. “Why I- I’ve never seen such a mock-up-“*

*“It was a coincidence!” Lance tried in vain, flailing forward to stop the movie before Allura could put her fist through the screen.*

*“After years of oppression, they come up with this- this joke-“*

*“Allura, please, Yoda isn’t meant to be a Morizon, he’s meant to be Yoda.”*

*“The insolence-“*

*“Jaws!” Lance said hastily. “An Earth classic.”*

-

**Star date – 33:07:25**

**Castle Cycle – 18:02**

**Log – 24**

*“Lance?”*

*“Yes?”*

*“Is the shark real?”*

*“No.”*

*“Okay. Thanks.”*

*"No problem."*

*The pair fell silent for a moment, blue light washing over their faces and shrill screams bursting from the set of speakers before them. Lance tightened the blanket around his shoulders, Allura leaned forward intently, hugging the pillow.*

*"Lance?"*

*"Yes Allura?"*

*"That man looks like Coran."*

*"I... guess he does."*

*The sound of water and another scream, and Lance flinched.*

*"Lance?"*

*He stifled a sigh. "Yeah?"*

*"Do sharks like this exist on Earth?"*

*"They used to, a long time ago."*

*"Okay."*

*More splashing, more screaming. The music reached it's climax-*

*"What happened to the sharks-"*

*"I never liked Jaws anyway, you wanna try something with a little more realism? Good, so do I."*

**Star date – 33:07:25**

**Castle Cycle – 18:37**

**Log – 24** *Allura sniffled, and Lance's expression grew a little tighter. Another minute, and she wiped at her nose. "You okay?" "Mhm." A pause. The music swelled, and Allura's bottom lip began to wobble. "Allura?" "I'm fine." "You sure?" They waited, Lance's eyes tracking Allura's nervously as they filled with tears. "Love sucks!" She cried, suddenly clutching the blanket as tears began to fall. "It's gonna have a happy ending-" "His mom d-d-died!" "Oookay," Lance said, already reaching forward to stop the film. "Love Actually, is not actually a good idea-" "Stop i-i-it!" The last thing the camera caught was Lance grimacing as Allura began to sob.*

**Star date – 33:07:25**

**Castle Cycle – 19:05**

**Log – 24** *"This one's the one, I know it." Allura looked sceptical, giving Lance the side-eye as he sat back and let the film play. She rubbed at one of the red trails still on her cheek. "No sad parts?" "Well... look, just bare with me." Allura frowned. "This looks-" "Trust me. Kill Bill. You'll love it." The princess's frown turned into a glower. "I am not convinced."*

**Star date – 33:07:25**

**Castle Cycle – 20:41**

**Log – 24**

*"I'm convinced," said Allura, her face alight in the glow of the screen.*

*Lance hummed happily, leaning into Keith who'd snuck in to join them, only to fall asleep the instant the sword fight was over.*

*"What did I tell you, no sad bits."*

*"There's still a second movie," Keith mumbled against his chest. "She'll cry in that one. I do."*

*Lance smiled, happily hugging him closer. None of them stayed awake through the second one anyway.*

**Star date – 33:07:27**

**Castle Cycle – 22:54**

**Log – 25**

*"Oxygen generator?"*

*"Functional."*

*"Atmospheric regulators?"*

*"Functional."*

*"Humidity regulators?"*

*"Functional."*

*"Primary lighting?"*

*"Functional."*

*"Secondary lighting?"*

*"Functional."*

*"Tertiary lighting?"*

*"Functional."*

*"M..." Lance glanced up at Coran, who was pacing the cockpit as the storm paladin sat stationary by the controls, reading from the list. "Mood lighting is a joke, right?"*

*"Absolutely not! What sort of space ship do you think this is?"*

*"Uh..."*

*"They're functional, by the way, the mood lights. I fixed them this morning."*

*"That's... fantastic," Lance said, glancing down at the list, perplexed.*

*"Um, fibre... no, fiberectacu...rec..."*

*"Functional!" Coran called, before Lance could butcher the word any further.*

*"Detoxifier," he said with a sigh. "I'd hope we fixed that on day one-"*

*"Oh! The Detoxifier!" Coran exclaimed, and before Lance could ask, he was up and out the cockpit, footsteps echoing down the ramp.*



*“Um,” said the boy, into the empty air their advisor had been. “Good to know we’ve all been... poisoned?”*

*He looked into Black’s camera and shrugged.*

*“I’m going to bed.”*

*The log shut off.*

-

*“Pst. Lance. Laaaance. Psssst-“*

*“Mm.”*

*“Lance. Are you awake?”*

Lance swatted groggily in the general direction of where the voice was coming from, trying to burrow deeper into his pillow. He frowned when the voices surrounded him giggled, *multiple* voices. *Suspicious*. Lance cracked open an eye, and nearly jumped out of his skin as the chorus of voices around him picked up into a deafening chorus of-

*“HAPPY BIRTHDAY!”*

Keith was the first to come into focus as he burst into laughter, hovering just above Lance. He was lucky he was cute when he laughed, else Lance might just murder him over how fast his heart was beating.

“Happy birthday, buddy,” Hunk said, pushing himself into Lance’s frame of view and holding out a freshly baked slice of cake, which, okay, looked delicious, but it was like seven am.

“It’s... my birthday?” Lance asked dumbly.

“Obviously,” said Pidge, planting hands on Keith’s shoulders as she clambered onto the bed with them.

“Wait, twenty-eighth of July, right?”

“Uh, yeah,” Lance said slowly, eyes drifting over his teammates and their wide smiles. “It... it is my birthday.”

He smiled, and the rest followed suit. Lance blinked, trying to clear his head. His eyes fell to the cake again.

“Does that... does that mean we can have cake for breakfast?”

He didn’t think he’d ever seen Hunk smile so big.

It turned out cake for breakfast was a given, since before they could restock the water supply, the consistency of their food goo had turned inedible. Lance didn’t mind in the slightest, and found himself enjoying their shared meal that morning, as well as the little gifts his teammates had managed to put together for him. They still had work to do that day, but Lance soon realised Allura had timed it with a purpose in mind.

Hands planted on hips, Lance beamed at the vortex of water being sucked up into the sky, where the castle’s storage tank was hovering.

“This is awesome,” he said, earning a scoff from Keith. “This is fucking awesome.”

They didn’t need to collect a huge amount of water; the castle recycled all its water, but they still needed a fair amount to keep that system circulating. That fair amount had been lost when the crystals had effectively torn right through the hull and storage tank. So now, finally, they were back on a planet with water.

“Looks pretty cool I guess,” Keith said, standing beside Lance on the ledge of a bank overlooking the lake.

The planet they’d come to had been abandoned for decades; the Galra had drained many of its resources dry, but it still had some considerably large fresh water lakes (mostly fresh, but the castle could purify the rest), and the remains of their mining activities, which Pidge and Hunk were currently picking apart a few hundred miles away. It was nearing evening on this side of the planet, meaning the light was soft and subdued over the lake. It didn’t really look like Earth- the sky was a tinge too purple, and the red dirt made it look more like the Martian surface. Still, there was a lake, which meant water. Which Allura insisted had not coincided with his birthday, nope, not at all.

“Hey,” Lance nudged Keith with his elbow, drawing his eyes from the distant yellow streaks of cloud across the sky. “Wanna explore?”

Keith raised a brow.

“We have to get the water.”

“Yeah, but that’s gonna take, like, an hour. Come on, we can find somewhere to swim! Allura *did* give us permission to do whatever we wanted, right?”

“Pretty sure Allura said no swimming-“

“Not in *that*,” Lance said, gesturing to the massive lake before them. “But there’s gotta be somewhere safe. Hey? Please?”

Keith tried to look stubborn for a moment, but Lance could see the façade breaking, the temptation to do something fun winning out over sensibility.

“I mean... I *guess* it’s kinda useless to wait here, right?”

Lance grinned devilishly. “Right.”

That was what landed them stumbling through rough, prickly bushes not ten minutes later, trying to contain fits of laughter at their slow struggle. Maybe this planet wasn’t all that different to Earth, Lance reasoned, if you used a bit of imagination. The red rock wasn’t that different to that found alongside riverbanks in areas where the sun shone hot, nor were the baobab-like trees and dry bushes growing through cracks in the dry earth. He liked it. What he liked even better was the small, shallow pool in the river on its way to the lake.

“Allura said no swim-“

Keith was cut off by Lance’s actual shriek of delight as he practically danced circles around the edge of the water, jabbing his finger at the pool and grinning wildly.

“I can see the bottom, there are no space crocodiles I guarantee!”

“That doesn’t mean it’s safe-“

“You scared?”

Keith glowered at him, looking between the water and Lance.

“If one of us dies, it’s *your* fault,” he said, angling a finger at Lance.

It was an empty threat, and Lance barely heard it, already whooping and tugging off the various parts of his armour. He didn’t even stop to test the temperature before launching himself into the river in nothing but his boxers, while Keith hung back, still in his flight suit. He grimaced at the water as if anticipating how cold it was already. Lance felt like a child again, resurfacing and yelling wildly as he splashed water around. He might’ve looked a little mad, but he didn’t care, it had been months since he’d been in a proper body of water, not just the artificial environment of the castle’s pool. He was laughing before he knew it, running his hands along the surface before diving back under, embracing the cold water as it closed over his head.

This felt right. It felt like all the better memories he had, calm and safe and happy. The sharp chill of his powers felt more at home here, just like he did. Keith was still just standing on the water’s edge when Lance came back to the surface, laughing and shaking water from his hair.

“Come on! It’s not even cold!”

Keith scrunched up his nose, refusing to part with his flight suit, arms wrapped around his middle as he tested the water with his toe.

“What? Can’t swim?”

“I can swim,” he snapped defensively. “Not... well.”

Lance just chuckled, gesturing to where the water rose midway up his chest. “You can stand, it’s shallow, see?”

Keith narrowed his eyes, but carefully inched his way through the shallow water, balancing on the rocky ledges. Lance grinned, extending a hand to help him down. Still focused on trying not to fall in, Keith took the helping hand, realising his mistake a second too late when Lance tugged harshly and sent him tumbling into the water. The splash wasn’t enough to hide Lance’s loud burst of laughter, especially when Keith resurfaced with his fringe hanging damply over his eyes, swiping water from his face and cursing at the cold. The look he sent Lance was murderous, but he only managed to uphold it for a second before they were both breaking down into laughter.

“Asshole,” Keith muttered, but by this point he was just joking, a wide grin splitting his face as he splashed water at Lance.

Lance escaped by diving beneath the surface and refusing to come up. He wondered idly if he’d be able to breath underwater, but quickly decided now was not the time to test that out. He could hold his breath for a while anyway, giving him time to absorb the silence. The pool was mostly still, but small sounds of shifting sands scuttled along the bottom as the river worked its way through. The floor was the same orange sand and rock, rough to the touch. Lance let himself float motionlessly, one hand held delicately against a rock to keep himself underwater. Could he control it like this? Without fear, or anger, or hatred? Lance didn’t try; instead he just lay back, let himself follow the flow of the water instead of the other way around.

He thought of the ocean, of lakes and rivers on Earth, of his childhood there. Tears sprung to his eyes but he didn’t notice, the water stealing them away. It didn’t matter anyway, they weren’t born of sadness. Lance probably could have stayed there, trying to breath underwater, but a pair of hands

on his shoulders and the hesitant press of lips against his own had him drifting back up to the surface. He wrapped arms around Keith before the other could get too far, letting him wipe the water away from his eyes before speaking.

“Getting lonely up here?”

Keith suppressed an eye roll, gesturing over Lance’s shoulder. “No, the sky’s doing something cool.”

Lance turned, taking Keith with him, setting sights on the setting sun as it lowered itself through the tangle of dry treetops toward the horizon. He sighed, something akin to relief tickling his insides. The pale purple sky was painted with streaks of yellow, the glow of the clouds colouring the air around them. It dulled down the intense orange dirt, making it softer and safer. Lance flopped back in the water, floating on his back with an arm loosely wound under Keith’s neck.

“That’s nice,” he breathed, water swamping his ears and muffling the dull chirp of desert insects as they gathered before the nightfall.

Keith hummed, though he probably hadn’t heard, floating in the water beside him. They lay there for a while, blinking up at the colourful sky, which gradually grew softer, not darker, beckoning in the long period of twilight.

“Miss Earth sunsets,” said Lance. “Those were nice.”

Keith said nothing, but Lance could feel his hands moving through the water to keep himself afloat. A quiet moment passed.

“Wish we could stay here.”

“What?”

Keith voice was muffled, and Lance was surprised he’d heard him at all.

“Said I wanna stay here.”

Keith shifted, raising his head out the water. “I can’t hear you.”

Lance grinned up at him. “Cause your hair’s muffling your ears, mullet.”

Keith glared, and after a moments thought, dived at Lance. He shrieked when Keith landed on top of him, plunging them both underwater. They emerged coughing and spluttering, laughter shaking their bodies until Lance grabbed Keith around the waist and brought them close together.

“I said I wish we could stay here,” he said, smiling softly.

Keith returned the smile, little dregs of laughter dissolving into the water around them. His hand found Lance’s shoulder, fingers tracing the scar there.

“Why?”

Lance shrugged, trying not to get too caught up in how nicely the sky complimented Keith’s eyes. “It’s safe.”

“That all?”

“It’s pretty.”

“More than Earth?”

Lance scoffed. “Nothing’s prettier than Earth.”

Keith hummed. “Fair point.”

“Wait, you agree?”

He frowned softly, tracking a hand into Lance’s hair as he was pulled closer. “Shouldn’t I?”

“No, I just thought- I don’t know. You never talk about Earth.”

Keith thought on that point for a moment. “Don’t think I appreciated it enough til we left it.”

“You miss it?”

“Of course.”

“Unbearably?”

“No.”

Lance frowned at that. Starting to spin them in a slow circle through the water. “That’s sad.”

“If your family was here with you, in space, would you still miss it?”

“Yeah,” Lance answered honestly.

“Unbearably?”

Lance hesitated; there was a curious little twinkle in Keith’s eye, one he hoped would stick around. He faltered a little as they turned, finding footing on the rough sand.

“Yeah.”

Keith let his answer sink in for a moment, frowning softly and winding arms around Lance’s neck.

“Why?”

Lance hesitated, thinking hard. “Cause it’s... Earth. It’s our planet.”

Keith waited, clearly expecting more of an answer than that.

“It’s the same as your home country,” Lance continued. “You can leave and go somewhere else, but it won’t feel right. Being away from Earth doesn’t... I enjoy it, sometimes. Space is so... it’s amazing. But it will never feel right.”

They were both silent then, listening to the gentle slush of the water against the banks.

“And you?” Asked Lance. “Why wouldn’t you miss it unbearably?”

Keith sighed softly, letting himself be dragged around in a circle through the water, his eyes locked on Lance.

“All the family I have and want,” he said eventually. “Is here with me in space.”

A moment passed, where both their thoughts went to Shiro.

“Somewhere. So yes I miss Earth, but no, not unbearably. And I like space,” Keith continued quickly. “Not for the war and... you know, but for that. For the others, and, for you.”

Lance blinked, transfixed by the brightness of Keith’s eyes, matching his stare and exposing all their honesty. He swallowed thickly, ensuring his voice wasn’t going to embarrass him when he spoke.

“Good to know.”

Keith smirked, and Lance had only a moments warning before he was kissing him. He could still feel Keith’s smile when they kissed; the water on his lips and the warmth of his body in comparison to the cool river made him taste even better. Keith was nice like this, happy and warm and wrapped up in Lance’s arms. He stopped moving them in a circle, too focused on kissing Keith and working hands up under his shirt. A hand ran up his side, and Keith pulled back, looking at him questioningly. Lance’s lips tingled at the loss, and he eyed the small droplets of water clinging to Keith’s cheeks. Slowly, he shifted Keith’s shirt higher, giving the other plenty of time to stop him. He didn’t, just raised his arms so Lance could pull the shirt over his head and continue running hands over the bruised patches on his skin.

Lance let his head fall forward, smiling against the scar on Keith’s own shoulder from his trial with the Blade, as he huffed out, “we match.”

With that, the tension was broken. Keith scoffed, running a hand through Lance’s hair.

“Cause neither of us takes enough care.”

“Hey, your words, not mine,” said Lance, pulling back to expose Keith to his grin.

The red paladin just shook his head fondly, leaning in to press his lips to the scar on Lance shoulder, effectively wiping the smile from his face. Lance shivered, tightening his arms around Keith’s middle as legs wound carefully around him. Keith was weightless in the water, staying easily in his arms as he curled around Lance, trailing soft kisses up his neck. For a minute, Lance let him, before hefting him up in his arms and capturing Keith’s lips with his own. The hands around his neck began to wonder when Lance tightened his hold, and he didn’t pull back, not until he felt the first drop of cold-water land on his shoulder. Lance paused, him and Keith leaning away from each other simultaneously.

“Was that...”

Lance released the other in his haste to look up at the sky, his smile widening.

“Oh my god... oh my god! Oh my god it’s rain! It’s raining!”

The raindrops were slow and large, colder than the water, but picking up as the seconds went by. Lance laughed aloud, gripping Keith’s hands and jumping up and down in the water. The other was laughing too, a little quieter, watching Lance with something warm in his eyes. They were so caught up in the moment they barely heard Pidge’s voice coming over the comms when their helmets began to crackle.

*“Lance? Keith? Hello? Uh, hope you guys are having fun and all, but that rain’s about to turn highly acidic in like... five minutes. So, yeah. Go back to your lions, I guess.”*

The pair froze, staring at the helmet for a few extended seconds before leaping into action and scrambling out of the water. They were still laughing as they snatched up their gear and began legging it through the undergrowth, back in the direction of their lions. The red lion was closest,

and they stumbled into it's mouth like a pair of idiots, soaked in rain, shivering, but still grinning madly.

"Made it to our lions," Lance said shakily into the comms just so the others knew they weren't about to be dissolved by the oncoming downpour.

"Cool," came Pidge's reply. "*The lions should be fine if you still wanna hang around on the surface. It still looks pretty, and all.*"

Lance nodded, completely forgetting Pidge couldn't see him, before dropping his helmet and opening his arms to Keith. The other practically jumped at him, pulling his head down to kiss him though they were both smiling too much to really mean it. They backtracked into the cockpit, still kissing and laughing and tripping over each others feet, leaving a trail of water behind them. It was absolutely pouring outside, rain hammering against the windscreen and blotting out the darkening landscape.

"That was fun," Keith said against his lips, giggling when Lance spun them around and pressed him against the controls.

"Yeah," he agreed, studying the raindrops caught in Keith's eyelashes, before kissing him.

"Did you know," Keith managed after a minute, pushing back slightly. "That the rain reacts to how happy you are?"

Lance frowned. "What?"

Because honestly, *what?*

"The rain," he repeated, eyes gleaming. "You're moving it."

Lance froze with his mouth agape, staring at Keith. He jerked his head to the side, looking at the rain hitting the windscreen.

"What do you mean?"

Keith chuckled softly, pressing his face into Lance's neck. "Do I make you happy?"

"Yeah?" Lance answered slowly, still confused, his eyes scanning the rain.

Because sorry, things moving in the rain? The *rain* moving? That sounded dangerous. Then Keith tightened the arms around his neck, nuzzling into his shoulder and whispering, "Look at it."

Lance's heart did a little flutter when Keith kissed his shoulder, just softly, so Lance would feel the smile on his lips. He couldn't help turning instinctively toward the red paladin, holding him tight and leaning a little of Keith's weight onto the controls. It felt nice, made him feel giddy, like gravity had lifted around him. Keith ran fingers through his hair and kissed just under his jaw.

"Look," he said, with a hint of amazement.

Lance's eyes flickered back to the windscreen, heart jumping at the sight. Little tendrils of rainwater had altered course as they streamed down the glass curling and looping, forming loose patterns, like a snowflake might. Lance gasped and felt Keith laugh against his chest, the water jumping just a bit at the sound. *He* was doing that?

"You're happy," Keith mumbled, and the *I'm happy* went unsaid.

His finger traced gently over the lightning scar on Lance's shoulder, and the pair of them watched in amazement as a trail of water twisted and split itself into a little symmetric pattern.

"Oh my god that's so embarrassing," Lance said, slapping a hand over his mouth, cheeks burning.

"You *like* me," Keith teased, and the grin on his face was *lethal*.

"S-shut up."

"You're gone red."

"I said shut up--"

"It's cute."

"It's not!"

"It's *adorable*."

"Keith! Ugh," Lance buried his head against Keith's shoulder, cheeks burning despite the raindrops still clinging to his skin.

"It's nice," Keith said, more kindly this time.

He hesitated, and Lance huffed against his shoulder, sneaking a small peak out at the rain, which had stopped abiding to him and gone back to falling normally.

"It's..." Keith bit his lip. "It's something related to your powers that isn't- it's not... it's gentle, not destructive."

A beat.

"N-not that your powers are always destructive! They're good, good too, they stop Carma, a-and help with this," Keith said hastily, pulling away from Lance to point out the dark bruising on his arms. "I just mean--"

"I get what you mean," Lance said, cutting him short. "This is, yeah, it's gentle."

Keith took his hand, tugging him back in.

"*And* it proves how much you like me--"

He squeaked when Lance tackled him, except it sent them both sprawling forward onto the controls, laughing in full again. What he felt was happiness, Lance realised, full, untamed *joy*, and it sat in his chest like a breath of fresh air. Keith was smiling like a madman when Lance lifted him onto the controls; the rain fluttered against the windscreen when Lance grabbed his legs and wrapped them around him. He caught sight of the water spiralling when he kissed Keith and felt the other smile against his lips. It was easier to feel his grip on it now, loose, almost unconscious, but he knew it moved in time with the warmth that spread through his chest when Keith relaxed into him.

Lance felt like the epitome of fool in love when he hovered over Keith, tickling his sides to make him laugh, and slipping up when Keith touched him and the rain reacted to the warmth against his skin. It was stupid, and wonderful, and he could not be more happy. Keith looked beautiful, whether he was talking or smiling or kissing him or staring out at the rain in bewilderment, running hands over Lance's back to see how the water would react.



“It’s really beautiful,” he said, and he wasn’t joking at all.

Lance nodded a little, curling a finger around a strand of Keith’s hair that was splayed out across the dash. He leant down to kiss Keith’s bare collar, burning up when hands gripped his biceps, dug into his shoulders, tugged softly at his hair. It was beautiful, that he could manipulate water to do something so *beautiful*. Lance kissed a little harder, because he needed to keep them both right where they were. *It’s you*, he wanted to say. *It’s beautiful because it’s you*. Because the delicate patterns formed by the water, intricate and flowing like the lines of a snowflake, they were was all because of Keith, because of how he felt about Keith. It *was* how he felt.

The cold didn’t bother him, nor did the fear that plagued him constantly, or the darkness that had begun to fall around them. Lance just let himself love and be loved, forgetting for a brief while what waited for them back on the castle and the cold grips of space, forgetting how dire the situation and how limited the future was, pushing it all away in favour of holding and having Keith. None of it mattered, not Carma, not anything. He laid all his attention onto Keith, and was given the same in return. He could hear the rain beating tirelessly against the glass, felt it thrumming through his veins. The only things that mattered were the things he wanted to, like Keith, and the rain, and the small amount of hope that whispered to him, and told him that maybe things would be alright.

-

The darkness wasn’t so intimidating now. Light filtered very faintly through the window in Keith’s room, almost not there at all, allowing only a smidgeon for Lance to see by. His eyes had adjusted as best they could, after hours of laying in the dark with Keith tucked against his chest. Lance could feel him breathing, in and out steadily, warmth radiating from his body and seeping into the covers around them. Keith’s arms were tucked up between them, their legs entangled with Lance’s arm thrown protectively over them. His other hand carded slowly through Keith’s hair as he slept. It was still damp, a cold contrast to the rest of his body.

Lance glanced down at his face, so completely serene as he slept it *hurt*. His breath caught; he wasn’t ever going to get tired of looking at that face. Keith mumbled something in his sleep, a sigh; Lance’s throat tightened, heart swelling to what felt about ten times bigger than was strictly possible. He dragged fingers through Keith’s damp mop of hair slowly, fixated on the little droplets of water. Curiously, he reached out for them, surprised to find that in his sleepy, love-struck state, the water followed his fingers with ease. He huffed, somewhat amused, as a dozen raindrop-like orbs of water floated around his fingers. Keith made a small sound and Lance let the water drop, returning a hand to his hair and pulling the boy impossibly closer.

Keith’s lips moved minutely in his sleep, as if talking to himself softly, too quiet for Lance to hear. His hands tightened into fists, but a chaste kiss from Lance and the were unfurling again, feeling for his chest as Keith curled toward him. Lance wanted to stay there, just will himself asleep beside Keith, but there was something he had to do first. Regretfully, Lance pulled himself out of bed and made his way toward the hangar.

-

**Star date – 33:07:28**

**Castle Cycle – 23:47**

**Log – 26**

*“Hey Black.”*

*Lance smiled sleepily at the camera, rubbing at his neck.*

*"It's my birthday."*

*A few quiet seconds went by, Lance's thoughts somewhere else. He was smiling very softly, not even bothered by his hair sticking up at all angles from the rain.*

*"Was really good," he mumbled gently.*

*Black purred softly, and Lance's fingers drifted thoughtfully over the bandana around his wrist.*

*"It's her birthday too," he said, managing to sound neither bitter nor sad. "H-happy birthday, Allita."*

*Lance ducked his head, lips pursed. "Bummed out we couldn't spent it together. As usual. But, uh, today was fun. I hope you-"*

*Lance startled as a screen crackled to life in the cockpit, and the atmosphere within the black lion grew tense.*

*"Please no..." he whispered, but that didn't stop the old video recording that was beginning to play.*

*Lance watched with a fearful face as the cover was lifted on their family's handheld recorder and their old kitchen came into view.*

*"Come on, is everyone here?" Suzanna, his mother, was winding her way around the kitchen table with his younger sister, Rosie, balanced on her hip.*

*It was rare for her not to be the one holding the camera, but she looked a bit preoccupied. Lily was seated at the table with their baby brother in her arms, fed-up. Theo must be the one holding the camera then, Lance reasoned, given the three other people standing around the table were cousins and an aunt, and his own eleven year old self was seated at the head. Exactly eleven, judging by the cake laid out in front of him and the party hat placed skew-ly on his head, the one their mama forced them all to wear.*

*Eleven. His first birthday without Allita.*

*He looked... Lance's jaw tightened. He looked awful. Just a kid, dressed in his brother's hand-me-down shirt and the cardboard hat that pushed his hair in funny directions, hands pooling in his lap and his eyes staring glumly at the cake. No one around him was paying much attention to his listless expression though, his older siblings and mother too caught up with the younger children or each other.*

*"We're going to sing!" Suzanna announced a little forcefully, shifting Rosie's weight on her hip so she could squeeze Lance's shoulder.*

*The cake, having his cousins over; she was making an effort to make his birthday a good one. His family members began to sing, a short, rather choppy version of happy birthday. Lance watched the face of his younger self, and realised he hadn't changed at all. His expression just lacked-lacked excitement, or happiness, or love. Like he'd been drained; he was just the body of the child he used to be, all of his character siphoned out, spilled on the streets and lost.*

*A rather dull cheer went up at the end of the song, and the other's immediately went back to the subtle argument they were having whilst his mother tried to coax him into blowing out the pair of candles forming a little 11. Lance stared at the set up, the orange flames licking wax off the tops of the candles.*

*"Come on," Lily urged, tiring of the baby in her lap.*

*"Come on, Lance," Theo urged from behind the camera, voice a little softer.*

*"Mama," Rosie drawled, patting her cheek to draw her attention away from Lance. "Mama."*

*His aunt turned away, busy with his cousins, and Lily and Theo began to argue. Lance just stared, watching his younger-self watch as wax dripped down onto the icing. Allita always got the candles first. His lip twitched as another drop of wax hit the cake.*

*"When's papa going to get home," Lily asked irritably.*

*"When he's finished work," Theo replied.*

*"But he said he'd be home by now," Lily argued, only to be hushed by their mother.*

*"Well he's not," Suzanna said, trying to keep the bite out of her tone and juggling Rosie, who was starting to kick up a fuss.*

*"Mama," said Theo.*

*"He always says that," Lily grumbled.*

*"I know- "*

*"Mama- "*

*"It's not fair."*

*"I know- "*

*"Mama," Theo said, more insistently.*

*"What?" Their mother snapped, turning to the camera.*

*"He's crying," said Theo. "Lance is."*

*Five sets of eyes turned toward Lance, his mother's mouth dropping open. Watching on, Lance felt his eyes heating up. Eleven years old, his feet dangling off the chair and fingers digging into the wood... he looked so young. Slowly, as they watched, a small, almost inaudible hiccup of a sob upset his lower lip. Silence, like a blanket. Lance's lips parted, sucking in a stuttering breath. A frown crumpled his brow, watery eyes staring at the wax dripping down the candle. A soft whine, and a tear slipped down his cheek.*

*"Oh, Lance..."*

*His mother placed Rosie quickly on the floor, ignoring the toddler's protests as she crouched before Lance, taking his face in her hands with a tentative horror, as if his tears burned her. Lance whimpered, little face screwing up with hurt and he began to sniffle.*

*"Lance, mijo, look here..." Suzanna began to whisper gently to him, but Lance was only starting to cry harder.*

*"Stop filming," Lily hissed at their brother.*

*He seemed too transfixed by the scene unfolding before them though, now that little Rosie had*

*began to wail from lack of attention. Suzanna was trying to wipe away tears, but they were only falling faster, a strained whimper making its way out of Lance. Her eyes wide with concern, she scooped up the crying child, who quickly buried his head into her shoulder.*

*“Theo!” Lily hissed, louder now. “Stop filming!”*

*His fingers fumbled with the camera, just as Lance’s mother carried her child towards the doorway. The recording shut off, the screen went dark.*

*Lance blinked through the water clouding his vision, face like stone. He felt cold. He waited for another recording, but nothing came. He was left alone, as he always was, as he’d always really been, truly, from the age of eleven.*

## Chapter End Notes

GOD that was cheesy im sorry

ok I thinkkkk things will move more quickly now??? sort of  
we're getting there guys I promise it wont drag on forever

## Chapter Notes

A LITTLE LATE SORRY BUT HERE'S THE NEXT CHAPTER!!!

Thanks for your lovely comments last time guys!! They're so sweet <3 <3 <3 <3

Hope you all had a nice Christmas/happy holidays/just a great December!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

The logs passed quickly as the days passed during the repairs on the castle. Lance tried to include Black in many of his interactions with the team. Thus as the days went by, they saw plenty of the teammates passing through. Pidge came with questions or to play video games with Lance, and Hunk was in periodically to talk and work or just hang around. Allura came in plenty to discuss everything varying from baby procedures to castle maintenance, or just to argue with Lance over Altean versus Human music genres. Coran came in more than Lance would have liked to nag him to help with chores or to sell him on new dress designs for Allura. Keith was in the most; the pair just seemed to enjoy each other's company.

Sometimes Lance would just sit by himself, not even saying anything. Sometimes he'd bring a bucket of water and sit for hours, making small movements with his wrist, trying to manipulate the liquid. Sometimes he looked scared, and sometimes his expression would convey nothing at all. Black knew he was still scared.

-

**Star date – 33:08:11**

Castle Cycle – 19:12

Log – 33

*The atmosphere inside the cockpit was calm; Keith sat a little off to the side, paging slowly through a book, while Lance balanced in the pilot's chair, clicking his fingers and trying to summon a little ball of electricity.*

*Another snap of his fingers, and a short, sharp crackle sparked to life in the air, only to fizzle out a second later. Keith didn't even glance up, feet propped up against the controls, clearly accustomed to Lance's antics. The boy in question was growing more irritable by the second, glaring at his fingers as he clicked them together again, this time managing to maintain the sphere of light for a few short seconds before it dispersed. He cursed softly, beginning the process all over again.*

Snap. Crackle. Snap. Crackle.

*He inhaled sharply as a larger sphere formed suddenly between his fingers, pulsating, spreading blue light across the room. Lance's eyes widened, his body rigid with tension, focused sharply on the orb. It began to waver, to fade, and he hissed, grabbing for it.*

*A loud crackle, a hiss of electricity, and Lance jerked backwards with a loud yelp. He clutched his arm, tears burning at his eyes as a strained whimper made it past his lips. The electricity flared; he gasped, heart racing, choking on air for a second before the wave died down. Keith was on him in an instant, pulling him back from the controls and taking hold of the wounded arm Lance was cradling close to his chest.*

*“What happened?”*

*Keith’s eyes were fierce and alert, scanning the controls for the source of the injury.*

*“You did that?”*

*“I...” Lance tried to swallow, his lip trembling, unable to stop the hot tears spilling down his cheeks. “Ow.”*

*“Let me see.”*

*He held out a trembling arm to Keith, staring at his own fingers like they’d betrayed him.*

*“It’s burnt,” said Keith. “An electrical burn.”*

*His gaze flickered up, eyes meeting Lance’s.*

*“You hurt yourself.”*

*“I didn’t... I didn’t mean to,” Lance stuttered softly, flexing his fingers experimentally and wincing.*

*Keith’s expression was tight, concerned. He turned Lance’s hand over gently, ghosting a finger over the reddened flesh. There was something in his gaze, something scared, something deeply concerned.*

*“Sorry,” Lance mumbled, wiping the tears off his cheeks and trying to cover the burn with his hand.*

*“It’s okay.”*

*“Just shocked,” he said with a huff, trying to crack a smile.*

*Keith didn’t smile, nor did he surrender his hold on Lance’s arm. He glanced sideways at the camera.*

*“Is that still recording?”*

*Lance paused, sensing how serious he was. Keith had a we need to talk look about him.*

*“Yeah.”*

*“Can you turn it off?”*

*“Yeah,” Lance breathed, reaching out to stop the recording.*

*-*

The castle felt cold that night, colder than it usually did. Colder than the nights Lance had spent alone, or spent wondering the halls. Keith slept like the dead, his breathing barely audible,

especially with his back to Lance; it was unsettling. He propped himself up loosely with an elbow, trailing a finger over Keith's bare shoulder, down his spine. In the dark and the glow of emergency lights, his skin looked grey, a purple hue adding to the sickly aura emitted by the dark bruises across his skin. He looked like a corpse.

Lance drew a sharp breath, finger stilling halfway down his back. He waited, waited, waited to see Keith's chest rise and fall. The boy exhaled softly, and it was like a million tonnes of weight had been lifted from Lance's chest. Then the wait began again.

This was going to kill him, lying in a dark room unable to sleep, waiting with baited breath each time he thought Keith had stopped breathing. It was still, and suffocating; he couldn't take it.

He shoved the covers off with as much force as he could without waking Keith, sliding off the bed and fumbling around in the dark for his shirt. Wincing slightly at the burn on his hand, Lance scribbled a short explanation on the notepad he and Keith kept permanently beside the bed, for whenever one had to get up without waking the other. He glanced over at the sleeping paladin, waiting for the slight rise and fall of his chest before heading for the door.

Space was cold. It was vast, and dark, and *bitter*. Lance could feel it pressing in on him, the impassable vacuum that would swallow him alive in a second. It couldn't be reasoned with, it couldn't show mercy, because it had no conscience. It didn't hate him, because it could not care enough to. It couldn't care at all; indifferent. Space was a lake, a scattering of stepping-stones laid out across it. Each jump was thrilling, each stone a delight, planets and nebulas and fields of meteors, things more beautiful than Lance could have ever imagined.

But mess up the jump, miss the stone, and you fell. Into the water, into the icy, suffocating darkness, where there was no direction and no meaning and no *nothing*. Death had never been more terrifying, not if it could leave him in the senseless void of space.

Lance's chest hurt, tight from stress, and perhaps the shock he'd taken earlier. The soles of his feet were cold where they rested lightly against the floor, the chill of the ground seeping through the fabric of his clothing and settling deep within his bones. The window he gazed through showed nothing but darkness, the very faint light of the red dwarf like a tantalising flicker, meant as nothing more than a tease. His fingers tightened around the ledge he sat on, grinding his teeth anxiously. Shivers worked their way through his body, but he was too preoccupied to do anything about it.

He could feel himself spiralling, terror gripping his insides. Lance flinched when someone sat down beside him, and Keith's arms wound their way around his middle, holding on tight. A mop of hair brushed against his right shoulder blade, just a little of Keith's warmth sinking into his chest. Lance swallowed the lump in his throat before speaking.

"Sorry I woke you."

"It's okay," Keith whispered, tucked against his side. "Doesn't feel right without you there."

Lance couldn't even bring himself to look at their reflection in the glass, staring past it, his vision swimming.

"I'm so scared," he breathed.

"Me too."

Lance's breath came shorter, eyes flitting restlessly across the dark expanse before them.

“I don’t-“ the words caught in his throat.

He trembled, and Keith held on a little bit tighter.

“I don’t want to die.”

No reply. Lance dared himself a look at the glass; Keith’s eyes were tired, haunted, gazing dully out at space. They sat like that, letting the minutes fall away.

“Let’s go back,” Keith said, soft.

“I don’t want to sleep.”

“I know.”

“I don’t want to sleep.”

“That’s okay. It’s cold. Let’s just go back.”

A hand found its way into Lance’s, squeezing lightly. Keith stood up, tugging gently on his hand to get him to stand. Lance’s legs were shaking.

“Let’s go,” he said again, leading them back slowly.

The blankets didn’t feel warm, not as Keith drew them back over, nor did the bed itself, or the hands that cupped Lance’s cheeks.

“You alright?”

Keith had kept the door ajar by jamming a shirt in the gap, a trick to let a little more light into the room. He kneeled over Lance, pulling the blanket around him so the other’s back wasn’t touching the cold wall he leant against.

“I’m scared.”

Keith was frowning, ever so softly. The dim light was just enough to see him by; Lance thought his eyes looked a little more violet like this.

“Hey.” The hands on his cheeks tilted his head. “You’re zoning out.”

Lance blinked, Keith’s pale form swimming before him, hair bleeding into the darkness like ink.

“Lance.” A hand traced his cheekbone, brushed over his brow. “We’re alright.”

Lips touched his cheeks, his eyelids. “We’re alright.”

“I don’t want to sleep. It, i-i-it...”

“I know.”

“I don’t want to sleep.”

“We don’t have to. We’re not going to, we’re not in danger.”

Keith ran a hand over his hair, smoothing it down; his expression softened even more when Lance met his eye.



“She’s gonna come, she’s gonna find me-“

“Not now,” Keith said, cutting him off. “It isn’t here. It’s just us, Lance, it’s okay. Just focus on me, the rest... i-it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter.”

The hand onto his face tightened minutely.

“This matters.”

Lance looked into Keith’s eyes, which were desperately searching his face for signs of what he was feeling. Lance understood, in that moment; Keith was scared too. Slowly, limbs still shaking, he forced his hands to move, rising to Keith’s neck, touching him as gently as he was Lance. A sigh escaped Keith’s lips, like a sign of relief at the response. His eyes looked sad; the crease in his brow, the quick inhale when Lance’s thumb brushed over a bruise, it was all so *sad*. Lance sighed, leaning in to press his lips gently to Keith’s.

They kissed for a long while, Keith’s hand coming up to settle on his cheek, the other curling around the bandana on his wrist. When Lance finally pulled back Keith’s fingers were still tucked underneath the bandana, settled on his pulse.

Lance huffed, clearing the roughness from his voice before twisting his wrist so they could both see the small *A.K.* stitched onto the bandana he’d forgotten about.

“What’s the initials for? The *A.K.*?”

“Hm?”

Keith dropped his gaze to look at his own bandana tied around Lance’s wrist.

“Oh. I don’t know.”

“But isn’t it yours?”

“It is.”

“Why *A.K.*, not *K.K.*?”

“Um. I’m not really sure. I think my birth name might’ve been Akira. Or that’s what my grandmother called me. That’s my guess, anyway.”

“Oh.” Lance traced the stitching with a finger. “That’s nice.”

“What is?”

“Akira, that’s a nice name.”

Keith huffed. “Don’t know if it’s true. They could’ve just stuffed up the stitching.”

Lance sighed against his shoulder. “Could be.”

It was nice, learning little things about Keith. *Pity it won’t last*. He pushed the thought away, leaning in and pressing his lips to Keith’s shoulder, breathing him in. It *hurt*. The burn on his hand, the tightness in his chest, the tension in Keith’s limbs, and the gentle way he handled him, like he knew he was going to lose him. Keith’s cheeks were wet when he kissed him, or maybe those were his own, he didn’t know. He knew the fingers that gripped his neck and the hand that settled against his chest meant *stay*, and he knew the hands he placed on Keith’s face to hold him close meant *I’ll try*.

When Lance pulled back it was to look. Look and look at Keith, because looking straight into those eyes, never breaking, never shying away, made it feel like there was a bigger bit of light, a bigger bit of existence in the dark expanse than that negligible flicker of a red dwarf star. Lance said that, out loud, knowing how sensitive it sounded, knowing Keith would normally tease him for it; he said it because this time he knew he wouldn't. It didn't matter what *should* or *shouldn't* be said; there was no script, he realised, no script to life, to what feelings were meant to be. Lance couldn't name it, the complete and complex mess of emotions in his chest that pit love and anxiety against each other. It was nameless, and more than he understood, and the not-knowing and the fear of dying and the feeling that uncurled in his chest when he looked at Keith could not be reasoned with only *felt*. And it hurt, but when he looked at Keith acknowledged the piece of reality they existed in right then, it didn't; Lance tried not to get too caught up in thinking about that.

Keith was a warm presence against his chest when he leant forward, wrapping his arms around Lance and just holding them close together. It was intimate, so much so it felt his head was spinning. Chest's pressed together, foreheads touching; Keith tilted his head slightly, sighing into Lance's cheek and bringing a hand to touch his face. He kept their gazes locked, blinking slowly in the dark confines of the room, so close and so soft. Lance held on tightly, all of Keith's presence so *wanted*, and so loved. This was more than he'd expected, just more; it helped balance out the terror of whatever tethered them there to that dark spot in space.

Keith's hand drifted slowly through his hair, along his cheek, round and around, until the touch was as natural and needed as the blood flowing beneath his skin. His eyes betrayed how tired he was, but even as his breathing evened out he fought to keep them open, just looking at Lance as if he didn't care that time existed. Lance ran hands up his back and fit them snug around his waist, keeping him where he was, keeping them both there, together. In those slow moments the rest of the world wasn't as frightening. Lance still fought not to fall asleep, but now it was for an entirely different reason.

-

"How's it going with the west wing?"

Lance glanced up at Allura's question, but it was addressed to Hunk. All of them were gathered in the kitchen, shoving food goo into their faces after another long morning.

"It's fine," Hunk replied around a mouthful of goo. "Pretty much just polishing now."

Everyone was rushing through the meal, happy for the break but eager to finish up the very last repairs. It had been over a month, and very little remained to do.

"I sacrificed the use of a large portion of it, but the section I sealed is functioning fine."

Allura nodded, stirring a spoon through her goo. "That's excellent. Get Coran to look it over with you, just to make sure we haven't left any essential section exposed."

Hunk nodded. "Will do."

"I'm proud of the progress that's been made," Allura continued. "We should be on our way within a day or two."

They all nodded. Lance cleared his throat, trying to prompt her to talk about their next course of action. Allura sighed; she still didn't like the plan, as inevitable as it now was.

"Our second point to consider," she began reluctantly, "is where to go next."

“The Balmeran’s do know a lot about being underground and stuff-“

“No,” Allura said firmly, cutting Hunk short. “We’re not going back to the Balmera. Or to anyone we know. No Blade of Marmora, either. This is already a bad idea. If anyone finds out Voltron has been compromised, that we’re stuck here... we have no idea what the state of the Galran empire is. For all we know, it has already rebuilt. This is a huge disadvantage, if they discover this weakness of ours, who’s to say they won’t crush us?”

“But we can trust the Bal-“

“I said no. Besides, why would they have any more idea than us? *We* are the Alteans, if anyone knows anything it should be us.”

“But it’s not,” interrupted Lance. “We know the story, sure, but we have no idea how to get out of this. At all.”

“I’m aware,” said Allura. “Our only hope of getting out of this is to find a people that *do* know.”

“That doesn’t seem likely,” said Pidge.

“No, but what other options do we have? This Dark Planet has been here for so long, surely someone must have discovered it before us.”

“Uh, yeah,” said Keith. “And then they died.”

“Possibly not.”

“You saw what happened to the dwarf planet. And that ship that came into this system-“

“All I’m suggesting is that we look,” Allura snapped. “We can’t run to our friends just because we may find sympathy and comfort there. We need a real plan. We need to find the closest inhabited planet to this system.”

“What if they’re all dead,” asked Keith.

“Then we move further. But the closer a species lives to this system, the more likely they are to know about it. Or... or to know something. Don’t you think?”

Lance frowned, all his teammates similarly debating this. It was tempting to go to the Balmera, or seek out the Blade, or some aliens they were familiar with, someone who had a motive to help them. But Allura was right; none of those species would have any ideas regarding the Dark Planet. They needed to find someone who did.

“What if there’s no one?”

“One problem at a time please, Lance.”

He grumbled, but refrained from commenting further.

“As soon as the castle is in a good enough state, we’ll begin searching.”

“I could scan for nearby planets from here,” said Coran. “We’ll just have to visit them to see if they’re inhabited.”

“What if they’re hostile?”

“One problem at a time please, Lance,” Pidge mimicked, before Allura got the chance.

“Exactly,” said Allura. “Let’s finish up these repairs. Then we can go about searching for help.”

She stood, and Lance couldn’t help staring a little. It wasn’t that he hadn’t noticed Allura’s stomach growing bigger- they were around each other every day, it was just...

“Wow, your stomach’s *huge*,” Pidge said eloquently, staring open-mouthed.

“Well, yes,” said Allura, glancing down. “I suppose it is.”

“Has it always been that big?”

“It’s a slightly tighter dress.”

“Did you seriously not notice?” Keith asked, staring at his friend.

“I did!” Pidge insisted. “It’s a tighter dress she just said so!”

Keith shook his head, but Allura looked amused by the youngest paladin.

“How long til the baby’s even here,” Pidge grumbled, shovelling more food into her mouth. “I wanna meet it already.”

“Oh,” said Allura, running a hand over the bump. “About a week.”

Pidge spat out her food. “*What!*”

“Seven months,” Lance reminded her.

“I know that,” the green paladin snapped. “It’s just... I just can’t believe it’s... been seven months.”

The table fell silent.

“Yeah that’s... a pretty long time,” said Hunk.

“And we still didn’t think of a name,” Lance exclaimed.

“I have a name,” Allura said.

“What is it?”

“I’m not telling you.”

“That’s so rude!”

“No,” said Hunk. “It’s secretive. I like the tactic.”

Pidge and Lance groaned in unison, Keith just looked happy to be a part of the conversation.

“Anyway,” Allura said. “Back to work. The hopefully we can be up and out of her before they’re born.”

-

It only took another three days before the castle was back on it’s feet, and then an additional half-

day to convince Coran they could stop running system tests. By the time breakfast rolled by on the forth day, Lance was feeling excited.

There was a whole air of excitement at the breakfast table, a sense of finally achieving something; he liked it. He also liked the peace and calm that had somehow settled over the castle amid the chaos. There was no panic this morning; hell, Lance was barely half awake and no one seemed to mind. Hunk had managed to scavenge together some ingredients from he and Pidge's mission, so now they ate a plainer substitute to cornflakes, which was only a thousand times better than the food goo. Keith sat opposite him at the table, beside Pidge, both of them still groggy and dishevelled as they shovelled cereal into their mouths mechanically. It was cute.

There was a hickey under Keith's collar which only Lance knew about, and a birthmark on his thigh, and a scattering of bruises below his ribs, and a scar twisting around the small of his back, all of which only Lance knew about. He liked that. Keith was wearing one of his shirts, which the others may or may not know about. Pidge looked too tired to be paying attention. Lance liked that he knew these things about Keith, he liked that he could find out even more, he liked that there were things shared between them alone. The thought struck him like a jolt of electricity, and in his half-asleep, love-struck state, Lance saw no problem in voicing it.

"I fucking love you."

Keith looked up from his bowl, a spoon of cereal poised halfway to his mouth. His expression hadn't changed at all, but he did Lance the honour of at least blinking to acknowledge he'd spoken.

"Congratulations," he said.

Pidge huffed, turning to glare at Keith as if this was a conversation they'd already had, and the number one word she'd implored him not to say when someone confessed their love was-

"Congratulations?" The green paladin said, and stared at her friend with something akin to outrage. "Really, Keith?"

Keith's neutral expression slowly morphed into a frown as he chewed his cereal slowly, seriously thinking about what he'd just said. Lance didn't care; Keith could say anything, it wouldn't matter. He smiled dopily at the pair, both of whom were ignoring him in favour of coming up with a better response from Keith.

"Thanks?" The boy tried hesitantly, and flinched when Pidge groaned.

"Why do I even try," Lance thought he heard Pidge mumble into the table, but he was too focused on Keith, who had now turned to him for approval.

"You're welcome," Lance said, and his heart lifted when a happy little smile appeared on Keith's lips.

"Good morning, paladins!"

Their moment was broken when Coran strode noisily into the room, beaming at them all as if this was a day of celebration. Pidge groaned again, leaving her head lying against the table.

"That's right!" Coran continued, oblivious to her obvious dismay. "It's show time! Get your suits on, your hair brushed, I want you looking spick and span for-"

"Coran," Lance interrupted, taking pity of his teammates who were cringing into their bowls. "Can we finish breakfast first?"

“Finish- oh. Oh of course, my boy. You just take your time.”

Lance offered their advisor a smile, but faltered when he kept talking.

“Keith! Pidge! Up and at ‘em, let Lance finish his breakfast in peace-“

“No, no, I meant *all* of us finish breakfast,” Lance quickly amended, trying not to laugh.

“Er... fine,” said Coran, looking a little unsure. “Ten minutes, paladins! Then you better be ready to go searching!”

-

“That’s the closest one?”

“So far.”

“That isn’t swirling gas.”

“Or a barren wasteland.”

“Or the size of Pluto’s thumbnail-“

“It’s the closest planet to the Dark Planet possibly harbouring life,” Allura finished for Pidge.

“Neat,” said the green paladin. “What if they’re hostile?”

The princess stifled a sigh. They’d been wormholing from place to place all day, searching for planets around the nearest stars to their dark system. The first few planets had proved futile, none harbouring any life. The system they’d come to now was similar to the Dark Planet’s system in the way in only had one planet, though its star was much brighter and overall just less horrifying.

“They’re more likely to be dead than hostile,” said Keith, then added an outraged, “*what?*” under Allura’s withering stare.

“But seriously,” said Lance. “How are we going to go about this? If we land there in our lions they’ll know we’re with Voltron-“

“Perhaps not.”

“Perhaps not? Who doesn’t know about Voltron by now?”

Allura looked uneasy already. “We’re a very long way out from any other galaxy, Lance. From anything at all.”

“But if they do know about Voltron?” Keith continued. “And if they’re allied with Zarkon?”

“If they’re allied with Zarkon we destroy them. If they are under Galra rule, we free them. If they have any affiliation with, or knowledge of, Voltron or the Galran empire, we treat this as any other mission.”

The room fell silent, wide-eyed and watching Allura.

“We need to find someone who not only knows of the Dark Planet, but who *doesn’t* know of Voltron. Any more dumb questions, or can we get on with this?”

Ten minutes later, they found themselves en route to the planet, a good, Mercury sized structure, the only one around its star. Seven planets in total, in all the solar systems they'd searched, in the millions of miles around that dark star system. Lance really hated how isolated this part of space was.

Lion assignments had been a story all on its own, one with a simpler solution than Lance had been anticipating. He piloted the Black lion still, but Blue flew stubbornly behind him, like a guardian angel trailing after them. It was kind of enduring. Allura stood beside him in Black's cockpit, peering anxiously over his shoulder as they neared the surface. The planet looked to Lance like an armadillo, all rolled up in a little ball, its surface riddled with lines like the shifting scales of that animal. From a distance, the surface was a pale, woody brown, and Lance thought he could see dark lakes scattered across the land.

"Any signs of civilisation?" Allura asked Coran over the comms.

*"Er, nothing too obvious,"* came the reply from the castle. *"Though there might be something ahead. Just keep in this direction, and get closer to the surface perhaps."*

Lance's stomach was tying itself in knots, but he steered the black lion lower, feeling a surge of reassurance when the other lions followed him down.

"There," said Allura suddenly. "On the horizon."

And okay, Alteans must have much better sight than humans, because Lance could barely see where the horizon was, not with the glare of afternoon sun radiating off the brown surface.

"Where?" He asked, squinting.

"Beneath that hillcrest," Allura said, pointing in the vague direction of the lip of one of the planet's many folds.

The surface was like a frozen ocean; earth, or maybe rock, rose and fell dramatically like sand hills in a desert, the ridges curved like cresting waves.

"I still don't- wait, hang on, is it that tower thing?"

*"Looks kinda like a natural formation,"* said Pidge.

*"A big ant hill,"* added Hunk.

*"I think its more like termites,"* said Keith.

*"No, no that's definitely an ant hill."*

*"Have you even seen an ant hill? That's a termite mound."*

*"I was going to say it looked more like a stalagmite,"* said Pidge again.

"What?"

"No way."

*"I thought it was a pyramid,"* said Allura, just for the hell of it.

"Wait, you know what a pyramid is-"

*“Hey guys,” said Pidge. “We’re being signalled.”*

*Lance nearly dropped the controls, scrambling to get better sights on the small light flashing at them from the base of the earthen structure.*

*“Everyone stay calm,” said Allura. “Keep your eyes open and defences ready.”*

*“What should I do?” Lance asked.*

*Allura opened her mouth, but paused. “What do you think?”*

*She didn’t say it meanly; it was an open invitation. Lance shrugged.*

*“We either die now or in two hundred and-“*

*“Oh just land.”*

*The sun was still bothering Lance when he set the Black lion down a few hundred feet from the tower. He could see it better now; Keith was right, it did look quite a lot like a termite mound. Heart beating up his throat, he squinted through the window to try see anyone on the surface. They’d landed at the base of one of the rivets, in what was a narrow, but very long valley, half in sun, half in shade, with little holes cut into the sides of the hills like gaps in a block of cheese.*

*“Atmosphere?” Lance asked.*

*“We’re all good to breath,” said Pidge. “There’s a weird chemical in the air, but nothing toxic. Gravity’s alright too, just a bit stronger than Earth’s.”*

*“Everyone stay in your lions,” said Lance. “Allura and I will investigate.”*

*“Bad idea.”*

*“Stay in your lion, Keith. We may need backup. From within your lion.”*

*There was a grumpy sigh from the red paladin, but they all stayed put. Steeling himself for the worst, Lance activated the visor on his suit, ensured his bayards were ready if needed, and followed Allura toward the exit. She’d ditched her usual diplomatic dress for a suit of armour too; and although it fit a little awkwardly given the size of her stomach, Lance doubted she’d be merciful if they were met with any hostility this time.*

*The sun hit his eyes the moment the set foot out of the black lion, moving cautiously down the ramp until they stood on the dry earth. Lance gazed up at the tower; it had to be at least two hundred feet, shadowy patches marking crevices where the sun couldn’t reach.*

*“I don’t see any movement,” said Pidge.*

*“Permission to fire laser if I see anything shady,” asked Keith.*

*“Uh, no?” Lance replied.*

*“No what?”*

*“Permission not granted?”*

*“Why are you saying it like a question?”*



*“Because I can’t even believe you’d try that?”*

*“You’re still saying it like a question-“*

*“Hold that thought,” said Pidge. “Something’s moving by the tower.”*

*Lance cursed, spinning quickly with both bayards raised.*

*“Cool it,” Allura hissed, but he could see the way her fingers tightened around the staff.*

*The pair inched forward, Lance’s eyes fixed upon the figure stepping out from the shade of the tower, clad in a dark cloak, which moved as fluidly as sand over desert dunes.*

*“Who are you?” He called.*

*There was no reply, nothing but the sound of sand crunching as the figure moved toward them. Lance’s hands tightened around the bayards.*

*“Who-“*

*The reply that came went right over Lance’s head. It was so fast and foreign he’d barely registered hearing it before Allura gasped.*

*“Allura?”*

*“Princess!” Said Coran, and he sounded just as alarmed as her. “It-“*

*“I know, Coran,” she said, her eyes widening. “I know, I heard.”*

*“Heard what?” Lance asked.*

*“How is this...”*

*“I, I don’t know, I-“*

*“It spoke Altean, princess-“*

*“What?” Lance blanched, but the figure was moving closer now.*

*“How do you speak Altean?” He called unhelpfully in English.*

*In that way they were all surprised when the figure replied back in perfect English this time.*

*“What are you doing on our planet?”*

*Lance mouth dropped open, staring at the being a mere thirty feet from them.*

*“We seek an alliance,” said Allura, while the rest of team Voltron looked on in shock.*

*“Who are you?”*

*There was something odd about their voice, the way they spoke; it was filled with an odd chatter, or chirp.*

*“I am princess Allura of Altea,” Allura said, and paused. “These are my friends.”*

*“Altea?” There was something strange in the creature’s voice.*

*Allura stiffened. “Yes. And who are you?”*

*For a long moment, nothing happened. Then, very slowly, the creature reached up to lower its hood. A pair of beady eyes settled straight on Lance, an elderly, weathered face awakening to their presence with not a speck of hostility written across it. Allura gasped, but Lance stayed soundless, transfixed, the chatter of his teammates falling on deaf ears.*

*“We are the O’kyan,” said the woman, or something of those sorts. “The last descents of Aryon.”*

## Chapter End Notes

D:

## Chapter Notes

yay we're back! Sorry that updates are slowing down a little, I'm just getting more busy with studies n stuff, but I'll do my best...

Thanks for the awesome comments!! You guys are the best <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

Lance had been to plenty of awkward family reunions over the course of his life. You know, the big family events where they were forced to interact with *all* their relatives, not just the ones they got along with. The ones with cousins seven times removed and uncles you were pretty sure weren't even related to you, and the boyfriend of your aunt's step-niece's best friend who could never shut up about his ideal brand of car. Lance used to retreat into his siblings during those events. Don't get him wrong, he liked family *gatherings*, when it was never more than thirty people together in one backyard, most of whom were cousins, aunts uncles, or grandparents that he adored. Family *reunions* were an entirely different matter.

If Lance hated reunions, Allita had truly despised them. The pair would end up trailing Theo or Lily, using their older siblings as a barrier against the hoards of distant cousins who always picked on the smallest in the group. Most of the time, that was the twins. Then there had been the whole stupid twin conspiracy, the belief that they were destined for misery. Nothing got to Lance quite like some bullish older cousin taunting him and Allita with tales of kidnappers and untimely illnesses and grisly accidents. That's when Allita's eyes would fill with tears, and Lance would drag them off to hide underneath a table, scribbling drawings into the dirt until their mother came along and hauled them out.

Lance was pretty sure his mother hated those events as much as he did, but she was always amiable and polite. Up until the first reunion post Allita's death. Lance remembered that day like one recalls the dreariness of a lingering illness. It came before their move, shortly after his eleventh birthday, the lack of twin sister made glaringly apparent by that. He clung to his mother's skirt the entire time, ignoring the subtle taunts and snickers from the other kids his age, and the cool and forced affection his parents fought to maintain before the eyes of their spectators.

The family members who came to offer his parents a word of sympathy somehow managed to slip in a vile little comment regarding the apparent *oddness* of Allita. Each word felt like a drop of poison on Lance's skin, how *strange* she was, how *quiet*, how little she smiled, how sometimes children do these things to themselves. Then they'd crouch down to Lance's level, ignoring the way he burrowed behind his mother's legs, patting a cheek and exclaiming how he had such stronger sensibilities, than to go wondering into an uncharted cave.

That was half of them. The other half came bearing questions. *But didn't you see her go, Lance? You must have seen her.* They came like fully formed council, a semi-circle of relatives staring down the boy cowering behind his mother as she tried to keep them distracted. One particularly toughened uncle approached him with all the might of a military general, exclaiming loudly and

unabashedly that if he'd been raised more of a man he'd have followed his sister into that cave. And Lance, without a sister, without a twin and best friend with whom he could escape with, simply took it.

It was only when their father agreed gravely with an elderly aunt that the situation could have been helped if only they'd enforced more discipline upon Allita's withdrawn behaviour, that his mother finally snapped. Susanna handed baby Tajo off to Theo, put little Rosie in the care of Lily, and after a brief but vicious exchange of words, ripped herself free of their father's furious grip and gaze, picked Lance up herself, and marched all five children toward the car. That had been the last family reunion they'd been too. That was the last time Lance saw his father.

Miserable family commemorations aside, the situation the paladins were in now was reminding Lance very much of a family reunion. And yes reunion, not gathering, because although the species before them was without a doubt descended from the Altean lineage, this was one of the most uncomfortable meetings he'd been to in his *life*.

"Tell me again, if you could," said Allura, her smile small and forced, "how is it this planet came to be?"

There sat twelve of them around a table, six of each group, plus the other members of this species, spectators, gathered around the outskirts of the room. Even Coran had come down from the castle to join them, and now their adviser sat stiffly beside Allura, frozen with shock at the sight before them. The table they sat at was square, dug into the ground so their waists were level with the ground, which acted as a backrest. Allura wasn't displaying much of her usual diplomatic charm, too entranced by this species to bother. In fact, she was leaning over the table by now, as if to get closer to the trio of O'kyan facing them. Lance sat adjacent to Allura, with Keith crammed in between him and Hunk, while Pidge sat beside Coran.

Keith kept fidgeting beside him, and it would've been annoying had Lance not known it was because of the marks on his skin. They were clearly causing him a lot of discomfort. He pressed his arm up along Keith's, hoping to help by transferring some of the cold energy, but their suits effectively stopped that. Pidge was staring at the table top as if she might be reevaluating her whole life. In fact, Hunk looked the most put together of all of them. Lance wasn't too sure how this whole lion change worked, but next time he was voting black paladin Hunk for sure.

"It all has to do with the atmosphere," one of the O'kyan began.

Lance's head snapped from his friends back to the man, taking time to study them again. The O'kyan were not un-like Alteans, but they were not the same. They were more... insect like. Their eyes bulged, and they were rounded not unlike those of a bug. Instead of eyebrows, the skin above said eyes hardened into a shell-like texture that crept back to their hairlines. Though their hair was fairly Altean-like, they were all blonde, a fact Lance found a little disconcerting. The colourful markings that decorated Altean faces had faded into their skin, leaving only heavy circles under their eyes, just a touch darker than their bordering on yellow skin. Again, disconcerting. Lance was *related* to these people. There was only a couple of hundred generations in between, but still. Aside from that they were fairly humanoid, save the strange bulges in their necks, which Lance guessed could be spit glands. Gross, he knew, but given that and their sixth, pincer like digit on each hand, he supposed it was a way to build the mound they sat in now. The O'kyan really were like termites.

Sitting within the tower they'd first seen from a distance, Lance wasn't as claustrophobic as he would have thought. Sunlight radiated through the walls, leaving it as though they were inside some warm, orange lamp shade. The air was surprisingly cool inside, and almost everything was sculpted from the sand and earth. Termite-Alteans, he thought; they could have encountered a lot

worse.

Since arriving, the O'kyan had immediately taken to questioning Allura about Altea. What Lance got from their interactions thus far was this: the O'kyan didn't know what Voltron was. Allura had brought it and the paladins up immediately, but to the absolute shock of their team, the O'kyan hadn't ever heard of it, nor of the Galra. This system really was far out. The last they knew of Altea was the state of the world some two hundred years after Aryon's death, when misfortunes falling upon their family were at a high. That was strange to consider, that they could no longer ignore the fact that the 'curse' was real. Since fleeing Altea, a large group had come to this planet by chance after crashing. They'd thought- at least this is what history recounted, that the close proximity to the Dark Planet would mean instant death. Instead...

"It's all to do with the atmosphere," the man continued.

They hadn't been given names for anyone; Lance wondered if maybe names weren't a commonplace here. Also, their leader was apparently not the woman who had first greeted them, because there seemed to be no leader at all.

"How so?" Allura pressed.

"It blocks all scent. Try and smell something, you cannot. We have never known smell."

Frowning, and not having really considered this, Lance gave the air a sniff. Nothing. He leaned closer to Keith, battling down the childish pang of disappointment when he still couldn't smell a thing. He *liked* how Keith smelled. Hopefully they wouldn't have to stay here forever. He glanced at Allura, who was looking sceptical and sniffing the air intently.

"That's... interesting."

"Yes," said the man.

He blinked at her with round, slitted eyes. Lance was *related* to these things.

"Without scent," he continued. "Carma has never detected us."

"That's... incredible," Allura breathed, her lips creating a wobbly smile. "Do you think it could work for us?"

The man turned to consult the pair beside him. Another thing Lance found weird; they displayed no emotion, like none, at all. They looked like those folks in old photographs, with their still, impersonal expressions. Keith was starting to shiver beside him; Lance cast him a worried glance, but the boy's eyes were fixed on the table.

"Yes," said the man. "That is possible."

Allura laughed shakily, her raw display of emotion so out of place in the gloom and impartialness of that room.

"Incredible."

"What is the full extent of your problem," a woman to the side of Lance asked.

She looked directly at Lance, and he tried not to cower. They had big eyes, okay?

"You say this boy is of Aryon's line?"

“Yes,” Allura answered for him. “After... a number of strange happenings, we ran a blood test, and discovered that the Altean homing gene resided within him.”

“What strange happenings?”

“Lance,” Allura said, looking to him. “Perhaps a demonstration?”

He blinked, quite unsure of what to do.

“Um...”

He looked to Keith for help, but the boy was too absorbed in gripping the table and looking like he wanted to vomit. *Yikes*. Was he alright?

“S-shoot me,” Lance said out of impulse.

Allura sighed like that was exactly what she’d expected, but hadn’t wanted to hear.

“Pidge,” she said. “Have you got that taser?”

“Why does Pidge have a taser?” Lance blurted, as the green paladin extracted a very small taser from her bag.

“Uh, I think cause of Keith,” Hunk said, right over Keith’s head.

The red paladin didn’t even look like he’d heard, his lips pressed into a thin line and sweat beading on his forehead. Lance frowned, nudging Keith with his arm.

“Keith? Are you al-“

“Hunk, please do us the honours of tasing Lance.”

“Hey!”

“The moment I’ve been waiting for,” Pidge said with a smirk, and Lance shot a dirty look in her direction.

“Uh...um...” said Hunk, staring at the taser in his hand

“Just do it,” Lance said, and extended an arm over Keith so Hunk could reach. “I won’t feel it.”

Before he could undoubtedly change his mind, Hunk jabbed Lance’s arm with the taser. Admittedly, he felt a strange buzz, but that was probably just the noise of it. Lance watched in mild fascination as the lightning ran up his arm, curling around it like a snake chasing its tail. Everyone else, might he add, watched in *enormous* fascination. Except Keith. There was something off about Keith. Lance turned to him as he let the lightning fizzle out and die, ignoring the chatter that had erupted around them.

“Keith?”

His whole body was trembling; this was a little more than the pain he usually felt, surely.

“I believe Lance has honed his abilities in on an Earth occurrence, a storm,” Allura was sprouting happily. “It’s a rare-“

Keith stood abruptly, cutting the princess short.

“Gotta go,” he stuttered, his eyes still fixated on the floor, breathing fast.

“Keith?”

Lance rose slowly as Keith leapt back, stumbling away from the table as the eyes of the others followed him. *What the hell?*

“Hey, Keith!”

The boy ignored him, turning his back on them and making it five steps toward the wall before he gasped, shoulders hunching, breathing fast through clenched teeth. Lance was up quickly, walking toward him with only an ounce of caution at the last second. Everyone was watching with equal levels concern and confusion from the table, and Lance tried to block them with his body, shielding Keith. Sensing his approach, Keith made to move off, but Lance blocked him, putting himself right in the other’s space.

“Hey man,” he said, and reached out for Keith’s shoulder.

His hand only made it halfway, before Keith grabbed it and forced it still, his grip like a vice.

“Wh-“

Lance stopped short when an honest to god *growl* escaped the red paladin, not loud enough for the other’s to hear amid their confused chatter, but certainly enough to set Lance on edge.

“Keith,” he said. “Look at me.”

Keith was shaking hard, sweat pouring down his forehead. The hand gripping Lance was forming a crushing fist. The pressure was starting to hurt; this wasn’t normal. The red paladin grit his teeth, making angry, pained noises under his breath. Lance understood in less than a second, his body going rigid.

“Lance?” Allura called.

“He’s just- ah!” Lance hissed when Keith’s grip grew tight enough to begin crushing his fingers.

“N-not feeling well.”

*Please understand, please distract them.* Lance’s pulse picked up now that he could see the rapid shaking of Keith’s iris, his eyes like a quivering pond, fighting between clear, calm waters and an outright mud slide. He was breathing so fast Lance thought he might just pass out, face twisted into a snarl as he crushed Lance’s hand in his own. Allura still hadn’t said anything, but Lance could hear the questions beginning to pour from the O’kyan. *Get him out.* In a spilt second decision, he used his free arm to grab Keith’s back, trying to pull him toward the door. But Jesus, blame it on his Galra genes, when that boy wanted to stay put, he *stayed put*. His feet ground into the floor as Lance tried to wrestle him toward the nearest door in a way that didn’t arouse suspicion. He caught a cry just before it escaped, when Keith squeezed hard enough for him to hear his own finger snap.

“Keith,” Lance hissed, desperate now.

*What if they find out it’s in him? That Carma’s in him?* This was a mistake, this was such a mistake- there was no backing out now.

“Keith, it’s me,” he tried again in a low voice, so close to Keith the other’s wouldn’t even see his lips moving.

“Lance-“ Allura began again.

“Just having some trouble,” Lance wheezed, praying she’d *get the message*. “H-his hand.”

Said hand crushed Lance’s own so tightly he failed to stop the short, sharp cry that tore away from him. He muffled the sound into Keith’s shoulder, his own grip tightening when Keith tried to turn toward the others. He had to hide this, hide him.

“O-of course!” Allura squeaked, so loud and shrill it drew the attention of the whole table.

“He’s been unwell, our Keith,” she began to explain, before Lance stopped listening because he was too focused on the pain radiating from his probably broken finger.

“Keith,” he said again, pressing his lips right up to the boy’s ear, his other hand curling around his waist. “Keith, it’s me, it’s Lance, I’ve got you.”

He bit back another cry as Keith twisted his fingers, still caught in fighting Carma’s control. They were so close now, Lance could feel his whole body shaking and fighting against them both.

“I’m not- ah, letting you go. Just, f-focus, on h-her.”

A low snarl sounded from Keith, one Lance didn’t think he’d hear from any human ever, and his head twisted viciously in the direction of the nearest O’kyan.

“No,” Lance hissed, yanking his body and forcing it back toward him. “Fight her. I’m not letting you go.”

Allura was talking up a storm in the background to create a distraction for them, but Lance wasn’t sure how much longer either could last.

“The cold,” he whispered into Keith’s hair, pressing his temple against Keith’s as the only form of skin-on-skin contact they could get. “Focus on the cold, I’ve got you.”

Lance pushed forward with everything he had, fighting desperately to summon that energy despite the situation keeping him very preoccupied.

“Keith,” he repeated, as the boy shook violently against him. “Talk to me, Keith. Listen to me. I’ve got you, not her. I’m right here, y-you’ve got me. R-right here.”

Lance could tell he wasn’t making much sense, but the pain radiating from his crushed hand was making him delirious.

“Keith,” he repeated, because he was officially out of words.

He was officially out of breath too; Keith’s other arm was gripping him so tight his ribs felt close to snapping.

“No,” Allura assured cheerily. “Don’t worry about them.”

Lance felt like suggesting that maybe a little help would be nice, maybe an hand from Hunk to help pry off the parasite that was Keith. He felt bad immediately for thinking that. Keith was fighting it, and *hard*; there was a bead of blood where his lips met from biting his cheeks, and his eyes were still flickering between all shades of grey scale like an old picture film. Lance had made a promise to him, a promise that right now only Keith was upholding. He’d helped Lance, over and over and over, let him share his bed, his company, his thoughts, he’d slept with him for gods sake, despite



the danger he posed. All because Lance had promised they'd never hurt each other. Because they helped each other. If he let Keith squeeze all the air from his lungs, that was the end for both of them.

"Keith," he whispered, little more than a wheeze, pressing his forehead to Keith's temple. "Focus on me."

*There were a series of rock pools on the beach they used to play, that he and Allita would investigate whenever the tide was right. The rocks were brown and slick with algae, the white speckle of barnacles like star-clusters besides walls of dark mussels and seaweed falling like high-ropes down into the shallow tidal pools. There they'd find crabs no bigger than a penny, and blenny fish that when disturbed fired like bullets from a gun, until they settled on a new patch of sand at the other end of the pool. There were speckled anemones, and slimy sea slugs, and blunt bits of sea glass that looked like tiny, gleaming gems. Lance adored playing there, they would spend hours amongst the rocks. The only disappointment was the upper pool.*

*It wasn't that large of a rock pool, but Lance was always drawn to it anyway. The sea had clearly reached it once or twice, as they was a large sum of water deposited within it, that dried out bit by bit as the weeks would pass. The seaweed growing on its side died out as the water retreated, and the shells that once resided there were either plucked up by birds or left to scavenge at the very bottom, where the water had turned rancid and green, overcome with a thick, pungent algae. Occasionally he'd catch a miserable looking hermit crab tugging itself through the muck of that pool, which he tactfully avoided setting foot in. It was nothing more than a stagnant pond really, a place for the sea to rot away.*

*Then came the king tide, and with it, a storm. He'd watched from far back on the dunes as wave after wave overtook the beach, engulfing the sand and rocks until not a piece of that serene play place remained. They wondered down the next day, when the storm had cleared and the sand was soft from its thorough soaking, the tide filtering slowly away. Lance went straight for that pool, with its stagnant green water and sharp smell of decay. What he found was something quite different. Like a tap rinsing grunge from an old cloth, the pool had been transformed. He stared for some time at the glittering, clear water, lapping softly at its borders in the slight breeze. A dozen new fish, no larger than his thumb, darted back and forth in the water, creating explosions in the sand as they scattered. The seaweed was afloat and rich and thick, brown and gold and bobbing happily in its new home. New creatures, new water, life had been breathed into the pool. The water had come in like a violent, vicious animal, carving all that had been from its place, refreshing it, renewing it, ridding it of the filth that had been occupying it for so long.*

Keith shuddered against him, his hand uncurling from Lance's fingers like a rusted spring, slowly awakening to their position. Lance was freezing, he could feel it chasing down his fingers and chilling his suit from the inside out. Allura was speaking, many people were, but all Lance caught was the hitch in Keith's breath. One second, two seconds, they'd been in sight for too long. Lance wrapped Keith up in his arms, and without any regard for the others, hauled the slack-boned boy toward the nearest door and shut them inside.

Keith was heaving in air like a fish out of water before the door even clicked shut, wrenching himself out of Lance's grip and stumbling to the other side of the room. Lance's fingers hurt like hell, and he had no doubt at least one digit was broken, but all that could wait. He had no idea what this room this was meant to be; it was completely bare, just like the rest of them, yellow, earthen walls and a hard, sandy floor.

Keith doubled over with a stuttering, "shit."

He squeezed his eyes shut, his own eyes, not Carma's, and buried fingers in his hair, pulling harshly at the roots.

"Shit!"

"Keith," Lance said softly, raising his hands in way of peace.

Keith straightened at the sound of his voice, his eyes flitting over Lance's crooked fingers and his short, staccato breaths. He looked to the door, to his own hands, eyes widening with horror as he came to terms with the situation.

"Keith, it's alright."

Keith shook his head sharply, mouth agape and speckled with blood.

"Shouldn't have come here," he croaked, an unreadable swirl of emotions messing with his head.

"It's going to be alri--"

"No it's *not*!" Keith yelled, turning on Lance with a snarl.

"It's not! Fuck!" He voice broke, and he clawed at his hair with all the intention of pulling it out.

"Keith--"

"*Fuck!*" The boy screamed, and Lance flinched when he threw his fist into the wall.

"Hey!"

Lance grabbed his arm before he could throw another punch, eyeing the yellow dust that was now sticking to the blood around Keith's knuckles.

"Let go of me," Keith hissed, ripping his arm away and taking a good step back.

"Boys?" Coran's voice came drifting to them through the doorway. "Everything alright?"

"We're fine!" Lance called back, circling Keith like one might a dangerous animal, wary of setting foot too close.

The force possessing Keith was something Lance might have had some control over; his temper was not.

"How were we this *stupid*!" Keith yelled, his voice like an earthquake that disturbed the fragile dirt around them.

"Stop yelling."

"Why! Don't you *fucking* get it?"

"I do!" Lance insisted under his breath, wary of how close they still were to the others, just one wall between them. "I do, just keep your voice down!"

"We're *fucked*!" Keith sobbed, though his face was alight with anger. "Fucked! It knows now, I--"

"Shut up!" Lance shouted, dropping his voice immediately. "Shut the hell up!"

"Why?" Keith spluttered, clearly not thinking straight. "I've killed us, we're all fucking dead--"

“Keith! Stop it!”

“It’s *in me*, it’s *here*! It’s f-found-“

“Stop talking!” Lance bit out, lowering his voice to try and mask it from going beyond this room. “They’ll hear you!”

“We’re fucked, I killed them!”

“Keith!”

“No!” Keith shoved him back when Lance moved for him. “No! Y-you don’t, Carm-“

“Keith! *Cállate la boca!*” Lance lunged forward and grabbed hold of the red paladin’s shoulders, shaking him. “Jesus, will you shut up! Pull yourself together, man.”

Keith eyes were crazed, darting across Lance’s face but not really settling.

“I k-killed them,” he began, yelping when Lance shook him enough to stop the flow of words.

Lance grimaced; he didn’t want to treat Keith rough, but the idiot was about to get himself killed.

“Stop talking,” he said, *pleaded*, his heart going a million miles an hour.

Keith’s eyes swam, and he swayed a little in Lance’s hold, balanced between the two hands like vices on his shoulders. Lance’s fingers hurt so much he could scream.

“If they find out it’s in you, Keith,” he whispered harshly, enough for the words to pierce through the veil over Keith’s eyes. “That Carma’s in you, they could come in here and kill you right now.”

“Maybe they should.”

Lance sucked in a sharp breath, holding back a thousand curses behind gritted teeth.

Think,” he hissed, staring straight into Keith’s eyes. “For once, just think.”

“You think,” came Keith’s harsh response, but at least he spoke quieter now. “Think what we’ve just done!”

“I know, I-“

“Then acknowledge it!”

They were speaking in harsh whispers, hovering just in front of each other like a pair of furious wasps, waiting to strike.

“Lance,” he said. “We just, w-we, we brought Carma-“

“Don’t say her name!”

“So what if they hear, they deserve to know we’ve just ended *centuries* of peace.”

“We haven’t-“

“We *have*.”

“I fucked up,” Lance spat. “I fucked up, we all screwed up so, so bad. But don’t say her name,

don't- they might hurt you, Keith."

"If it helps, I'll let them."

"How can you-" Lance stuttered soundlessly, too angry to form his words. "*Keith*."

"It's gonna, it- *fuck*, Lance. This p-planet-"

"We don't know she'll be able to find them once we leave-"

"Of course it will!" Keith snapped, his voice rising a little and making Lance grimace. "I was literally just possessed! You know what it wanted to do, huh? To kill them, Lance. To kill everyone in that room. Thing's been hunting Aryon's descendants for centuries, and I just lead to it the *jackpot*."

"We *all* lead it-"

"Stop fucking babying me! There's more at stake than stupid blame! Fine, so we all lead it here, we all killed this planet!"

"Jesus, Keith," Lance hissed, fighting to keep his voice down. "It's not dead yet!"

"We're not dead yet either, Lance. It's just a matter of time."

Lance gripped his hair, tugging at the short strands to alleviate the throbbing pressure in his head.

"Fuck," he breathed. "Fuck."

"We shouldn't have come here," Keith said again, his eyes wide. "We shouldn't have come here, we should have known, this was so stupid, how could we do this-"

"S-stop."

"They- what's it going to do to them? I... I-I don't- we c-couldn't have done this how could we do this-"

"Keith, shut up, please."

Both of them, Lance realised, were breaking down. One needed to step up, that's what they always did; one took the blow and the other kept their head, that's how this relationship worked out. But neither was keeping their cool; Lance tried, but he couldn't. Keith was spiralling, repeating his own fears to himself. They'd just condemned this planet to death. *Stupid. Wretched.* Lance couldn't even look at his companion, for the first time in his life he was disgusted by *Keith*. By himself. By Allura, and Coran, and Pidge, and Hunk. He hated them. He hated the people he loved, because no matter how much he did care for them, this was... Lance reeled, this was incomprehensible.

They'd lead Carma to this planet. They'd lead Carma to the O'kyan, to the last of Aryon's descendants, to a planet full of innocent life for her to take. And for what? Because of a stupid mistake. Because they'd feared so much for their own lives, they'd put the lives at others at risk. This wasn't meant to be what they stood for, what they did. They should have *thought*. How could they bring Keith to any planet they sought help from? Keith, carrying Carma within him? And this... of all the planet's in the universe, they'd lead her to the very people she was hunting. Lance didn't even feel fear; this was despair.

"Oh my god," he breathed, hands clutching his head and staring at the floor.

Keith made a choked sound, and Lance couldn't bring himself to look.

"We should- we should've just-“ *died*."

They should have sucked up their fate as defenders of the universe, sent away which crewmembers they could, and *died*. Hope was a fickle illusion. Lance should have died in that cave. He said that then, because his mind was shot and he had nothing left to go on but regret.

"You should have let me die," he said. "In the cave. That's what she wanted."

Keith's head shot up so fast he nearly got whiplash.

"Are you fucking stupid?"

Lance could barely breathe from the pressure on his lungs and the voices in his head.

"We wouldn't be here if-"

"That's not what it wanted!" Keith yelled, forgetting for a second they should have been keeping quiet.

Lance flinched at the harsh sound of his voice. He pulled himself together quickly, coming to retaliate.

"It is, of course it is! She killed Allita, don't you get it? I'm just her unfinished business."

"Pity it's not all about you, Lance," Keith hissed, stepping closer so he'd be heard without raising his voice.

"What does that-"

"If you think your death would finish this, you're an idiot," Keith said.

*Idiot*. Keith's tone was no longer kind. That was okay, Lance hated him too. He hated all of them, in that moment.

"Go get yourself killed, Lance," Keith continued. "Cause I'm so sure, with you out the way, it'll just stop, right? A-Allura, her baby? They'll be *fine*."

"Not what I meant-"

"And back on Earth, when one of your siblings has twins? Your mom will love that, won't she? Won't she-"

"No!" Lance shouted.

He dropped his hands from his face, staring at Keith with open distaste.

"Don't bring my family into this!"

"They're already caught in it!" Keith yelled back. "You're mother's already caught- no she's not gonna want to love those twins, Lance! No one is! But she won't be able to help it, right? Like she couldn't help but love you and Allita? Allita fucking died and she kept loving you, knowing the same was going to happen to you-"

"She didn't know!"

Lance was angry now. Keith had no right to be saying the things he was.

“It’s a joke, Keith! No one actually believes that shit-“

“They do now. Any more twins born to your family and she’ll be *terrified*.”

“How about you shut up? You don’t know shit about my mom.”

“No, Lance, cause you’re not thinking!”

“I don’t care-“

“There’s going to be more twins, Lance! Generations more! More little brothers and sisters who are also going to die! But thank god Lance solved the problem by just lying back and *dying*-“

Lance didn’t even realise what he was doing until he heard the sharp crack and crumble of the walls. They clay tightened, compacting, as he sucked the particles of water from it with all the force of a sudden vacuum. Keith gasped, the words stuck in his throat as he eyed the particles of water orbiting him, sparking with little tendrils of electricity as Lance’s breathing grew laboured. Shock, horror at what he’d done all set in, but he didn’t release the water.

“Don’t,” he said, voice as cold as precise as the electrified water prowling around Keith. “Talk like that about my family.”

“Why not?” Said Keith, his eyes boring into Lance fearlessly. “You’re threatening mine.”

“I’m not-“ the words caught in Lance’s throat.

He was breathing heavy, as was Keith, both of them beyond frightened and beyond furious.

“I have a brother,” said Keith. “And someday a sister-in-law. And a little niece or nephew. I have a spaceship full of people who are *my* family. And they’ve all been dragged into this with you.”

Lance’s throat tightened, fingers twitching in the fist he’d made.

“I can see you giving up,” continued Keith.

“What’s that got to do with your family-“

“Cause you’re fucking part of it! And if you die, it’s not going to leave us alone! That thing will take it out on them. On that baby. On Allura. On Shiro. On your family back on Earth, Lance. On people like *this*.”

Keith’s eyes were burning, and now Lance was sure he could hear someone knocking on the door. It would make sense; he’d just compressed an entire room.

“Your family’s going to loose a lot more than you and Allita,” said Keith. “We’ve all been too worried about our own lives, that’s how this happened. We’re not thinking of everyone else it’s still going to kill.”

In the silence, they just stared at each other. Lance didn’t care if what Keith said made sense, he was *angry*. Someone thumped their fist into the door.

“Lance? Keith?” Allura called, sounding equal bits distressed and furious. “Come out right now.”

Lance’s lip twitched, the water doing one more circle around Keith’s head before he let it drop.

Keith's breathing grew easier, and Lance hated himself a little more. He wanted to cry, because Keith had hurt him and he'd hurt Keith. Because when the barriers were stretched to thin, they couldn't help each other after all.

"Anything else you wanna say?" He said coldly.

Keith frowned. "What do you expect me to say? When you talk about dying?"

Lance bit his lip, his whole being thrumming with angry energy.

"Not fucking that."

Keith's expression tightened, but Lance didn't waste time waiting for his reaction. He spun on his heel, and went forth to confront Allura.

## Chapter End Notes

D: sorry

## Chapter Notes

BLESS YOU ALL THESE COMMENTS ARE LOVELY!! Thanks for everyone who's sticking with this fic even tho its taking ages... I promise there's an end in sight, kinda in sight, it's there, whether or not we can see it yet  
 THE END EXISTS theres just a few more chapters to pack in there before u guys can see it im sorry  
 ok thank u bye

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

Allura stumbled back when Lance flung the door open and came storming out the room, his hands in fists and brows knitted tightly. She glanced briefly into the room at Keith, standing frozen where Lance had left him. It took a mere moment for her to realise Lance was the bigger problem right now, and she tried to catch his arm as he pushed his way through the semi-circle of O'kyan crowded around the doorway.

"Lance!" She called sharply, shoving her way past the O'kyan to try and catch him.

They came to a stop no more than thirty feet away, when Allura grabbed his arm and yanked him back hard enough to get him to lose his footing.

"What's happening?" She hissed, eyes wild and- *they really must have scared her there.*

Lance was still fuming, or freezing, more like it. He glared at the doorway, but he couldn't see Keith through the crowd of O'kyan filtering into the room to assess the damage he'd done. Good, he hoped they'd leave him and Allura alone for a minute, he needed to cool off. Warm up? Hell, Lance didn't know. Hugging Keith would really help right now, except that he was really, seriously, not going to do that.

"Lance," Allura insisted, grabbing his chin and actually forcing him to look at her.

Wow, she was... *really* scared. Did she know? Had she figured it out?

"*What* is happening? What did you do to that room?"

"Got angry," he muttered, and it felt like the words should have frozen the air around them.

*Fuck*, he was cold, could Allura feel it? This was... this was dangerous levels of cold, he needed to calm the hell down. He could have brought the building down, *shit*. There were questions pouring from the O'kyan from inside the room, but Lance ignored them, letting Keith deal with them.

"Allura," he said. "We messed up."

Her gaze didn't waver, it stayed strong and fixed.

"How?"



Lance *hurt*. It felt like there was ice freezing the lining of his organs, halting his body in place. Could he do that, hurt himself? He could go sticking his fingers into electrical outlets and shielding people from explosions, but one little argument and he was freezing his internal organs?

“We messed up,” he said again, trying to breath deeply to warm his chest. “We-“

Lance wished he’d finished that sentence. He could have told Allura everything, and she could have helped. She was the diplomat, right? Just tell Allura, she’ll know what to do. But someone else spoke first. Keith spoke, raising his voice so it carried over the heads of all the O’kyan, right to Lance and Allura, to the rest of their team standing fretting on the other end of the room. He spoke, and Lance’s heart sank like a brick of cement, right to the bottom of the sea floor.

“You are all in danger,” said Keith, bringing the chatter in the room to an abrupt halt.

Lance turned, as did everyone else, to peer at the boy standing square jawed in the middle of the room, his eyes burning where he looked into Lance.

“You’re not safe here anymore.”

“Keith...”

A few hesitant voices turned to the person beside them, speculating what Keith could mean by that.

“You-“

“Keith-“

“Carma has found you,” Keith said, ignoring Lance.

The storm paladin shut his eyes, his lip trembling, the weight of this atmosphere gathering, compacting upon his shoulder until all he could do was try and keep himself standing. The reaction was instantaneous.

“What did that boy say?”

An eruption of voices went up around the room, while the paladins stood slack-jawed at the sight of Keith spilling their secret. Lance tried to breath, tried to *think*. He had to stop Keith, but it was a little too late. By the look in his eyes, Keith knew that.

“We made a mistake coming here,” Keith continued. “It’s our fault and... you deserve to know.”

“Know what?”

“He said Carma, why did he say Carma?”

Allura was watching wide eyed beside Lance; she hadn’t come to the same conclusion as them, then.

“There’s a piece of Carma residing within me,” said Keith.

He was starting to speak faster, as though he feared someone would stop him.

“If we knew you were the descendants of Aryon, we never would have come. But we did, and, and she realised you were here, and- I-I’m sorry. I think it’s best to evacuate the planet-“

Keith was cut off by the absolute upheaval of outrage that radiated from the midst of the O'kyan.

"He's Carma!" Yelled one.

"It's not true, how can he be telling the truth?"

"They came to kill us?"

"What does that mean--"

"It's true!" Keith insisted.

And then, because by that point he surely believed he could not make the situation any worse, he began removing the armour around his arm.

"Keith," said Lance, finally finding his voice.

The red paladin's eyes landed on his briefly, but it was only for a second. His glove hit the floor before Lance could even draw breath, and Keith was holding up his infected hand and the bruised skin around it for them all to see. It was like a whirlwind had taken hold of the O'kyan. One minute they'd been outraged, and confused, the next... they were *dangerous*.

"Traitor!" Yelled one, followed by a number of calls that Lance couldn't decipher, but which made Allura wince.

Keith's face paled, but he didn't back down. *If it helps, I'll let them*. Keith was prepared to let these people kill him, if that would help them deal with the threat? By the looks of it, that possibility wasn't too far off. Lance chest seized up when the first wave of O'kyan moved to grab Keith.

"Keith!" He yelled, but the boy didn't even fight them.

One O'kyan grabbed his hand roughly, holding it up to the light to get a better look at the cut. He hissed, dropping it, and two more grabbed his arms and forced his head back. Pidge shouted something from across the room, elbowing her way through the crowd toward them. And Lance... he couldn't breathe. It shouldn't be hurting this much; he'd just used his powers to help Keith, and now they were bringing him down. Keith was being manhandled into a position that left him vulnerable, his arms trapped, locked in place, bare neck exposed to the knife that was-

"Stop it!" Pidge screamed, rising over the chaos around her. "Don't hurt him! Stop!"

Lance needed to *move*, but his limbs were locked in place. He opened his mouth, but all that came out was a winded squeak, ice seizing his innards. He hated them, his whole team, himself, Keith, for coming here. He hated them- but he didn't. Because he still loved Keith, he couldn't let him die, so why couldn't he move? The conflicting feelings and the sheer, blinding panic kept him frozen in place.

"Is this the truth?" An O'kyan was screaming into Keith's ear, wrenching his head back with a grip on his hair and holding a knife to his throat.

"It's not!" Pidge yelled.

"What are you doing?" Hunk was right behind her, finding even he couldn't get through the crowd.

“You speak of Carma residing within you?”

“I do,” Keith grit out. “We will help you-“

“Kill it!” Another O’kyan screamed, much to the approval of the others.

Lance wrenched himself forward, grimacing when a thousand shards of ice appeared to pierce his insides.

“It’s not in him!” He yelled. “Hurting him will do nothing!”

He was ignored in favour of the O’kyan taking up a vicious chant, a deafening call to kill Keith. Lance panicked, grasping for a hold on the energy within him. It didn’t just slip through his fingers, it cut and sliced as it went, evading his grip and tearing him to pieces from the inside out. The energy wasn’t obeying him, Keith was in danger, he could barely breath, the O’kyan was forcing the red paladin to his knees-

“Keith!” Pidge screamed, as he was stolen from her view.

“N-no!” Lance forced out, flinging himself forward into the fray, elbowing O’kyan out of his way as he battled to reach Keith.

They stopped him, shoving back against him as he went for the red paladin, all of them screaming as the man holding Keith responded to the vicious instructions pouring over them from his fellow O’kyan.

“Keith!” He yelled, catching glimpses of red and white armour through the gaps in the crowd.  
“*Keith!*”

Why couldn’t he *help*? He yelled, kicking and screaming, shoving at the aliens holding him back and trying to gain a hold on the cold energy, but finding it was growing further and further-

“*STOP!*”

Allura’s voice went through him like a shockwave. For a moment, blinding pink light filled the room, bursting out as if the princess had just gone supernova, gushing over them in waves of light and vibration. Lance gasped at the lightness in his chest, flexing his fingers and revelling in the lack of terrifying coldness gripping his insides. He was still shoved up against the O’kyan, but everyone had stopped moving, as though in a daze. Pidge blinked tears out of her eyes, halfway to raising her bayard. The man holding Keith had frozen up, staring into empty space as if in a trance. Allura straightened from her stance, retracting her staff as the last of the pink light fell away from her like a swirling mist. She strode to the front of the room, easily pushing past the dazed O’kyan and making her way toward Keith. The man holding the knife frowned as she approached, his fingers twitching around the blade as if remembering his purpose.

“You can’t-“

A vicious cry tore out of Allura as she thrust the staff into his torso, sending him flying back, where he landed flat on his ass far away from Keith. Said paladin blinked up at Allura as if she were an angel descended from heaven. She grabbed his collar, hauling him to his feet before turning on the crowd, poised with her staff in hand.

“That’s *enough*,” she spat.

Lance was gaping at her, as was everyone else. The princess glared back at them, her raised

stomach doing very little to dispel her air of intimidation.

“Look at you,” she practically growled. “About to murder an innocent *boy*. You are not the Alteans I know.”

“An understandable observation,” one woman sneered. “Given that we’re *not*.”

“You call him an innocent boy,” called another, beginning to regain their sense of purpose. “He carries Carma!”

“I recognise that mark,” said one of the men they’d sat with at the table. “Carma resides within him for certain. And now you’ve come to kill us.”

“We did not come to kill you!” Allura said, raising her voice.

As angry as the crowd was, she still managed to commandeer their presence.

“We came seeking *help*. We came because this boy,” she pointed toward Lance. “Is also descended from Aryon. Because he and all those on Earth descended from her are still in danger.”

“And now you bring danger to us-“

“How were we to know!” Allura yelled. “How were we to know you resided here? You’ve never shown yourself! Altea fell, our planet was lost, to a force far more potent than Carma, and you never once-“

“We have been in hiding!” A woman yelled. “We left Altea behind when your people could not protect us! We couldn’t have known of its fall.”

“We’ve been safe for centuries,” said a man. “Centuries of peace, disturbed by *you*-“

“No,” said Allura. “No, I assure you, it was more than us. Carma was *woken*.”

Her eyes locked with Lance, and suddenly he understood. He’d told her all about his first dream, the very first night they came to the system, how voices in the tunnel had berated him for waking it. That it was coming.

“Thousand of years have passed,” Allura continued. “Because she wasn’t searching for you. She’s been clinging to life, barely, by picking off the generations of twins to come from our paladin’s family. But now she is awake.”

“And what woke it,” one man hissed. “You again?”

“You cannot think you’d be safe here forever,” Allura snapped. “Not with Carma alive! She’s been *waiting*, just keeping herself alive until the right moment!”

Lance could see where this was going; he wished he could be there to take Keith from the room.

“This is nonsense-“

“Get over yourself,” Allura snapped. “She’s been hunting for centuries. Your planet may have kept you safe from her in her weakened state. But I’ll tell you something. I can still smell you. They can’t, not the humans, but I tell you now I can *smell* this planet. And if I can, then Carma can. She’ll follow your scent like she did ours, track you down the same way she followed the scent of the father of my child, right to me, and to Lance, and to our team.”

Allura paused, her eyes burning as they settled on the O'kyan before her.

"That is how she woke. A stray man in her system. A scent."

A small movement to her side, and Lance watched the colour drain from Keith's face.

"What?" He squeaked, so soft and scared it was barely heard at all.

Allura winced slightly, her eyes shutting for a second as she no doubt realised what she'd revealed to Keith, to their whole team.

"Carma's growing stronger," she said, calmer. "If we don't help each other, we will all be lost."

-

Whatever awkward family reunion vibes Lance had been getting earlier on that day, had been infinitely better than this. Only he and Allura remained on the planet they'd come to know as Oro, seated at a different table, in a different room, before a different set of O'kyan, because apparently there really was no defined leader. They all thought together, acted together, and consulted their allies turned enemies together. Keith and the rest of their team had been forcibly removed to the castle, which now hung about at a safe distance in the sky, since Allura had insisted upon removing Keith from the planet.

"As I told you," Allura was saying, sitting stiffly beside Lance, their knees pressed together under the table in way of reassurance.

She was terrified; Lance knew, because so was he. Two of them against the whole planet, a planet he simultaneously hated and had no plausible reason too, because Voltron had brought their problems here.

"After our last battle against the Galra, the army which brought about the destruction of Altea, my partner went missing. We believe the druid magic and raw quintessence involved in the exchange may have transported him somewhere."

Lance knew this was hard for Allura to talk about- hell, she'd done her best to deny it thus far. But since Keith had been put in danger, since this whole planet had... it was the only explanation they had. And they needed a starting point.

"We have no concrete proof," Lance continued, when Allura faltered. "But our guess is that Shiro was transported to the realm of the Dark Planet. Using his scent, Carma would have been able to find their unborn baby, and has been using that to open the wormholes."

The atmosphere was beyond tense.

"I think you're quite missing the point," said the O'kyan now seated before them. "Carma finding you was one thing, now you have lead her to us. The red one poses-"

"Keith has nothing to do with this," Lance began.

"He has *everything*-"

"It was mistake coming here," Allura said. "We know. But the last thing we expected to find were descendants of Aryon. All we knew was that Lance was being hunted. His family has been subject to Carma's revenge for years, and now that she has him right within her realm, she's drawing the sentence out."

“So all our lives meant nothing against just one-“

“It’s not just Lance’s life on the line!” Allura snapped. “It’s all the twins in his family, previous generations and the ones still to come. If he dies, Carma will still come for his family.”

Lance flinched. As much as Allura’s point meant to him- he’d do anything to stop just one more member of his family dying, it wouldn’t satisfy the O’kyan. One family didn’t outweigh the significance of an entire planet. That must have showed on their faces, because Allura kept talking.

“What do you want to do about it? Hate us all you want, that’s your right. But if you kill us, or banish us, we won’t be able to help you.”

“*Help-*“

“We are trying to stop Carma,” Allura said imploringly. “That’s why we came here. We were trying to find a people who knew enough about the Dark Planet to break the wormhole cycle, and... and destroy her.”

The O’kyan just continued to stare, to blame. And Lance knew they should, that that was their right, but he just didn’t... he didn’t like them. Blame it on the fact they had no expressions, or acted like a hive mind, or that they’d tried to kill Keith, or that they... their whole planet had been doomed. Lance felt ill. No wonder he hated them; he just hated *everything*.

“The red one can’t help us in any case,” said one man. “But you owe us your help-“

“You won’t be getting any fucking help if you harm him,” Lance spat, before common sense could get the better of him.

“I thought you said you were saviours of the universe,” an O’kyan woman said. “But here you are, condemning a species.”

“What Lance meant to say,” said Allura, on the verge of anger herself. “Is that we work together as a team. If any one of us is compromised, we won’t be of nearly as much use to you.”

She paused, biting her lip.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Truly I... I am in over my head, as they might say. We didn’t... if we’d *known*, if we’d known at all, we wouldn’t have come here. I know you hate us, I know we’ve destroyed centuries of peace, but please, if we continue to argue we’ll get nowhere. I don’t believe you would have been safe from Carma forever. I believe the only way to fix this, to truly fix it, is to put an end to this spirit. But we need your help because we... we have nothing. Nothing but each other.”

For a mere minute, the O’kyan were quiet as they considered this. Lance could still see the distaste on their faces, the hatred and objection that was only seconds-

“We cannot kill Carma.”

He looked up to who had spoken, a man across the other side of the room. Lance had figured out by now that unless an O’kyan was seated before them at the table, they weren’t permitted to speak. Annoyance showed on the faces of the other’s, but Allura had already pinned her attention on this new man.

“Why not?”

“We have no way to,” he continued, after sparing a glance to his fellow O’kyan. “This princess is right, if we keep arguing, we cannot help ourselves.”

Lance could see the others weren’t happy he was speaking, but Allura at least looked hopeful. He glanced back at the man; he was young, or seemed so, the brown shell that formed his forehead bleeding darker strands into his blonde hair. He had restless eyes, that flitted over the crowd so rapidly it almost helped him convey emotion.

“But working together?” Allura asked. “Can we help each other like that?”

“Him,” said an older, withered O’kyan, and Lance realised she was angling her finger at him. “He can.”

“I can...” Lance trailed off, looking to Allura for help.

“He can help?”

“A child of Aryon, who shares the powers of those in older times. He must know how to use them.”

“I do,” said Lance. “But can they stop Carma?”

He was met with a sharp scoff, which was weird, cause he didn’t think these things could laugh.

“You do not know how to use those powers,” another O’kyan said.

“Hey, I can do more than hold some electricity, alright?”

Lance frowned, trying to defend his powers, ignoring the tingle he could still feel in his stomach where it felt like ice was stabbing him.

“What can you do?”

“He creates shields out of water,” said Allura. “Enough to withstand an explosion. And redirects electricity-“

“Make one, then.”

“What?”

“Make this shield.”

Lance wrung his fingers together anxiously, glancing toward Allura.

“It doesn’t just... I can’t just do it.”

“Oh? You should.”

The O’kyan before him shook their head disdainfully. “He is like a baby.”

“Oh yeah? I don’t see you guys doing anything.”

“We can’t,” mumbled the young man from the sidelines.

“No,” said the O’kyan before them. “But we know how to train powers such as this.”

“Y-you do?”

“How?” Allura asked.

“We are descended from one of Altea’s most powerful, we take pride in studying these powers, even if they have been filtered out from our own population over the centuries.”

“So you think Lance...”

“Whatever Carma has become,” said the O’kyan., “cannot be fought with numbers, or strength. Only the techniques of the old can combat her.”

“Hate fights hate,” said another. “And whichever is strongest, wins.”

“That sounds, uh...” Lance frowned.

Sounded like everything his mother had taught him not to think, but whatever. What did any of them know when it came to killing centuries old spirits?

“So you could train us,” asked Allura. “Train us to stop Carma?”

“Perhaps,” said one.

“Not you,” said another.

“What do you mean, not her?” Lance asked.

He didn’t want Allura fighting of course, but a) this was kind of about more than what he wanted, and b) there was no way Allura would sit back and do nothing.

“I have powers too,” she said. “I’ve become better at training them.”

“You are not descended from Aryon,” said an O’kyan.

“So? What does that matter-“

“We will train the boy. And he will consider it an honour.”

Lance nearly choked on his words. “Nothing about this is an *honour*. We’re trying to save peoples lives! It makes more sense to-”

“Quiet! What’s said is said. You do not understand what this training *is*.”

“Yeah, but-“

“Do you understand,” said the O’kyan before them. “What you have done to us?”

Lance shut his mouth.

“Maybe Carma would have found us, as you said, or maybe she wouldn’t have. But you have stolen all the years of possibility from us. You’ve stolen our future. So we will train you, and you will not object. And if you do, the lives of twenty thousand will be lost by your hand.”

-

**Star date – 33:08:15**

Castle Cycle – 23:37

Log – 34



*When the log began, Lance was crying. Not loudly or noticeably; he sat hunched over the consul, one hand pressed tightly over his mouth while droplets of silent tears ran down his cheeks, between his fingers and dripping off his chin. Black's sensors were going a little berserk, warming the lights in the cockpit and trying to conjure up the sound of waves, which ended up sounding little more than static.*

*"Messed up today, Black," Lance said through his fingers, his voice pitchy.*

*A shuddering sigh had him reaching for his shirt, using the fabric to wipe away the streams of water coming from his eyes.*

*"I'm sorry," he said, his voice catching. "And I was t-trying to, y-you know, be brave. And I j-just hate m-me."*

*He cut himself off, stifling a sob into his sleeve, brows bunched together miserably.*

*"Didn't mean to, Black. I-I, killed them. They're gonna d-die, because I was scared. I shouldn't have suggested we find help, I shouldn't-"*

*Lance stopped, crying more, folding into himself in the chair.*

*"I'm sorry."*

*It took a few minutes for him to calm down, by which time the screens in the cockpit were lighting up periodically to try and distract him.*

*"Don't know why I hated them," Lance mumbled. "That's so fucking awful, for me to hate them. I killed them."*

*He sniffled. "A-and Keith. How'd I... how'd I ruin it all? Yesterday was so n-nice. And now everything's just f-falling apart. I threatened him, Black, w-what kind of person am I? Who threatens someone they love? Did I- I don't wanna be that person, I don't want to be that, I-"*

*Lance ran a hand over his mouth to stop the flow of words, squeezing his eyes shut.*

*"That dream," he said. "Where I killed Allita. I don't- I don't want to be the person who makes things like that plausible."*

*The silence stretched in the dim confines, and Lance sat with his head in his hands.*

*"I just gotta train, right? Gotta do their training, and it- it will all be okay. Won't it?"*

*There was no reply, not from Black, or Blue, or anyone.*

*"It's just a fight, right? Just a fight."*

## Chapter End Notes

keith, you fool

## Chapter Notes

HALLO

super short chapter this time sorry! Thank you so much to everyone who commented that they'd happily read like a thousand more chapters, you guys are just the best, thank you <3 <3 <3 I appreciate you!!

IMPORTANTLY LOOK AT THIS AMAZING ART!!

<https://anawkwardavocadoart.tumblr.com/post/169780295404/quit-being-stressed-lance-stuttered-disbelief>

A Lancey Lance (and a rock, by suggestion), by anawkwardavocadoart... thank you so very much for drawing somethin for this fic <3

enjoy the chapter!! In which Lance has another bad day

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There was actual sunlight pouring through the window when Lance stood getting dressed that morning. He stood in the hangar instead of their room, unwilling to face Keith after their fight. Both lions were watching him with muted concern as Lance miserably slapped on bit after bit of black armour, tugging on the gloves and trying to sooth the uncomfortable tingle in his arms. It was fight day. That, apparently, was what the O'kyans' training involved. An arena fight, where he'd supposably be shown how to harness his powers correctly. Lance had no idea what that meant, really. If it was anything similar to Altean training, it would probably involve being tossed around by a drone for a couple of hours before crawling back to the castle miserably, covered in an assortment of new bruises. That wasn't too bad, given the alternative of, you know, dying.

Even so, Lance didn't feel well. He hadn't slept well, he was hungry, and scared, and irritable, and hurting from his fight with Keith and the disaster of going back to Oro. He flinched when the door to the hangar slid open, and footsteps started quickly toward him. He knew who it was; Lance refused to turn to look at them, fiddling with a glove that didn't seem to be sitting right.

"Where did you sleep?"

Keith sounded hoarse, like he'd been crying. Lance doubted he looked any better than he sounded, but wasn't about to give in to find out.

"In the common room," he replied stiffly.

Keith's breath caught, and Lance could picture how he'd look standing a few feet behind him-tired, eyes desperate, fingers playing nervously in and out of fists.

"That's not safe," Keith pleaded.

Lance felt his throat constrict. He shrugged nonchalantly, glad Keith couldn't see his expression. It was stupid, them fighting like this. But as much as he hated to admit, Lance was still angry. At himself and Keith. Angry that Keith had upset him by bringing up his family, for even suggesting

that his mother was going to loose more grandchildren, more relatives. He was angry at himself for threatening Keith, for *being* angry, for proving he could hurt the red paladin if he wanted. Which he didn't. But he *could*. That fact didn't sit well with Lance. The way his eyes had grown fearful when Lance summoned that water, the way he shrank-

Lance flinched when arms wrapped around his stomach, Keith's face pressed between his shoulder blades and holding tight. Lance waited, but neither said anything. Keith hugged him closer, tighter, but Lance didn't return the gesture. He stared straight ahead, refusing to acknowledge the boy clinging to him. A more sensible side of his brain reminded him this was probably the best apology Keith could come up with, but he wasn't up to accepting it. Not when he was angry at himself.

