

Alternity

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Alternity

by [kamanzi](#)

Summary

After five years, the war against the Galra Empire finally comes to a close. Lance is initially disconcerted to find that it's not as satisfying as he anticipated. But he soon realizes that he doesn't even know the true definition of "disconcerted" until a stranger from another reality stumbles into his own. It gets scary, it gets awkward, and it even gets sad. But at least it never gets boring.

Notes

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

Chapter 1

What nobody tells you about nearing the end of an intergalactic war is this:

It can get pretty boring.

Long gone were the days of being woken in the middle of the night (or, rather, in the middle of a sleep cycle, because night didn't exactly exist in deep space) to disaster alarms blaring. The same went for the days of suiting up, sailing through the stars, and dodging bad guys while kicking butt and taking names. No more violently pounding hearts, no more aching muscles or nursing injuries. No more action.

Instead, the average day's program was occupied nearly exclusively by diplomacy efforts. There were leaders to meet, civilizations to reconstruct, and only once in a while remaining Empire colonies to wipe out. But that last duty was most frequently designated to allies, more often than not to members of the Blade of Marmora, as "expert non-essentials"—at least, as some nameless member of the Blade explained it once.

For the first time in five years, the paladins of Voltron were allowed to kind of relax, and to even have fun.

And Lance—despite everything that he ever thought he'd feel about the end of the war and the anticipation of finally returning home—hated it.

That's not to say that this part of the Voltron saga didn't suit him. In fact, Lance somehow ended up becoming Allura's second-in-command for their ambassadorial duties with the other planets in the Coalition. Most of the other paladins were, at best, indifferent to schmoozing; and then there was Keith, who'd never quite grown out of the habit of acting outwardly volatile to strangers. Meanwhile, Lance thrived off attention and wining and dining and giving their allies—in Lance's words, and against the rest of Team Voltron's wishes—the good old razzle dazzle.

To Lance's defense, their allies adored him in return. If there were gifts of gratitude to present, they were presented to him. If there were special dinners and parties to attend, invites were extended to him. And if there were single daughters of foreign dignitaries to offer as brides (or, not uncommonly, sons to offer as grooms), the offers were made to him.

It was the kind of recognition that the Lance of the past once looked forward to most. When the time came to enjoy the fruits of their labor, however, the appeal was inexplicably lost on him. Of course, the gifts and the invites were accepted; it would be rude *not* to accept them, Allura repeatedly reminded him. But she permitted him to reject the marriage proposals, which he did every time with a false, sympathetic smile.

The Lance of the past would have throttled him. The Lance of the present couldn't have cared less.

What was the point to any of it anymore, really? Five years after catapulting himself at warp speed off the face of the Earth, Lance realized that lavish gifts, incredible parties, and the beauty of alien women had become superficial pleasures. Real pleasure came from hard work, from the knowing he could actually make a difference.

And when he really took the time to contemplate those facts, Lance would inwardly smile. He'd certainly grown up a lot. Becoming a defender of the universe and *winning*, he mused, would do that to you.

So, as it went, no more critical injuries incurred as the cost of saving an entire race of people from destruction or enslavement. No more aching muscles from overworking training, ensuring that he was physically capable of completing the aforementioned duty. And pounding hearts were reserved for special occasions.

Like when Pidge sat a bit too close to him at dinner and the backs of their hands would brush. Or like when Pidge would tip back her head and laugh, even if it was at his own expense. Or when Pidge was distracted or focused or annoyed and she made that face with her nose scrunched upward and Lance would reach out to pull her glasses with his index finger so that they fell to the tip of her nose and, even when she was at her maddest, the edges of her lips would quirk upward.

Stuff like that wasn't superficial pleasure. To the contrary, it was stuff like that that made the mundanity a little more stomachable.

"Oh, you know what I'm gonna do when we get home?" Hunk said one day as they sat around the Castle's lounge. He leaned his back into the couch cushion, kicking up his feet. "I'm gonna hit one of the amusement parks near my parents' place."

"Hunk," Pidge sighed from her position perched on one of the steps. She didn't look up at him, focusing instead on twirling some gadget between her fingers. "You're telling me that—after years of loop-de-looping through the cosmos—you want to go straight back to loop-de-looping?"

Hunk pouted a bit. "Well, not *straight* back. But I do want to prove to my sister that my motion sickness is under control. Like, I'm straight up *conditioned* now. And she doesn't believe me."

"Plus the food?" Lance added.

Hunk's mouth stretched wide in a grin. "Plus the food."

Lance shifted where he sat on the floor and threw his leg over the side of the steps. His foot dangled within an arm's reach of where Pidge was situated. "When we get home, I'm going to the beach."

"You've said that one already," Keith noted, though his voice was absent of any real malice.

It had become a game between the four of them: “When We Get Home.” It was pretty new, largely because they hadn’t wanted to give themselves false hope when returning to Earth was a far more abstract concept. But then, after the fall of the Galra Empire—and after Pidge finished building an insanely long-range communicator that let them contact their families back home, let them say hello for the first time in years and tell their families that they’d be rejoining them in a few months’ time—it became a constant thing. Anytime one of them was reminded of something they missed, they’d list it out loud. Really, “When We Get Home” was a simple game.

Which was why Lance narrowed his eyes at Keith when he replied, “I didn’t realize there were rules.”

Keith shrugged and stretched out his legs over the steps across the floor from Lance. “There aren’t. I’m just saying.”

“Yeah,” Hunk said with a nod. “I mean, you can’t have *that* short of a list. New rule: no repeats.”

“Fine.” Lance crossed his arms over his knee and rested his chin on top of them. “Then, when we get home, I’m going to take my sister to the zoo.”

“Which sister?” Pidge asked.

“The second youngest to me. Elena. She was always bugging me to go with her when we were kids, and I never did.”

“D’you think she still wants to?” Hunk asked. “Like, do you think she’s still into that? I mean, how old was she last time you saw her?”

“Seventeen,” Lance answered, a bit more quietly than he intended.

“I think that’s nice,” Pidge said, glancing up from her gadget to meet his eye. She smiled softly, and then looked back down. Lance’s chest throbbed momentarily in response.

But Lance was properly distracted from that whole issue when Keith piped up, “When we get home.”

Keith very rarely actually participated in the game himself. Part of it, Lance suspected, was probably because Keith was the only one of them without anyone, any family, to whom to call home. Plus, the last time he *did* play, he had told them that when he went home he was going to talk to Shiro’s family before suddenly deciding that he needed to leave the room at once. So there was a long moment of silence as everyone waited for him to go on. Meanwhile, Keith pursed his lips at the ceiling.

After a couple extra ticks, Hunk probed, “‘When we get home’ what? You’ll what?”

Keith smirked. “I don’t know. Probably give therapy a try. This game is kind of a bummer.”

There was a beat before everyone dissolved into laughter. Just then, though, the door at the far end of the room slid open and Allura stepped through, her mice riding in on her skirts that

billowed in her wake. “Hello, paladins!” she greeted with a beaming smile.

The group called back various versions of greetings in return, and then Pidge stood, bringing whatever that gadget was close to her chest. “Is it time?” she asked, eyes bright and eager.

“It is,” Allura confirmed, coming to a stop and waving vaguely behind herself. “Coran is loading himself onto the Green Lion as we speak, so you should go put on your armor and ready yourself to leave.”

“Her *armor*? *Leave*?” asked Lance, volleying his gaze between Pidge and Allura. To Allura, he pressed, “Why does she need her *armor*?” Then to Pidge, “Where are you *going*?”

“Dude, relax,” said Pidge. Ascending the steps, she kicked Lance in the ankle lightly as she passed him. She then briefly waved the gadget in his face and explained, “I made me and Matt a couple of short-range, single-channel communicators. He’s gonna be at a nearby swap moon in a few vargas, so Coran and I are meeting him there to hand his over.”

“Also,” Allura added with a half-grimace, half-smile. “Coran would like to use the opportunity to shop for a new cape. I’m afraid the last few galas rather did his previous one in. He’s really quite excited for the trip.”

“You’d think he’d be pretty practiced at flinging that thing around by now,” Hunk said around a fond smile.

“Yes, you would think so, wouldn’t you?” Allura responded. “Alas, practice only means so much when there are aimlessly floating trays of nunvill at play.” With a slight shrug, she sighed and turned back to Pidge. “Well, I’ll be headed to the bridge now so that I can see you off.”

“Right behind you,” Pidge told her. With a wave and a quick, “See you lot later,” to the group behind her, she and Allura disappeared behind the closing door.

Lance stared after it for an extra-long moment. “Okay?” he said quietly to no one in particular. And then he slumped backward onto the couch below him.

There was a long silence that preceded Keith’s low chuckle. Hunk returned a heavy exhale of his own before saying, “When Lance gets home.”

That was the second part of the game that developed over time. When one of them said, “When we get home,” they would follow it up with something they wanted to do. But when one of them said, “When Insert Name Here gets home,” it opened the floor for speculation—sometimes genuine, sometimes not. For example, “When Pidge gets home, she’s going to pull an Allura and sleep for a ten thousand years.” Or, “When Keith gets home, he’s going to become a camp counselor and teach arts and crafts.”

Lance had mixed feelings about this part of the game anyway. But just then, as he side-eyed Hunk and Keith looking mischievously at one another, his scale tipped wholly out of its favor.

“*What?*” he snapped when Hunk started wagging his eyebrows.

“When Lance gets home?” Keith repeated around tight lips. “Huh. I don’t know. Hunk? What do you think?”

“You know, Keith, I’m not sure either. Mice?”

Only then did Lance realize that the mice had stayed behind after Allura’s departure, occupying themselves by chasing each other around in circles around Keith, up and down and up and down the stairs. But at Hunk’s call, all four snapped to attention. The little blue one crawled into Keith’s lap, batted its eyelashes, and began to swoon. The pink mouse followed, catching the little one in its arms and leaning over it with puckered lips. The slender blue mouse gagged, and the round yellow one wiped faux tears from its eyes.

Lance bristled. Sitting up and crossing his arms over his chest, he spat, “I have *no idea* what you’re implying!”

Which did nothing but reduce Keith and Hunk to a flat-out giggle fit. Even the mice seemed to be laughing at him, as they collapsed out of their scene and squeaked out high-pitched chatters. Lance crossed his arms tighter and scowled at the lot of them.

“Come on, bud,” Hunk admonished, wiping a real tear from his eye with the back of his hand. “You’re not as subtle as you think you are.”

“*Again*,” Lance grunted, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The *heart eyes*. The *pining*.”

“This isn’t even the first time we’ve ragged on you about it, man,” Keith supplied, eyebrows crumpled sympathetically as he patted the little blue mouse gently with the tip of his index finger.

“I’m *not*—” Lance spluttered. “*Heart eyes*? I don’t— *Pining*! *How*— If you mean what I *think* you mean—”

“We do,” Hunk said.

“He can’t even *say* it,” Keith sighed, shaking his head at Hunk.

“Oh, yeah. It’s sad.”

Lance was borderline *seething*. “Say *what*, exactly?”

“Come *on*,” Hunk chuckled as he shook his head in tandem with Keith. “Don’t make *us* say it.”

Keith added, “*Again*.”

“Say *what*?”

“He’s gonna make us say it, Hunk.”

“At this point,” Hunk said, “it’s probably better to *sing* it.”

In a moment, Lance was standing, nearly bouncing on the balls of his feet in anxious anticipation. “Don’t sing it.”

“I’m *sorry*. You’ve left us no choice.” Hunk dropped his head solemnly, and then took an abrupt, deep breath.

Lance pointed his finger at each of them in turn. “*Don’t. Sing it.*”

But it was too late.

“*Lance and Pi-idge, sitting in a tree!*” Hunk bellowed.

His hands flying upward to cover his ears, Lance spun on his heel and booked it towards the door. “*I can’t hear you! I can’t hear you!*” he chanted.

Then Keith joined in, and even the mice squealed in harmony, creating a din comparable to that of a thousand laser canons firing at once. “*K-I-S-S-I-N-G!*”

The door slid open automatically, and Lance flung himself through it. Before it could shut again, he hollered over his shoulder, “*You’re both children!*” Even when the door did seal itself, however, the chorus leaked through, and Lance was forced to stomp down the hallway and around the corner to escape it.

He eventually dropped his hands, opting instead to push them deep into his pockets. Distracted by his burning ears and the idea that he ever decided to have those two *quiznacking idiots* as friends, he wasn’t fully aware of where he was headed until he stopped in front of a door on the far end of the Castle.

Ignoring the intrusive thought that Hunk and Keith would never let him live it down if they knew, he waved his hand in front of the door’s sensor, and it slid open without protest.

At the opposite side of the hangar, the Green Lion stood sentry. Lance took a moment to gaze around the room, which looked completely vacant of anything other than scattered computer parts and large blueprints. The elevator that would usually spit its paladin out from the bridge was still.

“Pidge?” he called out.

And she appeared, as if she was simply popping into existence at the sound of his voice, around one of Green’s front paws. “Lance?” she called in response.

He couldn’t keep the easy smile from springing onto his face. “Hey,” he said, and he approached her.

She was already in full armor save for her helmet, which he quickly located on a workbench nearby. Meanwhile, her hands were preoccupied with tying her hair back. He was sidetracked

for a second considering that he only just then realized that it'd become long enough for her to do that. How long was it when it was down? If Lance remembered correctly from fifteen minutes earlier, he supposed its tips would barely brush the top of her windbreaker. And when precisely did she decide to grow it out anyway? And why? Not that he was complaining, of course. She didn't *not* look nice with longer hair, he begrudgingly admitted in his mind. But, still, it was different. Her face itself still looked nearly as young as it had been when they met at the Galaxy Garrison all those years ago, with the exception that it had maybe hollowed out a bit. She certainly hadn't grown much in height, either—much to Pidge's frequent and vocal disdain, he knew. But Lance found that it was the hair that made her look older, like the young adult woman that she'd become.

It was, in a word, unsettling.

“What're you doing down here?” Pidge asked, successfully breaking Lance from his trance. She secured her ponytail with an elastic band, and then she dropped her hands to cross them over her breastplate. With an eyebrow quirked upward, she smirked. “Gonna beg me not to go?”

Lance barked out a half-hearted laugh, then said, “Yeah, more like gonna beg to come with.”

“Do you want to?” Pidge gestured her chin to her Lion behind her. “There's enough room in Green for all three of us. Could be fun.”

And Lance would be a liar if he said he didn't consider the offer for a moment. He definitely liked spending time with Pidge. In fact, recently, it didn't really matter if he'd already spent an irregularly enormous amount time with Pidge; he always felt like spending more. But there was a difference between spending time with Pidge, and spending time with Pidge and someone else. Especially if that someone else was Coran, who—bless his heart, and stars love him—tended to speak for the vast majority of any given conversation. Plus, there was the pending matter of the trip's purpose, which was meeting up with Pidge's older brother. The mere thought of doing so, for some inexplicable reason, made Lance's chest feel as if someone was sitting on it.

“Nah,” Lance said after a tick spent chewing on his bottom lip. “I should probably stay back and use the time for training.”

Pidge rolled her eyes. “Like there's anything to train *for* these days.”

Lance beamed at her. “*Right?*” he gushed, throwing his arms up and back down to his sides. “Tell me about it!”

Humming, Pidge returned Lance's smile before staring down at their feet. “Anyway,” she sighed. “Why *did* you come down here?” Then she sharply looked back up at him with narrowed eyes (although her grin remained transfixed on her mouth). “Unless you're stalking me?”

“*Ha*. No. You *wish*.”

“I really don't.”

When Pidge didn't say anything more after that, it finally dawned on Lance that he didn't actually have a viable excuse for wanting to visit her.

None that he would say out loud, anyway.

So, instead, he faltered, "Why did I come down here? I—uh—" Hoping for a distraction, he paused to flash her another charming smile. It had little to no effect. "I came here—down here, to your hangar—to—" He looked around wildly, his eyes falling once more onto Pidge's helmet, next to which sat the little gadget from earlier. "To ask you about that doohickey you built!" he said (perhaps a touch louder than he intended) as he pointed to it. "The one for Matt."

Pidge turned her head to follow Lance's pointed finger before furrowing her brow. "Oh. What about it?"

"Well," said Lance, stepping past her and swiping up the gadget from its place on the workbench. "Mostly what it is, exactly?"

There was a small, exasperated huff before Pidge walked around to Lance's front and plucked the item from his fingers. "I told you already. It's a short-range, single-channel communicator. It's a smaller, less sophisticated version of the communicator I built that lets us talk to our people on Earth. Plus it's just half-duplex, so only one end can speak at a time."

Lance leaned down to examine the thing cradled in Pidge's hands more properly. "So," he said, drawing out the single syllable as his brain processed her words. "It's a walkie-talkie?"

To his surprise, she smiled at that. "The actual tech is different, and this one has a *far* wider range. But in layman's terms, yes. It's a walkie-talkie."

"*What?*" Lance made a grab for the communicator, which Pidge pulled further away at the last minute. "Man, I want one!"

Pidge scoffed, "Oh yeah? Who're *you* gonna talk to?"

"You wound me," he said, standing upright and throwing his hand dramatically over his chest. "I mean, I could talk to *you*!"

"Me?" Pidge blinked. "What do you want to talk to me for?"

"Eh," Lance said with a shrug. "You have interesting things to say sometimes."

Pidge rolled her eyes again. "That I do. But we already have our helmets."

"You think I want to wear that thing all the time? Plus, everyone else can listen in with those."

"You're saying you want to talk to me—and only me—at all hours of the day?" Pidge's voice dripped with skepticism. "Even if we're just across the Castle from each other?"

A hundred quips flashed through Lance's head to say in response. But anything clever died on his tongue. Instead, he simply nodded. "Yeah. I guess I am."

Pidge just blinked at him again. Then—slowly—her smile returned. A genuine smile that made Lance's heart leap. "Well. I suppose I could jury-rig a couple more for us. When I have the time."

"Of course," Lance said. "No rush."

His face warmed. But it sort of looked like Pidge's did, too, if the flush crawling across her cheeks was any indication. The room itself was obviously becoming hotter. After all, what other explanation was there?

"Ready when you are, Number Five!" a voice rang out, echoing off the walls of the hangar.

Lance and Pidge jumped back from each other (though Lance hadn't realized they'd drifted close in the first place). Pidge looked up into the face of the Green Lion and shouted—"I'll be up in a dobosh!"—before looking back at Lance with a slight grimace.

"Has Coran been up there the whole time?" Lance asked, his hand pressed to his sternum in an effort to slow the violent, erratic beating of his heart.

"Yeah," Pidge sighed as she mimicked his position. "I forgot." She then hooked her thumb over her shoulder, gesturing towards her Lion. "I ought to get going."

"Okay. Well."

They both stepped forward at the same time to hug one another. It was quick, though, and they dropped their arms immediately after they released each other.

"Stay safe out there, Pidgey," Lance said, reaching out the tip of his finger to pull her glasses down her nose.

She snorted. "Whatever." And then Pidge took her glasses off her face entirely, folding the earpieces down and offering them to Lance. "Take these to remember me by, I guess," she said, mouth pressed tightly in a line in an attempt—Lance suspected—not to smile.

"Shut up," he replied. But he accepted the glasses anyway and tucked them into an inner pocket of his jacket. "I'll keep 'em safe and sound for you."

"Thanks."

Without another word, Pidge stepped away, scooped her helmet up from her workbench, and made her way towards the Green Lion. Lance, meanwhile, hurriedly made his own way back across the hangar to the door through which he'd entered. Keeping in mind the fact that he had no desire to get sucked into the void that was deep space as soon as the back hatch swung open to let the Lion and her passengers out, he didn't waste any time throwing any last waves or winks over his shoulder at Pidge's retreating form.

But that's not to say he didn't want to.

After wandering through the Castle for a little while longer, Lance eventually found himself stepping into the bridge. At the far back of the room stood Allura, who turned instantly to him at his entrance.

“Oh, hello, Lance,” she said simply before turning back to stare out at the galaxy before them. “What brings you here?”

Lance shrugged, but—realizing Allura couldn’t see that—sighed, “Eh. No reason, really. Just bored.” He walked to his usual seat and collapsed into it, stretching out his legs and crossing one foot over the other. “What about you? What’re you doing?”

Allura pointed at a star. “Seeing Coran and Pidge off.”

Sitting up a fraction and squinting his eyes, Lance located the star in question—which, he supposed, was *not* actually a star at all. Once he really looked at it, he noticed its bright green color that faded bit by bit with every passing second.

“Huh,” Lance grunted. “There they go.”

The two were silent for a while as they watched the blinking light disappear from view. Then Allura turned to regard Lance once more. This time, one of her eyebrows slanted upward curiously. “So, *Lance*,” she said, dragging out the vowel in his name just long enough to make his spine stiffen. “How *are* you?”

“Uh—” He tipped his chin a little to his right so he could side-eye her more properly. “Fine. How are *you*?”

“Fine,” she answered quickly before stepping away from the window. Or was it technically a screen? Lance was never entirely sure what they qualified as and, at that point, he was too afraid to ask. But whatever it was, Allura certainly stepped away from it and planted her feet a spitting distance away from Lance’s chair instead. “But enough about me!” she said brightly. “Is there anything *new* with you?”

Lance resisted the urge to narrow his eyes at her. In lieu of that, he just smirked and kicked a leg up to rest his ankle on his knee. “Well, you know me. Killing it at social appearances and breaking hearts left and right. But I wouldn’t say that’s *new*.”

Allura nodded in understanding and said, “Well, of *course*.”

And it was that that roused Lance’s suspicions more than anything else. The agreement. The lack of a withering glare.

Lance straightened up in his seat, digging his heels firmly into the ground and folding his arms across his chest. “Okay. What’s your angle?”

“My ‘angle?’” Allura repeated, her expression falling into one of confusion as she peered down at her feet. “Ninety degrees, I thought? Perhaps eighty-five?”

“No, I mean—” Lance stood and placed his hands on his hips. “What are you getting at? What’s with the questions?”

“Oh,” said Allura as she looked up at him again. And, again, she smiled. “It’s just been a while since we’ve spoken, hasn’t it? About something other than diplomatic measures and parties and the like. Don’t you agree?”

“Oh.” Lance deflated a touch, his arms slumping down to rest at his sides. *Defensive, much?* a voice in his head chided. “Yeah. I guess it’s been a minute.”

“Certainly more than that! It’s likely been well over a phoebe since we had a proper—what is it that you call them? A *bonding sess*?”

Completely incapable of hiding a grin, Lance said, “Yeah, you got it.” He ran a hand through his hair and scratched the nape of his neck. “All right, sure. A bonding sess sounds good.”

“*Fantastic*,” Allura said, reaching forward to capture his free hand between both of her own. She then dragged him to the center platform and, sitting herself upon it first, pulled him down next to her.

“So,” Lance groaned as he stretched his legs in front of himself once more. “What do you want to talk about first, Princess?”

Allura’s eyes opened wide, and she began to play with the ends of her hair. The picture of innocence. But it was a picture that ended up being entirely at odds with her reply, which was a quick and firm: “How about you and Pidge?”

In a flash, Lance was on his feet and dashing towards the exit. “Nope.”

“Lance!” Allura called after him. “What’s the matter?”

“Nope.”

“I’m sorry if I’ve offended you!” The sound of footsteps pursued him. “I was just wondering —”

“Nope.”

“I’ve noticed that you’re spending a lot more time with her, and—Lance, *please*, stop. *Really*, I don’t understand why—”

“*Nope*.”

“Lance.”

“Nope!” He nearly started singing as he chanted, “Nopesolutely not. Nope thank you. No—”

“*Lance, look!*”

Right as the exit door whooshed open, Lance threw a backwards glance over his shoulder. Then he threw a second one, and then he turned around fully. “What. The *cheese*. Is *that*?”

Allura stood not far from her platform, but her own head was turned in the opposite direction. Beyond her, though, the window-screens were awash with a pulsing, dull light.

In a trance, Lance stumbled back to her side. “What’s going on?” he asked.

Allura didn’t respond. She just gaped openmouthed alongside him.

