**Shivers of Oaks**

by **SouthernBird**

**Summary**

There is something blue that watches from the second floor of a house that thrived in days long past, possibly centuries before he was even a thought.

A light flickers, then is snuffed out so that there is nothing more than the rush of water in his ears.

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[Shance BigBang 2017] Shiro is a disabled veteran who is still haunted by the ghosts of his comrades after a routine run ends horribly with him as the sole survivor of a detonated IED. Months later, when the voices in his head are much too loud and the road to recovery is not a path he can tread, Shiro finds himself boarding the first flight he can get out of Seattle.
Somehow, he ends up in bucolic Gilman, Alabama, home to the amicable Holts, a sheriff by the name of Allura King, and a young man trying to do right by his family's land when his father bails on him.

Oh, and there is the old house on Oak Avenue.

Notes

This has been a labor for the past nine months, and to be finished is a dream.

Many thanks to my friend Liz who has been with me every step of this journey. When I decided to undertake this plot as my Shance BigBang story, I never thought it would evolve to where it is now. Without her? This wouldn't be where it is.

Also, more thanks to my artist, corgioki, who gave me immense happiness by choosing my summary and even creating an entire comic with another scene based on what I had sent her! Sadly, I did not finish in time for our due date, but she has been a blessing to work with, and I could not be happier.

Lastly, thank you to all those that supported me throughout these months.

[There is also a mix of music that inspired much of this story, found here for ambiance.]
Chapter 1

“To drive oneself mad is an art form very few truly understand.” — Johnny Daggers

thud. thud. thud.

he followed them, followed the reds of their scarves deeper into a white wasteland, followed them across embankments he could not decipher amongst the winter storm that clouds his senses absolutely. it’s a strange feeling, not playing the part of the leader, the chief, the one to lead to safety, but maybe like the alpha of a pack, he approaches from behind to see the dangers that his little flock cannot detect.

they do not turn back to him, they do not heed him, so alpha he must not be. they merely carry on their journey as the ends of their weathered scarves wave like flags of surrender in the frigid snaps. just follow, he thinks, endlessly and resolutely, just follow; they know the way, they know the road home to the barracks because, after all, his scarf is gone, blown away by the winds, maybe, to find some other soul in need of a good wrap around the neck.

noises echo in the distance from all directions, but there’s a way home as there always has been, winding along the treacherous environments of winter deserts and barren glens. there’s always a way home, he thinks, so just follow the pack; the reds is all he can see, after all, all that can comfort him in the whispering ices of winds that hisses threats of ‘take the heads, take the heads.’

thud. thud. thud.

the woods break, all white and all blank, but the thuds are there, sure signs that the storm has lingered there in the desolated glens. crack! crack goes the trees, the lumbering giants of bark and limbs falling around them, covering the red ends, hiding them from his vision as he screams, everything starting to pound too loud in his ears before there’s a sudden hush of solace, when the snow drifts down and shows the heads of his pack all littered around him, reds staining the snow.

his arm hurts so much, his right limb, his dominant hand, burning like it will melt off—or maybe it already has, leaving a stump, stolen away by something he cannot see.

he screams, screams at the carnage left of his fellows, screams at the sounds of helicopter blades slashing through the air as explosions (thuds, cracks, he will accept anything else but the bombs again) ring clear through the trees, bringing each of the oaks down, one by one, until there’s nothing but sand in his mouth and in his eyes.

thud. thud. th—.

and then his heart stops.

It’s the hammer that drums inside of his skull that wakes him up, the weighted metal against brittle bones that reminds him of his ceasing humanity.

There are traffic sounds that remind him more of helicopter blades rather than car horns and tire skids along the Seattle roadways while the sun rays are clouded gray, a foreshadowing of stormy weather or maybe just a bad day.

The otherwise lack of noise in his bedroom shatters when the time hits nine, the radio eradicating his safety net with disc jockeys giving the warmest (fake, his mind chatters on against their prattles on the most redundant of topics, fake talk is cheap) of greetings to the audience of their morning talk show. It’s random station he had set it to long after he left for the war, sent overseas to join his fellow ranks to ‘fight the good fight.’

The jockeys talk about the weather, the usual fare of horrible traffic on the interstate roads that hinder their affairs, then it will be the news, maybe some off-the-wall ideas of how wives and girlfriends are difficult and how men are idiots.

Takashi Shirogane lays there in his childhood room, wishing every moment, as he has since he woke in the bed of the military hospital, that he too had died in the same IED explosion his comrades fell to, instead of enduring this static grind of monotony of these pale light mornings.

(His Purple Heart collects dust in his bedside drawer— he despises it, this testament to some grand valor that is not rightly earned because it did not take his life, rather took his spirit, ripped away his will to live because living isn’t right anymore.)

It is enough to drive a man mad, surely, he thinks, as he slaps a palm over the snooze button to just shut the drivel up before rising up, popping joints that stiffen more than he’s used to and flexing the cyborg prosthetic that weighs down the stump of his right arm. One day, Shiro hopes, he will throw the thing into the ocean and never see the eyesore ever again; however, it’s a necessity right now, at least until he’s back into some kind of mental state where he can actually rejoin the living world instead of mourn for a finality that was not his.

His mother and father are already gone, he’s sure, off to take public transport to their respective jobs to be the good, productive citizens they’re able to be. Pausing, Shiro looks over at the lone picture frame on his table, sees his little sisters, identical twins that smile at him like they have sunshine and glory in their souls, wonders if they’ve pulled all nighters again while studying abroad for their degrees.

It’s another drop of regret that fills his head, a lingering itch he wishes he could claw out, that he graduated with such high honors only to end up like this, a shell of a man that was destined for great endeavors to have it ripped out from underneath his feet.

His knees ache today. He knows by the way his tendons shift when he stands up fully to roll his shoulders, let the muscles loosen from being in bed for longer than he should. It is just another reminder that he didn’t pass away in his sleep. Pity.

The four bedroom condominium is, as predicted, quiet, lacking any sounds of breakfast rush and fleeting kisses goodbye, and that’s how Shiro likes it. The traffic alone is sometimes too much to
take as the noise can morph into echoes of gunshots and bombs, a mind trick he’s been told, but it’s enough to drive him mad, it’s enough to make him crave the silence of his own feebleness.

As the coffee brews, his gray eyes watches the steady drip… drip… drip…

There’s a twitch in his jaw, tugging at the skin and the scar along his nose. Something rolls in his veins, urges him to draw his neck taut and close his eyes tight.

There’s a storm that rumbles beneath his skin, like the snow—no, like the sandstorm of his nightmares—something that nicks away in a need to rupture forth, spring out and let every little thing that eats away at his nerves out. They’re frayed, his nerves, but they’re still there, set off by tiny existential things that he regrets just seconds after the storm has a chance to decimate the calm.

Not today, he tells himself; he will see his therapist today, tell her in somber tones that he’s fine and hasn’t thrown anything breakable in a week. He will go to physical therapy today, make sure that the prosthetic that he wasn’t sure he consented to is working well. He will go to the gym after, having bulked up for nothing better to do in the few months after his release from the hospital.

He’s an apparent astonishment, the doctors claimed, should have fucking died yet here he is! Just a few scars, they said, just a few. At least, other than the fact he lost his fucking arm.

Is he an unlucky bastard or a lucky one? Hard to tell, and the coffee pot has little to no answers. None, even.

He needs a damn cup, needs something fragile and weighted in his left hand before he starts to scratch over the welts his nails have left a few days prior during one of his mindless fits. Shiro barely notices when he does it, just know that there are maggots under the skin there where the prosthetic fits because he’s dead, should be dead, should be a corpse in a coffin laying six feet below where happier people tread.

Something catches his eye as he reaches up into the cabinet, something cursive and pink. It’s just innocently there, held onto the fridge by a magnet from a random Caribbean cruise his parents took for some anniversary they had. It’s enough to draw his gaze from getting a mug for his morning brew, enough to raise his shackles in anxiousness.

‘Shiro,

Good morning, sweetheart. Do not forget to shave this morning as you’re looking a little scruffy! Would you please pick up a few things at the grocery store on your way home today? I will text you my list! :)’

Love, mom’

Were it another day, maybe back during his bright-eyed days of dreamy youth, Shiro would have smiled and thought fondly of his mother. In a strange sense, he does still, despite the gnawing teeth along his innards that doesn’t fail to warp everything in his reality and leave him absolutely… well, annoyed, really.

His fingers curl, the joints cracking with his fist as he thinks of his mother, short and stout and full of welcome homes and warm dinners, thinks of her as much as he can because she’s been a damn saint, trying to sit and to listen to her son who is being driven mad by a devil who has a noose around his neck to drag him down to the bowels of nowhere.

How does a simple woman with a humble job, happy in her life with her husband and grown
children, comprehend that there’s a hell that has not lashed her back, that has not seared a fire in her
eyes that leaves her despondent?

It’s enough to make the last nerve \textit{snap}, like the trees in the woods, like the step that set the IED
off, suddenly feeding him to a frenzy of predators that’s nothing more than his need to get out, get
out, fuck, if he doesn’t \textit{leave}, get out, go away, he can’t \textit{stand} it!

It’s a flurry of motion, swerves of rooms and clothes and a few little things he subconsciously
thinks to grab and fling into a random carry on he found while tearing out his room—he has to get
out, the noose tightens, get out, Shiro, get away from the lackluster smiles and cautious touches on
his hands—love, mom, love her, she tried, \textit{you’re just too damn broken, son.}

If some stranger stops him, what is he going to tell them? What words will tumble from his mouth,
leave his soul, and reflect the brevity of his actions? All he knows is \textit{leave}. If he doesn’t, he’s
going to go mad, madder than he already is, and damn if he’s going to stay around long enough
that they strap him down for some shit like a lobotomy.

He isn’t fixable, not here, not in Seattle cityscapes with the deafening populous that takes up more
air than they need, that takes up too much space, it’s all too much to think off as Shiro gives the
world a final breathy sigh and slams the door.

(In his flustered state, he doesn’t remember crumbling his poor mother’s note and throwing it
across the room, just knew there was a thud, thud, thud like hammers in his head, like the blood
rushed so loud he couldn’t hear his own heart break.)

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The lady at SEATAC’s ticket registry probably thinks he escaped the psych ward when he
manages to force himself into departures, barely able to keep his breathing in check while his carry
on barely trails behind him. Shiro is nearly running towards the counter like there’s something
sinister after him; it’s just himself, the voices constantly screaming to \textit{go go go gogogogo.}

“Sir…” she begins softly, tapping at her keyboard in a bit of a nervous tick after he gruffly spat out
he needed the first plane out of Seattle and would take \textit{anything}, “the next flight I have will leave
in about a half hour, and—.”

Shiro is curt, swallowing around the tightness in his throat because if he doesn’t get on that plane,
doesn’t fly far away to some location that isn’t here, he claw his own face off, he knows he will.
And, poor girl, she looks so tired, so worn out from her occupation that he’d honestly hate to give
her a mess to clean up.

Broken soldiers are honestly the worst.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s fine, I’ll take it,” he responds with a tightness, like there’s a rope that just won’t
stop burning along his neck, while he fumbles for his credit card. He’ll literally take a flight to
Siberia at this point, just wanting to go the fuck away from everything that reminds him of what
he’s lost, both stateside and abroad.

When the cashier isn’t quick enough to take his card, his fingers start to drum against the counter
— God, he’s so sorry, he really is, but the crawling of his skin nearly drives him insane just from
that, and the skin along his prosthetic pulses, pulses, twitches, aches— like he’s merely annoyed
when he’s just ready to board a plane that will hopefully crash.

Frowning at him, the girl takes the card to swipe it, her motions stiff and worrisome like she thinks
he means to reach across the counter to snap her neck. No, no, surely she’s safe, Shiro won’t—
wouldn’t hurt her (maybe himself, but that’s a different story). She’s just trying to do her job in the
best was she can while dealing with a crazy man that might have a foot in the grave already.

“Here’s your card, sir, if you’ll sign,” she stops short as Shiro scribbles across the paper receipt,
the paper nearly ripping in pieces from the force of his signature and the shakes of his hand. How
embarrassing, really, that he really can’t keep himself composed enough to write his own name
legibly.

The girl takes the receipt though, smooths out the wrinkles from his short mistreatment before
handing him his receipt and his boarding pass. “Gate D6 is down that way, and…”

Poor girl, just doing her job in the bustling airport despite the morning hours of this random
weekday, or hell, maybe it’s Judgement Day and Shiro just didn’t get the memo as he stalks down
to the TSA screening, shoving his bag onto the conveyor belt and praying he isn’t frisked.

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He’s frisked. At least the guy had a nice face. Not his type though, and he almost walked away
with broken hands when touching too close to Shiro’s prosthetic, but poor bastard all the same.

It’s almost pathetic how easily the American infrastructure accepts his military credentials—
which are his dog tags and his obvious metallic adornment— as just and sound reasoning to allow
him passage through the screening area. The whole process makes his head pound after he pulls
out his carry on, wondering how much of a sugar crash he wants to have with something from
Starbucks, loathe as he is to buy anything from there.

He chooses Seattle’s Best, a last little part of home (that isn’t Starbucks, thank God) he’s about to
fly far, far away from, the last taste of decent coffee before it’s just Starbucks and whatever local
fare there is to offer. He still hasn’t quite looked at his boarding pass for his destination, for the
place hopefully miles and miles away from this no longer home, a place that’s merely a resting
place for what was once a life that cultivated the endless possibilities that laid ahead, earning
medals and praise abound.

War changes a person, of course it does; but not before it breaks and it shatters souls and dreams
only to wrap its bony fingers along the necks of the unfortunate sheep sent for the slaughter in the
end, then snap.

Snap, that’s a good thought, a thought that he thinks about constantly in the exhausted daydreams
that pervade his daily consciousness, but snapping is bad, snapping isn’t allowed for those that live
and those that cheat death.

Shiro either wants to shake Death’s hand or break it into pieces, the half-assed son of a bitch that
couldn’t even draw the scythe down low enough to take Shiro’s soul, too. There’s a disturbing
truth that keeps him antsy in his seat at the gate that will take him to somewhere, somewhere far
away.

Hours pass, it seems, his phone starting to buzz over and over with messages and phone calls that
go unanswered; he is sure that one, or several, of the notifications are from his dear mother who is
more than likely just smiling away at her desk chair in her nice office while she thinks fondly (or
somewhat fondly) of her deranged son that needs to go to the store to bring home some bread and
milk.

Her son, what a disappointment he is, sitting there in the terminal instead to board a plane that will
take him so far from their home, so far from her gaze and from her embrace. She is a good mother, truly, intent on the best for her children with how hard she works at home and at her career. Pity he’s so far gone that he can’t even damn put up a good front so that she can just fantasize about a happy home with a family like those in the photographs of her magazines. How envious the world would be of them, how jealous.

Shiro, though, can’t handle fixing things, and it’s all the more reason why when his plane finally starts to board that he rises from the uncomfortable seat to ease the kinks out of his back to walk towards the bridge to the plane.

He hesitates for just one moment, but nothing more, his step faltering as his hand clenches the handle of his carry on that was such a dismal attempt at a last minute reparation to save himself in the days ahead some headache. Just walk, son, he hears Iverson— and God or whoever the hell gives a shit about dead soldiers let that old bastard rest in peace— just walk on because there ain’t nothing else he can do but walk.

So, he walks, he walks until he’s greeted sweetly by the stewardess and he sits in his assigned seat. With a deep breath and a deep rift of self-awareness, he watches as the other passengers start to file in, rumble about with their bags and their carry ons, slam the overhead compartments since the latches are a little more than hard to work with. His heart begins to beat harder with each slam, clenches a little more in his chest because the sudden bangs are like firecrackers or gunshots that ring too hard in his head.

It’s then, with the thuds, the slams, that Shiro starts to feel the itch at the base of his throat, the hammer in his head starting to raise itself again to come down.

It stops, but it’s not for the sake of gaining his composure, but his ears fill with water to muffle every sound and every word around him, his bones trembling as the engines roar to life and the intercom blares with the captain’s voice; Shiro can’t understand a word, can only huddle in his seat as his nails dig into his palms while his eyes shut as tightly as he can stand. He breathes, or tries to, he breathes in the hot air of a fire he cannot see, that only scorches his lungs and quickens his pulse to the point he wonders mildly if he’s boiling alive.

The plane starts to take off, slow but with a gradual force, and Shiro goes down, the static fields of his mind roaring so loud that he’s sure he will go deaf or dead.

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He lands in Atlanta, Georgia, and he’s cussing himself up and down, back and forth that he literally just flew hours across the United States just to arrive at what has to be the worst place on earth. What a damn mess he is, having shaken the whole time, having relinquished the painful bite of a dig into his palms to instead bear down on the arm rests. The others beside him must see his dog tags because they never spoke a word of discomfort or dislike, only seemed to offer what might have been pitying glances in attempt to soothe over the open wounds of a man that has seen hell far worse than they have.

He’s the last to leave the plane. He can’t handle the people. He can’t handle how frenzied his blood runs and can’t handle how he’s going to vomit the nothing on his stomach the moment he’s on solid ground. He cannot begin to accept that there are others that watch him with worried eyes and guilty frowns.

Thankfully, he does not have to find the nearest restroom for any other reason than he really has to piss. Even then, the motions are a jumble of messes that are his hands, a clumsy showcase that he’s
sure gives off the appeal that he’s just drunk off of the alcohol that was offered on the plane ride.

That would be a positive outlook, to be drunk instead of feeling like there are wolves at his heels, hungry and snapping beasts that are looking for the one that stole away by life flight away. The mirror is an object that he avoids at all costs, opting for the antibacterial dispenser instead of a thorough hand washing.

The whites of their eyes and the reds of their stained teeth: a dead man would see any monster that awaited him if he lets himself be drawn into the glass.

God, there’s so many people, all crowding about through the hallways and gates of departures like they have some meaning to their lives. Shiro can barely make out any one detail, everything a blur of color spectrums in all shades and heights. Everything is pounding, pounding in his ears like his heart is about to burst from all the damn people that are around him—he wishes they would all shut up for two minutes, let himself have a moment to gather himself, gather the scattered disarray of himself from the airport tile to put himself together long enough to hobble out.

They don’t. They keep talking, speaking in cell phones and to each other. The itch worsens, sticks like raw honey to his larynx. He’s about to scream.

Then, then, a savior in the form of a young man in a business suit, someone that actually truly understands the sight of haplessness to the point where he understands what it must be to intervene, arrives to take him by the elbow.

He works for the airport’s rental department; his name is easy to pronounce, but the syllables are lost on the heaviness that has swollen Shiro’s tongue.

“You have a ride?” but there it is in his eyes, the knowing that there is another life in the airport that gets that there are things that lurk in the shadows that cannot be seen, that the monsters are really sometimes in a person’s head though they seem so, so real. This kid, Shiro can tell, has suffered at the hands of force too great for him to inhibit.

Kindred spirits always find each other even the clouds of busy travelers.

“No— no, I don’t, I don’t have a ride,” Shiro stutters while he damns his tongue and the lack of proper speech. It’s everything to even say no, but there’s a fondness in the man’s smile that doesn’t reek of pity, but rather sympathy, the two sentiments nothing alike and yet can be all the same. “Do you need a rental?” is the next inquiry, the next step to uncovering what Shiro needs to finally find his way out of the twentieth circle of hell that is so aptly named Hartsfield-Jackson.

“Ye—,” is all Shiro can get out, his mouth stopping completely as the thudding gets so chaotic in his head, the time bomb to another explosion mere seconds away.

“You need to get out, I get that— the crowds get to me, too, sometimes,” is the lasting assertion that, when coupled with the sharp appearance of a military hairstyle and posture, twists itself into the most comforting presence that Shiro has felt in weeks. This is another, that kindred spirit, no, a fellow brother in arms that has the nightmares, though unique to himself as they may be. He sees the wolves, though to him they may not be wolves, but the offerings of children not known to him offering water and flowers, or even the smiles of loved ones that are no longer there.

A second swipe of his credit card is all it takes for Shiro to find himself in the driver’s seat of a rental hybrid that has a full tank of gas. His savior sets the GPS and tells him never in a million hells to take the I-285 bypass if he wants to live. Find another route. Find a better way.
But with his trembling hands, he maneuvers another hellish circle known just as that, the interstate leading out from ATL being just as bad, if not worse, than the blustering herds that traverse through the gates of the airport at his rear.

It’s frantic, everything that sweats from his pores and down into his clothes, and it doesn’t fucking help that every time he rolls down the window for a sating breath of fresh air, he is met with a humid death trap that is so heavy, it merely races his heart closer to a state of complete meltdown. The grip on the steering wheel is twitchy and unstable, like the cartilage has diminished from the all this panicking he’s doing to leave him crippled and unable to go.

But, this was what he needed, what he wanted above all else; his stupid ass attack brought him this far, lead him to a near snap where the only solution was to hop a plane for hellish five hour flight to just find some space to breathe. Of course, Lady Luck, she is a devious harlot, has him pick the one airport with more people that he can even stand.

However, what Shiro sees outside the main interstate as he rambles on an instinct of direction that guides him westward which is more or less just following I-85 to see where it leads. The signs pass, green and large on the roadside while he drives, thankful for the messiah in the nice suit of the rentals for actually foreseeing the need for a car with great gas mileage.

The names of the towns are not out of the ordinary, and seem typical enough despite being in a region he has never traversed before; there’s Fairburn and Newnan… there’s a million of exits that offer McDonald’s and Waffle Houses that it’s probably just a testament to the eating habits of the general American population, but it’s endless yellow and black signs for these houses of waffles that’s a bit, ah… much. For the general sake of sanity because the radio stations are failing to provide background noise to distract himself, he begins to count the signs that he sees. It’s mundane, but it helps.

After some driving, he then sees something that draws his attention from his counting, losing track, to read the lovely white declarations amid the expanse of plain green: Welcome to Alabama, the Beautiful.

Well, fuck.

The names of towns then shift into a crazier flurry of names that just throw him for a loop, but the game shifts from counting restaurants chains to pronouncing the towns. It’s freeing, silly that he can do this with himself. His favorite, God, it has to be Opelika, but Wetumpka? Tuskegee? The possibilities tumble from his mouth and his own surly chuckles ease a few inches of anxiety that will burden his limbs away.

Another game is brought to mind with the emblems of sports teams on the passing cars with Alabama (and a few Georgia) tags. Shiro played football in high school and liked to sit back and watch a good Seahawks game with the best of them, but the utter numbers of War Eagle and Roll Tide that can be found is maddening; it’s strange to be brought face to face with what is now beginning to feel like another country as opposed to another state, from the weather and from the colorful montage of Auburn and University of Alabama fare whizzing down I-85.

Montgomery is a fucking dream compared to Atlanta, with not nearly the traffic and not nearly the headache of twists and turns, but it is still a large city in its own right with its cityscape and its connectors to branching roads to random parts of the state. Here, however, is here that Shiro gets, unfortunately, exceptionally lost, though he begs the question, can a wandering man actually be lost?

The answer is, as he ambles down a random highway of the state of Alabama where his own sense
of cardinal directions is completely *fucked*, that, yes, a wandering man can.

He’s taken a random exit, some kind of level of ignorance that led him to flick on the blinker to ease off of the interstate and to a new road, then another… and then it’s just wondering what the hell he’s doing. The GPS is useless, having given up the ghost and Shiro would rather not risk turning on the GPS of his phone in case his family has already figured out his leaving. Granted, he is in a time zone hours far ahead, but five hours is a damn long time to pass for someone to not have figured it out.

Or, maybe they are grateful to be rid of a shell of a son that will never live up the standards that he should hold himself to, should place upon a pedestal of character that he should be. Soldier, veteran, whatever the hell he is now does not change the fact that he should function like an average human being that has to play his part in society— he sighs, rubbing his eyes with the tips of his pointer finger and thumb; this must be what a dive into insanity feels like to other poor sufferers.

He’s beginning to grow tired from the stresses he has endured, and the minute tenses of jet lag are starting to eat away at his cognitive senses; the countryside of the highway he’s managed to drive to— Highway 80— is fraught with randomly placed stores and small towns, almost like if one drifts off of this road, they may never find their way back to urbanized civilization. That might not be too awful of a scenario at first, but for now, it’s just a wait and see kind of venture now that the adrenaline and anxiousness has waded into more tepid flows.

As soon as he imagines the prospect of never seeing a town with a population of more than ten people ever again, Shiro sees a brick and iron piece that displays a fine welcome to Selma, Alabama. The town must be quite the place, welcoming visitors and home comers with an incline of a bridge that hides the reveal of the buildings and the roadways. Shiro’s car crests the hill to be greeted a quaint riverside town with history that has aged both under the duress of time while preserved all the same. It’s old, maybe not as old as it could be, but it feels sleepy, feels like the beginning of sights that are lost in time.

Selma passes with a blur as Highway 80 goes off into another highway, a few random arrows directing travelers to nearby cities. He picks one at random, sleep-addled synapses basically taking over as turns off to the left and just… goes.

With Selma at his back, it’s only within the next hour that exhaustion abruptly bears into his joints, throws his mind back into a drunk-heavy near stupor that threatens to drive him off the road and into a ditch. With a groan beneath his breath, he also notes that the sun is beginning to dip at the tops of trees that stand tall with their years. If the sun is beginning to bid the day a fond farewell, then he really should think about finding a cheap place to settle for the night.

It’s a ways down, but eventually, there’s another bidding of welcome to him after the rushing greenery of trees and bushes and little else; it’s a little carved out wooden post, white paint peeling off in mottled spots, but all that matters is that Shiro has been greeted by a little cheery sign for Gilman, Alabama, self proclaimed home of the Juniberry Festival.

He whispers a prayer of thanks to his fallen comrades for asking their deities to bring him to a town that has more than one stop light and more than one hotel just on the main road. Damn, he’s hankering for some coffee, his Seattle’s Best brew gone and wilting him into constant yawning grump. There’s a little store on the right, a nicer gas station that seems to also have a produce stand off in mottled spots, but all that matters is that Shiro has been greeted by a little cheery sign for Gilman, Alabama, self proclaimed home of the Juniberry Festival.

With a press of the button on the fancy ass console of the car, Shiro kills the engine and then flops
back into his seat, knees and calves aching from sitting for so long over the span of his day. There’s a lethargic deepness to the dull throbs in his legs, but it’s not enough of a hindrance to keep himself from closing his eyes for just a tick…

There’s a knock on his window, and a muffled sound, jerking Shiro fully upright with a race of his pulse since his heart stopped beating for a moment. Turning to the window, he’s ready to defend himself against someone that’s looking to throw him off and steal what little he has, but he is instead greeted with the visage of the kindest older gentleman with a to go cup in his hand. His spectacles cling low to his nose, but his eyes are bright with a mirth that comes with a wisdom old-age-still-youthful brings. Beside him is a curiouser sight, a young man that’s the near splitting image of the older man that it’s painfully obvious that they’re related.

The older of the two motions his hand for Shiro to roll down his window, but the engine is quiet, so he opts to open the door, pointing down to reveal to them he is about to get out. The two step back, speaking between themselves in hushed tones while he ambles out with a grunt: ah, the blood is rushing through his circulatory track, veins breathing anew with fresher blood cells.

“Well, Matt, I told you a stranger done come into town,” the elder laughs, and it reminds Shiro of an old friend that hasn’t been seen in years, but is still just as familiar as the last time he was seen. It’s a comfort, not once setting of panicked alarms to run, run, run.

The other— Matt, apparently— just smiles with a hint of shyness at his lips, just nodding in agreement. He’s not social, but he’s also not a prick about it, but if the guess were on the spot, Shiro approximates that the boy is younger than himself, around eighteen at the oldest. However, he has but a moment to ponder upon ages and other characteristics before a cup of hot black coffee is offered to him, the older man standing closer with a brilliance that’s like seeing the sun for the very first time.

Shiro is stunned, but what is said next is what shocks him the most, what commences a story that could only ever be woven together by the gossiping ladies of Southern towns or by those indie movies his sisters adore to watch on their laptops. It’ll be a story beset in the southland that reeks of things that are long dead, and should stay dead, but didn’t get the damn message at the end of gun fire.

“They say I can tell a tired man from about ten miles away, but all the same, son; here’s your welcome to good ol’ Gilman, Alaba-mee!”
Chapter 2

The atmosphere of Holt’s Grocery is nothing like Shiro can say that he has experienced outside of an Army mess hall, the lights above humming with halogen while burning too white, casting the aisles of fresh produce and canned goods with an eerily cold ambiance. There’s a few customers, all turning their heads up to the rattling of bells that the door hits on their way in that are barely heard over the running of fans from various points in the store and the radio blaring out a man singing in a somber tone about being a fool while walking lines.

Mr. Holt— no, no, it’s apparently Sam— “did you hear that, son? Mr. Holt is for my students”— leads the two younger men into the store especially after forcing the cup of hot brew into Shiro’s hand. A welcome gift, apparently, if the elder were anyone to believe, but it’s damn dark, steeped for hours and more like drudge than coffee, and it’s the best thing he’s put in his mouth all day.

“Colleen!” Mr. Holt calls, fidgeting with the glasses perched on his nose, “most excitement I’ve seen all week! And this beats my kids trying that coke and mentos trick!”

A lady perks from her seat at the register, a worn copy of Southern Living open before her on the counter. The odds and ends of this place, having already spent a majority of maybe five minutes within the store, can’t ever seem to fail enticing him in a curious way. It’s an odd assortment, different containers with colorful wrappers of candy or jars to raise funds for a child with sickness or for a church’s mission trip. What’s the oddest must certainly be a vase of flowers so pink that he honestly has to do a double take since they’re so new and so… different. There are not a lot of questionable flowers in the desert or in the city, both of which he knows all too well, so the dictionaries of fauna that he could have read just did not carry a lot of salt of worth until now.

Like the flowers, Colleen Holt is sweet and lovely, her age a mystery just due to the brightness of her smile. She must be a good match for the man she married since, well, he seems to enjoy the act of pouring cups of coffee for strangers that amble into a small town in a ‘yuppie’ car without hearing one ounce of fuss. A lady must take these occurrences in stride, and she’s just the perfect picture of a well-made wife running a small town grocery. She courteous, standing up from her seat instantly the moment that the stranger her husband has dragged enters her vision.

She’s lovely, a maternal warmth that should bring about a veil of consolation, but instead, Shiro feels sick. A big gulp of the scalding equivalent of tar is enough to drown the flares of guilt that start to vine their way up his spine from his guy,

“Colleen Holt, and it’s nice to meet ya, hun,’” is all she says at first, her left hand out for a shake of greeting that’s a motion as kind as her voice, her drawl less obvious but still lilting her syllables. In response, there’s a hint of hesitance that weights down his right arm, keeps the prosthetic at his side, but help him, she doesn’t even bat an eye before her lips part again with just a hint of a smirk along a corner, “son, your fancy arm don’t scare me.”

Shiro knows then that they’re going to get along just fine, just perfect with how her eyes never glance down warily, how she firmly shakes hands with a confident grip like that of one in business. Even though her husband harps beside them, something about this ‘wannabe Man in Black’ that’s driven his way out into the middle of nowhere, to this small town that already seems more pleasant that the congested metropolis of Seattle, Washington.

“Takashi Shirogane— please, call me Shiro— and the feeling is quite mutual.”

Mrs. Holt hums at the exchange, a twinkle in the corner of her eye that just tells him she’s thinking...
about something, but it isn’t a sinister threat, nothing that’ll creep out like a monster in those gory horror films to rip away his soul or dismember him. No, nothing of the such.

After their handshake ends with a fall of their arms, she just turns to her husband who has gone over to ask a kind-looking elderly lady if she’s doing all right and hopes Johnny is too, poor kid, he’s gotta get a better head on his shoulder, Barbara, and asks of him with a hint of saccharine that’s more obvious than a bat to the head, “sweetie, have you even thought to feed your tumbleweed here?”

Samuel Holt is nearly offended, his jaw dropping so quickly that it never seemed to have been shut in the first place, lips sealed to hold the hinges closed. Matt stands beside his father, ever the dutiful son, shifting his weight from foot to foot though while Barbara just smiles and pushes her buggy away with a tiny departure.

“By God, woman! What’ve I been doin’ this whole time!? Not whippin’ up a meal, that’s what!” And with the worrisome questions comes a sudden flurry from the man, his back soon in sight as he goes about the store, Matt in tow, to find their newest customer (though Shiro isn’t quite sure what his current position is in this scenario) something to eat.

Colleen hums, taps a finger to her chin as her eyes skirt up and down the taller form before her more in assessment of what she’s working with rather than admiring. “You’re definitely not from around these parts, son, so I have to ask as all gossip lovin’ Southern women do; where’re you from?”

There, a catch forms in his throat, and suddenly he can’t even swallow. The feeling is there, the sensation of need to do so— but it’s not happening. He should speak, dammit, he’s been asked a question, and if there’s anything he recalled in the first moments of waking in a brightly-lit and cold hospital room, there’s that immediate pounding of home in one’s head.

But, he can’t, can’t dare with the rush of events that he’s brought upon himself, a charge on his credit card for a flight away from said home that ended him up here in a part of the day where the sun sets to rustle up the moon, to let her silver glow cover the earth.

Thank God for distractions, for little things that are merciful in His eyes, for there’s a movement next to the woman asking him the hardest of questions and big hazel eyes that just command a wisdom far beyond their years.

“Oh, Katie,” Colleen murmurs, turning her head down to regard the young lady that has come between them, her hair— freshly cut short, nearly up to her ears— quite striking in comparison to the longer hairstyles that Shiro has seen in his short time in the store. “We have us a visitor—.”

“Mama, it’s Pidge,” comes a huff from the smaller of the two, an obvious statement that is riddled with the exhaustion of repetition, and, well, this one is another piece to the puzzle that is known as this Holt family. There’s a crossing of arms, and brushy motion of squaring shoulders, as if the girl is trying to embolden her presence with just a sharp, indignant inhale. However, when her eyes cast back to Shiro, there’s a bit of a shyness that simmers there, hard hazel melting into something a little more cordial than a teenager that has their feelings hurt.

There’s no hardness towards the tall man that had brought a shadow of a hybrid to their parking lot, somehow lost his way to blow into a small town that hasn’t had any one too new in years apparently, outside of the festival and the ball games at sports field and gymnasium of the local high school. No, Pidge isn’t defensive of their place in the world, isn’t withholding hospitality hostage to a stranger that, in a way, really has no sense of right to be so far from home like a highwayman.
He will have to be sure that he does not squander such an opportunity away, this gift that has been offered to him in that lackadaisical of ways, so he leans down just slightly, enough to offer her more of an advantage to offer his left hand because Colleen might not be frightened by the wonderments of military advancements, but he won’t dare assume that Pidge wouldn’t be.

“Nice to meet you, Pidge,” he murmurs with the best smile he can slap into place, the best the corners of his mouth can lift when there’s a tiredness that weeks into his bones, that pools into the crevice of healed fractures to make him soggy and downtrodden.

Pidge, bless her, she’s a sweetheart underneath the teen angst of phases or not phases as her hand takes his, her short hair sticking out in frazzled directions more than likely due to her fingers tugging through the ends that just reminds Shiro of his younger sisters.

It makes his heart shrivel up a little more.

“No, Shiro, right? You’re gonna get some crazy name callin’ while you’re here— just warning you,” she chuckles a bit, mirthful but with a hint of slyness that tells him that she’s going to be a little lady that will be a handful, “it’ll either be ‘Shee-roohw’ or they’ll just give you a nickname.”

With her words, Shiro feels something in his chest unclench and float into the air, hover up to the speakers as a true Man in Black croons along, the notes hitting a point in his soul that resonates with a hope that he hasn’t felt in months.

No one knows him in this town. No one knows that he was supposed to go to a therapist. No one knows of his physical therapy for the damned prosthetic that he still wishes would just rust away into pieces. No one knows that he’s seen blood, that he’s heard screams and explosions, that there’s a hammer constantly hammering away at the locked door that keeps the smidgeon of sanity he retains to smash it into dismemberment.

No one knows that his comrades are dead, and that God has played a horrible hand to somehow keep his sorry ass alive to suffer with it.

Shiro never cared for acting, and truly saw no use in anything but wearing the bluntness of honesty on his face. There are meanings behind his words, some sugar-coated and others not, but at the end of it, there has never been a reason to lie, or, well, there never was until after his tour overseas, never had been until his mother would ask how he was, and he could just resentfully reply with “I’m fine.”

Here, here in Gilman, Alabama, these people seemed, well, nothing but strangely hospitable to the point of it being a near sin. He’s heard it, heard it over and over how Southerners were not the sort of folk to turn a nasty spell against a stranger, how they were known for open doors and caring souls.

Personally, he wouldn’t have blamed any of these townspeople one ounce if they snarled their noses up at his presence, found a way to avoid him at all costs or cast him out. Instead, here he is, meeting a nice family running a reputable business while the customers inside tap their toes to the strum of a guitar and chatter amongst themselves with the news of the town.

Pretending; it’s an astonishment at how childish it sounds in his head, but it echoes within the walls of his mind, a constant hymn that gives him a light at the end of the tunnel, some path out of the darkness that has clouded his reality for months now that has forced him to watch his heart so closely that he cannot fathom looking away for the sake of it breaking.

Here, at the edge of a desolate road due to a horrible decision sparked by a sudden rush of go, he
has found escape.

“I can live with that, Pidge” he tells her, and he tells her with a confidence that bubbles beneath the ends of a hopeless thought because, yes, he truly can live with a strange name for the sake of playing make believe if the townsfolk are as kind as the Holts, though a bit eclectic with their personalities while the sun finally sinks below the skyline and Shiro enjoys his first hot meal of the day, an overly microwaved Hungry Man that might just be the best thing he has eaten in a long time.

—

“So, where’re you stayin’?”

The store has been shut up for the night, the last of the customers sneaking in ten minutes before closing for a quick purchase of pickled peaches and a loaf of bread. Colleen seems to know everyone, and Shiro truly believes that it really is everyone with her charming words of greeting and inquiring about mamas and brothers and kids.

There’s the sound of night that seems to both tense the nerves under his skin while also calming him; there’s a quietness that just isn’t found in Seattle, but it’s a lack thereof that rings in reverberation that, well, he’s across the damn continental United States. Also, the humidity is a rank cloud that suffocates and clings, even in the cooler times of sundown.

“I, uh,” and, well, he hadn’t really figured out that part of his plan with the spontaneity of the whole thing. Surely, though, they will not offer him a place in the guest room of their home which he is sure is quite lovely if Colleen’s following the Southern Belle’s Bible better known as *Southern Living* is concerned.

Sam, though, raises a hand, a quirk of a smile drawing the younger man out of his gloomier mental proceedings. “I’d offer you the house, but, while we welcome all strangers, Colleen has taken it over for her craft work! Burlap and wreaths are scattered out like a minefield!”

“We ought to let him have the couch for sweepin’ up the store, but we better give some thought to sendin’ him back up to Selma to book a room at St. James,” Colleen teases with a lighter air while locking the door behind them. The sign for Holt’s Grocery casts a white dreary luminance upon the near empty parking lot, Pidge and Matt already getting into bed of a newly painted pick up truck with their loaded book bags.

That surely isn’t safe, but Shiro’s gone to war— he isn’t the one to judge on what’s safe or not anymore.

Oh, right, there’s a discussion of where he will be sleeping for the night, and really, it isn’t that horrific of a thought to sleep in the hybrid here in the parking lot, not that there are spooks out there outside of bears and raccoons that’ll dare come up and cause a fuss over someone closed in a car.

Samuel Holt, though, is a man that just isn’t going to take the most sensible solution to problems, and that might just be a better perk of getting to learn the ins and outs of the family. His jaw has dropped again, a sight that is just humorous with the slow eating of exhaustion nipping along his legs.

“St. James? All the way back in Selm-ee? Aw, hell, Colleen, he’s already come here from Atlanta, we really wanna send him back? He might drive all the way to Nashville then,” huffs Sam, appearance more of a child being told that he must go home when he prefers to stay at his friend’s
house for dinner. The toys are probably better at the friend’s house anyway, the mother surely a
better cook.

Selma is not too far away, something that Shiro could probably deal with if he could find a gas
station that brewed a pot of coffee at least twelve hours ago to leave it to reduce down into
caffeinated sludge. That would be the ticket, honestly.

But, Colleen, her husband is more like a puppy with its bone taken away during its play, and she’s
a weakling, it seems, for the pout that puckers out the bottom of her husband’s lips. A tap of her
finger along her jaw and she sighs, “I think I have a few spare pillows and blankets.”

“Atta girl, Colleen Jean! Knew you’d come through for me in the end, you trooper you,” he calls in
a victorious bellow, wrapping his arms around his good wife to her cheek profusely. It’s an
adorable display of affection, one that tugs at the heartstrings of their guest because it’s another
reminder of what once was home, a home that still echoes even though he was there in the
apartment kitchen just that morning, staring at a note from his mother that—.

“Good Lord, can you two quit! We’re growing children here!” Pidge yells from the edge of the
tailgate, sticking out her tongue as Matt turns red with humiliation akin to all children that have to
watch gross public displays of adoration from their parents, groaning with a flop that thuds against
the metal floor of the bed.

Shiro can’t help but laugh, especially when the heads of the Holt family just laugh at the
embarrassment of their offspring. Their laughter turns into rambunctious guffaws once Pidge pulls
the tailgate up, tells them to take it to the bedroom because she wants to be
innocent of all the
mushy romance crap thanks.

“Keep it up, Katie Lynn; noisy altercation gets a lady nowhere,” Colleen calls with a simple smile
and a slight shake of her head, eyes drawn over to Shiro once she notices that her children are more
grossed with their parental issues than listening, feet now kicking the inner walls of the truck
bed. “Come along, hun, or else you’re gonna be locked out for the night.”

The fob rolls along Shiro’s fingers as he gathers himself, thinks upon the offering of a warm house
with a possibly comfortable couch where all the springs are still coiled correctly. The hell of a
broken spring digging into his back might be worth the lack of sleep— though a feeling he knows
too well, knows more than most the desperate grasping for sleep’s hand as she drifts above
temptingly, yet never saunters down to drape over him to shush him into dreams. He may not
sleep, but the hospitality alone is a soothing touch along his soul and reinvigorates his fantasies of
imagining himself as whole and stable.

But, he shouldn’t tread into a home that is not his, and shouldn’t even fathom taking up space on a
couch of a family he just met. He isn’t sure if they are truly wonderful people or great actors,
façades aplenty perched upon cheeks and noses to lure in unsuspecting travelers. However, he feels
a security with them, an understanding despite not knowing an ounce of information concerning his
life outside of Seattle and his prosthetic.

It’s been hours, but they still have not pried more than what Shiro willing breathes out.

“I want to pay you back for the night, though; it’s only fair, especially after being so damn— er, so
kind to me,” Shiro relents, cutting his eyes over to the wedded pair after a pause, “some way to pay
you back.”

It must be a funny thing to say to them because after the words have shuffled about in the humid
air, Samuel laughs, clutching at his ribs while the sounds echo through the parking lot. Colleen is
not far behind, but hers is a lighter tone, a kind of tinkling that adds a fair melody to accompany
the chirps and calls of the woods around them.

“Son, son, you’re a damn offense,” Sam chides him with a megawatt grin to ease the worries that
furrow Shiro’s brow, “to think that you should have to pay back something that’s a gift. You ain’t
borrowing our couch anymore than that flea-bitten Gunther does.”

Oh, that’s quite the comparison, a ‘guest’ to the family dog. It’s a humorous one all the same,
brings a mirthful chuckle to Shiro’s lips while Colleen nods over to his rental before walking
towards the pick up.

“We’re burning moonlight, hun!”

His eyes make each step as she does because it’s almost heartbreaking that he has to constantly see
a vision of his own mother, probably having found a mess of a kitchen and a room without an
occupant, in the form of Mrs. Holt.

Another sin to live with, another burden in his hopes of creating a gentler life. He needs to swallow
it down, keep the guilt down with an anchor so that he can live, God, just let him live when fate
tried its damnedest to rip his soul away from the land of living men. He should forget, should let
those feelings go, and he hopes with an extended stay here that he can.

So, before he turns to the hybrid parked by its lonesome, he whispers out a soft prayer to the low
buzz of halogen lights and flutters of moths, that on the breeze is carried his apology, that he hopes
to receive penance in some way other than having to relieve his nightmares repeatedly.

It helps, if only slightly, as he eases into the driver’s seat and revs the engine, reversing out of the
space before driving behind a pick up with one brake light out as Pidge sits up to wave her arms
whenever Sam is about to make a turn because, by golly, working blinkers and lights aren’t useful
in a small town like this.

There’s one turn, though, down a dark road called Oak Avenue that sets Shiro so abruptly on edge
that the tension chills goosebumps along his arms and back. The Holt’s truck drives slow, slower
than on the roadways beforehand, as though to prolong the bleak worries that are beginning to
cloud Shiro’s head.

Something is very wrong on this road, he thinks, too dark to see anything on the sides other than
tall shadows of trees and the gloomy barricades of maybe there fences. It’s the scene of ghost
stories, of the silly paranormal shows that his parents (and himself) watch for something to chuckle
about outside of the usual dramatic flair or crude humor of primetime television. Whether it’s
about ghosts haunting a hotel or big foot prowling in the forest of Montana or Ohio— wherever the
furry giant felt like making his home, Shiro guesses—, there’s something quirky that keeps them in
their seats.

However, instead of the radios going off with supposed sighting of a snarling beast that has to just
be fictional for the sheer audacity of it, something feels heavy, even in the car, while driving on
Oak. It’s almost as if Shiro is laying down, cradled in cushions bordered with silk before a coffin
lid slowly descends down to lock him in, and it’s—.

Suffocating.

His fingers twitch along the leather of steering wheel, tighten his hold to keep his heart from
beating harder, harder, because there is a mystery that will damn near come up and tear him out of
the car. God, what if something does? What if those little paranoid voices that hissed in
cumbersome bedlam, the voices that he has been told constantly by so many others than know more than himself **supposedly** that they are some sort of defense mechanisms to deal with the trauma, were right?

There is something here in this town, as if a prologue that lulls those that are not immune to its trapping techniques, something that has been allowed to consume this neck of the woods and the road as though lands can be possessed by otherworldly specters.

Then—.

There’s a sudden flash of blue that lowly blurs the side of Shiro’s vision, forcing him to slam on his brakes in at attempt to gather himself, to tell himself it’s just a fucking dark road and he’s turning something as trivial as a drive to a house into something out of a D grade horror film.

Sam notices, brakes of the pick up screeching at his pressing down before the truck sits idle and he lumbers out. He’s worried, that much is seen by the headlights and— when did the car swerve nearly off the road?

All he recalls is a color that was so sad, so somberly there off the side of the road that it just shook him, make him yield to the sensation since it was just so compelling of a force that it nearly drove him off the road in a frantic state that might have killed him.

Not too horrifying a thought were it not for the outline of a structure cradled in the branches of shadow trees. The moon, half full, barely lights the ominous blackness that tugs at his attention, keeps his eyes staring up at the thing instead of considering that there’s a man opening his door.

“Son, you hurt!? What happened?! Did a possum run out on you?!”

Despite the hands on his jaw drawing his head away from the— it’s a **house**, a damn house of all things that could possibly cause the circumstance of nearly wrecking a rental like it was his first time behind the steering wheel. He’s almost sick of himself, how there’s something that just swells his tongue, makes it heavy and useless in the dryness of his mouth while Sam looks him over for anything that could have been bad.

*Something* is there, nothing he can decipher from the yards away that he is, but it is a sensation that chills at his skin, that quakes at his nerves, the same that are already so frazzled from exhaustion and jet lag. He’s speechless, dull minded in every way because that shadow house evokes something that is absolutely bone-numbing within his soul, that drags it down to settle on the murky floor of a riverbed to decay with waterlog.

“Shiro,” is a command that is lower and more fraught with frustration at his lack of response than worry of his wellbeing. Then, there’s something that unfurls like silk, drifting away to give Shiro a sense of comprehension that was stolen away just moments before. There’s a feeling of guilt, especially now that Colleen is standing between the vehicles, fidgeting with her hands over their stranger’s near accident.

“I… I am so damn sorry,” is all he can muster, voice letting the guilt hang in the thickness of the Southern air, “just… got distracted by that.”

For all of the strangeness that just rolled clear through his psyche, for all the gravity of something that surely should not possess as such, Sam’s face turns from a worrying frown to something damn hard to decipher, something grave and paling as the corners of his eyes ease open wider and his lips part as if to speak. The words are lost, though, caught in the gossamer of a spider’s web before flitting out to maybe give an explanation to the eerie abode within the hoards of oaks.
Silence is a temporary, only permanent in the wishfulness of death, as Sam sighs, then inhales with the enthusiasm of a preacher giving a eulogy, “let me give you a bit of advice from an old man that knows more than what’s good for him; that up there is something of a thorn in the side of some people in this town, and you’d do best to mosey on home with us instead of playing detective.”

It’s said so plainly that it cuts into the veteran, something that he can only equate to drama that is best to stay very clear from. Though, he hesitates because his eyes keep darting over to the house, keep thinking that there’s someone there waiting… maybe even waiting for him.

Too damn late, though, to play adventure seeker in a land not his own, too late to go digging into the graves of things that might be dead or might be preferable to stay dead. Oh, joy, that this West Coast man be the one to find himself embroiled in something that’ll burn him up quick like he’s soaked in kerosene.

Maybe it has trailed behind him, and the fire has only just caught up. He can’t think about the stench of burning flesh and singing hair as tiredness howls in his head, makes a pounding there that brings the hammer back to its thudding.

“Come on, son, let’s get you to the house,” Sam says, once again a command that the man follow instead of being a straggler causing hold ups along the lightless roadways that he would surely remember like the veins and line of his hands.

With that settled, and the truck door slamming with the Holt’s back in their truck, it’s then that Shiro realizes that Pidge and Matt have been silent, only simply staring at him and away from the house the whole time. There’s an admission that he quietly makes, that the sight of them watching like dull-eyed buzzards creeps him out.

He waves despite that they would surely not see, hoping to alleviate his own anxiety, and Pidge, bless her, smiles as bright as the headlights cast upon her before hunkering back down in the bed. It brings him to a steadier footing, something happier and more relieved, that she could feel more like a kindred spirit that someone that waits for him to lose his footing on the trapeze he can barely step down on.

Matt, poor thing, he smiles too, but it’s not nearly as comforting, not nearly as uplifting when his eyes finally break their line to Shiro’s car to glance to the house before he’s turning away in a flurry to get away.

One more glance, one more look and Shiro’s foot will ease off the brake, will release the tension that has pooled there to ache in his joints.

What he never tells the Holts is that before they amble down Oak Avenue once more is that Shiro sees it, swirling blue that sneaks out as quickly as it sneaks in, a dim light in the top window that blows out like it was never there.

What he cannot tell himself is that there’s something dreadful that rakes at his bones, that drags down his spine, yet curiosity begins to overtake him, something akin to a forlorn longing to know what could possibly reside in that house that Mr. Holt knows too much about.

there is something blue that watches from the second floor of a house that thrived in days long past, possibly centuries before he was even a thought. a light flickers, then is snuffed out so that
there is nothing more than the rush of water in his ears.

—

‘Ain’t I the lucky one? Look what I’ve gone and done. I let her steal my heart; I know we’ll never part.’

Distantly, in a foggy haze of swimming in the last seconds of sleep, there’s a pop, pop of meat sizzling in an inch of grease and fat, a bark of a dog, and the pop of a toaster.

There’s something that sneaks into his olfactory senses, something that rattles bells in his head, clearly ringing, eggs and fucking bacon. Bustling sounds of morning routines, of a family that has risen to rejoice in a new day as the sun shines golden and warm along the panels of their home, twinge at his ears, drawing him out of the dreamlessness (not entirely so, blues upon blues that not once cease their attempts to submerge him) that he had never once been so thankful for.

It should bother him, maybe, that he slept an entire night without one nightmare, but he will accept whatever empty fortune he can take.

Waking up has never truly been something he has overly enjoyed doing. There’s always something uncomfortable about it, more annoyances that should be more gratuitous proof that he’s still amongst the living souls. Takashi Shirogane, though, will find any reason to hate mornings as much as anyone else with half a brain would.

Despite the parchedness of his throat and the entanglement of his limbs in a too short afghan, this morning finds him in lighter spirits. He’s hearing chuckles at silly jokes, the muffled words of people that love each other, of people that have no worries of the dangers that lurk in the forms of good intentions outside of their sanctuary.

He should warn them, but then there’s a laughter and a clinking of porcelain— and his heart stops, hinges on the precipice of something that floods over the shoddily erected dam. Just as quickly as he feels the tightness of his lungs and the sting of salt in his eyes, he rakes in a shaky breath, begs himself to calm down and let him float back down into himself.

And, it works— fuck, for the first time in months, it works. He lays there and nearly cries, nearly wrings himself dry from the lack of an attack that will overcome his senses.

He’s okay. He can be okay.

Fortunately, he isn’t so delirious to not know where he is near instantly. The sun’s glow may be blocked by the plantation blinds of the living room, but her radiance still seeps though and gives him easy sight. It’s warm in the room, the light green afghan useless in keeping whatever chill could exist around him since it’s more for one of the youngest Holt’s height as opposed to Shiro’s own.

Yes, he’s in the Holt’s home, that is more than easy to recall, having taken the couch after his near psychotic episode from the day prior. It’s all a blur in the way that impulsive actions are, but there’s enough comprehension skill within him to know that he should get up and at least thank the people who took him in for the night.

Though, as he starts to rise, there’s a soreness in his hip, and he flops right back, bangs falling in his eyes. It’s near damn comedic, but honestly, it’s nice to wake up with hip pains. It’s a reminder that he isn’t in his bed, isn’t laying on a mattress that has dip on the left side where Shiro used to
always curl up on, isn’t at home with his own family so that he can falsify his life to them in the hopes of his cracks and his scars from being too prominently seen.

Besides, the joy that erupts from the kitchen is damn near infectious, a testament to how a close knit family, even with their differences, can find a happiness in each other’s presence for something as simple as breakfast.

Samuel Holt is too obvious of a voice, even with knowing the man for maybe twelve hours by now. He’s got a twang that just hints of the scent of peaches while they bake in the oven, buttery pastry of a pie giving off that homey comfort that’s settles in a simmering heat that makes everything just a bit better. He’s damn singing, and though he’s met with a playful groan from his daughter, he’s sounds like summertime has walked through the door and made this its residence, casting gold wherever he treads.

“Well, ain’t I a happy man? She lets me hold her hand! And when the lights are low, she never tells me n—!

“Samuel Holt, if you don’t stop that caterwauling, poor boy is gonna wake up deaf,” oh, and that’s Mrs. Holt, though there not one instance of anger or annoyance lacing her tone, no, nothing but affection if the light smack of what had to be a kiss gives any indication to her mood.

Another loud groan. “You two are the worst! He’s gonna be scarred for life at this rate!”

There’s laughter, so much of it, bubbling forth like there has never been a worry or a doubt ever sneak through the cracks of the foundation, not one obscurity that would diminish the felicity that these four have built behind four walls. No, nothing dark has prowled along the windows, no rabid beast has slunk on its hind legs to sniff a way into this home so that it can drown the goodness in oil and tar.

What a nice family.

Matt— it must be Matt, the voice is quieter than the patriarch of the line— asks if he can go wake Shiro up. It’s a timid inquiry, barely heard over the wailing of the radio on the old classics music station. Marty Robbins’ serenade of his perfect doll fades into a swooping of winds, chilling baritones of the woeful composition of a poor man working too hard for piddly wages.

Okay, Shiro admits it; the music choices of the region are just weird as hell.

“Oh, Mattie, let him wake up on his own,” Colleen tells her son, “he’s got a burden we haven’t had the time to learn.”

Well, that’s enough to rouse him up, hip pain be damned. He’s gotta put on that mask, that aura of ‘doing just fine, thanks’ that he has failed to convey since getting into Gilman. He isn’t stupid, by any means, and he’s a poor man too, made of muscle and blood with a damn strong back. Time to act like he has a backbone instead of a flimsy wisp of a man.

Besides, the fatty smokiness of that bacon is calling his name, and if he’s going to die, he might as well die trying his best to clog his arteries with a bucket of good pork grease.

With a wince and a hiss, his feet bear his weight for him to shuffle to where the noises are the loudest. The house is a fairly standard layout, nothing too elaborate, creams and greens incorporated into a basic design that flatters the lifestyle of the Holts. There’s nothing fancy, overly done to risk an eyesore, just pleasant minimalism despite the few crazy knick knacks like metal apples and obscure mirrors.
The kitchen was the first room Shiro entered the night before, a near disaster as Gunther barked and ran towards the creaking of the carport door opening. Poor pup didn’t cause too much commotion, but the running around between the feet of the humans entering his house nearly caused a trip or two. A good boy through and through, happily panted at his food bowl before Matt poured some food in for him before patting his head. Shiro’s opinion is simple enough; it’s a dog, so he’ll love it, and Gunther already won his heart by allowing pets and ear scratches, all things the good boy rewarded with licks and tail wags.

Gunther is curled up on the floor mat near the door, snoozing in the sun while the zealous scene of breakfast meets Shiro when he steps in. There’s not even a damn beat missed, a flutter of heartbeat that would indicate that the family is frightened by another presence not typical of their own, as their gazes follow to his form.

They all smile, and it’s the weirdest shit, he thinks, that they just flop him onto their couch and expect him up early for their routines of orange juice and toast. Too add a sprinkle of extra oddity to the entirety of it, there’s a fifth setting on the table, fluffy eggs and buttered toast placing on a bright yellow plate with bacon— God, glorious bacon— along with a strange bowl of white… muck.

“Shiro, son, you’re walkin’ with the livin’ again, I see!” Sam laughs, walking over to the table to place his second cup of coffee down. “Hope you got an appetite for a horse because we’ve cooked up a feast this mornin’!”

By golly, he has, or Colleen has, if her apron with delicate green embroidered flowers name the true chef of the family. The lady of the house is already sitting at her post, sipping at some tea while her Devotional Bible sits open next to her plate. Her love of reading must have been passed onto her kids, Matt grinning over his worn copy of The Goblet of Fire.

Contradictions are apparent here, but Shiro says nothing, only just faintly recalling some calls for book burning over the tales of a wizard fighting the forces of evil. It’s a little out of place next to the Bible, but it’s nothing as bizarre as Pidge’s literature of choice: Learning Robotics Using Python.

The South is apparently full of eclecticism.

“Good morning… but you didn’t have to worry about feeding me,” Shiro starts while leaning against the chair that’s obviously been chosen for his place on the table. He isn’t sure what it means, really, that they’ve so readily made a space just for him, but maybe it’s as redundant as being the ‘guest’ spot, and looking further into it is just asking for a headache.

A scoff, and Pidge rolls her eyes. “Dad doesn’t just wrangle in a stranger onto our couch and (not) cook for him,” she remarks, as if telling on her father is as common as inhaling a breath of air from the lack of offense on Sam’s face.

“Now, now, girlie, what am I always tellin’ you? Nothin’ better in life than a good night’s sleep and grits and eggs for breakfast to put a man back on his feet,” Sam retorts with a waggish smile, pulling out his chair to sit down with the rest of them. Another song plays on the radio, wailing about good looking and cookings, and Shiro figures it’s just time to sit down because everything is starting to feel, well, quirky.

“Thank you, really, I…” he trails off, eyes glancing back down to the slop of a mess that’s been more or less poured into the ceramic bowl set before him. Is it porridge? Oatmeal? He’s just taken aback by it because he has no realm to compare this ‘food’ to, nothing to relate.
Well, no, that isn’t quite right, he supposes in a regrettable distaste, as memories of sick days from school were filled with warm bowls of rice porridge being brought to the quarantine haven of his bedroom.

Snickering float along drift into his ears, tinkles of noise that pluck him right back from ten-year-old ‘Taka-kun’ hacking up a lung during a fretful cold to the present where four pairs of mirthful eyes watch him.

Matt is the one that pops the stretched edges of increasing tension with a grin that’s too much like his father to ever be denied the source of his genetics. With a point of his finger to the bowl, he just remarks kindly, “never seen grits before, Shiro?”

Grits. Grits. Shiro has been witness to the sight of peculiar eats through the years, and honestly, there hasn’t been much to briefly yield his senses from partaking of the things on the ends of caloric. This, these ‘grits,’ look about as their name would suggest, some kind of bizarre hybrid of gritty granules and sticky gloop. If this is a testament to the grand ol’ culinary history and cultures of the South, the West Coaster might be flying back from his attempts of escape a hell of a lot sooner out of starvation rather than out of a breakdown.

“Quit lookin’ at it like it’s gonna snap you like a rattler, son,” Sam lightly chastises though the smile never once falters down to make his guest feel like a problem; if anything, he feels more like a part of the family, having been adopted as another son that has just been away for awhile and has returned to the door step with the world at his back, eager to nestle back into Small Town, USA.

All he can do is nod in spite of himself, and reckons that if the mush that has little yellow creeks trailing along the surface from the copious amounts of real butter ladled on top is really that disgusting, the Holts will surely just find a bit of a laugh in the affair, but not hold it vehemently against him.

“But, before you get your first good eatin’, it’s time to say Grace,” the patriarch continues, offering his wife his hand which then is given a kiss once Colleen places her own there. Pidge holds her mother’s on the other side, and Matt hers, which leaves Shiro without a connection for something that should have been as expected as the grits that are before him.

He isn’t religious, by any means, angrier at God over the tragedies wrought on the soldiers putting their necks down on the guillotine more than just for the sake of it. His parents were more the traditional flair when it came to heritage, celebrating the days of the year that other kids didn’t learn about as regularly as he did. He took pride in his heritage, truly, first American born Shirogane of the family that flew to visit family in the prefecture of his lineage over the summers to help his aging grandmother with the little chores around her old home. So, here he is, sloshed into yet another instance of novelty that will just have to be written to home about.

Facing the truth, he knows he won’t be writing long letters to his kindred about this, but it’s… the better thought to have with his reluctance to offering his own hands to complete their circle. It’s respectful, just as it was when he bowed his head in the hospital room for his own moments of silence for his fallen comrades when he even had a moment to think, to complete the enclosure with the width of his arms.

Between the glances of hands and of eyes, nothing discloses a hint of distrust in his lack of a reaction. Yes, their hands inch closer to his own, Matt’s and Sam’s a beckoning light in the fog that pervades the meadows of Shiro’s headspace, but it isn’t with the expectation of Shiro to ask for the Grace of God so that He might bless their food, bless their days, forever and ever, yada yada, Amen.
No, it’s out of compassion, out of some kind of suspicion that there’s more under this veteran’s skin that just the veins that course and the muscles that tense. It’s a promise that even if Shiro does not believe, maybe, that they are still there out of their love of fellow man that out of falsified obligation.

Before he knows it, before the food has a chance to cool over and become less appetizing, his hands reaching to curl around the hands on the table, remarking timidly that they are smaller than his own. Sam’s smile could brighten the shadows of Pluto’s moons themselves for the brightness blinds Shiro from sitting within proximity of it.

A tip of his head, and he’s praying, hell, he’s actually listening, actually permitting a small gate of his soul to open for the sake of the family that has done more for him that he could ever fathom. There’s nothing discouraging, nothing that repels him from their presence. Even as Sam inhales to speak Grace, there’s something somehow not fearful about this.

He prays, then, to float a little further down the road, his closed eyes not the static of impaired vision as he is used to, but is instead all shades of blue.

—

Shiro washes the dishes.

Breakfast was a cabaret of an affair, full of talking more than just seeing how fast one could engulf their meal, though Shiro learned on this day that he really, really likes that muck that he was served, adding ‘grits’ to the strange list of odd foods he has attempted and wants to eat more of for future reference now that he has proven survival is possible.

He’s meticulous in his cleaning since it’s only just damn respectful to do so. Colleen, bless her, she nearly fell over out of her chair when he rose to gather their empty dining ware to take to the sink, probably even nearly contemplated fussing the whole while as he washed away. It was only fair, after all, that they cooked and he cleaned— Takashi Shirogane is notoriously known amongst their friends and family that he is a horrific cook, completely dependent on protein shakes, frozen meals, and binges on meat lover’s pizza if someone did not take pity on him and fed him.

She accepts that, but the snark in her voice is a reason to believe that this is just one victory, and there is a war to battles to come.

As he scrubs at a bitch of a pan to clean, the Holts continue to ready themselves for the day, Pidge and Matt stuffing their last minute papers and textbooks into their bags while Colleen makes a to go cup of tea for a day managing the grocery. Sam, however, huffily goes through the house, scratching his chin to find his car keys.

“You left them out in the truck, honey,” Colleen calls to him after hearing her husband curse in the living room for the umpteenth time, “you were too busy lallygaggin’ that you didn’t think to take them out.”

“‘Lallygaggin’” she says,” he mutters as he reenters the kitchen to step behind her, his smile still a manifestation of his eternal happiness with life and home.

She simply taps her cheek, and Sam is a man under command and more than excited to follow through, kissing his wife’s cheek like she’s a sergeant barking for him to drop and give her fifty.

Shiro turns back to the pan and scrubs with more force because he’ll be damned before he’s bested by some kind of stuck on egg crust.
“Son,” is his name now, apparently, and there’s a touch along his shoulder while he struggles with putting a shit ton of elbow grease into washing one skillet, “I got a little somethin’ for you.”

Sighing in defeat, Shiro turns to Sam, frowning at his inability to achieve kitchen cleanliness. It’s a wanted distraction, yes, but round two is inevitable because he isn’t a quitter, no. “Yes?” He asks while the hot soap water sloshes with the drop of the skillet to the bottom of the sink.

Sam pulls out a folded paper from his pocket to flash it proudly before his visitor’s eyes. “Got you a map and a list of things to do in the big ol’ town of Gilman! Granted, I reckon you could also head on up the way to Selma for awhile, but you might get so enamored with the historic district you won’t come back!”

That’s— touching, really, and it brings a chuckle to rattle his throat. Mr. Holt is quite the character, concerned with what his guest will bide his time with while the day strolls on. “Not going to take me to work with you?” Shiro jokes while the paper is placed next to the sink, his eyes darting down and noting the scribbles and cross outs.

“Son, I teach teenagers. As in teenage girls. They’ll be all over you like flies on honey— heck, I reckon even some of the boys would, so my teachin’ days would be numbered if I risked that,” Sam laughs out in response, clapping Shiro on the back in good-hearted nature.

Shiro thinks, and he guesses he will take that as a compliment. “Thank you, sir?”

“Dad’s right; I can think of people of the student body that would start a club just to talk about a good lookin’ stranger,” Pidge sighs with despondence, weighted down by her book bag that’s more like a rucksack for a camping trip.

That garners a laugh out of Matt, who shakes his head and readjusts his glasses, “Like Nyma?”

“Can it, Mattie,” Pidge warns coldly, and it’s such a one-eighty that Shiro stops completely to turn to her. He notes her shoulders, rigid to the point of possibly being unbearable, and her fists, clenched tight and shaking. Her face is the scariest, a chilling glare that warns of a girl that would probably be willing to find out if she can commit murder with a blunt spoon. This ‘Nyma’ is a sore as fuck subject, obviously, and Matt’s learned his lesson full well as he raises his hands in surrender.

“All right, crew, we gotta head out,” Colleen calls from the door with her purse and tote bag full of books, both for leisure and for small business management. The odds and ends of grocery store upkeep has got to be full of strenuous longevity, so Shiro won’t hold anything against her in the way of finding little things to do while keeping herself sane during the working hours.

“Yes, ma’am, pretty lady ma’am,” Sam nods in agreement, briefcase in hand before kissing his wife on the cheek. It’s probably the most methodical and continuous part of their routine, done every day like clock work that it’s an event never missed, never postponed due to any extremity of any sort. Samuel Holt kisses his wife, kisses her despite their years of marriage that would dull others in their relationships.

Shiro watches from the sink, mystified with himself as he stares at the two of them, wondering what it feels like to gaze at another like the world would grow dark and still if their voice, if their presence was simply not there anymore. Maybe nothing would feel right, like putting on clothes that once fit but took a tumble in the heat of a dryer, so everything is too tight, too restrictive. Maybe it would feel cold, like the sun faded away and died, a dead star no longer able to warm the lands with her heat.
Maybe it’s like dying, slow and sure, because no one can escape that, but it’s just sadder to think that then there’s no one else to cling to until the life is gone.

“Be good to those kids today. Someone needs to steer them on the better path to greatness,” Colleen chides with a hint of lightness that just purveys all else, makes her shine even more as a beacon of goodness that radiates within her family. Pidge and Matt wave goodbye, and like a good daughter and son, kiss their mama’s cheek before piling outside to crawl into the bed of the truck.

Colleen stands there for a moment, Sam bidding her a good day with all his love and devotion before scurrying away to that they will make it before the home room bell. Being a teacher with two children in the same school can’t be easy, but it probably gives an advantage on the days they might be tardy. Lucky kids.

“Shiro,” is called to him, a bird like song that takes him from his preoccupations to direct him to her and only her as though to usher him into another subject that might not be broached were it not for her wise ways. “There’s a key on the counter for you along with my number; just lock up when you wanna go out, please? Lots to see in Gilman, dear, like that good-meaning husband of mine says.”

Mulling over her words, he rolls them around like they’re marbles in a jar of his own discretion. They’re clattering, a juxtaposition to the quiet resilience that firms her voice and gives him such space. Instead, those glass words roll and clatter, keep on keeping on to keep him from just nodding and maybe finally bidding her to leave.

But, he can never let things go so easy, and the marbles should be green like the Holts, full of life like the flowers outside, full of springtime that shall surely give way to summer in all the grandeur of greenery. No, the blues scatter in the jar, the cracks showing in the glass as he rattles them again and again and again.

Shiro prompts her with an unsettled soul, “what if I don’t want to go out?”

He expects a laugh, expects something that would just break him, force him to crash the jar against the floor so that the marbles all spill out, all collide against walls or furniture or go away into some crevice where he can’t find them. Rather, there is not a sound from her lips, Colleen being so steady in her disposition that instead of hands cupping in vain to catch rain water, she’s the lake that accepts every wary drop.

“Then don’t, sweetie,” she tells him as though she is consoling her child, and not some wandering soul that offered to wash her dishes and clean her kitchen, “just stay in here where it’s safe.”

Colleen waves her hand with a bittersweet departure that causes a yearning to sing sadly in his heart though he knows that he will surely see her again soon. He waves back, halfheartedly swaying his hand up before the door closes and he’s all alone in the kitchen.

Sam, Colleen, they’re completely out of their rockers; they’ve left him here with a spare key and all of the belongings that he could swipe away to sell or use for his own devices. They’ve left him, alone, with everything that they have built up over the long years of marriage, everything that symbolizes each passing day as the happily wedded raising two children.

But, Shiro, he’s damn fortunate, something like a man that has luck fully on his side to happen upon something as good as a caring group of people that would just go out of their way for the sake of being kind. It’s jarring, unsettling even, how kind they can really be.

Now that there is silence, nothing more than Gunther’s tapping across the kitchen floor towards his
water bowl, there a heaviness that starts to settle into his joints. It’s a slow thing, something that traps his bone in tin and keeps him down. He finds himself sitting in Sam’s chair, leaning forward on his elbows because his head is starting to hurt, a throbbing rain shower of thoughts that drop in sporadic falls. His eyes, before closing to stave off the strains of thoughts not his own, follow along the lines of the grains in the table in a lackluster endeavor.

Though he hopes to imbibe ideas that pace him away from what he figures is the inevitable, Shiro can only think about blue, endless blue, and it’s too much, feeling like he’s being called to a place he’s only seen in a glimpse of a fright, but all the same, his knees feel the compulsion to unbend.

Nothing feels safe. He doesn’t feel safe, and there’s something that tugs at his mind, keeps him from finding some flickering hope of solace. There is nothing of a sanctuary for him to find here, so out he must go to God only knows where because wherever the hell it is, there has to be some place safe.

So he rises, and goes outside to be welcomed into the world by a glorious sky of swelling blue.
Against all better judgements that would have resorted to a slew of arguments to keep him from the place that lulls him back down the road from the Holts, Shiro finds himself in his rental to trail down Oak Avenue with the hopes of closing another chapter of his crazy spells.

The house isn’t too far down the lane, but damn if it isn’t just as worrisome in the daylight as it is at night. There’s something off about the whole road, really, something that just seems dead almost, something festering amongst the reeds and the roadside flowers to keep new life from springing forth. From what he can tell, there’s not another house within miles, nothing else to become a victim to the inevitable decay time induces.

He idles down, hands gripping the steering wheel like there will be a predator rush out before him with dripping fangs and raking claws. Surely, though, there is nothing like those weirdo paranormal shows out here, but, after last night, after being forced into a near tailspin over something that seemed to present itself yards away, he’s beginning to believe otherwise.

Then, there, the house comes into view, a disintegrating testament to a once grand home that probably held within its walls a kind family that owned a farm or two. From where he sits in the car, he can make out a fair-sized shed in the distance. Other than the randomly put together fence and the overgrown weeds and grass, there’s nothing else but the trees to ominously stand at attention.

There’s just enough of a patch for him to park the car off the road, so he does despite the warning bells ringing clear and loud in his head. Firstly, he gathers from the signs that this is trespassing on private property, though who in the hell would let this house that could be fixed up like something nice go like this? It’s tragic, really, because all it would need is someone with a strong back and a dedication to tear it all out and redo it all— oh, surely he’s not thinking about becoming a renovator extraordinaire from where he stands before a small pathway to the front door.

He isn’t here to walk onto private lands to sate some kind of morbid curiosity that has been made near restless now that he is alone with no one else to take his hand and guide him back into more coherent thoughts, yet… here he is.

It’s just silent, nerve-wracking and unusual, even for a populous maybe no bigger than an outer neighborhood of his home city. It nurtures an uneasiness in his chest, and keeps him standing at the edge of the fence where he possibly has a chance at a legal case if someone comes up.

But, no, he can’t just be content with his, the sea of his dreams that churned with flickering oil lamps provoking a sense of deeper intent than just a weathered down house in dire need of repair. He’s buried under the pressure, something raising the heckles of that hunger for something different, something pinpricking a dreadful longing that pushes him forward.

It’s almost like a march to the noose with how rotten the air seems, not a stench to be found in the waft of a breeze, yet dismal all the same. Looming ahead and then soon above him, the house stands, still a focal point in his vision that will not disappear so that he can just walk away and go back to the Holt’s household so that he can curl up and feel safe.

It’s almost worth grieving how the doorknob has rusted over, the brass no longer a brilliant sheen but ruddy red that is so poignant against a crumbling front door. It’s more than likely locked to keep any pests away— such as himself— but if it’s anything like other abandoned places, there’s graffiti and trash everywhere from rowdy teens searching for some stupid thing to do on late Friday
nights.

Contemplating just driving up to the property was strange enough, but mulling over wrapping his hand around the door knob and trying to see if he can walk in? That’s an entirely different story, and one that he should close and tuck away on a shelf of several other dumb ideas while he’s ahead of the cops or the owners. Hell, there might even been a dog prowling around a corner of the porch, waiting to strike on the intruder like righteousness unleashed.

But blue swirls around him and blue fills him, enrapturing his heart and leaving him barely buoyant on the surface of the surrealism that vastly understating any other sensation until they’re all dulled. There’s something here, something that makes his hairs stand up on his arm, something that makes him dream of water churning in his ears and drowning his lungs.

He’s a smart man, damn it, and an ache in his jaw causes him to realize that he’s been grinding his teeth together under the stress of decision. What does he do? He’s being called, summoned inside, and all he has to do is reach out and try the door—.

“Well, son, I hope you have a damn good reason to be trying to sneak into this house, or I’m gonna have to throw you into the jail.”

He yelps, fucking yelps, nearly jumping high enough to ram his head through the roof of the porch. Fuck, fuck, he’s even nearly screamed, spinning on the balls of his feet and going straight into a defensive crouch because what he knows best, unfortunately, is the art of battle.

However, the moment his eyes focus on the vigilante that’ll surely do him in, the tension seeps out of his bones, leaves his restless, yet despondent in the face of a smile bigger that the Appalachian Trail.

Below the steps stands a man that is as golden as the barely-seen daffodils gandering through the weeds of a once garden, adorned in a white suit sans the jacket and a straw hat that just makes him wholesome and approachable. His smile, God, Shiro nearly flusters from the sight, finding it a handsome and ageless grin that could make anyone swoon.

He’s old though, as told by the wrinkles of laugh lines and creases of crow’s feet. Wise beyond his years while as youthful as a child, those blue eyes that pin the other man down hold an expense of mystery that foretells of another acquaintance for him in this town of Dallas County.

Shiro’s lips part once, twice, trying to thread together some theory of speech that will convey intelligence rather than the stupor dropping from his mouth, “… jail, sir?”

The man laughs gloriously, and the world brightens with the sound, and damn, maybe his is really just Apollo incarnate, standing before a mind-blank mortal that just wanted to know why the hell he was so inclined to stop at a falling-in house on a back road.

“Jail, he says! Jail! Might be the first damn lot in all of Gilman to believe I’ll throw them in the county jail!” The man nearly roars, doubling over with the laughter that shakes his entire being, and what’s really so funny? The old man is even slapping his hand over his knee like it’s just the most humorous joke that he’s been told in a century.

Shiro is as still as a statue, figuratively cemented to the battered, misshapen boards of the porch as — the owner of this land more than likely— finally reels in his laughs to rub at his eyes and stand tall once more.

“You’ll have to forgive a man with one foot in the grave; I sure do enjoy a good laugh in the
morning. It’s my secret for stayin’ youthful, son,” comes with a methodical wink, a nod, and a tip of the straw hat, “name is Alford King, Judge of this lovely town, and you look like you’re a ghost wanderin’ in the wrong place.”

Judge. Oh, hell, he really is going to jail. “I— I’m really sorry, I just wanted—,” and great, that’s just wonderful, he cannot even conjure up a full sentence from the barrel of his severely limited vocabulary that would defend himself. Damn, he hopes there’s a decent lawyer in this small town. Every town better have a good, wheelin’ and dealin’ snake in the grass to buy off.

“Ah-ah, hold the groveling,” Judge King remarks, interrupting easily with a loss of his smile and the raise of his hand to count. “First off, trespassing on private property— my property especially — is a misdemeanor here in the state of Alabama, punishable by a fine— yeah, son, some jail time. Second off, if you come with me for a big ol’ breakfast down at the Sunny Side Diner, I’ll forgive it all.”

Shiro, though, already feels the dread rising, raising his hands up as he finally manages a step back over the premise of a fine and, of course, jail time, probably a good thirty days or even a year or two and he just wanted to know what was in the stupid hou—.

“Huh?” Shiro asks, dumbfounded sound flying out his lungs like a crow rushing from its roadkill feast to avoid the front bumper of a speeding car. His stomach is already full enough, distended out but thankfully hidden by the looseness of a bit too big shirt. “Breakfast…? I already…”

“Aw, don’t tell me you don’t know about second breakfast! Just as important as the first, I say!” the Judge laughs, pulling his hat off to run a hand through his hair, shockingly pure white and befitting his age and demeanor. “Now, come on down before I done change my mind and get you in one of those ugly ass orange suits; we gotta shake hands proper like.”

This town is just fucking kooky. That’s the only damn thing that he can think of, but Shiro isn’t going to look away from a deal that’ll keep him off the hook for his own benefit. Stepping down is hard, like there are hands dragging along the back of his shirt to tug him back to the house, to drag him into the house and tie him down with rough ropes to keep him there forever.

Yet, for the life of him, he cannot understand why he wants that to happen, to be held down in the confines of a house that would no sooner collapse on him.

“I’m… just call me Shiro, sir,” he relents, offering his hand once he gets on equal level with Alford because manners are always important, and protocol is as much beaten into his brain as morning drills.

Alford grins again all the same, seemingly tickled to death over the premise of a hand shake with this dumb boy that trespassed on his property. Clapping their hands together, the older man shakes with a firm grip that tells of a hard working man that’s just a Judge for the honest to God hell of it.

And that’s how Shiro finds himself in the passenger seat of a well-loved 1980 Chrysler LeBaron to be taken on a grand tour of the Gilman, Alabama by the duly elected Judge of the town himself.

Alford, bless him, he chats away during his tour of his grand small town with a pride that is unmistakable, not at once faltered by any sort of lack of industrial economy or substantial location. This man, surely he’s a simple one, seen many things in his life that has turned his hair white as a symbol of his wisdom eternal.

It brings a little smile to Shiro’s lips, to see that there can be so much happiness found by someone that wants it.
“Over yonder is the Town Hall which is also the courthouse, where my office is— I’ll take you after a good meal at the Diner to conduct some business,” Alford speaks gayly with a sweep of his hand while one holds the steering wheel, the windows down since the air conditioning isn’t keeping up today. Town Hall is a small building, old and sturdy, not at all misplaced in the town landscape. It’s about what one would imagine in traveling, older model street lights with electric poles dotting the scenery while little local shops and administrative buildings for the town government fill in the rest.

The thing that is peculiar is the adornments of steel trees on each corner, blue bottles hanging from the ‘branches’ as far as he could see. The blue glass reflects the morning sun like sapphires would, creating entrancing fixtures that draw in the soul to cause a moment of pause.

It’s mesmerizing, pulling Shiro in like the blues of his dreams, like there are hands along his jaw, beckoning down into something dark and deep.

It feels like he’s drowning.

“Why you quietin’ down, boy? Cat got that tongue?”

A gasp hits his lungs, and he’s back in the seat of the LeBaron on the tour of the century. The car sits idle at the only stoplight on Main Street with only another presence of a vehicle across the intersection.

“Just… looking at the decorations,” mentions Shiro as his hands smooth over his pants to wipe away the sweat, “are they for some art project?"

His question is answered with a reverberation of laughter that nearly vibrates the car, with a good smack of a hand on the steering wheel for good measure.

“The bottle trees? My ancestors, God let ‘em lay low and quiet, done put these pretty blue bottles up to keep away the things that we ain’t gonna see,” the Judge tells him with a gesture of his hand while they wait at the longest stoplight in existence, “or maybe it’s the things we don’t wanna see.”

Shiro is a bit puzzled, looking at how the rounded bottoms of the blue bottles shimmer throughout Main Street, the metal trees like the civilians themselves with an ode to one principal; all are welcome, except the ones that aren’t.

“I’m not sure I follow, but they’re really unique,” states Shiro politely to abstain from thinking or talking too deeply after Alford’s avoidance of a true answer, or vice versa. He’d rather just admire from afar how the blues reflect onto the sidewalks and roads warped mosaics of sea like hues.

It gathers a chuckle of a response from the self-proclaimed best tour guide this side of the Alabama River, so Shiro secretly pats himself on the back, thinking he has staved off a discussion of what might possibly warrant bottle trees to keep the unseeable things away.

The light, at last, turns green, and the LeBaron rumbles on a bit further down Main Street to a little section of buildings that have been repainted across from an old, but well maintained restaurant named Sunny Side Diner. It’s not much, but it looks clean and the property is nicely kept, so it must be a good place to hope for clean eating, he guesses.

Shiro eyes the hand painted signs across the diner, noting the curly cues of the names on rustic boards that may have alluded to a project taken off of Pinterest for that natural aesthetic intermingled with arrays of colors. There’s a salon, a fancy place with pink petunia baskets hanging at each corner of the door as frilly patrons walk in and out to have their nails and their hair
done up for their nice occasions or just for the hell of it. Next to it, in the center, with an eclectic
manner of style in the windows, is a boutique that really makes no sense of being here to the
veteran, but who is he to assume what place on the map should have what?

Lastly, there is what Shiro would consider the best of the bunch, a lovely little fixture framed by
crisp yellow flowers galore that waltz like little fairies floating along a kind zephyr as the intricate
ribbons of an adorable wreath catch the wind to wave to passerby and bid them welcome to the
Buttercup Florist and Gifts.

“Mighty nice things happening here, son, mighty nice things,” is spoken with a preening pleasure
as the Judge parks his vintage vehicle in the first parking spot, seemingly reserved for him since no
one else has dared to take it already. “We’re actually getting commerce out here on the river bend,
and I think it’s right dandy!”

