

fit the crown to my head

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/15872568) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/15872568>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Voltron: Legendary Defender
Relationship:	Keith/Lance (Voltron)
Characters:	Keith (Voltron) , Lance (Voltron) , Shiro (Voltron) , Adam (Voltron) , Krolia (Voltron) , Nyma (Voltron) , Allura (Voltron) , Romelle (Voltron) , Keith's Father (Voltron) , Shay (Voltron)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Royalty , Alternate Universe - Magic , Fantasy , Action/Adventure
Language:	English
Collections:	Suggested Good Reads , klance , The Klance Fanfic Survey Fics , Precious Favourites , TQIW_TheBest , Bloo's Must Reads , 11ds a Bitter's Life Sweetener , No Good Very Bad Day Soft Comfort Klance , All the Fandoms All the Feels , Lynsey's Rereads , not sure if cured my depression or gave me depression , GOLDEN STAR WORKS
Stats:	Published: 2018-09-02 Words: 75,705 Chapters: 1/1

fit the crown to my head

by [aknightley](#)

Summary

“What’s the fun in a masquerade if you don’t flirt outrageously with the prettiest person in the room?” the young man says flippantly, and then winks at Keith. Keith huffs a laugh, amused.

“You keep saying things like that, but you haven’t seen my face,” he says, gesturing to his mask. “I could have warts under here. I could have spots, or scars.”

“You’d be lovely even with all of those,” the young man says, and he suddenly sounds serious. It takes Keith by surprise, makes his heart twist along with his stomach. “Your eyes,” he continues, tilting his head. “I’ve never seen eyes like yours before.”

Notes

In August of 2017, my friend Beth and I began crafting a ridiculously self-indulgent Prince Keith AU, one that I was hopefully going to finish by his birthday -- an entire year and 75k words later, that obviously didn't happen, but this fic is no less self-indulgent and no less ridiculous. I don't think I've ever worked harder on a fic, to be honest, and at times it was really difficult to continue on, especially as the show itself continued on. I'm hopeful you guys will love this as much as I do, because I'm very fond of this fic, and I'm very fond of Prince Keith.

Title comes from Fall Out Boy's song, "From Now On We Are Enemies." The full lyric is:

Fit the crown to my head, but I was only a kid.

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

The room is dimly lit, the hour is late, and all he wants is to go to sleep.

Keith smothers a yawn behind the embroidered sleeve of his coat, offering a half-hearted smile to the dark-haired woman next to him, who's wearing a mask made to look like the blindingly white plumage of a swan. She gives him a deeply unimpressed look in return, before turning on her heel and moving further into the crowd and away from him. Keith can't help but feel a little pleased that she doesn't spare him a second glance.

The *only* good thing about this masquerade is that no one can tell who he is.

His own mask, black and completely covered with thousands of tiny black glass stones, hides most of his upper face. It flares out at the edges, reminiscent of dragon scales, and with his hair tied back in a high tail rather than his usual low braid, he's sufficiently disguised from the masses of similarly masked nobles, for once just another faceless body in the crowd.

They float around him in fluttering groups, dressed as animals and creatures of all sizes and shapes, legendary beasts to domestic tabby cats. It's one of the only nights a year they mingle as strangers, and many are taking advantage of it by becoming as anonymous as possible, whispering secrets into each other's ears and kissing in darkened corners. Keith doesn't recognize a single person around him, and they clearly don't recognize him either.

He sips idly at a glass of murky wine and wonders how many of them would be ignoring him if they knew the crown prince of Marmora was standing here with them.

The conversation around him varies between quietly intimate and loudly boisterous depending on how drunk the conversationalists are. He continues to drink his wine slowly as he makes his way through the crowd, pausing only to glance up at his father, who's sitting on the throne with a golden mask made to look like the sun perched on his face, the only person in the room not dressed as a creature of earth. The king is leaned to the side, talking to one of his advisors with a cheerful expression on his face. The advisor, Kolivan, unmasked and unadorned in his usual plain black clothing, wears an impassively serious expression as he replies, but that's not uncommon for him.

Keith does his best to aim his footsteps towards the walls of the room. He just wants to make it through the night without accidentally sparking any unnecessary drama and go to sleep. Events like these are good for the morale of the court, which tends to get more and more tense the longer the year goes on, but they do very little for Keith, who would much prefer to be spending the night in the library with the book he's nearly finished. Balls at this castle are prone to last until dawn starts to creep over the edge of the horizon, which feels like a waste of precious time -- something that Keith is starting to lose track of, the older he gets.

He's thinking about the book he's been reading as he walks along, and is distracted enough contemplating sneaking out that he doesn't notice the person walking in front of him until it's too late. He steps heavily on a dark brown boot, right at the tip of the toe, prompting the young man attached to it to stumble roughly. Keith immediately steps back, wincing, and holds his hands up in automatic apology.

The young man stifles a yelp, biting his lower lip, and turns to look at Keith with barely concealed annoyance. His eyes are dark in the dim lighting of the ballroom, almost black -- they're offset by the bright silver of his mask, which contrasts well against his brown skin. Similar to Keith's, it also has the appearance of scales, although more like a spiky fish creature than a dragon. The iridescent shimmer on them catches in the candlelight when he tilts his head down at Keith.

"I'm very sorry," Keith says, hoping to cut off whatever diatribe the young man is about to go off on before he starts. "Please forgive me."

The young man's expression smooths over at once, and he tilts his head more considerably at Keith, not saying anything. Keith's eyes absently flick down to his mouth, which is quirked with one side lifted higher than the other, almost a sardonic half-smile. It becomes a full smile when the young man realizes where Keith is staring, which makes Keith flush hotly.

"No harm done," the young man says, his voice quiet and warm. "My apologies for not looking either."

"It's crowded in here," Keith replies, trying to quickly end the conversation and move past him, but the young man leans in, ducking his head closer to Keith's.

"Your mask suits you," the young man offers, silver flashing at his temple as his head tilts again. Before Keith can reply, he reaches out and puts a hand to the edge of the dragon mask, fingering the beading gently. Keith feels his stomach jump nervously at his sudden proximity, but doesn't step away -- something about the glint in those dark eyes has him lingering in place, breath stuck in his throat. After what feels like an eternity of Keith's pulse quickening, the stranger finally lets his hand drop to his side again, his smile still firmly in place. "It's beautiful."

"How could you possibly know what suits me when we're strangers?" Keith says, taking another small gulp of wine to soothe his suddenly dry mouth.

"I can sense it," the young man says, accompanying the ridiculous statement with a sage nod. He looks so much like one of Keith's tutors, he has to swallow a laugh. "You have a certain look about you."

"What does that mean?" Keith asks, still vaguely amused at his faux-serious expression. Instead of responding, the young man reaches over and touches his wrist gently, tilting the half empty cup of wine towards his own face and inhaling. The movement is soft, his fingertips light, but the sensation makes Keith shiver. He realizes the stranger is wearing silver gloves to match his mask, and they're soft as silk against his bare skin.

"Your eyes," the young man murmurs, and then, without clarifying what that means, adds, "Can I have a drink of that?"

Keith wishes he had an entire barrel of wine. "Of course," he says, offering it to him, but instead of taking it, he tightens his grip on Keith's wrist a little and puts his mouth to the rim of the cup, his throat working as he drinks. Keith's entire body flashes cold and then hot --

very few people have dared to touch him unsolicited in his life, and no one has ever touched him the way this stranger is right now.

He's sure that he should feel outraged, but instead something else is simmering under his skin; it only grows warmer when the young man licks his lips and flashes a bright grin.

"Only the best at a Marmoran royal masquerade," the young man says. His head dips into a vague approximation of a bow. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"You're welcome," Keith says automatically, glad when his voice doesn't waver. He tries on a smile of his own, and is gratified when the stranger's eyes fall to his mouth. "I'm sure you've already had your fill, though."

"Are you casting aspersions on me? Saying I'm a drunkard?" the young man says, feigning shock. "I'm incredibly sober right now. Too sober, to be honest. As you seem to be."

"The only way to make it through these things unscathed is to keep a clear head," Keith says wryly, because he's found out from experience that although drunkenness can make the evening go by faster, the repercussions are rarely worth it.

"That seems boring," the young man says thoughtfully, "but it's sound advice. Are you perhaps one of the king's advisors?"

Keith makes a face, thinking of all of those serious-faced and stuffy men and women, and the young man laughs. His laughter lights up his entire face, almost literally, as he tips it up to the ceiling and the flames cast flickering lights over his silver mask. It draws the attention of a few of the other people around them, but Keith finds he doesn't mind their gazes -- the young man is already smiling again at him, tapping his lower lip contemplatively.

"I suppose that's a no," he says. Keith shakes his head. "Should I try and guess which lord you are?"

"That defeats the purpose of the masks, I think," Keith points out, trying to sound deadpan despite a sudden quiet panic in his gut. He desperately doesn't want this strange boy to know who he is, doesn't want this conversation to end with useless fawning and coy attempts to sway him to a certain political viewpoint. He's never spoken with a person his age like this before -- he's never been flirted with just for standing around being a faceless boy in a crowd.

The young man's face suddenly goes a little serious, and he nods thoughtfully. "You're right. Let me unsubtly change the subject then -- would you like to dance with me?"

It's not the first time he's been asked to dance by a stranger, but Keith finds himself without words, his stomach twisting low, not unpleasantly but -- excited. Hopeful. He stares without speaking long enough that the stranger looks a little hesitant for the first time in their conversation. "That is," the young man says, reaching up to fuss with his mask, adjusting the strap binding it around his head, "you don't have to--"

Keith hands his wine glass to a passing man in a fox mask, who takes it and drains it in one go without even pausing. "Lead on," he says, putting his hand in the young man's. Now it's

his turn to stare silently, until his sly mouth twitches a little, and he tugs on Keith's hand lightly, pulling him towards the dance floor where couples are already spinning in place to the lazy music.

Keith's hand stays clasped in the stranger's, but the other goes to his shoulder as a gloved hand settles on his waist. They hold each other's gaze for a moment, waiting with eyes locked, and then his hand flexes against Keith's and they're spinning into movement, twirling along with the other dancers.

It's foolish: Keith has been raised in this world, has known how to dance properly for years, but he still finds himself wanting to check his footing, to make sure he's not about to step on the young man's toes for a second time in one evening. He apparently notices Keith's fervent glances, because he laughs.

"You're fine," he assures Keith, twirling him in place in a showy spin -- it leaves Keith slightly off balance, but he finds himself breathlessly laughing along with him, unused to being led around this way. "You have good form," the young man says approvingly, and when Keith is face to face with him again, he drops his gaze up and down Keith's body in an exaggerated fashion and grins mischievously.

Keith is glad that the mask covers most of his face -- his cheeks feel like they're on fire, and he ducks his head automatically, his mouth quirking into a half-smile.

"You're very bold," Keith tells him, feeling bold himself, tilting his head back up to face him. As they turn around the room, the candlelight catches on the stranger's hair, turning it from dark brown to reddish as the flames flicker. For all that he doesn't want the stranger to see his face, his own fingers itch to find their way under the silver mask, to grab hold of this stranger's hands and pull him outside, or perhaps even to Keith's room, to find out what color those dark eyes really are. He wonders if he's more drunk than he thought, except for all that his stomach is swooping as if he were drunk, there's none of the blurriness or dizziness that usually accompanies too much wine. Everything seems frosted with gold, like a dream, but his dreams are usually never this interesting.

"What's the fun in a masquerade if you don't flirt outrageously with the prettiest person in the room?" the young man says flippantly, and then winks at Keith. Keith huffs a laugh, amused.

"You keep saying things like that, but you haven't seen my face," he says, gesturing to his mask. "I could have warts under here. I could have spots, or scars."

"You'd be lovely even with all of those," the young man says, and he suddenly sounds serious. It takes Keith by surprise, makes his heart twist along with his stomach. "Your eyes," he continues, tilting his head. "I've never seen eyes like yours before."

His voice is soft, intimate, and Keith realizes it's because they've moved closer, a breath apart. Their chests are brushing, their arms pressed together -- Keith can feel his pulse in his wrists, in his throat, heavy in his chest, wonders if the stranger can as well. He feels as if he's heating from the inside out, like an ember being gently fanned into flame.

They are a breath apart, and they're going to kiss. Keith knows it, can see the angle of the young man's head, can feel his own lashes fluttering, and he *wants* to, wants to know if he'll taste of wine, if he'll kiss the way he speaks. The hand at his waist tightens a little, and his own hand at the stranger's shoulder grips harder in response, a silent answer to a silent question.

They're going to *kiss*. He wants it so badly he can barely breathe.

His eyes are just about to fall closed, his lips just barely parted -- a shout goes through the room, shocking the two of them apart as his father calls for attention, asking for everyone to raise their glasses in a toast.

"My fellow gentlemen and women!" the king cheers, raising his own goblet high in the air. "Thank you all for joining me this evening, for your incomparable company and your spectacular disguises. You've all outdone yourselves this year, truly."

Keith curses under his breath, realizing what's about to happen. The stranger seems to sense his discomfort, because he pulls away a little, and the space between them feels like a yawning chasm rather than inches.

"I have to go," Keith says dully, just in time for his father to call for the crown prince to join him on the dais, so they can all raise a toast to their continued good health, or a bountiful harvest in the fall, or something else -- Keith stops listening, because it doesn't matter, because the end result is the same in that means that this moment, *his* moment with this handsome and mysterious stranger, is over.

"Oh," the young man says, and then, more softly, "*Oh*." He has a vaguely hunted look in his eyes, his voice quietly mortified, and he steps aside without trying to stop Keith from moving forward, through the crowd and up towards his father.

Keith doesn't hear the boisterous words his father says, doesn't bother smiling down at the crowds as they cheer his name. He looks out over them and tries to find the silver-masked stranger, but he's nowhere to be seen.

Keith doesn't find him again the entire night, and crawls into bed feeling quietly and miserably hollow inside, pretending he can still feel the warmth of fingertips at his waist, on his wrist, on his lips. Sleep does not come.

.

Life goes on, the way it always has. Keith has lessons and avoids lessons, trains with Shiro and the rest of the guard, performs his role as prince as ably as he can. He's had a lifetime to get used to living this way, and he mostly *has*, but things feel...gray and muted, those first few days after the ball.

The masked stranger won't leave his mind. They'd spoken barely ten minutes, but Keith can starkly feel the difference between those minutes and every one that had come after. Talking to him, he'd felt brighter, more -- more real, more known. A person divorced from the role he'd been living for so long, a fellow stranger flirting in the dim lighting of a hundred candles

who kissed people he barely knew and danced without a care in the world. Returning to being the prince of Marmora after that was a bitter disappointment he hadn't been prepared for.

"Keith, are you even listening?"

Keith glances up from the book in front of him, meeting Shiro's puzzled and vaguely exasperated eyes. His scattered thoughts coalesce into solidity again, and he remembers where he is, what he's doing -- a debriefing with Shiro, to be followed by yet more preparations for the incoming Balmeran delegation of traders and nobles, who are visiting Marmora to debate trade options between their countries.

In the corner, Shiro's latest squire hovers, doing her best not to stare openly at the prince being addressed so informally by her superior. Shiro ignores the soft shuffling noise she makes, keeping his eyes trained hawkishly on Keith.

"Of course," Keith says, clearing his throat. "You were telling me about guiding Lady Shay around the castle when she arrives tomorrow." He smiles up at Shiro, who looks resigned.

"I spoke about Lady Shay no less than ten minutes ago, and I've been talking about our newest hire in the stables for the last three," Shiro says. His voice is level, almost stern, but his brows are furrowed in concern. "Keith, are you alright? You've been somewhat--"

"I just got distracted for a moment," Keith interrupts. The squire is doing a good job of pretending she can't see Keith at all, staring determinedly at the far wall, but Keith can practically hear the gossip already. The last thing he needs right now is more rumors spreading that he really is unfit for leadership, that he can't even pay attention in meetings.

Keith huffs out a breath, and then ruthlessly shoves all thoughts of the masked stranger from his mind.

"Continue, Shiro," he says, waving a hand. Shiro raises a brow at his abrupt gesture, but doesn't say anything, thankfully. He lifts a piece of paper in front of him, scanning it quickly.

"Well. Other than the newly hired stablehand for your stable and the increased security rotations we spoke of while the Balmerans are visiting, there shouldn't be anything else you need to know about right now. Lady Shay should arrive here early tomorrow morning, so you'll have to forgo the morning practice with the guard. There won't be any need for you to rise early." Shiro folds the paper and tucks it into his tunic, frowning at Keith again. "Your Highness--"

"Thank you, Shiro," Keith says firmly. "I've got to finish checking over this missive from Lord Rolo, but I'll see you later at dinner."

Shiro's stare lingers, and the squire gives in to the awkwardness and begins to fidget, torn between Keith's overt dismissal as the prince and Shiro's more immediate authority over her. Her mouth purses in obvious discomfort and she shifts towards the door, finally distracting Shiro from his intent gaze.

“Of course, Your Highness,” Shiro says, dipping his head in a gentle bow. “I’ll come collect you in a while, or else you’ll forget dinner again, I’m sure. Come along, Moontow.”

The squire nods gratefully, then belatedly bows deeply to Keith, following Shiro out of Keith’s study and closing the door carefully behind her. Keith waits until their footsteps fade away before he leans back in his chair, sighing. The stone ceiling of his study does not offer him any answers, nor any comfort, but he stares up at it anyways.

“Foolish,” he says aloud. “It’s foolish to keep thinking of him.” His voice echoes slightly, just enough to feel as if someone else is admonishing him.

He’s got to let it all go -- his thoughts of the masked stranger, the endless dreams that won’t stop haunting his sleepless nights. He has to make himself move on, because waiting for the memories to fade clearly isn’t working. It was just another costumed ball, another dance with someone he doesn’t know, another night come and gone -- he can blend it in with all the others and pretend it wasn’t any different. Those eyes and that smile can become one with all the others he’s seen before, even if the thought makes him quietly miserable.

He straightens again and looks down at the book in front of him -- it’s an enormous book with copies of family trees for the nobles at court, a halfhearted attempt at narrowing down who the stranger might have been; Keith flushes, staring at the lilting script detailing the Harrington family line with a mixture of embarrassment and fatigue.

Completely apart from his own lovesick efforts, though, the book is obviously not the missive from Rolo at all, which makes him grimace. He’s lucky Shiro hadn’t pressed him further; he wonders how blatant his absentmindedness has been over the last few days, and if others have noticed as well. Stars above, he hopes not.

Time to move on, Keith thinks, and he’s only a little bitter about it. The sun is starting to disappear behind the forest outside, so he snaps his fingers and a bit of flame appears at his fingertips, willingly jumping to the candle on his desk. He moves it closer, then pulls the parchment from Rolo in front of him, settling back into the familiar feeling of pushing his own feelings aside and becoming the prince.

.

Lady Shay is tall -- much taller than Keith, and her close cropped hair suits her high cheekbones and her dark skin. Everyone in the courtyard -- men and women, nobles and servants -- are staring at her, taken aback by the bright smile she’s been wearing since she stepped out of her carriage. Her dress is the color of a sunrise, dusky pink with cream colored accents, and it’s so different from the dark clothing that Marmorans usually wear for daily use that she’s doubly noticeable.

She trains her luminous smile on Keith the moment he approaches her, and even he feels vaguely dazzled despite himself. Nearby, Shiro shakes hands with a lord who looks remarkably similar to Lady Shay, enough that they could be twins.

“Lady Shay,” he murmurs, bowing over her hand when she extends it.

Her voice is soft and melodic when she replies, "Prince Keith! It's far too early to make you linger in this chill. I'm sorry to put you out."

"Nonsense," Keith says automatically, although it is approaching winter, the chill from the night seeping into the cobblestones and lingering around the buildings, even as the sun slowly inches its way above the horizon. Luckily he barely feels it; his magic is fire-based, and warms him from the inside out. The unlucky inverse is that summers are nearly unbearable, but it's possible to buy charms from water-based magicians that keep someone cool for a few hours, and the entire castle makes good use of them -- Marmoran summers are always hot.

Around them, servants slowly begin to pick back up duties they've been at for hours already, recovering from the Balmerans' arrival and Lady Shay's stunning visage. It reminds Keith to pay attention to his own duties, and he continues, "It's wonderful to meet you, my lady."

"And you," Lady Shay says enthusiastically, her hand flexing in his briefly. She steps closer, towering over him, and Keith wonders if she's naturally tall or wearing heels. "I've heard so much about Marmora, and I'm really interested in the foothills to your north -- have you been there? My tutor tells me there are crystals in the hills there, which you know we're known for, but yours are a completely different color, and I've heard they--"

"My lady," Shiro says, ever present behind Keith, smiling benevolently at the two of them. He is, as usual, saving Keith, who was feeling slightly overwhelmed both by Lady Shay's stature and her rapid speech. "We don't want you to catch cold. Shall we move indoors? We have breakfast already waiting for you and your retinue."

"Of course," Lady Shay says, smiling again. She puts her arm through Keith's and allows him to lead her towards the tall doors that lead inside, as Shiro directs the servants behind them to gather her luggage and put her horses in the stable that houses Keith's own horses. A dozen others are already tending to the other carriages and the other guests, and Marmoran nobles, usually still in bed at this hour, have already eagerly engaged the other Balmerans in conversations. "Forgive my excitement, Prince Keith."

"Not at all," Keith replies, smiling up at her. Despite his brief trepidation, she feels a little familiar already, her smile warming his own into something less perfunctory than it usually is when he has to deal with foreign nobility. His minor trepidation at having to spend the next few days with her is already melting away, because he can tell she's going to be more than happy to lead the conversation, and she seems interesting in a way few other nobles are. "I'm more than happy to discuss the hills to the north. I've only been once, but I have several swords and daggers set with crystals from there, and I'm sure we have some we could show you."

"Really?" Lady Shay asks, her smile brightening. "That sounds -- oh!" She turns slightly, moving in Keith's loose grip to look back at Shiro with her brow furrowed. "Sir Shirogane, could you tell the stablehands that the mare might have picked up a stone on the way here? It was too dark for us to see."

"Of course, my lady," Shiro says, dipping his head. "Aranda?"

“New kid,” the stable master growls in a gruff voice, his bushy beard twitching as he gestures at someone on the other side of the carriage that Keith can’t see. From the labored grunting noises, they seem to be struggling with something very heavy. “Make sure you follow through.”

“Yep!” the person on the other side of the carriage says as they wave a slender hand around the side of the carriage, sounding completely preoccupied. Lady Shay seems satisfied, because she turns back and allows Keith to lead her the rest of the way inside. She makes the appropriate pleased noises at the grand hall, admires the walls of tapestries and weaponry that decorate their halls, and seems genuinely thrilled to sit down to breakfast with Keith.

Keith was right -- she keeps up a steady stream of conversation, and doesn’t seem to mind Keith only commenting every few minutes. Her voice is almost a song, high-pitched and soft, and it lulls Keith, never a morning person, into a half-doze.

He doesn’t realize she’s said his name until she gently puts her fingertips to his covered wrist. “Prince Keith?” she asks, tilting her head.

“Sorry,” Keith says automatically, and then adds, “And please, just call me Keith, if you like. We’ll be spending a lot of time together the next few days, and formalities seem excessive.”

“I agree completely,” Lady Shay says, her smile returning. “You can call me Shay as well. But I was wondering, who are those people over there?”

Keith follows her surreptitious finger point over to the far side of the dining hall, where Kolivan leads two fellow advisors, both laden with scrolls of parchment, through the room. They make a point of stopping to briefly confer with Shiro, heads bowed close -- Kolivan’s gaze flickers to meet Keith’s, as if he feels himself being watched. There’s a brief pause, his mouth tightening a little as he stares at Keith -- but then the moment is broken, and his head dips in acknowledgement once at Shiro, before he leads the other advisors through the room and into the hallway.

“My father’s advisors,” Keith says, sopping up a bit of jam with a biscuit just to have something to do with his hands. Kolivan’s sudden gaze had unsettled him a little; he’s known him all his life, but he doesn’t quite know if he’s seen Kolivan look that way before. His eyes had barely held Keith’s before they moved away, furtive but trying to hide it.

“Will the king be joining us for breakfast?” Shay asks, taking a small sip of cooled water -- it’s extra crisp this morning, like the water mages who work in the kitchens below are showing off for their company.

“Unfortunately, no,” Keith says, quirking his mouth at her. He pushes the thoughts of Kolivan aside, remembering that he’d promised himself he would focus on his duties today. “Meetings this morning. I’m sure that’s where the advisors were headed.”

“Hmm,” she hums thoughtfully. “Well, I’m at your disposal, Keith, if you have plans for us.”

“We’ll let you settle in before anything, considering the journey you’ve had, but this afternoon, I was hoping you might join me for a ride around the town. It’s the best way to

show you the capital, and we have excellent weather once the sun is higher in the sky.” Keith pushes his plate away and the servants milling around the edges of the room immediately move in and scoop them away, flashing warm smiles and bowed heads in Shay’s direction.

Shay, of course, smiles. Keith is already beginning to want to smile back. “I would be delighted.”

Keith walks with her to her series of rooms, where her servants are already freely walking around and unpacking her things. Lady Shay thanks them all by name, which makes Keith’s already high opinion of her skyrocket, and promises to be ready for their ride just after noon.

Keith is on his way back to his personal wing when someone falls into step with him, just at his left side. “Shouldn’t you be on patrol?” he asks, glancing sideways.

Nyma’s dark eyes glitter with amusement. “I am. Just thought I’d make it an entertaining shift while I could.”

Her headscarf is a bright blue today, and it clashes horribly with the deep purple of the cloaks that all of the guards have to wear, but it doesn’t look horrible on her. Nyma never looks anything but perfectly in place and in control, which can be amusing or annoying depending on how much she plans on teasing him that day. Today she looks moderately devious, which puts Keith on edge when she opens her mouth again.

“How do you like the lady?” Nyma asks curiously. He blinks at her suspiciously, and she smiles guilelessly back.

“She’s nice,” Keith replies, glancing sideways at her. Nyma hadn’t been there with the other guards to meet the Balmerans, so she hasn’t seen Shay yet. “Are you coming along with us for our ride this afternoon?”

“Of course,” Nyma says, smiling again. Her smile is flippant, but her eyes track the hallway as they walk, dark and sly. For all her airy words and mischievous grins, Nyma is Shiro’s second in command for a reason, and gets assigned to Keith far more often than other guards. “Are you going to be ready to play the tour guide?”

“Yes,” Keith says shortly.

“Are you sure?” she presses.

“Yes,” Keith says, torn between vaguely annoyed and resigned that she was trying to bait him into admitting that diplomacy was one of his weaker areas. “I’ve been preparing for weeks to take care of Lady Shay, Nyma.”

“Okay,” she replies, somehow managing to sound placating and dubious at the same time. They turn the corner and walk past a few servants, two girls and a boy carrying linens. The girls smile brightly at Keith -- they’re familiar to him, both of them among those who usually take care of this part of the castle, but the boy is not -- he’s tall, with brown skin and blue eyes that lower respectfully when Keith passes by. A hint of a smile plays about his mouth, just in the corners, like he’s laughing at a joke that’s just been told.

Keith feels like he's seen that smile before.

It puzzles him briefly, but then he arrives at his own room, and he still has letters to read and reply to before the afternoon, so he dismisses the servant from his mind entirely.

.

Shay is cheerful as they cross the castle grounds towards the stables with Nyma trailing loosely behind them, telling him all about how pleasant her rooms are, how nice all of the servants have been, how excited she is to see the city. Keith feels just as warmed by her conversation as he does by the sun, tracking high in the sky and casting down brilliant light upon them.

"It really is very strange to not smell the sea when walking around," she says now, her shoulder brushing Keith's as they step gingerly over rough cobblestones. She's tall enough that Keith can't look up at her without getting the sun in his eyes, so he keeps his hand at her elbow and his eyes straight ahead while they walk. "The trees here are taller as well."

"I haven't been to the Balmeran coast before, but I have to the Altean one," Keith tells her, guiding her towards his personal stable. Around them, servants hurry back and forth, the picture of industry, but more than one stare lingers on Shay. She's changed her outfit from the pink dress to a deep burgundy riding outfit, her trousers the color of a freshly plucked apple. It means that Keith can see that she doesn't wear heels, and she really is just that much taller than him. "It was like being in a different world, to be honest."

"Yes!" Shay says, smiling at him cheerfully. "That's exactly how I feel. I've been to Altea several times, since they're our neighbors, but Marmora is a completely different experience. Altea is just enough like home that I barely notice the change of scenery. I can't do that here."

"I hope you don't become homesick," Keith says honestly. It's something he finds himself feeling, whenever he ventures out of the castle for various diplomatic meetings. There's something comforting about the sprawling hills of Mamora, compared to the unending flatlands of Altea or the rocky crags in Galra -- there's something reassuring about the tall and spindly pine trees that surround the capital city, about the familiar shape of the sturdy brick and stone castle braced against the skyline.

"Oh, I very much doubt that," Shay tells him, flashing a smile and sending a passing maid into a flustered daze. "I've been looking forward to this trip for a long time -- it's very rare that I get to travel because I'm so busy with managing our town, and so when my brother was assigned as part of the delegation, I knew I had to join him just this once."

"Your brother Lord Rax, you mean," Keith says, thankful for Shiro's endless reminders to memorize the Balmeran delegation when the name of the nobleman springs to his mind easily.

"That's him!" Shay says, just as they reach the stable doors. "I'll introduce you to him at dinner, if you have the time."

The inside of the barn is still slightly chilled from the cool evening and the lack of sunlight, but beginning to warm from all of the bodies moving around, mending tack or shoveling straw or carrying heavy bags of grain around. The room smells heavily of horse and hay, with the slightly warmer scents of leather and oil underneath.

“Your Highness,” one of the stablehands calls, giving a friendly wave as they walk through the doors. “We’ve got the horses already saddled and ready to go!”

Keith pulls up abruptly, and Shay’s arm slips out of his absent grip. “Red is already saddled?” he asks, surprised. Nyma makes an amused noise behind him, and he hurriedly adds for Shay’s benefit, “Red is my horse. She’s -- sort of temperamental.” To be honest, that’s putting it mildly. She only grudgingly puts up with care from the stablehands, and usually vehemently resists anyone but Keith actually saddling her -- he’d been prepared to handle it himself while Shay was assisted onto her own horse.

“Lady Shay,” Nyma says, placing a delicate hand against Shay’s back, “Why don’t I take you to meet your horse while His Highness overcomes his shock?”

“Oh!” Shay says, blinking at her, and then smiles. “Oh, of course!”

“Nyma,” Keith says, sending her a sharp look, but she’s already sweeping Shay around the corner, towards a few beaming stablehands who look ecstatic to be elected to assist her. Keith halfway wonders what rumors about her have already started spreading, considering how eager they are, but more of his attention is pulled to the other side of the stable, where Red stands in front of the enormous open wooden doors with someone’s hand at her bridle, the stablehand herself hidden by the bulk of her body. Both of them are backlit by the blinding sunlight outside, their silhouettes stark like painted lines on a fresh page of parchment.

That brown hand is a familiar one -- it takes Keith a moment to recognize it as the one from this morning, the hand that had waved absently from the other side of Lady Shay’s carriage. Keith’s brow furrows in confusion, but he nonetheless makes his way towards his horse, gradually realizing as he draws closer that the person is speaking softly.

“--don’t really know what all the fuss was, you’re an absolute sweetheart. I bet all those nasty stories about you are made up because the prince likes to take care of you himself. I would be the same way, you beautiful--”

Keith clears his throat pointedly, vaguely pleased when the speaker makes a surprised noise, jumping in place high enough his boots make a noise when they hit the stone floor. Red turns her head to look at him, her large brown eyes blinking at him, ears flicking back and forth. She blows a breath through her lips at him in greeting before turning back to face the stablehand.

A head pops out from around her body. It’s attached a boy around his age, a face with guilelessly attractive features topped off with messy brown hair and wide blue eyes. Those eyes grow even wider when they catch sight of Keith, then flick down and to the side.

“Do I know you?” Keith asks curiously, wracking his brain for his knowledge of the stable. To be honest, he only knows a few of the hands who work here -- a girl named Olia, who Red

tolerated the most when it came to grooming, and Jax and Raj, twin brothers who regularly caused trouble and mayhem around the castle in general, known to everyone for hosting wild card games that caused half of the servants to lose their monthly wages and/or pride.

Still, he knows most of them by sight if not name, and he doesn't recognize this boy at all. Considering his bright eyes and how tall he is, Keith thinks he probably *would* have noticed him, as well.

The stablehand coughs a little, fussing with the looping leather reins attached to Red's bridle, and then says, "My name is Lance, Your Highness. I'm new here."

"Oh," Keith says, expression clearing. "Shiro mentioned you to me yesterday."

"Shiro's -- Sir Shirogane, I mean -- he's actually who got me hired here," Lance says, smiling crookedly. His teeth are a little sharp at the incisors, catching on his lower lip. "We met at a port in Altea earlier this year, when I was down on my luck, and he told me if I ever needed help in Marmora I could come here and ask for him. I found myself here not long ago, and I needed a job -- he got me one."

"Oh," Keith repeats, surprised. He wonders if that had been part of Shiro's explanation that he'd missed yesterday; it seems the kind of thing Shiro would do, though, collecting sad young people at every port, promising to help them in the future regardless of what it might hold. "A job here."

"Better here than in the kitchen," Lance says, stroking a hand up and down Red's nose. "I like animals so much more than I do cleaning pots and pans." He grins at Keith unreservedly; Keith blinks, taken aback by how open his face is. "And the last dish I tried to cook ended up more char than food."

Keith snorts despite himself. "I have the same luck with cooking."

"A prince cooking in the kitchens? Marmora is strange indeed," Lance says, tilting his dark head curiously, eyebrows raised. Keith feels a flush spreading across his face, realizing belatedly that sharing your illicit midnight cooking attempts with a near stranger when you are the prince of a country is probably ill-advised. Still, most of the servants and staff wouldn't have questioned the Crown Prince in the first place -- yet Lance had done so without pause, and without looking embarrassed.

Keith clears his throat, attempting to look unbothered by Lance's blatant stare.

"How did you manage to saddle Red?" he asks imperiously, using his firmest authoritative voice in an attempt to unquestionably change the subject. Rather than looking deferential, Lance's expression turns amused, but his eyes soften as he looks up at Red.

"She's not nearly as terrifying as everyone says. Sure, she tried to take a bite out of me when I first approached," Lance says, ruffling her forelock playfully. "But I managed to win her over in the end."

“Win her over,” Keith echoes faintly, brow furrowed. He’s seen Red kick at people who’ve been taking care of her almost as long as he’s had her -- the only person she’s ever behaved for before has been him, and yet some strange boy shows up and has her wrapped around his finger in a single day?

A lick of annoyance darts through him, and he pushes it aside. He doesn’t have time to feel jealous that a stranger has gained the trust of his favorite horse so easily -- Lady Shay is already seated on her horse outside, talking to Nyma with her ever present smile.

“I’m a charming person,” Lance says, pulling Keith’s attention away from the women. Lance is grinning at him, his teeth showing white and neat in his brown face. Something about it is familiar to Keith, tugging at a half-formed memory of that grin flashing at him before now. He feels himself flush against his will.

“I’m sure,” Keith replies shortly. He takes the reins from Lance, scratching under Red’s chin with his other hand as he tugs her forward. “Thank you for saddling her for me. And congratulations on your new job.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Lance says, ducking his head and shoulders in a bow -- it’s a technically perfect one, not too shallow or too deep, but the faint impression of a smile lingers at the corner of his mouth, and it feels...mocking. Like he’s heard a joke that Keith isn’t in on. He straightens from the bow, tilting his head up to look at Keith directly, and the smile deepens.

Keith leads Red away from the stable with a frown on his face, the tips of his ears still feeling hot.

In the sunlight, Red shivers her body and dances in place, her excitement growing when she spots the other horses already saddled and ready to go -- Keith can already tell he’s going to have a hard time making her keep pace with the others and not race ahead, but her energy distracts him from the irritating stablehand, and he rubs a hand along her long neck gratefully.

“Took you long enough,” Nyma says, perched on her own horse, still standing close to Lady Shay. Shay, sitting straight and proper on one of Keith’s other horses, Kuro, peers down at him curiously.

“She doesn’t look very temperamental to me,” Shay says, smiling.

“She must be in a good mood for your arrival,” Nyma tells her, flashing her own crooked smile when Shay blushes prettily.

Keith ignores Nyma’s frankly obvious and embarrassing attempts at flirting with foreign nobility, checking Red’s saddle for himself. He runs his hands over the blanket and tack, checks her girth to make sure she hasn’t puffed herself up so that it’s looser than it should be -- but it seems to all be in order. Unreasonably, his gaze flicks up to the still open stable doors.

Lance is intently watching him check his work, and when he catches Keith’s eye, that faintly teasing smile returns and he *winks*. His forearms almost glow in the sunlight where the skin is

exposed by rolled up sleeves, but that's as far as Lance ventures out -- he turns in place and heads back into the stable, and even from this distance, Keith can hear him start whistling.

Something about that smile tugs at again Keith's memory, harder this time -- *oh*. Of course.

He should have realized the moment he saw him, probably would have if he hadn't been distracted by Red's sudden good behavior. It's the boy he saw earlier today, carrying linens around his area of the castle with the other maids.

Keith bites his lip, staring at the darkened doorway of the stable with something itching at the back of his mind, turning the memory over and over trying to see through it, trying to glean an answer to a question that probably wouldn't bother him so much if *Lance* hadn't bothered him so much.

What in the world was a stablehand doing in the castle? In his part of the castle, no less?

"Your Highness, are you in there?"

Nyma's voice pulls him out of his thoughts, and he rips his gaze away from the stable and up at the two of them. Nyma looks impatient, but Shay merely looks politely concerned, leaned forward in her saddle to peer more closely at him.

"Is everything okay?" she asks gently.

"Fine," Keith replies, resisting the inexplicable urge to cast one more glance in Lance's direction. "Sorry, I was distracted a moment. I'm ready to go." He swings himself easily into the saddle, gripping tightly with his thighs when Red jostles underneath him slightly, her muscles flexing beneath his legs as she prepares to run. "Shall I lead the way?" he asks, as if Red would allow anything else.

"Please do," Shay tells him, waiting patiently as he gives Red a little slack and lets her lead the procession out of the courtyard. Kuro follows her automatically, her black coat gleaming iridescent in the warm sunshine, with Nyma and several other guards bringing up the rear.

Through the gates of the stone wall that surrounds the castle, Keith can see the sprawling city of Ilun, capital of the country he'll rule one day. As it always does, whether midday or late evening, the city heaves with life. There are people milling about in the streets, vendors with open doors using charms to deliberately waft tantalizing scents of freshly cooked food towards passerby, children tugging at their mother's and father's legs for attention or to beg for treats, young men and women in all manner of groups and couplings holding hands and enjoying the last few summery days while they can.

There are so many of them, some of them known to him, some of them strangers, but they all live here in the city relying upon him, upon his father, to watch over them. It's strange, how heavy that sits on his chest, sometimes, and stranger still how unbelievably light it makes him, how it loosens the burdens that creep up and wrap around his throat now and again to realize all over again how much he loves this place.

The city, bustling all around them, seems to breathe in and out with him.

Ilun is the most beautiful place in the world, or at least Keith thinks so -- of all the places he's ever traveled to, the spiky black fortresses of Galra and the bone white cliffs overhanging infinite oceans in Altea, nothing can compare to this view, to these people. A feeling swells deep in his chest, pressing against the insides of his ribs like his lungs are expanding inside of him.

This is what he should be thinking about, what he should be focusing on. Not beautiful strangers at a masquerade, or annoying stableboys, or any of the hundreds of other complaints and distractions he finds himself mired in every single day. This is what is important.

"It's lovely," Shay says, sounding delighted.

"It's home," Keith murmurs, a smile stealing across his face. He gives Red's sides a gentle tap with his heels, and she breaks into a trot, leading them into the city as the sun tracks higher and higher across the sky above.

.

"You must promise we can go back to that shop with all of those books," Shay beseeches, her hands outstretched so that her fingertips just barely graze the shoulder of his leather jacket. Her eyes are rounded plaintively.

Keith takes a sip of his wine and smiles around the edge of the cup, pleased that even now, hours later, she's still excited about seeing the city. It was a tour he'd given a few times to visiting nobles he was told to entertain, but Shay was the first person who seemed to actually enjoy it beyond what was expected of her.

Originally they'd gone down the main road that divided the city in half, stopping at all of the most important shops and saying hello to citizens who were used to seeing him but not used to the sight of a tall and beautiful foreign noble. Everyone had wanted to greet them, to try and tempt them into stopping and buying a necklace for Shay to take home, or to beg her to convince the dignitaries she was with to come and buy trinkets for their families -- Marmora was known for its weaponry, from the smallest of daggers to the fiercest of luxite blades, and many of the swordsmiths familiar with Keith had called out to him to tell him to gift the young lady with their wares.

Young and old, men and woman -- they'd all been in fervent awe of her, and had only grown more enthusiastic the more she'd smiled.

It had taken far longer than Keith had planned, but that hadn't stopped him from convincing Nyma and the other guards to let him show her some of the other places in the city as well, the ones that made it truly special in Keith's opinion: the winding dirt road that twisted its way out of the city and towards the towering evergreen pine trees, leading to an enormous clearing filled with flowers in every single color you could imagine; the small pub tucked away in one of the seedier areas of Ilun where a woman so old her eyes could barely be seen through her wrinkles made the best fried dumplings Keith has ever tasted; the bookshop that lived above an apothecary where Keith often snuck away to and spent more time than

anywhere else in the city other than the castle, perusing stories from around the world and tomes filled with history from places he'd never even heard of, far away from their continent.

Seeing the city through another person's eyes had settled something inside of him that had been shaken loose for over a week now, left rattling painfully around his empty chest every time his memory fell back to the masquerade. He felt a little more at ease, finally.

Shay had been starstruck throughout the tour, and it had filled Keith with a kind of glowing pride that lingered now, with empty dinner plates laid out in front of them and the warm bustle of fellow nobles, soldiers, and assorted castle dwellers spread out around them, enjoying their meals.

"Of course," Keith tells her, setting his cup down. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"It was so informative! Those stories you told me are some I've never heard of before, and I spent time studying Marmora before I came here. Especially that one about Grenak the Elder who forged the metal ring that sits at the center of the city to this day -- how he used it to communicate with the stars and beg for answers to his questions but grew too greedy and arrogant and was punished -- it was so interesting!"

"That was one of my favorite stories when I was growing up," Keith says, smiling. "Of course, there are some who say that the ring Grenak made was merely meant to symbolize the stars themselves, and that the myth about him using them to talk to stars was made up after he died as a punishment for the wrongs he did to others in life."

Shay's mouth purses contemplatively, and after a moment of pondering, she flashes a smile at him. "I like your version better," she says decisively. "Balmeran history tells of those who could speak with the earth, so why should Marmorans not speak with the stars? Even if the stars did not care to listen, it's a far more romantic story."

Keith laughs a little. A few of the people sitting near them turn their heads and stare, but Keith finds he doesn't mind. "Thank you for indulging me today, Shay. It's been a long time since I've been let out of the castle so freely, and Red needed the exercise."

Shay beams at him, her long fingers clasping together on top of the wooden table. "I'm the one who's grateful -- you've been a wonderful guide, Keith."

Keith feels himself flushing -- truthfully, if it was anyone but the effusive and kind Lady Shay, he's not sure that he would be managing himself so well, but he's happy that *she* genuinely seems to be happy.