Without warning, the dull light disappeared. It was replaced, however, with a blinding flash and a sound like an explosion. As if a tidal wave had hit them, the Castle Ship rocked violently upward. Allura cried out as she lost her footing, and Lance—who’d flung his forearm over his face to block out the surge of light that had filled the bridge—barely had the wherewithal to clutch her elbow to keep her upright. The Castle fell back down, surfing the inexplicable wave. It teetered for a few moments, and then it came to rest.

Space beyond the Castle looked just as it did before. Except, that is, for the sudden appearance of a comet that hurdled off into the distance.

And, of course, for the thing it left behind.

Wordlessly, Lance released his hold of Allura’s elbow. He stepped forward to the panel where Coran usually stood, and he pressed one of the only buttons he actually knew how to use.

“Uh, guys?” His voice reverberated loudly throughout the bridge and—he was certain—throughout the rest of the ship. “If you get a chance? Come meet us in the bridge.”

“*Glowy explody area*,” Hunk whined, his extended finger shaking towards the place from which the comet had arrived.

“I know,” Lance replied.

Allura, still a bit shell-shocked, said dazedly, “It looks as if the comet tore a hole through the fabric of space itself.”

“But is that possible?” Keith stood with his hands firmly pressed against the front-most window-screen. Like everyone else, his gaze was intently trained on the space—the tear, or the rip, or whatever one wanted to call it—that rippled before them.

“I mean,” Lance said, shrugging his shoulders with a nonchalance he didn’t feel. “It’s happened before, remember? Wasn’t that the Empire’s whole deal?”

“Trying to spread their reign of terror throughout every possible universe,” Allura confirmed, her voice taking on a disgusted quality that usually preceded a person spitting.

Lance continued on, “Plus, there was that time we went through one of these things ourselves.”

“*Glowy explody area*,” Hunk repeated.

“Exactly, buddy.”

“*Yes—*” Keith whipped around to face his companions. His eyes were big and wild. “—but how is it possible that the comet went off—*wherever* it went off to—but *this is still here?*”

Allura sighed. “That, I can’t explain.”

Keith looked directly to Lance. “You guys were here, right? You actually saw the thing?”

“Kind of,” Lance said.

“What do you mean, ‘*kind of?*’” Keith snapped. “Did you or didn’t you?”

Lance’s face suddenly grew hot, his features feeling tight. He stalked over to Keith and jabbed his finger into his shoulder. “We were a little *busy* trying not to get thrown around, you know! I didn’t exactly have a moment to *prance over and examine it!*”

Keith shoved Lance’s hand away. “I was just *asking*. Keep your fingers to yourself if you’re interested in keeping them.”

“Enough!” Allura scolded as Lance growled under his breath at Keith, and as Keith stepped so closely to Lance so as to almost butt foreheads.

“What are we supposed to do about it, though?” Hunk asked. “Like, can we sew it up or something? Because what if there’s something—or *someone*—waiting on the other side to burst through?”

Allura stepped forward to join Keith and Lance near the window-screen. “I’m not sure,” she said pensively. “When we entered that alternate reality before, the comet that caused *that* rift was at its center. And perhaps when a similar comet collided with Daibazaal over ten thousand years ago, the comet had left enough fragments to keep *that* rift open.” She looked back towards Hunk. “What I mean to say is that I’m uncertain whether a rift can remain open if its comet has left it behind.”

“So, what?” Lance prompted. “We just wait and see if it closes itself up?”

“That might be for the best. After all, my father could only destroy the rift on Daibazaal by destroying Daibazaal itself.” Allura returned her gaze to the tear ahead of them. Its edges undulated as if caught in a breeze. Its center, however, burned ever brightly. “And I hesitate to shoot into it without knowing exactly what will happen.”

“Okay, sure,” Hunk said, nodding. He joined the others, the four of them standing in a line side by side, staring beyond. “And if some big bad monster comes through?”

Allura shook her head. “Hunk, a majority of the universe is empty space. The chance that this comet ripped the fabric between universes and that there was some sentient thing waiting close by on *both ends* of that rip are astronomical.”

“Yeah, well,” Hunk grunted, “it’s happened before.”

The four of them were silent for a full minute. Then Allura said, “Well. You might have a point there.”

“We should probably have Voltron here, just in case,” Keith said. He stepped backwards out of their line, and then turned to approach Coran’s control panel. “I’ll call the Green Lion back right now.”

Lance followed him. “Oh, come on. Don’t do that.”

“Why not?” Keith asked as he rounded the panel, eyeing Lance warily.

“We don’t necessarily need Voltron!” Lance said. “We’ve got four of the Lions here. That should be more than enough, don’t you think?”

“No,” said Keith.

“Lance,” Allura reproached. “I think it’s very kind of you to not want to interrupt Pidge’s meeting with her brother. We all know it means a lot to her. But—”

“*Pidge?*” Lance said, his voice an octave higher than he intended. He blew out air between his lips, creating a *pfft* sound in its wake. “This isn’t about *Pidge*.”

Hunk turned from the window-screen to raise an eyebrow at him, a sudden grin spreading across his face.

“It’s *not*. It’s about not needing Voltron! And, really, if anything, it’s more about Coran getting his cape. He’s so excited about it, you guys, and he doesn’t ask for a lot.”

“I’m calling her,” Keith said.

Lance, meanwhile, lunged across the panel to push Keith back. Keith responded by catching Lance’s collar and pulling him over the panel to the ground.

“Now, *really!*” Allura shouted, running around the panel herself to pry the now-brawling boys apart. “I cannot believe, after all these decaphoebs, that you—*All right, that’s enough!*”

“Ow!”

“Guys.”

“I am *supremely disappointed* in you both.”

“*Guys.*”

“He started it!”

“*I* started it? How *old* are you?”

“How old are *you?*”

“How old are you both? Paladins of Voltron, defenders of the universe, scrapping like children.”

“Ow, ow, ow—”

“Guys!” Hunk bellowed.

“What?” Allura snapped, too preoccupied with twisting Lance and Keith’s ears and bringing them to their feet to look up at him.

“Pidge.”

“That’s what I’m *trying* to—ow,” Keith said, clawing at Allura’s hands as she twisted his ear even harder.

“No, *guys*. *Pidge!*”

The three behind the panel looked to Hunk, who stood at the center of the window-screen, once again pointing out towards the rift. Following the path of his finger, however, all three gaped.

Drifting noiselessly through the rift at that moment was the Green Lion itself. Its head and most of its body was already through, and the four paladins watched in silence as its hind legs and tail followed. Then the Green Lion stopped, and waited, and did nothing else.

“That’s not possible,” Allura muttered, dropping her grip on Keith’s and Lance’s ears.

“Call Pidge,” Lance said. And Keith sprung, pressing buttons with lightning-fast fingers. A new screen appeared in front of the front window, partially shadowing the Green Lion from view. And then Pidge’s face popped into existence.

“Hi, guys!” she greeted cheerily.

Coran appeared beyond her shoulder, waving enthusiastically. “Paladins and Princess! To what do we owe the pleasure? Oh! Is this a *bonding sess*?”

“Hey, you two,” Hunk said casually as he plastered on a large, noticeably taut smile. “Just checking in. Where are you at?”

Pidge said, “We’re just entering the Jercol Galactic region, so we’re probably half a varga out from the swap moon.”

“So.” Hunk gulped audibly. “You’re *not* floating in front of the Castle right now?”

“Uh.” Pidge’s eyebrows furrowed. “No. Why?”

The screen cut out just then, replaced instead by white and black static.

“What happened? Pidge?” Lance called out, clutching the edges of the panel in a vicelike grip. “*Pidge?*”

Words began to break through the crackle of white noise. “—Paladin—Voltron—” A longer pause, then, “—hear me?”

“That’s not Pidge,” said Lance, his voice quavering a little beyond his control.

“It’s whoever just came through the rift! They’re trying to communicate with us!” Allura said.

“They can’t though,” Hunk replied. “Assuming *that* is the Green Lion from another universe, it’s probably trying to use the same frequency as Pidge.”

“Get Pidge back,” Allura instructed.

Keith groaned, “I’m *trying*.”

The static disappeared, and Pidge’s face reappeared. And Coran’s too, whose cheek was pressed flush against the side of Pidge’s helmet. “Princess!” he called. “Are you there?”

“What happened?” Pidge asked with a frown, a crinkle appearing between her eyebrows. “You cut out for—”

“There’s no time to explain,” Allura said. “We need you two to return as quickly as you can. It’s urgent.”

“But—” Pidge began to reply before the image disappeared once more. The black and white static returned.

“They’re coming,” sighed Allura, leaning forward a bit to squint at the screen in front of them. “Now, try to talk to this person.”

Keith pressed a few more buttons, pulled at a dial. The static hiss lessened, although a new picture still refused to come through. “Uh—hello?” he said. Then, more loudly, “Hello? Are you there?”

A moment of silence, and then a woman’s voice came through. “Yes, I’m here. I can hear you.”

Hunk twisted around to look at Lance. He mouthed out the word, *Pidge*? In response, Lance shook his head.

Allura raised her own voice then. “I am Princess Allura of Altea. Please—” She visibly faltered for a moment, clearly at a loss on how to proceed. “State your name and business.”

The screen still did not display any recognizable image, and the person at the other end said nothing.

“Hello?” said Allura.

“Sorry,” the woman’s voice replied. “Sorry. I just—I know who you are.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah, of course I do, it’s *me*.”

“I’m—” Allura looked beseechingly to either side of her at Keith and Lance in turn. “I don’t know who ‘me’ is. Who are you, and how did you come into possession of the Green Lion?”

The voice took on a slightly annoyed quality, “She’s *mine*, that’s how.” Lance could just *hear* the eye roll at the other end, and he resisted a strange urge to smirk.

Keith grumbled, quietly enough to only be heard by those in the room, “So what do we do? Do we engage?”

“Yeah, this doesn’t feel right to me,” Hunk said.

“Your *name*, please,” Allura insisted.

“Elena,” the voice responded. “This is beyond crazy. The odds—”

Allura interrupted her. “Elena of where?”

The voice was quiet for a moment. Then, in a borderline jokey tone, “Uh. Elena of here, I guess? Elena of the blackest void of space. Elena of—”

“Do you have any additional names?” Allura pressed as her face reddened. Lance rarely saw her so rapidly annoyed at someone who wasn’t—well—*him*. “Any identifiers so that we can be convinced a preemptive maneuver is not necessary?”

“Sorry, Princess,” the voice said quickly, any and all flippancy discarded. “Elena McClain.”

“*What?*” Lance practically hollered, looking up and staring first at the static, and then past it to the part of the Green Lion he could see. “*Elena?*”

“Yes?” the voice—Elena—responded. “Who’s that?”

“Who’s Elena?” Hunk asked.

“My sister,” Lance said, now fast-walking around the panel to the window-screen, pressing himself against it in his effort to see into the Green Lion’s eyes.

“Your *sister?*” Allura gasped.

Spinning on his heel to face Hunk, Allura, and Keith, Lance said, “Let her in.”

“What?” Keith said, pushing away from the panel and coming around to meet Lance toe-to-toe. “We have no idea who she is—”

“She’s my *sister*.”

“She *can’t* be—”

“Pidge followed Matt into space to bring him home,” Lance choked around a sudden lump in his throat, stepping back from Keith and looking wide-eyed up at Allura. “Why couldn’t Elena have done the same for me?”

“But, Lance,” Allura told him in a near whisper. It was the kind of voice one might use at the bedside of a sick person. “You’ve spoken with your family recently. Wasn’t Elena with them?”

“Yeah,” Hunk said, equally softly. “Plus, you just watched this girl pop through a *glowy explody area*. It can’t be your sister.”

“That’s it, though!” Lance pleaded, gesticulating wildly at the window-screen behind him. “On the other side of that rift is an alternate reality, right? Maybe in *that* reality—” Lance looked back over his shoulder at the Green Lion. “—that’s my sister in there.”

The other three didn’t say anything, trading glances between themselves and the back of Lance’s head.

The voice did chirp up again, though. “Hi. It’s me again,” Elena said. “I’m sorry, this sounds like a very—well, I’m picking up that this is all a bit emotional.”

Lance scoffed, wiping the back of his hand across his forehead.

“But,” Elena continued, “I’m an only child. So. Sorry, Mr. Unidentified Voice.”

“*Fine*,” Lance spat, now glaring at the screen of static above him. “If you’re not my sister, where in the *quiznak* did you get that name?”

At once, Elena replied, “My parents?”

“Oh, go eat an egg,” Lance mumbled as he crossed his arms and slumped against the screen.

“What are you doing here?” Keith abruptly called out. “What do you want from us?”

Nothing happened. No response. Just the sizzle from the static.

Keith yelled out again. “Hello? Are you there?”

“Yeah,” Elena responded. “Uh—sorry. I was distracted. Thinking.”

Keith rolled his eyes and threw up his hands. Allura just shrugged at him.

“Hey,” Elena said after an extra moment. “Can I come aboard?”

“Absolutely not,” Keith answered.

Ignoring Keith, Allura asked, “Why? What do you want?”

“I have a hypothesis,” explained Elena. “I want to see if it’s correct.”

“Okay, vague,” Hunk muttered.

“Sorry, I can’t jeopardize the experiment by giving you any more information than that.” After a moment, she added, “If you let me into my hangar—”

“S’not *your* hangar,” Lance said under his breath.

“—I’ll leave my bayard in the cockpit. I will enter completely unarmed. And if I’m wrong, I will leave and I’ll crawl back into the rift I came out of.”

“Come on, Allura,” Keith said in a low voice. “We know nothing about her other than her name, which we don’t even *know for sure* is real. We can’t see her face, and we can’t see if she’s alone. It’s too risky. She could be dangerous, or she could be crazy.”

Hunk tacked on, “Or dangerously crazy.”

Elena quipped, “I can hear you. But whatever.”

Allura looked to Lance. “Thoughts?” she asked.

Lance stared back out at the Green Lion. “I don’t know,” he said. Despite his slight exhaustion from the emotional roller coaster he’d just been on, he could feel pure curiosity tickling his spine. “I mean, that *is* the Green Lion. And she says she has its bayard.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Keith said. “She could have stolen them! Who knows?”

“I didn’t *steal them*,” Elena’s voice snapped. “Look, you can scan me when I get in there, okay? Don’t you have that kind of tech? You can see that I’m alone. You guys outnumber me so, really, if you think about it, I’ve got a right to be a lot more scared of you than you are of me.”

Allura looked around at the boys once more. Keith shook his head. Hunk shrugged. Lance shrugged, too, but then gave a small nod. Allura returned her gaze to the screen ahead, and to the Green Lion beyond it.

“Elena,” Allura said, narrowing her eyes. “Are you a paladin of Voltron?”

A short pause, then, “I am, Princess.”

“And what does that mean where you come from?”

“That means,” Elena said, so much more quietly than she said anything thus far that Lance had to strain to hear her, “I’m a defender of the universe.”

Allura stared out the window-screen for a few additional moments. Then she nodded.

Keith heaved a great sigh.

“You may approach,” Allura said. “Once you are secured in the hangar, we will run a scan. If you pass that scan, we will greet you down there. If you do not, you will be ejected. Do you agree to those terms?”

“I do,” Elena said, a smile evident in her voice. “Thank you. I’ll see you soon.”

The screen full of static disappeared instantly. Then the Green Lion picked up and flew around the window-screens to the left and beyond their field of vision.

“Well,” Lance said, kicking off from his place leaned against the window. “She knows where the Green Lion’s hangar is.”

“Yes. That is interesting.” Allura said with a nod.

Hunk brought his hands up to massage his temples. “‘The universe is mostly empty space,’ she said. ‘The odds are astronomical,’ she said.” He pointed to Allura, and groaned, “I *told* you. If something statistically improbable was gonna happen to someone, of course it was gonna happen to *us*.”

Allura watched on the security monitors as the Green Lion—or, rather, *a* Green Lion—landed in the empty hangar and as the hatch sealed shut behind it. And, to everyone’s moderate surprise (except for Keith; it was to his *supreme* surprise), the scan checked out totally above the board. One Lion, one pilot, and that was it.

The princess then led their way to Pidge’s lift, all four squeezing in at once, and together they traversed her usual path to her hangar. It took a while longer than it would’ve taken Pidge on her own; after all, her zipline couldn’t carry more than one at a time. But eventually they stepped into the hangar itself, their footsteps echoing metallically off its floor and walls.

Lance, meanwhile, felt as if he was watching the whole scene from above, too trapped in his own mind to appreciate it all from his own perspective.

The imposter Green paladin.

The imposter Elena McClain.

What in the name of the universe was *happening*?

There was the Green Lion standing before him, but not in her usual glory. Now that he could see it up close, he noted that there were long, white marks where her coloring had been stripped. There were more dents than he remembered the Lion having, and even a few places where the exoskeleton looked punctured.

When the head began to lower to the ground, the four of them stopped in a line. In other circumstances, Lance might’ve considered how authoritative it looked, how it portrayed a united front. Instead, Lance held his breath.

As an automatic response, he was initially solaced by the sight of a green-armored person stepping from the robot’s mouth. But as the stranger approached, even from a distance, Lance could tell that she was a good amount taller than Pidge. Taller than his sister even (although not by as much). An icy twinge in his gut interrupted any comfortable warmth, and Lance shuffled his feet.

Once she'd made it to the metal ground, and once Green had stood upright again, the stranger put her hands up. "I come in peace," she chuckled. And then, as she continued advancing towards them, she dropped her hands to pull off her helmet.

Lance's heart sunk a bit. Despite everything, he'd been holding out some hope that this woman would prove to be his sister. So, on top of it all, he felt stupid. Embarrassed.

(How he *hated it* when Keith was right.)

This woman—or girl, rather, because she couldn't have too much younger than *he* was—was indisputably not his sister. Her skin was fairer. The hair that was half tied back, half falling loose around her shoulders was lighter, a dark brown rather than *his* Elena's black. Her eyes were not his family's signature dark blue, but brown.

And yet, there was something indistinguishably familiar.

Before he could even dream of attempting to place it, the woman's eyes locked onto his own.

Elena—this Elena—beamed at him. "Shut. The front. Door. I *knew* it," she said, pulling her helmet roughly into her own chest. It clacked against her breastplate. "I know who you are."

Lance balked. Blinked. Opened his mouth to say something, then closed it, then opened it again. "Uh—you—I don't. Huh?"

Her smile grew impossibly wider. "You're Lance, aren't you? Lance McClain."

He didn't say anything at first, just continued to stare blankly at her.

Hunk was the one who asked, "How did you *know that*?"

And without taking her eyes off Lance for a moment, Elena tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, shaking her head back and forth in clear, unadulterated, *delighted* disbelief. "I'm his daughter. That's how."

In hindsight, Lance would've liked to take back anything he'd ever said—even internally—about his life being boring. Was it terrifying sometimes? For sure. Did he like it anyway? Eh, depends on when you asked him. As soon as those words left Elena's mouth, for example, he probably would've answered in the negative.

But boring? Not by a long shot.

Boring sure sounded nice.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Elena McClain introduces herself a bit more thoroughly, and the paladins make a heartbreaking discovery.

“She’s kind of got his nose. D’you see that?”

“Uh, maybe?”

“No, yeah, *trust me*. That’s Lance’s nose. Look at the swoop.”

“I don’t know, Hunk. This all just seems sort of—*I don’t know*. Hard to believe.”

“Sure. But, listen. Everything we’ve ever learned about anything since we left Earth has been hard to believe, hasn’t it? *That’s* all been true.”

Keith didn’t say anything, opting instead to give a non-committal grunt.

“*Dude*, just *look* at her! If Lance grew his hair out and tucked his chin in a bit, they’d be almost *identical*.”

Despite his best efforts at continuing his staring contest with his own fingers, Lance’s eyes twitched to land on the girl that sat at the far opposite end of the table. Elena’s eyes, meanwhile, were already fixed onto him. She smiled at him, and Lance forced himself to look back down.

“Her eyes are different. And her jaw,” Keith said finally.

“Yeah, well, that’s genetics, isn’t it?” Hunk replied. “She’s not a *clone*. She’s half him, half her mom.”

Hunk and Keith were silent then. Still glaring at his hands, Lance couldn’t see what they were doing, their intensified examination of Elena’s features and their wordless exchange of glances. But his ears burned anyway.

The door behind Elena whooshed open, and Lance looked up once more. Allura entered. “My apologies for that, Elena. I didn’t intend for it to take me so long.”

“You’re fine,” Elena said, sitting up a little straighter in her chair. “How is it?”

“How’s what?”

Elena blinked at her. Then she tipped her chin a bit and side-eyed her.

(Lance wished she wouldn't. It looked too familiar for his comfort.)

"The rift," said Elena, slowly, like she was explaining something complicated. "That's what you told me you stepped away to check on, at least."

"Oh, yes!" Allura clapped her hands together and grinned. It wasn't lost on Lance, though, the slight flush that crept across her cheeks. "Of course. It's still there, and doesn't appear to have changed at all. So I imagine we have plenty of time to—er—"

Elena supplied, "Figure out what the fork is going on?"

"To chat," Allura finished. "Yes." She walked around the length of the table to sit herself next to Lance. As she busied herself with tucking her skirts beneath her, Hunk leaned back and behind Lance to mutter to Allura, hidden from Elena's view.

"Did you get ahold of them?"

"No," Allura whispered back. "I suspect that the presence of *this* Green Lion in the Castle is interrupting our ability to contact *our* Green Lion."

Hunk gave her a weird, weak smile and shrug in response, and then he settled himself back into his chair.

Elena leaned forward, planting her elbows on the table. "I feel like I'm being interviewed," she said around a smirk.

"I'd prefer an interrogation," Keith mumbled into his lap.

Allura nodded a little. "Well, I suppose that's not too far off from what we're doing. I have—that is to say, I'm sure we *all* have—" She looked briefly to Lance, and then back to Elena. "—a lot of questions."

Elena mirrored the nod. "That's fair. Okay." She pressed back into her chair, crossing her arms over her breastplate. "Shoot."

Without pause, Hunk slammed his open hands down on the table. "*How do you know Lance is really your dad?*"

Lance couldn't help wincing.

Elena furrowed her brow. "I know what *my dad* looks like. I mean, sure, this guy—" She indicated Lance with a nod of her head. "—is a little twiggier. And a lot younger. But that's Pops, all right."

"Pops," Hunk repeated around a quiet chuckle, elbowing Lance in the side. Lance batted his arm away.

"How old is Lance—or, rather, how old is *your father* where you're from?" Allura asked.

Elena hesitated with her answer as she peered up at the ceiling. “I think like fifty?” She returned her gaze to Allura. “Fifty or fifty-one. It’s sort of hard to keep track of birthdays out here, isn’t it?”

“So,” Hunk said, “you’re from the *future*.”

Keith shook his head. “Alternate reality,” he corrected.

“Yeah, an alternate reality that takes place about thirty years *in the future*.”

Ignoring Hunk, Keith leaned forward, narrowing his eyes at Elena. He asked, “How did you know who the Princess was?”

Elena rolled her eyes. “Uh, she basically *raised* me.”

Hunk’s eyes went wide. “Wait. Is Allura—” He pointed feebly at the princess. “She’s not your mom, is she?”

Both Lance and Allura twisted in their chairs to glare at him.

“*Dude*,” Lance said simply, his voice croaking a tad from underuse. He hadn’t said a word since Elena introduced herself in the hangar.

Meanwhile, Elena’s face fell. Suddenly serious, all she said in reply was, “No.”

“Okay,” Hunk said, dragging out the last syllable as he glanced back at Lance out of the corner of his eye. “Then who is?”

Lance found himself automatically looking to Elena for her response.

It didn’t come. Elena blinked once, and then said, “Pass.”

“Why?” Keith pressed.

“She’s off limits,” Elena said. “*Pass*.”

Keith pushed his chair roughly out from under him and stood. “You don’t get to—”

“That’s quite enough,” Allura scolded. “Sit.”

After a beat, Keith obeyed. Allura then turned her attention back to Elena. “Returning to what you were saying about—well, about me.”

Elena’s eyes softened a bit, the corners of her mouth quirking upward. “Yeah. ‘It takes a village,’ right? That’s what Dad’s always told me.” Her gaze flicked to Lance, and then back to Allura. “But, yeah, you were there. Hunk, too.”