His enthusiasm is just a poison, a virus waiting on the whims of a dust mote on the chances that it
will land on an unsuspecting victim, to infect the dumb bastard’s blood with the grandeur of
expanding renovations while preserving the historic districts with love of tradition and of heritage.
It’s almost fake, but if there’s anything to be taken from his journey thus far, is that there are truly
people in the world that are this obscenely happy. Maybe it comes with age, or lack of witnessing
helicopters over sands and lack of watching children of foreign lands play soccer to wonder when
the next air strike will leave them on the ground, but it’s something that Shiro hasn’t figured out
yet.

Matters for another day, another term for his mental state to wrap around when it isn’t all static and
blues. It’ll be kept away for the time being, tucked away under wherever Shiro finds himself
sleeping this night, and for now, he’s climbing from the car to follow the Judge inside the diner.

The moment that the bells chime to signal their welcome into the bustling diner, there’s a cluster of
welcoming chants from all around the booths, every patron giving some sort of verbal salutation or
lack thereof as their Judge walks in with a stranger that is so out of place here, and oh, it’s the man
from the Holt’s Grocery, came in like a windstorm to piece himself into the perfect puzzle of their
home.

Shiro has never taken into account the bending of heads towards another to hiss judgements
between folks, but he can definitely see it here, scrutinizing it back just as much as he is being
while standing at Alford’s side.

A girl surely no older than twenty-two smiles from the counter where she’s set a place of heaping
breakfast fare in front of a hardworking man trying to get in a full meal in before the later shift
starts or having dinner after working third, but nonetheless, she’s sweeps her hand wide over to a
booth near the side. “Judge King! I’ll get ya in a sec, gotta get more red eye for these poor
bastards!”

Alford laughs, deep and warm, like it comes from the deepest hollow of his good heart to vibrate
throughout his entire corpulence; it makes Shiro feel like he’s just as welcomed here, just as taken
by as this anomaly of an old man is. “Go on, take your time, Ezzy, just getting my trespassing
friend here some good eatin’ before having to see what Lulu has gotten herself into for the day,” he
tells her with a voice that booms through the restaurant, that echoes into the kitchen and maybe out
through the vents to make the world a little happier all while he removes his hat and steers them to
a booth.

Sitting down, Shiro isn’t sure that he’s going to be able to partake of the ‘good eating’ Alford
seems to be overly concerned with, but shouldn’t he be at the office or courtroom? Then again, he
tells himself as the man settles his glasses onto the perch of his nose so that he can read through
the menu that he possibly knows better than the back of his hand that this is a different environment with different rules and it’s just smarter to observe and then to react. Just like how methodical a Southern gentleman could be as he reads the words of a menu like it’s the Bible itself, he knows he has to be just as patient.

“Think I’ll get the special today,” Alford hums, rubbing his fingers through his beard, “Hunk’s always got a damn good special… that chicken fried steak though…”

Forget patience, Shiro thinks with a grimace, what the hell is chicken fried steak? “Sir? What’s that?”

A pause, and Alford slowly lays the menu down on the table, eyes boring into Shiro’s with a look that depicts a horribly curious man that has come across such an oddity that all his cordiality of politeness graciously learned goes flying out the damn door in a snap. It’s pitying, damn right sorry that he has had to hear something so wrong come out of another person’s mouth.

“Oh, do you not know of good eatin’, son? God Almighty, the hell do they feed y’all in— wait, where are you from?” Alford blinks as suddenly having the thought that he has driven a poor sap around that should have been charged with a misdemeanor and he is the one that hasn’t been proper in all of their talking despite it being almost entirely one-sided.

It’s a question that, yes, is redundant for Shiro to answer, would have been a half-hearted reply out of routine more than actual belief that it was real. It was real, for years, for decades, it was a place that he held dearly to his breast so that he may always know that regardless of where he went or where he goes, there it would be, that place in Seattle where the Shirogane family would always be. He should mourn that he has let himself lose it, that home is a barren falsehood.

He should feel guilty instead of just numb.

“Seattle, Washington,” and that’s all spoken beneath his breath, and that must be enough, Alford nodding in reply rather than push the topic further with a prod of curious fingers. He’s more infatuated with what he wants for the morning meal as opposed to all else, so it’s a blessing of a chance that he will accept.

However, it’s extremely short lived, blue eyes hovering over spectacles to regard Shiro in a manner that almost causes his heart to stop right in its track just from the eminence of understanding that he sees. Maybe he shouldn’t say anything, but the older man has an aura of a good listener if there ever was one, as though he might spend the days quietly casually sipping at the stories blustered out into the open as though out of compulsion. It isn’t like the man is a judge or anything…

But, it’s terribly tempting, wanting to divulge his darker beasts to this night-light of a man in the dismal hope that the monsters that writhe and snap under the bed might disappear if he simply talks, unearthing a little tin box of worries from the backyard amongst his internal conflicts.

Then, a saccharine giggle with the vibrancy of rainbows arrives next to the booth, “breakfast for two!”

Whatever desire he has flits away the moment Ezzy arrives with two coffee cups filled with piping hot brew and a platter of heaping helpings that could feed a small village alone for months. It’s a smorgasbord of proteins, starches, and carbs, the smells alone about to drive Shiro in a near frenzy of wanting to empty his stomach so that he too can have a part in ‘second breakfast.’ There’s a sweet hint of peaches from the fruit preserves, the buttery scent of fresh biscuits fresh from the oven— those the bacon is a little meatier, thicker and fattier than what he’s used to seeing.
Alford is already drooling, rubbing his hands together at the glorious sight of a plate worthy of a well-loved king with a greater disposition for the finer culinary treats in life.

Shiro can’t help but draw his eyes over and up Ezzy’s athletic form, noting a charge in the air that snaps with her coquettish smirk framed by her rainbow-dipped hair. She’s pleased with herself, not even having to come over to take an order before already having the mind of a psychic to know what Alford would order. Maybe there is something there, some kind of— dare he say?— affair since a lady her age shouldn’t be too concerned with an older man’s order.

Then again, she’s a waitress, and one that personable at that, and judgement is a fickle, fraying tightrope he needs to try and not step across on.

“Who’s this, Judge King? Don’t you know you’re the only man for me? Bringin’ me a beau to try and spurn my affections? Ugh, you’re the absolute worst.”

Shiro is almost offended, listening to this haughty young woman talking to a man probably three times her age like he’s hers to claim. He reels it in, though, because he obviously isn’t seeing what all he needs to see, noting Alford’s chuckle of delighted merriment that dissipates the worries of lack of respect. He sits back, craning his head up to Ezzy who just smiles fondly like she’s seeing her grandfather for the first time in years, and she’s just as wholesome as he was when she last saw him.

There’s a past there, and he is the last to ever judge, especially when hellhounds and specters tug at his back.

“Ezzy, darlin’, you’re just a firecracker! Blazing up the sky this morning as per usual,” says the elder of them as he sets the menu down to unwrap the silverware since now there isn’t a thing to worry about but eating, “and already figured out exactly what I wanted!”

Ezzy flits a flimsy strand of overprocessed hair over her ear, a little full of herself as she preens, “only the best for my man to be. Hunk knows when I walk into that kitchen it’s all hands on deck.”

If he wanted to feel out of place listening to the daily going ons, then this is exactly here Shiro needed to be. The feeling of out of place during a discussion that doesn’t feel his right to listen in on stampedes through his chest, keeps him down in his seat to bide time rather than pushing him to walk right out for fresh air when it’s all just to get back to his car and get back to the house further down off of Oak Avenue.

Blue, striking and effervescent blue, hits him again like a swan that sings sadly on the lake for something it cannot find, cannot find amongst the reeds and the mud. He’s sinking like a stone, body limp and weighted as he watches the light flicker darker, darker…

A bell chimes, a clatter against a pane of glass, and then blue is aflame, in cinders by the suddenness fire that is red.

Ezzy perks up mid-tease with Alford, glancing over to the newest customer with a smile that seems more pitiful than inviting, raising a hand as her only gesture of a good morning rather than boast about the young man’s arrival. Shiro is intrigued how Alford simply looks over his shoulder and does not say a word, but merely sucks his teeth and shakes his head as though he has seen a widow step into a world where he cannot help himself against the mourning that wraps around his arms and waist, drapes around his legs in gossamers of black.

But, Shiro only sees red, sees something in strangely colored eyes that screams of fire, yells of
burning wood and scorched earth all while there’s a burden that simmers it all down, like a mighty lion ready for the pounce.

This lion, though, is quieter, less apt for the kill, hunched in his red flannel and dirty cowboy boots.

“Poor boy,” Alford sighs, shaking his head again and signaling for Ezzy to lean closer so that he can mutter to her, “is Hunk keeping him fed? I told Lulu to go and take him some food, but she’s more like a startled rattlesnake than my good girl when I mention Keith.”

Keith. There’s a little hum of thought in his chest, a distantly long howl that forlorn in his ears as the odd man out watches the red man go to the counter to ask the other waitress of the diner something Shiro cannot decipher from where he watches, only seeing her nod and head back to the kitchen, door swinging back and forth on the swivel.

Maybe it’s concerning to believe, maybe even preposterous of a proposal to assume that there is a notion in the universe as wayward souls meant to find each other, lost ones that are meant to meet at a certain place and time due to a confounded scheme of fates and destinies. Fabrication of a deity or otherwise, there’s a click within his heart, a shifting of two pieces that suddenly slip together perfectly to shape a bond that only two of the same could ever perceive.

With time, he will know this one, will know this one like he knew his brothers in arms, knew them as though he were himself though it will not be war that that they both find a kinship through, but rather feeling as though they had to shut the door to the world around them to survive.

A squeak of rushing hinges, and the kitchen door opens with an exuberance that would startle others, but just reminds Shiro of the doors of barracks and bases, sets him on edge and ready to roll down under the table. The momentary fight or flight diminishes as abruptly as it lit into Shiro’s throat to spark at the synapses, a hefty man with the anadem of an old yellow headband a vision of peace hard-earned.

The tank of a man must be Hunk, this master chef that has whipped up the best smells from his kitchen with a finesse that he would personally give up his other arm for, lumbers out with his teeth showing, lips split wide in a grin once his eyes catch sight of the aforementioned Evans boy. The feeling is half reciprocated, a half smile that seems to be so grateful for Hunk’s air of acceptance, their hands clapping together in greeting before their other arms reach around for a brotherly embrace.

So, rambling Southern men do show physical affection. Shiro always presumed that the breed was too rough and tough to even show an inkling of such friendliness, more in tune with their wily mannerisms of shoot ups and galloping in the sunset.

Then again, forgive his next thought, but maybe his father was a little too into John Wayne and Clint Eastwood in those older late reruns depicting a ragged West needing to be conquered and be made civil—and it’s not even the right damn region, is it? Shiro huffs to himself, wondering why he’s so transfixed on comparisons, but movies and songs are all he has to go by with walking into a world that has never crossed his path before, but the West is the West and the South is the South, ad Westward is a way he is happy not to tread to for a good while.

“Got you some good ol’ soul food for the day, but don’t be telling me you’re gonna eat a load then work with them cows,” Hunk talks loud enough to hear, a voice low, yet tender, a friendliness that fills the soul with the vials of kindness that this man could only bear forth. Wholesome, that’s the ambiance of Hunk’s spirit, the energy that he gives off as he leans back from the hug to pat his hand on Keith’s shoulder.
“Gotta stomach of iron, Hunk, I think I can handle it,” is a half-there suggestion that doesn’t quite reach the lines of Keith’s eyes, and Shiro gets it, gets that there is a gesture of friendship underlying the scene, but it is clouded with a veil of a circumstance pushes Keith’s shoulders down, that heavies his step.

For what little he can tell, Hunk is nothing less than good, the demeanor of his gait and of his tone emboldened with a golden heart and a brave soul. It’s all yellow, bright like the buttercups dancing merrily across the road at the florist’s, fervent like the first light of the sun through the curtains of a warm bedroom. It’s a feeling similar to Alford’s, that kindness that comes from the experiences that life creates in the unusual ways to bring others into their flock and hope to guide to a better sense of self.

“Just don’t put your dumb ass in a bad position, ‘cause I don’t know one damn thing about bulls and heifers,” laughs Hunk before he gets Keith in a chair at the counter, “but one big Evans special, comin’ up, cowboy.”

There, though, is a little bit of a smile from a young man that feels more like a boy that’s still having to learn how to grow up with the wrath of onsloughts that threaten his childhood, that steal away what the naivety of a youthful mind still long to keep.

A cough, and Shiro turns his gaze back to the rainbow girl and the Judge of Gilman to find them watching him owlishly, like he’s done something wrong but they’re nice folk trying to mull over the opportune ways to inform their guest how so. Ezzy, though, she’s probably a true doll, smiling and touching the old man’s shoulder before excusing herself to check in on the other customers.

As a napkin is unfolded and set in his lap, Alford pushes the dish closer to Shiro and nods to another set of silverware, “time to eat up, boy, ’cause there ain’t no use in staring at a poor farm boy like Keith Evans. It’s not polite.”

He nods, the only thing that he can think of to do, feeling himself forced to pick up his rolled up silverware to pull out a fork and help share the feast of food between them by the unwavering regard of Alford’s eyes.

Shiro goes straight for the grits to take a bite, to see if he will like these as much as he liked Sam’s, but oh, damn, these grits are buttery and cheesy, something delightful in the undertones that satiate his tastebuds in ways his first partaken dish couldn’t accomplish. He admits it with a swoon of culinary adoration that he’s in love with these glops of mush, and the biscuits? Near damn lighter than any cloud passing through that blue springtime sky.

Alford’s just as happy as a loon, sneaking over pieces of hog jowls (“it’s the better bacon, son”) and scrambled egg to Shiro’s side as if he’s fattening up a hog for the country fair—

Or the slaughter.

But whatever morbid thoughts crash with another clatter of bells, this time near violent and jarring, Shiro nearly jumps, bones askew from the cacophony of bells that toll for yet another presence into the restaurant.

The air, though, turns sour, turns a greenish hint of detest as seen by Alford turning once more to see the newcomers and his shoulder tensing not in worry, but in annoyance.

These are not welcomed persons.

“Ah, them there, boy, are the Garland cousins… don’t mention them to our dear Mayor of Gilman
that they’re related; he’s been tryin’ put them in early graves after they shot up the wrong house over a piece of land that isn’t theirs to claim.”

Now that they are in his view, the rowdy overalls-wearing trio of men, adorned with their dirty trucker hats and unfashionable cowboy boots are what Shiro had been expecting down here once his sense of geography kicked in. What he didn’t expect to abruptly, though, was an utter distaste of their station within the Sunny Side Diner. The Garlands are hardly suited to come into a clean place of eating in their sullied state, grease stained and appearing honest to God rude as the tallest wolf whistles at Ezzy’s coworker, her face so stricken as she backs up and whips around to hide in the kitchen.

She looks like she’s seen the face of the devil himself, coming back for a lick at her neck and a taste for her soul, and it sets Shiro on fire.

“Ashy, babe, don’t go hidin’ from me!” the tallest Garland hollers with a slap of his hat on the counter as his two family members whoop in snide laughter, “but I guess you know I like seein’ that ass—!”

Snap.

Shiro blinks, already standing up and ready to punch the asshole down with his metal hand to just see how much damage he can do to himself while justifying shutting down a want-to-be harasser that has even put these well meaning people into a bunch of bristling cougars ready to pounce. That these bastards dared to walk past that threshold to start this kind of rowdy, unnecessary shit while Hunk’s waitress hides in the employee only sanctuary, and he’s ready to just take out his paranoia of sudden noises that might be monsters coming for his last breath on lecherous men.

However, it isn’t Shiro that has made it across the tile, but rather a flash of red flannel and a fist raised with the promise of a connection while another hand twists itself into a nasty once-white collar.

“Shut the fuck up, Thorne.”

There’s a clatter of silverware, of forks hitting porcelain plates that are bare with consumption of meals, of men and ladies that are just trying to have a decent morning rousing up to arms with the witnessing of a fight that feels charged, feels like has been coming for ages. Shiro might have to sit this one out, especially with how Ezzy is manning the door, her sweet face contorted with spite that oozes with the slithering promise of easily skirted homicide.

Even Alford is near murderous, a justice bristling at the ends of his presence that snap, spark, like he’s the dominance with his blindfold and his scales, passed down to him by his mother before him to educate the masses of the truth, of the fickle balance between heralded innocence and sinking guilt. The scales must be all brass, probably like the man’s knuckles if evidenced by the tightening of liver-spotted skin over the ridges along the elder’s hands.

There may be a brawl here, a throw of a first righteous punch by Keith who is seething like a wounded wolf, licking his wounds from a previous altercation so that he can give his best shot here even if it may land him in jail.

Thorne, though, is hardly deterred, a bit more shocked that Keith would have the audacity to even think he had even a smidgeon of moral virtuosity to raise a fist to a Garland.

“You dumb ass Evanses, y’all can’t figure out your heads out of your asses,” Thorne grits out with a sinister smoke that covers the entirety, that settles on the counters and on the windows, that
cannot even be cleaned and wiped away with the lighter, teasing tones of Hank Williams twanging in an echo of a background of humming silence.

Shiro can’t breathe, can’t move, as though an inch of residual movement may distract the two forces from their conflict and force them to raise hell upon him. He’d rather wallow for a moment though his blood pressure is through the roof, a pounding along the vein of his temple that throbs, throbs, throbs to each inane strums of chords and sibilant silence.

If Shiro cannot breathe, cannot take in or let go the air of his lungs, Keith cannot allow his own diminishment of will in this fight, cannot show that the words ground deep into his ribs and threaten to crush the bones into the pulp of his meat. There’s something tense along his neck, something that isn’t born from a motivation to fight for a good cause, a cause like the honor of a poor girl that may have had a bad encounter with the slimy snake of a man about to be hit.

The stouter of the trio guffaws, a petulance that eludes to some kind of half-assed convulsion concocted from a past that Shiro has not been a part of, a past that he has not seen with his own storm eyes. It’s hardly a difference of what was and what will be, but what was and what still is. The ‘is’ is what still lingers, still shuffles low along the feet of the men at the center of the antagonism, watching for the opportunity of the moment.

“Better beat the shit outta ‘im now, considerin’ his good ol’ daddy ran away with our money—.”

The fist connects with a jaw, this time a swerve away from the tallest to deck the shortest down to the freshly mopped laminate. Alford is up in a ruckus, hollering profanity far from those expected from a gentleman as he grabs Keith by the back of his collar, pulling him away from the rousing Garlands that are flabbergasted, absolutely confounded that this Evans boy had a bite to his bark at the tail end of his threats.

“Get out,” Shiro starts, shaking so hard he can’t bear to stand at the sidelines, ready to make a few licks himself. He isn’t sure if it’s the augmented impairment of judgement that readies him for a brawl, that constricts the sinews, that makes him become an almost reluctant fighter entering the ring, tagged in. He’s seen this before, seen it amongst the superiority complexities within ranks and the barracks, an awful entitlement that derives itself from an array of problems that either discharges like a snap of lightning or kindles a wildfire that will enflame everything in its path for days, weeks, even months. He’s seen this all before, and kept to himself all the same to be a good soldier just doing his dailies.

But, he isn’t his uniform, isn’t his gear, standard issues long gone and buried somewhere, he hopes. He’s here, and there’s just something that awakens an instinct of fight.

There’s a tussle, a growling of sorts, the middle Garland, one of more average height and girth but still plenty ugly, cracks his knuckles and taunts closer as the stout one that’s must still be baffled that he’s been hit by a good lick stays down like a well-beaten mutt, “well, you slanted-eye shit —.”

Alford, God bless him, he’s ready to go, at Shiro’s side as he pushes Keith down into the booth as though his old limbs could hold his own in a wrangle, and it’s a comfort to know that this Judge is willing to cause trouble for trouble despite his position of justice in the town. A few more townspeople stand up, a few eager to maybe hold the two opposite forces that are bond to collide away from each other in an effortless attempt, but the world suddenly drops, an adrenaline rush that shakes itself out of its own hide as the door opens once more, the bells violent, more so than when the Garlands thrust their shitty introductions to a visiting man amongst the usuals, and appears a young woman with the face of a lioness ready to smite the pride down.
Keith stills, a hitch of his breath from where he’s lumbered back in the booth, barely notices the rough swinging of the kitchen door as Hunk appears again, his aura now fervent with anger, a pure rage that reminds others of an army of angels leading a righteous, fiery path to earth in a wrathful adornment of flames. No, his eyes are affixed upon the warrior woman at the door, her figure every bit domineering and authoritative as a king with his sword and his shield at the precipice of war.

Her clothes, Shiro manages to notice, are that of an officer, her badge gleaming in the blaring mid-morning sun to reflect to the people that she is not only a Sheriff, but she literally owns the title in every manner fathomable.

A call to the cops, perhaps, has brought her to this dismal affair, this example of modern prejudice, both in race and familial ties, and it worries Shiro at the sight of her own skin, sees it dark just like Alford’s, a beautiful tone that might be sneered at even though she could book whoever the hell decided to do it, kick their asses in the back of her patrol car after telling them their rights and claiming they harassed an officer of the law.

She’s beautiful in a fearsome way, completely dazzling with the sharpness of a dagger and the coldness of a diamond that would fall a man, that would utterly wreck him and leave him lifeless. From the beginnings of wrinkles on her forehead, she may have already had to commit such an act, may have already had to strike a saturnine embodiment under a cloak of night so that none may discredit her stature of the law.

But, there are laugh lines along her mouth that are oddly familiar, crevices carved into her skin by the rambunctiousness that she may find herself up to against the towering wall of her age and her career, and it’s just the slightest feelings of relief that cool down his hot as hellfire will to kill the damn bastard who’d— who would—.

“Don’t you three have a rickety deer stand to occupy? Like we ain’t smart enough to know that isn’t another way to hide your ass getting drunk off cheap beer all day.”

Oh, she’s snake-tongued, the stabbing pointedness of her words like a tip of a knife nicking at the Adam’s Apple of a man’s neck, but moreover the neck of these three shitheads that have instantly backed down in a show of false sheepishness that will suffice under the circumstances.

“Evans threw the first punch, Miss Sheriff Ma’am,” the short, portly cousin mutters with a disgruntled askance to the woman king that is fiercer than a million black hoof mares stampeding along the fields of the farms around, commanding his hesitant respect with an assurance of a proud beast that bears her shoulders broad and sturdy. *Come at her*, the stature of her figure confides a loyalty to her own devices to rupture the doings of others that dare utter a question of her limited, gracious sanctions, *come at her, peasants.*

They’ve apparently had run-ins with this woman Sheriff with how the cousins’ heads hang low, and though the lady emblazoned with her badge is surely the noted force of most assured pressure amongst their necks, Hunk is a burning monster, a gentle giant that not once portrays a clout that protrudes from his size or his strength, but rather shows his goodness and his kindness first. However, with the waitress that hid earlier at his back, barely peaking around the door jamb, the slim fingers of her hands white with clenching the metal to keep herself from scurrying back into the kitchen, Hunk is a torrent, a rage of storms bridled just for the sake that he, too, can be carted off to a prison block.

However, she’s unimpressed with the falsities of humility and the seething iron horse that threatens to wreck all that was disrupted the peace, a quirk of her eyebrow and a cross of her arms her only allowances on the change of stance, “and you know you ain’t supposed to be here while Ms. Ash works— restraining order, remember?”
“Coincidences, coincidences, Sheriff Ma’am, we—.”

A scoff, short and steep with the annoyance that conveys in the crease of her brows, forming wrinkles that will bound to be permanent in a few years time. Shiro scoffs with her, glaring hard and putting himself near the Judge though the elder man has taken on a strange air about him, covered himself in the clouds of mystery as he plays witness as opposed to player on the board.

“No excuses: out, the three of you, or I’ll see to it the Mayor hears about this,” and the words are enough to cause a match light of fear, the darkening woes of a foe that may be scarier than this Sheriff of the Gilman folk might catch wind of their folly this day, the folly of kinfolk that can’t keep respect well enough to abide by a restraining order.

There’s a bit of a commotion, but as soon as they tumbled in, the cousins are gone in what Shiro begins to figure is Garland fashion, a festering of misguided entitlements wrought by years of misled teachings and of reluctant dreads of comeuppance by a hand in grand position whirling out like green fog mists after the lady of the hour steps aside.

It’s quiet now, the tintinnabulation of the door bells falling still against the door, waiting to tingle at the arrival of another customer in silver anticipation. Hunk, no longer burning red, but rather a sickly yellow full of worry, turns to the kitchen door to gently tell Ash to gather her things and he’ll make sure she makes it home safe.

“No, sir,” Shiro happens to catch her murmur, a soft shake of her head that sways her long ebony bangs, “no, sir, I’m safest here.”

Ezzy goes to calm the patrons down with a smile of razzle-dazzle, her rainbow locks just the perfect frame for her cordiality that honestly touches Shiro’s heart while throwing a wink to Alford at her exceptional customer service skills. If in another time, he would find it adorable, something to take for granted maybe in the midst of the world that has found more ways to go to hell than the opposite.

However, the vision of assessing the damage of a conflict stirs down towards the other presences around him, and Shiro realizes that Keith is still there in the booth, staring over at the Sheriff like she’s a goddess of war, a goddess of wrath here to rip his beating heart out of his ribs to parade her prize up and down the streets in gilded affair.

The Sheriff, rather, just looks tired and a bit tense, her spine tall yet awkward as she finally comes over with a shake of her head, pointedly not looking at where the Evans boy sits, “daddy, you’re a damn idiot.”

It’s a tick of time that slinks around before outright snapping up with a sharp slap of ‘oh’ right at the high point of his cheekbone, and of course the Sheriff would be the judge’s daughter. After all, their features are scarily familiar, blue eyes vibrant with life and duty, their forms imposing yet welcoming (thought the poor sheriff may disregard that as frivolous talk), a hint of honeydew summer warmth that’ll invite passersby into a cozy little place to suffocate them slowly with the stifling humidity.

The most shockingly apparent hint would be their rare hair color, a shared trait apparently that may not come from old age but rather genetics, both father and daughter both having stark white tresses that catch the eye, that keep the onlookers to stare and be lost in an aesthetic pureness.

“Well, Lulu, an old man has to have some excitement in his life!” Alford grins with a wink to his daughter, who seems to teeter on the edge of a strained chuckle and cold vehemence. Her arms ease down from her stance, hands falling to her hips as her composure changes into something
slightly duller, but nonetheless serious. “You can’t go on living like the world will catch up with you everyday!”

“You’re the absolute…” ‘Lulu’ stops short, shaking her head before breathing in an air of shortsight, a head snap of changing the focus on her father over to Keith who is sitting there dumbstruck with his eyes on her like she’s an angel of death come for his head. “But, I won’t press charges this time. I’ll call it even, Evans.”

The glare is abysmal, creates a reaction that cannot be described as nothing short of withering, and it’s a little horrifying to watch a tough man willing to fight a man bigger than himself finding himself feeling an inch tall under the gaze of someone like this Lulu. There’s something there, a small town story that is known somehow in high school annuals and sports banners, known more in the secrecy of lower level sports bleachers than the openness of the restaurant that Shiro is in, and it’s saddening, as though he’s watching a heartbreak over and over.

“…Thanks,” is the only response Keith manages, hanging his head and scuffing the toe of his boot against the floor, “won’t happen again.”

“Damn well better not. Ain’t gonna keep pulling you off their hook,” she answers coolly, her eyes a steely cutting cut of a glare that’s a knife on the edge of a wrist, the metal just nipping at the skin for a bribe of danger. Sadly, it’s humiliating to watch as it must be the bearer of the force, to sit there and take the snippiest of tongue lashings while the sheriff, someone that must have been important to Keith—and still is—walk away to ask for a cup of coffee to go because, well, the precinct is calling.

Alford coughs into his hand, some kind of distraction from his offspring chatting it up something kindly with Ezzy, “go on to the farm, Evans.”

Keith, though, cannot even pop his jaw fast enough to snark back any sort of retort before Hunk is there, huffing tight and low while fussing over his apron to wipe his hands. He’s that giant again, full of carefulness and full of love for fragility, but his hands are anxious as their cup Keith’s chin to turn his head right and left to put him under inspection. Shiro finds it quite heartwarming, this large man that could break his spine in half worrying over his smaller friend like a mother fretting over a son after a schoolyard fight with his bullies. Their words are hushed, something only meant for the two of them to hear, and that’s just fine; Shiro isn’t here to butt into too much that doesn’t concern him directly anyway.

However, the tugging on his soul still lingers, a kinship that cannot be explained harking on a smoke signal that probably is unrequited. It lingers, like dust overlaying on his bones to rise him from what might have been an early grave.

Friend. Maybe the word he’s searching his idling mind for is simply friend, or at least, potentially one, a companion in a confounding environment with more twists to the plot than could ever be imagined, a plot found more in the dusty shelves of out-of-nowhere fiction than what could be discovered in real life.

Hunk, though, he’s a friend enough, smoothing delicate fingertips along the jawline of the smaller of the two in case he had taken on any injury outside of the wound to his pulsing pride which must still be flayed open, presented like a hunted doe wrongly torn into pieces by the claws and teeth of hungry wolves to stain the fur of their muzzles with the red of their meal.

“Hunk, I’m fine,” Keith grunts, mildly pushing the hands away from his face so he can construct a fallible armor of personal space, a rickety, conspiring method that is shoddy from the get go, will easily tumble over and crack again if the right person utters the right thing.
That right person is chastising a man that has fathered her, letting herself be the parental reminder of the wrongs of the world and the issues with people that mean to do bad for the sake of being not good. Poor man that he is, Alford is just trying to eat his breakfast, sighing over how his child is going over scenarios over his meal concerning Garlands having a bad reputation, Mayor being one or not.

Shiro feels out of place again, a fidgeting motion of his fingers starting up as he thinks. He could walk out now, could head back down the road—he remembers the turns, each road that the LeBaron took to arrive at the fine establishment for a bite to eat. He could get back to Oak Avenue, walk those shanty steps one more time to open the door, just let him open that door and see what’s on the other side, let him wrap his hand around the doorknob to turn—.

“Hey, where’re you from? You ain’t no bastard I recognize, and I know damn everybody.”

Dammit. The door was there, the door was right damn there before him in the morbid imagination that retains some admonishment for the current events to return to that doorstep of that house that keeps howling for him in vociferation that he isn’t there.

He drenches it out however he can, positions himself back under the lights and within the sounds of a diner to calm himself, to weigh down his soul that it will stay here just a tad bit more.

Thus, he offers his hand to Hunk and to Keith both, the two taking their turns with the hospitality that is expected of their upbringing, not one wary sight trailing over to his right arm despite him using his left hand as any misgivings they would have is a factor of the unknown, an uncommon variable now within the algorithm of the daily logistics of small town functionality. But, “I’m Taka—Shiro. Just call me Shiro.”

Hunk, damn, his laugh is just a sparkling glass of lemonade on a hot summer day, the bittersweet drink a quench on the dried tongue of a laboring fellow that has given the land all his hard work, has fed the fields with his blood and his sweat with the tears to be spilled yet another day. The chill of the lemonade would be good enough, but the sour lemon and the overdose of sugar would leave Shiro thirstier, desperate to be satiated with the rainfall instead. “Just Shiro, then,” and he grins, megawatt bright and blinding at that, after shaking hands with what may be the newest member of the town, “and I’m sure you already know us.”

“Keith, Hunk,” Shiro nods to each respectfully, Keith returning with a tilt of his own head in thanks. It’s a nonverbal confirmation, but there all the same, something better unspoken if the jumbled mess of awkward syllables leave the air with a less than true understanding of the intention behind it.

There was bound to be further discussion of the events prior to their humble meetings, but they’re gone under the guise of Alford trying to give his own daughter the slip after she grunts her frustrations with his whimsical nature and stalked off with such a steaming silence to get a brew of coffee to last her through her long shift. Whatever she has told him has left with a demeanor of downright docility, nothing like the amicable outwardness that Shiro experienced beforehand with their touring of the town and the dropping of any charges for a companion.

If it were another time, there might have been a debriefing, some kind of discussion to relax the joints into unlocking with the frigidity that comes with the loss of adrenaline to keep everything high-paced and limber. Shiro would prefer that in this case, but Alford just claps a hand on his shoulder with a low, “let me get you back, son, we’ve had enough excitement for the day.”

Hunk and Keith do not need any other queues, bidding their utterances of departing while warily glancing over to the back of the sheriff as she stands at the counter where the to go box sits for
Keith, but it sits there to cool over, to become a leftover in some kind of fashion that only Hunk and maybe Ezzy or Ash will know because the fate of the food isn’t of importance right now.

But, as Shiro heads out with the judge, he’s stopped with a timid tug along his t-shirt, another remarkable piece of the puzzle sloting into place as he turns to see Keith behind him, confusion and gratitude brooding in his eyes that are a unique dark plum that must surely be inherited by the parent that also gifted him with his lack of Caucasian features.

He’s a handsome man by all means, but there’s a burden, much like Shiro owns along the rigidity of his spine, that will age him, will bury him down into the ground far before his time truly comes with the tolling of the funeral bells if he does not heed the warnings of his own feeble mortality.

“There’s all that is needed to forge the last of a comradeship that begins on this day at this minute, one that Shiro hopes will be his support rather than just another stumbling block to bring him right back down into the carnage of his own busted psyche.

—

“I’ve gotta proposition for you, Shiro.”

The car ride is thick with the dusty settlement of the words that should be said, but men are shy creatures when it comes to discussion, preferring action and sight rather than bearing the soul with tones of voices that just feel wrong. It comes as a surprise that Alford would be the first to speak, his seniority allowing a bit more of an entitlement to not make the first move.

The words still sting slightly, like a dulling throb of a stab or of a bullet wound, cauterized with intentional seers to make the blood loss less of a trouble than the actual cause itself. He’s faced a bit of discrimination in the past, but never something so cold, something so relished in the hatred of his racial heritage that he would feel discombobulated, feel lesser than himself. Alford, though, he might know the same, but that must not be the end all of the start of talking, not the meaning behind even speaking in the first place.

“You’re off in some dream land, that’s easy to tell, but I find you at this old house that my great grandfather bought to keep a big ol’ secret in the grave and we haven’t dared sell it since. No one goes near it, nobody in their right mind talks about it, but here you are, and you’re at the porch like some kinda man lookin’ for a home where one can’t be found.”

It would seem like a lot of senseless rambling, but it hits too close to the heart, a vivacious hit that stutters the circulation of blood for a moment due to a stressor of near collapse. It’s there though, that thought of a home, but it’s also something to be buried with the rest of his shortcomings, a writen trove that’s all the property of Takashi Shirogane being laid to rest with each clump of rusty dirt he shovels down into the hole.

“But, I’m in need of a bit of a henchman since I’m just gettin’ too old to deal with the bigger matters, and, well, you saw it yourself; the Mayor ain’t my issue, it’s them damn inbreeds that can’t figure out how to tie their own damn boots,” the fury underlying the tone simmers beneath an earnest message, conveys a lack of sympathy and a stronger adherence to surviving the later years than just going about life like life has gone. It’s a fatigue that gets to Shiro, that stops any protest that he could bring up in deferring from accepting this proposition.

Alford pauses, but when Shiro cannot answer, cannot interrupt with even a noise of disent, he continues with a caution as he pulls up to the fence of the house that is now the center of this all, a piece on the board to be played for—or against—this veteran from Seattle, “but I’ll let you live here in this house on my conditions. Just two: be my right hand man when I need ya, and work on
sprucing her up for the sake of my own decrepit heart.”

There’s a shaking within him, a beguiling reasoning that trembles out an answer before thought can
come before action. It’s all swirling again, that dreamlike blur of dark rooms with only spots of
flickering lantern light, that fantasy of blues that flutter within his heart and make him crave for a
truce within himself, that the facets comprising a man named Shiro would reach a mutuality that
might grant him some serenity here. There’s something of a chill down his spine despite the heat,
something soothing along the sweat of his brow and of his collarbone. It’s there; whatever this
feeling is, it’s there, this thorny path of callousness that will precede a goal unseen for now, but
still lurks beneath the woody vines and the poison oak leaves.

“Yes, sir,” and with just that it is sealed, a carmine wax stamping on a contract struck with a man
that has nothing but a benevolent heart but might unwittingly just be a pawn for a sickly tenebrous
hand to spread a pall over a corpse nestled down in the silks of a coffin.

But, it is done, and it cannot be undone, and the house stands there, another fixture in his life that
drags on.
Nighttime comes with a flutter of sunset orange, comes with the last bird song to end a day in a sweet melodious finale.

Since the fiasco of the morning, Shiro has been mostly discussing the gritty details of the deal he has made with one Judge King. The terms might seem casual enough to an outside eye, but there’s a meat to the innards that could not be chopped up for the sake of making something half-way. Shiro wants to know his boundaries in the case that his novel outlook on his life might fail, desires to be able to relish in the knowledge of what can and what cannot be done. The house that calls to him is being sold to him for nothing down other than his time and his sweat, and there are more chains latching to his wrists than he would like to believe, but respects regardless.

Regret is a particular fiend of time, a hindsight kind of creature that hides to not be seen until the sneaking can go on no longer. It may slither along, but is stepped upon to matter how long the trail leads, always leaving a bite of ache that lingers through the days soon to come. Regret is a mistress Shiro has met, has watched her sit on the hospital bed, has felt her hand along the length of his neck to press her palm down and feel the thickness of a sob undulating beneath his skin. Regret is a sickness he would like to not writhe between again.

Still, it’s a lot to take on, a stipulation that he is not only the bulk of a bodyguard for an aging member of the government here in Gilman, an imposing shadow to the judge of all people, but also now an amateur in the field of home renovations. Granted, the West Coaster can attest to a few in-home repairs and attending little projects with his mother just for the thrill of being a good son for the woman wonderful enough to give birth to him, but HGTV was far from his favorite channel to drone the world out to, and he’s fairly certain house flipping twins will not be traveling to the deep reaches of Alabama to help him fix his new home up.

Still, he can settle back into the seat of the hybrid rental and just imagine it, just let his thoughts drift up in a whorl of colored zephyrs and painted landings to a home with a nicely done porch with a new swing. There he could stay, could wake in the mornings to a first kiss of sunlight along his temple while the coffee machine beeps to brew a strong pot of Seattle’s Best coffee. He could make the bed, his own little haven within in a minimalistic bedroom. Maybe, just maybe, he’d even have a desk set up for a hobby of his own, something frivolous that would be all his own, a little treasured alcove to sit when the sun wanes to let himself be lost in the act of meniality.

Timidly, he thinks of what he once enjoyed to gratify his need urge to stay focused on a task, a bit of a queer habit that he picked up during his high school years as he found the angular drabs of the hallways and the classrooms of academia a monotonous scene that oddly translated well to paper. It had been a little flair of a purchase, a sketchbook from the crafts store that had been discounted significantly, but it had been what he needed during the long lectures of biology and English when the teachers’ words were droll, flopped to a tile floor to fester and to mold in the ears of their students while Shiro sketched the doorways and the signs, loving the preciseness of shapes in their assured corners and curves.

Who knows where that sketchbook found itself to rest when Shiro traded his book bag for a military pack, traded his varsity jacket for an OCP uniform so that he could enter adulthood while still getting used to the stiff heaviness of his new boots. It could be frayed by now, it could be stored in a box of varied possessions, but it all remains a testament to how he’s been influenced by the world, how he used the should-be perfect structures of gray and precise architecture to attempt to work time into a faster route.
He longs for the practiced skill now as he closes his eyes, settle back against the leather of the
driver’s seat and breathe in the illusory fragrance of gardenias, a panchromatic regalia of floral
greeters aligning the newly-laid paseo to the porch. The house, with an even coat of refreshing
ivory, would stand under a crown of oak trees towering above, verdant diadem rustling in the touch
of westerly winds as the thump, thump of his boots hit the lumber of the stairs, a resounding,
gratifying sound that seems to echo within his ears the welcome of coming home.

Gray and white scratch together, the angles and the curbside appeals start to line along foundation
beams, begin to erect something that would emulate all the hopes of a young man aged far too
abruptly struggling to do right by what little of himself remains intact from the crossfire. Strange
how now, after years of picking up a pencil to graze the lead along the rough white of sketchbook
paper that he would contemplate asking where the nearest store would be to find the supplies as he
is content with drifting there, mulling the interior of the house as he guesses what he has to work
with though he at least has the decency of indoor plumbing and electricity, all done in decades past
and more than in need of substantial updates. Still, the accommodations of modern living are
within the infrastructure are mostly there with the question perking up along the sweat of his back
concerning an air conditioner unit.

His right hand twitches, a phantom ache of the small humble talent he continuously practiced on
gone in the blink of an eye to be swept away by the sand. He wants to sketch again. He wants to
plan and to create. He wants to tear out rotten wood with his bare hands, wants to hammer away at
superfluous walls that serve no purpose outside of creating enclosures for the sake of design. He
wants to do it all, make something as shabby and run down as himself and make it worth again.

He’s set to have the keys tomorrow, and then at least, he will know what’s in the damn place.

Against his better judgment, Shiro determines staying at the Holt home for one more night will not
be too nary an issue, and tomorrow he can find a makeshift bed of some sort, and well, no use in
taking up space when he has his own house to go to once the keys are his. Granted, fuck the labor,
but also, thank God for the distraction. Alford might have mentioned during the updates that there
had been some structural renovations, but nothing so far as even removing the belongings of the
family that had claimed it as their homestead last. A peculiar detail, but at the time, did not warrant
more than a hum of contemplation from Shiro as the judge rattled on about his inherited property
with only one real warning.

“Got some hunters that live in the cabin in the woods beside ya, some wanderers that have set up
camp here and that help me with my meat and sell the hides. Retired men that have a relationship
much like David and Jonathan, if you catch my drift.”

Thace and Ulaz, Judge King muttered during their humid deal making in the LeBaron; with a sneer
of amusement, Shiro thinks that David and Jonathan are less likely to the be the great legends of
the Bible as opposed to two grungy hunters with names such as theirs.

If there is anything further to take up the connection, Shiro doesn’t catch the drift at all, wondering
all the same about how everyone likes to speak in proverbs and comparisons, almost like everyone
enjoys the usages of metaphors in their daily lingo to weave a finery of stories to add pigments of
wonderment of the every day droll. However, Alford mentions them like they are business partners
with a hint of wariness, so Shiro will respect the boundaries of whatever strict line has been drawn
in the dirt between.

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The Holts arrive from their day in their usual bustle, Matt dirtied up from baseball practice and
Katie— Pidge— already looking for him as their bags drop to the countertops of the kitchen. Their
voices are tinged with the hope that he has not left them, unlike how others families would be, worried that their life has turned for the worst due to their hospitable naivety.

Shiro has been waiting at the table with a book he picked up from the collection found in the living room, one written by Samuel Holt himself. Shiro might have limited knowledge of his own once childhood dream, but he can still appreciate the expertise of calculations that have gone into Mr. Holt’s research, a humble expert in astrophysics that chose to encourage the minds of the generations of tomorrow into choosing science as their field rather than English and— God help them all—Psychology.

A minimal amount of searching Main Street procured the location of the town's own shiny Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Shiro has to wonder in his ever-going boredom why Kentucky has a franchise all the way into the state of Alabama or anywhere outside of the Bluegrass State when the name is obviously derivative of its location. As his car idles in the drive thru though, he tries to forget that the country of his heritage, miles away across the Pacific, also caters to the red and white extravaganza of fried chicken served by white suited colonels. Perhaps, really, it’s just best to buy the family size dinner for the Holts and himself without much further internal discussion than that, hoarding the overload of caloric intake for the day in its bucket of grease and secret spice and herb blend.

When the Holts shuffle in, the smell hits them instantaneously, a perk up of their shoulders even as Colleen rounds out the back of the crowd with a smile so thankful and gracious that Shiro’s heart swells at the realization that he made her night a little easier.

“Tell me, did you get extra crispy? That’s the best,” she tells him as they gather up plates to set the table with, intricate porcelain plates that depict the humble lives of farmers with their plows and their scythes. He finds his eyes rounding the blade of the farmer’s scythe a little too closely as she patters behind him through the kitchen while going on about how her husband is a joke of a man to dare like the original recipe.

Much like breakfast, supper proves be the usual fare, a conglomeration of topics that have arisen in their individual lives throughout another day that has nearly passed entirely. Matt is more animated, probably still full of endorphins from a hard practice as he remarks about baseball practice like it’s second nature for a not-even eighteen year old that’s probably a few stones soaking weight to have the stamina and the strength of a seasoned player. Judgment aside, Shiro is entirely intrigued by the whole season talk, hearing a not-adult with a gentle smile speak about crushing his school’s rivals.

Colleen must be the encourager of sports in the family, nodding and patting his shoulder while Sam just grins and approves, but relays that academia for their senior year is a bit more important that going to State Championships.

The slicing side-eye that Sam receives from his wife would do just as well pressing a blade to his throat, a twitch of a metal nick along her temple vein before it erases into maternal fortitude, “you go on to those championships, baby, I’ll make sure we’re all there to cheer you on!”

Shiro nods, definitely, knowing that if he’s invited for the games, he’s going to go and scream as loud as Colleen Holt allows.

With a shifty cough to hide his subject change, Mr. Holt relays about the experiments in chemistry and biology, specifically how the dissection of frogs has incited contention between the students of his classes. He’s been delighted to see how each group recites moral issues of pain of animals and rights of scientific exploration, but at the end of the day, it will happen either way they argue it.
“Poor kids, I feel for ‘em, but they gotta label the organs one way or another, and if I can’t eat the frogs, well, you might as well use ‘em for science.”

Shiro feels a little green then, stomach queasy for a second as he recalls the pungent odor of formaldehyde reeking from an embalmed amphibian that once hopped about in a pond somewhere far from the sterile table of a Seattle high school—he stops. He has to stop, forcing his mind to reboot because his stomach reels and he nearly throws up there at the table, the bile churning close to this throat as he hopes to not be a bad dinner guest over something as simple to Mr. Holt as dissection.

“Dad… I’m eating.”

Shiro could hug Pidge, good gracious could he, so thankful that the subject is thrown out the door with the ambiguity and issues of treatment of animals both alive and dead, and the dismantling of an entire industry that profits—Shiro stops his thoughts again, deciding that fried chicken is a better alternative than questioning the actual responsibility of man with the animal kingdom as it’s just for another day.

Baseball returns to the helm, Matt glancing at Shiro with a bit of a grin and doe eyes because the green at the gills must be obviously stagnant in sight, even if the poor kid has to wear glasses, “would you like to come my next game? It’s this Friday night, and if we win, Championships, here we come!”

Shiro ponders for a moment the offer, a courteous one at that, but it’s an underlying hand reaching out to continue to draw him into their fold. He thinks to himself when the rejection embarks to roll on his tongue, well, what else does he even have to do? Outside of his acquirement of property, his only acquaintances outside of the Holts are Judge King and his possibly irascible daughter, the Evans boy, and Hunk in condition of his waitresses. There is not much else that would hinder his occupation of a bleacher seat at Gilman High in hopes to see Matt crack a home run out of the field, though a tap out might be more feasible.

In another turn for his own safety, he might should include the Garland cousins in his list of people that he has encountered so far, though while he has not uttered one word of the instance that has occurred earlier at the Sunny Side Diner, he’s still sore at the pride of his own identity. He isn’t sure their reaction, if they would their worry or affront would be one of faux intent, but there is so much different between himself and them, their Caucasian features smoother, rounder, more normal than his own. To be remarked upon with criticism over his skin, over his eyes, rather than his character still dismantles his composure, so it’s best to… just not.

Besides, to see the young Holt boy play with all his heart, to see the ball fly fast in a flurry of passes and hits, would be a great sight, would be nice. It’s been years since he’s been to a game, and he did already presume that if Gilman is championship bound, he intends to buy a ticket.

“I’ll be there, champ,” and the warm yellow of the kitchen light glows a little more ardently with the brightness of Matt’s smile that makes it all worth it.

The conversation is picked up by Colleen then, telling all about the customers for the day and grateful that Ms. Ryner came early to take over the closing shift—she’s an old maid with no children of her own and damn happy about her lot in life and easily one of the most loved ladies in town. Shiro is glad that the woman he’s grown quite fond of has help at the grocery store, that it isn’t just here all the time passing the day by while her family goes about their own means.

There is, however, a bit of a festering silence that derives from Pidge’s spot, and Shiro finds his gaze falls to her over the course of supper to see how entirely uninterested she is in her family’s
affairs. Rather than engage, she’s started to press her fork down to create crosshatch patterns in her mashed potatoes and gravy. Her biscuit is cold, surely, but at least her chicken has a few nibble marks, as though she only needs that ounce of sustenance to last her for the rest of the day. It’s a stagnant juxtaposition from that bright-eyed girl with her robotics book this morning, locked away in her own personal swellings that will end up causing her more harm than good. He wants to tell her that, to beset his wisdom upon her in hopes that she will perk up and smile, but that isn’t his place. Not yet.

“What’s wrong, Katie-Bell?” Sam asks with a worry that prolongs the intentions of a father that seizes the venture that his daughter sits passively with something on her mind. It must have bothered him, too, that Pidge has not spoken outside of her amens and her thanks, but he’s met with a shake of her head while she mutters incoherently around a lonesome bite of coleslaw.

The pressing into her life ends then, but has the lingering note that Sam is not deterred, a breath of “we’ll talk about later” easing from his lips because he must surely feel it all the same, that his little girl is growing up and going through something. He’s a good man and a good father, yes, surely ready to wander up to the dragon that keeps Pidge’s problems under its greedy possession to fight the damn beast to wrestle his daughter out of the damn tower. He’s worried, and poor Pidge, she suffers from that same enigma that puberty creates, that entire existence of believing no one understands— or so Shiro would think, but she gives a little smile like she accepts that answer full and well.

For the first time since meeting the little family, they fall into a lack of verbal outcries and chatter, opting instead to eat at their drive thru bucket chicken instead of continuing the clamor of discussion. Shiro flounders, desperate for their conversation to ring over his own thoughts, the ones mulling over informing his little group that he is here to stay, that he has struck a deal with the judge of the town himself to take possession of real estate that has sat dormant for decades, it would seem. He would imagine their excitement as there is not one lick of talk that concerns him abandoning this place to strive out to other pastures yonder, to once again saddle up in the hybrid and become the Man in Black, a rambler like the man sung about on Mr. Holt’s radio, tuned in on the oldies station as it does mutedly for some background noise.

They might possibly be overjoyed, exuberance in the news glimmering in the lights of their eyes and the presses of their lips before splitting into grins, but in another breath, there is worry, always that worry that couples its gnarly fingers into his back. It lingers, snickering, hissing and lapping up at his paranoia, a high tension that signifies his lack of purposeful existence in the gazes of those that he has honestly come to enjoy and to respect in less than twenty-four hours.

In the end, it’s the quick take of his own volition, that rising thickness into his mouth that works his tongue loose and forces him into state of confession, as though he is a sinner in the pew, hands clasped tight in feeble despair for a God to save him, to provide the sanctity of salvation that cannot be found amongst the lands of mortals. Their eyes all turn to him once his breath inhales sharp, quick, because if he’s going to let it out, to admit that he will be revoking his citizenship as a West Coaster to take up identity within Gilman, he might as well do it now.

“I bought the house, the one off of Oak,” and he sputters, lips clumsily fluttering along the seams of his mouth, and the sudden clatter is so evident that it’s groundbreaking, Sam and Colleen both in apparent motions of shock that betray their true feelings on the information he has provided. Matt and Pidge don’t seem to think of the purchase as one of bad tastes, both telling him their congratulations though there’s something ominous in Matt’s eyes, reflected only by the glasses of his frames. There’s something wrong here, something unsettled like a grave shifting in the dark of night.
Maybe he’s truly certifiably insane, off his rocker and limp on a rundown porch that’s friendlier with the termites than with the soles of shoes, for wanting to claim the house as his own, just to end that growling in his chest that longs to see the shambles and the mess that he’s singlehandedly given himself to work to death over. He’d thought it was a sensible idea at the time, two birds with one stone if he thought clearly enough, and then he’d be a resident of the town that has beguiled him in just about every manner there is to be, snared him with the scent of magnolias and peach preserves to find a resting place there.

“You… bought the old McClain house, Shiro?” Colleen asks, her skin no longer it’s soft peachy hue but now a sullen pallor as she watches him owlishly. It’s an off-kilter kind of pass, a blackening of facts that arise only with the ebb of the tide away from the riverside. No one has mentioned a McClain yet, has not shared to Shiro their surname as the same. More than likely, it’s due to this limited intrusions into the people that make the town population as opposed to anything troublesome in any defining way…

But, the way that he’s being watched, there’s more to this story, this tale that he has stumbled upon with its worn pages and broken binding, a historical emphasis that must surely influence today as it might have yesterday.

The McClain house, a petrified homage to a family that must have either left or died out, or simply lost their lineage along the years. Shiro hears it though, that trickle of water that leads to the inlets that trail rootlike creeks into the potential scenarios that will become a constant driving hammer in his head. The hammer taken up again, that thud that has been silent for such a good bit, as he thinks, rolls the bleak prospects between his palms.

He will learn one way or another, a guilty man going into the iron cage of a Maiden that will surely cut until he screams mercy. Proceeding forward with caution would lead to the most opportune escape.

“I haven’t heard of the McClains… thought the house was Judge King’s,” he proffers his lack of knowledge of the names on deeds that would surely be held in dusty safes in a dark closet or in the dingy file cabinet at the Register of Deeds in hopes to discourage a possible disaster. He would rather not endure the tumultuous worry that these two are capable of if their emotional ranges are to be taken into account, but at least his admittance of ignorance has flushed their skin once more with color.

A sigh, relieved and just—mortified in all the same breath, whispers from Colleen’s lips as she dips closer to Sam, who is working his fingers over his napkin, “he doesn’t know.”

She’s given him yet another detail, another rush to a clouded undertow that will push down deeper into the mystique of a well that continues further down towards a foreboding whimsy of a rabbit hole. He straightens his back, attentive and unsure, if he will receive his answers tonight, or if they will do their duty in preserving that shoddy remains of a family that may not even exist.

There’s a cough, though, and a smile from Samuel as she straightens his spine, never-ending the pop of the vertebrae as he shakes his head to return to the table a reprieve of distant issue, “just the same, as you said; land’s been in the King’s family for years, so you’re gettin’ it off of the old judge’s hands, huh?”

Then, though, the lights flickers, a darkening of his sight as the daze of something haunting veils with gauzy folds, halos bleary and dim as a though candlelight seeps through a film while cotton meets his ears. It’s fuzzy, but his hands clench the chair, something hard pressed to fight against the floating into the water feeling again—.
The Holts mean well, they do, with all their charisma and their Deep South compassion, Shiro knows that they mean well with their shared glances of concern. If he weren’t so bothered by it, he would simply say that he would tell Judge King that he has changed his mind, staying with the Holts longer than he thought while trying to plan a scope of a future that does not seem to have any sort of sturdy foundation at all.

A grit, a bite along the prongs of his fork, something with a bite of its own along his teeth as he thinks, no.

He’s going to that house tomorrow. The moment the keys are in his hand, he will open the door, push it open wide with an authoritative sense of ownership to tell, no, enlighten whatever seeks to hide in the shadows of his brutal honesty that it is now his.

—

Shiro tries to soothe thing over with the now nervous caretakers he’s come so suddenly to admire, so much that he’s at the kitchen sink again while Pidge and Matt sit at the table with their homework. Kids these days; they’re learning more complicated shit than he ever had to worry about, and though he’s a damn fine expert in math on a good day, there are some problems that not even he can solve. They’re both geniuses in their own right, Matt more inclined to write theories and processes while Pidge tends to calculate them, and they’re a good pair, bonded siblings that’ll pick up the slack where the other lacks.

“God knows I don’t wanna read Dickens again! He’s so dry, Katie-Bell,” Matt whines over his school issued copy of *Bleak House*, forehead dropping to cradle along the open pages to groan lowly, “and he’s gotta spend a whole chapter describing some crap!”

Pidge scribbles along her notes for some kind of independent study as Shiro wonders what the science budget is for the small town high school with a prodigal girl that seems to have a mind for computer and for robots whereas most would be more interested in who they were taking to prom. A stereotype, he’s sure, a contemplation to never explore as he scrubs a sponge along a plate in time with the melancholic palpitations of the banjo from the radio, but she’s a darling, all rapid fire shot that she derives with a huff.

“At least it ain’t P.E.”

Once more, Matt groans, thumping his forehead along the curves from the spine of the novel to garner some compassion out of Shiro, “man, please, please tell me you’ve read this book!”

“Matt, best words of advice I could ever give you,” he tells the younger man who seems to have a head more for gloves of leather and red stitches of baseballs, a secret that most students have figured out long before their senior year, “is that Spark Notes is a fuc— freaking life saver.”

Pidge nearly falls out of her chair from the shakes of her laughter, leaning so far that Matt squawks in fear as he reaches out to grab her by her elbow. He didn’t think his advice was really a target for such a reaction, meant to actually be a helpful recommendation to ease the suffering that is too much damn homework for a student athlete. Poor girl is gone, holding her sides with tears at the corner of her eyes as Shiro drops the plate he’s washing to lean against the counter closet to the table.

“And what’s so funny, Katie-Bell?”

“H-hey now,” but her retort is lost with her laughs, feet kicking at the legs of her chair, “it’s Pidge to you, and I know you were about to say somethin’ bad!”
Well, yes, she’s right about that, obviously, but Shiro’s nose still wrinkles at being caught in such an asinine recovery of saying a foul word around younger ones. He’s gotten a dirty mouth from the Army, more grit and filth than the average person, but it’s a struggle, like quitting something cold turkey when all he wants is to repeat the word ‘fuck’ as many times as his heart yearns.

Still, he’s a silly moth caught in her web, so he’ll let her take her meal for what it’s worth, “I’m old enough to say it, at least.”

Pidge soon calms down, rubbing at the tears from the corners of her hazel eyes though her shoulders still quiver with her giggles. It’s cute, like teasing from one of his younger sisters, a thought that warms him up a little, the wholesome wonderment that comes from the pride of seeing a younger sibling grin bright despite the oncoming struggles towards adulthood.

“You’re funny, big trouble,” she remarks teasingly, smirk that just seems to beset her darling features, though petite and near frail, with a resilience that would surely break down the sturdiest of walls whether made of concrete or mud.

Some random television sitcom plays the living room, Colleen and Samuel watching their shows with running commentary while he stays in the kitchen with the teens, finding that sloshing around suds and water is a lot more fun when he’s listening to the bemoaning of the American education system by two members of an up and coming generation that really might not have any damn clue what they're into. Let them learn, though, let them learn as he did, the soiled roads and the lackadaisical cheats paving a way to maturity that will meet them before they meet it.

Through the night, he doesn’t even realize it that through all the noise, his foot taps against the mat in front of his work station with the beating wail of whatever bluegrass melody is playing on the radio, not once thinking it a distaste in the comparison of his own taste in music. There’s something about it, actually, the songs he’s heard that cover the silence that threatens to allow the whispers of things that should not be listened to be heard. Thankfully, with the plucks of the strings and the croons of country gents and ladies, the adumbration of the bad voices diminish and he can breathe freely just for a little while.

‘I’d rather be in some dark hollow where the sun don’t ever shine than to be at home alone and knowin’ that you’re gone.’

—

glistening like yellow stars, candles sit in a drab bedroom. there are scores of lights, all flickering flames and dripping wax.

then, like mourners in pallid cloaks of ash, the vigil lights flick once, flick twice, then fade, one by one, until one lonely candle stands in the middle with the little wisps of smokes rising high.

not water this time, but fire .

—
Shiro slips out of the house by daybreak, his strives to be as quiet as a mouse more like the clamoring of a field rat scratching away at the walls and at the cabinets in search of morsels of food while winter looms in the distance. Hoping he has not wakened the family before their time as he seems to step on every creaky place of the floor, their guest will surely attempt to remember that they are deserving of another meal thanks to him.

The door of the hybrid shuts with a muted clunk, but he’s inside the damn thing so it’s all he can do not to lay limp along the driver’s seat. The rearview mirror catches his eyes, makes him wonder how pitiful he must look with clothes that are two days old despite hoarding the bathroom for just a few moments for any of the facilities need to be addressed. The bags under his eyes must surely begin to be a purplish bruise this morning, having not slept at all with the deliriums that plagued his dreams and the soreness of his hip that was not nearly as bad yesterday as he is enduring this morning.

He’d kill for a good seventy-two ounce IV bag of coffee, steeped dark with several essential shots of espresso to flood directly into his veins because the act of digestion is too sluggish for his own particular misgivings at the time. Mornings are just evil, an epitome of the issues with the people of the world that they must rise so early to deal with dreaded first awakenings.

Lacking the gratitude that his poor heart should have that he can even still wake up, he turns the ignition key to start the car, then drives down the driveway to head towards that godforsaken house.

There’s a stirring of hatred, a slow drip into a glass of personal grudges that will never know fullness as the vial is forever replaced with a container meant to hold a heavier volume. He is a crabby bastard with no caffeine, but he’s being driven to a jittery nervous wreck over something literally as little as a shelter to house himself and maybe a few scant possessions. Even if alone, that place should only be considered with starch-hard resolve that there are walls and there is a roof and a prominent, excessive amount of nothing else. Sure, he is sure that there will be company, but in the same breath—he longs for loneliness, for that solitude that harps on the pin drops of soliloquies.

That one candle, flickering in the middle of regiment of white wax gone cold, is from a dream that eases in and out with the varied movements of a firefly and reminds him so much of himself with his sinking sentiments of home in a house alone. Not alone maybe, not surely, but perhaps with a wordless entity that he cannot feel and cannot see, some kind of energy of history itself saturating the air with antecedent prominence.

The drive is short lived, disassociation aiding with Shiro focusing once more to find himself parked near the fence of his new house. Perhaps, while he’s waiting for Alford, he should take a moment act as a makeshift gardener to rip at the roots of frayed, thread out the landscaping a bit to aid in future Shiro’s war with the overgrown shrubs and weeds to cultivate some means of a garden.

He instead cranes his head to gaze skyward through the windshield at the second floor window, breath hummingbird-thin as he hopes against hope that he does not see light nor silhouette. On one hand, there is an urgency that floods his blood with the chill of dread, that there might legitimately be something that creeps along the floorboards at night with a lantern to watch the few passing cars on the road go by. On the other, it’s just simply to make himself see that there is nothing but his own mind tricking him into believing that there are things in a land of the living that cannot be blamed on the humidity.

There is nothing, not even a shift of the curtains, filthy with dust and whatever the hell else. He
exhales, slow and relieving, a resonance of calmness that he rings through his soul.

It does not pacify the bitter yearning that webs around his heart, and he knows that there is nothing he can do but to force himself inside, keys in his hand or not, while pissing himself off that he just can’t let this go.

He let his family go, and he let his home go. Figuratively speaking, Takashi Shirogane flipped off the West Coast with shaking hands while his heart panicked over the claustrophobia that continued to shrivel up his settlement into his own home. Anxiety may be a lock and peace is a key, but peace is a damn hard thing in the saturnine vines that find roots in a man’s fears.

He has not dreamt once of his mother nor his father, not even of his sisters. Thought of them, yes, but dreams are another realm of the conscious that has a throne for the entities that lurk beneath the layers of truth. No, his family has been absent, but rather them, it’s all about this fucking house, dreams of its sidings and its overgrowth, of its oaks and its silence. There’s not one chirp, not one morning song of a lonesome bird calling from its high perch to awaken the sleeping that cannot be disturbed at the first dusky gray light of dawn.

Like all that could be splendorous in sound and in sight that thrives on the breath of life outside of himself does not tread onto the property that was once home to one McClain family.

It does take a bit of self encouragement, more cussing his own sorry ass off for being so reckless with his intuitions that are obviously on the far side of practical at this point, but he climbs out of the rental car with an irritated slam of the door, sliding both hands through his hair to tug at the longer strands above an undercut that will require a good shave sooner than later. He’s going up to that porch, dammit, going to sit on the step until the LeBaron drives up with a man with a smile sweeter than any fair-winning pecan pie.

Stomps, he downright stomps his way up the unkempt walkway to the steps, nearly busting the plank of the stairs with the heaviness of his gait. That rattles him just enough to leave him on the level of precautionary, Shiro sighing once he’s on the same level as the door, a damned last rampart before he would be able to infiltrate enemy territory with victory in his soul. There is, though, a hesitation, something lead-heavy that keeps his eyes on the door handle, a lump forming at the base of his throat while this anxiousness all just boils down to a simmer.

The door is old, yes, decrepit beyond years and beyond passage of repair. It is a testament to age itself, a symbol of time and its wicked nails scraping down the paint to form engraved tracks to formalize its torment on the wood.

The lump of his throat grows thicker, more uncomfortable, before he breathes in, let’s himself smell the bitterly sweet decay of the world around him before he feels it, that snap, that something angry and just all around done with this go about that he’s just now pissy and tired. Give him a goal and he will break it, when he has nothing in him but sheer volition to stand in the face of God himself to say down goes this door.

Screw the judge. Screw fucking everything. Two nights of torment on a mind that is already swollen with the blight of trauma have him abuzz have static under his skin. He’s exhausted of this, only able to handle less than forty-eight hours of what surely is the most assured and successful interrogation tactic. He needs to damn figure out what it is, what there is to even be found while there’s hornets stinging his lungs, needle pinpricks that make it harder and harder to gulp in a breath of dank air.

He will break that damn door down if he has to, knowing he is more than strong enough to do it out of sheer damn will. This is his, it’s all his now, all this history and all this long gone story of a
family that might have just moved away from the town and became deserters, and all he needs is just a verbal acknowledgment and a key necessary to—.

_Click._

The swarm of hornets suddenly still, their wings twitching on the precipice of cold tear while they wait for another rush of adrenaline.

The noise is a reverberation that knocks away any meaning of sensical processing, and that just makes the reward that much grander. It’s an invitation, a most assured hand being held out to politely play the part of good Southern host, and all he has to do is wrap his hand around the doorknob, twist it slowly with nerves steeped in humid anticipation to fulfill the promise of hospitality that should not have a reason to be given.

As he pushes, the door creaks open with a wail shrill and sad, the rusted hinges grating with detest so bone shaking that a piece of his soul screams silently at its death. He’s awoken something; he can feel it shifting in the corners where the sun doesn’t reach, a dreary disembodiment that stains the walls and floor with tar. He cannot attest to understand what this is, cannot describe it with words or syllables of his desolate vocabulary other than what comes to mind foremost that arrives with the banging of metal and the booming of thunder.

_Something lingers here._

It stinks, pungent with mold and with decayed wood, but for all of his suspicions of graffiti art and broken walls where rebellious teenagers with nothing better to do slip into the windows at night to stay in old King’s abandoned two story, there’s a stunning lack of human-caused catastrophe outside of the shambles of personal possessions, books and papers flung across the room while any paintings are found with splintered remnants of frames holding their shredded pictures. It’s all in disarray, just a sad sight for someone that can imagine uprooting the stability of each perfectly placed object himself in a fit of raging imbalance.

God save him, and save them all, Shiro has been so close to doing the same in the walls of his childhood home with his own two hands, eager to unleash chaos upon the innocence just so that he can lay amongst the mess and know he did it. The guilt would be reprehensible, would just destroy him, would leave him wishing he were without a heart so that he did not find a doubt and a grief for his heinous actions. Seattle memories be cast away in a wind like the dust of his own cremation, he knows how hard it is to see a precisely set up place and think wreck.

Wandering now, the West Coast transplant goes about into his now house with a brittle step to hinder any further destruction that could be caused by his shoes. He wants to preserve what he can, wants to archive it in the hopes to utilize the evidence in a mystery crime that more or less just has to do with his insane obsession. Here he is, finally, and the house is a little smaller than he expected, but will be more than enough room for him.

Seeing the molded furniture is remarkable, all in the same state of despair as the rest, but still almost as if in place as they were back in the days of use. If thinking hard enough, maybe Shiro can hear it, can imagine the laughter and the banter of a family just like the Holts—and maybe his own— with their lives looking so up and bound that everything is just a star-length away if they reach high enough, that if hopes are truly wonderful things, that their fingertips would brush along the celestial glow of—.

_blue, static. a crying baby and blood. begging a shadow of a beast with a hand of metal and_
It is noiseless, painstakingly so as he stills amongst the shadows of a sunrise that begins to envelope the outside with an apricot heat. His hands, they tremble, thoughtless yet thoughtful as he tries in vain to sift it through, to rummage through the sands some gold of knowledge that could ponder just a wondering of what he saw in eyes that were not his.

Could this be so? Could there truly be such things that reach across the veil of death, that pries into this plane of the living with cold hands made stiff with rigor mortis? Surely, it cannot be so, a very laugh in the face of science and the art of dying that has been the most inevitable end to almost all things. Shiro, one day, will finally die, as will his mother, his father, his family, and as will the Holts and the judge, as will the magnolias and the stars and suns.

Everything, in the end of all courses, must go on, must pass through the shroud of endlessness that may be a heaven or a hell in the vision of those that believe, or maybe just blackness, a void that will be all yet naught. For himself, he just begs into the cracks of salvation not for him that in his void that there will not be ice nor flame, but rather stars, seas of them, stars to count upon for eternity infinitesimal.

Eternity after life, though, has not been found here, has not been dug up from the thrown together piles of lives missing from this place. If these walls could talk, if these age stains and molded wallpaper, all discolored yellow could utter just one word, it would surely be ‘lost.’

Breathe in, Shiro, then breathe out, gather the lackluster frays of composure then steel it all together; despite the vivid instances of visions where only blue is so resplendent, whatever phantasms that might float about in their supernatural dissonance will not stop him from pressing on. There are no obstacles, alive or dead, that will yield him here as he is a persistently awful man when he wants to be. Patience, he must remind himself, patience is the end all of all virtues, will focus him into the line to walk, will return him always to a focal point.

A step, then two, and then a crack of glass under the toe of his shoe and he nearly jumps from nerves shot to hell and back, lacking the brew of dark caffeine and motivation of reasoning to steady him. Thankfully for his pride, there is not a sound that emits from his mouth, but most assuredly if he had yelled, the whole town would have awoken to a sound not like a rooster calling up the daylight.

Glancing down at the damage he’s done, he winces at the spiderweb fractures that weave fissure patterns into the glass of a frame, all done by his dumb half-second fortitude. Kneeling down amongst the papers and the books, he whispers a bit of an apology to keep the lurking thing abated from jumping to offense as he gathers the crackled item to further inspect it. With the dim light from the windows, it’s not the easiest task, but bringing the picture closer to face level reveals a sight that stops Shiro’s heartbeats dead.

His mind deadlines, a monotone beep that echoes in a steel cage with no door to go out or to lead in, but there’s a word wavers into the long pause, then blooms.

And, God, he can’t live any longer with a soul that knows yearning that would never be fulfilled, can’t bear to rattle in another inhale because what he sees is the most beautiful person that could
Shiro, regrettably, has a type, has a bit of an affection for pretty people, for long lashes and even longer, voluptuous legs, for lips that draw into full pouts and eyes that reflect the cosmos back to him. Sadly, old grainy photographs could never capture in the flare lens the whorl of galaxies to be found in the soulful gazes of a person that baits Shiro’s attention in, but were he to see them in person, were he to delve in the colors, he knows he’d see a universe of goodness before him.

His fingers— they work and they fumble, a frenzy of motion driven by desires to see that face without the webs of cracks hiding that mouth, without that shattered glass to hide the loveliness that was this once-person.

The shards knick at his fingertips, threaten to stain the fragile photograph with blood that pools just at the most minute of cuts, but he can hardly care of the stings when the frame finally gives away and he can so delicately remove the paper from the glass.

An angel, it must be, a beauty that cannot be written or be painted, but must be epitomized in the sacredness of hymns more fit for a wedding bed than a church, must be more summer storms that cool the lands than whiteouts of winter. Shiro’s heart swells and aches, his eyes roaming over those features captured with light and halftones: the sharpness of a gentle jaw, the kindness of a mouth, and the most subliminal of it all are those eyes, expressive in the quake of withering time, might would be— no, are blue, most emphatically so because in the tremors of his worrying core there is a confirmation that will be his making.

Those eyes, those bright eyes full of life and joy, those eyes that would be lovely over the tinge of a blush from a bashful courter, were blue, were the hues of seas and rivers all churning in their splendor in those depths, were all sea foam and abalone shells that might have be the envy and the pride of so many.

He’s in love with a picture of a person that more than likely is now the age of his great grandfather, but help him, he’s a dying man that has stumbled upon an oasis and he wants to drink. Knowledge is a bystander that arises when the duty is clearly called, and Shiro needs to know, requires to know all that there could be to know about this beauty in the photo.

His wrist turns, desperate for anything, any information that would give him a scent of a quest, that would gather his armor and his steed to venture out and find this darling, to find this bellflower amongst the weeds of Styx itself.

There, though, there it is, another gush of a near heart attack as the increasing palpitations of his poor heart nearly jerks his blood pressure too high, but he can’t care. There it is, cursive handwriting that yes, has faded, but as been just preserved enough to give a man in the modern days years later to read and to repeat in a delusional mantra that comes with a lovesick fool.

May his heart lie dead amongst the dust and rot for he heralds the name of a siren that has besieged him drown and has inscribed its name into the meat of his muscle, into the marrow of his bones.

$Lance McClain$, 1915.

The sun hangs low in the expanse of vernal cobalt skies, and there is the sound of a LeBaron rumbling down the road towards the house. The brakes squeak just so, pads and rotors in need of a
bit of a tune up as the judge’s car of choice eases into a park along the iron fence. The engine dies, leaves the silence to reign before a car door slams to make way for the springing footsteps tapping along the grass.

Shiro sits on the steps, his elbows laid along his knees as he lets it all sink in, prays to bottle away the feelings that are buzzing in his heart. Were he to write a note, scratch along the paper his pen-stroke love, it would surely be to Lance, and he’d let the corked bottle float down the Alabama River to find him, to let him be aware that there is a man dead set on knowing him in every way. The currents, whims of a water maiden with a heart heavy for star-crossed lovers, would guide the way to the hands of a blue-eyed dear.

For a second as the judge turns to the gate, Shiro hopes that his reckless sort-of-yet-not home invasion is not too ostensible. After all, the evidence is all gone, cast away behind the bookshelf for no one to find until the time is right to tidy it all up.

Alford raises his hand, yet another smile honey-sweet and sun-warm along his face. In the stead, his buyer and his shackled prisoner rises, his last act of rebellion for a man that now, in a sense, owns his soul. Good thing his keeper is a generous, cantankerous old soul, a man of judgment that will surely pay his dues as his somewhat cohort bleeds to pay his own back.

May his back stay strong, rigid with labor of love and just downright spite. May his arms stay right, eager to raise up the graves of sirens from the mud should the chance arise.

He steps down the stairs, nods at Alford King, this man who knows the secrets that are embedded like moths into the wood grains, to shake his hand.

But more than his own slow-burn resilience of body and mind, may Lance be the prospective haunting of his dreams, a hidden image that will soothe away the worry lines and the ailments of brokenness with fingertips that will ghost along Shiro’s temple as the stardust fades from the sky, with lips against his forehead as the moon shatters into gloaming glass amethysts.

“Ready, son?” Alford asks, grinning with all teeth as he raises the key into view, to let those storm eyes trail down the curves of metal and see what is now his for a steep price.

With Lance’s photograph kept in his pocket, a memento to see in the dim light of a lamp to remind him that those eyes are his and his to be, Shiro gnaws his nerves, buries them in the sediments like a victim of his choosing, and takes the key from an old hand that must have no sense to tell the poor boy ‘no.’
Chapter 5

It does not take too long to tour the house once Alford has arrived with key in hand, and while there are more pressing matters to address, such as signing a contract (surely, Judge King would compel Shiro to sign the legal documentation to attain the law on his side should something crumble, invoking action) and getting to the rough labor to removing all the old to start the renovations, it is enough to walk about and get a good feel of his new home.

Were he truthful, the transplant would reckon that the walls could be painted a pleasant shade of blue, possibly a sky or a cornflower, to weave in the ambiance of house a feeling of watery calm to submerge the negative thoughts into drifting away. Instead, as his eyes rove along the corridors of slanted frames, tattered rugs, and broken glass, he wonders if the yellow just needs a fresh coat of paint, something to bring the sunshine to brighten up the dreary, burdening climate.

The layout is fairly simple, a large parlor in the front with the rooms allotted for the use of cooking and laundry in the back of the first story with minor renovations to include the modern accommodation of indoor plumbing and of reasonably updated electricity. Shiro is at least impressed with the pipes, and thankful as hell that he won’t have to drive down to the Holt’s in order to utilize the restroom.

The judge, for all his grandiose the day before in his prideful acclimations of the town tour, is more of a somber entity today, full of more vague explanations that lead Shiro with a few more questions to ask when the time is right, all of them pertaining to the lives that dwelled within the home long before he even arrived. Surely, the Gilman native has some tale of their lives, some little ledger that depicts the day to day, the ways they would have cooked and worked, the ways they would have all come together in the end of hardships.

Lance would have been there, warm and generous, kind and supple. Shiro knows this with no further explanation than he just does.

“Careful on the stairs, they gotta few weak spots and creak like the devil’s comin’ on ya, but bedrooms and bath are on the second floor,” Alford forewarns as he takes each step expertly well as though he has ran up and down them as a child to learn all their squeaky points so that he could avoid detection through this playful antics. A thought, but only just so, as a younger idea of the old man would just feel not as whole as he does alongside Shiro.

It’s all the same throughout: battered furniture, rusted bedframes, and more random possessions litter the scape of each room upstairs except for the modest bath with an unused clawfoot tub and porcelain vanity at the sink. For all the muddle of disarray of items that he has seen throughout his walking through his new property, to see a room sans the now common sight of muss is a welcome sight though idiosyncratic with how immaculate it all is outside of the typical dirtiness time sweeps in.

“So, that’s the whole place, son, and she’s all yours to fix up as you please so long as you ain’t thinkin’ you gonna be using some fancy hammer to knock down the walls. Not a good idea,” is laughed as they step back out into the now putridly hot air, the damp heat having not been so suffocating within the cooler shades of indoors. “Now we gotta get you all fixed up to do the fixin’ up!”

All fine and well, but that seemed to be more a list of errands that would be dealt with in the privacy of Shiro’s own personal time, especially since he’s head-deep into non-monetary debt to be paid with labor of the soul, not money. Bartering system be damned, this is starting to seem like a
steeper downhill roll than anticipated.

But, oh, he can imagine it, can envision the set of French doors in the back to where Alford took him to lead a backyard in much need of a long endured manicure, vivaciousness that would be the sight to behold through the glass. With fresh yellow along the walls, there would always be that feeling of summer-light happiness, a tickling joy that bubbles from the backs of mouths in the seconds before laughter erupts while footsteps sound on newly cleaned and polished oakwood floors.

It’s a fantasy that can come true, all dreams of amazement that would revitalize the old house with so much more potential than thought before he crossed that threshold unannounced. Here it all is, the pieces laid bare for him to pick up from their scattered mess to erect them back like so. Shiro, well, a piece of him questions his sanity and his energy, proclaims in a pessimism only familiar to himself that there is so much work to do, and so little that can be done by one man. But, there are tools, there are easier ways to dismantle and to repair, smarter means to cut down and hammer back together, and while he’s a master of none, to spruce this dwelling to a vibrant home would be…

Would Lance love it? Would he hate it? Would he ask for marigolds instead of petunias? For blue instead of yellow?

Maybe, just maybe, Shiro will be told, but there are other things to do, errands to stores to fetch necessary tools and equipment so that he can sift through the shambles of a house, much like he’s had to sort through the assortment of crazy in his mind, and being to renew again.

—

“You’re gonna need a truck.”

Judge King must simply not have much to do, Shiro reasons lightly, since this is now the second day that he has not once mentioned hearing court cases or shuffling paperwork like most elected officials would do. Retirement age surely, Alford is a man that has a nice cushy job with the town government and has enough tenure to do as he wills. Court cases? Push them back to the next day. Someone has a dispute or need legal advice? That’s what attorneys are for.

It’s a nice companionship like this, he thinks gratefully with an air of white impression, something to offset the loneliness that he would suffer through in the ticktock solitude of the Holt household. There, unless he could preoccupy his mind with the literature of their humble bookshelf or with the tinkering of some kind of puzzle, he would surely go madder than he already is, laughing at his own stupid jokes that only make sense to himself.

A truck though, that’s important, as the rental is surely racking up the fees from having been away from any facility since that understanding soul guided his frantic self, overwrought with panic, into the driver’s seat. For now, the hybrid has accomplished its purpose, got Shiro away from the bustling overcrowding of the largest crowd he’s ever had to endure while breakdown was imminent and horribly so. To think that it’s only been a few days since his trembling fingers gripped that steering wheel tight, white knuckled and pale faced as he staved off hyperventilation. The winged stinging beasts of his lungs, they had been on full pestered swarm then, too, but now he’s far away, miles upon miles away from the awful shit that’s known as Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport.

If he ever has to be dragged back by his ankles to that hell mouth, he’s going to spit in someone’s face before trying to take their neck into stronghold for allowed such fucking cesspool of human commotion to exist while some anxious souls just want to get the hell out.
“Well, I’m not sure I can afford anything… fancy,” Shiro offers up in the hopes to avoid any high-rolling dealerships that will claim with annoyingly too chipper monologue that they have the best deals around! Zero percent down! No credit? Bad credit? No damn problem! Better act fast ‘cause these deals won’t be around forever!

… Then again, the rental is starting to sound like more of a necessary evil than just a money squander in the horrific endeavor of finding a car with shady wolves in nice starched collars ready to take a good bite of some simple sap that’s bought his first house with the collateral of blood and sweat. Maybe the bill wouldn’t come out to such an exorbitant amount since his residence still reads Seattle and his phone—.

Well, fuck, that would explain the silence, the shocking lack of worried texts and frantic phone calls, of his family maybe bagging with each beep of a voicemail box that he pick up, he tell them where he is, he just bring his ass on back home where he needs to be. His mother might be sobbing, withering fingers cradling the receiver close while his father mutters low some prayer in his native language while the next messages might be from his sisters, their shrill screams of empty threats and pleading rants filling his ears, thus strengthening his resolve. His low-end smartphone was dead as a hammer when he shoved it into a random pocket of the carry on and was simply a forgotten item ever since. Unnecessary and unhelpful, it will just have to stay quiet in his bag with maybe another day’s change of clothes before laundry will be a chore he joins Mrs. Holt in.

He doesn’t want to regret this, not now, not especially now when he’s starting to settle into the framework of his life here, wanting more than anything to shift his limbs to fit the mold just right so that he can breathe in the humid air of Southern living without restriction.

Alford, bless him, pops right in with a laugh and a shake of his head to push those agonizing teeter-tots of guilt and of refusal to, “won’t do that to you, son; there’s always somethin’ on the side of the road for sale. We’re gonna go into ol’ Selma for a few errands and we’ll see what we find. Need to start getting a feel for all we’re gonna need for the festival.”

That piques a bit of interest, so it’s more than polite to ask, he thinks, though his laconic inquiry may appear otherwise, “festival?”

A holler of a laugh, and Alford’s hand raises to slap the steering wheel with such sunny glee that it might eventually hurt the elder to smile so big and laugh so loud. Still, the exuberance of youth that the judge possesses despite the abuse of his car with jovial smacks and kicks is endearing, makes the other man hope that there may be a time he’s like the man, too happy for words, too kind to speak of as he wastes away in a rickety rocking chair on the porch as he oversees his kingdom.

“Why, the Juniberry Festival! See, ol’ Gilman, we got ourselves a pretty special crop, little something special from the river we’ve been growing for years, and the festival brings all sorts of tourists to the town! Why, we got Yankees and yuppies galore crowdin’ down the highways to get a sight of the juniberries while paying out the door for food and lodging.”

Well, that’s a good ploy, a plan as masterful as any, to use some unique harvest to draw in tourists to sell overpriced goods to them while rising the rates for hotel rooms (though Shiro has not seen evidence of a Motel 6 or Best Western in Gilman yet) to stimulate the economy of what appears to be an area of the state that isn’t in the poor house in whole, but isn’t lavishly sumptuous. No, there are no opulent mansions or remodeled plantation homes to strike into the hearts of travelers that the people living along the bends of the Alabama River swim in their wealth, just modest houses that have some age, have some love instead of hollow rooms with nothing but stagnant, stale air to fill in the nooks and crannies.