Holding in any embarrassing sound he might make, Lance took hold of Keith's hand, ignoring the way those fingers went for his instinctually, hopefully, and peeled it off him. There was pained gasp from the boy behind him, which Lance ignored also. Dropping Keith's arms from around him, he turned sharply and walked from the room.

-

"You're sure this is safe?"

Allura had only asked that question a million times. She'd put aside her irritation at not being included in the training in favour of making sure Lance was doing alright. She hovered beside him as the O'kyan removed the lower left arm of his suit and replaced it with a type of metallic brace. Lance eyed the instrument with suspicion; they'd laid it gently over his skin, but he imagined there was going to be a bit more involved to keep it there.

"This is part of the training," said one of the O'kyan aiding them.

That seemed to be their answer to everything; *part of the training*. The brace ran all the way from his wrist to the base of his elbow, so Lance still had free movement of the limb, even if it felt a little heavier. It was a sleek, silver metal, with two ribs running over the top of his arm, and one large rib underneath, which connected on each side to a tight bracelet around his wrist and arm. There was a small, dark square embedded in the metal just above his wrist, which almost looked like it was made of stone. It had to be something more than that, he reasoned, eyeing the reflective black surface.

"But what's the purpose of it?"

Allura kept trying to touch the device, but her hand was promptly slapped away. The rest of the paladins hadn't been permitted into this laboratory, which sat in a higher room in the tower on Oro. Keith had to wait on the castle with Coran, but at least Hunk and Pidge could wait outside until the procedure was over with. Allura had piloted them back to the dark star system the night before, and back to the planet that morning, to avoid her baby being used to open the wormholes.

"This controls his training," explained an O'kyan. "It's called the Lox. We too use it for training, but not in the same way you will."

"What's it do?" Lance asked, finding his voice amid the nerves clouding his mind.

"It transports you to and from the arena, for one."

"It's a transporter?" Allura looked stunned.

"That's one use, yes. If the first trial goes well, you'll have no need to return to Oro. You can operate from your spaceship, and from the system of the Dark Planet."

“That’s...”

Lance didn’t know what to say. It was weird, and useful, and confusing all the same.

“This,” said an O’kyan, tapping the black square. “Will tell you when to enter the arena, and when to leave. When it summons you to fight, you must go. If you don’t, this training will not continue.”

“What of I miss, like, one?”

The eyes of all the O’kyan bored into him.

“You must go when summoned. If not, the training will not continue.”

Lance shifted foot to foot. “Sure. How often do I have to fight?”

“The Lox will decide.”

Which, okay. A rock was going to decide when he went to train in the arena. Could definitely be weirder.

“Okay...”

Lance shared a look with Allura; she was frowning. She gave his arm a squeeze, and he frowned. *Any day now*, he thought, eyeing her stomach. Any day, and look at the mess they were in.

“What exactly does that mean?”

The O’kyan exchanged a look as if they couldn’t tell why Lance and Allura required any more of an explanation.

“Once the cycle is broken, so is the Lox. If you miss a trial, the training ends. We cannot begin it again.”

“Couldn’t you just, I don’t know, replace it?” Allura asked, while the O’kyan gestured for Lance’s arm.

“Depending on when he is summoned,” Allura continued. “We may be in the middle of battle, or-“

Lance zoned out to what she was saying, to focused on what the Lox surrounding his arm was doing. He hissed as the brace was tightened, and the O’kyan began to insert thin bolts into rivets in the main bands. They looked like tiny nails. That was all the warning Lance got before pain shot through his arm like a bullet, burning at his insides as dozens of needle like teeth were plunged into his skin.

“Fuck!” he yanked his arm back, out of the grip of the O’kyan, but it had already been done.

“Lance!” Allura was at his side, fussing over his arm as tears began falling.

He couldn’t help it, it *hurt*. He whimpered as blood began leaking out from under the metal, and Allura lost it.

“What did you do!” She yelled, pressing her fingers to his bloody skin.

Lance yelped, the pressure only making it hurt more. He could feel those bits of metal just sitting in his flesh, like leeches burrowing into his skin, feeding off his blood as it seeped through the tight metal clasp.

“Attached the Lox,” an O’kyan was explaining to a furious Allura, whose nails were digging into Lance’s shoulder in an unconscious display of rage.

“What the- this is barbaric!” The princess cried and gestured to his arm.

Lance couldn’t speak, just focused on drawing deep breaths and avoided looking at his arm in case he vomited. This wasn’t an on-off thing then. Allura was yelling things beside him, the O’kyan’s claims doing little to reassure her.

“Allura,” he reached for her arm, patting it gently, shuddering at the sickening squelch of blood around his arm. “It’s okay.”

She turned to him, fire in her eyes. “They’ve hurt you!”

“It’s okay-“

Lance was cut off as a bolt of electricity ran through him, which was weird, since he was pretty sure he was immune to electricity. He didn’t have much time to think on that, not when a thousand images came flashing before his eyelids, freezing him in place. Lance gasped as he was assaulted by thousands of memories and visions. He saw his family, all his siblings, Allita, his childhood, his school, his friends, his *thoughts*. *What the hell?* He saw himself meeting Hunk, and Pidge and Keith and everyone. The Garrison, going to space, Zarkon, Blue. More, all his private memories were playing out before his eyes as if he was a stranger to himself. His first kiss, a dull afternoon spent studying, finding a shell, trying to learn guitar in his room, playing with Lily’s makeup when she wasn’t home, cooking with Hunk, kicking his cousin in a soccer match, holding Keith in the decontamination chamber, trying to pull out a loose tooth in front of the bathroom mirror, raising his hand to answer a question he knew, watching an approaching storm, comforting his mother when she cried-

Lance fell forward, gasping for air and blinking pictures out of his vision, memories of things he’d previously forgotten. There was no order, no relation, all memories old and new and happy and sad and neutral and important and irrelevant... it was just all there. His whole life. That thing on his arm had just seen his whole life. Lance was sure he could feel it humming like a living thing, sated with his blood and everything that made Lance... *Lance*.

“What now?” Allura was screaming, and Lance realised she was supporting him.

“It read him-“

“What is that-“

“It’s what the training operates off,” an O’kyan insisted.

“Oh look,” said another, before Allura could explode. “It’s ready for you.”

Confused, Lance glanced down at the Lox, and the dark square. Except it wasn’t dark, it had begun to glow a mild green. He shivered.

“What’s that mean,” he slurred, still shaken from the millions of images he’d just seen.

It was too many to even make sense of, but clearly the Lox had gotten what it wanted.

“It’s time for you to enter the arena,” said an O’kyan.

“But he’s hurt,” Allura said. “H-he can’t go right now. How long does he have?”

Lance was staring at the square, which was gradually beginning to glow brighter and brighter.

“He has until it breaks. The Lox will grow gradually brighter, until it self-destructs. He must enter before that.”

“And how long does that take?”

By the looks of it, Lance reckoned less than a minute.

“N-now,” he stuttered, cutting off whatever Allura was trying to say.

“Lance,” she began, but he met her eye and tried for a smile.

“It’s okay, I-I’m fine.”

“You’re not...” Allura sighed, brows pinched.

“It’s just training, Allura. It’s cool. Promise.”

It wasn’t cool, not at all. Lance knew it was training, but he’d at least wanted to see his friends first. This was... he was being tossed right in. This was to help people, he reminded himself. Stifling a sigh, Lance straightened his shoulders, gritting his teeth against the throbbing in his arm. It felt a bit numb, which helped a little with the pain; probably part of the plan, then.

“What do I do, to enter?”

“You might want to lie down,” said an O’kyan. “The transition is a little rough.”

Sharing one more look with Allura, Lance sat back on the floor, lying down so he was staring up at the ceiling and the faces hovering over him.

“Simply touch it,” said an O’kyan, which sounded way too simple, but who was Lance to say so.

“Okay...” He eyed the square, glowing a much brighter green. “Guess I’ll, uh, see you guys later.”

“I’ll be right here,” Allura said. “Good luck.”

“Don’t go worrying,” he said, ignoring the O’kyan and shooting Allura a wobbly smile. “See you soon.”

Before he could do something stupid like insist they take the Lox off, Lance shut his eyes, and touched two fingers to the stone.

-

Saying the transition would be a little rough was an understatement. Try sickeningly disorientating, for starters. Lance felt like the floor had dropped out from under him, and even though his eyes flew open immediately, all he saw was darkness. It lasted only a second, but Lance certainly didn’t want to spend any longer in transition, before ground was materialising beneath his back and he was left staring up at a high ceiling, bright lights blinking down at him from corners in the arena. Groaning, still aware of the numb ache in his arm, Lance sat up.

It was an arena all right, a decent sized circular pit, with dull beige walls that rose right up to the ceiling. The ground was sand, and Lance was reminded of a gladiator arena. And okay, that was not a comforting thought. Flinching at the weight on his arm, he pushed himself to his feet, feeling for his bayards while turning in a slow circle to take in his surrounds. The spectators... weren’t

there. There was no one watching him, yet he could hear them. He could hear the hum and buzz of a thousand voices drifting through the walls, too many to make out; it gave a weird depth to the atmosphere.

Lance wondered where this arena actually *was*. The ceiling and walls were devoid of windows, so he had no way of knowing. He ignored the idea that they might be underground in favour of searching for his supposed opponent. Lance didn't have to search for too long; another second, and a slot was opening in the ceiling. He watched in fascination as a humanoid drone dropped from the hole, landing firmly on the sand a hundred feet away. It stood mechanically, at least a full head taller than him, its blank metal face not that unlike the drones aboard the castle. Maybe some things about Altea never changed.

"Uh, hey," he said, grimacing at the stupidity of it.

Of course the droid wasn't going to respond.

"Okay," he said slowly, as the machine withdrew a jagged blade from its armour. "Gun against sword. Cool. We can totally do this, not like Keith kicks my ass every time."

Lance shook his head, trying to clear away thoughts of Keith, of his soft lips the day before, and the feel of his body pressed against Lance's, and the horrible words- A change in the droid had Lance raising his bayards, forced to confront reality. It was moving toward him with long strides, raising the blade and wow, that looked sharp. How did this work then? Either he beats the droid, or he gets his ass kicked hard enough for it to shut off, right? That was the Altean way, anyway.

Lance fired off a shot with the blue bayard before the droid got too close. It hit their shoulder, rebounding off the metal fairly harmlessly. Okay then, maybe some electricity. The black bayard had a bit more of an effect, shooting through the droid's body and causing it to spasm. The relief didn't last very long, not when the machine recovered and started running. Lance fired off two more shots before realising he needed to *move*. He'd barely just darted left before the droid's blade was coming down like a guillotine, slamming into the sand where he stood. Lance's eyes widened; whatever kind of training this was, he didn't think he was going to enjoy it.

*Come on, you can do it, this is to help you help them.* Thinking fast, Lance darted back around the droid, firing shots into its back while it heaved its blade out the sand. It turned faster than he expected, and Lance was forced to leap backwards to avoid the blunt edge slamming into his stomach. There were some bruises he could do without, thank you. He wondered briefly what exactly this had to do with fighting Carma; it felt more like an ordinary training session on the castle, except for the huge scary blade. Maybe he was supposed to do more. But this was only the first fight, right? His arm still hurt, surely he didn't have to do anything fancy this time around.

Lance kept up that same tactic, firing until the droid came too close, then darting around it to go for the weak spots on its back. It worked once, twice, he was starting to get the hang of this. The droid came charging forward, and Lance evaded it swiftly, turning with both gun to fire-

It was better heard, than seen, the swift whistle of metal through air. Lance stumbled slightly, just one step back and a jerk to a side. The blade went through his suit like a knife through butter, like a stroke of pen across paper, a sharp tug to completion. Lance's jaw dropped, a gasp punched out of him, limbs hanging loosely by his side with the bayards stuck in his firm clasp. *That was over too fast*, he thought, his very first thought, before the signals could even reach his brain. Lance tried to breathe, but he *couldn't*. He looked down, or perhaps his head had just fallen, chin hitting his chest as a dizzying wave of shock ran through him.

The split in his suit had peeled the edges away, but Lance couldn't see any skin. He wondered

briefly what it was he was looking at, until the lump of red oozed forward, and a wave of blood spilled out from his stomach, coating the lower patches of his suit. Lance made a sound somewhere between a cry and a gag, the blue bayard slipping from his fingers as he touched a hand to the long, gaping hole in his stomach. He could feel it moving. A fresh wave of blood soaked his arm; Lance fell to his knees, lightheaded. There was *so much blood*. Lance opened his mouth to call for help, but no words came out. This wasn't... this was *training*. That thought didn't stand a chance against the sharp spike of fear that shot through him. *I'm dying*.

He couldn't see, his vision was blurring. His head felt too heavy and too light all the same, and the *pain*. Lance couldn't even scream, not gaping down at the gash across his stomach, gushing blood onto the sand where he knelt. *I'm dying*. And not slowly either. There was stuff he had to do, he had to- Lance made a pained gasp, but it turned raspy on the last beat. He could feel blood in his throat. He was dying, *now*.

Nothing made sense to his brain, he was just in so much pain. He should have apologised to Keith, he should have gotten to hold him before he went into the arena. What did they fight about? It was nothing, it meant nothing, and he was dying. He couldn't even focus on his family. Lance had accepted the possibility of dying; he'd accepted the possibility of them thinking he was dead. He hadn't accepted *this*. And he couldn't get one single image through his skull but Keith's eyes in the room in the tower where Lance had threatened him. And now he was going to die, and leave Keith alone, like he'd promised not to do, like every other person had left him. That was all Lance could think.

The next time he tried to draw breath he choked, blood splattering over his chin and joining the liquid pulsing out of his stomach. He just wanted to see Keith. It hurt, it hurt, *it hurt*. Lance's vision blacked out, and it still hurt. He was so afraid. He wanted to see Keith. There was so much he was supposed to do. Lance died kneeling before his body could crumple against the sand, the last thing registering in his consciousness a pulsing green glow around his wrist.

-

Lance sat up screaming. Allura's arms were around him, holding him to her, gripping the arms that fought against them both. He doubled over, gasping, drawing ragged breaths of air as his stomach churned.

"Lance, sh, it's alright, i-it's okay."

A sweet smell overwhelmed him as Allura drew his face toward her shoulder, whispering those things into his hair.

Lance shuddered, babbling incomprehensibly, his fingers scrambling for the gash on his stomach.

"It's not real," Allura said, trying to bring him to a standstill. "Lance, it's not real, it's not real. You're okay."

She was crying. Lance froze when his fingers met the firm surface of his suit, drifting over the plane of his stomach where the cut should be. He didn't feel it, or any blood either, just the rough stretch of his suit. Allura hugged him tighter, burying her head in his shoulder.

"I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, you're okay."

Lance cracked open an eye. Nothing hurt, he could see fine, there was no blood. Allura smelt so nice, warm and comforting and everything calming. Lance tried to speak, but ended up just whimpering. He caught sight of shapes moving around them, O'kyan milling about the room. He



ignored them, ducking his head into Allura's shoulder and clinging to her tightly. He wasn't dying.

"It's not real," she repeated, rocking them side-to-side. "It wasn't real."

Out of the corner of his eyes, Lance saw the Lox wrapped around his arm where it rested on Allura's back. He could feel it humming, like an animal satisfied with its meal. The stone wasn't glowing anymore.

## Chapter End Notes

you were all so pumped for a fun training montage and I'm... like so sorry guys

## Chapter Notes

thank you so much for all the comments last chapter guys!!

-

The ride back in their lions to the castle was remarkably tense. Since coming out of that lab in the tower on Oro, Lance had realised two things. Firstly, the arena was virtual. Whatever that Lox thing was attached to his arm, it was only teleporting him into his own mind. Secondly, that didn't mean it didn't hurt. And that wasn't the only time Lance was going to be subjected to it.

He'd been in no shape to fly Black, so both he and Allura rode in Pidge's lion while Hunk carried the black lion along behind them. Lance sat on the floor at the back of the cockpit, arms wrapped around his knees, trying to calm the nauseating feeling his stomach. Allura stood speaking softly with Pidge, probably to explain better why Lance had thrown himself at her and Hunk as soon as they left the room, crying over his friends and mumbling nonsensical promises. The O'kyan hadn't let them stick around for very long. As soon as Lance was coordinated enough to stand, they'd done some quick explaining to cover their asses before Allura tugged him out the lab.

What Lance took from their explanation was this: they had nothing to do with what the arena presented him with. The Lox would begin glowing every time Lance was summoned to battle, and it was up to him to respond to the call before the stone self-destructed. That way they could remain mostly separate from the O'kyan, as he didn't need to be anywhere. Lance shuddered. He could just lie down wherever in the castle, touch that stone, and be transported to a state of virtual reality. The reason for this? In virtual training, there were no limits as to what could be done to him. They could hurt him, disable him, kill him- it meant nothing. But it did, *it did it did it did*, because it hurt. *He'd been so scared.*

*Allura had gone off her head when the O'kyan explained that to her while Lance was still in virtual state. He looked asleep, according to her, until he began twitching and thrashing, and the O'kyan admitted it was entirely likely he'd be killed in the simulation. The princess still looked angry, and the O'kyan insisted they had no control over what the Lox chose to train him with, that it should be an honour to even receive training. This didn't feel like an honour. Lance was terrified.*

*Coran was his first port of call when the lions landed in the hangar and they were allowed out. Their advisor hovered near the landing zones, on the look out for the paladins. Lance made straight for him, throwing his arms around the older Altean before the other could get a word in, nearly hefting Coran right off his feet as he hugged him for all he was worth.*

*"You're the best, Coran," he mumbled, tears burning his eyes.*

*"Well, er, thank you, my boy," Coran looked around helplessly, patting Lance's back reassuringly. "Are you... alright?"*

*Lance shook his head vehemently, squeezing the air from him. "You're just the best guy. Thanks for taking care of us. A-all the time."*

*Coran locked eyes with Allura, but didn't say anything, just hesitantly hugged Lance back. When the latter finally released him, they both looked on the verge of tears. Coran gave the younger paladin's shoulder a firm pat before drawing back, revealing the final member of their team.*

*"Hey," said Keith, as Lance drew back to give Coran some breathing room.*

*His breath lodged in his throat, chest tightening as Keith fiddled with the hem of his sleeve.*

*"I didn't know if you'd want to see me, but I figured it was--"*

*Keith stopped talking when a short cry tore away from Lance, and he began taking long strides toward the red paladin, his arms already reaching. He pulled Keith to him as soon as he was within reach, wrapping him in the tightest hug possible and pressing one teary cheek to his head. The chill was sharp in his blood, but as Keith's arms came up around him, and the apologies began spilling off his tongue, it felt more like a distant memory.*

-

*Lance sighed softly when Keith's fingers traced the edges of the Lox. He liked it, that a boy that rough could be this gentle. And he always was; the care he took tying the banana around Lance's wrist, or the tender way he soothed over fading bruises, or the way he held his arm now, frowning at the smudges of blood not yet cleaned away. Lance leaned his chin on Keith's shoulder, the two of them curled up together in bed late into the night, Keith bracketed between his legs. Lance's free arm drifted over Keith's stomach, running along the dark patterns on his skin, his left arm up for inspection. Keith shifted against his chest, tugging Lance's arm further around for him to see.*

*"Does it hurt?"*

*"Not that much."*

*It hurt a lot, but he didn't want Keith taking Red and bringing hell down on the O'kyan for it. The boy in his arms twisted, trying to glare at Lance over his shoulder.*

*"It hurts a lot, doesn't it?"*

*Lance sighed, pressing his lips to Keith's shoulder.*

*"It's kinda numb."*

*"Bastards," Keith muttered, turning the arm over gently and scrutinising the strips of metal disappearing into Lance's skin.*

*The latter huffed, nuzzling into Keith's neck fondly. "'S okay."*

*"You spent an hour crying," Keith said shortly. "No it's not."*

*Lance hummed; that was true, he had spent a good hour crying. And a considerable amount of that hour trying to make out with Keith and apologise all at the same time, neither of which worked when you were bawling your eyes out. Oh well, they got there eventually.*

*Keith reached back to stroke his hair, but Lance knew the question was directed to the phantom wound on his stomach. "Does it still hurt?"*

*"No. It's not real."*

*"But it did."*

*Keith really had a terrible way of getting the truth out of him; Lance should do something about that.*

*“It’s tingly. Like I... I don’t know. I just- thought it was final.”*

*Keith dropped his arm to squeeze both of Lance’s hands tighter, pressing a kiss to the tender skin around the metal brace.*

*“Can’t believe they did this to you,” he whispered, moving his lips to Lance’s palm. “’m sorry.”*

*Lance snorted despite himself, tugging Keith in closer. “What have you got to be sorry for?”*

*“For letting them hurt you-“*

*“Keith, that’s not... it’s not you. You...”*

*Lance’s breath caught. Keith’s hands tightened over his forearms, head turned to look at him.*

*“When I thought I... was gonna die,” Lance began cautiously. “The only thing I t-thought about, was you. H-how sorry I was, Keith, for leaving you.”*

*“Lance-“*

*“No, no, listen.”*

*Lance drew a deep breath, resting his head on Keith’s shoulder and speaking softly into his skin.*

*“I couldn’t even remember why we were fighting, just that I- I felt so awful, for leaving you. I came to terms with leaving my family some time ago, I think. I’ve always known the dangers, and known I may not see them again, but you I...I wasn’t ready to leave you. Because what would happen, what... I n-never want you to suffer. But you do, and you are, and it kills me that I can’t always help you, Keith. B-because I love you, but also I... I would do anything. You have to live, you just have to-“*

*“Lance...”*

*“I couldn’t leave you like that, Keith. It was all I could think about, how I was leaving you.”*

*The eyes that looked back at Lance were heavy with emotion. A thumb traced his knuckles unconsciously, before Keith was shifting in his hold, bringing himself more toward facing Lance so he could lean in and kiss him. Lance met him halfway in a soft kiss so laden with love it made his chest swell. When they finally pulled back Keith’s fingers were around the bandana again, fingers against his pulse like he trusted that bit of fabric to keep it inside.*

*“I’m sorry,” Lance said suddenly, softly. “I’m sorry for threatening you.”*

*“You weren’t...” Keith bit his lip, frowning. “You don’t need to-“*

*“I do.”*

*“Lance-“*

*“I know you’re not used to people apologising, but you need to be.”*

*Lance squeezed his boyfriend’s arms a little tighter, speaking seriously. “You should expect an apology, when someone’s wronged you, Keith. If you want to forgive them, do, if you don’t, then*

*don't. But don't brush it off as nothing, because I did threaten you. I did, and it hurt you, and I am... I'm so sorry. And it's your right to be angry-*

*"I'm not angry," Keith interrupted with a huff. "And fine. Apology accepted. Sorry for talking shit. Um, amongst other stuff..."*

*Lance chuckled lightly into his shoulder. "Also accepted. We suck at apologies."*

*Keith frowned. "We're great at apologies."*

*"Nah, if this was a great apology, I'd get you flowers."*

*Keith frowned harder. "Flowers? That's a very materialistic way of apologising-"*

*"Oh my god it's romantic, you absolute Grinch of love."*

*"The hell is a Grinch?"*

*"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that so I don't add crying about your traumatic childhood to my evening agenda."*

*"Whatever," Keith muttered.*

*Lance pressed his ear to Keith's back, fascinated by the heart beat he could hear. "Did you have a favourite childhood film?"*

*"Uh, you know Brother Bear?"*

*"Oh my god, Brother Bear... great choice."*

*"Thanks."*

*Lance hummed, tracing his finger over a dark patch on Keith's stomach and feeling him relax.*

*"You know that dream I had," he said after a minute. "The one where I dreamt I killed Allita-"*

*"Lance-"*

*"Do you think-"*

*"No. No I don't think you killed her, Lance, what-"*

*"No but... if I was capable..." Lance paused, biting his tongue. "If I ever hurt you, Keith... don't forgive me."*

*"What the fuck, Lance."*

*"I mean it-"*

*"You do this every time," said Keith. "You're powers get a little rough and you freak. You're not a bad person, Lance. Don't think that. We got into a fight, we said... some horrible stuff. B... because we were angry, I was angry you even thought you could- you'd die. You're... kind, Lance."*

*Lance blinked back at him; Keith's face had gone beet red, and he struggled around the words.*

*"You're the kindest person I know."*

*“Untrue, that’s Hunk.”*

*“God, I- I’m trying, for fucks sake! Second kindest, are you happy now?”*

*Lance grinned sheepishly. “Immensely.”*

*“Dumbass,” Keith muttered, but it was nothing but fond.*

*Lance snickered, folding Keith up in his arms even though the other was pretending to ignore him. He drew happy little trails over Keith’s arms, eventually ending where the red paladin’s fingers were still twisted around the bandana. Like a comfort thing, almost, like it was something he used to do a lot. Lance eyed the stitching, the little A.K. he’d all but forgotten about. He huffed a breath into Keith’s shoulder, glad to have something more light-hearted to talk about.*

*“It would’ve been a nice name.”*

*Kith turned a little in his hold, frowning. “What?”*

*“Akira would have been a nice name,” Lance continued, gesturing with the wrist wrapped in the bandana. “You said that was what the A.K. stood for, right?”*

*“Oh,” Keith trailed off, eyes fixated on the bandana. “No. That was just my guess.”*

*“Why else would you have A.K?”*

*“I don’t know,” he said, sounding almost irritated.*

*“Come on, you can tell me-“*

*“I don’t know, Lance. Alright?”*

*When Keith looked at him there was hurt in his eyes.*

*“I barely know anything about my parents. Why it’s A.K. instead of K.K, I have no idea. Alright?”*

*“Oh,” Lance looked away, feeling bad. “Sorry.”*

*“No it’s...” Keith bit down on his tongue, frowning some more. “Don’t worry about it.”*

*Deciding that was good enough for the moment, Lance shifted his wrist so the letters were out of sight and went back to cuddling Keith.*

*“How soon til the next fight,” Keith asked after a minute, his voice unnaturally tight.*

*Lance sighed, hiding his face in the red paladin’s back.*

*“Whenever the Lox next calls me,” he mumbled, nudging his injured wrist in Keith’s direction.*

*“And when’s that?”*

*“Anytime,” he continued, spying on the metallic device from the corner of his eye. “Anywhere. I have to go. No matter what.”*

*-*

*Anytime ended up being a lot sooner than Lance would have liked. He would have preferred anytime to happen never again ever, but what he got instead was a rude awakening at a little past*

*six in the morning, a throbbing around his wrist that proved enough of an irritation to rouse him.*

*Blinking blearily at the green light emitting from the Lox on his wrist, he forgot for a moment the events of the previous day. When the memories returned, they came back in full force, and Lance was left staring glumly at the green light, stomach already filled with nerves. Breathing deeply, he nudged the boy beside him, ignoring Keith's grumble of protest in favour of peeling away a few more dry flakes of blood. His arm looked worse than yesterday; a little swollen, the skin all red and irritated, it was no wonder it had bled more onto the sheets.*

*He spared a glance at Keith as the boy raised his head, arms wound tightly around his pillow as he squinted at the green light pulsating out. Realisation dawned on him slowly, and he let out a sleepy sigh.*

*"Already?"*

*"Guess so."*

*Lance stayed captivated by the Lox as Keith struggled to sit up beside him, wiping sleep from his eyes, face still so scrunched up he could barely see.*

*"Lemme see it," he mumbled, grabbing weakly for Lance's wrist.*

*Keith stared at the Lox, not really taking anything in. His frown deepened, until he was just one angry, slightly blotchy mound of half-asleep paladin. Lance nudged him again.*

*"Hey."*

*"This's bullshit," Keith grumbled.*

*"I know. Will you watch over me?"*

*Keith scoffed, something between mockery and genuine care.*

*"What am I, your guardian angel," he muttered, though he was already dutifully taking up his place, legs crossed on the bed, trying to ensure he wouldn't fall back asleep.*

*"So how's it work?"*

*Lance's heart was going a thousand miles a minute, his hands a little shaky when he manoeuvred himself back to lying down.*

*"I just touch it," he said, before finally mustering up enough courage to look at Keith.*

*Said paladin was still frowning, but something softened when Lance looked at him.*

*"I'll be here," he said, squeezing his arm.*

*Lance nodded jerkily, not trusting himself to speak.*

*"S-see you."*

*He touched the stone.*

-

*The second transition was no better than the first, and when Lance landed in the same arena, he*

*couldn't help the fear that uncoiled like a snake within him. He stood quickly, drawing his bayards, and waited for the droid to emerge. When it did, it showed even fewer mercies than the last time.*

-

*Dying in the virtual arena did not get easier. It didn't matter if Lance had Keith or Hunk to welcome him back to reality, no amount of soothing touches or words of encouragement could dispel the sickening feel of his head spinning at the loss of blood, or the sight of his own flesh split open, the smell of his blood the last thing he'd sense before his body shut down and he woke again, shuddering in the arms of his friends.*

*Lance hated it. Worse, he feared it. Whenever the Lox began to glow he'd start to tremble, fighting the urge to just rip the device from his arm and never have anything to do with it again. In one fight he lost an arm, in the next the blade impaled his chest, the one after that he tried to run. Ran and ran, making circles around the arena, too afraid to just give in to the inevitable. His bayards did little to nothing; they'd never win in the end. And Lance felt trapped.*

*It was a week after his first fight that Lance gave in to the fear. Not a long time at all, he realised bitterly, rooted to the spot in the dining room, feeling he was about to loose the contents of his stomach. His heart was beating fast, was it always that loud? He was vaguely aware that Hunk was still chattering away in the background, but the sounds were starting to amplify and blur in his ears. His breath came shorter, sharper, he was beginning to loose control. His eyes bore into the green light, growing stronger by the second, a hurt noise escaping involuntarily.*

*"Oh," he heard Hunk say, aware that his friend had turned around and spotted him hunched over his own arm. "Lance? Shit, are you okay?"*

*Lance shook his head vehemently, trying to slow his breathing but failing. It hurt, the shuddering of his chest brought on by the panic attack.*

*"Sit, come on, sit down."*

*There were hands on his shoulders, a familiar figure swamping his view. Lance felt himself flop weakly onto the floor, kept upright by Hunk, who had begun talking to him softly.*

*"I don't want to fight," Lance stuttered, trying to speak, to breath, to get in control.*

*"I know you don't, buddy," Hunk said, eyes wide with concern. "And I don't want you to either. If I could go in there and fight them for you, I would. I'd do it every time, yeah?"*

*Lance shook his head jerkily.*

*"Because you're my friend," Hunk continued. "And that's exactly what you're doing for us. You're fighting so we don't have to, Lance. You're doing more than we could ever ask of you, you're protecting this team, and I hate that you're hurting because of it- but I need you to be proud of what you're doing."*

*Lance drew a sharp breath, chest stuttering.*

*"You've always been my b-best friend," Hunk said, and there was a sniffle in there somewhere. "My first best friend, and we're in this together. It kills me that I can't do this for you, Lance, cause you're doing so much for me, and for everyone, yeah?"*

*Another sniffle from them both, and Lance let himself be pulled into a hug.*



*“Do you think you can keep doing this for us?” Hunk asked softly, hugging his friend tight. “Cause we won’t leave you either way. We won’t leave you no matter what.”*

*“I-I can do it,” Lance whispered, still taking deep breaths as he tried to relax into Hunk’s arms.*

*Hunk squeezed him so tight he nearly lost his breath, curled around his friend on the kitchen floor. They pulled back when the Lox on Lance’s arm began to glow a blinding green.*

*“I’ll stay right here,” said Hunk, eyeing the device with a dark kind of hatred. “I... I think that maybe you should try and use your powers.”*

*Lance paused, grimacing at the pulsating light on his wrist as he frowned at Hunk. “What?”*

*“Your powers, man. The water and lightning. The O’kyan said they thought you might have a chance against Carma if you used those powers so... I don’t know. I just think that maybe the training would go more your way if you focused on them.”*

*Lance looked into the eyes of his terrified friend and saw some kind of sense there.*

*“Oh. I... I guess that’s a good idea.”*

*“All my ideas are good,” Hunk said with a wobbly smile, seconds before the light grew blinding and Lance grabbed hold of the Lox.*

-

*The arena was much the same as always; it shifted slightly now and then, sometimes bigger, sometimes small, a slightly different sand or higher walls. The gladiator landed with a dull thud on the sand, straightening and raising the jagged blade that had already struck Lance down numerous times. He repressed a shudder as the machine began to lumber toward him, forcing his fingers not to stray toward the comforting weight of the bayards at his hips, and instead let his hands lift before him.*

*It was most likely the fear that drove the flutter of ice within his veins, spreading out like a frigid wildfire as the gladiator drew nearer, taking up it’s usual stance. Lance drew a deep breath, and when the droid charged, he thrust a hand forward with the image of a jagged blot of lightning in his mind. The air before Lance’s outstretched hand erupted in a fierce crack, the lightning dashed toward the approaching gladiator and hit it square in the chest. Lance let loose a gasp as the machine staggered, it’s systems in disarray for a moment before it righted itself again. That was more than any shot did, but Lance knew not to get cocky.*

*He began circling the droid, trying to keep a distance between them as he rebuilt his strength. When he felt he was ready, Lance struck again, a violent surge of electricity splitting the air and colliding with the machine. Another hit to its system maybe, but now there was anger building between them. Without a breath of warning, the gladiator charged Lance. He scrambled, backtracking across the sand and trying to build enough energy in his hands to strike again.*

*The blade soared down beside his shoulder, and Lance released a bolt with not nearly enough power behind it. The gladiator barely flinched before continuing it’s assault. Heavy metal feet pounded into the ground, a blank face stared Lance down as the blade was raised- he needed water. Lance raised the blue bayard, mind filled with images of the day he’d saved Keith from the explosion on the dwarf planet, of the shield of water that hid them from the flames, and fired.*

*He felt the vibrations go up his arm as the blade collided with a solid shield, water flowing from the bayard in his hand and surrounding him. Lance stared, shocked, as the gladiator withdrew it’s*

*blade and tried to break through the shield again. The force was enough to jolt Lance's arm painfully, but the shield held. This time when the gladiator withdrew, he was ready. Lance leapt up, the shield falling away as he thrust out his free hand and another bolt of energy overtook the gladiator. He laughed, the first slither of hope worming its way back into his heart since their first fight. That's what made the blade that sliced through his calves even more of a surprise. Maybe next time, he thought, on his back, watching as the blade was raised... He shut his eyes before it fell. There were some images he could live without.*

-

*Lance found his way easily enough to Allura's chambers that night, knocking politely even though he knew she'd have the door unlocked.*

*"Come in!"*

*He sauntered in, nodding at the mice that scuttled over to the edge of the dresser to get a better look at him. Allura was sat on her bed, trying to get a comb through her hair.*

*"Hey," he greeted, taking a seat on the stool beside the dresser.*

*Allura smiled in greeting, tugging at a knot the brush became stuck in.*

*"How are you?" She asked after a moment.*

*"Great."*

*"How are the trials going?"*

*Lance's fingers began to fidget with the edges of the stool. "Uh... good. Tried using my powers, which went a little better."*

*Allura looked at him sadly. "Hunk said..."*

*"Oh. I, um, I was just a bit run down, I think. But it's okay. I promise."*

*"Lance-"*

*"I had a good talk with Hunk," he said, shooting a small but grateful smile to Allura. "It's okay."*

*She sighed, setting the brush down.*

*"And you?" Lance asked. "You look kinda stressed."*

*Allura frowned, gripping her nightgown.*

*"Baby's overdue."*

*Lance cocked his head.*

*"That's okay though, right? It's just a few days."*

*Allura bit her lip. "I know. I'm just..."*

*"Worried. I get it. It's impossible not to be."*

*Allura smiled shakily, her face filled with emotion.*

*“It’ll be fine,” Lance promised. “This little dude’s half human, remember. We’re overall a less productive species, I don’t blame them for being a little late. Besides, this just gives you more time to study up on being a mom. You’ve read the manual, right?”*

*Allura’s eyes widened and Lance cracked a grin.*

*“I’m kidding, there’s no manual. Actually there probably is, but we are not in possession of that.”*

*The princess fixed him with a withering stare, but Lance continued to smile.*

*“Get some sleep,” he said, hopping up from the stool and wondering over to Allura to drop a tender kiss into her hair. “Things will work themselves out.”*

*Allura smiled thinly, watching him retreat.*

*“I hope they do,” she said, and as Lance left the room, he couldn’t agree more.*

## Chapter Notes

## IMPORTANT NOTE

hey guys, so I'm starting up with uni now, meaning I'm gonna be busy, meaning that unfortunately this fic is not gonna update as frequently as it usually does, possibly for two months. This does NOT mean its not continuing, I've got chapters I'm dying to post but I haven't edited yet, so the next update might not come until about two months from now. Of course if I can, I'll update sooner... sorry about that, cause I really do appreciate the readers of this fic, and especially all those lovely comments. So please enjoy this chapter, and know I'll update as soon as I can!

Thank you so so much for reading, you guys are seriously the best

chapter summary? uuuuuh big problem becomes small problem  
the smallest problem  
the tiniest problem out there

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

After the multitude of rude awakenings Lance had experienced over the last few months, it could almost be assumed he'd have gotten used to them. He hadn't, Lance decided for himself, when he was once again shaken from his sleep an hour or so before their usual time by an uncomfortable rattling.

Scrap uncomfortable, Lance thought, as he raised his head from his pillow and reached blindly across the bed for Keith; this was *awful*. The lights aboard the castle had only just begun to brighten, soft, like early dawn, enough to see by but not too harsh on the eyes. Lance sat up fully in bed as the room around them shuddered like one might in an earthquake. Keith was pushing himself up onto his elbows, startled awake but the sudden shaking. It felt like turbulence, like a rough shuttle descent, and Lance could tell already it was a lot more than just their room shaking.

"What the hell," Keith mumbled, crawling out of bed after Lance and stumbling over the shaky floor.

Their eyes met, hastily chasing away the traces of sleep as suspicion honed in their senses. Keith went for their bayards the same time Lance went for the comms, speaking into it rapidly.

"Yo team, you guys also getting shaken up?"

All that met him was static spilling out of the speakers, and Lance cursed.

"Allura? Hunk? Guys, can anyone hear me?"

"Comms must be down," said Keith, and Lance accepted the blue bayard that was pressed into his hand.

“Not again...”

“Any ideas?”

“None,” Lance muttered.

“Armour up?”

“I don’t think we have time, I’d prefer to figure out what the hell is causing this.”

“Good plan.”

Lance locked eyes with Keith; his boyfriend’s hair was still mused by sleep and his clothes all rumpled, but his expression was deathly serious.

“Watch each other’s backs. Let’s go.”

They were forced to pry the door open upon discovering the automatic opening mechanism wasn’t working. The pair stumbled out into the hallways with their bayards already raised, but there were no signs of danger yet. In fact, nothing seemed wrong save the incessant shuddering of the ship.

“Pidge!” Keith called out, knowing his friend’s room was nearest.

The very air seemed to be vibrating, carrying a low hum as the castle trembled, but it wasn’t enough to mask the voice that came floating back to them.

“Keith?”

Lance whipped around as a mop of yellow hair appeared from around the corner. Pidge was still in her sleepwear but also armed with a bayard.

“Oh thank god, you guys are awake,” she said, stumbling toward them. “You know what’s happening?”

“No,” said Keith, eyeing the hallways apprehensively. “We need to find the others.”

“You don’t think this is some more dead body nonsense, do you?” Pidge asked as the three made their way down the hall on wobbly legs.

“I hope not, but stay alert.”

“Feels like something’s wrong with the castle,” the girl said.

Keith and Lance shared a look as the castle shuddered rougher than before. It seemed to be coming in waves, the constant shaking like a background noise filled with bouts of violent shudders that had the floors shaking and the walls creaking. The lights flickered briefly as they heard the whole ship groan, the noise low and deep enough to muffle their hearing.

“Oh thank god, you guys are alive!”

Lance barely had time to blink before a big yellow bundle was colliding with him, and Hunk wrapped all three paladins up in his arms.

“Good to see you, buddy,” Lance squeaked, as Hunk set them back on their feet.

He’d at least managed to don his chest plate before venturing out into the hallways, but was still

looking pretty shaken.

“No ideas,” Keith said before he could ask. “We’re heading for the bridge.”

Hunk nodded, quickly falling into step with them. Lance grit his teeth as a particularly rough bout of turbulence had their vision trembling along with the ship.

“Oh, this feels bad,” Pidge whispered.

Lance agreed internally, using a hand to support himself against the wall as the bridge doors came into view.

“Coran!” He yelled, as soon as the doors slid open, but there was no need to.

Their advisor was already situated by the screens, though there was no sign of Allura.

“Ah, paladins, good-“

“What’s happening?” Keith demanded, striding toward him.

“It seems we missed a spot when repairing the castle,” Coran said, straight to the point. “One of our boosters is misfiring, hence the instability.”

As if on cue, another terrible batch of turbulence shook the room, making them all wince.

“Can we fix it?” Hunk asked, shaking both from the turbulence and fear.

“Should be easy enough, yes.”

“How bad is it?” Pidge asked, using the wall for support.

“It’s possible the booster could rip away entirely. That, or it could rapture a section of the castle. Either way, we need to stop it firing.”

“Got it.”

“Pidge and Keith,” Coran continued, “if you head to the main power board, you should be able to see if there’s a flaw in the engine’s internal dialogue. I’ll run diagnostics from here, but if it’s a localised issue, Lance and-“

“Where’s Allura?” Lance interrupted, now aware that they were all about to be splitting up.

“I assumed she’d be arriving shortly,” Coran trailed off, looking around the room.

The others also glanced around nervously, cringing a little as the castle shook.

“We need to act now,” said Pidge. “She can catch up. Or stay put. That’s probably safer.”

“No,” said Lance. “I’ll go find her. Hunk, I’ll catch you up.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“Lance?”

He turned at the sound of his name, finding Keith had moved closer. There was an offish look to

him.

“I don’t think we should split up again.”

Lance bit his lip, all too aware of what happened the last time the team got separated during an emergency.

“I know,” he said. “But I need to get Allura.”

The red paladin didn’t look convinced.

“I… I have a bad feeling about this,” Lance said, softer, under his breath. “About her. I need to find her, okay?”

Keith nodded stiffly, dropping his hand into Lance’s and squeezing tight.

“You’ve still gotta get this back to me, yeah?” He said, flicking the bandana around Lance’s wrist. “Promise is a promise.”

Lance shot him a smile. “That it is.”

The team looked anxious, and when the castle walls groaned loudly, Lance began to worry about how much time they had left.

“You guys take care,” he said, backtracking with a wave of his hand. “I’ll see you back here.”

Varying calls of goodbyes and good lucks followed him out of the bridge, and Lance didn’t waste a moment before he was sprinting in the direction of Allura’s room. This wasn’t normal; the princess was always first on the scene, and often by a long shot. Unless she was already somewhere fixing the problem for them, something was wrong. Lance’s brain filled with a thousand different situations as he ran, feet failing him whenever the castle shook the hardest. Maybe she was ill, maybe there was something wrong with the pregnancy, maybe Carma had set something else loose in the castle, maybe-

Maybe he was just overthinking things. Maybe her door had gotten jammed. It was probably better for Allura to stay out of the fray at this point in her pregnancy anyway. She might be tough as nails, but her baby wasn’t. Lance’s heartbeat was painfully fast against his ribs by the time he rounded the corner into the passage he knew her room lay. There was no movement in the hall, and he could see her door at the end, still firmly shut. *Please be alright*. The anticipation was overwhelming.

Lance didn’t bother knocking this time- the moment he reached the door he was digging fingers into the crack and wrenching the mechanism open, a jolt of electricity tearing from his fingers as he did. An awful shudder shook the castle as he stepped in, his ears vibrating with the metal around him and his vision blurring until the ship settled. Lance stumbled forward, Allura’s name on the tip of his tongue, one hand going for his bayard-

“Oh.”

He stopped dead, staring at the scene before him. Allura was sat on the edge of the bed, her hair a mess and the mice scurrying frantically around her as she stared down at-

“Oh my god,” said Lance.

Allura’s head snapped up.

“Lance?”

“Oh... my god.”

“You’re here.”

“Oh my god.”

“The door was jammed.” Allura took a number of very quick breaths. “I-it’s been jammed.”

Lance was frozen, simply staring.

“What do I do?”

“Your... oh my god.”

“Lance?”

“Allura?”

She stared at him helplessly, fingers bunched around her nightgown.

“That’s...”

Lance felt dizzy, because *really? Really? Right now?*

“Your water broke,” he said dumbly.

“Yeah,” Allura said, panicky.

“How long ago?”

“Two hours.”

“Is it meant to be blue?”

“What other *quiznaking* colour would it be!” The princess shrieked, her face screwed up with a mix of fear and panic and maybe a little bit of embarrassment.

“Uh,” said Lance. “Sorry. Sorry, dumb question. Your water broke, you are... going into labour. Okay. Alright. Okay-“

“Lance.”

“You’re going into labour *right fucking now!*”

“Yes!”

“Oh my god!”

“It’s not like I could hold it in!”

“Sometimes Alteans are *different!*” Lance yelled back, aware of the mice looking frantically between the pair.

“Lance...”



There were tears in Allura's eyes. *Oh no oh shit oh my god-*

"Hey! That's..." Lance swallowed roughly. "Great!"

"Lance," said Allura. "The castle is malfunctioning."

"Yeah," said Lance, forcing a grin. "And you're... having a baby."

"I'm having a baby," said Allura, then grit her teeth.

"Lance," she said, expression growing more serious, serious and... *pained*. "I'm having a baby *now*."

"Shit," said Lance. "We need to get to you the med-bay."

Allura nodded like she'd never agreed with anything more, reaching out to grab the hand Lance offered her.

"Can you walk?" he asked, ignoring the florescent puddle on the floor, and slinging an arm around Allura to help her up.

She nodded gravely, nails biting into his arm as they stood together. The castle shook as they stumbled toward the door, and Allura hissed sharply. There was no hiding it: she was terrified.

"What's wrong with the castle?" She demanded the second they set foot in the hallway, with Lance supporting much of her weight so they could hobble along.

"Just a booster malfunctioning," he said as calmly as possible. "The others will have it sorted in a jiffy."

Allura tensed.

"A jiffy? How long is a jiffy?"

"Very soon," he said through gritted teeth, taming the panicked feeling that was coursing through his veins.

"Don't worry about that, just--"

He was cut off by a sudden gasp from Allura, who came to a stand still and braced both hands over her stomach. Lance swore, fumbling again for his comm but hearing the same helpless static. Why hadn't he *and* Hunk checked on Allura? The princess was breathing heavier now, though Lance reckoned most of it could be pinned on panic.

"How long since your water broke again?" He asked.

"Two hours," Allura said through gritted teeth.

"And you didn't get help?"

"The door was jammed and the comms were down! I couldn't get through."

"I got the door open!"

"Because you- you shocked it."

“Oh.”

“Yeah, *oh*.”

“So you’ve just been... sitting there?”

“Trying to solve the problem of course,” Allura muttered. “But yes.”

Lance nodded along to everything she was saying, feeling dread curl in his stomach. “How long do Altean deliveries take again?”

“Just get to the med bay,” Allura snapped.

“You’re contractions have started, I need to know how long-“

“Lance, can we *walk*? Please?”

“Okay, okay, cool cool cool,” he muttered under his breath. “This is excellent timing, perfect actually, *right*-“

“Lance!” Allura snapped, trying to take a shaky step forward.

“Hold it!”

Lance lunged after her, offering his arm for support again. He’d read a little about Altean deliveries, and they sounded pretty rapid. The both of them curled inwards whenever the walls shook, but the second the turbulence was over, Lance was pulling them along quickly.

“Could you slow down?” Allura snapped soon after. “Do you have any idea what it’s like walking like this?”

“Nope,” Lance replied curtly. “But sorry-not-sorry, I don’t trust mini-Shiro to take his merry time like a regular human.”

“I’m sure we have five extra minutes, walk slower.”

Lance frowned, but slowed a little, the stress making him jumpy.

“How long do Altean deliveries usually take?” He repeated, hoping it would prove a point.

Allura shrugged. “About half an hour.”

“What the *fuck*!”

“What! How long do humans take?”

“Hours! Numerous hours! Whole days! And since it’s already been two hours, I’d say you’re pretty lucky to have any time left. *Half an hour*? Fuck.”

Lance stumbled as the floor shook hard, wincing at sound Allura made.

“The castle’s falling apart,” she said.

“No it’s not.”

Lance tugged them round another corner quickly, trying to ignore the awful shudder of the ship around them. Their snappish exchanges were grounding, somewhat, it gave them something to

focus on other than the panic threatening to take hold.

“How are you feeling?” Lance asked, glancing across nervously.

Allura looked a little pale, but she still managed a glare.

“Beachy.”

“Uh, do you mean peachy?”

“What?”

“Are you feeling peachy?”

“Oh. Oh, yes, I mean peachy.”

A pause.

“Is beachy a human emotion?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Lance replied, and then he was knocking a shoulder into the med-bay doors and steering Allura swiftly inside.

He helped set her down on the nearest bed, ignoring her low-whine in favour of searching for the things Coran had set aside for when delivery day came.

“Lance?”

Lance ran fingers through his hair, looking around the med-bay wildly with not a clue what to do. Allura was watching him, her fingers gripping the sides of the bed tightly.

“I... I’m gonna go find Coran, okay?”

“O-okay.”

“You good?”

Allura looked terrified, but she nodded. Their expressions were mirrors of fear and confusion.

“I’ll be quick,” Lance promised, hand on the door. “I’ll be right back.”

Lance could think of very few situations he’d run that fast in his life. Saving Keith from the explosion had been one, running away from his mama and a wooden spoon had been another. His feet skidded across the floor as he reached the bridge, where Coran said he’d be. Lance’s heart sunk; their advisor wasn’t there.

“Coran!”

He dashed back out into the halls, yelling for his teammates. The castle shook viciously, and Lance imagined Allura back in the med-bay by herself. *Shit*. He could feel panicked tears burning at the corners of his eyes, pulse picking up as he turned circles in the empty hallways. Where did the others go? He ought to remember. Pidge and Keith were by the main power board, but how far away was that? Would they even know where Coran was? The walls shook, and Lance was certain he could hear a cry from the direction of the med-bay. Screw it, he couldn’t leave Allura alone. The other’s had to realise something was wrong, they *had* to. Lance turned heel, and sprinted back.

Allura was where he left her on the bed, scooping her hair into a disastrous bun and gritting her teeth against the contraction. Her eyes flickered up as he approached, and she must have read the despair on his face.

“Where’s Coran?”

“I-I... I don’t know.”

Allura looked like she might cry for a moment, but then she was nodding firmly.

“O-okay. We can do this.”

Lance’s heart clenched painfully, but he nodded.

“I’m grabbing you some water.”

Allura bit down another whimper as he rushed toward the sink, hands trembling so much he spilt half the cup on his walk back. What the hell was he even meant to do? He didn’t even know if Allura was in pain or just scared out of her mind.

“Breathe,” Lance stuttered, setting the water into Allura’s shaking hand. “You need to breathe.”

“You breathe,” she snapped.

“I *am* breathing.”

Allura’s eyes were shut tight, fingers gripping the sheet.

“Hey,” Lance said, eyes roaming her frightened face. “It’ll be okay. Want me to do some breathing exercises with you?”

Allura’s eyes fluttered open, frowning. There was already sweat beading on her brow.

“I’m scared,” she said, very quietly.

Lance nodded shakily. “Yeah. Yeah, I know. We’ll be okay, though. We can do this. I’m staying right here, okay?”

Allura’s fingers gripped his own tightly, and she returned the nod.

“Just breath,” he said, and she did.

“Awesome, you’re doing great. This won’t even be the hardest thing you’ve done, trust me.”

There was a short scoff from Allura, but it was quickly cut off.

“Lance?” she said.

“Yeah? You still breathing?”

“Lance.”

Allura’s tone had changed. Lance stared at the pillow beside her head, refusing to meet her eye.

“The-“

“I know.”

He knew. Lance squeezed her hand, the panic in his veins rearing up. He grabbed for a towel besides the bed, dabbing at Allura's forehead and ignoring the faint tickle around his wrist.

"What are--"

"Ignore it," he said.

"The Lox, Lance."

"I know," he repeated through gritted teeth.

There was a soft pulsing against his wrist, a faint green glow beginning to creep up his arm. Lance ran for the sink, wetting another towel before returning to Allura. Her eyes were wide with fear, but there was something else embedded in her gaze. *Determination*, he thought bitterly. He swallowed, laying the towel over her forehead and offering his hand to her as Allura's face screwed up with discomfort. Her head hit the pillow, but her eyes were trained on the storm paladin.

"Lance," she said. "The Lox is calling you."

Lance ignored her, trying to stuff another pillow behind her to make the bed more comfortable. His actions were mechanical now, nerves winning out, the serious blanket that had fallen over his face doing nothing to counteract the tremble in his hands. The castle shuddered more violently than before, and he threw an arm over Allura lest something fall. When he drew back she was still staring at him, tears in her eyes.

"I don't care," he said curtly, over the roar of the ship, whose innards had begun to shake so continuously the whole air was filled with a low tremble.

Jars and instruments within the cabinets jingled as they clinked together, larger machines rattling and light fittings creaking. The Lox around Lance's wrist was brighter now, a fluorescent green that cast an ill glow over Allura's sweaty face. She tilted her head slightly, something akin to pity painting her features, which was *stupid*, considering *she* was the one giving birth. Lance looked away, shoving the nearest objects clear of the bed, worried something could collide or fall if that shaking got any worse.

"Lance--"

"I don't care!" He yelled, slapping a hand down the edge of the bed and startling them both.

A shuddering breath; he was crying.

"I... I don't care, he croaked, refusing to look at the Lox gradually lighting up on his arm. "I'm not going anywhere."

Allura's face crumbled, and they were reaching for each other's hands without a second thought.

"You need to go," she said.

It was soft, her voice. He could barely hear it now, not over the quaking of the walls and the roar of blood in his ears.

"I'm not leaving you," Lance said. "I'm not."

"The--"

"*Allura*, I'm not going. I'm staying here, with you, a...and the baby, you're not doing this by

yourself-“

“Lance-“

“You’re not!”

He was furious, and scared, and devastated. So much, they’d done so much, kept her and the baby safe for so long, and now... Lance shook his head, more vigorously when Allura’s expression became set.

“I know you’re scared,” she whispered.

“For you! For you, Allura! I-I’m not leaving you, you need someone here, the training a-and Lox, it doesn’t mean *anything*, you don’t understand-“

“It does!”

Allura pinched his arm tightly, and he could see she was clamping down on the pain. She drew a shaky breath, blinking tears and sweat out of her eyes and forcing him to look at her.

“It matters, Lance. If you don’t complete the training, we don’t get out. I... I need you to go.”

Lance shook his head, trying to draw away, but Allura held fast.

“I need you to go.”

“No.”

“You need to,” she whispered, trying to keep the quiver out of her voice.

“No. No, I’m staying with you.”

The Lox was beginning to burn around his wrist. Lance swiped at the tears on his cheeks angrily, shaking his head at Allura.

“Please,” she said, tugging on his hands. “Please, I...”

She gasped, fingers tightened around his hand, swallowing down a whine.

“Maybe you c-cant help me now,” she said, very calmly. “But in the end you... you can help us all. But if you don’t go, you can’t. The... the other’s will find me, Lance.”

“No.”

“They will, shh, they will. That’s what we need, Lance. A... a chance for a happy end.”

Allura’s lips were trembling, her eyes all misty. Lance felt like crumbling.

“Okay?”

Lance couldn’t reply, his mouth was dry. The castle shook violently and Allura cried out a little.

“You have to go,” she said.

Lance met her eye; there wouldn’t be any convincing her otherwise.

“I’ll be back,” he said, and the words felt like they burned his throat. “I’m coming right back.”

Allura nodded tearfully, keeping their hands entwined as Lance dropped to the floor beside her bed. He gave her a short nod of reassurance, finding he couldn't speak unless he wanted an embarrassing sob to leave with his words. Allura looked away as her expression grew strained, and Lance touched a finger to the Lox.

-

Darkness engulfed him as the transition hit. The floor fell, he fell, Allura and the med-bay and the shaking of the castle all fell away into *nothing*.

Then he landed.

Lance didn't even wait until his vision cleared before he was standing, brushing sand from his body and pulling out both bayards. The droid couldn't land fast enough.

"Come on!" He yelled, striding toward the fighter and waiting for it to advance. "*COME ON!*"

He considered just turning his gun on himself and finishing the fight early, but a memory of the O'kyan's warning came back to him, of respecting the fight. If he tried to off himself before even facing the droid, he had little doubt that would somehow effect the Lox. He couldn't risk sabotaging the training; that was the last thing Allura wanted. Still, he needed this fight over as fast as possible. Growing impatient with the droid, Lance began running toward it and firing off the bayards.

It was like the thing knew. It knew he was in a rush, because come the first shot, it ducked out of the way, evading Lance when he tried to draw closer. He resisted the urge to just *scream*, frustration mounting as the machine wove its way around his next attack too. It didn't come at him, letting him launch into attack after attack, never striking the fatal blow he longed for. Lance grew more frustrated by the second; every minute he spent in the virtual arena was a minute Allura spent alone and in pain, going through delivery by herself. Lance charged the droid, crying out in frustration when it dodged him again, leading him around the arena in an endless chase. This wasn't shaping up to be a quick fight.

That didn't stop Lance. He drove forward again, firing, pulling his powers into the mix. But the gladiator just *wouldn't attack*. He tried attacking from every direction, every tactic he knew; he fired off the bayards, twisted the water into a deadly vortex, lit up the air around them with a violent bolt of electricity. His opponent evaded him, again and again. Lance was out of his mind with stress, even going so far as to go at the droid with his fists. It threw him back, but refused to land the killing blow. He picked himself up again and again, growing more frantic, more upset with every moment wasted. He pictured Allura in the med-bay, crying out and so, so afraid.

Lance attacked, and the gladiator put up a defence. Lance backed down but no attack was made on him. It went on, and on, and on, and by the time he was finally left lying on the sand to bleed out, it felt as if hours had passed.

-

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Lance returned to reality with a stuttering gasp, feeling for his throat, where a phantom wound was still slowly releasing bouts of blood. He shifted, feeling soft sheets beneath him. A blinding light assaulted his eyes when he dared to open them, white and glaring, beating down on him. He groaned, sitting up groggingly. *Where am I?* A thought came back to him, of white hair, then of shuddering walls, and then-

*Allura.*

He startled, sitting up fully and kicking at the sheets surrounding him. A name lodged in his throat, and he blinked away the light furiously as he scrambled for a hold on his surroundings.

“Hey.”

Lance’s head whipped to the right, frozen. His senses were humming, but after a moment or two, he realised the sheets beneath him belonged to a bed, and the light nothing but the bright fluorescent of the med-bay. He stared at the person in the next bed over, at her tangled hair and clammy skin, at her eyes, so drained of energy and vibrancy they looked frozen; he stared and stared at Allura, tucked cosily into the bed and offering him the smallest, most hesitant smile. Lance fell out of bed.

Allura huffed out a breath of laughter before Lance was on her, caring very little about her spent appearance as he threw himself at her in a hug. Tired arms came up to cling to him, and Lance wasn’t sure whether he was crying or laughing as he held onto Allura, pressing kisses into her hair and holding so tight there could be no doubt of her existence. Her gaze was packed full of fondness when he finally drew back, and she tracked his expressions like a hawk. The second his brows furrowed and his eyes fell to her stomach she squeezed his hand, gesturing very weakly to her right.

Lance followed the movement, time seeming to slow around him as he traced her elbow to the edge of the bed. Right to the box of clouded glass resting beside it. His breath stuck in his throat, heart racing and skin prickling as he stared and stared at what looked like some type of incubator.

“Oh my god,” he breathed.

Allura drew a sharp breath, caught between all numbers of emotions.

“It, is it... they’re r-really-“

“Go look at him,” she urged, and though her voice was kind, Lance could tell something else lay beneath the surface.

Feeling as if he was dragging his legs through honey, Lance stumbled around the bed, coming up on Allura’s other side. He couldn’t hope to collate his thoughts as he came up to the incubator, sitting on its stand within reach of Allura. *Fear*, why did he feel fear? Lance leant toward the incubator, holding his breath, every muscle in his body tensing. *Would the baby be alright? Was the baby even real? Was any of this?* Lance swallowed his fears and looked.



It felt like spring. Like surfacing from beneath the waves. All the air left his body in a rush, his muscles loosening, frown dissipating, every tower of anticipation just dissolving into *nothing*.

“Oh,” Lance breathed. “He’s perfect.”

Allura’s breath hitched beside him, but Lance’s gaze was fixed on the incubator and the tiny baby bundled up within it. His heart felt tight, the world felt *good*.

“He’s okay.”

Allura sniffled. “He’s weak.”

Lance’s face was already betraying his happiness. “He’s amazing.”

He met Allura’s eye the second she burst into tears.

“He is,” she choked out. “I love him.”

Lance was laughing, a soft, joyful sound that lifted from his chest like air. Tentatively, he raised a hand to the glass. The top of the incubator was open, and the glass walls radiated warm light. It was Altean tech, obviously, a warm, safe place for the small baby inside.

“Hiroshi, like Keith suggested,” Allura said, wiping at her eyes. “Shiro’s father.”

“Hiroshi,” Lance said softly, looking back at the baby.

He was... very small. Lance felt a surge of protectiveness staring down at Hiroshi, at this tiny person, equal parts Altean and human. He was fast asleep, eyes screwed shut and little face all scrunched up, a small fist of curled fingers resting beside his cheek. He had Allura’s dark skin, Shiro’s jet-black hair, a tuft of it already growing on his head. Lance couldn’t tell much about his eyes yet, but his ears were small and just a little bit pointed. A perfect blend of species, a small, brave little person.

Lance stared at his cheeks, transfixed by the markings below his eyes. They... weren’t all that Altean. Black, like his hair, markings that began not unlike Allura’s, but were drawn out, messier. On his right cheek, the marking barely existed, just a small smudge of black across his skin. The left cheek had more, and Lance was reminded of a patch of spilt ink, like someone had been trying to paint the mark on before their jar spilt all over; a cross between an Altean pattern and a human birthmark. It reminded him somewhat of the dark bruises over Keith’s skin, but he refused to let that thought taint the moment.

“Hi Hiroshi,” he said softly, terrified of waking the baby.

His gaze darted to Allura, and he lifted a hand toward the opening of the incubator.

“Can I?”

She nodded.

Hesitantly, Lance dipped his hand into the cot, flinching when the air within turned a bright orange, a laser type light dancing over his skin.

“It’s disinfecting you,” Allura explained. “So you can’t infect him.”

Lance nodded, waiting til the light shut off before lowering his hand toward the baby. He was *definitely* crying, he realised when the incubator emitted an angry orange spark at the teardrop that

landed on its surface. Moving slowly, he ran a finger gently over the baby's hand. Hiroshi shifted slightly, giving the smallest huff before settling right back down.

"He's real," Lance said, feeling numb.

"He is," Allura confirmed with a small chuckle.

Lance met her eye, grinning wildly.

"You're a mom," he said, feeling giddy. "You're a real mom."

-

Ten minutes later, Lance and Allura were still sat on the bed, *ooing* and *ahhing* at any and every small thing Hiroshi did. He'd shuffle a little in his blankets, and they'd both be leaning forward. A twitch of his nose or almost inaudible sound, and both would be dead still and silence, waiting for him to repeat the action.

"Want to watch the video Pidge took?" Allura asked after a while, when Hiroshi was well and truly asleep.

"She took a video?"

"Yes, of the team meeting him. It's... it was for Shiro."

"Oh." Lance hesitated, before smiling. "Yeah, I'd love too."

"*Shiro, my dude!*"

Lance chuckled at the camera that Pidge was pointing at her own face, waving it around ecstatically.

"*You are not gonna believe the day we had.*"

Pidge jumped around a bit, fitting herself against the wall in the med-bay.

"*We're sorry you couldn't be here today, but I know you're out there somewhere, and I know you're gonna want to see this when you get back...*"

Suddenly the camera was being swung around, and Pidge's excited squeal filled the air.

"*Congratulations man, you're a dad!*"

Various cheers went up from around the room, a cheerful *yaaay* from Hunk and some loud exclamations from Coran. The camera stopped on Allura, tucked into bed with Hiroshi bundled in her arms. She grinned at the camera, looking sweaty and exhausted but so genuinely happy it made Lance's chest hurt.

"*He's called Hiroshi,*" she mouthed over Pidge's excitable chatter, before the camera was being shoved right in said baby's face.

Hiroshi squirmed in his mother's arms, his nose twitching and a discontented whine coming from his throat as Pidge pressed the camera right up to his face.

"*Amazing!*" She exclaimed off screen. "*He can cry all by himself! And move! He breathes also. It's incredible!*"

*“Dude, give them a break.”*

That was Keith, and Lance was granted view of him as Pidge pulled the camera back, focusing on the red paladin.

*“Your brother’s here too, and he’s the one who cried the most, just by the way.”*

*“Hey!”* Keith protested, but he was smiling.

He waved a hand dismissively at Pidge and went to hand Allura a cup of water, one finger stroking gently over the baby’s hair.

*“And here’s Hunk and Coran,”* Pidge continued, moving the camera to give Lance a chance to see his best friend.

Hunk was sat in a chair a few feet away, Coran patting his back reassuringly. He looked a bit shell-shocked, but happy too, eyes somewhere else but a soft smile plastered onto his face.

*“Hunk helped most with the delivery,”* Allura whispered, and Lance felt a swell of pride.

*“Oh! Oh, and here’s Lance,”* Pidge continued, immediately drawing their attention back to the screen.

Lance swallowed at the sight of himself; they’d laid him on the bed beside Allura, just out the way of the boisterous team. He looked asleep but he also didn’t. There was a blank veil over his face, a small line of tension in his brow and shoulders. He looked unhappy, dead to the world but frantic in his own, unconscious way. It was extremely unsettling.

*“He’s fighting in a virtual arena right now,”* said Pidge. *“Being all cool and saving our lives.”*

Her words were nice, but they didn’t help the sick feeling Lance got looking at himself in that state.

*“So yeah,”* Pidge kept chattering. *“We miss you Shiro, and we cant wait to see you again.”*

Her expression fell for a second, growing more serious.

*“Stay safe, yeah? You’ve got some great things waiting for you.”*

Lance felt Allura tense beside him, but then Pidge was grinning again.

*“And hurry up and learn how to change the diapers will you, cause I am not doing that.”*

The video shut off with a click, and they were left in the silence of the med-bay.

*“Wow,”* said Lance.

*“They were a handful,”* Allura admitted.

*“Where are they?”*

*“Probably just outside the door. They wanted to stay, but uh...”* she paused, chuckling. *“Grandpa Coran kicked them out.”*

Lance couldn’t help the laughter that burst from his chest.

“Oh man... Did he come up with that name himself?”

Allura looked sheepishly at the floor. “Well... I did. Actually.”

Lance smiled, pushing away the unsettling images of himself for another time.

“It suits him. Maybe not as much as uncle Coran, but I’m sure I’ll get used to it.”

Allura chuckled weakly, her hands fidgeting in her lap.

“Are you okay?” Lance asked suddenly.

“Hm?”

“It’s just you’ve... you seemed a little worried when I first woke up. Still kinda do.”

Allura sighed, glancing at the floor.

“I just...” she bit her lip, thinking. “I’m worried about him. I-I was so caught up in worrying that he was overdue that I didn’t think maybe he’d... he needed more time. He’s so *small*, Lance. And weak.”

“Hey, he’s not weak-“

“He is,” Allura insisted sharply. “Coran said so. He... he’s struggling, he’s a combination of species we don’t understand, he’s been used by Carma and... we have to be so careful with him I just, I’m scared for him.”

Lance sighed, eyes flitting to Hiroshi. “You can’t be too scared, Allura. Parents always worry, but... look, he survived seven months of Carma leeching off him-“

Allura inhaled sharply and Lance muttered a quick apology.

“But he did survive,” he said, trying to amend that sentence. “He got through that, and now he’s here, and he’s alive, and he’s healthy... Maybe he’s a little small, a little weak right now, but only cause he’s different. Doesn’t mean he’s not a fighter, cause he is. And now he’s got us all to take care of him properly.”

Allura’s expression was downcast, but he could see her thinking on those words.

“Did you know Hunk was premature?”

“Really?”

“Yep, smallest baby in the ward. His mom showed me the pictures. And now he’s the strongest guy I know.”

Allura was smiling properly now, lifting a hand to rest on the side of the incubator. “I didn’t know that.”

“Hiroshi’s gonna be fine,” said Lance. “He already is.”

He joined Allura, staring down at the small baby resting in the warm incubator. He stared at Hiroshi’s tiny fingers and toes, at the ink splatter on his cheeks, and his small pointed ears and scrunched face, and promised himself right there he was going to get them out. Not just one or two, but all of them. They were all getting out of this system, and they were leaving Carma behind.

“Should we let the other’s back in?” Allura asked, interrupting his thoughts.

Lance smiled, eyeing the door and imagining the other paladins gathered behind it eagerly.

“Yeah, I think we should.”

## Chapter End Notes

hope that was an alright note to leave you hanging on for a while!

(I Do Not Know Much About Babies so apologies if bits of my writing are,,,  
inaccurate)

see you in two months!

## Chapter Notes

jokes I lied I'm posting another chapter already because I have no sense of how long it takes me to write or complete other tasks and also writing keeps me happy so sorry for the lies but also heres another chapter

Mostly I just got too excited because I finally have an estimate for the number of chapters WOW so... 51 is the goal. It might be a little off but I can't believe I kinda have a rough idea hoorayyyy

I figure if you're reading a physical book you should have an idea of how many pages are left so why should this be different?

Anyhow thank you all for your super supportive messages about uni! Yes, it will take priority, but as you can already see I kinda maybe over plan, so will hopefully fit some chapters in... love you all thank you!

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The week following the arrival of Hiroshi was surprisingly calm. Lance was called to fight, but not as frequently as usual, which was a great relief. No attacks came, no bad dreams, it was as if the whole universe had just put its problems aside for a while to marvel at the existence of the team's newest member.

"He's like a raisin," said Pidge. "Kinda wrinkly. Super ugly. Yet... sweet. Oh my god, I'd die for him."

"Pidge," said Keith, as she continued to zoom the camera in and out of Hiroshi's face. "Can you not call my nephew a raisin?"

"What? He's all funny, *don't* say newborns don't look funny."

Keith sighed, rolling his eyes before returning his attention to Hiroshi. There were three of them lying on the floor, Pidge, Keith, and Lance, all gathered around the baby who was lying on his mat. Allura was passed out on the couch near them, dead to the world. Hiroshi was allowed out of the incubator for short periods during the day; Coran monitored him strictly. Lance had come to realise the incubator was somewhat of a healing pod for babies. He wasn't sick, but he still needed a little support. At just over seven months, he was bigger than human babies born at that time would be thanks to his Altean genes, but he was still small and slow and slept most of the time.

Pidge had been in their faces with a camera almost non-stop, capturing Hiroshi's every waking moment to show Shiro. Lance didn't dare say anything to dash her hopes; if they ever did get Shiro back, he knew the other man would want to see his son.

"Oh my god!" Keith whispered suddenly, leaning forward as he drew a finger away from Hiroshi's cheek. "He's moving!"

The trio all leant in with a series of soft *wows*, peering down at the baby who'd begun to squirm around on the blanket.

“Incredible,” said Pidge. “The peanut moves.”

Lance smiled softly at the look of bewilderment on Keith’s face, like he couldn’t believe the human he was seeing in front of him was really real. Hiroshi kicked out a leg before trying to curl into an even smaller ball, a whine coming from the baby before he finally settled. Keith watched with baited breath as the infant cracked an eye open, squinting up at him with about as much suspicion as a baby that young could muster up. Pidge chuckled at Keith’s dumbstruck face, blinking back down at the baby who’d taken to staring intently at him.

“Can he see me?” Keith whispered.

“Babies vision is pretty fuzzy,” said Lance. “But maybe, you’re close enough.”

That seemed to be enough for Keith, who leant in just a little closer and watched the baby with fascination. Hiroshi’s eyes were dark, verging on black, and Lance refused to acknowledge that could have been part of Carma’s influence. She might’ve used him to get to them, but there wasn’t a trace of evil on that baby’s face.

There was still the issue of the wormhole, and what would happen now that Hiroshi was born. It was possible that Carma wouldn’t be able to use him now, but that wasn’t something they were going to test until he was much stronger.

“Hi, I’m Keith.”

Lance was drawn from his thoughts by those words, and it calmed him to see the red paladin speaking softly to his nephew.

“It’s nice to meet you little dude.”

Pidge scoffed. “You know he can’t understand you, right?”

“And that was Pidge,” Keith continued. “She’s very annoying, and I hope you pull her hair lots.”

“Hey! That’s not fair!”

Keith chuckled, grinning at his friend. “Thought he couldn’t understand me.”

It went on like that; whenever Keith was tasked with watching Hiroshi, he’d talk to him as openly and logically as he would any other adult. Lance would watch in amusement as Keith walked the baby around the castle, talking as he went, *all your name’s Hiroshi, and you were born a bit early, but that’s okay. This is Hunk, and he’s an engineer, and that means he fixes and builds things. There are five lions, but Lance has two, and maybe one day if you’re good you’ll get to fly one. You’re half-Altean, and that’s really cool. I’m half-Galra, we have lots of halves in our family. This is your mom, and she’s been really busy, so don’t cry too much, okay?*

It was enduring to the point Lance felt sick, as if he hadn’t loved Keith enough to begin with, the universe was ensuring it now. It was harder sometimes leaving them all to go fight in the virtual arena, but Lance had a more solid grasp on the objective now. Since he’d taken Hunk’s advice and tried using his powers, the arena had become more animated. Not much, but the scenery changed. Instead of plain sand there’d be a scattering of trees, or a pool of water to navigate around and use as he pleased. Lance didn’t know if these changes gave him hope or terrified him. Still, the first two weeks of Hiroshi’s life were stable. The team seemed happy enough, as if this baby proved they had a future. Lance himself was happy, up until the halfway mark, the two-hundredth day.

He was back in the dream, back in the tunnel. No amount of focus could draw him out of it, and no one could help. It was him and the earth, him and the dark, him and the mud and chain and sinister tunnel. He needed a plan, a way to get out before it all inevitably went to shit. What would happen this time? Would something finally emerge? God, he hoped not. The chain seemed like his best bet; it was the only thing he could interact with.

Chilling memories sprang to mind of the last time he'd tried digging it up as Lance crouched down beside the chain disappearing into the mud; memories of the cold, stiff fingers he'd felt seconds before waking. That could easily happen again. Still, he had to do *something*, else he might never wake up. No panicking this time, at least not at first, Lance knelt in the mud and began to dig.

The mud was oddly cold, clinging to his skin like it always did, like it had a will of its own. Lance dug his fingers in, scratching at the dirt and yanking the chain free painstakingly slowly. Small noises scuttled along the walls from down the tunnel, whispers and scratches that had Lance glancing over his shoulder. The tunnel looked darker every time he turned around. There was a horrid feeling settling in his gut, a cold sweat breaking out over his forehead as he dug, like something was watching him. He hunched his shoulders, refusing to look any further down the tunnel, and tugged at the chain. It was coming free again, one chink at a time.

Time was impossible to tell in this dream, but Lance could sense when something more was coming. He'd begun to shiver, not from the cold, but from the terror that gripped him. He was hyperaware of the noises filtering up from the tunnel, of his hands slipping on the chain, of the darkness and stuffiness closing in on him. He'd told himself he wouldn't panic, but here he was, grabbing quicker at the mud and biting down on whimpers. He was close now, he knew it. What would it be? The feel of those fingers haunted him still, as did the possibility of who it could be. Allita? Shiro? Lance blinked mud out his eyes and yanked harder on the chain.

It was happening again, his powers going haywire, responding enthusiastically to his fear. It was freezing, *everything*, his innards, the air around him, his fingers as they gripped the chain. It felt as if the metal was fusing to his skin, little particles of ice holding them together as he pulled desperately on the chain. Mud, darkness, ice, sweat- his world was spinning again, the fear seizing his chest. Dirt sunk beneath his finger nails, the ice-cold chain ran his hands raw, mud soaked his clothing, his face, hands digging and digging, down, down, pulling harder and harder on the metal-

*There.*

Lance froze, panting weakly into the frigid air. There, just beneath the surface. He pulled slowly on the chain and something, *something*, began pushing itself up through the floor. Heart hammering in his chest, eyes burning, Lance reached out for it.

*Quiet.*

His hand stilled. It was so, so quiet. A little bit too quiet. Chills ran up his spine, ears ringing in the silence. *Absolute, awful, noiseless.* Lance wanted to cry.

There was something in the tunnel. He couldn't see it, couldn't hear it, he *knew*.

The silence stretched. He shut his eyes, fingers tracing over the slight rise in the mud, itching to reach out to it. He could pull them out, reach for the fingers he'd only just grasped before. But there was something *there*.

Lance stood slowly, his back still turned to the tunnel. It was like a vacuum, he couldn't even hear his own breath. The chain and whatever was attached to it rested by his feet, the silent echo of the tunnel behind him beckoning. Lance turned slowly, his chest tight with fear. The darkness swam



before him like a mist; the slow slide of water down the tunnel walls come to a stop, as though the water itself was trying to curl in on itself and hide. Lance waited, and waited, eyes boring into the dark tunnel mouth.

The first thing he saw was movement, a slight twitch from within the dark. Nothing distinguishable, he tried convincing himself he'd seen nothing at all. Then a breath. Lance covered his mouth with a hand to try and muffle the short puffs of air. That noise hadn't come from him. Again, a jarring, wheezing sound, barely audible. It sounded like whoever it was was breathing through the mud, their chest clogged with the stuff, the noise strained and raspy. Lance was shaking now, feet rooted to the spot. The chain at his feet was all but forgotten as he searched for whatever was making it's way up the tunnel.

There was a soft squelch, like mud between fingers, and Lance went rigid. *There*, he could see it. There was some sort of mass moving along the floor, a slightly different tinge of black than the rest. His heart was beating so fast it hurt, but Lance didn't so much as blink an eye. Another breath as the mass reared a little, raising... was that its head? Was that a *person*? The mass crawled forward, and Lance made out an arm grappling with the mud to pull the thing along. It lurched a little, and Lance's stomach churned as it scented the air, a breathy wheeze emitting from the creature. He refused to think of it as a person, he *refused*, though it crawled along on its stomach with humanoid arms and lifted a humanoid head. The creature's head snapped forward with a crack, and Lance bit down on his hand. It was *searching*.

Searching for him, him or... Lance dropped to the ground again, gripped the chain firmly, and *pulled*. It slid free another inch then stopped with a jolt, stuck. *Shit*. He tugged again, harder, head darting to the side to watch the creature dragging itself toward him through the mud. Its arm shot out, elbow twisted at a wholly unnatural angle as it dragged its limp body forward another few feet. Lance muffled a snuffle, digging his fingers into the mud and trying to dig up the end of the chain. He nearly cried out when he felt cold flesh. It was hard to get a hold, whoevers fingers he was trying to grip were slick with mud and freezing.

It was a battle against time now; Lance gripped those fingers as tight as he could, pulling as if both their lives depended on it. He could hear the creature gaining on them, its ragged breathing, the chatter of its teeth, the squelch of mud between its fingers. Every time he glanced behind him it was closer, twisted, hunched body slithering through the mud. Eventually he stopped looking.

Mud, cold, darkness; it was as it always was, only this time there was something sinister breathing down his back, something half-dead and mutilated, creeping its way toward him. And Lance had nowhere to go. He was breathing faster now, the familiar panic seizing his body, veins pumping ice. *It hurt and hurt and hurt*-but he didn't care. This time he was going to do something, this time he was getting out. Gritting his teeth, Lance reached for that feeling. He didn't care what he destroyed, he'd bring it all down, as long as that thing didn't reach them.

Closer, colder. Lance dug his fingers into the cold flesh still buried, the sound of the creature's steady approach assaulting his ears. The chill was violent now, like a hurricane following his pulse, the water separating itself from the mud and obeying his command; *destroy*, it said, *destroy destroy destroy*. The hand slipped from his grip, the body reached toward him, and Lance did. *Destroy*.

It came down like a wave, water breaking free from the walls and crashing over his head. But it wasn't gentle, and it wasn't cleansing, and it wasn't the saviour he hoped it would be. Darkness, and not like before. This was absolute, this was complete. Lance opened his eyes and saw nothing, nothing but the sting of polluted water rushing his senses. He lost his hold of the hand, lost his footing as the water engulfed everything. Suspended, tossed around in a current of his own making.

He floated in a directionless state, as if gravity had ceased to exist, all his senses blocked or confused.

*Air*, he needed air. Lance kicked, thrashed about, searching for some way out. His hands hit a surface; *mud*. All around him, water and mud. A jolt of panic ran up his spine. *You're trapped*. Surely not, he'd done this, he'd summoned the water. But as he tried to force it away, it stuck; there was nowhere to go. Beyond scared now, Lance felt along the ceiling, the mud coming away wherever his hands settled. But it wasn't giving way to anything, just more mud. More dirt, more filth, more to fill the water, to turn it thick and stagnant. His chest was burning, he needed to breathe, but there was no way out.

*I'm drowning*, Lance realised, and his limbs twitched. *In mud*. It was filling the water now, reclaiming its place. Soon, the liquid surrounding him was thick and suffocating. He was underground, he was in the dirt, he was suffocating. Lance tried to scream out of instinct, but it flooded his mouth. He thrashed, searching for a way out, for a pocket of air, for *anything*. Colder, colder, his lungs were burning and his body was freezing. *Freeze it all, stop it, stop it, freeze it destroy it-*

*Please.*

Lance jolted, stilling for a moment.

*Please.*

A voice? That didn't make sense. His head was throbbing, a fire in his chest that he couldn't quell, no matter how cold he was. *Destroy it, destroy it all-*

*Open your eyes.*

Colder and colder, but something was burning. His arms, his cheeks, they were burning in the hold-

*Lance.*

Lance's eyes flew open, body jolting forward in bed only to find he was already sitting. He was heaving in air like a man starved for it, blinking away the thick darkness that wasn't mud, just darkness, his skin tingling and blood *freezing*.

"Oh, thank god."

A head hit his chest, the hand on his cheek coming around to cup his head. A stuttering breath; a shiver.

"Thank god."

*Keith*. Keith was there, kneeling before him, just the faint emergency lights illuminating him.

That was when Lance realised how cold it was.

He blinked, flexing his fingers, clearing his head.

"Keith?"

His voice was croaky, and there was something off about the way his skin felt.

"I'm here," Keith sobbed, and his voice was all stuttered. "You're okay."

“What’s wrong?”

Lance was still trying to get his thoughts in order. He was awake, he wasn’t drowning, Keith was holding him, Keith was- Keith was *freezing*. Lance hissed as he felt his arm; it felt like ice. Realisation dawned on him slowly, and Lance’s stomach turned.

“Lights on,” he said, growing frantic when they didn’t comply. “Lights on!”

“Y...you f-froze them,” Keith stuttered.

Except he wasn’t stuttering, he was shivering. Lance dove for the bedside drawer, pulling out a torch he kept stashed and flicking the light on. Pale blue lit up the space around them, travelling over the sheets to Keith-

“Shit!”

Lance swore loudly, dropping the torch and grabbing for the blankets, wrapping them hastily around the boy in front of him. It would’ve helped weren’t they, just like Keith, covered in a layer of frost. Keith was shivering uncontrollably, withdrawing his hands from Lance to keep them close to his chest. Sure enough, there was glittering white frost settling over his hair and skin, as if Lance had frozen all the moisture in the air.

“Keith?” He took hold of the red paladin’s arms. “I-I’m... are you alright? Keith? Keith, I’m so sorry, I... I’m so sorry.”

Keith looked like he must’ve expended all his energy waking Lance, because he just nodded weakly and stayed huddled in a ball, lips tinged blue and fingers eerily pale where they gripped the sheet. Lance’s eyes were stinging; *look what you destroyed*. He noticed it now, the icy temperature of the air. He could have frozen Keith to death.

Apologies spilling from his lips like a prayer, Lance hefted Keith and the nearest blanket off the bed, cursing at the frost that bit into his arms. He stumbled across the floor with them, ice tickling his bare feet all the way to the doorway. Light from the hallway only emphasised how pale Keith was, and Lance could barely look as he all but ran for Pidge’s room, kicking insistently at the door until the younger girl opened, looking thoroughly pissed off in her pyjamas. Her look of annoyance faded the second she saw Keith, but by that point Lance was already barging past her.

“Get him blankets,” he demanded. “Get him warm!”

“What the hell?” Pidge spluttered. “What happened?”

“Just help me get him warm!”

Keith was dropped onto the bed, thankfully warm from where Pidge had been lying in it. Lance tossed away the frigid blanket in favour of a new one, wrapping the fabric around Keith and dusting the frost from his hair.

“Is he *frozen*?”

Pidge was standing behind him in shock.

“I’m fine,” Keith bit out, but he was shaking so hard the words barely made sense.

“Jeez,” Pidge muttered when she reached out a hand to feel his forehead. “Is this an anti-fever or what-“

"I did it," Lance said. "I... I froze the room."

Pidge stared at him with wide eyes, cautiously wrapping another blanket around Keith.

"Why'd you do that?"

"He was dreaming," Keith said before Lance had the chance. "It wasn't your fault."

Lance shook his head, taking a few steps back and running hands through his hair nervously. Keith was so *pale*. *You hurt him you hurt him you hurt him*.

"I'm sorry," he blurted, pacing skittishly.

The others eyes followed him with something like concern in them.

"Calm down, yeah?" Said Pidge. "I'm gonna turn the heating up. We're okay."

Lance shook his head, but it was a false assurance.

"I.. I've gotta go. Go, um, I'm... I'll get you something to drink. Something warm. Okay. Okay I'm gonna go."

He turned before either friend could reply, unable to look at Keith's pale appearance knowing he had done that. Lance headed straight for the kitchen, staying true to his word as he navigated the halls with a thousand other thoughts pressing at his mind. He didn't even care about the dream anymore, it was a *dream*; Keith was real, he'd only been destroying what was real.

Lance spent far more time than necessary gathering a mug of hot water from the kitchen and stirring in some sort of chocolate powder. It wasn't chocolate, but it tasted good enough, and besides that it was warm. His hands were still shaking by the time he returned down the hall, fingers burning where they gripped the mug but he didn't care. He entered Pidge's room without knocking, stopping dead when he saw Keith's bare wrists. The red paladin was holding them out to Pidge, who was gently inspecting the red freezer burns around his wrists, as if Lance had grabbed him and...

Both paladins' heads shot up when he gasped, and Keith quickly hid his wrists beneath the blanket.

"Oh, cool, cocoa," said Pidge.

Lance just stared, locking eyes with Keith, certain they must've looked all watery and pathetic by then.

"It's fine," said Keith.

But Lance was already backtracking, setting the mug down on his way out, trying to form words but failing. He'd hurt Keith, he'd *failed*.

"Lance."

"I'm gonna go... talk to Black. I..."

"*Lance*."

Keith's tone was harsh enough to get him to stop and turn around. Lance winced, meeting the red paladin's fierce gaze.

"I've been stabbed before," said Keith. "And electrocuted, and thrown out airlocks, and beat up by frickin mega-robots. I can handle this."

Lance sniffled, fingers tightening around the doorframe. Keith raised a brow, understanding yet firm.

"Can you?" He asked.

Lance bit his tongue, feet itching to *run*.

"That doesn't... that doesn't make it okay," he said. "I just... I just gotta go."

With that, he left.

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Ice exploded against the far wall of the hangar, the sound of it cracking against the wall only just beginning to die off before there was another, larger explosion. Lance grit his teeth as he sent another shower of jagged ice at the wall, the Black lion sitting nearby watching him patiently, as if she knew he'd burn himself out eventually. The chill of it had been sitting in Lance's veins since waking from the dream, and now that he was far away from Keith and anyone else he could hurt, he was letting it all out. It didn't erase the images.

He'd hurt Keith, could've killed him; a slither of water rose from the bucket of water at Lance's feet before solidifying into a flurry of ice that collided violently with the wall. Lance could picture it now, all the moments in his life he'd hurt someone. *The time he pushed Tajo off the swing. The time he hit his playmate just a little too hard.* Ice smashed against the hangar wall. *The time he yelled at Lily, and the time he made his mother cry, and the time he kicked his cousin.* More things, worse things. *Shooting at the backs of Galran sentries, slamming his blaster into a druids skull, burning through the corpse of a dead Altean.* Ice burst from the water before his fingers, embedding itself in the wall.

*More; Allura cowering as electricity shot from his hands, Keith collapsing against the cave wall. Pidge shrinking back from him, you're cold. Water tearing through the trunks of trees, things freezing under his touch. Allita... Allita crying when he tripped her in a race, Allita growing quiet when he spoke over her, Allita cringing away from the rain he'd splash her at her mercilessly, Allita wondering deeper into that cave, deep, deep down, Allita losing her way, Allita dying-*

Lance screamed, flinging the bucket and its contents at the wall where it shattered amid the ice. He was breathing hard, tears burning at his eyes.

"Lance?"

Lance whipped around, guilt and revolution at himself flooding his gut as he spotted Hunk standing there. The yellow paladin smiled weakly, but he didn't look scared. No, that... that was pity.

"Hey buddy," he said, taking a few cautious steps toward Lance before opening his arms. "Looks like you need a hug."

Lance tried to resist, standing there shivering, drenched in water and sweat and maybe a tear or two. Hunk shouldn't want to hug him, Hunk should be *scared*. Lance was out of time to resist it though, because in the next second Hunk was wrapping him up in his arms and Lance was hugging him back, burying his face in his friends shoulder as he sobbed.

"Let me guess," said Hunk. "You're thinking about what a horrible person you are."

Lance sniffled pathetically. "I am."

"Mm. And you're thinking about how terrible you are for hurting Keith?"

"Yeah."

"And that you're, like, super dangerous?"

"Yeah."

"And that you've hurt so many people?"

"Yeah."

Hunk sighed. "Lance, remember that time you cried when I dropped my ice cream? *You* cried, when *I* dropped *my* ice cream. It wasn't even your ice cream, you just felt so bad for me."

Lance whimpered, glad that Hunk had the kind of shoulder you could hide your whole face in.

"You're not a dangerous person, dude. You have some weird powers, but you'd never hurt anyone on purpose."

"I... I've just hurt so many people."

"What people? You're gonna have to give me some examples."

"L-like Lily, I used to yell at her when she annoyed me--"

"What? You got into fights with your siblings? No kidding."

Hunk chuckled lightly, forcing Lance to look up.

"When I was a kid I shoved my cousin's face into the garbage can because he stole my Snickers bar. That's called being a little shit, Lance. It's what kids do. So maybe you pulled your sisters pigtails or punched your brother cause he beat you in a soccer match. Kids do that, Lance. You aren't inherently *bad*."

"It's more serious than that," Lance argued. "I... I got Keith hurt, and I've... I've killed people, Hunk. The Galra, I know we don't think, but I... and Allita. I let her go, Hunk. I let her wonder off--"

"Hey."

Hunk pushed him back and set two heavy hands on Lance's shoulders. "We're fighting a war. Those Galra, they... that's war, Lance. It's not something you delight in, ever. I've seen you after battles, you... you're full of emotion, Lance. Happiness that we're all alive, but there's more. You're not evil, not in anyway. And Allita? Lance, you were a child who was afraid of the dark, whose sister wandered into a cave, and there was nothing you could have done to stop her. So stop feeling guilty. Stop."

Lance wiped at his eyes, clearing his throat.

"Is he okay?" he asked, ever so softly.

"Keith?" Hunk sighed, pulling Lance into a hug again. "He's fine. He's absolutely fine. We were all just worried about you. We care about you, Lance. You don't want Keith getting hurt? Well he

cares just as much about you, that's why he stuck around. No ones forcing him to be there, Lance. You aren't forcing him, you aren't hurting him. You care about each other, and that's a beautiful thing."

Lance let his head rest against his friends chest, feeling the ice slowly retract from his veins.

"Feeling okay?"

"No."

"But better than before?"

"Kinda."

"Good," said Hunk, giving him a firm pat on the back. "Then get back in there and hug it out."

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The halfway mark meant more than just a bad dream, Lance discovered, as that morning they received an invite, asking them to return to Oro for a sort of... celebration? Hell, Lance didn't know, the O'kyan didn't seem the celebratory type. Still, it was a chance to make amends, so Allura insisted they go.

The atmosphere was still kind of tense as Lance, Allura, Hunk, and Pidge descended in three of the lions. Keith had been strictly prohibited from attending, so remained in the castle under the watchful eye of Coran. Lance missed having his presence beside him as he stood fidgeting with his shirt. They'd had a long talk after the events of 2am that morning, filled with apologies and demands to stop apologising so much and more apologies to apologise for apologising. It was getting kind of ridiculous, but Lance was glad they were okay.

Allura had suggested more casual attire for this occasion, since arriving in armour may only create more tension. Thus, they were dressed in some of the old paladins formal wear, which consisted of uncomfortable shirts with ridiculously high collars, and what Lance would define as skorts, but long. Oh well, now that Lance had seen how identically the O'kyan dressed, it didn't seem to matter.

The greetings were stiff when they first landed, but Allura had done her best to stay in a good mood. She walked ahead of them as they were lead along a rock face to wherever the occasion would be taking place, one hand resting gently against the small bundle strapped to her chest.

"Are you sure it was a good idea to bring Hiroshi?" Hunk whispered to Lance as they and Pidge strolled along just behind the main precession.

"You'd need twelve Hunk's to pry them apart," Pidge said. "She wouldn't go anywhere without him."

"It's just a celebration," Lance said to reassure his friend. "Not like we're bringing the baby into battle."

"Still," said Hunk. "Different atmosphere, different aliens, what if it makes him sick, what if--"

"Hunk, Allura and Coran wouldn't let Hiroshi go anywhere they didn't know for sure was safe. Relax a little. Besides, I think the O'kyan like him."

In truth, Lance had know idea if the O'kyan liked the baby, but enough of them had stared at

Hiroshi for long enough that he got the feeling they were quite intrigued. He couldn't blame them; Hiroshi was adorable. He was still pretty quiet and spent most of his day sleeping, but he'd open his eyes for longer periods of time now, watching the world around him with unabashed fascination. His dark mop of hair looked hilariously like Shiro's when it was swept back, and the dark markings beneath his eyes hadn't faded or grown. Currently he was asleep against Allura's chest, content to be swaddled and carted around with his mother.

Talk died down until they reached the entrance of the hall, by which time they were all too interested in the design of the place. There was only one settlement on Oro, which centred around the tower and well the civilisation drew its water from. This hall was one of their sacred places, located a little way up the valley and amid the rocks. Like the others buildings, it was constructed of dense sand, rectangular, like a temple.

"Oh," Allura exclaimed happily upon seeing it. "That's Altean design."

"Some things never change," a woman offered beside her, and Lance thought that was the first genuinely warm exchange they'd had.

Allura smiled at her, eyes flickering to the temple excitably. "I... I'd love to see inside."

"Good," said the woman. "That's where we're going."

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Although the O'kyan seemed overall like a pretty dull species, Lance had to admit this hall had its pluses. Allura was delighted, spouting on and on about Altean architecture. It was large and domed inside, with smaller walkways around the edges giving it's exterior a rectangular shape. Everything, again, was sand, but Lance was starting to see the appeal of it. Tables around the room were the same design as before, chunks of tamed earth with shallow trenches dug around them for seats. The centre of the dome was left open, a staircase descending in a spiral into the floor in the middle, which Lance assumed must lead to kitchens and other rooms given that several O'kyan emerged from there over the course of the evening bearing food. The food itself left something to be desired- a stale, biscuit type bread, and purple ground roots, but Lance was plenty adjusted to accepting that kind of food after the many diplomatic meets they'd had before.

The O'kyan were pretty stiff and offish at first, but once you got over their initial unwelcome-ness, Lance found he might just be able to win them over. They were all very eager to hear about how the training was going; after all, their lives depended on it. Lance obliged happily, detailing the events and even throwing some humour in there instead of letting on to how much the cycle of dying without end was getting to him. They ate the food and answered the O'kyans' questions, and by the time the plates had been cleared and they were left to mill about the dome, the progress made was apparent.

"How are you holding up?"

Lance looked beside him and found Allura had come to stand there, her eyes skirting the room inquisitively. They'd been here for three hours already, and Lance resisted the tiredness prickling his eyes.

"Good," he answered, peaking at the bundle attached to Allura's chest. "How's the peanut?"

Allura sighed heavily. "Did Pidge really have to call him that?"

"Take it as a compliment, she loves peanuts."



“She *hates* peanuts.”

“What? No, I’m sure she likes them.”

“That aside,” Allura said with a fond huff. “He’s fine. He’s awake, actually.”

Lance perked up, inching closer as Allura peeled back the cloth shielding the baby from view. Hiroshi cooed happily at the sight of his mother, gazing up at her with his eyes blown fully open.

“Yes,” said Allura. “Hello. I am still here. I’m the one holding you.”

She frowned a little, looking into Hiroshi’s dark eyes.

“Do all babies... stare this much?”

Lance burst into laughter beside her.

“What?”

“Nothing, you’re just... yes. Yes they do stare, a lot. It’s pretty much all newborns do.”

“Hm. It’s just as if... he expects me to do something.”

“Nah, I think babies are still just catching on to the fact that, you know, they exist. I don’t know. You’re pretty fascinating to a baby.”

“Hm.”

Allura smiled stiffly but Hiroshi kept a neutral expression, his tiny fingers bunching in her shirt and gazing up. His nose crinkled a little as he yawned softly, and Lance slapped a hand over his chest.

“Fuck, my heart. He’s too cute.”

Allura chuckled softly, stroking Hiroshi’s head gently as the baby settled back down.

“Do you think Shiro looked much like this, when he was a baby?”

“Probably. I definitely see similarities in their eyes. And hair. And frown. Man...” Lance muttered.

“What a little cutie.”

Allura hummed softly, her gaze packed with fondness as she looked at her baby.

“Oh! We should find another baby! A O’kyan baby, they can be friends!” Lance said suddenly.

He looked around wildly; he hadn’t seen any babies since first landing on Oro, no children either, but maybe this was a ‘children are not seen *or* heard’ society. Didn’t ants and termites keep all their babies in one room? That’d be weird, but maybe it was an O’kyan thing, since they were so termite-like.

“Hey,” Lance caught onto their arm of a passing O’kyan, quickly withdrawing his hand at their scandalised look.

“Sorry... listen, is there like another baby we can meet?”

The O’kyan fixed him with a blank expression, and Lance could’ve sworn they were frowning, except that they weren’t. They never frowned.

“Excuse me?”

“Like Hiroshi. We could introduce him to another baby, I know they’re a little young, but it’d be sweet-“

“No.”

Allura shared a look with Lance.

“No?”

“No, you may not meet another... baby.”

“O...kay? Uh. Do we have to fill in an application form or-“

“There will be no fraternisation between the young,” the O’kyan replied stiffly, before stalking off.

Lance huffed. “Wow. Okay then, seems like we’re not doing that.”

Allura’s eyebrows were high on her head, and she nodded in agreement.

“Jeez, did he have a stick up his ass though or what-“

“They’re worried about Carma.”

Lance fell silent, turning to whoever had spoken. He didn’t recognise them at first, after all, the O’kyan all looked quite similar, but after a moment Lance realised he was the young man who’d spoken in support of Lance’s abilities at their first meeting.

“Hey,” he said brightly, glad an O’kyan had finally been the one to approach them first. “What do you mean by that?”

The O’kyan edged closer, nodding politely to Allura.

“We have seen how Carma resided in the red one. Knowing that she tracked you using that baby, it... it sets everyone on edge.”

Allura frowned. “Carma isn’t in Hiroshi. She followed his scent, sure, manipulates his power-“

“She manipulates him,” said the O’kyan abruptly. His voice was pitchy yet monotonous. “There, you said it yourself.”

“Yes, but...” Allura trailed off, frowning.

“Please,” said the man. “Don’t take offence. We’re all worried, that is all.”

“Yeah, well, we’re worried too,” Lance said.

“Your training,” said the O’kyan, turning his attention to Lance. “It has been going well?”

“Yes, yeah, of course. But we’re still, y’know, concerned.”

The O’kyan blinked, once, twice. “Of course.”

He inclined his head a little to the side, blank eyes staring into Lance, who offered up an awkward smile.

“Are you suffering? Because of this training?”

“You know, as much as I *love* talking about this training, trust me, I do, I haven’t actually heard anything about you guys.”

The O’kyan righted himself, his posture emitting confusion.

“Us?”

“Yeah. I’m big on befriending new species, makes the universe seem smaller. So…”

Lance trailed off, shooting a look at Allura who nodded in encouragement.

“How about you tell us something about you?”

The O’kyan stared. “Me?”

“Yeah. Like… do you guys seriously not have names?”

“No, all are equal.”

Lance hummed. “Nice sentiment. But it’s confusing me, mind if I give you a name?”

“For the sake of political reasons… I suppose–“

“Excellent! Let’s go with Jim, you seem like a Jim.”

The O’kyan moved their head side to side, an unfamiliar gesture. “Jim… what does it mean?”

“Doesn’t need to mean anything, it’s just what you call yourself. Like I’m Lance, and she’s Allura, and this little guy’s Hiroshi. You, are Jim.”

Jim nodded slowly, beige eyes flitting between the pair in front of him. “I am… the only Jim?”

“Nah, there’s a few others. A really cool space commander, some guy in my physics class–“

“Then how will you tell us apart?”

Lance smiled warmly. “I think I’ll manage.”

“So tell us, Jim,” Allura piped up. “Do you have family?”

“Of course.”

“Who are they?”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

The hardened skin about Jim’s eyes moved slightly, and if Lance’s opinion meant anything, it made his expression look lighter, almost as if he was smiling.

“We do not keep track of who our direct relatives are. Only that we are all descended from Aryon, we are her children.”

“You guys have crazy dedication to your ancestors,” Lance muttered.

“Pardon?”

“I think it’s great,” he said, louder. “I think it’s really nice you’re all so in touch with your past. After all, that’s gonna be what saves us.”

Jim’s face shifted again, minutely, but Lance was definitely getting better at reading these expressions, because that looked like a smile.

“I hope so,” he said, and his eyes settled on Hiroshi. “We are all hoping so.”

The rest of the evening passed quickly after that; they stayed talking to Jim a while, but despite warming up to them, the O’kyan really had very little to share. Still, Lance enjoyed as much of it as he could, tried his best to mend their broken bond. It wasn’t until they were returning to the castle aboard their lions that the Lox began to glow.

-

Lance knew the break in training wouldn’t last, especially at the halfway mark, so when the Lox began to light up, he acted immediately. He just made it to he and Keith’s room before curling up on the edge of their bed and pressing his fingers to the stone.

The transition never became any easier, nothing about this training did. Lance swallowed down the wave of nausea as he stood, blinking his eyes open to take in his surroundings and-

*Weird.*

This arena was weird. There was no noise; that wasn’t unheard of, but it was rare. It was darker, like twilight, with no sign of any trees or other obstacles, just... mud. Lance shivered. That was what he hated most about the Lox, that it knew him. It had read him when they’d first attached it, and everything that was in his mind then, was in the Lox now. So if Lance was aware of his own fear of caves and dirt and darkness, then so was the Lox.

He swallowed thickly, stepping forward and awaiting the gladiator that would surely appear shortly. Time moved slowly here in his mind. Lance waited, and waited, until he realised that after waiting this long, nothing was going to happen. No gladiator meant something different. Nervous now, Lance strode further into the centre of the domed arena, stepping lightly over the dense earth. That’s all this room was, earthen floor, earthen walls, earthen ceiling. Like he was underground. *Like the tunnel.* No, Lance argued, not like the tunnel, because the tunnel was confining and dark and cold and he was helpless. He wasn’t helpless here; sure, he’d loose against whatever the arena threw at him, but he still had a *chance*.

Lance didn’t like this; he didn’t like the dimness of the arena, and the tight earth surrounding him, and the lack of gladiator there to kill him. Because no gladiator just meant something else would, right? He continued forward, into the centre of the dome, ignoring how the smell of stale earth and air assaulted his senses. At least in his dreams he knew it wasn’t real. This might’ve been virtual, but his senses were all fully in tact, he lived the arena out as he would any fight, except here the physical consequences weren’t permanent. The mental ones though, the sensations and terrors and memories of agony that followed him into the waking world? Those remained.

Steeling himself for the worst, Lance reached the centre. He stopped, turning in a slow circle with all his senses on high alert. Nothing, no noise, no movement; he didn’t even cast a shadow to chase.

Something brushed his shoulder and Lance turned quicker than light. His hands were raised and ready for a fight, heart rate skyrocketing, but there was nothing there. He turned again, a full circle, but the arena remained empty. Now on edge, Lance remained where he was, eyes skirting the edges

of the dome. He flinched as something touched his shoulder again, except now he realised it wasn't something brushing past, it was something landing. Pulse in his throat, Lance reached fingers up to his left shoulder. Soft, slightly damp dirt was splattered across the shoulder of his armour. Another few grains flopped down onto his fingers, and ever so slowly, Lance looked up.

A trickle of dirt fell from the ceiling like rain and landed on his cheek. Lance blinked it away, his breath stuttering as he took in the dark, earthen ceiling, the cracks all through it, and the way it was beginning to buckle, to sag, small gatherings of dirt slowly breaking free and raining down on him. The surface bulged, and Lance stopped breathing. *Oh my god.* It was collapsing.

The centre dipped low, and Lance dived aside. He landed in the dirt a few feet away, as the centre of the ceiling came crashing down from above, huge mounds of earth colliding with the floor and kicking up mud. Lance was back on his feet in an instant, racing for the edges of the arena as more of the ceiling began to cave. It came down slowly at first, but once the centre was down, it all began to fall. Slabs of earth thicker than Lance was tall were suddenly falling from above, making the floor shudder and spreading fresh cracks through the mud. The floor was no more stable than the ceiling, Lance realised with horror. And the ceiling... lead to nothing, only more dirt.

Biting back a cry, he dashed along the edges of the arena as dirt came raining down on him. It smelt of rot and decay, cold and wet, not unlike that inside the tunnel. Lance backed up against the wall, making himself as small as possible as another massive chunk of earth fell from above. He squeezed his eyes shut, willing for it to end, waiting for an opening in the ceiling to show there was a way out of this cave in. His eyes fluttered open again when he felt something pressing against his back. *No.* Lance stepped forward but the pressure followed him. He looked up, behind him, and saw the wall bulging forward, its massive weight slowly pressing down on him. He yelled as he stumbled back, tripping over fallen earth in his haste to escape the downfall of the wall. It was no use; within seconds, tonnes of sodden earth were coming down on him like a wave, crashing into the mounds of fallen dirt and splitting apart. Lance dove between a few fallen chunks, arms thrown over his head as unimaginable weight landed on top of him.

The mounds around him took much of the blow, but he was forced onto his stomach, winded by the force of metres of earth coming down on top of him. Lance gasped, weight pressing down on his back and trapping his legs. He clawed at the dirt in front of him, trying to pull himself forward, out of this mess. It was too much, the weight of all that earth, holding him down, squeezing the air from him. The adjacent wall groaned, and Lance whimpered as he saw the earth buckling. He curled in on himself as even more dirt came crashing down, the roar of it fresh in his ears as he was pounded into the uneven ground.

When the added weight stopped coming, Lance couldn't feel his legs. He cried out, calling for help even though he knew, he *knew* how pointless it was. He wouldn't be crushed, he wouldn't be buried. He grabbed weakly for the dirt, but it came away under his fingers, not a useful grip in sight. There was more raining down from the ceiling, and Lance realised he'd become trapped in a sort of crater between two chunks, his legs and lower torso completely submerged. He grit his teeth, using his elbows to try and shuffle forward, spitting out the dirt that had invaded his mouth. It was suffocating, the weight on him, pressing him down into the ground. His fingers grappled with a crack in the floor, and suddenly the ground beneath him was shifting, dipping into a v that had his body bending unnaturally. He heard something crack, and choked on the scream as more dirt flooded into his little crater and rose above his arms.

*I'm being buried alive.* The weight on his back was forcing it to bend as the floor dipped below him, and Lance could barely breath. He blinked up at the faint light far above, reaching for it, begging for it. Another chunk of earth fell, burying him for a second before Lance wrenched his head and arms out of the mud, gasping for breath. It was building up around him and he was

trapped, the floor sagging more and more, drawing him deeper down, the weight so crushing he was sure he spine was about to snap. *I can't die like this.* But he was. And it wasn't like the dream, because this was too real.

Lance sobbed as another fall of earth blinded him to the light, but it came out as nothing more than a weak wheeze. He grabbed at the dirt, trying to clear it away from his face, his mouth, but finding fresh earth simply filled the space. He was going to suffocate. Lance shut his eyes, trying to will his powers into action, but he could do nothing. He heard something crack, but couldn't feel a thing. The ground shuddered beneath him and Lance was pulled deeper, packed in tighter, his ribs aching as the dirt overcame him. He couldn't see, but he could hear. He could hear the earth shifting around him, smell the stench of stale air, taste the dirt clogging his mouth. He couldn't breathe, the weight was too much. The dirt encased him, pressing, suffocating, slithering over his skin until all he could feel was the weight of the earth. *Not this.* Anything but this. Anything but dying buried alive, choking on his sobs because the air couldn't make it to his lungs in time, thrashing powerlessly against the walls of the earthen prison as suffocation overtook him, helpless to the dirt that filled his mouth, his nose, his eyes, overcoming him until it was all he knew. Not this, anything but this, because Lance would rather die any other way.

