

To Know Is Not Enough by Otlal3
Chapter 10: Space Academy

Author's Chapter Notes:

WEP owns Voltron. Rated R for language and sexual references

Towers of glass loomed tall over Lance, giant ice sculptures piercing the sky. Tubular walkways connected the many buildings and tiny shapes of people could be seen walking through them like ants through the intricate tunnels of a vast colony. Lance walked along a cobblestone path, remnants of a culture long since decimated from this region of Earth, leading him to the largest glass building in the courtyard. He looked skyward and saw the structure had been built around an old bell tower where ugly stone gargoyles sat atop, their snarling faces and pointed fangs keeping vigil over the campus. Intergalactic Space Academy. He grumbled to himself as he progressed toward the old stone tower penetrating the center of the elegant glass building. The path diverted around at a large fountain adorned with plump cherubs and wild beasts spewing water in gentle arcs. He tilted his head sideways, his eyes caught by the etched lettering at the base of the fountain. *Non satis scire*. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" he said, dropping his bag to the ground.

"Lance. Shut up." A steady voice standing over him demanded his immediate attention. His older brother stood next to him and frowned at the disheveled boy.

"I'm not going. They don't even speak English here!" Lance crossed his arms and leaned against the fountain.

"Don't be a brat. Of course they speak English. Just not *your* English." His brother looked down at Lance and gave him a nudge. "C'mon. You'll like it here. I did."

"Yeah, well you *wanted* to go here. I'm being *forced*," Lance moaned. He looked up at his brother, so aptly names Scout, and caught his eye, a blue so faint it was nearly white with a piercing iris of black. The odd pigment always bothered Lance and he looked away.

"True. But you heard what dad said. If he can't get that crap washed out of your mouth, maybe the Space Academy can. Let's go, Squirt." Scout grabbed Lance's bag and walked toward the entrance. He turned to his brother midway to the building and saw him touch the engraved Latin phrase. Lance slowly stood up and trotted toward his brother, his lanky eleven year old frame tripping over awkward feet. "To know is not enough."

"What?" Lance asked.

"The phrase on the fountain. To know is not enough." Scout pointed back at the fountain.

"Am I supposed to understand that?"

“Nah. Not now. But you will.” Scout’s face uplifted into a grin and they entered the large building through revolving doors that clunked over the threshold. It was difficult to discern the transition from outside to in with the high glass walls and ceiling. The echoing sounds of clicking feet and quiet voices were all that upheld the effect of enclosure.

“Shit!” Lance yelled, suddenly feeling very out of place. His single word bounced into the air and across the cascading staircase, into the ears of passersby and then dissipated.

“Lance! Watch your mouth! I mean it,” Scout reprimanded with a suppressed shout and grabbed his brother’s skinny arm. He pulled Lance close to him, wanting to warn him about the consequences of a foul mouth at the academy, but a deep voice boomed over him.

“Is this your little brother that just filled this building with curses, Commander?” the voice asked. Scout released Lance and in one quick motion turned in salute to the senior officer who spoke.

“Yes sir, General. I apologize on behalf of my scoundrel sibling for his disrespectful mouth. He just now told me it won’t happen again,” Scout responded, throwing Lance a quick look.

“Did he? That’s a mighty big promise to keep, young man.” The general looked at Lance who stood silently, his arms crossed in resilience.

“Yeah, well good thing I didn’t really make that promise then,” Lance replied with a smug grin.

“Lance!” Scout growled and then looked back at the general with apology.

“Relax, Commander. Soon enough he’ll learn where he can and can’t flap his mouth like that. Listen, young man. You have some big shoes to fill. Your brother here was one of our star pilots. Think you can outdo him?” the general asked.

“Hell yeah,” Lance said, wondering why this giant man was bothering to even ask.

“That’s what I thought.” The general turned to Scout and mumbled a few words, throwing Lance a few glances. Lance lost interest in their conversation and played with the strap on his bag, tying and untying elaborate knots he had mastered on his fishing line. Engrossed in his craft, Lance jumped when Scout tapped him on the shoulder.