It sounds nice, overall, a boisterous event with the most assured features of carnival rides and
funnel cake, of all the sights and sounds of a grand county fair without the overdone attempt at the exaggerated grate of circus fare. If it’s coming up soon, surely it’s a summer festival, something like a matsuri back in Japan where the summer heat was made only bearable with the dips into the babbling brooks near the family onsen inn and the licks of iced treats as lanterns hang in the night sky like warm stars floating within arms reach. They’re all symbols of a childhood that is now nothing more than faded memories, though they were once beautifully woven silks with golden embroideries depicting the streams of colors reminiscent of fluttering waterfalls. He recalls almost painfully when he walked past those lanterns, eyes wide as his mother held his hand to lead him through a festival for star lovers.

There’s a pang in his chest, another lonely longing that sounds in an empty chamber, a wail that’s only to be heard by itself and Shiro alone in the wake of revelation that comes with becoming an adult: there is never a way to go back and time is nothing more than strips of colored paper with written wishes dimming under the first snap of an autumn breeze.

If Alford asks, Shiro will help with the festival preparations without a second of hesitation, if only to remind himself that there might still be a child within him, still in awe that there are lovers in the sky held away by the arms of the Milky Way, passing time as time can be passed when there is a loved one that they surely desire to be with above all else.

He thinks, in a strange way, that life is the arms reach that keeps death at bay, that will keep him from seeing any more of the beauty in the photograph delicately folded and held close where he can always touch absentminded as the day marches on.

“It sounds like a good time, sir,” is all Shiro can mutter out as he stares ahead past the windshield to follow the white line of their lane, thinking he can still smell the scent of street food and sweets as the drums pound in the distance.

—

Tractor Supply is just another store that brings up another slew of questions since ‘supply’ and ‘tractor’ are both within the name of a business and there’s blindingly obvious issue there. After all, there is an astonishing lack of tractors to gander at as by the very name suggests there should be a yard of tractors, all varying in size and color and price tag, all for customers to flock through as shady salesman ease through the bulk of the shapes of the aisles to snatch up a victim for a commission.

That is hardly the case here, and to be honest, Shiro is more than disappointed at the misnomer, and will be even more disappointed later on when out of boredom, he will find that the store franchise has a location just south of Seattle.

It’s a reliable hodgepodge of a store by all means, the closest store that Gilman and the surrounding area has to equate to a Lowe’s or a Home Depot, Alford explained, but it’s just all floating words of unheeded information as the first step inside docks Shiro’s city lifestyle down several pegs. There’s the nastiest sounding faux country blasting through the speakers, something about someone thinking tractors are sexy — Shiro’s in the Twilight Zone now, seeing more truckers hats, plaid button up shirts, and cowboy boots imaginable instead of the more fashionable attire of urban domesticity.

Alford surely knows better than he what all of these contraptions do and if they’re even useful to starting on the house, but what Shiro realizes is that this isn’t so much of a trip for the old McClain home as it is scoping out materials to create a makeshift list of items to conduct one of the most lauded events of Dallas County.
“It’s gonna be a hoot and a holler, my boy, the biggest yet! Gotta band coming in, ain’t nobody real famous, but they’re gonna play good music while hogs sweat on the grills for that good ol’ pulled pork,” there’s a hum then and a pleased smile that’s akin to a cat reminiscing about how good a canary bird would taste between its maws, how juicy and frail the meat would chew between the feathers, “but if pork ain’t your thing, I think that two-faced Sendak is gonna have his famous white sauce with his chicken. Damn good mechanic and griller, but be wary— he’s gotta nasty bite.”

“Uh… huh…” Shiro has since moved away from the put-up tents and plastic tables to gaze upon the plants that have been marked down, wondering which ones might would appease his own throbbing heart, the one that would rather swim in a sea of blues and purples, the azures and the lilacs, with little mottled specks of white to add a purity to the gardens. His inspection of the pots finds an entanglement of drooping blue flowers that hang with their bell shaped petals that drape down in near melancholy near the label that lists their name: bluebells.

Bluebells…

summer. river swims. nimble fingertips caressing the petals of the bluebells along a dirt road to the house.

fingers pluck, pluck at the stems, snap the fibers apart. glass jar for a vase. mama’s happy.

chirp. chirp.

Over the garish lyrics of beers with friends on yachts, Shiro is then distracted by the chirp, chirp of something small and new to the world, stepping away from Alford gloating about Alabama-style barbecue and Gilman-raised juniberries to find chicks scuffling in long tin holdings under warm lamplight.

Hodgepodge Tractor Supply: if your farming, flower festival throwing, country loving mind can think of it, it’s apparently here as evidenced by the chicks that hop and chatter around each other in a cute fuzzy distraction around their temporary (hopefully) home.

Cute, and for sale, meant for raising up for all sorts of purposes; Shiro thinks back to the mention of this Sendak with his prized barbecue chicken and has to walk away, feeling something unsettled in his stomach that will gush over into a nausea he’d rather not dwell over.

It’s best to leave while he can, so he does, glancing down the aisles and assessing the thingamabobs galore, of deer stands, weighted chained links, and bird feeders to find something closer to fit his needs though a little chicken house would be nice to have when he thinks he can take care of himself better.

Maybe it’s a little too ambitious for to worry over the gardening section when he stumbles upon it, needing to focus on cleaning out the rooms with windows wide open to sweep out the old dust and let in the fresh air. The curtains will need to be replaced for surely washing would just destroy the fabric and inlay the age stains, and the furniture wiped down and salvaged while the rest of the pieces are sent somewhere else, either for repurposing or for the trash heap. That would all seem
small jobs in comparison to uncovering the secrets that might have found their shallow graves in the closets and in the walls, but these are all tasks that add themselves to a now book’s worth of work in the months ahead.

It can’t hurt, at least, to have a few gardening tools on hand at least, a shovel or a hoe to at least tear away at the parched vines and crumbling leaves of an overgrown suppuration that make up the landscaping of his yard. Yet, nothing too expensive, nothing too bank-shattering as he grouses over the prices to compare what the better deal might be. A rake is a rake, and a shovel is a shovel he thought, but apparently there’s variables he never had to remark upon until face-to-face with all the variations of gardening tools.

He’ll definitely need the shovel, need to dig out the decrepit flora that takes up the beds so that he can plant newer plants, something lovely and inviting, like the bluebells (*Lance must love them*).

But, red, reds galore, like poppies or spider lilies, dancing embers of fiery plague that would waft in a breeze over the smoldering ashes of burned wood—.

Then, there’s a glimpse of that same fire from his left side, something slow yet building into that burning kindred flame as two souls brush close in proximity. It’s like two will-o-wisps drifting in a forest of mist and shadow, the only solid light in an endless void of smoke and blackness. But, hark, there comes another, another fading speck of floating fire that was on its own precipice of giving up encountering another such as it. They will collide. That is simply how fate works.

With a tilt of his head from the shovels and rakes that line the aisle, Shiro meets Keith Evans all over again.

The two of them stand there, silent despite the crowing twang from the speakers of the Tractor Supply, as though assessments have to be made all over now that they were alone with each other. How strange now that Shiro can see just how full of depths are in the near plums of Keith’s eyes are when met on peaceful grounds rather than in battle with an unsuspecting ally in a war against prejudice and small town scuffles.

With some observation, Shiro notes a likeness to their features: both have the epicanthic folds, a bit of a roundness of their cheeks that denotes their heritage being oceans away from the cultural geography of this state. There’s the obvious contrasts no doubt, as Shiro has a sharp jawline while Keith has a slimmer nose and pink tone to his skin.

It is nothing but genetics, nothing that is different in the grand scheme of human anatomy other than just set up differently from another, but there’s that heaviness on Shiro’s shoulders as he thinks what has been gritted out to him a day ago. He doesn’t understand why he’s so shaken by it, having faced it in every way throughout his life with his Army service being no exception. It was for every one though, scathing shit throwing that did not leave one soldier on higher standing than any other, or at least, that’s what he had to tell himself to survive and to prove himself worthy of trust.

Maybe, just maybe, it’s the fact that the arm that is not his yet is his all the same should have been enough of a shield to cast all mutterings of basic, ignorant hate. Maybe the scars, especially the one most prominent on his nose and cheeks, would have told the world that looked to judge him by his eyes alone that he has nearly died for whatever half-assed right they concocted in their enclosed mind, but Shiro hides the truth from himself.

He’d felt safe for the one time in his life when he needed to, and some asshole wrecked it, toppled that wall of security down with just a few damn words that made him jittery and wary again.
“… Shiro, right?” Keith asks after appearing to roll over all the options he has other than turning tail and booking it out the door without the bucket in his hand, full with bundles of ropes and packages of nails. Gray eyes watch the shift of shoulder under a dirty Crimson Tide t-shirt as though to exude the tension from his joints to convey his control of the discussion.

Trust issues are always obvious, Shiro thinks with a purse of his lips, especially when they come from a young man that looks more like a skittish stray cat.

But, he nods, putting on his best face to show his lack of wanting conflict; after all, Shiro is a cat person.

“And you’re Keith,” he speaks as though to show he’s been paying attention like a good student that he is, learning that observation is key to strike any masterly laid plan. Sure, resources are nice, firepower and all, but there isn’t a damn thing better than watching how people work when faced with intel that reveals a watchful eye and overhearing ear.

“… Uh, yeah,” and there’s a hand to rub at the back of Keith’s neck because there’s another facet to his personality that steers the taller man to other course due to the evidence of social awkwardness that clings to Keith like sweat and grime after a long day’s work.

Luckily for Keith, Shiro has learned how to talk to people, an art that comes when he’s in a placid state of mind rather than his usual high-strung mental state as he has been for so long that the all his reminders of small-talk etiquette almost blew away into smithereens. It may not be much, and it may just end in a parade of disparaging flames that will flicker and will crush any platonic bond between them. Shiro is at a dead end though, with no other choice in this aisle of overpriced rakes but to at least attempt to cross the bridge.

“… Do you know anything about gardening?”

Keith snorts, and thank God, the release of strain abetting the threat of conflagration that would have burned Shiro’s outstretched hand. There’s still a fire, or a danger of one, wild with he the promise of a burn, but for now… it’s appeased, calmed down from the whipping flares to something more akin to a homey bonfire.

“Hell fuckin’ no,” he laughs, and the sound is free, like a firebird rising from the ashes to be born anew, and knows that they’ll be good friends after that.

—

After a bit of banter over the superiority to a chainsaw over the flimsy equipment that the supply store has to offer, Keith leaves Shiro with Alford with a nod to the judge and a bit of a shy invitation for Shiro to come out and see his farm.

“Ain’t much. It’s got a house and the cows. Lots of them. And ol’ Red. You’ll like her, I think. She’s… my mom’s old cat that can’t seem to die. Believe me; my shithead of a father tried.”

As Shiro watches the red truck amble out of the parking lot, Alford stands next to Shiro in a packed down LeBaron with their purchases, all on the elder’s card as he refused every attempt his younger companion made to at least pay for his share which mostly was comprised of the basic tools to start repair work and the bluebells that sit in plastic bags in the backseat. Alford hopefully did not catch how Shiro’s fingers brushed along the petals of the blue flowers, how he inhaled deep and thought of eyes the same shade.

He’s in love with a beauty in an old photograph. God, he’s fucked up. He’s even more fucked up
that said photograph is in his pocket. He needs therapy.

“I see you’re making friends already, son,” the elder sighs out in some sense of relief that indicates a fear for the two of them during their shopping trip. To think that he is normal enough to stand there for a good few hours and walk through the store with two other people, to feel so at ease in a new environment that he can even chuckle and joke just a bit. It’s liberating, truly, because the mask that he has placed over his countenance to hide all the nasty bits of his true soul is working, and soon, it’ll melt into his skin and be his forever.

Like the porcelain masks he saw throughout the corridors of his family’s home back overseas, in the inn where he met with strangers and cousins alike, it will simply reflect to the seeing eye what Shiro wants them to see: a perfect face without the stress lines and fractures that his genuine face has undergone.

A touch along his shoulder, provoking a tilt of his head to see the judge watching him with blue eyes that are bright, *too bright*, that swirl with understanding worry that shoddily hides behind a veil of well-meaning mischief.

“Think it’s time for a biscuit, Shiro, and Bojangles is down the road with a steak biscuit just for my arteries,” the judge affirms with a squeeze before stepping away to get into the driver’s seat and start up his trusty white steed, only to wait for Shiro to shake away the fuzz in his head, cotton-dry and smokey.

What the *damn hell* is a Bojangles?

During the long-ass wait in drive-thru of the Selma Bojangles, Shiro, the outsider from Washington State that hasn’t heard of several of the fried chicken and biscuit staples of the United States, gets his education handed to him by the wisest of all men in these parts.

“Chick-fil-A is God’s chicken, and is a damn far drive all the way in damn Prattville,” Judge King hums with the radio turned down and a hand doing its usual swish with the A/C vents at full force, “but, you got good ol’ KFC being the one a man goes to when God’s chicken is not in sight. Church’s if you can’t find KFC. Then again, if you a man of the spicier nature, then you go to the Popeye’s ‘cause it’s got that Cajun flair… then there’s Bojangles.”

That’s it. It’s left at that, just ‘then there’s Bojangles.’ But, then there’s also McDonald’s, and Shiro is nearly driven to jump out of the car to order a hot cakes breakfast being all this talk of fried chicken superiority is making his head hurt and his arteries clog in protest.

He orders the Cajun filet combo with sweet tea under the recommendations of his driver, but then, he understands what Alford means with the drop of the topic as he ends up pulling the chicken off of the biscuit and handing the overly-buttered bread to the ravenous beast to finish off. Not to his taste as he’s realized that he’s probably trained for Hunk’s cooking down at the diner or the Holt’s in the comfort of their sweet home.

It’s just a drive back to Gilman after their day of shopping like professionals, Alford walking around, taking names and numbers and count of stock, talking to himself and to his drag-along about all that will have to come through in order for the festival to go off without a hitch. It’s all dizzying to him, how much work and how much money has to be plunked down months before the event shuts down Main Street and acts to glorify the juniberies for a whole four days.

It’s exhausting, and the tiredness is weighing them down when there’s already so much to do back
at the house that he is almost so excited to sleep in for the night that he’s beside himself with wonderment that it almost blurs away the sleep that pinpricks at his eyes. Ah, right, his sleeping the night before, well, sucked. It’s catching up, and he’s yawning when something catches his eyes.

On the side of the road, there’s an old truck, a rust bucket that has been repainted at least three times by amateurs that couldn’t even think to bolt the fender back on, but it looks cheap and it might run. He’s a little too excited, the clunker of a frame just looking like a dream, all faux gilded with patchy paint job and tilted front fender, and his uplift in mood must show as the LeBaron is slowly coming to a stop next to the farmhouse.

It’s old, yes, but it looks like it’s gone through hell, and if it still runs right, well, it’s just a testament to throwing off the woes that life brings to keep on going.

“That something you like? Boy, you sure are tryin’ to fit in more than I’d gather you would,” the judge jokes, yet the tone of it is like cigar smoke in a pool room, of whiskey poured over ice in a heavy-bottom glass, like something fine and classic, “ol’ Pops been tryin’ to sell that hunk o’ junk for months, and you figure you the one to make him proud to give it to a good man.”

The accent, so deeply founded in the lands abound, is something that Shiro still finds a little strange, his only ideas of voices being from the bustling ways of Seattle and overseas where anyone that knew English was an honest to God gift to him. He tried, haplessly, to make struggling alliances with those that could help him and his comrades, hesitant in the moments of society and culture that he could absorb through the strangers in garb and in tongue that he only had experience in glimpsing instances before.

This is another terrain to learn, another culture to dismantle and analyze, and by now, the act of it all is not lost on Shiro, but at least this time, he is more at ease when this man with his seer-sucker suit pants and rolled up sleeves, speaks than he ever could imagine.

(Unless he is imagining sitting in the dim light of the dining room, wallpaper curled from the walls and accent rug shredded and worn, in a near fevered stupor as he hears the thing he should not hear, knows the things he should not know from presence alone.)

It’s so easy, here, and he’s not sure why.

Fortune smiles down upon him that day since Ol’ Pops just so happens to be on his John Deere, mowing his lawn after an arduous day in the fields. Alford talks it up, introduces Shiro as his new bodyguard with an amicable tease, and it’s all a flow down from there to the sale of the truck. Alford offers the money because cash for the truck is simply not in the younger man’s wallet, but Shiro is certain that there has to be an ATM around to withdraw what he needs to last and to pay the judge back in full for the wares in Selma and for the truck.

Shiro tries not to think about why Alford carries around so much money in pocket, but that’s none of his business.

“We’ll come back in the morning for the signing of the title and such, but for now… I’m thinkin’ we’ve done a good day’s work and it’s time to rest,” the elder admits his own lack of energy with a hand along his own shoulders to roll the ball joint around to ease some discomfort. Aging must be brutal with all its random aches and pains, though if they’re anything like the phantom aches of missing limbs, Shiro knows the feeling.

In the waning light of the evening, Alford leaves Shiro at the house with the pots of bluebells and the rest of his purchases, including a cot that’ll be a temporary bed until a good frame can be found
with the master bedroom cleaned up. It’s still an eerie quiet, only sound being the ever so often rustle of the oak leaves, and it’s enough to urge him to leave the door open as he checks the light fixtures.

It might not have mentioned, but the lights flicker once, twice, then glow with a resisting glow that it’s apparent that the workmanship is up to useful standard but in dire need of an update. So long as there are no burning wires with the sweet foreshadow of electrical fires, Shiro can live with the flicks of light until the rest of the house is fixed.

As he shuffles through the bags from the Tractor Supply, he starts mulling over his schedule:

the first week in the house should be pulling out all the furniture and sweeping out the ghosts of dust with the second week starting to figure out what boards need to be torn out and replaced. Maybe it’ll be taking down the wallpaper and evening out the walls so that he can paint. He might start out in the garden a day or two within all that time.

It’s all daunting, all this that he has to do, but the repercussions if he walks away now, if he stops midway makes a hot jump of bile rise to his throat to remind him no.

The picture in his pocket feels heavy, so he knows he that he is on the right rickety path to spurring together the energy to pull this off, and have something that he— no, that Lance would be proud of. This… is surely his resting place of sorts, his afterlife mausoleum where he walks the halls and the stairs in an eternal cycle that will go on and on as the rotting foundations of his once home finally crumble into the ground, to let the termites and the maggots have theirs in the end.

The lights flicker again, and now it’s just annoying. Before pulling away, Alford had at least mentioned that there are a few good men in town that could ride out and help Shiro with the basics, their expertise far more valuable than his little handyman job could ever be. They sound nice enough, though the mischief of the judge rears again as he mentions in passing that their wives would be thrilled to meet a fresh face— they have a few daughters, too, around Shiro’s age— and but Shiro just simply lost all interest then.

If he were frank with himself, or to anyone with enough gumption to listen, he… no. Arousal is the last testament on his mind, any thoughts of sex and intimacy washed away with tides that bring in the darker themes of his life. He used to have wet dreams, thought of a few women and men he interacted in length with back in college and in the military. They were kinder feelings, awakening sexuality that left him with soiled sheets and sweat along his brow.

Now, it’s just boom, boom, scream after heralding scream of get down! Get down, dammit!

All this introspection isn’t going to get a damn thing done, he tells himself, rustling off the chills along his back that don’t seem to strike up any alarm in the cognitive functions. The breeze must have made it into the house, a cool wish from the dying sunlight as she kisses goodbye to the world so that the moon will rise soon in her orb of silver glory.

The silence is soon deafening, even so much as starting to unnerve him once more. He swallows it down, this icy fear that prickles down low in his torso before it stretches roots into his veins, makes goosebumps along his skin. For a moment, he thinks of the lurking thing before when he first trespassed into the house during the hours of dawn, when it seemed to still be in the haze of sleep much like he was.

To think upon it gives it presence. To allow it to grow and become a bigger problem would be an issue he isn’t ready to deal with. Think happy thoughts, positive ones, think of bluebells and laughter along the river trail.
In retort to that slowly mounting feeling of eyes upon him from all around the parlor, Shiro hums something despite the lack of tune, a dismal call of a song he once heard on the radio in his youthful days, and it’s just enough distraction from the state of his new property, enough to draw him away from the something caught in the corner of his eye when there’s a low creak—.

There’s a shadow.

All that he is as a living man screeches to a halt that nearly stops his own heartbeat to dead still as his eyes at last give the shape pressed along the threshold opposite of him his full attention. It’s wrong, wrong with this, wrong with what he is seeing, wrong with the horripilation he now suffers from. It’s like metal, rusted and cracked, grate along his veins, scrape along his skin, to cut and to sear an unworldly existence into his reality, and damn if it ain’t cold as hell.

The shadow stands there, a form of a frail thing that lingers too long at the post near the door to the shabby parlor. Shiro isn’t sure if his eyes are failing him after all these years of near perfect vision, or if it’s just the reflection of a drooping sun, but it still stays after he rubs his dirty hands along his eyes. It’s there, it’s truly there, and though there’s something soft and waning in his head that tells him, disjointedly, run.

It may be death itself peering from across the room, cold and still like a corpse pulled from its coffin; there’s a waft of something old and bittersweet, much like the last bloom of honeysuckles before a fatal and untimely frost of a late winter snap.

It doesn’t move. Hell, it doesn’t even breathe, but every sense of logic just doesn’t add up right because surely it’s just a play on light and shadow, something that plays along his senses of his sleep-deprived mind. Yes, that’s right, he’s fucking tired, slept like shit the night before with nothing to go on but God-given self-will and—.

But, then it moves.

It steps forward, slow and daunting, and there’s a sight to behold, dead, deader than dead, sunken eyes of blue, those eyes are so blue, bluebell blue— and she— it’s a fucking lady, and Shiro suddenly can’t breathe, there’s ice permeating his lungs, stabbing into the vessels to coax him into fast breath, near hyperventilation that will draw the air out but never let it back in— she is so lovely, beautiful even, but she’s a corpse walking, disjointedly limber as she comes closer… closer…

Help.

It’s a step or five back on his part that hits his knees over a leftover end table, wracking his vision towards the ceiling with a crack along the back of his head— and it’s over, his vision going black.

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help. help. help who? help what?

gunshots are always louder than screams. mercy is only ever found in those willing to give it, not
from those that never had it. blood stains along white cotton, little orbs swaying slowly with the southern breeze. something is terribly, terribly wrong.

bluebells dancing. a sweet laugh like summertime fruit hanging in the trees.

water again, blue. river high. another scream as a shadow man shifts down between the oaks, chasing. don’t kill. muddy hands reach up in a hope of a prayer for may god grant mercy.

please don’t—.

There’s something wet along his forehead, pressing softly in delicate touches that it’s almost like his mother is tending to a fever.

His head is pounding like a train pounding down the tracks, the engines roaring with the coals as he groans in his distaste for the woken plane. Shiro can’t tell if he’s suffering from another one of his famous hangovers or he’s been hit clear across his skull with some kind of blunt object with enough force to damn near tear his vertebrae apart. If it’s the latter, he’s ready to bloody his knuckles to beat the hell out of the bastard that thought he could get one up on him.

A shush, and a finger placed along his lips after he groans. The tenderness makes him stiffen up, and though that makes the thudding of his head hurt more than the hammer ever does, the fight melts away into something far more complacent.

His eyes dare not open yet, but there’s the hovering scent of summer rainstorm along the shores of the sea, salt-sweet and crisp, and of bluebells. In the distance of his throbbing head, he can hear wind chimes tingling in time with the sounds of passive waves that bring sea foam and shells to the beaches.

Against the lone finger, his lips more or less crack into a smile.

There’s a ticking of a clock that begins to echo in the chambers of his ears, a notable passage of time that was not there before— what’s happened occurred, but though they have not met in the realm of the living where Shiro can tread freely, he knows who this is that is nursing his headache away with the gentlest of touches. It’s like being in the hospital again, but with a feather-light soul of an angel easing away all the pains and tribulations that his body suffered throughout his years. The scars? They mean nothing. His prosthetic? No longer the disgusting disfigurement for eyes to scour, for noses to wrinkle up at the sight of some toy soldier that’s been broken and taped back together.

He finally opens his eyes, finally allows himself the freedom to do so, to look upon the splendor that kneels above him. He’s more beautiful than he imagined, fathomed in his darkest dreams, the ones where he’d imagine what he wished for in a lover. Dark skin, pretty eyes, and a kindness that spoke to the liveliness within the soul that catches his affection, and it’s all there. He’s right there, so soon after finding his picture haphazardly with a step of his dumb gait. How lucky he is, how so very lucky, and he can be a witness to subliminal pulchritude that is the envy of every jewel and every star. Maybe he’s dead, he craves death for sure, if it means that he can wake up and see him.
“Lance.”

The smile that blooms in the lamplight is so magnificently soft that Shiro’s heart stutters, and he’d enjoy the sensation death would bring with a cold grip on his throat to take the air from his lungs if it meant that this vision would be his last. Lance is there, Lance is so gloriously there, and life and death are just meaningless go betweens when love at first sight takes him by the hand to lead him into the shadows of candlelit room where two stars not meant to meet, where there’s a field of cosmos and stardust meant to split the horizon, keep seas and skies from kissing at the lines where their lips would meet.

Instead of skylines and ocean waves, they meet here, in this house that was once residence for one and now the other, with the mess swept away, beloved books and adorned picture frames all back in proper setting as white sheets cover every piece of furniture. Shiro’s eyes only tear away from Lance’s face for just a moment to take it all in, to see the shadows along the drapes of the sheets, how they loom above the two of them like the shapes of the stereotypical ghost as the flickering flame of the oil lamp lights the darkness away to offer instead a dark yellow gloom.

But, it doesn’t matter, Lance is there. God… he’s there. Does he know? Is there even a glimmer of hope that can be found in the murky bottom of this abysmal fate that is Shiro so enchanted by this face, so entranced by a silhouette that watched him nearly wreck from the second floor?

“Took a tumble, didn’t you? From what I’ve seen, I thought you were more agile than that,” oh, help him, help him so much, Shiro hears that chuckle that recollects the sound like the wind chimes with the ocean’s call, and he’s lost, he’s tumbling down further into a dizzying void of being in love with the soul of someone that shouldn’t be here, shouldn’t even be smiling, shouldn’t even be teasing.

Shiro already wants to kiss him.

The thoughts of kisses between them, chaste yet tender, supple yet brief, makes Shiro think hard, so hard that the headache wails louder and makes the veins pulse in a torturous circulation in almost vain as to why he fell, why his head hurts like a yelling bitch. Then he remembers a shadow walking to him, a girl no older than her early twenties finding her way across the dirty parlor to him. For a moment, he shivers at the recollection, pained at how she overtook him with a silent, slow jostle of a cadence before he could hear it— her— ask for something so profoundly huge that he isn’t sure where it begins and where it ends, or what it all entails.

But, those are philosophies that are too grand to ponder, to allow control when there’s a cloth along his cheekbone like a darling’s caress as Lance hums softly.

“Come to me, my melancholy baby, cuddle up and don’t be blue…”

Oh…

Is this what falling in love is truly like? Is it truly painful, horrifically so? Is it the knowledge knowing that a man would tumble ten, no, a hundred, no, a thousand times if it meant he could play patient to the most beautiful creature to ever grace the soils of the earth with his presence? He wants to fall, let the fathomless well of his heart keeping going down, down until he understands. How encompassing it is, how he wants to be surrounded, submerged in every inch of Lance’s closeness, how even after death, there is such a pearl to be found in the grime of the riverbeds, so
far from the sea it’s heartbreaking to find.

There is no end to love like this.

"Guess I did," replies Shiro with that goofy smile still slapped on his face because it's a giddy feeling, this love thing, and he's known it before in the simmering kind of ways, but never like this, never so strong that he would tear this whole house by hand, rip the boards from the nails, let the splinters dig into his fingers and his palms if Lance so asked with a tone as sweet as muscadine wine.

“All your fears are foolish fancy, maybe. You know, dear, that I’m in love with you.”

An aria, or the sweet vocals are maybe a lullaby, but whatever song Lance sings is one that repletes him with the smoothness of velvet. As the notes mellow out the worrisome tension of the parlor that is presented in stark juxtaposition as before, Shiro believes that this song has even a chance to cradle the pain along his skull and hold it away so to rock it into merciful subjugation. Let there be no doubt that he is so wholly mystified by the loveliness above him, this non-canonical saint that should claim a high pedestal of holiness just for the sake of his beauty alone.

Maybe time is a figment, an aspiration of mortals in order to create some sentience of manipulation over the days and the years, over the hours and seconds of the day to night, over the lifespan of birth and death of man so that mankind might believe through structure, there is power. However, he’s powerless, so damnably so, when he would rather that grandfather clock cloaked in cotton sheets stop that consistent, insistent tick… tock… tick… tock… tick—.

Radio static, and the song begins to fade into the fuzz.

“Tell me of…— the cares— … ‘ke you feel — blue.”

Then, abruptly, there’s a deafening run of water that crashes through him, leaves all of Lance's melody mute before the room because to flicker and turn into static dust. Shiro is immobile, can’t even shift an inch from where he lays, like his hands and feet are chained to the railing of a gurney, and he's being carted off into the psych ward, sedation compromising his ability to even see as it melts him away like acid.

Shiro... Sh-- r....!

A hum, the lost of the tone of a note in his ears, electric and sad, sings as the last sights of Lance drift in and out into nothing but glimpses of shapes, all black against gray that writhe behind his eyelids-- and when did he close them? Where is he going? Isn’t he home, on the parlor floor cushioned by an articulately placed rug being tended to by an adoringly kind soul?

Hun... can... lif-- im? Shiro--!

These frighteningly humanoid shapes are like mannequins, disjounted limbs whirling askew with a drunken waltz vigor that hardly makes sense, but that fucking hum grows louder, heavier above the crashing of undertows beating against his bones, like a hurricane off the coast has come to batter
him weak and wet.

It’s the IED all over again, an eruption of such magnitude that it left him with not authority over even his own fingers to rake through the sands, but now it’s worse, somehow so much more, because the one thing that had taken him in such transfixing charisma, that had flayed his heart open to breathe against it words of melancholy pining, is now unseeable.

But, someone is here. Someone is in his house, someone that isn’t Lance or that poor young woman, but his arms and legs don’t move, can’t move, the contours of shadows returning back into a static snow that falls and falls and falls as the world shakes beneath him and he falls through the fissures of the earth into a blackness with a slam and a crack.

And it stops.

“Smile, my honey dear, while I kiss away each tear, or else I shall be melancholy, too.”
there is a baby crying now, the small thing’s squalling ear-piercing over the pants of a tired new mother and the cries of her companion. the shed is dark, nearly pitch black, the poor writhing infant wrapped in a flimsy sheet that’s more red than white by the time its first shriek shook through the air, shattering any hope that this would all be a dream, that illegitimate children were just worries told by parents that kept their crosses and their Bibles too close.

footsteps. a creaking swing of a door on rusty hinges make the world a loud and horrifying reality — eyes turn back to the mother— and her eyes are no more than dulled bluebells fading into the first nips of fall’s frosts.

the baby is gone.

—

Without the ticking of the grandfather clock of the parlor from his dreamscape, Shiro wakes up to an existence where time does not make a lick of sense, fuzzy, black-spotted vision soon smoothing away to the adornments of a room he does not recognize.

One moment, he was so sure he had been with Lance and the ghostly forms of the sheets to act as witnesses to their first meeting, and it’d had been so very blissful, a fairytale scene straight from a lukewarm horror story where phantoms roam the earths and where sad little blue souls cling to the plane of the living in spite of the veil of death. Here lies Shiro, a grand knight of onyx armor, having faced a beast so grandiose not in size but in force that nearly fell him from his valiant charge into the den of a dark monster.

Then, Lance, a gentle myth of beauty with eyes like those bluebells that Shiro cannot somehow pluck from his thoughts, and with a song as harmonious as the sirens of the deep, granting such small mercy on a knight as a moment of peace.

No more are the orange glows of oil lamps, casting the darker shadows that unsettle Shiro in ways he will not dare to admit for admission is permitting the unsteadiness that mounts within him purpose. No more the notes of melancholy songs, but rather the wistful cooing of a dove at the window sill window while a freshly laundered set of curtains float along a morning breeze.

He has never been here before, not in this bed at least, but there are the smallest of instances that begin to create a piece-together kind of puzzle that relays to Shiro his location. He is surely not in the house off Oak Avenue now for there was not one room that was half as clean as this one, though there is the occasional discarded shirt piled on the carpet along with a few randomly strewn about sneakers. He manages to sit up just a little, grunting at the sharp throb of his head that starts at the back before the roots of the headache ripple to the front, and he’s in agony once more, barely able keep upright for than a few anguishing seconds.

It’s as long as he needs as he can gather more evidence to decipher his location, such as the
baseball bat propped along the door with a gym bag that might have a few dirty shirts peeking through the open zipper. The sunlight might glare a little too much through the open window, but he can gaze well enough to line along the shelves mounted on the walls where baseball paraphernalia decorates the pine ledges as far as he can see. To his right, there is more, creased posters of the Major League players placed symmetrically along the jade green walls of the room, only offset by the random science fair award.

Oh.

He's in Matt's room.

The family picture alone would have tipped him off, a family vacation photo taken from somewhere that Shiro can’t truly make out for the life of him, but it’s a memento that must be treasured as it sits next to a laptop on the desk. Matt’s awards and achievements might rival Shiro’s own, and it’s a perk in the morning to see that the Holt boy has a bright future ahead of him.

Just, Shiro hopes that the boy doesn’t get any doe eyes for the decorated badges of soldiers or sailors, doesn’t get the whiff of victorious bitterness that comes with the noble cause that is signing up for the military. The poor kid shouldn’t have to worry about it as he’s got a damn good head on his shoulders, and could get all the scholarships he could ever need to pay for the gauging fees of college tuition.

The military life should never call for his soul, he prays.

These are all dismal thoughts, though, and he’s trying to relieve himself of the damned headache instead of egging it on. Closing his eyes, his head rolls along the pillow as his eyes close—.

He stops dead, seeing the sheriff of Gilman herself standing in the doorway.

If it weren’t for the ache, Shiro would have sat up quickly, barked out some kind of shocked sound for it to echo in the house, thus rousing the Holts if they have not already gone for the day. However, he’s still enough in the surprise that there is a uniformed lady gazing upon his prone form as though she has seen a ghost herself just a day or so after she nearly cold cocked the bastard Garland cousins with her burning gaze alone.

Today though, she is pale, rattled to the quick and further then, like she’s seen an Angel of Death and its ungodly scythe raised to take another one for its deathly river beds. How it must have churned in the air before her eyes for her to be so shaken, so unlike her assured and authoritative demeanor that put all others to shame for even batting an eye at breaking the law of the town.

She knows something, that is as plain as the daylight.

“Good morning, Mister… Shiro?” Sheriff King— Lulu?— yes, this is her, more than he cares to admit, for her presence leaves a foreboding curiosity that weighs along his limbs to make him ask as to why she is here. Surely as sheriff, she has other commitments that require her utmost attention, nothing that align themselves to the wellbeing of her father’s ‘bought’ companion (though Shiro would not complain as the man, larger than life itself, is a warm addition that was well needed).

She knows something, that is as plain as the daylight.

Shiro cannot help but sift through the tension that exudes from her stance to take her in better as a sight rather than her uniform. From where he lays in the bed, he sees a lovely face, smooth where it counts though there are already the tell-all signs of age and stress creasing wrinkles along her forehead. Just with the knowledge of her position in the infrastructure of small town government and society, Ms. King cannot possibly experience a day that does not try to force her down, force
her to swallow down any hopes of peaceful moments when there are stacks of reports to write and distressing calls to answer.

That this small town might have so much to dwell upon must be every ounce of nerve-wracking as having a full police force ready to take on a metropolis of crime that might reek in the corners and in the alleys.

Shiro honestly feels sorry for her, especially for the way her blue eyes, a charismatic blue just like her father’s, lack his blooming vibrancy that overtakes the elder man’s wrinkles to make others believe that Alford King is a man of his youth rather than an old gentleman with his spells of arthritis. This lady’s soul feels ancient, bedridden with sores and troubled memories.

Her soul feels like it’s on its death bed, too tired to care for its own suffering as more sprightly persons run about the fields with sunlight trailing behind them.

“Yeah,” he answers with a pause and a shift of his knees, “that’s me.”

The tiredness that sits upon the ends of her shoulders sags further then, but there’s strange tilt of her lips, an indication that she isn’t sure where to go. An explanation of the reason behind her being here would suffice, especially since one moment he’s falling back from a grisly sight of something unreal approaching him with stilted gait in his house only to find himself another moment down the road in another house.

His head really, really fucking hurts.

With pain comes a certain tenacity, an odd state where the ability to lose more than what one has already seems null and void. His fingers are twisted into the sheets, knuckles white and joints popping at the grip around the soft cotton that may even soon cause tearing. His eyes are heavy with his gaze upon her, hoping to convey as his teeth grit hard along his jaw that he deserves, no, has right to know why she is here and he isn’t back at the house.

“You’re confused, I’m sure,” she mutters once something changes in her eyes, that lovely sky blue fading into a darkened sky with the looming overcast of clouds, “and that’s why I feel like I should say something sooner than later.”

Well, that’s all dandy, yes, all dandy when she’s able to say something, but saying something before he turns fifty would be best.

“This about me buying your father’s house? I— Is that why I’m here and not there?” he asks, though it’s less of a question with the intention of an accusation as he grounds himself, steadies his composure for something that might come to break him down. The sheriff is by all means the judge’s daughter, might feel some kind of hard pressed that her inheritance has been practically gifted away to a man she doesn’t even know outside of the ‘wandered into town looking for some peace.’

Or, rather, Shiro can imagine that the good old soul of Alford King would allot him such a solemn and understanding backstory.

She sighs, though, spine dipping forward just an inch in an act that is not becoming of her probable age, but adds a bit of humanity to her. This isn’t about money or land, not so with the sympathy laden along her brows and her lips, but the face value appearance that this is something more than monetary gain is troubling in itself.

Maybe she’s here to tell him that she’s called the Mystery Gang and the garishly painted minivan
with the talking dog are coming to sniff out the haunted house for clues. That’d make his day, personally. At least Shiro can laugh at his own failure to make a joke— he’s pathetic, especially when in pain.

“Look, sir, this is… all I can say,” she relinquishes with a fidgeting hesitation that’s just lamentable, an expression that’s too grim along her enduring face to bear booming volumes of what her worry is, “is that… my aunt said daddy— my father—.”

Suddenly, the sheriff stops, and now she’s more frustrated than worried, a flicker of a fire in her eyes that mirrors the flames of another someone he has met on his journey. She, too, has a shaking familiarity with heartbreak and with burden, and it may be her badge or something more tale that Shiro may or may not learn for it is her own business. Regardless, it’s eases him into a sense of relief; she’s just another like him, living each day with torturing chains that tugs at her ankles and wrists to see if they can make her kneel.

If Sheriff King has ever knelt for anyone or anything, Shiro would be shocked, for the straightening of her spine and the clenching of her fists goes to show that she is a woman that should not be reckoned with.

“You ain’t allowed to breathe a damn word,” and she shuts the door then, grabbing Matt’s desk chair to drag the legs across the carpet to set it backwards beside the bed so she can flop right down, “and if I hear one damn breath that this has left this room, I’m throwing you in jail for bamboozling an old man.”

Shiro snorts, unable to resist rolling his eyes— bamboozling, huh? He’s pretty sure he’s the one that’s been coerced into some fluffy version of seedy dealmaking because there just isn’t telling the judge no regardless of his desires for the house on Oak or not. Offended, though, he definitely is, cause Shiro might have blood on his hands, and some might be of innocent people, and he might be off the damn rocker so far the psych wards in three counties couldn’t save him, but he isn’t a crook. “Look—.”

The sheriff raises her hand from the crossed links of her arms along the back of Matt’s chair, “I know my daddy well enough to know that’s not even the truth, but he’s the judge, I’m the sheriff, and you’re some no name that’s already trying to make a name by wanting that house.”

Ah. That answers more questions that the daughter of the judge can ever fathom. The whole grand scheme of it all was not hard enough to gather upon, and that this young lady seems to have an inkling of what’s even inside that place could spell either victory or game over for Shiro’s endeavors in being a home owner with a home that’s got a few more occupants than he was bargaining for.

Still, she knows, and seems willing to reveal, and that’s more than he can beg for.

“First off… I do wanna say thank you for what happened at the diner. Da— my fa— ugh, you know what? Fuck professionalism,” she groans, and maybe she also suffers from a lack of caffeine the lowers her ‘give a fucks’ just like it does for himself. It’s cute, actually, seeing her nose wrinkle up with the distress of having to speak like she’s in the interrogation room with a Garland rather than in a teenage boy’s sanctuary only to throw the imaginary book of etiquette surrounding the situation out the window to hopefully hit a truck.

Shiro can already tell he will like her in that way that he determines what position she would thrive in within the ranks. Definitely a sergeant of some kind, reeking of need to be listened to and having all the balls and boot kicks to back it up, or a higher up, calling the shots after learning full well how the front lines of war all work and don’t.
Pay attention, the veteran reprimanding his own lack of attention span as the throbs still go about like drunken fools having a party with hammers and nails.

Another sigh indicates she has gathered her scattered gears and placed them all back in line, ready to continue to the menial labor of her story, “daddy told me what you did for Keith… and for that, I wanna say thanks. He’s… a good man, and didn’t deserve what happened to him, but you didn’t have one lick of his raisin’ story, so… thanks.”

Honest to God, Shiro is taken aback because there’s a fondness in her voice that has a tone of carnations left to wither in starched white coats, of lovers drifting apart against their own wills for some cosmic reasoning beyond their own compulsion. Her eyes are so very much like Alford’s, open windows to let the summer breeze in while allowing the world to see inside the soul that makes her who she is: a strong woman with a purpose driven in a blue collar career that has too much of a soft spot for a cattle farmer in Gilman.

In a soul that runs bare with the wisps of fog tinged with the blue of summer sky, there is a softened pink that clouds over the tough-as-nails woman that keeps the peace with a Smith and Wesson glock in her holster. Regardless of the rough demeanor, the kind that tells the world it’s her bitch with just a roll of her shoulders and a grimace of her mouth, she’s still malleable.

His observations must have tipped her off, must have given his blooming fondness for a tough girl that’d rather have bloodied knuckles than pristine sundresses yet longs for all the same a showing, because those blues are now steeled over, colder, unbendable.

“But, back to the important stuff; I’m not saying there’s something bad in that house, but what I’m saying is—and daddy, he isn’t trying to hurt you or swindle your sorry ass, he just don’t believe in it—is that something bad happened and it stays. Auntie Haggy seems to know more than her old ass lets on, but I’ll be damned if she’ll tell me!” the aggravation is too thick along her voice, clinging to each syllable with a resonance that she has fallen for the weaving of a ploy of a senile lady that somehow the vision of a withered hands along the arms of a rocking chair.

Storytelling is an art all its own, and this one is nothing but a molded fairy tale, grim and perhaps bloodied, stained with tears and eaten up by wood bugs. It’s got an undemanding message, one that might have had the colorful words of a life that ran through the cotton fields, that might have padded along the red clay trails to stain feet and hands.

*That house is haunted.*

It’s frightening, all shades of dust and film of algae, like the slickness of wooden pier with a step is mistook. It’s a loss of breath, that crushing adrenaline high that pounds in ears like the riptides to leave him wrung out in all ways but corpulent. The worst truth is that this no conjure of a myth, no horrifying bedtime story that parents would tell their children to keep them away from the forms of wraiths that might lurk in the silver shadows of a full moon.

No, this work of fiction is falsehood entirely as he knows, knows in the deepest chasm of his blistered spirit, that there are two drifters that did not pass on through that shaded grove to another side to only stay and radiate with some semblance of personality from years that are just figments of passed-by literature and faded photographs.

“You’re quiet, so maybe you already know that, or you’re sitting here thinking I’m due for the loony bin, but I’m telling you; Auntie Haggy called me last night, told me to get down there cause some dumb bastard had ‘woken it up,’” Sheriff King rolls on as she slips her head down, presses her chin against her folded hands, holding him down with a pointed look of accusation, though accusation is long gone as he has been caught red-handed.
She goes strangely quiet after a beat, Shiro unable to dig his fingers into some kind of speech of retort, some kind of explanation that is, well, palpable and sturdy, but all he can manage is a nod. He’s caught, though he can hope with unfounded prayers that his intentions are not known.

“So, me, huh?” grumbles Shiro with a winded sigh because thank fuck that jerk of a headache is starting to ebb and he can start defending his tawdry perspective.

Another beat, a bit of an emotionless smirk tugging at her mouth as the sheriff grousers, “yes, Mister Shiro, you’re that dumb bastard that Hunk had to lug out like a body in a bag.”

Hunk? The chef from the diner? The happiest man this side of the river?

“Didn’t remember how big you were, so sue me,” she chides, appearing annoyed from the confusion that mists over Shiro’s eyes, “and he’s a Creek at that, this is all his land, so I know there was something there I couldn’t handle, he might have some kinda know-how that I don’t.”

Her lips thin out, fingers tapping along the pressured pine of her seat, “especially when he tells me, ‘his land is cursed, Lulu, cursed like a thousand crows died there and still rotting.’ Spooky shit, but he’s damn right. After being in that godawful house, I can…tell.”

Damn, the pain comes right back, rears a howl foul, ugly, and menacing, reclaiming its stakes in the realm of his skull as he jerks at just the whole magnitude of her words. The throbs just reverberate in random sporadic pulses, keeps his knuckles tight in the sheets. This time, no words form, just a nod, a slow motion to say, yes, why, he is paying attention to all these warnings of dark curses that poisons the ground and the air.

He can claim ignorance a little while longer, not when he knows that a gentle presence that sang a tune that’s now a murmuring dissonance rather than true tones with lyrics waits for him beyond that doorstep. Still, there’s a desperation that tries to hide in the crannies of her voice, some kind of sign that she is risking her own neck to impart to an outsider of the town the delicate and confidential information concerning one property that is now under the name of Takashi Shirogane, barring that there has not been official filing with who the hell ever needs to receive the signatures of the transfer.

“… You’re going back there, aren’t you? God, you’re as thick as any other man, I swear to God,” is her haughty remark, and the guilt that his nods of placation didn’t fully recover him. Still, she’s right; he’ll be right back down there the moment he can, eager to rustle through the garbage more to clean it right up.

After all, that’s in the contract.

With a slump of defeat, the young woman rises with a movement that feels old, like the arthritis has settled in her knees to make it all just ache. The chair is slid back under the desk, and before Shiro knows it, he’s being offered a hand to shake.

“Guess if you’re gonna stay, we’re gonna have to make due with the introductions some time or another…” and with that, her shoulders square up, taking upon herself the visage of a true decorated officer of the law, and the top of the chain as it were, “name’s Allura—not Lulu, Mister King—that’s for family and a few special folk, but Sheriff King is better around the public.”

Her seriousness in all this is charming, needless to say, that can look upon her and respect her in every right and still find something that’s still trying to fill in the too big work boots that come with the job. It isn’t her sex, no, she’s probably tougher than most men he’s ever met, ready to raise her fists and beat down any glass ceiling that would dare block her journey to successes.
abound.

No, it’s something else, something young that is uprooted and has quite settled into the new ground, hasn’t let itself wrap around the foundations to crack them for her own satisfaction. Surprising that it is, it makes sense, but with just these few minutes of interaction that might have been more for the benefit of others outside of himself, Shiro can tell that she’s a good soul with a big heart, ready to do justice its fair share.

She just needs a little time to grow her roots into the grooves that might have been left when the hands that tried to stagger her, just like he does, too.

—

‘Shiro,

Hope you’re feeling better, sweetie! Hunk and Sheriff King said you took a nasty fall in the new place, so you’ll find some brunch in the microwave with a bottle of Aleve waiting for you. Drink lots of water, okay?

Don’t go back to that death trap without us! We’ll make sure all that work doesn’t get to your head again!

Eat up, and see you soon — C. Holt

P.S. SHIRO. IT’S FRIDAY. DON’T FORGET — 7 PM TONIGHT. FEEL BETTER OKAY? — Matt’

It’s the kitchen in Seattle all over again, that pressurized heat that builds up under his skin to threaten a crash that would send him reeling, scared and panicked, to get as damn far away from where he stands. The itch is there, that need for something that burns down the back of his throat as he swigs it down while his fingers nearly crack the glass in fine hairlines that would just end with a broken skin as the shards dug into his palm.

But, he breathes in with the deepest chasm of struggle before breathing right out, lets the cobwebs be swept away with the winds that funnel through his lungs. It cools him down, lets him stay in the kitchen that isn’t all stainless steel and minimalist decor, but rather filled with weird thingamabobs that add to a slightly kitschy conglomeration of what could be considered a home sweet home kind of kitchen.

He’s here, not floating away screaming while trying to tear at his own hair in that frenzy he cannot control, cannot settle down with begs and pleas that falls from loose lips that just want it all to end. No, no, not that again, not ever that as he swallows down that fitfulness that wants squirms against the bars of the cage like a flightless bird. Think, Shiro, think of something better, something gentler, something that dulls the harshness that cuts into his senses.

Oh, there, he remembers, and it’s a fuzzy sound of a siren’s voice singing of melancholy pining and the chill of a wet cloth along his temple. Shiro remembers so quaintly, oh, yes he does, a grin on his lips so wide it might threaten to split his jawline if it isn’t careful.

It would be so simple to hate himself, so easy to turn the readied spears to sing through the air to pierce his own limbs for his treason now that he has settled in this ‘exotic’ middle of fucking
nowhere town. He misses his family in that way guilt always lingers prevalently in the silence of the desolate attach that is his headspace, though their what might have been the fists of his parents banging on the door that he has locked with dozens of locks could be the thudding hammer falls that come with the edging of attacks. Despite this, despite how they might still be pacing the floors and checking the charges on his credit card if they have access to such, he repeats in full agreement that this is all for the best.

There is something here, something that may even outweigh the omnipotence of the God that roams the fields of harvest with hands splayed for Lazarus was a man reckoned back to life, and it may just be that Shiro has been brought back from the precipice.

The sunlight is burning, and there is something that makes him imagine red. His hands itch for the knowledge of hard labor, to know the land and to know the inner workings of the engines and rotors of tractors and trucks. An expert on any of the aspects of outsider country living would be an oxymoron bestowed upon himself, but at least there’s a good teacher down the road on the Evans farm if Shiro can figure out the address.

After all, he’s got a bit of a matchmaking quirk about him now, since it seems that Keith has caught the eye of the sheriff, and damn if it wouldn’t be a good story to read.

Scarifying down the food lovingly placed in the microwave within five minutes is a feat in itself, heaping helpings of buttery biscuits with safe sausage, seasoned hash browns, and four pills of Aleve. Cleaning up is even easier as the kitchen was been wiped down from the morning cooking of the Holts. Just a quick glance over in a dark bathroom and a prayer of gratitude for overcast skies that shield from the brutal glow of the sun, and the veteran is walking out the kitchen door to the carport.

Walking back to the house had not been a thought that crossed his mind, but it should have since case of the rental car being left at the McClain house— no, his house— with no one needing to worry about getting it back to where they were taking him. That’s no matter because, well, when was the last time he even worked out? At this rate, he’s going to get flabby, a sagging heap of once-muscles out of the sheer invigoration and exhaustion overworking his body brought him.

But, there she is, Ol’ Pops’ black truck that was a purchase of yesterday’s run to Selma sitting in the drive way with only a scribbled note on the windshield.

‘Here’s your old black, boy. Take this Sendak’s down past Hunk’s diner; all repairs compliments of me. — A.K.’

The address is scribbled along the bottom in fine point ink, and while there’s a residual radiance of appreciation for the man that has ostensibly taken him under his wing, it’s another drop in the jar so appropriately labeled ‘debts that Takashi Shirogane has accrued since setting foot past the Alabama stateline.’

He’ll pay this back, somehow, but for now... Sendak’s, though it’s reeling in his mind just how strangely the given names are in Gilman. Granted, his own probably throws everyone off their horses just a bit, but other than that bastard who is going to meet the blunt force of the knuckles of his right fist, there hasn’t been a bat of an eye about how different he might be.

Thoughts for another time, and he relinquishes the processes of guessing and considering to the birds as he climbs into his 1970 Ford and headdown the road towards Main Street.
Shiro barely makes it down Oak Avenue before the urge to stop suddenly overtakes him with a slow burn that presses his foot on the brakes. There on the road beside the truck stands a little cluster of white blooms along the weeds and high grass of the fence. There is an unnameable pressure along his joints, easing him down from the driver’s seat while his heart skips a nervous beat. He should take them, so he does, plucking the stems in a little bundle that he holds in his hands while walking to the house. He’s nervous, God, he’s like a school boy ambled up to his sweetheart’s house, anxious and eager to take her (or him) out on their first date together.

The door creaks as expected, the parlor silent and still like death has yet to remove itself from the corners of the room. There is no sight of the lady, and for that he wants to holler a yelp of thanks to her so she can hear. Still, these flowers in his hand are hardly for her, though something in this throat swells at the thought that he would hold any hardness towards her. He can’t, and while he can’t determine the reasoning now, he will eventually.

The petals add a crispness of life into the scene, a symbol of what Shiro wants to badly to bring into this house, this embodiment of himself. He wants to heal it, to pull out the decaying flesh like his own troubled pulp and replace it with something newer, stronger.

He wants something he hasn’t allowed himself to have before, and if this is some twisted version of a love story, then, by God, he’ll bring all the gifts and flowers to appease it. With a draping of his bouquet on the table closet to the door, and him shifting the poor pot of forgotten bluebells outside to dig out a place when he’s got the time, he stands once more at the door before shutting it slowly.

“… I’ll see you soon, Lance.”

Gilman, Alabama has but one mechanic shop within the town limits, and after his first visit, Shiro can garner a wild guess as to why that's so.

The owner, Sendak, is a character in his own right, a dark man that stands a good head taller than most of his customers which include Shiro on this Friday. The height difference would not normally irk him as badly as it does if just by simply walking through the door, he’s caused a distraction of eyes, and Sendak’s especially eye his form up and down like he’s a steak dinner.

As an older brother and a once friend to several females in his life, the hungry eyes and the lick of lips present a little more appreciation than he already had for his younger sisters' worries over the prowling gazes of men that trail too far down their legs, wolf whistles high and all around trust-shattering. Men aren’t to be trusted, he always crowed, because while he has never had a thought of grabbing a female—or male—by their hair to pull them back, reel them close, and rip away their vestiges to—.

His skin crawls and his stomach pangs with an abrupt wave of nausea, and for a moment, he isn’t sure if he’s thankful that the sexual urges he has experienced have never driven him to force another against their will, or just thankful he has a fucking conscience. Sendak, though, doesn’t give off those vibes as a mechanic that has made it onto the sex offender list, but he’s got a surety of shadiness about him that alludes to all sorts of ambiguous scenarios.

“Well, well, we got ourselves a bit of fresh meat in town, just as Mister Judge King himself done told about,” Sendak practically purrs, elbow leaned against the counter as he levels his eyes, a piercing bright hazel that almost seem to glow with an eeriness that isn’t going to calm any nerves within the hour, “bet all the ol’ ladies gonna be sniffin’ after you since you ain’t got no bride.”
Lunacy wouldn’t be too terrible of a rumor to start for himself if it meant keeping the man’s gaze up as his eyes—and he’s fairly mad at himself for wearing his tighter t-shirt for the time, the black cotton just slightly stretched over the muscles that will soon fade into unfitness if Shiro doesn’t pick up the gym rat habit again. After all, he’s granted a lovely thought of Lance in pure white, a humble button-up and pants to match, feet grass-stained from padding through what will soon be a garden just for them, and really if he’s already so far gone already, wedding bells wouldn’t be straggling too far behind.

Barely two days, and damn if his mind isn’t already in a quandary about how to marry a dead boy.

“Guess they’ll just have to sniff,” he retorts, straightening his posture because he’ll be damned if he’s going to let tall, dark, and sketchy have him shake in his boots or have him reach for the nearest sharp object—though pepper spray isn’t too awful of an item to put on the list for his next trip to the store.

But, the man laughs, steep and filled to the brim the pinpoints of tacks, slapping his grease-stained hand along the equally dirt-ridden counter, “oh, man, he said I’d like ya, and I do, boy, I surely do.”

Something about his laughing only allows an inch of tension to release from joints of his shoulders, but only an inch. There’s an omen that hangs over his head, like he has a power to do bad and get away with it to his merriment, like snipping brake lines and stabbing tires only to wake up the next morning to find his victims in his gravel lot, hapless to find another soul that’ll fix up their car like good ol’ Sendak will.

“Gimme the keys, boy, and I’ll take care of the truck, and you sit yourself down in the lobby and just look pretty.”

It’s enough to roll Shiro’s stomach into flips so outrageous in acrobatics he nearly barfs, but not from the come on, hell no, he’s flirted with men bigger than himself every so often, but more from the fact that he is clearly just there to have the truck worked on and no other reason. Besides, his heart is taken, left with the white flowers he left for Lance on the parlor table in hopes that he’ll be waited for once more.

A flippant grumble only protrudes the keys from Shiro’s pocket after a chuckle and a twist of waiting fingers prompts him, and the mechanic with more grease than skin is out the door, leaving Shiro nearly snarling under this breath about perverts.

—

A free twenty-four-point inspection with oil change and new filters has the old truck running down Main Street quite nicely if Shiro is ready to say that the mechanic that winked at him on his out has some clout to his field of business. For the sake of his own skin, he would never dare say his impressions out loud in earshot of Sendak (who might take it as a flirt and, sheesh, does the grease monkey flirt), but other than the obvious winks and purrs, Shiro figures for a good tune up that he can tolerate it.

Though the entirety of the maintenance has thus presented Shiro once more with his need to brood over his current financial stance.

For all that the judge has done for him that may be driven from a core of philanthropy than any other reason, Shiro proceeds down to the diner with an urge to find the judge of Gilman for the sole purpose of discussing how much debt he really is in with the King family. Between a truck and repairs, he can ascertain that there’s a few grand in rounded figures floating about before
adding in the house and Allura's home visit with Hunk. Allura isn’t wholly the point of concern, but more so Hunk, as the thought of the heavyset, but joyful chef carrying his limp body out of the house twists his guts a bit.

Hunk is comprised of a build that is reminiscent of a tank constructed with a sole purpose of pile driving through the worst of imaginable sand storms, but the veteran of desert warfare is not as light as a feather of a yellowhammer. Though Hunk might have barely broken a sweat, still, gratitude for the sake of help is just plain good manners, so he pulls into Sunny Side Diner for the sole purpose of shaking the big man’s hand, at least.

It would just be by felicitous grace that the judge’s car would be parked right at his favorite spot while he sat in his particular booth while inhaling a damn good greasy helping of heart attack special, but much to Shiro’s chagrin, the LeBaron is absent this near-noon. The truck sits idle for a moment, but he turns the key and kills the engine as something curiourer catches his attention.

She’s a sleek beauty, pristine to the point of sin with chrome detailing that shines even in the overcast skies that predicts only a chance of showers that may threaten to postpone Matt’s game. The clouds loom gray through the skies of the small town while Shiro’s roam the body of a gorgeous 1958 Cadillac Deville. He won’t dare breathe that someone in town has got money to keep up a car this old, but that’s an assumption based on what he knows about cars, regardless of how limited it may be.

He’s astounded by the car, not only by the condition, but also how he feels an aura of agency as though just from the vintage vehicle alone, he can gather a few estimations of the career of the driver. It must be someone with a gift of charisma, someone who can cajole and charm with such magnanimous resolve that literally every citizen drops to their knees in groveling worship.

Or, and what may be an assumption closer to the truth, there is a fear behind this person, some wariness that might edged with forced sympathy. This person may just not have the spine of an oppressor, but may just have the appearance of.

It doesn't matter, Shiro tells himself. It shouldn't matter. Go inside, he thinks while sweeping away all the granules of precarious judgments to the sides, and just thank the man who lifted him up…and might have pulled him away from Lance.

As the door swings open two steps before Shiro can take a hold of the handle, he comes face to face with the someone that might just fit the descriptions he has created surrounding the Deville. This new man is a gentleman that the outsider has never laid eyes upon before, but somehow feels he knows in ways that are, to put in layman's terms, unexplainable.

He's tall, taller than Sendak which is an anatomical feat that loosens Shiro's jaw a half an inch, a looming form in a suit that is nicely pressed yet is faded with age and with wisdom that comes with office work. His face, wrinkled and a tone lighter than Judge King's, has a scar that runs from his cheek down over his lip and to his chin.

This man has a struggle that has worn his skin thin, and while there is a domineering weight to his aura, some internalized impenetrable armor of caliber above others, there is also a small reflection of something somber. His life has known trouble, or maybe the longevity of his years finally catching up with him. Maybe it's living small town life when there is a world abound in sights and sounds that will never be here in this little place in Dallas County, but still, it's there, some moving mass that only history itself reads.

To be polite, Shiro tilts out of the way, but not before their shoulders brush with a gruff and low from the other, "excuse me."
And a touch is more a spark, a lambency that cracks before sizzling away like the dying embers of fireworks.

There's suddenly springtime giggles, fingers interlaced in as they walk the secret pathways to the river. That river, she calls for them, for lovers that are parted not by the walls of houses or of fences, but by skin. She is not his own.

But he loves her, as seen by the twinkle in his dark eyes as he bows her down.

He tells her with a pride that floods from his mouth that she’s prettiest camellia the South has ever done seen.

She smiles, lips a hue of peach.

Her eyes are blue.

Slowly, Shiro eases the breath he is holding out with a shudder, something cold crinkling at his spine while the man eases into the Deville with his takeout box, undisturbed by the newcomer watching him reverse the black car from the parking spot to out onto Main Street to head towards City Hall.

It’s undoubtedly ninety-degrees, a sweat forming along his brow and behind his ears, but he stands there, frozen, fever chills wracking his bones from a blur of memories not his own. The scenes were fragmented, antique film reels depicting a sepia-toned romance between two lovers so in love in spite of those that believe that they should have never met, the disembodied figments of memories enough to dismantle his core. He is left entirely immobile, thin ice crackling in his joints as he stares out into the distance in the direction of Oak Avenue.

That camellia, that sun-warm delight walking down the path to the river, that symbolic vision of beauty and youth, shares the face of the young woman that he knows isn’t alive anymore.

—

Thank God for flirty young girls.

Ezzy is graciously working her flair up with the patrons, her hair still her statement piece, but she finds just a second of time to zero in on Shiro and ease him to a seat at the bar. Nothing feels right to him, everything missing to return in the wrong place while he mulls over the peachy smile and blue eyes over and over. It’s her, it has to be, with a fluttering hem of a light dress that’s now a mist as she walks through that house to find someone that might just would listen to her.

If he wasn’t sympathetic to her before, he surely is now, her smile a bloom of petals just like the flower she is so called now sullen and long turned down. She is not what she once was, just a girl carefree and young enough to glorify it, loving life and loving a man that doted on her as she was the apple of his eye, the treasure he discovered on his journeys through life in Gilman.

Bless Ezzy, she’s got him down and easing a cup of hot brew in his hands, urging him to drink something warming to bring back some life to his color. He’s sorry for her as she worries over her bottom lip, her lipgloss wearing thin while her eyes look over to see any damage that could have him so petrified. It’s pathetic, but she doesn’t make any mind of it, that he so much more than her slight frame, yet she handles him with ease.
“Did that ol’ Mister Mayor say something to you? He’s not that bad an old fart, just… not the friendliest,” she chatters lowly while he sips along the lip of the coffee cup, knuckles fighting all of his will to not clench down in his sporadic tremors to break the mug in his hands. He should thank her, be kind and just nod to her that he understands, but he sees without seeing, like she’s there before him, yet not.

It surely isn’t disassociation, that broken line of existence that tugs at him, makes him float along the ticks of the clock before focusing on the time to see it has been hours since he’s fallen into the void of thoughtless action. Shiro has a rolling guilt that suits itself to cling along his shoulders, to press down and remind him in a somber mantra how he should not be so weak.

But, mayor? That’s flummoxing, that a man of seemingly opposite personality holds a position similar if not more prominent than that of the judge and would also be the cause of turning the page on the book that is based on the enigma of his new home.

Ezzy, though, must have a keen sense of the distress of another person, her hands wrapping over Shiro’s to hold his fingers, to lull him into a safer understanding of how utterly discombobulated his body feels. She hums to him, some listless tune that has an eerie familiarity to it, something lost from ages ago, but still comforts his spasming soul, quiets it down into some exhausted state.

Even with the idyllic aroma of brewed coffee, his is in sore need of a bit of shut eye.

“You’re gonna have to be a bit more careful, Mister Shiro, sir, if you intend to stay on Mayor Zarend Garland’s good side,” Ezzy chuckles, her voice hummingbird soft and creamy sweet, “but he isn’t like those nasty asshole cousins of his… they don’t particularly care for him either.”

He thinks about it, eradicating the toxins of musty disillusionment from his mind as he thinks hard, trying to put together any reasoning behind—.

—Parted not by the walls of houses or of fences, but by skin. She is not his own.

“Guess they don’t care for his looks either, huh…?” It’s a shot in the ever endless dark, but when her shoulders perk up, he can tell he’s hit whatever the hell she intended right square on target.

A sigh from her lungs, and a lilt of her head are the little details that show she isn’t really forthcoming, but she’s going to tell on them all anyway with incautiousness, “the ‘bad’ Garlands try to pass the Mayor off as their free ticket to do whatever the hell they want like they’ve always wanted. Bad blood there, after all, but he isn’t their ally or their friend.”

She inches in closer, eyes open wide with her blow of gossip while her voice drops to a whisper, “he doesn’t even go to any of the fish fries or the reunions! He hates them, I figure, since they give too much of a damn who his mama was, but you didn’t hear that from me!”

Ezzy is a doll, just a peach, and her appalled façade over the audacity of the mayor to miss his family’s fish fries is such funny little quirk that brings a hint of a smile to his lips while the jitters settle down, allowing him to think without the cotton haze forbidding him to.

“To me, he has a pretty good reason not to go to a fish fry put on by those jerks, Ezzy,” Shiro attempts to soothe over with a smidgeon of lukewarm amusement, “but thank you… he’s just a bit scary, but I’m not too worried.”

Huffing, she pouts with a slight crease of aggravation and a pucker of her glossy lips, “yeah, well, he better not mess with you, or I’m gonna have a few words with how Hunk cooks up his picky ass food!”
She’s a blessing, perfectly so, and he’s laughing now, and God, he’s thankful to feel alive again even if it’s just a few short bursts of air’s worth.

Ezzy’s pout melts into her own smile, just as splendidly dynamic as her hair colors. Her hands slip down to the counter to tap her fingertips along the top as though she is concocting a dastardly plan to make a certain elected figure in town pay for frightening one of her customers who has yet to pay a bill in the diner. Shiro opens his mouth to ask her what’s possibly scrolling through the confines of what is presumably a vivacious mental prowess when the kitchen door swings open to reveal the man he meant to see today.

“Well, good to see you up and going about,” Hunk laughs, and honestly, Shiro can believe that the cook and owner of the diner truly had at least a bit of concern for his wellbeing with the veracity that belies Hunk’s personality. The sunshine tells no lies, Shiro thinks, and Hunk has an openness in his eyes that reflects what little good could be found in a hellacious reality that is life.

Laughing with him, Ezzy instead giggles, a sneaky sound that’s just befitting her charm while she inches away from the counter, “got him a good cup of coffee, boss, so I’ll play good waitress for a bit!” She’s off then, Shiro’s eyes watching her do what she does best: make people feel at home in a humble restaurant as they eat their home cooked meals.

Turning back to Hunk, Shiro feels the pricks of sheepishness along his throat, another sense of pitiful atrocity that he is. He is so exhausted from the constant reminders of his embarrassments, that he is allowed to be weak, but the issue is that he has been weak for so long, and having found some ground to bear upon and steady himself, he’s shown that horribly debilitating element that connects all the pieces that make Shiro who he is to two already.

Hunk, like Ezzy, must have a sixth sense that hovers around him, some innate ability to hone in on the issue and alleviate the wickedness of it with just a raise of his hand and a grin to boot, “you didn’t have to come all this way to thank me, y’know. It’s always good to help Lulu out when she needs it… she doesn’t ask for help much, y’see: too proud.”

From the discussion with the sheriff herself that morning, Shiro just nods, gazing down at his coffee with no way to speak up and allow his jumbled thoughts to flow. It’s like he’s hit a dam again, forcing it all to push and to rush against the coming currents, making the levels rise, rise, rise…

It’ll spill over, but he has to drain it out in his own little ways in secret so he isn’t portrayed as a putrid failure of a stable human. He may allow the dam to crack, to sustain damage to the integrity of the structure, but he cannot allow it to break and let everything wash over the other side.

It would mean the end for him. It would mean a noose around his neck as he stands in the gallows for the sallow conduction of his death sentence because he was so idiotic to permit the insanity of it all to press along his back and push him over the brink.

Instead of destruction of dams, he should think of flowers, of bluebells that float along like wind chimes, petal chiming along the zephyrs. Instead of his own demise, he should think of Lance who may surely wait at that second floor window for Shiro’s truck to pull in next to the fence so that he can welcome him home.

Once, just once he’s been in the presence of the young man, a haunt that not only has providence of the home, but of Shiro’s heart, like a succubus that preys on war-scarred victims, that lays them down after rough falls to stay with them until help comes in police cars. There’s something rotten there, Hunk has apparently said so himself, but Lance— God, no, Shiro cannot even stomach the disgusting bile that pulses into his throat at such a traitorous sentiment. Lance, seemingly, has not
one ill will in his aura—body?—and he will not allow such ghastly assumptions.

Love is a veil, an illusion of grandeur in the wake of a Havisham-style room that is as bleak as it is saddening, but not here, no, not when there it is before him in the glory that has never transfixed his attention before. Shiro wants this, wants to step into the unknown, wants to dig into the obscurity of romancing as fascinating as it may be.

Gray eyes gaze up, ready to express with sight alone his resolve to maintain his composure, gnarled at the roots they may be. Hunk, wise with his ancestral heritage and with his knowledge of the land of his people, should just happen to take in the resoluteness with a comprehension above all else.

But, Hunk’s eyes are no longer focused on his patrons or his restaurant, but rather straight ahead to peer through the windows that view the street and the buildings across. It’s the cutesy structures Shiro toured earlier in the week with the judge, the florist shop and the salon which are shops that do not conjure any zeal in their wares. Shiro isn’t sure what has stopped Hunk’s attention on their conversation, but there’s a woman outside the florist shop with a yellow watering can tending to the buttercups, and from where he sits, she is as sweet as honey and as lovely the flowers she grows.

Oh. Oh.

Hunk’s face is as adorably longing as can be imagined, a puppy love that rounds his cheeks and scrunches his button nose. Ah, a crush, a big one at that, as big as Hunk’s heart, so it just be as big as the county itself, encompassing all the how-to-dos and what-will-dos that all surround love from afar. Shiro must chuckle to himself after the drawn out silence of the bigger man just playing lovesick observer as Hunk’s eyes trail down to Shiro with a bashful grimace.

“Oh, c’mon, man, that’s not really fair,” Hunk whines, and it just livens Shiro more, who is pretty proud of his newfound information. Damn, it is surreal in its very nature, that he would feel so compelled to take to heart the young adult’s version of a love story that is so impeccably adorable, it’s surely the most G-rated scenario in existence. The owner of a diner with taste buds to outdo any man, and the florist across the street that he’s in love with. God, it’s so cute it nearly gives Shiro a cavity as thinks of shy blushes and side glances in hopes the florist doesn’t notice.

Shiro needs to know more, so he starts to prod, “what’s her name?”

Hunk groans, rubbing a hand along his face as his eyes roll back so far they may never turn back down again. The whites might disturb Shiro, that slight chance with the lack of pupils and irises, but Hunk relents, shoulders drawn down as he gives up his defenses to let the other in. It’s admirable, really, that he would even hold out for a minute, but Shiro, well… he wouldn’t mind helping to see where this would lead for this man and his love-to-be.

“… It’s Shay.”

Shay. That’s as saccharine as she is, fits her so perfectly it’d be a glove it were anything but a name to face. His eyes peer through the front windows again while she sways in a little dance of her own while the buttercups get their daily watering. She’s just like a flower herself, or maybe that’s how Shiro can envision Hunk seeing her, a beautiful blood of yellow petals to take in the sunlight, to bloom in fullness with golden rays and rain showers.

He could make that some kind of proverb for life itself, but he’s only just gotten rid of his headache and now his shakes; he’ll pass.

“I think you should ask her out,” Shiro admonishes Hunk as he shifts off the set, pulling out a few
dollar bills to set on the counter. With a scoff as though his heart just took a swift punch of offense, Hunk bats the bills in his direction.

“A cup of coffee doesn’t cost you a damn thing if at least you’re doing all right. You were a bad sight last night, man…” and there it is, that subjacent uneasiness over the whole matter of what this all leads to at the base, but what Hunk might presume is wicked in sense is only just a mayor of learning for Shiro, but it’s the girl now, not Lance, this sprightly wonder that once wandered the backwoods of Gilman with a secret that kissed her and held her tight, promised her a world aplenty.

A world aplenty and none to be found. Tragic.

Shiro sighs himself this time, looking at Hunk as he tilts himself to the door. He has something else on his mind, a deep-rooted quest that has him needing to get on because he’s burning daylight faster than the sands of an hourglass. “If you insist… but, thank you, really, it means a lot that you did all that.”

Hunk’s face seems to fade into a shadow, no longer the easygoing smoothness of a jubilant chef, but now a prophet that has seen tragedy that he cannot stop, cannot even dare to speak against for there is no salvation for those already damned. There’s that upheaval of complacency again, that varying position of groundwork that quakes and breaks, uneven spaces rocked around the chasms.

He knows. Fuck, this good-hearted bastard knows.

“But… don’t let your guard down, man,” is all Hunk divulges before he waves in his goodbye to reenter his helm at the back of the diner. The loss of the other man in the main area of the diner leaves him cold again, as though whatever macabre floats around in the day has another chance to sift into his life again, provide nothing more than a damper in what could have felt like a good day.

Shiro should go, and while he stuffs his hands in his pockets, he makes sure that the dollars stay on the counter for Ezzy to take home at least a small tip for her efforts in calming down what could have been the storm of the century, greater than any hurricane or any tornado the town has ever seen. After seeing her chat away with another table, he can see that she’s got an eye for the weary, and a soul that just wants to aid them.

It’s a chime of the diner bells and a slam of the truck door that has Shiro mulling over where he should go next. There’s a longing for the house, to see if Lance has accepted the flowers, to hope that he can start fixing up a bedroom upstairs to at least set up a cot so he can sleep where Lance may tread. It’d be grossly obvious, and while he’s certain that times back then weren’t nearly as understanding in the spectrums and in the preferences of the individual, maybe… he won’t scare a ghost away that easily.

He’s downright restless though, edgy and desperate to figure out a means to release the tension that still pools in his stomach. There’s a glimmer of an idea, the directions he vaguely recalls from his excursion to Selma and the Tractor Supply where he was more or less invited out to a certain cattle farm.

It’s a home remedy for sure, but it’d clear his head to use his hands and his legs for more than just being hands and legs, to work under a blistering sun so the sweat rolls down his back and neck to that get the darker poisons to seep from him. Maybe exhausting himself will abet the phantom pain today while it stagnantly remains, but flares every so often to remind him that his right arm just isn’t there anymore.
He turns left on Main Street to head out past Sendak’s— and if he presses a little more down on the pedal, it’s no fault of his own— to wander down a dusty road towards what he hopes will be a sure sign that he’s getting to the Evans Farm.
Once past the rolling expanses of farm lands growing corn and cotton along with the occasional cluster of woods, Shiro stumbles on what he believes—prays— is his point of destination while the overcasting shroud of clouds begin to fade.

The Evans Farm is only marked by a dinged-up mailbox and a dead flower in an old flower pot hanging from the post. The only other hint that Shiro has found the place is the barbed wire fence melding with an old wooden one that stretches far along the property while cattle graze in the fields.

Turning the truck down the dirt drive, he sighs in a bit a stilted relief to see Keith’s own truck sitting near a wooden farm house that has a bit of wear from the years, but is overall in nicer shape than what he could hope for his own house within the near future. As the truck idles to a halt, Shiro notes the perk of something from the porch steps, a set of ears on a fat, near red tabby cat that was napping in the sun.

Her fur is sleek, and from her weight, Shiro can tell she’s well-fed, probably a plethora of cans of food at her beck and call if she so much meows at her hunger.

Her eyes, yellow and all-seeing, follow him while her tail slinks in curls behind her as though curious, yet calculating. Here is a stranger, a man that she has never seen before, to approach her home as though he is a friend of what Shiro presumes is her human. Damn him, Shiro adores a cat even if they are a wary stray or a taken pet, his fingertips itching to pet along her fur, to feel her spine curl up to his palm as she purrs like a motor.

Wouldn’t it be nice, yes, to have a lazy feline of his own, have her sit in his lap while he rocks away in the rocking chair on his porch to watch the sun set below the faux hill lines of trees, all that hard work behind him as the chill of dead hands touch along his neck, then lips as those hands trail down—?

The screen door squeaks open with a suddenness that scares the tabby away, and startles Shiro into staring up into those dark plum eyes that are just so out of place here amongst the corn crops and the red dirt. How much of a burden to have such eyes, so exotic like almost every other feature he has.

Handsome like a cotton mouth: sleek, sharp, and temperament. Shiro acknowledges all this with respect for boundaries and his own person tastes, while there is obviously other eyes set on the hopes that Keith may be theirs. If Allura’s affectionate statements are to be taken for what they are worth, it gives Shiro all the more reason to scope out the two with his own intentions of collecting intel on both.

Call him a hopeless romantic, but Shiro has always had a hankering to wish that two people (or more, he shouldn’t leave those preferences out either) should find something the cloud-dew lightness of adoration when the fog rolls in, the mists elongating the shadows of world with claws out. Their hands, always bound, would form that endless bond of lovers, so much like the ode of a glowing red thread at the smallest of fingers of destined lovers, portrayal of fate at its finest taken from the lavish myths and tales that he has heard since he was a child.

Romantics aside, he’s here on business despite his hidden intentions of self-asserted matchmaking.

“… Didn’t expect you to actually show up,” Keith begins with an unsure step across the porch,
work boots already scuffed and dirty from chores prior to Shiro’s arrival, grease and mud along his
clothes. Shiro should have expected as much, that the young man raised on a farm would be up
with the first slivers of dawn to greet the world with an eagerness to get all the hard work done
before the humidity makes the air too damn miserable to breathe, but from the drying cloth in
Keith’s hands, he has either stumbled upon the farm during a pause or a finality.

Shiro hopes, for his own sake, that it’s just the pause, needing to get the buzz out of his system, to
bleed through sweat where blood will not do. Everything is jittery, has been the whole way down
the road, like locusts’ wings in flight rush through his veins. God, let Keith be a hell of a man to
work for, a brute that will wring Shiro out of every ounce of energy his body contained—but not
too much so. He does, after all, have a baseball game to watch tonight.

Swallow the worry, push it down, and offer a gift to expect none in return, “I don’t have much to
do today, so I was wondering if you wanted a hand?”

The gift, a simple matter of building trust that reaches beyond a few hours of conversation in a big
toy store for the hardworking outdoors person and a threadbare admittance to come to this farm, is
taken with hesitation, but also something more.

If there is anything to be told in Keith’s eyes, it’s a sign of weariness that dissipates just so into the
afternoon heat, that he can work and no longer be the only soul he feels on the lands as he herds
the cattle or repairs the busted tractor that might have had its last bush hog.

—

Shiro would have thought by the time the orb of gold in the sky that makes the spring time feel like
damnable summer at the equator, he’d have detested Keith so much that his own ribs would have
cracked from the exhaustion of putrid loathing. No, while he has been made to be a second hand
man with no experience in the art of farming, let alone cattle rearing, Shiro figures he’s done fairly
well on his first day.

The first lesson that learn is that cattle are pretty dumb, and don’t require too much. There’s a lot to
do in the case of calfs or moving the herd to safer pastures in the case of storms or when a part of
the fence needs to be repaired, but otherwise, cattle are pretty set. They’ve been watered and
looked over already, and were again throughout the day, but Keith isn’t just a cattle farmer, but
also a soybean farmer, but only as a hobby that brings in a little extra money.

Beef always comes first in Keith’s ways of thinking.

But, all the chores around the farm still underlie that Keith works all on his own, still repairs the
equipment on his own, tills on his own, and cooks and cleans the house all on his own. It’d be
damn pitiful for Shiro to see if it weren’t for Keith having a good head on his shoulders and
knowledge that ranges far beyond any textbook or Google search could provide.

The land is lonely for him, surely, without any parents, without a spouse, only company just a
pretty fat cat and the cattle that sound off at the weirdest times of day and set off Shiro’s paranoia
to no end, much to Keith’s slight amusement. He wonders if Keith considers Shiro just a slight
distraction to the monotony.

There’s a dexterity to Keith’s repertoire that must be worthy of help of at least a good farmhand or
two, but what Shiro can gather from his time with Keith, where Shiro is now a student to a teacher
of the field, is that the shorter man, derived from tragedy and heartache, does not need anyone else,
or maybe just prefers not to need the presence of another human.
It’s— sad, yes, but Shiro gets it, and can hold the utmost respect to the mindset that is so engraved in solitude, it may be written in epitaphs on the headstones of the town cemetery. Keith probably cannot acclaim to be haunted by any translucent entity grabbed in ghoulish white, so maybe the silence of being by himself is a gift rather than what came before whereas Shiro longs for things that he cannot explain.

“You did good work today,” Keith grins, and it’s easy, so easy, like cherries plucked from a tree bearing the fruit to all that want it as he offers a bottle of water to Shiro from the fridge, “I think you got the makins’ of a fine cattle handler.”

The joke makes Shiro chuckle from a depth that he has not felt rumble in months, so he raises the bottle up in a mocking of a toast, “to all my mistakes you fixed today.”

The plastic bottles tap together before Keith settles into the chair next to Shiro’s, boot heels slamming hard against the porch decking while he leans back to take a swig. A day of work is over, and Shiro can reckon if his true boss, one judge of Gilman, needed his assistance today, he would have known full well where to track his helping hand out like a hoard of bloodhounds after a rabbit. Shiro, though, cannot fathom that the older man would be so surly with him for going off and helping out another, especially after hearing how he spoke of Keith back in the diner.

He’s making friends, making relationships that might sink him or keep him afloat as he bobs along the surface that is life in small town Alabama. It sure doesn’t feel like the urban cut throat lifestyle of Seattle, bustling constantly with the brashness of heavy traffic and irritated calls of city slickers. While sometimes it might just find him to perk up at the silence of it all, how there’s nothing more than a straggling truck down the road or the chirps of birds and insects to fill in the void that would otherwise be nothing but his destructively pining thoughts.

“So, you just came all the way out here to work for me for the day,” Keith starts, a flurry of words that ease Shiro’s attention back to porch where they sit, “and I gotta ask— why?”

The question, personally for Shiro, is needless, but he’ll humor Keith, “why, why?”

The ricochet seems to catch Keith off guard, flubs at the wall he constructs for himself, similar to the armor of the mayor Shiro brushed alongside in the hours before their rest. Keith’s cat has come out to see them, rubbing her sides along Keith’s boots before hopping, though it’s more like a fluke of a jump for the poor thing, up to curl right up in his lap. A large feline trying to curl about on the tops of his thighs hardly irritates Keith, more apt to scratch along her ears with his free hand while he actually thinks.

“Gossip, I guess, and I figure since everyone knows my business better than I do, you’d had been educated on the poor story of Keith Evans and his asshole bastard shithead of a father that I’ll put a bullet between the eyes of if he ever gets the gumption to come home.”

Regardless of all the sympathies and wails of congruent compassion, Shiro understands what Keith means in volumes that encyclopedias alone could not document, and it’s all the more to believe that there is the inklings of too much coincidence rather than a crazy random flight bringing him here.