Handling other nobles has always been his weak point, as far as being a prince went; he often let conversations peter out into awkward silences, and he once made a young lord cry after an impromptu swordfight the lord had suggested. Apparently it was meant to be for show only, something Keith was not aware a swordfight could be -- he'd beaten him soundly, because he'd refused to do anything less than his best, and the boy had burst into tears from his fallen position on the ground and hadn't come back to court for the past two summers.

Shiro still liked to tease him about that. He often insisted the lord had been attempting to flirt with him -- even now the memory makes Keith want to roll his eyes. No one has ever really flirted with Keith before, except to try and curry favor with him in an attempt to gain favors themselves.

Except that stranger, a traitorous part of him whispers in his head.

Annoyed with himself for dredging up the memory of the masked boy yet again, he takes another gulp of wine, letting the flavor of it linger on the back of his throat.

He then promptly chokes on the wine when his eyes catch on Lance ducking around the edges of the dining hall, heading away from the entrance to the room.

“Are you alright?” Shay sounds alarmed, her eyes wide. “You’re not choking, are you? Are there water mages nearby, could someone--”

“I’m fine,” Keith manages, coughing as politely as he can around the words, a hand rising to his throat. His eyes track Lance automatically, even as he speaks to Shay. “I just drank too much at once, I’m fine.”

Lance hasn’t noticed him -- he doesn’t seem to be looking at anyone in the room, actually, intent on making his way to the servants’ door, winding his way through the various people who are carrying flasks of water and wine, neatly side-stepping an air mage who’s juggling knives in the air for a few of the Balmeran dignitaries.

He’s walking with shoulders high, a vague smile on his face, his hair glinting deep brown under the crystalline lights floating above. He steps neatly out of the path of a boy who’s carrying away a half-dozen empty pewter plates, bowing his head with a nonchalant grin on his face when the boy nervously laughs and murmurs something to him. Lance replies with something that makes the boy laugh again, more genuinely, and they continue past one another without looking back.

What are you doing in here, Keith wonders, fingers still pressed to his throat. He watches as Lance smoothly follows a servant with an armful of plates through the door, his long fingertips wrapping around the wooden frame briefly before sliding away and out of sight along with the rest of him.

He’d been in the dining hall less than thirty seconds total, just a momentary passerby, and still Keith feels himself frowning after him, wrapped up in questions.

“Keith,” Shay whispers, jolting him out of his thoughts. She’s right next to him, close enough her breath stirs the hair at the side of his head. Keith turns to look at her so quickly his braid flips over his shoulder, the hair brushing his collarbone.

“Sorry,” he says, feeling himself flush. “I got distracted.”

“Yes,” Shay says, the beginnings of a smile curving her lips. “I could see that.” Before Keith can do something stupid, like stutter out the beginnings of a defense or explanation, she

clears her throat, almost nervously, and continues speaking. "I had a favor I wanted to ask of you."

"Ask away," Keith tells her, grateful to change the subject.

"I was wondering if you would mind taking me to the northern hills before I left Ilun. I know it might be a bit of a journey, but I'm really desperate to see them while I'm here in Marmora, and I don't know if I'll ever get the opportunity again and it would really mean so much to me to be able to actually see them face to face." She speaks all at once in a dizzying rush, as if she has to say the words without stopping or she'll never get them out, and then stares at him with breathless anticipation.

Startled, Keith replies immediately, "Of course," because that's what you do when you're entertaining visiting nobility that you need to impress in order to secure the best trading agreements on the continent. Shay's eyes light up brightly, her mouth parting on a relieved laugh.

It's only after the words are out of his mouth that he realizes this means taking a foreign noble out of the protection of the city and through a heavily forested and uninhabited area, on a trip that will take at least half a day one way.

Shiro's going to kill him.

Oh well. It's not like he exactly minds ignoring the plans Shiro and his advisors had made for him, anyways: luncheons and introductions to other nobles and garden party entertainment aren't exactly high on his list of desirable ways to spend his time. Out of all of his duties as prince, the ones where he has to mingle with other members of the court without embarrassing either himself or his father are his least favorite.

But if there *is* something he likes, it's getting to spend time out in the woods, especially the northern ones -- there, the trees are so tall he swears some of them disappear into the clouds, and it's quiet the way a city can never really be. The birds sing louder out there, and the sky is as blue as the ocean he remembers seeing in Altea, as if it were a separate world than the one here in Ilun, brighter and more colorful simply by nature of being removed from humankind.

Anticipation stirs in his chest, warmth that spreads from the inside out as a real smile sneaks over his face. "If you'll give me leave tomorrow to make arrangements," he says, "we can head out the day after, and if we leave early in the morning we'll be back a little after nightfall. That should be alright with Lord Rax, right?"

"Absolutely," Shay says, eyes bright. "Thank you so much, Keith."

"It's my pleasure, my lady," Keith replies, already daydreaming about the quiet.

.

"Keith," Shiro groans; his hands are covering most of his face, so the words come out muffled and weak. He's sitting hunched over in a chair opposite Keith's desk in his study, his

spine curved so deeply Keith idly wonders if his bones are bending. “Keith, please. You are killing me.”

“If we take the shortcuts we can be there and back in one day, what’s the problem?” Keith asks blithely, skimming a report on one of the villages that borders Altea. “Hey. Arus is reporting less yield for their wheat this year, didn’t we send a water mage down there to help with that last year?”

“Don’t pretend to be a diligent prince just to get out of this conversation,” Shiro says sternly. “Keith, you know if you leave the city I have to go with you. We’ll have to pull at least two other guards and possibly more if others in the Balmeran envoy want to go, plus an earth mage just in case--”

“Shiro, it’s a daytrip to the northern hills, not a weeklong journey into the mountains. I’m entertaining our guests, isn’t that what we’re meant to be doing? I’ve heard you say so to me many, many times.” Keith folds his hands over his mouth to hide his smile, keeping his eyes as innocent as possible.

The knight stares at him with accusatory dark eyes. “This is like a double blow for you, isn’t it?” Shiro asks, frowning. “You get to spend an entire day outside of the castle *and* make things difficult for me.”

“Shiro, you are my oldest friend,” Keith tells him seriously. He makes his voice as genuine as possible, leaning forward with wide eyes. “I love you like my own brother, and have for years. Would I delight in your unhappiness? Yes, absolutely.”

“I should have drowned you when you were a child,” Shiro mutters.

“That’s treason, you know,” Keith tells him, smirking. Shiro stares at him without emotion or remorse.

“It’s the truth,” he mutters, but he leans back in his seat with a familiar sigh, a sign that tells Keith he’s given up.

Keith returns to the report with a furrowed brow, skimming through the neat writing for more information on what’s happening. Words like *missing tools and equipment* and *strange droughts* pop out at him. “Shiro, do you know more about what’s happening in Arus, or--”

“Unfortunately I have unexpected duties to attend to,” Shiro says, shooting him a look as he stands. Despite his tone, there’s a small smile tugging at his mouth. “And you have plenty of work to get done today if we’re spending all of tomorrow in the woods. Don’t slack off or I’ll take Lady Shay myself while you stay at home.”

Keith rolls his eyes, but he’s inwardly pleased -- Shiro doesn’t seem that upset, not really. He just hates having things change at the last minute, especially when it comes to Keith, whose impulses had gotten both of them in trouble more than once.

“I’ll be good,” Keith promises.

“Then I’ll have your lunch brought to you today, so you can keep working without pause.” Shiro’s wide smile is full of teeth.

“Thank you,” Keith tells him dryly.

Shiro gives a bow that’s only barely mocking, closing the door behind him and leaving Keith alone with only the faintly muffled sound of the people working outside in the courtyard below his window. He squares his shoulders and settles into a pattern that’s become familiar to him the last few years, barely even registering when, hours later, someone slips into the room and sets a tray on the edge of his desk without interrupting him.

Keith reads letter after letter, reports on taxes, on crops, on population, on which local lord is misbehaving with their people and which is possibly working with a foreign country against Marmora’s interests. He reads gossip and rumors and a few letters from those who seek his personal help. He reads and writes until his hand begins to cramp around the straight length of his pen, until words begin to blur together into an incomprehensible gibberish.

“Your Highness?”

He jolts, his entire body rocketing up at once -- a whorl of black ink spreads over the letter he’d been writing, and he scowls down at it before glancing up at the doorway.

Two servants smile at him in the doorway -- Sera and Marco, both of them well known to him after years of working in his wing of the palace. Both of them are holding wide, circular trays in their hands, piled with cleaning rags and small stones carrying charms.

“We’re here to clean up your study and take that tray away, but if you’re busy we can come back later,” Sera tells him. They tilt their head curiously at the piles of papers and books on his desk, at the tray of food pushed nearly to the edge of the desk, with a piece of bread that’s probably stale and hard, and a lukewarm plate of meat and fruit left untouched. “Sir Shirogane did tell us you’d be working hard today, but that’s no excuse not to eat,” Sera tells him, faintly admonishing. Marco nods, his dark hair falling in his eyes.

Keith smiles faintly at them, rubbing tiredly at his heavy eyes. “I got distracted. You can clean around me, if that’s alright. I’ll be here all day.”

“I’ll have someone send up some new food,” Sera says, stepping fully into the room, Marco right behind them. “That’ll all be cold now.”

“I’ll warm it myself, Sera,” Keith tells them, waving a hand around absently.

Sera clucks their tongue, then turns to the bookshelves and lifts their hands up. Dust begins to float off of the tops of the shelves and the books, tucking itself altogether until it vaguely resembles a fuzzy brown ball hovering above their hand. Marco isn’t a mage at all, much less an air mage, so he takes the physical task of tidying the room, reshelving loose books and gathering writing materials together where Keith has left them strewn across the shelves.

Keith, used to this sort of thing by now, turns to his meal, gathering warmth in his fingertips and setting it to the metal plate so that it warms through. As he waits for it to heat, he idly

bites into an apple set to the side of the tray, relishing the sweet crispness of it on his tongue and sipping idly at a cup filled with water. He can't help but make a face when he realizes it's gone lukewarm and he doesn't have any charms to cool it down again, but it's his own fault for letting it sit so long, so he drinks without complaining.

The servants clean in perfect tandem, whispering to each other as though Keith isn't there -- they're all used to being in one another's space after so many years, and these two, at least, are mostly unafraid of the authority he represents, although it had taken a while for Keith to convince them he didn't mind them behaving normally around him.

The meat is just beginning to reach the perfect temperature for eating when Marco bumps Sera's hip with his own and murmurs, "Did you see that new guy at the card game last night?"

Sera *giggles*. Keith has never once heard Sera make anything close to a giggle before. "From the stables?" He feels his ears prickle a little, but he refuses to look up from his plate, even as he listens more intently than he had before. *They have to be talking about Lance*, he thinks, and feels a flutter of interest in his stomach. "Yes, he must have flirted with half of the people there at one point or another. Harmless thing, really, but he even had Jax blushing."

"I heard he won a load off of a bunch of the kitchen folk. There was a lot of complaining going on in there earlier," Marco says, carefully adjusting a hanging map of the country that's gone askew from Sera's dusting. Keith picks a little at the hard bread, pretending to peel off the edge, wondering how well Lance must have done in the game to get so noticed.

"Oh, they're always complaining," Sera says dismissively. "They don't know how not to. Water mages, honestly."

"Sera," Marco says; Keith can't see his face, but he can imagine him rolling his eyes. "How would you like it if people talked about air mages that way?"

"They already do -- fickle and flighty, aren't we? And earth mages are intractable and lazy and fire mages are--"

"Moody and wild, isn't it?" Keith asks, lifting a slice of meat to his mouth and grinning when Sera and Marco spin in place and send him matching embarrassed expressions.

"Your Highness, we apologize," Sera says, bowing their head. There's a faint blush on Marco's cheeks as he bows as well. "I didn't mean any disrespect."

"Sera, please," Keith says, smiling. "I know you were joking. Besides, I *am* moody and wild, according to all the latest rumors." They'd more than doubled following the masquerade, when he'd been...distracted.

Sera clicks their tongue against the roof of their mouth again. "You shouldn't listen to those sorts of rumors, Your Highness. No one who knows you would say anything against you, you know that."

"I do," Keith says gently. It's a lie, of course -- there are plenty of people who know him who would spread ill-intentioned rumors about him, and would do so without pause. He's a prince, after all, destined to be king, and leveraging information about a prince could be useful to all sorts of people looking for favors in this court.

Marmoran nobles were not as openly hostile to one another as those in Galra, or as diplomatically tricky as those in Altean, but they did trade heavily in secrets -- knowledge was everything, in Marmora, and plenty either had it in spades, or pretended to well enough that it didn't matter if they didn't. He'd grown up knowing he would be expected to behave the same way, although knowing it didn't make it any easier to actually do.

Still, loyalty could be found even within castle walls that were practically paved with wandering ears and eyes. Keith could see it in the frown pulling at Marco's mouth, and the stubborn glint in Sera's eyes.

He feels himself smiling more genuinely, and turns back to his papers to hide it, embarrassed a little at the flood of emotion. "I didn't mean to interrupt," he tells them. "Please continue, I'll try to finish eating so you can take this tray before you leave."

"Of course, Your Highness," Sera replies, tilting their head in a gentle bow.

They spend the rest of their time cleaning talking about the visiting Balmerans, and about the weather getting cooler more quickly in the evenings, and a half dozen other topics of conversation that flit through one of Keith's ears and out of the other without lingering.

Against his will, he's thinking about Lance.

It's rare for someone to occupy so much of Keith's attention, especially when they'd barely interacted, but his mind won't stop coming back to him -- the strangely elegant curve of his hand wrapped around a bridle, the annoying glint in his eye that said he knew something you didn't and found it humorous, the way the sun had shone on his brown forearms in the sunlight; all of it jumbled around in Keith's head, knocking into a hundred incessant questions.

Was the card game the reason he'd gone to the kitchens last night? Why was he always laughing at something? How had he tamed Red so quickly, when it had taken Keith a full week to gain her trust? What had happened when he and Shiro met, that Shiro would promise him help?

Why the hell did he even care?

Something bitter roils in Keith's stomach, the lingering taste of the meat souring on the back of his tongue -- he pushes the nearly empty plate away and leans back in his chair, sighing. His head is aching faintly from reading for too long, and when he closes his eyes, numbers and words start to flash across his eyelids, reminding him that he has so much more work to do today.

He feels suddenly very tired.

“Your Highness,” a voice says from somewhere to his left. Keith opens his eyes to see Marco gingerly lifting the tray and giving him a concerned look. “Are you alright? Should I have a cooling charm sent up? You look flushed.”

“Only a little tired,” Keith reassures him, running a hand over his hair and trailing down his braid, an absent gesture.

“You should take a break, Your Highness,” Sera says from behind Marco, an enormous ball of dust and debris floating next to their head. Their brows are furrowed, their arms crossed. “You might get sick if you push yourself too hard.”

“I’ll do that,” Keith says, eyeing the stack of paper he still has sitting next to him with ill-concealed doubt lacing his voice. “Thank you both.”

They dip their heads in a bow, then leave quietly, shutting the door behind them. Keith waits for a minute, just until he’s sure they’re gone, and then lets himself fall forward, pillowing his head on his forearms and sighing.

He allows himself a short moment of self-pity, wallowing in his weariness for a perversely pleasurable moment, then straightens again, firming his shoulders. He pulls the next paper in his pile towards himself, and begins to read.

.

“Your Highness.”

The whisper comes so softly that Keith almost thinks it’s part of his dream -- it’s a painfully wonderful dream, a hazy kaleidoscope of silver scales flashing on an intricate mask, warm dark eyes filled with slivers of candlelight, a gloved hand flexing in his own -- except his body reacts without him being aware, awake before his eyes even open. With one swift hand he grasps for the knife under his pillow and draws it out in a single movement, rolling quickly onto his side and squinting at whoever is with him in the dark.

“This is why I volunteered to come wake you,” Shiro tells him, amusement in his voice despite the knife only a foot away from his gut. He looms over Keith in the darkness, a hand settled casually against his hip. “You’ve always been terrible in the mornings.”

“It is not morning if the sun is not up,” Keith rasps out, collapsing back against his pillow. He brushes a hand over his forehead, pushing the long tangle of loose black hair away from his face, his mind still caught faintly in the terrible and beautiful glow of the dream.

“Nevertheless, it’s time for your promised outing,” Shiro tells him, gently taking the knife from his loose fingertips and setting it atop a nearby table. “Come on, you gave your word to a lady.”

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” Keith tells him wearily, sitting up in bed. The sheets are cool underneath him, so he rubs his fingertips together, sparking a small flame whose warmth sends shivers down his spine. In the flickering light, Shiro watches him with a poorly concealed smirk. “Don’t you have duties to attend to?” Keith asks irritably.

“I am,” Shiro says pointedly, but he obligingly leaves Keith to wake up at his own pace, letting the door close behind him with a solid click. Keith lets himself linger in bed for another full minute, rubbing his eyes and pushing the heavy fall of dark hair off of his shoulders, then braces himself and leaves the comforts of his bed.

He wakes slowly as usual, regaining his faculties bit by bit as he gets ready: shedding his long, white sleeping shirt, pulling a sturdy riding outfit on, tucking his pants into his softest leather boots. Blinking blearily at the delicate silk hangings above his bed, he spends longer than usual combing his messy hair, finally twisting it into a simple braid that he ties off with a bit of string he keeps looped around his wrist.

By the time he’s ready, there’s the faintest hint of dawn’s light cutting through the darkness outside his window. The glass is damp with dewdrops, so Keith pulls on a cloak to go over top his clothes before he leaves.

Nyma is waiting for him in the hallway, her headscarf a soft shade of pale pink today; Keith regards her warily for a moment, but she’s even less fond of mornings than him, so instead of arguing or baiting one another, they both take turns yawning as they make their silent way through the still sleeping castle and down to the courtyard.

Here there is life: fire mages with sleepy eyes cooling the fires that have been burning all night, servants wandering around with handbills of fruit and soft bread so they can eat as they rush to whatever job they might have this morning, soldiers squinting with sleepy, grim-faced resignation into the dawning light over the horizon.

A few of the servants give Keith surprised looks as they hurry past them, but none of them linger; everyone is busiest now, trying to finish the bulk of their morning chores before the rest of the castle wakes up and starts demanding more of them. Keith has only been awake this early a few times in his life, and each time he regrets the process more and more; he cannot understand how human beings can function when the sun isn’t even properly up.

Their small party is gathered in the courtyard near the entrance to the castle, a cluster of horses and hushed voices conspicuously out of place among the busy workers. A wooden cart is being attached to one of the pack horses from the main stable, a roan that Keith recognizes from the other times he’s made longer journeys. The hand at her flank is also unreasonably familiar to him, soothing fingers keeping her steady while the cart is joined to her yoke.

Keith can see Lance’s ever present smile even in the gloom of pre-dawn, and a flicker of -- *something* darts through his chest.

Not everyone is as miserably tired as Keith and Nyma: Shiro actually claps his hands together to call their attention, a firmly pleasant expression on his face.

“So,” he says to the small group, setting a hand on his own horse’s bridle, “it will be the prince, Lady Shay, her ladies maid Inai, myself and Sir Nyma, Sir Karys, and a couple of hands from the stable to help with the horses. A small enough group that we should be able to make it there and back before nightfall, per Lord Rax’s request.”

Of course someone from the stable would be coming. Of course it would be Lance, whose eyes glint in the flickering light from a nearby crystal lamp when he looks directly at Keith. There's something strangely searching about his expression, like he's trying to read Keith's mind somehow, probing but distant.

Keith wishes desperately for something stronger than the slightly gritty coffee Nyma unceremoniously drops into his hands. He drains the mug in one go despite how hot it is, ignoring the lingering feeling of eyes on the back of his neck.

The horses are already saddled, of course, even Red. He pulls himself up onto her back, rubbing a hand down her neck when her muscles bunch eagerly under him -- she's clearly unphased by the early hour, as excitable as ever. She waits impatiently while Lady Shay mounts Kuro again with help from Nyma -- Keith tries not to watch too closely when Shay's maid accepts Lance's hand up into her saddle, or listen to the low sound of his laughter that seems to echo in the darkness.

Their small group heads out as soon as they're all mounted -- a slow and sluggish procession, winding its way around the other people working in the courtyard, but a steady one nonetheless. Keith finds himself riding in the middle today, which deeply annoys Red, but he keeps a tight hand on her reins, unwilling to give her too much of her head so early.

Lady Shay seems to be as bright and cheerful as ever, her back straight and her eyes sparkling with excitement, although her ladies maid is, amusingly, actually falling asleep in her saddle - - they're both dressed in practical riding leathers, inlaid with blue accents the color of a robin's egg. The bright flash of color keeps catching at the corner of Keith's eyes -- the rest of the group, in Marmoran fashion, are dressed in dark clothing, the indigo collars around the hood of their cloaks the only concession of color.

The group is quiet as it makes its way through the city, where hardly anyone is stirring at this early hour -- even the hoofsteps of the horses seem muted on the worn cobblestone, a gentle rhythm that nearly lulls Keith back into sleep himself. A blacksmith heating his coals waves at them with one hand, the other feeding flames into his forge, and a woman with her hair woven into an intricate braid steps off of the road to let them pass, but other than that, they encounter no one else as they ride through and then out of Ilun.

For a moment, the forest is even quieter than the city as the cobblestone ends and the dirt path begins, but slowly various sounds begin to emerge, like a group of musicians gradually finding their place in a song -- the rustling in the brush of some small creature, a badger or a fox perhaps, and sporadic birdsong from every angle as wings flap and flutter above them, casting flickering shadows over their head in the burgeoning light. Nyma leans over and whispers something to Shiro, who tilts his head to listen.

A lone wolf howls briefly, her mournful cry distant enough that the horses barely even acknowledge it.

The echo of the howl prickles the hair at the back of his neck, sending a shiver of recognition down his spine -- in an instant he's not sitting on his horse, riding among friends, but crouching behind a tall oak tree with the smooth wood of a bow clenched in his fingers, hands on his shoulders, a low voice in his ear telling him *steady, steady, eyes forward, Keith,*

always forward. The images in his mind flash too quickly for him to focus on them: a warm hand in his hair, a chorus of howls and enthusiastic laughter, the flash of white teeth in the dark verdant brush, yellowed fangs bared in wild, puppyish smiles, the sensation of sickly hot breath panting against the side of his face.

His mother's dark eyes watching him intently as he took aim and fired.

The wolves in this forest had always flocked to her, rubbing themselves like overgrown cats along her legs, leaving behind tufts of silvery fur and smears of blood from whatever they'd been hunting last. She'd always laughed and touched the space between their ears softly, and refused to name them, even when Keith had asked her to. *They're not ours, little bird. They belong to themselves.* Keith had sometimes carefully fisted his hands in their fur, buried his face against their necks and just breathed in time with them, wishing despite her words that they could be his, that something tangible could be just for him, *Keith*, something other than the gilded and delicate belongings in the castle that had been given to the crown prince. His mother had always hummed quietly to herself and cleaned her dagger next to him, her solid shoulder pressed against his own.

A very old memory indeed.

Familiar by now with the lingering sensation of bitterness, Keith takes a deep breath and holds it until his lungs begin to ache, then slowly, carefully lets it out -- he repeats this process a few times, until his head feels a little clearer, until the years old misery leeches itself out of his bones and into his chest, physical pain instead of mental.

Behind him there is a soft, thoughtful hum, just loud enough that he catches it over the horses and the murmured conversation between Nyma and Shiro.

Keith turns slightly in his saddle to find Lance watching him thoughtfully; when their eyes meet, he seems as unabashed as ever at being caught openly staring at the prince. Blood rushes to Keith's face and he immediately faces forward again, his stomach twisting unhappily at being caught behaving strangely.

There's a quiet snort, the sound of amusement. Keith bites his lower lip and digs his teeth in until it goes numb. In front of him, Nyma and Shiro stop talking, and everything goes quiet again but for the forest alive around them.

Keith counts down from a hundred and shrugs his shoulders, pretending his messy feelings are rolling down his back and away. It even works, a little. By the time they are an hour outside of Ilun, he's decided that he's making much too big a deal out of a single servant -- even one so confusing as Lance. There's no reason for the stablehand to single Keith out, so Keith should be returning the courtesy. Simple enough, an easy resolution to follow.

He tries instead to think of nothing but the trees around them, cupped like giant hands along the pathway, of the wind blowing coolly through his hair, of the hard warmth of Red's body underneath him as he rides.

A sleepy silence between an entire group of people can only last so long, though; when the sun is finally round in the sky, throwing shades of pink and orange and gold over their faces

through the dense foliage of the trees above, Shay clears her throat and says, "Thank you again, for indulging me, Prince Keith."

"Your ladyship is the one indulging the prince," Shiro calls from the front of the line, tossing a smile over his shoulder. "This is a welcome retreat for him."

Keith narrows his eyes at Shiro's broad back, contemplating a truly short list of reasons why throwing a sheathed dagger at the back of his most important knight's head was a bad idea. "Shiro's right that I'm glad to be out here with you, although I'm beginning to regret letting him join us."

"But where the prince goes, so does Sir Shirogane." Lance voice is quiet enough to be unassuming, and yet all of them look at him in surprise as he speaks unprompted. He smiles back at them with a closed mouth, tilting his head. "Everyone knows that, even newcomers. Your bond to the prince is well documented."

Shiro laughs. "I thought I told you when we met not to trust rumors, Lance."

Lance tilts his head and grins, flashing his teeth this time. "I only trust the ones that are true," he tells him, and then winks for the second time in three days since Keith has known him. *Does he wink at everything?* Keith wonders, a little irritably.

Lady Shay laughs a little, her voice as sweet as the songbirds chirping around them. "I have heard the same thing, Sir Shirogane. But I believe I heard you say," and here she looks intently at Lance, her mouth pursed curiously, "that you're a newcomer to Marmora as well?"

"I am, my lady," Lance says, nodding. "It's my first time in the country. I grew up in a small town near Olkari on the Altean coast."

"Olkari?" Shay says, sounding delighted. "I've visited there many times! The fishing there is incredible, we had the most amazing meals in Olkari."

"My parents are fishermen, my lady," Lance replies -- and for the first time, there's a hint of something other than casual amusement in his voice, a lingering note like...longing, or maybe just pride. His face softens at the edges a little, his smile imperceptibly shifting. "They're both water mages, so it comes naturally to them, I think."

"And you?"

Keith hardly realizes he's spoken until everyone looks at him -- he feels himself reddening but doesn't look away, forcing himself to sit straight in his saddle, unblinking and unwavering. Nearby, a bird trills out an entire warning call before Lance speaks again. He watches Keith with a smile, but it's not the soft, fond one he'd made talking about his parents -- watching Keith, his eyes catch the light and consume it, a deep blue that reminds Keith of the sky at midnight, or maybe veins showing through pale skin.

Keith shivers.

“I’m not a mage at all, Your Highness,” Lance tells him cheerfully, flicking the reins of the roan mare absently. “And I didn’t take to fishing so well as my older sister and brother. Hence my journey to your country.”

“How interesting,” Shay says, touching a finger to her mouth thoughtfully. “And you found your way here, to Ilun and on our little trip.”

Behind Keith, someone sighs -- no, it’s more of a huff of air, indignant and annoyed at once. He twists a little and catches the eye of the other stablehand, a boy a little older than him with wide green eyes. Keith doesn’t know his name, but he does recognize those eyes -- he’s an earth mage who takes care of the knights’ horses, so they must have asked him to come along just in case the footing in the hills is unstable after the summer storms. The boy is looking at Lance with an ill-concealed frown, a furrow between his blonde brows, but he must feel Keith’s gaze, because he suddenly looks at him, startled, and then flushes pink. His gaze jerks down to the back of his horse’s head, and his mouth tightens into a line.

Lance clears his throat, and although he doesn’t openly acknowledge the other stableboy’s reaction in any way, his tone is very pointed when he says, “I’ll only be here for the rest of the season, my lady. When spring comes, I plan to move on. I’m very grateful for the opportunity to see the northern hills, though.”

The conversation then turns naturally to the hills themselves -- Nyma and Shiro share the task of telling Shay about the first time that they’d traveled here with Keith, even including the brief detour where they’d been chased by a bear until the earth mage riding with them had been forced to trap the bear in a cocoon of dirt until they were a safe enough distance away.

It’s a story Keith is intimately familiar with, so he tunes them out, fussing with the ends of his braid and letting the gentle sway of his body atop Red’s take over the forefront of his mind. In front of him, Shay lets out a peal of laughter -- it’s the part of the story where Shiro was so busy looking over his shoulder that he ran into a branch, and Keith feels himself smiling automatically in response.

“Your Highness.”

Keith looks up and over at Lance, who’s drawn even with him. For some reason, Keith finds himself glancing down at his long legs, his gaze winding its way from the worn and faded leather boots all the way up to his narrow waist, where his white shirt is loosely tucked in. Lance is not wearing a cloak despite the chill lingering in the air, his throat bare where his collar is hanging open.

“Are you alright?” Lance asks. For once, his voice is devoid of any humor or charm; he asks the question simply, leaned forward so his words can be spoken quietly. When Keith doesn’t answer immediately, he adds, “You seemed distraught, earlier. If you’re unwell, I’m sure Lady Shay would--”

“I’m not unwell, just tired,” Keith replies quietly. He looks at Lance for a moment contemplatively. Sunlight plays over the curling ends of his hair, turning it gold. In the dappled shadows cast by tree limbs above, he can see his cheeks and nose are flushed pinkish, even with his dark skin. Without thinking, Keith blurts out, “Aren’t you cold?”

“You changed the subject quickly,” Lance says, a hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth. “And I thought the rumors said you were bad at diplomacy.”

“Who’s changing the subject?” Keith retorts. “And I thought you said you didn’t listen to rumors.”

“I try not to,” Lance tells him, shrugging, “but they’re always good to keep track of all the same. And I’m not cold, but thank you for your concern, Your Highness.”

As if to undermine his flippant words, only seconds after he finishes speaking his pointed nose scrunches up and he sneezes twice in a row, startling the roan into a sudden trot that he has to quickly rein back in. Shiro, Nyma, and Shay all glance back at him with varying expressions of bemusement on their faces.

“Mm,” Keith hums dryly, pleased when Lance looks a little embarrassed. It’s a foreign expression on his face, and Keith takes a moment to relish it, considering how many times he’s felt foolish in front of him.

“Excuse me, Your Highness,” Lance says, ducking his head. “I didn’t -- wait, what are you doing?”

Ignoring him, Keith finishes undoing the clasp of his cloak, gathering the material and bunching it up before he tosses it at Lance with one hand, where it falls in a dark flood of cloth against his chest. Lance hurriedly presses it to himself to keep it from sliding to the ground, his gaze alternating between the cloak and Keith in rapid succession.

“I can’t take this,” he says, looking entirely confused.

“I just gave it to you,” Keith says shortly.

“But you’ll be cold,” Lance protests, although his fingers clutch at the cloak instinctively. “Your Highness, honestly--”

Keith snaps his fingers together and a small flame appears, dancing along the back of his hand towards his wrists and then back down into his palm. He cups it there, then gives Lance an expectant look.

“Still,” Lance says weakly. Keith stares at him without expression. Lance gives him such a helpless look that Keith has to swallow a burst of laughter, biting his lower lip and turning away.

Lance hesitates for a few more heartbeats, but eventually sighs and swings the cloak around his shoulders, buttoning it at the throat and letting the heavy cloth drape down his sides. It skims the tops of his thighs, the hem brushing his knees; despite the fact that he’s bigger than Keith, it looks almost like it’s swallowing him whole. “Thank you, Your Highness,” he murmurs.

“You’re welcome,” Keith says offhandedly. They both fall silent after that, riding alongside one another quietly as Nyma finally ends the story up ahead to a chorus of laughter.

When Keith chances a glance, Lance has his face tipped down so that his mouth is covered by cloak, his eyes closed, like he's breathing it in -- Keith can only see the smallest corner of his mouth, but he looks like he's smiling again.

For the first time, the thought that Lance might be smiling at him doesn't put Keith on edge -- instead, something hot kindles deep in his stomach and burns brightly, a crackling flame even when he makes himself look away again.

.

Keith knows they're close to the hills when the humming starts.

Shay pulls her horse to a stop, a startled look stealing across her face -- her hand drops to her side, where a short dagger rests. "What is that?"

Next to Keith, Lance also sits rigidly in his saddle, a hand straying to his back automatically although he has no weapons. An archer, Keith surmises, unsurprised -- Lance's long reach and strong hands lent themselves naturally to archery.

"It's the crystals, Lady Shay," Keith tells her, rubbing at his ears where they've started to ring a little. "They vibrate with the earth and make this sound."

"That's why some call them the singing hills," Nyma adds, urging her horse forward. Shay makes an interested noise, letting go of her sheathed dagger and following her, pulling ahead of the others despite Shiro's exasperated sigh that they should stay in the same formation.

"This country is so weird," Lance mutters quietly. He still hasn't shed Keith's cloak despite the sun high in the sky, even though the air is warm enough now that Keith has undone the top button of his high-collared tunic.

The sound of the crystals is easy enough to follow directly to the source, so it's only a matter of minutes before the towering trees suddenly thin and then disappear entirely, dropping off so suddenly it's as if they've been swept away by a precise hand dividing the countryside in two, their absence revealing an unending, sprawling expanse of rolling green hills.

"Oh," Lady Shay says softly, her dark eyes wide, her voice almost an exhale.

Keith almost echoes her, even though he's been here before. The grassy hills are studded all over with purplish glittering crystals that shine in the sun like stars that have been granted permission to glow even during the day, so bright they almost hurt to look at. They seem somehow infinite, speckling the hills as far as the eye can see, scattered like diamonds just waiting to be plucked from the earth and admired; at the same time, the thought of disturbing them makes Keith's chest ache a little.

The air around them almost feels heavy with the sound of the humming, like he could wave his hand in front of himself and scoop it up, press it to his mouth and swallow it whole; the weight of it makes the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

All in all, it is an impressive, almost *oppressive* sight, and they all spend a long, silent moment taking it in.

“Well,” Shiro says, ever diligent, breaking the quiet as he carefully dismounts from his horse, mindful of his false arm, “we should rest for a moment and break for lunch, and then the prince and Lady Shay can explore a little while we gather some of the crystals for the Balmerans to take back, and for our armory to use. We’ve only got a little bit of time here before we have to head back, if we want to make it before nightfall.”

“That sounds lovely,” Shay says, wincing a little as she slides off of Kuro. Her ladies maid follows suit, standing a little bow-legged next to her own horse. Keith swings himself off of Red, running a hand along the side of her face as she breathes heavily next to him -- for once, even she was tired from their journey.

“Brigan, Lance, the horses,” Shiro says, gesturing absently, but they’ve both already dismounted and pulled the riderless horses away and towards a small stream winding its way along the edge of the forest. Shiro looks at Keith and says, rather pointedly, “Your Highness, these rocks should provide a good seat for the ladies. Nyma and Karys will unpack the lunch the kitchens prepared this morning.”

Keith, playing the part of princely guide the way Shiro clearly intends him to, leads Shay over to a pile of rocks that are mostly smoothed over on top and set in a small circle, obviously a normal gathering spot for those who travel here. As he wipes a hand over the rocks to clear some debris off the top, the stone smooths even further under his fingertips, turning into a proper seat -- the other rocks around them do the same, all of them flattening into much more comfortable stone benches.

Keith, startled, glances up and catches the eye of the other stablehand -- Brigan -- who smiles hesitantly at him, lowers his raised hands where they’d been lifted in their direction, and then quickly goes back to tending the horses.

“Thank you so much!” Shay calls over, sinking gratefully onto the rock and stretching her legs out in front of her. Inai does the same, making a face and rubbing her hands up and down her thighs.

Keith sends a curious look in Brigan’s direction, watching him rub down Shiro’s horse brusquely and then bend to check for any stones caught in her hooves -- he’s efficient and works without fuss, moving the same way his magic had just moments before. There’s a faint flush on his face from the heat of the sun.

“There you are, beautiful.”

The low voice makes Keith’s eyes slide over towards Lance, who’s got one hand on Red’s neck and the other on her back, gently stroking over her sweaty sides. His hands glide over her slowly, following the swelling curve of her body, taking his time and murmuring to her. Behind her, Kuro is already grazing under the shade of a crabapple tree, her reigns dragging loosely on the ground beside her.

Brigan snorts. “You could spend less time talking to her and more time actually grooming.”

"I could do both and mind my own business while I'm at it," Lance replies pleasantly, not even bothering to look away from Red. Brigan rolls his eyes and turns to Nyma's horse, letting Shiro's mare loose to feed among the other horses he's already tended to.

"Your Highness," Nyma says loudly, far too close to his right ear. He snaps his gaze to her and scowls, but she looks unrepentant. "Here," she says, thrusting a cup into his hands filled with water. She hands him a charmed stone as well, which he presses to the cup and then taps twice -- the spell releases, and the water inside cools considerably. He gratefully drinks from it, draining the cup in three probably undignified gulps, then nods when Nyma wordlessly offers more from the water skein she's holding.

"Karys, can you take some water to the--" Nyma cuts herself off when she sees Karys at the cart, her hands filled with the baskets that hold their lunch.

"I can take the water to the stablehands," Keith offers.

Nyma gives him a look that isn't exactly *surprised*, because Nyma never looked surprised, but is something rather close to it, lending her brows a tilt that Keith is entirely unfamiliar with. "You're a prince, Your Highness. Or had you forgotten?"

"So I can't carry some water over to a couple of people?" Keith mutters, irritated.

"No," Nyma says immediately, rolling her eyes. She leans in closer to him and adds, softly enough no one else can hear, "Not even pretty people who forget to bring their own cloaks on trips."

"*Nyma*," Keith hisses under his breath, but she's already walking away, leaving him standing and seething next to the stone seats, trying to control the flush that was attempting to take over his face and ears.

He drops himself unceremoniously down, frowning down at his half-empty cup and telling himself that she was just trying to antagonize him, the way she always did -- it was how they worked, how their friendship functioned. If Nyma wasn't teasing him about something then he wouldn't trust that it was her.

Sharing his cloak with Lance had been the right thing to do -- in Keith's head, it had almost been an olive branch in a war that was entirely in his own head, an unspoken apology for the unkind thoughts Keith had been having about someone who didn't deserve the misplaced antagonism of a prince who was still frustrated and miserable about -- about a stranger who had come like a thief in the night, who had stolen a part of his heart and then disappeared without regard for all of the other lonely parts he'd left behind.

He glares at the cup in his lap so intensely his eyes itch, then counts to five and risks a glance up at the clearing where the horses are standing; he regrets it almost immediately.

Lance's head is tipped back as he drinks from a cup identical to the one in Keith's grasp, his throat working rhythmically as he swallows -- as Keith watches, a stray drop of water slips out of the corner of the rim of the cup and slides its way down the side of Lance's chin and down his jawline, dripping onto his collarbone. He's cast in golden light from the sun, wind

catching at his hair and tugging it around his face, turning him into something gilded and untouchable, like he's every windswept protagonist in every romantic novel Keith's ever guiltily read locked in the safety of his own room.

Pretty, Nyma's voice taunts him, and fine. She's objectively right. Lance is beautiful, attractive in the way tall and long-limbed boys can be, soft in strange places and sharp in others -- Keith has a type, that's fine.

What he doesn't have time for is an unwanted and unneeded attraction to a stableboy who already had one foot out of the door -- he'd said so himself earlier in the morning, that he was only staying at the castle for the season.

Looming even more enormously in his mind than objectively pretty boys and Keith's impulses towards them, though, is the fact that Lance is a foreign born commoner -- nothing could ever come of them, even if Keith had the stomach for an affair.

Clutching the cup so tightly his fingers hurt, he realizes that he has no appetite even for fleeting feelings anymore. His heart has already been damaged enough for a lifetime.

.

The journey back to the castle takes a little longer than the one in the morning -- their horses are tired after traveling all day with only a few hours of rest, and the cart is weighed down with three huge canvas sacks filled with crystals. Their lighthearted chatter from earlier in the day is gone; even Shay is yawning in her saddle, albeit politely enough that Keith can't even hear her breath come and go as she covers her mouth.

Nighttime falls over them like a blanket being slowly pulled across the sky, pale blue turning into violet and then into deep, deep indigo, like the midnight colored dyes they trade for from Altea. In the cover of darkness, the forest around them goes muted but not silent, as some animals hurry to hiding spots to sleep while others wake and prepare themselves for their nightly hunt. The temperature around them drops from warm to cool within the space of only an hour, until all of them but Keith have their hoods pulled up to ward off the evening chill.

Lance had offered him the cloak back before they'd even started the return journey, and Keith had refused, ignoring the pointed look Nyma had given him and the probing one Shiro had sent his way. He doesn't even mind the cold, actually relishes the goosebumps on his exposed skin and the sight of his own foggy breath in front of him -- winter had always been his favorite time of year, and it was nearly upon them now.

He warms himself with his magic and listens to the offhand conversation that picks up and drops off between the rest of them -- Shiro asking Karys a question about the path they're taking, Shay whispering something to her ladies maid that sends both of them into giggles that sound deliriously exhausted, and, most worrying for Keith, Nyma murmuring to Lance something that causes him to stare at her with a blank expression, his mouth neither a smile nor a frown. They hold each other's gazes for so long that something uncomfortable squirms in Keith's stomach, but eventually she relents and leans back in her saddle, a semi-satisfied expression on her face.

Ilun is mostly asleep by the time they're riding through it, although there are still glowing windows in the homes above many shops, and several of the pubs along the main road are still spilling light and laughter into the streets, filled with merrymakers who don't have early mornings ahead of them. The blacksmith they'd seen so early in the day is absent tonight, his flaming coals reduced to merely embers now.

When they arrive at the castle, there are people waiting for them in the courtyard -- Lord Rax himself is standing near the wooden doors at the entrance, and he breaks into a relieved smile at the sight of Shay, who lifts a hand in the air and waves to him cheerfully. Several stablehands rush forward and grab the reins of the horses as the riders dismount, although no one approaches Red, too used to her antics to risk it.

Keith lets himself slide off of her, his legs wobbling a little when they touch down on solid earth again, gripping the horn of her saddle tightly for balance. She huffs a sputtering breath of air out, as if to say *you think you're tired?* but she still lets him lean against her without shifting away. He hides a smile against her tangled mane of hair, stroking a hand along her neck.

"Brother, it was incredible," Shay says, her former exhaustion seemingly vanished. "The crystals -- it reminded me so much of home, except these make a noise! We brought some back -- these don't hum anymore, they only do that when they're still in the earth, but their color is like nothing I've ever seen before, and they said we could have a whole sack to take back to Balmera!"

"Shay," Lord Rax says, his voice fondly exasperated as he wraps a stabilizing hand around her waist, "you can barely stand up. You should go to bed, and you can tell me all about it in the morning." His eyes flick to Keith, and he bows his head. "Your Highness, I cannot thank you enough for taking my sister on this trip. The lengths you went to for us will not go unappreciated."

"It was no trouble," Keith says awkwardly, shifting from one aching leg to another. He thinks somewhat longingly of his own bed. "It was honestly my pleasure to be her guide these last few days."

"Thank you again, Keith," Shay says, ignoring her brother's quietly fervent, "*Prince* Keith, Shay!" She steps closer, out of her brother's grasp, and reaches out both hands, taking his hands in her own. "I'm really glad to have seen the hills for myself."

"You're welcome, Shay," he tells her softly, smiling up at her. She bows her head to him respectfully, then leans against her brother as he leads her inside of the castle, only stumbling once on the stone steps.