“Really?” Hunk said. The way his mouth quivered, Lance could tell he was just barely holding back a grin.

Elena grinned brightly enough at him for the both of them, though. “Of course. You’re my *tío*.”

Hunk’s hand found Lance’s shoulder and squeezed hard. ““*Tío*,”” he said in reverence, his eyes becoming watery.

Lance didn’t have the heart to bat him away that time.

Allura, too, appeared to be holding back a smile as she shook her head a little. “Well, that’s— That’s very nice, isn’t it?”

Elena hummed, then said, “The only one of you I *don’t* recognize is this guy.” She hooked her thumb in Keith’s direction. Then she leant her cheek against her open palm and smirked. “Speaking of which. What’s your name, handsome?” she added with a wink.

Hunk dissolved completely, shaking Lance where he still had a hold on him. “Oh, *man*. Oh, *buddy*,” he wheezed. “I’m sorry. That is *one hundred percent* your daughter.”

With a rough roll of his shoulder, Lance released himself from Hunk’s grip. “*Shut up*,” he hissed.

“You don’t know who Keith is?” Allura asked Elena. “But how can that be if you know Hunk and me?”

Elena looked sharply towards Allura, any trace of residual flirtation evaporated. Again, she hooked her thumb in Keith’s direction. “That’s *Keith*?” Then she looked back to the boy in question, narrowed her eyes at him, and said, “Oh, then, *you* can go fudge yourself.”

Only she didn’t say “fudge.”

Hunk fell from his chair to the floor. “*Daughter confirmed*,” he hiccupped between bouts of laughter.

Keith, on the other hand, came to his feet once more, planting his hands on the table and leaning into them as he shouted, “What’s *your* problem?”

Elena did the same. “*My* problem? What was *yours*?”

“I have *no idea* what you’re talking about!”

“Hold on,” Allura said, getting to her own feet and holding her hands up in a calming gesture. “I don’t understand. So you *do* know Keith?”

“I know *of* him,” Elena spat, placing her hands on her hips and continuing to glower at Keith. “He ditched right before I was born. Never met him myself. Dad’s told me more than enough, though.”

Hunk, who was pulling himself back into his chair, abruptly sobered. “But where did he go? Back to Earth? And then why did we stay up here? That doesn’t make sense.”

Elena whipped her head around to stare at Hunk. “Wait, what’re *you* talking about? He couldn’t have gone to Earth.”

“Why not?” Allura said. “Now that the war is virtually over—”

“The *what* is *what*?” Elena’s eyebrows shot upward. “Are you saying you actually defeated the Galra?”

“Are *you* saying,” said Keith, any anger he had replaced with clear and utter disbelief, “you’re still fighting?”

Elena shook her head. “No, the fight’s over. I’m saying we *lost*.”

The silence that hung over them then was heavy. Crushing.

“So, after everything,” Hunk said finally, quietly, “we still lose.”

“No.” Allura smiled, though it twitched at its edges. “That’s not possible.”

Keith sat back down, his hands still clutching the table. “She’s from an alternate reality, Hunk. Not the future. Just because they lost in her reality doesn’t mean anything for us.”

“But still,” Hunk nearly whispered. “What if the alternate reality Elena’s from is identical to ours except for some really small detail? Like if what our realities are the same except for, in hers, one day some alien we’ve never met bought a different hat? Aren’t there *infinite* realities?” Hunk looked to Lance. “Isn’t that possible?”

Lance could only stare blankly back at him. Then he turned his head to regard Elena.

Elena wasn’t looking at Lance, though. “My reality apparently takes place thirty years ahead of yours. Maybe that’s the only difference,” she said. Her eyes flicked upward to meet Lance’s for a moment. Her face held some indistinguishable expression—something between hopefulness and hopelessness. “But maybe not. I don’t know.” She looked away once more.

“Elena,” Allura said carefully, slowly, as though she feared her words would startle Elena into flight. “You have to tell us all you know so that we can attempt to place what went wrong in your reality.”

“Yeah,” Hunk added. “That way we’ll know how to avoid it.”

Keith cut in, “Or we’ll know for sure that our realities are different.”

Elena gaped at each of them in turn—except for Lance, whose eyes she avoided entirely. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t really know anything about before I was born. Dad doesn’t talk about it. All I know is that we’ve been on the run for my entire life.”

“On the run? Where have you been going?” Allura asked, taking her seat again.

Elena followed her, slumping back into her own chair. “Everywhere. Usually we just float around the emptiest parts of galaxies so we won’t draw attention. Sometimes a few Galra find

us, and we'll fight to get away. Then we just go somewhere else. We would stay for a while on a few uninhabited planets when I was younger, but—" She swallowed, looked towards Lance again, and then into her lap. "We stopped doing that."

"Did Lance—your dad version of Lance, not *this* one—" Hunk clarified, nodding his head in Lance's direction. "Or future me or future Allura or future *anybody*. Did any of them ever mention, like, a time where they all *thought* they'd won and it was peaceful for a while? Or no?"

Elena shrugged. "They never said anything like that. But, again, none of them talk about before. Not war-related stuff, anyway."

"What do they talk about?" Allura questioned.

"Mostly old stories about each other. Like—" Elena finally zeroed in on Lance. "That night you all snuck out from the Garrison and found Keith and Shiro and the Blue Lion and launched yourself to Arus? Is that how it happened in this reality?"

Lance's stomach did a weird thing, as if it sank and leapt at the same time. As if the memory made him nervous and happy at the same time. He nodded. "Yeah, it is."

Elena smiled a bit and tucked her hair behind her ear. "Good. I like that story."

It was unnerving, really, the little things he was slowly noticing about her. Like how the hair that Elena tucked behind her ear was not the shade of black that his sister Elena had, but how it was almost precisely the same shade of dark brown *he* had. Hunk was right about the nose, too, and its dramatic slope. Lance had only seen that nose when he looked at his family or when he looked in a mirror. But there it was, smack dab in the center of Elena's face.

Keith was right about the eyes, though. Lance's were blue, Elena's were brown. A very specific shade of brown, one that fell somewhere between amber and honey.

"Elena" Allura said, "do you think there's any possibility of contacting your father? I think we need to speak to him."

"Across realities?" Elena replied. "I'm not sure. Green's communication system is already pretty messed up, so I don't think her signal's strong enough to do that. I could try, though."

Hunk piped, "Oh! Try using the Castle's system. It's definitely stronger than any of the Lions', and maybe it has a better chance of breaching the rift with the whole Castle à Castle thing going for it."

"She should just fly back and get Lance," Keith said. "Her dad. Whatever."

Allura shook her head. "But then we run the risk of the rift closing before she can get back."

"Well, if the rift starts closing, I'd wouldn't want to strand myself here anyway." Elena said. "We should go to the bridge first. Then we can check on the rift while I try to get ahold of Dad. If it looks pretty sturdy, and I can't get through on the com, then I'll duck back through

the glowy explody area and get him.” She stood, grabbing her helmet from the chair beside her and wedging it between her elbow and hip. “Sound like a plan?”

Allura rose to her feet with Elena, and nodded. “It does. Allow me to show you to the bridge.”

“Auntie, I—” Elena stopped herself, and winced. “Sorry. *Princess*. I just—I know where the bridge is.”

“Oh!” Allura said, blushing and pursing her lips in an attempt—Lance suspected—not to look too pleased at Elena’s slip. “Of course. I apologize.”

“No, no, no, don’t! That was a very *you* thing to do, even in my reality. It’s nice.” Elena turned and began making her way to the exit. “Shall we?”

Lance stood at once, as did Keith. Hunk did not.

“Uh, Allura,” he said, raising his finger gingerly into the air. “Can you hold back for a tick? I kind of gotta talk to you about something.”

“Oh, well.” Allura glanced back at Elena. “Is it urgent?”

“It might be,” Hunk replied.

“All right, then. Lance, Keith, will you two please accompany Elena—”

“Actually,” added Hunk, cringing. “Maybe Keith can hold back, too?”

Lance, who’d already been halfway around the table towards the door, skidded on his heels. “Hey, hold on! What about *me*?”

“Well—I—” Hunk’s eyes volleyed desperately between Allura, Keith, and Lance. “It’s just—maybe you ought to go with her. I mean, she—she’s still basically a stranger, right?” He crossed his arms over his barreled chest. “I—I’m just not convinced that we can trust her yet.” He elbowed Keith’s arm. “Keith, buddy. Back me up.”

Elena, who stood in the now-open doorway, said crossly, “Oh, so me calling you *tío* suddenly means *nothing*, does it? I thought we bonded!”

“It’s about me, isn’t it?” Lance pressed.

Hunk’s lips thinned, and a bead of sweat appeared at his hairline. “No,” he said.

“Liar.”

Allura looked to Elena once more, then to Hunk, then to Lance. “Lance,” she said, “Please accompany Elena to the bridge.”

“*But—*”

Hunk interrupted him. “Dude, I’ll tell you later, okay?” At Lance’s responding, skeptical eyebrow raise, Hunk sighed, “I *promise*. I just—” He frowned. “Can you trust me?”

Lance wanted so badly to say no. Even fully knowing that he didn’t mean it, because he literally trusted Hunk with his life. It was just that—truth be told—Lance’s exclusion was making him feel paranoid. Hurt. Like he was sixteen years old all over again.

Hunk’s face was sort of crumpling in on itself, though, and Lance couldn’t force himself to say anything that could possibly make it worse. So, instead, he just groaned wordlessly, spun on his heel, and sulked out of the dining room.

“Come on,” he said as he passed Elena and stalked into the hallway.

“Okay,” she replied, and followed him, the door sealing shut behind her.

The only real sound for a while was the echoing of their footsteps. Lance’s mind, on the other hand, was buzzing with half-formed thoughts. Most concerned the discussion that, despite Hunk’s reassurances, was obviously centered around Lance himself. One concerned Pidge, and when she would get back, and what might happen to her while this other Green Lion kept her from being able to communicate with them. And the rest concerned the girl who walked beside him. But, for the moment, he was trying his best to ignore those particular thoughts.

“It’s funny,” Elena said just as they rounded a corner. She pointed at her own face. “When Dad’s worried about something, he gets that exact same line between the eyebrows that you’ve got going on right now.”

Automatically, Lance’s fingers flew up to cover his forehead. “I don’t *have* lines,” he said.

Elena laughed. “I’m looking at one right now, bud. Just wait until you’re Dad’s age.” She shook her head, still chuckling. “You’re not gonna be happy.”

Lance let his hand fall, stared resolutely at the hallway before them, and didn’t respond.

After a moment, Elena sighed. “Hey. I’m sorry.”

Still refusing to look at her, Lance said, “Don’t worry about it. Everybody’s wrong sometimes.”

“What?”

“*What?*”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s just—” Lance stopped short. Elena almost tripped over her own feet as she skidded to stop next to him, and Lance pressed his palms together, pointing his fingers towards Elena’s person. “Listen, I don’t know about *your dad*, but *I* happen to maintain an intensive skincare regimen. So either you’re wrong about me one day getting anything even *resembling* a line, or—”

“Are you *serious*?” Elena asked, her facial expression flirting somewhere between bewildered and delighted. “*That’s* what you’re upset about? You’re *joking*.”

Lance’s jaw dropped, literally *dropped*. “There’s nothing funny about skincare.”

“*Guy*.” Elena shook her head again, then pressed her own palms together and pointed her fingers towards Lance, her helmet still perched precariously between her elbow and hip. “I was apologizing for this whole situation. With you, and my dad, and *you* being *my dad*. Not for *insulting your skin*.” She threw one hand in the air, grabbed her helmet with the other, and continued marching forward. “*Quiznak*.”

“Wait.” Lance jogged for a second to catch up, slowing as he said, “Why are you apologizing for *that*?”

“Because—*oh*, I don’t know—this entire thing’s *insane*? Like, isn’t this freaking you out at all?”

“Well.” Lance frowned. “Yeah, I guess.”

It was Elena’s turn to stop short, and Lance’s turn to skid so as to keep back with her. “You *guess*?”

“Yeah. It’s—” Lance raked one hand through his hair, then both. “*I’m* sorry. It’s just that I’m not one-hundred percent convinced that I’m—you know. That me and your dad are the same person.”

“Bro. Are you for real?” Elena waved her free hand wildly at her own face, then repeated the gesture at his.

Lance shrugged. “Could be a coincidence.”

“Plus you have the exact same name as my dad.”

“Eh. It’s a common enough name.”

“And you named me after your *sister*.”

“*I* didn’t name you anything,” Lance said, finger raised in the air. “*Someone* named Lance McClain had a sister named Elena, who he then named his daughter—you—after.”

“And he also just *happened* to become a paladin of Voltron, too?”

Lance pointed his finger at Elena, finger gun style. “Exactly. You’re catching on.”

Elena just gaped at him. “You are un-flipping-believable.” She continued walking, and turned another corner, Lance following in her wake. “Traversing alternate realities, you can believe. Magic fighting *Lions*, you can believe. Yet here I am, standing in front of you, looking the way I do and named the way I am. And *that* you can’t believe.”

“Come on, cut me some slack. I mean, you’re trying to tell me that, at some point, and no matter everything we’ve done, we eventually lose this war. You’re telling me that *Keith*, of all people, just ups and leaves without looking back for—how old are you?”

“Twenty,” Elena replied curtly.

“Without looking back for over *twenty years*! Sure, I guess he’s been known to take the occasional sabbatical. But not forever, and especially not when we still *need* him. And you’re telling me that—in addition to losing the war and Keith leaving—that we all just *give up* and start running. That *I* give up and start running. That might be your dad, but that’s not me.”

They were just outside the door to the bridge when Elena spun and leaned sharply up into Lance’s face. She might’ve only been tall enough for her eye line to reach his mouth, but it didn’t lessen the action’s effect. Her light brown eyes were aflame. Borderline deadly.

He’d seen that look before. At that moment, though, he just couldn’t name on whom.

“*Hey*,” she snapped. “*Lay off*.” She waved her hand in front of the door’s sensor, but didn’t move away from Lance as it flew open. “You have *no idea*, okay? You might become my dad one day, but you are *not* him yet. You have no *idea* what he’s been through, and why he and the team made the choices they made.” As she stepped into the bridge, she muttered again, “You have no idea what my dad’s been through. And I really hope that you never do.”

Lance remained where he was for a moment as Elena made a beeline to Coran’s control panel. She set her helmet carefully on the ground, and he watched her shoulders move as she worked, masterfully pressing buttons and fiddling with dials, the purposes of which he only had the vaguest idea. A screen popped up at the far end of the bridge, front and center, but blank. Beyond it, the rift rippled, ever bright and ever large, unchanged. And beyond *that*, only the stars. Lance stared at those for a moment, as if willing one to start blinking green and to approach them. Then he returned his stare to Elena’s back, and he stepped forward. The door sealed itself shut behind him.

“Elena?”

Elena hummed—though, because it came from the base of her throat, it sounded more like a growl. She didn’t turn around.

“How’d you get the Green Lion?”

Elena’s body stiffened for an infinitesimal moment, her hands stilling over the controls. But then she continued her task as if nothing had happened. “She chose me,” she said over her shoulder, perhaps a touch louder than was necessary. The volume, however, didn’t succeed in obscuring the clear strain in her voice. “Just like how every paladin gets any of the Lions.”

“Sure,” Lance said. “But what I meant—Um.” He cleared his dry throat, and swallowed. “Who was Green’s paladin before you?”

Her body stiffened again, her hands stilled, just as the screen filled with that same, crackling static as before. Elena didn’t respond, didn’t move another muscle.

“Elena.” Lance walked towards her until her shoulder was within arm’s reach.

Elena’s voice was far quieter when she mumbled, “I have to talk to my dad.” With less vigor than before, her hands continued moving over the buttons and dials.

“Elena,” Lance said again, coming around to stand next to her, to study her face. She stared blankly outward at the screen.

“*Elena?*” said a different voice, louder and slightly distorted. A man’s voice. Eerily familiar, yet deeper than Lance had ever heard it.

Lance’s head snapped forward to look at the screen, where there was still no image to be found. “Is that—?”

“Tío Hunk!” Elena called out, grinning wide, her eyes suddenly glistening. “It’s me! I need you to get Dad, okay? I need to talk to him.”

“Where—” Hunk’s voice cut out, replaced by a violent sizzling.

“*Son of a bird,*” Elena barked as her smile fell from her face, flying forward again to enter a few more rapid commands into the system. “Hunk? *Hunk?*”

“What?” said someone from behind them, and both Elena and Lance twisted to look at the door. Unnoticed, it had apparently opened once more, and through it entered Hunk and Allura and Keith together. Hunk frowned at the pair of them. “What’s up?” he asked.

“No, not *you*, Hunk,” Elena groaned, facing the screen again, stabbing buttons. “*My* Hunk.”

“*Your* Hunk?” Allura gasped. “Do you mean you were able to contact them?”

“I’m *trying*.” Elena’s pointer finger jabbed at one button several times, harder and harder as nothing seemed to happen in response. “Come *on!*”

The static intensified, then broke. “*Elena!*” Hunk’s voice hollered over the system.

“*Whoa,*” the present Hunk whispered, his jaw going slack.

Elena pumped her fist in triumph. “*Yes!* I can hear you!”

“Where—you?—you okay?”

“The connection’s still choppy,” Lance said.

Elena shook her head. “It might be the best we can get, though.” Then, louder, “I’m fine, Hunk, but listen. If you can hear me, I need you to go get Dad. I’m still on the other side of the rift, and—” She stopped and looked around herself at the people in her company. She half-smiled, then continued, “There are some people here who have some questions.”

“What—say? Ellie, honey—trouble hearing—But are you *okay?*”

Elena raked her hands through her hair. “*I said, I’m fine!*” she yelled.

“You—fine?”

“Yes! Fine!”

“All—Where—”

“Rift!”

“—did—say?”

“*Rift!*”

“You’re still—rift?”

“*Yes!*” Elena pulled her hands away from her head, and Lance was somewhat surprised to find that she hadn’t pulled any hair away with them. Instead, her knuckles went white as she squeezed the edge of the control panel, and she grumbled. “Of *all the people* to be waiting by the com.”

The Hunk who had come up beside her gave her a look, crossed somewhere between hurt and irritated. He pouted at her. “Hey, maybe go easy on me slash him, huh? It’s not my slash his fault the connection’s bad!”

“No,” Elena replied, rolling her eyes. “But it *is* kind of your slash his fault that he became deaf as a doornail. My professional, futuristic advice? Stop messing with stuff that *explodes*.”

“Who’s with you?” the other Hunk’s voice came through. “Sounds—someone familiar.”

“*Tio!*” Elena roared, slamming her fist down on top of the panel. “*Get! Dad!*”

“You want me—your dad?”

“*Yes! My dad! Get him!*”

“Hold—*Lance!*”

But there was a light popping sound from the control panel, followed by an even louder *snap*. Lance jumped back into Keith’s front, not having realized that he’d snuck up behind him. Before Lance could whip around and tell him off, however, the screen in front of them went blank. The control panel emitted a few sparks, at which point Elena drew her hands into her chest. Then the sparks stopped, replaced by a single trail of smoke rising from somewhere underneath the controls.

“*Are you kidding me?*” Elena dropped to her knees, ripping open a door at the base of the panel. Some more smoke billowed out as she did so, and Elena was forced to lean away, her eyes tearing up. “Mother *forking* piece of *shirt*.”

“Hey,” Hunk said, his voice soft, as he squatted to pull Elena’s hands gently away from the panel. “You’re fine. Take a break, and take some deep breaths. I’ll work on this.”

Elena did back away, but only to reach out between Lance’s feet to retrieve her helmet. Then she stood and began stomping to the lift that led to the Green Lion’s hangar. “I’ll just go get him. Wait here, and I’ll back in half a varga—”

“Hold on a tick,” Allura said, quickstepping to catch up with Elena and to grasp her by the elbow. “Elena, I’m sorry, we need to ask you something before you leave.”

Elena looked very much like she was considering shaking the Princess off of her, but thought better of it. Still, there was a certain edge to her voice as she replied, “What? I told you, my dad’s the one who knows anything about everything. Don’t you want me to go get him?”

“Of course. But, as I’ve mentioned, we run the risk of the rift sealing itself at any moment, so we don’t know for certain that we’ll get the opportunity to speak to your father later.” Allura removed her hand from Elena’s arm and waved it in the direction of Pidge’s chair. “Please, while we still have you, can we ask you a few final questions?”

Elena eyed the seat, and then eyed Allura. Then she heaved a great sigh before wordlessly climbing the few steps and slumping into Pidge’s chair, balancing her helmet on her knee.

Allura smiled reassuringly at her. “Thank you.” Standing at the base of the steps, she crossed her hands in front of herself. She heaved her own sigh, and then said, “Now, we need you to tell us how and when you came into possession of the Green Lion.”

Instantly, Elena was on her feet. “Nope,” she said as she jumped down the steps and brushed past Allura. But Keith ran forward to stand between her and the lift to the Green Lion’s hangar, and Elena stopped in her tracks. “Move it, pretty boy. I’m leaving.”

“I don’t think so,” Keith replied, holding his hands out a bit so that she couldn’t sidestep him.

“You want answers? Then let me get my dad. I’m done talking.” Elena moved to duck under Keith’s arm, but Keith grabbed her shoulder and pushed her upright again. “*Don’t. Touch. Me.*”

“Keith,” Allura admonished. “I appreciate your trying to help, but please—”

“Just let her go,” Lance said from his place leaning against Coran’s station. “I already tried asking her.”

“You did?” Hunk asked from his own spot on the ground, where his hands were shoved deep in the belly of the control panel. He retracted them, wiped them on his pants, and stood. “What’d she say?”

“Nothing.” Lance shook his head. “She avoided the question like she’s doing right now.”

“What?” Keith asked, his eyes narrowing. “Are you hiding something?”

“No.” Elena backed away, twisting around to head towards the door from which they’d all entered. “But I’m not your prisoner, and I don’t have to talk if I don’t want to.”

Allura hurried to catch up to her side. “Elena, *please*. We don’t mean to cause you any distress—”

“Yeah,” Elena scoffed. “You guys are doing a great job at that.”

“We only insist upon asking you in the hope that—on the off chance that your reality *is* our reality—we don’t suffer from the same conclusion.”

Elena stopped abruptly in her tracks, and Allura stopped beside her. When Elena didn’t say anything in response, though, Allura went on.

“I do have a guess why your inheriting your Lion is a story you don’t wish to repeat, and I empathize with you *greatly*. But, please, don’t leave us relying on guesses.”

Then, slowly, Elena faced Allura head on, her cheeks red and her mouth pursed tight. After a long moment, Elena seemed to deflate. “Fine,” she said, looking down at her feet. “Ask away, Princess.”

“Wait,” Lance said as his brow furrowed. “‘Suffer the same conclusion?’ What’re you talking about?”

Just then, however, Hunk called out, “Incoming!”

Everyone turned to look at him, and followed his outstretched finger to the image beyond the window-screens. The rift was still there, still unchanged. But there was something new, too, which grew in size as it hurtled towards them. Lance breathed a sigh of relief that he hadn’t known he’d been holding since even before Elena’s arrival. And, at once, he stepped around Coran’s panel to get as close to the space beyond the Castle as possible, where the Green Lion—their Green Lion—was just arriving.

Before he could so much as announce Pidge’s name, though, there was a body next to him. Elena had joined him at his side and had pressed herself almost entirely flush with the window-screen.

“Is that—” Elena began saying in a whisper. But she cut herself off, resolving herself instead to stare wide-eyed and unmoving at the approaching figure.

Lance, for some reason, couldn’t help smiling somewhat softly at her. “That’s *our* green paladin. Pidge.”

But then, just as quickly as the warm, comforting sensation that Pidge’s return brought had settled itself in Lance’s stomach, it disappeared. Replacing it was a growing, sticky unease.

“Hold on,” Lance said, shifting so that his body faced Elena straight on. Elena, on the other hand, was still frozen in place, her hands pushed so flat against the window-screen that it looked as if she were trying to pop it off entirely. “You’ve got to know of Pidge, right?”

Almost imperceptibly, Elena nodded.

“But if she exists in your universe, why didn’t you mention that earlier? When I asked about the Green Lion’s paladin before you? Why wouldn’t you just answer the question?”