There’s a purpose, and honest to God, put that right hand on the Good Book and swear to God purpose to everything now.

“Gossip is gossip,” Shiro muses, rolling his head back against the chair cushion to ease the pressure off his neck, “and I’m not one that really puts too much into gossip. You’re you, and that’s all that matters, I think, not what happened to you.”
For all of the lack of wisdom that Shiro could give, his words seem to build an ark to weather what may be the storms of brewing doubts in Keith’s mind. He watches his brow crease from the batting back of concepts, and maybe, while it isn’t really all substantial on the eloquence, it’s enough to tug on Keith’s shirt, to draw him back from over the cliff that he’s looking over.

Jumping off isn’t always literal.

“…Really, I think it doesn’t matter what happened, Keith, but what matters is what you do with that,” Shiro, in the best tone of bourbon-laden comfort he can derive, imparts what little wisdom he as to Keith while Red purrs away during her catnap on her human’s lap. The more the words settle, the syllables floating down feather light until they touch the dirt and the grass, the more at ease the air around the cattle farmer, as though Shiro has taken a few of the bags Keith carries for some time away.

A pause, time morphing into a noiseless absolution as though the clocks have all stopped just for a moment so that Keith and Shiro can both just be.

“Thanks… that means a lot.”

As they sit there in the baseness of solitude shared by two, to rest and to watch the sun sink further down into the sky, Shiro realizes that he should take his own damn advice, to let the past be the past so that he can be what he can only be. Harder said than done, but a hypocrite grants himself no favors, and as a hypocrite he stands, he slides into another subject when the timing benefits him.

"So, I have a ball game to attend tonight. Matt Holt is playing and he wanted me to come watch.”

Once more, a pause, then Red is slowly picked up and placed down on the porch with a huffy mewl of discontent from being moved from her warm makeshift bed.

Before Shiro can even get another half a sentence out, Keith is up in full, hopping about as he pulls his work boots off with a varied curses before he chucks them on the porch. Red yowls at him, padding over to her human while he goes about pulling out from just beyond the screen door a nicer pair of sneakers and a flannel shirt hanging from the coat hook, tying the laces before buttoning up.

“Doubt you know where the school is, so cmon, then. Ain’t like there’s football to watch anyway.”

There is not even an ounce of protest or argument that Shiro can conjure when Keith puts Red another can of food out before grabbing his keys off the side table just inside the house, the old black truck just going to have to sit in the grass of the Evans’ yard for a few hours while they play audience to America’s favorite pastime.

The passenger door of the red rust bucket squeals in a protest so astounding that Shiro feels his ear drums tense at the reverberations that nearly split his hearing into pieces. The slam echoes in his head, creating a symphony of soldier boys rat-tat-tating along their drums.

It’s nerve-wracking, but at least there’s another presence for him to pinpoint and allow to distract from the darker things that nestle in his head, away from marching soldiers with their war drums that walk into shallow graves one by one. How many fill the graves? How many corpses in uniform does it take to fill in the holes dug in the earth by the hands that commanded them there?

God Almighty, let him stop; he’s already pathetic over how certain sounds and sights put him on the utter precipice of craggy mountainsides, the rocks below just waiting for their next plunging victim. He had been so calm just seconds before on the porch after hours spent in the sun’s
makeshift furnace that is the farm, and now just a creak and a slam of a door beside him nearly sends him out of his skin.

Focus on another, focus on Keith, and so, with every nerve that will listen to his supplication, he tries.

Keith is a lazy man, Shiro observes, when it comes to lumbering up into his old man's truck, the one that has sat abandoned until the need arise to turn her engine, let the rust addled truck relearn a combustion of life though it may have been just a few hours since. The radio, older than the Evans’ wood fence built by the hands of ancestors gone, churns out a tune of Patsy Cline, her honey-smooth voice singing a bittersweet melody that seems to startle Keith into something akin to a man seeing the love of his life with someone else that brings a smile so endearing so their lips.

‘I fall to pieces each time I see you again.’

There's a flash of a worn farm hand, too young to be showing such wear yet still the callouses and roughness is all the same, scrambling to turn off the old country music station out of Selma—‘WGKH, the best old country station this side of the Alabama River!’

“Fuckin’— aw, hell, shut the hell up.”

Keith turns off the radio with a sneer, petulant and bitter, and that makes Shiro wonder a whole lot more than he was before about the love lives a certain sheriff and a certain farmer within a five mile radius of each other. There could be nothing there, and there could be plenty there, but Shiro knows that playing audience in an interactive affair is a tricky game to play.

Nothing to think about further, he guesses, as the truck pulls around in the grass to head out to the road.

The truck creaks with every bump along the dirt drive before pulling onto smoother paved asphalt of the road, Keith saying something about the struts being worn out from years of abuse. It’s going to be one hell of a ride, he concurs, one that will be filled with brooding silence after their personal talk.

It's in fact the complete opposite.

"Since you ain't from these parts, I guess I should do the hospitable thing and warn you. See, there are two religions in Alabama: Christianity and College Football.”

For the minutes spent turning down roads and speeding through shortcuts, Keith takes all of his time to educate to Shiro on the ways of the Alabamian essentials. Firstly, there is God, Lord of All, He who gave His only Begotten Son, Savior for these dumb ass sinners that can’t quit sinning to save their lives. These same sinners are the conglomeration of black-souled sheep that bemoan the ills of life and beg God for salvation while sitting in the hard pews of the sanctuary for the weekly hour of preaching. Their hands will shake, their voices will tremble, and the choir will herald the Lord, God Almighty in the highest, in spite of the dispiriting state of society they all witness outside the doors of the church.

Keith is among the flock on Sunday mornings, sitting along a back pew while the pastor preaches a sermon from the Lord's word to the congregation of Saint Michael's Church. Saint Michael’s is a good church if there is any salt to weigh on Keith’s words, and Pastor Coran is one out of a million, a true God-guided man of faith that wandered into town, much like Shiro did, but on the happenstance that his belief would steer him like a ship on the choppy seas to where he belonged. He walks the path as a righteous sheep with God as his Shepherd.
But, in the land of cotton, there is yet another god that may be even more of a tumultuous presence than the aforementioned.

This god is one of pigskins and fight songs, one of rivals so strong that the Iron Bowl is as close to a state holiday as possible where the amicable celebration of Thanksgiving falls apart in the blaring stand off of Auburn versus Alabama just a day or so after holding hands to say grace.

The religion of football is evident by the decals of tigers and elephants on the back of cars, the flags of college emblems and mascots proudly waving from the porches. For the season there is a tension in the air of houses divided, and has even been the cause of divorce papers being filed at the circuit court just because the marriage is broken over the overly-done celebratory dance of a Hail Mary that connected for the clincher of a touchdown. Yes, football is a wildfire creed that stands above all, ‘War Eagles’ and ‘Roll Tides' yelled from living rooms and stands of Jordan-Hare and Bryant-Denny while faith to the Cross is presented more humbly by Jesus fish and the spookily placed signs of ‘repentance’ on the sides of lonely dirt roads.

Unfortunately— or fortunately as Shiro is mightily concerned by the passion of a means of near brutal entertainment that Keith has for college football— the glorified months of fall and winter for the sport is not in season, so the good God of the Bible comes first, and baseball second (and basketball is just some frivolous undertaking in-between the two for the students to keep fit).

For all the winded spiels of how football is the truly superior force that puts the South far above the rest— "there is an 'A' in 'Dynasty' for a damn good reason”— baseball is a local enjoyment since almost every able bodied kid is out there running bases and catching fly balls while their parents cheer and argue from the bleachers. Matt Holt is surely one of those kids with his family in the crowds, practicing on his slides and his catches, but now Shiro recalls that he doesn’t even know what position the kid plays. At least he can confirm sooner rather than later, though with the crowd of cars, he’s wondering if there will even be a seat to be found.

It seems like the whole town has shown up, every ounce of parking taken up with many trucks and SUVs finding spots on the lawns of the school so that the people of Gilman can have a bit of entertainment in their lives with their false god while football lies dormant. Having never seen the school, it is hard to decipher the integrity of the building of academia that is now shaded with sunset hues, but hopefully the determination stands true that the schoolhouse is taken straight out of the Eighties with it’s bricks and cinder blocks standing the test of the decades due to poor funding or lack of demand.

At least the damned headache is gone, thanks to Mrs. Holt with her sixth sense of thinking ahead by ensuring that her guest would find the Aleve and meal waiting for him. He’ll have thank her, hug her for all the effort she has put in for him, but as his last meal was hours ago, his stomach makes a whine of hunger that gurgles so violently, it vibrates in his lower chest.

Keith barely has time to run the truck tires over the curb to park between two other vehicles before he’s doubled over, slamming his foot down on the brake to stop.

The son of a bitch is laughing hard, that dastardly noise having brought tears to Keith's eyes while he guffaws in the driver’s seat of the truck. His shoulders freely shaking with the force, and it is so reminiscent of the other men Shiro has met that he is beginning to liken the sound Christmas when it's a hundred and one degrees outside, sweet like marmalade yet hot like sun tea brewing on the back porch.

"Oh, man, that’s funny as hell, shit… but, hey, want some boiled peanuts? It’s on me."

Mentally adding boiled peanuts to crazy shit he's heard since rambling into town, Shiro hops out,
gritting his teeth as the hinges of the door shriek. He deserves some damn boiled peanuts, whatever they may be like.

Admission is cheap, and a price that Shiro has the cash for though a playful bitterness rises like bile that he should let Keith pay. However, to hear such carefree laughter has to be good for the soul, and he isn’t as offended as he could have been, so he lets it go while Keith leads them to the concession stand to stand in a long line of parents and family waiting for a cool drink and warm food.

The overhead lights click on, and Shiro can see the players out on the field warming up. Squinting, he tries to slip up on to the balls of his feet to see around the people crowded around the fence while they wait for the game to begin in attempts to find Matt.

“Shiro?”

Honestly, that his name has been called for takes him for a tailspin, but the voice is a kinder tone of something fond and familiar, so he turns towards it, letting his gaze slip away from the field to find Pidge standing behind him. He’s pleasantly touched by how wide her grin is, how her eyes shine with such elatedness to see him that it is almost—almost—like walking into his old home and seeing his twin sisters waiting for him to hear all of his adventures throughout his walk through life.

His heart nearly lurches from his chest at just how the same it is.

"You made it! Mama and I were gettin' worried when daddy said you weren’t at the house!" And her elation is contagious, like he’s just plucked a constellation of stars just for her to keep close in the cusp of her hands. The glows of the gas giants would illuminate her fingers and her smile, making him feel like he’s made up for his absence when they had no way to find him. For all the Holts could have guessed, Shiro was in a ditch somewhere, naked as the day he was born and mangled up like a crumpled piece of litter.

Her concerns spark into mind that this is a good reminder all surrounding Shiro’s avoidance of his cell phone, still tucked away in his luggage, or at least obtaining a new plan if he truly feels so compelled to cut ties with his own blood to forge a mockery of peace through these measures of extreme silence. Just from tonight, he would hate himself a little more if he worries this little family that gave him so much to a point farther than they were today.

The near car wreck over the shadow in the window of the house from his first night cannot be applied as that could, in no way, shape, or form, be his fault.

"Oh, wait," Pidge raises a finger before turning and waving to a trio of high schoolers that would fit in perfectly with the science club, all big rimmed glasses and oxford shoes, all stereotypical fare of the ‘nerds’ of school other than a certain curly-haired boy’s dusty overalls and another’s cutesy that is so accurately color-coordinated, it’s strange.

The teenagers that Shiro presumes are Pidge’s friends all wave back emphatically, as though having aided in her quest to find the mysterious black-clad man that the whole student body might have heard of at this point as been a success, so they are bidding Pidge away with the prospect of seeing her Monday. They scatter then, all sight of the trio lost as they scuttle into the webs of crowds to never be seen again, or at until the bell rings next week for first period.

Pidge apparently has math with them.

In the corner of his eye, Keith himself is nodding to a few people that he may have graduated with,
the few alumni that stayed within the district as the allure of city life did not appeal to them so they kept their roots firmly bound so that they would never slither away.

Before being sent overseas to a garish reality that would upheave all of his prior preferences, Shiro loved a metropolis, and the bigger the better teeming with all the colors and all the walks of life all to be found in the office buildings and high rise apartments that all establish the skylines that he is fond of seeing. After coming home to Seattle, for all he cared, the buildings could disintegrate, could all fade into the granules of sand to be swept away by the hot winds of a world on fire.

What Shiro is discovering is in deference to his own experiences, small town life is a grand lifestyle all its own, but with its own set of problems.

“Haven’t heard from your dad, huh? Quite a shame.”

“Can’t believe a good man would do all that. Your mama dying did him in.”

Keith is a saint, one more akin to the flames of wings of God’s Most Righteous angel, but a saint nonetheless, stepping up to a pyre for slander as the two or three he’s speaking to shake their heads at the sham of a family Keith has been reared from. For his showings of a quick-crack temper, he stands there and takes it, all the two-faced worries that come from just half-assed cordiality that stems for wanting to know the dregs of dramatic gossip rather than the worries of how a young man is taking his father being gone.

But, Keith gets his quip in, and the signal to see that it’s growing, pulsating under his skin to stiffen his spine, “my dad was a damn greedy man, too.”

The little family of people Keith has surely known all his life, has seen in the school corridors, in the diner, and in the grocery store, minding his own business while they whispered to each other the odes of his pity, stop in their tracks with the hiss of repute for his paternal figure, eyes widening because how dare this son of such a good man know better than the rest. Though, if a good man Mr. Evans were, Shiro is sure that he would have been in the folds of farm work next to his son throughout the day, back breaking under their shirts and hands aching in their gloves.

Shiro has a bit of pride in that because his friend, and dare he say that they have bonded and wrought a friendship over their first day of labor together, isn’t bending over and allowing the words and opinions of others to stampede over him to leave him a crushed when there is strength to be found in the negatives of life.

While he watches, Shiro feels a touch along his hand, and then a palm cupping against his own, a motion of locking hands before his gray orbs divert down next to him. Pidge watches him, her hazels such an owlish, wise color that reflect back an ageless calculation of numerals and of theories. For someone so young, just barely on the cusp of adulthood, she feels old then while they stare at each other.

“A lot of people don’t know the whole story,” she mutters, and he can’t help but squeeze her hand in understanding because there is always more facets to discover, chapters undisclosed for the stories that each person writes with every breath, with every footfall. Keith’s own is fraught with the issues of abandonment, just as Pidge and everyone else in the area keeps on their own.

Any conversation thereafter is brief, the young family moving along with awkward shuffles to leave Keith alone with the fragmented stories that needs to stay locked away. The younger man is tense, the ambiance exuding from his less than malleable, while his arms cross over his chest to protect his heart from the verbal lacerations that would bleed him dry of all that he is.
There is only so much a man can give, so much a man can explain to those that have not seen the scenes as he has with his own two eyes.

Pidge perks up, still where she is at Shiro’s side, “can I cut in line with you?” There is a timidity to her tone that does not behold her usual character while she keeps their hands in place in some temporary form of security. Shiro begs silently after the realization smacks him across the back of the bead that their hand holding has not rustled up the talks of how they both must look, this obviously grown man with a teenage girl, Mr. Holt’s daughter at that.

With a bile of spite that he has to swallow down so he isn’t forced to spit it out, he grimaces with a lock of his jaw, not even inching away from Pidge where they stand. Let those gossiping hens, if any exist, conjure their own twisted scandals and be damned with them, for as long as the Holts know that he wouldn’t dare hurt Pidge or seduce her into affairs salacious, any other opinion can go fuck itself.

“I don’t see why you can’t, Little Trouble,” he grins down at her, drawing a little smile from her as Keith steps up to the concession counter to order their baseball viewing food.

—

Boiled peanuts aren’t what he imagined.

Pidge is fairly assertive with Keith that while peanut butter is the best use of peanuts, boiled peanuts are only second to that with roasted peanuts being too dry to deal with. Keith, bless him, ordered three cups of the salty meal along with water, shelling out the cash before the youngest of their group can offer him the cash Mrs. Holt had given her.

“Payback for the years your dad put up with me hating his science classes,” Keith shrugged after telling her to put the five dollars back in her pocket, “since I’m the one who nearly blew up the lab for not giving a shit.”

“Daddy still talks about that,” she laughs, having only let go of Shiro’s hand so that he can carry their styrofoam cups filled to the brim with boiled peanuts, giving him the full scent of the boiled peanuts that he just has to try.

Personally, Shiro attributes the tingling smell to what must be the daily equivalent of the average sodium intake in one peanut because the saltiness reeks from the brine.

While Keith and Pidge chat away about how Keith nearly blew away half of the school due to negligence of a teenage mind, Shiro is led up the bleachers to where Samuel and Colleen sit. They must have acquired their own food earlier with how Mr. Holt avidly chomps down on a hot dog and his wife takes a few fries for herself. They’re just adorable, really, teasing each other and swiping a bite from the other to pretend to take for themselves before feeding their spouse.

Pidge might think it is a display of ‘grossness,’ that overbearing affection that parents act out around their offspring to make the situation all that more embarrassing and intolerable, but Shiro… Shiro feels his heart clench, feels the sad twitch of capillaries that just don’t fulfill a beat due to the melancholy that overwhelms him. The saltiness of the peanuts and the chill of the bottled water soon grow numb just as the chatters of the crowd that has come to watch teenagers hitting fly balls draw into flurry of random syllables that make not one sense. He’s hearing the speaking of tongues while he himself is displaced, half of himself walking towards the doting spouses while the rest of him stands at the porch of the house on Oak.

The oak trees loom silent as ever as his not hand reaches for the doorknob—.
“Well, by God, there he is!” Sam exclaims, and he’s so thrilled to see Shiro along with his daughter that he nearly spits the boiled remnants of animal byproducts at the head of the couple sitting below him. At Colleen’s titillating wave, he is jerked back together, all Shiro as a whole again though he longs to open the door and press himself inside in hopes that there is a grinning young man waiting for him.

“Been hopin’ you’d show that face of yours back around— Judge King said he hasn’t seen you all day!” Colleen speaks with a fashion so tenderly frenzied that Shiro can’t help but melt, a goofy smile slapping itself on his mouth as Keith takes the seat right behind them to shuffle into a sole seat.

Sheepish, he is fully aware that he is being chided for his absence and lack of explanation for such, but there’s a pleasant voice behind him, one with a flavor of pride while chewing around the shell of a peanut, “he’s been out helpin’ me rein in all them dumb cows.”

A sound of understanding, as though clarity rings in a glass clear. Mr. Holt hums and nods, chewing on his next morsel of ballpark frank while there’s a twinkle in his eye that panders to a mischief that is evident in this older man.

“Makin’ friends, my boy, is what keeps the soul young.”

Shiro wonders if there’s any grace to the cause until Pidge settles in beside Shiro with a giddiness that’s just transparent as her father’s humor as the principal of Gilman High, a short portly man with a smile more akin to a Cheshire Cat but without the conflagration of what’s up and what’s down and all mimsy were the borogroves, Alice, steps forward onto the pitching mound.

It’s all pomp and circumstance once one Mr. Arus begins to welcome the congregation of locals and visitors to the game, indicating that the concession stand has all the treats and quick eats that could satisfy any appetite before announcing a few school associated affairs such as graduation and final report cards. The husky man in his simple attire of white polo emblazoned with the Gilman Lions logo and khakis isn’t what Shiro would imagine as a principal here, but he lauds the respect of the students and the parents, well, that’s good enough.

The most curious moment, though, before calling the player line up for both teams, is that there walks onto the field a man with orange hair that is akin to freshly squeezed carrot juice (Shiro admits he needs to get out and grow up more when he’s trying to hide a smile at how vibrantly orange that hair and then mustache is), but then his smile falls once the newcomer’s attention comes full circle.

Those eyes hold something ancient in them, something that was once buried in the sands of old Babylon only to be dug up and pulled from its bronzed ark to be used for this man’s irises, to be displayed upon the world of sinners a wisdom that only the One on High could ever, ever gift to those chosen. By far, though, those eyes hold nothing that is facetious or fallacious, but rather cusp the unfaltering and firm, like Jesus offering his hand to a wary disciple in the churning seas.

A touch along his shoulder, and Keith’s voice, soft and informative, hisses in his ear when it must be evident the awe of confusion on Shiro’s countenance.

“That’s Pastor Coran.”

It’s all a blur for a minute, like the tribulations of world, with all the violence and all the pain that could ever be found in mortal life, stills for a moment, just that infinitesimal moment, to pause as Mr. Arus offers the microphone to the pastor so that prayer may be said.
Religion is a card, Shiro has always figured, one that is played over and over in the poker game that is affairs of life. It can either make or break a hand, bring all the spoils of winnings over to the side or lose them forever. It’s a precarious perch, rickety and falsely fabricated for so many that he’s never allotted any deity the time to discover his own spiritual needs. This isn’t the time or place to start shoveling away the mud to find a treasure box of religious aspects that would grant him peace of salvation, but when Pastor Coran asks for everyone to bow their heads, well— Shiro bows to pray, too.

The prayer is short, briefly exposing the ears of those that listen in to the holiness of Grace and Protection with such profoundness that the outsider of town feels like he’s listened to a two-hour sermon full of the Gospel to brush away the cobwebs of empty sins to let the sunshine of Providence in.

Then, it’s suddenly time to play ball, and while God is surely not forgotten, He certainly isn’t stepping onto the pitcher’s mound in place of the principal and the pastor either.

Once the game starts, Shiro admits that he knows very minute details of the game of baseball. From the years of being around athletes and catching snippets of games while his father flips channels, all he seems to know is that there is a pitcher that throws a ball and the ball is either a hit or miss with three strikes being an out and getting a bruise from the force of the pitcher’s throw is an instant walk to first base. If struck out, the batter must lay down his burden and head back into the dugout so that another warrior with his own dulled bat can take a shot in heralding victory for the team.

It’s a drudging pastime, really, having to wait for the signals cast between the pitcher and the catcher, for the pitcher to wind up after their secret language of fingers and palms meets the eyes of their teammate to smack together a strategy that will prohibit a good hit. It takes time even for the batter to settle down for the golden chance at the throw, regardless of a curve or fast ball that might be heading at blinding speeds towards the plate.

Honestly, at this time, it’s more fun to hear Mrs. Holt yell at the umpire than deal with how long the opposing team’s players take.

While he has patience to wear, there is a tick of a twitch along his temple when he grumbles at what Colleen Holt bitterly regales is a ‘joke of a call.’ With all her frustrated stomping and aggravated groaning, Shiro cannot help but chuckle at her, at how between the two Holt parents, the wife is the most aggressive sports fan.

"You should see her during football. Everyone takes everything more personal during football season, especially my Colleen.”

Shiro can believe Sam’s words after his knock down drag out of truck side education he received maybe an hour before as Keith is more annoyed sucks of teeth and whispers of curses rather than that boisterous yelling that he led Shiro to believe is customary when there is a good game going.

Matt, dear Matt, once he jogs out onto the field, he makes even more of mark on Shiro than ever thought before as he goes right to the pitcher’s mound before shielding his eyes and gaze out amongst the crowd. Sam grins, elbowing Shiro as Pidge stands to holler and to wave her arms, “he’s here! Big Trouble’s here!”

Matt’s grin is a megawatt sight that outshines the lights of the field, and his heart clenches at how happy and at how proud this young man is when he waves over to his family and to Shiro before cupping his hand to his mouth to promise them as loud as he can: “watch me strike ‘em out, pronto!”
It’s a flurry from there, a sickening beast of a juggernaut that’s been pulled out of the basements and dismal corridors of the Gilman academia to suddenly wipe up the mess that his team left before when it was their time to bat.

Matt Holt, quiet and polite Matt Holt who dislikes the English Classics with a passion and has the dorkiest glasses on earth, is a bonafide monster.

Mercy is a concept that is only imparted to those that are deserving, and not those that are merely a body count that act as gatekeeper to Matt Holt achieving access to the gloried valley of Championships. His fastballs are a wicked trip, Shiro blinking once and losing sight of the ball before Matt’s back has unhinged to stand straight and he’s nearly flabbergasted that he keeps throwing strikes, but those curveballs are just downright evil. It’s nearly despicable with how much force and curve Matt give the ball when he goes, not taking more than a few seconds to analyze the batter’s stance before rallying harm in an overhead throw that might start shattering and bending bats at this rate.

Colleen Holt is beside herself, standing up and clapping hard along with the others in the crowd that are getting their thrill of high school baseball fanaticism that whoop and raise their fist into the air along with her. Shiro merely claps, yelling a ‘good job’ or ‘good throw’ whenever he deems fit, making Matt’s pitches even deadlier. If the man didn’t know any better, he would safely assume that the want-to-be baseball prodigy might be showing off.

Pidge confirms that with a nudge along his side, eyes glinting with a mischief that mirrors her father’s as he claps and cheers at the third out, “he’s been working extra hard at practice to make sure you see them win this game.”

Maybe it’s that empathetic older sibling reasoning that sparks that little tinge of warmth along the heartstrings, and maybe it’s that feeling that he is something special to this family even more so than they have made practical, but then it hits him, drains him of all those doubts and those worries that plagued him like storm clouds full of flooding rains and crackling lightning.

This is what being at home is like.

The game suddenly rolls from a snail’s pace to a rabbit’s, the Gilman team overzealous with how their pitcher does not allow one iota of an error in all of his ways. The batting is starting to achieve a further level of athletic success, Gilman boys hitting balls around to finally put the bases loaded towards the bottom of eighth inning.

Matt is up to bat again for that night, lazily swinging the bat about to warm up the muscles of his arms before his face hardens, and his knees bend while the bat steadies in wait for the ball despite a mother’s ever encouraging hollers.

“Hit it, baby! Hit it a ‘fur piece!” and to give Mrs. Holt a tip of the cap, the pitcher of the other team, worn out from bad pitches and bitter sportsmanship, underestimates Matt for only a half a second with a throw.

There's a resounding crack from the batter mound, a rush of rushing cheers and glorious stamping of feet in the stands among Shiro, but he’s up with them, too, yelling at the top of his lungs while they burn and burn. Matt Holt is gone, racing as hard as he can towards first base while the others on base run into home-- Shiro briefly glances out, and that poor ball is going, going, too dark to see as it flies to the fields for a home run.

The swell of pride that escalates into a hubris that is as shiny and as deafening despite the shuddering of nerves from such a sudden echo of sound soon whelms over the nervous ticks to heat
him over with the lukewarm afterglow of victory cinched. Still, he calms himself with an inhale, stationing his senses into the there and then; there are no enemies in civilian clothing, no innocent citizens of a country that is not his own there to become collateral damage-- no, he is in small town, US of A and the man beside him, one Mr. Samuel Holt, may have a heart attack from his excitement in his rambunctious endeavors to out-celebrate his wife.

Mr. Holt sways his hands after jumping out of his seat, yelling with an effort that should be applauded, "run home, son, run on home!" Colleen, ever the graceful of the two of them, has maybe let a few choice curse words slip from the chambers of her well-composed mannerisms while dancing, her hips shaking back and forth while her fists pump over and over into a hot air abuzz with the gate to the Championships now hanging broken and haggard after Matt broke the lock with the blunt force of a bat swing.

"... She's over at the dugout again."

It's so ebulliently cheerful amongst the home team crowd that Shiro barely registers the words, glancing down to his other side where Pidge stands there contrite, her limbs stiff after crossing her arms and tilting her gaze to glare away from the where her brother has surely won the game with his fellow teammates. Her tone shocks his systems, surreptitious in a surly way, but in the same breath, as Shiro watches her, he realizes that her eyes hold a bitterness that is dipped in longing that is seen in the looks that teenagers give when they realize love is a fickle matter, and it’s all cracked up as the fairytales of old would lead a fanciful child to naively believe.

To play a bit of detective, Shiro follows her gaze to see what ties her sight away from her brother's rousing MVP play of the night, finding a beautiful young blonde with clothes surely not entirely following the school dress code for a school event even if the heat still lingers well after the sun has set, leaning over the fence to blow kisses to what appears to one of the players on the Gilman High team.

The boy is lanky, but full of himself in a way that probably is at least half true, not really the running or the hitting type when it comes to the anatomical use of his body, but more than type that observes and then strategizes, using the weaknesses of his enemies against them to put himself on top. Smarmy is a damn good word for the kid, and Shiro assumes that he’s more enthralled with the dipping cleavage of the blonde admirer than the game that he as no aspirations for the sport after high school.

But, the truth of the matter is that if he noted that Pidge was glaring daggers dipped in arsenic towards the girl, it wouldn’t really line up with all the respect she holds herself with, but no, he sees it plain as day, that the longing in those hazel eyes stems from the heartbeats the clatter at the sight of the girl rather than the suave presumptuous fast talker.

God, how awful must it be, because skin and heritage are two sides of a coin, but sexuality is another, a warped, vague subject that would surely be broached in small town Southern homes with the most timid of toeing if at all. The Holts have not said one ill word towards anyone until Shiro mentioned he bought the McClain house, and even then, it was entirely from the conscious knowledge of what events may have unfurled in the house where the oaks watch. This, though, creates a varying set of circumstances with all its own burden for this bright girl where the risk of being ostracized for the sin of love for another is all too real.

He is not sure what drove Pidge to mention this out loud in his presence, but there is a tiny voice that glows with appreciation that she feels comfortable with him to speak into words might be the ruining of what reputation she has by association. It draws his hand to touch her shoulder through her baggy t-shirt as he sighs in sympathy.
“Seeing someone you want to talk to, Pidge?”

She frowns deeply at his question, souring entirely before glancing up at him with a shake of her head, “doesn’t matter if I wanna talk ‘cause she doesn’t wanna talk to me.”

Ah. Friends once? A crush from afar?

The scene trembles itself into silence, Shiro pointedly glaring at the piece of shit teenage boy that rolls his shoulders like he is not poor as a racer, barely having more muscle than Shiro has sanity. The lack of investment in a game that would take the school to State Championships grinds along his nerves like sandpaper on gnarled wood, and he knows if he—or even Mrs. Holt—were coach, the kid would be running laps until the bell rang for homeroom on Monday.

The rest of the game is a no brainer, Matt's four points shooting Gilman far ahead too little, too late for the visiting team, and only God Himself would have to grace the field with His mercy to beset a miracle that would surely win the souls of every player there. That is, if God has more wrath than Matt Holt, a hawk-like beast that stands next to his coach as though he were team captain, battle ready for the poor bastard that pries the win away from his steel grip. His uniform is his armor and his bat his sword, no shield to be found other than the bodies in the dugout because he needs no protection other than the corpse and his own skin.

“… Her name is Nyma, just so you know.”

Shiro perks up when he hears Keith at his ear, a hand cupped close to barricade their talk from the noises that refuse to cease from the home team crowd while explaining nonchalantly, “and the boy pissin' in the wind is Rolo, and yeah buddy, he has always been like that.”

Names to faces and faces to names aside, this is all very interesting, yes, but there stands a lack of the joining, that number one issue that clouds the eyes of a girl that intends to outsmart every dumb shit around. Keith can barely get the next bit out before Shiro notices Sam is also observing the two love birds more enamored with lust and not really meant-to-be’s than the bottom of the ninth.

Where Pidge yearns with a fractured heart, Sam is damn cold, his usual fortitude of exclaiming acceptance and humor coupled with an out-of-tune song gone like Matt's homerun ball. It is probably best to assume that any diversion from the game on behalf of Mrs. Holt would reach finality at reach of her rage, so Sam and Pidge stew away while Colleen (and at times Shiro himself), badger the other players to further rub coarse salt into that never healing wound of a loss irrevocably profound.

The last inning, the last few plays are not at the nail biters that they could be, but honestly, Shiro has had enough excitement for his day with the aches from farm work and headaches from shadow girls, so the relief of the tension of whether or not this game would balance back and forth on tiny fractals of lucky chance is welcomed.

However, the last ball is such a flimsy of a fluke when Rolo, smarmy shit extraordinaire, sauntered up to bat after winking to Nyma in a matter of lustful cheesiness that it nearly makes the bile churn in his gut. Shiro's teeth grind, jaw locked as he desires to walk right down and pop the carelessness out of the kid with his hand because, God, can’t this high schooler have just a lick of respect?

Casually pop the carelessness out, after all. Hitting possible minors might not win any friends outside of his small, thrown together social circle, and right now, he needs to not start any falsehoods that might lurk their way on spindly gossiping wings to the Judge.

Regardless of his own— and several others— inhibitions with the lack of sportsman focus, the
game ends with a bare swing and easy catch, the umpire calling Rolo out, and what follows is an
uproar that is deafening in satisfaction, bombastic and excitable that the long battle has come to a
lacking close, but a good one all the same. Colleen is a frenzied jumble of words and waves, tears
running as she sobs with her excitement with the bobs of hops on her toes: “my baby is going to
Montgomery!”

The elation causes an ethereal floating that sets him on Cloud Nine, leaves him there along cotton
fields of cumuliform to watch the rowdy boys of victory pile together in congratulations for a job
well done, and he’s so, so proud of them, of Matt, everyone is so proud of—.

_Boom. Pop._

There’s a sudden _snap_ and a whistle, a flight of ember trailing through the night before the world
shoots to Hell in back in a flash of ruby, emerald, and gold.

Every thing is bright, and nothing makes sense, all of his composure and his defenses draining so
abnormally fast that he shakes, shakes with the tremors of his helplessness as there is naught a
reprieve from his overloaded synapses.

There is a crackling sizzle over the buzz, a combustion of oxygen burns in a blaze of blinding
luminance. He is lost, kept still with a silent scream as the grit of desert scrapes at his cheek, works
into the gaping wound of the stub of his arm to grate over splayed nerves that pulsate with the loss
of the rest of the whole. He’s dying again, ruddy stains along the sand and body parts scattered, a
scene he has played over and over again in devastating desperation that the deeds he has committed
did not deem him to live while others did not.

It's stagnant, endless, pointless in its multitude of fathomless pounds of his heart and his head,
won't stop, won't let him rest and there's Iverson _laughing_ his last death sentence.

And he laughs and he laughs until its no longer decipherable, and is it Iverson or the bells, a
resounding echo of banging that rolls through a cloud of dust and shrapnel to spread through the
hills like a veil of plague come to smite the nonbelievers of their frivolous celebrations wrought
from their sinful natures.

He screams, screams, begs whatever entity of higher sentience that might give a poor sinning man
an ear that they crush his throat now, stop the breath that will not leave, will not escape, and the
world is so damn _white_, snow white in the worst of ways.

And, then, black yet again.

—

He will come to in the seat of the Holt’s car, will blink away the rubble of a bomb field from his
eyes as the crickets chirp a tune of forlorn and sympathy while eyes worry over his prone form. No
one says a word, Sam just tapping his shoulder with a ‘good to have you back, son.’ It’s painful, so
excruciating that he cannot clear the sawdust from his mouth so he can beg their forgiveness, to
plead for their worrying gazes to fade back into their kind and jovial demeanors. Now, he’d even
beg Pidge for her callous jealousy, but she’s next to him, holding his hand as the rest ease into a
quiet car to go home before Keith nods to Sam before heading to his truck.

(Shiro doesn’t realize that he’d been begging, didn’t have the cognition to yield his thoughts as he
whispered pleadingly for Lance, another person who is just as dead as his comrades, to come for
him, save him because it’s happened again. The only time he will hear of it is by a timid inquiry
from Pidge, sweet thing still holding his hand the whole car ride home to stabilize him, anchor him
in the now so he doesn't fly off back to war on death's decaying steed.

‘Who is Lance?’

Shiro lets himself drift back into the void where what can be found is a madness that only he understands.

—

thud. thud. thud.

Iverson is there.

Montgomery is ahead of them along with the rest of their engagement.

Iverson laughs, and it echoes in a steel trap that’s more bolts and steel that openness of blazing sun and sand dunes. Their packs are heavy, and the heat is like walking in the domain of the fiery pits of brimstone.

Iverson is talking, shaking his head, just one step a head.

Montgomery sets his boot down.

he follows the red scarves once more, shuffles just behind. no longer the heat, but rather the cold. snow instead of sand. cotton fields instead of dunes. frayed ends of red before everything falls, and shadows of corpses stand sightless into the barrel of a gun.

it is all pounding and red, the whiteness of memories that click, click forth with a lack of bullets while the thud, thud, thud drums in the distance and the shadows float along a depthless sky while ribs splinter and crunch down on his lungs.
Chapter 8

The noise from breakfast from prior mornings is absent when Shiro awakens, this time on the Holt couch instead of Matt’s bed.

There’s nothing, no radio, no sizzling of the day’s protein, no pouring of milk — nothing. There’s a solemnness to the silence, a tension that is more out of worry, not annoyance.

Maybe he finally wore them down.

His ‘crazy spells’ were bound to catch up with him, an instance that makes him grab the blanket that someone has so kindly lay over him, turn his knuckles white as the self-hatred bubbles and spills over the cauldron. A few days without a good episode had been near blinding to the actual issues, had blindfolded his careful sensibilities for the sake for cure all to be found here in the South. He’s broken, God, shattered and glued together in all the wrong ways, and he’s thoroughly embarrassed — no, humiliated — some of the few that he’s come to trust in such short time. They’re probably upstairs, not even roused from their trials that have left them exhausted as Shiro can only put the muddled consciousness of last night into sifters in order to reveal what happened after the first firework shot.

The clock ticks idly on, the tock deeper and more resonating within his cluster fuck of a brain before there’s the softest of shifts from the recliner, drawing him to find Sam Holt shuffling in his sleep with an afghan draped along his legs. To his shock, Shiro’s eyes trail down the bends of knees to find two Holt teenagers curled up in separate sleeping bags with Colleen eerily absent from the love seat where, presumably, her own quilt lays folded.

Then, a hand, gentle and warm, nothing else but the epitome of a maternal heart, touches along his cheek as one Mrs. Holt leans from behind the couch.

"Sleep a little longer, hun… sun doesn’t need us up just yet."

In the quiet grayish hues of dawn’s dreary light, he cannot bear to awaken them, stifling the tears that sting at his eyes as best as he can while Colleen gently pets through his hair and hums tunelessly as her family sleeps.

—

The flowers are gone.

Once he has stepped into the parlor of his house, the first since the incident he cannot attest any logic for, Shiro’s gaze, stormy and wary, fall to the table in hopes to find some answer. He is not sure what was to be expected after being come upon by a shadow he cannot describe outside of physical description, but perhaps just the hope that they would be there waiting for him to return just as Lance might would be jarred him into a fumbling mess of emotions.

Against all odds, the outsider still swears he can hear that lady… thing clear as a bell, a tingling of macabre funeral chimes that cloak the senses with the sheer sadness that comes with death everlasting. Help still rings, violent despite her whisper, so gone that she never even had to utter a breath.

Jealousy sweeps through him because his concern now is that she has taken the flowers, his gift to the blue-eyed sweetness that has literally taken Shiro over. They should be there, those flowers he picked with his bare hands should be right there.
But, truth stands firm and noticeable with the bareness of the table, and his heart cords flutter with a stringing thumb that maybe, just maybe, not her, but Lance accepted his gift. Wouldn’t it be just the grandest of sights, to see Lance bringing the petals to his nose, a smile so endearing on his face? Would he draw a vase or a jaw from the cupboard and fill the glass with cool water, drip the stems in so that Shiro’s offering of affection might thrive a bit longer?

His thoughts, addled by the warmest of adorations that a man could possess, falls with a muted thud on the floor as Colleen comes in first behind him, bucket of rags and cleaner in hand. Her eyes assess the damage time and others have wrought upon the house as she hums at the not too bad disaster zone, but still a good day’s work ahead. "We have a lot of work to do, hun."

"I know," is all he can manage to mumble in response, his sight more concerned with the loss of the bouquet rather than the dirtiness of the debris about them. Her hand touches his shoulder, fingers squeezing while there’s a glimmer of refraction from her wedding ring, lighting up his eyes just like her smile.

"We’re gonna earn that good heart attack food tonight, hun."

Pidge and Matt shuffle in with tired grunts with a half-mast Mr. Holt in tow, and the cleaning commences from there, but within a few minutes, Shiro already wanders about, still pondering about the whereabouts of those pretty flowers for a pretty boy.

There’s no indication in the parlor, nothing on the stairs or down the halls. He’s frowning by the time he starts to the dining area and the kitchen—.

And, there before him, there’s a mottling of off white that catches him.

He finally finds the withered flowers— strange, he plucked them just yesterday— in the kitchen on the window sill that looks out onto the backyard, placed delicately as though they are now an offering to him. The feeling of chill along his back, like a million eyes are set upon his form creeps up his spine joint by joint until he is in front of the double sink to see a disarray of once garden beds and a shed.

Shiro stares out the window, time no longer retaining its structural integrity in his life as he watches, waits for the sure sight of some instance occurring outside at the shed.

Shiro? Shiro, hun?

Is someone calling his name? Theres static now, radio waves on AM stations crackling and furing in his ears as he realizes in a blink of an eye that he is standing before the shed door with no way of recalling how he got there

He should look inside. He wants to look inside.

And, it’s there, right there, the rusted lock on the shed is unlatched, a sign that someone has left the way inside unhindered. All that needs to be done is slip the loop out of the hook and just peek inside at what is probably nothing more than old gardening tools and boxes of items to be thrown away.

The door creaks open an inch, just so to frazzle his nerves that silently and shrilly buzz, and despite the rising heat of the morning licking along his neck, something ice-like freezes his soul. Something akin to survivalist nature, that fight or hide syndrome that all humans possess rears its head loudly while he battles with his own common sense.

Do not look in. Do not do it. Help, help, but do not look.
He watches his fingers curl along the short of the door, uncaring of the splinters that will dig into his skin, tear into him to stay, stay, longer than he intends and longer than the house will stand. He has to know what is lying behind the shed door, he has to—.

Everything falls silent.

It’s her.

She’s there, lifelessly rigid, blue eyes dulled as her mouth is slack with a silent scream. She is dead, he knows she is, her knees bent in a position he has seen in poorly run sex education classes to frighten girls from their own sexuality, and provide vigor for boys. Her thighs, her once white frolicking dress, they are drenched red with the blood of giving life with her own snuffed out far before her time, some kind of disgusting dark metaphor that would have more meaning upon him if he were not more like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming collision.

Movement is no longer a fathomable, no longer within his realm of construct; here she is, and now he knows, with the heaviest and burdening revelations, what has happened and what has made itself known to him.

She is dead, and the baby he dreamt of long ago is gone from the mother that maybe never held it.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit, the multitude of the shittiness of this is incomparable to anything he has ever experienced before, even with his missing arm and his trauma. This knowledge, this horrific venture into the shed, makes a bomb going off so much less because at least he did not die giving birth in a shed, did not die hiding such as she did herself and the baby away from prying eyes of judgment. No, he did not die like this, possibly alone and scared, in such an agonizingly vulnerable way.

A shift, and a long sigh.

She is before him.

Breath is lost, her eyes, a dusty, lonely, and flat blue boring into his own. Now, with the abruptness of her presence now a hairline away, they are so close now, so damn close that their skin—or lack thereof—nearly touch. She is there, not an utter of a word, but a coldness that she surely did not carry in her warm life.

The truth is a cut of a knife, a dull blade along his skin that threatens to break, to force the platelets to congeal and form a scab: he cannot help her.

He cannot hear it until he has rushed out, nearly breaking the door when slammed it in her face with the force of man running from certain death, but he’s screaming, and it’s so loud and so vibrating that the bees swarm his lungs and sting sting sting. His breath, still missing from his lungs, will not return in spite of his trying to engulf the humid air, while his fingers fist into his hair and it’s a sorrowful cry mixed with the obvious dismissal of what he cannot do.

"Son of a bitch—!"

All at once hands are upon him, two shadows speaking in tongues though it’s perfectly sound English though it’s all foreign jargon to him while in the distance of his ringing ears there’s another slam of the door. Shiro writhes, trying to beat her off of him since she has followed him to perhaps finish what she could not sooner, but not her, he soon sees once the sky is blue above him, it is not her.

He does not know these shadows.
Surrounding him are two men clad some semblance of hunting attire, dark cotton browns and blacks clinging to the darks of their skins while their bows and a quiver of arrows hang from their backs. Shiro feels like he should know them, should have felt some familiarity towards them because he has seen many people in this town, maybe somewhere in the diner once before, but he cannot think.

She is still in that shed.

"... Judge was right, Ulaz."

There is a grunt, something akin to affirmation from the one man looming above him, his form tall and slender with a bulk of hunter’s life along his arms and shoulders. Ulaz’ eyes, an amber that’s a startling contract to the background of sky behind him, bore down on him while the weeds and grass prod across the sweat line of his back.

"He's spooked as fuck, Thace."

Thace's hands hold his shoulders down, his grip not firm with the intent of the malicious, but steady for the worrisome safety of all involved in the incident in passing.

Still, there words are ominous, troubling wrecking on his sentiments towards the King family that seemed to only have better judgment than to be imagined, but what was Judge King right about? Does he know about the girl? Allura does, though what she knows versus what her aunt has informed might not be relative to the voluminosity of the presence that might be dragging its nails down the wood, dragging more and more in bare attempts to be free from the imprisonment it has been cast in. But, all this streams of consciousness pivots to the worst of it all, because if there’s a clue of the girl, does this mean that someone, possibly, knows about his Lance?

... And, did King think he was so messed up in the head to put him in with the specters, though Shiro could never permit the regret of meeting blue eyes like bluebells, the same that dance with breezy mirth in the candlelight?

"Hey, boy, I know that look—you’re doing a damn shame to yourself by pickin’ the wrong fruit from the wrong tree."

Thace is kind, that is evident in the hardened demeanor that casts itself out to envelope the space around him, some kind of shield that presses out before concaving in. He can appreciate the words thought they’re a little more flamboyantly stated than most would say, but Southern colloquialism has a finesse that is just a breed all its own.

But, still.

"Y... you said that Judge King..." he can barely speak it out, can barely push himself up to think this hard because this betrayal, this treason of his trust and wellbeing would put him in a tailspin to crash in the fields of the pastures near.

Thank God for the stability of an older man, wise beyond his years when he’s already aged like wine, though his disposition is more like the moonshine in the makeshift kilns of the mountainsides. Thace holds shoulders a tad bit longer, eyes, a darker brown that is nearly black.

"It's a too long bedtime story that few wanna believe, son, but let me tell ya... you ain’t alone in this house," Thace rumbles low in his throat before eyeing the back door in case the Holts may have heard the commotion and bolted out after Shiro.

Ulaz sighs, shakes his head down at his partner, "we can’t be gossipin’ about the things that we
only half know."

With a sluggish unhinging of his knuckles, Thace loosens his grip and eases back to tip his head back up the man at his side, and they share a gaze that really does cause Shiro pause, much like David and Jonathan must have invoked from those eyes that witnessed them in the days of Old Israel, their own rhapsody singing poetically in their eyes.

There’s such an understanding without the clutter of spoken word that it creates a longing in Shiro's own heart, the yearning echoing his earlier thoughts of Lance coddling the bouquet close, sniffing at the scent of flowers brought to him by a man that fell at the sight of his picture behind broken glass. His cheeks would warm, a hint of sweet pea pink along the apples of such a resplendent face, and would he enjoy this, being the cynosure of one Takashi Shirogane?

From this encounter with Thace and Ulaz, hunters that keep to their own in the oaks, Shiro wants to know what this love is that transcends the literal and dances in the proverbial.

Thace turns back to Shiro, ceasing the wordless conversation that could have been nothing more than flourishing the lunar promises of a night alone to gruffly note, "well, ol’ judge didn’t mean you any harm, son, I can tell you that, but just… keep your eyes open and be careful on the trail."

Oh, there’s a trail now, some new pinpoint on the map of the grounds that he was not aware of in any case, and the news idles him down, makes him just want to flop right there in the stirrings of his frustration to nap in the sun.

(Maybe Lance will come one more.)

Thace and Ulaz share another poignant look before Ulaz hums, uncrossing his arms with a balancing of his weight on his feet, "it goes all the way to the river, boy, and the river is wide and deep."

Thace just nods in agreement from the harbinger of the river’s creed, standing fully with a click of his knees before offering Shiro a helping hand. Hesitant for the reasons he cannot account, Shiro takes the hand and is hoisted up. Everything trolleys along in a clatter of steel and coal before gazes between them, immersing the wisdom of their warnings in his head.

Be smart. Be wise. And by God, don’t go to the river is all permeated in their final gazes before Thace tips his hat, a cowboy one in fashion, and they’re walking back behind the shed towards the fence to open a rickety gate and head down a red clay trail.

The sight of the gate, iron wrought and suffering the oxidation that time brings to metal, just chimes in another reminder that Shiro really needs to learn to be more observant, and prolongs the thought that he really just wants to be inside, away from the shed where his first— and hopefully only— scare of the day occurred.

The door to the kitchen catches as he closes it, the wooden frame misaligned due to the foundation shifting over the past century. He sighs, starts to press his weight against it to shove the door back in.

"Shiro."

He gasps, ivory bones jarring in his skin while he spins so quickly to cause a smidgeon of a case of vertigo to see Colleen standing there, her features usually so welcoming, now shadowed with a crease of suspicion.

The air conflates together the skepticism and the wariness that Colleen holds in her joints and in
her gaze then, and it punctures his will of a defending helm, leaves him instead a child caught in
the act he did not have means to realize was a guilt-ridden sentence.

"... Do you know those men?"

Swallowing down the budding fretfulness over her loaded question, he shakes his head because, in
a sense, he doesn't. Yes, he has their names and their occupation (supposedly), their bonds to the
Judge in a vague confidential nature and to one another, but further, they are still mysterious
enshrouding an enigma with a milky shade of jade.

"I... they just came up when I shouted; something... jumped out at me, that’s all."

At his half-truth of admission, the suspicion woven along frown lines melts into concern, Colleen
stepping closer to check him over with a gentle hold on his chin to tilt his head side to side. "Tsk,
you look like you’ve seen a ghost, hun, you’re as white as a sheet! Did they say somethin’ to you?"

But, dear woman, he has seen a ghost, saw her with his own eyes the fate she endured, the
abhorrently silent tale of a lady in white that died in youth in childbirth. Were Thace and Ulaz
perhaps the same as she, wandering spirits passing through the trees that hold their graves?

Another headache is in the near future if he does all this thinking this morning.

Colleen sighs in self-reprimand, shaking her head at her own question like it’s a dutiful retort to her
own inquisition, "I’m being unfair... They aren’t bad men by any means, just tend to keep to
themselves. Don’t know their story, and figurin’ it ain’t any of my business, but if they hurt you,
sweetie—."

Shiro has to interject then, bottom lip in a pout since his name might be listed on a loony bin list for
sure, he is not so far gone he would allow two grown men with a caliber for chasing game get one
up on him, off his rocker from seeing a dead girl or not, "no, no, they were just looking me over
'cause I— I fell."

She is placated for now, but her uneasiness to his affairs effuses from her gaze, fingertips along his
jaw to then pat at his cheek.

"Oh hun," she draws out, her tone old like the house they stand in, lofty and chapped, "when are
you gonna start looking out after yourself right?"

With a solemn acceptance, she walks away then, leaving Shiro alone in the kitchen for longer than
he’d dare stay with all the commotion about the house with three helpers swiping away at tables
and frames filmy with dust. As he stands there, lonely in the room where his flowers sit sadly in
the window sill, he asks himself with desperation of a man half past gone mad if he should quit
while he is ahead for her betterment.

"Shiro! Shiro, you gotta come look at this!"

Thought is a fickle matter though, temporary unless in true solitude, and the pause is broken by a
pounding of sneakers on the floor of the parlor to the kitchen while shouts of rallying excitement
echo through. Pidge rounds the corner, breathless and grinning, "C’mere! You gotta see this!"

It doesn’t take much but a lean of her torso to grab his hand to jerk him along, her voice quivering
with fascination over something that soon seeps into him and has him smiling right along with her.

The rest of the group is found in the parlor, Matt bent over a cabinet that has been wiped clean by
their furious clean spree. The two teenagers are giddy, chuckling together as Pidge rejoins her
brother in his quest of discovery with some thingamabob that has stood unused in the house for years. Every nook and cranny must be checked, rechecked, before the kids—twins, just like his little sisters that would flutter about over their phones—turn around to present their ode to scientific endeavor through historic artifacts within Shiro’s new house.

"With scrutiny and utilization of the scientific method, we believe," Pidge offers with a push of her glasses up the bridge of her nose, "we have an old phonograph!"

Shiro looks away from Colleen and Sam, both who watch him with an air of nervousness over his sullen state, but smooth their darker thoughts because the two kids of the room are too damn thrilled to speak like a vacuum salesman ringing the doors of the homes where housewives would await for a deal and a catalog. Their titillation is infectious, and Shiro reacts with a grin before the twins turn their backs to face the phonograph once more.

"I had to google this real quick, buuuut," Matt takes a hold of the crank and twists it around, grunting lowly through his teeth as the rusted gears squealing in protests. Poor Matt works the crank with such strength and concern that his biceps strain and shift, but the phonograph winds up and the boy can let out a hoot of victory. His sister at his side bounces on her toes, egging him on with a mantra of ‘hurry, hurry, hurry’ while he slowly moves the needle down onto the record. There’s a screech, ear piercing, then a scratch and a scritch that has Shiro grinding his molars together just to stave off a headache while Colleen plugs her ears, her husband smiling at the two.

A warble croon whirls out with a few more tries, and soon there is the muffled symphony with the words that reels into the parlor.

"Dear, when you sigh, or when you cry—s-some—thing seems to grip this he-art of mine."

It’s a staple piece, for sure, something that would be an item of conversation for Shiro to allow guests to humor themselves over some mint juleps, or whatever the hell else he could do with it. He couldn’t bear to throw it out, not something that just needs a little grease and a little work to put it at its prime in spite of its age.

As the Holts stare and clap, there is a strange feeling of goosebumps along his skin and what almost feels like weightlessness settles onto his shoulder like a lover would their head while taking a stroll with their beloved in the park on some autumn night.

Then, Shiro hears it, and nearly falls over dead from the wave of epiphany that should have him tearing out the house for something he yearns for more than life itself.

"C-come to me, my mel—anchooly baby, cuddle up don’t b-be blue."

The popping sounds of the antique phonograph might bring humor and laughter to the Holts, cheers of getting a contraption that might seem an anachronism for them to operate when there’s gadgets and technology abundantly found at the Selma Walmart, but for Shiro, there is the drip of water fall into the hallowness of his heart and a chill of touch along the back of his left hand, starting from his shoulder before caressing down.
A gift… surely this is a gift, and what a charming one he has received in return, this present of Lance’s tune here now in his ears, though quality of music is lacking from the magnolia-light song that he craves. This record is not smooth and adoring, not that molten sweetness that hummed to him just a night ago, but love at first sight might be an imaginary ambition full if fraught, but if Lance...

As sure as rainfall along the Appalachian must surely bend and wear down the jagged lines of the valleys and hills to reach the sea, so too might Lance love a burned soul dipped in melancholy so that something more can be found for both of them.

"Smile, my honey dear while I brush away each tear— or else I sh-shall be melancholy, too."

—

"Are you sure, sweetie?"

The sun went to sleep an hour ago, and now Shiro stands in the parlor, dirty and musty and just ready to settle into the cot upstairs and sleep the rest of the weekend away.

It’s been an arduously labor of a day, one filled with Pidge and Matt switching out the records and keeping the gears wound on the phonograph while the family with Shiro in tow pulled out, dusted, swept, and boxed away the possessions of the McClains without peering too deeply into their business. Hell, he even managed to rush outside before the wavering end of the daylight to water the bluebells. Even with all their work, there is more to be found tomorrow and for however long Shiro might be assured on earth, but they can refuse that at least the parlor, kitchen, and most of the upper level have some sense of cleanliness.

He can live here for the time, at least, though there will need to be the addressing of appliances and other items for that ‘quality of life’ that would include at least a refrigerator so he isn’t eating Kentucky Fried Chicken or at the Holts every time the meal bell is ringed by his stomach.

Thankfully, the electricity seems to be leaning towards the side of reliable tonight, no flickering to be experienced yet, and running the faucets to clear the pipes provided proof that maybe the renovations of the King family might be resilient as a test of time.

"Kinda kooky timing," Sam mulled over as the bath water before them ran clear after a good three minutes of murkiness, fingers drawn over his chin as though perplexed, "I think the Judge had some stuff done pretty recent, but never got the gumption to sell 'til you.

"I wonder what he saw in you that’s so darn special, son."

No matter; the house is livable for now, though there’s the little projects that are starting to pile up in the corner of Shiro’s work list of a now homeowner. Daunting reality settles down along with the foundation cooling off and constricting, but he just kind of buzzes off a rising joy that comes with a first night alone.

After hours of thoughtless working, Shiro has more ecstatic wonderment now since the blisters of possible treason by the Kings have simmered down into light aches. There is still the question of what all is found within the books of family and town history with Shiro pointedly curious with their own sides of the story, but for tonight, he will ease the burden off his shoulders.
Where she, that thing, roams in the day, surely Lance roams at night. It will all be worth it. I will be worth it.

The deluded sinews of his heart curl then sigh, a bittersweet wistfulness that Lance must have been in moonlight rather than the parallel. How extravagant, subliminal Lance would with golden glows of sunshine on his skin, his smile caught in the fabric of time. Oh, how the silkiness of those lips would glimmer in the shining rays, and God, Shiro is lost, wanting to sketch humanity instead of architecture, inserting Lance in every homage to this home everywhere he can.

But, Colleen’s worry tugs along his string to pull him back down from his romantic reverie, grounds his feet back on the oaken floor. He frowns; he’s grown man, feeling like his mother is fretting over him after he moved from her nest, but there's a sliver of adoration for her, the same he holds for his own mother.

She would just as unsure as Colleen.

"I’m sure, Mrs. Holt," he comforts before his hand comes to her shoulder to squeeze tenderly, "I’m a big boy, and I can take care of myself."

Snorting, Colleen chuckles, her smile attempting to cloak away her motherly concerns and only barely meaning it. Still, her hand comes up to squeeze over his own while her eyes catch his. "I’m just arguing an empty house, aren’t I?"

The question is loaded, full ammunition there, but with the design of a mercy kill rather than capital punishment intended. He won’t take offense, couldn’t ever from her or her family, and he, who must surely now be an adopted son, nods before letting her go.

Sam has loaded their supplies, popping his back and rolling his shoulders to relieve the first aches of arthritis from the sockets as he steps back into the parlor from the porch. "Where’s the twins, sweetie dear? Better get headin’ back since we got Sunday school early."

With all the grandeur that derives itself from maternity, Colleen hollers in that calling way that a hen would for her chicks to patter along.

"Katie Lynn! Matthew Samuel! I’m leavin’ y’all here if you ain’t gettin’ along!"

There’s suddenly a slam from upstairs with a couple of whining groans. Shiro can’t help the laughter that buds through his poorly-made up sternness while there’s obvious verbal pouting from the top of the staircase.

"Mama! We can stay the night!"

Sam’s eyes brighten through the bags of his eyes give away his tiredness, and he shakes his head to tease at his wife. "Let ‘em stay with the cobwebs, sweetie."

Having none of that, Colleen just sighs and taps her foot. She isn’t nearly as annoyed or oppressive as she’s trying to be, fluffing up her feathers for an array of defense for if the Holt twins pried at her enough, they’d be making sleeping arrangements in the den. She is tired more than anything as they all are, and Shiro is sure she’ll need her rest for the morning before them.

"Not tonight, babies, now come down! Your daddy and I are whooped, and so is Shiro."

Personally? Shiro would never turn them away, force them out of this house after they’ve all taken pieces of his heart so that he can label them each with that symbol of found family here in the American South. It might would be a fun event once he sets up a bit of an entertainment section,
maybe a flat screen with a DVD player so that they can sing along with Disney songs or watch those scary movies Colleen and Sam would disapprove of. He’d love that again, to be that big brother that sets the line in the sands but still ciphers through just a bit of adulthood to ease the teenagers into a rite of passage to the other side of life.

Yet, Shiro wants to take the chance, and has to know; will Lance come again?

Matt shuffles down each step with a pause of his feet, bottom lip puckered out in such a flagrant pout that Shiro nearly caves with the stalactites of his resolve rumbling with the austerity of that unwillingness to leave him or the house. His mouth opens to say, no, let the twins stay, they’d maybe keep her away if his presumptions are amiss, off by a hairline calculation that may cost him dearly.

"Pidge is comin’, mama."

"That’s my good boy," Colleen coos, gently pinching his cheek just the salt the wound of Matt’s argument destroyed by a mother’s supremacy. There’s such a methodical playfulness to her pointer finger and thumb clumping such a slight pudge of cheek to wiggle it to the dismay of her son, but it’s all better with a kiss on his cheek and a "run along, dear, I’ll come out with Katie."

Sam and Matt bid Shiro goodnight, nodding and waving to go out to the truck and wait for the ladies. Colleen shuffles closer, smiling up at him with a sincerity that is resilient with the grace that comes with a woman from a land haunted by religion and that can only be the way it is with the next words out of her mouth.

"You comin’ to church tomorrow, sweetie?"

Blindsided and off his pedestal, Shiro can’t begin to fathom why she would ask something of him, someone who must surely be seen as a weird heathen in these parts, needing the salvation of the Holy Spirit that flows with the water, needing the mercy granted only by a God that he should love and love only. How fickle he is, how terribly weak, to stand there and think that his love is more worthy elsewhere.

Yet, there is not one mark of displeasure or expectance on her face as he looks at her to only shrug.

"No forcin’ yourself for my sake," she tisks at him, her smile lax and amiable, "but Pastor Coran always has a sermon that just speaks to the Spirit, and we go to Hunk’s after church every Sunday. If you wanted to meet after—."

"I’ll go," Shiro confirms as a peace flag that is useless, but for her, for this woman and this family, he can get up and try, though the teachings of Jesus and his Disciples might be a little lost on him once the pastor rouses from the pulpit, "I just don’t have… anything nice to wear."

Pidge hops her way down the stairs then, giggling at his admission of such triviality while rounding the banister’s curving bottom. She has been up to something if the impish smirk and fiendish glint in her eyes are her mannerisms surrounding the probable prank she has left waiting for him upstairs.

"There you are, Little Trouble," and he ruffles her hair for an extra set of giggles to wrap a bow around his heart and make her feel a little guilty about what she may have done, "what are you hiding?"

"Nothin’ special, but I heard your little problem about dressing appropriately, and don’t worry; poor Keith comes in his nice jeans and boots… actually most people do accept for the old farts. Suits and fancy Sunday dresses with hats that match."
Colleen pretends to smart a little, mocking away at a frown while her hand exaggeratedly comes to her chest as though offended, "Katie Bell, your daddy is one of those old farts!"

"And you don’t wear the floofy hats that match your dress! You’re doing old wrong, mama," Pidge reprimands, and these two are just the best, making Shiro hold his side as he laughs at their jokes bantered back and forth. They both laugh also, balanced in their casual relationship as a good mother and a good daughter should before Colleen sighs and shakes her head and the lot of them, including herself.

"Good night, hun," is softly said, arms moving around his neck for Mrs. Holt to embrace him for her leaving him, everything about her now tinged with poignancy, "and we’ll be by around nine-fifteen, okay?"

"Yes, ma’am," he murmurs into the tresses of hair pressed along his nose, hugging her back before a pair of smaller arms encircle his waist.

And sneaky little thing that she is, Shiro feels her press something into his jeans pocket, very much a piece of paper.

It seems like time jerks forward, and he is standing alone on his porch while watching the truck drive down Oak Avenue towards the Holt abode. A fleeting flurry of anticipation might spark awake his awareness, but he is now bone-tired, filled with iron instead of marrow as he fumbles back inside and shuts the door with a press of his back along the frame.

It is as silent as death.

He shakes that tiny feathery touch of the creeps off his skin, heading upstairs to pass out for the day ahead tomorrow is a grander alternative than standing there defenseless and risking another encounter with the lady. Rubbing his hands along the length of his neck before sticking his hands into his pockets— oh, Pidge’s note.

While climbing the staircase, he unfolds the paper, thumbs smoothing out the creases to read her quickly scribbled scrawl.

‘Box under the cot.’

He really hopes the twins haven’t decided to put rats in a box. Or spiders. Or, really, whatever the hell else they’d get a kick out of. Matt might be shier at first glance, but Shiro is certain with time, he’ll be just as full devilish as his sister.

They really are going to take all the familial love he has left, aren’t they?

Routine for a man of the military is something he regretted losing during the months of dwindling rehab sessions, though sleeping, exercising, eating, and drinking whatever he could get his hands on were probably some maniacal routine that pledged to lower the burden of a man wanting to die and get it over with, but too scared to do it. It will be nice, he thinks, for the normalcy he wants to erect in this town, and the first step is shifting through his bag to pull out his sleep pants for the oncoming slumber while quietly thanking Sam for freshly laundered clothes while Colleen and the teens cooked breakfast that morning.

There’s more gratitude to be found as the lights never flicker once, and one of Shiro’s now prominent fears of water turning red as he brushes his teeth and gargles mouth wash have yet to come, though the lady in white does not seem to be on the level of R-rated horror-gore. He isn’t taking his chances, turning the faucet on and off a few times as if to test her, to see if he would
annoy her to the point she’d just have to prove him wrong.

The water, clear and cool in the muggy heat of the bathroom, is pellucid, swirling down the drain as the man tempting fate gives up, purposely leaving his bag there so the phone he has been avoiding stays away from him as he sleeps.

His bedroom is simple, and that suits him fine, enjoying a minimalist touch of lifestyle that can only be found with lesser possessions. After salvaging the furniture that could be used with minimal repair for the time being, the main room has only a desk, bedside table, and cot, the only lamp and clock in the room bought when Colleen and Matt ran down to the house to make cold cut sandwiches for lunch.

It will do for now, and anything more bustling with decoration would feel out of place to him as, weirdly, it is like he’s encroaching on territory that he ponders if it is genuinely his property or not. That is left to be seen, and today is gone and his eyelids are sore with complaint that he could sleep through the rattle of chains or disembodied screams. His curiosity, quite roused now, has him kneeling to the cot, pulling out the box that Pidge mentioned in her small note.

With a slide of cardboard along the floor, the weight of the box has him reeling in presumptions for the contents inside, but there seems to be nothing moving around on its own, so he will thank good fortune that there is not a live animal ready to burst out of the flaps. With a slow exhale, Shiro opens the box to see paper and bindings of books that just make him wonder why the hell Pidge was intent that he find this.

Granted, he should give her the benefit of the doubt while he picks one at random, deftly opening the pages to see not typed words of non-fiction or otherwise, but written word that has a little fading, but sill quite readable.

Someone wrote a lot, it seems, as with further investigation, this is nothing more than a journal treasure trove, pieces of firsthand accounts of a person’s life and thoughts.

Whatever tiredness idled him and called him to bed is not longer relevant because he has something to work with, something to use in figuring out the identity of the haunts that ease into his life at their own whim, and to testify if he will be visited by more.

He starts at the first page of the book and his hand, and reads by the soft glow of the lamplight.

—

December, 1913

To Me in Later Years,

You will miss Tampa. You will miss your brothers and sisters that have gone back home to a place you have never seen, but only heard about from papa and mama. You will ask Sue, but she will know only as much as you do, only that Cuba is a motherland we cannot go to because there’s tobacco to pick and fish to catch, and we weren’t meant to be born into war.

Papa was too old, he tells you, and that’s all right. He’s a good man, and it is better that he is. He made sure that you and I could read and write, and that is more than I could ask for.
You will miss the sea and the salt. You will miss the sands and the shells. There are so many seashells to be found, and your little siblings will miss the lot of you going to the beaches to catch whatever the ocean offers.

You will miss home, but papa and mama say home is here now. This is a nice house, quite nice, and the King man that sold papa and mama the house is very admirable, too. He has a kindness to him, and his wife brings over the best lemon meringue.

Sue will settle in just fine with the rest of the family. She’s already the talk of the town, Susannah McClain, the prettiest flower to ever come to Gilman, Alabama.

Good thing our sister is a good person, and doesn’t leave us behind.

There’s nothing here. Nothing but this red clay, cotton fields, and family.

At least there’s family, and family is forever the most important.

Tampa, though, may be a dream by the time you read this, but at least I still hope you make it back to the sea one day.

With all regard and hope,

— Lance Martinez McClain

—

A whisper and a shush, a creak of wood, and the blackness over his eyes blears away into odd shadow shapes.

Another squeak of wood against the nails that bear it down to form a staircase draws Shiro from his void of sleep, finally having one night where the freaky dream images don’t come out and he’s railing against the unknown message his subconscious is painting along the backdrop of his mind.

Haziness of sleep curls into the darkness of the bedroom before there is yet another creak from the floorboards of the hallway, a yellow glow coming ever closer to his bedroom door.

Oh. Oh.

Shiro can’t help himself, and his palms go clammy while his heart starts to thud hard in his chest, a constant drummer boy having a battle tune for the war of winning out for an affair that might would ruin the both of them. Little butterflies harp a silkily jilted tune with his heart strings before dread’s cold hand runs down his back to remind him of the his current state of laying in his cot. Oh, dear, is he presentable, clad in only sleep pants? Will it truly be Lance who is symbolized by the glow of oil lamps?

Will his breath stink already? He tried brushing his teeth before bedtime, he should promise Lance if it— if it truly is him. Would he be perturbed by Shiro’s falling asleep reading his words, detailing out the lives of his family as written by a young man who longed for his elder siblings, gone back home to reconnect to the roots of their island while he doted on his younger? The beginnings of life there in Gilman for the McClains who hailed from Tampa, Florida is now as true to him as his own experiences, though he did not go the life of fishing and tobacco picking to
traverse more inland to try a hand at another crop of prime culture, cotton.

A step closer, and time is short, he’s already late with much else that calls for his attention while its lost in Neverland of dumb vanity. A chuckle, a hiccup of sound that strikes his fluke of a heartbeat into shreds, and Lance is just there, too lovely with the fondness of his gaze and not a shadow that peers from the window out to the road in hopes of finding someone that will come in to live in his house for the company.

"You've worked all day, and still waiting up for me? Aren’t you something?"

With an ah, Shiro longs to convey that he would suffer sleep deprivation to the point of death to wait up for a chance to be in the presence of nothing short of a miracle, and strike him down if he thinks any less of Lance from here forward. A visage of an angel has come to visit upon him, to harken him for a cause far more profound than anything that can be offered in the plane of the existential, a cause that would embroidered his skin with the love of a holy being that surely would make him tremble as he is now.

With the clink of the glass bottom of the oil lamp being set on the bedside table, Lance perches on the edge of the cot with a mirthful titter at Shiro's poor response. The man beside Lance cannot help but sit up and take the closeness in, rove his gaze over this young man that seems to have walked straight out of his photograph, the same that is tucked away now in the drawer of the table. Everything about Lance is crisp and alive, from the cotton of his white shirt and his rolled up sleeves to his slacks and his suspenders. He’s a vision, a masterpiece crafted only by the most articulate and talented of otherworldly artists, the warmth of his skin bathed in sea foam and his blues of his eyes sea glass plucked from the ocean sands. Every detail, every crease of shadow and highlight, Shiro analyzes and catalogues into memory with such particular commitment that he may just very well be a stalker with nothing better to do than look upon Lance.

But, for all the strangeness that he has encountered, what is most apparent is such stark juxtaposition between Lance and the lady in white: Lance seems real and still full of the breath of life, corporeal to the point he is a touchable organism that has joined Shiro in the bedroom for a midnight chatter, whereas her...

Sympathy pangs in his chest, a hollow core that shovels out his most regrets to add in her story. She did not ask for this, surely, for the molded gossamer of her dress translucence of her being, for the shadows and for the loss, no, they were not meant for her.

But, she is not here to cry for the help that Shiro cannot give, so instead his attention sways to this beauty made of seasides and tidal drifts.

"Cat got your tongue?" Lance chimes with a smirk that is damn kittenish, inching in closer to a bigger man that is slack jawed and silent, "or, am I just that dazzling?"

"Dazzling," Shiro barks out, his traitorous heart drumming away while his mind catches up from rewinding, and he pales at his folly. Lance comes from a time far more conservative and private than his own, one where liberation of love was hardly blooming. Secrecy was a given for the dalliances and courtships that were deemed unnatural, and the wrong word to the wrong person might end in imprisonment just for carrying affections for a particular person.

Hell, Shiro can imagine the noose on his neck, the knot tightening like blind righteousness as his feet dangle for purchase while his lungs burst in ache and pleads for air, sweet air, before the oak tree stands unyielding as he joins the strange fruit hanging that died for lesser things that he.

Damn his morbid thoughts, how they take him over and leave him speechless, especially when
Lance is, maybe, flirting?

Shiro’s confirmation rolls off of Lance's back as he hums, now shying away with a blush warming his cheeks. For a second, Shiro triumphs, a jig floundering about in his head because maybe those times that Lance lived were just oppressive to those who wrote the history textbooks he along with his fellow student body were forced to read.

No matter that now as Shiro’s eyes fall and he is transfixed, a moth to flame as Lance’s fingertips trace patterns into the barely made cot, rippling the fitting sheet as though to entrance Lance from his muddling thoughts. It is methodical, this gesture that settles a calmness between them, and it gives him the excuse to watch those long fingers with a bit of a longing to kiss each one.

"You're a funny man, Mister.... Shee-row?" Lance tips his head, shoulders shrugging at his attempt to say the other's name, "those... people were saying that today, like the other day when you fell… it’s a funny name to match a funny man!" Lance laughs softly, kicking his feet as he does. Youthful exuberance is so blessedly beautiful on him, not a care in the world except for the both of them.

Shiro takes no hardship from the jab, just smiles like a dumb man struck with a million of Eros’ arrows, tips digging well into him because, yes, he is a funny man indeed. He will be the funniest man in the universe if it would keep Lance laughing so sweet, and he would bet a bottom dollar on it.

"'Shiro' short for my real name... Takashi Shirogane," and the explanation shrouds over Lance, and those blue eyes flash with perplexity. With a tap of a finger along his chin, Lance hums again, his eyes beholding the other with a sort of commiseration that aligns with the empathetic.

"You're not from here at all."

A laugh and a shake of his head, and Shiro tidily confirms, "I'm from Seattle."

"Sounds far away, like out of sight, out of mind."

He can agree to that. Seattle feels like a home lost, like a dream that keeps creeping up in sensations of déjà vu and footsteps once traveled there in other lives. Maybe Lance comprehends it, that home away from home, walking through a house no longer his own in the bleak hours of early, dark morning before twilight breaks over the tree lines. But, no, Shiro should not think that way.

This house is their home.

"I guess it really is far away from here... miles and miles away, hundreds even." Shiro sighs, that guilty breed rolling its head to watch him, beady eyes constantly on him. He should feel sick. He should want to go home, yet he wants to stay right here with Lance, and fight tooth and nail and soul that it never end.

"Probably is... Tampa is a long ways from here, too…"

If not for him feeling bashful and anxious since Shiro has already peered into the Lance’s writing in concerns to the McClain family history, he would note the other’s shoulders sloping down with the downtrodden nature of being away from the place the heart longs to be most. Seattle isn’t where Shiro wants to be, and outside of his family and his now-dying love for a life with cluttered busyness, there is nothing left there for him, the opposite of how Lance must feel for what now is a city in its own right. But, he must confess his sins to keep the air clear of misconduct, "I read about that…"
Shiro goes to nod to the journals that would surely be sitting either on the cot or in the box, but to his shock, there is nothing there, no procurement of journals found by the Holt twins and certainly no electric light or digital clock.

There is somehow nothing there of his own outside of the cot and himself.

Lance speaks then, voice gentle with a tease that snaps the reality of the state of his belongings away from their conversation, "I know... you're not a sneaky man by any means, just cute like a curious cat."

Shiro blushes then as he’s been caught red handed, though he prompts Lance to further explain with his own special kind of worried muteness while Lance turns to him fully, "I can see you. I saw you that night. You looked up at the window... and you saw me."

Oh, God, yes he did, and then the plagues of blues and of rivers crept upon him, and candlelight gleams that cascade into the veils of darker thoughts, of little forms with their scarves that were his comrades all the same, and then cotton blooms that float like stars in the black back drop.

Worth it all for this moment, and he inches closer, their hands nearly brushing.

"I did... and I wanted to see you again," Shiro grins smoothly as he can, coming off as a jittery and lopsided mess that has Lance snickering just a bit. It has been such a long time since he has flirted, and longer since-- no.

He has never been in love so badly before.

"Mr. Shiro, I believe you're a mad man, loonier than any hatter, to want to see me again."

A snort, and he nods in agreement, letting the tip of his left ring finger brush timidly against Lance’s right before leaning in.

"As long as you wanted to see me… then I think I’m all right with being mad, bluebell."

Lance smiles, and the brilliance is splendorous, taken right of out sonnets and iambic pentameters of literature collecting dust in the libraries, taken from the sight of couples holding hands in the colorful buds of springtime in the park gardens. This is what love is, when all the writings and sights of men long dead or dying can all have foretold the day that falling is like dying all the same, but it’s the kind that addictive, that painless ache that stabs into the heart so that the knife stays embedded for the ages to gaze upon in awe.

"Bluebell?" Lance whispers in the space between them, this secret lost between the inches of their lips. Shiro cannot stop himself from staring down at Lance’s while parts his own, wondering how those lips would feel along the kisses of his mouth, seeking, yet never prodding, all at the other’s pace. Would they be cold? Warm? Would they be smooth or chapped? Would Shiro feel anything at all?

He wants to know, wants to be so sure of what kissing Lance would be like, to know that when they must part again, he can line his lips with his tongue and remember the moment their lips touched. Repetition would wear down others, but never Shiro, having to relive the instance that Lance would melt against him, maybe, if he would just move closer, tilt his head from where their noses already brush with the light from the oil lamp the only shining proof of their touches in the night.

"Your eyes..." is all Shiro mutters out, hesitating with a tick of his throat and a shift of his jaw. Swallowing the nervousness of love’s first kiss for the sake of his manhood, he deftly brushes his
lips along Lance’s bottom one before he gasps—.

It’s cold.

Then, it’s nothing but air, and Lance is gone, completely gone, and there’s nothing more than shadows of unknown shapes trailing up the walls and to the ceiling, flickering with the shuddering of the small light.

He is never scared, and nothing feels frightening, but what scares him is that he frightened Lance away before the disjointed umbras suddenly curl down to wrap around him, jowls splintered wide and mauling as they overtake him, and he’s gone into the void again.

—

did you really see me?

nothing more than the breeze whistling amongst the bluebells he lays in, limbs pinned down by the kudzu root as the oak leaves dance in ominous serenade around cotton stars mottled in a void of a sky. a tall window with one small light is blown out.

i want to see you again.

the kudzu wraps tighter and tighter, grows and feeds until he cannot see the stars anymore.

—


It takes all of his willpower not to slam his right hand into the clock to cease the fucking incessant screeching of an alarm, the red numbers blaring red and menacing to display the time: eight o’clock.

He hates himself as he lays there, smashing the snooze button so he can glare at the ceiling of his bedroom and just deprecate everything that he is as a man. He fucked up, fucked up royally, let his desires cloud his judgment to fucking kiss Lance after only just a few exchanges and thinking, hey, it will work out just damn fine.

He needs a stiff drink, something stronger than whiskey could ever be to dull the utter embarrassment of heartache that he’s enduring. Lance will never come back, will never press forth into his life, but instead stay hidden in the shadows where Shiro cannot find him, wrapped in the cloak of transparency while he assesses Shiro like he’s a fucking wolf out for a meal.

Shiro would— he’d never hurt Lance, would never even dare, yet, fucking dumbass that he is, is there, drenched in sweat with books scattered around him from his late night reading like the helpless lovesick bastard he is.

Groaning at the dryness of his mouth, he tells himself he needs to get up and shower. The Holts will be there soon to load him up in the vehicle of their choice so he can go and pray for God to smack the idiot out of him.

Shiro emits another groan at the stiffness from sleep’s idleness and his own regressions, rubbing at
his eyes before his feet turn to touch the floor. His eyes, perilously dealing with the fading of black spots that ease into a now clear vision, spies an open journal with a page so bare that it’s sad to see such waste of paper. It seems out of place, a feet or two away from the box, like it was meant to be found.

Kneeling down from the cot, the metal hinges squeak at the shifting of weight just as his spine pops in protest, but Shiro pays neither any mind as he brings the journal closer to read what has been left for him to find.

*July, 1914.*

*I am lonely.*

It strikes a cord, a breaking of a string that floods over so much forlornness that can only be quelled by the misery that comes with like-minded company. He never would have wished this for Lance, this being around loved ones and those that love him to realize that when the words stop and the noises fall short that there is still that crow that sits, watching sadly, on the perch of a shoulder to remind over and over how loneliness never flies away.

It takes some time, so much of it, a grumbling about invigorated by his morning discovery, but Shiro somehow gathers a writing utensil from this bag left in the bathroom. He clicks the pen open, walking back to the bedroom to the desk so he can write right below.

It is a very easy thing to do.

*March, 2017.*

*Dear bluebell,*

*I’m lonely, too.*

—

Precisely at nine-twenty-nine, a truck pulls up the fence and a horn blows.

For all his ‘primping’ that has taken place in the quiet bathroom upstairs, Shiro is fairly certain that he’s still underdressed to the point of underwhelming. There’s not much he can do with his hair as the white wisps have a mind of their own since the explosion, fluffy when he just wants to appear rigid and clean cut. Then again, his clothes are not much to come by, his nicer with the cleaner pair of jeans and his loafers.

Heaven might strike him the moment he steps into the church for such a crime of Sunday church-going fashion, but go he said he would do, so go he will.
As he shuts the door behind him, the once soldier finds to his surprise Pidge and Matt clambering out of their father’s truck, smiling with a yell of good mornings while they head towards his truck, Ol’ Black sitting idle at side of the road.

It’s a good bit of a walk until he’s right at the driver side of the running truck, but Sam and Colleen are there in their fraying Sunday fineries.

Sam notes the confusion with a lazy smirk and a half shrug. "Kids wanna help you get to the church, that way if you need to go, you can go as you will."

Shiro sighs, hanging his head when Sam's voice brims with his concerns though guised with the timbre of a small, meaningless jest. He supposes that if they were just slighter than a good group of people, they would shackle his wrists to the truck bed to drag him down the road to the church so that he can be cuffed to the pew. No, instead, they just want him to make the choice of his own free will with the ability to walk away if the need arises, in case the Good Word just wasn’t his to listen to today.

What’s most glorious about this is that while there is that worry that subdues that typical Southern charm, this is not pitying, thank God, just more of an experimenting within the spectrum of knowledge utilized to gain findings from their subject, this veteran from Seattle that has come to love them too deeply to say 'stop.'

No point in forcing them to go away if they only mean the best, and their best helps, as any medication, any psychoanalysis, any tool at their disposal would just fall short of the kindness that he has received. Their efforts just earn the brackets of his trust, segment by segment, and while professionals would be aghast at how their methods are floundering throw aways, Shiro just wants to do right by this family. After all, they have dealt with and alleviated his tension by not implying their expectations, those imaginary standards not held like a knife to his back.

"Okay," Shiro answers, his own hips easing upwards at Sam's trademark grin. Colleen just winks at Shiro and motions to old Black that now has two occupants and waits for the third.

"Get on with it then, hun." So, he does.

For all his years, though, the ride to the church has to be the most interesting ten minute drive of his life.

The moment his truck roars with the combustion of her engine, Matt promptly takes control of the radio much to the dismay of Pidge who proclaims with loathing for the genre of song playing that she’s refutably petulant.

"It's God's day, and you're just the worst. I am not gonna suffer through that horrible conglomeration of racket people call music!"

Matt scoff, returning to his awful singing with the thickly accented voice that’s on the borderline of being just a damn fake in accompaniment with electric guitars and tuned fiddles.

"Just giving Shiro a taste of how bad music can be."

The banter just makes him laugh, the sound freely flying like doves in the corn fields when the first paws of a hound come to rile them out. It feels good, natural like (but would Lance now hate it if he laughs in the house?).

"Okay, okay, Matt, who is this singing so I can avoid it?"
Matt rolls his eyes while his head drops back the headrest, hair battering back and forth from the open rear window. His fingers tap along his thigh as he thinks then mutters, "probably some Yankee from Ohio or whatever thinkin’ he’s gonna be the next George Jones."