But he did, breathing in the dirt, drowning in the weight of the earth around him. Helpless, and afraid, and alone. Like Allita, he thought, before lack of oxygen overcame him, his head pounding and lungs screaming and body thrashing involuntarily. *Like Allita.*

-

Lance's element was water. It was slow moving or fast falling, strong currents and small creeks and variability and adaptability, but above all it was calm. Lance was not calm when he emerged from the simulation. He was not water, not delicate rainfall or an ocean trench, he wasn't even an violent storm. Lance was an explosion; a terrifying, harrowing, explosion. So far from his element, with so little clarity, he ripped himself up from wherever he lay, not caring if it was the floor or bed or anything. Not caring who was there, what time it was, because that didn't matter when you were dying.

Lance was on his feet before he'd even regained feeling of his legs, tearing at himself, grabbing at his clothing as if it was the dirt that had killed him. He was crying, gasping for air and *crying*. This was too much, it was just too much. His fingers found his skin, and it felt cold, cold like the earth and mud that he'd drowned in. So Lance tore at it, dug his nails into his arms and scratched at the dirt he could still feel there. His arms bled but he didn't stop, not caring not caring-

Someone grabbed him; there was someone there then. The world was a blur of dim lights and muted colours, panic searing through Lance. He dug his nails in harder, tearing at the dirt, at the mud, at the pressure. Someone was dragging him backwards now, so Lance fought. Fought against the weight surrounding him, the dirt compacting and suffocating. Stronger, he was hauled away, hitting at whoever it was, at himself, at his arms. The more he bled, the more dirt seemed to cling to him. He could taste it, and smell it, feel it smothering him like a dark-

Lance froze up when he felt water hit his skin. It was cold, not freezing, but enough to shock him. He was breathing hard, fingers clenching in and out of fists rapidly. The water just continued to fall, like rain, hitting his head and shoulders, dripping down his forehead, his back, his arms. It fell, and Lance breathed, it fell, and he felt.

Silence.

Nothing, for minutes on end, just the water and his breathing, and someone, someone familiar, holding very lightly onto his arms. He didn't think of much while standing there, feeling the spray

as it slowly soaked through his clothes, smoothing down his hair and curling around his bloody fingers. Lance saw rain falling on the ocean, dark swells rising to meet it. He saw it falling over the crop fields, yellow stems huddled together like business men beneath their umbrellas as the storm washed over. Rain in forests, rain dampening the sand on the beach, rain against their school windows, rain wetting his mother's hair as she pulled washing frantically from the line. They all ran from it, sheltered from it, because they knew what it stripped you of. So Lance embraced it, and let it take everything.

When he no longer felt like there was a vice gripping his chest, Lance let himself sigh. His arms were stinging; he could feel the sharp scratches he'd left on them and the blood dripping off his fingertips. It still felt like there was dirt on them, but now... he could manage. There was water flowing over his eyelids, but he let them flicker open.

The dull, white shine of the shower walls greeted him. The bathroom lights were fairly dim, suggesting it was late into the night. Water continued to fall from the showerhead, soaking Lance's head, his shirt, flowing over his skin in soothing waves. He felt numb. Wide, almost violet eyes stared back into his. Keith's brow was furrowed with concern, watching Lance's every movement to try and predict what would be next. His fingers were wrapped very gently around his biceps, to hold him steady, to contain the wild, frightened boy who had emerged ten minutes prior.

Lance blinked, his thoughts slowing, heart rate calming, gazing at Keith who was returning the gesture with frightened eyes. Not scared of him, scared *for* him.

"Okay?" Keith asked, his voice a tired whisper.

Lance shook his head no. Keith's expression grew tight, raising a hand to cup his cheek.

"Can feel it," Lance mumbled.

His tongue felt heavy, as did his limbs.

"S on me," he slurred. "The dirt."

A heavy hand rubbed against this arm, brushing over the scratches, trying to scrap off the imaginary layer of mud that felt as if it was fused to his skin.

"No, don't," Keith said, catching his hands gently and pulling them away from the cuts. "You're hurting yourself."

Keith's shirt was a little wet, droplets of water along his arms where he held Lance under the spray.

"Where's the dirt?" He asked very softly.

"Everywhere."

Keith held his breath, debating something for a second. Keeping one hand wound around Lance's arm, he reached for the cloth hanging over the edge of the shower and wet it in the spray. Lance watched his every movement, too tired to be curious, but captivated all the same. Cautious about his movements, Keith lifted the cloth to hover over Lance's forehead.

"Here?" He asked.

Lance nodded, and shut his eyes as the cloth was dabbed gently over his forehead. Keith worked gently, wiping away the imaginary dirt with as much care and precision as he would were it real. Lance breathed a sigh of relief as Keith continued down his cheek, wiping away the feel of the dirt

and mud that clung to him, leaving him clean and free to breathe. Keith dabbed gently over one eyelid, then the other. He ran the cloth over Lance's jaw, his nose, his lips. The dirt he was sure was built up behind his ears was washed away. When he was done with his face, Keith peeled off Lance's shirt and pants, pushing him further under the spray as he wiped over his shoulders, chest, legs, down his arms. He took care with each hand, cleaning between his fingers to erase any trace of dirt that could have lingered there.

Lance knew his skin was bare, he *knew* it, he could see it, but the feel of the dirt didn't fade until Keith washed it away, scrubbing gently but hard enough for Lance to feel it. When Keith was sure his skin was clean, he dropped the cloth and came for Lance's hair, fingers rubbing through it until he was certain the look of discomfort was gone.

Lance went with it, going slack as Keith coaxed the tension out of his body, washed away the feel of dirt and the violent images in his head with cold water and gentle touches. The red paladin's shirt was soaked through by the time he was finished, but without a word he peeled it off and shifted so they were both under the spray of the water. *Numb*, Lance felt numb. Keith cupped his face, pressing a gentle kiss to his lips and rubbing soothing fingers over his cheekbones. He let Lance lean into him, his body drained of energy and will. Keith kissed him again, and again, until the soft, insistent displays of affection finally elicited a response from Lance. He sighed into the mop of dark hair, now soaked through, shutting his eyes as Keith trailed fingers over his back, stopping to trace the scar on his shoulder.

Lance missed the feel of it instantly when Keith finally shut the water off, but he admitted he was tired enough that his legs would barely stand. Keith pulled them both from the shower, towelling them off, pulling Lance's softest shirt over his head and steering him carefully toward the bed. Lance just lay there for a while, staring up at the ceiling, too spent to even speak. Keith leant over him, pressing kisses to his cheeks, his eyelids, his shoulders, his wrists. He returned to his lips again and again, until they were numb from kisses filled with love, rather than the paralysing fear. The blanket Keith wrapped around them was soft, like the clothes on his back, and the touches to his skin.

Wrapped in Keith's embrace in the warmth of their bed, Lance felt like one did after a long cry. A little empty, a little emotionless, but comforted. *Stable*. Keith tucked himself against Lance, breath tickling his chest as he drew patterns on his skin around the metal teeth of the Lox.

"I love you," he whispered into Lance's neck.

Keith raised his head, pressed a kiss to his temple and sighed when Lance's eyes finally drifted shut.

"More than I thought I could... love someone."

Lance gave a small squeeze to his waist, and Keith settled back down beside him. There was no mud on his skin now, he was sure of it. The weight of an arm over his chest was welcomed, not frightening. Lance kept his mind empty, quiet, afraid that if he let it drift back to that arena, he'd lose himself.



## Chapter Notes

last 10 chapters before the epilogue here we frickin go  
hope this one isn't too disjointed yikes

thank you to everyone who left a comment, you guys seriously keep this story going I  
can't even express how thankful I am

-

*The recording began with someone's nose shoved right up to the camera, and Pidge cleared her throat before beginning with:*

*"Pidge Pictures, coming to you live, with all the latest news, the greatest news, and the hottest gossip about our paladins-"*

*"Oh my god-"*

*"Shut up, Keith!" The nose in front of the camera snapped, and Pidge drew back enough to catch a glint of her glasses. "I'm on air!"*

*"Shiro doesn't want to see that far up your nose," Keith called from somewhere out of view. "No one does."*

*"Uh, my millions of subscribing viewers do?"*

*"What? You don't have any viewers."*

*"Hunk watches my videos-" the camera was yanked back harshly and turned suddenly on the friendly looking boy fiddling nervously across the table from her. "Isn't that right?"*

*"Uh, sure," Hunk squeaked, adjusting the glasses- a very new development- on his nose and returning to the book laid out before him.*

*"He's studying," Pidge finished shortly. "Super boring stuff."*

*The camera was flipped to her face again, but this time at a more respectable distance, so Keith could be seen rolling his eyes over her shoulder.*

*"Anyway, welcome to your next instalment, Shiro. Your son's like... two... three weeks old? Here, we have Lance to helpfully illustrate."*

*Pidge swung the camera sideways, panning onto Lance who was already posing with one leg propped up on a chair, a playfully seriously smirk on his lips.*

*"Wow," said Pidge, with theatrical enthusiasm. "Lance McClain himself! But is he the hero of this show, you ask?"*

*"You guys are so dumb," Keith muttered.*

*"Ooh, vocalisations from the audience... I wonder what they'll think when they meet... the main attraction!"*

*Clearly trying to stifle his laughter, Lance turned with the arm he'd been hiding from view, revealing Hiroshi cradled on his forearm. Pidge gasped as if this revelation was truly a surprise, the camera jolting in her hold.*

*"Fuck me," she said. "That's a real baby."*

*"What else would it be?" Keith muttered.*

*"Hold him higher, Lance!" Pidge insisted, ignoring her friend.*

*Lance posed theatrically with the baby, holding Hiroshi up to a fake spotlight and turning so they could see the baby's inquisitive eyes gazing back at the camera. Hiroshi fit snugly along Lance's forearm, the baby's head cradled in Lance's hand and his arms bunched by his cheeks. He was wide awake, enthralled by the movement and noise that was going on around him. He kicked his legs happily when Lance pressed a kiss to his mop of dark hair, very content with where he was.*

*"Oh my god, do the Simba hold!" Pidge called.*

*"Support his neck!" Keith snapped.*

*"Don't worry mullet, I got him."*

*Pidge giggled as Lance swung the baby around, his eyes widening at each movement, before kicking when they came across something he liked.*

*"I want him," Keith said, suddenly appearing on screen. "Give him here."*

*He marched up to Lance, taking the baby deftly from his arms and cradling Hiroshi as he walked away, muttering, "they're just being silly, Hiro."*

*The camera panned to Lance, who was watching the red paladin go fondly, even though he'd now been robbed of the baby.*

*"Great," said Pidge. "Back to just Lance."*

*"As if I'm not the main attraction."*

*Pidge chuckled, but kept the camera on him. "Okay, but seriously, so Shiro knows how you are, what's being the black paladin like?"*

*"I'm not the black paladin," Lance corrected. "I'm the storm paladin."*

*"Ohh, my apologies," Pidge snickered.*

*"And its great," said Lance. "I'm two paladins all in one, twice as cool as all the other paladins."*

*Pidge joined Lance in laughing, stumbling toward him with the camera to poke him, but catching sight of something else on her way.*

*"Allura!"*

*Lance turned along with the camera, setting sights on the princess as she entered the common room. She smiled a little awkwardly at the camera, before Pidge was bounding toward her.*

*“I’m doing another video for Shiro!” She said excitedly, and Allura’s eyes flashed with some unknown emotion.*

*They filled with fondness a moment later, as Pidge began rattling off compliments about her to the camera.*

*“She made a whole baby,” Pidge said. “And she still pilots the castle, and made peace with the O’kyan, and told Lance off for double dipping a fry into his food goo-“*

*“Okay, that’s enough,” Allura chuckled.*

*She looked tired, but radiant as always, bunching up her hair into a ponytail as she walked into the room.*

*“Your son hasn’t started crying at night yet,” she said, when Pidge continued to pester her with the camera. “You better be back before he does.”*

*“I’m sure he’s doing his best,” Lance called from behind her.*

*Allura’s eyes softened for a second as she gazed into the camera. “I know you are.”*

*“Cool, enough sappiness,” Pidge said a moment later, steering the camera away from the princes and stalking towards Hunk and muttering, “Hunky, Hunky, Hunk, what are you working on?”*

*The yellow paladin had only just launched into his explanation on jetpacks powered by Balmeran worm dung before a soft whimper was drawing her attention back to Keith and the baby. Hiroshi was still tucked safely in Keith’s arms, but he’d begun to whine, and it was soon turning to tears, even as Keith tried to shush him.*

*“Oh, it’s the moustache, it’s always the moustache,” Coran said mournfully as he backed away from the baby he’d been fussing over.*

*Hiroshi calmed down the moment Coran was out of view, oblivious to the apparent grief he was causing his ‘grandfather’.*

*“I should shave it,” their advisor announced.*

*“Oh, no don’t do that... another week and he’ll be used to it I’m sure,” said Allura hastily. “It took me at least five to stop crying at the sight of that thing.”*

*Coran huffed, drawing himself up a little. “Very well. It remains for now.”*

*Keith remained oblivious to their dilemma, rocking Hiroshi gently as the baby gradually calmed down, lulled into a sleep-like state. Pidge crept closer with the camera, leaving it resting on Keith and the baby. The red paladin softened completely around his nephew; at times he was almost more protective than Allura. The quiet words he was whispering came to a stop when Hiroshi shut his eyes, a small, contented coo coming from the baby. Keith watched his every move intently, his eyes widening substantially as Hiroshi opened his mouth to yawn, tired and tiny and really very sweet. He looked awestruck, and when Hiroshi snuggled into him, Pidge began to chuckle.*

*“Your nerd brother’s crying,” she snickered, sparking an immediate reaction from Keith.*

*"Shut up, Pidge," he snapped, or tried too.*

*His voice was a bit wobbly, and far too quiet. Keith's eyes were glistening, and as much as he looked like he wanted to stay angry with Pidge, he couldn't keep his eyes off the tiny bundle in his arms.*

*"Aw," Hunk cooed from out of view. "That's so cute."*

*Pidge sighed, though it was obvious she found the display enduring. She turned quickly with the camera, landing on Lance, who was staring at his boyfriend with a star-struck expression.*

*"Lance, Keith wants a baby."*

*"Yeah... wait, what?" Lance said suddenly, snapping out of his daze. "Why are you looking at me?"*

*Lance looked frantically between Pidge and Keith, the latter of whom was watching him with round, watery eyes.*

*"We're not having a baby!" He yelled, when neither would elaborate.*

*"Just giving you a heads up," Pidge muttered.*

*"Well... don't," Lance stammered, looking far too flustered.*

*Pidge began to laugh, but it was cut short when a small coughing started up behind her. She turned again as Hiroshi began to cough in earnest, the peace in Keith's eyes vanishing, replaced by immediate fear.*

*"A-Allura," he stammered. "He's coughing again."*

*The princess was already halfway across the room toward them, exchanging a few quiet words with Keith as she took the baby from his arms, both their expressions rigid-*

The recording stopped a moment later. Lance saw Pidge tuck the phone back into her pocket, her eyes watching the scene unfolding before them nervously. This wasn't the first time Hiroshi had displayed signs of sickness; he was still weak, after all.

"Is he alright?" Lance called, as Coran joined Allura and huddled around the baby.

"He's okay," she said, sounding frightened. "I'm just... I'm just going to take him back to my room."

"Oh... okay," Lance trailed off, watching Allura and Coran hurriedly exit the room, leaving the rest of them in silence.

He closed the distance between him and Keith, sensing the others' unease as he wound an arm around his waist to pull him close.

"It's okay guys," Hunk tried to assure them. "He's gonna be fine."

Keith was still staring off into space sadly.

"He's strong," Lance whispered. "He'll be alright."

Keith nodded shakily, just as Lance began to feel a familiar thrum around his wrist. He sighed,

pressing a kiss into Keith's hair as the others began to list off suggestions for board games to pass the time.

"I'll be back," he said, giving Keith's hip a squeeze before following the others out the room to respond to the call of the Lox.

-

The battle this time was intense, and seemed to be lasting longer than usual. The gladiator came on strong, and Lance fought back no less viciously. They danced around each other, blade meeting water, and electricity meeting metal. Lance wiped sweat from his brows, blinking it away before it clouded his vision. He was into this fight, he could feel his powers thrumming through him, speaking to him, helping him act, helping him *win*.

The gladiator charged forward and Lance deflected the blow with a sharp, upward explosion of water. He was lucky this time- the arena had a central pool of water, which the gladiator dared not enter. It angered Lance, because while water was an effective attack, he never seemed to be able to summon enough to do any permanent challenge. So was that it? Was he meant to die every single time? That didn't seem so much as training than it did torture. It was torture in a way, Lance realised numbly. If he failed to defeat Carma in the end, this really wasn't the best of ways to live out his final days. That thought angered him more, and suddenly Lance found he was the one pushing forward, forcing the gladiator back with rapid jets of water.

He needed a *motive*. Lance's eyes landed on the pool, trying to lift just a few more litres. It was tiring, and painful almost. He tried to think of Hunk's kind expression, urging him to focus on his powers, of Keith's lovely eyes and their bodies tangled together in a bed as he whispered *you are brave*-

Lance dropped the water, hissing through his teeth as he did so because it *wasn't working*, because he was just so *angry*.

*Hate fights hate*, the O'kyan had said. *Whichever is stronger, wins*. They win, the strongest wins. So there was a way to win, there had to be, else why would they ever have told him that? Lance breathed in, focusing himself. What did he *hate*? What did he hate enough that it couldn't even compare to fire, to boiling anger or burning fits of rage? What was enough to smother out the most intense heat, the blistering fury, what was enough to quell it, what was *more* than it, what made his soul turn to *frost*?

His father. *I don't blame him*, Lance would tell them, anyone who asked. But he did, oh he did, because Leo lost a daughter, but so did his mother, and so did their siblings, and so did *he*. They all lost Allita, all of them did. She became a loose end, an unanswered question, a void where her shoes should have sat by the door and air lying wasted where the space should have been filled by her body at the breakfast table or on the bed or on their first fucking day of high school. She left them with a life unlived, but he left to live his, lest they bring him down.

Lance hated his powers sometimes, when he lashed out at Keith, or scared Allura, or caused a change in Hunk's eyes; where they once was undying trust, there now was weariness, fearfulness. He hated the way Hiroshi looked weaker some days, hated the coughs that would shake his tiny body and cause fractures in Allura's heart. He hated the empty space left by Shiro, and the hope that died slowly in Pidge's eyes, and the way Coran would sit with his head in his hands, just talking to himself, and only to himself. He hated all the wild remarks Hunk would make about their future, only to watch as he caught on his words, like a fish to hook, realising his mistake as reality came back to him bit by bit.

Lance hated the pain in Keith's eyes and the indents of nails around the bruises on his arms, as if

tearing himself apart would stop the spread of it. He hated the dream of the cave and the taste of mud he still reeled in, hated the chain and the secrets and the cold looks of the O'kyan, and Pidge's bloodshot eyes because she couldn't sleep and Hunk disappearing because he knew Lance hated seeing him cry and Keith waking in the middle of the night as if he'd forgotten how to breath, and all of it, *all of it*, was because of her. Because of Carma.

The gladiator charged, and Lance saw red. He was going to tear Carma to *pieces*. He vaguely registered the blade coming toward him, but Lance ignored that. He reached out with both his arms, calling to the water sitting idle in the pool behind him. Hatred, for everyone that had wronged him burned like ice in his veins. He hoped they *never* found a way out of this system, at least not until he faced Carma; because he longed to bring her world down around her. Lance felt the vibrations of the water as more and more of it lifted into the air. It was heavy, he could feel the pressure of it squeezing every ounce of strength from his body. But that didn't matter, not when he had things to kill.

He would bring as much chaos down on Carma as she had brought him in four hundred days. He would tear the soul from the bastard planet, poison the soil of her world so nothing lived there for a hundred thousand years. There would be no stories of her, and no fear of her, he would kill the very *idea* of her. Crush her, drown her, cut her down; everything that had been done to him, to his family, to his friends and to the boy he loved. Carma was *nothing*, not a speck, not a gathering of dirt, or ash, or decay. He would wipe this galaxy clean. Lance didn't care if her heart was solid diamond, he would find a way to cut through it, to kill. He hated her, he *hated* her, forever and always, until she was so far gone not even he could recall the shadow of her planet or the blood of her victims, or the loveless stretch of her deeds.

There was water swirling around Lance now; he could see the shadow it cast before him, bearing down on the gladiator. It swept itself up into a churning orb, so vicious and wild the edges threw spray across the damp floor between them. The gladiator paused, shrinking back, but it was no use as the water enveloped it. Lance could feel its movements from within the churning water, feel it struggling to escape. His head was throbbing, limbs shaking and muscles tingling but he held tight. Round and around the water went, gathering, growing, until it all surrounded them like a vicious tornado, howling in his ears. The gladiator was helpless, tossed around in the currents within as Lance just watched. He would kill Carma, he would do it right. He'd do it for Aryon, and Callio, and Keith, and Allita, and Allura, and everyone other person she had wronged. He would meet her, he would fight her, and he was going to kill her.

Lance clenched his fists, and lightning shot through the water, lighting every corner of the arena in a blinding display of noise and electricity. The light died; the water fell flat. Lance was left staring at the charred remains of the gladiator, its body nothing more than broken shards. He breathed in, out. Water was soaking him and he was shaking. He felt something trickle out his nose. *Blood*. Lance swiped a finger through it, fascinated. He'd won. He'd *won*.

Silence, like a blanket, only his rough breathing to fill the space. He felt dizzy; he felt hatred. The Lox on his wrist began to glow.

-

Lance woke calmly this time, his back against the cold floor of a storage closet, blinking at the faint light filtering in through the door. He hadn't made it to their room, but that was alright. There was no one there with him, which Lance found a little strange, since Keith knew all the places he was likely to go. Still, Lance didn't mind; for the first time in weeks he felt calm.

He'd beaten the gladiator. He'd won the fight. Sure, there were bound to be more, but he'd done it.

And now he knew he could do it again.

Lance sat up slowly, rubbing the stiffness out of his arms and getting to his feet. He better find the others, check on Hiroshi, tell them all the good news. The light in the hallways had paled, suggesting evening had come. Lance swung his arms as he walked to chase away the last of the ice in his veins. He called out to the others as he reached the common room, striding in through the door only to find it empty. *Huh*. Maybe they were asleep, he had no idea what time it was. He and Keith's room was the next port of call then; he could always find the others in the morning.

It was only when Lance entered their room to find no one there that he began to worry. If Keith wasn't in their room, it meant he wasn't asleep yet, and if he wasn't no one was. Lance wondered back into the halls, heading for the bridge this time. He called out to Keith as he went, then to all the others, picking up his pace at the echo of uncanny silence. *Where were they?* Unless they'd all taken an impromptu holiday without him, something must be wrong. Lance jogged down the hall, peering into rooms as he went.

It was a light that stopped him, a faint blue glow from down the hallway he knew Allura's room sat. *Bingo*; he'd go there. Lance tried to convince himself he shouldn't be nervous, not as he approached the open door, peering around to see into the dark room, where only a luminous blue lamp cast light like flowing water over the walls.

"Allura-" he began, but his voice fell short at the sound of sniffing.

Lance stepped into the dark room, squinting to make out the shape of a figure huddled on the floor.

"Allura?"

The room felt stifling. The princess was curled into a ball in the corner, pressed tightly to the wall, her messy hair falling like a veil over her shoulders. She was... was she crying? Lance darted forward, concern flooding his face.

"Allura, hey, what's the matter?"

He knelt down before her, reaching out to lay a hand gently over her own only to have it slapped away. Lance flinched, shrinking back an inch as Allura raised her head. Her eyes were blotchy from crying, the markings on her cheeks glowing a sickly pale colour. Tear marks streaked down her face, but her expression itself was cold, and empty, and harrowed.

"What's happening?" Lance asked, as she continued to stare at him, her brow slowly crumbling.

"Where... where's Hiroshi?"

"He's too..." Allura's voice broke.

It felt like Lance had been stabbed, she sounded so *broken*.

"He was too weak," the princess completed, before folding in on herself with a hollow cry.

Time stopped for Lance; his pulse froze, eyes unmoving, the sound of Allura's wail like a seldom, endless chord. Hiroshi's cot sat beside her bed; it was empty.

"No," he said. "You're lying."

Allura's shoulders shook. Lance fell from a crouch to his knees. The pads of his fingers dug into the floor; it was cold.

“No,” he repeated, shaking his head. “No, no, you’re lying.”

“He was too weak,” Allura said again, and this time she fell like an avalanche; tears spilling over her cheeks, a pale tinge coming over her brow, hair cascading like a sorrowful snowfall.

“Where is he?” Lance said, because he couldn’t think, and he couldn’t *feel*. “Where are the others?”

Allura muffled a sob into her sleeve before growing eerily silent. Se stayed like that for a moment, with her head burrowed into her arm. Then she said:

“They took his body. They’re taking it away.”

And her voice was as empty as the air around them.

“No,” said Lance, and now he could feel heat behind his eyes. “No, no, no, Allura, *no*.”

He slumped in front her her, trying to meet her eye but she refused.

“A-Allura, you’re lying... he’s not, he’s not, no, no he’s not.”

Lance had begun to shake, and like a dandelion in the wind, it was tearing him apart. His face twisted, tears brimming as he shook his head.

“No... n-no.”

He was starting to cry, words stuttering and slurring. Because Hiroshi? Hiroshi could not be dead. There was pain building in his chest, so agonising he thought it might swallow him.

“Please, Allura,” he said, and the sob that bubbled from his throat turned the words wet and rubbery. “Please, you’re lying, please.”

Allura didn’t respond. She was so still, and so silence, it was as if she’d frozen time around her. Lance continued to break, words deserting him as he devolved into tears. A mess of a boy, slumped on the floor with no direction and no hope.

“It’s your fault,” Allura said quietly.

Lance dragged his gaze up from the floor, face twisted in pain and his shoulders shaking as he wept.

“You brought us here,” she continued, and her voice was cold and quiet. “You made her use him.”

Lance shuddered at the ache in his chest, barely suppressing the weak whimpers shaken from between clenched teeth. There was a gun against his forehead, Allura’s slender fingers wrapped around the trigger.

“It’s your fault,” she said.

And fired.

-

Lance was not calm when he came back to reality this time. He was up like a bat out of hell, throwing himself off the bed and only just registering Keith’s voice calling to him. His feet hit the floor and he was running, tears streaming out his eyes but he didn’t *care*, he had to get there.



There were feet thundering after him as he sprinted down the hall, but they wouldn't catch him, Lance was faster. He slammed into the wall as he rounded a corner too fast, tripping over himself in his haste. The lights were dim, it was evening, there was a blue light spilling from Allura's open door. Lance didn't bother with greeting or explanation as he barged into the room, his eyes darting around wildly before they settled on the woman seated on the bed, her fingers dipping into the cradle beside it.

"Oh, Lance," Allura jumped as he slammed into the side of her doorway.

Her hair was done up neatly, and the blue lamp casting light across the room was peaceful. A faint glow emitted from the cradle, warm and safe.

"Goodness, Lance, are you alright? What's happened?"

Lance just let out a strangled gasp, stumbling over his own feet as he approached the cradle. Allura withdrew her hand from it, standing to meet him with confusing written all across her face.

"Lance--"

But he was already there; his eyes, then his hands fell upon the tiny baby sleeping soundly within the cot. He was crying in earnest when he picked Hiroshi up, a discontented grumble coming from the baby as he was rudely roused, pulled against Lance's chest as the paladin sank to his knees, shaking as shivers wracked his body. Weak cries spilled from his mouth, Allura looked down on him in confused bewilderment as Lance embraced her son and *cried*.

Another noise rattled the doorway as Keith appeared there, his eyes a little frantic before they landed on Lance. His expression also gave way to confusion.

"Lance?" Allura asked.

"He's okay," Lance whimpered. "You're okay. You're okay."

His words devolved into a blabbering mess, and he held the bundle tighter. Hiroshi squirmed against his chest, a little confused and a little alarmed. Lance peered down at the baby, scarcely believing his eyes. A fresh bout of tears began to fall as Hiroshi smiled disjointedly at him. Lance knew it was just a reflex, but *god*, his heart broke and came back together a hundred times over.

"We love you," he stuttered, gazing at the baby in his arms. "We love you so much. You're okay, you're okay."

Allura looked to Keith, he looked to her. They both shrugged, concerned gazes falling on Lance.

"Lance?" The princess tried again.

"We should talk," he said, blowing out a long, shuddery breath. "Now."

-

Their initial conversation lasted over two hours. By the end, they'd reached the conclusion that the Lox levelling up meant Lance was exposed to situations that felt... well, a lot more real than they had before. Not that the arena didn't feel real, but when the fighting was confined to that space, he could manage. Now though... now the Lox could show him anything. That terrified Lance. Four days later, and he still couldn't shake the feeling.

The observation deck was fairly quiet that evening, as Lance and Allura sat across from each other,

working on their own projects. The scratch of pen across paper and tap of fingers on the tablet the only thing to dispel the silence. Hiroshi was sleeping peacefully beside his mother in the warmth of the cot, much the like rest of the team, already back in their rooms. Lance took another sip from the hot chocolate in his mug; it was starting to go cold. Still, he had work to finish.

“Has it happened again?” Allura asked out of the blue, not even glancing up from her work.

“No,” Lance replied in a similar matter. “Not yet.”

They’d had a very long discussion following the night Lance broke down over Hiroshi, eventually coming to the conclusion that the arena wasn’t always just an arena. Sometimes... sometimes it was more real. Terrifyingly real. Lance hated to think what could be done about it.

“Do you think you could tell?”

“I... I think so. I could probably tell the first time, if I’d been expecting it. But I wasn’t and it just... overwhelmed me.”

Allura hummed.

“It’s a sick tactic,” she said. “On Altea we would never train our warriors like that.”

“Yeah I figured,” Lance said with a snort. “But this is Carma I’m gonna be up against. I guess they can’t hold back on preparation.”

Allura’s expression was sour, but she pushed it, along with her work, aside.

“Can we talk?”

“We are talking.”

“About something else.”

“Yeah sure, what’s up?”

The princess sighed, and Lance figured he should probably put down his pen for this.

“Voltron’s been missing for too long,” the princess said.

She paused, and Lance sat up a little straighter.

“Far too long. People are wondering where it’s gone.”

“What are you suggesting?”

Allura fiddled with her sleeve, averting her gaze to the floor.

“I know you’re exhausted from training right now, Lance, and I know we’re in a life or death situation, but... we fought so hard to bring hope to the universe, and now... now that’s all slipping away. We’ve heard the rumours, the Galra are on the rise again. We need to, we... I think we should make an appearance.”

They sat contemplating each other for a long minute.

“I agree,” said Lance.

“You do?”

“Absolutely. That’s what got us into the mess with the O’kyan in the first place, loosing sight of our purpose. We’re in danger, but so is the entire universe. Our first role is to protect others, and we... we haven’t been doing that.”

Allura nodded. “Exactly.”

“So what were you thinking?”

“I’m not sure yet, but whatever it is, we cannot risk drawing the Galra’s attention here.”

Lance nodded in agreement. “Small appearances then. Wormhole in, blow up a few cruisers, save a planet, and we’re out. As long as they know we’re there, those planets won’t lose hope.”

“It will be risky.”

“I know. But what choice do we have? We can’t only focus on saving ourselves.”

“You’re already working to save the O’kyan, Lance, and your family. Remember that.”

Lance smiled. “Yeah, I know. But I kinda miss kicking Galra ass, you know?”

“*Do* I,” Allura said, huffing out a laugh.

“It’s settled then,” Lance said, a tight smile on his lips. “Voltron’s back. And they’re here to kick ass.”

-

Much to the surprise of everyone, they managed to rally themselves together within two days, slowly readjusting to the way things used to be. Lance could only hope he wouldn’t be called to train that day as Allura opened a wormhole before them, and began to steer the castle toward it.

“The Los Trialga galaxy is a large system, with a small Galra presence.”

Lance turned his eyes away from the window in order to listen to Coran, who was currently giving them a rundown of how the battle would go.

“It should be an easy operation, but I know we haven’t done this for a while, so I want everyone to be extra careful. Drawing the attention of any larger cruisers means risking a tracking device being placed on us. With that, they could trace us back to the dark star system, and, er, destroy us.”

“Optimistic,” said Pidge.

“There’s a trio of planets orbiting the star *Tago Major*, all with Galra occupancy,” Allura said, continuing with the plan. “We’ll launch an attack on the smallest, Taj, as this is where the ground base is. Once that’s been eradicated, I imagine backup will have arrived from the largest planet in the form of airships. From there we launch an air attack. If all goes well, we take shelter on the barren side of Tisi, the second largest, and wormhole out from there. Taj is the most important, the locals must be made aware of Voltron’s presence. Word will spread from there.”

“This seems like more of a show than a battle,” Keith said. “We’re not even touching the forces on Tisi.”

Allura sighed. “I know we want to take out all the bases, but the most important thing now is

letting people know that Voltron still stands. If they have hope, they won't give in as easily. The Galra empire still fears Voltron; the only reason they're so bold is because they think we aren't there. It's time to make an appearance. There will be more chances to pull bigger stunts. But for now, let's just... let's remind them who they're dealing with."

Keith thought on this for a long moment, before finally shrugging.

"Sure," he said. "As long as I can blow some ships up."

"Oh absolutely," said Allura. "In fact, I want as many explosions as possible."

The wormhole deposited them on the dark side of Taj's moon just a few minutes later, by which time all paladins were situated in their lions and awaiting orders. Lance sat in Black, reaching out to the blue lion, crammed into the hangar with them. He's flown Black with Blue trailing along behind, but he'd never had control of both lions in a fight. He was a bit nervous, mostly excited, the promise of battle giving him reason to think they were finally doing some good again.

"*Everyone set?*" Allura asked.

She was situated in the bridge, Hiroshi strapped to her chest in a carrier as his mother's hands flew over the controls.

"As we'll ever be," Lance replied.

He tightened his hands on the controls, holding fast to his link with Blue as the hangar door opened before him, revealing space in all its glory.

"Alright team," he said, flexing his fingers as the black lion shot from the castle, four colourful streaks behind it. "Let's do this."

Taj was a good Mercury sized planet, with streaks of red and orange and yellow that made it look like Jupiter, except it wasn't gas, it was dirt and minerals. Lance could see traces of cities as they grew closer, clusters of brown, square buildings marring the colourful earth.

"*I have a visual on the base,*" Hunk said over the comms.

"Civilians?" Lance asked.

"*Nope. Looks like that wall protects the base. As long as we only fire within than perimeter, we should avoid all civilian housing.*"

Lance zoomed in on the base they were rapidly approaching. Sure enough, a towering mud wall, topped with jagged wires was encasing the tall base within. Galra colours and trademark ships were everywhere, easily giving them away. Lance resisted the smirk that tickled at his lips; the Galra had no idea they were coming.

"Alright Keith," he said as he steered his lion lower. "Time to blow things up."

"*Happily,*" said Keith, and that was all the warning they got before the red and green lions were swooping down, their gigantic paws just clipping the tops of the walls before both were firing mercilessly down on the Galra base.

The next half hour passed in a blaze of fighter drones and explosions, each of which kicked more of the red dust up into the atmosphere until Lance was flying through an absolute haze. They seemed to be winning though, as more and more fighters fell, just like the base they'd come from,

and the final ones began to retreat. It felt good to back in the lions, to be fighting the Galra, and winning. It gave Lance renewed energy, a sense of purpose, an escape for the darkness and drag of time back in the dark star system.

*"Hey guys," Keith's voice crackled over the comms. "There's a river to the north of the city that the Galra have damned. We gotta break that wall else they'll have no water."*

"On it-" Lance began, only to be cut off by Allura.

*"Hold it," she said. "You've got fighters coming in from above. They've come from Talis, focus on those first and come back for the dam."*

Lance turned his lion sharply, gazing up into the sky, where a Galra cruiser had appeared.

"Everyone on that ship," he ordered. "Eliminate air forces first and we'll come back for the damn."

*"Got it,"* came the three responses.

With that, they launched their lions into the air. Lance lingered a moment, peering down at the city, where locals had begun emerging from their houses. Their eyes searched through the dust until they settled on the wall, and the smoking remains of the base within it. Lance waited until he saw smiles on their faces, a unanimous cheer of joy coming from the crowd as they hugged and fell into each others arm. He steered the black lion just a little closer, enough to catch their eyes, before doing a large loop de loop, much to the delight of the crowd, and shooting off after the others.

The others were already fighting off the cruiser by the time Lance breached the atmosphere. The fighting was fast and intense, but Allura was right- the Galra presence here was small. Voltron had this fight in the bag. Lance cheered as he swooped into the fight, calling to Blue in his mind and coordinating the lions to crush a Galra fighter between them. He heard various exclamations from his teammates; this is what they were meant to do, not sit around in space waiting to die, they were meant to fight, and defend, and free the universe from evil. Lance felt freer than he had in months.

*"Cruiser down!"* Hunk called after a few minutes of intense fighting.

He was almost drowned out by a loud whoop from Pidge and Keith's carrying laughter.

*"Well done Voltron!"* Allura said, and Lance saw her smiling face filling the screen.

*"That was awesome!"*

*"I agree,"* Allura said in response to Pidge. *"But now I need you back on the barren side of Tisi. We should wormhole out before they call in more backup."*

"In a minute, princess," Lance replied. "First we're taking out that dam."

*"How?"* Pidge asked. *"That's a thick wall, even the yellow lion would struggle to break through and we're short on time."*

"I have an idea," he said, already steering Black down toward the surface. "Follow me."

*"Voltron?"* Keith blurted a minute later. *"That's your idea? Form Voltron?"*

"Yeah, why not?"

*"We only have four pilots!"*

“Yet five lions are flying. Look, I can feel Blue, we’ve been connected this whole flight. I think we can do it.”

Keith’s sigh was long and suffering.

*“Fine, let’s try it.”*

*“Oh boy, this should be good,”* said Hunk.

“Everyone get in formation,” Lance instructed. “We’ll fly through it, and if it doesn’t form, retreat to the castle.”

*“What about the dam?”*

“This will work.”

There was a nervous flutter in Lance’s veins as he steered Black into the centre of the lions, calling to Blue to take up her place on the outside. They began to gain speed, shooting across the sky with vapour trailing behind them.

“Come on,” Lance muttered under his breath, keeping his mind open as possible.

He could feel Blue, both the lion’s energy circling him, feeding off each other.

*“I think its working!”* Hunk called.

A second later Lance’s vision was swimming. He forced himself not to panic, a familiar feeling spreading through him, opening his senses. Suddenly he was seeing through two sets of eyes, the horizon racing toward him from numerous points. He could see through Black and Blue. Lance let out a whoop as he felt the lions drawn together magnetically, the familiar whirl of machinery filling his ears as Voltron began to join.

They were clumsy at first, almost too excited. The blue leg was too eager to move, the yellow lagging, but eventually they were speeding back in the direction of the town and dam.

“Form sword,” Lance said, when the dam wall was in sight.

The canyon below it, that should have sported a river, was a dry wasteland. Lance caught sight of the locals watching them from the safety of their town, curious eyes following Voltron’s progress through the sky. He saw the sword appear in the gigantic robots arm, and they began to dip toward the wall.

The sword sliced through it like a knife through butter, tearing up the brick and clay as water gushed from the holes, bringing the whole wall down with it. Cheers erupted from the crowd, and as they pulled up, Lance saw people rushing toward the flowing river with buckets and all sorts.

*“What now?”* Pidge asked.

“Uh, strike a pose?” Lance suggested.

*“They know it’s us,”* Keith muttered jokingly. *“Just...let them take it all in.”*

They hovered in the air for a minute, waving an awkward giant hand as people pointed up to the robot and grinned and threw wildly happy gestures.

*“Excellent work, paladins,”* Allura’s voice said over the comms.

She sounded like she was smiling.

*“You’ve done it.”*

-

Spirits were high as they arrived back in the castle. Lance slung an arm over Hunk’s shoulder as they walked into the bridge, chattering and laughing happily as Pidge and Keith pushed each other playfully down the hall. Allura was practically beaming, the wormhole closing up behind them as they were deposited back in the dark star system, though no one seemed to care.

“That was amazing!” Pidge said. “We smashed them!”

“Well done team,” Allura said, chuckling as Coran leapt around to room to congratulate each paladin.

She walked up to Lance, setting a hand on his shoulder. “That was good leadership. I’m proud.”

He returned the smile, managing a small thank you before Pidge was leaping at him, tugging on his arm and insisting they go do something fun to celebrate. Lance caught Allura’s eyes on his way out, and they seemed to be thinking the same thing; *this will work*.

## Chapter Notes

lemme tell you the chapters here are kinda getting close to the end but to the point I've actually written is REALLY near the end and its weird as hell (these last few are gonna be a bit longer just to help the flow if thats alright)

I have an idea to try post the later chapter on the day the fic was first published and that way with the chapter numbers it would pretty much mean it'd be chapter a week for a full year which would be neat but we'll see. Honestly can't believe its so many words honestly what have I done...

Thank you for the comments guys!! You're the best <3 please enjoy this chapter

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**Star date – 33:10:22**

Castle Cycle – 06:03

Log – 35

*“Good morning Black!”*

*Unlike many times before, when Lance began the log, he was beaming. Instead of sitting, he was standing, and had a small but curious bundle resting along his arm.*

*“That’s right,” he drawled happily. “Guess who’s finally allowed into Captain’s log to come meet you...”*

*Lance smiled even wider as he adjusted the way Hiroshi was resting, supporting the baby’s neck so he could peer into the camera. An excited huff came from the baby, before he started to fuss over the way Lance was holding him.*

*“Okay buddy, cool your jets, we’re sitting down, see?”*

*The potential cry building on Hiroshi’s tongue died when Lance took a seat in the pilot’s chair, manoeuvring the baby so Hiroshi was lying in his lap.*

*“Yep,” he said, looking down fondly. “Your mom needs a shower, so you’re stuck with me.”*

*Lance chuckled as Hiroshi began to coo happily, tiny fingers grasping for the bandana dangling from the paladin’s wrist.*

*“Anyway” Lance continued after a moment, finally tearing his eyes away from the baby, who continued to gurgle happily in the background. “It’s good to talk to you, Black. Things have been pretty decent here, well, as much as they can be. Hiro’s doing good, getting stronger. And noisier. Jesus, I forgot how noisy babies are. He’s not allowed to stay overnight with me and Keith since I freeze the room sometimes and Keith is, you know, possessed. But even between Coran, Hunk, and Allura- Pidge refused to have a crying baby in her room by the way, he’s still a handful.”*



*Lance looked down, trying to fix the baby with a stern look but ultimately failing.*

*“Yes,” he said. “You’re very noisy. Could you find more opportune moments to cry? Say six, instead of oh, I don’t know, three in the morning?”*

*Hiroshi cooed in his lap, and Lance’s expression crumbled.*

*“Yeah, you win. Again. Cry whenever you want, you have all six of us wrapped around your finger.”*

*Huffing out a breath, Lance returned his attention to Black.*

*“We’ve been keeping up the missions,” he said. “And they’ve been hugely successful. Et Vribrata, Janti III, Hove, Dargeen, all planets we liberated. We’ve been picking easy targets, yeah, but it’s still something. Besides, now people know Voltron is back.”*

*Lance smiled lightly, oblivious to Hiroshi playing happily with the bandana.*

*“The Galra are getting the message. We’re headed to a system later today, gonna surprise them and bust up the Galra settlement there. Do a few cool tricks... we might have time to drop down and chat to the locals this time. I’d like that.”*

*Lance sighed, his shoulders dropping a little.*

*“The training’s still going. It... it’s hard. It really pushes me, really... hurts.”*

*He rubbed at his neck. “It... it really hurts. And sometimes it... like when Hiroshi... sometimes it feels too real. Sometimes I can’t tell, sometimes it’s set around my life just as it is in reality and I- I can’t tell them apart. Sometimes. Reality and that virtual world. That really scares me.”*

*Lance’s eyes were downcast. “I can’t take it sometimes. Can’t take dying. I don’t want to keep doing this, I don’t want it to keep tricking me. You don’t...”*

*He paused, gnawing on his lip.*

*“I thought I’d get used to it,” he admitted softly. “To the pain. But you don’t. You don’t get used to it at all.”*

*Black purred reassuringly, but eventually it was Hiroshi’s attention-seeking cry that brought Lance back to reality. He sighed, gazing down at the baby who curled a hand around his finger when offered.*

*“It’s worth it though, isn’t it?”*

*Hiroshi peered up at him inquisitively, and Lance felt his lips form a small smile.*

*“Yeah...”*

*A resigned sigh, and Lance was looking back at the camera.*

*“Oh well, we should be off. Got a planet to liberate and Galra to intimidate and all that, you know how it is.”*

*Lance grinned as he lifted Hiroshi back up to the camera. “But I know this little guy enjoyed meeting you. So... talk later, Black.”*

-

The crowd cheered loudly as they set their lions down in the central square of a city on the planet *Ditrium*. Lance was grinning as he made his way down the ramp, helmet tucked under his arm, the other waving to the hoards of blue aliens that had swarmed to them after the final Galra air gunner had fallen. In truth, he was exhausted. He'd been summoned for training just before their stunt on the planet, and now after that and the fight with the Galra, his legs felt close to giving out. But Lance put up a confident façade for the crowd, glancing around to see the others also making their way down the ramps. Hunk was beaming, practically skipping along so he was the first to come in contact with the cities thankful inhabitants. Keith was... Lance eyes flashed as he saw Keith stumble a little on his way down the ramp. He was smiling, waving, but one hand was braced subtly on his side. Lance knew he hadn't been injured in the battle... no, this was Carma's doing; those marks were getting worse. Even with his full armour on, it was impossible to miss the dark patch that had spread as far as Keith's jaw. *He doesn't have much time.*

Lance shook himself. Keith did have time, because they were going to fix this. He returned his attention to the city, hopping neatly off the end of the ramp as aliens flooded toward him. Allura was already there with Ditrium's locals, but had wisely chosen for Hiroshi to stay hidden with Coran on the castle.

"Where is the fifth paladin?" An excitable Ditri was asking, practically dancing circles around them.

They were a very short species, bright blue, and extremely cheery. This particular Ditri had a few scraggly strands of blue hair on his head, and a mouthful of grinning teeth.

"He's here," Allura answered with ease, gesturing to Lance.

A dozen or so heads snapped toward him, all looking up in awe.

"But didn't he pilot the Black lion?" One asked, clearly confused.

"He pilots both," Allura explained, raising her voice a little so others would hear her too. "The Blue and Black lion."

She paused, smiling at Lance, then turned so she was facing the vast majority of the Ditri.

"We have a new paladin to introduce you to," she said loudly, voice carrying over the short aliens.

A hand was thrust out proudly to point at Lance.

"The storm paladin. Protector of the sky and the sea, of lightning and rain, electricity and water."

The aliens eyes were wide with amazement, looking between Allura and Lance with fascination.

"The paladin of storms," Allura finished loudly, and now everyone's eyes were on her. "Who swears to protect this, and all planets, with the will and the might of two paladins!"

Lance heard Pidge snort beside him, but the aliens loved it; they erupted in raucous cheers, many crowding around Lance and hanging off his arms and legs. The mood was high, the aliens loved them.

"Another demonstration," one pleaded to Allura. "Won't they please fly for us one more time?"

The princess looked thoughtful. "Well... we must be going soon, but--"

“It’s been so long since we’ve heard word of Voltron,” the Ditri pleaded. “It would mean so much.”

Allura’s resolve cracked. “Oh, I suppose.”

She turned, facing them. “Paladins! Back to your lions! We have a flyby to perform.”

Lance chuckled as he removed each alien from his arm and began making his way back toward the Black lion. They were exhausted, sure, but one more performance for the Ditri would be fun. Besides, no better way to spread the word that Voltron was back. Making sure the Ditri were clear of his lion, he shot up into the sky, the others following soon after. Blue hung beside him in the air, his vision shifting a little as he took in what both lions were seeing.

“*So what’re we doing?*” Pidge asked.

“Just a flyover,” Lance explained. “Some loop-de-loops... something to make the crowd happy.”

“*Frootloop formation?*” Hunk suggested.

“Perfect.”

They started off in perfect sync, flying five concentric circles above the main square before shooting higher into the sky. It was a simple routine, but was pretty entertaining for anyone watching. Pidge and Keith swerved the green and red lions around each other, leaving colourful streaks through the sky, while Hunk and the Blue lion turned complicated patterns beneath them. Lance flew higher and higher, guiding the Black lion into flips and tricks as he went. The ground was a tiny speck below, the other lions having caught up to him and going on with their next act. Lance was laughing, having more fun than he thought he would. He missed flying like this, just for fun. A loud whoop as he put Black into a quick succession of spins, before righting them again. He was about to call to the others that they do something impressive like form Voltron, when a warning from Black stopped him. The lion was rumbling in the back on his head, making Lance focus, making him realise-

“Ugh, great,” he muttered, spotting the Lox glowing from underneath his altered armour.

It was already bright, he hadn’t noticed it starting up with all the fun he was having. Lance sighed heavily. Of course this would happen now. He pulled Black out of formation, starting a steady descent toward the ground, which looked miles away. Shit, he was pretty high up, and that Lox was already bright. He could see the fields of Ditrism spread out for miles and miles below, red and green crops, blue rivers, the beige glow of the city...

“Looks like you’re gonna have to land us, buddy,” Lance said to Black, stripping off his left glove to find access to the Lox. “I gotta go virtual.”

Black sounded unsure in his mind, but Lance didn’t have much of a choice.

“Just take us back to the square, Allura will know what to do.”

Lance gave Black’s consul a pat, eyeing the ground far below them before sitting back in his seat and touching a finger to the Lox. The last thing to register in his mind was the slow but sure tilt of the cockpit, the feeling of his stomach rising as their descent picked up. His vision clouded over as Black’s controls flickered out, and they began freefalling toward the ground.

Lance fought in the arena. He lost in the arena. But when he woke, there was only black.

-

Noise came to him in little broken up segments; voices, machines, drifting toward him like lanterns through heavy fog. Lance was cold, he felt it in his bones, but this wasn't the chill of his powers. His head felt foggy, thoughts failing to form properly. He'd been flying, hadn't he? He liked flying. Lance thought he could hear the wind. He frowned, following the sound of it, of a storm. His vision wasn't as dark now, there were traces of blue dancing before his eyes, greys and whites and stormy colours. And the wind. He felt in on his skin, felt sand beneath his toes, heard a voice. Through the haze, Lance saw a little girl skipping along the rocks on a beach. *Allita*. He followed her, the world swimming around him like water paints running, all swirls and shapes and muffled noise. But he could hear the wind, and feel the sand, and he could see her.

The crack in the rock appeared before them like the gaping maw of a beast. Allita's form was watery, unclear, and she didn't even spare him a glance before ducking inside. Lance followed like a ghost, not even sure his feet were touching the ground, floating like the wind itself after her. It was colder in here, darker; the sound of the wind began to die. Allita faded in and out of view, her hands falling on rocks as she made her way down deeper. Lance had no voice, and no energy to call to her even if he wanted. Down they went, on and on, until he could see nothing. He heard her breathing, the only indication she was even there. His ears felt like they were stuffed full of cottonwool, no sounds reaching him properly, the images he saw bleeding together like water. Nothing, it was so, so dark down here. Where was she? Lance kept going, not even walking, just drifting.

There, ahead, there was something. *Someone*. Allita was sat on a rock, hunched over in the tight confines of the cave. Was she crying? Was she lost? Everything felt so drowned out and dull; his hearing, his sight, his feelings. Still, there was a faint tug at Lance's heart. He came closer, soundless as a ghost, until he was beside her. He tried to reach out, to call her name. He was the wind, and that was all. Allita turned to him, a head of curls and a flash of dark eyes, brown skin and a gaunt, lost expression. A familiar face, a familiar person, but not in the way he wanted. Lance fell back, spiralling like air in a vortex, the cave, the beach, the ocean, blurring together in a violent swell of colour and noise and everything. That wasn't Allita.

It was Carma.

-

Lance woke in a panic, jolting forward only to find his way blocked by a sheet of cold glass. It evaporated a second later, and he was tumbling forward, out of the healing pod's cold clutches and into a pair of warm, sturdy arms. His mind was still reeling, but the images of Allita and Carma and the beach were fading fast. He gasped, catching his breath, confusion flooding his senses. The arms around him squeezed, and Lance blinked away the cloudiness in his vision until he could make out where he was. *The healing pods. Arms. Cold. Huh.*

"Why'd you do that you idiot," someone mumbled into his chest.

Lance frowned, swaying.

"Keith?"

He was... he came out the healing pod. Keith was holding him. He tried to hug him back but Keith was pulling away.

“That was so stupid, Lance!”

Red-rimmed eyes were glaring at him, a mop of tousled black hair and a furious frown. God, Keith was really beautiful.

“Wha-*mmf*.”

Lance was cut off as Keith kissed him hard, the arms around his waist moving to pull him in closer and bury fingers in the suit that clung to his back. There was nothing gentle about it; it was a little desperate actually. Lance found balance and clung to Keith’s shoulders, kissing him back as best he could. They found a rhythm eventually, when Keith had calmed down enough to tilt his head a little, kissing Lance deeply. Lance’s arms wrapped around his neck, his eyes fluttering shut as Keith tugged him closer by the waist. This was a good kiss, he decided. He still wasn’t sure what had merited quite such a great one, but hey, Keith was running a tongue over his lips and rubbing circles into his back so who was he to complain.

Lance pulled back for air, gazing down at Keith who was looking back with hooded eyes. They drifted back together, Lance nosing his way toward Keith’s mouth, their lips brushing as they met again and again in a series of chaste yet lingering kisses. Keith’s hands bunched in his suit, shivering when Lance raked fingers through his hair, tilting his face to kiss him deeper than before.

Lance nearly jumped out of his skin when someone finally cleared their throat. He and Keith sprung apart at light speed, their arms catching so Lance’s was still slung around the red paladin’s neck, with Keith’s arm around his waist.

“H-hey Allura,” Lance stuttered.

The princess was standing a mere five metres away with a tablet in her hands.

“How long have you been there?”

“Oh, I’ve been here the whole time,” she assured, giving Keith a pointed look.

Keith flushed red, swiping a hand over his mouth guiltily and turning a little into Lance.

“Um, okay...” said Lance.

The awkwardness in the air was tangible.

“Anyone wanna, uh, explain the occasion.”

“You nearly died,” Allura said, as if this was something that happened everyday. “Your Lox activated mid-flight, I assume?”

Lance frowned, memories coming back to him slowly. “Oh... yeah... I told Black to land, though.”

Allura sighed, and Keith squeezed his waist a little tighter. “When you activated the Lox, it somehow got to Black through your connection. You both shut down, mid-flight. You crashed.”

Lance stared at her. “Oh.”

Allura nodded.

“Is.. is Black alright? Is the city- where did we crash?”

“Black will be alright. Luckily these lions are built for collision, so only a few repairs were necessary. As for the city, it’s fine. You crashed in a field a little way out. The Ditri... they were worried, of course.”

Allura paused.

“We were all worried. You got quite knocked up.”

“You nearly lost your leg,” Keith mumbled.

“Shit, really?”

“That crash wasn’t good on you, Lance. Black shut down completely and we didn’t realise until it was too late.”

“You should have told us,” said Keith. “I could have taken you down to the surface.”

Lance looked between them guiltily. “I... I’m sorry guys, I didn’t realise Black would shut down.”

“I know,” said Allura. “No one did. We just... we care about you. Next time, take more caution.”

Lance nodded firmly. “Got it. No more Loxing in the Stratosphere.”

Allura shook her head in exasperation.

“I’m glad you’re okay, Lance,” she said, before turning to go.

“Yeah, me too princess,” he called after her, sighing in the momentary silence.

When he looked down Keith was glaring at him.

“Jeez, what?”

Keith frowned harder. “What?”

“Why are you glaring at me?”

“I’m not glaring.”

“Yes you are!”

“Oh, I’m...” Keith trailed off, adjusting his expression so he looked more confused than angry. “I wanted you to kiss me again.”

“And you told me that by glaring?”

“I wasn’t glaring!”

Lance shook his head.

“You are a strange boy sometimes,” he said.

“Could you just kiss me?”

“I mean I *guess*,” he said sarcastically, but was already laughing when Keith pinched his side and dragged him down for another kiss.

He slowly coaxed a smile out of Keith as they kissed, the curl of his lips against his own an obvious give away. It didn't last though. Keith pulled back reluctantly, far away enough to stop Lance following him. His expression... was kinda sad. Lance frowned, brushing a thumb over the dark bruise creeping over Keith's jaw. The other flinched and turned his head despite Lance's hasty apology.

"It's bad, isn't it?" He asked softly.

Keith didn't say anything for a while, his fingers bunching in Lance's shirt while his arms stayed wrapped around his waist.

"The crash wasn't good," he said eventually, ignoring Lance's question.

"I know, I'm sorry--"

"Not just cause you got hurt."

Lance's brow furrowed. *What did that mean?*

"What do you mean?"

Keith met his eye solemnly, and there was something grim in his gaze that was absolutely captivating.

"A lion of Voltron crashing creates noise," he said slowly.

Lance still wasn't catching on.

"A lot of noise," said Keith. "That travels."

Oh. Lance swallowed.

"What happened?"

"Nothing yet," Keith said with a shrug that really felt a little inappropriate given the gravity of the situation. "Not really."

"Not really?"

"A Galra ship showed up while we were transferring between the crash site," Keith admitted. "Not a big one. But they saw the crash. They saw *us*."

Lance's stomach dropped.

"Did they engage?"

"No, they got out of there pretty quickly, actually. But they saw the crash."

"But that's okay, right?"

Keith sighed, dropping his gaze.

"I hope so."

"Keith?"

"Allura's worried. She didn't want the Galra getting any clues on our whereabouts. The... we think

they saw the wormhole. Not that this means they know where we are, but..."

"But there's a chance," Lance finished. "*Shit.*"

"Don't... don't worry about it," Keith said. "You have enough to think about."

"It's a little hard *not* to--"

"Lance."

Keith tugged at his hip, forcing Lance to meet his eye.

"The crash wasn't your fault. And the chance of the Galra finding us... it's close to zero. So don't... you've already got enough to worry about."

Lance forced a quick smile, which fell quickly when he reached for Keith's hand.

"Like you," he said, the words falling very quickly and very quietly.

The red paladin did little to disguise his wince when Lance's fingers brushed the marks around the scar across his palm, still dark and sickly looking from Carma's influence.

"You shouldn't worry about me," he muttered, refusing to meet Lance's eye again.

Lance shrugged, but he had to force himself to keep his voice from shaking. "Can't help it."

"Just--" Keith tried to pull his hand away, brows pinched when Lance kept a firm hold of it. "Let go. It doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters," Lance hissed, his voice low. "It- it's hurting you, Keith. It..."

He sucked in a sharp breath, fingers digging into Keith's blackened skin. *Like charcoal*, he thought; like he'd been burnt from the inside out.

"It's killing you," Lance whispered, like saying it out loud would only solidify what was already true.

Keith was thinking out loud again, his face a mix of fury and despair, all tight lips and downcast eyes.

"You can't worry about everything," he said, trying to pull his hand away again.

"Wait!"

Lance tugged him back firmer, clasping Keith's wrist and tracing the scar with his finger.

"Just let me help, a bit?"

"You need to conserve your powers for training, Lance."

Lance chuckled dryly. "No I don't. They're for helping people. That's the whole point, right?"

"The point is to beat Carma."

"Nah, this point is better," Lance assured, eyes falling to Keith's palm as he drew light patterns with his fingers and focused on finding the ice he knew resided somewhere within him.



“You just got out of the healing pod,” Keith protested. “It’s not good to use-“

“Did you say I should use my powers? I agree.”

“No, it’s not-“

“The best idea on Earth? I thought so too.”

“Lance-“

“Nope-“

“Lance, *listen*-“

“Not listening-“

“*Ugh.*”

Lance chuckled as Keith threw up his free hand in exasperation. The ice was starting to flow, he could feel the energy spreading along his arms, all the way to his fingers where it began seeping into Keith’s palm.

“I know it puts a strain on you,” Keith tried again.

Lance snorted. “No it doesn’t.”

“It does! You told me so, when you... when you beat the virtual gladiator, Lance. You said blood came out your nose, that... that’s not good-“

“That was different,” Lance said, frowning.

“How?”

Keith did not sound convinced.

“I... I, uh, I don’t know. It’s just different, alright?”

“*How?*”

Lance’s frown deepened as he concentrated on Keith’s hand, massaging the soft flesh between his fingers.

“Okay, maybe that... maybe fighting like that, and destroying stuff does strain me. But this is different.”

It clicked into place when Lance urged the cold into Keith’s hand. He smiled softly.

“This is easy,” he said. “It’s like breathing.”

His eyes flickered up, meeting Keith’s. The red paladin still looked so worried; Lance’s heart skipped a beat.

“Breathe,” he said, urging Keith on with a small smile. “Just breathe.”

Keith looked on the verge of arguing still, but his eyes fluttered shut when Lance directed the chill in his blood on to Keith, watching him relax. Keith sighed, the tension slipping from his shoulders and brow. He shuddered, hand going slack in Lance’s hold. He was in a hell of a lot of pain, that

much was obvious. Lance felt a stab of guilt; he should try and relieve the pain more, stop letting Keith talk him out of it. Healing him, lessening the pain... it really didn't feel like a strain at all. And even if it did, Lance was happy expending every ounce of power he had within him to lessen the burden of what Keith was carrying. He wiped the worry from his face when Keith's eyes opened, blinking up at him slowly.

"Better?" Lance asked.

Keith smiled softly. "Yeah."

"Told you so."

"Still shouldn't... doesn't mean you should," Keith said, before yawning.

"*Ugh*," he muttered. "That always makes me so tired."

"Aw," Lance teased. "You need a nap."

"It's nearly midnight," Keith deadpanned, but soon he was yawning again.

"Want me to carry you to bed?" Lance asked with a smirk.

Keith's head snapped toward him. "No."

"Are you sure?" Lance teased. "I think I should."

Keith thrust out a finger in warning. "*No*."

"Come on," Lance said, laughing, making grabby hands for Keith as his boyfriend began to backtrack.

"You're not carrying me," he said, trying to be firm but quickly beginning to retreat.

"What was that? I should carry you?"

"Lance, *no*-" Keith shrieked when Lance lunged for him, evading his arms and sprinting for the door with the other hot on his tail.

"Fuck you!" Keith yelled as he bolted down the passage, but it was all in good spirits.

Lance was dissolving into laughter behind him, stumbling along after Keith as they threw pleas and insults back and forth down the hall.

-

For the first time in what felt like months, Lance hadn't been dreaming at all when the alarm woke him the next morning. He'd been in perfect, blissful, *nothingness*. No bad dreams, no cryptic tunnels, no dead sisters, no cave-ins; nothing. It was perfect. Then the siren had to sound at a little before five, and Lance was jolted out of his blissful state by the shrill noise. Not only that, but Keith managed to elbow him in his haste to get out of bed.

"Oh come on!" Lance growled, trying to block the shrill alarm with hands over his ears. "We're awake! Fuck off!"

The alarm continued to blare though, all through he and Keith yanking various bits of armour on.

“I swear to *god*,” Lance seethed, shoving his foot unceremoniously into a boot.

“I’m gonna kill this Carma bitch so dead, and then when I do- thank you,” he added, accepting the glove he couldn’t find from Keith’s outstretched hand. “And when I do I’m gonna go to sleep.”

Lance slapped the altered plate of armour over the dormant Lox angrily. “And I’m gonna sleep for forty-eight-fucking-hours, and anyone who interrupts my forty and then eight hours of solid sleep, is going to join her in her stupid, ugly, rotten, *grave*!”

He grabbed his bayards before joining Keith by the door.

“Solid resolution,” the red paladin said nonchalantly.

“I am so fucking tired,” Lance muttered.

The door slid open, revealing an even louder alarm.

“Oh, fuck yourself,” he snapped, before racing after Keith down the passage.

They were the last to appear on the bridge this time, and Pidge was sure to berate them for it. She raised a questioning brow.

“Lance had to perform an unforgivable an curse on a security system,” Keith sighed as he passed her, a very grouchy Lance trampling after him.

“What?” Is all the storm paladin said upon reaching Allura.

She looked him up and down, even less delighted to be awake.

“What?”

“What’s up?”

The princess yawned.

“There’s a ship in the system,” she said.

“Fuck,” said Lance.

“It’s a Galra ship,” said Hunk.

“Fuck,” said Lance.

“It’s been here a few minutes-“

“Will someone turn that *fucking* alarm off!” Lance yelled.

“Oh.” Coran hastily pressed a button and the alarm fell dead. “Sorry.”

“Fuck,” said Lance. “Thank you.”

“Did he get up on the wrong side of bed?” Hunk whispered to Keith.

“He punched one of the alarms on the way here,” Keith replied impassively. “Which set off another alarm.”

Hunk nodded like that explained it all. Lance sighed, rubbing his eyes.

“Can we start this from the beginning again?”

Allura sighed even deeper, pulling up a screen in front of them.

“There’s a ship in the system,” she said.

Repressing a yawn, Lance moved to stand beside her to get a good look at the screen. It was a Galra ship for sure; they had good visuals on it, a medium sized dual transport and army vessel. His heart sank.

“When did that appear?”

“Just a few minutes ago. They haven’t tried to make contact.”

Lance ran a hand through his hair, the reality of the situation sinking in.

“Alright,” he breathed out. “Let’s get out there and blow them up, I don’t know.”

Allura frowned. “I don’t like the idea of you all being outside the castle in this system.”

“Then let’s wormhole out of here, act like we’re not held down.”

“But they know,” Allura stressed. “They’ll monitor this area now... if they follow us out, they’re bound to follow us back again at sometime.”

“Okay, so then what?”

Allura’s expression was strained.

“I don’t know.”

Lance sighed heavily. “Let’s just take them down, okay?”

“The lions-“

“I think this is a bit of an acceptance. You think Carma’s really going to find a way to cause havoc while we’re out in our lions?”

“Actually,” Pidge began.

“Okay I know it would be a great opportunity to stir shit, but she can’t do everything guys,” Lance argued back. “Let’s take a look at the facts. Galra ship is here, knows our co-ordinates now-“

“Has probably broadcast our coordinates to every other ship in the galaxy,” Hunk muttered.

“We should take them out before they discover anything... you know. If they know we’re stuck here we’re done for.”

“If they’re here to capture or kill us,” said Allura suddenly. “Then why haven’t they attacked?”

“Maybe they weren’t expecting us to be here,” Pidge suggested. “Now they’re rallying troops.”

Allura shook her head. “No. No, I don’t think so.”

“So what do you think?” Lance asked.

“I- I don’t know,” the princess said, fumbling with her words. “But I don’t... I don’t want us to just

attack.”

“Since when do you see a Galra ship and *not* want to attack it?” Lance asked, a little shocked, and a little irritated too.

“Since that one has made no move to attack us,” Allura pleaded. “It doesn’t seem right!”

“Allura, they could be rallying troops,”

“No, she has a point,” Keith interrupted. “It’s not normal.”

Lance frowned. The two most impulsive members of Voltron didn’t want to dive straight into an attack... *huh*.

“I am not comfortable with that thing just sitting there. If we have the opportunity to make the first move, we should-“

“I think it’s a trap,” said Allura. “I think it’s a trap set by Carma.”

Lance paused, considering. It could be, but also...

“Look at the order of events,” he argued. “Yesterday I crashed the black lion of Voltron. Word spreads. A Galra cruiser shows up and sees the wreckage, sees us wormhole, more word spreads. The likelihood of this being a setup by Carma, it’s... it’s close to none. Not when we were exposed to the Galra less than twenty-four hours ago. I’m sorry.”

“But what if it is?” Keith jumped in again to back up the princess. “Galra we know how to fight. Carma...”

“We know how to fight the Galra until they pinpoint our location,” Lance said. “We *know* how to fight the Galra until they calculate the time we wormhole back here everyday, and discover that little half hour window where we are motionless and *helpless*. We’re like sitting ducks. Fish in a barrel. If they bring in a full fleet, hell, two fleets, while we’re sitting here with a ship that can’t move... what’s our plan then? Where do we go? We take them out; now.”

“No,” said Allura. “There is no plausible reason I can think of for them to delay an attack. This is Carma. It has to be Carma.”

“This is the *Galra*,” Lance snapped; they were all beginning to grow tense with each other. “That’s a Galra ship, who followed us a day after we were just spotted. This is the first lead they’ve had on us in months!”

“It doesn’t feel right, Lance,” Keith argued.

“What could Carma possibly do to that ship anyway?” Hunk said, coming to back Lance up. “We don’t have to board it, just form Voltron and rip it up.”

“What if there are prisoners on board!” Pidge said, suddenly jumping in.

“Then we try get them to make contact-“

“No, that gives them more opportunities to find out about us-“

“Blowing it up could make the situation worse!” Allura pleaded.

“How? As long as there’s no prisoners-“

“Keith blowing up the dwarf planet didn’t do one bit of good,” Allura snapped, then sent an apologetic look toward the red paladin. “Sorry, Keith.”

“No, you’re right,” he said, turning back to Lance. “Now it’s just a wasteland crawling with god knows what. Who’s to say this won’t be the same?”

“That was a whole planet, we didn’t know what was going on there,” Lance said. “This is one ship-“

“Fucking with Carma doesn’t help us!” Keith said, finally snapping. “She’ll come back for revenge-“

“She’s already trying to kill us,” Lance replied, also starting to raise his voice.

“She’ll do more,” Keith stressed. “She’ll come seeking revenge like she did when I set off that bomb on the dwarf planet-“

“Her whole fucking game is already revenge! What more can she do?”

“You *know* what more,” Keith said, close to shouting now, and for a second Lance saw a flicker of fear in his eyes. “What she did to us after the dwarf planet, what she did to me- what she did!”

“But it’s not Carma,” Lance said, more gently this time.

“You know that for sure, do you?” Muttered Pidge.

“What if it is?” Said Allura, her eyes searching his own. “Is that a risk you’re willing to take?”

“Are the *Galra*?” Lance asked. “We don’t even know how strong they are now. We... we don’t know what happened to Zarkon, we don’t *know*, Allura, we don’t know anything. But you heard what people have been saying, on all the planet’s we’ve visited. They’re still there. They have new commanders, new leaders, new... a new Zarkon, perhaps, I don’t know, but we *can’t* afford to face them.”

Lance looked at her, pleading. “If the Galra come for us, I... I don’t know what to do. I can only keep track of so many things, it... I can only go so far.”

His finishing note was much softer, and Lance felt it within him too. He was exhausted. Tired of Carma and tired of the training and tired of the stress and tired of worrying over Keith and Allura and Shiro and the baby. If the Galra were added to all that... he really didn’t know what he’d do. There was pity written in her gaze when Allura looked at him, biting her lip.

“We need to compromise,” she said. “We need to play it safe-“

“Princess-“

“In a minute, Coran-“

“No, this is important,” Coran said suddenly, drawing them out of their conversation.

The princess frowned. “What is it?”

Their advisor was frowning deeply, fingers tapping over the screen before him. Lance locked eyes with Allura, who simply shrugged.

“One of the sensors has been set off,” said Coran. “Er, ten of them, actually.”

“What?” Allura blurted, and Lance didn’t miss the way she glanced toward the door.

“I’m detecting heat signatures within the castle,” Coran said.

“Weren’t our shields up? I thought they were put up immediately-“

“They were!” Coran insisted. “Still are; somehow something has bypassed them.”

“Carma,” Keith said glumly. “It has to be her.”

“Are you kidding?” Said Hunk. “With a Galra ship *right there?*”

“Where are the signatures?” Lance asked sternly.

“They appeared near the hangars... they’re spreading out. There appears to be ten-“

“What are we waiting for?” Said Keith. “Shut off that section of the castle!”

“They’ll use the vents again-“

“We don’t know that it’s Carma,” said Hunk. “This could be the Galra. I *knew* we should have just attacked-“

“Whatever it is, we need to contain it,” Lance said, though he couldn’t help but agree with Hunk; if they’d acted immediately they could have taken out that ship before they were breached.

“How’d they get on undetected?” Pidge was saying, walking circles around Coran to try and get a view of the tablet.

“It doesn’t matter,” Lance snapped. “Let’s get moving. Allura, where’s Hiroshi?”

“Sleeping in Coran’s room. I’m heading there.”

“Good. Everyone, pick a signature. If they’re Galra, you know what to do. If this is some shit Carma’s pulled... uh, we’ll figure it out.”

“Solid speech,” Pidge muttered.

“Coran, broadcast the location of those heat signatures to our armour,” Allura called on her way out the door.

The other’s were quick to follow, bayards drawn as they filed out into the halls, already on high alert. Lance opened the hologram on his suit, opening up the map of the signatures. He fixed his focus on one moving rapidly toward the med-bay as Hunk and Pidge took off running, behind Allura who was probably halfway to Hiroshi already giving the speed she was travelling at. Keith gave his shoulder a hearty thumb and a tight smile before turning toward the adjacent hall.

“Don’t do stupid things,” Lance called after him.

Lance was a pretty big fan of the sideways smirk Keith flashed him over his shoulder, despite the fact it eluded to him definitely doing stupid things. Lance shook his head, before heading down the hall at a quick jog. He kept the map open, flickering in front of him as he tracked down the heat signature. They moved at a vaguely human pace, leaving him to believe this was definitely a move by the Galra, rather than Carma. In all honesty, Lance didn’t know what was worse. Carma was a more potent force alone, but as long as she was their only problem...

*"These are speedy buggers,"* Hunk muttered over the comms.

Lance heard Pidge and Keith grunt I agreement. It was better splitting up this time, now that they could maintain communication. The previous times had never ended well.

*"I can't catch them!"* Pidge complained. *"Every time I get close it's like they know I'm coming and speed up!"*

That didn't sound good. Lance sped up, gaining on the little red blip doing circles around the med-bay. *Weird*. Similar complaints began spilling from the others, and Lance started to grow tense. Unexplained was bad news, unexplained meant Carma.

He was coming up on one of the heat signatures now. Lance turned up the sensors on his helmet, searching for any signs of movement or debris. This dot wasn't moving as much, just hovering inexplicably by the med-bay doors, occasionally traversing circles around that block. What was it doing? A scout maybe; who were they watching out for? Lance slowed his steps as he approached the hall, trying to stay as silent as possible. Did whoever it was know they'd been detected? Did he have the element of surprise on his side? Well, as much as he could given they'd already been breached.

He toned down the chatter of his teammates on the comms, creeping forward. Lance cocked the black bayard, the blue ready to form if he needed it. He listened intently, but not a sound could be heard. Another step forward; Lance fought to keep his heart rate steady, knowing some species were known for hearing one based off that alone. Dead silence. *Fuck this*, Lance thought. Stifling a sigh, he gripped the black bayard and swung soundlessly out into the hall, ready to shoot. Carma or no-Carma, Galra or what-fucking-ever, Lance was sick of things messing with their ship. This thing was going *down*, except-

He blinked, seriously confused now. There was nothing there.

"What?" Lance blurted aloud.

He glanced down at the map projected from his wrist, and sure enough, the red dot showing a heat signature rested just a few metres ahead of him. Except there was nothing- *oh, oh no, oh wait, hang on, there was something there*. Lance walked forward, gun still held out before him. There was *something*. He frowned at the soft buzzing sound, kinda like... kinda like a drone. Like a teeny, tiny, very inconspicuous, and very harmless drone. *What the fuck*. Lance saw it now; it wasn't easy at first, not when you were expecting a full-sized ball of purple fur to be occupying the passage. The heat signature, as it turned out, was nothing more than a bumbling drone, even smaller than Rover had been. It buzzed along awkwardly, throwing red light along the passage as it went. Small, kinda fast, noisy and shiny yet inconspicuous all the same. A bit... Lance swallowed; a bit like a distraction.

"Team," he said. "Something's up. Stay-"

He jumped as Allura's desperate voice pierced the speakers.

*"Hiroshi's gone!"* She cried, voice dissolving into static when it became too pitchy. *"H-he's not here!"*

"What?" Keith practically growled over the comms, shortly before Pidge and Hunk were exclaiming similar things.

*"Something's taken him!"* Allura wailed.



She was probably breaking down on the spot.

“The heat signatures are a ruse,” Lance grit out. “They’re drones. They’re- *fuck*. They’re a distraction.”

“*Where the hell is Hiroshi?*” Keith yelled.

“Everyone, focus on finding him now. The drones...”

Lance swore, slapping a hand against his helmet. *Stupid.*

“Fuck!”

He turned heel, withdrawing the blue bayard on second thoughts to shoot the drone down as a ball of ice. Then he was running. He didn’t know where, but they had to find Hiroshi. They *had* to. Coran was working furiously by searching the castle’s camera’s, trying to latch onto something that wasn’t a drone. God, they could be overrun already, they wouldn’t even know. Lance raced down the hall, working with the others over the comms to determine where they were searching, Allura sounded on the verge of hysterics, but she was racing around just like the rest of them. He could hear Pidge calling out to Hiroshi; it wouldn’t help, but he supposed she probably couldn’t help it.

Lance tore down the hallway, throwing open doors as he went to check inside. Everyone came up empty. The case remained the same from the others, and their cries only grew more frantic. Lance turned fast enough to give himself whiplash when he heard the faint hint of a cry. Heart hammering in his chest, he froze in place, listening out desperately. There, very, very soft, but there was definitely a baby crying.

“I have a lead!” He yelled, then immediately dropped his voice as he sprinted down the hallway leading left.

*To the shuttle bay, his mind provided. Shit.*

“*Get me Lance’s position!*” Allura began screaming to Coran over the comms.

Lance tuned out their voices, listening for the sounds of Hiroshi crying. He was headed in the right direction, the sounds grew surer by the second. What was happening? Was he hurt? Just scared? Who the *hell* had him? Fury spread through Lance’s blood like wild fire. Except it wasn’t, he supposed; as per usual, the ice was so fierce it stung.

Hiroshi’s cries were much louder now, the baby screaming in distress in a way that had Lance’s heart twisting. He was going to kill whoever had him, *kill* them. Allura was practically sobbing over the comms, saying she was on her way towards them. Lance tuned down her voice, not wanting to give the invader any clues of his approach. They ended up a little short of the shuttle bay; Lance turned down a less used hallway, keeping his footsteps as quiet as possible as he ran toward the sound. There were few sounds more distressing than a baby crying like that, especially given how much Hiroshi meant to them all. Lance focused the ice in his veins, drawing both bayards as he neared the end of the hall, where the cries were the loudest.

*I’m coming*, he wished he could say, anything to stop Hiroshi crying like that. The sound was jarring, and Allura could no doubt hear it over the comms. Trying to be stealthy, but not wanting to waste any time, Lance pressed his back to the wall beside an open door. Hiroshi was in there, it was obvious from his cries, but who was with him? Lance took a deep breath, squeezing the bayards tightly before ducking into the room with both weapons raised.

The first thing he took in was Hiroshi. The baby had been deposited on an empty desk within the bare looking room, still swaddled in his blanket but screaming his lungs out. Next was the dark figure looming over him. They stood shorter than Lance, but it was impossible to tell anything else about them, only that they were dressed in a dark, purplish-blue armour and blacked out helmet. That, and that they were standing over the baby, staring down at the screaming infant as if his cries alone might harm them. Lance saw red.

“Get away from him,” he growled, stepping fully into the room and feeling the bayards energise in his hands.

The figure’s head snapped up, and Lance could see himself reflected in their visor. He looked *furious*; even with his own helmet on, he could see the almost feral look in his eyes, teeth bared as he stared them down, the bayards pointed directly at the intruders heart. The figure took a step back from Hiroshi, who continued to scream. Lance fought the instinct telling him to go and scoop the baby up immediately, and instead took another step into the room, forcing the intruder back as he went. Galra? Something else? He couldn’t tell. They weren’t very big; though neither was Keith.

“Who the hell are you-“ Lance began, cut off abruptly when the figure dove forward.

They were so fast he didn’t anticipate the heavy blow to his head, which sent him sprawling across the floor, the blue bayard immediately dislodging from his hand. Lance saw stars for a second, before he registered a weight settling on his chest and flung an arm out to slap the intruder off him. He stumbled a little trying to get up, head throbbing from how hard they’d hit him. He registered a gun being raised toward him, and instinctively raised the black bayard, firing off a haphazard shot as he fought to orientate himself again. The shot hit the opposite wall, but it must have at least grazed his opponent, because he had enough time to right himself again. This time when Lance turned, he was ready.

They held a purple blaster, but after firing a single shot at him and missing, the figure sprinted forward, trying to ram their gun into his head again. Lance blocked the attack with his own bayard, hyper aware of their proximity to Hiroshi. Lance strained against the intruder, a surprising amount of strength stored in their small body as they pressed down with the gun while trying to disarm him. He made the mistake of glancing toward Hiroshi for a second; the baby’s cheeks were wet, a frown on his forehead as he screamed and looked back at Lance with wide, tearful eyes. Something smashed into Lance’s head, and he fell flat onto the floor. He recovered quickly, but the helmet had already been ripped from his head. A solid black visor stared down at Lance, seeming to drink in every aspect of his face.

“No,” they said, very simply.

Lance didn’t very much care what that meant. He snarled, throwing their weight over and switching their positions until he had them pinned with the bayard against the intruders throat. His victory didn’t last; they bucked their hips, throwing him off and gathering themselves up quickly. The pair returned to a fighting stance within seconds, circling each other dangerously. Lance shook his head, trying to shake the humming in his ears at how hard he’d been hit. The intruder spun, kicking out so a foot connected with his stomach, then his jaw. *Oh god*, Lance tasted blood. Lance buckled for a second, wiping the blood off his split lip before ripping the glove from his right hand and turning with renewed vengeance.

A bolt of electricity tore away from his hand, smacking his opponent square in the face. Their helmet sparked, and Lance watched as they tore it from their face desperately. He stood to full height again, clutching his stomach where the nauseating feeling of being kicked was slowly

fading. The figure turned, and Lance took in a plane of smooth, purple skin. It was a woman, a Galra woman, but... not. She was different, somehow. He hadn't actually seen a Galra woman, but something was telling him she wasn't entirely Galra. Smaller, quicker, *smarter*; dark, piercing eyes stared back at him, swimming in faint yellow, but nothing like the glowing eyes of the Galra he'd encountered before. Her ears were pointed sharply, hair a darker purple than her skin, though some kind of ridges poked through, running along her head. She looked furious, *dangerous*, expression all kinds of extreme that he was *sure* he'd seen before.

That was all the time they had to consider each other before they launched themselves into the fight again. She came at Lance with her fists, and he returned the favour. A gloved hand went for his jaw, but Lance caught her fist, twisting her arm until she cried out. He pulled back his other fist and struck. Lance might not have been as quick or even deadly as Keith when they sparred, but he could land a hard punch. The Galra's head snapped back and he heard something crack. She stumbled back, hunched over for just a second before she righted herself, blood dribbling down from her nose and a murderous look in her eyes. *Fuck*, that look was intense.

The woman snarled, raising the gun, and then- she froze. Her eyes were fixed on Lance's exposed hand, no, his wrist. His wrist, where Keith's bandana was tied neatly around the skin. It felt so warm, right now, with the ice pumping through his veins underneath.

"Where did you get that?" The woman hissed, her voice like venom.

And, okay, Lance was not answering that question. He dove forward, raising his hand and feeling his powers spring to life, just in time to put her down- his feet were swept out from him suddenly, and he hit the ground hard. A furious purple mass bore down on him, knees pinning his chest and hands around his throat.

"Where did you get that!" The woman yelled, her fingers digging painfully into his neck.

"It's mine," Lance spat, because he seriously did not want Keith getting involved in whatever the hell this woman was about.

Her eyes searched his desperately for a second before returning to their furious state.

"Liar," she said, squeezing harder, until Lance could begin to feel the effects of her hold.

He tried to shrug her off, but she was strong; inhumanly so. She held him down, fingers around his throat, slowly constricting his airway.

"Tell me!" She snarled, undeterred when Lance freed a hand and tried to shove her off.

"It's mine, you bitch," he wheezed, making a strangled noise as she pressed down harder.

Hiroshi was still screaming where he lay, and Lance wanted desperately to go to him. The black bayard lay just out of reach; the woman kicked it further from his reaching fingers, leaning down as she pressed her weight down, suffocating him.

"Tell me or die," she said.

Okay, she did not have a chill setting, Lance thought, his head pounding. He made one more attempt at throwing her off before falling back, straining for air but finding her fingers were shutting off his airflow. He gasped, thrashing, pulling weakly at her fingers. *Oh great*, he thought, *dying again*. Lance wondered briefly if this could all just be another simulation, but decided against it when a blinding light exploded with the woman above him and she was thrown off. Lance's chest arched as he sucked in air, rolling onto his stomach and retching up nothing. His

throat burned, just one of the many parts of his body that hurt like hell right now.

Lance rolled over enough to see his opponent sprawled across the floor a few feet away, and, *praise the lord*, Keith, standing by the doorway and breathing hard, Lance's bayard in hand. The red paladin walked forward, planting himself between Lance and the intruder, who was getting shakily to her feet. Lance found he couldn't get up just get, laid out on his back and gasping like a fish out of water. Thank god for Keith, alright?

"Who the fuck are you?" Keith spat, as the Galra turned to consider him.

He still had the blue bayard in hand, and if Lance was being completely honest, that was kinda maybe a tiny bit hot. Okay, it was a lot hot, especially when he drew the red bayard in his other hand and stepped a little to the side, so he was protecting both Lance and Hiroshi from the Galra. Figuring he should probably do more than stare though, Lance grasped for a hold on the wall, making his way to his feet as Keith and the Galra continued their showdown. The woman was breathing hard; there was blood all over her face, nicely mirrored on Lance's fist, and an icy tarnish over her chest plate.

"I said who *are* you?" Keith snapped, waving the gun.

The woman just... stared.

"I'll shoot," said Keith. "I'll fucking do it don't *test me!*"

"I wasn't going to hurt him," the woman said, obviously referring to Hiroshi.

Keith scoffed mirthlessly.

"I wasn't," the woman hissed, but her heart wasn't in.

She seemed preoccupied, her eyes just *searching searching searching*.

"Why are you on our ship?" Keith asked, his voice like ice.

The woman said nothing, but flinched a little when Allura slammed into the side of the doorway. Their leader didn't even notice the intruder at first, a short cry tearing from her lips as her eyes landed on Hiroshi. She crossed the room quickly and scooped up her son, who whimpered unhappily into her chest, sobbing. Allura's eyes were glistening with tears, but they grew fierce as they settled on the Galra across the room from the trio. She took up a stance beside Lance, cooing softly to Hiroshi until he stopped screaming and simply sniffled heavily as his mother soothed him.

"Who are you?" Allura hissed, and her tone was finally enough to merit a response.

"My name is Acxa," the woman said tightly, before Keith was leaning forward, squinting.

"I know you," he said, almost accusingly. "You're the Weblum Galra!"

Shock registered on the woman's face- Acxa, Lance remembered. She looked rapidly between the trio.

"What are you doing here?" Allura said, radiating anger.

"I..." the Galra fumbled for words, seemingly lost.

Lance frowned. What the hell was up with this?

“What were you doing with him?” Keith demanded.

“Who do you serve?” Allura asked at the same time.

Acxa’s eyes shifted between them nervously, dark and calculating. Lance didn’t like this, whatever this situation was.

“I’m a Galran high-commander,” she stuttered. “I serve Prince Lotor-“

“Kill her,” said Lance. “I don’t give a fuck who she is.”

“No!” She cried. “I- I *did* serve Prince-“

“Lady, I don’t even know who that is, and frankly, I don’t care. You’re on our ship. Times up.”

Acxa’s face paled, turning a light shade of pink, and she looked frantically to Keith.

“Please-“ she began, but froze when a shrill beep emitted from a device attached to her lip.

She cursed in a language Lance didn’t recognise, and everyone’s eyes were immediately drawn to the device. She glanced up, meeting their eyes almost... apologetically.

“I am sorry for this,” she said.

Then, before Lance could even open his mouth telling Keith to just *shoot*, she pressed a finger to something on her suit and the castle shook as something erupted. They all stumbled as the floor shook, and by the time Lance had gotten a grasp on the situation, Acxa had pushed her way past them and was out in the hall. Lance swore, tearing after her a second after Keith. They emerged in the hall just in time to see her disappearing down the end.

“Don’t come back here!” Keith yelled, obviously aware that they now had something else to deal with beside the intruder.

He took a few useless strides after her, but Lance didn’t miss the way Acxa glanced over her shoulder at them.

“You’ll die here!” Keith shouted after her. “You’ll all die! You can go tell that to your stupid prince!”

He came to a stop, panting, her fading footsteps ringing out in the empty hall. Lance wasn’t sure if the red paladin sounded angry or desperate. The whole situation just felt... off. Keith turned to him, eyes full of questions and concern. Lance shrugged, because honestly, *what?* He flinched as Keith strode toward him, fingers ghosting over the bruises he was sure were forming around his neck. The red paladin wrapped him up in a hug as Allura emerged from the room, cradling Hiroshi tightly and speaking rapidly to the others over the comms.

“No, no we have Hiroshi. But the intruder got away. A Galra, or half at least. I don’t know. It was... we have him back. That’s all that matters for now. She’s left the ship already? Good. Reconvene on the bridge.”

She dropped her hand from her earpiece, looking at Lance and Keith.

“Pidge said the decoy drones were also programmed as mini bombs. No serious damage, but a good getaway. What was that?” She asked, to which they could only shake their heads.

“Weird,” muttered Lance, wincing at the pain he felt speaking.

“We should get you to a pod,” Allura said.

Lance waved her off.

“I’m good,” he said croakily. “We, uh, let’s have a talk. First. Yeah...”

Allura nodded slowly in agreement, slowly rocking Hiroshi, though she was shaking herself.

“Can I?” Keith asked, stepping toward her and holding out arms for the baby.

Allura nodded, carefully transferring the whimpering baby across. It was pretty strange, watching Keith calm a baby. He did it whenever Hiroshi was crying and Allura couldn’t get him to calm down, holding the baby close to his chest and speaking to them softly. Lance watched in a daze as Keith turned with Hiroshi, making his way slowly back up the hall, nuzzling the baby’s hair so that he immediately calmed down. Allura came to stand beside Lance, shaking her head in astonishment, still very much in shock.

“Next he’s gonna start purring,” Lance muttered, earning a snort from Allura.

He sighed, sharing a tired look with her.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” he said, wiping a little blood off his lip.

The princess nodded, casting another look toward the room the fight had taken place in before joining Lance on their way back to the bridge.

-

“What the hell does it all mean?”

Lance heard Pidge’s question, and the seriousness with which she asked it, but could only shrug.

“She just got up and left?” Pidge asked, looking to Coran for answers.

“The video footage show that after the fight she went straight for her ship. It was docked, very expertly, near our hangars. She made herself virtually undetectable.”

“And there was no one else on the castle?” Allura asked, her son asleep in her arms. “Are we sure of this?”

“Absolutely certain, princess,” Coran said with a sigh. “Now that I’ve perused the video footage, it’s clear she was the only one on board. She activated those drones as a distraction, and in the end a way of escape.”

“But *why*?” Pidge asked. “A distraction for what? She took Hiroshi but... didn’t even take him.”

“Yeah,” said Hunk. “She just like, carried him around. She didn’t look like she was planning on hurting him.”

Lance frowned. He was still burning with anger at the idea that anyone would cause Hiroshi any distress, but it was true; he’d seen the footage of Acxa stumbling across Hiroshi as she searched the halls for something. He saw her approach the baby and just kind of stare at him, before picking him up and walking in a bit of a daze toward where they’d found her. She only seemed to set him down in that room because he was crying so much. It didn’t make sense, no matter how you looked at it.

“Where do you think she’s gone?” Pidge asked; she was full of questions today. “To find more Galra?”

Lance felt something uncomfortable uncurl within his gut. The things Acxa had said... what did she *want*? Why had she come, and why alone? Was it possible she was the only person on that ship? They hadn’t seen that ship or any others since she’d raced out of there, giving them no chance to follow. Lance glanced at Keith, who was oddly quiet where he sat beside him. There were dark circles under his eyes, and he rubbed uncomfortably at his arms, as if there was an itch there he couldn’t quite get to. Lance felt his heart clench; the marks, they had to be hurting.

“You okay?” He whispered, as Pidge continued to question Coran.

“Yeah,” Keith said, and nodded shakily. “Just, uh, tired. Y-you know?”

Lance did know; he knew that wasn’t the problem.

“I can help,” he said.

Keith shook his head, and jumped at the opportunity of a distraction when Allura spoke.

“I think we should wormhole out for the day,” the princess said. “In case the Galra return, it shouldn’t look like we’re stuck here.”

“I agree,” said Keith.

He got to his feet, leaning a little too heavily to one side.

“Whatever was up with Acxa, we should do our best to shake her off.”

Allura nodded, handing a sleeping Hiroshi off to Coran as she stood to move toward the controls.

“I’ll move us out,” she said. “We’ll have to come back tonight but... hopefully that will be enough time.”

## Chapter Notes

## WOW WHAT A SEASON

Once again this story is super unlikely to spoil anything from s5 since All Facts Are Different (but I hope that those of you who have seen it enjoyed it!)

Thank you so so much to everyone who left a comment, you guys have a special place in my heart (you have my entire heart, its my whole heart, thanks guys)

## Chapter summary: EMOTIONS

They're a bitch (so is carma)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

**Star date – 33:10:23**

**Castle Cycle – 22:45**

**Log – 36**

*When the log began, Lance looked a lot more withdrawn than he had only two days ago, holding Hiroshi up for the lion to meet. He was still in his armour, had been since that morning, indicating the busyness of the day they'd had. The top half had been shed, leaving him in his flight shirt, bits of armour still clinging to his legs. Lance sighed, running a hand over tired eyes.*

*"Captain's log," he said. "One hundred and fifty-four days left. Whenever you think it's getting better, it's actually getting worse."*

*He stopped a minute, slouching forward so he could fold his arms over the consul. The blood around his lip had been cleared away, but it left a fat, red cut that crept toward his chin. His hair stuck up at all odd angles, and the skin of his neck was dark and bruised from where Acxa had tried to strangle him. He cleared his throat, still a little raspy; it hurt to speak, after all.*

*"Still tryna figure out what the hell happened today," he said finally. "The Galra found us, at least, a Galra found us."*

*He muttered something under his breath, the firm lines of his brow forming something serious. Lance looked older than he had in his first log. He was older, but this was different. He looked stronger in some ways, weaker in others. Wiser and more hopeless all the same. He looked like he'd aged a few months, he looked like he'd been training, fighting, learning. He looked stronger, more frightened, dangerous. But at the centre of it all he was still just kind, and he was still just scared, and he was still just Lance.*

*"We don't know what she'll do," Lance continued. "Don't know if she's gone to fetch backup, or what. We're screwed if she has. But... I don't know. Something about that whole meeting, it just seemed like... she was looking for something, that's for sure. I don't know why she took Hiroshi, or why she... she got so pissy about this."*



*Lance paused, lifting a wrist to wave the banana around it.*

*“Maybe it’s super offence to Galra. Don’t know, am kinda too tired to care. I just didn’t want her messing with Keith.”*

*Lance’s expression fell even more, and he leant his forehead heavily on his hand.*

*“I’m not here to talk about that, though.”*

*He sighed; the air in the cockpit felt so dismal it was suffocating.*

*“I learnt about Carma,” he said. “And Aryon.”*

*Lance pulled himself up, sitting back so he could actually see the screen before him.*

*“I want to know about Callio.”*

*Lance began typing, slow and methodically, his eyes scanning the results that came up. He stopped after a few minutes, squinting at the screen.*

*“There’s not as much stuff,” he announced. “I guess she wasn’t as big of a player? Even if she was the one who got killed first, and all. I guess she’s the root of it.”*

*Lance went silent for a minute, just reading.*

*“Here,” he said after a while, turning the screen for the camera to see.*

*There was a picture of a woman on it, with soft brown skin and greying hair. Another, smaller picture sat beside it, where she looked a lot younger, like a child. She looked a lot healthier as a child. Callio, twin of Carma, wife of Aryon. Lance thought she looked kind. There was a reserved look about her, and Lance guessed she was the quieter of the twins. In the latter picture, she looked into her late teens, early adulthood, perhaps. It was likely different in Altean years, but Lance couldn’t convert all that now. The illness was apparent; it made her look thinner, weaker, darker patches forming along her arms. Lance’s stomach flipped when he realised they looked quite similar to the marks on Keith. Carma couldn’t... actually make him sick? She was possessing him, but if Lance could stop her, rid him of her, he’d... Keith would still have a chance, right? He shook his head, refusing to think of that.*

*“It says she was soft-spoken,” he said quickly, drawing himself back into the present. “A kind, quiet soul, who kept to herself. She... she made things grow.”*

*Lance scoffed, but there was little emotion to it.*

*“Isn’t that ironic,” he muttered. “One twins grows, the other...”*

*He bit his lip, brows furrowing as he read more.*

*“They discovered her sickness at an early age... very rare... incurable... looks like her and Carma probably got on pretty well before she infected her sister. Well, allegedly. It’s unlikely she actually infected Carma; it was probably just a genetic thing, there already.”*

*Lance sighed, scrolling until a new picture appeared. It was of the sisters, Carma and Callio. Lance couldn’t tell exactly what was happening, it looked like the picture had been taken without their permission, as they were involved in what look like a tense conversation. Both women’s head were turned slightly toward the camera, as if just spotting the photographer, and both looked*

*somewhat alarmed. They were dressed in what Lance could guess was the attire of Altea at the time. The Victorian era, but Altean. Dresses that were kinda puffy, kinda scruffy, weird looking boots, weird looking architecture. It looked like Carma was clutching a basket of herbs, but oh, her hands. They were littered with dark blotches, like those all over Callio's arms. Lance stared at the picture for a long while.*

*"Doesn't say too much," he said. "She met Aryon when they were still kids, got married eventually. It... god. I'm sorry this happened to you," he whispered, looking at Callio and her soft smile, oblivious to all the pain that would one day befall her.*

*"I..." Lance shook his head, closing down the screen. "I'm going to bed."*

*He glanced at the time and stood from his seat, giving Black's consul a fond pat.*

*"Better go check on Allura," he said. "She'll be wormholding us back to the dark system soon. I, uh... hope the Galra aren't there."*

*Lance yawned before reaching out to the recording.*

*"See ya, Black," he mumbled, and shut it off.*

-

Lance arrived on the bridge after midnight, aching tired, but aware he should check up on Allura first. Had to make sure they wormholed alright, after all. It was quiet in the castle, most of the others already asleep. Lance made his way into the room, eyes tracking the various star charts glowing dimly in the dark. The lights were mostly off, a few here and there to provide just enough to see by. Lance noticed why after just a moment.

Allura was curled up on the floor by the window, her hair swept over her shoulder as she rocked the baby sleeping in her arms. Lance made his way over quietly, sitting down beside her without a word. Allura didn't look up, but acknowledged his presence with a small hum. She looked... very tired. Hiroshi was peacefully asleep, bundled in her arms and lulled by her heartbeat.

"Gonna open the wormhole soon?" Lance asked.

Allura sighed.

"Yes. I won't let her use him to open it."

Lance hummed in agreement, looking at the sleeping baby. They sat in comfortable silence and let the minutes pass, until Lance noticed the tension in Allura's shoulders, and the small shake as she breathed in deep.

"Shiro's dead, isn't he?" She asked.

Lance felt his heart drop. Allura sighed, tilting her head to the stars and the dark, dark beyond, her eyes glistening. She sounded so heavy-hearted; the anticipation of the battle had defeated her before it had even begun.

"No," Lance said softly. "I don't think he is."

Allura smiled, but it was devastating.

"It's been months," she whispered.

“Maybe,” Lance said. “But Allura, there’s *hope*.”

“There’s Carma,” she said. “There’s Carma, and she... she takes, and she takes. She’ll take us, eventually, like she did him. And I’m... I just wish he’d-“

Allura’s breath caught, and she pressed her lips to Hiroshi’s head, tears seeping from her eyes.

“He’s alone,” she said. “He died alone, or he... he’s alone. And I’m not. And I just wish he *knew*.”

Lance laid a hand on her shoulder as the princess curled in on herself, crying silently.

“Allura...” he trailed off.

She took a deep breath, gazing down at Hiroshi.

“Go to sleep, Lance,” she said. “You need to rest.”

“You do too-“

“Lance,” said Allura.

She met his eye. Hers were wet with tears, but she smiled at him anyway.

“I know you want to help. But you need to rest. And I... I need to be alone. With him.”

She hugged Hiroshi a little closer.

“I just need to be with him. Okay?”

Lance ached to hug her, or offer some words of support; hell, he could probably even pull off a joke if it meant cheering Allura up. But...

“Okay,” he said softly. “But you... you come get me if you need me. You know where I am, I’m here for you, okay?”

Allura nodded, biting her lips as she tried to stop the tears falling. Lance squeezed her shoulder, tears forming in his own eyes.

“Night,” he whispered, giving Hiroshi a fond look before standing.

Allura spared him one more brief, tearful smile, before turning back to her son and the stars. Lance left the room quietly, his heart aching. Surely he could help more, surely he could... do what? Bring Shiro back? Allura needed alone time, and unless he could solve the problem at it’s root, there wasn’t anything he could do. That thought made Lance sick.

Exhaustion weighed him down heavily as he made his way back to his room, feet dragging, blinking away the waves of sleepiness that overtook him. God, what would it be like to feel free again? Everything just felt so dismal that evening. The world was cold, *he* felt cold, and dejected, and hopeless. Like he was sinking into a substance he couldn’t control. He didn’t like the feel of it.

The door slid open to their room and he padded in quietly, expecting Keith to already be asleep. Instead, the bed was empty, and a slither of light escaped from under the bathroom door. Lance sighed. It was gonna be one of those nights. One of the nights Keith couldn’t sleep because whatever the hell Carma was doing to him hurt, where he’d argue with Lance for hours because he thought it somehow put a strain on the storm paladin to ease his pain. Rubbing at his eyes, Lance walked toward the bathroom and knocked quietly.

“Keith?”

There was no response, just a slight scuffle and a muffled sound, like somehow was trying to disguise the fact that they were crying. Lance clenched his hands into fists, anger at Carma and sympathy for Keith eating at him.

“I’m coming in, okay?”

Instead of waiting for a response he knew would be something along the lines of *no I’m fine don’t come in sorry I’ll be out in a minute*, Lance pressed his hand to the scanner and let himself in, crumbling at the sight of Keith curled up on the floor.

“Keith...” he whispered, chest tightening.

The red paladin had pushed himself into the corner, his face streaked with tears as he curled fingers into his arms, rubbing and scratching at the black bruises all over his skin. He choked a little when he saw Lance, desperation budding in his glistening eyes. Lance’s heart broke in about a hundred different ways at the absolutely shattered sound that escaped Keith’s lips, and at the sight of him twisting uncomfortably on the floor as if nothing he did could relieve the pain.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled, struggling to speak around the tears. “I’m sorry, it h-hurts.”

Lance’s expression crumpled, and he dropped to his knees before Keith, eyes wide with concern.

“It’s okay,” he whispered, reaching out to Keith’s trembling hand.

He wouldn’t stop *moving*. He ran hands over his arms, pulling at his shirt, digging into his neck, chasing a burn that was impossible to catch. He was hurting, deep within, his legs kicking erratically at each other, heel digging into the dark bruise up his calf. There was a fire burning in his blood, searing his veins and blackening the planes of his skin.

“Hey,” Lance said gently, not even sure where to *begin*.

Keith had gotten bad before, but this was different. This looked a whole lot worse.

“Keith.”

Keith twist his hand out of Lance’s when he made to take it. The latter frowned, grabbing Keith’s wrist more firmly.

“No, no, it burns,” Keith mumbled, shaking his head.

He looked feverish, a sheen of sweat clinging to his skin, flushed red despite the sickly aura cast by the bruises.

“It hurts,” Keith repeated, his words all slurring together as if he was drunk. “Hurts so much, h... it hurts.”

“I know,” Lance said, Keith’s words tugging at his heartstrings. “I know, I’m gonna help, okay?”

A stuttered sob tore away from Keith’s lips and he whined, squeezing his eyes shut and digging nails into his arms.

“Hurts,” he stammered. “Please, p-please, I can’t... I-“

“Okay, you’re gonna be okay. Hey, can you look at me?”

Lance leant down, trying to tilt Keith's chin toward him, but the other shook him off. Lance reached desperately for his powers, building them up. The state Keith was in was tearing him apart.

"Keith, stop moving, you're making it worse."

Keith didn't hear him, or just ignored him, wincing as he jerked his head to the side and twisting as if something was eating him from the inside out. Hands came up to his shoulders but they struggled to remain as Keith tossed and turned.

"Keith," Lance tried again, feeling ice beginning to form in his fingertips. "Keith, love, stop moving. Stop, you're making it worse."

Keith whined at the contact, trying to shrink away from Lance's hands as they held his shoulders still. He kicked out weakly, doing little to discourage Lance, who just took a hold of his wrists and pulled them back gently so Keith would stop hurting himself.

"It hurts," he whined, still fighting, still trying to wriggle away.

"I know," Lance said.

And he did, he could see on his face how much Keith was hurting.

"I know."

Again, softer. *I know*. He pressed closer, lifting Keith's wrists and placing them around his own shoulders.

"Come on," he said. "Hold onto me. It's alright, you won't hurt me. Just hold on. Stop hurting yourself, it's gonna be fine, I promise."

Keith grit his teeth, trying to catch the pathetic sound that tumbled out as he dug his nails in. Okay, it didn't kinda hurt, but it was *nothing* compared to what Keith was feeling. With Keith's hands occupied, Lance let go, wrapping an arm around his back and pulling the other to him. Keith fought against him, trying weakly to escape, too feverish and confused to realise he was literally clinging to Lance's shoulders all the while.

"It's okay, you're gonna be alright," Lance whispered close to him, running a hand over Keith's back.

He could feel the fight in his body as it debated pushing closer or tearing itself away. Lance shut his eyes as Keith cried into his shirt. He hated this. Hated that there wasn't an ounce of strength left in the other, hated how he cried and fought and shook even though he had nothing left to give. This was Carma, this is what Carma did. Lance pushed aside the hateful thoughts in favour of ones of love. Soothing, calm. He held Keith close, whispering soft encouragements into his hair as his other hand slipped beneath his shirt and settled over his heart. Lance felt carefully for his pulse, more with his powers than his actual touch, running a finger gently over the skin before he was sure he had a hold on Keith's pulse. The boy in his arms whimpered, clinging tightly to Lance but trying to kick him away.

"You're okay," Lance whispered. "You're okay, I know, *I know*."

He squeezed Keith tight, fingers resting directly over his heart, and summoned all the cold energy within him.

*Lance thought of rain, the smell of it, the feel of it hitting his skin. He pictured stormy nights, the*

*bank of clouds pulling in, heavy and grey and somehow magnificent. And oh, those nights were soothing. He could hear the insects chirping, signalling the arrival of the storm, their wings beating excitedly as it all drew closer. The clouds bulged, their grey bodies filled with water, spreading across the earth. The thunder sounded, far away still, but on it's way. The wind changed, the air grew cool, and a weight settled but it wasn't suffocating. Lightning lit the far away clouds like fireworks exploding in celebration. And then, finally, the rain.*

*It fell gently, drop by drop at first. Lance breathed it in. It started as a soft patter against the roads, bouncing off the tops of lampposts with a soft ping, making the light they cast waver as it filled the air like a silent swarm of insects. Drop after drop, each like a fallen angel, the last of its light captured in the shine of all it reflected before it plunged to earth. It grew harder, heavy, rapping its knuckles against the rooftops, painting the windows in greeting. The leaves on the trees bowed before it, streams of water dripping off the foliage, feeding the sodden earth. The concrete grew darker, the insects buzzed from beneath the leaves they took shelter under. The fields were still and silent as the rain washed over them, battering the plants lightly, like excitable children, knocking into their parents legs in their rush to reach the yard. Lance breathed, and the rain breathed with him. It grew cold against his skin, and he grew colder still. He took it, all of it, all his memories of rain and storms and love, and poured it into Keith.*

Keith shuddered, like a heavy weight had been yanked from his chest. He caved into Lance as he gasped for air, the cold spreading from the hand on his chest all across him, over his skin, into his blood. His body stopped fighting, his legs stopped kicking, the hand squeezed around Lance's shoulders went slack. Lance held him up, bracing an arm around his back and feeding cold into his body. Lance wasn't sure the other was entirely conscious. The arm slipped from around his neck, Keith's head knocking back into the wall. He was still struggling for breath, except it wasn't so much a struggle as it was a recovery. He calmed down slowly, his breathing becoming less ragged as he discovered he could do so without his lungs burning. The hand against the floor reached clumsily for Lance, brushing over his hair before it fell to the floor again.

