Out of the Desert

by rosemaryandtime

Summary

“He’d have an easier time of it if there were somebody to mentor him,” says the General. He looks at Shiro sidelong. “I understand you’ll be stationed here for the next few years.”

Shiro thinks of the flinch, and he knows already there's only one answer he can make.

"What can I do?"

Five years before Voltron, three years before Kerberos, Shiro finds Keith, and Keith finds a home.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It’s a long road between being chosen for the Kerberos mission and launch day, filled with trainings, briefings, more trainings, setbacks and recoveries, adjustments of the mission parameters as new data comes in, and Shiro’s personal hell, meet-and-greets.

It’s not so bad when it’s the three of them. He can step back and let Matt and the Commander give an enthusiastic brief about their project to an interested audience and only chime in when somebody has a question related to piloting, but their schedules simply do not allow for that, not every time.

And this time it’s the Garrison, his alma mater and the facility that will be working with them most closely in preparation for the launch.

He has to dry the sweat off his palms before he shakes the General’s hand, and he hopes nobody can tell how his gut is flip-flopping and his heart is racing. There are familiar faces in the crowd and not all of them are friendly. He catches Iverson looking at him resentfully from one end of a row of new recruits, and he swallows. But he’s had a lot of practice at this over the last two months and he gives the crowd an easy smile when the General introduces him. The applause when he takes the podium contains a great many whoops and cheers, and no boos at all.

It’s downhill coasting from there. He’s given the talk a dozen times already, and the questions are nothing he can’t answer thoroughly and well. There’s a couple smartasses, as always, but that’s nothing after sharing living space with Matt for the last eight weeks. And then it’s over, and there’s only the gauntlet of handshaking to get through.

He meets a couple dozen cadets, afterwards, has test scores and simulation results recited to him proudly. He listens to each, praises when there’s a pause, offers advice when it’s requested: it’s somehow both rewarding and incredibly draining. The General keeps him moving, briskly efficient, and doesn’t let any one student monopolize their time.

“This young man here is our youngest recruit by nearly two years,” he says in Shiro’s ear, steering him to the last student. “Cadet Keith Kogane, meet Captain Takashi Shirogane.”

And there’s suddenly a small boy with messy black hair in front of him, looking up at him with huge gray eyes. He can’t be more than eleven or twelve, and his Garrison uniform is too big on him by at least a full size.

“Hey,” Shiro greets him, smiling, but he has a brief mental stutter of confusion. He’s too young, he’s too young for the Garrison, what's he doing here?

The boy gives him a salute, and then quickly ducks his head, his hair falling in his face. It might actually be the cutest thing Shiro’s ever seen.

“Cadet Kogane came to us by way of the Outreach program,” the General says.

“No kidding?” asks Shiro. “Me too!” When I was in junior high, he silently amends.

But it works: the boy is watching him again from under his fringe. Shiro grins at him. “You must have worked very hard to be chosen to be here,” he says seriously. “I bet your parents are so proud.”
The General clears his throat and moves to stand behind the boy. “Keith spent some time in the foster system before he got here,” he says, clapping a hand on the boy’s shoulder. Shiro doesn’t miss the flinch. “His parents have both passed.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that,” says Shiro after a pause. Keith is staring down at his shoes, still shrinking under the General’s hand, gone closed-off and visibly uncomfortable. “They would be very proud of you, Keith.”

Keith doesn’t look up, and Shiro’s stomach churns with unease. The Garrison can be incredibly isolating even for somebody surrounded by others of their own age. Keith has nobody.

“Do you like it here?” he asks softly, trying to meet the boy’s eyes.

Keith startles a little bit and looks up at him, assessing and wary. But then his eyes slip past Shiro’s shoulder briefly and he ducks his head again, nodding. Shiro glances back casually and gets just a glimpse of Iverson heading out the door.

The General claps Keith’s shoulder again, not unkindly, and says, “Go rejoin your squad, cadet.”

Keith salutes again and goes immediately. Shiro straightens, watching him go, and looks back at the General. Some of his concern must show on his face, because the man lifts his shoulders and says, “It’s not ideal, but we didn’t want to risk losing him in the foster system shuffle. His test results are really unbelievable for his age.”

“I see,” says Shiro, trying to keep the censure out of his voice.

“He’s had some trouble settling in here,” says the General. "He'd have an easier time of it if there were somebody to mentor him.” He looks at Shiro sidelong. “I understand you’ll be stationed here for the next few years.”

“Until launch, yes, sir.”

“Well,” says the General. “You’ll be busy, of course, but you’ve always been an asset with the younger cadets…”

Shiro thinks of the flinch, and he knows already there's only one answer he can make.

"What can I do?" he asks.

Despite his best intentions, it’s almost two weeks later before Shiro can get away to check on Keith. A new batch of transmissions has come back from the Fearless, the probe most recently dispatched to Kerberos. The region where they had planned to land is far less stable than previous scans had suggested, and for a very stressful nine days it is questionable whether they will be able to proceed with the launch at all. But the probe keeps scanning, and a new site is tentatively selected, and everybody breathes again.

And Shiro remembers the little boy with the uniform that doesn’t fit.

He’s walking down the familiar halls twenty minutes later, Keith Kogane’s schedule up on the screen of his tablet. It’s evening, suppretime, a little after Keith’s scheduled meal block, and the sergeant on duty has him in the rec room for his free hour. He turns down the corridor, but pauses at the sound of running ahead.
Keith hurtles around the corner. He shies to the side before he can collide with Shiro, but it’s a near thing. His eyes are wild and startled as he sizes Shiro up.

“Keith?” Shiro asks, showing his empty hands. “You all right, buddy?”

And then the rest of the pounding footsteps round the corner, two boys and a girl older than Keith, and Shiro understands immediately. He takes a quick step forward and catches Keith with an arm around his shoulders just as the boy turns to run, and he gives the newcomers a big smile with teeth in it. “Hi!” he says brightly.

They clatter to a confused halt and fall into line. “Sir!” they shout in almost-unison.

“I was just looking for my friend, but you found him for me,” Shiro continues pleasantly, keenly aware of Keith tense and trembling under his arm. “Thanks for your help! I’ll have your names, please.”

They are Paschel, Beck, and Ricketts, and they flee guiltily the moment they are dismissed. Shiro watches them go, then squeezes Keith’s shoulder and kneels to get a good look at him.

“They give you trouble often?” he asks quietly.

But the boy pulls away, pale and suspicious. There’s a pause where Shiro can see him trying to understand, but then he whirls on the ball of one foot and bolts down the hallway.

Shiro sighs, unsurprised, and gets back to his feet. He considers going after him for a moment, then decides against it. Pushing in here will not help.

He looks down at the document on the tablet, and his eyes are drawn to the name in the right-hand corner. Keith’s officer-in-charge is Commander Martin Iverson, so that’s cool.

He sighs again and turns toward the offices.

Iverson isn’t pleased to see him. “Captain,” he growls, and only waves a hand dismissively to release Shiro to stand at ease. “What can I do for you?”

“It’s about one of the cadets in your unit, sir,” Shiro says, keeping his voice carefully respectful. It won’t do Keith any favors if he sours the encounter without even accomplishing anything. “Kogane?”


Shiro hesitates a beat, but keeps going. “I think he’s having some trouble with the other cadets, sir. I came across him earlier and he seemed about five seconds from a three-on-one fight.”

“Probably got mouthy again,” Iverson says, unconcerned, setting down a file in front of him and opening it. Keith’s picture is in the front, attached by a paperclip, glaring openly at the camera. “It’s been a problem. One of these days he’ll learn.”

Shiro presses his lips together. The reaction doesn’t surprise him, but he doesn’t like it either. “Bullying in your unit doesn’t bother you, sir?” he asks, coldly polite.

Iverson looks at him for a beat, and laughs. “Shirogane, I got upwards of two hundred kids in this
facility to look after at any given time, in addition to the training programs I oversee. You’re lucky I
even knew who you were talking about. This little shit,” he smacks Keith’s file with the back of his
hand, “if there's an incident, you'd better believe he's behind it. He gets in trouble constantly for
mouthing off to instructors, starting fights, it’s all in here. Bullying isn't the root problem here, trust
me.”

Shiro frowns, trying to reconcile this picture with the wild-eyed cadet fleeing desperately down the
hallway. “Would you send me a digital copy?” he asks, looking at the file upside-down. “I’d like to
look into this more closely, if you don’t mind.”

Iverson sits back in his chair, his head cocked, and narrows his eyes. “We got a problem here,
Shirogane?”

Shiro goes still for a moment. Then he sits back as well, nonthreatening, unchallenging; he lifts his
shoulders and spreads his empty hands. “Another pair of eyes on it can’t hurt, sir.”

“Mm,” says Iverson. He leans forward over his desk. “How about you attend to your business and
I’ll attend to mine. I don’t recall asking you to butt in here.”

Shiro draws a breath. *Stand down,* his military training warns, but there’s a little boy who flinches…

He looks down for a moment.

"General Beck asked me a couple weeks ago to look into it," he says evenly. "I can go to him
instead if you'd be more comfortable with that, sir."

Iverson stares back at him, one eye narrowed, and lets out a short sharp breath through his nose. “I’d
say you’ve gotten cocky, captain, but you always were a self-righteous sumbitch.” He closes Keith’s
file and puts it away, closing the drawer with a final snick. “I’ve heard nothing from the General.”

Shiro takes another deep breath. He smiles mildly and gets to his feet. "Thank you for your valuable
time, sir." He waits pointedly at perfect attention to be dismissed.

Iverson clears his desk and makes to ignore him, but Shiro is good at this game, and eventually the
commander makes a slight banishing motion with one hand.

Shiro clicks his heels crisply and goes.

It takes another week to get in to see the General, but once he does he's in and out in a quarter hour
with full access to Kogane's digital file. He's also got codes for the hallway, classroom, mess hall,
and rec room surveillance cameras, which he thinks is probably overkill, but might come in handy.

He spends the rest of his night perched on a stool at the kitchen island of the apartment he shares
with the Holts, going through Keith's file, watching simulation footage and recordings of past
altercations, getting a feel for the kid. He finds a bright intellect, a biting sense of humor, a highly
subjective view on rules and instructions.

And as uneasy as he is with the Garrison's acquisition of a child of Keith's age, he begins to
understand why they did it, because the kid can fly.

Sam emerges from his office after a half hour or so of this, aiming for the fridge and rubbing the back
of his neck. "What's this you're watching?" he asks, dumping leftover Chinese into a bowl. He sets
the microwave and wanders over to watch over Shiro's shoulder.
"Footage from this kid's file," answered Shiro, glancing back at the commander. "His name's Keith, he's... ahh, he's really young, they pulled him out of foster care for the pilot program. The General asked me to think about mentoring him while we're waiting for launch, he's... he hasn't got anybody."

"So you said you would," murmurs Sam, unsurprised, watching the screen. "Jesus, how old is he?"

"Just turned twelve," says Shiro, checking on the file. "Been here six months."

Sam shakes his head and goes to get his leftovers. "That's too young. That's way too young, what are they thinking?"

"That's what I said," said Shiro. "Anyway I met him a few weeks ago at the thing, and he's... I don't know, I get a feeling from him. He's-- I think he's scared of adults. I'm worried he won't have anybody to talk to if he gets hurt."

"Enter Shiro?" asks Sam, quirking an eyebrow.

"Shut up, sir," Shiro says easily. He looks back at his laptop, where the screen shows a simulation of a murky yellow landscape. "I just-- the General says he's been having a hard time. I want to..."

"Round the bend at your ten," says somebody out of view of the camera, talking Keith through the simulation. "The pick-up point is about fourteen miles away. You need to maintain a speed of 85 knots or they'll run out of oxygen before you get there."

Sam comes back around the island to watch, and they fall silent.

On the screen, the ship slows and hesitates. Then it dives down into a rocky valley instead of following the TA's prompts.

"Cadet Kogane," says the TA wearily. "Let's stick to the route, please."

"I can get there faster this way," Keith says. "If they're in trouble, fast is good, right?"

"Getting there fast is good, but if you take this route you might not get there at all."

"I can do it," Keith insists. "I did it last week in practice."

"Go back to the route, cadet."

"No," says Keith, and Shiro hears a bullish note of obstinance in his voice. "If I go back now they'll run out of oxygen and I'll fail it."

The ship leaps forward, dodging and weaving: it's not a particularly difficult route he's chosen, but it's certainly beyond the first year's curriculum, and Keith is nearly two years younger than his peers in the class.

There's a sigh from the TA, and then a moment later a yelp from Keith. On the screen, the ship drifts into an outcropping of rock and explodes into a bright computer-generated fireball. Keith's microphone is picking up an indistinct tirade from somebody in the simulator with him--Shiro thinks it's Iverson.

"I could have done it!" Keith says. He sounds outraged. "You didn't let me finish, I could have--"

Iverson is bellowing now, loud enough that Keith's microphone is picking up his words. "...drill is not about whether or not you could have gotten through, Kogane, it's about whether or not you can take a damn order when it's given!"
"What's the point of following orders if everybody dies!"

There's a brief silence.

"Watch your tone with me, cadet. You failed the drill. Out of the pod."

"I didn't fail it, you shut off my controls!"

There's another silence, one in which Shiro can hear a quick intake of breath.

"You wanna try that one again, cadet?"

"I'm sorry, sir."

"Get out of here, Kogane. Report to my office after class."

"Yes, sir."

The clip ends.

"Hm," Shiro says.

Sam makes a soft noise of agreement. "I've thought for a long time that we push cadets into a military mindset too early here," he says absently.

Shiro isn't sure he agrees entirely. But he doesn't like what he's seeing here: innovation should be rewarded and encouraged at this stage, not crushed down in favor of making an obedient soldier. He understands, at least, why Iverson doesn't seem to like Keith.

"He doesn't seem skittish," says Sam thoughtfully.

"This was... four, almost five months ago," answers Shiro, checking the document. "He got-- oh."

"What?" asks Sam, looking to see.

"He got a week in his bunk for that," murmurs Shiro. "That's too long for a twelve-year-old..."

Sam is nodding in agreement, reaching to play the next file. They watch a series of brief clips quietly, gathering together a picture of how things have gone for Keith: there are very few instructors in the Garrison with patience for his mouth. And, as the adults treat him coldly, his fellow students take it as permission to do the same.

The next is an event log of an incident in the rec room. There are four against Keith, wearing raggy homemade masks: three facing the camera crowd Keith back against the foosball table while the fourth runs to the other side to jab him sharply in the back and sides with the table rods.

Sam makes a hissing sound and shifts his weight. Shiro watches, his heart in his throat, as Keith stiffens up with pain and pushes frantically away. He watches the older students take him by the arms and force him to turn and face the pummeling. There's no audio from the rec room camera, but Shiro can see Keith begging. He watches as a badly timed struggle aligns with a particularly brutal jab, and Keith goes limp, bleeding from his forehead.

The four scatter, leaving Keith folded up on the floor like a discarded toy.

The recording ends there.
"Shit," murmurs Sam. He sounds as sick as Shiro feels. "Teach the kid to throw a punch, at least, will you?"

Shiro has to take a minute. There’s a document attached to the video with the full incident report, but his heart is pounding and he can’t catch his breath. He gets up instead, makes a circuit of the kitchen, gets a glass of water. Sam watches him and claps a hand gently on his shoulder when he returns.

"All right," breathes Shiro. Then he opens the document.

There are pictures. A skinny torso, front and back, mottled with bruises; a pallid forehead with black hair pulled back, the skin marked by a bruise-rimmed gash. The notes are succinct: Moderate concuss. Fract. rib. There’s a signed slip confirming that he spent the night in the med ward; a note releasing him from his classes the following day. There’s nothing to confirm the assailants were caught.

Shiro clicks out of the event log and documentation, shaken. He looks at the computer for a moment, and then he gathers himself and opens the next log.

Sam squeezes his shoulder again. "I'm glad you're on the case," he says quietly. "He needs somebody in his corner."

Shiro takes a deep breath and nods. "I appreciate the support, sir."

"I'll be in the office if you need to talk later," says Sam.

Something eases in Shiro's chest. "Thank you, sir," he says quietly, lowering his head.

A warm hand grips his nape briefly, and then Sam is padding back down the hall to the office, and Shiro is alone.

He takes another deep breath and plunges back in.

There is a definite shift after the incident at the foosball table. Keith seems to be opening his mouth less; there are long stretches of time with no incidents tagged insubordination or sass. Surveillance clips of fights show him pulling into himself, keeping his head down, defending instead of striking out. Shiro begins to catch glimpses of the withdrawn cadet he met three weeks ago, and his heart aches at the change.

The names of the three he met in the hall the week before surface a few times in the reports, but only a few, and never in any major role.

The frequency of incidents drops sharply, only two in the last two months. Shiro relaxes a little to see this: Keith is getting into fewer fights. But he clicks on the first, and his heart twists.

There’s no fight reported. There’s no incident. There’s only pictures of more bruises and a note that Keith claimed that he had fallen out of bed, but Shiro can see cruel human intent in the marks on his body. There’s older injuries there alongside the new ones, and Shiro wonders how long he’d been hiding them.

The last incident contains two video files. The first is grainy mess hall footage of what looks like a full-on food fight. It’s hard to find Keith in the chaos, and Shiro watches for a few minutes before concluding that he must have just been present somewhere, and so it was included in his file, even if he was not directly involved. The other video file is corrupted. He prods at it a little, tries a few easy fixes, then gives up and closes his laptop. He slides off the stool, and wanders to the window, processing. He can see the top of some of the school buildings from here, and he stares at them
Abruptly, he turns around and opens his laptop again, pulling up the camera-viewing app. He hasn’t tried this yet, and there’s a small suspicious feeling in the back of his mind that it won’t actually work, but he types in the camera’s address, and there it is. The code the General gave him works on the first try, and the mess hall blinks into monochromal view on his screen. It’s not quite 5:45, Keith isn’t due to sit down for another minute or so, but he zooms in on the food line, scanning quickly.

And there he is, smaller than the rest, holding his tray and keeping his head down. As Shiro watches, the mess sergeant puts the whistle to her lips and blows. The cadets at the tables get up, line up to return their trays, and leave the hall. The cadets in line replace them. Another inaudible blast from the whistle, and they begin eating.

Mind made up, Shiro grabs his jacket and leaves the apartment.

Chapter End Notes

Shiro is 19, Keith is 12, Pidge will (probably) not be in this fic but she’s 8 or 9, and I’m gonna say Matt is 16 or 17.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

In which Shiro brings sandwiches and an idea.

Kellings on his left and Lourd on his right aren’t bad guys, not all on their own, but they’re also not the sort to borrow trouble. When Paschel reaches casually across the table to take Keith’s hashbrown wedge, they only watch with placid, unperturbed eyes that make Keith think viciously of cows.

Paschel takes a bite of the wedge, grinning open-mouthed at Keith while she chews. Keith keeps his eyes down and doesn’t react. There’s no way to win here: if he kicks up a fuss they’ll both be written up, and then he’ll have to be on his guard until Paschel or her friends have gotten their retribution. If he keeps quiet, all he loses is whichever portion of his meal Paschel decides to take.

He keeps quiet. He’s getting good at that.

Paschel takes his milk next, and Keith can’t quite stop a worried flicker of his eyes after the carton. It’s still all right, he decides, calculating the amount of food left on his tray. He won’t be quite as full at bedtime, but he’ll be full enough to get to sleep, and then there will be breakfast. For now, he eats strategically, doing his best to make the rest of his food look unappealing to Paschel. He sticks his fork in everything; he accidentally gets his bread soggy with gravy from the meat patty. He reaches for the fruit cup to open and contaminate somehow, but Paschel reaches out calmly and takes that too.

Keith’s spine stiffens, and he feels his face get hot. Paschel watches him, knowing and smug, and peels the foil back. It’s just dessert, Keith thinks. It’s not real food. It doesn’t make that much of a difference. He lowers his head again. It’s harder this time, and the helplessness sits bitterly.

He finishes the meat and bread and scoops up the remaining gravy in his spoon. It sits there, brown and unappetizing and a little jiggly with coagulated fat. He stares down at it, picturing it sliding down Paschel’s face. It would be so easy, he can almost hear the splat…

A hand comes down on his shoulder. He starts guiltily and the spoon lands with a clatter. “Go ahead and grab your stuff, cadet,” says the sergeant behind him. “They need you in the office.”

Keith’s gut plummets. Faces all up and down the table have turned to look at him, some with curiosity or pity, some with undisguised delight. His cheeks are burning, and his heart pounds sick and heavy in his chest. Feeling numb, he obediently steps over the bench and picks up his tray, unable to look anybody in the eye.

The sergeant waits for him to return his tray, then leads him out the door. Keith follows her, feeling curiously removed from himself. He’ll go back to the foster home, he supposes. Or a new one, maybe; the last one had been glad enough to be rid of him. Or he could run away, instead. There’s a gas station down the road, he remembers passing it on the bus on the way in. He could break in at night and get some food and water, then go east. There’s trees east.

They’re passing the turn to Commander Iverson’s office. Keith turns his head to look down the corridor, then looks back up at the back of the sergeant’s head. Maybe she forgot where it was?
Keith isn’t about to tell her. She’ll realize soon, and they’ll turn around. But there’s no hint of hesitation or uncertainty in the sergeant’s stride, and Keith’s heart begins to pound again. They’re going somewhere worse, maybe; they’re going straight to the General. He’s going to be punished before they throw him out.

They stop outside an empty office room. The window is open and a light is on inside, and there’s a young man with black hair in civilian clothes sitting on—not at—the desk. He’s reading a tablet, a paper bag next to him. Keith can’t see his face, his back is to the window, but he seems familiar. The sergeant leads him past the window to the door and raps on it briskly. “Here he is, Captain,” she says when the door hisses open, and gestures for Keith to go through.

But Keith can’t move, and there’s an odd rushing noise in his ears. The officer propels him gently forward with a hand between his shoulderblades, and he’s inside the room before he realizes it. The tile under his feet is white, speckled with mica and glittering slightly in the harsh artificial light. He thinks he might throw up.

“Thank you, Sergeant Burns, I appreciate it,” says the young man, standing now. “You can go back to what you were doing, I’ll bring him back to you in an hour or so.”

Keith feels the sergeant salute behind him, the hand slipping off his back. Then the door hisses shut, and they’re alone. He risks a quick look up.

“Hey, Keith,” says Captain Takashi Shirogane, grinning.

Keith’s mouth opens, but before he can even think what to ask, the captain has turned around and grabbed the paper bag, stowing the tablet away. “Come on, let’s get out of here,” he says, moving toward the door. “We got some time before it’s dark and it’s beautiful out.”

Keith turns in place to keep him in view, hopelessly bewildered. “What,” he tries to ask, but nothing comes out.

“I brought Jack-in-the-Box,” the captain is saying. He’s got his hand in front of the door to keep it open for Keith, so he numbly steps through, and then he’s walking after his hero down the deserted corridor. “I know you just came from supper, but. I don’t know about you but I never felt like I got enough food in this place. I don’t know what you like, but I figured a burger and fries would be pretty safe. Later we’ll talk milkshake flavors.”

Keith listens to him talk, trying to make sense of everything. His whole body has gone tense with the confusion, and he clenches his jaw to stop his teeth from chattering. He’s walking behind and a step to the right of the captain, like he should, but Shirogane glances back at him, gives a little crooked half-smile, and doubles back deliberately so they’re walking side-by-side.

“You got any place in particular you like to walk?” asks Shirogane, opening the door. The warm evening sunlight washes over them, brilliant gold and red after the pale cold light of the Garrison. “Keith?”

Keith realizes, panicking, that some response is necessary. He shakes his head quickly.

The captain has paused, still looking at him, and Keith feels his shoulders going stiff and anxious. Attention from grown-ups is not a good thing. Attention in general is not a good thing, but grown-ups are dangerous. He watches the captain’s body language from the corner of his eye, and flinches slightly when the man sighs.

“You, Keith, I’m sorry,” he says, softer, and Keith is so surprised by this that he looks up. Shirogane is
looking back at him with a complicated expression: remorse, and something gentle and sorrowful that Keith doesn’t know what to do with. “I should have given you some warning, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I’m not scared,” says Keith automatically.

Shirogane smiles, but it doesn’t go all the way to his eyes. He takes a half-step back, looking out over the desert, and shades his eyes. “There’s a good flat spot up a little bit past those rocks,” he says, pointing. “It’s got a nice view of the valley, especially this time of day. Let’s go sit there, and we can talk and eat, okay?”

Keith nods mutely and starts after him.

“You’re not in trouble, by the way,” Shirogane adds, glancing back at him. “Nothing like that, nothing bad. There’s not a ‘but’ attached to that either.”

The path is rocky and takes most of Keith’s concentration, but he asks, “I’m not-- I’m not expelled?”

“No?” says Shirogane. He sounds startled. “Of course not. Why would you be expelled?”

Keith falters a little bit, confused. The last talk with Commander Iverson is still fresh in his mind, and the fear has been too constant to easily dismiss. “I don’t know.”

They’re quiet for a while. Keith gets the feeling that Shirogane is taking an easier route for him, a suspicion that is confirmed when the captain takes two big steps up a steep slope to a little ledge, then turns around and reaches down to help Keith up.

“I can do it,” Keith says, his pride slightly stung. Tone, his mind shouts at him in Iverson’s voice, and he looks quickly at Shirogane’s face.

But the captain doesn’t seem angry. “Course, sorry,” he answers agreeably and withdraws his hand, straightening. “I didn’t mean to imply otherwise.”

He turns politely away to look ahead as Keith struggles up the slope. It’s harder than he expected, but he’s only panting a little when he gets to the top. Shirogane asks, “Ready?” and continues on when Keith nods.

The going is easier after the slope, and Keith stares at Shirogane’s back as they go. He’s never known adults to apologize to kids, or officers to cadets, but Shirogane has done it twice in ten minutes. Without even stopping to think, or acting like it was a big deal.

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The going is easier after the slope, and Keith stares at Shirogane’s back as they go. He’s never known adults to apologize to kids, or officers to cadets, but Shirogane has done it twice in ten minutes. Without even stopping to think, or acting like it was a big deal.

The path curves through the rocks, and the valley opens up before them, and Keith forgets to breathe.

Sunlight fills the valley, softened and caught by the brush and low cactus that grow where loose, sandy soil has collected. Saguaro stand like sentinels in stark backlit relief, their spines glowing, insects buzzing around their blooms. Keith can just make out the glitter of the town, several miles away.

He realizes, startling slightly, that Shirogane has stopped too and is standing quietly next to him. He looks up, guarded, but the captain is only looking out over the valley as he did, smiling in genuine pleasure. It’s a nice smile, Keith thinks, and is unprepared when it’s turned full on him.

“I was hoping we’d get here for this,” says Shirogane quietly. “What do you think?”

"I was hoping we’d get here for this," says Shirogane quietly. "What do you think?"
Keith doesn’t know what to say, so he looks out over the glowing valley again.

The captain lets out a soft sigh after a moment and turns away. Keith doesn’t want to move, but he tears his eyes away from the valley and turns to follow Shirogane. But he doesn’t seem to be going anywhere, just circling the little space and looking at the ground, and Keith realizes abruptly that this must be their destination.

“I’ve seen both rattlesnakes and scorpions here,” the captain explains as he looks behind boulders and into crevices. “They’d both just as soon be left alone, but check before you settle in if you come here without me.”

Keith nods, shifting his weight, and Shirogane straightens, satisfied. “No unwanted company,” he says, and sits down with his back to a boulder, facing out over the valley. “Have a seat, if you want.”

Keith circles around to join him, watching his face just in case, and settles on the ground next to him, pulling his knees up to hug.

Shirogane rifles through the paper bag, setting out the food, two large sandwich-shaped bundles and the biggest container of curly fries Keith’s ever seen. “Let’s see,” Shirogane says. “I got a bacon cheeseburger for you, because that seemed pretty uncontroversial, so that is... this one, yeah, and a spicy chicken thing for me, but if spicy chicken sounds better to you than a bacon cheeseburger, we can switch. Or if they both sound good, we could split them and each have half, what do you think?”

Shirogane is looking at him for an answer, and Keith kind of wants to hide away from all the choices. “I don’t know,” he says. “They both-- they both look good, you pick.”

“Splitting it is, then,” says Shirogane, and unwraps a knife from the bag to cut the sandwiches.

And Keith is hungry. He makes it through the bacon cheeseburger half and a quarter of the chicken before Shirogane’s hardly started. There’s onions on it, which he doesn’t like, and tomatoes, which he’s not sure about, but he eats it all, unwilling to waste anything. He starts to slow, trying to pace himself, but the captain pushes the fries toward him and says, “You’d better be saving room for some of these, I can’t finish them by myself,” and that’s all right. And then Shirogane gets full halfway through his first sandwich half and gives him the second bacon cheeseburger half, and that’s all right too.

Finally he sits back against the boulder and stretches out his legs, pleasantly full and a little bit sleepy. Then Shirogane says, “So,” and he tenses up all over again.

The captain looks at him, and his face gets that look again. “No, no,” he says, turning where he sits to face him. “You’re okay, you’re okay. It’s nothing bad, I promise, all right? There’s something I want to talk to you about, but you’re not in trouble. Okay?”

Keith doesn’t quite believe him, but he really wants to, so he nods.

“Okay,” says Shirogane gently. “Now. You remember when we met, a few weeks ago? The General introduced us?”

Keith nods again.

“Well,” says the captain. “We talked about you a little bit afterwards. He said he thought you might need a friend.”

Keith feels his forehead furrowing up, and he glances at Shirogane doubtfully.
“A mentor,” Shirogane corrects himself. “I’d like to be both.”

Keith isn’t sure what to say to this. His heart is beating fast and light with something he’s afraid to define, something like hope and distrust all tangled up together. He studies the captain’s face.

Shirogane looks back, and then looks down. “The Garrison can be a really… a really lonely place,” he says after a moment, and gives Keith a small half-smile. It makes him look younger than Keith had initially guessed, like somebody closer in age to Keith himself than to the General or Iverson. “There’s a lot of pressure. It hasn’t been that long for me, I remember. But I was older than you when I came, and I had my grandpa just over in Albuquerque.” He pauses, rolling a pebble between his fingers. “There’s a lot of things you have to carry that I didn’t. You’re very strong, Keith, and smart, and persistent, but you shouldn’t have to be that strong. I want to help, if that’s… if it’s something you’d like.”

Keith pulls up his knees again. The sun has dipped below the horizon, and the spring breeze off the valley is almost chilly. His mind is whirling. “What would you… do?” he asks hesitantly after a pause.

“Well,” says the captain, and takes a deep breath. “I still need to talk to the General, but I’d definitely like to work with you on the simulator some. I’ve seen your scores, you’re going to be amazing if you keep working at it. So it would be some pilot training, some classwork support, that kind of thing. I’d come get you like this sometimes, say once or twice a week, take you off campus, get you some fresh air and a change of scene. But I’d also just-- be available to you. You can call me if something goes wrong, if you get hurt, if you just… need somebody to talk to.”

“Oh,” says Keith. He tries to picture it, the captain helping him with his homework, beside him in the simulator, walking down a sunny sidewalk and drinking milkshakes. But then there’s somebody else’s face superimposed over Shirogane’s, and the sharp unexpected jab of grief makes him flinch away from the idea.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” says Shirogane, watching him. “You don’t even have to decide right now. I know it’s a big thing.”

Keith does want to, is the thing. He wants it desperately, what Shirogane is offering. But--

“I thought you were going to space,” he blurts.

“I am,” answers Shirogane, and his whole face sort of lights up for a minute. “But we don’t launch for almost three and a half years. I’ll be around quite a while yet.”

“What if you get too busy with space things?”

The captain looks a little pained at this. “I probably will, from time to time,” he admits. “But I’ll let you know, all right? I won’t just leave you wondering where I’ve gone and if I’m coming back.”

Keith considers this, chewing his lower lip. “What if--” he starts. Shirogane waits. “What if you don’t like me.”

“What if you don’t like me?” counters Shirogane, and laughs at Keith’s appalled, disbelieving look. “Yeah, I’m not too worried about that.”

Keith isn’t sure what to make of this. People don’t just like him. “I get into a lot of trouble,” he warns him.

“I know,” says Shirogane, with an easy confidence that takes Keith aback.
“...How?” he asks warily.

Shirogane pauses, almost guiltily. “I read your file,” he admits. “The General set my permissions pretty high when I said I was willing.”

“Oh,” says Keith. He feels sick, like he’s stepped wrong and the floor wasn’t where it was supposed to be, like the breath’s been punched out of him. The wind picks up and he shudders, hugging his knees tighter.

Shirogane gets to his feet, and Keith jumps and glances up when the captain’s huge jacket settles with a gentle weight around his shoulders. It’s soft on the inside and richly warm with body heat, and Keith finds himself relaxing into it without conscious thought. He pulls it closed around himself and peeks sidelong at Shirogane where he’s crouching down to gather up their garbage.

“Did you... all of it, did you read all of it?” he asks after a moment, and can’t quite look at the captain when he does. It’s a big file. Maybe he got bored before he got to the bad parts.

“Yeah,” says Shirogane. “Earlier today, before I came to get you.”

Keith swallows a couple times. He’s trembling for a different reason now, the humiliation making his stomach sour and his shoulders hunch. He wants to throw off the jacket and walk away right now; he doesn't want anybody to look at him ever again. He finds himself shrinking down deeper into the jacket instead. "Why the fuck are you here, then," he bites out, sharp-edged and bitter.

Shirogane gives him a startled look, confused, like he doesn't know why Keith would even ask that. Keith hates him a little bit for that look.

"If you read it all," Keith says. "Why are you here, why the hell are you here?"

"Why wouldn't I be here?" Shirogane asks, something aching in his voice. "Why wouldn't I..."

“Because--” flares Keith, ready with a thousand reasons--he's foster system garbage, he has interpersonal issues, he’s a problem kid who can’t handle authority, can't get along with his peers, he's difficult, a discipline case, a trauma study, he’ll never amount to anything--reasons that shouldn't need saying if Shirogane has seen his file. And then, horribly, his eyes are stinging and he can feel his face twisting, and he can’t talk around the tightness in his throat, and he’s crying in front of Takashi Shirogane.

Then Shirogane is crouching next to him, saying his name urgently and reaching out; and then, somehow, Keith has lurched into the open circle of his arms. He holds on and hides his face while Shirogane shifts to sit with him, and Shirogane lets him.

He breathes deep and tries to gather himself. He's forgotten how good the warmth and pressure and safety of a good hug can feel. It's dangerously disarming, he could sink into it and stay forever, but he knows it's only borrowed. He knows better than to let himself rely on it.

Still, it’s nice, right now. In a minute, he thinks, and shuts his eyes. In a minute.

Shirogane lets him go right away when he pulls back. He keeps a hand on Keith’s shoulder, and Keith wants to shrug it off, but he can’t quite bring himself to do it. He faces forward and pulls up his knees, trying to dry his face with his uniform sleeve. “I’m sorry, sir,” he mumbles.

Keith vaguely remembers a news broadcast, a picture of the captain in his dress uniform, a name underneath with a nickname in quotation marks. Still, he can’t just…

“At the Garrison we get in trouble if we don’t use officers’ ranks,” he says slowly.

“Well,” says Shirogane, and shrugs again. “I’m not a Garrison instructor, and you’re not an enlisted airman.”

Keith doesn’t see what this has to do with anything.

Shirogane explains, “When you’re older, if you decide to enlist, then you’ll use my rank, if we're working together in a military setting. Or if I join the Garrison as a teacher.”

"Oh,” says Keith uncertainly.

"You don't have to, if you're not comfortable with it,” says Shiro, and Keith relaxes a little to have the safer option back. He nods.

Shiro grins at him companionably. "Anyway," he says, gentler. "There’s nothing you should be sorry for."

Stars are coming out. Keith looks west, down into the valley, and sees a bat flittering between the saguaro.

"We should be getting back," says Shiro with regret after the silence has stretched. Keith nods, an odd blend of relief and disappointment fighting for space in his chest, and gets to his feet. After a last look down into the valley, they step between the boulders and begin toward the square, unlovely shapes of the Garrison buildings against the mesas.

The walk is harder in the dark, but Shiro stays close and is there with a steadying arm whenever Keith stumbles. They reach the difficult little slope and Shiro steps down to lower ground with only a moment’s hesitation. Keith tries to put his feet where Shiro put his, but his legs are not nearly as long, and he has to take shorter steps on the steep slope. He puts a foot wrong and wobbles, windmilling his arms, then pulls hastily back to surer ground and follows the ledge to try to find an easier way.

Shiro watches, waiting patiently below while Keith tries one route down after another. Finally, when Keith is starting to get frustrated and desperate, he shifts his weight and steps closer to the ledge. “C’mere, buddy,” he says, and opens his arms. “Jump, I’ll catch you.”

“I’m not--” says Keith, and skids a little on loose gravel. “I can do it, I’m not scared!”

“I know,” Shiro assures him. “I know, but listen, ok? You don’t have to do it, I can catch you.”

Keith finally looks at him, sizing him up. He takes a deep breath and swallows nervously. “Don’t drop me,” he says, and hates the anxious, pleading note in his voice.

“I won’t drop you,” says Shiro, and beckons slightly, planting his arms. “C’mon.”

Keith takes another deep breath, and leaps.

Shiro catches him.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

In which there are pancakes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It’s late when Shiro makes it back to the apartment, and Matt’s window is already dark. There’s a light on in Sam’s office, though, so Shiro toes off his shoes at the door and pads down the hall to knock softly on the frame of the half-open door.

Sam opens the door, leaning back in his chair to reach the knob without standing up. “Hey,” he says when he sees Shiro, and takes off his glasses, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Didn’t hear you come in.”

“I didn’t want to wake Matt,” says Shiro, half-apologetic.

The commander snorts. “He’s not asleep. He’s messaging with Katie, I guarantee it.”

Shiro raises his eyebrows, grinning. “They’re close?”

“Thick as thieves,” says Sam ruefully. “They’ll be the doom of the universe between them, or its salvation, and woe betide the man who tries to impose a bedtime.”

Shiro’s grin widens, but a wistful feeling hooks behind his heart and tugs. Something must show on his face, because Sam looks at him and asks, “Are you and Ryou close?”

Shiro shifts and leans against the doorframe, crossing his arms. “Not very,” he admits. “The divorce, you know, he went with Mom and I went with Dad. Kind of threw a wrench in our hijink potential.”

“Mm,” says Sam, looking back at him with regret and understanding. “How old were you?”

“I was ten, he was four,” says Shiro. “We were buddies.”

“Grew apart?” asks Sam.

“Living on opposite sides of the country will do that,” says Shiro, lifting his shoulders. “We face2face once a month or so. He’s doing good.”

Sam hmms softly, nodding. After a moment he quirks an eyebrow. “You gonna sit down or just loom there?”

Shiro unfolds and refolds his arms, affronted. “I don’t loom.”

“You are, at this very moment, looming.”

Shiro huffs and takes two steps inside to lean against the wall and slide all the way down to the floor. He stretches his legs out in front of him, abruptly very tired.
Sam watches him. “Did you go up to the school?”

“Yeah,” says Shiro. “Grabbed some fast food, took him out walking.”

“How’d it go?”

Shiro blows out a breath and scrubs both hands over his face. “I have no idea what I’m doing, sir.”

“What’s he think of the idea?” asks Sam, swiveling his chair to face Shiro.

“He’s gonna think about it for a couple days,” says Shiro. “He doesn’t trust me. I think he wants to, but it’s-- why should he, you know?”

“It’ll take time,” agrees Sam. “There were a couple foster kids in my unit in the late ‘60s, back when I was still teaching. They were… it was tough. Rewarding, but tough.”

“What did you do?” asks Shiro, and Sam shrugs.

“Stayed constant. Showed them I wasn’t going anywhere. Listened, when they were ready to talk.” He pauses. “My two… obviously this isn’t indicative of all foster kids, but they both had very low self-worth. They both had this-- this idea that their circumstances defined their value. And that was tough to get past, it’s one of those things that… I could keep telling them that that wasn’t true, you know, that they’re smart, capable, going to do good things, so on, but it doesn’t stick until you show them, over and over again.”

“What do you mean?”

Sam pauses again, and leans forward to put his elbows on his knees. “Just-- watch for what he does well. Recognize it, and make him recognize it too, but don’t change your behavior toward him when he messes up.” He looks at Shiro and grins lopsidedly. “Just go love on the kid, damn it. You’ll do fine.”

Shiro nods slowly, looking down at his hands. He lets out a short breath through his nose. “He was so scared when the sergeant brought him to me. He thought he was being expelled.”

Sam hums thoughtfully. “There’s a good goal, then,” he says. “See if you can’t get him more settled here, more sure of his place.”

Yeah,” says Shiro. “Seems like a good place to start.” He goes quiet for a moment, running over the events of the evening. “I don’t think he’s eating enough,” he says suddenly. “He ate all of his sandwich, half of mine, and almost all the fries. And he’d just come from supper.”

“Growing kid,” says Sam, but he sounds doubtful.

“He’s really light, too,” says Shiro, frowning. “I don’t know how heavy kids that age are supposed to be but he seemed really light.”

“Yeah?” asks Sam. “Hmm. Something to check with medical about, if you’re worried. Malnutrition at that age isn’t something to mess around with.”

Shiro thinks of Keith, clinging to him, melting from desperate tension to warm, limp stillness. Shiro had held his breath and rubbed Keith’s back and wondered if this was it, if it could really be so easy, and then Keith had taken a breath and pulled away, and closed off from him again. He sighs again and rubs his eyes.
"Go to bed, captain," says Sam. "You did good today. Go sleep."

“Yes, sir,” says Shiro. The order settles on him, a borrowed strength, and he gets to his feet. “Don’t stay up too late?”

“Nah,” Sam says, looking at the clock on his monitor. “Another fifteen minutes to tie off some loose ends, then I’m out.”

“All right,” says Shiro, lingering in the doorway. “Good night, sir.”

“Sleep well, Shiro.”

It takes a while, but at last, Shiro does.

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Keith does not.

His bunkmate is older--not that everybody here isn’t, but Malone has four years on him and a later curfew. The empty room is an improvement over all his loud friends crowding in, but Keith can’t relax knowing the door could open at any time.

He lays still, curled knees to chest under the blanket, and shuts his eyes tightly. An hour later, he rolls over onto his other side and tries again. Too much has happened today; he’s all wound up in knots, and his stomach hurts.

He can’t quite make it real in his mind yet: Shirogane--Shiro--is famous in the Garrison, one of its most celebrated graduates, the youngest pilot ever to be selected for a long-term space mission past the station; Keith had been pulled out of class to meet him and his heart had pounded and pounded. He’d been too afraid to speak. Thinking of the meeting now makes him squirm with embarrassment, but Shiro had been kind. He hadn’t tried to make him talk; he’d only asked the one question.

It was a question that nobody else had asked him. It had been assumed that he would rather be here than in a foster home, and the assumption isn’t wrong, exactly. But the threat of expulsion presses down on him every day. He’s on edge and jumpy, he feels like he can’t ever catch his breath. There’s part of him that just wants to get it over with, so it would be over and he wouldn’t have to keep living under its shadow.

There are footsteps coming down the hall outside, and he goes tense and still under the blanket, watching the sliver of light under the door. The light is blocked briefly by a shadow, and he hears the beeping of the keypad. Quickly, he shuts his eyes and pretends to be asleep, wishing he were facing the other direction.

The door opens and shuts quietly. Keith listens, frozen, and risks a quick look when the light from the hallway disappears. Malone stands by the door, his shape hard to make out in the dim light, but familiar. Keith relaxes and closes his eyes.

There’s the sound of a stumble, the chair sliding a little on the tile floor, and a hissed breath. Keith stiffens up again, his heart lurching, but there’s no more noise. A lamp clicks on briefly, and then off again. He hears Malone getting into bed.

And then it’s quiet again, but a quiet punctuated by the sounds of another person’s peaceful breathing. It’s a calming sound, and Keith feels his limbs finally getting heavy and loose.

Shiro’s face swims into his thoughts again, and he considers it sleepily. It might be nice, to take him
up on his offer. Such a chance, to learn from *Takashi Shirogane* in the simulator; Paschel would lose her shit when she found out. And the rest sounds nice too: he’s not sure he can trust it, but it sounds nice.

And it had been a really good hug.

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In the morning, he’s less sure.

He wakes up with a start to the gunshot-loud slam of a drawer. Malone is tearing apart his side of the room, saying low angry things under his breath, searching for something with increasing frustration.

Keith lies frozen under his blanket, watching. Malone slams the second drawer and straightens, staring around at the mess he’s made. Then he turns on Keith, and the look on his face makes Keith want to shrink down small into the crappy mattress until it’s safe again.

“Did you move my notes?” demands Malone.

He can’t talk around the frightened tightness in his throat. He shakes his head quickly.

Malone looks at him, and something changes in his face: the angry suspicion fades slightly, replaced by something like remorse. He turns away, to Keith’s relief, and searches the pile of papers next to his bag. And then, after what seems like hours, he looks at his tablet, huffs out a breath, and leaves.

It’s a long time before Keith can get out of bed. There’s still an hour before his breakfast block, and he needs every minute of it to stop shaking. Malone’s never hurt him, Keith is pretty sure he wouldn’t, but it’s a long way for that knowledge to travel from his head to the place where the terror is thrumming hot and reedy in his lungs.

He shuts his eyes, and he goes back to the flat place over the valley and hides his face in Shiro’s shoulder. Then he recoils, terrified and appalled by how quickly he’s become dependent, and gets up.

He stands shivering in his pajamas for a moment, then finds his clothes and gets dressed for breakfast.

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Paschel takes his orange juice and both packets of maple syrup. Keith keeps his head down and pretends not to see.

***

Shiro doesn’t come back that day.

Keith isn’t sure if he’s relieved or disappointed. Every time the mess sergeant passes behind him at breakfast, at lunch, at supper, his heart starts to race with apprehension. He eats more quickly than usual, just in case he’s about to be called away, but the sergeant keeps walking every time. He watches doorways and hallways and windows, unable to stop himself.

By the end of the day, the anxious tension has eased its grip on his lungs and heart, but a familiar dull, sick, empty feeling is there in its place. He goes back to his room and curls up in his bed. His eyes feel hot and swollen, but there are no tears.
The next morning, Sergeant Burns pulls him out of the mess line. Keith follows behind her, trying to
tamp down the excitement, but there’s a happy, relieved little lurch in his chest when they step
outside and Shiro is waiting there in the chilly morning sunshine with his bike.

“Morning, Keith!” he says cheerfully, and salutes back to Burns. “Can I borrow you for breakfast?”

Keith wants to be cool and casual when he says, “Sure, I guess,” but he can feel the grin threatening
to split his face. That’s a hoverbike, and he’s gonna get to ride on it.

“I’ll have him back in time for his first class,” Shiro tells Sergeant Burns, and Keith is a little
disappointed, but he can’t really spare the time for it right now, because hoverbike.

Then Burns is gone, and it’s just them and the bike, and Keith has to circle all the way around it,
because wow. It’s got one seat in the front, which Shiro is messing with, identical vertical thrusters
on either side, and a long streamlined body that makes Keith think of a dragonfly. It’s painted glossy
black with a number on the side in white: 01. Keith has to stare at it for a moment. “Are you a
racer?” he blurs.

“Used to be, for a couple years,” says Shiro lightly. “They don’t let you do that kind of thing when
you’re lined up for space missions, but I couldn’t give up the bike.”

“Wow,” breathes Keith, and reaches out to touch the side of the little craft reverently.

“You ever been on one of these?” asks Shiro.

Keith has a brief flash of memory: a hot, sunny track; the noise of engines and cheering, the smell of
exhaust; caramel popcorn stuck in his teeth; and afterwards a slow, slow circuit of the track, his dad’s
arm secure around his waist and the bike humming beneath them--

He shakes his head.

“Well,” says Shiro, and hands him a helmet. “You get to sit in front today. I don’t have a jacket for
you, but it’s only about five minutes away, where we’re going. You should be fine in that.”

Keith buckles the helmet on and nods, zipping up his sweatshirt.

“Need a boost up?” Shiro asks, and Keith shakes his head. He clambers into the seat, and Shiro
settles behind him and buckles the safety belt around both of them. “All right,” Shiro says. “You can
hang on right here, see these spaces under the steering?”

Keith fits his hands into the spaces and grips for dear life, nodding.

“Good, all right,” says Shiro. “We’re not gonna go too fast today, but if you start feeling scared or
uncomfortable, I want you to tell me right away, okay?”

“I’m not gonna get scared,” Keith scoffs, and Shiro laughs behind him.

“All right,” he says. “I want you to promise you’ll say, just in case.”

“I will,” Keith assures him. “I won’t get scared, though.”

Shiro laughs again and reaches forward to punch the ignition sequence in front of Keith. The bike
roars to life underneath them and Keith holds his breath. Shiro’s arms come up on either side of him,
bracketing him safely in, and then there is a lift and they’re floating smoothly over the road away
from the Garrison.

It’s not scary.

The bike sails gracefully between the mesas and stacks. Keith feels Shiro shifting behind him at each turn, leaning from side to side to steer the bike with his weight. They’re not going very fast at all, but the wind in his face makes it seem so. The ground dips and rises beneath them, and the bike dips and rises with it. It’s the most exhilarating thing Keith’s ever felt.

They get to the town far too quickly, and it’s an odd feeling to be back on paved streets, obeying stop-lights and pedestrian-crossing signs. Shiro pulls into the parking lot of a pancake house and the bike powers down, settling gently on the pavement like a gull landing.

Shiro gets off first, and Keith follows reluctantly. He takes off his helmet to give back, and Shiro takes one look at him and laughs out loud. “Want to take a longer route back?” he guesses.

“Well?” asks Keith, brightening up.

“I know a good track or two,” says Shiro, stowing away their helmets in the bike’s storage compartment. He reaches out and messes up Keith’s hair. “Breakfast first, though.”

The inside of the restaurant is… sort of old person-ish, honestly. There’s polished blonde wood and burgundy carpet and serene watercolor animations on loop that make Keith think of the art he and his dad had taken off the walls of his grandma’s house in Dallas after she died. But the smell, the smell is heavenly.

Shiro leads him to a table by the window where they can both see the bike, and a waitress follows them with menus and a cheerful, “How’re we doing today?”

Keith feels suddenly shy, and he doesn’t know what to say at all when she asks what he’d like to drink.

“Orange juice?” suggests Shiro. “They squeeze it fresh here.”

“Okay,” Keith agrees in a murmur. His feet don’t reach the floor, and he swings them nervously under the table.

“Two orange juices,” says Shiro to the waitress. “And some coffee for me as well, please.”

She scribbles it down and disappears as quickly as she came.

“You can order whatever you like,” says Shiro, glancing at him over his menu. “The crepes are really good. I’m probably gonna get waffles…” He trails off and goes quiet, considering.

Keith opens his menu slowly and stares down at it. He feels a little bit short of breath, looking at all the choices, all the listed prices. It’s not an expensive place, he can tell, but it’s still far more than his foster parents would have wanted to spend on him. And there’s so many choices; he doesn’t know where to start. He flips through helplessly, looking for something cheaper.

The waitress sets down a glass of juice in front of him, and he jumps. “You guys ready to order, or do you need a minute?” she asks, glancing between them.

“I’m about ready,” says Shiro, but before Keith can panic, he adds, “Ahh, we might need another minute, though.”
“No problem, hon,” she says. “I’ll check back in with you guys in a little bit.” And she’s gone again.

Keith stares down at the page. He doesn’t want to look up at Shiro; he knows the man is getting impatient with him, he’s going to look at his watch and sigh, he’s going to wonder why he brought Keith here, he’s going to realize that there’s nothing special about Keith after all--

He doesn’t realize he’s hyperventilating or that Shiro is saying his name until Shiro gets up and comes around the table, sliding into the booth to sit next to Keith.

"Hey," Shiro says, soft and urgent, and puts an arm around Keith's shoulders. "Hey, Keith, Keith, you're okay. You're okay."

Keith comes back to himself, startled, and closes his mouth with a gulp. A couple across the restaurant is looking at them with a sort of vague, indifferent pity, and Keith feels his face get hot.

"You're okay, bud," Shiro says again, and sort of shifts so he's between Keith and the watching couple. “I didn’t mean to rush you, it’s okay.” Then he frowns slightly and lifts the weight of his arm a little bit off Keith's shoulders without completely withdrawing. "Is this alright, to hug you like this?"

_I could say no_, thinks Keith, wondering. He doesn't want to, but he _could_ if he did.

He nods. Shiro’s arm settles around him again, and he finds himself turning slightly to meet the embrace.

"For the record," Shiro says, "If I ever hug you and you're not wanting a hug, it’s okay to say so. Or you can give me a good shove, that's okay too."

Keith finds himself smiling at this idea, relaxing further.

"What happened, bud?" asks Shiro quietly after a moment. "Can you tell me?"

"I don't know," says Keith, feeling foolish. He panicked over pancakes versus waffles is what happened, but there's no dignified way to explain that, and he doesn't quite understand why it happened.

"That's all right," says Shiro. "We'll talk about it later, okay?"

Keith isn't sure what to think of this, but he nods.

"Do you want some help picking out breakfast?" asks Shiro, reaching to pull the menu closer.

In the end, Shiro steers him toward a combo option where he can pick four things off a list. The price still makes a little hot coil of anxiety unfurl at the bottom of Keith's lungs, but Shiro's paying and Shiro suggested it, so it's all right. "I'd do two sweet things and two savory things, if I were you," Shiro advises. "Make sure you get enough real food to tide you over until lunch."

This, of course, makes him think of Paschel, and he feels sick for a fleeting moment. But Paschel's not here, and he pushes the thought aside. He decides to get eggs and hash browns for his savory things, and he looks at the sweet list indecisively.

"If you're really hungry the flapjacks are a good choice," says Shiro. "They're little, but it's a bottomless stack, so they just keep bringing them until you're full."

This sounds excellent to Keith. After some thought, he picks a crepe for his fourth thing, since Shiro
likes it. Shiro makes an approving noise and goes back to his side of the table, clapping him briefly on the shoulder as he slides out of the booth.

When the waitress returns, Keith isn’t quite as shy, but he still forgets half of what he was going to get. But Shiro comes to his rescue and fills in the gaps, and the waitress -- Ryann, her nametag reads -- writes everything down, and then it’s done and Keith can relax and drink his juice.

“What have you got today?” Shiro asks. “What classes?”

“Math,” says Keith. “Coding, Earth science.”

Shiro squints up one eye and asks, “C schedule, sounds like?”

Keith nods.

“I was B all the way through the Garrison,” Shiro says. “So I had the same, but one class behind. Literature first, then math and coding on Tuesdays and Fridays. What’s your favorite?”

The topic gets them through until the food comes. They discover that they both like the practical side of physics but are ambivalent about biology, that they have one professor in common, that they share an intense distrust of the mess hall baked beans.

“It’s like, I mean, that might be bacon,” says Shiro, and Keith’s already giggling.

“But it really looks like the specimens from the regeneration lab,” he says, and is rewarded with a horrified full-body shudder from Shiro.


“My partner threw up,” Keith informs him proudly.

“But I about did!” says Shiro. “But I’m never going to be able to touch those beans again, thanks for that.” And Keith’s lost in giggles again.

Breakfast arrives, and they go quiet to do it justice. The crepe is weird: it’s rolled up with sweet cream cheese goo inside, and the texture makes him pause. Still, it’s not bad, and Shiro likes it, so Keith decides he likes it too.

The flapjacks really do go on forever. Keith pours on a blissful amount of syrup, thinking smugly of the two tablespoons Paschel had taken from him yesterday, and is cleaning his plate before Shiro’s even made a dent in his first waffle. Ryann swoops in almost immediately to whisk his empty plate away and replace it with a new stack, and Keith decides he likes her.

Shiro watches him eat, chewing pensively. “I’ve been wondering,” he says. “Are you getting enough to eat at the Garrison?”

And just like that, the peaceful, easy feeling evaporates.

Keith has no idea how to answer. But that must be an answer in and of itself, because Shiro makes a soft thoughtful noise.

“You’re not wild about the food?” he guesses.

Keith latches onto this with relief. “Yeah,” he says. “The-- the beans.”

Shiro hmms again and uses the side of his fork to cut off a piece of waffle. “Are you eating at least
“Half of what they give you?” he asks, and Keith freezes up again.

“There’s no write-ups in your file about wasting food,” Shiro continues, still focused on his waffle, gentle and relentless. “So you must be clearing your plate at least most of the time. But I don’t think you’re getting to eat it all. Are you?”

Keith has stopped eating. His mouth has gone dry, and he doesn’t know what to do. He sets his fork down carefully on the side of his plate, trying to fight down the wild urge to hide.

“Keith,” says Shiro, and Keith feels his shoulders hunching up. “Keith, you’re not in trouble. You’re not in trouble, do you understand?”

Keith nods, but he can’t look up at Shiro.

“Is somebody taking your food at school?”

And there it is. He feels sick and apprehensive, but he can’t pin down why. He doesn’t want Shiro to see that part of him, is some of it, the part that is so cowed and helpless that he lets people take his food without even reacting. He’s afraid of what might happen if Shiro tries to help.

“You don’t have to say who it is,” says Shiro, still pushing, still gentle, damn him.

“I don’t… want…” Keith manages to say, but it’s not enough, he knows it’s not.

“I know,” says Shiro.

So Keith, staring down at a droplet of maple syrup on the table top, finally nods.

And that’s the end of it. Shiro stops pushing. They go back to eating, but there’s a soft weight to the quiet that makes Keith think incongruously of Shiro’s borrowed jacket.

But then Shiro scoops up a bit of strawberry jelly and holds it up to consider, jiggling slightly on the end of his spoon. “Looks kind of like that nutrigel they use for culture labs,” he remarks, and Keith’s giggling helplessly again, even though it’s not really that funny.

And after that the silence is easy again: no more unpleasant questions, just flapjacks and flapjacks and flapjacks, until Keith wonders if he could curl up right there in the booth and take a nap.

Shiro stacks up their dishes neatly and pushes them to the end of the table for Ryann, then clicks through the billing screen when it pops up. Keith watches him sign from the other side of the holographic display: he can’t see anything from this side except for what looks like a thin blue film of light, and Shiro jabbing lightly at the air with one finger. He remembers watching his foster mom doing the same, sitting sandwiched between his foster siblings, the sick startled jolt of shame when she looked directly at him through the screen with her lips pressed tightly together. He searches Shiro’s face for a hint of similar resentment, but there’s nothing there, just a calm contentment that mirrors Keith’s own full, satisfied feeling.

With a wave of his hand, Shiro banishes the screen and sits back. “So,” he says. “What do you think? Is it alright if I hang around?”

Oh, thinks Keith, and, Right. He looks at Shiro, and then he doesn’t know where to look at all. He shifts anxiously and sits on his hands. “Um,” he says, and falters for a minute. “Do you really want to?”

“Yeah, buddy,” says Shiro, and something wound tight and scared in Keith eases. “I really do.”
“Will you, really?” asks Keith, not quite looking at him directly. He almost wants to retract the question as soon as he speaks it: the words are too challenging, even if he’s being very, very careful with his tone. It’s not a kind thing to assume, either, that somebody will leave, but people always do.

“I really will,” says Shiro, gentler, and Keith feels warm all the way down to his toes. Time will tell, of course—but right now he wants to believe it, and most of him does.

“All right, then,” he says, shrugging, trying to sound indifferent. He ducks his head so Shiro won’t see the smile he can’t quite stop.

“All right, then,” Shiro echoes, a smile in his voice. “Come on, there’s a stop I want to make before we go back.”

They don’t go straight back to the bike, to Keith’s mild dismay. They cut across the parking lot instead to a tiny grocery store in the far corner of a little strip mall. It’s very cold inside, and smells like green things and refrigeration: the shift from the warm dry air outside makes gooseflesh prickle across Keith’s arms.

“What’s your bunkmate like?” Shiro asks conversationally, steering them down the main aisle.

“Malone?” asks Keith, startled. “I don’t know. He’s nice, I think. We don’t really talk much.”

Shiro seems satisfied with this. They take another turn, down an aisle lined on one side with bins of candy and snacks. Shiro pauses to grab a few bags off the roll and strides with purpose toward the end of the aisle.

Keith watches him scoop different mixes of fruits and nuts and snack-things into each bag, interested. He’s never seen this done: both his dad and his foster mom were the InstaMeal type. He’s only been in an old-fashioned grocery store like this a couple times. He trails behind Shiro to the scale and watches the process of printing out the stickers with fascination. And then they’re moving again, headed to the front of the store, only pausing so Shiro can grab a couple of oranges and bananas from the display in front of the cash register.

Shiro pays, pulls a wadded mesh bag out of his jacket pocket, and slings it over his shoulder full of his purchases. “All right!” he says. “Half an hour to spare! Let’s go see some desert.”

And Keith’s grinning again, he can’t even help it. He follows Shiro back across the parking lot, waits impatiently while he stows the groceries and retrieves the helmets, and clambers up onto the seat in front of him. And then they’re off again, and the town is behind them.

“You say if you’re uncomfortable,” Shiro warns, and Keith nods impatiently. And then Shiro rolls the throttle forward, and they shoot off over the desert, and Keith is clinging on, his mouth open wide around a shriek of exhilaration he doesn’t dare voice because Shiro will think he’s scared and stop, and he never, ever wants to stop.

The ride lasts forever. The ride lasts no time at all.

They pull to a stop just inside the front gate of the Garrison. Shiro gets off first and reaches to help Keith down, which Keith would normally scorn, but just now he’s feeling strange and shaky. His knees buckle when his feet hit the ground, which startles him and greatly amuses Shiro.

“Walk around a little bit,” Shiro advises, hauling him back up under his elbows. Keith pulls away, embarrassed, but does so while Shiro puts away his helmet.

“You’ve got about ten minutes until first block starts,” says Shiro, coming around the back of the
bike to meet him. “Take this to your room.” And he holds out the bag of snacks.

Keith takes it automatically and stares at it. He doesn’t know what to say for a minute, and finally stammers, “We’re not– we’re not supposed to have food in our rooms.”

Shiro makes a ‘tchk’ noise and rolls his eyes. “I’ll tell you right now,” he says. “Nobody follows that rule. But if you’re worried, I’m working on getting you a note so you don’t have to be sneaky about it.”

“A note?” asks Keith, baffled.

“Mm-hmm,” says Shiro. “Gotta get some meat on these bones.” And then he’s poking Keith in the ribs with both hands, and Keith shrieks and doubles over and nearly drops the bag, which puts an end to that. Shiro ruffles up his hair while he tries to get his breath back. “All right, you’d better go,” he says. “I don’t want you to be late, I’ll get in trouble!”

Keith starts obligingly, but he hesitates before he goes through the gate. “Shiro?” he calls. The name feels dangerously disrespectful, and he stutters slightly over the syllables. But Shiro looks pleased when he turns back, his face lit up like when he talked about space. “Um,” says Keith. “Thanks, for- - for breakfast. And--”

“No problem,” says Shiro, and Keith has the odd, warm feeling that he means it. “I’ll be around to talk to the General tonight, I might see you then. If not, tomorrow after supper?”

“All right,” says Keith, unable to stop smiling. “See you then.”

He turns and goes back inside, feeling light.

Chapter End Notes

how do you chapter pacing
Shiro doesn’t leave right away. He waits until Keith has disappeared inside and the bell for first block has blared, and then he follows. Even now, two years after graduation, there’s an intensely smug satisfaction in wandering down the silent hallways while everybody else is stuck in class.

It takes ten minutes or so, but he finally finds Sergeant Burns in the L3 off-duty lounge, studying. “Hey,” he says, poking his head through the door. “Sergeant, excuse me, can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Oh!” she says, and gets to her feet immediately, standing at attention. “Of course, captain. What can I do for you?”

Shiro gestures her back to her seat a little self-consciously. It’s still so weird. “Um,” he says, sitting on the edge of the chair opposite her. “You’re on lunch and supper mess duty, correct?”

“Yes, sir,” says Burns. “Every day except Friday and Saturday.”

“Great,” says Shiro. “I wonder if you could help me with something. Cadet Kogane, I’m mentoring him, I think he’s having some trouble with other cadets picking on him.”

Burns shifts, frowning. “At mealtime?” she asks to clarify.

“Yeah,” says Shiro. “Sorry, I don’t mean to imply you’re not doing your job, I know it’s a full hall and there’s only one of you.”

“No, no,” says Burns, shaking her head. “Just-- I know he’s been having trouble, but I hadn’t noticed it at meals.”

“Well,” Shiro says. “Somebody’s been taking his food.”

Burns is already pulling up a new note page on her tablet. “Do you know who?”

“No,” says Shiro apologetically. “It was like pulling teeth to get him to admit even that much, I’m sorry. If you haven’t noticed it, it must be somebody sitting near him. I thought I’d check the surveillance records later, but I was here, so.”

Burns hums in thought, scribbling on her tablet. “I’ll keep an eye open,” she says. “I’ll talk to Talmadge, too, he’s got breakfast duty. Thank you for letting me know, sir.”

“If you could deal with it discreetly, I’d appreciate it,” says Shiro. “Don’t make it look like Kogane snitched.”

“I understand completely.”

“Thank you,” says Shiro, and gets back to his feet. “I’ll message you if I find out who it is.”

“I appreciate it, sir,” says Burns, saluting again.

Shiro salutes back and slips out the way he came.

He drops by the med ward too while he’s there. The head nurse is a friend from when he had
appendicitis in his final year, and they catch up for a while before he explains what he came for.

“Oh, absolutely,” says the man. “You know, I had a feeling something was off, but his weight’s still technically within healthy parameters so there wasn’t anything I could do. And it’s not like he’ll say if something is wrong.”

“Yeah,” says Shiro, his heart sinking. “I’ve been noticing that about him.”

The nurse writes and authorizes the note permitting Keith to keep snacks in his room and sends it in triplicate to Keith, Keith’s file, and Iverson.

It takes about fifteen minutes and one meal-viewing to find the culprit on the surveillance tape, a familiar-looking cadet seated across from Keith. Shiro watches her help herself to Keith’s potatoes and dessert with a sense of grim satisfaction. He waits for a clear shot of her face, grabs a shot of the screen, circles her in yellow, and fires it off to Burns. He sits back in his chair for a moment, pleased with the afternoon’s work—and then realizes they have a meeting with engineering on the other side of town in less than half an hour.

He makes it on time. Almost. Sam turns looks at him with his eyebrows raised when he hurries to stand behind them. “Sorry,” Shiro mouths, but it’s too late.

Matt looks delighted.

“Shiro’s late,” he announces. Loudly.

“Oh, come on,” Shiro says, amiably exasperated. “June’s not even here yet. It’s not like you’ve ever-”

“Is everybody else seeing this? Somebody mark it on the calendar, I want to always remember this day.”

“All right,” says Shiro, and pulls him from behind into a headlock without further preamb. Matt yelps and a brief scuffle ensues: Matt tries to duck out from underneath Shiro’s arm, then, failing, jabs backward at him with his shockingly sharp elbows; Shiro digs his fingers mercilessly into Matt’s armpit in retribution until Matt makes a high-pitched noise and stops fighting, elbows clamped tightly to his sides.


Shiro thumps him on the back. “It’s a tough world, buddy.”

“Oh, good, we’re all here,” June says dryly, coming around the partition, and all three of them automatically straighten to attention. It would be easy to assume, based on June’s appearance, that she is nothing more than a sweet harmless grandma. It would be the last such assumption one ever made.

“Yes, ma’am,” says Matt virtuously, the little shit.

“Hmm,” she says, eyeing him. “Well, come on. We’ve made some changes to the plans that I want to go over with you.”

She leads them back past the partition through the high-ceilinged factory floor, past cranes and carts and organized chaos, past magnesium-white welding sparks flying from the bones of the ship—Our
ship, thinks Shiro, a familiar giddy leap in his chest, that's our ship-- and on, up clanking metal stairs to the glass-fronted office.

June shuts the door behind them, and the factory noise mutes.

“So,” she says, crossing around to the desk. “Good news first, or bad?”

They exchange glances.

“Good?” hazards Shiro.

June waits a disapproving beat. Shiro feels every bit of his youth and inexperience in the silence, twice. Then June turns to her tablet and starts tapping, her fingers flying silently across the screen. “Well,” she says, “The good news is that we’ve made some additions and improvements to your landing apparatus based on Fearless’s data. Flight is working on some new variable landing scenarios for you, which you’ll be drilling on as soon as they’ve worked out the glitches, I’m sure. Between the flexible approaches and the new gear, you should be able to land in about any Kerberos condition. Maybe even at the original site.”

Matt and the commander have perked up, as keen as hunting hounds on point. “What’s the catch?” asks Shiro cautiously.

“It cuts significantly into your sample storage space,” June says. She clicks something on her monitor and two ghost-gray renderings of the ship's plans blink into holographic existence above her desk, rotating slowly.

“How significantly?” asks Sam.

“We're looking at roughly forty percent.”

Matt makes an unhappy noise. Sam shifts his weight, frowning.

Shiro looks between them. “Is that doable?” he asks. “Can we get by with sixty percent?”

June looks at him pityingly. “You're losing sixty percent,” she says. “Forty percent is what we have for you.”

Matt’s mouth opens with startled outrage. “We can't-- Forty percent! What's the point of even going if we come back with less than half of the samples?”

The commander grips his son's forearm quellingly, and Matt goes grudgingly silent. “There is a threshold,” Sam says, apologizing with his tone. “Without that space we don't have a mission.”

June looks at the renderings, tapping the desk with her stylus. “If we split the sample storage into multiple compartments, will that be a problem?”

Matt and Sam glance at each other.

“As long as each compartment is big enough to accommodate the samples and the climate control, that should be fine,” Sam answers.

“I should be able to get you back up to fifty or fifty-five percent with that,” June says thoughtfully. She reaches up to the floating renderings and pares down layers with her stylus.

“We could talk about doing more tests on site, too,” suggests Shiro.
Sam sighs. “I don't love that,” he says. “But yes, we can talk about it.”

“Out,” June says. “I need to undo all my hard work, again.”

“Sorry, June,” says Matt, and he does sound it, now that the threat to the mission is past.

“Thank you, June,” Shiro adds.

“Yeah, yeah,” she says, and flaps one hand at them until they file out.

Matt and Sam already have their heads together, grimly tossing ideas back and forth. Shiro watches, and quietly orders them all Thai while they walk.

It’s going to be a long night.

There’s two sergeants on duty in the mess at lunch instead of one.

Sergeant Burns is there as always, but there’s another sergeant with her that Keith doesn’t know. He stares at them curiously, and, alarmingly, Sergeant Burns looks directly back at him. He looks away quickly and keeps his head down as they go through the line, but there’s a tight feeling of apprehension in his chest.

Shiro did something.

The new sergeant blows the whistle to signal lunch change, and they file down the rows of tables. Keith takes his seat between Kellings and Lourd, not quite daring to look at Paschel across the table. He already knows what she’ll take from his tray: there’s a little cardboard boat of tater-tots and a small brownie square, and she might take his apple slices too. He resolves to eat those first.

The whistle blows again. From the corner of his eye he sees Paschel reach out, hesitate, and then draw her hand back again. He stays very still for a moment, frozen and unsure, and then he realizes there’s somebody standing in the aisle behind him.

He risks a quick look. It’s Sergeant Burns, and she doesn’t seem to be paying any particular attention to him. She’s not looking at him, or at Paschel, she’s just… chosen that point to stand and pace and keep an eye on lunch, apparently.

Keith looks back at Paschel. She’s watching the sergeant, but she looks back at Keith. Her eyes are very cold and full of warning--but powerless too, Keith realizes abruptly. She can’t do anything to him, not with Burns standing right there. Feeling giddy and reckless, he picks up his brownie. Then, looking her directly in the eyes, he takes a giant bite.

Paschel’s eyes narrow. She watches him, and she presses her lips together and she smiles just slightly. There’s danger in that smile: Keith has stepped out of line and there will be retribution, but he doesn’t even care right now. He has a brownie, and he has a friend, and he is dizzy and bold with the unfamiliar feeling of being looked after.

He finishes his lunch, every bite.

Paschel doesn’t take her eyes off him at supper either, and she smiles the whole time.

The giddiness has worn off. His food sits heavy and sour in his stomach. He feels sick with dread, and he keeps his eyes down. The whistle blows, releasing them to their free time, but he wants,
absurdly, to stay in the supervised safety of the mess hall. But the next block is waiting to sit and eat, and everybody at his table is standing and filing out, and there’s no way to avoid it.

He follows the general stream of cadets down the hall and ducks into the bathroom to wait for the coast to clear. Then he hurries up to the quiet of the library and hides away in a sheltered nook. He finds a book, but he can’t focus on it.

After about an hour, Beck wanders through. He pauses at the end of the aisle and looks at Keith, and Keith looks back. Then Beck smirks a little and moves on.

Keith sits back in his chair, a terrible sinking feeling in his stomach. He can’t quite get his breath, and his mind races like a trapped thing. This is their favorite game, Paschel’s and Ricketts’ and Beck’s, and there’s no way to win it. If he manages to evade them tonight, they will catch him tomorrow. If they don’t catch him tomorrow, they will wait patiently until he slips up, and the longer he succeeds in avoiding them the worse it will be.

He thinks, briefly, of asking the librarian for help. But he’ll report it to Iverson, and the thought of that fills Keith with a different kind of horror.

He sits for a long time, until the lights dim to announce that the library will be locking up soon. Then he gets to his feet and goes to the door, and he walks down the silent, white-lit hallway.

He takes the longer route back to his bunk, keeping in view of as many cameras as he can. They never hurt him where there’s cameras. He passes a few people on the higher levels, other cadets and a few officers, but the lower he gets the quieter the halls are. His footsteps echo.

He keeps walking, and nobody bothers him. He begins to wonder if he’s gotten off tonight, if they’ve lost interest and gone to the rec room, if they were waiting for him along his usual route instead of the one he took. He turns down the final hallway, and his room is in sight and all the tension leaves him in one relieved breath.

And then the bathroom door opens as he passes it and somebody yanks him inside.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

In which Keith is found out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next day sucks.

He hurts, and he’s so tired, and his head pounds with a sick heavy throb that makes it hard to think. His stomach is upset all day, and he can’t finish his food. The sergeant stays close at mealtimes, so nobody can take it from him, but Paschel sees that he’s not eating it all and looks satisfied. It’s a hollow relief.

He can’t focus at classtime. At least it’s Wednesday, and his only classes are Art and Flight, and they’re at the Garrison instead of somewhere in Maine or Iowa. The screens and tinned voices of his off-site classes make his head hurt at the best of times. They’re not on the simulator today, which is good too: even when he’s sitting down the room feels like it’s spinning and tilting. He keeps quiet, keeps his head down, and is only called on once.

Afterwards he collapses into bed and sleeps in disjointed pieces. He wakes with a disoriented start to Malone gently shaking his shoulder, the supper bell buzzing in the hall.

He doesn’t want to get up. He turns his face to hide in the pillow, but Malone is persistent, and he finally sits up and puts on his shoes and shuffles out through the painfully bright corridors to the mess hall.

He eats most of his food, and then he barely makes it to the bathroom before he throws it up. But then it’s free hours again, and he can go back to his room and his bed.

It feels like he’s barely closed his eyes when somebody is knocking on the door.

He pulls his blanket up around his face and hides from the light and noise as Malone answers it. There’s a brief conversation at the door, muffled and faraway-- and there’s something niggling at the back of Keith’s mind, something important, something…

And then he hears his name, and recognizes Shiro’s voice, and remembers with a jolt.

He sits up quickly, trying to ignore the spinning room. “I for-- I, I forgot, I forgot,” he stammers. “I’m sorry, I’m really sorry.”

But Shiro doesn’t look mad. There’s a grin on his face, the one that makes his eyes go all warm and fond. “Hey, no,” he says. “It’s okay, buddy. You look really tired, though, do you want to do this another night?”

“No,” Keith says hastily. “Don’t leave, don’t leave, I’m sorry, just let me--” He hunts around for his shoes: his vision is still lagging, a little bit. He’s so tired.
Shiro waits patiently by the door, and Keith hurries to join him, distantly aware of Malone looking on in confusion. “I’m ready,” he says.

The hallway is so bright, after the semi-darkness of the room. It hurts, and he has to shut his eyes for a second against the searing whiteness of it. Shiro is already walking, and Keith suddenly panics that he will be left behind. He plunges on down the hallway after him as the floor drifts gently from side to side.

Shiro is saying something, Keith realizes abruptly. He blinks hard and tries to focus.

“...any particular plans for today. I thought we’d figure out a schedule, maybe work on whatever classwork you’ve got due later this week, go check out the simulator if there’s time…”

Keith feels queasy at the idea. He gets lost for a minute, wondering if he could make it through a couple scenarios if he asked Shiro to turn off the G-force simulator, wondering if Shiro even would--

“...Keith?” asks Shiro, and Keith realizes he’s lost track of the conversation. Shiro slows to a stop and is looking at him more keenly, and oh no. “You with me, buddy?”

“Yeah,” Keith says, straightening. “’M sorry, I’m not-- I think I’m not awake yet.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to do this tomorrow or the next day instead?” asks Shiro, and now he looks worried. “I don’t mind, I promise.”

Keith rubs his eyes. “No, I-- please don’t go, please don’t…” His balance goes off a little bit, and he quickly opens his eyes again.

“Hey, hey, whoa,” says Shiro, and he’s suddenly crouching in front of Keith, steadying him by his upper arms, and it’s too quick and Keith can’t suppress a cringe, and the startled look on Shiro’s face makes him want to cry.

Shiro’s hands lift off his arms, but they hover close. “Talk to me, buddy,” Shiro urges. “You’re not feeling good, what’s going on? What hurts?”

And Keith is trembling, then, because he doesn’t know how to answer. He wants badly to take a step forward and hide against Shiro’s shoulder and let him take care of everything, but he knows--he knows--what a bad idea that is. Relying on grown-ups will fix things for a while, but then they go away and leave everything worse than before.

So he says, “My stomach,” because that seems safest, and it’s not exactly a lie.

Shiro moves one of his hands up toward Keith’s face, slowly. Keith rears back a little, confused, but then he understands, and he holds still so Shiro can touch his forehead and cheeks gently with the backs of his knuckles.

“Okay,” says Shiro, lowering his hand and standing up again. “New plan, we’re going to go see the nurse.”

“No,” Keith says, and his heart’s racing, just like that. “No, it’s not-- it’s not that bad, I’m okay.”

“You’re slurring, bud,” Shiro says, and Keith stares at him in confusion. He hadn’t thought he was. “You’re all shaky and you can’t walk in a straight line. Come on, we’re just gonna stop by and make sure everything’s okay. Maybe get you out of class tomorrow.”

He puts a hand on Keith’s back and tugs a little, and Keith pulls in a breath and sets his feet. “No,”
he says again, resisting, abruptly aware that the man is big and more than capable of making him go where he does not want to go. “Please, Shiro—”

Shiro stops immediately. The pressure lifts and his hand falls away, and he kneels in front of Keith again. “Okay,” he says, his eyes dark and serious on Keith’s face. “Okay.”

Keith stares back at him. He relaxes again by increments, but his heart keeps pounding.

“Can you tell me what it is, what scares you?” Shiro asks.

“I’m not-- I’m not…” says Keith, and okay, yeah, he hears it now, he is slurring.

Shiro pauses. “There’s a clinic in town,” he offers. “Would that be better than the med wing here?”

Keith swallows. “I think I just want to go back to sleep,” he says, but Shiro catches him by the arm before he can turn around and go back to his room.

“No,” he says, sympathetic but firm. “You’re kind of scaring me, kiddo, we need to get you looked at first. Do you want to go to the med wing here or the town?”

Keith holds very still. Shiro’s grip on his arm is not tight, not at all, but it is exactly where Ricketts held him down yesterday, and the bruise aches. “The town,” he finally mumbles.

“Okay,” says Shiro. “Let’s go.” He stands up, and his arm wraps around Keith’s shoulders to guide and steady, and Keith doesn’t resist this time.

Shiro leads him out, down the halls and up the elevator, through the yard and out the second gate to the staff parking lot. There’s a car waiting there instead of the bike, to Keith’s profound relief, and Shiro helps him get settled in the front seat before he crosses around to get in on the other side.

It’s a nice car, older, but with deep soft seats. He curls up facing the door with his back turned to Shiro and shuts his eyes while Shiro enters the address. He feels the familiar subsonic hum as the electric motor switches on, and then they’re moving.

He opens his eyes and watches Shiro typing on his tablet in the reflection off the window while the car’s navigation carries them down the highway. “What’re you writing?” he finally asks without turning around.

“Just letting the important people know you’re with me,” Shiro answers a little absently. He sends the message and turns the tablet off, and Keith shuts his eyes again before he can get any ideas about talking.

The ride is very smooth, and despite his apprehension Keith is half-drowsing when they arrive. Shiro opens the door for him, and he gets out groggily. The chilly evening air rouses him a little, and the sight of the clinic wakes him up the rest of the way. He’s shaking again by the time they reach the step, and Shiro’s arm tightens around his shoulders comfortably.

He pulls back a little as they near the door. “Shiro…”

Shiro doesn’t push him. “I know,” he says. “I know. I won’t leave unless you want me to, okay?”

“No--” says Keith, and rubs at his eyes. He’s exhausted and hurting and frustrated, and Shiro doesn’t understand, and he doesn’t understand because Keith can’t tell him. “I don’t…”

“What’s going on, Keith?” asks Shiro when he trails off, so caring that Keith wants to kick
something, or cry.

"I don't want to go in," he explodes, pulling away.

Shiro stays where he is. “Okay,” he says, calm and even and attentive, like he cares what Keith is saying, like he’s not just going to make him go regardless. “Why don’t you want to go in?”

But there’s a wall there, a block, and it starts with the bruises on Keith’s arms and ribs and back, and with the aching lump on the back of his head, and if he gives that to Shiro then the rest will fall down too, and he is terrified.

He covers his face with his hands. He’s so tired.

There’s a soft crunch of gravel next to him, and Shiro has caught him. He hadn’t even realized he was falling.

They go inside in the end, as Keith had known they would. Shiro gives him a little while, sitting next to him on the step, then gently urges him up to his feet and guides him inside, and Keith is too exhausted to fight.

Shiro gets Keith settled on a chair and then goes up to the desk. Keith catches snippets of a conversation that contains words like legal guardianship and care of the Garrison, and the familiar ugly feeling of being somewhere adrift and untethered creeps past the pounding in his head. He pulls up his knees and rests his forehead on them.

Shiro comes back to sit with him, and Keith doesn’t look at him. He feels sick again.

The wait isn’t long. They’re ushered into a room, and Keith is put onto a table and helped to lie down. The doctor is brisk and gentle, and her hands when she lifts Keith’s shirt and presses lightly on his abdomen are dry and warm.

He cooperates as well as he can, breathes under her stethoscope, opens his mouth for the thermometer, tries to relax, but he’s tense and shivering the whole time. He can feel each bruise underneath the thin covering of his shirt, tries not to flinch when she brushes against them. Shiro is standing next to him on the other side of the table. Keith ignores him, still simmeringly upset.

The questions for concussion are familiar from the last time, and Keith doesn’t miss the shift. The doctor shines a tiny light in his eyes, asks him questions about his day today, yesterday. He makes up what he can’t remember. She studies him thoughtfully, then helps him sit up. Then she’s combing through his hair, pressing gently at his scalp, searching methodically, and Keith knows it’s over.

Her fingers pause when she finds the lump, and she parts the hair over it to see better. “What happened here, sweetie?”

“I fell,” he answers readily.

“When?” she asks, lightly exploring the tender spot with her fingertips.

“During gym,” he says. It hurts, a lot, and there’s tears prickling in his eyes before she lowers her hands.

Next to him, Shiro shifts. “You didn’t have gym today,” he says gently, and Keith hates him a little bit, just then.
“I had it yesterday,” he flares.


“Have you got any more bruises or hurts?” asks the doctor, cutting in.

Keith says quickly, “No,” just as Shiro says, “His back and arms seem like they’re tender.”

The doctor looks between them. “Can you take off your shirt for me, sweetheart?” she asks Keith after a small pause.

Keith hunches up his shoulders and doesn’t look at either of them. He could refuse, he thinks darkly. He could kick up a fuss, he could. But then Shiro shifts his weight next to him, and Keith thinks of the look on his face when he flinched, and. No, he really can’t.

He squirms out of his shirt and bundles it up in his arms to hold.

The adults are quiet for a second. Then Shiro takes a deep breath, and Keith feels the doctor’s fingertips pressing gently around the edges of the big tender place on his back, the bad one. “Does it hurt to breathe at all?” she asks.

Keith shakes his head, taking a deep breath to demonstrate. It does hurt, but he knows she’s asking about ribs, and they’re not broken. He knows what that would feel like.

“Okay,” she murmurs, and straightens, coming around so he can see her again. “We’re gonna do a scan of your back and head, all right? It looks like you got hit pretty hard.”

“When I fell,” says Keith. The doctor opens her mouth a little and looks past him at Shiro, and Keith goes cold.

She doesn’t press the issue, just gives him a cup for a urine sample and shows him to the bathroom. When he comes back, there’s an odd machine poised above the table like a giant’s microscope, and he can’t help a little quiver of apprehension.

“It doesn’t hurt,” the waiting tech assures him. “Little noise, that’s all.”

Keith doesn’t trust this, but Shiro’s nodding, so he climbs back up onto the table and lays down on his front. They smear his back with some sort of clear goo and lower the machine until a wide, cool surface contacts and conforms to his back. There’s a loud, close noise like a heavy book being slammed down on a table that makes him jump and his head throb cruelly. The doctor murmurs, “One more,” and the noise repeats, and then they lift the machine and he relaxes again.

They fit together an odd apparatus around Keith’s head, like a globe with a hole for his neck. It’s claustrophobic and dark, and he’s suddenly very close to panic. He thinks of the machine hovering above him, his head trapped beneath it, and he can’t catch his breath.

But then there’s a broad warm hand on his back between his shoulder blades, and somebody’s caught hold of his hand, and he can hear Shiro saying, “It’s all right, Keith, you’re safe, you’re safe. I’m right here.”

The tech, on his other side: “Loud noise, just for a second--”

And it’s much, much worse like this; it’s all around him, it goes straight through him. His vision blinks out completely for a second, buried in the explosion of pain from his skull. When he comes back to himself, he’s scrabbling to get out; Shiro is saying his name urgently, and then somebody is
opening the globe and he’s free again.

Shiro gathers him in against himself and Keith goes without thinking. He huddles in the circle of Shiro’s arms and he shakes.

Distantly, he’s aware of the machine being rolled out, of somebody gently wiping the goo from his back with a handful of paper towels. Then the door shuts and the room is quiet again, except for the sound of the doctor rummaging around in one of the cupboards. Keith pulls back a little from Shiro and turns his head to watch.

Shiro reaches wordlessly for his right arm, and Keith, resigned, lets him have it. He watches, feeling rather distant from himself, as Shiro rotates it gently in his hand, turning it so the underside faces the light. The row of bruises where Paschel pinched and twisted look lurid and unreal, a bloom of fuschia under his skin. There’s finger marks on his upper arm, and Shiro silently measures the bruise against his own much larger hand.

The doctor returns. “Little cold,” she warns, and Keith feels a cool cream being smeared over the tender part of his back. The relief is almost instant, and he breathes out. She puts it on the lump on his head, too, which makes his hair feel strange and oily, but suddenly he can bear to have it touched again.

When she comes around to put the cream on his arms, he sees her measuring the handprint-bruises too.

“Can he have his shirt again?” asks Shiro quietly when she’s finished, and she nods. Keith reaches for it, and Shiro helps him sort out which end is up.

“It’ll be about fifteen minutes for the results,” she says. “We might need to keep him overnight.”

Keith goes tense and still at this while Shiro nods, as if that’s perfectly acceptable and expected. Then the doctor is gone, and it’s just them.

Keith doesn’t want to look at Shiro. He knows he’s got the sad and disappointed face on, and Keith is too tired to face it. He keeps his head down.

“I don’t want to stay here,” he says.

But Shiro just wraps an arm around his shoulders again and tugs, guiding him toward the edge of the table. “Come on, bud,” he says. “These exam tables aren’t comfortable and we’ve got a wait.”

Keith slides down and steps off the step-stool. Shiro sits on the padded bench, and Keith settles next to him to wait. He means to stay straight-backed and alert, but Shiro pulls him gently to rest against him.

He’s asleep before the doctor comes back.

Chapter End Notes

I’m on tumblr! I don't post a ton of voltron, but if you wanna yell about fictional characters or politics or whatever I'm heckin down.
“Is this okay?” asks Shiro quietly when the doctor opens the door twenty minutes later. “Can he sleep?”

Keith is a warm limp weight curled against his side, breathing steadily. The doctor looks surprised, and then her face goes soft.

“Yes,” she answers, just as quietly. “If he’s able to sleep, then that’s exactly what he should be doing right now.”

“Do I need to be waking him up?” Shiro asks.

She shakes her head, clicking the imaging results up onto the small screen. “He’s not in any danger at this point. Just give him some time, make sure he gets lots of rest. No strenuous exercise, no gaming, no reading, no homework. Keep him in bed for the next day or so as much as you can, keep tabs on his symptoms. If he’s still having trouble by the weekend, or if any of his symptoms get worse, bring him back in.”

“He’s not--” Shiro begins, confused. He can feel his face getting warm. “Uh, he doesn’t live with me…”

“Oh!” says the doctor. She frowns at Keith, and frowns down at his chart, and then looks back up at Shiro. “I’m so sorry, I assumed you were family.”

“About four days,” Shiro admits.

The doctor’s eyebrows shoot up. She leans against the exam table. “He seems to trust you a lot.”

Shiro doesn’t know what to say to this. He looks down at the top of Keith’s head, at the bruise-marked forearm. “He doesn’t have anybody else,” he finally says, quietly.

The doctor is silent. After a moment, she shifts. “I’ll have the instructions sent over to the Garrison’s nurse,” she says. “They can have somebody check in on him through the day tomorrow. I’m sending a note excusing him from his classes from the next few days as well, and a report on his injuries.”

Shiro catches his lip between his teeth. The idea of leaving Keith in his room for somebody else to take care of for the next two days does not sit well, and he still doesn’t know who gave him the bruises. “Wait,” he says.

The doctor looks back at him, her hand on the door panel.

“My apartment,” says Shiro, “it’s me and two others, but it’s not loud. I can work from home for the next couple of days and keep an eye on him. Would that-- would that be better, do you think, if he
came and stayed with me?”

The doctor shifts her weight, looking back at Keith. “It would be best for him to be with somebody he trusts who can monitor him,” she agrees. “You need permission from his legal guardian, but if he’s already signed temporary care to you for this visit I assume that won’t be an issue.”

“No, ma’am, I don’t believe so,” answers Shiro, relieved.

She pauses. “I don’t think I need to tell you,” she says, “this wasn’t a fall.”

“No, ma’am.”

She nods slowly. “I’m going to be attaching some informational documents on bullying to his report,” she says. “Would you like me to send them to you as well?”

“Please,” says Shiro, relieved. “I’m… in a little over my head here.”

“I’ll send them to you,” she says. “There’s an extent to which social conflict is normal at this age, but this is… definitely not normal or healthy. There’s going to be long-term consequences for him if this isn’t sorted out--physical, interpersonal, mental…”

“I want to help,” says Shiro. “Just-- tell me where to stand.”

“I’ll send the documents,” she says.

Keith doesn’t wake all the way when Shiro carries him out to the car, just shifts a little and tucks his forehead into Shiro’s neck. Shiro doesn’t have the heart to put him down, so he moves the right front seat back a little, reaches back for the blanket folded on the back seat, and wraps it around them both. After he’s set the address for the autodrive and the car is humming quietly over the empty dusk-lit road between the town and the Garrison, he opens another message to the General.

He doesn’t know what to say. Keith has a head injury, and Somebody’s hurting him, and I don’t know who did this, but I’m going to find out and stop them. In the end, he attaches all the files from the clinic, just in case the General’s mail app sorted the message from the clinic into the wrong folder, and he adds a one-line request for permission to keep Keith with him for a couple days.

He sends it off and settles back in the seat, wrapping his arms around Keith. He can feel the boy’s breath in humid puffs against his throat, and he sighs quietly and shuts his eyes.

His tablet lights up with a single-word reply from the General before they reach the apartment building: Granted.

Shiro looks at it, feeling his forehead pull down into a dissatisfied frown. The General’s busy, he knows that; he delegates important things like care of the Garrison’s wards, but still. Still. It seems like he should care more. Somebody should.

The car pulls into the garage and finds its place, and Shiro carries Keith through the silent hallways of his building. The door to his home beeps once and slides open, and he lowers Keith gently onto the couch.

“Sam?” he calls softly down the hall, and slips into the office when he gets an answer. “Keith’s asleep on the couch,” he says without preamble. “He’s got a concussion, I’m gonna keep an eye on him for a couple days.”
“A concussion?” repeats Sam, startled. “How’d he--”

“He says he fell,” says Shiro, and all the helpless anger he pushed down to take care of Keith comes bubbling back up. “There’s grip marks on his arms.”

Sam’s face falls. “You think one of the officers…?”

Shiro shakes his head. “No, it’s-- they’re kid-sized, it’s definitely other cadets. I just…”

“Hey,” says Sam gently, getting to his feet and reaching out. “Hey, all right. Listen. There’s nothing you can do about it tonight, except take care of the kid. They’re not gonna get to him here.”

“Yeah, I know,” says Shiro. He takes a deep breath and scrubs one hand through his hair. “I’m gonna go clean the room.”

“All right,” says Sam, watching him. “You need anything?”

Shiro shakes his head, moving toward his room. “Thanks.”

"You got all your permissions in order?"

"Uh," Shiro says, and doubles back, pulling up the forms on his tablet: one for taking a cadet off-campus, another authorizing medical care at the clinic. He hands it over to Sam, stands a little nervously while Sam flips through and scans the messages from the General. "Is this okay?" he asks. "Is there anything else I need?"

Sam's scrolling through the fine-print on the first form. "This covers it, it looks like," he answers. "Just checking to see if there's an expiration on his off-campus time allotment here... Nah, you're good, I think. And you've got explicit permission from his legal guardian, that should cover anything missing in good faith." He hands Shiro's tablet back to him. "Good job, kid."

Shiro breathes out. "Thanks," he says again, and gestures at the door. "I'm gonna--"

"Sure," says Sam. "I'll be here if you need me."

Shiro’s got tidy habits after the Garrison and not much for personal belongings, so there isn’t much to clean, but he does a quick once-over of his room anyway. It doesn’t take long to strip the sheets off his bed and replace them with fresh, but while he’s carrying the old sheets to the wash, he hears his name called from the living room, high and slightly panicked.

He drops the bundled sheets on top of the washer and hurries down the hall.

Keith is sitting up, wrapped in the brown blanket from Shiro’s car. His eyes fix on Shiro as he comes into sight, big and scared and disoriented.

“I’m sorry,” Shiro says, and crosses to sit next to Keith on the couch in two long strides. “I’m so sorry, I thought I could get the room fixed up before you woke up. How are you feeling?”

Keith is still breathing too fast, quick shallow gasps that sound like panic. “Am I expelled?” he asks, his voice breaking. “Did they, am I expelled?”

“No, of course you’re not,” says Shiro quickly. “You’re not expelled, you’re not being punished. You didn’t do anything wrong, okay? You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Keith's eyes dart around the room, still frightened and confused, and Shiro reaches out for him again.
“This is my house,” he says, keeping his voice steady, trying to communicate calm. “The doctor wrote a note for you so you don't have to go to class tomorrow or Friday while your head gets better. I thought you could stay here instead of by yourself all day in your room. Is that okay with you?”

Keith's eyes finally settle on him again. “Stay… here?”

“You don’t have to,” Shiro assures him. “It's probably not going to be very exciting, it's just me and the commander during the day. I just thought— if you needed anything…” He pauses, abruptly aware of how Keith might be interpreting the situation. His mouth goes dry. “You don’t have to stay here,” he says again. “I’ll take you back right away if you're not comfortable…”

Keith stares him with a little frown, not quite comprehending, and the silence stretches long enough for Shiro to panic. Then Keith asks slowly, “You.... want me to stay here?”

“Only if you want to, bud,” says Shiro, breathing again. “I’m sorry, I should have woken you up to ask before we got here.”

“’Sall right,” says Keith, shuffling the blanket up around his shoulders. He looks around the living room, his eyes still wide and worried. “Is it... Am I allowed?”

Shiro pulls his tablet out of his pocket and lights the screen to show Keith the message thread from the General.

Keith leans forward to read it. He sits back again quickly and gives Shiro a startled look.

“You’re allowed,” Shiro says, grinning at Keith’s open astonishment. “Come on, I’ll give you the tour.”

Keith gets up obligingly to follow, and Shiro steadies him with a hand behind his back. “Kitchen over there, obviously,” he says. “Breakfast things in the cupboard next to the fridge, mostly; there’s some fruit in that basket, bread… there’s milk and juice in the fridge. Help yourself to whatever you want. Err, but maybe not Matt’s cocoa puffs. He’d forgive you eventually, but it might take a while.”

He shows Keith the bathroom and the office, introduces him to Sam. Keith goes shy and quiet here, his eyes wide, so Shiro steers him out of the office again before he can get too overwhelmed.

“And I thought we’d put you in here,” he says, moving into his own room. “Sorry, give me two minutes and I’ll have the bed made up for you.”

Keith looks around the room, his eyes lingering with bleary interest on the posters on the wall, the bookshelf with its odd mix of heavy technical manuals, biographies, and fiction. “’S this your room?”

“Yes,” Shiro confirms, shaking out the duvet.

Keith seems to come a little more awake at this, shifting from foot to foot under the brown blanket like a tiny anxious Jedi. “Where’ll you sleep?”

“Oh,” says Shiro. “I’ll take the couch. Don’t worry about me, I end up sleeping out there half the time anyway. It’s a really comfortable couch.” He circles around the bed to tuck in the corners and Keith turns to keep him in view.

“I c’n sleep on the couch,” he offers.

Shiro’s heart melts a little bit. “Nah,” he says easily, shaking his head. “I’d rather have the couch,
honestly. Plus, we all get up pretty early and I want you to sleep in if you can.”

Keith looks a little bit baffled by this order, but he shifts his weight again and says, “All right.”

Shiro sets aside his preferred pillow and plumps up the other two, then turns to his dresser. A little rummaging turns up a t-shirt and a pair of shorts that will be comically large on Keith but at least have a drawstring. “Here you go,” he says, holding them out to Keith. “Pajamas. They’ll be big but they’ll work for you tonight.”

Keith blinks at the clothes. There’s a little disoriented delay, and then he reaches out to take them.

Shiro watches him, trying quietly to decide how much of Keith’s behavior is from the concussion and how much is from being sleepy in an unfamiliar place. Either way, he decides, the sooner Keith is in bed the better. He reaches out and gently turns him toward the door, walking him down the hall into the bathroom.

It’s the work of a minute to set out a toothbrush still in its package and a clean washcloth, then Shiro leaves Keith to change and do his nighttime routine. He doesn’t want to hover, but he stays close just in case, ducking into the kitchen to do the few dishes stacked in the sink, setting out a cup of water for Keith. After a moment’s thought, he reaches into the cupboard and grabs the painkillers too.

The bathroom door opens after ten minutes or so and Keith emerges, barefoot and all but swimming in his borrowed clothes. He searches for Shiro and relaxes visibly when he finds him.

“How’s your head feeling?” Shiro asks.

Keith shrugs a little, but he shuts his eyes for a moment when he steps into the brighter light of the kitchen, giving Shiro his answer.

He checks the dosage on the painkiller bottle, just in case, then shakes out one. “How about the rest of you?” he asks, handing the pill to Keith with the cup of water.

“M okay,” Keith says. He takes the painkiller without arguing.

“Do you need anything to eat?”

Keith shuts his eyes again and shakes his head.

“Do you want to go to bed?” asks Shiro. Keith nods gratefully, and Shiro curls an arm around his shoulders. “All right, let’s go, come on.”

It’s so easy to show Keith physical affection, Shiro reflects, tucking him in. He’s starting to figure out what he needs, what scares him and what’s safe, which cues mean hug and which mean back off. He’s starting to understand, too, how hungry the boy is for kind touch.

He pulls the covers up to Keith’s chin and steps back. “If you wake up in the night and need anything, you can wake me up, all right?”

Keith nods sleepily, already half-gone. Shiro touches the side of his head briefly, fondly, then shuts off the lamp and slips out.

It’s getting to be late, but he won’t be sleeping for a while. His mind is whirling with images of Keith’s injuries, replaying on a loop Keith stumbling and swaying and falling. He pauses in the hallway, and he rubs a hand over his face and goes to make himself a cup of tea.
He opens his laptop while the kettle roils and pulls up one of the new landing sequences. The on-screen simulation is far less responsive and detailed than the Garrison’s simulators, but the exercise is still both familiar enough to settle him and novel enough to distract him. He sits back and closes the program when the ship is safely landed, feeling more composed. Then he has to turn the kettle back on to reheat the water.

He stares at the screen while he waits, debating. If he pulls up yesterday’s camera feeds from the Garrison, he’ll almost certainly be too angry to sleep by the time he’s found the answers he needs. And with so many cameras to review, it would be the work of hours.

The kettle beeps. Shiro sighs and shuts his computer and goes to make his tea. He has a whole month to find the footage before it’s erased, and it’ll be better to talk to Keith first anyway.

Assuming Keith will talk.

***

Keith wakes up with his heart pounding.

He lies frozen on his back, staring up at the unfamiliar light patterns on the ceiling. He doesn’t know where he is. He blinks rapidly through memories of places he’s stayed: foster homes one and two; the emergency placement the week after the accident; the group home; the Garrison. Nothing fits, and he pushes groggily to remember the events of the day.

It comes back all at once.

Keith breathes out, but he can’t quite relax. It’s deafeningly quiet in the room: no breathing, no electronic hum, not even the whir of climate control. He curls on his side and pulls the blanket up around his ears, but it’s not enough.

He tries to find his way back to sleep, and can’t. He wonders what time it is.

Finally, very quietly, he rolls out of bed and tip-toes to the door, taking the brown blanket with him. It is closed completely, and the little click as Keith turns the knob sounds gunshot-loud. He holds his breath, but nobody seems to have noticed, and after a moment he eases it open a little.

The office is dark, as are the other two bedrooms. He can hear soft snoring coming from the room Shiro identified as the commander’s. There’s a light on down the hall in the living room, though, and he stands uncertainly for a long time, looking at it. Finally he pulls a deep breath and slips out of the room: he can always say he’s just up to use the bathroom if he gets in trouble.

There’s no noise coming from the living room, but as he nears the end of the hallway he can hear steady breathing. He stays there for a moment, holding his weight on the balls of his feet, and then risks a quick look.

Shiro is asleep on the couch, a book tented open on his chest, the lamp glowing gold behind him. Keith hesitates, then steals out to sit on the shorter couch across from him. His bare feet make no noise on the deep, plush carpet, and Shiro doesn’t stir.

Keith pulls up his knees and hugs them, watching Shiro, frowning slightly. He’s not sure how this happened yet. None of it feels real. It feels like a story, like the sort of grand, empty thing kids in the system tell each other.

He reaches up and ghosts his fingertips over the tender lump on the back of his head. It hurts, so he’s definitely awake. His whole head hurts, really, so he shuts his eyes. Then he curls up on his side on
the short couch, wraps the blanket around himself, and listens to Shiro’s breathing until he falls asleep.

Chapter End Notes

This fic now has beautiful & amazing ART and I'm legitimately giddy rn. Thank you so much to AndSoItBegins who is TALENTED af. <3
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

In which there is science, and a door is opened.

When Keith wakes up, there’s a pillow under his head and a second blanket unfolded over him. There are morning noises in the house, both familiar and strange: somebody is brushing their teeth down the hall; behind him in the kitchen there are soft ceramic clinks and a promising sizzle. He can smell coffee and bacon and fresh desert air.

He stays still for a little while, listening to people move around, luxuriating a little bit in the sleepy heaviness of his limbs and the soft weight of the blankets, then he peeks up over the back of the couch to see who’s in the kitchen.

Shiro’s at the stove, pouring pancake batter into a skillet, and there’s somebody else with short light hair sitting with his back to Keith at the kitchen island. Keith studies the unfamiliar person, frowning, and then jumps guiltily when Shiro says cheerfully, “Morning, Keith!”

The person at the island turns, and Keith recognizes him instantly: Matthew Holt, Commander Sam Holt’s son, the youngest person on record to be selected for a space mission. Another Garrison celebrity.

“Oh, hey, good!” says Matthew Holt, and bounces off the stool to come around the couch. “I was worried you’d keep sleeping until I was gone and I wouldn’t get to meet you. I’m Matt.”

And suddenly there’s a friendly hand held out to him, and Keith is panicking a little bit. He takes Matt’s hand automatically, and is entirely unprepared for the vigorous shake.

In the kitchen, Shiro is laughing. “Give him a minute, Matt, geez,” he says. “He just woke up. And he’s recovering from a concussion.”

Matt looks instantly remorseful. “Aahh, right, I’m sorry,” he says, mercifully lowering his voice as he plops to sit next to Keith. “I forgot. How’re you feeling? I had one once, it sucked.”

“Are you hungry?” asks Matt. “Shiro’s making blueberry pancakes. Unless you don’t like blueberries. There’s chocolate chips too. He won’t ever make chocolate chip pancakes for me but I bet he would for you if you asked.”

“Chocolate chips aren’t for breakfast,” says Shiro mildly, stacking pancakes on a plate.

“Oh my god,” says Matt, exasperated. “You’re wrong. There’s a list about how wrong you are and it starts with chocolate chip pancakes.”
“If you actually get up early and make pancakes, you can put whatever you want into them.”

Matt heaves a sigh, pulling a face for Keith that Keith can’t help but giggle at, and hops up again. He circles back around to the kitchen, and Keith watches with bemused interest as Matt and Shiro perform a sort of unchoreographed dance, ducking around each other with perfect familiar coordination to grab plates and syrup and butter and cups, arguing good-naturedly all the while.

“Why is it that syrup’s okay and chocolate chips aren’t,” Matt is saying while he slathers butter on his stack. “I’m pretty sure there’s like, four times as much sugar in syrup as chocolate.”

“Syrup is okay and chocolate chips are okay, but chocolate chips and syrup together are too much,” Shiro says, stealing the butter knife. “Keith, do you want pancakes?”

“You have the weirdest and most arbitrary rules,” Matt complains.

Shiro rolls his eyes and shakes his head slightly, annoyed but smiling, and asks again, “Keith?”

“Um,” says Keith, feeling very shy. “Sure?”

Shiro fixes him a stack without asking any more questions, and Keith is both relieved and more apprehensive. He feels like an intruder, unsure of his welcome, unsure of the rules. His head has started to hurt again and he rubs his eyes.

Then both Matt and Shiro are in the living room with him. Matt flops to sprawl all over the long couch while Shiro hands Keith a plate and sets another down on the coffee table before going back to the kitchen.

“We always eat out here when Dad’s gone,” Matt confides, cutting into his pancakes with the edge of his fork. “He doesn’t actually care, but I think he feels like he should put up a fuss for civilization.”

“Where is he?” asks Keith.

“Running,” says Shiro. “He has to, for his bones.”

“He just got back from space,” Matt says.

Some of Keith’s confusion must show on his face, because Shiro explains as he comes back around with two cups, “Zero gravity, it messes with your bone density. People who go on long space missions have to do impact exercise and take a ton of supplements to build it back up again.”

“Oh,” says Keith.

Shiro hands him a cup full of juice and a pill. “Pain reliever,” he murmurs, sitting down next to him.

Keith sets down his plate on his lap to accept the cup and pill, and a strange warm cared-for feeling spreads all through him. He takes the pill.

“We don’t have to run yet,” Matt continues with his mouth full. “Shiro’s only been on short missions to the station and I’ve never been to space. Shiro runs anyway, though, because he’s a huge nerd.”

“That’s not what nerd means,” says Shiro.

“Nooo, it definitely is in this case.”

Shiro tilts his head thoughtfully and leans forward to put his plate back down on the coffee table. He
starts to get back up. There’s nothing particularly threatening about the movement that Keith can see, but Matt shrieks and scrambles to sit up, holding up his hands palms-out. “I yield I yield I yield!”

Shiro settles back again, a look of satisfaction on his face. He picks up his plate and winks at Keith.

Keith can’t keep back a bewildered smile, looking between them. They’re so easy with each other, it’s infectious, and his anxious, out-of-place feeling begins to ease.

He turns his attention to his plate as his companions go quiet in favor of eating. There’s two large pancakes drizzled with butter and syrup, bacon to the side, and he realizes suddenly that he’s very hungry. Supper was years ago, it feels like, and he threw all that up anyway.

The pancakes are good, if with far less syrup than he would put on himself, but he’s only made it about halfway through the first before his stomach starts churning. There’s an odd dizzy feeling pushing at the front of his skull and he rubs his eyes to try to get rid of it.

He picks all the blueberries out of the pancakes and eats them one by one, but he can’t bring himself to eat anything more. There’s so much left over on his plate, and his heart has started to race with the worry that he will be in trouble for wasting, but Matt whisks away his plate and Shiro’s for washing without even looking at him funny. Keith sneaks a look at Shiro, but he doesn’t seem angry either.

And then Matt breezes out the door with a cheerful goodbye and no explanation.

“Where’s he going?” asks Keith blankly. The apartment is suddenly very quiet.

“Class,” says Shiro.

“Class?” Keith repeats. “I thought--”

“He might be a science prodigy, but he still doesn’t graduate for another year,” Shiro says, grinning. “He’s part-time at the Garrison, just finishing up. The rest of the time he’s with his dad in the lab.”

This sounds nice. Keith tries to picture it, going to one or two classes, then leaving for more interesting and important things. He pictures Paschel’s face.

“If I get really good at science can I do that too?” he asks.

“Maybe so,” says Shiro, shrugging a little. “It all depends what you end up focusing on, and what opportunities there are when you outgrow the Garrison.”

He says it seriously, like it’s something achievable, something he thinks Keith can do if he wants. There’s no hint of the patient, smiling indulgence Keith’s seen adults get when kids say what they want to do. It gives Keith a strange uneasy feeling.

“What are we doing today?” he asks to cover it.

“I’m working on some landing sequences,” Shiro says. “You are resting.”

“I just woke up!” says Keith, appalled.

“Sorry, bud,” says Shiro, and he really does sound sorry. “That’s how concussion recovery goes.”

“My head doesn’t even hurt!”

“Good,” says Shiro. “That means the painkillers are working.”
Keith lets out a little scoff of breath, feeling betrayed. “I feel fine!”

Shiro gives him a look that is far too knowing. “Do you want something other than pancakes?” he asks. “There’s more blueberries, if those are sitting okay. I can make some toast.”

Keith feels his face getting hot. “I’m fine,” he mumbles. “I’m not very hungry.”

“All right,” says Shiro. He wrinkles up his nose a little bit. “I’m sorry, I kind of thought pancakes might be too heavy.” He gets up and goes into the kitchen, and Keith watches him glumly, pulling the blanket around his shoulders.

When he returns, he hands Keith a cup of clear brown tea. “Mint,” he says in explanation. “Should help your stomach, if you can drink it.”

Keith wraps his hands around the cup and sniffs it. He had tea once, a long time ago: his dad let him try his instant iced tea. This doesn’t smell like that tasted. The warmth is nice, too; Shiro’s living room isn’t cold, exactly, but the April morning breeze coming in the window is brisk. He sips cautiously and decides to wait for it to cool a little more. “Thanks.”