Elena, still gaping outward, blinked. For just a moment, her eyes flicked sideways to meet his.

Her nonresponse only served to set his nerves more on edge than they already were. “Why’re you flying Pidge’s Lion?” Lance asked, his hands unwittingly balling themselves into fists.

A beat of silence, then Elena pushed herself away from the window-screen and from Lance. “I have to go,” she mumbled, walking across the room and scooping her helmet off the ground where she’d apparently dropped it earlier.

“Nuh uh,” Lance called out as he pursued her. “You’re not going anywhere until you tell us where Pidge is.”

“Lance,” Allura whispered, stepping between him and Elena and placing her hands tentatively on his shoulders. “I think it’s best if we approach this delicately.”

“‘*Delicately*?’” Lance repeated around a scoff. His blood heated up in his veins. “Forget ‘delicately,’ Allura! What do I have to be delicate for?”

Hunk materialized beside him. “Lance, listen. I think—”

“You think *what*? You think we should just let her go? With absolutely zero explanation of why Pidge is apparently no longer part of the team?” He shouted at Elena over Allura’s shoulder, “What happened? Did she go with Keith off to wherever he went? Did she abandon us, too?”

Elena, meanwhile, was already halfway across the room at that point. But she hadn’t yet escaped through the door. Instead, she stood facing him, her eyes somehow even wider than they had been before. They were like saucers, and full of something very close to fear. Her cheeks and the tips of her ears were bright with color, so bright that Lance could almost feel the stinging secondhand.

She looked so *young* like that.

“*Lance*, that’s *enough*,” Allura scolded. “I understand that you care for Pidge a very great deal—”

“Of course I do! But don’t we all?”

Allura’s face slackened a bit, her scowl softening. “*Of course* we do, too. It’s just that—well, look.” She tightened her steady grip on his shoulders. “*Our* Pidge is here, isn’t she? You just saw her. She’s here and she’s safe. So you can calm down.”

“Yeah, buddy,” Hunk added, patting Lance’s back. “Just look out the—oh, well, never mind. She must’ve gotten to her hangar already.”

“She *what*?” Elena burst out. Then, like she’d been pushed, she stumbled forward towards the lift to the Green Lion’s hangar.

Keith was still positioned there, though, and blocked her path. “Do you want to get sucked into space?” he asked her. “Because going down there right now while Pidge is landing is a good way to get sucked into space.”

“I—” Elena whirled back around, looking helplessly to Lance. “I can’t—”

Lance paused for a moment to take a deep breath. As he did, Allura’s words echoed in his head: Our *Pidge is here*. She was right. The Pidge that he knew was there, and she was safe. With another deep breath, he could feel his sudden spike of rage—of abject, blind panic—ebb away. Then, calmly, he brought his hands up to peel Allura’s fingers away from his biceps. Once done, he stepped around her and went to Elena.

Without prelude, and in the hushed-but-firm tone he typically reserved for nieces, nephews, and his own Lion, Lance said, “Hey.”

Elena, still looking moderately petrified, nodded at him.

“I’m sorry for snapping at you. I just got kind of freaked out.” As a smirk inexplicably broke across his face, he added, “Isn’t that what you wanted from me earlier, anyway? To freak out?”

A mirrored smirk, however shaky, broke out across Elena’s. “Careful what you wish for, huh?” she muttered.

“Elena,” said Allura’s voice from behind Lance’s shoulder. “I’m so, *so* sorry. But, please, before she gets here—” A familiar pressure on Lance’s shoulder; Allura had once again lain her hand upon it.

The rest of Allura’s question, however, went unfinished. Maintaining unflinching eye contact with Lance, Elena gulped. Then, in a voice so quiet Lance had to strain to hear her, Elena said, “She’s gone.”

“‘She’s gone?’” Lance blinked at her. “You mean Pidge *did* leave? With Keith, or with somebody else?”

Elena shook her head slowly—achingly slowly—while her eyes still fixed magnetically to Lance’s. “Not like that.”

Allura’s hand dropped from Lance’s shoulder. “Oh, no,” she sighed, her voice cracking.

“Oh, *jeez*,” Hunk mumbled from somewhere faraway. “I knew it.”

Any ambient noise throughout the bridge—other’s words, the gentle chugging of the ship’s system, the remnant crackling of the fried control panel, *everything*—faded, eventually dissolving into nothingness.

She’s gone, a sinister voice chanted in Lance’s head. *She’s gone, she’s gone, she’s gone.*

But no, Lance reasoned. That wasn't true. At least, not in *his* universe.

Maybe not yet, the faceless monster noted, grinning menacingly. *But it might be.*

Although Lance could hear nothing beyond the cavernous white noise in his own mind, he could still see. His stare was still locked onto Elena's as he prayed that, any moment, she might wink or wince or otherwise imply that whatever she just told him was a lie. It was a joke. It wasn't true.

Elena's eyes—her light brown eyes—didn't so much as blink.

His sense of hearing rapidly returned as the door to the lift next to him opened with a *whoosh*.

"Thank goodness!" Coran hollered, basically falling over his own feet to join Allura at her side. "We lost all ability to contact you as soon as your call cut off. We've been worried absolutely sick!"

"*What*," Pidge barked, following Coran into the bridge and ripping her helmet off her head as she stalked towards them, "*the quiznak* are you playing at? You call us back here with *no explanation*, you somehow cut us off from all contact—and don't even pretend that that wasn't you, because I *know* Green's system was working *fine*—"

Lance finally let go of Elena's gaze as they both turned their heads to look at Pidge.

Who, to her own credit, gloriously continued on with her rant, unbothered, as she threw her helmet to the ground and tore her hands through her hair. "Then we *do* get back here, and there's a *glowy explody area*. And a *second Green Lion*. And—and—" Steam lost, Pidge lamely pointed a finger at Elena, her eyebrows furrowing and her nose scrunching dramatically in confusion instead. "Who are *you*?"

Lance, despite everything he'd just learned, despite the ominous voice still vying for his attention somewhere deep down in the dark recesses of his head, couldn't help grinning at Pidge. But the grin swiftly vanished as he turned to introduce Elena, and as he subsequently realized that the girl before him had tears coursing down her cheeks.

"Uh," was all he could think to say. Then, a tad more eloquently, "Hey. Elena. You okay there?"

Elena, tears still falling from her eyes in currents, nodded silently. Then she shook her head silently. Then she let out a single sob and buckled, launching herself forward to lock her arms around Pidge's neck.

Pidge's hands remained tightly at her sides, her fists clenching and unclenching as she looked around wildly—Lance was certain—for help. "Guys?" she muttered past Elena's hair.

But Elena continued to weep unabashedly into Pidge's shoulder. "*I'm so sorry*," she cried. "*Oh my god, Mom. I'm so, so sorry.*"

Pidge, looking only mildly taken aback, narrowed her eyes.

Her light brown eyes.

“*Mom?*” she repeated.

“*Mom?*” Lance also repeated—albeit at a far louder volume—as his heart froze over and dropped to the pit of his stomach.

“Oh, *man!*” Hunk whooped. “I called that one, too!”

A tension fell over the room once more, silent but for Elena’s erratic sobs and sniffles. After a moment, though, Allura clapped her hands together.

“Well,” she said, her voice clipped with over-exuberant cheeriness. “Perhaps we should sit and catch one another up. Back to the dining room, now, shall we?”

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Pidge is caught up, Lance is embarrassed, and the paladins learn more about Elena's reality.

Chapter Notes

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

To catch Pidge and Coran up on everything that had transpired in their short absence took about as long as it had to all happen in the first place. A significant portion of this was due to the fact that Coran—as he so often did—shot off questions in rapid-fire succession, frequently failing to procure an answer for one before moving on to another. But, still, the whole re-explanation might've gone more smoothly had Elena been capable of responding to all of Coran's whats and whys and how-in-the-universes for herself. Unfortunately, she was otherwise preoccupied with the rapt, undivided attention she paid to Pidge. When Elena wasn't too close to tears to be able to choke out an answer, she was usually too busy just gawking silently at her, perched on tenterhooks at the edge of her chair, obviously lost in a world of her own. To pull her back into the group's conversation at any given moment was quite as difficult as it had been to physically pull her off of Pidge at the get-go. Somehow, though, they were able to piece their story together between Allura, Keith, and Hunk.

Lance, on the other hand, fell into the same boat that Elena did. As he listened halfheartedly to his friends' voices, his eyes never left Pidge's face. As the story progressed, he watched Pidge experience the same reactions he had felt himself. At first, shock—which was clear in the way that she tilted her head so far back on her neck that her chin almost disappeared. Next, there was the complete shutdown, the mindless staring at a fixed point on the table underneath her hands while her nose scrunched upward in thought. There was the abject, hollow version of disbelief, characterized by Pidge's large, searching eyes. And then there was the skeptical, borderline amused version of disbelief—which, Lance could only just then comprehend by watching its evolution on another person's face, was merely denial, pure and simple—characterized by her single eyebrow quirking upward, the twitching of the corners of her mouth. Finally, as Pidge's amused expression fell, there was the acceptance. Slow, vexing, heart-wrenching acceptance.

“So, let me get this straight,” Pidge said just as soon as Hunk punctuated the end of his last sentence with a shrug. She placed her elbows on the table and motioned sharply with her hands towards Elena. “In *her* reality, we lose.”

Hunk nodded solemnly. “Yep.”

“And you all are there with her, but not Keith for some reason?”

“Apparently,” Keith scoffed.

“Or me?”

The room could only respond with silence at that.

“I mean—” Pidge leaned back hard in her chair. “—Allura’s basically her aunt, Hunk’s her uncle—”

“Tío,” Hunk corrected with a kind smile thrown in Elena’s direction for good measure.

“*Whatever.* And Lance is—”

“Elena’s father,” Allura supplied.

That’s when Pidge finally glanced up at Lance, their eyes really meeting for the first time since she’d returned. They held each other’s gaze for a moment before Pidge dropped it, her cheeks reddening.

Lance’s own skin prickled uncomfortably, his heart squirming in his chest. He still didn’t look away from her, though. If anything, he began to examine Pidge even more fervently out of an inexplicably intensified desire to note every movement she made.

“Right,” Pidge said at last, as she tucked behind her ear a piece of hair that had fallen loose from her ponytail. Only then did she look towards Elena directly, her first time doing so since the story began. “And you—uh. You called me—”

““Mom,”” Elena finished for her, her voice cracking a little at the end. “Yeah.”

Again, Pidge’s eyes flicked to Lance’s. But she looked away even faster that time, clearing her throat before continuing on. “Yeah. Okay. Sure.” She nodded her head, so quickly and so rhythmically that she reminded Lance of the bobble head his father used to keep on his station wagon’s dashboard. “*That.* So, you mentioned Allura and Hunk and Lance are there, but not me.” Her head suddenly stopped bobbling, and she blinked. “Why is that?”

Elena winced, pulling her bottom lip between her teeth and biting down.

It was Allura, however, who answered. She reached beside herself to place her hand on top of Elena’s, folded together on the table, and then said, “Well, Pidge, that’s what we were addressing right as you arrived. It seems that—oh—” Allura looked to Pidge, her face sorrowful, appearing as if she’d very much liked to have reached across the table for Pidge’s hand, too. “How do I put this?” she muttered.

“It’s okay, Princess,” Elena cut in, sliding her hands out of Allura’s grasp and placing them in her lap instead. Then she gave Pidge a quavering smirk. “I should probably be the one to tell you this part.”

As if pulled by an invisible leash, Lance leaned forward in his seat. And, as he waited for Elena to continue, for a moment, it felt like his heart had stopped beating.

Pidge, meanwhile, met Elena's eyes and nodded once, curtly.

Elena took a deep breath, sighed it back out, and nodded in return. "I—uh. I'm not sure where I start with this whole—you know." Another breath, another sigh. "You—or, I mean, my mom. I didn't talk about her at first because I didn't want to make things weird. And also because, like, you know. It's sort of hard for me to talk about. I'm sort of out of the habit of talking about her at all, because it—" One more breath, one more sigh, both of them shakier than ever before. "My mom isn't there anymore. Like, she's . . . um. She—"

"She died," Pidge finished for her. There was no trace of emotion in her voice when she spoke, only the bare fact. It was like Pidge was just reporting the day's weather.

Clear, black skies, Lance thought, joking to himself. Because literally what else could he be expected to do in this situation? When Pidge, in two words, confirmed the worst-case scenario? *Starry with a chance of rift*.

Elena frowned, but pointed finger guns at Pidge before dropping her hands lamely back into her lap. "Yep. That she did."

Again, for a while, everyone was silent. Pidge never released Elena's gaze, though. Never even so much as blinked. Lance could just picture the cogs in her brain working overtime.

Eventually, Pidge said, uncharacteristically quietly, "I'm sorry to hear that."

Elena shrugged. "I'm sorry to report it."

"Elena," Allura said, placing both palms on the table like she was steeling herself. "Would you tell us how it happened?"

"Yeah," Hunk added. "And when?"

Elena narrowed her eyes a touch, her brow furrowing as she held Pidge's eyes, as if she were attempting to ask for Pidge's permission.

And with a nearly imperceptible dip of her chin, Pidge granted it.

"I was twelve," Elena mumbled. "We stopped on some planet in some galaxy. I don't remember which." Strangely, she cracked a smile. "But I remember that Dad used to call it 'going on vacation.' We'd get to leave the Castle and stretch our legs. And this one planet had an atmosphere that had oxygen, so we didn't have to wear our armor or helmets or anything. We could breathe."

Elena's smile fell then. Her eyes fell, too, from Pidge's down to her own knees.

"The planet was covered with these really tall trees, but I'd found this one clearing where there was this flat rock. Huge, like, the size-of-this-room kind of huge. No trees grew on it so, if you laid back on this rock, you'd have a clear view of the sky. And this planet's atmosphere created *insane* auroras, like, I can't describe them with words. So, one night, Mom and Dad and I just sort of laid out on that rock and looked at the sky. Pointed out constellations we recognized, invented names for the ones we didn't. It felt like we were there for *hours*, but

Allura told me later—*after*—that it—” Elena cleared her throat, wiped beneath one of her eyes with the heel of her palm. “It couldn’t have been any more than, like, fifteen minutes.”

The tension in the room had reached a point that it was palpable. Lance’s skin buzzed unpleasantly. His heartbeat, though present, was weak and erratic. His mouth, dry. But he still could not force himself to look away from Pidge, whose eyes had squinted and whose skin between her eyebrows had creased, like she was expecting someone would slap her. Or—perhaps more likely—like she was expecting a bomb to go off.

“We’re laying there,” Elena continued, blinking rapidly as her eyes began to glisten. “And then, out of nowhere, this fighter pops into view.”

“Galra,” Keith growled, low in his throat.

Her mouth in a tight line, Elena replied, “Yep.”

“But I thought,” Allura whispered, “that you only visited uninhabited planets?”

“Yep,” Elena repeated. Some of her tears bubbled over and spilled down her cheek. Again, she wiped them away. “That’s what we thought, too. But I guess they’d scouted that place before, maybe left some kind of sensor there. I don’t know, we didn’t really stop to think it over. And it didn’t matter. They showed up anyway.”

“What’d they do?” Hunk asked, so quiet that Lance almost didn’t hear him.

Elena coughed out a weird half-laugh. “What they always do. They started shooting.”

Suddenly, Elena shoved herself away from the table and stood. The movement succeeded in forcing Lance to tear his eyes away from Pidge’s face for the first time since they sat down. When Elena started marching towards the door, Lance—thinking that she was making a move for the exit—began to push himself away from the table as well so as to pursue. But then she spun on her heel and continued her march back, retracing her steps up and down the length of the room again and again, her voice growing progressively more maniacal as she spoke.

“The three of us are just *there*, unarmored and unarmed, like sitting *du-flaxes*. Mom throws herself over me while Dad jumps off the rock and starts screaming for the rest of the team. And, like—” Elena stopped in her tracks for only a second, long enough to gesticulate wildly at Pidge. “You’re *small*. And, *spoiler alert*, you *stay* that small. And I was already a pretty lanky kid by then, so, quite frankly, your whole pretending-to-be-a-shield thing wasn’t doing a lot of good anyway. Like, come *on*, you—*she* should’ve just ran and dragged me along with her.

“So Dad comes back and gets Mom to pass me down the rock to him, but then the fighter finally hits their target—for *once*, am I right—and the rock, like, *shatters*. Dad and I are blown off in one direction, and Mom’s blown off in another. So then my dad calls out to my mom, and she calls back and tells him to grab me and run, which he does, and—”

By that point, Elena was close to hyperventilating. Allura rose from the table and planted herself in Elena's tracks, interrupting her pacing. Lance half-expected Elena to bowl right over the princess when she got back around to her, but she didn't. Instead, when Allura put her arms out to grab Elena by her shoulders, Elena just plain stopped. As soon as she did, though, she looked to Lance.

"You pick me up and you pull me to your chest," Elena choked out between sobs. "And, like I said, I was so *gangly*. But you carried me like I was a toddler and you just ran, like Mom told you to, even when—" She paused, attempting to catch her breath. "Even when we couldn't hear her anymore."

"It's all right," Allura shushed, pulling Elena into her body. She wrapped her arms around Elena's back and patted her shoulders. "It's all right, Elena. You don't have to say any more."

Elena melted into Allura's embrace, hiccupping, "I'm *sorry*. I'm *so sorry*."

At the opposite end of the table, Coran stood. His own eyes were suspiciously shiny, but it was with a strong voice that he said, "I'll go and fetch you some water."

"We'll help," Keith announced, rising to his own feet and tugging Hunk along with him by the sleeve.

"But—" Hunk started to protest. Keith, however, leaned forward to mutter something in Hunk's ear. Only then did Hunk allow Keith to pull him up and out of the room, following Coran through the door before it automatically slid shut behind them.

Allura still cradled Elena in her arms, shushing her gently. Elena still mumbled incoherent apologies into Allura's hair as her shoulders wracked with sobs. And Pidge still sat at her same spot at the table, as did Lance, waiting. Without being fully conscious of it, Lance's eyes drifted back to Pidge. He found, though, that Pidge was already looking at him.

She looked the way he felt. Her face held some faraway kind of sadness, which accurately reflected the hollowness that was tearing apart Lance's chest. He attempted a smile at her. She attempted one in return. But both smiles fell away nearly at once, and they were left with nothing else to do but to merely stare at one another.

At some point, Pidge's face shifted. Her tired eyes abruptly snapped to attention, and a patch of pink crept across her cheeks. Lance narrowed his own eyes at her, but before he could even think to ask her what she was thinking, Elena and Allura broke apart and retook their seats.

"I'm really sorry about that, guys," Elena said—a bit quiet, but newly calm. She smirked weakly as she looked straight at Lance. "But you get it now, why I was hesitant to tell you all what happened. It, uh, it's still really hard to talk about. In fact—" She chuckled a little ruefully. "—I've never had to talk about it since it happened, so. You know. Flood gates."

"You've never talked about it before?" Allura asked, her eyes going wide.

Elena shrugged, bringing up both hands to rub at her eyelids. “Nah. It’s too hard on my dad. And everyone else, of course. And me. But Dad especially. So we just—” She shrugged again, dropping her hands. “We just don’t talk about it anymore. Or her.”

“You don’t talk about *Pidge* anymore?” Lance found himself saying before he could stop himself. At once, his ears began to burn. But he shook his head and, with one last sideways glance at the Pidge across the table—who gaped blankly back at him, her face still tinged pink—he settled his gaze on Elena. “I *mean*—you know what I mean! Your mom! You don’t talk about her? At *all*?”

“Well,” Elena said, glancing to Allura. “The others will talk to me about her if I have questions. Allura—*my* Allura—in particular, because, like, she lost her parents, too. So, she gets it.” Elena’s eyes flitted back to Lance. “But never in front of Dad. It’s an unspoken rule. She’s omitted entirely, from every old story from back in the day and from my childhood and from everything, because hearing her name sort of breaks his heart all over again.”

It was that phrase—*breaks his heart*—that very suddenly clicked all the loose puzzle pieces in Lance’s mind together.

Of course, it *would* break Lance’s heart to lose Pidge. She was one of his best friends, if not *the* best friend, and one of his teammates. It would equally break his heart, he insisted to himself, to lose Hunk or Keith or Allura or Coran. He could surmise as much from real, past experience.

But, still. The way that Elena had said it—*breaks his heart*—held some other connotation. *I mean*, Lance thought. *If I’m supposed to be Elena’s dad, and Pidge is supposed to be Elena’s mom—*

And there it was.

(Finally.)

Lance and Pidge—the Lance and Pidge of Elena’s reality, that is—were more than best friends, more than teammates. They were parents together, which naturally led to the conclusion that they were *together* together. *Romantically. Physically*, at least once, considering that they had a child sitting there, proving it, what with Lance’s hair and Pidge’s jaw and the McClain nose and the Holt eyes.

For some reason, Lance’s first thought in response to putting it all together was that Hunk and Keith would be *beside themselves* if they knew.

His second thought, however, was that *of course* they knew. Of course *everyone* knew what Elena’s existence implied, because nobody else on the team was as utterly *dim* as he was. If he had just figured it out, everyone else must’ve figured it out eons ago. And Pidge of all people must’ve figured it out *first*.

And then there was his third thought: *Pidge*. Pidge, who was already intensely fixed on examining the table, her pink face quickly turning red, by the time Lance finally gathered the wherewithal to look back to her.

His fourth thought: *Oh, cool. We're never going to be able to look each other in the eye after this. All-star.*

But, at last, there was his fifth thought, which concerned the idea that—*hypothetically speaking*—if he and Pidge were to—you know?

And then if he were to lose her?

Yeah, he mused. He could maybe understand what true heartbreak felt like under those circumstances, however hypothetical.

“That’s, uh,” Lance said, because the silence of the room was making him want to fidget and he felt the urge to fill it with something else. “That’s too bad.”

Elena snorted, a fond smile playing on her lips as she shook her head at Lance. “Yeah. That’s one way to put it.”

The door opened just then, and over its threshold crossed Hunk and Keith, the former carrying a tray of food and the latter carrying cups and a pitcher. Both sort of hesitated, though, before stepping further into the room.

“Hey,” Hunk greeted. “Are we interrupting anything?”

“You mean am I done blubbering away like a baby?” Elena said, rolling her eyes but still smiling. “Yes, you are safe to enter.”

Without further preamble, Keith approached her, placing a cup on the table in front of her and pouring her a drink from the pitcher. Any remnant traces of suspicion were absent from his face, his lips frowning softly as he muttered, “Here.”

Elena nodded, reached for the drink, and took a sip. “Thanks.”

Hunk approached her, too, and slid a tray of steaming hot something-that-wiggled onto the table next to her hand. “If you feel like it,” he offered with a grin.

“Uh,” Elena said, wrinkling her nose a bit at the food in front of her. The something-that-wiggled seemed to belch, and a cloud of green billowed upward from some hidden spout. “That’s okay. I’m not that hungry.”

Allura chuckled, “Hunk’s cooking tastes much better than it looks, I assure you. Although—” Allura brought her hand to her cheek. “—of course, you must know that.”

One of Elena’s eyebrows quirked upward. “I don’t, actually. All he ever makes us is modified goo. Which, yeah, tastes great, but—”

“*What?*” Hunk’s jaw dropped. “I don’t cook for you guys? But—that’s impossible. I *love* to cook!”

“Do you?” Elena asked, her brow creasing. “I mean, my tío certainly doesn’t *dislike* it. But it’s not, like, a *thing* he does.”

“*How* is that not a thing?” Hunk shook his head in an attempt, Lance suspected, to wake himself up from his own personal nightmare. “No Pollisucratian sweet rolls? Arthropalian skewers? *Milkshakes*?”

Elena tipped her chin to the side. “Milkshakes?”

“They’re delicious,” Allura said before frowning, suppressing a shudder. “Though, unconventional.”

“No, I’ve heard of milkshakes before,” Elena said. “But how do you get them here without milk?”

“We have Kaltenecker,” Hunk replied with a shrug.

“What’s a Kaltenecker?”

“*What?*” Lance gasped, twisting his head to gawk at Elena.

“What?” Elena asked, brow furrowing impossibly more.

Lance pressed his hand into his chest. “Kaltenecker’s our *cow*.”

