

To Know Is Not Enough by Otlal3
Chapter 9: Birthday Morning

Bolts of lightning sliced the sky in a pulse of heat, expanding molecules of air with explosive power. White against a dark sky, they branched like veins on the hand of a mighty god. Crack! Boom! Allura's eyes fluttered open at the noise and she blinked away the haze of sleep. She lifted her head off the pillow and looked at the clock. Static strands of hair stood upright in the electrified air, surrounding her head in a crown of gold.

"Crap. 3 a.m.," she mumbled and dropped her head back to the softness of her pillow. Her vocabulary had grown significantly since the boys arrived on Arus, but to the chagrin of Nanny, not all words involved diplomacy and courtship behavior. Allura always laughed at when she swore, surprised at the looseness of her tongue after so many years of propriety drilled into her.

Delinquent curse words streamed through her mind as she teetered on the edge of sleep once more. Lightning strikes illuminated the room and the thunder was relentless, cackling and snapping like the evil laugh of witch Haggar. Allura sat upright, a low grumble in her throat over the disruption. She flung the covers back and stepped onto the cool floor. "Shit, well sleep is out of the question," she said to no one in particular. She padded across the room and to the broad windows overlooking the village below. She rested her head on the glass, its coolness slippery against her skin.

Her thoughts flashed to Keith, one moment wondering if he was experiencing this same downpour, the next moment remembering him standing on the balcony during a fierce storm as though empowered by its energy. Her hand touched the glass as she caught the ghost of Keith standing in the rain, eyes skyward, fearless to the power of the electric bolts flashing through the air. He always smiled broadly when he came inside from the rain and she wondered if it was a rush for him.

Allura looked at the clock again. Only fifteen minutes had ticked by and the storm ravaged on. "It's already Lance's birthday. Perhaps I should go wake him up," she said, walking toward her closet in search of just the right outfit for an early birthday attack on her friend. The doors slid open as she approached and the automatic light shone directly on the rack of dresses and gowns she had collected over her life. She eyed them with mostly distaste, wishing she could pawn them off on someone who might enjoy wearing them. On occasion it was nice to look prim, but when it was expected she wear dresses at all meals, official events, and scheduled encounters with her people, it became a chore to don them.

Allura ran her hand across the dresses, feeling the varied fabrics. Her eye caught sight of a pale green dress tucked in the back and reached her hands for the hanger. She smiled at the dress that had been specially made for the first ball to celebrate the renewal of her kingdom. Nanny had been none too happy about the slit up the leg and the low neckline, but Allura had been thrilled and insisted on wearing it. And now, Allura removed her night gown and slipped the dress over

her head. It fell around her body with ease, the silken fabric grazing her breasts and hips in its descent. She sighed at the beauty of its design, cut low to reveal her collarbone, hugging her waist and hips then cascading straight down into a puddle of glowing green at her feet. She bent over and found the finger loop which had allowed her to dance that night at the ball. To dance with Keith. She hadn't known until she stepped into the ballroom and saw him across the great hall in his formal uniform that he was to have the first dance of the evening. He had stood out from the crowd, a confident yet humble demeanor made him as appealing to the attendees as the glamour of the princess. His striking military formal wear made him appear kingly, with crisp lines, medals at his chest and a sash to indicate his station as captain. The rest of the team wore similarly straight military apparel, but Keith's accomplishments had sparkled under the dim lights of the room and caught everyone's attention, including Allura's.

It had been an obstacle to reach Keith at the opposite end of the room, dodging potential suitors yearning for a dance, or diplomats wanting a word on peace relations, or worse yet, the glaring eyes of Nanny whose every attempt at hiding Allura's radiant skin from the eyes of all men had suddenly failed. After several bows from strangers and hands on her elbow, Allura had finally reached Keith who eyed her with an unusual expression of surprise and discomfort. He had bowed deeply when she smiled at him, and he had smirked mischievously at her when he rose to meet her stare. It was a look she rarely saw in him anymore.

"Captain, will you honor me with the first dance of the evening?" Allura had asked, her voice confident and sweet.

"It would be my pleasure, Princess," he had responded with a slighter bow. He had offered his arm and they made their way through the crowd, all eyes on the two people whose grooming had stolen the night.

Allura sighed at the memory of Keith's hand on her hip, his fingers spread out on her side and his thumb pressing just above her hip bone. She remembered his hand trembling for a brief moment. *Had he actually been nervous?* Allura wondered, crossing her arms in thought. She laughed at the idea and then closed her eyes to welcome the memory back. He had gently reached for her hand and held it aloft with strong fingers encircling hers. She had arched her back slightly and placed her free hand on his shoulder. Her eyes had lifted to his and they spun lightly around to the flowing music of violins and cellos.