Keith's skin was still feverish. Lance pressed lips to his neck and Keith melted in his arms. There was a slight wheeze in his chest and his limbs were close to useless, but he managed to smush his face against Lance's bicep. Keith sighed, the long, drawn out sort, which quivered so much it devolved into a whimper. They stayed like that, in the silence, listening to Keith's breathing return to normal. Lance shifted slightly, and a desperate, broken noise tore away from Keith.

"Please," he tried, but Lance felt the words mouthed against his arm more than he heard them. "Please--"

"I'm not leaving," Lance said quickly, pulling him in tighter. "I'm not going anywhere, shh, it's alright."

He did need to get them off the bathroom floor however. Lance struggled to stand, especially with Keith hanging awkwardly from his arms. The other clung to him like a vice; he doubted he could shake Keith if he tried. The red paladin began to protest as he got them on their feet, dragging them both toward the door. Lance kept him wrapped in his arms though, whispering small words of encouragement when Keith stumbled over his feet, failing to find his footing. Lance practically carried them back into the room and dropped them both onto the bed. He pulled back for a totalled two seconds, enough to pull his and Keith's shirts off, before he pulled the other back toward him.

Keith's skin was dangerously warm, but whatever Lance was doing was definitely helping. He lay back, pulling Keith onto his chest so they could just lie there with as much of their body's touches as possible. Keith sniffled, drawing his limbs together, hiding as much of himself as he could in the space between them.

“You’re alright,” Lance whispered.

It may have been more of a reassurance to himself, he supposed.

Keith sighed deeply, his limbs lacking any energy. He went down easily, resting his head below Lance’s chin and breathing in time with him. They stayed like that; Lance put his arms around Keith’s back, Keith found the strength to tuck his against Lance’s sides. A hand found its way into Keith’s hair, massaging his scalp, and he was asleep within seconds. His breathing stayed a little uneven, like he was still coming down from a hard fight, all the tension and pain that had been building up for weeks finally leaving his body. Lance let himself cry a little, running hands over Keith’s back, his arms, though his hair, along his sides, desperate to keep the pain at bay. Keith sighed softly in his sleep, pressing himself closer to Lance, trying to feel as much of his as possible. It was like everything, every feeling, had just deserted him. It had all been too much, and now, nothing. And for the while, that was perfect.

Lance fell asleep to the sound of Keith breathing, their bodies locked together as the dark system pressed in against the ship. The fever in Keith’s body died down the longer Lance held him, and if he felt a little warmer in his own skin because of it? Well, he guessed that was just kind of what love felt like.

-

Lance came to slowly the next morning. There was something about using his powers for healing that left him in a state of calm. Fewer dreams, fewer nerves; it was as if healing someone else put himself in place. Especially Keith. Feeling him slowly calm down over the course of about an hour had brought some peace to Lance as well. He hesitated to think of all the pain Keith had been in prior to being discovered, when he’d been curled up on the bathroom floor in agony, the marks on his skin acting up more than they ever had.

Lance stretched, a little miffed that Keith wasn’t clinging to him in his sleep like he usually was, especially after a rough night. He stretched out an arm over the sheets in search of Keith, too sleepy to bother opening his eyes. Lance frowned when he felt a cold, empty space in the bed beside him. Sitting up felt like a chore, and the castle’s soft morning hue was still a little bright for his eyes, but Lance powered through. He rubbed at his eyes groggily before they raked the room in search of Keith.

He stopped after a few seconds; Keith was standing at the end of their bed, near the wall. Lance blinked. He’d removed his shirt. Out of bed, no shirt... a knife.

Lance snapped awake fully, ripping the sheet off him with his heart thumping hard as hell in his chest. Keith was awake but Keith was *not* himself.

“Keith-“

Lance could barely *speak*. Panic shot through him, electrifying his nerves that screamed to be called to attention this early in the morning. God, his head was throbbing, tiredness clinging to him and making him clumsy, despite the terror now coursing through him. Keith’s Marmoran dagger was dangling from his fingers, tracing feather light patterns over his exposed stomach. Lance felt dizzy.

“Keith,” he said.

Dark eyes with milky irises rose to meet his own, their pace slow and unhurried. The dagger dragged dangerously across Keith’s skin.

“Please,” said Lance, still trying to get a hold on the situation.

It felt like the floor was shifting beneath him, because Carma had Keith and Keith had a knife that he was dangerously close to using on himself.

“Carma,” Lance stuttered. “Please.”

Keith’s lip quirked a little, but it was wrong, it wasn’t Keith enough. The white mist in his eyes solidified as he looked at Lance and the tip of the dagger pressed just below his ribs.

“Hello Lance,” he said.

*She said.* Because it was Keith’s voice but wrong, so wrong. The usual pitch of Keith’s voice was warm and deep, with all the right hitches and accent and movement that made Lance feel safe. This just made his skin crawl.

“Carma,” he repeated.

He kept stammering, edging slowly out of bed until he was standing, the backs of his knees pressed against the mattress because if he got any closer she’d-

“Please,” Lance said, and he raised his hands. “Don’t hurt him.”

Keith dropped his gaze again, and although it was a relief not to have those inverted eyes staring into him, it was worse to see him watching the progress of the knife. It drew sure lines over his skin, as if mapping all the ways he’d carve himself up. One second, that’s all it would take for Keith to plunge that thing into his own heart. And if Carma had access to that boy’s skill with a knife? He wouldn’t miss.

“Please don’t hurt him, I... I’ll do anything, just don’t, p-please, Carma, don’t-“

Keith cut Lance off by speaking over him, the latter’s words dissolving into an emotional mess.

“He knows a lot of things,” Keith said. “He’s so good for you.”

He was; Carma was right. Keith was the only thing that kept Lance sane sometimes.

“Don’t kill him,” he said.

It was probably the worst thing he could do, plead with something that wanted nothing but to cause him pain. But Lance couldn’t help it, because what else could he do?

“I will do *anything*, don’t hurt him. Don’t-“

“He keeps making the wrong choice,” said Keith, and if Lance could believe any of it, he almost sounded *wistful*.

Wistful, and angry. Lance swallowed thickly, desperately looking for a way out. He couldn’t harm Carma, not like this, he’d just be hurting Keith. But if he did nothing, Keith was likely to finish with a knife in his heart, and that... that couldn’t happen. His eyes darted briefly from Keith, searching the room for something, a distraction, a weapon, he didn’t know. Lance raised his hands a little higher in surrender to disguise the tiny step he took forward. There was about four metres between them, maybe enough to make if it he was fast, but... But if he didn’t Keith was as good as dead.

“What do you want?” Lance pleaded, because there had to be something.



“You know what I want.”

The knife traced a neat line right across his stomach.

“I want you to suffer,” said Keith, *said Carma*. “I want him.”

The knife pointed inwards, its tip pinned to the beginnings on an old scar on Keith’s torso. Lance’s breath caught as it was pressed a little deeper, until he saw a bead of red blossoming at the tip.

“Stop!”

Lance winced as the word left his mouth, and Keith’s eyes turned to him, a cruel flicker within them.

“Desperation,” he said. “Kills us very easily.”

“Why are you doing this?” Lance blurted, because try as he might he felt nothing but desperation. “Why?”

Keith’s lip quirked, and he cocked his head a little, the movement too sloppy to be one of Keith’s own.

“Desperation,” he said, with a sharp kind of smirk that Lance didn’t like at all.

“He’s not- he’s not part of it.” The storm paladin insisted. “Keith isn’t... please-“

“No one is innocent,” Keith said suddenly, and his gaze fell back to the knife.

He dragged it slowly across the pale skin, riddled with marks of Carma’s own creation.

“No one is blameless,” he said, and his voice fell to a whisper on the last words.

“Not Carma.”

Lance inched forward another step. He could feel the change in the air, the finality with which Keith spoke.

“Not Aryon.”

Keith paused, his lips curling. Lance’s eyes widened, the knife stilled, and he knew what would happen by the end of Keith’s lips slowly forming the last two words.

"Not..."

*Callio.*

But the name never made it past his lips. Because the knife came down. And Lance screamed.

He lunged the same time the knife found its position. He collided with Keith as the knife came down, a deadly bit of strength in it as Keith tried to plunge it into his own stomach. They hit the floor, Lance and Keith, Carma, the knife. The knife wielding hand was smacked away from Keith’s flesh on their descent. The boy screamed; pinned beneath Lance he began to thrash wildly, fighting the weight on top of him and the arm pinning his wrist to the floor.

One arm broke free and went for Lance’s face, where it gripped his jaw and tried to force his head away. Lance fought back, countering all the moves. Keith tried to throw him off, grappled at his

face to twist his neck. Gritting his teeth, Lance tore one hand away from the wrist holding the knife and ripped Keith's other away from his face. Keith bucked his hips, freed a leg, and kneed him in the side hard enough to make Lance shout. The hand holding the dagger escaped his hold, and Lance lunged for it, jamming an arm underneath Keith's to block the blade as it turned toward the red paladin's chest. It was one thing to stop someone stabbing you; stopping them stabbing themselves was a whole other matter.

"Keith!" Lance yelled, before a fist connected with his face.

Lance flexed his jaw; he could taste blood, but adrenaline sidelined the pain in favour of pouring his attention into stopping Keith letting that blade pierce his skin.

"Keith!"

*Again*; because Keith had gotten out of these things himself before. Except this was different, because this was worse and this time the marks had played up so, so much beforehand. Lance cursed himself; *why didn't you guess this would happen?*

"Keith, stop!"

Lance stashed his words as Keith yanked the knife toward himself, the blade begging to sink into the exposed skin over his ribs. Lance held on for dear life, pulling back as forcefully as Keith was dragging the blade toward himself. If Keith won out... Lance screamed in the hopes someone would hear as the knife edged closer, hanging in a deadly equilibrium between them. Lance's arms were burning with the effort; Keith might be smaller and weaker due to illness, but he was still Galra, a fact which was not working well in Lance's favour. He watched in terror as their tangled hands were dragged lower, the knife locked in Keith's grip coming ever closer to reaching him.

"Stop! Keith, *STOP!*"

Even with Lance kneeling over him and trapping much of his body, Keith still appeared to have the upper hand. There was a determined, lethal look on his face, and a sharp smirk underneath, which made Lance was to cry. He wouldn't meet Lance's eye; Carma's fierce white eyes were fixed on the knife as Keith dragged in closer to himself. Those eyes grew wider, more eager, as the blade hovered just above his skin.

"Please!"

Lance pulled back on Keith's hands with all his strength, but the knife didn't budge. He was going to put it right through his chest.

"Stop!" Lance was screaming now, anger and desperation in his voice. "*STOP!*"

The tip of the dagger met Keith's skin; the red paladin arched into it, forcing the blade into his flesh and Lance snapped. *Stop*; he didn't care how he stopped Keith, or what it meant for them. *Stop stop stop*. That word didn't even mean anything to him, it was more of a feeling. He had to stop Keith, stop this, *stop, freeze, end it-*

Lance released Keith's hand.

*Stop. Lightning split a tree in two, the flood drowned the shrubs growing along the canyon floor.*

Something flickered in Carma's eyes; *victory*.

*A tidal wave tore trees from the sand, thunder shattered the tranquillity of twilight, the lake froze*

*over, then the hills, the leaves, all of it solidifying into ice. Everything, life, it froze.*

The chill flooded Lance's veins. His fingers touched Keith's chest, the knife pressed deeper, all in the space of one fraction of a second. *The land froze over. The lightning struck. And everything, all of it, stopped.*

Keith slumped back against the floor. His hands fell from around the dagger, which clattered to his chest. Lance froze with his fingers poised above the red paladin's chest, breathing hard. He waited; Keith's eyes had rolled back, shut. A small puncture seeped blood above his ribs, but it wasn't deep enough to be fatal. His skin was pale and blotched with dark bruises, his fingers curled toward his palms, and he was motionless.

Lance's hand was bleeding from where he'd grabbed the dagger, and his skin stung with cold. The patch of skin where he'd touched Keith was red, and, when he felt it, frigid.

"Keith," he said.

The other lay completely still, not a flicker of movement.

"Keith," Lance repeated.

He was breathing hard, and Keith... Keith wasn't breathing. Lance lay a hand over his chest. It didn't rise or fall; his skin was as cold as winter in the deepest north. A hand found Keith's pulse point, his neck, then his wrist, and a strangled sound escaped Lance when he couldn't feel any.

"Keith?"

Louder, he was frantic now.

"Keith!"

Hands shook the red paladin's shoulders, but his head lolled sideways. Lifeless. A desperate, choked noise tore away from Lance, and he shook Keith harder.

"Keith- h... help!"

Lance was up; he ran for the door, slamming a hand into the alarm to activate it before returning to Keith and lifting the red paladin up. The siren was already blaring through the halls, but Lance called for the others anyway.

"Help!"

He got them out the door, Keith hanging limply from his arms. The hallways were empty; it was still early. Lance began running in the direction of the med-bay with Keith's deadweight in his hold.

"*HELP!*"

A head of orange hair skidded to a stop before them at the end of the hall, and Lance sobbed.

"Coran! Help, help him, h-help--"

Their advisors eyes widening as Lance fell to the floor before him, Keith dropping limply with him.

"He's not breathing!" Lance yelled. "I-I- Carma was- I shocked him to stop her a-and now he's

not-“

“That’s enough,” Coran said firmly, sensing Lance was spiralling.

He crouched down before the pair, eyes raking over Keith’s lifeless body, a little bloodied up from the wound on his chest.

“M-make him breath,” Lance pleaded. “O-or get him to a healing pod, please, please, I... oh *god*.”

Coran ran a hand up Keith arm and across his chest, flinching at the feel of his cold skin. Lance was falling to tears above him, his hands gripping Keith’s so tightly his knuckles had gone white.

“Please-“

“Hush, boy. A healing pod won’t do him any good.”

A cry nearly bubbled out of Lance, but Coran held up a finger.

“You did this?”

“Yes.”

Coran nodded slowly, eyes settling on Keith’s face.

“You did this, you can fix it.”

“How?” Lance sobbed, grabbing for Keith’s shoulders so he could pull his lifeless body closer.

“You... stopped his heart. You can start it.”

“W-what?”

“Your powers, they’ve stopped his heart, whatever you did can be undone, but only by you-“

“I don’t know,” Lance wailed. “I don’t know how, I-I- please, please help, help him, help-“

“Lance!”

The boy startled, looking at Coran through wide, teary eyes. Their advisor fixed him with a firm look.

“Lance,” he repeated, more orderly. “Focus. You destroy things, *and* you heal them. You can undo this.”

Lance stared at him for an extended moment, tears dripping off his chin, but no fresh ones falling.

“I... can?”

“Yes.”

Coran looked like he was being swamped by equal parts pity and frustration.

“Lance. Focus, my boy, and you can do it.”

Lance looked like he’d been dragged kicking and screaming and crying from one of his worse dreams, but he nodded hastily at Coran’s insistence. He fumbled clumsily with Keith for a moment, before pulling the other’s head into his lap and leaning their foreheads together. His

shoulders were shaking, that much was apparent to Coran. The elderly Altean watched in abject terror as Lance cupped his boyfriend's face in his hands and shut his eyes, fingers twitching as he tried to summon the frightening power in his blood. A gasp from the end of the hallway alerted them to Pidge's presence.

"Keith!"

She rushed forward, dropping to her knees before the pair of paladins and looking to Coran for an explanation since Lance was ignoring all those around him.

"What happened?" Pidge asked, taking Keith's hand in her own and gasping at the chill radiating off his skin.

Coran shook his head slowly, eyeing Lance as the boy began whispering to himself through clenched teeth.

"Carma..."

"Carma what?" Pidge demanded.

She looked at Lance, to he and Keith's foreheads pressed together.

"What did she do?"

"Possessed him," Coran said.

He considered urging Pidge away from the pair, lest Lance's powers get a little out of hand, but the girl stayed put. Their advisor cleared his throat, meeting the green paladin's eye.

"Lance stopped her, but has somehow in the process, stopped Keith's heart."

Pidge's face paled. She whipped back to Keith, gripping his hand in both of hers.

"He's dead?"

Her voice broke on the last syllable, and this time the question was directed at Lance. Lance, who ignored her. One of his hands was cupping Keith's cheek, keeping their faces aligned, while the other had drifted to Keith's chest to rest above his heart. Furious whispers poured from his lips; whether he was pleading with Keith or talking himself up remained a mystery, Pidge couldn't understand a word. She pressed a hand over her mouth, holding back any noises as she looked down at Keith's face, his unnaturally pale skin and lax expression.

Lance shut out the others presence from his mind, focusing only on Keith. Lance couldn't tell if Keith's skin was warming or he was growing colder, but he suspected the latter. The lack of pulse beneath his fingers sent terror roaring through his veins. Lance screwed his eyes shut tighter, conjuring up what he knew of healing. This was different to the others times he'd taken pain from Keith, this was trying to give him something back. Lance didn't know what he was meant to do. He just needed him to *breathe*. Needed to heal him, to fix what he'd broken, what he'd hurt, everything, everything that was *wrong*-

*Lance didn't like the park at the end of their block. He didn't like the block itself, nor the city, nor its people. But the park was bigger than the room he shared with two of his siblings in their crowded apartment, and he needed space to breathe. So there he was, twelve years old, sat on the molding bench shoved under the weak shade of an oak tree whose bark was riddled with crude graffiti. A fat raindrop landed on the knee of his pants, the leaves slowly filtering out the rain that*

*fell around him. It soaked the brown sand that made the playground, balanced atop the rusting swing set and streaked down the metal of the faded blue slide.*

*Lance sniffled. He was trying not to cry; he was too old for that, and if any of the guys patrolling the block saw him crying they'd be sure to give him hell for it. Lance could do without being labelled that kid. He tugged at the sleeves of his jacket, shrinking into himself to hide from the chill in the air. It must be close to sunset now; he couldn't tell, the sky was shrouded in grey storm clouds, slowly leaking rain. He felt lonely, a kid too gangly for his own good, in hand-me-down clothes and his brother's jacket, a slight gap in his teeth and cropped hair.*

*There was a woman struggling over the low wooden fence encasing the park, and Lance's heart jumped when he realised it was his mother. He ducked his head, hoping she wouldn't see him. It was no use; he knew Lily had probably told her where he was after he'd stormed out of their apartment. The rain was just starting to pick up, and he watched as Susanna made her way toward him, squinting through the drizzle and pulling her jersey tighter around her shoulders. She was still dressed in her uniform, her cleaner's slacks and sneakers ill adapted for the rain. She'd probably had a shitty day, she was probably there to yell at him. Lance shrunk into himself, hunching his shoulders and glaring at his scuffed shoes.*

*He didn't look up, not when his mother found her way into the shelter beneath the oak tree, or when she sighed deeply, taking in the sight of her son. He probably looked pathetic. He could sense her standing before him even before her shoes crept into his line of vision. For a moment, neither said anything.*

*"It's cold out here. Come, let's go."*

*Lance bit his lip. His mother usually spoke English to them now, she said they needed to learn, now that they were here. He didn't like it, she had always sounded so beautiful speaking their language, why should she stop?*

*"Lance," Susanna warned.*

*Lance shoved his hands deeper into his pockets, shivering, but too stubborn to admit he was cold.*

*"Come, I need to make dinner."*

*"Then go make dinner," Lance snapped, immediately biting his tongue.*

*He was sure to hear it for that; he sounded irritable, and knew that comment was undeserved. Susanna was silent for a moment, studying her son.*

*"Lance."*

*That was the final warning. Lance felt tears welling in his eyes, but he blinked them away furiously.*

*"I don't want to go back," he bit out, trying to mask the quiver in his voice. "I'm staying here."*

*"You're going to get sick. Look, you're all wet."*

*"Good."*

*"Good?"*

*"I hope I get sick."*

*Lance glanced up quickly, and regretted it. Susanna was looking down on him with a cool anger in her eyes; she'd had a long day, a fussy twelve year old was the last thing she needed. His mother sighed.*

*"Why do you want to get sick?"*

*"Don't have to go to stupid school," Lance muttered.*

*Susanna sighed again and tilted her face to the sky. The clouds were growing darker, the air murky, signalling the evening drawing in. Her son ducked his head, hiding his face from her. With a resigned breath, Susanna went to sit beside him on the bench, grimacing at the damp seat. She huffed unhappily as she sat down, her pants instantly soaked.*

*"What's wrong?"*

*"Nothing."*

*"Lance, did you have a bad day at school?"*

*"No."*

*Susanna raised a brow at him, but her expression was softening.*

*"I thought you made a friend. What was his name? The strong boy?"*

*"Hunk," Lance mumbled. "He wasn't at school."*

*"So, did you not make other friends?"*

*Lance bit his lip, fingers digging into his jacket.*

*"They make fun of how I speak."*

*"You'll sound like them soon."*

*"I don't want to," the boy snapped.*

*Susanna gazed at him sadly, her hands resting idly in her lap as the water soaked through their clothes.*

*"I know."*

*Lance raised his head, and she startled a little at the furious look on his face. It was wrong, that look on him, on happy-go-lucky Lance.*

*"Then why did we come here," he said accusingly.*

*Susanna frowned. "You know why, mijo."*

*Lance scoffed, turning from her angrily.*

*"Hey," his mother snapped. "You know why, Lance. Your brothers and sisters, they are finding it difficult too, but we-"*

*"Then why did we come here, mama!"*

*There were tears in Lance's eyes but he was refusing to cry, trying to be the man he thought he*

*should be, like his brother, like the other boy's who came to this park when the raining wasn't falling.*

*"Lance..."*

*"I hate it," Lance snapped, raising his voice. "I hate it! I want to go back!"*

*Susanna's expression grew tight.*

*"What do you hate?"*

*"Everything!"*

*"You cannot hate everything. Tell me, specifically."*

*Lance made an angered noise, shoving his palms into his eyes to stop the tears.*

*"I want to see my friends," he snapped. "I don't like the kids here, and they don't like me."*

*Lance rubbed harshly at his eyes; he knew what he expected his mother to say. Maybe because you're not trying to befriend them. Susanna was kind, but she took no nonsense. A mother of six, turned five, she had no leeway, she had no option but to be firm.*

*"What else?" She said, instead.*

*Lance ground his teeth together, the heel of his palms digging in harder, tilting his head back to stop the flow of tears.*

*"I don't know," he whined.*

*"You do know," said Susanna. "Else you wouldn't be crying."*

*"I'm not crying!"*

*"Lance, what else?"*

*"I hate our stupid apartment," he yelled. "I h-hate our stupid neighbours. And I hate... I hate this city. I hate the air, mama, it feels wrong, it..."*

*Lance stopped, sucking in a stuttering breath and drawing his legs in to shield his body. Susanna watched him, listening, as each word grew more honest, and more open. Lance was trying so hard not to cry, his fingers curling into the roots of his hair and tugging hard.*

*"The sea is so far away, mama, its so far, and its so crowded, and I hate it-"*

*"We can visit the sea, mijo. On the weekend, we can take the bus-"*

*"It's not the same!" Lance yelled. "A-and we can't take the bus, because you'll be busy with your-your stupid job, a-and Lily won't even want to go-"*

*"Lance..."*

*"I don't want to go!" Lance balled his fists, glaring at his mother. "I don't want to go to that s-stupid sea, it's not right, and everything... e-everything is wrong."*

*Susanna's lips formed a thin line, the hands in her lap itching to wipe away the stray tear that*



*escaped her son's eye. Lance almost slapped the tear away before she had the chance, stormy blue eyes pleading with her to do something, please, just do something.*

*"I hate this country," Lance choked out. "And I hate papi, and I want to go home."*

*His voice broke around that word. Home. Susanna sniffled sharply, and her hand flew to her mouth at the hiccup of emotion that overwhelmed her at the expression on her son's face.*

*"I want to go home," Lance repeated.*

*This time his voice wavered. His face screwed up, still fighting the tears.*

*"I hate it here," he said, choking on the words. "I-I'm sorry, mama, I'm so sorry, I c-can't like it, I don't want to be here, please-"*

*"Lance-"*

*Susanna's hand found its way to his cheek, tilting his chin as concerned eyes looked over his face. Lance took a huge, stuttering breath, trying to hold it all in. It was eating at him; he was practically bursting at the seams with all the ill feelings inside of him.*

*"Lance," she repeated, softly, and his face crumpled.*

*"I miss home," he wailed, digging his nails into the rotting wood of the bench in an attempt to quell the tears. "I want to go home, p-please-"*

*Susanna pulled him to her, cradling his head in her hands as Lance gripped her jersey, grinding his teeth together anxiously.*

*"Come on," she said, pulling gently at his arms to get him to stand with her.*

*Lance shook his head against her chest, digging his fingers into her sweater.*

*"No," he mumbled. "I d-don't want to go back-"*

*"Sh, mijo, we're not going anywhere, just stand up."*

*Susanna managed to coax them both up, mostly because Lance was expending most of his energy trying not to cry.*

*"Come on, just a few steps."*

*Lance sniffled, his head hidden against her chest as Susanna walked them awkwardly out from the cover of the oak tree, into the rain. Lance shivered when the rain hit his skin, but didn't pull away. He bunched both hands in his mother's jersey and held tight, shaking with all the effort it took not to cry. Susana wrapped her arms around him, holding him close and resting her chin on his head.*

*"What are you doing, mama?" Lance mumbled, as she rocked them back and forth in the rain.*

*Susanna hummed, tilting her head to the sky and letting the raindrops fall against her cheeks.*

*"The rain calms you down," she said.*

*"What?" Came the muffled response.*

*"I did this when you were a baby," she murmured.*

*Lance shifted against her, tilting his head to catch his mother's eye.*

*"What do you mean?"*

*Susanna ran a hand over his hair, gazing at her son for a second before pulling him in close, swaying the pair slowly.*

*"I thought you would hate storms," she said softly. "When you were a baby you would always cry when it started raining."*

*Lance said nothing, but she took that as him wanting to know more.*

*"I thought the sound of it must have been frightening you. Allita would be sleeping soundly beside you, but as soon as the rain or thunder started, you'd start wailing."*

*Susanna hugged Lance a little closer as he flinched at the mention of his dead sister.*

*"Shh," she whispered. "Your papi and I didn't know what to do. We'd try and make it quiet for you, tried taking you somewhere you couldn't hear the rain, but you would just cry more."*

*Susanna huffed fondly at the memory, shaking her head.*

*"And one day I just gave up, and walked outside with you. You... felt the rain. We were both there, just you and me, standing in it, and you stopped crying. Completely, just sudden silence, and you didn't start again."*

*Lance shifted so his head was against her shoulder, and Susanna knew he was watching her. She smiled, very faintly.*

*"It calmed you down completely. And I... I thought to myself, that maybe you'd been crying, because they whole time you wanted this. You wanted to be in the rain. Your father didn't understand; he thought we were mad, just standing out there for hours."*

*Susanna chuckled to herself, glancing down to catch Lance looking at her. She squeezed him tighter, feeling pity at his tearful eyes, refusing to give in and just cry.*

*"And we would stay for hours. Storms became my favourite part of any day, because you and me, we could bond. You were so little, and I just wanted to hold you forever. Sometimes you would fall asleep out there, or you would just look at me, and look at the rain. I never... you looked so peaceful, mijo. My baby boy, who only cried because he wanted to know what the rain was."*

*Susanna sighed deeply, stroking Lance's hair. His lip was trembling.*

*"Cry all you want, Alejandro, it's okay."*

*Lance bit his lip harder, and Susanna's brow furrowed.*

*"I know you miss home," she said. "And you think you are so, so far away from it."*

*A thumb wiped away the first wave of tears that fell.*

*"But Earth is your home, Lance. And I know that Cuba is special-" Susanna paused, her own voice wavering for a moment. "But we are still home. There is still the ocean, a little further away, but it's there. And the rain..."*

*Lance sniffled, his fingers tightening in her jersey.*

*"I'm sorry I didn't follow her, mama," he spluttered. "I'm sorry."*

*Susanna gave in, her expression dissolving into pity and pain.*

*"No," she whispered, caressing his cheek. "No, baby."*

*A hiccup of a sob shook Lance's chest, and tears filled Susanna's eyes.*

*"If you followed her, Lance, I would have lost you both."*

*Susanna shook her head; just imagining the possibility was too much for her.*

*"I can't lose you, mijo. I need you. You are our little Lance, my... my baby boy, who... who cries when he cannot feel the rain..."*

*Susanna stifled her small sob with her sleeve, returning the hand to Lance's hair as he began to cry.*

*"You will be okay, Lance," she whispered. "Just cry."*

*A small, very hurt noise escaped him, and Susanna hugged him tighter.*

*"Cry," she said. "It's alright."*

*The small body huddled against her chest began to shake, Lance's hands gripping his mother's shirt tightly as he reluctantly let himself cry. There was comfort in the way she held him, and comfort in the rain. Warmth from his mother, cold from the downpour. It created a kind of safety he was sure of, and that he did not take for granted. He buried his head in his chest and cried, the arms encircling him holding him through it, and the rain from above washing over his skin. Susanna sighed, shutting her eyes.*

*"The rain calmed you," she said. "It fixed whatever was hurting you, it always has."*

*Lance cried harder, rain soaking his hair. It felt like he could breathe again.*

*"I never wanted to take you back inside," his mother said. "Because even after the rain stopped, you'd have this peaceful look about you."*

*She sniffled, tucking her face into his hair. "Like you could breathe again, Lance. Like everything you'd been holding in was gone. And... and you were free."*

*Lance felt that, then. He leant into his mother, into the safety of her arms and the warmth and the familiar smell of her jersey, and felt the rain falling gently over them. He knew this feeling, he'd known it since he was a baby.*

*"You could breathe," Susanna whispered, and her voice was as soft and as soothing as the rain. "So just breathe."*

*Just breathe.*

*Lance shut his eyes, and held tight to his mother. He shut his eyes, and let the rain wash the worries from his skin. He knew this feeling.*

*Breathe.*

*The body in his arms heaved as someone drew a strangled breath of air. Lance startled, his eyes*

flying open. There were bright lights dancing in his vision, and voices all around him. Every sense was assaulted, confused, but in his arms he held a living, breathing body. Keith blinked up at him, gasping for air, his fingers twitching against the floor. He was reeling, reaching confusedly for Lance as he pulled more air into his lungs. His skin was cold, the cut on his chest leaked more blood, but he was breathing. Lance cried.

Keith's body was weak and disorientated; he flailed against the floor as Lance yanked him up into his arms, wrapping himself around Keith tightly. Pidge was beside them, crying, Coran resting a hand over his own heart as the two boys embraced.

"Lance?" Keith croaked out.

All Lance could answer with was a drawn out sob. He clutched at Keith desperately, almost crushing him, gathering as much of the red paladin as he could into his arms and holding him. He could feel Keith's heart beating hard and fast against his ribs, blood pulsing through his veins, his fingers gathering enough co-ordination to curl around Lance's shoulders. *Alive alive alive*. Lance laughed aloud, the sound choked and awkward, but god, it was genuine.

Coran sat back on his heels, muttering off some choice phrases in Altean as Lance finally pulled back to look at Keith, being sure to support him as he ran hands over his face and neck.

"I think we ought to get you two somewhere where you can actually sit," their advisor stated.

Keith blinked at him, still bleary and confused.

"What... happened?" He asked.

Lance shook his head, tilting Keith's chin back toward him so he could study his face. Coran sighed.

"I'll fetch Allura," he said. "I believe there's something that needs to be done."

## Chapter End Notes

At this stage I feel like I genuinely owe Lance an apology for making him carry so many people? They're heavy bro

## Chapter Notes

Thanks for being patient for this chapter guys! Its uh,,,,,,,,, the longest one yet  
Thank you so so much to everyone who left a comment! I love them <3

Summary??

Keith.

Hope you love him as much as I do cause its, 100% Keith.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

The air in the common room that morning was filled with equal parts relief and tension. Keith smiled gratefully and accepted the warm mug Hunk offered him, before the latter moved to take his seat across from them. Lance sat clutching Keith's free hand, bumping his knees nervously. Allura and Coran were seated on the adjacent couch, the former frowning at the paladins around her thoughtfully.

"How are you feeling?" She asked.

Keith glanced up at the question.

"Fine," he said honestly. "I'm... just a bit cold, I guess."

"I can get you another blanket-" Hunk began, but Keith waved him off.

He gestured to the one over his shoulders, the fifth to have been lumped onto him over the past ten minutes.

"I think I'm good, thanks."

"Just say if you need more though," said Pidge.

She was beside Hunk, with Hiroshi lying in her lap and peering up at her curiously. He blinked confusedly as Pidge plonked her own glasses over his eyes.

"I'm certainly glad you're alright," Allura continued. "You really scared us."

Keith averted his eyes, fingers tightening in Lance's hold.

"I'm sorry-"

"It's definitely not something you should apologise for," Allura said quickly.

She sighed, glancing at Coran.

"We... uh. We have something we'd like to discuss, though. Coran, would you?"

“Oh, certainly.”

Their advisor stood up, reconsidered his decision, and sat back down.

“Er, Keith,” he began. “We don’t think you can live with Carma inside you for that much longer.”

Lance flinched. Keith’s body grew tense, but he looked... almost resigned.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “I know.”

Lance looked frantically between him and the two Alteans, squeezing his boyfriend’s hand.

“But you’re gonna live,” he said quickly. “We can do things to help, c... can’t we?”

Allura and Coran shared a look.

“We *can*,” said Lance.

“Possibly,” said Coran.

“*Possibly?*”

Coran looked to Allura for permission, and she nodded in return.

“I...” their advisor sighed, smoothing over his moustache before continuing. “Lance possesses the ability to override Carma’s influence.”

“Well, yeah,” said Pidge. “But then she just comes back. Or Keith like, nearly dies.”

“Exactly,” said Coran. “Lance can beat Carma, but he’s shooting blind. Of course you run the risk of hurting Keith, in fact, it would be impossible not to. They share a body and consciousness now, while Lance is trying to pick apart who to attack and who to defend without being able to see the line of difference.”

“What are you suggesting,” Pidge asked, sounding dubious.

“He needs to see Carma,” Coran said simply.

“Wha-“

“Of course!” Hunk said suddenly. “Oh, it makes so much sense.”

“What does?” Lance demanded.

“You gotta get inside his head, man,” Hunk said excitedly.

Keith was frowning. “Uh...”

“Do you remember one of the first training exercises you all completed as a team,” Allura asked. “The mind-meld, where you were exposed to each other’s thoughts?”

“Yeah,” said Keith, slowly starting to catch on.

“You want us to mind-meld?” Lance asked.

“Sort of. More than that. We’ll need the lions.”

Allura was looking far more enthusiastic now, as if she really believed her idea would work.

“The blue lion,” she said. “That’s the one you both have a connection to.”

“How do I have a connection to the blue lion?” Keith asked.

“You *found* her,” Lance said suddenly.

“I mean, I guess...”

“The lions are incredibly powerful,” Allura said. “As we’ve been shown, they can project past memories, return you to parts of your mind, project those things to you. Including the blue lion in your mind-meld will, well, I hope at least, give Lance a clear view of your memories, Keith.”

“My... memories?” The red paladin asked, looking a little sceptical.

“You mind,” Allura corrected. “Which at present, you share with Carma. If Lance could have sight into that, he could... it’s possible he could eradicate Carma from you for good. Better to have her confined to her own planet, rather than one of our paladins, don’t you think?”

“I mean... I guess,” said Keith.

“It could work,” Coran announced happily.

“Could, or will?” Lance asked.

The Alteans shared another look.

“It’s dangerous to attempt,” Allura explained. “I don’t... I don’t know what you’ll see, if anything. If... I don’t know what Carma will do once she discovers what you’re attempting, to you or Keith. It... you yourself are dangerous, Lance. I know you’d never willingly hurt anyone, but just earlier, we... unless you are certain of what you are doing, you could end up killing Keith instead of expelling Carma from his mind.”

The storm paladin’s face paled.

“We have to try though.” Said Keith. “If we don’t, I die, right?”

Coran glanced at his feet, as if it pained him to admit.

“I... we believe so, my boy. Yes. You are growing weaker, and she is growing stronger.”

“She said you were making the wrong choice,” Lance whispered.

Keith’s head snapped to him. “What?”

“She... when she was in control, she said you were making the wrong choice. That no one was innocent. Of... of Carma, Callio, and Aryn. I don’t know what that means but... she was done keeping you alive, Keith.”

The red paladin was silent, watching him. The others all considered this anxiously.

“I, um, believe that settles it,” said Allura. “We should attempt to rid Keith of Carma. For good, this time.”

They didn't get down to it right away. Lance spent the entire day thinking and rethinking their decision. It was dangerous, what they were attempting. He could kill Keith, or Carma could lose her shit in the middle of it and kill them both. On the other hand... On the other hand, Keith was going to die. Carma's attempt on his life that morning was the start to many, Lance knew. She was done with him being there as an aid, and for that reason, or perhaps some others, Keith's life wasn't of value anymore.

Lance shuddered. A hand settled over his.

"You're thinking very loudly," said Keith.

Lance raised his head. Keith was seated opposite him on the floor of the blue lion, their knees pressed together as Coran shuffled about around them, setting things up.

"This could kill you," Lance said quietly.

Keith gazed back at him, clearly concerned but also determined.

"There's not really another option," he said.

Lance squeezed his hands.

"I trust you," said Keith.

"Doesn't matter, if I mess it up--"

"Lance. I trust you."

Keith was staring at him intently.

"Keith..."

"All set!" Coran announced suddenly, making them jump.

Their advisor crouched down beside them, adjusting the mind-meld devices on their heads that were hooked up to Blue's consul with a few complicated crossings of wires that kinda had Lance worried.

"How are you both feeling?" Coran asked.

Lance just nodded, not sure if he could manage speaking.

"It doesn't like this," Keith said. "Carma."

Lance frowned.

"Good," said Coran. "That means it may work."

He stood, double-checking Blue's connections before backing off toward the doorway.

"Why'd you always call her *it*?" Lance asked, but Coran interrupted before Keith could answer.

"I doubt its safe for me to remain in here," he said, glancing around the cockpit. "But yell extra hard if you need anything."

Lance found he still couldn't respond, but Keith nodded kindly at Coran.



“Thanks,” he said.

“I’ll be right outside,” the Altean said, watching them fearfully.

“We’ll be fine,” said Keith.

He squeezed Lance’s hands, and the storm paladin managed a nod. With that, Coran backed out of the room, his footsteps echoing down the ramp before Blue closed her mouth and shut them in. Keith let go a shaky breath.

“If I start to hurt you-“

“Then you hurt me,” said Lance. “We’re not stopping until both of us can walk out of this alive and well. Yeah?”

Keith looked a bit stunned, but nodded nevertheless.

“I’m sorry though,” he said. “If... I don’t know what you’ll see, or what she’s going to do, with... with all of us in my mind. If she hurts you, if *I* hurt-“

“Hey,” Lance interrupted.

He offered Keith a timid smile.

“Let’s save apologies until after we’ve kicked Carma out. Yeah?”

Keith returned the smile. “Yeah.”

Lance lay his forearms over his folded legs, palms up; an offering. Taking extra care with his injured hand, Keith rested his hands over Lance’s, until they were gripping each other’s wrists. They stayed like that for a minute, refusing to look each other in the eye. Lance drew a sharp breath, and Keith gave in. He yanked the storm paladin into a tight hug, and they clung to each other like life depended upon it. It hurt to let go again, to return to how they were before with only their knees and hands touching. Lance tucked a loose strand of hair behind Keith’s ear.

“I trust you,” the red paladin repeated, his eyes fixed on their entwined hands.

“I love you,” said Lance, his heart swelling at the flicker of hope on Keith’s face.

“Ready?” He asked.

Keith shook his head. Yes. Lance nodded, curling his fingers around Keith’s wrists and shutting his eyes. He tried to remember what the first mind-meld between the team had been like, although he suspected this would be a little different. *Keep your minds open*, Coran had instructed. Lance did just that, opening his mind to Keith, until a swell of dizziness and darkness overtook them both.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

When the light finally cleared from Lance's eyes, he was standing in a classroom. He frowned, blinking away blinding strips of sunlight, his vision swimming a little, like the world he was in was nothing but water, and he was suspended in it. Sounds reached his ears slowly, like honey, but eventually the fog began to clear, the tide pulling out and leaving in its wake an untarnished shore.

Lance was definitely in a classroom. Little wooden desks surrounded him, each with a young student seated behind them. A bookshelf was pushed against the wall and drawings decorated the walls. Sunlight streamed in through the wooden shutters, and powdered chalk hung in the air around a black board. Lance felt incredibly out of place standing there, and he jumped when someone spoke.

"We have a new student in our class today--"

His head whipped forward, to the teacher standing at the front of the classroom, a round, middle-aged woman with blonde ringlets of hair. She was staring right at him. Lance's voice caught.

"Why don't you introduce yourself, honey?"

Except... she wasn't looking at him, but through him. Lance's knees hit the desk behind him, and he turned, just as a mop of dark hair shot out of the seat. He blinked, stunned, because-

"My name is Keith Kogane," the kid drawled, and Lance nearly clutched his sides, doubled over, and *laughed*.

Cause no way, *that* was Keith? The dorky looking kid with a bowl cut and a gap in his teeth, dressed in a shirt two sizes too big and a bright, beaming smile on his face? Oh my god, that was Keith. Lance stared, rooted in place. Keith only looked about five, but going off the other kids in the class he was actually probably six or seven, just small. It looked like a first grade classroom.

"Hi, Keith," the class drawled in unison, much to their teachers delight.

"Want to tell the class something about yourself, Keith?" She asked.

"Um..." Keith thought for a second, before his face lit up. "My mom's an astronaut!"

A few kids perked up at that, and their teacher nodded happily.

"That's pretty cool," she said. "What mission is she on?"

"None," Keith announced cheerfully. "She disappeared in space."

Their teacher's mouth formed a perfect 'o', and she frowned. A few of the students looked to her as if seeking affirmation.

"Okay, honey," she said. "But there aren't any astronauts missing in space."

Keith shrugged, like he'd heard this all before.

"It's a secret mission," he said. "But she's coming back."

Their teacher looked flustered, putout by that statement.

"I... I'm sure she is," she settled on, nodding to Keith for him to sit down.

Keith took his seat, grabbing a crayon off his desk and scribbling away on the sheet of paper while he swung his legs. He looked so... Lance swallowed. He looked happy. Like nothing bad had ever happened to him, and he didn't think it ever would. Lance crouched down before the desk as their teacher began speaking, welcoming them all into the classroom and asking them to show folders with their spelling practice. He waved a hand in front of Keith's face, but the child remained oblivious. He couldn't see him, then; of course, this wasn't real, this was a memory.

His purpose there struck Lance, and he stood, searching the classroom. *Carma*. If he was here, surely she was too. Nothing seemed out of place. It was ideal, in fact. A sunny classroom, somewhere warm, where the teacher spoke in a honey-sweet voice and the kids all listened. What the hell happened, Lance wanted to ask. How the hell did a happy kid like Keith end up in his current situation?

A slight breeze drifted in from the hallway, knocking the open door against its stopper. Lance's eyes drifted toward the door, and whatever lay beyond. Sparing one more glance toward little Keith, he made his way slowly across the classroom, winding his way around desks he doubted he could touch anyway. He came to a stand still in the hall. There was a sign on the door that read *First Grade*, as he'd suspected, and around it were stickers of bees and flowers, and a label with the teacher's name. The breeze tickled Lance's ankles, and he followed it as it carried along the

school's worn floorboards, the wood creaking beneath his feet as he made his way down the hall. It was a small, country school. The next classroom held a handful of slightly older children, and down the end of the hall he could see another door leading outside.

Lance followed the passage to the end, coming to a standstill above three wooden steps that lead to a little fenced off yard. A set of swings, a tree; the ground was a dustbowl from where children had run around playing. A truck trundled past on the main road about fifty yards past the fence, but that was the only road he could see. There were out in the country somewhere, where the air was warm and dry, and heat radiated off the yellow earth in waves. It was fairly quiet, the peaceful, farm-like quiet, where all he could hear was a single pigeon cooing, or a passing truck, or a cow, or the chatter of children from within the nearest classroom.

Lance turned back inside, making his way slowly back up the hall. This was Keith's life, a memory of it. What was he meant to do with that? What did Carma have to do with that? He neared the classroom again, wondering what it all meant. Lance paused a few feet from the door. The chatter, it was gone. He listened intently, but even a classroom of well-behaved children weren't that silent. Lance closed the gap in a few short steps, ducking into the classroom and stopping dead when he saw there was no one there. No students, no teacher, no Keith. He searched the room, but there was no trace of them. A crayon lay discarded on Keith's desk, and the paper he'd been drawing on fluttered as the breeze found its way inside. Lance made toward it, snatching the paper up. There was only one drawing on it, a dark circle, the crayon leaving an endless trail of lines that solidified into one: the gaping maw of the dark planet.

The paper fell from his hands as he dashed back out of the classroom, calling Keith's name throughout the empty hallway. The other classrooms were empty now, as was the yard. Lance ran back along the passage and out the front entrance, which lead to a small parking lot, completely empty.

"Keith!" He yelled, but his voice sounded meaningless here.

The sun beat down, blinding him. He could smell pollen in the air, and taste the dust that rose off the earth, dry as a bone.

"Keith!"

Fields rode on the backs of low hills, stretching into the horizon, but there wasn't a person in sight. Lance turned circles, his feet never disturbing the dust.

"Keith?"

The wind picked up, a crow called from the rooftop. Lance felt sweat beading on his forehead. It was dead, this memory, this place. It just felt dead. Lance turned and slammed into something, like a brick wall, except this one let him in, pushing him through like he was being forced to walk through honey. He reached out, temporarily blinded, stumbling when he was released into something else; *a new memory*. It was the school again; he was inside, in a section he hadn't seen before.

"I cannot advise you to pull him from the school."

Lance turned circles, taking in his surroundings. They were in a waiting room, he and Keith. Keith looked much the same as before, except it definitely wasn't the same day. He wore a jacket now, and the windows were all shut, a strong wind howling through the gaps in the pane.

"I'll do what I damn please, he's my kid."

“Keith has really settled here. He’s making friends, he’s a smart child, I don’t understand why you’d remove him from the school.”

They were in a waiting room, that much was apparent. A secretary sat behind a desk near the door, tapping away at her computer. Keith fiddled with his hands in his lap, seated on the bench just outside the principle’s office. Lance risked a look inside. The principle was a kind looking woman, with large spectacles and a firm stance, even if she seemed quite young. The man across from her looked shockingly similar to Keith; his father, Lance realised. He was dressed in a tattered winter coat, his hands bunched in fists and an unnerving look in his eyes. He hadn’t shaved for days; he looked tired, and stressed.

“*Look*,” the man bit out. “It’s a family matter. It ain’t up to you whether or not he shows up to school, I just thought I’d do you the favour of letting you know.”

The principle drew back a little, clearly uncomfortable.

“We care a lot about our students here, Mr Kogane, if it’s a financial matter-“

“I said it’s a family matter,” Keith’s father snapped. “End of story. I’m taking him out of school and I don’t want none of you phoning me up every day like you did last time! You can mind your business on this personal matter, or I will be removing him from this institution for good.”

With that his father stood, glaring down Keith’s principle as she glared back, and began marching towards them.

“Keith,” he snapped. “Come on, we’re going.”

The boy stood automatically, stumbling after his father as he made his way toward the door.

“Keith-“

The principle caught herself, gazing at the child with concern, her fingers playing nervously along the doorframe. The secretary raised her head, alerted by all the action. Keith’s father yanked the door open, holding it that way and gesturing for Keith to get a move on. He hesitated, tripping over his feet as he looked at the principle. Her brow furrowed, but she didn’t say anything, just shared a long look with the secretary as Keith followed his father out the door. Lance slipped through before it shut, racing after the pair as Keith’s father marched quickly toward their car. The wind was howling outside, bitter and cold. Keith fumbled for the handle on the truck, clambering into the backseat, where boxes of all sorts of things took up most of the space. Lance leapt in beside him before he could shut the door, deeply confused and even more concerned. Keith pressed his nose to the glass as his father revved up the engine and pulled out of the parking bay.

“Papa, why can’t I go to school?” He asked, watching the building retreat from view as they pulled onto the main road.

“That school’s no good,” he father replied gruffly.

“But I like Mrs Stella, and she said that on Friday-“

“You’re not going back to that school, Keith.”

His father was watching him through the rear-view mirror, his shoulders deflating a little as his son slumped back against his seat.

“Don’t look so down, kid. We’re gonna put you in a better school.”

“Don’t want another school,” Keith mumbled to himself, finally taking note of all their belongings crammed into the truck with them.

“Where are we going?” He asked.

“We’re moving.”

“*What?* What about our house, papa, what- what about- did you bring-”

“He’s in the red bag,” his father said, resigned.

Keith lunged across the seat, his hand going right through Lance as he grabbed for the red duffle bag and tore it open. He calmed down once his fingers closed around a tattered teddy bear, drawing the animal onto his lap and hugging it. Lance’s heart skipped a beat; there was a red bandana tied off around the teddy bear’s neck, the same one Lance wore around his wrist, with its little inscribing of *A.K.* It really did mean a lot to Keith.

“But where are we going?” Keith asked, as their car sped along the highway.

“Someplace,” his father replied.

Their eyes met through the rear-view mirror again, and this time the elder man smiled kindly.

“You were born there.”

“Really?”

“Mm. Don’t worry, okay kiddo? It’ll be fine.”

Keith gazed out at the passing landscape, hugging the bear tightly.

“Okay,” he murmured.

Lance looked between Keith and his father, confused. They were moving? Where; out to that shack in the desert? He released then how little he really knew of Keith’s life. He was an orphan, or so they suspected, what else? What happened between then and now that turned Keith from a happy kid into the distrustful, lonely, tempered person he was today. Lance gazed at him sadly, at the boy who would one day grow up to be someone he loved dearly, and grew fearful. It had to happen, obviously. Everything that happened to Keith *had* to happen, but looking at his younger self and the innocent way he viewed the world, Lance couldn’t bare to think about it.

They both turned their attention forward as Keith’s dad slowed down, pulling the car into a gas station.

“Stay in the car,” he instructed, before hopping out.

His father paused by the door a moment, before sticking his head back in and pseudo whispering, “and which candy bar do you want?”

Keith’s cheeks sprouted dimples as he smiled.

“Peanut butter one,” he mumbled, and his dad shot him a wink.

The door slammed shut, and Keith stayed obediently in his seat. His father trudged off toward the station, shoving his hands into his pockets to escape the bitter cold. Lance stilled. Something had changed, like the atmosphere. Like the school, when all the classrooms had fallen silent. *Carma.*

This was her game then, hide in his memories, wait for the opportune moment to steal Keith away from him. Lance twisted in his seat, trying to shield Keith though he knew it was useless. He couldn't spot where his dad had gone to; the gas station was empty, as was the road. There was a small forest to the other side of the road that Lance's eyes were drawn to.

Making the decision, he climbed from the car, finding he drifted through the walls easily, like a ghost might. His feet made no sound as he walked across the gravel, casting looks back over his shoulder to Keith in the truck. The forest seemed to be calling to him; if Carma was anywhere, it was there. Lance reached the line of trees, his eyes scanning the dark forest for signs of movement. He didn't even know what he was looking for, only that he wanted to intercept it before it got to Keith.

A change in the wind, a whisper of a cry; Lance knew what had happened before he even looked.

The car door was open. Keith's bear lay on the gravel, and he was nowhere to be seen. Lance swore, sprinting back toward the car and searching all around it though he knew it was hopeless. He ran fingers through his hair, the cold wind picking up. He was alone again. No people, no Keith. Another dead memory. Carma had another piece of him. Lance didn't need to look to know the world was changing around him again.

The air was hotter again, humid. There were curtains drawn over the windows, heavy black cloth that blocked out the light, so only slithers of the golden morning spilled in from underneath. They were in the desert shack, Lance knew immediately. Keith was asleep on the couch, his blanket tossed on the floor and body covered in a layer of sweat. The air was stiff and muggy, and the living room a mess of paper and homemade machinery.

Keith still looked roughly the same, maybe a few months older than the first time Lance had seen him. His hair was a little messier, and he still had his bear and bandana. Lance wondered carefully around the room. The kitchen was small and cluttered, as was the bedroom. Various newspaper clippings were pinned to the walls, and there was no one else home. Lance turned back to Keith, and found the boy was awake.

He blinked blearily, before getting up and wondering around the house. He returned to the same spot when he found his father wasn't there. Confused, Keith checked his bedroom again, before wondering out onto the porch. Lance followed him. His father's boots weren't by their usual place by the door, but his car was still parked a little down the hill on the gravel road. That was weird.

"Papa?"

Keith voice was carried away by the wind. He hugged himself, eyes scanning the far horizon. Lance felt something tighten in his chest; he thought he knew what this was. Keith's eyes fell to the sand that the porch steps lead into; there were footprints leading away from the shack. He began to follow them, Lance trailing after him like a ghost. They continued out for about a hundred metres, then stopped abruptly. Keith came to a halt just before them, as did Lance. Together, they stared at the final set of footprints. The trail led all the way from the house and then just... stopped. Lance frowned. Keith looked down at the footsteps and the undisturbed sand just in front of them, then squinted up at the sky. It was as if his father had just vanished off the face of the Earth.

"Papa?" he called.

No one answered but the wind, long and lonesome. Keith sat down next to the footprints, eyes searching the sky and sand alike. He began to draw little patterns in the sand, glancing up every now and then to see if his father had returned. This world... there was nothing. Lance crouched down before him, gazing at the brave face Keith was putting up. He was so, so young. A crow

flapped its wings and he glanced up, but that's all it was. Lance's heart broke.

He sat down heavily in the sand beside Keith, gazing out at the horizon with him. He didn't think he'd ever felt so lonely. Keith didn't cry though. He stayed there, obedient, silent, drawing in the sand or gazing up at the sky. The sun cast shadows that moved as it floated across the sky, and Keith remained. The sun began to set, and Lance wiped at the tears that spilt from his eyes. Keith fell asleep eventually, curled up in a ball on the sand and shivering lightly. Lance wished he could throw a blanket over him, carry him back to the shack, but his fingers passed through things like air.

He stayed with Keith, growing sadder by the minute, until the call of the shack became too much. He could leave Keith, go to the shack, try and find Carma. But he knew the second he left, the boy would disappear. Lance sniffled, tugging his legs toward him. It was easy to get lost out here in Keith's memories. They clung to one, became one.

Lance stood, shivering in the cool desert air. The moon was bright above them, even if the stars had become a little obscured by the clouds. He tried again to pick Keith up, but his fingers grasped at nothing. Relenting, Lance began walking toward the shack. The doorway was dark, and the sand followed him in on the breeze. He stood in the empty living room, waiting. Shadows wound around him, some darker than others, and the hairs rose on the back of his neck. Lance turned in a circle, trying to keep his eyes on the shifting shadows. Whispers came to him, soft as the night. He waited, ready to strike. A shadow slunk past him, over his shoulder, and out the door.

Lance cried out, but it was too late. He raced to the porch, down the steps and across the sand to where Keith was sleeping. But he wasn't there. Smaller footsteps had begun making their way back toward the shack, but stopped just like his father's had. Lance sunk to his knees, staring at the patch of sand where Keith's footsteps just stopped. Gone, again. He gripped his hair as the world shifted.

They were in another car. The memories bled together nicely like that. Keith was huddled up in the back, shrinking into the flaking leather seat and clutching his bear. He looked about seven. Lance flinched as the yelling from the front seat continued.

"He's a damn *kid*, Charlie!"

A woman in her late thirties was berating the driver, a man of similar age who was already starting to bald. She waved her hands around, her nails a shocking red and a denim jacket clinging to her shoulders. Her husband, most likely, kept his eyes on the road, angrily gesturing when their argument grew more intense.

"He ain't right!"

Lance flinched along with Keith, who was covering his ears as his caretakers yelled at each other. The world outside was a mass of thick fog, the road barely visible as their headlights scoured the damp tar. It looked close to twilight, and Lance caught sight of pine trees fading in and out of the fog, their needles and deep green interiors beckoning.

"He's your godson," the woman snapped. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I don't care what he is," the man behind the wheel growled. "That kids messed up in the head. There's something inhuman about him, Patty, you *seen* his eyes. They were yellow, they were *glowing*."

"You're being stupid!" Patty yelled, and Keith whimpered.



Lance wished he could wrap the child in his arms and hide him from the world.

“First his mother vanishes,” Keith’s godfather muttered. “Then his father. I’m not waiting around for the same to happen to us.”

“He’s a child,” Patty pleaded. “You can’t just put him out-“

“There’s something wrong with that kid, I see it, you can see, looking in his eyes.”

Charlie gestured roughly to his own eyes, knuckles gripping the wheel tightly.

“Charlie-“

Patty’s next plea was cut off as Charlie swerved sharply and pulled the car onto the gravel lining the roadside.

“Charlie,” she said, sounding exasperated.

But he was up. He slammed his door roughly, stomping around to the other side of the car and flinging Keith’s door open.

“Come on,” he snapped. “Out.”

Lance tried to shield Keith, putting his body between them, but the man’s hand slipped right through him as he grabbed the child’s arm and dragged the crying boy from the car.

“Come one!” He shouted, yanking Keith out so he stumbled across the gravel.

The jacket on his shoulders didn’t seem enough to hold back the chill in the air, and the only other thing Keith had was his teddy bear with its precious bandana. Another door slammed as Patty jumped out.

“Charlie!” She yelled. “Charlie, stop it!”

“Get back in the car!” Her husband yelled, pulling Keith away from the vehicle, into the wispy grass just before the line of pines.

“I said get back in the fucking car!”

He raised his voice and Patty stilled, rolling her eyes before stepping back and waiting by her door.

“Now you listen here, kid,” Charlie growled, crouching down in front of Keith, his large form intimidating to the child.

Lance wanted to tear him to pieces, but all he could do was watch as Keith tried to shrink away from his godfather, held in place by the hand on his shoulder.

“You stay right here,” Charlie hissed. “Got it? I don’t want you following us. Anyone finds you, and you don’t mention my name. You don’t tell them nothing about us. If you do, I’ll come back, and I’ll kill you.”

Tears filled Keith eyes and he whimpered, lips trembling. He cried when Charlie shook him.

“Charlie!” Patty yelled, but he ignored her.

“Got it?” He demanded.

Keith nodded frantically, pulling the teddy to his chest. Charlie stood, pushing the child back with a soft shove before stalking toward the car.

“Charlie...” Patty complained, her eyes flitting to Keith on the roadside.

“Get in the car,” he muttered.

“You can’t just *leave* him-“

“Get in!” Charlie yelled, frantic now.

He glanced hurriedly over his shoulders before slamming the door shut and starting up the engine. Keith stood in stunned silence for a moment before he realised what was happening. When he did, he started running for the car, taking his bear with him.

“Patty!” He yelled, and the woman spared him a glance from within the car, her brows furrowed. “Wait!”

Lance followed hopelessly, hatred and anger and despair burning inside him.

“Wait!” Keith yelled.

The car jerked forward, kicking up gravel as it skidded back onto the road. Keith stumbled after it, tears streaming from his eyes.

“Don’t go!”

Charlie revved the engine, and tires screeched on the tar as the car took off quickly, speeding down the road.

“Wait!” Keith screamed. “Come back!”

The fog closed around him, the brake lights dissolving into the gloom as the sounds of the engine grew fainter. Keith kept running, his little feet stumbling over the tar as he cried for them.

“Come back! Patty! *COME BACK!*”

The lights vanished, and the engine’s stutter faded away. Keith came to a stop, tears dripping off his chin.

“Come b-back,” he wailed, fists bunching around the bear.

Lance watched in horror as the child came to realise what had happened; they weren’t returning. Keith’s face screwed up and he began to cry bitterly, little sobs shaking his chest as he stood by himself in the middle of the road. Lance crouched down before him, well aware that Keith couldn’t see him, but desperate to do something. His chest ached, watching Keith cry, so young and alone and afraid. Lance felt tears welling in his eyes as he reached out to try and wipe those off Keith’s cheeks but found his fingers grasped at nothing.

“It’s not real,” he said, his voice catching. “Keith... Keith, it’s not real.”

The child sobbed into his bear, his little body shaking as the cold fog drew in. Lance felt tears forming in his eyes. Keith was there with him, somewhere, trapped in his own memories. He just needed to get through to him.

“It’s a memory,” Lance whispered. “Keith... it’s not real. I’m here.”

The fog pulled into tighter around them, and the boy continued to sob. Lance couldn't even see the pines anymore. Carma was coming, he knew. She was taunting him, leading him around Keith's most awful memories. The boy cried softly on the road, his voice never carrying far. Lance clenched his fists; this was a game then. The fog grew thicker, blinding him. He wasn't sure the exact moment Keith vanished completely, only that his cries had stopped by the time the world shifted around Lance.

It was only the fifth memory, but Lance had already had enough. If these were all going to be Keith suffering, part of Carma's ploy to weaken them both, he wasn't sure he wanted to see them. Not because they upset him, but because Keith had never told him these things for a reason. If Keith wanted to open up to Lance about his past, fine, *good*, in fact. But Carma rummaging around in his head, pulling up tragic bits of memories to weaken Keith and try and throw Lance off her tail? It was cruel.

They were sat in what looked like the dining hall of a boarding house, *or an orphanage*, Lance's mind supplied numbly. Keith was across the table from him, a little too short for the seat, glancing around at the boys seated around him. There was little chatter; most of the kids just sat shoving their dubiously good looking food into their mouths or snickering with each other while keeping an eye on the teachers patrolling the hall. Keith chewed slowly on his food, looking sick to the stomach. His hair was shorter now; gone was the dorky yet adorable bowl cut- his hair was cropped close to his head, making his eyes look even wider. He was still only around seven, and-  
"Hey."

Keith jumped as the older boy beside him nudged him with his elbow. He turned to peer up at him, fingers tightening around his spoon.

"What's your name?"

Keith blinked owlshly at the boy.

"What? You can't speak?"

It didn't necessarily sound mean; the other boy couldn't have been older than twelve, after all.

"He hasn't said anything," the boy sitting next to Lance muttered.

"Is it true they found you on the side of the road?" The first boy asked.

Keith's eyes darted nervously between them, no doubt recalling his godfather's warning. He swallowed uncomfortably.

"I'm not trying to scare you," the boy said. "Just wanna know. Who left you there?"

Keith was trying not to cry now. He averted his eyes, folding his arms over his stomach. The older boys looked to each other and shrugged, one kinder than the other.

"Just tell me, okay? Can't you speak?"

"Nah, he can speak," another boy piped up. "Heard him crying yesterday."

Keith's head shot up, but there was no use trying to defend himself- his eyes were watering.

"Then why won't you tell me?" The first boy demanded.

He nudged Keith again, harder. "Hey. It's rude to ignore people."

"He's just weird."

"Why isn't he answering if he can talk? Hey, why aren't you answering?"

"Freak," another boy muttered.

"Who left you there?"

"No one," Keith said suddenly.

His voice was so quiet it could barely be heard. The older boy frowned, leaning down.

"What did you say?"

"Said no one," Keith mumbled, staring at his hands.

"What?" Piped another. "You just appeared there?"

A few of them began to snicker, but they were cut off by a loud bell going off. Lance realised what was happening a second too late, when the children all stood suddenly, stealing Keith from his view. He was lost in the sea of people, gone from view; Carma had another piece.

The next memory came, though Lance reckoned he was still at the orphanage, given he recognised a few of the kids. Keith though... Keith looked at least a year older. He'd grown taller, but lost weight, a thin, gangly kid who looked a lot more roughed up than before. There was a large group of kids playing outdoors, and Lance spotted Keith in the shade of a tree. He was grinning and playing a game that involved tossing a rock up and trying to grab those on the ground before catching it again, throwing an occasional comment to the boy who sat across from him. They seemed happy enough, enveloped in their game, and for a moment Lance could assume Keith was fine.

A shadow fell across their game, and both boys squinted up at the person who'd come to stand above them. Lance recognised him as one of the boy's from the dining hall, and he looked angry.

"What?" Keith asked bluntly.

"Don't *what*, Kogane. Give me my five bucks back."

Keith frowned. "What five bucks?"

The older boy snorted, glancing at his friend. "The one you stole. *Thief*."

Keith sighed, rolling his eye before returning to his game. His own friend was a boy with curly orange hair, taller, but somehow weaker looking than Keith; he glanced nervously at the legs of the boy accusing Keith.

"Hey," the older boy snapped. "Give it back."

"I didn't steal anything," Keith muttered.

He tried to ignore them, but when a foot landed on his friend's hand and he yelped, Keith looked up and glared. He got to his feet, only emphasising how small he was in comparison.

"What do you want, Harry?"

“Want my five bucks.”

Keith snorted. “I don’t have it.”

Harry’s expression grew sour. “Do too. I saw you take it from my bag you little creep.”

Keith balled his fists, but a smirk crept onto his face.

“Prove it,” he said.

Something tightened and lifted in Lance’s chest at the same time. This was more like the Keith he’d grow to know, the smart-assed, intelligent, often brutal boy, who acted like he wasn’t afraid of anything. And yet it hurt. Because Lance knew all the things that lead to him becoming that way.

“I said I saw you take it,” Harry snapped. “That’s proof enough.”

Keith shrugged. “I saw me not take it.”

Harry straightened up, crossing his arms over his chest.

“You think you’re funny, Kogane?”

“No, but I think you are-“

“Just give it back,” someone mumbled, and Keith turned with a shocked expression to see it was his friend who had spoken.

The ginger boy shrugged, staring at his feet.

“I saw you take it too.”

Keith’s expression fell for a second, looking betrayed. He turned back to Harry with a smirk, however.

“Finders keepers,” said Keith, and grinned.

Lance would have laughed, except the next thing Harry did was pull his fist back and punch Keith square in the face. He wasn’t used to seeing Keith go down when people bigger than him hit him. The Keith Lance knew would evade the punch, or do some complicated trick which left his attacker face down in the dirt while he skipped away with barely a scratch. This Keith evidently had a long way to go. He hit the ground with a bloody cheek to show for it, wincing as he touched fingers to the wound. Harry laughed, but Keith’s friend backed away a little as the boy got to his knees, fire burning in his eyes. Keith wiped a hand over the graze and stood, glaring at Harry. The older boy raised an eyebrow, daring him, but his smug expression faded the second Keith screamed and threw himself toward him.

Late on the start, but Keith wasn’t losing this fight, apparently. He barrelled into Harry, taking them both down and landing on his chest. He raised a fist and brought it down on the others face. Lance just stared, mouth agape, as Keith hit him again, then again. Boys of every age were crowded around them now, some shouting for them to stop, but the majority cheering the pair on. Harry was crying, but Keith barely noticed as he hit him, tiny fists balled up tight and a violent look in his eyes.

“Enough!” An adults voice roared through the yard, but Keith didn’t look up.

It wasn't until the hands of a burly warden were yanking him off of Harry that he stopped hitting him, fists flailing to get one last punch in.

"Don't touch me!" Keith yelled, thrashing in the warden's hold.

She was a no-nonsense looking woman, with a heavy brow and a very firm grip. She set him down on his feet, hand around his collar, as Harry struggled to get up. Keith was furious, his entire body radiating anger. He spat in Harry's direction, chuckling when it earned him a sharp slap from the warden.

"Out of here, all of you!" She snapped, grabbing Keith by the ear.

"Any more fighting and you'll all be joining him in Mr McKinley's office!"

The children parted quickly as the warden began marching quickly with Keith, dragging him back toward the building. His friend looked apologetic as they passed, but Keith just glared. Lance followed as quick as he could, stumbling across the yard and up the stairs after them. The inside of the boarding house was cold and a little gloomy.

"This is the last time, Kogane," the warden warned. "Three fights this week, god help you."

Keith ground his teeth angrily as she marched him in the direction of what Lance assumed could be the principle, or equivalent's office. They were speeding up, unnaturally so, such that Lance could barely keep up. Carma, he realised after a few seconds; Carma was doing this. They turned a corner, but were already to the next by the time Lance got around it. He ran, trying to keep up, but Keith grew further and further away, until it was just him, lost in the endless halls. Lance realised he'd lost when the next step forward made it feel like he was walking through honey.

The next few memories passed quickly, but Lance lost sight of Keith every time. More of the orphanage, of the warden angrily berating him for a bruise on his cheek or the sharp words that came from his mouth, those which grew fiercer and surer every time. Keith entered the foster system around age nine. Lance didn't like the first family, and neither did Keith. The second was worse, undoubtedly. Lance thought the third was all right, but by that point Keith was immune. Immune to disappointment, and affection, because he'd stopped placing any part of himself in a vulnerable position. Each time Lance lost sight of Keith, the memories felt even more desolate than before. Whatever Carma was doing was working; he couldn't find her, and he couldn't get to her. But god, she was getting to him.

Most importantly, Lance couldn't get to Keith. The boy was lost in his own memories, and unless Lance could pull him out, he'd keep falling prey to Carma.

At age ten Keith moved states. That was the first memory that sparked something other than misery in Lance, because staring at the breakfast table in an ordinary suburban house, he could scarcely believe his eyes.

"So... you like spaghetti, huh?"

The boy sitting across from Keith was fourteen, fifteen maybe, with a rigid posture and impeccable manners. He stared, gaping, at Keith, who was shovelling spaghetti bolognese into his mouth like there was no tomorrow.

Lance felt a large smile growing across his face, because that? That kid, with his badly cut spikey black hair, and his out-dated Pink Floyd shirt, and his mortified expression? Was undoubtedly Takashi Shirogane.

“Uh...” said Shiro.

He winced when Keith looked up from under a mop of shaggy hair and fixed him with a glare. Lance nearly resorted to hysterics at the sight of them, like polar opposites; Shiro, with his polite conversation starters and good table manners, verses Keith Kogane, who looked like he'd never been taught how to use a knife and fork, let alone comb his hair, chew his food, or not slouch with his elbows on the table as he ate. Keith slowed down a little once he realised Shiro was still staring at him, narrowing his eyes and pulling his bowl closer.

“You can... have as much as you like,” Shiro said awkwardly.

His eyes widened as Keith fit about a fist-sized wad of pasta into his mouth and chewed angrily.

“B-but I think mom and dad are organising a barbeque for dinner, so...”

Keith raised a brow as he chewed, waiting for Shiro to finish.

“I guess you'll be hungry again by then though,” Shiro said, coming to the same conclusion as Keith.

He shrugged, and went back to his own bowl, twisting spaghetti up onto his fork as he studied his new brother nervously out of the corner of his eye. Lance was still fighting off laughter, even as the memory slipped from him, placing him in a new one.

It was still those two, Shiro and Keith. The latter had gotten a haircut and by the looks of it some new clothes, but he still wore that fierce scowl and stayed silent. Lance fell into step with them as they made their way along the pavement; going off their backpacks, they were on their way home from school. Keith lingered a little behind Shiro, dragging his feet and taking in very little of what the elder boy was chatting to him about. That didn't deter Shiro; he looked used to the silence by now. He was mostly quiet too, but occasionally he'd stop to point something out or comment on it, like a car he thought he liked, or a bird singing in the tree, or some crude graffiti on the fence.

He turned when they reached a gas station, gesturing for Keith to follow him in. The bell above the door tinkered and Lance slipped in behind them. There was a radio playing softly over the hum of the fridges, and three isles of basic foods and newspapers. Shiro headed to the fridges, grabbing a carton of juice while Keith lingered near the back of the store. Lance watched Keith's eyes shift around nervously, glancing at the cashier before he grabbed a chocolate bar off the shelf and stuffed it into his pocket.

Lance didn't think much of it, but Shiro, apparently, did. Keith jumped as Shiro gasped, and whipped around to catch the other boy staring at him. Guilt flooded his features, but he stuck his chin out, almost daring the other to comment.

“Were you going to steal that?” Shiro hissed quietly, eyes darting to the cashier.

Keith didn't answer, just clenched his fists inside his pockets. Shiro's expression hardened, and he held out a hand.

“Give it here.”

Keith sniffed defiantly. “No.”

Shiro looked shocked for a second, before his face began to morph and oh, oh boy, did Lance know *that* look. It was kinda funny to see that dad-like disapproval on the face of someone so young, especially since Lance was used to seeing it on the face of a much more intimidating

version of the man.

“Keith,” Shiro said sternly, puffing himself out a bit.

It fucking worked, and Lance nearly blanched. Keith shrunk a little, averting his eyes as he guiltily withdrew the chocolate bar from his pocket and placed it into Shiro’s outstretched hand. He kept his eyes on the floor as Shiro walked past him, shoving his hands deeper into his pockets and hunching his shoulder, the epitome of guilt. Lance could almost see the thoughts going through Keith’s head, the regrets, and fears, as if he’d just blown it all for himself.

There were tears building in the younger boy’s eyes when Shiro returned. Keith sniffled, risking a look up and freezing. Shiro was holding the bar out to him, a forgiving expression on his face. Keith stared, and stared, and stared. The cashier was putting away the coins Shiro had paid him with. Keith looked like he might just faint.

“Go on,” said Shiro. “It’s yours.”

Hesitantly, Keith reached out and took the bar from Shiro’s hand, stopping at the last second as if he still expected it to be a cruel joke. Shiro beamed once Keith finally accepted the chocolate, and gestured for them to leave. Keith trailed after him in a trance, his eyes wide as he clutched the bar tightly. Shiro was back to talking normally as they continued on their way home, while Keith looked like he was having an existential crisis.

“But I like Pluto,” Shiro was saying. “You know they once declassified it as being a planet? They say the ice on its moons could hold clues to-“

“I like rocks,” Keith blurted.

Shiro stopped in his tracks, staring at the boy, before quickly remembering he should probably play off Keith talking as something normal so as not to make him uncomfortable.

“Oh,” he said, trying to build up pace again. “That’s neat. Mars has a lot of rocks. You could study those, and maybe you’d find alien life!”

Keith nodded, smiling a little around a mouthful of chocolate.

“Maybe we can do missions together,” Shiro said excitedly. “Into space!”

Keith glanced up at his foster brother with the happiest looking expression Lance had seen on his face for months. It was still shy, still hesitant, but it was hopeful.

“That sounds fun,” he said, albeit struggling a little with the words.

Shiro didn’t seem to mind. He just grinned and went on listing things they could discover. The memory was such a happy contrast to the others that Lance almost believed Carma wouldn’t infiltrate this one. It came as a dismal surprise then, that when crossing the road the cars surged forward between Lance and the brothers, cutting him off from them, long enough to leave him in a lonely memory with no trace of Keith.

“Takashi!”

Lance jumped, plastering himself against the wall that had materialised as someone came stomping past him, their feet racing up the stairwell. Keith looked sixteen or so; his hair had grown out a little, but was relatively tame. He was young and fresh-faced and excited, wielding a letter that he dropped three times before finally managing to fit the key into the lock and barged with it into the



apartment. The door was slammed in Lance's face, but he stepped straight through, right as Keith yelled for his adoptive brother again.

"Takashi!"

Keith flung his backpack onto the spongy couch, practically leaping up and down by the time Shiro poked his head out his bedroom. He looked closer to the age Lance was now, though the lack of white tuft in his hair made him look all the more younger.

"*What?*" He said, looking like he'd just woken up.

"I got in!" Keith yelled.

Shiro froze, then frowned. Keith threw the letter at his face.

"I got into the Garrison!"

Shiro grappled with the letter, staring at the page for a few seconds as his eyes grew wide. His head shot up.

"You got in," he said.

Keith nodded so enthusiastically the action jolted his entire body.

"Holy shit, you got in!"

Suddenly there was not one, but two ecstatically happy guys jumping up and down in the living room. The hugged, and Lance couldn't even make out half the words that were tumbling from their mouths. Shiro was grinning when he placed a hand on Keith's shoulders. It seemed to be just the two of them living here, in this cramped apartment. Lance wondered if they'd simply moved out of home, or-

"Mom and dad would be so proud," said Shiro.

Oh. Or that. Lance realised he'd never learnt much about Shiro's family either. Keith looked so damn proud of himself it made Lance's heart swell. He nodded, clearing his throat roughly as the pair finally settled down. They were silent for a minute before Shiro blurted-

"Holy shit!"

And suddenly they'd dissolved into laughter again.

"We should celebrate," Shiro said suddenly.

"Nah, we don't--"

"We should get food or something!"

Keith narrowed his eyes. "Are you just saying that so you can chat to the girl who works--"

"You want takeout or not?"

Keith rolled his eyes, but chuckled as he turned heel and made his way back toward the door, while Shiro hurried to chuck shoes and a jacket on. The elder boy snatched his phone off the counter, shoving Keith affectionately when the other made some snide remark about him trying to fix his hair.

“How about I wingman for you this time,” Keith said, still chuckling, as he held open the door. “I could tell her about the time you cried watching *Space Buddies*—“

“You could shut your mouth instead,” Shiro threatened half-heartedly, letting the door slam behind him.

Lance just stood there for a second, listening to their laughter ring down the stairwell. He smiled; the sound was golden. He should have foreseen it though, that when he reached the door he couldn’t get through. Another one of Carma’s tricks. He cursed, turning back to search the apartment for another way out, though he doubted he’d find one. Besides, Keith was gone. He stood there in the silence, taking in their little home. The door to Keith’s bedroom was plastered with posters, while a textbook lay open on Shiro’s bed. Lance saw a picture of him and Matt goofing off stuck to the wall. There was a small kitchen beside the doorway, a door leading to the bathroom, and a tiny living room that barely fit a couch and tv. Lance studied the picture frame on the bookshelf; it was Shiro’s parents. It seemed to have been taken not long after they adopted Keith. Lance’s smile was bittersweet now, and he let himself go easily into the next memory.

The second he arrived he wished he hadn’t. No, he’d do anything to have been spared another moment before he was confronted with *this* memory.

Keith sat in the Garrison’s library, diligently studying from a textbook. He’d let his hair grow out a bit, so it was starting to look more like his signature mullet. Lance groaned as a boy took the seat across from Keith, propping his elbow up on the desk and flashing a killer grin. Lance slapped a hand over his forehead at the sight of this idiot, this absolute fool, this annoying half-wit; in other words, his own self.

“Hi,” said Lance.

The younger, stupider Lance.

“The name’s Lance.”

Keith raised a brow, as if to say, *so?*

“In case you were wondering.”

“I wasn’t,” Keith assured him.

His answer didn’t deter Lance, who leant forward on his elbows to peer at the book Keith was reading from.

“What’cha reading?”

“A book.”

“Yeah, no shit.”

“Is there a reason you’re talking to me?” Keith said, and Lance at least had the decency to look surprised.

His older self, meanwhile, was just about dying from embarrassment. Younger Lance grinned, but it wasn’t a very friendly.

“You’re Keith, right? Kogane?”

“Yeah?” Keith replied stiffly, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms.

“Saw your simulator scores.”

Lance grinned, and with his teeth on full display like that, it was almost predatory.

“So what?” Keith snapped, clearly expecting some sort of attack.

“They were pretty good.”

“They’re the best.”

Lance chuckled. “So far.”

Keith resisted rolling his eyes, as did elder Lance.

“What do you want?”

“What? I’m not allowed to talk?”

Keith frowned. “Why the hell do you want to talk to me?”

“Assess the playing field,” Lance said, his voice suddenly very, very serious.

Keith scoffed. “If this is some keep your enemies close, bullshit-“

“I prefer the term rivals.”

“Whatever,” Keith muttered, shutting his textbook. “Are we done?”

“Wow, slow down.”

Lance raised his hands in surrender, pushing his chair back and standing. For just a second, he sounded genuine.

“I’ll go if I’m bothering you.”

Keith only just refrained from glaring. “Isn’t that why you came over here?”

Lance hummed, and shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe.”

“*Maybe*? Why else did you come talk to me?”

Another shrug, and this time Lance smirked when he met Keith’s eye. Elder Lance was practically watching through his fingers now, unable to take the embarrassment. Keith raised his eyebrows in search of a response, but instead of replying like a *normal fucking person*, Lance looked him up and down and *winked*. He turned, sauntering off to his table at the other end of the room where Hunk was repeatedly hitting his head against the desk. Keith stared, watching him go. Lance risked a glance out from his fingers, knowing exactly what happened now. Cause he remembered this, remembered Keith storming angrily from the library, except-

*Oh my god*. Lance dropped his hands, crowding closer to Keith to get a look at his face. He was *blushing*. Lance’s jaw dropped, and he planted both hands on the table as he stared at a very flustered Keith, all while his younger self sat back down at the other end of the room, oblivious. Keith tried to hide the fact he was blushing for about half a minute, before he stood quickly, snatching up his book and legging it out of the library. And if Lance lost him in the hallway a

minute later, it was entirely his own fault, for staying rooted to the spot as he simply considered what that meant.

The second he emerged in the next memory, a strong wind hit his face. Lance stumbled, not expecting Keith to be right in front of him. They were outside, on a chilly morning under a clear blue sky. Keith's head was inclined toward the sky, the wind whipping hair around his face. He looked really beautiful. His expression however... Keith looked afraid. Lance could hear the roar of a rocket in the distance, and when he turned he could see a white blot in the sky. The Kerberos mission, this was the day of the launch. The rocket left a white trail behind it, bleeding into the blue sky.

Keith's brow tightened, his lips pulled into a thin line. He stood there motionlessly as the roar of the rocket faded into the clouds along with the ship itself. He shivered a little in the cold, fists clenched. When Keith decided to leave, he did so very suddenly, turning and walking back toward the line of Garrison buildings. Lance stumbled after him, wishing there was some way he could comfort him, cursing himself, because if he'd actually made the effort to befriend Keith back in their Garrison days, he might've been able to. The wind was bitter, and fate was unkind. Keith wrapped arms around himself as he walked. Lance didn't catch up to him, Carma saw to that. The maintenance truck that pulled suddenly in front of him stole Keith from his view. Even before the vehicle vanished, Lance knew he wouldn't see Keith again.

The air was warmer again. Lance knew this place, knew it all too well. Keith was on the floor of the living room in his little desert shack, his legs splayed out across the hardwood. This was post-Garrison then, Lance realised. This was a piece of the year he'd spent alone. It was night time, signalled by the dim orange lights that lit the room, flickering now and then. Keith bit down on his hand to muffle a cry, and Lance's stomach flipped.

There was a long, ugly gash across his stomach. Lance knew that cut, he'd traced the scar countless time, but he'd never asked where Keith had gotten it. An accident, it looked like, given his pack was dumped beside him on the floor, and he still wore boots caked with mud. What had he been doing? Exploring caves? Messing around with his bike? Didn't matter; all that did was that he had discarded his bloody shirt and was currently choking back sobs as he tried to tend to the wound. Lance's chest tightened painfully, and he knelt before Keith. The boy's face was streaked with mud and sweat; he was panicking. The wound was deep and he'd evidently bled a lot. Keith fumbled for the kit beside him, his hands shaking.

Lance watched fearfully and pitifully as Keith struggled with the needle, gripping the bloody skin of his stomach as he prepared to stitch it. He bit down on a pained whine as he dug the needle in, threading it through shakily and breathing heavily through clenched teeth. Keith twitched as he pulled the needle through, tears mingling with the sweat on his cheeks. He gasped, the sound ragged, and tried to control the shaking in his body as he stitched the flesh back together. Heat built behind Lance's eyes as he watched the boy patch himself clumsily back together, no one to help or comfort him for miles around. Keith was crying in earnest when he finished off the last stitch and tied it off, shaking to the point he might be ill. Lance grimaced as he tipped a bottle of alcohol over the wound, the scream catching in his throat as he kicked a leg out, his teeth biting into his palm. Keith was breathing raggedly, but he managed to pull himself over and onto the couch. He collapsed, whimpering around the wound, and Lance's heart broke a little more.

The worst came when Keith shut his eyes, still leaking tears, and hugged the pillow tight instead of placing it behind his head. He shuddered, brows furrowed as he tried to ignore the pain and the *loneliness*. God, Lance had never regretted not being there so badly. Just to hold him, kiss his forehead, tell him it was all going to be alright... Keith fought to control his crying; the movement it caused him made the wound hurt worse.

Hopeless, and sad, Lance sat beside the couch, gazing at Keith's face, all contorted with pain. He ran fingers through his hair, imagining Keith could feel him, imagining that for once in his life Keith might feel he wasn't alone. Tears seeped from Lance's eyes, and he let them fall, ghosting fingers over Keith's cheeks and aching at how lonely this memory felt.

That's all Keith was: lonely. Not a troubled child, not a rude child; he wasn't an angry person, not hot-tempered, nor impulsive. Those were all just side effects, symptoms. It was his defining emotion, really. Because even in the company of others, Lance had seen it. And sometimes it made him kinder, and sometimes it made him unbearable. Keith Kogane was lonely. And right then it hurt worse than any wound ever could. Lance sniffled, tucking his head into the crook of Keith's neck. He wondered how many more of these he'd have to go through. His question was answered soon, however. Because Lance didn't get any warning before the next memory took him, he just fell.

At first he thought he'd arrived at nothing, because that's all there was- darkness. Then a torch flared in the corner of his eye and he turned. Lance recognised the memory immediately. Something twisted in his gut.

Keith's skin was almost blue in the light of the torch, his hair like ink, irises glowing a mesmerising shade of purple. He was dressed in the baggy overalls of the Altean's caving gear, various belts and harnesses buckled around his waist, which attached him to the shifting coil of rope. They were on the dwarf planet, *in it*, in the cavern Keith had found where he'd first been possessed. And Lance knew. He just knew.

This was where it ended. This was his last chance.

"*Come back*," someone's voice said over the comm.

Lance could just hear it from where he stood; it was his own voice. Allura's voice came in over the comms, asking Keith to describe what he was seeing. Lance zoned out, their words never reaching his ears as he took in his surroundings, the horror of them. *Don't look*. He knew what he and Keith were standing on. He'd never seen it before, but Keith had described it well enough. He'd seen these bodies later, when they were crawling through the vents with Carma in control of their charred limbs. But for now...

"So much death," said Keith.

And Lance remembered this.

"*I know*," Allura whispered over the comms. "*I know. Now come back*."

"We can't leave them."

"*Keith, I'm sorry you had to find them*."

"There's so many, so, so many."

Lance looked at Keith as his words came slower. Before, he could only assume what had happened to Keith down in the tunnel. Now he knew, now he was seeing.

"So much death," said Keith. "Everyone's dead, there... there's no one."

"*It's okay*." There was Pidge's attempt at comfort. "*Don't think about it, Keith*."

"It's so empty," Keith said.

His eyes searched the cavern, vacant. There were no bruises on his skin, no possession, no infection, no pain; not yet.

“There’s no one. The whole world... I’m so alone.”

*“There’s us. Keith.”*

That. That was Lance’s own voice.

*“Come back to us.”*

It was the sound of his own voice calling Keith that refocused Lance. He’d done all he could last time, but it hadn’t been enough. This time he couldn’t fail.

“I have to... I have to see.”

*“You don’t have to do anything,”* Allura said sharply, but Lance had stopped listening.

Keith began walking, and the sound was worse now that he was here in person. Lance made after him, watching Keith’s face, watching the shadows around them. His eyes raked the floor quickly, not willing to take in the mangled bodies fused together underneath them. Keith knelt down.

“Get up,” Lance hissed. And over the comms he said the very same thing.

“Allura, you’re having a baby.”

There was silence for a few seconds, in which Lance planted himself in front of Keith. He waved a hand in front of his face, tried to tug at his arms, his face, anything, anything to connect with this vacant memory. Allura’s reply was full of static, but audible.

*“Yes. Yes I am. Will you come back now?”*

“Like this one.”

“Leave it,” said Lance.

*“Leave it,”* he echoed over the comms.

“It’s so small,” Keith whispered.

A few frightened questions came through from Pidge, and her and Allura could be heard discussing. Lance ground his teeth together. Was that the key? Getting Keith to interact with him. Memories couldn’t be changed, but these weren’t pure memories. If Carma could manipulate them then so could he. He could stop Keith getting possessed, he just had to focus.

“There’s a baby here,” said Keith. “It’s dead.”

Lance heard Allura whimpering over the comms, her and Keith’s exchange growing more distorted by the second. Lance focused only on Keith. He blocked the other’s frantic words, blocked the stench of this cavern, the creeping shadows, the crack of ancient bones and the flare of the torch. He saw Keith, and Keith alone. Scared, scared eyes stared at the tragedy before him on the floor. The sight had broken Keith long before Carma touched him. Pidge yelled things angrily over the comms as Keith made a harsh comment about the baby, oblivious to the damage he’d done.

*“This isn’t right,”* said Hunk, and Keith’s head snapped up at the sound. *“Keith, you should come back.”*

The boy stood, and Lance rose with him, facing him.

“Hunk...” Keith replied slowly. “Can you let go of the rope?”

“No,” said Lance.

He planted himself in front of Keith. He wouldn’t walk through him this time, he *wouldn’t*.

“*No!*” Hunk yelled.

Lance saw the rope jolt a little on the floor.

“Then give some more,” Keith continued. “I need to go further.”

Lance heard his friend stuttering over the line. “*N-no. There’s none left. Come back.*”

A pause, Lance knew what this meant, he knew what came next.

“I’m untying myself.”

Objections exploded from the comms. Lance heard himself yelling, heard Hunk fretting. Anger and fear and desperation, all of it collided. But this time he stayed calm.

“Keith,” he said. “No you’re not.”

They were staring at each other, except they weren’t. Those violet eyes searched the air where Lance stood, and he was reminded of how little control he really had here.

“Keith, he repeated. “You are not going.”

Keith blinked. He squinted a little, as though clearing something from his vision. Firmer, Lance needed to be firmer; he was close to getting through.

“The cavern keeps going,” Keith murmured.

His fingers fumbled slowly with the harness, and Lance swallowed a wave of nausea as the rope hit the floor.

“I need to see how many there are, how many bodies there are.”

The bodies beneath Keith’s feet crunched sickeningly as Keith took a step forward and then... stopped. They were almost nose to nose now. The others were yelling orders frantically over the comms. Lance could feel Keith’s breath against his skin, feel the warmth radiating off his body; could Keith feel him?

“*You promised!*” Lance screamed over the comms. “*Keith, you promised; stop walking!*”

Keith frowned. He wet his lips and said-

“I... have.”

And oh. That was new. Keith had not said that before. Lance could see the detailed colouration of his eyes from this distance, each crease in his brow, every blemish on his skin. It was breathtaking, being this close to Keith. And his eyes, they were searching, searching for something he *knew* was there, but couldn’t see.

*“There’s something in the air,” Allura said.*

Something seized in Lance’s chest. The atmosphere was changing.

*“Keith, can you hear me?”*

*“Don’t be stupid! What are you doing?”*

*“Keith. Come back. Listen to me, come back, please. D-don’t do this, where ever you’re going, stop.”*

“There’s thousands,” said Lance, just as Keith’s lips went to form those exact words. “So much death.”

The red paladin’s frown deepened. He tilted his head a little, listening. *Just look*, Lance wanted to yell. *Look at me, I’m here, I’m here.*

*“Leave it! Don’t think about it!”*

“There’s nothing,” Keith whispered.

“No one,” said Lance.

Keith pursed his lips. It was doing something, stealing his words from him. Something related to awareness.

*“That’s not true,”* Pidge wailed. *“Keith, come back!”*

*“Keith, get out of there!”*

*“I don’t like this. No, no, no, I don’t like this.”*

*“Keith.”* Lance’s voice. *“I-“*

The comms fizzled out. Silence descended upon the pair, nothing but their breathing and the faint buzz of static emitting from Keith’s suit. It burned in his ears, the voiceless echo of the cavern. Lance could almost imagine hearing Keith’s heartbeat coming through the baggy fabric of those overalls. The torch hung from his fingers, lighting up the ground where Lance stood.

“Keith,” he said. “I’m here.”

“I don’t...”

A pause. Keith’s lips were parted slightly, his gaze focused. He was looking at Lance, *he was looking at Lance.*

“That’s it,” Lance whispered. “It’s me. I’m here, Keith. I’m here. Focus, *remember.*”

Keith stared and stared, his eyes swimming before Lance in the haze of their proximity. He raised his hand. Yes. He was still frowning, still searching, but he knew... god, he *knew*.

“I’m here,” Lance whispered.

Keith’s hand was between them, hovering just over his chest.

“Who...”



He reached out. He was looking at Lance. But his fingers didn't touch him, they went through him. Through, to touch-

Lance threw an arm out as he turned, *screaming*, and the lightning that tore from his fingers enveloped the shadows looming behind him. Keith gasped behind him, and Lance watched as electricity and darkness danced together through the air, like two furious birds locked together in a deadly spiral. They smashed into the floor a hundred feet away, the electricity flickering out. Lance could feel it humming beneath his skin, the anger fuelling him. This was it; the battle had begun. Keith hadn't been reaching for him, he'd been reaching for-

"Lance?"

Lance whipped around. Keith was staring at him, and this time it was for real. He looked stunned, like he'd just woken from some trance.

"Here," Lance thrust out a hand, and Keith hurried to grab it.

They stood close, back-to-back, hands clasped tightly.

"You back with me?"

"Yeah," Keith said shakily. "Yeah, I... think. Where is it?"

"Everywhere," Lance replied stiffly. "Why'd you call her it?"

"Because... I know," said Keith.

"What do you know?"

"I... can't. I don't know."

Lance pressed on Keith's hand a little, indicating for them to walk in a tight circle.

"What's it gonna do?" Keith whispered.

"Kill you. That's what this memory is, right? Fair game."

"What?"

"This is where you were possessed. She gets you now, she gets you forever."

Lance tightened his hold on Keith's hand, eyes searching the darkness.

"But I'm gonna get her first."

"Do try," Keith muttered, making Lance snicker.

"Why don't you try? Only took you about a hundred memories to see me."

"What the hell? They were memories, kind of easy to get lost in them."

"Just sayin. Effort was there on my part."

"Whatever," Keith muttered.

He squeezed Lance's hand, letting him know he was with him on this.

“Come on you bastard,” Lance muttered. “Stop hiding.”

“Shit-

Keith tugged harshly on his hand, turning them.

“There, there’s something over there.”

Lance squinted into the shadows, his heart racing. He blocked the noises their feet were making as they walked circles over the bodies. Carma was there, all around them, in the shadows that stalked them. Lance kept his grip on Keith’s hand, raising the other, ready and waiting with electricity burning under his skin. His eyes flashed as shadows slunk away from the rest, curling along the walls, down into the floor. It infiltrated the bones of the mummified corpses, filling the hollows of their eyes before crawling through the raptures in their flimsy chests. It was circling them, drawing closer each rotation it made. Lance clenched his fist, electricity skittering over his fingers. Tension was building in the air; his senses grew more active, until the sound of Keith breathing or the crunch of their feet over the bones was almost deafening.

“Where is it?” Keith hissed, growing frustrated as the shadows lead them in circles.

“Wait,” Lance instructed.

Trying to make his footsteps as quiet as possible, Lance listened out for something. Trying to see was almost pointless; their torch created deceptive enemies, springing at them from the jagged bones before vanishing into thin air. But when he listened... there was something underneath the silence, something that moved alongside Lance’s heartbeat to disguise itself. He slowed his breathing down, brining them to a stop. Keith shot him a glance over his shoulder to ask what the matter was; Lance’s inclined his head, a sign for him to listen. They did, scarcely daring to breathe in the darkness.

The whispers came to Lance like they did in dreams, silent, scared, indistinguishable. Except this time there weren’t a hundred voices, only one. One furious voice. Lance still couldn’t make much out, only that over the sound of his heartbeat whispers came to them as soft and flimsy sounding as the flaking of skin off the bones at their feet. And yet the sound sent chills up Lance’s spine, because no matter how quiet the whispers were, they were filled with malice. Like a swarm of gnats, the sound crowded around him, filling his ears and pulling unwarranted reactions from him.

They grew greater in number, more insistent, until Lance was sure he could make out actual words. *Lies. Lied to me.* He gripped Keith’s hand, and Keith held on tight, hearing the same thing. *Betrayed me, used me, lied to me.* The boys stumbled in a circle, the sound growing louder, the shadows closing in. *Betrayed me, used me, lied to me, betrayed me, used me-* they grew more frantic, a furious whisper, a single frequency, a hum in their ears that had no voice, only a sound. Closer; Lance caught the shadows in the corners of his vision closing in, scuttling over the bones of their victims like a swarm of insects, come to devour the scent of fresh blood. *Closer, closer,* the voices were a roar of static in their ears. *Betrayed me, used me, lied to me, betrayed me, used me, lied to me, betrayed me, used me, lies, lies lies lies-*

Behind him, Keith’s breath caught. Even before he yelled a warning, Lance was moving. The noise, the darkness, the tension in the air, it all erupted in a violent explosion of blue light as electricity tore away from his hand. It scattered the shadows like two rockets colliding, and Lance knew it wouldn’t be enough. Keith gasped as blue light burnt their eyes, dancing like fireworks against a dark sky made of shadows and malice. Lance yanked him back and thrust out a hand, mesmerised by the scorching bolt of electricity that gathered at his fingertips and shot into the air. His arm looked silver, his veins seemed to glow. Keith grabbed his body and spun them around so

he could face the shadow gathering like a wave behind their backs.

A sound split the air, like a scream, like something burning, as electricity encased the shadows. Lance knew the sight of fish trapped within a net, the way they thrashed and fought as the net was raised from the water. This reminded him distinctly of that, except this wasn't a boy watching fishermen unload their boats onto the sand, this was a fight for Keith's life, and the shadow thrashing in the scorching hold of the electricity was more than a helpless fish caught in a net.

The shadows surrounded them like a vortex now. Lance and Keith stood back to back, their watchful eyes tracking the movements, the swells of darkness that grew seconds before they would move to try and encase them. Lance's skin was burning; he wondered if Keith could feel it. He grit his teeth as another burst of electricity chased the shadows away from their heads. Releasing Keith's hand, his limbs followed through, like the sun moving across the sky, but his hands burned blue and the light he cast was that of moonlight off an ocean or terror within a storm cloud. Keith reached back to grip his shirt, terrified they'd lose each other as the shadows swarmed them.

They were at the centre of the storm, the shadows around them like vicious winds, the lightning pouring from Lance's hands illuminating them like ghosts lost in the fray. It crackled viciously, and the shadows howled like wind through the rafter. Lance could hear other things now, the snap of bones swept up into the fight, and the groans of the cavern around him.

"Lance," Keith warned, his voice barely audible.

He was shaking, shivering as the cave grew colder and the current of air they'd created around them whipped his hair around his face. The cavern was shaking now, and he was struggling to stand, caught in a battle between two powers that he was practically helpless against. Lance grabbed his collar, tugging Keith toward him to shield him before throwing a jagged bolt toward the shadows rearing up behind Keith. The red paladin wrapped his arms around Lance and held tight, as if fearing he'd be swept away by the vicious tide of shadows. Dirt from the ceiling rained down on them, but Lance wasn't afraid this time. Keith shouted something into his shoulder, words inaudible but the tone enough of a warning for Lance to flip them around and chase back the shadow with a wall of blue light.

The cavern was coming down, that much was apparent. The fall of dirt grew heavier, covering the bones like a scattering of snow. Keith was trying to say something, his voice whipped away by the growing chaos. He grew frustrated when Lance failed to read his lips, and grabbed his face, pressing his lips to his ear to shout-

"Use the water!"

Lance frowned, meeting Keith's eye.

"What water?" He mouthed.

*"Use the water."*

Lance shook his head, not understanding.

"On Oro!" Keith shouted. "What you did on Oro!"

He ducked his head as dirt fell onto them, leaving Lance with those words as the shadows condensed. *On Oro*. The only time he and Keith had been on Oro together had been the first time they arrived, when Keith escaped possession, when they fought and he... of course.

Lance wrapped one arm around Keith's back, shielding him from the dirt and shadows and

violence, before reaching out with the other and *pulling*. Water burst from the cavern walls like shards of shattering glass, ripping through the shadows in their haste to get to Lance. He surrounded them, like he had with the explosion, the water churning and moulding together, forming a shield around them as the cavern walls fell. Darkness came to engulf them but found its way blocked by the water. The shadows were trapped within, and, unable to reach the dirt they'd brought down to aid them, they panicked. Black streaks tore along the edges of the water, trying to escape, trying to distance themselves from Lance. He drew them in, shrinking the sphere, feeling the weight of dirt above it but resisting it. Keith hid his face in his shoulder as lightning joined the water around them, seeking out the shadows in their exposed form and ripping them to pieces.

They were falling through an inky darkness, but it wasn't the dirt that surrounded them anymore, it was the memories. Lance had to squint through the spray of water and vicious storm cycle around them, but he caught glances of Keith, of the boy in his arms, as a teen, as a grubby looking child, as a happy baby in the arms of a frighteningly tall woman. They came and went so quickly he could barely process them, like they were falling at high-speed, back through the pages of Keith's life, but this time Keith was in his arms, not Carma's. For his part, Keith just held on tight, trying to hide from the fall and the shadows that raged against the wall of water trapping them as lightning slowly but steadily tore them apart. It was too much, it was too fast, the screech of shadows and pull of darkness and the wild currents of Lance's powers fighting back. Noise and chaos and blinding light, but all through it he knew that Keith was there with him. They fell, and fell, the shadows dissipating as the water and lightning melded into one another, until Lance was sure they'd keep falling forever.

When they hit the ground, it was as if they plunged straight into the deepest ocean trench. It was dark, but it wasn't black. It wasn't the darkness of earth or a cave... it was deep twilight; it was blue. They floated there, motionless, not a single sound breaching the peaceful haven. Lance's couldn't feel anything, not the shadows, or the dirt, only Keith, pressed up against him and holding him. The ocean around them lulled him, like they were deep, deep beneath the waves, but that fact wasn't troubling at all.

Lance didn't know how long it took, but eventually he sensed the world changing, as if the current were slowly carrying them up to the surface. It grew lighter, warmer; bits of sound began to reach his ears, until he was left sitting in the cockpit of the blue lion, right where they'd started.

Keith had migrated into his lap, and they were still embracing tightly, the red paladin shaking. Lance blinked his eyes open. His chest felt lighter than before, despite Keith's body weighing down on him. Keith shifted, his arms loosening a little from around Lance's neck as he peered curiously at his hand. His chest was heaving a little, like he'd been crying. Lance ran a hand up his back to sooth him, holding his breath as Keith came to terms with what had happened.

"It... it doesn't hurt."

Lance's heart skipped a beat. He shifted, pulling back just enough so the pair could look at each other. Keith's injured hand was held between them, still covered in bruises like the rest of his skin, but...

"It doesn't hurt," he repeated.

The tension lifted from Lance's face. He took Keith's hand, turning it over and inspecting it. The silence between them was as soothing as a lullaby, the blue lion humming faintly around them. Lance wet his lips, his voice gradually coming back to him.

"She's... gone?"

Keith laughed. It wasn't a full laugh, just a single happy note slapped onto the end of the relieved sigh that left his lips.

"Yeah," he breathed.

He was smiling. His hair was out of place but his eyes looked more alive than they ever had. He looked absolutely breathtaking.

"It's gone."

Lance surged forward and kissed him. Keith met him half way, fingers curling into Lance's hair as he pressed their lips together desperately. It was warm, so much warmer than the chill of ice and electricity still running skittishly through Lance's veins, waiting for the next attack. Keith touched his face and it melted, pressed himself close along his chest and the powers fizzled out, finally resting, finally safe. Keith was familiar, the good kind, and Lance was addicted to the taste of his lips, to the slight cloudiness in his head that came whenever Keith kissed him like this, to the electricity that shot up his spine when a small gasp punched out of Keith as Lance tugged him against his chest. He wanted to get lost in it, in Keith, and the touch of their lips, and the sound of their mingled breathing.

Keith tugged lightly at his hair, claiming Lance with every kiss and every heated touch, like he was kissing him for the first time, like it had never been enough, not with Carma in his head. Lance ran hands up his sides, under his shirt to the bruises, but this time Keith didn't flinch. They were still there, they looked like they should have been hurting, but it felt... they felt empty, like the awful energy that had been residing there had simply packed up and left. And perhaps they would take time to heal, as any wound would, but now there was a way.

Keith's shoulders were starting to shake again, Lance could feel them shivering beneath his hands, and felt the tears on his cheeks. He frowned, drawing Keith closer, into a long, tender kiss before finally pulling back to look at him. Keith had his eyes shut, trying to hold back tears as well as a whole number of emotions. A wobbly smile graced his lips briefly, before his expression buckled, giving way to fear and exhaustion.

"Hey..."

Lance traced a hand over his cheek, wiping away some of the tears. Keith's hands remained fisted tightly in his shirt, but he opened his eyes to look tearfully at Lance.

"What's wrong?"

"That was a lot," Keith blurted, pressing his lips together to try and stop the little sob that accompanied those words. "It was just a lot."

"Yeah," Lance agreed. "It was."

"I'm sorry you had to, t... to see that," Keith stuttered, frowning.

His expression grew pinched; he was trying to hold back. Lance ran hands up and down his back, trying to ease the tension from his shoulders.

"Sorry I saw what?"

Keith laughed, small and bitter, a pitiful splutter to disguise the flow of tears that came with it, like he couldn't believe Lance actually required clarification.

"I was a shitty kid," he said.

Lance hummed, pressing a kiss to Keith's shoulder.

"Yeah, kinda," he said. "You got into a fistfight over five bucks."

Keith laughed at that, shaking his head at the grin that came over Lance's face, but the sound soon dissolved into small cries. Lance hugged him, tucking Keith's head into his shoulder and rocking them ever so slightly.

"You were also a lonely kid," he said. "People loved you, Keith. People have always loved you, but often they couldn't show it in the way you deserved."

Keith made a small noise against his chest, and Lance pressed a kiss to his hair.

"I know it's maybe not my place to say, but I don't think your dad wanted to leave you, Keith. Not at all."

Keith sighed, but it sounded heavy.

"But he did," he whispered. "They all did."

A pause, and Keith's fingers tightened around his shirt. A hitch in his breath, before he said in small, terrified words:

"Please don't."

Lance felt Keith cringe away from his own words, going very still in his arms as if he could hide from what he'd said. For a moment, Lance was still too. He gazed down at the boy in his arms, hiding his face but not the tremble in his shoulders. He brought a hand up to card gently through Keith's hair, leaning down to whisper to him.

"I'm not."

Keith didn't move, not a word, not a muscle.

"I'm not," Lance repeated gently, waiting for Keith to look at him.

Lance took his chin, gently tilting Keith's face toward him, eyes flooding with concern as the other blinked away tears, his lips downturned and eyes almost... guilty. Lance kissed him, gently this time, pouring all the love he felt into the way they kissed, until Keith was kissing him back with only a very small hint of hesitation. Lance stopped, kissing his cheeks.

"I'm not going," he said.

He kissed his eyelids, and Keith huffed, trying to turn his head away though Lance could tell he loved it. He left his lips against Keith's forehead, brushing his hair back as he spoke softly into his skin.

"Love me as much as you want. As hard as you want. Cause I'm not leaving you, Keith. I love you. I loved you *before* I was even *in* love with you."

Keith sighed shakily, resting against Lance's shoulder as his fingers traced the sensitive stretches of his neck.

"What if you stop?"

“Try me,” said Lance. “Try make me stop.”

Keith met his eye, a flicker of anger in them. “If I tried you’d stop easily. You *should* stop.”

Lance shrugged. “If you tried, I’d know something was wrong. And I’d fix it, so you’d stop trying.”

He leant in, nuzzling at Keith’s neck until the frown on his face gave way to a satisfied sigh.

“I know I’m not that nice,” Keith said. “I know I... I... you can’t help if you stop loving me-“

“I don’t care,” Lance said bluntly. “I don’t care about all the things you think I care about. I don’t care if you were a shitty kid, or if you’re rude sometimes, or if your Galra genes make you act funny, or what weird shit you eat for breakfast- no, wait. That’s not the right way to say it. I *do* care. I care what you eat for breakfast so I can make you that thing for breakfast, I care about your Galra side because I want to be there for you no matter what happens, and I care about your shitty, shitty childhood because I care about *you*. Because I care about all the times I couldn’t hold or comfort you. I care, Keith, a lot. Just not in the way you think I do.”

Lance stopped, looking down at Keith, who was watching him with wide eyes. He cleared his throat awkwardly.

“We good?”

“Uh...” Keith blinked rapidly. “Yeah. We... we’re good.”

They stared at each other. Lance’s heart felt like it was racing a little too fast.

“I like, really like you,” he said dumbly. “If you... like, if you couldn’t tell.”

“No, I... think I can,” said Keith.

He traced a little circle on Lance’s neck.

“I like you to,” he mumbled. “Like your laugh.”

Lance grinned, and Keith knew that teasing look, because he was already trying to struggle out of his arms.

“Aw, and there I thought you were only into me for my looks.”

“Oh my god, don’t ruin the moment!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” Lance pleaded, as Keith toppled out of his hold, laughing at him exasperatedly. “Didn’t realise you had such an aversion to talking about my-“

“Stop,” said Keith.

“Are you into me for my intellect alone? Is sleeping with me all a ruse-“

“*Stoop*,” Keith whined, trying to cover Lance’s mouth but laughing as he did.

They sat back, laughing, feeling the purr of the blue lion around them, happy to see the paladins that way. Lance sighed.

“We should go tell the others you’re alright. They’re probably worried sick.”

Keith nodded. "Yeah."

A pause.

"Thank you, Lance. Thanks for... for doing that. For me."

"What? Kicking Carma's ass?"

Keith smiled at him fondly. "You saved my life."