“Squirt, General Laxor will take you to your room. I gotta get going. If you need anything, call me. I’m a 10 minute flight from here. Don’t call Dad. You’ll just piss him off.” Scout had his hands on Lance’s shoulders as though anticipating an attempted escape from his new fate as space cadet. “And listen. You’re lucky they let you in during summer session and being so young. Watch yourself - it’s not always the officers who’ll give you a hard time. And don’t be such a cynical brat. You’re too young.”

“Fine. Whatever you say, *Commander*,” Lance mocked as he wriggled loose from his brother’s clutch. Scout shook his head and saluted the General before he walked back out the door.

The general left Lance in his quarters with instructions to unpack, familiarize himself with his surroundings, and then report to the dining hall at 1700 hours for dinner. Lance was glad to be rid of the big boss guy, tired of being cajoled into besting his brother who had graduated nearly 5 years ago. It got old when they started up the second flight of stairs to his room and the general commented on the perfect scores Scout had achieved in his classes and the leadership role he played in extra curricular activities. There was only so much over-achieving Lance was willing to do and that would only happen on his terms, preferably when he was flying – the only good thing that would come of being here. The rest of it could be someone else's responsibility.

Lance looked over his room. There was two of everything – desks, beds, lamps, dressers – and only one of him. He unloaded his sack onto the bed, clothes piling high in a disorganized heap. He opened the dresser closest to his bed and saw it was full of crisp black uniforms folded individually in a neat row. Juggling an armful of clothing, he moved to the other dresser and found it was full as well. He grumbled to himself and dropped his clothes on the floor, finding no better alternative. A scan of the desks found one with a notebook on it and Lance moved to it, but its pages were empty. A pile of pencils, pens, and various student supplies were neatly aligned in the middle desk drawer. Lance didn't know what he was looking for, but it would be obvious when he found it. All the drawers were opened and then closed, revealing nothing of any interest to a mischievous boy.

Lance stood in the middle of the room and tapped his chin. This was the old section of the building with ancient wooden walls and floors, tiled ceilings and one large paneled window looking out over the green. The bell tower sat across the green, surrounded in its foundation of glass, and he wondered if it rang at all hours of the night. He didn't like the idea of that one bit. His eyes moved to the bed opposite his and he noted the precise folds in the blanket, the puffed pillow and stark white linens. It looked terribly uncomfortable. He rushed to the bed and pulled the blanket down into a mangled mess on the floor. The pillow followed and Lance lifted the mattress, his final touch in redecorating the room. And there, under the mattress, he found what he was looking for. A creased picture, aged and worn, floated between the slats of the bed frame and onto the floor. Lance dropped the bed back into place and sat down. The picture remained on the floor and he looked down at it to see a young child embraced by a man and woman, all smiling broadly.

"Hunh," Lance said, his curiosity piqued. His fingers found the delicate edges of the picture and he folded it into his pocket. It might come in handy later.

Feeling restless, Lance left his room in disarray and wandered the halls of the dormitory. He found the lounge where various chairs and games were scattered about. A giant fireplace filled the far side with ancient stones mortared into a fantastic earthen face of gray. Lance continued down the hall, passing closed doors he assumed were more bedrooms. At the end of the hall he discovered a room with several computers and map tables. He scrambled about looking for the power switch, wanting to see the star maps light up before him and projected into the air in a three dimensional display where his fingers could reach out and touch them. When his finger found a button, the table hummed to life and purple light jumped from the surface to reveal an

electronic mirage of glowing stars, planets, moons, and all elements of space. Lance's jaw fell open and he gawked at the tiny galaxy, flickering and moving.

"Cool!" Lance smiled broadly and ran his hands through the image. It jumped at the intrusion, splitting apart and then joining back together with a blink.

"Hey kid! What the hell are you doing here? Who the hell are you?" A loud voice reached him and Lance stood upright and very still, hoping that maybe, just maybe the voice was speaking to someone else. "I asked you a question, twirp. Who the hell are you and what are you doing in the map room?"