If not for keeping the truck on the pavement of Main Street, the eldest would surely be putting them on a path to a wreck from the humorous shakes that threaten his integrity to drive behind Sam. Matt so deadpan and bitter that it makes the explanation more than real, a walking book of snark to the modern music scene that plays on nearly every channel the radios in Gilman, Alabama pick up except for the classic country station.

Sam turns down a dirt road, and Shiro follows with two car lengths between them while Saint Michael’s Church comes into view, the sight of the building settling his jubilance down into something low and reverent as he puts Black into park.

Even the twins have faded into quietness for the sanctimonious.

The church is old, older than the dirt the stilts and the frame are built upon with the last paint of white crackling up along the board of the siding. The steeple is tall but not ostentatiously so, more welcoming to sinners of all walks of life rather than just those with some money in their pocket and thick sludge of putrid judgment in their souls.

His eyes scour the yard where all the vehicles have made a makeshift parking lot, spying near the little grove of poplar trees the judge’s LeBaron. Right next to it, Allura’s patrol car, way across the other side is the Coupe Deville from the diner.

Keith’s truck is no where to be seen.

"Your BFF only comes to service," Pidge remarks after Shiro inquires about the Evans man, "his mama used to run the youth group, so I guess coming early makes him see she isn’t here."

Whatever remnants of the cloud of hilarity they instilled in the cab of the truck trickles out from the rolled down windows, solemness a heavy weight for now along their shoulders. For now, then, Shiro climbs out of his seat, Pidge and Matt in step behind while Colleen and Sam step up to the side door near the back of the church.

"Run along, sweet peas, I’m sure Mr. Kolivan is waiting," Colleen hushes to them after briefly taking them aside to fix the tiny annoyances of their outfits. The twins, good as can be, do not pout or try to pull away, but the second their mother gives her approval, they’re turning to scurry off with their Bibles down into the labyrinth of classrooms.

"See you in the sanctuary?" Matt asks before they both leave the adults, and Shiro tips his head once in a wordless confirmation.

The church hasn’t pushed him into that aggravation feeling that he’s being dragged down with a noose of thorns at his neck… yet.

"Mr. Kolivan?"

Sam hums as he holds the door open to let Colleen and him in while the classrooms of Sunday school are already crowded with people, all speaking in such hushed tones that it would seem God walks the halls to shush them if He feels that there is too much noise to keep Him from His thoughts. “Mr. Kolivan is the deputy up at the police department, but he took over Mrs. Evans’ position when she... passed.”

Colleen inches closer to whisper, and while the woman would prefer to agree with Shiro’s opinion
that her words aren’t gossip, it must still be rude to talk of the late Mrs. Evans in such proximity of others, "stage four pancreatic cancer, and took forever to get her a doctor to get the proper diagnosis… it was such a sad shame; she was too good for this world."

"She was too, too good," Sam remarks with a blueness that makes Shiro frown, "and too good people always go too soon."

Out of respect, Shiro walks them to their class, and perks at the stares he receives from the older ladies that sit in plastic chairs of the room before noting how they turn to their husbands to cluck mutedly about the 'strapping young man' from out of town that’s been taken in by the Holts. The whole debacle makes Sam give Shiro a look over for forgiveness, as though it were his fault he is reason for the commotion amongst Southern ladies in their floppy hats of easter egg colors.

“Pastor Coran might be hauntin' the halls, but go ahead and pass the time as you want, son. I bet the choir’s practicin’ and they sound just as good as the angels do.”

There is a fear as the door clicks shut behind Sam, a stone’s drop into his stomach as it just adds to the ever burgeoning mess that’s a weight that keeps him down.

Too good people leave too soon, and what’s worrisome is that Sam, Colleen, hell, Judge King… they’re all too good people, too, for taking their time on a broken, lonely man like him.

Regardless of his internal self-criticisms, the doors are all now shut with classes beginning before the main service, and the loneliness starts return, a creeping of spider legs up his legs to his torso. Here, now, he thinks back to the night before, of Lance in all his radiance being right there for his hormones to fuck them both over.

He really, really wants to punch himself in the gut, kick his own ass for it.

With nothing better to do then, a step or two then has him following the dim lights down the corridor towards the chiming cords of piano hammers tapping at the strings of what's assuredly a pianist warming up for the service while there’s the distinct hymns of glorious choir song.

“That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing He bled and died to take away my sin.”

It might would be nice to sit in the sanctuary and just be for a bit. Yes, a good idea, to air out his misgivings to make himself hallow and hollow all at once.

He goes, and he does not quite catch it at first, but once he turns the corner, he is suddenly met the darkness. Where the songs of choral practice are the closest, there is a long corridor towards a door straight out of some parable as the light shines through the spaces of the frame and threshold.

Oh, well, this is all right, though forewarning and foreboding are figurative that intertwine at the worst of times. He’s a strong, grown man, and this is a damn structure with only Providence at the top of the steeple, so he walks while accounting the for hanging boards and papers towards the sanctuary door.

Shiro is a little unsure how to take in the details that can be found in the hallway as the paint job is faded yet resilient against time’s fade, and the last remnants of the lights from behind him seem too yellow to make it feel like a part of a place of worship. Then, he finds himself lost in the bulletin boards with posts concerning mission trips and senior citizens bowling on Thursday nights.

He works slowly down a little farther where the hall proceeds into more ominous dimness, like God and salvation are at his back and he is towards a place He will not reach. The posters of inspiration morph into an ever-growing display of youth and children's church paraphernalia: a
picture of bright children with their hammers and their shovels after helping an elderly member with a clean up of their property, crayon declarations of 'Jesus Loves You!' And 'God is my best friend,' but it's the hand prints of red that seem to line the walls endlessly down into the darkness that unsettles him the most. There’s a painted banner above all the handprints, the dripping from the letters adding to the unpleasantness.

FOR GOD GAVE HIS ONLY SON

Shiro feels a chill down his spine, feels like someone has come to breathe down his neck as the only semblance of threat for its prey before snapping his neck, so he turns in a rush, the hand prints more like blurs of blood running down the walls before there before Shiro is a large portrait of a soldier of angels, general above all else, the Saint Michael himself, the same archangel and saint that Montgomery prayed to before fate blew him into pieces. He is adorned in reds and golds, sword and shield in hand with fire at his wings.

His eyes, golden and righteous, glower right into Shiro’s soul as if to ask what sins have been brought to his feet this day.

"Are you lost in the darkness, child?"

Shiro gasps, ribs flexing sharply around the rush of musty air as he jumps, near defensive stance readying for something new that has startled him. He’s near cat like on the scared factor, claws out some means of protection in case, well, they’re needed.

But the instant all comes together with the sight of too-bright orange and white robes, he sees that harmless source of the voice is the older man from the baseball game, Pastor Coran himself.

There has always been strange discussions in and out of his life in connection to the aura of others. Some are milky blues with sadness or remorse, others are flares of red with tempers or passions, but then there are yellows and whites of benevolence and purity.

Coran is that purity, not one foul or demeaning tendril of wrath or bitterness, but more with something hidden that keeps his throat, something that harkens him for wordless guidance.

"I... I’m sorry, sir, just— reflexes," Shiro relaxes when he determines that there is no foe threatening his wellbeing, shoulders slumping. "I just... was biding time, I think."

A chuckle thumps from deep in the man's soul, a tickle of movement of that bright orange mustache to add a pop of character. From just these few moments alone, the pastor is indeed someone the younger man can envision being that kinder counselor and leader and so good for the town.

This holy preacher, this man of God, might could help him... if he would allow that. He isn’t sure he wants to be helped, doesn’t want to allow that weakness when he’s just now grating around on the gravel of upheaval to stand upright.

"No, son, never apologize for searching! God is everywhere you are; why would He be angry at searching His House?"

A valid question, but, “uh... I’m not in a class?”
With mustache ruffling up, Coran tilts his head with a comprehending steadiness and answers calmly, "God does not require His flock to sit in Sunday School. It is something we do for ourselves."

Oh. Shiro feels something spin in curiousness, unsure of how to proceed down this introspection of divinity. Coran, however, never allots him to fumble within the breakthroughs of discussion

“Al— forgive me, I mean, Judge King has told me all about you; bought his family’s property, too? A long way to come for small town life, son, believe me.”

Shiro isn’t the most observant man, but he’s starting to pick up on the deviations of accent and speech the other man has. It’s something he must point out to abate the curiosity as it baffles him why there’s another outsider such as himself here. “Well, I think you’re not from here either, sir.”

There’s a glitter of sass at the accusation in those wise eyes and a twirl of a curled end of mustache as the preacher snorts, “easy to tell? I keep my native tone of talk as an ode to my loyalty to my home country... and the elderly ladies love it.”

A laugh, then softness, as though his own joke, while gaining a little laugh from Shiro, falls away from importance.

“But, yes, you’re right. I’m from New Zealand— Ah, Christchurch, in fact,” Coran hums, and then that pure aura dispirits, stiffling with a clamp of regret that condoes a voice now humorless, “fitting, is it not?”

Shiro just takes that in, confirming with a low grunt of shock that there is definitely an element of coincidental fate that lies in the scattered pieces of past life. Still, this man of the Holy Word is not just from across the states, but from oceans away, and the sails of understanding drift him down to that clarity.

He ran away, too.

“When he started talking about you, I have been hoping you would come to visit our church, and here you are. God answers prayers, but I think you and I will agree... that we are not sure why we were brought here.”

Yes, yes, Shiro agrees, incredibly so, that lolling inquiry that has not been forefront but bobbing up to breach the openness of internal conversation. Why, out of all the flights out of SEATAC that would have been boarding, did he arrive in ATL? Why did that gentleman at the rental center empathize with a panicked veteran much like himself, and work to get Shiro away from the hell of the terminal? And why in the hell did every turn of the hybrid rental lead him to Gilman? There are dozens of highways, of roads, a million calculations of avenues to travel instead of the perfect formation that brought him here.

And, why did Lance appear that night?

“Why do you think we were brought out here, if God did it?”

If there were ever a play of shadow and light, then Shiro certainly hopes that it what he observes is that and only that, but indistinct purpose pronounces the wrinkles of the pastor’s fallen face as Saint Michael himself, armor and all, grows dimmer.

The world is a little gloomier, akin to little white flowers and weeping dreams as Coran peers with eyes familiar with the black hearses of funerals and the blessing of souls that have swept into the wings of angels, torn away from his grasping hands.
Helplessly, all the pastor can seem to utter is, "God works in mysterious ways."

Beyond the door, Shiro hears the choir exalt in somber glorification.

"How Great Thou Art…"

—

Keith is sitting in the back most pew, an unironed white oxford and nice denim his attire just as predicted by Pidge. From where Shiro stands in the sanctuary after Coran left him to prepare for the sermon ahead, he sees eyes of plum moving left to right to read through the Holy Book, though the dusty rose of the worn cover is held reverently in his hands.

It has to be his mother's, and Shiro hurts more for him.

"Hey," Shiro greets as a way not to startle a man in the recesses of Scripture, and Keith tilts his odd color of eyes up to see him and take him in with a punctuation of distaste.

"... You wore that already."

That’s gold, and it even brings a chuckle to his while his nerves steady down to the base of the church. They’ve been buzzing about on high alert since the eternal promulgation that acted as catalyst to end the conversation with Coran briefly after, and he’s needing the familiarity of an acquaintance. “Yeah, it's freshly laundered though, I promise.”

Keith isn’t impressed with his answer, groaning at as he tugs at the side of his shirt with a wrinkle of his nose, “there’s a darn stain here— red clay. Shi— crap gets everywhere and it doesn’t come out. Ugh, where’s your house again? Off Oak? I’ll bring you some things.

“They’re no good to me anymore.”

Well, then. "So much for come as you are?"

Keith shrugs as Shiro settles down next to him while he slowly shuts the Bible to keep it in his lap. “Can't say much since I’m not dressed to the nines, but you know, you need more than just two shirts to live on."

Leaning his spine along the length of the rest of the pew, Shiro nods, and leaves it at that.

The choir is indeed practicing, and he can’t help but note the age of them, how the sopranos and tenors melt in such beautiful sync that if it were any genre or any tune, he’s certain that the choristers would steal away the souls of anyone that hadn’t given their ticket of decision away. He’s content with listening to the greatness of God and how salvation is found in the Lamb, though he has to lean up to see closer.

Allura stands amongst the singers, hymnal book in her hands with her purple robes barely able to hide the uniform she’s wearing underneath. Keith must notice as he takes in the prominence of such adoration for Providence that surrounds them even despite how his eyes linger on the sheriff with her fidgeting of the pages.

“… She’s really pretty up there.”

Ah, ha, and that’s distraction that he can rely for to bide time, indeed.

“You gonna ask her out? She seems fond of you, too,” Shiro teases with a friendly elbow against
the younger man’s side, but the tap hits what seems to be a brick wall, a bastion to encase Keith as he grips the sides of the Bible for dear life. It quells the haughty go-get-her right down, lays it down in the shallows to cool and swim along the banks.

“She ain’t. Believe me… she ain’t.”

There’s a commotion beyond the entrance of the sanctuary that shuts Shiro right up, the loss of privacy hanging heavy with how much Keith trembles, refusing to risk a glance askance upon Allura as the others exit their Sunday school classes to finish their morning all together.

Shiro edges around in the seat to see the Holts walk in, catching instead the happy glance of Judge King who winks and waves, prompting him to wave right back. He expects the man, dressed in that white suit that just makes him a pop of Deep South opulence, to head his way and strike up a conversation they’re needing to have, but he instead takes the foremost pew to plop himself right down.

It’s Pidge that Shiro takes into account first, but any call for her name dies when he sees that her eyes are swollen red, hidden behind her bangs as she beelines for him with Matt just a pace behind her.

He wants to kill whoever hurt her, and what better place than here on hallow ground to act upon homicidal impulses.

“Pidge, no, don’t bother Shiro with it…” Matt huffs, and his twin has no reception to heed his voice of reason, climbing right next to Shiro to hug at his waist so that her face can press right against his side.

She’s hiding, and that boils the rage, bubbles of molten steel popping with his blood pressure that’s only beneath the swell as Keith’s feathers of composure ruffle a bit from newcomers. He’s probably watched these two grow up as he did the same, a good set of years between them, but there is a stoical sense of pert lips and even voice.

"Nyma?"

Well, damn. If she’s the culprit that has hurt Pidge, he can’t very well rip the little girl's head off, not with this pitiful thing burying against his side, not with the pews being filled by the various members of the congregation. All of them are witnesses, and while they aren’t typically his concern, Little Trouble here might wouldn’t talk to him again if he upset her more than she already is.

“Rolo. He started it,” Pidge exhales out along the dark, wet stain of Shiro's clothes, "I... just wanted people to get that, y’know, it’s totally okay to be religious and scientific at the same time."

Matt grimaces with her confession, spiteful and cutting, and he explains further with a lilt of regret, "I started it, really, ’cause we were talking about Big Bangs and how God could be involved— Big Guy created all this, He had to, and it… then it just fell apart from there. Genesis sucks, I swear."

“I just... kept it up, eggin’ it on. I was getting as a hornet when Mr. Kolivan called off the talk, but Rolo… said before I— we all walked out,” she hiccups so softly, easing back to mumbles along the black cotton of a now tear-sullied shirt, “I was going to hell."

He has a temper, yes, a temper that he has worked damn hard to hide, damn hard to let his sergeants beat out of him and lock away behind the cage so that it wouldn’t lash out and hurts those that he loves and adores. He’s failed, countlessly, as many times as there are stars in the Northern sky, but
fuck, there’s those carmine flecks floating in his eyes and they’re vibrant and goading, willing him to stand. His nails dig into skin of his palms, curving in more lines into the skin.

What’s the point of this church, of this town, of this whole existence if a young woman went to hell because she worked with the brain God supposedly gave her?

Keith is up, too, and maybe they are kindred spirits just for the grievance of having such flares of anger that crack like arson in the woods. His hands go to Shiro’s shoulders, his mother’s Bible on the seat like it’s a reminder to do good and to be good. “Kid ain’t worth it, Shiro, and your best bet? Tell Kolivan or let him handle it. Bet you a dollar he already is conniving somethin’.”

Matt kicks his sole lightly against the pew, obviously guilty of something with Shiro steaming from his ears, “that, or let me cut his brake lines…”

Pidge squawks, offended and absolutely beside herself from the suggestion. “Nyma is riding with him and…” she finally quiets down and frowns, her fingers.

"She was my best friend once. I couldn't…"

The anger that would rival the blow from the archangel on display in the hallway beyond the sanctuary door slips from his loosening fists. He’s been here a plethora of instances before when his sisters came home with their mascara running and their eyes red with unshed tears. He’s proud of say he’s punched a guy or two on behalf of his younger siblings, scared a few boyfriends-to-be with a glare and a punctuated slit motion across his throat if something didn’t set right.

He doesn’t want the same for Pidge. He doesn’t want her to think she’s less than anyone else, and he certainly doesn’t want that to come from heartache from a boy or a girl.

After all, he hasn’t quite figured out the best places to hide bodies at yet.

As a peace treaty, Matt smiles with a sheen of hopefulness on the brim of his hazel irises, “well, don’t think too badly on it. Rolo and everyone else is scared to death of Mr. Kolivan, and Keith’s right; he’s got a lesson to teach, so let’s let him take it.”

A striking image comes to mind of a rough and tough bastard with tattoos and scars all along his arms and his neck sharpening a knife with a picture of all the little shits that dare speak ill in his classroom. That sounds like Mr. Kolivan, and he really wants to see how accurate his imagination stacked against the bonafide man in person.

The pianist, an elderly lady that plays more from heart than from talent, starts to play the first chords of ‘Beulah Land’ in heavenly andante, prompting the small-chatting crowd to disperse to sit. As the sanctuary attendance settles down, Pidge leans tug on Shiro’s hand.

“Sit down, or the pastor is gonna use you for the offering.”

Service ends up not being nearly as grueling as surmised, nothing like pulling teeth to keep awake, nothing like having to pretend to care when apathy is a reigning crown. No, he is shocked at how each tick passes, and how there are so many that come to him for the proper introductions. It’s as though he’s due the hospitable welcomes to good ol’ Gilman and due the hopes that he loves the patch of land as much as they all do.

It’s all choir songs, hymnals, and children’s church before Pastor Coran ascends to the pulpit while the crucifix hangs behind him.

"Today, my fellows and ladies, God has touched upon my heart these words. May He use me to
speak to you this glorious Sunday for those with a burden upon your heart that needs to be given to
His hands. As the Disciples did, we, too, sometimes lose all that we own and love to be made
anew.”

—

Black rolls to a stop at the fence at three o’clock.

Hunk was in gracious spirits with Ezzy flaunting about with her usual flair, hair fluttering along
fractals of sunlight while taking care of customers with a shyer but no less efficient Ashe at her
side. The incident at the diner earlier in the week seems to have endured time fading memories
away, Hunk smiling from the counter when Ms. Waitress of the Year herself brings Shiro an extra
piece of scrumptious pecan pie to make him ask how the hell did he go all these years without
good artery-clogging Southern cooking?

“Gratis, Mr. Hunk said,” Ezzy coos with such warmth that Shiro is sure to figure out how to pay
him back, “think of it as a welcome to town gift, as small as it is, but it’ll fatten you right up quite
nicely!”

Thoughtlessly, the veteran adds a six mile jog to his daily routine to start exactly at six a.m.,
tomorrow morning whether he appreciates the health concerns or not.

With the clanks of coffee mugs and clinks of silverware all mingled with small talk and deep
methodical conversation of Pastor Coran's sermon, Shiro wears down faster than he intended. The
Holts are still the most gracious hosts to ever be pulled from the earth, the twins keep Shiro
between them in the booth while the old hens of the church vicariously speak through Colleen.
He’s been called stud, grade A beef, and worthy of cradle robbing all in one day, and he’s a bit
squeamish now.

Colleen only chuckles and promises with a pat on the back of his hand, “don’t worry, buttercup,
I’ll beat the old bats right off of you if they keep studyin’ you too hard.”

And to add to his lack of volition to keep up with the personal interactions, Judge Alford King
himself comes up behind to clap him on the shoulder. That touch sucks away the last drop of
energy and just makes that cot upstairs in his house all the more a sight to behold when he gets
beyond that door.

"I know you’re my heavy, son, but I am in desperate need of some filing help and some errand
runnin’ tomorrow..."

If the man wasn’t so kind and so charming with his drawl and hopeful bright blues… damn.

With the day’s excursion done and over with, Shiro sits there in Black for a bit to check off his
nerves before slipping from her seat to walk up to the porch, The bluebells he’s still meaning to
plant when the garden beds are all planned out sit in greeting, a slight of wind even swaying the
petals in a mockery of a wave. It’s nice, he thinks, to believe that maybe something here is happy
to see him.

The silence is still fucking deafening.

Better to walk in and see what awaits him today rather than put it all off, his hand wrapping around
the knob before he stops dead. Blinking through a mention from Thace and Ulaz yesterday, there’s
still a part of his property he hasn’t quite involved himself in. The thought is strong enough to pull
him away from the door to urge him towards the side of the house where grass is as tall as his
shoulders, dried blades that go all the way near the shed.

God, he really needs to cut this all down, to make this atrocity to landscaping fall away so he can have land, not tussocks as far as can be seen, and while there is that small underlying threat of snakes and of rats, those he can handle.

It isn’t even eight steps before his knee smacks along a thick flatness, and his reaction is delayed, then crudely loud.

"Fuck... ! Fuck, fucking, fuck!"

He growls, temper jacking up right back up to level orange from the pain that shakes through his leg from impact of— what the hell was that even? His right arm, stub fitted with advanced wiring and metal, hurts enough as it is, and here he is risking his knee caps.

Curious or not, his fists grasps at the stalks of tall grass, jerking away until the fibers break as they cut into his left, right one thankfully replaced with the robustness of non-keratin. It’s now a measure of rectifying the throbs in his knees and to know what’s going to be the next problem in his renovation project.

It’s stone, a washed white with stains of green that splotch over engravings. He steps back because it’s out of place, unable to put any stake as to what this could be until he can scan the carvings out to see a name.

Susannah McClain

1895-1915

It’s cold. It’s suddenly very cold and as starkly dead as a cemetery, but, oh, this dumb boy that he is though a grown man, this is in fact just that.

The unalloyed horror forces him back, unable to breathe or blink as he’s washed clean of the strength that would keep him tall when the backs of his knees hit a flat piece, just the same as the marker he’s unable to tear away from. Nearly thrown off balance, he’s barely able to catch himself, a testament of resolve that saves him so that he can lean against the shape hidden in the grass.

His mind sparks with icy refraction as he gazes at the grave marker of this Susannah with one ringing question: he’s found another one, hasn’t he?

It is mindless monotony of blurring sharps and darkened curves then, his arms and legs possessed by a beast that is more scared than furious as he’s so desperately needing to see with his own eyes what is here, needing the confirmation that it isn’t just timorous delusions from his mourning.

It’s hours, surely, but they pass like seconds as he allows himself to blank out and tear into the reeds under the blazing supervision of the sun. The day soon begins to droop, a drop of the sun evident in the sky when he stands to inhale a brimming gulp of air, to see the piles of blood stained grass, red from the cuts along his palm and fingers.

Seven. There are seven graves here.

How could these have been missing? How could no one have warned him? For the lack of
warning, he is now trembling at the grave markers, barely up to his knee yet seem abominably large in comparison to his frame. In his frenzy, he glances back and forth between the epitaphs carved in the limestone, lurid letters spelling out words while he trembles: mother, father, sister, daughter, son—.

The names, outside McClain, mean nothing to him as he is then struck with such terrible revelation, a heart shattering reality that for this portion of life he has stolen for himself, for the selfish gripping at the petals of a bond that he has ruined by means that he could not— no, would not control— he wouldn’t have—. The world, in the blacks and in the wheats and in the stones, are all achromatic as he must accept what is not six feet under his feet.

Lance has no grave here.

A sob scrapes at his throat, but he swallows it away with an obstinate swallow as the lack of Lance’s presence of death creates is pathos unrelentingly fracturing. Between the cracks, the sorrow, atramentous, pours over his ribs to drown his heart and heavies his legs, draws his knees to bend as he settles along the bends of grasses.

Macabre as it is? With only the oak to testify to his madness, he wanted to line his fingertips along the chisel of Lance’s name, to press his forehead against the cool roughness of stone. How close Shiro could be to him, this youthful dancer of ribbons tied to Shiro’s neck and his wrists, the silks compelling him to beg and to need. He would have been content like this when he fears that Lance’s wayward soul might never come to see him again, drifting in the aphotic abyss far away from Shiro.

The wind sighs into his ears, and eases around him to press along his cheeks a clarity.

The trail.

Explanation isn’t easy coming, and while Shiro surely cannot put a finger on it, he thanks the blessed wind for its calling. He needs to go to the path, to walk it all the way down to the river wherever it may be. Something aways him, maybe even Lance, and he needs to go to properly meet it.

It isn’t too hard to keep his eyes averted straight when passing the shed, the grisly image of the lady in her undeserved Tatarus still rancid in his brain, but he unlatches the gate to step beyond the fence.

The path is winding, bordered with the tall oaks that seem endless, their emerald foliage nearly hiding the sky above. It’s all red dirt under his soles with gnarled roots vining over the path in myriad of spindly patterns to regain the land that is nature’s claim. It would be peaceful, perhaps, if not for his lungs in his stomach and heart in his ears, but the silence of the woods follow him.

He is nearly beside himself when he hears the lonesome coo of a mourning dove.

The path starts to feel like it leads to nothingness, a cipher of void that can only await the existence of a life stagnant. Never changing, it is all the same, rows and rows of oaks and of shadows in the wake of what he may surely find at the end of the path when there might be nothing but the door to Purgatory awaiting him.

With nothing more than grit and sheer spite, he perseveres against that anxious common sense to go back.

There is something he needs to see.
Soon, sooner than he expected, the shadows start to part, and he finds the Alabama River in its
glory, murky and overcast with umbrae from the trees and the water reeds.

Unsure of himself, he leans over the edge, noting the drop in the land to the water. While the
ripples brew, Shiro wants to dip down beneath that muddy surface, let the currents high and strong
whirl him down to the bottom as though a siren in her own right settles with the bottom feeders as
she awaits her next lover and meal.

If there is no grave, and if there is no body, could Lance be there with the bottles of figurative love
letters Shiro would cast into the river for him, hoarding the glasses of blue in a monument to
affections he cannot return?

He waits for a sign, for hands to reach out the silt and the grime, but there is nothing here, not even
a boat or a demon, and he’s… disappointed. Shiro optimism, lacking as it is, was hoping for a
message, some closure to his eerie find of the McClain family cemetery, sans the grave he was so
sure he would find.

Stop, he begs himself, as if he’s wandering too far down those horrific creeks of mindlessness that
leads to corpses, and he would like to leave it where it stands.

For the seconds that he spends with hopes dashed asunder, there is just the river that runs as it has
for centuries and the trees that loom with their secrets. There is no Lance here, there is no grave,
and he's just as worn down to the brittle as he was before.

But, he prays, for anyone that would listen to the words of love lying bleeding, for a sign that only
he could comprehend.

Shiro lingers another moment before the sun wanes down in the vernal sky, and reluctant as he is,
heading back now would be opportune in case darkness casts the shadows along the path. There
may be hunters in these woods, and they may be some halfway allies to him, but he’d rather be in
the confines of the house before nightfall.

Turning his back to the river is when something catches his eyes, and were it any other color, he
might have left it be, but it’s blue. It’s blue and he has to give it all the undivided attention the
universe grants, and with a sluggish step or two, he finds himself kneeling in the dirt to once more
pull away at the weeds of the land to gain his treasure.

It’s a cameo, weathered by all the years, discarded here to be alone just like he is. It’s so small in
his palm, tarnished gold encircling faded blue with embellished curvatures of a flower Shiro
doesn’t recognize. With some minor inspection, he finds a clasp, nearly broken in two, that budges
with a little bit of work. Inside, an engraving reads a hidden message.

‘To my camellia,

Yours, Z.G.’

Blame it on the heat, blame it on the sorrows of a downtrodden man ready for a long sleep with no
more visitors, but once he reads the adoration of this gift, he knows without truly understanding
that this belongs to someone he has met already, a lady that is probably looking for it as she does
for her own child, missing from the pages of her story.

This needs to come home.

—

February, 1914

Sue introduced me to a friend today. She says he is the Mayor's son and going off to university once he receives his acceptance, He intends to be a lawyer, and Sue is just taken by him.

His name is Zarend Garland.
August, 1914

Mama says she dreamt of fish again. I sure ain’t having them. Papa says maybe one of my brothers’ wives might be having one, but mama says that she wouldn’t dream of fish with them being so far away. It’s hard to tell hundreds of miles, she says and that’s for just fine. I guess I am not sure which girl we know is going to be birthing if mama is dreaming about fish.

Sue snuck off again tonight. When she is gone, I cannot sleep. I feel restless like I need to worry about her. Sue told me to keep quiet when she went out though, told me she was going to see her friend. Sure it’s the Garland man that she took into the shed with her when mama sent me back from the cotton to get some water for papa and her. I am not blind.

I do not know if I like this Garland man. While I have not had a mean word between him, I have heard many things about his father. Terrible things. People go missing because of this man. Sue’s Garland does not seem to be hateful, but just something does not feel right.

I really hope the fish aren’t swimming for Sue.

—

A month passes, but Lance does not return to his cot side.

In dew light morning shine, he stands in front of the mirror of his bathroom sink, fresh from his sweaty jog down Oak and then all the way back up. He wonders about a bath, wash away the salt of his skin and settle under the water, but really, Shiro is more preoccupied with the reflection of a man in the mirror that looks like he’s been rode hard and put up wet.

Fingertips touch over the garish scar of his face, tracing the pinkish scab with the lightest presses of his left hand with metal and carbon fittings are too much. He’s been thinking about it, pontificating on the ordeal that he has sown. How unlikely is it that Lance has been scared off by the candor of Shiro’s affection, but just him entirely? Maybe he is just too grisly a sight to bear, a wayworn beast that is too damn scary to love.

It wouldn’t just be Lance, but it’s quite the common time in Gilman as he has learned that the talk
of the town in dealings with him is to not stare, it’s impolite, because he’s human like the rest of them. Bless his heart, they might would think, and not in that Southern double standard of conniving false concern that Shiro learned quick to pic up on, but in the true way, the one that hurts more, he thinks.

Though, Sendak might say different, as according to him during an encounter in the Holt Grocery, Shiro is a sight to behold and is as handsome as a cleaned up 1968 Ford Mustang. It’s a weird compliment, but it’s almost better than being called a monster.

Shiro would be all right not being called monster to his face.

While standing there for a prolonged moment more, there is a question of the senses of the tactile, a chill along his shoulders as if it’s a ghost of hand brushing to console. For his own sake, to not even suppose that he’s half as crazy as he feels, especially on these days when phantom pains flare up like hell, he chalks it up to jogger’s fever, that coldness that takes the body when it’s working back to not dying from overexertion.

Quietly, despite his reasoning, he whispers into spaces of life and death that he’s sorry, he’s so sorry, that he’d do anything to have Lance back for another night just so he can rectify it all.

The cold lingers a little while longer these days, just as normal as seeing Sue herself walking towards town in a time she no longer exists in. It is clock work, on the hour every morning he laces his shoes— brought to him by a bitter Keith Evans in a box of his father’s nicer, barely used clothes— to head down the road and burn the calories so he can indulge in the butter laden and deep fried perfections that he’s come to crave though his fridge is stock full of juice, produce, and a pitcher of Judge King’s favorite sweet tea, specially made for Shiro.

Sue is wistful and almost soft now, and this morning was the same as any other, just another day to her as she is repeats the cycle. Her attention is always on the road she walked in her once life, but try as Shiro might to schedule around her, it’s every morning at seven, her white dress unmistakable.

Despite their first time impressions, he can say with confidence that he has more understanding of her from the eyes of her brother. Susannah McClain was lively, full of love for family and the church. Her beauty, prettier than any Georgia peach with a heart as sweet as honey, made her a popular staple in the town as beaus from every corner of Gilman and even Selma came to her beck and call. By the stars, her ways were simple, caring for the house and for the younger ones while others were in the cotton fields, and there was only man that was the apple of her eye of all of them.
In all of Lance’s journals so far, it’s always the same man over and over, and well, that’s fine to do. If Sue was happy, then why not?

They were happy in their ways, though there were shared fears in concerns to the truth of their adopted surname being discovered by someone unsavory, but they were still content and accepted. The parents worked in the cotton fields with a few hands, Lance helping around there and also in town as he was the most educated. At times, he would help Sue tend to the home and the little siblings, and Shiro can just read the integrity of Lance’s familial love in every scratch he made with his pen on paper.

Shiro loves it all, loves all the details written by Lance’s hand, and every night when the world is full of cotton fibers that float in his vision, he kisses Lance’s signature before bidding the house good night.

It’s when he reaches to click the bedside lamp off that he wishes that for his mornings, it would be Lance on that road instead of his elder sister.

Truthfully, his sorry heart misses Lance more than it misses life before the Army, and though he’s trying to live with no regrets blooming in the valleys of his mind, planting azaleas and dogwoods where there is a cacophony of colors and feelings, the splotches of forget me nots still bud.

Life, though, is almost too busy some days to think upon the haunt he wants so badly to see with working with the Judge on all the odds and ends of a career as overseer of law while also working towards the celebration of the Juniberry Festival. There is an incredible to-do list that is at least twenty pages from scheduling events, booking bands and assigning booths. Then, there are the easier things, of mapping out parking areas for visitors and tasting the cuisine of a fifty mile radius for admission into the coveted food spot. It’s all a bunch of busy work to help fulfill their deal, but it’s enjoyable and a damn good distraction.

When Shiro has a free breath to inhale, free from the musty office building of Town Hall, he is company on the Evans farms or at the Holts, either helping around the farm or attending championship games for baseball.

If not in the bleachers hollering himself hoarse with Colleen, he is just another part of the family, even so much as being a guest of honor at the eighteenth jubilee of the twins, an invitation without the room for rejection (like he would ever dare not attend), but his attendance still appreciated all the same.

Most teenagers on their cusp of adulthood would have been rowdier, he’s sure, but for Matt and
Pidge, their party was more a humble gathering and that suited them just fine. There was plenty of yard for all groups, Matt between his friends from the baseball team and the science club and Pidge with her gaggle of fellow intellectuals that all obtained early scholarships to major universities, same as she, and then the adults that crowded around the punch bowl to talk about all the accomplishments of their kids.

It ended with the guests leaving with the arrival of lightning bugs and Shiro handing over a silly birthday card to each of them with money from little cash back purchases during his errands for the judge.

“Don’t spend it all in one place,” he told them while the fairy lights of the dogwoods illuminated their private sitting once all party was cleaned up and done away with, "but you two know I don’t mean that."

Tapping his foot along the cheap bathroom rug, he’s should chastise himsel for not trying to figure out their graduation gifts sooner, but he's honestly awful at that. Gift giving is an art that he is a dismal amateur of, so for their final day as children of the high school system before a summer before college, he will unabashedly give them colorfully childlike cards again just to joke on them. At least Matt and Pidge are worth it, all around good kids that have already picked out their first sleep over at the house once summer is in full swing.

Damn him, there’s so much to do in the coming days, and yet, his eyes line over the pink of the scar in the mirror, a forever mark that never fades despite all the praying on liar’s gold in wishing wells. He loathes it like a man should loathe sin, but it’s a part of himself that will never leave.

That scar is as much an everyday commonality as him looking for Lance is.

For all the commotion he should be inflicting upon his house, he groans low and slumps his shoulders, reminding himself as he brushes his teeth and changes clothes that today is an off day that he must allow himself after bustling yonder and back more times than he can count while keeping up with the social graces amidst the town folk.

After a few good deeds under persuasion of Sam Holt, Shiro has gratefully swindled a free one-time lawn service from a local teacher that does landscaping on the side and would just so happen to have a soft spot for veterans. Sam was right, and the man was good on his word, cleaning and manicuring the McClain cemetery as well as cutting the grass, removing the weeds, and tilling the garden beds for Shiro’s poor bluebells to finally set their roots in.

Today, though, he should at least make a grocery run, but that might not be enough to pull him
from the house with a donated fridge puttering away in a barely stocked kitchen, furnished perfectly with a few of Mrs. Holt’s old pots and pans.

By God, he is making this house a home if it takes every drop of blood and sweat he has.

With his sweat-stained jogging clothes in the hamper, he is in some reasonable working clothes, eager to at least make the day useful and put to the test some handyman skills he’s picked up from Keith— though Shiro is pretty sure Keith is more encouraged by Shiro’s skill with a tractor than a hammer— when there’s suddenly a blaring of sirens and incessant honking from outside.

With a grunt, he’s nearly chomped down on his tongue from all the noise, but gathers wherewithal to rush over to the front door to fling it open as must as it would allow, seeing the last person he expected to find on the other side.

“Sherriff?”

Allura King indeed stands there on the porch, looking like she has already had a good, old fashioned bad luck morning as evidenced by her usually impeccable attire instead wrinkled and disheveled. She’s on the brink of exaggerated, exhausted from what may have been a series of bad circumstances that lead her here instead of a bottle of something stiff and strong.

“You’re gonna have to come with me, or she’s gonna drive me mad! She said she was gonna make me do it, and here I am!”

From the bags under her eyes and the shaking of her hands, Shiro is stricken with worry, how this usually determined woman of authority is still holding her bearings, through there is a few missing.

“…Who?”

“Auntie Haggy!” Allura confirms as through Shiro is a dumb as a bucket of rocks, her hands flaying about in the obvious, “I said I wasn’t bringing you to see her, and I swear I’m a worm in hot ashes over her castin' something on me! Me! Her own flesh and blood!”

She’s gone down right daffy, completely off her rocker because here the sheriff is speaking of things that sound like spells instead of just verbal demands of wanting a visit, and it just unsettles
him more.

“Okay, okay.” His hands raise and he’s taking a step back into the parlor, honestly with the hopes that he has an ally in all this, that somehow the broken peace of the home will rouse one of the spectral residents and prompt them to pitch a commotion over all this. He’s definitely fretting over Allura who is about two feet away from the psych ward with the twitch of her eye.

“Wait… you’re coming?” inquires Allura with such skepticism that the outsider-turned-citizen is offended, “you’re seriously gonna let me take you to Auntie’s?”

Shrugging loosely, Shiro gives up on his dreams on aims to work on the house with just some wood from an old lot in town and his hammer since he’s just curious now. “Sure, why not?”

Allura’s relief is like steam rising into the skies, and as he locks the door out of random familiarity, he notes a shift in the curtain of the main window of the parlor. His eyes linger on them for a bit, like he’s watching eyes beg him not to go.

“… I’ll be back soon,” he mutters to the shut door before he turns to walk down the porch stairs and to the patrol car where Allura listens to the police scanner as Zephne, one of her officers, dispatches the calls for the day.

While Allura takes her job with an earnestness that would befuddle those that know how little crime is committed in the Gilman district, Shiro watches her slump into the car seat before driving them down into town as they listen to radio static and silence.

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Hagaret King, more widely known as Ol' Haggy the root doctor, has a shack on the other side of town closer to the Evans farm. After debilitating muteness, Allura gives up on keeping the mystery to give him a quick rundown of her aunt. From the sound of it, Shiro might come to like her as she’s as quick as a whip and as cunning as fox, having successfully spurned the affections of the Mayor of Gilman since he was old enough to love anyone other than himself.

"She thinks it's all a game, really, one's she’s masterfully played in the sixty some odd years they've been playing, and he’s dumb enough to wait until the cows come home. Poor bastard; he never had a chance chasin’ after magic."
Once Shiro steps onto Haggy’s land, he can believe it. In the air, there is a static cling that raises the hairs on his arm, makes him feel that there is something powerful at work with the shack at its core. From all this talk of magic, the man on the premises can only think of witchcraft which then relies on such limited knowledge he possesses other than the few misinformed cartoons he’s viewed as a kid. He can see it now, a green, older version of Allura leans over a fat cauldron that bubbles eye of newt and boils salamander tail in the middle of her living room. It would make for snappy potion making, though it also just makes his stomach roll in acrid distaste.

Allura side eyes him with a hesitant look after she’s reached the door, pushing back the inevitable as long as she can muster before her fists rises to knock. Her attempt at the cordial are in vain as there’s a shrill cry of an antsy older lady through the screen door, "come on in, Lulu! You been keepin’ an ol’ bat like me waitin’ so long I’m fixin’ to put myself in my death bed!"

Allura rolls her eyes, winning her a ‘don’t make eyes in front of guests’ from her aunt, but smirks at him while opening the door to let him in, a gesture he is sure is frowned upon.

“Beware, Shiro, she’s a flirt— and her name is Auntie Haggy, don’t even try to be formal.”

By God, Hagaret King cannot get over to him fast enough, her grin full of white teeth and her hair in long loose natural curls that gives her an air of youthful carelessness. She indeed seems like an older Allura, or what Allura has to look forward to, but while Hagaret may need a cane, Shiro bets she can out run him.

This woman, peculiar as she is at first sight, feels like the grandmother he has not seen in decades.

Before she’s upon him, he spies around the room to see instead of a cauldron is an outdated set of seating, a faded couch and love seat. For her comfort, Haggy has a new recliner that sits directly in front of the television that displays a soap opera rerun with a scandal of love and of death brewing away. Shiro even finds dried herbs in place of hanging lizards and birds, more varieties than he has ever seen before in his life and cannot possibly name. Everything has an old atmosphere, yet has a magic that collides with his thoughts and makes it magnetic.

"Look at ‘im, Lulu, just look at ‘im, this good lookin’ man without a girl on his arm— or boy, I ain’t like them old hateful hussies now— but my, my!" Auntie Haggy croons over him, and just for keeping on her good side, he leans when she motions down to whisper in his ear, her pointer curled in a ‘come hither.’
"I won’t tell nobody your little secret, baby cakes."

Though his jog was hours ago, a fever chill of sweat wets along his forehead, worried that her fingers have dug in to his heart to grub around for the wiggling vestiges of his heartache, those pieces of himself that he’s hacked apart and buried with Lance’s lack of presence.

But, Haggy continues, her voice shrouded in the low churning clouds of a coming storm. "You need to be thinkin' hard about it when the answer ain’t in your hands to hold."

For all her commotion, Shiro doesn’t understand, but he wonders if she somehow knows about the journals, of the written entries of the life day to day of the McClains, especially of Sue who Lance was closest to.

The thought strikes a piano cord on sharp, makes him recall the fluttering of the curtains on his way out of the house. It’s been a mulling about, but Shiro wonders at times when he’s away does Sue come looking for him, wandering the halls and the rooms to call for him. Her voice is gone, and she has never tried to speak since she begged for help, but God, how terribly lonely she must be, no child or lover, no brother out and about with her.

Shiro only ebbs the solace upon himself that he has not had to face any other ghosts of the McClain family—I he isn’t sure how he would deal with the smaller ones who are buried outside with their parents, or even the patriarchs themselves.

Coran mentioned at times to count the little blessings, and by golly, Shiro counts those.

He’s gone again for too long when Haggy eases him back from the floating away he tends to do a lot here lately, touching his cheek the same way Colleen does in that soft maternal way. He watches her, lets those hazel eyes peer into his own while Allura’s stance is one of strange stiffness as though she is ready to pounce and manhandle her aunt off of Shiro.

“I’ve got a special tea blend for you. Did your silly self know I could feel you in my bones when you done rambled in here like a bad wind? Knew you were troubled when the air changed— but my tea, it’ll ease them jitters you got, help your poor heart sleep.”

Frightening as it should be, it’s actually a consolation that she knows in milky smokes and in swirling brews, in tea leaves and in burned bones what his ailment is, as though she is prescribing a remedy for a heart broken by actions of his ignorance. He figures, for all the herbs at her disposal,
that the tea is just a natural blend for something she assumes upon with a projection of accuracy, but he isn’t turning her down.

Even though Allura and Shiro have just walked in and afternoon has not soared up, Haggy fusses over them until the two of them are at the table so she can feed them. Even before walking into the kitchen, the spices and the meats frying turn him on to a good meal, and Shiro is fed the old lady’s infamous spicy fried chicken and sweet cornbread straight from a cast iron skillet while her greens cook to perfection with slices of ham hock and fatback.

If not for his workouts, he is certain that by now, they would have had to widen the door ways for his girth, surely able to gain fifty pounds out of sheer gladness of the eats he has devoured in a sitting at supper.

While talking it up with Haggy over just the little nuances of Gilman and his life prior to rooting to the red clay here, Allura is peculiar in all this, her owlish eyes watching the two of them in their banter. However, one thing holds clear, and Haggy is just as sweet and doting with her Lulu as she is with Shiro, even trying to get up to make them second helpings. For him, Sam Holt is a good man and a good teacher, having told Shiro one night when Colleen went to make another plate that a Southern man of decent raising doesn’t let a woman toil her whims away.

Haggy is nearly beside herself when Shiro makes her plate for her, slapping the table and making the silverware clatter. “I'll be damned, honey cake, look at you! Gettin' sweet on me!”

“I… I think Mr. Holt puts it as ‘I wasn’t raised in a barn?’ He’s been a great teacher,” he interjects between her candied croons, heaping her plate with more cornbread and greens, “and I want to make sure he’s proud of what he has taught me, ma'am.”

"Ohh, Lulu, listen to him! Talkin' like a good one! I bet only your Keith could sweet talk an old bitty like me more than handsome here!"

He stops. ‘Yours?’ As in Allura’s? It’s strange, and though there’s a glimpse of Keith in his mind, his hands tight around his mother’s Bible as he gazes at Allura from his back pew seat, he turns from the stove to find a stricken face of not a sheriff, but of a young woman that sits in torment.

There’s nothing in the kitchen but the boiling of a pot on the stovetop and the ticking of a cuckoo clock on the wall.
Haggy sighs in an ultimatum, a stumble of her grand gestures now resigned in the pity she wears along the frown lines of her mouth, "oh, honey child, I completely forgot again... you know your ol’ auntie; it’s gettin' hard to remember such things."

“I know.” Allura sits there, her food now going cold as she burns her gaze at the home cooked meal instead of either of the two see the watering of her blue eyes. It’s unquestionable now that for his time here, Shiro had it all wrong, that Keith and Allura aren’t pining away for each other— no, they loved once, were once his and hers, but now the two halves of a whole are split. Here Allura is, her disposition one that nearly crumbles entirely in the face of the calamity that befell her love affair while she already carries the jar of her guilts in the crook of her arm where Keith’s should be.

“Things will change,” Haggy tells her once the main course is over, folding her weathered hand over Allura’s while Shiro cleans up the kitchen some, his little way of giving them the privacy that they deserve, “and when you stop bein’ so damn stubborn, you’re gonna be happy again.”

He thinks the same of Keith, but as the formulates mission guidelines that will require more intel, the old root doctor is up, throwing open the freezer door to bang against the cabinets in what’s apparently regular fashion for her. It’s time to move on, so they both allow it with Shiro smiling kindly over his shoulder at the sheriff.

“Made a fresh batch just this mornin’! Boy, you thought I was fattenin’ up them bones of yours, but you haven’t had nothin’ yet!”

Haggy’s dessert is ice cream straight from her machine thats seen better days about twenty years prior with fresh peach slices dropped into the bowl for health, she says. After his second bowl, he’d determined that he needs to eat homemade ice cream at least twice a day because while it may be rudimentary compared to the ice cream shops across the United States, there’s that underlying ingredient that truly makes all the difference, that addition of love and tradition that is essential to making the best damn stuff on earth.

For the rest of their time at the shack, Allura does not speak much outside of being spoken to, tip of her spoon used for making indentations into the cold cream. Auntie Haggy with a nose for trouble and a heart for her family must be merciful today as she has let Keith completely drop from memory if only for as long Allura sits on the porch where her aunt insisted they migrate to after the dishes were washed.

As the sun raises high and Allura gets a call from the station of just a small debate between neighbors, Haggy shoos them away, but tugs on Shiro's shirt to keep him longer as her niece tropes along to her patrol car.
“Here, sugar, here’s you that somethin’ good I’ve been promisin’ you,” and she sets in his palm a bag of loose leaf tea with a wrinkled smile that has not one ounce of mischief or meanness, full of glowing empathy for his predicament. “Somethin’ to help with your achin’ heart and all that thinkin’ you fixin to do when you leave an old belle like me. Heartbreakin’, I know, but we must part ways.”

He smiles gratefully and thanks her, and he means it from the bottom of his heart, but as he goes to bid goodbye, she prompts with her finger for him to bend back close to her.

"Help a dying ratchet of a woman... and put my Lulu back where she belongs. She longs for the fire, and you know what I mean."

Her words indicate the mixing of affairs that he may need to step back from, but he just truly wants happiness for the two of them after seeing them pine more than turtledoves over the other that it’s just unbearable at times. For now, he has obtained her blessing to continue that fickle task of matchmaking, so he pats her shoulder. “I’ll do my best.”

At such short handed remittance, Haggy crows in disdain for the lack of approach, tapping her finger to her cheek to rebuke his gentlemanly touches, “you gonna lay some sugar on an old lady on her cheek, boy! Old maids, we gotta get what we can take!"

Of course he kisses her cheek, the skin soft and supple from the years she has spent walking this earth and living life in small town myth. She smells of spices from the kitchen and of herbs of her living room garden; like this, she is a comfort.

As Allura drives off, Auntie Haggy waves at them in the rear view mirror until she’s just another reflection of his life here in Dallas County, just another facet that has made him feel a little more whole again.

Bringing the satchel to his nose, he inhales deep before sighing, something light and floral enrapturing him. It’s clean, easing his nerves as they drive back towards Oak Avenue through all the turns towards Main Street. Even Allura makes a comment as her nose wrinkles pleasantly as the redolent scent filling the car, “chamomile? Are you having trouble sleeping?”

... He is, but he will not admit it, will to give voice that the nightmares that he suffers from are more horrific as of late, of shadows slinking from corner to corner in scrupulous dance while the candles of his subconscious are for too dim. It’s all too much symbolism for him to take, of
gloaming forms in cotton fields and blues rush like bloodied rivers over his ears. Never mind, too, that his darkest secret surfaces from a black pool of heartbreak when tears sting at his eyes when Lance does not come again, does not brush away the monsters that lurk not under the bed but in Shiro’s own mind.

Every night, he whispers pleadingly, fingers trembling against the sheets.

“I’m here. Please, come here.”

Here is not where Lance wanders and Shiro is alone until Sue walks the path at seven in the morning, and it’s all monotonous clockwork with monochromatic visions until night comes again for Shiro to wait once more.

—

When Shiro has been kicked out of the car and Allura has sped off in a cloud of dust and a blare of sirens, he stands there at the end of the walkway down at the blue and red of her filmy lights before she makes the turn back into town.

He’s got what he’s heard is a ‘hankering,’ some kind of craving that he has to do pretty damn quick or else it’s all for naught. Matt uses it when he’s in the mood for a cookie, or even Pidge when she’s sneaking into his pantry during Sunday visits to his house for his peanut butter. He knows now that he needs to go out to the farm instead of playing hermit to enact a recon mission to write in those details of Keith’s relationship with Allura, but he should at least check in long enough to put the tea away.

Inside is quiet, eerie, and just solemn all at once, like there’s something sad that dances forlornly with the dust motes. He hasn’t seen Lance in days, not since he was more of a fool to believe that love can be found like this, but there is now a feeling of sadness, something that pricks along his skin and makes him wonder what’s here.

It’s like longing reciprocated, and that sentience gives him the smallest flicker of hope, something tiny that he feels is like wondrous, hesitant in his own reluctant yearning that he has swept away when he pushed the boundaries too far.

He hopes Lance forgives him.
After all, he has used every trick he can think of to show how badly he knows he screwed up, from bouquets of flowers to gardening to setting down fresh baked pies from the church ladies in the kitchen to entice Lance into slipping in, curious. He has tried calling for Lance, walked the halls and the rooms in hopes that he can catch just a shift of a glance.

He’s nearly tugging at his hair as he stand there, nothing answered to quell the bees that swarm and fester in his lungs. It’s all shoddy excuses, he gets it, antsy with his lack of personal boundaries and unrequited feelings. There’s nothing that allows a man to kiss another without permission, without some mention of his intentions, and while he wasn’t too sure, Shiro could have at least thought ahead on the topic of sexuality. Since the kiss, he’s berated himself over and over, like wasps agitated, like drumbeats booming, chiding in such timbres of self-deprecation that topics such as romantic sentiments should just remain trinkets locked in boxes and be stowed away in attic spaces.

Yet, love should always be a river, curving a path through mountain rock and valley dirt to find the inlets into the ocean, that salty, endless ocean. Love is a path with overgrown with the tumultuous and fearsome as white river rapids or with the calm and tepid as babbling brooks of soft beginnings. He wanted— no, wants to take Lance’s hand to lead him down their path, but this is like an ultimatum, the guillotine sharply raised over Shiro’s jugular to cut it off. A sane man would stop, but Shiro laughs humorlessly in the parlor by his lonesome.

He isn’t sane, and he can't help himself, a lovesick fool that is left holding his own beating heart in his hand, to try again. But, mad or not, strings of puppetry guided by a throbbing heart or not, Shiro tries just one more time. An inhale, shallow and unsure, and then he sings.

"Come to me, my melancholy baby..."

Then, a pause, bones rattling minutely as his eyes dart throughout— but there's nothing, not even a ripple of a shadow or a flutter of a bloody skirt to show him that he has even been heard.

He’ll be damned to the ninth level of hell if he isn’t listened to today.

“Cuddle up and don’t you be blue.”

It's silent, so... regrettably silent. It is not even the common lack of sound that unnerves him now, but rather how there’s guilty oppression thick like the scent of freshly bloomed petals of early spring. Even the wind, usually a prevalence through the passage of the sun’s trail across the sky, is empty of its blustering currents.
His heart nearly breaks, the glass fragility of the bleeding beating thing too real and too painful to patch up when the fracture lines threaten to shatter him in pieces. The pressure is like a hand against his rib cage to press the blunt tips in, and the poison of lament like tar clogging his throat.

“All… your fears are foolish fancy maybes… You know dear that I’m in love with you.”

He stops at a noise, and for a second, he swears it was a gasp, tiny and perfect. He almost cries, almost yells for Lance to come where he cannot. Chewing on his lip, he parts his lip to press on, to croon as the singers of the past have done to their ladies and their gents, those propensities of affection that continued on until those figures of times once golden were cadaverous shells of glory days gone.

The next lyric catches in at the wet of his throat as the softest of brushes breathes on his cheeks, and something cold presses timidly along his lips.

It may not be much for others, but if that is all he will receive in response, he will drift just a little more, let the frayed seams mend themselves back into a patchwork joy.

Then, a chirp, and that nearly shocks his system with the sensation of ice water down his spine and done his legs. A second chirp, and there! It is surely a chirping, a song bird that has come to visit the humble garden, rest her wings along the banister of the porch to scope an opportune nesting place.

Shiro walks to the window, slow and unsure in the fear that he will scare the bird off, but she is there, a creature of the aviary, a mockingbird singing in joyous sunlight when his ears have been so accustomed to near deafness. Her sweet song and ruffles of her gray feathers rounds his cheeks as he grins, his lips stretching wider when that same airy touch grazes his hand.

Maybe he’s doing something right, after all.

—

Red’s ears raise at the sound of Black squealing to a stop, reluctantly roused from a cat nap to stretch her paws and her back before padding down the porch to cry for Shiro to pet her scruff.
Even from where he’s parked his truck, he’s more than happy to jog up to her, elated that she comes to eagerly for scratches and loved ons. She’s so good for him, so affectionate with the tilts of her head to guide his fingers to the best spot, that she even earns a kiss on her crown today. She meows at that, gazing up with her big all-seeing eyes.

“Where’s Keith, Red?” he asks while her tail curls in languid shapes, his gaze transfixed on her lazy drawls before she yawns and curls right up on the porch to resume her afternoon nap.

Well, he needs the walk, especially when Haggy’s lunch weighs him down to the the soil.

Easier to find than usual, Keith is draped across the gate of the main fence to watch the cattle graze in the fields, apparently having a lazy day himself. He does not budge, does not even jerk at the presence of someone unexpected as Shiro approaches without a word. Kinship such as theirs, he believes, lacks the essential verbosity that comes with talking, just needing to feel who is there instead of not.

“Thought you were gonna work on the house,” Keith grouses while staring out, listless and somber. Shiro shrugs with the decision to join his companion, feet climbing onto the bottom bar as he balances out.

“Are you working today? Don’t seem to be.” With a nudge of his elbow against Keith’s, Shiro half heartedly teases, but there’s a tension at Keith’s jaw that prompts a rush of an apology.

“Nah, no need for sorry, but... really, what’re you doing out here? Thought you said that the judge tuckered you out.”

Shiro hums, running over the scenarios in his head. With the aspirations in the apprehensions that his impasse with Lance has finally succumbed to the building of a bridge to meet halfway, the veteran of war still has a thought or two of the whole situation with the cattle farmer and the sheriff of small town life. It’s a romance novel written subpar at best, but once he gets to the nitty gritty of the nuances, then it’ll shove any dribble by Nicholas Sparks out the damn door.

But, nothing will come to fruition if he doesn’t start pushing boundaries again.

“I met Allura's aunt today," and instantly the stiffness is there tenfold, Keith made of granite rather than flesh at Shiro’s recounting, “and I guess since I was already up and dressed, I came over to see if you needed any help."
Keith snorts, hiding his nose against the folds of his arms before shaking his head, sullying away the covering up of facts with suggestions from the other man. Then, though, there is a suck of teeth and a croak. "How… is Allura?"

“She's good,” Shiro admits before turning to look at Keith head on, plums eyes catching his storms, an interlocking of a time where they can neither look away or stay there, spirits flaring as Shiro says plainly, “but I think she misses you as much as you miss her.”

Keith grows quiet, like God sent Michael from the church to steal away Keith's voice so that his secrets may forever be locked away. Fingertips drums along the biceps, the younger of the two deliberating as though death row has its eyeless gaze on him, his feet too close to the gallows and his neck to the noose, but there's something there, that need to vent brimming in his eyes.

Shiro is willing to listen.

"I think I need some coffee... you want some?"

Soon, the two men sit at the table, Keith nursing a cup of dark brew from a cup from his mothers’s willow china as he stumbles through his words, but it just makes Shiro all the more aware that Keith has maybe never had someone he could just talk to. It must be a relief, to let all that detritus that accumulated as a consequence of love too young float out and dissipate.

So, Shiro listens, and mourns what could have been.

—

If Keith were to be believed, Allura and him were fireworks, firebirds flying roughshod across the dirt roads that led to all their back way excursions while crisscrossing throughout the whole county. It’d been ardor, it’d been flames and laughter, of lemonade in the seat of the truck on hot days while the radio played the Braves or in the cooler months when high school bells bid the students back in for grueling year of academia and peer issues.

She’s a War Eagle and he’s a Roll Tide, but in Keith’s mind there’s still a box with a ring that he nearly threw away the night Allura broke his heart, told him she wanted to be the sheriff of their own, wanted to keep her roots and her raising when all he wanted was to gather her up into the truck, go off into the world that they talked all about seeing together. It’d been a nasty fight with
his father, drunkard and useless at the time, a rattling of empty beer bottles and slamming of screen doors. Keith had decided that night that he had enough, and every penny his poor departed mother saved for his college fund would go to their future.

Salt to the wound, Shiro realizes, is that the same night that Allura told Keith their paths could no longer walk together, hand in hand, as his intentions were from the moment he laid eyes on her at a Juniberry Festival all those years ago, Keith found a home without his father and all the savings gone from the Folger’s coffee cans hidden in the laundry room.

Allura assuredly let him go, let him spread his wings to fly away so he could traverse the skies where she could not follow. Keith should have gone, and probably would have before coming back to the home he knew he could not leave forever, travel-worn and happy to settle down with the woman of his dreams, the same he kissed the stars for every night away.

But life has a knack for cruxes, and Keith’s father, let the bastard burn in hell, for he clipped his own son’s wings because he loved the sex of a younger woman and the neck of a beer bottle more than his own flesh and blood, and took every cent in effigy to rambling the roads with a girl barely legal.

Mrs. Evans must roll in her grave every night her son goes to bed alone in that house, and Shiro knows exactly how that feels.

—

Keith sends him home after a plain turkey sandwich and some stale chips. It isn’t much and Shiro offered to have dinner at Hunk’s, but the other seems drained of all his devices from his sharing, so he politely declines.

The road is dark, ominous with how there’s such little light outside of the few lanterns of Main Street reflection eerily off the blue bottle trees. No ‘haints’ to be found walking from the boutiques or the diner, just common faces that Shiro is beginning to learn from the church and working with the judge. A few remark his truck and wave, and he’s gotten enough crash course in Southern hospitality to wave in return.

At a lone red light, he sees into Hunk’s diner where Ezzy and Ashe cater to a few late customers before sneaking back to a booth where Zephne from Allura’s patrol and Narti from Shay’s florist shop. They all fall into conversation that is surely about their day or their affairs, sipping at coffee and all four sharing a fat piece of caramel cake. Further down towards the corner, Hunk is there standing almost bashfully, and Shiro nearly lays down the horn for support as Shay is the lady that
has the large and in charge chef of the town adorably flustered.

The other customers are obvious fare, though thankfully no one atrociously scraggly like the Garland cousins who have thankfully made themselves scarce to be seen since Shiro’s near brawl with the trio. He should ask around if he’s scared their dirty, greasy overalls off their asses with his sheer prowess—he coughs at his own silliness—but with a flaunting shrug, he lets it go.

There is no point in thinking upon the matters that do not influence tomorrow or the next day, and there is not point in dwelling on the things of himself he cannot change.

Oak Avenue is darker than ever, and Shiro pulls next to the fence and kills Black still, the engine rumbling into silence while he instead looks up at the second floor window. Not a light to be found, no silhouette watching the few cars that will run up and down the road during the hours of the moon’s fancy. Disappointment assured, he does his best to chase it off, as it will surely bud into the purpling blooms of resentment. Many things he might be, but there isn’t an inch of his soul that could ever grow distaste for Lance.

The light switch of the parlor lights snaps, and illuminance is a blessing on gloomy roads and lonely houses, if at least for one more night. Count them, he thinks, as there hasn’t been a flicker or two in some time, and he’s mighty grateful. Such gratitude leads him into the kitchen where Haggy’s gift of tea sits on the counter, unmoved, and there isn’t anything to lose. He’s not much of a tea drinker outside of the usual warm greens on the chill of a winter morning back home though he’s guzzling the over-saturated syrupy sweetness of tea here like it’s water and essential for satiation.

Just a few spoonfuls of sugar in his tea, he agrees, a little something to stave off any of the tea’s bitterness as he’s such a poor keeper of time and bitterness of brew is inevitable. Then, he exhumes the drive to continue on with his day to leave it until tomorrow when the church bells toll for its sheep, and readies for bed.

It doesn’t take long for him to pass out while reading another book of Lance’s thoughts and life events, an autobiography that he eats up faster than a slice of apple pie baked by the loving care of Hunk. He reads until the tea brew, floral and light, seeps into the marrow and into the sinews to leave him weak to sleep’s dusty wand, sand bags heavy on his eyes before he’s out.

—

I miss the sea.
I miss the gulls’ cries.

I miss our little house near the shoreline.

I miss seeing the boats and the fishing nets.

I even miss the smell of tobacco leaves.

I miss home.

—

“Shiro?”

There’s a whisper, soft and unsure, from the top of the stairs. He’s barely cognizant, bones settled into the creaky cot with breath evened out under the floral guise of chamomile tea. A squeak after along the boards, and a then a glow from a lamp proceeds towards his room, casting orange over the long walls.

Shiro’s eyes barely blear opens, sleep dust clinging to his lashes as he manages to undo sleep’s hooks on his mind, tears the tips from his sleep attire as there is that sprouting hope that it’s Lance rusting towards the master room, please let it be him, so that Shiro knows that his serenade has garnered forgiveness from that beauty of his dreams.

“Shiro.”

As before, he merely blinks, and Lance is there, standing right beside his bed with hands that rumble and eyes puffy and red from crying. Shiro parts his lip, a scant murmur of Lance’s name breathing out before the oil lamp is set right down, a hard thud on the wood before the lithe form of the young man is climbing into the bed, right over Shiro. He’s shocked by the change, gasping as all the cognition slaps him fully awake, but cold palms cup his jaw and then lips are on his—.
Lance kisses him rightly, all lack of experience shining like a porch light in the pitch blackness, but if Shiro could give less of a damn, he’d have no more to give.

Though Lance’s hands are a burning cold, Shiro nuzzles eagerly into the life lines of those palms, reciprocating the touch before sneaking his hands down Lance’s shoulders and back to twist into his shirt. He’s suddenly ravenous, heat flares and spontaneous combustion all edging into that hunger for attention. Hungry, he’s damn hungry for those kisses, wanting nothing more than to kiss the younger man until they’re breathless supernovae that burn out of their passion into a simmering afterglow.

If kissing Lance is all he can have, he will drink like there is no quenching his thirst in sight, desert parching his throat and granules sticking to his tongue. If holding him is all he is allowed, he will carry Lance into their graves, six fathoms deep, because ‘til death do they part is a misnomer for eternity, and damn, Shiro is just fine with eternity wrapped around Lance.

Starving men are the worst, a declaration that is too respondent as Shiro’s hands delve further down towards the planes of a curves just below the belt.

“Shiro— n-no— T... Takashi.”

Shiro’s desire roar in his ears, and he has to jerk away, panting hard from the buzz in his veins and the tightness of his pants. His hands slide up, thumbs circling along the sharpness of shoulder blades beneath the cotton of Lance’s shirt.

They sit there, Lance straddling his hips and watching him worriedly as though he has done something wrong. “Is that...?”

Shiro swallows the burn down, lava trailing down his stomach as he shakily draws Lance down to shift onto their sides. He can’t handle that, those puppy eyes and puckered out bottom lip like he’s caught the pretty boy with a hand in a cookie jar to steal a treat long before the supper bell rings. Proverbial figures of speech might ruin Shiro as this point, because while Lance is pouting, there’s also the idea of another so-called jar Lance could sneak his hand right in.

But, no. Not this, not this way. He cannot sow the fear into Lance’s heart again, cannot spark the dark vines of nervousness and wariness to thread along those blue eyes. Death may be certain, but if Lance were to hide again, the older of them would be surely ringing up Death itself for a pleasant visit to tip his head, expose his neck the welcoming blade of a scythe, one that would slice him like wheat from the field.
“You're perfect... you're so fucking perfect." He whispers it all in tender prayers along the seam of those full lips, letting his hands caress over bony shoulders before petting through Lance's hair, loving each lock of warm brunet as their tongues barely brush and cause a giggle. It’s all for the best, a moment for them both to calm down, especially so for Shiro as hormones rage like lightning.

Lance sighs faintly into the touches, as gentle as a lover in the afterglow of the wedding night, and presses closer so his fingers will curl against the bareness of Shiro's chest. It derives a chuckle as the fingertips trace constellations of lions and of fishes along the skin, but then the tenderness severs with a hesitant hum.

"I... I'm sorry I… I went away," Lance whispers just over Shiro's heart, a wrapping claim on the piece of the other man that was willingly given at love’s inexorable first sight, "I... I didn’t know what to do, and...

"You were my first kiss."

If Shiro needed the slap to his lust-idle thoughts, there it was in resonating crack of skin on skin, that piercing, soul-clutching epiphany as to what really has been mustering away behind his back.

In a few instances of his time reading the journals, Shiro recalls at times Lance writing of the aesthetics of pretty girls, dictating with precision their curls and their rouges. In a quirk or two, Lance, vaguely, roams over the handsomeness of a few men, remarks on their broad builds and their scarred knuckles. Jealousy is an ugly beast, and one that burns in remission whenever Shiro reads about the nice farms girls and farm hands that catch Lance's eye.

*Primal.* That’s all Shiro can name the rupture of heat that erupts in his lower core, like the ore of his resolve is now hot liquid to turn to ash his will to keep this innocent. He will, albeit it is against his instincts, do all that he can manage to keep Lance feeling safe this time.

Swallow it down, he remarks, swallow it down into the pit because he is just thankful for his Lance coming to him, for slipping into his bed so that they might have this, whatever this is.

Like a moth’s wings to candlelight, like sunshine on the blue jay’s wings, Shiro can give it a name to what they have, and it is love, enamoring and drowning, digging out perfectly shaped holes so that they can settle in and stay there.
"I... I didn’t know," is confessed on a thick tongue that just wants to be preoccupied with those lips that taste like honey and ice. "I should have asked, I... I shouldn’t have assumed."

Lance shushes him with a tender smile, placing one finger over Shiro's lips. "No more sorries."

Forget being in love; he is absolutely possessed by this blue eyed angel.

"Okay... no more sorries, bluebell." Grinning at that little finger, Shiro puckers his lips to the lone digit before taking Lance's hand in his own, leaning over for with all the fervent ambition to kiss Lance senseless.

In his arms, the younger man squirms with a laugh, wrapping his arms around Shiro’s neck before there’s a pained gasp, tight and seething. It makes Shiro ease back to ask from the precipitous shift, but he sees churns bile in his stomach.

Lance’s eyes are wide and sightless, his body frigid, all his willowy curves rigid like a three day old carcass. His skin, that sun kissed caramel that sumptuously glows in the lamplight, sullies and decays.

The bedroom fogs over with the mist of sleep, those claws from the monsters that skulk under the cot rip him down with a snarling violence.

What’s the most terrifying sound to ever be heard, a shrieking noise that shatters Shiro into an undeniable wreck, is Lance’s screams, over and over. It’s a mantra of moments that carves into his flesh, into the meat of muscle, the words begged before a chasm of colorless, lifeless naught.

Don’t. Don’t. Don’t, please.

—

camellias. All white camellias stare towards him in judging reprimand while the blackness of the oaks groan as the river floods over their roots.
each flower begins to bleed, each petal dyed a sickly red.

he looks down, and there are corpses, all eyes wide open and all their eyes are blue.

help, she calls. help, she pleads.

the river bed rises, the silt-thick water up to his knees, drowning the camellias and waterlogging the family that died almost all together.

help, she whispers, broken and blue, as her fingers thread over his neck and constricts.

and as the air drips from his parched lungs, he thinks for a boy made of blue and broken sea glass and knows.

he needs help, too.

his heart, shivers of oaks that splinter the hands that try to hold him, beats only for that boy like the river’s hand stretches towards the sea.

her baby cries in the distance as the riptides swell.

—

Sunlight bleeds orange behind his closed eyes, awakening slowly from the grove of withering dreams to feel a burdensome heaviness on his chest.

It’s been such a small portion of his life spent here in the small town, even smaller that Shiro has lived inside his new home. More than thirty days, and he’s just barely scratching at the framework of what been wrought, of what prompted the digging of seven graves without an eighth, of what prompted a drifting soul to ask for his help. It seemed so far off in the distance, a star’s journey in fact, this ability or talent to offer a hand when he still pieced together what horrors he would find.
Now, though, he has a starting point, a beginning to an end, and he sits up slow. He knows what must be done, for not only for McClains that haunt him, but for this blood stained dirt, this red clay that stains his hands and his feet.

Church will toll for his soul in the pew soon, but he instead leans over the side of the cot to pick up the journal he left the night prior while the hollowness echoes in the hindsight that his dreams, sporadically twisted and haunted, are more than what he’s given credit for.

November, 1914

Sue is pregnant. I wish I could will the knowledge away. It stays, like a wound that will not close. She is with child, and I want it to go away.

I am not angry at her. I am angry at the man. I begged her to tell me, though I already knew. She told me my worst fears, that she’s been with the Garland man.

I do not fear Zarend Garland. I fear his father who I have seen treat others poorly. I fear the man that sits in Saint Michael’s with demands that the Kings sit in the back ‘where they belong.’

I ask Sue, does her lover know? Does he know our blood? Where our home is? She says he knows and that he does not care. I assume that his father does not know for if he did, it would surely destroy us.

Sue will show more soon. I do not know what to do.

I hope God watches over our family.

And when Shiro finds himself closing the borrowed Bible provided by the church, he stares listlessly as Pastor Coran speaks with the conviction of a good sheep that salvation is found through forgiveness, just as God forgave man for his sins with the blood of His Son.
Sin is not evil, but bleak. Sin is one thing that lines the sand between hope and helpless, and man sits here in their cacophony of lies and of scandals, of cheats and of murders, that Shiro knows, deep down where the hammer thuds once more, that he cannot ever forgive whomever harmed what is *his*.

—

As graduation for the twins nears and May flowers bloom in flourishing stateliness, Shiro bides his time and swallows his pride.

Alford has been eyeing him from his desk while they go over the finalized schedule, revised a million and one times since their first meeting. His companion is antsy, like fire ants have been crawling up his legs to bite his knees and thighs.

“Boy, last I checked, you ain’t no woman of the night and you ain’t in church,” the judge asks with a teasing lilt to cast a veil over his concerns, “but you’re sittin’ over there like a cat on a hot tin roof.”

“It’s just hot,” and hellfire it is, humid and disgusting hot already though seasonal progression to summer is skewed. He’s been reassured over and over that city folk like him, especially from the regions from afar that don’t understand the trials of Southern weather, that he will never get accustomed. As the window units chugs and rattles in the offices of Town Hall, Shiro believes it.

“Hot ain’t a hill of beans in May, Shiro. Wait until August, then you’ll really be suffering.”

Shiro barks a laugh too loud and to cutting, not out of spite or out of dread, but from his nerves scrambling together and breaking apart. The Coupe Deville sat in the mayor’s parking spot this morning, right next to the judge’s LeBaron, like a sore sight that smacked him hard to invigorate that bubbling rage that still simmers.

Lance has been wonderful, yet shy since that frightening occurrence, avoiding all of Shiro’s questions as to what happened, both in life and after. It’s only served to make Shiro, more aware of his corpulence, to gnash his teeth and chew on the side of his mouth throughout the days.

“I can’t tell you, sweetheart,” Lance breathed after days of inquiry, his hand cupping his lover’s jaw while his eyes, azure and forlorn, bore into his, “it’s best to not tell you.”
Against Lance’s wishes and good intentions, Shiro has sucked it up, telling himself in a horribly peppy manner that today is the day he speaks to the mayor, Zarend K. Garland III.

Any prodding into the old man that would rather laugh and joke about the other figurehead of the town he resides just ends up deflating Shiro’s faith in Alford King altogether. Locked doors with the skeletons of their enemies aside, he understands, truly, that there are things that are not his business to know. What is problematic is that this all is now his right to know as he has found the private cemetery though that opinion is apparently not agreed with. Even when asked about the graves, Alford’s composure fell short of his usual jovial and bright self, instead a shell that lacked the splendor of laughter.

“Let them rest, son, that’s all I ask.” But, they aren’t resting, and Shiro takes that entirely too much to heart. Not with Lance, who melts into his caresses, into the osculation while candlelight gleams along the sharp cheekbones. Not with Sue, poor Sue, terrifying only in her sepulchral torment, though fading into a tense solace as Shiro, her company other than her sprightly brother, strives for the pieces to complete her story.

Shiro has wracked his brain for any leads outside of the most obvious of the list, and the Holts are just as wary as the judge concerning their knowledge of the family’s fate. Colleen pales whenever he strikes up to the topic, disregarding the somberness that encircles the property and her own personal views while Sam waves him off, tuning him out for something far closer than death’s dealings.

Impasse that this is, he needs a damn answer, and he’s about to get one out of someone whether congenial to his asking or not.

“I think I’m going to get a drink. You want anything?” Shiro rises from his chair, consoling the quavery of voice that would give him away. Alford must think nothing of it, but raises his hand in dismissal of the offer while his eyes turn to their hectically penned notes on the festival.

“I reckon I’m content, but go on while I figure out where the hell we’re gonna put all these damn bounce houses for the young’uns.”

The fussing eases a smile out of the younger man, but he’s heading towards the door, only hesitating momentarily to glance back, wishing for a moment that instead of facing a hard ass like the mayor that the judge would instead be a messenger of mercy and miraculously mention to Shiro that he is ready to talk McClains.

No such restriction occurs, so Shiro slips out of the office with a quick click of the old door, the
journal he in the back of his jeans still digging into his spine. While not the best hiding place this side of the Appalachian, he at least deserves a few points for getting by with his weapon of choice for this long.

The mayor’s office is way across Town Hall, opposite of the courts and down a diluted hallway with boring linoleum and fluorescent lights to add to the environment that can only be described as ‘government administration.’ While the upkeep has been attempted at best, the building has its age and its issues, in need of repairs and of renovations, as that seems to be a reoccurring theme in Gilman. Shiro, though, doesn’t really mind it now, thinking that now these archaic foundations are just the details that sculpt out a small town life that appeases all that choose to stay.

True to say, he stayed too, and while there were sky scrapers and architecture of cities that moved him into lifting a number two pencil to sketchbook pages, this almost insignificant dot on the map has added him to the populous.

This all lies in another problem, one that while shielded with the journal of his choosing, will be rectified on this day with private meeting with Mayor Garland.

Convincing the mayor’s assistant to let him knock on the door is easy, an act simpler just by Shiro’s impeccable timing as the assistant is missing from their post. Fortune must just want to shine on him this hour, rolling out the carpet towards the impending final barrier into the office.

Now, it’s a matter of steeling nerves and exhaling jitters, to raise his fist to the door and rap in polite knocks before granted entrance. However, with the rupturing of his composure at the very act itself, his taps for requesting admittance are heavier and quicker than need be.

It’s with a wince that Shiro awaits the consequence of his heavy hand, a scrunch of his nose and his eyebrows perforating the folly he could have stumbled into. He waits, the clock of the waiting room ticking slowly while the beast he locked away rakes its claws on the bars of the cage, eager for a ravishing bombardment that would derive answers from beaten targets faster than any conversation could.

It comes after a pregnant pause, and Shiro hears a toneless grunt: “come in.”

Without dwelling on the treason he may undoubtedly be committing by going against the judge’s wishes for keeping sleeping dogs where they lay, he presses forward with a turn of the doorknob and step into the office of who may be the most powerful man around.
Zarend K. Garland III is about as lively as a corpse walking could, more attributed to running a small town rather than exceeding in any social queues. His deliverance is not through bombastic charisma like Alford King, but rather through the respect of the citizens by being work-brickle. He has not taken a day off in years, has not attended frivolous parties or festivals other than to conduct opening ceremonies or discuss the economic ledger of government finances, and has not married or reproduced. For all Shiro knows, the only person that stirred his affection is Hagaret King who literally found spurning him a cantankerous sport.

Haggy cannot be the sole ground that Mayor Garland erects the pyres of what little conviviality he could boast of as on that wizened countenance is a scare as vulgar as his own, a symbol of an instance that he will bear and bear alone. There are question, of course, mingled with thoughts, but assuming is an assertion that Shiro may be allowing trouble to meet him instead of him meeting trouble, so he refrain.

A smirk, out of place, twitches along the pall of sickened humor while lips form syllables around a baritone voice of poison oak.

“Well, if it isn’t Alford’s lap dog.”

The lack of any emotion is disconcerting, a barren wasteland of any inflection that would lead to some determination though, apparently, that smirk of pettiness is revealing enough. Shiro understands now that he has walked into a gladiator ring with a lion, starved and wild, is readying for meal that is a promise for a good spectacle.

More over, Shiro hopes that while his head is in the musty maw of a beast, the king of the wild cannot snap teeth down to crush his skull while a shield lies in place for his life. The journal is his salvation, like Caesar’s favor, like God’s grace, that might keep the lion snarling with its famish.

“I guess I am, yeah,” is retorted with a smoothness like a make calculating where the pawn and the bishop must move next on the board. Zarend chuckles, still emotionless even, and offers a hand towards the seat before his desk.

“Around here, boy, we have a saying. It isn’t kind, so I’ll be more than emphatic to tell you that you’re too damn big for your britches if you think you can come into here and demand something.”

Huh. Once the door is shut and Shiro is sitting in what might be more lacking in comfort than Alford’s guest chairs, he reckons that there is a lot more drama to the town’s hierarchy of relationships and opinions. Mayor or not, the formidable figure, dark and brooding in the lacking of
ways, does not want song or dance to justify the outsider’s visit.

So, it’s just a simple matter then, and Shiro places the journal before the imposing bastion that is Mayor Garland, gentle and reverent. He should be treated with more respect, an awfully true statement, as he is showing this man the writings of the love of his life, rotting in a shallow grave or not. A bold statement that this is, Shiro is obviously not here to abide time with flimsy stories of a youthful life surrounded such a small population, but with fissuring tomes that would crack shell of earth.

The mayor quirks an eyebrow, unimpressed, but with hands swollen with onset arthritis, he takes the book to open the pages, dark eyes scanning each word with the precision only authority can grant. Casually, the pages are flipped through, as though this is a faceless guerrilla tactic perpetrated by the judge before his reading slows, his lips pursing to stretch the scar on his face.

“You are here to ask me about Zarend Garland I?”

Shiro swallows, wasps in his ribs, blitzes of angry stingers that aid not in his this intimidation tactic.

“I’m here to ask if you know what happened to Susannah... and her family.”

Mayor Garland is by no means a gentleman that carries a cloak of kindness as his torch nor a man that holds a cup of compassion, but there is something there, an old stain that never washed away with time's ebb and flow. The curtains that would drape along his soul have been dirtied, a pall that is forever scrubbed and hanged to dry, repeated year after year from then forward.

Stains are usually easy to clean, a simple use of detergent and the fibers release the blot from what should be pristine. Here in this office, in the drab, minimalist decor only for the necessary, in the building with no central air conditioning while humidity threatens to asphyxiate them all, does he get it; stains are just as prominent as scars.

“You are digging into the graves that should stay dead, boy. You come into my town and bring this to me, to offend me?”

“No, sir,” Shiro objects, voice rising as his fingers dig into the arms of this miserable excuse for a wing back chair, "I came here because… I need to know what happened to them.”
A snort, rotten and derisive, condescending yet protective. “Happened? Are you assuming foul play? That—,” Zarend stops, and all that heightening build up to a tempest of furling rage settles into a stiff calmness, an eye of a storm that is dead set on watching the other.

“… Did your judge send you here, lap dog? Did he send you for one final jest before we both are feed for maggots?”

Maggots, the man says, but instead of wriggling worms in the soil, Shiro thinks of Sue’s hands on his neck, of her tired plea. Help. Help. Help, please.

She has poor taste in the living.

“No, and that’s why I’m here, dammit. He won’t tell me a thing, and fuck, it’s my house now, and all I know is that the house and the lands were the Kings’—.”

“Shut your damn mouth!”

A slam, rattling and jarring, and the older man’s fists have met with the desk as he erupts with the whipping lashes of a hurricane, haunches up and ammunition loaded, “that house is mine, should be mine! My grandmother—.”

He should leave, but he’s exhausted, too weary to even fall into a near panic attack over shouting and loud bangs of pounding fists. He should walk away, but composure, for once, weighs him down, a saint of clarity maybe so benign to make him a stead.

At the temper tantrum, Shiro concurs morosely that Sue would be heartbroken to see her grandchild like this, petty and possessive, shrinking back into his shell like an old turtle that has better manners than that.

But, at so much as a slight flinch from the target of his fury, Zarend stops, grasping the flinders of his dignified ambiance before he sits back in his worn leather chair to fold his hands together. The mask has fallen away into the childish, into a man-child with vendettas and hard feelings, but now the elected official of highest office in town has returned to the fold.
So, Mayor Garland speaks.

“My grandmother, Susannah McClain... was the apple of my grandfather’s eye. I knew her only in stories and in her picture.” At his confession, he nods to a frame on his wall, a command that would have Shiro turn to see a portrait of Sue herself, wearing the same dress he has seen nearly every morning on his runs. She is breathtaking, her face remarkably beautiful and elegantly kind, all the things she would want for her offspring.

At her eyes, all seeing yet blind to the woes of the last of her blood, Shiro longs to reveal that the mayor only needs to venture down Oak and he would plainly find her, a lady in white searching over and over for a town she cannot go to.

