You Can't Go Back (or can you?)

by Orobus

Summary

Written for Shiro Week 2017:

After the events of "Blackout"; Shiro falls unconscious as the fight with Zarkon ends. He wakes up in the past, in the body of his fifteen-year-old self.

Things may not be as they seem.

Notes

this is just really self-indulgent, honestly.

Shiro is a trans man here. warnings for dysphoria triggers, and emotions, and grief regarding people who are dead but aren't because you're in the past now. time travel is traumatic.
Then:

Coran was yelling for a retreat. Their time was up. They had just this one last shot to take Zarkon down for good. It was now or never.

Voltron and Zarkon’s Ro-Beast armor collided violently. The Beast’s hands wrapped around their head, and Shiro felt it as if it was his own head being crushed. He felt claws ripping at his skin. He felt knives digging into his mind. He felt something dark and intangible trying to tear apart his very soul. But he didn’t stop fighting. He would never stop fighting.

He rallied. He called to the others and dragged out every spark of defiance left within him. He felt their strength rush back into the bond. He felt the cracks in their formation knit together. He felt them move again as one. He gripped the bayard in his hand (it tingled and felt unsteady in his grip and he gripped tighter). He yelled and drove it home into Black’s open port. It pulled at him, and he trusted his Lion and let her take what was needed. He put everything he was into that strike. If this was going to be their final act, then by every force he could name, he was going to make it count.

He felt his voice joined by the others. He felt the power in their hands crest like a wave. He felt himself stretch out, out, *our* like a string of taffy, like a star pulled into an event horizon.

He was a single line of light tottering on the edge of an abyss. He lost his grip. He heard roaring as he fell.

Now?:

Shiro woke up and had no idea where he was. The ceiling above him (white, flat, blurrily familiar) was covered in sticker-decals of planets and moons and constellations. The bed he lay in was softer than anything he’d felt in a very, very long time. And there was something...off, about himself. Something *wrong*. He frowned and gripped the sheets below him and--

--and his eyes snapped open wide. He could feel the textured cloth of the sheets with *both* his hands. Both of them. Two hands. *He had two hands.*

He shot up from the bed and stared. Two hands, two full and whole, flesh-and-bone arms. His palms
were rosy and unscarred, save for the mark at the base of his right thumb where he’d torn the skin off wrecking his bike when he was eight. He could see the veins under his skin. His right hand was human and his left was missing callouses and burn scars, and they were both so much smaller than they should be. His arms were smaller and thinner than they should be.

He looked down at himself and felt dizzy and nauseous and wrong and displaced. He was smaller all over. So much smaller. He was Pidge’s size for godsake. And he was wearing black and red pajamas he recognized from somewhere he couldn’t immediately place, and-- He looked at his chest, and he had to swallow down bile. He looked away, back at his hands again, turning them over to stare at unmarked, young knuckles. He recognized them.

There was a banging. Shiro looked up and felt a sudden stab of recognition at the furniture and the posters on the wall. A voice -- a ghost, his mother, his mother who died three years before Kerberos -- called out through the closed door. "Takashi! Time to get up! You don't want to be late for your first day!"

Shiro felt light-headed. He started shaking. White noise filled his ears. He was-- He took a breath. Then again, deeper. "Don't panic, Shiro," he whispered to himself. The sound of his own voice nearly sent him off again and he pressed his hands over his eyes (two hands, two warm human hands). 'Breathe,' he told himself. 'Keep it together. Think. You can get through this.'

He recognized this room. He recognized the bed, the walls covered in star charts, the NASA poster by the window and the Gundam action figures on the desk. He recognized the Garrison cadet uniform draped across the top of the dresser beside a line of model airplanes, the dark blue jeans and purple flannel shirts left haphazardly on the carpet. He recognized the worn stuffed dog sitting on the bookshelf next to overflowing piles of science fiction novels and physics textbooks. He recognized the feel of the sunlight through the blinds, and the faint smell of frying eggs in the air.

He recognized the body he was in; his own, but younger. Eight or ten years younger and Before. This body, the room, his mother...the evidence built up to something impossible. This had to be a very vivid dream, or vision, or memory. 'Black?' he called out in his mind. ‘Are you there? Can you hear me?’

There was no answer. Shiro couldn’t even feel the bond. And that scared him more than anything else. He was so completely alone.

“Takashi?” his mother called again. Oh, god, his mother. Mom. Shiro choked on a wave of grief. He hadn’t even realized how raw that particular wound still was. “Takashi, if you want breakfast you’d better get moving!”
Shiro dragged shaking hands down his face, breathing unsteady, and looked around. This was either a dream...or Shiro had somehow been sent back in time. His mind had, at least. He looked at his hands again. Then he clenched them into fists.