"Um... I was in here trying to avoid your ugly face," Lance said as he scanned the room for a possible escape route. When he looked back to the source of the voice, he saw a hefty teenager and two equally large yet silent sidekicks. *Oh shit.*

"Real funny. Why don't you come over here so you can see just how ugly I can get," the teen retorted as he took a step toward Lance. Lance stepped toward him and the trio stopped. Surprise flashed across their faces and Lance smirked. *All talk, no action. Typical.*

"What's the matter? Afraid of a little boy, are we?" Lance prodded, taking another step toward the three large boys. He wasn't the least bit nervous anymore as he eyed the giant crawl space between their legs – the ultimate escape route for any scrawny boy. The boys glared at Lance, with fists clenched, but they remained unmoved by his antagonizing. *Is this what military training does? Makes pussies out of men? C'mon, make a move!*

"Magnus! Leave him alone. He's with me." A voice from behind the trio called out and became more distinct as its source neared. Lance squinted as the lights came on and the purple haze of the map table faded in the whiteness of the overheads. He looked over the shoulders of his rivals and saw a boy not much older than him approaching. His black hair was buzzed short to his head and his alert dark eyes gave him an air of authority. He was lean but without the lanky arms and legs that vexed Lance, and he walked confidently toward the much larger teens.

"Oh really? Well then who is he exactly?"

"He's my new roommate. Hey, isn't Captain Frees expecting you for mop duty?" The young boy stood in front of the teen, his hands on his hips and his face stern. The teen shifted his eyes and without a word, turned from the room, his two friends following closely.

"So are you my new roommate?" The dark-haired boy turned to Lance, his brows raised in question.

"I dunno. Do you snore?" Lance responded with a huff.

"No," the boy laughed and reached out his hand. "I'm Keith. They told me you were coming. Lance, right?"

“Yeah. So those guys were awful nervous about you staring them down. What’s up with that? You’re half their size,” Lance asked as they walked down the hall.

“I think they’re more afraid of Captain Frees than me. But that’s not to say I haven’t kicked their asses once or twice at our sparring matches.”

“You spar with them? They let you do that?” Lance was suddenly very intrigued by his new roommate, as well as the prospect of getting to kick some ass himself.

“Sure. Why wouldn’t they?” Keith asked with a shrug.

“I dunno. You’re so much younger than them.”

“Oh, I guess so. But I’m in their class, and I have to fight someone, don’t I?” Keith opened the door to their room and stopped as his eyes caught the mess Lance had made.

“Uh, sorry about that. I didn’t know I had a roommate. I was trying to make it more comfortable,” Lance said, catching the look of distress in Keith’s eyes.

“They won’t like that. Help me make the bed, will you?” Keith had a confidence in his words that demanded attention and evoked in Lance a desire to listen closely as though he might miss something important. Without question or contention, he leaned over and learned the art of military folds as Keith told him about dress code, evening chores and the dreaded 5am toll of the bell tower. Lance grimaced at the latter, suddenly aware that his life was now drastically different from the lazy days of fishing, reading, and stickball back home.

Several months at the academy had allowed Lance all the time he needed to make himself known throughout the ranks as the smartass troublemaker his father had cursed him for being. The officers were none too pleased at the impact this was having on their star pupil, who happened to be Lance’s roommate. It became clear to Lance that Keith was their pride and joy. A mere six years old when he entered the academy under unknown circumstances, Keith had excelled at his studies and now at twelve had jumped ahead three years. Lance’s keen eye had detected this humble brilliance in Keith long before he had ever admitted to being in advanced classes. Keith had an innate ability to mastermind intricate scenarios for their side projects and pranks which made Lance wonder exactly what this boy was capable of. And all the coddling Keith received from instructors and officers was another hint that they had special plans for this wonder kid.

The two became inseparable and pandemic in their efforts to bring an ounce of chaos to the campus. Keith had been a reluctant participant in Lance’s elaborate antics, but always caved when he saw the grin of his friend and felt the laughter fill his stomach when older students fell prey to a booming voice in the shower, spaghetti in their dresser drawers, or their pictures attached to phallic images throughout the halls. Luckily for Lance, Keith was exceptionally quick at completing his studies, and this often allowed them time to plan. They had made a deal

that no talk of their next scheme would interrupt Keith's study time, and Lance was rewarded with the protection from school bullies that Keith's reputation afforded him.