“Do you need anything?” Shiro asks, and Keith shakes his head.

He watches as Shiro settles on the big couch across from him and opens his laptop. Quiet fills the room like a glass: Keith can hear birds outside, and a bumblebee tumbling about in the windowbox; a plane passes overhead and traffic whispers on the freeway miles off. Shiro’s keyboard taps an irregular rhythm across the room.

It’s a peculiar kind of peace, one that Keith isn’t used to anymore. There’s nothing he has to do, nowhere he has to be; there’s nobody looking over his shoulder, nothing he has to guard against. He watches the slanting sunshine tangle in the steam curling off Shiro’s coffee. He feels heavy and still and loose-limbed, and after a little while he sets his tea on the table and curls up on his side.

He doesn’t quite sleep, though he feels like he could. He snuggles up with his back against the back of the couch and lies still, his eyes shut, and drifts.

When he comes back to himself, Shiro is still typing, but the puddles of sunshine on the carpet have moved. He listens for a little while, comfortable and content, then finally asks, “What’re you working on?”

“I am…” says Shiro a little absently, and trails off, still typing. “Sorry, I’m… converting some common flight patterns to work with Kerberos’s gravity and atmosphere.”

“Kerberos has an atmosphere?” Keith asks.

“Not much of one,” Shiro says, looking up over the top of the screen. “Nothing breathable, mostly just a tiny bit of nitrogen and methane.”

Keith squints. “Methane’s not…” He can’t remember the word. “Methane blows up?”

Shiro looks pleased. “Yeah. There’s not nearly enough on Kerberos to be dangerous to a ship, though.”

“Can I watch?” asks Keith.

Shiro looks up at him and considers him narrowly for a moment. Then he pats the couch next to him. “Only as long as it’s not hurting your head,” he warns, a little belatedly, as Keith shuffles over.
“Yeah, okay,” says Keith dismissively, and peers at the screen. To his disappointment, there’s nothing very exciting going on, just a static model of a ship and a spreadsheet of values and functions. He pulls up his knees and frowns at it. “Is this what you’re gonna use when you go there?”

“Well,” says Shiro, “It’s what we’re gonna use in the simulator first, and then maybe we’ll use it on Kerberos if it works out and we need it.”

Keith watches as Shiro manipulates the position of the little ship on the screen, adjusting the functions in a flurry of typing. He scoots a little closer for a better view when Shiro reaches out to touch the play button, curious, but the ship only sort of bobs in a three second animation that Keith immediately classifies as underwhelming. Shiro seems satisfied, though, and switches windows to input a new series of numbers.

Keith loses interest quickly. He watches a little while longer without really taking in any of the information, then yawns. He’s sore, now that he’s sitting up, and his back hurts, and he casts about for something to distract himself. “Why’s it so long?” he asks. “Until the launch?”

Shiro hums softly, minimizing windows, and pulls up a new one. “Have you done Pluto yet in science?”

“Not here,” says Keith. “We talked about it in my old school, when I was a kid.”

Shiro seems amused by this for some reason and Keith gives him a narrow suspicious look, but all Shiro says is, “Do you remember about its orbit?”

“It’s…” Keith falters. The words are there, but he can’t remember them. He rubs at his forehead between his eyes. “It’s like a, it’s an oval?”

“Elliptical, good, yeah,” Shiro confirms, nodding.

That’s one of them, Keith thinks. He can’t remember the other one. An ugly jagged-edged throb cuts through his head from his temples and he has to blink a couple times.

There’s a diagram up on Shiro’s screen when he can focus again. It’s the solar system, he knows that much, and he knows the furthest looping oval is Pluto. He watches Shiro lift it from the screen until the little holographic model floats in front of them.

“So,” says Shiro. “They’re all at least a little eccentric--that’s, uhh… if it’s not very eccentric, it’s more circular, and if it’s more eccentric, it’s more like an oval. Pluto is really eccentric.”

“You’re really eccentric,” Keith says automatically under his breath, without even thinking.

He barely has time to realize what he just--oh no--before Shiro responds without missing a beat, “No, you,” and continues on with his explanation.

Keith loses track a little bit after that. There’s something shy and warm unfurling in his chest, and it takes all his concentration to keep the foolish smile down. He nods when it seems some response is needed and absorbs very little as Shiro talks him through the oddities of Pluto’s orbit.

“So here,” says Shiro, and clicks a button that makes the planets all shift to a new position, “is roughly where we are now. Ahh, it’s where we were on the equinox a month ago. See where Pluto is, and see where we are?”

Keith nods dutifully.
“Okay,” says Shiro. “So four years from now…” He scrolls forward and Keith watches in fascination as the translucent planets spin and glide along their orbits. “See?”

Keith leans forward, and understands all at once. Pluto and its moons are aligned with Earth, closer than they are at any other time. “Oh,” he says, startled by how simple it is after all that.

“Yeah,” says Shiro, pleased. “That’s when we’ll be in opposition, so we’ll be as close as we can be before we launch.”

“But you launch in three years,” Keith objects, then tacks on hastily, “I thought.”

“Right, yeah,” says Shiro. “Three years and some change. It’s gonna take us about nine months to get there.”

“Oh,” says Keith, feeling foolish. Pluto and its clustered moons are floating close to him, growing fainter the further they get from the projector, and he reaches out to slow their spin with a single finger. “Which one’s which?”

Shiro reaches over and expands the model with a flick of his fingers. “That’s Pluto, obviously,” he says, and Keith nods, recognizing the Heart. “This one’s Charon, see Mordor? That’s Hydra, Nix, and Styx, and this one here…” He rotates the model gently and zooms in a little more. “This is Kerberos.”

Keith stares at the misshapen lump of a moon, watching it wobble in its rotation. “It’s so little,” he says.

“Yeah,” says Shiro. “Just a little bit of space debris that decided to fall into orbit.”

There’s affection in Shiro’s voice, Keith realizes. It makes his skin crawl a little: the speck that is Kerberos looks so small and unstable, and so far away. Keith glances back across the ecliptic plane towards Earth to gauge the distance and realizes that Earth isn’t even in the projection anymore. None of the planets are.

“Why are you going?” he asks.

“Well,” says Shiro, and flicks at Styx to make the system spin again. “Pluto and its moons sort of dip in and out of the Kuiper Belt along its orbit—you know what that is?” he asks, glancing at Keith.

Keith nods uncertainly, and Shiro hmms and clicks something on his laptop. There’s suddenly a million other objects drifting serenely by at the level of his face in the projection, and Keith jumps.

“Sorry,” says Shiro, and quickly zooms down so that they can see the entire solar system again. Pluto and its moons are colored in bright silver, otherwise Keith thinks he might have lost them in the sea of new objects. Shiro starts the animation again, clicks it until it speeds up and up. Keith watches with interest as Pluto and its little family dive in and under and over the belt.

“We still don’t know very much about Pluto,” says Shiro. “There’s only been one manned mission in the last two centuries since it was discovered, and this is the first to one of its minor moons. We’re wanting to know more about how Kerberos and Styx were formed, and see what they might have picked up from deep space.”

“Like something alien?” asks Keith, and Shiro grins, dipping his head to one side.

“That’s what the commander is hoping,” he says. “That’s been his career, you know, looking for signs of life outside of Earth.”
“Do you want there to be alien things there?” asks Keith.

Shiro shrugs, pausing. “I want to stand on the ground on the edge of the system,” he says simply. “I want to go further than anybody’s gone before, and then come back.”

There’s something strange and wistful in Shiro’s voice, something Keith can’t define. He stares at the model in front of them, spinning years into seconds, and he shivers.

Shiro looks at him, and he reaches to minimize the model back to the screen. “Anyway,” he says. “Does that answer your questions?”

“Yeah,” says Keith. “Thanks.”

“Does your head hurt?”

“No,” Keith says. “A little. It's fine.”

“Alright,” says Shiro. He hesitates, then closes his laptop. Keith stiffens up, a feeling of foreboding sweeping through him, and Shiro says, “We should talk.”

“We are,” says Keith. He doesn't want to look at Shiro. He pulls the blanket further up around his shoulders instead, trying to ignore the deep ache in his muscles.

Shiro sets his laptop aside, angling his body toward Keith. “What happened?”

Keith stares down at his knees. “I fell,” he mumbles. It's not technically a lie; he did fall a couple times, he's pretty sure. Shiro shifts a little and sighs, and Keith catches back a cringe.

“You didn't fall, bud, I know you didn't,” Shiro says. He reaches out, and Keith freezes up, but Shiro only taps his upper arm lightly with the backs of his knuckles. “These bruises you’ve got here, I know how you get them. And somebody kicked you in your back, didn't they?”

Keith wraps his arms around himself. He feels sick and overwhelmed, as helpless as when Ricketts had him pinned. “I don’t--” he starts, then stops. He's trapped: whatever he says will confirm something, and then--

“I know,” says Shiro. “I know, I'm sorry. I wouldn't ask if it weren't important.”

Keith feels his face twisting up with incredulity before he can stop it. He turns his face away from Shiro to hide it. There's resentment and frustration building as hot pressure behind his eyes: he rubs them to try to dispel it.

“Why?” he says finally, flatly, without looking at Shiro.

“Why am I asking?” asks Shiro.

“Why's it important,” says Keith impatiently. There's the definite threat of tears now, and it just makes him angrier. “It's not-- it's not anybody's business, it's mine, it's my business, why are you--”

“Keith,” says Shiro softly. “I just want to help--”

“I don't want your help.” Distantly, Keith realizes that he's on his feet and shouting, that he's definitely going to be in trouble for this. “You keep, you keep butting in, I didn't ask for you to, I didn't--”

“Keith,” says Shiro again. He makes a movement like he's going to get up, and Keith skitters back.
“I didn't ask you to, I didn't ask you to,” and, oh, yeah, there's the tears. “Why can't you leave it alone, please just leave it alone, leave me alone!”

The last words come out as a howl. Shiro has shifted down off the couch onto the floor after him and is reaching out and he can't, he can't--

His head hurts. Everything hurts. He buries his face in his hands.

The light warm weight of the blanket settles around his shoulders again. Shiro tugs it more securely around him and leaves his hands on Keith's shoulders.

Keith lowers his hands from his face and swipes at his nose, but he can't bring himself to look at Shiro. The quiet hangs for a moment, heavy and soft.

“Can I hug you?” asks Shiro.

There's a moment where Keith almost refuses. He's still angry, and he doesn't want to be comforted out of it. He doesn't want to give this to Shiro, this terrible and tenuous part of his life. But he's stepping forward anyway, almost before he's given himself permission, because affection is rare and precious and he's never yet been strong enough to reject it.

Shiro folds him in. He's a little shorter than Keith like this, sitting while Keith stands, but he draws Keith to sit with him against the couch after a moment, and Keith lets him.

“What are you afraid will happen, if you talk about it?” Shiro asks finally.

Keith swallows and stares at his knees. He lets himself imagine it for a moment, follows the chain of events to their inevitable conclusion, sees himself uprooted again and thrown away. His stomach lurches violently enough that he holds his breath.

“Hey,” says Shiro, alarmed. “Wow, you’re really pale, hey, here--” He gets up, returning to press Keith's cup of tea, now cold, into his hands.

The tea is better cold, and the bright green flavor of the mint gives him something more immediate than the churning nausea to focus on. He breathes in and feels better.

“All right?” asks Shiro, watching him closely, and Keith nods. “Good,” says Shiro. “Good, okay. What was that, did you get dizzy? Are you hurting?”

“No,” says Keith, half-irritated. “Nothing hurts, I'm fine.”

Shiro looks at him, and he almost seems to deflate. There’s a little worried wrinkle between his eyebrows, and Keith looks hastily away.

“Tell me one thing you're scared will happen if you talk about this,” Shiro says.

Keith doesn't look at him. The powerless, sullen feeling is creeping back; Shiro doesn’t get it; he doesn’t--

“One thing, bud,” Shiro urges.

“I'll get in trouble,” Keith mumbles finally, grudgingly.

“Okay,” says Shiro, and his tone is so reasonable adult that Keith wants to hit something. “Why would you be in trouble?”
“For fighting,” says Keith flatly. Shiro only graduated two years ago, he should know.

“Did you hurt somebody?” Shiro asks.

“I don't know,” says Keith. Maybe. “Probably.”

Shiro pauses and tips his head back for a moment, squinting one eye. “Did you hurt somebody who wasn't already trying to hurt you?”

Keith doesn't answer. He fidgets, running the edge of the blanket between his fingers. It's soft, worn and a little pilled, makes him think of the blankets on his old bed at home--

“Keith?”

He feels his shoulders hunch up. Shiro is still waiting for an answer, and he'll keep pushing until he gets one. He shakes his head slightly.

“Okay,” says Shiro firmly. “Then that's self-defense, and you're not in trouble for it.”

Keith takes another drink of his tea. He doesn't feel reassured. He feels more sick and apprehensive than before; Shiro doesn't understand--

“What else?”

“You said one thing,” says Keith unhappily.

“Are you ready to talk about it?” asks Shiro.

Keith lets out a breath through his nose. He shrugs.

Shiro watches him, still frowning like there's a puzzle here to be solved. “Here, okay,” he says, his face clearing, and he shifts to face Keith. “What can I do? What would… What can I do that would make it safe for you to tell me?”

Keith sizes him up doubtfully. “Um,” he says, and hugs his knees. He takes a deep breath. “If you… if you promised not to tell anybody else, maybe.”

Shiro faces forward and rubs a hand over his mouth. He's quiet for a moment. “Okay, here's a, a counteroffer: what if we talk, and I promise not to do anything or say anything, but--”

Keith bites his lip.

“--but what if we work together to figure it out, and then once we've got a strategy we both like, then I talk to some people. But only after you've given permission. Would that be okay, maybe?”

He sounds so cautious and hopeful that Keith doesn't know what to say.

“Why is it so important?” he blurs.

“Because,” Shiro says, lowering his head a little to try to catch Keith's eye, “Somebody's hurting you, and I think they've been hurting you for a while, and you think it's something you have to handle by yourself.”

He sounds so serious that Keith almost apologizes. He shuts his mouth tightly and stares at his knees.

“You don't have to deal with this alone, Keith. I'm here, this is literally why I'm here, I want to help
you. Please let me help you.”

Keith realizes abruptly that he's shaking. The intensity of Shiro's focus is a heavy thing, and it's centered on him. He doesn't know where to look or what to say, and when Shiro reaches out to put a hand on his shoulder, he flinches before he leans into it.

“You're okay.” Shiro murmurs, his voice gone gentle and oddly remorseful. He rubs Keith's back between his shoulder blades, and it feels so nice on his aching muscles that Keith closes his eyes. “I didn't mean to scare you, Keith, I'm so sorry.”

“It wasn't--” Keith begins. He doesn't know how to explain it, so he just shakes his head and hopes Shiro understands.

Shiro is quiet for a minute. “I don't want anyone to hurt you anymore,” he says at last, and there's something in his tone that makes it a resolution rather than a wish. He sounds in charge, like it's a change he can effect. “I don't want you to have to be afraid, either of classmates hurting you or of being expelled. I want you to do well here, I want you to be happy and safe and healthy.”

This sounds like a pamphlet to Keith, all bright pictures and happy words describing an unrealistic situation. He's read a lot of pamphlets. But he nods, because Shiro seems to be expecting some response, and the thought is nice, anyway.

“Please let me in,” says Shiro, softer. “Please let me help you.”

Keith swallows. He's so tired, and if he's learned anything about Shiro in the last week, it's that he will not let something go once he's fixed on it.

“Okay,” he says.

Shiro grips the back of his neck gently and smiles, warm and proud.
Information comes in a trickle, not a flood, in disjointed pieces that sometimes have to be coaxed out.

“Is it the same person who’s been taking your food?” asks Shiro. Keith has gone quiet, mostly, fidgeting and uneasy. He nods, and Shiro presses, “Is it just her, or are there others?”

Keith looks up at him, confused. “How’d you know…?”

“I looked,” Shiro admits. “I can log in and see the feed from the mess camera, so… I went to see who it was after breakfast the other day so I could ask Sergeant Burns to keep an eye on it.”

Keith looks startled. “Can you see from all the cameras?”

“No,” says Shiro quickly. “The mess, the halls, the rec room, a couple of the classrooms. And-- wow, I’m sorry, this sounds bad, I should have told you about it before. Um, I haven’t actually used it much, just to find out who was taking your food. I’ll show you what I’ve used it to see, if you want.”

He’s flustered and knows he’s blushing, and he’s reaching for his laptop before Keith has even said anything, silently cursing himself for coming across as so creepy oh my god. “Here,” he says, pulling up the app and going to the tab with his history.

Keith is laughing at him, he realizes. Not actually laughing, but close to it. He reaches for the laptop interestedly when Shiro hands it to him and clicks the first clip in the history, his face going serious. He doesn’t say anything for a minute, watching the girl on the screen take food from his tray, then he shifts, rolling his shoulders like he’s trying to shrug off something uncomfortable. “I didn’t think anybody watched these,” he says. “Nobody ever-- I mean, she’s never… she’s never cared about the mess cameras and nobody ever did anything.”

“They don’t watch them, usually,” says Shiro. “Unless there’s an incident. Security camera footage is really boring and it’s more useful to have a sergeant in the room.”

Keith nods absently. He goes back to the history tab and clicks the other, a twenty-second clip of the supper line a week ago. “What’s this?” he asks, puzzled.

“Oh,” says Shiro. He forgot about that one. “That was the night I came and got you and we went walking. I wanted to see if you were eating yet, I thought maybe if I hurried I could get there with food before you finished supper.”

“Oh,” says Keith. And then, “Oh, there’s me!”

He doesn’t sound creeped out. Shiro relaxes, but to be safe he asks, “Is this-- does it make you uncomfortable?”

Keith frowns and looks up at Shiro. “No,” he says, shaking his head, and looks back at the screen. “I always thought there was somebody watching who-- who could see everything and just didn’t care. I’d rather…”

He falters and stops, like he’s said more than he meant to. “Um,” he says, and shifts. “You should,
you should send me a message when you’re watching, because then I can wave at you.”

“Maybe I’ll start opening it over lunch,” offers Shiro. It’s half a joke, but only half.

“Yeah, okay,” says Keith. He’s lighting up for the first time all day, a shy glow that Shiro already knows he’d do about anything to earn.

The mention of lunch makes them both realize they’re hungry. Keith follows Shiro out to the kitchen, still trailing the blanket, and sits at the island while Shiro starts water boiling.

“So,” says Shiro, chopping vegetables with his back to Keith. “Was it her? Paschel, right?”

Keith doesn’t respond right away, but Shiro holds his breath and waits, and finally hears a subdued, “Yeah.”

“Her and her two friends?” asks Shiro. “Ricketts and… I forgot the other. From the hallway?”

Keith looks pale again when he risks a look, and Shiro pauses watchfully in case the kid is about to pass out. But Keith nods after a moment, just a small motion of his head, and Shiro decides he’s all right.

He puts noodles in the boiling water and starts the timer, then turns to face Keith, leaning on the island. “Where’d they catch you?”

“The bathroom by my room,” Keith mumbles.

Shiro nods. There are no cameras in the bathrooms, and some of the lower floors are quiet enough that a fight could go unnoticed. “What happened to your head?”

“Hit it on the shower basin when I fell.”

“Did you have help falling?” asks Shiro.

“Ricketts knocked me down.”

“How about your back?”

Keith hesitates. “I don’t remember,” he says. “I think somebody kicked me, but it’s kind of-- it’s fuzzy, I don’t know.”

“It was after you hit your head?” Shiro guesses.

“Yeah.”

“What about your arm, was that before or after?”

Keith rubs his arm. “Before.”

Shiro pauses. He doesn’t recognize the bruise pattern, but they seem deliberately inflicted. “What happened there, can you tell me?”

“Um,” murmurs Keith, and shifts on the stool. “I-- They had my arm, she just kind of… pinched it a lot.”
Shiro pinches the skin on the inside of his own forearm experimentally. It’s more painful than he expects, a sharp electric bloom, and he releases with a wince. The skin where he pinched is pink but unmarked. “What about the other bruises?” he asks, gesturing at his own upper arm. “Did that-- happen at the same time?”

Keith nods.

Shiro takes a deep breath. It’s far too easy to picture. “Okay,” he says. “I'm going to hug you now.”

This elicits a tiny smile. He circles the island, and Keith swivels a little on his stool to meet him, and Shiro wraps him up tightly in his arms.

“If that ever happens again,” he says, “if anybody ever hurts you, I want you to call me right away, okay? Call me, or call the General, he's your legal guardian and it's his business what happens to you. Tell Sergeant Burns, tell one of your teachers, or the nurse, just-- just tell somebody. You don't have to live with this.”

Keith doesn't say anything. He turns his face in to hide against Shiro's shoulder, and Shiro combs his fingers through the soft hair on the back of his head. He needs a haircut and a shower, Shiro notices absently, and then wonders who sees to that sort of thing, who decides when Keith gets his haircuts, if anybody reminds him to wash.

“I know that was hard to talk about,” he says finally. “Thank you.”

Keith nods without raising his head, and Shiro holds him tightly until the timer goes off.

Lunch is simple, just steamed vegetables and noodles with butter. Shiro keeps an eye on Keith, but he finishes his portion without trouble, though he eyes the snow peas suspiciously.

Halfway through cleaning up, Sam comes home. Keith sort of shrinks where he sits, watching the commander kick off his shoes at the door.

“Hi, sir,” Shiro calls, putting deliberate cheer and friendliness into his voice. He's safe, he wants Keith to hear. He's a good one.

Sam looks up in the middle of bending to put his shoes away. “Hey, Shiro, Keith,” he answers, and grins at Keith. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, sir,” Keith says, sounding very small.

The commander, bless him, shifts his focus away from Keith. “Not answering your phone today?” he asks Shiro. “I called a couple times, I was gonna bring home fried chicken.”

“Oh! Oh,” says Shiro, startled. “Sorry, I must have…” He crosses to the couch, hunting between the cushions for his tablet. “We just had noodles, I think fried chicken might have been a little much.” He finds it, finally, and sees with chagrin the two missed calls. “Sorry, Sam.”

“Don’t worry about it,” says Sam, poking into the kitchen. “Any noodles left?”

“No, but I'll make you some,” says Shiro, scrolling through his notifications. There's a message from a Garrison address, and he squints for a moment before he opens it.

Shit.

Shit.
“Okay,” he says slowly. “Actually, sorry, I have to go in for a little bit. Can you stay with Keith? Keith, is that all right?”

Some of his apprehension must come through in his voice, because Sam and Keith both look up at him. Sam shifts. “Yeah, I'm back for the day, what's up?”

“Um,” says Shiro, and just hands over the tablet in explanation. Sam takes it, frowning. Keith is still sitting small and blanket-cocooned at the island, eyes huge with anxiety, and Shiro goes to him. “I'm sorry,” he says. “I'm really sorry, it won't take more than an hour or so, okay? I'll be back as soon as I can.”

Keith nods quickly, but he stares at Shiro, scared and searching. His eyes slip past Shiro to the commander for a moment.

“It's okay,” Shiro says, answering the unspoken question. “If you need anything at all, you can ask Commander Holt.” Sam will have won Keith over in about fifteen minutes, but Shiro hates that he's leaving Keith with somebody he doesn't know. “It's okay,” he says again, and gives Keith another quick, tight hug before turning back to Sam.

Sam hands the tablet back. “It's just posturing,” he says quietly. “He'll bluster a bit, that's about all he can do.”

Shiro hesitates, then nods. “Thanks. I should--”

“Yeah,” says Sam. “Go.”

Shiro looks back at Keith one more time, then goes.

Chapter End Notes

Short one this time, but the next one will be longer. Christmas season is kicking my ass i hate everything.

Is there anything in particular you guys are wanting to see from this fic? I'm definitely finding what I write influenced by comments, so if there's a scenario you'd like to see, or more of a character, anything like that, I'd love to hear it!
Shiro reads the message again once the car is humming silently along the road. It's a curt paragraph from Iverson, nearly three hours old, ordering him to report to his office two and a half hours ago. It can only be about Keith.

He takes a deep breath and blows it out again, his knee jogging nervously. Then he writes a brief, briskly apologetic reply and sends it off. Then, to be safe, he sends a copy to the General.

It's unusual that Iverson chose to contact him the way he did, through an easily-missed message to his ordinary inbox rather than to the high-priority mail that goes to every piece of tech he owns, including his watch. It's a deliberate step meant to put Shiro on unstable ground, and it's worked.

Iverson makes him wait in the office outside for nearly half an hour. Shiro sits, fighting the impulse to check his tablet, to message Sam and ask if Keith is all right. He deliberately deepens and slows his breathing, focusing on each point of tension until it eases. If he can calm his body his mind will follow.

He's nearly there when Iverson finally barks for him to enter. He takes a last deep breath and stands, straightening his clothing, and after a small hesitation starts his tablet recording audio before he slips it into his pocket.

He steps inside.

Iverson doesn't look at him or gesture for him to sit, so he stays standing, straight-backed and formal at attention. “I guess you know what this is about,” says Iverson after a moment.

“No, sir,” Shiro says.

Iverson does look at him at this, irritated. He sighs and flips across apps on his tablet, glancing over a document. The text is too small for Shiro to read upside-down, and he returns his gaze to the wall behind Iverson before the man looks back up at him.

“Last night at about 1900 hours you left base with one of my cadets without securing permission from myself,” he says. “You took this cadet to an off-site medical facility without approval, and you then kept him with you in an off-site location. Do you know you could be charged with kidnapping, Captain?”

The accusation is so wildly unfair that Shiro can only gape for a moment. He gathers himself, moistens his lips, and says slowly, “With respect, sir… I have the proper forms signed electronically by General Beck. I believe if you look in your inbox you’ll find that I’ve had them all forwarded to you. The events of last night were-- were urgent and unusual in nature, and I acted in what I believe to be the best interest of the cadet.”

“What might be in the cadet’s best interest isn’t your decision,” says Iverson. “It’s mine. Your actions last night were precipitous and inappropriate, and this will be going in your permanent file.”

"Easy, thinks Shiro, easy. He can feel his calm slipping away, and he takes a deep breath. “Sir,” he says, his tone carefully level. There’s only a slight tremor to betray him. “I did everything I could possibly have done to keep you informed through the evening. I did not... abscond with your cadet;"
I took him to get care he needed—

“You don’t inform me, Shirogane,” Iverson cuts him off, throwing down his stylus. “You ask, and you proceed with permission, if granted. There was no reason for you to take Kogane off base.”

“Cadets have a right to medical care—”

“The Garrison medical facilities are more than adequate,” says Iverson.

“Cadets and their guardians have the right to select alternate facilities of care for any reason at any time,” Shiro says loudly. His voice has gone sharp and angry; he’s not doing himself or Keith any favors. “Cadet Kogane chose to exercise that right. I acquired permission from his guardian and I took him to get care for injuries that were a direct result of your negligence, sir.”

Iverson leans back in his chair. The silence stretches cold and dangerous for a moment, then he says, “I’m going to dismiss you in a minute, Captain. When I do, you’re going to go get my cadet, you’re going to bring him back here, and you’re going to leave. If you pull a stunt like this again, if you keep playing hopscotch with the chain of command, I will have you banned from this campus. Do you understand me?”

Shiro feels a muscle flutter in his jaw. “I understand you, sir.”

“Good,” says Iverson pleasantly. “Now. What are you going to do, again, Captain?”

Shiro stares at him. The memory of Keith trembling, burrowing into him for comfort and shelter in the cold white light of the exam room is painfully vivid, and if there’s one thing Shiro knows right now it’s that he is not capable of walking away. He opens his mouth, and he takes a breath to say something he will never, ever regret—

Iverson’s eyes slip past him. The door opens.

The General is one of those people who quietly fills a room, and Shiro knows before he even begins to turn who is there. Iverson is scrambling to his feet and standing at rigid attention, and the look he casts Shiro is full of disgust.

“At ease, please,” says the General, and Shiro and Iverson step in tandem to shift their stance. Shiro’s heart is racing with residual adrenaline, a peculiar kind of fierce gladness: he would have happily fought this battle and a hundred more to stand beside Keith, but he doesn’t have to.

The relief is here; he can stand down.

“I think,” says the General mildly, “there may have been some confusion.”

Shiro calls Sam once he is dismissed, and the commander answers almost immediately.

“What happened?” Sam asks, his face alert and attentive on the tablet screen. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” says Shiro, and laughs. He’s a little bit breathless and shaky with the relief still, and he glances back down the hall toward Iverson’s office as he walks. “Um, yeah, it was-- everything’s fine.”

“What happened?” Sam asks again.

“Where’s Keith?” Shiro asks. “Is he doing okay?”
“Oh, yeah,” says Sam, and the view on the screen rotates. Keith is curled up on the big couch, fast asleep. “He’s fine. We had chocolate milk, and he had some questions about the Tethys mission, and now he’s out.”

Shiro relaxes. “Thank you,” he says. “Thank you. Um…” He slows and hesitates, getting his bearings. “I’m going to-- I’m gonna stop by Keith’s room and get some clean clothes for him, and then I’ll be home. I’ll tell you the rest later.”

“We’ll be here,” says Sam. “I’m glad everything worked out.”

“Me too,” says Shiro fervently. “Okay, I’ll-- see you later.”

He closes the connection and turns down the hall to leave the administrative wing.

Malone opens the door when he knocks, and he’s just as startled to see Shiro this time as the last. “Oh--” he says, and leans out into the hall, glancing up and down. “Keith isn’t, Keith isn’t with you, sir?”

“No,” says Shiro. “I’m just here to get some of his things. He’s staying with me for a couple days.”

Malone steps aside to let him in, rubbing his elbow and frowning. “Is he all right?”

There’s worry in his voice, and Shiro glances at him. “I’m sorry,” he says, straightening. “I’m so sorry, I should have sent you a message too. He’s, um-- he’s fine, but he’s got a concussion.”

“Oh,” says Malone, his face going slack with realization. “Oh, that was-- wow. I knew he wasn’t feeling great…”

“Do you know where he might have a knapsack or something?” Shiro asks, and Malone finds him an old, beaten-up backpack in the corner of Keith’s closet.

Between the two of them, they find enough clothing neatly folded in Keith’s drawers to fix him up for a couple days, and Shiro packs it up while Malone hovers awkwardly.

“How long is he staying with you?” he asks.

Shiro tucks a pair of socks into the side of the backpack’s compartment. “The doctor said to keep an eye on him until Friday at least, and I thought we’d keep him for the weekend too, just in case.”

“How’d he… how’d he get the concussion?”

Shiro takes a breath and hesitates. This is unfamiliar ground; he’s not sure how much is appropriate to tell one cadet about another, even if the one seems to be the closest thing to a friend that the other has. But Malone saves him the uncertainty:

“Did he get into another fight?”

“You know about that?” asks Shiro, startled.


Shiro stares at him. He has a hundred questions--why didn’t he say something, why didn’t he step up if he knew--and Malone flushes uncomfortably.
“I told the nurse last time it looked like he got beat up,” he says. “But it’s-- he’s sort of… cagey, he mostly tries to hide it all, and if I ask he gets all panicky. Um, it’s not bad, not very often. It’s just, he’s always… you know, ‘running into things’ or ‘falling down’ or whatever.”

“Did you tell anybody besides the nurse?” asks Shiro.

“I told Burns,” says Malone. “She likes him, she keeps an eye out.”

“Good,” says Shiro. “Thank you, you did-- you did good. Um--” He hesitates. “I’m gonna give you my contact code. I want to know if he’s got… weird bruises, or if it looks like he’s been in trouble. Can you let me know, would you do that?”

“Yeah,” says Malone, straightening, and reaches for his tablet. He seems relieved. “Yeah, of course, sir.”

Shiro gets up and pulls out his own tablet to make the connection. “This is my high-priority code,” he says. “Don’t give it out.”

“I won’t, sir,” says Malone. He seems serious; Shiro isn’t sure he trusts him entirely, but it’ll be worth blocking a couple of spam connections if he can have an extra pair of eyes on Keith.

“Thank you,” he says again. He considers the boy. “What’s your focus here?”

“Pilot program,” Malone answers. He says it matter-of-factly, without quite looking at Shiro, as if a year three slot in the program isn’t one of the more difficult and coveted positions in the school. “It’s why they--” He gestures at Keith’s side of the room.

“What’s your ranking?”

Malone shifts his weight and admits, “First.” His ears have gone pink.

“Wow,” says Shiro, impressed. He zips up Keith’s backpack and slings it over one shoulder, pausing. “Interested in running a simulation drill sometime?”

Malone’s mouth goes slack. “Um,” he says after a startled moment. “Um, yeah, that would be-- that would be awesome. Really?”

Shiro grins. “I’ll give you a call sometime after this week and we can set something up.”


Shiro’s grin widens. “I’ll see you around,” he promises, and heads out.

He picks up his pace as he leaves the Garrison. He needs to be home; he needs to be there before Keith wakes up. He can’t stop himself from glancing down the hall toward Iverson’s office as he passes, and he just gets a glimpse of the General’s back through the window. He faces forward again quickly and blows out a breath.

The ride home takes forever. He keeps his tablet in his hand, writes and erases a dozen messages to the commander. To distract himself, he turns his attention to the backpack. It’s stained, but brightly colored; there’s a cartoon astronaut on the back pocket, the logo of a show underneath. Shiro stares at it for a moment, trying to imagine a Keith who watched Saturday morning cartoons in his pajamas and liked bold happy colors, who had somebody to outfit him according to his interests.
Then he’s looking up the cartoon, and messaging the clinic to see how long it will be before Keith’s concussion has cleared enough that he can watch it again, and trying to think what he liked at that age because Keith should have the normal things kids have, he should have lazy mornings and weird enthusiasms and the cereal with the stupid shapes, he should have that.

The car pulls into its space and Shiro hops out before it’s finished powerng down. The elevator is too slow, so he takes the stairs, going two at a time. Then the apartment door is sliding open in front of him. Sam turns to look toward the sound, and Shiro’s eyes skip past him to the big couch.

Keith is there, still safe, still sleeping. A core of tension Shiro hadn't realized he was still carrying eases and dissipates, and he lets it go on an exhale.

“Hey,” says Sam, his voice soft. There's a held-breath hush in the apartment, no sound of music or gaming or simulation. It feels unnatural in this home of three men, and yet at the same time entirely natural.

“Hey,” Shiro answers, equally quiet. He sets down Keith's backpack by the door and kicks off his shoes, padding silently to the couch. Keith is asleep in a heap next to where Shiro was sitting earlier, like he sat down to wait and just toppled over. Shiro sits down gingerly next to him, reclaiming his earlier seat, and Keith doesn't stir. His messy too-long hair has fallen across his eyes and Shiro wants to brush it back.

“So?” Sam asks, pressing gently.

Shiro looks across the coffee table at him, then looks away, lifting his shoulders. “Um,” he says, and rubs his eyes. The adrenaline rush is fading abruptly, now that he is home, and he feels tired and sluggish. “My position with Keith isn't… isn't a military one, and Iverson was wanting to treat it like it was, what it boiled down to.”

“Pulled rank on you?” Sam guesses, and Shiro huffs out a weary laugh.

“Threatened court martial,” he says. Sam's eyebrows shoot up, and Shiro hastens to reassure him. “There's nothing there, it was… I don't know if he didn't get my communications last night or if he was just ignoring them. It was over me taking Keith off campus, but I had the forms and permissions I needed…”

“What happened?”

“The General intervened,” says Shiro. “It was something to see. I've got—” He stares down at the black dark screen of his tablet without really seeing it, overwhelmed all over again. “Um, it won't be a problem again. I've been made an agent of care on a renewing biweekly basis.”


“Yeah.”

Sam rubs his hands over his face. “This has moved really fast,” he says. “Are you okay with it?”

It's a complicated question, and Shiro takes a moment to answer. “I feel really… underqualified,” he says finally. “I feel like somebody's going to realize this is a job for a real adult and I'm definitely not one.”

That holds weight, and Shiro turns the words over in his head for a moment.

“And don't think the General's just charging ahead with this half-cocked,” Sam adds, reaching for his coffee. “There's laws. You've had the most thorough background check of your life this week, believe me.”

Shiro gives him a startled look.

Sam grins crookedly. “I might have provided a reference.”

Shiro gapes at him. “You-- were you going to tell me?”

“Nah,” says Sam lightly, and takes a drink of his coffee. “Didn't figure you needed any influence.”

“Would have appreciated some warning!”

“Well,” Sam says. “I wasn't actually told what it was for. I had some suspicions, but this is more than I expected, honestly.”

Shiro's gut flips again. “What if I screw this up?” he asks. “Sam, I don't know anything about kids, what if--?” The potential for disaster is overwhelming: he could hurt Keith, he could step wrong and cause lifelong damage.

“Just love on him,” Sam says firmly, repeating his earlier advice. “You're going to mess up at some point, you can't dwell on that. If you let yourself get too caught up worrying over what might go wrong, you could miss the chance to do something great.”

Shiro goes still as the words sink in. He draws a deep breath and finally nods. "Thank you, sir.”

On the couch next to him, Keith begins to stir, and Shiro straightens alertly. “Hey,” he says when Keith blinks at him blearily. “Hey, bud, hi…”

Keith doesn't answer, pushing himself to sit up. Shiro reaches out, his hand hovering uncertainly over Keith's back.

Keith is clumsy with sleep, a little bit tangled in the blanket from the car he still hasn't let go. His eyes don't open or focus all the way, but he scoots toward Shiro and sort of collapses against his side. In seconds, he's gone limp and warm and still again, breathing steadily.

Shiro can't breathe at all for a moment. He closes his mouth and swallows, and very carefully he lowers his arm to nestle around Keith's back.

“You've adopted a cat,” says Sam solemnly, and Shiro gets a fit of silent giggles.

Chapter End Notes

merry christmas, if you celebrate it!

if you don't, have a JOLLY GOOD DAY and stay warm, unless you're in a non-cold climate, in which case stay hydrated i guess???
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Keith sleeps for the rest of the afternoon. He sleeps through Shiro reaching for his laptop and making the necessary adjustments so he can type without whacking him in the face with his elbow. He sleeps through Matt coming home from class, whispering “Oh, no,” loudly, and taking about a dozen pictures. He even, two hours later, sleeps through Shiro gingerly extracting himself for a badly needed bathroom break, and only snuggles back into his side without ever fully waking when he returns.

Then, near suppertime, when the sunlight from the windows on the other side of the apartment is getting to be gold and long-shadowed, Matt drops a pan in the kitchen, and Keith’s entire body jolts.

Shiro holds still, not sure yet if he should acknowledge it. Keith isn’t moving, hasn’t opened his eyes, but there’s a thrumming tension in his body and a tightness in his face that wasn’t there before.

He’s trying to decide if it’s safe, Shiro realizes all at once.

There’s a moment where he nearly panics, where he doesn’t have any idea how to help, but a memory resolves sharp and clear of his grandfather’s kitchen table, a scorching summer day full of apprehension and indecision and a life-altering choice to be made--

He knows what to do.

He puts his hand on Keith’s back and runs his palm up and down the knobby spine, slow and firm, consciously deepening the pace of his own breathing to match the rhythm. Keith doesn’t react, doesn’t open his eyes, but there’s a tiny flinch when Shiro’s hand reaches the middle of his back. Shiro pauses immediately, wondering if he’s stumbled into unsafe territory; then he realizes his fingers are resting above the deep and ugly bruise.

“Sorry,” he says quietly, shifting his hand up, away from the tender place, resuming the rhythm over Keith’s shoulders instead.

Keith doesn’t respond, still pretending to be asleep, but Shiro can feel the tension easing under his hand, the tremors stilling.

Shiro looks back at the screen in front of him after a moment, but only half of his attention is on his work. He types with one hand, the other still absentely rubbing Keith’s back, and he watches from the corner of his eye while Keith gathers information. There’s a few more loud clangs and some off-key whistling--Matt has a habit of filling whatever space he occupies with noise--but Keith seems to be becoming accustomed.

Finally, when Keith has been still and calm again for a while, Shiro shifts a little to sit up straighter, tapping Keith’s back lightly. “Hey,” he murmurs. “I brought back some of your clothes. Supper’s going to be soon, but there’s time for you to take a shower first, okay?”

Keith sits up reluctantly. He winces a little with the motion, holds himself like he aches, and Shiro watches narrowly. The bottle of painkillers is still on the coffee table: he glances at the time, then leans forward and shakes one out for Keith.

“What’s hurting?” he asks, handing it to Keith with his cup.
Keith just shrugs, swallowing the pill.

Shiro gives him a minute, then says gently, “I need you to tell me, bud. Is it your back?”

“S... everything,” Keith says, and his eyes drift shut again for a moment. He rubs the side of his head, then stretches out his shoulders, his face creasing up with discomfort.

“Sore muscles?” asks Shiro, watching.

“I guess.”

“Well,” says Shiro. “A hot shower should help that. If you’re still hurting later on after the painkiller’s had some time to work, we’ll see what else we can do.”

Keith stays sitting, eyes half closed, and Shiro can see him falling asleep again. “Okay,” he says, and wraps an arm around Keith’s shoulders to urge him to his feet and steer him to the bathroom. “Come on. It’s not gonna take long, and then you’ll feel better and you can sleep again.”

He sets out a towel and clean pajamas for Keith, shows him shampoo and soap. “You got this?” he asks, a little anxious. He has no idea what to do if the kid says no. But Keith nods, groggy but awake, and Shiro relaxes. “Yell if you need anything,” he says, and slips out.

Matt’s making enchiladas, and the kitchen is fragrant with cumin and chili. Shiro opens the oven door for a quick look, and Matt protests from where he’s sitting at the island. “They're not gonna cook if you do that!”

“Sorry,” Shiro says humbly. “They smell really good.”

Matt looks mollified, and a bit smug. “Yeah they do,” he says, looking back down at his homework. “Uh, I put olives in half, so.”

“Thanks for the warning,” says Shiro. “Which half?”

“That's for me to know and you to guess,” says Matt. And then, when Shiro starts around the counter, “Ohgod, they're the ones with olives on top, I marked them, I marked them!”

“I was just going back to the couch,” says Shiro, widening his eyes. “I don't know why you're so jumpy all the time.”

“I hate you,” says Matt.

“No, you don't,” says Shiro comfortably.

“I do, though,” says Matt. “I plot your demise daily. Hey, do you remember anything from the mid-1900s fantasy unit?”

Shiro squints at him. “Your plotting needs work.”

“No, come on,” says Matt. “I need help with this, I can't get started.”

“What's up?” Shiro asks, coming around to look over his shoulder.

“It's a paper on escapism, I'm just-- I'm having a hard time applying the concept to the bundle they gave us, I guess?”

“Why's that?”
Matt gestures helplessly at the screen. “It's pretty heavy, some of it, planets getting blown up, worlds getting taken over by dark lords, people losing fingers and limbs and shit. Straight up dystopia, half the time? I don't see it being an escape, I don't get it.”

Shiro reaches past him to scroll through the notes he's taken, skimming past screengrabs and looping animations. “Hmm.”

“Incisive.”

“Quiet, puppy,” says Shiro. “Okay, you're making this too hard on yourself.”

“How's that?” asks Matt warily.

“It's not... literal escapism they're going for. You're gonna find horror in a lot of these that really reflects the real life horrors they were dealing with at the time--”

“Yeah,” says Matt. “Yeah, exactly, so what the hell--”

“Moral escapism,” says Shiro. He claps Matt's shoulder and goes to get some water.

“What,” Matt complains.

“I'm not going to write the paper for you,” says Shiro, filling his glass. “Think about the conflicts, think about the good-guy bad-guy balance.”

“You suck,” says Matt.

Shiro grins broadly, turning to lean against the counter. “If you can tie it into the more morally ambiguous narratives favored in the climate change era, they'll like that. Um, and the political schisms of the early twenty-first century, you could definitely make the argument that those were affected if not directly related.”

“Are you doing this on purpose?” demands Matt.

“A little bit,” Shiro says, and hastily ducks the stylus Matt throws at him. “No, but really, start thinking about how it would feel to identify with a character who is unquestionably good and resisting something that is unquestionably evil in a time where everything is, you know, changing, feels like a threat. That's your escapism, not people taking a mental vacation to Rivendell.”

“I hate this stuff so much,” Matt mutters. “Thanks, though.”

“No problem,” says Shiro, stooping to retrieve the stylus. He glances down the hall toward the bathroom as he hands it back to Matt: the shower is still running.

Matt follows his glance. “So what’s the story there?” he asks, lowering his voice.

“Um,” says Shiro. “Late twenty-first century post-collapse hyperreality?”


Shiro shifts his weight and shrugs. “He’s a Garrison ward,” he says. “He’s-- I don’t know much about his background, he doesn’t have parents. The General asked me to mentor him a couple weeks ago and things just sort of… fell into place?”

“Is he going to be hanging around?” asks Matt.
“Would you mind?”

“No,” says Matt. “Course not. He seems nice, and you seem invested, and it’s pretty sweet honestly.”

Shiro leans his elbows on the island. “I have no idea what I’m doing,” he says. “The commander says I should just roll with it, though, so I’m… trying to roll, I guess.”

“Does he get beat up a lot?” asks Matt thoughtfully. “You should get him a panic button.”

“Yeah?”

“I had one in middle school when I was riding the city bus,” says Matt. “I never had to use it, it was just in case. It was made to look like one of those cord bracelets with the buckle, and then there was a button on the buckle that turned on the GPS and pinged Mom. I think Pidge is using it now.”

“That’s…” says Shiro, and pauses. “That’s a really good idea, thank you.”

“I try.”

The water shuts off down the hall. Shiro glances that way automatically, frowning: it’s been less than ten minutes, he almost wants to knock on the door and order Keith back in for another quarter hour to let the water work on his aches.

Matt makes a coughing noise. “Motherhen.”

“What?” asks Shiro.

“What?” asks Matt, eyes big.

“God,” says Shiro, grabbing his water and heading out to the couch. “Do your homework. And get off my lawn!”

“Yes sir, Captain Helicopter Dad, sir.”

Keith emerges a few minutes later, dressed in his own clothes with his hair towel-mussed and damp-dark. He pauses at the end of the hallway with the borrowed shirt and shorts bundled in his arms. “Shiro? What should I do with--”

“Oh,” says Shiro, and gets up to meet him. “I’ll take it. How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay,” says Keith. “I feel better.”

Shiro assesses him briefly: he looks better, his eyes are more focused and alert, he’s not holding himself so stiffly. “Supper’s about ready,” he says. “Feel like you could eat something?”

Keith’s eyes slip past him to the kitchen. He shifts from foot to foot uncertainly. “May-- um, maybe?”

“Okay,” says Shiro. “No pressure. It’ll be a few minutes yet, want to help me set the table?”

Keith trails after him, almost unnervingly quiet. Shiro hands him silverware and only pauses for a moment to turn on some music before he follows with plates.
“Are you serious,” says Matt, looking up from his homework. “You’re gonna scar this poor kid.”


“That it definitely is not,” Matt says severely. “At least put on something in 360, if you really have to psych us all up to fight orcs.”

“I like it,” ventures Keith. Both Matt and Shiro turn to look at him across the table, surprised, and Keith hunches up his shoulders in a small defensive shrug. His eyes dart between them, big and a little worried.

Shiro quickly averts his eyes, turning instead to point triumphantly at Matt. “Keith likes it.”

Matt throws up his hands and turns back to his tablet. “I try to bring some modicum of relevance to this house,” he says. “Keith, come talk to me when Shiro’s not around and I’ll introduce you to real music.”

“Matt has a very narrow definition of real music,” Shiro whispers loudly, and is rewarded with a loud snort from Matt and a small grin from Keith.

They set the table and put out the sour cream and cheese, the little bundle of cilantro. Shiro hands Keith full glasses of water, two at a time, and Keith carries them to the table with lip-biting concentration. It seems to settle him, having something to do, but he’s still quiet and wide-eyed once they’re all four seated around the table.

Matt and Sam are both beautifully considerate in the face of Keith's shy uncertainty, and between them they find a balance that both draws Keith out and gives him the space he needs. Keith is smiling more easily by the time the meal is over, and Shiro's heart is aching with affection for all three of them.

Sam is on clean-up, so Matt wanders back to his paper as soon as he's finished eating, and Shiro gets up to head back to the living room. Keith hesitates by his chair, though, and asks, “Can I help, sir?”

Sam grins at him and claps his back lightly, leaning past him to gather up the plates. “Nah,” he says. “Fair’s fair, you set the table. I appreciate the offer, though!”

Shiro, watching closely, sees Keith's shoulders hunch up a little in surprise under Sam's hand, but there's no real flinch. He's lighting up under the attention, rather, and Shiro relaxes.

“I don't mind,” says Keith. “I want to help.”

“Shoo,” says Sam, mock-stern. “I'm pretty sure you're still supposed to be sitting and resting.”

“I've been doing that all day,” says Keith, his face scrunching up with dissatisfaction, but he turns obediently to follow Shiro.

He picks up the brown blanket to wrap himself in before he sits. It's not chilly in the apartment, just pleasantly cool, and Shiro wonders if it's a self-soothing thing or if he just runs cold. Keith settles back into the couch next to him, and Shiro catches a wince and a slight stiffening.

“Bruises or muscles?” he asks softly.

Keith shifts uncomfortably before he answers. “Both?”

“Hmm,” says Shiro, and gets back up. “Come with me, I think we've got some cream or something.”
Keith follows him to the bathroom, dragging the blanket with him, and stands in the doorway watching apprehensively as Shiro digs in the cupboard.

“Here we go,” says Shiro, reading the back of a small tube. “Yeah, this should be pretty close to what she used last night. That okay?”

Keith nods, but his face goes worried and uncertain when Shiro hands him the tube.

Shiro hesitates, thinking about the location of the bruise, awkward to reach and impossible to see. “Do you want me to put it on you?” he offers.

Keith's expression clears, but he darts a quick searching look at Shiro before his eyes go skittering away. “Okay,” he agrees.

He lets Shiro have the blanket, and he turns his back obligingly as Shiro takes a knee on the rug. “Can I lift up your shirt?” Shiro asks, and Keith quickly does it himself.

The bruise is no prettier today than it was yesterday. Shiro stares at it, at the deep purple-black impact mark and the discolored spots around the edges, and he lets out his anger on a breath. He dearly wants to go find the three who did this, to drag them to the General and keep them there until an acceptable punishment has been meted out. But Keith's trust is a fragile and tenuous thing, and the road forward is a puzzle that has yet to be solved.

Shiro squeezes out a little cream onto his finger, lifts the edge of Keith's shirt a little higher to expose the entire bruise, then dabs the ointment gently onto the injury. He tries to keep his touch light, but Keith flinches, his breath hitching. Still, Shiro can tell the moment the relief kicks in: Keith’s shoulders relax and drop; he sways slightly where he stands.

“Are any of the other ones hurting?” Shiro asks, tugging Keith’s shirt back down.

Keith shakes his head. “Thanks,” he says in a murmur.

“I’m gonna leave this out,” says Shiro, capping the cream and setting it on the sink. “If you need help with it again, just let me know.”

Keith nods, and Shiro picks up the blanket to re-drape around his shoulders, getting back to his feet. “Supper sitting all right?”

“Yes,” says Keith, glancing up at him. “I was really hungry.”

“Good,” says Shiro, pleased, and ushers Keith out of the bathroom and past the kitchen back toward the living room. “That’s good to hear. Matt’s enchiladas are solid. Don’t tell him that, though, he’ll get a big head.”

“I can hear you,” says Matt.

“Oh, what, heyyyy Matt!”

The rest of the evening passes uneventfully. Sam brings his work out to the living room; Matt plucks away with grim resolve at his paper, occasionally picking Shiro's brain. Keith sits next to Shiro, hugging his knees, upright and quietly watchful and not at all dispelling Sam’s earlier comparison to a cat.
It's strange and a little awkward: Shiro's instinct is to entertain the guest, to turn on a show or start a game or something, but with Keith's activity restrictions there isn't much to do but talk, and Keith seems talked out.

He doesn't seem bored, at least: he follows the brief back-and-forth conversations with interest; he asks Shiro occasional questions about the music still playing. Sam shares Shiro’s taste in music, so he chimes in every now and then. To Shiro's great surprise, Keith actually gets up and goes to sit with the commander, listening to the music behind old, old movie clips.

Shiro watches them, quietly charmed and trying not to grin too big. Then he pulls up a shopping window while Keith is distracted and starts looking at panic button bracelets.

Matt vetoes the first one he sends for approval: godddd no thats hideous

What am I even looking for? Shiro sends back. It is kind of ugly, but he'd been looking for function rather than aesthetic.

tiny, Matt answers, and links several suggestions, thin discreet bands that would attract no attention.

I want continuous pinging in panic mode, Shiro sends. And something he can activate without looking like he's messing with it too much. These all have buttons he has to find and push.

yeah lol that's pretty standard, Matt sends, but he goes quiet for a few moments, searching for alternatives. here's one with nonspecific pressure activation but it's got reviews that say people kept setting it off in their sleep lmao

Shiro hmms under his breath and switches categories, a thought tugging at the back of his mind. What about this?

It's a simple band like a thin braided cord of warm brown leather, military issue, pressure activated with continuous pinging, set to activate and stand down through Morse commands.

do you think he'll be able to remember SOS if he's in trouble?

I mean, Shiro sends, it's not hard, and he's smart, and I'll make sure he knows it.

well if you're not worried about that, Matt sends, and Shiro waits for him to make up his mind. yeah this looks good i like it

Good. I'm gonna get it.

Across the room, Matt plays a helicopter sound effect. Keith turns to look at him over the back of the couch, and Shiro glares.

“Whoops,” says Matt blithely. “Wrong button.”

Troll.

:> 

Shiro starts clicking through to order the bracelet, but hesitates. He pulls up Matt's window again.

Is this helicoptering?

Matt sends a long string of emojis in which helicopters and fireworks feature extensively.
I'm serious. Am I overdoing it?

nah man im just giving u shit
it's normal stuff people do for kids, it just feels like a lot right now i think because you're not used to doing it
also because nobody's been doing it for him so there's like a backlog
anyway he's soaking it up so i think you're good

Shiro relaxes. Ok. I'm going to get it.

go get em, champ

Chapter End Notes

this is 100% fluff sorry guys
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

whats this more fluff

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Despite having slept most of the day, Keith fades early. He migrates back to Shiro's side after about half an hour with Sam, and though he seems unwilling to snuggle up as he did earlier, he sits near enough that Shiro feels it when he begins to list tiredly.

Shiro gets him into bed. He pulls the covers up to Keith's chin, cracks the window a little, gives him one more painkiller and leaves a glass of water on the nightstand. Then he shuts off the light and closes the door behind him.

Matt and Sam are talking quietly when he gets back. They stop when he comes into the room, and Shiro has time for a second's worry.

"Hey," says Matt. "If you want to start bringing him here on weekends, we don't mind."

"Yeah?" asks Shiro, pleasantly surprised.

"I mean except for all our wild parties obviously--"

"We'll be going back to the city for the summer in a couple weeks here anyway," says Sam. "But honestly-- I'm only going to be staying here Tuesday-Friday next year, he can have my room on the weekends if he wants."

The thought of the summer gives Shiro pause. He wonders what the Garrison’s wards do while class is out of session. "Thank you," he says out loud. "I'll-- I'll ask."

"Did you find out who beat him up?" asks Matt.

"Yeah," says Shiro. "But I had to promise not to run off and report it before he's ready."

Sam shifts, frowning. "When will you report it?"

"Um," says Shiro, abruptly wrong-footed. "When he's-- when he's said he's okay with it?"

"Ah."

"I had to promise," Shiro says, feeling his face warm. "He wouldn't tell me anything otherwise, he's-- I don't know, I think there's something else going on, I just don't know what it is."

"Yeah," says Sam. "That's... I understand that. All the same, that's a promise you might not be able to keep."

It's the commander speaking now. Shiro bites his lower lip, feeling his heart start to hammer uneasily: if his CO orders him to make the report, he'll have no choice but to break Keith's trust. "I just need some time, sir," he says. "I'm getting through to him, I just need a little more time."
Behind the commander, Matt sits quietly, watchful and uncharacteristically serious.

Sam releases a breath. “Shiro,” he says. “If they hurt him again, or if they hurt somebody else, and you knew and didn't report them-- that's on you. You can't not report something like this. You have an obligation, captain.”

Shiro swallows, sitting very still. He fucked up. He fucked up and now he doesn't know what to do. He finally nods mutely.

“He's going back Sunday night?” Sam asks.

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay,” says Sam. “I'll give you until then to work it out with him. But this needs to be addressed.”

“Yes, sir,” says Shiro. “Thank you. I'm-- I apologize.”

He registers abruptly that he is shaking. He's never done well with this sort of realization, that the thing he did with all his heart could have terrible consequences; it rocks something at his core, makes him wonder about his convictions if this is where they've led him--

“You're okay,” says Sam, and the edge of authority in his voice has softened and lifted: it's Shiro's friend and mentor speaking now. “You did the wrong thing, but you did it for the right reason. It's going to work out.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Sam gives him a minute, then asks, “Do you have anything on this from the surveillance system?”

“Not yet,” Shiro answers, straightening slightly. “I know where to look, but it's going to take a while. I'm not sure exactly when it happened.”

Matt hmms thoughtfully at the island. “I could patch in some facial recognition and tracking,” he offers.

“Is your paper done?” asks Sam, twisting to look at him over the back of the couch.

“Enough of it is,” says Matt. “I've got about two thirds written, I guess. I'm kind of hitting a wall anyway.”

Shiro hesitates. When it seems that Sam is satisfied, he asks, “How big of a project would that be?”

Matt makes a small scornful noise. “Give me half an hour.”

“Something like that could be really useful,” Shiro admits.

“Great,” says Matt. “Sit tight.”

Shiro goes to shower and think while Matt fiddles with the program. By the time he emerges, feeling calmer and more settled, it’s rough, but finished. Matt shows him how to use the patch, how to introduce the facial recognition to new faces, how to run the search. They test it by searching for Shiro: it brings up several dozen brief clips of him walking through the halls.

“Oh boy,” says Shiro, staring at the intimidatingly long list.
“No, it’s fine, it’s fine, don’t panic,” says Matt. He’s already got the code window back up. “I’m just gonna… add… Ok, yeah, here, we’ll just refine it by source. What’s the camera number for the clip you need?”

Shiro finds it, and they adjust the search for Keith. The list of clips extends back for the entire month this time, but it’s just the top handful Shiro’s interested in.

“What day?” asks Matt.

“Tuesday.”

They watch in high speed, in chronological order, and the camera jumps from morning to afternoon to evening, brief uneventful clips of Keith coming and going.

“There,” says Shiro suddenly, and Matt pauses the clip. “Ok, go back.”

They watch in reverse. Keith reappears from the bathroom door with startling abruptness, walks backward down the hall. Nothing happens for a long time, just a few cadets backing out of their rooms.

Three cadets back out of the bathroom, disappear down the hall.

“That’s,” says Shiro. “That’s them, that’s them, play it forward again. Start recording.”

The three have their heads down. There’s never a clear shot of any of their faces, but Shiro knows. They disappear into the bathroom, and Matt speeds up the video again until Keith appears and is pulled out of sight.

Shiro watches the timestamps as Matt skips forward, his stomach as sour and tight as if Keith were still there, still behind that door, out of sight, still being hurt. It doesn’t take long: four minutes and twenty-three seconds have passed when the door opens again and three cadets head out into the hallway. There’s a brief moment where one glances up toward the camera, his face in full view, and Shiro makes a note of it.

Another six minutes speed by. A hall monitor passes, one senior cadet. Then the bathroom door opens and Keith steps out.

He looks dazed, unsteady. His posture is strange and lopsided, hurting, and he makes it about two steps from the door before he falls.

“What the hell,” says Matt. “What the hell.”

On the screen, Keith stays down, swaying slightly on hands and knees. Then he gets back to his feet, holding the wall, and makes his slow, laborious way up the hall to his room.

“Stop the recording there,” says Shiro once Keith has disappeared into his room. His voice sounds strange, like it’s somebody else using it.

“What the hell did we just watch?” asks Matt helplessly. “Why, why did that happen, why didn’t he yell for help? Why didn’t he just stay put until somebody came by? Shiro, what the fuck?”

“I know,” says Shiro. The expected fury has burned out; he feels empty and exhausted. “Can you send me that clip, please?”

Matt looks back at the computer, extracts the clip from the recording, compresses and sends it. Shiro
feels his tablet buzz in his pocket as the file arrives. “He’s hiding it, why is he hiding it?”

Shiro shakes his head tiredly. “I’m trying to figure that out.”

“This is so messed up.”

Matt sounds so distressed that Shiro reaches out automatically and grips the back of his neck. “It’s gonna be—” he starts, and stops there. He doesn’t know what to promise. “Thanks for your help.”

“Yeah, no problem,” says Matt, shaking his head slightly. “It’s— Anything you need, anything…”

“Thanks,” says Shiro again. He squeezes the back of Matt’s neck lightly and lets his hand fall away.

Matt gathers up his stuff after another half-hour or so and disappears into his room. Shiro tries to lose himself in his book, but the protagonist keeps making him think of Keith. He finally closes the paperback over his finger and shuts his eyes, rubbing the bridge of his nose. It’s late, he should try to sleep, but he’s too keyed up.

He doesn’t register any sound, there’s nothing in particular out of place, but something puts him on alert anyway and he opens his eyes. Keith is standing in the hallway, blanket-wrapped, peering out at him watchfully. There’s a half-guilty, anxious look on his face that says he expects to be in trouble, and he rocks back a little when Shiro looks at him.

“Hey,” Shiro says. He sets his book aside and sits forward, rubbing his hands over his face. “Hey, bud, what’re you doing up?”

Keith shifts from foot to foot. “I woke up.”

“Can’t get back to sleep?”

Keith hesitates a beat, then shakes his head.

“Are you feeling okay, are you sore?”

Keith stretches out his shoulders, his face twisting up a little with discomfort, then shrugs.

Shiro sighs. It’s only been two hours since the last painkiller, and the four recommended hours before that one were more like three and a half. He can’t give him another one yet. He straightens where he sits and turns, folding one leg up underneath him. “Okay,” he says, and beckons. “C’mon, come sit here.” Keith shuffles over and perches uncertainly on the edge of the couch, and Shiro reaches out to turn him ninety degrees. “Back to me.”

Keith lets himself be maneuvered. He pulls up his knees once Shiro has him positioned, twisting to look back over his shoulder.

“Face forward,” says Shiro, and starts to reach out as Keith obeys. He pauses. “I’m going to rub your shoulders, is that okay?”

Some of the confused tension lifts from Keith’s posture, but he gives Shiro a quick surprised look. “Um,” he says. “Alright. I mean, if... if you want?”

Shiro nods, and Keith settles into a more comfortable position, shifting to sit cross-legged. After a small hesitation he drops the blanket from around his shoulders, giving Shiro his back.
Shiro smiles faintly. He rests his hands on Keith’s slight shoulders, giving him a moment to become accustomed to the contact, then begins to rub light, brisk circles through the thin t-shirt, warming up the muscles.

Tension is beaded in knots across Keith’s shoulder blades, and Shiro chases each cramped spot with his thumbs. He works across Keith’s back, along his spine. He gives the bruised place a wide berth, but he finds painful tightness clustered at the base of Keith’s neck and follows it down to his upper arms.

“They really did a number on you,” he murmurs. Keith’s shoulders are the worst, and he gently maneuvers each arm in turn, stretching out the hurt muscles. “I didn’t realize it was this bad.”

“It wasn’t-- it wasn’t bad earlier,” says Keith. He’s been holding his breath while Shiro works on him: either he’s so tender that even the careful, careful pressure of Shiro’s hands is painful, or he’s not used to having his hurts handled.

“Makes sense,” says Shiro. “You were pretty out of it last night, and we kept you on pain relief all day. Must have just stiffened up when you went to bed.”

“I guess.”

Shiro runs his hands over Keith’s upper back again, probing with his fingertips for cramped places he missed. He’s done what he can for the aches, he decides, and taps Keith’s shoulder lightly to signal that he’s finished.

Keith shifts to sit normally, stretching his back and shoulders experimentally.

“Better?” asks Shiro.

“Yeah,” Keith says. He sounds surprised. “A lot better. Thanks.”

“How’s that bruise feeling?” asks Shiro. “There’s more of that cream if you want.”

Keith hesitates. “Yeah, okay.”

“Do you want to put it on?”

Keith hesitates again. His eyes dart briefly to look at Shiro. “Can you?”

“Yeah,” says Shiro. “Yeah, bud, I can do it. I’ll be right back, all right?”

When he returns from the bathroom, cream in hand, Keith has picked up his book and is looking at it curiously. Shiro has a moment’s panic wherein he tries to remember if the book is age-appropriate for Keith.

“What is this?” asks Keith, glancing up as Shiro comes back to the couch.

“Classic sci-fi,” Shiro answers, resuming his seat. “It came out about fifteen years after the first manned moon landing. It’s good, you’ll read it in… year three or four Lit, I think.”

Keith turns again so his back faces Shiro, still reading the back of the book. Shiro lifts his shirt, and Keith absentely raises his elbows to make it easier. “What’s it about?”

Shiro dabs cream around the edges of the bruise, considering how to answer. Neglect and manipulation, children being trained as soldiers in defense of a desperately vulnerable Earth: he’s not sure how much of this Keith is ready for. It seems too close, too real.
“It’s about a boy who gets recruited by the government to fight aliens,” he says finally. “Earth’s invaded a while before the story begins, and they fight off the aliens, but they’re afraid it’s going to happen again, so they train up kids to be their strategists.”

Keith considers this thoughtfully. He’s distracted enough that he doesn’t flinch when Shiro’s thumb brushes over the deepest part of the bruise. “Will you read me some?”

Shiro blows out a slightly apprehensive breath. It’s not bedtime story material for a twelve-year-old, not even a little bit. It’s too stark, too bleak; there is nothing of the escape concept that Matt’s been wrestling with all night. He doesn’t want to expose Keith to this world where childhoods are appropriated and twisted and weaponized.

But he looks at Keith, who has already had so much taken from him, who has been brought into the dubious security of the Garrison strictly for his potential, and he wonders if it’s not the height of arrogance to assume that the concepts in the story are not already familiar to him.

“Yeah,” he says. “All right.”

He puts the cream on the end table and pulls Keith’s shirt back down. Keith all but pushes the book into his hand, scooting to sit near enough that he can read over Shiro’s shoulder. Shiro reaches past him for the blanket and tucks it over him, lifting up his arm so that Keith can curl up against his side if he wants. Keith glances at him, cautious and shy, weighing the wordless offer carefully before he accepts.

Shiro settles his arm around Keith’s shoulders, flips to the first page of the weathered old book. “‘I’ve watched through his eyes,’ ” he says, and feels Keith snuggle in for the story. “‘I’ve listened through his ears, and I tell you he’s the one…””

It is very late. It only takes a few paragraphs for Keith’s eyelids to begin drooping, and by the end of the second page his head has sagged onto Shiro’s chest. Shiro keeps an eye on him, keeps reading, then murmurs without changing his tone, “I think you are asleep.”

Keith doesn’t answer.

Shiro tries to keep back the smile. He doesn’t quite succeed, but nobody is present or conscious to notice. He checks the page number and sets the book aside, then considers what to do with Keith.

He came out purposefully to sleep in the living room the night before, which makes Shiro think that may have been his intention again tonight. On the other hand, maybe he just came out for reassurance, and now he’d rather sleep in the bed. But he’s had better luck sleeping in the living room than alone in Shiro’s room.

Alone, Shiro realizes suddenly, is the key word. The kid doesn’t like to be alone. He doesn’t quite succeed, but nobody is present or conscious to notice. He checks the page number and sets the book aside, then considers what to do with Keith.

He came out purposefully to sleep in the living room the night before, which makes Shiro think that may have been his intention again tonight. On the other hand, maybe he just came out for reassurance, and now he’d rather sleep in the bed. But he’s had better luck sleeping in the living room than alone in Shiro’s room.

Alone, Shiro realizes suddenly, is the key word. The kid doesn't like to be alone. He doesn't like too many people, he doesn't like too much noise or scrutiny or too little space, but he's stuck like glue to Shiro all day, all week. He remembers, in Keith’s dorm last night, the panic in his face and voice when Shiro had offered to come back later and let him sleep, and he understands better.

He turns and lifts gently, an arm behind Keith's shoulders and an arm beneath his knees. Keith doesn't react much, just snuggles into him and sighs. Shiro holds him for a moment, lets himself have this, then gets to his feet and carries Keith to the short couch. He lays him there, carefully easing him down onto the soft cushions, and goes to get Keith's pillow and another blanket from the room.

When he returns, Keith has pushed himself up enough that he can look over the corner of the couch
down the hallway, blearily anxious. Relief sweeps over his face when he sees Shiro, and he sinks
down to lie on his stomach again.

Shiro comes around so he can put the pillow under Keith's head. Keith's eyes follow him, barely
open, and he makes an effort to sit back up to make room for the pillow. Shiro helps him, gets him
settled, then shakes out the second blanket to spread on top of him.

He rests his hand on Keith's back lightly when this is done. Keith sighs out a breath at the contact
and finally lets his eyes slip shut, so Shiro leaves his hand there. He lowers himself to the floor next
to the couch and gently strokes the space between Keith's shoulder blades until his breathing is deep
and steady.

Chapter End Notes

I posted this earlier in the end notes of chapter 6 so if you're reading in order instead of
just nabbing the updates you've already seen it but GUYS. LOOK.

AN ART.

AndSoItBegins is the artist and I'm so giddyhappy & grateful I can't even tell you all.

I hope you all have a happy and safe New Year's Eve! I myself am going to go catch
the tail end of a LotR marathon, because we know how to party. <3
“Where did you go yesterday?” asks Keith over lunch the next day. His stomach has finally settled; there’s not even a hint of the unease that made him leave half his enchilada on his plate last night. His head feels better too, and his back and shoulders still feel loose and relaxed from whatever it was Shiro did to him last night.

“Oh,” says Shiro lightly. “Just up to the Garrison. I had to talk to one of the commanders.”

They’re eating something still warm from the oven that Shiro calls focaccia and Keith calls pizza but is weirdly amazing whatever it’s called. There’s sun-dried tomatoes and herbs and red onions in slivers on top instead of meat and cheese, which might be what makes it the one thing instead of the other, but Keith has decided he likes it.

“Was it about space?” he asks.

“No, it was about something else,” Shiro says. His tone is still breezy, like it’s no big deal, whatever it was, but he’s not looking at Keith.

Keith narrows his eyes and picks off a sweet curl of red onion to eat by itself. “You were nervous about it,” he reminds Shiro.

“Yeah,” answers Shiro. “A little bit, I was.”

“So what was it?”

“There’s gonna be a lot of this left,” says Shiro, poking at the pan of bread. “Do you want to go see if the commander wants any?”

Keith frowns at his back, but he slides down off his stool and pads down the hallway to the commander’s office. He puzzles over it as he goes: it had scared Shiro, whatever was on the tablet yesterday, Keith had felt it in the tightness of the hug he’d given him before he left. It had scared him, and now he doesn’t want to talk about it; he wants to keep it hidden from Keith.

Keith hates grown-up secrets.

He raises his hand and knocks on the side of the commander’s door. It’s open, like it has been since he arrived, but he still feels like he should knock.

“Yeah,” answers the commander, rolling his chair back to look around the door. “Oh, hey, Keith!”

Keith doesn’t know where to look. “Um,” he says, and scratches the back of one ankle with the other foot. “Um, Shiro says to tell you there’s bread.”

“Oh, is it done?” the commander asks. “About time, I’ve been smelling it for hours!”

He hasn’t; this is hyperbole, which is one of Keith’s favorite words. It’s only been about forty-five minutes since they put it in the oven, the dough stretched flat and dimpled with finger-pokes, brushed with oil and sprinkled with fresh rosemary. Keith can still smell the bright pine scent of the herb on his hands.
He shifts from foot to foot and edges back a little when the commander gets up. He likes the man, he likes him a lot; he has a kind voice and way of talking that puts Keith automatically at ease, but he still towers over Keith, he’s still an *in charge* person, and it always takes Keith a minute to put his wariness away.

“Did Shiro tell you about the recipe?” asks the commander, angling himself back a little to talk to Keith while he walks out to the kitchen.

“No?” says Keith curiously, following.

“I didn’t,” says Shiro, poking his head around the corner. “I figured I’d let you or Matt tell that story.”

“Oh!” says the commander, pleased, and rubs his hands together. “Well! In *that* case.”

Keith climbs back up onto his stool, looking between them in confusion.

“We’re Italian,” says the commander. “Matt and I. A couple generations watered down, but there you go. Katie, my daughter, she had a family tree project in school a couple of years ago, and she and Matt both got *really* into it. She only had to go back to… ahh, great-grandparents, I think it was, or maybe just to where social media dead-ended. But they went back further, they found census records and birth certificates and then immigration records, and somehow they found the name of a relative who lived in Narni, and then they traced it all the way back down and got into contact with some living relatives. And that focaccia recipe is from them, so it’s a genuine family recipe.”

“Wow,” says Keith.

“And then Matt taught it to me,” says Shiro, “and I make it once a month or so, because it’s awesome.”

“I think he was just excited to have something to trade to you, after you taught him your grandpa’s miso,” the commander says. “What about you, Keith? Any family recipes you want to make?”

It's a friendly question, a loop tossed to make Keith feel included. All the same, it puts an odd squirmy feeling in the pit of his stomach, a reminder that he doesn’t belong anywhere. He shakes his head.

“Kogane,” muses the commander, reaching to tear off a piece of focaccia. “I can't tell where that comes from. Irish, maybe?”


“Hmm,” says the commander, interested. “Related to your name?”

Shiro scratches the back of his neck. “I'm not fluent, but I'm pretty sure it means gold. The metal, not the color. *Shirogane* means silver.”

Keith loses track of everything else for a moment, the confusion of the new information making his ears ring. His name comes from somewhere, it means something? *His* name?

Then the rest follows, silver and gold slotting neatly together in their shared categories, and he stares at Shiro.

“You broke him,” says the commander.
Shiro raises his head and looks back at him with concern, coming around the island toward him, and Keith closes his mouth hastily.

“Um,” he manages. “I didn't-- I didn't know any of that, I thought it was just…”

“I might be wrong,” says Shiro. “It just seemed likely, I mean… the doctor thought we were related.”

“Oh,” says Keith weakly.

“We could try to find out for sure,” suggests Shiro. “Do you have--” He pauses. “I know that… that your parents are both gone, but do you have… aunts, uncles? Grandparents?”

The commander takes his bread and quietly leaves the kitchen. Keith watches him go, then sneaks a sidelong look up at Shiro. He's answered this question so many times, first to the police, then to social workers, to placements, to kids and supervisors in the group home, to foster parents, but it feels different here, now. It feels given, not taken, like something he can choose to share or choose to keep.

“Um,” he murmurs, and chooses. “My-- my grandpa died before I was born and my grandma died when I was seven. My dad didn’t have any brothers or sisters.”

“Ah,” says Shiro, sitting down on the other stool. “So no cousins or anything on that side.”

“I have a-- a second cousin?” Keith says, trying to remember what they told him.

“Yeah?” asks Shiro, perking up. “Would they know, do you think?”

“I don't know,” says Keith uncomfortably. He picks up his bread again so he doesn't have to look at Shiro.

“What's their name?” asks Shiro, already reaching for his tablet. “We can call them and find out.”

“No, that's all right,” Keith says quickly. “It's all right.”

Shiro pauses, looking at him. “Do you know them?” he asks, gently curious. His tone says Keith doesn't have to answer, and oddly, this is what makes him feel that he can.

“They were my emergency placement,” he says, still picking apart his focaccia. “After--”

But that's as far as he can go; he's not ready yet to tell Shiro about that night.

Shiro seems to understand, though. “I see,” he says. “It didn't-- it didn't go well?”

Keith shrugs. He doesn't want to look at Shiro. “They didn't…” There's several things he could say here; they’d had a lot of reasons to give to the social worker. They only had one extra bedroom and needed to keep it for guests; they didn't have time for another kid; they weren't equipped for Keith's unique situation.

They didn't like him, is what it came down to, Keith's smart enough to figure that out.

“It didn't work out,” he finally says out loud, falling back on the rote non-explanation that somehow grown-ups always accept.

Shiro is quiet for a minute. Keith keeps his eyes stubbornly down. His face is burning; the rejection is still a sick thrum of shame in the pit of his stomach and he doesn't want Shiro to see.
Okay,” says Shiro under his breath. Keith hears him shift, and then jumps when a hand lands lightly on his shoulder. There's a small hesitation, then the hand squeezes his shoulder gently and falls away. “What about your mom's side of the family?”

“My mom's not—” It's strange and a little disorienting, that Shiro doesn't know this. Everybody knows this, every adult in Keith's life. “I don't know who she is.”

“You don't—?”

“It's not on my birth certificate and my dad never said,” Keith mumbles.

“Wow,” says Shiro. “So you really-- They didn't write it in in the hospital where you were born?”

Keith shrugs again.

“Huh,” says Shiro thoughtfully. “So I guess that's a dead end for now.”

Keith's almost forgotten why they started talking about this. “Um,” he says, “You're probably right, about the name. I just never…”

Shiro looks at him sidelong, then gives him a small smug smile. “Gold and silver,” he says, and holds out his hand for a high-five.

Keith looks from the hand to Shiro’s face, and something swells and glows behind his ribs. He’s grinning foolishly, he knows, but he can’t stop it.

He high-fives Shiro as hard as he can.

Shiro lets him watch cartoons the next morning. Matt wanders out to see what the noise is, says, “Oh, sweet, I didn’t know this was still running,” and plops down on the floor in front of where Keith is sitting on the couch to watch too.

It feels comfortably familiar already, sitting with Matt while Shiro putters around in the kitchen. It’s been nearly a year since he watched this show, so he has no idea at all what is happening, but he watches anyway, laughs at the jokes and the caricatures while bacon cooks and coffee brews.

His head starts to ache after about fifteen minutes, a dull throb that steadily grows until sharp jagged pains stab back through his skull from his temples. He shuts his eyes and pushes the heels of his hands against them, and that helps, but the noise from the cartoon is constant and unpredictable and too much too much too much--

It cuts off.

“Hey!” says Matt, startled. “Shiro!”

Keith opens his eyes and blinks until they focus again.

Shiro is setting down the remote. “Sorry,” he says. “Keith was looking kind of post-concussion.”

“What?” asks Matt, twisting to look up at Keith.

“I’m okay,” Keith says hastily, blushing.

“Oh, geez,” Matt says, and his whole face twists up with remorse and pity.
Keith doesn’t know what to do with that look, so he pushes at his eyes again. The pain is still present, a deep dizzying ache that makes him want to hold very still until it passes. “’M sorry,” he mumbles.

“Don’t even worry about it,” says Matt quickly. “We’ll watch it on replay later. You should’ve said!”

“Here,” says Shiro, from closer than Keith expects. He’s holding a pill and a glass of water when Keith blinks up at him, and he takes both gratefully. “Can you get the blinds, Matt?”

With the living room darkened and the sharp colorful sound effects of the cartoons gone, the pain ebbs, and Keith relaxes again. By the time Shiro comes out again with toast and orange juice and bacon it’s gone entirely, though it’s left a sort of heavy, tired feeling in its wake. But there’s bacon, and it’s crispy and fresh-cooked and not the sad limp mass-produced stuff that the mess hall serves, and Keith hasn’t had good bacon in so long.

Shiro sits next to him, drinking his coffee and scrolling through the news on his tablet. It smells enticingly good, warm and black in the cup, and Keith eyes it curiously. He’s never had it; his dad didn’t drink it and the mess hall doesn’t serve it to cadets.

Feeling very daring, he asks, “Can I try that?”

Shiro glances at him, surprised, then looks down at his cup. “The coffee?” he asks. “Uhh. Sure?”

Matt has turned around, his eyebrows up. “Have you had it before?” he asks interestedly. Keith shakes his head, and the glint in Matt’s eyes turns wicked.

“Just a sip,” says Shiro. “I don’t know what the rules are with concussions and caffeine.”

“All right,” says Keith, regarding Matt uncertainly. It occurs to him that he might have made a terrible mistake. Shiro’s handing him the mug, though, and he can’t back out now.

He takes a deep breath, hesitates, and takes a tiny cautious taste.

It’s so bitter. His entire body goes rigid, his shoulders hunching up, and he squeezes his eyes tightly shut. He can’t remember how to swallow for a moment.

“What the ass,” he splutters once he’s gotten it all down, and Matt howls with laughter. Shiro makes a strangled choking noise and gets up hastily to disappear into the kitchen.

The orange juice is the closest thing to Keith’s hand, and he drinks half of that in one go. When he emerges, Matt is still laughing, wheezing breathlessly like Keith not liking coffee is the funniest thing to ever happen. “Stop it,” Keith says irritably, and kicks out at Matt with one socked foot. It doesn’t connect, because Matt has fallen over, clutching his gut.

“Okay! Okay okay okay,” says Matt, finally pushing himself back upright and wiping at his eyes. “Two important lessons for you: first, coffee takes years of training to enjoy and Shiro’s is like, serious coffee. Level twelve coffee, do not attempt. Second lesson: ass does not complete what the. Your best choices there are heck if Shiro’s around or hell if he’s not.”

“Matt!” Shiro says, aghast.

“Somebody’s gotta teach this kid the facts of life, Shiro!”

“He is twelve years old!”
“He just sincerely said what the ass!”

Things devolve from there into a tussle that makes Keith hastily pull his legs up onto the couch and sit back, wide-eyed. It’s legitimately scary for a moment--there’s a lot of floor-shaking thumps and yelps--but then they bump into the coffee table and instantly stop to make sure nothing’s damaged or spilled before they resume, and the pause gives Keith space to realize that the yelps are laughter, that nobody’s being hurt, and nobody’s really mad. He eases, but still watches carefully.

The match ends decisively when Shiro pins Matt face-down on the carpet and sits on him. Matt wheezes and squirms and tries ineffectively to throw him off, but Shiro just perches blithely on his back and takes a drink of his coffee.

“Get your bony ass off me!”

“Nope,” says Shiro cheerfully. “Not until I have a promise that you’ll stop corrupting the child.”

“I’m twelve,” Keith objects, because really.

“He’s twelve!”

Shiro takes another sip of his coffee and sets it back down on the table. Then he reaches down calmly and digs his fingers into Matt’s unprotected sides. Matt shrieks and thrashes and finally yelps a half-coherent promise of compliance.

He rolls limply over onto his back when Shiro gets off him a second later, limbs splayed dramatically. “I’m sorry, Keith,” he gasps, and drapes his elbow over his eyes. “I tried, but I am overcome. Forgive me!”

Shiro lets out a ‘pfff’ sound, dropping back onto the couch next to Keith. He heaves a big sigh and picks up his coffee again. “Uh,” he says, looking down into his cup. “Yeah, I probably should have warned you. This is an Italian dark roast made in the french press.”

“Oh,” says Keith, who understands all of those words separately.

“It’s really strong,” says Matt, lifting his elbow from his face. “It’s got, like, sludge.”

Shiro lifts his shoulders unapologetically, drinking. Keith watches, vaguely horrified. “Sludge?”

“Sludge.”

“Particulates,” says Shiro mildly. “Not that much. Turkish coffee is the one that’s sludgy.”

“I have no idea what that is but I definitely do not want to know any more.”

“Mm,” says Shiro. “Wait ‘til you’re in grad school.”

“Are you in grad school?” asks Keith curiously.

“Shiro graduated like three semesters early,” says Matt, sitting up. “What a geek, am I right.”

Shiro reaches out with one foot to prod Matt in the ribs with his toes. Matt rolls smoothly to his feet and stalks to the short couch, out of range. “Matt is on track to beat me,” Shiro says. “But yeah. Commander Holt is both my CO and my advisor.”

Keith looks between them, a little awed, and picks up a piece of toast to focus on. It’s intimidating, being around smart people. They think he’s smart, too, and that’s worse. He wonders, feeling
vaguely sick, how long he can fool them.

He’s still not sure why the Garrison took him in.

Scouts came around to all the schools. He remembers the assembly, a presentation by a woman in uniform with dark skin and curly hair. He remembers the aptitude tests afterwards, classes shuffled one by one through the computer lab; he remembers with more clarity a basic holographic simulation. It had been fun; it had been like a game, except the route was too simple to be interesting.

He’d completed it, then gotten bored waiting for the allotted time to run out and gone exploring off-route in the simulation. He’d crashed a lot before he got the hang of it, and his craft had respawned over and over at the starting point, but after he’d had a while to experiment and find what worked, one of the scouts had paused by his projector to watch. And then he called over another, and by the time Keith realized he had an audience there was a small crowd of adults watching.

There had been a series of meetings with the scouts after that, with his foster parents and the social worker. There had been so many adults, talking to him seriously about his future, his education, his career path. It had been confusing and overwhelming, and he didn’t know what to do, how to tell them that it was all a mistake, that he’d spent the whole first half hour crashing.

But then his foster dad asked, “So he’ll be living at this Garrison place permanently, then?” and Keith had frozen up, because he could hear hope and relief in the man’s voice. So when they asked him if he wanted to do it, to transfer to the school as a student and a ward, he’d heard himself say sure, I guess, and he hadn’t looked anybody in the face.

He didn't really care about the Garrison after that. It was a temporary alternate option, someplace he could go for a while to get away from the ugly shameful knowledge that his caretakers didn’t want him. He expected to be found out and expelled and plunged back into whirling uncertainty, that's just the way things go. But now--

Now there's Shiro.

Now, if he loses this, he's lost something he cares about.

Keith eats his toast, and he keeps his head down, and he doesn't dare look at the man sitting next to him.

Chapter End Notes

i stg i use 14x more italics when writing keith's POV
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The bracelet arrives that evening, delivered by a small hovering drone that lands on the patio and beeps patiently until Shiro gets up to accept the parcel.

He opens the package there, wrestling with packing tape and bubble wrap, and looks at the little band. It’s small: child-sized, obviously, but beyond that it looks… breakable, cheap, like a souvenir, like nothing much at all. He tests the strength of the band, though, and is pleasantly surprised by a flexible but unyielding answer to his tugging: it feels like a band of strong plastic or steel cord underneath the soft braided leather. Shiro doesn’t try too hard, but he suspects he couldn’t break it even if he gave it his best go.

He glances over the little instruction book that comes with it, then looks back inside. Matt and Sam are both in the living room, occupied with their tablets, while Keith is flopped on his back on the short couch, playing with a paperweight that came in Colleen’s you’re living here and you need some personal effects box.

Keith’s been so good through the stay, so good, even though he’s been hurting and confused and surrounded by people he doesn’t know well, but the boredom of the post-concussion activity restriction is definitely beginning to take its toll. He’s gotten progressively quieter and moodier over the day; he answers questions with as few words as possible. Clearing up after supper, Shiro had rested a hand briefly on Keith’s shoulder when he squeezed between Keith and the open dishwasher, and Keith had actually squirmed away.

Shiro has no idea how this is going to go over.

He takes a deep breath and opens the patio door. “Keith?” he asks, sticking his head back in. It’s still cooler inside than out, but not by much, and not for long. “Come out here for a minute? I want to talk to you.”

Keith sits up. His expression goes from curiosity to suspicion to resignation almost faster than Shiro can register it. He hesitates for a moment, then slowly gets to his feet and crosses the small dining room to step out onto the patio.

Shiro closes the door behind him and regards him with some confusion. Keith isn’t looking at him, his shoulders are slightly hunched up, and his arms are folded around his ribs. He looks like--

“You’re not in trouble,” Shiro says, frowning uncertainly. “I just-- do you want to sit down? I just want to talk to you.”

Keith glances at him, just a quick inscrutable dart of eyes, and sits down on the edge of the nearest chair.

Shiro sits on the porch swing across from him, putting his elbows on his knees. “You’re really not in trouble,” he says, trying to smile. It comes out a little crooked, he can tell. “Um,” he says, and extends the little band. “Here.”

Keith looks at the band. His forehead furrows up and he glances at Shiro again, then leans forward to take it. “What is it?”
“It’s a bracelet,” says Shiro, and shows him how to join it into a loop, the magnetic clasp clicking shut. “It’s… um, it’s a panic bracelet, it’s a way for you to let me know if you’re in trouble and need help.”

He watches Keith turn it in his hand, running the fawn-colored loop between his fingers. “How?” Keith asks finally.

“It’s pressure activated,” Shiro says. “Um-- sorry, it just came a minute ago, I haven’t really figured it all out yet. I thought we could set it up.”

He opens the manual and sets it on the little table between them, and they both lean forward to read it. Shiro takes his tablet out of his pocket to install the app and pair the devices. There's a satisfying beep from both his tablet and the bracelet, and it's done. Keith watches, frowning seriously, still running the soft textured band between his fingers.

“Okay,” says Shiro. “There, cool. So how it works is it's just a bracelet most of the time, unless you signal to it. Then it turns on and sends me a message that you need help and it shows me where you are on this map.”

Keith leans forward to look at the app screen on Shiro's tablet. “I don't see anything,” he says after a moment.

“It's not on right now,” says Shiro. “Want to test it?”

“How?”

“Did they teach you SOS yet in Flight?”

“Um,” says Keith. “It was an extra credit question on a test a while ago…”

“Did you get it?” asks Shiro.

“No,” Keith says, ducking his head guiltily.

“That's all right,” says Shiro. “It's easy, it's just shortshortshort, long, long, long, shortshortshort.” Keith looks a little blank, so Shiro reaches out for the bracelet. “Can I…?” Keith hands it over, and Shiro considers the band a little doubtfully for a moment before he unclasps it and refastens it around his own wrist. It fits, surprisingly: a little snug, but it goes all the way around and doesn’t seem to be cutting off his circulation.

“Okay,” he says. “Watch.” He presses his wrist on the table between them, trapping the bracelet between his skin and the hard surface. Shortshortshort, long, long, long, shortshortshort. There's a pause, then both his tablet and watch buzz, and the bracelet vibrates slightly.

The screen of his tablet lights up, showing the map with the apartment building pinpointed. “There,” says Shiro, satisfied, and tilts the screen to show Keith.

“...Cool,” says Keith, scooting forward interestedly. “You just… push on it?”

“Yeah,” says Shiro, unclasping the bracelet to give back. “You can squish it with your fingers, or you can tug on it, or you can do what I just did if that works better. Want to give it a try?”

Keith reaches out for the bracelet. Shiro quickly resets it, reconnecting, disconnecting, and reconnecting the clasp again, and hands it over.
“Okay,” Keith mutters, frowning in concentration. The bracelet clicks shut around his skinny wrist, and he grips it between his fingers and squeezes it in the SOS pattern. Shiro’s tablet buzzes in answer, and Keith’s face lights up. “It worked!”

“Great,” says Shiro, grinning. “Nice job. Okay, now to reset it just open and close the clasp twice.”

Keith obeys, slipping the bracelet off before he closes it again.

“That’s for you to keep,” Shiro says, gesturing at it. “It’s… it’s only to use in emergencies, but if it is an emergency, please use it. If you’re in a place where you’re in trouble and you can’t call me, please, please use it. I promise I’ll come as fast as I can.”

“Okay,” murmurs Keith, his voice low and his head down. He hesitates, then puts the bracelet back on his right wrist with a quiet snick.

Shiro moistens his lips, glancing through the glass door toward Sam. “Okay,” he echoes, and takes a deep breath. “Can we talk about what happened to you the other night a little more?”

He sees Keith tense up and go still, and a held-breath moment passes before he shrugs slightly.

Shiro leans forward, putting his elbows on his knees again, trying to catch Keith’s eye. “It’s… it’s not okay, what they did to you,” he says. “You understand that, right?”

Keith avoids his eyes. He plays with the bracelet, his shoulders slouching forward a little, and finally shrugs again. He’s still perched on the very edge of the chair, the balls of his bare feet on the ground. It’s a ready-for-flight position, Shiro recognizes: on some level, Keith thinks he might need to escape.

“It’s not,” Shiro says, keeping his tone carefully gentle. “It’s not okay. I have the surveillance footage from the hallway, it’s got a clear shot of one of their faces, it’s-- it’s enough. It’s proof.” He pauses, takes a deep breath. “Keith, I want to file a report.”

Keith rears back slightly, staring up at him. His eyes are wide and startled and terrified, and Shiro’s reaching out before he can think better of it. He pulls his hand back hastily when Keith shrinks away from him, a sick horrified jolt resonating through his chest.

“You can’t, please don’t, please don’t--” Keith is breathing too fast and begging, near tears with panic. “Please, you promised you wouldn’t, you promised you wouldn’t, Shiro please--”

“Keith--” says Shiro desperately. He wants to gather the boy in, to hug him tightly until he understands that he’s safe, that everything’s going to be okay. “Keith, listen, listen to me--”

“You said you wouldn’t.” Keith’s voice breaks, and he folds forward.

Shiro stares at the top of Keith’s head, at the small fingers laced tightly behind it. He rubs a hand over his mouth. “Okay,” he says, trying to keep his voice even and gentle and confident. “Okay. What’s gonna happen if I do?”

Keith pulls in a shaking breath and doesn’t answer.

Shiro swallows hard. Part of him--a really fucking big part, if he’s honest--wants to go inside, get Sam, get a real adult who knows how to talk to scared kids. But he knows that if he walks away from this, here, now, he might as well walk away from Keith entirely.

Moving slowly, he gets up from the swing and shifts to sit on the low table instead, facing Keith, knee-to-knee. He reaches out, hesitates, then settles his hand on Keith’s shoulder for a moment.
“It’s just me,” he murmurs, when Keith doesn’t pull away. “It’s just me.”

Keith wipes at his nose and sniffs, keeping his head down. He’s shivering miserably, pulled into himself, and he refuses to look at Shiro when he tries to catch his eye.

“What’s gonna happen?” asks Shiro quietly. “What are you scared of, what’s gonna happen?”

“Um,” says Keith shakily, and stops there, but it’s a start, and Shiro waits patiently. “I’ll get-- I’ll get expelled?”

“You won’t,” says Shiro. “I promise you won’t.”

But Keith is already shaking his head, his face twisting up. Shiro studies him, at a loss: he’s never felt so out of his depth.

“Help me out here,” he asks. “What am I missing, what’s going on?” He wonders, briefly, if Keith is being blackmailed for something, if he actually did something worthy of expulsion that somehow went unreported, if there’s a secret he can’t let out.

Keith folds his arms tightly around his middle and doesn’t answer. Shiro rubs a hand across his mouth and tries to think what next, what now, but before he’s found an answer Keith takes a deep breath and says, “Beck.”

“The General?” asks Shiro, confused. Keith shakes his head, darting him a frustrated look that would be withering if it weren’t so teary. Shiro stares back at him blankly.

Then it connects.

Oh.

“Beck,” he says, and sits back.

Keith nods.

“The General doesn’t have kids,” says Shiro. “So he must be…”

“General Beck’s his uncle,” mumbles Keith.

“I see,” says Shiro, and wonders what to do with this.

“If you,” Keith says, and gulps. “I’ll get, I’ll get expelled, you can’t report it.”

“No,” Shiro says slowly after a pause. “No, that’s not how that works. Even for the General’s nephew.”

“It is,” Keith insists. “It is, it’s-- I’m on, I’m on-- they gave me three strikes and I’m on two, I can’t-”

“Hold on,” says Shiro, frowning. “Back up. What’s that mean, three strikes?”

“For-- for starting fights,” says Keith. His shoulders are hunched up guiltily.

Shiro thinks back, tries to remember if there was anything about this in Keith’s file. An official warning should have stuck out, should have been at the very top. The General would have mentioned it, there would have been extensive documentation of both violations of the warning. Shiro would have remembered it.
Something isn’t right here. He glances through the door toward the commander, but Sam is watching a show on his tablet and paying no attention to them.

“Okay,” he says, turning back toward Keith. “Um-- how do you start fights, what do they give you strikes for?”

“For-- antagonizing behavior,” mumbles Keith.

“Like what?”

Keith shifts uncomfortably. He doesn’t look at Shiro, but he plays with the bracelet on his wrist, turning it around and around. “I-- mouth off,” he says finally. “I’m getting better about it, I’m trying to not… um…”

“I know,” says Shiro. This seems to settle Keith: the tight scared line of his shoulders eases a little, and Shiro presses, “What else?”

“Um,” says Keith again. “I don’t know how to…” He’s frowning, but it’s more of a puzzle-solving look than one of avoidance. “Um, I mouth off without saying anything?”

Shiro has to squint at this. “Okay,” he says. “Like how?”

“Like if-- if somebody wants me to do something, and I don’t want to, I just-- do the opposite thing.” Keith’s hard to hear now, embarrassed and fidgeting and anxious.

“Somebody being another cadet?” asks Shiro, and Keith nods. “All right, um… Tell me about the first strike, tell me about the first time you got in trouble for-- for starting fights?”

“It was in the rec room,” says Keith. “I was on one of the consoles and somebody else wanted it but I wasn’t finished with my game so I stayed there.”

“What happened then?”

Keith doesn’t answer. He licks his lips nervously and glances at the door.

“Hey,” says Shiro, swaying to the side to catch Keith’s attention. “Hey. You’re okay. It’s just me here, it’s just me, you’re not in trouble.”

Keith does look at him at this, a quick searching glance. He lowers his head again and nods, rubbing his palms on his knees.

“What happened after you didn’t give up your console?” asks Shiro.

“He went and got his friends,” Keith mumbles.

Shiro pauses, a brief memory of the footage from Keith’s file surfacing. “The foosball table?” he asks softly, and Keith’s startled look confirms it. “Who was it?” he asks. “There were four, weren’t there?”

“It was…” Keith says a little unsteadily, and stops. “It was Ricketts and Paschel and Beck and Torston. Um, Torston was the one who wanted the console. He was already on probation, I guess.”

“He got expelled?” Shiro guesses, and Keith nods. “What about the others, what happened to them?”

Keith shrugs. He reaches up to rub the side of his face. “They weren’t… there wasn’t any proof it was them. They believed me about Torston because he-- because he already had a record and they
saw him on the camera with the console, but the others, their faces weren’t on the cameras.”

“They had shirts over their faces,” Shiro remembers.

“Beck’s really careful about cameras,” Keith says matter-of-factly. “He knows where they all are and where to go so they can’t see you, so it’s…” He swallows and hunches forward a little, crossing an arm over his stomach. “It’s never, it’s never on camera when he’s…”

Keith is shaking. Shiro regards him somberly for a moment, then sighs and gets to his feet. “Come over here,” he says, moving to the swing. “Let’s get out of the breeze a little bit.” The sun is down and the temperature of the dry desert air is dropping rapidly, and the upholstered swing will provide more warmth-retention than the metal chair.

He takes off his zip-up sweatshirt as Keith gets to his feet to follow, draping it over Keith’s shoulders before he sits. Keith tugs it around himself like a cloak, embarrassed but grateful, and sinks back into the swing’s cushions. He’s too short for the swing; his legs don’t reach the ground when he’s sitting back, so Shiro steadies it as they both sit.

“Tell me about strike two,” he asks.

Keith pulls up his knees, his bare toes curling over the edge of the swing. “It was… Paschel told me to give her my chips at lunchtime and I told her to bite me.”

Shiro doesn’t smile. “What happened?”

“Um,” says Keith. He’s blushing now, all the way up to his ears. “Um, she kept kicking me under the table so I threw cottage cheese at her, and then there was a food fight and I got in trouble because I started it.”

Shiro thinks of the mess hall ruckus he’d seen in Keith’s file and wonders if it’s the same one. It seems likely. “Did you get in trouble for that, other than a strike?” he asks curiously.

“Yeah,” says Keith. “I got suspension for the next day and had to stay in my room. That was for the cottage cheese, the strike was for-- because I sassed at her, and she’s older.”

“Did Paschel get in trouble?”

“I don’t know.”

Shiro rocks the swing absently back and forth with one foot while he considers this, frowning hard. Something is incredibly wrong here: somebody is telling Keith he has to give way for his peers, that he’s less entitled than other cadets to the amenities of the Garrison; somebody is holding his position and his vulnerabilities over his head to keep him in line--

“Keith,” he says slowly, and Keith turns to look up at him. “Who issued the strikes?”

“It’s Iverson,” he says furiously, two hours later.

Keith is in bed. When Shiro tucked him in, he’d given reluctant permission for Shiro to tell Sam what Keith had told him. Then he’d curled up knees to chest with an uncontrovertible case of shivers, wound cruelly tight with apprehension. Shiro had gotten him an extra blanket and turned on his heating mattress pad, then sat with him and read aloud for the next hour while Keith slowly, slowly untensed and uncurled and finally slept.
Sam looks up from his tablet. “What?”

“The thing I was missing,” says Shiro. “The reason he wouldn’t let me report the fight. He’s been…” But he doesn’t know where to start. He rubs his hands over his face and drops onto the couch down from Sam.

“He’s been what?” asks Sam warily.

“He doesn’t like Keith,” Shiro says. “He’s been telling him he’ll be kicked out if he doesn’t–” That’s the wrong place to start. “The General’s nephew is a cadet here, a freshman. It’s him and two others who keep hurting Keith.”

“Oh…” says Sam.

“Iverson knows,” says Shiro. “But he doesn’t care about Keith and he doesn’t want to write up the General’s nephew so he’s– trying to shut Keith up by making him think he’ll get expelled if he stands up for himself!”

Sam pauses. “Okay,” he says. “Start from the beginning and cite your sources.”

“Yes, sir,” says Shiro, abashed. “I’m sorry.”

He’s exhausted, and anger is still making rational argument difficult, but his military training kicks in and he manages to give a coherent report.

Sam listens carefully to the entire thing. “You believe him?” he asks, once Shiro comes to a pause.

“I just–” says Shiro, and gestures helplessly back down the hallway. “He’s– he’s so scared, yeah I believe him.”

“Oh okay,” says Sam mildly, raising his hands. “All right.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“You need to verify before you formally accuse,” the commander says. “You need some kind of proof that you can show the General. That’s not to say you can’t talk to him about it, but before you file anything…”

“Yeah,” says Shiro, his heart sinking. “I don’t have…”

He doesn’t have anything. All he has that could possibly help Keith is a blurry shot of a boy’s face in the hallway outside the bathroom, and that won’t go far enough. It won’t go nearly far enough.


“Yeah,” says Shiro. He sits forward, putting his elbows on his knees, and covers his face for a moment. “Um– it involves his nephew, is that…”

“No,” the commander says instantly. “No, he won’t be favored for that.”


“Keith’s file is probably worth another look,” Sam says.

“It’s not in his file,” Shiro starts to say, but Sam holds up a hand.
“No, I know, but there still might be something that sticks out now that you know something is off.”

Shiro considers this, mentally reviewing the file. “Yeah,” he says finally. “Yeah, that’s true.” He sits still for a moment—he’s so tired—then he gets to his feet and goes to get his laptop.

Sam watches him. “You don’t have to solve this tonight.”

“I know, sir.”

“Shiro,” says the commander, more firmly. “Don’t try to solve this tonight.”

Shiro looks up, half-guilty. “No, sir.”

“I’m going to come out at eleven,” Sam says, beginning to pick up his work. “You’re going to be resting by then.”

Shiro has to smile. The order lifts a weight from his shoulders; he can breathe more easily. But still--

“Does your deadline hold, sir?” he asks. “Reporting by tomorrow night?”

Sam pauses. “We’ll talk about that tomorrow.”

“All right,” says Shiro, and breathes out.

“Good night, Shiro.”

“Good night, sir.”

Half an hour later he’s staring blankly at his screen after rewatching the footage from Keith’s file, exhausted and heartsick.

The corrupted video that follows the mess hall incident is still refusing to open. He doesn’t have the know-how to fix it; he doesn’t know if it’s possible. But the block bothers him, especially so close to an incident that Keith had identified as a strike. He finally saves it, minimizes the window, and hesitates before he opens a chat window to Matt.

_Are you awake?_

_yeah what’s up_

_Can you fix this?_

_twR5x9.mp6_

There’s a pause.

_ yyyeah i think so maybe?_
_ hahaha um yeah thats a big maybe_
_ we’ll see? i’ll play with it a little bit tomorrow_

_I appreciate it, sends Shiro. Thanks. Sleep good._

_what is it?_
_ something kinky?? ;;;;)
Shiro huffs out a breath, but that’s all the disapproval he has energy for. *It’s from Keith’s file, I don’t know what it is.*

*oh huh
that’s kind of weird, maybe a buggy extraction protocol??
yeah i’ll look at it tomorrow*

*Thanks.*

Matt types for a little longer, and Shiro waits, but the notification disappears and the window stays silent.

The hair on the back of his neck prickles, and he knows without looking that Keith is in the hallway. He closes his laptop and sets it aside, then looks up.

“How on, then,” he says, lifting up his arm. Keith shuffles across the living room toward him and clambers ungracefully up onto the couch, then settles into the space made for him without hesitating.

Shiro reaches across Keith for the blanket piled up down the couch. “Do you want to read or just sit?”

Keith shrugs, reaching to help spread the blanket over their laps. He heaves a big sigh and curls sleepily into Shiro’s side.

Shiro exhales, leaning his head back against the back of the couch. It’s an unexpected bone-deep relief, the tactile reminder that Keith is safe. If it had been hard watching the footage in Keith’s file the first time, when Keith was a stranger, it is doubly so now. It had made him sick and shaky, keyed up and wrung out—but now, with Keith falling asleep on his shoulder, everything has shifted *just so* and is right again.

He runs his hand over Keith’s head once, absently, and closes his eyes for a moment.

When Sam comes out at half past eleven to check on Shiro, he finds them both fast asleep, propped up by the corner of the couch. He stands in the hallway for a moment, then he quietly steals out and turns off the lamp.

He takes a picture first, though, and sends it to Colleen and Matt, because *aw geez.*

Chapter End Notes

*Ao3 does some WEIRD STUFF to italics and special formatting when you paste from google docs and I have not figured out the knack of getting it to behave and paste neatly yet. Anybody have any insight?*
“What’s the code for your bracelet?” Shiro asks conversationally over breakfast Sunday morning.

Keith completely blanks. “Um,” he says, panicking mildly.

“Short...” Shiro prompts.

“Shortshortshort,” Keith says, latching on with relief, “Long, long, shortshortshort.”

“Almost,” says Shiro, and somehow he makes it sound like a good thing. “That’s SMS. Shortshortshort, long, long, long, shortshortshort. Three of each.”

Keith repeats it back. There’s a squirmy anxious feeling that goes with answering a question wrong, but Shiro doesn’t seem upset.

“What’s the code?” Shiro asks again, about fifteen minutes later. He’s at the island, fixing two mugs while Keith watches with narrowed eyes. There’s coffee in both, and though Shiro’s putting other things in the smaller mug too, Keith does not trust it.

“Shortshortshort, long, long, long, shortshortshort,” Keith says dutifully. “Do I have to drink that?”

Shiro tips his head back and laughs. “Ahh, um. No, no, you do not. You might want to taste it, though.”

“Why?” asks Keith suspiciously, but Shiro just makes a mysterious noise. “Shirooo.”

“Keiiiiith.”

“What are you putting in it?”

“Powdered bat guano,” says Shiro.

“What?” asks Keith, alarmed, and scrambles up onto the stool for a better look. Shiro doubles over laughing, though, and Keith realizes his mistake a second too late. He scoffs and swings his legs.

“Um,” says Shiro, wiping at his eyes. “Um, just some of this, some of that. Soy milk, hot chocolate mix, some of Matt’s white chocolate powder. There’s not very much coffee at all. Oh, some of the commander’s peppermint creamer. He doesn’t mind,” he adds, when Keith glances nervously down the hall. “I didn’t use very much.”

Keith isn’t sure he’s as unconcerned about it as Shiro, but he faces forward again and watches Shiro spoon whipped cream onto the top of the smaller mug.

It’s good, he decides after the first cautious taste. It’s really good. The bitterness is there, but muted, harmonizing with the chocolate. He wants to ask for more, but he decides he shouldn’t push his luck. He makes it last, instead.

“What’s the code?” Shiro asks again, whisking his empty cup away to put in the wash.

“Oh my god,” says Keith.
“Come on, you gotta know it.”

Keith gives him an exasperated look. “I know it! I knew it last time too!”

“Yeah?” asks Shiro. “Tell it to me backwards.”

“It’s the same backwards.”

“Are you sure?”

“Shiro.”

Shiro’s laughing again. Keith huffs out an annoyed breath.

“I guess you know it by heart, then,” Shiro says.

“Yes,” says Keith.

“You’ll be able to answer the extra credit questions.”

Keith doesn’t think they’ll run the same question twice, but he shrugs.

“You’ll be able to remember it at any time, no matter what’s going on.”

There’s an odd glint in Shiro’s eye as he comes around the island. Keith will later realize that it should have worried him much, much more than it did.

“Sure,” he says slowly, squinting over his shoulder at Shiro. “What are y--ShIRO!”

Shiro has swooped down on him from behind, snaking an arm around his middle and pinning his arms to his sides “What’s the code, quick quick quick what’s the code!”

“Short,” gasps Keith, trying to find his arms. His legs are too short, he can’t get any purchase on the stool’s footrest. “Shortshortshort, long, l-ONG--”

And then he’s shrieking and writhing and can’t remember how to breathe, let alone signal in Morse, because Shiro is tickling him and he can’t get away.

It should be scary. It almost is. But Shiro is laughing behind him and there’s no malice in the sound; Shiro’s arms around him are familiar and safe. But even once he’s decided to not be scared, it’s still too much, he’s still laughing breathlessly, struggling without intent or control, and he doesn’t have access to words while Shiro’s fingers are spidering mercilessly across his sides and tummy.

“Whoops!” says Shiro, and hastily scoops Keith up under the knees while the stool topples underneath him. It lands with a deafening clatter that puts Keith’s heart in his throat.

“Sorry, I'm sorry,” Keith manages, wheezing desperately for breath. The noise has brought him out of the sort of overwhelmed fog of being tickled to within an inch of his life, and now he's pricklingly alert and aware. “I didn't mean to!”

“Nah, bud, that was my fault,” says Shiro easily. His voice thrums pleasantly into Keith's back where it is pressed against his chest, and Keith relaxes a little, but then a door opens down the hall and he flinches.

“You know we have neighbors,” says Matt, sticking his head out his bedroom door. His hair is sticking up every which way and he looks a frowsy half-awake mess.
“Eh,” Shiro says, cheerfully unconcerned. He shifts his arm from around Keith's middle to loop with the other under his knees, so that Keith is trapped in a basket made of his arms. “It's 11:30, nobody's still asleep.”

“I was asleep,” Matt says grouchily, shuffling out to the kitchen.

Keith squirms, testing Shiro's hold on him. His feet are sticking out absurdly in front of him and he feels extremely vulnerable, even with both of Shiro's hands removed from the proximity of his abdomen.

“It's for science,” Shiro says, and deftly flips Keith upside-down, dangling him from his ankles. “Keith has hypothesized that he can remember SOS in any circumstance. I am looking for evidence.”

Keith twists and flails, feeling his hair all stand up the wrong way and the blood rush to his face. He’s already giggling again, breathless and helpless, holding up his shirt with one hand so it doesn’t fall down around his face, reaching for the floor with the other just in case.

“Find any?” asks Matt. Keith can’t see what he’s doing, but he hears dishes clinking.

“No yet,” says Shiro regretfully. “Further testing needed.”

“NoooOoo,” Keith howls as Shiro begins to carry him out to the living room, still upside-down. “I know it, I know it, Shiro!”

Shiro hauls him up and swings him so he lands gently on his back on the soft bouncy cushions of the long couch. “Is that the code?” he wonders out loud, pinning Keith’s legs down. “I don’t think that’s the code…”

“Matt help!”