"Wait a minute. Was I flirting with him?" Allura asked herself as she suddenly remembered puffing out her chest and where exactly his eyes had been before they met hers. *I had no idea I was doing it, but I was.* Living a sheltered life of royalty, she had little experience with flirting until the boys had arrived. When Lance first flirted with her, she had reacted with a petulant squawk, certain she had just been insulted. Keith begrudgingly clarified Lance's intentions and assured her he was just being an ass, the first of many times that word was used to describe the lieutenant. By the time the ball came around, Allura was on the cusp of understanding flirtation and how it worked. What she had yet to discover, however, was the giddy sensation of flirting with someone who flirted back. She had been blind-sided when she found herself admiring Keith with thoughts unfamiliar to her. She had frequently blushed at the images that ran through her mind as he spun her around the floor and they spoke of his medals.

An older and more seasoned Allura looked back on that night with a certain longing for her innocence. It was easier not knowing how to define her feelings, and it was certainly less painful. She closed her eyes and placed her hands in position, searching for the vestigial memory of the dance, wanting it to return to her in more vivid color. She danced around her bedroom, partnered with the man of her memory, her skin glowing intermittently as the lightning grew more distant. She suddenly stopped, sorrow in her gut as she realized Keith's face had faded in her mind. She concentrated, hoping to make out the laugh lines and wisps of hair that so often pestered his brooding eyes, but she couldn't distinctly conjure his image.

"Oh god." She dropped to the floor, covering her face with her hands. Her body shook with grief and she felt overwhelmingly alone with the tears that dampened her face. She wiped her eyes and looked at the clock. 430 a.m. Not too early to go wake up Lance for his birthday. Allura stood up and removed the dress, throwing a forlorn look at it as she returned it to the closet. She threw on her nightgown and walked out to the hall, a persistent mechanical hum penetrating the silence, as though the castle breathed.

Allura reached Lance's door and typed in the override code that Pidge had programmed for all of their rooms. She ran into the dark chamber when the door slid open and jumped on the bed with childlike exuberance. "Lance! Get up, you lazy bum! It's your birthday!" She continued to jump, expecting Lance to grumble and roll over, or at the very least swat her with his pillow. Nothing happened and Allura stopped jumping. The bed was empty and the room was still. She looked around from her post on the bed, scanning for anything out of place. Nothing seemed unordinary and she stepped down from the bed to peer into the bathroom. Nothing.

"Well, isn't that odd? Where could the little punk be?" She said to herself and walked to the window. She admired the sheets of rain slanting through the dim sky, small droplets making contact with the glass and twisting her view. She had a sudden need to see Lance, to know he was okay. She couldn't lose him too. Allura spun around and the door opened. A tall, shirtless figure stood silhouetted against the hallway lights and Allura paused. *Keith*? Her mind reeled and she reached her hand out questioningly.

"Princess? Are you lost, or are you here to give my birthday present?" The lights flickered on and Lance stepped into the room. Allura looked at him, his hair drenched and drips of moisture tracing the cut of his muscular chest.

"Princess?" Lance asked again as he stepped toward her, noticing her absent stare.

"Oh. Sorry Lance. I thought you were..." Her voice trailed off and she covered her chin as it quivered.

"You thought I was Keith? Oh," Lance said quietly as he threw his shirt on the bed. "So did you always make early morning visits to his room?"

"Uh, no. Forget it. Happy birthday, Lance. I came to wake you up for an early start to the day, but it seems you've managed that on your own," Allura said, determined to divert the conversation.

“Yup. Top secret rendez-vous with a village wench.”

“Right.”

“Princess, what’s wrong?” Lance saw the troubled look in her face and stepped closer. She turned away briefly, wanting to forget that something - someone - so important was no longer distinct in her mind.

“Lance, I can’t remember his face.” Allura’s voice trembled and tears brimmed again in her eyes.

“Oh, man. Not good,” he said as he stood in front of her. His heart ached for what she was experiencing. He knew the sensation of losing the expressions and features of someone to time to the frustrating betrayal of the mind. Lance wanted to make it better for her, but all he had was himself, his body. With only slight apprehension, he wrapped his arms around her and let her body rest against his.