Lance's twelfth birthday passed in the late summer with little fanfare, aside from Scout's visit and the pocketknife Keith gave him as a gift. The months continued to tick by and the boys frolicked in their youthful endeavors. In general, the administration looked the other way as their charges continued to wreak havoc across campus. This was solely due to Keith's continued high marks and Lance's proficiency for math and physics. Lance won top honors for a classroom project involving projectiles in states of weakened gravity, and was advanced several levels to join Keith and the older boys in the initial steps to flight training. Lance was thrilled at this new development. He no longer had to wait until he was seventeen to fly, and instead would be granted his wings within a year. He couldn't be more pleased, but was surprised when Keith turned gloomy as January arrived and the days lingered in darkness. Lance watched his friend intently from under the cover of his studies, while Keith sat at his desk with books open, but his eyes gazing out the window. What could possibly be wrong – they were going to be pilots soon? Something wasn't right, and it occurred to Lance that maybe he didn't know Keith very well at all.

"Hey I hear Pendleton has a new battle stripe. I have a new marker. Wanna go do some coloring?" Lance asked as he tossed his book on his bed.

"Nah. I gotta study," Keith replied, his eyes slowly moving from the window to his open book.

"Yeah, I can tell you're getting on really well with that." Lance was being sarcastic and rolled his eyes.

"Leave me alone, would you?" Keith jumped up from his chair and scowled at Lance.

"Well quit being such a piss ant. You're no fun anymore" Lance retorted with a snort.

"And you're stupid!" Keith grabbed his coat from the back of his chair and walked out.

Lance jumped up and opened the door, glancing down one side of the hall and then the other. Boys milled around, and a quiet murmur echoed throughout. He spotted Keith scrambling through the loiterers and opened his mouth in anger. He was determined to have the last word. "Go cry to mommy and daddy, you big baby!"

Lance saw Keith stop in his tracks, and spin on his heels. People in the hall stood still, watching the two young boys glare at each other as the distance between them closed. Keith breathed rapidly, his nostrils flaring with rage and he never broke his stare with Lance. His pace quickened and with a surge of adrenaline, slammed Lance into the wall with his body. His fists were clenched and swung out in fierce circles, serving sharp blows to the boy beneath him. Lance covered his face, knowing full well he was outweighed and out-skilled by Keith who had been in physical combat training for nearly seven years. But these were not calculated punches; they were the punches of a child brewing with rage from a place he didn't recognize, from a pain he couldn't understand.

A red-faced Keith was pulled from Lance, his eyes moist and mouth spitting like a rabid animal. He broke free from the grip that held him and ran outside into the night. Lance lifted himself off the wooden floor and felt the throb of Keith's furious punches in his sides. Fellow students looked at him and shuffled around as they dispersed to their rooms, their interest in the conflict waning. It was clear who had won.

"Hey, Litska. What the hell is eating him anyway?" Lance asked the quiet boy who roomed next door to them.

"His parents are dead. He's an orphan," Litska answered, pushing his glasses up his crooked nose and retreating into his room.

"Oh. Shit." Lance walked into his room and closed the door behind him. His ribs ached and he sat heavily on the bed with a deep sigh. What an ass. Lance leaned over and felt under his mattress until his fingers touched a sliver of glossy paper. With a gentle pull, the picture he had found under Keith's mattress long ago slid out. He neatly folded it into his coat pocket and left to find Keith.

Lance didn't have to search far as he suspected Keith would be wandering the trails of the campus woods where it was rumored that space viruses and exiled intergalactic demons resided. Keith used these woods as a means of desensitizing himself to irrational thoughts, an exercise promoted by the Advanced Military Tactics and Psychology class he was taking. Lance had yet to be enrolled in this class, so as he approached the combed edge of the woods, his mind danced with images of man-eating blobs and skeletons among the skinny, poking tree limbs. A narrow trail sliced through the fingers of leafless trees and he noted fresh footprints in the snow. *Well, it's either Keith or some hideous space creature. I better go find out which.* Lance stepped into the forest and held his breath as new snowflakes quietly floated to the ground around him. Stepping gingerly, he moved forward and his eyes adjusted to the dark. A twig snapped in the distance and he stopped moving. No wind shuffled the trees, but something was moving and Lance's heart pumped faster.