Alford King, brilliant man that he is, told on himself in a smidgeon of a proud man lauding over the unique adornments on Main Street. The Kings were either afraid or could see the trouble brewing, so up went the bottle trees, blue to mimic the waters of vivid mortality so that any haunts could not impose upon the town folk.

Zarend continues, tiresome and morbid, “but, the past is a matter of what we hide to preserve our future. The family that holds your leash took what was rightfully my inheritance. Age, though, has a way of teaching us the things we do not want, and in time, you will know also."

"Know what, sir?"

A tick of a clock and a wrinkle of fabric, and soon Shiro notes that Zarend Garland is growing bigger, leaning forward over the desk to loom over like the oaks.

"What rock bottom feels like."

—

When their impromptu meeting ends, Shiro feels worse than before, more tongue-tied and twisted in his own heartaches and mentions. He walks away for now, journal hidden in the bagginess of his jeans as he thinks.
“... Always damn camellias. Like a damn fool in love to pick them out of his own mama’s garden to take them to her, too... but he said he planted some at her grave, and you’ve seen them, haven’t you, boy?”

He stops. No, he had said, and the bitter sadness with his reply just makes the void of the ache a little bigger. No, he had muttered, knuckles bone-white and skin-tight, there are no camellias there. Gone, withered up, dried into dust for the wind to drift away, to take a little piece of Sue McClain wherever the southern zephyrs would fly.

But, he wanted to say, he planted bluebells instead of camellias, sown those stringy roots down after digging his hole as to say, camellias are for girls that wanted too much and bluebells are for the boys that just want enough.

“My God, son, I was wonderin’ where you wandered off to. Did you get lost?”

He feels lost, he thinks as he sags back into yet another poor and awkward chair, he feels so lost, and he can’t even fathom how daunting it is to be so.

“Ah, you really are daydreamin’ then. Havin’ your head in the clouds does you no good, son.”

“Daydreaming isn’t too bad, is it?” is half-mustered, a decent attempt at cordial conversation with the most talkative man this side of Dallas County as confirmed by his own daughter’s words, spoken in respectful teasing during sparse morning encounters at Hunk’s diner.

Talkative is not the word to attribute to this old man on this date, and Judge King, in his wise old age, finally speaks in tomes that seem waterlogged and centuries old.

“Daydreamin’ is for poor folk that wanna stay lost.”
"Katie Lynn Holt."

The gymnasium fills with hollers and crows from a trio that sit in the fold-out chairs of the makeshift auditorium to fluster the now graduate as said Ms. Holt walks across the stage to shake the principal’s hand and receive her coveted diploma. At the applause of the crowd, Pidge waves bashfully to her family and her underclassmen friends that count across the audience.

"Matthew Samuel Holt."

The same three howl again, but now with cheers from a baseball team losing their star player to a full ride to college on a baseball scholarship, though his GPA would have sufficed to obtain full funds, same as his twin sister. Their ball hats circle the air in grand last bows as Matt, precious man that is he, sweeps a fabulous bow before near dancing down the stairs from a flabbergasted principal.

Graduation day comes heralding in with an emotional Colleen, a proud Sam, and a touched Shiro for being requested (though more of a demand than a polite ask) to sit with the family instead of with friends and students in the bleachers of the school gymnasium. For the occasion that has been the talk of town and of church for the past month, he was more than happy to sit in the hard seats of the plastic bleachers instead of the equally uncomfortable metal chairs for the specially reserved.

Either way, his ass is numb, but he hardly cares as he’s nearly in tears from the twins adorned in their caps and gowns.

As the golden ripple of gowns float over the stage, the crowd gathered cheers and applauds the girls in their pearls and heels and the boys in their good jeans and button ups while they put an end to a chapter of life that leads to an open door of a journey not traveled. It’s graciously short, only having a graduating class of forty at the most, and Shiro could kiss each of their cheeks in gratitude as his own graduation basically sucked, an endless call of names from a roster that comprised of at least three times the graduates that Gilman boasts.

Still, he is tickled to death where he is after being offered the coveted ticket of special guests for the Holt twins. To think that a few months ago, had fate intervened with a twist of its wrist, he could have turned down another road, merged onto another highway, or went across another state, and he might not would have been here to witness this.
Hindsight is terrifically relieving.

As the class dwindles to the poor saps with surnames of the lower end of the alphabet, his eyes find the tell all color of wheat in the summer sunshine to note Pidge lining the gold embossment of her name along the leather encasement for her diploma, Matt chatting in hushed tones to her. They’re two of a kind, a pair of thieves that stole him away and placed him on the mantle of their family tree as an honorary big brother when another set of twins miles away have clue where their own brother has gone to.

A sharp hint of air, burning hot, seethes through his teeth before he tenses, then relaxes.

Not today. Today is for the Holts, for Matt and Pidge who are the focal point of this time. Today is for smiling and shaking hands and giving hugs. Today is crowding around the school yard with other guests and students to celebrate the successes of the generation of the future, to take bets on who will marry and who will drive off from Gilman to attempt the field of higher education.

There are already a few takers on Pidge and Matt never moving back home after college, but he would bet a few of his dollars that they would visit often as Sam and Colleen are more than content with their lives here. After all, Sam will be ripe for retirement soon, and Colleen is busier than ever with her store with her own preparations for the visitors on the horizon, ready to take indulge in summer festivals and high priced lodging.

The final name is called, and the principal and head of ceremonies give his final goodbye to the graduates before leading the crowd into a lasting ode to pomp and circumstance with the singing of the Gilman Alma Mater.

Shiro stands, hands clasped behind his back out of respect for all those that know the words and the tune. As the people sing, their voices clamber to the roof to echo, what is a few hundred voices multiplies into thousands, millions, as the strange pink flowers, the juniberries so loved by the town for the unique petals and color, sit in the arrangements mottling the stage in near expectancy.

Graduation ends with caps of gold flung into the air and they fall back to the students like the bombs of an air strike.

It’s getting to him again, the social gatherings and how closed in he feels. He does not want to lean towards a self diagnosis of claustrophobia though the afterwards of the ceremony has melded into a single buzz of dissonance that’s just meaningless discussions spoken out of politeness.
Shiro walks outside to get away for just a bit, just to be at ease while the kids get their extol for their accomplishments while answering for the umpteenth time which college they were accepted to, or if they’re just going to go straight into work. Oh, well, but what are they going to do? What will they major in? Will they be doctors, lawyers, something actually special? Really, if Shiro had all the answers at eighteen, he wouldn’t have gone into the Army, that’s for sure, and those kids are about as savvy to their wants as they are to their needs.

“Mind a little company?”

Turning his head back, he’s graced by the presence of the sheriff once more, Allura giving him a sheepish smile that’s a little too anxious of his answer.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Shiro slaps on an easy smile, though the hand in his pocket is reaching for the folded ridges of Lance’s photograph, a letting his human skin smooth over the corners as he thinks of blue eyes and tender kisses. Lance helps him here, even all the way across the town, with the memories of their nightly chitchat and chaste make outs, to run the wrinkles out of Shiro’s nerves and ease them back down.

Allura, though, is the focus now, grunting at the question she’s been presented, “because a skittish cat usually don’t like to be followed.”

Shiro gets a good chuckle out of that, and he’s thankful that she gets it, even though his story is as lost to her as everyone else. No one but Lance knows the truth about his arm, the truth about what he did in wartime and in Seattle after. No one but Lance knows that the phantom pains are just another burden, though some days are predominantly better than others. No one but Lance knows of desires to leave the earth and be one with the Final Frontier, of flying amongst the galaxies and the planets, of counting stars and charting constellations in the guise of night when his family was asleep.

“Guess it’s a good thing I like cats.”

His companion smiles, her grin as sweet as cherries and as good as an angel’s, “have you met Red? She’s an old thing, cantankerous just like Auntie Haggy, but—.”

The smile falls, crashes into the parking lot and shatters on the asphalt. It hurts to see such a sudden shift in her stance, how her proud akimbo withering into fidgets of fingers and shuffling of weight between her boots.
“Of course you’ve met Red. You work out on the farm.”

Oh, and he frowns, stepping closer to where she waits for permission to join him though he could never imagine turning her away, to cast her off when she just wants to be someone he can rely on. He stands at her side, tipping his head back to watch the clouds amble over the empyrean azures and oranges of a dying sky.

Allura refuses to speak, moving to step away, but he grunts and merely states with certainty, “I bet she wonders where you are.”

A hollow bark of a failure to laugh, and the sheriff shakes her head vigorously. “Oh, hell no, you’re not gonna make think an old stray that took up with the Evans misses little old me. You offend me, sir.”

“But I bet she does because I know he does.”

“Now, now, don’t go foolin’ me like I’m some pretty broad to be taken for a ride,” Allura grits out, though the threat falls short of the edge of the sword she supposes to use, and instead is as heartbroken as her face leads him to believe. She’s lovely, really a beauty, as pretty as the magnolias and as brutal as iron forged into spears. She’s charming as she is cutting, and to see her like this is just a damn shame, that Keith is at his farm alone with only Red to remind him there is another life outside of his own and the cattle when Allura is right here.

Shiro wants nothing more than to sit them both down and knock their heads together, but children they are not, and he cannot force adults into being together if there isn’t a together agreed between them. Keith and Allura deserve the solace that comes with happiness found in true love, whether they entrust themselves into the threadbare wisdom Shiro has to offer.

He can say it, preach of it, how they both deserve to wake up to the dust motes dancing above their lover’s crown. He can tell of it, how their tangled limbs have no beginning to end because alpha and omega are just infinity in the not-spaces of lovers meant to be. He can ask of it because would the sun not shine a little warmer, the world not seem a little rosier, if every morning was welcomed with the sight of the most beautiful thing to be found in this mortal path?

Do they not care that he would surely give upon himself all, give up all his earthly possessions to awaken to the songbirds that chirp sweet nothings at the window while through the blur of sleep’s slipping grip, he could see Lance sleeping before the day’s time? Do they not stand before
judgment and fear that their time is short, whisking by around them while they squander the minutes away when others cannot be so fortunate as them?

“I wouldn’t try to fool you, Allura,” and he means that, as sure as the sun sets on this day over the rolling lines of forest beds so that there can be another sunrise tomorrow. “Even if I tried, you’d lock me up without a key.”

“Damn right, I would, you liar,” but the twitch of a half-smile helps the worries of the elephant that sits pink and enlarged behind their backs, a trumpet call that dots back to core of what they both want, yet feel that they cannot have in the ways that they wish.

Shiro eases silence into further thought provocation with a lilt of his voice, consoling while questioning the extremity that she frets, “but, would it be so bad? To admit it?”

Allura’s eyes close, a holy sign that she is on the precipice of temptation, a jagged mountainside that leads to a depthless churning of ocean that eggs her to jump and see how far she could drop. She is a godly woman, found in her choir robes on Sunday and eager to be a part of her church as much as she physically can manage, but even God’s voice could not comfort her when she must whisper to herself, can she allow herself to fall when she broke Keith’s heart?

Or maybe it’s more in the act that as passed, that falling is fell and it’s more that Allura soaks in the salt brine and flotsam for centuries until Keith joins her, having fallen back to join her?

Shiro’s head is hurting, and his left hand reaches across his chest to grip along the line of flesh meeting metal. Philosophies and poetics aside, there is a river, wide as a crow’s flight, and there is a bridge, rickety and old, and meeting in the middle sure sound fairer than expecting the other to cross to the other side.

“It would be like dying.”

The confession hurts, more for Keith than for her, because he had visions of hydrangeas and daisies in mason jars, of aisles of white lace scalloped between the spaces of pews. He had been certain the sound of church bells chiming for the witnesses to observe a wedding, of the families and friends gathered there that day for love, and nothing less. Oh, it would have been wonderful to watch as a fumbling farm boy stands stunned while a tough girl with a soft heart, clad in the silks and embroideries of pearlescent bridal raiment, walks down the aisle with a man so prominent and proud would give her away.
“… That wouldn’t be like dying at all.”

The bitterness that croaks in his throat acts like a lashing, blue eyes snapping open to stare at him incredulously. He notices how her hands shake, how she clings to the mirror shield that reflects what she wants the world to see rather than what she knows she is.

She’s so in love, she’s suffering with it, same as him, but with a far better advantage as Keith is at least breathing.

“Dying is fucking painful, Allura. It’s hearing drums in your head and you can’t get them out because there’s assholes shouting, and even though they’re trying to help, you want to know why. Why you? Why were you picked out of the unfortunate bastards to live? Dying is looking out across the sand you hate so much and seeing limbs of the men you were just joking with. Dying is waking up in a hospital bed weeks later and the military you served just thinks, hey, let’s give him a new arm without his permission! Let’s not let him overdose, let’s not let him go without a psych evaluation to definitely figure out he’s crazy! No, you loving Keith? That isn’t dying. That’s fucking living if you’d just let yourself…”

He finally turns to her, sees the blues of her irises swimming in the tears that she will not shed for him, for the pity that he knew he would eventually see were he to give his excuses a burning flame to flare once more, to let his testimony cry from the lungs that should have been punctured with shrapnel. He needs her to see, though, that dying isn’t dying unless there’s something bleeding or something breaking. No, dying isn’t this, it isn’t this at all, when there is a garden to grow, when the carnations, pink and white, can bloom with lofty fullness if these two would lace their fingers together as lovers should and admit that they cannot live alone while the other is there.

“Look, I… I’m not trying to force you,” Shiro relents, chewing on his bottom lip at her own quivering from his story, “but you two… love each other. I know he loves you, so don’t you want to love him, too?”

A broken, short whisper is all he needs to hear. “Of course I do, Shiro… but I’m scared I’ll…”

Oh. Oh, poor thing, too imbued with her guilts that hang like flickering fairy lights while storm clouds, thick and gray, roil out in the distance ever booming with the thunder claps of her rejections. She could be happy would she let herself.

“You won’t hurt him again,” he tries, and he tries so hard to convey that he believes his words while his hand, though metallic and heavy, lays on her shoulder to squeeze gently. “If you don’t do what’s good for you, you’ll regret it. I mean that.”
He manages with the brevity of his encouragement to receive a smile that is hardly there, but with just a tip of the corners of Allura’s mouth, he knows it will all be okay if she just listens to instinct calling for her to go to Keith.

They stand there for a little while more before the students start filing out to the field out in the back, to go and indulge in the specially baked cakes and foods that will round this night that will surely be filled with unspoken confessions and heartbreaks, of half-meant promises and pleas to be theirs.

It’ll be just like Allura and Keith maybe all those years ago on a night just like this, when they took their diplomas and hid behind the gym to mutter forever on chapped lips and to fold their hands together in a memento that could never break under the stresses of the reality outside theirs.

—

With Pidge and Matt tuckered out in the back of old Black, wrapped in shabby afghans while the party goers disband for the night, Shiro thinks that it is finally time to go home.

For their graduation present, in accordance with his gift of money, the twins requested to have a sleep over at his house, not an uncommon occurrence at all, but a strange request all the same. They could have wanted for naught, outside of partaking of underage drinking and smoking recreational drugs, and they have doted upon him instead of taking full advantage of their first summer night.

Sam chuckles at the sight of his children, shaking his head in a fond manner while he elbows Shiro, “guess you get to tuck them in, son. They’re out like lights.”

“They’ve had a long day, Mr. Holt,” Shiro returns, winking at his elder and instantaneous father figure. “Good thing their pallets were made this morning, or else I’d just leave them out in the truck.”

Colleen comes up with her empty casserole dishes, embellished with green vines and grapes, waning from the work she herself has put in to the laborious and emotional hours. She deserves a good sleep before waking up and opening the store tomorrow, but Shiro might have to talk her into sleeping in a little later than necessary so she can bask in the peace before having two high school graduates really slams her hard.
“Didn’t I tell you, sweet pea? Better to be prepared than not, you know that.”

“I have a smart teacher, I know.” Shiro turns and takes the casserole dish before Sam can do so, heading to their green pick up so he can load it up, “but I guess you already knew that.”

“Darn tootin’,” Colleen chuckles, watching him while pulling at the sleeves of her light cardigan. “Now, go on, and get them in before the mosquitos come out to eat them alive. Y’all have a fun morning before old man Holt and I get there.”

“Old man, she says,” but Sam kisses her cheek and squeezes her tight, still exuberant and adoring like a man on his honeymoon with his new bride. Colleen, such a loving wife, reaches up to cup his jaw and draw their foreheads close.

“Old man, I say, and now take me home so I can cry myself to sleep like the other poor mamas.”

With a kiss to her cheek and a half-hug from him, Colleen and Sam Holt climb into the pick up to chug up the road towards their house which will soon be an empty nest by the time August comes. He watches them go from where his tailgate hangs open, thinking how the two not-kids snoozing away when they could be galavanting and making all the bad decisions that come with growing up.

But, in a weird way, they’re far more mature than most, and smarter than even more, taking Shiro by surprise every time he gets the enjoyment of sitting down for a hard discussion with the geniuses that would rather break apart physics and theories of relativity rather than chase skirts and flirt with their peers.

Poor Pidge, though, her heartbreak still held on her sleeve like an open hand in the hopes that something will change, will blow from west to east as the tides change, but alas, maybe things staying stagnant are for the best; Katie Lynn Holt is on the roster of the Auburn University on full scholarships with her intent to graduate with a degree in Aerospace Engineering from Samuel Ginn. Better to keep her focus on the things that matter outside of high school crushes on former best friends.

After all, she’s made the promise to her parents (and to Shiro, who teamed up with the Holts when she mentioned maybe changing her acceptance to an out of state facility) that her Bachelor’s would come in their mother state, just as Matt’s, who has already been signed on as a Freshman starter at Alabama so he stomp with the Crimson Tide to winning championships (though poor baseball isn’t
near the traditional sport of choice as football).

From the days that will follow her first step of higher education, Shiro guesses then Pidge can fulfill her dreams of obtaining a Master’s in Philadelphia with one of the most prestigious robotics program in the States. He’s probably Philly bound when that happens, someone needing to go with her in case she causes a ruckus yelling at the audacity of the complicated trolley system.

Let her dream, he thinks, because ambitions for a girl— no, young lady, such as herself are meant to flourish, to coincide with her audacity and her tenacity to forge a path of steel and wiring to electrify the masses, to see she is as capable as any man in the fields of technology.

But, even young ladies that would rather tinker with silicon and aluminum need to sleep in a bed, makeshift as it may be, so he better get the twins on to the house. Matt’s a good meal for the mosquitoes, and poor kid suffers from scores of itchy bumps he gets while being outside when the sun falls.

Loading up, he drives Black down the roads to take them to the house, liking that he can already figure it out so easily despite the few short months of his living here in Gilman. It’s a badge of honor to decipher the directions adamantly spoken by the locals, as there aren’t just road names familiarized, but rather, vague depictions of landmarks and forks in roads that will do better than Google ever could.

He turns on Oak, and stops dead, gasping when he sees something flash in the headlights. He brakes, luckily still somehow aware of the bundles asleep in the truck bed. It’s a deer, possibly, but it’s small, and too white to be a doe or buck.

He blinks, then rubs at his eyes to make sure he’s seeing it right, as it is far from a woodland animal, but a person that isn’t one anymore.

It’s Sue.

His jaw falls agape and he’s now in a dreaded reality, one where he is not alone and can handle her himself, but with company, the twins in fact, the two that found Lance’s journals and gifted their discovery to him. Her being here is unusual as her purport is planted with the shadows of daytime where she can enact in random encounters her life before and her calls for anyone that will be her knight.
Shiro is tempted to step out of the truck, to ease out with his hands raised to ask her what she’s doing all the way out on the edge of the road. He is sure she will not answer because she never does, but maybe it’s more that she’s imprinted on him, two hard-earned souls that can claim to know death so closely that the silk of the casket could be felt pillowed along their back.

He simply waits her out, stares right into the blues that flare bright and skyless in the headlights. Then, in the most heart-pounding moment supplemented by goosebumps on his forearms and pounds of pulses in ears, she just smiles— and she’s gone.

… Shiro shudders and outright bashes his forehead against the steering wheel. Damn girl, can’t give him a break when he’s on getting close to a level of punch drunk off exhaustion. She’s ruthless.

He’d better keep going, so he does, and it’s just a list of check offs when the truck stops and he’s rustling up the twins to nearly carry them into the house and tuck them into their pallets, chuckling lowly at their snuffles and whines of having to move about.

When Matt and Pidge settle in, he knows he wants to, too, and the sofa look too inviting. Just a close of his eyes and a nap before he goes upstairs, he tells himself. He’ll tiptoe upstairs and lay down, wait for Lance who is surely waiting at the top of the banisters, waiting for him to join.

Sleep grips a little too tight, too soon, and he’s out the moment his head hits the pillow, Sue’s smile, too kind to understand, at the forefront of his mind before being washed away by duskiness.

—

“Wake up, my moon.”

Shiro jerks, knees twitching as he sits awake and nearly yells, scouring around him for that voice. He’s panting from the adrenaline rush, white river rapids racing in rapidity over his heart, because there’s only one person in the whole universe that calls him that, just one.

“Mom?”

There is no mother, just the candle glow and sheets white on the parlor furniture again, just like the first time he met Lance, and lo, there he is, chuckling from his perch on the side table across the room. His eyes flicker over to him, his grin playful as his feet kick idly against the cotton covering.
“I ain’t your mama, but if that’s what you like…”

Shiro laughs in a humorless fashion, dropping his head to let his hand cradle the weight of his, all eight pounds of messy scramble that can’t piece itself together. It’s fussy, this ache, like a mother prattling on about a lazy son that can’t be half-assed to do even the most menial of chores.

He sighs, quiet and still, and realizes he really wishes that his mother would have been standing there in the parlor, her eyes, dark and fretful, on her only son as she searches him over for any bruises, physical or not, accumulated on his soul and skin when not under her hawkish gaze.

“Nah,” Shiro murmurs, but then smirks a little over at his spectral lover, “I’d rather keep that completely out of the equation.”

Oh, that smile is the death of him, smooth as molasses and sweet like flower honey, all on him as Lance slips off the table to walk over and kneel next to the sofa to thread their fingers together. “I missed you today. You were gone forever.”

On instinct, Shiro draws their hands close to his mouth so that he can kiss each knuckle of Lance’s hand, glancing over to where a sleeping Pidge and Matt are so that he can be sure that his time with Lance is secluded.

But, to his chilling shock, there are no blankets or pillow thrown together for sleeping arrangements on the floor, and there is certainly not a set of twins dreaming of college campuses and science clubs and baseball teams going to national championships.

No, there is just blank space, empty of the two lives that should be right there, and while it should worry him because where the hell would they have gotten to, but Lance is suddenly up, moving their hands down so he can kiss him fully.

“Did you miss me?” whispers against Shiro’s lips in lacy petals, of inquiries that are cloud like and wondrous though tinged with the blueness of yearning. Shiro sighs and presses their lips together in another kiss, cupping Lance’s jaw to sweep his thumb just under the plumpness of Lance’s mouth.

“You know I did… I miss you every moment I can’t have you.”
The marble swirls of tenderness in those blue eyes makes Shiro’s heart melt like the wax of the candles that circle the two of them. They can only know of them, of the special place with even the inanimate items being covered to block such a secret meeting. The candlelights flicker and sway in a whisper of a breeze that Shiro cannot feel, but their little flames dance in their eyes and reflect the glass panes that see into their very souls.

Shiro must kiss Lance again, but a coo slips between their lips as Lance stands full and slips away to cross the bare floor in tip toe of tulips excitement, tugging the sheet covering the old phonograph off and letting it flutter away into the blackness that Shiro cannot see past.

It’s a grinding of gears, of Lance winding up the contraption before he turns to him, the warbled construed tune with its poor syllables an incoherent mess of sounds. His smile is brilliantly affectionate, and his hand is pliant and soft, held out to him once Lance has returned to his side.

“Dance with me? I’ve always wanted to… well.”

The light from the candles is just enough to tell on Lance, to let Shiro bask in the blush that reddens those cheeks he adores like a man would adore his blushing bride at the altar. But, a dance has been requested, so a dance there shall be, placing his hand in Lance’s while he mounts up to full height, placing a hand on Lance’s hips to guide them into the center of the ring of white candles.

“You romantic. Playing our song, aren’t we?” Shiro croons, pressing their foreheads together as the phonograph sings out the lyrics that they pass to each other in breaths of rapturous admiration, in those not-spaces between their mouths that can never leave them as those words have been carved into their hides and into their hearts by hands of their own. The each hold a knife steady, readying for the next cut into their lover’s flesh to add another mark of possession.

Lance knows this well, and smiles up at his taller love before rubbing their noses together, “you prefer the romantic side, I think, since I didn’t get a ‘no’ when asked to dance with me and my two left feet.”

“I love those two left feet,” Shiro chides with a beguiling smirk and a raise of an eyebrow that has the other laughing, quivering with the sound though he’s kept close to a chest of a larger man that just wants to hold him until Judgement Day arrives with a blare of heavenly trumpets to call good sheep home.

And as they sway in their lazy waltz, the two of them hum together as they tell each other the cares that make them blue in the worldly kind of way while pressing lips into their hairs and neck to
proclaim the silver lining of clouds that must be found within their time together. The grandfather clock, and ominous shadow of height that sits in patient respite as the clock hands tick away, is just a reminder that their time is short, that when the dreams of fantastical dates that coincide with growing sentiments of one true loves, there shall be melancholy once more in the hazy sunrise that snatches Lance’s hand away from Shiro’s.

Even as the phonograph falls silent, and the needle slips off the record and the whirring of gears can still be heard, they stand there, wrapped around each other in tepid air that is meant just for them, before the shadows creep up and smears them into lovelorn askance.

Before the speckled black dots of loss overtake him, Lance smiles and whispers something he cannot hear—but what hurts is that tip of lips as the same that Sue graced upon him hours earlier out on Oak.

And Shiro awakens to a parlor room with two recent graduates sprawled half way out of the blankets and a knock on the door while sunlight reposes over the three of them in a bidding to wake them up for a new day of glory and of life.

With a sigh, Shiro barely manages to slip off the sofa to walk the few feet to the door, stopping as he notes through the window it is not a usual visitor to his home. No, there is no Colleen or Sam, no Allura or her father, and that most certainly isn’t Keith.

There’s a glimpse of yellow, beautifully friendly and kindly enough to beckon Shiro forth as he opens the door with pleasant surprise.

“Hunk?”

The chef of Sunny Side Diner is a little frayed, but there’s that impeccable grin that casts golden sunniness no matter how gloomy the weather is, no matter how awful circumstances are. It lightens the ambiance of the world, brightens the colors into a refulgent myriad of rainbows better the senses and scrub out the monotony of sorrows.

Still, the edges are worn thin, and the man looks like he’s only just about to call it a night, one foot in the sheets of a bed that he is miles away from. Though he has a covered tray in his hand, Shiro cannot help but reckon that there’s a shaking there, a starling of digits around the yellow flowered porcelain that does not ease his worries surrounding this visit.
“Hey, Shiro,” Hunk chimes, but his voice is too low and his eyes are too wide, “someone mentioned you had a pair of maniacal geniuses that might want some breakfast.”

The twins? Shiro tilts his head over his shoulder, watching the pair of blond-headed rascals snore away in their warm bundle of strewn together blankets, pillows gone and Matt’s head laying on the hard floor. He didn’t call, so maybe Sam mentioned it to Hunk if he had surprised his wife with a Saturday morning date at the best place to eat in town.

But, that doesn’t seem right, because Hunk’s eyes are darting around like a man man’s, like he’s hearing footsteps of a predator ease ever closer with a sigh of sultry, coiling mud that will snatch his neck to snap it in pieces.

Hunk is a good sized man, a tank that can whip up chicken and waffles like he’s the wife banging out the meals to entrap the man she’s got her eye on, but right now, he’s as skittish as a mouse, kind to come out here with a meal fit for an army from the smells of it but regretting it all the same from whatever might be ready to shred him to bits.

“… You’re looking a little ill. You okay?” comes a little too quietly, but Hunk hears him all the same, swelling round a lump the size of Dallas County and nodding, though his eyes close and he has to take a moment.

It’s unnerving in every sense, that this towering prowess of man can be humbled into such a state. “Yeah, yeah, peachy keen, with more peaches to spare…”

A lie, but Shiro just takes the tray and starts to tip toe to the kitchen so the rambunctious tides of twins ravenous for nourishment don’t overtake the two grown ups too soon. “Come in, Hunk, and I’ll make some coffee— you look tired—.”

“How the hell do you stand it?” Hunk suddenly asks, and he’s pale, that glorious skin that is warm with sunlight and melanin sullen, gone as soon as the words hit the air. The tension is now humid thick and ice sharp, but Shiro slowly regards him and somehow knows.

So, he attempts, and hopes that he is wrong, “… can you see them?”

“Them? There’s more?!”
“Hush, dammit,” Shiro curses, placing the tray on the countertop before ushering Hunk right outside again onto the porch, raking his hands through his hair. These haunts are his secrets, or well, he suspected that they were supposed to be, meant to be nesting eggs of macabre wonderment, little patches on the quilt to add a little something more to the tapestry.

Hunk is a man that is a mess, raising his hands and shaking them to still any anger that he worries he may elicit from his frightful outburst. It’s enough to calm the other man, fists clenched and ready for an argument over the things that cannot speak for themselves, and Hunk lessens his own defenses as Shiro’s hand unclench.

“Look, I… Lulu told you, didn’t she? That something really bad happened?”

‘Really bad,’ as Hunk says, is an understatement and should be spoken to the face to the poor girl that died in the shed in the backyard. ‘Really bad’ is a misnomer, a miscalculation, and while Shiro wants to relinquish Hunk of his ignorance of the extremities that have possibly occurred, he realizes with a stop of the words in his throat that he does not have the full story himself.

So, playing along is better, maybe, than beating up a good man, formed by the bronzed hands of Apollo himself to shine light wherever he may tread. Hunk is just marvelous, with an orotund tone that brings images of Judge King to mind, but without the declamatory expulsions of Southern phrases that baffles anyone from the outside. What Shiro needs is more, someone else to write another paragraph in the book for him to read between the lines of because of as right now, he’s scrambling.

Shiro, wary still, nods and shifts his weight back, “she mentioned that, and that something is here because of it.”

“Dude, man, you gotta be honest with me— them? They’re here, too? All of them? Keith’s—.”

Oh, this just gets even better, and Shiro’s eyes widen because now, other than the Holts, his truest friendship is being questioned as he wonders who all knows what he’s seeped himself in, this quicksand of a melodramatic small town crime scene. However, Hunk observes the tension and sighs with comforting motion of his hands, “Keith’s seen them on his farm, but I… always thought house just had one.”

*One.* Just one, but oh, Shiro laughs, hollow within the chambers of his misgivings as there is not one but two, a brother and a sister that must have been so close they could not parted even, even by the sheer veils of death came.
Hunk frowns, a pout elongating his bottom lip, “I’m serious as a heart attack, there is something there, and it reeks on this land. It’s troubled and won’t move on.”

Underneath the cracks of the larger man’s voice, it’s apparent the sincerity of his worries that there isn’t an issue with won’t, but more can’t. Shiro will refrain from remarking upon it, not add oil to water, and he nods to Hunk to continue.

“Don’t… God, I shouldn’t have— Keith just told me, okay? Because— I feel them, Shiro. I feel them every time I’m at his house like they’re across the pastures and they’re watchin’ me. I feel it whenever I gotta come down this road. The judge won’t tell you because he’s a good man and doesn’t wanna burden you. Lulu kinda feels them but, she just… she’s just been told stories by Ol’ Haggy, and man, that woman can see them from miles away.”

“Them? The McClains? I need you to say it, Hunk” and a wind of hot current gusts in tepid flutter as the cirrus above in the mantle of heaven shift, and Hunk begets a stepping stone with an uttering of admittance that is tiredly small.

“Casualties.”

It’s an end to their conversation, a telling of too much, and Hunk moves on from this. With a nod goodbye and a reminder for the other to bring the food tray by later when the twins are spruced up for the day, the master chef puts his back to Shiro and starts towards his jeep, and it all hits him in the worst jab to the gut. It’s such a sudden pain that doubles him over, bent at the waist with a hand over his torso. Still, the resonation of what has been professed pounds its fists into his stomach, a battering ram that only ceases when Hunk drives off.

The presences that do not toll of their coming with disjointed moans and rattling chains instead enter silently or not at all. They are strangely silent killers, but not draining of essence, but rather sanity. They have found their victim, no, a predecessor to a casualty, wrapping their arms around his neck and his legs to drag him down so that Shiro cannot breach the surface of coherent thought. Yet, they are harmless, just mournful or adoring, Sue and Lance respectfully searching for what they cannot have or what can be offered with their corpulences gone from their attainment.

For Sue, Shiro wants to give peace, and for Lance, Shiro wants to give up everything.
“Hey, Big Trouble? What does your family think of you being all the way out here?”

Speaking of giving up everything, Shiro has not been faced with this from an outsider to the insight only his own self can give, and his eyes burn as he watches Pidge stare right back. Her cheeks are full of pancakes, giving her the adorable appeal of a chipmunk, but her curiosity remains just like her stubbornness and lack of tact.

Matt is on her side at the counter, glancing between the other two is worry that they have offended their host as he leans over to his sister and hisses for her to back off, it isn’t her business.

Pidge frowns at that, swatting her prattling brother away, “I’m not askin’ for his business, I’m just askin’ if they know! Maybe we’re gonna be meeting them soon, and we might need to know! Mama’ll wanna put out the best china, don’t you figure?”

Her naivety would be such a gift were it not colliding with a music box opening to childhood nostalgia and family miles and miles away in a home he could no longer claim as his.

It still is the first time his family has been brought up, as there is always the question of where he is from, what has he done in the past and what he intends to do now. People here are careful not to bring up parents and siblings, never pressing their noses to the glass too hard into matters that shouldn’t be their concern. However, small towns under the Mason Dixon line must just have an appeal of making one’s business all of their business in that way to make it better with covered dishes and helping with chores.

But this is new for Shiro, and if he hadn’t already been reeling from Hunk and his spooky talk of a family that were casualties to something so wicked that the whole town seems in on it, he might would have smoothed Matt and Pidge over with better finesse than basic honesty.

“They don’t know I’m here.”

Then, there it is, the practical inevitability of stating what may have been obvious, but vague, and Shiro is more than certain that if the air could crack like glass, it would do so. With how Pidge and Matt grow quiet, the clinks of their of silverware on plates now falling into a pause of pondering while they stare at him, incredulous, he realizes he isn’t prepared to raise his defenses or explain why.
"Your family doesn’t know? None of them? Not your mama or anyone?"

Ah, it starts with speck of ash that falls like snow, then more float along in whimsical slowness to eventually cover the ground of his mental disparity to snuff out rationality. Their questions are valid, but with it comes the guilt, rearing its ugly monstrous head from the ravine he dug with his two hands, just his own, to remind him that his past is a looming beast of regret.

"No," he can only say with a lack of emotion that scares even himself, but he is a trembling scarce remnant of a once proud and strong man, a warrior that may have quivered in fear of airhorns and helicopters instead of gathering a bayonet against a tank for the good of freedom.

Yet, here he is, scrutinized with fretful glances of swarming hazel from twins, not from enemies that look like humans, not the monsters he was so forced to accept but never believed, and he is so thankful for their maturity that it comes with bone-chilling relief. Something clicks, though, albeit on this day instead of any other, and Matt is slow to say it as though Shiro will shake apart at the seams with his words, “but, you should call home… tell them you’re okay in case they’re worryin’ about you.”

An answer, the elder cannot give, so he does not, preferring to hold the gaze on a figment that is not there, but once roamed the earth, memories of his fallen comrades that he has used over and over as excuses to have kept so long away from those that he loved and loved him first. He dreads it, that there will be a day when he wakes up and see them crowd above him, heaven’s justice in their hands and hell fire in their eyes. With that, he is prompted into a subspace that is hidden in the scaffolding of attic like thoughts, distracted from the mindless movie marathons and junk food splurges. Matt’s advice clamors and clangs like Saint Michael’s bells, beckoning the town of Gilman to rise and give thanks for another breath of life from the Lord, to rise and hope that their salvation is promised through blood of a Lamb far better than any lowly man slaughtered on a cross.

Even as he sits in the pew on Sunday with Keith at his side the Holts on the other, the former soldier, now a veteran and abandoner of the real war that comes not from the frontline but of reality. He listens not to the sermon Coran revels in that day, some discussion of a series that delves in Revelations. End Times. Judgment Day. All these synonyms that all derive from the connotation that the trumpets will sound and seals will break, but Coran is a good man, intent on proper teaching and not allowing the worldly bastardization to entreat the small town into arms against others.

Still, for all the respect Shiro has for the man and for this town that took him in, the hymns are toneless, and the verses fall on deaf ears as he thinks of what his mother may be doing instead of giving up his sins for an eternity to walk on streets of gold behind pearly gates.
Service ends before too long, but he hardly notices save for the touch on his elbow that finally seeks to unearth his head from his shell. Keith is next to him, of course, as is tradition for them both now, but those eerie plum eyes are now just reminders of Hunk’s comments of ‘badness’ that has left some lasting festering scorch on town. He feels a little more sorry for Keith, this friend he has made, and then he thinks that his mother and sisters would enjoy meeting the Evans boy.

The lack of statement ushers in a crease of skepticism over the welfare of the elder, so Keith asks, ”you okay? Usually you at least try to sing like a squallerin’ pig.”

It’s a tease though it’s brimming with the meanings found deeper than the surface reflects.

“Yet not a peep from you today.”

For all his intelligence in vocabulary, Shiro isn’t sure what even to say. For all his mulling like an ass in a barn, Keith really should punch him, rear his fist back and deck him hard in the jaw to bust the pain wide open. Post traumatic stress disorder and survivors guilt aside, the former West Coaster is so inclined to saturate his senses with the knowledge that he’s a terrible son to have left with his family with nothing.

Here before him is a son that cannot call for his good mother, the same he has buried, the same he has mourned, and the same that is nowhere to be found when her widowed husband drunk himself insane with her loss. This son did not run, but suffers on his self-erected pyre still.

Shiro should be kind enough to wallow in his thoughts along, so he smiles, a timid stretch of his lips that is nettle sharp with friction that rubs him wrong. “Nothing. Just tired. I had the twins over for their graduation.”

Keith accepts the answer with a grim reluctance, smarter than what Shiro gives him credit for this Sunday as he counters with an offer, “would you like to have lunch over at the farm today? I can rustle up some chili from a can, maybe whip up a pan of cornbread to go with it. Y’know, good ol’ bachelor cooking.”

The peace that comes from the farmland might proffer benefit of calmness, a place to rattle off his dwellings of too much thinking and release it to a blue sky. With that, Shiro turns to the Holts, who have already been listening in to their conversation with such inventiveness on their adopted family member than it hurts that he nearly left them out.
Samuel, and his wife Colleen, are fine people, understanding and accepting to a fault. It should be a matter of trouble if Shiro were greedier, more sinister, but he could never harm them, or take advantage of them in a way that would be purposeful. It should cause a pause of wariness, how ready the family as a whole wants to give so much. However, the husband and wife that have raised two great kids and have opened their home to a struggling one-armed survivor and made him feel like there’s home here.

“Aw, son, you can’t offend us by brushin’ us off Sunday dinner. Go on; poor boy needs to learn how to be a host to guests anyway,” Sam relays for the family before they all gather to wish him goodbye temporarily before they go on to eat the special at the Sunny Side Diner.

As the four of them file down the aisle, Pidge lingers in a strange way, that owl like perception that unsettles Shiro in a semblance of non-consensual transparency, but she smiles and goes up to hug around his middle to alleviate what dread he may have felt. Before he can embrace her back, she’s gone, flitting off like a yellowhammer.

From there, it’s just a drive down the dusty road to the Evans farm, and the time spent behind the wheel is more grating than sitting in a web of spiders that prick up his legs in anticipation of a bite. The closer that the ramshackle convoy of two pick up trucks arrive to the farm, the more Shiro finds himself glancing out the window over the fence where the cattle graze and meander in the hopes to see something there that wasn’t thought to be there before. He’s been missing signs, implications of a story more complicated connected than briar patch roots snaking under the dirt, while focusing on the mortal presences of a farm boy, cows, and an old yard cat.

Nothing, though, not even a glimpse, not one shadowy humanoid figure floating over the pasture to bid him to see where those supposed casualties haunt.

It’s sad, but his attempt at detective is a good distraction from the topic of Seattle citizens that might still call a turned off phone that stays nestled in his once carry on bag. He’s able to settle down already, drown that guilty beast back into the chasm as his truck pulls up beside Keith’s. Once he’s climbed out, he’s suddenly tense, noting that Keith hasn’t moved from the truck to open up the house for his guest. No, instead the younger man stays sat, eyes on the corner of the porch as though caught sight of a two headed snake.

“Keith?” Shiro calls, tapping on the half rolled down window with a knuckle.

There’s nothing more once the spell is broken, magic, whether good or not, dissipating from the red pick up. Whatever’s spooked the poor farmer into procuring the characteristics of a statue is missing from its post, and Keith slump against the seat, descending against the leather in dismal acceptance. At the sign of a man defeated, Shiro chances opening the door, peering around the frame to check on him.
“If you’re not feeling spright and chipper, I can go get us something instead.”

Keith waves his hand in a half-hearted raise before the arm flops right back down, and then he sighs, unbuckling the seat belt— Allura would pull him over in a heartbeat and charge him triple the fine for goodness’ sake if she caught him without it, he admitted once— to roll out with a thud of his boots on the grass.

There are windows into people’s souls, and then there’s Keith, who looks exhaustedly perplexed but more apt to tilt his head down as he heads towards the house in a pejorative huff. He would prefer the world not see what it going on inside that head of his, Shiro knows, so he follows dutifully to help put together lunch for two.

It’s simple meal of canned hearty chili that’s more preservatives and questionable meat products than sustenance and a thrown together cast iron skillet of cornbread that doesn’t have the nice crust on the edges like Old Haggy’s does. Shiro will not complain, having to rely on the cooking skills of others while his own are disgustingly futile in the kitchen that he could burn water if given the chance. No, he can chop and julienne, do all the nice knife work that comes with taking food to task to make them ingredients, but nevertheless, his one lonely foray into cooking nearly burned his house to ashes.

Lance had gotten a bit of a laugh out of it as his lover grossly exaggerated the boiling over of the fresh field peas he’d been given by a shy Ashe from her family’s garden, and after fussing over Shiro’s faults and failures, the whole ordeal seems humorous to dwell upon now. Same as his mother when all he wanted as a child after school was a packet of instant noodles, and every day, he’d have to wait until someone came along to properly cook the plastic packet of excessively salted carb overload.

As Keith douses his bowl of chili with hot sauce, the other stares into his bowl, wondering if his favorite spicy caloric bombs of ramen have been thrown out without him there to be devouring them after burning too much at the gym, a means to sweat out the toxins from his issues.

“Sheesh, man, just add some cheese and hot sauce, don’t sulk into the bowl,” Keith mutters, but there’s a smirk on the fringe of his mouth and it lessens that sentiment of burden a smidgeon. Granted, his advice is duly noted, so after loading up on half a bag of shredded cheddar and a few shakes of red sauce, Shiro feels his lunch is up to standard for a non-cook.

They eat in friendly silence, as usual whenever he’s come over to the farm, but there’s that mosquito hum of taut buzzing in the kitchen, an apprehension to ask what could be wrong with a friend.
Keith breaks the quiet first with a capricious snort. “Don’t figure you can get anything as good as this back at your place?”

“No really.” and he speaks out of turn with cornbread mashed in between his molars, and good manners is lost on him it seems, “it seems like food in Seattle was healthier, but this is still better than any MRE I’ve had.”

That brings forth a bubble of laughter, and it’s contagious, the two of them falling into snickers before Keith shakes his head, “you’re pretty funny for a city boy, but I’ll make you a good ol’ boy yet.”

“I think you’ve bitten off more than you can chew, since outsiders are kind of an uncommon occurrence here, huh? Not much on practice, I think.”

Keith’s lips thin in a small smile as he shrugs, pushing his empty bowl away to roll the bottle of hot sauce back and forth between his fingers on the table as they talk. It’s childlike, adding a sense of youthful charm to a rough and tough modern day cowboy, and Shiro feels like he’s watching the little brother he never had grow up before his eyes.

“You’re a rare thing, indeed… see, back then, these parts used to flood real bad, so not a lot of folk stayed around to begin with. Guess it kinda cursed the population ‘cause the last person to settle in Gilman was Pastor Coran, though we all have our little suspicions on that.”

“Suspicions?” Shiro echoes in surprise as the pastor of Saint Michael’s is as holy as they come, walking the walk as much as talking it, though his words sound a little more peculiar than regular daily talk when he rattles from his King James Version of the Bible. At Shiro’s rounding astonishment, Keith frowns in a manner that’s sympathetic, shaking his head.

“Judge King sure is a real charmer of a Southern gent, ain’t he?”

Even Shiro admits that his employer and debtor was a handsome old man at first sight, wrinkles outshone by the personality that would surely put Adonis to shame. Furthermore, the judge, with his kindness and his giving nature coupled with down home jokes and light hearted teases, would have fell King David into temptation from his marble arch.
here, just as Shiro and even any others, as penance or healing. Shiro prays that his is healing, as evidenced with how light he feels in the mornings after being showered with Lance’s kisses, how happy he sees the world after Lance reminds him that there are good things always to be found.

Love is such a funny thing. It breaks and mends, all the same, while doing nothing yet everything. Though unrequited or never spoken of, it’s there, a perfume of melodious florals and spices that betwixt the senses and gives way to actions and speech that would otherwise never be mustered.

With that, Shiro hums in agreement and gives Keith his due, “well, that is... pretty close to the truth.

Keith’s nose wrinkles up for a moment, glass bottle still going in its cycle against his palms, “one day, you’re gonna drop all that citified lingo and talk like the rest of us; with flavor.”

The foreshadow of Shiro’s change of accent and phrasing makes him chuckle, something that he can’t imagine, drawing out syllables and sprinkling a well-done twang, rolling his r’s and dropping consonants. He learned real quick that these differing accents are by no means a reflection of any lack of education, just an adding to the culture that the South is known for.

Still, Shiro mentions with a roll of his head onto his hand, “I can’t help it, man. I wasn’t born and raised here— old habits die hard, y’know.”

“Hot damn, there you go. Not too hard is it?”

They fall back into that menial wordlessness when Shiro shrugs with a tip of his head to agree. It’s companionable, everything that works for them, kindred souls that find that words are meaningless when there is such depth of comprehension between the two. They have their burdens, their mistrusts and their trials, and while at times, they do not voice it, it is better to let the dogs to lay low rather than rouse them into hapless hunts.

But, Shiro is here, and while that dark cloud broods above him, he has Keith in a position to talk about something else, more than what is necessary for the two of them. He still brims with that rage, tempered with time into a grossly different creature, most calculative than wrathful, erring to safety now rather than picking fights, especially with a young man that still bears the marks of his father’s selfishness.

“I really can’t be as good as you, since your family has been on this land since forever, huh?”
The bottle that was once Keith’s play toy, a victim of his cat like game, suddenly stops. Tension leaks like gas into the kitchen, a bitter, highly flammable topic approaching if Shiro doesn’t keep the spark from burning them both.

With a dark gleam of hesitation that pools in the other’s eyes, there is a soft utterance. “This wasn’t our… land first. Not in the way you’re meaning.”

There. There it is, and Shiro grabs at the chance as it dangles before him, a carrot as a prize it he keeps clopping towards it, "what do you mean?"

Instead of answering rightly, Keith’s eyes fall back to the hot sauce, a danger to eyes and tongues alike, cradled in his palm before he sets it upright. He sits there with an idleness that delays the next sequence, but really, how much longer can these people avoid Shiro’s insistence on realizing what’s happened?

“Back in like, I dunno, the twenties, my great granddad bought up the land ‘cause it was cheap and bordered our land, but my dad is the one who moved onto this plot to build up the farm. Used to be all crop land here, but the cows took care of that.”

"Who had it first?" And Shiro’s fingers stay hidden beneath the table, trembling along his church worthy pants before gripping the stiff fabric. He has to proceed lightly, he can't botch this up and scare Keith into non-answers. "Just curious."

“Kings did. They procured it back after…”

Time slows, and it’s grating, dragging chipped nails up his forearms to make him twitch, that make him want to scream because this land is Lance’s, and though he can’t contest it, won’t dare try to upend his friend over his lover, there’s still a right to it all the same.

The McClains were laid to rest in the dirt that Shiro now claims, the same dirt that he has placed his hopes for a life with the simpler joys, a life where he can slowly fill the fissures in with gold instead of C-4. In that house, in night’s hidden shadow, Lance is there at his side, away from the land where his family is for a reason the elder of them does not know, to melt the liars’ gold and pour it into the cracks.

Shiro implores to know, begs him, kisses his hair and caresses his jaw to beseech Lance, to draw
from the well of stories that the haunt that’s become the love he possesses in seclusion the truth. No matter how hard he pleads, Lance refuses to speak, his fingers always pressing along the seam of Shiro’s lips as he whispers lugubriously, his eyes shading into a benthic blue.

“It hurts enough.”

With an inhale from the other, the dwellings of a presence that awaits his return from the second floor window, the same window that cast the lamplight on that fateful night months ago, disappears in smoke fumes as Keith explains, ”we don’t talk about it much ‘cause it ain’t worth it. It’s like whenever you watch an old TV show about small towns and crime; when a good one happens, it’s a literal hell raiser.”

That isn’t good enough, and through gritted teeth, the gums of his molars and his canines aching from the force, ”I need to know, Keith... I need to.”

At the red ink that bleeds heartless reasoning into their friendship, Keith’s head raises up, but God, he looks so tired. Sleepless nights must be as typical as the sounds of bulls and cicadas in the summer darkness, and poor boy is just worn the hell out. Here he is, so adamantly blinded to the cause of a family that’s just dead that he isn’t abiding to the rules of mortal engagements.

Psalms depicts that anger is evil, and then and there, Shiro gets why, but Keith is resigned, submitting to the crimson that rolls over the hills, that floods the creeks from the mountains to run the river with sanguine so dull that it’s been just been years to unearth the carcasses from their shallows.

He speaks with profound heartache, the same as creaking piano keys over rusted strings, “I was always told we live on bad land. Grandaddy always said something about dying before God’s time or whatever... but now, the crops grow and the cows aren’t ever spooked, nothing like he said. Dad said…”

To see this sight of this, to watch a man turn into a boy, to relive the funeral day of his mother, to see her final resting place in flashes of blurring colors, in memories that are besmirched with alcohol stains and bruises from fist fights, is the worst.

But, then, “dad said mama helped it. She was so damn good she made peace with it.”

Fingers drum along the checkered vinyl table cloth, red and white faded with age and what once
was love for the hearth and for family. It’s a sad remnant of a once happy home, but Keith continues all the same. “Dad... met my mom when he was stationed overseas. He always said that the world was happier because she was alive, that he couldn't believe someone so good could be found out there. If—if he hadn’t just given the hell up, he’d see her, too.”

Shiro feels something hitch deep in his stomach, but he gently abides, "you see her?"

Keith smiles, and god, its sad, almost as sad as Lance's when he trails off, when his stories of his family linger in droplets on window pane and refuse to run.

“… I see her sometimes,” Keith whispers, clouds of a dusk storm a brewing thing that stirs up a feeling on loneliness deep within his breast. Shiro would like to wonder how that must feel, to wake up, see something out of the corner of his eye to see a person that should no longer walk the earth. He knows this feeling every night, and every day, though the feelings brought forth are always paralleled.

Is it not the same as seeing Sue McClain, her form prone in the corner of a room to watch him, hair matted to her cheeks and her eyes blank and dull? Is it not the same as waking up in the dream room, Lance sitting on the bed with a sweet smile that's made more beautiful by the warm glow of an oil lamp?

It’s the same, yet Keith’s must be worse, so much more, to see the welcoming form of his late mother watching him sleep, watching him work from the porch, unable to speak to him, unable to touch him. She must abhor the in-between of planes as much as her son detests living amongst a town that whispers at his back, that crudely reminds him that his daddy is a no good cheat, swindling the money meant for his son’s education to blow it on a younger woman just a short time after his wife’s death.

Mrs. Evans must walk the steps she did once before, the soft pads of her nonexistence waking Keith up in the middle of the night because she cannot fathom not making the same journey between her bedroom and the kitchen in search of her husband, gone, gone from the home that they made together, gone from their only son who tries to piece together a life abandoned by the only parent he had left.

There’s a storm in the distance as framed by the kitchen window, the overcast sky starts to overtake the dwindling sun, a twilight of foretelling downpours that seek to invade the heavens with gray, nothing but dark and gray. It would be peaceful if not for the lingering scent of perfume that tickles at Shiro’s nose while they sit in the kitchen, a lingering, fading reminder of what once lived.
Keith must just look at the wood that built this house, see the splintering lumber that was hammered and sawed to make each important piece to form a mother and a wife’s dreams of a home made with a loving man that would support her and their child. Said child must see each imperfection, fray of the timber and see how a life without a mother’s love sets forth a path of decay that washes the colors out of life, leaves them hollow and irreparable, and realize what he hopes for himself is just to survive.

Shiro’s eyes stray out the window to the porch, following the line of Keith’s somber gaze has he turns in his seat to stare at an empty space. She must be there, watching them, Mrs. Evans a kinder soul than most to simply stay to ensure her son always has a mother to come home to.

“Don’t get it. I don’t get why she’s here. I’m fine, more than fine,” Keith speaks with a heaviness that lumps in his throat, speaks around the lack of feeling of his words like he’s chewed through the meat to find nothing but ash. Shiro wishes he could see Keith’s mother, could tell her that she’s raised a fine son that does the right thing, who wakes up at the crack of dawn to water and feed her bastard of a husband’s cows, that goes into town to pick up breakfast from a good friend before going back home to work on the farm. That he does these things instead of packing up and leaving from this hell mouth that proves harder to live within each day, a tar of a space that has nothing for Keith, is admirable.

But, no, that isn’t quite right, something tells him, a breeze of rain caressing his cheek through the cracked windows to whisper the truth, that there is an anchor in Keith’s soul that grounds him to this land whether he truly gives it permittance to or not.

It’s something as vicious as thorns, but as sweet as cherries, as lovely as the rare juniberries, yet as ferocious as a lioness. The anchor is a woman, a dream shattered and glued together into something uglier, but still theirs. It’ll right itself, and this will all be a fever pitch into the sky.

Or, so, that is all that can be hoped as the silence falls once more, broken only by thundering rumbles. Absently, the two men watch the storm roll in, a precedence for something that calls over the horizon.

—

He isn’t ready, but then again, there isn’t a time that he will be so close as he is now.

Once the rains slacked off and the downpours ceased, Shiro made it back home with a knot in his throat and a worry along his brow. There’s a chill that should not be there, but creeps in on him, but it is no haunt, no, just his own anxiety, his own fears that may lave him bare with muddy water.
God, he’s afraid, taking each lonely step up to the second floor as though he were rising to the gallows, a noose hanging there to wrap around his neck. How badly he wants to push this away, to let the darkness overtake him with sleep, to have Lance come to him instead of this.

But, just a glimpse of Keith, a son with a mother gone, comes to mind, and it hammers another nail into the coffin of his will to push his family away. Thus, it drives him to pull his phone from the bag and find solace on the bathroom floor.

There isn’t a rhyme or reason for his placement, but honestly, the room feels safest, the most secluded from ears that may overhear his misery. He can’t be in the parlor as the twins’ warmth still provides a sense of exuberance that he may need in the morning, likewise as the bedroom is the domain for his lover, it would be unwise to smear this over their sanctuary.

The phone lights up after he holds down the power button, and instantly, the messages and voice mails start to ping through. There’s at least a hundred missed calls, more than that in texts, but he can’t read them, can’t be bothered to break the dam that is already near crumbling as he shudders out. Merely, all that he needs to do is dial his voice and let the messages go.

He has to listen as this is the only closure he can come to now, the only way to ease him into a false state of wellbeing.

The first one is his mother.

“Tak-kun. Where are you? Are you still at the store? Did you have an appointment today? Call me, please.”

He hits delete. Next.

“Tak-kun. This isn’t funny... some of your things are missing and it’s getting late. Your father has been calling, and no one has seen you. Please come home.”

His thumb taps the screen. Another deletion, and his eyes close slowly as he listens and grits.

“Shirogane Takashi. Where. Are. You? You’re worrying your mother sick, and your father has
called the police. Where are you, my little moon?”

Oh, that hurt. Mother always knew how to make it hurt when she was most worried, adding her love in childhood names that she kept for embarrassing her children in later years.

“Mom just called and told me. Did you leave? Why didn't you leave a note? Did we do something? Ta—.”

The eldest twin, his adored sister. He’s trembling now, shoulders against the lip of the tub as he sits in the bathroom, pouring his family over his woes.

“Everyone is worried. There’s a police report and a missing person’s case. You’ve been gone for three days, Tak-kun. My moon, where did you go?”

The messages continue, a few from the disjointed grunts of his fretful father, but mostly from his mothers and sisters, a monotonous barrage of worrying and expecting the worst when worst is only just leaving home before he ruined them.

“You can call us. I promise, mom and dad aren’t mad! They just wanna be sure you’re okay. That’s all we want… just… a text, something.”

The youngest twin, and he thinks of Pidge, thinks of her calling an elder brother that abandoned his family because his demons were too great and the longing he held in his breast for something else grew past his ribs, cracking the bone and tearing the lungs.

The final message is the most heartbreaking, time stamped on the twins’ birthday.

“… I won’t— I can’t bother you anymore, my sweet moon. The detective came today, said they found your bank transactions. I… I do not know what is there all the way across the country from us—from me, and it better not be anything drug or gang related! You will worry me to death that way!”

He’s already worried her to death, already disregarded his phone, his family’s only connection to him out here in the boondocks of the South, across rivers and states. They must have determined to no longer follow because his parents are elderly and his sisters have lives of their own. If the police mentioned that he wasn’t in any lucrative affairs or shanghaied…
They gave up calling him home.

“But… I just hope you are happy, and know that we love you. We love you so much, and… I can’t wait for the day when you find what you need, and come home to me.”

He saves the last message after a pause, then sluggishly shuts down his phone so that he can be bathed in silver moonlight that spills in from the lone window high on the wall. The moon is his only companion now, the only gaze upon him as he slumps against the porcelain side of a claw foot tub to slide sideways so his left shoulder hits the floor.

His hand cradles the phone, the human one, grazes his thumb along the black screen before he lets the device clatter to the floor with what he wishes were apathy. No, what he feels is defeat, that the one thing he tried to do right by everyone, that the one attack of his shot nerves and scrambling mind that pushed him into a cluster fuck ended up hurting more than it would otherwise.

Home is only a word, and strength is an imagined affirmation that the weak call upon when there is simply nothing else to do but pick up the stones that fell from their backs and push forward. Weakness, though, is what settles him there and drains away what little he had left for the night.

He blinks slow, then shudders a hesitant exhale as something wet drips across his temple.

Shiro hates crying. The tears sting his eyes too hard that it feels like needles in the film of the whites and his eyelids swell and ache with the salt that will surely trail down his cheek and stain his face.

Tonight, though, he allows himself to grieve, curls up and sobs alone in night’s quiet cloak though there’s a brush of cold along the nape of his neck and down his curved spine, and a whisper in his ear.

Shhh, shhhh…

Through the hiccups and wracks of a breakdown that needed to happen sooner rather than later, Shiro falls asleep there, eyes and cheeks red with the swell of emotion, as his sorrowful cries finally cease, and he knows peace only the mess of his thoughts for just a little while longer.
Chapter 11

May bleeds fervently into June and July in an ever-growing infestation of birds and of insects, in a never-ending heat that with even nights that can offer no reprieve from the sweat drenched forehead and clothes. Humidity is a killer with an MO for asphyxiation upon its victims, mucky digits of a transparent hand gripping necks tight and forcing all outside activity to either occur early with the dawn or later with the dusk.

Free time is no longer an option with every second utilized in the composition of daily routine. There is never a moment now that Shiro finds himself idly sitting, each day marching forth a motivation that will surely drive him to a point of obsession in fixing up the issues of his home. There is so much to do, and for the life of him, he cannot pinpoint his focus for full week to one project whether it be cleaning up the lawn and humble gardens or working out the decaying side boards on the outside.

Granted, there’s some character to the house, and with it’s dull, cracked paint, creaking foundation, and dusty windows, it fits that part of the haunted house too well. The little things, the aspects that add to a build up to a monster of a local story that evades all discussion no matter who or how Shiro asks. He’s meant to be left out of the loop of vintage gossip in a piteous way, always gaining the frowns that derive from the unfortunate circumstances that have shaped the town.

Still, no matter how endearing the fraying paint job and decaying siding may be, something urges him to change out the worst of the boards for new planks, and something urges install new doors in the house, and let Colleen fix up some curtains for cleaned windows. Something tells him, oh, the inside walls are just fine as they are, but needing some love and elbow grease to clean them just as he’s cleaned up the stair banisters and stained the wood.

It’s been with so much enthusiastic labor to spruce up this house that Shiro, with the help of so many others, has brought back something long that dead back alive. This house, he comes to think one night, weeks after he has nearly broken down into smoldering cinders of a dying fire, is an emulation of his psyche, of his mental state. Once broken down, dusty with the bleakness and clouded with the darkness, with tenderness and with kindness, the cobwebs have been wiped away and the disarray of strewn about fixtures and thoughts have been slowly put back in place.

The same as in his head, there was once an eerie rambling or buzzing silence, but now, with all their work, the house no longer reeks of forbiddance of nature’s call, now allowing the tweets of songbirds and hoots of owls, allowing the chirps of nightlife and the sound of laughter as guests come and go as they please. The sadness that had settled over the property for decades like soot from a fire is being swept out with brooms, all held in the hands of Shiro and the people he has come to love and accept as they have reciprocated. It’s satisfying, placing him on a pedestal that he adamantly hopes is a ‘better place.’
And, oh, what a treat it is to live every night with Lance beside him, nestled in the crook of his arm to praise Shiro as their finger interlace, "you're making this a home again… just like I knew you would."

It’s then that the idiosyncrasy in behavior, to construct instead of destroy, becomes a fulfillment that is not so much as making the space livable as it is making Lance happy. His sister, though, seems wildly indifferent, not ceasing her random spurts of activity or her strange routines that are just disheartening to relive with her, but all the same, Shiro wants to believe that Sue notices.

She has been quite the help for sure, helping Shiro learn to recognize the dank dread of her presence when she is tormented with a bad cycle, and it has effectively guided him into avoiding her, even bringing him to leave his equipment outside in the elements a few times instead of storing it all safely in the shed. He would rather do that than risk an encounter such as one of their first, perfectly content with just their leisure meetings when her spirit isn’t so damn pitiful.

It’s a song and a dance that plays forth each day, rounding out the summer with spending time and Pidge and Matt before they cart off to their freshman year of college and fixing up the town in preparation to the onslaught of visitors that will come in August for the jamboree of the year, the Juniberry Festival. Shiro is happy, able to wake up some mornings and tell the reflection in the mirror that he’s on the mend, tearing out the rotten wood and replacing it with new oaks, the budding sprouts popping from the soil of his calming sanity.

Then, one blistering hot evening towards the precipice of summer, July nearing its final tolls of long hours of sunlight, Alford King gazes down Main Street at the banners that now wave from the street lamps, ‘Gilman Welcomes You!’ He has stopped to admire the handiwork of putting up the flags of welcome himself, breathing in deep as the pink and greens of the flags depict juniberry petals in curlicues around the yellow embroidery of Southern hospitality. At this point, there isn’t much left to do but to have the damn party.

Shiro stands beside the judge, as is his place to be when he isn’t off, and he glances over the older man, a tickle in his throat over just how damn proud Alford appears. “Happy?”

“It’s gonna be the damn biggest shindig this side of the Mississippi, boy, I just know it! It’s bigger, better, and damn, not a cattywampus flag to boot!” With a pause, there’s suddenly coughing into a weathered hand, and the judge sheepishly admits, “usually, I, uh, mess up on the balancing ratio of wind to flag and, well, if it weren’t for you, I’d have done messed it up again.”

If he’s meant to garner a little bit of pride from that, he’ll take it, as there isn’t much grander in life than being told he’s done a good job like he’s been told in Gilman. The rehabilitation clinic, the
doctors, all of them back in Seattle had mentioned, oh, he’d done a good job, taken this all in strides as well as anyone could do. That was all out of survival, out of guilt, and now he can say, from the bottom of his heart, that any help or any good deed he does comes from the sheer volition to do so. From the bottom of his heart, Shiro hopes that he has earned his spot on the citizenship roster just as well as someone who has inherited their part instead.

As the few cars drive down to the only stop light of the Main Street intersection, the two men stand there and admire their work in the tangerines fading over the aged street side. In true fashion, supper will become a hankering, a reward for the energy spent dressing this old town up to a shiny small town that has charm and beauty all its own. With a growl of his own stomach, Shiro sheepishly glances over, and parts his lips to speak before he is stopped.

“C’mon son. Got something I’ve itchin’ to do.”

It throws him off, Alford’s change from sprightly man that is surely a child in an adult’s skin and bones to an archaic man of somber resignation, age catching up in flight of years in a mere set of seconds rather than years. He goes, and it’s with a hitch in his gait, a catch along the knees that Shiro acknowledges that there are times when even this judge, this last patriarch of the King family, wears his senescence.

Judge King does not call for his right hand again, but dutifully, Shiro follows as he always does, trailing behind his elder out of fearing respect that the years ahead may be unkind.

Though worried, Shiro’s thoughts run skyward into the clouds of perplexity as Alford moves towards the boutique stores, opening the door to the florist shop like he steps to a dance macabre only his ears can hear.

As the bell tingles, Shiro is met with the most buoyant of sights, flowers and handmade wreaths all on articulate display in a plethora of colors and of varieties. While Shay is not present on the store floor, Narti is there instead, her trademark cat bandana (a gag gift from her small ragtag clique of friends, but one she wears proudly) wrapping her hair back while she waters the flowers.

From what he’s taken from Ezzy’s gabbing over her best friends during his coffee breaks, Narti is mute, and while he has been informed by the waitress that her friend can read lips like an agent trained in the art of espionage and intel gathering, Shiro wishes he had taken up sign language when those classes were offered.

However, what comes about is just further proof that Alford King is a god among men, a deity that has learned all of the tongues of communication even if he can only speak English, as he smiles and...
nods, raising his hands to sign, “is Shay here?”

Narti is a stoic creature in her own right, more like Ashe in regard to their serious dispositions in comparison to the boasting personalities of Ezzy and Zephne, but when her lips upturn the tiniest bit, its like the judge can make this mortal plane a far greater ease of existence with his ways.

Narti leaves them with her watering can in hand, silently heading towards the yellow organza that has been hanged for another pop of splendor to please the sense of sight while the florals please the sense of smell. There’s just a few shuffles from the back of the store, a delighted ‘oh!’ that is followed by the thud of shoes along the floor, and soon Shay herself appears from the curtains, round-faced and lovely as ever.

Shiro has briefly met Shay, owner of Buttercup Florist and Gifts, a handful of times with most of those being in Hunk's diner while the chef himself flutters and chokes on his words. It’s a sight, one that has many wondering when the poor man is going to drop to his knee and propose as the gossip goes that he picked out a ring years ago as they grew up together, but her benevolence and her passion for her business keeps Hunk at bay. Shay hardly puts up any fight, blushing and giggling whenever they are able to sit and chat the minutes away, but Shiro bets that it will be soon that one caves and ties the other to their waist in romantic bliss.

Now, though, her eyes, adoringly bright and attentive, are upon the two men in her place of business, and with that smile, it is no wonder that she has netted up the nervous affections of Hunk. Her soul is as jovial as the buttercups she grows, her speciality in both her skill and her spirit.

“Why, good evenin’, y’all!” Shay greets, her voice like fireflies that dance in the heat of moonless nights and lemonade down parched throats, “it’s always a treat to have hard working men come in my shop!”

Alford has a lightness in his step again, but that lowly tone still resounds a warning in Shiro’s chest after being around the charismatic epitome of a jolly good man. ”Need some flowers, dear, as many as you can give two poor folk like us tonight.”

“Say no more, Your Honor!” and Shay is already flitting about the store like a bee, Narti at the counter preparing the plastic sleeves as her employer hums with the contemplation of what will be the best combinations. "Birthday? Anniversary? Oh, is Lulu mad at you? You’re always steppin’ on her toes!"

Even while the embodiment of sweet honey and sunshine giggles, Alford stays a shell of his once self with a muttering, “gonna put some nice fresh flowers in some poor folks' graves.”
Shiro feels his heart clench at the statement, and he wonders— no, he needs to know which graves this man means, if he will be asked to join him on the journey to the church cemetery and lay the flowers there out of due respect.

Though her humming falls into a quiet reverence for whomever the judge means to pay respects to, Shay hardly misses a step, picking out her best flowers to bring them over to her employee. Between Shay and Narti hard at work, there’s soon a good few bundles together, Alford counting each as he rubs his hand over his beard in thought. For someone so keen on the details for the festival, he barely gives any opinion, trusting the ladies with their work and their talents.

When all is said and done, neither Shay or Narti even try to ring up the flowers for sale, and Shay presents the bouquets at long last as Narti starts closing up the shop for the night. “Free of charge, Your Honor, for thanks for all that you do for us.”

Ah, but an old man like this King just casually pulls out his wallet to hand over two crisp hundred dollar bills and merely says, “charity is for those that honest to God need a little compassion in their lives, and y’know I ain’t a hurtin’ man. Here, sweetie, here’s extra for you and Narti— go visit the girls and Hunk for supper.”

And with kisses to their cheeks that is Shay’s trademark farewell, Shiro is drawn out of the florist shop dumbfounded, any explanation wracking about in the befuddlement bouncing against the walls of his skull.

“Do you need me to drive you out to Saint Michael’s, sir?” Shiro asks in step with Alford who is heading out to Black as the LeBaron is currently sitting at Sendak’s shop in need of a regular tune up. The judge finally smiles, chuckling as he glances over to his help, the man he’s sort of swindled into doing dirty work that’s all good and legal for the sake of taking a young man lost under his wing.

“To the house, son. I wanna pay my respects.”

They say nothing else because Alford is in a mourning state of mind and Shiro if flabbergasted that this event has even come to fruition as for all the little drops of questions and nudges that he has pressed against the other’s side, nothing has come of it. Whenever he tries to strike up the conversation on the history of the house, of the family who dwelled there before the house fell into near ramshackle ruins, there is a figurative cease and desist order, a swerving of topics or the judge stating in a hard line, “son, don’t go diggin’ up the dead.”
But, now they are at Shiro’s address, stopped at the usual parking spot along the roadside as Alford sighs, withering as a leaf would when winter’s first frost ices stems and freezes roots. He’s older, brittle bones and dying tendons as he settles his feet on the ground, staring up at the house he first met his friendly lackey on.

“D’you like it here, boy?” Alford asks as Shiro comes to his side, his younger stead puzzled and concerned at how the day has brought them here from their earlier teases and laughter that is such an accustomed piece of interaction between them. “Are you happy you made it out here from that ol’ city of yours?”

“I— I’m grateful, I think,” Shiro whispers, offering to take a few bouquets out of the judge’s hands, to bear the burden that has been dragging by ball and chain at his ankles and shoulders as they walk in sobering steps towards the graves of the humble resting place of the McClains.

At the response, Alford just hums as he comes to the headstone of the patriarch of the family he has come to visit, bowing his head before shaking it slowly. “Grateful that you found somethin’ you needed, or grateful that you got away from what was chasin’ you?”

The truth of it all, the very stickler that stabs in neat sporadic pricks along the skin of his back, is horrifically bland that it’s almost a pain to even form it into words, so Shiro leaves it be. The problem always lies in the things that cannot be taken for granted, and the things that can, that sanctity of mind and place is just as useless he is on the mornings the pains along his right arm are just too much. He grits his teeth because that’s what all good people do, and stands with the morning light in hopes to become of use again.

But, here he is, standing there, back turned to the west with his eyes to the south, and from that window perch a story above them, Shiro feels it, a chill down his spine, a reminder that there isn’t a thing to be said about the smudging rakes of claws that still sits at the door at night, still calls him back to a place he can’t bring himself to remember. No, though the beast chases and waits in patient shade, there is a treasure that has been found, the same that Shiro has loved since first sight.

It’s the same that calls his name down the unlit hallways when the bird fall silent in their slumber, bluebell eyes searching him out. It’s the same that cups his jaw, and reminds him he’s a good man, just a little rough at the edges and broken at the heart. It’s the same that kisses him, steals the breath from him to that it can sing sweet nothings all night long before the shadows rise in tidal oppressors and the sun looms once more.

Lance is an answer that Shiro cannot mutter, cannot offer in hopes for more to this reasoning, so he lacks voice and leaves the man beside him to contemplate.
“Cat always get the tongue when the words can’t just right themselves out, don’t it?” Alford kneels down, letting the grass and the red dirt stain the knees of his white suit pants as a sufferable act while placing the first bouquet on a dead man’s grave.

Shiro tries to do the same, but he’s waved away with a slow raise of a loose fist, “no, son, let me do this. Let an old man make up for the sins of his family blood.”

So it goes, and it goes, Alford King, judge of Gilman, tiredly adding a touch of revering color to the hidden cemetery, some kind of joyful hue that ends up washing away in the blurring of Shiro’s thoughts as they bleed together as that the rain has come to smear the tints of Shay’s flowers.

It lasts for an hour, maybe two or three, time inkling into the draining of nature and death’s splendor as he cannot help but stand there tall, as though he were at the ready for a salute to a higher up walking in for inspection of his barrack. Here, though, is just another facet of tragic history, pen on paper as it dictates not an end, but a continuation.

The evening sun wanes into a dusky haze, elongating the umbras of two men that toe at the precipices of their own neglect as they are joined by seven gravestones that stretch the length of the yard. With each passing prayer and asking for forgiveness, Shiro’s hands are soon lacking in all but one bouquet, one for a grave that is not here, but is a life lost all the same, gone for reasons that are still unknown.

As the judge dictates final verdicts on his own follies, Shiro decides to lay the last bouquet on the porch steps in the hopes that he is doing right by his lover.

When the judge has ended his whispering eulogies, tracing the epitaph of the matriarch’s marker with trembling fingers, he rises, but is not tall; it’s bittersweet, to see a man come to the place of turmoil from darker days for reprieve of his guilts, yet be so small altogether.

Through rushing waters that throb in his ears, Shiro ponders from the dense depths if this is what it would be like to become wise with age, to meet with the ghosts that haunt in the manners not always in bed sheets and candle light, but in memory, even if never experienced in full by one’s eyes.

“…This town has been my stompin’ grounds since the day the good Lord decided to bless me with His Breath, after all these years— and, Shiro, have I lived many— there are just a handful of times I’ve been to this house.”
Shiro steps closer out of the need to feel closer to some other creature that bleeds same as he, that breathes and cries, that screams and begs when all else is chaos, a miraculous cluster fuck that is dissonance incarnate. For all the nights he walks to bed too happy to let sandmen into his bedroom for their labor of sleep, for all the days that he finds solace in the solitude of his home, there is a time when a companion just calms the tempest of nervousness in his breast.

But, Alford speaks in tomes of brittle sapience in thick composition of scripture, given from an old man to a young one, “I can’t… tell you what you wanna know; there just ain’t the give in me to do it. All I can tell you is that I’m gettin’ older, and it’s gettin’ harder to recollect the things my daddy told me and the reasons why I had to lose my best friend to the blaze that still smolders.”

Shiro stops mid-breath, lungs hitching as he glances up. “Sir?”

A laugh, weary and bitter, citrus sharp and loathsome, “ain’t you heard about the old dog that sits as mayor? That scar on his face makes him right prettier if you ask me. Gave it to him myself… on this very land.”

Completely enthralled, Shiro’s eyes widen, a pricking shock that nails into his throat as he stares at a gentleman admitting his harm upon another and it is too wild a statement, too slanderous for this one. This is the same elderly fellow that flirts in teasing renditions with a waitress with rainbows cascading in her hair, that sits on the front pew every Sunday to listen with utmost attention to the sermon and sing each hymn with embellished faith, and yet, he has harmed another living being.

It is a flaw, and it is horrifically satisfying to hear that Shiro and him are the same, that there is a darker anger within them, that under the folds of sincerest intentions or just damn naivety, there is still something else, black, diseased embers of distrust in the people that they once held in treasure chests in their hearts.

Broken, now, those locks have been, wood of enclosures left for the termites.

Wistful exhale inches from Alford’s lips, and a hand pressed against the small of his back to alleviate the soreness that thuds from his work, he gazes at Shiro, desperate and pleading.

“But, my boy, do us both a favor, and do what that decrepit bastard can’t: let go. Just let this go. Ain’t nothin’ we can do for the dead… but hope we can learn from it.”
Shiro takes Alford to Allura’s later that night while the half moon hangs in the sky. She comes to the door of her humble little garden house and waves, but he doesn’t exit the truck, just raises a hand to the sheriff fresh off her shift. Alford hesitates in his departing of the vehicle before he tips his head, eyes even bright in the darkness as they watch him.

“Promise me you’ll let it go, ‘cause I can tell you now that pontificatin’ on the dead will have Death come for you too soon, my boy.”

Alford squeezes his shoulder, a grandfatherly motive behind the touch, and soon the truck is empty sans for its driver. Black idles, and Shiro drives off, hands clenching the wheel tight.

Death already came for his sorry ass, and it was too blind to take him. He’s fondly used to the shade that floats in gossamer banners, used to ebony feathers that block luminance from life buoyant. Still, a lesson is being taught here, and he chooses to not heed it. In the end, lessons are seldom learned by advice, and Shiro knows this as he rides the curves back home that action must take precedence or he will surely corrode from the acid that eats at him, that desire to know.

(And all the same, it’s just more repressing the temperament rather than the fight when Shiro arrives back home to find Lance’s bouquet of mourning marigolds missing from the steps as though they were instead dandelions caught in a throe of breath.)

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*a doe stands in the distance, white shadow amongst the black static.*

*her fawn is at her side, a speckled depiction of new life that bounds with its mother, free and spright.*

*gunshot. smokes of gun powders, ash gray and sickly stark in the void, waft upward to a skyless horizon. the doe is slain, sprawled upon the white floor of forest dark.*

*the fawn is alone. it mourns and it cries over the carcass.*

*a buck with eight limbs of antlers comes to guide the fawn down a thorny path of mysterious grief.*
maggots eat the doe, and she is nothing more than memory now, written in a journal that weighs his hand before the gun stares into his eyes, barrel as endless as the depths of the ocean where the rivers end.

then, another shot, and lo, a pale horse with hellfire at its back gallops towards him. before he screams, water encircles his neck to squeeze like a lover’s traitorous choke, salt sharp and bitter pulp.

—

Shiro drifts this morning, a day after a gravesite ceremony years too late took place. His limbs feel weightless, yet heavy, and his soul is the same. His throat is parched as though he has, in blinding thirst, drunk the volume of the sea to quench the necessity of water only to let the salt dry him inside out.

Preserved may be a simpler term for his state, but he is lethargic, so gone on stares at the ceiling in hopes that the stars will burn through so that the universe may map out his life with the use of helium and hydrogen in perfect symbiosis. It would be wonderful to simply supine there, let the world steer a course to an age that he will one day see, when he is as old as the cosmos and there is nothing but regret.

Sadly, the blue that beats along his veins wonders of another thought, of a life that is shorter, one that does not dillydally with the expositions that too long years force. It’s a trap, a door under his feet with an unknown executioner holding the rope, letting the most pristine of moments collapse before the pulley squeaks and the trap is sprung.

He presses his cheek into the pillow, inhaling that brief scent of sea flower and salt foam. For the first time since Lance returned to him, they wrapped around each other, interwoven in hopeless, muted infinity. The question breathes in wet hisses through the vents, scrapes beneath the floorboards as Shiro wants to know why an eighth grave does not exist.

Even at the mention, there was a shift in the ambiance, usually flirty and warm with their affections as they partake of each other in the romantics most innocent, yet belied then something far grimmer. Lance did not speak, rather traced phantom shapes and letters along the metal of Shiro’s fake arm in dim focus.

That is how it began, and how it ended, and he is a lonelier man for it.
Apologies will not remake the rift Shiro is digging, and he is crucially aware of it. It isn’t Lance that slips away, but rather clings more, his heart heavy with the love that he has for a sentience that is not like himself. No, Shiro is the push, the crashing waves endlessly battering the shoreline with his incessant barrage of questions. Why? How? For what?

It’s the chirping of wrens outside his window that rouses Shiro to tuck the presumptuous discernments away and begin the day, morning run forgotten.

Grimacing, his legs finally shift, and the cotton of his sleep pants cling to his skin in a wet way that’s just grinding on uncomfortable. The humidity has snuck into the bedroom overnight, and if melodies of bird song are not enough to ease him up, the relief that comes from a bath is.

An hour passes, and he wonders what his day will be. Will the judge return, the LeBaron good as new just as himself, pieced back together for happier tone to wash away the remnants of what was left behind prior? He supposes if not, then a visit to the Holt Grocery would be in order as he is once again low on pantry stock, but such would prompt lunch at the Sunny Side Diner to see if there would be any progress on the love story of Hunk and Shay as the food cooks away and flowers are watered and tended to, both of them greeting customers with a welcoming smile.

Personally, human contact should be kept to a minimal, figuring he would prefer his haunts in lieu of social graces.

But, time passes slow yet sure, and the sun glows brighter with its ascent into the sky. Minutes tick by, but with there being no sight or sound of visitors and not an inch of self-antagonism to procure a trip into town, he resigns himself to the duties of repair for something to do or else he would be in the parlor in front of the television in vegetative madness.

Besides, his labor and his sweat being poured into the fixing up of this once sorry sight of a house is his true purpose, other than his self-appointed scale of justice for the crimes of assumption he has come to accept. This, here, the floors under his feet and the walls that surround him, is a scene that long ago held the innocent victims of some tragedy. He could be audience to the twisted scheme, of a matter that he cannot witness himself but can learn, or he could be the player, the active role that is a catalyst to uncover the entirety of hidden allegory.

The latter requires energy and focus, determination and vitriol, but today, he wants to roll up his sleeves, or lack thereof because fuck, the day is hot already, and use that burn in his blood to rebuild the home he shares with Lance.
A cup of instant coffee and a change of work clothes later, he has gone in search of his tools that are kept in the shed, that damn hellhole of a shelter he wants to burn down after taking an axe to it after seeing Sue’s corpse laying there with the squallers of a baby echoing in his pounding eardrums. Today, that sense of dread does not linger over the shed, though Shiro holds his breath in chilling anticipation as the door creaks open, hinges rusted but loose from his working. Sue is not there, and he finally lets his bated breath loose, lungs near collapsing from the weak relief of her absence.

With a picking up of a saw, a hammer, and fresh boards of lumber, he decides to work on the frame work of a back porch. It isn’t much, but it would be a nice addition, something more than just barely nailed together steps to the back yard. It will be a sense of purpose for today, something to smile at night as his bones ache and his skin shivers, something for him to ask his lover, did Lance see what he did for their home in the grousing heat of summer sun.

With boards down for the desired length of the porch, Shiro’s mind goes off into disassociation of body while he toils away, wondering if there really is a thing as fate even after all this time. Lance is up the stairs, second floor residing, and Shiro feels it, that longing that always is with him like the pains of his missing arm. With the sweat of his brow, he hopes in thuds of nail in wood that he was meant to come here and meet Lance, to bring providence and grandeur back into the younger man’s once home for a sense of pride and for a sense that things that are broken down and weathered can be rebuilt and be renovated, especially when done by loving hands.

Nearly every night, those same hands, tender and careful, take the photograph of Lance that is kept on the rickety bedside table to let his eyes linger along a jawline that begs to be nuzzled, a pair of lips that plead to be kissed. The romantic inclinations are all childishly minuscule, yet poignant in consideration that Lance is his, as he is the other’s, their two hearts, both blue and black, coinciding in every bliss but wedded.

The ice that pours into his veins comes with the stark realization of something horrible to his pride and to his manhood; that even if anything more than kisses and touches could be achieved between a mortal and a specter, the prevalent fear of a breakdown during the act is enough to keep their love quite chaste.