Keith reaches for the ring on the underside of Red's bridle, preparing to lead her back to the stables himself, but his fingers brush against something warm. He startles, then realizes that Lance is standing next to him, his long fingers already hooked through the leather bridle.

Keith jerks his hand away and down to his side, rubbing his fingertips against the smooth cloth of his pants to brush away the feeling of Lance's skin against his own. He prays Lance doesn't notice the unwilling flush that covers his cheeks.

In the twilight, Lance's dark, sleepy eyes meet Keith's, and he smiles crookedly. "I'll take care of her, Your Highness."

"I can do it," Keith protests, although he doesn't know why he does it. Red doesn't distrust Lance the way she does the other stablehands -- he can clearly brush her down and put her to bed himself, it's his job to, and yet Keith...is reluctant to let her go with him. He feels strangely like he's letting something important slip through his fingers all over again, too afraid to tighten his grasp and hold on.

"Go to sleep, prince," Lance says, smiling as he gently pulls Red away, her hooves clapping against the cobblestones. His shoulders are broad underneath the span of Keith's cloak -- Keith has been trying not to notice all day, but he's tired, and his mind has given up on making sense of anything, apparently. "It's been a long day, and the next one will be upon us soon enough."

He doesn't look back as he walks away, the darkness tugging at his edges until both he and Red are swallowed entirely. Keith watches him until he cannot see them anymore, and then silently turns and goes inside, his fingertips still warm where they'd touched bare skin.

The Balmerans leave only a few days later, the ink freshly dried on a new series of trade agreements that have everyone smiling -- Marmora has secured a strong claim to Balmeran energy crystals in exchange for luxite and other weaponry, and everyone parts ways congratulating each other on their successes, mutually assured they've strengthened the relationship between the two countries considerably in only a week of deliberations.

Keith's father actually draws him aside after the Balmerans have left, pulling him into his study with a warm look on his face. Keith tries not to stare too openly at a room he's been allowed into only a handful of times -- his father has many more maps than he's ever seen at one time, all hanging on one enormous wall together, stitching together a piecemeal portrait of their continent and all of the countries on it. There's Balmera and Altea curving around the bottom and sides toward the sea, and Galra to the east of Marmora with its jagged mountain range, with Taujeer to the northwest, and Mamora, transplanted almost directly in the middle of all of them.

But the thing that always catches his eye is the long row of portraits that are hanging on the wall behind his father's desk, all of the rulers of Marmora laid out next to each other from the first -- the High Queen Irinia -- to the last. His mother smiles down at him with dark eyes as he steps through the door, her painted gaze as piercing and intent as it had been in person.

His father claps him on the shoulder as soon as the door is shut behind them, wrinkles at the corners of his eyes as he grins broadly at Keith. Keith offers him a smile in return, vaguely surprised to realize that he hasn't seen his father in almost a week.

"You did well taking care of Lady Shay, Keith." His father squeezes his shoulder once and then lets go, still smiling. "I heard nothing but good opinions about you from everyone in the Balmeran party, especially after your trip up north, and I wanted to say I'm proud of you."

“Oh,” Keith says, blinking, warmth suffusing throughout his chest. “You wanted to -- oh.”

“I know we haven’t seen each other these last few days, but I didn’t want you to think your efforts went unnoticed.” His father grins and nudges him with his elbow a little, adding, “Even if you gave Shiro some unexpected grief.”

Keith cracks his own smile, ducking his head a little. “Shiro can handle a few more white hairs, I think.”

His father laughs, throwing his head back. It’s a sound familiar to Keith -- his father had always been the more easy-going of his parents, more apt to wave off Keith’s mistakes with a grin than his mother. It had often made her exasperated; Keith recalls her giving him sharp looks, sometimes tempered by her crooked smile to show that she too could see the humor in the situation, even if she didn’t want to indulge it.

“Half the court think they make him more handsome, so I’m sure you’re right,” the king says, waving an absent hand in the air, dismissing the thought of Shiro’s imminently gray head with one gesture. “My point is that you did well.”

He pauses, sitting down at his desk and adjusting a few of the loose pages in front of him. His voice is very carefully light when he says, “You’ve grown so much in the last few years, you know.”

Keith feels his fingertips go numb, a sense of foreboding tensing the muscles in his shoulders. “Thank you, sir,” he murmurs, head still bowed. The eyes of the portrait are burning a hole into his forehead, but he doesn’t dare look up at her.

They must both feel the shifting tone of the conversation; Keith hears his father sigh. “We both know that I am merely a temporary measure, Keith,” his father tells him quietly. He takes off his crown, a slender golden band with only a small red gem as its ornamentation, and studies it for a prolonged moment. “Your mother was raised to be queen, as you have been raised to be king. It is something you were meant for.”

“Father,” Keith begins, his tongue heavy in his mouth. A chill is creeping up his spine, freezing him from the inside out; he feels ten years old again, glued to his mother’s hip and closing his eyes tightly as she told him, her voice calm and merciless, what his future would hold. *I’m not ready*, he thinks, but he can’t get the words out around his heart stuck in his throat. *I’m not ready, I’m not--*

His father ignores him, still staring at the crown gleaming in his hands. The same crown sits on his mother’s head in the portrait, nestled like a golden halo in her dark hair. “When she disappeared, I took over because you weren’t ready -- you were still a child, and it was hard on all of us to accept her absence as reality. I was more than happy to step up and give you time to adjust, but...it’s becoming more and more clear that you are growing into the ruler Marmora deserves to have.”

“Father, please,” Keith says hurriedly, voice pitching higher, hands clenched at his sides, “I’m not -- one diplomatic success can hardly--”

“Calm yourself, Keith,” his father says, sighing. Keith’s mouth shuts so quickly his teeth snap together. “I’m not planning your coronation for tomorrow. But I am letting you know that come the summer solstice, I plan on passing the crown to you.”

Summer solstice -- it’s both further away and closer than Keith would have thought, but it is not today, and that is most important. He lets his hands loosen, feeling half-moon aches where his nails had dug in roughly. “I understand, sir.” He does his best to keep his voice level, even if his stomach is jumping uncontrollably.

“I think you do,” his father says softly. His dark eyes are the only thing Keith has truly inherited from him, and they’re fixed on him now, the faintest hint of pity in his gaze. “It is not a punishment, Keith, or a reward. It’s merely your destiny coming to call sooner than either of us expected.”

His mother’s words coming out of his father’s mouth leaves Keith feeling off kilter, like he’s a child again, hearing them for the first time, and he can’t find the words to respond -- he stands motionless, staring at a vague point behind his father’s shoulder.

The king sighs again, the sound hissing out of his body like water thrown on embers, and settles the crown back on top of his head. He sounds almost amused when he adds, “That’s all I wanted to say.”

Keith bows his head automatically, murmurs a mindless farewell, and then flees the room as calmly as he can, his chest and eyes burning as hotly as if he were made of flame and ash instead of flesh and blood.

He makes his way to his room blindly, the walls and portraits and decor blurring together in a gray and red and gold mass, floating past him like broken pieces of colored glass. He’s fairly certain he doesn’t encounter anyone as he hurriedly walks through the castle -- thank the stars -- but if he does, he’s not sure that he would notice.

Less than a year. He would be a *king* in less than a year.

His room is blessedly empty when he throws himself into it, closing the door firmly behind himself and leaning against the wood heavily. His head aches so badly he can’t even see for a moment; he presses it firmly against the door and counts slowly out loud, each number quiet as he can make it. It takes until one hundred and forty-six until he can think again, until he’s calm enough to feel embarrassed and quietly afraid instead of merely incomprehensible.

It had been foolish to think his father would stay king -- he’d known that once he had passed eighteen, it had merely been a matter of time until he would be expected to take the crown, and he was already nearly a year older than that. He’d had time to prepare for this, he’d *known* it was coming, and still --

Still, he wasn’t *ready*.

His feet give out beneath him, and he slides to the floor with his legs outstretched, a lifeless marionette with its strings cut -- he doesn’t move for a very long time.

“You want to talk about it?”

Keith ignores Shiro’s question, jabbing at him with the practice sword pointedly. Shiro, of course, dodges, but what was once an easy feat for him at least now involves him shuffling backwards in an undignified manner, which is enough to pull a smirk to Keith’s lips.

“You don’t have to disembowel me, Your Highness,” Shiro says, striking back at Keith with a twisting motion that requires a complicated parry to avoid -- both of them are quiet for a moment as they struggle against one another and then draw back, their feet automatically slipping into a familiar motion, moving counterclockwise as they circle each other.

“These are blunt swords, Shiro, I’d have to really try if I wanted to disembowel you,” Keith finally replies, flicking his head to the side, trying to remove a strand of sweaty hair from the corner of his eye without lowering his sword. “And Adam would kill me himself if I tried.”

“With your mood these last few days, I don’t think it’s out of the question,” Shiro mutters quietly, though not low enough for Keith to miss.

Keith narrows his eyes just long enough for Shiro to comprehend his mistake, then thrusts his sword at him without warning, feinting at the last second so that Shiro stumbles backward and then falls over completely as Keith swipes a foot at his ankle, which connects and topples him onto his back. His sword is at Shiro’s throat before he can raise his left arm again.

Both of them stare at one another from along the length of the blade, chests heaving. Keith ignores his aching lungs, clenching his jaw as his blood sizzles in his veins and his arms burn with the weight of holding his sword aloft.

Finally, Shiro says, with an abundance of smugness dripping from his voice, “Your sleeve is on fire.”

Cursing vehemently, Keith drops the sword in the grass and hurriedly stamps out the flame at his elbow with his other hand, leaving behind a sooty hole that stretches all along his forearm. Shiro rolls in the grass and laughs, the sound of his amusement carrying so far across the training grounds in the courtyard that several nearby servants and groundskeepers turn and stare at them.

Feeling a rueful smile tugging at his mouth, his bad mood finally abating a little at the sight of his oldest friend’s giddy humor, Keith kicks out gently at Shiro’s side, nudging the toe of his boot against his ribs. “Stop it, you’re embarrassing yourself.”

“What could be more embarrassing than a pipsqueak like you knocking me to the ground?” Shiro asks, still chuckling. Keith’s next kick is less gentle. “Ow, Your Highness.”

“Get up,” Keith says, fully grinning now. He holds a hand out, relieved when Shiro finally stops chuckling and lets himself be pulled to his feet, both of them grimacing as their sweaty hands connect. “Are you alright?” he asks, running a hand over Shiro’s right arm where the false hand starts.

“Fine,” Shiro says, pulling up his sleeve so they can both peer at the straps holding it in place. Nothing is amiss, so he lowers it again, prodding Keith with a metal finger teasingly. “You should trust in Marmoran craftsmanship more, Keith.”

“You’re truly looking for a stabbing today, aren’t you?” Keith wonders aloud, picking his sword up off the ground, although he grins when he says it. He expects for Shiro to playfully attempt his own stabbing, or another joke about his size, but instead he studies him with dark eyes for a moment.

“Anything to change your mood,” Shiro replies, his voice turning quiet and sincere. It’s the same voice he used the first time he found twelve year old Keith crying silently in the armory after losing badly at sparring practice, and when Keith had a disastrous first kiss with a visiting duke from Altea who later ignored him until his party left the castle.

It’s the voice he used when a breathless soldier rode into the courtyard and fell at Keith’s feet to gasp out that the Her Majesty the queen, his mother, had been lost at sea during a storm and could not be found no matter how long they searched the ocean.

Keith swallows, his hand clenching around the rough grip of the practice sword. “I’m fine,” he says shortly. “It’s not even -- I knew this was how things were going to be. It’s hardly a surprise.”

“My prince,” Shiro says to him, his right hand coming to rest on Keith’s white-knuckled fist, “you *will* be fine. It’s not like your father won’t still be here to help, and his advisors will be your own -- and me,” he adds, smiling. “I’ll be at your side as always.”

Keith’s fingers loosen a little, and Shiro lets go of his hand. “You’re right,” Keith says, closing his eyes. “It just -- hit me, I suppose, that there truly was a limit to how long this reprieve could last. I’d convinced myself things would continue on as they were for a long time.”

“All things must come to an end,” Shiro says philosophically. “And I think your father is right -- you’re ready to do this.”

“Ugh,” Keith replies, making a face at him. “Don’t pull your wise elder voice on me.”

“Keith,” Shiro says, rolling his eyes, but then cuts himself off as there’s a swelling of voices from the southern side of the courtyard -- a crowd of boys shouting as they gather into a circle, jostling each other for the best view of whatever has grabbed their attention. Someone is cursing very colorfully, causing the others to laugh and jeer and shout louder.

“Great,” Shiro says, sighing. “Surrounded on all sides today.”

“Hey,” Keith says mildly, already hefting his sword again and striding across the lawn. Shiro heaves another sigh and follows at his shoulder. “At least I only started a fight with you.” He knows he should be annoyed that someone is causing a commotion in the courtyard, but he’s honestly relieved for the distraction.

The crowd is packed tightly together by the time they reach them, so that Keith can't see what's going on beyond the backs of their heads. It looks like the majority of them are from the stables, but he can spot gardeners and builders as well as a few of the knights in training all flashing wild grins and shoving each other's shoulders, calling out to whoever's in the middle.

He balances the sword on his shoulder and clears his throat, waiting for the bearded man in front of him to notice. It takes another pointed cough, but he eventually turns his head with an annoyed expression on his face, which clears immediately into pale horror.

"Your Highness!" the man yelps, drawing the attention of the man next to him, whose mouth drops in an unattractive gasp of shock -- and little by little, his title spreads across the crowd like a wave, until all of them are bowing and breaking apart into smaller groups, fleeing the scene like bugs scattering from an upturned log.

Keith waits patiently until his path is clear before he steps forward, finally spying two men rolling around on the ground together, dust rising all around them like a cloud of fog as they scuffle.

"You *ass*, get off of me!"

Keith recognizes who's speaking just as he rolls on top of the other person -- Lance has a red spot blooming on his left cheekbone and a scowl on his face as he pins the other man's hands down and snaps, "Will you *stop*?"

"I know you took it!" His blonde hair is covered in dirt and his mouth is bleeding from a split lip, but Brigan doesn't seem to notice it as he bares his teeth at Lance in a snarl. The loose soil underneath Keith's feet shudders a little, and Lance's head whips to the side to stare at the slowly roiling earth with narrowed eyes.

"Listen, you--"

"Gentlemen," Keith interrupts placidly -- it's gratifying how quickly both of them freeze in place and then turn their heads to look at him, although neither of them let go of their rigid grasp on each other. "What's going on here?"

"This -- this Altean *thief* stole my keys and refuses to admit it!" Brigan says, punctuating his sentence by trying to buck Lance off of him. Lance fluidly rolls with the movement and slides to his feet, the motion so effortless that Keith finds himself staring at him with wide eyes, his mouth going dry.

"I didn't steal anything, and I don't know what me being Altean has to do with it," Lance replies in a low voice, his hands fisted at his sides. His eyes blaze bright in his face, his jaw tight with clenched teeth. He tears his gaze away from Brigan to look at Keith, his head inclining a little. "Your Highness, I apologize for the disruption."

"Why don't you get back to what you were doing, Lance, and I'll talk with Brigan about these lost keys," Shiro suggests, his smile deceptively calm. There's a beat of tense silence,

but Brigan finally gets to his feet slowly, then shoots Lance one last venomous look before following Shiro as he leads him to the stables, dust coating the back of his tunic and pants.

Keith waits until they're a decent length away before he says, eyeing the swelling bruise on Lance's cheek, "Do you need a healing charm?"

Lance scoffs, his eyes casting to the ground as his arms cross. "I'm fine. He had a weak punch."

"Mm," Keith says idly. "Do you want to explain why he was weakly punching you?"

"He told you," Lance says shortly, glancing up at Keith. "He thinks I stole his keys, which -- they're not even his, they're the stable master's keys, he was just holding onto them because Aranda is sick this week."

"Why would he blame you?" Keith asks, tilting his head.

Lance makes a derisive noise, then does something strange: he looks at Keith from top to bottom and then back up again, his dark eyes lingering. Keith clenches his fists against a flush. "Aside from the obvious," Lance drawls, finally meeting Keith's eyes again, "he thinks all Alteans are crooked. Something about them having a royal thief meaning all of them are thieves."

Not sure how to address whatever *the obvious* is, Keith blinks, surprised, and says, "Isn't that just some story?"

Lance blinks back. "What, the queen's thief?"

"I was told it was a bedtime story told to Altean children, to keep them in line. To do their chores and listen to their parents or the queen's thief would come steal them away." A grin breaks across Lance's face, curling at the edges inward, amusement blooming in his eyes. Keith frowns at him. "What?"

"Oh, just -- I can't believe that's what you were told. I was told Marmorans traded in secrets and intelligence. Still, it makes sense -- it was probably told to you that way on purpose. The queen's thief is known to spread false rumors."

Or I've been left out of the loop, Keith thinks sourly. It's not the sort of thing that his father's advisors would miss. The Blade were the best secret gatherers in the country, and a legendary thief would be something they would definitely keep track of.

Perhaps it would be something they shared with him once he became king. His mood plummets a little further.

"But rumor or not, I suppose it makes a good excuse to be rude," Lance continues, sighing. He touches the arch of his cheek and sighs, grimacing. "Red is really not my color."

It's objectively false -- Keith has a sneaking suspicion that anything would look good on Lance, including the scratchy woven bags they use to carry grain around. Still, it makes something stir unhappily in his chest to see the scrape, blossoming dark on brown skin.

He reaches out and brushes a fingertip over the mark before he realizes what he's doing.

Lance's blue eyes widen, his breath hitching, and Keith jerks his hand back like he's been burnt.

"Sorry," he mutters, face hot with embarrassment.

"No," Lance says, shaking his head, "it was -- it's fine." There's an awkward pause for a moment, and then he says slowly, "Um, your arm -- are you alright?"

"My arm?" Keith says, confused, and then remembers that gaping, scorched hole in his shirt, still faintly smoking. "Oh, just -- we were training, and I got a little -- heated." He feels stupid as soon as he says it, the pun falling off his tongue completely unintended, but Lance smiles at him delightedly.

"Funny *and* a prince -- is there no end to your admirable qualities?"

"Being a prince is admirable?" Keith asks archly.

"Well," Lance says, his mouth pursing, "not always." He casts his gaze up and down Keith again, but it's quicker this time, more assessing. His smile almost seems to surprise him when he flashes it at Keith. "But you seem different."

Keith has no idea what to say, no idea what *Lance* is saying, but he's saved from looking like an idiot by Shiro coming up to stand next to him, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"It turns out his keys were in his pocket the whole time," Shiro tells them, his voice a careful study in patience. "He has promised to apologize to you, Lance, but I told him you both probably need to cool down a little."

"He didn't check his own pockets?" Keith asks, eyebrow raised.

"He claims he did, and he seemed genuinely surprised to find them there. I don't know," Shiro says, sighing. He looks somewhere between reluctantly amused and genuinely tired. "I'm only supposed to have to deal with my idiot soldiers, not this."

"Thank you, Shiro," Lance says, grinning. "I owe you one."

"Get back to work, Lance," Shiro tells him pointedly, but the corner of his mouth curves as he watches Lance salute him and then walk away, heading towards the stables with a tuneless whistle falling from his lips.

"Lance," Keith calls out before he can stop himself. Lance turns in place, brow raised above that mottled red mark, and has to quickly snap out a hand out to grab the healing charm Keith throws to him. He blinks, opens his hand and stares at it with wide eyes before giving Keith a surprised look. "You said you didn't look good in red," Keith tells him, trying for nonchalant.

Lance flashes a smile at him, closing his fist around the charm, and murmurs, "Thank you, Prince Keith," before he continues to walk away.

Keith watches him go, his gaze lingering on his shoulders again, the slight scuff of dirt against the white of his shirt; he realizes his mistake only when he turns to look at Shiro again and finds a smirk waiting for him.

“No,” he tells him firmly, but Shiro ignores him and says, his tone dripping with barely concealed glee, “*I see.*”

“Shut up,” Keith says, scowling as he flushes hot. “It’s not -- it’s just -- *shut up.*”

“Not even if you actually intimidated me,” Shiro replies, his smile practically inhuman. “You *like* Lance?”

“Are you the lead knight in our regiment or a child?” Keith asks tartly.

“I should have seen this,” Shiro says, almost to himself. “He’s tall and good with animals and has nice hair. He must hit every single weak spot you have--”

“I will banish you,” Keith hisses.

“I’ve heard that a hundred times before,” Shiro replies, “so my concern isn’t very great. Not like your concern for *Lance*--”

Keith is grateful the courtyard has already cleared, because it probably wouldn’t do for everyone to see the crown prince shoving his head knight over and onto the ground before stomping away in a hurry.

.

Things...change, and yet don’t.

Keith expects to be busier than ever, but for some reason the pace around the castle has slowed to a crawl. He isn’t sure if it’s the approaching winter or if everyone is exhausted after maintaining their best for the Balmerans, but the servants are a little slower in the mornings to rouse the fires, and Keith’s tutors have barely increased his studies at all, considering the looming deadline in the coming year. Strangest yet is that his father has all but halted public gatherings and appearances, choosing to focus on whatever work Kolivan keeps bringing to him at all hours of the day.

“Just regular reports from the various edges of the kingdom,” he says absently to Keith at dinner, sipping his cup of wine. “There’s a lot to take care of before all of the harvests are complete, you know -- we’ve all got to make it through the winter.”

Keith is well aware of that fact, having lived through the last eighteen of them himself, but he can’t help but feel that his father is leaving something out. He has a tell -- his mother had pointed it out to him years ago, fondness lacing the words. *He always tugs his ear when he’s hiding something from me.*

That had been in regards to hidden gifts and letting Keith get away with skipping out of his tutoring, but Keith watches his father pull at his earlobe and realizes his mother was right, and there is little chance a surprise present is behind his father’s secrecy now.

He remembers the way Kolivan couldn't quite meet his eyes those few weeks ago, the way the king's advisors whisper to one another when they think no one is watching, and smile blankly at him when he greets them, and he has to bite his lip against the sarcastic words that wants to come when his father gives him an expectant look.

Secrets were the most important thing in this country and he clearly hadn't earned all of them yet.

He supposed he'd just have to steal them for himself, then. Perhaps the Alteans had it right after all.

"Let me know if I can help," is all he says, and his father smiles, but it doesn't touch his eyes. Keith smiles back and takes an idle sip of his own wine, his thoughts swirling busily in his head.

Finding out secrets when they're being kept by the top spies in the country is -- perhaps not an insurmountable task, but one that Keith willingly admits he has no idea how to approach. He debates asking Shiro, but Shiro's loyalty is to the crown above all else, and that includes Keith; he also has a feeling that if it's a secret his father has deemed worthy of hiding from Keith, Shiro will undoubtedly agree.

So he'll have to go it alone.

He has an advantage, one he's not sure even Shiro is aware of: the castle is filled to the brim with secret passages and hidden corners, and he's found almost all of them -- years and years of skipping out on lessons and reckless exploration had given him plenty of opportunity, and he was nothing if not persistent as a child.

There was the passage behind the enormous tapestry of the Battle of Bloodsvelt, the crimson fabric so heavy Keith had been eleven before he'd had enough strength to move it properly out of the way. And the passage hidden in the stones at the top of the servants' staircase that led directly to the gardens, which Keith had found when he was eight entirely by accident as he'd jabbed a wooden sword into a groove in the rock, pretending he was making a fatal wound in his enemy. There was the one that linked together all three of the libraries, hidden behind a statue of Keith's great-great-great grandfather, whose dark eyes always seemed to pierce Keith knowingly when he approached.

There were dozens of them, and he knew there were even more he hadn't found yet -- just as he knew there were some he'd found that no one else was aware of either. He just needed to use them to his advantage, to find out the truth for himself.

If it turned out his father really was just making sure the country was prepared for winter, then fine -- but Keith trusted his instincts, trusted his mother's voice in his head, and he had a feeling there was more going on.

The problem was that spying on his father and Kolivan presented unique challenges -- the king was rarely alone, and Kolivan was the head of the Blade, renowned for his quiet footsteps and ability to blend into the scenery. People claimed he faded into the shadows themselves and stepped out of them somewhere else entirely -- Keith would scoff at the idea,

but Kolivan had developed the bad habit of coming up from behind him no matter where Keith was in the castle and startling him into yelping. It was impossible to discount the rumors entirely.

Still, persistent as ever, Keith spends several days wandering dusty passages, trying to spot Kolivan through the pinprick holes in the rocky walls, squinting into the darkness beyond the flickering flames at his fingertips. It had been ages since he'd been down some of the darkened hallways -- he rarely needed to run away from lessons anymore, so the scuff marks his smaller feet had left in the dirt have been smudged beyond recognition. The tentative drawings he'd scratched into the walls remain, though, childish renditions of himself and his mother and father, and then more intricate drawings as he'd grown older: wolves dancing around a campfire, the moon reflecting on a silvery pond, a dozen eyes watching him pace back and forth impatiently.

As the days pass, he debates commissioning a tracking charm from an earth mage, but he knows all too well how *that* kind of information would trickle through the castle gossip, and Kolivan probably had ways to ward off tracking anyway.

He blows a chunk of his hair out of his face, scowling as a servant hurries through the hallway outside his father's study with an armful of folded clothing -- it's the third time someone has passed by and not been one of the Blade. Yesterday he'd heard Antok mention new information being delivered today, but it was nearly the middle of the night now, and still no one had entered the study.

He runs a finger through the thick dust on the walls and grimaces, thinking of the grime that must be in his hair and on his face -- he'd pulled it into a rounded top knot at the crown of his head, hoping to keep it out of the way, and had accidentally ended up bumping into the ceiling, forgetting he was no longer a child. So far no one had caught him sneaking around, but it wouldn't take long for rumors to spread if he were discovered in the middle of the night covered in filth. He spares a moment to pray there aren't spiders crawling around on his head.

Someone else walks past the small hole looking out onto the hallway and he jerks to attention, but it's only a guard, yawning into his fist as he heads towards the main entrance.

It's times like these when he remembers Shiro telling him he would never be suited to the Blade -- his mind is restless when he can't move, and he hates waiting more than perhaps anything else in the world. Minutes passing seems to take hours when you're stuck in one place.

He gives up when the bell outside tolls midnight properly, knowing that any later and he'll be caught outside of bed. He lingers just a moment more, desperately hoping for a last minute arrival, but the hallway is still and silent, and he reluctantly begins to make his way through the winding passage.

This one lets out behind a portrait of some obscure lord who'd once visited Ilun and gifted them with an image of himself, which the royal family at the time had immediately relegated to one of the least used corridors in the castle -- it's close to where the unused eastern tower sits, which used to be a home for carrier birds before messenger crystals became more

common for close range communication. The birds still flock to it, owls and hawks and pigeons mingling among the wooden overhangs, but they're only rarely sent out any more.

It's because of this that Keith is a little less careful as he makes his way out of the portrait, only to come face to face with a familiar one.

Lance, to his credit, only blinks in surprise once, eyes widening, before his face smooths into a semblance of calm amusement.

Keith can only stare at him wordlessly, his heart in his throat.

"Your Highness," he says, dipping his head into a bow. There's a feather in his hair, stuck in the curls. "Good evening."

"I--" Keith is caught with one leg still in the passage, one leg out, and he wavers between stepping all the way out with some of his dignity remaining, or just fleeing back into the passageways and staying there until sunrise. "I--"

"I should be going," Lance continues blithely; he looks up at Keith through his lashes, his head still dropped into a bow. The rugged smile tugging at his lips leaves Keith slightly breathless. "Sleep well, Your Highness."

And then he walks away, continuing his path towards the main part of the castle, casting a final glance at Keith just as he turns the corner. His footsteps fade bit by bit until everything is quiet again.

Keith lets himself tumble out of the portrait and to the floor, his heart hammering in his chest, something like giddy laughter pressing at the inside of his ribcage. Of all *people* -- of all times for Lance to be there--

He allows himself a muffled noise as he presses his hands to his eyes, a half laugh and half groan that's quiet enough it barely echoes in the hallway, and then climbs back to his feet. The portrait closes silently behind him, and when he checks around the corner, there's no one in sight. He makes his way back to his room as silently as he can, but almost everyone is asleep, and the only people he sees are guards, who are laughably easy to avoid at this point.

Safely tucked away in bed that night, hair brushed through and free of lurking bugs, he thinks of the look on Lance's face, equal parts baffled surprise and carefully controlled amusement, and he turns to press his face into his pillow to smother the helpless smile that comes and won't go away.

.

"You're up to something," Nyma says, and Keith looks up from the paper he's reading with a small measure of relief at the interruption.

"I'm reading a letter from the Duke of Sylvain complaining about the sun waking him too early in the morning so could we please," here he shifts to look at the letter again, reading

word for word, “send as many of our best earth mages as we can spare to his estate so they could turn the castle a little bit to the right so the sun won’t be in his very sensitive eyes.”

“They don’t have curtains in Sylvain?” Nyma asks, raising her eyebrow.

“He thinks they’re stuffy,” Keith replies dryly. “How do I politely phrase, ‘I’d rather chew off my own arm than entertain the idea of providing you a modicum of comfort?’”

“Sounds like a question for an advisor and not a knight,” Nyma says dismissively, turning to examine his bookshelf with a studied air of nonchalance. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“Are you doing a poor job of spying for Shiro or just being spectacularly nosy as usual?” Keith asks her, setting the letter aside to sip from a goblet filled with water.

“Little bit of both,” she confesses, grabbing a wooden figure off the shelf and turning it over in her hands. “I’m varied that way.”

“You can tell Shiro I’m not up to anything,” Keith mutters, running a hand over his head absently, setting stray locks of hair straight.

“You’re lying,” Nyma says immediately. “You fuss with your braid when you’re hiding something.”

“I fuss with my hair all the time,” Keith replies, although he lets go of his braid quickly. “You’ve made fun of me for it before.”

“Yeah, I made that up, but you are hiding something,” Nyma sets the figurine down and gives him a look. “Are you alright? Do you need help with something?”

Her tone is flippant, but her eyes are intent when Keith meets her gaze. For all her lofty words and endless teasing, Keith knows she would do anything for him, and not just because he’s the prince -- they’ve been close friends since he was fourteen and she was sixteen, and they both know it despite all of their bickering.

But he can’t share this with her; he can’t share it with anyone. He doesn’t even know what it is yet.

The lie comes to his tongue before he can think better of it. “I’m -- interested in someone.”

Nyma snorts, flipping the end of her headscarf over her shoulder dismissively. “Practically everyone in the castle knows *that*, Keith. It’s hardly something you should bother hiding.”

“*What*.”

Nyma gives him a look that says he’s being strange. “Keith, you walked into a door the other day because you were too busy watching Lance bathe a horse. Jax and Raj both saw you, which means *everyone* saw you.”

“I’m going to murder those twins,” Keith mutters, crumpling the edge of the Duke of Sylvain’s letter in his fist. “I specifically told them--”

“Oh, even without that, we would know,” Nyma interrupts, huffing a little. “You’re hardly subtle, Your Highness.”

Keith’s face is so hot he’s afraid he’s about to set his clothes on fire again by accident -- something that, until recently, hasn’t happened since he was a child. Nyma stares at him with a mixture of amusement and something else, something worryingly like pity.

Keith abruptly wishes he’d told her the truth instead, or at least not this truth. Because *it* is the truth, no matter how many times he tells himself he should ignore Lance, ignore the fuzzy feelings in his stomach and the way his heart jumps when their eyes meet, even for a second.

He likes Lance -- he likes his bold, curving smile and his dark blue eyes and the way his whole body goes soft at all his sharp angles when he’s looking at Red. He likes him despite knowing it’s stupid to like him, and maybe even more because of it; he’s never been good at following rules.

“It’s foolish to even think about it,” he mutters, dropping the letter entirely and leaning back to rest his heavy head against the firm wood of his chair. “Nothing could ever come of it.”

Nyma clicks her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “I’ll never understand you,” she tells him, settling into the chair across from his desk. “You’re allowed to have something foolish, you know, right? It’s okay to want something for yourself, even if you’re a prince and he’s a commoner.”

Keith thinks of warm fur pressed to his cold cheeks, and his mother’s voice in his ear. *They’re not ours, little bird.* He thinks of the flash of gold in his father’s dark hair in his study, and the way everyone’s eyes linger on him now, assessing, knowing that in less than a year he’ll be their ruler. He thinks of a stranger’s hand in his own hand, and on his wrist, and lingering at his waist. He thinks of Lance’s mouth pressed to the fabric of his cloak, eyes closed and a smile lingering on his lips.

Nyma is wrong -- it’s not okay at all. It would be better by far to not want anything than to feel the loss of something you could never have. He doesn’t know why he keeps forgetting that, when it’s a lesson that’s been taught to him many times over.

“Most people would enjoy a short romantic fling, Keith,” Nyma says, watching him with her sharp eyes. “You’re a prince. It’s not uncommon.”

“I don’t want--” *A fling*, he almost says, but it’s too painful to admit out loud. Instead, he clears his throat and says, “I don’t want to talk about it, Nyma. I need to finish some more paperwork, and then I’ve got to go for a fitting for the hunt next week.”

Nyma eyes him a little longer, and he stares back at her with a carefully blank expression until she shrugs her shoulders and stands up from the chair, fussing with the edges of her long sleeves. “Alright. But--” She pauses, then gives him a small smile, one of the genuine ones he almost never sees from her. “You can talk to me, if you need to. Or to Shiro or Adam. You know that, right?”

He nods, throat too tight to speak. She nods back, then leaves as quietly as she'd come, closing the door behind her.

He stares at the door in silence, feeling a mixture of relief that she hadn't kept pressing him for more information and a quiet misery that he keeps going in circles over the same thing, that every single time he tells himself to stop thinking about Lance, he ends up thinking about him more than ever.

Worse still is that part of him *likes* it, stomach flipping like he's a child and sneaking furtive glances at the knights training in the courtyard again; he likes the giddiness of catching Lance's attention, likes when their hands brush as Lance passes him Red's reins, likes daydreaming of making Lance laugh again and again.

He exhales, pushing his hair off of his forehead. "I'm such an idiot," he mutters, thinking of flashing silver scales and gloved hands alongside Lance's teasing grin.

With a sigh, he finds a fresh piece of paper and starts to write, informing the Duke of Sylvain as politely as he can that there's no way in hell they'll be helping him, and that he should focus on his duties to his citizens rather than writing the prince of Marmora about his sleeping habits.

It's not really *that* polite, but it makes him feel better, and he signs his name with a flourish that's vaguely mocking of the duke's own swirling signature.

He thinks Lance would find it funny. He hates himself, a little.

.

Against his will, his snooping in passageways has to stop for a few days, because it's finally time for the Winter Hunt; the castle has finally perked up enough that sneaking around is nearly impossible, with servants running around preparing for an influx of Marmoran nobles who will come to scour the northern woods for bragging rights over which creatures they manage to find and kill.

The Winter Hunt falls just before winter really hits, the last opportunity for nobles to gather for an outdoor activity before all of them retreat to their own homes to hibernate for the winter. Most of them won't return to Ilun until the Winter Solstice, and many don't even return then, which means the castle will be quiet for the next few months, the normally teeming numbers of people hanging around reduced to those nobles who live at court year round.

Keith always has mixed feelings about the hunt -- it had been one of his mother's favorite days of the year, a chance to show off her many skills and to teach Keith how to follow in her footsteps. She'd bundled him up in enormous fur coats, letting him ride in front of her on her giant mare as they led the group deeper and deeper into the forest.

He can still feel her hand on his elbow, pushing down to make a better angle as he aimed his bow. He can hear her murmuring, *Be patient, Keith. Let them come to you.*

The hunt was a reminder of better days -- and also that those days were gone. So: mixed feelings.

The day dawns frosty, dew crystallizing on the yellowing tall grass outside of the better maintained courtyard. Servants are hurrying back and forth, trying to make sure everything is ready for an early start so that everyone can be back at the castle midday for the huge meal that's been two-days in the making.

Keith watches from the front steps of the castle, blinking sleep out of his eyes and leaning as subtly as he can against the stone wall. Shiro is across the lawn, bright-eyed and chipper as ever, speaking with one of the guards and gesturing broadly with his left arm.

"You didn't have to be up this early." He turns his head and sees Nyma standing next to him, hand resting absently on the pommel of her sword. She's watching Shiro as well, brow furrowed. "The rest of the nobles won't come out for another hour."

"It's fine," Keith mutters, folding his arms. "I can't sleep anyway."

She gives him a look, but wisely chooses not to say anything. They watch in relative silence as a girl walks past with a half dozen hunting dogs on leather leashes, all of them jumbling over one another and twisting the lines as they try to crowd around her. She expertly untangles them as she walks, whistling a tune that's vaguely familiar, a Marmoran nursery rhyme.

"Will you take a dog?" Nyma asks.

"No," Keith replies, because his mother never had; the wolves had always found them hunting in the woods, and the dogs grew nervous around them, so she had never taken them with her. He didn't know if the wolves would come for him today -- they hadn't the last few years -- but he was used to hunting without dogs along anyway.

"I figured," Nyma says. "I'm with you, today."

"I don't need anyone along," Keith says, because his mother never had. It's strange, the parts of her that seep into him and linger, the parts of their history that feel sacred despite their mundanity. His mother had never allowed any guards along when she took Keith hunting, and to have one along now, even Nyma, feels...wrong.

"Shiro insisted," Nyma says, quirking her mouth in a half-smile. "He has to stay with your father, so I'm with you."

"It's just the northern woods outside our castle," Keith mutters. "I'm not traveling to our border with Taujeer."

"Fewer things are more dangerous than acid ponds," Nyma tells him blithely, "so that's a poor comparison. There's plenty that could happen in the woods."

"Such as?"

Nyma raises one perfect eyebrow. "Bears."

“It was one bear, Nyma, and it didn’t even chase me, it chased Shiro.”

“I don’t know why you bother arguing with me when you know I’m coming with you,” Nyma says to him, ignoring his response entirely. Keith exhales, tipping his head against the wall and closing his eyes.

“Guess I was under the mistaken assumption I was the heir to the throne you serve.” She snorts, a truly indelicate sound, and Keith’s mouth curves against his will.

“It’s because I serve the throne that I’m coming with you,” she says. There’s a gentle pressure against his side, there and then gone in an instant as she bumps against him teasingly. “I won’t crowd you. I’ll just be there to carry your catches and clap politely when you don’t shoot yourself with your own bow.”

“Our conversations always leave me feeling so warm inside,” Keith deadpans. She laughs aloud and steps away from him, out from the shadows of the castle and into the soft sunlight. “Where are you going?”

“Thought I’d check out the stables,” she says, smirking. “There’s interesting people there.”

“I hate you,” he tells her, feeling his ears go hot, and she bows her head to him shallowly, then continues on her way without responding.

Keith lingers beside the castle, watching everyone else get ready -- tables are dragged outside and covered with dark linens, and a small boy runs around handing off little warming charms to everyone who isn’t working near one of the fires burning outside. The jumble of voices and banging becomes background noise after a while, until he thinks he might be able to fall asleep standing up.

He’s drowsily watching two children try to teach a little girl how to juggle pebbles when someone wearing a wide-brimmed hat runs past him, startling him awake and causing a man with an armful of apples to drop them, letting them cascade down the castle steps. Keith catches a glimpse of brown eyes and long brown hair -- Olia, from the stables.

He stares after her with a furrowed brow as she disappears into the castle, the wooden door closing heavily behind her. A shuffling sound behind him pulls his attention to the servant on his knees, struggling to gather all of the fallen apples together. Keith quickly hurries to help, dropping to his knees and grabbing for wayward apples out of his reach.

“Your Highness, you don’t have to do that,” the man says quickly, hurriedly shoving apples back into the basket they’d been in. Keith puts two in himself and reaches for another, tilting it back and forth to check for bruising.

“It’s fine,” Keith reassures him, glancing back up at the castle doors. “I wonder what had her in such a rush.”

“Busy day,” the man says, sighing. “We’ve got a dozen pies to make before afternoon, and the flour hasn’t been delivered yet.”

“Right,” Keith says, trying not to sound dubious, because he doubts pies were on Olia’s mind.

The servant thanks Keith and continues on his way to the kitchens, and he has just enough time to step back to his place near the wall when Olia comes running back out of the castle with someone else right behind her -- a water mage Keith recognizes from her time spent taking care of the knights with Adam after training accidents.

His stomach jumps nervously and he follows them, not quite running but as quickly as he can without losing decorum. By the time he reaches the stables they’re both gone, and Shiro is standing outside and talking to -- Keith’s stomach jumps again, higher -- Lance, both of them with grave expressions on their face.

“Shiro?” Keith calls out, and Shiro looks at him and smiles tiredly, reaching out with his left arm to touch Keith’s shoulder as soon as he’s close enough. Lance stays quiet, watching the two of them with dark eyes.

“Keith,” Shiro says, sighing. “Don’t worry, nothing’s wrong.”

“A healer ran by with Olia just a moment ago,” Keith says, frowning at him. “What happened?”

“Sir Nyma,” Lance says, “She and I were talking as I was mucking Mina’s stall, and Mina startled and pushed her into the wall. She hit her head and seemed dizzy afterwards -- she lost consciousness for a moment, but she’s awake now.”

“Is she alright?” Keith asks, already stepping around the two of them to try and go see for himself. Shiro grabs his arm by the elbow, holding him in place gently.

“She’s fine,” he says, “but Akane asked everyone to clear out so she could work in peace. She’s just giving her some pain relief and making sure her head is fine.”

Keith exhales, covering his eyes with one hand and offering a brief thanks to the stars that Nyma hadn’t been seriously hurt. Water mages could do a lot with their healing, but even the best couldn’t cure everything -- he’d grown up around enough soldiers injured in battle and servants working in dangerous places to know that even a simple injury could lead to someone’s death.

“Why did you look so serious when I came up?” Keith asks, lowering his hand to look at Shiro with faint accusation. “You had me worried someone had died.”

Shiro says, “I was trying to convince Lance to join you for the hunt, since Nyma will need to rest.” Keith’s mouth drops before he can swallow his surprise, and Shiro’s weariness seems to lift for a moment as a smile creases his face. “Yes, that was his expression.”

“I’m not a guard or a knight,” Lance tells him. He looks strangely defensive, his arms crossed and his eyes lowered. There’s a tension to his shoulders that feels misplaced, all things considered. “I don’t know why you’re asking me, especially not when there are others who can protect the prince far better than me.”

“Keith doesn’t need a protector,” Shiro says. “He’s capable of protecting himself. But the crown prince and future king of our country shouldn’t be alone, not even in woods he’s grown up in. I thought you would be a good compromise between nothing and a stranger.”

Keith stares at Shiro, feeling a little lost, unsure if he’s being underestimated or overestimated all at once. “Shiro,” he starts to say, but Shiro raises a hand to stop him.

“I know your opinion already -- I know what the queen chose to do, but you are not the queen, Keith.” He pauses for a moment, then adds, “She was never really alone, anyway. She had you with her. This is the same thing.”

Keith swallows the protest that wants to come, because it wasn’t the same thing, not at all, but he knows Shiro knows that already, and he doesn’t really want to talk about his mother in front of Lance, who’d never even met her. It feels too personal, especially since he’d already had her on his mind this morning.

For his part, Lance still looks quietly reluctant, arms crossed and lower lip caught between his teeth as he avoids looking at both of them. The silence stretches between them, Shiro waiting patiently, but Keith feels something nervous bubbling in his gut, a startling realization that he doesn’t *want* Lance to say no.

Feelings were *abhorrent*.