"Keith?" he said, barely audible to his own ears. He scanned the brown darkness, faintly illuminated by the glow of snow, but somehow he missed the driving circle of white that flew at his face and stung upon impact.

"What?" Keith was standing down the path, his expression empty as he shaped another snowball with his hands.

"Shit," Lance mumbled as he wiped coarse grains of hardened snow from his eyes. The burning cold of the impact tingled and he glared at Keith. "What was that for?"

"Because you're an ass," Keith responded and pelted another bullet of snow at Lance's shoulder.

"Of course I am. I didn't know about your folks. I'm sorry." Lance brushed snow off his coat and stepped forward.

“So why’d you steal my picture?” Keith’s face was barely visible in the dark, but Lance could see the blackened lines of his eyebrows slanting down.

“I don’t know. I found it my first day and forgot about it. You never asked for it, so I wasn’t even sure it was yours. I’m sorry. Here,” he said as walked to Keith and handed the picture to him.

Keith slowly took the picture and unfolded it. Flakes collected on the image as he looked at it, and he blew them off with a sharp breath. “I used to look at it every day. But since you got here, I’d forgotten about it. But then the snow and my thirteenth birthday coming. It’ll be ten years tomorrow.”

“What happened?” Lance asked.

Keith wasn’t prepared to tell the full story, neither the one he remembered nor the one he had been told. He pocketed the picture and tossed his last snowball into the trees, listening to it crack against limbs stiffened with cold. He opted to give his standard answer to the difficult question. “They were shot when I was three. Right in front of me.”

“Oh man.” Lance waited for words of comfort to come to him, but he could only think to share his own loss. “My mom died when I was born. She was too old to be having a baby. My dad blames me for her death, but my brother told me she was sick before she was even pregnant.”

“That sucks. Sorry.” Keith absently picked up a pile of snow and watched the tiny crystals shift from distinct prisms to pearls of water in the warmth of his hands. “And sorry I beat you up.”

“Bah! Barely a scratch. Besides, you hit like a girl,” Lance said with a smile, and in his next breath was face down in the snow. Keith’s tackle had put him at the disadvantage of being subdued by the heavy snow and he scrambled to find a release from its grip. Keith leaned in to Lance’s ear and whispered, “Funny thing coming from someone who looks an awful lot like a girl.”

“You’re dead, roomy!” Lance clumsily jumped up from the snow and gave chase. He found his legs steady and swift under the shifting snow as he ran after Keith, and within a few turns through the forest, he had the advantage and tackled his friend. They landed with a grunt and Lance jumped up immediately, claiming victory with a joyous dance. He looked down at Keith whose face was red with the wash of cold snow. Keith’s eyes were raised in amazement and Lance stopped gloating. “What?”

“Do you know how fast you were going?” Keith asked as he sat up.

“No.”

“Me neither, but I’ve never seen anyone move like that in deep snow.” Keith said as he tried to stand up and fell back into the snow. Lance offered his hand and pulled up his friend and their

arms locked in a grip of camaraderie and friendship that ran deeper than their youthful age could understand.

Turning seventeen at the Academy was a big event for Lance. He would soon be able to fly into space. He had earned his wings at fourteen alongside Keith, but flying over Earth had become routine in the past three years. Space was what he had been waiting for. Unlike Keith, Lance had not been granted advanced trainings in all areas and still mucked through tedious hours of more rudimentary homework on weaponry, cavalry, wilderness survival and what felt like a mile-long list of classes remaining. Keith's academic progress had set him to flying reconnaissance missions in the Milky Way galaxy on a weekly basis and Lance saw him only on weekends. Keith often came home exhausted and with an odd assortment of cuts and bruises that Lance found peculiar for mere recon activity.