Lance throat felt a little constricted but he nodded.

"Y-yeah man, anytime."

Keith looked on the verge of saying something, but before he could, a distressed sort of hum from the blue lion filled the air. Lance frowned, steadying himself with his hands as the cockpit shook a little, like Blue was trying to tell them something.

"Blue, what's up girl?"

Another distressed signal, and Lance and Keith locked eyes. They reached for each other's hands, and Lance realised the moment their fingers met what Blue was trying to show them. *Another memory*. His fingers closed around Keith's, and the world went black.

It was the same as arriving in the first memory; Lance's vision was swimming, like he was stuck underwater. This time though, he could feel Keith holding his hand, and knew the pair of them were arriving together in the lamp lit room of the desert shack. Images swam before them, noises bled together. Lance squinted through the hazy lamplight, at the small bedroom before them. In later years this room was filled with junk and old experiments, he knew from the times he'd seen the shack. Now though, it was a bedroom, with a cot pushed against the wall and a blanket laid out on the floor sporting a tiny baby. Lance took in the sight of baby Keith, his dark mop of hair and bright, violet eyes swimming as the memory struggled to clear. There was a little purple figure crouched before him, their fingers dancing above the baby's eyes.

"It's okay baby."

It was a child's voice, like a toddler. There was shouting coming from someplace else, perhaps outside, an argument he could hear but was too distant to understand. Lance was rooted to the spot, just staring, because-

"Mama and I have to go," said the little figure.

It was a girl, a Galra girl, or something of that sort. She was little and purple, with darker hair and ridges atop her head. Keith whimpered, and she dropped a hand to his head, tenderly stroking the baby's hair away from his eyes. He kicked, tiny fingers reaching out to grasp her own.

"I'll miss you, baby," the toddler cooed. "But I'm going to give you this."

She waved a piece of fabric above Keith, and the baby watched it with wide, curious eyes. Lance's heart stopped. It was Keith's bandana.

"You can take mine, and I'll take yours."

The toddler took great care in wrapping the bandana around Keith. He moved his tiny little limbs, fascinated by the piece of material, while the girl slipped another, almost identical piece into her



pocket.

“That way we won’t forget each other,” the girl said happily.

A bang sounded outside, and her head shot up, giving Lance a clear view of her face. He already knew, he knew when he first saw her, really, but now it solidified like rock. Keith gasped, clutching his hand; Lance had almost forgotten he was there.

“I have to go, Keith,” said Acxa, and Lance’s heart was beating far, far too fast.

She stuck out a podgy hand, patting the baby’s cheek once more. Lance saw the bit of bandana sticking out of her pocket; it read *K.K.*

“I love you baby,” she said. “I know we will see each other.”

Someone called her name, but by the time she looked up, the world was already dissolving.

Lance fell back against the floor with a gasp, his eyes flying to Keith, who sat across from him, stunned. They stayed there, breathing hard. The blue lion had gone silent.

“You...” said Lance.

Keith’s eyes were wide; *he never knew.*

“She’s your sister,” said Lance. “Acxa’s your sister.”

## Chapter End Notes

Next chapters a turning point I guess?

## Chapter Notes

Thanks for being patient again guys!! Sorry if this chapter sucks, I just emerged from the haze of midterms so thank you for waiting  
 And you guys leaving comments? I love you guys. I'm gonna serenade you all thank you

Chapter summary

?

(seriously I wrote it drunk)

??

Carma

But more Carma than usual

Idk how I feel about this chapter, so hope its alright to read <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

It was cold in the castle at four in the morning. Lance could see the time blinking at him angrily from over Keith's shoulder, the digits glowing a fierce green. Keith always made sure to sleep on the side of bed nearest the door, trapping Lance in against the wall, still afraid he'd go wandering off in his sleep. The red paladin was asleep now, sleeping better than he had in *months*. Lance couldn't remember the last time he'd looked so peaceful, or fallen asleep so easily. It may have been when they'd first started sharing a bed, before Keith was possessed, before he'd wake at random intervals in the night to cry over the marks on his skin or shoot out of bed, struggling to breathe.

Lance propped his head up on his arm, reaching out with the other to brush over Keith's bare shoulder. His skin wasn't as cold as it sometimes was, or as feverish; it felt normal. He swallowed around the lump that rose in his throat. Carma was gone. Not entirely, she was still waiting for them on the Dark Planet; but Lance could sense she no longer resided in Keith.

He thought back to the previous day, to the process required to rid Keith of Carma. All the memories had been intense, and draining, possibly why Keith slept so soundly now. Still, nothing had compared to that last one...

Keith and Acxa were siblings. Acxa was Keith's older sister. She might have had a different father, Lance didn't know, but ultimately they shared the same mother; she'd known him as a baby. Keith had begged him not to tell the others, not yet; he didn't want Acxa being dragged into this mess. It was another variable out of their control, the more they could keep under wraps the better. And, after all the things Keith had kept a secret for Lance... he couldn't refuse.

Lance lifted his wrist, eyeing the bandana tied snugly around it. Keith still hadn't asked for it back, even after the revelation that it once belonged to his sister, who still supposedly had his. Lance stared at the *A.K.* stitched onto it. Is that why Acxa had broken onto the ship? She was looking for

Keith? It would explain why she'd attacked Lance so viciously upon seeing Keith's bandana around his wrist; maybe she thought he'd taken it from Keith by force. Did that mean she cared about Keith? Did she want to help her brother? Just locate him? Lance's stomach churned; would she try and take him away? The possibility that their mother could still be alive...

Lance shut out those thoughts, trailing his fingers over Keith's cheek. He was beautiful; the way his lashes splayed over his cheeks, the peaceful expression on his face, the deep scar over his shoulder, all of it. The bruises were still all over his skin, but Lance reckoned they'd fade. Maybe scar a little, but Carma's influence was retreating already. He dragged the blanket up from Keith's hip to his shoulders, keeping him warm now that Lance had withdrawn his arms from around him.

*4:14*

It was getting late. If Lance wanted to act he had to do it now. Still... watching Keith sleep, it was hard to drag himself away. He ran a thumb over the other boy's lips, his chin, resisting the urge to tug his body closer and never let go. Lance hoped he'd have had his full of impassioned kisses last night, but it never seemed to be enough. Still, if he kissed Keith now he'd wake him, and then there'd be no getting out of this bed. Instead, he tucked a strand of hair behind Keith's ear, kissing the junction of his neck and shoulder before tucking the blanket in around his sleeping partner.

The floor was cold beneath Lance's feet, already an unwelcoming sign. He tugged his suit on quickly, being careful not to make much noise. His armour was waiting for him in the hangar along with his bayards. Lance squared his jaw, aching to just climb back into bed with Keith, wake him with soft kisses, just like last night, but slower, and sleepier. He turned away, untying the bandana from around his wrist. He set it down neatly on the table beside the bed, Keith's sleeping face burned into his vision. Lance grabbed for the pen, chewing on it as he thought. He didn't want Keith to wake up alone, the thought made him sick. Still, this was for Keith.

*Morning beautiful,* Lance wrote.

He added a little winky face after a moments thought, huffing as he did. Best to try and get a smile out of Keith before the panic set in.

*I'm coming back for this.*

Lance lay the bandana a little over the note, the fabric still warm from where it had been sitting against his skin.

*I love you.*

He stood, sparing one more glance at Keith and almost dying from the need to climb back into bed with him. Carma wasn't in him anymore. Carma couldn't hurt him anymore. The only place Carma could hurt him was the Dark Planet. Lance clenched his jaw, pressing his fingers to the bandana one last time, before walking from the room.

-

Lance had been sure to steal Pidge's earphones the night before. He didn't think he could do this without music playing loud enough in his ears to drown out the beat of his own heart and the voices in his own head screaming at him.

The castle halls were empty at this time of the morning. Lance made his way straight to the lab. His flight suit didn't provide too much warmth, making him miss his bed even more. He scratched at the scabs around the needles of the Lox, daring it to activate. Even if it did, he didn't think it

would matter. Not for very long.

Hunk's desk was strewn with bits of experiments, but Lance made his way past all that. At the back of the lab, the cooling room doors opened easily when he sent a shock through their system. Lance didn't register much as he stood in the cool confines of that room, opening a case and carefully lowering the missiles his friend had carefully designed into the clutches of the box. They were about the size of his arm, their metal cool to the touch. Lance tapped his feet to the rhythm of the music that was blaring so loud it hurt his ears. He didn't lower the volume, fearing if he did he might leave space in his head to think. Once he'd loaded up three of the missiles, Lance shut up the case and made his way toward the hangers.

The missiles were surprisingly light, given their size, so Lance didn't struggle too much with the case through the empty halls. Black purred warmly as he entered the hanger, and for the first time that morning, Lance felt something other than rigid fear. He smiled up at the lion, donning his armour before carefully loading the missiles into Black's weapons bay. When all that was done, he stepped back, gazing up at the lion.

"You ready, buddy?"

Black made a noise, something between a purr and a growl.

"Yeah," said Lance. "Exactly."

They launched soundlessly from the hanger a minute later. Lance pulled up a number of screens, monitoring their progress, clenching his fists as he watched the castle retreat behind them. Black purred reassuringly in his mind, and Lance's smile wavered. Stashing his fear, he flicked a button on the consuls, beginning a recording.

"Captain's log," he said. "One hundred and fifty-three days left."

A deep breathe.

"We're finishing this today," he said. "We're heading to the Dark Planet."

Lance closed his hands over the controls, and Black tore off through space.

-

The first distress signal arrived after only two hours. Lance sighed; that meant Keith hadn't slept for as long as he'd hoped. Begrudgingly he shut off the music that had been blaring through the cockpit and answered the incoming voice call.

*"Lance! Where are you? What are you doing?"*

Lance sighed, rubbing at his eyes.

"Morning princess," he said.

*"Don't 'morning princess' me," Allura snapped, and Lance was honestly too tired to ask what was wrong with that response. "Keith just came running into my room saying you were gone. So where are you? And where is the black lion?"*

"Yeah... change of plans," said Lance, scratching at the back of his neck. "Black and I are out on a little road trip. We should be back tomorrow... hopefully."

“*Lance*,” Allura warned.

Hoo boy, he was glad this wasn’t a video call.

“Where *are you?*”

“I’m on my way to the Dark Planet,” Lance answered honestly, figuring there was no point lying now. “I’m ending all this bullshit. Now.”

“*What?*”

“Sorry for not telling you, Allura, but... shits just gotta be done. You know?”

Allura sputtered wordlessly. Lance felt a little bad; the team was probably scared out of their minds. Still, he’d take it over the fear they’d feel when Carma finally came for them all.

“This isn’t a suicide mission, ‘Lura,” Lance said. “I’m coming back.”

“*Like hell*,” Allura yelled, and Lance couldn’t tell if she was crying or just angry. “*Tell me your coordinates right now, we’re coming to fetch you.*”

“Yeah, not happening,” said Lance.

He flicked a screen open on Black’s consul, just to ensure he’d definitely disabled the tracking device.

“Look, this one’s on me, alright?”

“*Where are you, Lance?*” Allura said, and it sounded like something she might say before kicking his ass halfway across the galaxy. “*Why isn’t the castle moving?*”

She was definitely crying, there was a heavy wobble to her voice.

“I, uh, wouldn’t try that at the moment,” Lance said. “Moving the castle.”

We wet his lips, careful to keep any emotion out of his voice.

“It usually needs a while to recover when the coolants jam.”

Allura sobbed, and Lance just caught the end of it.

“*Please, Lance*,” she said. “*Stop what you’re doing. Come back.*”

“I’m coming back,” he said. “But I’m doing this first.”

The speakers crackled; he was nearing the end of their signal.

“I’m, uh... I’m gonna loose contact pretty soon, I think.”

“*Please*,” said Allura. “*Please don’t do this.*”

“Okay princess, you take care now,” Lance said, biting down on the quiver in his voice. “Don’t get up to too much fun without me.”

“*Lance-*“

Black shut off the comms, and Lance sighed.

“Thanks buddy,” he breathed, wiping at the stray tear on his cheek. “You understand.”

He steadied his hands against the controls to calm the shaking in his body. Black purred reassuringly, and Lance managed a smile. *We’re in this together*, they seemed to be saying. *We both chose this, for the sake of the people we love.*

With the others no longer able to contact him, Lance set his focus on running checks of the system. He got up no less than five times to check the missiles were in place, running diagnostics on them, assessing Black’s operating system. Hours passed with nothing but the soft music coming from his headphones and Black’s warm presence to stimulate his mind. Lance chewed on the bar he’d brought while he practiced summoning water in and out of a cup, tapping his feet restlessly and pacing the small cockpit. He chatted to Black, tapped out little rhythms on the dash, almost nodded off a couple of times. At around the fifth hour of flying, he turned the captain’s log back on.

“So, we’re getting there,” Lance began. “I’d estimate about an hour or two.”

He breathed in deep, unconsciously reaching for his wrist where the bandana should have sat. He startled when he found it wasn’t there, biting on his lip. He knew he couldn’t have taken him with. In the event he didn’t return... well, it was one less thing he’d be taking from Keith. Lance shivered a little. *Keith*. He must have gone berserk when he woke to find Lance gone. The timing was less than ideal, Lance knew that, in fact the thought made him sick. He wondered if Keith considered it a betrayal, that Lance had stayed with him all night, whispering heartfelt promises into his skin, about loving him, and staying with him, only for him to disappear the next morning like a ghost.

But he meant it. He did want to stay with Keith. But staying meant more than sticking around after one emotional night; he wanted to *remain* a part of Keith’s life. He wanted to spend a whole lifetime with Keith. They couldn’t have that if Carma was still preying on Lance. He’d freed Keith from her clutches, now it was him who needed to escape the cycle. Both their futures depended upon it.

“It’s, uh, it’s dark,” said Lance, trying to connect with Black and keep Keith from his mind for the time being.

He frowned, gazing out the windows as he thought of a better way to phrase that.

“The... the stars are disappearing.”

Lance looked scared.

“They’ve been growing dimmer,” he said. “I... I didn’t think space could get darker. But it is. It’s...cold.”

Lance wrapped arms around himself. “We’re getting closer, I know. I can sense it. You can too, can’t you Black?”

The lion sounded in his mind, affirming that question.

“Guess that’s good though. Guess that’s what I wanted.”

Lance’s expression grew tight.

“I...I just didn’t expect it to be so dark.”

It was dark, unnaturally so. The stars seemed to flicker out as they plunged further into the

darkness; space had never seemed so *deep*. Lance straightened his shoulders, eyes set on a non-existent horizon as he reached for the controls.

“What do you say we speed this journey up a little, huh?”

-

The next time Lance spoke, they were a lot closer. He didn't look scared, though he felt it within; he looked confident, in a way he never had. It was a proud kind, a terrified kind, the type of confidence that said he had something to fight for. Lance steered Black carefully through the dark, eyes searching the dark expanse before them. His breath made little clouds of white; it was freezing within the cockpit. Outside... there was nothing. It was a type of darkness Lance could never have imagined. It felt thick, like space had melted around them into a sticky black substance that'd he'd suffocate in the second he stepped from his lion. Black's headlights and the little lights that lined the lion's paws seemed to dissipate after only a few feet, like space was eating them up. Lance had no sense of magnitude, or distance; there was nothing here, only darkness.

The chill in his bones wasn't only from his powers; it was *freezing*. He shivered slightly as he gripped the controls, his expression stern, jaw set and fingers flexing periodically around the throttles.

“Coming up on the Dark Planet,” Lance said.

He breathed in, out. Shutting his eyes, he could picture Keith, as he'd been no more than twelve hours prior. He balanced in Lance's lap, his bare skin flushed a pretty pink in stark contrast to the bluish hue of their room. Lance could almost hear his laugh, soft, unhurried, picking at every one of Lance's stupid jokes as if they had all the time in the world. Keith would lean down, kiss him, wait for Lance to speak before shifting his hips and stealing the words from both their lips.

Lance opened his eyes, clenching his jaw and fixing his sights ahead. That wouldn't be his last memory of Keith, no matter how fittingly sugar-sweet it seemed. No, Keith deserved more than a few shimmering happy moments, he deserved a fucking lifetime of them. Black purred loudly in his mind, approving of the thought.

“Coming up on the Dark Planet,” Lance repeated, his voice stronger now. “Visibility is at zero.”

He flicked a few buttons on the consul, gazing at the screen it brought up and typing co-ordinates into the box.

“I should be able to see the fucking thing, but obviously that's not happening.”

Lance looked over the screens, firm about his movements.

“Approaching the launch zone, though. These should work as a triplet. Carma's not doing shit if her planet's radioactive dust.”

Lance punched a series of digits into the consul.

“I've slowed us down,” he said. “We're fifty miles out.”

A deep, shuddering sigh. “This better fucking work.”

They kept up their approach. Lance could see nothing, no planet, no stars... he couldn't even see the dwarf star, which was wholly unsettling, given this was the same distance out from it as the castle. He'd just begun to plug in a second series of digits when the cockpit trembled. Lance set a

hand against the controls as it shuddered again.

“Black, you good buddy?”

Black made a confused noise in his head; they didn’t know what was happening either. Lance frowned, slowly lifting his hand from the consul now that the shaking had stopped. He only rested for a minute before the outside lights flickered and dimmed a little.

“Okay,” said Lance, sitting up straighter in his seat. “Weird shit’s begun.”

He brought up the controls for the lights, trying to ramp them up to full brightness again, cursing when the system refused him. The internal lights flickered, their brightness dying out, leaving Lance in a purple aura. He fixed his gaze out the window, glaring into the dark space before them. He dug his fingers into three switches on the consul, and for a second the headlights flared. They didn’t show anything, just more darkness ahead of them. Lance cursed as the lion began to tremble again, some unseen turbulence making for a shaky flight. Black growled, sensing something was amiss.

“Stay on track,” Lance muttered, keeping his eyes keenly peeled.

He glanced at the map.

“Thirty miles to launch.”

Releasing a shaky breath, Lance watched it freeze in the air before him. The shaking grew more insistent, like they were passing through a turbulent patch of air. *Maybe it’s the atmosphere*, Lance thought numbly, though logic was telling him he was further out than that. Still, maybe they’d underestimated its reaches.

“Twenty miles,” he said.

The lights in the cockpit dimmed to just a faint glow. Lance placed his helmet over his head, activating the visor. His fingers went to plug in the third series of digits, but the entire cockpit jolted roughly. Lance cursed, catching himself on his hands as Black lurched.

“Did we hit something?” He snapped.

His eyes flew to the window, but he couldn’t seem anything. Another, rougher hit; it felt like something had collided with the side of the lion.

“Black? I’m blind here, buddy.”

Black broadcast confusion. *So am I*. Lance glanced at the map; they were still ten miles out from the launch site. The lion was shoved harshly to the side, and Lance stumbled.

“Stay on course,” he ordered.

Lance staggered through the cockpit, bracing hands against the walls as the lights dimmed dangerously. The turbulence was constant, making the whole interior shake, the sound a little worrying. Little chinks of noise sprung up around them, like gravel was hitting the sides of the lion. Black jerked sideways suddenly, throwing Lance off his feet, and he caught sight of something sailing past the windscreen.

“Was that a rock?” He shouted.



Black was reeling, trying to dodge whatever was throwing them, but finding it was too thick to navigate through. Lance pushed himself to his feet, stumbling to the back of the cockpit, to a control panel for the missiles. He glanced over his shoulder at the map, blinking against the windscreen. *Seven miles.*

“Come on, Black,” he hissed.

The cockpit shuddered as something slammed into the lion, and Lance braced himself against the wall, his hands grappling with the launch screen.

*Five miles.*

The lights died completely for a moment, Black’s mechanics humming dangerously.

“Keep it up, buddy!” Lance called, punching numbers into the launch sequence.

Black pushed a warning into his head.

“I know, we’re nearly there.”

It felt like the lion was shaking apart the turbulence was so rough. Lance’s fingers shook as he finished the second sequence.

*Two miles.*

He was frowning, teeth chattering as the floor shook violently. Black was alive with noise, pleading for Lance to take a more sensible course of action. Lance plugged in the last code, gripping the wall and sending a pointed look toward the front of the lion.

“Keep going,” he ordered. “Come on!”

*One mile.*

Lance’s feet lifted from the floor a little as something hit the lion from underneath. It was if they were in a meteor field, but he couldn’t see a thing.

*Nine hundred metres.*

*Eight.*

“Prepare for launch!” Lance yelled.

Black growled in his mind. Lance flicked the safety switches, stumbling through the cockpit and colliding with the pilot’s chair. He took hold of the throttle, holding Black steady.

*Seven.*

*Six.*

“Engaging,” he said.

Black’s central screen lit up. Lance’s thumbs hovered over the trigger.

*Five.*

*Three-*

“FIRE!” Lance yelled.

He squeezed down on the triggers. Black dropped the bay doors, and the cockpit jolted as three missiles tore from the hold, one after the other in equal succession.

“Halt!”

The lion came to a sudden stop and Lance flung a hand out to stop himself hitting the screen. He stared into the dark, the hiss of the bay doors closing the only sound. He searched desperately for the missiles, but the darkness was too thick. Lance sat down slowly, hands squeezing the consul as he and Black waited. The cockpit trembled a little, but it was far calmer now that they’d stopped moving.

“Come on,” Lance whispered, waiting for the explosions.

Black was on edge, also waiting. Lance searched the inky darkness, holding his breath.

He nearly gasped when a distant explosion brought a slither of light to the scene. Miles away, a single explosion struck the surface. It burned a fierce red for a few seconds, and though it was soundless, Lance could almost picture the shockwave travelling away from it. It was *massive*. A second missile struck a little further along, its brief burst of light like the spark from a match. So very far away, but so very massive. Lance held his breath, waiting for the third and final missile to strike.

“Come on,” he said, unconsciously leaning forward.

Black’s energy was curled up tightly with anticipation. The darkness stared back at them, the two tiny flickers of red slowly dying.

“Where are you..?” Lance whispered.

The missiles worked as a trio, he needed it to hit. Black poked at his mind, but he shushed her. Lance squinted into the dark, his heart racing. The seconds felt as if they passed as minutes.

“Where...”

Lance’s voice caught. He leaned forward, struggling to see out the windscreen. There... there was something...

There was something headed towards them.

Black sent a puzzled emotion. Lance frowned. There was something heading toward them. *Shit*.

Lance fell back into his seat and grabbed the throttles. The object headed their way multiplied in size faster than he could blink.

“Shit!” He yelled.

The Black lion jerked to the side, Lance throwing them out of the projectiles path. They weren’t fast enough. His eyes widened. Black roared in his head.

The third missile collided with the black lion.

-

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The space they floated through was dark. Bits of debris knocked into Lance as he floated motionlessly in the cold void. Bits of metal painted black, white, and yellow hung like shards of glass. Lance drifted in and out of consciousness, never really coming too. There was a hum in his ears that wouldn't go away. His suit had shut down, feeding him oxygen, its lights dimming gradually. He hung there, in the balance, amid the debris of the black lion.

*Silence.*

This is what they all should fear; not Carma, not the Galra, but space. Cold, dark, infinite space. No sound, no light, no direction and no meaning. Lance could have drifted through it forever; his head couldn't make sense of it.

Blood trickled down his forehead, a crack in his visor just small enough not to let the oxygen out. Lance's eyes flickered open, but he wasn't sure if he was actually seeing, or just imagining. He couldn't hear *anything*. How long had he been there? The thought slipped as quickly as it came, his head throbbing, his mind fuzzy.

There was something drifting just inside his vision, a piece of debris perhaps. Lance couldn't move, he just let himself hang there, weightless. The object in his vision moved in, and Lance managed to tilt his head. His eyes widened, limbs twitching uselessly within his suit.

"Allita," he breathed, except his voice made no sound.

She hung there with him, no suit to protect her, just floating as she would in a pool of water. Lance's heart ached. She was his age. He blinked the tears from his eyes, reaching weakly for his sister.

No, he mouthed, touching the flakes of ice on her arms. He looked to her, pleading; she couldn't be out there, in the cold clutches of space. She smiled, and his heart stopped.

“No,” he said, forcing the word past his lips.

His voice was croaky, just a hoarse whisper. Allita drifted colder, taking his gloved hands in her own. She was silent, and still, but she gazed at him fondly. Lance began to cry. His sister frowned softly; she looked so much like their mother. So much like Lance. They were different, of course, but like his dream where they had both been sixteen, he could pick her out now as easily as he could’ve as a child.

*Allita*, he mouthed, clutching her hands. A heavy dress swarm around her, tickling the tops of her ankles. It looked like the one Lily had worn to the funeral, the one she wept into the sleeve of as they stood around an empty casket no taller than Lance.

She should have been the sun, out here. Lance always used to think that, that she was the sun, with her golden skin and eyes that shined. She shut them, and she seemed as grey as the debris that drifted around them. Allita pressed fingers to his helmet, and Lance shut his eyes.

His conscience betrayed him, dragging him down into his depths.

Flashes of light sprung up behind his eyelids from time to time. Lance didn’t think much of them, barely acknowledged them; his head just felt so *heavy*. He was probably going to die. He couldn’t process that thought right. He hung there for hours, stripped of every sense. When he finally fell into complete unconsciousness, it felt like he remained for hours.

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When Lance opened his eyes again, it felt like he’d woken from a good long sleep. There was a dull ache in the back of his skull, but he could see and hear and feel and *breathe*. He didn’t feel tired, even. He wondered if he was dead. Lance’s eyes slowly adjusted to the light, and immediately he grew confused. This was... sunlight. This was strange.

He got to his feet, finding he’d been lying in a patch of soft grass, beside... okay, mark him down as confused. It looked like he’d landed smack bang in the middle of a quaint bit of English countryside. Except... this wasn’t England. He knew that for two reasons: one, he was currently millions of light-years away from Earth, stuck around the pull of the Dark Planet, and two, England didn’t have pink grass.

Okay, pink was a bit of an overstatement, he’d admit. The grass was long and wispy, and looked as soft as cotton wool. It was a blend of pastel yellows and pinks, so washed out they were almost cream in colour. He stood in a field of it, that eventually gave way to hills, then tall, tall mountains. Impossibly tall. They looked so far away yet so massive Lance was dizzy. Above them, two pale moons hung in the blue sky. This... this was not Earth.

A smell hit him, and it was familiar. Lance’s head reeled for a second, before he named the culprit. Allura’s perfume. That’s what it smelt like. He looked down, and saw tiny flowers poking their heads out from some of the blades of grass. This definitely wasn’t Earth. Lance looked up, at the sky that was just a slightly different shade of blue, and across to the mountains that stood like hulking waves. He breathed in the scent of flowers. *This was Altea.*

He looked around, finding he was standing on the side of a dirt road, its muddy track marked up with the prints of wagon wheels and hooves that did not belong to any horse Lance had seen. He followed the track, finding he was standing just outside a small village. Feeling numb, Lance began to walk toward it. The houses were very quaint, made of white and grey speckled stones, their roofs all thatched. It felt medieval, somewhat, the wagon he passed on the street and the smoke billowing from stone chimneys and the herbs and animal skins laid out to dry over wooden fences.

It was very tidy.

Lance saw them then, the Alteans; but they didn't see him. A man lumbered past him with a stack of wood under one arm, and old woman beat at her mat with a stick. This didn't look like the Altea Allura had described.

Lance found himself drawn along the road, past the little cottages to the one at the other end of the village. It was a small one, but lead to some paddocks, where crops grew and a few creatures resembling small horses grazed. Vines decorated it's bleak exterior, and smoke puffed from the chimney. There were two girls playing out the front.

It was quiet in this village, peaceful. The chime of a bell and squeak of wagon wheels down the road were the only things to disturb the silence. Lance grew closer to the girls, stepping over the little stonewall, drawn in by the scene. They weren't as young as he'd first assumed, fifteen perhaps. Still, they were playing around in the mud as joyfully as a pair of children would, erecting sticks into a little fortress, their hands all dirty. Lance felt a small smile tugging at his lips, before one of the girls turned, and his blood ran cold.

He knew these girls. He knew this place.

Carma acted out a silly scene with the sticks, and Callio threw her head back and laughed.

Lance's world flipped on its head.

He resisted running for the hills. They couldn't see him, evidently; he doubted he was there at all. This was... this felt scarily similar to Keith's memories. The twins continued to play, oblivious to his presence. Carma's hair was done in a braid that swept over her shoulder, her face still that of a child, with a wide smile and genuine delight in her eyes. Callio looked similar in some ways, different in others. Her hair was paler, wrapped into a braided bun atop her head, and though she looked a little smaller and weaker than her sister, when she laughed her smile was no less animated. Their dresses were old, *little house on the prairie* type old, Lance thought. He just stood there, staring, until Carma raised her head.

For a terrifying moment, Lance thought she was staring at him. His knees hit the wall, and he startled when an animal canted behind him. He whipped around, coming face to face with a shaggy looking beast, a little like a bison, with grey fur and an elongated nose. Lance blanched.

It wasn't til the girl seated atop the animal cleared her throat that he realised she was who Carma was staring at.

"What are you doing?"

Lance frowned. This new girl's voice rung out like a bell, words clipped and accentuated, almost pompously so. She sounded almost... Scandic? Lance couldn't put a name to the accent. He looked back at the twins. Carma had gotten to her feet and was gazing at the animal, her hands wound behind her back while Callio watched from her place on the ground, picking at their stick fortress and squinting at the girl atop the animal.

"We're playing," said Carma, and Lance found her accent matched.

Her voice was a little teasing, a little testy. There was something in her eyes that spoke of humour. He heard a huff from the girl atop the bison, and took a few steps back, trying to see what the hell was happening. Lance nearly fell flat on his arse.

This new girl was decked out in animal furs and leather, like old hunting attire, except she wasn't

quite big enough to fit it. She looked maybe sixteen, with yellow hair and a righteous expression. Aryon, warrior of the Long Isles, flicked the harness of the bison as it began to munch on the grass growing thinly from between the cracks in the wall. Lance took a long time staring at her; this was his great great great great- no, actually he couldn't count it, grandmother. She stuck out her chin, raised a brow in Carma's direction, and asked, very stiffly:

"Aren't you a little *old* to be playing in the dirt?"

Carma smirked, faking innocence.

"Aren't you a little young to be parading around like an aristocrat on a *bisol*?"

Callio hid a chuckle in her sleeve, and Aryon glared at Carma. Her gaze wasn't hateful thought, it was almost... curious.

"I'll have you know I was awarded this title," she said.

And Carma nodded like this was Big News.

"What are you playing?" Aryon asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

"Why don't you come down here and find out?"

For a moment Aryon hesitated, and it was clear Carma thought she'd remain on the bison, or bisol, as she'd called it. But then, with an indignant huff, she swung her legs over and hopped neatly off the animal. Carma struggled to hide her shock for a moment, but smirked when Aryon came to stand before her; the older girl was shorter, despite her regal aura.

"What are you playing?" She repeated.

Carma shrugged. "A game."

"You know it's my duty to patrol this village, so you ought to tell me--"

"What are you going to do," Carma asked in that sing-song voice of hers. "Report us to your father because we were playing with sticks--"

"She is probably just curious."

Aryon glanced in the direction of the voice, which came from over Carma's shoulder. The first twin huffed, keeping her eyes trained on Aryon as Callio struggled to her feet.

"We're building a little fort," Callio continued. "Like we saw in a book."

She made her way toward her sister, leaning a little heavily on one foot. Aryon's expression lightened a little; Callio was a lot friendlier than her sister.

"I'm Callio," she said, and held out a hand. "What are you doing in our village?"

"I'm Aryon, I..." but Aryon stopped.

She was staring at Callio's hand, where dark bruises circled her wrists.

"What is wrong with you?" She asked.

"Nothing is wrong with her," Carma snapped.

Suddenly she'd forced herself between the two, glaring Aryon down with hands on her hips.

"I'm... sorry?"

Aryon was frowning.

"I didn't mean to offend you--"

"Why don't you go away," Carma suggested rudely.

"Carma..." Callio tried.

"I think you have more important things to look at, huh?"

Aryon looked between the twins, a little bit of hurt written in her expression.

"Okay..." she said after a moment. "I am sorry for interrupting your game."

"It's fine," Callio murmured, but Carma continued to glare.

Reluctantly, the older girl returned to the bisol, hopping back atop the saddle and never giving the twins a second glance. Carma and Callio watched her go, arguing lightly about the situation. Callio looked a little put-off by her sisters hostility, but they returned to their game soon enough. The last thing Lance saw before the memory faded was the pair crouching on the ground, Carma's hands resting over Callio's as the latter murmured, *show me how to do it again*. A flower sprouted from the mud between Callio's fingers, and the memory fell away.

When Lance woke again, he was still on Altea. He felt so much peace, he couldn't seem to remember the explosion, or the Dark Planet, or indeed anything. He was just content to be, carefully curious. He stood in a wooden building with a high ceiling and open rafters. It was warm, cosy even. It looked like a tavern of sorts; warm firelight lit the room, animal skins lay as rugs, and somewhere there was music playing. Lance could still smell Allura's perfume, and when he looked, bunches of the same dried flowers were hanging from the roof.

There was someone standing beside him, and when Lance looked, Carma was there, leaning against the wall and watching the crowd mill and dance about in the crowded tavern. She stifled a sigh as someone plonked their back against the wall beside her.

"If it isn't my favourite regal procession," she muttered, and the girl beside her laughed dryly.

"So you do remember me."

"Irritating people are hard to forget," said Carma.

She turned her head to the side, raising a brow. "*Aryon*."

Aryon smiled tipsily, her cheeks flushed red from the drink in her hand.

"You're Carma, aren't you?"

"No, I'm Callio."

"Nah, Callio was the nice one."

"Then why aren't you talking to her?" Carma muttered, gazing out at the crowd.

Aryon shrugged, swirling the drink around her cup. "She was having so much fun dancing."

"So I'm the substitute."

The blonde girl frowned, peering at Carma.

"Are you going to take everything I say the wrong way?"

"Depends," said Carma.

"On what?"

"On what you have to say."

Aryon paused, gnawing on her lip and gazing at Carma, though the other refused to meet her eyes.

"I think we got off to a bad start."

"Really? I thought it was pretty average," Carma mumbled.

"How do I get off to a good start with you?"

Carma finally relented and met the other's eye.

"Try."

Aryon sighed, her gaze flitting to the crowd.

"I'm sorry if I upset you by bringing up Callio's disease," she said quickly. "I just- my father has a good physician, I thought maybe he could take a look-"

"It's incurable," Carma said.

Aryon stared at her for a long time. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. It's just part of who she is. It's inevitable."

Aryon averted her gaze, staring sadly into her cup.

"Sorry."

The silence stretched between them, until Carma let go a long-suffering sigh.

"What are you drinking?" She asked eventually.

"Oh," Aryon perked up at the question. "Nunvil. Try some."

She held out the cup. Carma eyed it warily as she took it from her fingers, sniffing the liquid before taking a sip. She started coughing immediately, shoving the cup back at Aryon, who promptly burst into laughter.

"It's disgusting," Carma spluttered.

"It's not very nice, is it?" Aryon snickered.

"I thought you were meant to be protecting this village."



Aryon's snorted, and Carma smiled properly for about the first time. They fell into silence again, but it wasn't uncomfortable now. Aryon took another sip of her drink, cringing just a little as it went down.

"So can you do anything?" Aryon asked suddenly, swinging round a little too fast and swaying on her toes.

Carma frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Powers," Aryon drawled.

She swirled her drink slowly, staring into Carma's eyes.

"Callio makes things grow; do you make things die?"

Carma scrunched her nose, and Aryon immediately picked up on the clue.

"Sorry," she stuttered. "That was... inappropriate."

Carma looked a little hurt by her words, her body language growing cold again.

"I think that's private," she said.

"It's alright if you don't have a power--"

"I said it's private."

Aryon bit her lip, glancing down.

"I'm sure you have *such* a cool power," Carma muttered.

Aryon shrugged, tapping her nails against the cup.

*I can do this.*

Carma nearly leapt a foot into the air. She whipped around, staring at Aryon, who giggled, tilting a little on her feet.

"What did you do?" She demanded.

*What did I do?*

Lance heard the question too, but in his head. Aryon's lips hadn't moved. Carma's jaw dropped, and Aryon continued to chuckle.

"Don't worry," she said. "I can't read your mind. I can just... project myself."

"That's strange," Carma murmured, staring at her with wide eyes.

"You're impressed."

"No I'm not."

"Yes," Aryon said, and she was laughing as she nodded. "You are."

Carma's eyes narrowed. "You *can* read my mind."

Aryon shook her head. “No. But I can sense emotion. It’s how I knew Callio was ill. It’s... fluid. I feel fluid.”

She grinned, rocking back and forth on her heels. “I’m like water.”

“It’s still weird,” Carma assured, but she was trying to hide a smile.

*You’re still impressed.*

“Obviously,” Carma muttered. “Powers are incredible gifts.”

*You seem impressive enough without them.*

Carma whipped around, her cheeks filling with colour. Aryon grinned.

“Now you’re flustered.”

“I... I am going to check on my sister,” Carma spluttered.

She looked between Aryon and the crowd a couple of times before nodding and ducking into the mass of bodies, Aryon smiling after her. Lance knew he should be confused, knew this didn’t seem quite right... but his head felt too foggy. The darkness took him again, and he went easily.

The following memories weren’t as clear to Lance, as though whoever was showing them to him had exerted everything trying to give him a basis, and now... they blurred a little. But he knew who he was looking at, even if voices faded in and out and faces darkened before he could finish reading their expression.

Carma and Callio were seated out in the field, a heavy shawl over Callio’s shoulders that danced in the breeze. She pressed her fingers into the dirt.

“You can do it,” Carma said.

Her voice was soft like the breeze that carried it and the fog in Lance’s head. Callio was biting her lip in concentration. The clouds were heavy above them; it looked like it may rain soon. Lance could smell it in the air.

“Come on,” Carma urged, and placed her hand gently over her sister’s. “Just let it go.”

Callio’s expression lightened as a tiny bud pushed its way out of the earth, unfurling a tender leaf. She gasped, a small smile dancing on her lips, which Carma returned.

“Now give me your hand,” she said.

Lance didn’t hear Callio’s reply, the voices were fading. Her expression though, she looked doubtful. Carma’s face grew soft, understanding. Lance failed to decipher the words she was mouthing.

The next moment they were back in the town, in the square, and Lance watched from beside the twins as Aryon stepped up onto the wooden stage. A proud-looking man placed a hand on her shoulder, and she beamed up at him. An elder woman draped flowers around her neck. Noise was fluid here, but Lance knew the crowd was cheering. Aryon smiled at them, albeit a little awkwardly, but it grew more confident as they cheered her on.

The elder woman was saying something. She held up Aryon’s hand, the one gripping a sword, and the crowd applauded. Carma was jostled by the man beside her, and when she looked back to the

stage, Aryon was watching her. She smiled, the slight blush on her cheeks visible only to Lance. There was something personal shared between them then, something the rest couldn't hope to hack into, even as Aryon waved to them all.

Callio grabbed a hold of Carma's arm, saying something excitedly, but Carma's smile faltered for a second. Her sister didn't notice. Carma's eyes went searching for Aryon again, and the memory dissolved into the darkness of her irises.

Flashes, whispers, Lance couldn't keep track. His head was starting to throb. He felt like sleeping, though he already knew he couldn't be conscious. Still, a deeper rest called to him, telling him to shut his eyes, to let go, and forgot. He forced himself to hold on, trying to will in the desperation, to remember what he was seeing, what it meant. Because Carma and Aryon were out in the hills beyond the farm, by a river that stole the light from the stars as it wound its way through the twilight. And when their hands found each other Lance was sure he saw it, but by the time their lips touched the memory was lost in the blink of an eye as he fought to stay awake.

Callio was there before him, curled in on herself in the bed. Her nails dug into the marks on her arms, and she cried. Like Keith. *Like Keith, like Keith, like Keith*. The thought of him forced Lance to stay focused.

"Give me your hand," Carma said.

Her voice was muffled, but understandable. Callio shook her head. Sweat glistened on her forehead, and her body shook with sobs. She gripped the sheet with white knuckles and pushed herself into the corner of the bed.

"Callio," said Carma.

She was stern, but *kind*. And Lance didn't understand.

"Callio."

Carma dabbed sweat off her sister's forehead, pity in her eyes. She took her hand.

"It's not okay," said Callio.

She shook her head. "It's not."

"It is."

Carma smiled. Callio hugged her.

"You're my sister," said Carma. "I won't abandon you."

Lance's head was aching now. Aryon's face swam before him. Her eyes were almost gold; the freckles on her cheeks and her yellow hair, the dimples her cheeks made when she smiled. She was like the sun.

"Callio makes things grow," she said. "Do you make them die?"

Lance could almost feel the panic that ran through the next memory. He could feel the blood roaring through Carma's veins, the blinding terror as she gripped the cabinet in her bedroom. She was breathing hard and fast, unable to control it. She peeled up the sleeve of her shirt. A dark bruise had sprouted around her wrist.

The next memory struck something in Lance, because he knew it. He'd seen the picture, it was the first time he'd ever seen the trio. There were villagers gathered around him in the calm twilight, lanterns strung between trees and cottages. *On the eve of their birthday*. That's what that caption had said. Lance blinked away the flash of an old-fashioned camera, and the girls who'd been standing like statues beside him dissolved into laughter and chatter.

They were young adults now, Carma, Aryon, and Callio. Lance took a while just staring at them, at their smiling faces, at the drinks that passed between their hands, at the warm firelight that danced over their cheeks, illuminating the dark patches curling around Callio's jaw. Lance stared at the subtle way Aryon and Carma's hands found each other, pinkies hooked together under the shine of stars and lanterns and-

When the darkness took Lance again, it was heavy. He had to fight to wake from it, and when he did, Carma was in tears. Aryon was staring at her, her eyes wide and afraid, so concerned yet...

Carma was shouting. Aryon's eyes darted between the other woman's face and the dark bruises on her palm. She said something, but Lance didn't understand. He watched the conversation unfold, trying desperately to read their lips. Aryon looked confused. She moved toward Carma, trying to speak rationally, and the latter shoved her back. She stumbled, catching herself on a table, and Carma's eyes went wide.

More words poured from her lips. Aryon's eyes watched warily as she moved her hand, the bruises carrying disease littering her arm now. And Lance wished he could understand what was being said, was desperate to hear the words. He fought to wake up, to stop floating in this useless abysses where sound would reach him as if he were underwater. Aryon shook her head; tears spilt from Carma's eyes.

*Please*. Aryon's lips formed the words. And then, a second later-

"Please."

"I can't."

That was Carma.

"Don't lie to me," Aryon stressed, angry and desperate all the same.

"I can't-"

Carma stopped herself, sobbing a little. Aryon shook her head; there were tears in her eyes too.

"Then say you're telling the truth," she spat, but her voice trembled at the same time. "Why'd you do it? *Why* did you-"

"How can you even ask me that?" Carma yelled.

There was fire in her eyes now, the kind Lance knew, the kind he'd seen in the pictures of her.

"How-" she spluttered. "How could I n-not. When she-"

"What about *you*?" Aryon shouted back. "W... what about us, Carma? *Why*?"

Carma shook her head, nails biting into the counter she leant against.

"You weren't lying, were you?" Aryon whispered.

Carma bit her lip, hard enough to bleed.

“You can’t...”

A pause.

“It was Callio-“

“Don’t bring her into this!” Carma hissed.

Aryon’s expression contorted, anger and sadness and a whole number of unreadable things.

“She’s already a part of it,” Aryon hissed.

“I know!” Carma bit back. “She did this, how could I not know?”

“No,” Aryon said, shaking her head. “No, you did this to yourself.”

Carma’s expression twisted, but it all fell away before Lance could see.

A bitter wind hit his skin, dust teasing his naked eyes as the gust ripped dirt from the ground. Carma struggled out in the fields, tugging on the reigns of a bisol as she tried to coax the animal to move. Heavy ploughing equipment was attached to the bisol, and Carma’s heels dug into the mud as she urged the animals onwards. Lance didn’t know what he was meant to take from this memory, from any of them. Only that it felt lonely. Carma felt lonely.

He blacked out for a second, and when he came too, his head was throbbing. The sun beat down on him, Carma’s fingers fumbled with the sewing needle in her lap. She sat in the yard of their little cottage, her hands shaking as she tried to thread needle through the torn cloth she held.

Laughter reached Lance’s ears, and he followed Carma’s stormy gaze to the pair of people standing a few hundred feet away in the fields. Callio and Aryon. They were much too far away to hear words, but Lance could see they were talking. And laughing. Carma hissed as the needle pricked her finger.

They were at the table in the cottage kitchen, which smelt of herbs and spice and faintly of earth. The night outside was dark, but there was a gas lamp burning in the corner. Carma was staring at the book she held, her eyes not really reading anything. Callio sat to her right, the bruises prominent but a genuine smile on her face as she chattered away. Carma’s fingers tightened around the book. Her nails bit into the cover. Lance couldn’t hear what Callio was saying at first, but he knew the shape her lips made. *Aryon*.

Curls fell across Carma’s face, hiding her expression from her sister. There were bruises up to her elbows now, tainting her brown skin. Callio smiled to herself, staring dreamily at the burning lamp, talking softly and excitedly. Carma stood abruptly, her chair screeching against the stone floor as sound returned to Lance.

“I’m going to bed,” she said.

Callio’s look of confusion and disappointment was the last thing Lance saw.

The roof came off the barn in a storm. Carma cut her hand open trying to fix it. One of the bisol wandered from its paddock, and Lance followed Carma through the forest as she searched for it. She scribbled notes in a book, in a language this memory could not decipher for him. It felt like he knew her, each second he spent around her, it felt as if Carma was soaking into his blood.

Aryon danced with Callio in the village tavern, to joyful music and the chatter of people around them. When they kissed at the end, the villagers applauded the shy couple. Carma slunk from the building like a shadow into the dark night.

Callio's room was emptied one day. Carma stood at the doorway, staring at the bare shelves and neatly made bed. Her sister grinned widely at her as she and Aryon set off in a little wagon. Carma forced herself to smile. Only Lance heard her screaming at the bare walls once they'd left, tossing the clay vase Callio had made against the floor and falling to her knees once it shattered.

They grew older little by little. Lance's head throbbed, but he forced himself to stay awake. Callio sat at their kitchen table, back in the cottage that belonged to only Carma now. Her sister was yelling, her hands making animated movements. And Lance had to know, he *had* to.

"You ruined my *life*!" Carma shouted.

It hurt to focus, hurt to listen. Callio shrunk into her chair, her hands bunching nervously in her dress.

"You, y-you ruined my life," Carma sobbed.

"Carma--"

"*How could you!*"

The words that tore from Carma's lips were so vile, so potent, that Lance slipped for a second, sound disappearing. When it came back, Carma was on her knees crying.

"I didn't know," Callio pleaded.

There were tears in her eyes. She looked weak, sickly, but still more put together than her sister.

"Carma, I didn't know. I didn't know you and her..."

Carma wiped the tears from her cheeks, glaring at her sister through the devastation that threatened to overcome her.

"You ruined my life," she whispered, and the words vanished in a sob.

Callio shook her head, starting to cry. "I love her. I can't change that. A-and she loves me, now."

Carma took several deep breaths. There were bruises along her neck.

"You took everything from me," she said. "You took everything."

Callio looked like the words broke her heart.

"Carma..."

"Leave," her sister spat.

Callio shook her head.

"Leave!" Carma insisted. "I don't want to see you, I don't want you! Go!"

Lance grasped at the ends of the memory as it disappeared like fog. He was hurting, confused, but too delirious to really think. Callio was smiling widely in his eyes as Aryon lifted her neatly from

the wagon, her dress cascading down around her. Lance knew this memory too, he'd seen the picture, seen how happy Callio and Aryon looked at their wedding. He looked beside him, at the woman with dark, dark hair that hid a portion of her face. Carma looked sick to the stomach. He blacked out.

She was older the next time Lance came to. She was older and...

"Get out!"

He heard the words, loud and clear. They were in the cottage, the smell of herbs and spices tainted by something bitter.

"Get out!" Carma screamed, and she shoved at the man in the doorway.

There were tears in her eyes, but they were barely noticeable, not beneath the fury that bled from her being. The man was obscured by the shadows cast by the gas lamp, Lance couldn't see his face. He tried saying something, but Carma screamed. She shoved at him, pushing him further toward the door, and he held up his hands in frustrated surrender.

"Go!" She spat. "Get out!"

The door slammed shut. Carma sank against the wall, head in her hands. She was crying. She was pregnant.

Lance blinked and still time passed. Carma scoured over book sprawled across the kitchen table. She still felt lonely.

A storm shook the shutters on the windows, rain thudding against their thatched roof. Carma was hunched over a screaming baby, trying to hush it desperately.

"Stop crying," she pleaded.

She looked on the verge of tears herself. Lightning struck and thunder clapped, and she cringed as her child screamed.

The memory changed, and Lance blinked fog out of his eyes. The village was cloudy, and two women stood arguing in an alley. *Carma and Callio*. Lance knew this too, from the picture taken of them. They were talking in furious whispers, flinching at each other's words. It was now Lance realised that the basket Carma held was not just filled with herbs and plants, but a tiny sleeping baby.

"You have to let me," Carma hissed.

Callio reeled when she grabbed her hand, Carma's nails digging into her skin.

"You have to, you need to--"

"Let go," Callio demanded, eyes darting around the alleyway skittishly.

"Callio, you'll die--"

"I don't need you anymore," Callio snapped.

She ripped her hand from Carma's, glaring her sister down. Carma stuttered soundlessly, her mouth opening and closing. Callio glanced down at the baby.

"I'm glad to see your son," she said, and Carma just stared. "I hope he won't inherit the same disease."

"*Inherit*," Carma stuttered. "Callio-"

Callio turned from her sister, and Lance's vision swam.

When his vision cleared again, Lance's blood ran cold. They were back in the small village, standing in the streets as a bitter wind drew storm clouds in overhead. All the villagers were gathered in a tight circle around a stationary wagon, crowding to see what lay within. Various cries echoed from the crowd, mothers hurried to cover their children's eyes. Lance looked beside him, to Carma, and found her eyes transfixed by the scene. The wagon, which held... he shivered.

There was a body loaded onto it, but it was no ordinary corpse. Lance felt a chill go through him; the husk of a person that lay within the wagon couldn't have been very old, yet it was as if they'd just... been drained. Their skin was all shrivelled, dark and covered in mud, their eyes dry and unseeing. Lance looked away; there were some things he could go without seeing. Carma raised her head at the arrival of another wagon. A woman leapt out, her blonde hair cascading over her shoulder as she strode through the crowd to get a better look at the body.

Aryon's face paled as she took in the sight of what was once a person. *Murder*. The whispers carried on the tongues of the villagers. Carma ignored Aryon; her eyes travelled to the second woman, still seated on the wagon. Callio looked petrified, mortified by the sight of the body, but she met Carma's eyes when she felt her sister's gaze on her. They locked eyes, a standoff. Callio's brow furrowed slightly, her lips parting as a wave of realisation washed over her. Carma's expression remained dormant and calculating. *Murder murder murder*. She raised her chin, backing away, out of the crowd and away from the body.

This was the first then, Lance realised. The first of Carma's kills. Had Callio realised, all the way back then? His head throbbed, threatening to black out as he stumbled after Carma, desperate for another clue. He tripped, landing on his knees, and when he managed to open his eyes the scene had changed.

Carma sat in the cottages crowded kitchen by candlelight, pouring over pages from the books scattered around her. Plants were strung from every inch of wall, drying and filling the room with their sweet scent. She looked weary and strung-out, dark lines beneath her eyes. She looked ill. The small patter of feet alerted her to the presence of someone by the door.

"Ma?"

Carma's head shot up. There was a little boy of four or so standing there, with eyes like Carma's and darker, shaggier hair. His mother slammed the book she had open shut, abruptly standing and making a shooing motion with her hands.

"Out," she muttered, but there wasn't much hostility to it. "Back to bed, now, what did I tell you?"

"But I can't sleep," the child complained.

Lance caught sight of him as Carma whisked him up, carrying the boy swiftly from the room and casting a nervous glance back toward her work. Realising the opportunity he had, Lance lunged for the book she'd had open, but his vision was overtaken by black spots before he could read a word.

The sleep felt longer this time, harder to wake from. What happened if Lance couldn't wake at all? What was the point of all these memories if he was just going to die? Or was it just another one of



Carma's cruel tricks? These were her memories, after all. Lance forced his eyes to open. They were in the town; the boy who stood by Carma's side was older now, ten perhaps. Carma gazed at the scene unfolding in the centre of the square.

Two women occupied the stage, as well as the town's elderly leader. Aryon beamed as she met Callio's eye, cradling a baby in her arms.

"We are here to celebrate!" Their mayor announced. "Joy and prosper, to the third child of Aryon of the Long Isles, and her wife, Callio!"

Carma and her son were jostled by the people around them, who were overcome with excitement. Carma fixed her eyes on the baby, her eyes flittering to her sister, who gazed lovingly at the child her wife held. Something bitter flickered in Carma's eyes. She touched a hand to her son's shoulder, steering them away.

"Ma, aren't we going to speak to them?"

Carma said nothing, just tugged him along, back out of the square.

"Ma--"

"Amdion," she said. "We are going."

Her son, Amdion, looked conflicted, but followed her. Carma cast a look behind her, eyes trailing over the baby, before locking on her sister. Callio was watching her. The latter's expression fell a little. Carma didn't wait around after that.

There were streaks of grey in Carma's hair the next time Lance saw her. Her skin was patchy with bruises, and she looked weaker. It was winter now, he could tell by the thin snow settled on the ground, and the thick coats the villagers wore as they mourned the passing of a wagon lumped with dirtied bones. Carma barely spared the wagon a glance. Amdion trudged along beside her, a teenager now, similar to his mother in many ways. Dark eyes flitted back to the wagon once they'd passed, snow littered on the dark curls of his hair. He flinched at the hateful looks the villagers sent after them.

"They think it's you, ma," he whispered, shoving hands into his pockets.

Carma walked on, her boots leaving indents in the snow as she passively ignored the looks they were getting.

"They are looking at us--"

"They have always looked at us. An unwed mother, what do you expect?"

Amdion bit his lip, shifting the bag slung over his shoulder as he helped carry his mother's supplies back home.

"Not like that," he argued. "They think you are doing this, killing those people."

They reached the cottage. Carma kicked the gate aside with her foot, shuffling toward the door with her basket.

"Callio makes stuff grow," said Amdion. "You make stuff die; right?"

Carma shouldered the door open, shivering at the gust of wind that followed her inside.

“But you’re not doing it, are you, ma?” Amdion asked.

Carma set the basket down, sighing deeply. She looked awful, with bruises creeping toward her eyes. Her son paused in the doorway, little snowflakes dancing around him as he stared hopefully at his mother.

“Are you?”

Carma turned. She looked him over, something softening in her expression.

“You think too much,” she said. “Now come inside before you freeze.”

Amdion huffed, but begrudgingly stepped inside and lumped the sack down on the table.

“Why do you even need all this stuff,” he muttered, as he began pulling lumps of plants from the sack.

“One day I hope I can tell you,” Carma said, taking her usual seat and starting to pry the leaves apart.

Amdion said something, the words barley leaving his lips before Lance’s head throbbed, and he was plunged into darkness.

There was something pressing tugging at him when he tried to open his eyes next. Something telling him to try, telling him to focus. Lance blinked his eyes open warily, clutching his head. It felt as if he was dying. He was in the hut. There was a woman standing near the window, framed by the light spilling through. *Carma*. There were worry lines etched into her brow, the skin around her nails was bloody from her picking at them. The bruises were worse now, casting a dark shadow across her face.

She turned, walking across the room until she stood before him. Her gaze... it was so soft, and so sad. She reached out, and for a second Lance flinched, before her hand passed through him. He turned, backstopping. Carma’s hand settled over her son’s cheek, stroking it tenderly. Lance watched, listening as best he could though his entire body ached. There were tears in Amdion’s eyes, a coat on his back, and a backpack slung over his shoulder. He shook his head, but Carma nodded.

“She’s coming,” his mother whispered.

“Ma-“

“Go,” said Carma. “Stay off the roads, keeping heading for the mountains. When you find the tunnel follow it-“

Amdion shook his head more vigorously, but Carma held his cheek, forcing him to look at her.

“Follow it,” she said firmly. “When you reach the coast, find work on one of the ships. You can’t come back here, do you understand?”

“I’m not leaving you, ma. Y-you-“

Carma’s expression crumbled as he son whimpered, nearly a grown man but so desperately afraid.

“Come *with*,” he pleaded.

“Oh, my boy, it’s too late for that.”

“It’s not-“

“You know I have to stay, Amdion. You know.”

Lance frowned, trying to make sense of what was happening. Carma was... sending her son away? Why? He glanced toward the window, looking out on the empty field. Who was coming? A soft sigh drew his attention back to the little family before him. Carma leaned up to place a kiss on her son’s forehead.

“Travel safe,” she whispered.

She said something, in a dialect Lance failed to pick up on. Amdion’s lip quivered.

“You know I haven’t learnt that yet, ma.”

Carma smiled, and touched a hand to his heart.

“Like the earth,” she said. “I am in your blood.”

Her voice caught, and she squeezed her son’s hand as the first tears fell.

“I will protect you,” she whispered. “Until all is forgiven.”

Amdion was crying properly now, clinging to his mother’s hand.

“Ma-“

“Go,” Carma said.

She glanced nervously toward the window.

“You must go, now, and fast.”

Amdion shook his head, but let her push him toward the back door. The trees behind their house beckoned as Carma stood facing her son by the doorway. Lance lost focus for a second, their final words of farewell bleeding together. Amdion was backing away from the doorway, taking in the sight of his mother for the last time. Carma pressed a hand to her heart, and he mirrored the action. With tears in their eyes, he turned, slinking into the trees. Carma held back a sob, and shut the door.

She stood there for a minute, motionless, just breathing. When she turned, there was determination in her eyes. Lance watched in horror as she waked back to the front of the cottage, taking a seat in the chair and just... waiting. She wiped away the last of the tears as they fell. Lance glanced toward the window, then to the backdoor, wondering how far Amdion had gotten.

Footsteps sounded outside, then stopped, just before the door. They waited. Carma raised her chin defiantly. Her fingers traced something in her pocket; a gun, Lance realised. Was this... *oh my god*. Lance’s head was pounding, but he forced his eyes open. This was the day Callio came to confront Carma. This was the day Callio died.

The door swung open. A sweet spring breeze carried in the scent of flowers. Carma raised her head as Callio stepped inside. The door shut behind her, the scent of flowers snuffed out. Carma remained exactly where she was, twirling a little sprig between her fingers.

Callio... looked ill too. Her hair was grey, despite the fact the sisters only looked into their late thirties in human years. A bruise wound around her neck, and in between her fingers. She was

trembling, just slightly.

“Hello Callio,” said Carma.

Callio fretted by the door. Her eyes looked lost and watery. The silence between them stretched.

“You have to stop this,” she whispered.

“I know.”

“No-” a halted step forward. “Carma. You have to stop. T... this can’t go on.”

Carma stood, moving toward the table and trailing her finger over one of the various books there. Callio remained fixed by the doorway, looking scared.

“Where is Amdion?” She asked.

Carma scoffed. “You would never tell me the location of your children. Why should I tell you mine?”

“Carma...”

“Why are you here?” Carma asked.

Callio’s brow pinched, her hands curling into fists.

“Because you- what you are doing, it’s wrong. I... I ignored it for years, because you are my sister-“

“So did I,” said Carma. “That was my mistake.”

A pause, a long one.

“Where is Amdion?” Callio repeated.

Carma gazed down at the book her fingers had settled on, eyes in a faraway place.

“You took almost everything from me,” she said softly. “You took the love of my life. You removed yourself from my life, you took my own sister-“

“You removed yourself from our lives-“

“You took my... my health,” Carma continued, ignoring Callio. “You gave me this... this disease. Why do you think I would let you take him?”

Callio shook her head.

“You are still bitter,” she said. “After all these years, you still haven’t forgiven-“

“I am still dying!” Carma snapped. “After all these years... I am still sick with your disease. *Still*. It was never fair, Callio, none of it. Not Aryon, nor this.”

“Aryon made her choice years ago,” Callio snapped. “You cannot control someone’s heart, Carma. She loves me. She loves me. For once in my life-“

“You really think I care who Aryon loves?” Carma scoffed.

She shook her head scornfully. "You are still a child. Playing along by everybody else's rules. She is using you. And if you cannot see that..."

Callio bit her lip. Her hands went in and out of fists.

"Amdion, will he follow in your footsteps?"

"No," Carma answered shortly. "That's why he is not here. And you, and Aryon... you will never get to him."

She raised her head. The sister's locked eyes.

"Stop this," Callio whispered. "Please."

"You know I can't."

"Don't you... do my words, my pleas, mean nothing?"

Carma straightened her shoulders, turning fully to her sister.

"Not when life depends upon it."

The air felt heavy. A small breeze knocked at the window, the smell of flowers drifting in from under the door.

"When will she be here?"

Callio frowned at her sister's question.

"Who?"

"Aryon. She's coming to kill me, isn't she?"

Callio's face stayed impassive, though she was frowning deeply.

"She doesn't know I'm here."

Now it was Carma's turn to look confused.

"Why?"

Callio sighed deeply, all the tension falling from her shoulders; *despair*.

"Because I don't want to kill you, Carma. I just want you to *stop*."

Lance's heartbeat began to speed up as Carma's fingers traced the gun in her pocket. She shook her head, a small, sad scoff falling from her lips.

"Pity we were never that alike."

The afternoon sun spilt yellow light down the curtains. The smell of flowers drowned the scent of dust. Callio barely flinched when the gun was levelled with her chest.

"Thought you might," she whispered.

Carma's face was stoic, still. Her finger rested calmly on the trigger of the old handgun.

“Then why did you come?” She asked.

Callio smiled, small and sad.

“Don’t you understand?”

“No,” said Carma. “I do.”

Callio’s lip quivered.

“She’s coming.”

“Suppose I should do it then.”

A tear fell, trickling slowly down Callio’s cheek.

“She’ll kill you.”

Carma sighed, shutting her eyes.

“Tell me something I don’t know, sister.”

The day outside felt warm, but in here it was cool, just enough to have Lance shivering. He looked between the sisters, his knees threatening to give out.

“Carma,” said Callio. “You have to s-stop-“

She trailed off, shaking. Her hands gripped her arms, as if she were holding her body together.

“You have to stop this.”

“I will,” Carma whispered.

“Will you run?” Callio asked.

She was shaking so hard her knees might give out.

“No,” said Carma.

This exchange, Lance didn’t understand it. It was almost... understanding. Was it hatred between them? Fear? Love? He didn’t know, couldn’t hope to know, especially not with his head pounding the way it was. The sounds around him grey heavy, blurring together. He shook his head, focusing to stay conscious.

Carma’s jaw twitched. She wet her lips, finger trembling over the trigger.

“I can’t,” she whispered.

Callio’s face screwed up with pain. Her nails dug into the back of the chair she gripped, keeling over. Carma’s expression grey strained, the dam wall crumbling.

“You have to stop it,” Callio hissed.

“I don’t want to.”

“People are dying,” Callio snapped, finding the strength to raise her voice.

She gasped, choking a little on her words. “*Innocent* people. I... I can’t... let it keep happening. Carma please, please...”

There were tears in Carma’s eyes now. Lance looked between the sisters desperately, knowing there was nothing he could do, but at the same time, feeling unsure what to do. This didn’t feel right, not entirely. Callio opened her mouth, but he couldn’t hear her. His vision swam, and Lance lunged for the strands of conscious he clung to, desperate to see this memory play out. Tears fell from Carma’s eyes, and Callio’s; Callio began to scream, her lips forming fierce words, but none made it to Lance’s ears. He shook his head, clutching his ears as his skull seemed to split apart. Carma shook her head, the gun wavering in her hands. He could still smell flowers.

“What are you afraid of!” Callio screamed, the words rushing back toward Lance like a wave.

Carma was crying properly now.

“Aryon?” Callio asked. “She’ll kill you, is that what you’re afraid of?”

Carma couldn’t respond at first. She swiped angrily at the tears that fell, never lowering the gun.

“Same as you,” she whispered. “Dying.”

Callio shook her head. “I was never afraid of that.”

“But I was!” Carma yelled. “I-I am.”

Callio looked in pain.

“I know,” she bit out. “You’re just like her.”

Lance dragged himself forward, closer to the sisters, though the world swam around him as he did.

“Come on,” Callio said. “Stop this. Don’t you hate me?”

Carma shook her head. Her sister scoffed.

“Of course you do,” Callio said. “I took the woman you loved. I infected you. Deserted you.”

More tears fell down Carma’s cheeks, but she didn’t say anything.

“I’d take your son if I could,” Callio whispered. “Finish this for good. That’s the only way for it to end, isn’t it? Our whole family, dead. My children, your children... don’t you hate it?”

Carma shook her head.

“Don’t you hate me?” Callio repeated.

Tears were streaming down her cheeks. The sun made the curtains behind her glow; the outside world was so peaceful.

“Don’t you hate me!” She yelled.

Carma breathed in, out.

“It was never about hate,” she said.

Callio’s brow softened. Her lips were parted, tears dripping from her chin. For a second, she looked

as if she'd forgotten the pain in her limbs and in her heart.

"Neither is this," said Carma.

Callio shut her eyes. Lance screamed. The bullet that fired from the gun struck Callio's head. She fell in a second, her body crumpling onto the dusty floor by the doorway. Lance's mouth hung open, the cry dying on his lips. He blinked, his vision swimming, the body before him bleeding into the wood.

The gun fell from Carma's hand, clattering to the floor, but to Lance's ears it sounded like it just kept falling, down, down, into a cavern. The world was shrinking around him. Carma gasped soundlessly, her eyes fixed on her sister who lay on the floor. Her dead sister. Who she'd killed.

Lance was crying, just like her. The world began to spin. Footsteps came down like thunderous rain outside the door, and it was flung open. A flash of golden hair, a knife, a woman. Aryon collapsed beside her wife's lifeless body. Her eyes were raised, locking with Carma. Words, or maybe just a scream; Lance could neither see or hear properly. He was sinking, into a deep, dark pool, where there was no waking from. Pain exploded in his head as Aryon screamed; there was murder written in her eyes. He heard it, as Carma did, in his head, in his *blood*.

*Hate.*

The world began to crumble around them, but it wasn't just Lance's consciousness. The smell of flowers rotted into that of freshly turned earth, the sun was blotted out, his head swam as the air shifted, tears them apart, like a tidal wave carrying them on its violent tide. Darkness, ice, *death*. Lance wasn't sure whose scream he could hear as they were sunk into the earth of the Dark Planet, only that it rung in his ears long after his vision had betrayed him and he sunk deep into unconsciousness.

*Blue.*

Blue was a nice colour. It was the ocean, and his mother's eyes. Lance couldn't focus on it for very long.



It was the sky at twilight. Or reflected on a lake. *Blue*. It was arctic waters, and humid tropics. Lance's head exploded in pain, and he fell away into nothing.

The third time he woke, he could feel his limbs. He blinked his eyes open; *blue*. A purr vibrated through his head, making his spine tingle. A face swam before him. Lance knew her, he truly did, but he couldn't recall. Brown skin, dark ringlets of hair... she whispered something to him, but he couldn't process the words. He tried to speak, but all he managed was a choked whimper. The woman touched his forehead, pressing him back, into darkness. He recognised her in the second it took his eyes to shut. *Carma*.

Lance didn't feel anything for a long, long time.

"He *needs* a healing pod- I'm sick of arguing!"

"I'm telling you, he just needs time! I don't trust the pods until we've run a systems check--"

"He's been unconscious for hours!"

“Unconscious is better than dead-“

“Not if the healing pods malfunction-“

The words came to Lance slowly at first, growing more persistent by the second. What started as soft whispers were devolving into loud, angry voices. There was an argument taking place somewhere, but he didn't know what for. Where was he? Lance frowned, but he wasn't sure his face was obeying him. Why was everything so *loud* all of a sudden?

More yelling; he knew these voices. His hand felt like it was being crushed; there was a weight on his legs, and a terrible ache in his shoulder. His head was still throbbing, and when he breathed, he thought he could hear a rattle in his chest. Lance groaned weakly, and the voices around him came to a halting stop.

“Lance?”

The crushing weight on his hand intensified as a hand brushed over his cheek.

“Lance, can you hear me?”

Lance liked this voice; it was softer than the rest, quiet and healthily concerned and just a little raspy. He smiled, caught in a daze, trying to lift his eyelids, which felt so, *so* heavy. Scuffling sounds reached his ears as all the other voices fell silent.

“Did he say something?” A man asked, his voice shrill with concern.

“No, just... mumbled,” said the nice voice.

Where was he? Lance's face felt numb; he tried twitching his nose, feeling across his teeth with his tongue. Yep, all still there.

“Lance? Can you hear me?”

Okay, he seriously had to get around to opening his eyes, because that voice sounded so wonderfully concerned. Lance dragged one eye open, his vision a blur of varying colours and lights.

“He's waking up!” Someone squeaked; a girl, he thought.

“Lance, buddy, can you see us?” Another voice, a man's, one that was warm and familiar, but wasn't quite the one he was searching for-

“Thank god,” someone breathed.

*Bingo.* That one. Lance shifted just slightly, blinking both eyes open until the colours swirling above him condensed into a face. A pale, pretty face. They peered back at him, a halo of inky black hair framing their cheeks as they hovered attentively over Lance. He blinked, cause wow. This boy was really beautiful. Lance tried to remember how to breathe, but it was hard when one had a *literal angel staring down at them.*

“Wow,” Lance breathed.

The boy above him frowned, and his heart skipped a beat as he followed the curve of his brows to his eyes, framed by dark lashes that stood out so beautifully against his cheeks, above eyes that... *wow.* Were they *purple*? Blue had always been his favourite colour, but Lance was about two

seconds from changing his mind.

“You have really pretty eye,” he mumbled.

The boy’s frown deepened, his lips forming a cute little pout and Lance really wanted to touch them. And his hair. It looked so *soft*.

“He’s awake, alright,” a girl said, sighing.

“Seriously?” The other familiar voice exclaimed.

The boy looking down at Lance ignored the other voice, trailing a hand tenderly over his cheek, and wow, just kill him now.

“Can I marry you?” Lance blurted.

His tongue felt funny in his mouth. He swirled it around, frowning at the bout of laughter that came from somewhere off to his right. The boy, who he realised had Lance’s head cradled in his lap, hesitated.

“No?”

Lance frowned, watching his lips form perfectly around the word and- wait. No? Lance felt his brows drawing together, lips forming a wobbly pout because evidently he’d never heard such terrible news in his *life*.

“Why not?” He blubbered, too focused on the pretty boy to bother with the other face hovering over him.

“He’s out of it,” they muttered.

“Because he has a boyfriend,” said another, and Lance was too out of it to pick up on the teasing tone.

“A boyfriend?” he said, and began to sniffle.

“Lance,” said the kinder voice. “You’re his boyfriend.”

“I don’t like Lance,” Lance said without thinking, tears prickling at his eyes.

“I can’t *believe* I’m not filming this,” said the girl.

But now the pretty boy was leaning closer, his eyes filling with concern as he cupped his face.

“You’re Lance,” he insisted. “Do you really not remember who you are?”

He pulled away suddenly to snap at the girl to the right.

“This isn’t funny, Pidge! He could have serious memory loss!”

“Lance, buddy?”

There was another, more familiar face filling his vision; a warm face and brown skin and messy hair tied back with a strip of yellow.

“Do you know where you are?”

Lance frowned, wincing as the movement caused pain to his head.

“Hunk?” He mumbled.

The face above him split into a grin. “That’s right. You know who else is here?”

The boy with dark hair and violent eyes peered down at Lance nervously from beside his friend. Lance struggled for a second, his tongue failing to form the word.

“Keith?”

A look of relief flooded the boy’s face, and he sighed.

“Yeah,” he breathed. “Yeah, that’s me.”

“I’m...” Lance frowned. “*I’m* Lance.”

“You sure are,” said Hunk, sharing a smile with Keith.

A mop of yellow hair forced it’s way into the picture a second later, pushing the glasses higher up their nose.

“If you don’t remember me I’m gonna kick your ass,” the girl said.

“Aw, Pidgey,” Lance cooed. “How could I?”

Pidge’s face dissolved into a smile, and she reached down to ruffle his hair, pulling away quickly when Lance flinched. Keith adjusted his hold, trying to keep his head still.

“You with us?” He asked.

Lance still felt dizzy and sore and a little confused, but smiled shakily. “Yeah, yeah I think so. Where... where are we? Where are the others?”

Keith shared a look with Hunk, and they both glanced nervously of to the side.

“Let’s... sit you up for a moment,” said Hunk.

Between he and Keith, they managed to get Lance semi-upright, where he slumped against his friend.

“Hey Coran,” he mumbled, cracking a smile as he saw their advisor standing off to the side.

Coran nodded, concern bright in his eyes. Lance blinked the light away, looking around the bridge and at his friend’s faces. Everything seemed fairly in order, except... he sighed when he spotted Allura. She was asleep, splayed out in one of the chairs with Hiroshi asleep on her chest. They looked peaceful; everything seemed fine, so why was everyone so... so worried?

“Do you remember what happened?” Keith asked.

He positioned himself so he was looking at Lance, and ran a hand over his cheek.

“Um...” Lance lost himself for a second, trying to think through the haze surrounding his mind. “I went to the Dark Planet.”

Silence descended upon the room.

"I tried to blow it up," he admitted guiltily.

A thought struck him, fierce and sudden.

"Black--"

"Hey, hey, calm down," Keith said softly, pushing him back against Hunk's chest.

But Lance couldn't, not now. He'd remembered. Leaving the castle, talking to Black during the flight, firing the missiles, the third rebounding and hitting them- he gasped; *the memories*.

"What's happening?" Lance choked out.

His friend's were silent, Keith gnawing anxiously on his lip.

"What happened," Lance insisted, panic flaring in his veins and hot tears burning behind his eyes.

The confusion, he hated it.

"W-why's Allura asleep? A-Allura, I need to tell her- Allura!"

A few people shushed him at the same time.

"She needs rest," Keith explained quickly, sadness in his eyes.

"W-why?" Lance stuttered.

Suddenly it felt as if he'd missed out on years. Something had happened, something bad; *what?*

"It took her hours to calm Hiroshi down," Pidge mumbled.

"Calm him down?" Lance looked frantically between the other paladins, the movement jolting his head. "What, what happened?"

"Hey," Keith was there, soothing him. "Try...try keep your head still."

"Tell me," Lance pleaded.

Keith locked eyes with him, his brow furrowing. He looked away guiltily, sorrow burning in his eyes.

"We... wormholed," he said, when Lance's gaze grew too much. "Except we didn't expect it so- so Carma used Hiroshi, t... to open the wormhole. I... guess we know she can do that now."

Keith paused, his eyes downcast.

"He cried a lot."

"It was hurting him," Pidge whispered.

Lance's eyes were filling with tears, but he still didn't *understand*. Sensing his question, Keith kept going.

"We wormholed to a new location," He said. "Carma... moved us."

"Moved us?" Lance echoed.

“She didn’t like what you did,” Hunk admitted softly.

His friend looked so beaten down.

“I’m sorry,” Keith whispered.

He was looking at Lance now, his eyes bleeding empathy.

“I’m sorry...”

He reached out, stroking Lance’s cheek.

“We’ve moved,” he repeated. “She changed the rules.”

Lance sat there, stunned.

“What does that mean?” he said.

Keith bit his lip, unable to meet his eyes.

“She brought us closer to the Dark Planet,” said Pidge, after sensing no one else would.

Keith squeezed his hand; Hunk dropped his head against Lance’s shoulder.

“We only have fifty two days til it reaches us.”

## Chapter End Notes

THANKS FOR READING GUYS THE END IS N E A R

sorry for being useless at responding to comments, I'm trying and I love them thank you <3

## Chapter Notes

HEY YOU GUYS ARE THE BEST FOR WAITING SO LONG FOR THIS  
CHAPTER THE ACTUAL BEST

I'm sorry, exams killed me and rehearsal killed me but I lived so here's a very very late chapter very hastily written (so sorry for any mistakes)

Thanks for your ongoing support, for reading and for all the nice comments... you guys are super (and god I'm so so sorry for not responding to comments lifes been hectic)

Summary

I'm confused, you're confused, even more so than me because I have like 18 pages of notes explaining the rest of the story and why I shouldn't be confused but here we are Lance is the most confused

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

Lance had been standing by the hangar door for ten minutes now.

He shuffled anxiously from foot to foot, unable to take that final step through the door. He knew what he'd find, technically, but he wasn't sure he'd actually be able to take it.

Black... his hands made fists, worrying his lip between his teeth. Black hadn't made it through that explosion. Lance swallowed the sick feeling clawing its way up his throat and stepped into the hangar.

It was quiet in there, the faint lull of the castle the only noise. Lance advanced hesitantly, his breath catching as his eyes took in the scene before him. The sight made tears spring to his eyes. He let go a shuddery breath, dragging his feet forward.

"Black..." he whispered. "I'm so sorry."

The blue lion was the one to find him. After Carma had forced them to wormhole in her anger, Blue had torn out of the hangar while the rest were still fussing over Hiroshi. It hadn't taken her as long to reach them, given they were so much closer to the Dark Planet now. She'd plucked Lance from among the debris, but the black lion...

Black lay in pieces. Strips of mangled metal, black, white, and yellow, some charred and distorted frightfully. Black had done everything they could to protect Lance, and they'd succeeded. But now there wasn't much left to the lion. Blue had carted back the pieces, but it was a sorry sight. The lion's right paw had been ripped from its body, lying next to the shattered remains of Black's torso. One leg was completely gone, shards of it scattered around the hangar. Lance's knees nearly buckled when his eyes landed on the lion's head, resting weakly beside a splintered paw bearing a dull set of eyes.

There were already tears on his cheeks when Lance reached the bulk of the debris and laid a hand gently over a charred bit of metal.

“Black,” he whimpered. “I... I’m sorry.”

He came to stand by the lion’s head, placing a palm against her nose. Lance didn’t even try to disguise the tears, wiping them away with the sleeve of his jacket as his fingers grasped at the cool metal of the lion’s snout. He glanced toward Blue, who was crouched at the other corner of the hanger, her head hanging low. Lance sniffled; Blue knew what he meant. He was thankful she’d saved him, yet... devastated.

A faint, almost inaudible purr rumbled beneath his hand. Lance’s face screwed up with tears as Black’s eyes flickered weakly. The lion tried to project emotions to him, but they fell flat, as did the purr that cut off abruptly as soon as it began. Muffling a little sob, Lance sank down against the lion, curling into a ball with his back resting against Black’s massive head. He sighed, wiping at the tears and hiding his hands in his sleeves as the lion’s stuttered purrs continued to grow fainter and fainter against his back.

“This is all my fault,” he whispered, voice heavy with emotion. “I thought I could stop her, Black, I... I really thought. Now you’re...”

He stopped, hiding a sob in his sleeve.

“I’m sorry, Black. Coran doesn’t know if you- if you’re dying. I t-thought we were invincible, in a way. I’m sorry.”

The blue lion lay down from them across the hangar, tucking her head into her paws as Lance cried. He stopped when the doors to the hanger slid open, and someone padded in hesitantly. Hunk came to a stop just before the black lion, his face filling with horror at the sight. Lance looked away when Hunk’s eyes settled on him, wiping at his nose. A heavy sigh, and Hunk walked over. He looked almost scared as he sat down beside Lance, and the latter knew why. It was terrifying, seeing a lion of Voltron like that. They weren’t so invincible after all.

“Hey, buddy,” Hunk said after a minute, settling a hand on Lance’s shoulder.

The storm paladin sniffled loudly, leaning against his friend. Hunk ran a hand up and down his back in way of comfort.

“I’m so sorry,” Lance whispered.

“Don’t be. I know why you did it. I just... wish you’d take one of us with you.”

Lance met his friend’s eye; Hunk looked ill with worry.

“We can’t lose you, man,” Hunk mumbled, before pulling him into a tight hug.

They stayed like that a while. Lance clung tightly to his friend, to the familiar warmth and feel of Hunk, to the kind soul he’d known since childhood. He squeezed his eyes shut, tears seeping through as he held on for dear life.

When they pulled back, there was a different sort of expression on Lance’s face, one that made Hunk stomach flutter nervously. He wasn’t crying anymore; his eyes had hardened, face dark and calculating.

“You need to go soon,” said Lance.



Hunk frowned. "Like... you wanna be left alone?"

Lance shook his head. "No. You need to leave this system soon. It's not safe anymore."

Hunk nearly laughed, harsh and loud. "What? It's never been safe, Lance. But we're in this together."

For a moment, Lance was silent. His fingers bunched in and out of his jacket. He took a deep breath to steady himself, before meeting Hunk's eye.

"Actually... we're not."

Hunk frowned, not understanding.

"You have to leave, Hunk," said Lance. "It... it was nice, at the beginning, when you all said you'd stay with me, but... but it's getting late."

Lance paused, wiping at a stray tear.

"We're running out of time," he said. "And you, you can't be here when the timer runs out."

"Lance--"

"No," Lance said harshly. "No, okay? I know what you're gonna say, Hunk. I have spent *weeks* thinking of everything you might say, because I know you'll argue because you are so goddam *stubborn*."

Hunk flinched back a little as Lance sat up straighter, beginning to gesture roughly with his hands as more emotion wove its way into his voice.

"I get it, Hunk. I know you'll stay, I *know*, but you can't. You *have* to go."

"I can't leave you here, Lance."

Lance shut his eyes; he knew he'd hear that.

"You know after... after Allita died," he began. "I lost my best friend. I have other siblings, but they weren't like her. We... we had a connection that they didn't, you know? And for a while it felt like I-I'd never have that connection again."

Hunk's eyes were watery now as he gazed down at his friend. Lance was struggling a little with the words, but he persisted.

"But you're like... you're like that sibling, Hunk."

His eyes were filling with tears again, but he blinked them away.

"*You're* that person, Hunk. You're my best friend, a-and, you need to live, okay?"

Hunk's eyes were wide, his lip trembling a little.

"If I don't... you have to tell my family, Hunk. It has to be you; you know my mami will only listen to you. I... need you to be there for them."

Lance looked up at his friend with teary eyes.

“Yeah?”

Hunk nodded, squeezing Lance’s shoulder.

“And Keith,” Lance said suddenly. “Hunk, I... you’ll get him back to Earth?”

“Lance...”

“I...” Lance stopped, wiping at the tears that fell. “He- he doesn’t have anyone, Hunk. He doesn’t have anyone on Earth, and if we don’t find Shiro, and... and if Allura-“

He stopped, crying.

“If Allura and I don’t make it out, take him back to Earth, Hunk. Please, take him to my family, it has to be you. I love him, tell my- tell my family I *love* him. I know he’s difficult, a-and if I die he won’t- I don’t know what he’ll do, Hunk, so please, god *please*, take care of him. You... you have to tell Suzanna how much he means, okay? Please, Hunk.”

“Okay, hey, okay I will,” Hunk said quickly, steadying Lance as the storm paladin began to sob.

Lance let himself be pulled into a lasting hug, tucking his head against Hunk’s chest and simply crying. The black lion grew quieter in his mind, and it made him hurt. He curled in on himself, clinging to Hunk, feeling he was spiralling every further to an abrupt and fatal landing.

-

It hadn’t taken long for the news to spread. Allura received word from the O’kyan less than twenty-four hours after they were forced to wormhole. They’d figured something had gone wrong, whether by sense, or whether Carma had punished them too, Lance didn’t know. What he did know, was that they were not happy.

“You’re gonna strangle yourself if you keep playing with that zip.”

Lance’s fingers stilled, realising he’d been tugging the zip on the collar of his shirt right up to his jaw. He stared into his hollow reflection in the mirror, thankful when Keith came to stand in front of him.

“Here,” the red paladin said, chasing Lance’s fingers away and edging the zip down so it wasn’t strangulating him anymore.

“It only zips to here,” he said. “Then it crosses.”

Lance allowed him to adjust the shirt, crossing the sides of the collar so the shirt fit snugly.

“There,” said Keith, stepping back to admire his work.

He came to stand behind Lance, peering over his shoulder at the reflection of them both. “Now you look all handsome.”

Lance didn’t even smile. Keith glanced up at him, lacing his arms around Lance’s stomach and pressing his lips to his shoulder.

“It’s gonna be alright,” he whispered.

Lance hummed. He was caught up in how dark the circles under his eyes looked, gaunt and tired, not how they should be. They’d been invited down to the planet, to Oro. *Dress respectfully*, Allura

said. *They're meant to be sharing a bigger part of history.* Whatever that meant. To Lance, it seemed more like a trip to the principle's office, but instead of passing notes in class, he'd failed in destroying the dark force coming to consume them all, and probably blown all plans of escape to dust by knocking one hundred days from their doomsday clock.

"You think too loud," Keith said.

Lance shuddered as the arm tightened around his stomach, the other snaking up so a hand settled lightly around his neck. It was protective somehow, *possessive*, as Keith thumbed a very faint bruise there, and pressed a kiss between Lance's shoulder blades.

"I'll be right there with you," he whispered. "We all will."

Lance laced his fingers with the hand over his stomach, tilting his head toward Keith.

"Ready, love?"

The words were whispered, still so soft and timid after all this time, as though Keith still shied away from saying them. It made something warm unfurl in Lance's chest.

He nodded.

-

They took a pod down. Allura said it was best for them all to travel together in this instance. Lance knew what she meant though; he couldn't bare the thought of being in one of the lions yet, not with Black lying broken like that in the hangar.

It was a tense ride. Allura piloted them with Coran beside her, the four paladins strapped into their seats at the back. Pidge sat with Hiroshi in her lap, gazing at the baby as he grabbed for the little green ribbon she had tied into her hair.

"Say Pidge," she said.

"I think it's a little too early for him to start speaking," Hunk offered.

"Pidge," said Pidge. "Whichever word he hears most he should say first, right?"

Keith snorted. He sat opposite her, his hand never straying from Lance's.

"Keith," said Keith.

He chuckled when Hiroshi kicked his feet, trying to seek out Keith's voice.

"Say Keiiiiith."

"Personally I think his first word should be something cool and spacey," said Hunk. "Like Ursa Major. Or Aristotle."

Pidge shrugged. "Pidge."

Hiroshi squirmed in her lap, and she quickly readjusted the baby.

"What a mess, Hiro..." she murmured. "What a messy place you came into."

The baby gurgled softly, oblivious to the sudden change in Pidge's demeanour. He grabbed for a

tassel on her shirt, identical to the others, but green. Pidge smiled sadly, undoing one of the little ribbons in her hair, and using it to scoop Hiroshi's dark mop up into a whale-spout.

"I hope your dad gets to meet you," Pidge whispered.

Keith squeezed Lance's fingers tightly, and he returned the gesture.

"Coming in for landing," Allura said.

None of their trips to Oro had been particularly thrilling, at least, not in the good sense. Try as he might, Lance didn't like the O'kyan. Even the one they'd befriend, Jim, as Lance called him, still had a certain air of hostility around him. Still, they were in this together, he supposed.

Allura set the pod down just outside the temple where they'd gathered the last time, for a much happier occasion. Well, as happy as the O'kayn could get in any case. Coran bustled back and forth along the line of paladins, smoothing Hunk's hair back, polishing the little button that kept Keith's shirt together, and straightening the short cape that cascaded down from Pidge's shoulders. Their advisor paused, eyeing the baby in her arms seriously. He hummed, and Hiroshi's eyes widened when Coran reached forward and perfected the little green bow holding up his hair. The baby blinked rapidly, before grinning up at the elder Altean. Lance didn't miss the tears that sprung to Coran's eyes.

Allura was the last to join them. She nodded to Pidge, an agreement for the younger girl to hold tight to Hiroshi no matter how the evening went. She came to stand beside Lance just as Coran patted the storm paladin's shoulder, reassuring him.

"They aren't going to like Keith," Allura said.

Lance knew what she meant; the last time Keith had been here, he'd lead Carma to their hiding. He slipped his hand into Keith's.

"They don't have to," Lance answered evenly.

Satisfied with that, Allura opened the main doors.

The sun was just beginning to go down on Oro, casting giant shadows as it fell beneath the rising, wavelike rocks. The temple glowed in the dying light, its sandstone structure and flaming torches beckoning. Keith's fingers tightened around his own as their eyes fell on the first set of O'kyan. The two elders who had come to greet them wore sweeping brown garments, just like every other member of the species. Their pale eyes bore into Lance; he felt beyond tense already. There was a crowd of O'kyan gathered out the front of the temple, all clustered around eagerly, waiting to lay their eyes on the man who'd just about failed them already.

"Chin up," Keith whispered.

Lance did his best, especially once they set off down the ramp, he, Allura, and Keith leading their little procession. The second Keith emerged from the shadows of the pod, an audible muttering went up amid the O'kyan. Allura tensed beside him, shooting Lance a little look as if to say *here we go*.

"Stop," an elder O'kyan called, almost immediately.

He angled a finger toward Keith.

"That boy is not welcome on our planet."

The O'kyan murmured among themselves, their voices like a hum of insects. Lance straightened his shoulders, ready to address them, but Allura beat him to it.

"Carma no longer resides within him," she said, loud and clear.

A pause. The O'kyan didn't look convinced.

"Impossible," one muttered.

"More lies."

"Carma isn't in him," Lance said.

The chatter went dead.

"A bold claim," said the elder.

"She's not," Lance repeated, firmer this time.

His fingers were nearly crushing Keith's, but the red paladin made no move to get away.

"I know. Because I killed that piece of her."

He was met with silence. Lance glared back at the O'kyan, sure their expressionless faces would have been glaring right back at him. The elders were watching him carefully, trying to detect a lie.

"Shall we move this conversation indoors?"

Allura's voice shocked them all out of their stupor. The princess met the crowd with a forced yet radiant smile.

"The sun is going down," she said. "I'm getting cold."

-

Half an hour into their little gathering, and Lance still hadn't managed to determine the exact cause of this meeting. Allura had already explained to the O'kyan what had happened on Lance's failed mission (though he hadn't mentioned the memories to anyone, not even her). In any case, this was apparently something they'd intended to share with them on the hundredth day, but given it had come a little sooner... there was history, the O'kyan claimed, that Lance needed to know. So there was that; that, and the fact that this was a perfect way to interrogate Lance.

"How are the trials going?"

Lance stifled a sigh; that's what it always came back to, the bloody Lox.

"Fine," he bit out. "I'm doing what it wants me to do."

He hadn't been in a chatty mood all evening, but that hadn't stopped the questions. *Imagine that*, Lance mused to himself. *Lance McClain, not wanting to talk*. He shoved a spoonful of whatever weird fungi-like soup they were feeding them was into his mouth, grimacing a little at the taste. Keith's fingers were still entwined with his, and though their palms were clammy, neither was willing to let go. They sat at a long table, surrounded by many O'kyan, with their teammates spread out around them.

Another problem with the O'kyan: they didn't just *chat*. It seemed all their attention was focused

on Lance or his teammates, and they were incapable of just talking among themselves. It left the hall feeling empty, and unsettling. The one small mercy afforded to them was Jim, the only O'kyan Lance had managed to create any bond with.

"How has the arena been?" Another O'kyan asked.

"Fine," Lance said, again.

He hated questions about the arena.

"Do you think you are improving?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

Lance looked up. He knew the O'kyan were kind of depending on him for their continued survival, but come on.

"I killed one piece of her, didn't I?"

Keith cleared his throat in the awkward silence that followed, tapping Lance's fingers to let him know he was maybe holding on just a bit too tight.

"When Lance is faced with an actual enemy, like Carma herself, he seems to do a lot better," Allura said suddenly, shooting Lance a smile.

Her expression soured a little as she turned toward the O'kyan.

"Tricks, the Lox pitting him against nothing, or against his own teammates, is not an effective strategy."

If the O'kyan could shrug, Lance imagined that's exactly what they're be doing. There was something cool and calculating in Allura's gaze; she was not happy.

"We do not control what the Lox shows him," an O'kyan said, for about the thousandth time.

"I'm aware," said Allura. "Still, it's your stone, and I'm making you aware of the fact that those sort of strategies don't work. You want him to improve, don't you? Too much cruelty *does not help*."

She punctuated each word clearly, enough to turn a few heads, including those of their teammates. Pidge and Hunk blinked at them from a little way down the table, the latter inclining his head as if to ask what the matter was.

"Jim," said Lance, turning to the familiar O'kyan, who sat beside Coran. "How did you guys come across the Lox?"

"We mined it," Jim answered simply.

"But you designed the Lox itself," said Allura. "A stone like that requires regulation. Yet you say you have no control over what it shows?"

"Exactly," another O'kyan said.

"You seem upset."

Allura's gaze hardened. She turned to the new O'kyan who had spoken, fire in her eyes.

"Simulating the death of my child to get a reaction out of Lance is not an acceptable form of training. That doesn't train him for anything. Only loss."

"Perhaps it is necessary."

"*Necessary?*" someone spat, but it wasn't Allura, it was Keith.

Their hands gripped even tighter as Keith's lips curled, glaring down the O'kyan.

"Making him suffer isn't necessary. It's not improving his skill, it's just draining him."

"Such bitter words," an O'kyan remarked. "Has the Lox involved you yet?"

Keith tensed beside him, Lance immediately picking up on it.

"What?" The red paladin snapped.

"The Lox tends to incorporate the things its wearer cares about most."

"Perhaps you've overestimated your worth."

Keith opened his mouth, but it was Pidge that beat him to the mark.

"Excuse me?" The green paladin hissed.

She still had Hiroshi cradled in her lap, and the baby peered up at her curiously as she raised her head to meet the gaze of the O'kyan.

"Don't talk to him like that," Pidge snapped. "Your stupid machine uses bad tactics. You think using him against Lance like that would help?"

She scoffed. "You guys are *sick*."

"Pidge."

Hunk laid a hand on her shoulder gently. She whipped around to him, anger burning in her eyes.

"No, this is stupid," Pidge snapped. "All the Lox is doing is hurting Lance! It's not helping him, he can hardly sleep!"

"Pidge-" Lance tried, and she swivelled around to him.

"You know I'm right, Lance. It isn't helping, it's just hurting you!"

All the eyes of the O'kyan were on Pidge now. And they looked almost... curious. Lance didn't like it.

"It's alright, Pidge," he tried.

It wasn't alright. But the way they were watching her... It was as if Pidge was the newest weapon. Where before it was Hiroshi they used against him, now they had-

"You're all cowards!" Pidge was saying. "Lance is the only one doing anything to try and help! You're all just sitting here, watching him hurt, because you think you can blame him! Well Carma was going to find you eventually-"

“Pidge-“

“But you all pretend like you can just do anything to him-“

“Hey.”

Hunk set both hands on Pidge’s shoulders, turning her so his friend was forced to meet his eye. Pidge was breathing fast, tears in her eyes.

“It’s not okay,” she began, and Hunk nodded.

“I know,” he whispered. “I know, I just... think we should talk about this outside. Maybe.”

Hunk’s eyes flickered up to meet Lance’s, and he nodded. Keith looked on the verge of leaving his seat to go to Pidge, but Hunk motioned for them to stay. He guided the youngest paladin up, waiting for her to hand Hiroshi to Allura before the pair began moving toward the doors. The silence stretched.

“He’ll calm her down,” Lance whispered to Keith, sensing the others anxiety.

“He shouldn’t have to,” Keith muttered back. “What she said is true.”

“I think we should save that chat for another time,” Lance murmured, eyeing the O’kyan staring at them.

This was really not the time to be causing a scene. Thank god for Allura.

“I’m so sorry about that,” she said.

She didn’t look very sorry.

“Tensions have been high this week. Everyone’s... tired.”

The O’kyan murmured to one another, a few sending some disapproving looks after Hunk and Pidge. The latter would be alright, Lance knew, just needed to rant. It was comforting to know she cared, but they weren’t looking for a conflict with the O’kyan.

“I know you were waiting to share some history with us,” Allura continued. “Perhaps we could proceed with that?”

There was another minute or two of conversation between the O’kyan, before some elders finally rose.

“Yes,” one announced. “We think it would be beneficial for you to know the whole history.”

“The history?” Allura asked.

She sounded confused, but something cold settled within Lance.

“Of the twins,” said the O’kyan. “And Aryon.”

Lance didn’t trust himself to speak. They were going to tell them more of the history of his ancestor? The memories, *Carma’s memories*, played in his head. Between healing up, dealing with Black, and the revelation that they now had only fifty days, he hadn’t had much time to think about them, let alone mention them to anyone. Why had Carma shown him her memories? More importantly, were they true? They felt true, true in a way Lance couldn’t explain. Yet... they



differed from what he'd been told. Especially since-

"The time of our ancestors came many thousands of years ago."

Lance was drawn from his thoughts by the elder O'kyan who had taken to the centre of the room, and was beginning with their story. He tried to ignore the itch of unease as he saw Pidge and Hunk speaking in furious whispers in the shadows of the entrance, and let Keith's hold on his hand coax him into listening to the O'kyan's speech. They were talking about Altea, about the twins. Lance should probably be paying attention.

"Aryon," said the O'kyan. "Our ancestral mother, lived in Altea's far south. She was born to parents of-

Lance tried to listen, he really did. But an O'kyan rambling on about Aryon's baby days couldn't quite hold his attention over his friends, who were still bickering by the doorway. Pidge looked really upset. He'd have to speak to her after-

"-like your red paladin."

Lance jumped as an O'kyan set their hand on Keith's shoulder, making him flinch. He quickly turned his attention back to the presentation.

"Uh..."

Keith's eyes flitted between Lance and the O'kyan.

"A fierce warrior," said the O'kyan. "Like Aryon."

Lance frowned, sharing a confused look with Keith.

"If you would rise, red paladin," the O'kyan said, tugging lightly on Keith's shoulder to get him to stand. "As Aryon defeated Carma, so have you."

He looked terribly unsure, questioning eyes settling on Lance as the O'kyan urged him up. Allura just shrugged, as if telling them to play along, though Lance didn't miss how alert she looked. Reluctantly, Keith followed the O'kyan up, letting them guide him away from their table and into the centre of the room. He looked nervous, standing there; he kept looking at Lance as though hoping he'd have the answer. Pidge and Hunk had noticed the change too, and were making their way back to their seats. Lance supposed it was a good thing if the O'kyan changed their opinion of Keith; best to look to him for hope, as proof that she Carma could be defeated.

"Aryon," the elder O'kyan announced loudly.

He grabbed Keith's hand and hoisted it into the air, ignoring the subtle signs of unease coming from the boy.

"Was a brave warrior, not unlike your red paladin."

The O'kyan dropped Keith's hand, gesturing for him to help hold whatever another O'kyan was presenting them with. Keith took hold of the bowl awkwardly, glancing at Lance again. He was clearly uncomfortable. Lance wasn't sure what exactly the O'kyan wanted with him, but Allura had explained it would only be polite to involve themselves in whatever customary activities were to be performed. A different O'kyan took to talking as the older man busied himself with Keith, dipping his fingers into the liquid in the bowl and withdrawing them to hover over Keith's cheek.

“A demonstration of the war paint worn by our warriors,” an O’kyan continued.

Keith flinched a little, but kept still as the O’kyan painted smooth lines below his eyes with the rust-coloured paint.

“I read about this,” Allura whispered to Lance from across the table. “It was an old tradition. Corresponds to the Altean markings.”

Lance nodded thankfully before turning back to the ceremony. Keith clearly hadn’t gotten the memo about what the paint meant, cause he’d scrunched his nose up, frowning in confusion. Lance’s heart jumped a little when he turned to look at him; they’d essentially painted Altean markings onto his cheekbones, the red-brown paint quite fitting.

“Aryon lead many successful campaigns with her father, even before reaching adulthood,” the O’kyan continued. “Their family bordered up the wetlands against vicious animal attacks, kept raiders out of the far villagers, and provided shelter to those in the coldest winters.”

An O’kyan lowered a ring of leaves over Keith’s head to hang around his neck; it was a different plant species, but Lance still recognised it as the one he’d seen in Carma’s memories, the one they’d laid onto Aryon in the village celebration. Keith glanced down at the thin chain of plants, eyeing the O’kyan warily. Lance tore his eyes away when he realised they were still talking.

“-she was assigned to protect a small village in the mountainous region of Kquill.”

It was like the memories he’d seen were playing out before him as they spoke. *Tall mountains. Pink grass.*

“It was here she met Callio,” said the O’kyan.

*Smoke from the village chimneys. A stone and thatched cottage.*

“And her twin, Carma.”

Lance could see her. The little smirk she flashed when Aryon hopped down from her bisol, the way her expression soured as Aryon’s attention drifted to her sister’s diseased hand.

The other’s didn’t know the truth, Lance realised with a start. They didn’t know that Carma loved Aryon, that-

“Our ancestral mother,” the O’kyan harked on. “Was kind. More than most, she could sense the emotions of others, she could project herself to them.”

The elder O’kyan grabbed Keith’s hand, the injured one, tilting his palm up.

“It was through this power she became aware of Callio’s illness. Their connection was instant.”

Lance frowned. *No it wasn’t.* Was it out of shame, that they hid the whole story? Or had he been lied to, were those memories twisted, distorted, not to be trusted? It didn’t feel right; their words, the whole story, it sat like a weight on his chest, urging him to *act*.

“They fell in love,” the O’kyan announced.

The bowl was raised, and Lance grew more alert as Keith tried to twist his hand away from the painted fingers that were hovering just a little too close to the scar on his palm.

“I’d, I... I’d prefer if you didn’t,” Keith stuttered, not trying to seem rude, but clearly

uncomfortable with them touching the scar left by Carma's possession.

The O'kyan ignored him, gripping his hand tightly as he tried to squirm away and painting a cross over his palm. Keith swallowed the discomfort eating away at him, caught between looking angry and genuinely upset. Lance glanced at Allura; her expression was hard, but she didn't notice him. Lance turned his attention back to the O'kyan as the one talking continued to drone on about the bond between Aryon and Callio, about their marriage, about-

He frowned as another, younger O'kyan walked forward, holding out their palm so an identical cross could be painted on it. Lance turned back to Allura.

"They're not, like, about to marry them, are they?"

Allura sighed, sounding a little fed-up of all his questions. Then again, she could have just been fed-up in general.

"It's a presentation, Lance."

Lance nodded slowly, narrowing his eyes at the 'presentation'.

"Just checking. You know. Thought I'd make sure. Since it looks like Keith's about to marry an O'kyan, and all."

"Lance," said Allura.

"Confirming, is all."

"It's a performance, for the sake of their culture."

Lance hummed, crossing his arms and tapping fingers furiously along his biceps.

"Like that performance where we nearly let Coran be sacrificed to a volcano god?"

Allura huffed, turning to look at him now with her *I respect you and cherish this friendship, but if you don't shut up by the count of three I'm locking you in the trash redistributor* look.

"It's. A. Presentation," she said. "Watch it."

Lance sulked, settling back into his chair and watching miserably as the O'kyan took hold of Keith's painted hand. The red paladin was still frowning; Lance doubted he'd enjoyed group presentations in middle school.

"From the day they met, there was a connection," the O'kyan said, and began to wrap another string of leaves around the joint pair of hands.

It wasn't *right*. The performance was questionable, but the actual story? It was wrong, this wasn't how it went. Lance bit his lip.

"Callio and Aryon were married--"

There was something *eating* at Lance, like something he'd forgotten.

"Raised their children in the town nearest Callio's home village--"

It was stupid, but Lance couldn't ease the feeling that was making his skin itch, making the ice play up in his blood.

“Carma remained bitter, that she had no family, yet chased her sister away-“

Keith kept looking at him, and it wasn't helping the feeling. He blinked, and the paint on his cheeks caught the light a little. He looked Altean like that.

“Callio was Aryon's first and only love, and losing her-“

“That's not true.”

The O'kyan fell silent. A heavy, *still* silence descended upon the room. Lance's spine was tingling, his lips still parted because- that was him. The eyes on him confirmed it. He was the one who'd spoken. He wondered idly why he had.

“That...”

Eyes, everywhere. Allura was staring at him like he'd grown a third head. Coran, Pidge and Hunk... they all just sat there, brows furrowed, mouths a little agape at what he'd said. But Keith... looked curious. Lance wet his lips, hoping his voice didn't waver-

“That's not true.”

He spoke a little softer this time, less sure of himself. The O'kyan involved in the performance didn't dare move, their bug like eyes watching him, stunned into silence. All of them, just *staring*-

“*Lance.*”

Lance turned slowly in his chair, gaze settling numbly on Allura.

“What are you doing?” She hissed, keeping her voice down, though it still carried in the silence.

“I...”

Lance looked around; everyone was still staring at him. His eyes found Keith's again, something in the other's expression urging him to speak.

“Aryon didn't just... she didn't love Callio,” he began awkwardly. “T... to begin with.”

Allura was gawking at him, Lance could see her out of the corner of his eye. He kept his eyes on Keith; there was something reassuring about looking at him, something pushing him to keep talking, as his eyes drifted over the pair of entwined hands and the red paint that shone on his cheeks.

“Carma loved Aryon,” he said.

A muted display of outrage drifted over the crowd in the form of turned heads and open mouths. Pidge turned to Hunk, the latter of whom was staring openly at his friend. Keith though... Lance could focus on Keith. His tongue felt numb with nerves, but he managed through the words, managed through it with Keith's eyes watching him curiously, like he wanted to know, like he *believed* him.

“And... and Aryon loved Carma,” Lance said softly.

He felt like smiling. Why? Because Keith was looking at him softly? Because it felt like a vice had been lifted from his chest? Because something, somehow, was telling him that wasn't a lie?

“They loved each other,” said Lance. “As... as much as people... *can.*”

The words were out, and they felt right. Light, like air, easy and truthful and *necessary*.

Then reality came crashing back down on Lance like a *fucking train*. *What the fuck, he thought. What the fuck what the fuck what the fuck*. He tore his eyes away from Keith, blinking rapidly at the many pairs of eyes staring back at him. Allura's eye twitched, her mouth hanging open, speechless. Pidge was looking rapidly between him and Keith, and if she didn't look kinda scared, Lance would say she was on the verge of *hysterics*. Hunk just... looked so confused. Lance laughed, harsh, awkward, his voice the only voice sounding in the expanse of that hall.

"Just a feeling," he squeaked.

"Er...Lance?"

Lance whipped around to Coran. Their advisor was frowning lightly, but looked overall less shell-shocked than the rest.

"Um," said Lance.

"Are you alright, my boy?" Coran began, but stopped when Allura snapped out of her daze and laid a hand firmly on the table.

"Lance," she said. "Could you repeat that?"

Lance shook his head.

"No."

No way in hell. The O'kyan looked like they might've just turned to stone, and Lance really, really regretted opening his mouth. Despite that, there was still a feeling tugging at him, telling him to do *more*.

"Why did you say that?" Allura asked.

"Is... is that true?"

Pidge was looking rapidly between everyone now. Her eyes settled on Lance.

"Is it? Did Aryon and Carma love each other? Is that... is that why Carma hates her sister--"

"No," said Lance.

He nearly slapped a hand over his mouth, cause that was *not* invited. He couldn't seem to stop himself.

"Aryon and Carma," he said. "They... they loved each other and... and then they didn't."

Allura looked like she was thoroughly regretting getting out of bed that morning.

"They... didn't?" Pidge echoed.

Lance could not stop speaking, could not stop *feeling*. *Aryon and Carma in the tavern, one a little tipsy, trying to work her way into the others life with charming comments and a dazzling smile. Their eyes meeting across the town's square, their hands finding each other on cold evenings-* Aryon and Carma loved each other. Lance wasn't sure how ready he was to confront that fact.

"They stopped," he said softly.

Why did he feel so sad all of a sudden? Everyone's eyes were still on him, but it was becoming harder to pay attention.

"That's when Aryon fell in love with Callio, after... and Carma, was..."

What was she? Angry? For sure. But there was more, there was so much more.

"She was lonely," said Lance. "Aryon stopped loving her. And she... she was alone."

They were still staring, but something had just intensified. *Oh god.*

"Lance," said Allura, softly.

She reached across the table and took his hand. There was concern in her eyes.

"You're crying," she whispered.

*Oh god.* Lance raised a hand to his cheeks, feeling the tears that had fallen there. *Oh god.* There was movement in the centre of the room as Keith removed his hand none to delicately from the ceremony and made his way back toward them. He took the seat beside Lance, cautiously taking Lance's hand in his. Allura jumped, pulling back as Lance felt something cold race along his skin. Keith was staring at him with wide eyes.

"Your... eyes," said Allura.

Lance blinked rapidly, the tears no longer falling, but everything about him just feeling *numb*.

"What?" He asked. "What is it?"

"They're, uh, just glowing a little," Keith whispered. "No biggie."

He shared a look with Allura, while Lance continued to break down from the inside out. What the hell was happening? The princess cleared her throat.

"I, uh, I think you should get him back to the castle," she said to Keith.

"I..." Her eyes drifted over the many O'kyan watching them. "I'm just going to wrap things up here."

-

The ride back in the pod was tense. Beyond tense. Things between Lance and Keith hadn't been awkward for a long time, but this... this was starting to feel awkward. Allura and the other paladins had stayed on Oro to try and placate Lance's... announcement. Meanwhile, Keith had guided the stunned storm paladin back to their shuttle, and started back toward the castle. His knuckles were white where they gripped the controls, Lance could see from his seat in the co-pilots chair. The shuttle shuddered through the last bit of the ascent, seconds before they breached the atmosphere.