“Sorry, dude,” says Matt from the kitchen. “You’re on your own.”

And then Shiro is tickling him again and it’s not fair because his hands are so big that they can reach Keith’s entire stomach at once and how is he meant to get the breath to say anything--

Oh.

It takes him a minute to get a good hold on the bracelet, because Shiro has figured out that his most ticklish spot is the concavity just below his sternum and Keith is actually dying. Then it takes him two tries once he has the bracelet, because it persists in being two longs in his head instead of three--but then the bracelet buzzes.

Shiro sits back, distracted and looking at his watch. “Oh, crap, hang on--”

Keith wastes no time. He reclaims his legs and launches himself at Shiro, clambering around to latch onto his back like a monkey. The sight of Shiro’s eyes going wide with surprised realization is the most satisfying thing Keith’s ever seen.

“Oh nooo,” Shiro wails, flailing his arms and leaning forward. “Oh noooo, Matt, there’s a bugbear on my back.”

“I don’t know what you expect me to do about it,” says Matt.

Giggling madly, Keith locks his arms around Shiro’s shoulders. He feels a slight hesitation before Shiro gets up, and suspects Shiro might be checking to be sure he’s steady, but then Shiro’s on his
feet and Keith has to concentrate on hanging on unaided. He latches his legs around Shiro’s waist while Shiro staggers around the living room, waving his arms like a man distraught.

“What will I doooo.”

“Just sit on it,” Matt says, and Keith shrieks.

“But then it will squish,” says Shiro. “It’s very squishy!” He reaches around to poke Keith in the side to demonstrate, and Keith nearly loses his hold.

“Guess you’re doomed, then,” says Matt, taking a drink from his mug.

“Oh nooo,” says Shiro again. He reaches up and grips Keith’s arms, then topples dramatically to his knees on the big fluffy rug in front of the couch. “Tell the commander… I died… bravely…”

He flops forward limply on the rug.

Keith has to scramble to avoid getting dragged down with him: he sits up, perched triumphantly on Shiro’s back, and lets out a satisfied huff. “I remembered it,” he says, still a little breathless. “I told you I could.”

“Yes you did,” says Shiro, opening his eyes. “Great job, I’m really proud of you! The bracelet works,” he adds, looking at Matt while Keith glows and glows. “He managed to set it off while I was tickling him and I didn’t even notice him doing it.”

“Nice,” says Matt. “Good job, Keith.”

Shiro starts to get to his hands and feet, and Keith hastily clutches his shoulders to steady himself. Shiro loops his arms underneath Keith’s legs, gets to his feet, and casually carries Keith piggyback around the living room while Keith clings on and grins hugely.

“We should go for a walk,” says Shiro, pausing by the window, and jostles Keith a little bit. “What do you think? Up for a walk?”

“Yeah, okay,” Keith says.

“Matt?”

“Mornings are not for walks,” says Matt. “Mornings are for coffee and contemplation.”

“Another time, then!” Shiro says brightly. He bends his knees and leans backwards. “All right, down, limpet,” he says over his shoulder. “Go put on some real clothes.”

Keith slides down reluctantly and goes to dig through his knapsack. There’s only one set of clean clothes left, which means today is Sunday and he has to go back to the Garrison. The thought makes his stomach twist and sink: tomorrow it’ll be back to classes and bland meals across from Paschel. He takes his clothes and carries them into the bathroom to change, glumly wondering what it would take for him to be able to stay with Shiro instead.

When he comes out again, Shiro has two water bottles full on the counter. “Sunscreen,” he says, and tosses a pink bottle to Keith.

“How long are we going to be out?” Keith asks, bewildered, and squirts some of the sunscreen into his hand to put on.

“Don’t know!” says Shiro. “This is an adventure!” He’s smearing sunscreen all over his face and
neck and arms, and Keith copies him. Shiro inspects his work when he’s done, tweaks both his ears with sunscreen-slimy fingers while Keith hunches his shoulders up like a turtle, then says, “All right, let’s go!”

He hands Keith one of the water bottles and leads the way out the door.

The hallway and elevator are startlingly unfamiliar. Keith is disoriented for a moment before he realizes that he’d been thinking of the Kerberos crew’s apartment as an extension of the Garrison. “Where are we?” he asks when they step outside and he gets a good look at the building for the first time.

“Oh,” says Shiro. “You were asleep when we came in, weren’t you. This is… ahh, the town’s over that rise and the Garrison’s about a mile east. We can walk that way if you want.”

“No, thanks,” Keith says hastily. He doesn’t want to see the Garrison any sooner than he absolutely has to.

Shiro glances at him, a little too keenly for comfort, but only says, “All right, let’s go this way instead. There’s a nice route I run a lot that ends in the town.”

“Are you going to run now?” asks Keith apprehensively.

“Not unless you want to run,” says Shiro, laughing. “I like to run in the evenings, when it’s cooling down instead of warming up.”

Keith frowns, thinking back: Shiro hadn’t left hardly at all for the last three days, and he definitely hadn’t disappeared to go run. He realizes guiltily that that had probably been because of him.

Thinking about Shiro going places makes him think of when he’d left two days ago, and Keith realizes he never got an answer about that. It takes him a minute of walking to decide whether or not he wants to ask again—adult secrets sometimes lead to terrifying places—but he finally does. “What did you go to the Garrison for the other day?”

He expects Shiro to brush it off again, give him a breezy answer that isn’t a lie but isn’t the entire truth either, so it’s surprising and a little frightening when Shiro sighs instead and says, “Yeah, we should talk about that.”

The words we should talk coming from Shiro have never yet meant anything fun for Keith. “We don’t—we don’t have to,” he says, abruptly nervous.

“No, it’s okay,” says Shiro. “It’s nothing scary this time, I promise.” He pauses, and frowns uncertainly. “I don’t think.”

This is not encouraging. Keith’s heart has started to hammer in time with his steps, dull and deep.

“Um,” says Shiro, and blows out a breath. He looks as nervous as Keith feels; he isn’t looking at him directly. “Um— do you know what an agent of care is?”

Keith misses a step, a cold sick emptiness creeping up the inside of his ribs. This is one of those conversations.

“Yeah,” he says finally, reluctantly. “Foster parents are them, and— and social workers sometimes, and people in charge of group homes.”

His voice sounds wooden; he needs to look to his tone before he gets in trouble. But everything’s
about to change, again, and he can’t remember how to care. He feels curiously detached, like he’s floating a foot above his own head.

“It’s somebody authorized to provide basic care for a kid,” says Shiro. “It’s not– it’s not always kids in your situation who get assigned agents of care, um… like sometimes parents will make a grandparent or a nanny an agent of care for their kids in case something goes wrong and the nanny’s there and they’re not. It means the nanny can, oh, give permission for emergency medical care, sign most school forms, that kind of thing.”

Shiro pauses there, like he expects Keith to say something, but Keith can’t quite process what he’s saying. It doesn’t seem relevant to him.

“Um,” Shiro says. “In your case, it means your foster parents were able to do those things for you when you were a ward of the state. It’s not quite legal guardianship, your legal guardian was still the state of Texas, but it’s a couple steps down.”

Keith hates this kind of talk. There had been so much of it in the days following the accident, grown-ups talking to him seriously while he sat still and listened from somewhere very far away, while he wondered if this were even real, while he tried, desperately, to find a place in his mind where it wasn’t. Even now, almost two years later, the helplessness and uncertainty slip softly along the seams tethering Keith to himself and cut…

“Keith?”

He blinks a few times and focuses, realizes he’s stopped walking.

“Hey,” Shiro says, stepping back along the rocky path toward him. He looks worried. “Are you feeling okay? We can go back.”

“I’m fine,” Keith hears himself say.

Shiro crouches down and looks closely at him. “Okay,” he says. “Okay, well, let’s sit for a minute.”

There’s a bench a little ways ahead, and Shiro leads him to it, a hand on his back. Keith wants to shrug it off. He wants to push Shiro away and run, run out into the desert until he can’t run anymore, until it doesn’t matter, because Shiro had known. He’d known for two days that they were sending Keith away and he’d-- he’d read to him, and he’d hugged him and held him and made Keith think everything was all right, that he was safe, that he was found, and Keith hates him.

He hates him because he fell for it.

“What’s going on?” he hears Shiro ask. “Keith, what’s hurting?”

Keith doesn’t look at him. He focuses on the gravel of the walking path, he focuses on the dry sweet desert air, he focuses on the tight, cruel ache in his chest; anything is better than him looking at Shiro right now.

“Where are they sending me.”

His tone is brittle. He’s going to get in trouble.

“What?” asks Shiro. They’ve reached the bench, and Shiro tugs him slightly toward it.
Keith pulls away, breaking the contact, walking faster down the path. He wishes they’d walked toward the Garrison. He thinks he’ll throw up if he has to go back into the apartment. “Not that I get a say or anything but it’d be nice if they’d wait a month, it’d be nice if I could go one semester without switching schools—”

“Keith—” Shiro is following him, and the compassion in his voice nearly makes Keith gag.

“You know what fuck you,” Keith spits, whirling to face him, and oh, oh no, that was a mistake. His vision blurs over with tears. “You let me think— you let me think—”

“Keith,” says Shiro urgently. He’s reaching out, and Keith hates how much he wants to step forward and meet it.

He drags in a breath and backs away. “Don’t fucking touch me,” he says, and sobs.

“Keith,” says Shiro, one more time. He crouches down, like he thinks Keith will spook if he comes nearer. “Keith. You’re not going anywhere.”

Keith stares at him, thrown off. He closes his mouth, swipes furiously at his nose.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Shiro says again, meeting Keith’s eyes steadily. “I promise you, I will never, ever hide something like that from you.”

Keith swallows. It’s hard to meet Shiro’s eyes, and he doesn’t know where to look. He’s shaking, he realizes abruptly; he’s shaking so badly he can barely stand straight.

“I’m an agent of care for you now,” Shiro says. “That’s what I was gearing up to tell you. I’m sorry I made you think it was something else.” He pauses, lowering his head a little wryly. “I was nervous.”

Keith feels for a moment like somebody has struck him hard in the chest. The breath is knocked out of him, he can't remember how his lungs work. He shifts from foot to foot, helplessly disoriented. “You--” he starts, and turns half away. This isn’t the pattern, this isn’t how things go. He doesn’t know what to do.

Shiro is getting slowly back to his feet, showing his empty palms to Keith. “You’re okay,” he says, steady and gentle. “You’re okay.”

He begins toward Keith, each slow footstep crunching softly in the gravel, and Keith can only stand and tremble. And then Shiro stops a few paces away, and kneels down again, and offers Keith his arms.

Keith sucks in a breath that shudders, and stumbles forward to close the gap.

Chapter End Notes

Before you go googling, I made agents of care up.
Shiro isn’t sure about the walk after that, but Keith, red-eyed and trembly, hadn’t wanted to go back. So they sit together on the side of the path, and Shiro rubs Keith’s back in big soothing sweeps of his palm until he’s settled again, and finally they get up and continue on.

“You’re not--” Keith begins after about a quarter mile, and stops, frowning. Shiro waits patiently, and Keith finally says, “You’re not… foster…”

“No,” says Shiro, though a tiny piece of him wonders for a second before he banishes it. This, what he’s been given, is a lot: he isn’t nearly ready to put on a parent title of any sort. He’s going on a long mission in less than four years, too. He can’t do that to Keith, even if they'd let him, even if he wasn't too young and unprepared. “No, I’m still just a mentor. But a mentor who can do things like…” He pauses and glances sidelong at Keith. “Sign you up for a karate class?”

Keith takes a second to realize that it’s a serious offer. He gives Shiro a startled look. “What, really?”

Shiro lifts his shoulders. “There’s a place in town with a summer program. I’ll get you in if you want.”

Keith doesn’t answer right away. Shiro keeps an eye on him: he’s fidgeting with the panic bracelet in what Shiro has already begun to recognize as an anxious habit. “I don’t--” Keith says finally. “Isn’t that-- expensive?”

“Not prohibitively,” Shiro assures him. He pauses, weighing his words, then says, “It would… honestly be very worth it to me to know you know how to defend yourself if somebody’s trying to hurt you again.”

Keith glances up at him quickly, then looks away. Shiro has just resolved not to press the issue when Keith finally says, very quietly, “Okay.”

“Yeah?” asks Shiro, brightening up. “Okay.”

Keith’s answering smile is shy and a bit pink-cheeked. He scuffs the toe of his shoe in the gravel. “I’m sorry I said fuck at you.”

It takes Shiro a minute to figure out what he means. “Oh,” he says, and shrugs. “You know, if I’d done what you thought I did, I’d have deserved it.” He pauses, one side of his mouth quirking up ruefully. “You definitely don’t need cussing lessons from Matt, though.”


“Don’t get too excited,” Shiro warns him. “I have a swear jar and I’m not afraid to use it.”

The quiet giggle he gets in response makes his heart swell and glow and ache.

They end up walking about two and a half miles. Keith surprises Shiro with his ability to keep up and keep going in the growing heat of the day, and when Shiro turns them toward home it’s more to assuage his own concern that they might be overdoing it so soon after a head injury than because
Keith seems to be tiring.

Keith is quiet for most of the walk, though, emotionally if not physically drained. Shiro catches the tail end of several anxious, assessing looks, but Keith averts his eyes quickly every time he’s caught, so Shiro decides to give him time.

He doesn’t want to give Keith back to the Garrison tonight.

The realization grows slowly: as they walk down the trail, as they ride the elevator to the third floor, as Keith crosses without hesitation to the short couch and curls into the space in the corner. Keith is raw from the misunderstanding, still processing Shiro's new role, and Shiro doesn't want to send him back so unsteady.

He steps into the kitchen to get them each more water, already considering. He could keep Keith tonight and take him back early tomorrow instead, maybe; it would mean a little earlier start for Keith, but he's been doing reasonably well in the mornings. Shiro's pretty sure he can get him back before his first class without trouble.

He hesitates, then sends a message to Sam and Matt: *Is it all right with you guys if I keep Keith here another night?*

He's reasonably certain of their responses, so he drafts the request to the General while he's waiting. Matt's approving emoji blinks up in his notifications before he's finished the first sentence, and Sam's assent follows shortly.

“You want to stay one more night?” he asks Keith, carrying out the water.

Keith looks up at him, startled and so painfully relieved that something in Shiro's chest constricts. “Really?”

“Yeah,” says Shiro, handing him the cup. “I'll take you back tomorrow before first block.”

“Yeah,” Keith says, and his whole demeanor eases and glows. “Yeah, all right.”

Shiro plops down next to him. “Let's do that, then. Let's try to leave at... ahh, how about around 8:30 so we have time to get you settled back in your room before class starts.”

“Can we go on your bike?” asks Keith quickly. “Please?”

Shiro has to grin. “We'll see how you're feeling.” The tablet buzzes with the official permission, and Shiro settles back into the couch, satisfied.

Next to him, Keith pulls up his legs and hugs his knees. Shiro scribbles a quick message to Malone, aware of Keith watching him. He sends the message and glances sidelong at Keith.

Keith quickly looks away.

Shiro pauses, debating briefly with himself. “You’ve been pretty quiet,” he ventures.

Keith glances at him, his eyes halfway to wary. He shrugs slightly, shifting where he sits. “Sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry,” Shiro says. “Do you want to talk?”

Keith shrugs again. The brown blanket is still on the couch from the morning, rucked up in the corner behind Keith, and Shiro watches as he fidgets with it, running the soft felt between his fingers.
“Do you have any questions, about...?” asks Shiro finally, when the silence has stretched long enough that it’s clear that Keith isn’t going to break it.

Keith shifts again and shakes his head. “I’ve had… I’ve had people be agents of care before,” he says, not looking up.

He sounds resigned more than anything else, and Shiro gets it all at once, looking at him hunched small in the corner of the couch. He’s had-- he must have had so many, Shiro hasn’t seen his file from before the Garrison, but he’s mentioned foster parents and a group home and a second cousin who didn’t want him.

Every single adult in Keith’s life who has stepped into this role has stepped out of it again and left Keith alone, every single one.

Shiro feels the pressure like a physical weight for a moment, like something squeezing his lungs. This has moved so fast, and he’s let it sweep him along for the sake of the little boy at the other end of the couch, but oh god there’s so very, very much at stake and he’s so very, very unqualified.

“Okay,” he murmurs. He takes a deep, purposeful breath, setting his shoulders and filling his lungs in defiance of the weight. “Can I… can I tell you something?”

Keith looks up at him, both vulnerable and watchful, the sunshine from the window slanting across his face. In this light, the deep gray of his eyes looks almost violet.

“I’m not going to make any big promises,” says Shiro, shifting a little to face him more fully. “I think… I think maybe people have made promises to you before and maybe that makes it kind of hard for you to hear that kind of thing now.”

It’s a guess, but it seems to hit truth: Keith’s eyes widen fractionally and sharpen, his shoulders stiffen up.

“It’s okay,” Shiro says quickly. “It’s okay, you’re okay. I’m not… asking for you to change that. I’m just, I understand, all right?”

Keith swallows. His eyes don’t leave Shiro’s face.

“Um,” says Shiro, and falters for a moment. “You don’t… have to believe me right now, I just…” He pauses, meets Keith’s eyes. “I’m not always going to be here, I mean-- I’m going to space in a few years, but… while I’m here, I’m going to do everything I can to make sure you’ll be alright when I’m not. I’m on your side. I want-- this is, this is all new to me, I’ve got a lot to learn, but I want to take care of you, I want to find you a place where you feel safe, I want to help you grow past all this.” He stops. He feels abruptly self-conscious, like he’s said too much. He rubs the side of his jaw. “Is this all… okay with you? It's moved really fast, we've only known each other a little while…”

Keith doesn't answer, and Shiro's heart drops all the way to his feet.

“He's babbling, he realizes, and he cuts himself off deliberately. The disappointment is shocking in its intensity, a keen knife-pain without source or center.
Keith stirs.

“It’s okay with me,” he says softly, and Shiro remembers to breathe again.

“Oh,” he says weakly. “Oh, good, okay.”

“I just--” Keith says, and then stops. His face twists up for a second, like he’s hurting somewhere, like there’s an ache he’s used to but can’t ease. “Are you... are you sure? Was it like-- was it your idea or is somebody…” He pauses again. “Did somebody like… assign me to you?”

He doesn’t look at Shiro while he asks; he twists the blanket in his hands.

Shiro takes a breath and licks his lips while he considers how to answer. “It wasn’t… my idea,” he finally answers frankly. “I didn’t know it was an option, honestly, I don’t know much about this stuff. But it was my choice. The General set it up and offered it, but it wasn’t… it wasn’t an order. It wasn’t something I felt like I had to do, it’s-- it’s something I want to do. Does that answer your question?”

Keith doesn’t say anything or look up, and Shiro thinks for a terrifying moment that he’s given the wrong answer. But then Keith breathes, sudden and deep, like he’d been forgetting. Shiro sees his shoulders shudder, and he understands immediately.

“Oh, bud, hey,” he says, shifting nearer on the couch. “C’mere, c’mere, it’s okay.”

Keith uncurls and reaches out as Shiro tugs him in. He twines his arms around Shiro's chest as far as they will go and hides his face in Shiro's t-shirt.

Shiro holds him tightly, feeling each silent sob that tears and wrenches through the fragile frame in his arms. “You’re okay,” he whispers into Keith's hair. “You're okay, bud, you're okay. I've got you.”

*I've got you.*

“Where’s Matt and Commander Holt?” Keith asks that evening, watching as Shiro measures out soap for the tiny load of Keith's clothes.

“They went to the city for family dinner,” answers Shiro. “They go home every Sunday.”

“Home?” repeats Keith blankly. “This isn’t--?”

“No,” says Shiro a little absently, setting the cycle. “This is pre-mission mandatory cohabitation. We've got another month.”

There’s a nauseating little jolt that comes with the revelation, like when he would come down the stairs in the dark at his first foster home and miss the last step because there was one more than he was used to. Keith glances around the apartment with new eyes, noticing the simple, coordinated furniture, the bland-but-tasteful wall decor: this apartment came furnished, because the Kerberos crew is *staying* here, not *living* here.

He feels abruptly cold.

“So this isn’t--” he says, and swallows. “You’re moving?”

Shiro glances at him, shutting the laundry closet door. “I’m not, no,” he answers. “It’s a year lease,
so we’ll finish that out at least, but we’ll get another place close by if we don’t keep this one. Matt and the commander are moving back to the city for the summer after the term finishes next month, but there’s going to be trainings and meetings and things that we have to be here for, so. The rent’s worth them having a place to crash if stuff runs late, and I’ve kind of gotten attached to having my own space.”

Keith follows Shiro back to the couch and sits, pulling up his knees to hug. “I didn’t think about them having family,” he confesses. Maybe it’s the effect of the last couple years, the company he’s kept, where it’s impolite to ask and dangerous to assume such things, but he’s gotten out of the habit of imagining anybody with connections, siblings or parents or kids.

“Commander Holt’s wife Colleen and Matt’s sister Katie,” Shiro says. “Katie’s a few years younger than you.”

“Why don’t they move here?” Keith asks.

“Katie goes to school in the city, and Colleen’s a microbiologist at the university there,” Shiro says. “So they can’t really pick up and move easily. The commute isn’t bad, anyway, it’s only about forty-five minutes if you time it right.”

“Do you have family someplace?”

Shiro smiles, but he doesn’t quite look at Keith. “My mom and my brother live in Rhode Island, and my dad lives over in Phoenix.”

There’s something there, something that Shiro isn’t saying. Keith stares at him, trying to puzzle it out, trying to decide if he should ask, then Shiro glances at him and looks down, shrugging slightly. “My dad and I aren’t on the greatest of terms. I mostly stayed with my grandpa until I got accepted to the Garrison.”

Keith shifts. He doesn’t know how to respond to this, he doesn’t know whether he’s supposed to say something, or hug Shiro, or…

“I’m sorry,” he offers finally, because that seems safe, because he wants to say something.

Something shifts and lightens in Shiro’s face, his smile becoming more genuine, and he looks at Keith. “Thanks,” he says. “You don’t have to be, it’s… it’s long settled.”

Keith plays self-consciously with the clasp of the bracelet, sliding his thumbnail between the magnets. “Still,” he mumbles.

Shiro reaches over and fondly ruffles up his hair, and Keith’s heart lurches and glows happily: it’s been a long time since he’s been around a grown-up who touches as easily and frequently as Shiro, and Keith likes it. He can’t bring himself yet to actually ask for contact, but Shiro seems to know when he needs it. He seems to be as happy to give hugs as Keith is to receive them.

“Anyway,” says Shiro. “We’re on our own for supper. What kind of pizza do you like?”

And in the ensuing discussion, Keith discovers that his hero has a flaw after all, because Shiro likes pineapple on his pizza.

Chapter End Notes
Hey guys! I just wanted to say: thank you so much for the feedback and conversations and headcanons and ranting in the comments, that stuff is my JAM. You guys have really made me look closer at my writing and my concepts of characters and god I appreciate it SO MUCH. As always, feel free to drop me a line on tumblr (though I do feel duty-bound to warn you that if you do the thing I will PROBABLY message you with crack headcanons every time I get writers block which is basically every hour of every day).

also! important question: would you guys rather have frequent, smallish updates (about the size of this chapter, about twice a week), or longer, less frequent updates (about twice this size, once a week or so)?
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The evening goes quietly and comfortably.

Shiro gets them a pizza split down the middle with things Keith likes on one side and things Shiro likes on the other, and Keith goes speechless for a full thirty seconds at the sight of a pizza half just for him. Then he eats too much and has to lie down on the couch next to Shiro, curled sleepily around his slightly achy tummy.

Shiro lets him watch a movie afterwards while he does some work on his laptop, though he keeps the volume down low and Keith is aware of him keeping a closer watch on Keith than the movie. It's both annoying and warming.

At bedtime, Shiro just makes up the short couch for him instead of making him try to sleep in the bedroom again. Keith crawls under the blankets and settles on his stomach, his face turned so that he can see Shiro on the other couch, sitting in a golden puddle of lamplight with his tablet.

Keith is tired, but he can't relax enough to drop off. He can't stop thinking that tomorrow he's going to have to sit across from Paschel at lunch, change in the same locker room as Ricketts and Beck, watch his back in the halls again. His heart starts beating, trapped in the cage of his ribs; there's molten fear pouring through the veins of his arms, his legs, twisting like a live thing in his belly.

“Shiro--” he blurts without thinking.

Shiro looks up. His face goes from alert to worried in the space of a blink, and then he's setting his tablet aside and moving quickly around the coffee table to crouch at Keith's side. “Bud, hey,” he says, and touches the side of Keith's head. “What's going on, what's the matter?”

Keith realizes too late that the corners of his eyes are leaking, that he's breathing unsteadily. “I--” he starts. He accidentally meets Shiro's eyes and quickly shuts his own tightly: the concern and love looking back at him from so close are too much and it nearly shatters him.

“I don't want to go back,” he manages.

There's a pause.

“Oh, Keith,” Shiro murmurs. The hand on the side of his head sweeps softly down over his hair. It lifts, settles again on the top of his head, repeats.

He feels more than hears Shiro shifting to sit on the floor next to him. The rhythm of Shiro's hand pauses, then resumes. Keith keeps still, quivering under the blanket, trying to breathe normally, trying to keep the wetness inside his eyes.

“You won't be alone,” Shiro says after a few moments. “If you need me, I'll be right there, I promise. I'm only a minute away.”

“That's not--” whispers Keith, and hiccups.

Shiro waits for a moment, then goes on talking, low and soothing, while his fingers smooth over Keith's thick unruly hair. “We'll add my code to your contacts on your tablet tomorrow, and then you
can message me through the day whenever you want, whenever you're not in class.”

*It's not the same*, Keith wants to say; he wants to stay here, with Shiro, where he can see Shiro and Shiro can see him.

“Can't I take the satellite classes from here?” he begs, opening his eyes. “Please?”

“No, kiddo, I'm sorry,” says Shiro. “We don't have a class immersion pod.”

“I can just watch it on the screen instead!”

“They don't count you as present if you use a screen,” Shiro says gently. “I'm sorry, bud.”

Keith squeezes his eyes shut again, feeling new tears leak out.

“Listen,” says Shiro after a moment, brushing back the hair around Keith's ear. “If you get scared that somebody is going to hurt you, go someplace safe and call me, okay? Where are some good safe places?”

“The library,” says Keith, thinking of the hidden nooks in the far corners of the stacks.

“Yeah, good,” Shiro encourages. “If you go to the library, Ms Boer or Mr Rollings will help you out. People can be better safe places than actual places. Who else?”

Keith stares at him, at a loss. It’s been a long time since he thought of anybody as a safe place. The exception is sitting in front of him.

“Sergeant Burns?” suggests Shiro. At Keith’s blank look, he says, “I know she’d be more than happy to help if you were in trouble.”

Keith thinks of the mess hall, of the sergeant standing casually behind him so he could eat. He rubs the side of his face, embarrassed and confused.

“Who else?”

“I don’t know,” says Keith. He doesn’t know where to look. Shiro is trying so hard to help him, but each solution makes Keith’s skin crawl. “I don’t know.”

Shiro looks at him, and pauses. “Okay,” he says. “Okay. If there’s nobody around you trust, go to someplace where there’s cameras, and call me. If you can’t call me, use the bracelet.”

“Okay,” whispers Keith.

“Okay,” Shiro repeats. He goes quiet for a minute. His hand smooths down Keith’s hair one more time, then falls away. “Do you think you can sleep?”

Keith doesn’t know, but Shiro wants him to, so he shrugs.

“Do you need the light off?” Shiro asks.

Keith shakes his head.

“All right,” Shiro says. He squeezes Keith’s shoulder briefly, then gets up and goes back to the other couch.

Despite Keith’s apprehensions, he’s very tired, and Shiro’s quiet presence across the room is
grounding. He closes his eyes.

He’s not sure if he actually sleeps or not, or how much time has passed, but he comes abruptly awake and alert, his heart pounding. Nothing has changed in the apartment; Shiro hasn’t moved, the living room is still lit by the single lamp. He’s not sure what woke him for a moment, but then he hears it: noise in the hallway, the soft beeping of the door keypad.

Shiro glances up toward the door, attentive but not alarmed, and Keith stares at him. Shiro sees him looking and murmurs something that Keith doesn't even hear for trying to listen to the hallway instead--

The lock disengages with a soft *snick* that jolts through Keith’s entire body like an electric shock. The door opens, and he can hear people moving behind him, behind the back of the couch, out of his range of vision. He can’t move, he can’t look away from Shiro’s face.

Shiro isn’t looking at him; he’s looking past him, grinning in greeting.

“Hey,” somebody whispers. “Is he--?”

“Nah, he’s awake,” says Shiro.

“Ah, crap,” Keith hears Matt say. “Did we wake you up, Keith? Sorry.”

A hand comes down over the back of the couch, startlingly sudden, and there isn’t anywhere to go. He feels his shoulders jerk slightly as the hand--Matt’s?--pats his arm, feels his body pull into itself while his heart pounds and pounds, but Matt doesn’t seem to notice. Keith can hear both sets of footsteps moving away.

“’Night,” the commander whispers from the hallway, and Shiro replies, “’Night, sir.”

Then it’s quiet in the living room again, just him and Shiro, and Shiro’s watching him. “Are you okay?” Shiro asks in a low voice.

Keith nods. He shaking, he realizes suddenly; he wants to cover his face with the blanket, sink into the cracks of the couch cushions, anything to avoid looking at Shiro.

“Can I come over there?”

The request is a strange one, and Keith can’t even process it for a moment. He finally remembers to nod.

Shiro sets aside his tablet. The light from the screen makes a small white pool on the ceiling in the shadow of the lamp’s shade. Then Shiro is coming toward him, moving slowly, not looking at him directly as he approaches. He sits down on the floor next to the short couch.

“What can I do?” asks Shiro softly, and Keith has no idea how to answer. He’s not sure he could speak right now, even if he did know what to say. But Shiro doesn’t push, thankfully, just sits quietly by while Matt and the commander wander back and forth in the hallway, going about their nighttime routines. Water trickles, somebody brushes their teeth; the toilet flushes; the shower runs.

The ice flooding Keith’s chest finally eases and lifts. He can breathe again, he can swallow; he can focus.
“Hey,” whispers Shiro. “There you are. There you are.”

*I didn’t go anywhere,* Keith wants to say, but he doesn’t.

“What can I do?” Shiro asks again. “What do you need?”

“I don’t know,” Keith hears himself say. “I don’t know.”

The hallway light flicks off; a door closes.

“Do you know where you are?” Shiro asks.

“Yes.”

Shiro seems satisfied with this. He scoots back a little, sitting on the floor parallel to the couch, and rests his elbow on the couch cushion in front of Keith. “I used to get anxiety attacks a lot,” he says, quiet and conversational, a steady stream of words. “My parents divorced when I was… oh, ten or eleven. It was messy. I used to…” He rubs the side of his face thoughtfully. “*Dissociate* was the word they used. Nothing felt real, nothing felt permanent. I’d just kind of zone out, because that was better than… than feeling scared and worthless and powerless.”

Keith curls up a little tighter. His heart is still racing, he's still trembly with residual adrenaline; he doesn't *want* to have a whole talk with Shiro right now.

“Sometimes it can help to have a-- a name to put to that kind of thing,” Shiro says a little absently. “If there's, you know, a word for it, then other people feel it too and you're not alone. If there's a word for it and you know it, you can look and read to see how other people handle it.”

Shiro doesn't seem to be expecting him to answer, Keith realizes. He's just talking, filling the silence with his quiet gentle voice, giving Keith something to focus on other than the scared thrumming in his chest.

It's working.

“What helps you calm down?” Shiro asks after a small pause. “Do you have music you like to listen to, or white noise?”

Keith shakes his head.

“Do you want me to put something on so it's not so quiet?” asks Shiro.

It's *really* quiet. The dryer finished its cycle a while ago, and there's barely anything in the house making noise.

“Alright,” whispers Keith, and Shiro reaches immediately for his tablet.

“What else helps?” he asks, his fingers sweeping across the screen.

“Can you--” begins Keith, and stops. He can't ask for this, he can't.

Shiro glances up at him from the tablet, questioning. “Can I…?” he prompts when Keith doesn't continue.

Keith's face feels hot, and he can't say anything at all for a moment. But Shiro is still looking at him, his face gone attentive and concerned, like he *wants* Keith to ask, like it's important to him. “I like it when you rub my back,” Keith finally mumbles, and buries his face in his blankets.
There's a small pause. “I can do that,” Shiro says, very gently, and Keith hears him smiling.

Sound is spilling out of the room’s audio system, quietly filling the corners and empty spaces, wrapping around them comfortably. It's waves, Keith realizes; he's never seen the ocean but he knows the sound. And then, a moment later, there's music.

Shiro's hand settles light and familiar on his shoulder. “You want to roll over, bud?”

Keith rolls obligingly, squirming to lay flat on his stomach. He's still embarrassed, doesn't quite want to look at Shiro, but he nestles down into the cushions and closes his eyes as Shiro folds down the blanket from his back.

The music is living gold and polished-wood brown and midnight blue, near enough to touch, deep flowing chords made by instruments whose names Keith doesn’t know. He listens while Shiro's flat palm sweeps methodically over his back, erasing the lingering tension. The melody pulls at him, hurts him and comforts him all at the same time: there’s sadness there in gently resolving tritones, but it’s wrapped up with peace and stillness. There are people singing very far away.

His body disappears, little by little, until all that remains is the space under Shiro's hand. Then the touch lifts, and the blanket resettles with its soft weight in its place, and he's gone entirely.

Keith sleeps.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! sorry about the wait this time: my boss went to frickin Ecuador on what is almost certainly an incredibly fun and well-deserved vacation and one of my coworkers went with him so we are sooo dang short-handed at work. I have five (5) doubles this week and I am dying.

You guys were split pretty evenly between longer rarer chapters and shorter more frequent chapters, so I'm gonna just keep doing what I've been doing, which is break at the most convenient spot, but I do anticipate chapters getting longer when drama happens.

Thank you for all your comments! even those of you with INCORRECT PIZZA OPINIONS.

Back to the Garrison next chapter...

EDIT: this giant piece of cotton candy fluff just hit 50,000 words i can't believe y'all are still reading :O
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It's hard to get up in the morning.

Keith sits up, groggy and grumpy, when Shiro shakes his shoulder to wake him up, and then he stays sitting, yawning stupidly while Shiro bustles around him.

“Eggs?” Shiro asks brightly, and Keith hates him a little, that he can be so energetic and alert while Keith can only get his eyes a quarter of the way open.

He mumbles something in answer, he doesn't know what, and lists sleepy against the side of the couch. He's blissfully drowsy for a moment, drifting back to sleep sitting up, but then Shiro says, “Noo, you gotta be up now, sorry bud,” and tweaks his side so he startles all the way awake.

He groans and rubs his eyes and hates everything, but then Shiro puts a warm cup in his hands, and it's the same not quite coffee thing he made yesterday, and.

Well. All right.

He sits on the couch and drinks from the mug, and gradually begins to feel more awake. Shiro gets him on his feet and into the bathroom, attacks his hair with a comb and a spray bottle and says, “We should get you a haircut, do you want a haircut?” Keith grumbles and hunches up his shoulders when cold water goes trickling ticklishly down the side of his neck, and he wants to tell Shiro not to bother because it's just school, god, nobody cares, but it's strangely nice to be fussed over, so he keeps quiet. And then there's eggs and toast, and he's actually awake enough to appreciate them.

And then, almost before he knows it, he's being whisked out the door with his backpack and bundled onto Shiro's bike.

“How are you feeling?” asks Shiro as he buckles his helmet under his chin, and Keith hesitates for a second. If he says he's feeling sick and his head hurts, maybe he can get another day away from the Garrison out of it. But it's Shiro asking, and he finds that he really doesn't want to lie to Shiro.

“Fine,” he says reluctantly.

“Fine enough for the off-road route?”

Everything is amazing.

“Yes,” says Keith. “Really? Yes, yeah, I feel great!”

Shiro laughs, an open, joyful sound, and climbs onto the bike behind him. “Okay, well. If that changes…”

“I'll say, I'll tell you, I promise,” Keith says impatiently, already gripping the handholds under the steering.

The bike roars to life. It shoots off over the road, smooth as glass, the acceleration pushing Keith backwards. He sets his feet and hangs on, already breathless.

And then they leave the road.
Keith has known, intellectually, that Shiro is a talented pilot. He knows it from simulator scoreboards and in-class examples, he knows it from Shiro’s assignments and rapid advancement. He knows it, too, from the curious web search he’d run after he learned that Shiro used to race.

It’s miles and miles away from that knowledge, being here now, clinging on against the pull of gravity and shifting momentum. It’s the difference between watching a storm develop in green and orange and red on the screen and standing out alone in the wild, roaring heart of it. This is the basis of Shiro’s skill, right here, reflex and timing and focus and grace, and this is ground he knows.

He’s not holding back this time.

The wind is brutal. It wants to tear Keith off, send him tumbling back through the bike’s wake like a discarded piece of garbage, but he grits his bared teeth and holds on with all his strength. He belongs here. This is his place and he’ll fight to keep it.

Shiro is a solid presence behind him, a broad living barrier between Keith and where the wind wants to take him. Keith can feel each turn before they take it in the minute shifting of Shiro’s weight: intention and control realized through simple physics.

“Hold on,” Shiro commands, close to Keith’s ear, and Keith is confused for a moment. Then he sees the dropoff dead ahead, and realizes that Shiro is not slowing down or turning.

He doesn’t scream. There’s not breath for it. He holds on, terror and exhilaration twining together, and they sail over the cliff.

They’re weightless for a single, perfect instant. Shiro takes one hand off the steering and wraps his arm tightly around Keith over the safety belt, and then they’re falling, falling; Keith’s whole body has frozen up in anticipation of the impact--

The thrusters flip, angling down, and they’re shooting forward parallel to the ground instead in a breathless rush of speed, and Keith is shouting with glad, giddy laughter.

And then the Garrison buildings are in front of them, and the bike is slowing, and he wants to beg not yet, please not yet. There’s a lump in his throat as the bike coasts to a stop.

Shiro wraps his other arm around him too and squeezes, hugging him tightly from behind like he knows, and then he asks, “Want to do this again next weekend? Sans concussion, hopefully.”

“What?” asks Keith, twisting to look up at him, not quite daring to understand.

“I’ll come get you Friday night,” says Shiro, getting down off the bike. “You can stay with us for the weekend again. If you want.”

Keith swallows, and despite the Garrison looming big and gray in front of him, his chest glows with happiness. “Okay,” he manages.

“Okay,” Shiro repeats, grinning. He takes a step forward and reaches to help Keith down.

Keith is just shaky enough from the ride yet that he doesn’t resent the help, or the steadying hand on his back that turns into an arm around his shoulders as they approach the Garrison’s outer gates.

Shiro calls out to the sergeant, and they divert for a moment so that Shiro can talk to him. Keith watches as the sergeant salutes and stands formally, and then shifts all at once into Shiro’s friend, grinning and looking interestedly down at Keith.
“Missed you Thursday night,” he says, and Shiro shrugs, grinning back easily.

“Something came up,” he says, and Keith realizes with an unpleasant jolt that he was probably the something. “Keith,” Shiro says, “this is Sergeant Gaines, we were classmates here.”

“Before this geek up and left us all in the dust,” says Sergeant Gaines. “Where’d Shiro find you, Keith?”

“Um,” says Keith, and completely forgets words.

Before he can panic, Shiro pulls him against his side and says, “Keith’s my mentee.” He sounds so gleeful and proud that Keith finds himself grinning shyly.

Sergeant Gaines looks impressed. “No shit?” he asks, looking at Shiro. Shiro makes an exaggerated harrumph noise, and Sergeant Gaines says guiltily, “...way?”

Keith almost giggles, both at the chagrined look on Sergeant Gaines’ face and at Shiro’s absurd rule that nobody use bad words in front of him. He wonders privately what would happen if he started using bad words more.

“Look at you, though,” says Sergeant Gaines, reaching out to smack Shiro’s arm companionably. “Role modeling and stuff, it figures. Kid,” he adds, looking at Keith, “If you ever need blackmail material…”

“Aaaand we’re going,” says Shiro, steering Keith away and laughing.

“You coming tomorrow, Shiro?” Sergeant Gaines calls after them.

“Tomorrow, ahh, probably not,” Shiro says, pausing and half-turning back. “Um, Thursday I’ll be there, though.”


“What, why?”

“ Anders might have… gotten us a little bit banned.”

“Oh my god,” says Shiro, exasperated. “I leave you guys alone for one night.”

“It was all Anders, I swear!”

“Don’t talk to me,” Shiro says. “I’m in mourning. Come on, Keith.”

“See you Thursday?” calls Gaines.

“Thursday,” Shiro calls back, opening the door for Keith.

It’s weird to think of Shiro as part of a group, as somebody with a whole other life, with friends Keith’s never seen or met. It gives Keith a funny shy feeling, and he doesn’t know what to say as they walk down the halls toward the barracks.

“We hang out a couple times a week,” Shiro says, saving him from asking. “A group of us from our year, three or four usually. Used to be more, but Santana and Ebeid got long-term assignments at the station and Piper’s been in D.C. lobbying for funding for another Titan mission for the last few months.”
“What do you do?” asks Keith.

“Oh, play pool,” Shiro says. “Eat garbage, talk. It’s easy to lose touch if you don’t make an effort.” He pauses, then lets out a huff of breath. “Ugh, I can’t believe they got kicked out of Foxtrot, though. Foxtrot has the best jalapeno poppers.”

Because Shiro wasn’t there, Keith remembers. And Shiro wasn’t there because he was taking Keith to the clinic instead. He feels his face heat. “Sorry.”


“Cause,” Keith says uncomfortably. “I made you miss it.”

Shiro lets out a pff noise, reaching over to drag Keith into an affectionate headlock. “No. I decided to skip and hang out with you instead. You didn’t make me do anything.”

Keith splutters and pushes at Shiro, trying to free himself. “Shiro, let go!”

“What’s the code?”

“Oh my god,” Keith says. “Shortshortshort, long, long, long, shortshortshort. Let go!”

“Attaboy,” crows Shiro, releasing him.

“You are the worst,” Keith mutters, and straightens his clothes with a huff.

“Yeahhh,” Shiro agrees happily. “This one’s you, isn’t it?”

Keith steps forward to put in the code for the door. Malone’s at his early class, so the room is empty; Shiro follows him in, glancing interestedly over his half of the room. “We gotta get you some posters or something. Where’s your tablet?”

“Here,” says Keith, digging it out of the desk drawer where he left it Thursday. It’s just a standard Garrison issue device, not capable of much more than messaging, document editing, and some limited browsing. He doesn’t use it much outside of class and homework; there’s nobody in his contacts except teachers and Malone. Now, though--

Shiro takes it, and Keith stands awkwardly for a moment while Shiro sweeps and types over the slightly grimy screen. “Okay,” says Shiro, and shows him the entries he’s made. “This is normal me, this is emergency me. Message this one if you just want to talk, message this one if you’re in trouble. I put in Matt and Commander Holt too just in case.”

Keith nods mutely. The first bell sounds in the hall and he jumps.

Shiro pushes the tablet back into his hands. “You’d better go,” he says gently.

Keith nods again, but he can’t look at Shiro. There’s a hard lump in his throat.

“Okay,” Shiro says under his breath. He takes a knee in front of Keith and folds him in tightly against his chest. “You can do this,” he says quietly in Keith’s ear. “You can do this.”

Keith buries his face in Shiro’s shoulder. Please don’t leave, he wants to say. Please, please...

But that’s never worked.

He breathes deeply once, again, filling his lungs with the safe, familiar smells that follow Shiro--
Shiro watches as Keith pulls away and swipes at his eyes. There’s a moment where Keith is sort of hunched in on himself, and Shiro holds his breath: if Keith can’t walk out the door, he won’t force him.

But Keith takes a deep breath and walks out into the hallway. There’s a defiant little tilt to his chin that goes straight to Shiro’s heart, makes his breath catch with pride and love and worry.

He stays where he is for a moment, kneeling in the middle of Keith’s empty room. Then he gets to his feet, unpacks the dingy backpack and puts Keith’s clean clothes away where he found them. At the bottom of the bag is the brown blanket, rolled tight where Shiro hid it this morning; he shakes it out and refolds it neatly, then leaves it draped across the foot of Keith’s bed.

Then he sits down on Keith’s bed, rests his elbows on his knees, and covers his face with his hands.

This isn’t right.

The feeling of Keith clinging to him and shaking is a persistent, viscerally jarring memory, a ghost sensation he can’t shake off, and it’s wrong. The thought of going to class shouldn’t do that to Keith, shouldn’t send him spiraling down into panic. He shouldn’t be caught between fear of his peers and fear of a caretaker.

He shouldn’t have to face people who hurt him before those wrongs have been addressed.

Shiro takes out his tablet without really thinking, scrolls absently through the folder with the pictures and files and documentation from the latest incident, looks again at the photos of the injuries, the scans of Keith’s skull and spine and kidneys, stares for a long moment at the screenshot of Ricketts’ face outside the bathroom.

He takes a deep breath and opens a window to message Sam.

_I’m making the report._

The answer comes less than a minute later.

_Okay. Do you need me?_

Shiro hesitates. _No, _he finally sends. _I think I’m good._

_Okay, _Sam answers. _Good luck._

There’s a pause, and Shiro has started to put the tablet away, but then it chimes again.

_I’m proud of you._

Shiro swallows. He turns off the tablet without replying and puts it away.

He sits alone in the silent room for another moment, gathering himself. Then he gets to his feet and slips out, and he turns down the hallway toward the administrative offices.

It feels, so very much, like a betrayal.
my hell week isn't quite over, but by dint of much begging and pleading I got today off, because it is my birthday. I celebrated by sleeping in and eating too much chocolate and powering through some mild writer's block, so here's an update!

I'm off for some time with my besties! ENJOY.
Ricketts is pulled out of Gym about half an hour into the block.

Keith is sitting with his back to the wall, watching his classmates jog in circles around the perimeter of the gymnasium, his head pounding dully with the deafening noise of their footfalls. The coach had met him at the door with a note excusing him from physical activity, so that was a relief, but he wishes he could go back to the quiet of his room.

He doesn’t notice right away when a man from the offices steps in for a word with the coach. He doesn’t notice either when they stop Ricketts and draw him aside from the stream of panting cadets. He only really notices when the class is distracted enough that Coach Pullman has to bawl at them to get your butts in gear, rubberneckers!

He watches, wondering idly—and then Ricketts looks past Pullman straight at him, and Keith’s stomach drops.

He swallows hard, looking out over the gym until he finds Beck. The older boy is still jogging, paying no attention to Ricketts and the two by the door, but when he passes Keith he looks at him, just a quick poisonous flick of his eyes.

Keith is breathing too fast. He pulls up his knees—Paschel, where’s Paschel; there she is, just rounding the far corner; he has to keep track of both of them. There’s no cameras in the locker room but he has to go there to get his things; maybe he can go early, maybe if he tells Coach he’s feeling sick he can get changed and get out before the rest of the class is dismissed and then he won’t be caught where there’s no cameras--

He’s gripping the bracelet with his left hand so tightly that the right is beginning to go cold with the constriction. He looks down at it, at where the beds of his fingernails are beginning to purple, and consciously loosens his grip. He takes a deep breath, and then he takes another one.

Paschel and Beck are still running. They’re tired. Even if they break away and come for him, he can outrun them. There is a grown-up ushering Ricketts out to the hallway. There’s no danger, not right now, not right here.

Find someone you trust.

He doesn’t know about Coach Pullman. The woman is prone to yelling, which makes Keith want to curl in on himself and find somewhere to hide, but she does go much easier on Keith than she does the older cadets.

Keith’s still not sure he can ask her for help.

Find a safe place.

He can’t even move. He can only sit still and try to breathe while ice and overwhelming heat pour over him in alternating waves.

Find someplace where there are cameras.
There’s cameras in all the classrooms. The gym is a classroom. There should be a camera here. He lifts his head and scans the walls, searching—there. It’s mounted over the big double doors in the east wall. The blind spots are the corners on either side. Keith is within its field of vision.

Call me.

His tablet is in the locker room. They’re not allowed in the locker room during class.

If you can’t call me, use the bracelet.

He coils the slack of the bracelet between his fingers and he waits.

Time crawls. The whistle blows, and the footfalls quiet. Keith pulls into himself as the class walks their cool-down lap, watching faces. Paschel passes, then Beck; Paschel looks at him, Beck does not.

The gym door opens again twenty minutes later. Pullman has the class stretching and breathing, and the clang is loud in the silence. It sends a shudder through Keith where he sits. It’s the same man as before, and this time Paschel and Beck both go with him.

Keith folds his arms around his head, his heart pounding hard. He can’t think, he can’t think through the dread; the next time is going to be so bad, the next time they get their hands on him—

He loses track of things for a little while. The class shifts and moves around him, guided from one activity to the next by short sharp blasts of the whistle. Then the door opens again, and the man steps through a third time and crosses the gym to speak to Coach Pullman.

Keith hears his name.

Except it’s not the usual way of saying his name. It’s the Japanese way, Shiro’s way, three syllables equally spaced.

Comprehension slams into him like a solid punch to the gut. There’s a moment of shock, where it’s not quite real—and then he can’t breathe and everything hurts.

He’s going to throw up.

Both adults turn to look at him, and everything goes very sharp and clear. He feels himself getting to his feet when Coach Pullman points and beckons, hears the soles of his shoes tapping against the floor. There’s a strange weightless feeling in the back of his skull, like he’s floating.

“You’re needed in the office, cadet,” the man says, not unkindly.

“My stuff?” he hears himself ask.

“It’ll be here when you get back,” says Coach Pullman.

The man reaches out and takes him by the arm and it’s all Keith can do to keep his head down, to behave and not fight. He wants, desperately, to fight.

The man leads him out of the gym, down the silent, empty halls to the administrative wing.

General Beck’s office is big, nice, with old-fashioned furniture and a long window facing west. There’s plants of various sizes on either side of it, big leafy things that look like something from a rainforest and stand in stark contrast to the naked desert landscape behind them.
Shiro stands next to Iverson, silent and still, his arms crossed. Three cadets sit in front of the General’s desk while the General, without raising his voice, quietly and thoroughly hands them their asses.

“I don’t think I need to tell you how disappointed I am,” he says. He’s leaning back against his desk, facing the cadets. “And confused, honestly! You three are some of the most promising in your year. Your grades, your scores, your improvement over the last semester. Why would you decide to add terrorizing a twelve-year-old to your extracurriculars?”

“We didn’t mean to hurt him that bad,” mumbles one of the boys. Shiro thinks it’s Beck.

“I’m talking,” says the General. “And-- no, hold on, back up, what does that mean, you didn’t mean to hurt him that bad? You meant to hurt him, but not so bad you’d get caught, right?”

The cadets shift sullenly. The General sighs. He reaches behind him, activates the holographic screen on his desk, and clicks through the clips Shiro gave him: Paschel taking food from Keith’s tray, the three leaving the bathroom on Keith’s floor, the foosball table--

“You can’t prove that was us!” Beck flares, and Shiro almost cringes on his behalf at the look on the General’s face.

“You’re right,” General Beck says. “I can’t. And as that’s the only reason you’re all still here on probation and not on a bus back to your parents--yes, even you, Joshua--you had better all start acting much more remorseful, right now; before I decide to take it on circumstantial evidence. Are we clear?”

There’s a mumbled chorus of yes, sir s.

“This is what is going to happen,” the General says, crossing around his desk to sit. “You’re all going to apologize to Cadet Kogane, right here, in front of Commander Iverson and Captain Shirogane and myself. Then you’re going to go back to your bunks and you’re going to write two letters. The first is going to be to Cadet Kogane. You’re going to demonstrate in this letter that you know what you did wrong and you’re going to explain how you intend to do better. The second is going to be to your parents. You’re going to tell them exactly what you did, why you did it, and you’re going to apologize for jeopardizing your future and the future of your fellow cadets here. They’re going to be very good letters, because you’re going to be staying in your bunks until I’m satisfied with them. Do you understand?”

The mumbling is more subdued this time.

“Good,” says the General, eyeing them. He leans forward and presses a button on his desk. “Bring him in, please.”

The door slides open, and the General’s secretary enters, Keith in tow. Keith’s expression is wooden, almost sullen, his hair falling in his face, but to Shiro’s eyes he’s terrified. He misses a step, taking in the room and its occupants with a quick dart of gray eyes, and the secretary pulls him along by his upper arm. Shiro wants to shout at him-- you can’t hold him like that; he doesn’t know you; don’t you know he’s been hurt? --but he keeps his silence.

Beside him, Iverson shifts and snorts softly.

“Thank you,” says the General to the secretary. “You’re dismissed.”

Then it’s just Keith, standing alone and small in the middle of the room.
“Cadet Kogane,” the General says, “Cadet Beck, Cadet Paschel, and Cadet Ricketts have something to say to you.”

The cadets stand up, filing to face Keith.

Keith quails back. His face is as pale and watchful as Shiro’s ever seen it.

There’s a beat of tense silence, the cadets looking across the office at each other. Then Paschel says bluntly, “I apologize, Cadet Kogane.”

The other two follow suit. Shiro watches closely; there’s a subtle hostility in the monotone apologies, challenge in the unwavering eye contact. Keith sees it too. He’s frozen and tongue-tied where he stands.

“Candice, Josh, Peter, you’re dismissed to your bunks,” says the General. “Get writing.”

“Yes, sir,” they say in near-unison, and file out past Keith.

The door slides shut again, and Keith’s visibly shaking, and Shiro can’t take it anymore. He takes two steps forward and stands with him, slightly behind and a little to the right. He wants to reach out, but he doubts Keith would accept or appreciate comfort right now; visible solidarity will have to be enough.

The General pauses, and his eyes shift to Shiro briefly. “Keith,” he says finally. “I would like to apologize to you as well on behalf of the Garrison. This should never have happened.” He pauses again, maybe to let Keith respond—but Keith is tremblingly still, like he expects a blow that hasn’t fallen yet, and he says nothing. “I understand that Captain Shirogane has taken steps to reinforce your safety,” the General says. “We will be supporting him in this and taking some steps of our own. I hope you will not hesitate to come to us in the future.”

Keith doesn’t answer. Shiro shifts after a beat and says quietly for him, “Thank you, sir.”

The General nods, his eyes serious on Shiro’s face. “Was there anything else you needed to report, captain?” he asks.

In front of Shiro, Keith tenses. Iverson watches silently from the side, and Shiro sucks his lips between his teeth for a moment. “No, sir,” he says. “Thank you for your time.”

“Very well,” says the General. “You’re dismissed, you two. Commander, stay a minute, if you would.”

Keith can’t seem to move. Shiro waits a moment, then hesitantly lays a hand on his shoulder. When Keith doesn’t shrug it off, he tugs a little, and is relieved when Keith turns and starts walking with him.

He waits until they’re a decent distance from the office, passing through the quieter section of the wing. Then he slows, drawing Keith into a silent alcove, and crouches in front of him.

“Are you okay?” he asks softly.

Keith stares back at him incredulously. His breathing is unsteady, and waves of horrible full-body shudders take him with every exhale. “You--” he manages, unvoiced, and his face twists and contorts, anger and incomprehension and terror and hurt. His body begins to fold in on itself and Shiro catches him, wrapping his hands around Keith’s upper arms in support.
Keith hits him.

It doesn’t hurt, not really; it’s just an open-handed shove to his chest without much strength behind it, but it catches Shiro off guard and off balance. He rocks back and straightens to his feet, catching at Keith’s hands. “Hey,” he says, startled, “hey --”

Keith curls his hands into fists and hits him again, pounding on his chest like a door that won’t open. “Why did you-- Why did you do that, why -- ”

There’s tears streaming down Keith’s face, and Shiro is frozen for a moment. He doesn’t know what to do with this, with the spiky mess of fear and distrust and hurt lashing out at him, he doesn’t know how to help, he doesn’t know what to do--

*Just love on him.*

“Keith,” he says urgently, a little breathless from the pummelling. He reaches out and grabs on, pulls the boy in against himself and holds him there. “Keith. Stop. You’re safe. You’re safe.”

Keith struggles, trying to fight Shiro, trying to get away, but Shiro doesn’t let go, doesn’t let go.

“Listen to me,” he says, and presses the side of Keith’s head to his heart. “Listen to me, Keith, it’s over. They’re not going to bother you again. You’re safe. It’s over. You’re not… you’re not in trouble, you’re not expelled, you’re safe.”

He doesn’t know how many times he says it. Keith’s struggles subside, and Shiro holds him tightly while he turns his face to hide against Shiro’s shoulder. Keith is still shaking, though, the rhythm of his breath stuttering with sobs he won’t give voice.

“Why did you do that,” he whispers again. There’s something desperate in the words, a keening strain like an animal in pain. “Why, why, why--”

“Because,” says Shiro, and runs his hand lightly over the crown of Keith’s head. The lump is still there, much reduced but still present, still perceivable under the soft flow of Keith’s thick hair. “Because they hurt you, bud, because that’s not okay.”

He hesitates. There’s a line here that he’s not sure how to approach: Iverson’s deplorable handling of Keith has already made wounds that will be months mending; Shiro is already rolling up his sleeves for the fight—but that still doesn’t give him license to bad-mouth a superior officer to a cadet.

“They’re gonna be so mad,” says Keith. He inhales and shudders. “Whatever they try, whatever happens, you’re not alone anymore.” He jostles Keith gently, willing him to understand. “I’ve got you.”
Keith tucks his head down, hiding his face from Shiro. He doesn’t relax.

Far away in another wing, the bell rings to signal the end of the block. Keith stiffens up at the sound, raising his head and pulling back.

“You’re okay,” says Shiro quickly, releasing him. “You’re okay. I’ll get you excused, don’t worry. What have you got now, lunch?”

“Yeah,” says Keith. He’s not looking at Shiro; he’s gone pale and scared again, one arm crossed in front of his stomach.

Shiro considers. “I’ll walk you there.”

He takes Keith by the quiet staff bathroom before they leave the wing and stands guard at the doorway while Keith splashes his blotchy, teary face with cold water and gets himself straightened up.

“My clothes are still in the locker room,” Keith says uncertainly, and Shiro realizes for the first time that Keith is still wearing his gym clothes, baggy shorts and a loose t-shirt that will definitely not pass muster. They detour so Keith won’t get a dress code write-up, and by the time they make it to the mess hall most of the cadets who share Keith’s lunch block have filed through the line.

Sergeant Burns zeros in on them immediately when they enter the hall, her eyes shifting keenly from Shiro to Keith and back. “He’s with you, captain?” she asks once she’s near enough.

“Yeah,” says Shiro. “Sorry, there was a, a thing…”

“No, it’s fine,” says Burns. “As long as you’re excusing him, I mean. I’m missing three cadets, I wanted to make sure…”

“Oh,” says Shiro, and nudges Keith gently to move toward the line while he hangs back. “That’s, that just happened, they’re on suspension.”

“Suspension?” Burns repeats, her forehead furrowing. “I don’t have a note…” She pulls out her tablet to check, and Shiro hears the chime of an incoming message. “Aha,” Burns says, gesturing wryly. “Well, that’s all right, then. I was thinking I’d have to go hunt them down.”

“They’re in their bunks, if you need to check,” says Shiro.

“Yeah,” says Burns, her fingers already sweeping rapidly across the tablet keyboard. “Lin’s on hall duty, I’ll ask her to pop in on them.” Her eyes shift to where Keith is waiting in line for his food, and she looks back at Shiro. “Is he…?”

“He’s fine,” Shiro says, something in his chest easing at her concern. “On light activity and restricted classwork for the week, but he’s fine.”

“Good,” says Burns, and nods firmly. “Good.” She makes a slight gesture toward Keith’s table, where Paschel’s seat sits empty. “Does this have anything to do with that?”

Shiro presses his lips together and gives her a grim look. “They’re on probation,” he says, and can’t quite keep the satisfaction out of his tone.

Burns lets out a little huff of breath through her nose. “About time,” she says. “Those three. Unholy trinity. They’re all trouble, but put them together and it’s like…” She makes a vague, wild descriptive gesture in the air. “But somehow they never get caught.”

Burns smirks. She looks out over the hall, tracking a mild skirmish at one of the far tables before dismissing it. “I don’t get how anybody could pick on Kogane either,” she says. “God. He’s like a tiny angry puppy. And he’s got those big purple eyes, you just want to squish him.”

Shiro chokes, glancing quickly to see if the angry puppy overheard. When he looks back at Burns, she's looking at him sidelong, the corners of her mouth twisting up with mischief.

“I’m not wrong,” she says.


She glances at him. Her smile goes softer, gently amused and almost apologetic. “I have a girlfriend.”

“Oh, she can come too,” Shiro says earnestly.

It takes him a moment, a moment in which Burns’ smile slips and her eyes sharpen with startled, resigned disgust, and then he realizes, and--

“Oh god,” he says. He can feel his face flushing mortified crimson. “Oh my god, I didn’t-- I’m so sorry, that’s not-- I meant, I meant with me and Keith, I’m trying to get him comfortable with more adults and I thought--”

“Oh, thank god,” Burns says, her expression clearing. She tilts her head back to laugh with relief. “You’re fine, you’re good, I just-- sorry, jaded lesbian here. Thought I was gonna have to sort you into the gross pile with the other ninety percent of the straight male population for a hot second.”

“I’m, gonna, go crawl into a hole,” says Shiro, covering his face with both hands and turning to follow Keith while Burns cackles behind him.

“We like laser tag,” she calls after him.

“Yeah?” he asks, turning back.

Burns shrugs. “Fridays are good for us. You’ve got my code, give me a call sometime.”

“All right,” Shiro says, grinning. “All right, yeah, I’ll do that. Thanks.”

“Hug that puppy for me!”

He makes a frantic shushing motion, but Keith has heard and is looking back at them curiously. “There’s a puppy?” he asks when Shiro joins him.

“There’s no puppy,” says Shiro. His face is so incredibly red. “Uhh, the Holts have a dog. It’s grown, though.” Misdirection, he tells himself, not lying.

Keith looks disappointed, but seems to accept it as an answer. He shifts his weight: his tray is full but he seems unwilling to actually go sit down and eat. Shiro catches a quick anxious dart of slightly bloodshot eyes--and yeah, okay, Burns is right; now that he’s looking for it he can see the purple, weird --and Keith ducks his head again, hiding behind the fringe of his hair.

Shiro takes a deep breath. He doesn’t want to leave. “Hey,” he says. “Tomorrow night? I’ll come by and get you for supper and we can figure out a normal schedule?”
“Okay,” Keith whispers. He doesn’t look up.

“Okay,” murmurs Shiro. He hesitates, then pulls Keith into a tight hug from the side. “If you need me, I’ll come.”

Keith nods quickly, not raising his head. He resists Shiro’s hug for a moment before he sways into it, still holding his tray with both hands.

“Okay,” Shiro says one more time, and releases him. “You should go eat before your food gets cold.”

“Yeah,” Keith says. “Yeah.” He pauses, like he wants to say something else, but finally just nods and goes.

Shiro waits a moment, then turns to leave.

Chapter End Notes

I thought my hell week was over with the weekend; it was not. I worked 10 hours Monday and 12.5 hours yesterday and it was exactly as awful and exhausting as it sounds. BUT my boss is back as of today, I got today off, and everything is going back to normal.

Slightly longer update to make up for the wait! Thank you all for the birthday wishes!

EDIT: got a message on the tumblrs so I figured I'd better clarify: neither Shiro nor Burns are polyphobic (or straight, but that’s a topic for another chapter). There's just a thing that happens quite often if you, as a woman, identify yourself as not interested in a straight guy for reasons of orientation, and it involves the guy trying to fulfill his threesome fantasy with you and whatever partner you might happen to be with. It is NOT the same as polyamory; it's very objectifying and disrespectful and yep gross. Burns and her gf have a lot of experience with this.
There’s silence when Keith takes his place at the lunch table. Paschel’s seat is empty across from him, and he frowns at it, but when he looks back toward Shiro for an answer he’s already gone.

“Was that Captain Shirogane?” Lourd asks, and Keith realizes all at once that the entire table is looking at him.

He sits back slightly, feeling his heart beating hard in his throat. His fingers go automatically to the bracelet, but there’s no immediate hostility in the curious gazes leveled on him. After a careful pause he nods.

“You know him?” asks Kellings incredulously.

Keith feels his shoulders hunching up. “Kinda?”

There’s an impressed pause.

“How?” Lourd asks.

“I don’t know,” mumbles Keith. He wants to shrink into the floor. He wants everybody to stop looking at him. It feels dangerous, being on the receiving end of this much attention.

“You don’t know?”

It’s more than Keith can articulate to himself, let alone to half a dozen staring cadets. The expressions on the faces looking at him range from interest to jealous disbelief, and he can't look back at them.

Brisk footsteps sound behind him, and he knows without looking that Sergeant Burns has come to stand her usual watch. The cadets at the table shift and look away, and Keith feels the lifting of their focus like the palpable easing of a crushing weight. He can breathe again.

He twists to peek up at her, but she isn't looking at him. He faces forward again, a hollow uneasy feeling settling in the pit of his stomach. He feels sick, off-balance, like he’s stepped out onto a steady limb but has just looked down...

Paschel’s seat is still empty. He hesitates, then reaches down for his tablet.

pashel isn't here, he sends to Shiro.

There's no response for a moment. He’s just begun to wish he hadn’t sent it when the read receipt blinks up, and the notification that Shiro is writing a message.

No.

She’ll probably have her meals in her bunk for a couple days.

They're all three suspended until they make some amends.

Keith doesn't know what to say. He stares at the messages until the screen goes dark, and then he glances at the rest of the cadets and quietly goes back to eating.

It's not exactly that he doesn't believe Shiro, that everything’s fine, that he's safe, that he hasn’t just
used up his last warning. Shiro obviously believes it, so it’s not like he’s lying to Keith. But Shiro still doesn’t get it, he doesn’t see the terrible tenuous uncertainty that is Keith’s life, he doesn’t get that Keith could be torn loose from everything familiar and sent back out into the world at a moment’s notice. The helpless, terrified anger whirls and roars in Keith’s ears.

It’s his own fault. He’d known, he’d known where trusting grown-ups led and he’d done it anyway because he liked Shiro’s hugs.

He hates himself. He hates Shiro.

Keith eats steadily, swallowing around the tightness in his throat, keeping his head down while his eyes burn and burn.

***

He sits quietly in the pod in his history class an hour later (it’s in Seattle, he thinks; he’s not sure, but it's raining outside the window on the left side of where the pod has his desk) and watches his classmates while the teacher talks. They’re mostly flesh-and-blood, actually physically present in the classroom, but there’s two others like him, slightly transparent holograms projected in. One of them has something wrong with her pod or projector; her whole right side glitches out every five minutes or so. Keith watches with slightly horrified fascination, wondering if she knows. He wonders if his are like that, if he blinks in and out too.

His head doesn't start to really hurt until the second half of literature, almost four hours later. The audio from the pod’s 360 speakers has been getting louder and louder, he thinks; the curving dome of the screen surrounding him has been getting brighter, the colors more vivid. It's overwhelming, and every new stimulus hits his head like long thin needles boring through his skull.

He shuts his eyes and covers his ears and puts his head down on the desk.

It's such a relief to shut it all out that he stays down. The surface of the desk is flat and cool against his forehead and he lets himself drift, just for a moment.

Then there’s a hand on his back, shaking him to get him up, and he thinks Shiro, then, no; wrong. He pulls away on startled, panicked reflex and lashes out, striking the hand away.

Mr Rollings, the librarian, is there in the open door of the pod, raising his empty hands slowly. There's a funny look on his face, surprise and concern and wariness, and Keith stares back at him. He hit him, he realizes; he hit Mr Rollings.

He didn’t mean to.

The pod’s screen is still on; his projector is still on. The class has gone silent. They’re all watching him, all of them. He looks back at them, frozen--and then the curving screen abruptly goes black.

Mr Rollings steps back, taking his hand off the power switch. “Come on out,” he says, holding the door open for him.

Keith swallows and gathers up his tablet and jacket. “I didn’t mean to,” he says.

“I didn’t think you did,” says Mr Rollings.

“I’m sorry,” Keith says.

“You didn’t hurt me,” says Mr Rollings. “Come on, come out.”
Keith doesn’t want to. The warm darkness of the powered-down pod feels safe, like a closet he can stay in quietly for a while. But Mr Rollings waits patiently and Keith finally steps out.

“What happened?” Mr Rollings asks, shutting the pod. “Your teacher buzzed me, he said he couldn’t get you to sit up.”

“I--” Keith is disoriented for a moment, can’t quite think past the panicky awareness that Mr Rollings is probably mad at him. “My head-- my head hurts?”

“Oh,” says Mr Rollings. “You should have come out and told me. You’re still marked for light classwork, I thought they told you.”

Keith feels his face heat. “I’m sorry.”

Mr Rollings makes a dismissive gesture with one hand, glancing briefly down at his tablet. “Well,” he says. “There’s only fifteen minutes left in the block. Go report to the med ward for a painkiller and then go rest until supper.”

There’s still a little unpleasant lurch at the thought of going to the nurse, but Keith forces himself to relax. There’s nothing he needs to hide right now; there’s nothing new. “Yes, sir,” he says.

“Kogane,” says Mr Rollings before he’s gotten more than a few steps away. “You’ve got that exception all week. Use if, if you need to.”

“Yes, sir,” Keith says again, and goes.

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That night, he lies curled on his side, listening to Malone’s breathing and not sleeping. Shiro’s brown blanket has been kicked to the floor, and it sits there in a reproachful lump just visible in the thin blue light from the window. The clock turns over from Monday to Tuesday, and Keith finally reaches for his tablet.

The screen is painfully bright after the darkness of the room, and it takes him a moment to figure out how to turn down the backlight. He’s only ever really used it during the day, and the interface isn’t much like the system he remembers from his dad’s tablet.

He opens the messaging app once the screen is dimmed and looks at Shiro’s name. It’s got the little tick next to it that means he’s been active in the last hour, but Keith’s not sure he wants to message him. There’s still resentment and hurt simmering under his breastbone, making his heart skip and his lungs clench. He lowers the tablet, staring up at the ceiling—he’s so tired, why can’t he sleep—and nearly falls out of bed when the tablet buzzes and chimes loudly.

Malone snorts a bit and rolls over, but he doesn’t seem to have woken, and Keith finally breathes again. Very carefully, he turns the volume all the way down, and then looks.

What are you still doing awake!!

Keith pulls a quick guilty breath and turns off the tablet, closing his eyes tightly in case somebody’s about to come to his room to check on him.

The tablet buzzes again, muted by his t-shirt, and he jumps. He doesn’t move for a moment, but then his curiosity gets the best of him and he peeks at the screen.

Can’t sleep? :( 
Shiro doesn’t seem mad. It’s hard to tell without his face and voice to check, but Keith stares at the messages for a long moment and decides he’s safe.

It takes a moment longer for him to decide whether or not he wants to talk to Shiro. There’s a strange hypersensitive ambivalence fogging up his head and heart, like a limb that’s gone all pins-and-needles: he hurts and it’s Shiro’s fault; he hurts and he wants Shiro to hug him and fix it.

He finally cautiously types no to send in answer.

What have you tried? Shiro sends.

This makes very little sense.

? 

Have they taught you sleep strategies in Health yet? 
Breathing exercises, progressive relaxation, that kind of thing?

Keith stares at the screen while the hot angry place in his chest hisses and glows. It’s almost offensive; it’s reasonable adult Shiro trying to fix everything by offering practical, sensible solutions to the problems he can see while Keith is so tangled up in the messy, complicated, irrational reality of it that he can barely breathe.

no 

Do you want me to talk you through some things, Shiro asks, or are you okay?

Keith swallows, feeling his jaw clench. It’s getting hard to breathe around the lump in his throat.

not really 

You don’t really want any pointers?

There’s a pause.

Or you’re not really okay?

Tears well up and spill over, and Keith swipes them furiously away.

i dont really want to talk, he finally sends.

There’s a longer pause, and he thinks for a moment that Shiro must have gone to bed. He hasn’t decided yet whether to be angry or relieved when the tablet buzzes again.

I’m sorry. 
I know you’re upset with me.

Keith hates that word, upset. It sounds small, petty, like a word grown-ups use to describe a child throwing a fit: he’s upset because the red crayons were all taken, or he missed his nap and he’s upset.

He doesn’t answer Shiro. What is he even supposed to say?

You have every right to be angry. I didn’t handle this very well, and I hurt you.

The bald admission hits him like a blow to the chest, and he crumples. He rolls onto his side and
curls in on himself, burying his face in his pillow to stifle the ragged sound of his breathing. The tablet buzzes a few more times, but several minutes pass before he can bring himself to look.

*I made a promise I didn’t have any right to make, and you trusted me, and I really screwed that up. I’m so sorry I hurt you.*

*Can we talk about this some more tomorrow?*

Keith stares at the messages until the screen goes dark. He doesn’t turn it back on.

(A quarter hour later, he climbs out of bed and retrieves the brown blanket.)

(It doesn’t mean anything, he tells himself. It’s just a blanket.)

Chapter End Notes

So emotions are Hard and getting through this arc took A While, but I'm past the worst of it! and here is a tiny update.

(it's real tiny I know & I'm sorry BUT that means the next one will be soon!)

Thank you all so much for your comments and encouragement! <3
“I played with your messed up file yesterday,” Matt says over breakfast the next morning. “I don't know, man, it's really screwed up.”

“Oh,” says Shiro. It takes a minute to connect: his head is foggy with lost sleep. “Okay, well. Thanks for trying.”

“Do you mind if I let Pidge try some things?” Matt asks.

“Pidge?”

“Katie.”

“Katie?”

“Dude,” says Matt disapprovingly.

“Sorry,” Shiro says. “Sorry, I just thought-- isn't she… eight?”

“She's nine,” says Matt. “And she's been playing around with coding since she learned to read. She's almost as good as me with most languages, better with a couple. Thrice, Bism… I'm still better with Helix,” he adds as an afterthought.

“Bism, wow,” says Shiro, wondering whether or not to be skeptical. “I never got the hang of stack-based stuff.”

“Talk to Pidge,” Matt says. “I'm serious.”

Shiro pauses. “You think she can fix it?”

“I think she has a better chance than me at this point.”

Matt's face and voice are serious, with none of the good-natured trolling that Shiro has learned to watch for.

“Okay,” he says slowly. “I don't know what's in the file, is the thing. It might be-- it might very well be more stuff like from the other day, I don't know if that's…”

“Oh,” says Matt, and his face clouds over for a moment. “Um. That's-- she's tough, she's a lot tougher than people give her credit for.”

Shiro doesn't know how to answer this. It does not sit well, the notion of possibly exposing a nine-year-old to the kind of violence he's seen in Keith's file, no matter how tough and talented. “I'll…” he says, and hesitates. “I'll talk to your dad about it.”

Matt nods. “If she can't, I can try some people I know online. But if it's doable at all, I think she can do it.”

“Thanks,” says Shiro.
He has a meeting with the General later today, a meeting in his capacity as Keith’s mentor rather than his rank as captain. It’s a delineation he has to remind himself of every ten minutes, because otherwise his stomach starts jumping with anxiety again and he can’t think straight: he means to bring up Iverson.

It’s exactly what Iverson accused him of doing, otherwise: hopscotching up the chain of command, bypassing proper protocol for the sake of his personal opinions, being, as Iverson so succinctly put it, a self-righteous sumbitch.

*For Keith,* he reminds himself relentlessly. *For Keith.*

He wishes he knew what was in the corrupted file.

* * *

Several hours later he's sitting across from the General, resisting the urge to fidget as the man looks over the rough schedule he's drafted for time with Keith.

“This is...” General Beck murmurs. He scrolls over to the end of the week and back, shaking his head slightly. “This is more one-on-one time than I was expecting, Captain. Are you sure this is sustainable?”

“It’s all personal time, sir,” Shiro says quickly. “It won't impact my mission preparation.”

The General glances at him and sets his tablet down. “Personal time is a resource too.”

Shiro goes cold, his heart dropping. “Yes, sir,” he hears himself say, but he's already a mile away, trying to think how to explain to Keith that he can't be there the way he wanted to, trying not to picture Keith’s face as he realizes that Shiro is letting him down again...

General Beck’s eyes turn shrewd. He sighs, looking down at the tablet again, and taps the desk with his stylus absently. “This is important to you.”

“Yes, sir, it is.” Shiro has a whole speech pushing to get out: he wants to tell the General about how Keith had opened up and leaned into the least little bit of affection, like a plant starved of sun; he wants to tell him about the shy friendship Keith is cultivating with Matt and the commander; he wants to tell him about the plans he’s already made, the steps he means to take to help Keith trust again. But he keeps the words locked behind his teeth and waits.

“You're willing to put in the effort,” says the General.

“I am.”

The General sighs again. “Conditionally approved, then,” he finally says. “I don't want to hear that you're overextending yourself, Shirogane.”

*It's worth it,* Shiro wants to say. *It's worth it.*

“We'll revisit this schedule when we meet in two weeks to recertify you as Kogane’s agent of care,” the General says, and signs it, the tip of his stylus looping over the screen. “This is on a trial basis only, alright? I'll be consulting with your CO.”

Relief sweeps through Shiro. He almost lets his shoulders slump before he catches himself. Sam will understand; Sam will be an advocate for them.
“Thank you, sir,” he says aloud.

“We need to talk about your budget at some point,” the General says, flipping apps on his tablet. “For now, just input your expenses on the reimbursement form I'm sending to you, and the Garrison will compensate you within reason.”

“Thank you, sir,” Shiro says, surprised. He hadn't thought-- it makes sense, of course, now that he does, but he'd just automatically absorbed the minor costs of his plans into his own mental budget.

“Anything big, of course, you'll want to get approved first.”

“I thought I'd take him for a haircut?” Shiro says cautiously.

The General gives him a wryly amused look. “Shirogane, if you can get him to consent to a haircut, we'll reimburse you double.”

Shiro feels his forehead furrowing up, but the General offers nothing more.

“Anything else you need to report while you're here?”

This is it. Shiro fills his lungs. “Yes, sir,” he answers, and the General sits back in his chair to listen. “Keith was… very reluctant to disclose his injuries. He didn't want to tell me he was hurt, he didn't want to tell me who hurt him, he didn't want to accept help, he just… um, I was… It worried me, that kind of isolation, so I pushed to find out why.”

“Yes,” says the General. “Good.”

This is encouraging, but Shiro still has to pause and gather his nerve. “He's… apparently been receiving warnings,” he says. “There's one associated with each of the last two major altercations in his file, he's been-- he's been told that if he accrues too many of these warnings there won't be a place for him here.”

The General narrows his eyes and leans forward to turn on his tablet. Shiro recognizes Keith's file upside-down.

“It's not in there, sir,” he says. “I went through the whole thing again after I got him to tell me. There's nothing in there.”

“What’s the context?”

“The incident in late January that led to Cadet Torston’s expulsion, and the mess hall food fight in March.”

The General scrolls through the incident reports, frowning. “What was the warning associated with the first?”

Shiro shifts. “According to Keith, he was reprimanded for not giving up a gaming console in the rec room when Cadet Torston told him to move.”

“January,” murmurs the General. “So the feeds have been deleted by now.”

“Yes, sir.”

“The one in March was for starting the food fight, I suppose.”

“No, sir,” Shiro says. “He got a day's suspension for that. The warning was because-- ahh, I'm sorry,
there was more before that. He started the fight by throwing food at Cadet Paschel, but it was
provoked. She'd been kicking him under the table for not giving her some of his meal. The warning
was, as far as I can tell, for starting the conflict by not giving up his food.”

“Well,” says the General absently. “Kids at that age will say about anything if it gets them out of
trouble. Especially kids from bad situations.”

“Sir--” Shiro begins hotly.

“Stand down, Shirogane,” says the General, looking up from his tablet. “I'm not saying I don't
believe you, but it’s something that needs a close look.”


“You believe him.”

“Yes, sir, I do,” Shiro says, raising his chin. “He's been letting Cadet Paschel take his food for the
last month at least, to the point that he's bordering on underweight for his age group. He’s hiding
when he gets hurt so he doesn’t get in trouble. He’s-- terrified of getting kicked out. Something isn’t
right, sir, please--”

He doesn’t mean to add the please. He stops, closes his mouth, but he forces himself to look the
General in the eye.

The General is quiet for another moment, looking back at Shiro thoughtfully. “He's been told he
could be removed from the Garrison?”

“No, sir.”

“Well,” says the General. “That I can settle here and now, anyway. He’s done nothing to warrant
something so drastic. He’s a bit of a troublemaker,” he adds after a moment. “Doesn’t mesh well
with the other cadets, but I expect that to change in the next couple of years when he has some
classmates his own age.”

Shiro hesitates. “Can I pass that along to him, sir?”

“Please do,” the General says. “I’ll be sending him a message direct that says the same.”

“Thank you,” says Shiro, and pauses.

The General studies him for a moment and sighs. “You haven’t said who it is,” he says, “which
makes me think it’s an officer rather than a teacher.”

It’s not a question, so Shiro doesn’t answer.

“You don’t have evidence,” says the General.

“No, sir,” Shiro says, looking down at the desk. “Just Cadet Kogane’s word.”

Who is it?”

Shiro feels a little ripple of relief pass down his spine as the procedural constraints of his rank lift. He
moistens his dry lips and takes a breath. “Commander Iverson, sir.”

The General’s eyes cut to the side, and he nods slowly. “Very well,” he says. “I’ll keep watch on it
from my end, and you do the same from yours.”

Shiro nods, too grateful and relieved to speak.

“Was there anything else?” the General asks.

“No, sir,” says Shiro. “Thank you.”

“All right,” says the General. “Same time in two weeks, then.”

***

There’s still about fifteen minutes before the final block lets out, so Shiro goes to the library to wait. He chooses a seat in the open, atrium-like area under the skylight where he can easily see the door to the pod room, and settles in.

He’s idly skimming the news--Audrey’s going to get her funding for the Titan mission, it looks like--when the bell rings and cadets start drifting out of the classrooms and along the halls. He lowers his tablet and waits.

Keith emerges from the darkened pod room behind a handful of older cadets, looking absurdly tiny in the company of half a dozen teenagers of various ages. He’s wearing his uniform jacket while everybody else has shucked theirs, and Shiro briefly revisits his theory that the kid runs cold. It’s not surprising, as skinny as he is, and Shiro resolves to make sure he gets as many decent, healthy, filling meals as possible until the evidence of Paschel’s bullying is erased completely.

Keith has his head down, only looking up enough to avoid running into other cadets as they stream toward the door, and he doesn’t notice Shiro where he sits. He looks as exhausted as Shiro feels: there's bruise-like shadows under his eyes, a slight unkempt look to his hair and clothing.

Shiro hesitates. It occurs to him that maybe Keith would rather not see him just now, that he’d just as soon go down to supper with the rest without the pressure of choosing between Shiro and solitude.

But he said he’d be here.

Keith’s path to the door across the library brings him near to the group of chairs under the skylight, and Shiro quietly stands. The movement catches Keith’s attention, earns Shiro a quick watchful glance and then a double-take.

“Hey,” Shiro ventures once Keith has slowed and stopped. There’s something shuttered and wary behind Keith’s eyes that hurts to see, but Shiro carefully doesn’t look away.

Stay constant.

“Hey,” Keith says after a beat.

Shiro tips his head toward the door. “Want to go into town and get some food?”

Keith swallows and shifts from one foot to the other, averting his eyes, and Shiro thinks for a moment that he’s going to refuse. But he finally shrugs and says without looking at Shiro, “Sure, I guess.”

“All right,” Shiro says. “All right, let’s go. I know a place with a good carry-out buffet.”

He leads Keith toward the door, and Keith falls into step with him silently. They make their way down the hall toward the stairs, following the stream of students heading toward the mess hall and
the barracks wing. It’s crowded for a little while, and then they turn a corner and the hallways are empty and silent all the way to the doors.

Shiro reaches out as they pass through the Garrison’s sunlit ward, wrapping an arm around Keith’s shoulders. Keith doesn’t acknowledge it, doesn’t look up or shrug it off, but Shiro feels his shoulders going stiff and understands: this is something he has to earn back.

He lets his arm fall away.

Shiro borrowed Sam’s car for the evening again: there’s a few hours of daylight left, but Shiro wasn’t sure how long they’d be out and he tries to avoid biking at night whenever possible. Now, though, with the uncomfortable silence filling the space between them as they walk through the outer gate, he wishes he’d brought his bike instead.

He unlocks the passenger side door and opens it for Keith, then crosses around and takes a deep breath before getting in on the other side.

“How was today?” he asks, starting the car.

Keith gives him an oblique look. “Fine.”

“What classes did you have?” Shiro asks. He knows Keith’s schedule, but god if he can just get him talking--

There’s a slight pause, a resentful flicker of eyes. I know what you’re doing, the look says, but Keith answers, “Math, coding, Earth science.”

“Oh yeah,” says Shiro, a little lamely. He doesn’t know what else to say, so he lets the silence carry them the rest of the way into town.

They park outside the restaurant. It’s a relief to be out of the car and moving, even if Keith’s sullen mood follows them. Shiro leads him to the buffet, hands him a container, tells him to get whatever he wants.

“The broccoli beef is really good,” he says, belatedly remembering Keith’s difficulty with the menu last week. “So are the potatoes.”

Keith ignores him, spooning macaroni and cheese into his container.

Shiro pauses, watching, then closes his mouth and fixes his own box.

He takes them to a small park in the valley to eat after they’ve paid. It’s already started to cool here, out of the sun, and the dip in temperature is pleasant. Keith still has his jacket on, though, and Shiro keeps an eye on him while they eat.

Keith doesn’t say a word all through supper.

There’s a gradual but definite shift in the mood. Keith doesn’t look at him, but Shiro feels the active hostility lifting, replaced by heavy weariness. He watches while Keith’s shoulders droop and his eyes start to slide out of focus.

“Did you get any sleep at all last night?” he finally asks softly.

Keith straightens and takes a breath. He shrugs.

Shiro hesitates. He really, really wants to talk, he wants to address this prickling, painful thing
between them before it grows--but instead he says, “Do you want me to take you back so you can get some sleep?’”

Keith’s face sort of crumples for a second. He swallows and shrugs again, like he doesn’t care.

“We don’t have to go now,” says Shiro, watching him. “We can stay a while if you want.”

“I don’t care.”

“Okay,” Shiro says. “Let me know when you want to go back.”

“Fine,” says Keith.

Shiro blows out a breath and scrubs a hand over his face. “Can we talk about this?” he asks.

Keith looks at him, then looks back down at what remains of his mac and cheese and shrugs. He looks so tired; his eyes are bloodshot and resigned.

“I'm sorry,” says Shiro softly, trying to catch his eye across the picnic table. “I'm so sorry. I didn't-- I didn't want to hurt you, I wanted to help you.”

Keith sits very still. His head is bowed and his hair has fallen down over his face.

Shiro has no idea what he's doing.

“I made a mistake,” he says. “I thought… I could fix this for you all on my own, but that's—” He stops and moistens his lips.

“You said you wouldn't tell anybody,” Keith whispers without raising his head. There's a catch in his voice.

“I shouldn't have said that,” Shiro says. He can feel tears beginning, and he shuts his eyes tightly for a moment and swallows, forcing them back. “I shouldn't have-- That's not a promise I ever should have made, it's-- it could have made it so much worse for you, and them, and other people.”

Keith raises his head to give Shiro a scornful look. His face is blotched red and teary, and he swipes at his nose.

Shiro looks back at him, and all his excuses and rationalizations die in his throat. He’d made the promise with every intention of keeping it; he’d broken it out of love--but from where Keith is sitting all that matters is that he’d held Keith’s trust and he had misused it.

There’s no excusing that.

“I’m sorry,” he says finally. “I’m sorry. Can you forgive me?”

Keith averts his eyes. He swallows and takes a shaky breath, and he shrugs, and nods.

Shiro takes a deep breath. “Thank you,” he says, and Keith shrugs again.

There’s a slight hunch to Keith’s shoulders, like he’s cold or anxious, and Shiro gets to his feet and circles around the picnic table to join him. He sits down next to Keith, his back to the table.

Keith has sat up, straightening a little warily, and Shiro catches an apprehensive side-glance. He hesitates: he wants to reach out, but he’s not sure, he’s not sure--
“Is it okay if I hug you?” he asks.

He gets a long look for this, Keith’s dark eyes guarded and weighing. He keeps still, waits with his heart in his throat—and a moment later Keith lowers his head and sighs out a breath, sagging tiredly against his side.

Shiro shifts, twisting to gather him close. Keith pulls up his knees and turns around on the bench, tucking himself under Shiro’s arm.

They don’t move for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

hey guys! was gonna wait to post tomorrow, but the last week has been roughhhh lmao. Without going into too many details, there was a dream job opportunity that cropped up (I applied, I got the position, I was THRILLED, and then it IMMEDIATELY fell through), my wallet got lost or (more likely) stolen, and today the guy who stole my phone ON CAMERA 2 months ago showed up again at the restaurant where I work.

(...that last one was more empowering than rough tbh because i put on my big girl gryffindor socks and yelled at him and he immediately scurried out in a very satisfyingly embarrassed and guilty way buuut I still was shaky for about half an hour afterwards)

uh anyway hope y'all liked the chapter <3

(happy birthday werealldreaming!)
Chapter 21

Keith wakes up in his dorm the next morning and can’t account for how he got there.

There’s still twenty minutes until his alarm will go off, according to Malone’s clock, and he lies still and stares sleepily at the ceiling, trying to make it all come together.

They’d had supper in the quiet park, they’d talked… Shiro had apologized. Keith isn’t sure he believes it, not all the way; Shiro hadn’t apologized for reporting, only for reporting after he’d said he wouldn’t. No, that’s not right either: Shiro had only apologized for saying he wouldn’t.

He doesn’t remember much past that. He remembers Shiro asking if he could hug him; he remembers half-wanting to refuse. He remembers, too, the sweeping exhaustion of the day and the sleepless night coming to an abrupt, overwhelming head; he remembers just wanting it all to be over, just wanting the familiar warmth of Shiro’s arms.

He'd burrowed into Shiro's side and said please don't hurt me anymore, and Shiro had inhaled shakily and pressed his cheek to the top of Keith's head.

That's where his memory goes foggy.

Malone is already up, sitting at his desk hunched over his tablet. Keith pushes himself up onto his elbows and asks, “How’d I get home last night?”


Keith rubs his eyes and squints at Malone's clock. By that count, he's slept for nearly twelve hours. He lets himself flop back onto his pillow, pulling the brown blanket up to his chin: he feels heavy and warm and well-rested, and he doesn't want to get up just yet.

He stays there while a few scattered memories drift back to him. He remembers the car on the way back, he thinks; the climate control had blown uncomfortably cold air at him until Shiro had leaned forward and fixed it.

There's nothing else after that, so Shiro must have carried him in and put him to bed. He's just started to turn red with the realization when Malone glances up again and says, “He said if you got embarrassed to tell you he brought you in by the west gate instead of the front door. Nobody saw.” He pauses. “I mean, I saw, but I don't count.”

Keith covers up his face with the brown blanket and squirms down into his bed. It's not bad embarrassment, not the cold stomach-sinking sense of humiliation that Shiro seems to have been trying to shield him from; it's just-- it's just that Shiro thought to shield him, and that Malone remembered to tell him.

He still doesn't know what to do with people being gentle to him.

“How'd you two get to be friends, anyway?” asks Malone, and Keith freezes up a little bit. He's aware, suddenly, that Malone is an incredibly promising pilot, that if anybody deserves Shiro’s mentorship it's him.
Keith doesn't want Malone to hate him.

“I don’t know,” he says uncomfortably, scooting so that his head is out from under the blanket.

“Is he mentoring you?” Malone asks. He doesn’t sound resentful, just interested, but Keith goes guiltily still and can’t think how to answer. Malone looks over at him after a moment and laughs. “Come on,” he says, not unkindly. “You’re like three semesters advanced in Flight. I know you’ve got some ridiculous reaction time scores. Plus you’re like, high risk or whatever. So is he? Because that would be pretty cool.”

Keith wonders for a moment what that means, high risk. “Yeah,” he says finally. “Sort of. We haven’t really done anything yet.”

“Because you got hurt?”

“I guess,” Keith mumbles. It feels weird to acknowledge it. It sets off alarms in his head, a blaring warning of unsafe, unsafe, unsafe.

Malone looks at him again, his eyes a little too understanding for comfort. He looks away again after a second, goes back to tapping at the screen of his tablet, but then he says without looking up, “You know-- if you’re ever like… worried something’s gonna happen, you can message me and I’ll come walk with you.”

Keith doesn’t know what to say to this.

“You don’t have to or anything,” says Malone. “But, you know. It’s an option.”

“Okay,” Keith finally says. He turns this over in his head for a moment, frowning, and finally slots the offer into the just in case pile with Shiro’s bracelet. “Thank you,” he remembers to add.


Keith feels the flush climbing up his neck to his ears. “It’s fine,” he mumbles.

“I mean,” says Malone, giving him a wry sidelong look. “It’s really not. I’m sorry for-- I think I should have pushed harder about the other stuff, before.”

“I didn’t want you to,” says Keith, hoping desperately that this isn’t going to become a thing.

“Well,” Malone says, and shrugs again. “I should have anyway.”

“Please stop,” Keith says.

The words come out a little harsher than he means. Malone gives him a quick look, and Keith almost apologizes. But then Malone’s eyes shift away, down and to the right, and he gets to his feet. “I gotta get to class. See you tonight, probably.”

“See you,” Keith says automatically. He rolls onto his side as the door slides shut, curling his knees up to his chest, and stays there until his tablet buzzes to wake him up. He reaches out from under the blanket to shut it off--and realizes, as he does, that there’s an unread message.

It’s from Shiro.

We didn’t get to talk about this last night, but how’s this for a base schedule?

There’s a link underneath to a download, and Keith clicks on it curiously. It opens a calendar, a
It's a lot of time.

He scrolls back and forth over it several times, frowning, not sure how to feel. There’s a shy uneasiness that wasn’t there before when he thinks about spending time with Shiro, a strange balance between feeling *special* and *protected* and *loved* and feeling like-- like he has no control, like the ground under his feet isn’t quite solid.

He’s used to looking after himself. He doesn’t like when adults try to do it for him. They're generally not very good at it.

The tablet buzzes, startling him mildly. It’s Shiro, and Keith switches back to the messaging window.

*I thought we could make Wednesdays our simulator day.*
*I put it right after your Flight class so we can go over new stuff while it’s fresh, but we can change that.*

The reminder that he’s going to get to fly the simulator with Shiro sends a happy thrill through him. And that’s today, Wednesday is today!

*I talked to the clinic and they said we’d better give it another week before we go into the simulator, but we can do something else tonight if you want.*
*Unless you’d rather not. That’s fine too.*

The disappointment is quickly overshadowed by the pressure of making a choice. He swallows.

*i dont care*

There’s a long pause after this, like Shiro doesn’t really know how to answer, and then it shows him writing for a long time before anything comes.

*Okay.*
*How about we plan on taking a walk to the town after you get out of Flight?* Completely flexible if you’re too tired after class and just want a quiet night. :)

Keith reads the messages over several times. Shiro is trying so *hard*. Nobody’s ever tried this hard for him before.

*ok*, he sends finally.

He shuts off the tablet and puts it face-down on his table before Shiro can respond, because talking to Shiro is hard just now.

Then, finally, he gets out of bed.

***

Paschel and Ricketts and Beck are a strange absence through his day, like a wobbly sharp-edged tooth that has finally worked free; he keeps bumping up against the gap and being surprised all over again.

Wednesdays are when he usually sees the most of them. He has gym with them on Mondays and
Thursdays, but most of his core classes are in the pod. Wednesdays, though, Wednesdays are art and flight and mandatory studying hours, and he's with them all day.

Today their desks are empty. Today, when the whole class is on its feet and moving, either to shift classrooms or to take the ten-minute break in the middle of each two-and-a-half-hour block, nobody comes up behind him to jab him in the side with a sharp stylus, nobody kicks at his feet to trip him.

It takes until lunch, when he’s able to quietly eat without Sergeant Burns needing to enforce it, but he finally begins to relax into it. He pulls out his tablet and sets it on the table next to him, but there’s no new messages from Shiro and he doesn’t know what to say. *I’m sorry I got mad* isn’t really true, and *Thank you* is… well, soon, maybe. Not yet.

He finds himself looking at the camera, a small unassuming lens perched high in the northeast corner of the room. He pauses, then he turns on his tablet and starts typing.

*are you watching?*

There’s no response for a moment. Shiro’s activity light is dark. Then it blinks on, and Shiro starts typing.

*Watching what?*
*Oh!*
*You’re at lunch, aren’t you?*
Hang on.

Keith looks up at the camera again. A tiny green light blinks on underneath the lens, and he finds himself grinning foolishly despite himself. He ducks his head to hide it and gives the camera a tiny subtle wave.

*Hi. :D*

*hi,* Keith sends back. He has to consciously tamp down the urge to squirm with happiness.

*How’s your day going?*

*good,* sends Keith. It takes him a minute, but he finds first the colon and then the parentheses, and sends a :).

Shiro sends a smily face back almost immediately, and Keith wonders how he typed it so fast.

*Brains holding up okay?*

Keith decides that it’s stupid to type when Shiro can *see* him, so he looks up at the camera and gives a thumbs-up.

*Good.*
*Don’t push it if you’re hurting. I’m serious.*

Keith makes a face, and Shiro sends a laughing animation.

“What are you *doing?*” asks somebody close by, and Keith comes back to the table with a start. He has an audience: Payne who sits on Paschel’s right is staring at him across the table with a look of open confusion and disgust.

“Nothing,” he says. He can feel his face getting hot.
“He’s talking to somebody,” says Kellings, leaning in to look at Keith’s tablet. Keith snatches it away quickly, but not before he’s seen. Kellings sits back, startled. “It’s Captain Shirogane.”

Payne gives Keith a look that is simultaneously skeptical and jealous. “It's not,” he says. “It's probably a bot that he named so we'd think it was.”

“It is not,” Keith says, his face heating. The tablet buzzes in his hands—Everything alright? --but he ignores it. “It's Shiro.”

Lourd squints at him uncertainly. “Shouldn't you say captain?”

Payne is snickering. “Look at him,” he says. “He’s all red. It’s definitely a bot.”

Keith flares up furiously at this; he already ate all his mashed potatoes and there’s really nothing good left to throw, otherwise he might have started something. He opens his mouth to retort, but Kellings says, “I mean, he was here yesterday.”

“Who?” asks Lourd, leaning forward to see around Keith.

“Captain Shirogane. It was when you went to trade your milk,” Kellings adds, looking across at Payne. “They’re friends or something, I don’t know.”

Payne narrows his eyes. “Let me see,” he says, and grabs Keith’s tablet.

“Hey!” says Keith, outraged, and grabs for it. He misses, and Payne sits back and away to scroll through his messages. “Give that back, that’s mine!” He scrambles off the bench and begins to circle around to Payne’s side of the table, a gut-punch sense of helpless violation pounding urgently with his heart.

Before he’s made it more than a few steps, though, Payne stiffens and looks up guiltily, then pushes the tablet back to Keith’s side of the table. “Sorry,” he mutters.

Keith stares at him, his breath coming short. Payne’s face has gone red and uneasy, and he’s not looking at anybody. Keith begins back, watching warily in case it’s a trick and Payne’s about to snatch his tablet again, but nothing happens. He grabs it and holds on tightly, then looks down at the screen.

Cadet Payne, says Shiro’s latest message, give Cadet Kogane his tablet right now or you’ll be written up.

Everybody’s looking at him, so he scowls back at them, and one by one they look away. He sits back down and takes a careful breath, then holds the tablet under the table so nobody else can see.

thanks

You okay? asks Shiro.

yeah

they dont think your real

Maybe I’m not, sends Shiro, and an emoji with comically large startled eyes and a big round mouth.

Keith grins despite himself. The sharp jolt of panic from losing his tablet and his connection to Shiro is easing, and he picks up his fork to start eating again, the tablet held tightly in his other hand.

“What’s he like?” asks Lourd.
“What?” Keith asks, startled.

“Captain Shirogane,” Lourd says, gesturing at the tablet. “What’s he like?”

“Oh,” says Keith, feeling his face turn red again. He glances automatically up at the camera and wonders for a brief squirming second if it’s got audio.

(It doesn’t, he remembers; the recording he’d watched on Shiro’s laptop had been silent.)

“Oh,” he says, and rubs the side of his face. He can feel his shoulders hunching up a little. “He’s really nice? He makes good food.”

Lourd looks nonplussed for a second, then his face clears. “Oh,” he says. “That’s where you went, when you were gone last week?”

Keith bites his lip, aware of the other cadets listening. He shrugs uncomfortably. “I got-- I wasn’t feeling very good.”

“Yeah,” says Lourd persistently, “but you weren’t at the Garrison, so is that where you were? With him?”

Keith fidgets, running the braided leather of his bracelet through his fingers for a moment. “Yeah,” he mumbles. “He’s-- he’s my mentor now, I guess, I stayed at his house for a couple days.”

“Wow.” Lourd draws back slightly and gives Keith a long look before he returns to his food. “That’s cool, I guess.”

Keith doesn’t know what to say to this, so he keeps quiet. He doesn’t like the glances the others keep stealing.

But time passes, and eventually the usual chatter begins again, flowing easily around Keith like water around a rock. He looks at the camera, and the green light is still there, and he relaxes. Shiro doesn’t say anything else, and neither does Keith, but there’s an easiness to the silence between them.

Keith finishes his lunch and is whisked off to Flight class by Sergeant Burns’s whistle. He glances back at the camera one more time before he’s crowded out the door and sees the green light that means Shiro blink out.

Iverson ignores him completely in the lecture half of the class, which is nice, and he’s still excused from the simulator, so he sits quietly with the others while they watch each group take its turn with the scenario. His group goes in: a pilot from another group steps in to fill Keith’s chair and Keith watches her narrowly on the screen until it’s clear she’s not taking the chance to sabotage their scores.

As the clock nears 3:00, time slows and distorts. Keith finally puts his head down on his desk so he doesn’t have to watch the second hand on the clock above Iverson’s desk. He can’t really relax, knowing Iverson might pitch a fit at any moment, but it’s nice to rest his eyes from the lights and the screen.

Iverson doesn’t say a word.

The bell rings, and Keith’s heart jumps with it.

He gets up, gathers up his things, and realizes he has no idea where he’s meant to meet Shiro. The class is filing out, and he has no wish to be left alone in an empty classroom with Iverson, so he
keeps his head down and follows them out.

The hallway is crowded, but everybody’s moving more or less the same direction. Keith lets himself be swept along, and he bends his head over his tablet to check his messages.

There’s nothing new from Shiro. He frowns, wonders for a moment if he forgot, then begins carefully typing. It’s hard, when elbows belonging to people taller than him keep jostling him from all sides, but he’s managed are you when somebody catches him by the back of his jacket.

There’s a terrifyingly off-balance moment where his bottom half keeps moving while his top half has been rudely arrested, and it sends a sharp urgent jolt of alarm through him. He scrambles and twists—the uniform jacket is big on him but the sturdy fabric and severe cut are unforgiving; he can’t just squirm out to escape. All the same, he’s gotten one arm free and has enough slack to turn and start fighting when the grip releases a second later.

“--your name like three times but you just kept walking!”

Shiro is behind him, grinning. Keith is frozen and wide-eyed for a moment; his entire right side is drawn back to start hitting and kicking and clawing. His ears are ringing with the pressing sense of danger, of being caught, and he can’t easily dismiss it. He drops his arm and closes his mouth, feels blood pooling in his cheeks, and he sees the exact second where Shiro realizes.

“I’m sorry,” Keith blurs, at the exact same time that Shiro says, “Oh, geez--”

Shiro’s eyes are wide: he looks startled and guilt-sick, and Keith hates himself for putting that look on Shiro’s face.

“I’m sorry,” he says again.

Shiro’s shoulders drop. He puts his arm across Keith’s shoulders—lightly and a little hesitantly, like he’s afraid of hurting him, like he wants Keith to be able to duck away if he wants. “Don't be sorry,” he says. “Don't be sorry; I'm sorry. I didn't think--I'm sorry.”

Keith says nothing, just leans a little against Shiro to answer the unspoken question and lets him steer the way down the hallway. He can’t tell if the press of students around them has actually eased, or if it’s just the wider berth they seem to give to adults, but he can see further, breathe easier.

“You should probably change into civvies before we go,” says Shiro.

Keith doesn't know the word, but there's enough context, and he nods.

“It's a little bit rough, the way we're going,” Shiro says. “It would suck to get back and have to do laundry. Or stitch something up.”

Keith's never stitched anything up in his life, but he says uncertainly, “Yeah.”

“Go ahead,” says Shiro, nodding toward the door, and Keith realizes they're outside his bunk. “I'll wait out here.”

Keith ducks inside and changes quickly into shorts and a t-shirt. He hesitates, then grabs a zip-up sweatshirt too: it’s nice out now, he knows, but it gets cold when the sun goes down, and the cold goes all the way to his bones.

Shiro squints at him a little when he comes out wearing it. “It’s pretty hot,” he warns.
“I know,” says Keith. He watches Shiro uncertainly from the corner of his eye: grown-ups get ideas about what’s best, and he knows already that Shiro will hold his own such ideas above Keith’s if he feels it’s necessary.

But Shiro only shrugs and tilts his head toward the hallway. “Ready?”

Keith grins with relief and excitement, and falls into step with Shiro.

It is warm outside, the kind of dry, solid heat that curls around him like a blanket, like a hug. He breathes it in happily and closes his eyes, absorbing the sunshine as it soaks into the dark fabric of his hoodie.

“Feels good?” Shiro asks. He sounds amused.

“Mm,” says Keith blissfully, and opens his eyes in confusion when Shiro cracks up. “Hey,” he says, frowning, because Shiro just keeps laughing. “It’s not-- stop it, it’s not that funny!”

“It’s pretty funny,” says Shiro, and mmphs when Keith shoves him. “Just thinking about something the commander said.”

“What did he say?” Keith asks suspiciously.

Shiro makes a vague humming noise and shrugs hugely, his eyes all lit up with laughter.

Keith huffs out a breath and shoves him again. “Shi rooo!”

Shiro grunts again--and then, before Keith even realizes what he’s doing, he hauls Keith into a giant restraining bear-hug and scoops him up off his feet. “Oh no what now!!”

And then Keith’s shrieking and struggling, he can’t even help it, because the last time Shiro did this it ended in brutal tickling. But Shiro doesn’t really do anything, just swings him around in a big dizzy circle and carries him smugly toward the Garrison’s staff parking lot.

“Where are we going?” Keith demands.

“The bike,” says Shiro in a completely ordinary voice, like he doesn’t have Keith wheezing and squirming in his grip. “Gotta grab the water for the walk.”

“Let me down!”

“Nope!” Shiro says cheerfully. “I haven’t gotten to hug anybody all day.”

“This isn’t hugging,” Keith huffs, trying to find some slack in the warm arm trapping his arms against his sides.

“No?”

“You’re like a--” Keith pauses to strain against Shiro’s hold, to no effect. “You’re squishing me to death!”

“Are you sure?” Shiro asks. “You’re awfully noisy for somebody being squished to death.”

Keith goes completely limp and heavy in answer, dropping his head back to rest on Shiro’s shoulder. “I’m dead.”

“Hmm,” says Shiro. “Sounds fake.”
Keith, being dead, does not respond— but then Shiro blows hard in his ear.

It's the weirdest thing he's ever felt, an urgently uncomfortable tickle that makes his toes curl in his shoes and his body jackknife involuntarily. It stops just short of actual pain, but it's enough to nearly make him gag.

"It's a miracle," Shiro crows, and Keith feels him drawing a big breath to do it again.

"No don't!" he gasps, half-panicking, hunching up his shoulders to try to protect his ears. "I don't like that, I don't like that!"

Shiro releases the breath in a warm undirected whoosh of air that makes Keith flinch, and lets Keith down to stand immediately. "What, are you-- did that hurt? I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

"I don't--" Keith backs away and scrubs at his ear to try to erase the sensation. The tickle persists, down deep where he can't get rid of it, and he shudders all over with a funny unpleasant convulsion that catches him completely off-guard. "I don't like it, I don't…"

"I'm sorry!" Shiro says again, his face all creased up with startled distress, his hands held up palms-out. "I'm so sorry, Keith, I won't do it again."

"It's okay," Keith says, and it is, it is; it still feels weird but Shiro listened, Shiro stopped when he asked.

"You're okay?" Shiro asks to be sure.

Keith swallows a couple times. The tickle is still there; his eyes are still squinting and tearing and blinking reflexively and he can feel his face twisting into expressions that weren't his idea, but it's fading. "Yeah," he says. "I'm okay."

Shiro still looks worried and remorseful, hanging back like he's afraid to come too near, afraid to touch him--so Keith steps forward before he can think about it too much and gives him a quick tight hug.

Shiro goes very still for a second. Then Keith feels a big hand settle lightly on the crown of his head and an arm wrap around his back as Shiro crouches down to meet him, hugging him tightly in return like Keith had dared to hope he would.

"Okay," Shiro murmurs when Keith finally draws back, and gets back to his feet. "Okay, let's go."

He leaves his arm curled loosely around Keith's shoulders as they walk, though, never breaking contact, and Keith absorbs the sensation as happily as he absorbs the desert heat.

He's finally thoroughly warm for the first time in three days.

Chapter End Notes

made a sideblog.

Mostly gen Voltron rn with a smattering of Sheith because I ship it hard starting around season 2. If you post lots of Voltron and/or know good blogs that do the same, let me know in the comments! I need more Voltron content on my dash.
They follow an easy trail down toward the valley. *Easy* is Shiro’s word, anyway; Keith isn’t sure he’d go so far. The trail is rocky and uneven, full of steps that are just a little too high for Keith to scale easily, and he finds himself relying a little more on Shiro’s help than he’d like.

“It gets smoother up ahead,” Shiro assures him, boosting him up another annoyingly high ledge. “I think there’s one more like this and then it’s flat all the way to the town.

Keith huffs out a breath while Shiro climbs up to join him. He finally takes off his jacket. He’s not exactly hot, but he’s comfortable, and he wants to feel the sunshine on his skin. Beside him, Shiro is sweating: his face is flushed and glistening, and the fabric of his collar is dark and damp. Keith watches him swipe the sweat off his forehead with the hem of his shirt, vaguely worried.

“Good dad always used to get hot too,” he says.

Shiro gives him a quick surprised look, and Keith realizes belatedly that he hasn’t really talked about his dad to Shiro before. He waits for the familiar sick, vulnerable feeling that always accompanies this kind of slip, but it doesn’t come.

He doesn’t mind, he realizes. He doesn’t mind Shiro knowing things about his dad.

“You mean,” says Shiro dryly when he doesn’t volunteer anything more, “when hiking in the sunshine on a ninety degree day?”

“Yeah,” says Keith, and is slightly taken aback when Shiro snorts and shakes his head. “So it’s not just you,” he tries again.

“Thanks, bud,” says Shiro, even more dryly, and Keith glances up at him quickly to see if he’s offended. He’s smiling, to Keith’s relief, but there’s an odd expression on his face when he looks back at Keith. “You’re feeling okay, right?”

“Yeah?” Keith says, confused. He’s even more confused when Shiro kneels in front of him to squint into his face.

“Not dizzy or anything? Is your head okay?”

“I’m fine,” Keith says. “What are you even--? Shiro, I’m fine. ”

Shiro is feeling his forehead and cheeks with the back of one hand. He frowns, then feels his own face, then reaches out to feel Keith’s again.