On a late summer evening Keith opened the door to his room and threw his travel bag on the floor. Lance was not home and he sighed with relief. His friend's habit was to ask thousands of questions related to his missions, and Keith hated lying to him. Tonight, the blood on his uniform and the bandages on his hand would betray his true duties as a pilot.

Keith sat on his bed which had been disheveled in his absence. He smiled, certain that Lance had played host to some girl. Sometimes he wished he shared Lance's natural prowess for women, but his heart wasn't in it. He enjoyed the swooning that sometimes followed him, but his duties felt too big to be dabbling in the dynamics of flirtation and sex, and that made him feel older than he was. Keith closed his eyes as he lay back on his pillow and conjured the lovely image of Corinna, the one girl he had been coveting for the past year. He pictured her wavy brown hair brushing against her neck and her shimmering green eyes. A faint smile reached his face and he looked for the image again, but found only flashes of the horrors he faced today. Yes, having a girlfriend was out of the question.

"Hey, Keith!" Lance's voice boomed into the room as he entered. "Holy shit! What the hell happened to you?"

Keith sat up and rubbed his tired eyes. This was it - the end of his lies. "I ran into trouble near Jupiter."

"No shit! What were they flying? Did someone shoot you down? Oh, and how long have you been a fighter pilot?" Lance stood in front of Keith with his trademark smirk.

"You know?"

"C'mon. I'm no dummy. That's not exactly a cut from a crash landing. It's a laser burn," Lance said, pointing to the laceration across Keith's arm.

"Fuck. Yeah, I'm a fighter pilot."

“And when were you going to tell me?”

“Listen, I didn’t want to worry you. I spend my weeks flying around the galaxy fending off the Drule Empire.” Keith’s eyes were half closed with fatigue and he propped his head on the nightstand.

“Don’t lie. You didn’t tell me because you knew I’d be jealous,” Lance replied in a huff.

“Well... you are, aren’t you?”

“Hell yes! You’re out there shooting things, buzzing through space, and I am stuck in the stifling atmosphere of this planet flying air raid trainings for junior officers. So lame. So very lame. Man, can you imagine being able to touch the stars and defend your galaxy all in the same mission? Well, of course you can, you do it every week. What a blast!” Lance rambled on, pacing the room with excitement.

“Oh yeah. It’s a real blast. Literally,” Keith replied with a chuckle.

Lance stopped pacing and looked at Keith, who tiredly smiled at his friend. “Keith, really. Don’t tell me you don’t love being up there.”

Keith thought for a moment. The sensations of flying through space, skimming the surface of planets he had admired and studied from Earth for so long, was not lost to him. And the thrill of defeating the enemy was a rush he felt in his bones. He didn’t mind the bruises and the scars, because he knew he was making the universe a safer place. Keith felt all of this, and Lance saw it written on his face. They exchanged smiles, as no words were needed to convey this euphoria; it was why they were here.

“So next week I am grounded because of my injury,” Keith said, raising his wrapped hand.

“They want me to command the field simulations for your class. Think you can handle that?”

“You bet. You might just want to keep an eye on Hunk. He’s been having trouble with the long-range trajectory of the high powered rifles. Maybe you can show him how it’s done,” Lance suggested. Hunk had arrived at the Academy a month after Lance and pretty much kept to himself. Lance had noticed he often followed Keith from a distance, admiration and insecurity always stretched across his face - Keith had yet another admirer. Lance also knew that Hunk was quite the sucker for good food and good jokes, but his large size often intimidated people and he struggled to make friends. Keith had made every effort to befriend the giant, and it took several years before Hunk had accepted this offer of friendship. His mechanical aptitude had him secretly assigned to work on the fighters Keith was flying as a side project, all the while taking classes to become a pilot. When he wasn’t in classes, Hunk was always at the air field, loyally admiring Keith.

A steady knock came on the door and Lance opened it with an enthusiastic swing. Hunk stood at the threshold, his forehead barely under the door frame. He bent himself into the room and sat in the chair Lance had pulled up for him. “Heard you were back, Keith.”

“Yup. Couldn’t have made it back without your work on the fighter.” Keith replied, his head still propped in his hand.