Finally Lance sighs, arms falling to his side, a crooked smile sneaking over his face. The tension surrounding him has vanished behind a careful expression; Keith recognizes it as a front, well familiar with wearing one himself after so many years. “As you wish, Sir Shirogane. I’d be honored to ride with the prince for the hunt. As long as it’s alright with him.”

Those blue eyes turn to Keith, pinning him in place, curiosity reflected in their depths like mirrors. The false face is gone again, the question in his eyes genuine. *It’s so strange*, Keith thinks to himself, *how much of him is in his eyes and how little I still know about him*.

They’re both staring at him, Shiro with uncomfortable knowingness and Lance expectantly, so Keith clears his throat and says, “It’s alright with me.”

Shiro claps his hands together and says, “Excellent. I’m going to check on Nyma and make sure she’s put back to bed, and we’ll be headed out on the hunt in an hour or so. Lance, you can be ready by then, can’t you?”

“What do I need to bring?” Lance asks, ostensibly to Shiro but with eyes still watching Keith.

“A bow and your patience,” Shiro says, grinning, then ducks into the stables before Keith can punch him in the arm.

Lance laughs softly, glancing down at Keith with some of his familiar humor returning to his face. “Are you sure you’re alright with it?” he asks. “Nyma said you’d prefer to hunt alone.”

Keith swallows, then says, feeling like he means the words too much, "What I want and what's expected of me are two different things." He pauses, looking up at Lance as confidently as he can, then adds, "But I am alright with it. You at least won't crowd me, or treat me like I'm incompetent."

Lance nods, bowing his head. "I'll do my best, Your Highness."

Keith grasps blindly for the barn door behind him, feeling something tentatively hopeful crowding his rib cage, beating in time with his heart. "I'll see you later, then. I'm going to -- Nyma, I want to see her first. I'll meet you at the edge of the woods when the hunt begins."

Lance's smile is small but warm. "I'll see you there, Your Highness."

.

The hunt begins with the sound of music.

Several different entertainers are playing flutes and stringed instruments, strumming the last of the early morning weariness out of the gathered crowd's spirits. Nobles linger around their horses chatting with one another, dressed in their best clothing in a last bid for attention before everyone leaves court. Enormous hats seem to be very popular this year.

Keith's new riding outfit is black, as usual, but with silver threading -- he'd asked for the color despite his usual reticence when it came to clothing, much to his tailor's joy -- and a small spray of feathers embroidered on his shoulders. It's far showier than anything he's ever worn before, but he's never lead the hunt before either.

He stands near Red, fussing with her reins just to look busy, but he can feel eyes on him, and he knows it's only a matter of time before someone approaches. Nerves bubble in his stomach like boiling water, nearly as hot.

"Your Highness."

Keith hides a wince, then turns to smile as politely as he can at the tall, leering noble hovering next to him. "Good morning, Lord Gravtok. I hope you're feeling well for the hunt."

Lord Gravtok smooths a hand over his beard, eyeing Red warily as she stares at him with ears pinned back. "I'm ready to ride, yes. I have plans to bag a good dozen pheasant this year, show up Lady Hixen once and for all."

Keith thinks to himself that he has a better chance of getting the hair to move from his chin to his balding head than he does of beating Alysia Hixen for kills, but he wisely chooses instead to say, "Good luck to you."

Lord Gravtok isn't done speaking, though. "We're all very excited to see how you do this year, Prince Keith. I know you've always participated in the past, but all things considered -- I know the court expects great things." There's a lilt in his tone, a studied nonchalance. "If you find yourself needing any help--"

“Your Highness.” A bow is thrust into Keith’s line of sight, and he finds with some relief that it’s attached to Lance, who’s smiling at him brightly. “I’ve got your bow strung and ready to go, and a quiver for you.”

“Thank you, Lance,” Keith says gratefully, slinging the quiver over his shoulder so that it sits at his waist. “Lord Gravtok, I thank you for your time, but I should be getting ready to go.” Keith flashes a smile at him and takes the bow from Lance, pretending to inspect it the way any good archer would before a hunt. Lord Gravtok lingers petulantly for a moment, then turns and walks towards his own hunting party, who are all pretending not to watch them eagerly.

“Was that alright?” Lance asks, running a hand under Red’s saddle and straightening her gear. “I know I interrupted a noble, but--”

“If he’d reprimanded you I would have stopped him,” Keith says, flashing him a small smile. “He was trying to curry favor with me, and he was doing a really unsubtle job of it. He could have at least waited until after the hunt to make his move, but Lord Gravtok has always been impatient.”

“How uncouth,” Lance says, adopting a faux-snooty tone, and Keith snorts out a laugh before he can stop himself. He covers his mouth quickly, but Lance looks delighted. “That was an interesting sound.”

“You didn’t hear anything,” Keith tells him, trying to sound firm, but he can feel the smile lingering in the edges of his mouth. Lance opens his own mouth, probably to say something teasing, but the music draws to a close, and then a horn sounds, causing all of the dogs to bay excitedly at the rising sun.

“It’s time for the hunt,” Keith murmurs. His father is already standing on the dais they’ve erected outside, leaned down to speak to Kolivan, and Keith realizes with a start that he’s going to have to give the opening speech. A trill of fear skips down his spine, his mouth going dry as all eyes turn to him at once. *Say something*, a voice whispers in his head. It sounds painfully like his mother. *You have to say something*.

The words don’t want to come. He knows how this speech should go, he’s heard it a hundred times, but--

There is the softest touch at the dip of his elbow. When he glances to the side, Lance is studiously still looking over Red’s tack, but his arm is pressed against Keith’s side, and he doesn’t draw away when Keith finds himself pressing back, just a little.

He takes a breath and lets it out.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he calls out, his voice reverberating in the crisp dawn air, “thank you all for joining us for the Winter Hunt.” There’s a brief pause while everyone claps, their gloved hands making muffled sounds. Does the applause last longer or shorter than when his father did this speech, or his mother? Is it softer than usual? He doesn’t know -- he forces himself to stop thinking of it, to continue despite his lingering nervousness. “On this cool winter morning we gather to celebrate the end of another long, bountiful year together, to

show off our skills and to support one another in our efforts. We are all eager to begin, so let's make this a hunt to remember -- good luck to you all, and may your aim be true."

"May your aim be true!" they chorus back to him, and there's more scattered applause for a moment before everyone turns back to their horses and companions, only a few eyes lingering on him. Keith exhales as quietly as he can, then looks at Lance, who's looking back at him with a crooked smile on his face.

"Are you ready, Your Highness?" he asks.

"I'm ready," Keith replies, and it almost feels true.

Lance has saddled for himself one of the many packhorses they keep in the stable, a lovely quarter horse with a star on her nose -- she looks almost a twin to Red, except that Red's coat is a deeper burgundy and her legs a little longer. He has his own bow slung over his back, although it is a noticeably cheap one, and his arrows have plain fletching. A soldier's arrows, since Lance won't be joining the hunt.

Keith's arrows have red feathering on them, and they knock against his side when he pulls himself into the saddle, clattering together loudly. He remembers too late that his mother had always put her quiver on after she was seated, and for good reason -- the arrows start to slip out as he leans over, and he has to rebalance himself quickly to keep from spilling them out onto the ground.

Flushing, he wheels Red around to face the forest, grateful that no one seems to have noticed his fumbling. Next to him, Lance gracefully climbs into his own saddle, and Keith watches with wide eyes as he maintains perfect balance so that his arrows barely even shift until he settles against his horse's back, looping the reins around his fist.

"How did you do that?" he asks, brow furrowing.

Lance's mouth is curved teasingly. "Mounting a horse is a fairly common trick, Your Highness."

Keith wants to reply to him, to pry a straight answer out of him for once about the dozens of questions floating around his head that pertain to Lance, but the horn sounds again, and the dogs call out wildly, and the hunt begins.

Keith puts his heels to Red, giving her her head for once so that she gallops at full speed into the woods. He doesn't turn to look behind himself but he can hear Lance riding behind him, a few lengths away but maintaining pace. The other nobles are thundering into the woods around them, dogs baying and hooves clattering over fallen limbs and branches. Someone curses loudly to his right, sending up a spray of laughter from the other hunters -- probably someone had run into a branch face first, Keith guesses, ducking his own head just in time to avoid a bruised forehead.

As soon as they're a fair distance into the woods, far enough that the other hunters have faded into distant noises and faraway howls, Keith slows Red, bringing her to a halt in a small clearing, both of them breathing heavily from the run. It takes a moment for Lance to catch

up but he does, leaned over the mare's neck with a laugh already spilling out of his mouth before he comes to a stop.

"She's so fast!" he says, grinning at Red. "I had no idea she could run like that."

"I don't let her do it often," Keith says, running an appreciative hand down her neck as she huffs underneath him. "She doesn't like to stop, and then we end up running in circles until she's calm again."

"She's a natural," Lance tells him, watching Red prance in place excitedly. "I can't believe you found her wandering around the woods."

Keith stares at him in confusion. "How did you know that?"

It wasn't common knowledge in the stables that Red had been a wild horse -- he'd told all of them but the stablemaster that she'd been bought from a wrangler traveling from Altea, who were known for their incredible horses. He was sure some of them had suspicions, considering how wild-tempered she was, but none of them would have ever questioned him.

Lance blinks, then tilts his head curiously. "Shiro told me -- was it a secret?"

"Sort of," Keith says, frowning. It wasn't like Shiro to share things like that, but he clearly got on with Lance, and he'd recommended Lance to take care of Keith's horse -- perhaps he'd thought it was something Lance needed to know. "She's not considered purebred, which means I shouldn't really be riding her."

"Seems silly, considering how incredible she is," Lance says. "I don't know if I've seen any horse that could match her speed."

"Regardless," Keith says, "to everyone else she was bought from a merchant and her birthright is peerless, and I'd like it to stay that way."

Lance dips his head in a half-bow. "Of course, Your Highness." He lifts his head and looks around the clearing, one brow raised. "Why did we stop here?"

"I'll need to dismount if I'm going to track properly," Keith replies, sliding off of Red's back. She shuffles away a little, nipping at the bits of grass that are growing in spite of the heavy tree limbs blocking out most of the sun. Keith crouches in the dirt, looking around intently at the foliage, at the scuffs marking the edge of the trees.

"What are you looking for?" Lance asks, his voice hushed.

"A deer." Keith bites his lower lip, thinking for a moment. "I think it's a fairly young buck. He's been rubbing his antlers on the trees, there, but they're not that big."

Lance follows his finger point to a pine tree, where the bark has been scraped away to the tender pale wood underneath. "You can tell where he's gone?"

"Yes," Keith says. He stands up, squinting in the gloom, the faint mist rising between the trees as the air heats the cold earth. "I want to--"

They both grow quiet as something crackles nearby, brush shifting. The horses go still except for their ears, and Lance is as frozen as if he were made of glass or ice, his hand raised in midair and his eyes trained on the spot the noise came from.

Keith lets the dagger he keeps up his sleeve creep into his palm, waiting silently for something, anything to happen -- *it's not going to be a bear*, he tells himself, but part of him goes cold with trepidation anyways, desperately trying to think of how to defend himself, and Lance, and Red all at once. A bead of sweat slides down his temple despite the cool air.

He doesn't realize he's holding his breath until it whooshes out of him at the sight of a familiar gray snout breaking through the bushes. The wolf, trotting carefully into the clearing, perks her tail up at the sight of him, her tongue lolling out of her mouth. *She knows me*, he thinks wondrously, starting to smile, but before he can call out to her, her friendly demeanor turns into a half-snarl with hackles raised.

"Keith, don't move." When Keith turns to look at Lance, he's sitting with his bow nocked and an arrow pointed at the wolf, his eyes trained on her intently. The wolf starts to growl, and Red shifts nervously next to him, her eyes rolling in their sockets.

"Don't!" Keith cries out, instinctively throwing himself between Lance and the wolf. Lance curses sharply and points his bow up at the trees, and the wolf stops her snarling immediately.

"I could have shot you," Lance snaps out, looking strangely wild-eyed, his pointed tooth flashing as he scowls at Keith. "What are you--"

Keith kneels in the grass next to the wolf and she comes up to him immediately, pressing her huge body to his chest and rubbing her face against his. Her hot breath stinks of her last meal, blood and meat and the sweet scent of decay, but he ignores it and presses his face to her neck, revelling in her warmth. His arms barely fit all the way around her, but she allows him to wrap them around her neck and hold on.

"Um," Lance says.

"She's a friend," Keith says, his voice muffled by her fur. "I knew her when I was younger." Her chest rumbles against his own, a pleased growl reverberating through her body and into his.

"This country is insane," Lance murmurs. "Singing rocks and princes who sneak into secret passages and wolves that you can hug. Stars save me."

Keith feels his face go hot. "I forgot you saw that," he mutters. The wolf shifts a little in his arms, squirming to break free, and Keith lets her go. She pads a few feet away, carefully stepping away from Red, and then sits back on her haunches, watching him with wide, golden eyes.

"Your Highness, it's not something I'm likely to forget," Lance says, amused. He moves the bow to his back again, seeming to finally agree that the wolf isn't a threat. His mare cautiously shifts her weight underneath him, but she seems calm as well, and Red has grown comfortable enough to go back to eating grass.

Keith clears his throat, then says, "You called me by my name, a moment ago." He hadn't really realized it until Lance had addressed him by his title again, and the dissonance was stark -- his voice when he's called his name has been desperate and rough, and remembering it sent shivers down Keith's spine. *Your Highness* in Lance's voice held all of the formality and distance it was meant to evoke, and he found he hated it.

Lance flushes red, the color darkening his cheeks as he ducks his head shyly. He's so attractive Keith almost blushes himself. "I'm so sorry, Your Highness, I never meant to--"

"I didn't mind," Keith interrupts. His throat feels weirdly scratchy, so he clears it. "I don't mind. If you call me that."

Lance stares at him, open-mouthed. "I -- I couldn't--"

"You saw me hanging out of a portrait with dust in my hair," Keith says dryly. "I would think calling me by my name would be the least untoward thing about our relationship so far."

Lance laughs weakly, running a hand through his hair and looking off into the forest, his brow furrowed in confusion. "I can't figure you out at all. I thought I knew, I thought I had an idea of what to expect, but you keep -- you keep changing in front of me."

Keith blinks at him. "I'm not trying to change," he says. *I just have so many things I have to be*, he thinks to himself, not without some bitterness. *And I don't know what parts are truly me anymore.*

"I know," Lance says, looking at him again. His dark eyes are smiling, and his mouth follows suit. "It will sound very strange to use your name after the formalities for so long."

"If my horse can get used to you in an afternoon, you can adjust to this," Keith says, and his own smile feels like relief -- he'd felt a little like he was balancing on the edge of a precipice, and now he's got solid ground under his feet again.

Lance laughs. "Fine. What are we going to do with a wolf, Keith?" He says the name liltingly, almost teasingly. Keith feels like he's swallowed a gallon of mead, light and bubbly and warm all over.

"She's here for the hunt," he says, glancing at the wolf again. "She'll help us."

"Oh, of course," Lance says, all faux-lightness and understanding. "Why didn't that occur to me from the start?"

Keith shoots him a look. "I told you I knew her when I was younger. She hunted with my mother and me years ago." The wolf's ears perk up, and her head tilts to the side -- she looks so much like an overgrown dog that there's a swell of warmth in Keith's chest, that same overwhelming urge to call her his own that he'd had to swallow down as a child.

He ignores it as best he can, then gestures to the tree where the deer has scraped the bark away. "Find," he says simply, and the wolf raises her nose to the air, sniffing, and then lopes away and into the woods.

“Can you speak to animals as well?” Lance asks, and only half-sounds like he’s joking.

Keith ignores him, pulling himself into his saddle quickly, and urges Red to follow the wolf.

The wolf’s easy lope has turned into a run by the time he catches up to her, but it’s not too quick, and it’s simple enough for Keith to keep track of her flashing gray tail through the brush and the trees. The sun rising above them in the sky breaks through the gloom of the forest like dazzling golden beams of light, bolts of warmth in the cool winter air that she darts through like she’s playing a game.

His breath comes quick in his lungs like he’s running too, like he’s part of the pack, nipping the leader’s heels and swallowing his excited howls until the prey is taken down. He can hear Lance riding behind him, closer than before, and it’s like his heart is swelling in his chest, too big and too light -- he feels like the lanterns they light at the summer solstice that they send floating into the nighttime sky, flickering and warm.

He can’t believe she’d shown up, after all these years. It feels like a sign, somehow.

The wolf never wavers from her path, although she slows now and again to sniff the air. The only sound is the horses’ hooves on the ground and the distant cry as the others’ hounds find prey; even the birds have gone silent, as if they know the hunt is afoot today.

The wolf finally draws to a complete stop, turning to look back at Keith with her tongue lolling out of her mouth, her chest heaving. Keith dismounts in an instant, a hand straying to his waist to check his arrows. He takes Red’s reins and pulls her gently to the side, tucking her next to a tree.

“Aren’t you going to tie her off?” Lance asks quietly. Keith glances at him, surprised to see him already out of his saddle as well, reins in hand -- he hadn’t even heard him moving.

“If something happens I want her to be able to flee. She’ll only go back to the castle. Your horse would do the same, but I won’t stop you from tying her if you like.”

Lance shakes his head, letting the reins slip from his fingers. “Lead on,” he whispers.

The wolf waits until they’re close behind her before she continues, nose to the ground as she follows the scent of the buck. Keith has his bow in hand, mindful of everywhere he’s stepping, heart pounding in his chest. Next to him, Lance walks as silent as a ghost, although he barely bothers to glance down.

The foliage around them thins, and the sound of running water catches his ear -- a small stream, likely too small even for fish to live in. The wolf slows, then stops, glancing back at the two of them. Keith moves closer, and Lance follows him close enough that Keith feels warmth all along his side. Pressed elbow to elbow, they peer around the trunk of a particularly large tree and movement catches Keith’s eye.

It’s the buck. His antlers are larger than Keith had anticipated, his bulk slim and sleek, still a little too small for his long legs but well on his way to maturity. He drinks from the stream

with one foot in the water, ears swiveling, ever watchful. Keith's breath catches in his throat; he can hear the blood rushing in his ears, pounding with each pulse of his heart.

The deer is alone. Strange, for a herd creature, especially one so young.

"Keith," Lance whispers, his breath stirring the hair near his right ear. "Are you--?"

Keith nods sharply, his fingers tightening on his bow. The feathers at the end of his arrow are soft against the inside of his wrist as he pulls an arrow out of his quiver, the shaft of the arrow smooth against his calloused fingers as he draws the string back.

The world narrows to sensation -- the warmth of Lance's hand pressing steady against his shoulder, the sharp sting of the bow string against his fingers, the stream trickling in his ears, the dry taste of his tongue in his mouth. The deer is still drinking, unaware of the screaming heart in Keith's chest, the heavy breath in his lungs.

Something twists in his chest to look at the buck -- he's no stranger to hunting animals, since he grew up hunting with his mother and their pack of wolves. It wasn't something he relished, but his mother had reminded him again and again to take in the lessons of the hunt more than the kill itself -- how to be patient, how to track, how to blend into the trees and brush and hide your scent. *You just have to remember your place in nature, little bird, because nature is a far better teacher than myself.*

He knows how to hunt, but this feels different somehow. The fire that usually sits in his chest when he hunts is banked at the sight of the deer lifting his head, huge dark eyes blinking long lashes as his tongue flicks at water left on his nose. A deer all alone in the woods, still young and growing into his body.

Let go, he thinks. Just let go.

The bow trembles in his hand for a moment, and then the arrow flies.

It buries itself in a birch tree on the other side of the stream, thudding loudly enough a few birds startle into flight.

"You missed on purpose," Lance breathes out, eyes wide. Keith's stuck frozen in place, holding his bow aloft. His heart is just as still in his chest.

The deer jolts violently and spins in place, water splashing around his hooves as he turns to face them. He makes a low grunting noise, and Keith has only a moment to realize what's about to happen before the deer lowers his head and charges with antlers pointed straight at them.

Lance's hand on his shirt grips tight and hauls him back, and the wolf snaps her teeth in warning, but the deer is either unafraid or unseeing in his rage, because he runs without slowing down at all. Keith is breathlessly stumbling backwards when the world tilts beneath him and a blinding pain burns its way through his right leg. He smashes to the ground all at once.

The world goes blurry for a moment, and then dark as he closes his eyes and curls in on himself. He can hear snarling, and the frantic whinnies of his horse in the distance, and the thudding of hooves on the solid, cold earth.

There is the high, thin sound of something screaming in fear.

The pain in his leg recedes enough that he can think straight again, and he struggles to sit up slowly, looking for Lance immediately.

Everything has gone still and quiet by the time his vision clears, although he can hear Lance breathing heavily and the wolf still rumbling with a growl. They both stand next to him, crowded in front of his fallen form. Lance is holding his bow in his hands.

The deer is on the ground, an arrow through his head.

Keith must make some sort of noise, because Lance turns to him, that same wild-eyed look all over his face again, and he crouches in front of him and cups his face all in the same swift movement.

“You’re okay,” he says, halfway firm and halfway a question. “Keith, you’re okay, right?”

“I’m fine,” Keith says, and he is, although his leg still stings enough he doesn’t really want to look at it. He looks at the deer, feeling strangely numb, his head ringing. “You killed him.”

“He was going to kill you,” Lance says. He doesn’t look at the deer, which the wolf is sniffing at with delicate interest -- his eyes are focused on Keith’s face, his hands warm on his cold cheeks. “Keith, look at me. You had a perfect shot for his throat, I saw you -- why did you miss?”

Keith swallows, flexing his hands, surprised to find them gripping Lance’s shirt; he hadn’t realized he’d moved them, hadn’t realized how tightly he was holding on until his fingers protested. “I just -- I don’t know why. I just did.”

Lance makes a weak sound, a strangled laugh, and lets his hands drop from Keith’s face. “You really are the strangest prince,” he murmurs, letting his head fall forward with something like relief. Keith exhales a little, a half-laugh of his own, then winces as feeling floods back into his foot.

Lance notices immediately, brow furrowing, and then looks to where Keith’s gaze has fallen. A hissing sound escapes his mouth, just as the sight registers for Keith.

His foot is twisted at an unnatural angle, caught between two pieces of root from the tree they’d been hiding behind. Looking at it makes him feel slightly sick, so he looks back at Lance, who’s biting his lower lip.

“Do you think we can get the boot off without cutting it?” he asks.

“I think so,” Keith says slowly, reaching out, but Lance beats him to it, picking Keith’s foot up and gently drawing the leather boot down his calf.

It's -- *agony*, the kind of pain that hurts so much he can't even think straight as his brain wipes clean of anything but broken screaming. He can tell Lance is being as careful as possible, but just the whisper of movement has pain like daggers stabbing into his leg shooting up and down his body. It hurts so much that involuntary tears spring into Keith's eyes, but he bites his tongue hard enough to bleed and blinks until the tears are gone, because Lance is focused and he doesn't want to distract him.

The boot barely comes off, because Keith's ankle is already so swollen at the joint that it's turning purple and blue. Lance makes another sympathetic noise, touching just above the blooming bruise of color with the barest brush of a fingertip.

"This looks -- bad. You need a healer, Keith." Lance looks at up at him through his lashes and blinks in surprise. His hand comes up and wipes at Keith's cheek, smoothing away tear tracks Keith hadn't even been aware of. His touch is unbearably soft. "I'll go get one and bring them back here to you, alright?"

"No," Keith says, louder than he means to. The wolf's ears perk up, and Lance draws back from him, staring. "No, I -- Lance, you can't even imagine what would happen if I went back like this. I'd be -- they'd tear me apart. I'm supposed to be *king* next year, and I -- I can't even kill a stupid deer for the hunt I'm leading, and then I hurt myself like this? I can't." His voice cracks a little on the word, and he shakes his head wildly, knowing he sounds unhinged but unable to stop the words spilling out. He closes his eyes rather than see the expression on Lance's face. "Lance, I'd rather *walk* back out of this forest on a broken foot than have them see me like this. I have to -- I have to be the king they expect me to be."

The silence that follows is broken only by the sound of Keith breathing in sharp, sudden bursts.

All of a sudden, a hand touches at his neck, thumb against his jaw. He opens his eyes to see Lance smiling at him, something undefinable in his blue eyes. Wry amusement, maybe, or resignation.

"Alright," he says. "I understand. Do you have any healing charms on hand?"

"In my saddlebag," Keith says, relieved that Lance hadn't laughed at him, or ignored him, or worse -- asked him what his silence was worth. Lance is already on his feet and digging through Keith's bag, making a triumphant sound when he finds the little bluish green charm and comes back, tapping it to release the magic.

It's an instantaneous relief, numbness spreading up his leg like cold stroking fingers. The swelling recedes a little, but the color of the injury actually grows darker in response to the magic. It isn't healed, not nearly, but it's enough that Keith thinks he'll be able to ride back out until he can get to Adam.

"I'll set up a marker for someone to collect the buck, and we'll head back for the courtyard. We can say you were bored after your kill and wanted to return early," Lance says, finding another charm and tapping it so that bright red sparks shoot up over them and above the treeline.

“My kill?” Keith asks, blinking.

“It would have been,” Lance tells him firmly, “and there’s no reason for them to think otherwise.”

“You have different arrows than me,” Keith reminds him, and feels something twist hotly in his stomach at the mischievous smirk that steals over Lance’s face. He seems to light up within when he smiles like that, a trickster god descended from legends made manifest in the wicked point of his grin.

“True,” Lance says, raising a brow, “if I had shot the deer with one of my arrows they would be able to tell.”

Keith’s eyes widen and he looks at the deer again, where a red-feathered arrow really is sticking out of its head. “You stole one of my arrows?” he asks, glancing back to see Lance already stepping away to get the horses and bring them closer.

“I grabbed an arrow from your quiver when you fell backwards,” Lance says. At Keith’s stare, he says, rather defensively, “They were closer than my own arrows!”

Keith wants to say, *It’s not that you used one of my arrows, it’s that I never even felt you take one*. That moment is crystallized perfectly in his mind, the sharp pain of his ankle twisting, the sound of hooves pounding like drums in his ears, the warmth of Lance’s hand fading as he jerked out of his grasp.

Instead he glances at the deer and says, “I suppose it’s lucky they were.”

“I’m a lucky guy,” Lance says, and enough levity has returned that he winks at him, and Keith finds it in himself to roll his eyes. “Now, let’s get you back in the saddle.”

Keith starts to reach for the tree next to him, weakly trying to pull himself to his feet again, but Lance makes an annoyed noise and swats his hands away, then tucks one arm under Keith’s knees and the other behind his back and lifts.

The motion is so smooth Keith barely registers he’s being carried until his legs swing back and forth where they’re folded over Lance’s arm. Lance gives him a look, displeasure evident in his voice when he says, “You didn’t *really* think you were going to walk on this, did you?”

“I can make it to my horse,” Keith says in a thin voice, trying not to think of how close he is to Lance’s face right now, how tightly he’s holding onto Keith’s back and thighs. His face feels hot all over, and he spares a prayer to the stars that he won’t actually burst into flames in Lance’s arms. “You won’t even be able to lift me that high, Lance.”

“Oh, ye of little faith,” Lance says, shaking his head, and walks Keith across the clearing to where Red is standing more patiently than he’s ever seen her be before.

Keith barely has time to feel dubious at Lance’s confidence, because Lance is carrying him like he weighs nothing at all. His strong grip tightens a little, and Keith braces himself, ready to fall when Lance realizes that Red is taller and Keith is heavier than he realized.

The fall never happens.

Lance wearing a loose white shirt as usual, but Keith can see the muscles in his shoulders bunch and flex as he lifts Keith up and above his head, placing him in the saddle with his feet hanging over one side.

Keith wobbles a little, feeling dazed -- he's not sure if it's the magic from the spell or the heat that's threatening to consume him from the inside out as Lance reaches out and grabs him at his hips, steadying him.

"Let's try to get your leg on the other side," Lance says, seemingly unaware that Keith is in the middle of a minor crisis. His hand is fitted to Keith's waist so that his thumb is resting on the sensitive place at his hipbone. "Keith?"

"Yes," Keith says quickly. "Yeah, right."

"If it hurts too much we'll just pretend you're inventing a new style of riding," Lance says, grinning.

"Yeah, because I'm such a trendsetter in this court," Keith says dryly, prompting Lance to laugh. Keith grins, then braces himself again and begins the long and arduous process of lifting his aching foot up and over the back of Red's neck. Lance helps hold his leg aloft, fingers careful at the back of his knee and calf, and finally they lower Keith's leg to his other stirrup.

"I'll get your boot," Lance says, then gathers it and Keith's bow from where they were left on the ground. The wolf hovers around him, then looks up at Keith with an almost curious expression on her face.

I'm sorry, he thinks at her, for not finishing the hunt.

She tilts her head, then looks at Lance again, her tail flicking back and forth. She takes a few steps closer to Keith, then stops. Her golden eyes hold his, intelligence and knowing practically pouring out of her, and he honestly thinks she must understand him, and expects him to understand her, but all he can see is --

Little bird.

She tips her head back and howls, long and low and so eerily lonely that his heart aches all over again. As soon as the howl fades from her throat, she darts her way out of the clearing and disappears into the brush, the sound of her padding feet fading as quickly as she'd come.

"Uh, bye I guess," Lance calls out after her, startling Keith out of his thoughts. He glances at him and realizes Lance is at his side again, boot in hand. "This is gonna suck, but if we're committing to this, you probably shouldn't ride out of the forest with one boot missing."

"I'll be fine," Keith says. It's mostly true -- he grits his teeth through the process of Lance sliding the boot back onto his foot, easier with the swelling gone down but still painful enough that it breaks through the numbing effects of the healing charm. It doesn't make his

mind white out again, though, and he almost feels better having something wrapped around his ankle, even if it's going to hurt to have to do that all over again later.

Riding back out of the forest is an experience he does his best not to focus on, although Lance tries to distract him with stories from Altea, including one about the elusive queen's thief and all of her antics over the years and years she's been stealing secrets and magical items for the rulers of the country.

"Wouldn't that make her like, a hundred years old?" Keith asks through clenched teeth, trying not to move his foot too much. Red is walking as sedately as she's able underneath him, barely even trying to go faster the way she usually would. He's going to have to have Lance give her a half dozen lumps of sugar later as a reward.

"The queen's thief is obviously magic," Lance says matter-of-factly. "No one's ever seen her when she's spying on people, but she's in the castle all the time. I saw her, once."

"You saw her?" Keith asks skeptically. "How?"

"I have a friend who works in the castle as one of the queen's diplomats, and I was delivering a message for him." Lance leans forward in his saddle a little, grinning slyly at Keith. "What do you want to guess she looked like?"

Keith is too tired and in pain to guess, but he offers Lance a half-hearted guess. "The most beautiful person you'd ever seen?"

"No, not her," Lance says, his smile dimming a little. His face goes suddenly serious, his mouth going straight at the edges and eyes flicking away. "That's -- not her." He meets Keith's eyes again and grins. "I'll just tell you. She had green eyes, and skin as white as snow, and long curly white hair, and her teeth were sharp like--"

"Are you talking about the White Lion?" Keith interrupts, scowling at him. "You're saying she was wearing a White Lion mask."

Lance laughs, his own sharp teeth flashing. "Yeah. She wears it all over the castle. I think only the princess has ever really seen her face. And her family, I suppose. I was pretty disappointed when she turned around and it was just like looking at my favorite toy as a child."

"A thrilling tale," Keith murmurs, but he's still smiling a little.

"It got us through this forest," Lance says, gesturing at the thinning trees as the sound of music starts to filter back in, chirping voices and laughter filling the air. "I'll go get Shiro as soon as we're back in the stables. You can stay there until we find this healer."

"Make sure you tell him it has to be Adam," Keith says, then straightens in his saddle despite the flare of sharp pain in his foot as the crowd cheers long and loudly at the sight of them.

"Your Highness!" someone shouts.

"Prince Keith, how was the hunt!"

“Are you done already, Prince Keith?”

Keith smiles, running a hand over his braid to set it straight against his back. He tries to look the way his father usually does, confident and collected, good humor pouring off of him like water. His foot throbs unrelentingly in his boot like a headache. “We, um, found a decent-sized deer and decided that was enough for the day. I was too eager to get back to the festivities here to linger in the woods. It’s our last chance to share each other’s company for the year, right?”

A few whispers break out that he can see, but most people are beaming at him, clapping politely and nodding at his words. He lets out a relieved sigh, nods his head at the assembled crowd and lets Red lead Lance’s mare back to the stables, doing his best not to catch anyone’s eyes.

A few other red sparks float above the forest that he can see, and there are still dogs baying every now and then. The hunt should continue for another few hours at least, so as long as Adam can get to him quickly, no one should notice his absence for a little while.

The stable is practically empty -- most of the horses housed here are out as part of the hunt, and many of the stablehands are enjoying the servant’s party that always happens in the back part of the courtyard during the Winter Hunt, with their own forms of festivities, usually involving some kind of mischief from Jax and Raj. It means that only Olia is there when they arrive and she’s tucked away in the loft, reading a book; she doesn’t even look up to acknowledge them.

Lance dismounts and casually walks over to Keith, reaching up to grab him by the waist and lifting him out of the saddle in one smooth motion -- it simultaneously makes his stomach flutter and his foot twinge in pain, but it’s the simplest way to get him off of the horse and out of sight. Lance gently lowers him to a bale of hay, taking care to take his injured foot and prop it up before he lets go of him.

He leans in close and whispers, “Shiro was still with your father in the courtyard. I’ll sneak a message to him and find this Adam person myself, alright? Will you be okay in here?”

“Fine,” Keith murmurs, glancing up at the loft. Olia turns a page and yawns.

Lance touches his shoulder once and then hurries away in a flurry of movement, leaving Keith to lean his head against the wooden walls of the stable and sigh.

The hunt plays in his head over and over like some kind of terrible dream -- the wolf appearing, and the deer ankle deep in the water, Lance standing over him like a hero from legend, bow raised in his hands. The deer dead on the ground, blood red sparks in the sky, the blinding pain and humiliation of tripping over his own feet -- Keith closes his eyes tightly and sighs again for good measure.

“All right there, Your Highness?” Olia asks idly. Another page turns.

“I’ll pay you double your wages today if you just go to your bunk, Olia,” Keith says wearily.

“Deal,” Olia says, snapping the book closed. She jumps down from the loft, ignoring the ladder, and when she walks past him he can see she has a sprig of hay stuck between her teeth. “Hope you had a good hunt, Your Highness.”

The door closes behind her before he can respond. Just as well -- he doesn't know how to feel about the hunt, to be honest. The honest joy of seeing the wolf, of hunting with her again is tempered by his inability to kill the deer; his giddy enjoyment of Lance's hands on his waist is dimmed by the knowledge that it was only because he was a fool.

The heavy door to the stable slams open, and Keith winces.

“Stars above, Keith,” Adam says in a low, irritated voice, “I was just thinking you were doing so well.” He sweeps into the stable with Lance bobbing in his wake, looking slightly overwhelmed.

“C'mon, Adam,” Keith says, trying for a winning smile. “It's been months since I've seriously hurt myself, this was overdue.”

“Do you hear yourself?” Adam demands, crouching near him. “Do you and Takashi take pleasure in making things difficult for me? This one says I'm not supposed to let anyone know, including the king.” He jerks a thumb at Lance, who stares bemusedly at Keith.

“Lance is just doing what I asked,” Keith says calmly, reassured to see him in spite of his annoyance. Adam reaches out with both of his hands and puts them to Keith's boot; just that slight pressure has him biting his tongue to keep from crying out. Adam notices, because of course he does, and lightens his touch immediately, brows furrowing.

“Keith, this is fractured badly,” Adam says, fingers hovering over Keith, mouth set in a frown. “It's gonna take me at least an hour to set it properly, and you really shouldn't be on it after.”

“I've got to finish the rest of the hunt,” Keith says firmly. Adam opens his mouth, and Keith holds up a hand. “I won't move around, I won't do any of the dancing. But I've got to be out there, you know that.”

Adam looks at him for a prolonged moment, then visibly softens at the edges -- his shoulders drop and he puts a hand on Keith's knee, warmth bleeding through the fabric. “Keith...you know don't have to push yourself, right? I've known you long enough and bandaged enough of your wounds to know that that's how you get into these kinds of situations. I know what Takashi says, and what the king says, but Keith -- your choices matter too, you know.”

His voice is quiet, his brown eyes serious. It the same expression he'd had when Keith had first met him, a perfect apprentice to the royal healer, complete with a studious expression and clasped hands at his back. Despite his quiet demeanor, Shiro had been taken with him immediately, to Keith's delight -- he'd embarrassed himself a dozen times every time they'd met that first year, tripping over his own feet or dropping weaponry at the sight of Adam walking through the courtyard, until eventually one day Adam's stern face had cracked into a smile at Shiro's misfortune and Shiro had looked like he was being lit from the inside out, glowing with happiness.

Adam was one of the people Keith trusted most in the world, not only because he was important to Shiro but because he'd kept Keith's secrets -- the embarrassing injuries he'd gotten practicing on his own with swords he could barely lift, his terrible baking attempts in the middle of the night, the things he felt he couldn't share even with Shiro for fear of disappointing him. The nightmares he'd had for months after his mother's disappearance were locked carefully behind his ribcage and Adam's promised silence in exchange for sleeping charms.

Feeling impossibly fond of him, Keith reaches out and puts a hand on Adam's, offering him a smile. "I promise it's what I want to do, okay? For myself. I want to see it through, Adam."

Adam exhales, sitting back on his heels. "You and Takashi really are secretly related, aren't you?" he mutters, more to himself than anything. "Fine. You're the prince, it's your choice, despite my infinitely more knowledgeable opinion. Alright, you there, er, Lance, I need you to help keep him distracted for this first little bit." Adam squares his shoulders, frowning at Keith's foot grimly. "It's going to hurt, especially since I'm going to be rushing it a bit so no one notices we're gone."

"How do I--?" Lance asks, and Adam reaches out without looking and pushes him towards Keith with one hand, still focused on Keith's foot.

"Just tell him a story or something," Adam says distractedly.

"A story," Lance echoes, raising his eyebrows at Keith. Keith raises his eyebrows back, feeling a little amused at normally confident Lance looking slightly flustered by Adam's brusqueness. "A story," Lance says again, more thoughtfully this time. He pauses, then grins and says, "What about the story of when I met Shiro?"

"Didn't you meet on a dock or something?" Keith asks. "Sounds boring."

"It was a tavern by the dock," Lance corrects him. Keith opens his mouth to say something pithy about sailors, but before he can do anything, Adam grabs his leg just below his knee with both hands and his foot turns to burning ice, a scalding and numbing kind of pain that twists in on itself like fire.

He doesn't cry out, but it's a close thing -- his mind goes fuzzy and soft for a moment, melting like a candle held to a flame, and then he registers a touch to his hair, to his hand. His hand is warm because -- because he's holding Lance's hand, he realizes, and Lance is staring at him with wide, startled eyes. He focuses on those eyes and feels himself slot back into his body like a sword being sheathed, steadying himself with a deep breath.

Keith says through gritted teeth, "Tell me about meeting Shiro." Below him, Adam makes a soothing noise and the pain in his foot lessens, just a little.

Lance glances down at Adam, then back at Keith, hesitating. Then he says, halting, "Well, Shiro was about to get into a bar fight..."

"*Shiro?*" Keith asks skeptically, distracted from the pain for a moment. Adam snorts a little, sounding amused. His foot feels as if it's been submerged in a frozen pond and then stuck by

a fire, but he can feel -- something happening. The bones shifting, maybe, which is a little strange to think about, so he thinks instead about the absent hold Lance still has on his hand.

“Well,” Lance says, drawing the vowel out into a lilting word. “It was more like he got involved in a bar fight than anything. He was trying to keep the peace. But these guys were about the size of two Shiro’s apiece, and he kind of ended up getting thrown over a table.” Lance gives a sheepish grin. “It was my table.”

“I bet you cracked a joke or something,” Keith murmurs, and Lance laughs a little, reaching out with his free hand to tug his braid sharply just once, a teasing gesture that makes Keith’s mouth go dry.

“You’re right -- I yelled out to the barmaid that I’d ordered a mug of beer, not a soldier, and she yelled back something that I don’t want to repeat in polite company, so I ended up shrugging and helping him back up.”

Keith can picture it -- the smokey tavern, the clamor of voices, the stench of alcohol and sea air and bad choices stifling their lungs. Lance, all honey-voiced and charming quips, brown skin illuminated by candles and dimly lit crystals, bringing a cup of beer up to his mouth and drinking deeply -- the way he’d done at the northern hills that day nearly a month ago now.

“I’m sorry,” Adam murmurs suddenly, and Keith has only a moment to brace himself, to wrench his brain away from the golden memory before the pain rips through him again, deeper this time; tears spring to his eyes as he feels the actual grating of his bones against one another, loud enough that all three of them wince.

“Shit,” Lance murmurs, and his grip on Keith’s hand tightens as he leans in closer. “Shit, just--”

Keith collapses against him, pressing his face to Lance’s shoulder and breathing shallowly -- he can smell hay and horses and something sooty, earthy. He says, his voice embarrassingly weak, “Keep going.”

“Keith,” Lance says, quiet, and Keith feels the barest brush of a hand against his hair again. He closes his eyes tightly and presses his face closer to the rough fabric of Lance’s shirt, letting the warmth of his skin bleeding through the material distract him from the awful noises coming from where Adam is working.

Lance inhales, his chest lifting Keith up with the movement, and then lets it out. “So,” he says, forced brightness dripping from his tone, “obviously I couldn’t just sit there, but it was also clear that we were no match for these guys barehanded, so I aimed my biggest smile at them, and I asked them about which ship they were on -- it was the *Anna Maria*, it’s funny how so many of these ships have Maria in them somewhere -- and I said, oh, do you know Jamie -- there’s always a Jamie on every ship out there, I think there’s a rule about them -- and they said they did, and I went on and on about how Jamie and I had been friends a few years back in Olkari and before they could realize I was lying my ass off to try and distract them, I’d bought them a few new beers and they were joking around like they were friends instead of two men who’d been seconds away from killing each other and us. And Shiro and I

managed to sneak out of there before they could remember that fact and he thanked me for helping him out and then promised to help me if I was ever in Marmora.”

Lance takes a deep breath as all of this spills out of him in one long rush, and by the time he’s done the pain in Keith’s leg has all but disappeared. Adam lets out a long sigh, then pats a hand against Keith’s knee.

“I’ll need to do some work on the bruising here, but your fracture is healed. It went pretty well, all things considered. Normally I’d take twice the time to do that and there’d be almost no pain, you know.”

“Thank you, Adam,” Keith murmurs. His mouth brushes Lance’s neck, and he tastes the salt of his sweat despite the cool air around them. Lance shivers underneath him, and the hand gripping his flexes a little. “You’re my favorite person in the whole world.”

“Don’t tell me lies, Keith,” Adam says, a strange mixture of fond and exasperated. “And Lance, thank you for keeping him distracted -- and I suppose for saving the love of my life’s ass in a bar once. He neglects to mention all the trouble he gets into when he’s away.”

“Did I just get him into trouble?” Lance asks, sounding a little worried.

“That’s Takashi’s usual state of being,” Adam says wryly.

Keith levers himself up and away from Lance, hands braced against his chest. Lance’s own hands wrap around his forearms, helping him regain his balance. “I’ve got to get back out there,” Keith says, glancing towards the sound of music and raised voices. “They’ll have the deer back, soon, and I’ll be expected.”

“I’ll just be a moment,” Adam says, standing and shaking out his hands absently. “Need to recharge a bit, then I’ll fix your bruising and you’ll be good for the next few hours. I am going to be seeing you tonight to make sure it’s alright, though, and don’t you dare try to get out of it.”