Keith catches at Shiro’s wrist with both hands before he can make contact. “Shiro, gross! You’re
“Just-- just...” Shiro says distractedly. He withdraws his hand and wipes it on his shirt, then reaches for Keith’s face again.

He’s worried, Keith realizes abruptly. He has no idea why, but the intent look on Shiro’s face scares him a little. He holds still and doesn’t protest again.

“Let me borrow your hand,” Shiro says, reaching for it, and Keith obeys. He watches Shiro fit two fingers to the pulse point in his wrist while the seconds tick along on his watch.

Shiro releases him after a moment and looks up at him again. “Okay,” he says slowly. “Do you just--not get hot?”

“I don’t know,” says Keith, feeling his face warm. “Sometimes I-- if it’s, if it’s really hot, I guess?”

“It’s… pretty hot here, bud.”

Keith doesn’t think it’s that hot. He remembers the foster home in Austin last August, where the heat would build and build in layers of humidity and stillness until everything was inescapably sticky-damp and you felt with every breath like you were suffocating. That kind of heavy, malevolent heat was bad; it had crawled inside his chest and made him sick. This kind of heat is friendly.

He shrugs.

Shiro studies him for another minute, then hmms. “Well, you definitely don’t have heat exhaustion or anything,” he says, getting to his feet. “Drink some water, though. It’ll make me feel better.”

Keith rolls his eyes, but he pops the lid off his water bottle and drinks dutifully. Shiro does the same, and they continue on.

“No, I want to do it,” he says ten minutes later when they reach the last ledge and Shiro reaches to help him up. It’s about five feet, this one, well past the height of his head, but it’s not as sheer as some of the others: he can see places to put his hands and feet to haul himself up.

Shiro steps back immediately, nodding. Keith hesitates a moment, then rolls up his jacket to toss up ahead of him. The sandstone is firm and rough under his hands when he reaches to begin climbing, and though he’s aware of Shiro watching closely, he doesn’t do anything insulting like stand behind him with his hands up to catch him.

It feels like it takes a long time, but he doesn’t think it actually does. He clambers up over the edge, sprawling ungracefully on his belly before he picks himself and his jacket up. “Did it!” he announces unnecessarily, a little breathless.

“Way to go!” Shiro cheers, and Keith glows. He brushes the dirt and sand off his shirt as well as he can, grateful that he’s not wearing his uniform, and backs out of the way while Shiro climbs up over the edge to follow him.

He catches a slight movement on the ground from the corner of his eye as he does so, a soft dry rustling sound that makes the hair stand up on the back of his neck. He turns to look and hears the rattle.

Keith has seen rattlesnakes before, in documentaries and zoos; he remembers being allowed to touch a shed skin once, very gently. He’d been fascinated by the delicate translucency, the perfect imprint of each leaflike scale. He’d had a phase after that: he’d read articles with his dad, he’d looked at
pictures and learned about their habits, he’d written a half-page report for school.

None of that prepared him, it turns out, for the reality of having one coiled angrily almost at his feet, within easy striking distance of his bare shin.

His whole world narrows with blinding focus to the snake. He sees the slitted pupils, the pits on either side of its face; he sees the tongue flick out and thinks Jacobson’s organ. He can remember every fact he’d put into his report, he knows that the genus is named for an ancient instrument, he knows that fewer than five people per year die from rattlesnake bites, he knows they’re important and misunderstood--

He can’t move.

He watches the snake shift in its coil and he can’t move.

He’s aware suddenly that Shiro is saying his name, deliberately calm and even but with a strained edge that says he’s been repeating it for a while. He drags in a breath. “Shiro--”

“I’m right here,” says Shiro immediately. “I’m right here. I need you to take a step back toward me.”

“I can’t--”

“You can,” Shiro says. “You can do this. One step back, come on.”

Keith’s mouth is dry. He closes it and swallows. The rattle stutters, then resumes. “Shiro, it’s gonna...”

“No,” says Shiro. “Focus on what you’re going to do. Left foot first.”

“I can’t--”

“Keith,” Shiro says, and there’s a slightly desperate note in his voice now. “Keith, I need you to trust me. Just for now, just for a minute, just give me a step.”

Keith squeezes his eyes shut, feels the tears at the corners. He pulls in a shaky breath and slides his left foot carefully backward, away from the snake. The rattling intensifies and he freezes.

“Good,” breathes Shiro. “Good, Keith, I am so, so proud of you. Right foot now, exactly the same. I'm right behind you.”

“You said one step,” Keith whispers.

“Right foot,” says Shiro relentlessly. “You're nearly there, you're nearly safe.”

Keith trembles and wavers. It takes him a moment to remember how to shift his weight, but he does it, and he drags his right foot backwards.

Several things happen at once, then, in a confusing rush of motion that is nevertheless blindingly clear. The snake lunges, and desperate panic overrides Keith's frozen stillness: he throws his rolled-up jacket just as Shiro's hands catch him under his arms and swoop him away.

Keith can't look away from the snake. He sees how his jacket knocks off the trajectory of the lunge—and he sees it, too, when the fangs impact Shiro's foot instead of Keith's bare leg.

Shiro makes a noise behind him, a grunt and an exhalation, but they’re moving, there’s no pause, there’s no sound but Shiro’s rapid footfalls. He shifts his hold on Keith, and Keith twists to wrap his
arms around Shiro’s neck and his legs around Shiro’s waist, watching the dusty-brown reptile over Shiro’s shoulder.

Shiro carries him for maybe fifty yards, his arms tight, and then slows and stops. “Okay,” he says, and breathes in shakily before he lets Keith down. “Wow, okay. That was fun.”

“It--” Keith can’t quite talk. He takes a step back to look at Shiro, at his foot, at his face. “It got you, it got you--”

“It didn’t,” Shiro says, his hands steadying Keith’s shoulders. “It didn’t go through my boot, it didn’t get me. It’s okay. It’s okay.”

He turns his foot a little to show Keith the shallow scratch: the snake’s fangs pierced and tore the outer layer, but couldn’t break through the sturdy material underneath. The edges of the tear are damp with what Keith realizes is venom, and his knees are suddenly alarmingly unsteady. He reaches up and wraps a hand around Shiro’s forearm and tries to remember how to breathe.

Shiro pulls him in against himself. His arms are a little too tight, but Keith doesn’t object. He squeezes back just as fiercely.

Shiro doesn’t seem to be in any hurry to let Keith go, which is perfectly okay with Keith. It’s okay, too, when Shiro finds a reasonably shady place to sit and draws them both to the ground. Keith tucks his face down to hide in Shiro’s shoulder and sniffs, hoping that it isn’t too obvious that he’s crying. He’s shaking pretty badly too, but there’s no way to hide that--and he’s startled to realize after a moment that it’s not just him, that Shiro’s trembling too.

“It did good,” Shiro murmurs, and his big warm hand settles on the nape of Keith’s neck. “You did so good, I’m so proud of you. The jacket, that was--you had it, you didn’t even need me.”

Keith isn’t sure at all about that. There’s still gooseflesh on his arms and legs; there’s a funny hollow feeling in his lungs, like no matter how much air he pulls he’ll never catch his breath. He keeps his head down while Shiro talks quietly in his ear, telling him he was brave and smart; he holds still and counts Shiro’s breaths, focuses on the rise and fall of respiration and tries to match it.

By the time they start to find their equilibrium again, even Keith is starting to feel too warm. He scoots down off Shiro’s lap to sit next to him instead, and Shiro shifts to sit cross-legged, flapping his t-shirt to cool himself down. They don’t speak; there’s no need. They sit in silence and drink their water.

“Okay,” says Shiro finally. “We should get going.” He takes one more long drink, and then pours the rest of the water from the bottle onto his own head.

Keith watches interestedly, then considers the water left in his own bottle and does the same. It feels nice, a welcome counter to the sweat he can feel prickling between his shoulder blades and at the roots of his hair, but he doesn’t think to tip his head back first and it drips into his face. He has to spend a moment sputtering and trying to wipe it out of his eyes.

Shiro is on his feet when Keith can see again, watching with amusement. “Ready?” he asks, offering Keith a hand. Keith accepts it, and Shiro hauls him up easily.

They walk together toward the town.

Chapter End Notes
AN IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT:

ART, featuring Cranky Blanket Burrito Keith. i love. so much. god look @ that cute face. Itssiccia on tumblr is the artist, PLEASE go check out all their work because they are incredibly brilliant and talented and a lovely person!

As always, thank you guys so very much for all your comments and kudos and bookmarks (and the bookmarks with the sweet little notes, I SEE YOU; BLESS). Whenever I'm feeling writers-blocky or discouraged I go back and read comments and: you guys are honestly the best. <3

Happy (early) birthday, Ookamisoulreaper!

(who else has birthdays coming up??)
"Hello?"

"Sam? Hey..." Shiro turns to glance back inside the coffee shop. Keith is on the other side of the glass, perched on a stool at the high table he chose, slurping down a milkshake with reckless abandon. "Uh, are you busy?"

"Just cleaning, why?"

"Do you think you could come pick us up and give us a ride back to the Garrison?" Shiro asks.

There's a pause. "Ahh, shit. Yeah, I can. Are you guys okay, did you crash?"

"No, no," Shiro says hastily. "We're fine, nothing like that. We took a walk to the town but-- um, we had an encounter with a rattlesnake."

There's another pause. "Where are you guys?"

"The coffee shop on Prescott."

"Nobody got struck? You're both okay?"

"We're both okay," says Shiro. "We're a little bit shook up, but nothing supper and a milkshake can't fix."

"Close call?"

Shiro pauses, and for a second he's back on the ledge with Keith and he's not fast enough--

"Very close," he finally says.

Sam is quiet for a beat. "I'll be there in ten."

Shiro pockets his tablet and glances through the window to check on Keith again. The boy is frowning down at his thick milkshake in deep concentration, using the straw to stir it into a more drinkable consistency. He takes a long drink, then rears back with the unmistakable startled grimace of brain-freeze.

And Shiro's standing on the sidewalk by himself, laughing like an idiot while his heart does its level best to outshine the setting sun.

"Heard you had an adventure," Sam says ten minutes later when Keith opens the passenger side door.

Keith is still mildly miffed at Shiro for laughing at him and has cheerfully abandoned him to sit shotgun, but the question catches him off guard. He looks over his shoulder at Shiro uncertainly.

"I told him," Shiro says.
“There was a snake,” says Keith, climbing in. “It was gonna bite me but I threw my jacket at it and then it almost bit Shiro instead but it couldn’t because his boots were too thick. It was really big, it was-- it was this big around at least, it was like a python except maybe I guess just a baby python but it was really big.”

Shiro’s never heard Keith say this many words in a row. He climbs into the back seat, accidentally meets Sam’s eyes in the rear-view mirror, and has to duck his head hastily to keep from laughing again.

What a day.

“And it had fangs that were like this long,” Keith continues, and Sam, father of two and actual saint, listens and nods and asks interested questions until Keith’s excited, sugar-buzzed rant finally runs down.

“And then we had really big milkshakes,” Keith says in conclusion, and it’s nearly Shiro’s undoing when Sam nods solemnly and says, “So I gathered.”

The ride to the Garrison is a short one, and Keith is the first one out of the car.

“He’s gonna crash hard,” remarks Sam wryly as the door slams shut behind him.

Shiro shifts guiltily and bluses. “I know, I know, he’s still riding an adrenaline high and I just, fed it a ton of sugar. I didn’t really think about it until after we ordered.”

“What about you, are you doing okay?” Sam asks, twisting to look back at him.

“Yeah,” says Shiro. “I’m fine, I just-- yeah.”

“Come debrief when you get home if you want,” Sam says.

“I will,” says Shiro. “Thanks for the ride, sir.”

Keith is waiting impatiently outside his door, so he finally gets out of the car and pulls the hyped-up kid into an affectionate headlock from behind. The attention makes Keith light up instantly, even more than he usually does, so Shiro lets the moment stretch: he wrestles Keith back and forth, scoops him up and whirls him around while Keith shrieks with delight, and carries him upside-down to the west gate.

(He watches carefully all the while for any sign of the panic that crept into Keith’s voice earlier, but it never returns.)

He holds Keith with one arm while he fishes out his ID to let them in, then flips him easily right-way-up again, and the sound of Keith’s unrestrained laughter is rapidly becoming one of Shiro’s favorite things in the world. He tweaks his ribs to make him yelp and squirm, then lets him down.

Keith is a little wobbly on his feet for a second, out of breath and dizzy, but that doesn’t stop him from charging headlong into Shiro in retribution. Shiro oofs and stumbles back, actually knocked off balance. “Okay, okay, ow,” he says hastily when Keith steps back to charge at him again, and catches at his hands. “Take it easy, take it easy.”

Keith stops immediately and draws back. He looks legitimately scared for a moment, studying Shiro with huge eyes, and Shiro has to pull him into a tight hug from the side. “You’re okay,” he says, and feels Keith relax against him. “You’re okay. Thank you for stopping.”
“Sorry,” mumbles Keith.

“You’re okay,” Shiro assures him again. “I’m not mad, you didn’t hurt me.”

Keith nods, and Shiro squeezes him tightly one more time before loosening his hold enough that they can walk together comfortably. “You don’t have homework tonight, right?” he asks.

“No,” says Keith. “I’ve got-- I’ve got an exception or something?”

“Good, yeah,” Shiro says. “I was pretty sure. Anything in particular you want to do?”

Keith peeks up at him sidelong. “Can we go in the simulator?”

Shiro winces. “No, we’d better not. The clinic said to give it a week.”

“I just faced down a rattlesnake and I’m fine,” argues Keith.

“Yeah, exactly,” says Shiro. “So it’s extra important that we don’t push it right now.”

“I went to all my classes, those are on screens!”

“You had to duck out early both yesterday and Monday,” Shiro reminds him gently.

“I--” Keith stops, his face flaming. “I didn’t leave early today!”

“I know,” Shiro says. “We wouldn’t have gone out walking if you had.”

Keith goes sullenly silent at this, staring at the floor. Watching him, Shiro can see that he’s beginning to crash: the disappointment is hitting him too hard; there’s tremors beginning in his shoulders; he looks pale and tired.

He needs to get him someplace safe and familiar, someplace he can let go, and he needs to do it soon.

“Come on,” he says, and tugs lightly to turn Keith down the hall to the lower level dorms. “Let’s go hang out in your room for a while until we think of something.”

The halls are noisier than usual at this time of day: the sound of shows or music coming from occupied rooms, a couple cadets doing homework on the hallway floor, dorm room doors open. Somebody is singing loudly in the bathroom.

Keith sticks close to Shiro’s side as they pass through. It’s mostly older cadets in this wing, sixteen and seventeen-year-old year threes and year fours. There’s a familiar sense of community here that gives Shiro a bittersweet twinge of nostalgia.

“That was my room,” he murmurs to Keith as they pass its door. Keith turns to look, and when he looks back up at Shiro he looks less overwhelmed.

They go down the stairs to the lower level, past the glass door to the sunken courtyard where Shiro remembers water-balloon-bombing unsuspecting fourteen-year-olds as an initiation prank, and turn down the quiet dead-end hall to Keith and Malone’s room. He stands by while Keith enters the code for his door and follows him in.

Keith slows and stops, standing in the middle of the room, and rubs his eyes. He’s shivering in earnest now, goosebumps on his arms and legs after the switch from desert heat to chilly climate-controlled hallways, so Shiro steps past him to grab the brown blanket off the foot of his bed.
“You want to sit for a while and read?” he asks, wrapping the blanket around Keith’s shoulders. “I’ve got Ender’s Game on my tablet, we could pick up where we left off.”

“I don’t care,” mumbles Keith, avoiding Shiro’s eyes. There’s still a bit of attitude in his tone, but not enough, Shiro decides, to make an issue of. Not with the day they’ve had.

“Come on, then,” he says, tilting his head, and moves to sit on Keith’s bed, scooting back on the mattress so his back is against the wall. Keith follows and climbs up next to him clumsily, and despite the lingering sulk he doesn’t hesitate to claim the space under Shiro’s arm, settling in with an irritable breath.

Shiro doesn’t smile.

The wall is hard behind their backs, so Shiro grabs Keith’s pillow to cushion it. It’s still not as comfortable as the couch at home, but it’ll work. He pulls out his tablet and opens the app, taking a moment to find the point where they left off last time they read together. Then he clears his throat, settles back, and begins to read.

It doesn’t take long for Keith’s interest to overcome his sour mood. He scoots a little closer so he can read along on the tablet, and Shiro resettles his arm around his shoulders. By the end of the next page, Keith has snuggled in with his head on Shiro’s chest, warm and heavy.

Shiro keeps reading, running his free hand gently up and down Keith’s back. Keith takes a long breath and sighs it out again, going still. When Shiro checks on him again, fifteen minutes later, his eyes are closed.

Shiro lowers his tablet to his lap and leans his head back against the wall. He’s exhausted, and if he stays too much later he’ll have to bike back in the dark, but he doesn’t want to let go of Keith. When he closes his eyes he can see the snake again; he’s still frozen a step too far away, aware that if he moves closer the snake will almost certainly strike, aware that with Keith’s size and weight it will almost certainly be serious.

He swallows hard and presses his cheek to the top of Keith’s head.

The light of the setting sun makes a small golden rectangle on the wall above the door, and Shiro watches it slowly move up toward the ceiling. It startles him rather more than it should when the door slides open.

Malone steps through. He makes it a few steps into the room before he notices Shiro and Keith, and jumps visibly.

Shiro cringes slightly in apology, making a face. “Sorry,” he whispers.

“It’s all right,” whispers Malone, recovering and smiling sheepishly. “I didn’t expect you guys to be in here.”

“We had a little more excitement tonight than we planned,” Shiro answers wryly. “Wore us out.”

“Excitement, sir?”

“Close encounter with a rattlesnake.”

Malone’s eyes widen slightly and flick to Keith.

“He’s okay,” whispers Shiro quickly. “We’re okay. Nobody got hurt. The snake’s fine too.”
“Well,” says Malone, and shifts. “Good.”

“We came back here to read and calm down,” says Shiro, “except then this happened and now I can't move ever again.”

Malone glances at him, quick and uncertain, and then grins. “Looks like you're pretty stuck, sir,” he agrees. “Um, I was gonna work on a paper, am I gonna be bothering you guys if I…?”


“All right,” says Malone, and hesitates for a second before he reaches over and turns on his desk lamp. He angles it quickly down so it shines less directly on Shiro and Keith's side of the room, then sits down at his desk.

Quiet falls, and Keith slumbers on while Malone works and Shiro idly scrolls through news and messages and alerts on his tablet. The little golden sliver of sunlight on the wall finally disappears completely and Shiro decides reluctantly that he should go. He begins to extricate himself, a process made difficult by the soft noise of distress Keith makes when Shiro withdraws.

“It's okay,” Shiro whispers, trying to ignore the sharp twist the sound gives his heart. “It's okay.” He peels the blanket and top sheet of Keith's bed back and carefully maneuvers him under the covers. Keith rouses a little here--not quite all the way, but enough to roll onto his stomach and reach blindly for his pillow. Shiro gives it to him, and Keith sighs and settles in again.

Shiro pulls the blankets up to cover him and sits with him for a moment, keeping his hand moving over Keith's back. Finally, he touches the side of Keith's head lightly and gets up to go.

He pauses at the door. “Hey,” he whispers to Malone. “Monday or Tuesday evening good for you?”

Malone is bewildered for a moment, then his eyes light up. “For the-- um, um, yeah, either is fine!”

“Let's do Tuesday, then.”

“Okay,” Malone answers, still whispering, grinning big and delighted. “Um, I'll meet you there?”

“Sounds good,” says Shiro. “After supper?”

“I'll be there, sir,” Malone says, almost quivering with restrained excitement. “Thank you, thank you so much!”

“See you then,” whispers Shiro, and slips out.

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He knocks on the doorframe of the commander’s office fifteen minutes later. “Reporting for debrief, sir.”

Sam leans back in his chair, taking off his glasses. “Get in here, kid,” he says. “You look beat.”

Shiro rubs a hand over his face and takes two steps in, plopping to sit on the floor next to Sam’s chair, his back against the sturdy desk. “Thanks for coming to get us.”

“No trouble,” says the commander. “He crash?”

“He crashed,” Shiro confirms.
“And you?”

Shiro pulls up one knee and admits a little wryly, “Getting there.”

Sam gives him a small twisting half-smile, achingly sympathetic. He sits forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “When Matt was… oh, four, I guess, he went on a science adventure to the back alley and came back with a used syringe he’d found. I’ll never forget that feeling.”

Shiro inhales deeply. “What did you do?”

Sam shrugs, looking at his hands. “Got it away from him, told him never, ever touch something like that without me or his mom there. He said it didn’t stick him but Colleen still ran every test she could think to run, both on him and the needle. It was a long couple days.”

Shiro tries to imagine it, the sick terror and uncertainty, the repositioning of reality around this new threat. It’s not hard to picture. “I bet,” he finally says.

“Anyway,” says Sam, and lowers his head a little to catch Shiro’s eye. “I know what it feels like, a close call like that.”

Shiro nods, a small tight motion of his head. He can’t look up at Sam: the gentleness in his face and voice is unspooling something that Shiro has managed to hold together for the last several hours, and he’s rapidly losing control. He remembers how to breathe around the tightness in his throat, after a moment; he pulls a long shaky breath of air. “I’m sorry,” he manages, drawing up his other knee, and rubs a hand over his mouth. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, it was really close--”

“Oh, kid,” Sam says softly, and Shiro feels a warm dry hand gripping the back of his neck. “It’s okay, you’re okay. I know. I know.”

Then there’s a gentle, gentle impact, Sam’s forehead pressing to the top of Shiro’s head, and Shiro just, breaks.

Sam shifts down to sit with him on the carpet, pulling him in, and part of Shiro balks for a moment. He doesn’t want to need this. He wants to be strong enough, he wants to be the steady, capable presence that Keith needs and Sam thinks he can be. But Sam keeps murmuring, “It’s okay, it’s okay,” and Shiro shuts his eyes and lets go.

“Dad?” calls Matt, down the hall. Footsteps approach, and Shiro tries to pull himself together before Matt pokes his head around the door. “Do you have the chromatography results from last--oh, shit.”

He stops abruptly, his eyes darting between his father and Shiro, his mouth opening slightly. “What’s-- Shiro? Did something happen, are you--”

“Me too, right now,” agrees Shiro, managing a shaky laugh.
Matt looks at him carefully, then scoots over to sit on Shiro's other side. He wraps an arm around Shiro's back under Sam's and rests his head on Shiro's shoulder, and Shiro finds himself enveloped for a moment in his team’s affection.

He closes his eyes and breathes it in. There's strength here, and comfort, and he can finally begin to release the pent-up energy that has been quivering through his limbs for the last several hours. He takes a breath after a moment and sits back so he can wrap his arms around them in return.

Matt stirs after a little while, looking around Shiro at Sam. “Did you tell him?”

“Ahh,” says Sam, sitting back. He makes a face and rubs his lower back, then gets up off the floor to sit in his chair again. “I hadn’t yet. Katie’s got Friday off, Shiro, she and Colleen are coming to visit for the weekend.”

“Oh!” says Shiro. “Cool, okay.”

“Planning on them staying here if you’re okay with it,” Sam says, lifting his eyebrows at Shiro.

“Oh, yeah,” says Shiro, mildly surprised to be asked. “I figured, yeah, of course. Um--” He pauses abruptly, thinking of Keith, already mentally adjusting his weekend plans.

“Keith is still welcome, if he’s okay with that many people,” Sam says. “Colleen wants to meet him.”

“Will we all fit?”

“Eh,” says the commander, and shrugs. “It’ll be a little tight, but it’ll be fine. I thought maybe you two could camp in the living room and Katie could borrow your room, or she can kip in here, or on Matt’s floor if he can find it. There’s options.”

“Thank you,” says Shiro. “And yeah, she can definitely have my room. When are they coming?”

“Tomorrow night,” says Sam. “We’re going out for dinner in town if you want to join us.”

“Ah,” Shiro says, half-grinning, “that sounds like family time.”

“You’re family,” Sam says, so easy and matter-of-fact that Shiro doesn’t know what to say. The assertion hits him hard in a place he didn’t know was still tender, and it sets him reeling for a moment.

He gathers himself. He might be family to Sam and Matt, but he’s met Colleen twice and Katie never, and tomorrow night is theirs, not his.

“Nah,” he says, trying to put both apology and thanks into his tone. “I bailed on my friends the last couple times. I’d better show tomorrow.”

“Ah, gotcha,” says Sam. “Thursday, right.”

Matt prods Shiro in the side. “Did you ask him?”

Shiro jerks away reflexively and grabs at Matt’s wrists to stop him poking again as Sam asks, “Ask me what?”

“Nothing, sir,” says Shiro, giving Matt a warning look.

Matt looks back at him and narrows his eyes. “He’s got a corrupted file that I think Katie can fix,” he says, leaning to the side to talk around Shiro.
“Yeah?” asks Sam. “What is it?”

Shiro closes his eyes briefly and lets out a short gust of air through his nose. “I don’t know, sir,” he answers, releasing Matt’s wrists and turning to face the commander. “It’s from Keith’s file. I have no idea what’s in it, which is why I wasn’t going to ask for Katie to look at it.” He gives Matt a pointed look.

“Corrupted how?” asks the commander, looking at Matt.

Matt hesitates, and the look he gives Shiro is slightly apologetic. “Deliberately,” he answers, pushing his glasses up his nose. “I’m pretty sure. I’ve been looking into data scramblers and there’s a couple that fit the pattern of the corruption, but there’s not currently any way to reverse them. Katie’s done way more with Bism than I have, I’m pretty sure if we work together we can come up with something to counter the scrambling.”

Shiro moistens his lips anxiously. “Sir,” he says. “I don’t know what’s in the file. I don’t know if it’s something you want her to see.”

“Would she need to see it?” Sam asks Matt.

Matt gives this a moment’s consideration. “I think she’d be pissed if she didn’t get to,” he admits. “But no, she wouldn’t need to see, like, the content to fix it. Just the data.”

Sam nods slowly.

“He’s got--” says Shiro, and turns back to Matt. “You said you’ve got friends online who can-- I’m really not comfortable with this, can you talk to your friends first, please?”

“Well,” Matt says, and shifts uncomfortably. “I already have. I’m kind of striking out. A couple of them have ideas but there’s only so much they can do without, you know, actually looking at the file, and I can’t just send them a Garrison file, obviously. Pidge is about my last shot.”

They both look at Sam.

“I don’t like the idea of somebody screwing around with Garrison data,” Sam says finally. He looks at Shiro. “Have you told the General?”

“No, sir,” says Shiro, and glances at Matt. “I didn’t know it was deliberate until just now.”

“Sorry,” says Matt, blushing. “I wasn’t sure until like, an hour ago.”

“Brief him,” says the commander. ‘Tomorrow, if you can. Matt, I want you to go too.”

“Me?” Matt repeats, startled. “Are you-- I’ve never…”

Sam looks amused. “Get used to it,” he says. “You’ll be giving lots of briefings on your own in the next few years. Think of this as practice. I’ll write you a note for whatever class you have to miss.”

“Sweet,” says Matt, though he still looks mildly panicked. “Um, can I… ask him about using Pidge?”

Sam sighs deeply. “You can float the idea to him, and we’ll talk about it if he’s amenable.”

“Thank you, sir,” says Matt, and after a moment’s hesitation Shiro murmurs the same.

“All right,” says the commander, and sighs again. He taps his thumb on the armrest of his chair, then
tilts his head at Matt. “Didn’t you come in here to ask me something?”

“Oh, yeah!” says Matt, brightening up. “Did we get Fearless’s gas chromatography results from last week yet?”

“I think they came in this morning,” says Sam, turning to look on his screen. “Yeah, they’re here. Need ‘em?”

“Yeah, please,” Matt says. “I want to run some comparisons. I feel like we might be looking at a more active core than we thought.”

Shiro gets to his feet to escape before the discussion gets too technical. “I’m gonna crash,” he says quietly. “Thank you guys.”

They both look up at him, pausing their conversation briefly to assess him. “‘Night, Shiro,” says Matt, and there’s a slight anxious note to his tone that makes Shiro wince.

“‘Night,” he answers, and half-smiles to Matt, trying for reassurance. He’s not sure it works, but Matt gives him a cautious smile back, and yeah, they’re probably all right.

He’ll make sure in the morning, he decides. Right now he wants his bed.

He shuts his door and flops on his back on top of the covers without changing, draping his elbow over his eyes. He’ll send a message to the General in a moment to request a meeting, but he needs a moment to breathe and rest first, to absorb the implications of a deliberately obscured event in Keith’s file.

He wonders, for a moment, if Keith would just tell him about it if he asked, then reluctantly dismisses the idea. He has no idea what to ask--and it seems more likely now than before that the corrupted file is hiding something with the potential to be traumatic. He doesn’t want to go into this blind.

He takes a deep breath, lifts his elbow from his face, and reaches for his tablet. He writes the message to the General without sitting up, sends it, and is asleep almost before the screen has gone dark.

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The tablet buzzing on Shiro’s chest wakes him with a start somewhere in the middle of the night. He blinks up at the ceiling, disoriented, and props himself up on one elbow. He’s sleeping in his jeans for some reason, and his mouth has the sour unpleasant taste that says he forgot to brush his teeth. He squints at the clock--it’s a little after 2:00--and sits up, rubbing his eyes.

are u awake ?

It’s from Keith, and Shiro frowns at it for a moment before he responds.

I’m here. How come are you awake?
Are you okay?

He’s gotten used to Keith’s messaging speed over the last few days, which is good, because otherwise the delay might have worried him more.

i cant sleep
bad dream
Do you want to talk about it? Shiro sends. He gets up and changes into pajama pants while he waits, then slips out quietly through the dark and silent hallway to go brush his teeth. The tablet rattles loudly on the counter a minute later and he quickly reaches for it.

you got bit
the snake i mean

Shiro stops brushing his teeth, reading the messages over again. He spits and rinses his mouth and tries, tries to wrap his head around this, because Keith had come so very close to being struck, but the scenario in his nightmares is Shiro getting hurt?

He rubs a hand over his face and cradles the tablet, wishing fiercely that he had Keith here, that he could just go hug the night terrors away.

I didn’t get bit, he sends finally. I’m safe, and so are you.

i know

Shiro wanders out to the living room and settles in the corner of the big couch. What can I do?

i dont know
nothing
this is stupid im sorry

No, it’s not stupid, Shiro sends quickly. I’m glad you messaged me. I want to help.

There’s silence from Keith’s end, but the little light that says he’s looking at the chat stays lit. Shiro hesitates, then swipes his fingertip rapidly over the keyboard again.

Do you want some help getting back to sleep, or do you just want to talk for a little bit?

i dont know what to talk about
i just saw you

What’s your favorite color?

?

Do you have one? Shiro asks. I don’t know very much about you!

This isn’t entirely true: Shiro knows Keith likes puppies and desert heat and the thrill of flight, that he likes being held and he likes being tickled but his ears are off-limits. He knows that Keith still doesn’t quite believe that he’s going to stick around; he knows that Keith doesn’t know what to do with praise. He knows what fear looks like on Keith’s face, and he knows what trust looks like too.

He doesn’t know about Keith’s past. He doesn’t know what happened to make him terrified of people unexpectedly entering a room where he’s sleeping. He doesn’t know his favorite color.

i dont know, Keith finally responds. red?

Solid choice, Shiro sends. He’s going to get Keith a giant warm sweatshirt to replace the one sacrificed to the rattlesnake, and it’s going to be red.

whats yours ?

Shiro hmms in the silent room, laying his head back against the back of the couch to consider. The
darkness is soft and heavy in the corners of the room, amber-tinged from the warm light of his tablet’s screen.

*Black,* he sends finally. *I like black.*

There’s no more messages for a little while. Shiro keeps his finger on the screen to keep it from turning off, and stirs when he finds himself falling asleep. He checks Keith’s light, and sighs a little when he sees it’s still on.

*Do you want some help getting to sleep?*

*what kind of help?*

*I can talk you through some steps, if you want.*

*ok,* Keith sends finally. Shiro pictures his sceptical face and grins.

*Can I call you?* he asks.

*malones asleep*

*That’s okay,* sends Shiro. *I just want you to be able to turn off the screen and close your eyes.*

*ok,* Keith responds after a moment.

Shiro clicks the button to make the call, sitting forward on the couch. He glances down the dark hallway, then gets to his feet and steps out onto the patio, closing the screen door carefully behind him.

Keith answers almost immediately. “Hi,” he whispers.

“Hey, bud,” says Shiro, unable to stop the smile. “How’re you doing?”

“‘M fine,” Keith answers, and Shiro can hear a shy grin in his voice too.

“Are you warm enough?” he asks.

“Yeah,” whispers Keith. “I’ve got-- um, thanks for, thanks for letting me borrow the blanket.”

“It’s yours,” says Shiro. “It was just a car blanket, I think you’re getting more use out of it than we were.”

“Oh,” says Keith, and then doesn’t say anything else. Shiro’s just drawing a breath to ask if he’s all right when he says quietly, “Thanks.”

Shiro pauses. *No problem* is on the tip of his tongue, or *it’s nothing,* but it’s not nothing to Keith. “You’re welcome,” he says instead, gently. “I’m glad you’re warm.”

Quiet falls for a moment. Shiro takes a deep breath of the cool desert air and leans his forearms on the patio’s railing. He can see the lights of the Garrison from here.

“Okay,” he says. “Turn off your screen.”

He hears a shuffling, a muffled *thud,* and then Keith whispers, “All right.”

“Are you in a comfortable position for sleeping?”
“Yeah.”

“Okay,” says Shiro. He closes his eyes briefly and thinks god I hope this works. “Okay. Close your eyes. Breathe with me. In… hold… out…”

The rhythm is familiar and soothing. It carries him back to his grandfather’s sunlit kitchen table; he can almost feel the weight and pressure of gentle, wizened hands on his back and belly, guiding him out of the maze of his own panic, bringing him back to himself.

In… hold… out…

In… hold… out…

They breathe together for a little while, long enough that when Shiro stops prompting Keith continues automatically in the same rhythm. “Good,” Shiro praises him softly. “You’re doing really good. Keep breathing.”

He waits another breath cycle.

In… hold… out…

“Now I want you to think about someplace you feel safe,” Shiro says, keeping his voice low and even. “Think about someplace or some time where you feel warm, where you feel loved.” He breathes in and breathes out, listens to Keith doing the same. “Got one?”

“Yeah…” Keith sounds half asleep already.

Shiro bites his lip, trying not to grin, and backs toward the swing to sit. “Okay,” he says. “Picture it in as much detail as you can. Think about what you can see, what you can smell… think about the sounds, think about what you can feel.”

Keith’s exhale is a little longer this time, and Shiro can tell that he’s struggling to stay awake enough to maintain the rhythm.

“You’re doing good, bud,” he murmurs again. “You’re doing so good. You can let go whenever you want. You can sleep.”

Keith mumbles something indistinct, and Shiro keeps quietly talking. If he were more awake, he might have been self-conscious, he might have worried about saying the right thing. But here, now, in the starlit desert darkness between midnight and morning, the only thing that is important is that Keith knows he’s safe, that he knows that he matters, that he’s seen and cherished.

So Shiro tells him, over and over again.

Finally, when the chill has gotten into Shiro’s hands and feet and the tip of his nose, when Keith has been silent for a long time and the stars have shifted their position, Shiro whispers, “Are you asleep?”

There’s no answer but peaceful breathing.

Shiro sits forward, a little stiff and clumsy with sleepiness, and takes a deep breath. He holds the tablet in his hands for a moment. Then he says softly, “Love you, bud,” and ends the call.

***

(A mile away, Keith sleeps, drifting on the memory of the soft weight of an arm around his back, a heartbeat under his ear, and a voice rising and falling with the gentle cadences of storytelling.)
get a good night's sleep. make shiro proud.

posted at 1:10 AM what
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

gotta update the tags for this one because MORE HOLTS :O

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Matt skirts around Shiro in the morning, not quite avoiding him, but breezily managing to be just leaving every room as Shiro enters it. Shiro is too sleepy to immediately notice it—he didn’t lose much sleep last night, but something about breaking it into chunks has left him groggy and off-balance—but when Matt has left without saying more than two words to him, he squints at the door and wonders.

Their meeting with the General is a fifteen-minute slot after lunch. Shiro forwards the message from the General’s secretary to Matt and Sam, and Matt acknowledges it with a thumbs-up. Sam responds after about ten minutes with a copy of a note excusing Matt from Literature, and Shiro sends their confirmation to the secretary.

He tries to work outside on the patio for a while, but the apartment is too empty and quiet, so he finally finishes his coffee and goes to change into his uniform. He needs a Garrison simulator to test some of his proposed landing patterns anyway.

The morning goes quickly once he’s settled in. He falls easily into the puzzle-solving and repetition of running the same sequence over and over again, making minor tweaks until he’s satisfied. When he can run the landing from several different angles almost with his eyes closed, he starts the program that throws randomized challenges into the sequence and runs it again, and again, and again.

He stops by the mess hall over lunch, making a point of walking by Keith’s table. His impulse is to grab Keith up into a tight hug from behind, but he knows now about unexpected contact in a setting where Keith doesn’t feel safe. So he says, “Hey!” as he approaches and waits until Keith has whipped his head around and given him a big startled grin to put his hand on the kid’s shoulder.

“Hi!” Keith answers, his head tilted to look up at Shiro almost upside-down. “What’re you, what’re you doing here?”

The rest of the table has gone quiet and wide-eyed. Cadet Payne is turning slowly crimson, and Shiro gives him a particularly merciless grin across the table. “Oh,” he says, “Just grabbing a tray for lunch. I’m meeting Commander Holt, but I thought I’d say hi. How’s the day going?” He glances up and down the table to include the rest of the cadets in this question, and gets an uncertain chorus of variations on good, sir in answer.

“Glad to hear it,” says Shiro, and very pointedly doesn’t remove his hand from Keith’s shoulder. Payne gets it, he can tell; others have noticed too. Somebody will fill in Cadet Paschel when she returns. “Pod classes going all right?” he asks Keith.

“Yeah! Yeah,” says Keith. He’s gone a little bit pink-cheeked. “I’m fine.”

“Good,” says Shiro, and squeezes his shoulder. “I gotta go, but I’ll be around if you need me.” The words are to Keith, but they’re for the rest of the table to hear too. “See you tomorrow?”
“Yes, sir,” says Keith, and his whole face is lit up. “See you.”

Shiro grins, both to Keith and to the cadets still watching, and goes to get his food. He realizes too late that he forgot to tell Keith about Colleen and Katie’s visit, and he almost turns around, but he decides that’s a conversation for fewer people to overhear.

Forty-five minutes later, he meets Matt in the elevator on the way to the General’s office. Matt grins at him, a little too brightly, and shifts to the side to make room, but he doesn’t look at Shiro as the elevator begins up. Shiro looks at him from the corner of his eye, watches him shifting his weight, and sighs.

“Listen--” he begins, just as Matt says, “Hey, so--”

They pause and look at each other. “Go ahead,” says Matt.

Shiro hesitates, weighing Matt’s wary expression and jittery body language, and decides to just go for it. “I’m not mad.”

“Oh,” Matt says, rather weakly.

“I was--” Shiro says, and pauses, trying to put his thoughts in order. “I was frustrated? Because I don’t want another kid to-- to see the kinds of things that Keith…”

He can’t quite find the right words here, and he stalls for a moment until Matt says quietly, “Yeah.”

“Yeah,” says Shiro, relieved. “But that’s-- I know that’s important to you and your dad, too.”

“Yeah,” says Matt again. He takes off his glasses and wipes the lenses with the sleeve of his jacket as the elevator slows. “We’ll both be with her, we won’t-- we won’t let her see anything she shouldn’t.”

“I trust you,” says Shiro, and finds that he means it.

The elevator doors open. Matt puts on his glasses, and they step forward in tandem. They check in with the General’s secretary and sit down to wait.

“I didn’t--” begins Matt, and falters. “I’m sorry for pushing it past you like that. That wasn’t… I didn’t follow protocol there.”

“No, you didn’t,” agrees Shiro. Matt blanches and looks up at him, and Shiro gives him a small rueful smile. “It’s probably not a situation they had in mind when they wrote the protocols, though. You weren’t just talking to your CO about an asset, you were talking to your dad about your sister. It’s…” He shrugs. “It’s murky. And it’s all right.”

“Okay,” says Matt finally, looking at his hands. “Okay.” His knee is jogging nervously, and Shiro remembers belatedly that he’s never briefed the General before.

He leans to the side to bump shoulders with Matt companionably. “You’re okay,” he says quietly. “You’re gonna do fine. Just tell him what you told us.”

Matt sways away and bumps back gratefully, and the strange tension between them is gone.

They’re called in, and a moment later they’re standing in front of the General’s desk. Shiro takes the lead, shows the corrupted file to the General and puts it into context within the timeline of Keith’s received warnings. Then he steps back to let Matt explain his findings.

Matt takes a deep breath, a little pale around the mouth--and then he draws himself up and launches
He does beautifully. His explanations are concise and clear, and no hint of his anxiety comes through in his voice. Shiro can see the slight overdilation of his pupils and the trembling in his hands, but he knows that he wouldn’t have noticed if he weren’t looking for it. He stands by while Matt shows the General how the file’s data has been fractured and scrambled, while he compares it to the data of files corrupted accidentally and files corrupted deliberately.

“Where did the file come from?” the General finally asks, when Matt has finished. “What camera?”

“I’m not sure, sir,” Matt confesses. “That’s part of what’s scrambled. Um, the Garrison signature’s intact, so it definitely came from somewhere within the facility, but beyond that…”

“Can it be unscrambled?”

“Well,” says Matt, and hesitates. His eyes dart to Shiro for a second. “It’s beyond what I can do on my own right now, sir. I’d like to get a second pair of eyes on it.”

“A particular pair of eyes?” asks the General, lifting one eyebrow.

“Yes, sir,” says Matt firmly. “There’s a coder I know and trust who has extensive experience with Bism—thats the language that the scrambler I’m pretty sure was used on this file was written in, sir. We’ve worked together before and we make an effective team.”

“Hmm,” says the General. “What’s his name?”

Matt moistens his lips. “Katie Holt, sir.”

The General glances up from Matt’s tablet, a look on his face that says he expects a joke and had better not find one. His eyes shift from Matt to Shiro, and Shiro returns his gaze steadily. “Katie Holt,” the General finally repeats, looking back at Matt. “Your eight-year-old sister.”

“She turned nine earlier this month, sir,” says Matt quickly. There’s two bright spots of red high on his cheeks, but he keeps his chin up and doesn’t look away from the General. “She’s fluent in a number of coding languages and Bism was her first. She actually has quite a bit of experience deconstructing programs to get to their function, it’s— it’s how she learned. I think she can fill in the gaps I’m missing if you give her a chance, sir, it’s… like I said, we work really well together.”

General Beck is silent and skeptical. He sits back in his chair and studies Matt for a moment, then looks back at Shiro. “Are you vouching for this, Captain?”


The General stares at them both for a moment longer, then lifts his eyebrows and looks down at the tablet still sitting on his desk. “If the file contains sensitive material…”

Matt glances at Shiro and shifts his weight. “She won’t be allowed to view the file’s actual contents, sir. Just the data.”

“She won’t be able to extrapolate the contents just from seeing the video data?” the General asks, very dryly.

Matt’s flush deepens and he presses his lips together. “No, sir,” he answers, his tone carefully
respectful. “She’s not quite that good.”

The General smiles, a little humorlessly, and lets out a breath through his nose. “It’ll be at least two months before I have any analysts free,” he says, and looks at Shiro. “With the greatest sympathy and respect for Cadet Kogane’s situation, this cannot be a priority for Garrison resources.”

Shiro has to work to keep the flare of anger off his face and out of his tone. “I understand, sir,” he says evenly. “Do we have your permission in that case to give Miss Holt access to the file’s data?”

The General pauses. “Under the condition that the file doesn’t leave the Garrison firewall,” he finally answers. “And under the condition that Miss Holt is not allowed to view the file itself.”

“Understood,” says Shiro. “Thank you for your time, sir.”

“Anything else?” the General asks.

“No, sir,” says Shiro, and Matt murmurs his thanks as well.

“Dismissed, then. Thank you for bringing this to my attention.”

Matt is still quivering with excess adrenaline as they make their way back out of the administrative wing, so Shiro pulls him into a rough one-armed hug. “Congratulations,” he says. “You survived.”

“Get off,” grumbles Matt, but his struggles are only half-hearted. “At least he took me mostly seriously.”

“Well,” says Shiro, and shrugs. “It’s unusual, what your sister can do. You gotta give him a minute to adjust.”

“I guess,” says Matt ungraciously, and sighs. “Sorry. It drives me nuts sometimes, the way adults react to Pidge.”

“Why do you call her that?” asks Shiro curiously.

“Oh,” says Matt. “It was her online handle when she started dabbling. She wasn’t supposed to be going on unsupervised, so she made this whole fake profile and didn’t tell any of us, but I caught her at it.”

“Did you tell?”

“Nah,” Matt says, and grins. “She was in the middle of developing an app, I wanted to see where she went with it. I started calling her that to rile her up a little bit, though, and then it just sort of became a thing?”

Shiro considers this. “Huh,” he says finally, not entirely sure how he feels about knowing a secret kept from his CO. “Cool.”

“Anyway,” says Matt, and gestures at where the hallway branches ahead of them. “I gotta get back to class. Unless you want to sign me out for the rest of the day.”

“Mm. You’re funny.”

“Cute, too!”
Shiro rolls his eyes. “I’ll see you tonight.”

He pokes his head into Sam’s lab a few minutes later. The commander is busy, typing furiously at his computer, but he glances up and tips his head to the side to invite Shiro in before he returns to his project.

Shiro takes the other chair, sitting backwards with his arms resting on the backrest, and waits for Sam to come to a stopping point. It’s cold in the lab, even with his uniform jacket, and he makes a face at the air conditioning vent directly above him.

“How’d it go?” asks the commander finally, swiveling in his chair to face Shiro.

“It went well,” answers Shiro, straightening automatically to make the report. “Um, Matt did a really good job presenting.”

Sam grins, smug and proud. “Glad to hear it. What did the General have to say?”

“Um,” says Shiro, and takes a deep breath, trying to push aside his dissatisfaction. “Um, he wasn’t happy about somebody tampering with the file, but he says he won’t have an analyst available to look at it for a couple months.”

Sam sits back. “A couple months?”

“Yeah,” says Shiro grimly. “He did give permission for Katie to look at it, so that’s something?”

“Yeah, it sure is,” mutters Sam, turning back to his desk. “Can’t spare a trained professional to look into possible corruption, but hey, somebody’s nine-year-old can have a crack at it, that’s fine.”

Shiro blinks.

The commander has gone still and stiff, wincing a little. “That can stay between us, if you don’t mind.”

“Yes, sir,” says Shiro, wondering. He’s never heard Sam express dissatisfaction with the Garrison leadership before. Policies, sure; curriculum, absolutely, but he’s never said a word against the General. He keeps quiet, wary of pushing.

Sam takes off his glasses and rubs the bridge of his nose. “I don’t want her any more involved than she has to be,” he says abruptly.

“Yes, sir,” Shiro says again. He hesitates, then offers, “That’s one of the General’s conditions too, that she’s not allowed to watch it if they do manage to fix it.”

The commander grunts. “What’s the other?”

“Um,” says Shiro. “The file has to stay on Garrison devices, it can’t leave the firewall.”

“That’s fair,” says Sam, and sighs.

“Sir,” Shiro says carefully, watching him, “If you’re not comfortable with Katie getting into this, that’s… we’ll find another option, we’ll wait for an analyst if we need to, it’s okay.”

“Oh,” says Sam, and rubs his hands over his face. “It’s not… I’m not uncomfortable, exactly, at least not with the General’s conditions in place. I think she and Matt can probably do it, and I think it’ll be
good experience for both of them. It’s just… you don’t really want your kid’s first close encounter
with the institution where you’ve been working for the last two decades to be this, you know?”

“Yeah,” says Shiro, looking at the ground.

“I guess it’s something she’ll learn sooner or later,” says Sam after a moment. “That not all adults
mean well, that you have to watch for the worm at the heart of the tower. She might as well learn it
when there’s something she can do about it.”

Shiro doesn’t say anything. He sits still and quiet, and he listens. This isn’t his choice to make.

“I’ll talk to Colleen about it,” Sam says finally.

***

When Shiro gets home that night, a little after nine, it’s to an apartment full of light and sound and the
smell of hot chocolate.

“Shirooo!” cheers Matt as Shiro shuts the door behind him and pauses to kick off his shoes. “Shiro
Shiro Shiro!”

“Oh,” says Shiro, grinning self-consciously and straightening. “Evening, hi. Um, hi, Mrs Holt.”

She raises her eyebrows at him and prompts, with great long-suffering, “Colleen…”

“Colleen,” Shiro repeats obediently. “Sorry, sorry sorry.” He’s grinning big, half out of genuine
pleasure and half out of unaccustomed shyness. It’s been a long time since anybody mothered him,
and Colleen Holt is gleefully relentless. He never quite knows what to do with it.

“Yeah, you’d better be,” she says, coming around the couch to hug him. “Come on. Katie talked
Matt into making hot chocolate aaand he made about half a gallon too much, so you’ve got some
work to do.”

“What,” complains Shiro, laughing and following her to the kitchen. “Why do I always have to clean
up Matt’s messes—oh heyyy he made it spicy?”

“Is that even a question?” calls Matt from the living room.

Colleen hands him a mug. “You want whipped cream?”

“Nah,” says Shiro, reaching for it happily. “Whipped cream is the boss you have to beat to unlock
the main quest.”

“Nerrrrrd.”

The rich cinnamon-chocolate scent is a glorious distraction; otherwise Shiro might have noticed how
Matt and Colleen both go quiet and glinty-eyed and how Sam is watching him over the top of his
tablet. He should have noticed the wicked smirk on Colleen’s face, he really should have—but it’s
definitely not something he would have thought to expect, and so he doesn’t see it.

He takes a sip.

It’s delicious and sweet and smooth, a perfect suspension of fats and cocoa, and he has exactly two
seconds to enjoy it before his mouth catches on fire.

He sputters, and coughs, and then his eyes are streaming as a frankly astonishing level of capsaicin
bites and burns all the way down his esophagus. “Matt,” he wheezes when he has the breath again. “What did you do.”

And then the apartment is loud with laughing Holts, and Shiro gets it. He breathes in big huffs, playing it up just a bit, and bends to put his hands on his knees. His eyes are still tearing up, that’s not acting, and he’s not sure his sinuses will ever be the same, but yeah, okay, he can appreciate that he’s just been initiated.

Now they had better watch their backs.

“The lid fell off the cayenne,” says a new voice matter-of-factly, and Shiro blinks and rubs his eyes until he can focus on where a small girl is climbing up to sit on one of the stools at the island. She has Matt’s amber eyes, currently dancing with humor.

Matt crosses behind Shiro to pull the soy milk out of the fridge and a glass from the cupboard. “Yeah, I don’t know, it wasn’t screwed on all the way and it just.” He makes an illustrative gesture with the glass, cracking up again. “Woomph. It was like, half the jar. We actually got most of it out.”

“Well, this guy on my team is always telling me about how accidents are actually opportunities—”

“Matt calls it an accident,” says Katie. “I call it natural selection at work.”

She has a mug of the hot chocolate too, Shiro realizes, and he has less than a second to be horrified before she is guzzling it down like a toddler in a juice commercial, maintaining unblinking eye contact the entire time.

Shiro stares. Sam guffaws. Katie tips the mug back to get the last little bit, then wipes her mouth with the back of her hand and smirks with glowing self-satisfaction. The entire family is laughing now, and Shiro shakes his head in bewildered, delighted defeat, joining in. “Okay,” he says. “Okay, I know when I’m beaten.” He holds out his hand to Katie. “I’m Shiro.”

She takes his hand and gives it a firm shake. “Somewhere between the fifth and sixth time Matt said your name I figured that out,” she says. “Okay, he says. “Okay, I know when I’m beaten.” He holds out his hand to Katie. “I’m Shiro.”

She takes his hand and gives it a firm shake. “Somewhere between the fifth and sixth time Matt said your name I figured that out,” she says. “Okay, he says. “Okay, I know when I’m beaten.” He holds out his hand to Katie. “I’m Shiro.”

Shiro likes her, instantly and immensely.

“I’m Katie,” she adds.

“I wasn’t sure,” Shiro says, very seriously, and Katie’s entire face splits into a grin that makes her look so much like a younger version of Matt that Shiro has to glance between them.

“Hey, you’ve already got six likes!” says Matt, just as Shiro’s tablet buzzes. He checks the notification with a deep sense of foreboding, only to find that he’s been tagged in a looping video of himself drinking the hot chocolate, going bug-eyed, and choking (#hesbeautyhesgrace #hesluckythereisnopepperupinspace #garrisonsfinest). “Haa, Sergeant Burns just started following me.”

Shiro sighs out a resigned breath and grabs Matt into a headlock. “So how are you, Mrs-- Colleen?” he asks conversationally while Matt flails and struggles and Katie cackles.

“Oh, you know,” she says, equally casual, leaning on the island next to Katie. “Enjoying some peace
and quiet. Finally making some strides with a long-term study. Thinking about remodeling the bathroom.”

“Yeah?” asks Shiro. Matt tries to ram into him from the side, and Shiro mmmphs and plants his feet. “The downstairs one?”

“Mm,” says Colleen. “It needs some updating. The plumbing was kind of suffering when we bought the house and that was like ten years ago.”

Shiro catches Matt’s hand as he tries to smack Shiro in the face. “What’s the study?” he asks interestedly.

“Oh, contagion vectors,” Colleen says. “It’s been a long time since we had a superbug, but we’re-- Katie, good grief, stop screwing around with Shiro’s tablet.”

“He doesn’t mind,” says Katie blithely--and Shiro realizes that she’s taking a video, on his tablet, which is secured with a fingerprint lock.

“Um,” he says, “how did you…”

“Katie you brat,” gasps Matt. “Mom!”

Colleen tilts her head. “Did you hear something?”

“A whisper,” says Shiro, and staggers, laughing, as Matt redoubles his escape attempts. “Like unto the wind in the trees.”

“He’s got really ticklish armpits,” says Katie, still recording.

“No!” Matt yelps. “No, no nonono don’t. Shiro. Don’t.”

“Tell the camera what you did,” says Shiro.

“I’m completely innocent and my family has abandoned me and this crazy assho-- eep!”

“Try again,” Shiro suggests, making use of Katie’s intelligence.

Matt holds his breath to keep from making noise, his face all squinched up. He gasps several big breaths when Shiro grants him a reprieve. “Mom did it, it wasn’t even me, Mom did it! And it was Katie’s idea!”

“Really,” says Shiro, raising his eyebrows at Katie. She shrugs, completely unrepentant.

“And Dad knew too! I just took the video!”

“And?” prompts Shiro.

“And posted it, because I know viral content when I see it. Ohgodpleaseno.”

Katie slides off the stool and comes around for a better angle while Matt howls, completely helpless with laughter. Shiro lets him squirm for a little while longer, then releases him. Matt staggers to the short couch and tumbles dramatically over the back of it.

“I’m posting this,” says Katie, already typing on the screen of Shiro’s tablet, and Shiro decides that that’s probably as far as that should go.
“You are terrifying,” he says, and reclaims his tablet. “How did you even turn this on?”

“If you hold the home button down for four seconds and then hit the volume button fast three times it opens a coding screen and you can use a Maillard-rosebud workaround to get past the lock,” says Katie. She seems completely unbothered by Shiro’s confiscation of the tablet. “It’s in Thrice so it’s pretty easy. Are you gonna post that?”

“Maybe,” says Shiro, clicking play, and grins. “Oh, this is good. Maybe I’ll just sit on it for a while.”

“I’m posting it if you don’t,” says Katie.

“I hate you both,” groans Matt.

“Where’s your laptop?” Katie asks him, peering at him over the back of the couch. “I want to see your weird file.”

Shiro glances quickly at Colleen. She gives a small, subtle nod, and Shiro relaxes, mostly.

“Not tonight, Katie-bug,” says Sam. “It’s about bedtime.”

“Dad!” she says, appalled. “It’s a weekend!”

Sam pauses and glances at the clock, then across at Colleen. A brief, wordless conversation is held, and Sam finally says, “Okay, half an hour. Then bed.”

Katie grabs Matt’s hand and tugs. “Come on, come on come on he said half an hour!”

“I can’t,” Matt says. “I am rendered unconscious.”

“If you get up I won’t post the video,” offers Katie. She glances up at Shiro and winks, and Shiro is left to ponder the rather frightening concept of absolute technological power in the hands of a nine-year-old with a questionable moral compass.

Matt groans loudly and gets up. “Okay, fine, god.” He grabs Katie’s ponytail and tugs gently, and Katie squawks and socks him hard in the arm, and for a moment they’re two completely normal siblings instead of a pair of wunderkinds off to solve a puzzle that would give professional adults pause.

It’s very quiet when they’ve disappeared down the hall. Shiro looks with regret down into the mug of undrinkable hot chocolate, then carries it to the sink to dump. “Now I’m in the mood for hot chocolate,” he mourns.

“Oh,” says Colleen. “The stuff on the stove is fine, we made a second batch. We just saved some of the spicy stuff for you.”

Shiro opens his mouth, but all that comes out is an indignant scoff. Sam is cracking up in the living room, and Shiro leans over the island to glare at him. “I can’t believe you let them do that to me!”

“You know,” says Sam, “I’m at peace with my choices.”

“You are a bad man,” Shiro accuses.

Sam shrugs expansively. “I’m an antihero.”

Shiro huffs and rinses his mug. Colleen takes it from him and fills it up with hot chocolate from the pot on the stove, and Shiro watches very closely. She’s snickering again by the time he accepts it,
which does absolutely nothing for Shiro’s apprehensions—but he really wants hot chocolate, so he
gives her a narrow look and takes a tiny, tiny careful sip.

It’s normal. It takes him a minute to be sure, but—yeah, yeah, it’s normal. He takes another sip and
closes his eyes for a minute, because Matt is amazing at hot chocolate. “This is good,” he sighs,
savoring the layered flavors—cinnamon and cayenne, of course, but also clove and vanilla and orange
and something he can’t put his finger on. “What’s—” he starts. “There’s something different?”

“Ah, that’d be the laxative,” says Colleen blandly. Shiro chokes, and she laughs, raising her hands.
“Sorry, sorry, it’s probably the anise. No more pranks tonight, I promise.”

“What did I ever do to you?” Shiro asks, and it turns out Matt got his evil grin from his mom.

He glances down the hallway after Matt and Katie as their laughter tapers off, then peeks sidelong at
Colleen. “Thanks,” he says, a little hesitantly. “For—”

Her grin fades and her eyes avert, and Shiro has time to cringe and question every choice in his life
that has led him to this moment before Colleen lifts her shoulders, glancing across the apartment at
Sam. “We talked about it. We’re neither of us crazy about it, but…” She sighs and pauses for a
moment, looking at her hands. “It’s important for kids to learn early on that they have the power to
impact the world for good.”

Shiro nods, turning his cup absentely in his hands. “She’s sharp,” he offers finally.

Colleen blows out a breath, giving him a side-look like you have no idea. “Scary sharp. We’re
already looking at the Garrison for her.”

“She’s looking at it more than we are,” Sam says. “She’s got her whole education planned out
already.”

“What’s she want to do?” asks Shiro, thinking of high-level cybersecurity, government work--

“She wants to go to space,” says Sam, “obviously.”

finally. “Whatever she ends up doing, the Garrison’s a good springboard for it.”

“So when do we get to meet Keith?” Colleen asks, and Shiro latches onto the change in subject
gratefully.

“Ah,” he says, “I gotta run it by him still, I haven’t had the chance. Tomorrow, probably?”

“What’s his story?” she asks, and for the next twenty minutes Shiro finds himself telling her about
Keith, about the little things Keith has let slip, about the suspicions and worries he hasn’t yet put into
words, even to himself. She listens attentively, her arms folded and her eyes intent, and Shiro leans
against the counter on the other side of the island and answers her questions and forgets to drink his
cocoa.

“You think he’s been abused?” she asks finally when he comes to a pause.

He draws a long breath and lets it out again before he answers. “I don’t know?” he says helplessly.
“I really don’t, it’s— Sometimes he’ll do something or say something and I think oh, there it is, he’s
definitely, he’s definitely…” He stops, and he has to swallow before he continues. “Um, but other
times he’ll seem so happy and-- and trusting? I don’t know, I don’t know.”
Colleen is quiet for a minute. “There’s a lot of different ways somebody can hurt a child.”

“Yeah,” says Shiro. “Yeah.”

“What do you want for him?” she asks. “What’s your long-term goal?”

“Um,” says Shiro, and shifts his weight. He glances out toward Sam for a moment, and takes a deep breath. “I want-- I guess I want to see him settled? I want him to not feel like he has to constantly be preparing for somebody to kick him to the curb. That’s been-- I keep coming up against that, I don’t know how to meet it.”

“If he’s had a lot of instability in his life for the last couple years, that’s going to take some time to overcome,” Colleen agrees.

Shiro nods. He feels tired, suddenly, and overwhelmed and inadequate; he doesn’t want to look at Colleen. He stares at his hot chocolate instead.

“We brought a box,” says Colleen abruptly. “It’s still in the car. I thought I’d have you or Matt haul it up tomorrow. It’s just some hand-me-downs, some things Matt’s outgrown and Katie won’t use. You and Keith can go through it sometime, see if there’s anything that’ll fit him.”

“Oh,” says Shiro, surprised. “Oh, wow, that’s-- thank you so much. I don’t think he has much.”

Colleen half-smiles a little wryly. “Well, it’s not much. I hope you find something he can use in it.”

“I appreciate it,” says Shiro seriously. “Really, thank you for-- for thinking of him.”

“Least I can do,” says Colleen, pushing off the counter. “I don’t know if you knew this, but you two are very adorable.”

Shiro pauses uncertainly, trying to make this connect, and squints at her. He hasn’t even figured out what to ask when she pulls out her tablet and taps for a moment before turning it to show him.

It’s a picture of him, asleep in the corner of the couch in a pool of warm lamplight, his head tilted back and his mouth open. There’s a bundle of blankets tucked under his arm, a head of untidy black hair nestled on his chest, a single small bare foot poking out from under the blanket.

“Oh, for--” he says, and feels the blush creeping up his neck. “What even-- Sam.”

“Sorry,” says Sam in a tone that sounds anything but.

“You are not.”

“I’m not,” Sam agrees.

Colleen is laughing. “It's pretty cute, though. Want me to send it to you?”

“Yes, please,” grumbles Shiro.

“He’s got a lot of hair,” she remarks as she sends the picture. “He doesn’t get in trouble?”

“He’s little,” says Shiro, shrugging. “They cut him some slack on things like that.”

Colleen hmms thoughtfully, looking at the picture. “Makes sense. He’s twelve?”

“Yeah,” Shiro says. Colleen sucks her teeth and shakes her head, and Shiro adds, “Yeah, I know.”
She sighs. “I’m glad he’s got you.”

*I’m not enough*, Shiro wants to say, but he has to be, he has to be. “I’ll try to bring him tomorrow,” he says instead, and she smiles.

**Chapter End Notes**

i was all mild panic last week because i posted my longest chapter yet and wasn’t sure how long it would take me to replace it in my word bank and: here’s a longer one

can’t stop won’t stop

prolly the last chapter before season 5 goes live and josses all my headcanons to heck what
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The apartment is so quiet the next morning when Shiro wakes that he thinks for a moment that everybody must have gone out. Then he hears the quiet clacking of a keyboard, and he opens his eyes, pushing himself up onto his elbows.

“Oh, geez, hi,” he says, and rubs his eyes.

“Morning, Shiro,” says Matt from across the living room, looking at him upside-down. He’s laying on the short couch with his legs dangling over the back and his head hanging down over the cushions. His laptop is open on his stomach.

Shiro stares at him blearily. “Why the hell are you sitting like that?”

“Hsst!” Matt waggles his eyebrows significantly and intones, “Little pitchers.”

“Shut the fuck up, Matt,” says Katie from under the coffee table, and Shiro nearly falls off the couch.

“Uh,” he says, and lowers his head to peer under the table. Katie looks back at him, her hair sleep-frowsy but her eyes alert. She’s flopped on her stomach in her pajamas with one of the couch pillows and a blanket, her laptop in front of her. “Hi, good morning.”

“Morning,” she says. “You sleep really hard.”

Shiro squints. “Thank you?”

“Can you make us pancakes?” asks Matt, giving him hopeful puppy-eyes.

Shiro pushes himself upright, rubbing the side of his face. “Um,” he says. “What time is it, even? Don’t you have class?”

“Nope!” says Matt happily. “I’m using my skip credits today. We’re working on your file.”

“You should really save those for emergencies,” Shiro says automatically, but he stretches and gets to his feet. “Where’s your parents?”

“Breakfast date,” says Katie. “Then the lab, I think.”

“We’re working really hard and we’re really hungry--”

“All right,” says Shiro good-naturedly. He grabs Matt’s ankle as he passes and noogies the bottom of his foot, narrowly dodging a kick to the face. Once he’s in the kitchen, he has to stand and yawn for a minute, then he starts the kettle for the coffee and reaches for the pancake mix.

It’s weirdly quiet in the living room. Matt has shifted position so that his legs are hanging over the armrest of the couch instead, and Shiro can see part of his laptop screen from where he stands at the island. It’s too far away for him to read the text of the program--not that he’d necessarily understand it even if he could see it; Bism isn’t a language he’s ever learned well--but he can see that there are two different definitions being written and edited simultaneously.

He watches covertly while the mixer hums under his hands and the kettle roils. He’d believed Matt,
mostly, when he said Katie was capable, but there had been a tiny skeptical corner of his mind that remained unconvinced. It was too weird, too much to believe. But now, having met Katie, seeing the way their minds work in seamless tandem--now he’s beginning to understand Matt’s confidence.

He measures batter into the skillet, pauses, and pulls down the chocolate chips.

On some unspoken signal, several minutes later, Matt heaves a sigh and gets to his feet while Katie elbow-crawls out from under the coffee table. The atmosphere of silent concentration lifts, and Shiro abruptly finds himself fending off an attack from both sides at once.

“How’s it going?” he asks as Matt and Katie wander back out to the living room, breakfast and juice in hand.

“We’re compiling,” says Katie, and curls up in a corner of the recently vacated long couch, shamelessly pulling all of Shiro’s blankets into a nest for herself. Shiro watches with amusement, privately comparing her comfort-seeking to Keith’s.

They’re so very different, the two children, and yet he can’t help drawing parallels. There’s a similar watchful look in their eyes, guarded, like they expect to be disregarded, dismissed, spoken down to and walked over. It’s sharper-edged in Katie, Shiro thinks; she would readily meet dismissal with dismissal. She’s been given space to stand, to excel. She doesn’t need the validation of adults.

(Keith, Shiro knows, would recoil from dismissal just as quickly, but he doesn’t have Katie’s secure footing. He would flare up instead, he would show that bright blaze of anger rooted in hurt and fear and helplessness, he would lash out--or he would shut down.)

(Shiro isn’t sure which is worse.)

“What is it you’re writing?” he asks, and gets a solid six minutes of rapid-fire explanation, traded off between siblings, sometimes mid-sentence. He doesn’t understand most of it—he took and passed the Garrison’s basic coding courses, but that was never his focus or his passion—but from the little he does follow he tentatively gathers together an idea of their approach.

“The problem is,” Matt says, “it’s really hard to sort of-- reconstruct things from the wrong side of this kind of randomization? So we have to like, teach the program what this kind of file is supposed to look like before it can even start to piece it back together.”

“Like an AI?” Shiro guesses cautiously.

Matt grins on one side of his face and rolls his eyes, a fond and mildly exasperated look—but then he pauses, looking at Katie. He’s got one eye narrowed, his head cocked slightly, his mouth forming the beginning of a word, an idea--
“Yeah,” Katie says, and Shiro glances at her, but she’s not looking at him. She’s staring back at Matt intently, the same look on her face. “Yeah, I’ve still got--”

“Let’s, let's see if it'll--” says Matt, unfolding his legs and setting his pancakes aside, and just like that they’re off again, breakfast completely forgotten.

Shiro shakes his head and goes to clean up.

***

pashels back

Shiro glances down automatically at his tablet when it buzzes on the couch next to him, and immediately loses track of the conversation. June is still talking on his screen, and he nods absently and makes agreeing sorts of noises when there’s a pause, but he’s pushed the face2face window to the side of his screen and is hastily opening the surveillance app.

Keith is already looking at the camera when the mess hall flickers onto Shiro’s screen, small and large-eyed but safe, not in any immediate trouble. Shiro doesn’t miss the way his shoulders drop slightly in relief when the camera turns on. Sergeant Burns is standing near, close enough to casually prevent Paschel from trying anything, far enough that she isn’t actively hovering over Keith. He’s okay.

Shiro breathes out.

Are you okay?

Keith looks down at his tablet, looks back up toward Shiro, and nods slightly. He bends his head over his tablet again, tapping laboriously on the screen’s keyboard.

its wierd
shes just ignoring me

Good, sends Shiro, carefully keeping his eyes up so June and the other engineer in their meeting won’t realize he’s messaging. You’re okay. I’m here.

i know
thanks

Shiro scrolls up on the automatic transcript on the side of the face2face window and reads what he missed, then rejoins the conversation. But he keeps an eye on Keith’s window, guarding, and his hand clutching his tablet is tight.

Nothing happens. Keith's lunch block is dismissed and the next files in. Shiro watches him disappear from the camera's sight and tries to tamp down his apprehension.

No more messages come. Keith's meeting concludes. He sits quietly on the couch and tries to work; he listens to the snatches of words as Matt and Katie trade ideas in fragmented sentences. He bullies them into taking a break and eating, an hour later; he even successfully drags them outside for a walk around the complex.

(It’s literal dragging, briefly, but fortunately Katie is tiny and Matt is still a lanky bit of nothing.)

No more messages come.
His watch doesn’t buzz.

He waits, and works, and reminds himself that one of three is unlikely to try something, that even all three of them together would have to be very foolish to try again so quickly after getting caught, that the worst incidents have all taken place during free hours and that time belongs to Shiro today.

It’s still a deep relief, three hours later when the last class of the day ends, to walk with Keith down the noisy hallways. Keith keeps very close. He’s jumpier than usual, distracted and a little wild-eyed, flinching toward Shiro every time another cadet crowds past from behind. The fourth time Keith’s shoulders knock against Shiro’s ribs, Shiro just pulls him in and keeps him there. He gets a startled look for this, but Keith doesn’t pull away or protest, and the flinching stops.

“Are you packed?” Shiro asks as they turn down the hall to Keith’s room.

Keith glances up guiltily, still tucked under Shiro’s arm. “No,” he answers, and swallows. “I didn’t-- I’m sorry, I forgot, I’m sorry.”

Shiro makes the translation—he didn’t quite believe that the invitation was real—and winces slightly. “It’s okay,” he says, and rubs Keith’s back briskly in reassurance, releasing him so he can unlock the door. “I’ll help. It’ll go fast with two of us. I need to talk to you about this weekend anyway.”

Keith punches in his code, giving Shiro a quick careful look. “What about?”

“Well,” says Shiro, following him in. “There’s… a couple more people at my house than there were last week. I wanted to be sure you were okay with it before we went.”

“Oh,” says Keith.

“It’s Matt and the commander’s family,” says Shiro. “Colleen and Katie. They’re nice.”

“Oh,” says Keith again. He sets his tablet down on his bed, his face creasing up with uncertainty.

“If you’d rather not come stay tonight, that’s okay,” says Shiro, watching him. “You can say no, I’m not gonna be upset.”

“No, that’s… I--” Keith starts, and stops. He rubs his stomach with one hand and moistens his lips, his eyes flitting around the room. “I don’t--”

Shiro sees the anxiety starting and quickly takes two steps forward to crouch in front of him, catching him gently by the elbows. “Hey,” he says, quick and soft, “hey, hey. It’s okay. It’s okay. If you don’t want to stay over, we’ll still hang out. I just want you to be comfortable, all right?”

Keith nods, just a tiny motion. His head is ducked, his fringe falling down to obscure his eyes, but his hands come up to grip Shiro’s forearms.

“How about this,” Shiro says, trying to catch Keith’s eye. “Is it okay if we eat supper with them? You can say no.”

It takes a minute, and Keith’s hands tighten convulsively on Shiro’s arms, but he finally murmurs, “Yeah, okay.”

“Okay,” Shiro says quietly, hoping hard that he isn’t pushing Keith past what he can handle. “Okay, then let’s do that. Do you want to pack a bag just in case?”

Keith nods. He’s still not quite looking at Shiro, and Shiro wishes desperately that he knew what he
was thinking.

“All right,” he says, and squeezes Keith’s shoulder briefly before he gets back to his feet. “Where’s your backpack?”

“Closet,” mumbles Keith, and Shiro turns to get it.

It doesn’t take long at all to pack. Shiro supervises and helps fold as three sets of clean clothing and Keith’s pajamas make their way into the bag. “Are you going to be warm enough in these?” he asks, folding a t-shirt.

“Yeah,” says Keith, nodding quickly. “I’ll be fine.”

Shiro pauses, a thought dawning. “You don’t have another jacket, do you.”

“I have this one,” Keith says, shrugging and avoiding Shiro’s eyes.

Shiro eyes the uniform jacket with distaste. “Yeah, that doesn’t count,” he says. “There’s no heat retention in these things and you can’t get them dirty. I’ve got a hoodie you can use.”

Keith glances at him at this, a careful dark-eyed look that Shiro can’t entirely decipher, and doesn’t answer.

“Go ahead and change,” says Shiro, nodding to Keith’s uniform and picking up the backpack. “I’ll wait outside.”

He leans against the wall in the hallway as Keith’s door hisses shut and pulls his tablet out of his pocket. He hesitates, then starts a group chat with the three older Holts.

I’m bringing Keith for supper tonight.
He might or might not stay. He’s a little bit spooked.
I know you all will anyway, but... be extra kind to him?

There’s a pause, then the window shows Colleen typing.

Sweetie :(  
did something happen? or is it just new-people nerves?

Mostly that, sends Shiro. But one of the kids who hurt him got out of suspension today, so it’s already been a long day.

poor kid :(  
I’ll fill Katie in a little bit when we get home. we’re about two minutes out.

Thanks, Shiro answers. I appreciate it. See you in a couple hours.

The door slides open, and Shiro turns off his tablet and puts it away. “Ready?”

Keith nods. He looks chilled already, wearing shorts and a faded, worn t-shirt. Shiro studies him and decides the faster they get outside the better.

“Come on,” he says. “We’re gonna make a stop before we go home.”

“A stop where?” asks Keith, and, when Shiro just grins, “Shiro.”

“Keith.”
Keith shoves him, a tiny exasperated smile breaking through what remains of his anxiety. It’s the cutest thing Shiro’s seen yet today, so he grabs Keith up in a bear hug from behind and tickles him until he shrieks.

“It’s a surprise,” he says, finally releasing his captive. “But you’ll like it. Promise.”

Keith pushes him again and straightens his shirt, red-faced and out of breath. “Are we walking there?”

“Nope!” says Shiro cheerfully, and leads him out toward the west gate. “It’s in the town. And I won’t tell you any more than that.”

“Is it ice cream?” asks Keith, incorrigible, and groans when Shiro shrugs hugely.

The transition from the chilly Garrison hallways to the bright, tangible sunshine outside is just as entertaining as last time. Shiro watches Keith take a deep breath of the shimmering heat, watches him close his eyes and just sort of melt with contentment, and he has to cover his mouth quickly to keep from laughing.

“Pretty good stuff, that sunshine,” he says, and almost dies when Keith says dreamily, “Yeahh…”

It’s hilarious and adorable, and he’ll stand by that, but in the back of his mind it makes him wonder, and worry. Warmth, whether from snuggling up against Shiro or standing in the searing desert sunshine, has such a strange impact on Keith. It opens him up, makes him sleepy and vulnerable. It’s as if being without warmth is a strain on him—physical or emotional or both—and if he’s provided with it suddenly after he's adjusted to the paucity, it hits him like this. It makes him close his eyes and sway where he stands, makes him relax enough to drift off to sleep under Shiro's arm.

It's something, he decides, to run past Colleen. In the meantime he's going to do what he can to keep Keith warm.

He leads Keith to the bike and opens the storage compartment. Some searching yields the big hooded sweatshirt he keeps with the first aid kit and emergency water, and he shakes it out. The fabric is hot from the bike's exposure to the sun, and thick and heavy, and he worries for a second that it might be too much. Keith's eyes have already fixed on the sweatshirt, though, and he will almost certainly get chilled riding with Shiro in only his shorts and t-shirt, so Shiro holds it out to him.

Keith disappears for a moment under the bulky garment before he manages to find first the head-hole and then the sleeves and emerges, his hair disheveled. It's enormous on him, draping halfway to his knobby knees, but he seems content.

“Ready?” Shiro asks.

Keith nods and climbs up onto his spot on the front of the bike. Shiro settles behind him, buckles the belt, and kicks off.

He can’t quite resist taking the fun route to town: he’s eager to get to their destination and doesn’t want to spend too much time on the trip, but still. It's too much fun to resist, making Keith giggle with the wild swoops and dips of the off-road route.

They park around the corner. Shiro helps Keith down from the bike and asks, as Keith glances up at the buildings on both sides of the street, “Do you know where you are?”

“Um,” says Keith, and hesitates. “The place we got milkshakes is two blocks that way? And the HHS building is over there.”
“Yeah!” says Shiro, surprised. He doesn’t know about the HHS building, but they’d taken a different route from last time, and he hadn’t expected Keith to have a good enough sense of the town to be able to identify their position. “Good orienting! That’s a skill it isn’t easy to learn!”

Keith gives Shiro a mildly suspicious sidelong glance, then blushes and shrugs, sticking his hands in the sweatshirt’s pockets. “I remember that,” he says, pointing at an abstract statue that doubles as a bench. “And this is Prescott, right?”

“That’s a great name,” Shiro murmurs, and adds, “I think it’s great!”

“Right,” says Shiro, guiding him around the corner. He pauses, then gives Keith a speculative look and bites his lip.

“What?” asks Keith warily.

“Trust me?”

“Uhh,” Keith says, and side-eyes him again, leaning slightly away. There’s a tiny wary smile tugging at the sides of his mouth. “Sure, I guess?”

“Great!” says Shiro, and steps behind him. “I’m gonna cover your eyes.”

Keith turns in place to keep him in view and takes a startled step back, his hands up palms-out between them. “Wait, what? Why?”

“Because,” Shiro says, “It’s a surprise, and I want it to be a real surprise.” Keith has gone dark-eyed and unsure, though, so he hesitates and adds, “It’s okay if you don’t want to. It’ll still be a surprise.”

Keith shifts his weight, going pink again with embarrassment. “I’ll trip,” he says after a small pause.

“I won’t let you trip,” Shiro promises.

“I’ll probably step on you.”

“Oohh,” says Shiro, and makes a worried face. “That one I’m not sure I can survive.”

Keith lets out a little exasperated huff of breath and shoves him. He hesitates, then gives Shiro one last measured look and shrugs with one shoulder. “Fine, okay.”

Shiro grins and reaches for his shoulders to turn him around, then settles one hand carefully over Keith’s eyes. “No trying to peek,” he warns, and gives Keith his other arm to hang onto.

“M not gonna peek,” Keith mumbles, gripping Shiro’s arm. His other hand comes up to wrap tentatively around the wrist of the hand covering his eyes. “Are we gonna go or what?”

“Allll right,” sings Shiro, steering him the right direction. “Forrrrr ward! Right, left, right, left, right, left--”

“Oh my god.”

They proceed. There are a few stumbles, but they find a rhythm within a few steps. Shiro can feel Keith’s cheeks pushing up with an apprehensive smile; he can feel his eyes twitching and roving under the petal-thin skin of his eyelids. Once, he feels the feathery brush of eyelashes against his palm as Keith tries to sneak a look, and warns, “Ah!”

“I didn’t!” Keith protests, but the giggle in his voice gives it away.

Their destination isn’t far. Shiro guides Keith to the front door, reaching to push it open in front of
them. “Little step-- all right.”

“Can I look?” asks Keith.

“Nope!” says Shiro cheerfully, and grins at the girl behind the desk, who is clutching her cheeks and beaming in the universal expression of this thing I am seeing is too cute for words. “Hi!” he says. “I’m Takashi Shirogane, I called yesterday about socializing…?”

“Oh, yeah!” she says, brightening up with recognition. “I think I’m the one who talked to you, actually. I’ll get you guys set up in a room to start out with.”

“Thanks,” Shiro says, and nudges Keith to start walking again as she makes her way down the hallway.

Keith doesn’t move right away. “Shiro--”

Shiro stops immediately, half-lifting his hand from Keith’s eyes, in case. “Doing okay?” he asks softly.

Keith’s fingers tighten slightly on his wrist. “I’m okay,” he says after a beat.

Shiro hesitates, wondering for a moment if he’s made a terrible mistake. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” says Keith, more firmly. “I’m fine.”

“Okay,” says Shiro, after a pause. “Listen, it’s-- You being comfortable is more important to me than the surprise, okay? You can look if you want, it’s okay.”

He feels the delicate flutter of eyelashes again, but Keith shuts his eyes and shakes his head slightly. “We’re almost there, right? Anyway, I trust you.”

Shiro swallows and takes a breath, something aching fiercely between his lungs. “Yeah, bud,” he says. “We’re almost there.”

Keith takes a step forward, and Shiro resets his hand gently, and then they’re moving again. They shuffle down the hallway after the receptionist, through the door she holds open for them.

“You want… what we talked about, I guess?” asks the receptionist as Shiro gets Keith settled on a chair. Shiro thinks from the brief conversation yesterday that her name is Brenna.

“Yeah, please,” he says, and gives her a quick bright grin in thanks for playing along with the secret. She grins back, and winks, and disappears, closing the door behind her.

Shiro lifts his hand from Keith’s eyes and settles it on his shoulder instead, squeezing briefly as he takes the chair next to him.

“Now?” asks Keith.

“Not quite,” says Shiro. “She’s going to get it, I’ll tell you when.”

“Okay,” Keith whispers. He’s sitting on the edge of the chair so his feet can reach the ground, hunched forward a little with his arms folded protectively around his middle, the picture of apprehension--but his eyes stay shut, and his jaw is tight with grim determination.

Shiro wants to tell him how much it means to him that Keith trusts him this much, how proud he is, and humbled, but he doesn’t know how to put it into words. He wants to tell Keith he doesn’t have to
be nervous, but he doesn't know how to say it in a way that would help. He runs his palm over Keith’s shoulder blades instead, smoothing out the rigid tension coiled there. Keith sighs and lists into the contact--and Shiro wonders, not for the first time, how long it’s been since Keith had somebody to hug him.

Brenna returns, opening the door quietly with one hand while the other cradles a blanket-wrapped bundle against her. Shiro gets to his feet, keeping a hand on Keith’s shoulder. “Ready?” Brenna asks, her eyes sparkling.

Keith stiffens slightly at the noises, sitting up straighter, breathing faster. “Can I have your hands?” Shiro asks him quietly, and Keith unfolds his arms so that Shiro can position them into a loose cradle. “Now?” Keith asks.

“Almost,” says Shiro, “almost,” and he steps aside so that Brenna can deposit the bundle into Keith’s arms. He watches Keith flinch and freeze, watches realization sweep over his face--and he murmurs, “Okay, now.”

Keith opens his eyes and stares down at the sleepy puppy struggling to its paws in his lap. His mouth opens slightly and he pulls in a deep breath. “Ohhh,” he says weakly. “Oh, wow, hi…”

Shiro exchanges silent, delighted glances with Brenna. They watch as Keith pets the puppy’s ears and back, delicate and careful and reverent with just the tips of his fingers, like he’s afraid he’ll hurt it.


“There’s more?” Keith asks, raising his head to stare at them. He’s shaky and overwhelmed, and his eyes are shining.

“Four more,” says Brenna, grinning big. “Sit tight.”

Keith looks at Shiro as the door shuts behind her, and Shiro returns to sit next to him. “What do you think?” he asks. “Worth it?”

Keith ducks his head, hunching over the puppy, and tries to hide one of the rare, brilliant smiles that transforms his entire face. “Yeah,” he whispers.

The puppy is beginning to rouse. It yawns, tiny pink tongue curling, and begins to stumble unsteadily around on Keith’s lap. “Do you want to move to the floor?” Shiro asks, watching. “There’s more coming.”

“Yeah, okay,” says Keith, and he lets Shiro take the puppy for a second so he can shift down to the chilly tile floor. He holds out his arms for it again once he’s settled, and Shiro carefully makes the transfer.

The puppy is awake enough by now to strain toward Keith's face, oversized paws flailing clumsily, and it licks enthusiastically at his cheeks and chin when it's close enough. Keith makes a startled noise and turns his face away, grinning helplessly.

Shiro drops to sit with him, folding up one knee, and reaches over to ruffle up the puppy's ears. “I can't have a dog right now,” he says. “Neither can you, but… this place always needs people to help with walking dogs, cleaning up, that kind of thing. We can make this a thing we do sometimes, if you want.”
“Really?” asks Keith, and Shiro shrugs and nods.

“If it’s something you think you’d like,” he says.

Keith is already nodding, his eyes round and earnest. His hands are still hovering over the puppy like he doesn’t quite know what to do with it, and Shiro takes pity on him.

“You can play with her,” he says. “Look, see, she wants to tussle.” He gives the puppy his hand, lets her gnaw on it with tiny needle-teeth, then withdraws it and mimics pouncing, to the puppy’s very great delight.

Keith watches, his forehead furrowed with concentration. The puppy has rolled over in his lap, all four paws kicking and flailing at Shiro’s hand.

“Rub her belly,” Shiro suggests. “Dogs like that.” Keith obeys, and shortly has the puppy squirming with delight, but there’s still caution and uncertainty to his approach, and after a moment Shiro asks, “Did you ever have a dog?”

“No,” says Keith, shaking his head. “There was-- um… one of my foster families had one? He barked a lot.” He pauses reflectively. “He didn’t like me.”

Shiro glances at him. Keith’s never talked about his foster families to Shiro before: he doesn’t want to let the opportunity slip, but he also doesn’t know what questions are safe. “When was that?” he asks finally.

“Last year,” Keith says, keeping his eyes on the puppy. “Before I came here.”

“How long did you stay there?”

Keith shifts. “Not long. Like five months.”

He’s uncomfortable with this line of questioning, Shiro can tell. It’s not something he wants to talk about, not yet, and Shiro should respect that—but he can’t stop himself from asking quietly, “Were they kind to you?”

Keith goes still. He licks his lips and catches the lower between his teeth, his hair partially obscuring his face. After a moment he shifts again, and shrugs, and takes a breath to answer—but then the door opens and Brenna has an entire carrier full of the puppy’s littermates, yipping and squirming and pawing at the door to be let free, and the moment is gone.

“Here we go!” Brenna says gleefully, and sets the carrier down. “We ready for this?”

Keith’s eyes are huge and he seems entirely incapable of speech, so Shiro says for him, “Unleash the hounds!”

Brenna reaches down and flips the carrier door open. “Hounds unleashed!”

The puppies swarm out in an uncoordinated stream, tripping over their own paws, pausing to sniff at interesting invisible things on the ground, pausing to nip at each others’ ears. One diverts to investigate Brenna’s shoes, dropping to his elbows in a play-bow, and yips; the rest trot importantly over to find out about Keith and Shiro.

“Heyy, you,” croons Shiro, hauling one up from where it is arguing with his shoelace. “You’re cute. What are they?” he asks Brenna. “Retrievers?”
“Mm,” says Brenna. “They came from a puppy-mill bust. Their mom’s here too, but it’s gonna be a while before she’s ready to be around too many people. These guys are about weaned, we’ve already got homes lined up for most of them.”

Keith glances up at this, at once startled and devastated, and Shiro thinks oh no. But Keith only bends his head down again over the bit of golden fluff and pudge in his lap and says nothing.

“Do you guys have pretty high turnover here?” Shiro asks, keeping an eye on Keith.

“For puppies, yeah,” Brenna says, nodding at the one in her arms. “Older dogs take quite a bit longer, especially the ones that were rescued from bad situations. It can take quite a while before they’re comfortable with humans again. That’s where our socializing volunteers come in really handy.”

“Yeah, I bet,” says Shiro, careful to keep his voice noncommittal. Keith still hasn’t raised his head.

Brenna stays with them for another ten minutes or so, then leaves to man the front desk. Shiro watches her go, then tips his head down to look at Keith. “Doing okay?” he asks softly.

“Huh?” asks Keith, raising his head quickly. “Yeah, yeah!”

“You went pretty quiet there for a minute,” Shiro observes.

Keith lifts his shoulders, lowering his head again to hide behind his hair, and smoothes a hand down the back of the puppy on his lap. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to.”

“You don’t have to be sorry,” says Shiro. He lifts one of the puppies and deposits it next to the other in Keith’s lap. “I’m sorry.”

“What?” asks Keith, startled. “No, why? This is, this is awesome.”

Shiro hesitates. “It seemed like it caught you off-guard, a little bit. Hearing that they’ve got homes already.”

“Oh.” Keith looks down at the puppies vying for attention in his lap, shifts his foot away from the one chewing industriously on his shoe and reaches to pull her closer, offering her a knotted-rope toy. “No, it–I just didn’t think about it. It’s not, it’s fine.” He pauses. “Thank you. This was a really, really good surprise.”

He looks at Shiro when he says it: vulnerable, but direct and unflinching, with a tiny glad half-smile that makes his eyes shine. Shiro looks back at him and finds himself smiling in answer before he’s even thought about it.

He reaches out and drapes his arm comfortably over Keith’s shoulders, feels Keith first stiffen slightly and then lean into it, melting completely. “Yeesh,” he remarks after a moment, considering Keith from this angle, and reaches down to lift Keith’s shaggy fringe up to peer underneath it at his face. “You under there?”

Keith pulls his head back in surprise, his eyes squinting up and his nose wrinkling. “Shirooo,” he complains, but he’s grinning.

“Oh, hey,” says Shiro, with exaggerated delight and recognition. “There you are!”

Keith pushes his hand away and fusses at his hair, shooting Shiro a sidelong exasperated look. “What are you even doing,” he asks, in the flattest and least impressed voice Shiro’s ever heard.
“Just trying to find my buddy,” Shiro says cheerfully. “Hey, we should get you in for a haircut tomorrow. The place I usually go is open on Saturdays.”

Keith stiffens up again, and Shiro belatedly remembers the General’s rueful words: *If you can get him to consent to a haircut…*

“...That okay?” he asks, abruptly worried.

“Yeah!” says Keith. “Yeah, that’s, that’s fine.” He’s not looking up from the puppies, but his shoulders are still rigid under Shiro’s arm.

“You sure?” Shiro asks, trying to catch his eye again—but in this, at least, Keith is closed off to him.

“I said it’s fine,” Keith says, a little terse.

Shiro hesitates. “Okay,” he finally says, wondering what exactly he’s stumbled into here. “Okay, I’ll… make an appointment?”

“Cool,” says Keith indifferently, and Shiro studies the top of his head, like maybe he can see through to his brain and figure out what is going on. Keith doesn’t relax against him again, and after a moment Shiro withdraws his arm casually to wrestle a puppy.

Whatever apprehensions the suggestion of a haircut has awoken in Keith, they can’t stand up to the continual onslaught of puppy tongues and puppy teeth. It isn’t long before Keith is laughing—under his breath at first, like he doesn’t want to be heard, then openly and freely, and the sound eases something in Shiro too.

They stay for another hour, until Brenna pokes her head in the door to remind them that they close at five, and Shiro discovers, to Keith's great amusement, that somewhere in the course of the visit he got peed on a little.

“Welp,” he says philosophically, using the handful of paper towels and the wet wipe Brenna gave him to try to reduce the damp spot on his shirt. “At least we’re headed home, I guess.”

Keith is still snickering, and Shiro makes a face at him—but the sound, honestly, makes it worth it. “Ready?” he asks, deciding that he’s done what he can for the spot.

“Just waiting on you,” Keith drawls.

Shiro eyes him. “You're sassy when you're not concussed. All right, let's go.”

He messes up Keith's hair vindictively until the boy makes an outraged noise and elbows at him sharply, then drags him in for a rough, tight hug.

“Ready?” Shiro asks quietly fifteen minutes later, standing on the landing outside the apartment door. Keith nods quickly, glancing up at him for a fleeting second.

“Hey,” says Shiro, and taps his elbow. “If you get uncomfortable, if you need to go back, just tell me.”

“Kay,” Keith says, and sets his shoulders.
“You don’t even have to say that if you don’t want to, you can just tell me you’re not feeling good.”

“Fine, yeah,” says Keith, staring grimly at the door.

“We can set up a code word situation if you want--”

“Shiro, god,” Keith blurts finally, giving him an impatient look. “Stop, can you just--”

Shiro stops. He looks back at Keith, takes in the pissed-off panic sparking in his eyes.

Keith draws back slightly, his eyes widening and then hastily averting. He crosses one arm over his stomach and moistens his lips. “Sorry,” he says, and his tone has gone instantly quieter and more cautious in a way that makes the hair stand up on the back of Shiro’s neck. “Sorry, I just-- can we just--?”

“Yeah,” says Shiro after a beat. “I’m sorry, bud. I didn’t mean to make it worse.”

“I know,” says Keith quickly. “I know.”

“Okay...” Shiro says. He hesitates, then reaches out. Keith’s watchful eyes track his hand, and when it lands lightly on his shoulder there’s a quiver, like a horse’s skin when a fly has bitten it. But Keith doesn’t pull away: after a second he exhales softly, and Shiro feels him slump, just a little, just enough that he’s sort of pushing into the touch.

“Ready?” Shiro asks again.

Keith nods.

Shiro opens the door.

Chapter End Notes

come yell about season 5 with me!!

ooomg what a wild ride. and LOOK i get to keep my "canon compliant" tag for another 3 months!
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The apartment is peaceful and sunset-lit when they step through the door, the front area empty except for Sam chopping vegetables in the kitchen. There’s music playing, something with a light simple woodwind melody backed by dancing strings in counterpoint. Shiro bends to take off his shoes, steadying himself on the back of the short couch. Keith does the same next to him, looking back and forth uncertainly as if he expects to find new people hiding behind the furniture.

Not, Shiro reflects privately, thinking of Katie’s chosen workspace under the coffee table, that that is necessarily an unreasonable expectation.

“Hey!” Sam says, waving a carrot at them. “You’re in time to help assemble.”

“Oof,” remarks Shiro, wandering over, Keith a silent shadow behind him. “Two seconds home and already conscripted. That’s gotta be some kind of record.”

“Keith!” says Sam, ignoring Shiro. “I got chocolate milk for the weekend but I need somebody to make sure it’s decent. You up for it?”

Keith is already grinning shyly. “Sure, I guess,” he answers.

Sam gestures to the stools at the island. “Hop on up.”

“That’s fine,” says Shiro to the ceiling. “It’s cool, I didn’t want any.”

“You can have some,” Sam says mildly, offering him the carton.

Shiro sniffs. “Moment’s gone.”

Keith seems more at ease already, throwing Shiro a tiny smug sidelong grin as he climbs up onto the stool. Shiro waits until Sam has filled a half-sized cup with chocolate milk and pushed it across the island to Keith, then turns down the hallway toward his room.

“Hey hey hey where do you think you’re going?” Sam calls after him, poking his head into the hallway.

“I gotta change first, I’ll be right back,” answers Shiro, half-turning back. “Don’t steal my buddy while I’m gone.”

“Too late,” says Sam. “He’s my buddy now.”

Shiro snorts and makes his way down the hall, grinning foolishly as the sound of Keith’s quiet giggling follows him. He changes quickly and steps back out into the hallway, only to nearly bump into Colleen as he turns toward the laundry closet. She staggers a little bit and grabs him by the elbows, whispering, “Sorry, sorry, sorry, hi!” and leaning to the side to peer past him toward the kitchen. “Is that Keith, is he out there?”

Shiro blinks at her. “Um,” he whispers back. “Yeah?”

“How’s he doing? Can I go say hi?”
“Yeah?” whispers Shiro, smiling bemusedly. “Why-- why are we whispering?”

“Because,” says Colleen. “I didn’t want to overwhelm him if he was still spooked. Is he still spooked?”

“Um,” says Shiro, and glances over his shoulder toward the kitchen. “Um, a little bit. But he’s okay, you can-- you can go meet him?” He pauses. “Where’s Matt and Katie?”

“The library,” Colleen says. “I kicked them out for a change of scene, otherwise they’d just sit in the same spots on their laptops all day.” She pauses, and tips her head slightly to the side as if in concession. “And, yeah, I figured it might be easier on Keith to not have to deal with everybody all at once to start out.”

“You’re amazing,” Shiro tells her fervently.

She shrugs, grinning modestly. “Yeahh, I kind of am. Okay, okay, I’m gonna go steal your kid.” She pats his arm and hurries down the hall.

“What,” Shiro complains. He hesitates: his impulse is to follow Colleen and ease the introduction-- but the dirty shirt is still bundled up in his hands, and he doesn’t want to smother Keith with overprotection. He walks the other direction instead and opens the laundry closet, listening to Colleen introduce herself. The washer is almost full, with--he digs a little and checks--reasonably similar colors, so he measures out soap and softener, trying to pick out words from the barely-audible murmur of Keith’s voice across the apartment.

The noise of the rushing water filling the washer drowns out any further eavesdropping he might have otherwise managed, so he closes the machine and the closet door and hurry back down the hall.

Keith is sitting small when he gets there, elbows tucked in and shoulders hunched over his chocolate milk. His eyes are dark and nervous--but he’s smiling, a real smile if tiny, reacting to something Sam is saying. Colleen is giving him space, leaning against the counter next to Sam on the other side of the island.

“There he is!” says Sam as Shiro steps into the kitchen. “Wanna do the potatoes?”

“Suure,” says Shiro, drawing out the word as he edges around Sam to wash his hands. “How are we doing them? Mashed?”

Sam considers. “Sure, if you want. I was leaning toward just scoring and baking, but…”

“Nah,” Shiro says, already pulling the potatoes down from the top of the fridge. “That sounds fine. Less dishes.”

Colleen shifts out of the way, going to sit at the dining room table instead. “Keith and I will supervise.” Shiro opens his mouth wide and makes an offended, betrayed noise, and Colleen raises her hands while Keith grins. “I did the shopping,” she says. “That’s my contribution.”

“I guess that's fair,” Shiro relents. He rummages until he finds a knife and goes to sit next to Keith while he works.

“How are you liking the Garrison, Keith?” Colleen asks.

Keith freezes up a little bit, and Shiro winces. Sam keeps chopping asparagus, to all appearances not paying much attention, and Shiro follows his lead, carving a bad spot out of the first potato with the
tip of the paring knife.

“Um,” says Keith after a hesitation. “It’s-- it’s fine?”

“Yeah?” she asks. “What’s your favorite class?”

Shiro listens, alert and a little on edge, ready to jump in and distract Colleen the minute Keith seems to need it. But he consciously relaxes, doing his best to project stillness and calm unconcern, because Keith is glancing at him before every answer, like he’s checking to make sure it’s still safe, and there is nothing more important right now than Keith understanding that he is safe.

It works. Keith relaxes too, stops looking at him so frequently, and gradually he opens up under Colleen’s gentle interrogation. Shiro works quietly, scoring each potato deeply and precisely until he can open it like a fan, listening as Colleen teases first single words and then entire sentences out of Keith. She has a knack for finding and chasing the threads of conversation that are most interesting and least threatening to Keith, and before very long they are discoursing happily on puppies.

“They were--” Keith breaks off, frowning, and tugs at Shiro’s elbow. “What were they, you said, what were they?”

“Golden retrievers,” Shiro supplies, and Colleen croons appreciatively.

“Ohhh, we had a retriever when I was in high school,” she says. “Did you take any pictures?”

“...No,” says Shiro, suddenly stricken by this failure. Keith had been covered in puppies and-- “I did not take a single picture oh my god.”

He stares at Colleen in mounting horror and regret, and she stares back at him, shakes her head slowly, and sucks her teeth with the deepest censure.

Sam intones without turning around, “You done screwed up, son.”

“You’re gonna have to go back,” Colleen says. “Do better, Shirogane.”

“I will, I will,” he agrees humbly. “I’m very sorry, ma’am.”

She makes a flat line with her mouth and shakes her head again, her eyes shifting past Shiro to exchange a despairing look with Keith--Keith, who is giggling silently, in real danger of falling off his stool.

And just like that, Keith is solidly won over. In another two minutes, Colleen has him next to her at the dining table, flipping through pictures on her tablet of Bae Bae as a puppy--and then, when that source runs dry, flipping through pictures of random dogs on the internet captioned in big bold impact font. Shiro bends his head over the cutting board as his hands go pruney from the starchy potato-juice, listening to them laugh at fifty-year-old memes, and he smiles and smiles.

Matt and Katie come home half an hour later, flushed and breathless from having raced from the road. They pause the doorway to add their shoes to the heap by the door, radiating energy and desert heat, and Matt gives Shiro a significant look, hard-eyed and grimly satisfied. Shiro's stomach flips unpleasantly and he understands. He's reaching for his tablet before Matt's even started typing.

Keith and Katie are considering each other in the meantime, a brief wary sizing-up. Finally, Katie says, “Sup,” and Keith answers, “Sup,” and that's that.

“Be about fifteen minutes,” says Sam. “Go wash up and you guys can set the table.”
The kitchen is briefly very crowded as Katie and Matt jostle in for water and gulp greedily as if they’ve been parched for days; then just as quickly it’s quiet and normal again as they vanish to clean up. Shiro's tablet buzzes a moment later and he snatches it up.

*we got it,* Matt has sent, and more comes quickly.  
*i’m pretty sure, anyway, we didn’t try to play it*  
*it looks good from the data side though*  
*there’s definitely some visual corruption left, that shit is hardddd but we’re pretty sure at least audio will be solid and the file is definitely playable*  
*i sent it to you and dad*

Shiro reads over it. There's something Matt isn't saying and he's not sure how to ask--

*shiro it's from the camera in iverson's office.*

Ah.

Shiro stands still and reads it again, for a moment at a loss. Finally he pulls his lower lip between his teeth and quietly sets the tablet down on the counter next to Sam.

Sam glances at it, glances at Shiro, then steps closer and bends his head down to read it. He goes still, as Shiro did, and finally shifts his weight and looks out toward Keith and Colleen. “After supper,” he finally says in a low voice, and Shiro nods.

The food is good, but Shiro can’t focus on it properly. Sam is similarly absent, a rather forbidding tightness in his jaw, until Colleen nudges him with her shoulder and gives him a questioning look. Sam looks back at her, and Shiro sees the moment he chooses to put it aside and be present instead.

Keith is looking up at him, he realizes, sitting quiet and watchful and missing nothing--so he straightens his shoulders and resolves to do the same.

And it works. It’s strangely simple, it’s like one of those optical illusions that depends on depth of field: once he focuses on Keith now the rest fades neatly into the background, to be acknowledged and handled later.

Supper is mostly comfortable and easy, the six of them slotted like sardines around a table meant for four, elbows bumping and dishes clanking, conversation flowing messy and unhindered. There’s one brief food fight, triggered when Keith announces to general hilarity that Shiro got *peed on.* Shiro pokes him in the tummy in retribution; Keith flails and knocks into Matt; Matt accidentally flings potato into Katie’s face.

Things escalate *alarmingly* quickly from there.

It takes a solid fifteen minutes to clean up, and that’s not including the actual dishes, but by the time the sun is down they’ve mostly all made their way out to the living room. Colleen puts on a movie, something that seems to be a family favorite, something that Katie and Matt can quote from memory, and do, until they realize that Keith has never seen it before.

Shiro sits at the island, watching over the back of the short couch as Katie and Matt give Keith a rundown of the plot of the prequel and the necessary lore to understanding what he’s seeing. Keith looks overwhelmed, but he’s smiling bemusedly, and he doesn’t look uncomfortable.

About fifteen minutes in, Sam catches Shiro’s eye and quietly makes his way down the hallway toward his office. Shiro hesitates, checking on Keith one more time, then gets up and follows
He leans on the doorframe, arms crossed, as Sam pulls up the message from Matt with the file attached. It takes a little longer for the file to download than normal, long enough that Shiro has to count while he breathes, because he is shaking.

The door opens behind them, and they both turn, but it’s only Colleen, slipping in and closing the door behind her. Nobody speaks: they watch the progress bar on the screen grimly—and then the soft chime sounds to signal that it’s finished downloading, light and innocuous. There’s a pause, then Sam glances back at them and leans forward to hit the button to play it.

It’s glitchy. The visual jerks and pauses oddly, occasionally flares bright with vivid colors that have no place in the cold-lit view of Iverson’s office. But Sam turns up the volume, and Shiro registers that the low hum coming from the speakers is the ambient white noise of the room, and it is solid and consistent.

They didn’t quite fix it. But they took the shards and scattered pieces of the broken file and found a way to tie them together enough to be recognizable. They didn’t succeed perfectly, but they did the impossible, and they are only children.

In the fractured flashes of smooth playback, Shiro watches Keith enter the room and stand facing the desk. There’s a slight hesitation, and then he salutes.

“At ease, cadet,” says Iverson. “Have a seat.”

When the video clears next, Keith is perched on the edge of the seat opposite the commander, sitting on his hands. Shiro can see sullen hostility in his face, fear in the hunch of his shoulders.

There’s silence for a moment, then Iverson asks, sounding weary, “What do you want, Kogane?” He pauses for a moment, like he expects an answer; the video freezes on a frame of Keith’s wary face. “What do you want?” Iverson asks again. “I guess you like the idea of space, or you wouldn’t be here, but you sure don’t act like you want to be here.”

Keith doesn’t answer. His head is bowed, only the top visible to the camera’s high vantage point.

“So what’s the story?” Iverson presses. “You want to get yourself kicked out and sent back to some foster home in Who-Knows, New Mexico? You want to take your best chance of ever becoming something more than a sob story and flush it down the drain? Is that what you want?”

Keith mumbles something. The room’s microphones don’t pick it up, and neither, it seems, does Iverson.

“Speak. Up,” he growls. “And look at me when I am talking to you.”

Keith raises his head. The image splinters into cyan and yellow and black, but not before Shiro has time to see the look on his face and think shit. There’s sparks shooting off him, practically; it’s that dangerous combination of terror and anger that Shiro already knows so well, and Iverson has never responded well to backtalk.

But the soft buzz of the room’s ambient noise doesn’t flicker, and Iverson finally asks dryly, “You got something to say, Kogane?”

“No,” Keith mutters.

“No…?”

“No, sir.” The honorific is spat, and Shiro draws a breath.
“Yeah,” says Iverson after a pause, “you’re gonna want to watch that tone with me, cadet.”

There’s warning in the words, and danger, and Shiro holds his breath as the visual clears enough that he can see Keith’s eyes dart to Iverson’s face.

Silence holds. After a moment, Iverson says, “So why are you in here, Kogane?”

“She started it,” Keith flares. “She wouldn’t stop--”

“No,” Iverson says, cutting him off. “Why are you here?”

Keith falters. There’s a sort of startled vulnerability in his face for a second, extended by the juddering playback, and then when the video resumes he’s more closed-off than before, with a little obstinate jut to his chin. “She kept--”

“No,” says Iverson.

“It wasn’t my fault!” says Keith loudly. “She wouldn’t let me--”

“Kogane!” Iverson finally barks, and Shiro watches the way Keith’s eyes widen, his shoulders hunching as he quails back. “I do not care what she did. She’s not in here. You are in here. We are here to talk about your attitude and your behavior. Do you understand?”

There’s silence; the visual is fractured again.

“Do you understand, cadet?”

Keith’s voice answers after a pause, harder to hear, not quite steady. “Yes, sir.”

“Why are you in here?”

“For throwing food, sir.”

“And?” Iverson asks. His tone is still harsh, his voice is still loud, but some of the edge has left it. “What else, what did we talk about last time?”

“Escalating,” Keith whispers. The visual flickers back. He’s sitting hunched and small in his chair, his head down. There’s ready-to-run tension in the way his hands grip the seat beside his legs, in the way he’s sitting forward so his feet reach the floor.

Iverson sits back in his chair. “That’s right,” he says. “This is a problem, Kogane. Every fight, every conflict, every single time you end up here, there was a chance for you to get out of it and you decided to fight instead.”

Keith doesn’t say anything. Shiro folds his arms and shifts his weight, frowning.

Iverson waits a moment, then leans forward again. “I don’t think you quite understand how privileged you are to be here, cadet,” he says. “The scholarship you’re on? They only award three per year. There have only been eight cadets under the age of fourteen admitted in the last decade. The Garrison has only taken custody of six minors since its inception. Are you starting to get it?”

Keith is silent. Next to Shiro, Colleen shifts and makes a soft wordless sound, shaking her head.

“The General is taking a big risk on you, Kogane,” says Iverson. “He thinks you could be an asset to the program down the road, and I agree. But I’m gonna tell you something. Are you listening?”
There’s no answer. The screen glitches into green and cerulean blocks, somehow poisonous.

“I said *are you listening.*”

“Yes, sir,” Keith says quickly.

“There is no place here,” Iverson says, slow and clear and deliberate, “for a cadet who refuses to follow orders. There is no place here for a cadet who thinks he knows better than his instructors. There is no place here for a cadet who can’t back down from a fight. You’re here because your simulation scores show promise, but you know what? *That doesn’t mean a damn thing.*”

Shiro’s heart beats hard and heavy. He has to remind himself to breathe.

“Do you know how many cadets I’ve watched peak early and then burn out?” Iverson is continuing relentlessly. “You’re sharp, you’ve got... scads of talent, but that’s not enough to get you through here, you got it? That’s not enough to make this worth it.”

It’s devastating, because nothing Iverson has said is untrue. The words might even have been effective to a different cadet–but not here, not to Keith. Not to a twelve-year-old with no home but the walls around him.

The picture clears. Keith is still sitting hunched, but he’s got his arms crossed over his middle, like somebody’s hit him in the stomach. His face is colorless in the pale unforgiving light of the room, and Shiro can see that he’s hyperventilating.

“This is your second warning,” says Iverson, and Keith flinches. “Give me reason to issue a third and I’ll be recommending your dismissal from this facility to the General. Got it?”

Keith nods without looking up.

“Got it?” repeats Iverson, louder, insistent, his voice like a whip-crack in the silent room.

Keith jumps. He raises his head to look at the commander, and Shiro feels ice prickling down his spine at the look on his face: disoriented, *hopeless.* Keith blinks a couple times and focuses, and says, “Yes, sir.”

“Good,” Iverson says. “Alright, go on, get out of here. I don’t want to hear from you again this week.”

It takes a second, but Keith unfolds and stands up. He salutes, his movements slow and strangely clumsy, then turns to go, stumbling into the corner of his chair.

They watch in silence as the door shuts and the screen goes black.

Colleen is the first to speak. She purses up her lips thoughtfully and says, “So I’m gonna go murder him...”

Shiro is startled into a little huff of laughter. He covers his face with both hands and scrubs his fingers through his hair.

“That wasn’t great,” Sam says bleakly. “That was... that was not great.”

“Why was it obfuscated, though?” Colleen asks, frowning at the screen. “I don’t get it, I expected...” She pauses, then lifts her eyebrows briefly and lets out a short breath through her nose.