Whatever this was, dream or memory or time-travel, he could figure it out. He would figure it out, and he’d get home. He’d get back to his team. (Were they okay? Was the battle over? He couldn’t remember. They had to be okay. He had to get back, they needed him.) But for now, maybe he’d play along for a while. Just until he knew more about what was going on. And… he wanted to see his mom again. Just once. Just for a little while.

He dressed, and tried not to look at his body too much. It took him a minute to remember where everything was (and to hold his old favorite concert t-shirt, he’d never found something that fit him so perfectly again, it was the one thing he regretted growing out of). It took him a bit longer to remember how to put everything on properly, and the dysphoria hit him so hard he almost fell right over.

But he got dressed, and he pushed open his bedroom door, and the hinges still stuck just like he remembered. He walked down the hallway to the kitchen, and his feet still knew the way, surreal as the waking dream this had to be. There were photos on the walls just like he remembered. He wanted to look, but didn’t let himself. He could already barely keep the panic at bay.

Then he crossed the threshold into the kitchen and stopped, and felt all his control crumble. His mother was standing in front of the stove pushing eggs around on a frying pan. Her dark hair was up, but messy, just like she’d always worn it in the mornings. He recognized her outfit, a deep green tunic and ochre pants that stopped just past her knees, and fuzzy pink socks in lieu of house slippers. She’d preferred earth tones, he remembered. And solid colors. And she never did her nails because she chewed them when she was nervous and couldn’t shake the habit. She looked at him and smiled, pride in her eyes, and said, “Looking good, Cadet Shirogane.”

Shiro started crying. His mother’s face fell in concern, and she put down her spatula and came to him. “Honey? What’s wrong?” she asked. Shiro could only shake his head, helplessly. She tutted and pulled him into her arms.

For half a breath he froze, and then he gave up and clung to her. He pushed his face into her shoulder and cried. “I love you, mom.” ‘I miss you, mom. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry...’

“I love you, too,” she sighed, sounding confused. “Well, they did warn this new medicine might affect your emotions, though I was expecting it to go in the other direction...”

‘Medicine?’ Right, this was Before. He’d gotten his T script at fifteen, the summer before he started the Garrison. “That-- that must be it,” he said unsurely. A lie, but he couldn’t possibly tell her the
truth. Even if this was a dream.

She let him cry a moment longer, then pulled back and held his shoulders. She smiled again, and Shiro watched the lines it made on her face. “I know you’re nervous, but you worked so hard to get into the Garrison. You’ll be fine. And,” she poked the tip of his nose and her smile turned challenging, “if anyone gives you trouble, you remember you’re my son. And nobody messes with Hikaru Shirogane’s kid.” Shiro smiled at her, wobbly, and she patted his cheek. “Come on, come have some eggs. You’ll feel better with some food in you.”
The day continued on, as mundane and plodding as any other day would be if not for the fact that Shiro remembered living through it once already. It was a typical “first day of school” with droning lecturers, awkward seating chart politics, staring at his class schedule, and not actually getting anything done. He was present for every boring moment, with none of the skipping around or hazy disconnection he’d expect from a dream, or even a re-lived memory. He didn’t think this was a memory; it was too detailed (no one remembered every moment of their life, especially a day ten years in the past, not even Black’s memory-vision of her creation had been this thorough), and...uncertain. He kept mis-remembering things. He got lost trying to take stairways that didn’t exist yet and halls that led to different places than he recalled. And he’d entirely forgotten about the small plaza between the main academy building and the boarder student dormitories, the one with the infamously ugly statue that he had to stop and stare at for a while, nearly making himself late to Astrophysics. It was a blocky, vaguely humanoid figure reaching upwards, that was supposed to represent “the spirit of exploration” or something, but everyone had just called “the fat man”. The statue and the plaza had gotten -- would get... ugh, tenses... -- knocked down in a renovation a year or two after Shiro graduated to extend parking space. But before that...he remembered, now. Senior year, he and Matt (who was a year behind Shiro and therefore in greater danger if they got caught, but he came anyway) had sneaked out in the dead of night and spray-painted the whole statue to look like a middle-aged suburban tourist; loudly-colored t-shirt, socks with sandals, a waist pack, the works. The pictures had circulated for weeks, and they’d gotten away scot free. God, how had he forgotten that?