Allura felt the warmth of Lance’s arms reach across her back and pull her to him. Her head rested against his chest and her tears reached his skin. The primal scent of a sweating man floated around her, urging her to encircle his waist with her arms, hands sliding on moist skin. She felt the muscles of his back twitching at her touch and his warm breath in her hair. More tears fell from her tired eyes as Lance squeezed her tighter against him, protective and alert. Warm hands lowered down her back, the curve of her spine revealed to them in their exploration. Lance heard her breathe in sharply as he reached her lower back and his hands rested on her hips. Fingers spread, thumb pressing as another man’s hand had been. Allura looked up at him, lost and desperate. Recognition sunk into Lance, touching the sorrow that she felt. Lips skimmed and mingled in a dance of uncertainty until her sighing breath reached him and he kissed her deeply. She moaned beneath him, startling and real, cutting through him, and he pulled away from her sweet mouth and stepped back.

“Shit. Fuck! Sorry Princess. What the hell?!” He paced the room in front of her, attempting to redirect the blood rushing to his groin. He looked to her and saw she was desperate to understand as well. Lance ran his fingers through his hair and came to a halt in front of her. “Princess, don’t get me wrong... I want to throw you onto my bed and do things to you that are banned in seven galaxies. But I can’t. We can’t. Shit.”

“Lance. I –“ Allura started, but she lost her words as he grabbed her arms.

“It’s not me you want. It’s him. And he’s not here. I’m not him. I don’t know how to help you.” Lance looked at the princess with desperation, hoping to rattle Keith back into her mind.

“Lance, I miss him. And I can’t even remember his face!”

“I know, Princess.” Lance knew she was in love with their captain, and he was certain the feelings were reciprocated. But he wasn’t certain how much had transpired between them. A touch? A kiss? The intimacy of a shared bed? It was Keith who should be here comforting her,

holding her... kissing her. Lance suddenly felt guilty for having even touched the princess at all, and angry that Keith had left her in his care. *Doesn't he even know me? Shit.*

"I'm losing him. If not to my forsaken memory, then to the world out there." Allura gestured at the window where the rain continued. "I long to see him, to hear his voice. But more than anything, I long to connect with him again. To laugh with him. To fight beside him. I fear it will be so different when he returns."

"I doubt anything will be different. He'll come storming home, barking commands left and right, pissing me off and in turn I'll piss him off... and he'll look to you as he always does – with veneration so annoyingly profound that you will remain untouchable. He's a real pecker head that way." Allura laughed quietly and Lance sighed with relief. He was aiming for that laugh.

"Lance, I'm sorry for the kiss. It's just that you... keep me connected to him. You're so different, yet whatever you two share makes me feel closer to him. If I touch you, I touch him. If I laugh with you, I laugh with him." She sighed and dropped to the floor in frustration. Lance sat down beside her, folding his legs under him.

"Princess, you don't need me to stay connected to him. You have that man's heart wrapped up so tightly in your gorgeous flowing locks that I bet he's sitting under a tree right now, all alone, thinking of you." Lance's eyes twinkled. He was certain that his captain was capable of taking matters into his own hands under desperate circumstances. He was only human, despite all the talk otherwise.

"Oh. Well. Thanks for... comforting me." Allura feebly smiled at Lance and stood up.

"Sure. I'd say anytime, but I don't want you to think you can come barging in here whenever you want and seduce me like you did!"

"Don't worry. You set me straight," Allura mocked. They walked to the door and stood silent for a moment, regret stretching across both their faces. Lance wondered if her regret was for the kiss, or for him stopping it. Ah, he could only dream.

"Hey, was that your first kiss?" Lance asked, his hands crossed over his chest with curiosity.

"Well, that's for me to know, birthday boy," Allura responded as she walked out the door and it slid shut behind her. As a matter of fact, it had been her first intimate kiss, and she longed to learn more. She had enjoyed the soft lips pushing against hers, a slippery tongue exploring her mouth. But more than a longing to try it again, she longed to remember the details of Keith's face.

The door closed in front of Lance and he dropped his head into his hands. His thoughts felt heavy and throbbing with what had just transpired. A shower. A long, cold shower was what he needed. Standing in the bath, not bothering to disrobe, the water pelted him. It fell lukewarm against his skin and he started to shiver. He had just betrayed his best friend, a betrayal of the heart, no less. Keith had never confessed his affections for Allura to Lance, and Lance never

asked him. It didn't matter though. The unspoken language between two friends in this matter was more distinct than words that actually came from their mouths, and there was no question the princess was off limits to Lance.

"What the hell was I thinking?" he hollered out, pounding his fist against the tile. "I'm no longer sure who the bigger fool is." Keith's face flashed in his mind, his eyes playful and dancing with laughter. This wasn't the same friend who had left the castle months ago, the one who had somehow managed to disappoint Lance more and more. No, this was the Keith of old, the more jovial version from days long gone. As his eyes closed, Lance loitered in the memories of their coming-of-age together at the Space Academy.