“Fine,” Keith says reluctantly.

“I think this is the first time I’ve seen you so meek,” Lance says, amused. Keith glances at him, feeling himself flush pink because they’re both still touching each other, and this is -- now that he’s not in pain he’s remembering that no one touches him this way, ever, not since the masquerade at least, and --

Lance’s hands are big, his fingers long enough that they easily wrap all the way around Keith’s wrists, and Keith is determinedly trying not to think about those same hands cupping his face, gripping at his waist.

This day is impossibly long and strange.

“Don’t get used to it,” he finally manages to say, long past the time a normal response would have been expected. Lance doesn’t say anything in reply, just smiles at him, and he waits until Adam declares him fit for walking again before he lets go of Keith’s wrists.

Long after the speeches, and the cheerful toasts, and the slain trophies presented to the king, and the warm praise from his father and Shiro's quietly worried face and Adam's fussy ministrations -- long after all of that, when Keith is tucked into his bed under a heavy blanket and still shivering from the cold, he can feel the scalding heat of that touch on his wrists lingering.

It's almost insulting that after his long hours of trudging through passageways, pressing his face against grimy walls and dusty doorways, his first overheard conversation between his father and Kolivan is entirely an accident.

He spends the day avoiding everyone, his tutors and his guards and Shiro, deciding that for once he was just going to read the book he'd been neglecting for more than a month now, to take a little time for himself. He finishes it midday and starts in on another without really meaning to, stretching drowsily in the warm chair he's been curled up in.

He also doesn't meant to fall asleep in the library, and he certainly doesn't meant to do so sprawled out behind the soft and cushioned chair -- he'd been too lazy to light a candle or find a light crystal, and had chased the last rays of sunlight as they fled the room by laying across the floor with his book, the way he had when he was a child.

Now he wakes to a room dimly lit by a light charm, his arm numb beneath his head and hair from the fur rug he'd fallen asleep on stuck in his mouth. His eyes are still blurred with sleepiness, and he almost sits up to stretch before he realizes someone is speaking in a voice just above a whisper.

"The rumors are still unsubstantiated but I believe them," Kolivan says softly, and Keith goes very still when he registers that the deep sigh that follows belongs to his father. "The attacks have been carefully planned to leave no real evidence but it's the Altean border, Your Majesty. And that, coupled with the espionage we know is happening--"

"We have no proof they poisoned that well," the king says, but his voice sounds weak to Keith's ears, and clearly to Kolivan's too.

"They were seen by no less than three witnesses whom I consider reliable," he says quietly. "Wearing their royal colors. They are trying to bait us, sire. I know you are reluctant to strike, I know this is the last thing you want to pass on to Keith--"

"We cannot go to war with them," his father says, and his voice rings with an authority that it had never held before his mother vanished. The shock of it is almost enough to make him miss what he's actually saying, but then the words register and his blood runs cold as snow because -- *war*? Keith swallows, and it sounds like thunder in his head, but thankfully neither of them seem to hear him. "That cannot be my legacy," his father continues, "and I will not make it Keith's either. You said this would be taken care of before the end of the year, Kolivan--"

"Your Majesty, inaction gains us nothing, and the longer we wait, the more time we give them to strike us." Kolivan's voice is emotionless as ever, steady and implacable, and Keith

knows it's wearing at his father by the way he exhales slowly, shifting uncomfortably. It's always been Kolivan's strongest asset as an advisor, his methodical and objective way of looking at everything; it's always been why Keith could never really like him, or trust him.

His father does, though, on both counts, especially because his mother had as well. "Send another group of scouts across the border -- don't engage, just -- have them get some kind of proof. *Something*, Kolivan. Perhaps the queen isn't aware of what's happening. Perhaps she's testing me, or testing Keith. Perhaps it will lead to a war. Whatever the case, I want to have the truth at my back to guide me, and to ensure our neighbors don't take this opportunity to point fingers at me as pretext for attacking as well."

Kolivan takes a beat too long to answer, his only indication of displeasure, but eventually replies, "Yes, Your Majesty. I'll see to it right away."

A single set of footsteps walk away from the room, but the light lingers, and Keith listens to the sound of his father collapsing into the chair he'd been sitting in only a few hours ago. The sound he makes is less a sigh, more pure exhaustion.

A war with Altea, Keith thinks hollowly. Of all the things his father might have been hiding from him, this was not something that he'd been prepared for. There hadn't been war on the continent for a century, not since Taujeer and Galra had fought over their borders. Marmora, landlocked and reliant on the others for access to trade outside of the continent, had always tried to maintain a peaceful relationship with their neighbors, even when their neighbors hadn't agreed.

Altea had always been their friend and ally. It made no sense that they would attack unprovoked.

"Krolia," Keith's father murmurs, and Keith's heart stutters in his chest at how soft his voice is. "What in the world do I do?"

No one answers him; Keith lays on the floor and listens to his father breathe for what feels like hours, and then listens to him leave the room without speaking again. Darkness falls all around him, and Keith stays where he is, hidden and quiet, thinking of a thousand different things.

.

He tries not to go to the kitchens when there are others around, which means sneaking into them in the wee hours of the morning before the sun has begun to rise -- the head cook usually arrives a little past four in the morning to start on the breads, so Keith waits for the last servant to finish scrubbing a pan or cleaning the floor, usually only a short while past midnight, and then heads in.

He doesn't know why he likes the kitchens so much -- he's terrible at cooking, even with something as simple as eggs, but he thinks maybe it's because it's soothing to him to be surrounded by so much warmth. The fires in here are never put out, merely banked, so the whole room is lit with embers from the two enormous fireplaces that take up an entire wall of the kitchens.

He'd used this place as a hideout when he was younger and trying to escape lessons, before he'd discovered all of the secret passages. The cooks had indulged his terrible attempts at baking, and had dutifully kept quiet when his tutors had come looking for him while he hid under sacks of potatoes and carrots. He'd been given cookies and pastries and all manner of treats while servants cooed over him.

He supposes it's a refuge of sorts, although he rarely makes it down there anymore -- he's too embarrassed to keep trying and failing to cook in front of the servants, and he rarely has time for it anyways. Somehow it's still a surprise to find his feet leading him to the kitchens rather than his room only a short while after he leaves the library himself, his father's words still ringing in his head.

The room is empty and quiet except for the crackle of the fire, and he finds himself drawn to the sooty threshold of the fireplace, kneeling down and staring into the flames. The smell of whatever had last been made here lingers, smokey and strong and spiced like cinnamon, and he breathes in and out and lets the warmth seep back into his chilled fingertips. The embers throw off sparks as the charred wood settles and collapses in on itself, and he watches them dance and keeps breathing. His mind is very carefully blank.

He feels calmer after a while, and is just starting to think about going to bed when there's a soft noise of stone against stone, then the patter of footsteps. He turns his head just as Lance appears at the back entrance to the kitchens.

Lance doesn't seem to notice him at first, his eyes turned down and his mouth pursed in thought, and Keith realizes that for the first time since he's known him, Lance is wearing dark clothing -- he looks like a proper Marmoran, black shirt tucked into black pants. It looks good against his dark hair and broad shoulders; *he* looks good.

Keith must make some kind of noise, hopefully not a pathetic one, because Lance's gaze snaps to him immediately, hand raising sharply until he recognizes him and relaxes.

"Keith," he says, and Keith struggles not to smile at the easy way he says it -- the last few times they've met have been in front of others, and Lance has always deferred to *Your Highness*. "What are you doing?"

"What are *you* doing?" Keith counters, because it's the middle of the night and Lance's bunk is with the other stablehands outside of the castle. Lance glances to the side and then back at Keith, offering him a crooked smile.

"Was chatting with a friend and lost track of time. I was heading to bed and this is a shortcut." Lance shrugs his shoulders idly, and Keith tracks a strange tension to the movement. Before he can say something, Lance's smile widens. "Are you having one of your nighttime cooking sessions?"

It takes him a moment to realize what Lance is talking about, and then another to keep from flushing. Keith had almost forgotten he'd mentioned that to Lance when they first met, but clearly *Lance* hadn't. "I just needed a moment alone," he says, shifting a little on the stone floor. "I wasn't cooking."

“I can leave,” Lance offers, voice light. “You look pretty preoccupied.”

Keith glances at the embers, then back at Lance, who watches him with familiar eyes that gleam in the darkness. “I don’t mind,” he murmurs. “I’m just thinking.”

“Thinking or *thinking*?” he asks, putting special emphasis on the word and taking a step closer.

Keith snorts a little, wrapping his arms a little tighter around his knees as the fire dims a little more. “What’s the difference?”

“One is a sort of casual affair, and the other involves a lot of internal drama and frustration. I’ve been known to dabble in both, and the former is a lot more enjoyable than the latter.” Lance sneaks another step closer, and Keith buries his mouth against his arm so he won’t see the smile threatening to take over his face.

“I don’t think I’ve ever just thought, then,” Keith admits, well aware it makes him sound melodramatic. “There’s always something dramatic and frustrating happening in my life.”

“You *are* a prince,” Lance concedes, and now he’s close enough that the light from the fire is crawling up his chest and over his face, and Keith can see the flickering blue of his eyes. “I imagine there’s a lot to deal with.”

“Yes,” Keith says simply, and turns back to the fire. He doesn’t know how to tell Lance all of the things that linger in his mind when he’s laying in bed, or the thousand different responsibilities he finds himself mulling over at the start of the day; he memorizes names of nobles he has to woo, and servants he needs to maintain, and advisors he has to trust. He finds himself thinking of the foreign trade he has to improve, and the borders he has to watch, and the hundreds of thousands of people he’s going to be responsible for in only a few short months -- and he thinks of the threat of war, something he’d never considered would fall at his feet, and certainly not so soon.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Lance asks haltingly. He stoops to the ground, settling with his legs crossed so that his knee is touching Keith’s thigh, and Keith feels his gaze flick to their legs and back up at Lance. “Just -- I know what it’s like to have things build up,” Lance says, and there’s an edge of frustration to his voice that says he’s telling the truth, and Keith suddenly wants, more than anything, to stop thinking about his own problems; he wants to find out something, anything about this boy who won’t stop haunting his thoughts and dreams and every waking moment, but he doesn’t know how to say that without sounding strange.

“What’s your favorite color?” he blurts, and Lance looks surprised, brows raising. Keith swallows a curse and bites his lower lip. He’d bypassed strange and gone for ridiculous and embarrassing instead, which was honestly just like him.

“Um?” Lance asks, tilting his head. “It’s actually red.”

“Mine is blue,” Keith replies, grateful Lance was back to smiling. “I’m sorry, I know that was weird, I’m just -- I feel like you know a lot about me, and I don’t know as much about you,

so--”

“No,” Lance interrupts, “I get it.” He looks at the fire and the shadows play over his face, covering his mouth and cheeks and eyes rapidly. “I guess I’m used to people either knowing or not knowing things about me,” he says, and his shoulders rise and fall as he sighs. “I grew up somewhere where everyone always knew everyone else’s business, and I got used to not having to tell anyone anything. And then when I left, I just -- no one really cared to get to know anything about me, so I didn’t bother to tell them.”

Keith swallows, feeling stupid, and then says, “I care.”

Lance glances at him sharply. “About my favorite color?” he asks.

“And whatever else you want to share,” Keith says, shrugging his shoulder. “It would be nice to hear someone else’s problems, instead of dwelling on my own.”

“So you just want to commiserate,” Lance says, smiling with one side of his mouth. “I’m afraid none of my problems will amount to the things you must have to deal with.”

“I’ve been lucky so far,” Keith says quietly, “to deal with what I am. Leading hunts and answering letters and dealing with the court is nothing compared to what my father does.”

Lance leans in closer to him, his expression intent, and the place where their legs are touching grows warmer. “I’m sure you handle plenty, Keith. Being a prince can’t be easy; I know how hard it was for--” He cuts himself off, looking startled, then says, “I’ve seen you working, sometimes. I know you get up early and train, and I’ve heard Nyma and Shiro talk about all of the meetings you have to sit in, and the servants talk about all of the tutoring you have -- you’re not doing nothing.”

Keith ducks his face again, feeling himself grow hot around his ears. “I’m still not the king. There are things--”

He stops talking, because he’d been about to talk about the things his father did that he couldn’t, been about to mention the spectre of war that now loomed above him even now, when all he wanted to think about was the way Lance hadn’t pulled away from him, and the way his mouth looked curved warmly as he watched Keith.

“Keith?” Lance asks curiously, and puts a hand to Keith’s knee. The tips of his fingers press warmly against him, and Keith finds himself staring at them. There’s a smudge of ink against Lance’s knuckle.

“Nothing,” Keith says. And then, firmly to himself, “It’s nothing. I’ve changed my mind -- I do want to make something in here tonight.”

Lance’s eyes widen, and he lets out a short laugh. “I don’t think I’ll be much help to you, but I don’t mind sticking around.”

“You honestly can’t make things worse,” Keith tells him honestly, but it turns out to be a lie - between them they break a half dozen eggs, and flour ends up spilled across the floor, and

Lance accidentally sets off a water charm that ends up spewing hot water across the countertop and over the half-formed dough they've been trying to make.

In the end they end up sprawled across the countertops, laughing hard enough that Keith is breathless with it, and all thoughts of wars and rumors have fled from his mind, at least for tonight.

.

Adam always watches the soldiers during afternoon training sessions if they have them; he likes to pretend it's so he's close by in case something goes wrong, but Keith knows it's because he enjoys watching Shiro spar with his knights. Adam denies this, but his gaze always tracks Shiro no matter who's fighting, and Keith would tease him for it if it wasn't so endearing.

Keith normally trains along with the knights himself, but today he finds himself lingering with Adam on the edges of their practice grounds, tucked under the liminal shade of a tree that's turned orange and gold almost overnight. The wind keeps playing with the ends of his hair -- he'd been too tired to braid it this morning, and it's loose and curling and keeps blowing into his mouth, but he's too preoccupied to tie it back.

All of his tentative happiness from last night had evaporated by the time he woke up, cold and exhausted in bed. His mind keeps turning over the ways all of the people have been behaving around him lately, the furtive looks and the awkward staring and whispered exchanges behind surreptitious hands. He wonders who knows outside of his father and Kolivan -- the other advisors? Some of Kolivan's spies, surely, but what about the soldiers? What about *Shiro*?

On the field, Shiro's face is pink with exertion as he ducks underneath a sword and bats it away nearly effortlessly. People always underestimated Shiro because of his missing arm -- even his own men, long used to getting knocked on their asses by their leader, still try to take advantage of a perceived opening now and then, and end up flat on the ground and with a sword to their throat for their troubles.

Keith had never underestimated Shiro -- he'd grown up watching him train with the other soldiers, sneaking glances during lessons and hiding around trees as Shiro relentlessly swept the other soldiers away. He'd always felt strangely in awe of him.

Shiro had come from one of the small towns surrounding Ilun, skinny and dark haired and tall enough to make himself look even skinnier. He'd worked harder than any of the other soldiers from the moment he'd arrived, and rumors had started circulating that he was trying to become the youngest knight in the history of Marmora, a feat last achieved by Sir Alexandria nearly a hundred years ago at the age of twenty.

Shiro had managed his goal within two years of settling in the city. Even losing his arm in a skirmish at the western border hadn't slowed him down -- he'd been knighted at the age of nineteen, kneeling at the queen's feet with a smile spreading slowly across his face like a wildfire being fanned into flames.

He'd barely blinked when Keith, twelve years old and barely taller than the sword he carried, had demanded for Shiro to train him as well. He'd spent hours of every day with Keith, teaching him how to stand properly, and to hold his sword the way nobles were taught; but he'd also showed Keith how to care for his weapons and armor, how to thread a needle and how to dig a latrine and how to fight dirty if the situation called for it. He'd bandaged scraped knees and comforted Keith when he'd cried as a child and taken *care* of him for as long as Keith could remember.

Shiro was his brother in every way but blood -- so it made no sense that he'd kept something like the possibility of *war* in Keith's country a secret.

"Do you think Lance would be a good kisser?" Adam asks absently, dragging him roughly from his morose thoughts, and Keith looks up from where he'd been picking at the threading of his sleeve and says, "*Huh?*" so loudly that several bystanders who've also gathered to watch the training turn to stare at him.

Adam lets out a short laugh and claps Keith on the shoulder, grinning. "I've been asking you normal questions for the last five minutes, Keith." He raises his eyebrows pointedly and adds, "I'm not surprised that finally got you to pay attention."

"Sorry," Keith says, hunching his shoulders as he flushes. "I didn't meant to ignore you, I'm just--"

"Something on your mind?" Adam asks, tilting his head. Out in the yellowing grass, Shiro calls out an order and the knights jerk to attention, and Adam's gaze flicks naturally back towards him, a half-smile appearing on his face. Keith watches him for a moment, the softening at the corners of his eyes, the messy turn of his hair at the back of his head where he's forgotten to smooth it down.

He hums noncommittally, and Adam makes a curious noise, nudging him with one arm. His face is open, honest. "You can tell me, Keith, you know that. Healer's honor."

Keith feels unhappiness settle over him like a second skin, because he doesn't really want to know the answer to the questions in his head, but he knows he has to ask. He doesn't know how else to ask something like this, so Keith turns to stare at his own hands and says, "Did you know?"

Adam doesn't quite freeze, but his body goes still next to Keith's. "Know what?" he asks carefully, and Keith closes his eyes tightly.

"About Altea," he says quietly, but he already knows the truth.

Adam exhales, long and quiet. "A little," he admits, and just that alone is enough to have Keith's shoulders rising again. Betrayal swells in his gut like acid, stinging and hot -- Shiro could tell *Adam*, of course he could, he trusted Adam, but he couldn't share anything with *Keith*. "Not very much."

He'd said Keith was ready to become *king*, that he would be fine, but that had apparently been a lie. It was just another reminder that no one really thought he was ready for anything.

Neither do you, a voice in his head reminds him. He bitterly pushes the thought away and straightens his shoulders, facing Adam again.

“Well that’s more than me,” he snaps, and moves to walk away, but Adam catches him around the wrist and holds on tight, digging his fingers in when Keith tries to pull out of his grasp.

“Keith, honestly, calm down,” Adam says exasperatedly, and it just makes Keith more annoyed -- he already feels like a petulant child no one trusts, and he *hates* that he’s giving Adam a reason to treat him like one by storming away, but he suddenly doesn’t want to do this at all, doesn’t want to hear all the fake reassurances and the placations that Shiro wasn’t trying to hurt his feelings or leave him out, that lying by omission wasn’t really lying. “Takashi was just--”

“Adam, let me go,” Keith says, and he makes himself sound like a prince, cold and collected and above everyone and everything. Adam’s hand unlatches almost like a reflex, his brown eyes shocked. “Shiro can tell me all the reasons he kept this from me himself. Or he can just leave me in the dark again. I don’t particularly care.”

The lie is obvious to both of them even as he says it, but Adam doesn’t call him on it; he just watches as Keith walks away, wide-eyed and silent.

Keith trudges through the courtyard with fire flickering at his fingertips, annoyed and feeling even more upset at himself for feeling annoyed. He feels like everything is going in a loop, his frustration feeding itself and growing stronger, an ouroboros gorging itself on fear and insecurity and a gut-deep panic that’s been manifesting since he was sixteen.

There are so many things pushing at him from so many different directions -- he wants to be a good king for his people -- he *needs* to be a good son for his parents -- he wants to spend time with a common stable boy despite all the reasons it’s a bad idea -- he should be focusing on his country, where there could be a *war*--

Sudden footsteps jerk him from his thoughts, and then there’s a white shirt, broad shoulders in front of him.

“Hey there -- whoa.” Lance’s voice trips up a little in surprise, and Keith realizes that the small flames at his fingertips have turned into bigger ones, engulfing his whole fist. He makes himself unclench his hand, smoke unfurling from his palm as the fire extinguishes itself. “Are you okay?” Lance asks, his hand hovering just above Keith’s shoulder.

His eyes flick around the courtyard, and Keith realizes they’re in public, and Lance doesn’t want to spark any rumors.

“I’m fine,” he says shortly. “Tired,” he adds, because that at least should be something Lance could accept as truth, considering they were both up until the early hours of the morning cleaning up their mess in the kitchen.

“Me too,” Lance says, smiling wryly, “but I think this is something else.” He tilts his head and finally lets his hand rest gently on the curve of Keith’s shoulder, and Keith should shrug

him off but something sharp stitches itself in his chest, a heavy weight that's hovering somewhere between too much and not enough. Lance doesn't say the words out loud but his expression says *talk to me*, and Keith wishes he could, but--

"It's nothing," he says, rubbing at his face with his hand. His vision blurs as his fingertips press against the dark circles under his eyes, and the motion nudges Lance's hand from his shoulder. Lance lets it fall without saying anything. "I should get back to work. I have a thousand papers to read."

"Sounds fun," Lance comments idly.

"It's what I have to do," Keith replies wearily.

"Well...we could do something else?" Lance suggests, and Keith drags his hand away from his face to peer at Lance, who's still smiling. "It's just -- at the hunt last week, I noticed your stance when you were holding your bow wasn't the best. We could practice?"

Keith frowns. "My stance is fine."

Lance snorts. "For a Marmoran, maybe."

Keith scowls a little, crossing his arms. "You didn't even get to see me shoot for real."

"You could change that," Lance says innocently, and it's a bad idea -- all of his time spent with Lance is a bad idea, Keith knows himself well enough to know that, but he hates the thought of going back to his study and pretending to work while he thinks of all the lies and half-truths he's been told by the people he loves most.

He's never been good at ignoring bad ideas anyway.

"Fine," Keith says, giving in to his worst impulses again; he at least has the good sense to ignore the urge to grab Lance's wrist and pull him along. "Let's go somewhere else, though. The courtyard is too busy."

He means that there are too many people watching -- he can feel Adam's eyes still on him from across the grounds, and probably a half dozen other people too. He makes a sudden decision and looks at Lance with as straight a face as he can manage. "Grab a couple of bows from the armory and meet me where we met the wolf."

Lance nods with a placid smile, bowing his head formally. "As you wish, Your Highness." He leaves without looking back, a whistle falling from his lips.

Keith settles his shoulders and leaves the yard himself, knowing he's being watched intently and refusing to wonder why. There are a dozen different reasons at this point, and he's sure he'll hear the rumors soon enough anyway.

.

Keith sneaks into the kitchens for the second time in less than twelve hours and is immediately swarmed by cooks, who happily give him a basket filled with sandwiches and

fruit and a large skein of water when asked, along with a few charmed stones for cooling. None of them ask him who he's meeting, but Keith notices them packing extra strawberries even though he's never been that fond of them -- he has a sneaking suspicion that Lance might be, but the thought of asking them to confirm that makes him feel like combusting, so he thanks them and hopes he's not red in the face.

They send him on his way with cheerful bows and he uses one of the secret passages near the kitchens to tumble into the courtyard without being seen again. Technically he doesn't have any pressing concerns at the moment, but he has a feeling that Shiro will be looking for him before too long, and he doesn't -- he doesn't know what he wants to say to Shiro yet, so the less other people see him the better.

It's further into the woods than he remembers, but he'd been riding a horse before to be fair -- it takes him twenty minutes to find the clearing again, and Lance is already there, laying in the thin grass with his arms behind his head and his eyes closed peacefully, like he's sleeping.

"Took you long enough," he says without opening his eyes.

"I was getting something," Keith says, dropping the basket to the ground. Lance's eyes pop open and he makes an O with his mouth, which turns into a grin immediately.

"Food?" he asks, sitting up and reaching out with both hands. "Oh, you are a prince, I haven't eaten since before dawn and I'm starving."

"It's not that hard to find the kitchens," Keith tells him, opening the basket magnanimously despite his wry tone. "You were there just last night, spilling half the flour in the kingdom on the floor."

"The flour was all you," Lance says indignantly, then makes a rapturous noise as he spots the strawberries. He grabs a handful and stuffs half of them in his mouth without decorum, the red staining his fingertips immediately. Keith finds himself both grateful and resentful towards the cooks for including them. "These are my favorite," Lance tells him, tossing the green leafy parts aside. "They're rarely in season in Altea."

"We have special houses for growing them," Keith tells him, nibbling on a strawberry himself. He feels strangely nervous. He wants to ask a hundred questions about Altea, especially now that he knows they're possibly attacking his borders, but he doesn't know how to ask them to an Altean. He especially doesn't know how to ask Lance, when the best he could do in an attempt to learn more about him was blurt out a question about his favorite color in the middle of a completely different conversation.

"Your soil is different here," Lance tells him absently, biting another strawberry in half. The juice is staining his mouth now, turning it pink at the edges. "Back home, the earth is harder in places, so we can't grow as much for as long. My father used to complain about it a lot."

"I thought your family were fishermen," Keith says idly, biting his strawberry again. He's surprised when Lance drops the rest of his berry to the ground abruptly, then swallows in surprise, his shoulders suddenly rigid.

“We are,” Lance says, picking the berry up quickly and tossing it out of the clearing. He clears his throat, then adds, “We just -- grew some stuff of our own, since we were kinda far from Olkari and there wasn’t a lot of trade where we lived.”

“Ah,” Keith says. He squints at Lance, but he’s already gone back to digging around in the basket, and he makes a pleased noise at the sight of the sandwiches too. The moment of tension has passed before Keith could even really parse it, so he accepts the sandwich Lance hands to him and doesn’t press it.

It doesn’t take long for Lance to devour most of the food while Keith eats more sedately, trying his best not to dwell on the thousand things that are hovering in his mind. He thinks of and dismisses a dozen different things to ask Lance, about his home and about his family and about himself.

Before he can give up and just blurt out the first thing on his mind, Lance claps his hands together and says, “Okay.”

“Is the bottomless pit finally filled?” Keith asks, standing up.

“It wouldn’t be bottomless if it was, but it’s sated for now,” Lance says, grinning. “Come on, I already set up a few targets just past here.”

The targets are the same kind the soldiers use during practice, just simple sheets of paper with painted circles. Lance has hung them all around the trees at different heights and distances, with one high above the rest, nearly out of sight entirely.

“Show me your stance again?” Lance asks, bow already slung over his shoulder and quiver of arrows resting against his hip. Keith hadn’t heard him move again.

“It’s the same stance everyone uses,” Keith mutters, but he dutifully pulls out an arrow and draws his bow, feeling the familiar burn of muscles as the wood resists the movement. The string bites at his fingertips as he brings his hand back and anchors it near his mouth. A tendril of loose hair blows into and then out of his line of sight.

“Pretty good,” Lance says, circling him from behind. “But here,” he pushes on Keith’s elbow, nudging it straighter. His touch is firm, his fingertips lingering at the point of his elbow as if to keep Keith’s arm from rising again. “This should be a better angle. And you need to turn your body a bit more too.”

Another hand, this time at his waist; Lance fits his entire body behind Keith’s and pivots with him so that Keith turns alongside him, and then he leans in so that their faces are more or less at the same height.

Keith’s breath catches in his throat like he’s choking on it -- Lance is warm and solid behind him, just tall enough that Keith feels overwhelmed by his presence. The hand at his waist is light enough that he can barely feel it, but the sensation stays with him. In fact, other than the gentle touch at his elbow and his hip, Lance isn’t touching Keith at all, but he’s close enough Keith can smell hay and leather and something sweet.

He probably tastes like strawberries, Keith thinks, his blood boiling wildly in his veins.

“This will give you a better shot, and the recoil won’t be as bad with yourself braced like this.” Lance’s voice is matter-of-fact, like he stands this close to people and leans down over them all the time. Keith thinks if he tried to speak right now that the only thing that would come out would be a thin gasp of air.

“Whenever you’re ready just let go,” Lance murmurs in his ear. His cheek brushes against Keith’s hair.

The arrow flies from his fingertips nearly instantly, burying itself in the target with a thud that sends a few birds fluttering from the nearby bushes. It’s not quite perfect centered, but it’s close -- a lot closer than Keith had expected.

“Excellent,” Lance says, clearly pleased. The touch at his elbow disappears as Keith lowers his arm, but he doesn’t step back. Keith clutches his bow and feels slightly dazed at the continued proximity -- he’d been half-hoping and half-dreading Lance moving away. “Try again.”

“How did you learn to shoot?” Keith asks, desperately trying not to shiver as he notches another arrow. Lance’s hand touches him further up his arm this time, but he doesn’t correct the angle this time, just sets it there and leaves it.

“My mother,” Lance says absently. The warmth of his breath brushes the loose hair at Keith’s nape. “Good form, just anchor the arrow a little lower -- good, there.”

“Your mother?” Keith asks. The wind blows his hair into his face again, but before he has a chance to blow it out of the way, Lance is tugging it and tucking it behind his ear, smoothing his finger over the curl carefully. Keith feels a thousand sparks ricocheting in his stomach, bouncing off of his rib cage and lighting up his insides -- he holds his breath until Lance’s hand falls away again.

“Yes,” Lance replies, a smile evident in his voice. “She was a good teacher, but I was a -- hmm, a precocious child, so she made me practice this stance a lot when I got into trouble. I think I could shoot arrows in my sleep.” He says *precocious* like he means *a wild handful but I don’t want to say that* and Keith can picture it -- curly hair and wide blue eyes and restless hands that refused to settle no matter how many times his mother asked. The thought makes a smile curve his lips without thinking.

Keith lets the arrow fly again, and it’s a little bit closer to the center but not quite there. “My mother taught me how to shoot too,” he admits, and the flash of pain from talking about her is still there but it’s muted for once. “She was so good at it, but I always preferred swords.” He picks up another arrow and aims again, pleased when the movement feels a little more natural this time.

Lance makes a small noise behind him that Keith can’t decipher. “The queen...you were fifteen when she disappeared?”

He looses the arrow, and it ends up embedded at the edge of the target, noticeably further than his other shots, and Keith tightens his mouth and frowns. Lance exhales a little and steps away from him, and Keith finds he doesn't know if he appreciates it or hates the space after all.

"Yes," Keith says, making himself aim again even though all he wants to do is curl in on himself, an instinctive huddle to protect the soft and tender parts of him that are still bleeding even years later. His elbow levels out as he stretches the string and it only aches a little. "It was four summers ago."

"I couldn't believe it when we heard in Altea," Lance says quietly. The arrow flies again, a little closer to the center this time, but still not perfect. "She was always a good leader in our eyes. Our queen spoke very highly of her."

"I only met Queen Allura twice, when we were both children," Keith admits, "but I know my mother liked her even when she was still just a princess. She said she had a good look in her eyes. Like she was going to be a strong queen."

"Allura is incredible," Lance says, and there's a warmth of pride in his voice that Keith hasn't heard since he mentioned his family so long ago on their trip to the northern hills. "She cares about her people above all else and it shows."

Something about the way he talks about her makes Keith's fingers itch, the hair on the back of his neck standing up. "Have you met the queen?" he asks, trying to sound idle. He pulls back another arrow and Lance presses a warm palm against the middle of his back, forcing him to straighten up. Keith swallows hard, his tongue like rough grit against the roof of his mouth. The arrow strikes off center again.

"I have. She's a beautiful and inspiring presence," Lance says. He doesn't offer anything else and Keith isn't sure if he should press it. A queen who cares about her people above all else is a queen who might consider going to war against her neighbor if the reasons were right, but it wasn't like Lance would know what the queen of his homeland was thinking anyway.

Before he can open his mouth, Lance says, "Keith, your mother..."

Keith turns a little, looking at him directly for the first time since he started shooting -- Lance is all windswept hair and pink-stained mouth and furrowed brows, still so close that Keith has to tilt his head up to look him in the eye. Keith can see him struggling with something, can practically hear the words on the tip of his tongue that won't come as he opens and closes his mouth without finishing his sentence.

"What?" he asks, and it comes out softer than he means for it to, so it's strange when Lance flinches a little.

Lance looks at him with dark blue eyes and messy hair and an unfamiliar frown, and then sighs, soft and sad. "I'm sorry you lost her. I can't imagine how hard that must have been."

Keith turns away from him again, stringing another arrow as the words carve themselves into his chest and linger -- pity stings even more when it comes from someone you care about,

he's found.

"I miss her every single day," Keith says, and lets the arrow go. It embeds itself deeply into the center of the target, a perfect shot at last, but he's already drawing again. "Everything I do, I think of her." Another arrow pins itself next to the center arrow, quivering from the impact. "She was a great leader, and a good mother, and a kind person, and if I could trade places with her on that ship I would a thousand times over because she's the one who should be here now."

Three more arrows cluster around the target's center and Lance makes a soft noise like he's been wounded.

Keith blinks in frustration, fingers grasping for another arrow and touching only air in his empty quiver; his fingertips burn from firing so rapidly, and his chest hurts and Lance touches his waist again, one finger and then two and then all of them at once, and Keith feels his body slumping as the scalding bitterness seeps out of his throat and back into his heart where it belongs.

Lance doesn't say anything, just stands behind him and breathes, an overwhelming presence behind him, confusing and too much to think of, the way he has been since Keith first laid eyes on him.

"I'm sorry," Keith mutters. He has a thousand things he's sorry for and he doesn't know how to articulate them so he hopes that's enough. "I don't -- I need to go anyways."

"I didn't mean to -- Keith, *I'm* sorry, really," Lance says quietly, tugging at the cloth of his pants, but his grip isn't that firm and Keith slips easily out of his grasp. When he chances a glance at Lance, his face is tilted at downward angles, brows and mouth and eyes conveying unhappiness and regret.

"It's alright," Keith says, and even smiles to prove it, although Lance doesn't look convinced. "I've had a long time to get used to it, Lance, I promise."

"Don't go," Lance says, and he doesn't reach out for Keith with his hand again but the plea in his voice is a tether just the same. "There's more arrows, and I've got other things I could teach you. You don't have to leave just because I'm a dumbass."

His smile comes a little more easily this time, teasing. "If I left every time you were a dumbass, we'd never speak, Lance."

"Hey," Lance says mildly, but some of the guilt leeches out of his eyes, and the corner of his mouth curves up. "Please, stay. There's more strawberries," he says, trying to sound enticing, and Keith tucks his hair behind his ear and glances at the target, all of the arrows clustered around one another like quills on a porcupine.

"Alright," he says, and Lance breaks into a relieved smile, one so wide and bright that Keith feels a little stunned in its wake. "What's next?"

The next hour is filled with a lot of Lance methodically nudging Keith into new poses, and correcting his balance, and laughing when he complains about how unnatural and uncomfortable it all feels. Every touch makes Keith flush a little more, but Lance doesn't seem to notice, maybe chalking it up to frustration with Lance pushing his shoulder back for the fifth time in less than half a minute.

Lance shoots a few arrows as well, demonstrating how to shoot while rolling and the best way to hold a bow while moving, and Keith tries not to be too obvious at how he stares at the exposed skin of his forearms, the muscles shifting under his shirt as he pulls his bow taut again and again.

It's strange, Keith thinks, that being with Lance makes him forget all of the terrible things that have been on his mind lately. Stranger still that he doesn't mind forgetting them for once.

He manages to avoid Shiro for a solid day and a half, which is an entire day longer than he expected. He suspects that Adam might have asked Shiro to give him time to cool off, but Shiro is far less patient than his subordinates think, so Keith isn't really that surprised when he walks out of his study after a long day and right into Shiro's chest.

And it's just -- he's tired from the studying he'd done to make up for his recent absences, maths and history spinning around in his head unendingly, and he's still sore from all of the archery practice he'd done the day before yesterday, and he still feels the knot of betrayal sitting lodged in his chest when he looks at Shiro, the one that refuses to come loose no matter how similarly tired Shiro looks.

And he does look tired. There are circles under his eyes and wrinkles in his clothing, when normally Shiro insists on plenty of sleep and crisp lines in his clothing.

"Keith," Shiro says firmly, and when Keith steps to the side, he follows him so that he can't move past.

Keith doesn't really want to have this conversation now, but one look at Shiro's face has him resigning himself to a confrontation he won't be able to get out of. Shiro can be just as stubborn as him when he puts his mind to it, maybe even worse.

"*Keith*," Shiro says again, holding his hands out beseechingly so that Keith is more or less trapped in the hallway with him. Keith swallows a sigh and crosses his arms so that there's the illusion of a barrier between them.

"Hello, Sir Shirogane," Keith tells him coolly.

"Don't do that," Shiro says, frustration edging his voice as he drags his hand through his white-streaked hair. "Keith you know why I--"

"I don't know anything anymore, Shiro," Keith interrupts, and gets a slick and fleeting feeling of pleasure at the hurt expression on Shiro's face. *I want you to feel the way I do*, he thinks, and part of him even means it, wants Shiro to feel guilty and unhappy and miserable

at the thought of Keith being upset at him. The rest of him feels horrible to be the reason he looks that way, when Shiro has always been his closest friend and ally. "I'm sure you had your reasons but I can't think of a single one."

"It was to keep you from doing what you're doing now," Shiro says quietly, his mouth pulling down at the corners. "I knew you were going to worry about it, and it's not something you should--"

"If I'm going to be the king of an entire country I should be aware of what's happening in that country," Keith snaps, arms uncrossing as he steps closer to Shiro with a snarl on his face. "Of course I'm going to worry, what kind of leader would I be if I didn't?"

"We don't even know what's going on yet, Keith," Shiro says wearily. "Our contacts in Altea are denying everything and going to the queen herself to confirm would be diplomatically suicidal without some kind of proof, and Kolivan's spies haven't made a solid tie yet."

"I still fail to see why I shouldn't know about it," Keith says coldly.

Shiro reaches out with one hand, and Keith's meanest impulse tells him to duck away from him, to slide out of his grasp and dig the knife in deeper, but his first and oldest instinct has him holding still and letting Shiro put his hand against the crook of Keith's neck and hold on. Despite his simmering fury, he feels strangely grounded under Shiro's gaze, pinned in place by a strong and familiar grip.

"Keith," Shiro says quietly, "I know you. I've known you since you were a child, and I know just how much you care about Marmora and I knew you wouldn't just let this lie without getting involved. I didn't want that to happen. You should be preparing yourself for running a kingdom -- not chasing rumors through secret passageways in the middle of the night."

Keith scowls. "I wasn't--"

"Nyma saw you leaving one of the tunnels," Shiro says dryly, and Keith closes his mouth with a clicking noise. "It doesn't matter," Shiro says, sighing. "I should have known you would find out. You're smart enough to put things together, and nosy enough to not care about how you have to do it."

He pauses, then lifts a shoulder, a deprecating smile lifting his mouth. "It was stupid of me. I suppose I was hoping the issue would resolve itself before you had to worry about it, because I knew you were already anxious about next year."

Keith frowns again, but his determination to stay upset at Shiro is wavering at the sincere regret in his voice, at the weary set of his eyes and the way his voice goes rough the longer he speaks.

"It's my responsibility," he mutters, staring at his boots. "And you're supposed to be my brother."

"I know," Shiro says, grip tightening a little. "I know, and I'm sorry. I am. I messed up on this one, Keith, I know I did. I should have said something to you. I guess..." He exhales, and it

sounds a little amused, a little wry. “I guess part of me still thinks I have to protect you from everything, even though you’re grown up now.”

Keith shifts from one foot to the other, weighing the honesty in Shiro’s words against his bruised feelings, then chances a look up at Shiro again. “I don’t mind you protecting me, but I don’t want that to mean lying to me either.”

“Understood,” Shiro says quickly, nodding his head. He hesitates, then says, “Are you too upset for me to hug you?”

“Ugh,” Keith says, wrinkling his nose, but he doesn’t protest when Shiro steps forward and tugs him into an embrace. He ends up with his nose mashed against the uncomfortable hard edge of Shiro’s shoulder, but he hugs him back, relieved. He *hates* being upset at Shiro; it always feels like putting his shoes on the wrong feet, or brushing his hair backwards -- unsettling and uncomfortable and something he wants to fix immediately.

“Are you going to explain this whole thing to me?” he asks, muffled, and Shiro laughs a little and pulls away from him to shake his head and sigh.

“There honestly isn’t much to tell. You know some of it already without realizing -- the droughts and thefts along the borders you’ve been hearing about in your letters are supposedly raids from Altean soldiers, but no one has been able to prove it. There’s been small attacks on roadways that Kolivan is telling people to blame on bandits, but eyewitnesses are making other claims.”

Keith bites his lower lip, hand absently pulling at his braid as he thinks for a moment. “Why would Altea do something like this?” he asks, more to himself than anything.

“Queen Allura is said to be ambitious,” Shiro says, although he doesn’t sound confident in his answer. “She could be looking to expand her borders -- she could be threatened by our trade ties to the rest of the continent. It doesn’t sound like her, from what we know, but we don’t know how else to explain what’s going on.”

“And until we have proof my father won’t act against her,” Keith says flatly.

“No,” Shiro replies firmly. “Once we start a war on this continent, the likelihood of other countries joining in to further their own interests is imminent. We’re one of the biggest countries on the continent but also the most vulnerable -- we’re surrounded on all sides, and we’re sure to lose if we engage.”

“None of this makes any sense,” Keith mutters. “Altea isn’t known for its military in the first place, why would they--”

“Keith,” Shiro cuts in, “please. Your father is handling this, and has been for the last few months. His advisors and spies are as well. I don’t mind keeping you in the loop, but I don’t want this to be your focus right now.”

“How can it not be?” Keith argues, crossing his arms again. “It affects our people, Shiro, I have to do *something*.”

“You can do something by preparing yourself to be their king next summer,” Shiro replies seriously, crossing his own arms. Keith scowls up at him. “If all goes well, none of this will matter.”

“And if it doesn’t?” Keith says, his voice challenging.

“Your father will postpone your coronation until it is,” Shiro tells him, and --

“Oh,” Keith murmurs. So he might not be king next year after all. Maybe not for several years, if a war expanded and dragged on. It would be the smart thing to do, regardless of whether or not Keith was ready -- upheaval and change in times of war led to unrest and unhappiness in a country, and it would be like a dagger in Keith’s back to crown him in the middle of that. His father would never do that to him.

He might not be king next year.

It would come at the expense of his entire country, all of the people he cared about most.

“Promise me you’ll focus on your lessons, listen to your advisors and tutors and keep up with your duties,” Shiro says, watching him closely. “I’ll keep you informed as I am, I swear it, but promise me you’ll let us handle it.”

“I promise,” Keith lies, keeping his face as solemn and serious as possible. Shiro breaks into a relieved smile, then wraps an arm around his shoulders, tugging him along and talking about what’s been prepared for dinner, and how Nyma has been complaining that she hasn’t seen him for nearly a week now -- but even as he replies, Keith’s mind spins frantically, a plan already half-formed in his mind.

It would be monumentally stupid, and risky, and possibly diplomatically suicidal, but -- he can’t just sit around and wait for a war to happen. Kolivan would eventually manage to talk his father into taking the first step to keep their country and people safe, and it sounded like he was already close to his breaking point.

Keith will have to take things into his own hands.

Sometimes that’s what a good leader must do, little bird, his mother whispers, and her warm voice in his head sounds like a blessing, so he tilts his head back and plots his next steps.

.

He waits two days, enough time for Shiro’s eyes to stop tracking him wherever he goes and for the phantom sensation of being followed by an increasingly unsubtle Nyma to cease. He goes to meetings and he trains with the knights again and does his best to look suitably serious but not overly concerned.

It makes him feel a little guilty, seeing the stark relief on Shiro’s face, the warm and tentative smile Adam sends him from across the table at dinner. He knows they would never approve

of what he plans to do -- Shiro would rather lock him in the tallest tower of the castle, and Adam would throw away the key, but their protectiveness of him has to have its limits.

He may not be ready to be king, but he can do this, at least.