“Yeah,” Hunk added. “Lance and Pidge’s *first* daughter.”

If looks could kill, Hunk would’ve keeled over instantaneously from the withering one Pidge threw in his direction. Lance, however, ignored the way the tips of his ears burned and pressed on as if Hunk hadn’t said anything at all. “Don’t tell me *she’s* gone, too.”

“Lance,” Pidge sighed. It was the first time she’d really addressed him since her arrival and, as such, he was quick to twist around to face her once more. She didn’t look right at him, though, settling her gaze instead somewhere past his ear. Her expression was tired, exasperated. Maybe a little annoyed. “If I’m doing my math right—and I’m positive that I am—Kaltenecker would have to be at *least* thirty-six years old in—” She nodded her chin towards Elena. “—this other reality. And dairy cows typically only live to *half* that age.”

“Yeah, uh, I wouldn’t say she *died* as much as she—” Elena paused to wince. “—never existed?”

Allura’s frown deepened. “Why do you say that?”

Elena smiled a skeptical smile. “Because I’ve never once in my life heard about this cow? Literally ever?”

“Didn’t you say that I—other Lance, your dad, *whatever*. He doesn’t talk about stuff involving Pidge. Your mom, Pidge.” Lance shook his head with vigor, not unlike the way Hunk had just a minute earlier. “Maybe that’s why you never heard of her. We—this Pidge and me—we got her together.”

Elena shook her head, as well, but with less fervency and more silent determination. “Nah. Mom or Dad would’ve told me when I was younger. Or someone else would’ve mentioned it,

I'm sure. I mean, you have a *cow*." She cracked a wider grin. "That's pretty fun."

Lance couldn't help cracking a bit of a smile himself, glancing sideways at Pidge (who, meanwhile, seemed to be fighting a smile of her own). "Yeah, it is," he confirmed.

"But what does that mean?" Keith suddenly cut in. Still standing behind Elena's shoulder, he stepped forward to place his hand on the back of her chair. "This proves that *something* about our realities *is* different. How far does it go, then?"

Allura pouted and peered down the table at Lance and Pidge. "Where did you two get Kaltenecker, again?"

"Space mall," Lance and Pidge said together.

Before they could so much as look at each other, however, Hunk gasped. He waved his hand in the air like he was volunteering to answer a question in class. "Oh! Oh! I remember that day! That's when I accidentally stole free samples from that guy and got chained to his sink!"

"Yeah?" Lance asked as he felt his own brow crease.

Hunk just nodded emphatically. "Yeah!"

"Uh—So?"

"Hunk," Pidge said, bringing her fingers up to rub at her eyelids. "Not that your experience wasn't noteworthy in its own right, but what does it have to do with—"

"*Because—*" Hunk cut in as he whipped around to point his finger at Pidge. "*—that's* where I started exploring alien cuisine! *But—*" He whipped around again, that time to point at Elena. "*—if we'd never gone* to the space mall, who knows if I ever would've really gotten into it?"

"And if you never visited the space mall—" Allura burst out, shooting out of her own chair so suddenly that Lance couldn't help flinching. "*—then* Lance and Pidge wouldn't have purchased Kaltenecker either!" Allura moved swiftly to join Hunk at his side, excitedly grabbing his sleeve as soon as he was within arm's reach. "Hunk, that's *it*!"

"If we never went to the space mall in Elena's reality," Keith pressed, "what *else* did we not do?"

Lance's eyes drifted to where Elena sat slumped in her chair. Apparently, everyone else's did, too, because Elena's own eyes shifted between everyone else's before she shrugged. "Don't ask me. I barely know what you guys actually *did* do."

"We need your father," Allura said to her, moving past Hunk to stand beside Elena's chair instead. "Assuming that we won't be able to contact him again from here—"

Keith interrupted. "Well, Coran stayed behind to work on the control panel some more. Maybe—"

Then Pidge interrupted. “Wait. Coran.” But she didn’t say anything more as she opted instead to stare off into space with narrowed eyes.

After a long, silent moment, Allura cocked one of her eyebrows. “Yes? What about him?”

Pidge turned to appraise Elena. “You didn’t mention Coran on your side of things at all.” Her eyes softened a touch. “Is he . . . ?”

Elena leaned forward in her seat, waving her hands wildly in front of her apologetic face. “No, no, he’s *fine*. Coran’s with us, too. It’s just—” She dropped her hands and blew a piece of hair out of her face. “I didn’t mention him to any of you when I first got here because— Well, I didn’t know if *you’d* lost him. But don’t worry. When and if we get more time, I have *tons* of stories about him.”

Hunk’s mouth quivered with what Lance suspected was a repressed smirk. “Another *tío* to embarrass you, huh?”

Elena beamed back at him. “You could say that. But he kind of *delivered me*, so he gets a special pass.”

“What about Shiro?” Keith burst out. Not angrily. Hopefully. And, as grateful as Lance was for a distraction from his supposed daughter’s *birth story*, Lance’s heart sank a bit to see such an expression on Keith’s face.

Lance’s heart sank even more to see Elena’s smile vanish at once. “You guys, too?” she asked, turning around in her seat to stare up at Keith.

Lips set in a tight line, Keith only nodded.

Elena shook her head sadly. “I’m sorry. I thought so when—when everyone was accounted for but him.” She sighed a shaky sigh. “I mean, I was little when he—you know. But I remember him. And—”

“You *met* him?” Pidge burst out. “I mean, we only lost him—”

“A year ago,” Keith supplemented, his eyes going wide.

“Exactly. Again, if I’m doing my math correctly—which, again, I’m sure I am—”

“If *our* reality is *that* reality,” Lance added as the metaphorical lightbulb over his head clicked on, “Elena would have to have been born already.” His cheeks abruptly warmed, and he threw a nervous glance past Pidge’s head before tacking on, “Or—you know.”

Elena stood suddenly from her chair. Her face, however, was strangely unreadable as she said, “My reality isn’t your reality, then. It can’t be.”

A heavy silence hung over them for what felt like hours, but what must’ve actually been barely a minute. Hunk was the one to break it with a low whistle and a breathy, “Well. That’s a relief.”

Elena fell back into her chair, her eyes downcast. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

Allura frowned. Then she sat herself in the chair beside Elena and reached out to place her hand on her shoulder. “You’re disappointed,” she said.

It was more of a statement than a question, but Elena answered anyway. “I’m not. I mean—” She bit down on her bottom lip. “I’m definitely not disappointed that you guys probably get to avoid most of what happened to us. Obviously.”

“But you were hoping,” Allura offered, “that we’d somehow be able to change your reality’s fate.”

Elena nodded. “Yeah. I guess I was.”

Keith moved to sit in the chair on Elena’s other side. Then, to Lance’s supreme surprise, Keith leaned forward, elbows on his knees, to meet Elena’s gaze.

With a virtual stranger, that was basically his version of a hug.

“Hey,” Keith said gently. “There’s still a chance we can help. Even if our realities aren’t the exact same, they’re still pretty similar. If we can figure out exactly where the differences are, maybe we can help correct them.”

Elena let out a little cough-laugh, and rolled her eyes. “Big talk coming from the guy who’s incognito on my side of the rift.”

Keith blinked, then reeled backwards in his seat. He snapped, “That wasn’t—”

“I’m joshing you,” Elena said, smirking. Then, so quickly that Keith wasn’t afforded the opportunity to slap her hand away, she patted Keith’s cheek. “You’re not so bad, bright eyes.”

While Keith spluttered out an objection, Lance held his breath to keep from snickering. Based on the way air escaped Hunk’s own lips, creating a *pfft* sound in its wake, he seemed to be facing the same issue. Allura, meanwhile, smiled and rose to her feet once more. “We should go to the bridge,” she announced. “We’ll check on the rift and try to contact your father through the ship again. If that fails, and if the rift appears stable, we’ll send you off to retrieve him.”

“Sounds like a deal, Princess,” Elena said, standing. After a moment, Keith—still red in the face—stood, too. Lance took that as his own cue to rise, and he walked around the table to follow the rest of the party through the door.

“You’ve gotta tell Coran about your birth, though,” Hunk muttered to Elena as they rounded the corner into the hallway. “That’s bound to really tickle him.”

Elena chuckled. “As if he needs the extra ammo, though. If your Coran is anything like mine, he could spin a story about pulling a splinter from your finger into some epic yarn about saving you from certain death. *My* Coran’s certainly never let me forget it, anyway.”

At the threshold, Lance craned his head over his shoulder to make sure Pidge was behind him. She wasn't, though. To the contrary, she hadn't yet even stood from her chair.

"Pidge?" he said as he skidded to a stop. "You coming?"

Pidge, who had been staring at the wall ahead of her, turned her face towards Lance. "Huh?"

Lance leaned against the doorframe. "I asked if you were coming." Cocking his head to the side, he asked, "You okay?"

"Yeah, of course," Pidge replied, finally standing and walking around the table. Her face was still the lightest shade pinker than normal, and her eyes still seemed to land somewhere around his ear rather than meeting his own. "Zoned out. Sorry."

"Okay," Lance said. He could hear the skepticism in his own voice, and was certain that Pidge wasn't ignorant of it either. But neither of them addressed it. Instead, Lance waved vaguely down the hallway, where the rest of the group was still headed. "Shall we, then?"

As she passed Lance into the hallway, Pidge's shoulders visibly tensed. "Actually, I'm going to stop by my room real quick." She tapped her knuckles against the breastplate of her armor. "Change."

Lance nodded. "Okay. Uh. Can I walk with you?"

Pidge's face tinged a little pinker. It looked the way Lance's felt, warm and stinging. "Oh," she said. "All right."

The door sealed closed behind them and, at that moment, Hunk turned to look back at them. "You guys coming?" he called.

Elena, too, turned to regard them, her own eyebrows shooting upward.

"We'll catch up," Lance called back simply, waving them off.

Hunk smirked, but nodded, before rounding the corner towards the bridge, beyond which Keith and Allura had already disappeared. Elena, however, stopped in her tracks.

Lance met her eyes and held them. When Elena's eyes flicked to something behind Lance's shoulder, he knew that she was staring at Pidge—who, based on the eerie silence behind him, Lance thought must be staring back. A ghost of a smile flittered across Elena's face, and then she rounded the corner as well.

Just then, footsteps echoed off the wall closest to Lance, and he realized that Pidge had begun walking down the hallway opposite. He spun on in heel and pursued. It didn't take him long to catch up, at which point he slowed his pace and stuffed his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans.

"So," he said, forcing a cheery bravado that made his voice shake a bit. "Talk about crazy, right?"

Pidge just hummed in response, her face blank.

Lance's lips pursed as he examined her. Then, only after a few seconds of that, he blurted out, "What's up with you?"

Quickly—too quickly—Pidge answered, "Nothing."

"Liar."

"I am *not*."

"Yes, you are! You know how I know?"

Pidge rolled her eyes, hard. "How?" she asked.

"Because," Lance said, allowing the smallest amount of annoyance seep into his voice, "I'm currently going through the exact same thing you're going through. And *I* wouldn't say 'nothing' is up."

Pidge stopped walking, and Lance stopped beside her. With a great sigh, she turned to face him. "I'm sorry," she said sheepishly, peeking down at her toes. "This is all sort of . . . Well. It's a lot to handle."

Lance nodded. "I know. It's okay." He gingerly kicked the toe of Pidge's shoe with his own. "I mean, you got the special treat of hearing how you—you know." Dragging his finger across the base of his throat, Lance made a choking sound. He chuckled lamely, and then cleared his throat. "That's, uh. That's rough."

Pidge nodded then. "Yeah. That, too."

As Pidge started walking again, and as Lance followed her, he asked, "What? Is that not it?"

"I mean," Pidge said, rolling her eyes once more, "how about the person that's claiming to be our *future daughter*?"

"Oh," Lance replied. Chewing briefly on the inside of his lip, he went on, "Well, I had more time to get used to *that* one. Once the surprise wore off—"

"You mean the abject terror?"

Unable to help himself, Lance smiled. "Yeah, that. Once that wore off—I don't know." He shrugged, and together they rounded a corner, passing the door of Hunk's bedroom. "I guess I kind of see it."

Pidge hummed again. "She certainly looks a lot like you."

Lance's smile spread even further across his face. "That's funny. I was gonna say I thought she looked like you."

Just as they reached Pidge's bedroom door, she snorted. "Where are you getting *that* from? The Amazonian height or the tan complexion?"

"The eyes," Lance answered, stopping beside Pidge outside of her door.

The eyes at issue widened, the skin on the cheeks beneath them flushing ever pinker. "Oh?" Pidge said simply.

Lance willed the heat crawling across his own cheeks to bug off. "Sure," he said after an awkward cough. "Cold, calculating, and judgmental. Just like my Pidgey's."

"Oh," Pidge said again on an exhale, sounding semi-relieved. She cleared her own throat and continued, "Right. Come on. Like, how insane is that?"

"How insane is what?"

"That—" If Pidge's face could get any redder, she'd be mistaken for Lance's own Lion. "You know. You. Me. *Daughter*."

"*Right*." Lance snapped his fingers, then ran them through his hair, then used them to scratch at the nape of his neck. "Me and you. You and me. Us. That would never—"

"*Of course* not, never—"

"So insane."

"Uh huh."

They stood in a thick silence for an extra minute, looking around at everything and anything but each other.

"So," Pidge sighed, leaning against her closed door.

"Yep," Lance replied.

When Lance gathered the nerve to look down at her, he found her staring back up at him with a smirk. "Are you gonna be really weird around me now?"

He immediately cracked a grin. "One hundred percent."

"Cool." Pidge bobbed her head, then held her hand out in the air. Confused, Lance mirrored the gesture, and she slapped his hand with her own in a high five.

". . . What was that for?"

"*God*," Pidge burst out in a laugh. "I don't *know*! I'm just casually having some existential crisis over here. Don't mind me." Then she groaned and kicked off from her perch against the door, turning to wave her hand in front of its sensor. "Whatever, I'm gonna get changed."

"Okay, I'll wait here."

“Whatever you want, weirdo.”

When the door closed behind her with a *whoosh*, Lance moved to press his back against the wall opposite. After standing like that for only a moment, his knees gave out, and he slid down the length of the wall to puddle onto the floor. Pushing his forehead onto his knees, he took deep, even breaths and focused on ridding himself of the fluttering sensation in his chest.

Then, when something poked him in the side, Lance leaned back against the wall and reached into his jacket pocket. He came up with Pidge’s glasses—a bit littered with whatever crumbs had been stuffed in the pocket with them, but otherwise unharmed. Twirling them between his fingers and blowing the crumbs away, Lance readied himself to holler to Pidge, loud enough so that she could hear him through the door.

Just then, however, Coran’s voice rang loudly throughout the hallway instead.

“Numbers Three and Five?” it announced, perhaps a tad tremulously. “You’re required in the bridge.”

“Tell them to hurry,” came a muffled voice over the hallway’s speakers. Elena.

“Yes,” Coran’s voice piped up once more. “Numbers Three and Five. The bridge. Posthaste.” A pause, then, “Now.”

Pidge’s bedroom door slid open, and there she stood, looking slightly harassed and dressed in her windbreaker and shorts, hair free from its tie. While normally Lance might be inclined to admire the little dent in her hair that the tie left behind, instead, he held her glasses out to her from his spot on the ground.

“You’re probably gonna want these, I think,” he said.

When Lance finally erupted headfirst into the bridge with Pidge, the first thing he saw was the rest of his teammates pressed shoulder to shoulder, their faces and hands flush against the centermost window-screen, looking out.

Beyond them, there was the rift.

Between them and that, however, there was—

“The Black Lion?” Lance burst. “But—” He looked at the back of Keith’s head. “Keith, you —”

“It’s not Keith,” Elena explained. Just then did Lance notice her, standing at the control panel. She didn’t turn when she spoke to him, though, focusing instead on the buttons and dials beneath her fingers, which she pressed and pulled in a rapid, indeterminable sequence.

“Then where—” Pidge started.

“The rift.” Elena answered.

Lance shook his head back and forth. “When—”

“Literally the moment before we called you.” Elena’s voice fell somewhere between exasperation and delight as she, too, shook her head back and forth. “Apparently, when he couldn’t get a hold of me, he decided to take matters into his own hands. Typical.”

“Okay. One last question?” Lance stopped shaking his head. “Who?”

Only then did Elena turned her upper body around to look back at Lance. Her expression matched her voice—both exasperated and delighted, eyes bright and tired and smile wicked. “Dad?” she called to him, with a tip of her chin towards the Black Lion beyond. “Meet my dad.”

Chapter End Notes

I will begin studying for my bar exam at the end of December. Given that such studying is a ten-hour-a-day, six-day-a-week commitment, I don't anticipate quick updates to this story—if any at all—before March. Thank you in advance for your patience, and thank you additionally for the support you've already given me. Kisses and hugs, and wish me luck!

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Elena's father joins the paladins on their side of the rift.

Chapter Notes

A surprise update about two months ahead of schedule. I might not pass the bar, but at least I can do something else right.

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

“Dad?”

Elena’s voice rang out strong and clear from where she stood at Coran’s control panel. Where it rang out from some unseeable speaker beyond the window-screens, however, it echoed vaguely, slightly muted.

The Black Lion floated between the Castle and the rift, silent.

“Why don’t you try him on his channel?” Hunk asked in a loud whisper, which was muffled by his nose’s position pressed firmly against the window-screen.

“You guys have the other Black Lion here, don’t you?” Elena responded. Her eyes didn’t move from the other Black Lion as she shrugged. “I figured it wasn’t worth wasting time trying.”

Again, she pushed a button on the panel and held it.

“Dad, it’s me. I know you’re probably freaking out a little bit right now, but listen. I’m fine. More than fine. I’m safe.” She winced. “And I’m *super* sorry for running off like that, but—”

“You *ran off*?” Allura admonished, whipping her head around from her own place at the window-screen to stare back at Elena. “You mean to say that you didn’t tell your father before you crossed a *rift*? Oh, Elena, my father would be *furious*! I can’t imagine what you were—”

Elena continued on as if Allura hadn’t said anything. In fact, but for the tiniest of eye rolls, it would have looked as if she hadn’t even heard Allura at all. “But now that you’re here, I think you should meet me aboard. There’s—uh—” She paused as her eyes fell to survey the line of people standing at the far end of the bridge. Then she glanced over her shoulder,

where Lance was still frozen beside Pidge. Elena half-smiled, then finished, “There’s some people here who want to talk to you.”

Lance, despite the waves of shock still coursing through his muscles, looked sharply up and out into space, straight into the face of the Black Lion. He held his breath, and waited.

The room at large seemed to hold a collective breath, as well, as tension filled the room. It was so quiet that Lance could hear the hissing sound of fabric sliding past fabric somewhere just behind him. Then the edge of the sleeve of his jacket tightened around his wrist as Pidge’s fist clutched to it. Still without breathing, Lance curled his fingers to graze lightly against her knuckles.

That was all he could do to communicate. *I’m okay. I’m pretty wigged out right now, yeah, but I’m okay.*

From the way her grip loosened a bit, Lance figured she understood.

It seemed to be a long time before anyone spoke again.

“Can he hear her, do you think?” Coran asked in a low voice, his eyes seeking out Allura’s over Keith’s head.

“I’m pretty sure he can,” Allura replied, though her voice didn’t sound quite as certain.

“Try him again,” Keith called back to Elena.

Elena cleared her throat and pressed her finger to the button once more. “I’m not sure if you can hear us, or if you’re trying to say something, because we can’t hear you at all. So. I don’t know—uh. Give us a sign you can hear us, I guess?”

There was a long second, and then everyone in the room—save for Elena—startled at once as the great head of the Black Lion bobbed up and down, nodding.

“Oh!” Elena said, grinning wide. “Okay! Hi, Dad! You coming aboard, or what?”

The Black Lion was still for another long second, and then it lowered its head. Lance couldn’t help thinking of some television program he watched as a kid—the one where a single lioness took down a zebra on her own. Right before she had pounced, he mused, she’d lowered her head just like that.

Elena groaned. “Come *on*, I swear to you, I’m *fine*. This isn’t a trap. I haven’t said the code word, have I?”

“Code word?” Hunk’s upper body twisted around to face Elena. “What’s your code word?”

Elena blew air out sharply between her lips, making a *pfft* sound. “Like I’d tell you.” Then she looked back up at the Black Lion beyond. “Go to your hangar, okay? I’ll let you yell at me for a minute, and then I—we will explain everything. Trust me—” She looked over her shoulder for a second time and smirked more widely at Lance. “—you’re gonna want to see this.”

There was a final, longer second. And then the Black Lion brought its head up before immediately diving forward, straight underneath where they were gathered in the bridge.

“There he goes!” Elena laughed, pushing away from the panel and jogging the few steps to Keith’s platform. “Come on, guys, let’s—”

“*Hey*,” Keith scolded. He pushed himself away from his spot between Allura and Coran to rush forward and grab Elena by her elbow. “What did I warn you about doing that? The getting-sucked-into-space thing?”

Hunk followed shortly behind Keith, with Allura and Coran shortly behind him. “I can’t believe we’re going to meet your *dad*,” said Hunk. “I mean, I know we’ve already met your dad. *Our* your dad. But I can’t believe we’re going to meet *your* our your dad.”

“I can’t believe how much my your my dad is going to flip his cheesing lid.”

The five of them squeezed themselves around Keith’s chair, Elena perched on the edge of its seat. Coran twirled the edge of his mustache as he said, “I wonder if your father will be bringing with him any more members of the team? I, for one, and at the very least, would be interested to see how the years treated everyone!”

“Spoiler alert,” Elena muttered. “Not great, apparently. Except for Allura.” She grinned up at the princess. “My auntie still looks just as young as you do.”

Allura beamed down at her in return. “A relief, certainly.”

“Hands and feet within the platform, people,” Keith announced. “I’ll let us down as soon as the hatch closes.”

It was only at that point that Elena whipped around to glare behind her chair. “Uh—” Her eyebrows furrowed. “You guys coming? Or . . . ?”

“Uh—” Lance finally choked out as everyone else turned to stare at him, too.

“Uh—” Pidge echoed as she stepped in line with Lance, her hand slipping away from his jacket sleeve to hold a single finger up. “Just—Hold up for a tick, okay?”

Slowly, the five on the platform returned to conversations with each other—far quieter this time, and complete with surreptitious glances in Lance’s direction. Meanwhile, Pidge spun on her heel to face him, her chin tipped far upward to look him as square in the eye as she could. “You okay, man?” she whispered.

Lance nodded, then swallowed. “Yeah. Sure. Totally coolio.”

Pidge snorted a bit, but the corners of her eyes still creased with unmistakable concern. “You sure? You’re not just a little bit freaked about how a thirty-years-older version of you is waiting for us in Keith’s hangar as we speak?”

Throat dry, Lance swallowed again. “I mean—that’s . . .”

“A lot?” Pidge offered.

Lance cough-chuckled. “A lot,” he confirmed.

“Thought so.” A small smile crept over Pidge’s face, but she began to shake her head as if halfheartedly trying to fling it off. “We don’t have to go down there. At least, not yet. Maybe not at all.”

“Nah,” Lance said with a grimace. He brought his hand up to scratch at the base of his skull. “I feel like I should. *We* should. You know? Team unity and all that.”

Pidge hummed. “Plus,” she added, “you wanna see if all that exfoliating was worth the trouble?”

Lance barked out a real laugh, the strange tightness in his chest relieving itself a small amount. He moved his hand to hook his finger around the bridge of Pidge’s glasses and swiped downward, pulling them down the length of her nose. “*Exactly*, Pidge. *Exactly*.”

Pidge, smirking, pushed her glasses up her nose before landing a soft punch on Lance’s bicep. “Okay, then, loser. Let’s do it.”

She stepped forward, and Lance followed her. Together, they crossed the bridge to mount Keith’s platform, both pressing themselves flat against the back of Keith’s chair as Keith himself said, “Okay, let’s go.” The platform shuddered, and they started their descent.

Elena, from her spot in Keith’s chair, let her head fall back to look up at Lance and Pidge above her. “You guys ready for this?”

“No,” Lance answered at once with a tight smile.