"So, what the hell was that?"

Lance thought seriously about that question. Keith's eyes darted across to him, his thumbs playing nervously over the throttle.

"I, uh, I don't know."

"...Okay?"

Lance met Keith's eye.

"What the hell did I do?"

"I... really don't know, dude."

They fell into silence, watching the planet's surface shrink behind them as they powered toward the castle. Keith was flying slower than usual, meaning he wanted to talk.

"Carma... and Aryon," he said.

"Carma and Aryon," Lance confirmed.

"You, uh, dream that, or something?" Keith asked.

Lance huffed. "That would've been a fucking weird dream."

"Yeah, well it was a pretty fucking weird announcement. In the middle of... whatever... that was."

"Your marriage to an O'kyan?"

"I don't think..." Keith paused, frowning. "You know, I'm not really sure what just happened."

"Makes two of us."

Keith glanced at him, biting his lip.

"Lance?"

A deep sigh. Lance tugged at the hem of his shirt, suddenly feeling constricted.

"Look, Keith, I... saw some stuff when Black and I were, you know, drifting."

Keith frowned.

"After the crash?"

"Yeah. Yeah, before I passed out I... I saw Allita. Just, floating there with me in space. I was hallucinating that, I know, but then I... I passed out and Keith, when I woke up..."

Lance shook his head, a dry chuckle escaping his lips.

"I was in her memories."

"Allita's?"

"No, Carma's."

Keith looked even more confused now.

"*Carma's*? What... were you dreaming?"

"No, no I was *in* her memories. Like with you. I woke up and it... didn't feel like a dream, Keith. I was in her memories, I was seeing her life. Through her eyes."

Keith looked sceptical, and worried.

“She’s shown you things before, you think-“

“No, Keith,” Lance said, a little firmer than he’d intended.

“O....kay?”

Lance shook his head, glaring at the controls.

“I know it sounds like bullshit-“

“It doesn’t, Lance, just, tell me?”

Lance crossed his arms over his chest, protectively almost. The memories, they felt... so personal.

“I saw where they grew up,” he mumbled. “The village. Saw them meeting Aryon, they... her and Carma butted heads at first. I thought, that’s it, that’s where their rivalry began. But then... god, Keith. They just... it played out, and it was the opposite of what I expected but it didn’t feel wrong. It- it was like I could feel how happy she was, Carma.”

Keith was watching him, drinking in every word, and Lance appreciated that.

“They fell in love,” he said, and his lips formed a bitter smile. “Really, really fell. I... I can feel how much she loved Aryon, it’s like how much I-“

Lance cut himself off with a swift shake of the head.

“And then Aryon just... didn’t.”

“Stopped loving her?” Keith asked. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” said Lance, and he sounded frustrated.

“Carma and Callio, they got on well. Callio was ill, but her power... Callio made things grow, and Carma helped her, helped her train her powers, and encouraged her. I... I think she really helped her with the illness.”

“And Carma’s power?”

“She lied. Straight to Aryon’s face, said she didn’t have any. But she... she makes things die, we know.”

“Did you see her?” Keith asked.

“See her?”

“See Carma kill stuff?”

“Well... no. But I saw the bodies. Of those she killed. She was so angry she was ill, she started killing them to add life to her own. They came into the village on carts, all... well, you know. And the villagers, they began to suspect. Her own son did, I think he knew by the end-“

“Her son?” Keith asked. “Not... was that with Aryon?”

“No. Some other guy. I didn’t see him, that was after Callio and Aryon got together.”

“I don’t get it,” Keith muttered. “Did Aryon find out she was killing people? Is that was she left?”



Lance bit his lip. “I don’t know. But I don’t think so. Carma got ill. The marks started up on her arms, and the next memory, they were arguing. They said something about it being Carma’s fault... then, then how it had always been Callio. That could mean anything.”

Keith listened, but didn’t say anything. He looked deep in thought.

“I thought...” Lance scoffed. “I don’t know what I thought. I thought maybe Carma wasn’t in the wrong, for a short, stupid second.”

“What changed your mind?” Keith asked, surprising him.

“She killed Callio,” Lance said softly. “Callio came to her home, and... and begged her to stop. Pleaded and... and Carma still killed her. She still killed her sister, even when she *begged* her to just stop killing. But it still didn’t feel like it was out of *hate*.”

Lance dug the heels on his palms into his eyes and groaned.

“Keith, I don’t understand.”

“Makes two of us,” Keith mumbled.

“I just- I don’t know why I said that to the O’kyan. Wether they know or not it... it doesn’t matter, now. Cause Carma still killed Callio, still... she’s still doing this to us, but it just felt like... I don’t know.”

Keith sighed, glancing at Lance as he pulled the pod into the hangar.

“That’s... a lot,” he settled on.

“Yeah.”

Lance glared at the ground, refusing to move even after the shuttle had come to a rest and the airlock closed up behind them.

“Are you... okay?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I think I pissed the O’kyan off, even more, and all cause of some stupid memories I don’t even know why I saw.”

“It’s not ideal,” Keith admitted. “But Allura will straighten things out with the O’kyan. You just, you need to take care of yourself.”

Lance pressed his palms harder against his eyes, frowning.

“Straighten things out for sure, not like I just knocked a hundred days off the clock.”

A hand settled on his arm, drawing Lance out’ve his hunched stance.

“Hey,” Keith said gently. “That wasn’t your fault-“

“Except it was.”

The red paladin frowned. “You couldn’t have known, Lance. You had the right intentions.”

“Right intentions don’t mean much.”

“How am I meant to help if you refute everything I say?” Keith said, shaking his head. “Come on.”

He tugged on Lance’s arm to get him to stand. Lance followed reluctantly, letting Keith drag him towards the pod doors and out into the hangar. Keith snorted at his grumpy expression, leading them down the ramp and taking Lance’s hands.

“Tonight was shitty,” he announced. “The O’kyan hate us-“

“Except they still dragged you into a weird wedding ceremony.”

Keith smirked. “I’m *pretty* sure that was just a demonstration-“

“Don’t care.”

“Okay, so weird wedding ceremony-“

“You still look Altean, by the way.”

Keith blanched for a second, one hand leaving Lance’s and flying to his cheek.

“Ugh,” he muttered, swiping at the paint.

“No...” Lance caught his hand, lowering it. “It looks nice. Keep it, please. If you want.”

Keith scoffed, moving easily into Lance’s embrace. Lance smiled at him, despite the numb feeling gripping his chest. Leaning into his chest, Keith prodded gently at the skin on Lance’s cheekbone.

“They’d be blue,” he mused.

“What would be?”

“If you had those Altean marks.”

The finger traced along his cheek, Keith’s eyes tracking the movement.

“A really, deep blue.”

“Isn’t blue a bit stereotypical for me?”

Keith hummed, laying his head against Lance’s shoulder.

“No. Cause its storm colours. And the colour of your eyes.”

Lance chuckled, tightening his arms around Keith.

“That’s the cheesiest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

Keith snorted. “Sorry.”

A quiet minute passed between them.

“Bet I’d have better looking ears too.”

“Your ears are pretty sweet,” said Keith, flicking one. “Real sticky-outy.”

“Are you seriously insulting my ears too?”

"I said I *like* your ears."

"Yeah yeah... hypocrite. You could have had purple fluffy ones."

Keith huffed, pressing his face into Lance's chest.

"You're still unhappy," he mumbled.

"Huh?"

"When you're unhappy, you're cold," said Keith, peering up at Lance.

"Oh," said Lance.

Keith really knew him, didn't he? The red paladin sighed, using the grip he had on Lance to begin swaying them in a small circle. Lance huffed.

"What're you doing?"

Keith shrugged. "Don't know. Dancing, maybe. I've seen you trying to teach Pidge to dance when she's stressed."

Even in his miserable state, Lance couldn't stop the small smile that spread across his face.

"This is dancing?"

"We're moving, aren't we?"

Lance smiled, shaking his head. "Don't you have to go get the others?"

"Yeah, in a bit," said Keith. "Not yet."

"So we have time to correct your pathetic attempt at a slow dance?"

"I don't see anything wrong with my attempt."

"We're literally just turning in a circle."

"So?"

Lance's chest felt tight, and there were a thousand things itching at his subconscious, but perhaps he could do this.

"Firstly," he said, holding Keith at arms length. "You're not even moving your feet in time with mine."

"Yeah, cause I'm trying not to step on your feet?"

"No, no no no, our feet move at the same time, but different directions. Here--"

Lance took hold of Keith's arms, arranging one hand to rest on his shoulder while his arm went around Keith's waist. Taking Keith's other hand, he triumphantly arranged them into position, glaring down at Keith half-heartedly as the other struggled not to laugh.

"What?" Lance demanded.

"I didn't think you were actually gonna dance."

“Second hand embarrassment was about to do me in for good. Now stop slouching and pretend like you actually want to dance.”

Keith grinned, shaking his head, but at least straightened his shoulders.

“Lead the way,” he teased, well aware that his strategy to cheer Lance up was having some effect.

Lance ignored that smile, knowing he’d be distracted, and instead nudged Keith’s foot with his own.

“You’re gonna step forward first, with this foot. And...” Lance moved his foot back as Keith stepped forward. “I move back.”

“That seems easy.”

“Oh, you’ll mess it up, I guarantee.”

Keith snorted. “Okay? Then what?”

“Then it’s kind just... back and forth. No, no don’t just *step*. You’re not hiking, Keith, you’re *dancing*. You have to lean your weight back, we’re balancing each other.”

Lance yelped as Keith threw himself back, nearly throwing them off balance.

“Not that much!”

Keith laughed.

“You said to lean back!”

“I said to *balance*.”

Lance gripped his hand, leaning his weight back while keeping an arm securely around Keith’s waist.

“See? Now we step. You forward first, on one. Three counts, back- ow, that was four steps you took, onto my toe.”

“...Sorry.”

“Forward. No, keep leaning.”

Lance guided them along slowly, talking Keith through the footwork.

“You’re supposed to look at me, not your feet.”

“I’ll mess up,” Keith muttered, watching his feet intently as he tried to follow Lance’s steps.

“Come on, look up.”

Keith did, grimacing slightly as his foot missed its mark and stumbled over Lance. Lance kept them upright, grinning as he turned them quickly, once, twice, until Keith got the hang of it and laughed the next time they spun. It was so easy, watching him like this, the red paint on his cheeks crinkling as he smiled. Lance turned them faster, to hear him laugh, to see his fringe falling over his eyes. Keith tripped on his foot, laughing through his apology, and Lance couldn’t help joining him.

Keith would have to leave in a minute, go back to Oro to collect the others. Then Lance would have to explain to Allura, and to all of them, what he'd already told Keith. But until then, until everything really, he resigned himself to just being there, with Keith.

Ignoring every feeling telling him that maybe, once, Carma felt just like this.

## Chapter End Notes

**SORRY FOR NOT RESPONDING TO YOUR COMMENTS FROM LAST CHAPTER!!!**

they were so fucking lovely thank you <3 <3 <3

## Chapter Notes

Thank you for the beautiful comments <3

I am genuinely sorry for this chapter, it's a rough one

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*Ilia Crux* was a planet the paladins had never been to before, but Lance liked it. It was largely oceanic, with one large, narrow continent that ran all the way around the equator. Due to that, it's climate was warm and pleasant, enough to draw people in from all over the galaxy. The city they'd come to was a busy one, with aliens of all sorts using the crowded walkways. Lance knew the *technical* reason they'd come there was to collect supplies, since Hunk was giving a wormhole shield one last go. In reality, Allura had taken them there to stop everyone from going out of their minds. It was more of a *you have less than fifty days to live, so might as well enjoy it*, kind of trip, a *Pidge couldn't eat her breakfast because she was so anxious* kind of trip, and a *Lance had a meltdown after this mornings Lox training* trip. It was a way to get them all out of the castle, a short break from their work, a chance for them to breathe.

Lance was extremely thankful for it. He and Hunk had used the trip for another, additional purpose.

"Oh man, oh man I'm gonna miss him so much."

Lance patted his friends shoulder in consolidation as Hunk's eyes began to water. Together they watched the young alien girl carry away Puffy, Hunk's loyal yet kinda untrained and pissy (in Lance's opinion) space dog.

"It's what's best for him."

"Yeah," Hunk whined, his voice shaking. "But I'll miss him."

"He'll be very happy here," Lance offered, happy that Puffy, at least, looked delighted to be in the arms of a playful child.

Geez, seeing Hunk so upset was gonna make him cry no matter how he felt about that dog.

"He was the best dog," Hunk said decisively, sobering up enough to nod his head firmly in the direction of their retreating adoptee.

"I mean, he did poison Pidge that one time--"

"The best."

"Yeah, you're right. The best."

Lance sighed, watching the happy pair retreat. He glanced over at Hunk, who was sniffing a little into his sleeve.

“Ready to join the others?”

Hunk nodded tearfully, bidding one last farewell in the form of a little wave, before turning around and following Lance back toward their group.

They strolled along beside each other, neither friend in the mood for talking, just content to be there in the sun, surrounded by the busy aliens of Ilia Crux. It was a nice reminder, Lance supposed, to see life going on as per usual elsewhere. Pidge, Keith, and Allura had formed a little group ahead of them, while Coran trailed behind, Hiroshi playing with his moustache since he'd been swaddled to his so called grandfather. The trio ahead were making the most of their day off; fresh air was doing them good, especially Pidge, who'd reverted back into the child she really was. She darted back and forth, ogling cool gadgets in some of the shops, tugging on Keith's arm to get him to look at things, chatting away to Allura about anything and everything.

Keith was looking better. He'd managed to spar that morning without needing to keel over. The bruises were still there, but Lance thought they might be fading. Either way, he looked healthier, more colour to his skin, his movements surer, and quicker.

“It says the dealers shop is just up the next block,” said Hunk, eyeing the little map he had.

Lance hummed, squinting at it through the glare of the sun.

“Think they'll have what you need?”

“He seemed trustworthy, I'd say so.”

Lance offered his friend a smile. It was nice, a day like today. Peaceful, and well-paced, Lance was glad they'd-

“Dad?”

Pidge's voice was cutting. Lance and Hunk both searched quickly for the green paladin, and found she'd come to a standstill a little way ahead. Keith and Allura also stopped once they realised she was no longer behind them. Pidge was staring intently off into the crowd, frowning. She took a stuttered step forward, ignoring the aliens she bumped into.

“...Dad?”

And then she was moving. Running, actually, a frantic, puzzled expression on her face. She shoved her way through the aliens, her voice taking on a desperate tone.

“Dad!”

Lance looked around, but try as he might, he couldn't see whatever Pidge was.

“Pidge!” Keith was tearing after her, the others following after only a moments hesitation.

Lance tried to his best to apologise to the aliens that had been shoved aside in the youngest paladin's haste. He could see her fighting her way through the crowd a little way ahead, her voice calling for her father. Sam Holt? *Here?* Lance came stumbling into the little clearing after her. Pidge was staring at the wall of a woodworking shop, her father's name dying on her tongue. She was breathing hard, and slowly, hope turned to disappointment. Aliens all around were looking at them, tutting as they made their way past along the cluttered street.

“Pidge?” Keith asked.

“I thought...” A heavy sigh. “I thought I saw my dad.”

Pidge chuckled dryly, but it sounded sad.

“I think I was imagining it.”

Keith smiled kindly, laying a hand on his friend’s shoulder. The other’s moved to her side, Hunk offering a hug as Pidge looked around once more hopefully.

“There’s a lot of people here,” said Allura sympathetically. “It’s easy to see things.”

“Yeah,” Pidge agreed.

She glanced up at them.

“We should, uh, keep going. To that shop.”

“Yeah,” Keith agreed, but he was being patient with her.

Lance watched them merge back into the crowd with tinge of sadness. His eyes swept the area, just to make sure Pidge had definitely imagined it, over the crowd, the wall-

Lance froze. He glanced back, making sure the others had moved on before stepping closer to the wall. His breath lodged in his throat, and tentatively he reached out to brush his fingers over the small carving in the stone.

A seven pointed star.

The symbol of the story, of Carma and Callio and Aryon. What the hell was it doing here?

“Lance? You coming?”

“Uh, yeah, yeah, sorry,” Lance called back to Hunk.

His eyes lingered on the star for a moment, something cold spreading through his blood. He saw Pidge, chatting away to Keith as they disappeared into the crowd, and tried to ignore the feeling.

-

*6:13*

That’s when the alarm had sounded. Coran was the one who set it off, since he was up earliest. Lance stood beside Allura on the bridge, his armour half thrown on, eyes itching with tiredness.

There was a ship in the system, not going anywhere, just... drifting.

“Acxa?” Hunk asked.

“No,” said Keith. “She wouldn’t pull the same trick twice.”

Five tired pairs of eyes blinked back at Lance.

“We know what it is,” he said.

His neck hurt, and the words tasted like ash on his tongue. This was how the end began, huh?

“It’s unmarked,” he said. “Unmanned. Unresponsive.”



“Like the first one we found,” mumbled Pidge. “She’s done it again, hasn’t she?”

“You think there’s bodies on it?” Asked Hunk.

“Without doubt,” said Keith.

He was stony faced that morning, glaring at the image they’d pulled up of the ship. It looked a little like a Galra carrier, similar to the first ship they’d stumbled across filled with Carma’s victims, but much of the paint had been stripped off it.

“There must be something more to this one,” Allura said. “She wouldn’t present us with the same problem twice.”

“I don’t know, I’d say our first encounter was horrific enough to not want to repeat,” Lance muttered.

“We should be cautious,” the princess said. “We’re much closer to the dark planet now. If that ship does have corpses on it, Carma would have more control of them now. She could... you know what she could do.”

“So what do we do?” Pidge asked, looking between the pair. “We can’t just leave it.”

“I’ll go check it out.”

Lance whipped around to Hunk, who’d spoken.

“No you won’t.”

“You heard Pidge,” the yellow paladin argued. “We can’t leave it. Yellow is the strongest lion, I’ll fly out, if it blows up or something, I’ve got the best chance.”

“The *best chance*? Hunk, we’re not taking any risks-“

“We may not have another option,” Allura interrupted.

She shared a look with Hunk, some unspoken agreement passing between them. Lance felt an argument building on the tip of his tongue, but Hunk set a hand on his shoulder.

“Look,” he said. “Let me help while I still can?”

Hunk looked so earnest, it made something tighten in Lance’s chest. His fingers formed fists, freezing the inner lining of his gloves.

“You check it out, then get the hell out. You’re the priority, got it?”

Hunk nodded.

“I’ll go with.”

Lance had to resist rolling his eyes as he turned to Keith.

“You’re still recovering-“

“I’m fine. Hunk needs backup, I’ll go.”

“Are you sure, Keith?” Allura asked. “It hasn’t been long-“

“She’s not in me anymore,” Keith said, failing to keep the edge out of his voice. “You can all stop treating me like I’m about to die.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re infallible,” Lance argued.

“We’ll look out for each other,” Hunk said suddenly.

Keith shot him a grateful smile before turning back to Lance.

“We got this,” he said, softer. “Don’t worry.”

*Don’t worry.* Yeah right. Lance didn’t think he could remember a time when he hadn’t been stressed, where he hadn’t had the threat of the Dark Planet looming over him and his teammates. And now, with Keith and Hunk flying out to meet the ship, the worry only intensified. They monitored their progress from the bridge, watching the red and yellow blips approach the dormant spacecraft.

Lance felt sick. They knew what they’d find, only this time... it was bound to be worse. It was bound to be dangerous. Allura cradled Hiroshi tightly to her chest as she watched the screens, Coran beside her, constantly monitoring the ship in search of changes. Lance couldn’t keep still; Pidge’s eyes tracked him as he paced back and forth on the bridge, arms growing colder by the second.

“Sometimes I seriously think you’re gonna explode,” the green paladin muttered.

Lance ignored the comment, bouncing up and down on his feet, studying every little reading they were receiving from the ship, counting the seconds.

“*Okay, we’re coming up on it now,*” said Hunk, his voice coming in over the comms.

“Be careful,” Lances stressed.

“*Gotcha. Keith, stay back until I give the signal.*”

Lance held his breath as the dot representing the yellow lion began approaching the ship.

“*Can’t see anything yet,*” said Hunk. “*Probably is a Galra ship, but the markings have been obscured.*”

“Maybe more captives?” Pidge asked.

She looked anxious.

“Maybe,” said Allura. “They could have been trying to disguise their escape from the Galra.”

“*Could be rebels,*” said Keith.

“*Alright... scanning for life forms,*” said Hunk.

Silence descended over the bridge as they waited. A sigh from the comms, a troubled one.

“*I’m not getting anything.*”

“That doesn’t mean there’s, you know, nothing there,” Allura warned.

“*I know. Just... there’s nothing living. At least, not without Carma... guys, we know what to expect,*

*right?”*

Hunk sounded nervous.

*“Want me to get over there?”* Keith asked.

*“Nah, hang back. I’m gonna open it up.”*

“You think that’s a good idea?” Lance asked.

*“I’m out of options, buddy,”* Hunk said. *“I’ll let Yellow do the work, won’t actually expose myself to it.”*

“Be careful,” said Pidge.

*“Will do.”*

Lance felt like his blood was actively trying to claw its way out from beneath his skin, a sharp chill to it as it raced through his veins. They waited, listening to Hunk’s steady breathing over the comms. He was silent for a full few minutes, before finally speaking again.

*“I can’t get the door open. It’s jammed, I think.”*

*“I’ll help,”* said Keith.

*“Nah man, this thing isn’t budging without help from my lab equipment. You guys... you guys think I should bring it back?”*

“No,” said Lance, the same time Pidge offered an affirmative response.

“We need to know what’s on there,” the green paladin said. “Yeah, it’s probably just bodies, but... still, whatever innocent aliens got caught in this, we can’t just leave them out there.”

“Bringing that thing on board though...”

Lance bit his tongue.

“We could take it to the quarantine hangar?” Allura suggested. “I agree, we need to know what’s on that ship. But this is a hazard.”

Lance turned back to the screens.

“Bring it in,” he instructed. “But we are operating under *extreme* precaution.”

Following Hunk and Keith’s response, he turned back to Allura.

“Now what?”

“We prepare the hangar.”

Ten minutes later, Lance stood in his same spot on the bridge, watching the screen as the red and yellow lions entered the hangar, dragging the dormant ship in behind them.

“This is a bad idea,” he muttered.

Allura shot him a look.

“You know this is a bad idea, right?”

“Perhaps,” she said. “But we need to know.”

There was something in her eyes, something scared, and quite unlike her. *Is it Shiro?* Lance could practically see the thought pouring from her head.

“*Ok, hangar is secure,*” said Hunk, pulling Lance’s and Allura’s attention away from each other. “*We’re disembarking.*”

“Remain in the hangar,” Allura instructed. “Coran will deliver your supplies to you.”

“Any signs from the ship?” Pidge asked.

“None,” said Keith. “*We’re inspecting it now.*”

“Be careful,” said Allura. “If you aren’t in your lions, you need to be on high alert.”

“*Got it.*”

“*I’m gonna look at the panelling,*” said Hunk. “*How long til Coran gets here?*”

“He’ll just be a minute.”

Allura looked tense. She’d already set Coran off to the lab to pick up tools for Hunk. Lance listened to the pair of paladins talking over the comms, debating with each other the right approach. Lance half listened, too full of nerves to be settled. His ears picked up on the sudden silence though.

“Guys?” He said.

He could hear them breathing, but nothing else.

“Hunk? Keith?”

“*Uh... I think, I... I think I got it,*” said Hunk, after a minute or so of silence.

“Got it?”

“*Got the doors open.*”

Hunk sounded scared. Lance glanced at Allura, who was gripping the consul tightly. Pidge was watching them with wide eyes. Slowly she set her computer down, and padded over to the screens.

“Be careful,” she said, and it was almost a whisper, like she feared disrupting something.

They waited, listening, as the sharp groan of metal bending filled the comms. Lance could still hear his friend breathing, but no one dared to speak. Another crunch of metal; something fell to the floor. Lance could picture it, the buckled door of the spacecraft crumbling onto the floor, two hesitant pairs of boots treading lightly up into the hull.

Then nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing. No talking, no fighting, no screaming or crying or the sounds of metal creaking.

“Keith?” Lance whispered. “Hunk?”

“Guys,” said Pidge. “What’s there?”

“Answer please, paladins.”

Allura was rocking Hiroshi, though the baby was fast asleep, so it was probably more a way to calm herself down. Pidge looked to Lance, then to the princess.

“Keith? Hunk?”

“Hey, what’s happening?”

Lance could feel his pace picking up, frantic.

“I’m gonna go to them,” said Pidge, suddenly and decisively.

“Pidge-“

“Guys I’m on my way,” she announced, gripping her bayard tightly.

“No-“

They both jumped at the sound of Keith’s voice. Lance heard him breathing now; they must have muted their comms.

“*No don’t...*” Keith paused, and Lance could feel the hesitation in those words, the regret.

“*Don’t let Pidge in here,*” he finished quickly, quietly, like he wished those words and all the others like it in the world would just disappear.

Pidge frowned. Lance could hear his own heart hammering in his chest, confusion writing itself across his face as Pidge turned to him with questioning eyes.

“Why... not?” She said, soft, a little bit afraid.

There was another pause, and it dragged for too long. It dragged long enough to let the words sink in, for a change to come over Pidge’s face, for the cool traces of caution in Lance’s veins to solidify into ice. Pidge turned. She ran.

Lance lunged into action a second after her, but she was already ahead, and he was already too late. The last thing he saw of her face was dawning realisation, the type he’d seen on Tajo’s face when their mama handed him a suitcase and told him to collect his sister’s things, the type he’d seen on Lily’s when the sixth and final search party returned from the cliffs along the seaside.

Lance called for Pidge, racing after her as she tore out of the bridge, everyone crying out for her to stop. And he should’ve been faster, with longer legs and years worth of training, but god when Pidge wanted to run she could *run*. She ran and ran and didn’t slow down once. She rounded every corner of a route she knew too well, running as fast as her legs could carry her away from Lance.

“Pidge!” He yelled. “*PIDGE!*”

She kept running. They were getting closer, they were nearly there. Lance lunged for her at the end of a corridor, but she evaded him, slipping through his fingers, quicker and more agile in her steps. He ran, and ran, considered ripping the electrics from the walls or casting ice over the ground to slow her down, but couldn’t bring himself to do it.

The hangar doors loomed before them, and Pidge kept running. Lance called out to her again,

futile. She slammed into the doors, her fingers flying over the keypad. He nearly reached her, *he nearly reached her*, but then the doors were opening and she was through, and Lance's fingers grasped at nothing.

Keith caught her. He was standing right by the doors. She barrelled into him unwittingly and he snatched her up, locked his arms around the green paladin and brought them both to their knees as he tried desperately, *desperately*, to hold her back. But Pidge had already seen; Lance's hands gripped the roots of his hair, the broken whine through gritted teeth completely drowned by the awful, awful scream that came from Pidge. Keith gave up, he gave up holding her when she cried like that, his eyes dull and unseeing, back turned to the scene unfolding in the hangar, where Hunk was slowly lowering the bloodied up body of Commander Holt to the floor. Keith just raised his arms and gave up, Pidge falling from his hold as she half-ran half-stumbled toward her father's body.

Hunk looked up and he cried when he saw her, and though he could've held her back, actually held her, he didn't, because it was too late and they all knew that. So Hunk knelt there next to her, crying, as Pidge gripped her father's face and dug her fingers into his shirt and lost her mind over the blood covering his body. He was dead, and she knew, and they knew, and she kept *screaming* for him.

Lance's chin hit his chest, blood roaring in his ears and his head felt foggy and detached, and the sounds coming from him didn't sound like his own but he knew they were. The screaming got too much for Keith and he stood, made his way over to the green paladin, wrestled Pidge's hands away from her father. He pulled her to his chest, turning them, hiding her face from the sight.

"Katie," he said, "don't look, Katie, don't look at it."

Pidge fought against him, beat her fists against his chest and screamed her throat raw trying to escape, trying to see. Keith shut his eyes, shaking, locking his arms around her and just repeating those words over and over.

The hangar doors opened again, Coran and Allura fell through. There was something burning Lances wrist. His eyes flitted down, to the Lox, to the glowing green stone, vicious and bright. It was getting brighter, brighter. Allura was speaking to him, but Lance's head felt foggy.

"It's not real," he whispered.

Allura was yelling at him, even over Pidge's cries.

"It's not real," said Lance.

He touched the stone.

-

Lance didn't know what was real. It could have been all of it, or none of it; he had no way of telling. He only knew that all of it hurt. Pidge's scream rung in his head, and it hurt. The worlds blurred together as he slipped between reality and illusion, unsure of which was real, only that it hurt.

He knew eventually, when he blinked back at the boy before him, at Keith, who'd just run a knife through his chest, that it couldn't be real. He knew, because Keith would never hurt him, would never kill him, the boy he was looking at couldn't be Keith. But it still *hurt*. And when that world faded from Lance, he didn't think he wanted any of them to be real.

-

When Lance woke, there was no one around. There was a crick in his neck and a dull ache in the back of his head since he'd no doubt collapsed after touching the Lox. A sickening feeling clawed its way up his throat. This was real. *This was real.*

Looking around, Lance noted someone had at least dragged him from the hangar. The castle was deathly silent, dark, the night cycle well in motion. Pidge... there was no sign of her, of any of them. Lance felt ill. He didn't want to go back into the hangar, but he had to know. When the doors slid open, there was still blood on the floor, and a crumpled space ship discarded in the middle. Lance left quickly.

He didn't know where he was going, not really, only that he couldn't sit still. He should find Pidge- and tell her what? What could he do? Her father was dead. *Sam Holt was dead.* Lance stopped, placing his hands against the wall as he heaved in breathes of air, the nauseating feeling intensifying suddenly. When he'd calmed down enough to resume walking, he head off in the direction of the bridge.

The world felt cold again, grey and lifeless and hopeless. It felt like loosing Hiroshi, except this time it was real. Part of Lance never wanted him to find the others. Part of him wanted to launch himself and the blue lion out an airlock, go back to the Dark Planet to finish what he'd started, except this time he wouldn't be coming back.

The cries hit him the moment he turned corner, the doors to the common room open, a dim light spilling through. Lance felt himself deteriorate, his feet dragging, head pounding, the pull of hatred and anguish on him too strong.

It was just Keith and Pidge, in the end. They were the only two there. They sat curled on the floor, the red paladin wrapped around his friend as she cried bitterly into his shirt. It was less of a cry, actually, just a dry heave, her whole body shuddering, weak noises of distress escaping her lips. She didn't see Lance, but Keith did. His eyes moved slow and looked solemn, his skin taking on a grey hue in the poor lighting. He didn't say anything, didn't need to. He shut his eyes, stroking Pidge's hair. Lance knew what he meant. *I don't blame you.* He turned and left, because it didn't matter, not when Pidge's father was dead.

Lance walked with an odd mix of purpose and non-purpose. He had no idea where he was going, but he needed to do *something*. The thought of taking Blue and brining hell down on Carma one more time was becoming more tempting that ever; Lance could scarcely believe he's even considered her blameless for one fucking second. He was just about ready to start in the direction of the hangars when he slammed into someone.

"Oh, Lance, there you are!"

Suddenly he had a face full of white hair and a pair of arms around his shoulders, as Allura squeezed the life out of him in a crushing hug. Her eyes were red when she pulled back; she'd been crying. She touched his cheek, eyes searching his for some change in expression, but Lance kept his face like stone.

"I was coming to find you," she said. "Lance..."

And then they were hugging again. This time Lance raised his arms to hug her back, wrapping his friend up tightly as his shoulders began to shake. Allura caved, her tough composure crumbling as they slowly but surely dissolved into sobs in each other's arms.

"I'm sorry," Lance whispered, when they finally settled down.

Allura shook her head vehemently, fingers curling around his arms.

"I... have to go," said Lance.

"No--"

Allura's voice was warbled, pitchy, floating around on fragile emotions. "No, you're not."

"Allura," said Lance. "She killed Pidge's father."

Allura's brow furrowed, eyes brimming with tears.

"I... I-I have to do something, god, Allura, oh *god*--"

And Lance was crying again, shaking apart under her watchful gaze. He felt five years old again, lost in a crown, he felt ten, staring at the cliff face and begging, *begging*, for his sister to come wandering out. Allura was patient, that or she couldn't quite handle herself either.

"It will shorten our days more," she whispered.

Lance was forced to look at her. Tears shone on her cheeks, her marks seemed duller than usual.

"If you do something," Allura said, soft as air. "She'll take away more days."

She squeezed his hands. Lance couldn't *breathe*.

"It's because she stood up for me," he said. "Pidge... because she defended me, against the O'kyan, and always... it's punishment for her, for helping me, Allura... Allura this is my fault, they hurt Pidge, they hurt Pidge--"

Allura hugged him to stop him talking. They stood there, in the empty hallway, waiting for space to sooth over the mess it had made.

"You know what we have to do," Lance whispered into her hair.

Allura nodded. *She knew*.

-

It was one of those nights time didn't seem to exist. Back in his room, Lance drifted off eventually. He woke periodically, the Lox aching around his arm, his head foggy with sleep and eyes itching with tears. He was shaken by a nightmare sometime after two am, brought back to consciousness by the weight of a body lowering itself into the bed beside him. Lance mumbled something sleepily, rolling over and searching for Keith as the boy clambered into bed. A kiss landed on his forehead before Lance could fully accustom to his surroundings.

"Sh," Keith whispered. "It's just a dream."

That might've been, but the rest...

"Pidge," Lance managed, his voice slurred.

Keith's breath hitched, and Lance didn't need to see him to know what his expression was. The darkness embraced them, but it couldn't disguise the exhaustion that Keith carried with him.



“She wanted to sleep by Allura and Hiroshi,” Keith said.

And then they didn’t know what to say. Lance felt like crying. Keith took his hand, holding it against his cheek.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Lance shook his head.

“She wasn’t supposed to hurt Pidge,” he said, his voice rough.

Keith’s shoulders shook a little. Lance pulled him down onto the bed. They lay there in each other’s embrace, letting the heavy weight of the day press down on them, trying to shield the other.

“It’s not fair,” Keith whispered.

Lance held him a little closer.

“I thought it wasn’t real,” he admitted softly. “It felt like something the Lox would do, so I... I thought it wasn’t real, Keith. And I couldn’t tell the difference.”

Keith was looking at him, Lance didn’t need to see his face to confirm that, to confirm he was worried.

“You really couldn’t tell?”

“No. It... it scares me, Keith.”

There was a long moment of silence between them, before Keith said-

“Then we need to trick the system.”

Lance frowned. “What?”

“Fool the system,” said Keith. “You and me, we make a... a code. So we know, if you ask me, if it’s real or not.”

Another pause; Keith stroked his cheek.

“What do you think?”

“Would... would that work?” Lance asked.

“They can’t know everything,” said Keith. “The Lox, when they first put it on, you said it read you. That’s when it found out about you. Since then... the O’kyan, what they know, it knows, right? That’s kind of how it... updates. It’s why they always want to know what’s happening with you.”

Lance thought on that. It was true... what the O’kyan didn’t know, the Lox didn’t seem to either. Like Axca- Keith and he had kept that secret under tight wraps. To his knowledge, Lance had never heard a mention of their relation outside a real life situation.

“But... how?” He asked.

“The code, it has to be something they won’t notice,” Keith whispered. “Something you can always check on.”

The hand on his cheek trailed down his neck, his arm, Keith's fingers curling around the bandana.

"You mean--"

"Lights on," said Keith.

The lights blinked to life, both of them squinting against the invasion before Keith dimmed them down again. He propped himself up a little in bed, fingers swiftly undoing the bandana.

"Taking the bandana off might be too obvious a clue," Lance huffed.

"I'm not taking it off," said Keith. "I'm flipping it."

"Flipping it?"

"You always wear it with the A.K. over your wrist," the red paladin explained. "The right way around. All we have to do is flip the fabric over."

"Not sure I understand," Lance admitted.

"Look."

Keith was wrapping the bandana around his wrist again, tying it off neatly exactly as it had been before, except... the A.K. stitching sat on the inside, against Lance's skin. The back of the stitching came through, messy, the writing reversed. It was obvious, looking closely, that the fabric had been flipped and the letters backwards, but to those unaware... Lance laughed.

"When it's real," Keith whispered. "I'll flip it."

He turned Lance's wrist over slowly, before pressing a soft kiss to his knuckles.

"When it's not, the Lox will show that bandana as it always has been, as the O'kyan see it, the right way around."

Lance stared at his wrist, at the bandana, then at Keith.

"Thank you," he breathed.

Keith smiled, just slightly, the most he could manage.

"You don't deserve to live like this," he said softly, and then he was kissing Lance.

Lance embraced the warmth that came with Keith, wrapping his arms around him and pulling him closer under the blankets.

"Go back to sleep," Keith whispered, laying his head on Lance's chest.

His fingers traced the skin beneath the bandana.

"And remember..."

Another kiss.

"This is real."

## Chapter Notes

Hey guys!

This chapters kinda short and cluttered, but I'm drowning in assessment so, what can you do? (cry)

But thanks so much for the comments last time, and sorry so much for last chapter...

Don't know if this one's gonna fix much, but hey!! Look how close we are to finishing wow!!!

Anyway thanks for reading guys <3

IM AN IDIOT I FORGOT TO ADD!!!

<https://twitter.com/foxfaeble/status/991198676063281152>

A lovely friend of a reader drew this pic of Keith from the last chapter... thank you so much <3 <3 <3

-

It took Lance two weeks to look Pidge in the eye. He didn't see her at all at first; for the first week, Pidge stayed concealed in her room. Allura stayed with her most nights, other nights Keith would disappear from he and Lance's room at around three am to go and talk to the restless paladin, or just hold her while she cried. Lance hadn't seen these things, just heard them from the others. They tried to be there for her, as much as they could; and the best thing Lance could do for her was to stay far, far away.

He threw himself into his work instead. Some mornings felt foggy, not quite right. Those days Lance found himself staring at the bandana around his wrist, the direction of the stitching he and Keith's little secret, not for the O'kyan, or the Lox to know.

No one talked much on the castle that week. Lance joined Hunk in the lab everyday, working on their shield, pouring over pages of notes he had to fight to even understand, all in the hopes of one last chance at escape. When Pidge finally did emerge, she was quiet. Keith managed to coax her into the dining room one morning, and while the others greeted her with a chorus of fond good mornings, Lance slunk from the room.

She must hate him now, he knew. He was the reason her father was dead. Sam Holt, likely escaping the Galra, only to be dragged into this hellish system and torn apart because Pidge cared about Lance. Because Pidge helped him. Lance couldn't even take the thought; so why should Pidge.

An exceedingly dismal morning found Lance sitting in a familiar spot, talking to a familiar friend, trying to ignore the weight of the atmosphere in the castle.

"Captain's log," said Lance. "I know it's not recording but... we can still talk, huh Black?"

Lance sat outside the lion, cross-legged on the floor as he stared up at Black's ginormous, dormant form. No sounds or movement came from the lion, but that was to be expected.

“Coran says you’re getting better,” Lance continued.

He paused, running his fingers over the chipped paint of the lion’s chin.

“Doesn’t know how much, if... if it’ll be enough.”

A look of sadness came over him, and Lance curled up a little.

“We have thirty-five says left,” he whispered. “It’s getting darker. And... and Pidge’s dad is dead.”

Lance shuddered.

“Everything’s blurring. Real and not real. I... I need Keith. I need him to tell me, sometimes. It’s blurring, and Pidge-“

Lance leapt to his feet as something clattered to the floor to his right. Breathing hard, his face paled as he saw who it was. Pidge stepped sheepishly away from the chunk of metal she’d knocked into. For a moment, the two just stared. Lance was the first to gather his wits; he tore his eyes away from her, staring at the floor as he began to shuffle away with a hasty apology.

“Lance?”

Her voice stopped him. It was small, and broken, and curious. Lance shut his eyes, inhaling sharply through his nose. Pidge’s eyes were red and sleepless, her form smaller and weaker than usual. Lance turned to her, shame, guilt, disgust at himself, all of it draped over his figure. In the silence, Black purred weakly, urging them to confront each other. Pidge wet her lips, knuckles tightening around the jacket over her shoulders.

“Why won’t you look at me?” She said finally.

Lance felt sorrow making home in his chest. Despite her question, he still averted his eyes.

“You hate me.”

The words left his lips in a flurry, barely spoken at all. Lance had never sounded so small, so ashamed. The silence stretched. He felt a tangible thickness building in his throat, and heat behind his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Pidge,” he gasped, on the cusp of tears. “I’m so sorry. If- if I could change... Pidge...”

And he couldn’t say more, because now Lance was crying. A small sound escaped Pidge, and she began to move. Lance shut his eyes, bracing for the impact, waiting for her to hit him, yell at him, *hate-*

Then Pidge’s arms were around him, and she was sobbing into his chest. Lance’s eyes snapped open in shock. The green paladin was clinging to him now, crying and crying, and holding on for dear life. Lance was numb. He brought his arms up, slowly, encircling her. Pidge cried harder. He hugged her back. He began to shake. They fell apart in neat succession, until each was clutching the other and baring their hearts with no room left for consequence. Lance felt the thorns in his chest dislodging, the knots untying, untwisting, air filling his lungs as they held each other and just *cried*.

“I lost...” Pidge stuttered, gasping for air. “M...my dad.”

Lance bit his lip until he tasted blood, tucking his face into her hair.

"I-if I lose you, I'll be losing a brother," said Pidge.

An ugly sob worked its way from Lance's chest. He clung a little tighter to Pidge. She calmed, from hysterics, to a steady flow of tears.

"Don't make me lose you," she said.

He shook his head roughly.

"I won't."

Pidge chest heaved with a fresh wave of tears. Lance tucked her against his chest, repeating that phrase. *I won't, I won't, I won't*.

They could have stayed like that for an hour, Lance's didn't know. It was enough time for them to sink to the floor, for their breathing to sync, and for the tears to dry on their cheeks. Pidge might've fallen asleep at some point, in the comfort of Lance's hold, finally giving in to the exhaustion that had been griping her for days.

Lance made no attempt at moving, right up until he heard Pidge's stomach give a loud rumble. He nudged her slightly, not wanting to disturb the paladin, but keen to get her back to healthier habits.

"Hey, how about we get some food in you?"

Pidge uncurled slowly from her place on the floor, blinking and rubbing her eyes against the light.

"I'm not really hungry," she protested, before her stomach made an even noisier protest.

She frowned down at it in betrayal. Lance smiled softly, tugging the smaller paladin to her feet, both of them swaying a little since they'd been sitting for so long.

"Come on," he said softly. "I bet Hunk's making something really good."

Pidge didn't return the smile, but her expression told she was thankful. A brief moment of hesitation, and she was pulling Lance in for another hug. Less tearful this time, but still just as heartfelt. Lance was about two seconds away from saying something sappy when the sirens blared to life.

The two paladins sprung apart, Lance grabbing for his bayards as the alarm continued to blare loudly through the hangar.

"*Paladins!*" Allura shouted over the comms.

She sounded frantic.

"*To the bridge, immediately. There's a Galra ship in the system!*"

Pidge and Lance locked eyes.

"*Now!*" Allura yelled. "*It's a warship!*"

-

"What the hell is happening?"

Lance barged through the doors of the bridge, Pidge hot on his heels. He knew his eyes must still

be red from crying, but either the other's were too preoccupied with the threat of the Galra, or just didn't notice.

"Galra warship," said Keith.

He was already suited up, itching for a fight.

"This isn't Acxa, or some stray vessel."

He pointed to the window.

"It's a full out attack."

When Lance's eyes looked outside, his blood turned to ice. Damn right this wasn't Acxa; he crushed the thought that maybe she'd led them here. Outside, within view of the naked eye, sat a massive Galra warship. Lance had seen one before, many in fact; they'd battle them all the time when they had Voltron. But now they were a lion short, and they were trapped, and they were at the mercy of Carma.

"To your lions," Lance ordered, his eyes only meeting Allura's for a swift second before an agreement passed between them.

"But what about--"

"Now! We're taking them down, Voltron or not."

That sealed the deal. All four paladins immediately turned, about to sprint from the bridge when Coran's voice rung out above them all.

"*Wait!*"

They all came to a stop. It was seldom Coran sounded so serious.

"Everyone wait," their advisor pleaded.

His eyes weren't on them, or on the screens... he was looking out the window, right at the ship.

"Something's wrong," he breathed.

There was something in his voice that made them all turn, gathering by the window and staring out at the dark void and it's single ship. Lance frowned, trying to see what Coran was. The others gathered around them, all so far failing to see why Coran had delayed them.

"There," the elder Altean raised a hand to point, but it was probably more out of instinct, because no one could tell where on the ship he meant.

Then Allura gasped. The others looked between her and the ship, now trying harder to see something.

"The underside," Allura said. "By the cannons."

Lance looked, and this time he saw. There was air escaping the ship, in a small, vicious stream, barely visible against the bulk of the vessel as a whole.

"They... opened an airlock?" Hunk asked.

“No,” Lance breathed. “No... that’s a breach, that’s... they shouldn’t be losing air like that, or...”

He swallowed thickly, something tingling along his spine.

“What is that?” Pidge asked.

“They’re bodies,” said Keith.

The youngest paladins eyes flicked to him.

“Carma?” She breathed.

No one answered, because a sharp gasp from Coran was drawing all their attention back to the vessel. Lance saw another breach had opened, air, bodies, bits of ships, all of it being sucked out into space. It seemed so far away, so intangible, and inaudible, but there it was. Then, as if on cue, the entire Galra warship began to tilt to the side. Lance watched in terror and fascination as the vessel leant dangerously to port, like a cruise liner on rough seas, thrown off balance by the monstrous waves. If those Galra didn’t have their stabilisers in order, Lance knew they’d be flying all over the place.

“What the hell is happening?” Pidge demanded.

She sounded scared.

“It’s okay,” Lance assured, though he didn’t know that, not for sure.

“It’s protecting us,” Keith said.

“*Preserving* us,” Allura corrected.

“Carma doesn’t want the Galra killing us before she does,” Lance muttered.

The whole team flinched as a huge portion of the ship burst open, flinging bits of debris out like a star going supernova. Everything was sucked out into space; Lance could almost imagine the sound. He was thankful, suddenly, for the huge distance between them; even watching the tiny specks he knew were Galra bodies from here was disturbing enough.

“They’re deploying escape pods,” Coran said.

Their advisor looked pale, in a trance, somewhat. It was chilling, seeing what Carma could do to that ship.

“Oh god-“ Hunk shoved a hand over his mouth.

The first of the escape pods had just burst into pieces.

“She’s not letting them get away,” Keith murmured.

Pidge turned her face into Hunk’s chest, and the yellow paladin looked away. Lance scarcely blinked as two escape pods collided, going up in flames that were immediately extinguished as space ate them up.

“We’re being signalled,” said Coran.

Lance felt Keith reaching for his hand, and immediately latched onto him.

“Open the channel,” he said.

Coran accepted the signal, and the team held their breath as the screen came to life before them.

“*We surrender!*”

Lance flinched at the words that came tumbling through, before the connection had even finished patching. The bloody face of a Galra general filled the screen, his eyes frenzied with fear.

“*Voltron, we surrender!*”

Lance couldn't speak. His tongue felt stuck, his throat constricted. Behind the captain, spread through the escape pod, the crew had gone berserk. Lance had found himself wondering, without his permission, what had really happened aboard the ship they'd first towed into the hangar, filled with bodies that had woken when he'd stepped on board. Now he had his answer.

Half the crew were dead or dying. Blood, dislocated limbs, the world inside that confined ship had devolved into chaos. Over the captain's pleas for surrender, Lance heard the guttural screams, the begging, the senseless crying. Some had lost their minds. They attacked the others, slammed them into walls, smearing blood across the dark surfaces of the Galra pod. They fought each other, overpowered those who were weakest, forced them into tighter spaces, smaller, confined, crushing them-

Pidge and Hunk had turned away completely. The captain was desperate now, *desperate*; he thought it was their doing. He thought they could help him.

“*We surrender,*” the captain cried, and his cry turned to a weak gurgle.

“*Please,*” he sobbed. “*Please...*”

The sounds of the other crew members were dying out. One with a blank look in their eye turned on the captain.

Keith fist a hand into Lance's shirt as the Captain's sobs cut off with a garbled cry. A few more harsh, piercing noises. Keith hid his face in Lance's shoulder. He still flinched at the sound. Allura had covered her mouth with her hands, but her eyes were wide, watching. The chaos died down; the last bodies still thrashing about slowly stilled, the few raspy sobs and please began to dry in their throats, and the slap of bloody hands against the floor as Galra tried to free themselves in their dying moments all fell away into silence. Through the window, two of the last escape pods collided.

“C-close channel,” Lance stuttered.

The screen went blank. In the silence, he swore no one was breathing. Out the window, air kept streaming from the ship, the last of the debris following it out. Carma had done her part, and space had done it's. Pidge began to sob.

-

The following days passed like a blur for Lance. The raw display of Carma's power had left them shaken, and afraid. He slipped between reality and the virtual world more frequently, more deceptively. Sometimes Lance wouldn't even trust the bandana, so he'd tug the knot loose and bring it to Keith, ask him to retie it. It was only then, in addition to the knowing smile, that Lance knew if something was real. He tried to avoid looking at it most days; realising he was living in another simulation via the Lox made it all seem so meaningless.



Pidge wasn't doing well, they could all tell, but she, like the rest, refused to leave. Despite Hunk's promise to get everyone Lance cared for back to Earth, the team seemed set on staying. Lance let them, for the time being, but he had Allura's word, and she had his. So instead of arguing, they worked together. Lance spent every day in the lab, doing things from pouring over Altean history books, to holding machinery steady as Hunk tested out the final parts of his shield.

At night, he'd train. Keith tried to dissuade him at first, their roles finally reversed, as Lance worked himself to the ground on the training deck, often accompanied by Allura. They'd spar for hours, hand-to-hand, or one power against the other, growing more vicious, more desperate, every time they met. Eventually Keith gave up, and joined them instead, easily beat by the alien extension of his teammates but training nevertheless. They'd help each other stumble back to bed in the early hours, past the time the nightmares usually came, only to wake in the morning and begin their gruelling routine.

It went on, and on; Lance lost track of time. With twenty five days to go, they decided to test the shield.

"We can start it running now," said Hunk. "Leave it up just to see if it holds. Closer to wormhole time we can get out of here, and then... well, we'll see if it works."

"If it doesn't," Pidge cut in suddenly. "Will she... she... it's going to be angry, right?"

Lance's chest ached at how afraid Pidge looked. He knew what she was worried about; aside from their own safety, she was now terrified for the lives of the other members of her family. *Matt*. The name hovered in the air unspoken. *Does she have Matt?* Their guess was that Commander Holt had escaped the Galra, but when fleeing, like the first set of prisoners, had been lured to their system using Pidge's scent... Lance refused to believe Matt could be caught in this web too.

"Pidge," Lance said. "You know you... you don't have to stick around for this one. We're gonna swing by another planet before the wormhole, we were thinking the Olkari--"

Pidge's head snapped toward him, and her look silenced him.

"I'm *staying*," she hissed.

There was motive behind those words. This wasn't just about keeping her teammates alive anymore, this was about Pidge's own revenge. Lance swallowed.

"Then we're gonna be fine," he said, not wanting to start that argument up now. "I trust Hunk's shield."

Lance's ignored how he'd trusted all their previous attempts too. There was still time, there was still hope.

"So how do we begin this?" Allura asked.

"Uh," the software's already installed," Hunk said. "It could just take a while to par with the castle's usual shields."

"Time estimate?"

"Not more than an hour."

"Excellent," Allura said. "Just point out where you need us, and I'm sure--"

She didn't finish. Allura just stopped in the middle of her sentence, as if she could sense something. She looked puzzled, for a second or two, and that should've been the hint they needed. In the next second, something was colliding with the castle.

Lance hit the floor as the entire ship lurched to the side, a force like an earthquake going through it. He was cursing himself, cursing their carelessness, before he even got to his feet, because he knew that sensation. Lance's eyes flew to the window as the castle trembled, the blood draining from his face.

There was a Galra fleet surrounding them; not a single ship, a fleet. As he watched, more and more ships popped into existence, until they were facing down not one, but ten, the sudden emergence of them like a face full of freezing water.

"Shit!"

The team was frozen, caught off guard entirely. Lance locked eyes with Allura, and even she was struggling to even find words. They must've sent a call for help, the ship Carma had torn to pieces, they must've-

"Get to your lions *now!*" Lance yelled.

"Coran, activate the particle barrier!" Allura shouted after him, tying Hiroshi's little blanket around her back to swaddle the baby tightly to her chest.

The rest of team Voltron took off. Thankfully they were in their armour in preparation for the shield set up, but Lance sensed they already had too little time. The castle shuddered as the particle barrier took the first shot. His actions became mechanical as they raced towards their lions, Blue's massive jaws closing behind him as Lance slammed his helmet over his head and grabbed the controls. They tore out of the hangar at record speed, the red lion already flying ahead of the others as Keith fired mercilessly on the Galra ships.

They were ridiculously outnumbered, especially with Voltron out of commission. Lance felt his chest fill with fear, keeping the most of it out of his voice as he yelled formations to the others. He hadn't actually glanced at his bandana, but this... he knew this was real. The Galra were firing from every direction, at the castle, at the lion's... Lance could barely keep up. The voices of his teammates blurred together, frantic orders and sharp cries whenever they were hit.

"*There's too many!*" Hunk yelled. "*What do we do?*"

"*Hold position!*" Keith shouted back.

Lance's head was spinning. He had to do something, something more than this, because this wasn't a fight they were going to win. Renewed anger filling his veins, Lance dove headfirst toward the nearest Galra fighter, smashing the smaller ship into its parent before digging his claws into the hull of the warship and ripping it open.

"*Barrier at forty percent!*" Coran yelled.

Lance yanked Blue away from the warship, turning fast, dodging fire, before calling Pidge into a formation that allowed them to trick two fighters into colliding. Hunk yelped over the comms as the yellow lion took heavy fire, and Lance watched fearfully as his friend was momentarily lost in the various explosions. The castle began firing on the Galra, but it wasn't enough, *it wasn't enough*. Chaos, all around them, a world that was already out of his control had caught fire. Lance fought thoughtlessly, firing, taking hits, killing and killing and-

Keith cried out, and it was loud enough, hurt enough, to get his attention. When Lance turned his lion around, Red was caught in a violent beam of light pouring from the mouth of a warship. And she was being pulled in.

“Keith!”

He heard the red paladin struggling, fighting against the pull of the laser that was trying to draw the lion and it’s pilot into the belly of the ship.

“*It’s not giving!*” Keith shouted.

Lance tore forward, avoiding as much fire as he could as he navigated the battlefield towards Keith.

“*Keith!*” Pidge shouted, under heavy fire herself.

“I got him,” Lance replied. “Defend the castle, the shields are losing integrity!”

In the corner of the screen, Lance saw the green lion race back toward the castle, firing at the ship that was doing the most damage to their shields. He kept the sum of his attention on the red lion, who was getting closer and closer to certain capture.

“Take her sideways!” Lance ordered.

“*I can’t! It’s frozen my controls!*”

“I’m coming in with sonic shielding!” Lance warned, steering Blue headfirst towards the other lion.

“*What? No!*”

“Brace for collision!” Lance yelled, gripping the controls tight before flying headfirst into the beam.

Blue took it like a champ. Lance shuddered at the nauseating feel of whatever ray was begin used to reel Red in. Blue’s shield worked, however; they collided with the red lion at speed, knocking both from the reach of the laser, though the impact was jarring.

“Gotcha buddy,” Lance said, as both lions went tumbling out into open space.

Keith muttered something over the comms that could’ve been a compliment or an insult, Lance wasn’t sure.

“*Just get back to the real fight,*” Keith mumbled, but there was lightness to his tone.

“On it,” Lance said, turning Blue around and-

A laser engulfed the pair of lions, and he stopped breathing. Stopped hearing, stopped thinking; it was like it shut down every sense. Over the comms, he was faintly aware of Keith struggling, frozen in his seat while pain coursed through his body. Blue roared in his mind, and distantly, faintly, the black lion too. Lance tried to fight, to overcome the horrible sensation that had him frozen in place, but he couldn’t. And neither could the lions.

He could only watched in horror as he and Keith were towed towards the mouth of a waiting warship. Lance grit his teeth, blood filling his mouth as he bit into his cheek in an attempt to just *move*. Keith was yelling, so were the others, but he and Lance were helpless. *Closer*. The dark

maw of the Galra ship hid the bright laser fire. *Closer*. The yellow lion changed course and began racing towards them. Lance could faintly make out Allura yelling, ordering the others after them, urging them to break away. But Lance couldn't even reply. He was frozen, trapped; the Galra ship drew closer.

A stronger force went through the laser, and all sound disappeared. Lance's vision blurred, shaking, his limbs losing all co-ordination. A sharp ringing, a searing pain along his spine; the Galra ships closed around he and Keith.

## Chapter Notes

Thanks for being patient with this one guys, ya girl got her ass kicked by assessment and will have it kicked again shortly but not as much as this chapters gonna kick you! Importantly though:

## PLEASE READ

you're not gonna like this chapter I don't like this chapter but please please promise me that if you've read this far you'll read til the end? you'll see what I mean

Thank you so much for the comments, I've been useless at replying but they're so very appreciated... thanks to everyone whose stuck along for this ride

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

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By the time Lance's hearing had returned, they'd sedated Keith. It meant that even though he could hear the loud footsteps of Galra soldiers through the halls, there were no sounds of struggle.

It had been easy enough for the Galra to pry both paladins from their lions; confused, disorientated by the strange force of the laser beam, neither pilots nor their lions could put up much of a fight. Keith had tried, though. When they got him out of Red he was still kicking; Lance could make out his fuzzy shape out of the corner of his eye, thrashing in the holds of the Galra until they jabbed a needle into his neck and he went limp.

Blue was sending rapid distress signals to Lance across their bond, horrified that she hadn't been able to keep the Galra out; whatever the laser had done to them, it had affected the lions too. Lance was feeling drugged, like his brain had been carved out and microwaved for a couple of minutes before being rudely shoved back into his skull. It hurt, he felt like vomiting, but the worst was the fear. Terror even, deep, underlying *terror*; because they had been captured.

His senses were coming back steadily, but not quick enough. He could breathe now, the air had an actual, tangible taste. Lance felt a curse building on the tip of his tongue as the pair of Galra dragging him along jostled his body around a corner. He curled his hands into fists, seeking out their *blood*-

Lance fell forward onto his knees as he was shoved unceremoniously into a cell. The floor was jarring and cold, the energy that had been building in his hands scurrying to form defences instead of an attack.

"Lance!"

The cell door- a electrified purple wall really, closed up, and Keith's hands were on him.

"Lance?"

He was forced to look up, into the eyes that bled the same colour as the cell around them.

“Lance? Can you hear me?”

Lance nodded shakily, slowly accustoming to their surroundings. The pressure in his head was starting to subside, allowing clearer thoughts in.

“It’s okay,” he said, before he could really process the words.

Then he was hugging Keith, and reality was coming down hard.

“It’s okay.”

The red paladin shook a little, from anger or fear Lance wasn’t sure. His hands fisted in Lance’s hair- when had he lost his helmet? They stayed like that until their breathing fell into sync, slowly calming down, recovering from the shock of the laser.

“They warped out of the system,” Keith said, releasing Lance from his suffocating hold but keeping them close. “The lions are on board, I can feel them.”

Lance nodded. “Yeah, yeah me too. The castle... do you know?”

Keith shook his head.

“I can’t sense the other lions so... I assume the others got away. Or, or are still in the system.”

“Or on a different Galra ship,” Lance muttered.

Keith’s breath caught.

“You think?”

Lance caught his hands; they felt cold, this cell was cold.

“What do we do?” Keith whispered, as though he feared the Galra were listening in.

They probably were. Lance glanced at his wrist, but the bandana was still hidden under his armour.

“This is real, isn’t it?”

Keith frowned, then took Lance’s face between his hands.

“You ask that a lot,” he said.

He looked serious.

“This is very, *very* real.”

Lance held his gaze, slowly unfurling his fingers. He began to search, reaching out with his powers, with the cold- A sinking feeling settled in his chest.

“I... I can’t see,” he said.

Keith’s frown deepened, and he glanced at Lance’s eyes.

“You can’t see-“

“Feel, with my powers. Outside this cell I... I can’t. I can feel you, Keith, but if I try... I can’t touch that wall,” he said, in reference to the dull shield of electricity, or an equivalent, keeping

them in.

This felt wrong, and restricting. Before, when Lance was being dragged to the cells, he could feel the blood in the Galra around him. Now though... the world had shrunk to the size of that cell. He could feel Keith, his heartbeat just a little elevated, but outside of that... nothing. Lance didn't like whatever these walls were made of.

"We need to get out," Lance said suddenly.

Keith huffed a sigh. "I know that. I meant do you have any ideas?"

Lance met his eye again.

"I don't think my powers work in here," he admitted.

"We've gotten out of worse before," Keith said.

"Worse than what? Getting stuck in a Galra cell on a warship while my death clock's busy counting down? We really haven't, man."

"I don't know, I think I prefer this over the cave."

Lance chuckled dryly, leaving Keith's side to go and inspect the cell as the red paladin rolled his eyes. It was a smallish room, only a few metres in length, and all the surfaces were coated in a translucent purple shielding. The floor was solid, set in place, while the walls seemed to be alive with the stuff. Lance guessed it was to keep the more creative aliens inside; in this instance he was that alien. The Galra might not know about his powers, but their shielding saw to it anyway.

Lance was drawn from his thoughts at the sound of footsteps approaching. Both he and Keith crowded to the front of the cell, perhaps against better judgement, but they had to know what was going on. The front was defined by the door, which, while composed of the same purple shield, had a section of completely clear material for the guards to see through.

A face appeared there, and both paladins stumbled back. Instinctively, Lance reached for his bayards, cursing when he realised they weren't there. For a moment, the Galra general just watched them, his large purple head dominating much of the window.

"What do you want?" Keith spat.

The Galra didn't even look his way.

"What weapon was used against the crew aboard fighter C-53?"

Lance could only assume that was the ship Carma had torn to pieces only days earlier. Is that why they'd been kidnapped? The Galra thought they had some new kind of weapon? He and Keith remained silent. The Galra smirked.

"Our commander will be here in the morning. I suggest you be ready to talk by then."

With that, he turned away from the window, leaving Lance and Keith alone in the cold confines of the cell. They shared a look. The morning... the way it was phrased made it seem hours away. That would mean...

"Are we going to wormhole?" Keith whispered. "In this ship, is the whole thing going to wormhole?"

Lance swallowed. He could only assume they were far from the dark system already, so come early morning...

"Lance," said Keith. "They'll think it's us doing it."

"I know."

"They're gonna..." Keith cursed, running hands through his hair. "We have to get off this ship. We... we need to get out, the Galra, they-"

"Hey," Lance said, trying to get the other to look at him.

He caught Keith's hand to stop him pacing. "We know we're gonna wormhole, so the others do too. In fact, they probably haven't come after us cause they're waiting. The Galra, they don't know what's coming. Allura, the others, they do. They'll be ready."

Keith hesitated, eyes flitting nervously between Lance and the door.

"And if not? What if the others have been captured too?"

Lance squeezed his hand. "They haven't."

The next few hours were dismal and cold. The cell was very basic, and the single mat laid out on the floor held little protection against the cold that seeped in through the floor. Lance and Keith sat huddled side by side, talking tactics through in low whispers, trying to decide what their teammates were likely to be doing, what they planned after the Galra ship wormholed back into the system. Presumably only the ship they were in would move, so at least the playing field would be more even. Still, with only two active lions... They could still hope for the best.

Lance was very aware of Keith shivering in his suit beside him; his powers seemed to make him more resistant to the cold than the red paladin. No more Galra soldiers or sentries stopped by, and Lance couldn't hear any other prisoners. It was dark, and silent, and they had no way of telling time. They could only wait, think through the plans they hoped would play out in their heads, and pray that their teammates were waiting for them.

Time moved slow; the cell got colder. It had to be close to the time, it just had to be. Keith was a tight ball of anxiety and pent up energy beside him, practically humming with need for release.

Finally, when Lance was just starting to think that maybe they'd never wormhole again, the ship gave a dangerous shudder. Keith's ears perked up, and a second later Lance heard Galra scurrying down the hall. They waited. The ship lurched. Lance grabbed Keith as the cell tilted to the side, no one on the ship prepared for the sudden force of an untamed wormhole. Who was opening it? Allura didn't know where they were, meaning Carma was likely using poor Hiroshi to open the bridge. Lance bit down on the anger that thought conjured up.

A few minutes of rabid shaking, then silence. For a second, at least. This time when the ship shuddered, Lance nearly laughed. Because that wasn't a wormhole; that was a lion of Voltron firing on them. He and Keith were on their feet in an instant, peering through the small window in the hopes of seeing out. Lance could just make out Galra soldiers rushing down the hall at the end of the passage, alarms going off over the speakers and orders passing frantically between them all. Would the team know where to find them? Were they coming to get them? This was a large fighter, but surely they could handle it...

Lance held onto that hope, held on tight to the thought of his friends coming to rescue them... held it right until a Galra general filled the door of their cell, flanked by soldiers with murder in his eyes.



The ship was still shuddering, they were still under attack, and would be until one party won, or the Galra retreated. Would they, Lance wondered, would they retreat that quickly? Unless... the Galra were probably trapped here too, the same half hour limit on their ship that existed on the castle.

“How did you broadcast your location to Voltron?” The general spat, alerting Lance to their very current problem.

Keith drew himself up like a snake poised to strike, a single look passing between he and Lance as the Galra glared down at them from the doorway. Neither answered the question. A growl emitted from the Galra, and Lance tensed. The door open, four soldiers filing in with their blasters aimed at the pair. The general came in behind them, his teeth bared as he studied the paladins.

“You will tell us, paladins-“

“We don’t know,” Lance said firmly. “We didn’t broadcast anything.”

“Lies!” The general hissed.

The ship gave a violent shudder, the soldiers glancing around as if fearing a lion would come bursting through the walls at any second. Lance sincerely hoped that would happen, and soon; they only had half an hour before the Galra could take off again.

“Search them!”

Lance flinched as soldiers descended on them, but didn’t struggle. They were outnumbered, and outgunned, if he started anything now, they’d only be hurt. Or killed, his mind supplied. Keith snarled at the soldiers who grabbed his arms roughly, and Lance felt a swell of pride at the way they shrunk back minutely.

“They don’t have any communication devices,” a soldier reported back, and Lance couldn’t stop the small smirk that spread across his face at the general’s outraged look.

“Yeah, we don’t. So why don’t you run along and question your pilot instead.”

The general growled, and before Lance could consider that maybe that was bad idea, the Galra was crossing the cell and grabbing Lance by the neck to hoist him up. He squeaked, toes just touching the ground as the Galra lifted him up.

“You will reveal the truth to us, *black paladin*,” he spat.

He was a little short of air, and the hand around his neck was crushing, but Lance still managed a smirk.

“Actually,” he wheezed, well aware that Keith was nearly spitting fire at the Galra to let him go. “I’m the storm paladin.”

The general frowned. It was risky, it was stupid maybe; Lance’s powers felt weak and scattered in this cell, but maybe if he just tried to conjure up a little-

A small flinch, the only indication the general had felt anything. He dropped Lance, a deep frown etched onto his face. A static shock, that’s all it had been; but it was enough to ignite something in Lance.

“General,” a soldier said from the door. “Our engines are back.”

With a final look in Lance's direction, the general shrugged a shoulder and the soldiers filed out after him.

"We'll be back," was the only warning they got, before the cell door slammed shut, and the small traces of ice Lance had been feeling vanished.

"You're an idiot," said Keith.

He was panting, a little roughed up from being manhandled, anger still pouring off him.

"They didn't come," said Lance.

The engines were humming beneath their feet; the Galra were about to warp back out of the system.

"They didn't get us."

"But they will," said Keith. "We know they're alive. They just have to wait until tomorrow."

"And he'll be back tomorrow," Lance added, nudging a shoulder in the direction of the retreating Galra. "Wanting to know why the hell we wormholed again."

"What are we gonna tell him?" Keith asked, crossing his arms.

"I don't know. But he's running out of patience."

A heavy sigh, and Keith sat down in the corner of the cell. He kept his arms crossed, pissed off and scared all the same.

"It's fucking freezing in here," he muttered.

Lance sat beside him, trying to be subtle about his concern; he wasn't feeling the cold like Keith was.

"What now?" The red paladin grumbled.

Lance wrapped an arm around his shoulder, bringing them side to side.

"We wait until tomorrow, I guess."

Keith scoffed.

"We should find a way out."

Lance smirked. "Bet I can think of something before you."

Keith was still frowning, but Lance could sense him rising to the playful challenge.

"Your plans suck," Keith scoffed. "I'm getting us out of here first."

Neither of them, it turned out, were thinking of a way out first. It started off as a bit of fun, stupid ideas for escaping passing between them. But then, when the time came for an actual solution... They grew quieter. Keith had started to shiver again. Hours passed, impossible to count in the confines of the cell. Lance knew it grew darker during the night cycle, and that only added to the sense of urgency. The wormhole would return to take them. Perhaps Voltron would be ready for them this time, perhaps their friends could get them out... But if they couldn't? Lance shivered.

That Galra general didn't seem like one for games; he'd want an explanation as to why they kept wormholing. The truth would never be sufficient, and an excuse just didn't seem viable.

Lance thought this over as they lay on the thin mat in the corner of the cell, carding fingers through Keith's hair as the other boy slept against his chest. Keith was cold. Lance didn't like it; it reminded him of the nights Carma would infest his skin. Since the Galra believed they were still communicating with the team somehow, their armour had been taken. The flight suits weren't warm by any means, and even sharing body heat wasn't enough to block the shivers from Keith. On top of it all, Lance was hungry. They'd only been fed once since being captured, and with all the stress piled up... Of all the ways Lance could imagine spending the last few days of his life, this was not an ideal one.

A deep boom from within the ship immediately grabbed his attention. His fingers froze in Keith's hair; *shit*, it couldn't be time for the wormhole already. But the ship was beginning to shake, and distantly Lance heard the cry of an alarm.

"Shit."

He shook Keith awake, scrambling to his feet as the red paladin sat up blearily beside him.

"W'us happening?" Keith slurred.

"We wormholed."

That woke him up. Keith was on his feet in an instant, cursing the cold as he joined Lance by the cell door.

"Shit. What do we do?"

Lance swallowed nervously. "Got any good excuses?"

"No."

Footsteps sounded down the hall.

"Here we go," Lance muttered.

Something exploded against the side of the ship. The attack was under way. It seemed to last longer this time, or maybe that was just Lance being hopeful. The roar of a lion echoed through the walls of the Galra ship, Lance's heart thumping at every sound. They were so close, so close to their team, to freedom, or at least to a fighting chance. The red and blue lions were already on board, if they could just find a way out of this cell, a way to get to the others...

The door flew open. Lance stumbled back as the general stepped in, fire in his eyes.

"Look man, we don't know what's doing it," Lance blurted.

The Galra ignored him. He angled a finger at Keith.

"That one."

Lance's eyes widened as three of the soldiers moved toward Keith, a forth aiming his blaster at Lance's chest. In the blink of an eye, they'd seized him. Keith was a great fighter, but unarmed and unprepared, he was no match for three Galra soldiers. He managed to knee one in the spleen before the other two had him under control, yanking his arms back to pin them behind his back. Keith

yelped as his arm was twisted, a little too harshly in the wrong direction. And suddenly Lance didn't care that there was a blaster pointed at him.

"Hey!"

He grabbed one guard by his collar, yanking him away from Keith. A sharp elbow to the face is what he got in return. Another soldier entered the room, pushing Lance away. He shoved back, harder, trying to get to Keith.

"Hey! Leave him alone!"

The soldiers were turning, dragging Keith toward the door as the red paladin fought against them.

"Let go of me!" He yelled, sensing they were about to be separated.

Their eyes met, and Lance could see the fear on Keith's face that was no doubt mirrored on his own. Where the hell were they taking him? To question him? To *torture* him? Lance tried to shove past the soldier holding him, but now there were two, three, filling the cell to hold him back as Keith was dragged away.

"Keith!"

He punched the soldier nearest him, gaining a foot forward before a sharp blow from the butt of a blaster was being delivered to his back.

"Lance!"

Keith sounded desperate now. He kicked at the Galra holding him, but they were bigger, and they outnumbered him; his feet barely graced the floor.

"*Lance!*"

"Hey!"

Another soldier was on him. They shoved Lance against the wall, his head hitting the hard surface.

"Keith!"

He tried to shove his way out, past them. Keith vanished out the door, but Lance could still hear him.

"Let go!"

The general cast a dirty look in Lance's direction before following the party carrying Keith.

"*KEITH!*"

A shout of his name, followed by a short cry. They were taking him away, they were hurting him- Lance shoved the guard off him with a jolt of power that left his fingers tingling. The Galra looked at him in shock, one guard splayed across the floor, the other two pinning Lance's arms to the wall.

"*Lance!*"

Keith's voice was growing fainter. The remaining guards looked at each other, one reaching for their blaster, but Lance was quicker. With a growl, he wrenched an arm free, shoving his palm into the stomach of the guard and sending him flying back. Dead, alive, Lance didn't care. They were

going to hurt Keith. His skin was buzzing, the familiar freezing feeling pulsing through his veins. He curled his fingers into fists, a sharp chill running down his arm as he connected with the third guard.

A shout from down the hall; Keith sounded hurt. There was a guard at the door. He rushed to close it, but Lance collided with him, slamming him into the wall and knocking his head into the door. The guard went down, and Lance felt every nerve in his body ignite. He was a storm, all the power of one contained within him; and he controlled it.

The castle shook as he emerged into the hall; they were still under attack. Lance clenched his fists, trying to get his breathing under control. He felt ready to implode, the chill in his veins condensing, solidifying, pulling him in like a black hole.

“Lance!”

His senses felt amplified. Lance blinked, but his vision seemed off; the lights were brighter, scalding and blue. Or maybe that was just him. A gasp from the end of the hallway; they were still there, Keith and four guards, the general just ahead of them. Keith’s arms were being held painfully behind his back, a cut on his cheek where he’d no doubt been hit, and Lance found that he didn’t see anger in red, but in blue. Blue like ice, blue like water. He didn’t know why fire had always been considered the element of hatred, and anger. Fire burned, but that was all it did. Water burned too, but water cut. Water drowned and water sliced, water pulled the air from people’s lungs, it crushed them under its weight, and forced them under its currents. It froze in people’s chests, and burnt scalding wounds into their skin.

Water was life, but as soon as it turned on one... The lights along the hall dimmed suddenly, and Lance didn’t know if it was him, or the attack, but he knew that his vision was blue now, blue and cold and sharp as ice. He began advancing on them, on the Galra, toward Keith, the dizzying rush of adrenaline and power driving him forward. He could feel them, their blood. Hearts were beating fast, blood roaring through veins as the Galra watched him advance. Blasters were drawn, warnings were shouted. There was blood on Keith’s cheek, *there was blood on Keith*.

A Galra approached Lance from behind, but stopped dead, shocking on his own saliva. Lance didn’t notice, didn’t realise what he was doing. Keith’s eyes widened as the storm paladin descended on them, Lance’s eyes a frightening colour, the same that pulsed and spread through his veins. *Blue*. He was searching for them, not with his eyes, but with the blue swarm of energy that swam before him. Keith felt the moment Lance’s powers found him, something cold infiltrating his blood. But it didn’t hurt; it wrapped around him, following his rapid pulse. He felt the cold spread over the nick on his cheek, the bruised flesh of his wrists, the fading scar on his hand. Then Lance found the Galra.

Their blood felt different to Keith’s. Lance didn’t grace over it with care, didn’t try to sooth them at all. He took hold of it, and *squeezed*. The Galra on Keith’s right screamed, his back arching, blaster falling to the ground. The red paladin’s eyes went wide, watching the soldier fall to his knees. Panic erupted in the already chaotic hallway. Keith tried to move, to grab the blaster, but he couldn’t. He sank to his knees, the cold pulsing through him. It was an unconscious decision; he slumped, the chill surrounding his blood so soothing his limbs didn’t obey. Keith’s mouth dropped open in horror as the second soldier screamed, his body twisting and contorting as he released Keith and clawed at his face.

Lance was *glowing*. He’d stopped his approach, arms raised before him as his sightless eyes bore holes into the Galra. The general was shaking, his eyes wide as he stared at the boy. The veins in Lance’s arms were cold and blue, like ice, like ocean, humming with energy. He could feel it, he

was the storm. There was movement off to his left, his senses slowly catching on. A Galra. A blaster. Keith screamed. His warning echoed all down the hall, the panic that spiked in his blood making Lance flinch. And then the Galra fired.

The shot hit Lance square in the chest, Keith's scream absolutely *shattering*, because it should have gone right through him. The red paladin was slumped forward, weakened by the chill emitting from Lance. He stared, and stared, lips still parted in a scream that had lodged in his throat. Lance glanced down at his chest. His flight suit was smoking, the edges of the material sizzling around the hole created by the blaster. But his skin... Lance looked up, eyes settling on the Galra who'd shot him. Keith shrunk back a little. There was a look in Lance's eyes quite unfamiliar. The Galra holding the gun shuddered. He glanced between them, Keith and Lance, at the smoking hole in Lance's suit and the untarnished skin beneath. He levelled the blaster at Keith's head.

Lance breathed in, out, calmly. The storm was his, the cold was his, the ice, the water, the *blood*- He clenched his fist. Keith's cry was short, startled. The Galra holding the blaster crumbled to the ground beside him, his blood splattering against the floor three feet from him. Keith couldn't look away, his body in shock. The last of the Galra's blood was seeping through the pores on his neck. He felt ill, but maybe that was just the hold Lance had on him, on all of them. The storm paladin wiped away the trail of blood dripping from his nose, his eyes still glowing a fierce blue. A sharp hum filled the air, a purple light filling the hallway. That was all the warning Lance got before the laser engulfed his body, and he collapsed.

-

No one came into their cell for three days. Lance first woke from the hit he'd taken to find Keith cradling him, fear in his eyes and a nasty bruise on his cheek. They were back in their cold prison, or maybe it was a different one, but the walls were the same dull purple that suffocated Lance's powers. Keith looked traumatised, his eyes red from crying as he helped Lance sit and tried shakily to explain the situation. The situation being what Lance had done.

Their team hadn't managed to get them out, the Galra had gotten away again. And Lance... Lance had killed three of them, injured another four. Keith told him this as he ran hands over Lance's cheeks, to his shoulders, holding him steady as the memories returned slowly. Terrified, the Galra had thrown them back in a cell, and then... nothing. The wormhole came to take them the next night, the ship was under attack again, but no guards came to the door. The Galra held off Voltron, they warped back out of the system, but no questions were asked. No one dared even approach their cell; when Lance went to look out the window, he couldn't even see any Galra walk past. There were terrified of him, and for a good reason. He could kill them without even touching them; Lance hadn't figured out how he felt about that.

So he and Keith remained in the cell alone, praying that the next time they wormholed would be the time their friends rescued them. Their teammates were trying, that much was apparent. The battles grew fiercer, the shaking in the ship became unbearable. Voltron knew they were on board, and all parties always arrived back at the same place every night, but the Galra must have called in back up, because no matter what they did, they hadn't gotten aboard to rescue the two paladins.

The next night, Keith began to cough. Lance noticed it as they were drifting off to sleep, the way Keith's back tensed as he tried to muffle the sound.

"Hey," Lance squeezed his shoulder. "Are you sick?"

Keith froze. He was shivering.

"Keith?"

Lance sat up, and the red paladin followed suit.

“Just a cough” he mumbled.

Lance flinched when he coughed properly, not trying to hide it anymore. He knead fingers into Keith’s shoulders, eyeing his boyfriend with concern.

“That doesn’t sound good.”

Keith shrugged.

“Not like they’re gonna give us a blanket.”

“You’re cold?”

“You’re not?”

“Not... I think it’s effecting you more than me,” Lance admitted.

Keith looked away, wrapping his arms around him. Lance held his arms open.

“C’mere.”

Keith grumbled something about being fine as Lance tucked him against his chest, wrapping Keith up in his arms to keep him warm. It didn’t work, he kept shivering, but it had to be better than sitting by himself in the cold cell. Keith kissed his shoulder, and something tightened in Lance’s chest.

“They’ll get us out soon,” he promised.

“Yeah,” Keith agreed, though it was probably more for Lance’s sake.

“Get some sleep,” Lance said, doing his best to keep them warm.

Keith mumbled something to him, but he didn’t catch it. The wormhole came again, but no one disturbed them.

Lance checked the bandana occasionally, always when Keith wasn’t looking, peeling back his flight suit to see what the day held. It changed almost as frequently as they drifted in and out of sleep, the cold and hunger draining them of energy. Illusion was as frequent as reality, even if neither held anything but more of the same old happenings. Once or twice Lance woke to find he wasn’t in the cell, but in an arena, or someplace else. It was obvious then that the Lox was at work, but other times... other times he’d have to wait until he could check the stitching that his sanity seemed tethered too.

Keith’s cough worsened. The wormhole took them again. Lance woke to Keith coughing his lungs up, shuddering and shivering on the cold floor. Then the wormhole came, and something changed.

The Galra didn’t come immediately, this time they waited til after the fight was over, til they’d warped to a different system and everything seemed at peace.

Lance was caught between a state of consciousness, dozing off with Keith against his chest, when he picked up on their footsteps. Shoving the red paladin off him, he was up and on his feet, creating a barrier between Keith and the door. The footsteps grew nearer, accompanied by hushed voices. Keith raised himself up, using the side of the cell for support. Steady breathing, steady patience, a wavering sense of hope.

The cell door was thrown open and Lance flinched at the gust of hot air that swept in with it. The warmth wasn't a relief though, the warmth was-

Three steps back, Keith gasped and Lance clung to his hand, their backs against the wall. The soldiers who'd entered the cell weren't in their usual uniform, but in full body suits that glowed a similar purple to the walls. Figures, Lance thought glumly. He couldn't feel them; his powers couldn't breach those suits. Their faces were hidden by their armour, and in their hands... Lance grimaced at the sight of fire, at a smouldering stick of molten metal, aglow with heat. Had they figured him out that quickly? The cold couldn't touch him, the cold was *his*, but this...

Keith caught on fast, and he was not alright. His head turned frantically, looking between Lance and the guards advancing with the molten staff. His panic was compacting like a building collapsing, layers of concrete tumbling down into each other, the weight increasing, crushing, the pressure unbearable.

"No," he said, when the Galra advanced, pushing the staff aggressively between them.

Lance tried to push him away. They were coming for him, not Keith; they didn't need a stick of molten metal to subdue Keith. A terrified gasp tore away from his lips as the weapon came nearer.

"Out of the way," a Galra spat.

Keith bared his teeth, but Lance was repeating that very phrase.

"Get out the way, Keith."

Keith shook his head, but then the staff was coming closer, and he could feel the heat prickling his skin.

"Keith," he said.

He shoved the red paladin aside, eyes trained on the staff. The metal was glowing with warmth, probably some druid magic woven into it to keep it hot.

"No, you can't do this."

Keith clung to his hand, trying to stay with him, trying to keep them together. The Galra grew more brunt about their attack; they advanced with the staff so Lance was forced to shove Keith off him to stop it burning him. At the feel of burning heat against his stomach, Keith at least backed down a little. He accepted the gap between them, but his eyes were wide and terrified and Lance wanted nothing more than to hold him and to tell him it would be alright, though he knew it wasn't.

A pair of Galra grabbed Keith's arms, but it was only to hold him back. With both paladins secure, the general entered the cell. Through his helmet his eyes were aflame with power, and hatred, a smug look on his face, as if he'd won already.

"It's been a little chilly since your friends damaged our ship," he said.

Lance frowned. That's why it had been getting progressively colder, then, the ship was damaged. They had no climate control. He wondered how long it would take for space to take over entirely, to freeze them. Then the Galra smirked, the Lance supposed it didn't matter.

"Thought you'd appreciate the warmth."

A few soldiers snickered, and Keith jerked in their hold, trying to rip his arm free.



“*Don’t* hurt him,” he growled.

The general turned to him, unimpressed. Lance tracked his movements with venom in his gaze, still and silent and calculating.

“You’re the half breed, aren’t you?” The general scoffed. “We’ve heard so many impressive things about half-breeds lately. What, with those new generals. I admit, I’m underwhelmed.”

Keith said nothing, glaring. The general shrugged.

“Still,” he continued. “Maybe with the right training, you’d fit right into their ranks.”

“I’d rather die,” Keith spat, and Lance’s pulse spiked at the look that drew from the general.

Panicking a little, he reached out to Keith with his powers, searching and searching with the flicker of blue in his mind until he found Keith’s heartbeat. He forced that cool calmness into his blood, until Keith went lax, relaxing into the Galra’s grip. It was no use him fighting; he was going to get himself hurt again. The red paladin turned to him with a puzzled, outraged look. No doubt he could feel Lance messing with his energy. The general tracked his gaze to Lance, and he smirked.

“I see we’re immune to your tricks today, paladin.”

Warily, Lance’s eyes left Keith, coming face to face with the general. His expression was less joking now. Lance swallowed the lump of unease in his throat, kept his expression static as the general loomed before him. He couldn’t help it when his eyes flickered to the burning staff.

“Scared, are we?” The Galra asked.

Lance said nothing. The general’s eyes flickered.

“Good.”

He nodded to his men, and the staff drifted closer. Lance’s back pressed into the wall, his stomach clenching as it hovered just a few inches from his skin. Keith began to fight again, spitting curses at the Galra holding him.

“I’m going to ask you a question,” said the general. “And I won’t ask twice.”

Lance shut his eyes for a second, trying to get his breathing and the nauseous feeling in his stomach under control. When he opened them, the general was right in his face.

“How,” he said slowly. “Are you opening the wormhole?”

Lance’s jaw twitched, and Keith mumbled something that sounded like a plea, but neither answered. The general sighed, a long, draw out sigh.

“Very well,” he said.

He nodded, and the Galra wielding the staff drove the metal directly into Lance’s exposed stomach. It didn’t pierce his skin, it was too blunt for that, but god, it *burned*. Lance’s voice lodged in his throat, a silent scream that he simply couldn’t draw in enough air for. Keith screamed for him, thrashing and kicking at the Galra as Lance mouthed around the pain. It hurt, it burned and burned and then-

He sucked in a desperate breathe of air, the ice so sharp in his veins it stung. The staff wasn’t burning him. His flight suit, already tattered from the blaster shot he’d taken, began to sizzle as

scorching metal met his skin. But... Lance breathed deep through his nose. It still hurt like hell, but instead of melting the skin off his body, the staff was met with vicious cold. Lance felt it, the chill in his body so strong. He could *hear* it, and once Keith calmed down enough to listen, so could he. It crackled, like a bonfire splitting the ice of a glacier, one vicious force against another. Lance was starting to shake. It felt like the explosion, like the one he and Keith had survived on the dwarf planet, but this time it was ice saving his life instead of water.

The general looked furious, but he clearly wasn't done. Lance sunk to his knees, trembling, eyes almost unseeing as he poured all his energy into the barrier between him and the molten staff. It *burned*. Like he was holding back a pack of starving wolves, their claws and teeth just gracing the smooth layer of his skin, waiting to sink their fangs in, to make him *scream*. A breathy whine tore away from him, and the general smirked. He knew Lance couldn't stay like this. It was becoming too much, it was tearing him apart, it-

Suddenly it was gone. Lance gasped, ragged, his hands hitting the floor as he doubled over to heave air into his lungs. Sounds weren't reaching his ears right, but vaguely Lance became aware that someone was shouting. *Keith*. A face forced itself into Lance's line of view.

"How are you opening the wormhole," the general demanded.

Lance blinked, his skin tingling.

"We're not," he rasped.

The general's expression darkened.

"Answer me," he spat.

Lance wanted to cry.

"I am."

"Get up."

He didn't move; he wasn't sure he could.

"I'm going to kill you."

That was Keith. He was shaking in the hold of the Galra, eyes flaming with anger and distress. He shook his head, glaring at the general so fiercely the light that caught on his bared teeth made them look sharper, like the Galra around them, *deadly*.

"I'll kill you, I'll *kill* you."

But the general ignored him.

"Up, on your feet."

Lance raised his chin as the staff came to hover below it, forcing him to straighten, then clamber shakily to his feet.

"*Storm* paladin," the general mocked. "How are you opening the wormhole?"

Lance knew what was coming. So did Keith.

"Don't," the latter warned, but it left as a sob. "Don't, no don't."

"I don't know," Lance whispered.

He winced as the staff was driven back into his stomach. This time there was no stopping the cry that tore out of him. His skin was sensitive, already red, burning at a rate a hundred times slower than it should have been. It almost hurt worse, with the ice to combat it.

"Stop it! Stop!"

Keith was screaming. The Galra found amusement in his desperation, easily holding the smaller boy back as he yelled and cursed them out, tears forming in the corners of his eyes.

"Lance!"

He kicked at them, struggled and fought, but he could get nowhere.

"Let him go, let him *go*!"

As for Lance, he could barely breathe. No matter how much of a fight he put up, he couldn't hold back the heat forever. He grit his teeth as it tickled his stomach, leaving scorching patches in its wake. Then it was gone again. Lance could barely draw breath before it was slammed back into his chest.

Right above his heart this time. The air was punched out of him, tears springing to his eyes as he suffocated on the heat pouring from the metal. It infiltrated his throat, so even the air around him seemed to boil. He whimpered, skin beginning to sizzle under the immense heat.

"*Lance!*"

God, Keith sounded desperate. His voice broke around the paladin's name, screaming his throat raw, cursing the Galra around them and when that didn't work, begging.

"Please!"

He sagged into their arms for a moment, knees losing strength as he took in the sight of Lance and the bit of hell contained within their cell.

"*Please*, please, please, stop, stop hurting him *stop!*"

Lance wanted to answer him, comfort him, hell, just look at him, but it was too much. His eyes were watering, he couldn't breathe, his flesh was burning. On his knees again, the general glared down at him.

"How are you wormholing?" He asked.

Lance couldn't reply if he wanted to. The staff was removed, then plunged back into his stomach, into the already sensitive flesh. Lance yelped, broken sounds bubbling up from his throat, sweat mingling with the tears on his cheeks. He wasn't sure Keith was even speaking English anymore, only that his threats were violent, desperate, breaking every barrier between them as he *begged* them to stop. The pressure was too much, the blunt tip of the staff pressing his back into the wall. Lance felt a sob building in his throat as the metal began to burn his skin. The ice was cracking, melting, his body wracked with shivers as he tried to fight. His mouth dropped open, tears spilling from his eyes but the general remained expressionless.

"Stop!" Keith yelled. "He's hurting, d-don't, stop it!"

Lance grit his teeth, and raising shaking hands, gripped the metal. He hissed as it seared through the skin on his palms, but he couldn't breathe. He pushed, blood seeping out from between his fingers as he tried to alleviate the pressure on his stomach. Sensing he was close to breaking point, the Galra pushed harder. The scorching metal slid against his fingers, pushing harder into his stomach. The ice flaked off, his defences fell. Lance couldn't hold back any longer; he *screamed*.

For a second, it burned for real. There was no ice to protect him, no barrier, or defence. Burning metal met his exposed skin and set it alight. He couldn't breathe, or see or hear, just felt it melt his suit and then his skin, burning and burning as he screamed-

"We're trapped!"

Keith's voice cut through the chaos like a knife.

"Something's hunting us," he yelled. "A s-spirit, on the planet."

The staff withdrew from Lance's stomach. He fell forward, heaving and convulsing as the words left Keith's lips as broken sobs. Maybe Keith was looking at him, Lance couldn't raise his head.

"That's what's opening the wormholes," Keith said.

A heaving breath; he was crying.

"That's what killed your fighter. S-something on the planet wants Voltron, and we can't leave. We can't leave or it pulls us back."

Lance shifted slightly, sucking in air as he toppled sideways to look at Keith. The red paladin gazed back at him, tears streaked down his cheeks and a broken look in his eyes. He buckled under Lance's gaze; *I'm sorry*.

"Please don't hurt him," he whispered, so unlike Keith, so unlike the fighter who was told to suck it up, toughen up, move on.

Silence in the cell. The Galra had all paused, waiting for a command from the general. Lance raised his head, bleary with pain. The staff still hung from a soldier's hands, smoking hot. The general took hold of it, eyeing the weapon thoughtfully. A broken whimper escaped Keith, and Lance began to tremble.

"I'm telling the truth," Keith pleaded. "Please, *please*."

The general hummed.

"I believe you," he said.

A single ounce of tension seeped from Lance's shoulders. Then the general thrust the burning metal into Keith. It happened in slow motion, the arc of molten light that swung toward him, striking the red paladin's side just short of his ribs. Lance gasped, the sound torn from him as his eyes went wide and the world condensed around him. He had ice to protect him, he had ancient powers and a powerful heritage to keep him safe. Keith had nothing. The metal struck him and he screamed. Lance could hear the sound it made as it met his flesh, melting suit and skin alike. Keith thrashed, knees giving out as the most terrible sound tore away from him. And then Lance was screaming too.

The staff was removed only seconds later with a sickening sizzle. The Galra dropped Keith, and he fell to the floor like a ragdoll, choking on his own cries as the soldiers stepped back quickly. They

were backing up, heading for the exit. The general was saying something but Lance did not hear. He couldn't *think*. On hands and knees, he scrambled across the cell, not caring one bit for the burned flesh on his own stomach, just seeing Keith. *Keith, Keith, Keith.*

The Galra didn't bother holding them back from one another any more. Faintly, Lance registered the cell door slamming shut, a final word from the general and footsteps retreating. His hands fell to Keith's form. He was breathing rapidly, harsh pants to get through the pain coursing through him. Keith's hands were fisted in the remains of his flight suit, every breath that left him punched with a short gasp, or groan.

"What did you do?" Lance was crying, though there were no Galra left to blame. "What did you do, what did you do?"

Keith shut his eyes and whimpered as Lance's hands drifted down his body, fingers dancing anxiously around the flesh on his side. He nudged Keith's hands aside, breath catching as the boy bit back a groan. The staff had burnt straight through his suit. Underneath, Keith's side was burnt raw, blood and flesh and suit all melded together in a horrid mess. A choked cry came from Lance. He cupped Keith's cheek, doubled over as his other hands hovered over the wound.

"Lance?"

It sounded so weak.

"You're okay."

He was cupping both of Keith's cheeks and crying. The boy blinked back at him warily, fingers clumsily entwining with his own.

"You're okay, baby."

He pressed a kiss to Keith's forehead, squeezing his eyes shut before returning to confront the injury. *God*. Lance felt sick. How was Keith conscious right now?

"Why did you do that?" Lance whined, his brows furrowing and more tears spilling down his cheeks as he framed the wound gently with his hands.

"They were h-hurting you," Keith wheezed.

He was shaking. Holding back a sob, Lance tried what he could to address the wound. He started by peeling back the rest of the suit, creating a clear opening so the threads would stop rubbing over Keith's burnt flesh.

"Oh, sweetheart," he whispered as Keith turned his face to the floor, biting down hard on his lip.

"I... I don't know what to do," he admitted.

That terrified him.

"Keith I... I don't know..."

Keith was breathing harshly through his nose, fingers digging into the cold floor.

"I'll l-live," he stuttered.

Lance started to cry again. He searched the room for anything to help, but it was so empty. A single pouch still sat in the corner, leftovers from the last bit of water they've been given. Lance

retrieved it, crouching down beside Keith and drawing the water out carefully. He adjusted them, lifting Keith's head gently so it rested on his lap before moving the hovering water so it rested just over the burns on Keith's side. He gasped at the feel of cool water seeping into his wound. It wasn't enough, it wouldn't help, but maybe Lance could relieve the pain. He lifted the pouch to Keith's lips, trying to get him to take a sip of the remaining water.

"M cold," Keith mumbled, delirious.

Lance pressed a hand to the floor, and sure enough, it was freezing. He cursed. He had to keep Keith warm. Moving him was torture for them both. Lance's skin was red and sore, but nothing compared to Keith's. He cried when Lance lifted him, taking minutes to settle once Lance had finally laid them on the scruffy mat in the corner. He had nothing to cover the burn with, could only coax cool water over it as Keith whimpered into his chest.

He lay Keith on top of him, placing himself as a barrier between the injured paladin and the freezing floor. It would only get colder, the Galra had said. Keith coughed violently, whimpering at the pain it caused his side. The chill in the air was strong, and Lance knew Keith could feel it. He wrapped his arms around him, their chests pressed together as Lance took great care not to disturb the wound. Keith just lay there, whimpering, fisting his hands into Lance's suit as the latter desperately tried to make him comfortable.

Lance started by running hands through his hair, but when he realised how cold Keith was, just wrapped them around his middle and held tight. He shuffled their legs, trying to prop Keith's limbs up off the floor, but even the air was freezing now. Lance felt tears forming in his eyes as Keith shivered against him. They stayed like that for hours, shivering in the cold cell, clinging to each other for dear life.

Lance had been sure Keith was asleep when he began to talk hours later, his voice croaky from the cold. He sniffled, blinking away the tears that had been blurring his vision as Keith shifted weakly against his chest.

"Like you since the Garrison, you know," he mumbled.

Lance sighed, rubbing between Keith's shoulders.

"What?"

"When I first saw you at the Garrison," Keith said. "I knew it was you."

"Knew it was me who what? You'd hate for the next few years?" Lance joked.

Keith smiled softly into his chest, but resumed talking.

"No, knew I'd love you."

Lance's breath caught.

"That so?"

Keith hummed.

"You ever see someone and you just... stop," he said. "You were in line with Hunk, for our first simulator test, and... and you turned, and I thought, he looks like autumn."

Lance frowned, but kept rubbing hands over Keith's back to warm him.

“Autumn,” he said. “Not... what I was expecting.”

“It’s cause the storms come in autumn,” Keith said. “It gets a little colder, sharper. The leaves turn red and brown and... warm, somehow. And you were all that, warm colours and cold and sharp and bitter all the same. You... you had freckles back then, and your face... I just wanted to wrap up in you and feel that.”

Lance stared up at the dark ceiling above them, tensing when Keith coughed.

“Mean we could’ve been like this all the way back then?”

“No,” Keith scoffed. “Cause then you opened your mouth and I couldn’t stand you.”

Lance laughed with him, gently, so as not to disturb his wound.

“You’re my whole world,” Keith mumbled deliriously.

Lance didn’t like the lag in his words, or the shivers that wracked his body. Keith coughed hard, and Lance squeezed him tighter.

“A-and you’re my world,” he said quickly. “So don’t... just get better fast, alright.”

Keith hummed, fingers playing with the hairs at Lance’s nape.

“The other’s are coming,” Lance said. “They’re coming, I promise. We.. we’re gonna hold on til then. Okay?”

Keith breathed into his neck, eyes drooping.

“M’kay sharpshooter,” he mumbled. “I love you.”

Lance clung to him, his own heart beating a lot faster than Keith’s.

“I love you too. Are you cold?”

Keith sighed. “Not with you here.”

Lance kissed his head, trapping Keith between his legs to warm him.

“Get some rest, you crazy bastard.”

Keith snorted softly, trembling as another cough wracked his body.

“Still love you,” he slurred.

“Still... love you too,” said Lance.

Keith was silent now, breathing evenly against his chest.

“A lot. Forever.”

The cell was silent now, the air growing colder as they lay there. Lance held Keith tight and shut his eyes, praying that the team would be there for them when he woke.

-

Lance himself hadn’t meant to fall asleep. He’d intended on staying awake and alert, watching over

Keith and making sure the Galra didn't come back. Instead, with exhaustion and injury weighing him down, he'd passed out cold.

He woke when the shuddering of the ship alerted him to the wormhole opening. Alarms blared in the distance, and Lance heard a crash that didn't register properly in his brain. He stirred under the weight on top of him, moving his arms clumsily to stop Keith falling off his body. His hands ran through Keith's hair, over his back. Lance froze.

"Keith," he whispered.

The alarms continued to blare, but they were so far away, and so quiet.

"Keith," said Lance.

The weight on his chest didn't budge. Like poison creeping through his veins, fear woke Lance fully. He sat up fully and Keith slumped against his chest, dried blood from his wound scraping against Lance's suit.

"Keith," Lance croaked. "Wake up."

He was cold. He was *deathly* cold. Lance's hand hit the floor as he struggled to sit up properly, and he registered the ground was so cold it stung. He moved Keith between his legs, into his lap, where his head lolled against Lance's shoulder. He looked so peaceful, his eyes shut and face serene as he slept. Except he wasn't sleeping, and Lance knew, but he would rather tear himself to pieces than confront it, the cold reality hanging between them.

"Wake up," Lance said, louder, his voice breaking. "Keith, wake up."

He grabbed his shoulder, shaking him, then his cheeks. His skin as stiff beneath Lance's fingers, and cold as ice. Lance shook his head, mouth falling open around a wretched cry, that died on his lips as his lungs simply refused to draw breath.

"Keith."

He forced the word out, gasping, broken. Keith didn't reply, he wouldn't, ever. Lance made it to his knees and shook Keith's body properly, biting back a cry at the sight of his pale skin, lips gone purple in the cold.

"Wake up!"

A deafening crash; the ship shuddered and Lance gasped at the sudden change in pressure, but didn't give up his hold on Keith. He wasn't dead. That was what Lance told himself, as he clung to Keith's lifeless body. *He wasn't dead.*

There was screaming in the halls, and chaos as something tore into the side of the ship, but Lance barely paid attention. He hefted Keith up, rocking him, tears springing to his eyes as he dug nails into Keith's skin and shouted.

"*Wake up!*"

The lights went out. Lance sobbed as the ship gave an awful groan, the roar of a lion accompanying the sound of metal tearing.

"Keith," he slurred.



He gripped his face, feeling for signs of life in the darkness. Dull, emergency lights lit the halls in grey. When Lance looked up the wall of their cell was gone. He didn't care. He held Keith and sobbed. It was only when the other walls began to buckle, when the ship began to cave, that Lance picked up his partner's lifeless body and stumbled out into the halls. The alarms were dead, like the lights, punctures in the walls and not a body in sight. Lance cried as he stumbled along, Keith's weight too heavy in his arms. He rounded a corner, saw the remains of a control room, before the adjacent wall was ripped away and blown into space.

Lance was rammed into a wall divider as the ship lost pressure and the contents of the control room were sucked out into space. Keith fell from his arms, and he nearly died lunging to get a hold on his shoulders. It was pulling them out, like the bits of furniture still residing in the room, like the walls of the ship itself. Out, into space, where they'd die. *He's already dead.* Lance screamed as his wounded stomach pressed into the barrier, the only thing keeping them from being sucked out too. Keith was completely lax in his hold, Lance's arms wound under his armpits, but losing their hold. He grit his teeth, trying to pull Keith inwards, but he simply lacked the strength. Lance cried, the sound and very air deserting him, as Keith slowly but surely slipped from his grip. The darkness outside loomed before them, already scattered with remains from the ship.

There was no sound here, on this brink, just him, just Lance, and the body of someone he loved. Keith's body slipped, until Lance was just clinging to his arms. He was so cold, nothing like the boy Lance loved to hold. He waited for Keith to wake up, to turn and grab hold of him, help pull himself to safety so he could embrace Lance and they'd laugh about what a close call that had been. Lance waited to kiss those warm lips and feel Keith smile against his, waited to brush back his hair and hear his snarky comment on the matter as they helped drag each other back to the castle in one piece. He waited to hear Keith's voice, watch his eyes take in the stars outside their window or his face as he smiled around a spoonful of Coran's awful cooking. Lance needed him, his presence, his every breath. Keith slipped a little further from his grip, and Lance couldn't even hear the scream that came from his lips.

This was emptiness. This was the space between, the darkness, and cold, cold expanse of it, so vast it was incomprehensible. Not a single sound reached his ears, or a feeling. Keith was just as cold as the fleeting air around them. So Lance's fingers slipped; his hands slid from Keith's elbows, to his wrists. He couldn't see his face, not with his hair obscuring it and the strong pull the atmosphere abandoning them. Lance screamed and screamed but he couldn't hear himself, not even when Keith's wrists became his fingers, and his body nothing more than another bit of debris, lost to the cold, unforgiving darkness.

Lance lost him. He lost him when his fingers cramped, and Keith's pinkie slipped through his fingers like the string of a balloon, floating away to be lost. His hand froze the metal where he slammed it into the wall, hunched over, screaming soundlessly as Keith's body was whisked out of sight. Lance swayed, considered falling into the gaping hole in the ship, as easily as one would topple off a cliff.

The jaws of the black lion tore through the last of the debris and closed around him. He fell into the cockpit hard, air and sound and *everything* returning in an awful rush. Lance gasped, reeling, as Black's conscious surrounded him. Something terrible erupted within him, making the lion stutter. *Keith.* Lance tore at the sleeve of his flight suit. It didn't give easily, but he ripped until his arm was exposed.

The bandana sat around his wrist, Keith's bandana. Lance stared at it, stared and stared and stared. He screamed. The stitching was backwards, wrong, like the world, like this life, like their fate, like every fucking thing that ever contributed to this existence.

The lettering was backwards. This was real. Lance doubled over as they hurtled through space, head in his hands in the hopes he could just cease. Because this was *real*, and Keith was dead.

-

**Star date – 34:03:16**

Castle Cycle – 03:06

Log – 48

*Lance had passed out on their way back to the castle. Between oxygen deprivation and shock, aided by the rough flight of the half-mended black lion, he'd simply lost consciousness. He came to when they landed, when the team raced into the cockpit to see him. There was smiling and there was laughter, there was an overwhelming look of relief on Hunk's face as he scooped his friend up, but then Lance had just screamed.*

*And it fell away. The smile of Hunk's face and the relief in Allura's and the hope that shrivelled up on the tip of Pidge's tongue before she could even ask.*

Where's Keith?

*It fell away. Until it was just those words and just Lance and just a future that didn't stretch very far, but that didn't matter because it was worthless.*

Where's Keith? Where's Keith? Where's Keith? Where's Keith? Where's Keith? Where's Keith?  
Where's Keith? Where's Keith? Where's Keith? Where's Keith? Where's Keith? Where's Keith?  
Where's Keith? Where's Keith? Where's Keith?

*Lance sat in the dark confines of the black lion, staring at the little recording light, transfixed by it. He hadn't healed properly from his time on the Galra ship; he looked like he was worsening. Weathering on the spot, his skin losing its colour and eyes losing all their warmth. Lance just sat there, knowing he should speak. The black lion purred gently, but it was broken, and off, and it made Lance feel worse. She was hurt, Black was hurt, and Keith...*

*"Keith's dead," he whispered into the silent cockpit.*

*Nothing. Nothing but the rolling silence, so sharp it cut, so empty he lost himself. Lance was crying again, the slow slide of tears down his cheeks.*

*"I don't..."*

*He stopped. Night weighed in around them. The others were asleep, or in their rooms grieving by themselves. Had the world always felt this lonely?*

*"Gonna die soon," Lance mumbled. "But it doesn't even... it doesn't matter now."*

*A stuttering breath. His eyes left the recording to rest his gaze on the floor.*

*"Nothing matters," said Lance. "Nothing can matter now."*

Chapter End Notes

comments allow me to gauge your anger

(please don't abandon the story)

next chapter will be posted in a week

## Chapter Notes

HI

Sorry about last chapter guys, but oh my god thanks for the comments they about tripled in number and you're all so goddam nice. Hoping you'll like this one...

I've added one more chapter (52 is the final number!) cause I feel like there needed to be a break between this chapter and That chapter, so the next ones gonna be a brief-ish interlude of sorts.

@pink-painted-flowers did some cute ( I say cute its angsty) art from chaters 45 and 48! Thank you so much!

[Ch 45](#)

[Ch 48](#)

And of course if you wanna say [hi](#)

Next chapter will be up in 1-2 weeks, hope you like this one!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

Days passed in a blur when one just stopped caring. One day Lance would be curled on his bed unable to move, and in the blink of an eye he'd be on the battle field, firing thoughtlessly on Galra ships that had insisted on following them back into the system. The hours between those kind of events... simply blurred.

Time meant nothing, and his looming death meant nothing, and the only thing Lance could bring himself to care about at all was Allura and Hiroshi, the frightened mother and child, who he intended to die for. Carma would not get them, but she could have him. She could have him, and when they were both dead and gone, the others could go on with their lives and maybe it would all mean something to them. But to Lance, it meant nothing.

At night he dreamt of Keith, of his cold hands and the purple tinge to his skin, of his stiff fingers slipping from Lance's to be whisked away into the dark void. His body was out there, somewhere, lost and floating in space. Whenever that thought occurred to Lance, he'd find himself doubled over, unable to breathe, clutching at his head and digging nails into his skull to drive the thought into the dirt because he simply couldn't function with it.

*You're killing yourself.* That's what Hunk had said to him that morning. But he must have seen from the look in Lance's eyes that he didn't care. Allura sat with him through the entirety of the night, laid Hiroshi in his lap and stroked his hair as Lance stared down at the baby. But when Hiroshi began to cry no one could stop him, because that was Keith's job, and Keith should have been there, and Keith should be calming the baby but he wasn't because he was dead. And time blurred. And it meant nothing.