Having a course of action, a solid thing to do at last, gets him through the two days without breaking character -- he slides into his princely persona and lives there, thankful for all of the practice he's had over the years. He smiles at the nobles who try to get him on their side. He attends every lesson his tutors give him, pretends to absorb the historical significance of a conflict on their border with Galra. He attends every meal and fitting and need of those who seek him out.

He waits for the perfect moment to leave.

It comes a little after midnight. Sneaking past the guards is easy -- he's had their shift rotation memorized since he was a child, and it takes barely any effort at all to slip into a passageway and out of the castle without being caught.

It's cold outside now, Marmora well and truly on its way to winter -- his breath gathers in clouds in front of him as he makes his silent way past patrolling soldiers and servants who are either heading to bed or sneaking into each other's beds. The pack on his shoulder rustles as he presses his back against the brick wall, waiting for the right moment--

There. He darts across the lawn, praying he doesn't step on a leaf or stick to alert anyone to his presence. He doesn't have time to be cautious out in the open, so he ducks his head and hopes that if anyone does see him, they won't recognize him. His hair is tied up again the same way he'd done at the masquerade in an attempt to make it harder to tell who he is, but he's under no illusion that if he's caught he'll be stopped immediately.

Halfway across the courtyard, he hears movement just a few feet away, and a lilting sound like music. Giving up all pretense of being quiet, he sprints his way across the lawn, pack bouncing against his back and boots thudding gently on the grass.

He makes it into the shadows cast by the stables just as a soldier rounds the corner of the castle, whistling a jaunty tune. Heart beating a little faster, he waits and prays that the cover of night is enough to keep him covered and out of sight as the guard slowly makes his way along the path curving along the exterior of the castle. His whistling is slightly pitchy, but Keith can make out a bawdy drinking song as the tune, and it makes a smile crack his face despite his fear of being seen.

The guard disappears around the corner after a moment, and Keith waits just a minute longer before he slides open the stable door and lets himself in, closing it behind himself with a soft click. It's dark in here, a few dimly lit crystals leaving enough light to barely see a few feet in front of himself, but he's familiar enough with the stables to feel his way towards Red's stall.

Around him, he can hear horses breathing heavily in sleep, the swishing of their tails against the walls. The scent of wet hay is overwhelming and strangely comforting as he lifts the lock of her gate pulls it open. She's somehow already awake, watching him with bright eyes and a tilted head.

“Good girl,” he whispers. “Ready for an adventure?”

“An adventure?”

Keith’s heart shoots into his throat as he jolts to his left and finds Lance standing there, a horse brush in his hand and dark eyebrows raised -- his expectant expression is clearly visible even in the low light.

“What are you doing here?” Keith hisses, pressing a shaky hand against his chest where his heart is still pounding.

“Taking care of your horse?” Lance replies, tilting his head and raising the brush with an implied *obviously* left unsaid. “And what are *you* doing here?”

“Um,” Keith says, because he’d made vague plans for being caught by a guard, but none for being caught by someone like *Lance*. What was he doing brushing out Red after midnight? Did the stablehands really have to work this late? “I just felt like a ride,” he tries out, and Lance smirks a little.

“I suppose you just felt like packing a bag for a midnight ride as well?” he asks, gesturing at the bag on Keith’s back.

Did he have to be so damn observant all the time?

“I don’t really have time for this,” Keith says, frowning at him. “I’m taking my horse out. Where’s her saddle?”

No longer smiling himself, Lance drops the brush to the ground and steps closer, a hand reaching out to touch the edge of Keith’s sleeve. His mouth parts and then closes, and Keith feels his chest hitch a little at the genuine concern in his gaze.

“Keith,” Lance says, his voice turned low and fervent. “Are you alright? Tell me what’s going on, please.”

“Lance, please, just go to bed,” Keith says, hoping he doesn’t sound as desperate as he feels. Stars, why did Lance always have to be there when Keith didn’t want to be found? “I’ll be back in the morning.”

“Your pack says otherwise,” Lance retorts stubbornly.

“Are you going to make me order you to leave?” Keith asks, hands clenching at his sides.

“I would rather risk the consequences of ignoring a prince than leave you to disappear into the night,” Lance tells him, and all of the air goes out of Keith’s lungs as he stares at him, shocked at the determination on his face, at the way the words seemed to spill out of him without a second thought.

He means it, and it shouldn’t make Keith feel warm and bubbly inside to be outright refused, but then, Lance has always made him feel more than he was supposed to.

“Please, let me help you,” Lance says, soft and pleading. It’s just the two of them in such a small space -- Keith can feel the warmth of his hand through his sleeve, can smell the warm leather smell that follows Lance around. His heart is an echoing shout in a very large cavern, yearning towards this boy who Keith cannot fall in love with but --

He makes a decision and tells himself it’s with his head and not his heart, although he can feel the truth beating hard behind his ribcage.

“I’m heading to the Altean border,” Keith says quietly. “To confirm or disprove a rumor for myself.”

“A rumor?” Lance says, although his tone is not quite a question. His eyes narrow and his grip on Keith’s sleeve tightens a little. “You’re going to confirm -- shouldn’t one of the king’s spies do that?”

“None of them have been able to confirm it,” Keith says, “so I’m going to do it. I have to, or else--”

He cuts himself off, not sure if he should continue -- it would mean explaining what kind of rumor he hoped to confirm, and he knows Kolivan at the very least would disapprove.

Lance seems to realize what he hasn’t said, though, brow furrowing as he touches a hand to his mouth and says, “Something to do with Altea. It must be very serious if a crown prince leaves his bed in the middle of the night, so -- you think there will be conflict between you and them?”

“I’m going,” Keith says again, purposefully neglecting to answer the question. He pauses, gathering his nerves, then adds, “You can -- you can join me, if you want, but I’m going, and I’m not letting you stop me.”

He touches a hand to the sword at his hip, knowing there’s no way he could actually hurt Lance but hoping somehow that perhaps Lance won’t. Lance, however, doesn’t seem remotely threatened, simply thoughtful, watching Keith carefully with dark eyes. His messy hair glints reddish in the dim light from the crystals overhead.

A half-forgotten memory stirs in the back of Keith’s mind.

“I’ll come with you,” Lance says, and the stray thought dissipates as quickly as it had come. “I know Altea pretty well, so I might be able to help you.”

Keith nods his head, trying not to look too relieved as he glances the the door to the stables. “We have limited time before the next guard makes their way around the building. You saddle Kuro and take her, and I’ll get Red.”

“You didn’t want to share Red?” Lance asks, faintly teasing, but he hurries to the next stable to comply, gently waking Kuro from her sleep with a soft touch to her forehead.

“I think that would make her lose her high opinion of you,” Keith replies, grabbing her blankets and tack from the wall where they’d been hanging. Lance snorts dismissively, and

Keith spares a moment to grin at his back, watching as he hurriedly gathers Kuro's gear.

They work quickly in silence; Red seems to sense the urgency of the moment, because she doesn't shift away as Keith straps her saddle down, doesn't try to trick him into make the girdle looser. She simply stands and watches him, then follows quietly as he leads her out of her stable and towards the barn door, where Lance is already waiting with Kuro.

"Where to?" Lance whispers.

"Wait for the toll of the bell and then two minutes more," Keith replies, just as hushed. "Then we'll have just enough time to lead the horses to the forest before the new guard comes through."

"Aren't there guards along the perimeter?"

Keith blinks at him, because the guards along the northern woods aren't ones Lance should have had cause to see or know about -- no one patrols there during the day, and the guard shift at night is sparse. "There are, but I know how to avoid them."

The bell tolls, and they fall silent. Keith can hear distant voices, someone laughing. For everyone else, this is a normal night -- another shift, another lazy winter night spent watching the horizon and wishing for a warm bed. In the morning, everyone who worked tonight will be questioned and they won't know what to say.

His chest aches a little at the thought of how worried everyone will be once it's discovered he's gone, at the knowledge that Shiro is going to be *furious* and hurt -- but he knows that he can't just stay here and wait for secondhand information, either.

A mental count in his head finishes and he whispers, "Now."

Lance springs into action like he'd been counting as well, seamlessly opening the stable door and leading Kuro out. Keith follows with Red and slides the door closed behind him, casting his eyes around. It's darker on this side of the courtyard -- fewer lights from the castle, and fewer buildings as well. There are barracks housing the soldiers, and a few buildings that house the servants and workers who maintain the castle, but they're all dark except for the building where the guard rotations cycle through.

"Quickly," Keith murmurs, pulling Red behind him. Lance follows suit, and together they lead their horses through the crisp grass, leaving sodden footsteps in the dew behind them. He hopes it reforms before sunrise, or there will be a solid trail showing exactly which direction they'd gone -- if he were a water mage he could reform the droplets behind him as he went, but with fire the best he could do would be to heat the ground enough to evaporate the entire field -- a tedious and useless job.

In the end, it wouldn't really matter. Shiro will definitely know where he's going, if not the route he was planning to take. Perhaps Lance might be able to offer an alternate route so they wouldn't be caught.

He shakes his head, trying to focus. That would all have to come later. They needed to get off of the castle grounds first.

The forest looms in front of them, familiar and frightening all at once. The darkness is deeper between the trees, like someone has purposefully blotted all of the color out of a painting. Keith aims for that darkness, trying not to pull too hard at Red's bit as he breaks into a gentle jog.

They're barely into the treeline when someone, far enough away that Keith can't quite see them but close enough to be heard, says in a hushed voice, "What was that?"

"Did you see something?" Another voice -- Keith recognizes her, one of Shiro's knights named Zethrid.

"Maybe," the other guard says. "There was movement at the treeline."

"Shit," Lance hisses through his teeth. Keith clenches his jaw, mentally cursing along with him. If they move, they're sure to be noticed -- two horses are not a subtle thing even in the cover of darkness. But they're only twenty or feet into the forest, so if they stay still they're sure to be seen when the guards come closer.

"We might have to just run for it," Keith murmurs, although it would mean being found out far sooner than he'd hoped for. He needed at least a few hours headstart to be sure Shiro wouldn't catch up to him.

Lance opens his mouth to say something back, but both of them freeze in place when a howl pierces the quiet.

She's only a dozen or so feet away, head tilted back and voice echoing in the small clearing. Her gray fur glints a dull black in the low light, but he can still tell it's the same one who joined them during the hunt. Her howl fills the air around them like a physical thing, long and loud, and in the distance Keith hears Zethrid say, "Must have been that wolf."

"Should we do something about it?" the other guard asks, sounding a little tremulous.

"No," Zethrid says immediately. She pauses, and then says, her voice low and gruff, "The wolves in this forest are to be left alone. They were the queen's favorites."

"Right. So what should we--"

"C'mon, new guy. The normal patrol goes this way."

Their voices start to fade as they head along their path, but Keith's gaze is caught on the wolf, who looks back at him with golden eyes. He wonders if he's imagining the approval in her eyes, or if he's casting more of his own fantasizations upon her.

"Keith," Lance says under his breath, "we should go."

"Thank you," Keith whispers to the wolf. She waits until they're on the horses before she disappears into the brush, her tail flashing silver in the dim light.

The moon is half gone tonight, and its light barely makes it through the dense treetops. They ride slowly at first, afraid of making too much noise or risking the horses' footing in the dark, but as they get further and further from the castle they pick up the pace, slowly heading down and to the east.

"What part of the border are we going to?" Lance calls out. Keith glances at him, his form flickering with shadows and moonlight, his hair whipping in the breeze.

He's smiling, white teeth flashing in the dark.

"Arus," Keith says, casting his voice over the thudding of the hooves.

And despite the cold freezing his fingertips and the low thrum of worry still running through his veins, he feels himself smiling back. The giddiness of the moment seems to rush at him all at once -- he's riding into the night with *Lance* heading for a foreign country to try and stop a war from breaking out. It's ridiculous. It's insane.

It feels *right*.

People are probably going to assume they've run away together -- maybe Kolivan will even encourage people to think that, even if he and Shiro and the king know better. Just the thought of it has his face flushing hot, his stomach twisting into complicated knots. He sneaks another look at Lance, who has his face turned up at the sky, watching the moon through the trees.

Lance looks back at him suddenly, and his smile widens. Keith knows he can't pretend he hasn't been caught staring, but he drops his gaze all the same.

"I know someone who lives near Arus," Lance says, apparently choosing not to tease him. "On the Altean side of the border. We should find her and see if she can help us."

Keith's only plan had been to reach the border, disguise himself as best he could, and start asking questions, so he tries not to look too relieved as he replies, "Sounds good to me."

Lance grins at him again, like he knows what Keith is thinking, but doesn't say anything else.

They ride on into the night, the moon glowing pale above them.

.

Arus is a fairly large city, a bustling trade center surrounded by farmland. It's mostly full of Altean and Marmoran traders, since it's the border between their countries, but Keith spots a group of Galran merchants with hauling crates of precious metals, and a whole caravan full of Balmeran traders with jewelry and crystals.

It's a good place to blend in, considering there are so many different people around from so many cultures. They leave the horses tied up in the woods near the entrance to the town and make their way into the teeming crowd of buyers and sellers, staying as close to each other as they can so they don't get separated.

The stands and shops here are colorful and slim, packed as tightly together as they can be without spilling into one another. There is everything imaginable for sale -- food and drink and weapons and jewelry and silks and furs and metal and wood, it all goes on and on in an unending chain of shouting vendors and disaffected crowdgoers. Keith knows there are trade buildings in the town as well where the bigger deals are done, the ones between wealthy nobles and countries rather than citizens, but this, the haggling and yelling and the bustling excitement of being pressed between so many other people, is always what he thinks of when he thinks of Arus.

He keeps an eye on Lance, just to make sure no one is going to pickpocket him or overwhelm him, but Lance seems unaffected, and when a young boy does try and swipe his wallet Lance simply grabs him by the arm, hands him a silver coin, then gently turns him in place and nudges him on his way. The boy barely has time to blink before they disappear into the crowd again, and Keith has to stifle a grin at the smug look on Lance's face.

They've only been in Arus a half hour or so before he notices the staring. He'd hoped that since they were so far from Ilun that he might not be recognized, but several people turn to watch him pass by, and one woman even surreptitiously points at him. Someone muttering into a communication crystal keeps glancing at him, and he feels nervousness start to creep up his spine.

"I need to do something to disguise myself," he says, and Lance nods, glaring distastefully at the man with the crystal.

Keith unties his hair and lets it hang loose and curly around his face, his bangs falling into his eyes, and pays for a pot of makeup from a stand that they pass by. The vendor lets him borrow a small mirror, and Lance watches with interest as he paints a gently curved line on both of his cheeks, mimicking a Galran style that's become popular in the last year and a half.

"Pink is a lovely shade on you," Lance observes. He watches with amusement in his eyes as Keith painstakingly inks out his design, then makes a brusque noise and grabs the paint out of his hands. "Let me," he murmurs, dipping a fingertip into the pot. "You're taking too long."

"You try doing this with such a tiny mirror," Keith grumbles, but he obligingly tilts his head up and tries not to stare at Lance's eyes as he touches Keith's face with gentle fingertips. He attempts to focus on his nose instead, but all that does it make him aware that there are dozens of freckles speckled across the bridge of it, and he finds himself wondering how long it might take to count them all.

"There," Lance says, satisfaction turning his voice deep. "It looks good on you."

"Thank you," Keith says, biting back a flush. "Did you want to--"

"No one will know me here," Lance says. His voice turns a little wry when he adds, "I'm not meant to be noticed in the first place."

Keith frowns, but before he can say anything Lance continues speaking. "My friend is usually in Arus this time of the year, she stays here through the winter to help her family

with their business. Let me find a courier to send word for her and I'll see if she can meet with us somewhere."

"Are you sure she's going to help?" Keith asks a little while later, as they watch a young girl with a letter tucked between her fingertips flit into the crowds. The cool wind pulls at his hair, so he lifts his hand and lights a flame in his palm.

"Romelle is small and friendly and people underestimate the things she picks up on," Lance says, surreptitiously leaning towards the warmth of the fire. Keith bites back a grin and holds his hand closer to Lance without saying anything. "There's a good chance she'll at least know where we can pursue this rumor of yours. Better than wandering around without a plan."

"You're right," Keith admits. "I should have made plans for my own contacts, but I'm just--"

"--a little impulsive," Lance finishes for him, grinning when Keith shoots him a look. "Your Highness, I've known that from the moment we met."

"Surely not from *the moment* we met," Keith mutters, embarrassment making him hunch his shoulders.

"The moment," Lance confirms. His voice goes soft and contemplative, and Keith glances at him curiously. "Anyway," Lance says abruptly, clapping his hands together. "Should we find something to eat while we wait for Romelle?"

Slightly bewildered, Keith nods his agreement, letting Lance take his hand and pull him along the food stalls littered around them. They snack on fried foods on sticks, and fruit grown by a family of earth mages, the youngest of whom shyly offers Keith a basket of strawberries that she claims she grew herself. Lance suggests strange food after strange food, with Keith refusing all of them until Lance implies he's too scared, which -- Keith can't let that go unaddressed, so he ends up eating something fried that he's pretty sure once used to be an eyeball. It tastes *terrible* (except for a strange sugary aftertaste) and he almost chokes on it, but Lance gamely offers to eat a bite as well, only to end up spitting it out so hard that some of it lands on a nearby woman's hat, which leads to Keith laughing so hard he almost chokes again.

Lance is dramatically gulping down a cup full of water when a short blonde girl suddenly appears at his elbow, small brows knitted together. She's got blue curves painted under her matching blue eyes, and a frown that doesn't fit with her frankly cute appearance.

"Lance," she whispers, frowning at him, "what are you doing here? You're supposed to be--"

"Romelle," Lance says quickly, "this is my friend, *Keith*."

"Your friend--" Romelle quickly looks at Keith, then goes pale rapidly. "Your friend," she repeats weakly. "Your friend...*Keith*."

"Yes, that's what I said," Lance says, hushed and through gritted teeth. Keith watches them with undisguised curiosity. She clearly recognizes him, but she seems more upset at seeing

Lance than she does interested in meeting a prince. "Can you help us with a rumor we're here to confirm?"

"A rumor," Romelle echoes, staring at him. "You mean -- of course you do. The rumor about the bandits that aren't really bandits." She looks vaguely exasperated with him.

"Do you know anyone who claims to have seen them, Romelle?" Lance asks. She narrows her eyes at him, then opens her mouth to reply, but Keith quickly interrupts her.

"Actually, do you know where they're supposed to be hiding, these....bandits?"

Romelle blinks at him.

"You mean you want to -- you want to find them yourself?" she asks, clearly surprised. "But you're--"

"I came down here to confirm rumors, not to hear them repeated," Keith tells her firmly. Lance makes a small noise of indignation, but they both ignore him. She stares up at him, tugging one of her long blonde locks of hair thoughtfully, and he looks back at her steadily. "You weren't kidding, huh?" Romelle says, but she's clearly speaking to Lance.

"Rom, please," Lance says, sounding pained.

"I mean, I know you kept saying it, but--"

"*Romelle*," Lance says, "can you help us or not?"

Romelle settles her shoulders, finally allowing herself a small smile. She directs it at Keith, who tentatively returns it. "I can help," she says. "I'll have to do a bit of reconnaissance first, but meet me at the southern end of Arus in about an hour, alright? I'll have the information and a map by then."

"Thank you, Romelle," Keith says gratefully. "It means a lot to me."

"Yes," Romelle says, tilting her head. "I can see that. I suppose it is true."

"What?"

"Keith," Lance says loudly, "why don't we see if we can't find some supplies while we're here. I imagine it's going to take us a bit of time to figure out what's going on here."

"You do that," Romelle says, reaching into the bag at her waist and pulling out a dark knit hat that she shoves unceremoniously on her head. "I'll meet you in a little while. Try not to have too much fun, hm, Lance?" She winks at him, and he makes a half-hearted grab for her that she neatly ducks underneath and darts away from, her chuckles trickling behind her like bells.

"She's...interesting," Keith says, but he finds himself grinning. He wonders what it says about himself that he feels so amused seeing Lance thrown off balance every time it happens.

“She’s a gossip,” Lance says, sighing. “So she hears things she’s not meant to but that extends to enemies and allies. I imagine everyone will know--” He cuts himself off, scowling at nothing. “Nevermind. Let’s go, we have a lot of shopping to do in a short window of time.”

They renew their food supplies, and Keith insists on buying a new cloak for Lance, whose own cloak was threadbare and patched in certain places. It had taken threatening to give Lance his own cloak again for him to agree, but he’d ended up bundled up in the new one with a half-smile on his face, tucking his hands in the fur-lined pockets inside.

“Thank you,” he murmurs, face red, and Keith swallows the urge to press his mouth to those warm cheeks. He looks uncommonly handsome, his hair swept back from his face and his shoulders dark and broad under the heavy material -- it’s unfair that two days of riding has done little to take away from his natural attractiveness, when Keith knows his hair is a tangled mess and his face is worn and stiff.

Romelle shows up at their agreed upon waiting spot exactly on time, to the point that Keith wonders if she was counting down to be perfectly precise. She has a map with her, and a cloak tucked under her arms that she promptly holds to her face and buries a laugh in when she spots Lance with his new one.

“You look much better,” she says, grinning, and he sends her a quelling look. “Right, anyway. Let me unfold this and I’ll explain.”

She spreads the map on a dry patch of ground, and all three of them kneel around it as she points at the agrarian plots of land surrounding Arus.

“Here and here are farms that were mysteriously vandalized earlier in the year. There are three other unconfirmed places here, and here, and here. They were saying it was natural causes but people in town chatter, especially since Ilun has sent so much magical aid.” Her fingertip moves along the map in a wide arc, nearly surrounding the entire city. “Then there have been attacks on homes and travelers along this path.”

“Bandits,” Lance says, giving her a meaningful look.

“Supposedly,” she says, giving him a level look in return. She glances at Keith, her blue eyes wide and piercing. “I know there have been men sent by the king in Arus these last few months. Why are you here, Your Highness?”

“To confirm for myself,” he says simply.

“Do you not trust your father’s men, or do you simply think yourself a better spy?” she asks, cocking her head.

Something about her tone catches at him -- her words are light, but there’s something heavier behind them, and, perhaps most tellingly, he can feel Lance’s body tense next to him.

“I’m here to confirm rumors,” he repeats, looking her straight in the eye. “I’m going to be king and it’s a king’s duty to take care of his people. My rank doesn’t put me above securing

information myself. My mother used to travel to other countries to do business and confirm trades all the time.”

Both of them tilt their heads slightly, acknowledging her death silently -- it was well known that the queen had been traveling for that very reason when she’d drowned at sea.

Unconventional, yes, but Krolia had been an unconventional queen; unafraid of getting her hands dirty, of taking the time to listen to everyone who reached out to her, of giving herself entirely to her country and people.

Keith had always been a little jealous of her devotion to Marmora, the time she spent on her duties instead of with him, until he’d realized that her love for it encompassed him as well. She’d often held him in her arms and told him story after story of all the people she’d met and the things she’d done, and listening to her, he’d felt the first stirrings of excitement that one day, he would live her life as well.

Before then, he’d worn that knowledge as a sort of burden heavy on his back, but his mother made it sound -- important. Wonderful and impossible and the best sort of challenge, the kind of duty that would prove the kind of person he could be.

“Very well,” Romelle says slowly; her tone seems vaguely approving. “I don’t know if you’ll have better luck than the spies that have already been here, but here are their last known whereabouts. They were seen traveling east.” She taps a spot on the trail a short distance from Arus, just a little bit further south.

“Back towards Altea,” Lance murmurs.

“Then we’ll start there,” Keith says decisively. “Romelle, do you mind if we borrow this map?”

“Not at all,” she says, folding it neatly up. “I -- I hope you find what you’re looking for,” she says hesitantly, her eyes flicking between the two of them. “Lance -- can I talk to you just a moment?”

Lance gives her a look, which she returns, and Keith politely decides to go get the horses ready to go. He smooths out Red’s reins and watches over her back as Lance whispers fervently to Romelle, who touches her mouth and whispers back -- so he can’t read her lips, Keith realizes.

A gossip, Lance had said. Keith very seriously doubts that’s all she is.

They murmur back and forth for a minute, until Lance finally throws his arms up in the air and says, “I’ve got it under control, Rom,” just loud enough for Keith to catch it. She stares up at him impassively and he deflates a little, sighing.

“I know,” she says, not bothering to be quiet. She tugs him into a hug, holding on tightly. “I know you do. I know you’ll figure things out.”

“Thank you,” Lance tells her, hugging her back. They cling for a moment, and Romelle must say something Keith can’t hear or see because Lance laughs suddenly, a wry and self-

deprecating sound. Romelle leans back and taps him twice on the chest with a small fist, smiling up at him.

She turns her gaze on Keith, who startles a little, and then steps closer to him with a strange determination blazing in her eyes.

“Your Highness, please look after Lance,” she says, holding her hand out to him. He takes hers in his own, feeling a little bemused while Lance looks on with thinly disguised resignation.

“I’m meant to be watching out for him, Rom,” Lance says, and Romelle scoffs loudly.

“I’ll keep him safe,” Keith tells her, and she beams at him, tugging his hand forward until she’s suddenly hugging him too -- she’s smaller than he realized but also stronger, her grip firm and steady. He tentatively hugs her back, feeling strangely pleased by the obvious affection she has for Lance and therefore by extension himself. He can tell that her hugging him has nothing to do with who he is, but rather because of Lance. It’s...a nice feeling.

She lets go and watches them mount their horses, carefully packing the map into Keith’s saddlebag herself.

“Stay safe, both of you,” she says, tucking the spare cloak under her arm again as she looks up at them. She shoots Lance a pointed look in particular, which he pretends not to see.

“Tell your girlfriend I said hello,” Lance says, smiling softly at her, and she nods her head once before flitting off between the trees, heading back towards Arus. Her bright hair flashes once and then disappears like a sunbeam -- and strangely, Keith feels as if a little warmth has fled in her absence as well.

“Was she a mage?” he asks, and Lance shoots him an amused look.

“Fire,” he says, quirking a smile. “She’s always been overwarm like that. I actually thought it was just a fire mage thing, until I met you.”

Keith nudges Red into moving before he asks, “How did you meet her?”

Lance doesn’t answer immediately, ducking beneath a branch as they make their way through the forest and back towards the main road. They’d both agreed to keep their travel off of heavily trafficked areas as possible, but it was nearly sunset now, and they would make much better time on the road than in the overgrown forest.

“Through her girlfriend. She’s my best friend, and they’ve known each other since they were young, so it was inevitable that Rom and I would become friends too. She’s always been a spitfire.”

There’s more that he’s not saying -- Keith has become used to recognizing the slight flicker of hesitation in his voice, the places where carefully omitted parts of the story shine through in increasingly obvious ways. Lies by omission and half-truths, Keith thinks to himself, seem to be following him around.

He doesn't push it though -- he's keeping his own secrets, and although he's sure Lance has guessed at most of them, he doesn't want to go into greater detail without knowing what page they're both on.

They ride on in relative silence, the only sound the infrequent sound of birds calling out to one another and their horses feet upon the ground. In the distance, over the tops of the dead trees, the moon rises in the sky, nearly empty.

.

There's nothing at the site of the last attack, of course -- Keith hadn't expected for there to be, really, but it's still annoying. He dismounts from Red and lets her loose, leaving her to snuffle at the last wisps of grass still holding onto their green.

"So they headed east from here," he murmurs to himself, glancing at the setting sun barely peeking over the tops of the trees behind them.

"It's been two weeks since then," Lance says, dismounting with him. He holds onto Kuro's reins, leading her off of the road and squinting into the sunset as well. "They've probably moved on."

"They've been lingering around Arus," Keith says quietly. "They've been attacking it in coordinated patterns for months now. They're not bandits, and they're not moving on."

Lance turns to look at him, surprise in his eyes -- not at his words, Keith thinks, but at the fact that he's said them. "Who do you think it is, then? Alteans?"

His tone is careless, light, but Keith can see the way his hands tighten around the leather strap of the reins.

"There's something about the way the attacks have been happening that's bothering me," he says, well aware he's not really answering Lance's question. Lance's brow furrows, but he doesn't say anything. "It's like I've seen it before, somehow."

The truth is that he doesn't know whether or not it's the Alteans or not. He doesn't know how anyone, bandits or Altean soldiers alike, could escape the notice of Kolivan's spies for so long. He doesn't know what he's really doing, or why Lance is here with him.

Looking at Lance, whose dark eyes gaze back at him unblinking, Keith wonders if Lance knows the answer to that either.

You like Lance, Shiro's voice from nearly two months ago echoes in his head, giddy with disbelief and amusement, and it's true -- to a terrifying degree, it's true, but Keith also can't help but think again, *I don't even really know him*.

"Let's make camp," Lance suggests, leading Kuro a little further away from the road. "If we go further into the woods, you can make a small enough fire we can keep warm without being noticed."

"Alright," Keith agrees, grabbing Red and following.

Camp is perhaps too generous a word for their set up. The horses are left to wander in the area around them, provided with handfuls of hay Keith had taken from a wayward bale that had been left at the edge of a field they'd passed. In lieu of a real fire, Keith clears the vegetation from a small area and gently sets a small fire in the center of it.

"How long can you keep that up without kindling?" Lance asks, watching him.

"A few hours," Keith admits. Fire mages could maintain fires without a source of fuel, but it drew their energy too fast for it to be sustainable, which was why most mages preferred to use sources of their element to perform magic. Water mages carried water with them for that reason, and earth mages had been known to keep bags of dirt with them, especially when forced on boats. Air mages were generally considered the luckiest, since their source element was literally everywhere.

Normally Keith would never burn a campfire off of his own energy, but burning sticks or leaves would give off smoke, and they can't afford to be found -- Ilun has had plenty of time to send soldiers or spies after them, and Keith and Lance would only have had a half day's head start on them. There were probably Blade members in Arus at that very moment trying to dig up information on them.

"I'll see if I can find something small to cook, then, and we'll have you conserve your energy. It shouldn't be too cold tonight."

Keith raises a brow at Lance, who's still got the cloak wrapped tightly around himself despite the warmth of the fire.

"This is just me -- admiring the quality of the material," Lance says defensively, clutching the cloak tighter. Keith covers a smile by taking a drink of water, but Lance must see the amusement because he cracks his own smile, wrapping his arms around himself. "I'll warm up by hunting us up something. Back in just a few."

The bow slung around his shoulder is new too, bought in Arus from someone who assured them it was fine enough quality for the prince of Mamora himself -- it does look beautiful enough to be one of Keith's, dark, glossy wood with intricate carvings of feathers, and they'd been given an extra string wrapped in greased paper along with a large bundle of arrows.

Keith watches him draw an arrow as he walks away, the crunching of leaves under his feet nearly soundless, until he disappears into the growing gloom of twilight.

The night is calm and cold, the fire a small flare of warmth against his numb toes and fingertips. Thoughts swirl in his head like a river spinning into a whirlpool, pressing against the instead of his head until he's worried he's going to spill over. He huddles under his own cloak and closes his eyes, thinking of the map spread on the ground again, Romelle's fingertips pointing to each farm in turn, the gradual arc of progression.

They want us to think they're bandits, but they're using military tactics, he tells himself. They want us to question who they are but they haven't thought through everything.

Something about the way they've been moving sticks at him -- it's not a straight line, point to point. He *knows* he's seen similar patterns before, can practically see the maps placed against the wall and his tutor's pointer following the progression of armies and scouts as she explains the history of some battle or another.

He presses his palms to his eyes and pushes until white sparks behind his lids, trying to force the image to clarify itself into some semblance of order through the pounding in his head. Was it Altean? Marmoran? It didn't sound like either of them, but he couldn't--

"It's just a pheasant, but it should be big enough to share," Lance says, startling Keith out of his hunched position. "Oh, sorry," Lance adds, dropping the bird to the ground next to him before taking the bow off of his shoulder. The arrow is straight through the pheasant's throat, so perfectly placed that if Keith hadn't seen him shoot before, he'd think Lance had put it there after the fact.

"It should be fine," Keith says, smiling weakly at him. The pounding in his head recedes a little, but not completely.

Lance tilts his head, then kneels and puts a hand to Keith's knee, concern creasing his forehead. "Are you alright? You looked -- preoccupied, when I came back."

"Just trying to figure things out," Keith says tiredly. "If I can't find them, this will all have been for nothing."

Lance's hand tightens on his knee briefly, cold bleeding through the rough fabric of his pants. "Hey." He waits patiently until Keith looks up at him, then smiles gently. "We'll find out what's going on together, Keith. I promise."

Keith swallows, steeling himself, and then puts his hand on top of Lance's, letting the heat from his magic warm through Lance's cold skin. Lance's hand twitches underneath his, splaying out, long fingers pressing against Keith's thigh.

Keith glances up and Lance is staring at him, dark-eyed and intent.

"You're right," Keith says, mouth dry. "Together."

The pheasant is a little gamey but it's hot and filling, and after they've both eaten, Keith incinerates the remains and they bury the bones and ashes under a bush to keep from leaving signs of their presence. Lance brushes the horses down and takes off their gear, folding their blankets as carefully as if he were about to hang them up in the stables at home.

Keith spends another hour examining the map by firelight, hoping the memory will come through at last; it never does, but eventually Lance tugs it from his hand and folds it up, telling him they both need their rest and they can both look at it again in the morning.

Keith curls up next to the fire, well aware that as soon as he falls asleep it will go out -- he resolves to wait until Lance has fallen asleep before he closes his eyes. Behind him, Lance spreads a blanket on the ground and wraps himself in it, still wearing his heavy cloak. His presence is a solid pressure against Keith's back, and he listens to the crackle of the fire and

the sound of Lance's breathing and doesn't let himself think about how close they are, how much he wants to turn over and face him, how he wishes they were this close at home in a warm bed instead of a hard, cold forest floor with only the vague warmth of a small fire for comfort.

Lance's voice is soft, but in the darkness it seems to leap out at Keith. "Are you asleep?"

Keith sighs, watching his breath stream out in a white fog. "Not yet, no."

"Me neither," Lance says. His voice shakes a little, and he shifts under his blankets. "You should tell a story."

"Me?" Keith asks. He gives into impulse, turning under his own rough blanket to face Lance, who stares back at him with wide eyes reflecting the flickering flames. "You should tell a story, you're the one breaking up fights in bars and making friends with strangers everywhere we turn."

Lance snorts, his shoulders shaking. Another hard tremor goes through his body, a shiver that seems to linger in his hands and mouth, as if the chill has taken hold of him and won't let go. Keith carefully gives up some of the warmth in the fire behind him, instead letting it gather in his hands -- not a flame, but the heat of one, and Lance's body goes loose next to him all at once as it spreads between their bodies.

"Well," Lance says, slowly letting his fingertips unfurl from where they'd been clenched close to his chest. "What kind of story do you want, then?"

Keith burrows into his blankets, feeling his eyes growing heavy. Lance shifts as well, incessant movement as always, and when he's done, it feels like he's a little bit closer than before. His foot brushes against Keith's through their heavy blankets.

"Tell a story about the queen's thief," Keith says, yawning. "One of her adventures."

Lance doesn't say anything for a moment, seemingly lost in thought. An owl calls out, a low and mournful sound in the darkness, and when she's finished her warning Lance finally says, "The queen's thief doesn't know boundaries, or borders. She goes where she wants without care for what locks or walls might be in her way. But she doesn't go anywhere except where the queen sends her, and the queen is bound to only use her for the good of Altea."

Keith listens attentively, watching Lance's mouth moving slowly, feeling out a story it seems he's told many times before.

Lance continues:

"Almost twenty years ago, the queen's thief embarked on one of her most dangerous missions -- sneaking into Galra to steal a necklace that once belonged to the queen's mother. It was said to possess the power to enhance natural magical abilities, although the queen never really believed that. This was Allura's mother, Queen Amare, she was an air mage like Allura is. Anyways, the necklace was more of an heirloom than anything, but it was valuable as well, and it belonged to Altea. Bandits had stolen it during a raid in Naxcela nearly ten

years before all of this happened, and somehow it ended up with the Galran royalty, because a visiting Altean diplomat saw it around Queen Honerva's throat at some fancy party Galra was throwing. Now, Queen Amare wasn't prone to hasty decisions, but this was her mother's necklace, and the diplomat hadn't been able to persuade Honerva to give the necklace up, so she decided to ask the queen's thief to return it."

"Ask her?" Keith queries, raising an eyebrow. Lance smiles at him, mouth creasing crookedly where his face is pressed to the blanket under his head.

"The queen's thief may do the queen's bidding, but she's allowed to refuse if she doesn't deem the theft worthy for Altea." Lance's voice goes soft and warm as he adds, "I've never heard of the queen's thief rejecting a request, but A -- a friend of mine says it's happened before. Still, even though it was really a personal matter, the queen's thief didn't refuse Amare. She agreed to steal the necklace back. It took her three days to get to the Galran capital of Daibazaal. If it weren't so late, I would go into detail about all of the things that happened to her on her journey, but I'm honestly not sure if they're true or not, and I know the rest of the story is, so we'll focus on that."

His voice deepens a little, and he pauses to draw a hand out from his blankets to trace a figure in the sky, a series of spikes with a circular base. "Have you been to Daibazaal before?"

"No," Keith says, recognizing the shapes he's making in the air, "but I've seen drawings. The castle looks...foreboding."

"It looks like a creepy dragon's lair, you mean," Lance corrects. "There's a series of traps built into the outer part of the castle there -- it's more like a fortress to be honest. Sand traps built by earth mages, and lava pits, and all kinds of crazy shit. The queen's thief isn't a mage so she has to slowly, carefully make her way through all of these traps, and it takes her a full day to even get to the inside of the castle walls. Once she's inside she has to sneak around to figure out how to get the necklace, because Queen Honerva wears it all the time. So the queen's thief decides to pose as a maid and ends up figuring out that *all the time* includes at night, because Honerva is even wearing this necklace to bed."

"So what'd she do?" Keith asks, leaning closer, caught up in the story now.

"This is what makes her the best thief," Lance says, sounding as proud of her as if she were *his* thief. "She ends up stealing a similar looking stone from a noble who lived in the castle -- the necklace has a silver chain and a sort of pinkish gem on it -- and she cuts it down with nothing but a steel pick she took from the armory until it looks enough like Amare's necklace to pass. She waits for a night where there's a celebration -- it takes two weeks of pretending to be a servant in the castle for this to happen, because there isn't much cause for celebration in Galra -- and makes sure to serve Honerva a particularly strong drink herself. And then, as quickly as she can, she flees the celebration and hides under the queen's bed for a few hours until she comes in and passed out from the alcohol -- apparently Queen Honerva snores, sort of sounds like the horn they blew before the Winter Hunt. Speaking of, you wouldn't *believe* the sort of noises Jax and Raj make when they sleep--"

Keith laughs a little, prodding Lance in the side. "Keep going, don't get distracted *now*."

Lance clears his throat, grinning.

“Right, anyways, the queen’s thief crawls from under the bed, and Honerva is just well and truly out of it, so she manages to sneak the necklace from around her neck -- she has to snip one of the links holding the necklace together, but it’s the stone that’s the most important part, so that’s not that big of a deal. Putting the fake necklace around Honerva’s neck is a much bigger problem -- when I tell this story to my nieces and nephews I go into detail about the sweat dripping down the thief’s face and the many times Honerva moves in her sleep and disrupts the process, but suffice it to say that after many long, harrowing minutes, the thief manages to get it on.”

“So it’s downhill from there, right?”

Lance’s sharp grin flashes in the nearly extinguished light from the fire. “Not exactly. The thief manages to sneak her way out of Honerva’s room, but getting out of the castle is just as hard as getting into it had been, and what’s worse is who is in the castle. The thief had known the celebration earlier in the evening had been for Prince Lotor’s return, but she hadn’t expected for him to be wandering around so late at night, and she ran into him -- and I mean she physically bumped into him.”

Keith has seen Prince Lotor only once before -- a passing glimpse at a summit between Galra and Marmora that he’d attended alongside his mother. He’d barely been five at the time, and Lotor had been a full grown prince standing next to his father, all smooth features and gently curling upper lip. He’d exuded a sort of noble aura that had unnerved Keith, because neither of his parents nor the nobility at Ilun looked as effortlessly haughty as Lotor did. He’d heard stories about Lotor putting down insurrections within Galra, which had nearly as much infighting as it did peace, and knew that he was eagerly awaiting the death of his father to ascend the throne.

“He was only a teenager, but he was already a pretty big deal in the Galran military,” Lance continues. “And he’s...suspicious by nature, so he stopped the thief and asked to know what she was doing in that part of the castle, where only nobility and their guests stayed, well past the hour a servant should be wandering around.”

“Shit,” Keith murmurs.

“She was thinking the same thing. She had to think quickly, so she made up a story about sleeping with someone who was staying at the castle at the time -- a merchant traveling with an Altean noble that the Galra were trying to woo into a trade deal. He was a food merchant, I think -- Galra doesn’t have the best land for agriculture, and they import a lot from Altea. So Lotor, not really buying this, drags her to the merchant’s room and knocks on the door, demanding he confirm her story.”

The fire behind Keith finally goes out, leaving them in darkness. He lets the warmth between them grow a little, but without illumination he can’t see much more than the shape of Lance’s mouth as it moves. His voice grows more hushed as he keeps speaking.

“The merchant came to the door and was obviously confused, but the queen’s thief must have one hell of a stare, because he agreed to her story immediately, and even made up a story

about seeing her over the last week or so around the castle and knowing he had to court her. Annoyed but without cause to doubt the word of a guest of the castle, Lotor had no choice but to leave them be, and left the thief with the merchant.

“The thief thanked the merchant for his complicitness in her lie, and immediately tried to leave again, but the merchant told her that it hadn’t been a lie, not really -- he had seen her around the castle, and he had wanted to court her, but he’d known he wouldn’t be staying in Galra forever and didn’t want to bear the heartbreak of leaving her. The thief, startled but flattered, wrote down a place in Altea, and a date two weeks away, and told him to meet her there if he really meant it.”

“Really?” Keith asks dubiously.

“He was a good looking guy, or so the story goes,” Lance says, and there’s a gentle movement in the dark that suggests he’s shrugging. His voice is warm with humor as he adds, “I’m sure she was running off of adrenaline. Keep in mind the night she’s had so far.”

“You’re right,” Keith agrees solemnly. “Please continue.”

“Anyways, she leaves the merchant to his sleep, and makes her way out of the castle again, this time taking even greater care not to bump into any wayward princes. It takes her three hours to make it outside of the castle walls, and by then, dawn was nearly breaking over the horizon. She knew the queen would be awake soon, and that it wouldn’t take long for the fake necklace to be discovered. She stole a horse from the stables -- this is another part of the story I’m trimming down, but it does involve hiding in a bale of hay and mimicking a man’s voice so a stablehand is distracted as she drags a horse outside -- and made her way out of Daibazaal, back towards Altea. Her adventure home had some eventful moments too, but it’s too close to what we’re doing now to be that interesting. Eventually, though, the necklace was back with Queen Amare, the way her mother had intended for it to be. Honerva was, of course, furious that the necklace had been stolen, but there was little she could do to prove Amare had taken it back, so she was forced to swallow her fury. The queen’s thief met up with the merchant as promised and they apparently hit it off; he features in several other stories. And, uh, all’s well that ends well.” Lance’s voice is a little scratchy with use, so he clears his throat and then falls silent.

“That was a good bedtime story,” Keith says quietly, hiding the curve of his smile under his blanket. “Adventure and romance and intrigue all in one.”

“There’s a reason my nieces and nephews love this one,” Lance agrees. He shifts under his blankets again, and then he’s closer, his legs pressed all along Keith’s. Keith’s warm hands between them are suddenly tucked against the firm planes of Lance’s chest. “Is this okay?” Lance asks, voice low.