The return of Pidge’s vicelike grip to his sleeve conveyed her own unspoken reply: *Me neither*.

It was unsettling enough to see, as soon as they stepped away from the lift at a far end of the hangar, two Black Lions waiting for them. One sat at the center of the room, in the glory to which Lance had grown accustomed. The second, however, stood to its left.

Like Elena’s Green Lion, this second Black Lion looked quite the worse for wear. Scratches in the color and great, big puncture wounds decorated every inch. But its eyes were alight, just as bright and piercing as Lance had ever seen them.

As soon as Elena, leading the group, stepped into a ray of light, the head of the second Black Lion began to lower. Simultaneously, Lance’s guts iced over.

Yes, all of that was unsettling enough on its own. So it didn’t help when Elena stopped dead in her tracks, spun, and ushered the group behind her backwards into a dark spot, hidden away behind one of the hangar’s pillars.

“What’s the matter?” Allura asked, her lips pulling downward into a tight frown.

“I think,” Elena responded as her eyes flicked nervously between everyone (landing for a second too long, in Lance’s opinion, on him and Pidge in turn), “it might be best not to overwhelm him all at once, you know? He’s—he can kind of be a nervous guy sometimes.”

“Like,” said Keith, smirking a little, “when his kid runs off without warning and crosses into another universe?”

“And when, just on the other side of that rift between universes, there happens to be a younger replica of his own team.” Elena nodded. “But, yeah, basically.”

“We’ll wait here, then,” Allura offered. She took another step backwards for good measure, pulling Coran and Hunk with her by their sleeves.

Elena sighed. “Thank you.” Then, again, her eyes landed on Lance and Pidge in turn. “And, listen, you especially—”

Lance interrupted, “Yeah, yeah. We’ll wait for your signal.”

“Maybe—” Elena said as her expression contorted, as she glanced nervously over her shoulder, as the Black Lion’s jaw hit the floor. “—wait for a second signal? Yeah?”

“Sure.” Lance waved his hand vaguely at her person. “Go.”

With one last anxious grin, Elena moved into the light.

At that moment, a pair of feet appeared at the Lion’s mouth. The figure that balanced on top of them moved in quick, jerky movements. And all too soon—

There he was.

The blue armor, not unlike the Black Lion himself, could’ve used some tender loving care, and maybe some elbow grease. The frame was broader. The gut strained perhaps just a bit more against the fabric at the front of his suit. But even before he could rip off his helmet, Lance could see it.

After he ripped off his helmet, Lance wish he’d stayed upstairs.

Pidge’s fingers found purchase at the edge of Lance’s jacket sleeve once more.

Elena stopped halfway between their hiding spot and the Black Lions. Feet together, hands behind her back. Lance could practically hear the big, appeasing smile she wore as she spoke. “Hey, Pops. How was your trip?”

The man, still holding his helmet, didn’t stop jogging until he caught up to her. Without hesitation, he threw the hand that held his helmet around her, while his other hand grabbed the back of her head, pulling her in.

“You’re dead, kid,” the man said, his voice stifled as he pressed his lips to the top of her hair. That being said, though, there was nothing beyond the sound of unadulterated relief with a light undertone of weariness. “Grounded for life and then some.”

“Yeah,” Elena replied, bringing up her own arms to wrap them around the man’s ribs. “I figured as much.”

When the man finally pulled away to hold her at arm’s length, Hunk gasped quietly. “*Dude*,” he whispered fervently, grabbing hard onto Lance’s shoulder and giving it a rough shake.

But Lance’s eyes never moved from the man. It was as if he was watching a movie. One he’d never seen before, but one he didn’t necessarily dislike. When, all of a sudden: boom. He watched a vague reflection of himself walk into the scene, heard a deeper echo of his own voice recite lines he’d never rehearsed.

“*Dude*,” Hunk repeated, drawing out the single syllable like he was trying to impersonate a ghost.

The ghost of Lance’s future, Lance thought dryly as he swatted Hunk’s hand away.

Elena’s father’s eyebrows furrowed unexpectedly, distinct lines creasing his forehead and the sides of his mouth as he scolded, “What did I tell you about crossing the rift, huh?”

“To not to,” Elena muttered.

“That’s *right*, Elena, to *not* to.” His eyes, which appeared dark from that distance, narrowed. “And then what did you *do*, huh?”

“Crossed it.” Elena’s head dipped lower.

“That’s *right*, you *did*. And you scared the absolute snot out of me in doing it. What were you thinking?”

Elena twisted out of her father’s arms and pouted. “I was *thinking* that I’m an adult and that you were wasting an opportunity to—”

“Ah, ah, ah—” Elena’s father’s eyes widened and he lifted a finger to wag in her face. “Nope. No. We talked about this.”

Elena smacked his hand away. “*No, you* talked. *I* didn’t get to talk.”

“Honey. Light of my life. Fruit of my loins,” he said over Elena’s responding, exaggerated gag. He threaded his fingers fretfully through his hair—buzzed shorter than Lance could ever remember wearing it, and precisely matching Elena’s color brown but for generous streaks of grey. “I love you. I respect your opinion. But I have a bit of experience with rifts and what waits on the other side of rifts and the general trappy quality of rifts, okay? You, my dear one, *mi querida*, do not.”

“Well, I do *now*, don’t I?” Elena snapped, backing further away from her father and crossing her arms. “And I was *right*! Like I *said*—”

“Ah, ah, *ah!*” Elena’s father closed the gap between them and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Enough. We’ll talk about it back at the Castle. Let’s just—”

“We *are* at the Castle, Dad. *A* Castle, at least.”

“Elena,” he said, his voice falling into an authoritative half-growl as he released her. “We are leaving this instant. No further discussion. Where’s your Lion?”

“In her hangar. I’m telling you—”

“*No. I’m* telling *you* that you’re gonna march yourself into Black. Right. Now.” He thrust a finger at the Lion in question. “Then we are going to go get Green. And then we are going home.”

“*But—*”

“I said *we’re going home*. Capiche?”

Elena, fists clenched at her sides, shook her head. “No.”

“*Elena—*”

“*No! Dad*, you need to listen to me, okay?” She clasped her hands together, pressing them into her breastplate. “I’m sorry—really, genuinely sorry—that I ran off without you. Okay? I didn’t do it to punish you or anything! But you just—you wouldn’t—” Elena stopped to take a deep breath. On the exhale, she said, “I found people who can help us. Or—” She shrugged. “—maybe they’re people that *we* can help. We’re not sure. That’s why I called.”

Elena’s father was silent for a while after she finished. His brow still creased, but his eyes were no longer so narrowed. As they bore into his daughter’s, his mouth set itself into a tight line. Finally, he said, “We’re not in much of a position to help people, sweetheart.”

“Actually,” Elena said with a wry smile. “I think this might be a special situation. But listen to what I said first: *they* can help *us*.” Her smile drooped a little. “Maybe.”

The man’s eyes narrowed again. “I don’t know who these people are, or what they told you. But I’m not willing to risk what we have left on the promises of *strangers*. *Especially* alternate-reality strangers! I mean—” He threw his arms out to the sides and gave an exasperated sort of grunt. “Who even *are* they? How even did they get a ship like this? How did they get their own *Black Lion*, for star’s sake? It’s all so—so *fishy*. Something’s not right here, and I think we need to leave. Now.”

Elena’s smirk returned. “Eh. I think we can trust them.”

“I don’t.”

“I think you will.”

“I won’t.”

“*Really*, Dad?” Elena propped her hands on her hips. “Come on. You can’t think of a single group of people who have a Castle like this, and a Black Lion, and who you’d trust with your life?”

“Nope,” Elena’s father replied, popping his lips around the last consonant. “No one outside of us.”

Elena’s smile grew to the point that she was absolutely beaming. “*Excellent* choice of words, Pops. And, on that note, don’t freak out, okay?”

The man’s face slackened as his eyes widened comically. “Don’t—what? Don’t freak out about what?”

Ignoring him, Elena turned to call out behind her, “Hey, first string, that’s your cue!”

““First string?”” Allura whispered.

Hunk chuckled. “She means us. Let’s do it.”

As Hunk brushed past Lance’s shoulder, he gave it another hearty shake. Allura’s own hand came to briefly replaced Hunk’s, squeezing lightly, as she passed, too. Coran and Keith passed him without further incident, and soon all four had walked into a patch of light.

Lance was only barely aware of all of this as he carefully examined Elena’s father carefully examine the line of people that suddenly appeared out of the darkness. He watched the man lean backwards—out of shock, Lance was sure of it—then overcorrect and lean so far forward he bent at the waist, face pinched in scrutiny.

Hunk, leading the line, didn’t stop until he was only a few paces away from Elena and her father. Then, he raised his hand lamely and said, “Hey, buddy.”

Elena’s father’s jaw dropped. After several tense moments, he spoke. “Hunk?”

Hunk grinned, nodded, and then shrugged. “Yeah,” he said simply.

A beat. And then the man dropped his helmet to the ground and launched forward.

“*Hunk!*” he laughed, throwing his arms around Hunk’s neck. “Shut up. You’re *not* serious. *Hunk?* Look at you! You’re a *baby*, man!”

Automatically, Hunk’s embraced the man around his middle. “Look at *me*? Look at *you*! Lookin’ pretty good for an old geezer!”

Elena’s father stepped back, hands still patting Hunk’s upper arms as he beamed. “I don’t—How—” He looked beyond Hunk, and his eyes landed on Allura. “Oh my—”

Allura smiled, though it quivered a tad at its edges. “Hello, Lance.”

Lance. The name sent a shiver down Lance’s spine. This was all, after all, entirely crazy already. Hearing someone address him—the *other* him, not the *him* him—

Well.

That was a little more than he was prepared to handle.

Then Pidge's hand shifted from his jacket sleeve to his hand. Her palm was clammy and warm, and she squeezed his fingers with hers.

Okay. *That* was more than he was prepared to handle.

Still, he squeezed back, gulped, and focused on staying upright as he watched Allura extend her hand to the man in front of her—the other Lance.

“It’s a pleasure to—well, I suppose I was going to say ‘meet you.’ But that’s not really the case, is it?”

The man—Elena’s father—the other Lance extended his own hand to clasp hers. Then, abruptly, he pulled her into his chest. “*Allura*,” he gushed. “You look exactly the same. *Exactly*. Just as beautiful as ever.”

From beside him, Lance heard the tiniest of scoffs. Inexplicably fighting a sudden urge to chuckle, and without thinking, he squeezed Pidge’s hand again.

When Allura stepped back from the other Lance’s hug, it was with a wider, more comfortable smile—and a roll of her eyes. “And you’re just as ingratiating as ever. It’s lovely to learn that hasn’t changed.”

The other Lance moved fluidly from Allura to Coran, and they grasped each other at their forearms. “*You*, though,” he said. “You look just about as much of a baby as Hunk does.”

And then down the line the other Lance moved before he stiffened, his hand already halfway extended outward.

“Hey,” Keith said, his lips twitching with the ghost of a smirk as he reached forward.

Before their hands could make contact, however, the other Lance pulled back so quickly it was as if he’d been burned. He wheeled around to Hunk, hooking his thumb in Keith’s direction. “What’s *that guy* doing here, huh? What’s he playing at?”

Keith, on the other hand, turned to Elena and threw his hands in the air, sneering.

“Hey, Dad,” Elena said, ducking under the other Lance’s arm to face him head-on. “It’s cool, okay? He’s cool.”

“He—wha—*cool*?” the other Lance sputtered. He gaped openmouthed down at his daughter as if she’d sprouted a second head, and that head was *also* Keith. “*Cool*?” he said again, beyond incredulous. “Elena, do you have any idea who this *is*? It’s—”

Elena finished for him, “Keith. I know.”

“You *know*? You *know* that this is the—the—” The other Lance failed his arms frantically in Keith’s direction. “—the *quiznak* who *abandoned* us?”

“Hey!” Keith snapped. “I didn’t do anything!”

Spinning around to jab a finger in Keith’s chest, the other Lance spat, “The *cheese* you didn’t! As if you *didn’t* just pick up, rambling on about some *knife* and *answers* and whatever-the-universe else, and fly off—”

Keith took a timid step back. An unprecedented action, the Lance hidden in the shadows noticed with a cock of his chin, out of the countless number of times he had been in a similar confrontation with him. Keith tilted his own head to the side as he said, “A *knife*? You mean my blade?”

“*Whatever!*”

“*Dad!*” Elena hollered, ducking under her father’s arm once more to plant both hands on his chest, gingerly pushing him away. “That’s just it! That’s why we—*they*—needed to talk to you! Here, their reality—it’s—” For only a moment, her eyes twitched to the column that shielded Lance and Pidge from view. Then she corrected before the other Lance could follow her line of sight. “It’s different here,” she said, somewhat hoarsely. “Something’s different, and we need to figure out what and why. And I don’t know that much about before, so . . .”

The other Lance still glared at Keith over Elena’s head—though, at least, he no longer pushed back against her hands. “Can’t be *that* different,” he mumbled. “*Mullet* over there looks the same as the day he left.” His glare relaxed a touch then. “Maybe a little younger. But he was always pretty scrawny. It’s hard to tell.”

“*Scrawny?*” Keith barely had the opportunity to jump at the other Lance before Hunk stood between them, arms locked around Keith in a bear hug. Still, over Hunk’s shoulder, Keith barked, “I’ll show you ‘scrawny,’ *Grandpa*.”

“Aw,” Hunk said, grunting as he squeezed Keith ever tighter. “You guys still have your thing. That’s cute, isn’t it?”

Elena gave the other Lance a halfhearted shove as she said, “*Listen*.” She positioned her hands back onto her hips. “*Look*. Look around. Everyone here is, like, super young. Right?”

The other Lance finally glanced down at her. “. . . Yes? Right?”

“Right,” she repeated. “But we’ve been talking, and we’re pretty sure this isn’t *actually* the past. Okay?”

“Okay. Uh—” The other Lance frowned. “How?”

“There’s differences, but I’ll get there in a second. Patience.” Elena exhaled through pursed lips. A wisp of hair that had fallen into her eyes floated upwards. “Anyway. There’s also similarities. We thought that, if we could just figure out exactly where the similarities split

from the differences, we—you and I, but you especially—could help them avoid what went wrong. Or, alternatively—” She grinned. “—maybe *they* can help *us*.”

The other Lance’s eyes widened a fraction. “What do you mean, ‘help us?’”

Elena’s grin widened impossibly more. “Dad. They *won*.”

Without skipping a beat, the other Lance smirked, crinkling the already-crinkled corner of his eye. He tipped his head to side-eye his daughter more properly. ““They won?’ You don’t—” Then his face fell. ““They won?’ Like, *they won*, they won?”

Elena didn’t say anything more, settling instead on nodding excitedly.

The other Lance peered over Elena’s head to gaze dumbfounded at Hunk.

Hunk’s grin matched Elena’s. “Yeah. Kind of.”

When the other Lance’s eyes sought out Allura’s, she dipped her chin in a quick nod. “It does seem that way,” she offered.

All else was silent for a while as the other Lance stood frozen in place, visibly stunned. Then, he looked to Elena. Her eyes were bright, glistening, as she said, “They got something right that we didn’t. If we can find out what that is . . .” Her voice drifted off, its hopeful twinge floating between them.

Finally, her father smiled again. But it was small. Sad. “Sweetheart, that’s—” He glanced at Hunk, Coran, and Allura in turn. “That’s incredible. That’s—” He chuckled a bit. “That’s pretty flipping unbelievable, to be honest. I have no idea how you guys did it, and I’m so—*so* happy you did.”

Elena’s own smile faltered. “You don’t seem happy.”

When his gaze returned to her, he sighed. “I’m processing. I *am* happy. For them. It’s just—” He took a deep breath, sighed once more. “Kid, I know what you’re thinking. But I don’t think anything can be done for us.”

“Why not?” Elena asked in a whisper edged with something like annoyance. Her brow furrowed over narrowed eyes.

The other Lance’s face looked pained as he replied, “It’s too late for us. We’ve lost—” He gulped. “We lost too many battles. Missed too many opportunities. I mean, *Elena*, we lost *Voltron*. How can we—”

“You *lost Voltron*?” Allura cut in sharply, her eyebrows shooting upward. “How—Which—Where are—”

The other Lance waved his hand dismissively in her general direction. “We have all the Lions. We’re just down a pilot.”

“Well,” Hunk said, at last releasing Keith before crossing his arms over his barreled chest. “All you need is a replacement then, right?”

“Who are we supposed to put in there, bud?” the other Lance pressed, his words becoming slightly clipped. He pointed at Keith. “I took Red when *he* spooked. Allura took Blue.” He shook his head. “But when I had to take Black, Red wouldn’t let our Allura in. Or our Hunk. Even Coran.”

A tick passed. Then, Coran snapped his fingers. “What about Elena?” he asked. “If Red let Elena in, then *I*—or, rather, *your* Coran—could possibly take—”

Elena huffed, interrupting him. “Dad won’t let me try.”

“Elena has Green,” the other Lance said sternly.

“You’ve had *three Lions!*” Elena shouted. “I think that Green and Coran might actually—”

“Green is *your* Lion,” he half-shouted back.

Elena’s face grew steadily pinker. “And Red is nobody’s! So, what then? We’re just stuck?”

The other Lance deflated a touch. “That’s what I’m saying. Yes. We’re stuck. We don’t have Voltron. And even if we did, we probably *still* couldn’t swing it.”

“Why do you say that?” Allura asked quietly.

“Like I said.” The other Lance shrugged weakly. “Lost too much.” His eyes flicked briefly to his daughter. Then, again, he shook his head. “Shiro, for one. Without him—”

“We don’t have Shiro either,” Keith said.

The other Lance stared at him, hard. For once, however, his face failed to convey any malice behind it. “You guys lost Shiro?”

Keith glowered at him in return, then grunted. “Yeah. A few deca-phoebs before we put a stop to the Galra Empire. So don’t use that as an excuse.”

A million questions appeared to flash through the other Lance’s mind. The Lance whose hand tightened subconsciously around Pidge’s fingers figured as much as he saw the other Lance’s cheek twitch, saw the other Lance’s eyes scan the five people who stood around him before moving on to survey the scene behind them.

“Dad?” Elena asked. Her voice was much softer than it had been a minute before.

“Sorry,” the other Lance responded immediately. His eyes skimmed the edge of the hangar and passed right over where the first Lance and Pidge were obscured by shadow. Eventually, his gaze landed on Allura. “You four. Is—Am—” He took a long, measured breath. “Are you all that’s left?”

“Oh!” Allura’s own eyes jumped immediately to meet Elena’s. “Well . . .”

Elena just blinked at her before turning to her father. “Uh—” She gave him a feeble smile. “Can I ask you again to not freak out?”

The other Lance softly cleared his throat. “No promises.”

“That’s fair. Okay.” She looked behind herself to the darkness, and Lance’s heart dropped to the pit of his stomach. “Second string, I think. Yeah?”

The other Lance’s eyes followed hers.

It was the first time that Lance got a good, hard, full-on look at the man’s face. It was so *serious* that it looked unnatural. It was unnatural to see the wrinkle in his brow that only magnified the lines that framed it. It was unnatural to see the lines that cut shallow ridges around his mouth and under his eyes. It was unnatural to see the grey streaks in his too-short hair, and the wide scar that paralleled a sideburn and interrupted a shadow of stubble, which Lance had previously failed to notice.

But then there was everything else that didn’t look so unnatural. The nose, for one. The chin for another. The way he pursed his lips in obvious concentration.

Lance had nearly forgotten that he’d been clutching to Pidge’s hand like a life raft until the moment that it pulled itself free and went instead to push lightly at the small of his back.

Obediently, his feet stumbled forward.

He could tell the exact second that the other Lance made him out through the darkness, because that was the second that the other Lance reeled backwards, clutching Elena’s forearm for support.

“Hey, hey!” she hissed. “Don’t freak out, huh? I told you not to freak out.”

But the other Lance’s expression fell somewhere between bewildered and—most surprisingly—exuberant. A sound bubbled out of him that could be described in no other way than as a *giggle*. Wordlessly, he released his daughter’s arm and took a single step towards the shadow.

Just as the first Lance emerged from it.

That’s when the other Lance barked out a laugh. “No way,” he hiccupped. His eyes focused on nothing else but the first Lance’s own. “*No. Way.*” He took another clumsy step forward, and then another, like he was learning to walk all over again.

The first Lance’s pace matched the other’s—though without so much delight as with trepidation. He did force a smile that twitched at its corners, and lifted a hand to wave lamely at the man approaching him.

The other Lance beamed at him. They were only a few paces away from each other when the other Lance began to stretch out his arms, as if he were reaching to envelope the first Lance in them. “I can’t believe it,” the other Lance chattered away. “I—I didn’t know what to think when I saw the rest of the team and not me. Or, I mean, I guess *you*! But—but—” He giggled again from deep in his throat. “*No! Way! I—*”

That, when the other Lance's astonished gaze snapped away for only the briefest of ticks, was when he cut himself off midsentence. It returned to the first Lance for an equally brief tick before volleying once more to stare at something beyond his shoulder. The other Lance's face fell. His arms remained stiffly outstretched.

The hangar roared with a heavy silence, interrupted only by a shuffle from somewhere behind Lance.

The other Lance's lips popped open, then closed. They opened and closed again. After their fifth or sixth repeat, they released a single name, carried by a hoarse, haunted voice that the first Lance had never heard before (and sincerely hoped never to hear again).

"Katie?"

Katie?

. . . *Oh.*

Oh, no.

"Katie," the other Lance said again, even quieter than before. His hands that had been left hanging in midair moved to his head, raking their nails over his scalp as he shuddered—or maybe sighed? Or laughed? It was impossible to tell by the pained way his mouth twisted, or by the way his eyes widened to the size of teludav lenses. "*Katie*. How—"

Swiftly, Elena was at the other Lance's side, hands grasping him tightly at his bicep. "Dad," she rasped, voice low. "Hey, that's not her, okay? That's not—she's not the same—"

The other Lance spared only a passing glance down at her. His eyebrows slanted in disbelief, in despair. "Wh—Of *course* that's—"

Elena sniffled a little. Then, with a pleading smile, she clutched to the other Lance with even more vehemence. "It's not. Take a breath for me, will you? Deep breath."

But the other Lance just tried to shake her off—gently, but desperately. He looked back to the same spot as before as his face crumpled more in on itself. "*Katie!*" he called, fighting against his daughter to take another step forward.

Automatically, the Lance that stood across from him moved sideways, so suddenly aware of Pidge's presence and her precise location that he was certain he would shield her from his older self's view. Then he twisted his head around to look at her, stretching his hand out backwards a bit as tried without words to ask her: *Are you okay?*

Pidge didn't need to say anything—she didn't even need to look at him in return—for Lance to deduce that her answer was a big, resounding *nope*. She was a statue, rooted to her spot just outside of the darkness behind her, leaned just a fraction sideways to peer around him. Her face was drained of any color, and her gaping eyes were transfixed on the scene in front of her, on the man who was still struggling to reach her.

"Hey," Lance whispered.

Instantly, she turned her face to him—still pale, still gaping, but at least transfixed on something else.

Anything else.

Not knowing what else to say to her, Lance just muttered, “It’s okay. Yeah?”

She nodded once, quickly. The fingers of her balled-up fist twitched once, too, as if they considered breaching the gap between them to touch Lance’s own fingers, which were still extended out to her. Pidge made no more movement than that, though.

“Elena, *please!* Will you—*Hunk!*!”

Lance whipped back around in time to watch Hunk turn his bear hug onto the other Lance, catching him around his upper body and pulling him up enough that his toes barely grazed the floor. Elena, meanwhile, beelined it into Allura’s arms, tucking her face deep into the other’s hair.

“Sorry, dude,” Hunk groaned. “But you gotta cool it. Just a bit, huh?”

The other Lance fought valiantly as he kicked his legs out in front of him in a clear attempt to wiggle free. “Let *go* of me! You don’t *understand!*” His eyes sought out Pidge again. “*Katie,*” he choked out when they found her. “*Pidge. Please.*”

Behind Lance, Pidge mumbled, “I can’t. I have to . . .”

But by the time he turned around, she’d already gone, the sound of her rapidly retreating footsteps reverberating off the hangar’s walls.