Shiro drops his hands and gestures at the screen. “He just threatened a minor under his care with
“Well,” says Colleen, making a little apologetic twist with her mouth. “He threatened to recommend that a minor under his care be put back into the system where they found him. It’s not-- he’s not making a claim to authority he doesn’t have, he’s just saying he’s gonna talk to the General.” She pauses. “Not that-- god, don’t get me wrong, that was--that was cruel, just… it’s weird, isn’t it?”

“Do we know when the file was altered?” Sam asks.

Shiro pulls out his tablet and opens the messaging app. “No, I’ll…” He swipes out a message to Matt to find out and sends it, half-listening as Sam and Colleen talk. He understands the anxiety he’s seen in Keith over the last weeks in sudden painful clarity.

He’s still shaking, half in anger and half in relief, because like Colleen he’d had suspicions about the file’s content, he’d expected-- he’d expected violence, at the least; he’d expected worse than violence, but this is--

Well, it’s better. There’s no blood, there’s no pain, and that’s good. But it’s worse, too, because it’s an undermining of Keith’s security by somebody who should have been supporting him, a calculated manipulation of his worst fears to keep him in line.

His tablet chimes.

no idea
um the last time it was viewed before it was corrupted was thursday the 4th though so maybe then?

“Thursday the fourth,” Shiro says aloud, already flipping back through his calendar to try to place it. They’d had a meeting that day about the new landing site, and afterwards he’d gone-- “That was... that was the day I went and requested Keith’s file from Iverson.”

They pause, looking at him. “Did you get it?” asks Colleen.

“No, I had to go to the General,” says Shiro absently, frowning. “Iverson got kind of snarly about it.”

Colleen looks at Sam. “He reviewed the footage and had regrets?” she suggests.

“And decided to cover it up,” says Sam grimly. “Shiro--”

“Yeah,” says Shiro. “I’m sending it to the General now.”

Sam says, “Good.” He sighs, leaning forward to close the file. “This is…”

“We should probably get back out there,” Colleen says, glancing at the door. “Katie’s suspiciously cool with the fact that she’s not allowed to watch it.”

“...That’s pretty suspicious.”

They file back out toward the music and pew pew pew of space battles in the darkened living room. Matt and Katie are still sitting on the short couch, Keith squished between them with his knees pulled up, looking like he’s not sure how to feel about his position. He looks up as the adults return, visibly relieved to see Shiro. There’s worry and a question in his face, and Shiro can only answer it with a grin that he knows doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

Sam claims the corner of the long couch, and Colleen settles in next to him while Shiro drops to sit
on the floor on the other end. It isn’t too long before Keith gets up and crosses around the living area to sit with Shiro. Shiro reaches over as he settles in to mess up his mop of hair, then tugs him close with an arm around his shoulders.

The movie is cheesy and overblown and has been memed to death. Shiro’s probably seen the entire thing twice in gifs alone, and he loves it. He sits quietly, Keith warm against his side, and listens to Matt and Katie shout the more egregious lines in gloriously accurate mimicry.

It’s not quite contentment. He’s still too on-edge, still thrumming with the confirmation that the Garrison hasn’t just failed to protect Keith but actively harmed him. He’s following the file’s path in his mind, from Iverson to Matt and Katie to himself to the General, wondering if it’s been received yet, wondering what will happen--

Keith shifts under his arm, pulling up his knees and snuggling in a little closer, and Shiro’s breath catches in his throat. He understands, now; he understands just a little piece of the whirling mess of suspicion and hurt in Keith, and with that understanding comes a deeper appreciation for the trust that has been given to him.

He combs absently through Keith’s hair, putting it back to rights, and asks quietly, “You want to stay tonight or go back?”

Keith’s eyes have gone half-lidded under the touch. He rouses a little at the question, his eyes darting around the dark room. “Can I stay?” he finally asks in a whisper, glancing at Shiro almost guiltily.

Shiro half-grins down at him, something tight and painful easing its grip on him. “Yeah, bud,” he murmurs. “Sounds good.”

Keith shifts and resettles, relaxing again, and lets out a long content sigh.

Chapter End Notes

A POLL: if I start posting WIP snippets on my tumblr, is that something you guys would want to see, or ehhh just wait and post the finished product?
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! I'm updating the tags for this one. Content warning in this chapter specifically for past child abuse in the context of a flashback. It's pretty brief, nonsexual, and not particularly violent, but if you think this might be triggering content for you, please feel free to contact me on tumblr or in the comments, and I'll either do some mild spoiling or get you a copy of the chapter without the potentially triggering material. A lot of you have expressed in the comments that this fic has been a safe/encouraging/relaxing place for you, and I really want that to continue! <3

this chapter is for itssiccia, who requested a haircut 87 years ago and helped me when I was stalled!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hours later, the apartment is dark and silent, and Keith is wide awake.

He lies still, curled up on the short couch, watching the lights on the ceiling from the window. Shiro is asleep on the other couch, breathing in soft whistling not-quite-snores. He hadn’t snored last time, and Keith wonders vaguely if he’s getting sick. This thought is alarming, and he sits up for a moment to peer across the dim room at Shiro.

(He lays down again a moment later, feeling foolish: even if Shiro was sick, what did he expect to see? The mucus monster from that commercial dancing on his chest?)

He reaches for the couch pillow where it fell on the ground and hauls it back up for something to hug, then resolutely closes his eyes and tries to remember the breathing pattern Shiro had told him last time he couldn’t sleep.

Think of somewhere you feel safe and warm and loved, he tells himself firmly. It’s easy: he goes back to earlier in the evening and tucks himself under Shiro’s arm. They’re surrounded by the rich unfamiliar warmth of family and belonging, and-- and it’s a little jarring, honestly, because he isn’t family and he doesn’t belong and the old sour sensation of being an unwanted outsider is there, welling up in his throat and threatening to choke him, but Shiro--

But Shiro.

It’s easier, somehow, from his place at Shiro’s side. The jarring discordant chord buzzing up his spine and shrieking in his ear-- intruder, uninvited, unwanted --has somehow shifted a single note into soft sustaining harmony, and Keith can relax. He is surrounded by family and belonging, but there is a place for him here, a place where he belongs, and it’s right .

He breathes-- in… hold… out --and listens to the chord humming softly in his head, and he drifts. The memory of Shiro combing his hair straight is a pleasant ghost sensation on his scalp--

Keith comes fully awake, all at once. He sits up again, urgency making his heart lurch sideways, and touches his hair uneasily. It’s long for the Garrison, he’s been uncomfortably aware, but after the first couple of times somebody suggested a haircut and he said no, he sort of--pushed the awareness
Shiro is taking him for a haircut tomorrow.

Keith sits on the edge of the couch for a moment, then gets to his feet and hurries out to the kitchen. There’d been a crock next to the stove with things in it, there had been scissors—ah.

He has to stand on his tiptoes to get the scissors out, and there’s a deafening clatter of shifting utensils as they come free. Keith stands very still for a moment, his heart hammering hard in his throat and the scissors clutched tightly in both hands, and waits to see who he’s awakened.

In the living room, Shiro sort of snuffles and shifts, and Keith holds his breath, but then Shiro sighs and the soft wheezing-whistling of his breathing resumes.

Keith waits another minute to be safe, then steps careful-quiet out of the kitchen and down the hallway to the bathroom. He doesn’t turn on the light just yet; he gropes around in the dark until his questing hand finds the softness of a bath-towel hanging on the rack. He pulls it down and rolls it up, and he presses it up against the gap between the bottom of the closed door and the floor. It won’t help him much if the door leaks light around the edges, but it’s the best he can do.

The light is blinding when he turns it on. He shuts his eyes tightly against the sharp flare of pain behind them for a moment, then forces himself to take in light in quick blinks until he’s adjusted. Then he stares at himself in the mirror, meets his own eyes in his pale serious face.

He’s never done this. He’s never done this, but how hard could it be?

He licks his lips. Then he gathers up a section of his sleep-mussed hair, pulls it straight as well as he can, makes a guess, and--

The silver snick of the scissors next to his ear feels ominously final, and a tuft of dark hair goes drifting down to the floor. He stares at it and up at his reflection, his heart already hammering. Then he takes a deep breath and sets his jaw, and cuts another section.

Twenty minutes later, he’s panicking.

It looks bad, it looks really, really bad, but that’s not even the worst of it.

The worst of it is the hair scattered all over the floor and in the sink and on the counter; he’s trying to clean it up, first with his hands and then with wet toilet paper, but it’s everywhere, and it’s gotten down into his pajamas and he itches all over, and he’s breathing in shaky, shuddery gasps because he’s going to be in so, so much trouble--

Somebody knocks.

Keith goes very still, staring at the door. He's crouched on his hands and knees on the rug in front of the sink, the floor around him a mess. The door isn't locked, why didn't he lock it--

The knock repeats. Panic jerks in his chest, freezing him where he sits; he should hide, he should hide, but he can't move and he can’t breathe and there's nowhere to go.

The knob turns. The door cracks open. Keith cowers.

“Keith?” asks Colleen Holt, poking her head in. She blinks blearily in the bright light. “You okay, sweetie?”
Keith stares back at her, and he sees the moment when she realizes. Her eyes settle briefly on his hair, then shift to the mess on the floor, to the scissors still sitting on the counter, and then back to him.

He scrambles to his feet and backs away, already babbling. “I’ll clean it up, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’ll clean it up--”

The backs of his calves hit the cold porcelain side of the bathtub; his shoulder impacts the wall. There’s no more room for him to back up without actually getting into the tub. He casts a frantic, strategizing glance around the bathroom: there’s not much, there’s the bristle-brush in its holder by the toilet, there’s-- there’s towels, he could throw one at her face and get past, maybe--

(His eyes fall, very briefly, on the scissors by the sink, but he recoils from that before the thought has even formed.)

She’s not moving. She’s still standing still in the doorway, her eyes wide. There’s a strange look on her face, a sort of soft, sad horror; Keith can’t look away from it. She shifts her weight, and Keith flinches from the way her mouth closes with resolve.

“Can I come in?” she asks, very gently.

Keith stares at her, trying to decipher the expression on her face.

“I’m not gonna hurt you,” she says. “I’m not gonna hurt you. You’re not in trouble.”

Keith doesn’t move. He doesn’t look away from her, but the quiet repetition of soothing words gets under his guard in a way he doesn’t really understand. He swallows and shifts from foot to foot.

“Are you okay, Keith?” she asks. “Do you want me to get Shiro?”

“No,” he blurts without thinking. He doesn’t want Shiro to see this. He’d get that look, the one that is so very like the one Colleen is wearing now, the one that tells Keith he’s screwed up and shown too much. “Please, don’t--”

“Okay,” says Colleen steadily. She doesn’t move from the doorway. Her eyes sweep over the mess he’s made again. “Here,” she says. “I know where there’s a vacuum. I’m gonna go get it and come back. Is that okay?”

He can’t think how to answer. The words are a choking lump in his throat; he can almost feel the shape of them. Colleen waits for a moment, then nods and withdraws from the doorway, pulling the door almost-closed behind her.

Keith is left standing alone, watching the door. His stomach is still jumping with apprehension; he’s shaking and he can’t tell if he’s cold or scared. He jumps again when the soft knock sounds to announce her return; he can feel his shoulders hunching up without his direction; the backs of his hands are prickling with alarm. He can’t look at her this time when she comes in. He stares at the rug under his feet instead--light sea-blue, with dark strands of his hair standing out on it.

She has a broom and a handheld vacuum, and she narrates her actions quietly as she moves about the space. “Just gonna sweep it all up first, make it easier… gonna shake out this rug a little bit. Can I have that one, sweetheart?”

It takes Keith a second to realize what she means. He steps carefully to the side, off the rug, and picks it up by the two shorter ends. He hands it over without looking up.
Colleen takes it and brushes it off briskly, then sweeps the broom over the floor. The tidy heap of Keith’s hair looks inconsequential against the clean slate-gray tile, and he watches it disappear into the vacuum.

“There,” she says quietly, shutting it off. “Not a big deal.”

He swallows, staring down at his feet. There’s a humiliating prickle behind his eyes, as if everything isn’t awful enough. “Thanks,” he whispers.

“It’s okay,” Colleen says immediately. “Sweetie, sweetie, it’s okay.” She hesitates, then takes a single step forward and reaches out.

Keith quails back, he can’t help it. Her intent is clear, and he’s not, he can’t--

But she’s not coming closer. She stays where she is, her arms still open in easy, patient invitation. Keith hesitates, studies her carefully from the corners of his vision. It’s up to him, he realizes; he can choose. The interaction slots neatly into the pattern Shiro established, quantifiable, predictable: there’s a hug offered, but he doesn’t have to accept it.

He’s still trembling, but some of the sick apprehension making his stomach hurt eases. He wavers for another moment, then finally draws a breath and steps forward, consciously and deliberately, into the circle of her arms.

It’s not like Shiro’s hugs. Shiro is bigger, solid; Keith’s head only comes up to the middle of his chest. There’s comforting pressure and weight, a sense that nothing will be able to tear Keith away, a sense of safety and fierce protection.

This is softer, lighter; Colleen isn’t as tall. She smells different, like citrus and herbs, and if Shiro is a safe place to hide and rest, then Colleen is the warmth of a favorite blanket. She wraps her arms around him, guiding his head down to rest on her shoulder, petting his back gently. He isn’t quite brave enough to hug her in return; his arms are folded up between them, a just-in-case barrier, but she doesn’t seem to mind. She holds him and soothes him, and Keith hides his face in the cloud-soft pastel green of her robe.

“So what’s this about?” she asks finally. Her fingers have shifted up to sift through the rough-chopped hair at the nape of his neck. “How come the secret haircut in the middle of the night, hmm?”

“I don’t know,” mumbles Keith into her shoulder. It had been, he knows now, an incredibly stupid idea. His breath is starting to come too quickly again at the thought of having to explain it to Shiro, having to go back to the Garrison...

Colleen hmms, combing through his hair, lifting it away from his scalp. It feels nice, but there’s a shift from aimless comfort-touch to purposeful consideration that makes Keith tense uneasily. “This honestly isn’t too bad,” she says thoughtfully. “I could clean it up for you a little bit if you want.”

Keith goes still.

“Yeah,” Colleen says, still combing through his hair. “This is totally salvageable. I’m pretty sure Sam’s kit is even here, we can do this if you want. What do you think?”

She’s pulled back from him enough that she can see his face before he even realizes what she’s doing. He stares back at her, at a loss; he can’t even think how to answer. The optimistic brightness in her face falters.
“We don’t have to,” she says. “I know you’ve got an appointment tomorrow, they can fix it up too, if
that’s…”

That’s worse.

He draws back, and she lets him go immediately, watching him with worried eyes. “Um,” Keith
murmurs shakily, and crosses his arms over his middle. He doesn’t know where to look. “I can
maybe-- I’ll fix it, I can fix it.”

“Sweetie…” Colleen begins, almost apologetic, and Keith’s stomach drops. She’s going to take the
scissors away; she’s going to tell Shiro; Keith doesn’t know, but what he does know is that whatever
comes next is outside his control.

She pauses for a long moment, looking at him, then finally makes a wincing sort of face. “I used to
cut my own hair, back when it was long. It’s really hard to do a good job on yourself when it’s
short.” She hesitates again, then lowers her head a little and offers, “It would take me about fifteen
minutes, and then you wouldn’t have to go in tomorrow, maybe.”

Keith shifts his weight from one foot to the other. His eyes shift past her to the mirror, to his own
tired, scared reflection, to the hair hanging in choppy tufts around his face.

He just wants to go back to bed and undo the last hour.

“Okay,” he whispers.

Five minutes later he's sitting on one of the stools from the island, his hair dampened with a wet
comb, facing the mirror and watching while Colleen wraps a big fluffy towel around his shoulders.
He feels twitchy and anxious, too much energy humming under his skin, and the tiny irritating
pinpricks of the hair clippings that have gotten under his clothing feel like hot needles. There's a
container like a little suitcase open on the counter, full of gleaming things Keith is trying not to look
at too closely.

“Hmm,” says Colleen, tugging at the towel, her face scrunched up with dissatisfaction. “I wish I had
a clip or something. I guess you'll have to rinse off afterwards anyway…”

She leaves off fussing with the towel and turns her attention to Keith's hair instead. “Ready?” she
asks, and Keith nods hastily. “All right,” she says, and shuffles her hands up through the hair on both
sides of Keith's head, staring consideringly at his reflection. “Do you like it a little long?”

It's been so long since Keith was expected to have an answer to this question that he stumbles
mentally. “I don't-- I don't know?”

Colleen hums thoughtfully. “I can do something a little like Matt's, if you want. It'll be shorter, just
because of what's left to work with here, but I think it'll look good.”

Keith doesn't realize right away that it's a question, not until Colleen has been looking at him
expectantly for a moment. “Oh,” he says, and feels his cheeks burning. “Okay, that's…”

“That sounds okay?” Colleen asks to be sure, her eyebrows up.

“Yeah,” says Keith. “Sure, yeah.”

“Okay,” says Colleen. She leans forward to dig through the tiny suitcase on the counter, her hand
resting on the nape of Keith’s neck. There's the slightest pressure--
--and he’s too stunned to resist; the hand spanning the back of his neck is bearing down, and he cries out as his forehead impacts the counter and is held there, pressed down with bruising force and trapped--

--and then she's stepping back again with a pair of scissors, the kind with a little curl off the handle. “Here we go,” she says. It’s a question, and Keith swallows back the sick feeling and clenches his jaw to stop his teeth chattering, and he nods.

Colleen is quick and confident with the scissors, and Keith watches the wreck of his hair shift into neatness as the floor turns dark with tiny damp locks. The cold flat part of the scissors grazes the shell of his ear once, and he flinches and shuts his eyes.

“How’s it going?” she asks, and he nods tightly.

This is fine. It's fine. As long as he focuses on his surroundings, on the fact that Shiro's just over in the other room, he can get through this. He’s still shivering, deep rhythmic waves of shudders that well up with every breath from somewhere in his core.

“You’re doing good, sweetie,” she murmurs, and Keith realizes with a rush of shame that she can tell. “Just gonna clean up around the bottom and then we’ll be done, okay?”

Almost done, he thinks. Almost done. He swallows and nods and keeps his eyes tightly shut.

Colleen runs a hand soothingly over his back and draws away for a moment. Keith can hear soft metallic clinks and shifts as she rummages around in the kit, and he pulls the towel tighter around himself. He feels her hand on his back again a moment later, gentle warning before something cold and toothed and strangely heavy settles at the nape of his neck.

He has time to realize and pull a breath, and then the trimmer is whirring and buzzing and he’s--

--crying and fighting because it hurts, it hurts, it’s too hot and it’s drawing lines in scorching heat up his scalp and he can’t move; there’s pain where his head is pinned against the hard counter; there’s pain in his back and his legs from the forced position; there’s pain where the hand is crushing him down by the back of the neck.

He braces his hands against the counter’s edge and pushes, kicking out blindly at the man behind him. There’s the satisfying thud of impact, his heel to a shin, and a sharp intake of breath--

“Fuckin’--”

--and the pressure on his neck increases, fingers digging in until he whimpers and goes still.

“Seriously this would take about three seconds if you’d fuckin’ hold still-- I should just leave it like this, then you could be bald on one side and nit-infested on the other. Is that what you want? You want me to just leave it like this? God.”

It hurts, he tries to say; you’re hurting me-- but it comes out garbled with a sob and then he’s crying again while the man’s weight pins him down and the overheated metal of the electric trimmer glides searingly over the sensitive skin of his scalp and the buzzing settles in the deep places of his ears like a hundred furious insects--

--and Colleen is saying his name urgently, and he’s three feet away from where he was a second ago, cowering against the wall, and he can’t get his breath, he can’t breathe--

“Keith,” she says again, “Keith, it’s okay, baby, it’s okay, I put it away, I’m not gonna hurt you. I’m
She’s got both her hands up when Keith can focus again, empty palms out, her eyes wide and worried. He realizes abruptly that he’s whimpering; he closes his mouth and swallows back the sound, but he still can’t get enough air, he’s still--

Colleen takes a step forward, showing her hands; Keith doesn’t move and she takes another--and then she is gathering him in, holding him tightly, and his knees are buckling and she’s helping him down to sit on the floor.

“I’m not gonna hurt you,” she repeats, a quiet cycle of words that wraps around him, reminds him where he is. “Big breaths for me, okay? In deep… out.”

Keith knows this one and he breathes obediently--but he can’t quite find the rhythm, he’s stuttering on every inhale, and every exhale wants to reverse to a gasp.


He tries, he tries; he’s almost crying with the frustration and the residual panic. His shoulders bow forward; he shudders and wheezes and hiccups while she kneels next to him on the rug.

“Breathe down here, alright?” she says finally, reaching out to press her flat palm lightly against his stomach. He flinches in surprise, clutching reflexively at her wrist with both hands, but her hand is loose in his. “Okay?” she asks, lifting her hand slightly and bending her head down to get a look at his face.

He relaxes his tight, scared grip on her hand and nods.

“Okay,” she says again, her voice still quiet and even, resettling her hand gently. “Big breaths, big tummy breaths, ready? I’m gonna breathe with you. In… out…”

She presses down on the exhale. It’s a weird feeling, air continuing to leave his lungs without him doing any extra work, but he shuts his eyes and focuses on not fighting it.

“In,” she says, and the pressure lifts. “Try to push your tummy into my hand when you’re breathing in, okay? And out.”

He nods quickly, eyes still shut, hands still gripping hers. He’s going to be very embarrassed tomorrow, he registers dimly, but his heart is still drumming a runaway rhythm on the inside of his ribcage and his lungs are still hitching at every opportunity; he’s drowning and he’s just been tossed a rope.

She keeps talking quietly, keeps pressing and releasing. Keith concentrates on breathing with her, focuses on the warm wide point of contact above his belly-button--and he begins to realize two things after a moment: first, that she’s been gradually slowing down the rhythm of their breathing since they started; second, that he is very, very tired.

“Good job, sweetie,” she whispers when he’s managed two minutes of even breathing, and lifts her hands from his stomach and back so that she can hug him tightly. “Good job. I’m so sorry.”

He’s too worn out to do anything but hide his face in her shoulder. He could almost fall asleep there, but she’s urging him up to his feet after a moment. He sniffles and swipes at his nose, tugging his pajama shirt straight self-consciously.
Colleen fingers at the untrimmed hair at the back of his neck, and Keith tenses, watching her face in the mirror. She doesn’t look entirely satisfied, but after a moment she says, “It could be better, but it’s good enough, I think. We can fix it up a little more tomorrow or Sunday, if you want. I can show Shiro how to do it.”

Keith privately thinks it would be fine with him if he never gets another haircut as long as he lives, but he nods. “Thanks, Mrs Holt,” he murmurs after a small hesitation.

“Sheeetie,” she says, grinning at him tiredly in the mirror, and kisses the top of his head. “Colleen.”

“Okay,” he agrees shyly, wrapping his arms around his ribs. She combs through his hair with her fingers for a moment, admiring her work, then pats his shoulders and says, “Okay, let’s clean up.”

Cleaning up consists of Keith standing awkwardly while Colleen sweeps and vacuums again and packs away Commander Holt’s haircut kit. “You probably don’t have another pair of pajamas with you, do you?” she asks, eyeing him critically. He shakes his head, and she hmms, brushing loose hair clippings away from his collar. “Yeah, you’re not gonna want to try to sleep in those. Tell you what…” She pauses, glancing at the door. “Go ahead and hop in the shower and rinse off, and I’ll go see what I can find for you, okay?”

Keith doesn’t really want to take a shower, but he’s painfully itchy, so he nods.

Colleen opens a cupboard and pulls down a clean towel and hands it to him, then pauses. “Gonna be alright?”

“Yeah,” says Keith, blushing. “Thanks.”

“Okay,” she says. “I’ll be right outside if you need anything.”

“Thanks,” he says again, shifting his weight.

She kisses his forehead and slips out, closing the door behind her.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve started posting WIP snippets and previews on tumblr for those of you who are interested in such things!
Shiro is good at sleeping. It’s a skill left over from basic training: he can fall asleep anywhere at any time for as long as he needs, and he can sleep through about anything. Still, he keeps in the back of his sleeping mind an awareness of his surroundings, a knowledge of what should or should not be happening—and the front door opening in the middle of the night, barely five feet from where Keith is sleeping, falls solidly into the second category.

He sits straight up, reaching: he doesn’t have a bat or anything at hand that could really pass for a weapon, but the lamp on the table has a sturdy base, and he closes his hand around the narrowest part and waits.

There’s a thump from the hallway outside the door, a hissed curse, and Shiro holds his breath—and then the dim amber security light outside the door outlines a face in profile, and the tension drains out of him all at once. “Colleen?” he asks in a whisper.

“Shiro?” she asks, not whispering. “Crap, crap, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“It’s fine,” he says, bewildered, and then hisses and covers his eyes as she immediately puts the lie to the remorse in her tone by turning on the light. “Ow, ow, don’t, Keith’s sleeping!”

“He’s not,” she says, and Shiro squints at the short couch. “It’s okay,” Colleen assures him hastily, before the jolt of alarm at finding Keith’s sleeping place empty has time to really manifest. “He’s just in the shower.”

“The shower,” he repeats. He can hear the water running down the hall, now that he’s listening for it. “What—”

She’s carrying a box, he realizes, and she’s a little breathless with the effort. She drops it with a dull heavy thud on the floor next to the short couch and pushes it toward the coffee table with her foot. “There,” she says, and dusts her hands off with satisfaction, then narrows one eye at Shiro. “Were you planning to bean me with that lamp?”

“No,” says Shiro guiltily, releasing it. “Maybe.”

“Lord,” she remarks, lifting her eyebrows. “Teach me to go sneaking around in the middle of the night. Here, help me find something pajama-ish.”

She’s already kneeling next to the box, peeling the cardboard flaps back from where they are interfolded with each other. Shiro slides down automatically to join her, rubbing his eyes. “What’s—Why is Keith in the shower?”

Colleen begins to sift through a stack of tightly-folded clothing. “Well,” she starts, and pauses.

“Did something happen?” asks Shiro, wondering how he slept through it. “What’s-- is he okay?”

“He’s fine,” she says, glancing up at him. “He’s fine, nothing’s, um…” She pauses, and winces. “He tried to give himself a haircut.”

Shiro isn’t sure what he was expecting, but it definitely wasn’t that. He sits back, puzzled.
Colleen winces again. “Um,” she says. “He’s got a thing about getting haircuts, turns out.”

“A thing?”

“A… pretty major phobia.”

Shiro takes a minute, making the connection between this information and the way Keith had stiffened up and closed off when he offered to make the appointment. “Oh,” he says, something sinking in his chest. He rubs his hands over his face, feeling tired and slow and stupid. “Oh.”

Colleen digs out a t-shirt and considers it, rubbing the fabric between her fingers, then sets it on the couch. “He let me fix his hair,” she says, focusing on the box as she starts shuffling through again. “It doesn’t look as neat as it could, but it’s within Garrison regulations, so.”

“Thanks,” says Shiro. He watches without really seeing as she unearthed a pair of basketball shorts that look roughly Keith’s size.

“He did really well with it,” Colleen continues steadily. “But I pulled out the electric clippers to clean it up a little bit and it-- um, it triggered some kind of panic attack when I turned it on.”

Shiro goes cold. He glances down the hall toward the bathroom. “Is he--”

“He’s okay,” she says. “We got through it. He’s a trooper. I taught him tummy-breathing, so he’ll…” She draws and releases a deep breath, and suddenly looks very tired. “He’ll hopefully be a little more equipped, next time…”

“Thank you,” Shiro says again. He rubs a hand over his face. “Thanks for-- for taking care of him, I’m sorry it was…”

Colleen sits up a little straighter and smiles. “No,” she says. “Don’t be sorry, I’m glad I could help. He’s a sweetheart.”

“Yeah,” says Shiro, a lump in his throat. “Yeah.”

“Anyway,” Colleen says. “There was… hair, everywhere, so he’s showering and I’m hunting down clean pajamas. I’m glad you’re awake. I think he’s-- probably gonna want you, when he gets out.”

Shiro nods quickly. He can’t bring himself to look at her directly; the failure is making his breath come short.

“Hey,” she says, and reaches across the box to squeeze his upper arm. “You’re doing great with him, okay? I mean it.”

He glances up and shifts where he sits, finding a smile. “Thanks,” he answers, and looks down again. “I want to be.”

“You are,” says Colleen firmly. “That little boy loves you.” She lets her hand fall away and reaches for the pajamas, folding them neatly and stacking them in her lap. “Alright. You got him?”

“Yeah,” Shiro says.

“Alright,” she says again, and sighs. “I’m gonna give these to him and then head back to bed, then.”

“Okay,” says Shiro. He rubs a hand over the side of his face and gets to his feet, pushing the box toward the wall to sort through tomorrow. “I’m gonna heat up some milk, I think.”
“That’s a good idea,” says Colleen. She stays sitting for another moment, then pushes herself to her feet wearily, covering a yawn. “‘Night, Shiro.”

“‘Night, Colleen,” he answers.

He turns on the over-the-stove light in the kitchen instead of the main one: the illumination is a little warmer, a little less direct, a little more conducive to sleeping soon. He pours soy milk into a saucepan and turns the heat to low, then digs until he finds the box of chamomile tea in the cupboard. There’s only one bag left, because of course there is; he glares at the empty box absently and drops the last teabag into the milk to steep. There’s a tiny, precious jar of honey in the very back of the cupboard, hoarded from Christmas two years ago, half-gone and beginning to sugar at the edges: he pauses, and pulls it down.

The kitchen is starting to smell good when he hears the bathroom door open down the hall. He steps down off the single stool and crosses to the stove to pour the milk into two mugs. When he turns around, Keith is standing on the carpet outside the kitchen, his eyes big and startled and-- scared, maybe? Guilty? He rocks back slightly when Shiro turns toward him, a wary almost-flinch that hurts to see.

“Hey, bud,” Shiro says, smiling to cover his dismay, and offers him one of the mugs.

“Hey,” Keith responds, and hesitates before stepping forward to accept the milk. His voice is soft and shy, and his eyes on Shiro’s face are still watchful, so Shiro cants his head slightly and takes a moment to look at Keith’s new hair.

It’s short in the back and on the sides, a little longer on top. It’s a bit choppy in places, but the look comes across as more deliberate than anything a twelve-year-old with a pair of kitchen scissors could effect. Colleen knows what she’s doing, that’s certain, and Shiro doesn’t have to stretch at all for an approving grin. “It looks really good, Keith.”

Keith takes and releases a breath, quick and shaky. “You’re not-- you’re not mad?”

“No, bud, no,” says Shiro. He picks up his mug and reaches to wrap his arm around Keith’s shoulders. “Not even a little bit. Come on, let’s go sit.”

Keith lets himself be led out to the living room, but he hesitates a little before sitting down next to Shiro, and he sits forward with his elbows on his knees instead of close like usual. “You’re really…?” he asks again anxiously.

“I’m not mad,” Shiro says again. He reaches out to rub his palm up and down the hunched slope of Keith’s spine. “I promise.”

Keith looks down at his milk, apprehension still evident in every line of his body. Shiro watches him for a moment, then grimaces.

“I’m a little upset,” he admits. He feels the minute flinch that ripples across Keith’s shoulders at the words and says quickly, “No, no, not at you! Not at you, I’m sorry. I’m upset at myself.”

“Why?” asks Keith, confused.

Shiro draws a breath. “Because,” he says, and pauses. “Because I could tell you weren’t comfortable with going to get a haircut, and I just… hoped it would end up being all right, instead of making sure. I should have made sure.”
Keith swallows, not looking up. He finally shrugs. “It’s not—” he begins, and has to clear his throat. “I’m sorry.”

It’s Shiro’s turn to be confused now. “Hey, no, why?”

“’Cause it’s…” Keith starts, and shrugs again. “You were-- you were trying to do something nice and I—”

“No, hey,” says Shiro, leaning forward to sit like Keith, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. “No, that’s-- Listen…” He pauses, trying to put his thoughts into order. “I don’t-- I don’t ever want to put you into a situation you’re not ready for, okay? Whether that’s coming to spend time with people you don’t know, or going to let a stranger cut your hair, if it’s… if you’re not comfortable, I want to know, I want to help.”

Keith doesn’t answer for a moment. He’s hunched low over his milk, not looking at Shiro. He finally shifts and wipes at his nose. “It’s just a fucking haircut, I don’t know why…”

“Oh, bud,” murmurs Shiro, and sighs. He sets his milk down on the coffee table in front of them and scoots a little closer to Keith, gathering him in. Keith takes a shuddery breath and presses close, curling in like he’s desperate for the contact.

Shiro rubs his back in small circles, breathing deep; after a moment he feels Keith doing the same, matching him inhale for inhale while his free hand fists in Shiro’s t-shirt.

“Sometimes…” Shiro begins, then pauses. He's groping in a dark room; there's something here, something whose shape he knows but has never seen. He rests his chin on the top of Keith's head. “Sometimes if something happens that hurts us or scares us in-- in ways that we're not able to handle, sometimes our brains kind of… do everything they can to make sure we aren't hurt like that again. Only they're not very good at it sometimes, because sometimes they think normal, ordinary situations--like haircuts, maybe? They think those situations are dangerous because there's something about them that makes us think of a-- a bad time, and maybe we don’t even remember what the bad time was, but our brains still know. And so they get us ready to fight, or run, or hide, and that's something brains are really good at, so sometimes we can… sort of get lost in it.”

Keith is quiet and still against him. After a moment he releases Shiro's t-shirt and swipes at his eyes, sniffing. It's as good as an answer, and something in Shiro can breathe again, knowing that he's on the right track.

He keeps his hand moving on Keith's back, up and down his shoulders. “It’s not something to be embarrassed about,” he says finally. “You don’t have to be ashamed, okay? It just means… it just means you survived some bad things.”

There’s no answer. Shiro pulls back a little after a moment, enough that he can check to see if Keith fell asleep on him--but Keith looks back at him, eyes dark in the dim light, his face pale and tear-streaked and tired. Tired, but not sleepy.

Shiro pauses. “Do you want to talk about it?” he asks at last, very gently.

Keith’s face disappears, tucked back down out of sight. Shiro waits, but the silence stretches and the answer gradually becomes apparent.

He draws a deep breath and reaches down the couch for the blanket. Keith’s thick hair is still damp. He’d been radiating heat fresh from the shower, but now, even curled up against Shiro, his skin is beginning to be clammy and chilled. “If you ever do want to talk about it,” Shiro murmurs, pulling
the blanket over both of their laps and wrapping it carefully around Keith, “I’ll be here, okay?”

There’s silence, and Shiro doesn’t really expect to get an answer--but then Keith nods, just a tiny movement.

Shiro goes still. Then he smooths a hand over the crown of Keith’s damp head, leans forward to pick up his milk, and draws Keith back with him to settle into the couch. Keith squirms in closer and pulls up his knees to tuck his bare feet under the blanket.

They sit together and drink their milk, sharing silence and stillness and warmth, until the lateness of the hour and the heaviness of the night’s events finally wear Keith down to a limp weight propped up by Shiro’s shoulder.

“Think you could sleep?” Shiro asks him quietly, and Keith sighs and nods. His eyes slip shut for a moment; then he draws a deep breath and gathers himself, pushing himself to sit up and forward.

Shiro reaches out and takes the empty mug out of his hands, setting it on the coffee table with his, and curls an arm around Keith’s back to steady him as he gets to his feet.

“I got it,” mumbles Keith, vaguely cranky, and Shiro sits back and tries not to smile as Keith struggles, sleep-clumsy, with the blanket tangled around him.

“Here,” he says, and turns on the end table lamp so Keith can better see what he’s doing. “Got it?”

Keith extricates himself from the blanket, gooseflesh already rising on his bare arms and legs, and picks his way around the coffee table to the short couch.

“Let's trade blankets,” says Shiro, getting up to follow him. “This one's already warm, why don't you take it.”

Keith doesn't protest as Shiro drapes the blanket over his shoulders, just pulls it hungrily around himself, but he does roll his eyes a little when Shiro asks, “Gonna be warm enough?”

“M fine, Shiro,” he grumps.

“Okay, okay okay,” says Shiro, laughing under his breath, and swoops down to hug him tightly while Keith complains and squirms, trapped in his blanket burrito. “Sleep good, bud. Love you.”

It just slips out, easy and thoughtless as breathing; he doesn’t register until he’s released Keith and is halfway back to the kitchen with their empty mugs that Keith has frozen up where he stands. Shiro glances across at him in confusion, catches a split second of startled, painfully vulnerable eye-contact--then Keith closes his mouth hastily and crawls under the blankets on the short couch, hidden by the back of the couch from Shiro’s line of sight.

Shiro stands still, still holding the cups, bewildered, mentally rewinding--

Oh.

There’s a moment, a very peculiar kind of quiet panic, in which Shiro doesn’t know what to do. There’s an apology forming on the tip of his tongue and a breath he can’t quite take, because he didn’t stop to consider if Keith was ready to hear that, because he didn’t stop to consider at all. That had been wariness in Keith’s eyes, wariness and incomprehension and a strange sort of fear that Shiro thinks he understands and wishes he didn’t.

But he’d meant the words, even if he hadn’t consciously meant to speak them.
He closes his mouth, and he turns to put the mugs and the saucepan in the dishwasher. He takes a little longer than he needs to, straightening the already-neat kitchen, wiping the spotless counters. When he finally returns to the living room, Keith is already asleep, or pretending to be.

Shiro pauses for a moment, then turns off the lamp and unfolds a blanket to do the same.

Chapter End Notes

:O

thank you guys so much for your comments and encouragements and tumblr messages in the middle of the night! I appreciate you more than you know!! <3

as always, feel free to come chat at me about voltron or cats or Pretty Literally Anything.
Chapter 29

Keith sleeps badly.

He tosses and turns, hears Shiro doing the same. The sky outside the big window on the east side of the living room is getting light by the time Shiro is finally quiet and still, maybe an hour later; Keith manages to doze off shortly after, but is startled awake by somebody using the bathroom down the hall, and after that sleep is a lost cause entirely.

He pulls the blankets up over his head anyway, unwilling to acknowledge the brightening windows or the apartment slowly coming to life around him. He can hear somebody moving around quietly in the kitchen: he can hear water running, the kettle beeping, the click-pop of the toaster. Then there are more people, and he can hear soft snatches of conversation: Colleen’s even alto voice, low and barely audible; Matt’s clear easy tenor, the words more distinct; the commander’s murmur.

“…wanted to show her the Turing collection for sure…” Matt is saying, and Keith vaguely remembers seeing a flyer for an exhibit at the museum in town.

“…thought we could cook out tonight…”

“…still sleeping?”

“Keep it down, they had a late night last night…”

Keith covers his ears and turns on his side, facing the back of the couch. The air under the blankets is getting warm and humid and stale, so he makes a tiny opening in front of his mouth and shuts everything else out.

He must finally sleep, because the next thing that breaks into his awareness is a soft pressure on his shoulder, shaking him gently awake. There’s a brief, disoriented flare of alarm--but there’s a comfortable familiarity in the big hand rubbing his arm to wake him up, and the voice saying his name is one that his heart recognizes before his mind.

Still, he was asleep.

“Go away,” he says, or tries to. It comes out kind of garbled.

“Come on, bud,” says Shiro, plucking at the blanket covering Keith’s face. “I know you’re sleepy but you gotta get up.”

Keith pulls the blanket tightly back down before Shiro can pull it away. “Nooo,” he moans. “Lemme alooone…”

Shiro’s voice turns wheedling. “I made eggs,” he says. “And bacon, and there’s muffins.”

This is tempting. Keith contemplates it sleepily, but he’s half-drowsing again before he’s come to a conclusion.

Shiro gives him a moment, his hand still moving gently on Keith’s shoulder, and Keith begins to think he might be allowed to sleep again, but then Shiro is shaking him again. “Come on,” he urges,
and, “I know, bud, I know,” when Keith moans unhappily. “It’s past lunchtime, though, if you sleep too much later you won’t be able to sleep tonight.”

Keith definitely has never cared less about anything in his life. Right now he’s warm and comfortable and sleepy and Shiro is trying to make him get up. He curls his knees up stubbornly and keeps his tight grip on his blanket.

He hears Shiro make a considering noise, and the hand lifts from his arm. He has enough time for a sigh of relief, enough time to relax and begin to find the soft peaceful place on this side of sleep--

--and then there’s fingers worming under the blanket to reach him, dancing across his ribs and the soft part of his side with cunning, devastating accuracy and intent, and Keith howls with indignation and despair.

There’s no sleeping after that.

Keith struggles free of the blanket and rolls onto his back, landing a solid kick that makes Shiro grunt and reel backwards, tickling paused for long enough that Keith can find his feet and tackle him. He’s too small, he suspects in the back of his mind, to actually be making Shiro stagger and topple like that; he suspects that Shiro might be playing. Then Shiro’s pulling him down with him and they’re wrestling on the carpet, all elbows and knees, dramatic groaning and flailing and breathless, unintended laughter.

It ends with Shiro sprawled out on the floor in defeat, limbs akimbo and eyes shut, wheezing while Keith perches heavily on his stomach. “That’s what you get,” Keith says vindictively, “for waking me up when I’m sleeping.”

Shiro cracks an eye at this and wonders, “When else am I supposed to wake you up?”

This, Keith suspects, is a trap.

“All right,” Shiro says at last with a sigh, and sits up, displacing Keith with almost alarming ease. “Eggs are gonna get cold if we don’t eat them soon.” He gets to his feet and offers Keith a hand up as well. Keith debates for a beat, then accepts the help: Shiro’s arm settling warm around his shoulders almost makes up for being woken up so rudely. Almost.

Climbing up to sit on the swiveling stool at the island brings back the vivid sense-memory of sitting on the same stool last night while Colleen clipped his hair. He lifts his hand to feel at his head, vaguely discomfited by the unfamiliar bare feeling of his neck, and at the same time realizes that the apartment is… very quiet.

“Where is everybody?” he asks, watching Shiro scoop eggs from a skillet onto two plates.

“Ahh, town,” Shiro answers. “There was a thing at the museum, I guess? If you want to go, we can, I just figured you’d probably rather have a few more hours of sleep.”

Keith considers it briefly, compares the prospect of educational outings to the peaceful afternoon quiet of the empty apartment.

There’s really no contest.

“That’s okay,” he says, reaching to accept the plate Shiro slides across the island to him. There’s cheese in the egg scramble, it looks like, and little dark flecks of pepper, and two slices of bacon on the side of the plate.
“Breakfast,” says Shiro. “Or I guess late lunch? Whatever.” He's opening the cupboard where the painkillers live and taking down a little bottle.

Keith watches him shake out a pill and swallow it with coffee, worry stirring. He remembers Shiro's funny snores in the first half of the night last night. “Are you sick?” he asks anxiously.

“Nah,” says Shiro. “Lactose. Cheese is usually fine but some things you don’t want to risk.”

Keith has no idea what this means. Shiro glances at him, grins a little sheepishly, and confides in a loud whisper, “Gives me the farts.”

Keith is overcome by snickers.

Shiro makes them coffee--coffee and almost-coffee, anyway--and comes around to sit with Keith while he eats his own eggs. Keith's giggles have finally run out, after two more bouts triggered by the thought of Shiro saying the word fart and one by Shiro glancing at him slyly and making a long rude sputter with the side of his mouth.

Keith finishes his eggs and sits, swinging his legs absentely and drinking from his mug while Shiro eats. He reaches up again to touch his hair, frowning a little at the strange new feel of it.

“Whatcha thinking?” Shiro asks, watching him, and Keith drops his hand hastily, feeling his face heat.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Nothing, I guess.”

“Do you like it?” Shiro asks, nodding at his hair.

“Yeah,” Keith says, “I guess--I mean, yeah.”

Shiro is quiet for a thoughtful moment. He cuts a piece of egg through with the side of his fork. “I’m proud of you,” he says finally, glancing at Keith again.

Keith doesn’t move. The shame of the night’s events comes rushing back, and for a moment he’s sick to his stomach and overwhelmed. He stares down at the steaming, milky surface of his not-coffee.

“I am,” says Shiro, gentle and persistent, dipping his head down to try to catch Keith’s eye. “You were scared, you must’ve been so scared, but you let her help you, even though you don’t know her very well yet. That must have been really hard.”

This is cheating, Keith thinks; Shiro is cheating, or he is, maybe; somebody somehow has spun everything all upside-down and inside-out and back again so that what Shiro is saying is almost an accurate version of what happened, almost --but not quite. He avoids the man’s eyes, frowning while his shoulders hunch up.

*Love you.*

His heart twists and seizes; there’s a moment where everything hurts. The problem, Keith realizes with sudden sharp-edged clarity, is that Shiro thinks he’s somebody he’s not. Shiro thinks he’s brave, and he’s not brave; Shiro thinks he’s smart, and he’s not smart.

He wishes, desperately, that he knew how to turn into the person Shiro thinks he is.

Shiro’s hand lands lightly on his back, and Keith feels his shoulders jerk in a flinch that he didn’t
mean, he never means. He fills his lungs and pushes back against it, just a little, so Shiro will know.

And Shiro understands. His hand flattens as Keith sways into it, the weight of it going firmer and more sure. It sweeps in a broad circle, and Keith closes his eyes.

“I know you don’t want to talk about it,” Shiro says quietly. “It’s okay, I’m not asking you to. I just wanted you to know.”

This is the sort of thing that needs a response, but Keith doesn’t know how to answer. He sits miserably still with his head ducked low until Shiro finally squeezes his shoulder gently, lets his hand fall away, and goes to clean up.

***

The bonfire that night is bright and gold under the vast, vast desert sky.

“There they are!” somebody calls, and Matt sprints up to meet them, holding skewers.

“Holy,” says Shiro, taking a step back with his hands out. “Didn’t they ever tell you not to run with sharp things?”

“Here,” says Matt, out of breath, and hands a skewer to each of them. “Hot dogs.”

Keith stares at his skewer blankly. He tilts his head to look up at Shiro as Matt pelts away toward the bonfire again, and Shiro laughs in sheer delight: at the bewildered look on Keith’s face, at the absurdity of the greeting, at the beauty of the cloudless, star-filled sky.

“Come on,” he says. “It’ll make sense in a minute.”

“All right,” says Keith doubtfully, and trails after him.

They’re not hot dogs, precisely; they’re some kind of fancy sausage Colleen and Katie brought from the city. The ones already cooking smell amazing, whatever they are, and Shiro shows Keith how to spear a link on his skewer and hold it a little over the fire to cook.

Colleen wanders over and grabs Keith up in a tight hug from behind. “Ohh, it looks even better dry!” she exclaims, already inspecting his haircut with proud enthusiasm. “You have the softest hair of anybody I’ve ever met. Are you part chinchilla?”

Shiro catches his lower lip between his teeth and watches carefully, but Keith is just grinning shy confusion, his shoulders hunching up all the way to his ears when Colleen tickles the side of his neck. He’s all but glowing under the affectionate attention, and Shiro decides he's all right.

He turns away, his curiosity snared by an interesting tech set-up just outside the ring of firelight. Matt and Katie are huddled close around the screen, their faces ominously underlit by the green glow.

“What are you doing?” Shiro asks, coming around to look over their shoulders.

“Tracking the station,” says Katie, and Shiro realizes he's looking at the space station’s orbit on her screen. “We've got about half an hour until the next flyover.”

Shiro squints. “Can't you just track it with the app?”

Identical incredulous, pitying expressions stare back at him.

“Uhh,” says Shiro, looking between them, and guesses, “Bad suggestion?”
“The app,” says Katie with dignity, returning her attention to her screen, “is for civilians.”

“Oh,” Shiro says meekly. “My mistake.”

Matt’s got his tablet out. “The app lags,” he says, turning the screen so Shiro can see it. “We figured that out during Dad’s mission last summer. It’s based on projection instead of live data.”

“So you’re looking for the station in one place and it’s actually already twenty degrees further west,” says Katie, typing. “Ok, there, it’ll alert us when we need to start walking.”

“Cool,” says Matt, and gets to his feet. “Come on, I don’t want our hot dogs to burn.”

It’s too late for one of the sausages, and Matt inspects it regretfully. A set of bright headlights cut across the desert, momentarily washing out the glow of the fire as the car they belong to parks next to Shiro’s bike.

Katie yelps, “Dad!” and goes pelting off into the darkness to meet him as the headlights switch off. There’s an exaggerated off of impact, a groan, and Sam comes walking toward the bonfire, Katie riding piggy-back and clutching a bag of s’mores ingredients.

“I don’t know if she was more excited to see me or the marshmallows,” says Sam when he reaches them, bending back to let her down.

“The marshmallows,” Katie says, promptly and without remorse. “The chocolate was a close second, though.”

Sam clutches his chest. “A hit! A palpable hit!”

“It’s okay,” says Colleen, patting his arm. “I still like you.”

“You like me better with chocolate, though,” Sam says mournfully.

“Well…”

“Oh my god,” says Matt under his breath. Even in the tricky light of the fire Shiro can see that his ears are bright red.

Colleen clicks her tongue. “Listen, you,” she says, swatting the back of Matt’s head, “it wasn’t there until you took it there, so I have no pity for you.”

Keith is watching, following the conversation with keen dark eyes and a puzzled expression, so Shiro clears his throat and asks to distract him, “Is that hot dog about done?”

“Um,” says Keith, looking at his skewer. “I don’t know. Maybe?”

Colleen swoops in with a hot dog bun. “Looks good! Here, let me…”

“Hey,” says Katie, outraged. “Matt! Give me back my hot dog!”

“That is your hot dog!”

“That’s your hot dog. Mine wasn’t burned!”

There’s a brief, heartfelt tussle—but then Sam says, “Guys,” and they break apart in confusion. Sam’s tone is a little more quelling than Shiro would have expected, given that Matt was already laughingly surrendering, but he understands a second later, and sees the guilty start when Matt does
too: Keith has gone worried and wide-eyed, distracted from where Colleen is helping him fix his hot
dog.

“Sorry, Dad,” says Matt. “Just messing around.”

“You want mustard, Keith?” Colleen asks, and Keith, his attention redirected, stares in deep
confusion at the bottle.

“That's,” he begins, and pauses. “I… don't think that's mustard?”

Katie points at them across the fire and says in tones of deep vindication, “Ha.”

Colleen is already laughing, bent nearly double. “No, it is, it is, I promise, here, taste it.”

Keith balks. “What's in it though.”

“It's mustard, it's just mustard seeds, they're good, they sort of pop--”

“I don’t think you're selling it, Colleen,” says Sam, reaching for the ketchup to doctor up his own hot
dog bun. “Shiro?” he asks, and passes the bottle when Shiro nods.

“I'll take the mustard too if Keith doesn't want it,” Shiro says, and Keith decides, after watching
suspiciously as Shiro helps himself, that maybe he'll try it after all.

Conversation trickles off as they eat, no sound but the crackling of the fire and a few nightbirds: two
distant owls, talking back and forth over the desert, and something that makes a peculiar call halfway
between a buzz and a beep, something that Matt casually identifies as a pterodactyl and Colleen calls
a nightjar.

The temperature is dropping rapidly, the heat of the day leeching away with no moisture in the
ground to hold it, and Shiro keeps half an eye on Keith. He seems content enough, licking mustard
and sausage-grease off his fingers, but a slight breeze picks up to disturb the comfortable puddle of
bonfire-heat, and it isn’t long before he’s shivering.

“Be right back,” Shiro murmurs to him, and gets up to return to the bike. The hoodie is rolled up in
the storage compartment, still a little warm from the engine, and Shiro brushes it off and turns back
the way he came.

The picture gives him pause: the four Holts and Keith clustered around the fire, amber-lit under the
cloudless sky, the stars pressing close. It puts a keen, sharp hurt in his chest, like something larger
than himself is trying to unfurl in his lungs; it’s like the ache when he visits his grandfather’s grave,
like the wonder of a sunrise from space. It’s like something has slotted into place that he forgot he
was missing.

He stands for a moment, then looks down at the sweatshirt in his hands and circles around to rejoin
them.

Keith looks up at him when he returns, grinning bright. Shiro holds the hoodie so that he can squirm
into it, then sits down with him, chafing his arms to warm him up. Keith makes a vague grumbling
noise, but he doesn’t pull away, and his eyes drift shut for a second in bliss.

“It’s time,” says Katie abruptly, and a half-second later the alarm from her laptop is beeping, and the
peace is gone.

Sam gets to his feet, packing away the leftover sausages and hot dog buns, tucking the condiment
bottles next to them in the cooler. Matt is helping Katie gather up her equipment. Colleen is considering the embers of the fire. “It’s fine for ten minutes, right?”

“Yeah,” says Sam. “There's nothing to burn out here, and we won’t go too far.”

“And we still have to do s’mores,” Matt adds. “We can’t leave without doing s’mores.”

“What’re we--” Keith begins, and turns a bewildered, apprehensive look on Shiro. “What’s--?”

He looks half-scared, getting automatically to his feet and turning in place, so Shiro messes up his hair and pulls him close in a quick, reassuring hug. “We’re gonna go see the space station,” he says. “And then we’re gonna come back here and make s’mores.”

“Oh,” says Keith, and, “What’s s’mores?”

“What’s s’mores,” repeats Matt, aghast. “Shiro!”

Shiro pauses. “Yeah, we’re gonna fix that.”

“What is it, though?” Keith asks, his eyes darting nervously between them.

Katie says, already walking out away from the fire, “It hurts a lot.”

“Katie,” scolds Colleen, and Katie snickers unapologetically.

Keith’s eyes have gone big and uncertain, so Shiro reassures him, “It doesn’t.” He tugs gently to get Keith to walk with him. “It’s a treat you make on a bonfire. You’ll like it, I promise. But come on, stars first.”

Keith falls into step, keeping close. They bring up the rear of the little troop, Katie and Matt forging forward ahead, Sam and Colleen walking hand-in-hand in the middle. It’s dark, and there’s no moon, but the ground is level and easy to traverse. They round the mesa and are abruptly in shadow, no light from the town or the campfire to interfere with their view of the sky.

Shiro breathes deep lungfuls of the cold air, reveling in the strange glad giddiness that comes with walking at night. The ground is dark beneath their feet; the only indication of the world around them is the shape of the land against the stars. It’s the closest thing on Earth to being in space, and his heart is beating with excitement and longing.

“This is good,” says Matt, up ahead, and they’re slowing to a stop. There’s no sound but the soft crunch of gravel as somebody shifts their weight, the quiet human noises of breathing.

“Where are we looking?” asks Colleen, her voice hushed in the stillness.

“Straight ahead,” says Katie. “About fifteen degrees north from that big mesa, it should be just rising...”

Silence falls again as they search. Shiro lets his eyes unfocus, drifting unhurriedly across the right general area of the sky, watching for anomalous movement.

There.

He takes a breath, his heart lurching with happy recognition of the tiny silver speck gliding serenely through the sky.

“I see it!” says Matt. “There, there--!”
There’s a ripple of movement through their group at the announcement, even Sam and Colleen crowding in to match their perspectives to Matt’s. Keith stirs, and Shiro comes back to Earth.

“What do you see?” he asks softly, and feels more than sees Keith shaking his head. He crouches next to him and points, describing a small circle in the sky. “Look in this area. It’s moving pretty fast…”

“I don’t…” Keith says after a pause, frustrated, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“It’s okay,” says Shiro. “It’s okay, don’t try to force it. Just be patient. Try not to focus on anything in particular. It’s right about here now…”

Keith is silent for a moment. He stiffens and draws in a breath.

Shiro glances at him. “You see it?”

“Yeah…” breathes Keith.

Shiro’s eyes have adjusted enough to the cool gray starlight that he can see that Keith’s mouth is open, his eyes wide and shining. He catches his lower lip between his teeth and grins.

“I lived there for two months this winter,” he says quietly, and Keith’s head whips around to look at him.

“What’s that one?” he asks. “In that one?”

“Yeah,” says Shiro, grinning at Keith’s open astonishment. “Commander Sam’s been up there too, for longer.”

Keith goes quiet, looking up again. He turns slowly to keep the tiny speck in view as it glides along parallel to the horizon, and Shiro straightens to his feet behind him.

“Shiro?” Keith whispers.

“Yeah?”

“…I want to go there.”

The words are barely breathed, just this side of audible; even in the stillness they will not have carried to the others. It’s a secret, Shiro knows, given only to him.

He reaches out, rests his hand on Keith’s shoulder and squeezes gently. There’s a moment where he can’t speak for the overflowing fullness of his heart. “I’ll help you get there,” he promises finally. There’s a weight to the words, a sort of magic in the listening darkness and starlight. “If it’s what you want, I’ll do everything I can to help you get there.”

Keith doesn’t answer, but after a moment he shifts his weight and edges closer to Shiro. There’s a silent request in the motion, and Shiro answers it gladly, tugging Keith gently back against himself, looping his arms around his shoulders from behind.

“Maybe we’ll get to go to space together someday,” he says softly. “I think that would be pretty cool.”

He feels Keith draw in a long breath and then sigh it out again. A moment later his head tips to rest against Shiro’s bicep, his hands curling loosely around Shiro’s forearm where it crosses his collarbone.
They stand together and watch until the gleaming man-made speck disappears below the horizon.

Chapter End Notes

it probably was a pterodactyl.
EDIT: hhhholy shit guys 100k
what am i doing
what are YOU doing
100k omg
“Okay.” Matt is saying seriously, holding a skewer like the fate of the world depends on it. “There’s a strategy to this.”

“Okay,” Keith answers, his eyes on the marshmallow impaled on the end of the skewer.

“The goal,” Matt continues, “is to get it nice and evenly sort of gold-brown. You want the outside crispy and the inside gooey and you don’t want it to burn.”

“Okay,” Keith says again, nodding.

“Some people like to set theirs on fire, but we are men of science and precision and such brutal methods do not become us.”

Keith blinks. “...Okay.”

“So,” says Matt, shifting to sit forward. “You want to keep it where the fire’s hot, but you also want to keep it moving. Spin it back and forth a little bit so no one side gets too hot all at once, then you’ll get it nice and toasty without so much risk of combustion.”

“Okay,” Keith says. This is complicated, but he can do it, it’s okay, he’ll just be really careful--

There’s a weird noise to his right, a sort of sizzle; he glances, and Shiro’s looking with satisfaction down at where his own marshmallow is a ball of orange-blue flame, the surface bubbling up and turning black.

It’s awesome.

“Shiro is a philistine,” says Matt in a long-suffering tone. “We love him and tolerate his weirdness but we do not follow in his footsteps.”

“What’s a philistine?” asks Keith curiously, and sets his marshmallow on fire.

There’s silence. Then Matt lets out an indignant scoff and reaches behind Keith to swat Shiro up the back of the head. “You did this,” he accuses.

Shiro splutters and ducks forward, reaching up to defend himself. “What, hey!” Then he sees what Keith is doing and his face splits into a gleeful grin. “Ahaaa, that’s my buddy.”

“You’re a terrible influence on this innocent child and you should be ashamed of yourself.”

Keith is giggling, pulling in his arms and legs just in case they start tussling over his head, watching his marshmallow burn. It’s weirdly satisfying. It occurs to him that he doesn’t know how long to let it burn, or how to put it out, but next to him Shiro just blows his own marshmallow out, like a candle, and. Okay, that works. It takes him two tries, but he does the same.

Matt stalks back around the fire with great dignity to help Katie with her roasting, and Shiro, still laughing, shows Keith how to make a sandwich around his charred marshmallow with a graham cracker snapped in half and a square of chocolate.
After the entire process has been repeated three or four times and everybody is blissfully sticky, Colleen passes around a damp rag for hands and faces. Then Sam disappears to the car and returns with a stack of blankets, to general approval.

Keith eyes the blankets, then makes himself look away. They probably brought them for the family, and he’s not family. Anyway, he has Shiro’s hoodie and he’s almost warm; if it gets uncomfortably cold he’ll just let it show a little bit that he’s chilled, and then Shiro will hug him, maybe, and that’s better than a blanket.

“Whoomph,” says Colleen, right behind them, and Keith is caught completely off-guard as a giant, heavy blanket is dropped unceremoniously like a fuzzy tent over both him and Shiro. He hunches up his shoulders and flails a little in surprise, distantly registering the sound of Colleen cackling as she walks away, and then Shiro’s laughingly shifting the blanket off their heads.

Katie’s crossing purposefully around the fire when Keith can see again, wearing her blanket like a robe. She plops next to Sam and squirms under his arm to cuddle into his side. It gives Keith a strange feeling, watching; he wonders what it’s like, to be able to just ask for affection whenever you want it.

As if he can tell what Keith is thinking, Shiro is fussing at the blanket around them, wrapping it tighter, closing all the gaps so there’s no place cold air can get in. Then he wraps an arm around Keith’s shoulders and tugs a little in invitation, and Keith gratefully scoots closer.

At least, he thinks, closing his eyes under the soft weight of sudden warmth, at least he never needs to ask Shiro.

He opens his eyes in confusion a moment later when Sam starts singing without warning. The rest of the Holts join in after a few words, loud and boisterously happy, all trying to out-volume each other. Keith doesn’t know the words. He sits quietly and watches, the unpleasant out-of-place feeling tugging at him--until Shiro’s hand moves gently on his shoulder and upper arm, soothing and grounding, and Keith glances up at him and remembers.

With that, Keith settles in and listens, finding himself smiling without even meaning to. The songs are mostly nonsensical: there’s one about a tree in a bog, one about a whole family of sharks, one about an ill-fated bumblebee that makes Keith giggle helplessly and also feel vaguely queasy.

The music gradually turns familiar, shifting to songs that Keith has heard but still doesn’t know well enough to sing. Shiro joins in for these. He has a nice voice, Keith thinks, clear and strong and easy, and he likes the way it thrums up through Shiro’s rib cage all the way to where Keith is sitting tucked under his arm.

Colleen leaves the melody after a little while, her voice dipping down to harmonize with her family. Shiro pauses for a moment, his head canting slightly, and begins singing again--but he’s singing a second harmony now, and Keith’s breath catches with a thrill he doesn’t understand, the perfect three-tier chord raising goosebumps on his arms and making his toes curl in his shoes. Colleen’s eyes have gone wide with delight, across the fire. She spreads her empty hands in happy confusion and points at Shiro with an open palm.

“I didn’t know you could do that!” she crows when the song has finished, and swats her husband in the chest. “Sam! You didn’t tell me he could sing!”

Sam makes a helpless gesture. “I didn’t know!”

“Why didn’t you tell Sam you could sing?” Colleen demands.
Shiro’s laughing, and also squirming a little, his face red with embarrassment when Keith looks up at him. “It didn’t come up? I don’t really, I just-- in the car.”

“Well, your secret’s out now,” Colleen says. “Come on, we obviously need another song.”

It takes some time to negotiate the next one, and Keith finds himself struggling to keep his eyes open. He doesn’t really want to fall asleep on Shiro in front of four Holts--but Katie’s already half-drowsing curled up against Sam, and nobody’s paying attention to him anyway. He holds out for a little while longer out of sheer stubbornness until his exhaustion makes the decision for him.

He doesn’t sleep deeply. He drifts, listening to the pleasant richness of Shiro’s voice under his ear, the steady ba-dum ba-dum of his heart. The singing begins again, soft and slow, a melody Keith’s never heard. There’s another after that, and a third, while the firelight glows crimson on the other side of Keith’s eyelids.

At last, it’s only Colleen singing, a sad lilting song full of words that Keith doesn’t know. It’s lovely in the silence, achingly poignant, and Keith finally opens his eyes. She’s looking at Sam, and he at her, and their fingers are twined together; as she reaches the end of the song she raises their hands to her lips and kisses Sam’s knuckles.

Keith watches. The tenderness in their faces gives him a funny feeling, like he’s looking at something he’s not meant to see, and after a moment he lets his eyes slip shut again and sinks back down into sleep.

He sinks further this time, deep enough that he’s only distantly aware of being carried to the car some time later. He rouses a little when one of the doors shuts, enough for brief disorientation when he discovers that he’s been put next to Katie in the back seat and she’s flopped onto him a little bit. Still, she’s warm, and he’s too sleepy to really complain, and Shiro’s head and shoulders are in the back seat with them, tucking them in and saying things like it’s okay, bud, go back to sleep and we’ll be home soon. So he nods, and somewhere in the middle of nodding his eyes shut and his head sags to rest on top of Katie’s. He’s vaguely aware of Matt getting in on Katie’s other side, of motion and distant voices, and then for a little while he’s blissfully not aware of anything at all.

Too soon, the car has stopped, and then the doors are open and there’s chilly air drifting unpleasantly around them. Someone is picking up Katie and carrying her away, and the warmth at Keith’s left side is suddenly entirely gone and someone at his right is coaxing him to get up.

“Come on, Keith,” says Shiro. He’s got an arm behind Keith’s shoulders and is tugging. “Just upstairs, then you can sleep.”

Keith sits forward, rubbing his eyes and blinking stupidly.

“Want me to carry you?” Shiro offers.

“Uhn-uh,” says Keith automatically, and takes a deep breath. The night air wakes him up, a little, and he finally climbs out of the car, clumsy and stiff with sleepiness. Shiro steadies him, and Keith is too groggy and wobbly to shrug off the support. “Shiro ‘m so tired.”

“I know, bud, I know,” says Shiro, rubbing his arms consolingly. “It’s pretty late and you didn’t get a lot of sleep last night. Come on, let’s get you to bed.”

Keith sleepwalks, more or less, letting Shiro steer him the right directions while his eyes squint shut against the painfully bright light of the stairwell and hallway. And then they’re home, and the lights are blessedly low, and Shiro’s shutting him in the bathroom with his toothbrush and pajamas, and
Keith’s got just enough mental wherewithal left to remember what he’s meant to do with them.

He stumbles back out to the living room, letting his hand trail along the wall as he goes so he can track which way is up. There’s still people out there, but he doesn’t care, he just wants the familiar softness of his bed on the short couch. He topples onto it head-first, reaching blindly for his pillow. Then Shiro’s there with him, tugging the blanket out from where it’s rucked up underneath him and spreading it over him instead.

“He’s so tuckered,” says Colleen fondly from somewhere very far away.

“Yeahh,” says Shiro. Keith opens his eyes a crack to look at him, and Shiro grins back from where he’s crouching next to the couch, and smooths Keith’s hair. “I probably should have brought him back earlier, but that fire was too nice.”

Keith closes his eyes. Now that he’s safely in bed, with nothing more he has to do and nobody trying to get him up, he’s oddly reluctant to let himself actually sleep. He keeps still and listens while Matt says his goodnights, while somebody makes tea in the kitchen, while Shiro shifts to sit on the floor with his back to Keith.

“I wanted to talk to you about him,” says Shiro. Keith hears Colleen make an inquisitive hmm? noise, and a second later somebody sits down across the living room. “He gets-- he gets cold? He’s got a weird thing with temperature, I don’t know if it’s…"

“Weird how?” Colleen asks.

“Um,” says Shiro, and pauses. “Well, he’s… he gets cold, and then if he’s warmed up suddenly it’s…” He stops, makes a helpless sound. “Maybe like a natural high, I guess? He goes all sleepy and happy for a minute.”

“Huh,” says Colleen thoughtfully. “Warmed up like…?”

“Walking out of the Garrison will do it,” Shiro says. “If it’s hot out. He gets chilled inside because they keep the climate control at, like, sixty, and then he steps outside and he just kind of... goes into a daze for a minute? It’s cute as hell but I don’t think it’s… normal…”

“Nooo,” agrees Colleen. “That’s kind of weird.”

Keith keeps very still. His face is burning with embarrassment and self-conscious confusion. He remembers Shiro laughing at him--

“I wanted to mention it,” Shiro says. “I don’t know what it means, if it’s something to… to be worried about, or just maybe keep an eye on…”

“Is there an inverse reaction?” Colleen asks. “Like if he gets cold fast, does it… What’s it do?”

Shiro pauses. Keith hears a slight shift, like he’s shaking his head. “I don’t know,” he answers frankly. “I mean, I think he just gets cold, but I haven’t really seen him in… in a really cold environment. Tonight was about the chilliest we’ve done, and that was-- what, fifty, fifty-five?”

Colleen hmms again. Keith wants to pull the blanket up over his head and hide, but not as much as he wants the grown-ups to keep thinking he’s asleep. “Thyroid problems, maybe, if he’s always cold,” Colleen says after a moment. “Or a vitamin deficiency. Is he tired a lot?”

“Uh,” says Shiro, and laughs a little. “Hard to say? I’ve only known him for a few weeks and he’s been concussed for half of that. I don’t think so, though.”
“That wouldn’t account for the weird heat reaction, anyway,” Colleen says dismissively. There’s quiet for a moment, then a sound of movement across the room. “I don’t know, Shiro, I’m not an MD…”

“No, sorry, I know,” says Shiro quickly. “I just… I thought if you had any ideas…”

“Yeah,” says Colleen. “Not so much, I’m sorry.” She pauses, and says with a note of humor, “I could always take a sample back with me and sequence him when I go back to work Monday.”

“Really?”

Colleen pauses again. “Mostly joking, but… yeah, if you want. It couldn’t hurt. You should still take him in and probably get some bloodwork done, but it might be good to have his genome on hand when they start troubleshooting.”

Shiro’s quiet for a minute. “We might take you up on that,” he says finally. “If that’s-- if you’re serious.”

“Sure,” says Colleen. “Yeah. It’s not a big deal, we do it for middle schoolers when they come on field trips. I do it about six times a day on my mycobacteria babies, some phases.”

Shiro snickers. “Your babies.”

“My babies,” Colleen agrees happily. “Can’t wait to get back and see what they’ve gotten up to over the weekend. Takashi Shirogane what is your face doing.”

“Nothing, ma’am, nothing!”

“I’m pretty sure your face was sassing me just there.”

Shiro sputters and protests, laughing, “It wasn’t! It wasn’t, I swear, I was just--thinking I know now where Matt gets his, um, his brains.”

“Uh-huh,” she says. “Good save.” Keith can hear the smirk in her voice. There’s silence for a little while, then Colleen takes a deep breath and sighs. “Well, it’s late. I want my bed and I’m sure you want yours, so I’ll clear out.”


“’S no trouble,” Colleen says. She sounds like she’s mid-yawn. Keith has to clamp his jaw quickly to keep from yawning too and giving himself away. “Sleep good.”

“You too.”

Shiro sits for a little while longer, then gets to his feet. Keith listens as the sound of his footsteps retreat down the hall, then finally, cautiously opens his eyes. His heart is racing, pounding so hard that he can hear it as a dull sloshy echo between his ear and the pillow. He rolls onto his back, drawing up his knees, and stares at the ceiling.

Shiro thinks there’s something wrong with him.

Maybe there is something wrong with him.

Words like bloodwork and sample chase each other around in his head. He wonders how much it will hurt.
“I didn’t mean to wake you up,” says Shiro from behind the arm of the couch, and Keith’s entire body jolts. He pushes himself up onto his elbows as Shiro comes around into the living room, dressed in his pajamas and smelling like toothpaste.

Shiro sits down on the other couch, reaching to unfold the blanket. He glances back across at Keith—then pauses, looking closer.

“You weren’t asleep,” he says.

Keith stares back across the living room at him. He doesn’t want to lie to Shiro, but at the same time he can’t bring himself to admit it. He holds very still and feels himself sort of shrink.

Shiro sighs and rubs the back of his neck, looking down. “I guess you heard all of that, then?” he asks.

He doesn’t sound mad. He sounds regretful, a little embarrassed, not angry—but Keith still can’t find his voice. He swallows, and shrugs.

Shiro looks at him for a moment, then his face winces up unhappily. He gets to his feet and comes around the coffee table toward Keith.

Part of Keith registers that Shiro’s just coming over to talk, that he’s probably going to get a hug out of it, that there’s nothing to be scared of. But he’s so tired, and the sick guilty caught feeling is still choking him, and he’s pushing himself up and back and away before he’s even given it conscious thought.

Shiro freezes, his face going slack with surprise. He draws back a step and takes a breath, and he shows Keith his hands, palms-up. “You’re okay,” he says. “It’s okay. You’re not in trouble.”

Keith is pressed back into the corner of the couch, his knees up, his hands and feet braced. He swallows twice and closes his eyes, miserable shame overtaking the brief flare of fear.

“It’s okay,” Shiro says again. “It’s okay. I’m not mad. Even—” and he falters here for the first time, “Keith, even if I were mad, I wouldn’t hurt you. I wouldn’t ever hurt you.”

There’s something in Shiro’s voice that Keith doesn’t know how to define, something strained, a truth that hurts with how much it wants to be heard. He still can’t talk, but he nods quickly, and he opens his eyes so he can tell Shiro that way that he knows.

“What do you need?” asks Shiro. “Do you need me to stay back?”

Keith swallows again, and takes a deliberate breath through the tightness in his chest. He whispers, “No.”

“Okay,” says Shiro softly after a pause. “Can I come over there, can I come sit with you?”

Keith nods. He checks his body, carefully relaxes the tension in his shoulders, his arms and his legs; he turns a little so he’s sitting more normally. He keeps his knees up.

Shiro leaves space between them—as much as he can, anyway; the short couch is long for a loveseat, but it’s still really only made for two people. Keith is sitting small against one armrest, and Shiro sits against the other, and Keith can’t decide if the gap left is a relief or a disappointment.

Shiro’s quiet for a moment, then he tilts his head a little and looks over at Keith from the corner of his eye. “I’m sorry for talking about you behind your back in front of your face,” he says.
The words are strung together in a funny way, and Keith finds himself smiling despite everything. “‘S okay,” he mumbles, fidgeting with his bracelet.

Shiro gives him another moment, then ventures, “You probably have questions.”

Keith frowns and avoids Shiro’s eyes. He does, but he doesn’t know where they even start.

“I didn’t say,” says Shiro. “I didn’t want you to be worried about it.”

There’s not really anything Keith can say to this, so he doesn’t try. He hugs his knees.

“I’m not very worried,” Shiro continues. “It doesn’t seem to be hurting you, as long as you can stay warm, but I still want to get you in to see a doctor so they can figure out why you’re-- why you’re cold so often.”

“For bloodwork,” Keith murmurs to his knees. He catches Shiro’s wince from the corner of his eye.

“Maybe, yeah.”

“Will it hurt?” he asks, watching Shiro.

Shiro looks back at him, biting his lower lip. Keith can see him debating, he can see Shiro trying to decide whether or not to lie to him.

“A little,” Shiro finally allows. “If they decide they need to draw blood. It’s not super fun, they put a needle in one of the veins in your arm so they can get some out to test. But it only hurts for a minute.”

Keith considers this answer, studying Shiro’s face. If he had said no, then Keith would have known immediately that he was lying, but this seems-- Keith thinks it’s the truth.

“Okay,” he says finally.

Shiro tilts his head at him. “Any other questions?”

“What’s a sample?” asks Keith.

“A part of something,” Shiro says, a little bewildered. “Representative of the whole.”

Keith doesn’t know what to do with this at all. He knows what a sample is but he’d thought maybe-- maybe it had another meaning, or something. He stares at Shiro with mounting unease.

Shiro looks back at him, one eye squinting up in confusion. His face clears all at once. “Oh,” he says. “You mean, you mean the kind of sample Colleen was talking about. That’s just, that means a piece of something with your genetic material in it. She’ll probably take a fingernail clipping.”

Keith can breathe again. He feels his shoulders drop slightly with relief and his head sag forward, and then Shiro is laughing a little and reaching over to grip his shoulder.

“Bud,” he says, “bud, I’m so sorry, that probably sounded pretty scary without any context.”

“I wasn’t scared,” Keith mutters, and Shiro just laughs some more.

“Okay,” he says finally, getting to his feet. “Come on, it’s past eleven and you need to be sleeping like two hours ago.” He holds up the blanket for Keith to get back underneath.
“I can’t be asleep two hours ago,” Keith argues as he squirms back down to lie under the blanket.

Shiro chuckles, tucking him in for a second time. “Just a phrase. Want me to rub your back until you fall asleep?”

Keith goes still, shy and warm and a little bit panicky all at once. It's confusing, how Shiro can offer it like it's nothing, no big deal, when just the memory of the last time makes Keith as sleepy and content as stepping into strong sunlight. It belongs to that part of himself that is too deep and tender to acknowledge; having Shiro brush up against it so casually is a bit like somebody jostling a limb that has gone to sleep.

“Nah?” asks Shiro, and Keith panics again.

“No, I--” he says, and gulps. He doesn't know how to say yes, he doesn't--

It's terrifyingly close to admitting that it's something he needs, and there's a danger in that. But the idea of refusing the offer is entirely incomprehensible.

“If that's-- if you want?” he says finally.

Shiro pauses. “If you want,” he corrects gently. “Only if you want. Do you?”

Keith squirms and wishes Shiro wasn't looking at him. He wishes Shiro would stop asking.

“Yeah,” he mumbles. “Kinda.”

“Yeah?” Shiro asks. Keith hides his face in his pillow and nods, and finally, finally feels Shiro's hand warm on his back.

He keeps his face hidden while Shiro shifts to kneel on the floor next to the couch. It’s harder to relax this time than the last; he feels strangely twitchy and on-edge. The contact lifts for a moment while Shiro gets himself situated, and Keith flinches involuntarily when it resettles in the middle of his back.

“Alright?” asks Shiro, the weight of his hand half-lifting, and Keith nods hastily before he can withdraw it entirely. Shiro hesitates, then murmurs, “Alright.”

It doesn't feel like last time. There's more purpose to it. It feels more like when Shiro worked on his hurt muscles: there's more weight and pressure in the thumbs gently kneading where he's tense. Keith keeps still. It hurts, a little bit, but in a good way, and his back is warming and going lax under Shiro's hands.

The air has gone stale in the gap in front of Keith's pillow, and he's starting to be too sleepy to remember why he was hiding in the first place. He turns his head so he can see Shiro.

Shiro is quiet, focused, soft-eyed and peaceful. Keith watches him for a moment before he notices and looks back, grinning quick and fond. “You're supposed to be going to sleep,” Shiro says. “You can't sleep with your eyes open.”

“Maybe I can,” Keith counters, but his eyelids are getting heavy, and Shiro's hands have shifted to easy, soothing movements. He fights it, a little bit; he doesn't want to sleep through this--but he's so tired, and the battle is already lost.

“Night, bud,” says Shiro. There's a hesitation, his hand slowing briefly between Keith's shoulder blades, then he adds more quietly, deliberately, “Love you.”
Oh, thinks Keith sleepily, and surrenders.

***

Katie and Colleen leave for the city Sunday afternoon. Colleen has three of Keith's hairs and a sliver of his thumbnail in a ziplock baggie, which is kind of weird, and Keith has her contact code in his tablet, which is kind of nice.

"Next time you need a haircut," she says, pulling him in for a hug, "you call me if you want, okay? Shiro can bring you to town and we'll get bubble tea and go see a movie and make a day of it."

"Okay," mumbles Keith, hiding the shy smile he can't help in her shoulder. He already knows he won't call her, but the idea is nice. He closes his eyes for a moment--Colleen's hugs are almost as good as Shiro's--and then she's releasing him.

She doesn't let him go entirely. She holds him there at arm's length and looks at him for a moment, a little worried, a little sad, smiling. "I'm gonna call and check on you this week, okay?"

"Okay," says Keith.

"Do something for me," she says, giving him a serious, intent look. "Let Shiro help. Okay? I mean it."

"Okay," says Keith again, blushing.

"You don't have to take care of everything on your own," she says. Her hands are tight on his shoulders, but it doesn't hurt. It feels like she could hold him up, if he fell. "You have people who love you and want to take care of you. Let them take care of you, alright?"

He doesn't know what to say to this. There's shame welling up like panic in his chest, a sick awareness that he's played a trick without even meaning to, that he's taking advantage of good people. He can't meet her eyes, but she's waiting for an answer, so he finally murmurs, "Alright."

"Alright," she repeats firmly, and pulls him in again for another hug. "Uh, I'm one of those people," she adds, "in case that wasn't clear."

For a moment, it's very hard to breathe. Keith shuts his eyes tightly, focuses on the bright lemon-mint smell that seems to follow Colleen wherever she goes, and concentrates on not shuddering when she rubs his back. "Thanks," he finally whispers. That seems safe.

She lets him go again and cups his cheek affectionately for a moment, studying him. Then she kisses his forehead, and she's gone.

Keith hugs himself and backs away, watching as the Holts exchange goodbyes next to Colleen's car. The crunch of gravel slightly behind and next to him alerts him to Shiro's presence, and he glances up a half-second before Shiro puts a hand on his shoulder.

(He knows, if he shifts just a little closer, Shiro will wrap him up in a hug and ruffle his hair.)

(He doesn't move.)
that was A HIATUS. thank you guys so much for your patience!

I feel like I probably owe y'all an explanation for why I was gone so long, and it's this: there's a Loose End that OotD is going to leave (introduced in this chapter) because I wanted to write a one-shot about Colleen. I'm still planning to do the thing, but I've got 13k in a google doc with no end in sight andddd I realized I hadn't paid attention to this thing for a month and I didn't really like that! So I will probably go back after OotD is finished and wrap up that one to post, but for now, it's just gonna sit.

happy spring!
Chapter 31

Galaxy Garrison Cadet,

Following recent expansion in student enrollment, Galaxy Garrison is undergoing significant restructuring of its direct supervision of cadets. Until recently, Commanders Iverson and Graves have had charge of the Year 1-2 group and the Year 3-4 group, respectively. Under the new system, these two groups will be split into six smaller subgroups, to be supervised by Lieutenants Nunez, Polk, Travis, Lane, Chan, and Coate, under the guidance of Commander Iverson and Commander Graves.

Report immediately to the lecture hall indicated for an introductory meeting with your new officer in charge.

A-103

Keith reads over the message, then reads it over again, swinging his legs slowly over the side of his bed. He sits for another moment, frowning, then hastily gets to his feet and changes back into his uniform. His hands are already sweaty and cold with nervousness.

He’s halfway down the hall when he realizes he has no idea where A-103 is. He turns in place uncertainly, but the other cadets emerging from their bunks just stream around him, all head-and-shoulders taller and paying no attention to him at all. He hesitates, then follows the general momentum: chances are at least one of them is going the same place as him.

The stream carries him to a corridor on the second level, where the upperclassmen have their classes—and the hallway begins to get very empty very quickly as cadets file into the classrooms through the doors on either side.

And that’s when Keith realizes with a sinking that he’s not even a little bit in the right place.

He turns in a circle in the suddenly-silent corridor, pacing up and down the long stretch of hallway, looking helplessly at the numbers affixed to each classroom door, like maybe they’ll change if he just stares at them long enough: L2-25, L2-26, all the way up to L2-31.

Six classrooms. Six groups. And none of them, apparently, are the group he’s supposed to be in.

He stares down at his tablet, just in case he read it wrong.

“Lost, Kogane?” asks somebody cheerfully behind him.

Keith startles and turns toward the footsteps approaching from behind, his shoulders hunching up guiltily. It’s Sergeant Burns, which is a relief, he thinks, but he still backs away a little as she nears.

“You’d better get on in,” she says as he salutes, tilting her head toward the nearest classroom. “You don’t want to be late for the first meeting.”

“I--” stammers Keith, holding up his tablet helplessly. “I don’t--”

He’s going to be in trouble; he’s going to be late; they’re going to hate him. This is how it always
goes: he means to make a good impression, but something happens and they make up their minds about him before he can fix it--

“Let me see,” says Burns, reaching for his tablet. She turns it on and scrolls down to the bottom of the message. She reads it, and frowns, and squints a little bit, and says, “Huh.”

This is not encouraging.

“I don’t…” she says absently, scrolling up and down the message again. “I don’t even know whose group… A-103, that’s administrative…”

She looks up over the tablet screen at where Keith is waiting anxiously. “Huh, okay, well,” she says, shifting her weight, and then she’s herding Keith purposefully back down the hall. “I don’t know what this is all about, but I’ll help you get it figured out. We’ll start by checking A-103, and if that’s a dead end we’ll check with the front desk and figure out where you’re meant to be, okay?”

“Okay,” says Keith, and he can breathe again, because she’s as confused as he is and she’s in charge. It’s going to be okay. She’ll explain to whoever his new officer-in-charge is that there was a mix-up, and then they won’t hate him.

There’s a weird sense of déjà-vu, following her through the quiet administrative wing with his heart pounding. He licks his lips and glances down the hallway toward Iverson’s office, reads the office numbers as they pass them: A-107, A-105, A-103.

“Here we are,” Burns says, and knocks briskly on the door. It whisks open, startlingly abrupt, and Keith takes a hasty step back out of sight while she leans in. “Commander? I’ve got a cadet here…?”

“Oh, yeah!” says a familiar voice, and Keith’s eyes widen. “Is it Keith? Send him in!”

Burns turns back to him, but Keith’s already pushing past her. “Commander Sam?”

“Commander Holt,” Burns remonstrates gently, but Sam makes a dismissive hand-waving gesture.

“It’s okay, Keith’s my buddy,” he says, coming around the desk. “I got it from here, Sergeant. Thanks for bringing him.”

“Yes, sir,” she says. “It was no trouble.” She salutes again and disappears down the hallway, the door whooshing shut behind her.

And then Keith’s alone with Commander Holt, self-conscious and unaccountably shy. He doesn’t know where to look, but Sam’s pulling out a chair for him on the other side of his desk. “You wanna sit?” the commander asks.

Keith nods and sits obediently, tucking his hands under his knees. All the offices in this wing smell the same, he notices in the back of his mind, like dusting spray and some generic air freshener and slightly stale coffee; they all have the same cold blue-tinted white light, the same barely audible hum from the light fixtures. He swallows and tries to breathe slower.

“So,” says Commander Sam, sitting back down in his seat. “You must have gotten the message, right?”

“Yes, sir,” says Keith.

“And you probably noticed I’m not one of the lieutenants it mentioned.”
“Yes, sir,” Keith says again, half-smiling nervously.

“Well,” says Sam. “That’s because we decided to do something a little different with you. So what’s going on right now is they kind of... redistributed all the students between those six lieutenants, and the lieutenants report to Commander Iverson or Commander Graves if they need to, depending what year the students are in. They’re doing it that way so the students have the same person to talk to all the way through their Garrison career. Make sense so far?”

Keith nods, his hands gripping the seat beneath his knees. The words *do something different with you* put a strange tight coil of anxiety in the pit of his stomach.

“You’re here instead because you’re not even a Year One yet. You’re doing things *way* different from the rest of the kids here, and so you’re probably going to have way different needs, at least until you start your first official year here.”

Keith nods again.

“So,” says Sam. “I’m your new officer-in-charge.”

Keith gapes.

“You’re--” he manages after a moment. “What about-- what about Commander Iverson?”

“I stole you away,” says the commander cheerily. “No, not really-- um.” He pauses, and his face goes rather serious for a moment. “When you start your first year, he’ll be your OIC again, but with whichever lieutenant you get assigned to as an intermediary. But for now, for the rest of this school year and for all of next year, while you’re still finding your feet, you’ve got me instead.”

“Oh,” Keith says weakly.

Commander Sam hesitates, then says, his voice going soft and serious for a moment, “So I’ll be the one reporting to the General about you. Not Commander Iverson.”

There’s a moment, a split second, where Keith hears this as a threat. He reels back slightly in his chair, a frightened shock shooting up his core--but when he snaps up his eyes to search out the commander’s intent, Sam is just looking back at him with a particularly knowing kind of compassion.

“Okay?” the commander asks.

Keith swallows hard and nods.

“Anything you might have been told before,” Sam says, “it doesn’t matter. You’re starting over right here, starting fresh. And I’m on your side.”

Keith doesn’t know what to make of this. It’s hard to look back at the commander. It feels like he’s trying to tell him something without words, a message that Keith can’t quite pick up. There’s no reason Commander Holt should side with Keith over Iverson that he can see, and the logical breakdown is disorienting.

“Okay,” he finally murmurs, rubbing his palms on his knees.

“Okay,” says Sam again, smiling at him like Keith’s got it, which Keith definitely has not. “So. Whatcha think?”
“Aren’t you--” Keith begins, and hesitates. “Aren’t you really busy?”

Commander Holt tips his head to one side, then the other, pursing up his lips. “Pretty busy,” he agrees. “Not too busy for this, though. You know, I used to have Commander Graves’ post, about eight years ago, herding all two hundred Year Threes and Year Fours on top of teaching and working on my doctorate. That was an interesting few years. Nah, kid, I’ve definitely got time for you.”

This is rather warming. Keith chews his lower lip and keeps his head down, though, trying hard to consider it objectively. “Why’d you…” he finally starts, then pauses midway through, trying to think of a less bald way to ask—but Commander Sam picks up his question before he’s even figured out how to form it.

“Well, General Beck offered you to me first because we’ve already got rapport.” He pronounces the word in a deeply posh accent, rolling the penultimate R to ridiculous levels to make Keith smile. “And I said I would, because I like you and you already know me. But,” he adds more seriously, “if you’d rather have somebody else, there’s lots of very qualified people and I won’t get hurt feelings.”

“That’s okay,” says Keith, squirming, trying hard to stop smiling. He can’t quite absorb it, that the people in charge of him are Shiro and Commander Sam.

“So,” says Commander Holt. “This is kind of uncharted territory, we're making this up as we go along a little bit, but I think let's set aside half an hour every week to meet and talk, for now. You'll probably see me more often than that some weeks, hope you don't mind.”

“I mean,” says Keith, greatly daring, “if I have to.”

“Listen, squirt,” Commander Sam growls—but his eyes are twinkling, and all the giddiness Keith has managed to keep reasonably contained comes welling up uncontrollably, and he’s grinning so broadly his face hurts.

“So let's see,” says the commander, looking down at his tablet. “Shiro's got you for weekends and Wednesday nights, right?”

Keith nods.

“And I'll probably see you at least some of those weekends, so let's make Thursdays our days, how's that sound?”

“Okay,” Keith agrees, sitting on his hands again.

“Right after supper work for you?” asks Sam.

“Okay,” Keith says again.

Commander Sam grins at him. “Excellent,” he says. “Then we'll officially start in two days. But while I've got you here, let's chat.”

Keith shifts where he sits, uneasiness making the back of his neck prickle. The commander's tone is still casual, but people in charge asking for chats generally doesn't mean anything good. He studies the man's face carefully.

“It's okay,” Commander Sam says, half-smiling. “You're not in trouble. I just want to know how you're doing. I know some friends of yours just got out of suspension.”
“Oh,” says Keith under his breath, and looks away. Ricketts got out of suspension Monday. Beck followed today. Keith has three almost identical messages of apology in his inbox and a sense of apprehension that he can’t shake.

“Are you doing okay?” the commander asks quietly, a gentle insistence in his voice that makes Keith think of Shiro. “Has anybody said anything to you or made you feel like… like you're not quite safe?”

“No, no,” says Keith uncomfortably, feeling his shoulders hunch up. He can't quite bring himself to look at the man on the other side of the desk. “Nothing like that. Um, they're mostly just-- ignoring me.”

“Good,” says Commander Sam. “Good. If that changes, I want you to let me know, okay? Me or Shiro, whoever you're more comfortable with.”

“Shiro already said,” mumbles Keith.

“Shiro's smart,” says the commander approvingly. “He's a good one to have on your side.”

“Yeah,” Keith says, sitting up a little straighter. There's a warm, proud glow in his chest at the compliment to his friend; he can feel a pleased grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“So,” says Commander Sam, smiling a little like he knows about the glow, “how are your classes going?”

They go over the half hour, and Keith doesn't even realize. Commander Sam is easy to talk to, and even with Keith's occasional sputters of nervousness there are not many awkward moments. They don't talk about anything too heavy, and that helps: once the commander has probed gently at the issues of his classes, his peers, the friendships he is and isn't making, the rest is easy. Keith learns that Shiro can’t really be called a picky eater, but he has a few select things that he refuses to touch, things like olives and mushrooms and shrimp. He learns that Matt is an absolute fiend with practical jokes, that Keith will almost certainly be a victim at some point, but it's okay because it's how Matt shows love.

Keith doesn't really follow this. He considers it narrowly and resolves to be on his guard.

Commander Holt offers to walk him back to his room when they finally notice what time it is, and Keith almost accepts. But he turns it down in the end and makes his way back to his room alone.

(He keeps his eyes open as he walks, and he gives a wide berth to empty doorways.)

Malone isn’t in the room, so Keith changes and hangs up his uniform. He has a lot of clothes now, more than he’s used to having, and it’s a little overwhelming. He’d picked out his favorites from the box that Colleen brought and stuffed the rest of what Shiro made him keep into the bottom drawers of his unused dresser, but it still feels like more than he’ll ever need or use. He has the jumpy, nervous feeling that he needs to hide it, that otherwise somebody will come and discover it and he’ll be in trouble.

Still, the worn cotton of the second-hand t-shirt is a familiar and comforting texture, and Shiro’s giant hoodie settles over the top of it like a hug. He clambers onto his bed and plumps up his pillow in the corner to settle in for homework. It isn’t much, just reading, and it goes reasonably quickly even if it’s not as interesting as the books Shiro likes to read. It’s still a little after nine when he finishes, past curfew--and Malone isn’t back yet.
Keith frowns at the door, then glances across at Malone’s clock. He checks his messages to see if Malone sent one to say where he was going, then slides off his bed and pads to his desk to see if there’s a paper note there.

There’s not.

He paces a little bit, eats some of the snacks Shiro bought for him, wonders and worries. Finally, at a quarter to ten, the door opens and Malone peeks in.

“Oh, good!” he says, looking relieved to see Keith standing there. “I was worried you went to bed and I’d wake you up but Shiro said your messenger light was still on so I guess it was fine but I was still worried.”

This is a lot of words, delivered very quickly. Keith turns in place as Malone all but bounces through the room to collect his shower caddy, trying to process the stream of information. One word sticks out.

“Shiro?” he repeats uncertainly.

“Yeah,” says Malone, hunting distractedly through his bottom drawer. “We went on the simulator—ohhh wow. Keith.” He sits back on his heels, his eyes bright. “He’s amazing. I want to be him. Have you done the Enceladus course in the simulator yet?”

Keith shakes his head mutely.

“Oh,” says Malone. “Well. It’s stupid hard, like— it’s— If somebody shoots off their mouth in class Iverson makes them run it in front of everybody, because it’s impossible to not screw up and embarrass yourself, there’s… geological crap going on, and the magnetic field is crazy so most of your instruments are going haywire, and the margin of error is like, nonexistent. It’s the hardest training course they have, it’s some Star Wars shit, I swear.”

“Okay,” says Malone. “Well. It’s stupid hard, like— it’s— If somebody shoots off their mouth in class Iverson makes them run it in front of everybody, because it’s impossible to not screw up and embarrass yourself, there’s… geological crap going on, and the magnetic field is crazy so most of your instruments are going haywire, and the margin of error is like, nonexistent. It’s the hardest training course they have, it’s some Star Wars shit, I swear.”

“Wow,” Keith says. He’s trying hard to meet Malone’s enthusiasm, but there’s a funny hollow feeling carving away at the inside of his ribs. “That’s awesome.”

“And then,” adds Malone, hopping back to his feet with his towel over his shoulder, “I got him to run it solo while I watched and. Keith. It was crazy. He’s so good.”


“Shit,” says Malone, checking his tablet. “There’s like fifteen minutes to lights out and I have to shower, I’ll tell you about it in a minute.”

The room is very quiet once he’s gone. Keith sits down on the edge of his bed and takes a deep breath, then another.

Tomorrow’s Wednesday. Tomorrow’s the day he finally gets to go with Shiro to the simulator. Tomorrow’s the day he’s been waiting for with so much impatience and yearning that his heart jumps every time he thinks about it, but now--
Well, his heart’s still jumping. It’s fluttering fast and light, like it’s trying and trying to pump oxygen but there isn’t enough there. He feels strangely dizzy, a funny detached floating sensation pushing at the top of his skull.

There’s no way he’ll be able to fly as well as Malone. There’s no way tomorrow ends with anything other than Shiro looking at him with disappointment, Shiro wondering why he’s wasting his time, Shiro staying because he’s nice but wishing quietly that he’d picked somebody else to mentor.

Keith sits in the silent room, staring wide-eyed at nothing in particular until his eyes water, breathing carefully around the constriction in his throat. He hears the two-minute warning chime for lights out and hastily gets into bed, sniffing.

When the door opens a minute and a half later, Keith has the covers up over his head.
“But Iverson’s still ultimately in charge of all the year ones and year twos?” Shiro says, frowning at Sam over the kitchen island.

Sam lifts his shoulders, his back to Shiro, poking at the cast-iron pan of sizzling chicken that will be their supper. “Nominally, yeah. But the lieutenants are the ones filling out the paperwork, and that’s what General Beck will be looking at, so it’s…”

“But he could still make trouble,” Shiro persists. “If, say, he had a grudge against one particular cadet and decided to keep a close eye on him.”

“Keith’s got an entire year before he’s back in the group that Iverson oversees. That’s a long time to build up a good record of behavior,” Sam says, prodding at a mostly-cooked chicken breast. “Ugh, these are gonna be tough…”

Shiro lets out a breath through his nose, staring down at the model rotating on his laptop’s holostage. “I don’t know if I like that either,” he says discontentedly. “They’re probably gonna assign him to some hardnose who’ll come down rough on him because of his record, and he’s already got problems trusting authority.”

“Hmm,” says Sam.

“Do you know who they’re gonna pick?” Shiro asks him.

Sam gives him an oblique glance, humor sparking in his eyes. “That would be me,” he says mildly.

“Y--” Shiro starts, and sits up straighter. “You, you’ve got him?”

“Well, they wanted a hardnose…”

Shiro shuts his laptop and sits back. “Stop it. You-- Really?” All the fretful tension leaves him in a rush. He wants to laugh with the relief.

“We had our first meeting last night,” Sam says, scooping chicken onto plates. “I’ve got him for a half an hour every Thursday evening. That shouldn’t mess up your schedule.”

Shiro shakes his head in happy disbelief. “I’ve heard you say on three separate occasions that you’d never go back to cadet-herding,” he accuses.

“Well,” says Sam, smiling, and shrugs. “It was frustrating for me last time because it always felt like I was spread so thin. There were so many cases that needed special attention, extra support, and I couldn’t-- I couldn’t always provide that. There weren’t enough hours in the day. This is good, this restructuring they’re doing. This is something they’ve needed to do for a long time.”

Shiro nods, coming around to dig out the pasta salad left over from the weekend while Sam talks. “So this with Keith is… this has the potential to be rewarding without what made it bad for you last time?” he guesses.

Sam shrugs again. “Sort of. There’s a need here I feel like I can actually help to meet, rather than just
slapping a bandaid on it and hoping for the best. Still,” he adds, looking at Shiro. “Half an hour a week isn’t very much. I’m counting on you to pick up the slack.”

“Yes, sir,” says Shiro, grinning as he pulls down three glasses.

“Grab Matt, would you? I think we’re good to go.”

Shiro eats quickly and leaves his plate in the sink. Sam waves off his apology for eating and dashing, and five minutes later he’s in the car humming down the road to the Garrison.

I’m on my way! he sends to Keith. Meet you outside the L6 lounge in five?

Keith doesn’t respond, but the read notification pops up, so Shiro considers that good enough. He puts his tablet away and waits while the car pulls into the faculty parking lot and finds a place, then hops out.

A little less than five minutes has passed when he reaches the lounge, so he’s not surprised when Keith hasn’t arrived yet. He kills time leaning against the wall, catching up on the group chat from his graduating class, sending an appreciative emoji in answer to the contextless video of a confused cat wearing a space helmet from Colleen.

Keith still hasn’t shown up. Shiro glances up to make sure he’s actually on L6 and didn’t get off the elevator a stop early, then checks the time. It’s closer to fifteen minutes now than five.

You coming?

He gives it another couple minutes, then hits the button to call Keith. It rings several times, and Shiro pushes off the wall in worry, looking up and down the hallway, starting back toward the elevator, but Keith finally picks up.

“Hi.”

“Hey, bud!” Shiro says, covering his apprehension in exuberance. “You ready?”

“Um,” says Keith. “Yeah…”

Shiro pauses. “You okay?”

There’s a moment’s hesitation from the other side of the speakers. “Yeah, I’m fine. Sorry.”

“Where are you?” Shiro asks, reaching out to punch the button for the elevator. “I’ll come meet you.”

“I’m-- no, I’ll…”

Keith trails off. He’s breathing funny, too fast and harsh through the tinny speakers. “Keith?” Shiro asks, stepping into the elevator. He doesn’t know where he’s going, but on a hunch he selects Keith’s floor. “Keith, where are you, buddy?”

There’s a muted clatter from the tablet, like the device on the other side of the call was set down hastily, and the call abruptly disconnects.

Shiro stares down at his tablet, the bottom dropping out of his stomach as the elevator descends smoothly. He pushes the button to call again and waits, watching the indicator on the wall change
levels: $L_3$, $L_2$, $L_1$, $L_0$. The doors open, and he pushes out almost before the gap is wide enough to admit him, striding purposefully toward Keith’s room as the tablet switches from ringing to a smooth-voiced AI suggesting that he send a text message or leave a voicemail instead.

There’s no answer to his initial knock. “Keith?” he calls through the door. “Malone?” He waits a moment, then winces and enters in his override code for the door’s lock.

The room is empty. Shiro stands in the doorway for a moment, lost, then backs out to the hallway again and lets the door whisk shut. He looks down at his tablet and pushes the button to call Keith one more time.

He can hear the sound of a tablet’s call alert, an incongruously lighthearted chiming. He turns in place to triangulate it, looking urgently up and down the hallway. It leads him to the bathroom door--the same bathroom door he remembers watching Keith stagger out, injured and hurting.

“Keith?” he asks, and bursts inside.

Keith startles back from where he stands by the row of sinks, his tablet clutched in both hands, still ringing. He stares up at Shiro, wide-eyed and guilty and very, very pale.

Shiro breathes out and gives him a quick once-over, looking for signs of hurt. The tablet is still ringing, bright and cheery in the echoing space between them. “Were you gonna answer that?” Shiro finally asks, a little dry.

Keith’s shoulders jerk slightly and he fumbles with his tablet. The ringing cuts off mid-arpeggio. “I’m sorry,” he says.

“What’s going on?” asks Shiro. “How come are you hiding out in here?”

“I…” starts Keith, his eyes darting toward one of the stalls. “I was-- I was on my way.”

“Are you sick?” Shiro asks. He takes a step forward, lifting one hand toward Keith’s face to telegraph his intention. Keith rears back slightly, but stills and permits Shiro to feel at his forehead. He’s not hot; if anything he’s rather too cool. His skin is clammy under Shiro’s investigative touch.

But he pulls away from Shiro’s hand against his face after a second, his forehead creasing up with discomfort. “I’m fine.”

Shiro lets him go. He studies him carefully: there’s something wrong, Keith is still breathing too quickly, he’s avoiding Shiro’s eyes. “Bud,” he says, “talk to me. What’s wrong, what’s going on?”

“Nothing’s…” says Keith, and falters.

“Do you want to wait to do the simulator?” asks Shiro after a moment.

Keith shakes his head. “No-- I--” He rubs the side of his face, a quick distressed gesture. “Let’s… just…”

He pushes past to the door abruptly, his head down and his shoulders hunched, like Shiro’s an obstacle, like Shiro’s something he has to defend against.

It stings.

Shiro almost reaches out and stops him, almost pulls him back to demand answers. But he doesn’t. He falls into step with Keith instead, and though he wants to reach out and tug Keith closer, hug him
until he breathes out the tension he’s carrying and relaxes again, Shiro leaves the space between them.

“This way,” he murmurs, and turns them down the hall to a faculty shortcut.

Keith keeps up, quiet, his jaw set in what looks like determination, and Shiro makes it another thirty seconds before he gives up.

“Did something happen today?” he asks, ducking his head down to try to catch Keith’s eye from the side.

“Nothing happened,” says Keith. “I’m--” He rubs at his eyes, his path veering slightly while his vision is obscured. Shiro dares to reach out and correct it with a hand on his shoulder: the little startled jump doesn’t surprise him, exactly, but it makes his heart twist painfully. Keith drops his hand, adjusts his path, and doesn’t acknowledge Shiro’s guidance. “I’m really tired.”

Shiro lets his hand fall away. “Why are you tired?”

“I just--” Keith’s frustrated now, undirected irritation seeping off him like a toxic gas. “I didn’t sleep good last night.”

This is the point at which Shiro should let it lie. He recognizes this, then promptly plunges in anyway. “Why not?”

“Can you please,” says Keith, “for one minute, pretend like I don’t have to tell you every detail of my life.”

Shiro recoils mentally, smarting. “Wow,” he says aloud before he can stop himself.

Keith gives him a quick skittering look; Shiro just catches a glimpse. It’s like a wince, a flinch, like Keith’s prodding at him deliberately but at the same time is terrified of the outcome.

Shiro has no idea what to do with that.

“Okay,” he says finally, feeling like he's groping in a dark room. “Do you want to do something else tonight instead of the simulator? You're not feeling good--”

“I'm fine,” says Keith shortly.

“Oh, okay,” says Shiro under his breath, and stops trying to get Keith to talk. It's a bit of a walk between the dorm wing and the simulators, and he uses the time to discreetly study Keith, trying to wrap his head around the sudden change.

The last time Keith had snapped at him like this was on the landing outside of the apartment, when he was about to face the Holts as a family unit for the first time. He'd been…he'd been nervous and overwhelmed, too scared to let anybody help, even Shiro. He hadn't taken well to prodding that time either. When he'd lashed out the week before, it had been a reaction to having any semblance of control taken away from him--and, again, fear.

Keith is afraid now, Shiro concludes. He's afraid and on uncertain footing, so he's trying to provoke a predictable response in Shiro.

It helps, putting Keith's behavior in this context, but it only goes so far. There's still information he doesn't have. Shiro watches Keith from the corner of his eye, studies the closed-off posture, the tight jaw and white lips, and he wishes he knew what he was missing.
Shiro punches in his code and opens the door to the simulator floor for Keith five minutes later. He keeps a close eye on him as he moves toward the nearest machine: there's a hesitance there that doesn't fit with the bright-eyed eagerness that Keith has shown in response to any mention of flight practice.

He needs to get Keith engaged and distracted, he thinks.

“Ready?” he asks, and the enthusiasm in his voice sounds so artificial that he cringes. But Keith just nods absently, following him to the first simulator. Shiro stands back to let him enter first, and Keith trudges up, hesitating in the cockpit until Shiro gestures him to the pilot’s seat. “What courses do they have you working on right now?”

“Supply drops on Mars,” answers Keith. “Um, M-224 and M-226 is what we’re drilling on.”

Keith’s voice is subdued, the words coming a little slow. There’s an unspoken apology in the fleeting look he gives Shiro, and Shiro accepts it quietly, reaching to help Keith with his harness.

“Mm,” he says. “That’s not surprising. I think you guys will be seeing a lot of Mars drills in the next few years while they scout out a support crew for the next colony. Which one’s your favorite so far?”

“Um,” says Keith, and wipes his palms on his knees, not looking at Shiro. “Um, I like 224.”

“What’s that one, what do you like about it?”

“I don’t know,” mumbles Keith. “It’s-- you have to stay really low, and the route is…”

“Landscape obstacle evasion?” Shiro asks, perking up with comprehension. “Oh, that’s fun. Do you want to warm up with that one, then?”

Keith lifts his shoulders. “I guess.”

He’s still not looking directly at Shiro. His demeanor has shifted away from prickly and defensive, and that’s something, but Shiro’s not sure he doesn’t prefer that Keith to this quiet, withdrawn version.

“That’s a single pilot drill,” he says. “Do you want me to run comms or set it to default and just hang out?”

“I don’t care,” murmurs Keith. “Whatever you want to do.”

Shiro pauses, considers. “Okay, I’ll do comms, then,” he says, and reaches past Keith to the screen to input his password and pull up the M-224 drill. “Ready?”

Keith nods, and Shiro draws back to strap himself into the comms officer’s seat while the sequence boots up.

The screens representing the viewports light, showing the rusty haze of Mars’s atmosphere. The simulator pod shudders, and Keith reaches for the controls.

For a little while, Shiro thinks Keith’s managed to snap out of whatever funk he fell into: he runs the course perfectly, if with significantly more caution than Shiro would have expected from his flight records. The stiff line of his shoulders starts to relax, the white-knuckled grip on the controls begins to ease.
And then the pod lifts a little, an unexpected updraft, and falls again just as quickly, and there’s a jarring shudder as the simulation grazes an outcropping of rock. “Shit,” Keith hisses, veering desperately. It’s sheer flinching: he’s shying away from the nearest threat instead of looking further down the course, flying reactively instead of strategically, and in a moment he’s going to fly himself into an unforgivingly literal corner.

“Look ahead,” Shiro says steadily, reaching with his voice to calm. “What’s your plan to get out of this ravine?”

“I don’t-- oh no, oh no --” The pod shudders again, hard enough to rock Shiro in his safety harness. “I can’t--”

There’s alarms going off. Shiro’s itching to jump in and right the ship, give Keith a stable place from which to start again--but he keeps back. “Deep breath,” he says instead. “What’s priority right now?”

“Not-- running into things--”

There’s another shudder, the most violent yet, and Shiro winces. There’s no recovering from that one. The screens show an outcropping looming directly in front of them as Keith frantically flips switches and yanks at the rudder.

The pod goes dark and still. Shiro can hear Keith breathing hard in his seat on the other side of the pod, and a second later the lights come up.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Yeah,” says Keith. His voice is a little strange, subdued, strained. He takes a deep breath. “I want to try that again.”


Keith rubs his eyes. “Um,” he says. “Um, I-- forgot to account for the… the change in air currents when you go over the tops of cliffs.” He’s not looking at Shiro. His shoulders are up, his head lowered.

“Good, yeah,” says Shiro. “Then what?”

“I…”

Keith doesn’t say anything else. He’s sitting too still, his head bowed so that all Shiro can see is the back of his head, the short dark hair curling at the nape of his neck. He takes in a breath, slow and careful, and Shiro understands all at once.

“Hey,” he says, and hastily unbuckles his harness, taking the single step to stand at Keith’s side. He puts a hand on the bony slope of Keith’s shoulder and squeezes, firm and soothing. “Hey, bud. This isn’t a test. It’s just me. This isn’t--”

“Can we just,” Keith interrupts, sharp-edged and raw, “I just want to try again. Please.”

Shiro pauses. Underneath his hand Keith is tense, quivering slightly like he’s actively stopping himself from reacting to the touch. “Okay,” Shiro finally says. “Okay, let’s go again.”

He leans over Keith’s shoulder to input his code to restart the simulation, then draws back to the comms seat. Keith takes a deep breath, his jaw set, and leans forward slightly in his seat.
The second time goes marginally better than the first. Keith watches his instruments and isn’t caught off guard by air currents again, but once again a minor mistake sends him spiraling out of control: he takes a turn at a speed and angle that would have worked with Terran gravity, but sends him drifting off the recommended course and straight into a cliffside in the simulated thirty-eight percent of Mars.

The pod is badly shaken by the impact, and so is Keith’s confidence.

They run it again. And again.

Keith manages to complete the mission objectives the fourth time, but it doesn’t feel much like a victory. He slumps tiredly in his safety harness, his head bowed, and doesn’t respond to Shiro’s cheering.

Shiro wastes no time unbuckling his own harness and moving to Keith’s side. “Hey, man,” he says, stooping next to the pilot’s seat and reaching to release the fastenings of Keith’s harness. “You did it. I’m so proud of you.”

“I want--” starts Keith, pushing Shiro’s hands away. “No, I want to do it again, I can do it better, I did it before--”

Shiro draws back, studying Keith: he’s flushed as if from a high fever, his face twisted up with distress, sweat from the punishing ride beaded along his hairline. His eyes are red. “Nooo,” Shiro says slowly. “I think we’re gonna take a break and get some fresh air. We’ve been in here almost two hours.”