He’s close enough his voice barely has to be more than a murmur, and his breath stirs the messy hairs surrounding Keith’s face. His stomach flipflops around like he’s being spun around in circles, but he’s dizzyingly still -- they both are, frozen in place but scaldingly hot where they’re pressed together.

“It’s fine,” Keith murmurs back. He takes a few shallow breaths, suddenly grateful that he’s so tired; he thinks if he were at full strength, the heat inside of him might spill out into an inferno, and *that* would be embarrassing. Silence fills the air between them for just a moment, until he whispers, “Lance?”

Lance sounds mostly asleep when he hums a response.

“Thank you,” Keith says softly. “For the story.” *And for being here, even if I don’t really know why.*

There’s a short flash in the darkness -- Lance’s teeth, or maybe his eyes, and Lance responds quietly, “Of course. I’ll tell you the full story someday, with all of the extra details.”

“I look forward to it,” Keith says. He lets a little more warmth pulse of his hands and into Lance’s chest, and says, “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Keith.”

.

Keith doesn’t know if he falls asleep before or after Lance, but he wakes up with his nose pressed to Lance’s throat, and their limbs and blankets so heavily intertwined that it takes both of them an awkward minute to untangle themselves. Neither of them says anything about how closely they’d been sleeping; Keith does his best not to dwell on the sensation of Lance’s hand thrown over his waist, or the leg that had been pressed between his knees.

They share a small breakfast of berries and bread bought from Arus the day before, and then Keith pulls out the map again, pouring over the area with a hand pressed to his mouth as he thinks.

“Should we try and just go east?” Lance asks, fussing with Kuro’s saddle. “It’s really our only clue.”

Keith makes a small, frustrated noise. “I don’t know why I can’t remember what this reminds me of, it’s just--”

“Hey, calm down,” Lance says, voice soothing. “You’ll figure it out. We can explore the area a little, no harm in that. I think the two of us are more than capable of avoiding undue attention, Prince I-Use-Secret-Passageways-In-My-Own-Home--”

The thought strikes him like lightning, causing him to jolt in place so violently that Lance startles as well. “That’s it,” Keith breathes out, looking up at Lance. He feels like the wind has been knocked out of his chest, dizzy with realization. “The thing that I’m remembering, it’s a battle that’s on a tapestry that hides one of the passageways. The Battle of Bloodsvelt. We fought the Galra a really long time ago for the town of Urani and won, but they raided us several times before it was all said and done, and they used *this pattern* to do it.”

“The Galra?” Lance asks, surprised. “Wait, are you saying you think it’s--”

“Of all of the countries on this continent, they’re the ones most likely to still be using military tactics from a century ago,” Keith says, studying the map again intently as his pulse quickens in his veins. “They’ve always been traditional like that.”

Now that he recognizes it, the memory comes flooding back to him -- his tutor walking with him to the tapestry and telling him the story of the battles at Urani, how much blood had been spilled in the name of a small town with unmitigated access to the mountains, which led to the crystal-filled hills at the northern end of Marmora. His tutor had told him solemnly that those mountains were the only thing that had ever kept Galra from conquering their northern border all those years ago, and that peace between the two countries had been hard won after Bloodsvelt.

“Why would the Galra attack Arus?” Lance asks, voice muffled. When Keith glances up at him, he’s got a hand over his mouth and his arms crossed, his brow furrowed with frustration. “It’s not on their border, they’d have no reason to--”

The answer is so simple that it almost doesn’t feel real to Keith when he says, “Because they want us to go to war with Altea.”

Lance’s hand lowers as he stares at Keith, wide-eyed and mouth agape. “But Galra--”

“Would swoop in and attack us both while we were distracted with one another,” Keith finishes for him, and with every word he speaks he can feel the truth of it in his gut -- Altea had never felt like the right answer to him, but this *does*. The sharp edge of satisfaction at finding the truth is dulled by the fact that it still means the threat of war is looming over Marmora, albeit from a different source than the one his father and the royal advisors were currently afraid of.

“It never made sense to me that Altea would start a fight with us,” Keith tells Lance, returning to the map. “They’ve always been our allies, they’ve always been peaceful with us, and there’s no reason for Allura to change that. But--”

“Lotor,” Lance murmurs, scowling to himself. “He’s exactly the kind of ruler who would want to conquer more territory, especially with his father dying. Galra has the type of nobility that he’d feel he needed to prove himself worthy of being king.”

“If Altea and Marmora started fighting, he’d have the perfect excuse to attack us as well, either under the guise of being allies with one of us or just because the peace on the continent would be broken. And if he did it under the right circumstances, Balmera and Taujeer couldn’t say anything against him for conquering parts of our territories, or even our entire countries.” Keith looks up at Lance, feeling slightly dizzy. “We have to stop him.”

“We could send a message to your father,” Lance suggests. “Let the Blade find us in Arus and explain it to them.”

Keith shakes his head. “Kolivan wouldn’t trust my word, he’ll believe the words of his spies above me until I’m king. And my father might believe me but he doesn’t answer to me, he answers to the country, and he’ll have to do the best thing for Marmora.”

Lance's mouth tightens into a flat line, understanding what he won't say. "You want to find the Galra and prove it's them, don't you?"

"It's what makes the most sense," Keith says, trying to sound as reasonable as possible. "It was what I was going to do anyway. If I can offer proof, Kolivan will have to take me seriously, and even better, we can present proof to Allura of Lotor's conduct and work together to push back."

To his surprise, Lance's furrowed brow fades into a -- guilty one, his face softening into something uncertain. His eyes are dark with unhappiness as he looks at him, and Keith feels something nervous stir in his gut, worried at his expression.

"Keith," Lance says, stepping hesitantly closer, "I should -- I need to tell you--"

The sound of laughter interrupts him, ringing out clearly between the trees from only a dozen or so paces away. Keith stands up immediately, hand going to his waist, but he grasps at air alone -- his sword is still on the ground several feet away where he'd left it last night.

Lance darts quickly towards his bow, but a swift arrow shot directly into his path has him pulling up short, scowling into the trees. Before he can try for his weapon again, two figures emerge from between the trees, bows drawn and enormous swords at their hips.

They're wearing Altean colors, blue and silver clothing, and their weapons are Altean as well -- gently curving swords and thin bows, the favorite of the Altean royal guard. At a distance they might easily pass as Alteans themselves, but this close, looking at the snarling sharp mouths and the murderous glint in their eyes, Keith can easily tell that they're the Galran men they've been looking for.

"Well," the taller one says -- he has an eyepatch over his left eye, a jagged scar peeking through behind the leather indicating it was lost painfully. Keith has the uncomfortable and sinking feeling that he's seen him before, although the innate fear that he feels means it probably when he was a lot smaller. The gleeful look in his eyes tells Keith that the recognition is returned. "Look what we have here."

"Sendak," the smaller one says excitedly, "the dark-haired one."

"I recognize him," Sendak says, smiling with all of his teeth. Keith's stomach drops to his feet at the predatory gleam in his eye. "I think we just found a way to raise the stakes in this little game."

"Sendak," Lance says sharply. "Then you *are* Galra. You're King Zarkon's favorite knight."

"And you're a useless whelp," Sendak returns idly, his gaze fixated on Keith still. "But the prince of Marmora showing up dead, killed by an Altean who dragged him from his bed in the middle of the night makes for as good a reason to start a war as any."

"How did you--" Keith begins, but the shorter one barks out a rusty laugh, interrupting him.

“You’re the talk of the town in Arus right now. The king’s men are all over looking for you, and there’s rumors flying around that the prince disappeared with a stableboy in the middle of the night. They’re saying it’s probably a wayward romance gone too far, that you’ve eloped and plan on abdicating your throne.”

“And luckily we found you before your keepers did,” Sendak says idly, “so we can turn that rumor on its head. We’ll turn the stableboy lover into an Altean spy who lured the prince away and killed him on Queen Allura’s orders. Simple enough to stage a murder and then kill the murderer as he’s fleeing the scene of the crime.”

“My father’s men won’t believe you,” Keith says coldly, trying to seem unaffected by the casual discussion about his impending death, but Sendak merely tilts his head and widens his smile. “Lance has worked at the castle for months now and had plenty of opportunity to kill me there, there’s no reason for him to steal me from the castle to do it.”

The two men snort in unison. “It’s easy enough to excuse minor holes in a story after the death of a king-to-be,” Sendak says, shrugging.

The shorter one adds, “We could spread word that he killed you close to the border to make his escape easier. This isn’t the first time we’ve done this, you know.”

“Under Zarkon’s orders, or Prince Lotor’s?” Keith asks, and has the vindictive pleasure of seeing the smile fade from Sendak’s face. The shorter one makes a displeased hissing sound, but Sendak holds up an arm, stopping him from moving forward.

“So you think you’re clever, hm?” Sendak asks, stepping closer to Keith himself. Lance tries to step in front of Keith, but another arrow sent from the smaller man forces him to stay in place; Keith is pathetically grateful that it keeps him out of Sendak’s line of sight. “You think you’ve figured it out?”

He spits, and it lands on Keith’s boot. Keith doesn’t acknowledge it, staring at him expressionlessly.

“This plan goes back before this year, little prince,” he says softly. His hand reaches out and fists in Keith’s shirt, pulling up nearly off of his feet. Lance makes a furious sound deep in his throat and tries again to reach Keith, but this time the shorter man lunges and grabs him, holding him back. Keith struggles to maintain a calm facade, feeling his heart rabbiting in his chest. He has his hidden knife up his sleeve, but could he incapacitate Sendak before Lance was hurt? “You couldn’t begin to understand how much planning has gone into it. Do you think it’s a coincidence that Marmora has a king without experience leading it now?”

Keith’s breath stops in his lungs, his thoughts fleeing all at once. Sendak’s mouth curls into a smile again, crueler than before.

“Well, someone had to destroy that ship so it looked like a storm had, didn’t they?” he asks idly. “A bunch of good Galran soldiers lost their lives to kill your mother you know. Apparently she was hard to contain. But they were happy to do so -- victory or death is our way.”

The fury he feels is incandescence made real.

It is a buzzing in his ears, a wasp stinging his eyes and chest and stomach until he feels nothing but venom coursing through his veins, pulsing through him with every enraged beat of his heart. He can barely see through it, feels the anger washing over him like a wave; he lets it gather heat inside of him, burning in his own skin like he's swallowed the sun and then he lets it go all at once.

But the flames don't come.

Sendak laughs again, raising Keith up higher so that the collar of his shirt threatens to choke him, cutting into the skin of his neck.

"Like we'd come after a fire mage without protection," he says, reaching into his pocket. He pulls out a small silvery stone, which flashes in the dull midmorning light. "Negates all magic. It doesn't last forever, and it cost more money than you're worth, but we can't have you fucking up our plans before we're ready."

Keith exhales and steam unfurls and spews from his mouth -- he's burning up inside but it won't come out, and he clenches his teeth against the enraged scream he wants to let out instead. He can't bear to give Sendak the satisfaction of seeing him lose control again.

He can still feel the knife he has hidden up his sleeve pressing against the hot skin of his forearm, but before he can slide it into his grasp, Sendak's hand tightens against his throat and his eyesight dims.

"Haxus," Sendak says, "we've got work to do. Silence him."

Lance's pained cry is the last thing Keith hears before his vision goes dark.

.

Waking up is agony -- his skull is throbbing like his brain has shaken loose from it, and even the act of waking up makes the pain worse. His arm is twisted behind his back unnaturally, bound with iron -- and when he weakly tries to use his magic again, nothing happens, so that damned charm must be nearby as well.

The conversation comes back to him in bits and pieces as he tries to think past his aching head, but the memory of Sendak talking about his mother's death is crystal clear in his mind, burned into his heart like a fire brand scoring his insides.

The Galra had killed his mother -- had *stolen* her from him, had discarded her as a pawn that stood in their way as if she were nothing. His *mother*, the queen of his country, was dead because of the selfish whims of some far-off murderous, scum-sucking toad too cowardly to act in the open. Frustrated and furious tears scald at the corners of his eyes, and he clenches them tightly closed and bites back the heaving sobs that want to come.

He didn't want whoever might be nearby to know he was awake, because he was going to get out of here, and he was going to stop this war, and he was going to enjoy running his sword

through Lotor's snobbish, sneering face.

Movement at his back distracts him, and he involuntarily freezes in place, but a soft noise and a gentle pressure against his legs tells him it's Lance. Praying to the stars for good luck, Keith chances cracking one of his eyes open and glances around.

The shorter Galra -- Haxus? -- is sitting not far off, muttering into a short-distance communication crystal. His attention seems to be focused on a map he has spread out in front of him, but Keith can't tell what he's saying or doing because his back is turned to them.

Lance must have made his own assessment of the situation too, because he taps at Keith's hand a few times -- Keith has no idea what he's trying to communicate, he's never bothered to learn silent military communication because he's not a soldier -- and then goes still again. Keith follows his cue and waits, trying to keep from moving too much.

There's a soft snapping noise, and Lance exhales.

Keith doesn't realize what's happening until he hears the softest sound of leaves rustling, and when he looks as best he can towards Lance, he sees him rising off the ground, a scowl on his face as he contemplates Haxus. His hands are loose and in front of him, the iron cuffs dangling from his left wrist. One of his hands is holding a heavy-looking rock with jagged edges.

Keith watches with wide eyes as Lance makes his silent way behind the Galran soldier and neatly slams the rock into his head, knocking him hard enough that the thud makes even Keith wince. Haxus topples over like a stack of cards, collapsing bonelessly on the ground in a loose sprawl. The communication crystal in his hands goes dark as soon as it falls from his grasp.

"Keith," Lance says immediately, turning to face him. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," Keith says, although his head is still aching. "How did you--"

Lance holds up his right hand, grimacing. His thumb is bent unnaturally, dark and swelling up quickly. "I dislocated my thumb," he says, "to take the cuffs off. I'll need your help to set it properly, but hopefully this shitheel has a key on him somewhere to get yours off."

"You--" Keith sputters a little, surprised at how nonchalant Lance is being. "How did you even know how to--"

"Keith," Lance interrupts, digging through Haxus' clothing. "I promise, I'll tell you everything in just a little while. But I don't want to risk whoever he was talking to showing up, so we've got to get out of here as soon as possible."

Keith falls silent but feels himself frowning. Everything sounded bigger than just explaining how he'd known how to get out of iron cuffs.

"Gotcha," Lance mutters under his breath, fishing a key out of Haxus' pocket. "Hang on."

He hurries to Keith's side, gently turning him over and fiddling with the cuffs. His hands are careful against Keith's wrists when the shackles finally come loose, smoothing away the irritated red lines they've left there.

Keith stretches his limbs as soon as he's able, turning quickly to face Lance. "Let me help with your injury," he says, gently taking his wrist. Lance winces, then smiles reassuringly when Keith bites his lip anxiously.

"Just realign the bone. I'll find a charm to fix the rest of it later." He uses his other hand to grip Keith's shoulder when he hesitates, squeezing gently. "You can do it, Keith."

The bone snaps into place easier than he expected, but the sound still makes him cringe, and Lance can't quite swallow his grunt of pain. The skin around his thumb has gone pale.

"Let me see if he's got an healing charms on him," Keith says, worriedly, although Lance's pained expression is already fading, "and if he doesn't there should be at least one with the saddlebags."

Haxus doesn't have any charms on him, but Keith does steal the map he'd been looking at and the communication crystal. He finds the knife he'd had hidden up his sleeve tucked into Haxus' pocket, still in its sheath. He contemplates running it through Haxus' heart just to be sure he won't follow them, but he hasn't stirred since Lance hit him, and the thought of stabbing an unconscious man left a bitter taste in Keith's mouth, no matter what kind of man he was.

He settles for snapping the iron cuffs around his wrists and breaking the key off in them.

Their horses are unharmed, thankfully, and they don't waste a moment before they mount them and ride away from the clearing they'd been in, the horse's hooves pounding frantically over the hard ground. Keith doesn't recognize the area around them -- it's all just the same forest they've been in the last few days -- but the sun is only midway through the sky, so they can't have been out for more than a few hours. They have to still be near Arus, and Sendak and the rest of his men would be probably still in the area.

"Where should we go?" Lance asks, as if he'd been reading Keith's thoughts.

"We should get our bearings and then head to Arus," Keith tells him, trying to figure out from the angle of the sun where that might actually be.

"What happened to needing proof?" Lance says, sounding surprised.

"I've taken a map with where they've marked their movements and a communication crystal," Keith says, "and Kolivan may not entirely trust me but I am a prince. If I tell him I was kidnapped by a Galran soldier who identified himself as Sendak, he should listen to that. Besides, once they know about what happened to my mother, every member of the Blade will be out for blood."

Lance jerks Kuro to a halt so suddenly that Keith almost doesn't realize he's stopped. He pulls on Red's reins, drawing her to a stop as well, turning in his saddle to look at Lance in

confusion.

“Lance?” he calls. Lance looks back at him with a firm set to his brow, his hands clenching and unclenching around his reins with tension -- or nervousness, maybe.

“I need to tell you something,” he says slowly, sounding pained. “I know you’re going to hate me after I tell you this, so I should honestly wait to do it until we’re both safe, but I can’t -- I can’t *stand* keeping this from you any longer.”

“Lance,” Keith says slowly, feeling something like fear creeping up his spine, “what are you talking about?”

There’s a beat of silence, and then Lance sighs.

“Your mother isn’t dead,” he says, the words so blunt Keith almost doesn’t register them.

For the second time in only a few hours, his breathing stops.

“Altea mourned her loss after we heard the news,” Lance says quietly, “Allura especially. She looked up to your mother a lot, you know? But about a month after the official pronouncement of her death, only days after your father was crowned, a few fishermen found a woman washed up on a beach. She had striking features -- dark hair, dark eyes, a bloody gash on her head. She was half-dead, floating on some kind of makeshift raft. She didn’t look Altean, so the fisherman alerted the local guard, and someone must have recognized her, because she was brought to the palace quickly after that.”

He pauses, and runs a hand through his hair -- a gesture of frustration, maybe, or exhaustion. Keith can’t bring himself to do anything but stare. He’s halfway afraid that if he moves, he might shatter.

“She couldn’t remember anything except the fact that she’d been on a ship and that the crew had attacked her, locking her in her cabin before they’d blown the ship up. She didn’t remember anything before or after that -- we think when they destroyed the ship, she was struck on the head, and she lost the memories in the concussion.”

He stops, taking a shaky breath, before he continues.

“Our healers have been working with her nonstop for the last few years, trying to restore her memories. They’ve finally started returning, this year -- she knows her own name, and that she has a son and a husband. She especially remembers you.” Lance’s voice breaks a little, sounding wretched. “She talks about you as a child a lot.”

Keith finally finds his voice -- he wishes it were a snarl or growl, but instead he just sounds pitifully small when he whispers, “How could you keep this from me?”

Lance closes his eyes tightly, bowing his head. “It wasn’t my choice,” he says, his voice aching. “I had orders.”

“*It’s my mother,*” Keith snaps, finally finding his anger, feeling it swell suddenly in his chest like a roiling wave of anger and betrayal. He thinks of all the times he’d spoken to Lance

about his mother, the times he'd confided in him, and feels his pain and misery double until he's afraid he might burst from it like an overfilled skein.

"We talked about telling Marmora when we found her, but all we knew was that her crew -- supposedly Marmoran -- had attacked her and tried to kill her, Keith. Look at it from our point of view! It looked like someone was trying to kill her off to get her out of the way of succession," Lance says, sounding desperate. "How could we risk giving her back to you when she was still clueless as to her own identity?"

"So you just *kept* her?" Keith asks, outrage driving his voice higher. "It's been *four years*, Lance! I've had to live with her being dead for four years, and you just had her hidden away in your palace?"

"We thought the attack might have been at your father's orders," Lance tells him. He clenches his eyes closed, then says through gritted teeth, "Or even your own."

Keith feels the blood rush from his head all at once, leaving him dizzy -- he feels sick to his stomach, has to fumble his way blindly off of Red's back and crashes to the forest floor, struggling to find his footing among the fallen leaves. He doesn't know what he's doing, doesn't know where he's trying to go, but he knows he has to get away from Lance. Fire flickers under his skin like bubbling acid, scorching his throat.

"Keith!" Lance shouts, and there's a thudding sound as he dismounts as well and hurriedly tries to stop Keith from stumbling away. "Keith, *please*, stop--"

"Leave me *alone*," Keith chokes out, pushing his hand away roughly.

"Keith, even before Sendak said anything I knew you hadn't done it -- would you please just -- *stop*," Lance says, tugging on his shirt until he stops trying to jerk away. "Keith, I haven't thought you had anything to do with any of this since we danced together, I swear to the stars."

Keith stares up at him, uncomprehending. "Since we danced together?"

"I was the man at the masquerade," Lance tells him hesitantly. "I was trying to get a feel for the court, but I had no idea that I'd run into the prince and I -- from the moment I met you, I felt -- Keith, I--"

His mysterious stranger all those months ago -- it's almost too easy to slot Lance into his skin, to take the heart-pounding moments shared between the two of them and twist them into fitting his daydreams of Lance as well, to intertwine longing in his heart and compound it with the bitterness filling his gut as every single puzzled thought he's had about Lance suddenly becomes painfully clear.

"Who *are* you?" Keith asks wearily. "Because you're not a stable boy."

He doesn't answer immediately, and when Keith raises his gaze to look Lance in the eye again, he can practically see the war going on behind his dark eyes -- his brow is furrowed, his mouth curved into a slowly tightening frown, but he finally sighs and closes his eyes.

Lance haltingly tells him, "The story I told you last night -- about the queen's thief taking back that necklace and meeting that merchant...that's my family's story. How my mother and father met, I mean. My mother is the queen's thief...or she was. It's been passed down to--"

"You," Keith finishes for him, the taste of betrayal acrid in his mouth. "You're the queen's thief."

Lance stares at him with dark, regretful eyes and replies, "Yes."

And it makes -- perfect sense, in the end. All of Lance's strange skills, the way he always seemed to know more than he should, how he seemingly ran into Keith no matter where he was. *Stars*, he was a stupid, lovestruck fool -- it should have been obvious Lance was a spy from the moment they'd met, but he'd been too caught up in Lance's charm and smiles to do more than bask in them.

"So everything you've told me from the moment we've met, everything -- it was all a lie?" Keith demands.

"No," Lance says fervently, gripping tighter at his shirt when he tries to pull away again. "Keith, listen to me. I was sent to figure out if someone in Marmora was framing us for the attacks on your border, and because of what had happened with Krolia, Allura thought it was someone in Ilun, and that it was probably -- probably either the royal family or their advisors. She sent me there to discover who was behind it, report to her, and then our plan was to stop them and restore Krolia to the throne before war could break out between our countries. I -- I had to keep some things a secret, yes, but I promise I haven't lied to you about everything."

Keith sags in Lance's grasp, his heart too heavy and his head too full of too many thoughts to keep trying to get away. He wishes he were angrier, that his fury from before could return so he could draw a knife on Lance and mean it, but even now he knows he couldn't hurt him. He was *pathetic*.

"I don't believe you," he murmurs, reaching up to press a hand to his aching head. "I can't believe I let myself--"

Fall in love with you. He refuses to let the words come out but they feel like daggers in his chest.

Lance makes a pained noise in the back of his throat, reaching out with one hand to cup Keith's cheek. "Ask me anything and I'll tell you the truth. My mother's name. Allura's greatest weakness, the place where my family lives -- my favorite color," he says softly, and Keith's heart lurches in his chest. "I'll tell you everything and anything you want to hear. I trust you, Keith."

"Why?" Keith asks roughly, his eyes hot and his throat dry, reaching up to fist his own hand in Lance's shirt and drag him closer. His pulse pounds wildly in his head, a staccato drumbeat that flickers every time Lance swallows. "How could you *trust me* and still not tell me the truth?"

“I didn’t know *how* to,” Lance says desperately, shaking him by his shoulders. “I wanted to tell you a hundred times, a thousand times, but it felt like every day it was less and less possible, and I still didn’t know if someone in your court was behind it, and then I was worried for *you*, that you might end up caught in the middle of all of this and get hurt, and I couldn’t let that happen because--”

He pauses, breath catching in his throat. They’re standing so closely together now that Keith can feel the warmth from Lance’s exhale against his face, can smell the winter wind in his hair and the hot clutch of his hand against his neck; they’re pressed as close together as they had been that first night at the masquerade, and his mouth unconsciously parts before he can think better of it.

“Keith,” Lance murmurs, leaning in, “I--”

The sound of shouting voices interrupts him, both of them jerking apart as the thudding of hooves registers in the distance. Keith’s heart feels like a counterpoint to the rhythmic pounding, shuddering in his chest as he realizes that he’d been about to -- about to --

“*Find them!*” a voice roars out, closer than before.

“Sendak,” Keith says grimly, recognizing him now. He pushes his dizzy thoughts aside to examine later, when he’s far away from Lance and has his sensibilities restored.

“We need to get out of here,” Lance says firmly, letting go of Keith’s shirt to reach for his wrist and tug him along. They both hurry back towards the horses, pulling themselves into their saddles and spinning them to point in the direction they’d been fleeing earlier. “We have to make it back to Arus.”

“There’s at least a dozen of them,” Keith says, listening carefully. “If they’re fanned out, there’s no way we won’t have to fight at least some of them.”

“I’ve got my bow. You take the lead, it’s more important for you to make it back than me. I’ll hold them off.” Lance takes the bow off of his shoulder in one fluid motion, wheeling Kuro around with his knees.

“What? *No*,” Keith protests, using Red’s body to cut him off. “We can both make it back to Arus, we just need to--”

“You’re the prince,” Lance says firmly. They’re close enough that Keith can see the flash of his eyes when he looks back at him, the wry twist to his mouth. “You have to find someone to help save both of our countries from making a huge mistake, and people will listen to a prince sooner than a stable boy.”

“You’re not a stable boy,” Keith snaps.

“I’m yours,” Lance replies quietly. “Now go. I’m right behind you, don’t worry.”

Keith grits his teeth and puts his heels to Red’s side, riding as quickly away from the sounds of the Galran soldiers as he dares, trying to be mindful of the looming trees and the

possibility of stones or holes underfoot. He's relieved when Lance immediately follows him, although he can tell that he's lagging behind on purpose, clearly prepared to take on whoever might show up.

He prays to the stars that he's heading towards Arus -- he thinks it's to the north of where they are, but they keep riding and the main road never shows up, and the sound of pounding hooves behind them doesn't abate; in fact, it seems to be getting closer.

"Lance!" he calls over his shoulder. "You have to go faster!"

Lance has the audacity to roll his eyes. "I'm going as fast as you are, Keith, now try to -- the road!"

Keith jerks his head forward and catches sight of the bright flash of the dirt road, covered in pale gravel and well-worn with use. He lowers his head, urging Red to go faster with a press of his legs against her sides; she obeys him eagerly, leaping forward with renewed enthusiasm.

When he breaks free of the tree line, for a brief, blissful moment he thinks that they've won, that the worst of it was behind them and they would make it -- but then someone cries out behind him.

His blood freezes in his veins and he turns to look at Lance with his heart in his throat.

The arrow has run all the way through him, piercing through his shoulder so that the point is aimed just above his heart. Blood is already staining his white shirt under his cloak, red spilling out over his chest as he slumps in his saddle.

"Lance!" Keith shouts, immediately jerking on Red's reins so that she spins in place, turning back towards him.

Lance lifts his head, reaching for the arrow jutting from his shoulder with a shaking hand. There's blood in his mouth when he looks at Keith and bares his teeth at him in a scowl.

"Keep going," he yells, pointing with bloody fingertips at Keith. "Go, I'm fine."

"Like *hell*," Keith snaps at him, drawing up close to Lance and reaching for him with both hands. Lance's body sways in the saddle a little, and up close Keith can see he's gone ashen, his eyes dimmed with pain. "Shit," Keith mutters. "Lance, we've got to get you to a healer right now."

"You need to go on without me," Lance tells him raggedly, wincing. "They were close enough to hit me, they should already be here."

Keith can hear them in the woods, the sound of horses making their way around the edges of the trees. "They're surrounding us," he says calmly. "Which means I only have a moment to do this, so stay close to me."

"What are you going to--"

Keith reaches into his well of magic, pulls all of his pain and fear and hatred to the surface and turns it molten, extending his hand and snapping his fingers together. Flames leap into existence at the edge of the trees, licking up the dried-out bark like teasing fingertips and spreading along the dead grass and shrubbery faster than he'd expected.

In seconds they are surrounded by an inferno.

The horses shy away from the flames immediately, rearing back with loud whinnies -- Lance yelps as it jostles his wound, and Keith reaches for Kuro's reins with his free hand and tries to tug her along behind him. An arrow sails out of the woods and misses him by inches, and more follow immediately, but none of the soldiers manage break through the wall of flames.

The horses in the forest are screaming as well, trying to flee the fire that's already spread beyond Keith's control. The air is thick with smoke and sparking embers, and he coughs several times before he thinks to pull his cloak up and over his face. He feels a frisson of worry for the creatures in the woods that he snuffs out immediately, urging Red to hurry along the road where the flames can't spread through the dirt. Kuro follows nervously, Lance leaned over her back with his eyes closed tightly. His shirt is almost more red than white now, and Keith feels fear like a fever creeping hotly up his spine.

He barely gets more than a hundred feet down the path before something stumbles out of the spreading wildfire, a tall man with smoking clothing and a sword raised in his direction. Keith pulls Red and Kuro to a stop, wincing when Lance hisses at the sudden movement.

It's Sendak, his eyepatch torn away so that the dark red scar tissue of his missing eye is exposed to them, and his arm is covered in bubbling burns under his false armor. His teeth are bared in a snarl that Keith can see even through the smoke and embers, his sword held high in the air.

"Victory or death! Nothing has changed as long as I kill you here and now," he shouts, a manic gleam in his eye. The flames around them flash off of the silvery metal of his sword as he points it at Keith.

"He's blocking the path," Keith mutters. He knows he could probably run past him with Red alone, but he doesn't want to risk something happening to Lance when he can barely hold himself up, growing paler by the second. He hesitates, trying to decide what to do -- knowing that the longer he waits, the more likely it was that other soldiers would break through the flames as well.

Lance murmurs something, but Keith can't hear him. He doesn't dare take his eyes off of Sendak. Lance says it again, a little louder, and a weak hand presses something against his thigh. When Keith touches it, he can feel that it's an arrow.

"Bow," Lance whispers, just barely audible above the crackling wildfire. "My bow is still on my back."

Sendak lets loose a wordless roar of fury and charges at him with his sword, and Keith makes a snap decision -- he reaches over and pulls the bow off of Lance's back, wincing at his

pained cry as the movement jostles his wound, and in seconds he has an arrow pointing at Sendak.

Sendak doesn't even acknowledge Keith, just continues his charge.

The string of the bow is sharp between his fingertips, there's sweat and smoke in his eyes, and he's pointing an arrow at another human being for the first time in his life. His hand wavers a little, his grip faltering.

Abruptly he thinks back to Lance's lessons, the gentle pressure at his elbow, the hand at his waist. He corrects his aim again, straightening his posture, remembering Lance murmuring in his ear.

Lance, a thief who had lied to him from the moment they'd met but saved his life multiple times without hesitation. Lance, who danced with him without knowing his name and kept his mother a secret from him from months. *Lance*, who he knew he still loved despite everything that had happened -- and who might die because of this man.

Let go.

In the end it's not even very difficult. The arrow buries itself in Sendak's throat, snapping his head back with the force of its impact. He makes a horrible gurgling sound, clutching at the root of the arrow, and then stumbles to the ground, limbs sprawling out. He goes completely still in a matter of seconds.

"Nice shot," Lance mumbles weakly, coughing a little. Blood seeps from between his fingertips where he's clutching at the shaft of the arrow, and Keith's stomach lurches in fear.

"Let's go," Keith says quickly, taking Kuro's reins again.

The fire still hasn't spread to the path, but he can hear the Galran soldiers rallying behind the walls of flames, so he pushes the horses to run as fast as they can through the smoke and soot, keeping his head low and praying to the stars for help.

Several times he has to stop and send bouts of gushing flames at soldiers who manage to sneak up behind them -- he can hear the hissing sounds of water cascading over fire, which means they've got water mages with them, and their means of escape drastically diminishes the more of them there are.

He'd hoped, foolishly, that without Sendak they might have fallen into disarray, but none of them seem to care -- *victory or death*, he remembers, and grits his teeth as he pulls Lance and Kuro along. His flames grow weaker and weaker as his energy depletes, and still he cannot see Arus in the distance. The path is unendingly the same no matter how far he rides, and he knows he's ridden at least a few miles. How far had Sendak carried them? Was he even traveling in the right direction? Fear and indecision twist together in his gut, weighing him down.

Lance stops making pained noises, going completely silent. Keith is terrified to look back at him for fear what he might see. He hopes against hope that he's merely fallen unconscious.

He can feel Red's lungs heaving underneath him, can feel Kuro flagging a little every time the reins go taut in his grip. He knows they've inhaled just as much smoke as he has, and that they've been traveling for days now without much rest.

He keeps his knees pressed tight around Red's sides and grits his teeth, knowing that there's no turning back at this point.

His vision is blurring dangerously by the time the forest begins to thin and then falls away completely, and a breathless gasp of air escapes him before he can choke it back -- he can see, in the distance, the tall bright red brick of Arus' border wall, and even better, can see the thick crowd of soldiers standing clustered around the gate, pointing in the distance.

A familiar face looms at the forefront, and even from this far away Keith can see him mouth his name in disbelief before he takes off at a sprint towards them.

"Shiro," Keith gasps out, slumping over Red's back with equal parts relief and exhaustion. She finally slows down a little, her gait breaking into a trot and then a shambling walk as he loosens his grip on her. He coughs weakly just as Shiro catches up to him, reaching out with one hand to fist in Shiro's clothes and pull him closer.

"Lance," he says frantically, "please get someone to take care of Lance--"

"Keith," Shiro says, alarmed, "what's going on? It looks like half the forest is on fire--"

"Shiro, you have to save him," Keith insists desperately; everything spins as he lurches from his saddle. His vision goes gray, then completely dark.

The silence is somehow a comfort.

.

He wakes to the sound of bickering.

"He's my patient, Takashi, I get to make the rules."

"He's going to want to know, Adam, you know that."

"He needs to get better before we start in on all of that and you know it--"

Keith opens his eyes and immediately regrets it -- the world is awash in bright light and colors, and he hisses and clenches them closed again tightly, but the damage is done.

The pain radiating through his body registers only a moment later. His entire chest feels like flames have scored him from the inside out, leaving him charred and raw inside. His lungs ache each time he inhales, and when he turns his head to cough into the soft pillow and squints his eyes open, he can see black residue left on the white cloth.

"Keith!" Adam says, hurrying to his side. "Here, drink some water -- careful, not too much, just sip it -- good, there you go." He runs a hand through Keith's loose hair, tucking it behind his ears carefully. "You inhaled a lot of smoke, I'm having to heal you in batches to take care

of it. Try not to move around too much. Your body was showing signs of extreme exhaustion, physical and magical.” His eyebrows furrow in worry over the tops of his glasses. “You overexerted yourself again, didn’t you?”

Keith opens his dry mouth and manages to croak out, “Lance,” before his throat screams at him, and he devolves into coughing again, covering his mouth with a shaking hand.

Adam’s face changes considerably, his concern melting into something more subdued. “I hate when you’re right,” he says sullenly, clearly to someone else. He presses the cup of water against Keith’s mouth, encouraging him to sip again, and the water soothes the sharp ache at the back of his throat.

A snort in the corner of the room draws his attention, but he doesn’t see who else is there until Shiro makes his way to Keith’s other side, a half-smile on his face. “Hey, kid,” he murmurs, pressing a hand against the top of Keith’s head. “How are you feeling?”

Keith sends him as deadpan a look as he can, unwilling to speak again.

“Right,” Shiro says, and his lukewarm smile fades into a frown. “Lance is fine, Keith. It was touch and go for a little while, but he pulled through. He’s actually been awake for a few hours now.”

He pauses, then says hesitantly, “He told us everything.”

Fear slams into his stomach like a punch. Keith closes his eyes and covers them with one hand, breathing shallowly. *Everything?* he mouths.

“Yes,” Shiro says tiredly. “Our men have already apprehended some of the Galran soldiers left in the woods, and the Blade are searching for the rest. Altean diplomats are on their way to discuss what’s happened here, and we’ve got advisors from Ilun headed to here as well. Your father -- he wanted to come but the castle can’t be abandoned right now.”

Keith waits, because he can sense there’s more to be said. Shiro inhales deeply.

“Queen Allura herself is escorting your mother to the border,” he tells him. “And she’s taking Lance back with her when she leaves.”

Keith absorbs the information, the twin blows to his heart. *Mother*, he thinks -- he’s been so preoccupied with so many other things that he’s barely let himself think of what it means that she’s still alive. He’s relived her death a thousand times, so often that he’d nearly grown numb to it -- and that makes the inverse feel all the more painful, his heart swelling in his chest until it leaves him even more breathless than he already is. Tears well hotly at the corners of his eyes and fall down the sides of his face; he’s grateful that he’s still covering them with his hand, so Shiro and Adam can’t see.

What if she didn’t want to see him? What if she didn’t remember him? Lance had said that her memories were returning, but that didn’t mean she would want to stay with her family after everything that had happened--

And Lance. The dizzying panic in his chest tightens into something sharper, more bitter.

Of course Lance would be leaving with his queen. He was her thief, and he'd finished his job. There was no reason for him to stay in Marmora, and no reason for Keith to feel like he's been stabbed in the heart at the thought of Lance leaving.

He tries to summon his sense of betrayal, the fury and outrage he'd felt when Lance had confessed to him, but all he feels is...heartbroken. Miserable and confused and longing. His feelings sit in a tangled knot in his chest, heavy inside of him like a physical weight.

He wants to see him more than anything, but he knows better than to ask for it.

Instead he uncovers his eyes, whispers as softly as he can, "I'm tired." Shiro and Adam exchange a glance but don't say anything out loud. Shiro strokes a hand through Keith's hair once more, and Adam rummages through his bag before reaching out and tapping a charm gently against Keith's forehead, sending him to sleep immediately.

.

He dreams of dancing under moonlight, flashing silver scales, blue eyes watching him from across a fire. He dreams of warm breath against the side of his face and a sly smile quirking up at him in a darkened stable. He dreams of Lance's crestfallen face as they'd fought, and the way he'd desperately murmured, "*From the moment I met you, I felt--*"

He wakes up alone and shivering in bed. He doesn't let himself fall back asleep until the sun starts to peek through the windows of the room he's in, pinks and oranges and yellows mixing together like an abstract painting on the far wall.

His sleep is dreamless this time, but waking up doesn't hurt any less.

.

It's another full day in bed before Adam declares him fit to leave his care, although Keith is fully healed well before then. Adam still fusses over him needlessly until he's restless in his own skin, barely waiting for the reluctant, "*Fine*, but if you overdo it then I'm tying you down to the bed next time," before he's pushing out of the infirmary door and into the fresh air.

The building they've been staying in is apparently one that diplomats and traders from Ilun used often, located centrally in city and surrounded on all sides by other trade buildings. He passes by a half-dozen advisors and diplomats from the castle, all of whom offer him cursory bows and then excitedly press him for details of what had happened. Kolivan had apparently made attempts to keep some of the more salacious details of the events under wraps, but that had led to wild guessing that was even more ridiculous than what had really happened. He has to remind no less than three people that he's a human being, and therefore incapable of jumping thirty feet into the air.

Even worse, everyone is still under the impression that he'd left Ilun with Lance on some kind of romantic getaway, and more than one person tries to slyly ask him if he really had

been running away with a stable boy when he'd inadvertently saved Marmora.

He gets used to repeating, "I can't speak on the matter," with a carefully blank face.

Arus is flooded with visitors from both sides of the border; Keith gets used to the sight of people murmuring over maps, disappearing into rooms for hours on end. Altea's top diplomat turns out to be a red-haired man with a truly astounding mustache and seemingly boundless righteous energy.

He bows deeply to Keith when they meet, his head nearly parallel with the floor. They're in a large meeting hall with a dozen other important people, about to begin discussions of what to do about their most pressing issue: namely Prince Lotor and Galra.

"I understand we owe a great deal to you, Your Highness," he tells Keith, his mustache twitching with a smile. "The queen will be here herself in tomorrow afternoon, but I offer our gratitude on her behalf."

Keith gives him a tentative smile in return, although the reminder that Allura would be there with his mother soon has his stomach churning. "Your gratitude is appreciated but not necessary, Sir Coran. Altea and Marmora have always been allies, and should remain so."

"Wisely spoken," Sir Coran tells him gravely. He pauses, then takes a few steps closer, leaning in carefully. He says, in a measured but warm tone, "I also wanted to personally thank you for saving Lance. He is the queen's close friend, and mine as well."

The mention of Lance causes a dart of unhappiness to spear through him, but he manages a small nod of acknowledgement. Sir Coran seems to notice, because he stares at him intently for a moment.

"You know Romelle, right?" he asks, seemingly apropos of nothing. Keith blinks at him in confusion, then hesitantly nods. "Look for her tonight after dinner, if you would. I think there's something you need to see."

"Alright," Keith says slowly. Sir Coran bows again to him, just as deeply as before, and then takes his seat at the table. The discussion begins a few minutes later, and Keith has to push the strange conversation to the back of his mind.

He picks at his food during dinner, his mind wrapped up in what Romelle could possibly have to show him. He's not a fool -- he knows it must have something to do with Lance, but he also knows that Lance isn't even in Arus anymore.

Shiro had told him when he'd woken again that first morning after without prompting, a simple, "Lance has been declared fit enough to move, so he's not in Arus anymore." Keith had absorbed the information silently and then nodded.

Kolivan had been reluctantly appreciative of what Lance had told him, and for his efforts in saving Keith and Marmora, but leaving a spy from another country in Marmora was out of the question, according to him. Lance was apparently just on the other side of the Altean

border in a small town called Melanor, still recovering from his wounds and waiting to return to the capital with Queen Allura.

Keith doesn't know if it's better or worse, than he can't even be tempted to seek out Lance anymore. Logically he knows it's better that they've severed their ties completely but still--

"Your Highness."

Keith looks up from his half-empty plate, realizing belatedly that the mess hall has mostly cleared out, and that Romelle is seated next to him with her hands folded in her lap. She's not wearing the plain clothing she'd worn the last time they met -- she's instead dressed in pale purple silk with jewels at her throat and ears, her hair carefully braided.

"You're a noble," he realizes.

"Yes, a duchess in Altea. My family remains gainfully employed as traders, however, just as Lance probably told you." She smiles, a hint of a blush appearing on her face. "Allura and I are...engaged, though, so my title will change eventually."

"I hadn't heard," Keith says, blinking at her and reeling slightly at the sudden pirouette his mental image of her has done in the last thirty seconds. "Congratulations."

"It hasn't been announced yet. We're waiting for spring," Romelle says blithely. "But that is not what I came to speak to you about."

"I'm not sure what you're here to speak to me about," Keith tells her plainly, but instead of looking offended she gives him a sad smile.

"I'm sure you didn't have time to talk about it, but I was Lance's correspondent while he was in Ilun. We communicated with crystals when we could, but they're finicky over long distances, so he sent me letters as well. He even had to use your hatchery in the castle, once, since our bird was already in use."

A half-forgotten memory of Lance surfaces in his mind, feathers in his hair as he smiled enigmatically at Keith hanging out of a secret passage. His heart twinges in his chest.