Thankfully, his stumbling and staring slack-jawed at everything was entirely in-character for the wide-eyed newbie he was supposed to be. There was no telling how the Garrison would react to a time-traveller (if that’s what he was, and he was starting to accept it was likely) in their midst. Considering how he’d been received after falling from space, it would not go well for him. He needed to keep his head down. Of course, as soon as he thought that, he knocked his elbow against his desk hard enough bite a curse out. He rubbed at the stinging sensation, thinking ‘Damn, I guess this really isn’t a dream,’ looked up and saw several people staring at him. He hunched his shoulders and sunk down in his chair and tried not to meet anyone’s eyes.

It took him a few minutes to realize that the expletive had come out in Altean. Oops.

(Allura had been teaching him the language. They’d practiced together every night, turning off the translators and stumbling through it, usually making themselves laugh until they couldn’t breathe. She’d been hurt in that battle. He remembered her screaming, God, he hoped she was alright.)

The unsettled feeling of remembering, but not-remembering, followed him the rest of the day. Faces and landmarks kept triggering memories and false deja-vu and tripping him up (seeing Iverson with
both eyes and captain’s bars, presiding over a physicals class, definitely made him trip over his feet in surprise. And he kept thinking about the battle he’d left, and worrying about his team. (were they affected by whatever-this-was too? Was Keith stuck as an eight-year-old somewhere? Was Pidge four?) And as he gradually updated his theory from “maybe time travel” to “probably time travel”, he started very quietly panicking.

If this was time travel -- and by lunchtime he had to admit it probably was (he piloted a partially-sentient magical robot lion spaceship, why not time travel) -- then how did it happen? Why did it happen? Did the black lion do it? Or Zarkon? Or Shiro himself, somehow? And how in the world was he going to get back? If he even could get back...what if he was stuck here?

Shiro put his head in his hands and stared at the pitted surface of the cafeteria table as if it had the answers. What if he couldn’t get back? What if he had to re-live the last ten years of his life? Should he try and preserve history and do everything the same way? And what if he couldn’t? He’d seen enough sci-fi to know what happened when a timeline unravelled, that the smallest of changes could change the course of your entire life. God, there was no way he could remember every action or decision he’d made over the years. He’d already changed things, starting with his breakdown at seeing his mom this morning. What had he already unraveled?

His stomach was knotted up in worry. He tried breathing through it; in through the nose, out through the mouth. But it wasn't working. What if what if what if what--

“Hey man, you okay?” Someone tapped him on the shoulder.

Shiro startled. He realized he’d been pulling at his hair. He carefully unclenched his fists and put his hands on the table. “Yeah-” he started, winced at how his voice cracked high, and cleared his throat. “Yeah, it’s just...”

“A lot, right?” The person, a boy whose face Shiro vaguely remembered, smiled kindly. “Yeah, I know how that goes. It’s your first day?” Shiro looked away, and nodded. What else could he do? He certainly couldn’t tell the boy the truth. “Don't worry, it'll get easier.” The boy patted him on his shoulder companionably. “You’ll meet with your advisor at the end of the day, they'll help you work it out.”

Right, Shiro had forgotten about that… that would...if it was the same as it was the first time (and why wouldn't it be?), that would be good. That would help. Shiro forced a breath in, steady. “Thanks.”
"No problem, dude. Good luck, ok?" The boy waved as he left -- the lunch period was ending -- but as he turned Shiro was struck dumb and froze mid-gesture.

He remembered, suddenly, where he knew the boy's face. It was Steven Michaels; he graduated a year ahead of Shiro, was a garrison lifer. Was one of the soldiers who had been there when Shiro returned to Earth. Who had strapped him down to a table and sedated him like a lab animal. Who had refused to even look Shiro in the eye as they did it.

Shiro felt sick. He couldn't do this. He needed to go home.

'Calm down, Shiro,' he tried to tell himself. 'Patience. You'll figure it out. You don't have enough information yet.' But his brain wouldn't listen. Maybe it was because he had the neurochemistry of a slightly-messed-up teenager, combined with the psychological scars of a definitely-messed-up trauma survivor. Or maybe it was just hitting him how awfully, desperately alone he was and would continue to be if he had to stay here. To avoid changing anything and messing up the timeline he would have to repeat every mistake, re-live every personal tragedy, re-fight every hard-won battle he'd ever fought and he wouldn't be able to tell anyone the truth. He would have to hide himself from every single person in his life. He couldn't do it. He didn't want to. He wanted to go home and he didn't want to hurt anymore.

...Okay. Maybe being fifteen (and kind of hormonally unstable) was affecting him more than he was willing to admit.