“Wow, look at you, all cut up. You okay?” Hunk said, ignoring the compliment Keith had just volunteered.

“Of course I’m okay. We won. I just wish I wasn’t so damn tired.”

A second knock came on the door and Keith rolled his eyes, dreading the party that was bound to ensue with another guest in the room. Lance opened the door and saw Scout before him.

“Hey big brother,” Lance said as he stepped aside and Scout walked in.

“Hey guys. Keith, you doing okay? That was quite a transport ride you had,” Scout nodded to Keith on the bed.

“He knows, Commander,” Keith said.

“Oh. Well then tell me how the fuck you got yourself out of that magnetic tractor beam. I was certain you were toast.” Scout sat down beside Keith on the bed and looked at him with amazement.

“I neutralized it with the laser probe. The expulsion it caused in my ship nearly killed me, but I got out and blasted the shit out of that skull ship.” Despite his fatigue and injuries, he was excited to be sharing his tactics with his commanding officer.

“Nicely done. I never would have thought of that. Good thing those probes are a dime a dozen, otherwise you and I would be sitting in front of the Admiral right now explaining ourselves.” Scout laughed to himself and silently marveled at Keith’s proficiency for battle strategy. He looked at Lance and smiled a half grin of gratitude that his little brother was still safely flying Earth’s atmosphere. But tomorrow he turned seventeen and would start his space flight training, and new worries would haunt Scout. “So Lance, I hear they had to customize a flight uniform for those skinny legs of yours.”

“Shut up Scout. My legs are just fine, thank you. They get me where I need to go... right down to the girls’ dorm.” Lance replied with a laugh.

“Oh really? Just the other day I heard Leah complaining to Belle that your legs make you look like a box on stilts. That can’t be good, my friend,” Keith joined.

“She didn’t say that. Leah likes everything about me, believe me!”

“Little brother, you have definitely found a way to make that ego work for you. Now here, I took the liberty of not wrapping your present, as I was in the middle of saving the universe. It’s not much but...” Scout took off his jacket and handed it to Lance.

“What? Really? You’re giving me your jacket?” Lance asked with a childish exuberance.

“You bet. You’ve made it to space pilot, Lance. I think I might actually be proud of you.”

“But this was Gramp’s. He gave it to you.” Lance looked at his brother, the brown leather coat hanging loosely from his hand. It was a genuine antique with worn patches at the elbows and a zipper that rarely worked. The cuffs were frayed and the pockets had holes, but Lance had always remembered that jacket covering the broad shoulders of his grandfather and then the smaller shoulders of the brother he so admired.

“Maybe, but now I want you to have it. I know how hard you’ve worked to be here, Lance. And I know that dad hasn’t exactly had much faith in you. But I knew you could do it. And I know Gramps would think you deserved it more than me.”

“Put it on, Lance. Go on,” Hunk urged his friend with a nudge. Lance slowly opened the jacket and dropped one arm into a sleeve, the smooth lining warm against his hand as he slid in. With his other arm in place, he shrugged the collar up and the jacket landed quietly on his shoulders.

“Damn. You look just like him. Like Gramps.” Scout quietly spoke and admired how much his younger brother had grown. He was now taller than him and steadily filling out with the physical demands of the Academy. He was nearly a man now.

“If I was a girl, I’d be all over your skinny ass,” Keith laughed as Lance looked in the mirror, his arms flexing into various body builder poses.

“If you were a girl, you’d be disappointed because I’m so untouchable.” Lance continued to look in the mirror, grooming his hair with long fingers, searching for just the right position to go with his new look.

“Okay, Lance. I didn’t give you the jacket to make you even more of pompous asshole. Just remember, it’s because I’m proud of you.... and glad you’re my family.” Scout stood up and placed his hands on Lance’s shoulders. Their eyes met and the silent words of brotherhood passed between them, an acknowledgement that their kinship was unconditional. They were brothers. “I’ve got to get back to base. I’m out of town this weekend, Lance. Have fun tomorrow. Keith, Hunk. Keep him out of trouble will you?”

The boys nodded and waved to Scout as he smiled to them all and left the room. It was the last time any of them would see him.