On the night of the seventh day left, Lance dreamt of the tunnel. The dirt dragged him under and filled his lungs, but not before the shapeless shadows crawling up from the depths of the earth swarmed him, working their way down his throat and forcing his head under the sea of mud. He dreamt of Allita, of her presence beside him as they floated in the ocean waves in the heat of summer, the sun tickling their skin and the water blocking the sound from their ears and part of Lance wished he'd sunk. Wished he'd drowned in the ocean as a child, that he'd passed away under the waves before Allita had the chance to leave him, before he was thrust out here and left to die in some godforsaken pit on the planet that reeked of death and despair. The sun and the taste of salt and the muffled sounds of waves breaking would have made for a better funeral-

"Lance."

There was something soft caressing his cheek. Lance's brow twitched, tossing about in bed as the dream slipped through his fingers. He tried to breathe in before it all disappeared, willed the water into his lungs-

"Lance."

He knew that voice. Something *ached* within him. The waves dried up, darkened into the ceiling of his room, the sun flickering out until all the light that remained was the faint dustings that spilt in from under the door.

"*Lance.*"

The soft caress of his cheek solidified into a real touch. A body leant over him, lips brushing his forehead.

"It's just a dream."

Something built in Lance's chest, a sob he thought. It trapped the air inside, the crushing weight of the moment swirling inside him. Keith's hair tickled his cheeks, warm breath mingling with Lance's as his lips hovered just above his.

"You were dreaming," he whispered. "It's okay."

Lance couldn't help it; he started to cry. He could feel the Lox pulsing around his wrist, *knew* this was it's doing, but he didn't care. The room swam around them as he sat up, blinking through the hazy darkness at Keith, who rose with him. And he was there, looking as real as he ever had, a crooked smile tugging at his lips and a calm aura around him. Lance's chest stuttered as the tears fell. He lifted his hands to Keith's cheeks, cringing as the boy leant into his touch. Down, his hands gripped Keith's arms, thumbs stroking the warm skin. He could feel his pulse when Lance pressed a kiss to Keith's wrist, saw the pity in his eyes as he pulled back to just look.

"Please," he said.

Because he didn't care if he stayed here forever. The Lox could keep him until he died for all Lance cared. He moved his hands up Keith's arms, tears flowing freely as he gazed at the body before him, alive and awake and caring. Keith smiled, small and personal and so *Keith* it killed him. He reached around Lance's neck, pressed a chaste kiss to the corner of his mouth and Lance was crying. His body shook, hands clinging desperately to Keith's forearms to keep him there. Keith thumbed away a tear, lips resting against Lance's cheek.

A deafening crack, and the wall of their room was sucked out into space. Keith was gone from his arms before Lance could even scream, and the darkness closed in on him. He woke, panting,

seconds after the void squeezed the last of the air from his lungs and froze his body over.

The Lox had gone quiet, satisfied with its doing. Lance hunched over in bed, dug palms into his eyes, and cried. The wall was still there, he was still breathing, but Keith... Keith was still gone. So, alone in his room, with an ache in his head and a weight too heavy in his chest, Lance cried. The wormhole came, and he wished the wait was over.

-

There were five days left when the alarm woke Lance. He no longer trusted the bandana around his wrist to tell if the days were real, not without Keith there to keep it in check. Not that it mattered much; Lance knew when he'd die.

His feet hit the floor as he rolled out of bed before he was even fully conscious. He knew that alarm, didn't even have to think. *Intruder*. Loud, blaring cries, one right after the other. He'd fallen asleep in his clothes; *perfect*. His vision blurry from sleep deprivation and dehydration, Lance grabbed his bayards off the floor and emerged into the hall.

The alarm was louder here, accompanied by the flashing red lights along the ceiling. *Intruder intruder intruder*. Lance had one goal, and that was to kill. He didn't care who was on their ship, didn't care why. He'd tear the blood from them, toss their body into space. Then the others would finally see him for what he'd become, and they'd leave, and Allura would hide with little Hiroshi, and Lance and Carma would die in the hold of that system, and the rest would find something that mattered.

“*Paladins!*”

Lance ignored Coran's voice. He pulled up the little map from the single piece of arm guard he's slapped on, and followed the blip that indicated the presence of someone on the ship. *Intruder*, the alarms kept screaming. *Intruder intruder intruder*.

He was close now, didn't care where the others were. As long as they saw the end result, as long as they saw whoever's blood scattered across the floor-

Lance activated his bayards, eyes dead, unseeing, uncaring. They buzzed in his hands, like the electricity under his skin. Dark circles marred the flesh below his eyes, chapped lips and greased back hair, a boy that neither cared nor didn't. He was just there to fulfil his purpose, and after that...

*Intruder*.

He hummed to himself, dragging his body around the corner of the hallway and raising the bayards.

“Don't!”

*Intruder*.

Acxa was covered in blood. Lance wrinkled his nose, and raised the gun to her head. Her eyes widened and she stumbled back.

“Don't shoot!” She said.

She *pleaded*. The alarm was rattling, pinching at his ears and tightening the tension already in his muscles. Lance cocked his head to the side, finger playing over the trigger. He could taste blood,

but it was probably just his lip.

“Please, please I need your help.”

He’d never cared much for Acxa. Keith had, Keith hadn’t understood how he’d felt, but he hadn’t hated her. Oh well, Keith was dead. The alarm was so shrill. If he shot her, would it stop?

“D-don’t shoot,” Acxa said again.

She was bruised from head to toe, hair matted with sweat and dirt, cuts on her arms and tattering her suit.

“We have to help him,” she stuttered. “K-Keith. Please.”

Lance swirled the blood around his mouth, his lip stinging from the spilt in it.

“Keith’s dead,” he said.

Acxa shook her head. Lance snorted and raised the gun. Where to shoot her?

“Please,” she said. “Please, he’s my brother, *please*.”

She was crying. *God*, as if she cared. Lance didn’t think he had the capacity anymore.

“Kill me,” she said. “But help him first, I k-know you love him, Lance. You have to help, he’s my brother, m-my brother, please, I’m not lying I wouldn’t lie about...”

Her face contorted. The bruise under her eyes was dark, and nasty looking.

“My little brother,” she whined.

She even had her own bandana tied around her bicep as if that was some kind of sick consolation-

Lance froze. Literally froze, the blood in his veins turning to ice, his thoughts, his limbs, his whole body going stuff. On his outstretched arm, he could see Keith’s bandana around his wrist, the letters the right way around, telling him in some convoluted way that this was false, yet-

Acxa’s bandana had a small K.K. stitched into it. It was the same yellow lettering as the one on Keith’s, A.K matching K.K and so on. Lance knew that. He’d always known. He’d known since he cured Keith of Carma that they were siblings, so why did the world feel like it had been thrown off its axis.

“What did you say?”

Lance’s voice sounded strained and raw. He swallowed and his throat felt like sandpaper.

“The O’kyan have Keith-“

“No,” he said.

He stepped forward with the gun and Acxa cringed.

“What are you?” He spat. “What are you to him?”

Acxa stared, and stared and stared and stared.

“I’m his sister,” she croaked. “He said you knew.”

"I do," said Lance.

He did. What was wrong about that? Something was wrong, something was wrong something was *wrong*.

"Keith's dead," said Lance.

Acxa's eyes filled with some unreadable emotion.

"No," she said. "No. Weren't you... *looking*?"

"Looking?" Lance echoed.

Under all the filth he'd closed up his mind with, a single emotion was wiggling its way out. *Confusion*. Confusion was not the first emotion Lance expected to feel.

"He said you'd come," Acxa said. "But you didn't know where we... please, please we have to go back, to Oro."

"To Oro?"

Lance's head was fuzzy. What was he missing? His arm was still outstretched, both of them, a gun in each. Two guns, one bandana, one Lox. The bandana. With it's stitching the right way around. *This was fake*. Anger bubbled in Lance's chest.

"Keith is *dead*," he spat.

He was sick of reliving this, sick of the false hope that sent daggers into his heart. Keith was gone, body lost in space, ice on his skin and in his blood and-

"My brother's alive," Acxa hissed.

*My brother*. Lance frowned. Why were his hands shaking? *My brother my brother my brother*. Keith face flashed before his eyes, soft in the caress of night and caught between Lance's hands. His fingers slipped under the bandana. *Trick the system*, he whispered.

"He's your brother," Lance said numbly.

Acxa nodded, tears streaking over her bruised cheeks. The alarm was too shrill. *My brother*.

"Is..."

*No*. He wouldn't let himself say it. He wouldn't give in like a heart broken idiot, falling into another trap, another ploy that would ultimately rip him to shreds.

"Is this real?"

The words were out before he could stop them. The Lox was tingling around his wrist. Was it starting to glow? He couldn't be sure, he refused to take his eyes off Acxa. She was watching him, wary.

"He said you ask that a lot."

Lance couldn't breathe.

"Who?"



“My brother.”

Lance’s world was shrinking. There was something itching at the back of his mind. He looked at his wrist, at the bandana.

“They…”

His mouth was numb, he couldn’t think.

“They don’t know Keith has a sister,” he said.

Acxa frowned.

“They don’t know,” Lance repeated. “They… they don’t know.”

Something was awakening in his veins.

“Lance!”

Allura skidded around the corner, followed by the rest of their team. They all stopped dead when they saw Lance with a gun aimed at Acxa’s head.

“Lance-“

“Is this real?”

He was addressing them now.

He’d dropped the gun, turned around, but Acxa didn’t move. The rest of the team stared at him, concerned.

“Yes,” said Pidge.

“Do you know who she is?” Lance said, thrusting a finger in Acxa’s direction..

“The woman who tried to steal my child,” Allura growled.

“No,” Lance shook his head. “No, who is she?”

“Acxa?” Pidge was frowning. “Is this a trick question?”

“Should we, like, contain her?” Hunk asked.

“No, who is she to Keith!” Lance yelled, unable to stop it.

The others blinked back at him, Acxa staying rooted to the spot. The alarm was still ringing.

“No one…” Hunk said slowly. “Lance, what are you talking about?”

He looked over their faces, but they weren’t lying; they truly didn’t know.

“You don’t know,” he echoed. “You don’t know.”

He turned back to Acxa, and she flinched.

“No one knows,” Lance said softly.

Then he yelled.

“No one knows!”

He jabbed a finger into his chest. “No one! But *me*! And you! And *Keith*!”

He swept a hand behind him, gesturing to the team. “They don’t know. And the O’kyan don’t know. And this...”

Lance raised a wrist, the one bearing the Lox, his bayard forgotten on the floor.

“Doesn’t know.”

Everyone was staring at him, no one understanding.

“The O’kyan don’t know,” he whispered.

His eyes were transfixed by the Lox now, glowing a sickly green, tempting him, calling him in.

“So if this isn’t real,” he whispered, voice turning into a snarl.

“How,” Lance hissed, and dug his fingers into the metal brace. “Does this, *know*!”

Acxa blinked, shocked.

“Know what?” She echoed.

“You’re his sister,” Lance hissed. “And the Lox doesn’t know.”

And the anger, and the heartbreak, and the pain was all contracting, building, getting ready for-

Allura gasped, but the bayard was already in his hand and already against his skin and Lance fired. Light flashed in his eyes, and something sizzled against his skin, but through the smoke he saw the Lox glowing green. And he *lost* it.

There was a cry of his name as Lance slammed his arm into the nearest wall, but he ignored it. The others watched, stunned, too scared to intervene as Lance slammed the brace into the wall with all his might. The metal clattered, the Lox growing brighter as Lance smashed the device against the hard surface.

“Lance! Lance, what are you doing? Stop!”

Allura touched his shoulder but he shrugged her off. On his knees, Lance grabbed the butt of his blaster and smashed it into the Lox. He heard the snap and piercing pain shot through his arm, but all he did was hit it again. And again. And again.

“What did you do to him?” Hunk was yelling at Acxa. “He’s gone mad, what did you do?”

Lance blocked them out, a snarl painted across his lips as he smashed relentlessly at the Lox. One of the bands around his arm twisted and snapped, and Lance saw red. He grabbed hold of the twisted metal, and *pulled*. A scream tore from his throat as long, metallic needles slid out from beneath his flesh. More, it needed more. Blood dripping down his forearm and Allura’s horrified pleas in his ears, Lance raised his blaster and smashed it into the Lox again.

It was excruciating now, the dislodged metal already wedged into his skin pushing deeper, tearing muscle and ripping the flesh. But Lance kept going. He dropped the bayard and grabbed at the

brace with his free hand, fingers slipping over the bloody metal but refusing to give up. He bit back a cry as it tore it away from his flesh, metallic teeth ripped out of place along his forearm where they'd resided for so long. Lance grunted with the effort, blood all over the floor from his arm, but he didn't care. The Lox was coming *off*.

With a final cry, he wrenched it free, dropping the bloodied up brace into the floor. He stared at it, panting, before making up his mind. He grabbed the stone still embedded in the metal. It pulsed in his hand, as if pleading with him. Lance snarled and squeezed the Lox tight.

"Fuck you," he said.

Lighting pulsed through his skin, and the stone exploded in his hands.

It was silent, after that. Lance realised someone must have shut off the alarm as he let the ash from the broken Lox trickle through his fingers. All eyes were on him, watching. Lance made it to his legs, swaying a little. There was blood staining Keith's bandana, and pulsing from the holes along his exposed forearm. Lance calmly removed his shirt, tugging it over his head with the aid of his uninjured arm, and wrapping the grey fabric around the bloody mess where the Lox had once resided. A hand settled on his shoulder.

"Lance?"

Allura. She sounded so concerned; he never wanted her to sound like that.

"Lance, what's happening?"

He turned to Acxa, a question forming on his tongue. He stopped. She was staring at him, shocked. Lance turned to his team. Hunk flinched at the sight of his friend, run down and bare chested with his left arm cradled by his side, blood soaking into the shirt covering it.

"Where's Keith?" Lance said.

This was real.

"Lance he... he's dead," Allura said.

"How do you know that?" He asked, voice steady.

"You... told us." Hunk was frowning. "He died in the cell, and when we... when we attacked you lost his body."

"And then I passed out," said Lance. "I woke up and he was dead. And I lost him. And I passed out in the black lion and *then* I told you."

His friends said nothing, clearly not catching on. Lance turned to Acxa.

"Where's Keith?" He asked.

She swallowed.

"That's not what happened," she said.

Lance's heart was beating way to fast. *This was realbreathe*.

"And the black lion took me," he said. "While I was hallucinating Keith's death. While the Lox was showing me Keith's death. And I woke up here."

He turned to the team; they were watching with wide eyes.

“And I told you he was dead.”

Acxa shuddered. Lance turned to her, a terrifying calm settling over him.

“Where the hell is Keith?” He said.

“On Oro,” she said. “We crash landed.”

Lance’s pace was picking up, he was coming alive.

“Why?”

“The O’kyan have him. I... I escaped. To get you. You have to help.”

Lance clenched his fists, breathing through the terrifying chill that ran up his spine.

“Get to your lions,” he said, voice cold as ice.

He angled a finger at Acxa. “You. Allura. With me.”

-

Blood was roaring in Lance’s ears as he piloted the blue lion toward Oro. He gripped the controls with white knuckles, jaw tensed and shoulders tight as Allura and Acxa engaged in an endless stare off behind him.

“*Ok can someone just remind me again what the hell is happening?*” Hunk asked over the comms, his face popping up on the screen. “*Cause I am, like, beyond confused right now.*”

Acxa glanced at the paladin’s projection on the screen warily, her bruised eye doing little to lift anyone’s spirits.

“Bad things,” she said, making Hunk frown.

“*Yeah, uh, I gathered that much,*” Hunk said, watching her with equal suspicion.

“I got it wrong,” Lance interrupted through gritted teeth. “Keith and I, we had an arrangement, a way of telling whether something was real based on what way the bandana was tied. But I got it wrong. That deal was made under the influence of the Lox. After... after Sam died, I’ve been getting it all wrong.”

“*Like thinking reality is the virtual and visa versa?*” Pidge asked.

“Yes. And I didn’t notice til... until Acxa said she was Keith’s sister. The O’kyan, you guys, no one knows that, so there was no way the Lox could have.”

Silence.

“*But you telling us Keith was dead, that was... that was real.*”

Lance bit his lip. He was nervous, nervous he’d fooled himself and all of them.

“The Lox... if I was unconscious during the rescue, the Lox may have shown me Keith dying. You guys didn’t have any proof. If we’re just going off my word alone...”

"Oh my god," Pidge whispered.

"Keith couldn't wake you," Acxa spoke up from behind him. "I... the Galra captured me some weeks back, for deserting. The... we can save the rest for another time. But they captured me before I could return to make peace."

Allura snorted. Acxa glanced at her nervously but continued.

"When I heard you two had been captured aboard the same ship, I had to do something. The wormholing, it damaged the ship, allowed me to escape. On my way to your cell I found the Galra taking Keith away. We managed to overpower the guards, take the escape pod for ourselves. As I said, the black lion had already taken you, Lance. I took us away from the fight, thinking we could return to the castle when it was safe but... something was messing with the ship. It caused us to crash on Oro."

"Carma," Lance muttered.

"And on Oro..." Allura prompted.

Lance's gaze darkened.

"There's our problem," he hissed.

The planet was in view now, just a speck, but they were getting there.

"The O'kyan," said Acxa. "Keith explained the situation to me. But they're not helping you. They took us captive. When they tried to separate us... that's when I got away. Stole a ship and came to you. But Keith... they want something with him. I don't know what. But it's not right."

"No," Lance muttered. "It's not."

"You... you think they were working against us?" Pidge asked. *"This could be a misunderstanding-*"

"This isn't a misunderstanding," Lance said. "We're getting to that planet, and we're getting Keith. And they aren't getting in our way."

*"But Lance-*"

"I don't know what the hell is happening," Lance said. "But we cannot trust the O'kyan. We all clear?"

The responses were hesitant, but all there.

*"Be safe, paladins,"* Coran said, still situated on the castle with Hiroshi.

They flew in silence for a minute or so, until Hunk's voice finally broke the spell.

*"So, uh, you're really Keith's sister, huh?"*

Acxa nodded coldly.

*"Wow. Guess you two kinda do look alike now that I think about it."*

*"Is that why you came onto our ship?"* Pidge asked. *"To find Keith?"*

“Yes-“

“And not to steal my child?” Allura interrupted coolly.

Lance narrowed his eyes at Acxa, glancing over his shoulder. “Yeah, what was up with that?”

The Galra girl glanced down sheepishly. “I, uh... I apologise. I wasn’t going to take him, your son.”

Allura waited patiently, her gaze hard.

“I came to find Keith, to try and make peace. There... there is much to explain, about our past but... in the chaos I stumbled across the baby and...”

A deep sigh.

“I was so young when we left Earth, but I can still remember him. And suddenly I’m faced with a half-human baby... I’m sorry. Truly. I don’t know what came over me, just the urge to hold him... it will not happen again.”

Acxa looked up with determination in her eyes.

“I will leave, after this is over. If you wish it. But please, help me retrieve my brother first.”

Allura looked her over, saying nothing to betray how she felt.

“Keith comes first,” she said. “Then we will talk.”

“*About that,*” said Pidge. “*Eyes open everyone, cause we’re coming up on Oro.*”

Lance gripped the controls tightly.

“We have one goal,” he said. “And that’s Keith.”

A strong chorus of affirmation greeted him before he threw the blue lion into a nosedive.

-

Blue landed like thunder on the dark sands of Oro’s surface. Lance was up and out his seat before the dust could settle, a bayard in each hand and a scowl on his face, Allura and Acxa at his side. He felt it as Pidge and Hunk and then the red lion landed in quick succession behind him. Out the window, he could see them, the O’kyan standing almost perfectly spaced, *waiting*. Lance’s vision felt blue again.

The ramp came down with a loud bang, kicking up more dust into the air. Evening was coming over this section of the planet, the sun teetering on the edge of the crescent like hills, deepening the shadows and casting glaring lines of fire through the hazy air. Lance’s face was impassive, his stance unbending; the black bayard hummed as he took three steps toward the waiting O’kyan and raised the gun.

Their eyes tracked his movements, then the movements of the team behind him. Silent, emotionless; they were like solemn statues. The movement of Lance’s eyes alone was too much as he raked the crowd for signs of a black haired boy. *It’s a lie*, hissed the voices in his head. *He’s dead*. Lance did not have time for them.

“Where is he?”

His voice passed over them like the ends of a breeze, reaching every last O'kyan gathered there, though it elicited no response. Lance's heart was racing as he breathed through the cold slowly spreading through his body. He was a bomb, and they were a weathering fuse.

"Where," Lance bit out. "*Is he!*"

Blank. Their eyes, their expressions, just blank. Lance dropped the gun, and shot the nearest O'kyan in the leg. He didn't go down with a cry, just crumbled, as if he felt no pain, only the inconvenience of a torn up calf. Pidge gasped, but there was no protest from Allura. Lance strode forward, stashing one bayard seconds before he grabbed an O'kyan by the scruff of their shirt, brining them face to face.

"Tell me," he hissed. "Or I'll kill you."

"Lance-" Hunk began.

"Let him," said Allura.

But the O'kyan in his grip didn't look scared. No, she looked... almost at peace. Lance had never seen any sort of expression on their faces. He'd imagined of course, countless times, but there was never really a flicker of anything. So, when the elder's lip twitched, the smallest, almost miss-able smile coming through, Lance nearly dropped her. He stood his ground, glaring down the O'kyan who remained lax in his grip.

"Tell me where he is."

Allura was closing in, the staff in her hands there to ward off anyone who dared approach her. Lance watched her out the corner of his eye, jaw twitching as the O'kyan simply stared at him as if she was *smirking*.

"He is ours," she said.

Soft, unafraid of Lance. Or perhaps they just feared nothing. Lance growled, fisting his hand into her robes to pull her up. She went easily, didn't fight, didn't resist, as if nothing he did could intimidate them. The other O'kyan just watched, static, caring very little for what was happening. What the hell was this? Lance's gaze darkened, the bayard closing up in his hand as he started to draw from another power. *Hatred*. It burned blue in his eyes, in his veins, running up the length of his arm where the blood was crusting from the punctures left by the Lox. And the O'kyan... she began to laugh.

Lance had never heard one of them laugh, never, didn't imagine they could. So when the sound escaped, like a clipped, stuttering rasp, he stumbled back. His skin felt numb, the cold racing through his blood.

"You rely on hate," the O'kyan said, the words dripping from her lips like poison.

The eyes of all the O'kyan were on Lance now.

"You rely on hate."

"What is the meaning of this?"

Allura was at his side, and she was angry.

"Deliver the red paladin to us, and no harm will come to anyone."

A hundred pairs of eyes turned on Allura.

“He is not the red paladin,” said one.

The princess frowned. Her and Lance inched a little closer, wary of the aliens staring them down. Something was off, something was terribly wrong here.

“Then... who is he?” Pidge asked.

She looked frightened, and confused, and all together pretty dubious.

“Aryon,” said one.

“Aryon,” said another.

They were speaking, all of them, one word.

“Aryon.”

Confusion mixed with anger mixed with fear. Lance felt it all, and he was sure the others did too.

“He’s not Aryon,” he snapped. “He’s Keith. He’s got nothing to do with our ancestor.”

“He was chosen,” said one.

“Chosen,” another repeated.

“She will live on.”

“Live on?” Lance was frowning. “Aryon is dead. Our ancestor’s dead. Carma killed her, Carma is coming, and I need- where is Keith?”

A hundred faces, blank, yet... knowing. Lance shivered. The air had changed, he felt it.

“Lance,” Allura whispered.

She felt it too, the sudden silence and shift in temperature. The O’kyan were motionless, as if they weren’t even breathing. The one Lance had first approached stepped forward, her dark eyes glinting in the lowering sun.

“You should not have come here,” she said.

Her voice started soft as sand, but it was hardening. Like rock, it scraped, the next words out of her lips grating against Lance’s skin until the blood began to pool. Her lips curled, their eyes locked, and Lance’s heart slowed to a stop as she spoke.

“You have no purpose here, *son* of Carma.”

In the silence, the sun trickled lower, and Lance could almost hear it. Allura had stiffened beside him, and the words rung in his head like an echoing chorus.

“What?” Lance said.

His throat felt dry.

*Son of Carma.* The thought was loud, deafening almost. *Son of Carma.*



“Where is Keith?” Allura said, but her voice sounded a million miles away.

Either someone was talking to him, or the blood rushing through his veins sounded like a stampede through his head. Son of Carma.

“Where-“

Allura stopped talking abruptly. She’s taken a step forward, but as she had her attention had shifted from the crowd to the ground, to her foot, to the mud that shifted slightly under her step.

“You should not have brought them here,” an O’kyan said.

He was addressing Lance.

“Our mother will take all the strength she needs.”

Allura’s foot was sinking. Lance eyes widened as the realisation struck, a second before Pidge’s strangled cry alerted him to what was happening behind him. He whipped around, in time to see Acxa’s foot sink into the ground, which had seemingly liquefied into thick mud below her. Hunk lunged for her, yanking the Galra girl back onto solid land before a patch of dirt beneath his own foot gave in.

“Lance!” Allura grabbed his hand, her ankle disappearing into the mud, and Lance snapped.

He wrenched her out, the princess tumbling backwards as the liquefying ground seemed to follow her.

“What are you doing?” He turned to hiss at the O’kyan, as his teammates panicked.

“Nothing,” said one.

“She will take what she needs,” said another.

Just occasionally, Lance found, he hated the truth. Because between those words and the next, the planet came to life.

“Get to your lions!” He yelled, but his warning went unheard, as everyone was already trapped in the swirling chaos.

The ground beneath the paladins was shifting as if it were made of water, the sands turning, mud oozing to the surface, sticking to their skin and sucking their feet under. Panic erupted amongst them, each trying to help the other toward a hasty retreat. Lance turned on the O’kyan, fire in his eyes.

“Stop!” He ordered, but they ignored him.

“Did you suffer?” One asked.

The O’kyan beside them took up the same ask.

“Did you suffer?”

Lance’s head was spinning. This was too much, too sudden. His world had been flipped upside down not five days ago, yet here it was again, reverting back to a different state, forcing the continents to shift and his mind to readjust.

“Did you suffer?”

It was like every other time they’d questioned him, asked the question he hated most, yet this time it meant more. *Did you suffer?*

“It thanks you,” said an O’kyan suddenly.

Lance’s thoughts were going to fast to properly process that. *Son of Carma son of Carma son of Carma*- what did that mean? Who were they? The descendants of Aryon against... him. The descendant of Carma. It made all the sense in the world yet none at all; it felt *right*, more fitting than anything before it, but Lance didn’t know how to breathe around that fact. *Son of Carma*.

“It thanks you,” the O’kyan said again.

They hadn’t moved. Behind him, the team was struggling to get to their lions, whose gigantic paws were also beginning to sink beneath the surface. It was going to use them, going to drain their energy like it had all those lives all those years ago- Lance paused, heart racing, because that posed a whole new question. The ground was crumbling, pulling them under; Keith’s voice was like an alarm in his head, over and over again. *It. It it it*. He’d never called it Carma, not really, never even called it *her*. He was stupid, Lance realised, so stupid for never really listening. Because now the question wouldn’t go away.

“Who?” He said, but his voice just sounded like a whisper in the chaos.

Who the hell was *it*?

“When you die,” said an O’kyan. “Remember their lives will be aiding it.”

That’s what this was about? Carma was going to drain the other’s lives so she’d be stronger facing Lance- but it wasn’t Carma, was it? *Was it?* Was Lance descended from a murderer, or... or was it never Carma. His head didn’t have time to think.

“It thanks you for suffering,” the O’kyan continued. “It’s pleased.”

Lance frowned. The O’kyan nearest him let her gaze drop to his arm, something so pleased about her look.

“It’s trained you so well,” she said.

She met his eye.

“Hate and suffering. It’s done you so well.”

And it clicked. It all came tumbling down into place, every single interaction, every build up, every day. Whoever it was, whatever was coming to kill Lance, the O’kyan were descended from it. Aryon, Carma, hell, maybe Callio. He didn’t know, he didn’t care right then; the O’kyan were part of it all along. And the Lox, and the training, and the countless hours of hell he’d gone through, all for the sake of... of what? Pain, for the sake of pain. Pain, for the sake of revenge. That’s exactly what it wanted, wasn’t it? For Lance to suffer? And there wasn’t really a better way than the Lox.

Stupidly, Lance felt tears burning the corners of his eyes. Shiro’s life, Sam’s life, Keith’s life, his own goddam life, wasted. Hiroshi, put through all that pain, Allura and the others, stuck here for so long... they’d played along perfectly. Four hundred days of suffering. And for what? For it all to end like this? Lance’s arms were numb, the cold spreading through his blood.

“Did you suffer?” An O’kyan asked.

It was too much, it was too fucking much. The other’s were screaming, trying to free themselves from the mud, and it was *too much*.

“Yes,” Lance said, through gritted teeth and freezing blood and a stifling desire for revenge. “Yes.”

He raised his bayard, fired, and the nearest O’kyan fell down dead. The others just watched, didn’t react, didn’t move or speak or scream. Scream, like Lance wanted them to. Instead, as the body hit the sand, the dirt around it shifted. The O’kyan looked down, curious now, as their fallen brother slowly sunk beneath the sand. And it was almost... unexpected. Lance was breathing harshly, the ice digging at his insides, but he still managed to meet the O’kyan’s gaze. It was questioning, which made no sense because...

He stared. Stared at the nearest elder, the one who’d first addressed him. Stared because her foot was sinking. The effect was instantaneous. The second her eyes settled on the ground, and she realised what was happening, hell broke out among the O’kyan. The woman screamed, just like Lance had wanted, but the sound was no consultation. She screamed, and as the man beside her began to sink also, he did too. It was taking them, all of them, it’s own ancestors. The final feeding, the final chance to draw strength, before it was just Lance against... whatever it was. And nothing was surviving this.

“Lance!”

*Allura.*

“Get to your lion!”

“No,” he said.

Then, louder:

“No! I’m going after Keith!”

Nothing made sense, not Carma, not the O’kyan, not his place within all of it. But Lance had come here for one reason alone, and he wasn’t going to stop until he had Keith.

“Get in the air!” He yelled.

He flinched when someone stumbled into him. Acxa, the mud tripping her up.

“Let’s go,” she hissed, but she didn’t pull him in the direction of the lions, she pulled him straight toward the O’kyan.

A chorus of screams had erupted now, as the sand began to shift all around them, pulling O’kyan under just as it was trying to the paladins. Terror tainted the air, as the ground liquefied, drowning people in the earth. It was just like the painting from the cave, Lance realised numbly, the one they’d found on the dwarf planet, of the village sinking into the dark mud. And now, it was real.

He and Axca took off running. They delved into the O’kyan, tripping as their feet stuck to the mud. Lance flinched when someone grabbed hold of his arm, dragging him to a stop. He whipped around, ready to fire his bayard, but was met with Jim’s terrified face.

“He’s in the tower,” the familiar O’kyan blurted before Lance could open his mouth.

Jim looked... different, somehow. Different to the others. He was terrified, his ankles already trapped below the surface, but he released Lance's arm.

"The tower," he repeated. "Your paladin."

Why was he telling them that? Lance looked past the O'kyan, to the towering mound of earth that made up their central building. He looked back to Jim, maybe to say something, maybe to help, but Acxa pushed him forward.

"Come on!" She yelled.

And so they ran. Their progress was made slow by the sticky earth; it seemed to be avoiding Lance, not willing to pull him under, but it showed no mercy to Acxa. Lance worked his powers, trying to suck the moisture from the soil beneath her feet before it could turn to mud. But even the dry sands shifted, trying to pull her under. They fought their way through the O'kyan, batting off those who tried to grab at them. Lance flinched at the sight of them disappearing beneath the mud with garbled breaths, but he didn't stop. Everyone's life was on the line, and when it was them or Keith... The O'kyan brought them here to die. The O'kyan meant nothing to him.

Hands made slippery by the mud, Lance and Acxa pulled each other towards the tower's looming entrance. The walls were quaking, raining sand down on them, but neither slowed down. One thing stood clear between them; Keith mattered most.

"Keith!"

Lance called out to the boy as soon as they were inside, glancing around the maze of sandy corridors.

"Keith!"

Acxa sounded desperate, fire in her eyes but a bitter sense of fear hanging about her. Was this a lie? Could it all still be a lie? Keith's lifeless body flashed before his eyes, his frail form swept out into space, out of Lance's hands-

"Keith!"

They took off running. Together, they picked the path that lead them deeper, a tall passageway lined with glowing torches. The ground was more solid here, but it was losing integrity fast. Lance shuddered at the thought of being buried alive in this prison, but knowing Keith could be inside... he picked up the pace, Acxa tearing after him as they called to the red paladin. They reached an empty chamber, torches burning on the walls. The ground bubbled as the mud took over, searching for their footsteps. They sprinted across the room, taking off down the next hall, deeper into the tower.

Lance nearly tripped when he heard a faint cry, just a smattering of one, before the noise was drowned out by the groan of the crumbling walls. Acxa heard it too, and with a single look, they'd changed direction.

"Keith!"

Acxa screamed for her brother, even faster than Lance until the crumbling earth eventually caught up to her. Another cry, short, desperate, *Keith*. They ran towards the opening to a new chamber, panting hard. Acxa tripped, fell, cursed as her arms disappeared into the earth. Lance whipped around to help her but she snarled, forcing him back.

“Keep going!” She demanded. “Get him!”

He hesitated for a second, and Acxa’s eyes turned murderous.

“Go!” She yelled, and Lance did.

He ran, leaving Acxa to struggle with trying to free her hands. He was close, he had to be, yet part of him still didn’t believe it. *Keith was dead, Keith was dead*- Lance emerged into a large chamber, fire burning fiercely along the walls. The torches illuminated the carvings on the wall, the seven pointed stars that swirled like whole galaxies along the sand ceiling. Lance’s eyes landed on the back of the room, and his breath caught.

There was a single, pale hand protruding from the mud, fingers grasping fruitlessly at the air as it was pulled under. Lance snapped. He ran forward, a cry on his lips, bayards abandoned as he skidded across the floor. He grabbed the hand, a death grip around their wrist, and *pulled*. The earth shifted angrily around them, trying to pull the body deeper, out of his hold. Lance grit his teeth, and dug another hand into the mud. The fingers grappled weakly for his own, their grip losing strength by the second. Anger swirled in Lance’s chest, desperation too. Ice seared through his veins, and the water in the earth around him responded.

It condensed around them, pouring into that patch of earth and it’s prisoner. Lance pulled, locking his hands around the arm and throwing all his weight into heaving them from the earth. The dirt shifted, the walls shook, but a hard, persistent tug, and an arm was following the muddy wrist. A shoulder, then a head, and Lance was falling back with Keith in his arms, mud covering trembling body of the red paladin as he heaved in air.

Maybe Lance was crying, or laughing, or just yelling. He’d never thought so much about what Keith sounded like *breathing*, but there he was ready to drown in the sound of it. A sound tumbled from his lips, he didn’t even know what to classify it as. *Relief*. Keith was huddled over him, swiping the dirt out his eyes and spitting onto the floor beside them. Lance helped him, wiped the caked earth from his lips and pushed his hair back, finding it was heavy with the stuff. Keith was gasping, fingers clenching in and out of fists, his tattered flight suit all but invisible under the thick layer of mud.

Lance pulled him against his chest, forgetting for a second the danger they were in as he repeated Keith’s name like a prayer. Keith’s fingers dug into his back, shaking as he cried and fought for more air. The walls shook around them, and Lance wrenched himself away. The ground was shifting, pulling them in. He grabbed Keith around the waist, hoisting him up onto his feet. Keith was dazed and burning with adrenaline all the same. He swayed as his eyes settled on Lance, the only part of him really visible under all the mud smeared over his skin.

“Lance?”

His voice was raspy, still short on oxygen, but Lance had never loved the sound of it more.

“Yeah,” he stuttered. “Yeah, Keith. It’s me. Come on, come on we gotta go.”

He looped Keith’s arm around his shoulders, and together they began to stumble toward the exit. Keith’s weight, the rise and fall of his chest, it was grounding. They emerged into the hall, and Lance’s heart dropped.

“What’s wrong?” Keith slurred, wondering why he’d stopped.

Lance stared at the spot he’d left Acxa, but there was nothing there. He shook his head.

“N-nothing, it’s nothing-“

“Lance!”

His head shot up, down to the end of the hall. Lance’s mouth dropped open. Hunk was standing there, mud all over his legs, and an unconscious Acxa draped over his shoulder.

“Come on!” His friend yelled, not even waiting before he turned as started running down the passage with Acxa.

Lance and Keith followed as fast as they could, helping each other along. The walls were beginning to cave, dirt raining down on them and the firelight flickering as it was snuffed out by the mud. Keith was panting harshly, and a trail of fingers over his side confirmed what Lance feared to be true; Keith dying may have been an illusion, but the burn on his side was still there. He tried to shift more of Keith’s weight onto him, carrying them forward and trying to keep his eye on Hunk.

The burst from the dreary tunnel entrance as the walls began them liquefied, collapsing into a sloshing mess as the entire tower began to come down. They kept running, across the open plain of sand where O’kyan were still screaming, half buried in the mud. Lance spotted the green lion in the air, Pidge doing her best to free Yellow’s paws from the ground. Hunk made straight for his lion with Acxa still slumped over his shoulder, leaving Lance and Keith a clear path to their lions. Keith didn’t seem in any shape to pilot, but surely Red would help him out.

The red paladin stumbled as he took in the chaos around them, wide eyes trailing over the heads of the O’kyan, some completely buried, some just sinking slowly. It was horrific, Lance knew, so he tried to ignore it. Was it wrong? Should he try to help? No matter what, getting the team to safety was propriety.

Hunk had reached his lion, whose eyes lit up as he powered the machine up. In one swift movement he shot into the air, Pidge helping to remove the binds of the sticky earth. Lance could only assume Allura was with her, leaving just he and Keith on the surface.

“*Need a hand?*” Pidge’s voice came in over his comm.

Lance was about to ask for just that, but a gasp from Keith stole his attention. The boy lost his footing completely as he gazed at the distant hill, which was seemingly coming to life. Lance watched in horror as the massive mound of earth began to shift. Suddenly the wave like curves of the rocks made a whole lot more sense.

“Shit!”

It was growing, dirt and mud rising like a wave, reaching for the lions hovering in the air.

“No,” Lance shouted. “Clear out, get up high!”

“*Are you sure-*“

“*Pidge, five o’clock!*” Hunk yelled.

The green lion swerved in time to miss the first onslaught of mud coming toward it, but there was more on the way.

“Get out of here,” Lance ordered. “We’re on our way.”

The blue lion was closest, so that's what they made for, reckoning the red lion could be pulled along if necessary. Lance dully noted the other lions shooting into the air, just in time to avoid the waves of dirt. The ground was coming alive, a whole ocean of it now. It shook beneath their feet, threatening to liquefy any second. O'kyan screamed as it swept over their heads, trapping their bodies beneath the heavy mud. They kept running, one goal in sight-

A single O'kyan caught Lance's eye. Jim was a few hundred feet out from their lions, buried waste deep and struggling as the mud crushed him. And Lance... couldn't do it. He couldn't leave him. He had no intention of helping them all, no way of helping them all, but Jim had always been the odd one out. The blue lion loomed above them, quickly lowering her head with her mouth wide open. Lance dragged Keith up the first few feet of the ramp, then let go. The boy turned, still dazed, and injured, confusion etched across his filthy brow.

"Get him out of here," Lance called to the lion, before jumping back off the ramp.

Terror registered on Keith's face, and he was lunging for him. But Blue was quicker. Her mouth closed with a loud bang, throwing the red paladin inside as he screamed for Lance. He raised a hand to shield his eyes as the blue lion leapt into the air with Keith inside.

Time was not on his side now, as Lance turned and began sprinting back toward Jim. The shifting sands had kicked dust up into the air, so slowly the mud was taking over the atmosphere too. He stumbled and fell, wrenching limbs from the mud and avoiding the grasping hands of the O'kyan. Jim had stopped struggling by the time Lance reached him, buried chest deep, just staring out across the sinking fields. He didn't want for Jim to respond though, just grabbed his free arm and started trying to haul him out the mud. The O'kyan looked up at him calmly, maybe a little short on oxygen.

"Come on," Lance hissed through gritted teeth, throwing back his weight to try and drag the alien from the mud.

"You must leave now, son of Carma," Jim said softly, in harsh juxtaposition against the other O'kyan screaming around them.

Lance ignored him; that much was obvious. There was a wall of mud descending upon them, ready to swallow them whole. Lance kept pulling, crouching down to dig at the dirt surrounding Jim. A hand landed on his shoulder, pushing him back.

"No," said Jim. "You must leave."

"What the hell man," Lance muttered. "Help me get you out!"

But Jim just shook his head, staring out over the plain.

"No one here has been themselves for a very long time," he said.

That didn't make any sense, but nothing really had today.

"Stop talking and help dig!" Lance demanded.

A trail of sweat trickled down his back, all too aware of the mud nearly upon them.

"Did you not wonder why there are no children here?" Jim asked.

"Can we talk about this later?"

“There will not be a later.”

That stopped him for a second. Lance paused, panting, staring at Jim.

“I’m trying to save your life,” he said. “We’re getting you out.”

“Aryon is not your mother,” said Jim. “She is ours. And the story... it is wrong.”

“Yeah I figured that much.”

Jim locked eyes with him, and Lance could see the wave descending reflected in his iris’s.

“Don’t think with hatred,” the alien said. “Or you’ll never understand.”

Lance frowned, his arms growing weary from digging at the mud. He didn’t get a chance to respond however, because in the next second Red’s gigantic jaws were closing around him as a wave of earth and darkness swept over Jim and all the surrounding land.

“No!”

Lance fell back into the cockpit, crying out as the destruction came to a close below. The dirt was like water, flowing, encompassing all. The final few O’kyan disappeared beneath the mud and Lance shut his eyes, hitting his forehead against the wall of Red’s cockpit and cursing. He felt like crying, felt sick to his core, shaken, disturbed, spread thin and worn down. Red did little to calm him during their rough ascent, purring a little once they finally broke through the atmosphere.

Then there was silence. Voices filtered in over the coms confirming people’s survival; but there was one missing. Lance picked himself up off the floor, stumbling to the window. The green and yellow lions flew ahead, and beside him, Blue drifted slowly through space. They were deliberately sticking close, blue and red, like they knew just what he needed.

Lance fastened his helmet securely, double-checking his armour before stepping up to the air locked entrance.

“You know what to do, buddy.”

Red purred, and swooped a little closer to the blue lion. A second later, Lance felt the change in pressure as he was yanked out into space. He drifted there for a second, weightless, worriless, before Blue’s jaws were opening up and swallowing him whole. The familiar rush of air into the airlock left Lance’s head spinning. He stepped out at the hiss of the doors opening, eyes already searching the small space. His breath caught in his throat, eyes filling with tears though there was really nothing to cry about now. Lance reached up to unscrew his helmet and it hit the floor. Across the small cabin, Keith rose on shaky legs from the pilot’s chair, still covered head to toe in mud but *there*, there in the blue lion, *alive*.

They moved for each other like symmetry, Lance barely catching his breath before Keith was on him, in his arms, a sharp exhale all the warning Lance got before there were legs and arms and a whole human body wrapped around him. He clung to Keith, breathing him in, holding him up for as long as he could before they were toppling awkwardly to their knees. The hug persisted, arms around necks and bodies pulled close together; Lance was crying when he tucked Keith’s head against his chest, gloved hands running over the dirt that matted his hair. He couldn’t hold Keith forever, because at some point he had to look, to see-

He was a mess, in every sense, and more tears were springing to Lance’s eyes as he pulled back and took Keith’s face in his hands. A broken, half-mast smile is what met him, before Keith was



crumbling, eyes overflowing with tears as he clung to Lance's hands. Lance shook his head, couldn't stop, handling Keith more delicately than he had anything.

"No," he mumbled, voice watery from crying. "What did they do?"

Keith's breath caught when Lance swiped at the mud on his cheeks. It was starting to dry, caking his skin and hair and clothes. But his eyes were clear, so clear, and when Lance pressed his lips gently against Keith's, the whole world felt clearer than it had in a long time.

"M disgusting," Keith mumbled in protest.

He was, covered in mud and sweat, barely alive, *buried* alive, but Lance didn't care. Keith's lips were still soft and the sweetness of having him there in his arms was almost too much. Tears mingled with mud, hands coming to clutch desperately at faces as they kissed and kissed and didn't stop. Keith pulled back to breathe but Lance didn't let him go far, opening his eyes to watch his face, to share the air between them.

"Thought you were dead," Lance slurred. "I l-lost you."

Keith grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him in. They met again, and again, until Lance began to cry too noticeably for them to keep going. Keith reached for him, pity in his eyes, but Lance was pulling away. He fumbled awkwardly for the med-kit stashed in Blue's cockpit to distract himself from the onslaught of tears. Keith was gazing at him softly, hand rubbing unconsciously at Lance's knee. When he returned with the kit, Lance could barely meet his eyes, emotions running high. A few disinfectant wipes was all that would work, but it would have to do.

Keith whimpered a little when Lance took hold of his face and gently wiped the mud away from his eyes. He shut them, waiting for the worst of the dirt to be cleaned away. Underneath, his skin was pale and scratched from the rough texture of the mud. Lance cleaned it from his face, his ears, tried to scrape some from his neck before giving in and leaning into Keith. He folded, arms around Keith's waist as the other boy lay his head on Lance's shoulders. No more words, nothing. They had each other, *they had each other*. The minute was everything.

-

It took a little while to get back to the castle, since they'd left it so far away for fear of interference by the O'kyan. After confirming everyone's survival, they'd simply waited the journey out, everyone politely giving Lance and Keith a moment of peace to just hold each other. Landing back on the castle was a different matter.

Lance had removed as much of the mud as he could from Keith's skin, which granted wasn't a lot, but it meant that when Pidge threw herself at him, they could at least see the wide grin that split his face. Lance was swallowed in a hug from Hunk, then Coran, then Allura, then forced to confront a crying baby who couldn't seem to understand what everyone was so damn happy about. The last person to join their reunion party was Acxa, but she went straight for Keith.

The red paladin faltered a moment as he spotted his sister marching towards him, the others torn between drawing back or crowding around to protect him. Too late, Acxa had grabbed hold of her younger brother, getting right up into his space in the weirdest greeting Lance had ever seen. She tilted his head back and forth, seemingly studying the boy as Keith grew flustered. She pulled back his ear, a displeased expression on her face. Keith tried to roll his eyes, but then she was prying his mouth open to glare at his teeth.

"Acthaaa!" He whined, trying to wriggle out of her hold.

With one final inspection of his hairline, she drew back, turning him in a quick circle before pulling him close and hugging the paladin tightly to her chest. Keith huffed, clearly embarrassed, but begrudgingly raised his arms to hug his sister back. Pidge looked like she was torn between laughing her ass off or running, in case she was about to be subjected to the same treatment.

“Galra thing?” Hunk whispered.

Acxa glared at him.

“Yes,” she said coolly.

Then she stepped toward him. Hunk yelped, covering his mouth with his hand.

“My teeth are fine please don’t do that!”

But Acxa just set a hand on his shoulder.

“Thank you,” she said. “For saving my life, and my brother’s.”

“Oh, good, all good,” said Hunk, looking largely relieved that he wasn’t about to be subjected to experimentation.

Lance kept looking around at them all, as if he couldn’t believe everyone was there and alive. Allura came up beside him, resting a hand on his shoulder and offering a relived smile.

“We’re okay,” she said softly.

Lance’s smile wavered a bit.

“The O’kyan...”

“We’ll meet to discuss this,” the princess said, loud enough for them all to hear. “But right now, Keith, we must get you to a healing pod.”

Keith looked up from where Pidge was squeezing the life out’ve him, forgetting in the moment that he had a potentially fatal injury.

“Oh,” he said. “I guess.”

Allura smiled kindly, but Lance didn’t miss the way her eyes fell to his side, tension in her shoulders at the sight of burnt flesh poorly covered by a strip of cloth.

“Come on,” Pidge said, tugging on his hand. “Let’s get you patched.”

Keith shot them a smile as he followed Pidge and Coran, and Lance and Acxa both went to follow.

“Hang on.” Allura held out a hand.

“Lance, Acxa, I need you two here.”

“He’s in good hands,” Coran assured, sensing the unease of the others.

Lance wanted nothing more than to follow Keith, but Allura was right; they needed to talk. He nodded, giving her his full attention as the others all left for the med-bay. Allura waited until they’d all left before she turned to Lance and Acxa. The relief was gone from her face, replaced by fear and apprehension.

“What did we just witness,” she asked, eyes flitting between the pair.

Lance let go a deep sigh as Acxa just sagged a little.

“That was... what was that?” He asked, not helping to answer her question,

“Am... am I... descended from *Carma*?”

“It... might appear so,” Allura answered.

The three of them paused, neither knowing what to say. Lance planted hands on his hips.

“What the hell,” he said.

Allura looked like she was about to give up and shrug when Acxa spoke up.

“Keith told me much of your situation,” she said. “About this... this spirit, that is hunting Lance. About what it did to him. When the O’kyan took us, they kept talking about this, this *choice* Keith had made. Like it was the wrong choice.”

“That’s been said before,” Lance said. “Right before Carma tried to kill Keith for good.”

“Do you know what choice they are speaking of?” Acxa asked, looking sceptical.

“No. Only that the O’kyan have always been funny about Keith. When we first arrived and they found out Carma- or... or whatever was in him, they hated him. Tried to kill him. But once she was out... you remember the weird ceremony, right Allura?”

The princess nodded slowly, deep in thought.

“Right,” said Lance. “They were being all weird, painted Altean markings on him and... and put him...”

“Put him in the place of Aryon,” Allura finished softly.

It stood on the verge of making sense, but Lance found there were still pieces missing.

“Why would they do that?” Lance insisted. “Unless, Keith couldn’t somehow be Aryon’s relative, right?”

“No,” said Allura. “No, they O’kyan said he was chosen. I don’t believe he is descended from any of those figures but...”

She shifted, uncomfortable.

“If you are Carma, Lance. If you are descended from her, if... is that’s who you are in all this, and Keith is Aryon...”

“He’s making the wrong choice,” Lance finished.

He disliked the tense silent that settled.

“Are you kidding me!” Lance blurted. “Are they- are they trying to follow the fucking *story*?”

Allura shook her head in disdain.

“Aryon loved Carma,” she said. “You saw it, in those memories, didn’t you.”

“Yeah,” Lance answered slowly.

Suddenly it was falling into place, and he didn’t like it at all. The fact that it felt right, those memories, that when Aryon broke Carma’s heart he’d felt so broken. He was Carma’s descendant, Carma’s blood, a long lost relative of the son that had gotten away. Lance ran a hand through his hair, breathing sharply through his teeth.

“What the hell,” he repeated.

“So Keith choosing you, fighting for you... felt like Aryon choosing Carma.”

“But how does this fit,” Lance insisted. “If I’m- if that’s how it is then whose... what is it, out there. Who killed people, whose coming for me if I’m... I-I’m Carma. Carma wouldn’t... why would she hunt her own descendants....”

Lance was met with silence. Acxa looked way out of her depth, and Allura....furious.

“It was never Carma,” Lance said. “Was it?”

Why did that feel like *relief*. Lance could feel it in his skin, a sweet sense of relief that it was *never Carma*. Allura’s gaze darkened.

“We have two options then,” she said. “It may have been Aryon.”

Lance felt *electric*.

“Or Callio.” He finished.

“And given Keith is Aryon, in their eyes at least...”

“But I saw Carma kill Callio! If we discredit that, we may as well I discredit all those memories!”

“Bit if she knew it was Callio doing it-“

“Callio came to *her*. Callio came to Carma, and asked her... asked her to stop.” Why would she go to her sister if she was guilty?”

“I... I don’t know,” Allura said. “I admit, there’s pieces missing. Major pieces. But... I don’t believe it could have been Carma. Not if you are related to her, Lance.”

“And the O’kyan? If they... they’re related to whatever this is, Callio, or not. It still killed them.”

“A final sacrifice,” Allura said. “All for the purpose of killing you. You have to admit there’s a difference there.”

Lance bit his lip. It would make sense; if the O’kyan were descended from Callio, if she’d been keeping them alive as well as herself... it would explain what Jim had pointed out. There were no children, and the O’kyan... they acted like a hive mind, almost as if... as if they weren’t all that different to those corpses. Controlled, used. Lance shivered. The only bit missing was the story itself. How had Carma come to kill Callio, why... what role did Aryon have? It did Lance’s head in trying to figure it out.

“Lance,” Allura said suddenly. “I know it’s a lot to think about. For now we should get you fixed up.”

She glanced at Acxa. “You too. After that, I’m sure Coran wouldn’t mind preparing a shuttle for

you.”

Acxa’s eyes widened.

“I’m not leaving,” she said. “Not with... with what is happening.”

Allura raised a brow. “I thought we had an agreement.”

Lance tensed as the two stared each other down.

“I lied,” said Acxa.

Allura snorted. She shook her head, and for a moment, Lance thought she’d shout or throw Acxa out herself.

“I suppose Coran will have to show you to your room, then,” she said instead.

Relief spread across Acxa face, and she nodded.

“Thank you.”

Allura returned the gesture, before turning to Lance.

“You,” she said. “Go and get your arm patched up. We have more to discuss.”

-

By the time Lance was finally discharged from the med-bay and then his meeting with Allura, he’d missed Keith emerging from the healing pod. After a quick chat with Pidge, which confirmed Keith had gone back to his room, Lance was off looking for him. He made quickly for their room, desperate to see how the red paladin was doing. It was getting late aboard the castle, another day drawing to an end, which wouldn’t have been so concerning if they had more than five left.

Lance was harrowed, exhaustion weighing heavy on him, but the second the door to their room slide open and his eyes landed on Keith, some of the pressure lifted. Acxa was with him, the pair seated awkwardly on the edge of the bed, deep in conversation.

“I think if I’d been older I wouldn’t have settled for that-“ is all Lance caught before Acxa spotted him and the words faded out.

“Hey,” Keith said, offering Lance a warm smile to let him know he wasn’t intruding.

“Hi,” Lance replied, torn between needing to greet Acxa yet never wanting to take his eyes off Keith ever again.

“Sorry,” he said suddenly. “If you guys wanna finish talking-“

“It’s alright.”

Acxa stood suddenly, sharing a look with Keith that Lance couldn’t hope to decipher.

“I was just about to leave. Keith must rest.”

The pair of siblings exchanged a little nod, and unspoken end to their conversation. Lance watched curiously. It was funny, watching them. They’d grown up without knowing each other, light years apart in absurdly different circumstances, and yet... some of the things they did, they were just so

*similar.*

“You know the way to your room?” Keith asked.

He looked eager to follow her to the door, but a nod from Acxa and he stayed seated; he must be exhausted.

“The orange one showed me,” she said.

Lance nearly cracked a smile at that.

“Decided which colours your favourite?” He joked.

Acxa paused by the door, glaring at him. For a second he thought she might growl or do some other strange and slightly intimidating Galra thing.

“The yellow one,” she said instead.

“Oh, understandable.”

Acxa’s lip twitched into a smirk as she passed him. No goodnight, but Lance sensed there was far less animosity between them now. The door slid shut behind her, and suddenly it was just he and Keith. Lance felt like a scared teenager again, like all their experience, and all their comfort zones had just gone flying out the window. Like he was meeting Keith again for the very first time, because he didn’t know what to say, and he didn’t know how to act-

“Lance?”

He met Keith’s eyes. And it was just them. It was finally just them, and he was alive, and they were *there*-

Lance crossed the room in just a few quick strides, didn’t even give Keith a chance to stand before he was barrelling into him. Keith was like oxygen, Lance thought, as he toppled them both onto the bed in the hug that felt wanted, and needed, and *right*. Keith was like the fucking air he breathed, because take him for even a minute, and the whole world shrunk to the size of instinctive survival. But when he returned, oh *god*, when Keith came *back*, life exploded into possibilities around him. They hugged for a long time; Keith squeezed his eyes shut, head tucked into the crook of Lance’s neck and arms locked around his body. And Lance could stay like this, stay for any amount of time to come. But when he felt goose bumps on Keith’s arms he backed off, wiped the stray tears from his eyes and smiled at the boy across from him as he tucked his hair back behind his ear.

Then Lance was removing his jacket wordlessly, draping it over Keith’s shoulders and helping him fit his arms through the sleeves. Keith scoffed lightly at Lance’s insistence, but the gesture was fond, softer than they deserved. Lance took Keith’s face in his hands, gently running his thumbs over Keith’s cheekbones.

“You still cold?”

Keith shook his head. There was a soft look in his eyes.

“Just tired.”

Lance nodded, his hands shaking uncontrollably, but he needed this, to be taking care of Keith. So he kicked off his shoes clumsily and piled the blanket over them, reaching for the red paladin and bringing him snug against his chest as they lay down in the small haven they’d created. Now what?

They could talk about the horrible things, about what had happened, about what'd they'd believed, about how it hurt to lose each other, how it *hurt*- but Lance didn't want to. And neither did Keith. They wanted all the kindest, gentlest things. So Lance revelled in the sleepy blink of Keith's eyes as they lay there, touching his lips, his ears, making him chuckle softly when he tapped the end of his nose.

"How was the healing pod?" He whispered, because only soft words and soft voices would break through the silence.

"Cold," Keith said with a tired smile.

He grabbed for Lance's waist, let their feet tangle together under the blanket.

"How was the meeting?"

"Boring."

Keith laughed lightly and Lance grinned.

"You found your family," said Lance.

He carded fingers through Keith's hair, drawing a tired hum from him.

"I had a family," the paladin mumbled. "But, yeah."

Lance kissed his forehead, and Keith's eyes fluttered shut.

"She thinks our mom could still be alive," he said.

Lance kissed his ear.

"Mm?"

"Yeah. Thinks she's with the blades."

Lance wrapped his arms around Keith's stomach, pulling him a little closer.

"Was she with the blades?"

"Yeah," said Keith. "When she was a kid. Some mission went wrong when she was a teenager, though. She switched sides. Said it was cause of some prince--"

"What prince?"

Keith paused. "I... don't think we should worry about that now."

He smiled, but Lance could see the deeper meaning behind those words. *Why worry about something else when we're bound to die so soon?* So Lance returned the smile, and hugged Keith tightly under the covers, and pretended like their world wasn't ending. Keith's eyes were beginning to droop; he'd had one hell of a time. Lance ran a thumb over the faint scar on his side, the evidence of a brutal burn not even the healing pod could erase completely. The bruises were still fading from his skin, his body still recovering from months of hardship, and from recent illness, and- Lance swallowed thickly. *Being buried alive.*

"Don't think at me that loudly," Keith mumbled.

Lance snorted, tugging the red paladin right up beside him so he could bury his face in Keith's hair.

"Missed you," is all he said.

Keith sighed deeply. That was all they needed, all that was necessary to acknowledge the horror. Maybe they'd talk about it, maybe they'd talk about the fear of what was coming and what had been, but now wasn't the time. Keith was falling asleep, but this time Lance's wasn't scared. Keith was warmth beneath the covers and at home in Lance's jacket and safe wrapped in his arms. The wound left from removing the Lox ached on Lance's arm, but he welcomed it. Because he was safe, in this reality, with Keith there with him; and this time nothing could take that away from him.

## Chapter End Notes

You thought I could kill him? My boy?? My sun and stars??? Keith???? nah  
I'm headed into finals week(s) so as much as I wanna throw the next chapter up  
immediately it might take 2 weeks... love you guys!



## Chapter Notes

Wow! The chapter before THE chapter... this ones pretty short, because its really a fill in. Chapter 52 is an epilogue so prepare yourself for 51 it's gonna be long.

Ya girl passed at least one final so far so here's this I guess. Thank you very much for the comments, I love and treasure them and all you readers

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

The alarm sounded at four am. It was early enough that disorientation and confusion still clung to the bodies of the paladins as they scrambled out of bed. This time they didn't go for their armour, or their lions, or even the bridge. They went for the hangar.

*Depressurisation event.*

Hunk knew that alarm like the back of his hand. It was one of the first alarms he'd memorised, terrified of the castle one day losing pressure and blowing them all out into space, or worse. So when it sounded, he was up and out of bed in an instant. He ran into Pidge in the hallway, the two sharing a frightened look before they began sprinting towards the hangar. Hunk didn't have time to think what was wrong with the castle, only knew that they had to get to the designated pod.

They found Lance when he ran past them, ordering them in the direction of the shuttle bay, explaining that he was helping Allura gather up Hiroshi. They did as they were told, hearts hammering in their chests as the alarm urged them on. They found Coran leading Acxa to the shuttle, the later looked confused, but didn't hesitate in following orders. Keith was plugging the escape route into the pods navigation, a serious mask on his face. A glance around the hangar, looking for Lance- Pidge was struggling with the heavy pod door, and Hunk went to lend a hand.

Lance watched it all play out calmly from the video feed on the bridge. Allura stood beside him, expression stormy and silent, her son asleep against her chest. They watched their friends scramble for the pod, watched them go through the correct procedures for starting the vessel up, promising periodically they were nearly there.

*Doors closing.*

Lance heard the mechanical announcement over the speakers, followed by a moment of confusion from the paladins.

"Hey, the doors are closing!" Hunk said, sounding worried.

Safety measure," Lance said into the comms. "We're on our way. Get buckled in so long, we're gonna eject pretty fast."

"Do hurry!" Coran said. "And have you got Hiroshi?"

"Babies here," Lance said, raising his head to meet Allura's eye.

He nodded.

“You guys all in?”

“*Yeah, we’re in,*” Keith snapped. “*Hurry the hell up.*”

“Patience, samurai.”

Lance should’ve smirked when he said that, but his lips disobeyed; he couldn’t form anything, not a simple expression. Allura took a shaky breath, laying her hand over the controls.

“Hold tight everyone,” Lance said.

He shut his eyes as a barrack of questions came flying at him, a second before a sharp hiss and faint shudder of the castle signalled the pod ejecting. For a moment, silence, then-

“*The pod just ejected! Oh my god it just left, Lance, it just left!*”

Hunk sounded on the verge of hysterics. Lance bit his lip, wishing he didn’t have to hear his friend like that.

“*Why did it do that!*”

“*Allura! Allura, are you on a different pod!*”

“*Hey, what’s happening?*”

“*I’m turning this around, hold tight guys-*”

“*Lance, Allura, do you copy? The pod ejected!*”

“*Why aren’t the controls responding?*”

Lance felt tears spring to his eyes, but he didn’t respond just yet. He looked to Allura, and nodded his head. She moved across the room, pressing a kiss to the top of Hiroshi’s head before setting both hands on the main controller.

The wormhole that opened was kinder than those before it. It was a tamed one, one Allura was opening herself. There was silence as the others took it in, as they realised what was happening. Then-

“*Lance, what are you doing?*”

“*Is that you opening that, is... is that you?*”

“*Princess, princess don’t do this.*”

Allura’s hand flew to her mouth to stifle a sob.

“*Guys, I don’t know what you’re thinking, but you better stop this!*” Pidge yelled. “*Stop it!*”

“*You can’t- you promised, Lance! We were gonna stay, we...*” Hunk trailed off, anger and sorrow and bitterness all eating at his words.

“*Don’t do this, please, we stand a better chance together.*”

“*Don’t do this!*”

*“Why won’t this pod move!”* Acxa growled, and Lance could almost feel her frustration.

They drifted towards the waiting wormhole, the speck of the pod but a silhouette against the blinding blue light. Keith had gone into shocked silence, not even uttering one word. Lance couldn’t see their faces, but he could hear the desperation pouring from their words.

*“Please.”*

That was Coran. At the sound of him crying, Lance got up and stood beside Allura. He wrapped his arms around her and she cried quietly into her sleeve, hands still braced on the controls.

*“Allura, don’t do this alone.”*

The princess bit down hard on her lip, before raising her head to speak to them.

*“You... you’ve always been a father to me, Coran,”* she said shakily. *“And I couldn’t be prouder.”*

She probably wanted to say more, but the ship was entering the wormhole, and she was struggling too much.

*“I love you guys,”* Lance said quickly.

Their voices were becoming distorted by the wormhole, still crying, still begging, still holding out hope.

*“I love you all so much.”*

He gasped as the wormhole closed in an explosion of blue light, swallowing up their voices once and for all. And then... silence. Hiroshi stirred against Allura’s chest, the princess’s face streaked with tears.

*“Just us now,”* she said quietly.

There was something indescribable building in Lance’s chest.

*“Yeah,”* he said. *“Just us.”*

The bridge was so quiet around them, the dull hum of machinery all that broke the silence. One day, thought Lance. Less than; twenty-two hours until the Dark Planet reached them.

*“Where did you send them?”* Lance asked.

Allura sighed.

*“I found a star, quite a way away from here. It’s called the Sun.”*

Lance blinked rapidly to stop the tears escaping as he turned to look at her.

*“You sent them to Earth,”* he said softly.

Allura’s smile was weak, but it was genuine.

*“Yes,”* she said.

The silence stretched.

*“Guess we should start prepping the castle-“*

Lance's words fell dead and they both leapt into the air as the doors to the bridge slid open. For a second, confusion muddled Lance's thoughts, before his eyes locked onto the person who'd just entered the room, and he felt anger instead.

"What the hell!"

Keith paused just inside the doorway, eyes flitting between the pair.

"What?" He said.

Lance felt disbelief, joy, anger, despair, all of it working its way through his body.

"Keith?"

He couldn't believe it, wouldn't, that Keith was standing there in front of them, not with the others on a ship now safely millions of miles away.

"What... what are you doing here?" Allura exclaimed.

The red paladin crossed his arms; he looked almost... angry?

"Did you really think I'd fall for that?" He said. "A depressurisation event one day before the Dark Planet reaches us?"

Lance blanched.

"Yes!"

Keith met his eye; there was something determined in them that only intensified as he strode towards Lance. He stopped a few feet short, glancing between the pair.

"I'm not leaving you," he said fiercely. "Any of you. And I understand why you did it, why you sent the others away, but..."

Keith shook his head, smiling as if the idea was just too absurd for him to comprehend.

"I'm staying with you."

He took Lance's hand.

"I promised."

Lance had tears welling in his eyes, angry tears mingling with sad ones, but Allura beat him to an answer.

"You quiznacking idiot," she cried, and Keith's eyes widened as she crushed him in a hug.

"Allura," he wheezed. "Can't breathe."

"Oh, oh of course, sorry," she let go of him reluctantly, swiping at the tears on her cheeks as she steadied the baby strapped to her chest.

Keith glanced down at Hiroshi, smiling fondly at the baby.

"Besides," he said. "Who's gonna mind this guy while you two are off shooting superpowers everywhere?"

Hiroshi gurgled happily, snatching hold of Keith's finger as it strayed into his field of view. Lances felt his heart speed up, and then they were all hugging- Keith crushed in the middle of their hug, with a baby grabbing at his face and two fully-grown adults sniffing into his shirt.

"We're gonna be okay," Allura managed to mumble.

Lance clung a little tighter to them both. *One day*. But they were all there, and as long as they were, something mattered.

-

The trio did all they could to prepare as the day drew on. They had a plan, they had months upon months of plans, but nothing that was guaranteed to work. The castle was heavily damaged from their skirmish with the Galra, the black lion was still barely operational, and none of them were up to fighting. They just had to pull it together, Lance supposed.

They took turns sleeping throughout the day, so that when the wormhole inevitably came at a little past two, they wouldn't be dead on their feet. That was the plan anyway; no one had much luck falling asleep. Still, it was Allura's turn now, so with Keith watching over her and the bridge, Lance wondered off to find a quiet spot on the observation deck. It was peaceful here, he supposed, just him and the dark, dark sky. It looked darker than usual, the effects of the Dark Planet taking hold. He tried not to dwell on that as he took a seat by the window and gazed out at the void; no, Lance was here for a different reason.

"Hey Allita," he said softly.

He looked past his reflection in the cold glass to the one of two stars he could see shimmering very faintly many light-years away.

"I'm probably gonna die tomorrow," Lance continued. "Same thing that got you's coming to get me."

He sighed, glancing away from the window to his feet, dangling idly from the windowsill.

"Hope I can stick it to them first, though. Make them sorry for what they did to you."

Lance shook his head, brows creased.

"I'm still sorry," he said.

His voice was quiet, especially in the vast, empty room.

"Sorry you missed out on it all. We all loved you so much, Allita. So much, and... and I would have loved to grow up with you. Would have loved to reach high school together. Done all our dumb studying together, helped you pick a date for prom and... and maybe we'd both go to the Garrison too."

He huffed, a crooked smile gracing his lips.

"Maybe you'd have ended up out here with us. Except we'd never be stuck here, we'd be out exploring the galaxy cause... cause I'm sure you'd beat Zarkon in one go, you know?"

Lance was crying now, but he didn't stop talking.

"And we'd miss home," he said. "We'd still miss it, but it wouldn't be as bad cause... cause we'd

have each other. Cause we're twins, a-and we're family, and... and you're my closest friend. Always will be, Allita."

Lance ran a hand over his face, gathering himself.

"I miss you."

Space looked back in through the window at him, vast and lonely.

"I miss you. I'll always miss you, but I'll fight for you too."

Lance bit his lip, shaking his head as determination made home amid the tears.

"All the way," he said. "I want you to know, that I'm fighting for you. And I will always, always love you, Allita. But I... I gotta say bye, you know?"

Lance sniffled, gazing at the stars as if they might offer some comfort.

"I gotta let you go. Cause you're..."

A pause, a breath in the quiet air.

"You're gone."

The words tasted bitter in his mouth. They drained the final colours from the world.

"You're gone," said Lance.

It was quiet in the room, final, and absolute.

"So... goodbye. I love you, Ali, but now it's just.... It's goodbye."

## Chapter End Notes

Chapter 52 will be posted the weekend of the 15th.

## Chapter Notes

HHHHHHHHH hope you all loved s6 as much as I did

Alright, we've reached that chapter. I'm going to save my long sappy thank you note (for those who want to read it) for the epilogue chapter so you can get on with reading this, but I will mention a couple of things now.

First off, thank you to every single person who has read this fic, and in particular, thanks to the people who left comments. You have been so supportive, and there's no way this fic would have gotten to the point its at without so much love and support from readers so thank you. If you enjoyed reading this, then please consider checking out my other fics (in future mostly, cause I've barely got anything at the moment lmao). I'm also considering writing a couple of prompt things if you have any ideas you want to send me over tumblr (idk if anyone would be interested in that but I like writing so lets give it a go) Ok I'll say more with the last chapter cause you have enough to read with this one... its the longest chapter yet so Prepare.

I really, really, really hope you enjoy this one, thanks everyone <3  
ALSO if you like listening to music while you read, I wrote this entire chapter listening to the Interstellar soundtrack so... give that a go if you want

ADDING THIS INCREDIBLE ART PIECE>>>> [by kriisykins](#)  
please look at it its Beautiful

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

The stars were gone when the Dark Planet arrived.

They didn't attempt to wormhole out of the system. Lance worried what would happen if they did, what would happen to Hiroshi, to the castle, what they'd stumble into. So they stayed. They stayed as the clock passed two in the morning, past the time the wormhole usually came, right into their last day. Day zero.

The castle hadn't stayed stationary, not entirely. It began to shake with turbulence, fighting its way through a field of debris like the black lion had done when Lance had attempted to take down the Dark Planet fifty days ago. The turbulence stopped, eventually, but the field of debris remained. The two paladins, Allura, and Hiroshi, all stood together on the bridge, bracing for the worst. Out the window, Lance could see nothing. The stars were gone; they couldn't even see this systems star through the dark blanket surrounding them.

"We're... not stationary," Allura said when she checked the readings.

She locked eyes with Lance, a look of controlled fear on her face.

"We're orbiting."

“Orbiting the Dark Planet?” Keith asked.

Allura nodded. Lance steadied himself with a deep breath.

“The lions are secured?”

“Yes.”

They’d decided to confine the lions to the hangars, so in the very least when all this was over, the Universe would still have a chance at recreating Voltron.

“Then let’s do this,” said Lance.

-

The hangar felt cold as Lance stood adjusting his final bits of armour. Blue sat loyally by his side, the only lion they were taking to the surface. Blue was a part of his powers, she was in his blood. The black lion was too, but... Lance glanced across the hangar, to where Black lay with their head resting weakly on the ground. The lion was damaged, maybe irreparably, from his first attack on this planet. Lance couldn’t put Black through any more.

“Breathe.”

A hand touched his chest, reminding Lance that he’d been holding his breath in anticipation. He let go, shaking the numb feeling from his hands as Keith gazed up at him. Hands found his shoulders, smoothing over his armour as if it could really keep him safe. Then Keith was forcing Lance to meet his eye, just a thumb and finger to frame his jaw, and he had his attention.

“Lance,” he said.

He didn’t know what to say.

“I don’t think you were made to fight it,” Keith said. “I don’t think that’s what your powers were for.”

Lance frowned softly, fingers playing nervously around Keith’s waist.

“So it is nothing against you,” Keith whispered fiercely. “*Nothing*. Because you’re meant for better things.”

Lance nodded, finding he couldn’t smile, even if he wanted. He didn’t trust his emotions to oblige. Keith kissed him, soft but sure, fingers curling around his neck. Lance held him for as long as he was allowed, trying to burn every bit of Keith to memory, his lips, the roughness of his fingers, the smell of him, everything. But he had to pull back, and it was too soon, but there was nothing Lance could do to change that. So he allowed himself one more touch, a caress of Keith’s cheek, melting under his watchful eyes as they stayed locked on his. Keith’s lip trembled slightly as Lance brushed his hair back, leaning their foreheads together.

They existed like that for a brief moment, breathing as one, the slight hitch in Keith’s breathing the only indication that they’d ever have to part. But they did. They did, and Lance watched as Allura embraced Keith, watched her exchange a few meaningful words before she was kissing the baby in her arms and handing him to Keith. Hiroshi cried as he was parted from his mother; he was usually so at home with Keith, but even the baby could sense something was wrong. Keith shushed him as best he could, rocking the tiny Altean as Allura said her final farewells to her son.



She drew herself up beside Lance, taking deep breaths to avoid crying. They both faced Keith and the baby, something unspoken passing between them. Blue leant down, opening her massive jaws to allow them in. Lance ingrained the image of Keith in his mind, holding it close, refusing to part with it even as the doors to the cockpit shut and the red paladin left for the bridge. They waited until Keith confirmed he was safely by the controls before opening the hangar doors and diving out into the formidable dark.

The turbulence was worse out here. Despite the castle shining lights brightly into the gloom, Lance had a feeling that light wouldn't go very far. Allura stood silently beside him as Lance piloted them through the darkness, in the direction of the planet's surface. He tried to keep his mind as blank as possible, away from thoughts of Keith alone in the castle, of his family mourning him, of which of them would die first-

Lance shuddered as the blue lion collided with a particularly rough patch of debris. Allura grabbed the back of his chair, her eyes wide and jaw set.

*"You're about to break the atmosphere,"* Keith said through the comms.

*"Gotcha."*

Lance adjusted the lion so they'd have a smoother ride, bracing himself for the inevitable rough patch. He grit his teeth as the shaking began, debris flying off the lion like bullets. Allura shut her eyes as they passed through, only opening them once all the shaking had come to a sudden stop. Lance blinked, the darkness swirling like mist around them, almost... clearing.

*"We're through,"* he said. *"We may have some visibility."*

*"Visibility?"* Keith asked. *"I got nothing."*

*"Hang on."*

Lance steered the lion lower, readjusting for the effects on this planet's gravity. It was a hell of a lot stronger than Earth's, that was for sure. He held his breath as the black around them began to shift into a pale grey.

*"Air's changing,"* he said. *"Allura, ideas?"*

*"The darkness,"* she said. *"It could be caused by orbiting debris. In that case we could have light."*

*Light.* It felt wrong putting it like that. It reminded Lance more of the eerie grey light that illuminated the tunnel in his dreams. Still, it was better than the dark, and the harder he looked... Lance gasped as the ground took shape.

*"I see it!"*

*"What?"*

*"We have visual on the Dark Planet, I can see the surface."*

*"What does it look like?"* Keith asked.

*"It... it's not clear. I'm just getting grey, kinda brown. But that's definitely land. We're still about fifty k's out. 'Lura, you think its stable to land?"*

*"It will have to be,"* Allura said distractedly, eyes fixed out the window on the approaching planet.

Lance took that as confirmation enough to keep going. He steered Blue lower, thanking the stars they hadn't lost connection with Keith yet. The muggy darkness seemed to be clearing, and in its place... a whole world of it. Brown, and sickly grey, the surface of the Dark Planet appeared to be mud or rock, and nothing else. It drifted in and out of view, thick bits of grey haze floating over the surface like creeping mist. Lance checked his helmet was secure, before turning to Allura.

"What readings are we getting?"

"The gravity is going to be intense, especially for you. It's nearly twice your Earth's, so we'll be slower, heavier."

Lance took it with a nod, wondering if it would effect how much water he could transport.

"UV isn't a problem, though I'd say the light is still natural, just a remnant of the star. It's cold out there, Lance. Fluctuates around freezing. Radiation isn't too high, but the atmosphere... it looks breathable, technically, but I wouldn't advise it. Those clouds--"

Allura motioned to the grey mists along the surface.

"Or whatever they are. I'm detecting some funny elements in those, so don't expose yourself. Other than that..."

She sighed.

"I don't know what this planet's going to do, Lance. It might sink us the second we land."

Lance shook his head. "No. It won't do that."

"How sure are you?"

Lance tightened his grip on the controls.

"As sure as I am that it wants me to suffer."

They next few minutes they flew in silence. Allura caught her breath when the sounds of Hiroshi babbling happily filtered into Keith's comm.

"He's calmed down?"

"*He's quite happy, princess,*" Keith replied.

Allura nodded, hands forming fists. "Take care of him."

"*I swear I will.*"

"We're coming in to land," said Lance.

"*I love you.*"

His voice threatened to break, so Lance took a second to calm himself.

"Love you too, samurai."

He changed Blue's course, straightening their flight path.

"You ready, princess?"

Allura nodded.

“Drop zones just ahead.”

Lance slowed the lion, eyes flitting nervously to the surface below. They were close, too close for comfort already and they hadn't even touched it. Allura was readying herself behind him, gripping her staff tightly as pink energy began to encircle her.

“You sure about this?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. We're nearly there.”

The princess nodded, before moving toward the doors.

“We're hovering.”

Lance looked down; they'd stopped about ten metres from the ground, just hanging there. From this distance, he could see the thick mud that formed the ground, misshapen and endless.

“Do it,” Allura said.

When she dropped from the blue lion, Lance stopped breathing for a moment. Allura landed without a sound, her eyes screwed shut, glowing with energy as her feet hit the earth. It radiated out of her like she was a star, sinking into the filthy ground and scurrying over the mounds of dirt and mud that made up the Dark Planet.

“I... I have it,” she said after a second.

Lance brought Blue down beside her gently, not too eager to be out of his lion, but desperate to get to Allura. The doors opened, the slight hiss of air mingling together as he stepped out into the new atmosphere. Lance caught his breath. Before him, for miles and miles, the Dark Planet lay dormant, waiting. The sky was grey and patchy, brown mud and earth stretching out before them in an uneven plain. Lance took a deep breath, before stepping out into it.

The planet weighed down on him like a vice, its gravity dragging him down, making every step twice as hard as it should have been. He could feel it. Could feel the bits of cold energy that reached out to him, tasting him. He ignored it, pushing through his unease as he walked toward Allura. She was deeply concentrated, using her powers to try and keep the planet as dormant as possible. That was her role, to keep it calm, to quell the conflict, to give Lance as much of a fighting chance as possible. Not wanting to disturb her too much, he simply crouched down beside her.

“You good?”

Her eyes flickered open.

“I can feel it.”

“Me too.”

“It knows we're here.”

Lance swallowed.

“I don’t want to leave you.”

Allura’s expression tightened. “Me neither.”

They stayed like that a moment, gathering themselves, adjusting to the intense weight of the planet and the suffocating feeling of dread.

“You have too... you have to lay down the charges,” Allura said.

Lance nodded.

“I-I will.”

He squeezed her shoulder. “I will.”

Allura offered him a weak smile, before shutting her eyes and concentrating on the planet.

“I’ve got it,” she said. “I’ve got you.”

“I’ve got you too,” Lance whispered.

He stood. Blue sealed her mouth up firmly once Lance had hauled out the backpack holding their supplies. The lion drew up, ready to watch over and guard Allura. Lance set his hand fondly against her massive paw.

“You be careful, girl.”

She purred in his mind, a comfort and a promise as Lance turned away from her and Allura and set his sights on the sprawling plains of mud. Adjusting the shoulder straps of the backpack, he let himself draw a deep breath before he began to walk.

Progress was slow here. Lance had been on planets with higher gravity before, knew how to walk, how to hold himself and the backpack that had doubled in weight. He could feel the vials of quintessence pressing into his back, and could only pray their plan would work. The first few minutes didn’t feel like too much of a chore, not when Lance could look back and still see Blue and Allura crouched in their landing sight. Then he made it up a rise, and down the other side, and the world felt all the more silent.

The Dark Planet was just that- dark, sterile, an endless plain of hard rock and mud pools that clung to his boots. Lance was panting into his helmet after just a mile or so, dragging his feet up another short incline and avoiding the slippery slope on the other side. He looked back in the direction he came, but all that marred the landscape were his lonely footprints; no Blue, and no Allura. Miles and miles of earth, of dirt, and mud, and a sickening sense of instability.

It felt like the coming of twilight. The day itself wasn’t changing, no progression of time visible, no sun setting or sky darkening or any of that. It was just... the feeling. The feeling of watching the sun sink. The feeling of watching the day die out, the tingle of night, of approaching dusk. Because something was coming, something was setting, and the further Lance walked, the more the feeling grew.

“C- ter----- t-o—mi--- crater i—two m--“

Keith’s voice came in and out of focus through the comms as Lance walked, the atmosphere messing with their communications.

“Allura, you hearing Keith any clearer?”

“-ittle. Y—bre—ing u--- a bit.”

Lance shook his head.

“You’re both rusty. I’m switching to morse.”

Lance activated his finger pads, tapping out a rhythm he knew would carry to the others suits as he walked.

S-T-I-L-L-S-A-F-E

The pads made a soft *blip* as they met, carrying out the dots and dashes necessary for his message. It felt so lonely then, the reality of it really sinking in. He was out there, alone, the small blips of his fingertips meeting as he tapped out the code the only sound breaking the barrier.

It was what Lance’s primary school teacher would have described as a desert. And then all the kids would protest because deserts were hot and dry and sandy. They grew big green cactuses and the sand was always orange, and the sun shone hot and camels roamed. Then the teacher would get them to quiet down, and explain that a desert didn’t have to be that. A desert was just... empty. A desert was anywhere, where the water was sparse, and the plants didn’t grow, and the land stretched and stretched and stretched until you felt like you were the only person in the whole world, because that is how lonely you felt. And it was quiet, quiet to the point your own breathing sounded like a labour, like a chore, like it would be better if you fell as silent as the sand, and as still as the rocks, and as vivid and dry as the blanketing sky.

Lance wished he could tear the helmet from his head, as if that would alleviate the crushing weight, allow him to draw a proper breath of air, to be free from the prison of his own body. He knew what he was looking for technically, but wasn’t sure if he’d ever actually find it. *You’ll have to go deep.* That’s what Allura had said. But Lance hadn’t really listened back then, hadn’t really listened, because the thought alone was too much. *Go deep, into it’s domain. That’s where you have to plant the quintessence.* It sounded so simple, such an easy way out. Lance knew it was coming for him, one way or another. So he just walked. Walked with the pack full of quintessence, until he found it or it found him.

After two hours of walking, he received another message from Keith. Lance paused a second, just to make sure he could record the series of sounds properly.

C-S-T-L-E-N-O-T-M-O-V-E

So the castle was stuck. No wormholing, no escaping; Lance supposed it wouldn’t ever move again, not unless he killed this thing. So he kept walking.

The landscape was changing. Less rock, more mud. It was becoming more what he had imagined, the ground dark and foreboding, his feet sinking millimetres at a time as he continued his trek. A wall of the grey mist was floating and shifting a few hundred feet to Lance’s left, so he steered himself away from it. Suit or not, he didn’t want to test what lay within. The light here wasn’t good, tossing him into an eternal twilight zone, where everything was shadowed and soft, gloomy, dragging, like a nightmare Lance was trying desperately to escape from. He trudged on, feet sinking into the soft mud, ignoring the tantalising crevices between the rocks protruding from the filth. Lance walked, and walked, and walked.

The first thing to make him stop it his tracks wasn’t the monster he’d been expecting. It wasn’t

some spirit, or corpse, or devil, or whatever he expected to find. It was a teddy bear. Lance crouched down, a frown etched onto his face. He stared at it for a long time, catching his breath, the child's toy staring back up at him from its resting place in the mud. Lance shivered. He resisted the urge to pluck it up, save it from its earthy prison, dust off its fur. Instead, he stepped around it, a perpetual frown on his face as he walked further into the fray.

The next think Lance encountered was a rocking chair. For some reason, it set him off even more than the bear. Half buried in the mud, he could still see its engraved armrest protruding, half a seat and coated in a fine layer of dirt. Things began cropping up after that; a mangled coat, a rusted car, a piece of building column Lance recognised from a planet they'd once visited. A giant propeller off some vast ship was plunged into the mud. It felt like a graveyard, lonely and desolate, forgotten things slowly sinking into the mud. Lance wandered right into the thick of it.

He caught walls poking through the mud, a shoe, a pot, half a fence. There was no order, no organisation, or category. Some things he didn't recognise, artefacts from other planets, perhaps once belonging to victims of this wasteland. Lance tried to keep a hold of his fear, but every glimpse of something poking out the mud had him seizing up, expecting something worse. He set his sights on the largest object, walking steadily toward it and trying to ignore the rest.

Lance recognised it as he drew closer; a carousel, with its little painted horses and gold banners, tilted a little on its side like a sinking ship. It was ringed with little bulbous lights, and Lance flinched as a couple flickered weakly, a halted melody spilling from the machine like a convoluted attempt at amusement. Lance hated it. Hated it, hated this place, hated the chilling sound and the dying graces of the carousel. He made to go around it, and that's when he saw it.

The pod lay a few hundred feet from the rest of the debris. On its side, its paint beginning to rust. But Lance knew it, knew it *knew it*. It was a Galra fighter. He started walking, and fast. The graveyard was forgotten behind him as he marched toward the ship, heart rate climbing in his throat. It had been there for a while, that much was obvious. The mud was starting to build on it like moss on a rock, splattered across the windscreen and what Lance could now see was a severely damaged engine. It had crashed, months ago by the looks of it. And he knew. He knew without needing to see.

*Shiro.*

The pilot's seat was empty. Lance didn't know if that was a blessing or a curse, whether it would have been better to find his body right away, than to wander circles on this planet looking for it. He inspected the ship closely, but there was nothing else in it, and the only evidence of the crash was the mangled engine, which looked like it had taken a hit from a piece of debris. Could it really have been the ship carrying Shiro, the one that lead him into this system? Was he also just trying to escape the Galra, make his way home to them like so many other victims? All Lance's thoughts came to a grinding halt when he spotted the footprints.

They lead away from the craft in a crooked line, like someone had stumbled out and just started walking. Lance crouched down to inspect them, the size and shape, thought there was no telling the age. Who knew how often the mud shifted here; it could be daily, or never at all. He could be standing on the same surface that existed a week ago, twelve months ago, or a thousand years ago. Lance checked the straps on the backpack, and began following the footprints.

F-O-O-T-P-R-I-N-T-S

He waited for the reply as he walked, waited for the others to translate his message and make something of it.

W-H-O

It came from Keith; Allura was probably too preoccupied keeping the planet calm to respond.

D-O-N-T-K-N-O-W

It was slow going, and Lance could tell whoever's footsteps he was following had been struggling too. Given the foot size, they weren't as far spaced as they should have been, suggesting short, shuffling steps as whoever it was battled against the gravity or perhaps some injury. Lance's fingers itched to tap out another message, a name, the name of the man he thought he might be following. But it would be cruel to plant false hope in the other's hearts. So Lance kept walking, eyes to the floor, sweating despite the freezing temperatures outside.

The grey mist swirled, a chunk of it building like a cloud somewhere ahead of him. Thankfully, the footsteps never strayed too close to it, sticking to the easiest routes, winding between rises and around bubbling pools of mud. They reached a long, flat plain, which Lance could tell already would take him near an hour to cross. He could see no end to this wretched land, no changes, nothing. It was just him, and the footsteps, and the endless earth. And then... and then it was just him. Because the footsteps disappeared.

Lance stared. The pit was massive, fifty feet across, a gaping hole in the earth that sloped almost too steeply down, and down, and *down down down*. Little trickles of water dripped into the mouth of the cave, the mud slowly caving in around the edges. Lance swallowed thickly. It would have been easy to fall; the slope was nearly vertical, and slippery, drawing anything that came to close into its depths. If it had been Shiro, stumbling along confused and hurt and alone... Lance looked for signs of footsteps leading down the steep slope, but there were none. Whoever it was, they'd fallen.

He stood there for a long while debating it. He had to get deep, deep into the earth where the quintessence had a chance of taking effect.

C-A-V-E

Lance's hands were trembling, but he still managed to tap the message out with the pads of his fingertips.

G-O-I-N-G-D-O-W-N

The reply came quickly, Keith rushing to get it out.

C-A-R-E-F-U-L

He didn't have any rope, which he regretted now. Ensuring the quintessence pack was done up securely, Lance edged toward the pit. The mud sunk and threatened to flow under his feet, so surrendering his vaguely clean gloves, he crouched down and gripped at the ground for support. The first step brought him over the lip of the cave, into the pit where he balanced along the steep slope. The mud tumbled down like inklings of rain, soundlessly settling somewhere in the hellish depths of the pit. Grabbing hold of the sturdiest bits of earth he could find, Lance began to climb.

Dirt crumbled under his feet, and the wet mud made it hard to keep his footing. The backpack made it even more awkward to climb, too many things to focus on. Despite all that, Lance persisted. His arms and shoulders ached as he carefully shuffled down the slope, breath coming in sharp pants as he blinked the sweat from his eyes. The cold came for him still, seeping in through his suit the lower he got. Lance tried to distract himself with other thoughts as he climbed, partially

to keep his nerve, partially to give him the strength to keep going. He knew they could have had it worse; the Dark Planet could have drowned them the second they landed, it could be resistant to Allura's powers, it could have crushed them right away. This at least felt like a chance...

Then again, was this really the type of thing to give them a fighting chance? Or was it something that knew the longer they dragged this out, the more it would ultimately hurt. That thought and many others plagued Lance during his descent, as he grappled for holds in the mud and let his feet slip carefully down the slope. It grew darker, colder, the chasm continuing deep into the earth, deeper than he could see. He wasn't too deep yet, when he glanced up there was still a sizable hole where the grey light filtered through and-

Lance gasped as his foot slipped. He grabbed for a chunk of dirt but it came away in his fingers. Then, he was falling.

The faint light tumbled into darkness as he went back, toppling, his shoulders dragged down by the backpack as he lost all stability and fell. The slope wasn't shallow enough to stop him, so he kept tumbling. It passed in the flurry of motion, of his frantic breathing as he half rolled half free-fell into the pit. Falling on a planet with twice Earth's gravity was not an experience Lance wanted to repeat. Every time he came into contact with the sides of the pit, it felt like he'd been punched. He kept falling, hands splayed to try and slow his descent but it didn't work. Down and down, a small landslide of dirt coming down with him.

Grey became pitched black, cold became freezing, and Lance kept falling. When he hit the ground, rolling down the last bit of slope, the backpack came down on top of him and punched the air out his lungs. His ears were ringing. The weight on his back felt crushing. There was mud on his visor and all over his suits and his muscles were screaming. Lance winced, rolling onto his side to alleviate the weight of quintessence on his back. Still breathing hard, he blinked his eyes open, trying to get his bearings.

Darkness. That's the only way he could describe it, really. A blanketing dark that sucked all the energy from his body, a black hole, a stretching silence. Lance made it to his knees, clutching at a pain in his ribs as he looked around. The darkness shifted, a pinprick of light existing somewhere far, far above him, the entrance to the pit. Lance groaned, pushing himself to his feet and swaying slightly.

It was awful down here, cold and silent, a stifling darkness that left him senseless. Now what? The question echoed in his mind as he looked around blindly, trying to sense where he was. Was this the bottom of the pit? How big was it? Was there anything else down here? He couldn't see a thing. So Lance shut his eyes. With them closed tight, he reached out to Blue. He sensed his lion by Allura's side still, her familiar presence filing his mind as he reached out with his powers. Lance felt for it, for the water, let the blue lion's energy sweep through him as he mapped out this underground prison with it. When he opened his eyes, he had a better sense of belonging.

He still couldn't see, but when Lance began walking, the water guided him. He could feel it mixed in with the mud, sliding over the damp walls and dripping from pores in the ceiling. The cave sent chills down his spine, but Lance focused on the water, on the openings it showed him, the path that continued deeper into the earth. *Be brave be brave, be brave.* Brave, like Allura, and Keith. They were all on their own, trusting that the others would do their part so that maybe they'd come back together.

It was that thought that got Lance to keep walking, the thought of embracing Allura again, of taking little Hiroshi in his arms, of sweeping Keith off his feet and holding tight to him because after this nothing, *nothing*, would keep them apart. His footsteps made soft indents in the mud,



powers trailing along the walls in search of the right path. On and on, it didn't seem to end. It probably wouldn't, Lance reasoned, maybe this pit would continue down to the very depths of the planet, to whatever was waiting for him. Callio? He wondered. It didn't feel right putting a name to it, not now, now that he could feel its sinister energy bleeding through every crevice and crack. It knew he was here, it was waiting. Lance didn't think he was ready to die how it wanted him too.

It could have been an hour he spent walking, Lance didn't know. What he did know was that eventually, he began to see. Whether it was light, or his eyes somehow adjusting, he knew the faint grey haze in the air wasn't just a trick. It reminded him of his dream, of the tunnel there, where the mud itself seemed to emit a strange grey light, just enough for him to see by. It was deeply unsettling, not enough to satisfy the eye, just to tease it with glimpses of what might be there. Lance could feel himself coming undone; nothing had even come for him yet, but his limbs felt twitchy and there was heat behind his eyes and impatience in his step and an altogether sick, worrisome feeling buzzing beneath his skin. And he hated it.

The cave grew wider periodically, forming caverns, pits, large empty spaces that Lance couldn't see. Other times it grew thinner, until the walls were pressing in on him and he feared that if he kept walking, it would all just close in. He'd become part of the earth, swallowed up by the mud, trapped forever in this dark prison. It was stuffy and freezing at the same time. His suit was set to filter in clean air so he wouldn't run out, and Lance was sure he could taste the bitter mud and smell the stench of death.

He was less reliant on his powers now, the grey haze emitting from the walls just enough for him to navigate by. Lance hated this, every bit of it. He wondered vaguely how dark it had been for Allita. Had she also fallen into a pit? Maybe the fall killed her, but then again, maybe she just got stuck. Maybe her leg slipped down a crevice, maybe she became wedged between the rocks, thinking they lead to an escape. Lance hated not knowing, and hated even more that one had to be a reality.

Time dragged down here, the weight of gravity felt too much. Lance kept walking. He was sure there were blisters forming on his feet, and the last message he'd gotten from Keith confirmed the castle was still stuck. How much further could he go? How deep? Lance didn't even know how deep was possible. So he just kept walking, through the dark and mud and-

There was something ahead of him. Lance stopped breathing, bringing his steps to a stop as he studied the shifting shadows before him. The cave had opened out into another cavern, and while various stalagmites rose from the floor, it was mostly flat. Except... he was sure one of them had moved. In the grey light, it was almost impossible to see, but Lance really didn't want to get any closer. His eyes scoured the area, moving over the various spiked structures, some just a few inches tall, others stretching to nearly fifty feet, so they scraped the ceiling above. And everything, *everything*, was quiet.

He couldn't move. Nothing made a noise, nothing gave any indication of *being*, but Lance still feared giving his position away somehow. His visor fogged a little as he sucked air in rapidly, trying to calm himself so it would clear. He could hear water dripping very faintly from the walls, the occasional splatter of dirt raining down from the ceiling high above- Lance caught his breath as a stalagmite no more than fifty yards away shifted. Meaning it couldn't *be* a stalagmite. Lance felt ill with the sudden terror that coursed through him. Whatever it was, it was big.

Not a breathe of sound escaped him. His feet stayed rooted in the mud, just watching, not nearly hidden enough-

It was getting up. *Oh god oh god oh god*. Lance's heart was thumping fast in his chest as he

watched the creature unfurl. Curiosity got the better of him, or perhaps it was just fear that kept him stationary, watching, enrapt, as something picked itself up on all fours from where it had been lying in the space between two stalagmite mounds. It stood as tall as a horse, a very large one, when on all fours. Lance couldn't make much out; the creature was wrapped in shadows, its hunched body slowly untwisting from the mess it had been lying in. He could hear it now, the sound it made as its feet settled in the mud, the faint crack of bones as they adjusted. Lance squinted, unsure, afraid- he flinched as it began to turn.

His chest freezing up, Lance attempted to rapidly backtrack, taking hasty, silent steps to conceal himself behind the nearest stalagmite. *Quick quick quick*, one step, another, he caught sight of a bony skeleton, a twisted spine filled with knobs as the creature rounded on him. Lance ducked behind the stalagmite, holding his breath. No noise, no indication it had seen him. He crouched down, then dared a peak out. His breath was fogging his helmet again, but when he peered around the edge of the stalagmite, he could still see very clearly the horror waiting for him.

Lance didn't know what to compare it to. A nightmare, something his brother would have dug up stories about just to terrify him and Allita. At first it carried itself much like any other large, four legged animal, shifting quietly through the mud with its nose. Lance shivered in disgust as its front legs came up like hands, lifting something to its face to smell. It's head... he didn't know. He just didn't know. The shadows and the dark were thick, but it was too flat to have a snout like a wolf or horse or... he just didn't know. Hair, or maybe it was skin, hung around its head and neck, and its body was little more than bone. Lance felt bile rise in his throat as it turned again and he caught sight of exposed skeleton, rotted flesh clinging to the bones of its ribs, and threatening to decay around the points that its spine pushed against. There were something like antlers, perhaps, protruding from its head, and its lower body was so crooked it could barely keep its back legs from buckling and dragging through the mud.

It was scavenging. Lance didn't need to be an expert on any type of fucked up alien, or otherwise, species to see that. It crept through the mud, around the stalagmites, bony fists digging and dragging things up for it to consume. Lance retreated back behind the stalagmite, taking deep breaths to calm himself as he thought out a plan. He could turn back, that was simplest, but he knew already that lead him nowhere. His chances weren't terrible; he hadn't been spotted, he doubted *this* was the spirit itself, and he had plenty of cover to get through. He could already see the cavern continued a little way on, deeper, to where he needed to go. So Lance decided to bet on his luck.

He altered course a little, slinking behind the stalagmites towards the edge of the cavern. He kept close watch of the creature, trying to put distance between them to lower the chance of it hearing him. Could it hear? He really didn't want to test that theory. The weight of the pack was almost forgotten with all the adrenaline pulsing through him. One step at a time, one breath at a time; he was going to get through this. He could hear the creature shuffling about a few hundred feet away, but it didn't appear to breathe or behave like any normal animal. God, what Lance could give for his knees to stop shaking.

Halfway around the cavern, he changed course a little, angling into the thick of the stalagmites to reach the opposing tunnel quicker. There were enough obstacles between them now that Lance could barely see the creature. He kept at a steady pace, moving his feet carefully, eyes open and listening for any indication of the creature changing pattern. He wove around a larger stalagmite, flinching a little when he realised it brought him within view of the creature. Relief flooded his veins as it stayed turned the other way. Thankful, Lance stepped carefully across the open space-

He gasped. There was a woman. There was an honest to god Altean woman standing at the foot of the stalagmite ahead of him. *Carma*. Lance fumbled, refusing to breathe, to *acknowledge*- and she

was gone. Lance blinked, trembling. He'd seen her, he knew he had. He's seen her in pictures and memories and he knew, *he knew*, that when he'd woken briefly in the safe hold of the blue lion after his mission to the Dark Planet failed, it had been her.

He couldn't trust it. Maybe it wasn't Carma doing this, maybe she'd been innocent.... But Lance couldn't guarantee that. He didn't trust the story, didn't trust what he thought he knew; he trusted himself, and his teammates, and seeing Carma instilled only fear. Fear upon fear upon fear. Lance shook the image from his head, checking on the creature; he had others things to worry about. He kept walking, quicker now, his nerves getting the better of him. It came as no surprise then, that when the image of Carma appeared right before him in a flurry of dark hair and wild eyes, he yelped.

She was gone by the time his eyes opened, and he lowered his arms from his face. She was gone, but Lance... could almost feel the short cry as it slipped away from him. So soft, barely there. Behind his helmet and tucked under his arms, so short and startled it shouldn't have been heard at all.

But it was. It was, and he knew before he looked. He knew before he turned to see the creature's hollow eyes fixed on him, to see its bony body twisted in his direction, mud dripping from its staggered jaw and blunt teeth. It's eyes were dark voids, empty sockets, it's face half a skull with unnatural proportions, that bled into the stubby antlers spread with dirt that adorned its hairy scalp. Lance felt despair lodge right in his chest, his hands stilling, lips still parted in regret at the tiny sound they'd made. The creature took one slow, hesitant step forward, its neck protruding from its body as it locked onto Lance's position. It's jaw twitched, teeth worn down from the grime it consumed, sightless eyes boring into the small human in its path. Lance let the backpack fall from his shoulders, and ran.

He turned as its mouth opened, an ear splitting bellow leaving the creature as he turned heel and bolted into the mass of stalagmites, abandoning the quintessence in favour of his life. Lance could hear it thundering through the mud behind him, deep, breathy howls escaping it's throat as it beared down on him.

"Shit," Lance cursed, picking up his pace. "*SHIT!*"

He swore he could smell it, felt its rancid breath hot on his neck. The ground shook as it galloped after him, smashing through then stalagmites in pursuit. Lance didn't know where the hell he was going; he couldn't go for the tunnel, he'd be butchered. So he wove in and around the stalagmites, resisting the urge to scream as the creature plundered after him. Lance yelled when Carma flashed across his vision, her fist flying towards his face. He ducked instinctively, just as a hardened chunk of mud swept through the air where his head had been. He didn't dwell on it, sprinting through the maze, doing his best not to slip.

The next time Carma materialised before him, she was beckoning. In a blink she was gone, but Lance had instinctively taken off in the direction she motioned too. He hoped that was the right decision. Was this... was this her trying to *help* him? And if the spirit wasn't her, how could she be here? It was one or the other, she couldn't be trying to save and destroy him. So perhaps it was just a trick. Still, Lance couldn't complain when the next time she made him duck, he avoided getting his head swiped off by the clawed fists that swept through the stalagmite above him.

*Your bayards, stupid.* In his terror, Lance had all but forgotten he would probably have to fight back. Outrunning this thing really didn't seem like very good of an option. He yanked them free, activating both in his hand and turning as he ran to fire off two shots at the approaching creature. It shrieked as they made contact with its skeleton, but it only slowed down for a short second. Lance

cursed, running, ducking around some stalagmites to try and make his route less predictable. It might have been faster, but he was more agile. Lance changed direction like a madman, leaving the creature grasping at his fleeting footprints. Angered shrieks pierced the air, deep grunts signalling it changing direction to go after him.

Instead of firing directly at the creature, Lance began aiming for the tops of larger stalagmites. He changed direction as they toppled, delaying the creature as he tried to escape its line of vision. A few attempts, and Lance flung himself beneath a small outcrop. If it spotted him, he'd be dead. Lance tensed as the creature thundered past, shaking the ground but failing to notice him in his hiding place. It carried on, slashing at the stalagmites in an attempt to find him. Lance waited until he heard it scurrying about on the other side of the cavern before sliding out from his hiding place, looking around anxiously as he began creeping back through the wreckage. His only hope was getting far enough down the tunnel that it didn't realise where he'd gotten to.

He froze as it all went silent. Seconds earlier, the creature had been grunting and smashing and making a racket. Now... now it was all quiet. Something about that didn't sit right with Lance. He picked up his pace, back towards where he knew the pack with quintessence lay. He rounded the corner, and his blood ran cold.

The creature was posed above the pack, where the quintessence vials had rolled out onto the ground. And it had its fist raised. A scream tore from Lance as the creature brought its weight down on the first vial, crushing it easily beneath its bones. He yelled, drew his bayards and fired, but it was too late. The quintessence shattered against the ground, and the creature wailed as it burned into its skin. Lance kept screaming, trying to draw it away, though he knew the damage had been done. The vials were broken; their plan had failed.

The creature turned on him in its state, flailing, flinging quintessence around like a shower of golden sparks. It began galloping toward Lance, a pitched bellow signalling its approach as it charged. Lance stood his ground, fury burning through his veins as he fired shot after shot at the creature. Carma appeared before him, yelling soundlessly, gesturing wildly for him to move. He shot right through her and she vanished like a ghost. It was her plan all along, right? She'd frightened him into betraying his position, lead him away from the quintessence, allowed them to be *broken*-

The creature was on him. Lance's eyes widened as it lunged, massive and horrifying and-

He was tossed violently back as the world erupted in gold. Slamming into a stalagmite, Lance's vision went white. He collapsed to the ground, gasping, a thunderous roar shaking the cavern as the quintessence erupted violently. The creature was caught in the midst of it, thrashing about and wailing as it burnt the remaining flesh from its rotting bones. Aching, Lance pushed himself to his feet as dirt rained down on them. The cavern was becoming unstable. Horrified, he began running. He passed the creature and swirling quintessence, hissing as bits of it burnt through his armour. He realised too late he'd lost his helmet in the explosion, gagging as he tasted the stale air, alive with the sounds of the desperate creature.

Dirt fell in thick clumps from the ceiling, and Lance was reminded horribly of his training. He wouldn't be buried this time, not like this, not for real. So he ran, made for the tunnel and kept running, sparing one last glance at the creature engulfed in quintessence as the entire cavern came down. To his horror, the tunnel began to crumble along with it. Worse- the ground tilted. Lance yelled as he slid along the ground, the whole world churning as the quintessence took hold. But it wouldn't be enough. He might have just killed himself, without ever doing this planet any harm. Darkness and dirt engulfed him, panic searing through his veins as he realised he was surrounded. The next second he was free, but the creature was there beside him.

Lance screamed as it lashed out, a claw drenched in quintessence slicing through his suit. It left a shallow, but long cut in its wake. Lance fought for his bayard as the pair of them thrashed about in the mud together, half buried, disorientated, the quintessence churning the dirt and burning them. He managed to get one shot off, before the creature had him in its jaws. Thick, blunt teeth pressed in on him, crushing his ribs but too dull to break his skin. Lance screamed, or tried too, as he felt something snap. The creature shoved him into the dirt, its mouth still attached, dragging Lance back and forth as it ground its teeth, trying to crush him. It's tooth caught on the slice across his stomach and Lance couldn't *breath*.

The quintessence sparked, and before he could do anything, the earth was moving around them. Lance was swallowed by it, the creature losing its hold as they were thrown apart by the swirling current of quintessence and mud. Lance could do nothing but pray he'd surface again. When he did, he was coughing mud up violently, clawing at his face and curling in on himself as the damage the creature had done took effect. He kept his eyes shut; if it was there with him, there was nothing he could do to stop it killing him. Lance breathed in, out, waiting. He whimpered, his broken rib throbbing in his chest, the cut on his stomach dribbling blood slowly out onto the ground. A ragged breath of relief as he opened his eyes to find he was alone. Lance doubled over and cried.

He was shaking all over, breathing in the freezing air and clutching the bruised indents left by the creature's blunt teeth. It hurt, *fuck it hurt*, enough to make Lance queasy. He stayed hunched over for a while, fearing the dirt might shift again. Drifting in and out of consciousness, he barely paid attention to his surroundings. A faint noise alerted him to a morse message from the others, but Lance lacked the energy to translate it or respond. He stayed slumped over, taking ragged breaths and blinking away tears that dribbled into the mud.

When he felt he could at least breathe around the pain, Lance sat up. The first thing to strike him was the light. It was pale, and grey, so washed out it appeared there was no colour left in the world at all. Then, as Lance took in the rest of his surroundings, his heart sank. Earthen walls, narrow spaces, no retreat, just the deep, dark descent into the core. It was the tunnel. The tunnel from his dreams, the one he'd seen since the beginning. And finally it was all coming together.

Lance stood. His legs were shaking, but he didn't care much for that. He could hear it, the water dripping from the walls, just as it had in his dreams. When he stretched his hands out, his fingers just grazed the walls of dark earth. Without his helmet, the cold infiltrated his body easily, and Lance let it. He knew he didn't feel the cold easily, but now... it overtook him. He could see his breath freezing in the air before him. Lance steadied himself, and looked off down the tunnel. It descended into the earth, darkening as it went, a formidable link between him and whatever it was. *It*. Whatever had been hunting him, hurting him, for over a year, the thought of it, its presence infiltrating his mind, wearing him down. And now it was just them. Him and the tunnel. Him and whatever lay in the deepest reaches of this planet.