“No--” Keith grabs at Shiro’s wrists when he reaches again to undo the harness buckles. “I don’t want-- I don’t want to stop, I want to do it right, please, I can do it right--”

There’s a catch in his voice like he’s close to tears, and his hands on Shiro’s wrists are desperately tight. Shiro can’t tell if Keith is trying to stop him from coming closer or from drawing away.

“Keith,” he says, and carefully crouches down next to the pilot’s chair, letting Keith keep his wrists. “Hey, listen to me, buddy…”

Keith is pushing back into his chair, his shoulders curling forward, angling away from Shiro. His head ducks, but Shiro can still see the miserable contortions of his face. “I can do it better,” Keith whispers, the words strained. “I swear I can, please just don’t--”

“Keith,” Shiro repeats urgently. He moves one hand experimentally, reaching to grip the joint of Keith’s shoulder; Keith’s hand tightens spasmodically, but he permits the shift. “Listen,” Shiro says again, quieter. “I’ve seen your flight logs, okay? I know what you can do.”

Keith goes still.

“This isn’t a test,” says Shiro again, trying to meet his eyes. “This isn’t something you pass or fail, there’s nothing-- You don’t have to prove anything to me, bud.”

“I--” says Keith, and swallows, his face twisting. “I choked.”

Shiro pauses. “You kind of panicked whenever you made a mistake,” he finally agrees. “But then you took your mistakes and you learned from them. You didn’t ever make the same mistake twice, did you notice?”

Keith doesn’t answer for a moment. “I made stupid mistakes.”
“Keith…” Shiro sighs. He reaches forward and curls his other hand around the back of Keith’s neck. Keith lets him, still holding his wrist but loosely, and he allows it too when Shiro tugs him forward by the nape and gently, gently bumps their foreheads together.

“You did good today,” Shiro tells him firmly. “I’m proud of you. You got shaky, you got frustrated, but you didn’t let that stop you. You kept trying until you got to the mission objectives. That persistence, that... that being willing to try again? That’s going to be so valuable to you here, Keith. It’s going to take you so far.”

Keith’s breathing again, melting a little bit. He’s still got hold of Shiro, but he seems to have forgotten: there’s no tension in his grip. His eyes are closed.

“You did good, okay?” Shiro says again. He squeezes the back of Keith’s neck, willing him to hear, willing him to understand. “You’re doing good. But right now you need to take a break.”

He waits until Keith responds, just a small nod of acquiescence, then draws back. He releases Keith’s harness, this time with no resistance, and stands to offer Keith a hand up.

Keith is shaky on his feet when they exit the simulator, a fairly normal symptom for new cadets after a rough session. Shiro’s just grateful he doesn’t seem prone to airsickness like some. He wraps an arm around Keith’s shoulders to steady him and leads him toward the alcove off the main simulator stage with the refreshment station.

“Thirsty?” he asks, and retrieves two bottles of water from the machine anyway when Keith shakes his head. He eyes the exhausted slope of Keith’s shoulders and touches the button for a packet of cookies as well. “Come on, let's sit.”

Keith follows him and sits down on the bench next to Shiro without a word, tucking his hands beneath his legs. He's too quiet, hunched over his knees like something hurts, his head down.

“Here, bud,” says Shiro, breaking the seal on one of the bottles of water and pressing it into his hands. “Drink some of that for me, okay?”

Keith looks at the bottle, then obediently raises it to drink. Despite his assertion that he wasn't thirsty, when he finally lowers it again, gasping slightly, a solid three-quarters of the water is gone. Shiro opens the cookies too, nudging Keith to take some.

“How come were you hiding?” he asks after a moment, when Keith's had one cookie and is halfway through a second. “Earlier, when I called you?”

“I wasn't… hiding,” Keith says uncomfortably. “I had to-- I had to throw up, I wasn't…”

A lot of things make sense, all at once. Shiro sits back, dismayed. “Oh geez,” he says. “Oh, bud. You should have told me you weren't feeling good, I wouldn't have-- Are you... still? Are you…”

“No,” says Keith, flushing. “I'm fine, I just--maybe ate something bad, I don't know.”

“I can't believe you flew the simulator for two hours with a sour stomach,” Shiro frets. “Tell me next time, don't just say you're fine. When did it start?”

“I don't know,” says Keith again, but he's fidgeting and won't look at Shiro.

“Why didn't you say?”

“I just,” mumbles Keith, “wanted to get it over with.”
Shiro squints one eye. “The simulator?” he asks. This doesn't track; Keith's been looking forward to it for weeks now.

But Keith's gone silent again, closed off from him. Shiro stares at him, at a loss--and then, dawning slowly, he begins to understand.

“You were nervous,” he realizes. “That's why you... that's why you weren't feeling good.”

Keith rubs his palms on his knees and doesn't answer at all, and that's an answer in itself.

Shiro frowns, bewildered and rather indignant. Why would Keith be suddenly nervous? Why would Keith be nervous of him? Shiro's never given him any reason, he's tried to be a safe place, he thought he was doing all right, he thought he was starting to get through--

Abruptly he realizes that Keith is sitting very still, and though he's not looking up from the half-eaten cookie in his hand his focus is unwaveringly on Shiro. His silence is not sullen; it's anxious.

*This isn't about you, Shirogane.*

He rubs a hand over his mouth and sighs.

“I'm sorry, Keith,” he says quietly. “I should have seen.”

Keith doesn’t answer. His shoulders jerk slightly in what it takes Shiro a moment to recognize as a shrug.

“How are you feeling now?” Shiro asks.

“Fine,” says Keith, with the edge in his voice that means his defenses are up. “I said already.”

“I mean--” Shiro stops. “I mean do you want to go back in or do you want to call it a day?”

Keith goes still. “I want to go back in,” he says, his voice low but resolute, and Shiro isn’t surprised at all.

“Okay,” he says, and takes a deep breath, reaching over to squeeze Keith's shoulder briefly. “Okay. Finish your water, then we will.”

Keith gives him a quick look: watchful, unhappy, strangely resigned. He's looked away again before Shiro can begin to make sense of it, chugging purposefully at his water.

Five minutes later, Keith is buckling in while Shiro navigates through the menu on the tiny admin-locked control screen. When more time has passed than could be considered reasonable to restart the last loaded course, Keith leans to the side to look past Shiro. “What are you doing?” he asks warily.

“Think we could use a change of scene,” Shiro answers absently, double-checking Keith's file on his tablet... *there.* He keys in the scenario number and stands back as the simulation boots.

“What--” Keith begins. “Shiro, this isn’t-- I want to, I want to do 224 again, what are you…”

He trails off. Shiro glances at him in time to see the recognition sweeping over his face. His eyes flit from viewport to viewport, wide and confused, then settle on Shiro.

“What is this?” he asks, and there's a strange pricking vulnerability in his tone. “Why are we…”

“You failed this course, didn't you?” Shiro asks, and Keith flinches. “They cut you off when you
kept going off-route?”

Keith licks his lips and averts his eyes, but not before Shiro sees the quick flash of hurt and hostility.

“I watched that whole log,” Shiro admits. “That was the first time I got to see you fly. It was...”

But Keith's all but shut down now, refusing to look at him, his head bowed and his arms crossed protectively over his stomach.

Shiro bites his lip, then takes a single step forward and crouches beside the pilot's seat. “Bud,” he says. “I'm gonna tell you something, but I need you to look at me.” He's not entirely surprised when Keith keeps his head stubbornly down. He waits a moment, then pushes gently, “Keith.”

Keith shudders, shutting his eyes tightly. Shiro stays still and patient until he finally looks up, gets a glimpse of fear and shame in the stormy violet before it's crowded out by resentment.

“Okay,” he says, keeping his voice soft and steady. “Listen. They only give you a preset route for this kind of scenario during your first year. Second year you get suggestions, third year and on you have to figure out your own course. Do you understand?”

Keith shrugs.

He doesn’t understand.

Shiro blows out a breath and hesitates. He doesn’t know how to do this, he doesn’t know how to praise and validate here without discrediting the Garrison’s methods. “Keith,” he finally says. “I’d... really like to see you fly this scenario the way you want to fly it.”

Keith raises his head and stares at Shiro.

“I've taken off the guidance settings,” Shiro says to fill the resounding silence, unaccountably nervous under the weight of the disbelieving scrutiny. “It’s just-- it’s just gonna be you and the mission objective, it’s not gonna matter how you get there.”

Keith stares at him a moment longer, then takes a quick deep breath and shifts, breaking the frozen stillness. “Um,” he murmurs, tugging restlessly at his harness, and peeks sidelong at Shiro again. His eyes are wide and his spine has straightened from its defensive hunch, but the look is sharp-edged with caution. “So I can...”

Shiro raises his eyebrows and nods, unable to stop the smile. “Whatever route you want to take,” he answers. “I liked what I saw in last time’s log.”

“Oh,” whispers Keith. The corners of his open mouth are tugging up, like he wants to be smiling but won’t quite let himself. He ducks his head and hunches up his shoulders to try to hide it, and Shiro finds himself grinning broadly at the picture. He reaches out and squeezes Keith’s shoulder as he straightens to his feet, and Keith doesn’t flinch.

“Okay?” he asks, and Keith nods quickly. The boy is breathing too fast, gripping the controls with white-knuckled fists, but Shiro looks at the way he’s sitting forward in his seat, eyes bright and intent, and knows it for exhilaration rather than panic.

“Okay,” Shiro repeats, and steps back to strap himself in.

Chapter End Notes
frickin 100k later we finally make it to the simulator~

(anybody else here do the thing where you Gotta perform well you just Gotta and so obviously you turn into clumsyfeet mcbutterfingers?)
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Keith rides the waves of elation through the entirety of the next day.

It’s a peculiar feeling, half doubt, half heart-pounding delight: he’d flown the course, and he’d done it well, he thinks—Shiro had let him see his scores afterwards and he’d beaten his own record—but then his own record probably wasn’t anything much, and he’s a little embarrassed that Shiro saw him excited about it—but then again Shiro had whooped and cheered and picked him right up off his feet to hug when the simulation landed.

He basks in that memory for a little while, and then goes spiraling off into uncertainty again with the thought that maybe Shiro was just humoring him, maybe it was empty praise, maybe it was just to make him feel better…

He tumbles through the cycle twice before breakfast, lands in glowing satisfaction by lunchtime, frets anxiously through the entire first half of Earth science and gets scolded for his distraction. He’s settled on cautious ambivalence by the time he’s scheduled to meet with Commander Sam, but then Commander Sam says, grinning, “I heard you had a good run on the simulator last night!” and Keith’s half-panicked again.

There’s been a thought prickling in the back of his mind since he watched Shiro input his codes last night, a thought he hasn’t dared to look at too closely—

—and should not; every time it pops up again he shoves it hastily into an out-of-sight corner of his mind and tries to forget about it--

--but it’s still there, waiting for him to notice it, and finally, under the faintly humming light fixture of Commander Sam’s pristine office, he gives it half of his attention.

He knows Shiro’s codes.

He could get into the simulator alone.

He’s already in the administrative wing. There’s no patrolled hallways between him and the simulator stage.

He watches the clock, works carefully on keeping any hint of his thoughts off his face, smiles and laughs at the right times, answers Commander Sam’s questions—and his hands grip the seat of his chair, clammy and cold, while his heart jumps in his throat with indecision.

“Well do you want me to walk you back to your room?” Commander Sam offers, just like last time, and just like last time Keith shakes his head and says, “I’m okay, thank you.” Commander Sam opens the door for him, claps his back fondly, and then Keith’s free and alone.

He walks down the silent hallway, his feet making no sound but a soft scuffscuff on the low-pile carpet, and touches the button for the elevator. It opens with a soft chime, and it shuts again while he’s still staring at the row of buttons, trying to decide. His hand hovers over the L6 button that would take him to the top floor—then he sighs and shifts to push the L0 button instead to go back to his room.
The elevator lurches into motion before he's touched the button, and Keith's stomach lurches with it. He backs away automatically from the door, watching the number on the display ascend: L3, L4, L5. On L6 it stops, and Keith stands frozen for the beat between the cessation of motion and the opening of the doors.

There's a sergeant he doesn't know on the other side. His eyes sweep over Keith impersonally as he enters the elevator. "Curfew in an hour, cadet."

"Yes, sir," says Keith, breathless with guilt. He edges to the side, away from the sergeant, then makes his escape before the doors close.

And then he's alone in the Level 6 hallway, two doors away from the simulator stage. He swallows nervously and glances up to the display above the elevator doors--L4, L3, L2--then spins on his heel and makes his way toward what is most likely a monumentally bad decision.

The second door is code-locked, and Keith hesitates. There's a camera in the hallway--but he remembers what Shiro said, that surveillance footage is boring, that it's generally not reviewed unless there's an incident, and he straightens his shoulders and carefully punches in the code he memorized last night without even meaning to.

For a moment, nothing happens, and it's almost a relief: he's got no choice but to turn around and go back to his room like he meant to. But then the door whisks open, and the stage is there before him, the Garrison's practice simulators lined up and motionless in their gyroscopic settings.

They're not all motionless, he realizes a second later: two are dipping and rolling, the observation screens showing two vastly different landscapes. He gulps, glances up and down the stage, and hurries down the line before anybody catches sight of him.

Once he's safely inside a pod with the door shut, he has to sit down on the gently swaying floor and breathe for a moment, deep and slow like Shiro taught him. When the rushing in his ears has subsided, he draws and releases one more breath, then gets to his feet and approaches the panel concealing the control screen.

Shiro's code works again, and Keith stares at the list of available scenarios, overwhelmed. But he's here on a mission, and he carefully types into the search bar: ENCELUS.

There's only one scenario option, which makes it easier. Keith taps it and clutches hastily at the wall when the simulator pod shudders with the boot-up. "Okay," he breathes when it stills again, and steps gingerly to the pilot's seat to strap himself in.

He starts slow and easy, just getting a feel for the terrain, the gravity. He turns, dips, ascends, dares a couple of simple rolls. He watches his instruments warily, remembering Malone's warning about the magnetic poles, but nothing really happens. Five minutes in, he's half-wondering if he got the wrong scenario.

That's when hell breaks loose.

There's a slight fuzziness to the horizon, a rising haze: he watches it curiously, coasting idly to meet it.

He pulls back a second later, half-panicked: it's geysers, an advancing line of them sweeping toward him, shooting up miles above the surface. He starts maneuvers almost automatically, but they're already beginning to erupt directly beneath him and it's far too late to evade.

And that's when he realizes he forgot to set the simulation to pilot-only.
There’s a drag on the right side: he’s fighting his own craft along with the lurch and buck of the rising plumes of gas and water. The engineer station behind him is lit up with alarms and flaring red lights, and he feels like he’s going to shake apart in the simulated turbulence. He clings to the controls, focuses fiercely on staying on top of the chaos, staying level--

--and then it’s over, just as abruptly as it started. He sits still, gasping for breath, cataloguing the new bumps and strains and mild hurts from the wild ride. His skull is throbbing a little where his head knocked into the seat rest, but it’s nothing bad; his entire chest aches where the simulation shook him against the harness. He breathes and blinks and focuses on the viewport.

There’s another wave coming, maybe a mile off. He gauges the distance, his time, then he breathes rapidly through his mouth, sets the controls to coast, and unbuckles his harness to dart back to the engineer’s seat. It takes him a frantic moment to figure out what all the chiming alarms and flashing lights want him to do, he’s not on the engineer track, but he licks his lips and tugs a lever labeled right stabilizer, and that seems to satisfy about half the alerts.

He’s just trying to puzzle out the rest when the proximity alarm blares from the pilot’s station. He scrambles back up front and takes his seat--but the first jarring impact of the next wave of geysers hits before he’s rebuckled the harness, and the shock shakes him out of the chair.

Everything goes a little unfocused for a while: bright chaos, wild jostling, blunt impacts and sharp edges that will hurt later. The pod goes into an uncontrolled spin, and he’s tumbling about helplessly in it, trying to find something to hold onto--

It stops.

The viewports go dark.

“Simulation failed,” says a dispassionate female voice, and Keith rolls painfully from the wall to the floor as the pod shifts back to its upright starting position.

He stays there, curled fetal with his arms up protectively around his head as the simulator pod finally, finally stills. His breathing is harsh in the silence, his heartbeat in his ears almost as loud. He stays still and doesn't move, listening for sounds of discovery.

When several seconds have passed, he carefully begins to uncurl, moving slow and stiff. It feels like the first moments after older, stronger children who like to inflict pain have finally finished with him, when he doesn’t yet know everything that has been hurt and is afraid to find out. He straightens his spine to lie flat on his back, and that's all right; he rests there for a moment, then rolls carefully to his hands and knees. One shoulder twinges warningly, and he discovers a deep ache in his ribs and his left hip, but he breathes through it, and nothing prevents him from getting unsteadily to his feet.

“Okay,” he says under his breath. He rubs his shoulder, wincing, and limps across the pod to the control screen. There's still forty-five minutes to curfew.

ENCELADUS

He finds the command to set the course to pilot-only this time, handing engineering and comms off to an AI, and buckles himself back into the seat.

The simulation begins.

This time, as soon as the hazy line of geysers appears on the horizon, he wheels the craft sharply and speeds along parallel to it, trying to find the end.
“Distance increasing between ship and objective,” a cool voice informs him from the comms station. “Recommend altering course.”

“I know,” Keith says, his eyes on the rapidly approaching line of geyser plumes. There doesn’t seem to be an end: he keeps going and keeps going, following the curve of the moon’s surface, but it never ends.

“Distance increasing--”

“I know,” snaps Keith, and the geysers slam into them.

It’s worse this time. He’s lower than he was before, and the first direct hit sends the craft tumbling end over end. Another plume catches him on the other side, reverses the direction of the pod’s spin. Keith takes blow after blow, never strong enough to fatally damage the craft and end the simulation, never forgiving enough that he can regain control. All he can do is hold on, his teeth clenched together, and stare at the bright friendly yellow of the emergency button.

(His palms are itching to slam the button and end the simulation, but he can’t, he can’t; it would call the sergeant on duty to his pod to see if he needs medical attention and he can’t get caught.)

He’s going to throw up if he doesn’t get out of this.

The viewports are completely obscured, he has no sense of up or down, and he remembers with sudden panic about the instruments being unreliable on this course. Another jarring blow shakes him in his harness and it hurts, it hurts--

He shoves the craft forward, he doesn’t even know where he’s going but he slams the acceleration and hopes and--

--and then everything is still and dark, and he almost sobs with relief when the cool voice confirms his failure.

It’s only been ten minutes. He closes his eyes, swallowing back the nausea and the frustration.

In... hold... out...

He stays in his seat, letting the harness hold him up, and he tries to think. He can’t go around the geyser wall, at least not that direction; he hasn’t figured out yet how to go through it, if it’s even possible. He wonders if the simulation will let him go over it.

He tries that next. It doesn’t.

He tries flying along the line of geysers in the opposite direction. It doesn’t end that way either.

He tries flying away from the geysers instead of toward them. They catch up to him, and the comms AI won’t shut up about the increasing distance.

That crash is the worst. The viewports clear just before the ship hits the ground, and the vertigo from the uncontrolled spinning descent leaves Keith reeling in his seat after the screens go black.

His head hurts. His body is a muddled mess of muscles that have been strung too tight and can’t remember how to relax; his stomach is roiling; everything aches. He shuts his eyes tightly, wondering absently where the wetness squeezing out the corners came from; he draws a deep breath, and he unbuckles the harness and goes back to the control panel to restart the simulation.
There’s an unpleasant jerk of alarm in his chest when he sees the time: six minutes to curfew, and he’s in the wrong wing of the building. He draws his hand back hastily from the panel and stumbles for the exit.

It’s hard to run on wobbly knees, but he takes it in short bursts. Somehow, miraculously, he doesn’t meet anybody in the corridor between the simulator stage and the elevator, but the elevator slows between L3 and L2 and comes to a stop. Keith hastily swipes at his sweaty forehead, tries to straighten his hair, and attempts a casual, non-guilty posture as the door slides open.

All his attempts crumble in an instant, because it’s Commander Iverson on the other side of the door. They stare at each other for a heavy second. Then Keith remembers to salute, and Iverson lets out a gusty breath through his nose and steps into the elevator.

The air in the elevator as the doors chime shut is suddenly too dense to breathe. Keith keeps his head down and tries not to cringe into the corner.

“Cutting it kind of close, aren’t you, cadet,” says Iverson, staring straight ahead at the door.

Keith glances up at him—why is he so tall—and swallows hard. “Yes, sir,” he answers, because that’s generally safest with Iverson.

Iverson looks down at him, and Keith ducks his head in alarm, both to avoid the piercing look and to try to conceal some of his dishevelment. “Just come from the training deck, did you?” Iverson asks gruffly.

“Y--yes, sir.” Keith stutters on the lie, but Iverson grunts in—was that approval?

The elevator stops on L1, and Iverson says, “Be in your room by lights out, Kogane,” and is gone.

Keith stares after him in mounting confusion until the doors shut. The elevator dips down to L0 and he scurries out into the hallway just as the bell rings for curfew.

Malone glances up from his desk as Keith finally makes it to the door. “Hey, dude,” he says casually, then looks again, his eyes going sharp. “Hey,” he says, getting to his feet, “hey, you okay?”

“What?” asks Keith, half-distracted. He hurries for his dresser and digs out his pajamas and his shower caddy.

“You look--” says Malone, and hesitates. “You look kind of shook up.”

“Um,” says Keith, and forgets what he was looking for. “I was-- Iverson was in the elevator just now?”

“Ahh, no,” Malone says sympathetically. “Did you get written up?”

“I-- no?” Keith turns in a circle, searching his side of the room—he needs something, he needs something, what is it… “He was-- he was nice, kind of? It was weird.”

Malone steps past him and grabs Keith’s towel down from where it’s hanging on the end of his bedframe. “Huh,” he says, and holds it out to Keith. “Are you okay, though?”

Keith blinks at his towel in Malone’s hand stupidly for a moment, then takes it with a quick embarrassed look. “No, yeah, I’m fine, I’m fine, I gotta…”
“You don’t have time to shower,” says Malone. “Not if you’re gonna go upstairs. I know you’ve been going to other floors since…”

“I’ll--” starts Keith, and looks over his shoulder at the clock. Malone’s right. “I’ll hurry, I gotta--”

“No, here,” Malone says reasonably. “I gotta brush my teeth and stuff, just shower in our bathroom and I’ll wait around until you’re out, okay?”

Keith doesn’t know where to look. He hadn’t thought Malone was paying that much attention. He’s been going up a floor or two to shower for the last two and a half weeks, unwilling to let himself be caught vulnerable on the site of his last encounter with Beck’s fists and Paschel’s cruel fingers. He’s pretty sure he’s not supposed to, but so far he hasn’t gotten in trouble. Nobody’s acknowledged it at all, in fact, and he doesn’t know what to do now that somebody has.

“Cool?” Malone asks, and Keith starts.

“Fine,” he says, shifting his weight and hugging his towel. “If you want. I don’t care.”

“Let’s go, then,” Malone says, gesturing to the door. “You got like ten minutes to get in and out.

“I can see the clock,” mutters Keith, but his heart's not in it. He's too tired and sore to start anything, though the strange feeling of shelter offered where there was none before makes him prickle up anxiously.

He ducks into the back of the bathroom to shower quickly while Malone does his routine at the front sinks. The hot water is both torture and bliss on his aching body: he leans his whole side on the wall of the stall and closes his eyes while the blunt, stinging needles of the shower’s stream pummel and soothe his viciously strained muscles. He wants to stay here forever.

But too soon Malone is thumping on the wall outside. “Keith!” he calls. “Come on, dude, that was the two minute warning.”

Keith opens his eyes and reaches reluctantly to turn off the water. He towels off, and then it's the usual race to get dressed before the chill settles into his skin. Malone keeps reminding him of the time, though, so he squirms into his shorts and just wraps his towel around his shoulders like a blanket in lieu of trying to wrestle his damp arms into his shirt, and hastily follows Malone out.

Malone turns half-back to look at him as they make their way down the hallway to their room, sharp-eyed enough that Keith wants to squirm. “What?” he finally blurts.

“Nothing,” says Malone. “Just-- are you--? You’re limping.”

Keith goes cold, a guilty, startled shock making him miss a step. He looks quickly at Malone’s face. “I’m not,” he says, and wraps the towel tighter around himself. “I’m-- I tripped.”

“You tripped,” Malone repeats, rather flat.

Keith ducks his head over their door’s entry pad, focusing intently on entering the code rather than looking at Malone. The pad beeps, the door opens, and he hurries inside just as the hallway lights blink to their night modes.

“Keith…” Malone says, and sighs as he follows him in. “Come on, man, you gotta stop this. I know you didn’t trip.”

“I did,” says Keith hotly. “I tripped in the library and I fell into a table and my leg hurts, and it was
Malone is watching him too closely. Keith is abruptly aware of every bump and bruise and tender place on his back and sides and shoulders. He shifts nervously, holding his towel like a shelter.

“Quit looking at me,” he mumbles.

Malone averts his eyes immediately, automatically, but he looks back a second later. “Okay,” he says, shifting his weight like he wants to come nearer to Keith. “Okay, so you tripped and fell. Did you hurt anything else? Did you hit your head?”

“No, god,” Keith says. “I’m fine.”

Malone’s lips press together. He studies Keith for another moment, one eye narrowed like he’s sizing him up, and Keith finds himself automatically planting his feet, bracing himself in preparation for a fight—but Malone looks away.

“Fine,” he says curtly. There’s a pause, then he adds without looking at Keith, “I’m glad you didn’t get hurt worse. When you tripped.”

Keith doesn’t know how to respond to this. He shifts his weight, forcing himself to relax, and lowers his head. He keeps the towel tightly around his shoulders until Malone reaches over and turns off his lamp, plunging the room into darkness, and then finishes changing by the dim amber glow of Malone’s tablet screen.

He doesn’t relax until he’s safely under his covers.

---

**Hey, Shiro?**

*I’m sorry to message so late. Are you still awake?*

**Hey! Yeah, I’m up for a bit yet. What’s up?**

*You said a couple weeks ago to message if Keith was acting weird or trying to hide bruises?*

---

**Chapter End Notes**

guys i’m getting so close to wrapping this up omg
Shiro sits upright on the couch, setting his laptop aside.

*What’s going on?*

*He’s limping,* Malone sends almost immediately. *Says he tripped. He’s being weird about it.*

Shiro gets to his feet, pacing without aim. He heads first to the door and his shoes, but then draws back. It’s past lights-out at the Garrison; Malone shouldn’t even be messaging him. *How bad is it?*

*Nothing like last time,* Malone answers, and Shiro can breathe again. *He’s just moving kind of slow, definitely got a limp, didn’t want me to see him without a shirt. He won’t tell me if anything hurts. I wasn’t sure what to do.*

*You did good,* Shiro sends. He bounces his tablet absently in his hands, thinking. *No concussion?*

*No,* sends Malone. *I don’t think so anyway. He seems tired but he’s not disoriented or sick or anything. He said he didn’t hit his head.*

Shiro pauses before he starts writing again. *Do you think he needs medical attention?*

There’s a long moment before an answer comes, the notification that Malone is typing appearing and disappearing several times.

*Um*

*I don’t think so? Not like urgently*  
*I think he’s *hurting* but I don’t think he’s *hurt**

Did that make sense at all, I’m sorry

*I’m following,* sends Shiro. He rubs the side of his face unhappily and moves toward the front door again, then turns away. *Okay,* he sends, and hesitates. *Okay, I’m gonna check in with him if he’s still awake. Thank you for letting me know.*

*Thanks for picking up,* answers Malone. *I didn’t know what to do.*

*It’s what I’m here for,* Shiro sends, then makes a dissatisfied face. He opens a new window to message Keith and stops there for a moment, trying to determine his approach.

*Hey, bud!* he finally sends. *How was your meeting with Commander Holt?*

There’s no response for a moment.

*hi :)*

*good*

*Yeah? :)* Shiro sends. *It’s working out for you all right, then?*

*yeah*

Shiro blows out a breath, wishing that he had Keith here, or even on a voice call. It’s always been
harder for Shiro to discern meaning and emotion over messaging, and Keith can barely communicate at all this way yet.

*How was the rest of your day?* he finally sends.

*fine*

*Anybody give you any trouble?*

There’s a longer pause this time, and Shiro holds his breath.

*no*

Shiro stares at the message, aching with a little pang of resigned frustration. It’s fine, he tells himself. Keith isn’t hurt badly this time, and Shiro has the whole weekend to take care of him and tease out the truth. It’s fine.

Still.

*Okay,* he finally sends. *Get some sleep. I’ll see you tomorrow.*

*k,* sends Keith. *you too.*

Shiro buries his face in his hands and gets up to tell Sam.

He’s there in the library the next day when Keith’s final pod class gets out, and he takes the moment before Keith sees him to discreetly assess him. There’s no sign of a limp, and he wonders briefly if Malone had been imagining it. But there’s a stiffness to Keith’s posture and a weariness in his expression that gives credence to his worries, and Shiro sighs as he moves to meet him.

“Hey, buddy,” he says when he’s near enough, and Keith’s tired face lights up to see him. Shiro reaches out almost without thinking to draw him in, and Keith veers automatically into the shelter of his arm, bumping up against Shiro’s side with a quiet, relieved exhalation. His eyes drop shut, and Shiro forgets for a moment that he’s not supposed to know that Keith is hurting. He wraps both arms around him as cadets stream past them on both sides.

“How are you doing?” he asks quietly, and Keith’s shoulders lift and drop in a shrug. His eyes are still shut, his forehead tucked against the middle of Shiro’s chest. “Rough day?” Shiro guesses, and Keith just shrugs again.

Shiro’s prepared to let Keith stay where he is for as long as he wants, but after a moment Keith shifts and sighs and pulls away. Shiro studies him closely, searching for a visible sign of a tussle. There’s a slight discoloration on one temple, like a bruise in the making, and Shiro latches onto it, pushing Keith’s hair aside to get a better look. “What happened here?”


He sounds dismissive, tired and casual. Like he’s not hiding anything at all. Shiro narrows his eyes.

“What kind of accident?” he asks, and there it is, a quick guilty glance. Keith’s wariness is his tell, every time.

“I tripped,” Keith says, and his eyes go skittering away.

Shiro closes his mouth and pauses. “Okay,” he murmurs, and puts it aside for now. He puts a hand
between Keith’s shoulder blades and tugs lightly. “Come on, bud, let’s go home.”

Keith perks up a little when they arrive at the apartment, enough to chat with Sam while he drinks his chocolate milk, enough to help Shiro with supper. But he settles at one end of the short couch with his tablet at the end of the night to do his weekend homework, and he’s drooping and glassy-eyed before even twenty minutes have passed.

Shiro gets him to bed early, piling blankets on top of him in ridiculous quantities until he gets a sleepily exasperated smile and a grumbled “Shirooo.” But Keith's eyes are heavy-lidded with exhaustion, and they close as Shiro spreads the last blanket over him and don't open again.

Shiro half-wakes to a thump and a stifled yelp of pain somewhere in the middle of the night. He stirs, blinking across the dark living room at the familiar shapes there: Keith has extricated himself from his nest, it seems, and walked straight into the corner of the coffee table. Shiro waits a moment to see if Keith needs him, but Keith just hisses out a disgruntled breath and straightens to walk toward the bathroom, so he shuts his eyes again and drifts.

He keeps half an ear tuned to the hallway, though, and he gradually surfaces more fully from sleep with the realization that time has passed and Keith has not returned. He rubs his eyes and sits up on his elbows, listening, then sighs and gets to his feet to pad quietly down the hall after Keith.

He can hear movement from inside, and the light is on. He hesitates, then knocks lightly with his knuckles. “Keith? You okay?”

The movement stops abruptly. Shiro waits.

“Bud?” he asks. “Can I come in?”

The movement starts again, frantic rustlings. “Just a-- just a second,” comes Keith's voice, slightly muffled, pitched high with alarm. Then the door opens, and Keith's standing in front of him, disheveled and large-eyed. His shirt’s hanging a little crooked, and Shiro's eyes track a fuzzy tuft of hair as it falls back down into place over Keith's forehead.

The bruise ointment is out on the counter.

Shiro looks at it, and he looks at the guilty face staring up at him, and he sighs heavily. “Okay,” he says at last, and gestures at Keith's torso. “Shirt off, let me see it.”

“Let you see what?” Keith starts to say, but Shiro cuts him off.

“Keith,” he says, and his voice is sharper with frustration than he means it to be. Keith rocks back, his skinny shoulders jerking, and goes quiet. Shiro meets the startled, wary look, and his heart stops for a moment. He shuts his eyes, scrubs his hands over his face. “I’m sorry,” he says, quieter. “I didn't mean to snap. Just-- let me see. Please. I know you're hurt.”

Keith shifts from foot to foot. His eyes flicker to the hallway behind Shiro, like for a moment he's thinking of refusing, pushing past--then, moving reluctantly, he lifts his shirt over his head and bundles it up in his arms, not looking at Shiro.

Shiro sighs again, his shoulders slumping. He reaches out--slowly, showing Keith his hands--and turns him, angling them both so the strongest light falls on Keith's back.

“Where’d they catch you this time?” he asks.
“They didn’t,” says Keith, instantly defensive. “It was an accident.”

Keith’s arms are pimpling up with gooseflesh. There's ointment smeared clumsily over a bruise close to the center of his back, like he tried but couldn't reach well enough to rub it in. Shiro swipes his fingertips over it until the cream is absorbed, light and brisk and careful, then reaches for the jar so he can apply a dollop to another bruise at the edge of one scapula.

There's nothing so bad as last time, at least, nothing so deep or deliberately cruel.

“What happened?” Shiro asks.


Shiro presses his lips together and looks back at the marks on Keith's back, considering them in the light of this scenario.

“When?”

“Last night. After I met with Commander Sam.”

Shiro nods absently. The bruises are fairly new, and it tracks with when Malone reported it. He caps the ointment and reaches past Keith to set it on the counter. “Let me see your arms?” he requests.

Keith looks puzzled, but he extends his arms without arguing. Shiro carefully checks each, over and under, checks his hands: there's some discoloration on his left shoulder, like he slammed into something, another deep lurid bruise behind his elbow--but there's no defensive marks. There's no swollen or scabby knuckles, there's no grip marks, there's no bruises to indicate blocked blows.

The tight ball of protective anger churning in Shiro's gut begins to ease. “Okay,” he murmurs, and an unhappiness of another sort takes its place. “You fell down some stairs.”

Keith nods quickly--but Shiro catches a slight guilty stiffening of his bare shoulders and pauses.

“Did somebody trip you?” he asks. There's something here he's missing. “Or push you?”

“No,” says Keith, edging toward irritable, still refusing to look at Shiro. “It was an accident.”

“Keith,” says Shiro desperately. He tugs one shoulder to get Keith to turn around, to face him. “Look at me, bud. Did somebody else make you fall?”

“No,” says Keith, definitely pissed off now. His eyes are sparking angrily--but he's meeting Shiro's searching gaze without flinching or looking away. “It was an accident, it was just me, nobody hurt me. God, Shiro.”


Keith stares up at him, then closes his mouth and swallows, breaking the eye contact. He shakes out his shirt and disappears briefly underneath it.

Shiro waits for him to emerge again, then asks quietly, “Do you want a painkiller?”

“No,” Keith mutters, mutinous.

“Okay,” says Shiro, and reaches to get the bottle down.
Keith watches him, his eyebrows drawing together. “I don't want one,” he says again.

“I know,” answers Shiro, focusing on the bottle. “I'm gonna set one out for you in case you change your mind later.”

“I won't,” says Keith, but his eyes follow the pill Shiro sets on the counter.

Shiro shrugs. “Either way,” he says lightly, and puts away the bottle. “Are you sore?”

Keith shakes his head, but he reaches up to rub at his neck. Shiro watches, then nudges Keith's hand out of the way so he can knead gently along the tight muscles there with his thumbs. Keith stiffens up, his head rearing back in startled confusion--but then in another instant his eyes are dropping shut, blinking owlishly while his head sags. He leans his hands on the counter while Shiro follows tightly wound tension up to the base of his skull and down again to the tops of his shoulders, and after a little while his face twists up in what Shiro thinks for a moment is pain.

“I'm sorry,” Keith mumbles to his hands.

“What’s up, buddy?”

Keith exhales, a short harsh breath of air, and his face twists again. “I'm not very…” He rubs above one eye. “I'm difficult.”

It’s a strange label, an adult label, and Shiro hurts to think how Keith came to affix it to himself.

“I don’t mean to be,” Keith adds, quieter.

Shiro has no idea what to say to this, or to the unhappy catch in Keith’s voice. He lets his hand go still, resting across Keith's back, and he stares across at the reflection of Keith's ducked head in the mirror.

“I just,” says Keith, and falters. “You keep being nice, and I'm-- I get…”

“Bud...” Shiro says unhappily. He hesitates, then wraps his arms around Keith from behind. Keith glances up at their reflections in the mirror, quick and guarded, but he leans back into the contact unprompted and shuts his eyes tiredly.

“Bud,” says Shiro again, resting his chin on top of Keith's head. “It's okay, alright? You’re okay. You don't have to be-- You don't have to have everything all under control, you don't have to be your best self before you let people care about you. It's okay if you're… it's okay if you get mad, if you get scared, it's okay. You’re still worth caring about, you still deserve to have people love you and take care of you. There's nothing you could do, there’s… You could be as difficult as it's possible for you to be and that wouldn’t change, alright?”

It's a lot of words, and they hang heavy in the silence that follows. Keith is perfectly still in the circle of Shiro's arms. Not perfectly still, Shiro realizes a moment later, once the quiet has stretched long enough that he's starting to worry: Keith is trembling.

“Hey,” Shiro says, alarmed, “hey, hey…” He releases Keith immediately, rubbing his upper arms. “Keith, it's okay, it's okay, I'm sorry…”

Keith stares at Shiro in the mirror. There's a strange look on his face, exhaustion and yearning, and his eyes are bright, so bright. He blinks, and Shiro catches a glimpse of the tears spilling over--and then Keith turns, quietly and simply, to huddle against Shiro.
Shiro holds his breath, his arms moving of their own accord to wrap him in. Keith’s face is out of sight, his forehead bunting into the soft heather-gray cotton of Shiro’s t-shirt. “It’s okay,” Shiro whispers, and if Keith wants to hide here then Shiro will make a place for him as long as he needs. “It’s okay, bud, it’s okay. I got you.”

There’s so much he wants to say, to ask. He wants to know who first called Keith difficult to his face, who put him aside and made him think it was his own fault, who hurt him in such a way that the truth of what he deserves, of what he is owed leaves him so shaken. He wants to take a step back, a year, two years, three, however long it’s been; he wants to catch Keith out of his lonely, lonely free-fall.


If Keith is still crying, he does it silently. He’s still shivering, breathing a little unsteadily, but he gradually goes still as Shiro soothes him and talks to him quietly, and finally he pulls back.

Shiro lets him go, watching as Keith quickly wipes under his eyes and tugs self-consciously at his shirt. He doesn’t seem to know where to look, and Shiro can almost see the barriers settling into place again as Keith’s aversion to vulnerability reasserts itself.

“Hey,” he murmurs, “Let's get you back to bed, come on.”

Keith permits the hand between his shoulder blades, his head lowering a little as Shiro steers him toward the door. Shiro pauses, glancing back, a hand on the light switch. “Are you sure you don’t want a painkiller?” he asks.

Keith raises his head and looks back at the little orange pill still sitting innocuously on the counter by the sink, then glances up at Shiro. He shrugs, his eyes averting.

It’s not quite an assent, but it’s not the flat refusal of ten minutes ago. Shiro doubles back and retrieves the pill, handing it to Keith to do with what he likes. Keith closes his hand around it, then somewhat guiltily ducks into the kitchen for a glass of water to swallow it down.

Shiro is waiting by the short couch to tuck him in when he returns. Keith crawls in under the blankets that Shiro holds up for him, settling in on his stomach. Shiro shifts to sit on the floor next to him, massaging lightly at the base of Keith’s skull with the tips of his fingers until Keith sighs and settles more deeply into the cushions of the couch, breathing steadily.

He stays there a little while longer, one elbow braced on the couch next to Keith's pillow, his forehead propped up by one hand, too tired to get up and walk the two steps back to the long couch. Finally, he gets sluggishly to his feet: he’s still a teenager for another nine months, but the position is killing his back.

Shiro collapses back into his nest of blankets and doesn’t stir again until morning.

Chapter End Notes

i'm traveling and so tired and sick; have a chapter
Chapter 35

The next week goes much the same as the last: Keith goes to his classes, keeps his head down and his eyes up. Paschel and her friends continue to ignore him, except for the occasional sneer in the hallway. He continues to avoid the bathroom on his floor whenever possible.

He finds himself in the library during his free hours, reading about Saturn’s moons in general and Enceladus in particular. The geysers are tidal, he learns, which is probably why he couldn’t find the end of them; the magnetic field is exactly as wild as Malone said it was. He finds a message board of past and present cadets discussing the scenario and reads through all eight pages. He doesn’t learn much, except that the course was designed to be sadistically close to impossible, and that only a few cadets per year have managed to complete it since it was installed.

*Shiro’s one of those,* he thinks with a fierce swell of pride, and then, *I’m going to be too.*

He almost asks Shiro to let him try it, Wednesday night when they’re both in the simulator again, but he pushes the impulse firmly down and focuses on the scenarios Shiro chooses. It’s easier this week than last: the anticipation all day is eager, not dreading. But he’s still shaky in the pilot’s seat, clumsier than he wants to be in front of Shiro, and he can’t quite seem to find his stride.

“Easy,” says Shiro sharply after Keith wrecks the simulator for the third time in fifteen minutes and kicks hard at the outer wall of the pod in frustration. It’s too solidly built for him to actually do any damage, but Shiro draws him firmly toward the door with an arm around his back, a warning in the grip of his hand on Keith’s opposite shoulder. “We’re gonna take a break,” he says, and the tone of his voice leaves no room for argument.

Keith follows along sullenly. He considers fighting, but much as he wants to smash things and make a destructive racket right now, he doesn’t really want to try to hurt Shiro.

Shiro makes him run a lap on the training deck, which Keith *resents,* and would resent *more* if not for the fact that Shiro runs it with him. Still, it does feel good in a weird way to expel his frustrations in the slap of sneaker soles against the rubber track surface, and when Shiro finally taps his shoulder and draws him off the track to a bench, he feels calmer.

“Simulators are meant to mimic real flight in every way possible,” says Shiro, once Keith’s gotten his breath back and had half a bottle of water. “When you train for long missions, you’ll stay in a pod for days at a time, sometimes. You’re meant to treat it the same way you’d treat your real ship.”

Keith can see where this is going. He nods and doesn’t look at Shiro.

“You cannot,” says Shiro, and his voice is serious in a way Keith hasn’t heard before. “You *cannot* lose your temper and lash out like that while you’re in the simulator, okay? Not if you want to go to space. They will see that, and they will *remember* that, and they will consider it a liability.”

Keith’s shoulders hunch up. He plays absently with the water bottle, squishing the sides in to hear the satisfying *crackle* and distract himself from the growing lump in his throat.

Shiro’s hand settles on his back and rubs up and down, firm and deliberate and soothing. “It’s okay to get frustrated,” he says. “It’s okay to get mad and need an outlet. Just— just tell me, alright? Tell me, and we’ll come here for ten minutes and run or hit a punching bag or whatever you need.”
Keith shrugs. The feeling that he's disappointed Shiro is heavy in his chest, making his heart beat painfully sideways, choking him. He doesn't want to look up.

Shiro's hand doesn't lift. “What are you thinking?”

Keith can feel his face twisting in a way he doesn't want it to, heat and pressure building behind his eyes. He swallows hard, and breathes, and shrugs again. “Sorry.”

He means to sound nonchalant. He wants to shrug this off, to be unaffected by what people think--but he's let Shiro under his guard, and now it's too late, because it matters.

Shiro pulls him in, rough and gentle all at once. “Bud,” he says. “It's okay, it's okay. Nobody expects you to know how to do it all right the first time.”

It takes Keith a minute. Shiro doesn't rush him. But Shiro finally sits back and asks, “Ready to go back in?” and the danger is past.

“Yeah,” says Keith, and gets up to follow him.

There's less indecision the next night, less guilt. He sits and talks to Commander Sam for their half hour, then walks briskly down the hall alone to the elevator. He presses the L6 button without hesitation, punches in Shiro's codes with the knowledge that they'll work. Inside the simulator, he takes a deep breath, his heart thrumming with adrenaline, and starts the Enceladus scenario.

An hour later, he leaves, aching and exhausted and discouraged.

“Take it slow,” says Shiro the next week. He's in the copilot's seat, but the controls are in Keith's hands. “There's no objective here except to figure out the best way through. You just need to focus.”

“I am focused,” Keith snaps. It's been almost an hour with this scenario. The bright sulphuric haze of the atmosphere is making his head hurt. “It's a-- it's a fucking maze.” Shiro hasn't called him out yet for swearing, so he does it frequently, just to see if he can get a reaction.

“You're not,” Shiro says calmly. “You're stressing out, you're white-knuckling it.”

“How am I supposed to NOT when it's--”

“Easy,” says Shiro. “Easy, easy. Do you need a break?”

Keith lets out a breath. “No,” he mumbles.

“Okay.” Shiro reaches over and lays his hand across the back of Keith's neck, squeezing gently. “Okay, bud, this is what I was talking about earlier. You need to be more patient with yourself.”

“I am,” says Keith defensively. His voice is smaller than he means it to be. It's always hard to argue under the warm weight of Shiro’s hand spanning his nape. “I always--I always try again, I don't…”

“No, I know,” Shiro says, lifting his hands. “I know. You're one of the most persistent people I know, it's... honestly kind of amazing to watch.”

Keith isn't sure what to make of this. He glances at Shiro sidelong, suspicious, already bracing for the but.
“What I mean is,” says Shiro, and stops. He makes a face and turns away toward the admin control screen, and after a moment the entire simulation pauses.

Keith stares at the screens, at the suddenly unresponsive controls, surprised and very interested. “How did you do that?” he blurts.

“What?” asks Shiro, a little nonplussed. “It's just…” He gestures at the screen.

“Oh,” says Keith, and realizes he’s maybe showing a little too much interest in the workings of the admin controls. “I didn’t-- I didn’t know you could pause it.”

“Haven’t needed to before,” Shiro says. He swivels his seat and unbuckles his harness so he can rest his elbows on his knees, and pauses there long enough that Keith finds himself stiffening slightly, pulling into himself, sitting smaller with a sort of anxiety he can’t pin down.

“Oh,” Shiro says finally. “What I mean is… the way you sort of… mm. If I say you internalize something, do you know what I mean?”

“Take it to heart,” Keith says automatically.

Shiro chews his lip thoughtfully, tilting his head back and forth. “Kind of,” he says. “Not quite what I’m going for here, though. Um… When you-- when you make a mistake, what do you think? What goes through your head?”

Keith shifts, abruptly uncomfortable. “I don’t know.”

“Five minutes ago, when you misread your altitude and flooded the engines, what did you say?”

Keith’s stomach twists. He stares at his knees and shrugs.

Shiro pauses. “You said stupid,” he says gently. “You said it a lot.”

“It was stupid,” mumbles Keith.

“No,” Shiro counters. “It was a really easy mistake to make, and you’re really new at this.”

“But I know better,” says Keith. He needs to stop, he has to stop; he’s been terrified of this moment for a month and here he is making it happen, but there’s an odd angry recklessness pushing the words out. “I know better and it was stupid and I keep doing stupid shit and I don’t know why you’re--”

He stops.

“Why I’m…?” Shiro asks after a moment. “Why I’m… what, Keith?”

The rest of what he was going to say is insultingly obvious. Keith shuts his mouth and sets his jaw and doesn’t answer.

“Hey, hey,” says Shiro, and his face is so open and earnest as he leans forward that Keith can’t even look at him. “Don’t shut down on me, buddy. Come on, talk to me. How was that sentence going to end?”

Keith breathes out.

“Forget it,” he says.
The next night alone in the simulator, he starts the Enceladus scenario, then pauses it as soon as the geysers are close enough to see clearly. He sits down cross-legged on the floor and stares at the screen.

He can't go over. He can't go around. He eyes the moon’s surface dubiously and concludes he can't go under, either. The only option is to go through.

The question is where.

He studies the plumes, scooting nearer to the screen. They seem to break through at random—but looking closer, he can see faint scarring in the ice, slightly darker points surrounded by ridges where the ice has broken and reformed and broken again. Curious, he unpauses the simulator for a beat, watching a dark spot near to the advancing line. It erupts a moment later and he wants to punch the air with delight: finally, a lead; finally something he can use, maybe.

The delight evaporates when he realizes just how many dark spots there are, and just how close together they are. There aren't very many spaces at all wide enough for a ship to pass through, not once he allows for the spread of each geyser’s plume as it rises.

Keith sits back and stresses.

If he flies too close to the surface, he won’t be able to react in time if a geyser erupts near to him.

If he flies too high, he’ll get lost in the cloud of vapor and tumble out of control, like the other fifty times.

He’s not sure there’s a happy medium, an elevation where he can see the jets in time to evade and still see at all. But he has an hour before curfew to find out.

(In an hour he leaves, bruised and aching, his neck whiplash-sore, but satisfaction and anticipation for the next week are glowing like a live thing in his chest.)

Chapter End Notes

lil short update this time, i’ll have a longer one in a few days!

ITEM THE FIRST: guys there's 1000 comments on this thing. that's. that's a frickload of comments you guys. Thank you guys so much for taking the time to let me know that you're reading and enjoying and here with me on this crazy long-ass fic trip that I didn't expect to take oh my god. Seriously I wouldn't have gotten this far without you.

ITEM THE SECOND: i joined discord. how tf do u discord.
“Have you played this before?” Shiro asks the next night, helping him buckle into a heavy vest. It’s a little too big for him, stiff canvas and unforgiving plastic plating, weird panels over his chest and back and sides that light up and play sound effects that make Keith think of the vintage video games his first foster brother had liked to play.

He tugs at the vest uncertainly and shakes his head.

“Okay,” says Shiro, and turns away to put on his own vest. “So the plates on your vest have sensors that pick up when somebody shoots at you, right? It’ll buzz so you know.”

“Shoot what?” Keith asks warily.

“Lasers,” says Shiro, glancing up at him. “Just light beams. It doesn’t hurt.”

Keith’s forehead furrows up. “What’s it feel like?” he asks. It’s not that he doesn’t trust Shiro, but sometimes grown-ups have different ideas of what does and doesn’t hurt.

In answer, Shiro raises his laser gun and shoots Keith point-blank in the chest. Keith lurches backward as the chest-plate buzzes insistently, startled. Shiro doubles over laughing.

Hey,” says Keith, annoyed, but Shiro just keeps laughing. “Hey,” Keith says again, louder, and Shiro’s too close to miss. Shiro’s face goes comically slack with astonishment as his armor buzzes, and Keith, fully vindicated, snickers.

And then Shiro’s raising his gun, and Keith hasn’t entirely figured out how this game works yet, but he figures he’d better find some cover of some sort, so he yelps and darts for the door of the gear room—just in time to run smack into Sergeant Burns.

Keith’s never actually seen her off-base. He’s never seen her out of uniform, either, and there’s a jarring moment of cognitive dissonance while he tries to process what’s happening. “Sor—I’m sorry, Sergeant,” he gasps, and then his self-preservation instincts kick in and he backs hastily toward Shiro.

Sergeant Burns purses up her lips and narrows her eyes, looking between them. “Did you start without us?” she inquires, and Keith doesn’t even know what to say to the dignified affront in her tone.

“I don’t,” he says helplessly. “Wh—?”

Shiro loops his arms comfortably around Keith from behind, and Keith’s relaxing before he’s even thought about it. He’s not in trouble, he won’t be in trouble; he’s with Shiro.

“Keith’s never laser-tagged before,” Shiro says. “He didn’t know how it worked.”


She’s looking at Keith now, so Keith mumbles, “No, ma’am.”

“Natasha, while we’re off base,” she says, grinning at him. “If you want, I don’t mind. So you don’t
know any of the rules or anything?"

Keith shakes his head, mentally stumbling over the fact that her first name isn’t Sergeant. “Um,” he says, and flounders for a moment before he guesses, “Don’t get hit?”

She tips her head back and laughs, not unkindly, and Keith can feel Shiro doing the same behind him. It makes him feel like he’s made a joke, even if he didn’t really mean to, and he smiles cautiously.

“More or less,” Sergeant Burns--Natasha--agrees. “Let me grab a vest and I’ll talk you through it. Unless you…” She’s looking past Keith at Shiro now, and Keith tilts his head back in time to see Shiro shake his head.

“Haven’t given him the rundown yet,” Shiro says. “Go for it, I’m gonna go get us a locker key.”

This means Shiro is going to leave him alone with Sergeant Burns. He’s already withdrawing, his arms lifting from around Keith’s shoulders. Keith turns, half-anxious, and Shiro claps a hand down on his shoulder reassuringly.

“‘Kay?” Shiro asks him quietly.

Keith swallows. “‘Kay,” he answers.

Shiro reaches out and ruffles up his hair. “I’ll be right back,” he promises.

He passes through the door to the lobby. Keith watches him approach the front desk, then turns back to face Sergeant Burns, rubbing his elbow self-consciously. “So are you,” he begins, and gulps. “Are you playing with us, then?”

“Mm!” she says cheerfully. “If that’s okay with you.”

“Oh!” says Keith. This is weird, this is weird, she’s a grown-up in charge and he doesn’t know what to think of her presence here, he doesn’t know what to make of the intrusion into this space that he has classified as his and Shiro’s. But Shiro’s obviously fine with it, Shiro expected her to be here--and Keith studies her warily, and he considers all the times she’s stood casually close at mealtimes so Paschel can’t take his food, all the times she’s grinned at him in the hallways, and something warm and familiar-strange unspools in his chest.

She’s still waiting for an answer, he realizes abruptly, and his face heats as he shifts from foot to foot. “Um-- Yeah, that’s... yeah,” he answers, in the smoothest of smooth responses, and nods several times earnestly to try to communicate what he can’t find the words for.

Burns dimples up at him. “Come on, then,” she says, and tilts her head toward the door. “There’s like a-- a model thing out there.”

The model thing turns out to be an animated 3D map of the playing field, which is intimidatingly large. Keith stares at it, and at the comparatively tiny color-coded human figures moving about in the maze-like structure, and wonders what happens if somebody gets lost. “It’s not as big as it looks,” Burns reassures him. “It’s like… mm, the size of a football field, maybe. Maybe a little bit bigger. It’s the second biggest laser tag field in the state.”

She talks him through the rules of the game, how the armor will take three hits before you’re temporarily imprisoned by the other team. “You can recharge to full health at one of the stations controlled by your team if you get hit,” she says, and points out eight color-coded pillars in the field. “They glow either red or blue, depending who currently owns them. Looks like the blue team is
winning right now, they’ve got seven stations and… mm, yep, look, that guy there has the red flag.”

“This is real?” Keith asks, startled, and peers down at the model with new interest. There’s at least a dozen people on the field, represented by stylized holographic figures.

“Mm-hmm,” she says. “It tracks your vest and shows everything here. There’s two screens out there in the field too, one at each home base. That’s these two squares here at each end, see?”

“How do you win?” asks Keith, leaning on the model table and frowning down at the chaotic action below.

“You win either when the other team’s players are all in jail or when you’ve brought the other team’s flag back to your own base,” Burns says.

This seems straightforward enough. “How do you get out of jail?”

Burns points at one corner of the map, where a bunch of dim-red people are milling about. “Somebody from your team has to come let you out,” she says. “Look, this one here is going to try-- ooh, but these two blues are guarding, I bet they don’t get through…”

Keith leans forward and watches, strangely invested, as the tiny red soldier sprints for the jail corner. Their light flickers--once, twice, three times--and the red fades to the same muted crimson as the people already in jail. “Oh,” he says, disappointed, as the defeated soldier is escorted to join their compatriots. A thought strikes him. “What-- what if something happens and you need to get out of jail but you can’t?”

Burns glances at him, frowning curiously. “Like an emergency? Like if somebody gets hurt?” Her face clears when Keith nods. “Oh, it’s not-- there’s no actual jail, there’s nothing keeping you in, it’s just your vest won’t let you participate until somebody’s come to free you. And if there’s an emergency, there’s buttons all over the place to pause the game and call for help. You’ll see them.”

“Oh,” says Keith, feeling foolish.

“Where’s your gal pal?” Shiro calls brightly from behind them, and there must be some joke there that Keith doesn’t understand, because Burns straight-up cackles.

“Ahh,” she says, straightening as Shiro joins them, “She was about five minutes behind me so she’s probably just about here. You guys can go on in, if you want, I’ll wait for her.”

“Nah, we’ll wait,” says Shiro, draping an arm around Keith’s shoulders. “I figure you guys will want to be on the same team anyway, right?”

“I don’t know,” says Burns thoughtfully, and eyes Keith. “I kinda want to go with him. He’s tiny and fast, I bet he can get through places before they even see him coming.”

Keith blinks, startled, but before he can even get his head around this potential advantage, Shiro’s tugging him possessively closer and declaring, “Nope! Keith’s on my team, I don’t make the rules.”

“We could flip a coin for him,” Burns offers generously.

“Do you have a coin?”

“I have,” says Burns with dignity, “a randomizing app.”

“Hmm,” says Shiro. “I’ll arm-wrestle you for him.”
The suggestions get increasingly more ridiculous until Keith is shaking with silent giggles. He’s pretty sure they’re doing it to make him feel better about being the smallest and least experienced here, but it still makes him feel warm and wanted. But then the door opens behind them, and Burns’ eyes shift up and past him, and her whole face lights up and the good-natured argument is forgotten.

Keith watches curiously as Burns darts past them with a little skipping step, playful in a way he’s never seen, and rushes to meet a woman with bunned-up black hair and skin a shade lighter than Burns’ own. They kiss, quick and light, Burns bending down while the other woman rises up onto her tip-toes, and they stand a moment to talk before Burns grabs her by the hand and tugs her along to join Keith and Shiro.

“This is my girlfriend,” she announces, out of breath and proud. The other woman is grinning like she can’t even help it, following in Burns’ wake, blushing a little. “Second Lieutenant Christina Mendez, this is Captain Takashi Shirogane and Cadet Keith Kogane.”

Mendez actually does a double take, looking from Shiro to Burns and back again. She salutes crisply, and Shiro releases Keith to do the same. “Sorry,” she says. “Kerberos? Is that--?”

“That’s right,” says Shiro, grinning a little self-consciously. He reaches out to shake hands, and Keith is struck all over again by the fact that Shiro’s important.

“Wow,” says Mendez, and laughs. “Sorry, um. My last flight class used you as an example like twice a week. Montgomery loves you.”

“I’ve heard your name before, haven’t I?” Shiro asks, smoothly shifting the subject, even though Keith would have liked to hear more. “You’re shortlisted to pilot the Europa mission, right?”

“That’s right, sir,” Mendez says, straightening. Keith accidentally catches Burns’ eye, and she winks at him. He looks hastily away. “It won’t be confirmed for a year at least, but… yeah.”

“That’s great!” says Shiro, enthusiastic and beaming. “Hossein’s the mission commander, right? I flew under her for my first hop to the station, she’s great. Tough, but constructive.”

Mendez nods. “Yes, sir,” she says. “She’s been one of my heroes since I was in grade school, I’m… I’m really hoping I get the chance to work with her. Someday, if not this mission.”

“Good luck,” Shiro says, and the words might have sounded trite from anybody else, but from Shiro they’re all warmth and encouragement. “Call me Shiro.”

Mendez hesitates, then nods once. “Tina.”

Shiro’s eyes glint wickedly and Keith has just enough time to realize that-- oh no. “No, no,” Shiro says, very earnestly. “Shiro.”

Burns cracks up and turns away, hiding her face in Tina’s shoulder. “Ohhh my god,” she moans. “Tina, come on, we gotta kick these guys’ asses.”

Shiro gasps loudly and claps his hands over Keith’s ears. Keith flails, startled, and turns to shove Shiro in retribution. “--language in front of the cadets, Tasha, geez.” Mendez is saying when he can hear again. Everybody looks very prim and shocked, and Keith thinks privately it’s a bit much.

“We’ll kick your asses,” he grumbles, tugging his vest straight.

There’s a beat of silence.
“A challenge has been issued,” says Burns gravely. “Let the lines be drawn.”

“We take challenges like that very seriously,” says Mendez. “Loser buys the winner a round.”

Shiro squints. “Literally none of us are old enough to drink.”

Burns draws herself up with great affront. “Speak for yourself, infant.”

“So it’ll be a round of root beer floats, whatever.”

“Deal,” says Shiro, ignoring Burns. “Suit up.”

It’s very quiet when Burns and Mendez have disappeared into the gear room to get Mendez a vest.

“Shiro,” says Keith, and lowers his voice a little. “What’s root beer floats?”

“Oh my god,” says Shiro.

There’s a game already in progress, so they split up: Mendez and Burns go to the blue team while Shiro and Keith join the red team. A bored-looking employee gives them a rapid-fire summary of the game and the house rules--no covering of your vest’s sensors, no tampering with the equipment, no physical grappling; failure to comply will result in removal from the playing field--and Keith is suddenly very grateful for Burns’ careful explanation. Somehow he doesn’t think the employee would be as patient with his questions.

And then they’re on the field, and it’s every bit as big and confusing as it looked on the 3D map. Calling it a field, Keith thinks, is misleading: it’s a maze, all blind corners and dim walkways and barriers. It’s outdoors, and even though the sun is already down, the sky is still glowing. It throws a weird desaturated cast over everything: along with the rubber mats underfoot that mute their footsteps, it lends a strange sense of unreality to the scene.

Keith looks over his shoulder and resolves to stay close to Shiro.

They reach their base, trade names with a handful of teammates. Keith doesn’t retain any of them. There’s too many, and the light is too tricky to make out faces clearly, and it doesn’t really matter anyway as long as he can make out their red armbands.

“If we get separated and you can’t find me,” says Shiro, drawing him to the screen and showing him where each player is represented and labeled, “come back here. If I’m not in jail, I’ll come meet you.”

“What if you are in jail?” asks Keith, and Shiro grins at him.

“Then you’ll have to come save me, I guess!”

This seems reasonable enough. But just to be sure, Keith asks, “And you’ll come save me if I’m in jail?”

“Always,” says Shiro, and messes up his hair. “Come on, they’re planning something.”

Laser tag, it turns out, is awesome.
As the sky darkens, lights hanging low over the walls flicker on— but not normal lights; they’re bars of vividly glowing purple. Keith squints up at one as they pass underneath it, but it’s too bright to look at, and he quickly looks away, trying to blink the spots out of his vision. It transforms the field, setting everything awash in pale violet, igniting the flecks of paint spattering the walls into neon fluorescence. It’s so far from normal that for a little while it’s overwhelming, and he walks close behind Shiro so he can keep his eyes on the flat, safe black of his shadow.

But then he adjusts.

And it’s amazing.

The night passes in a technicolored blur of breathless excitement: running after Shiro to capture charging stations for their team, advancing toward the blue team’s base. He’s captured once, which is annoying, but it’s by Burns, which is okay, he guesses. Waiting around in the jail for Shiro to come rescue him isn’t very fun, though, and it’s made less fun by the two blue team boys guarding the jail, because they keep trying to talk to him.

“They put us here because we’ve got the best aim,” the taller of the two informs him proudly. “Anybody tries to come in to open the jail, and pow. We take ‘em out.”

“Cool,” says Keith. He’s distracted, trying to guess which direction Shiro will come from, and when.

“Pretty sure they put us here because we’re slower than everybody else, dude,” says the other.

“Dude,” the first boy says, giving his friend an appalled look. “Don’t tell the enemy our weaknesses. Anyway I’m fast. I’m super fast. I just make an even better sharpshooter.”

“Sure thing, man,” says the second boy amiably. Keith classifies him absently as okay, except then he looks back at Keith and starts trying to make friends. “So do you go to school in town?”

Keith shakes his head. There’s an awkward silence that follows before Keith realizes that a second question was implied by the first. “Um,” he says, and shifts his weight. “I go to– I go to the Garrison?”

This gets their attention.

“No way,” says the first boy. “You can’t go to the Garrison, you’re our age!”

Keith stares back at him blankly. There’s a look on the boy’s face, incredulous envy, and Keith’s instincts are blaring a warning because that kind of look is dangerous.

“Really, though?” asks the other interestedly. “We’re both on the focus track to try to get in. What’s it like?”

“Um,” says Keith, still half-frozen. He fidgets with his bracelet. “It’s… cool?”

“Cool, he says,” huffs the taller of the two, and turns away. “Cool. Holy cheese.”

“He wants to be a pilot,” says the other boy to Keith, gesturing at his friend with his thumb. “He keeps trying to convince me to try for the on-board engineer track, but I haven’t decided. Flight kinda skeeves me out, you know?”

There’s something in the easy honesty of his manner that makes Keith feel he can relax. “Flight’s not bad,” he offers. “At least– I mean, the simulator’s not.”
“You’ve done flight simulations?” asks the first boy, his voice going high with disbelief. “Okay, no, back up, how’d you even get in? I thought they only took high schoolers!”

“I don’t know,” says Keith uncomfortably. He shifts his weight from foot to foot and checks again to see if Shiro is coming.

“You don’t know? What, is one of your parents like an officer or something?”

There’s an odd almost-aggression in the boy’s stance that Keith doesn’t understand. He hesitates, and says uncertainly, “I don’t have parents?”

The boy’s face goes slack with startled remorse. He rocks backward a little, and takes a breath to say something--

--and the hairs are standing up on the back of Keith’s neck, and he registers that somebody’s approaching very quickly from behind, and then the somebody is tagging him with a quick thump to his back before he’s even turned around to see who it is. There’s a little cheerful sound effect from his vest like an old computer booting up, and Shiro says in Keith’s ear, “You’re free, run!”

Keith runs.

The taller boy is howling in outrage behind them, and Keith’s vest buzzes once before they make it behind the first barrier, breathless and giddy. “Thanks,” Keith gasps, once they’ve put some distance between themselves and the jail. Shiro just claps him on the shoulder.

“Come on,” he says. “The station in this quadrant is ours right now, let’s go charge up.”

Shiro’s vest is two bars down, Keith realizes. Maybe the boy guarding the blue prison wasn’t all talk about having good aim. He follows close behind Shiro; he can see the red glow of the recharge station around the next corner--and then, just as they round it, it switches to blue.

“Aw, fricker,” says Shiro with feeling, and scrambles back as the pew-pew-pew sound effects of somebody shooting come from up ahead. “Go, go go go!”

Keith’s already running, but he hears the sad womp-womp sound that means somebody’s run out of lives. When he turns, Shiro’s staring down in consternation at the empty bar on his vest. “Keep going,” Shiro urges when he sees Keith looking back. “There’s another charging station close to the outer wall that way, run!”

“I got Shiro!” somebody shouts gleefully; Keith can’t tell if it’s Burns or Mendez. There’s a moment where he almost loiters a little bit on purpose to get caught too, because being in jail with Shiro sounds like more fun than being out of jail without him--but then he hears Burns say, quite close, “Is Keith with him? I’m gonna get him,” and that absolutely cannot be borne.

He turns and runs, but he’s already winded from the sprint with Shiro, and he suspects he can’t outrun Burns anyway, so he ducks into the first alcove he can find and crouches low to try to hide the lights on his vest, and he waits.

It’s not much of an alcove, just a little hollowed-out space in the wall, and Keith feels very exposed under the lilac glow of the strange lights, but to his great surprise Burns flies past his hiding place without pausing. It costs him an astonished beat, but he lurches quickly to his feet and sprints after her, raising his laser gun to aim at her back.

She yelps when the lights on her vest flash to signal a hit, whirling in place until she finds Keith. “Oohh, you sneaky little twerp!” she exclaims, and brings her gun up to aim at Keith. Keith’s vest
buzzes urgently—but hers is flashing again, and then there’s the distressed little descending tone to signal that she is out, and Keith still has one life left.

“Ohh nooo, he got me,” she wails, clutching at her chest dramatically. “Tina!”

“I’ll avenge you, my love!” comes Mendez’s voice from somewhere close. Keith whirrs, trying to pinpoint the source, and is startled when Burns ruffles up his hair from behind.

“Go north and recharge,” she whispers, and points toward the red-controlled half of the field. “I’ll send her the other way. Good job, dude.”

Keith stares after her as she turns the corner toward the jail, and he darts back to his alcove when he hears them talking on the other side of the wall.

“Where’d he go?” That’s Mendez, bright and breathless.

Burns is harder to hear. “That way,” she says, “...think he’s planning to try to bust Shiro out…”

And then they’re gone, and it’s quiet again, and he’s alone. He can hear people running about in different parts of the field, shouting and shooting and laughing, but it’s quiet in this area. He fingers his bracelet thoughtfully and leans against the wall to consider.

The worst thing that could really happen is getting caught and sent to jail with Shiro. It’s not a terrible prospect—but he finds himself picturing a different scenario, one in which he succeeds in saving Shiro and somehow winning the game into the bargain.

It’s a scenario he likes much better.

He makes his way north in as direct a line as he can manage to recharge at the first red station he finds, and then he turns back south toward the blue team’s jail. He knows exactly where it is, but actually getting there proves to be more difficult than he anticipates. The closer to the southern edge of the playing field he gets, the lousier with blue team players the maze is. He has to double back and recharge four times, getting progressively more sweaty and winded and indignant.

They don’t seem to care enough about him to chase him down and finish him off, at least: an advantage of being small and unthreatening. It doesn’t, Keith reflects rather bitterly, make up for how casually they can send him scurrying, but they’re all so much taller and faster than him. Other than the two boys guarding the prison, Keith hasn’t seen any other kids his age at all.

It takes another ten minutes, but when he finally reaches a vantage point where he can see the jail, Shiro is talking animatedly to the two boys—both of whom, Keith notices, have given Shiro their full starry-eyed attention. Their backs are to Keith, but Shiro has a clear line of sight to him, and it doesn’t take long before their eyes meet.

Shiro doesn’t show that he’s seen, not even a flicker of expression, and his eyes drift away from Keith unhurriedly a second later. Keith wonders for a beat if he only imagined that Shiro was looking at him, but then he sees that Shiro is giving him a thumbs-up, very subtly, still gesturing with his other hand as he talks to the two boys.

Keith grins. Then he raises his gun, takes careful aim, and shoots the tall boy.

The boy whirls almost immediately, but Keith’s already got him down two bars. He takes the third shot as the boy finally finds him and aims—and the boy’s suit goes dim.

“Aww, man,” Keith hears him complaining distantly, but he’s already focused on the other one, the
engineer who doesn't want to fly. He lands one hit before the boy darts behind the nearest wall with a yelp, and then Shiro's beckoning and Keith is darting out into the open, expecting at any second to feel his vest buzz. But it never does, and he feels like he must be glowing as bright as the lavender lights when he reaches up and tags Shiro to bring him out of jail.

“I knew you could do it!” Shiro crows as they run, and Keith nearly trips over himself, grinning and trying to hide it.

Their team loses the game, and the next, but Keith barely notices. He's still floating on the heady knowledge that he made Shiro proud, half distracted with pleasant anticipation of the day Shiro asks him to try the Enceladus scenario and he flies it perfectly on the first run.

It's late when they leave, a little after ten, and Keith is dizzy with sleepiness and the thrill of being allowed to stay out late. They all pile into the car, Burns and Mendez in back while Keith sits up front with Shiro, and they pile out again five minutes later outside an ice cream shop. Keith walks with them from the cool night air into the cooler air conditioning, feeling very serious and grown-up. He watches, full of secret knowledge, as Shiro takes a pill for the lactose, and he primly doesn't giggle when Shiro winks at him.

Root beer floats are overrated, he decides after they've walked back outside to sit at one of the round concrete tables by the door. The soda reminds him unpleasantly of the thick bubblegum-pink syrup his first foster mom made him swallow for stomach-aches, but the ice cream is good. He eats it carefully off the top with a spoon and leaves the weird creamy soda left in the glass alone.

Shiro and the others are talking animatedly over his head about people he’s never met and courses he’s never taken. He tries to follow it, but there’s too many unfamiliar names and places, and he finds himself watching the moths and small insects pinging relentlessly against the nearest streetlight to distract himself. It’s getting to be cold, and he let the cold get inside himself when he ate the ice cream. He considers scooting closer to Shiro to leech some warmth, but he tucks his hands under his legs to keep them warm instead and sets his jaw to stop his teeth from chattering.

“And what about you, Keith?” Mendez asks, and Keith looks up at her across the table, startled. “Where are you from?”

Keith shifts in the booth uncertainly and glances around the table. Everybody’s looking at him, all friendly curiosity, and it makes him want to hide. “Um,” he murmurs, kicking his feet nervously. “Um, Hereford?”

Mendez squints up one eye and repeats, “Hereford…”

“Oh, I’ve driven through there,” says Burns. “I got family in Amarillo. It’s like right across the border into Texas,” she adds, looking at Mendez. “It’s about… mm, four hours past Albuquerque, I guess?”

“Oh, sure,” says Mendez, with the sort of amiable head-bob that means she has no more idea of where the town is than she did a moment ago. “Four hours, that’s quite a drive,” she says, looking back at Keith with her eyebrows up.

“I guess,” says Keith uncomfortably.

“Do you get to go home often?”

There follows a quick near-silent communication of the sort that grown-ups think are subtle. Burns grips Mendez’s elbow; Shiro shifts and shakes his head urgently, a tiny tight movement.
Keith wants to sink into the ground.

Mendez looks between them, her bright dark eyes wide and confused--and then a beat later her face falls with comprehension, her mouth forming an ‘O’. She meets Keith’s eyes, a quick guilty look that Keith can tell she didn’t really mean to take, and Keith stares back at her. There’s tension crawling all up his back; he can feel his shoulders lifting. He can’t look away.

She looks back at him, closes her mouth for a moment. “Did you lose somebody?” she asks, finally.

Shiro stiffens slightly beside him, shifting. His hand settles on Keith’s back, a soft supporting weight, an escape if he wants it--but Keith can’t look away from Mendez. There’s a strange look on her face, one he doesn’t know how to identify. He’s used to the awkward pity when adults get blindsided by his circumstances, the sad smiles and the careful drawing away, the wariness, like his problems might infect their lives, like they need to wash their hands after they touch him.

There’s none of that here. Mendez is looking at him steadily, something a little tired and hard-edged in the back of her eyes, something he recognizes.

He wavers for a moment, watching her, and he nods.

She nods back, her eyes dropping just briefly, like she’s not surprised. “Me, I lost my grandma,” she says. “My abuela. It was just the two of us. I was…” She pauses, inhaling. “A little older than you, I guess. I spent a few years bouncing from place to place, relatives and friends. The Garrison was the only thing that stayed the same.”

Keith doesn’t know what to say. Burns is sitting quietly next to Mendez, listening. She doesn’t look surprised, but her hand is trailing up and down Mendez’s back. Keith watches the motion, steady and soothing, so like how Shiro comforts him, and the thought comes to him that maybe it wasn’t an easy thing for Mendez to tell him.

He hesitates. For a moment everything seems just a step off from reality. The tables outside the shop are empty except for them; beyond the streetlights ringing the parking lot the desert yawns endless and black. But Shiro’s hand is still on his back, and Burns’ is on Mendez’s, and there’s a strange trembling feeling of balance, of symmetry, of being vulnerable yet protected.

“My dad,” he says finally. “I lost--”

That’s all he can say. That’s all he needs to say. The words catch and stick, but Mendez is reaching toward him across the table, and almost automatically he’s reaching back. She takes his hand in her own and squeezes, and then lets him go again before he can really register what’s happening.

“It gets better,” she says quietly. “This place can be really good for people like us.”

Keith shifts where he sits. It’s hard to look at her, suddenly; his eyes are burning and he feels like the breath has been knocked out of him, but a gift has been given here and he can recognize that.

“Thank you,” he whispers, and makes himself meet her eyes for a moment so she knows he knows.

They don’t stay much longer. The conversation moves on. Shiro keeps his hand on Keith’s back, though, and it’s the only warm spot on Keith’s entire body before long. Keith scoots a little closer, shivering and half-hoping, and Shiro gives him a quick assessing look and understands immediately. He chafes briskly at Keith’s upper arms to warm him up, and then everybody’s getting to their feet all at once, putting empty cups in the recycling, stretching and groaning about the time.

“We should do this again sometime,” says Burns. “I want Keith on my team next time, though.” She elbows Keith. “What do you think, dude? Think we could take Shiro out?”
Keith considers, sizing Shiro up thoughtfully. “Yeah, prob’ly.”

Shiro makes an offended noise and scoops Keith off his feet, flipping him easily around to carry him upside-down, tickling him where his shirt rides up while Keith shrieks with helpless indignation and delight. “I’m taking this turncoat home,” Shiro announces. “Clearly I’m going to need to watch my back around you.”

Burns waggles her eyebrows ominously, and then they’re saying their goodbyes, Keith still wheezing and giggling and red-faced with his hair all hanging straight down from his scalp. Shiro carries him halfway to the car before he relents and lets Keith down to stand on his own feet.

“You're such a jerk,” grumbles Keith without much feeling, tugging his shirt straight.

“Yes!” Shiro agrees happily, and Keith has to take a hasty skittering step to the side to avoid being poked again. He huffs out an annoyed breath and shoves at Shiro when he guffaws, and Shiro catches him around the shoulders to tug in against his side. “You’re not cold anymore, though!”

“‘Yes I am,’” says Keith obstinately. “I'm freezing.” But Shiro's right, the edge has been taken off. He's not shivering anymore, though he's glad enough to squirm into the sweatshirt Shiro retrieves from the back seat before they get in.

Shiro turns up the heat when the car starts moving and lifts up his arm to offer Keith the warm place against his side. Keith leans back, regarding Shiro suspiciously. “Are you going to tickle me again?”

Shiro looks briefly thrown, giving Keith his answer, but his eyes immediately glint in a way that is very worrying. “Why would you think that?” he asks innocently. “Maybe I just want to hug my buddy!”

“Don’t,” Keith warns, and scrambles back into the far corner of the front seat when Shiro leans toward him with one index finger extended. “Shiro don’t I’m serious!”

But Shiro’s already sitting back into his own seat, laughing and withdrawing the threat. “I won’t,” he says. “I won’t, you seemed like you were done.”

Keith relaxes, mostly, but he keeps the corner of his eye on Shiro. There’s a part of him that sort of likes it, being held tight and made to laugh so hard he can barely breathe, but that part is tired. He wants to curl up someplace comfortable and warm and close his eyes.

“So what did you think?” Shiro asks, leaning forward to scroll through the music options on the dash screen.

Keith watches. “Of what?”

Shiro shrugs hugely. “Of the game? The company? The root beer floats?”

“Oh!” says Keith, and shrugs, grinning tiredly. “It was fun, I had-- I had fun.”

“Yeah?” asks Shiro, looking back at him and grinning to match. “Wanna go again sometime?”

“Will they be there too?” Keith asks, hugging his knees. “Sergeant Burns and…”

Shiro glances at him again as he sits back in his seat, keen-eyed. “Do you want them to be?” he asks instead of answering.

Keith pauses. “Yeah,” he finally answers, and is mildly surprised to find that he means it. “…Yeah, I-
“Yeah?” asks Shiro, a small smile making the corners of his eyes crinkle up.

“Yeah,” says Keith again, and shrugs, trying to hide his answering smile. He has to fight down the urge to fidget: the soft, pleased look on Shiro’s face is making his cheeks strangely warm.

“Good,” Shiro says quietly, and faces forward, watching the road out the windshield. “That’s good.”

Keith squints at him, mystified and still vaguely squirmy. “You’re being weird.”

“Am I?” asks Shiro, shifting a little on his seat so he can face Keith. “Sorry. I’m just...” He pauses, brushing absenty at a crumb or bit of lint on the upholstery. “What I want for you the most is-- is for you to have a lot of people around you that you like and trust and can talk to and have fun with. So it’s...” He stops again and grins crookedly, and looks up at Keith. “It makes me really, really happy whenever we find somebody else we can add to that list.”

Keith has no idea what to say to this at all. The straightforward tenderness in the words and tone is almost paralyzing; he doesn’t know what to do with it, he doesn’t know where to look.

He wants to hide from it. He wants to sink into it.

“Oh,” he finally says. He means to say it, anyway. No sound comes out.

Shiro looks at him, and he catches his lip between his teeth in a way that is almost nervous. “Too heavy?” he asks. “I’m sorry. It’s late.”

Keith shakes his head. “No, it’s--” The words stick. He closes his mouth and swallows, hugging himself.

Shiro studies him for a moment, then says gently, “C’mer, bud, come on.” When Keith looks up, Shiro is reaching for him, his hand settling on Keith's back and tugging a little. Keith considers, then scoots across the soft bench of the front seat to lean against Shiro's side, curling into the warmth he finds there. He can feel Shiro fussing over him, fingers combing through his hair, a palm smoothing over his back.

He sighs and shuts his eyes, and he lets himself fall into it.

Chapter End Notes

is there a word for a thing like a hat trick or a full house but for five

A couple of you suggested I make an OotD server on discord. I have noooo idea how one goes about doing something like that but is that? something you guys would want? if so I will figure it out!

oh geez we're getting really close to the end here guys. there's gonna be like. fiiive? more chapters? give or take? I'm not sure yet, I'll update the chapter thingy when I know. Thank you all for your support along the way. <3

EDIT: YAHTZEE. PALADIN YAHTZEE.
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Last-week-of-school excitement sweeps over the Garrison like a fresh breath of wind through a stand of trees. Classes are rowdier than usual; lunches are louder. Teachers and officers stump through the hallways with permanently disgruntled expressions.

Keith passes the days with a constant low-grade hum of anxiety pushing at the back of his skull, pricklingly aware of the reckless, undirected energy in the halls. The looming shift from classes to summer break leaves him wary too: he doesn't know what summer looks like at the Garrison, he doesn't know where he fits into it.

At least Paschel will be gone for the summer in a week. Ricketts and Beck, too, though that knowledge isn’t enough to dispel the paranoia that goes prickling up the back of his neck every time one of them looks at him. Their usual toothless malice seems to suddenly have an edge of intent to it, and Keith watches where he walks.

He finds himself sticking close to Malone during free hours, when he’s not with Shiro. Malone picks it up quickly, hanging back to walk with him when possible, making room for him without comment.

And then, Wednesday night, Shiro asks between simulator scenarios, “Are you taking summer classes?”

“I don't--” says Keith, startled, and fidgets uncertainly. “Um-- I don't know?”

“Did you sign up for any?” Shiro asks.

“No-oo?” says Keith hesitantly, trying to think if maybe he did and didn't realize it. “I don't think so?”

Shiro hums thoughtfully, setting the next scenario. “We'll find out before I leave tonight. If not…” He pauses and glances sidelong at Keith. “Want to come stay with me for the summer?”

Something lurches and leaps in Keith's chest. “Really?”

Shiro's grinning big as he swivels in his chair to face Keith. “Yeah,” he says. “There's gonna be room, Matt and Commander Sam are both going home for the summer. Commander Sam will be in and out. He said you could have his room for a few months if you want it, though. I'm still gonna be training all summer, but you can probably come along for at least some of that, and there's a shuttle that goes between our house and the Garrison every hour during the day so you can hang out in the library or the rec room if you get bored, and then we can hang out in the evenings. If you want.”

“Shut up,” says Keith. “Of course I want, that's-- really?”

“Really.”

Keith rubs the side of his face, trying not to smile. He feels strangely light, dazed, but in a good way. “Okay,” he murmurs.

‘Kay,” Shiro answers, still grinning at him. He gestures back at the screen. “I'm gonna start this, you ready?”
“Yeah,” says Keith, taking a deep breath and facing the viewports. “Ready.”

It should have been a distraction, honestly. The knowledge that he has three months with Shiro ahead of him refuses to settle quietly into the back of his mind. His lungs feel like they're glowing, transmuting the air they hold to golden liquid light; it feels like if he looked down at his chest he would see his ribs in shadowed relief under his uniform.

It should have been a distraction, but it’s not.

He flies better for Shiro than he has ever flown before; he sinks into the dives and dips of the course; he feels unstoppable, charmed, and the minor mistakes he makes in the first five minutes of the scenario roll off the shield of his buoyant mood like water off an otter’s sleek fur. He takes a curve close and tight, he hears Shiro whoop in the comms chair behind him, and his heart sings. A ravine opens to his left, leading more or less the right direction to reach the course objective, and he lifts the craft’s nose, brings it up and around in an entirely unnecessary looping dive just for the joy of it.

When it's over, when he's completed the course with ninety seconds to spare and left his own best record in the dust, Shiro is laughing incredulously.

“Keith,” he says, when Keith twists around in his seat to look at him, and he’s actually out of breath. “That was amazing.”

Keith stares at him. He can feel an uncertain smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, an automatic response to Shiro’s apparent delight. “Um,” he says, and hears his own tone tilting up in confusion.

“I'm serious,” says Shiro, and sits forward, rubbing his hands over his face. “Bud. Wow. You just did that.”

Keith shifts, frowning, vaguely anxious for reasons he can't pin down. “We--been working on this all month?”

“Yeah,” Shiro says, and shakes his head, still awed for some reason. Keith's stomach goes sour.

“We’ve been working on this all month,” he says again, insistently. The vague anxiety mounts into fear. “Stop it, don’t-- don’t…”

Shiro stops, his eyes wide and surprised. His smile slips.

Keith swallowing.

“What’s up, bud?” Shiro asks, softer. He unbuckles his harness and leans forward.

Keith doesn’t know where to look. He shifts in his harness and folds his arms over his churning stomach. “I don’t--” he begins, and falters. “...Nothing.”

Shiro's quiet for a minute, watching him. “Let’s go through that flight,” he says finally, and turns away. Keith feels the lifting of his focus like a palpable weight. “Let’s break it down, I want you to see what you did.”

He plays the flight log through, slowly, with lots of pauses for analysis and explanation. Keith doesn’t absorb much. There’s so many terms he doesn’t know yet, and while he knows he could stop Shiro and ask him to use simpler words, he’d much rather stay quiet just now. Still, he watches Shiro gesture, he watches as Shiro forgets himself and goes off on a wild happy rant about something Keith did right, and he begins to understand--
He impressed Shiro. He impressed Shiro, and he doesn’t have any idea how.

“We’ve been working on it all month, though,” he reminds Shiro again, when Shiro comes to a stopping point.

Shiro turns to look at him, a fond, exasperated look on his face. “Yeah, buddy,” he says. “All month. How many sessions is that?”

Keith pauses, wondering where he’s going with this. “…Four?”

“Four,” Shiro confirms, nodding. “Four sessions of two hours each, and we spent …maybe a quarter of that time on this scenario? It took you two hours of flight time to get comfortable enough with these planetary and atmospheric parameters to do this.” He gestures at the screen where it displays from three angles the path of Keith’s impulsive vertical loop down into the canyon. “Do you know how valuable that adaptive ability is? There’s pilots lined up for missions right now spending hours and hours studying to do what you just did intuitively. Keith, that’s incredible.”

Shiro is serious. Shiro is proud. Keith swallows and hugs himself, still mildly nauseous, and tries to wrap his head around this idea.

“Oh,” he says finally, noncommittal.

Shiro is tapping his armrest with his right thumb absently, staring at the screens. “I think,” he says, “I think let’s make this our project this summer. I want to help you develop this, this could-- this could really take you places.”

Keith doesn’t know what to say. He’s realizing with sudden panic that Shiro’s going to expect him to run this scenario as well as he just did every time after this, he’s going to be disappointed if Keith can’t, and Keith can already feel the apprehensive shakiness that makes him so clumsy in front of Shiro creeping back up his arms from his cold and sweating hands.

“I don’t--” he starts before he’s even thought about it.

Shiro looks back at him, and whatever he sees in Keith’s face makes his eyes go sharp and alert. He reaches for the small locker under his seat and retrieves his water bottle, and then he’s on his feet and stooping over Keith, pushing the bottle into his hands and encouraging him to drink. “What’s up?” he asks when Keith has taken a few swallows, crouching down next to his chair. “What’s going on, what are you thinking?”

It’s hard to look at Shiro from this close. Keith shifts away and wishes desperately that he were almost anywhere else. “I don’t-- I don’t think I can fly it… like that… again?”

Shiro doesn’t get it, he’s not listening, and the frustration wells up sharp and hot and angry behind Keith’s eyes. “No,” he says again. “That’s not-- that’s not real, I’m not, I don’t really--”
“Looked pretty real to me,” says Shiro. He’s smiling again, affectionate and tolerant, like he thinks Keith is being ridiculous, and something in Keith breaks.

“Would you fucking--” He’s all but shouting, and his voice cracks and falters. He inhales shakily. “Would you stop, would you just listen, that wasn’t-- I can’t fly like that, I can’t actually fly like that, that was just-- I don’t know what it was but I’ve never, I’ve never--”

Shiro pauses, rocking back slightly where he squats. His eyes are narrowed.

“I shouldn’t be here,” Keith blurs.

And there it is, just like that, exposed like a nerve.

There’s silence in the pod for a beat. Shiro shifts, drawing breath; Keith can tell he’s about to argue.

“I don’t belong here,” he says before Shiro can start. “I shouldn’t--” He drags in a breath, and it hurts, it hurts, it feels like his lungs are made of glass blown thin, shattering sharp-edged and brittle. “The scholarships, I don’t deserve-- I don’t--”

“Keith,” says Shiro, reaching out, frowning like he still doesn’t get it, like Keith's speaking a foreign language. “What are you talking about, of course you belong here--”

“But I--” Keith breathes, but the words just keep coming, a clumsy desperate stream. “I don’t, it was-- The scouts, the scouts at the school, they thought I was good at it but I’m not, I wrecked it a lot they just didn't see because they were doing other stuff but I crashed it like fifteen times and every time I do something right it's something I didn't mean to do or something I didn't know I was doing and I shouldn't be here--”

--and then it hits him, what he's just admitted, what he's just confessed to. Shiro's going to sit back in a minute, he's going to go quiet and troubled and then he'll say come on, and then they'll go find Commander Holt, and Keith will be shown to a chair in some corner of the administrative wing while they talk over what to do with him someplace not quite out of earshot. And then he'll be packing up his side of his room and saying goodbye to Malone and Matt and Sergeant Burns and--

Shiro's touching him, his face, his shoulders, talking to him urgently. Keith stares back at him, confused. Shiro reaches for his harness and Keith understands: he doesn't have any right to be here anymore, he needs to leave. He reaches numbly for the buckle.

At least, he thinks bleakly, at least he doesn't have to try to fool anybody anymore.

He gets to his feet. His legs don't feel like they belong to him, and he stumbles as the floor sways with the shift in weight--and then Shiro's catching him, lowering them both to sit on the floor, still talking. Keith's vision has gone blurred, so he blinks to clear it, dimly registering the wetness on his cheeks. He tries to focus on what Shiro is saying, and like a radio station suddenly coming back into tune, the words make sense again.


Shiro is kneeling on the floor of the pod behind him, his hands on Keith’s upper arms, holding him upright. He shifts to sit while Keith is still trying to figure this out, tucking one leg underneath, and pulls Keith back against himself.

“We’re just gonna breathe,” he says, and folds his arms around Keith. “We’re just gonna breathe, okay? In…”
Keith has the bizarre sense for a moment that he’s upside-down and underwater, disoriented by the pull of the surface. He blinks several times and tries to focus on the steady rise and fall of Shiro’s chest— but it’s like he’s been fractured into a dozen different pieces, and he can’t put himself back together just now, not with the reality looming over him like a wave that hasn’t broken yet. He draws back from himself and watches his body gasp and whimper with no particular feeling.

Shiro keeps talking, coaxing Keith to take in air and let it go again. The warmth of him at Keith’s back is what eventually anchors him and draws him back; the safe, sleepy feeling of sunlight, of being held tugs at him, swirling insistently at the borders of his panic. “There you are,” Shiro murmurs when Keith can finally open his lungs again without choking on his own breath. “There we go, there we go.”

He waits for a moment, still quietly prompting Keith’s inhalations and exhalations, rubbing lightly at his shoulder, then asks softly, “You back with me?”

Keith nods. He doesn’t trust himself to talk. The shame is a distant throb that will hurt later: he still feels a little like he’s watching everything from outside himself. His heart is pounding a dull sick rhythm at what is about to happen, but the rest of him feels unnaturally still and resigned.

“Okay,” murmurs Shiro. “Let’s go get some fresh air, come on, come on—” He helps Keith to his feet, waiting for a moment while Keith sniffs and drags his sleeve across his face, and guides him out of the pod and down the hall.

At the elevator, Shiro pushes the button to go up, not down, and Keith wonders a little blearily if he’s made a mistake. But when the elevator opens and they’re inside, Shiro pushes the button for the very top floor, and Keith watches as the floor indicator ascends.

Shiro steers him down a short, fluorescent-lit hallway on the top floor and keys in a code for a door at the end. He pushes it open and stands back to let Keith pass, and the unfiltered sunset washes over them in amber and gold. Keith breathes in the sudden warm burst of desert air, and he knows from the bright mineral smell of creosote and petrichor that there is rain somewhere behind the wind.

He steps out onto the roof.

There is something like a garden here: long wide beds planted with succulents that have spread and trailed over the sides, strands like strings of beads brushing the pavement. The air is cooler than he would have expected.

“What is this?” he asks.

“It’s to help regulate the temperature in this building,” says Shiro, letting the door shut softly behind him. “They put it in in my first year here. Come on, there’s some benches over here.”

That wasn’t exactly what Keith was asking, but he follows after Shiro, feeling distantly like he’s floating through the incongruous green. The wood of the bench is still warm when he sits, and he tucks his hands under his knees.

He’s so tired.

Shiro sits down across from him on the edge of one raised garden bed, his elbows on his knees.

“Listen, Keith,” he says.

Keith braces himself.

“Listen,” says Shiro again, studying his own hands like he isn’t really sure how to talk to Keith right
now. “I know… that… I know it feels like a lot to live up to, the chances you’ve been given here, and I know…” He pauses, takes a long breath in through his nose. “I know there’s been pressure put on you to… to do really well here.”

Keith doesn’t say anything. He wonders distantly at the brief flash of anger that crosses Shiro’s face.

Shiro stops there for a long moment, then finally shakes his head. “I don’t want to make it worse,” he says. “I know how it feels to have people telling you all the time that you’re good at things. That—ugh, you know that feeling, like you’re a big fake, like... you’re going to let everybody down and you have to make sure nobody finds out you don’t know what you’re doing? It’s the worst.”

There’s an urgent lurch of surprise in Keith’s chest at Shiro’s words. He shifts, pulling himself in to sit smaller, and sneaks a look at Shiro.

Shiro’s looking back at him, smiling with almost nervous self-deprecation. “Or is that… just me?” he asks, shaking his head a little and sort of pulling back.

“No,” says Keith immediately, startled: seeing that look on Shiro’s face shocks him out of his paralyzed apprehension. It’s wrong, it’s almost profane. Shiro shouldn't doubt himself. Keith has the sudden urge to reach out, to get up and go sit next to him. “That's not-- that's not just you.”

“Okay,” says Shiro quietly, his smile losing that self-conscious edge, turning into something softer and a little sad. “I had a feeling.”

Keith stares back at him. He's just been trapped, he realizes, tricked into confessing something he'd never have admitted for his own sake. He shifts and looks away.

Shiro pauses. “Listen,” he says, leaning forward. “That's-- it's not true, okay? And I'm saying that as somebody who knows exactly what it's like to feel that way. Do you think you can trust me?”

It's not fair, Shiro framing it like that. Keith fidgets, picking at a splintered place in the wood of the bench next to his leg, and shrugs reluctantly.

“Okay,” says Shiro steadily, like Keith's fully agreed. “Listen up. I've spent a lot of time with you over the last month or so, and this is what I've seen. Ready?”

“I guess,” mumbles Keith. He doesn't look up. The discomfort of the situation is a hard painful knot of nausea and apprehension in his stomach; he finds himself hunching over it, swallowing hard to keep it where it is.

Shiro waits for a moment, and when he begins to speak again his voice is gently matter-of-fact, like he can tell about the knot. “Okay,” he says again. “There's things that come easily to you that don't come easily to everybody, and that's pretty cool. It means that sometimes you're going to get to just sail through while everybody else is still confused. It means that sometimes you're going to get called on to help your classmates. It means…” He pauses. “It means it might be harder for you when things don't come easily. You're going to have to train yourself out of that-- that habit of calling yourself stupid every time you make a mistake. You're going to have to learn how to let yourself be bad at things, and that can kind of suck.”

Keith doesn't say anything. He stares at the cement under his feet, scuffing with his toe at a clumped bit of soil that escaped one of the beds.

“Those things that come easily to you,” Shiro continues, still serious, “they aren't going to carry you through here. They're going to help, but they're not going to be what makes you a good pilot or a good student.”
Here it comes, Keith thinks, and tries to steel himself. This is the part where Shiro tells him, gently and kindly because everything about the way Shiro treats him is gentle and kind, that everything Keith has is not enough and he'll be better off somewhere else. The knot in Keith's stomach tightens and twists, sending coiling tendrils up to wrap around his lungs and squeeze, there's tears at the corners of his eyes and a whimper pushing to escape his throat--

“What's going to carry you through here is that tenacity we talked about,” Shiro says. “That—that stubborn streak you've got, as long as you've got it facing the right direction, it's going to be a strength.”

The confusion sets Keith reeling. He doesn't move.

Shiro waits a moment. “Your biggest weakness,” he says, and his voice goes softer, like he doesn't want to hurt Keith with it, “your biggest weakness right now is the way you sort of panic and turn on yourself every time you make a mistake. It kind of… You can't focus on the situation in front of you if you're focused on beating yourself up instead. Make sense?”

Keith doesn't trust himself to talk. He lifts his shoulders slightly in a shrug. His eyes are still burning, his vision distorted slightly with tears he is just barely keeping from falling. He wishes Shiro would get on with it.

“I want to put that on our list of things to work on,” Shiro says. “Being kinder to yourself, moving on from your mistakes when you make them. The way your calm kind of gets away from you whenever you mess up really trips you up right now, but... if you can learn that-- that sort of patience with yourself, that's going to yield the focus you need to keep going.”

Keith sort of hears this. His mind fixes on the first few words and the rest blurs out. He forgets that he has tears to hide and he looks up at Shiro, swiping hastily at his face with his sleeves when his eyes spill over.

He needs to know. He doesn’t know how to ask but he needs to know.

“Um?” he says, and his voice wavers and breaks.

Shiro sucks in a breath, his eyes sharpening. In another second he’s on his feet, shifting to Keith’s side on the bench and wrapping him in with a protective urgency that is so like home that the sob that has been building in Keith’s throat for the last ten minutes threatens to break free. But he pulls away, because he needs to know, he needs--

“Are--” he manages. He swipes at his face again and draws himself to sit straighter, trying to steady himself enough to ask. “What are you going to do with me?”

Shiro sits back, looking at him a little blankly. “Um,” he says. “Do… with you? You mean like this summer?”

A little huff of frustrated breath escapes Keith. He shakes his head, the motion a little exaggerated to hide the tears still welling up. “No, I-- the Garrison, the Garrison, am I--”

Shiro still looks lost, shaking his head slightly in bewildered apology. Keith stares back at him, waiting for him to understand, then breathes out carefully and wipes under one eye with the heel of his hand. The formal, final words are there in his memories and they come readily when he reaches for them. He finds, oddly, a sort of strength in their bluntness.

“Are you going to recommend my dismissal?”
Shiro gapes at him. His mouth works for a moment like he doesn’t even know what to say. “Bud,” he manages finally. “No, I-- absolutely not, no. Why would I--”

Keith sits stiff and still, staring at his knees, listening hard.

“Did I--?” Shiro asks helplessly. “I’m-- I’m so sorry if I made you think…”

He means it. He means it. Keith opens his mouth and breathes in, the relief sweeping slow and warm down his back, down his arms.

“Even though…?” he asks, just to check. His voice comes out smaller than he likes, and shaky: he wants it to be steady, he wants his eyes to be dry.

“Even though?” Shiro repeats.

“What you just said,” says Keith. “About how I--”

Shiro picks it up, finally, thank god. “About how you get panicky when you mess up,” he realizes.

“Keith, no, that’s not-- That’s so common, that’s so common, I had to get past that too, it’s-- We’re gonna work on it. It’s gonna be hard but I already know you can do it.”

“What if I can’t, though.” The words come out flat and colorless; Keith can’t stop himself from picking at it, like a scab that has mostly fallen off but is still hanging on by a painfully sensate strip of skin.

“You can.” Shiro sounds steadier now, a calm confidence in his voice that eases the knot still twisting in Keith’s gut. “I know you can. But Keith, even if you can’t, that’s not-- that’s not enough reason for you to be expelled.”

Keith considers this, rubbing his damp palms on his knees. “How do you know?” he finally asks.

“How do I know you can get past it?” Shiro asks, and Keith nods. “Because,” Shiro says, and runs his palm up and down Keith’s spine between his shoulder blades, “Because I just saw you do it.”

Keith twists to look at him, confused.

“That first turn, when you went yawing too far to the right? You overcorrected back and it got a little bumpy before that flat stretch? You acknowledged it without getting flustered, you did what you had to do to get back on track, and then you kept flying. I was watching.”

“Oh,” says Keith uncomfortably, and shrugs, opening his mouth to dismiss it, but Shiro’s talking again before he can.

“During the atmospheric obstacle avoidance portion when you drifted up into the tertiary layer and almost stalled out? Same thing. You kept your cool, adapted, and kept flying.”

“That wasn’t--” Keith protests.

“And then,” says Shiro, his eyes twinkling like making compliments out of Keith’s mistakes is the most fun he’s had all day, “when you realized you were out of alignment with a route you wanted to use, you pulled some stupidly graceful acrobatics out of nowhere to get yourself where you wanted to be and you made it look fun.”

Keith pauses.

“It was fun,” he admits grudgingly.
Shiro laughs, loud enough with his delight that Keith feels his face heating, and pulls him into a rough, tight hug. Keith scoots to meet him, tucking his head down against Shiro’s chest so Shiro doesn’t see his reluctant smile. He closes his eyes for a moment and hides there, focusing on the sound of Shiro’s heartbeat, his breathing, the laughter still trailing off into fond chuckles. Shiro seems to realize, because something in the hug shifts, becomes softer and more sheltering, less playful.

“Bud,” Shiro says quietly. “I’m so proud of how hard you’ve worked this last month. I’m so excited to see where you go. You absolutely deserve to be here, okay? No more doubts.”

Keith breathes in, keeps his eyes closed. He nods slightly.

“Homework for next time,” says Shiro. “I want you to try to remember what you were thinking and how you were feeling when we ran that course. Something was obviously working for you there, let’s see if we can’t recreate it next week.”

Keith doesn’t have to try. He knows exactly what he was thinking, and just the reminder of it makes him feel a little better. But--

“Next week?” he repeats, pulling back a little. “Are we--”

Shiro pulls his tablet out of his pocket to check the time, then makes an apologetic face. “Yeah, sorry, bud. I gotta get back a little earlier tonight, I have to finish my speech for commencement on Friday.”

“You’re making a speech?” asks Keith, distracted from the disappointment. “Can I come watch?”

Shiro wrinkles up his nose. “You sure can,” he says. “Actually you’re required. All the cadets have to sit through it.”

“Oh,” says Keith. This takes some of the excitement out of it. “Guess you better make it good, then.”

Shiro gives him a look, an oh-really kind of look, and Keith freezes up, wondering if he’s gone too far. But there’s laughter in Shiro’s face, and he hooks his elbow around Keith's neck and hauls him close, scrubbing his knuckles into Keith's hair until he squawks. “Walk you back to your room?”

“Is there time for one more in the simulator?” Keith asks hopefully, swiping distractedly at his hair where he can feel it sort of flopping back to where it’s supposed to be. “What if we did the Europa one with the methane lake, that’s short.”

Shiro hesitates visibly, and Keith thinks for a moment that he’s got him, but then Shiro just grimaces and shakes his head. “Sorry, bud,” he says, and he does sound sorry. “I really gotta write this thing or it’s gonna be ten minutes of knock-knock jokes. I'll make it up to you next week, how's that sound?”

“Ten minutes of knock-knock jokes sounds better,” Keith observes, and hastily lurches away when Shiro moves to tweak his side.

“You can make that argument to Commander Sam tomorrow,” Shiro says. “Come on, I'll walk you in.”

Keith slides off the bench and follows Shiro up the path between succulent beds back to the door. He has to pause there: he feels calm and settled and safe again, a strange tender sense of security humming under his lungs in place of the hollow panic of twenty minutes ago, but he’s been crying and he knows it shows on his face. Shiro waits patiently by the door while Keith rubs his eyes and sniffs hard, then they go in together.
Shiro hugs him one more time in the silent hallway outside the door to Keith’s room. It occurs to Keith to be self-conscious, but there’s nobody to see except the indifferent black lens of the security camera, and he lets himself sort of melt into it.

“See you Friday,” says Shiro before he lets him go. “Don’t forget you’re packing for the summer this time.”

Keith’s heart jumps. He can feel the glow starting up again inside his ribcage, filling up his chest like liquid gold. He nods quickly, swallows, and takes a deep deliberate breath. It only seems to fuel the glow, but it’s a happy thing and he doesn’t mind.

“See you-- see you Friday,” he answers, the words only a little unsteady.

He feels Shiro’s hand smooth over the crown of his head, then clap down on his shoulder as he’s released. “Sleep good, bud,” Shiro says. “Love you.”

The glow swells and flares bright, an overwhelming almost-hurt that leaves Keith trembling. Say it back, he thinks desperately, say it back! But the ache of the glow has twisted up into his throat, and the words are caught there. All he can do is nod and hope Shiro understands.

Shiro winks at him and turns away, strolling back down the hallway the way they came. Keith watches him go, then turns and slips into his room as the door whisks open to admit him.

It’s a little too early to go to bed, but Keith pulls up all of his bedding to make a comfortably untidy nest for himself in one corner of his mattress and settles in to read more about Enceladus. There’s a mission in the earliest stages of planning, apparently; it won’t launch until Keith is almost nineteen, but for the first time he allows himself to consider it.

Warm with the heaped blankets and the strange calm of having given up a secret, Keith hugs his pillow and drifts, watching the feed from a probe that visited several of Saturn’s moons and wondering distantly how his life has suddenly started going so right.

It’s the next day, of course, that everything goes to shit.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote 3k words in the last 24 hours because I reeally really wanted to be able to update one more time before S6 drops so here! a chapter!

you guys I’m so nervous for this season; if my canon compliant tag survives Friday i will EAT MY HAT. I will also eat my hat if my favs all survive this season come yell at me about season 6 apprehensions or feelings!
“You've got that thing tonight with Commander Holt, right?” Malone asks him the next morning before breakfast. “How long does that go?”

“Um,” says Keith, distracted with a stubborn button. “Like half an hour.”

“Starts at 7:30?”

“Yeah,” says Keith.

“Cool,” Malone says. “I'll see you tonight.”

They part ways, and Keith forgets the entire exchange. He’s distracted the entire day, his entire body thrumming with anticipation—but that’s true of every single student in the facility, on this final day of classes, so he doesn’t exactly stick out.

He has a good feeling about tonight.

He’s in such a buoyant mood at dinner that he very generously offers Paschel his sugar cookies. It’s a taunt and she knows it, staring back at him with flat disgust, but she looks away without making any answer at all and Keith knows he’s won. It’s a good note to end the year on, he decides, and he carries the smug satisfaction all the way to Commander Sam’s office.

“Shiro told me you broke some personal records last night!” Commander Sam says, and Keith glows and glows. He tells the commander about each scenario they ran, in as much detail as he can remember, and Commander Sam listens as he always does, asks questions like he’s actually interested in what Keith is saying, gives him a couple scenarios to get Shiro to let him try. It’s almost enough to distract him from the clock—almost, but not quite.

“All right, all right,” says Commander Sam, laughing, when the clock on the wall reads 8:02 and Keith is about to vibrate out of his chair. “I can see that you’ve got more exciting places to be. We’ll talk about a summer schedule for our meetings this weekend sometime.”

“Yes, sir,” says Keith, perched on the edge of his seat, waiting.

Commander Sam grins at him rather knowingly, and a jolt of guilty alarm goes straight through Keith’s chest. But all the commander says is, “Dismissed. See you tomorrow, kiddo.”

Keith wavers for a moment, trying to see if the commander knows what he’s up to and is about to stop him, but Commander Sam just makes an amiable shooing motion, and Keith scurries out.

The administrative wing is busier than it usually is at this time of night—probably, Keith realizes, with last minute preparation for the commencement ceremony tomorrow. There’s more people around than he likes, in any case, and he finds himself looking over his shoulder while he waits for the elevator. But nobody seems very interested in one lone cadet, and he breathes out in relief when the elevator doors close behind him.

The simulator stage is absolutely silent when he arrives. It’s more than a little eerie, and he stands inside the doorway for a moment, listening, peering from side to side like a deer that hasn’t yet
decided about the safety of the field. But there’s nobody, there’s no sound, and eventually he steals out onto the deck, making his way toward the simulator pod he and Shiro used yesterday, for luck.

Finding and setting the specs for the Enceladus scenario is a well-worn track by now. Keith buckles himself in, watching the familiar boot-up supernova animation splash across the screens in brilliant, realistic color and light, and he breathes in.

He closes his eyes. He reaches for the glow that set him soaring like a paper lantern yesterday. *I’m going home with Shiro tomorrow*, he thinks. He calls to mind the warm safety of Shiro’s hugs, the familiar-strange looked-after feeling that comes whenever Shiro does something like make him his special coffee, or remember to bring along a sweatshirt so Keith won’t be cold, or notice when Keith is feeling unmoored and lonely.

*Shiro loves me.*

Keith’s heart ignites.

He opens his eyes.

The simulation begins.

It’s not a magic spell. The Enceladus course is not and never will be easy. But Keith grips the controls with practiced determination and lowers the craft to the altitude he settled on last week, and he watches the geysers approach with a strange sort of calm and clarity. *Shiro loves me,* he thinks again with distant awe, and he dives into the chaos.

It’s all instinct from there, hair-trigger reactions, losing himself in the wild brain-shaking turbulence and the fight for every second of control. The glow stays steady, as present and palpable as a hand on his shoulder.

A jet catches him under the left wing before he can evade and he inhales hard. *Adapt,* Shiro whispers in his ear, and before he’s even thought about it Keith is rolling to the right, twisting with the momentum of the geyser’s plume, angling up to regain his lost altitude once level. There’s another exploding directly behind him: the burst sends him pitching forward, stern lifting over the bow, and he’s drifting helplessly and *falling* as the plume’s momentum overcomes his own.

Panic blooms cold in his stomach and for a moment he’s frozen, watching the ground loom nearer on the viewport screens. He pulls hard, cursing breathlessly as the craft’s nose lifts, glacially slow--

--and he’s leveling off again, just in time to half-roll out of the path of another, holding his breath as the pod judders and shakes, and then there’s another to avoid, and another--

*Take it one challenge at a time.*

*Be patient with yourself.*

Keith sweats and swears, his entire body tensed against the wild jostling; he already knows exactly how stiff and sore he’s going to be tomorrow but it’ll be worth it, it’ll all have been worth it if he can just make it through…

There’s light ahead.

There’s *light ahead.*

*Focus.*
He can’t even see the ground through the billowing steam and gases. There’s no way at this point to tell where the next geyser will break through. He sets his teeth grimly and shoves the craft forward toward the clearing fog with every bit of speed it has.