"I kept those letters," Romelle continues, reaching into the pocket of her dress. She draws out a sheaf of letters, maybe half a dozen total all bound together with a red string. "And I thought maybe you'd like to see them."

Keith stares at her in disbelief. "Why should I care what's in those letters?" he asks.

"Because I think they'll clear a few things up for you," Romelle tells him, "and Lance won't push this any further so I'm making the choice for him."

"My lady," Keith says slowly, "I don't hold a grudge against Lance for what he did -- I understand he was thinking of his country first and foremost. That's something I...I can appreciate. You don't have to prove his fidelity to the crown to me."

Romelle shakes her head, her blue eyes glinting in the light. "You're both so -- ugh. Please, Your Highness. Just take them. What you do with them is up to you, but I think you're both making a mistake."

"What--" Keith sputters, startled when she shoves the letters against his chest, leaving him no choice but to grab for them.

"I do hope you'll be able to attend the wedding next year," Romelle tells him, smiling. "I think we're going to be good friends, you and I -- we have a lot in common, you know. Allura's always putting others before herself too. She hates the thought of letting anyone down, and it wears on her. But no matter how many missed dinners, or how often we argue, I still love her." Her voice goes soft and a little wobbly, and her smile grows warmer. "Loving someone is the scariest and most important choice we can give ourselves, Your Highness. I hope you'll let yourself have that chance too."

She stands, skirts rustling like whispers in a hall, and leaves before he can say anything else. Keith looks after her with wide eyes, still clutching the letters to his chest.

.

Rom,

I don't know if I can do this. Are you surprised I'm saying that after only being here a few days? I know my mom always preached emotional distance, but my mom has never seen the prince of Marmora up close. Rom, he's gorgeous. His eyes are like looking at the nighttime sky or falling into the deepest part of the oceans, I swear. And he's funny, and kind, and he dances like -- do you have enough proof yet that I shouldn't be on this mission? I don't think I can be objective, Rom. As of right now, I don't have any indication that anyone is part of what we think is going on. I've infiltrated the castle a few times but haven't managed to get very far. There's a delegation from Balmera showing up soon, so there's a lot of activity. I'll try and see if this meeting really is about trade, or if Balmera might be involved too.

I'll write soon. You can decide if you want to tell Lura about me not being on this mission anymore. I don't know what to think right now.

Rom,

Good news -- the trade deal was above board. Bad news -- the prince gave me his cloak and I've been sleeping with it the last few nights like some kind of lovestruck fool. I keep meaning to give it back to him -- I could even just sneak it back to his room if I wanted -- but I can't seem to let it go. I know Lura says that she trusts me, but still. I don't know. The other day he walked into a wall in the stable and it was the cutest thing I think I've ever seen. And the way he talks about Marmora, I can tell he'd do anything for his people. He reminds me of Lura, to be honest. Rom, I feel guilty whenever I look at him, knowing what I know.

Nothing else to report yet. The leader of the Blades is a sneaky guy. I haven't been able to pin him down. He doesn't keep anything of note in his rooms, and I haven't been able to search

the king's yet. I'm going to do my best to find some kind of physical link because I know we need tangible proof. The rumors among the advisors seem to be the same thing everyone at the border thinks -- that we're attacking them. I don't see any hints yet that it's being fabricated here. Also, can you send me another crystal back with you this time? Mine is broken again.

Rom,

Can confirm there are secret passageways here too -- nearly got caught the other night sneaking through the castle, but luckily the prince was too busy crawling out of a portrait to notice. I'm going to watch him and see if he reveals any others. He remains ridiculously beautiful -- his hair was pulled up again and I almost died on the spot. Also, no, I'm not going to stop talking about how pretty he is in these letters, I don't have anyone to talk to here so you can suffer. I did enough suffering when you were pining for Lura and vice versa.

The king seems to be just as genuinely confused as the prince, and from all accounts from servants who've served here a while, he really did love his wife. Starting to think I should be concentrating my efforts on the advisors and the Blade. Did you talk about that thing with Lura that I asked you? Please, Rom, it's important.

Rom,

I know we already talked about this but I need you to ask Lura again. Please rethink me letting him know about his mother. Rom, I'm begging you. Please.

Rom,

I think he's found out about something. I don't think he's figured me out but he seems on edge, and I can't get him to tell me anything. We spent the night in the kitchen and I wanted to try and get him to tell me what was going on, but I just...it's hard, Rom. Looking him in the eye and telling him only part of the truth, when I want to tell him more. I can see how badly he's hurting. He's scared of being king. It's strange, how hard he seems on the outside but how vulnerable he really is. He's like an open wound sometimes; I can see how hard it is for him to act healed.

Kolivan seems to be suspicious of us, and of me. I've caught him watching me a few times, but I honestly think it has more to do with how much time the prince and I are spending together. Still, he's the major player in trying to convince the king to strike at us first. I don't know if he's just overly cautious or playing the entire court -- still no hard evidence either way. I'll call next time, my crystal should be better.

Rom,

I don't care what Lura says. I can't do this anymore. I'm going to tell him tomorrow. It's already nearly midnight so I know this won't reach you until it's too late, but I don't think there's anything more I can do here. I'm sorry, Rom, but I just can't keep pretending to be what I'm not, not when I feel the way I do. He deserves better than that.

See you soon, I guess.

.

Queen Allura is somehow both smaller and grander than he remembers her being. She's shorter than him, and her voice is calm and measured, but as soon as she walks into the room she commands the attention of everyone within immediately. A half dozen diplomats swarm her for attention, and she politely greets each and every one of them as she steadily makes her way towards the table where their delegation is waiting.

She embraces Sir Coran warmly when they meet, and then turns her full attention to Keith all at once, freezing him in place with the force of her gaze.

"Your Highness," she says calmly, and then, to his horror, bows her head to him. Shocked gasps and whispers immediately erupt around the room, so he hurriedly grabs her by the elbows and pulls her upright again, trying to look composed and knowing he's failing spectacularly.

"You're a *queen*," he tells her in hushed tones, flushing in embarrassment.

"I made a grave error," she says firmly, looking unruffled despite the displeasure emanating from her advisors and diplomats aside from Coran. She ignores them, grasping at Keith's hands with her own and squeezing. Her brows furrow with guilt and remorse, and her voice wavers a little as she continues, "As someone who...recently lost her mother as well, I shouldn't have kept yours a secret from you for so long. I was trying to keep her safe, but I fear I hurt you more than I helped her."

Keith gives her a tentative smile, still feeling overwhelmed that she'd bowed to him. He thought he'd been prepared for how to handle this situation, but she's completely thrown him off, and he takes a moment to gather his thoughts again. "I understand your reasoning, Queen Allura," he says formally. "You did what you could with the information you had, and I -- we, my father and I, we bear no ill will towards you or Altea. Please do not bow to me when we are still friends." He squeezes her hands gently, trying to reassure her.

Her shoulders tremble imperceptibly, and her eyes close briefly. "Thank you, Prince Keith," she murmurs. "I know we have important things to discuss, but I thought -- I hoped you might permit me to take you to her? She's being moved into her temporary rooms right now."

Keith takes a shuddering breath and says, "Yes."

There are half a dozen healers wandering around the floor she's being kept on, along with twice as many Marmoran guards. All of them, even the Alteans, bow to him as he passes by,

no one speaking a word. The hallway is quiet except for their footsteps and the sounds of voices on other floors. He feels as if he's walking on eggshells; he's terrified he's going to open his eyes and this will all be a dream.

A healer standing outside of a door in the middle of the hall catches his eye, her mouth pressed into a straight line.

"Your Highness," she says, bowing to him perfunctorily, "I am -- was your mother's healer for most of her tenure in Altea. I just wanted to prepare you for seeing her again. She is...much better than she was when we first took her in, but her memory is still spotty. She remembers a little more each day, but there are still enormous gaps. I ask only that you do not pressure her, and that you try not to cause her undue stress." Her face is pink by the time she's through speaking, but her chin doesn't lower an inch.

"I understand," Keith murmurs, staring at the door. She nods, then opens the door for him, stepping out of his way.

The room is bright and airy, the curtains drawn despite the chill trying to break into the room. There is a fire burning in the fireplace, and a chair drawn up next to it, plush and covered in overlarge woolen blankets. She's sitting there, her feet drawn up off of the cold tiled floor and tucked underneath her body.

Allura clears her throat when she doesn't immediately acknowledge them, a gentle sound that cuts through the silence and Keith's nerves like a knife.

His mother looks up at him from the book she's leaned over, and her gaze is politely disconnected. She doesn't seem to recognize him at all.

"Hello," she says, giving him a reserved smile. He opens his mouth to respond in kind, but he can barely breathe, much less speak. She's there, in front of him, the same dark hair and dark eyes as the portrait in his father's study (in *her* study) and the same smile and even the way she tucks her finger into her book to hold her place is the same, and she doesn't *remember* him.

"Hello," he finally replies, his voice creaking. Allura, standing close behind him, clears her throat again and softly takes his elbow, guiding him closer to his mother.

"Krolia," she says gently, "I thought you might want to meet my friend...his name is Keith."

In the middle of setting her book aside, his mother visibly falters, her eyelashes fluttering. "Keith?" she echoes slowly.

"It's nice to meet you," Keith manages to say, holding a hand out to her. She regards him for a moment, her head tilted in a familiar manner -- it's the same way she used to look at him when he came to her for advice, or when he complained about his duties or lessons, a sort of contemplative judgement that either gave way to amused warmth or calm admonishment.

It used to unnerve him, the way she could look at him like she was seeing all that he was and all he would be. Now he thinks he would give anything, would move the earth and sky for

her to look at him like that again.

Krolia gently takes his hand with her own, then presses her other hand so that she's grasping his in both of hers. Her brow furrows, her mouth parts as she visibly struggles to speak for a moment.

"My head," she whispers, frowning. "There's something--"

"Should I call for your healer?" Keith asks worriedly, crouching down next to her chair.

"No, little bird," she says absently, "it's already passing."

She pauses, then gives a little hiccup of surprise. Keith's heart pounds heavily in his chest as her grip on his hand tightens to something almost painful. "Oh," she says softly, her eyes rounding as she stares at him. "*Oh*."

He waits, scarcely daring to hope, unable to voice anything for fear of causing her harm. His hand between hers is trembling.

His mother's eyes go warm all at once, and she laughingly says, "My little bird. It's you."

His eyes go hot with tears and he clutches at her hands with both of his, feeling a sob trying to rip from his throat -- a mixture of hysterical laughter and overwhelming relief floods his body, leaving him light-headed. He swallows it down and smiles at her instead as his whole body tries to shake apart from relief. "Yes," he says, and the tears finally start to fall down his cheeks. Her eyes are wet as well, her grip just as strong as his. "Yes, it's me."

.

Keith doesn't return to the meeting, although Allura does. She bids them farewell with a broad smile, and promises to let Keith's advisors know his plans. He thanks her but barely hears what she's saying to him -- his entire focus has narrowed to his mother, who holds tight to his hand and refuses to let go.

They spend the afternoon talking. The longer she sits with Keith, the more she seems to remember, until it's almost as if she'd never forgotten at all. Her healers are at once elated and worried -- they keep giving Keith suspicious looks, but his mother's condition never worsens and her headaches are light enough that she refuses any healing charms, claiming she doesn't want anything to disrupt their conversation. She looks more alert than she had when he'd first walked in, her eyes gleaming with interest and her cheeks flushed with happiness.

He doesn't know if it's a miracle or just the stars taking pity on him at last, but he doesn't want to question it.

The sunset comes and goes, leaving the room filled with flickering shadows as the fire becomes their only source of light. Neither of them seem inclined to go to bed; he knows that it's ridiculous, but he's halfway afraid that if he leaves this room, she'll vanish into smoke and dreams again, and he'll have to relearn losing her all over.

“Your father,” she says after a while, stroking a hand over his cheek gently. He’d been offered a chair but chose instead to sit at the floor at her feet, and she alternately pets his hair and his face as he looks up at her. “Has your father been alright while I’ve been gone?”

“He’s managed everything well,” Keith replies, quirking his mouth. “He...missed you, obviously, but the country has been in good hands.”

“Ryou always had a better head for these things than the court gave him credit for,” she says, sounding satisfied. “We were always a good team.”

“I’m honestly surprised he hasn’t snuck away to come see you,” Keith confesses. “If it were me, I don’t think I could have resisted.”

“A king has to put his people above his own desires,” she tells him, sighing. “I understand. Ilun needs the stability of having him present right now, and we’ll be home soon.”

“Right,” Keith says. He tries to sound neutral, but something in his voice must give him away, because his mother suddenly tugs at his hair sharply.

“What was that for?” he asks, blinking up at her and biting back a scowl.

“What is on your mind?” she asks him pointedly. “You sighed like you used to when I sent you back to your tutors.”

He thinks about arguing with her, or denying it, but he’s too tired and emotionally strung out after today to have the energy. He fixes his gaze on the book in her lap instead of her eyes, and speaks haltingly.

“Mother, all my life I’ve...known what I was destined for. And it used to scare me, you know, the pressure of knowing that I was meant to be king. I love Marmora more than anything, but it’s still such a terrifying prospect, and especially having to follow you, when you’re so good at it -- I just. Didn’t know how to handle it. I don’t know how to handle it.” His voice falters a little, and he has to push himself to continue, “And I’m scared that I’ve been giving up everything for something I’m not really meant for.”

His mother stares at him. “Why would you think you weren’t meant to be king just because you were frightened of it?”

“Because I should be prepared,” Keith says, frowning into the fire rather than look at her. “You never felt this way when you were my age, and you--”

“Who says so?” his mother interrupts, and arches her brow when Keith turns to look at her disbelievingly.

“You’ve never said anything about it,” Keith points out, and she laughs a little, tugging at his hair again.

“No parent wishes to bore their child with their childhood fears, Keith. I had no idea you felt this way -- you never said anything to me before, did you?”

“No,” Keith says immediately, because he knows her memory is still spotty and he doesn’t want her to push herself trying to remember. “I just -- feel like I should be better. Like Marmora deserves better.”

“Keith,” she says, frowning at him. Her touch is gentle now, smoothing his hair away from his face. “You’ve always been so hard on yourself, you don’t see all the good in you. Our people love you just as much as you do them, little bird, I can promise you that. And what’s this about giving up everything?” his mother asks, and even without looking at her he can tell her brows are raised high.

Keith flushes red, ducking his head. “There was...a boy.”

“Ah,” his mother says amusedly, and he scowls up at her before he can stop himself. “Don’t give me that look, little bird, I want to hear about this boy. Why is he in the past tense?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Keith mutters, “because we could never work. A king has to put his people first.”

The hand in his hair goes still, and his mother lets out a long, low sigh, deflating into her chair as it draws out of her. “I see. Keith...I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry?” Keith asks, gazing up at her in confusion.

She stares back at him with sadness and regret lingering in her eyes and the downturn of her mouth. Her voice is gentler than he thinks he’s ever heard her when she speaks again.

“Keith...yes, our people must come first. I’ve always taught you that, and it’s true, but my darling, that doesn’t mean you don’t also have a duty to yourself.” She quirks her mouth at him in a half-smile. “Your feelings are important too, and I’m so sorry I ever let you think that you weren’t allowed to be happy too.”

“I...know I’m allowed to be happy,” he says slowly, although he can hear the doubt in his own voice. “And I am, I’m fine--”

“Keith,” his mother interrupts, “fine is not enough. What do you *want*?”

His first, most immediate thought is: *a good night’s sleep*. And then: *to hear you laugh again, to see you and father standing together again, to know that Lotor is dead, to be back in Ilun surrounded by the people I love most*.

He thinks, a little surprised at how fierce the thought is: *I want to be a good king to my people. I want to deserve their trust and loyalty, I want to take care of them and follow in your footsteps*.

And looming above all of it, overwhelming in its simplicity, he thinks: *Lance. I want Lance*.

He settles with saying, “It’s complicated.”

His mother snorts indelicately, waving a hand in the air. “You are my son,” she tells him firmly, staring him down. “There is nothing you cannot do if it is what you truly want. You

just have to let yourself *try*.”

His stomach squirming nervously, he closes his eyes and says tentatively, “Even if that means wanting to be with another country’s spy?”

His mother pauses, then says in the gleeful tones of someone having a sudden incredible epiphany, “You’re in love with *Lance*!”

Keith opens his eyes and gapes at her in shock. “You *know* Lance?”

His mother openly laughs, clutching a hand to her chest in a rare display of giddiness. “He visited me often when I lived in Altea,” she says, smiling. “At first he was just asking me questions, trying to figure out what I remembered, but then I think he thought I was lonely. We spoke often over these last few years. He’s a fine man, little bird.”

“He’s the queen’s *thief*,” Keith reminds her pointedly.

“All royalty have their spies,” she says dismissively. “Is that really what concerns you?”

It isn’t, but he knows that it would concern members of their court, and especially the members of the Blade. Still, he’d inherited his stubbornness from his mother, so he switches to another argument. “What about the fact that he has a duty to his queen and to Altea? I couldn’t ask him to choose me over his country, just as I couldn’t give up being the prince of Marmora.”

His mother’s humor fades at last, settling into something contemplative. “You have examined this from every angle, haven’t you?”

“A thousand times,” he replies quietly, settling his head onto the corner of her chair. He’s done little else *but* think of Lance since receiving those letters. He’s read and reread them so many times he’s memorized their content, all of the creases and stains, the ink blots where Lance had smoothed away a spill. “I know what I want, mother. But I know it’s too much to ask for, and I...don’t want to deal with losing him all over again.”

“Keith--” she starts to say, but he tilts his head to look up at her and covers her hand with his own, and she falls into unwilling silence.

“I’ve got you back,” he tells her, pleased when her face creases into a smile, “and that’s more than I ever dared to hope for. I am happy, mother, I promise. It’s enough.”

It will be enough, he promises himself.

She doesn’t look convinced, but she asks him about Shiro and Adam instead of continuing to press him, and he gratefully latches on to the change in conversation. They continue to talk late into the night, until his mother’s healers gently but firmly convince her she needs her rest.

He presses a kiss to her forehead and promises to see her again in the morning. She smiles up at him and echoes that promise, and he sleeps that night knowing that at least one dream will stay with him when he wakes.

There's only so much that can be agreed upon in a few days, but the hasty meeting between Altea and Marmora over the matter of Galra attempting to tempt them into war with one another goes as smoothly as could be hoped for, given the circumstances. They part ways with plans to meet again in a few weeks once the fervor and rumors have died down, partially to see how King Zarkon plans on responding to what has happened -- if he punished Lotor himself and made a formal apology on his country's behalf, there might not be cause for Altea or Marmora to do more than examine their agreements with Galra and reassess their trade deals as retaliation.

Aside from wanting to spear Lotor through the chest, Keith doesn't relish the thought of going to war, so his hope is that this will be the outcome.

Ilun welcomes their queen back with enthusiastic and overabundant cheer -- even before they can see the borders of the city, the returning group of diplomats and soldiers and wayward royals can hear the music and laughter and shouting coming from the citizens, who spill out and around their caravan like they're a parade. The noise is an overwhelming cacophony of joy and elation.

"Queen Krolia!" a woman shouts, tears streaming down her face, "long live Queen Krolia!"

"Prince Keith!" two young girls shriek, their hands waving wildly in the air, "Prince Keith, welcome home!"

His mother waves at everyone with a smile, her posture and expression as poised as ever, but Keith is close enough to see the tears glinting in her eyes. She lingers in the streets of Ilun as vendors tearfully try to offer her food and jewelry, as earth mages throw specially grown flowers that catch in her hair and clothing, as her people eagerly try to catch a glimpse of their longlost queen.

His father is waiting for them outside the castle, and before they're even through the gates he's running in their direction, decorum abandoned entirely. His mother throws herself from her horse and into his arms, burying her face in his shoulder and clinging to him just as tightly as he is to her.

"Ryou," his mother murmurs, "I've missed you so much."

"I never thought I'd see you again," his father replies, his voice shaking. His voice is muffled where his mouth is pressed to her hair, but Keith is close enough to hear them still. "I kept thinking of all the things I should have said when I had the chance."

"You can tell me every day for the rest of our lives," his mother says, pulling back to press a lingering kiss to his cheek. "I don't plan on being away from you for a very long time."

Keith watches his parents holding one another with a smile on his face, buoyed by the ecstatic cheers coming from all of the servants and soldiers and knights watching them alongside him, but he can't quite let go of the longing that echoes in his chest.

The celebration lasts for an entire week, until Keith is happy but exhausted and ready for things to return to normal. Most of the court had unexpectedly flocked back to Ilun at the news of Krolia's return, so there are dozens more people underfoot than usual, and he starts feeling overcrowded and overwhelmed a few days into the partying. Luckily, the abundance of things to do distracts him from all of his other thoughts and leaves him tired by the time night falls everyday, so he drops into bed and sleeps without dreaming the first week back home.

His mother, still surrounded by a veritable fleet of worrisome healers, promises to take things easy for the first few months, but also loudly and openly proclaims that she is ready and willing to resume her throne as soon as she is able.

Keith absorbs the news with a confusing mixture of relief and disappointment. He does his best to look calmly pleased, but he's not fortunate enough to escape the notice of his mother. She approaches him later that evening as the rest of the court drowns themselves in wine, her golden circlet nestled in her hair again.

Watching him with shrewd eyes, she tells him, "I'm happy to take back my words, Keith. You are young, yes, but I know you would be a wonderful king of Marmora."

"No," Keith replies, smiling at her weakly. He takes a deep breath and lets it out again, thinking carefully about what to say, about how he feels. "No, you're our queen. I...think I still have a lot to learn, but I -- I think when you're ready to pass the throne on, I *will* be ready. Whenever that may be."

His mother brushes a hand through his hair, tucking his braid over his shoulder and smiling at him. "I'm so proud of you, little bird. You've gone and grown up on me."

"Mother," Keith says, rolling his eyes. "I think those air mages are trying to get your attention."

She glances over her shoulder at the air mages, who are attempting to juggle one another and failing spectacularly. Her mouth twitches at the corners. "We can talk more about this later. But I really am proud of you, Keith. You're going to make a fine king someday."

He mulls over her words later in the day as he's getting ready for bed, a little tipsy from the wine he'd had at dinner. He takes his time combing out his hair, looking at himself in the mirror with narrow eyes.

"You need to stop being foolish," he commands his reflection, swaying in place. Perhaps he's more than a *little* tipsy. "A good king would stop thinking about someone he can't be with. There are other tall and handsome boys out there, and you can fall in love with one of them."

His reflection looks back at him forlornly. He hisses a breath out through his teeth, setting his comb on the table. A flash of red at the corner of the mirror catches his eye, and without

thinking he reaches out to tug at it. He stares blankly as he pulls out an arrow that had been tucked away nearly out of sight, with a scrap of paper attached to the tip of it.

It's one of his arrows, the kind he'd used during the Winter Hunt.

His heart skips a beat.

With careful fingertips, he unwinds the scrap of paper from the arrow, unfolding it and smoothing it out on the wooden table with trembling fingertips. The message is short and unsigned.

I would choose you.

He stares at it, barely comprehending, the words swimming in front of him as his pulse starts to trip faster and faster.

I would choose you.

Could he really have written it?

I would choose you.

How had he managed to sneak into the castle when there were so many people around?

I would choose you.

How could he possibly have known about Keith's conversation with his mother?

I would choose you.

Did he really mean it?

"He would choose me," Keith says aloud, his voice a reverent whisper. He's afraid to let himself believe it, but saying it out loud makes it seem...real. Possible. He looks up at himself in the mirror again and discovers a smile spreading across his face.

It would be foolish to make plans while half-drunk and exhausted, but Keith is discovering he's willing to be foolish after all.

.

The queen of Altea practically beams at him as soon as he walks into the room with the rest of the delegation. He's dressed in his travel clothes, purposefully trying to be nondescript since he's not...technically supposed to be here, but her gaze hones in on him as soon as their group of Marmoran nobles and diplomats finishing filing into the throne room. It probably doesn't help that Nyma is standing next to him in full armor, where she's been stuck to him like glue since they left Ilun nearly five days ago.

"Your Highness!" Allura says, standing up so quickly half of the room is thrown into mild disarray as they come to abrupt attention. "How good of you to join us!"

“Your Majesty Queen Allura,” he says, bowing his head. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Please, we are friends,” she says, reaching out and drawing him onto her dais. She embraces him warmly, and while she’s pressed close she whispers in his ear, “Have you come to steal my thief?”

He flushes hotly at the glimmer in her eye when they pull apart. He keeps his voice low, well aware that both her royal court and his own party are paying extra attention to him. “I had hoped to start with telling him how I feel and then go from there, but essentially, yes.”

She laughs, her head tipping back. “I should have known you wouldn’t give in so easily,” she says, grinning at him. “You didn’t look like the type.”

“Is he here?” Keith asks, trying to sound nonchalant as he looks around the room. He doesn’t see Lance anywhere, but he doesn’t expect the queen’s thief to be noticeable.

“He’s due to be back from Galra tonight,” Allura says. “We’re trying to stay ahead of them for once, so I’ve had him spying on Zarkon and Lotor.” Her mouth creases into the faintest of frowns. “I imagine we’ll have plenty to discuss once he’s shared what’s he’s learned with us.”

“Does he know that *I’m* here?” Keith asks her.

“I didn’t know you were here,” Allura says, “and Romelle would have told me if she’d known. I’d wager he has no idea you are in Altea right now.”

“Could we keep it that way?” Keith says, and a grin breaks across Allura’s face, strangely devious on her elegant features.

“Did you have something planned?”

.

Lance’s rooms are located in the castle, although Allura tells Keith he spends most of his time when he’s in Altea at his family’s home with his parents and siblings. According to her, his mother had retired from her duty early due to an injury, and Lance had jumped into the role far sooner than anyone had expected.

Not quite the same as becoming a king, but Keith still marvels at how similar they are, at the thought of seventeen year old Lance shouldering that responsibility for his mother and queen and country.

The rooms are tidy, but Keith has a feeling that has more to do with the servants who have come and gone than Lance’s own tendencies. His desk has been left untouched, covered in parchment and maps and coded language that Keith can’t decipher no matter how long he stares at it. A few bows are tucked into the corner of the room, well cared for and clearly loved. A bookshelf is half-filled with scholarly texts on the countries on the continent, and half-filled with humorous comedies and romantic plays.

It only takes a few minutes of standing around in Lance’s space for Keith to feel jittery, so he paces back and forth, peers out the windows, flips open a few books only to snap them closed

again when the words refuse to stick in his mind.

It's silly to be nervous when he knows that Lance -- cares for him, too, but the squirming in his stomach refuses to fade no matter how many times he tells himself to calm down.

Night begins to fall, casting the castle in shades of blue and gray. The Altean castle is elegant white stone, blue and silver and pink accents at every corner, and it reflects the dawning moonlight well as he looks out over the courtyards, trying to spot a horse and rider in the bustling crowd of servants and guests who are still working outside.

He should have known he wouldn't see Lance return, but he nonetheless startles as the door behind him shudders and then jerks open. Lance's vaguely exhausted expression sharpens and then goes wide with shock as he recognizes Keith standing at the window.

"Hello," Keith says quietly.

"Keith -- Your Highness," Lance corrects, his voice strangled. "What are you--"

"My mother's name is Krolia Alexandra Danae Kogane," Keith says calmly. "Her greatest weakness is her family. My family lives in the royal castle in Ilun, in the northern and western wings. My favorite color is blue."

Lance stares at him, unmoving in the doorway. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I trust you too," Keith tells him. He clenches his hands behind his back, trying to hide his anxiousness. Lance doesn't react except to keep looking at him. "I'll tell you anything and everything you want to hear."

They watch each other from across the room -- Lance is backlit by the lights in the hallway, his face half-cast in shadow so that Keith can't really make out his expression. He can hear his own heartbeat in his ears, can feel his pulse quickening and his face turning red, and knows that Lance can see it all easily.

"I didn't--" Lance's voice rasps, and he clears his throat before continuing, "I didn't think you'd ever want to see me again."

"I didn't at first," Keith admits, "but not for the reasons you might think. It...hurt too much, to think of you."

"All I've done is think of you," Lance whispers. His head lowers and his shoulders drop in evident weariness. "Your face that day in the woods, you looked like you hated me. I can't get it out of my mind."

"I never hated you," Keith says honestly, taking a step forward. Lance's head jerks back up and he regards him with surprise. "I wanted to hate you," Keith continues, taking another step, "but somehow I never managed to."

"I didn't -- I didn't give you that note expecting anything," Lance says. He reaches up and runs a hand through his hair, leaving it messy and upturned in its wake. Keith's fingers itch to

smooth it back down again. "It was just because -- because I promised to tell you the truth, and I wanted you to know it."

Keith takes another step. "Know what?"

Lance regards him incredulously. "It was a single sentence, Keith, surely you know what I mean."

"I want to hear you say it," Keith says, and risks another step. They're only a few feet apart now, and he can see Lance's face a little better. He's wearing a half-wary, half-hopeful expression, like he doesn't quite trust what's happening. Keith knows the feeling.

Lance takes a deep breath and lets it out, and it almost sounds fondly exasperated. "I would choose you," he says softly, and takes his own step towards Keith. "If it was a choice between being the queen's thief and you, I would choose you."

The words echo around Keith's head, filling his chest and blood and body with warmth. He can feel the fire flickering inside of him, begging to be let out, but he tamps down on it and sucks in a breath as well, feeling it turn to steam in his lungs.

He closes the distance between them, taking the last step himself, putting them toe to toe -- he has to tilt his head up slightly to look Lance in the eye now, and the angle makes his stomach flip over excitedly.

He puts a hand to Lance's chest over his heart, and feels it pounding beneath his palm. It somehow steadies his own nerves to know that Lance is just as frightened as he is.

"I would choose you too," he murmurs, curling his fingers into the cloth of Lance's shirt. Lance's eyes are dark, pinning him in place; he feels heat licking up his spine and shivers a little. "I know it's foolish but I still want to choose you."

Even before he finishes speaking, Lance is leaning down to meet him, and he eagerly surges forward as well, unwilling to risk being interrupted a third time -- their mouths meet all at once, a blinding crush of sensation as a hand slides into his hair, another around his waist, so that he feels Lance everywhere, all around him. His mouth is hot as flame, scorching Keith's lips and tongue and stealing the air from his lungs. He winds his own arms around Lance's neck and clings, determined to give just as good as he gets, dizzy from giddiness and the unsteady beat of his heart.

When they pull apart the air between them crackles with dry heat, and both of them are sweating at their temples. Lance breathes out a laugh against his lips, and Keith can't resist kissing his mouth again, shorter but no less deep.

"I thought maybe we'd actually caught fire," Lance whispers, his mouth quirking teasingly. Keith had half-feared the same, but luckily the flames are still burning deep in his gut, warm and wicked.

"I'm just a really good kisser," Keith tells him seriously, and then feels a pleased smile break over his face as Lance bursts into laughter.

“Hard to argue with that,” Lance says, grinning at him. “It was kind of a group effort, though.”

Keith tightens his arms around Lance, adopts his most princely voice, arch and aloof and says, “I’m not convinced, I’m afraid.”

The curve of Lance’s mouth turns dangerous, and a hand at Keith’s lower back pulls him so he’s flush with Lance’s body again. “I’ll just have to prove it, I guess,” he murmurs in Keith’s ear, and smothers Keith’s smirk with another kiss.

The sun glinting off of the white-washed walls wakes Keith in the morning, piercing through his pleasant dreams of warm blue eyes and long limbs. He squints in annoyance, then burrows back into his pillow, which immediately shifts underneath him.

“Ow,” Lance mumbles sleepily. “Your chin is pointy.”

Startled, Keith opens his eyes again and comes face-to-face with Lance looking back at him, amusement written all across his face. There’s a crease from the pillow dotted along the corner of his cheeks, and his hair falls across his forehead in a messy whirl. His freckles are even more noticeable than they had been a few weeks ago, and Keith realizes with a kind of dawning hope that he might get to actually learn how long it would take to count them.

“We fell asleep,” Keith says, flushing hotly.

“We fell asleep,” Lance confirms idly, curling a hand around Keith’s waist. “Well, you fell asleep mid-kiss, but I passed out pretty soon after. It was kind of a long day yesterday.”

“Nyma is going to kill me,” Keith groans, burying his face in Lance’s chest again. The hand at his waist pats comfortingly. “I told her I’d be back in my room last night, shit.”

“She threatened to kill me once,” Lance remarks offhandedly, “if I did anything to hurt you. She didn’t accompany you here on an assassination mission, did she?”

“No,” Keith says, muffled, “but our advisors are going to lecture me about scandals and propriety during the journey home nonstop, which should please her just as much.”

Lance doesn’t reply at first, just starts threading his fingers through Keith’s hair, which had come undone from its braid at some point during their -- activities last night. Then, casually, he asks, “When are you returning home?”

Keith glances up at him. “I’ll return with the rest of our party at the end of the week,” he says, curling his fingers into Lance’s collar. “I barely got permission to come as it was, considering I’m not officially part of the discussions.”

“Right,” Lance says quietly.

Keith watches him breathe for a moment, steeling himself, and then says, “I know what we said last night, and I meant it, but I’m not -- I don’t expect for you to give up your duty.”

Lance's hand in his hair stills. "What?"

"I can't give up being a prince," Keith says, watching Lance's pulse beat in his throat rather than face him, "and I don't expect for you to give up being a spy. But I thought that maybe...we could find a way to stay together anyway."

Lance's other hand drags out of the sheets to touch Keith's chin, tipping his head up so that they're looking each other in the eye.

"Go on," he says, smiling. Keith's nerves settle a little, and he finds he can speak easier.

"My mother plans to rule for another decade at least," Keith tells him, "so until then I'll be studying under her and learning as much diplomacy as I can, which means fortifying our relationships with our allies, especially since she won't be leaving the capital much." He pauses, then says meaningfully, "Our relationship with Altea will be of utmost importance."

"Trips to Marmora are simple enough for me to make as well," Lance says casually, resuming his combing of Keith's hair. Keith feels a smile break across his face and resists the urge to bury it in Lance's shirt. His stomach twists with helpless hope at what he plans to say next.

"I'd hoped that maybe -- maybe by the time she was willing to give up the crown, you might have found a successor," Keith murmurs, "and we could -- we could take care of our countries together, side-by-side."

Lance stops breathing altogether -- Keith can feel his chest go completely still, and mortification and fear have him trying to scramble out of Lance's arms all at once, sure that he's made some kind of mistake, pushed too far finally.

Lance's grip on him tightens, refusing to let him go until he stops struggling. Keith, face scarlet, finds himself looking at a wide-eyed and beaming Lance underneath him.

"Did you just propose to me before we've even officially started courting?" he asks, laughing.

Keith scowls at him pointedly. "I thought we'd already officially started that last night."

"I'm sorry, silly me, of course that makes complete sense. First you start courting, then you propose the next day," Lance says seriously, wincing playfully when Keith hits him in the chest with a closed fist. "Ouch, sweetheart, I bruise easily."

"I'll bet," Keith mutters. "Look, all you have to say is--"

"Yes," Lance says, prompting Keith's mouth to close with a click. "I can find someone to take over for me by then, easily. And yes, I'll join you in Marmora when you become king. And yes, I love you too--"

Keith kisses him hard and fast, feeling laughter of his own bubbling in his chest, feeling Lance's own laughter shaking him underneath his body. They tangle together roughly, rolling around on top of golden sheets until Lance is pinned underneath Keith, both of them breathless and grinning.

“I don’t know what I’m doing most of the time,” Keith warns him, finally giving in and letting himself smooth Lance’s hair back into place.

“Me either,” Lance tells him, mouth quirked. He preens under Keith’s touch like a cat in the sun, gilded gold and so beautiful it makes his heart heart.

“And I know it won’t be easy to live in different countries, and you’re not a noble so my court is going to throw a fit--”

“I’ll have Allura grant me a title,” Lance says nonchalantly. “Keith, dearest, we don’t have to have it all figured out right now. Last night I thought I’d never see you again, and now I have you in my bed, trying to plan our lives together.” He touches a hand to Keith’s hair, tugging it straight. “This is enough for me.”

Keith stares down at him, lying warm and rumpled and happy; he almost can’t believe that something that seemed impossible weeks ago is in his reach, spread underneath him with open trust and love evident in every inch of his face.

Enough, he realizes, might actually be enough for now.

“Alright,” he says, smiling. Lance’s hand starts playing with his hair again, and he sighs, leaning into the touch. “I should go get ready for breakfast. My group is already going to be furious with me.”

“Well,” Lance says, wrapping a strand of Keith’s hair around his finger, “if they’re already mad, why worry about it? I think you should skip breakfast and we can kiss for another hour instead.”

“Hm,” Keith replies thoughtfully, “also a sound suggestion.” He makes a face, then adds wryly, “Though I doubt anyone else would agree.”

“You made that same face when we first met, and I guessed you were an advisor to the king,” Lance says, smiling. He leans up suddenly, biting at Keith’s earlobe and sending scorching heat blazing down Keith’s spine. In Keith’s ear, he murmurs lowly, “I wanted to kiss you so badly then, and every time I’ve seen you since I only wanted to more.”

Keith swallows hard, tracing the curve of Lance’s jaw. “Sounds like we’ve got a lot to make up for,” he says, fitting his thumb to the dimple in Lance’s cheek as he smiles up at him. “We should definitely skip breakfast.”

So they do.

.

Nyma watches him in the mirror as he glowers at his reflection, a smirk on her face.

“Having trouble with your hair?” she asks idly. “Did someone perhaps mess it up too much to brush out?”

“Shouldn’t you be out guarding something?” Keith gripes, but he lets her take the comb from his hand and work on brushing his hair out herself.

“Why so nervous?” she asks, gently undoing a knot.

“You know why,” he mutters, burying his face in his hands. “It’s...it’s a lot.”

“Nothing worse than what you’ve already done,” she points out, giving him a pointed look in the mirror. “This should be pretty simple in comparison, you know. You do remember stopping a war from happening, right? It wasn’t *that* long ago.”

“I know I’m being ridiculous,” Keith says, sighing and hoping it doesn’t sound too petulant. “Lance has said the same thing a thousand times.”

“Where is he?” she asks curiously, making a satisfied noise under her breath as the comb pulls through neatly.

“Waiting with Shiro and Adam down the hall,” he says, watching their reflections as she starts a small braid at his temple that she wraps around the back of his head. “I think he and Shiro are trying to convince the other not to come in here and give me a talk to calm me down.”

“Poor Adam,” she says, finishing the braid and starting another on the other side of his head. “Stuck in the middle of them on a day like this -- I think they’re more nervous than you, to be honest. A pretty big feat, considering.”

“Adam married him,” Keith says, grinning. “He knew what he was getting into. And at least I have a reason to be nervous.”

“Well,” Nyma says, setting the comb down, “at least you’ll look good while you do it.”

His hair has finally been tamed, skimming his shoulders in a dark fall with two simple braids crowning his head and joining together in the back. In his white shirt and dark overcoat, he looks almost like a stranger in the mirror for a moment -- but when he looks again, it’s just his own face again, well-worn and familiar. The same thin white scar at his jaw, the same dark eyes, the same angled mouth.

“Are you ready?” Nyma asks. Her voice is soft, and when Keith turns to look at her, she has a strange glint in her eye. He wonders if she’s not a little nervous too.

He squares his shoulders, smoothing a hand down his front. His stomach jitters and settles in his gut. “I’m ready,” he says, and lets her open the door.

The castle is full of people -- he can hear them in the distance, the chattering of eager voices, the halting sound of instruments being tuned and tested, the clanging and shouting coming from the kitchens. He’s barely out of his room before he’s being accosted by servants bowing excitedly at him, telling him the newest news he’s missed in the last thirty minutes.

“Lady Shay has arrived!” Marco tells Keith, beaming. “Your Highness -- shall we put her in her usual rooms?”

“Please do,” Nyma says, smirking. “It’ll make it easier to find her later.”

“Your Highness, the queen wants to make sure you see her before it all begins,” Hina says, her arms full of enormous yellow flowers.

“Prince Keith, shall I send for Lord Lance?” Sera asks, using their magic to hold several decorative pillows aloft.

“No need,” Lance says from behind Keith, settling a hand at his back. Keith leans into the touch, feeling a small amount of his nervousness fade as Lance draws up next to him. He’s dressed in dark colors as well, a deep navy outfit with hints of silver in the threading and in his ears. His gaze is intent on Keith, his mouth as warm as ever. “Hello, prince.”

“You can only call me that for a little while longer,” Keith reminds him, reaching out to fiddle with Lance’s collar even though it’s already perfect.

“I’ve got so many nicknames for you, it won’t hurt to lose one,” Lance says, smirking. Nyma makes a soft gagging noise, but half of the servants around them sigh beatifically, practically swooning. Keith resists the urge to roll his eyes -- after nearly ten years they should have been used to Lance’s charm, but half of them still got giddy when he spoke with them.

Well. He was the same, but Lance was *his* to get giddy over.

“How are you?” Lance asks quietly. Nyma starts ushering the servants out of the hallway, giving Keith a significant look over her shoulder as she goes.

“I’m fine,” Keith says. Lance stares sternly at him, and he amends it to, “I’m *good*, I promise. Excited and nervous all at once. Terrified I’m going to trip on something in front of everyone.”

“I won’t let you trip,” Lance promises, slipping a finger under his chin so that he’s looking up at him. “I’m still walking you up to the dais, remember.”

Keith exhales, flexing his hands in Lance’s overcoat. “Side-by-side, right?” he says softly, and Lance’s face goes soft all over. He cups Keith’s face in his hands, holding him gently for a moment, and then kisses him deeply. It’s a kiss that rocks Keith to his core, makes him dizzy and grounded all at once; he sways a little in place as Lance pulls away, blinking his eyes open slowly.

“Side-by-side,” he agrees lowly. “We’ll do it together.”

Keith is just about to rise onto his toes to kiss Lance again when a throat clearing interrupts them, and they both turn their heads to see Shiro standing at the end of the hallway, watching them with a half-smile on his face.

“Keith,” he says, “it’s time.” Behind him, Adam flashes a grin at the two of them and Nyma watches them with a wryly amused look on her face.

Keith nods, then turns back to Lance, feeling his stomach shiver with nerves all over again. His hand is shaking slightly when he presses it to Lance’s heart, trying to steel himself.

“Okay,” he says quietly, breathing in deeply. “Okay.”

“Hey,” Lance murmurs, tugging a strand of his hair, “remember when we met at the masquerade? And I told you your mask suited you?”

Keith blinks up at him, and then laughs a little. “You kept talking about my eyes,” he recalls fondly.

“I could see it in you even then,” Lance tells him, quirking his mouth. He lets go of Keith’s hair and reaches for his hand, tugging him down the hallway towards the others. Downstairs, music starts to coalesce and swell, a cheerful and grand sound beckoning him to his destiny. To his people. “You’re going to be amazing, Keith.”

Shiro claps a hand on his shoulder, giving him a tearful smile while Adam reaches out to fuss with the lines of his shirt. Nyma tries to hold on to her disaffected look, but a smile keeps breaching the corners of her mouth, and at the end of the staircase below him, he can see his mother and father beaming up at him, hand-in-hand.

He squeezes Lance’s hand, his heart in his throat and an overwhelming sense of joy crowding his chest. “*We’re* going to be amazing,” he corrects, and together, they take the first step.

End Notes

Thank you so much if you made it all the way through! This has been my most ambitious fic, and I hope you enjoyed it. You can find me on tumblr at [apvrrish](#) and on twitter at [apvrrish](#).

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!