Lance took a step forward. He didn't want to, didn't want to go anywhere near it, but-

He froze. His foot had caught on something momentarily. A sinking feeling settled in his stomach as Lance looked down to see what had tripped him. It wasn't a chain, not quite like his dream had predicted. It was a rope. An old, frayed rope. Lance crouched down, running his fingers over it. About a metre of it rested on the floor, before it disappeared beneath the mud. There was something... familiar about it. Lance frowned, a soft feeling of distant unease worming its way into his heart. He'd seen this rope before.

He picked it up, turning it over between his fingers. His eyes caught on the small label stitched on to the end of the rope. *Guanahacabibes Policía*. Lance's hand flew to his mouth, stifling a little gasp. This shouldn't be here, shouldn't be anywhere near here. Yet it was. It was, and Lance was

left holding the end of a rope belonging to their province's police department, rope they'd used to lower people into deeper portions of the cave during the weeks they searched for Allita.

There was a pit in Lance's chest, lungs refusing to take up air as he stared and stared at the rope in his hands. *Guanahacabibes*. As if that rope could belong to anything else. He wasn't seeing right, surely. He'd hit his head, it was all a trick, another foul play by Carma or Callio or *whatever* the fuck was lurking down here waiting for him. Their final trick, the only thing that could really finish him. *Her*. Allita. And the fucking rope they'd lowered into the cave to search for her.

Lance was digging. He didn't even realise he'd started until he was wrist deep in the mud, digging it up from around the rope desperately. And it was just like his dream. It was just like his dream except that it wasn't because it was real. It was real, and there was something coming up from that tunnel but Lance didn't know what it was, all he did know is that it wasn't a chain, it was the rope lowered into the cave to look for his dead sister, and he couldn't *take* it.

So he dug. He dug through the mud, and wrapped that frayed rope around his arms and *pulled*. Pulled on a rope some ten years old and whatever it was attached to deep within the ground. Haunting images of fingers, stiff and cold and *dead*- Lance lumped more mud to the side. The hole was growing deeper, and the rope was starting to budge. So he stopped thinking, and just dug.

There was something in the way Allita smiled, when he finally managed to coax one out of her, that felt so personal. Lance smiled at anyone and everyone; he was the cheery child, she was withdrawn. People who didn't know them, and even their own siblings he supposed, claimed they were the most different pair of twins they'd ever met. But Lance knew that wasn't true. Knew they were similar in the ways that mattered. Because while he would run his mouth all day and Allita would barely say a word, and while he'd offer raw affection to all their family and Allita shied away from the contact, when it was just them two...

Lance was crying. When it was just them, his sister was the only person who he just *understood*. She made *sense*. People were fickle and family was difficult and friends changed and society was harsh and romance was a whirlwind but Allita was just *Allita*, nothing more, and they were each others crutch and each others trust and each others reliance, and the fact that the world had taken her from him wasn't fair, it wasn't *fair*. Ten years was such a long time, such a lonely time, there were so many days to fill with thoughts of her and the life they could have had if they'd just stayed. If they'd just grown up together, like two normal siblings. Ten years of waiting and ten years of missing and ten years of grieving and now...

Now one strand of rope. One strand with the name of a familiar peninsula from a familiar country on a familiar planet. And it didn't matter what was coming up the tunnel, because right now Lance held everything he'd ever wanted in his hands. And it terrified him. He was crying, couldn't stop it, and the tears cleared the mud from his cheeks and they gave him reason to keep pulling, burning his hands on the frayed rope as it slowly, slowly, withdrew from the mud.

Ten years, *ten years*, and if everything else was, why couldn't this be? What was one more twist to him, what was one more ounce of misplaced hope after all that had happened? Lance was buried miles beneath the surface of a dark, dead earth. Praying for his life was like holding a match to a hurricane and hoping it wouldn't blow out, so what the hell was one more bout of hope?

He pulled, and the rope slid from the mud. He dug his hands in, reached for it, willed it along, ground his teeth as tears and sweat mingled on his skin and the rope moved steadily from the earth. She was like the sun, Allita. She was like the goddam sun. And everyone said it was Lance, that he was the child who shone, who dazzled everyone with his smile and his chatter, but he knew better. He might've been the ocean, been the sea and waves and salt in the air, but Allita was his goddam

*sun* and she should have shone so bright in the depths of that cave that it could never have taken her.

Lance dug his hands into the mud, clawing it away from the rope, and searching. For a hand, for the fingers he'd ghosted in his dream. For a person, for a being, for-

For Allita.

For Allita.

*For Allita.*

The rope came free.

The final pull brought Lance back on his knees, staring down at it.

Allita was like the sun, but it was only Lance who thought so. And his ideas had never meant so little.

Because there was nothing at the end of the rope.

It was broken.

The end was frayed, as though something had been tied to it once, but the rot and the earth had eaten away at it.

And it had broken.

*Ten years.*

"She's been gone for a while now."

The voice didn't surprise Lance. Didn't shock him. It barely elicited a response at all. He'd expected it, in a way. No movement, he didn't budge, just cradled the end of the rope in his muddy hands and let the sweat trickle down his forehead and mingle with the blood on his suit. *Allita was like the sun.*

"You knew that."

Lance got to his feet slowly, didn't rush it, didn't ruin it. He couldn't raise his eyes from the ground just yet, let them linger on the mud and the rope instead as he slowly let it drop. *Guanahacabibes Policía.* A million light-years away, he could still hear the waves against those cliffs. Lance turned to confront the tunnel.

Her skin was grey. Everything down here was, in a way. But it was seeing it on her that hurt him the most.

Allita looked quite like him. Of course she did, they were twins. And Lance knew her; knew her from his dreams and knew her from the strange visions he had and knew her because he'd always known her. Allita, his sister, his *sun*.

"Lance."

It was hard to speak, but he was going to, he was going to. His hands felt cold, and his head shook involuntarily. There might've been tears forming again, but Lance couldn't feel them through the tingle in his blood. This was how he died; he knew that.

“You’re Callio,” he said.

His voice wobbled, so he tried again. His fingers curled and his brows drew up tightly, and as much as he wanted to let go of every emotion, he felt them pulling him together tightly. Like they were the stitching, but he’d been threaded too many times, and the needle could barely make it through. So it stabbed, and the threads grew tighter, and Lance just wanted to *come apart*.

“You’re Callio,” he said, and raised his hand to gesture, to accuse. “It’s you.”

Allita stared back at him. She was his age, and she was his height, and she was his sister, but god, *oh god*, she wasn’t. Her skin, once vibrant and brown, had near paled to the grey hue of the walls around them. Her hair was in straggles, pushed back from her face and her muddied skin as if she were part of the earth. Eyes, blue like his, but empty, and dull, her whole face devoid of any emotion, and any feeling, and Lance... Lance felt it *all*.

“Are you confused?”

He shook his head. He was crying but he didn’t *care*.

“I’m Carma,” he said. “And you’re Callio.”

The tunnel dripped water, and the darkness pressed in on them.

“Did you suffer?” Said Allita.

“*Why* did you take her?”

Silence, more of it. Allita’s face was an expanse of nothing.

“Why did you take her?” Lance repeated.

For a moment, nothing. Then-

“Did you suffer?”

“What did you do to her!”

Lance’s voice carried. His ribs were bruised and broken, but when he yelled, his voice stayed steady and brave and *furios*. And Allita just stared. She was dressed in muddy rags, too thin, too pale, a husk of a person. *Ten years*. Had she... had Callio really taken her? How was she here? Lances head hurt, he didn’t want to think about the person before him that was both his sister but wasn’t, about how long her body had been here, about whether she was alive or just a host to an ancient being-

“What did you do?” He repeated numbly.

He knew what the response was, he was ready for it.

“Did you suffer?”

“*Yes*,” Lance bit out. “Yes. Yes! I suffered, are you fucking happy I suffered, it h-hurt, everything, everything you do hurts, so what did you *do*?”

“I took her.”

Lance could see it. Allita’s hand slipping from his, her figure disappearing into the darkness as he



pleaded with her not to go. She climbed a little deeper, away from the light, to where she thought she could explore. And the darkness drew in. It didn't give, it didn't falter. And she wandered, and wandered, into the depths of the Earth, of their planet, before-

Before somehow, she was brought here. By the thing in front of him; by Callio. Lance was shaking. Because this... he could never win. He couldn't win. Lance had been taught to fight with hate; he'd spent hundreds of days training with the Lox to fight like that. But now, in front of him, was the only being he could never, *never*, hate.

"Allita," he breathed. "What happened?"

His sister's body cocked her head slightly, a strand of muddy hair falling across her cheek.

"She hasn't been here for a long time, Lance."

Her eyes fell to the frayed rope by his feet.

"How long did you look, Lance?"

Lance didn't know why he was speaking, didn't know what this conversation was between them. Maybe it was the shock, maybe it was because in his final moments he could pretend to know his sister, to know what happened.

"Until now," he breathed. "I-I..."

A wretched sob tore from his chest, and Allita watched on passively.

"How did she die?" He asked.

Because no matter what this thing, what Callio, would do to him, he wanted to know.

"She didn't die," Allita replied. "She faded."

Lance's face screwed up with pain, still rooted to the spot. *She faded*. It felt so awful. His sister, his precious little sister, fading over the years he'd failed to find her. She was here, wasting away, a foreign presence using her body, draining the life from it as she just *faded*.

"Don't cry."

Lance looked up as the words were spoken, teary eyes settling on Allita. Not really, though, she wasn't Allita.

"There's nothing you can do," the girl continued. "Nothing. So don't cry, Lance."

They were the least comforting words he'd ever heard.

"The others," he said.

He had to force the words at this point. He was so afraid, so heartbroken; Lance didn't know how to breathe.

"They aren't part of this. Just... just let them go. Just let them leave."

He met her eye.

"Just leave them."

Allita's brows furrowed slightly, and it was so unnatural Lance nearly looked away.

"No," she said.

Lance's feet sunk suddenly into the mud. He didn't do a thing to prevent it.

"No," said Allita.

Then she was walking toward him. Lance couldn't move, even if he wanted, the mud trapping his feet and the fear paralysing his arms. He'd lost the black bayard, he didn't dare reach for the blue one. His powers were useless, because he could never hate her, not Allita. And it all fell into place so nicely.

Allita came to a stop just before him; they were eye to eye like this, with his ankles sunk into the mud. Lance felt useless, drained, and it took him a minute to realise she was doing it. He wondered if it would satisfy, finally having his blood on her hands. Allita plucked the small communicator gingerly from where it was tucked into the armour around his neck. She twist it around between her fingers, studying it. Lance shut his eyes as the device was flicked on.

*"-anyone hear me? Ca a—one hear me? Castle to surface, Lan- -llura, do y- copy?"*

Lance shuddered at the sound of Keith's voice. He was desperate, afraid; he had no idea what was about to happen.

"Keith," Allita breathed, her eyes finally lighting up as if she recognised something.

Lance's eyes snapped open, landing on her face. There was sweat beading on his brow, despite the cold. He was fighting it, unconsciously, fighting her as she drained his life.

*"Castle is malf- ning. Repeat, c--- s going down, w- -re losing con- rl!"*

Despair settled in Lance's chest. She was bringing the castle down, she was crashing Keith and Hiroshi on the surface.

"Leave him," he pleaded.

Allita met his eye. "No."

"He's not—"

A hand on his face. Lance flinched, but he still lacked the energy to move. Allita's skin was cold and stiff; *she was meant to be the sun.*

"You are Carma," she said. "I am Callio. And he..."

She squeezed the communicator, dull yes boring into Lance.

"Is Aryon."

"No he's not," Lance said, but it sounded weak. "He's not Altean, h-he's not a part—"

She shut him up with an intense look, inching closer as she studied his face.

"She was so scared, at first," Allita said. "I let her wander. I brought her here, and let her wander around underground."

Lance shivered. There was something dangerous in the eyes of this figure.

“*Lance*. She kept calling for you. For days. That’s how I learnt your name, *Lance*.”

The person before him traced his jaw, it’s eyes an upsettingly bleak blue. Because Lance refused to call it Allita now.

“I thought the cold would get her,” it continued. “But it was the thirst.”

Lance grit his teeth. He didn’t want to hear this, he didn’t want this at all.

“She cried her eyes out looking for you. Kept... walking. Stupid girl. She tried to squeeze the water from the mud, but it made her sick. I’m sorry.”

It pulled back slightly upon sensing Lance’s distress. He was crying, trying to hold it in as silent tears streaked down his cheeks and his chest *ached*.

“Don’t you want to know?”

Lance shook his head. It continued anyway.

“It took her five days. And then she couldn’t move. The thirst, and the sickness... did you know she stopped calling for you? She gave up on you, Lance. Just before she went. I was her *relief*.”

Lance shut his eyes, shaking his head.

“I’ll be his relief too,” it said. “When he gives up on you. He is meant to be here, with me. With us.”

“*Systems are failing! S—tems failing! L-nce! We —re go-ng --- crash-ng, the castle—*“

Lance shuddered as he listened to Keith’s desperation. They were crashing, hurtling through the atmosphere somewhere above.

“*I’m sorry—Allura so-r—lost co-trol, -m sorry—*“

The feed snapped to static so fast Lance flinched. He gaped at the communicator, refusing to believe Keith was gone. If he didn’t die on impact... then he belonged to this, to this planet, to this *thing*.

“*Lance!*”

Lance choked on a sob when he heard Allura’s voice.

“*I can’t hold it! The planet, I can’t—*“

“Please,” Lance breathed. “Not her.”

But the being before him, in his sister’s body, just listened.

“*Lance, it’s coming undone, I- I’m sorry.*”

Stuttering over the comms; Allura was crying.

“*I’m sinking,*” she whispered. “*I’m sinking.*”

Lance began to tremble, eyes fixed on the comm, mouth opening soundlessly as he listened to

Allura sink. And slowly, he began to sink with her. Allita- no, *Callio*, stepped back a little as he did. Down to his knees, and Allura was growing frantic.

*"I-I can't hear Keith,"* she stuttered. *"Lance, Lance, please get Hiroshi out, please."*

His thighs. The mud was freezing, crushing, it was going to bury him alive and drain the life from him. And Lance could do nothing. He didn't feel any hate, only despair. Allura was sobbing.

*"I can't hold it, I can't hold it."*

"I'm sorry," Lance mouthed, but the words barely left his lips.

His waist, his chest. Allita, Callio, the being above, watched him disappear. Lance felt empty, so empty. There was no sound from Keith, just Allura, silently begging. Allita should have been the sun, but she wasn't; and he supposed that was how his life ended. Shoulders, he was sinking fast. Allura was crying, and still trying to hold on, but there was nothing to support her and no one to help and they were alone *alone alone*-

The mud was closing in. Allita looked down on him pitifully.

*"I can't hold it,"* said Allura.

And then, like a whisper.

*"I've got her."*

A new voice.

Allura wasn't crying. Lance could barely hear because the mud was closing over him, but Allura *wasn't crying. I've got her*. He knew by the confusion on Allita's face at the by the sturdy voice that suddenly filtered through the comms.

*"I've got her."*

*Shiro.*

Lance's world was swallowed by the mud.

It was freezing, below the surface, where he couldn't breathe and where the dirt pressed in on him. But now there was something within him that was even colder. *Shiro*. With his eyes shut, he let himself drift, and drift and drift and drift until the darkness grew ancient, and the illusion of a woman in front of him was no longer chased away by the blink of an eye.

*Carma*. She stood there in the dark with him. Brown skin and curls of hair and a hardened expression and a glint in her eyes and yet she looked *terrified*. She was mouthing something. Lance couldn't understand. They were both there, buried beneath the mud, and he had no idea how much was an illusion, but when she grabbed his face the world shifted.

Her memories were messier than before. Callio sat in bed, dark patches on her arms. She blinked tearfully up at him, but when Lance reached out to her, his hands were those of Carma's.

"Give me your hand," Carma said.

Lance knew this memory. He'd seen it before. But now it was clear as day. Callio shook her head. Sweat glistened on her forehead, and her body shook with sobs. She gripped the sheet with white knuckles and pushed herself into the corner of the bed.

“Callio,” said Carma.

She was stern, but *kind*. And this time Lance did understand.

“Callio.”

Carma dabbed sweat off her sister’s forehead, cold to the touch. She took her hand.

“It’s not okay,” said Callio. “It’s not.”

“It is.”

Callio lunged forward and hugged her.

“You’re my sister,” said Carma. “I won’t abandon you.”

She pulled away. Lance watched as Callio laid her hand in Carma’s, and their eyes met.

“Take it,” Carma urged.

Callio shook her head no.

“My life is your life,” said Carma, calm and kind. “Take it.”

Callio did not make things grow. Carma did not make things die.

Both of Carma’s hands covered Callio’s.

“Take it.”

Callio took. It was always Callio, it was *always* Callio. It was Callio with the disease, Callio who could prolong her life by taking life from others. And it was Carma who let her have it. It was Carma who offered out her hand and shared her life with her sister. And as the marks began to spread across Carma’s skin... well, that was just part of the sacrifice. Lance understood everything yet nothing at all. Callio killed things, *Callio killed things*. Why? When Carma could no longer provide enough?

*It’s not hate*. That’s what Carma was saying, pushing desperately into his mind. Flashes of memories, Callio crying, Aryon leaving, the pair of them leaving together, leaving Carma behind. But it was hate, surely, what he felt? Hatred for the disease, hatred for what it did to the siblings, hatred that Aryon left, hatred that her and Callio lead their lives together, that Carma was abandoned. *Hate hate hate*.

Another memory, a new one. Carma and Callio sat in the field somewhere, still young. Carma was crying, calmly though. Callio looked to her, concern in her eyes.

“Why are you crying?”

Carma sniffled, wiped at her nose.

“Because you are sick.”

Callio tugged at the grass.

“You hate the disease?”

Carma shook her head, smiling softly.

“No,” she said. “No.”

A frown. “No?”

Carma turned to her, and there was so much in her expression.

“I’m crying, because you are sick. Because I love you.”

It was like a jolt to his system. Aryon was leaving, and Carma was crying because she *loved* her. Aryon and Callio were falling in love and Carma cried because she loved them, and she was losing them, but it only hurt because she *loved them*. And all of it, every part, it only meant something because of love. Beautiful, maddening, eternal, *love*. Without it, there couldn’t be hate. Without it, there couldn’t be loss. Without it there was nothing at all, to their story, to Lance, to the very point of being there. Without love, hate couldn’t form; but one was in no way the other.

Lance was breathing. He realised as the images of Carma faded and he was left in the dark. He was breathing. How? His limbs could move, his eyes could open, he couldn’t taste the dirt. He was breathing *water*. All around him, the whole time, it had been them hiding in the mud. And now...

Lance’s skin was cold and tingly, numbness creeping into his fingers as his powers built and built. Keith was out there. Allura was, and Hiroshi, and Shiro. And his sister, whether he like it or not. Lance drew the water to him, all of it he could find, feeling it swell into a current that surrounded him. It was never about hate, what Carma did to Callio. It was never about hate. Lance shut his eyes, and willed the water around him up.

Up.

*Up.*

The current surged, Lance surrounded by it, all the water he’d sucked from the mud. And they were shooting upwards in a violent flurry of water that tore through the earth and rock and mud towards the surface. *Up up up*. He could breathe the water, felt it flowing around him like the blood in his veins, carrying him out of the hellish depths of that planet and taking all that dwelled there with him. Dark water swirled around him, forcing the mud to part, cracking the ground as all the moisture was sucked from it, pulled toward Lance and forced to reshape the land around them.

He broke the surface and the water exploded out, gushing from the ground like a dam broke free, soaking the dry, earthen plain they’d emerged onto. Lance’s feet hit the ground, the water soaking his suit, freezing over but banishing the mud from his body. It cleared his head, his vision, renewed the strength in his bones that Callio had sucked dry. He was *alive*, and he was powerful, and her greatest flaw, the thing Callio had failed to realise, was that half this planet belonged to *him*.

Water seeped from the ground all around them, and he saw her. A few hundred feet away, Allita was struggling to her feet. She didn’t betray much emotion, not with Callio inside her, not given what she really was, but Lance knew there was shock there. He clenched his fists, the water trembling as it spread across the ground. His side still hurt where the creature had sunk its teeth, and his thoughts were in absolute disarray, but in the moment Lance felt like a storm, like a vast, unstoppable storm descending on the thing that had caused pain to everyone he’d ever loved.

“I don’t know the story,” he said.

He stopped a few yards from her, from Allita, whose eyes were burning with unspoken anger. His sister’s body twitched, straightened as she stood, contemplating him. Lance resisted the urge to

shrink back, because although it was his sister's body, that look did not belong to her. It belonged to something sinister, and ancient, something cruel and forgotten and unforgiving.

"I don't know it," Lance repeated. "But I don't care."

The water was slinking over the ground towards her, Allita drawing her feet back to avoid it. She looked furious, expression darkening as she met Lance's eye.

"I'm Carma, and you're Callio," he said.

He clicked his tongue, bending the water towards him.

"So who killed who?"

It wasn't water that Lance sent at her, it was electricity. A violent bolt tore from his hand, igniting the air as it raced toward the body of his sister. The ground erupted around them, huge, earthen shields coming up to protect her from his attack. Lance grit his teeth, pushing forward with the lightning to try and break through the earth. It scared him a little, both their powers. The water vibrated around him as he pushed harder, droplets rising into the air around him. It was harder on this planet to lift it, with the gravity weighing on them; but ultimately it was easier to drop it all with immense force. So Lance began lifting the water. It curled into the sky in thin tendrils, avoiding the violent arc of electricity that deflected off the shifting earth Allita had thrown up.

Lance lost his hold on the electricity as the ground beneath him shifted, throwing him off his feet. He thrust his hands out, holding the water in place, building it into a vicious storm cloud above them. The mud surrounded his ankles, trying to pull him down as Allita moved in on him. Lance growled, returning some of the water to the ground to free up his feet. Then he was running. It was harder for the ground to keep hold of him when he was moving, so he ran toward Allita, toward *Callio*, before she had the chance to stop him. He felt for the water, gripped it hard, and brought it down on the figure before him. It wasn't enough, the pressure wasn't enough, because Allita emerged unscathed from the torrent, the shield of earth around her more than enough to protect her.

It needed more, the water. It needed more height, more mass. The storm was building, but it wasn't enough. The air was punched from Lance's lungs as a slab of dirt smacked into his chest, throwing him back. The second he hit the ground, the mud was swarming him, coming alive as it worked to drag him under. It flooded him, tried to suffocate him under its weight. The water fought back, engulfing Lance, carrying him out of the earth. He saw through it, the world wavering through the clear current that surrounded him. The ground was shifting like it had on Oro, and in its midst the furious figure, his sister, what remained of her. Callio, who killed others to prolong her life, who had survived for centuries in the depths of this planet by scavenging on the life forms that strayed into this system, feeding off his family, waiting for the day one came to find her. The water surrounding Lance crackled, and he could feel the electricity pulsing through it. It should have killed him. But Lance breathed it in. let the water and electricity mix, let it swirl around and engulf him, run through him like his blood and feed his vision.

Distantly, he could hear Blue. She was trapped, held down by the mud, but fighting just like him. And in her vision, just a blur on the horizon, Lance could see Allura through her eyes. Allura, crouched on the planet, still fighting to weaken the being before him, and by her side... a figure. Lance couldn't see well, Blue's vision was shaking. A hooded figure with strips of metal and bone plating strapped oddly to their knees and feet. Blue roared, and he was forced back into the fight. The earth rose like a wave above him, crashing down on him, the shadows gushing from it fighting viciously with the water to try and get to him.

The fought back and forth, Lance completely numb as his powers took hold. He'd rarely felt them

this strongly. They surged through him, much like they had in Keith's memories, and when he first killed the gladiator. He was the storm, *he was the storm*. But she was even worse. Lance gasped as the current was ripped away from him and he fell back into the dirt. Electricity raced up his arms, his fingertips burning with an unprecedented *cold* as he struggled to his feet and faced the thing descending on him.

Allita's eyes didn't look like her own anymore. They were pale, oh so pale, her face like stone as she raised her fists and the ground rumbled. Lance stumbled back a little as the earth shook, trying to gather up the water again. Bits of earth and rock began to fly at him, forcing him to deflect them with bouts of water. A jagged piece of rock flew past, clipping his shoulder. Lance hissed as another hit his cheek, cutting him open. The water, he needed it. Lance stumbled, trying to put distance between them as he called the water to him. Another chunk of rock hit his arm, and he cried out, losing his grip on the liquid. This thing, he realised, was relentless; rock after rock flew at him, too many to deflect, making their home hard against his skin.

Lance cried out as a particularly large chunk sent him spiralling back. His back hit the ground, and immediately it was piling over him, accumulating on his chest to keep him trapped. Lance fought hard, willing the water toward him, but the earth covered his limbs and squeezed the air from him and then he *felt* it. Like a fever, a disease, seeping from the earth into his body. It was her, that thing, its presence. It was draining his life, and this time it *hurt*.

He grit his teeth, trying not to yell as blistering heat broke out over his body. The mud pressed in tighter, and his vision blurred. No, *no*. Lance fought, but she was draining him. It hurt, like his insides were melting, bleeding through his skin and into the earth. *Feeding* it. Lance screamed and thrashed about but it was no use. The mud had him pinned, and when the sickly face came to hover over him, he could only stare up at the eyes that once belonged to his sister. His Allita, who had died here, starving, sick, afraid and cold. She'd died in pain, he'd always known that. She'd died in so much pain; and Lance would have given his life a thousand times just to change that.

"Fight," the being spat.

Lance bared his teeth, trying to wrench himself free but it was no use.

"*Fight*."

The mud lifted from him, and Lance was on his feet in a second. It wasn't a chance though, it wasn't mercy. It collided back into him, throwing him fifty feet across the surface of the planet before he smashed into a mound. Groaning, he rolled onto his stomach, trying to crawl forward. His powers were faltering, withdrawing as Callio's presence sucked the life from him slowly. It was weakening, and painful, and every time he pressed his palms to the dirt he could feel it drawing on him.

Lance gasped as the ground shifted, throwing him back again. Allita kept steady pace, and he was so torn between what to call her, and so angry that this... this thing could still seem to him like his sister. Lance scrambled to his feet, and ran. The ground rose and crashed down on him, sharp rocks digging into his spine as he was tossed about by it. There were tears burning his eyes, his throat so dry it stung. Lance ran, stumbling, and-

He realised his mistake too late. The grey mist that had been spreading over patches of ground engulfed him. *Toxic*, Allura had warned. And Lance knew why. He tried to scream but his throat was closing up. It burned, his skin, his eyes, the air he breathed was set on fire. Lance gasped at the invasion of his senses, falling to his knees and trying to crawl out from the haze. It was like the world stopped. The ground was shifting angrily on the outskirts of the mist, as if even it was too afraid to venture inside. Lance's ears were ringing, growing dizzy as the mist billowed around him.



Disorientated, he couldn't see a way out.

He could breathe, *just*, the sharp stench of chemicals assaulting his nose. Gasping, he made it to his feet, swaying and stumbling across the barren ground. The mist was unforgiving, white turrets of swirling toxicity, drowning him. Lance blinked, and his vision flashed white, then red, then black. There was something he wasn't seeing.

Again, flashes through his mind; he flinched as the images assaulted him, springing from the mist as fast as he blinked. A face, a sky, all of it painted red as though he were looking through lines of thick blood. Carma really needed to work on her fucking timing, he thought weakly, as memories assaulted him as he attempted to navigate out of the mist. Because there was Callio, when he shut his eyes, standing at the doorway to their little cottage, the smell of flowers drifting in from outside. She'd come to die. And bitterly, Lance realised he still didn't understand. A flash, the world was *red, red, red*. There was blood when Carma shot her, and Lance clutched at his head as he saw her fall to the floor.

Then white again, the images vanished, he was staggering through the mist and it was burning his lungs. *Black. Red*. The door was swinging on its hinges, carrying in the scent of flowers, but all Lance could smell was this toxic wasteland that reeked of death. But the door was swinging, back, forth, back, forth, knocking on the heel of someone crouched before Callio's body. There was blood on Callio's face, blood from the bullet hole, and blood on Aryon's hands as she held her. And she was looking at Carma, looking at him, and there was anger and there was *hatred*.

What the hell was Carma trying to show him? Or maybe it was unconscious. Lance didn't even know how she was projecting these things; if she wasn't the spirit hunting him, then surely she was dead? The mist was filling his lungs, choking him, and if Lance could just find a way *out*-

He fell as his vision blurred. The ground was cold and hard and unforgiving, and showed him no way out. Flashes in his vision, red, white, and black. And Lance was slipping. He was slipping into darkness, into the cold, into the realm of the figure that appeared before him like mist, Carma's eyes wide with concern and pity as Lance went limp on the ground.

Lance could smell flowers. They carried in on the breeze that shook the curtains and busied the

dust in the doorway. Lance knew this memory. It felt clearer than the first time he'd seen it, when he'd been floating unconscious in space, trying to make sense of the muddled story Carma had shown him. The door to the cottage shut, leaving just Callio and Carma, standing there in their little cottage. *The confrontation.*

They were both ill, both tense, bruises from the disease on their skin and now Lance knew why. He knew why Carma was ill, why Carma was dying; Callio had been draining her life for years, with her *permission*.

"Hello Callio," said Carma.

Callio fretted by the door. Her eyes looked lost and watery. The silence between them stretched.

"You have to stop this," she whispered.

"I know."

"No-" a halted step forward. "Carma. You have to stop. T... this can't go on."

Carma stood, moving toward the table and trailing her finger over one of the various books there. Lance looked at them, *really* looked. Those books never held anything awful, he realised. They held ideas, they held hopes of cures and remedies, a way to survive that didn't involve the killing of others. Carma had known, she's known for a while her sister was killing people. Yet...

"Where is Amdion?" Callio asked.

Carma scoffed. "You would never tell me the location of your children. Why should I tell you mine?"

"Carma..."

"Why are you here?" Carma asked.

Callio's brow pinched, her hands curling into fists.

"Because you- what you are doing, it's wrong. I... I ignored it for years, because you are my sister-"

"So did I," said Carma. "That was my mistake."

A pause, a long one. And finally it was falling into place for Lance. What Carma was doing... she wasn't killing people. She was trying to stop them, trying to stop Callio.

"Where is Amdion?" Callio repeated.

Carma gazed down at the book her fingers had settled on, eyes in a faraway place.

"You took almost everything from me," she said softly. "You took the love of my life. You removed yourself from my life, you took my own sister-"

"You removed yourself from our lives-"

"You took my... my health," Carma continued, ignoring Callio. "You gave me this... this disease. Why do you think I would let you take him?"

Callio shook her head.

“You are still bitter,” she said. “After all these years, you still haven’t forgiven-“

“I am still dying!” Carma snapped. “After all these years... I am still sick with your disease. *Still*. It was never fair, Callio, none of it. Not Aryon, nor this.”

“Aryon made her choice years ago,” Callio snapped. “You cannot control someone’s heart, Carma. She loves me. She loves *me*. For once in my *life*-“

“You really think I care who Aryon loves?” Carma scoffed.

She shook her head scornfully. “You are still a child. Playing along by everybody else’s rules. She is using you. And if you cannot see that...”

Callio bit her lip. Her hands went in and out of fists.

“Amdion, will he follow in your footsteps?”

“No,” Carma answered shortly. “That’s why he is not here. And you, and Aryon... you will never get to him.”

Lance’s pulse was picking up. There was something else, something more. *What was it?*

“Stop this,” Callio whispered. “Please.”

“You know I can’t.”

“Don’t you... do my words, my pleas, mean nothing?”

Carma straightened her shoulders, turning fully to her sister.

“Not when life depends upon it.”

Not Carma’s life. It was never *about* Carma’s life. The lives depending on it.... They were those of the villagers, of everybody else. Lance realised, Carma realised; she couldn’t ignore her sister’s crimes forever. A small breeze knocked at the window, the smell of flowers drifting in from under the door.

“When will she be here?”

Callio frowned at her sister’s question.

“Who?”

“Aryon. She’s coming to kill me, isn’t she?”

Callio’s face stayed impassive, though she was frowning deeply.

“She doesn’t know I’m here.”

Confusion spread across Carma’s face, and Lance... Lance knew something. He held a piece to a puzzle, but there were ten spread out before him. And fitting the piece to the right one...

“Why?”

Callio sighed deeply, all the tension falling from her shoulders; *despair*.

“Because I don’t want to kill you, Carma. I just want you to *stop*.”

Lance's heartbeat began to speed up as Carma's fingers traced the gun in her pocket. She shook her head, a small, sad scoff falling from her lips.

"Pity we were never that alike."

The afternoon sun spilt yellow light down the curtains. The smell of flowers drowned the scent of dust. Callio barely flinched when the gun was levelled with her chest.

"Thought you might," she whispered.

Carma's face was stoic, still. Her finger rested calmly on the trigger of the old handgun.

"Then why did you come?" She asked.

Callio smiled, small and sad.

"Don't you understand?"

It hit Lance like a bolt of electricity. Do you understand? For months they'd been asking, for months *she'd* been asking. Allita's concentrated face in the recording Black had shown him months and months and months ago. *Do you understand? Do you understand do you understand do you understand do you understand do you understand do you understand do you understand do you understand-*

"No," said Carma. "I do."

Callio's lip quivered.

"She's coming."

Time slowed for Lance. Words, ideas, little hints and hunches he'd never shaken. *She's coming.*

"Suppose I should do it then."

A tear fell, trickling slowly down Callio's cheek.

"She'll kill you."

Carma sighed, shutting her eyes.

"Tell me something I don't know, sister."

The day outside felt warm, but in here it was cool, just enough to have Lance shivering. He looked between the sisters, and he *knew*.

"Carma," said Callio. "You have to s-stop--"

She trailed off, shaking. Her hands gripped her arms, as if she were holding her body together.

"You have to stop this."

"I will," Carma whispered.

"Will you run?" Callio asked.

She was shaking so hard her knees might give out.

“No,” said Carma.

Nothing was blurring this time. Nothing was fading, nothing was hiding. Lance was getting the truth, he was getting it piece by piece, and the more that came, the more it all came falling into place.

Carma’s jaw twitched. She wet her lips, finger trembling over the trigger.

“I can’t,” she whispered.

Callio’s face screwed up with pain. Her nails dug into the back of the chair she gripped, keeling over. Carma’s expression grey strained, the dam wall crumbling.

“You have to stop it,” Callio hissed.

“I don’t want to.”

“People are dying,” Callio snapped, finding the strength to raise her voice.

She gasped, choking a little on her words. “*Innocent* people. I... I can’t... let it keep happening. Carma please, please...”

There were tears in Carma’s eyes now. The last time he’d seen this memory... he hadn’t heard it all. Because now Callio’s mouth was opening, and the words were coming, and nothing could stop it.

“I can’t stop her.”

There was a lull, a silent moment as the wind knocked on the shutters and for a second or so they were removed from time. Their story wasn’t drawing to an end, and they didn’t have to die.

“I can’t do it,” said Callio. “She... she’s in my head, Carma, and I can’t stop her.”

Tears fell from Carma’s eyes; they were both crying, and Lance couldn’t look away.

“Please,” Callio said. “S-she’s coming, I can feel it. And I’m sorry. I’m sorry. All day, Carma, like a disease, I-I know what she’s doing, I know, a-and I’m sorry so please, please stop it.”

Carma shook her head, and Callio’s expression hardened.

“Kill me,” she hissed.

“No, I-I can’t.”

It was never Carma.

“Kill me!”

It was never Callio.

“Kill me Carma, do it! Because I can’t! I can’t, and she’ll keep using me!”

Callio was leaning heavily against the chair, something paining her.

“She won’t stop,” she hissed. “She won’t stop, a-and soon I won’t.... please, Carma. I’m losing myself, please. *Please.*”

Carma didn't have any powers. She never had. Nothing to combat Callio's, nothing to match seamlessly with her twins. Carma never had any powers, Carma could never get into people's heads. Carma couldn't twist thoughts, Carma couldn't speak words into people's minds, Carma wasn't fluid and she could never, never, steal Allita from Earth. There was only one person who could do that.

"This isn't life," Callio whispered. "I... I'm losing. And I can't stop her."

Carma shook her head, the gun wavering in her hands. The smell of flowers soured in the confines of that cottage.

"What are you afraid of!" Callio screamed.

Carma was crying properly now.

"Aryon?" Callio asked. "She'll kill you, is that what you're afraid of?"

Carma couldn't respond at first. She swiped angrily at the tears that fell, never lowering the gun.

"Same as you," she whispered. "Dying."

Callio shook her head. "I was never afraid of that."

"But I was!" Carma yelled. "I-I am."

Callio looked in pain.

"I know," she bit out. "You're just like her."

*Like Aryon.* Afraid of dying, afraid of the inevitable. There was only one way around death.

"Come on," Callio said. "Stop this. Don't you hate me?"

Carma shook her head. Her sister scoffed.

"Of course you do," Callio said. "I took the woman you loved. I infected you. Deserted you."

More tears fell down Carma's cheeks, but she didn't say anything.

"I'd take your son if I could," Callio whispered. "Finish this for good. That's the only way for it to end, isn't it? Our whole family, dead. My children, your children... don't you hate it?"

Carma shook her head.

"Don't you hate me?" Callio repeated.

Tears were streaming down her cheeks. The sun made the curtains behind her glow; the outside world was so peaceful.

"Don't you hate me!" She yelled.

Carma breathed in, out. Carma never had any powers. There was only one person who could connect to people's minds, and there was only one person with the power to transport them to the Dark Planet, to reach through time and space and manifest in places and planet's they should never have gotten too. And it wasn't Carma.

“It was never about hate.”

And it wasn't Callio.

“Neither is this,” said Carma.

Callio shut her eyes, her lips parted, tears dripping down her chin. For a second, she's forgotten about the pain. The bullet struck her head and she crumbled.

Lance didn't cry this time. The gun fell from Carma's hand, clattering to the floor, and Lance let it all keep rushing toward him. Carma gasped soundlessly, her eyes fixed on her sister who lay on the floor. There were footsteps coming, and he knew who they belonged to. *It wasn't Carma, and it wasn't Callio.*

Lance flinched in time with Carma as the door was flung open. A flash of golden hair, a knife, a woman. Aryon collapsed beside her wife's lifeless body. Her eyes were raised, locking with Carma. A scream, and this time Lance could hear it. He heard it, as Carma did, in his head, in his *blood*.

*Hate.*

The world began to crumble around them, and this time Lance fell with it. The smell of flowers rotted into that of freshly turned earth, the sun was blotted out, his head swam as the air shifted, tearing them apart, like a tidal wave carrying them on its violent tide. Darkness, ice, *death*. Lance saw in red and black and white. He stood on the Dark Planet thousands of years before the present, with Carma, and Callio, and Aryon.

Callio's body was slumped in the mud, but Aryon was getting up. Aryon was getting to her feet and her eyes were fixed on Carma and they were unforgiving. Lance shuddered, flinching as Carma raised the gun and fired. Once, twice; the first missed and the second hit Aryon's shoulder, but she didn't stop. Carma was on her knees, clutching at her head and screaming because there was something *in her head*.

He could *hear* her. There were no clear words, just anger. Just anger, and hatred, and murder, spilling from Aryon, infiltrating their heads, invading like a poison. Carma buckled, tears in her eyes, gritting her teeth as Aryon closed in. She was shaking, barely even taking note of where Aryon had taken them. Lance saw in *red red red*, and he realised it was Aryon. It was Aryon in his head, in Carma's, in Callio's. It was Aryon who was afraid of dying, it was Aryon who sided with the sister she knew could make her live forever. Aryon loved Carma, Aryon *loved* Carma, until she found out it was never her. It was Callio who controlled the flow of life, Callio who could draw life from one thing, and give it to another. Callio made things die, Callio made things grow, and Aryon... Aryon didn't want to die.

The voice in Lance's head was overpowering. He cowered, like Carma was, trying to watch the scene unfold as anger and hatred made war in his head. It was incomprehensible, the fury, and it was written across Aryon's face. She was right there, in front of Carma, and Lance wanted to yell, to stop her, to *stop this*. But there was a knife in her hand, and he could scream his throat raw, but it wouldn't stop her plunging it into Carma's stomach.

Carma gasped, failing to scream as the knife was pushed into her. There were tears streaked down her face, and she tried to look to Callio, but Aryon forced her head forward. The she was dragging her. And Carma *screamed*. She was dragging her through the mud, toward Callio's body. Blood was soaking Carma's front, leaving a trail on the ground behind them, but her fingers still managed to lock around the gun. She raised it, to Aryon's side as she dragged her along, and fired.

A shout, Aryon fell. The ground was strewn with blood, but they weren't dead, *they weren't dead*. Aryon pushed herself up onto her hands and knees, shaking. There was blood pouring from her side, but when she looked down at Carma, bleeding out in the mud, there was still vengeance there. She grabbed her wrist.

Carma couldn't scream as her body was tugged along, hurting, hurting, Lance could feel it. Tears fell from her eyes but the gun was out of reach, and her sister's body was beside her as Aryon dropped them both into the mud. And her hand was resting on Callio's forehead, and Carma began to squirm. She was weak, so weak, her vision was spotting and there was blood, so much blood, but she struggled, away from Aryon and away from her sister but she couldn't. Aryon shut her eyes, swaying, but she had them. She had a hold on each sister, and Carma couldn't escape.

A small *no* passed her lips, and there was nothing Lance could do. Because Aryon was in her head, and in Callio's head, and... and it was Aryon. It was never Carma and it was never Callio; it was Aryon. And the thing hunting them, the reason it had stayed alive for so long...

Lance gasped as he was thrust back into reality, stumbling out of the mist and collapsing onto the ground. He coughed violently, hacking his lungs up as the chemicals cleared from his throat. The air around him was freezing, and the mud was a disgustingly dark shade, but he was *still alive*. He was alive, and this time, he knew everything. Callio had the power to keep things alive, and Aryon had the power to *control*.

Lance turned, rolling onto his back and heaving air into his lungs. There was a figure moving towards him, a frail body and furious eyes and a complexion that moulded into the stale earth around them. *It's coming*. That was what he'd first heard, the very first time he woke it. There wasn't just one, it never *fit* with just one. Aryon had the power to control- the way she controlled the bodies, and the way she controlled Keith, and the way she controlled Allita, and... and the way she controlled Callio. Callio hadn't died on the Dark Planet, none of them had. They were all here, all of them, trapped in the body of his sister, trapped by *Aryon*, because it was her who could infiltrate people's minds and her who could shift consciousness's. And using them, using Callio's powers... she could stay like that forever.

Lance's eyes widened. There was a mountain of shadows building before him, hard rock and mud and violent energy forming between him and it, him and Aryon. And he was going to die. He tried to move, but his limbs were so, so weak, and he was trapped by the mud and unable to run. It built, and built. Allita's pale eyes bore into him, but it wasn't her. It was Aryon, and she had him right where she'd always wanted him. And Lance was going to die.

Lance stopped struggling. His mind went to Keith, and Allura, and all his friends, and his family. The shadows descended on him like a vicious pack of animals, ready to consume him, crush him, *kill* him-

But they never came. A flash of black and white as something dove in front of Lance. He was thrown under its shadow, saved from Aryon's wrath as the black lion placed itself between him and the shadows. They met in a violent clash, a thundering of noise and darkness as the world disappeared in shadow and Black was tossed back.

Lance couldn't see a thing. Darkness, full and complete, had descended upon them in the aftermath. He ripped himself free from the dirt, throat burning with chemicals but desperate to see where Black had fallen. The shadows shifted, as if they were dazed, and Lance was pushing through them. A crater in the ground and a smoking metallic body were his first indications of his lion's position. *No*. Lance stumbled forward, down the rim of the crater, to where shadows swirled and little bits of rock rained down from the explosion. It was clearing, the air was settling, not



enough to allow in much light, but enough for Lance to see the black lion's damaged frame lying in the dirt. Black was meant to stay in the hangar, to stay out of this.

"Black!"

He sounded like a little child. His voice was hoarse, and he stumbled toward the lion with tears streaming from his eyes.

There was little sound here, just his desperate cries and the faintest, faintest hum from the lion. Lance reached her nose, laying his palm against the heated metal.

"Black?"

The light in the lion's eyes grew dim, and Lance's heart clenched.

"Black?"

A small, stuttering hum, and whirl of machinery slowing down. For a second, his chest was filled with the warmest, safest feelings Lance knew. Then the light trickled out of the lion's eyes, and the cold filled his lungs. Lance couldn't move. His hand was still pressed to Black's nose, and tentatively he raised the other.

"Black?"

There was no response from the lion, no comforting call. Black was dormant, silent, and it felt like their presence had been ripped from his mind. Lance's lip twitched.

"Black," he said, and his voice broke.

His shoulders shook, not crying just yet. *Black was meant to stay in the hangar.* He pressed both hands more forcefully against the lion. He felt like a child, like a child at the mouth of a cave, and at the gates to a new school, a child watching the brighter days of his childhood desert him.

There was nothing to muffle the sound of Lance's scream, of him crying for the lion to move, to wake up, to come back. He pressed his palms against her nose, cried and cried until he couldn't see through the tears, but Black didn't move.

The darkness was clearing around Lance, but he couldn't find it in him to care. He rest his forehead against the lion, sniffing, fingers grasping at the cooling metal. Black was gone. There was ash and blood and dirt all over him, tears making marks through it as Lance's turned, his hand lingering against the lion. There was a figure standing on the rim of the crater, staring down at him mourning the lion. And this was it. There was no one left to sacrifice themselves for him, no one left to protect him. It was Lance, by himself, against the thing that had hurt or killed everyone who had ever mattered. Lance turned fully, let his hand drop from Black's nose. It was him, and it was Aryon. He shut his eyes, and felt for the water.

*Sunday's were dead days where Lance grew up. No work was done, not many people left the house. It was tricky even finding a fuel station to fill up your car. No one was out, and the wind blowing meant no one was at the beach. Just Lance. Just Lance, eleven years old, in his little singlet and the shorts racked up over his knees to expose the goose bumps on his legs as he stood in the sand of the deserted beach.*

*No one came to this beach much anymore. Parents didn't like their children playing there, and the tourists had never found it; the only people who'd ever really made it their home was his family anyway. But now, with the aging strip of police tape still caught on the run down warning sign by*

*the cave, it was home to no one.*

*Lance had come down to the beach by himself. He shouldn't have, he wasn't allowed, but the chaos of preparing for their move was driving him insane. Their house was a mess of hurt feelings and disorganisation and unwanted truths. They were leaving, leaving this place, leaving their home and this beach and... leaving Allita. And they couldn't, they just couldn't. So Lance left first. Snuck out the back window while his mother was arguing with movers in their yard, taken the long route to the beach, through the marsh and over the dunes until he stood there by the breaking waves, his eyes catching on the fading yellow tape by the cave mouth.*

*Lance let his feet sink into the saturated sand, shivering as the cold water pooled around his ankles. It was here, by the ocean, that he belonged. The sky was cloudy, a storm drawing in but not yet close enough to feel the thrill of. It felt so dull. The wind was cold and the ocean was rough, and he wanted nothing, nothing, to do with that was happening back at their house.*

*"Alejandro!"*

*His mother's voice cut through the air, startling him slightly, but Lance didn't budge. He scowled, staring out at the breaking waves as his mother stormed down the beach toward him. There was anger, frustration in Suzanna's gaze, but terror too.*

*"¿Qué haces aquí?"*

*What are you doing?*

*"Lance!"*

*Lance finally turned to address her, anger burning in his eyes. Suzanna was as much of a mess as he was, and her eyes darted nervously toward the sinister crack in the rock.*

*"I told you not to come here!"*

*She spoke in flames, grabbing Lance's arm and forcing him to look at her. Lance's expression darkened.*

*"We can't leave, mami. She's still here."*

*Suzanna tossed some curse to the sky, frantic in her movements.*

*"Come, Lance. You need to pack your things."*

*She tugged a little on his arm, trying to get him to come, but Lance wrenched his arm away angrily. Suzanna gasped, shocked at the furious expression on her sons face.*

*"Lance," she warned.*

*"No, mami!"*

*"No?"*

*Suzanna drew herself up, ready to shout-*

*"I'm not going!" Lance yelled, beating her too it.*

*His eyes were wide, afraid and angry, he was out of his depth. "I...I-I-"*

*Nothing; he had nothing to say, and his mother was angry, and he didn't want to go. So Lance did as any other child would do. He ran. For a second, Suzanna was too startled to do anything. Lance turned from her, and ran, his skinny legs carrying him swiftly across the sand.*

*"Lance!"*

*Suzanna cursed, kicking off her shoes before taking off after him along the beach. The weather was wild, and growing worse by the second, wind and wave dancing in a furious frenzy. Lance could taste salt in the air, and felt the chill of impending twilight. He didn't slow down, despite the sand sinking beneath his feet and the tears forming in his eyes, he kept running, away from his mother, as far as he could go along that beach. Suzanna didn't give up though; she stumbled through the sand after him, yelling for him to stop. But Lance couldn't because he knew what would happen if he did. They'd have to go, they'd have to leave. They'd leave this beach, they'd leave their home, and worst of all, they'd be leaving her. They'd leave Allita.*

*The wind howled around his ears as he ran, the sea growing more and more violent, but Lance barely noticed. The storm clouds were drawing in rapidly, too fast, and Lance may not have noticed but his mother did. She noticed the darkening sky and the rough, rough ocean, and she ran.*

*"Lance!"*

*There was less anger; now there was desperation.*

*"Lance!"*

*She glanced aside, to the sea, the wind whipping her hair, tangling it as she sprinted after her son. Suzanna's eyes grew wide as she watched the waves swell, taller, they were building, crashing against the sand and churning it in their wake.*

*"Lance, stop running!"*

*He barely seemed to hear her, tears streaking down his face as he stumbled down the shore. He was tiring though, crumbling under his own distress. That didn't mean he was calm, it didn't mean they were safe. His mother was screaming, why was she screaming? Why did she sound afraid? Lance's steps slowed, stumbling to a stop. He raised his head, blinking through the cloudy tears, peering up the beach. He stared, and stared, not making sense of it.*

*"Mami," he stuttered.*

*"Lance!"*

*Lance took a faltering step back. He blinked, once, twice, trying to clear his vision. There was a wave approaching. There was a wave higher than the cliffs, making its way along the shore. It came from ahead, rumbling toward him, ripping up the sand as it went. And Lance could only stare, dumbfounded.*

*"M-mami?"*

*He wanted to turn, to face her; he could hear her running toward him, straight towards the danger. But Lance could not tear his eyes away from the wave. It towered above them, and he was captivated. Deep and blue, it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, and it terrified him. It struck fear into his core, keeping him rooted to the spot, as the white tips of foam along its crest began to tumble. The shoreline disappeared as the massive bulk of water spread across it, unnatural in the way it dominated shore and ocean, as if it had simply been raised from the depths, from nowhere. He could not run from it, he could not stop it; Lance watched the wave descend*

*upon him, towering so high it blocked out the stormy sky.*

*His breath caught, tiny figure frozen with fear, and awe. He could see his reflection in the wavering wall of water, deep and dark and blue, moving too fast and too strong. It would sweep him away, it was too much-*

*Suzanna collapsed on top of her son, grabbing him and holding him to her. She planted her hands in the sodden sand. The wave hit breaking point, cascading, turning over itself to crash down upon them. Lance's eyes widened as the water descended, a thousand times more forceful than the humans huddled beneath it. And then it spread out.*

*The water erupted, as if it had come in contact with a wall of glass. Sheltered in his mother's arms, Lance watched in wonder as the water encased them, never touching them, its icy tendrils curling around the small safe haven with blind intent. He could feel the force of it, the crushing weight of water that hovered above them. Blue; all he could see was deep, beautiful blue. And the water covered them, surrounded them, but it did not hurt them. Suzanna did not move, did not utter a breath. She locked her son between her arms and shut her eyes and dug her hands into the sand and felt for it.*

*Lance watched the water recede. He watched it pour down around them, mingling with the sand and running in rivers back into the ocean. He felt his mother shudder, felt the light mist that settled on them as the invisible barrier came down. The last droplets of water rained down on them, soaking them in its haste to return to the ocean. Lance had stopped crying, his mother too. They knelt there in the sand, covered in the sea and salt, breathing.*

*"Mami?" Lance stuttered.*

*She was trembling. She raised a hand to his cheek, cupping his face. Her eyes were deep, and brown, but they still glistened like the light that caught on the shifting waters.*

*"Careful," she breathed. "Careful with the things you love."*

*Lance blinked at her. He looked to the ocean, but she gently turned his head back to her.*

*"Nothing happened, Lance," she said slowly. "Nothing."*

*Careful.*

*Careful with the things you love.*

His mother stopped the wave. Lance didn't believe it, not when he was eleven, not when he was sixteen, not when he was nineteen. He believed it now though. His mother stopped the wave. But it was him who made it.

When Lance opened his eyes, there was a wall of water swarming behind him. He could feel it, as if it were a part of him, flowing through his blood. He'd always had powers, even if he wasn't aware. The Earth, the ocean, the storms, they had always been a part of him. His mother had known; they'd been a part of her too. But such things were so easy to disguise when they seemed so improbable. She'd known when he was a baby, standing outside in the rain at night, letting his tiny hands grasp for the tender drops. She'd known when he was a child, when his anger and his anguish and his love for his sister drove the water from the ocean around them, shaped it into a devastating wave. She'd known, and she'd been there to guide him, to calm him, to show him love. Lance breathed in deep, and the water rose around him.

It wasn't an ordinary wave. The water rushed around his feet, flowing from cracks in the earth,

gushing over the ground towards him. It joined the towering mass of water, the growing wave that already stood a hundred feet above his head. And it grew. More water joined the current, brushing past Lance's knees before it was sucked into the vortex behind him. He could see Allita, Aryon, rooted to the spot. Her eyes tracked the growing wave as it grew taller, wider, an ocean's worth of water following Lance's command. She looked *afraid*. Lance saw the world in blue, his veins glowing, eyes burning the same colour as the water around him. *Careful*, said his mother. His skin tingled as the water swelled, forming a formidable wall, like a skyscraper, stretching far on either side of him. *Careful with the things you love*.

Blue was in his head, feeding him her strength. Black was like an empty void in his chest, like Allita. And the woman before him, the *thing* before him, it had taken them. The wave dominated the landscape now, and Lance saw in Blue. It rose like a bank of clouds, dominating the horizon, water pouring from every inch of the earth to join it. Aryon stumbled a little, the shadows shrinking back as the water built like a formidable entity before them. And the water rose.

Lance was the storm. He was the vicious waves in winter, the ones that rose to pummel the beach, to toss the sand aside and break the rocks apart and rip the grass from the dunes along the shore. He was the spring tide, the surge of water that overturned the land. He was deep ocean currents, and frigid arctic water, sinking to the depths of the ocean with the patience to remain there for a thousand years. He was the upwelling's, and the new life, the emergence of clear tides and crystalline coasts. The lightning that struck over glowing cities, or the winds that howled in the barren corners of the Earth. He was the storm, and every feeling along with it.

The wave rose, its crest beginning to curl. *He was the storm, he was the storm, he was the storm*. His mother caught the raindrops for him, her fingers keeping them afloat as his childish hands grabbed for them. She dipped his feet into the ocean, coaxing him into the cool current and he squealed at kicked at the shallow waves. She sheltered Allita from the rain, and held them close during the storms. And she loved them. She loved them so much, her twins. She loved him, and Allita; and Lance loved them too. He felt it, as the wave began to break.

"Please," said Allita. "Don't."

But it fell. The water came down, and it fell and it fell and it fell. Lance felt it rushing through him, a force too much for him to comprehend, but he *controlled* it. Water, a violent wave, the rush of electricity running through it; it engulfed her, Aryon. It took everything.

Lance could hear it rushing past him, tugging at his suit and filling his ears with static noise as the wave came down as an unstoppable force. It thundered down upon the earth, but it didn't harm him though; it embraced him. It kept coming, until he was sure he'd engulfed the whole planet in its endless expanse. It was all that existed, too him. Just the water, just the wave. The shadows were crushed beneath it, the ground buried under a new weight.

*Careful*, said his mother.

*Careful*.

Allita was like the sun, or she should have been. She was like the sun, and she shone, and he loved her, and this world should never have taken her. The water came down; it swallowed the land. Lance saw in Blue, and for all the time that passed, it was the only thing he saw.

When the current fell away, he drew his first breath.

It was freezing, the air. The moisture was turning to frost, crisp and icy. Lance doubled over, gasping for breath as water dripped off his drenched body. He blinked, clearing his vision, finally able to think with the rush of water gone from his ears. There was no noise, no violent blue light, no towering wave. Pools of water filled divots in the ground, sinking back in at some points, others forming vast puddles, glistening in the faint grey light.

Lance's legs were trembling, and he supported himself with hands braced against his knees, just trying to catch his breath. Water dripped from damp strands of hair, over his cheeks and sodden suit, which was freezing now that the rush of the fight was over. Finally, Lance looked up.

The world was quiet, and still. The ground didn't move, the water didn't even twitch. It was just him, and the silence, and the clear grey sky. The aftermath. The end, where nothing existed, but Lance, and the small, crumbled body, a few hundred feet away. Lance stopped breathing.

He began walking towards it.

There was no daylight on this planet, no changing of the weather. But the air felt clearer. The wave had wiped out most of the landscape, leaving them on a flat, muddy plain. Lance stumbled along, gritting his teeth against the pain in his side and struggling across the sodden ground. There was water streaming off him still, beginning to freeze, causing his teeth to chatter and the faint lines of blood and dirt on his skin to become more prominent as goose bumps rose on his neck.

Water sloshed as Lance made his way towards the body, the dawn of a lightless day following his progress. His chest felt numb, on the brink of an explosion. Another step, another; the gravity was weighing on him but he was determined to get there. Water soaked through his suit, but he was numb to it. He could see it now; he could see her.

Her hair was splayed out on the ground, back twisted a little too out of place where she lay in the

mud. Lance stopped a few feet from her, staring at the lifeless body of his sister. He couldn't think, couldn't feel-

A surge of feeling ripped through him as her hand twitched, neck craning to try and seek him out. And Lance didn't care, didn't care at all for the consequence. He was there, he was rushing forward and kneeling down and a pair of hazy blue eyes were peering up at him.

"Lance?"

His voice was croaky, and jagged, rough from misuse. But it was *her*.

"Yeah, it's... it's me."

Lance hovered, kneeling in the mud right beside her but too afraid to touch. He could see the outline of her rib threatening to push through the skin beneath her shirt, and grimaced. Allita's breathing was shallow, raspy; she struggled to move.

"I... I got her," she whispered. "I've got her."

Lance frowned, raising a hand from the mud to hover over her cheek.

"It's... you?" He said dumbly.

Allita's face contorted with pain as she shifted, trying to see him better, but once the pain subsided her eyes filled with tears and the softest expression flooded her face.

"Lance," she breathed.

So soft, so *real*. And he knew. Lance felt the first tears fall from his eyes.

"It's you," he repeated.

His chest was numb. A hand fell to her cheek as tears trickled from the corners of Allita's eyes.

"Lance."

He couldn't take it. He ripped the glove off, setting his fingers gently against her cheek.

"It's you," he said, again, but this time he could barely form the words.

"It's been..." Allita paused, stuttering. "It's been so long."

A sob caught in Lance's throat. He brought his other hand up, cradling her face gently.

"Allita?"

A crooked smile flashed briefly across her lips, before it dissolved into the pain.

"Lance," she said. "Lance, I have her. I have her. You have too--"

A deep, rasping breath as Allita tried to draw air. Lance lunged for her as her body convulsed, raising her head so she could breathe.

"Finish it," Allita whispered.

Lance stared, unwilling to speak.

“Finish it.”

It was a plea. A very weak, very quiet plea, that held more hope and more meaning than he could comprehend. Lance shook his head.

“I can f-fix you,” he stuttered.

“I’m... going to die.” Allita said. “I’m going to die.”

Lance shook his head more vehemently.

“No. N-no.” His hand shot out, hovering over her broken ribs and twisted back.

“It’s not about that,” Allita breathed.

She was struggling. Despite the chill, there was sweat beading on her forehead.

“I can get Aryon out, I h-have before.”

A deep, rattling sigh. Allita gazed up at him with sadness in her eye. “No you can’t.”

That had been a small piece of Aryon, what he’d banished from Keith. This was different and they both knew it.

“Allita,” said Lance. “Allita...”

“I have her,” his sister breathed. “I h-have her. Please... please end it.”

Lance’s shoulders shook, furiously blinking the tears out his eyes as he held his sister’s broken body.

“She... wants Earth, Lance. Wants it. Stop it, Lance, please.”

There was blood on Allita’s lips. Her body was too light, and her skin was too pale, but against all else, she was still *there*.

“Y... you’re alive,” Lance breathed. “You’re alive, Allita, you’re alive. I’ve got you, o-okay? I’ve got you.”

Allita gazed up at him and her vision swam.

“I... mami,” Lance said. “Mami, she still loves you. I can take you back to Earth, Ali. W-we can go back. You... you’re alive.”

And now Lance was smiling. The tears still fell but he was smiling. He shifted in the mud, cradling his sister’s body gently.

“You and me, we’re gonna go home. I... I’ve got you now.”

Because she didn’t *understand*. She didn’t understand what Lance would do to achieve the impossible, because she was everything, *everything* he’d ever wanted since he lost her. They had a *chance*. And Lance was smiling; but Allita wasn’t.

“No,” she said. “No we’re not.”

Lance shook his head, not understanding.



"We're gonna go home," he whispered.

"No--"

Allita tensed suddenly in his arms, cutting off. His eyes widened as she arched off the ground, gritting her teeth, violent changes to her expression frightening him. When she collapsed, she was panting, tears streaked down her cheeks as her broken body screamed for relief.

"Allita?"

"I... I can't hold her for long," she breathed.

Lance stared down at her, a horrid, horrid feeling unfurling in his chest.

"I'm not coming with you, Lance."

The words pierced him like a knife.

"But you're alive," he said, numb.

Allita met his eye, delirious with pain.

"I just want to go," she whispered. "Lance, I just want to go."

Lance's lip trembled, fresh tears spilling onto his cheeks.

"Please don't."

Allita's expression crumbled, a faint whine escaping her lips as she struggled against whatever it was trying to fight its way back into the front of her consciousness.

"You... have to let go."

Lance shook his head.

"I let go."

She sounded so sad, but so strong. She meant every word. Lance couldn't be that strong. He buckled, falling to pieces as he held his sister.

"Please," he said. "I just... I just want you to live. Just... just that, please."

Allita didn't break their gaze, not even when she endured another wave of pain.

"Lance," she said. "What was your life like?"

"Allita, Allita, please..."

"I just want to go," she whispered. "A-and I have her. Don't worry, Lance. I... have her. I won't let her get away."

Allita had Aryon, had her trapped within. And when Allita died... then they all did, Lance supposed. That was the end, that was how he won. And he didn't want it; it was the sum of everything he *did not want*. And yet...

"Please, Lance."

There were tears in Allita's eyes.

"Make it stop."

Lance shut his eyes. In the darkness that engulfed him, Carma sat silently beside him. He was trembling from head to toe, and she... she just looked empty.

"It's harder than you thought," she said. "Isn't it?"

Lance bit back a sob, resting a palm on Allita's forehead. His eyes opened, and she was there, gazing up at him sadly.

"My life was so nice," he said.

Allita's breath caught, and Lance offered her a gentle smile.

"Missed you being there, though."

Allita's brows furrowed, but it was clear she wanted him to continue. So Lance did. He ran his thumb across her forehead repetitively, resting the other over her heart.

"Our siblings are great. You're my favourite, though."

A weak smile had Lance's heart clenching.

"You're my favourite," Allita mumbled.

Lance smiled back at her, tears running down his cheeks. He could feel her blood beneath his fingers, felt it as if it was water.

"I went to this school," he said. "Learnt how to fly."

Her heart was beating fast, blood flowing rapidly through her veins. Lance followed it until he was sure he had a hold on it.

"I reckon you would have loved it. Always thought of you when I was there. We... we would have made the best team, you know?"

Allita didn't reply, but she was clearly listening, hazy eyes taking in every detail of his face as he spoke.

"Its so amazing, learning to fly."

Lance had a hold on her blood. With all the tenderness he had, with the slightest push of cold energy, he began to slow it down.

"We... we ended up in space."

A huff.

"Bit of a mess. But... but it's been so beautiful, Allita. Space is so beautiful."

Her eyes were drooping. *Slower*. Lance brought her heartbeat down. His arms were numb with cold, and he let it flow into her, feeling her relax.

"Hunk's my best friend," he stuttered. "You... you'd love him."

“Saw him,” Allita slurred. “Through... through him.”

“Saw him through Keith?”

Lance’s breath caught, but he refused to start crying, not heavily. A few tears were fine, but he was going to hold it together, he was going to *keep it together*.

“Yeah,” he said with a weak, forced chuckle. “Yeah, through Keith’s eyes. I l-love him. I fell in love.”

Allita sighed, the faintest smile gracing her lips before her face went slack. She was struggling to keep her eyes open, fingers curling loosely around his wrist. Lance choked a little on his words as he slowed her pulse to a sluggish rate.

“Missed you,” he whispered. “Missed you everyday.”

Tears fell from his cheeks onto the mud around Allita’s body. Lance felt so young, so robbed of life. They should have spent so many years together, they should have grown up together, but instead Allita was fading before his eyes, her breathing growing shallow as her pulse petered out. It was as if seeing her again unlocked a box of memories, because suddenly he knew the tone of her laugh again, and he knew all her moody expressions by heart, like she was a patch sewn to his jacket pocket, a piece he carried with him always.

“I wish we had a hundred years,” Lance breathed. “I wish we had a hundred years to know each other.”

Allita’s eyes fluttered open a little, her expression so soft when she looked up at him. *They were six, and they were singing along to the radio. They were nine and she was scared to go down the slide at school, they were five and she was sharing her coloured pencils. She cried when Lily tried to braid her hair, she cried at the start of second grade because Lance and her weren’t in the same class. Allita was on his bed and Lance was trying to stifle giggles, because it was nine o’clock and they should have been asleep, but something she’d said was funny and they were at the age where nothing mattered beyond a single day in which they were happy.* And Lance couldn’t help it, couldn’t help the question.

“Does it hurt?”

The cold flowed from his body to hers, carrying with it a soothing sense of numbness, and he had to know.

“No,” Allita said.

Her voice was barley there at all.

“Doesn’t... no.”

Lance’s hand stilled on her forehead. Allita’s eyes were glazed over, lost.

“Can we... can we go to the beach, Lance?”

His breath stuttered.

“I... I want to see the... the ocean today.”

“Yeah,” Lance said. “Yeah, we can go.”

Allita's eyes fluttered shut, her grip loosening.

"I love you, Ali," Lance said, losing control of the words.

Slower, slower, her heart rate was fading into nothing under his fingers. *She smiled at him from across the rock pools, and sat pensively beside him as he chattered on about a game he'd learnt at school. He made faces at her across the dinner table, and they both were scolded when she spat out her food. They were on the beach, and the sun was setting, and it was beautiful and maybe they began to realise how much beauty was out there in the universe.*

"I love you so much."

*I love you. She mouthed the words at the start first grade, because she was being brave and she was sitting with her own friends at lunch. And Lance mouthed it back, waved his hands and beamed at her because he didn't care what the other kids thought. I love you. I love you. I love you.* He held it, held the cold. He didn't let it stop, didn't let the pain seep in. Allita sunk into his arms, and Lance kept a hold of her, until there was no heat beat at all. And he held her, and held her, and held her.

In a place a million miles away and thousands of years ago, Carma watched her sister's body fall to the floor. And Lance held Allita, and held her, until the cold was absolute, and he felt *nothing*.

She was gone. Carma dissolved when he shut his eyes, and the weight lifted from his chest, and Allita was just a body in his arms. *I love you.* She was the sun and the sky and the warmth of summer, and he loved her. Lance tipped his head back, and cried.

He cried over her lifeless body in the mud, over the stillness in her face and chill in her hands. He cried over the absence, over the *nothingness* left in her wake. Lance thought he'd lost her ten years ago, but this... this was more than that. This was the real loss. This was the tangible truth. And without her, the world was empty.

Allita was the sun, and she should have shone forever. She should have outshone him by a million years. But she didn't; and sometimes there was no way to justify that. Sometimes things were simply lost, and there was nothing to be done. Sometimes one lost things, and all there was left to do was confront their absence.

-

Time did not pass on this planet. Lance had no concept of it, of how long he might have stayed huddled over Allita's body. But when he began to walk again, he knew no time, and no direction. He stumbled through a wasteland, wading through the water he'd left in his wake, staggering over the dry plains of mud. Not a thing moved, and not a thing changed. And he was alone.

His forefinger and thumb met again and again, tapping out a little morse message that carried and carried, possibly to no one.

A-L-I-V-E

Lance walked, and walked. His legs gave out but he got back up, staggering through the lonely world.

A-L-I-V-E

The short dots and dashes echoed through him each time his finger met, reminding himself of the very message he was trying to broadcast.

A-L-I-V-E

A-L-I-V-E

A-L-I-V-E

A-L-I-V-E

A-L-I-V-E

A-L-I-V-E

A-L-I-V-E

A-L-I-V-E

A-L-I-V-E

There was a figure on the horizon. Lance couldn't make them out, so he kept walking. Closer and closer, his fingers kept up the message.

A-L-I-V-E

There were human, they walked like one. In the grey light, there were the same colour as the rock, but they were drawing closer.

A-L-I-V-E

Lance stumbled, fell, got back up. Mud coated his suit, and dried on his skin. His sides ached from the punctures to his flesh and the bruises, and the over exertion, but he kept walking towards the figure.

A-L-I-V-E

The person.

A-L-I-V-E

With something bundled in their arms.

A-L-I-V-E

A tattered suit of armour, a swaddle of clothe.

A-L-I-V-E

There were moving faster, running toward him-

A-

And Keith was there. Keith was there, in his cut-up armour, and mud all over, and Hiroshi was in his arms. Lance ran for him, crying, stumbling over the uneven ground as Keith did the same. In a flash he had him in his arms, and Hiroshi was crying between them but he *had* them. *He had them, he had them, he had them.*

*Alive.*

They ended up kneeling in the mud, clutching each other tight and crying. Keith held his hands, feeling them shake, running a finger over Lance's icy skin. He stopped at the bandana, circling a finger over the fabric before speaking.

"I want this back."

Lance wasn't in a state to be thinking as it was, so he didn't understand. He frowned, leaning heavily into Keith.

"I said I was gonna get it back, when we... we got out. When it was over."

"Okay," Lance stuttered, too tired to think, to even register what he was doing as he clumsily undid the knot.

He placed it into Keith's waiting hand, sighing a little as the red paladin continued to stroke his neck. Keith eyed it pensively, turning the bandana over between his fingers. He held it out to Lance again.

"Now I want you to keep it forever."

Lance blinked. His head was swimming, eyes burning from the tears he'd cried.

"Okay," he said.

Keith kissed his forehead as he tied the bandana carefully around Lance's wrist again. They were both shaking.

"Let's go," he said. "Let's go home."

-

It took them an hour to find Allita's body again. Time felt real again with Keith there. Keith, who held Lance in his arms as he cried, who handed him Hiroshi shakily, who kissed his head and held his trembling hands before he knew a scrap of the story.

Keith was there with him, Keith had pulled himself out of a crashed spaceship with a baby strapped to his body. And Keith had found him. He'd wandered this barren wasteland until he found him.

"I think it was mostly a joke," said Keith. "But, uh, Pidge gave me this."

He was holding something. Lance frowned. He was crouched on the ground beside Allita, Keith watching over them. They'd been there for half an hour already, but Lance didn't know what to do, didn't know how to leave. They couldn't bring Allita back, the possibility of bringing something else from this planet back to Earth... the risk was close to nil, but it was there. Still, Lance couldn't... couldn't just *leave* her.

"What's that?" Lance mumbled.

His whole body felt empty, and numb. Keith looked from Allita's body to the small pouch in his hand, the other braced protectively over Hiroshi.

"It's... it's a plant seed. She said... when, when we got to the Dark Planet, we should... planet flowers, or something. I don't know. She said that'd show her. But I thought maybe... maybe you wanna plant it by her?"

Lance stared at the pouch of seeds for a long time before getting to his feet.

“Will it grow?”

“Pidge engineered it. So...” Keith sighed. “Yeah, I think it will.”

Lance took the pouch.

“Then we plant it.”

It took them a while, adjusting Allita’s body carefully, laying her hands over her chest; but they had all the time in the world. There were a handful of seeds in the bag, which Lance dug carefully into the soil around her. He sat back on his haunches, gazing down at his sister.

“We should go,” Keith said.

Lance nodded. He didn’t get up.

“Back to the castle, where it crashed. If... if Allura’s alive. That’s where she’ll go.”

Lance nodded.

“Black?”

“They...” Keith paused. “They have each other, here. Allita, and Black.”

A hand was held out to Lance, and he took it.

He must have looked back a hundred times as they walked away. Allita looked peaceful where she lay, surrounded by the ring of seeds, the black lion resting in the crater just a little way away. There stayed there, together. And Lance had to leave them, he had to let them go. But he looked back again, and again, and again, until finally the horizon stole them from view. And they were gone.

-

At first, the wreckage of the castle seemed like a silhouette to Lance. He was so exhausted, barely able to keep his footing as he and Keith stumbled across the landscape, leaning heavily on each other to stay upright. He stopped a couple of times, simply unable to walk, so Keith would kneel with him for a second before looping Lance’s arm around his shoulder and carrying on. Maybe it was Galra endurance, maybe it was because Lance had just faced off with a thousand year old spirit and watched his sister die; he wouldn’t have made it without Keith.

Hiroshi peered up at him as they staggered along, unusually quiet where he was strapped to Keith’s chest plate. Maybe it was because he could feel she was gone too, maybe there was nothing hurting Hiroshi any more. Lance didn’t watch the ground so much as he watched the baby, fascinated by his tiny fingers that tried clinging to Keith whenever the red paladin stumbled. That’s when it hit him, when he was watching Hiroshi; they were safe.

Lance could barely believe it when the castle truly came into view. Its massive body had carved a long pit through the mud, bits of broken off panel scattered about. Keith had been lucky to survive. It lay on its side, massive turrets casting shadows across the land, paint smeared with dirt and scorch marks. And there, in the shadow of metal...

Keith came to a complete stop. He didn’t even notice Hiroshi pawing at his armour, just stared at the two figures gathered by a broken off chunk of hangar. Lance unwound his arm from around Keith’s shoulders, mutely gesturing for the baby. Keith handed him over without a word, eyes

glistening with tears as they searched Lance's for something; the truth maybe, like he couldn't believe what he was seeing. Lance nodded, and Keith was running.

Lance lacked the energy to follow at that pace, and chose to stagger after Keith with Hiroshi in his arms. He watched the red paladin sprint towards the castle, saw Allura raise her head, a cry escaping her lips as she spotted them. And beside her, dressed in rags with strips of metal strapped to his legs, was a man Lance recognised. Not at first, because the change was harrowing; but he knew. And so did Keith, because he was running towards them with tears in his eyes, and the moment Shiro spotted him he was moving too.

Lance watched as they embraced, when Keith finally reached his brother, throwing himself at him and crying and crying and *crying*. A weak smile urged his lips up at their reunion, legs moving a little faster to carry him there. The pair were both in tears, wrapped up in a tight hug, disbelieving of the others presence. Lance's stomach flipped when Allura reached him, tears flooding his eyes and she threw arms around him and Hiroshi, rocking them back and forth.

"You're alive," she said; she was crying.

Lance hugged her back tightly. He couldn't breath, the pain in his ribs overwhelming, but he didn't dare let go. Hiroshi squirmed against his chest, unhappy that he was being squished between them. Allura withdrew with tears in her eyes, a soft cooing noise leaving her lips as he hands landed on her son. Lance handed him over, giving Allura another hug once Hiroshi was situated safely in her arms. And then they were turning, facing the pair of paladins still clinging to each others arms and talking so quickly Lance couldn't hope to understand. There were tears streaming down Keith's face, but he looked so goddam happy that it didn't even matter. He looked at them, at Lance and Allura, speechless. Allura held an arm out and Keith was moving, going to hug her, leaving Lance to confront the man before them.

Shiro was a mess. His hair was tied back, but clearly longer than his shoulders, filthy and caked in mud like the rest of him. His Galra arm was gone, torn from its socket, but the rest of him was intact. He was too thin, and his skin looked clammy, and the red stood out to prominently in his eyes but he was *alive*. A half-sob, half-laugh tore out of Lance, and he was rushing to hug him.

"Hey Lance."

Shiro's voice sounded awful. When Lance pulled back, he was wiping away tears, frowning at the strange plates strapped to Shiro's knees. On his feet, his elbow and knees, plates of metal, or bone, strapped to his limbs like primitive armour. There was a reason for it, Lance was sure, but right then he didn't care.

"Hey Shiro," he replied.

There was a smile growing on his face, despite all the heavy weight dragging him down.

"G-good to see you."

He might've said more, might've found words, but then Keith and Allura were coming to stand beside him. And Keith stepped aside, and Allura stepped forward, and Shiro's eyes fell to the bundle in her arms. A still silence descended on the little circle of people, no one daring to speak. Allura was trembling a little, worn out from the fight and now... now just nervous. Hiroshi made a little noise of protest, curious as to why everyone had stopped fussing over each other.

"Who's that?" Shiro said, but his voice just faded to a whisper.



He could not look away. They watched as he took a step towards Allura, then another, until he was staring down at the baby. The baby, with eyes like his and ears like Allura and a shaggy mop of black hair and ink spots on their cheeks.

“This...” Allura took a deep breath. “This is Hiroshi.”

*Shiro could not look away.* He looked shocked, and hopeful, and afraid, and... and *amazed*.

“He’s our... he’s our son,” Allura said softly. “He’s ours.”

A million emotions crossed Shiro’s face. He raised his good hand tentatively, breath stuttering as he rest his fingers on Hiroshi’s tiny hand. The baby squirmed, twisting in his mother’s arms to peer up at the stranger inquisitively. He blinked, deciding what to make of the shaggy looking man who had tears building in his eyes and whose finger was shaking against his skin. Hiroshi gurgled, glancing up at Allura to see her eyes were fixed on Shiro. Back to his father; he smiled.

Keith clutched Lance’s hand as Shiro began to cry, the other settling on his brother’s shoulder. They surrounded him, all breaking into various stages of laughter and tears as Hiroshi was handed to his father for the very first time. Allura was bleeding happiness, her eyes alight with it as she wrapped Shiro in her arms and let him marvel at the tiny baby he held.

Lance felt removed and engulfed all the same. He couldn’t believe it, that they were standing there, alive. Couldn’t believe Shiro was holding his son, that Allura was smiling and Keith was beside him and they were alive. A sudden wind caught his attention, and Lance whipped around.

“It’s okay.”

Allura caught his arm, reassuring him before he could panic. She pointed upwards.

“It’s them,” she breathed. “It’s the team. I got a message to Coran.”

Lance nodded slowly, numb, as his eyes drifted up, to the largish pod slowly descending towards them from the atmosphere. It was over. Keith squeezed his hand, a deep understanding in his eyes as Lance glanced back at the desolate plains. Keith knew what he was leaving, what it meant. He offered Lance a tired smile.

“We’re safe,” he whispered.

The wind picked up from the descending ship, ruffling his hair and whisking the words away from the others. So much had been lost, so much was gone. But all that could be saved, was. All that remained, had nowhere left to go.

*We’re safe.*

So Lance returning the gesture, clinging tight to Keith’s hand as they faced the ship coming down like some heavenly body from the sky.

-

“So the weird bones on your hands, they were like a disguise?”

As hard as Lance was trying to keep his eyes open, it was hard to pay attention to Pidge’s question. He needn’t worry too much; it was directed at Shiro. The warm air aboard the pod and the hum of his teammates voices was lulling Lance into a sleep-like state. He wouldn’t drift off just yet though, he refused; he wouldn’t sleep until he clock had passed that certain hour and he had proof

they'd never wormhole again.

"Yes, in a way. This thing, it controlled and could feel the planet, but it didn't have eyes, not everywhere at least. Strapping bones and metal to my feet confused it, hid me, in a way."

Lance frowned at Shiro's answer. He spoke about it so causally, his time on the Dark Planet. He'd crashed there alright, ended up in the system by accident after the disaster involving Black and druid magic. He told them what he could remember, months spent in the cold and the dark, kept alive by the same thing that was hunting them. He told them of how it controlled him, brought him to the ship, left his injured body in the hangar during the time the corpses had infiltrated the castle. Lance cursed himself for not believing it at the time, for not realising Shiro had been within their reach. By Shiro's estimate, he'd escaped two months ago. In a moment of luck, he'd found a way out of the ground, disguised his presence by never letting his bare skin come in contact with the ground, living off scraps as he struggled to find any way off the planet.

And then finally they'd come to the Dark Planet. And as the final battle raged, and Allura was almost pulled beneath the mud, Shiro found her. He found her, moments before Lance himself nearly died, and together they'd managed to keep control of the planet.

"But how'd you manage to get away?"

Pidge was full of questions. After the initial hour of tearful reunions, the team all gathered in the little common area aboard this new ship to talk about what had happened. They were all still tattered and injured, but no one could bare missing out on one moment spent around each other. Shiro sat squished between Allura and Pidge on the couch, his hand supporting the baby that slept against his shoulder. Hiroshi was completely content with him, barely crying at all, despite the fact that Shiro looked more caveman than paladin right now. Allura seemed completely at peace, more content than Lance had ever seen her. She didn't speak much, not about their time on the planet, not about the tremendous amount of strain she'd been under. She just rest her hand over Shiro's, over their sleeping child, and let the voices around her soak through her skin like sunlight.

On the other side of the couch, Pidge was attached to their long lost leader. After the initial two seconds spent berating them for abandoning the team, she'd flung herself at each paladin in turn, hugging them and crying her eyes out. Scattered around the room were Hunk, Acxa, and Coran. Hunk looked exhausted, completely harrowed from thinking the others had died, from working tirelessly to get a ship with wormhole capabilities up and running so they'd be able to retrieve them. Acxa looked oddly out of place, but it was clear she wasn't going anywhere. Coran had never looked so relieved when the ship finally landed and he'd been reunited with Allura. It had been endless tears and reassurances, and now finally they were all together, in the safety of their little ship, *home*.

Lance sighed, head sagging against Keith's shoulder. They were curled up together on the small couch, Keith's feet tucked under him and his arm protectively around Lance's shoulder, stroking his hair absentmindedly as they simply existence in each other's presence. Lance was going to fall asleep if he didn't stop, but he lacked the energy to do anything about that. His ribs ached, and his legs had turned to jelly, but with Keith beside him and the others around him, he could finally let himself fall prey to exhaustion.

"I... I'm not even sure," Shiro was saying. "One day I just... it's presence left me, for a minute. I could move, and... and act. There was an explosion, I think. The ground, I felt it move, and it seemed distracted. Without a hold on me I... could get away. My idea about the disguise worked and... I guess that was just luck."

"An explosion?" Keith asked, and Lance could hear his voice rumbling where he lay his head

against Keith's chest. "What kind of explosion?"

"I don't know."

Allura perked up a little. "You think..."

"The one Lance set off," Keith said. "When he tried to destroy the Dark Planet, but only two missiles struck."

Lance raised his head at the mention of his name, though it felt like he was trying to move mountains in doing so.

"Guess that mission wasn't for nothing, huh?" He slurred with a lopsided smirk.

"It was still stupid," Allura scolded.

She glanced at Shiro, and at Hiroshi with his chubby cheeks resting on his father's shoulder.

"But I suppose so, yes."

Keith snorted, but Shiro was looking at Lance earnestly.

"Thank you, Lance," he said. "Thank you for protecting them."

Lance waved him off, swaying a little at the nauseating feeling coursing through him.

"S my job," he said. "Just what you gotta do when space dad's not around."

"Hey, lie down," Keith said softly, steadying him with a hand so Lance could lay his head in the red paladin's lap.

"Actually he's real dad now," Pidge reminded, and Lance smiled at the stunned expression that passed over Shiro's face.

He glanced down at Hiroshi again, still in disbelief.

"He's really real," he whispered, as Hiroshi stirred slightly.

"I would bloody hope so," Allura muttered, causing Shiro to chuckle.

"He's like, so well behaved," said Hunk.

"He cries if you tickle him," said Keith.

"He hates Keith's hair," said Pidge.

"I think he *likes* my hair."

"Then why's he always pulling it?"

"Because he likes it?" Keith exclaimed, faux-offended.

"Pretty sure that means he doesn't like it--"

"Nah, pulling Keith's hair means you like it," Lance mumbled, smirking when he caught sight of Keith turning beet-red above him.

“You’re suppose to be dying,” he muttered, causing Lance to laugh.

He paused when he noticed Shiro staring at them, but the elder paladin just shook his head.

“Sorry, you two just... hated each other last time I saw you.”

Keith turned even redder, but Lance just smiled.

“I won him over,” he slurred. “He thinks I’m cool now.”

“No he definitely thought you were cool before,” Shiro amended quickly.

“*Shut up,*” Keith hissed through gritted teeth, as a sly smile spread across Shiro’s face.

“Oh no, tell me more,” said Lance.

Shiro shook his head in exasperation at the daggers Keith was sending him.

“Maybe where you’re a little more lucid buddy.”

Lance tried to come up with a retort, but Keith’s hand in his hair and the warmth of the blanket they’d draped over his shoulders sapped the remaining energy from him. He drifted out for a couple of minutes, not quite asleep, but not awake enough to be paying attention. Bits of conversation reached him now and then, talk of Hiroshi, more about the wormholes; Pidge pulled out the videos she’d taken of Hiroshi and the team in his first few weeks of life. There was more talk, and more tears. They began talking about him at some point, about the Lox, about what he’d been through. Their words were so kind, so loving; Lance tried to raise his head, to figure out why the hell they were talking about thanking him, but Keith just pressed a kiss to the corner of his ear and whispered rest.

“Hey Lance?”

Any amount of time could have passed by the time Lance finally registered Hunk saying his name. He hummed, shifting against Keith’s lap. Blinking his eyes open, he saw the others staring at him.

“Hey,” said Hunk.

He’d migrated a little closer, since Acxa was now wedged in besides Keith.

“I, uh... I know you don’t want to talk about the Dark Planet,” Hunk said kindly. “But uh... you think... do we know what happened, with Carma, in the end?”

Lance stared, taking a few moments to process the request. Keith helped him as he sat up groggily, rubbing at his eyes and wincing at the ache in his ribs.

“Uh, yeah. Yeah... I can, I can tell you that.”

Hunk smiled, warm and friendly, and Lance could definitely see why Acxa had taken to him before any one else in the team. Keith’s eyes were on him, his hand entwined with Lance’s. It felt right, to tell them the truth. It felt right to clear Carma of guilt.

“W-well it wasn’t her,” Lance began shakily.

He shook his head, little dots of light dancing in his vision. God, he needed sleep, how much longer did they have left to wait? A sigh, and he continued.

“Carma never had any powers. She’s the one I’m descended from, her and her son, who escaped. But she was powerless.”

The others were watching him intently, ready to hear the final story, the final version of the truth.

“But Callio... Callio was very powerful.”

Lance could picture her in his mind, Carma. Her warm skin and somewhat guarded expression and... and smile. She was smiling.

“Callio could transfer life from one thing to another. I... I saw her make flowers sprout from the ground, and all that. But it came with a toll, those powers. Made her sick. She... she was ill from birth and Carma knew. Carma knew, and let Callio draw life from her, so... so that way they could both stay alive. It weakened Carma, made her ill too, eventually. But she did that so Callio could live.”

A deep sigh; Keith let Lance lean heavily against him.

“Anyway. Aryon fell in love with Carma, and all that. I think that was genuine. But then... then she found out Carma was powerless. She found out Carma was sick, like her sister, but Carma... couldn’t stop that. Only Callio could. Callio could draw life from things and... and make them live forever.”

Allura gave Lance a small nod of encouragement, a cue for him to continue. He ran a thumb gently over Keith’s fingers, finding peace in his heartbeat.

“And Aryon didn’t want to die. Didn’t want any of them to die. So she... she left Carma. She left Carma in favour of Callio, and I don’t know how much was genuine. I don’t know. But in the end, she used her. Aryon’s power was described as fluid, like water, in a sense. She could broadcast her thoughts to others, sense their feelings, but she could also do more than that. She... she learnt to control. And she controlled Callio, used her to get to her powers. It was Aryon and Callio who killed people, who drained their lives to feed their own. A-and when Callio finally couldn’t take it, finally managed to gain a piece of her own mind back... that’s when she went to Carma. And asked her to kill her.”

Lance stopped, shuddering, as the image of Allura flashed before his eyes. Keith sensed him tense up, because he was cupping his cheek and whispered to him quietly as the others took all that in.

“Carma killed her,” Lance whispered. “Carma killed Callio. And when Aryon found them she brought them to the Dark Planet, b-because that’s what her powers allowed. And as they were all dying, she... m-melded them. Something like that. Her mind bonded to theirs, so with Callio’s powers, they could... it could survive.”

Lance was crying. He didn’t realise until Keith was dabbing at the tears and pulling him close.

“I’m sorry,” he stuttered. “I’m sorry I lost Black, and I lost her. I l-lost them.”

“You saved us, Lance,” Allura said very seriously.

She was kneeling before him; when had she gotten there?

“You saved so many people. Your family, all of us here, all the descendants of Carma who still exist out there. That planet can’t hurt anyone anymore.”

Lance felt his shoulders shake, so weak, but so devastated.

"I'm s-still scared," he stuttered. "Still scared, what if it comes, what if it--"

"Lance," said Pidge.

"I c-can't do it anymore. I can't fight, please, I'm so scared--"

"Lance."

Someone was holding something right in front of his face, but Lance couldn't see through the tears. He was so tired, and so hurt, so drained in everyway imaginable.

"I'm sorry," he stuttered. "I--"

"Lance, it's already three in the morning."

"I--"

Lance stopped. He was still shaking with sobs, curled around Keith, but he stopped talking. He blinked, the words ringing in his ears, the object swimming in front of his vision. It was a watch. He was looking at a watch. And it read three in the morning.

"We would have wormholed an hour ago already," Allura whispered.

She took his hand, squeezing it.

"But we didn't."

Lance stared. And stared and stared and stared. Keith placed a kiss into his hair, and Lance couldn't think.

"What?" He mumbled.

"We're safe, Lance," said Allura. "We aren't going to wormhole."

"We're safe," Keith whispered too him, reiterating the point.

He held Lance to him, wrapping him up safely as reality dawned on him.

"It's over," said Allura.

His bones were heavy with exhaustion, mind clouded and body overworked, but Lance could understand those words.

"You can rest now," Allura said. "Please, Lance, rest."

"Thank you," he mumbled, and Allura shook her head.

"What are you thanking me for?" She asked, a soft smile on her lips and brows furrowed in confusion.

"Didn't leave," Lance said.

His tongue felt heavy. He just wanted to sleep. Keith was so warm and comfortable, and he just wanted to exist there without a thought.

"Didn't leave me," Lance said, his voice soft.

Allura's breath caught, her hand still clutching his.

"We're family," she whispered. "We will never leave."

And that, Lance could believe. He let himself settle against Keith, Allura's face drifting in and out of focus as he struggled to stay awake but ultimately failed. He was safe, his family was safe. Something ached deep in his heart when he thought back to the girl on the surface of a far away planet, who'd never again see the sun, or the waves, or hear their mother's voice. It hurt, it hurt so much, but he let it. In his dreams, she wandered into the mouth of the cave, but he let her go. She was fading, fading like a wound that would scar, that would leave its mark forever, but could not bleed anymore.

Allura was the sun, but Lance lay amongst the stars. She faded from view, her light leaving his skin, like night drawing in and the day wearing out. So Lance turned to the stars. He turned his head to a million suns, to the vast expanse of space, and light, and life. She was there, behind him, leaving him in perpetual dusk, but Lance still loved her. He'd always love her, even if she never rose again, like the crisp clear morning of a golden day. Lance turned to the stars, and saw thousands upon thousands of pillars of light, beckoning him into their brilliance.

## Chapter End Notes

Epilogue will be up in a week! Thank you <3

# 14 Years

## Chapter Notes

So we reached the end, huh? This is gonna be the long spiel for those who wanna read it...

Thank you so much to everyone who read this story. Thanks for so much support, regardless of how long this went on for. Your comments have been so lovely, and so motivating, and honestly added a whole element to writing that I just loved. I wish I could thank so many of you guys personally, because from funny to outraged to thankful comments, you've really helped me get this story to the end. I didn't think I could write something this long in the time it took, so I have no doubt your encouragement is what helped.

This story introduced me to one of my best friends, and a lot of other awesome readers, so I hope you all enjoyed it as much as I loved writing it. I'm kinda gonna miss updating this, but also happy cause now I have more time to work on other stuff. You guys who commented that I should publish an original book actually made me cry cause I am working on a book and your support just... got me but in a really good way (I might turn this into a book one day, but obviously with a hell of a lot of adjustments lmao)

Special thanks to the artists who created beautiful pieces based off this story- I'm so happy you shared those with us, you're all very talented! I hope you all enjoy the end to this story; I was so overwhelmingly happy at the positive feedback from last chapter... If you'd like to read more of my writing I might give prompts a go. I don't have any long stories planned at the moment, but maybe a couple of short ones. Thank you for reading, and thanks for all the comments (I appreciated every last one), and most of all, enjoy the epilogue guys!

- Sabrina

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

-

Lance would never tire of waking up to find fog rolling in from over the ocean. The sight made something stir in his chest; it was the feeling of melancholy, of a happiness that felt intangible even though he'd experienced it time after time. Too good, too real; but it persisted, against all odds.

He woke before Keith most mornings, out of habit that he'd never managed to shake. Their cabin lay close to the water, so Lance could hear the tide pulling out just before the sun breached the horizon. The air was humid, just enough to settle comfortably in his bones, to sooth old scars and inject warmth into the otherwise cold nightmares that sometimes visited him.

Lance leant against the kitchen counter, peering out the window at the foggy beach. The pale outlines of the trees faded in and out of the mist, the soothing rush of water over sand an underlying sound to the faint hum of the coffee machine. Warm mug in hand, he stepped quietly past the bedroom, eyeing Keith's dark mop of hair peeking out from the sheets as he made his way



to the desk setup in the corner of their little living room.

The computer hummed softly as it came to life; Lance could still hear the waves shifting through the shells along the shore. A small smile tugged at his lips when he spotted the green blip in the corner of the screen. A sip of coffee, the computer began dialling. Lance rubbed sleep from his eyes, a soothing sense of peace settling over him. A ding- the call had been accepted. Lance smiled fully as a familiar face filled the screen.

“Uncle Lance!”

Lance grinned as his fingers flew to adjust the volume; it was a little early to wake Keith.

“Hey, Hiro,” he said.

His nephew was buzzing with excitement as he took a seat before the screen, his dark hair forming a wavy fringe that flopped in front of his eyes. A fourteen, Hiroshi was still kinda small for his age; Lance didn’t know if he’d hit his growth spurt later, or if he’d always show the side effects of being a premature baby. None of that quelled his energy though, even at this time of morning. Then again, Lance supposed it was a different time aboard the castle.

“We’ve been waiting for you to call for like two hours man!” Hiroshi went on, making Lance smile.

“Slept in,” he said. “Besides, it’s still early here.”

“Earth’s made you lazy,” the teenager drawled, and Lance smiled wider.

“Hey,” he said. “An attitude like that and Blue will never let you pilot her.”

Hiroshi laughed, before remembering something and launching excitedly into conversation.

“But I might not ever fly Blue! Mom said the white lion’s been reacting well to me, says maybe one day it’ll pick me as it’s paladin, which would be so cool.”

“Oh yeah?” Said Lance. “Why don’t you tell me about that?”

So he did. Lance sat back in his chair, drinking slowly from his mug as Hiroshi began to talk animatedly about the new lions they were working on. The half-Altean really was taking after both of his parents; he bore the most similarity to Allura, but his fluffy black hair and dark eyes were still those of his father. Allura assured them the only thing she cared about were the ears, but they could all see how happy she was that the small Altean markings beneath her son’s eyes had remained- albeit a bit messy, like spilt ink, but they were there.

Lance was forced back into the conversation when Hiroshi grumbled something along the lines of *fine, I’ll unlock the door*. He sat up straighter in his seat, trying to hold back laughter.

“Did you- Hiro did you lock your parents out the room?”

“Yes he did.”

Lance finally let out his laughter as Shiro appeared on screen, ruffling his son’s hair and giving him a stern yet exasperated look as he settled down.

“I just wanted to talk before you guys hogged the screen,” Hiroshi grumbled, ducking out of his father’s hold.

“Yeah Shiro, give him a break,” Lance teased.

“Yeah, give me a break!”

“You’re such a *dad*.”

“Hear that, dad?”

Shiro raised a brow, amused.

“I cannot wait to be a terrible influence to your children, Lance.”

“It’s okay, I’m all the bad influence they need.”

Shiro rolled his eyes, about to reply when a third voice joined their side of the call.

“Is that Lance?”

Lance smiled at the familiar sound of Allura’s voice, seconds before she was launching herself at the camera, shoving Shiro aside to get prime seating so she could talk.

“Lance!”

“Hey Princess,” he replied with a grin.

“Oh my goodness please excuse our terribly behaved child, if I knew he was going to lock the door-“

“*Mom*, you always get to talk to him first-“

Lance chuckled softly as he watched their family dispute. Allura hadn’t changed one bit, not really, yet she looked... wiser. More mature, with even more kindness in her heart and strength in her soul and love to give. She smiled at her son, pinching his cheek when he made some snarky comment, eventually leaving Shiro to distract him so they could talk.

“How have you been?” Allura asked, as her companions began play fighting behind her.

“We’re really good,” Lance said earnestly. “We’re missing you guys, of course.”

Allura looked wistful for a moment.

“We miss you too. The tests on the white lion should be over in less than a month, and then we’ll head right back to Earth to see you all.”

“Looking forward to it,” Lance said. “Coran too?”

“Of course. Granted Hiro doesn’t break his back in a dance-off again.”

Lance chuckled. “Of course. How’s the search going?”

Allura’s expression brightened. “Astoundingly well! We’ve located another ten location’s across the galaxy where we think there could still be populations of Alteans, one which might have the makings for another lion!”

“That’s great! Man, I can’t wait to be on missions with you guys again...”

“And we can’t wait to have you back. Pidge should be back even before us, I assume you’ll see her

then?”

“Yeah, yeah, she promised she’d drop by. Besides, Colleen’s been here three times already. You know, to see the twins.”

Allura’s smile grew steadily, and she rested her chin on a palm as she leant toward the camera.

“And how are they?”

Lance sighed, running a hand over his eyes.

“So tiring,” he said. “Oh my god.”

Allura laughed.

“Six people looking after *one* baby was hard enough, Allura.”

The Princess, or General now, he supposed, shook her head with a giddy smile.

“But you’re happy?”

Lance paused a second, his own heart skipping a beat at the gentle question.

“More than ever.”

He cleared his throat before Allura could accuse him of being sappy.

“I actually can’t complain,” Lance said hastily. “We’ve had so much help. It’s good with Hunk and Acxa so close. She seriously never wants to leave Keith’s side. And between Krolia and my mama... Jesus, I’m glad there’s two babies to share.”

Allura laughed, and Lance along with her.

“But I’m their favourite cousin, right?”

Hiroshi had forced himself back into the view of the camera, Shiro following along.

“Of course,” Lance said.

“When do I get to see them though?”

“Next month,” said Allura. “We’re visiting Earth.”

“But when do they get to come back to space with us?”

Allura looked to Lance.

“Just a couple of months, Hiro,” Lance said kindly. “Their grandmother wants to spend time with them until they’re a bit older, see?”

“Okaaay,” Hiroshi drawled.

Shiro reached out to ruffle his hair. “I know you miss them, buddy.”

Lance opened his mouth to respond, but a much smaller voice beat him to it. He paused at the sound of a baby beginning to cry, small, uncomfortable squawks coming from the direction of the bedroom.

“That sounds like trouble,” Allura said, smirking.

Lance scoffed, but was already rising from his chair. “I’ll chat with you guys later, okay?”

“Yeah!” Hiroshi replied enthusiastically.

“Send our regards to Keith,” Shiro said.

“Oh! Wait! Wait, Lance, I’m sending something to your tablet,” Allura said quickly. “Just- it’s from the flyby.”

Lance froze.

“It’s... watch it, Lance,” she said. “I really think you should.”

Allura smiled kindly. “Take care.”

Lance returned the gesture, before bidding them goodbye and shutting off the call. On the desk beside him, his tablet binged with a notification. Lance scooped it up, not bothering looking at the device just yet as he made his way back to the bedroom.

From the bed, Lucia was still crying unhappily as Keith began to stir. Lance made his way over, sitting down carefully on the edge of the mattress and scooping the baby into his arms. She quieted down the second Lance had her, just after attention. He smiled fondly at the child as he pulled himself into bed properly, a calming feeling flooding him as the breeze blew softly on their window blinds and the fog and ocean continued their dance just beyond.

A second, curious cry was directed at him from the bundle on the mattress between he and Keith, and Lance looked down to find Camila also waking up. A soft grumble from his husband, and Keith rolled onto his back without even opening his eyes.

“Gimme,” he mumbled, freeing up an arm and waving it weakly for the baby.

Lance laid Lucia carefully onto his chest, waiting until Keith’s hand found and steadied the baby before retreating. Camila was still squirming about in her blanket, but she also settled when Lance picked her up instead.

Keith had been hesitant about the twins. So had everyone, really. He’d fretted endlessly during the adoption process, tirelessly checking with Lance if he was sure he was making the right decision. But Lance was sure. He knew when he first saw them they were meant to be. Two infant girls, orphaned by an accident, in need of care. *But they’re twins*, Keith had said. He’d fallen in love with them instantly, but he’d still been so afraid. *They’re twins*. Lance knew, knew they were twins and knew the history better than anyone, and that was exactly why he knew they’d be safe.

It took one long, serious conversation with Keith. Over an hour, repeating, reassuring, what Lance already knew to be true. The Dark Planet had happened for a reason, he’d fought for a reason. He fought and he suffered and he did what he’d done so that when this day came, when he took Lucia’s tiny hand in his, and sang Camila to sleep, he could do so without fear of them ever being hurt.

He saw the fear in his mother’s eyes too, when he first handed her one of their daughters. She’d looked to him with a pleading look in her eye, as if to say that even if they weren’t biologically his, weren’t part of that history, she still feared. But Lance took her hand, and talked her through, and would do so every day, because they had nothing left to fear. All was forgiven, all of it. And their happiness was earned.

Camila gurgled happily when Lance tickled her cheek, a pudgy smile and small kick of her legs what he got in return. At five months old, they'd gotten playful, and their little smiles genuine. Lucia had promptly gone back to sleep on Keith's chest, rising and falling in time with his breathing, as her father kept a hand protectively over the baby's back. Keith would stay asleep until Lance failed at keeping two twins entertained on his own, when one would ultimately end up crying while he was trying to spoon feed the other and Keith would emerge to cuddle whichever daughter was proving the most trouble.

That's how their days worked, now. Lance would wake and feed the babies, they'd cuddle them, play with them, act like a proper family as Keith filmed them trying different foods and Lance encouraged them to crawl across the room to him. Hunk and Acxa would visit and the latter would be all over them, speaking very seriously to each baby and frowning whenever one cried and all together having no idea what she was doing, but she made Keith happy, and she loved them dearly.

As much as Lance loved them when they were so little, he also couldn't wait til they were older, so they could play properly in the waves, instead of shrieking when he dipped their toes into the water. He couldn't wait until they could return to space and continue their missions, show his daughters the beauty of the universe with Keith and his friends at his side. Lance smiled, running his free hand through Keith's hair as his husband continued to sleep, Lucia against his chest.

Adjusting Camila so she was snuggled up against him, her head resting on his shoulder, Lance reached for his tablet beside the bed. The message from Allura was still there, waiting. A small shiver ran through Lance. He knew what it was, and he really didn't have any reason to be afraid. Allura would have warned him if the flyover was upsetting, but instead she'd encouraged him. So, with one hand braced against his baby daughter, Lance set the tablet on his knee and opened the message.

It was a video. One taken by a drone, its camera slowly clearing as it approached a planet. *Planet A-10 – fly over.* The words were printed on the screen beside the date. Lance stared at the name a while; they didn't call it the Dark Planet anymore, no one did. He took a deep breath, refocusing on the drone footage showing him a planet he hadn't laid eyes on in fourteen years. It was... it was lighter. Nothing like Earth, but Lance's eyes widened at the gentle light across the planet's surface. It was still so barren, so lifeless; he didn't know why Allura had been so encouraging-

Lance's breath caught. They were still miles up from the surface, but he could see the change. He stared, barely daring to breathe, Camila's warm weight against his shoulder the only thing grounding him. Lance felt tears welling in his eyes, and he clutched the baby closer. The Dark Planet was not barren.

It originated from an open plain, the thickest greenery traced back to that point. Lance blinked away tears as the drone flew over what had become a small forest. Luscious shrubs and ferns sprouted from the ground, covering the planet for a couple of miles before trickling out, but they were still growing. Slowly, they were coming to encase the whole world. Tears dripped off Lance's chin and Keith was stirring beside him, mumbling a soft assurance despite not knowing the matter. Camila peered up at him with owlish eyes, clinging to the collar of Lance's shirt as her sister slept on in the safety of Keith's arms. And they were safe.

The fight was over. The danger was gone. All was forgiven, all of it, and from the core of a planet once shrouded in death and darkness, new life had begun.

*“Lance, Allita, look at the camera... come on, look at mami.”*

*The recording on Suzanna’s old camera was a little rusty, but functional, the bright sun flaring up in the lens. Two children played a little distance from her on the sand, Lance and Allita, their skin glowing in the bright sunlight that glistened on the crests of waves breaking along the shore.*

*“Mami...” Allita complained, as Suzanna moved closer to them with the camera.*

*Her mother just chuckled, crouching down in the sand as the shawl around her shoulders fluttered and caught in the camera’s line of view.*

*“What day is it today?” She asked, as both twins kept lumping sand onto their little sand castle.*

*“It’s our birthday!” Lance said cheerily, stopping to beam at the camera.*

*“And how old are you?”*

*“Ten,” Allita huffed out, refusing to look.*

*She’d always been camera shy.*

*“Ten! That is so big...”*

*Lance smiled, before returning to his work, Allita following soon after. Suzanna watched them play, listening to the seagulls circling overhead and to the waves crashing along the beach. It was so calm, so clear and sunny, a perfect day, the epitome of a childhood dream.*

*“Are you two having fun?”*

*“Yes, mami,” Lance said, as Allita nodded.*

*“You like sharing your birthday?”*

*Lance grinned. “Yeah!”*

*Allita didn't say anything yet, but a small smile tugged at her lips.*

*"And you, Allita?"*

*"Sí, mami. Our birthday is the best because we... we get to share it."*

*Lance looked to his sister, smile growing even brighter. She yelped when he dove at her, knocking them both into the sand in a hug that had the twins giggling.*

*"It's the best because she's my best friend," Lance announced, much to their mother's delight.*

*He squeezed his sister tight, comically so, so she was forced to try and wriggle away laughing.*

*"Lance! Let go," she complained, but she was still laughing.*

*Lance shook his head.*

*"Am I your best friend?"*

*Allita didn't reply, so he started to tickle her. She shrieked with laughing, trying to shove him away.*

*"Stop!"*

*"Am I your best friend though?"*

*"Yes!" Allita yelled, shaking with laughter when Lance finally released her.*

*"You're my best friend too," she said.*

*"You're my best friend forever and ever and ever and-"*

*Suzanna laughed when Lance paused to take a deep breath so he could continue.*

*"And ever and ever and ever!"*

*Allita smiled at him, full of warmth and fondness.*

*"Shells!" Lance yelled suddenly. "We need shells to decorate the castle!"*

*He grabbed his sister's hand, tugging her up and taking off down the beach. Suzanna watched them go, shaking her head fondly as Lance chattered on and on about what they were going to collect to decorate their sandcastle.*

*The sun shone brightly, silver light cascading off the waves and the sand glowing a warm, warm yellow. A perfect, hazy summer, the voices of the twins fading away into the rush of water over sand as they moved off down the beach. Salt in the air and warmth in their bones, and nothing mattered beyond that day. The sea and sunlight danced together along the shore, and in their midst the twins blended into the golden surrounds like two perfect pieces of the Earth itself.*

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, thank you for your support... love you guys!

[yell at me](#)

Can't believe its over holy shit... cheers to everyone who stuck around for this incredibly long ride, I hope I can write more for you in the future <3

## End Notes

comment anything i'll love you

Come say hi on [tumblr](#)

Cool art to check out~

[The Cave](#) by @peanutbutterfiles

[LANCE USING HIS POWERS HOT DAMN](#) by @kriisykins

[Keith and Lance](#) by @paffuz

[Black paladin Lance](#) by @anawkwardavocadoart

[Ch 30](#) by @serenphenix

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