Lance allowed himself a moment to watch the other Lance—to watch *himself*, it seemed then more than ever—strain against Hunk’s embrace. He grunted in frustration, pleaded, called out for Pidge. It was only a matter of time before his cheeks, to Lance’s utter horror, were wet—not with sweat, but with tears. Hunk held him close to his chest, muttering comforting words with a sad smile. Allura still held Elena as she, Keith, and Coran watched with stricken faces while the other Lance made a spectacle of himself.

Lance wanted to shout at them to look away, for stars’ sake. To give him some privacy.

Instead of shouting, he ran. Away from the display he didn’t think he could bear to watch for even a microtick more, back into the shadows from whence he’d come, in hot pursuit.

He caught up with Pidge a few floors above the hangar, halfway between the dining room and her bedroom. She surely must have heard him coming, he thought. But she made no indication of this as he grabbed her by the elbow and spun her around mid-stride.

Lance couldn’t even dream of saying anything before she started in. “I’m so sorry,” Pidge babbled. She smiled inexplicably, nervously, shaking her head back and forth. “I’m *so* sorry for running out. That was—that was just *a lot more* than I thought it would be, you know?

Like—” She laughed with an edge of madness to it. “*Quiznak!* That was—that was *so weird* —”

Lance wasted no more time before grabbing her by her shoulders and pulling her into a hug. There was a beat’s hesitation, upon making contact with his chest, where she stiffened. But it passed almost as quickly as it came, and Pidge wrapped her arms around Lance’s midsection and sighed a shaky sigh.

“I’m sorry,” she said again.

“No, *I’m* sorry,” Lance replied, resting his chin on the top of her head.

Pidge scoffed, though muffled a bit from her face’s position pressed sideways against his shirt. “Why are *you* sorry?”

He mimicked her scoff. Her answering chuckle warmed the sticky, cold feeling clogging up his chest. Ignoring that, though, he asked, “Well, why are *you* sorry?”

“I asked you first.”

“I asked you second.”

“*Lance*,” Pidge complained, chuckling a little more as she leaned back in his arms to peer up at him. She didn’t, however, step out of the hug completely. So Lance chose not to, either. “Seriously,” she pressed as she furrowed her brow. “What’re you sorry for?”

Lance frowned down at her. “For *that*. For *scaring you* like that.”

Pidge shook her head. “That wasn’t you, though.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

Pidge smiled softly. “Okay, well, yeah. That was you. But *that* wasn’t *you*.” She squinted. “You know what I mean?”

Shrugging, Lance tucked Pidge’s head back into place under his chin. “I never do.”

They stood like that for an indeterminate while. So many thoughts clouded Lance’s mind that it was impossible for him to pick one thread out from another. The only thing upon which Lance could even begin to focus was himself. That is, his older self. And the tortured faces that his older self made as he called out for Pidge, trying to reach a version of her who—in some other, faraway, *terrifying* reality—was gone. Gone, leaving behind some broken shell of a man who, lines and grey hair aside, looked way, *way* too much like Lance for his comfort.

“He just—” Pidge sighed into Lance’s chest. “He still looks so much like you.”

Lance almost swallowed his tongue. There was *no way* he’d said that all out loud, was there?

Pidge continued on, unawares. “And, like, not to make this whole thing about me. But it really, *really* sucks to have someone who looks so much like *you* look at *me* and then make

faces like *that*. And then to have that someone who looks so much like you yelling my name—like, my *real* name, too—like that.” Her body shuddered.

It was Lance’s turn to lean back to stare down at Pidge’s hair. Pidge didn’t make any move to step away from him, though, so he kept his arms wrapped around her.

“I know that’s selfish,” Pidge grumbled. “I know this—everything with *him* and *her* and *you* and *me*—it’s already so, *so* awkward enough already.” She laughed halfheartedly. “And I know that whatever I’m feeling, you have to be feeling around a billion times more. I just—”

“Hey,” Lance interrupted, bringing his hands up to ruffle her hair. “You’re fine. I’m fine. It’s fine.”

“It’s not—”

“It is.” Then, without really thinking twice about it, Lance planted his palms on either side of Pidge’s head, pulled her away from his chest, and leaned down to press his lips to her forehead.

In some part of his brain, the action had made total sense. It was meant to be a comforting thing. Casual. Just one pal giving another pal a reassuring, totally platonic smooch.

It only occurred to him when Pidge froze in his embrace, her hands falling away from his back to her own sides, that maybe, just maybe, kissing her forehead wasn’t exactly a normal thing to do. He’d never done it to her before, certainly. Nor had he ever done it with any of his other teammates either.

It was with greatest reluctance that Lance pulled away, already half-wincing by the time he plucked up the courage to look Pidge directly in the eye. The shocked expression she wore felt so much worse than he expected it would, like his chest had iced over mid-breath.

Pidge’s face visibly reddened as she stared up at him. “What was that?” she asked, a hint of an accusation in her tone.

“Uh—” Lance replied stupidly, because he was stupid. Helplessly, he shook his head. “I—I don’t know.”

Eyes narrowing, Pidge spat, “You *don’t know*?”

But he couldn’t help but notice that she didn’t push him off of her. She didn’t stomp on his toes, or pry his hands away from her head. She basically didn’t move at all.

As Lance gaped at her in utter silence, her face morphed. Narrowed eyes turned wide, furrowed brow shot upward beneath her bangs. “Lance?” she said, drawing out the single syllable of his name and quavering a bit at the end.

His mind was abruptly blank but for the image in front of him: Pidge watching him carefully, looking partially curious, mostly terrified. Again, without thinking twice—because that had worked out so well for him before, obviously—Lance stretched a finger to catch the hair that fell in her face, securing it behind her ear.

“I—” he began to say.

But then he decided to shut up instead.

Lance’s hands moved down from the sides of Pidge’s head to cup her jaw. And then he leaned forward to capture her lips with his.

His mouth fell onto empty air, though, and soon the only thing left in Lance’s arms was the space that Pidge had just vacated.

When he re-opened his eyes—barely aware he’d even closed them in the first place—Lance found Pidge ten feet down the hallway from him. She panted, hand pressed to her chest, and glared so intensely at him that his insides immediately shriveled from the angry heat of it.

“Oh,” was all Lance could think to say.

Pidge was, evidently, unimpressed. “*Oh?*” she yelled. “That’s *all* you have to say? *Oh?*”

“Um—” Lance cleared his throat. Set his hands on his hips. Frowned. “I don’t—”

“If you say ‘I don’t know’ again—” Pidge pointed her finger threateningly at him, but maintained her distance. “—I will throw you out the airlock. Got it?”

Lance gulped. “Got it.”

“Now,” she snapped, crossing her arms in front of her chest. “*Explain.*”

“I don’t—ah—I mean, I’m not sure. I—I—”

Lance’s mind was still entirely blank, his brain—like Coran’s control panel had been—fried beyond any possible use. Incapable in the extreme of rational thought, of explaining, of even beginning to sort out for himself why he had tried to do what he just tried to do. Meanwhile, he stuttered, equally incapable of forming real words.

Pidge kept glaring at him all the while, though she eventually threw him a bone by holding up her hand, effectively silencing his sputtering. Then she ran that hand through her hair as her eyes continued to bore holes into Lance’s own.

“Let me help,” she offered with a half-growl. “You’re confused, right? Because of everything that’s happening right now?”

Dumbstruck, Lance could only nod.

Her eyes narrowed impossibly more. “Right. Because there’s this old guy here who, in some other reality, is you. And that guy was—was *with* some girl who, in that other reality, was me, right?” A tick passed, then she demanded. “Nod if I’m right, Lance.”

Lance obeyed, nodding again.

Pidge took a step forward, and Lance resisted the inclination to take a step back. “Good. Right. So you did something idiotic. *Beyond* idiotic. But I’ll let it slide, because—”

Strangely, she stopped. Pursed her lips. Wrapped her arms around her own midsection as she scrutinized Lance.

“Because,” Pidge began again, most of the residual edge vanished, “you don’t feel that way about me, right?”

Lance didn’t so much as breathe then, let alone move.

“You tried to *kiss* me—” Pidge’s voice hitched. “—because you were confused.” A brief pause, then, “Right?”

Well, Lance’s otherwise useless mind pleaded. *Right?*

“Lance,” Pidge whispered. “Nod.”

There seemed to be no other option. Or, no *reasonable* option, at least. So, yes, Lance nodded.

Pidge’s gaze fell to his feet. “Okay,” she said, her tone suspiciously clipped, somewhat cheery. “Then that’s that, then.”

Another indeterminate while passed as they stood like that, paces apart, Pidge staring at the ground and Lance staring somewhere past her ear. Lance’s mind was so consumed with emptiness that he didn’t notice someone’s approach until Pidge’s head snapped up, and a voice rang out, “Uh. Hey.”

It was him. Lance knew it before he even turned around.

The other Lance stood there, his eyes volleying between the first Lance and Pidge. He rested one hand behind his neck, scratching the buzzed hair there, while the other hung limply at his side. He continued on, “Sorry if I’m interrupting something. I . . .” He swallowed and settled his eyes on Pidge. “I wanted to apologize to you. For—well. I feel like I maybe, a little bit, possibly scared the shirt off of you. Yeah?”

Pidge stared wordlessly at him for a few long seconds. Then, finally, she said (with the slightest of squeaks), “Yes. I mean, no. It’s not a problem. You’re . . .” She drifted off, shaking her head.

But the other Lance’s expression warmed as soon as she spoke. Very suddenly, Lance understood what Hunk had meant earlier that day about “heart eyes.” To see such a depressing, hopeless variation of them was unnerving enough. To see it on a vague reflection of his own face, though, was just too much.

“Okay,” the other Lance said, grinning softly. “Elena told me that she told you guys . . . kind of everything, huh? So, yeah. I’m glad you understand what—” He cleared his throat and wiped the smile off his face. “Well. I apologize.”

Again, Pidge took a moment before replying, “Apology accepted.”

And the other Lance’s cheek twitched in what the first Lance suspected was an attempt not to grin again. “All right,” he said simply.

Then—unwillingly, it seemed, if the amount of time his eyes lingered on Pidge was any indication—he turned to regard the first Lance.

“I also came to tell you guys that we’re all regrouping in the dining room. Elena’s pretty certain that we can figure out a way to help each other out, and—” He shrugged. “—I’m coming around to the idea that it might be worth a shot. The rift’s holding up, so we have time to kill, anyway.”

It took the first Lance a bit too long to comprehend that the other Lance was waiting for him to respond. When he did, he hiccupped, “Oh, yeah. Cool. Let’s, uh—Let’s go then.” He threw a beseeching glance to Pidge. “Ready?”

It took Pidge a bit too long, as well, to bob her head in agreement. “Sure thing.”

The other Lance smirked at the pair of them before turning on his heel and leading the way back down the hall. “That’s the spirit. Let’s go save some universes.”

Chapter End Notes

I know I said this last time, but I mean it now: No new update until March at the earliest. Maybe April. Maybe later. Thank you in advance for your patience.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

The group works together to find something to hope for. Meanwhile, Lance just hopes that this day doesn't kill him.

Chapter Notes

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

To say that the relatively short walk back to the dining room was awkward would be the understatement of the last hundred centuries.

That's not to say, of course, that Lance could fully appreciate that fact, because he was otherwise preoccupied. Although his mind had been gracefully numb to everything that had transpired up to that point, it thawed with every step he took, sandwiched in a line between the two people he least wanted to be sandwiched between in the entire universe.

First, there was Pidge. His best friend. His teammate. And, now—beyond his own comprehension—the person that he had just tried to kiss.

As he thought it, Lance peeked at her out of the corner of his eye. Meanwhile, she stared straight ahead, unblinking. Her hair had come free from where he'd tucked it behind her ear, and suddenly his fingers itched to put it back into place.

But *no*. Nope. That was a thought he should absolutely not have been thinking. He dug his nails a little deeper into his palms, to the point that he would have feared drawing blood if he hadn't been certain that every drop of blood in his body was pooling at his cheeks and the tips of his ears.

Why? Lance screamed at himself internally. *Why. Did. You. Do. That?* As if their friendship hadn't already been strained enough that day, first with the *rift* and then with the *daughter* and then the *50-year-old version of himself*.

His eyes flicked to their opposite corners at the man with whom he'd unwittingly fallen into perfect step. Like Pidge, the other Lance did not notice the first Lance's gaze on him. Unlike Pidge, though, it was not because he was busy staring straight ahead, but rather because he was busy casting glances of his own at her. To his defense, they were furtive, quick—the first Lance probably wouldn't have noticed them at all had he not begun carefully examining the other Lance. But those descriptions were the most innocent traits that could be attributed to the way that man was looking at Pidge. Otherwise, his glances held—well, it was hard for Lance to describe. His counterpart's glances held just *so much*. So much emotion and pain and longing that Lance forced himself to look away as the heaviness of it all manifested as a physical weight on his diaphragm.

What a day, huh?

“Your hair looks nice like that.”

Lance’s head snapped back to gawk at the man beside him. Still, the other Lance was peering around the first Lance’s front, eyes now trained exclusively on Pidge.

When he turned to look back at her, Lance realized that Pidge’s eyes, too, were locked in the same position they had been, gaping at the hallway beyond. After a long moment of silence, Lance took it upon himself to dig his elbow into her side.

“*Ack!*” Pidge squawked before whipping around to frown at Lance, eyes wide. “What was *that* for?”

Stars above, just making eye contact with her made Lance’s face flush with uncomfortable heat. Instead of attempting to choke out an explanation, however, he merely nodded his head at the Lance behind him.

“Sorry,” the other Lance said, grinning apologetically. “I was just—Small talk, you know? I said that I liked your hair like that.”

“Oh,” Pidge replied, staring at the man as if he’d just said something to her in another language. Her hand went automatically up to tug at the loose lock that Lance himself had touched only minutes ago; she put it back behind her ear. The pinkness in her cheeks flared. “Thanks.” A pause, then, “Wait, like what?”

He pointed vaguely at his own hairline. “Like that. Long. I don’t think I ever saw you—or—” The other Lance’s grin faltered for only a moment before he pressed on, “My wife, I mean. She always kept her hair cropped short. Even buzzed it off entirely once.”

My wife, my wife, my wife, echoed through Lance’s head and, despite his best effort, he stole a glance at Pidge for himself, just as his older self had been doing.

Pidge, meanwhile, somehow, inexplicably, looked a little less panicked. “Your wife,” she repeated simply with a small nod.

The other Lance nodded, too. “My wife. Elena’s mom.”

In other words, the first Lance mused as he watched the man continue to smile in an almost-too-nonchalant way. *Not you.*

And Pidge’s newly calmed—or at least, relatively calmed—expression quite suddenly made more sense.

“Right,” she breathed, attempting a smile of her own. “So. She never grew her hair out?”

“Nope,” the other Lance replied with a shrug. “Funny little differences, aren’t there?”

“Huh,” Pidge grunted. Her smile spread across her face more fluidly. “Yeah. Funny.”

Oh, yeah, a mean voice whispered at the back of Lance's mind. *That is funny. He makes her feel better by talking about her hair. You try to kiss her. An inward scoff, then, Idiot.*

"What was that?" the other Lance asked. And although the first Lance's initial reaction was to think that he'd missed some bit of the fragmented conversation that was happening over his head, he was soon faced with the fact that the man to his right was looking directly at him, one eyebrow and a corner of his mouth both slightly cocked upward.

Maybe that scoff hadn't been so inward after all.

"Oh!" Lance blinked before averting his gaze to the hallway beyond, blushing hard enough to sting. "Uh, nothing. Just— *ahem* —Just clearing my throat."

The remaining two-dobosh walk back to the dining room felt like eons. But, graciously, time was still a finite thing, and their journey did have to end sometime. So it was with great relief that Lance lunged forward when they reached the door, waved his hand in front of the sensor, and led the way into the room already filled with the rest of their party.

Elena rotated in her chair and smirked wickedly up at the other Lance. "'Bout time, old man."

"Hush, child," he responded, pressing his hand briefly to the top of her head before settling into the seat beside her with a groan. "So, what'd we miss?"

"Nothing yet!" Coran assured. "Just waiting on you two Number Threes and the one Number Five."

Pidge eyed the group around the table warily as she took her previous chair. "What, this whole time?"

Hunk said, "Well, you weren't gone *that* long."

Focusing her narrowed eyes at Hunk, Pidge cocked her head to the side. "So you just stood around in complete silence?"

Hunk's own eyes suddenly skipped to the ceiling, a redness crawling across his cheeks. "Uh —"

With a scoff, though, Elena cut in. "It's not like there's anything to talk about anyway, am I right? Between the comet, the rift, the meeting alternate versions of one's own family members, some of those family members having been dead for deca-phoebs—" She shrugged. "What's to discuss?"

A stony silence filled the room as everyone in it looked in some random direction—Keith at his hands, Hunk at the ceiling, et cetera. Everyone, that is, except for Pidge and Elena, who continued to wordlessly contemplate each other, Elena wearing a tight smirk.

The silence lasted a second more before Pidge laughed—actually *laughed*. Elena looked quite pleased with herself, overshadowed only by the beaming grin that overtook the other Lance's face.

“Well,” Pidge said, still chuckling, leaned onto her elbows planted on the table. “So. Where do we start?”

The group spent a few solid minutes rehashing for the other Lance what had already been hashed amongst them. The most blaring difference, of course, was where they stood in their individual wars.

Then there was Shiro.

“Self-sacrificial jerk,” the other Lance grunted sadly. “We received a distress call—first we’d had since before Elena was born. Shiro insisted that he go alone, he was too worried about it being a trap to let the rest of us come with, especially with Elena being as little as she was then. But he just—” His fists clenched. “He couldn’t live with himself if he’d ignored someone who needed him.”

Keith, still staring at his hands, quietly wiped his nose on the shoulder of his jacket. “Sounds like him,” he muttered into his sleeve.

The conversation went on. The other Lance had the same, confused reaction Elena had to what the first Lance considered little stuff: Hunk’s cooking, the space mall, Kaltenecker.

“What’s a Kaltenecker?”

“*Right?*” Elena quipped. “That’s what I said! So you and—you never had a cow?”

“A *cow*?”

The other Lance might’ve missed Elena’s redirection, or maybe he’d just gotten used to ignoring slips like it. But it wasn’t lost on the first Lance, the gaping hole where Pidge’s name should’ve been.

He didn’t have the courage, though, to glance across the table to see whether Pidge had picked up on it, too.

“I think our best strategy,” Allura finally said, “will be to work backwards to a point in time, to an event that our realities have in common.” She held her hands up and apart so that they framed her face. As she gently waved her right hand, she asked, “You never visited a space mall, then?”

The other Lance rubbed the back of his neck and leaned back into his seat. “I mean, yeah, we’ve visited a space mall. But we never bought a *cow* at one.”

Allura pressed on. “Did you visit a space mall within, say, your first few phoebs or so after leaving Earth?”

Tilting his head, the other Lance paused, staring intently at Allura with pursed lips. After a moment, he said, “No? I don’t think so. So, yeah. No.”

“All right.” Allura then peered up and down the table. “What happened before that?”

“Olkarion?” Pidge offered from where her head lay on her crossed arms.

“Ol-what-ion?” the other Lance responded.

“Okay, that’s a *no* .”

“The mermaid planet?” Hunk prompted.

The other Lance answered automatically, “No.” Then, with the ghost of an interested smirk on his face, he pointed meaningfully at Hunk. “But I want to hear about that later.”

“You saved the Balmera, surely!” Coran exclaimed.

“We’ve *seen* a Balmera,” the other Lance sighed. “A few, actually. But as far as *saving* one of them goes? Not so much.”

Before he could stop himself, Lance grumbled, “Well, it seems like you guys got a whole lot of nothing done after Arus. Or did you even make it to Arus?”

Lance could feel every person’s gaze latch onto him then—Elena’s especially volatile as she gripped the edge of the table so tightly her knuckles turned white. But his older reflection just smirked, somewhat weakly, and replied in a low voice, “Yes, we definitely made it to Arus.”

Without tearing her slightly critical glare away from the first Lance, Allura asked, “At which point Sendak eventually attacked, am I correct?”

The other Lance’s smirk fell a little. With a quick nod, he answered, “Yep.”

“But then,” Hunk cut in, “you and Shiro get imprisoned, Coran and I jet off to the Balmera, Keith and Allura stop the destruction of the Arusians’ village, and Pidge—” He paused briefly to point at her and wink. “—basically saves all our tails. That right?”

“Uh.” The other Lance, smirk completely vanished, blinked. “No.”

“That’s not right?” Hunk asked, his brow falling low over his eyes, his finger that he’d pointed at Pidge drooping pathetically. “Which part?”

“Uh,” the other Lance said again as he glanced at them each in turn. “All of it?” A nod, then, “Yeah. I would say all of it.”

As the group fell into chaotic (at least, that’s how it felt to the first Lance) silence, Elena leaned forward. “Okay! We found some similarity, though. Even if it is just the beginning part,” she added, half-muttering. Then she rubbed her hands together. “So what exactly happened in our version, then?”

For a nearly imperceptible moment, the other Lance’s eyes twitched leftwards. The first Lance suspected that this nearly imperceptible moment did not go unnoticed by Pidge, however, as she seemed to stiffen for an equally nearly imperceptible moment.

Forging on as if nothing had happened—as essentially, after all, nothing *did* happen—the other Lance said, “For starters?” His lips closed clumsily, as if stuttering over a name, before he finished, “Your mom wasn’t there.”

“She wasn’t?” Elena pressed.

“ *She wasn’t?* ” Pidge pressed, too.

And every eye volleyed to her.

Pidge’s face reddened. Still, she continued, “If she wasn’t there, where was she?”

The other Lance seemed unable to answer at first. He squinted, but not up at the ceiling, as if he was trying to extract a memory from it. Rather, his eyes narrowed sympathetically at Pidge. “She, uh—” He cleared his throat, swallowed. “She took off. Momentarily, I mean. Trying to find her family.”

“She *left* ?” Keith asked, his voice hollow in evident shock. “She actually *left* ?”

The other Lance wheeled his attention, suddenly steely, onto Keith. “ ‘*Momentarily* ,’ I said. And *you* certainly didn’t cut her any slack for it after, so don’t you—”

“How momentarily?” Allura interrupted.

With a huff, the other Lance slouched back into his chair. “Less than a day, definitely. Probably less than twelve hours. She came straight back after we called her. But, uh—” He shot another sorrowful look in Pidge’s direction. “She was too late to help much. The damage was mostly done.”

“And the damage entailed what, precisely?” Coran asked.

“Well.” The other Lance frowned, staring down at his lap. “The Arusians, mostly. Their whole village and most of their population.”

Allura covered her mouth with both her hands. “Oh, my,” she said softly, quite almost whimpering. “Those poor creatures.” Her fingers dropped from her lips to her chin. “But how? I seem to recall that Keith and I *alone* were able to save them in our reality . . . I mean to say, if everyone else hadn’t been preoccupied, certainly—”

“I don’t know how to explain it,” the other Lance cut in with a sharp shake of his head. “If I could, this discussion would probably be done by now.”

“Then let’s speed it up,” Elena quipped, edging her seat closer to her father’s as she looked to Pidge. “I take it you *didn’t* leave?”

“No, I—” Pidge shrugged, shook her own head as if trying to shake something loose. “I mean, I tried. But—”

“Lance got hurt,” Keith finished.

There was a semi-long, semi-awkward beat of silence before Pidge sighed. “Yeah.”

Cursing his thick skull for what felt like the thousandth time that day, Lance realized with a jolt that he hadn’t really put together before exactly why Pidge had stayed with them that night on Arus. He had always assumed that it was because Pidge came to the conclusion that the Arusians, the team, the *universe* needed her—not necessarily because *he* needed her. Even just then, he was sure that it wasn’t *only* because of him that she stayed. It was a combination, surely. They’d barely known each other at all at that point, anyway. *Stars*, he hadn’t even yet known she was a *girl*.

Still, beneath the layers and layers of embarrassment and some kind of shock, something in the pit of Lance’s belly warmed inexplicably at an implication he couldn’t name.

But the subtle, butterfly-ish feeling in his stomach was nothing compared to its physical manifestation on the other Lance’s face, which was soft and—and downright *gooey* and looking at Pidge with nothing short of the most abject affection.