The impact, when it comes, jolts Keith with such force that he can feel the gravity tugging at his brain in his skull, his insides jostling with each other for space. He hangs on, too shaken to make a sound, and watches the viewports flash with blinding sunlight and gray fog and white, white ice below as the ship spins. There’s a sick sense of resignation pulling at him: in a moment it will all be over and he’ll be sitting in an empty, silent pod once again, aching and discouraged.

But that’s sunlight. He’s made it through, he made it past the geysers, all he has to do now is land safely and he’ll have completed the simulation. He swallows hard, shuts his eyes for a second against the flashing and shaking and the insistent blaring of the altitude alarms; he drags in a deep breath and pictures Shiro’s astonished pride when Keith shows him what he can do.

I can do this, he thinks.

He grips the rudder and hauls for all he’s worth.

His memory afterwards of the moments that follow is a patchy conglomerate of sensation. The violent shudder of the landing sticks with him, the way the straps of the harness hold bruisingly tight around his chest; he remembers holding his breath until the pod stills.

“Simulation complete,” the pod announces, and the screens go black.

Keith lets out his breath, slow and shaky, and feels all the tension bleeding out of him at once. The harness is still tight around his ribs and over his hips; otherwise he thinks he might have just slid liquid-like to the floor of the pod to puddle there in a heap of exhausted limbs. There’s elation sparkling at the edges of his comprehension, but he can’t quite-- he can’t--

I did it, he thinks, half-bewildered, trying to make it real in his head. He says it a couple times too, trying it out, the words hushed in the silent pod--and then all of a sudden it clicks and he’s-- he did it, he did it--

The pod door opens.

Keith’s heart lurches, a sharp painful jerk of alarm, a start running signal that he’s too cornered to obey, because it’s Commander Iverson stooping to peer into the pod.

They stare at each other for an interminable moment, Keith frozen to his seat, Iverson’s face slowly purpling with fury and disbelief and something else, something Keith doesn’t recognize. Then Iverson says, “What in the ever-loving …” and is inside the pod, advancing on Keith.

Keith scrambles. He unfastens the clasp to release his harness and is out of his seat faster than he would have thought he could a moment ago. There isn’t really anywhere to go in the cramped space, but he puts the pilot’s chair between himself and the man, flattening his palms on the wall of the pod behind him. His lungs are working in time with his heart, a quick shallow gasping that is out of his control.

But Iverson stops at the admin screen, tapping and scrolling. Keith can’t see the screen from where he’s standing, but something Iverson finds there makes him go still, his face darkening further. Then he’s lifting his tablet to his ear. “Get me Shirogane,” he says shortly, and his tone makes the backs of Keith’s hands prickle with barely contained panic. “I do not care what time it is, Private, get him down here!”
The pod door is still open. Keith swallows, lowering his head, and measures the distance between himself and the exit with his eyes. The air of the pod is stale; he hadn’t even noticed until now, but now it feels like it’s choking him. Iverson is still tapping at the screen, cursing under his breath.

Keith bolts.

“No,” Iverson says loudly, and catches him around one arm. Keith hears himself make a strangled, abrupt sort of sound as the unyielding grip arrests his momentum. His awareness narrows to the painful pressure of Iverson’s hand around his upper arm; he can’t think past the sudden static of fear.

Iverson gives him a sharp shake that makes Keith’s teeth rattle, and he realizes abruptly that he’s struggling, his feet braced against the floor of the pod and his free hand scrabbling at Iverson’s wrist. “That’s enough of that,” Iverson growls. “You’re already in enough trouble. Cool it, cadet!”

Keith swallows back a whimper and focuses on not fighting.

Iverson isn’t looking at him. He’s still typing one-handed on the admin screen, scowling and muttering and-- worried? “How long have you been doing this?” he demands, rounding on Keith. “How many times have you snuck up here alone?”

Keith flinches back. He stares up at Iverson—meeting his eyes, he realizes abruptly, and hastily looks away—and he can’t remember how to use words at all.

Iverson sighs, just a short huff of breath through his nose. “Christ,” he mutters. “Are you hurt?”

“I--I--” stutters Keith.

Iverson sighs gustily again and tugs to get Keith to walk with him.

They make their way down the empty hallway and take the elevator down to the first floor offices, Iverson's hand inescapably tight around Keith's upper arm the entire time. Keith keeps his eyes on the dark carpet beneath his feet the entire way. He can't stop himself from pulling a little, from standing as far from Iverson as he can.

Shiro's coming, he thinks, and tries to breathe deeper.

With this thought he remembers the bracelet, and he curls his fingers around the familiar suede band with such a feeling of relief that a half-hysterical giggle tries to bubble up in his throat. It doesn’t matter, it doesn't matter where they’re going, because wherever he is Shiro will be able to find him if Keith needs him.

But the route is familiar, and continues to be familiar, until Iverson stops outside a door Keith knows very well. He stares at the number on the wall, and a sudden uncertainty fills him.

Iverson raises his free hand and pounds on the door. “Holt!” he barks. “Found something of yours!”

The door whisks open almost immediately. Keith can see Commander Sam on the other side of the desk, getting to his feet to come around to meet them. His eyes sharpen, shifting between Keith and Iverson in confusion. “What is this?” he asks, and he's already reaching out for Keith.

“He was in the simulator,” says Iverson grimly. “Under Shirogane’s log-on. I'm taking him to General Beck but I'm informing you as a courtesy.”

His hand is still clamped on Keith's arm. Keith shifts away a little to test it, and goes very still as the grip tightens warningly. He swallows and stares at the ground.
“Oh, I'll take him,” says Commander Sam. His tone is easy and amiable, but there's a steel under it that sends goosebumps prickling up Keith's arms under his uniform. “He's under my authority.”

“No,” says Iverson brusquely. “I'm the one making the report, I need him.” He tugs Keith's arm again to get him moving, and Keith nearly plants his feet to fight.

“Of course you have to make your report, Commander,” says Commander Sam as Iverson turns away. His voice raises a little, though it's even more pleasant than before, if possible. “But as I'm Keith's OIC, I'll be escorting him.”

Silence falls. The air sparks. Keith keeps his head down.

“Martin,” says Commander Sam quietly. “Let me have my cadet, please.”

Nothing happens for a moment. Then Iverson makes an irritated sound and releases Keith's arm.

“Thank you,” says Commander Sam, still quiet, and he lays a hand lightly on Keith's shoulder. “We'll follow you in a moment.”

“Take your time,” says Iverson, bone-dry, and is gone. The door swishes shut behind him.

Keith realizes that he's trembling.

“Sit down, kiddo,” Commander Sam says, and guides Keith to the chair he vacated only half an hour ago. “What's going on, what happened?”

“I--” Keith begins, and finds that he can't continue. He can't reach the glow; the joy of having completed the course is out of reach, smothered by dread and the phantom sensation of Iverson's hand squeezing his arm. His lungs are still fluttering like a terrified bird.

“Look at me, Keith,” urges Commander Sam, and Keith obeys. “Are you okay?”

He's still got his hand on Keith's shoulder, but nothing about it indicates restraint. It settles Keith, a little: there's no danger here. He's not going to be hurt.

He takes a deliberate, shaky breath and nods.

“Were you in the simulator, like Commander Iverson said?”

Commander Sam's face and voice are very serious. Keith shuts his eyes for a moment so he doesn't have to look at him, and he nods again.

The commander sighs. There's silence for a moment, and then he asks quietly, “And you used Shiro's code to get in?”

“Yeah,” Keith whispers wretchedly.

“Okay,” the commander sighs again, and goes around to sit on the other side of his desk. He rubs his hands over his face. “Okay. How did you get Shiro's code?”

“I--” Keith swallows. “I saw it when-- when he was putting it in.”

“So Shiro didn't tell you his code,” the commander clarifies, and Keith shakes his head. “Did Shiro tell you you could go in the simulator alone?”

“N--noo,” says Keith miserably.
“Why did you?”

“I didn't--” Keith has to stop. He tries to dry his clammy hands on the knees of his uniform. “I didn't… think anybody would mind?”

“You didn't know about the rule that junior cadet use of the simulators must be supervised?”

Keith doesn't know what to say. He remembers that rule vaguely from orientation, but he hadn't connected it to himself then and he hadn't thought of it when he started breaking it. “I don't-- I don't know?”

“Keith,” Commander Sam says, and his voice is more stern than Keith has ever heard it. “That's not an answer. Did you or didn't you know about the rule?”

“I forgot,” whispers Keith.

There's silence for a beat. Then Commander Sam sighs. “Was it just tonight?”

Keith swallows. “No.”

“How long?” asks the commander. “How long have you been doing this, how many times?”


“I just wanted to--” Keith says, and he drags in a breath carefully, because Commander Sam is looking at him like he's disappointed, and Keith wants to cry. “I just wanted to be good at it?”

“Keith,” says the commander, shaking his head slightly. “Keith, you are good at it. Why would you…”

Keith rubs his eyes. “I wanted to-- I wanted to be better at it?” That's not quite right. “I wanted to see…”

“See what?” Commander Sam prompts.

“If… I could…” Keith hunches where he sits. “I don't know, I don't know, I just want to not… I didn't want him to think…”

“Shiro?” asks the commander. “Think what?”

Keith rubs at one eye. He's managed not to let any tears fall, but his nose is starting to run, and he sniffs. He feels terribly exposed, trapped under the humming white light, and he has to keep reminding himself that it's Commander Sam on the other side of the desk. “That I'm-- not… worth it?”

There's silence for a long moment. Then Commander Sam sighs again and pushes a box of Kleenex toward Keith's side of the desk. “Listen,” he says as Keith takes one. “Every Wednesday night when Shiro comes home from flying with you, you're all he talks about. The progress you've made, your determination, how fast you are to pick up what he's taught you. Shiro is very, very proud of you, Keith. You don't need to doubt that.”

He seems to be waiting for some acknowledgement, so Keith nods without looking up from the tissue wadded up in his hand.
Commander Sam takes a deep breath. “Keith,” he says quietly. “This is really serious. Do you understand what you did?”

“I broke the rules,” Keith whispers.

“Yes,” says the commander. “Rules that are there to keep you safe. You could have been badly hurt, Keith, do you understand that?”

Keith thinks of the horrible chaos of his first time alone in the simulator, when the turbulence had shaken him out of his seat and the spinning pod had set him tumbling like a tennis ball in a dryer. He nods reluctantly.

“And because you used Shiro’s code to break the rules,” the commander says, “he’s implicated here too.”

Keith snaps his head up, staring. “What?” he blurs. “That’s not--”

“Shiro is an adult who has been given certain privileges of care over you,” says Commander Sam evenly. “That’s a position that comes with a lot of responsibility. He could be held culpable for allowing you to gain access to his code and putting you in danger, if General Beck chooses to see it that way. The General could decide to revoke Shiro’s status as an agent of care, among other things.”

“But that’s not--” Keith takes a shaky breath, sitting up straighter. “That’s not fair, he didn’t-- he didn’t know, it’s not his fault! They can’t punish Shiro!”

The commander doesn’t say anything, and Keith feels like the bottom has fallen out of his stomach.

“What… other things?” he asks.

Commander Sam regards him soberly for a moment, then sighs and looks away. “I don’t know,” he says frankly, and Keith gets the familiar, terrifying feeling that the adult in front of him is side-stepping giving him a real answer. “There’s a number of things the General could do. I don’t know what route he’ll take.”

“I’m gonna tell him,” Keith says desperately. “I’ll tell him it was all me and Shiro didn’t know and he’ll have to-- he can’t punish Shiro if he knows it was all me!”

“It definitely won’t hurt,” the commander agrees. “And I’m proud of you for taking that responsibility.”

At another time, these words might have wrapped around Keith and settled him, but just now he feels like he’s going to be sick. He swallows hard and stares at his knees. “I didn’t mean--” he starts, but the commander’s tablet is buzzing urgently.

“Holt,” says Commander Sam. “Yeah, I’ve got him. We’ll be right up.”

He tucks his tablet into his pocket and looks across the desk at Keith.

“Ready?”

Chapter End Notes
I'm hitting the part of the story that is hard to write sooo thank you for your patience.  
[tears out hair]

GUYS. SEASON 6. HOLY COW HOLY COW HOLY COW. WE'RE SO BLESSED.

I gotta edit my tags a little bit. I'm not quite canon compliant anymore (BUT I DON'T EVEN CARE BECAUSE HOLY COW). I am kind of thinking of going through and making some minor changes, like to Keith's hometown. The biggest one I'm considering is changing General Beck from Beck's uncle to Beck's aunt, but that's a big change and would take some time and I don't know how motivated I am!
Shiro is at home when the call comes, still staring at the draft for his speech, and not out with Anders and Gaines, at least.

“Did he say what it was about?” he asks the private on the other end of the call.

“No, sir,” answers the private. “Um, he didn’t sound happy, sir.”

*Does he ever?* thinks Shiro very quietly to himself. “All right,” he says, and shuts his laptop, already reaching for his shoes. “I’ll be there in five.”

It’s always a fun game, trying to guess what Iverson is seething over this time. Shiro rubs a sore spot above one eyebrow that has been trying to develop into a migraine for the last hour, checks his tablet for messages from Keith, just in case, and goes.

*How was your day?* he sends to Keith on the way. It’s not likely that Iverson would contact him about Keith now that Sam’s the officer on his case, but he still feels the need to settle it with himself, just to make sure.

There’s no response by the time he’s parked and checked in, and he pushes the mild concern to the back of his mind. He stands in the entryway and clicks the button on his tablet to report in to Iverson, and he waits there for further orders.

The orders come immediately, uncharacteristically: *My office, right now.*

Shiro frowns down at his tablet, running again over the events of the last few days, trying to think if he’s done anything wrong. He taps the button to acknowledge the order absently and sets off toward the administrative wing.

Iverson meets him at the door, zero to full bluster in *seconds.* “What in *hell* are you thinking, Shirogane? This goes so far beyond acceptable that if you weren’t slotted for a mission I’d have your access to the sim deck revoked!”

Shiro’s head throbs. He stands carefully straight, trying to make the dots connect. “Sir?”

“Don’t fucking *sir* me,” says Iverson, already halfway back to his desk. He snatches up his tablet and shoves it in Shiro’s face. “Is this what you wanted? Or did you even think that far?”

“What--” starts Shiro. There’s a video on the screen, a bit dark and hard to make out. He reaches out automatically to take the tablet and turn up the brightness.

“Iverson,” says Iverson curtly. “Get moving, captain.”

Shiro stares at him as he strides past. “Sir, I don’t-- I’m sorry, I don’t understand, what’s… what is this about?”
“It’s about Cadet Kogane logging an hour on the simulator every Thursday night for the past five weeks,” says Iverson, already halfway down the hallway. “Alone, using your codes. Watch the damn video, Shirogane.”

Shiro looks down at the screen, his feet moving to follow Iverson. It’s a video log of a simulation, the view of the inside of a cockpit. The pilot’s seat is empty, and his eyes skip automatically to check the others before he realizes fully what he’s looking at. The pod is in an uncontrolled spin, the gravity indicator in the bottom corner of the screen whipping wildly in an irregular circle, and there’s something loose in the cockpit. It takes a moment to identify it as an unsecured cadet. It takes a moment longer to identify it as Keith.

Shiro stops cold. There’s helpless horror freezing him to the spot, keeping him staring as Keith tumbles limply with the pod’s motion. He watches, unable to look away, as Keith slams into the engineer station; he feels the flinch all through his own body as Keith takes a blow to the back.

“Where is he?” he hears himself ask, and wrenches his gaze away from Iverson’s tablet screen. “I have to-- Is he in the med ward? I have to…”

“Stand down, Shirogane,” says Iverson without turning around. “That video is five weeks old.”

“Five weeks?” Shiro repeats blankly. “How--” His mind is whirling, trying to understand-- Keith hadn’t told him, Keith hadn’t been injured, Keith hadn’t told him--

The recollection abruptly surfaces of Keith sneaking into the bathroom in the dead of night five weeks ago to treat his bruises. I fell down some stairs...

“I need to,” he says, and tries to catch his breath, “I need to talk to him, I don’t know how this…”

Iverson turns toward the elevator. “No,” he says. “You need to come make your report to General Beck.”

“Where is he?” Shiro demands, jogging a step to catch up. “Commander, where’s Keith?”

Iverson gives him a look that speaks exasperated volumes. “He’s with Commander Holt. They’ll be joining us shortly.”

The tight panicky feeling making his breath come short eases. “Okay,” he says, and tries to focus. “Okay. So he’s-- he’s been doing this for the last five weeks?”

“Don’t act clueless,” says Iverson, slamming the button for the elevator with unnecessary force. “He’s been using your code, Shirogane. How’d he get it, hmm? What did you think was going to happen?”

“I didn’t give it to him, sir,” says Shiro, shaking his head urgently. Had he-- He must have been careless, he hadn’t seen Keith watching but he must have been--

(There’s a strange gut-punch sense of confusion and betrayal hovering around the edges of his thoughts, but he pushes it roughly away for later.)

“I didn’t give it to him,” he says again, more firmly. “I don’t know how he got it.”

“I’m sure General Beck will have something to say about that kind of responsibility with personal access codes,” Iverson says, very dryly, and steps out of the elevator.

Shiro sets his jaw and starts after him. The simulator log is still playing on Iverson’s tablet, and he
finds himself watching as it restarts. “Hold on,” he says slowly. “That’s-- Is that Enceladus?”

Iverson doesn’t answer him. He’s raising his hand to knock on the door to General Beck’s office, and then they’re inside.

The General looks as exhausted as Shiro feels. He looks like this is the very last thing he wants to be dealing with right now, and Shiro’s spine crawls with shame. Iverson briefs General Beck, and Shiro does his best to concentrate on what he’s saying, but he’s so tired.

Keith lied to him.

*Not now,* he thinks fiercely, and shoves it away again.

“Were you aware?” General Beck is asking him, and he draws himself up formally to answer. It’s a full grilling from there, Beck and Iverson trading off pointed questions while Shiro sweats and hurts and wishes, desperately, that he were in uniform.

And then the door is opening behind him, and the relief of seeing Sam is overwhelming for a moment. Keith is with him, walking behind him and half-hidden from Shiro’s perspective. He gets a glimpse of red eyes and a blotchy face, and he has to stop himself from going to him, because he knows what devastation looks like on Keith.

Sam moves to stand behind Shiro. Keith follows him.

There are more questions. Why didn’t he review his simulator logs to guard against this when working with a high-risk cadet. Why didn’t he change his code periodically. Why didn’t he notice when Keith was injured.

“I was aware of it,” he says carefully, conscious of Keith standing behind him. “I wasn’t aware that it came from an incident in the simulator.”

“What did you think happened?” asks the General.

Shiro pauses and takes a breath. “I was-- I was advised that Cadet Kogane tripped and fell down a flight of stairs. His bruises seemed consistent with… with an incident like that, as opposed to-- um, I initially thought it was another conflict. I didn’t look further.”

“Advised by whom?”

Shiro stops, shutting his eyes for a moment. He doesn’t want to be here, now, he doesn’t want to be facing this. He draws a breath to answer, but there’s a light brush of fabric at his side, and when he opens his eyes again Keith is standing between him and his interrogators, a tiny bristling shield.

“It’s my fault,” Keith says, his chin tilting up defiantly. Shiro can see him shaking. “I told him I fell.”

There’s a pause while Iverson and General Beck consider Keith. “Thank you, cadet,” says the General. “We aren’t finished talking to Captain Shirogane yet. We’ll get to you in a minute.”

It’s a clear dismissal, but Keith plants his feet and doesn’t move from his place. “Shiro didn’t do anything wrong,” he says loudly. “You can’t punish Shiro because I messed up, he didn’t do anything wrong!”

Iverson sighs irritably and looks past Shiro at Commander Holt. “Would you get him out of here?”

Sam is already moving, stepping around Shiro to take Keith by the arm. “Come on, kiddo,” Shiro
hears him say. “We’re gonna wait outside.”

“No,” Keith snarls, jerking his arm away from Sam and darting out of his reach. “You have to listen, you have to listen to me, Shiro didn’t do anything wrong, it was me, it was all me not him, punish me, don’t punish him punish me, you can’t--”

Shiro watches, paralyzed, as the situation deteriorates: Sam goes after Keith again, grabbing him by his shoulders to steer him away, trying to reason with him, but there’s an unwillingness there to hurt, to force, and Keith is too frantic to listen. Across the General’s desk, Iverson looks at his watch and rolls his eyes in disbelieving exasperation, then starts around the desk toward Keith.

No you don’t, Shiro thinks with a sudden swell of fury, and steps forward to put himself between Iverson and Keith. Keith chooses that moment to wrench free of Sam’s hold again, and he stumbles with a lurch directly into Shiro’s chest.

“Hey,” says Shiro, and wraps his arms around Keith before the kid’s found his balance again, “okay, hey, hey...”

Keith is startled into stillness. Shiro can feel him breathing too quickly, trembling, and he shifts them slightly so that the bulk of his body shields Keith from view. “You need to stop,” he says quietly into Keith’s ear, keeping his arms tight, keeping Keith where he is. “You need to go with Commander Sam right now, do you understand?”

Keith doesn’t move for a moment. He takes a breath, and Shiro feels him tensing in preparation to struggle. “No,” he murmurs sharply, tightening his arms. “Keith. I need you to stop fighting, bud. I need you to listen to me.”

Keith’s shoulders curl in, the resistance leaving him all at once as he tucks his head down to hide against Shiro’s chest, and a tiny unhappy noise escapes him. Shiro doesn’t think it’s pain, but he loosens his hold immediately anyway. “Are you listening?”

Keith nods.

“You need to go with Commander Sam,” Shiro tells him in a low voice. “This is serious, Keith. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” whispers Keith.

“Alright,” says Shiro, and cups the back of Keith’s head briefly before releasing him. Sam is there to receive him, guiding Keith toward the door of the office with a hand at the middle of Keith’s back. Shiro watches for a moment as they go--and, when Keith turns to look back at him over his shoulder, it’s the hardest thing Shiro’s ever done to turn away from him to face Iverson and the General again.

The General’s face is thoughtful. Iverson looks like he’s just stepped in gum.

“If we could proceed,” Iverson says, very dryly.

Shiro swallows and nods, drawing himself up to stand straight, and the questions begin again.

“Did you allow Kogane to try advanced scenarios like the Enceladus course during your sessions?” That’s Iverson: less bluster now and more blunt truth-seeking. It’s both easier to deal with and somehow worse.

“No, sir,” says Shiro.
“Did you discuss advanced scenarios with Kogane during your sessions?”

“No, sir,” Shiro says again. “You can—you can look at my sim logs with him, they’re—”

“Did you discuss advanced scenarios with him at any other time?”

Shiro breathes. “No, sir, not in detail.”

“Did you ever advise him on strategy pertaining to advanced scenarios?”

Shiro has to pause. “Can I ask you to be more specific, sir?”

Iverson stares at him flatly, then turns aside to pick up his tablet again. “Sir,” he says to the General, and gestures at the presentation screen on the wall. “Can I…?”

General Beck makes a vague permissive gesture, and Iverson taps at his tablet for a moment. The presentation screen lights up: it’s another simulator log, a split screen view of the cockpit and the simulated landscape. Keith’s in the pilot’s seat, alone.

It’s unmistakably the Enceladus scenario.

Shiro can’t take his eyes off Keith on the screen. There’s a flushed, disheveled look to his face and hair that makes Shiro think he must have been at this for a while already. He looks tired, discouraged and upset, and Shiro has the sudden urge to step between the screen and its viewers. Keith doesn’t seem to know there’s a camera watching him, and it hurts to see his expressions so unguarded.

On the screen, Keith takes a deep breath and sniffs and gets out of his seat. Shiro watches as he steps to the admin screen and taps rapidly to restart the scenario, then buckles himself back into his seat.

Shiro doesn’t know what he’s watching for, but oh even through the confusion and heartache it’s a pleasure to watch Keith fly. He’s graceful in a way it takes most pilots years to achieve; he reacts so quickly to changing conditions that sometimes Shiro’s still processing the shift by the time Keith’s adjusted his flight.

And then he understands.

Keith’s trying to fly the geyser field.

Don’t do it, Shiro thinks, going cold. Keith, don’t. Don’t try it.

He’s going at it too flinchingly. He needs to be lower; he’s going to get lost in the spray. Shiro holds his breath, shaking his head almost unconsciously, and then Keith’s diving into it, zipping and swerving and he’s doing so, so well but he’s too high and it’s inevitable when a burst catches him under one wing. Shiro watches, barely breathing, and the sharp noises of hurt and distress the simulation shakes out of Keith as the craft is buffeted from one brutal impact to the next go straight to Shiro’s heart and twist--

The video stops.

“This scenario,” says Iverson while Shiro’s still trying to catch his breath, “is an exercise in visually identifying safe landing zones and navigating without instruments under adverse conditions. Every cadet who has ever completed the mission has successfully landed, waited out the worst of the tidal instability, and flown on to reach the objective. Every cadet except you. And now Kogane. Tell me that’s a coincidence.”
Shiro can’t do anything but gape for a moment. “I– never,” he manages. “I would never leave him to figure out a scenario that far above his flight level on his own. Even– even when I fly this scenario with older cadets, I run it on dual pilot mode while they’re learning the parameters, I– Keith is twelve years old, he’s not ready for this scenario, let alone an alternate approach!”

“How do you explain it, then?”

Shiro stares at Iverson, then shakes his head helplessly and looks back at the paused screen. “He’s– the simulations we’ve been working on have all been fly-and-evade of some sort, he probably just… assumed this one was meant to be the same.” He pauses, and in the back of his mind something finishes processing and clicks. “Did you– just say he completed the scenario?”

Iverson gives him a sour look. “We’ll be having the log looked at for signs of tampering.”

Shiro’s head spins. “When?” he asks. “When did he–”

“That’s all I need from him, sir,” Iverson is saying to Beck.

“Dismissed,” says the General, nodding to Shiro. “But stay close. We need to revisit Kogane’s future here and your role in it.”

Shiro goes still. It feels for a moment like everything’s stopped: his breath, his heart, the blood in his veins. But he swallows deliberately, straightens his shoulders and salutes, and he turns to go.

“Send Kogane in on your way out,” calls the General after him.

“Yes, sir,” says Shiro. He doesn’t break stride or turn back; his expression will give him away if he does, and he doesn’t want to see the look on Iverson’s face.

Oh, god, he thinks.

Keith.

It's cold in the little sitting area outside the General's office. Keith sits very still, his hands fisted tightly by his legs to keep from fidgeting; his jaw clenched to keep his teeth from chattering. Commander Sam sits quietly in the chair next to him, a solid familiar point of warmth and color under the harsh white light: that, and the knowledge that Shiro is still behind the door in front of him is the only thing keeping Keith from bolting.

Far away, in another wing of the building, the bell sounds to signal two minutes to lights out. Keith flinches reflexively at the sound, glancing up at the commander.

“It's okay,” says Commander Sam quietly. “You're excused, it's okay.”

He's excused, Keith knows, because the trouble he's in for the simulator completely eclipses any other rule he could break. He kicks his legs anxiously before he can stop himself, then forces himself into stillness again. His heart gives a little sideways jerk two minutes later, when the second bell sounds, but he doesn’t startle.

They've been in there so long.

He starts to drift, a little, as the minutes tick by in silence; he's getting that floating, disconnected feeling that comes with helpless dread and exhaustion. There's a tile in the floor by the door with a
stained corner, an amorphous patch of brown-gray in the searing white: Keith stares at it without really seeing it. His eyes feel hot and swollen, but he's too tired to cry.

The door whisks open. Keith blinks and focuses and sits up straight.

Shiro is standing in the doorway, his broad shoulders slumped. He looks pale and tired, worn down in a way Keith has never seen. He looks at Keith for a moment, and Keith stares back desperately.

Shiro looks away.

“They're ready for you guys,” he says to the commander. He's not looking at Keith at all now, and a cold, quiet horror creeps into the pit of Keith's stomach. It makes him want to sit very still, melt into the row of chairs until everybody's forgotten him.

Commander Holt is getting to his feet. “Come on, kiddo,” he says. “Let's get this over with so you can go to bed.”

His voice is light and brisk, but he’s tired too. There’s something he knows that he hasn’t told Keith, and it all feels so nightmarishly familiar that Keith can’t move. The commander puts his hand on Keith’s back and tugs lightly, and Keith hunches up his shoulders, bracing himself automatically to resist.

“Come on, Keith,” says Commander Sam again, and the words are softer this time. “I'll be right there with you.”

Shiro is still standing quietly by the door. Keith shuts his eyes for a moment and digs the heels of his hands into their sockets, then stands. He doesn’t look up at Shiro as he walks past him to the door. He half-expects a hand on his shoulder, but there’s nothing.

The door opens; they pass through; the door closes again behind them.

Afterward, Keith doesn’t remember much of what follows. He remembers being asked to account for himself, to explain what he did and how and why; he remembers the startled, speechless jolt of surprise when Iverson bluntly asked him which upperclassman he’d gotten to fix the simulator so he could appear to pass the hardest scenario.

He remembers the General and Iverson asking him in a dozen different ways if Shiro had pushed him to try the Enceladus scenario, if he’d maybe given him the access code on purpose, if he’d ever given him hints on how to fly it. He remembers frustration, trying to explain to them again and again that Shiro didn’t know; he remembers an anger bigger than himself burning out into a weariness so sudden and deep that he’d swayed where he stood until Commander Holt caught him and steadied him.

“Look, it’s past eleven,” Commander Holt is saying when Keith has found his balance again and is standing, stupid with exhaustion. “Surely any further questions you have for him can wait for tomorrow.”

Iverson looks irritated and draws a breath to say something, but the General cuts across him before he can and says, “Yes, I think all of us could stand to let this rest for the night,” and Keith’s knees go weak with relief.

They’re all dismissed, then, and the General gets up to follow them to the door. Shiro is still outside the office, sitting in one of the chairs there, and he stands as they file out. He's looking at Commander Holt, a tired urgency in his face. The commander must make some answer; Keith doesn't see it, but Shiro's shoulders slump and his eyes shift to Keith.
He looks sad, Keith realizes, unable to look away, sad and sick and so tired. He wants to move, he wants to go stand with Shiro and lean into the warm space against his side until Shiro’s face lightens and the tired look goes away. But it’s his fault Shiro’s hurting, and Keith’s feet won’t budge.

“We’ll pick this up tomorrow, Captain,” the General is saying. “Fifteen-hundred hours, I’ve got a free hour before the ceremony.”

“Yes, sir,” answers Shiro, straightening, looking away from Keith. “I’ll be there. Thank you.”

“Good,” says the General, and points at Keith. “Get him to bed.”

There’s a soft pressure between Keith’s shoulder blades, Commander Holt’s voice murmuring quietly, “Come on, kiddo.”

“I’ll--” says Shiro, and stops, glancing between General Beck and Commander Holt. “I can-- I can take him, if that’s...”

There’s a heavy pause. Keith holds very still and stares at the stained tile beneath his feet, pricklingly aware of the looks being exchanged over his head. After a moment he feels Commander Holt’s hand fall away from his back and Shiro’s replace it, and he knows the negotiations are concluded.

“Let’s go, Keith,” says Shiro quietly, and then they’re moving.

They walk down the half-lit hallway toward the elevator. Shiro lifts his hand from Keith’s back to push the button, and he doesn’t put it back. Keith follows him into the elevator, feels the familiar swoop in his stomach as the descent begins, and watches the floor beneath his feet.

It’s not until they’re halfway to Keith’s room that Keith asks, not daring to look at Shiro, “Are you mad at me?”

Shiro inhales deeply and doesn’t answer for a moment. “I’m upset,” he admits.

“Oh,” whispers Keith.

“I don’t--” Shiro begins, and stops. “I understand why you did it,” he says, more deliberately. “I understand why you’d want to try, I’m-- I’m not surprised at all that you wanted to keep trying, I just--”

The silence is long enough this time that Keith steals a quick glance up at Shiro.

“I don’t understand,” says Shiro finally, “why you lied to me.”

Keith stops walking. His shoulders are tensing, pulling at the soreness from earlier in the evening (was it only this evening? It feels like weeks have passed; he feels like a different person, older and hollow). Shiro isn’t looking at him.

“I don’t understand why you shut me out,” Shiro says, and it’s only bewildered exhaustion in his voice, the hurt Keith had glimpsed earlier. “I wanted to-- I could have helped you, Keith, I would have-- I could have kept you from getting hurt. I thought…” He shakes his head. “Keith. Why did you lie to me?”

There’s an ugly pressure building in Keith’s throat. He swallows several times. “I didn't-- mean to,” he says, hoarsely.

“You didn't mean to?” Shiro repeats, his forehead furrowing up. “You lied… accidentally?”
“No, I--” Keith scrubs his hands over his face. He can't look at Shiro. “I didn’t-- I didn’t mean…”

Shiro waits a moment, then shakes his head again, spreading his hands. “You didn't mean... what, Keith?”

“I don’t--” says Keith, helplessly frustrated. He doesn't know how to say it, he doesn't know--but there's a difference between what he did and lying and he needs Shiro to see it. “I didn’t... think I was doing anything wrong.”

Shiro gives him a flat look at this. “No,” he says, and he doesn’t raise his voice but Keith cringes. “You knew you weren’t supposed to be in there. Didn’t you.”

Keith doesn’t know where to look. He crosses his arms over his stomach, realizes that might look like sass, and drops them to his sides again. “I--” he tries, and then he can’t speak at all, because it’s suddenly terribly clear how badly he’s messed up, how bad this looks. Every glance over his shoulder, every little guilty twinge that he pushed down and justified to himself comes welling back up, all at once. It’s like his perspective has shifted just slightly, like somebody’s come along and turned on the light, and suddenly the cumulative pile of tiny trespasses he’s acquired is huge and looming and unforgivable.

“If you didn’t know you were breaking the rules,” Shiro says relentlessly, still quiet, “there wouldn’t have been any reason for you to lie.”

“No,” says Keith, and he’s desperate now. “That’s not-- Shiro, I didn’t--” He flounders to explain, but he doesn’t know how; he doesn’t know how to communicate what this secret has been for him. “I wanted… to…”

Shiro waits.

Keith falters. He’s shaking and short of breath, trembling from his core, but he drags in air and hugs himself and doesn’t look at Shiro. “I wanted for you to be… I didn’t want anybody to see, I just wanted to… learn it, I wanted to see if I could, I wanted you to be--”

There’s silence. He doesn’t dare look up. At last he hears Shiro draw in a deep breath and let it out again, a tired, heavy sigh.

“Come on,” Shiro says.

They’re not far from Keith’s room, just a turn and another hallway. They walk it in silence. Shiro slows and stands to the side when they reach Keith’s door, and Keith moves slowly, reluctantly to punch in his access code.

He wants a hug. He wants a hug more than he ever knew he could. Shiro shifts his weight slightly, next to him, and Keith tenses: his body doesn’t know whether to expect pain or comfort, and for a moment he’s balanced precariously in the stillness between flight and longing.

Shiro doesn’t hug him. He puts his hand lightly on Keith’s shoulder and squeezes--and then the contact is falling away and Shiro is withdrawing and Keith is reeling.

“Shiro--” he blurts, and immediately wishes he hadn’t.

Shiro stops, looking back at him, startled. Something changes in his face, softens, and he turns back toward Keith. “C’mere,” he says quietly, and Keith finds himself gathered in for a moment, wrapped up tightly against a familiar heartbeat.
Keith shuts his eyes.

And then Shiro is releasing him and drawing back, and Keith is dizzy with the sudden loss. “We’ll talk later, okay?” Shiro asks, and Keith nods automatically, trying to blink away the blurriness in his vision.

Shiro puts his hand on Keith’s shoulder one more time, studying his face. Keith looks back, raising his hand without thinking to hold onto Shiro’s forearm. There’s a soft, sad intensity in Shiro’s eyes that terrifies him: it’s a look he’s seen before, on a different face, it’s a look that means goodbye--

Shiro’s hand squeezes gently and lets go.

Keith doesn’t move. He fixes his eyes on the floor beneath his feet and doesn’t-- doesn’t--listen to Shiro’s quietly departing footsteps. The keypad on his door has gone dark. He needs to re-enter his code, but he’s too numb to move. Before he can come back to himself enough to reach for it, though, the door whisks open.

“Keith?” asks Malone. He reaches out and pulls Keith into their room, leaning out to look down the hall. “Dude, what the hell, what happened?”

Keith’s legs carry him inside, but he slows and stops in the middle of the room. He’s so tired.

“...didn’t come back and I was worried, and then like an hour later Burns said you were meeting with Shiro and Iverson?” Malone is saying, shutting the door, turning on a lamp. “Is that where you’ve been this whole time? Why didn’t you answer your messages?”

There’s a pause. It dawns on Keith that he’s expected to fill it. He has no idea how.

Malone is circling him, coming around to get a look at his face. “Keith?” he asks again, and his voice goes gentler with uncertain concern. “Are you okay?”

Keith bursts into tears.

Chapter End Notes

a thousand grateful noises to itssiccia and werealldreaming and avidbeader and obsidianpearls, all of whom have put up with some degree of despairing flailing from me over this arc

it ain’t over yet, ladies and gentlemen
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It’s late when Shiro gets home.

He leaves the Garrison at the same time as Sam, but he pulls abruptly off the road halfway back and soars out into the desert alone instead of going straight to the apartment. He parks in the shadow of a mesa and climbs to sit cross-legged on the back of his bike, staring up at the endless stars.

This usually settles him, watching the immense stillness of the galaxy’s disk splashed across the sky in light and color. It reminds him of his place, of where he is and where he’s going, of all the mysteries left in the universe. Tonight it just makes him feel small.

He lets his eyes trace over the familiar points of light: Arcturus and Regulus and Spica in their triangle, the Lion and the Hydra hovering close. There’s a planet glimmering on the ecliptic plane; he doesn’t know which one. Jupiter, maybe, or Saturn. Probably Saturn, at this time of night, towing Enceladus in its orbit.

Shiro sighs and rubs his eyes.

He’s angry. Here and now, under the cool clarity of the desert sky, he can admit it--but the act of acknowledging it changes its shape, smooths down the jagged edges, breaks it into its components. He’s less angry than hurt; he’s less hurt than afraid. He’s less afraid than exhausted.

He stays where he is for a long time, until his right foot is all pins and needles and his tablet buzzes with a questioning message from Sam. He takes a deep breath of the chilly air and finally climbs back down to the bike’s seat.

Sam’s waiting for him when he gets back, sitting in the front room with his tablet. Shiro pauses guiltily in the doorway to kick off his shoes--it’s much later than the commander usually prefers to be awake--but there’s nothing in Sam’s face but empathy and concern.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Shiro says anyway, automatically. It’s hard to look at his mentor.

“You’re fine,” answers Sam. He stands as Shiro passes through the living room to the kitchen, twisting his torso from side to side to stretch out his back before following. “You okay?”

Shiro fills a glass at the sink, concentrating on the sloshing water. He has no idea how to answer. He shuts off the faucet and finally shrugs.

Sam’s hand claps down on his shoulder, squeezing gently, then falls away. “You want to sit and talk for a minute?”

“It’s late,” says Shiro dully.

Sam shrugs. He tips his head toward the living room in invitation and makes his way back to the couch. Shiro pauses for a moment, too tired to think straight, then looks down at his water and pushes off the counter to follow Sam.

The silence stretches, once they’re both seated. Shiro sinks into the corner of the short couch. There’s a stack of blankets folded up next to him, placed there earlier in anticipation of Keith coming home.
tomorrow. He looks at them without really seeing them.

“He didn’t do it to hurt you,” Sam says finally, softly.

Shiro stirs and looks away from the blankets, glancing up at Sam for a moment. “No, that’s--” he says, and rubs his eyes. “I-- I know.”

“He was ...devastated. When he learned there might be repercussions for you.”

Shiro thinks of Keith standing between him and the General’s desk, shouting and shaking and fighting to take the blame on himself. He nods distantly.

“He wants to make you proud.”

Shiro can feel his face twisting up. He sits forward to lean his elbows on his knees. “I am proud of him,” he says. “I’m so proud of him, it’s-- I’ve told him, so many times, why won’t he-- What do I have to do to get him to believe me? Why does he still think he has to--”

Sam is quiet in response. When Shiro finally looks up at him, he’s looking back with such compassionate sorrow that Shiro has to look away again hastily.

“You warned me about this,” he says after a moment, staring down at his water. He swallows and clears his throat. “When all this started.”

“Yes,” Sam agrees simply.

Shiro lets out a breath that shudders and rubs one hand over his face. “I have no idea what I’m doing, sir,” he whispers.

Sam doesn’t answer for a long moment. He sighs and shifts at last, moving to sit forward, mirroring Shiro. “You’ve done so well,” he says, and the gentleness in his voice fractures something in Shiro. “You’ve helped him so much, you’ve given him so much more than anybody could have ever asked.”

Shiro inhales shakily.

Sam waits another moment. “Shiro,” he says softly. “You’ve taken on so much responsibility with him, more than anybody ever expected. If you need… if you need to take a step back, it’s okay. He’ll be cared for. You’ve brought so much good into his life. You won’t have let him down.”

Shiro recoils, raising his head to stare at the commander.

“I don’t--” he starts. “What are you-- what are you saying?”

“I’m saying,” says Sam, meeting Shiro’s eyes, steady and even, “it’s okay to be overwhelmed. You’re still a teenager, and this role you’ve taken on-- it would make somebody ten years older think twice.” He pauses. “It’s okay if you need to let go of some of that responsibility, Shiro. Nobody will think any less of you.”

Shiro sits back. He doesn’t know where to look. The suggestion makes a heavy, nauseous tightness rise in his throat-- but he’s so tired. He’s tired, and he fucked up with Keith, again, and the uncertainty is suddenly crushing.

Somebody with more experience would have realized when Keith started sneaking off to the simulator, would have read his bruises correctly. Somebody with more experience wouldn’t have let
him get their code in the first place.

Somebody with more experience, something whispers in the back of his mind, would know how to make Keith understand that he doesn’t need to keep trying to prove himself.

He rubs an unsteady hand over his mouth. “Um,” he whispers.

“It’s not a decision you have to make tonight,” Sam says gently. “Sleep on it. But know that you have options.”

Shiro nods quickly. He can’t bring himself to look at Sam, and he keeps his eyes on the water in his glass as the commander gets up and circles around behind the couch on the way out of the living room.

“Whatever you decide to do,” Sam says, and rests his hand on Shiro’s shoulder for a moment, “I’ll support you.”

“Thank you, sir,” Shiro whispers.

Sam squeezes Shiro’s shoulder and lets his hand fall away, turning to go.

Shiro hesitates, indecisive, then blurs, “Sam--”

Sam waits.

“They won’t…” Shiro gets to his feet, turning to face Sam. “Enceladus, he was flying Enceladus, they won’t… right? They won’t cut him loose.”

There’s a plea in his voice that he can’t quite shut down, but he needs to know--

Sam sighs and rubs the back of his neck. The bottom falls out of Shiro’s lungs.

“Commander Iverson is pretty sure Keith found a way to cheat the scenario,” Sam says bluntly. Shiro draws in a breath, his weight shifting automatically forward, and Sam raises a hand to forestall his protests. “No,” he says evenly, “no, I know. But they’re going to be looking at it very closely.”

“Keith didn’t cheat,” Shiro says anyway, firm and certain. “That’s not how he goes at things. Even if he had the resources, that’s not-- He didn’t cheat.”

“They’re going to be looking at the logs,” Sam says. “If they find that he flew it the way he says…” He inhales and blows out the breath again, raising his eyebrows. “Then we’ve got something interesting on our hands.”

“And they won’t cut him loose,” Shiro pushes.

Sam hesitates. “I would be very surprised.”

Shiro can breathe again. “And… if they decide he cheated?”

Sam doesn’t say anything for a moment. He rubs his hand over his mouth. “I don’t know what’s going to happen,” he says frankly. “I do know that speculation won’t do us any good.”

Something tightens in Shiro’s throat, a heavy, icy stillness filling his chest. He swallows and nods.

“Go to bed, Shiro,” the commander says, and Shiro recognizes by the authority in his tone that it’s an order. “We’ll know more tomorrow.”
Shiro nods again. He can’t look at Sam.

Sam pauses. He sighs, then comes around the couch, and before Shiro’s entirely realized what’s happening he finds himself wrapped in a tight hug by his CO.

“Whatever happens tomorrow,” Sam says quietly, releasing him. “Whatever they decide to do, whatever you decide to do, it’s going to be okay. It’s going to work out. Alright?”

There’s no way this is anything more than an empty promise, but Shiro finds himself latching onto it desperately. He nods.

Sam’s hand settles on the nape of his neck for a moment and squeezes, warm and grounding. “Go get some sleep, kid.”

“Yes, sir.”

Keith does not sleep well.

Malone does his best to comfort him, but though he means well he’s clumsy at it. He sits on the edge of Keith’s bed and tries to get him to talk, but Keith curls up with his back to the room and buries his face in his pillow until Malone finally gives up and goes back to his own bed.

It’s a long night, after that. Keith cries for a while, silently so Malone will leave him alone, but even after the tears have run out he can’t find sleep. He lies still, hugging his pillow and keeping his eyes tightly shut, but his thoughts refuse to quiet.

He doesn’t know where the day’s events have left him.

Yesterday when he’d gone to bed, his mind had been spinning pleasantly with the strange new certainty of his place, both here in the Garrison and under Shiro’s love and protection. He’d gone to bed thinking with giddy anticipation of the summer, of mornings and evenings and weekends with Shiro, milkshakes and dogs and books about space.

Tonight all of that is gone.

He doesn’t know if he’s still going home with Shiro tomorrow. He doubts it.

He doesn’t know if he’s going to be allowed to stay at the Garrison.

He doubts it.

He doesn’t know what time it is when he finally drifts off, but it seems like it’s been only minutes when he wakes up, groggy and disoriented, to the sound of the bell for the first group’s breakfast. It takes a moment for everything to catch up, for him to sort through what’s real and what isn’t—and then he pulls his blankets over his head and his knees up to his chest.

“Keith,” says Malone when fifteen minutes have passed and Keith hasn’t moved. “Come on, man, you’re gonna be late for breakfast.”

“I’m not very hungry,” mumbles Keith, and makes an unhappy noise when Malone tugs at his blanket. “No don’t, stop it--”

Malone stops. “You’ll get written up,” he points out.
“It’s the last day,” says Keith wearily. “What are they gonna do.”

He hears Malone sigh. “Come on, dude, just-- put on some clothes and come to breakfast. It’s a weird day, you’re not gonna know the schedule if you don’t go.”

Commencement today, Keith thinks dully. Shiro’s making a speech. And then everybody’s going home with their parents for the summer. And Keith is going… somewhere.

“I’ll figure it out,” he says, and pulls the blanket more tightly around his head. He just wants to stay here where it’s familiar, just for a little while longer.

“You know they’re not gonna let you just skip,” says Malone. “You know somebody’s gonna come get you and make you go. Iverson or somebody.”

Fuck Iverson, thinks Keith, but the thought of being pulled along down the hallway again by the man’s big hand is enough to get his heart racing. He sits up reluctantly.

Malone doesn’t comment, to Keith’s relief, but he does go to Keith’s closet and pull out his uniform for him. Keith squints and rubs his eyes: he doesn’t remember hanging it up last night, which means-Malone must have picked it up from where he dropped it and hung it up so it would be ready for him today. Embarrassment tugs at him, but he can’t bring himself to care enough.

“Thanks,” he mumbles.

“’S no problem,” says Malone. “You up?”

“Yeah,” says Keith. “I’m up.”

“Okay,” Malone says. “I’m coming back for you if you’re not in the line in ten minutes.”

“Fine,” mumbles Keith.

Malone pauses for a moment, like he wants to say something else, but he finally just nods and steps out into the hallway, the door swishing shut again behind him.

Keith sits for another minute, then reaches for his tablet. There’s unread messages, and his heart leaps--

How was your day?

He stares at the message from Shiro for a moment, utterly confused--and then sees the timestamp. It must have come while he was still in the simulator last night, or maybe just after he got out. Either way, it’s old.

There’s no message from Shiro since last night.

He could send a message, he thinks. Just a short one to apologize, to see if Shiro’s still mad. He’s tapping the messaging field before he’s even thought about it--but then he’s staring at the empty window, and he doesn’t have any idea what to say.

He closes the window.

The other messages are from Malone, also from last night:

hey there’s ice cream sandwiches in the mess when you get out where are you
seriously i’m not trying to mom you or anything but can you let me know you’re okay
--missed call--
ok if i haven’t heard from you in ten minutes i’m calling the cavalry

Keith rubs his eyes and sighs, turning off the tablet.

Burns gives them a quick rundown of the day’s schedule at breakfast, standing up at the front of the hall and speaking loud to be heard. Keith doesn’t really register most of it--he feels bad, a little bit, because it’s Burns --but halfway through every tablet in the mess hall buzzes with a received copy of the day’s events.

He opens it and scrolls through absently. The schedule looks full at first, but he realizes that most of it-- 2:00-3:00: Presentation to Parents of Cadets; 2:15: Graduating Cadets to L1-30 --doesn’t apply to him. There’s several hours in the afternoon labeled Move Out and Clean Dormitory. Keith doesn’t think it’ll take that long. He takes note of what he needs to be present for-- 3:45: All Cadets to Auditorium for Commencement; 4:00: Commencement Ceremony; 5:30: Dinner on Launch Deck -- and forgets everything else.

Everybody’s eating and talking, and he sinks into the familiar sensation of being a single isolated pocket of silence in the flow of conversation. It’s more profound this time than it’s ever been before. It’s hard already to remember what the Garrison was like before Shiro, but he doesn’t remember the loneliness hurting so much. He looks up at the camera, just in case--but the light to indicate activity is dark. Nobody’s watching.

He pushes his food from one side of the tray to the other, makes himself eat enough that he won’t get a write-up, and then files out with the rest.

Back in his dorm, he watches Malone dismantle his side of the room. He has a lot more stuff to pack up than Keith: posters, printed photos of his family and friends, books, gadgets with no discernable purpose other than to look cool, a single giant plush stuffed animal that sits proudly on the top of his shelf. It’s a strange feeling, watching familiarity dissolve into the impersonal blankness of a standard uninhabited dorm, and Keith abruptly needs to get out.

He finds his way to the library and hides there until lunch, then goes back to his room afterward. It’s empty, except for his own small handful of possessions: Malone and all his belongings are gone. Keith sits down heavily on the edge of his bed. Then he gets up and goes to the closet to retrieve his backpack.

He’s not sure if he should keep the clothes from Colleen Holt. He considers, briefly, messaging her to ask--but he thinks of explaining to her everything that has gone so horribly wrong, and he can’t. He hesitates, then carefully chooses his favorites from the drawer. She’ll forgive him, he thinks.

Keith is good at packing. He knows how to roll garments tightly to conserve space, he knows to put them in the long way so that he can see and find what he needs from the top, he knows to put socks and underwear in last so he doesn’t have to dig. He has a mesh bag ready to keep dirty things separate, his toothbrush and soap zipped into the front pocket. The file with the paper copies of his keep these with you documents is tucked securely behind it all.

Shiro’s brown blanket is still folded up at the end of his bed where he left it before breakfast. Keith stares at it for a long moment, then breathes in deeply and rolls it up too, securing it with a belt for easier carrying.

And that’s all. That’s everything.
There’s still hand-me-downs in the dresser, but he doesn’t know what to do with them. He doesn’t have room for them in his backpack. He remembers abruptly that his tablet is not *his*, that he’ll have to turn it in when he leaves, and his heart lurches and hammers with the mistake he almost made. He searches until he finds a piece of paper, then painstakingly copies down all six contact codes saved in his tablet.

Malone, Commander Holt and Colleen and Matt, Sergeant Burns. Shiro.

It’s a short list. It doesn’t take up much room on the paper. Keith folds it carefully and tucks it into a side pocket of his backpack, then stands back to survey his work with a sort of bleak satisfaction. He still doesn’t know what they’re going to do with him, or when, or how, but he’s as prepared now as he can possibly be.

It’s only a little after 2:00. There’s still almost two hours before he has anywhere to be. He sits down on his bed, and after a moment he curls up on his side on top of the covers.

His stomach hurts. His whole body aches. He lies still and stares at the blank wall across the room, and he listens to the distant din of five hundred cadets moving out.

He needs to find Shiro and apologize.

The decision creeps up on him slowly, as if it’s always been there. He could send the apology on his tablet in a message--but something about that feels too safe, too artificial: he needs to say the words aloud. And, maybe selfishly, he wants to see Shiro's face, he needs to know how it's received. If Shiro hates him now, Keith wants to know.

(He needs to know what's going to happen.)

Shiro’s meeting with the General at 1500 hours. It takes Keith a moment to make the translation to normal time, and then he sits up abruptly. 3:00, that’s 3:00, and Shiro will be early because he’s *Shiro* and he’s always early, and it’s past 2:40 now and Keith has to get all the way down to the front gate if he wants to catch Shiro first--

He scrambles.

The halls are crowded. Keith has to dodge piles of haphazardly packed belongings, groups of cadets standing and talking, cadets hugging, cadets’ *families* hugging. When he reaches the front gate, it’s almost as wild: loud, full of people milling back and forth, shouting at each other across the courtyard, carrying suitcases and pillows.

Keith stands for a moment in the middle of the chaos, turning in place helplessly. There’s so many people, and none of them familiar. He has no idea how he’s going to find Shiro in all this--but there, just a glimpse between shifting bodies: a broad set of shoulders in uniform, a buzzed short haircut.

He hurries after him, skirting luggage piles and pushing through clumps of people. “Shiro!” he calls. “Shiro, wait- -”

The man turns. It isn’t Shiro.

Keith recoils slightly, startled, and salutes by reflex.

“...Can I help you, cadet?” the man asks.

“Um,” says Keith. He doesn’t know where to look. “I thought you were-- um, I’m looking for-- for Captain Shirogane?”
The man gives him a rather doubtful once-over, and Keith shrinks. “He came through about ten
minutes ago,” the man says. “You can go talk to the secretary for the junior officers and he can set up
a meeting. Good luck catching him today, though.”

“Yes, sir,” says Keith, feeling a little like the breath has been knocked out of him. “Thank you, sir.” He
salutes again, and the officer turns away.

He’s too late. Shiro’s probably already upstairs in the General’s office by now. Keith doesn’t move
for a moment, his hand tight around his tablet, then he turns to go back inside. He can meet Shiro on
his way out of the meeting, anyway; he can wait.

The hallways get darker and quieter as he gets away from the dormitory wings. It’s a strange feeling,
passing empty classrooms and seeing the rows of dimly-lit desks through the windows, hearing his
own footsteps echo. He takes the turn to the administrative wing, reaches for the doorknob to enter
the office suite, then stops cold: Beck is on the other side of the glass door, sitting at somebody’s
unoccupied desk with his feet up. Paschel is there too, rummaging through a candy dish; Ricketts is
playing a game on his tablet.

They look unsupervised. They look bored.

Keith releases the doorknob and backs away.

He walks quickly, taking the first turn in the hallway he reaches, and he doesn’t stop until he’s turned
two more corners. His heart is racing and his hands are cold, but when he finally slows and stops and
listens, there’s no sound of pursuit. He breathes out shakily and lets his shoulders sag, then considers
what to do.

His tablet is still in his hand. He looks down at it, biting his lip, then sighs and opens the app to
message Shiro. Typing takes a while, still; he has to search for each letter, but he carefully writes:

can we talk when you get

There’s a sound, a sudden scuff of footsteps and rustling uniforms. Keith’s head jerks up in alarm,
his already whirling to run--but somebody hits his hand from underneath, hard, and his tablet goes
flying.

“Hey, buddy,” says Ricketts pleasantly, and wraps an arm around Keith in a dangerous parody of a
hug. “Whatcha doin’?”

Chapter End Notes

*saunters*

ineverywordandsong#9463 on discord, come yell about voltron with me
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

Content warning in this chapter for onscreen bullying! If you think this might be a trigger for you, or if you want more details, give me a yell here and I'll do whatever I can to make it a safe reading experience for you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Keith holds very still. He can feel his body tensing, his knees bending slightly to lower his center of gravity, adrenaline trembling through every single limb. They’re here, all three of them: Beck is bending to pick up his tablet, Paschel is following him. Keith stares at the ground to keep them all in the corner of his eye, and he thinks.

There’s a camera in this hall, he’s pretty sure. He risks a quick look: it’s there, at the far end of the hallway. He can’t tell where its blind spot is--but if he had to guess, the space against the wall underneath it looks likely. They’re within its field of vision.

But nobody’s watching, something whispers in the back of his mind. The activity light is dark. Nobody will come to help him. And if they’re bored enough they might not care about the camera.

Keith breathes deeply and takes the band of Shiro’s bracelet between his fingers, and he waits.

“Who’s he messaging?” Paschel asks, peering over Beck’s shoulder.

Beck is scrolling through Keith’s messages with Shiro, his face lit up with laughter. “Captain Shirogane, I think,” he says. “It says can we talk, haaa, oh man.”

Don’t, Keith thinks to himself, and then promptly disregards his own advice and shoves hard at Ricketts. The older boy grunts and gives way, but an instant later Keith’s right arm is being twisted painfully up behind his back. He gasps and folds automatically at the waist to ease the pressure. He’s lost hold of the bracelet.

“They were fighting last night,” Paschel says conversationally. “In the hallway outside my room, I heard them. It was hilarious, he was all--” She waves her arms and pitches her voice high. “Shiro I’m sorry I didn’t mean to please don’t leave Shiro I love you.”

There’s a pause. Then Beck and Ricketts are snickering, and Keith’s ears are roaring with helpless fury.

“Give that back,” he snarls, and lunges forward, ignoring the pain in his arm. “That’s mine, give it back!”

“Yeah, or what,” says Beck, not even looking up from the screen of Keith’s tablet. “He’s not coming, he’s in talking to my uncle right now. He’s probably like, hi sir this fucking kid keeps bothering me, can you make him go away?”

“Oh, man,” says Paschel, laughing. “Oh man, that’s not even a joke. You should have heard them last night, he was pissed. What did you even do, Kogane?”
“Fuck you,” Keith gasps, and aims a hard kick at Rickett’s shins behind him. There’s a sharp intake of breath as his heel connects, and a stagger, and the hold on his arm loosens enough that Keith can twist free. He launches himself at Beck.

Beck has time to look up over the top of his tablet, startled, and then Keith is on him, punching and kicking and wrestling for control of the tablet. Beck wrenches it free and throws it to Ricketts, and Keith pulls back and turns to follow it—but then Beck has caught him by the back of his uniform collar and is pulling--

Keith coughs and gags, scrabbling frantically at the constriction around his throat. Beck is tugging him backwards, off-balance; his knees are bent, he has no leverage.

“Give me that,” Paschel is saying. Keith watches, the edges of his vision glittering ominously, as she takes the tablet from Ricketts. She looks down at it for a moment, scrolling and reading, her expression inscrutable. Then she drops it on the floor and positions the heel of her shoe over the screen.

“Nnng--” Keith wheezes, and thrashes, kicking backward at Beck.

“Whoops,” says Paschel blithely, and the screen crunches under her foot.

Keith stares. Then his vision all but whites out with rage. He rams his shoulders back into Beck’s chest, feels Beck’s breath huff out past his ear as they slam into the wall. The grip on his collar goes slack, enough that he can twist and swing his fist, hard, into Beck’s face. He draws back to punch again—but somebody catches him by the arm and yanks, and suddenly he’s stumbling almost-airborne in a wide arc that ends with a blunt, sickening impact with the wall.

He goes down. He doesn’t really remember falling, but a moment later he’s blinking in a ragdoll heap on the ground, trying to sort out his limbs and remember how his lungs work.

Paschel is standing over him when he can focus again. “You’re going to be in so much trouble for that,” she says. Ricketts is behind her with Beck, and Keith gets a glimpse of blood on Beck’s face.

Keith pushes himself to his hands and knees. Breathing hurts. “’Mnot,” he manages in a croak, and gets painfully to his feet. “Camera.”

“That camera doesn’t work, dumbass,” spits Beck, pushing forward. There’s quite a lot of blood on his face, streaming down from his nose to his mouth and smeared on his cheek. He looks murderous.

Keith falters. He spares a glance for the security camera as Beck advances on him—and then he’s drawing on reserves he didn’t think he still had, breaking into a stumbling sprint for the closest end of the hall.

They follow him, unhurried, and Keith fumbles for the band of his bracelet: shortshortshort, long, long, shortshortshort. Nothing happens, and his next breath tangles with a sob. But the mess hall is ahead, and he knows that camera works. He’ll be safe, if he can just make it around the next corner.

He turns the corner.

His heart plummets.

The mess hall is closed. There’s a metal gate drawn down over the wide doorway. He can see the padlock from here.

They’re closing in behind him, and with the mess closed the hallway is a dead end. Keith staggers to
the gate and rattles it desperately. It’s loud, encouragingly so: somebody has to hear. But behind him
the pursuing footsteps have picked up, and his throat closes with terror.

Keith drags in a breath and shouts through the gate into the empty hall with everything he has:
“Help! Help me, help me!”

Then there are hands, tight on his clothes, his arms, his hair, dragging him back. He struggles, lands a
solid blow with his elbow, and screams, “Shiro!”

“Shit!” somebody says, and there’s a hand over his mouth. He bites it, hard, and tastes blood:
somebody yells in pain, and Keith inhales to scream again--

--and the breath escapes on a reedy whimper, because somebody’s gripped him by the ear and is
twisting and he can’t--

“In here,” somebody else is saying, urgent and hushed, and there’s the soft beep of a keypad. There’s
an elbow hooked around Keith’s throat, somebody is marching him forward. “Get in here, get in
here--”

The grip on Keith’s ear tugs, fingernails digging in behind the shell in searing points of agony. He’s
panting in quick shallow gasps, his vision gone too dark and too bright all at once; his whole world
has narrowed to the pain, and all he can do is rise up onto his tiptoes to try to ease the strain,
clutching at the wrist of the hand hurting him.

“Sto-o…” he manages, the word distorting into a wheezing whine. “St…”

The door they squeeze through leads to a dark room full of dim blocky shapes; the way every sound
seems amplified suggests a large space. The grip on his ear eases slightly, the pain ebbing. His eyes
adjust to the low light, and he can focus enough to see that they're in the Garrison's enormous
kitchen, dark and empty now until the morning. Keith takes a breath to scream again, but there’s
another vicious twist, and his knees buckle. The arm over his throat lifts, a hand covering his mouth
again, and this time he doesn’t try to bite.

“Somebody’s coming,” hisses Ricketts, by the door. Keith can see his face lit in profile by the thin
rectangular window to the hall. “Somebody’s coming, get back, get back!”

“In here,” says Beck, and there’s a strange noise, a sort of sucking and the sound of rushing air.
“Come on, hurry--”

There’s another scramble. Somebody takes Keith by the arm and pulls him into a space even darker
than the outside room, a closet, a storeroom, he can’t tell. They're met by a breathtaking blast of cold
air and Keith flinches back automatically. The movement jars the grip on his ear and the pain tips
over an invisible threshold: his entire body goes rigid, and a frantic, wounded noise squeezes out of
him just as the door shuts behind them with a dull thud.

The person covering his mouth gives him a little shake. “If you do not shut the fuck up,” Paschel
hisses in his ear, “I will rip your entire ear off, I swear to god.”

“Jesus, Candice,” whispers somebody by the door.

“Do you want to get caught?” she whispers back furiously. “We can’t all rely on nepotism here.”

“I didn’t say I was objecting--”

“You guys want to shut up, maybe?”
Silence falls. The sound of rushing air fills the small space, a breeze stirring Keith’s hair and blowing full in his face, and the cold begins to reach him through the sharp urgent throbbing in his ear. It’s not pleasant, but it is brisk, and his head begins to clear from the dull gray fog of pain and panic. He breathes in, deliberate and deep, and in the respite he silently considers his options.

He has both his hands and both his feet free.

He has the darkness. He could cause a lot of confusion if he just started hitting and kicking. He could make a lot of noise. By the sounds of breathing, nobody’s very far apart.

Paschel still has an agonizingly tight grip on his ear. There are still three of them and one of him. Nobody outside knows where he is, nobody’s going to realize he’s missing for at least an hour. It’ll be longer, probably, before anybody thinks to look for him. If they’re all four still missing, that might speed things up, but Keith doesn’t think he wants to take that chance.

Keith takes one more deep breath, shifts his weight onto one foot, and feels backward carefully for Paschel’s shoe. Then, simultaneously, he stomps down as hard as he can on her foot and rams his elbow into her stomach.

Paschel lets out a hurt, winded noise, and Keith’s gut flips—but her grip on his ear has slipped and she’s tearing at his hair instead. He hits out at her again before she can get a good hold and twists away, and then everything is chaos.

He was right when he guessed that it was a small space: wherever he strikes or kicks he finds yielding human limbs, gasps and grunts of impact. He’s crowded up once against some kind of shelf, all cold metal and cardboard, something that feels unpleasantly damp and cool, even in the chilly room. He shoves out frantically and fights toward where he thinks the door is.

Somebody turns on a tablet screen.

Keith finds himself staring directly up into Beck’s face.

Beck grins at him, all satisfaction and malice. There’s blood still smeared across his cheek and under his nose, staining his teeth, and it transforms his face into a nightmare mask in the dim blue light. Then, in one smooth movement, he sweeps Keith’s feet out from underneath him and kicks him hard in the stomach.

In the dazed moments that follow, there is quite a lot more pain. Keith curls into himself as well as he can, brings his arms up to protect his head, and waits for it to be over. He loses track for a little while: the confusion and chaos is more than he can process and it’s not ending, he’s lost, he’s given up and stopped fighting back but they’re not stopping, they’re not stopping--

“...gonna need to figure out our stories before we go back. Shit.”

“...bit me, look at this…”

“Josh’s face is all fucked up too--”

“Can we figure out what we’re doing, please? It’s cold in here.”

Keith comes back to himself slowly. He’s still half-curled, one arm trapped beneath him, his cheek pressed against the floor. The floor beneath him is icy, gritty metal, and he can feel the warmth seeping out of his body. There’s danger pressing like a physical weight on all sides: he keeps his
eyes shut and doesn’t move.

“Okay.” That’s Paschel, standing somewhere by his feet. “Here’s what we do. We say we got bored waiting for your uncle in the office and we went out to play hide and seek.”

“Seriously?” says Beck. “Hide and seek.”

“Got a better idea?” Paschel flares. There’s silence for a moment and she continues, “We got bored, we went out to burn off some energy.”

“We’ll get in trouble,” says Ricketts, directly in front of Keith. He sounds oddly subdued.

“Not that much. Everybody’s in a good mood today, we’ll be fine.”

“What do we do about this?” asks Beck, and Keith flinches as something nudges him in the small of his back.

There’s a long pause, and Keith holds his breath. “We leave him here,” says Paschel finally. “Somebody will find him eventually. We just say he wanted to play too and he hid too well and we forgot about him.”

“Fuck’s sake, Candice,” says Ricketts wearily. “He’s all beat up.”

Paschel pauses again. “Okay, so… we still leave him here, and we say we don’t have any idea what happened. We’re okay on cameras, right, Josh?”

Beck hums. “There’s one in the offices that might have us all leaving, but it won’t have Kogane. Other than that we’re good.”

“We can’t leave him in here,” says Ricketts. “It’s too cold. He’ll freeze.”

“Dude,” says Paschel irritably. “Look at the display on the wall. What does that say.”

There’s a pause. “Thirty-eight.”

“What’s freezing, Bill Nye?”

“It’s still—”

“It’s fine,” says Beck. “It’s above freezing, it’s fine.”

Ricketts is silent for another moment. “I don’t like this,” he finally says in a low voice.

“You’re part of this,” says Paschel, her voice suddenly hard. “You’ve got teeth marks on your hand to prove it. If we go down for this, you’re going down with us.”

“You got us caught last time,” says Beck. “I told you to keep your head down and what do you do? Look straight at the camera like you’re on a bad reality show.”

“I just—”

“We’re gonna go up to the roof for a while,” interrupts Paschel. “That’s our alibi. We were up throwing things at people in the yard. If we get caught at it there’s a record to back us up.”

“And they won’t find Kogane until we’re gone,” Beck finishes. “Good, yeah. Nobody’ll miss him, right?”
“Nah,” says Paschel, snorting. “Shirogane's done with him. They'll figure it out after everybody's gone home, it'll be fine.”

Keith doesn't dare move. The words punch the air out of him. She doesn’t know what she's talking about, he tells himself fiercely, but Shiro’s bracelet hadn’t responded--

“So we're cool,” says Beck. “As long as nobody gets a look at my face. Fuck.”

“Bathroom across the hall,” Paschel says. “You two can get cleaned up. Cool?”

There's a pause. Then Beck says, more insistently, “Peter. Are we cool?”

Keith can hear Ricketts shifting his weight, the slight movement of his shoes on the floor in front of Keith's face. “Yeah,” he hears him say finally. “We're cool.”

“Then let's go.”

Keith fights the urge to curl more tightly into himself as they step over and around him. He hears the door open, feels a brief wash of warm air from outside--and then it’s closed again, and it’s just him and the incessant hum of the fan, alone in the darkness.

Everything hurts. He takes his time, taking stock of the sore places demanding his attention. His stomach is the worst, a visceral ache that shifts between nausea and something keener depending on his position, and he curls an arm around it protectively. There's an ache in his ribs, too: he vaguely remembers a kick to his side. He breathes in, slow and cautious, pushing tentatively at the inside of his rib cage with his lungs--and there it is, a sharp warning pain that means stop. The breath shudders out of his lungs in a rush.

He stays where he is, holding his stomach, breathing shallowly. It's cold, it's so cold, but his heart is pounding and they might still be outside and he doesn’t dare move. There’s a strange rattling sound from the door, like somebody’s pulling at the handle and about to come back inside, and his whole body jerks in a flinch.

But nothing happens. The door stays shut.

Time passes. The fan cycles and stills, and the air stills with it, and Keith is shivering so badly he can barely breathe.

When the cold has soaked in too deep to tolerate, he gingerly uncurls--discovering a whole host of new hurts as he does so--and crawls. It’s pitch black and he doesn’t trust his balance, but his groping hand finds the cold metal of a shelf. He hauls himself up from hands and knees and steadies himself, then makes his slow, aching way along the shelf toward the door. There's no knob or handle, just a flat expanse of cold metal and a seam, and he flattens his hand against it to push.

He stops there. He shuts his eyes and swallows, feeling his face twist. He’s shaking, and it’s not all from cold. If they’re still out there--

The fan cycles back on. Keith grits his teeth and shoves to open the door.

His heart stops for a moment. Then it starts up again, hammering hard and sick and slow.

He shoves again, harder. He backs up a step and rams into the door with his entire left side and it hurts but he barely notices through the panic roaring in his ears because he can’t get out, he can’t get
“Open the door!” he shouts, and his voice cracks with desperation. “Open the door, open the fucking door!”

He gropes over the door and its sides blindly again, searching for a latch, an emergency lever, something; he finds hinges and pries at them frantically with his fingernails, then backs up again and kicks at the door as hard as he can.

“Let me out!” he screams, and then he’s pounding at the door with his fists and feet, throwing himself against it with a frenzied disregard for the nauseating jolt that every impact sends through his body, crying--

There’s no answer.

Nobody’s coming.

He sinks down, hunching over his knees, and huddles there. The cold air is catching in his lungs; every breath wakens the sharp, stabbing pain in his bruised ribs. He has the strangest feeling that he’s split into two parts, that one half of him is watching the other from somewhere else, from sometime else, while the first half crouches in the unbroken darkness and whimpers and shivers and hurts.

He’s getting the lightheaded feeling that means he’s breathing too quickly, and almost automatically he forces himself into the rhythm that Shiro taught him: in deep, pause, out slow; in deep, pause, out slow. It doesn’t do much. The sense of helplessness and danger is too present, and every time he starts to find some kind of equilibrium the cold pulls him back.

Still, it makes him think of Shiro.

It makes him remember the bracelet still on his wrist.

He clenches his fingers around the familiar suede band. It hadn’t worked earlier, when he was running, but maybe the jostling confused it. Shortshortshort, he thinks, long, long, shortshortshort--

No. Wait. Wrong.

Three of each, bud.

He’d gotten the signal wrong. He’d gotten it wrong, that was all, he’d mixed up a letter. He sags against the door, the relief pouring over him in a warming wave, and twines his fingers with the band to resend the signal.

shortshortshort, long, long, long, shortshortshort

Nothing happens.

The bracelet is supposed to buzz after a successful signal, he knows that from their tests. They haven’t tested it for a few weeks now, maybe-- maybe the charge ran out? But no, it charges with the same wireless plugin as his tablet, and his tablet is fine--

shortshortshort, long, long, long, shortshortshort

There’s nothing, no vibration, nothing. Maybe it got banged up in the fight and broken--but it feels whole under his fingers, and it’s--Shiro told him people in the military use these so they’re tough, they’re practically unbreakable--
He shifts his fingers on the band in case it’s just a dead spot and tries again:

短短短，长，长，长，短短短

Nothing.

Keith is gasping again. He can feel tears streaming, first hot then icy. Everything hurts, there's cramps beginning up his forearms from the steadily deepening ache in his cold hands, there's an ache in his chest that he can't identify, there's throbs and twinges and tiny stabbing sparks of pain—-but nothing hurts so badly as the sudden certain awareness that he is completely alone.

Shirogane’s done with him.

“No,” he hears himself say, and then again, and again. “No, no no no, no please--”

短短短，长，长，长，短短短

短短短，长，长，长，短短短

短短短...

Chapter End Notes

just gonna

drop this here

and run away

sup guys
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Shiro is eighteen minutes early for his meeting.

He’s been back and forth between the apartment and the Garrison all day already: driving Matt up early, coming back so Sam will have the car; riding back with Sam an hour later to help direct setup for the ceremony, catching a shuttle back to the apartment so he can eat some late lunch and get into dress uniform. He’s tired, with the nauseous stressed-out kind of exhaustion that feels almost like hunger, and the early half of the day passes in a crawl.

Alone in the bathroom, he bends over the sink to splash his face with cold water, then straightens to run a comb through his hair. There’s dark circles under his eyes that the icy water has done nothing to dispel. He looks pale and nervous and young in the filtered afternoon light; he looks out of place in the dress uniform, like a kid playing dress-up. He stares at his washed-out reflection in the mirror, then rubs his eyes and turns to leave.

He can’t look at the pile of blankets on Keith’s couch on the way out the door.

The 2:30 shuttle from the town to the Garrison is crowded, full of people riding in for commencement, parents and siblings of cadets, grandparents and neighbors and friends. One old man, his balding head gleaming with sweat from the desert heat, gives the bars on Shiro’s uniform a long doubtful look and turns to say something to his wife. Shiro keeps his face carefully impassive and sets his feet against the jostling of the ride.

Once inside the gates, he makes his way straight to the administrative wing without stopping. There’s nobody in the main suite as he passes through, at least, except a handful of cadets. He checks in with the General’s secretary and sits down to wait, straight-backed, on the bench facing the door.

He breathes.

The apprehension sits heavy. There’s been no word to either Shiro or Sam all day, no messages, no calls. Shiro has no idea what is waiting for him on the other side of the door: he doesn’t know if they’ve analyzed Keith’s logs yet, he doesn’t know if he’ll be given the choice to remain Keith’s mentor or if they’ve already got somebody else lined up.

He doesn’t know what he’ll say if he’s given the choice.

Sam’s words last night cycle through his head, over and over again, a corrupted audio file. He doesn’t know what they mean; he can’t tell if the commander was encouraging him to step back or not. He thinks— he thinks no. Sam isn’t the sort to approach something indirectly like that. Sam said he would support whatever Shiro chose, if he was given a choice, and Shiro believes him.

But the idea of a more experienced mentor for Keith keeps tugging at him: somebody older, somebody who maybe has kids of their own and isn’t a teenager, somebody who knows what they’re doing. Keith deserves more than what Shiro has to give him, he deserves stability and confidence and structure.

His tablet buzzes in his pocket. It’s just a mass message to the set-up crew, something about parking for the catering trucks, but Shiro finds himself switching apps, scrolling through pictures and short videos from the last two months: Keith in the simulator, concentrating fiercely; Keith sitting at the
Island at home doing his homework, completely unaware of his chocolate milkshake moustache; Keith at the dog shelter with stars in his eyes, gently petting the beautiful retriever whose trust he’d won after three visits and almost five painstaking hours of sitting patient and motionless on the chilly floor.

And there, further up in the timeline: the two of them asleep in the corner of the couch, Keith’s head resting on Shiro’s chest, Shiro’s arm around Keith’s shoulders.

“He’s ready for you, Captain,” says the General’s secretary, and Shiro starts.

“Thank you,” he says to the young man behind the desk. He turns off his tablet and slips it into his pocket. Then he takes a deep breath in a vain attempt to steady himself, and steps through the door as it opens for him.

The General is alone in the office, which is both a surprise and a relief. He seats Shiro immediately, which is another--but then he leaves Shiro sitting there while he scrolls on the screen in front of him, frowning heavily. Shiro sits ramrod-straight, his hands on his knees, and tries to ignore the uncomfortable tugging of his dress uniform across his shoulders.

“You can relax, Captain,” General Beck says without looking up from the screen. “I didn't bring you here to bust your balls.”

Shiro swallows. The tight anxious feeling in his chest eases, but only marginally. “You'd be within your rights, sir.”

“I would,” agrees the General, and gives Shiro a brief sharp look that nearly makes him quail in his seat. “But I have very limited time, and that's what I keep Iverson for.”

Shiro decides it’s safest not to answer. His hands clench and unclench nervously where they rest on his knees.

“I brought you here because I want your opinion on this log,” the General says, and turns the screen so that Shiro can see it. The familiar split-screen recording format is open, the brilliant white landscape of Enceladus visible on the left side of the screen.

Shiro looks at the screen, at the frozen frame of Keith on the right. “Mine, sir?” he asks carefully.

“You've worked most closely with Kogane,” says the General. “It'll be a few weeks before we can fully analyze the log and the scenario itself for signs of tampering. I want an idea of what we're looking at.”

Shiro hesitates, his eyes on the screen. “Is this--” he begins, and clears his throat. “This is the log where he finishes it?”

The General lifts his eyebrows and his shoulders at the same time, noncommittal and exasperated, and starts the log playing. “It’s the log where he appears to finish, anyway. Iverson’s insistent that it’s not possible.”

“What… what are we watching for, sir?”

“I want to know if his flying style is consistent with what you’ve observed,” says General Beck. “I want to know if this looks like Kogane to you.”

Shiro nods mutely and turns his attention to the half of the screen showing the landscape, the specs, the outline of the craft. It’s hard to focus, at first--he’s painfully aware of the General watching him--
but then Keith starts to fly in earnest and Shiro forgets everything else.

He enters the geyser field significantly lower than Shiro would, and Shiro finds himself tensing with apprehension. But it’s working for him, impossibly, beautifully, his extraordinary reaction time on display for all to see. Shiro wants to laugh with the sheer delight of witnessing it.

A geyser catches Keith under one wing and Shiro inhales sharply—and then Keith’s rolling with it and Shiro punches the air before he can catch himself. “That’s—” he says to the General’s side-eye, trying hard to find his professionalism. “I taught him that, I taught him that maneuver on the Europa scenario two weeks ago, I can’t believe he…”

But the simulation is still running, and he trails off.

“What’s your assessment?” asks the General when it’s finished.

Shiro has no idea what to say.

“Have you seen him fly like that before, Captain?” General Beck presses.

“No…” Shiro begins, and stops. “Never that well, sir.”

“So your assessment is that the simulator was fixed.”

“No,” Shiro says immediately. “No, that is not…” He pauses and moistens his lips, trying to think how to explain the vast difference between his first few sessions with Keith and the latest, the difference that was not defined entirely by some massive jump in skill but by Keith’s comfort with Shiro’s presence in the cockpit. “He does better when… when he doesn’t feel like he has to impress the person watching.” He gestures at the screen. “He does best when nobody’s watching.”

The General sits back. His eyes on Shiro’s face are scrutinizing, disbelieving. “He is twelve years old,” he says finally, flatly.

Shiro swallows. “Yes, sir.”

“The Enceladus scenario is the most challenging scenario our simulators currently have to offer.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’re asking me to believe that a middle-schooler not only completed the scenario, but completed it with an approach that only one Garrison pilot has successfully used.”

“You asked me for my assessment, sir,” Shiro says. He realizes, a beat too late, that his tone is too defensive and sharp-edged to be anything like appropriate: he sucks in a breath and shuts his eyes for a beat. “I’m sorry, sir, that was out of line.”

The General lets him sweat, sitting back in his chair and staring at him with keen, considering eyes that make Shiro feel like a first-year cadet again. Then he says, “Convince me.”

“Sir?” asks Shiro, startled. The General lifts his eyebrows and gestures at the screen with patient irony, and Shiro gets it. “Ah,” he says, his stomach flipping unpleasantly. “Um. May I…?”

It’s the most off-the-cuff presentation he’s ever given.

The General transfers the log to Shiro’s tablet, and Shiro spends the next half hour breaking down the eight-minute flight, playing and replaying each maneuver, describing other times he’s seen Keith use them, the context in which he learned them. The General’s face is unreadable throughout, and
the awareness of what’s at stake is a crackling, electric hum of unease in the back of Shiro’s mind.

“This one…” he says, and trails off, watching as Keith hauls hard on the rudder to break out of an uncontrolled corkscrewing descent. Uncertainty stirs for the first time, but the General is waiting. “…I didn’t-- I didn’t teach him that one, sir.”

“Spin recovery is in the year one flight curriculum, Captain,” says the General dryly.

Shiro can feel the flush climbing his neck. “Right,” he says.

General Beck sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You realize,” he says abruptly, “he’s going to be facing questions and doubts about this for the rest of his time here.”

It’s too easy to picture. Shiro’s heart sinks. “It doesn't need to be public knowledge at this point, surely…”

“No,” says the General, “but this incident is in his permanent file. Anybody with the correct permissions will be able to view it, his teachers, his counselors, his superior officers if he decides to enlist in five years…”

“Then…” Shiro says. “Then… he'll just have to keep proving himself, he'll build up a record, he'll keep… They can't question it if it's consistently supported by similar results.”

“Is he up to it?”

“I'll help him,” says Shiro immediately. “I'll keep working with him, we'll--” He stops short, abruptly aware of the assumption he's just made. “If… that's…”

The General just looks at him, and Shiro thinks for a moment that lasts and lasts that he's just screwed everything up. But then the General sighs again and looks back at the screen. “You believe him,” he says, gesturing at the paused log. Keith’s face in the frozen frame is wide-eyed and shocked.

“Yes, sir, I do,” says Shiro without hesitation. He pauses, then says, greatly daring, “With your permission, I’d like to fly that scenario with him to confirm it.”

“No,” says the General. “You’re too tangled up in this already. Iverson can take him, or Montgomery.”

Shiro draws in a slow breath, feeling his shoulders stiffen. “Sir,” he says carefully. “He can’t-- If he thinks it’s a test, that’s… it’ll affect his performance in a big way.” The General gives him a look that is exasperated and skeptical in equal parts, and Shiro pushes on desperately. “Sir, please, I’ve been working with him closely for the last two months--my CO can back me up--Keith does not do well when he feels like he has to be looking over his shoulder.”

“There’s going to be people watching over his shoulder his entire life,” the General observes.

“But like this,” Shiro says, shaking his head urgently. “Not like this. Please, he’s-- He’s just a kid, and he hasn’t had a home since he lost his dad, and he’s scared that-- Do you know how many times he’s asked me if he’s going to be expelled and put back in the system? He doesn’t expect this to work out, he doesn’t think this will last and I’ve just started getting through to him--” He stops, closes his mouth. Swallows. “Do you know,” he begins again, slower, his eyes on the desk between himself and the General, “what it would do to him to be asked to run that course thinking that failure means he gets taken away from everything he knows again?”
The General is silent. “What do you suggest?” he asks at last, and Shiro can breathe again.

“Let me run the scenario with him,” he says, opening his hands. “Have Iverson observe, have whoever you want observe, but discreetly, from outside.” He hesitates. It’s a bold leap he’s about to make, but he doesn’t see any way around it. “Make sure he knows beforehand that-- that he’s not going anywhere, that his position here is secure.”

There’s no change in the General’s expression, and the relief is almost dizzying. Regardless of whether or not Shiro’s role with Keith changes, Keith will still have a home here.

“All right,” the General says finally. “We’ll schedule something for next week after all this with commencement is over. We’ve got a few days before teaching faculty all clears out for the summer. You haven’t said otherwise so I assume you’re still willing to host Kogane for the next few months?”

Shiro sputters a little, caught off-guard. “I--” he manages. “If that’s--”

“Yes or no, Shirogane.”

“Yes,” Shiro says hastily. “Yes, that’s-- I’m sorry, I thought-- You’d said, um... revisiting my... my role?”

“That’s going to be an ongoing conversation between myself and your CO,” says the General, clicking off the presentation screen. “For now, for the sake of stability, you’ll proceed as planned with the summer, but there’ll be no simulator time until this issue with Kogane is sorted out.”

“Yes, sir,” says Shiro, a little breathless. This is better than he’d dared to hope, this is-- In the back of his mind, in his darkest speculations, he’d seen Keith on a bus at the end of the day, shuffled off out of reach; his more realistic expectations had had Keith shifted to somebody else’s authority and Shiro himself firmly encouraged to keep his distance.

It’s not a promise that things will continue the way they are, not by any means--but it means that Shiro will be able to talk this out with Keith, to repair this strange rift, and he will take whatever time he’s given.

“Commander Holt will be checking in on Kogane over the summer on a weekly basis as his OIC, like we discussed,” the General continues, now looking down at his tablet, scrolling through a fine-printed document that Shiro can’t read upside-down. “A minimum of two in-person visits per month, the rest can be phone calls. Your stipend for Kogane’s care will be deposited directly into your account on the fifth and twentieth of every month as long as he’s with you.”

“Yes, sir,” says Shiro again.

“You’ll need to sign the documents I’m sending to you now,” says the General, and Shiro feels his pocket buzz with the file transfer. “Fill them out and return them before Commander Holt leaves.”

“I’ll do it tonight, sir.”

“Good.” The General turns off his tablet and puts it away, then gives Shiro a long wry look. “This is the second time in two months you’ve come in here trying to sell me on some wunderkind, you know.”

Shiro freezes up a little, wondering how he’s supposed to respond to that. He opens his mouth to say--something, he doesn’t know what, but the General is waving his hand dismissively.

“Get out of here,” he says. “You have about fifteen minutes before you need to report to the
“Thank you, sir,” says Shiro. He hesitates a beat, all his unaddressed uncertainties coming abruptly to the forefront of his mind—*but ongoing conversation*, the General said. There will be time.

Shiro gets to his feet, salutes, and turns to go.

“Shirogane,” the General calls before he’s through the door.

Shiro turns back.

“If this turns out to be legitimate,” General Beck says, gesturing at the screen, “Kogane’s going to have all your records busted by the end of his second year.”

Shiro’s chest swells with the giddy, delighted pride he hasn’t had the time or space to acknowledge yet, but he manages to keep it off his face. “I hope so, sir,” he answers.

He has fifteen minutes, and he really should use the time to go over his speech one last time, but he finds himself turning toward Keith’s room instead. Nobody answers when he knocks, so he punches in the code and sticks his head in. “Anybody home?”

The room is empty. Malone’s side is already completely dismantled: a bare mattress, an empty desk, a cleared dresser. Keith’s side is not; there’s still blankets on the bed, but Keith’s not moving out entirely, so it doesn’t matter. His backpack with its faded cartoon astronauts is on the floor, a familiar blanket rolled up next to it, ready to go, and Shiro grins.

If you come back to your room looking for your stuff, he messages to Keith, I came by and stole it all.

(It’ll be in the car if you need it.)

He picks up the backpack and rolled-up blanket. Keith’s backpack is shockingly heavy for its size, and Shiro hefts it assessingly before slinging it over his shoulder and leaving the room.

*Did you pack a backpack full of rocks?*

The little *message pending* icon is hovering beside all three messages, a row of little yellow triangles overlaid by an exclamation mark. Shiro looks at it without much surprise—the Garrison’s network is probably overloaded, with roughly four times as many devices on it as usual, and drops his tablet into his pocket.

“Nice, sir,” says Burns, saluting when he passes her in the hallway. “*Avengers in Space*, classic.”

“I’m a gentleman of impeccable taste,” Shiro answers good-naturedly, hefting the yellow backpack. “Hey, have you seen Keith?”

“Not since lunch,” she says, shrugging apologetically. “The library or the auditorium, probably.”

“Thanks,” he answers, and continues on. It’s slow going: the passage of an officer through crowded halls tends to make them *more* crowded as all the cadets stop what they’re doing to snap to attention. He wonders, briefly and mischievously, if he could get away with just carrying around a giant balloon labeled with the words *as you were* at times like this.

The cadets would love it. The brass probably would not. Shiro dismisses the notion with great
reluctance.

He drops Keith’s things off at the car and shuts the trunk, pulling his tablet out again. Where are you, he means to write, but none of his earlier messages have sent yet. He huffs out an exasperated breath and clicks the button to call instead. It rings once, then goes straight to voicemail. Shiro takes a moment to puzzle over this, but then the tone is sounding.

“Hey, Keith,” he says, “It’s me. Call me if you get this before the ceremony starts, otherwise I’ll see you afterwards.”

He hesitates, abruptly uncertain. There’s so many things they haven’t addressed yet, a wide sticky tangle that he doesn’t want to touch until they have time and privacy.

“I’m looking forward to this week,” he says finally. That’s both true and safe. “I’ll see you soon, buddy. Love you.”

He hangs up and pauses for a moment, then makes his way to the auditorium by a back route.

There’s a row of chairs on the stage behind the podium. One of these is his. Sam is already there, and Commander Hossein, and a nervous cadet Shiro knows by sight but has never spoken to. He climbs the steps and stands in front of them to salute crisply, aware of the hundreds of cadets filing into their seats in the wide auditorium behind him. It’s Hossein, as the ranking commander, who releases him from attention and gestures him to the seat on the far end of the row.

“How’d it go?” Sam asks quietly as Shiro sinks into the seat next to him.

Shiro lets out a breath. “Really well,” he answers, equally soft. “Better than I expected.”

Sam glances at him, eyebrows lifted. “Yeah?” he asks.

“We’ve been booted off the simulator for a couple weeks,” Shiro admits. “They’re going to have Keith’s Enceladus logs analyzed, but… the General asked me for a breakdown and I think he believes me. That Keith didn’t cheat, I mean. And– they’re not cutting him loose. And he’s still coming home with us tonight. So it’s--” He takes and releases a breath, nodding.

“Good,” says Sam softly. “That’s really, really good.” He pauses for a moment. “What we talked about last night, did you…”

“No,” says Shiro. He thumbs at an invisible smudge on his knee and glances out over the auditorium, searching out familiar faces. “I want to… I want to think about it a little longer. I was really tired last night.”

“Everything’s ten times as overwhelming when you’re tired,” Sam agrees. “I’ll be here if you need to process out loud.”

“I appreciate that,” says Shiro, giving him a quick grateful look.

Sam grins at him, the corners of his eyes wrinkling, and turns away to continue his conversation with Hossein.

Shiro breathes in deeply, the familiar flutters of nerves that come before addressing a large crowd beginning in his chest. He touches his pocket, reassuring himself that the solid square of his tablet is still there, loaded with his notes and ready to go, then dries his sweaty palms on his knees and looks out over the filling auditorium again.
The front four sections are a sea of white and orange, broken by the gray of supervising officer uniforms. Shiro locates Burns first, Talmadge on the opposite side of their section, and begins scanning the rows between them for Keith.

He combs the section twice with his eyes before it dawns on him, and a third time, and a fourth before he’s sure. His heart begins a slow, heavy drumming. “Sir,” he says softly, but Sam is deep in conversation and doesn’t hear him until Shiro plucks at his elbow. “Sir,” he says again when he’s got Sam’s attention, staring out over the auditorium just in case he overlooked... “Keith’s not here.”

“What?” asks Sam, and looks. Shiro waits, willing Burns to look over at them--but she’s busy wrangling fifty cadets and can’t spare the attention to watch a stage where nothing is happening yet. He feels like he’s about to crawl out of his own skin with urgency by the time Sam finally asks, “What time is it?”

“3:41.”

“He’s still got four minutes to report in,” says Sam, but he sounds doubtful. “Check with the sergeant on the floor, see if they know his status.”

Shiro’s got his tablet out already, scrolling to Burns’ code. “Hey,” he says when she picks up and turns to look questioningly toward the stage. “Do you have eyes on Keith?”

“Ahh,” she answers, turning away to glance over her section. “I don’t, let me see--”

Shiro watches as she lowers her tablet from her ear and scrolls.

“Yeah, he hasn’t checked in from free hours yet,” she says. “He’s got a few minutes yet, I’ll go find him if he doesn’t show.”

“Thanks,” Shiro says, relieved.

“No problem, sir. Break a leg.”

Shiro pulls an exaggerated apprehensive face at her across the auditorium and hangs up.

He looks over his notes again, keeping half an eye on the doors as he does. There’s a steady influx of cadets in bright orange, flanked by their families, separating out into their assigned seating toward the front of the auditorium--but Keith will be easy to spot due to his size. The time on his tablet turns over from 3:44 to 3:45, and Shiro watches as Burns glances up at the clock, then toward the stage to make eye contact with him. Then she's making her way up the aisle, pausing to speak with Talmadge, and disappearing through the wide double doors.

Shiro watches the clock, watches the doors for one last tardy splash of orange in the crowd. His knee is jogging nervously.

“Still no Keith?” Sam asks quietly.

Shiro shakes his head slightly, keeping his eyes on the door. “Burns is on the case,” he answers.

“She'll find him.”

“Yeah,” Shiro agrees, distracted.

But time ticks on. The flow of people entering the auditorium slows. The lights dim in warning, then lower completely, and Burns still hasn’t returned.
The auditorium hushes.

Shiro breathes in.

They’re close, he tells himself. Keith probably fell asleep in the library. He found some quiet cubby to hide in. He’s been reading sci-fi and forgot the time. He’ll be embarrassed later, and it will be hilarious.

Shiro stands as the stage lights come up, takes three steps forward to the podium. He draws his tablet out of his pocket and sets it in front of him, opening his notes. His hands are cold and slightly shaky, and that’s no uncommon thing for standing in front of this many people--but for the first time he’s barely conscious of the crowd. His awareness is centered on the doors at the far end, and the resonant clang as they shut.

They’re probably coming down the hall right now.

“Officers and cadets of the Galaxy Garrison,” he says, and forces himself to focus on the uniformed rows ahead of him. To the shadowy sections further back, he says, “Family, friends, neighbors and teachers and coaches and babysitters, thank you for being here today.”

He can hear his own voice filling the auditorium, easy and confident and clear. It’s like somebody else is borrowing his voice and his words while Shiro himself panics quietly in the back of his head. He keeps talking, keeps his notes open in front of him; he feels his face making the appropriate expressions. His anecdote about the rivalry between the engineers and the cargo pilots that sprang up in his second year gets an appreciative wave of laughter, so he thinks he’s doing all right.

The doors open. Burns slips in, her silhouette just recognizable. She’s alone.

Silence falls.

He bolted, Shiro realizes with sudden dry-mouthed clarity. An image of Keith hiking through the desert alone sears itself across his mind--and then, just as quickly, he remembers the packed-tight backpack Keith had left in his dorm. There’s no way he’d leave without his things, without water.

Somebody clears their throat behind him, and Shiro is abruptly aware that he trailed off more than five seconds ago, and he has no idea where he was in his speech. The faces looking back at him from the audience are unsure, concerned. A couple cadets near the front are laughing.

Shiro licks his lips and skips straight to the end of his speech. He introduces Sam and Hossein, sparks a big round of applause for the nervous valedictorian--and then, instead of returning to his seat when Sam takes the podium, he strides into the darkness at the edge of the stage lights and takes the steps down to the floor.

Burns meets him halfway.

“I don’t know,” she says quietly before he can ask. She’s out of breath, and her eyes in the darkness are wide. “I don’t know, I checked his room, I checked the library, I went up to the simulator deck, I was gonna come and see if you had any ideas--”


“Yes, sir,” she says, and starts toward the section where the third years are seated. Shiro pauses to send Sam a one-line message explaining, then makes his way to the opposite side of the same section where Matt is sitting.
Matt is already watching, alert and inquisitive, as Shiro stoops to speak to the lieutenant in charge of the section, and he wastes no time in squirming out of the aisle past his classmates’ knees when Shiro points at him and beckons.

“Is this a coup?” he asks in a whisper, falling into step with Shiro and glancing interestingly over to where Burns is extracting Malone. “I really hope this is a coup, Shiro, I’m honored to be part of your elite strike team—”

Shiro waits until they’re out of earshot of the cadets craning to see what’s going on. “Keith’s missing,” he says bluntly, and Matt shuts his mouth in surprise. “The patch for the cameras you did a couple months ago, can you do it again?”

“I-- yeah,” says Matt, shaking his head in confusion, jogging a little to keep up, “of course, I just need-- my laptop’s in Dad’s locker. Missing, what do you mean? How long?”

“Not sure,” says Shiro, opening the doors. “Go get your laptop, meet us back here.”

Malone and Burns come out of the next set of doors from the auditorium as Matt departs in the opposite direction, and Shiro hurries to meet them.

Malone is wide-eyed and confused, but he salutes briskly when Shiro approaches them. “Sir?” he asks. “What’s-- what’s going on?”

“When did you see Keith last?” Shiro asks instead of answering.

“Um.” Malone shuts his eyes for a moment. “Before lunch, it was before lunch, he left while I was packing up. Why, is he…?”

Shiro looks at Burns. “Was he at lunch?”

“Yes,” she says immediately. “He was there, he was fine. Um,” she amends, “no, he was a little out of it. He didn’t eat very much.”

“He’s missing?” Malone asks, sharp-eyed.

“Yes,” Shiro says, distracted, and looks back at Burns. “Is he sick, did he seem sick to you?”

Burns hesitates, and Malone puts in quickly, “He didn’t want to go to breakfast.”

“Okay,” says Shiro. “Okay…” There’s an app on his tablet with the Garrison floor plan, but he hasn’t used it since his first year. He pulls it up now. “So we need to check bathrooms, starting by the mess hall and the first floor south dorms. Sergeant, have you talked to security yet?”

“No, sir,” she says, straightening. “I wanted to get you first, in case you had some idea…”

Shiro nods. He zooms in on the app, checking the live positions of security staff. “There’s somebody on duty down that hall around the first corner, can you grab them?”

She goes. Then it’s just Shiro and Malone, standing in the silent foyer, the indistinct sound of Sam’s amplified speech leaking out the auditorium doors. “You can go back to your seat,” Shiro says, and rubs the bridge of his nose. “I just wanted to know if you’d seen him since lunch.”

Malone blinks at him, his mouth falling open. “I want-- I want to be involved, sir,” he says slowly. “I’m not going back in there if Keith’s in trouble.”

“You’ve already done everything you can,” Shiro begins, but Malone cuts him off.
“He’s been jumpy all week,” he says, short and sharp. “If something happened, it’s my fault.”

Shiro shakes his head slightly. “If it’s anybody’s fault, I’m pretty sure you’re not remotely on that list, Adrian.”

Malone’s face flickers with annoyance. “I want to be involved, Shiro,” he repeats firmly. “Please.”

His feet are planted, his jaw set: he looks ready to go toe-to-toe for this. Shiro looks at him for a moment, then blows out a breath. “Twenty minutes,” he says. “You can be involved for twenty minutes. I want you back before the graduates start to march.”

Malone looks like he’s thinking about arguing, but he pulls his lips between his teeth and nods once, jerkily. “Yes, sir. Thank you.”

The auditorium doors open behind them. It takes a beat for Shiro to recognize Mendez, in civilian clothes with her hair down. “Tasha messaged me,” she says, joining them in a breath of daisy-scented air, and snaps a quick salute to Shiro with her long skirt still in motion. “What can I do, how can I help?”

And then Matt’s returning before Shiro can answer, breathless and hugging his laptop to his chest, and Burns and the security officer are coming down the hallway from the classroom wing, and there’s a small crowd converging with Shiro at the center, all talking at once, all offering to help—all, Shiro realizes, suddenly overwhelmed, looking to him for direction.

He takes a deep breath and folds his shaking hands behind his back.

“Okay,” he says, and the group goes quiet, watching him and waiting for orders. “Okay. This is what we’re gonna do.”

Chapter End Notes

ayyy malone finally has a first name

so how about them season 7 rumblings
Shiro sends Malone to check bathrooms. Burns and Mendez go with him to check the library and upper levels more thoroughly, Mendez pausing to take off her heels to be able to keep up with Burns’ longer stride. Shiro stays with Matt for the moment to smooth the way with security.

“I just need like two minutes,” Matt is saying urgently. “It’s already written and tested, I’ve already got the bugs all worked out and everything, I just need to plug it in.”

The security officer stares at him, a little incredulous. “Where did you,” she begins, shifting her weight. “Why do you even have access to Garrison surveillance?”

“He doesn’t,” says Shiro. “I do. Can he use one of your devices to install his patch or not?”

She looks between them doubtfully, then shakes her head in resignation. “This’ll be on your head, captain,” she warns.

“I understand,” says Shiro, and the officer hands him her Garrison tablet, unlocked. Matt opens his laptop and sits down cross-legged on the floor to start the wireless sync.

“I want this deleted off your device as soon as the captain’s gotten what he needs, cadet,” says the officer, watching over Matt’s shoulder as the cloned surveillance feeds from the entire school pop up on his screen in quick succession. “Completely deleted, do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Matt answers, typing. “It won’t take long, I just need a second for it to compile… ok, there. Shiro, can you send me Keith’s face?”

It takes a second for Shiro to find Keith’s student ID, but he screencaps it and sends it over immediately, crouching behind Matt for a better view of the laptop. Matt plugs in the screencap to the face-mapping software, and then the output screen is being flooded with a list of brief clips of Keith coming and going. He opens the most recent.

Shiro watches as Keith walks down a dim and desaturated hallway, pauses at a doorway at the end, and then returns quickly the way he came. “What camera is this?” he asks. “What are we looking at here?”

“Uh,” says Matt, “The camera number is V6Z-723?”

“Let me see,” says the officer, stooping to look. “Oh, that’s outside the offices.”

Shiro’s eyes shift to the timestamp. “1448, that would be… I would have gone through there maybe five minutes before this clip. He must have been—”

He stops, replaying the walk in his head. He’d entered the suite, passed through on his way to the General’s private waiting room; it had been silent and empty except for a few cadets—

“Matt,” he says, and captures another screenshot to send. “Matt. Run this.”

“Who the hell?” asks Matt, confused, but he’s already plugging in the new face.

“Cadet Candice Paschel,” Shiro says, already shifting apps; maybe his settings got screwed up with
the software update last week, maybe the priority of Keith’s bracelet got dialed down accidentally…

“They’ve had run-ins before. Show me where she was at 2:50.”

There’s no notification from Keith’s bracelet.

“I don’t have her at 2:50,” Matt says after a moment. “There’s this one that runs… about an hour, starting at 1:45, and then there’s this little tiny one that runs for about eight seconds at 2:48… Shiro, it’s the same camera, it’s like, it’s right after Keith.”

Shiro reaches over Matt’s shoulder to start the clip. They watch it in silence: three cadets leaving the office, making their way down the hallway in a manner that can only be described as predatory.

Shiro sits back and swears.

“That’s the same three from before, huh,” says Matt grimly.

“Where does that hallway end up?” asks Shiro, looking at the security officer. “They all turned right at the end of this hallway, what’s the next camera?”

She shakes her head slightly. “There’s a few cameras out in that wing, that power surge two weeks ago... The one in the mess hall works, but none of the surrounding hallways.”

“The age of space exploration, ladies and gentlemen,” Matt mutters.

“It’s fine,” says Shiro, though it’s not, not remotely. “It’s fine. We have someplace to start.” He stands, switching apps. “Show me,” he says when the Garrison’s floor plan lights up his screen. “Which hallways?”

The officer takes his tablet, swiping and tapping deftly until a block is highlighted. “These,” she says, returning it to him. “And the classrooms off them, everything but the mess.”

“Thank you,” says Shiro, pausing briefly to study the map before he swipes to call Burns. “Don’t let them leave the auditorium,” he orders, turning back toward the security officer. “I’ll send you their profiles, don’t let them leave.”

Matt scrambles up, still typing one-handed while he supports his laptop awkwardly with the other, and hurries to follow after Shiro. He has to break into a run every few steps to keep up with Shiro’s pace--and Shiro feels bad, he does, but the memory of the way Keith looked the last time those three finished with him sets a fire under his lungs.

Burns answers on the first ring. “Did you find him?”

“No,” he says shortly, and fills her in as they turn the corner to the classroom wing.

There’s a pause. “Okay,” she says, and he wishes he could find a quarter of the calm in her voice. “How do you want to proceed?”

“Meet us by the mess hall,” he says. “We know roughly where he is, we just need to clear about four hallways.”

“What about our other friends?”

“They’re at the ceremony, they’re not going anywhere. We’ll get to them after we find Keith.”

“All right,” says Burns. “We’ll be there in a minute.”
The call disconnects.

Fuck it, thinks Shiro recklessly, and breaks into a run. He hears Matt doing the same behind him, and it feels good—it feels so good—to finally be doing something, to be expending physical effort. Adrenaline has been building in his blood for the last half hour, and finally he can give it vent.

“Keith!” he shouts as they reach the first hallway. His voice echoes down the long empty space and bounces back to him. “Keith! Where are you!”

There’s no answer. There’s no crumpled body on the floor, either, so that’s something. They pass on to the next, the grim rhythm of their footsteps the only sound.

“I’ll—” says Matt breathlessly, and points down the next junction. Shiro nods, and they split, going opposite directions. Shiro can hear Matt calling as he runs, fainter as the distance between them grows.

He slows and stops halfway down the final corridor, and turns helplessly in place. He puts both his hands on his head, lets them slide down to clasp behind his neck, stares up and down the hallway from between his elbows. The fierce, angry adrenaline is wearing off: now it’s just fear, gut-wrenching and sour.

“Where are you?” he pleads in a whisper. “Help me out here, buddy, help me find you.”

There’s no answer.

He checks his tablet again, swiping through to the app that connects with Keith’s bracelet, just in case—but there’s nothing. Keith hasn’t called for him.

It occurs to Shiro that Keith doesn’t want to be found.

He can hear voices from up ahead, Matt and Burns and Mendez and Malone. He draws a breath and turns to join them—and catches a glint of reflected light on the floor halfway down the hallway as he does.

It’s a Garrison-issue tablet, the screen cracked and spiderwebbed, still flickering feebly. Shiro crouches next to it and turns it over carefully to look at the tiny silver registration sticker: KOGANE_K-000219376.

“Guys,” he calls, and straightens. He feels abruptly short of breath, and he turns in place again, searching the hallway for more clues. “Guys!”

Malone’s the first around the corner, followed by Mendez and Burns. “Did you find him?” Malone asks, and his eyes shift from Shiro’s face to the tablet in his hand.

“It’s his,” says Shiro as Matt joins them. “This is Keith’s, it’s Keith’s tablet, something happened here.”

There’s silence for a beat. Then Burns says steadily, looking at Shiro, “Okay. So you’re Keith, and you’re outnumbered, and you can’t call for help. Where do you go?”

“He can, though,” says Matt, frowning. “He’s got that— Shiro gave him a bracelet he can use to call for help, it’s got like GPS and everything.”

“He hasn’t—” Shiro says, and shakes his head. “He hasn’t used it.”
Matt stares at him for a beat. “Give me your tablet,” he says abruptly. “I’m gonna try to reverse the signal.”

“Okay,” says Burns as Shiro hands over his tablet and Matt sits down in the middle of the hallway with his laptop. “You’re small and smart and scared, where do you go? Where’s the closest safe place you know from here, within the radius of the faulty cameras?”

Shiro shuts his eyes for a moment, trying to picture the floor plan. Keith’s broken tablet is a delicate weight cradled in his hands. “The bathroom,” he says, then shakes his head. “No, he wouldn’t try to hide in a bathroom, um-- the, the mess hall.”

“The mess hall’s closed,” says Burns. “Where else?”

“I’ll check the bathroom,” says Malone quietly. Matt glances up at Shiro, then frowns down at his laptop, typing.

“Um,” says Shiro, and falters. They’re all looking to him, they’re all expecting him to have the answer but he has nothing, he’s powerless--

“Shiro,” says Matt, and then again, more urgently, “Shiro, I’ve-- look at this, look, look--” He scrambles up, and Shiro hurries to look over his shoulder.

“Did you find him, did it work?” asks Mendez, coming around to the other side.

“No, it’s-- I haven’t tried anything with his bracelet yet, this is the mess hall camera, I just plugged in the time…”

In the far corner of the screen, Shiro can see the metal gate covering the door to the mess. Behind it, too small and indistinct to pick out faces, there are cadets fighting: three-- no, four, and one smaller than the rest. They disappear from the camera’s view a moment later--and Shiro is cold with alarm because Keith just stopped fighting --and a guard wanders up the hallway, rattles the gate, and wanders back the way he came.

“Who is that?” Shiro demands, turning to Burns.

“I can’t--” she says, and bends close to the screen, frowning. “I can’t tell, it might be--”

“Witts, isn’t it? I think it’s Witts,” says Mendez.

“Find out,” Shiro says. “And find out if he saw anything.”

“I’m on it.”

“Shiro,” says Malone, jogging back to them, “Keith’s not in the bathroom, but there’s like-- there’s blood on one of the sinks and a whole bunch of paper towels--”

“I’m coming,” says Shiro. “Matt-- see what you can do with Keith’s bracelet. Sergeant, I’ll need you in a minute, but for now would you take a look at that area by the mess hall?”

“Yes, sir.”

Shiro gestures to Malone. “Let’s go, show me.”

There’s nothing to be found in the bathroom but a smear of brownish-red across a white porcelain sink, like somebody tried to wipe it up and didn’t quite get it all. There’s a handful of bloodstained paper towels on the top of the trash, one on the floor in front of it. Shiro nudges at it with the toe of
his boot, watching it flutter over.

“Somebody cleaned up in here,” Malone says, watching him. “Do you think it was Keith?”

Shiro takes a moment. It’s not outside the realm of possibility, and he bleakly lines up the potential sequence of events in his head: Keith gets cornered; Keith gets hurt; Keith quietly, hastily cleans up after they’ve lost interest in him and goes to ground.

Why wouldn’t you call me? he thinks, and glances at his watch again, just in case.

He draws a breath to answer--and nearly chokes on his own saliva when his watch buzzes. But it’s not, it’s not, it’s a call from Sam. He reaches for his tablet, shoving away the sharp desperate jab of disappointment, and remembers that Matt still has it. “Shit,” he says distractedly, and pushes back out into the hallway.

Matt meets him halfway at a run, holding Shiro’s tablet out. “It’s my dad, it’s my dad--”

“Thanks,” Shiro says, and answers it immediately. “Sir?”

“Report.”

Shiro breathes in and straightens his shoulders. “Keith's missing. The last we have of him is some footage from outside the offices.”

“Did he run?”

“No, sir,” Shiro says. “His stuff was still in his room, I picked it up and put it in the car before I realized-- Sir, we have footage of the three cadets who gave him trouble last time following him into an area with no surveillance, and there’s a-- a kind of blurry clip from the mess camera of four cadets fighting. It's them, sir, the timing fits, it's-- I know it's Keith.”