He passed the rest of the day in a haze of anxiety over paradoxes and butterfly effects. It made him clumsy and distracted. A girl in his organic chemistry class tried to chat him up, and he remembered her standing him up and laughing at him afterwards, and he spent so long trying to decide if he should play along and avoid changing history or blow her off and take the risk, that he ended up just staring at her awkwardly until she backed off. He was changing things without even meaning to.

He was off-balance and upset, and it didn’t stop or get better no matter how many times he tried to talk himself down. Not until he walked into his advisor’s office and re-met one of the biggest stabilizing influences of his teen years. Seeing the familiar furniture and knick knacks, the dim lighting, and the pride flags in her pen cup, instantly put him more at ease. She sat with her feet up on the desk, and though there were far fewer lines on her dark face than the last time he saw her her smile was just as bright, and he had to stop himself from blurting out her name.

“Come on in, Cadet,” she waved him over. “Don't stand there gaping in the doorway, I don't bite.”

He bit his tongue and suppressed his initial instinct to run over and hug her. He couldn’t have a
repeat of this morning. He couldn’t act like he already knew her, no matter how much she meant to him in his future.

He mentally shook himself, took the offered handshake and settled into a chair.

“I'm Marsha Carter,” she said, “I’ll be your academic advisor for the year. This year anyway, we’ll see about the rest.” She dropped her feet to the floor with a thunk and spread a holo file out before her. “My job is to help you plot your academic trajectory, plan your coursework, and help you -- as much as I can -- be successful here at the garrison…”

Shiro tuned out a little. He toyed with the flags on her desk. Marsha had taken him to his first Pride, had checked up on him after his first surgery. She’d been there when Shiro’s mother passed. He wondered if the Marsha back in his own time even knew he was alive.

“It looks like you’re on the pilot track, right? Going for fighter?”

He remembered how this conversation went before.

“What do you want to do with your life, Cadet?” she had asked.

“I want to go to space,” he had answered, without hesitation.

Her eyebrows had shot up, her keen gaze focused intently. “You are aware of the physical requirements for extra-orbital certification, right? Not to mention deep space work.”

He had nodded once, decisively. “I know. And I don't care. I'm going to do it.”

He'd been so confident, the first time around. Defiant. He'd felt like he had to be. He couldn’t summon the willpower anymore. He’d been fighting for so damn long.

“Takashi?”

He looked up, and realized he'd completely zoned out. She smiled at him kindly, patiently. “It's okay if you don't know right away. Nothing is set in stone. It's okay if you change your mind later.”

Shiro struggled not to react. Nothing was set in stone (he’d already changed things, small things but
change was change, the butterflies were already making tsunamis). He could change his mind. He could change his path. He could see it; a safer career, one that kept him on Earth. He would never go to Kerberos, never be captured and mutilated and experimented on and forced to fight in blood sport. He would never carry the burden of the universe on his tired, aching shoulders. He would never be ripped away from everyone he knew and loved. (Almost everyone. Without Shiro, would Keith still end up in space? Would any of them? Or would the universe spare them and find itself another group of paladins, ones who were older and experienced and not led by a man with cracks in his resolve and empty spaces in his head that were sometimes filled with screaming?)

He could be safe. He could avoid the pain, the burden. It was tempting.

But...if none of that happened to him, it would happen to someone else. Someone would have to carry the burden. Someone would pilot the Kerberos mission (even if he could stop it, there would be another. Destiny, he knew, was stubborn like that). Maybe it would be Matt (oh god, Matt, whose fate was still unknown). Maybe it would be someone else. But it would be someone.

He could not pass this pain on to anyone else. It wasn't right.

Shiro took a bracing breath. “I want to go to space.”

That night he dreamt and woke in darkness.

He went to bed, fell asleep, and woke up...somewhere familiar. It was the soundless midnight of deep space, lit by distant stars, where he floated like a ghost. He looked down and saw himself as he was; body cored with muscle built from fighting for his life, thin and scarred from a year of poor food and poorer treatment, a limb made of metal that he didn’t understand and frightened him. The Astral Plane. He was in the Astral Plane, where Black had took him and where he’d fought with Zarkon.

Neither of those were here now, though. It was only him. He looked around, wandered the endless space (for all he felt like he was moving, he never seemed to get anywhere). “Black?” he called into the void. “Where are you? Hello? …Anyone?”

He couldn’t feel her. And he couldn’t hear her. He called and called all night, but she never answered.
this is taking longer than i anticipated but we'll try to have one up every week.

(please imagine tiny time-traveler Pidge stuck in the body of a four-year-old, driving the Holt family completely insane)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!