After all, there’s still that nipping cloud that hovers at the nape of his neck to remind him of his own broken self.

As whenever Shiro works on the house, time becomes irrelevant. There’s something freeing about just putting his hands to work, to be able to utilize what he has learned from able-bodied townsfolk and from working with Keith on the farm. Hell, even just his menial inclusion in the festival planning has afforded him newer skills that he use in his personal ventures. With these experiences, instead of breaking, he can build, a concept foreign some months ago now a reality in the present. Today, it’s a frame for a porch, and tomorrow, who the hell knows?
It’s gratifying, if at least temporarily, and affix the characteristics of positive consequences to his
life.

He works on, and works for hours, long into the morning and afternoon. The sweat has soaked
through his shirt until the fabric irritates him to the point he jerks it off to throw it aside into the
grass, stains be damned. It must appear almost methodical, how precise he works without pausing
to think, but it’s like something possess his body and leads him to the end game without him
having to consider much outside of work.

Then, as the evening crawls along the sky, he sees her, white dress in the corner of his eye, and Sue
watches him from the kitchen window. Familiar now, he would have been startled, should be
startled more than likely, but she is there all the same, and outside of confessing her ghost to Pastor
Coran in hopes of an exorcism, Shiro cannot bid her to leave.

He doesn’t want to, anyway. How cruel he could be has yet to be seen even by his own self, but to
bid her away would be an act thriving on just damn evil greed of personal space.

Bitterly, though, there’s a thought of a desire for Lance to be the same as her, for his blue eyes to
watch from that window instead of hers, to appear from the dust in his fullness and bring such
delight to Shiro's daytime.

Thankfully, it’s so fucking hot, and abruptly the heat jerks him back to his task, back to the damn
back porch he wants built for a pair of rockers and steps leading out to the yard that leads to the
gate, trail winding through the woods.

Sue leaves him alone for a time to never return. It’s nothing more than the heat and the cicadas that
confide in Shiro a sense that he is not alone in the woods, though he wonders at times if he can
hear the tightening of a bow string out in the distance, of Thace and Ulaz, his eerie shadows of
‘neighbors’ hunting for their next sale of meat and hide. He has never found their supposed cabin,
and honestly? He’s okay with it.

From the hours spent outside, he may die of heat exhaustion, but whenever the inking of
dehydration rears its desperate head, he tells himself that it’s just a bit longer and then he can rest.
The back porch will be a grand sight, with potted plants from Shay’s florist shop and a tea oil
stained rocker for Shiro to bide the afternoons in. Maybe he will even manage to get another jug of
Colleen’s famous sweet tea since she's gotten him addicted to the liquid equivalent of illegal
drugs.
The sun bears down relentlessly while the humidity swirls thickly through the air and into his lungs; his chest heaves with the effort to just stay conscious while the warning alarms blare in his skull that he’s a damn idiot to stay out so long in the scorching hell that is Southern heat.

Then, oh, he shivers, and it’s a whisper then, a trickle of a creek along the shell of his ear; it’s indecipherable, but it’s surely there, flitting around his ears to give him a gentle embrace of solace.

Along the hot sweat of his brow, there is a sudden cool shift that gives the gesture of a damp cloth being pressed to his forehead. It brings the silliest smile to his face when the breeze rustles the leaves of the oaks surrounding the property, and the man alone swears on his own damn grave that he can hear the whispers of his lover tell him, “love you.”

It’s a spoken testament, akin to a housewife gifting a cold glass of fresh lemonade or sweet tea to her hardworking spouse to say without words how pleased she is by his labor. Against the throbs and the aches that are pulsing down his left arm and shoulders, it’s the spark to return his motivation, to firm his grip on the handle of the hammer to renew pounding the nails into the boards again.

And again. And again. And again until the sunset convenes with the horizon formed by the shadows of trees, until Shiro knows bone-deep exhaustion like a husband knows his wife.

thud. thud. thud.

Like the hammer on the anvil of his own skull, the sound resonates with the beats of his heart, the moonlight is the final gaze that watches an obsessed man toil away, never once batting a thought at leaving his post.

What a sight it will be… how proud Lance will be.

How Lance will shower him with praise and excitement, how Lance’s worries and silence from the night before will whisk away with feather light kisses. He will chide Shiro, of course, for the sun burn and the near heat stroke, pouting that his lover would be so damn hard on himself to work and work until there’s not one sinew that doesn’t scream in protest. He won’t give a damn, just as Lance to kiss the pains away, to kiss his forehead, tell him he did a good thing.

And, oh, Lance will, smile soft in candlelight while his fingertips draw over skin red from too much sun, and the cold touch will shudder within another worry, another break in the dam that
Lance is always on the colder side of temperature, never, ever warm.

Maybe, then, he can be warm enough for both of them, though it’s a cracking thing, a little knick along the glass of windows of their sanctuary hidden down the corridor of the second story and makes this heaven on earth a little less ethereal.

—

The next week drolls on with a little less candor than before, and while he is more apt to spend time on the house and rereading Lance’s journals, Shiro eventually goes damn stir crazy in his own head.

He would go to the Holts, but with his mood and Pidge and Matt most assuredly packing their clothes and some of their belongings for the trips to their respective universities, to experience the worries of their first days of higher education while excelling in all that they do. Shiro knows that, and would fight anyone that says otherwise, but he isn’t sure he is the presence that they need when he feels like he’s burdened with water.

Just for a change of pace, he goes to the diner for breakfast, though food is not an appetizing sight as he hoped, someone’s home cooked meal other than his few scrape togethers of something that is a bastardization of minimal nutrition. Ezzy keeps away when he crawls into a corner booth by his lonesome, but when she brings his coffee and order of the fluffiest blueberry pancakes, she smiles and coos, “chin up, handsome. Sunshine’s comin’ your way whether you like it or not.”

And she lets him be, and he’s grateful, sipping his coffee and just letting the small town scene pass by in its molasses pace. It’s old cars and old ladies going about in directions of their intents, and while the shifting of his pieces aren’t lining up just right, well, he can appreciate this. It’s the murmur of town talk in the diner, of the smells of mouthwatering magic from the kitchen, and just good ol’ hospitality and understanding of a man not getting his footing right.

Midway through his breakfast, the door opens behind him with the clinging of bells, and while he wouldn’t pay it any heed, he is soon joined by a stranger coming up to his side before slipping into opposite side of his booth.

He glances up, half expecting anyone else other than Allura who looks as pissed as she is worried.

“You could warn somebody when you decide to play hermit, you ass.”
Around his bite of fluffy, fruity goodness, he smiles, though he isn’t sure if it brightens his eyes to convey some lie of happiness in meeting like this. He swallows quickly, rinsing the food down with a swig of black coffee to lazily drawl, “good mornin’ to you, too, sheriff.”

Allura looks ready to reach for her beloved Smith and Wesson just for something blunt to clock against his head, eyebrow raised and throat tight, “you trying to assimilate more?”

Shiro sighs, shaking his head the moment awareness of his reaction hit him hard, so rough that he’s flopping back against the booth seat. Really, what a way to greet the sheriff and daughter of his somewhat employer and debtor.

“Sorry, Allura, just… feel off? Yeah. Off.”

At his apology, her features soften, but her disposition still reeks of bristling concern as her elbows come to sit on the table. Poor thing is going to probably worry herself to death over others one day, the same as she possibly worries about Keith when he’s all alone in that farmhouse with nothing but cantankerously old Red and his own mama’s spirit as sparse company. Today, though, her focus seems strictly on Shiro, and really? That’s bothersome.

“… Can I ask you to do me a favor?”

“Favor?” Shiro perks up, frowning at that because she’s nearly beside herself to ask, cracking her knuckles as though pockets of anxiety have settled in the joints.

“Uh, sure, just as long as it’s not anything, you know, illegal?”

Allura rolls her eyes and gives off a huff of petulance. “Really? Illegal? You think of all the things I’d ask—?”

With a raise of his hands, he shows he’s unarmed after his injury, though he can’t blame himself to pointing out the obvious. “Okay, got it, nothing illegal, but what is it?”

Her eyes falter, then close, and her head falls forward to hang, defeated. She’s tired, weary from whatever has been bearing stones on her back. While Shiro has not seen Allura in true action, he
has heard plenty of stories, mostly all from Keith. Shiro has laughed at the many stories of the Garland cousins getting their asses handed to them by a righteous younger Allura who preferred to speak with her first rather than her words, or of Allura so angry that the school system was shipping in mice for dissection that she rallied an entire high school into protest.

She’s a queen of war, ready for battle with worn leather hide and dented steel armor, but whenever her heart speaks for itself, whenever her heartstrings flutter mournfully.

“… What’s wrong with Keith?” and it’s the nail on the head so precise that she winces further into her shell.

She sucks her teeth, scraping together threadbare patches of her resolve to her liege, no, her friend in the eyes and state in plain sad condolence, “today’s the anniversary of his mama’s parting, and I know I’m the last damn person he’d want to see…”

Appetite lost, though he didn’t have much of one to attest for anyway, he nods once, putting down a twenty on the table from his wallet before he stands. “I’ll go out and check on him, but… You should go see him tonight when I’m done.”

“Me? You deaf fool, didn’t you here me? Don’t you get it? I’d rather die than hurt him more!”

Shiro kneels then, desperate to make something right happen for these two, and haven’t they had this talk before? Did she not listen, stubbornness fortifying her resilience to his words? “Go out there tonight, and take dinner. You know his favorite whiskey, so take that, too. Remember what I said before?”

As her eyes meets his, Allura swallows down her tears, batting them away so that her weaknesses do not be discovered in public. Shiro cannot imagine that there might be wolves that prey on the borders, that wait to sniff out one sheriff’s fallacies and heartaches for their own nefarious plots. No, just riffraff of coyotes in the form of dirty overalls and backwoods way of thinking, like the centuries long gone for their hatred abound didn’t catch them up with the times.

Instead, he wonders if she just doesn’t want her people to know that she’s just so sorely in love that it warps her, shapes her into a blister of regrets. She sighs, and whispers so thinly he can barely hear her utter, “you think I won’t hurt him again.”

“You won’t, so go. I’ll do damage control, and you can handle the rest,” and with just a touch on
her hand and a made up smile, he walks out, leaving her to her devices though he knows Ezzy is already on it, a wink directed his way as he waves the waitress goodbye.

Allura is in good hands, and if whatever pep talk he gave just then didn’t get through her thick skull, there’s a feisty girl with an eye for the woes of others that will do the trick.

Thus, ready for whatever storm he might be walking into, Shiro goes out to the farm. Anniversaries of happy occasions seem like hell enough, and today would just be brutal to think that the younger man, regardless of the material of his exterior, could withstand it alone. When the first year comes for the incident, when Shiro comes face to face with the date on the calendar, he isn’t sure what he will do. That will come in time, fast approaching though he may try to brake the churning gears that rail towards the future, but for now, focusing on Keith is a better option.

It isn’t long until his Ford rumbles down the dirt drive up to the house, Red curled up asleep on the roof of Keith’s own truck. It’s about as normal of a sight that Shiro can imagine with the times that he has driven up to Keith’s residence, but the most out of place bit is the shorter man sitting on the steps of the porch nursing a bottle of beer. While fully stocked on the beverages alcoholic, Keith doesn’t just laze about drinking in plain sight, so already, he is on edge, unsure what will come of this visit.

It’s a personal connection, how alcohol tends to be a poison of choice for the sake of coping. There’s a twitch along his knuckles, like a phantom reaction in the joints that wishes for the weight of a glass with his favorite brand of whiskey, but it’s just that; a phantom that still lingers in the crevices of his limbs to breach the surface of his disciplines at the worse of times.

Keith doesn’t need that today, doesn’t need to be burdened by the insanities that haunt Shiro even more than Sue or Lance or any other McClain that might not have approached him on these lands. He’s been so good, able to maintain a sense of control like the oaks that shade the roads in and out of the small town; he cannot let the ropes he has tied around the bleaker parts of his soul and psyche to rear forth, to snap so that the beast can thirst for chaos again.

So, Shiro swallows, thinks of Keith and how a friend in these times should be a better cure than anything from the local ABC store, and places all the misplaced pieces back in their steel cages. He is a strong man, more than he was before stepping into combat boots and uniform. He can do this, and be what the younger man needs: a guide, a hand to weather the sandstorms and the dusty tornadoes of internal misery.

Plain as it may be, it has to be as incomplex at that.
Keith barely acknowledges his visitor even by the time the engine of the black truck has died and the door has creaked open before Shiro slams it shut. What a shame that this young man might already be too far gone in the growing heat of the morning to be of much use, but to be insistent will be what hopefully turns this all in a one-eighty towards a better outcome.

Their eyes intersect, and it’s almost a stare down to see who will falter first, but Shiro cannot fathom backing down, to have driven the miles down to the Evans farm just to climb back into his truck to go back into town. If he breaks and leaves, what kind of friend is he? Rather, who is he? He has walked this road before, for matters not the same but similar, walked through dreary grays to stumble over grief.

It’s loss, utterly horrific and a grim part of lifespan that cannot be prayed away, a cycle of endless birth and death for those living to suffer as witness to. There are not enough candles or vigils in the universe to illuminate the sempiternal depths bereavement has. There are not enough prayers and not even enough sermons, not enough Bible verses on comfort of God in times like these that truly encompasses the hopelessness that comes with this.

Keith will not want an embrace and a showing of how okay this is. Keith will not want to be coddle and handled as though he’s fragile. Rather, it must be Shiro’s hands that find the holsters of his hips that portrays a rock that refuses to be moved, that neither the rivers or the winds could crumble to their wills, so the fire that would otherwise flare behind the other’s eyes becomes a flicker of a spark.

The Gilman native yields, succumbing to his elder, and he rises from his rocker. Keith’s grip on the bottle loosens let it fall and crack satisfyingly against the wood before it rolls away into the grass.

While his eyes are swollen red with but inebriation and drying tears, Keith grunts, “well, the cows ain’t gonna water themselves today, I suppose.”

It’s just the supposing that Shiro likes to hear, a conformation towards an inch to an easier place than grieving alone with no one to enforce a semblance of commonality. It has to be hard for Keith to do, and if all that gets done today is watering cattle, then that’s enough. The hand has reached out, and been taken.

“Okay, buddy,” and as they walk, Shiro’s hand goes to Keith’s shoulder to keep the swaying man upright as the two make their way to the gates of the pasture.

They don’t talk, but the cows get watered and counted over, knowing eyes though swimming with booze taking into account each of his stock. Eventually, sobriety will rear its ugly head and release
a painful howl, but until then, he will keep the younger man upright.

They seem to stand there for hours before Keith sluggishly turns around, and with a sound that should never come out of a man Keith’s age, there’s then a soft thud of a back hitting wooden fence of the Evans farm.

“Dammit,” Shiro curses as he comes right over, leaning of the other with worry on his tongue, bitter that he watched that all happen, “are you trying to break your back?”

Keith stares up at the sky, to line his eyes around the shapes of cloud in the afternoon wanes of a summer day. He looks disappointed, but then, he looks so old, aging a multitude of turns of suns and of moons in a matter of seconds, and it’s so regrettable to have to see it with his own eyes.

“Keith?”

There’s nothing but the breaths of men and the calls of cows for awhile, but Keith finally bristles and begins.

“Y’know what my good for nothin’ dad told me the night before he left? Ain’t told a soul until you, but… he told me I was an old enough man to take care of myself,” is grumbled out, a hint of anger unfathomable smoldering beneath the syllables, “and he was just too damn old to be taking care of anything.”

This isn’t about Mrs. Evans, God rest her soul— no, this is about his father, and in a horrible way, what Mr. Evans did as a demented rite of passage for his son. It’s really just bullshit, a cop out of a reluctant father that held grief too close and allowed resentment to seduce him to the bottle. It terrifies Shiro that there may be a chance that Keith will go along the route, follow in the footsteps of a hapless drunkard that just didn’t want to bother with the frivolities of responsibility of adulthood.

It’s another reminder that Shiro was once trekking down that dark path of addiction, that the whiskey in the early gray mornings were more a comfort than his own mother’s hugs. That he permitted such a thing seems horrific, another dismal drag in the lowest point, but there’s still a taste in his mouth, an amber richness that he longs for in a way the population of Gilman longs for God within the walls of the Church.

He’s found another path of salvation, found more than what Pastor Coran could ever preach of in
the seas of Lance’s eyes. Whenever he thinks of being a better man, if he really just has to be just
downright gritty about it, while there have been good influences, the Holts and the Kings, and even
Keith himself, it’s Lance that has been the backbone. Lance has been the first thought in the nights
when it could all go to hell, when Shiro might want to pound his fists into brimstone and feel the
scorch on his knuckles. He could just break all apart again, a threat more real in these days than
when he first came home to Gilman.

It was Lance at the forefront when the fireworks popped like gunshots. It was Lance that edged
him into learning the ways of handiwork so he could fix up that shoddy house, not just Alford
King’s deal struck on the seams of Shiro’s desire for the property. If Lance hadn’t been in that
window…

Shiro would be long gone by now.

Keith hasn’t found that yet, or, well, not let it return more so, Allura probably sitting in her patrol
car on some lonely road as she gathers herself, as she lets her memories wash over to make her
soluble, make her fade into the seat as she thinks of what was and what could have been.

Shiro prays— yes, prays— that the two will find their needs in the arms of each other, even if it
doesn’t come later at night or even just a month or a year from then. They might be adults, but
there are times when clinging like children to the dreams of futures, though shredded by the highs
and lows of gales, is a cure for the ailments of a damaged soul.

Growing up, though, is just as bad as dying, and maybe that’s the saddest part of all this. This isn’t
more along the borderlines of two hearts pining, but maybe it’s just being an adult and facing the
consequences. It’s like losing those dreams of childhood, of wanting to float in a void with eyes full
of stars and galaxies when instead, Shiro knows the bitter twitch of a trigger finger, knows what
blood and limbs of people, soldier and civilian alike, look like sunbaked on the desert sand.

After all, those dreams of aspiration are what fueled a bright-eyed Seattle boy to stargaze and to
memorize star charts, to find companions amongst the constellations of Orion and Draco when all
others slept their nights away. Those dreams were the same that he began to shelve away when he
graduated high school, when he had the intelligent idea of enlisting in the Army as opposed to the
Air Force, thinking that after some time, once he received his degree in engineering with some kind
of special credit in astrophysics, that he would be able to continue on to flying space dust and
asteroid fields.

Now, there is no longer the invulnerability of youth at the ripe age of twenty-four for Shiro is no
longer Peter Pan gliding along the skies to dream of rocket ships, and Neverland is just a rouge to
hide the fact that Captain Hook is not nearly as awful as the shadows of things that lurk in the
depths of lagoons. No, the pirate captain notorious for swindling Peter Pan and his troupe of lost
boys of their mischief is hardly the villain, but rather, just another product of how age destroys a man.

All he can do is move to sit next to Keith as the sun just moseys right along in the blue, blue sky, and hope that though Peter Pan’s spirit is gone from Shiro that the flying boy who would never grow up is still within Keith. Surely, too, for Keith, there is a Wendy that will be pulling up in the shade of night with piping hot dinner and a new bottle of Jack Daniels, apology on her lips that will be echoed in his.

And, later that night, Shiro finds himself in bed, and Lance comes to him, but this time, it’s different, more lethargic. It isn’t Wendy coming into her bedroom to find Peter Pan flitting about and playing his pan flute, needing his shadow sewn back to his shoes. No, this is something far less fickle, something that does not err on the side of childhood antics.

“Lance?” He whispers to his lover as he sits up in worry, noting that instead of a grin of welcome, the other has a downturn of lips.

Lance looks incredibly… worn.

_This_ is what love is, not flying to second star on the right, not parading about on a pirate ship to win the day with _’carpe diem’_ a mantra of a victory cry. No, love like theirs may be truthfully wonderful, may be as lazily happy as dust motes waltzing in afternoon glows or as tenderly affection as giggles between kisses, but there is still the bad times.

Some nights can be rain clouds on window sills, can be mourning doves cooing all lonesome like on the power line outside. Love cannot always be happy, and though they have never had an unkind word said to the other, the brunt of Shiro’s pressure pushes on Lance’s shoulders, makes him hunch his spine downward.

Despite this chain of tension, Lance sits on the edge of the bed and hums quietly, tugging at his fingers as though this is their first night together. It would be adorable were it not for heaviness of the air, thick and oppressive like fog.

“Bluebell…” Shiro whispers, moving to nuzzle his head along his shoulder, press a hand to graze up his lower back, “talk to me?”

With a tilt of ‘no’ of Lance’s head, the elder sighs, pressing butterfly kisses along the nape of his
lover’s neck. “Please… let me hear you. Let me listen. Let me be what you need. Tell me what you need.”

It’s another arduously groan of a moment, but then Lance stands slowly, a rustling of bedsheets shifting before he turns to offer Shiro his hand with a soft plea, “come with me…?”

At the change, Shiro is puzzled, but he recalls dances in the parlor, dips and spins and giggles that lasted well into the first light of morning before he woke in his bed, smiling like a loon. However, there is no playful smirk, no sauntering of hips to beckon forth a press of bodies and murmurs of song, but a surety that this question does not concern frivolous romantics.

No, there is an underlying somberness to Lance, and though his eyes still cradle his love for Shiro, something else poisons their relationship. Whether by admission or not, there has be compromise and one must yield.

"I can’t tell you. I can’t… It hurts enough, and I don’t want you to listen, but… I want— no, I need to go to the river. With you."

It’s a request, no, a demand, only one of the few young man has made, but of course he will go, a hapless loyalty of a dog within him that would follow his master until the end. He would follow Lance wherever he treads, even to the grave.

Maybe especially then.

The demand goes heeded, and Shiro goes for his shoes and a shirt, Lance waiting uneasily at the bedroom door. Then, Shiro comes to him, leaning to kiss him chaste, to relay that there is nothing that would deter loyal strives to follow the other.

Full lips twist into a smile before splitting into a grin, wide as can be at the promise of going to the Alabama. The waters might not be the salty warmth of Gulf currents, but it’s water all the same, and if Lance wants it, by God, Shiro will provide.

Outside creeps on the precipice of desolate, not one chirp of bird or bug to scatter into the wind an idea of life around them. It was deathly quiet in the house, and now it is quiet on the red dirt trail that twists down to the river. Perhaps tonight, along the moonless darkness the witching hours, Thace and Ulaz shall appear again to him, the pair unseen and unheard of, stealth and camouflage to their tastes amongst the scape of trees and underbrush.
After all, who better to understand his devotion than those who draw pause with their own?

But there is nothing else to be found on the path, and Lance instead seems perfectly content with it just being them. Hand in hand, they tread towards the river that has ensnared all of Lance's attention, going towards the riverside depicted in journal entries as a retreat from the reality of small town affairs and the Southern heat.

The river is a passage of memories, and that Lance would ask Shiro to join him is an honor that tremors in his chest.

Through noiseless paces of their walk, Lance breathes in with a chuckle and sighs, “my brothers and sisters loved coming here. Mama and papa, whenever they just wanted some peace and quiet, us kids, we would come here to fish or swim! And Sue…”

Lance stops right when they can hear river down the trail, growing sullen and afraid, as though he cannot go any further and blocked by makings not his own. Rather than continuing, his entire face crumbles, shoulders hanging as he expresses sadly his thoughts of his sister.

“She would be so sad if…”

“If…?”

The fingers laced along Shiro’s tremble, and blue eyes search the lightless woods for gray eyes. Shiro stands there, not a sound foundation within himself for his own sake, but for Lance, oh, he can be resilient, a shelter to the hurricane that brews in those eyes where sea storms and typhoons are seen in azure horizons.

Lance loosens, all slumped shoulders and leans along Shiro's side, and all he can utter is: “nothing.”

They walk on, and though the oaks are scarce shapes, giants of branches and roots that watch with their foliage of greens and moss, Shiro can barely see anything but Lance and the outline of the trail. It would be disconcerting if not terribly comforting as he can pretend they in a macrocosm with not one other being.
Then, they’re there at the drop of the riverside where the dirt land fades into the riverbed and roots of trees are vines in the waters, spindly things in search of lost treasures in the dark currents. Beside him, Lance stands in awe of being back there, his smile resplendent with a joy that only blooms on that perfect countenance whenever their eyes meet in the spaces between them.

“It’s just as I remember. It’s— It’s the same.”

A creak of limbs groan in the distance while a zephyr of something old and ominous rustles through the leaves. At the change of the trees around them, now taller, now darker, and there’s an eerie spider walk up Shiro’s spine as he scours around them for any predator of the forest.

Nothing, naught one soul but Lance’s, so he turns to watch Lance bask in the sight, to admire that smile—.

It’s a grin turning sour, bitter and cold, a twitch of dustier whiffs of cobwebs and of seabed death.

“This is where I died.”

Blood runs cold, colder that ice, glaciers colliding in his veins as he slowly bastes in the claiming words that he thought he would never hear, yet never thought he would ever have to hear. This is Lance, his glorious Lance, lofty seaside love affair with a dash of garden beauty.

“What…” is croaked out from lips that are desperate for a reason behind a cruel joke such as this. Laughable, even, that Lance would want to return to the place where…

“I died here.”

The air grows dank and cold, and instead of summer, it is now winter’s treacherous tundra, Shiro feeling like he has been dipped into the seas of the Arctic, now frigid and on verge of hypothermia.

Everything warps around him, black and grays bleeding in glum watercolors stains along his vision, and Lance, God, his Lance, no longer everything he loves, but instead, the same as his flesh and blood, the same that are gone, near forgotten in name but not in tragedy.
Lips he adores to kiss are blue, swollen and bruised. Forehead and cheeks he desires to sigh sweet nothings along are red from a head blow, blood trailing down the cut of his hair down his skin.

"I died here. I died right here."

And a symphony of horror, brass instruments blaring in cacophonous resound, grows in volume in his ears as he steps away from this not Lance who laughs, and screams, and cries over and over, “here, here, I died here, I died right here!”

Shiro’s hands press to the sides of head, pressing the lobes of his ears down to snuff out the drumrupturing strangle of disharmony that throbs and throbs while he must be audience to this shell, no, this waterlogged carcass that stands in Lance’s place, shrilly proclaim morbid gospel with now rotting skin and broken veins. The oaks sway and shiver, choirs of timber groaning on the verge of snapping into pieces, the same as Shiro feels his heart do as storm clouds rumble with thunder above.

Then, it stops, and the woods are quiet once more, all of the mess frozen in a time that makes no sense.

A swallow, then a susurration of a man in love, “… Lance?”

To Shiro’s horror and heartbreak, Lance’s hollow grin falls into a frown, his water-worn slowly reaching for the man that cries for him before his eyes go dull.

“Shi…”

All at once, in agonizing wrenching of his heart, Lance falls back, down into the river with a churn of flood waters to drown, gnarled hands of oak roots wrapping around him in a sick depiction of a casket. As Shiro screams, hoarse and horrified, the rolling thunders of heavenly wrath boom along the shades, the same as bombs bursting in sporadic clout.

He wakes up, Lance’s name on his lips as he yells into his empty bedroom.
Chapter 12

July 28, 1915

I am nineteen years old today.

Mama and Sue baked a fine cake, and I have new writing utensils and a copy of A Room with a View. I am grateful, but I could not ask for much when the baby is to be born soon. He should come into a world both healthy and happy without worry of money, though money is not my worry.

I am so happy to meet him, but I have never been more frightened in my life.

—

As July melts into August, Shiro wakes up the morning of the first day of the Juniberry Festival nearly out of his head from rereading the last journal of Lance’s the night prior.

Since the riverside nightmare, everything has returned to a stiff complacency as though the heinous walk down the path through the oaks never occurred. His Lance returned with the silver shift of the next moon phase as his usual budding, kittenish self. Shiro was damn grateful, but wary, a dreadful drench of cold at any sudden pause of their conversation or change in movement. Shiro is wearing out from it, how sense overthrown while his guts are jerked one way to another in split directions because when will it happen again?

"Are you all right?" Lance had asked just last night, touching along Shiro's creased brows that are surely the cause of oncoming wrinkles that Shiro will grouse over in the mirror in the morning, "you look like you’ve seen a ghost..."

Shiro wants to laugh, hollow and shaken, that Lance is so beautiful, so kind, and yet so oblivious to his broken reflection, to its sneaking coming that reveals another side of his soul and one ending piece to the story of the McClains.

No matter how Shiro may turn his head away, no matter how he may cover his ears and yell so that he cannot or hear evil, the revelation is there is in the strike of a paper cut along his fingers: Lance and Sue are the same.
Doubt is no longer permitted in their relationship as it has colored him, made Lance the hues of blue plucked from the sea when instead he is just as tormented and gray like his sister's spirit. Shiro’s stormy eyes have wandered Lance’s form, seen the curves under cotton white and felt them too, seen those tide pools and sea foam in those eyes, seen the quirk of lips after a fleeting kiss.

But there is that image, starkly present in repetitive drifts, that tells him over and over in adage unbearable with a tongue swollen and eyes black, “I died in the river.”

Oh, but how he loves Lance, how he acknowledges it and feels it, keeps it within his trembling heartbeat. Shiro loves the damned ghost so much that he wants to rip away the river that floods Lance's lungs, take the muddy water into himself so he may drop to the turbid bottom. It would be worth it to let Lance know the calmness of the sea after a storm once more while Shiro is left as a forgotten piece of memory and testimony of love possessive and sacrificial.

Well, he hasn’t thought about that before, hasn’t let the slow rise of surmise for all that he would do for Lance flood him as absolutely as it does now. God, and wouldn’t it be worth it all, to drown for Lance?

It would be nice, another commonality they can share. Drowning does not seem to be the worst way to die, better than gun wound and bomb blast, though the more he admits it, he gathers that there is more to this fate. After all, he saw the bruises and the blood in that nightmare, and it's enough to suppose of another circumstance, one that he is more sure that he will have to face and to batter down.

Lance did not simply drown, no, that can’t be all there is.

The injuries, the swollen blues and blacks of contusions and the trails of sanguine from a slam against the head are not the simple scrapes of a scuffle or a tumble. No, they are the blows of a butt of a gun or of knuckles, of a killer voracious for the taste of frightened death or just damn pissed off enough to murder a man.

Before he can feel anger boil within in, let the sand grit into his teeth and set him up for a bad day, there’s a cluster of horns outside, pulling him out of morbid reverie to glance out the window to the road. Ah, the cavalry has arrived, a familiar LeBaron and a newly detailed patrol car sitting on the road to boast the presence of the one and only King father-daughter combo of Dallas County.

“Dammit all, Shiro, get your lazy lump of an ass down here!” Allura comes up to the door, huffing
though there’s just a spring in her step, a lightness in her gait. It’s been that way for days now since their brief conversation in the diner, since Shiro made sure Keith was in his house on the anniversary of the day his mother died and drove past Allura’s car going towards the Evans farm. “We gotta shindig to pull off, and the Yankees are in high water already!”

Shiro barely has time to brush his teeth and put on at least a decent pair of jeans and usual black t-shirt before Alford has used his key to get in, the smarmy bastard. He’s humming a tune, something akin to Cash or Nelson, a song older than Shiro and Allura combined, maybe.

Or, it could very well be smoother beats of Motown. Hell if Shiro knows, but it’s comforting and the only focus he has to distract himself from the near panic attack he is about to have if Allura doesn’t stop.

She’s at his back, barking orders like she was born to be a sergeant rather than a sheriff, but Shiro can bet a dollar that she would have an army of men and women eager to do her bidding with just a hard look and a thud of her boot heels on the ground. For all his military indoctrination, oh, it’s hard not to drop and give her a hundred push ups when the warrior queen of the small town scene is hurrying him up.

“So, go, go! Ain’t gonna get there any faster if you’re goin’ at a turtle’s pace!”

Shiro has feelings of a sister for her, or at least a first cousin, but right now, he’s sweaty and panting and ready to fall over to get out of a long day in the sun only to flop in the shade whenever there’s a chance of rest.

“You been snoozin’ the morning away? I had more hope for you, boy,” Alford drawls smooth and playful with a lean along the banisters of the staircase, watching the younger man pound down each stair with frantic footfall with a haughty sheriff right behind.

“S-sorry, sir, didn’t sleep well,” is an awkward excuse that stunts Allura long enough that she frowns, sheepishly crossing her arms over her chest with a blush before she’s talking about how he must take better care of himself.

Alford rubs the tips of his fingers together, thumbs along the ridged skins while he grants silent permission for his daughter to be the speaker between them. Judge King is the eye of the storm, a lack of bluster and danger, whereas his beloved daughter is all hurricane.
Then again, the mayor of Gilman surely knows how that storm looms, how the thunder claps strike against the ships at sea in eager wait for a panther to step from the forest’s shield of trunks and leaves. It would not be so worrisome if not for the wind gusts, cutting and forceful, how they push and pull in the ways temperaments gifted to children from fathers do.

Shiro’s head starts the edging on of hurting, and he’s not even made it out the door, but at least his shoes are on the right feet and his hair has some means of being combed through.

It’s decent enough, and passes Alford’s inspection with a twinkle of his eye and a nod. ”Well, you're ready then, or good enough to be. Let’s get a move on.”

Probably the best perk of being in a made up position deemed as an assistant to the job is being allotted a special parking place near the major vendors and a police escort. How trivial it may seem to others, a Ford Crown Vic blaring blue lights down Main Street with an old Ford truck and pristine LeBaron chugging behind, but there’s already too many damn people gathering about to celebrate, and Shiro will take any escort any day over this.

It’s a good way to slow down and how after all the set up from the days before how it still seems to have transformed overnight, the harvest festival celebrating a rare pink flower that grows along the gardens and soils of this small town fascinatingly lively. The slow cookers are burning up the cherry and hickory wood for barbecue from all over the South in a claim of which region does it best. Beside the pit masters are the pastel set ups of bakeries ran by mothers and grandmas with every variation of pie and cake known to man cut into perfect saran wrapped packages. There’s glitterings of handmade jewelry, manly rusty cut outs of horses and oxen, and just every single other thing that could ever come to Gilman to make a profit.

The best part though, hands down, is how the town itself has made their own wares, their own uses for the very flower they’ve cropped up to use for a big tourist attraction. The juniberries are everywhere, and while they have become just a part of the familiarity of Gilman, there are pink petals as far as Shiro can see: they adorn wreaths, hang from baskets, and are upside down to dry.

Then, the are the banners on the street lamps that wave in all visitors and town folk, bid them welcome to this humble, God fearing town.

Shiro knew beforehand that there would be flyers passed out by the Saint Michael’s Youth Group, Pastor Coran at their helm, to invite all of the crowd to join the congregation for a special Sunday sermon on the final day of festivities. It would have been a bit of a surprise had Shiro not known simply due to this curiosity, having poked his head in the church’s secretary office when the mayor’s assistant was trying to get the printer to work while Sunday school was in session.
After fuddling and hissing at the dinosaur of a contraption, Shiro had crumbled in his pride and went to pluck Pidge right out of the youth class to come help.

He hasn’t heard the end of it sense.

“So, what’s first?” Shiro asks in anticipation of some big errand or occupation after they’ve parked in the lot assigned just for the officials of the festival (assistants included). There’s a quiet grin as wide as the Alabama breaking through the dam of Alford’s lips, his teeth pearly white in spite of his age and his addiction to coffee and tea.

“You thinkin’ too hard again, so I’ll keep it real simple. I gotta do my thing, rally in the openin’ day and welcome all these folks here to our great town. And then? Just gotta make sure it all goes off without one hitch.”

It’s a cue, a starter’s gun shooting off, and then it’s a cluster of whirlwinds, of radio chatter and yelling adults badgering their screaming kids. It’s checking on vendors, pouring out ice, and trying to blankly remember the map off the top of his head when outsiders ask where first aid is. Shiro barely has a chance to hear the speech Alford gives, each word full of that exuberant charm that gets all the old ladies a-sighing and old men a-nodding, applause rousing in his ears as he’s meeting with the pit masters on safety standards.

Halfway through, he’s already on fizzling embers, and then and there is when he is grateful to the stars and back for Colleen Holt.

“You’re about to just fall over, sweetie. I know you’re a hard workin’ man and earnin’ your keep, but goodness, you’re sittin’ in that chair for more than a minute.”

Under Colleen’s stern command, Shiro was tracked down by Matt and Sam, pawns enacting the wishes of their high commander to fetch their target and return him to base. The second Shiro was hiding in a tent for the Saint Michael’s Youth, he’s promptly fussied into a lawn chair, though it’s more that he fell back into it, strewn about with minimal energy reserves left.

"I... I’m whooped, Mrs. Holt," and his tired smile up at the Mother Goose of a woman dabbing a cold cloth over his red face makes her giggle. While there’s no room for doubt that he loves her like a second mother, she’s seemingly just as fond to hope she can call him another son.

"Look at you, gettin’ acclimated to talkin’ like the rest of us," she teases before bringing up a cup
of her damn good sweet tea to his lips, egging him to take a full but slow sip, something to keep his throat cool and break off the heat.

“I think it’s a universal way to tell you how tired I am,” he mutters back around the green plastic of her cup, but for all her efforts in getting him to take a break, he puts in enough energy to smile up at her as a silent thanks for all the doting she does.

"It is, hun, it is."

With a fresh to go cup of sweet and a pat to his cheek, Colleen shoos him away once she is satisfied that he has taken a proper break and needs to get back to work. It’s rough, hell, it’s one of the hardest days he’s ever had in a long time, but for all the exhaustion that creeps into the marrow of his frame, this is the most fun he’s had in a long time. The laughter is just miraculously catching, the sights vibrantly cheerful, and smells like a foodie’s daydream— or, Shiro’s, since he’s come to learn that one does not eat to live but live to eat in the South.

No, he’s twisting through crowds and pointing out tents like he’s a madman, but deep down, nestled in the spaces of his ribs, there’s a note, penned down in his own hand writing to his claustrophobic tendencies at bay. However, here he is, laughing and joking to the poor saps that couldn’t find their own ass if it weren’t attached, and that he can keep the sizzling vines of panic away is even sweeter than an epiphany.

He can pull this off.

He can be **okay**.

Peer upon him, this once in a lifetime rambler that couldn’t keep destruction in his head, but now here he is, walking amongst his fellow man, handling their idiosyncratic proclivities, and it’s all thanks to this town.

This is the town that took him in, taught him how to eat grits and drink sweet sea like its water. It took him within the fold, taught him how to piddle and to tinker, to also be work brickle. Furthermore, it taught him how to talk to others, how to ask about mamas and grandpas, and how to kneel down to speak to the children all in their Sunday best, to smile like he means it and get a smile in return.

And through the hands that have molded his soul, there is Lance at the epicenter, that foundation
of the framework that settled in while these people of Gilman built upon it. It could be so different, nothing like it is now, all these variables of a great experiment that gets him through the crazy cluster of life clicking together in perfect formulation.

He could have never come to Gilman, and there could have never been a light in that window that night.

But, all those thoughts of positivity all fade with the sunburn and the dehydration, and for all the goodness he’s learned to accept, it really means all the more when he’s nearly passed out on the grass with twins crowding around him.

“You're cooked to hell, man,” Matt snorts while fanning Shiro with his last of his flyers, Pidge helping him sip at a water bottle. "I don’t think you’re gonna be able to work tomorrow."

Shiro just groans in response, splayed out like roadkill for the vultures to circle around before feasting upon his innards. He’s dead, definitely dead, and if he can crawl back home tonight, Lance’s cold not-body is going to make him sing in rejoice when his lover lays alongside him.

At his despair, Pidge snickers and pats the tuft of his bangs, that white fluff of hair that split from his head after the explosion and he doesn’t have a means to call it by the phenomena by a proper name. “You poor, poor thing… tell you what, I’ll put in a good word for you, and you can handle the petting zoo tomorrow. Hey, or the ball pit! Pretty sure all the kids would like havin’ an adult to pummel.”

Shiro manages to open his eyes and grunts, "when'd the hell we get a ball pit?"

"Ah, special request by the graduating class! They’ve actually hoarded it from the kids all day. Little farts don’t deserve a childhood."

Matt grins at his sister and sighs wistfully, “but don’t worry, Shiro, we’ve been good Godly kids, spreadin’ the gospel instead.”

"After we threw some dyed balls in there, of course. Imagine the looks on their parents’ faces when all those kids come out tie dyed!”

He laughs, and he laughs so hard he soon whimpers in pain, skin too hot and too tight with his
nerves screaming from all the picking up and moving he’s done. The twins chuckle at his misery, but stay for the company and to play makeshift doctor well after the sun sets over the shades of trees in the horizon and the live band kicks up the festivities.

Shiro can barely stay awake through the first numbers, let alone handle the twanging strings of banjos and slurrying bows of fiddles, so he takes up refuge in the church tent, huddled on a towel while Sam and Colleen man their chairs. He’s between them more like a guard dog that’s too bushed to bark than a twenty-something-year-old man, and while they fan themselves and gaze out at the crowd several yards towards the stage, they let him rest.

They’re too good to him.

"Hard day for 'im," Sam drawls out, the exhaustion of the day catching up with his old bones also. Colleen hums softly before leaning over to smiling down at Shiro to wink.

"Get some shut eye."

He falls asleep promptly after that, and while the memories are blurry, there’s that sunlit laugh of an ox of a man—Hunk, he finds out, is the unfortunate bastard once more having to drag his ass around it seems—that rings through unruly dreams of juniberry fairies dancing with lead-footed bluebell partners.

Lance was there in subconscious longing, Shiro is fairly certain, kneeling on a picnic blanket with two or three cats. God, it’s the closest thing to a wet dream Shiro has gotten around in a long time, and it’s the love of his life petting a cat too much like Keith’s Red.

Shiro awakens on the second morning on the Holt family couch, and while every atom and chemical bond that composes him aches and squeals in protest, he smiles.

Breakfast is cooking away, and it’s just a sense of déjà vu from the first morning he ever woke in this house, in this whole state, the radio crooning out Loretta Lynn while Colleen sings this time with her husband at her side.

There come the twins eventually, beckoning him to a hearty breakfast and maybe half a bottle of pain killers. They sit there, the younger of the lot scarlet like steam lobster, but all still in happy spirits as it’s just the same as it always is for a first meal in this house; gossip and good eating.
There is just a small out of place sight, a smirk and a flush from the younger lady in the room, with her soul high and her feet kicking under the table with her delight. Shiro thinks nothing of it, just strikes out all the reasons down to her being adamantly wishful for her next big step. He can’t blame her, and home is just right here, going nowhere, for when she’s ready to let her roots settle back in and she can be renewed.

Sopping up a runny egg yolk with a piece of toast, Shiro gobbles up the last of his meal while Pidge leans over, a smile smacked on her face that exudes her usual sneaky fashion. With a glance askance, he imagines she’s fluffed up her feathers to preen haughtily, but poor girl, he’s smarter than he looks, and her nervous tick is right there at the rim of her glasses.

“I want to introduce you to someone today.”

Shiro chuckles, thinking she might be the first of his closer clique to start bringing in potential lovers for a supposed bachelor. He wonders if Lance will be jealous, but there’s no reason to be. No one could ever draw Shiro’s affections away, could ever lead him astray.

What he finds waiting for him isn’t a virginal Southern Belle that dreams of horse drawn carriages and pictures with matching flannels for hay bale pictures when crisp autumn, nor is it a dapper gentleman to test the spectrum of Shiro’s sexuality.

It’s Nyma.

With breakfast gone and the dishes scrubbed clean, arrival back on the festival grounds that overtake Main Street leads Shiro to a gaggle of nerdy friends that he’s seen in passing but never has quite gotten to learn further than faces. They all seem to fade away for Pidge, her hazel eyes lighting up like those distant fireworks of the Fourth of July that were politely shot far away from him.

Nyma is far from the blonde bombshell derived from the head banging lyrics about sweet cherry pie from just weeks ago, now a far more soft façade that soaks up the summer sun and just lets herself be a flower learning how to shake away the rot.

When her big eyes glance over to the arrival of Pidge and a strange man, Shiro thinks Nyma fairly cute with natural makeup and a touch of peach color to her lips, but hell, if hellishly red lips and smoky eyes were her real thing, he shouldn’t judge. If the girl is happy with her decisions, he shouldn’t care, and he really doesn’t, but whenever his Little Trouble is involved, he’s up to bat to play protective big brother in a heart beat.
But, when Nyma’s eyes meet Pidge’s, it’s a glance Shiro knows all too well, that gentler bud of carnation pink that has risen from the ashes of a burned bridge. It’s too easy to decipher, and obviously the sentiments are more than readily requited.

He keeps quiet as Pidge introduces Nyma and Shiro, grinning like foolish adult with their first real lover on their trek to meet the family.

"I’ve heard all about you, sir," Nyma comments airily with an offering of her hand, all of her being just so downy and well-loved, washed out Bohemian that flows from her lithe form. The blonde pairs well with Pidge’s nerdy bum clothing of choice: t-shirt from the Alabama Science fair and old blue jean shorts with her glasses perched precariously atop her small nose.

“I can’t say the same, I’m afraid,” because the more adult of the trio has to reason to lie when he’s slightly skeptical of how well they pair after such heartache, “but I’m sure you’re a great friend to Little Trouble here.”

“Psh, really, Big Trouble? Poor mouthin’ me?”

With a coy giggle behind her hand that effectively draws the attention back to her, Nyma is nothing less than coquettish, sneaking a flirty glance to the shorter of the pair that is just too, too obvious.

"We used to be best friends, but now it’s even better than that, right, Katie-Bell?"

A wink, cute and darling, bubbles out a giggles and burns out a blush from Pidge, and Shiro just sighs, relieved but perturbed he can’t call Pidge Katie-Bell, too.

“So, what about Rolo?” Shiro manages to sneak a Pidge that’s head over heels to them moon away from the teenage cohorts for some lemonade age as time is short, and soon they’ll be blasting his name on the radio in urgent search for help.

Pidge counts the quarters from her pocket, growing quiet over metallic clinks before she just shrugs off the impact of the inquiry. “Broke up with her since she’s decided to go off to college rather than stay. While I’m… kinda really shook by it, we’re gonna be in Auburn together, and I guess she’s had some time to rethink things?”
"Rethink about you?"

"Yeah," and Pidge reaches for her paper cup of freshly squeezed lemonade to sips over her next words while she ponders them, “I think Rolo was fun. Y’know, ‘normal,’ and normal is better than not normal, right? Maybe I thought nothing was there and didn’t fight for it but…”

The lesson is all too apparent, but teenage years are the utter worst.

The years of high school and early college are those where hormones reign supreme and everything is an extreme or not, one moment wanting to live on the edge before falling down and scraping up knees and elbows and the other to stay in a cocoon of safety from the nasty pressure from peers. Being a teenager is learning all those hard lessons, the ones that come with bloody teeth, red eyes, and hickeys on necks when making out just was too damn good. Likewise, it’s basking in the fun lessons, the learning of a girl’s curves under the palm of a hand or of a boy’s flat chest when lips and tongues are locked.

There are even more ups and downs in college, when a teenager cannot use the excuse of still growing up when the world expects the growing up to be done, and still there are experiences that Shiro’s limited imagination cannot cook up. In the future, it’s all up to the twins, and if Pidge wants to walk into Toomer’s Corner with her hand in Nyma’s, by God, let her.

—

By the end of the second day, Shiro is as useless as a sack of wet sugar. By the grace of a higher being or sheer will of his own body, the veteran manages to make it home the second night under the scrutiny of the Kings, namely one Allura whose arms are crossed as her lips purse.

“God, you look like you’ve been flambéed. I’m puttin’ you at the admissions table tomorrow. No questions.”

A groan is all he can agree with, a sound low and boneless before he crawls into his truck to putter off to his house to hide until he’s pulled right back into the shenanigans. After a cold shower, he sleeps, only barely noticing the chill of a figure, lithe and sweet, against his side, a breath of Lance’s name on his lips while the usual oil lamp sits on the window sill.

He is too tired to dream that night.
It is halfway through day three’s whirlwind of pink petal jamboree that Shiro finally sees a red button up shirt and shined up boots approach him, two all familiar accessories of a particular modern day cowboy.

"About time," Shiro smirks at Keith, who looks about like a rabbit meeting an ill fate with a coyote’s canines. The other is spruced up, obviously in his better choice of attire, as his shy smile is a little off, never having been allowed in Shiro’s presence, but definitely lining his mouth al the same.

"Well, I um... had to get the gumption to drag Lulu away from her esteemed position as sheriff."

Oh. That is too much cannon fodder and poor Keith, his friend is a Grade A Bastard that likes to just relish in the ‘I told you so’s’ of seeing lovers come back together in the folds they left alone. “Yeah, like I said, about time.”

“I haven’t done this in years, so hush your mouth,” but Keith has a fussy turn of lips, that struggle between a laugh and a grimace that’s just a conflict of humor and reprimand.

To push the envelope is a fun pastime, and with his second (or third or fourth) attempt at his best Southern drawl, it’s just another botched endeavor too ambitious for his own range, “I reckon it’ll be like ridin’ a bike.”

“God, you’re just a damn fluke!” Keith finally laughs, remising his dumb friend while offering over his payment for admission. “Don't ever do that again, not until all the city is out of you.”

While making change, it’s a peculiar kind of statement, one that he has had directed towards him over some silly question on his part or when he wants to hear the groans of amicable annoyance when he tries that Deep South lilt. It’s never out of meanness, just always reminded that he’s still a city slicker, an urban-bred boy that is more familiar with skyscrapers and bustling traffic than countryside sprawling for miles and a truth sense of self out in the silence of lacking population.

He hopes that the city leaks from him, drains into the soil so that he can grow forth his tendrils, soak up all that is this easy going small town life and keep it for his own— no, make it his own.
Of course, there is still the problem at hand, an equation with two parts with a plus sign in the middle, but not ending solution.

“So, how do you plan to get Ms. Warrior Queen herself from her post?”

Keith hums softly, and tilts one of his shoulders up in a carless motion, “with all my good ol’ boy charm and devilishly good looks?

"Sorry, buddy, that all needs a little more work."

“Fuck you,” Keith pouts, wrinkling his nose while Shiro snickers against his palm, “okay then, watch this.”

Keith puffs up, walking around the barricades with the potential of a proud bird primed to show off to the mate of his choice as though he’s a red plumed peacock of sorts with fire feathers at his back.

Albeit every stop in his plethora of tricks is pulled, Keith gives up after two hours.

The Evans boy is a mope and a huff, sitting back on the legs of Shiro’s chair while the other greets visitors and duly takes their funds for their entrance in. "I don’t get it. She came the other night with dinner and Devil’s Cut. Then, y’know, we had lunch a few times at the diner, and she even invited me back to Ol’ Haggy’s!”

Shiro sighs at the bemoaning, reaching behind to flail about for a body part to pat sympathetically. "There, there, she'll come around eventually. She’s busy right now, making sure that her dad’s big thing for the year goes off with no surprises."

A pregnant pause, and then there’s a shift of weight at his back and Keith perks up, “did he ever tell you why? Why he puts so much into all this crazy shit?”

“Nah.” Shiro leans along the metal chair while the crowd lulls into a small break as the line is gone in spite of a few stragglers. “As I have been told at times, I should make sure I keep to my own business.”
What a lie.

A scuff of the heel of Keith’s boot scrapes against the asphalt as there’s a momentary thought, as though the other will think better of his reveal before a sharp inhale and then, “his wife freaking loved juniberries… and she was the director of the whole festival for years before she died.”

“Can… I ask what happened?” Shiro pleads while leaning back to glance over his shoulder, “was it natural?”

Keith snorts, sad and low, shaking his head while his bangs fall into his eyes. “It’s sad as hell that I have to admit, I’d rather mama have gone the way she did when I think about Lulu’s mama. I barely remember her, but I definitely remember the day she drove off the bridge… and went into the river.”

Oh, God.

Shiro stops, blood curdling and goosebumps raising up while laps of river water on the mud trickles into his ears, and Lance’s proclamation is as present to him as it was before; ‘I died here, I died here.’

How many victims does that old Alabama hold? How many lonely, downtrodden souls flow down to the Underworld by the Southern Styx?

For all the water in his ears, Shiro cannot voice his sadness, cannot fathom the reply that would adequately cover how terrible he feels for both Allura and Alford while wondering why so much tragedy as occurred in the tiny, almost insignificant spot on the atlas.

“That’s… horrible,” and Shiro just leaves it at that, lets the cloak of their conversation coat their hair and their hands. His hands hurt as though he’s gone into the river to sift up the mud and the muck to exhume Mrs. King from her shallow deathbed so that he can ask, why her? Why Mrs. Evans? Why anyone?

Keith ticks away at the downhill wonderings, and taps the leg of the fold out chair, “you not knowin’ means diddly squat, so can the sad shit and put on a happy face. This means something…”
Shiro turns fully in his seat, and looks out with Keith at the crowds, taking in the sights of happy children eating hand-spun cotton candy while their parents feast on barbecue straight from slow cookers. There are colorful carnival games on every street corner where couples and spouses all the same pay for tickets to shoot targets or toss rings so that they can show off their loved one carrying an overpriced prize.

This, in all its great hectic mess of organization, is all the laughter and fun that can be found even despite the heat and the hustle, and there at the center, between the people, there is a judge that chuckles in delight at the jubilee. His chest is puffed out, proud of all that he sees in the town that grew him, and Shiro hopes that if the man’s departed wife could be there then, she’s also tell him how pleased she is with all his work.

“I mean… it all has to mean something, doesn’t it?”

Keith offers Shiro a half smirk, not quite noticing the tall, barreling might coming towards them, one Deputy Zehpne coming towards them to snatch Keith up like a claw machine crane to drag him over to a forcibly relived Allura (by Kolivan, no less).

Shiro is left alone before another swarm of admission-seeking tourists come through, and right then, he finds it preferable as he can sit there and just… be.

From his post, he loses sight of the sheriff and the farmer, and that’s all right. Between the plotting deviants that will surely be reprimanded deputies come Monday, Allura has been allotted yet another chance to be with the man that dreams of their arms linked while parading from Saint Michael's in a shower of rice and cheers.

If they’d just get over the damn hurdle and put it all back together as it was before, then they would just be dandy and in love all over again, but… Shiro gets it. It’s scary, frightening to give over so much to just one person, and yet, it’s all the more satisfying to do so. Free falling is a treat when it is a descent into an embrace, into a husk of adorations abound.

It’s then he wishes he were asleep, letting Lance cascade all his love into their bedroom, let the tides climb the walls as they lay together, fingers and legs interwined to never let go, their lips briefly touching in caressing ardency as though they are kudzu rooted into the bed. They cannot be taken away from another, can only be one together.

Shiro daydreams of pillow talk and honey-hued whispers until the sun casts a fine glow of tangerine over the blues and cottons of the sky, lilacs and plums brushing over the first shimmers of night’s veil with the first star shine.
Finally, when fireflies creep out of the shades of trees and the strums of tuning instruments echo through the intersection of Main Street, a touch on his shoulder jars him away from Lance.

“Go on and eat, you poor boy,” is how Pastor Coran greets him, mustache sniffling over his kind beam, “you must be famished and lonely, being here all day.”

“It wasn’t too bad,” and it really is a half-truth, but it was fine, more than fine considering the alternative of a third day being rushed around to make sure the celebration of the flowers goes off without a hitch. Honestly, Shiro could definitely have done worse, could have been part of the judging of juniberry arrangements with Shay surely winning first prize— though he’d have liked to have helped with the pie tasting contest.

Yes, he quite lucked out in the droll of affairs, the in-betweens and the ins and outs, just getting to sit on his ass and take in money. His legs have had a chance of reprieve though his backside isn’t so sure of its fortune.

“Well, no matter. The band is about to play and you’ll need to hurry and catch something for dinner, or as they say, you’ll be blowing in the wind.”

Shiro leaves Coran with a tally of cash in the drawer and a sincerest mentioning of thanks before heading off towards the tents in hopes of getting at the last chance for grub that’s on the exceptionally higher side of quality for its price.

However, he doesn’t get too far when a hand tugs on his elbow and he’s being pulled to the side in a way that instantly snaps his defenses and puts him ready for some kind of throwing over his back to subdue the person who dared jerk him around.

He stops short, misfortune having been narrowly missed, as he seeps the usual updo of Colleen’s hair.

“Mrs. Holt, what—?”

Colleen grins over her shoulder, easy going and all knowing, while she’s guiding him to the church tent. “I told that ol’ pastor to go let you have a bite to eat. I got you a plate since you liked that Carolina style? Dunno what you see in it, but I guess if you like the mustard base…”
“I really like the mustard base though,” Shiro confirms with a tender softening of the edges of his eyes, and he’s just spoiled, definitely, thoroughly spoiled save for being spoon fed pulled pork bathed in a tumeric and paprika blend and baked beans straight from a cast iron skillet to add some meat to his ribs.

Colleen hums as she sits him down, Sam eating his plate with gusto of a man once traipsing the desert wilderness for refuge from the sweltering sun. The tent is vacant once again with just the three of them, and Colleen answers the question that comes forefront without verbal provocation.

“Pidge and Matt went ahead to the dance, and yes, dear, we’ve already met Nyma,” the matriarch chides with a twinkle in her eyes like a mother who’s children can’t keep a lick of secrets from her, “we already knew.”

“Oh.” That’s fair enough and is worth a silent retreat to an empty chair to be handed his take out tray and cup of sweet tea. “So, there are no… issues?”

Sam snorts before nearly choking on his bite of cornbread, causing both Colleen and Shiro to nearly jump from their chairs when the older man beats on his chest to dislodge the obtrusion. He easily settles down with a hard swallow, flopping back with a bitter sigh.

“Well, so much for my talkin’ with my full.”

“You poor dear.”

Sam is a lucky man, but a grateful man, too, and Shiro can affirm this with the sight of a happily wedded man having his drink refreshed out of pity before a hand rubs song his back to soothe whatever might be left of the humility of learning a child’s lesson.

Shiro could count his stars and his blessings as he too knows the touch of comfort when the world is dark and not a light to be found to remind him of the good things to enjoy.

Anyway… as I was tryin’ to say before being rudely interrupted by my own shortcomings, Katie-Bell ain’t the slickest fish in the pond for all that smarts she’s got in that brain of hers.”

Colleen chuckles, her eyes sliding to Shiro as she agrees with her husband. “We love our babies no matter what, just like God loves all of us. It isn’t too hard, don’t you think, sweetie?”
Shiro grins, all teeth and candor, cheeks swollen with the simplest of feeling that warms him through and through.

After that, it is relative small talk within their small circle, discussions of the Holts coming by tomorrow for Shiro to bid a best wishes and farewells to the twins before the family rides off into the cities, both Auburn and Tuscaloosa, to drop their now-grown children off for the next segment of their lives. They haven’t shown one ounce of fear for future’s lack of forewarning, and they’re braver, more spine than he ever was, and it will be so damn bittersweet to miss them.

“Well, we can’t just let our last night before being empty nesters go to waste, now can we?” Sam hints, standing up to discard their trash with Shiro’s help while Colleen follows with a sun tea teeter. Nudging Shiro’s side with her elbow, she takes his arm with on hand while her other finds Sam’s so that they can all walk together towards the string of lights across the open sky as the music starts to pick up.

“Now, you’re about to see a bunch of ol’ and haggard fools dance like they got a sense of rhythm, but do an old lady some good, and dance with her a bit? You might make a few hearts jealous tonight!”

How preposterous that Shiro would even let himself wait for the gazes of potential lovers be a worry of his, fully overjoyed that there is a lovely thing with bluebell eyes and a wind chime laugh. There’s salt in the air in that bedroom, and a light in the window to beckon forth a wayward man of black attire to come home, just come home.

Lance may have to wait though, may have to gaze out from the window sill in longing for the days he once knew, where the town was his to walk, and though it wasn’t where his heart was, it tried so hard to accommodate the sea yearning he carried for the months he spent in Gilman before…

Shiro grunts, the band playing some contrived attempt of ‘Orange Blossom Special’ in the style of a fiddling prodigy that met the devil in Georgia, and it’s far from his tastes, far, far from it, but how it’s just buzzed up the character of the crowd is just impeccable and perfect. It’s a train ride dance that Shiro has no chance to jump from, the wheels chugging down the tracks with coal smoke at his back while he fiddles with the gates, all locked and no key.

He’s a dead man with two left feet, and Lance is the only dance partner that he just likes if only for the intimacy that comes with their foreheads aligned, sharing their breaths of loving endearments while the phonograph warbles.
The fiddle whistles to the piano, both of the plucking and plinking a call and response with the invigoration of coal smolder and railroad conductions, and before he can even ask for a vote of absence, Colleen has him right in the middle of the hoedown.

“Just dance, sweet pea! Ain’t nothin’ to it!” she consoles with timely laughter, her feet light as they prance in high tempo while everyone else just makes themselves fools of merriment. He tries, Lord knows he tries, but he’s blustering as Colleen and him have a good laugh over just how bad he is keeping up with her.

Colleen grants him a bit of mercy, just a bit, but she’s ruthless, twists them around with their hands clasped together, but Shiro is a quick learner, he thinks, and he’s stunted to hell and back, but he figures out it’s more swaying and tapping the toes to the ground more than just calling it dancing. Sure fire, he gets it, laughs when he manages a little spin of the little lady before there’s a turn of the tides and he suddenly is with a new dance partner after the bearl of lights above them stop threading over the blackness above.

Allura is now in front of him, flushed up to her ears with a grin so lustrous, he almost grants that she’s been married shotgun just five minutes prior.

“Allura is as fun as Colleen, but hardly worth wrangling out some talent when it comes to keeping up the tortuously quick beat. That he now has someone closer to his dismal skill level in blue grass cotillion alleviates the nervous rolling of his stomach so he can brisk away the precarious downtrodden ways of real world living.

Then, the beat stops just for Allura to spin away, right into the arms of Keith, who has been off to the side, too shy to join in the major conglomeration of sporadic could-be-called-dancing.

Shiro stops and watches then, panting the hot air out as the singer returns to the stage after the rambunctious instrumental number, murmuring something about Cline being an inspiration or some personal whatnot. Shiro can barely hear the poor girl as the banjo plucks in forlorn saunter, the fiddle fading from its maniacal interpretation of a big, black train coming down the line to a somber trill with the first blue-heart lyrics.

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It’s a shot then, right to the heart, something that cracks the porcelain inlaid around his heart, fragile shield crunching with the first hit.

He should be so happy, so joyously excited when Keith and Allura stop and seem to have just that crash of understanding that comes with the miracles of being in love and knowing it for too long. They have been hurt, yes, some of it all contrived by their affections for the other, but with that inch of space between them, what might be infinity to some is a passage to something even longer as Keith’s fingers slowly glide down Allura’s arms to twine their fingers together.

And, the world shatters.

Glorious air from all his toil sinks from his lungs, and the colors of a resplendent festival with pinks dotting the sidewalks and decorations of the stage all fade into monochrome facets, everything he sees now a sullen gray. Laughter echoes in hollow drones, chatter now buzzing misspoken jargon, and he is left with senses disjointed as he comes to an abrupt end to this uplifting journey.

Oh, yes, he can fix that house right up. He can have this life with all the fattening, delicious meals while listening to the gossip and stories of tradition, can even work on with the judge in congruence with all the crazy shenanigans entailed while keeping his somewhat second job on Keith’s farm tending to the cattle and soybeans. He can watch the twins roll in from midterms and finals, watch all these younger folk grow into their better selves, and even sit in the pew as Keith stands adorned in a rented tux with fidget-friendly cuffs as he waits for his bride to walk down the aisle.

But he cannot be with Lance.

And, sure, he can evade Sendak’s snarky flirts as he has the entire festival and most every day—and the man isn’t too bad, just a little too dark on the shady art of things even if he’s the best mechanic this side of Dallas County. Yes, there is also an old farm cat to pet on the Evans porch while she sprawls out on the first step to wait for him. Oh, and he shouldn’t forget that he can have dinner with the Holts, empty nesters when they return from taking their kids to university, can wash dishes for Colleen and joke with Samuel. Finally, he can egg Hunk on to getting up the moxie to straighten his spine and walk right over to Buttercup Florist and Gifts to finally ask Shay out on a proper first date.

But, Shiro sees all his stupid thinking, all his dreams that are missing such a particular piece missing that it’s just another half of himself, the one that holds his heart and all his hopes for himself.
He can never hold Lance’s hand in the daylight, and treat him to a cone of ice cream from the Holt’s Grocery. He can never hold Lance close while they walk down Main Street lit up with lanterns and fireworks, bottoms of blue bottle trees reflecting the luminance to invoke a romantic dream just for the two of them. And… he can never kiss Lance while the other puts together a picnic lunch for them to go to the river with, a lazy day of fishing or some other silly thing for them to do together.

He cannot be with Lance like this, in all the ways he wants, in all the ways he craves. No, Shiro can only have Lance in the hidden intimacy of nighttime, only in the dreams that are really dreams, and just nothing more. He can only know Lance’s touch, Lance’s smile in the secrets of the unconscious, and if that really is it, then what is all the point of having this without Lance?

He hates it. God save him from the sin that he will declare then and there, but he hates it, hates it with every heartstring he possesses, hates how there’s so much goodness in the world when the most precious of treasures he has found in this world is dead and will not ever be his in this mortal life.

The dam, the construction of preservation that Shiro has so painstakingly built in his months in this town so far from the home he abandoned, breaks.

Everything swallows too thick in his throat, holds there on the back of his tongue. Everything is too close yet too far, and he’s too hot and too cold all at once. He cannot get enough air, and has too much all the same. He cannot stay here, that he does know, lights of fairies smearing into strands of strings that will tie him up and keep him down, strangle him under the guise of doing in a poor bastard that has come to a head with the truths he buried down too far for too long.

He cannot linger here, mask shattered into fractures along the asphalt and unable to hide the abyss of black threads that ball up in straggles along the dryness of his mouth.

Runs, he bids himself, run. Leave from here, he begs himself, so he does. He does not even think of his truck, but only what his own two legs can do, running as hard as he can in spite of the yells for him. No, he pleads, do not heed them, and there’s no damn use for legs if you can’t run, Iverson told him once, so he runs, runs, and runs to the last stronghold he has. In time, though, he can already smell the rising tide of salt water panic threatening to wash away the granules of the sandcastles he built with his own hand.

Shiro is lost again, and he does not have an inkling within his misfire body to know where to go. Blasted hammer pounds in his head again, reverberation of clangs accompanying the wasp stings of his lungs dragging in hot breath after painful breath. He wishes so much he could see them, see the
white figures with the red scarves that foretold his leaving from Seattle, the ones that he followed listlessly before the earth erupted and went black.

At this rate, his heart will surely burst, but whether it be from the white rapid adrenaline or stark chill of death, he cannot say for sure. Thus, he runs.

Instead, no, Shiro guess he is going to die this way, running from ghosts that do not haunt him to go to those that he haunts because he just can’t let his brothers in arms just stay down, can’t let them out of his head when the places and people around him close in to become cacophonies of enclosure and white noise.

He cannot do this tonight, this shoddy appearance of being glued back together like a patchwork doll sitting forgotten in a lost child’s rocker.

He just… cannot anymore.

Finally, he reaches the house, not a soul on the road to greet him or stop him, though he begs through haggard pants that scorch his throat that no one follows him. Praying in throbs of acid in his thighs and calves, he comes to terms that he is worn out, so weary when he returns to the cold embrace of this old architecture that he can barely stumble up the steps and bust the door open with a flimsy turn of the doorknob and a push of his shoulder.

He’s in Seattle once more with a sweet note of errands from his mother, the static too loud, God, it’s too loud in his ears and he wants it to stop.

“Lance…!”

Lance is nowhere to be found, so that final seam that has held him together since his last winter snaps.

Screaming. All he can do is scream as he drops to his knees, the sound resounding faintly in the pounds of his pulse. He yells for Lance in repetitive self pity, pleading for his lover, for his bluebell whose petal lips should kiss his forehead and take the cluster of wasps and of river currents away so Shiro could ultimately rest.

But, that heartbreak is there, and Lance cannot come to him now Shiro is awake, and that’s the
worst, when the sorrows and the griefs spill over the well and turn red as bomb fire.

It’s all kerosene now, flammable and toxic, deadly to every nth degree fathomable, but it’s Shiro’s volition of rationale gone, fleeting away to burrow itself as he strikes the match and feels the ropes of the beast burn.

All Shiro wants to do is destroy.

It is all clatters and dents. It’s all beautiful in his ears, the breaking of plates, the shattering of picture frames, and the splintering of wooden frame. The beast roars in piteous piety for the angry righteousness of his destructive path, the same that overturns and scatters every meticulously placed item to portray some illusion of getting better, of being healthier in mind and in essence. He wants this place, this home he so foolishly thought he could mend with his own bare hands just as he could mend his broken mind, to truly unmask what is found buried in the tar of his soul.

Broken. All of it needs to be broken, everything ruined, obliterated and dismantled. Let not one thing be unlike himself, be unlike this sad shell of a soldier that is dead inside, and wants to reflect upon this world how damned he is.

When he is finished, he cannot tell what he has created and what he has slaughtered, a masterpiece of a massacre.

And, now, it hurts even more.

How laughable he is, how funny this all is, and before he can even begin to decipher a beginning and an ending, he suddenly falls to the floor with a thud to be amongst the scattered books and chairs to laugh, laugh with everything snapping that holds him together, laughing with how horrifically ignorant he is.

Life isn’t beautiful. It isn’t lovely and isn’t kind, and while he has been so good here, so welcomed, it doesn’t matter in the end if he can’t even have what he wants the most, and that’s Lance, the same young man that nearly killed him in a car wreck because love at first sight is haunting, a veil of silk that clings to the throat and tied tight.

He laughs until it aches, and by then, the humor is derailed and tarnished as his eyes blear with tears so that every part of him must feel pain. The beast hunches down from its demolition of Shiro’s hard work, twisted and quiet to step back into its cage.
He mourns that he is not the strong man he wanted to be, and it is with that last thought that he then knows nothing but darkness and tear stains.

—

“Wake up... please, wake up.”

Something cool touches along his forehead, and as the gloomy glow of candlelight bleeds into his sight, there is Lance kneeled next to him, and help him, Shiro is weak, a child in the sight of an angel. How beautiful his lover is, glorious and ethereal, with all that he is swimming in gray storm cloud eyes as the light of the candles alludes to a radiance of a halo along the strands of Lance’s hair.

Oh, but his bluebell has been crying, too.

Lance’s irises drift in the redness of shed tears, cheeks rubbed raw from hands and shirt sleeves. He looks just as miserable as Shiro feels, and behind him is more a reason of conviction than a question of why.

There are seven of them, Shiro counts, seven bodies covered in the same cotton sheets as the furniture while they all loom over the two of them. Around him, the parlor is in a state of eerie order, coldly pristine until his gray eyes glance to one of the seven sheets, horrified by the bloodstains that spoil the dusty whiteness.

Sue.

“I'm so sorry...” Lance soon whispers with a bite of his bottom lip, chapped and bitten profusely from what the other assumes is fretting over a lover that broke and that he could not fix. For Shiro, every bone aches, weighed by the chains of his own admonishment, but somehow when the first tear he sees trails down that pretty cheek, his thumb catches it as he cups Lance’s jaw into his palm.

"Shhh, it’s okay, baby,” comforts Shiro, but his voice is rather useless after screaming his larynx raw. He tries, God, does he try, because this haunting beauty is as tormented by the evanescence of their affair as Shiro is.
Lance twists his head in sharp disagreement, a soft cry ridged in his throat. It’s pitiful, worst than the splinters in his skin and the cuts on his hands, worst than shrapnel lacerations of bomb shell and a new arm not his own.

“I wasn’t— I couldn’t…!”

And, lo, Lance, the boy with salt breeze on his breath and ocean depths in his eyes crumbles too, draping over Shiro to wrap himself around the larger man in the falsehood of protection against a monster than has come and gone, leaving a wake of condemnation and misery behind for nary a rectification to follow.

“I can’t, Takashi! I just— I just can’t!”

Shiro cannot allow this, not now, not when Lance is the last thing that’s barely hinging him whole, the last of the bent nails in his collapsing foundation. “You can’t fix me, Lance… and I never should have pushed that on you.”

A longing for that cure so close to his reach, yet jerked away at the sight of a love he should have been proud of has raked itself in jagged claw marks of his heart to make a nest there to stay. It’s a distressing feeling, heavy and dreary, to see that he has expected too much for far too long in dismal ruse that he could be better.

Then, Lance glances up, and the world saddens more, “but I love you…”

Threading his hand through Lance’s hair to imbue into their souls some poor man’s semblance of peace, Shiro hum tiredly, closes his eyes while drawing the other back close. Before Lance’s head rests along his shoulder, his breath hitches as his fingers curl into Shiro’s shirt.

“I… I’m fading.”

The old grandfather clock ticks no more at the words, pendulum falling to a stillness. It’s morbidly cold in every inch of Shiro’s body as the ice numbs him over.

Shiro wants to awaken from this woebegone nightmare for the relief that his sunshine is in his
arms is no longer so, that this sea drift of splendor that he loves with every sinew that might understand the notion of the feeling is too a subject of time with death itself not the ultimate permanent state. No, now… it is fading in ways of Providence come beckoning the spirits that wander the mortal earth while His Michael, with scabbard and shield in hand, blows his trumpet to announce that the way to the golden streets flowing with milk and honey is now for haunts like Lance.

To mourn again, to bury Lance into the gelid trove of memory only to diminish with his own life would be worst than death, and yes, he would rather die, not from ripe old age, but from something quicker, for an existence enduring a loss of his darling would be a suffering that not even hellfire could mar.

Salt to the wound is Lance’s expression of indescribable unhappiness along his brow, heartbreaking in a million ways, heart aching like the coo of a mourning dove lonesomely sitting in the oak, in a nest made for two with only one within.

“I… I know I am,” Lance whispers, time going yet sinking all the same when he sniffs again, “it’s getting even colder now.

“Lance…” Shiro whispers back, cupping Lance’s face in both hands to raise him closer for the most bittersweet kiss they have ever shared, wretchedly lamentable to the giggles and the hisses of forevermore that echo down the banister from their bedroom. Soon, Shiro wonders if his heart will bear the brunt of it, will be able to lay there in his bed knowing that no lamplight will walk down the corridor, that no lips will be against his ever again.

This is agony enough, to want Lance in all the ways possible and yet can’t, and now to hear this finality, that there is an end after all is a hell all its own, frozen and loveless.

Everything is ripped apart, crashing into imploding booms within Shiro’s breast while he desperately steals the words to press them back into Lance’s mouth. It’s glass shattering, of jars with sea shells and with sand meeting the oaken floor, of picture frames and bourbon glasses thrown in violent spiels, and it’s really just Shiro gone for his heart now lays near lifeless across the spaces.

His arms tighten around Lance, and if the smaller frame in his arms were a breathing thing, he’s sure he would have snapped his spine in bittersweet relish for the cracking of bone into pieces because his damn heart hurts too much.

Yes, Lance is colder despite the humidity off the Alabama, getting colder in spite of Shiro’s love.
and heat in all the countless way that only the stars above could ever comprehend. It tarnishes the metal bracings of his psyche, the rust of the hinges on his anger and self-starting to show its age far more prominently than just moments prior. There’s that all too familiar pressure, that throbbing force that raises up from its short slumber to raise its dark head, to bear its fangs at the ready. He has allowed it to roam free tonight prior, and to let it again…

But, then, there is water’s touch, a hand along his jaw to soothe away the heat of growing hellfire that would burn everything in its wake, that would just bring back the motions of broken things and cutting screams. It begins as a trickle, a gentle drip of rain shower before an easing of carving creek that fizzes out the embers, leaving charcoal and cinder.

“Shiro,” Lance murmurs, moves to press his lips along the line of Shiro’s jaw in an endeavor to ease the pain, to allow the horror of losing Lance to a fading veil with each doleful kiss, “I… I don’t know what to tell you other than how sorry I am…”

It doesn’t matter, it could never matter again because Shiro’s arms are trembling, the motion rising to his shoulders because it was only a mere approximation based on a complete lack of scientific proof or practice and laughable really, and damn if he isn’t getting a good bucketful of humor tonight, that his sweetheart would ever fade from his hold.

The waters might no longer hold back the fires of his smoldering soul, might not be enough to extinguish what Shiro has to offer the world with his two arms and his rage, his rage against an embodiment of justice that sends bodies to war to only bring them back in black bags with labels, and a folded flag as testament to their service. His fury is brunt against a world that claims that it understands, but still stole his trust, still let him live only to find another purpose— yet, here he is again.

Lost.

A touch, a soft whisper of his name that is like the gentlest of zephyrs along wind chimes, and he is back in Lance’s arms once more. A swallow, a threadbare effort to calm the beast in its cage for just a day or so more, then, “Lance?”

In the dimness of the candles with seven witnesses around them, there’s a timid smile, a memento of a hope that has grown roots in silent tides between them, unsure yet present all the same. It’s in the crevices of that smile lies the promise, unsaid, yet evident within the glory of a bravery anew.

“You could be with me forever.”
The words fall into the air, awe-striking and sweetly given, pledging whispers that ease the stifling hand of the humidity that has settled in the parlor.

He could go, yes, he could. He could go this way, could leave all that he’s managed to do with his twenty some-odd years in a blink of an eye and the regret would just be the devil in the details. In the end, Lance is on a plane that ties him here, binds him to the foundations that have harmed him in some way, and here is the offer, the hand reaching out for a promise of a love everlasting.

There’s nothing to be said, a decision made long before Lance could ever have conjured the idea himself, as Shiro knew that he would go sooner than later, would walk into a death that would be fire and be shameful, but with Lance at the precipice to reach…

The house, the same house he has mended back to some sense of stability and integrity only for him to tear down, the same house that has been a keeper of secrets and of stories that no one alive will tell the extent of, is the bearer of one last scene between lovers as seven bodies fade from existence in mourning defeat.

“I want to be with you.”

With a seal of their lips, an oath is made between a heart that has long fallen silent and another that marries the grave.
Chapter 13

spider lilies. red. glowing like a red moon while the twisted petals sway in mourning bend of stems as the river, black and gray, flows.

it is a step, one, then two to find in the middle of a watery grave his own waterlogged corpse, eyes muddied with black tar, his mouth forever open in a silent scream.

a single blue thread drift in the currents. eyes, not his corpse’s, follow; one step, then two.

go back.

he does. his own face greets him. fingers wrap around his neck. tight, tighter.

static. gray snow drifts.

then nothing.

—

Shiro wakes up on the parlor floor that morning, punch drunk with sorrow that just don’t feel right at all, acidic on his lungs with wing beats of moths that ate holes into his soul before fluttering away.

There is a pattering of rain on the roof, and the dreary dawn of thunderstorm is evident from the lackluster daytime from the parlor window. It’s with a groan of his spine that protests from his moving that he sits up and looks around to see what he has wrought.

It’s… abhorrent, and he feels more bitter and more aggravated by it, but he has to admit; he does feel better knowing that this house now reflects the chaotic journey of short self-destruction, an antithesis of Lazarus walking from his grave while Shiro walks towards his own.
He will, without a doubt, do what he must, and tie the ends that he has accumulated over the duration of his temporary stay. Those ends, the colorful, frayed cottons that sway before him like curtains fluttering in the wake of a summer storm, are his and his alone to pluck down.

The first cuts of cloth will be arrive soon, and Shiro can already hear the Holts driving down Oak towards the fence to gather up their umbrellas and rain coats so that they can come tell Shiro in unknowingly promises of ‘see you laters.’ He does not have the err of violation to dare inform them that he is so, so tired, and wants to go home or to wherever Lance lays in wait for him.

Shiro shuts the curtains to hide his mess, both inside the parlor and within his soul, as there comes the thud of car doors and hollers of twins while the Holts parade up the walkway to the door.

“Big Trouble, you’re in trouble!” Pidge yelps through the obstruction that keeps her away from him, and poor Colleen shushes her with a worried hiss. He woulds smile were he not staring at the first of bonds to break, to wish goodbye.

He wants to be weak, to admit that he could go on without Lance and spend each day in the Southern easies, to maybe settle down with a pretty, lovely thing and do his best to keep his pining heart from yearning for the taste of dirty water on his tongue. Though, to be weak is almost permitting the idea that he never loved Lance, that this all was a folly undertaken with diaphanous settlings.

No, and it’s a crow call in his mind, piercing and true, that he will be strong this day, that he will set this all down the spiral well of no return.

“… Shiro?” Pidge murmurs, knocking on the door with concern low in his tone, “are you there?”

For her, for the Holts, he will be, just this one last time, and he opens the door with his best face, fixed up happy and weary just for them. Only for them.

“Sorry—,” and it’s an interjection he only briefly gets out before Colleen Holt has him by the shirt, dragging him out to wrap him in her arms tight and comforting.

“Sweetie, don’t do that to me again! You frightened me to absolute death!”

Samuel is behind her, a peculiarly crease that wrinkles down his mouth as he too envelopes the
both of them suddenly. “You’re gonna give us ol’ folk an early grave to sleep in, son.”

He wants to laugh, to let them hear how hollow he is to that they would discourage him, but he falls short to press himself further into the two. He breathes in, smelling scents of jasmine and pine and holding that he can press the leaves into the books of his memories, mementos for him to carry in his heart.

There’s shuffling around him, and more arms that take him him. He’s thankful that they didn’t follow, so glad that they let him have his time to come to terms with the shattering of chains that brought about his darker side. In a way, he is sad that they did not, but… he does not convict them guilty of it as it were a crime. He cannot blame them, so he simply won’t.

“We didn’t know if… we should have gone after you,” Matt mutters into Shiro’s shoulder, and he smells of lemonade, and Pidge, peanut butter that she craves and eats as much as her lithe form can take.

“Was… was it— do you like Allura— or maybe Keith?” Pidge asks, and with a shake of his head, Shiro sighs, freeing a hand to pet her hair in teasing confirmation that no, neither of them have come to equal to his fancies, and all he can hope for is that he has not ruined their chance of love again.

“Nah… just, didn’t…” and where are the words? Nothing speaks right in his mouth, now dry and anxious to burden them with his bereavement, “couldn’t.”

“You don’t have to tell us,” Sam offers an elusion to voicing the problem, all but assured in his own opinion, “it’s yours, but just know, my boy, that we Holts might not have much, but we’ve got ears to listen and arms to hug with.”

“Sam’s right, Shiro, sweetie, we’re here for you, for anything,” Collen agrees, and her hands touches his cheek, giving him her trademark pat, “and I’ll be expecting you for supper Tuesday night when we get back.”

Will he be gone by then? Will Lance’s siren song already have drawn him to the river where he must wait for Shiro, a mermaid with gills flared in the silt-thick depths that will surely drown with his lover?

“Yes, ma’am.” And that’s it. That’s all he can say as he kisses Pidge’s hair, tells her to be good and
grab life by her own two hands. Then, the hugs Matt tight, patting his back and reminding him to impress them all at summer practice, to court and not date, to be smart and not tumble into college’s party scene.

Matt sucks his teeth and shakes his head, “really, Shiro? Y’think I’m gonna let my dreams of being a baseball-playing engineer go to waste? Nah.”

Pidge laughs and nudges Shiro’s hip, trying to worm out a smile as she steps over to her brother. “Besides, Mr. Shirogane, we got too much goin’ for us. Not gonna let something as silly as parties and girls keep us from it.”

He’s proud. He’s so damn proud, and it hurts, a piercing that stabs right between his ribs as he stares at them, takes in the sight of the twins just this one last time. It’s rougher along his edges, feels all wrong and misconstrued, that he has had them in his life for such a short time, and yet—he cannot.

“Don’t miss us too much!” Matt shouts with a grand, ecstatic wave, Sam and Colleen holding up the back as Pidge rushes in for another embrace from their playfully determined adopted sibling. While Matt is clambering into the vehicle that sits idle in wait for its owner, Shiro’s hands fold over the young woman’s shoulders.

Her cheeks presses into his chest and the jut of her glasses don’t bother him as much as the average person would figure, the tiny prick a worthwhile indication that he is alive, and very much human, still susceptible to the normal pains that come with living.

“I’ll miss you,” she tells him, a tightening of her limbs that have him wrapped to her relaying all he needs to know. He thinks that if he can think beyond death’s veil, he will miss her, too. No, that is a crock, a lie he tells himself to lessen the blow. Shiro would miss each of them, equally and profoundly, even if the hurricanes of afterlife wash him dry and leave him as bare as driftwood.