Whether to keep Pidge from finding such an expression on a face identical to his own, or whether to distract that face from making that expression in the first place, Lance burst out, “Right! And I got hurt because they sent that fake Rover in and exploded the Castle’s crystal. Which—” Lance could practically feel the light bulb fizzle into life over his head. “Which wouldn’t have happened if you’d left, because we would’ve known at once that wasn’t the real Rover.”

His tablemates looked on the whole rather impressed with him, and Lance allowed himself for just a moment to let that residual warmth in his belly spread to his chest. Meanwhile, Hunk added, “And if the crystal wasn’t wrecked, Coran and I wouldn’t have gone to the Balmera! We wouldn’t have met Shay, or saved her people . . .” His voice trailed away with a trace of sad uncertainty at its end.

“So,” Elena broke in, clutching at her father’s forearm. “What *did* happen?”

The other Lance rolled his shoulders. “It was pretty straightforward. The party ended, everyone went to bed. Allura woke to that communicator she gave to the Arusian king ringing its head off, but by the time she’d gathered everyone . . . You get it. There wasn’t much we could do. There were a lot of Galra, and—” He gave Pidge yet another apologetic look. “—no Voltron.”

“If the Galra couldn’t find their way into the Castle,” Coran mused, twirling his mustache pensively with his forefinger and thumb, “it makes sense that there would be more free to overtake the village.”

“That’s right!” Allura nearly shouted, slapping her palms onto the table’s surface. “With us, the Galra attacked when the party was still ongoing! That’s why the Arusians escaped unharmed, because all of them were still at the castle. The destruction of their village was just a trap!”

The other Lance scoffed. “Not for us.”

“Which makes the big difference—what?” Hunk asked, leaning his chin onto his fist. “A few hours, tops? In your reality—” He nodded at the other Lance. “—they won that battle just because they waited to strike?”

“Sounds more like they won the entire war because they waited,” Allura said, her voice shaky. “*Imagine* that! The mere difference of few *vargas* , and—” Suddenly, she took a tremulous gasp. “Of course!”

“What?” Coran asked, reaching out for her hands as if to steady her from his seat. “What ‘of course?’”

“The Arusians,” Allura explained, her voice shakier still. “They were our first allies, the first planet in the Voltron alliance! If we failed to save them—” She cut herself off and looked beseechingly at the other Lance. “No one trusted you after that, did they?”

The other Lance responded with a hollow chuckle. “That’s an understatement. The more planets we failed to save—”

“*More?* ” Hunk asked.

Throwing his hands in the air, the other Lance said, “We were on our own! One planet after the next wouldn’t so much as listen to us, let alone work with us. Our connections to our Lions and Voltron were shaky at *best* in those first few years, and by the time we’d all properly bonded, it was just—” His fists, balled, fell to rest on his knees. “We decided as a team to stop fighting and start hiding.”

Allura—mouth tight in what the first Lance recognized as something like anger or disappointment or some mixture thereof—said, “I’m sorry, but I simply can’t believe that you all . . . *gave up* like that.”

“It was never supposed to be forever,” the other Lance replied, his own mouth tightening a little. “And don’t you go getting huffy at me, because I remind you that you were a big contributor to making that decision!”

“*I* did no such thing,” Allura grumbled, occupying herself with retucking her skirts beneath her.

“Well, *you* thankfully didn’t go through what *we* went through. The fights got hopeless. We *all* came to terms with the fact that we couldn’t save the universe on our own, and we *all* decided that it was more important to save each other than die fighting a losing battle. I mean —” The other Lance stood and leaned his hands onto the table. “There was you and Coran to think about, for one.”

“What about us?” Allura shot back with narrowed, laser beam-like eyes.

“The fact that you two were the last of an entire race, maybe? Or maybe just the fact that you guys became family?” The other Lance stood up straight and crossed his arms over his breastplate. “I mean, we all did! Hunk and Shiro and I—even this twerp—” He hooked his thumb at Keith. “We were brothers by then. And Pidge and I—!”

Here, the other Lance stopped short. Without another word, he reclaimed his seat and reached to squeeze his daughter's hand. Elena squeezed back.

The first Lance felt a desire to look to the ceiling and never look away from it. He suppressed it, but did allow the indulgence of looking at anyone and anything besides Pidge across from him.

Meanwhile, Allura's face softened considerably. After an extra second, she leaned forward. "Lance," she said quietly, "please forgive me. Of course, I understand." She attempted a smile. "And then at some point, clearly, Elena became a part of your plan."

The other Lance laughed and squeezed Elena's hand again. "She was a surprise part of the plan, that's for sure."

If the first Lance had been drinking something right then, he would've spit it out.

This day, he decided, would certainly be the end of him.

The other Lance plugged away, though, and smiled. "But yeah. She changed everything. When we figured out she was coming, we all agreed any hope of returning to the fight would be, well, *postponed*." Then his smile quavered downwards as he began glaring at Keith. "At least, we *thought* we'd all agreed."

"So that's when Keith took off?" Hunk asked with a cock of his head. "Why then?" He looked at Keith, too—less menacingly than the other Lance was doing, surely, but not without some air of admonishment. "Like, they had a *baby* coming. They needed the whole team more than ever!"

Keith took a long second to look disbelievingly back at Hunk. Then he replied, "You know I didn't actually do that, right?"

"I don't know," the other Lance answered Hunk. He ran his fingers through his hair, stopping to scratch behind his ear. "It was a couple weeks before Elena was born, and he gathered us all in the bridge to tell us he was leaving to—I don't know, *find something*, I guess. He was waving some knife in our faces and rambling on and on about *knowledge* and *help* or whatever."

"He left to get help, then!" Keith supplied with a casual shrug. "Obviously, he went to find the Blade of Marmora."

"What's that?" the other Lance responded instantly.

"It's an underground Galra-resistance regime," Allura explained, "comprising primarily members of the Galra race who oppose Zarkon's tyranny."

The other Lance barked out a laugh. "That sounds nice! Also sounds like a lot of baloney, but still. Nice."

Keith snapped, "It's *real*. I've worked with them."

“It’s true,” Allura added.

“Real deal,” Hunk tacked on.

Ignoring this, the other Lance looked Keith up and down. “Okay,” he said. “Maybe. Maybe it’s real here. But—” He pointed his finger as close to Keith’s face as he could manage from across the table. “How do we know they exist in my and Elena’s universe? We’ve never met them, never even heard of them.”

Keith replied by digging his hand behind himself, pulling out his own violet blade, and unsheathing it. Holding it out for the other Lance’s inspection, Keith asked, “Did his ‘knife’ look anything like this?”

Hesitantly, the other Lance took it and held it gingerly between his fingertips. His eyes landed, and stayed for a long while, on the sign at the intersection between hilt and blade. “Huh,” the other Lance grunted. “I’ll be darned. It sure did.”

Keith’s face looked nothing short of triumphant. Accepting the blade the other Lance held out to him and re-sheathing it, he said around a tight, barely contained smile, “There you go. I—” Keith’s mouth twitched. “*He* didn’t just up and abandon you. He went to get help from the Blade of Marmora.”

The other Lance pursed his lips. He mumbled, “It still just doesn’t add up, though.”

“What doesn’t?” Elena asked.

“A lot, actually,” Pidge interjected—unable to help herself, the first Lance was sure of it. No amount of discomfort would ever keep Pidge from seeking out answers. “For one, how did other Keith know to look for the Blade of Marmora if no one on the team had ever even met them before? It’s not like our Keith had any idea what his blade meant before they explained it to him themselves.” She shrugged, then added, “Sounds to me more like he didn’t know what he was looking for when he left, and just . . . left.”

“It’s not like he just woke up one day and decided, ‘Hey, I’m done with these people, see you never!’” Keith replied as color rose in his face. “You were having a *baby*. Maybe he wanted to do anything he could to make the universe a little safer for her, huh? And maybe he thought the best place to start—” He waved his blade vaguely in the air. “—would be wrapped up in this mystery? And maybe, after everything, he was *right*.”

Pidge, visibly stunned, didn’t say anything. The other Lance cut in, though, standing again and saying, “Oh, yeah? How’d that turn out for him, you think? Because we haven’t seen him in *twenty years*.”

Keith attempted to stand as well, but was pulled back down with a tug on his forearm and a whispered warning from Allura. Obediently, he resettled and shoved his blade back behind him.

“Maybe he never found them,” Hunk mumbled. But perking up abruptly, he added, “Or maybe he did! Maybe he’s been working with them ever since, and just hasn’t been able to

find *you* ! I mean, you all have been hiding right? And you got pretty good at it!”

The other Lance’s frown slackened. “Then why is the Galra Empire still a thing, bud? Why hasn’t this underground group of defectors stopped it yet?”

“In all fairness,” Allura sighed, “the Blade of Marmora has been an organization for nearly as long as the war has existed. They weren’t able to stop it in the ten thousand years before . . .” Her voice drifted off, somewhat dreamily.

A beat of silence, then, “Uh, Princess?” Hunk, who’d placed his hand between Allura’s shoulder blades. “You all right?”

It seemed ages before Allura tore her eyes away from the point above Elena’s head at which she’d been staring. But tear her eyes away she eventually did, settling them instead on Elena herself. “I think we can help you,” Allura said.

Elena could only blink at her, mouth slightly agape. It was the other Lance who replied, hoarsely, “What? *How?* ”

“Here,” Allura elaborated, slowly, pensively, “the Blade of Marmora could not stop the Galra Empire until Voltron joined the fight. In your reality, the Blade of Marmora and Voltron have not joined forces, and the war wages on.” Allura looked to Coran for guidance. “The Blades were *essential* to our victory. What if— Wouldn’t it make sense—”

“ *Certainly* it would make sense!” Coran erupted, standing and joining the other Lance at his side. “If we could get you into contact with them—”

“What if it’s a coincidence, though?” Pidge said, seeming to only be musing aloud as she narrowed her eyes at the table beneath her splayed fingers. “Correlation—”

“Not causation?” Elena finished for her, glancing from Pidge to her father.

“So what if it is?” Hunk asked. “Isn’t it still worth a chance?”

The other Lance looked at each person around the table in turn, starting with his daughter at his right before going to Coran at his left. At Pidge, he gazed for a few moments more than he’d done at anyone else. When he finally got to the first Lance though, he stopped entirely.

The first Lance just looked back, and part of him was frustrated that, even when faced with literally *himself*, he couldn’t read the other man’s mind. It was a strange sensation, to say the least, to see facial features on another person that looked the way his own face felt, as if he was standing before some sentient mirror. Where the other Lance’s brow furrowed, the first Lance felt the bunching at the bridge of his nose. The first Lance felt the air dry the surface of his eyes, just as he observed the other Lance’s unblinking stare.

It finally occurred to Lance then that, in a way, he *could* read the other Lance’s mind, because he realized that they were doing and, thus, probably thinking the same thing: they were searching each other for the answer to Hunk’s question.

Isn’t it still worth a chance?

When both Lances' eyes flicked to Elena and then to Pidge, the first Lance knew—as he reckoned the other Lance did, too—that they came to the same conclusion.

The other Lance was the one who voiced it. “At this point,” he said, “something is definitely better than nothing. Elena and I’ll have to talk it over with our team before we act on anything. But if you can think of some way to get into contact with your people—” He nodded his chin at Keith. “—on our side? Well, I’d be happy to hear it.”

Preceded only by a sniffle, Elena launched upwards and wrapped her arms around the other Lance’s neck.

With a chuckle, the other Lance returned his daughter’s embrace, smoothing down her hair with his fingertips. “Kid, come on,” he grumbled lightheartedly.

“*Dad,*” she half-sobbed, voice quavering. “I thought— I didn’t think you’d ever—”

The other Lance just shushed her, tightening his grip a little more around her. “Honey, despite what you might think,” he said around another, deeper chuckle, “you don’t actually know *everything* .”

Hunk might’ve said something under his breath to Keith along the lines of, *Heh, who does that remind you of?* But most of it was lost with the sound of Allura’s chair scraping along the floor as she rose to her feet.

“I know what to do,” she explained, folding her hands together in front of her waist. Twisting around slightly, she continued, “Pidge, certainly you can extract from the Castle’s computer coordinates of our known Marmora outposts, correct?”

Pidge didn’t respond.

After a few extra seconds, Allura cleared her throat and prompted, “Ahem. Pidge?”

Only then did Pidge snap to attention, tearing her eyes away from staring somewhat unfocused at the other Lance and Elena to stare full-focused at Allura. “Uh, what? I mean, yes . Sorry.” She stood, too. “It might take a little while, but yeah, I can do that.”

Elena, parting from her father and running the heel of her hand beneath her eye, beamed. “Now all there’s left is to solve the Voltron problem.”

“Meaning?” Hunk asked.

“Meaning we’re still down a pilot.”

“I don’t know,” Keith interjected. The corners of his eyes crinkled in what Lance could only guess was a suppressed smile. “If you do find other Keith, I have a feeling he might be willing to help with that.”

Elena’s grin, if possible, widened. “If he’s as pretty as you, I have a feeling I might let him.”

Keith's almost-smile dropped as the other Lance hissed, “ *Elena* , please, he's *my* age. I swear, one of these days you're gonna give me a heart attack.” Meanwhile, the room's other occupants rose automatically to file out the door, making their path without direction down the hallway towards the bridge for the third time that day.

Habit , the first Lance mused internally as he watched Pidge's back round the corner in front of him.

At that moment, though, the collar of his shirt dug into his throat, halting Lance mid-stride. Without thinking, he whirled around, hands up, ready to fend off whatever unidentified sneak thought they'd try to get the best of him—only to have his hands smacked down.

“Relax, will you?” the other Lance, whose hand was dropping from its grip on the back of the first Lance's shirt, laughed. “Come on,” he added with a tilt of his chin down the other end of the hallway. “Walk with me. I want to talk to you.”

The walk was spent in complete silence. The other Lance, despite his saying he wanted to talk, made no indication that anything was urgent enough to begin discussing it before they got to wherever they were going. And Lance—the first Lance—certainly wasn't going to be the one to start talking. For one thing, he had nothing to say. For another, he was largely distracted in trying to will the sound of footsteps to pursue them, stop them, keep them from being alone.

Such a desired interruption never came, though. And soon a door whizzed open and the other Lance led the way through it as if he owned the place.

Of course, if the first Lance was being fair, the other Lance did, in a way, own the place. But the first Lance was not going to be fair and, to prove it, rushed ahead into the lounge to claim his—and the other Lance's, he was *sure* —favorite space on the couch.

In response, the other Lance just sighed, smiling, and gently lowered himself onto the seat across the floor. After taking a moment to settle, he said, “So.”

It took the first Lance an extra few seconds before he responded, “So what?”

“So . . .” The other Lance shrugged, and his smile deepened to the point that his cheek dimpled. Lance always thought he would grow out of that. “Do you have any questions for me?”

Annoyance crept up Lance's spine like a tiny, Lance-looking snake. “ *You're* the one who wanted to talk.”

“Yeah, that's true.” The other Lance leaned forward, setting his elbows on his knees. “But I figured *you'd* be the one who wanted to, you know, know stuff. I already know all the stuff. I mean, come on.” He twisted his head around to give the first Lance the side-eye; the first Lance hated it. “A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to quiz your future self? Can't pass *that* up.”

The spike of irritation, admittedly, ebbed away. Replacing it, however, was more anxiety than curiosity. Lance reached up to scratch at his earlobe and peered up at the ceiling. “I don’t know. I think I’ve had enough glimpses into the future for one quintant.”

“Maybe you’re right,” the other Lance agreed, reaching up to scratch at his own earlobe.

“Besides,” the first Lance added, feeling a slight, unbidden surge of confidence. “We can’t even be a hundred percent that you are my future self anyway. So.”

The other Lance looked him up and down dubiously. But he responded, “Sure. So, maybe not.”

“Let’s hope not,” Lance said without thinking. He didn’t need to see the other Lance’s quick, accusatory glare before tacking on, “Sorry, I didn’t mean— It’s just . . . Your version of things isn’t exactly a happy one, is it?”

“Isn’t it?”

This really threw Lance off, and he was incapable of doing anything outside of squinting warily at the man across from him.

The other Lance continued on unprompted. “Yeah, we, like, *lost* . But with this new Blaze of Mamba business—”

“Blade of Marmora.”

“Whatever. I don’t know.” The other Lance nodded. “Maybe it’s not *all* over. Plus I’ve still got the team. And Elena.” Then he began to laugh as he said, “Whatever else happens, I hope you’re lucky enough to end up getting Elena. Or someone like her, at least. She’s just—” Obviously lost for words, the other Lance settled on shaking his head. “She’s great. The greatest thing ever, actually.”

The first Lance replied, “She seems cool,” unwilling to say anything more than that because, honestly, acknowledging her as anything close to a daughter was a bit more than he was willing to handle and, also, he found Elena to be a little bit of a pest. But he added, without thinking, “To get Elena though, *Pidge* and *I* — *we’d* —” Unable to finish the sentence, he dropped it.

“You two aren’t together,” the other Lance stated, lacking any hint of a question in his voice.

The first Lance’s mind suddenly wandered to his hand cupping Pidge’s jaw, to leaning forward, lips puckered, to meet empty air. Using all his remaining strength to pull himself out of the memory and to not blush, though, he shook his head. “Nah,” he said, hoping it sounded casual, even though it cracked a little at the end. “She’s my best friend.”

“She was my best friend, too,” the other Lance replied simply, bringing his hands up to cradle his chin.

An awkward silence enveloped them as they sat and stared at each other. The first Lance’s skin itched, though, in a way that couldn’t be satisfied by scratching. Finally, eventually, he

asked, “What, does that disappoint you? That *this* Pidge . . . and *me* —”

The other Lance put on a (pretty clearly false) brave face. “No, no, if that’s not in the cards for you. I just . . .” He heaved a heavy sigh. “I just owe Elena ten thousand GAC now.”

Lance didn’t expect to laugh, but laugh he did. The other Lance probably didn’t expect the first Lance to laugh either, because his own laughter burst out surprisingly, abruptly. And they laughed for a while before Lance, who was obviously going a bit mental, took a deep breath and said, “I think—uh. I think Elena really misses her.”

The other Lance’s laughter died down, and he coughed a little before saying, “I know.”

“You should . . . you know. You should talk about her, then. With Elena.”

Pursing his lips, the other Lance took a semi-long pause, and then repeated, “I know.”

“Okay.”

The silence this time was longer, but a little more comfortable. The first Lance filled most of it by picking at his shoelaces before his mouth seemed to ask a question of its own volition. “How did that happen? You two together, I mean. Like, how did that start?”

There was a quick flash of something like smugness on the other Lance’s face, but before the first Lance could call him out on it, the other Lance spoke. “Slowly but surely.”

The first Lance nodded, waited for more explanation, and was met with a whole lot of nothing. “What, is that it?”

“You don’t want me giving away all the good stuff, do you?”

“No—I mean, not *no* . Nothing’s gonna happen—”

“Really? Because it sounds to me like you’re looking for tips.”

The annoyance was back and crawling hotly across Lance’s cheeks. He crossed his arms and grumbled, “Listen, man. You don’t know anything about me, *me* me, here, in *this* reality. So —”

“Maybe you’re right,” the other Lance said, but without any irritation on his part. If anything, he spoke with sympathy, with pity. “Maybe I don’t know how she’ll creep up on you so slowly that you’ll have no idea it’s happening until you’re already too far gone. Or how you’ll be so deep in your little . . . pit of denial that it’ll take years of dancing around each other before either of you *do* anything about it. Maybe that’s not you at all, maybe I’m crazy, blah blah blah.” He waved his hand dismissively in the air before dropping it to cross his own arms over his breastplate.

The first Lance, meanwhile, was too stunned, too numb, to do much more than gape at him.

The other Lance stared sulkily at his toes, in a way that reminded the first Lance so forcefully of his father, before he finished, “If I’m wrong, kid, I’m wrong. But all I’m saying is that I

would give anything to get that time we lost back. That's it."

The first Lance took his time swallowing, clearing his throat, and swallowing again before he said, "M'sorry."

"Nah, you've got nothing to be sorry for. *I'm* sorry for dumping all this on you. It's . . . well, it's been a while since I've talked about her." The other Lance smirked. "I guess you've just got one of those faces people trust."

Lance smirked back. "I get it. I just . . ." He was going to say that he couldn't imagine. But that wasn't true. He *could* imagine. What he couldn't imagine is how this man in front of him could stand it, living in a world where Pidge wasn't.

Just then, it felt like a piece of a dam had broken away in his mind. The whole thing hadn't come crashing down, waves of stark, undeniable realization hadn't flushed after it. It wasn't the first piece that had broken off, either. But still, it was a sizeable one, the first one he really noticed, and some truth was trickling through:

He wouldn't want to live in a world from which Pidge had gone. And, suddenly, he knew he felt this truth in a different way than he would have felt about a world without Hunk or Allura or Keith or Coran.

The other Lance seemed to sense his struggle in a way, because he said, "Sometimes I can't really believe it, that she's gone and I'm still here. Sometimes it feels like it's all . . . But having Elena makes it better. Gives me something to work for, you get it. And—" Inexplicably, he smiled. "—seeing her now?" His smile faltered for an infinitesimal moment as he seemed to chew on his next few words. "*Pidge* . Being healthy and happy and *here* ? It means a lot."

"It's weird though, too, right?" the first Lance prompted. "It's definitely weird for *us* ."

"Yeah, sure, it's weird. This Pidge here doesn't know me, doesn't remember what . . . You get it." He shrugged then, like he was explaining something simple. "*My Pidge, my Katie*. She was my wife."

Lance nodded in understanding, hoping that would suffice for an actual response. Again, though, a question rose to his lips without his thinking about it. "So . . . when did you guys actually, you know. Get *married* ? And, like, *how* ?"

Not for the first time, the other Lance's expression turned a little too knowing for the first Lance's comfort. But, also not for the first time, the other Lance didn't say anything about it. Instead, he answered the question. "We had a real small Altean ceremony thing when Elena was a few months old, so—"

"*Wha—huh? Wait*. Wait a minute. *You—*" Lance sputtered, leaning so far forward that his body was almost perpendicular to the floor. "You didn't get married until *after—*"

"*Hey* ," the other Lance said, holding his hands out in front of him defensively. "That wasn't *my* fault! I was trying to marry her for *years* before we even knew Elena existed. She just—"

What? ”

Lance had dissolved into utter hysterics, mind officially lost. Rubbing his hands over his tearing eyes, he choked out. “Sorry, nothing. It’s just—” He hiccupped. “Mom’s gonna *kill you*. ”

The other Lance took a minute to stare at him, thunderstruck. Then he buckled, too, and fell into a giggle fit.

“Hey—oh. Am I, uh, interrupting?”

The door had whizzed open without the first Lance’s noticing, and as he looked up to investigate, he found Elena standing in the threshold, leaning against its frame.

“Sorry,” she said, wincing. “Unless it’s something weird. Then I’m not sorry,”

“No,” the other Lance eventually said, still wheezing a bit. “No, you’re fine. What’s up?”

Elena’s wince deepened. “Don’t be mad.”

The other Lance blinked at her. “Angel,” he said, sounding exasperated. “I love it when you start sentences like that. Really, I do.” His mouth tightened, any trace of laughter dissipated. “What is it?”

“No big deal. S’just—” Elena hooked her thumb over her shoulder. “I’m thinking, maybe, a little bit, we ought to get moving. Back home, I mean.”

“Why?” both Lances asked simultaneously, with equal notes of suspicion creeping into their voices.

“Uh. The rift’s . . . sort of. . . Oh, how to put this?”

Elena attempted a smile, waggled her fingers in some feeble attempt at jazz hands, but then grimaced.

“Gone .”

Chapter End Notes

Story's been extended from five chapters to six, because getting this chapter out took a lot more words than I initially anticipated. Just think of it as an apology for the long hiatus between chapters, though I cannot and will not promise it won't happen again.

See y'all in six more months for the actual final installation lololol. Find me at mkandas.tumblr.com for musings in the meantime.

End Notes

My new attempt at completing a multi-chapter fic--this time, in new Voltron flavor!

Find me at mkandas.tumblr.com

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