“You know I’ll miss you too, but hey. Now you get to go out there and be great, Little Trouble,” and with another kiss of her soft hair, Shiro bids her goodbye, lets his hands fall slow as she turns from him to go down the porch steps.

Colleen eyes him, something akin to a maternal instinct looming there in the corners her hazel irises as her hands come to squeeze his warm and tender. Her husband grins from behind her, but Shiro can see it, the frayed edges, the ends he must leave behind. These two parents that have melded into their tiny fold an outsider must let the wings of their children fly into the horizon to parts they cannot control. It must be hard on them when close knit is an understatement to how
close the Holts are, one collective unit that has everything a wonderful family needs.

“Tuesday, remember?” Colleen asks in an echo, and the words bounce sullenly in his head as he nods. “Tuesday night. I’ll make your favorite fried chicken and biscuits. Okay?”

Shiro swallows, then timidly asks like he has the intention of accepting the invitation, “could… we have breakfast for dinner instead?”

Sam hums and chuckles, a lacking noise that is derived from long car drives into cities ahead of him in addition to the rising fear that something is amiss, “anything you want. I’ll cook it up myself if I gotta.”

With that, they leave him standing on the porch to watch them go, a kiss to his cheek with the aroma of flowers at Collen’s back, and a clap to the shoulder and a half hug from Sam. They leave him so that he must watch them go down Oak to Main where they will need to hit the highway and head to Tuscaloosa first. He can only half-heartedly wave while the twins twist in their seats to roll down the windows, and let the rain come in as they yell excitedly their farewells.

He stands there, and waits, noticing that there is just silence between the spaces of raindrops on the ground and on the leaves. Just silence, and himself.

With a resolve of a dead man walking, he walks back into his house, running over a mental list of the things he must do, of the things he must know before he walks into the void to never breathe an utterance of a word again.

There’s a strange noise from the kitchen, a half-call of a woman that he has never heard before, but it is heavy with the implication that Sue is in there.

Oh, Sue. Poor forgotten Sue.

Does she notice? Has she come to give him one last fright not of her own making before he leaves her? No— no, he cannot allow that, cannot think to go on when she would remain, all alone in this house. How lonesome this old place would be without her brother or a person to hauntingly come to, to smile and to show the cycles of her life expired.

For once, Shiro urges himself to go into her safe hold to beseech her, to speak with her some
sedated pursuit for the truth of her family’s fate from her own mouth. What he does not expect to see is Sue herself, standing in the gray light from the window at the sink. She’s humming, oblivious to the world around her as she acts as though it’s a normal day back in 1915 and expecting her first little one to be born into this world. She is such a grisly yet fair sight, a vision of a small town magnolia at her peak bloom only to have been plucked from her perch and left to rot in the dirt.

Shiro wants to ask her, wants to interrupt her, but then she stops, standing to full height from where she works at the sink before she flickers and she is watching him from the corner of the room. For once, there is despondency etched into her very existence though translucent, a sheer of dirtied white and faded red floating in his gaze.

“… Sue,” he begs, stepping towards her in hopes that she will be the harbinger of the story, the messenger that he has overlooked these months as he scoured the pages of Lance’s journals for a reason for all this, and yet, the one he needs has to be missing, has to be somewhere in some nook or cranny that he cannot fathom, and she must be the one to reveal the hiding place to him.

Instead, she shakes her head to him, a fleeting moment of grief worsening while she points to the long side of the counter on the opposite wall to where her cameo sits, taken from the bedside table upstairs where he left it.

Then, she fades away like dust that forlornly dances in the dreary glow of window sills and porches to leave him all alone with his accepting thoughts and his faltering fortitude. With her silent hint, he gets it, comprehends what she has gifted him after he has kept her cameo in the only place he could think of: out of sight and out of mind.

With that little blue jewelry in his pocket, he picks up his keys and his wallet, not giving one damn about the rain soaking through his shirt as stops—.

His truck is at the festival grounds, abandoned by its owner in his fleeing from the crowds and the people he cares for to invoke a tortuous warpath.

He could kick his own ass, absolutely slaughter himself for being so far gone in his panic that he left his vehicle. If not for the soreness of his raw throat, he’d yell, broken and defeated, but instead he groans and resigns himself to the necessary solution of the problem. He would wait if not for the ticking of time away from his this day, because he wants to go to Lance long before his beloved’s essence leaves him entirely.

After procuring an umbrella from the depths of a random box Keith dropped off months ago with
the rest of his father's clothes and shoes, he sets himself with a swallow and a glance back into the interior of the house.

No one is there, so he walks out to trudge his way up to the wet intersection of Main Street to get his truck.

—

He’s soaked through to the bone and shivering in his wet clothes by the time he has walked all the way down Oak to the main road of Gilman, noting that the town has vanished from its grandeur of Southern hospitality and party having the days to be replaced with the eeriness of a ghost town.

The misty scape of the buildings feels prophetic and cinematic, shadows of monoliths that he knows well are more than just dark shapes to guide him to the lot where Black sits. There’s a few human shapes in the distance, but the brumous corners of the intersection closes in on him with an ambiance of loneliness that drips down his spine to remind him where he is going.

The cameo is heavy in his pocket, and this light trinket given to a fair woman with such affection should not feel so burdening. Still, the fingers of his hand fiddle with it, this object that has tied him to Susannah McClain, has made him bear her brand as he walks on into the fog, careless as the church bells toll the congregation in for morning service.

He hopes that Saint Michael’s is filled to the brim with visitors, of souls for Pastor Coran to charm into the service of the Lord, to guide into taking the salvation before them in life eternal after this one with only acceptance of a Lamb sheered and beaten, of a Lamb that has died so that those that do not know sacrifice could be saved.

Should he be in the that church? Possibly. He hopes that there are people further in the darker shades of overgrowth that will be harkened upon to step forward this Sunday morning to have a good man with a heart holy and true bless them with God’s forgiveness. What a joy to have it, it must be, but forgiveness is not what Shiro needs.

He needs peace, and while he opens the door to his truck to crank her awake, he regrets that peace for the haunts that have clinging to this town for too long must accept that solace is found through a bastard like him.

But, Sue has given him his orders, his rallying cry and his banner into war, though he imagines,
war is not the accurate word to use. Armistice is only gained when a battle has already been fought, and the soldiers that have suffered the ultimate consequence litter the fields of wartime with eyes open yet unseeing. Thus, he reckons that there is a spot on the sloping fields for him once all is said and done, and this smoke and mirror of an enemy that he has erected in his private cries of foul play will sign the creed to end this.

To see Mayor Garland may be fruitless, but for Sue, for the sister of the man that he loves so wholly that he is lost without him, he will go.

He knows the Garland Plantation only from hearsay amongst the citizens, in lofty discussions of the public accordances and town meetings while sitting in Hunk’s diner on an early morning breakfast with the judge. While it was once a crown jewel a few miles off the Alabama, it is now antiquated to the point of dilapidation with now only a small line of oaks with listless draperies of Spanish moss to give reluctant welcome to any visiting person to the Garland estate. Shiro drives around to the portico to observe the cracks in the columns, a shifting of foundation as time slowly starts to steal away the brilliance of a once fine house.

Shiro won’t even go into the dirty details of how that house was built or by what means the money was gained, so he just kills the engine of his truck to get out and walk up to the front door.

Everything about the Garland abode is about as oppressive as the man himself is with not one decoration in place, not one flower or fern to give some color to the dreary exterior. Then again, there isn’t much personable about the man who is all business and all snark, teeth bared to bite at the throat of anyone that might question him.

If Sue were there, she might would be at Shiro’s back, her palms against his shoulder blades with a whisper of ‘go.’

Fortune—or misfortunate in consideration to the beast that he may meet this morning—must grant him favor as the Coupe Deville sits in a shanty of a garage in a testament to the mayor’s lack of holy belief, and for all that Shiro knows, he hasn’t seen the man attend a sermon the whole time going himself. It’s all right, and it may put them on more even ground this way.

At least Alford won’t be able to sniff him out like a blood hound, and even if he does, well… best not think about that now when he must become a bastion, armed to the teeth in spite of the beleaguerment to follow his act of bravery.

With a loud rapping of his knuckles on the door, he waits, and waits, and time slips along the clouds of mist around him, curling around the columns to watch the events of this final day unfold.
Then, remarkably in a way that nearly gives Shiro a premature heart attack, the door opens, and Mayor Garland is there, calm in his intimidating stature.

“Well, if it isn’t the judge’s lapdog.”

Shiro snorts, dry and offended, but he lets it trickle off his back while he clutches the cameo in his hand for the morale necessary to weather the panther in the doorway. “I need to talk to you, and I’m not taking no for an answer.”

The mayor grunts with a roll of his eyes, “got a back bone again, I see. You haven’t even been able to walk down to my wing since our little meeting—.”

“I have something you want— and something that I need to give you…” Shiro warns with interjecting ferocity, feeling that fire in his stomach burn when he’s being spoken to like the dog the mayor refers to him.

“… Ah,” and while Shiro has perked the other’s interests, it’s not until a moment later he’s permitted inside the home.

“Take off those shoes, boy, I won’t have you tracking water into my house.”

So he does, letting the shoes sit outside in the portico where there is no even a rocker or a table before following the lord of the home to his study.

If there is a man that could live like this, it must surely be Zarend Garland III, with not one picture on the walls, not one trinket or useless item of decor found within the house. It is minimalistic in the bareness of character, and with that Shiro gets more of an introspection of this mayor of Gilman just with the little he can see.

There is no wife, and no children, just a house, some land, and old money that are all possessed by one man, the last of the true Garland name. The blood line ends here, ends in this house with a decrepit old man that hasn’t a smile on his face if not for his derision. There is no warmth, no hearth and no home, this building just a roof and walls for shelter, and nothing more than that.
It must once have been host to something more in some previous life, but Shiro will not approximate how those days might now perhaps be dusty boxes locked in an attic up where he cannot see. They must be hard felt, or just wanting to be forgotten, artifacts of raising that cannot be taken wholly into account.

“Now, sit,” Garland mutters once they are in his study, strikingly similar to his office in Town Hall, “and give me a reason to give you what you want.”

“I…” Shiro carefully perches on the edge of the chair, rubbing the heels of his palms against the wet denim of his jeans that sick to his legs in a way that’s uncomfortable as he thinks.

Gilman has never been exactly what Shiro expected, a place with no major chain stores and Selma being at least a twenty minute drive to relieve the sparsity of amenities in the small river town. No, this town, with its small population and its streets covered in hand painted signs beseeching the people to pray to Jesus for salvation has been an upheaval of a panacea, but there has always been that underlying suspicion on his part. Granted, yes, he has met the few bad apples, but the town folk wave to him no matter how he looks to them, and always ask him about his home, ask about his mama that must surely wonder why he’s gone so far away.

Bigotry is a festering squelch of infestation that is opaque in the town limits, and outside of the mayor’s disturbing cousins, there hasn’t been fear or detest of someone that is different. Shiro has questioned it only at face value, and never bothered for the rest, but something wicked has come and washed the potential of pungent hate with and grief, and it’s time.

It is time to hear the story of why.

After all, the dead are dead, and there nothing more that he can do than let the poison of love that has gripped its thorns into his heart make him want justice if only for being witness of the truth.

Under Sue’s grace, he will take what he can, cameo in his pocket, and holds his love close like a broken blue jay in winter's cradle in the face of this black cat of a man that has his fur raised with a hiss.

“Tell me first about what happened. You know… you know what I mean, sir. I just… I need to know.”

Here, he cannot bend. Here, he must show that he is all out of options and only has the best to
deliver in return for knowledge for this man of elected caliber knows, and sinners that they are, there has to be confession.

A panther, black and sleek, descends from its haunches as Garland settles back in his leather chair with a sigh of woeful exhaustion as though he is now Atlas himself, the burden of a planet-sized truth finally breaking his back.

"Boy, you need to learn that there is a fine line between wanting information and hearing a story," he mutters, a smokiness in his tone like the ends of a bad cigar or the fumes from a burning house. His eyes do not confine Shiro down but look off to the wall behind him like there is someone there he wants so ardently to see, but is long, long dead.

Shiro suddenly feels sorry for the man as he speaks in timbers of rotting pines and hickories.

“Information is when there is a means to an end, but... this is just a story, and stories are just stories. You cannot change them, no matter how much you think you can.”

With limbs that are bound by sluggish joints, Garland reaches down to open a drawer of his desk to pull out an old dogeared journal, similar to the color and material of all the mates that are in Shiro’s bedroom. It has been folded through more than a hundred times for sure, but despite its age, it has been cared for.

And with oak laden sorrows, Zarend Garland, grandson of Susannah McClain, relinquishes the story Shiro wants— no, needs to hear.

—

Birth of a boy is just the beginning of a tale that has been swept under the welcome mat of each porch here in Gilman, Alabama to hide the sins that they all carry, but dirt is just as notorious of a presence as hate itself.

Zarend K. Garland I was a man that grew up with a silver spoon in his mouth and enough money to burn a wet mule to inherit until his nanny took it away from him to teach him how to act towards others, an act that he most assuredly was grateful for.

The first line of the Zarend name learned from his parents an instituted superiority that comes with class and money, being the only other family in Gilman with a lackluster plantation home other than the Kings. Oh, those Kings were a bad name in the Garland household as they were dark in
skin and holy in spirit, but stole from their ancestors' master his land and funds when he died and left none to inherit, the Southern lands scorched and tired from a war they could never have won.

What fools, what fools.

But, nanny was a good woman, a hired hand for the Garland estate and a friend of the Kings, and under her eye, her young master learned to run and play with other boys and girls, learned how to say ‘yes, ma’am,’ ‘no, ma’am,’ and ‘thank you, ma’am.’

Nanny was crafty, and her upstart was too, keeping hushed their ways when under the scrutiny of oppression found in the masters of the home. Zarend only had to suffer the sight of what a man who think he has power is capable of, and nanny loved him more than his own mother ever did.

He would do all that he could to protect her, so he did, being a good, polite child of the upper crust when the need arose, but always mindful that his stature would fade and die with the weeds that the gardeners pluck from his mother’s prized camellia beds.

Years would pass, and the heir to the Garland grew up. An admirable man that loved going to church and preferred to sit with his friends or his nanny than his own flesh and blood, he was the same as most teenage boys on the cusp of adult hood, finding his eyes falling from Jesus on the Cross to the skirts of girls in the congregation.

He had his fun, broke hearts and had his broken, but when he was a raving bachelor at the ripe age of twenty-three in the Lord’s year of 1914, the most beautiful woman imaginable moved into newly built two-story off on Oak Avenue.

And, God lay him low and help him rise on the third day, if he loved a woman more at first sight than he did Susannah McClain, he never lived to tell it.

Zarend might have been intended to grow up a fickle man with coin to the gills and more issues that old Carter’s got liver pills, but he loved so much, loved his Sue so dearly that he would pluck everyone one of those camellias in his mama’s garden if it made his Sue smile. He courted her, made love to her, took her to the river when the little ones were down for naps to go on and on about how she would be his wife, how they would leave this small town with its charms but all the issues to go along with it to go down the river so he could take her back to the sea.

But, talk is hard to keep low in the Southern grapevine, and Mr. Garland found out about his son’s
presumed dalliances with the McClain girl. Not only that, but it only took a little digging and pulling back on arms to find out about that McClain family secret.

*Cuban.* Born in Florida, but damn if it didn’t matter, and for two star crossed lovers, there would be no respite. The town might have adored the McClains, those wholesome, God fearing people, work brickle and eager to give to those with a little less than them, but a gun held by a hand of a murdering man knows no kindness.

Sue died in child birth. For all her grandson knows, she dies not with the father of her child, but with her brother at her side instead, their same bluebell eyes meeting before she bled out.

With every breath that lead to her last, how would anyone know how hate could drive a pathetic excuse for a father to break into property not his own and steal away what would be his only grandson? Snatched from the arms from a sobbing mess of a younger brother to the mother, only to incite a firestorm in the town that was unfathomable.

Whereas the Mayor of Gilman in days long past was driven by rage that laid in bed with simple hatred, Sue's brother was fueled by the kerosene of grieving madness.

And what comes later on is the revelation that doing good deeds and being kind to others no matter their birth or their circumstances makes allies to the grave, and Zarend I, while staring at a baby that he could not raise while his mother laid six feet in a cheap casket, made it all too easy for his nanny and Sue's brother to sneak the baby back to the household of the McClains.

It was supposed to end then, the story closing the painted pages on a life that was too beautiful and too adored to ever be written down, but familial obligation that lies in the unnecessary never flows as sure as the river where a no son of his quoted proposals of adoration to a woman that can no longer smile at him.

Mr. Garland went, in simple terms, insane with his anger. It was a final offense that drove him to find his most beloved revolver and send away his son to university to make something of himself. The bastard waited and abided before one grueling day in August after his only son was gone, believing that his child was still safe in the arms of a family that mourned still, did he commit the most grisly act in Gilman history.

There had been the children there, brought along to the cotton fields to be watched upon since their elder sister could no longer do so. It had been another day in the last vestiges of summer harvest, and the McClains were unmindful of what could ever have occurred.
Then, lo, in a red evening sun came a pale white horse, its hooves grinding into the red clay while its rider came upon them like dark smoke of hell was at his back.

Each of them were shot in the cotton field, child and parent all.

A massacare, a slaughter, and how righteous Garland must have felt, but, oh, one remained, and after stepping on the corpses of a family that should have fled back to their dear Pandhandle before they lost it all, the achromatic hellspawn went after the boy who defied him the most.

Lance McClain was an easy target, and for all that his grand nephew gathered from the tired second recounts of his grandfather, Lance hid the baby away when he heard the clopping of horse hooves that were more like the devils ranks coming for him.

While his nephew slept swaddled in the attic, Lance let the brute chase him, hoping he knew the woods of oaks and Spanish moss towards the Alabama better than a man bred on river water, red dirt, and servants’ food. Garland was a slow creature of blood stains and self righteousness, but there is only so far even a young man can go...

"And boy, on our ghostwriter... I cannot claim to know his fate," Zarend Garland III, having given a tale of the most gruelling to a stricken and slack jawed youth before him, sighs as the balls and chains slips down from his wrist and ankles with a profound clang.

“La…?”

“All my grandfather ever said was that he joined the water.”

Such a terrible event would become unspoken in a town left to mourn, all clad in the palls of black to carry down each casket from Saint Michael’s down to the house on Oak, all present sans a brother’s who they only thought was ghosted away by the mighty river’s grasp on his neck so the water would fill his lungs.

The Garlands then fell from their self imposed pedestal, and the direct decedents, in love to spite the hateful man, continued to find a woman to bear young that was not of their ‘kind.’
Such was good, and the town rejoiced because what they all learned is that all God's children are precious, all apart of His flock, and no one, not even Mr. Garland, had a right to harm another.

But Lance was gone, as mysterious as the mist on an autumn morning in late October. Lance was never found, never to be buried with his kin.

“Son, let me ask, did you think about all this? Did you think for even a minute what would you would do after learning about the blood on my family’s name? Because there’s a truth here, one you’ve turned your head away from. Didn’t you hear me?

You can hear the story, but the ending is done. It’s written, and only a damn fool could ever think that he could change it.”

It’s a pregnant pause, loaded with ammunition that behooves Shiro's most genuine of intentions, rings a prominently as the church bells chiming in the noon hour. The item that he has come to return burns in his hand, but only with the warmth that what he is doing is right.

"... She wants you to have this.”

That is all he can say all can say as he lays down the cameo, engraved with all the love a man now also buried six feet down and maggot infested could have for another. Before the mayor’s folded hands is an everlasting love note with the symbol of his pride, a blue camellia.

He stands, and can do nothing else, but before protest can come from the mayor, he picks up Lance’s last journal and presses it over his breast. He leaves, his back the only sight the mayor could see as he hopes that Sue finds her peace back in the hands of his bloodline, in the hands of a man should would have adored to meet and love as much as he could have loved her.

And, well, that old mean, no, just old and tired man is right, the end is done and cannot be rewritten. Lance is gone, murderer maybe burning in hell, and there is naught a thing Shiro can do to fix it.

But, what Shiro does not know, nor will ever know, is that from dank morning on, he took the rage of grief from that old and tired man and buried it with himself
Shiro wants breakfast. He wants that hardy heat of grits and grainy chew of toast, wants that buttery melt of biscuits and sweet tang of fresh preserves. It is better to think about food when he sits in his truck at the end of the drive way of the mayor’s land, letting time morph into a being he cannot describe.

Better to think of a meal than the deep, bottomless sorrow that he cannot seem to fill in with all the dirt around him, this gaping hole in his chest that will never be closed. He is now inducted into the town, knows their bloody history, and his rite of passage to a bonafide Gilman resident is complete.

Garland’s narration of a harrowing chronicle pounds into his head with that sardonic tone that freezes him in the driver's seat. Pyrrhic is how it all looks on the other side, when the victory flag is caught in soil-stained hands, but only one soldier remains to lift the flag high as all his comrades and his brothers lie supine in the valleys of a battlefield not theirs to have. Shiro is alone with this burden, this mildewed flag that flaps in forlorn counts in a wind of trouble, but not he has to continue.

There is a small voice that chides in insistent sibilant for him to read Lance's final words. He won’t. He can’t.

It hurts enough.

He drives, finally, when he can let go of this and keep on. It’s only just a short ride to town from here, though Main Street is still desolate. A glance towards the town clock indicates that church will conclude soon, and in the prosperity that comes with folk looking for a good Sunday lunch, Hunk will be firing up the stoves while Ezzy rushes back from Saint Michael’s to open up the diner.

Yes, he wants breakfast, and while it might made with the finesse of a man that has the perfect palette, nothing would be a full substitute for Colleen’s grits and fried ham hock that she’ll have on Tuesday. That Tuesday, he prays, will come quietly for her, for Sam… well, for everyone.

The parking lot already has a few stragglers, late wakers that didn’t make it to the eleven o’clock service, so must hang their head as they stop of homemade vanilla with a peach fried pie just as he will, but Shiro hardly cares to observe them. His eyes are instead on the tents, the few that are being folded down and put away while the rain drizzles in a sloping off. These vendors have decided to call it quits and skip out on a holy water sermon, moseying on back to where they hail from to return to life as they know it. It’s an odd scene to watch the very celebration that the town gussied up for months over now done, ended with a unpredicted rain out.
How damn fitting.

Eventually, twelve-fifteen comes around with a parking lot loaded with cars of more good church going sheep than those not, but all are eager for a piping hot meal to shake off the pessimistic weather. Ezzy pops right up to the door, turns the closed sign to open, and there comes the LeBaron into its usual spot, Alford King slipping from the driver’s side to hone in on the black Ford.

On a second glimpse of forethought, Shiro reverently hides the journal in the glove compartment before a tapping on the window draws his gaze back to an old man with a smile dampened by his uncharacteristic timidity. Shiro’s heart pangs that somehow this man has seen him crazed and flighty, and must now approach him with reasons that will not be explained.

Shiro rolls down the window a crack, watching him like a cat watching a rocker going back and forth before Alford murmurs, “come eat with me, son.”

It’s all that Shiro needs to smile back, a smidgeon of a flicker on his lips to try and settle an elder’s worries.

Inside, the diner bustles alive, and there’s a crowd to please. Ezzy stands at a table with her notepad in hand, taking down orders for drinks while Ashe is a flurry behind the counter, pouring cups of coffee and tea for the patrons before tending to her tables. They’re a hard working pair, just like their employer, and kindly, they both smile at him.

Then, as they walk to the judge’s personal booth, Shiro feels a touch on his and to see sweet Ms. Ryner sitting with her gaggle, and the questions ensue.

Is he all right? What spooked him? There was just too many people, wasn’t there? Did it get too much? Did he rest for a while? He looks pale, like the rain washed out the color of his face. He should have stayed inside, but it’s so wonderful to see him.

It’s all cyclical, the same questions over and over, repetitive, but it all resonates with the same, that they are all sorry that he placed them all in a position of not understanding what to do. Gosh, though, not his fault, he can’t help these things.

He does his best to answer, just giving them a half lie of an excuse that well, trauma is a bitch.
Trauma is a mistress that comes when its unwanted, sauntering its way into personal space before slapping the face of its target. It’s a hard hit, a blow both to the jaw and to the pride, a pain prolonged in throbs for however long the attack lasts.

It culls a tinge of sympathy from the little ladies, and Alford waits for him to finish with each person that feels obligated to stop him and remark upon him, remind him that he is a strong man, and that even strong men need time to be weak. The Lord will heal him; he just needs to give it time.

He feels their comforts, presented in wafts of vanilla and cinnamon, all sublime gestures that are to lift his spirit. Truly, they only sadden him, make the blues gloomier in tint as he carefully utilities precision of words in these fleets of conversation. It’s as if they want to make him falter, and fall to his knees to beg for help that will do him no damn good.

Alford must notice his anxiety increasing, gently touching his shoulder to thus end any further talking.

“Let’s go and sit down. A good meal will perk you right up.”

Once they sit down in Alford’s particular spot, the tension emerges apparent. However, it does not climb out from abrasion, nor does unfurl from anger or furty, and one might think otherwise an inaccurate opinion while onlooking towards the pair.

No, the tension is just self-deprecating, self-loathing, and it all spawns from the judge.

"... Why didn’t you come to me?" Alford mutters while burning scorch marks into the menu, unable to gaze up at his right hand man for a guise of reading every detail of the meals offered he knows like his own hand. Here lies the issue, how there is such a failure of communication between the two, a wall of impasse that was never there before other than the graves that were kept in the Kings’ cellar heart below, but now what was strong in their friendship is now brittle.

"I couldn’t."

Alford waits a second infinitesimal, eyes closing to hide the windows of his soul from the occupants of the diner. He is hardly a breath, hardly a noise, but a constructing of knuckles dismisses his invulnerability to the proclamation.
“Don't lie to a senile man, son. We might start believin' it.”

“I wouldn’t…” but he can’t finish, can’t let the lie out.

In turn, Alford places a hand over Shiro's wrist to squeeze lightly in understanding. "I know."

A raise of a curious brow is all that Alford requires to emit a chuckle, but it's not the same as his boisterous laugh. The noise evokes a man that that has stood at the McClain cemetery before he passes from his world to recite condolences that he wasn’t coerced to give, but spoke of them anyway. This is perhaps the image of the same man that brings his wife’s favorite flower to her gravesite so that he may in the petals of juneberries remember the grief he bears without her.

Shiro wants to tell this poor man that everything will be sunny tomorrow.

Alford coughs to clear the catch of his throat, then tells him in baritones of whiskey sweet, "I may be an ol' man with my own baggage, but I can still half-way hear. I can listen, and by God, I’m willing to listen."

The urge to tug his arm away is distinctly orange, a warning blare chirping in his ears, but Shiro keeps still, solidly there. “I don’t… need to talk, sir.”

"I know, and I can’t... say it proper. I may be a fool, but I know there’s all sorts of fancy medical lingo these days. Don’t mean much if I don’t know then for sure but," Alford confesses in their vinyl booth seat and plastic table refuge with one last nail in the coffin, hammered in by a mallet of his possession, "I can also tell you that you are loved."

There... is nothing to be said for that, no response to the cry when the chains that drag him down, river wash rattle too loud in his ears. Shiro knows he is loved, always has, knows that his family, both of blood and of his own choosing, have held him in the cradle swing of the bottoms of their hearts. To contest this is a folly, a fool’s errand to claim when the truth is there, that liar’s gold is in fact brilliant and worthy after being slipped into his palms by each one he has met.

It isn’t enough, and that what hurts the most, makes him feel so selfish that their love is not enough when Lance’s is there beyond a door into some unknown. For the love of that haunting smile, Shiro wants to walk through that door.
“… Would you do me a favor, sir?”

“Anything, Shiro. You’ve been good to me, good to this town. You’ve kept your word, so let me do something for you.”

“Tell me about your wife.”

The menu clatters mutely to the table, and blue eyes, wide and shocked, stare at him like he has seen the departed soul of his spouse perch right next to Shiro.

Alford’s smile drops entirely, his eyes darting around the diner at anything but Shiro, taking his time to calculate what has happened. He seems, however, perplexed more than off guard with offense, more confused than melancholy at such an odd request. Thus, Shiro is compelled to turn his wrist to hold Alford’s instead to lessen the blow he didn’t mean to inflict.

“It’s… an old story, son. It’ll take a long time.”

Shiro chuckles, drawing his hand away as Ezzy pops over as suffering the jealousy of a younger woman hellbent on protecting the judge is far down his list today, “I’ve got time.”

That is how Shiro spends his afternoon, and honestly, he cannot wish for more when Alford brightens up to brag about a beautiful woman that was his sweetheart, younger than him but still just as wild as a bonfire. At every bouquet and box of chocolate gifted to her, her nose wrinkled up, a sign that she was obviously a lady of finer tastes than that of the stereotypical. After she returned from college and he practicing law in full in Selma for a short while, they found a common love for racing down dirt roads in antique cars and pulling up in the drive thru for late night fast food. Then, marriage, and taking on their roles in society there in their town, raising their only daughter while Alford brought both of them a bouquet of juniberries home every Friday night.

It was love, and it was theirs, and Allura is her splitting image, all for her eyes which are her father’s blues that are endlessly summery, depthless like an afternoon sky. For all the animated chatter and recount of such an exemplary lady, Shiro thinks perchance he would like to hear about her all day.

Finally though, after hours of eating chilled food and sipping at coffee and tea while conversing of courtship and marriage of the olden days, Alford sighs, laughter dying down as he watches Shiro with the fondness of a grandfather. “I can’t tell you how good it is talk about her again. It isn’t that
I don’t, just… for someone to have never known her.”

“No, I get it. I’m glad for you, sir.”

Shiro hums around his last sip of tea before setting the glass down, finding the emptiness of it just another thing to ponder on. This is enough, he thinks, to spend this time with Alford, to let them both have this time together before Lance keeps Shiro all to himself. He opens his mouth to tell the judge how grateful he is to have met him, how lucky both him and his wife were to have known such goodness while she was alive, how much—.

“There y’all are.”

The syllables of his thanks clutter in his mouth as Allura walks up, off duty from her shift with her hands along her back to pop the joints with a grunt. Behind her is an accessory that Shiro’s heart flutters in delight over, one Keith Evans trailing up to the counter to be greeted by Hunk who gives him a friendly punch to the shoulder.

Shiro breathes out relief, alleviated in his fears that his panicked rush out of the dance had stifled them, but there they are; together, and hopefully to stay glued to each other like Judge King and his wife were while speeding down the back roads while she screams for him to go, go, go, to drive up the speed trap of Main with their hands tangled in the space between them.

Inviting herself in, Allura draws up a chair, sitting backwards while her arms cross the back to incite the memory of Matt’s bedroom, of the time where she came to warn Shiro of the house he had wanted to settle in. He wants to tease her about it, but he doesn’t. Doing so just wouldn’t feel right, not after this long, but nothing is starting to feel right anymore, like a hand presses to his back and presses up along each knob to jitter him up.

He feels disjointed, but he tries to lift the corners of his mouth all the same.

“Ah, and there’s my Lulu,” Alford croons and pats her arm, garnering a flash of a grin from his daughter before he leans in to hiss, “dare I ask what you two’ve been up to?”

“Daddy, don’t even. Been at the station, which was as boring as hell, but it’s nice to have some talkative company again. Y’know poor Kolivan more grunts than talks.” With her tease on her deputy, Allura’s smile lightens up, and is so preciously warmed over with the patch that has sewn itself into her quilted heart. From where Shiro sits, she looks so happy and at ease, like all the
puzzling over her thoughts have slid perfectly into place and nothing could bring her down from her pedestal of epiphany.

It has all fulfilled to Shiro's small aspiration that this daughter of the judge would find her other half along her arm once more, just as Keith is now, walking up to place his hands on her shoulders to listen in on the discussion of daily life and menial subjects. To an untrained eye, it would just be a static motion, but once he has come to know Keith as a friend and nearly a brother, he can see how Keith's thumbs roll circles along her shirt, fondness ripe in those strange plum eyes.

He looks at Allura like he has dived deep into the underwater grottos of a sea far from his home to draw from a sunken ship a lost chest of diamonds for him to keep, him to admire all his own. How golden it is to be a gambler here, to have rolled the dice and begged for the numbers to roll correctly so that his chance-taking on his words would pay off in due debt. Keith is there, no longer averse to be an absent existence in the glow of the sheriff that handcuffed him where he belongs.

Even Aflord seems just as emphatically pleased with the renewal of his daughter’s relationship with the cattle farmer, giving the lovers a chuckle and a wink, “you been dallyin’ the day away on tax payer dime, boy?”

“Oh, hush, daddy, please,” but Allura and Keith glance at each other to share a gaze that adheres silence where unshared words are told. They admire each other for all the secrets they’ve burrowed away in their secret garden, tended by their own hands before addressing the other two of their sudden lunch party. “We may have talked up on the radio some. Surprised we didn’t get a call with the vendors leavin’ though… no wrecks, thank goodness.”

Allura frees her hands to cross her fingers in plain sight, making Alford laugh. “My, baby girl, but that’s more revenue for the town if they get tickets due to unruly vehicular conduct! Have I taught you nothin’?”

Keith snorts a laugh in interruption, all white teeth and dimples, “I already told her to send Zephne out for a speed trap.”

“Atta boy! Hear him, Lulu? What a con man you got!”

Shiro smiles, settling back into the sticky slickness of the booth as the three chat amongst themselves the devious ways to catch speed demons that have no respect for the twenty-five to thirty-five speed limit posted on the streets. For the last hours he will spend here, already so adamant to go where he can tread on equal ground with his hand in Lance's, this is how it should
be. There in the bucolic town, where sins are buried with the black cloths of mourning for a past that can never be justified, there is such goodness of characters abound that conflate into a messy, but palatable conundrum that can only bring happiness.

Above all else, he wants them happy, wants their smiles to each other, wants all the adoration and affection that a person could have shared in all the right and proper ways. It’s all he can ask for, all he can pray for when the denouement is in his hands and there’s not a thing he can do. No, instead he will be thankful for all the gladness and the charity here, Southern hospitality in its purest state.

At the quiet that has fallen over the fourth man out, Keith swivels slowly to let the Kings sneakily devise new traps of patrols along the roads leading out of town. The glance perks Shiro up in his seat before Keith gives a small, fond smile while setting himself next to the man dressed in all black like the day he rolled into town. “Hey.”

“Hey, buddy,” and why, Keith is handsome today, a glow to him with cheekbones sore from all the grinning he’s been doing with Allura at his side again. It’s amicable and tender, how Keith’s hand trails the table for his sweetheart’s even while staring dead on elsewhere. Their fingers twine, and pride boils in Shiro’s stomach as though he fathoms to claim that he is the sole catalyst to the phoenix spark of young love continuous.

“You really okay?” Keith murmurs, voice broody with uncertainty. Shiro sighs not because his care is depleted from all the worrying, but because he doesn’t want anyone to be concerned at all. He’s okay. He promises, he is.

He’s going to be with Lance in love eternal.

“I’m fine, I swear. Just got… a little overwhelmed, is all. Cross my heart.”

“Don’t tell me hope to die.”

A pause, and there’s something swirling in his friend’s eyes, and before he can fully apprehend what has trickled southward in their tête-à-tête. Keith’s serious, deathly so, and it’s unnerving how the diner rolls on with the Sunday as it knows it when Shiro is being pinned down like this.

“It’s just a silly phrase, Keith,” Shiro lightly admonishes with a nudge of his elbow. Keith’s grunt, lightly rubbing his ribs like his friend has done considerable damage though the act was enough to placate him. “And I’m silly, aren’t I?”
“As silly as a rock,” and it’s better now, the air once charged now pacified by their personable banter. It’s slipping back into the small talk that works for them, little jokes and relevant story telling that soon has them ordering more food and even bringing Hunk in for a bit when there’s a lull in cooking.

This is it. This is all he could ask for, and Lance would want this for him though there is still the idea of his family back in Seattle, the same he has put behind him with their lives going on without him. He’s thought about it a time or two, pandered to the desire of phoning his sisters or his mother just to relish their voices, just to remedy any distresses that might encircle his health or position. He should…

Shiro won’t, and he knows this, and this is where his good day commences to break away, to dry up in a desert sun and crack as he realizes that his cowardice is a fallacy and his family will bear the brunt of his actions.

Still, he mends himself into the people that have imparted charming affinity, and skies darken from their dismal gray to a churning blackness, lightning in the distance.

Lance will be waiting, getting colder with each passing second in his tomb of currents and river mud. It may not be tonight, or even another year for Lance to fade, but Shiro won’t risk it, will not let him go without going beforehand. To live one breath of a millisecond in a life knowing Lance is not there now— it’s a slow death already.

With the excuse of needing to grab a few things before nightfall, he tries to ease from the booth when Allura’s hand catches his elbow.

“Y’know, Auntie Haggy called me to ask about you. Think you gotta moment to go calm an old woman’s weak heart? ”

Yes. He can do that. Haggy’s been nothing but gracious, if not a little too wild and too flirty in all her well to do gestures of food and requiring kisses.

Alford and Keith stand in unison while Ezzy and Ashe roll silverware at the counter and Hunk tallies out the cash register, humming to the radio while coins clink in the plastic tray. Shiro nods to the girls with a raise of his hand, unable to really envelope his heart with the courage to tell them some endearment of goodbye.
Rather, the judge comes up to him with a clap on the broad line of his shoulder to draw him in for a hearty embrace, the same that Shiro’s father gave him before he boarded the plane to the war overseas.

It’s almost too intimate in the memory, morphing into a crux that’ll do Shiro in, have him cave with a sob on his lips. He can’t help himself, can’t stop it even he if yelled, clenching his fists into the back of that off-white jacket he’s seen nearly every day since he came to rural America.

“You’ve made me so proud,” Alford warmly croons in his ear, and there’s a trace of tears along the expanses of vernal comfort his voice imbibes, “I feel like you’re needin’ to hear that.”

“I do,” Shiro whispers, shaking just like he did on the military base in the arms of his own father, “I really do.”

Another clap, this time on his back, and Alford draws away for what will be the last time yet does not notice the conflict within his handpicked right hand. No, no suspicion belies the twinkle in those blue orbs, flooded with a wisdom and a kindness that no one alive could ever purchase.

“G’night, son. See you when the sun rises.”

Like an empty trench, Shiro is quiet with the aftermath of a calamity that has not even occurred, but still tolls like canon fire in his soul when he sees one more smile from the judge before the man that gave him so much walks out.

It’s like the sun will never rise again when Shiro is left, when the decision becomes harder to grit in his teeth. If Alford will be so hard, he cannot imagine— he cannot encompass how hard letting go Keith will be.

Keith is a brother, a soulmate in this town when their eyes met in this very diner, this very place where he staggered in after being caught by Judge King on the porch steps of a house that promised a mystery with a sight and a bellow that he could not ignore. From the first day, Keith has been noticeably just fire, a flame that had to be tempered, and who could blame the young man that has had to work around this loss of a mother and a father? The truth of it is that Keith is a good man, raised right by a loving mother that wanted all the treasures and adventures for him to seize. Adversity in its own right is an adventure, a journey of self that hones character and whets resilience. If not for it, Shiro wonders if Keith would be who he is.
“I gotta go make sure the cows are in,” Keith sighs, running fingers through his hair as they exit the diner, “y’know how they get if they’re in the main pasture and it’s stormin’ like the devil’s dancin’.”

“Don’t I?” Shiro remarks slowly, a lack of heart in his voice that even he can hear, but Keith doesn’t notice as his hands slip into his jean pockets. Gray eyes that reflect the churning clouds above their heads observes the younger man, Shiro unable to look away as he thinks that Keith will make a handsome groom for Allura on their wedding day.

Or, well, he hopes so, if he doesn’t wear those damn cowboy boots.

“I think I’m gonna start goin’ back on the fence and see if anything needs patchin’ up before winter. Think you wanna learn?”

A rough swallow submerges a cry that threatens to peak from his sore throat, nearly dismantling the patient swathing of his own bruised resolve; he nods. “Yeah, I think that’s a plan.”

Keith nods in return, but doesn’t turn to leave with a wave of his hand as is his common departure, but stands stock still while his features corrugate with the flow of conflicting emotions. There is first uncertainty, then doubt, and then a little joy. The timid provocation of a friendly handshake prompts Shiro’s to grasp the hand given, before jerking Keith close in a brotherly clinch, free arm long the breadth of the other’s shoulders.

“I’m happy for you,” Shiro promulgates with the words airy and deep into Keith’s hair where a scent of whiskey and hay settle. He’s scared, damn scared to let go now when he found so much to believe in within this man that tucked in his wings just to survive, just to do what he thought was the right thing to do when his freedom was swept away by an appalling crime of family. Keith is resilient, persistent if only just to spit in the face of his naysayers.

On this evening, he can rest with the knowledge that Keith doesn’t have to fight, doesn’t have to claw or rake his nails into whatever little he’s taken when he has the world back in his hands in the little ways. It may not be with a resurrection of his mother or the regretful return of his father, but it’s at least through Allura a semblance of familiar serenity might temper that conflagration within Keith Evans.

Shiro wasn’t present for the halcyon days, and he supposes that him being present for those to follow will change nothing.
For a minute or three, Keith says nothing, but then when he relinquishes a sigh, Shiro grounding the earth beneath him firm up a little more, rouse him more into a shell to hide his woes, and just let them have this for this tie.

“See you tomorrow, buddy,” Keith chuckles, soon moving away, heels of his boots scuffing up the asphalt to repeat in monotonous repetition as Shiro watches his friend climb into his pick up with a wave of a mock salute.

He can’t talk, can’t do anything— he just stands there, stock still, as he turns every bit as brittle as thin ice.

And then, Keith, too, is gone, tires slick on the wet road while droplets prance behind the rubber of a red truck heading back to its farm.

He doesn’t even register the click of Allura’s boots behind him, a hand on his shoulder to bring him back to his position in the diner parking lot while his hair starts to sag with the misting of rain.

“C’mon, Auntie’s waiting,” she reminds him, tapping her fingertips along the skin where the joint is, “and you know she hates to wait too long for her sweetie pie.”

Allura winks and slips away, and Shiro can’t help but fake a grin that substitutes his forlorn with wavering glee. There’s no question that she wants him to comply, bounce right into his truck to head out to Haggy’s.

He should move and do so before he receives a fussing, but he makes a semi-step before rounds back to the diner door to tug it open.

“Hunk!”

“Yeah, man?” Hunk pops his head out from the kitchen, bandana starting to stain with sweat while the dishwasher clunks loud with the day’s dirty dishes.

“… If you don’t ask Shay out tonight, I’m coming to kick your ass tomorrow!”
Ezzy shrills high and shocked, banging the door of the kitchen against Hunk’s back while the larger man stares deadpan at Shiro, every bit of his face deep rosy with a blush. “Did’ya hear that, boss man!? He’s gonna do it! About time someone threatened your ass! I bet ten bucks he’s gonna whoop you if you ain’t got Miss Shay on your arm tomorrow morning when he comes in for red eye!”

From her post at the cups and glasses, Ashe blinks over at a motionless Hunk that has yet to have a breakdown, shrugging at him, “it’s time, I think.”

Hunk exasperates with a jumble of incoherent blithering and a fumble of the dish towel in his sturdy hands. He’s caught between three pairs of eyes, and his time is short when Allura blows the horn outside, yelling for Shiro to come on.

“Well?” Shiro presses, fist along the door handle quivering with an expected disagreement and maybe even Hunk, though he’s just too nice to do it, decking him for even putting him in such a tight spot so suddenly.

Ezzy dances up on her tiptoes to glissade so that Hunk has a full vision of her face as she hums, tapping his chin, “well? What do you say, boss man? You gonna fight?”

Hunk huffs, a wolf of a notion that he must be put in such indecisiveness when the heart wants what it wants, but sometimes what is wanted it not necessarily what’s right. He’s so shattered by the expectation of rejection when Shiro is aware that there are risks that need to be taken, risks that are so brutal that it may lead to death itself.

Surely Hunk is not meant for that, but even by some alternative means that Shay says ‘no,’ he is an embodiment of kindness and acceptance and it will not fester away, that rejection that will not occur. At a turtle’s pace, though, the chef slumps against the kitchen door, and resigns himself to fate as directed by Shiro.

“Okay, yeah, fine, I’ll do it, but—! No biscuits for you tomorrow if I make a fool of myself in front of her, you hear me?”

“Loud and clear, but I promise; you won’t,” Shiro says, meaning every ounce of his statement though that hole digs itself a little wider in his chest.
The diner door shuts, and another chapter does, too.

—

Haggy sits in the rocking chair on her porch as her niece and the nice fellow she likes to dote on with flirtations on the silly side pull up the dusty drive way.

The pale hour of the sun glows with its last lights through the apertures of gray clouds, and after shutting the door to his truck, he senses something far in the trees, a distant noise that settles over the property with a mournful tune.

As Allura greets her aunt, the predictable tap of a gnarled fingers taps along Haggy’s age-soft cheek, “put some sugar right here, baby, you’ve done deserve this one.”

Shiro chuckles even though the humor is a little lost within him, a kiss right where he’s been commanded to do so given as he always does. When he stands in full to inch back, the chair squeaks along the rusted nails securing the shabby thing together like a testament to a master of carpentry, maybe even Jesus himself building the rocker just for the old woman gossiped about for her hoodoo ways.

Knowing better than to ever assume that she’s anything but the cantankerous elderly lady that would rather cause trouble for the town in mischief, Shiro trains his eye on her like she’s brought him out here to impart some grand wisdom that she’s hoarded away in the cupboards for the decades she has walked the lands.

The only noise in the woods along her shanty house flaps feathers within the branches, and it comes closer like a fox coming up on a chicken pen.

“All y’all hear that?” the elder mutters with a maternal air that almost seems out of place in the rustling winds of a faint dusk, “y’know that sound, baby girl. Tell me what is it.”

Allura glances off into the woods, eyes creased as she assess what her auntie means; it’s a lonely sound, too mellow to be a vicious predator hungering for a meal, too sad not to be grieving. All the same, Shiro feels a need to wonder what animal could possibly be of importance amongst the oaks, what being out just yards away would want to sound so sad when it’s so free.

It reminds him of the little mourning dove that comes and goes on the power line near the house, always on the side where the McClain graves are to sing lonesome coos to fill in the quiet that
Shiro once lived entirely. Eerie as it is in the morning dew, Shiro wonders what his patchwork life would be like without the song drifting him back into the world of the woken when he finally swept out the oppression that seemingly only permitted him to cross the threshold.

It’s just that, a dove in a mating coo or whatever, and Shiro, compelled to inform Allura of his guess, chances a moment askance to her, but he stops short.

Allura King is a woman king if there ever was one, a young sheriff of the Southern town of Gilman, Alabama that accepts no shit, though she will say she is just doing her job. Her countenance is one that never falters, never dulls, concealing any minute fractures with a mask of confidence and of justice. She reveals the delicate pulp of her heart with her friends and her family, a willing hand and a hard voice of opinion when need be. She’s just like Keith, a wall of iron that hides her weaknesses and her longings.

The horror on her face in the wake of a revelation only known to Hagaret and Allura King is the greatest tragedy to ever beset upon him, coincidentally fitting for the occasion that heralds in his last day on this mortal plane.

If Shiro had not known of the circumstances behind Allura’s raising, he would say that she looks like she’s been told that her mother has died. Heartbreaking, really, to see the sorrow inexpressible that overtakes her countenance.

It’s just a mourning dove, though, isn’t it?

“Owl… that’s a damn horned owl,” the young woman whispers to her kinfolk, something chained down and sinking in her voice while she goes down to the first step of the porch. It’s like she’s dragged down to remember her circumstances, to remind her that she is still a motherless daughter that thought she found her place in the small town she loved so dearly. Allura seems so small, damn tiny in her uniform, and it’s sickening to see her shed her shell.

Behind them, Allura’s confirmation has caused a ruckus of laughter that echoes down the dirt road leading away from the house. Haggy smacks her knee, doubled over with the tremors of her fit, appearing to be more in pain than in exuberance otherwise. Shiro, were he not used to this already, would have been worried for the poor woman’s sanity. Rather, now, he’s more worried about what this all entails because it’s just an owl, isn’t it?

What’s this all have to do with him?
“Same damn owl that hoo’ed and hoo’ed for three nights out your bedroom window, baby girl! Thought it was gonna be you, you sickly thing, your daddy and I thought that fever was gonna burn you up like hellfire… but there it is! Back for another soul, same as your poor mama’s.”

Then her beady eyes, yellowed with age and tired with life’s tribulations, follows a figurative thread of a line from Allura to Shiro, hollow smile still there on her thin lips. The old hoodoo woman goes mute then, not even taking a breath, no inhale or exhale to remind the witnesses amongst her presence that she is still alive.

She looks terrifying— no, terrified.

“Guess your departed mama’s soul just wasn’t enough.”

With a bone-chilling scrape of the wood along the porch, the rocker falls back to hit the wall of the house as the old woman finds her way closer to Shiro. She’s devastated, her eyes reflecting all the woes he feels when the end in sight as she reaches up to cup his jaw.

“Baby, let me let you in on a little secret, hear? Don’t go to the river. Don’t you dare. I’ve been feeling that water on you this whole time, and I’m tellin’ you, sweetie, I’m tellin’ you here before God that it may smell sweet, and it may taste sweeter, but that river is a ghost that only takes.”

Allura steps in, touching her aunt’s hands to ease them down, “Auntie, don’t scare him off, he’s already had a fright.”

“Lulu, baby girl, you gotta let an old maid have her words in, or you and I will be—,” Haggy stops, eyes closing tight before she takes her hands back from her niece’s to hold Shiro’s. Her touch is calming, but with her warnings come a since of bitter counter in him that starts to annoy him— he shouldn’t disrespect her, especially in front of her own kin, but Haggy doesn’t know at all— she doesn’t know how much in love he is.

“I thought it was— I thought it wasn’t what it was ‘cause you’ve got a soul that’s black, and that’s good. Souls, honey, they’ve got colors, and yours is— was strong, but now it’s all grievin’ for something in that river. Don’t go to it,” Haggy begs, all nonsense now with wide eyes in the terror that she might not get through to him, that she won’t change his mind, that she would fucking dare think she could mean more to him than Lance ever did. “Don’t go to the singin’ no matter how pretty it sounds…!”
He, himself, is scared, but out of her irrational ramblings of the paranoid and of the spiritual. She’s an old bat on a stir-winder, but she’s been kind, and it’s all that he has to keep from the snap breaking to make him run away like the night prior.

“Shiro…” is Allura, a voice of reason within the befuddled mess that her aunt has created, though Shiro understands it on a level that he doesn’t want to see is of his own greed.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Auntie Haggy, but I promise, I’m fine. I’ve never even been to the river?”

Haggy sighs, eyes closing another time as her hands fall away, “just promise me that tonight, you’ll stay inside and sleep. You got another brew for tea, yeah? Drink it, and sleep. Lords knows it does us all some good.”

“I will,” he lies, right through his teeth like a gentleman talking to the senile, kissing her hair just to rub sugar on the wound for the flies to come to, “I promise I’ll be right up in bed.”

The tension ebbs from Allura as she gives her best smile between them after checking her phone for a split second, “ah, it’s gettin’ late… and I promised Keith if he came out for dinner…”

“Ah, that’s— you helped that along, you know, sweet thing,” Haggy remarks, her smile just as thoughtless as her sight as she tilts her head skyward to see him.

Shiro allows her to keep his hands as long as she needs because poor thing, for all the annoyance that he felt, she’s just an old lady of the supernatural that thrives on superstitions. Old owls can’t hoot and predict a death, no more than Shiro can with a bundle of sticks dropped onto the ground. It’ll kick up some dust, or mud in this case, but he could just say something will happen, and it might and it might not. He isn’t a fortune teller, no better than Haggy is.

He hopes.

“I did what you asked.” And he did, if really he was just an encourager with fluffy words of support that sounded great when spoken when he had Keith or Allura on their own to verbally smack some sense into them. Haggy wanted them put back there they belonged, like she knew that ways of love and two halves of gold coins that are better to be melded into one. Granted, they are individuals accepted the circumstances of their decisions and dealt with the blows that came with dignity and with fire.
They had to grow up a little more, Shiro thinks, before they were perfect, all flaws but maturity to batter down the trenches for whatever storm would bluster right through.

Haggy hums tiredly, moving to find the seat of her rocker with some help from the younger ones on her porch before she rocks again, the curves of the wood squeaking to and fro. Her eyes never leave Shiro before her lids close shut. “I pray you listen to an old crazy woman ’cause I know good seeds sprout from you.”

Shiro kisses her forehead as the elder King tiredly sits in her rocking chair, his farewell silence on his lips in blatant disregard.

He wants to tell her that the river is just a place, just an insignificant component of geography that carved its path into the rock and the soil to find its beloved sea. There’s thousands of rivers, all with their own varied elements that might make some unique for more than others, but the end is the same with all exceptions; they are sea bound. Yes, there’s the cool water during horrendous humid summers, and there’s good fishing to be had there on the river side, but they’re all lackluster in what counts to Shiro.

The river is where Lance died, so he will follow, letting all his blessing drip behind him as he goes.

“Sorry about Auntie… she gets a little frantic when she’s…” Allura trails off when they have helped the woman of topic into her house for the night, when Shiro is worried about the bugs and the wilder things that could approach a helpless lady, “she’s just… it’s an old superstition, I reckon.”

“She’s worried,” Shiro dismisses with a lean of his hip against her Crown Vic, his skin starting the itch and tense with the hours that have loomed closer to evening’s temporary demise, “but both of you have nothing to worry over.”

Allura chuckles, rattling her head back and forth as her eyes regard him with a funny tick, “it’s ‘y’all.’ Good Lord, Keith is right, you ain’t ever gonna un-citify.”

With a suck of his teeth, Shiro plays a pouting face with a poke of his bottom lip and a droop of his broad shoulders, “but isn’t that a part of my West Coast charm?”
“Hell no, it ain’t,” but they laugh, and it’s easy, better than Hagaret King staring at a man on death row by his own means to plead for him to go back, come back to them. Shiro regards how carefree Allura seems, how feather-light her step is with her shield down for her ally, for her friend.

“Just too different, huh? I’ll remember that,” he teases, and he will, keep it within his breast as he will all the others to speak of to Lance, more stories to listen to, more stories to tell with all the drawls of words and rolls of consonants. It’s always a treat, though done with a little playfulness rather than some putrid flavor of superiority, to hear Lance laugh when Shiro attempts to speak like with Southern palette.

With a hmm that muffles through her closed lips, the sheriff waits, testing the smoke between them before leaning up to wrap her arms around his neck and hide her face along his neck.

“Being just too different is a joy for us, and if you hadn’t help push us, well…”

Here will he regard Allura with what is their conclusion, a little caring moment that will comfort her perhaps while he prays that she laughs for all her years spent on earth, never letting the sorrows besmear the iridescence around her. It’s all painted windows, of all the hues available to the human eyes, for her to slowly glue together and fill the open sill with her most treasured glass.

He may be the black glass, obsidian fractals with jagged sides that may not be affixed in unison with the others, but maybe, she might, with all the hues at her pleasure, use him, too.

She tightens her arms, elbows popping from the tenacity which keeps them locked together before she finally steps away to cough into her hand, “sorry, I just— I want to thank you.”

Shiro musters an easy smile to reconcile days to come, “you two did all the work.”

“Don’t humble yourself, Shiro,” Allura warns, that cutting gaze returning with her sword back in her hand to fell whomever speaks lowly of those she adores, even if it’s their own words. She’s intent that he receives some credit, and maybe he feels due it if just to lie down in the waters and know that there is true happiness found in life when his is in death.

“I won’t, but you can’t keep your man waiting, so go on,” and as he did with Haggy, he kisses Allura’s forehead, a gesture that she isn’t used to, and makes her think with a crease of her frown.
“Shiro? What’s all this friendliness for?”

“Nothing— just happy for you two, for everyone,” and he’s in timbers of truth when the Holt twins are jittering about in a dorm room while Matt’s new roommate probably reels in how over his head he is. Sam and Colleen will help decorate the sparse half of Matt’s room with their own zeal, in wonderment that their son will be adorned in crimson red and stark white and Pidge in vibrant orange and battle blue.

Then, there’s Alford, alone but not lonely, an old man in his homely abode that has the warmth that come with his plethora of knick knacks that line the shelves, objects of his travels and pictures of his friends, his family, but most especially his dear departed wife. He is visited by friends and citizens, all thankful and kind to him just as the judge has nothing but adoration and courage to give. Just like his sister, he’s got a little tick off about him in the best of manners, an ability to be lively when there’s a door of light with an angel behind it, patiently waiting its turn.

Hunk might have sucked up his shy fidgets, emblazoned with the courage of a lion’s mane to trounce right over to Shay who’s shop is closed on Sundays, but she’s come by just to bring the flowers out for some rain. He’ll catch her while the winds sweep through town, nearly blowing her umbrella away— Ezzy hollering out terms of endearing support as Hunk fumbles with his affections for a round-cheek girl with sunshine as bright as his.

Shiro titters secretly to himself at the dreamy image of rainbow ponytails whipping in a whoop of ‘about damn time’ when the pawl clips into place, and she’s laughing and asking why it took Hunk so long.

Lastly, Keith is probably on his way to Allura’s now, still a little timid on the next step, but it will be like putting on a favorite shirt after laundry day; a little tight on the first hour of wear, but over time, it’ll fit all loose and right in the all the places it counts. His fingers tap at the steering wheel to the classic country blasting from the near antique radio while he zips down the bends and curves to a house of one sheriff.

“If you’re happy, then we’re happy, Shiro, and that’s how it oughta be,” Allura says gently before leaning back to ruffle his hair, “and that’s how it’s gonna stay, too!”

It would be that way, it really would, but he’s torn up inside, the scarf ends in tatters after all his tying up for the day. For a quintessential moment, he thought, surely he could drift his ghosts down the river, let them haunt the banks until they reach the outer roots to sink into the sea, forgotten if only in the influence they claimed over him. Living here, unwinding and unfolding to dig his spirit into the red clay that old house was built on, could lead to years of mostly happiness.
“Come to me.”

But, oh, he cannot let Lance lay in a boat of the could bes and why nots to float away with only a little lantern to guide him back to a home of shorelines and seashells, his resting place to be an oceanic sepulcher. Not alone, not without Shiro lying in the boat next to him, their hands locked in an eternity of promises.

“It sure is, Lulu,” Shiro mutters with a finality, using her nickname to smother any thoughts of trouble that might surround him as he goes to leave. He should, now sooner than later. He should let go of his last rope that anchors the boat to the pier that will always hold him complacent before he pulls a one-eighty and has a second thought that would put his love for Lance in detriment.

While he is reluctant, she holds him close again with a cutesy grunt as though she’s using all her strength to hug him tight. Pressing his face into her hair, he sighs into it, unable to pull away for a minute. Shiro wants to thrive in this parting just as long as he can, saying goodbye to his little sisters vicariously through Allura then.

He’s just damn sorry.

“G’night, Shiro,” is singsong that threatens to wake the torment that splinters his ribs and leaves him without breath following a jingle of keys clinking in the silence and a giggle like honeysuckle dawns, “go get a good night’s sleep before you’re worked like an ox tomorrow.”

“G… Good night,” and he’s robotic, a mechanical skeleton of ungreased joints that screech for oil with every foot that paces to the truck. It’s gratifying to hear the hinges protest just his own body is as he drives off, leaving Allura to turn out behind him the opposite way.

A blink of his eyes, and she’s dipped down hill towards the way to her own house, and the breath is slammed from him after her brake lights vanish in his rear view mirror.

He has to pull off the road as the attack crests, the scratch of needing heavier breaths dragging down his throat as he suddenly gulps for air, panting hard and quick. Banging his forehead against the top of the steering wheel, he yells as loud and as coarse as his sore throat allows with the throbs from his melt down last night. This sorrow is consuming, and he knows, he tells himself in derelict rationale, that if he just were a better man that could let go and let be.

“You could be with me forever.”
Then, it’s over with a wash of cold that drapes over the back of his neck in a tender sentiment of a kiss of a clandestine affair. Carrying on, he sits up in the seat, hands over the wheel to head back into town on his way to the house.

As the gloam of summer thunderclaps and thunder booms across the horizon, Shiro parks in the gas station. It’s a snatch of an impulse strategy, but it’ll do, as there is a meager yet eclectic selection of items available in the gas station that attributes to his errand list.

The push of the glass door with posters of church events and warnings against solicitation and illegal sale of tobacco and alcohol has Shiro be the only customer standing the linoleum lights. The cashier regards him quietly as he flips the page of his hunting magazine, “good evenin’.”

“Same to you,” Shiro grumbles evenly, his eyes scouring for the first instrument to the phase of his planning.

He cannot leave the house alone to be left as some hallow mausoleum to be tainted by others that will surely find a home within its walls. The thought of a thief of property traipsing in to sweep out the cobwebs and dust the banisters after he is gone would threaten to decay what happened in that bedroom upstairs.

He wants it all left as it should, or not at all, a sacellum for that soft bliss that was theirs; he loved Lance as he was loved in return, and for that desire would bloom. It is an insanity that he went as long as he did, lying to himself that this could last and be his alone, but preserve it, he must, every memory encased in ashes or in dimness.

Lance danced with Shiro in the parlor while they sang to each other in candlelight gleams, the only prying flames that would always speak not, and furthermore, while laying side by side, needy fingers snuck into he crack of crystalline hearts. There, they sowed the seedlings of bluebells and black dahlias, a garden of their own within marble and gravel.

The house cannot stand as a keepsake for a love hidden in attic alcoves and in the written word of a young man's life in well loved pages. It would be a sin to do so, this place of holy in love alone to be sold to another hand that would sully what Lance and he had.

Shiro makes his purchase just seconds later, a fire red gas can that is as integral as the simple lighter he picks up from the assorted kiosk on the register counter. The fluid sloshes satisfyingly in the translucent plastic held in the lines of his palm, a symbol of sparks, of burning flame.

It will be a good night for a burn, the earth wet and rain brewing in the cotton curls of ominous
clouds. To his advantage it will be as the last thing he wants is for fire to erupt in a wildfire, one that would threaten the woods and anyone or anything inhabiting within the trees. Thace and Ulaz might be on a hunt, vanishing specters in their own rights, only embellishing their presence with a hiss of a bow string drawing back for the kill.

“Kinda late to be mowin’ lawns, son?” the cashier remarks in a humorless joke, Shiro staring at the man’s camouflaged hat for some way to keep looking dead on.

“I have a generator in case the power goes out,” and Shiro is nearly proud of himself for how smooth the lie slithers right now, “doesn’t hurt to be too careful.”

With the canister of gasoline rattling in the bed of the Ford, his eyes scan the roads, gloomy and listless, while the radio announcer dictates that the weather service has issued warnings for storms and a possible tornado watch to come. Shiro snorts at how it all is coincidental, that the climate has shifted to make tonight too perfect to his act of committing life in whole to Lance’s hands.

Sue is not on the road, and after Shiro walks into the house with the gas can, wind picking up to sway along the oaks and the flowers in a tumultuous frolic, he realizes that she is missing entirely, in presence and in sight, in all the weblike vines that have kept her here. Susannah McClain, through just a point and a plea, has maybe, truly, found rest with her keepsake back in the possession of a rightful Garland, her grandson.

Lance’s sister, camellia of the town, plucked from her roots too soon, surely walks the trails with Zarend Garland on the other side.

Before he starts, he heads straight upstairs, slow and deliberate as he basks in the thudding of his shoes in an empty house. No floating skirts or disenchanted whispers greet him on the second floor, but he would barely recognize the distraction as his mind is focused on his bedside table. Beside the desk is the box of journals that he has so painstakingly read through what seems to be dozens of times, and he knows— those will burn first.

In reverent kiss to the cover, Shiro sets the Lance’s last journal, procured only hours before from the desk of Mayor Garland, on the very peak of the stack. That all the books are there, each written journal now a completed set again, it a finality that he can stare at all he wants, but that will just delay him further. With a tear away of his gaze to step to the table next to his cot, fingers wrapping around the knob to pull out the drawer, Lance’s photograph, his most cherished treasure, waiting for him.

This goes with him, and he kisses the picture also, a sigh against the filmy paper that whispers all
the vows that are for this darling of his. Into his pocket the photo goes until he hefts up the journals, tramping downstairs now that everything is in his peculiar order. He has made his goodbyes, his stifled farewells in just that small way to keep everyone with their own dome of felicity, and now he is at the end of the story.

Popping the cap, he snarls his nose once the heavy odor of octane hits his olfactory, but stirs the offense right out to labor upon this last chore. He starts in the parlor, dousing the journals with gasoline before trialing acrid unleaded through the corners of the room before walking to the kitchen and back to the staircase, upstairs getting it the bottom of the can. Heat and smoke rise, just as flames do, so he’s horrifically assured in his process while stepping over the liquid path, hoping his soles are clean.

Once he is back downstairs, he prevails over the drenched cardboard holding odes to days that might not have been kinder, but were definitely simpler. He nearly busts right then, the dam tactless as he picks up a strewn envelope from the scant pile of mail he has received to flick the lighter alight to burn the corner.

Then, he drops the paper into the box, the fire is ablaze, rushing up in orange and yellow bright to blind him while the papers and covers char, all left of his Lance in a world where he cannot act as guardian combusting into the beginnings of an inferno.

How sad that everything must not be blue, that a house fire has no other colors than that of rubies and of gold, and it’s already so hot and getting hotter as he walks away to the kitchen, the fire creeping behind to lick up the gasoline.

He steps out in the weather-trodden darkness, embedding into his mind house with fire glowing through the windows and with smoke and soot churning calamitous in the crannies and the corners.

Soon, there is nothing but the crackle and pops of burning wood, the hisses and whispers of fire licking along the fractured beams and dusty memories that flicker in his eyes; it’s done, it’s all done, and there is nothing to do now but to go.

Shiro is quiet, letting the sight of the his last home turn to ash and dust, to become the after thoughts of a sleepy Southern town that can’t seem to have let it go, so Shiro has brought the sin onto his own shoulders, let the smoke creep into his nostrils and smolder in his lungs. Figures it would take an outsider, figures it would take someone with the deepest ties to the old haunt even despite it being only a matter of months since this lost man’s unsuspected arrival.

For a weak moment, he thinks of the mayor, of old Zarend and the man’s old face, withered and
scarred with whatever time has deemed for him to endure, of how his sweet grandmother, who’s grave marker rests in the reeds and brushes just to Shiro’s right, now can watch her last home burn to the red dirt from wherever she is.

Whatever spirituality or Godliness that the Church of Saint Michael instilled in Shiro just prays that Sue does not feel the lashes of fire, truly in sleeplessness of another life far from Gilman, where she can dream, as Shiro did, of a better moment far away from the river beds and cotton fields.

And, yet, here they both will lie dead.

It’s the damnedest thing, Shiro ponders as the fire reaches the patched over roof, to turn around and go down that path to the Alabama. It’s a few miles down, a dead path yawning like a snake in tribulation over its meal precariously coming ever closer.

Lance walked this trail many times to dip into the lake, stepped along the dirt with a sure gait that the world was such a grand and fantastical place, a place where the honeysuckles smell sweet in a town with no secrets. God, but secrets are the burden of towns, he’s found, finally giving up one of the last shreds of his sanity to the fire. For his soul, Shiro, in all his tiredness, in all his burdened love lorn, will give his very last to the water, the giver and taker of life in these parts.

Outside of the McClain house’s fiery end, outside of the snaps and roars, the woods are still despite the storm, even eerily so, like the life in it all has flown away with the black smoke to meld into the overcast sky above. There are no stars, a sad thing, as Shiro always hoped they’d be his last sight in those naive days. Now, he wants another final sight, wants to see blue eyes as his vision goes, as he feels his heartbeat soak through and sink.

Randomly, or rather, a bit too methodically, he picks up rocks, carefully rolls them in his hands to test their weight, their usefulness. It might not be the best of intentions, might not even be the route to a fleeting end, but suffering is all Shiro has done since some God awful entity decided to rip away his arm, his comrades, and his mind before dropping him here for a good last while, so why not just suffer until the end where its all purged with water?

God might live in the church, but He didn’t reside in the sands of the Middle East, and He damn doesn’t reside in these woods, amongst the oaks and the moss that shift inauspicious in the abrupt storm squalls to guide this marked man walk down in their surreptitious glens.

_Down this way_, the breeze sings, dark and sweet like molasses, sinister in its cadence as it sings and sings for him, _down to the river, boy, down to the river you go._
Each step is easier, like every inch eases another piece of the world on his shoulder behind him on the path. It’s invigorating, in a way, like he’s heading for a baptism, the preacher just wading in the currents and in the shallows for the next soul saved up ahead.

The next breath Shiro takes is one that hitches in his throat, a slam to his head that there is no preacher, nothing up ahead but cold water and fathomless depths that lead to an empty, lonely end.

Maybe there is a God in these trees, along the hollers, as in the next blink in the dark shapes that barely indicate the reality around him, there’s a shock of light—lightning, he figures, but without the uproarious beat of thunder along its spindly back—that brightens void to show a glimpse of blue.

Blue before him in the black, worried and broken and unsure.

“L…” Shiro exhales, unsure to believe himself and his own eyes because damn it all, he’s mad, fucking insane in the eyes of everyone he’s encountered since he woke up in the military hospital with a stump of an arm and with a head full of nightmares. Praying like the dirty dog he is in these times, he jerks forward, begs anything, anyone, please let that be him.

“Lance?” he asks the wind, like it would give him an answer, some kind of closure, by God.

It’s so quiet then, not a sound of the river, not a sound of the summer chirps of the birds and the locusts, but then when the noise hits his ears, Shiro is a goner, knows it for a fact that he won’t be turning back around for town, won’t be even giving life a second thought.

“Shiro?”

There’s the briefness of a cold touch along his hand, and it’s all synapses and longing, but it’s Lance, holy hell, that hand is Lance’s, tender and true. A flash of light is the glorious confirmation when the streaks of lightning branch along bubbling storm clouds above them—there’s Lance.

Shiro cannot find it in himself to yield, to hinder any sense of rational thought because there’s the form of a boy who died ages ago standing before him, yet here he is, finally in the waking hours where Shiro can truly, undeniably believe that this boy is his.
“Oh, God, Lance,” Shiro murmurs in his last senses of desperation against the rising winds, reaching forward to cup that sharp jawline and press their lips together— he can feel it, the cold and the brittleness of death, but there beneath it all is the hint of honey and sea breeze. In his own ears, he swears he hears the gentle chinks of seashell charms in the distance, a testament to a life once known to the sea.

In the blackness, without the brief instances of lightning and the distant rumbles of thunder, Shiro cannot fully comprehend the thing that now rests against him, the thing he cradles so adoringly in his arms. Tucking his nose against the threads of hair, he can imagine it so plainly, so vividly like in the dim reveries with lamp lights and simpering love songs, like in the picture kept in a denim pocket.

The thing he holds is mum, not even making the slightest of inhales as they stand there in the sweeps of the oncoming heat storm, summer rearing its ugly head with thunderheads and hot wisps. It’s chilling, how Lance doesn’t even need to breathe, doesn’t have to worry with such living burdens that Shiro does (not much longer though, not long at all), doesn’t even have to worry with portraying the sense of a sigh or a gasp.

“Lance,” he says again because it’s starting to feel unreal, like something isn’t exactly all right and valid, like the lacking of heart beat and rushing blood is suddenly not acceptable in reality Shiro’s mental state has woven.

Then, there, right there is a hitch of a word, lightning glints again to show those eyes gazing up at him… sallow and broken and blue.

Hands slide up to his chest, cold and clammy even through his shirt, and for a second, Shiro might dread that there will be nails in the cotton, nails ripping through the cotton blend to hot flesh, nails that will dig and dig for his heart to pull it out, bending and breaking ribs in the process. Snap, each rib would go, snap, snap until the animal, this maybe-monster eats his heart, this heart that only beats for a young man that died too soon, so tragically.

“Shiro,” is the call, the wayward distant mention of his name that rings in his ears, but it’s enough, the adoration flooding through his joints and his veins; it’s his Lance, and Shiro won’t doubt this ever again.

Until the next hiss against thunder’s drum states, “go back.”

The statement is a shock, a near offensive slap, Shiro jerking back from Lance even as the shadows of this lacuna blur and groan. “Go back?” he asks with conviction, a rising sense of hot something
that simply isn’t good in his throat, “you’re telling me to go back?!”

A strike of light; Lance is forlorn, his once smile now a frown accompanied by a crease in his brow that seems endless, pathetically so.

“Go back, Shiro. Go back home.”

Then it’s hot, too damn hot, hotter than the judge’s office in the afternoon with only the fans blowing for relief, hotter than Hunk’s apple fritters fresh from the fryer, hotter than Lance ever made him feel, but it is rage, eternally smoldering like the fire that consumes the house a mile or so away now.

“There isn’t a home anymore, Lance! You told me— dammit, Lance, it’s gone! I burned it! It’s fucking gone!”

The wind is his answer, somber as it twists over his limbs in a feeble attempt to cool down the fury that sends his blood pressure higher, and buries his hopes lower. Lance, though, just shakes his head in the next flash of light, eyes closed and head hanging low. “Go home to your mama and your papa, to your sisters and your friends ’cause you know you should and you know I’m… not worth this.”

Something snaps. Something horrible and dark snaps, the last twine keeping Shiro in control, keeping him in constant control just breaks with nothing to soothe the wound, not to calm his coming out to the river because Lance, his sweet baby, asked him to. Then, though, the last of the worn twine curls, ties itself into beds of flesh and sears into his very soul.

Shiro has not allowed himself to be this angry since he threw a heavy glass against the wall of his family home, broke it into a million satisfying pieces as he screamed, screamed hoarse and wet as he told them all they’d never get their Takashi back, that the sorry son of a bitch was dead, died when that IED went off with the rest of the bastard’s platoon. It was enough to quell the beast in its rampage to see his mother’s horrified, pale-sunken face watch with a quivering hand to her lips. Then, in maternal condolence, he had heard in the static crescendo, “you will always be my moon.”

His mother isn’t here to lure this beast down to its haunches this time and raise her son from his lunar ponds, he thinks in a second of rational thought, back in Seattle with a care for a son of a bitch that never fucking told her he was at least okay.
“You’re worth everything, fuck it! You’re worth this! Dammit, Lance,” it’s a feat in itself to scream above the soughs of wind and shudders of trees, but he manages, slams his hands on those shoulders to grip tight and shake the whole while, “I just want to be with you!”

It’s all the beast now, this something unnatural that gnars fierce and claws deep, the Shiro that formed after he woke up weeks after the ambush with an arm that was not his own, a fucking gift from the dirt bags that only wished half-assed condolences and expected Shiro to walk away and be perfectly okay.

Fuck being okay, fuck knowing his brothers in arms were dead, blown to pieces, blood and flesh along the sand scape and scattered in messy trails. Fuck being okay when he went home to his parents for leave, for some kind of attempt at rehabilitation because he was flying off the handle, nothing like the solider that the world expected him to be. He was supposed to be Takashi Shirogane, decorated soldier that excelled in all he did, that was considered the most reliable and the most loyal.

Fuck their sympathy, the beast howls, fuck it all.

“I’m not leaving you, I’m not fucking leaving you alone, and I’m going! I’m going, dammit!” the beasts clamors inside, thick and oily, ripping the threads away, all the strings snap, snap, snap, cut into a million shreds for the sake of insanity, for the will to continue on that path to be with a dead boy. When nothing meets him in resistance or in acceptance, Shiro feels pitiful, furious, the beast in such disarray that he knows it’ll consume, cannibalize itself because didn’t Lance say he loved him? Didn’t he say they could be together?

Desperate is the feeling, lovesick is another, but Lance not even damn whimpered is bothersome all in itself. Granted, he’s dead, but the bluebell his hands nearly attempt to tear in two should at least give him something, anything, even if it’s a prayer for a damned soul.

“You promised, Lance… didn’t you?”

Another brief sense of daytime, Lance’s face contorted almost unrecognizable in waterlogged decay and lost youth. God, though, he’s still so beautiful, every bit as terrifying as he really should be, is in a way as a seducer in every sense of the word, but Shiro is a goner, so lost on this false buoyancy that he shakes, trembles like a frightened child, and whispers, “didn’t you?”

“… I’m going with you,” is what Lance says, a cold touch along Shiro’s knuckles, the knuckles of his still-there hand, the one that he managed to keep despite the war and his own ‘best’ intentions, “it’s… bad as bad gets, being alone when it’s all done, so I’m going with you.”
Defeated and appeased, the massive disaster of a beast suddenly falls over, dead as the hammer that put the last nail in this lost man’s coffin. In its stead blooms forth the storm, blustering and forceful, a warning from nature herself to bid a young man that’s just a little lost and a little scared back home, ‘go back home to your mama, kid.’

(‘She misses you, you know, as you imagine, boy, looks at your picture everyday and cries, wonders what she did wrong and how she should have helped you though she was as good a mama as any.’)

Shiro’s fingers weave along Lance’s, presses their segments tight as his thumb rubs along the decayed flesh that isn’t there, but has substance all the same, giving him a burden of solemn comfort. It reminds him that the storm is simply a storm, a mass like a beast that can seem as tepid as a stream, but beyond is the promise of fathomless eternity, as sure as a shiny dollar in a hardworking boy’s hand.

“Be mine?” Shiro asks, leaning to where he believes he will find those lips again, those lips he dreamt of over and over in silly trysts and naive fantasies. Sin is a funny thing, isn’t it, when Lance kisses back, leaving a man empty inside, yet craving more.

“Be yours,” is the whisper of a macabre hymn along the other’s lips once their last kiss is broken, leaving the shambles of a ramshackle wall to stop a man from meeting his maker along the trail as Shiro, their hands still together, leads them down, down the trail towards the river in where the lovers will find rest in the finality that is each other’s arms.

In their hands, in the loss spaces that nothing can fill, not even love, is that promise that is as certain as the first frost in the winter, is as certain as the deer that will meet her end to the end of a hunter’s rifle come the first day of the season, and is that there is only one thing more trusting than love, and that’s death creeping hand along the throat, a slow tug and a fated choke.

It’s the shivers of oaks that bid the little makeshift precession onward, bending and wailing like old maids with their kerchiefs while the two walk. The oaks, they sing as the choirs of St. Michael’s Church laud with their disarraying tones and timbers, oh, Lord, ain’t that enough to worry my sweet mind, oh Lord, help.

Lance’s hand, clasped tightly along the plains of his own, starts to tug away while the river below rushes with the rains of the storm from upriver. Shiro only thinks for a moment that Lance has shifted away, disappeared, to fade into he umbra of formless shapes that enshroud his prone stance.
If he watches closer, Shiro will see it, the lines of fingers will breach the surface of the river sweep, and they beckon, droplets trickling down in welcome for Shiro to join, to press into the waters for a baptism so that the spirit may leave to wrap around Lance.

Maybe the river will take them to the sea so that the salt brine and the sands may sink into their souls, one no longer bound to the corpulent and the other missing long ago, and they can be one.

*Come home to me...*

He jumps, and the river overcomes him with open arms that are cloaked in a veil of deception for the water is damn cold around him, nothing like the warmth he thought would embalm him.

The void around him is blurry and muddy, and slowly eats at his vision and his senses. Water fills his lungs, body craving the air fathoms above the surface as he lurks down. The water is cold, so damn cold and getting colder, and it is also unforgiving like a winter bite, sharp and sure.

Not even at the bottom, minutes, seconds, time is gone, pounding with each ending heart beat in his ears because he’s alone and he’s sinking, but it’s okay—there’s blue on the other side, there’s warm arms and sweet smiles beyond that lifeless veil that waits for him like a lonesome dove sitting on the power lines above Main Street, cooing for its departed mate to come home, *come home*.

There’s blue to be unearthed like hidden treasures in the muck and the grime, and he’s heading down, down, *down*, to the muck of sightless bottom to rest in his lonely grave, to find out that there are darker things in the world than one’s own mind.

One more gulp, one more needless struggle against the water. His vision blurs, suffers from the splotch of blackness that bleed from drop to drop.

Nothing comes to mind in its fullness, his cognition misfiring over the fragments of his life, rewinding the reel back to random instances: birthdays, ball games, first dates, the war. He wants to go, not recall the guilt that he will bury along his grave, not recollect the regrets that will lie bare long after his skin rots and his bones mold. His lungs, God, they burn, burn like the hellfire that he’s feared in subconscious requiems, and please, just let the pain, this self-destruction of his own functions finally bring about cessation so he can *go*.

*Lance.*
Blue. One last swarm of blue that numbs him, pacifies the squirming fire.

Then, black.

*Lance*...

Then, nothing.

His corpse never floats.

It’s two a.m., and her nerves are alight, a spark trembling along her skin, a forlorn howl in her ears.

Allura has only grieved once before in a time that she wishes so desperately to forget, a time that nearly crippled her, yet warped her ideas of a family and of love in ways that, she hopes, forged her anew.

It had been dark, the weather churning a brew of a storm that howled and threatened with lightning strikes that streaked in creeping patterns in the window of her kitchen. Allura, strange as she was, kept her house in the dark during the thunderstorms, as though she can hide herself away from the plucking hands of fate that might come knocking on her door.

Keith is upstairs, asleep in her bed after—well. She should go back to him, but there something that ties her to her place, that keeps her standing in front of her lonesome kitchen sink, bare of any dirty dishes from a dinner they picked up from Hunk’s diner with a sheepish glance under his knowing, proud gaze.

It had been years, ever since their Senior year, that they had even hunkered down in that rust
bucket of a vehicle and just talked. It was debilitating, yet freeing all the same; her heart flew into
the clouds like doves migrating to the south for the winter, leaving her body there to deal with the
renewal of what was theirs.

Something is coming, she mutters into the confines of her secret mind, something horrible is
coming and she already had the clues in her hand, given to her as evidence so freely by the culprit
that it’s nearly reprehensible to believe a crime could be solved so easily. Yet, here she is, her eyes
gazing out past her backyard towards Oak Avenue, a niggling something whispering over and over,
gone, it’s gone.

She does not even jump with the ringing of her phone over the silence of her kitchen, a steeled
resignation that act itself is done, over, and now she will be left with the pieces of victims that she
cannot find, pieces of someone that she came to care for in her own way and will not ever see
again.

Walking slowly towards the landline, Allura stares at the receiver, an off-white symbol of the
moment she will learn the worst news of her life. It’s the same as the day her mother died, snatched
away from her family like a predator’s meal, engulfed in a metal cage that sunk her to the depths of
the river rushing high.

The old stairs creak, a for sure sign that she is not alone anymore, Keith rubbing at his eyes and
wearing only his jeans, the waistband hanging low. Prior to this, she would have found an appeal in
the sight, of a farming man well toned and nicely tanned— though Keith burns like a lobster
sweltering in a pot— standing in her kitchen.

However, she is the sheriff Gilman, a badge that she wears with great pride and hope despite the
minuscule nature of her town in comparison to the crime dramas that she finds a guilty pleasure in.
She is the first of the line, but this call is one that she cannot fathom being the first to receive.

This is, as it always is regardless her struggle, the end of the line.

“‘Lulu?’ Keith grumbles, the idleness of sleep soaking through his voice as he moves closer to her,
a worry along his brow, “what’re up for? Who’s callin’?”

Dare she answer? The phone, it rings and it rings, a damned lullaby of a modern siren that will drag
her down another path of mourning once more, lead her down some way that is shadowed by the
dark forms she cannot fight. But, the end is inevitable, just like the detectives of her murder
mystery novels always find, and she cannot stop the unrelenting force of time though she pray she
might.
Her hand finds the phone, picks the receiver off the cradle to bring it to her ear—.

Her old Aunt Haggy has been crying, a crackle like fire in her voice and a sniff that just breaks her heart.

“The river took him, Lulu… poor boy’s departed us. Now… go wake up that daddy of yours.”

—

“A mermaid found a swimming lad,  
    Picked him up for her own,  
    Pressed her body to his body,  
    Laughed; and plunging down  
    Forgot in cruel happiness  
    That even lovers drown.”

— WB Yeats

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