Sam’s quiet for a moment. “Who’s we?”

“Um,” says Shiro, glancing down the hallway. Malone is hovering awkwardly without a task, his arms wrapped around his ribs. “I have Matt with me, he’s trying to get a signal from the bracelet I gave Keith. Sergeant Burns is here, Lieutenant Mendez is here, off-duty, I’ve got Cadet Malone too. I’m about to head back to the auditorium with Burns to pull the cadets we have following Keith.”

“No,” says Sam. “Let me. You focus on finding Keith, I’ll take care of the cadets.”

Shiro goes weak with relief. “Yes, sir.”

“Send me everything you have, send me those clips. Their profiles, too. Who’s their OIC?”

Shiro turns toward Matt to ask him to send the files, but Matt is already nodding and giving him a quick thumbs-up. “They’re year ones,” says Shiro, turning away again to pace. “It’d be Iverson.”

Sam pauses. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Shiro,” Sam says. “We’re gonna find him.”

Shiro shuts his eyes for a second, wishing he could just somehow skip ahead, ride on the certainty in Sam’s voice to the moment where he has Keith safe again. “Yes, sir,” he answers. “Sir, if you get anything out of them...”
“You’ll be the first to know, I promise.”


The call disconnects. Shiro starts to pocket his tablet, then remembers and offers it to Matt again.

Matt shakes his head slightly. “I got what I needed.”

“Did you--?” Shiro asks, glancing at his laptop screen.

“No,” says Matt. “Give me a minute, it’s--” He grimaces with dissatisfaction. “Could he have turned it off somehow?”

“It’s always off,” says Shiro, bewildered. “It’s dormant unless he activates it.”

“Dormant, yeah, this is like-- a, a block, it’s like it’s disabled somehow…”

“Sir!” calls Mendez, striding back down the hallway toward them in a whirl of pastel skirts, her heels still in her hand. A confused corporal trails in her wake. “This is Witts, he’s on guard duty for this wing.”

“Good,” Shiro says, straightening and returning the corporal’s salute. “Good, thank you. Did she fill you in? We’re missing a cadet.”

“Uh, yeah,” Witts says, glancing between them uncertainly. He has a slightly weedy look, a prominent adam’s apple, and the exact opposite of a confident presence. “I haven’t? Seen anybody?”

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“It looked like you responded to a commotion an hour or so ago…” Shiro begins, and feels his tablet buzz. Glancing down at it, he sees that Matt has sent the clip to him in a message. “Oh, good,” he says, “here…”

Witts stares down at the tablet screen, watching the recording of himself with blank-eyed confusion. “Oh,” he says, his face clearing. “Sure. It sounded like there were some cadets messing around so I came to chase them off. This whole wing is out of bounds while move-out is in progress.”

“Did you see anybody?” Shiro asks. Burns is returning from the hallway outside the mess hall, and Shiro glances up at her desperately past Witt’s shoulder. She shakes her head.

“No,” says Witts, shaking his head. “Just heard some yelling and clanging. Came to make sure the mess was still locked up.”

“Nobody ran past you as you came down the hall?” Shiro presses.

“No, sir,” Witts says again, shrugging. “I figured sound must’ve carried, or something.”

Burns shifts her weight, shaking her head slightly. “That’s a blind hallway when the mess is closed,” she says. “There’s nowhere to go but the way you were walking in, you’d have had to see them. Did you make sure everything was locked, the kitchen? Did you check the bathrooms?”

“I stuck my head in the bathrooms,” Witts says. “The kitchen was locked. I dunno, maybe they were just really fast.”

“Oh my god,” says Matt quietly. When Shiro looks at him, he’s gone very still, face pale, eyes unfocused.

Shiro takes a step toward him. “...Matt?”
Matt's in sudden motion, closing his laptop, scrambling to his feet. “Faraday-- Faraday shields, oh my god, Shiro--”

“What?” Shiro asks, blinking.

“Can you get us into the kitchen?” Matt is asking Witts. “Can anybody-- Sergeant?”

“I can, yeah,” Burns is saying. She looks as lost as Shiro, but she’s already turning back down the hallway. Matt is following her, his face urgent and intent.

“What?” repeats Shiro, helplessly confused. He breaks into a run to follow them, aware of Malone and Mendez doing the same.

“Industrial ovens,” Matt says over his shoulder as they run. “Fridges, freezers, proofers, they’re all giant metal boxes that could block a signal, he might be stuck, or--”

“Shit,” says Burns with feeling. “Shiro, there’s fucking-- there’s blood on this keypad. I missed it--”

“Just get us in,” Shiro orders. His heart is hammering desperately, a steady rhythm of Keith, Keith, Keith.

The keypad beeps as she enters the access code, the door unlocks, the light flicks on, and then they’re streaming in, fanning out between the gleaming silver prep tables and tall shelves of supplies and clean dishes and tools to search. “Keith?” calls Malone, and then they’re all following suit, calling his name into the echoing silence of the empty kitchen.

Shiro circles around a storage shelf to the back wall of the kitchen. The cold storage is there, two grim gray structures of galvanized steel standing side-by-side like twin mausolea.

Everything stops.

There’s a long metal rod of the textured sort used by cooks to sharpen knives jammed through the door handle of the structure on the right, as if to lock from outside, as if to keep something contained…

He doesn’t remember taking the last few steps across to the cold storage, but he’s wrenching the rod free an instant later, throwing it aside with no care for where it lands, yanking the door open--

“Oh god,” he hears Mendez say, as if from a very long way away. “Cadet-- what’s your name? Go to medical, tell them…”

But Shiro doesn’t hear any more. He’s inside the refrigerator on his knees, taking off his jacket. “Keith,” he whispers. “Hey, buddy, hey…”

Keith is sitting small, curled knees-to-chest against a cardboard box with his head tucked down in his arms. He lifts his head, disoriented, as Shiro tugs him gently away from the box and wraps the jacket around his shoulders.

“Ohh, bud,” Shiro breathes, something in his chest contracting painfully. Keith’s face is bruised: his left eye is swollen shut and there’s a livid scrape along his jaw. More alarmingly, his lips are pale and bloodless, tinged with lilac, and he’s shivering horribly. “Let’s get you out of here, let’s get you warm, come on…”

He wraps an arm around Keith’s shoulders to help him up, supporting him with both hands. Keith pulls back, confused and resistant, unfolding his body sluggishly. He stares blearily up at Shiro--but
his head is lolling, and his eyes don’t quite focus. Another wave of shivers takes him, his teeth clattering together violently, his shaking shoulders hunching up nearly to his ears.

“Okay,” murmurs Shiro, and slides one arm under Keith’s knees, lifting to cradle him against his chest. “I got you, buddy, let’s go.”

“Shhrrr…?” Keith slurs, and Shiro is unprepared when Keith’s cold, cold fingers bump questioning and clumsy against his face.

“I’m here,” Shiro tells him, and he lowers his head to press his forehead very gently to Keith’s. “You’re safe. I got you.”

Keith shuts his eyes. His body tenses and shudders again with the cold’s intermittent rhythm--and then, as the bout of shivering eases, he exhales and turns his face to hide in Shiro’s shoulder.

Then Matt is there with them, shucking his jacket to tuck over Keith; Burns is on their other side, doing the same, covering Keith’s head. They help Shiro up to his feet, steadying him, their arms around his back. Mendez holds the door for them, watching with wide sharp eyes.

Together, they step out into the light.

Chapter End Notes

what's this? something that vaguely resembles those story diagrams they give you in 6th grade english? whatttt

an extra big thank you to you guys for all your encouragement this week! this arc is stilll kicking my butt, but we're getting there!
Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Keith wakes in stages.

He’s aware first of warmth, of the pleasant weight of blankets over him, of softly glowing beacons of heat nestled on and around his body: there’s one tucked up under each of his arms, one across his lap, another weighing gently on his tummy. There’s no pain at all, and he stays quiet and still to keep it that way.

He sleeps again.

When he surfaces next it’s to low voices talking quite close to his bed. The cadence is pleasant and familiar, a quiet unhurried flow of conversation, and Keith floats along with it dreamily for some time before words and phrases start to emerge.

“...not even a question at this point.” That’s Commander Sam. He sounds tired; there’s a sort of gray tinge to his voice. “The last time was their final warning. I don’t anticipate any trouble from their families, either; by my guess they’re all holding their breath right now and praying nobody presses any charges…”

“Will there be charges?” Shiro’s voice comes from much closer. He must be sitting right next to Keith’s bed, next to his pillow. It’s a good feeling, having him so close.

“There will be if I have anything to say about it,” says Commander Sam grimly. “This can’t be let to stand, I don’t care how well-regarded their families are. They could have killed him.”

Shiro is silent. A warm palm settles on Keith's head and a thumb sweeps the hair back from his forehead, stroking tenderly and repetitively along his hairline. It feels like heaven, and Keith would push into the touch if his body were not still so heavy with sleep. “I hope--” Shiro says, and pauses. “I hope they can grow from this. I hope they get the help they need.”

“That’s a charitable perspective,” says Commander Sam, his voice very dry. “Personally I hope they get sentenced to a lot of really disgusting community service. Picking up garbage. In a bog.”

Shiro snorts, just a soft amused huff of air. “A mosquito-infested bog.”

“With that sticky foul mud. I hope they get tadpoles in their boots.”

“Wonder where the most convenient bog is.”

“Dunno. Minnesota.”

“Oh, there's got to be one farther than that.”

There’s a pause, and then they’re both laughing, quiet and tired and whole-hearted. It trails off into silence after a moment, the only sound the soft scratch-scratch of Shiro’s fingers drawing paths through Keith’s hair.

“Sir,” says Shiro at last, and his tone has shifted, deepened into something more serious and resolute. “What we talked about last night… I’m not going to give up.”
“Okay,” agrees Commander Sam softly after a beat. “Then I’m here with you.”

Shiro breathes out, and there’s a shudder in the sound that makes Keith wonder. “Will they let me, do you think?” he asks. “After…”

There’s a creak of springs and a rustle of fabric as Commander Sam shifts, a mirthless snort. “I wouldn’t worry about that too much.”

“…Why?” asks Shiro warily.

Commander Sam pauses. “You haven’t heard how they got into the kitchen in the first place, I guess.”

“No?”

“One of the cadets had an access code he shouldn’t have had,” says Commander Sam. “…A code he stole from his uncle.”

Shiro’s fingers stop moving through Keith’s hair. Keith wishes he’d start again. “You’re kidding.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much,” Commander Sam says again. There’s something like and unlike a smile in his voice, dry and grim.


“That’s not to be spread around.”

“No, of course…”

“When I left they were talking about a complete overhaul, finally making the switch to fingerprint readers instead of pin pads, so that’s one good thing to come out of all this, I guess.”

“I guess,” Shiro says faintly.

There’s a pause. Shiro’s hand starts moving over Keith’s head again, to Keith’s deep contentment. When the commander speaks again, his voice is quiet and fond. “I haven’t had the chance to say yet. I’m very, very impressed with the way you comported yourself today, Shiro. So is the General.”

“Sir?”

“There was a crisis,” says the commander. “A very real crisis. You assessed the situation, you formed a team, you directed them effectively, and you successfully pulled a cadet out of a very bad situation.”

“I wasn’t--” says Shiro. He sounds flustered. “That’s not… what happened, they all wanted to be there, they all care about Keith. They were all really motivated to find him…”

“I was watching,” says Commander Sam. “I’ve talked to Matt. You mobilized in about three minutes flat. Nobody else could have found Keith as quickly as you and your team did, you know that, right?”

“I couldn’t have done it without Matt,” Shiro says. There’s a deep inhale and exhale. “His patch with the cameras—we never would have found him without that. That was what got us started looking in the right direction. Then he found the clip of them fighting outside the mess--”

“--after you put him on the right track, I think.”
“--and he was the one who made the Faraday connection so we could finally…” Shiro trails off for a moment, and Keith feels his thumb lightly, lightly brushing at the ridge of bone above his left eye.

“And Natasha, Sergeant Burns, she kept me calm. I was freaking out. Tina and Adrian…”

“It was a group effort,” Commander Sam says, after Shiro’s been quiet for a moment.

Keith hears Shiro take a deep breath. “I’m just glad we did find him,” he says in a low voice. “I’m glad this is all over and they’ll never have another chance…”

Quiet falls. Keith starts to drift again, lulled by the warmth of the blankets and the soft shifting of Shiro’s hand through his hair. He feels heavy and peaceful and safe, like nothing bad can ever happen again.

“You’ll stay with him?” he hears Commander Sam ask.

Shiro hums softly in answer. “Heading out?”

“I think I’d better,” says the commander. “Do you want me to bring you anything else?”

“Think I’m okay,” Shiro says. “They’ve got blankets, I’ll just find somewhere to crash.”

“All right. Give me a call if you need anything, if anything changes.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

“See you in the morning, kid.”

There’s a soft clap, like a pat to the back, and nothing more.

It takes Keith a moment, listening to the commander’s receding footsteps, to realize he isn’t quite sure where he is. It takes him much longer to decide whether or not he actually cares enough to find out. He drifts between sleep and half-consciousness for some time more before his eyes slip open.

The space he finds himself in is tiny, dim, with no windows. He doesn't know if he should call it a room or not: one whole wall is a fabric-covered room divider, and another is a dark mint-green curtain, glowing from behind with light from the next room. But there’s a counter with a sink and cupboards built into the real wall to his right and a rather utilitarian-looking chair pulled close to his bed on the left.

Shiro is in the chair.

He’s scrolling one-handed on his tablet, his face underlit by the muted glow of the screen, while the other is still a soft warmth at the crown of Keith’s head. His thumb is still moving absently over the hair above Keith’s forehead, like he forgot about it.

Keith watches him. It’s starting to filter back in bits and disconnected pieces, all the fear and uncertainty of the last two days: he can’t connect it all with this, here. His forehead pulls into a frown, and the weight of the blankets is suddenly stifling rather than a comfort.

Shiro glances up at him over the tablet. “Hey…” he says, putting it down immediately. His whole face has gone soft and glad, his eyes lit up. He scoots his chair forward a little, rolling it closer to Keith. “Hey, buddy, how are you feeling?”

Keith extracts one arm from under the blankets, reaching up to rub at his eyes so he doesn't have to look at Shiro. The skin around the left is puffy and tender, and he spends a moment exploring it with
his fingertips.

“Pretty substantial shiner,” Shiro confirms unnecessarily. “No concussion this time, though.”

That's good. Keith feels at a sore scabby place at the edge of his jaw, tongues at a cut on the inside of his lower lip. He breathes in a little more deeply and stops when his ribs twinge. All right.

“What happened?” he asks.

Shiro's face goes slack, his eyes sharpening. “You don't remember?” he asks carefully.

“No, I--” His head hurts, he realizes dimly, a slow sloshy pounding. “I remember the…”

...dark and cold and helpless and alone...

“You were in a walk-in refrigerator,” Shiro says, watching him. His voice is gentle and tentative, like he doesn't want to alarm Keith. “You were in there for about two hours. You don't remember?”

“No, that's not… I...” Keith pushes himself up, struggling free of the blankets--and there it is, all at once, his bruised body shouting at him in a dozen different flavors of pain. His breath snags on an unvoiced whimper.

“Easy, easy,” says Shiro urgently, reaching out. “It's okay, Keith, it's okay. Take it slow, all right?”

His hands are steady on Keith's upper arms. “What hurts?”

Nothing important, Keith thinks. It's a lot of little hurts, sore muscles and twinging bruises, his ear. It's just a lot all at once, that's all. He's fine. He breathes in carefully until the limit imposed by his ribs shocks him still, then breathes it out again. Again: slow inhale, not quite as deep, and out. He wraps an arm around his middle and flattens his palm very tentatively against the place where his ribs hurt.

Shiro is rubbing his back when he can focus on other things again, his hand warm through the thin fabric of--whatever this thing is that Keith is wearing. He picks at it uncertainly: it's very thin, sort of shapeless. There's an unsettling looseness in the back near Shiro's hand, like it's not connected together very well. It's decidedly not what Keith put on this morning, and an uneasy quail shivers through him with the knowledge that somebody undressed him while he was asleep.

“You’ve got a couple cracked ribs,” Shiro says finally. “So we’re gonna be taking it easy again for a few weeks. How’s your stomach feel?”

Like it got kicked is how it feels. Keith touches it experimentally, feels his face shifting into a grimace. The ache is still there, deep and invasive, but at least he doesn’t feel like he's going to throw up anymore.

“They ran a couple different scans,” Shiro says, and the hazy memory surfaces of gloved hands and cold air on his bare torso, white light overhead. “Nothing’s… nothing’s badly damaged, but we’re going to be keeping a close eye on it. You’re probably gonna be sore for a while. They showed us a map of the inflammation and you were all lit up.”

That figures. Keith rubs his forehead and nods absently.

“Keith,” says Shiro. “This is important. What do you remember?”

Keith doesn’t want to think about it.

“Do you remember being in the fridge?” Shiro asks, more gently. “You don’t have to talk about it
yet if you don’t want to, I just need to know if you can remember it.”

“I remember it,” mumbles Keith.

“Okay,” says Shiro softly. “Okay. Do you remember after? Do you remember us coming to get you out?”

Keith pulls up his knees, kicking the blankets off the rest of the way. His abdomen hurts with the movement; there’s a strange stiffness in his legs. “I remember everything, you don’t have to…”

Shiro had scooped him up and carried him like a little kid when he’d been too cold and stiff to move. It’s foggy, but he remembers. There had been a brisk walk, Shiro’s heart pounding under his ear, then the overwhelming light and noise of the medical ward. There had been strangers putting their hands on him, a painfully bright light in his eyes--

Shiro had stayed with him, stayed close. They’d covered him with blankets and warming packs, and the exhaustion had swept over him all at once, but it had been Shiro’s hands and Shiro’s voice that told him it was safe to let go.

But--

Keith’s fingers twine with the familiar suede band still around his wrist. Almost without thinking, he’s gripping it to send the signal: shortshortshort, long, long, long, shortshortshort.

It buzzes.

Next to him, Shiro shifts and looks down at his wrist. He goes still.

Keith takes in a breath. There’s two hours of blind isolation and terror and loneliness and hurt churning in his chest, a twisting choking mass that demands answers, and he opens his mouth to let it out--

Shiro looks up at him. And just like that, all the words, all the questions, all the half-formed accusations die in Keith’s throat, drowning in a shuddering exhale, because Shiro looks devastated.

“Keith,” Shiro says--and then he stops, like he doesn’t know what to say. He closes his eyes for a moment, and Keith is startled to see tears at their corners. “Keith,” Shiro says again, and his voice is steadier. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

He reaches out, and Keith is still too stunned to react as Shiro gently, gently picks up his hand with both of his own, thumbing at the soft textured braid of his bracelet. He looks down at Keith’s scraped and battered knuckles for a long moment, then turns his hand carefully from side to side to see where it’s hurt, supporting it from underneath. Two of Keith's fingernails are ripped down past the quick from when he tried to unscrew the hinges on the door by feel; the outside edge of his hand is puffy and fuschia from pounding on the door with his fist. Shiro studies each tiny injury silently, touching with the tips of his fingers around the edges of a shallow gash.

Keith watches, transfixed by the soft movements of Shiro’s large hands. A deep, powerful sense of quiet and calm curls irresistibly around him, slowing his heart, settling him into stillness. It’s a strangely vulnerable feeling, letting his hand lie passively under this tender scrutiny. Months ago, he realizes dimly--weeks, even--he would have pulled back and found a way to avoid this, to shield himself, even from Shiro. Now, though… now he feels heavy with peace.

It’s nice.
“Refrigerators like that in big kitchens,” says Shiro quietly, still looking down at Keith’s bruised hand, cradled in his own, “they’re basically big metal boxes. Matt would do better explaining the science of it, but--what it comes down to is… the signal from your bracelet got caught in the walls, it sort of got… rerouted, the metal trapped it and kept it from getting through to me. That’s why it didn’t work.”

It’s almost offensively simple. Keith’s mouth opens, and he has to work for a moment to find the words. “I thought--” he manages. “They said-- I thought you turned it off, they said you were… they said you didn’t want me around anymore, they said--”

Shiro inhales, and then he’s on his feet, shifting from the chair to the bed to sit next to Keith. His arms are already open, and Keith finds himself lurching forward into the unspoken invitation, burying his face in Shiro’s dress grays. He feels Shiro plucking at the fabric of his gown where it gapes open over his back, tugging it closed so that Keith is covered--and then it's warmth and weight and security as Shiro folds him in.

“I didn’t turn it off,” Shiro murmurs, and Keith can feel the hum of his voice all the way through to his bones. “I won't ever turn it off, not as long as you need it. I'll always want you around. They said those things to hurt you and they're not true.”

Keith swallows hard. “I thought you…” He shuts his eyes, and for a moment he can’t say anything at all, choking on the memory; for a moment he’s alone again, left again. “I didn’t think you were coming, I thought you were mad at me, I thought you weren’t coming because you were mad at me--”

“No…” Shiro says immediately. “No, no no no, bud…” There’s a shift: Shiro’s arms wrap around him just a little more tightly, there’s soft pressure where Shiro’s cheek rests against the top of his head--and Keith’s eyes are prickling and welling.

“I’ll never, ever leave you in a place you're hurt or scared to--to punish you, or get even, or make a point.” Shiro's voice has gone quiet and soft in a way that somehow echoes the urgent warmth of his arms. “I won’t ever do that to you, okay? Even if we're in a fight, it doesn't matter. I won't leave you like that.”

Keith keeps still, listening and wondering.

“I was so scared, bud,” Shiro whispers. “When we couldn't find you. I was so scared.”

There’s a shuddering hitch to the words, a wetness, and Keith pulls back a little, enough that he can see Shiro. Shiro lets him go, and for a moment they look at each other, studying each other’s faces and the tears and weariness written there.

“You found me, though,” Keith says abruptly--and the truth of it hits him all at once, powerful and disorienting as an ocean wave. It knocks him breathless.

“Keith,” Shiro says, “Keith…”

“I thought I fucked it up,” Keith says, and suddenly he can't see Shiro for the tears blurring his vision. His voice tangles with the painful lump in his throat; the words ride on a strained keening. “I thought I fucked everything up again, I thought-- I thought you gave up on me I thought you weren't coming but you did and you found me, you--”

He sobs, then, and he manages to keep it silent but it wrenches through his body and hurts. Shiro gathers him in again as he crumples, and Keith clings to him like he's the only thing saving him from
drowning.

“I'm sorry,” he wheezes. “Shiro I'm sorry, I'm sorry--”

“Shhhhh,” Shiro murmurs in his ear. “Shh, hey, it's okay, bud. What are you sorry for?”

“The-- with the simulator, I fucked up, I was gonna-- I was coming to say, I'm sorry--”

Shiro hushes him again, rubbing his back. “We're gonna talk about that later, alright? For now I want you to know that it's okay. It's all going to be okay.”

Keith pulls back again to get a look at Shiro's face. The contrast between the calm conviction in the words and the terrified chaos of last night is too stark, and Keith can't wrap his mind around it.

“It's going to be okay,” Shiro says again, meeting his eyes. “I promise.”

Keith stares at him, half-wary. “You’re not... mad?”

“No,” says Shiro quietly, and wipes at the tears still damp under Keith's eyes with his thumb. “I had some time to process a little bit, and then--” He pauses and takes a deep breath, one side of his mouth quirking up in a tired little smile. “...I got kind of distracted. We’re gonna have some talks about it, you and me and Commander Sam. But it can wait until we’re home.”

“Home?” Keith repeats, and his voice breaks with the desperate hope suddenly alive again in his chest.

“Tomorrow, probably,” says Shiro. “They wanted to keep you overnight just in case. A doctor’s gonna come and check you over one more time in the morning, but they said we could probably go home after that if nothing’s gotten worse.”

“No, I--” Keith swallows. He doesn’t know where to look. “You’re-- I’m still...? You still want me? For summer?”

Shiro pauses. “Yeah, buddy,” he says, more gently. “If that’s okay with you.”

Keith can’t say anything. He swallows again, hard, trying to clear the lump in his throat. He’s smiling, somehow, smiling and crying all at once. It’s bright sunshine and rain, and he lets out a little hiccupsing giggle at the absurdity of it, trying to wipe away the tears that keep brimming over before they fall.

“That a yes?” asks Shiro, tilting his head down to get a better look at Keith’s face. He’s smiling too.

Keith laughs again, an unvoiced shuddery thing more than half a sob, and pitches forward to press his forehead to Shiro’s shoulder and hide his face. As Shiro’s hand comes up automatically to cup the back of his head, he nods.


And, since Shiro doesn’t seem inclined to disentangle himself, Keith stays where he is. There’s a part of him—a very, very distant part—that is embarrassed to be clinging like this, but he’s tired and he hurts and it feels good to rest curled up against Shiro’s solid warmth. The fabric of his dress grays is stiff and a little scratchy and it has a strange sharp dry-cleaned smell--but underneath it Keith can smell Shiro’s soap and the pleasant toasty odor that seems to just be him, and the familiarity of it makes the rhythm of his breathing deepen and slow without conscious thought.
“You came for me,” he mumbles into Shiro’s shoulder. It’s a bright thing, this truth, too bright to look at, warm as desert sunshine.

Shiro’s hand smooths over his back, big and warm. “I’ll always come for you,” he answers softly.

Keith considers this. He can feel the calm, heavy feeling stealing back out along his limbs, a deep quiet warming him from the inside. He breathes in deep and lets himself tumble into it.

Everything’s going to be okay.

Chapter End Notes

AS PROMISED, some gd FLUFF

(also look, an ultimate number of chapters)

(it might change, it might end up being 48 instead but)

(guys i’m gonna finish)
“Do you want me to step out?” Shiro asks quietly the next morning.

Keith’s eyes are huge and shadowed in his pinched pale face, and he doesn’t look away from the exam room door. The doctor is out in the main office of the medical ward, Shiro can hear him: he has a cheerful, boisterous manner that would put Shiro at ease but is making Keith shrink and go quiet.

“Don’t leave,” Keith whispers.

“All right,” Shiro agrees. “I’ll stay right here.”

They’ve put Keith in another gown. It’s too big on him, makes him look tinier than he is. This one opens in the front like a bathrobe, and he has his arms folded over the joining of the edges like an extra shield. His bare feet dangle off the edge of the exam table.

The night was an adventure.

It had been easy enough to soothe Keith back to sleep, but he hadn’t stayed there. In retrospect it’s not surprising. He’d slept almost the entire second half of the day, and he had to be in a lot of pain. But Shiro had startled awake at half past two to a scuffle and a crash: Keith had woken up, decided to find a bathroom, and gotten himself out of bed only to discover that his legs were too stiff and sore to carry him without a great deal of concentration. Shiro had found him on hands and knees beside his bed, confused and half-panicked.

Things had only gone downhill from there.

He’d gotten Keith to the bathroom and then back to his bed. The nurse on duty gave him a painkiller and a sleep aid--which was a good idea in theory, but Keith kept fighting it. The third time he struggled back to consciousness, disoriented and whimpering, Shiro finally gathered him up and carried him back with him to the reclining chair they’d found for him to sleep in.

Keith slept very well with this arrangement, snuggled up against Shiro’s left side. Shiro did not. He’s running on shitty coffee now.

The door opens. Keith flinches.

“Oof,” remarks the doctor, taking one look at Keith’s black eye and bruised face. “What’s the other guy look like?”

“The other guy looks expelled,” Shiro says quietly. He’s already bristling a bit: can’t the man see the way Keith is pulling into himself?

“Oof,” remarks the doctor, taking one look at Keith’s black eye and bruised face. “What’s the other guy look like?”

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The doctor plops on a wheeled chair and spins it to face them. He’s scrolling rapidly on his tablet, his eyes sharp on the screen. “That,” he says, “sounds like a very good look for him. Hypothermia?” He lowers the tablet and gives Keith a look, mock-affronted. “Kid, this is New Mexico in almost-June, don’t you know there are rules?”

Shiro stiffens. But though Keith’s shoulders are still hunched up, his bare toes curling, there’s a small, shy smile on his face. “Sorry,” he answers, one foot swinging nervously.
“Yeah, you’d better be,” grumbles the doctor, looking back at his tablet and sucking his teeth loudly. “Come into my house. Though I guess technically I came into your house. All right!” He sets his tablet aside and rolls his chair in one smooth movement to park in front of where Keith is sitting on the edge of the table. He sits forward to match Keith’s bowed posture, resting his elbows on his knees and folding his hands loosely between them. “So. This is what we’re gonna do.”

Keith’s eyes dart a little anxiously past him to Shiro, but he nods.

“They did all the heavy lifting for us yesterday,” the doctor tells Keith. “They took a bunch of pictures of your bones and your insides and your brains and they made sure your heart was still working right and all that stuff so today all we have to do is check their homework. Okay?”

“So we’re going to be taking a look at that beautiful shiner you’ve got,” the doctor says. “We’re going to be taking a look at your tummy, I’m going to be poking it a little bit and listening to it to make sure everything’s moving the way it’s supposed to, I’m going to listen to your heart and your lungs and check all your reflexes, and by that time the lady from town should be here, and she’s gonna do another quick scan of your tummy like yesterday, just to be safe.”

Keith’s forehead furrows up at this with worried confusion, and he looks past the doctor at Shiro for help.

“He was asleep yesterday when they did the scan,” Shiro says.

“Oh,” says the doctor cheerfully. “I’ll tell you about it, then. It’s no big deal, it takes about fifteen minutes and it doesn’t hurt at all. She’s gonna put some goop on your tummy and use a little wand like a-- a special camera to see what’s going on inside, and that’ll tell us if anything’s bleeding.”

“...I know about sonograms,” Keith says, frowning uncertainly.

The doctor throws up his hands. “You let me explain that whole thing? Well, there you go. Tummy sonogram in about ten minutes. After that, if everything checks out, you get to go home.”

Keith fidgets, picking at a corner of his gown. “What if it doesn’t?”

“Then we’ll do some other stuff to figure out what’s happening and what we need to do to fix it,” the doctor says, brisk and vague and confident. “For now we’re just gonna start with what I told you. Sound good?”

“Um,” murmurs Keith, and gives Shiro a quick searching look. Shiro lifts his eyebrows at him and nods encouragingly, and Keith looks down, swinging his legs. “Um, I guess?”

Shiro watches while the doctor conducts his examination, prompting Keith to follow a pen held in front of his face with his eyes, checking the peripheral vision of his puffy bruised eye, asking about blurriness. He’s good with Keith, and Shiro finds himself releasing his initial wary hostility as the doctor coaxes first tiny self-conscious smiles and then a quiet giggle out of his patient.

Keith does well through the process, sitting quietly while the doctor presses his stethoscope to his chest and back, breathing when he’s told. But then the doctor guides him to lie back on the table, and though Keith complies, he’s stiff and pale with apprehension.

“You want your buddy to come over for this part?” the doctor asks Keith quietly. Shiro doesn’t hear Keith’s answer, but the doctor looks over his shoulder at him a second later and says, “Moral support, your presence has been requested.”
“I’m coming,” says Shiro, hastily getting to his feet. Keith’s eyes fix on him as he circles to the side of the table opposite the doctor and scoops up Keith’s small battered hand in his own. “I got you,” Shiro tells him softly, and Keith exhales and nods, relaxing into the rustling paper underneath him.

Keith shuts his eyes as the doctor opens his gown, and he grips Shiro’s hand desperately tight when the man’s gloved fingertips make contact with his abdomen. Shiro puts his free hand on Keith’s shoulder, soothing, trying to distract with comfort. He can’t tell how well it works, but it doesn’t seem to hurt.

The doctor is quick and kind with his examination, anyway, talking throughout, telling Keith what he’s doing, asking about pain--and for that a pitifully grateful tightness rises in Shiro’s throat. He stares at the soft mottled skin under the doctor’s hands without really seeing it, and he wonders how they keep winding up here.

No more, he thinks, and squeezes Keith’s hand. We’re not doing this again.

Keith relaxes slightly when the doctor makes the switch from fingers to stethoscope. He opens his eyes to watch, but his gaze slides from the doctor up to Shiro after a moment.

“How’re you doing?” Shiro asks him softly.

Keith’s shoulders lift slightly. “M okay,” he answers.

“Don’t talk for a minute, kiddo,” says the doctor, the diaphragm of his stethoscope still pressed gently to the lower left side of Keith’s stomach. “Almost done.”

Shiro makes a face at Keith, an exaggerated guilty grimace, widening his eyes and pulling his lower lip flat. Keith wrinkles up his nose in answer, then turns his face to the side to hide an exasperated grin in Shiro’s uniform jacket.

The sonogram is more difficult.

It starts out easy enough, the transducer gliding smoothly while Keith stares up at the ceiling, his hand still gripping Shiro’s tightly. But then the technician settles to the task of checking individual organs, and with that comes pressure, and with pressure comes pain.

What follows is twenty minutes of misery: the tech urging Keith to relax, Keith managing it for maybe fifteen seconds before some new angle or pressure makes him flinch and tense up, the process repeating again. By the end of it, Keith is near tears with frustration and Shiro’s left hand is prickling with pins and needles--but the scan comes up clear, and home is within reach.

“He’s really stiff,” says Shiro worriedly to the doctor once they’ve stepped out to the main office to let Keith change into his real clothes. “He says it hurts to walk, is that--”

“Likely from the cold,” the doctor answers. “He spent a long time shivering, he’s gonna have some muscle fatigue. He’s probably in for a wretched couple of days, poor kid.”

“What can I…?”


“I can do that,” says Shiro, nodding. “Um, is there anything I need to watch for, with his…”
“Any sudden pain that gets worse, any fever… upset stomach, vomiting, diarrhea. Keep him breathing deep until those ribs heal. I’m gonna send you some files with more information.”

“Thank you, sir,” Shiro says, relieved. So far everything has sounded like common sense, but he doesn’t trust his foggy brain to retain it all.

The doctor leaves, and Shiro finds himself leaning against the wall outside the exam room, suddenly fighting to keep his eyes open while he waits for Keith. He’s abruptly acutely aware of the fact that he hasn’t gotten more than about seven hours of sleep in the last three days.

“Aha,” says a familiar voice, and Shiro feels the weight lift off his shoulders before he even registers what he’s hearing. “There you are.”

“Sir,” he manages, and pushes himself off the wall to salute. It’s a bit sloppy, exhausted as he is, but it’s really only for the principle of the thing: they’re in uniform on base.

“As you were,” says Sam affectionately, and catches Shiro into a hug as he slumps. “Oh, kid. You look worn out.”

“I want,” Shiro says, with great conviction, “a nap.”

“We can arrange that,” Sam says, and pats his back. “You gotta stay awake until we get home, though. I can’t carry you up the stairs.”

“I’ll sleep in the car,” says Shiro. “I’ll sleep in the garage. I’ll sleep right here.”

Sam chuckles. “Eyes on the prize, Shiro. You’ve got a mattress. A nice one.”

“Mmm,” Shiro agrees longingly.

“Where’s Keith?”

Shiro shifts and glances toward the exam room door, wondering if he should check on him. “Changing,” he says. “He’s okay, we’re clear to leave. He’s really sore, though. Moving kind of slow.”

Sam makes a soft unhappy sound. “I bet. Poor kid.” He exhales and glances around the medical office. “Well. That works out, then. I was planning to bully you into going home for a bit to rest and staying with Keith myself for a while, but I’ll just take you both home instead.”

“Oh, that’s--” Shiro shuts his eyes and laughs, rubbing the side of his face. “I don’t have a vehicle here, right…” The shuttle ride from the apartment yesterday feels like it was years ago.

“I think we’ll be able to fit it all in one trip,” Sam says musingly. “We might have to squeeze into the front seat but it’s a short drive, it’ll be fine.”

“What?” Shiro asks blankly. “Keith’s not-- they’re not checking him out of his room for the summer, he’s only got one bag. And I only have what you brought me last night…”

Sam glances at him, amused. “You sure about that?”

Shiro stares at him, but before he can ask, the exam room door opens behind him. Sam’s eyes slide past him, and Shiro catches a flash of a very complicated, very relatable mixture of anger and sorrow and relief.

“Hey, squirt,” Sam says, very gently, and steps past Shiro to draw Keith into a hug.
Shiro takes a step back, watching. He sees Keith’s eyes widen, startled, and then slip shut as he sags into it. “Hi, Commander Sam,” Keith mumbles.

“You know how good it is to see you on your feet?” Sam asks him.

Keith ducks his face down to hide, embarrassed. “Thanks.”

Sam lets him suffer for another moment before he releases him, touching the crown of his head briefly. “Come on,” he says. “Let’s get you two home.”

He leads them across to the quartered-off room where they’d spent the night and pulls back the curtain, standing back so Keith can go in first.

Keith stops short.

“Wh--” he starts. He stares, then steps back with one foot, confused and half-wary. “Um--”

“Better go check it out,” Sam says, half-smiling.

Keith looks up at him quickly, then twists to find Shiro before he turns back. There’s a strange sort of anxiety in his face: he looks like somebody who isn’t sure if he’s meant to be there. He looks overwhelmed. Shiro steps to stand behind him, reaching out to rest his hand on Keith's shoulder, and looks past him into the room.

“Oh, huh,” he says, and finds himself smiling, his heart hurting in the best way. He smooths his hand reassuringly over the joint of Keith's shoulder and looks at Sam. “Wonder where all that came from.”

Sam raises his hands, palms-out. “I just brought it from his room,” he says. “Most of it.”

The recliner pulled into the corner of the tiny room is piled high with colorful gifts, like a little shrine. There’s a giant plushie of some sort, a huge balloon bouquet weighted down with a bag of candy; another bouquet, not as large but with one balloon printed to look like the moon with a stylized rocket in silhouette against it, is fixed to a small box wrapped in bright colorful paper. Keith steps toward it uncertainly, and Shiro lets his hand fall away.

“So?” asks Sam. “Whatcha got there?”

Keith touches a tiny card affixed to the bag of candy, then carefully opens it. “It’s--” he says, and hesitates, shifting his weight. “It says it’s from Natasha and Tina?”

“Sergeant Burns and Lieutenant Mendez,” murmurs Shiro for Sam’s benefit.

“It says… it says they’re glad I’m okay and we need to have a laser tag rematch,” says Keith, still staring down at the card. He’s smiling, small and tentative and slightly dazed, but his shoulders are lifted, guarded. When he shifts his weight and turns to look back at Sam and Shiro again, his eyes are dark and apprehensive and unsure…

Shiro nods at him encouragingly, meeting his eyes. It’s okay, he wants to say. There’s no trick. It’s okay.

Keith bites his lower lip and looks back at the chair. He reaches for the box next: it’s wrapped, a little inexpertly, in a blue-and-green striped paper that looks vaguely familiar to Shiro. “This is…” He pauses, his fingers on the label, and looks at Sam questioningly.

Sam nods. “From me and Colleen and Matt and Katie.”
“Oh,” whispers Keith, and red is suddenly spreading across his cheeks. “Um, that’s-- thank, thank you.”

“Well, open it first,” Sam says, laughing.

Keith bends his head down over the package, his hair falling down to hide his face. It’s getting long again, Shiro notices absently; they’ll have to do something about that at some point. He watches Keith carefully pick apart the tape at the seams of the paper, like he’s afraid to tear it. The balloons escape as the tape comes loose, taking the paper with them, and Keith grabs for them hastily, but the ribbon is well within easy retrieving range when the balloons bump gently against the ceiling. Keith stares down at the small package left behind in his hands: a space-themed case with a gaming chip.

“I don’t think there’s anything in there you’ll find terribly challenging,” Sam says. “But it’s really highly rated for accuracy with planet topography and atmospheric conditions. Katie and Matt like it, we thought you might too.” He pauses and shrugs. “Something to keep you busy this summer.”

“Wow,” murmurs Keith. He hasn’t looked up from the package.

Shiro steps up behind him and checks the specs in the corner. “Oh, good,” he says, and taps the case. “You can run this on our system at home, but then you can also plug it into your tablet when you come back here in the fall.”

Keith goes still, almost guilty. It throws Shiro for a loop until he remembers--

“I gave it to the officers in charge of the case,” he says, a little quieter. “Matt thought he might be able to salvage it when they’re done with it. They’ll assign you another one if not.”

Keith doesn’t respond for a moment. Then he nods, quick and jerky, and raises his head to look at Sam. “Thank you, sir,” he says softly--and then apparently that’s all the eye contact he can handle, because he’s ducking his head again and picking at the edges of the case. “A lot, I-- this looks fun. You didn’t have to…”

“Hope you enjoy it,” says Sam, the words brisk and cheerful. “How about that other one? There wasn’t a card with it that I saw…”

“Oh,” says Keith, and sets the case carefully down on the chair. He’s smiling again, like he can’t even help it. “No, that’s… I know where it came from, I think.”

“You do?” Shiro asks curiously. He watches as Keith picks up the stuffed animal--it’s sort of gray-purple, sleek velveteen; a hippo, he realizes a second later when he gets a look at its face.

“Malone,” Keith says. It takes the entire reach of his arms to wrap around the thing. “He brought it back from the arcade a couple months ago. He said it cost like a thousand tickets…” He pauses, the worried, unsure look flickering back. “Did he-- Maybe he left it on accident…”

“Did he-- Maybe he left it on accident…”

“It was on your bed,” says Sam, grinning. “I don’t think he did.”

Keith takes a moment to consider this, staring down at the frankly ridiculous plushie--it’s easily half his size, Shiro thinks, marvelling--and then he’s shifting carefully, turning so his back is facing Shiro and Sam, bowing his head over the hippo--

There’s silence, and a wet sniff.

“I’m gonna bring the car around,” Sam murmurs, and slips out.
Keith doesn’t move, still hugging the hippo, still sort of hunched over it, like it hurts to stand up straight. Maybe it does, Shiro doesn’t know. But there’s a tension to the quiet, a tightness; Keith is breathing carefully, holding very still like he’s trying to keep something bigger than himself contained—and Shiro thinks he understands.

“Hey,” he whispers, and draws Keith closer, looping his arm around his shoulders. “It’s okay. It’s okay.”

Keith makes a tiny, choked noise and gasps, and then he’s letting go of the hippo with one hand so he can clutch at his ribs and oh, it’s not fair, it’s not fair that he can’t even cry without pain. Shiro wraps his arms around him, loose and careful, rubs his back with a flat palm.

“Everybody worked so hard to find you, bud,” he says softly. “Everybody was so worried.”

“I didn’t--” Keith starts, and then his breath is hitching and shuddering. “I thought, I didn’t think anybody would--”

There’s nothing else, no more words. Shiro holds him and soothes him, waiting patiently while Keith stares and stares at the incontrovertible evidence of friends, of people who love him.

“Come on,” says Shiro finally, when Keith’s breathing has settled. “Let’s go home.”

And they do.

Chapter End Notes

is the rest of this fic just going to be fluff, rosemary?

why yes.

yes it is.
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Of course it’s not as simple as that.

They make it home, and Shiro finds enough of a second wind to get Keith into the bathroom for a long hot shower and to help Matt make some pasta for lunch, to hunt down their small first aid kit and get the cold packs in the freezer and set out the hot packs to be microwaved later, to line up the painkillers and muscle creams on the kitchen island like a row of mismatched soldiers at attention, and to start a load of laundry because why not at this point, honestly.

And then, as they’re all eating—in the living room, for once, sprawled on the furniture because they deserve it, Keith damp and droopy at Shiro’s side and Shiro beginning to drift between bites--Sam’s tablet buzzes with an incoming call.

Sam leans forward to pick it up off the coffee table and looks at the screen for a moment, then gets up to take the call in his office. Shiro rouses with a sense of vague foreboding and watches him walk down the hall and shut the door. He glances at Keith, still working his way through his bowl of noodles, barely aware of anything not on his fork, and he reluctantly settles back into the couch.

But he keeps an ear open for the snatches of half a conversation floating back to them from Sam’s office.

It doesn’t last long. Sam calls him a moment later, beckoning him into the office with a jerk of his head. “Be right back,” Shiro murmurs to Keith, and gets to his feet to follow Sam.

Sam shuts the door behind them. “They want a statement.”

It takes a minute for the dots to connect. “Wh-- Now?” Shiro asks bleakly.

“Today,” Sam says, his eyes serious. “As soon as possible. I’ll hold them off for a couple hours if you need to rest first, but the General wants to send somebody over.”

Shiro rubs the heel of his hand into one eye. “Okay,” he agrees. “Okay, um-- do they need mine, or Keith’s, or both? Matt’s?”

“Yours and Keith’s, it sounded like.”

“Okay,” says Shiro again, and can’t even think for a moment. He shakes his head slightly, focuses. “I’m gonna… see what Keith wants to do. If he wants to do it now or wait.”

“Shiro,” Sam says, watching him, “do you need to rest first?”

It’s his commander voice, and Shiro tries to give the question the consideration it requires. “I’m okay,” he says. “If Keith wants to just do it now I can-- I’m okay for another hour or two.”

Sam gives him a long look, weighing this, skeptical. “Alright,” he finally says. “I trust you to know your own limits.”

Shiro instantly, guiltily feels like maybe this is a misplaced trust, but there’s nothing he can really say, so he just nods and turns to head out, back down the hallway.
Keith is sitting up, watching them with his single unblackened eye as they return to the living room. His face turns wary as Shiro circles around to sit on the coffee table, facing him. “What’s—?” he asks, and looks from Shiro to Sam and back, his shoulders lifting.

On the other couch, Matt puts down his fork, glancing at Sam.

“It’s okay,” Shiro says first, as a preamble. “It’s okay, um—” He takes a breath. “The Garrison is gonna send somebody over to ask us some questions about what happened yesterday.”

Keith stares at him for a moment, still wild-eyed and tense—and then deflates all at once. “Oh,” he says wearily. “Right, that’s…”

He looks, for a moment, like he’s going to cry, and Shiro’s reaching out before he’s even thought about it, wrapping a hand around his upper arm in silent support. “I know,” he says. “I know. We don’t have to do it right now if you don’t want to. They need a statement today, but we can rest for a couple hours first, if you want. Or we can get it over with now. It’s up to you.”

“Is there anything else we have to do?” Keith asks. There’s an exhausted, pleading note in his voice that would probably qualify as whiny if the situation were any less painful.

Shiro glances at Sam. Sam shakes his head, and Shiro says, “No, bud. This is it, then we’re done for today.”

Keith nods. He’s staring unfocused at the coffee table to Shiro’s right, his face twisted up with tired unhappiness. He drags in a breath and straightens a little, then lifts his shoulders in something like indifference. “I guess— can we-- get it over with.”

“You want to do it now?” Shiro asks to be sure, and looks back at Sam when Keith nods. “Okay, bud,” he says, and mentally pushes his nap back an hour. “We’ll get it over with.”

Sam heads back down the hall, swiping on his tablet to make the call, and Shiro shifts to sit with Keith again. Keith sags against him, leaning in against Shiro’s side when he raises his arm for him, shutting his eyes when Shiro combs through his damp hair with his fingers.

“You want me to stay?” Matt offers. “I can clear out if you’d rather…”

“No,” says Shiro. “Stay, if you don’t mind. I’m…” He shuts his eyes for a moment: the soft warm weight of Keith under his arm is dangerous. He could fall asleep right here; he will, if he doesn’t keep fighting it. “…I’m a little foggy.”

“You got it,” says Matt. He pauses, then unfolds and gets up from his corner of the long couch and starts collecting their dishes. Shiro gives him a grateful look when he comes to take Keith’s empty bowl out of his hands.

There’s almost no wait. The General must have had somebody standing by, because the brisk knock on the door comes less than ten minutes later. Keith’s whole body jolts, and a split second later he’s pulling back from Shiro, sitting up straight and tense as Sam goes to open the door.

“It’s okay,” Shiro reminds him quietly, and Keith gives him a quick distracted look before he returns to watching Sam usher the two officers to the long couch across from them. His face has the sort of tight flat non-expression that verges on hostile.

They take Shiro’s statement first, for which Shiro is grateful. He can appreciate the even professionalism with which they guide him through the events of the day before, the questions that tease out details he didn’t initially think to include. He gives them everything he has: he tells them
about messaging Keith with no response, calling him with no answer, searching for him in the crowd with no success. He tells them about the heart-pounding time that lapsed between realizing Keith was lost and finding him again--half an hour? An hour? Forty minutes, Matt confirms--and, conscious of Keith listening, Shiro emphasizes the role of their friends in the rescue.

Keith is quiet throughout, slouching back into the corner of the couch, staring at his knees with his hair falling in his face. He looks sullen, his arms wrapped around his ribs: Shiro can see his discomfort and apprehension, but he prays that the officers don’t take it for recalcitrance or guilt.

“Your turn,” says one of the officers, and she gives Keith a smile that is probably meant to be reassuring. Keith doesn’t look up from his knees, so the effect is lost. “Can you tell us what happened?”

Keith doesn’t answer. One hand tightens convulsively where it’s clutching his t-shirt. He’s breathing too fast, shallow rapid movements of his chest; his face is still blank.

“Keith,” Shiro says quietly, and shifts to sit so he is angled toward Keith, perched on the edge of the couch with his elbows on his knees, his body a shield. “Hey, bud, look at me.”

There’s a pause where nothing happens, and Shiro’s just begun to wonder if they can put this off after all, and then Keith swallows and flicks his eyes up to meet Shiro’s.

“Focus on me,” Shiro says, keeping his voice low, holding the eye contact. He’s peripherally aware of Sam withdrawing to the kitchen, of Matt slipping out of the room: one less person listening and watching. “Tell it to me if it’s easier, would that be easier?”

Keith swallows again, darting a glance across the room to the two officers. His shoulders jerk slightly in a small shrug.

Shiro studies him, trying to understand, reaching. “Hey,” he says, even softer, chasing a barely substantial glimmer of comprehension, and sways forward slightly to recapture Keith’s attention and block his view of the officers. “You’re not going anywhere, Keith. You’re not going anywhere, okay?”

Keith gives him a startled look--and then his face is flushing, he’s squirming, and Shiro thinks for a slightly panicked moment that he’s read it completely wrong. But there’s a small embarrassed nod, a glance of acknowledgement, and Keith is relaxing, focusing again, the look of blind panic leaving him.

“Okay,” says Shiro. “You went to the offices, right? You want to start there?”

“Yeah, okay,” mumbles Keith. He’s fidgeting a little, tiny anxious movements of his hands on a worn section of his t-shirt’s hem, but he’s unfolded, a little, and it’s so much better than the frozen stillness of before. “I was-- I was looking for you, I wanted to…” His eyes shift to the officers again, and then away. “I wanted to talk to you.”

That’s a conversation they haven’t had yet, a conversation that will keep until everybody’s had a chance to rest. Keith’s eyes on him are searching, and Shiro gives him a subtle nod that he hopes is encouraging. “What happened next?” he prompts.

“Um,” says Keith, and looks down at his hands. One foot swings nervously. “Um, they were in there? And there wasn't anybody else so I left?”

“Can you tell us their names for the record?” one of the officers asks.
“Josh Beck,” Keith says. “Candice Paschel and--um…” He rubs his uninjured eye. “I don’t know Ricketts’ first name…”

“Peter,” Shiro supplies, and Keith latches onto it, nodding.

“Why did you leave the office?” asks the other officer.

Keith stares at him. “Because,” he says again, slowly, “they were in there and there weren’t any grown-ups.”

“Were you afraid of them?”

Keith lets out a breath, a noise like something deflating under pressure, and licks his lips. He shrugs. The officer waits. “I need a verbal answer on that, cadet.”

“I guess,” mumbles Keith.

“You guess you were afraid of them?”

Shiro watches Keith cringe and squirm and decides he’s had enough. “They’ve had encounters before,” he says. “They didn’t end well for Keith.”

“Thank you, sir,” says the first officer. “We need to hear this from Cadet Kogane, though.”


And then everybody’s looking at Keith, and Keith is shrinking under the scrutiny. His eyes finally fix on Shiro again, in a sort of sideways indirect way: he stares at Shiro’s hands and doesn’t raise his head. “I didn’t want them to see me,” he says, low. “I thought they’d start something.”

“So you left to avoid that?”

Keith nods. “Yeah,” he adds out loud, a beat late, shifting.

“Where did you go?”

“I don’t--” Keith hesitates. “I wasn’t really going anywhere, I sort of-- I turned a couple corners? I guess… toward the mess hall.”

“Were you aware that that area of the facility was closed and off-limits?” the officer asks.

Keith startles a little, glancing from the officer to Shiro with a quick scared dart of eyes. “N-noo?”

“Is that relevant right now?” Sam asks from the kitchen island. “He was running and he picked the wrong direction. It’s not his fault.”

There’s a pause, the officers exchanging quick looks. “Just trying to gather all the information, sir,” says the first.

“Everything you’ve covered so far is on the surveillance clips in the file,” says Sam meaningfully.

“We’ll--” says the officer, swiping hastily on his tablet. “We’ll move on, uh-- Can you tell us what happened after you left the offices, cadet?”

And slowly, haltingly, with lots of hesitations and backtracking, Keith tells them.
Shiro stays where he is, listening quietly. Keith takes him up on his offer and delivers most of his statement looking at Shiro, like he’s just talking to Shiro, like this is just a conversation— but it’s not fair, because if this were really just a conversation, Shiro would have started hugging him five minutes ago and never stopped.

“In the clip from outside the mess hall, it kind of looks like you stopped fighting when the security officer was coming,” says the officer, looking down at his tablet. “Like as soon as it looked like you might get caught you decided to hide with them. Can you tell us what that’s about, were you… feeling guilty?”

Keith stiffens up. Shiro can feel the sudden wave of anger and fear rolling off him like something tangible, seismic.

The officer waits for a moment. “I mean,” he says, spreading his hands, “You… apparently had the ability to call Captain Shirogane all along, but you didn’t? And then you had this opportunity to get the attention of somebody who could help, but you suddenly decided to run away instead? It just doesn’t seem like getting out of this situation was a priority for you.”

“You had my ear,” he says, loud and sharp. He’s shaking. “She was trying to pull my fucking ear off and it hurt, I wasn’t-- I couldn’t, while she was-- I couldn’t, okay, I tried, I was trying--”

He stops there, too suddenly. His fists are clenched by his sides and his head is bowed. Shiro hesitates, then reaches out and lays a hand on his rigid shoulder, tugging gently. It jerks under his hand, a startled tremor like the beginning of a fight—but then the fight is leaving Keith all at once. He lets Shiro draw him back to sit, not looking up.

“Okay,” says the officer into the silent living room. “Okay, let’s-- try to keep the language PG for the official report, alright, cadet?”

“Where the hell,” Sam begins hotly, and Shiro's straightening, his mouth open, his heart pounding heavy and furious in his ears, but Keith's on his feet, talking over them both.

“She had my ear,” he says, loud and sharp. “She was trying to pull my fucking ear off and it hurt, I wasn’t-- I couldn’t, while she was-- I couldn’t, okay, I tried, I was trying--”

There’s a tense silence. Shiro watches the young man across the room as his eyes widen with disbeliefing indignation before he catches the reaction back. He stands, passes his tablet to his partner, and gives Sam a carefully neutral salute before he crosses to the door. Sam opens it for him and closes it pointedly behind him, and god Shiro could not ask for a better CO.

“I apologize for my partner's behavior,” says the other officer. She has a nice voice, low and mellifluous, and Shiro relaxes a little. He keeps his hand on Keith's shoulder anyway.

“Oh, I think he can use whatever language he damn well wants,” Sam says, coming to stand behind the short couch. His voice has a steely pleasantness to it that Shiro knows is dangerous. “I also think your partner can take the rest of Keith's statement, Lieutenant. You can wait for her outside.”

“I apologize for my partner's behavior,” says the other officer. She has a nice voice, low and mellifluous, and Shiro relaxes a little. He keeps his hand on Keith's shoulder anyway.

“It's not his job to ascribe intent,” Sam says, slightly curt, returning to stand behind Keith and Shiro. “He doesn't get to decide whether or not somebody was a good enough victim.”

“No, sir,” the officer agrees, even and calm and professional—deescalating effectively, Shiro notes with approval and relief, feeling Keith relax a little more. “We're just here to hear in Cadet Kogane’s words what happened.” She pauses, then lowers her head slightly, looking at Keith. “We can take a break if you want, cadet.”

Keith is still sitting hunched, his hands tucked under his knees and his head down. He doesn't respond for a moment, and Shiro rubs his back, drawing in a breath to suggest that they take the
offered respite--but then Keith shifts and shakes his head mutely.

“All right,” says the officer. “If that changes, we can pause.”

Keith nods. He sits without moving for a moment, then turns his head toward Shiro without looking up. “I wasn’t--” he says, and swallows. “I did, I did try to use it. Before the-- before when they left, I mean. I got the middle letter wrong. I'm really... It was really stupid, I'm sorry.”

“Hey,” says Shiro unhappily, “hey, no…” It's too much, Keith's quiet pleading tone and the slump of his skinny shoulders, and Shiro’s private resolution to wait to hug him until the officers have gone drops forgotten to the wayside. “C’mere, Keith…”

There’s no resistance in Keith; he huddles in against Shiro like a hunted thing who has found a place to hide. Shiro can feel the exhaustion in him, the overwhelmed, weary longing for this all to be over.

“It wasn’t stupid,” Shiro murmurs. “It wasn’t stupid. What did we talk about, what did we say about that?”

He doesn’t think he’s going to get an answer, but after a moment Keith whispers, “Be more patient with myself.”

“Yeah, buddy,” Shiro says. He rests his chin on top of Keith’s head. “Patience--”

“--yields focus,” says Keith, almost automatically--like it’s something he’s been repeating to himself, like it’s something that stuck.

Shiro pulls back to look at him, surprised and pleased, and Keith shrugs vaguely, the corners of his mouth lifting and his eyes darting away.

Shiro lets a breath of laughter puff out between his lips. He reaches out and messes up Keith's hair, then pulls him in to press their foreheads together affectionately. “It wasn’t stupid,” he says again. “You were scared and distracted and that's not something to be sorry for. We’ll practice with it some more, okay?”

“Okay,” Keith whispers.

“What do you think?” Shiro asks him softly, indicating the officer with a flick of his eyes. “Keep going?”

Keith swallows. Then he nods, tiny, almost imperceptible.

“Proud of you,” Shiro tells him in a whisper, gripping his shoulder. Keith glances up at him, then looks quickly away, a small embarrassed smile on his face.

The officer is watching quietly, her eyes keen, and Shiro has the sudden uncertain feeling that whatever she's just observed is going to be in her report. He turns to look up quickly at Sam to see if he did something wrong--but Sam is only smiling, small and crinkle-eyed and proud. “Okay,” Shiro says: to himself, to Keith, to Sam's reassuring wink, to the officer. “Okay.”

“Okay,” the officer agrees. She glances down at her partner's tablet. “Cadet Kogane, can you tell me how you got from the hallway outside the mess to the refrigerator where Captain Shirogane found you?”

“Um,” says Keith. “They were-- There was somebody coming so they wanted to hide? And we went in the kitchen but it wasn't… I don't know, I guess they wanted to hide… better.”
“So they all went into the refrigerator with you?”

“Yeah.”

The officer swipes for a moment, taking notes with quick movements of her fingers. “Who opened the kitchen door?”

Keith pauses and shuts his eyes. “Beck,” he says, nodding. “It was Beck.”

“Alright,” the officer says. “And do you know whose idea it was to leave you there?”

It takes a moment for Keith to respond this time. He rubs his palms on his knees and picks at a scab that crosses the knuckles of his right hand. “Yeah,” he says reluctantly.

The officer waits, lowering her tablet. “Can you tell me?” she prompts, gentler.

“It was-- Paschel, it was her idea,” says Keith, not looking up from his hands. “And Beck, I guess. Ricketts didn't want to.”

The officer's eyebrows lift and she makes a note on her tablet. “They talked about it where you could hear them, then?”

“They thought I was asleep.”

The back of Shiro's neck pricks.

The officer’s eyes shift up past Keith and Shiro to Sam for a moment. “Why would they think you were asleep, cadet?”

“Because I was pretending to be asleep,” says Keith flatly.

“And they believed you?” the officer asks. She’s sitting forward a little now, speaking softly, coaxing at something that Shiro both needs to see and dreads.

Keith shrugs. He’s beginning to be mulish and sullen again, limbs drawn in, head down: he doesn’t want to be here, he doesn’t want to be talking about this.

“Cadet,” the officer presses. “Why would they think you were asleep?”

It comes out, then, in disorganized fragments reluctantly ceded. The worst of the fighting happened in the refrigerator, it seems: Keith had made a bid for freedom and been beaten down; he’d stopped fighting and they had not.

“Did you ever lose consciousness?”

“I don’t know what that means,” mumbles Keith. Shiro shifts where he sits and gives Keith a look, narrowing one eye skeptically. Keith refuses to look up.

The officer pauses, then asks patiently, “Did you black out?”

“Maybe,” Keith says. “I guess. I don’t know.”

“Okay,” murmurs the officer. She looks down at the tablet in her hands for a long moment. “I think,” she says, “I think we’ve about got all we need. We’ll be in contact in the next few days if there’s anything else we need clarified.”
“Thank you,” Shiro hears Sam say. “We’ll give you a call if we think of anything else.”

“Thank you, Commander,” the officer says formally. She’s standing, and Shiro should get up too, but he’s suddenly so heavy and tired, and Keith is sagging where he sits and-- and maybe Sam can be polite enough for all three of them, this time.

The door shuts. The living room is home again.

Keith lists to the side, pressing his forehead against Shiro’s upper arm, actively seeking contact in a way he almost never does, and Shiro doesn’t wait to be asked twice. He turns and gathers Keith in, wrapping his arms around him as tightly as he dares. There’s words somewhere probably for the way Shiro’s chest hurts, for the way he wants to rewind the last two days, to make it not be real, but they’re swallowed up in his exhaustion.

All he can do is hold on. So he does.

He’s more than half asleep twenty minutes later when Sam lays his hand gently on his shoulder and says quietly, “Shiro. You need to go to bed.”

“I--” starts Shiro. He rubs his eyes and looks down at Keith.

“He’s asleep,” says Sam, and then his arm is around Shiro’s shoulders, urging him up. “Come on, kid, come on. Real sleep time. He’ll be okay without you for a couple hours.”

Shiro feels like there’s some argument he should be making here, like this isn’t quite right, but then Sam’s saying, “I’ll take care of him for a while, it’s alright,” and--okay. Okay. He trusts Sam. He trusts Sam with Keith.

He doesn’t really remember moving from the couch to his bedroom, but somehow he makes it to his bed, his own pillow under his head, too tired to get under the covers. He drifts there for a while, half-resistant to the pull of sleep, half-dreaming.

He dreams he’s in his grandfather’s house, the curtains swaying gently in the breeze from the open window, the afternoon light cool white on the walls. It’s warm, but not unpleasant; the air is in motion and dry. There’s a soft creak from the door, a brush as it passes over carpet, and he’s glad because it means his grandfather’s cat has come to sleep with him. He feels the mattress shudder and dip behind him--but the warm solid body that curls up at his back is sharper and bonier than is right for the fluffy old cat, textured in fabric instead of fur.

He opens his eyes and peers back over his own shoulder, disoriented: Keith is there, back-to-back with him, his arms wrapped around that ridiculously oversized hippo plushie, his eyes already shut. Oh, thinks Shiro groggily, and lets his head fall back onto his pillow, sighing out. Oh.

The missing piece slots into place, and Shiro sinks into sleep, deep and dreamless.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve been fudging a little bit on my 10k word bank rule as I get closer to the end of this thing, with the result that for the first time I'm posting a chapter without another one completed and ready to go. I'm gonna TRY to update again next Sunday, but oof this next chapter is a lot of wrapping of loose ends and feelings so: no promises!
god you guys i'm, so, close,...
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

Content warning in this chapter for oblique references to corporeal punishment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Keith wakes up, the room is dark and there's a vacant Shiro-shaped patch of warmth in the bed next to him. He rolls into it, chasing the residual heat, and drowses for another ten minutes until the sullen ache in his muscles and an urgent interest in the smells of food coming from down the hall draw him up irresistibly to something more like full wakefulness.

He pushes himself up--and oh god he's even more sore than he was before, if that's even possible; he feels like every single muscle has stiffened, every bruise. His back hurts, his neck and shoulders, his arms. He shifts to dangle his legs off the side of the bed and the pull across the tops of his thighs from the change in position makes him hiss out a breath. There's a moment where he considers just curling back up under the blankets and staying there, but he's really hungry and he needs the bathroom, so he carefully stands up.

Walking is a challenge. His legs feel weak and tired, strangely resistant to what he wants them to do. It feels like the air around them has thickened, like gravity has increased and each step takes twice as much effort. He wobbles and winces his way across the room, wrapping an arm protectively around his stomach, and leans on the doorframe for a moment.

There's voices coming from the direction of the kitchen, light slanting down the hallway toward him. Keith listens absently, trying to stretch the hurt out of his legs one at a time. It doesn't work.

“...me to stay for a few more days?” That's Commander Sam. “Until he's feeling a little better? Give you a little time to ease into the summer?”

“Oh,” Keith hears Shiro say, and then there's a long pause. “I don't… want to keep you from your family?”

“Just a day or two,” Commander Sam says. “It's fine. I don't want to leave you alone before you're ready.”

There's another pause. “If it's really...” Shiro stops, and Keith hears him laugh a little. “I'm kind of... Um? They-- I'm in charge of a kid for the summer Sam oh my god who signed off on this.”

“I'll stay,” Commander Sam says immediately. “I already talked to Colleen, I'm thinking... maybe Monday or Tuesday I'll head home, if you're feeling like you're in a better place by then.”

“Thank you,” Shiro says, and it startles Keith a little to hear his tone: he sounds sort of... young, unsure in a way Keith has never associated with Shiro. “I'm-- sorry, I thought I was more ready for this than I apparently am.”

Commander Sam hums thoughtfully. There’s a sizzle from the stove. “No, I think you're ready, I think you'll be fine. This is just a rockier start than we were planning on. We're all still a little bit shook up, I think.”
“A little,” Shiro says, quieter. There’s a small huff of breath, like a laugh but harsher. “He could have…”

“I know,” Commander Sam says as Shiro trails off. “I know, but he didn’t. And he’s here now, and he’s safe and he’s okay and he’s got a great summer ahead of him.”

There’s silence for a moment, and Keith moves to step out into the hallway—but then Shiro’s talking again.

“You’d say, right?” he asks abruptly. “If you thought this was a bad idea, this summer. You’d tell me, you wouldn’t just…”

There’s an anxious note in his voice, a sort of vulnerability, and Keith understands with a sudden lurch of insight that Commander Sam is to Shiro what Shiro is to Keith. It gives him a strange feeling to think of Shiro in that light, as somebody who doubts himself and worries, somebody who doesn’t always know what to do—somebody who, occasionally, needs to be reassured.

The realization makes something soft and still and strangely protective bloom aching in the space between Keith’s lungs.

“I would tell you.” Commander Sam’s voice has gone quieter, gentle, carrying a smile. There’s nothing dismissive in it, though, nothing callous: it’s a promise, and a heavy one. “If this is something you’re willing to do, I fully believe you’re capable of doing it.”

Quiet falls. Keith doesn’t move.


“But you’re not doing this alone,” Commander Sam says. “You have support. You have people standing by to take care of him when you need a break. You have the Garrison’s resources. You’ve got Colleen and I, we’re not even an hour away and we’ll be checking in daily.”

“Yeah…”

“And he's a good kid. You'll be okay.”

Good kid.

Sam’s talking about him, Keith realizes with a funny little jump in the pit of his stomach. He rolls the words around in his mind for a moment, testing their weight, feeling at the edges of them. It’s not a phrase anybody has applied to him for a long time, and he’s not sure what to do with it.

“You really think so?”

“Yeah,” Commander Sam says softly. “Really do.”

Nothing more is said, and no sounds come from the kitchen except the hisses and clatters of cooking. Keith waits a moment, then pushes his way out the half-open door and limps down the hallway on his sore stiff legs. He passes Sam in the kitchen, passes the island. Shiro is sitting there in the little dining area at the table, barefoot and still wearing the loose t-shirt and shorts he sleeps in, his hair still sticking up funny from their nap, his laptop open in front of him.

The ache in Keith’s chest tugs him forward, and he wraps his arms around Shiro’s broad shoulders from behind.
Shiro startles a little bit, but then he’s laughing quietly, twisting in his chair so that he can hug Keith in return. “Hey, buddy,” he says, and Keith finds himself swallowed up in the warm bigness of his arms. “Hey…”

There’s a new urgency to the way Shiro hugs him: it’s a little gentler, a little more encompassing. It’s like Shiro’s afraid to lose him, afraid to break him, afraid-- and so Keith pushes in closer, bunts his forehead against Shiro’s collarbone, hugs back with every bit of strength in his sore arms. There’s an empty space here under the hunch of Shiro’s shoulders, in the concavity of his bowed spine, and Keith fills it as well as he can.

We’ll be okay, he wants to assure him. But he’s not quite brave enough to admit out loud he’d been listening, so he tries to say it with the hug instead.

“He’s awake!” says Sam. “How you feeling, squirt?”

Shiro is releasing him, drawing back a little to give him a careful once-over, and Keith gives the question some consideration.

“Hungry,” he ventures.

“I can fix that,” says Sam cheerfully. “Be a few minutes before this is done. You want some peaches and cottage cheese to tide you over?”

“…Do I want what?”

Sam fixes him a bowl, and Keith takes a moment to inspect each spoonful of curds and fruit suspiciously before he eats it. It’s weird, it’s really weird, but in a this-shouldn’t-work-as-well-as-it-does kind of way. Halfway through he decides it’s his new favorite thing and scarfs the rest of the bowl with reckless abandon.

“Wow,” Shiro says, looking on with vague horror, and gets to his feet. “I don’t think I can watch this.”

In the kitchen, Sam chortles. Keith twists in his seat to see where Shiro is going, then returns to his bowl as Shiro sets the table around him. There’s only three places set when he’s finished, and Keith eyes the empty space. “Where’s Matt?”

“Out with some of his friends,” says Sam. “He’ll be back sometime later tonight.”

“Oh,” says Keith, with a lurch and a sinking. This means he’s alone with Commander Sam and Shiro for the evening. This means the talks Shiro said they were going to have are going to come much sooner than he expected.

Suddenly he’s not very hungry at all.

He stays where he is while supper gradually makes its way to the table, watching Shiro and the commander indirectly. It’s a strange, new sort of apprehension. He holds the knowledge that he’s not leaving in front of him like a shield, and it helps--but he doesn’t know what to do with the leftover fear. It sours and twists in his stomach, and he bows over his empty bowl and bites his lip hard to keep down the sudden rush of nausea.

“Hey,” says Shiro, “hey, bud,” and Keith’s whole body sort of jolts when Shiro’s hand lands lightly between his shoulder blades.

“Sorry,” he blurs reflexively.
Shiro goes still for a moment, then sinks down in the next chair, his body angled toward Keith. He hasn’t broken contact, but his hand has shifted to curl gently around Keith’s upper arm. “You hurting?” he asks in a lower voice.

Keith shakes his head. It’s a lie, but whatever’s coming will be ten times worse if he lets Shiro take care of him first.

But Shiro seems determined, touching the backs of his knuckles briefly to Keith’s cheek and forehead, thumbing at the edge of the tenderness surrounding Keith’s left eye with a little discontented twist of his mouth. “We’ll get a hot pack on this after supper,” he decides, and Keith, shrinking from the scrutiny, can only manage a sort of compliant mumble.

He’s never been in trouble with Shiro before—not big trouble, not like this. He doesn’t know what to expect. But he hates when punishment comes wrapped up in comfort. The dissonance leaves him shaky and sick, unable to predict what will happen next. Commander Sam leans past him to put a short glass of chocolate milk in front of his plate, resting a hand briefly on Keith's shoulder as he does, and Keith feels, for a moment, like he’s going to throw up.

They eat. It’s almost insultingly mundane. Commander Sam and Shiro talk, as they always do; Keith stays quiet and nobody pushes him to chat beyond a few single-word answers to gently probing questions. He makes his way through his plate, every bite seeming to stick in his throat, and waits for the inevitable turn of the conversation.

But it never comes. Shiro wonders aloud if it’s going to rain; Commander Sam says he hopes so, because rainy weather is sleeping weather and they all—meaning Shiro—need a good night’s sleep; Shiro snorts and grumbles and doesn’t disagree. They talk about the food. They talk about summer plans. They don’t talk about the simulator.

Finally, when their plates are cleaned and the table is starting to look rather empty, Commander Sam leans back in his chair and stretches his arms up over his head, and says, businesslike, “So.”

Keith goes still. It’s almost a relief. He feels like every aching muscle in his body is a string wound too tight: he’ll snap with a touch. Commander Sam puts both his hands on the table and Keith tenses—

“Movie?”

“Hmm, yeah,” says Shiro thoughtfully. “Is that--aahh, the new one with Jamie Zhou out yet? Wings of...something?”

“That one came out a few years ago, you’re thinking of Swift.”

“--if, right, is it out? I bet Keith would like it.”

“What do you think, Keith? It’s about the 912th Airborne in Ottawa during World War III, the aerobatic squad...”

They’re looking at him expectantly, and Keith can only stare back, dry-mouthed. “U-uh,” he finally stammers.

“Not so much?” Commander Sam guesses. “It might be a little heavy for this time of night. You want to pick something out instead?”

Keith glances helplessly at Shiro, only to find Shiro watching him, his eyes searching and concerned. “I don’t--”
There’s a pause.

“We don’t have to watch a movie,” Commander Sam says gently. “Sorry, kiddo. Didn’t mean to put you on the spot.”

“I’m--” Keith has to stop and swallow, fighting the sudden sick twist that climbs to his throat. “I thought-- Am I in trouble?”

Commander Sam hesitates. He regards Keith with an expression Keith can’t interpret, like he’s sizing him up. His eyes shift away from Keith, toward Shiro, and now there’s a question in his face: eyes serious and brows lifted. Keith feels more than sees Shiro’s nod, and goosebumps chase each other down his arms.

“We were planning to talk about that tomorrow,” Commander Sam says, looking at Keith again. “Do you want to talk about it now instead?”

“Um,” whispers Keith. His heart is jumping in his chest, a runaway pounding that almost hurts. He licks his lips and stares down at his empty plate. It’s tempting, pushing it off until tomorrow, but when he thinks about it--letting the dull pressure of dread stifle the rest of the evening, trying to sleep tonight with its shadow hanging over him--something like claustrophobia comes bubbling up molten and inescapable in his lungs.

He nods.

“Okay,” says Commander Sam. “Okay, let’s clear up, and then we’ll talk.”

They go about it quietly, communicating in fragments of sentences as they clear away the dishes and put away the leftovers. Keith tries to make himself useful, knowing from experience that it will help, but Shiro takes the serving bowl out of his hands and gently steers him to sit on the short couch. There’s nothing unkind about it, but Keith finds himself fighting tears anyway. He curls into the corner of the couch, hugging his knees, and waits.

Shiro disappears down the hallway as Commander Sam rinses and loads the dishes. When he comes back, he has what looks like a large rectangular piece of fabric in one hand, and he ducks into the kitchen as the microwave beeps to retrieve something. “Here,” he says, and circles around the short couch to join Keith. “This is for your eye. It might be too hot, maybe let it cool for a minute…”

He hands Keith a small sack the size of a grapefruit. It’s made of some stretchy durable fabric, like but unlike nylon, stuffed with something shifting and dense like sand. It has a pleasant weight in Keith’s hands, and it’s warm, radiating heat like a live thing. Keith cups his hands around it and nods.

“Can you lean forward for me a little bit?” Shiro asks. Keith obeys automatically, even as his shoulders hunch up from Shiro’s nearness. He feels the rectangle of fabric settling over his back, draping like a short malformed cape from his shoulders to his tailbone. “Okay, sit back,” says Shiro, and Keith does, mystified.

Shiro’s frowning down at a tiny silver remote control in his hand. He pushes and holds one button, aiming it at the fabric behind Keith’s back--

Keith has time for a cold shock of fear, a wild suspicion that whatever’s about to happen is going to hurt, that this is going to be his punishment--but then there’s warmth and warmth and warmth at his back, soaking in deep.

He can feel his body going slack, sinking back into it, his shoulders dropping, his arms unclenching.
“How’s that?” Shiro asks. “Too warm?”

Keith wants to wrap himself in it. He shakes his head mutely.

Shiro puts the remote in Keith’s hands. “Up, down, push and hold to turn it on or off,” he says, gesturing at each button in turn. “We’re gonna stretch after we’re done talking, but it’ll be a lot easier if your muscles are relaxed first.”

“Kay,” mumbles Keith, curling his fingers around the remote. He scoots down a little, pushing his shoulders back into the heating pad, and breathes until his ribs protest, trying to let the warmth settle him. It’s almost enough, almost, but the anxiety in his stomach is still a solid ball of ice that nothing can reach.

Commander Sam comes around from the kitchen, circling the coffee table to sit on the long couch across from them. He sits forward, elbows on knees, and says, “Okay.”

Keith swallows and maybe sort of tries to hide behind his updrawn knees. The hot pack Shiro brought him for his eye is heavy in his lap: he sets down the remote and picks it up, taking comfort in the warm weight of it in his hands.

“We talked about this some the other night,” Commander Sam says. “Keith, why don’t you… Can you sum up for me what you did, and why you did it, and what you understand of the consequences?”

Keith isn’t sure if he can talk at all, for a moment. He opens his mouth, but there’s no words in it. His eyes already feel hot and swollen, even the one Beck didn’t punch, with fear and shame and a wretched sort of anger. Everybody here already knows what he did; why does he have to say it?

“I,” he manages, “I used Shiro’s code to get into the simulator by myself.”

“Why?” asks Commander Sam.

“I told you why,” Keith mumbles miserably. He can’t look at Shiro.

“Tell me again.”

Keith fidgets with the hot pack, making little dimples in its surface with his fingertips, flattening the sand-like filling. He hates this, he hates this, he hates this. He feels helpless and exposed: it’s not just the impending punishment, though the thought of that sends a jolt of visceral dread straight to his core. He can take that, he thinks; it’ll be harder with how sore and hurt he already is, but they won’t do anything that lasts.

This part-- this part --he desperately wishes he could just… skip.

“I wanted more practice,” he says. It’s not the answer Commander Sam is looking for, but it’s not a lie either, and Keith hopes he’ll let it pass.

“Why did you go so late?” Commander Sam asks. “How come… how come did you need to be sneaky about it?”

“I wanted…” says Keith, and falters. “I wanted to practice without… I didn't want anybody to see.”

There's a heavy pause.

“Why not?”
Keith swallows. He tucks his elbows in close to his body and keeps his head bowed over the hot pack so he doesn’t have to look at anybody.

“Keith,” Commander Sam presses quietly.

“Because I was going to mess up a lot,” Keith mumbles. “I don’t… like people to see.”

Next to him, Shiro exhales softly.

“Why the Enceladus scenario?” the commander asks.

“Malone said it was hard,” Keith says to his knees. “I wanted to…”

Commander Sam gives him a moment. “What did you want?” he asks, not unkindly. “What were you hoping would happen?”

It’s gentle and merciless all at once, the inexorable progression of questions paring away his half-truths and defenses to uncover the vulnerable core of him. It hurts in a way that leaves Keith trembling, his eyes burning, wishing he could hide. He’s hyperaware of Shiro, sitting a foot away in the other corner of the couch.

“I don’t--” he says, and scrubs at his unbruised eye. His hand comes away wet. “I just-- I wanted to see if I could, I wanted to…” He doesn’t know how to put it into words.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Shiro asks then, and his voice is as low and undemanding as Commander Sam’s, but Keith still wants to shrink into the couch cushions.

“I’m sorry,” he says, and tries to clear the tightness out of his throat.

Shiro shifts a little, turning to angle his body toward Keith. “No,” he says, shaking his head. “This is--this is important to me, bud, I want to know. Why didn’t you want to tell me?”

“I did,” Keith pleads, his voice breaking. He needs Shiro to understand this. “I really really did, I wasn’t just-- I wanted to be able to do it first, I was gonna…”

Shiro sits back at this, his forehead knitting into a troubled frown. There’s a shadow of the tired hurt from two nights ago in his face.

“I’m sorry,” Keith says desperately. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it to go this way, I just wanted to do something you’d…”

There’s silence for a moment. “Something I’d…?” Shiro prompts softly when Keith doesn’t continue, his head dipping down as he tries to get Keith to look at him.

“I wanted to surprise you,” Keith says. It’s a pitiful offering, and he cringes. “I thought you’d-- I wanted for you to be…”

He stops.

Shiro is still waiting, watching him quietly. There’s weary unhappiness behind his eyes, and something in Keith goes frozen and still at the sight. He stares back at Shiro--and something clicks. The perspective shifts, and he understands.

“…I lied to you,” he realizes. It’s painfully stark from this angle; all his feeble excuses and explanations are worthless.
Shiro straightens, just a little. “Yeah,” he agrees simply after a small pause.

“I lied,” says Keith, “and-- and I got you in trouble.”

Shiro’s eyes are soft, but he acknowledges this with a nod.

“Really big trouble.”

“It could have been, yeah.”

Keith draws in a breath that shudders and catches, because there’s no getting around it now. “I hurt you.”

Shiro pauses again. He rolls both his lips between his teeth for a moment and exhales. “Yeah.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Keith whispers, and then his eyes are welling up again, hot and stinging. “I didn’t-- I messed up, I messed up really bad and I’m really really sorry, I didn’t want-- I’m sorry--”

And then he can’t talk, because he hurt Shiro and the tightness in his throat has sharpened to something strangling. He squeezes his eyes shut and presses his forehead to the top of his knees and he focuses with everything in him on keeping his sobs contained.

“Bud,” whispers Shiro, and then the couch cushion underneath Keith is dipping as Shiro scoots closer. He can feel Shiro’s arms around him, coaxing him to unfold, and he lets out an involuntary hiccuping whimper, because this is it, this is where he gets punished and he knows now how much he deserves it but he’s not ready, please, he’s not ready--

Nothing happens. Shiro’s got a hand on his back, and Keith blanks, but nothing happens. Confusion and fear make him clumsy, his limbs stiff and uncoordinated; he’s half-cringing as Shiro tugs at him gently--but then he understands, and he lets himself be drawn in against Shiro’s side. He can't fully relax, he can't leave himself open, but he hugs his own knees and sags sideways against Shiro, and he shakes with hiccuping, breathless sobs that wrench through his hurt ribs like shards of shattered glass. The whimpered apologies that escape him land just on the wrong side of coherence.

“I got you,” Shiro murmurs to him. The soft movement of his hand on Keith's shoulder and upper arm is rhythmic and reassuring, predictable, safe. “It's okay, bud. It’s okay.”

It's not okay. Keith can feel his face twisting up with disbelief. He drags in a breath to tell Shiro so.

“It's okay,” Shiro repeats, and smooths a hand over the back of Keith's head, combing through the hair there with his fingers. “All that happened, but it's over now. We're gonna learn from it and move on.”

Keith goes still. He pulls back, enough that he can study Shiro for a moment, uncertain.

“Why aren't you mad?” he asks.

Shiro looks back at him and blows out a breath that makes his cheeks puff out, his forehead furrowing. He glances across at Commander Sam. “I was,” he admits. “I was kind of… sad and hurt and really… confused? I couldn't understand why you'd do this and I was really-- I was scared about what might happen as a-- as a consequence.”

“Because I got you in trouble?” Keith asks.

Shiro lets out a short breath, his eyes shifting away from Keith, down and to the left. “No, that's--”
He pauses, and Keith gets the impression that he's choosing his words carefully. “I was worried about you, bud.”

“Oh,” whispers Keith. He both does and doesn't want to know what Shiro isn't saying. It puts a nervous knot in his stomach.

“But,” Shiro says, “I had some time to think about it a little bit, and-- It wasn't okay, alright, I want that to be really clear. You broke the rules, you lied about it, you hurt yourself and me and Commander Sam, it wasn't-- it wasn't okay. But I understand.”

Keith looks across at Commander Sam, startled. He hadn't considered that he might have hurt him too.

Commander Sam looks back at him, quiet and serious and not contradicting anything Shiro’s said. “We understand why you did what you did,” he says when Shiro says nothing more. “We know you didn't think through all the consequences. That's part of why we're having this talk now. It's important for you to think about how the choices you make can affect other people. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” whispers Keith.

“So what would you have done differently, knowing what you know now?”

“Um,” Keith says, and takes a breath. “Um… not… snuck?”

“Good start,” says Commander Sam. He's not quite smiling, but there's a crinkling-up around his eyes that makes Keith feel better. “What else?”

“I don't-- um…” Keith falters and glances at Shiro. He doesn't know what Commander Sam is looking for.

“Talk to me?” Shiro suggests, and there’s something pleading in the lift of his eyebrows. “If you want some time in the simulator without anybody watching what you're working on, we can like-- we can arrange that, we can do that, I'll grab my laptop and do some work while you fly or something. Just-- talk to me, or talk to Commander Sam. Let us help you.”

Keith stares at him, trying to wrap his head around this. He sniffs and swipes at his nose with his sleeve, then shakes his head slightly. “Um… You'd… really?”

“Yeah,” says Shiro earnestly, shrugging. “You just have to be supervised, you just need somebody there to make sure you don't overdo it or get hurt. I can keep an eye on the feed from the pod without watching the scenario.”

“So I'm… allowed back in the simulator?”

“Well,” says Shiro, and his eyes shift to Commander Sam again. Keith's heart stops.

“Not for a while,” says Commander Sam, rather firmly. “That's another consequence we need to talk about.”

Keith swallows.

Commander Sam pauses for a moment, like he's choosing his words. “You've been grounded from the simulator for a while,” he says, and Keith gets the distinct impression that he's hiding something. "That's from the General. You've been grounded from all other forms of Garrison-approved flight practice for two weeks too, and that's from me. Alright?"
It hits like a boulder to the chest: weeks without simulator nights with Shiro, with nobody to blame but himself. Keith ducks his head quickly, eyes prickling. “Um,” he says again, shakily. “...When, with the-- with the simulator?”

“Two weeks at least,” Commander Sam says, and there's some sympathy in his voice this time. “Maybe more like three.”

Three weeks. That's only three nights missed. Keith swallows hard and nods, breathing carefully. It’s not that bad. At least they're letting him back in. And he doesn't really care that much about the other stuff.

Shiro shifts next to Keith. “It'll be a little longer than that,” he says, apologizing with his tone. “The doctor doesn't want him in anything with a kinesthetic element until his ribs are healed.”

Keith does not like where this is going. “I get better really fast,” he begs.

“Hey,” says Shiro. “Hey, there's other flight training tools that don't shake you up as much. We'll mess around with some of those to fill up the time, deal?”

“But not until you're ungrounded,” says Commander Sam, and Shiro says a little guiltily, “Right, yeah.”

Keith sniffs again and decides to save that fight for later. It's hard to argue very hard for the jostling and bumps of the simulator when just standing up and breathing hurts.

“So why are you grounded?” Commander Sam asks, not unkindly, looking at Keith.

Keith sits up straighter and scrubs at his eyes to dry them. “Because I broke the rules,” he says. “And lied.”

“That’s right,” says Commander Sam. “And next time you will...?”

“Talk to you and Shiro and not sneak.”

“Good,” murmurs Commander Sam, smiling. He straightens and looks at Shiro. “That’s about all I’ve got. Anything more you want to go over with him?”

Shiro purses up his lips and shakes his head. “How about you, bud?” he asks. “You got anything else you want to talk about?”

Keith stammers and looks between them. “I--” he says, and realizes. “Um, I'm sorry,” he says, looking at Commander Sam. “I didn't-- say it to you yet.”

Commander Sam's face goes sort of soft, the corners of his mouth turning up. “Thank you, Keith,” he says gently. “I appreciate that. I accept your apology.”

Keith nods a little awkwardly. It seems like he should say something in response, but he doesn't know what. Thank you seems wrong.

“So!” says Commander Sam, in a different tone, and claps his hands down on his knees. “How about that movie?”

“Yup,” says Shiro, and he slides off the couch to kneel by the coffee table and set the playback while Keith stares between them, heart-poundingly baffled and reeling.

“Popcorn?” Commander Sam asks, pointing at Shiro. “Popcorn, Keith?” He's already walking into
the kitchen without waiting for an answer.

“We just ate!” Shiro yells after him.

“Popcorn doesn't count as food!”

“Where did you get your degree, exactly?”

Commander Sam grumbles something Keith can't entirely hear, something that includes the words *sass* and *commanding officer* and sets Shiro snickering while he scrolls.

Keith sits very still for a moment, hugging his knees and deliberating. The apprehensive feeling is still hanging over him, a blow that hasn't fallen yet. He considers it, weighs the live-wire tension making his heart skip and his lungs work too quickly against… just… ripping off the band-aid.

“Shiro,” he whispers as the sound of popcorn popping filters out from the kitchen.

“What's up, bud?” Shiro asks, still scrolling through movies.

“Um,” says Keith. He glances toward the kitchen. Commander Sam is looking down at his tablet on the other side of the island, smiling and typing and distracted. “Uh, am-- am I still in trouble?”

“Hmm?” asks Shiro. He selects a movie with a vaguely familiar cover and sits back, shifting to face Keith. “What do you mean?”

Keith doesn't know where to look. He shuffles his knees in tighter and glances toward Commander Sam again. “Is--” he starts. “Am I gonna-- Am I gonna get punished?”


Keith stares back at him, lost, because that's not what punishment *means*, that's not what he's--

There's a pause, a beat of silence that feels terribly heavy. Shiro inhales and goes still, the mild confusion leaving his face.

“You were expecting something else, huh?” he asks quietly.

Keith closes his mouth, feeling foolish and wrong-footed. “...I don't know.”

“White cheddar okay?” calls the commander from the kitchen.

“Yeah,” Shiro calls back, not looking away from Keith.

It's hard to look back at Shiro; he's got *that face* on, the unhappy startled expression that always makes Keith feel sort of-- guilty, like something about his life is *wrong* and he needs to make apologies for it. But Shiro sighs heavily after a moment, rubs the side of his face and gets back to his feet in one smooth movement. He stands there for a moment, hesitant, then sinks down to perch on the edge of the short couch next to Keith.

“I'd really like to hug you right now,” he says. “That okay?”

“You don't have to ask,” mumbles Keith, embarrassed. He scoots down to meet Shiro, letting his legs unfold and hang off the side of the couch.

Shiro holds him for a moment longer this time than Keith has come to expect, one hand cupped
around the back of Keith's head, the other absently rubbing his shoulders. “We don't do things like that here,” Shiro whispers to him. “Okay? We don't do that here. You don’t have to be scared.”

Keith ducks his head down so Shiro can't see his face, his shoulders lifting. It's almost paralyzing to be read so easily, and the shame and breathless relief put a new lump in his throat. “I'm not scared.”

Shiro doesn't say anything in answer, but Keith feels the soft underside of his chin rest on top of his head for a moment. He stays still, letting Shiro support him while the soft pops from the kitchen slow and subside and the last dread melts from his body.

He feels vulnerable. He feels sheltered.

“I want to talk about this sometime soon, alright?” Shiro asks quietly. He runs his palm over the curve of Keith’s skull, soothing down the prickle of tension that follows the words. “Think we could do that?”

Keith shrugs, an almost automatic response, evasive, noncommittal. But Shiro doesn’t push him for a better answer; there’s only warm arms and the rise and fall of breath taken and released, soft darkness where his face is hidden against Shiro’s shoulder, and after a moment's consideration Keith nods.

There’s a shift, a momentary increase of pressure, Shiro’s arms tightening around him in acknowledgement. “Love you so much, bud,” Shiro murmurs.

And later--after Shiro has shown him how to stretch so he won’t be so sore tomorrow and the movie Shiro picked is in its second half, after the giant bowl of popcorn has been traded for hot chocolate, after blankets have been unfolded and the music and dialogue from the speakers is undercut by the sound of nightbirds and distant thunder--Keith finally plucks up the courage to whisper it back.

Chapter End Notes

PSYCH there will be one more chapter. it'll be short and hopefully up soon!

(did shiro give keith a Warm Thing in a situation where he was anxious on purpose? WOULD HE BE THAT SNEAKY come on.)

(yeah.)

(he would.)
“If your ribs start hurting...” Shiro says.

“They won’t,” Keith says quickly. “They won’t, they’re fine.”

“No, listen,” says Shiro. His hands are on Keith’s shoulders and he has his serious face on. “Listen to me. I do not want you to try to tough it out if it hurts, okay?”

“Shiro,” Keith complains, and tries to squirm out from under Shiro’s hands. It doesn’t hurt, but Shiro has been irritatingly watchful for two months now and Keith is over it. They could have been back in the simulator ages ago but the doctor had said he might be sore in the simulator and so Shiro had made him wait another week even though Keith feels fine and can handle sore.

Indignity upon indignity.

Shiro’s not letting him go. “Keith,” he says patiently. “Come on, man, work with me here.”

“Sorry,” mutters Keith, and subsides.

Shiro waits a moment. “This is just a simulator, alright? You’re going to have more opportunities to fly. You’re going to have so many opportunities you’re going to get sick of it.”

Keith doubts this.

“I don’t want you to try to push through it if it hurts, okay? We don’t want another six weeks of downtime, it’s not worth it.”

This threat gives Keith pause. He glances carefully at Shiro to see if he’s serious.

He is.

Keith catches his lower lip between his teeth, reconsidering his initial plan to keep flying through any discomfort he can keep hidden from Shiro.

Shiro is still holding him by the shoulders, giving him a look like he knows exactly what Keith’s thinking. “Okay?” he prompts.

“Yeah, okay,” Keith says, conceding with bad grace. “Fine.”

Shiro studies him for another moment, then straightens, looking satisfied. “Cool,” he says, and messes up Keith's hair until Keith lets out an outraged squawk and slugs him hard in the arm. There follows a brief tussle which ends in laughter, Keith's head firmly trapped in the crook of Shiro's arm.

“Nothing to see here,” Shiro says to the door sergeant, a parody of gruff professionalism. “Carry on.”

“Sir yes sir,” says the sergeant, who is used to their nonsense, and buzzes them through.

The Garrison hallways are both familiar and strange, cold and coldly lit, empty of noise and people in a way that gives them an odd liminal quality. Keith follows Shiro down the corridors toward the east wing elevator, their footsteps muffled by the dark carpet underneath their feet, and takes carefully
even breaths to try to contain the excited jumping of his heart.

“Nervous?” Shiro asks softly, glancing at him sidelong with a little upward quirk of his lips.

“No,” Keith lies. He’s just excited. He’s not scared, he’s done this before and it’s just Shiro. And it’s only been seven weeks and two days, that’s not long enough to forget how to do everything.

It’s not.

Shiro gives him an assessing look, and Keith feels his face heating. “Stop it,” he mumbles.

Shiro faces forward again, but he reaches over and hauls Keith into a one-armed hug. “It’s gonna be fine.”

“I know,” says Keith, shoving at him without much feeling. “Why are you so weird, god.”

“Our top scientists remain mystified,” Shiro says cheerfully.

He leaves his arm draped over Keith's shoulders, and Keith can't decide whether or not to be pissy about it. Shiro doesn’t believe him that he’s not scared, which is annoying, and there’s a rolling grumbling sensation about it sulking in Keith’s chest—but also, even though he’s definitely not scared, he’s sort of... shaky. And it’s good, sometimes, when you’re shaky, to have something solid and steady close by to remind you what not-shaky feels like.

“I’ve missed getting to fly with you,” Shiro adds, and Keith ducks his head to hide the pleased flush that he can feel burning across his face. He's not entirely successful, he can tell, because Shiro messes up his hair again and clasps his shoulder before he reaches forward to let the scanner on the door to the simulator stage read his thumbprint.

Shiro leads him to the simulator farthest down the row and holds the pod door open for him. Keith clambers in--and a strange thing happens then, just for a moment: the walls and dark screens are too close, the ceiling too low, the space too small and dark in a way it's never been before. Keith freezes—and then the screens are coming up as Shiro boots the simulator. There's light, and the impression of space, and Keith breathes out.

“Let's warm up with a couple easy runs,” says Shiro, and Keith recognizes the Europa scenario with atmospheric obstacle evasion. “I booked us a little extra time today, I didn't figure you'd mind.”

Keith shakes his head. He's still standing back by the engineer station, hovering, oddly reluctant. It feels strange to be back here after almost two months. It feels like somebody’s going to tell them to leave.

Shiro glances back at him. “Planning to fly us from back there?” he asks, half-smiling.

“No,” says Keith, miffed, and steps forward to take the pilot’s seat. His hands are trembling a little as he buckles his harness. He settles them on the controls, gripping tightly to cover their unsteadiness.

“Close your eyes and give me three big breaths,” Shiro says from behind him.

“Shiro,” Keith says irritably.

“It helps,” says Shiro. “It helps, bud, trust me.”

Keith stares at the screen in front of him, the familiar static landscape. Shiro’s not going to start the simulation until he cooperates, he knows, so he grudgingly shuts his eyes. The weight of Shiro’s
hand on his shoulder a moment later doesn’t startle him. He knew it was coming.

“Shoulders loose,” Shiro says. “Relax your grip.”

This is easier said than done. Keith breathes, focuses on the tightness in his hands and arms until it melts away. With his eyes closed, the subsiding swaying of the pod is gently disorienting, a rocking motion that slips in and out of his awareness. He fills his lungs slowly and releases the spent air three times, then opens his eyes.

“Ready?” Shiro asks him.

“I was ready before,” Keith says, just to be obstinate, and smirks at the offended noise Shiro makes. Still, he does feel calmer. The shaking in his hands hasn’t gone away entirely, but it’s lessened enough that he knows he can fly. His heartbeat has slowed.

“Alright, hotshot,” Shiro grumbles, and turns away to start the simulation. “Show me what you got.”

“Are you buckled?” Keith asks, all innocent insolence, and he has to fight down a snicker at the exasperated look Shiro gives him.


The simulation begins, and Keith takes off fast, just because he can, flying a spiraling ascent that pulls at them hard with artificial G-forces and sets Shiro whooping in the seat behind him. And Keith's laughing, giddy and wild with the joy of being here again, flying with Shiro behind him, flying.

He didn't forget how.

He didn’t really think he would. But still.

They go through the course twice, pausing between runs to debrief. Shiro suggests a couple tweaks to Keith’s chosen route, which Keith considers, tweaks further, and adopts. They run both Mars supply drops, and Keith doesn’t quite beat his best score, but he comes close.

“How are you feeling?” Shiro asks when they’ve run through the entire familiar repertoire of courses. “Are your ribs still feeling okay?”

“Oh,” says Keith. “Oh, yeah, they're, they don't hurt at all.”

“Hmm,” says Shiro, and pauses thoughtfully. He takes in a breath and holds it, like he's thinking about saying something but hasn't decided yet, and he gives Keith a considering sidelong look.

Keith looks back warily. “What.”

Shiro hums again, rolling his lips between his teeth with indecision. “You can say no,” he says, like a preamble.

“Okay…”

“I was wondering,” Shiro says, and pauses again until Keith huffs out an exasperated breath and kicks him lightly to remind him to finish. “Hey,” says Shiro, startled and laughing, and grabs Keith by the ankle. “No violence in the cockpit.”

“So talk,” says Keith, trying to free his foot—or, barring that, to kick in the general direction of Shiro’s face. Shiro permits neither. “You’re being weird.”
“Wow, I'm on a roll today,” remarks Shiro, casually catching Keith's other foot as it swings at him and holding it captive too. “Okay, okay, listen, though...”

Keith waits a moment to see if there’s going to be something to listen to, then gives one mighty, fruitless kick with both of his trapped feet. “I would like to do that,” he retorts, “but you keep not saying anything.”

Shiro releases Keith's legs and leans forward in the copilot's seat, elbows on his knees. His face is serious, and Keith finds himself going still and serious to match.

“You can say no,” Shiro says again.

“...Okay,” says Keith, watching him. His gut is jumping with uneasy apprehension.

Shiro pauses one more time. “I'd really... If you're okay with it, I'd really like to fly Enceladus with you.”

“Oh!” says Keith, relieved and confused all at once. “That’s-- wait, you-- what? Really?”

Shiro lifts his eyebrows and nods, and the look on his face is so hopeful and earnest that Keith wants to laugh at him, but he's too confused.

“I didn’t,” he starts, and hesitates. “I thought I wasn’t allowed?”

“You're not allowed to fly it unsupervised,” Shiro says. “I’m with you, though. We can fly it if you want.”

Keith wants. He wants desperately. But to his own great surprise, he finds himself ducking his head, fidgeting, reluctant to answer. He's been quiet too long, he realizes, so he murmurs, “Um,” and tries to think what to say.

“We don’t have to, bud,” Shiro says immediately, gentle. “You can say no, it’s okay.”

“No, I just--” Keith rubs the side of his face, swinging his legs with a sudden rush of nervous energy. It’s hard to look at Shiro. “Um, I-- I don’t know if I…”

This isn’t how he envisioned flying the scenario with Shiro for the first time. He thought he’d be surprising Shiro, he thought-- he thought being able to fly the course would be sort of a gift he could give Shiro, he wanted to be polished and sure of his flight. Instead he's here, nearly two months out of practice, having only completed it successfully once, and that mostly by luck.

“I only made it through…” he says, and trails off uncertainly.

This isn’t how he envisioned flying the scenario with Shiro for the first time. He thought he'd be surprising Shiro, he thought-- he thought being able to fly the course would be sort of a gift he could give Shiro, he wanted to be polished and sure of his flight. Instead he's here, nearly two months out of practice, having only completed it successfully once, and that mostly by luck.

“I only made it through…” he says, and trails off uncertainly.

“I know,” says Shiro. “I know. I saw the log.”

This is not encouraging. Keith licks his lips and tries again. “I don't know if I can-- I only did it once, I don't know if I can… again.”

Shiro makes a small comprehending noise and shifts, the artificial leather of the seat creaking. “No, that's... bud, I'm sorry, I meant-- I mean I've already seen you fly it, it's not... You don't have to try to prove it to me, I already know you can do it.”

All Keith’s misgivings come stuttering to a confused halt. He hadn’t even been thinking about proving that he did it before. Suddenly the questions and accusations from the night he got caught are
all he can think about, and he stares tongue-tied up at Shiro.

“‘I’m not expecting you to fly it perfectly today anyway,’” says Shiro, half-smiling. “‘You haven’t been inside a simulator for weeks.’”

“You--” Keith has to pause and clear his throat. He doesn’t know where to look. “‘You don’t think I… cheated. Right?’”

Shiro blinks at him, his mouth opening.

Keith can feel his face heating, his ears. Just the suggestion gives him an unpleasant *slimy* feeling, even though he didn't cheat, he didn't cheat. “‘General Beck,’” he tries to explain. “‘He thinks-- he doesn’t think I--’”

“Bud, whoa,” Shiro says. “Hey, no--”

“He kept asking,” says Keith desperately. “They kept saying, they kept asking-- I *didn’t*, I didn’t but they kept--”

“Okay,” says Shiro. “Okay, okay, no, listen, it’s okay. They…” He pauses, wincing, and licks his lips. “They did think that, but they don’t think it anymore. They thought… You have to understand, nobody's ever done what you did before. The youngest cadet to make it through before you did was fifteen, he was in his second year, and he didn't fly it like you flew it. So there’s… They were really confused. But General Beck knows now that you didn't cheat.”

Keith swallows. “How’s he…”

“How does he know?” asks Shiro, and hesitates when Keith nods. “He asked me, and I told him. And then he asked some other people, and they analyzed all the logs of your flights and the logs of the flights we did together, and they told him too.”

It gives Keith an unpleasant sinking feeling to think of strangers watching him fly, watching him crash and fail again and again and again. “Oh,” he says, and then, “…How did you know, though?”

Shiro gives him a little wry half-smile, a look Keith can’t entirely decipher. “‘I know you, bud,’” he says. “‘You don’t cheat. You get your teeth into a problem and you hang on, that’s-- you don’t cheat. I don’t think it even occurred to you.’”

He’s serious. The conviction in his voice leaves Keith reeling, a little bit, sets his face burning again-- but for a different reason this time, and with a kinder warmth.

“Anyway,” says Shiro, sitting back, swiveling his chair toward the admin screen. “‘Let’s do Enceladus some other time. There’s a couple other scenarios I’ve been wanting to do with you--’”

“No,” says Keith abruptly. “‘Let’s-- I want to, I want to fly it with you.’”

Shiro gives him a startled look, then *grins*, broad and bright and excited. “‘You sure?’”

“Yeah,” Keith says. He feels reckless, his heart already racing. “‘Let’s-- yeah, let’s go.’”

It’s different with Shiro with him, it’s *so* different. Shiro enables something called *lesson mode* and shows Keith how to pause the scenario from the pilot controls if he needs to. “It’s gonna be less bumpy than you’re probably used to, too,” he adds. “‘I know you’re still feeling okay but this scenario gets rough and I don’t want to mess around with those ribs.’”
Keith can’t really argue with that.

He crashes halfway through the geyser field the first time. It’s more than a little disappointing, but Shiro is laughing breathlessly and cheering, and his open delight takes the sting out of the dispassionate “Simulation Failed” from the screen and speakers.

“I’ve never gotten to fly along with anybody who takes this tack!” Shiro says as he resets the simulation, still giggling and shaking his head. “This is a ride, holy shit, Keith!”

Keith latches onto this with glee. “You cussed!” he accuses, and howls with giddy laughter when Shiro claps his hand over his mouth, eyes wide.

“Okay, okay okay,” Shiro says, dropping his hand and returning to his seat. “I know where you were getting all that impact recovery practice now, anyway. Geez. Up for running it again?”

They run it again. Shiro participates more this time, making suggestions, helping him utilize the landscape, helping him stay in control of his altitude. Keith makes it further, but crashes again—and once again, he finds himself tensing automatically for a crushing sense of failure that …never comes.

“What’s the normal way?” he asks curiously after the next run.

“Hm?”

“You said—” says Keith. “The-- the other cadet who flew it, the year two, how did he fly it?”

“Oh!” says Shiro. “Oh, um-- It’s…”. He swivels to face Keith, already talking with broad gestures of his hands. “The strategy he used is to kind of hopscotch from safe point to safe point. There’s waves of intensity with the geysers, you probably noticed, so if you’re doing it that way you’ll use the lower intensity periods to fly and identify safe landing sites, then you’ll wait out the wave, then do it again until you’ve hit the end of the unstable region.”

“Oh,” says Keith, trying to process this epiphany. “So… I’ve been flying it wrong.”

“Not wrong,” says Shiro mildly. “Just different. There’s actually only a couple pilots in the Garrison who can fly it the way you’re doing it.”


But Shiro’s suddenly distracted, typing rapidly on the admin screen. “Ready for another run?” he asks brightly in a way that strikes Keith as distinctly cagey.

“Who are the other pilots?” he asks again, more insistently.

“Um,” says Shiro, and he’s definitely shifty now, avoiding Keith’s eyes, half-grinning in a sheepish, unsuppressable way.

Keith gets it.

“Show me,” he demands, once he can find words again through the delighted astonishment, squirming out of his harness. “Shiro you have to show me.”

“I don’t know…” Shiro hedges.

“Shiro,” Keith says, as sternly as he can manage through the face-splitting grin. He’s out of his seat, pushing Shiro toward the pilot’s chair and groaning with the effort while Shiro makes waffly indecisive noises and imitates deadweight. “Come on, you have to show me, you can’t just-- I know
you showed Malone Shiro come onnnn.”

Shiro turns at this, his eyes suddenly keen and worried in a way that gives Keith pause. “Did Malone tell you how I flew it?” Shiro asks. “Keith, is that-- did you know about that before you decided to try to fly it this way?”

“What?” asks Keith, baffled. “No, he just said you were really good, he didn’t say anything about what it was like…”

Shiro studies him for a beat, then relaxes. “Okay,” he says, and he seems relieved, but Keith is deeply concerned that he’s lost sight of what’s important here.

“Okay come on,” he says, and tugs and pushes at Shiro to turn him around and get him facing the pilot’s seat. “You have to fly it, you have to show me.”

“You’re bossy,” complains Shiro as Keith plants his feet and pushes him toward the chair with all his strength. “Ugh, I don’t know, I’m suddenly… so tired… everything… going dark…”

Keith yelps as Shiro’s body goes limp and heavy, sagging back on top of him. “No, no no no shit Shiro you’re gonna squish me.”

“Found a good squishy pillow…” Shiro says dreamily.

“Ribs,” Keith wheezes. “Ribs.”

Shiro comes instantly to life, rolling off him onto hands and knees with such a horrified look of remorse that Keith dissolves into laughter. He sees the moment Shiro’s face shifts from alarm to exasperated comprehension, but he’s less prepared than he should be when Shiro takes his retribution by poking him rapidly in the sides with both hands. He stays on the floor with his limbs all splayed akimbo when Shiro finally relents, gasping pathetically for breath as is appropriate for one half-dead.

“Hm,” Shiro says, eyeing him critically from the pilot’s seat, “I think you might be too worn out for a course demonstration.”

Keith makes a sudden and miraculous recovery.

Shiro leaves the simulator in lesson mode, the maximum impact force still dialed down. Keith complains a little, but Shiro gives him one serious look and Keith understands immediately that this is a line he should not push.

He watches as Shiro takes the controls, sitting calm and still and straight in the pilot’s chair. He watches Shiro breathe deliberately, in deep and out. “Begin simulation,” Shiro says, clear and confident, and goosebumps go chasing each other up Keith’s arms because he’s never met this Shiro before but he already loves him with all his heart.

For the next eight minutes and forty-six seconds, Keith barely breathes. It’s almost unreal. He knows this course, he knows the parts that are hard and the parts that are impossible and this…

Shiro takes impossibilities and turns them into grace and efficiency and skill. Where Keith holds his breath and makes it on luck, Shiro swivels and dips and soars through unscathed. Keith hangs on, gravity pressing him back in his seat as Shiro rolls to dodge another eruption, artificial sunlight slicing bright across the cockpit, and suddenly the fact that he managed to finish this scenario feels like nothing at all.

Shiro sets the ship down at the end of the course, gentle and controlled, barely a shudder on landing.
The screens darken, the AI confirms his success, and everything is suddenly overwhelmingly quiet and still. Shiro blows out a breath and sort of sags back in his seat, then rolls his head to look at Keith. His face is flushed and he's got stars in his eyes, and there's a tiny worn-out grin on his face.

"Whatcha think?" he asks.

Keith fidgets, tongue-tied, bashful in a way he’s never been before. He looks at the screens again—still dark—and peeks back at Shiro. “Can you,” he begins, and has to stop and clear his throat. “Can you teach me that?”

Shiro’s grin widens. He sits forward and unbuckles his harness, resting his elbows on his knees. “It’s a long road,” he warns. “Chunks of it are pretty boring.”

“I don’t care,” Keith says. There’s an icy landscape still spinning behind his eyes, and he already knows he’d give anything to fly like Shiro. “I’ll be patient, I don’t care.”

“Then…” Shiro says. He sizes Keith up, one eye narrowing thoughtfully. “Then there’s some flight exercises I think I’ll add to our line-up. You’re getting by on reaction time right now, let’s try to build up some good habits so you don’t have to scramble so much.”

“Can we start now?”

Shiro grins again, fond and a little regretful. “Nah, bud,” he says. “We’re about out of time and I gotta talk to some people to figure out where to start. Next time, okay?”

The disappointment flares bitter, but Keith reminds himself that there will be a next time. He swallows hard and nods.

Shiro ducks out of his harness and stretches. He messes up Keith’s hair, and Keith reluctantly unbuckles his harness to stand and follow him out—but then Shiro gestures him toward the vacant pilot’s seat and crouches to reset the simulator.

Keith sits slowly, confused.

“This one’s still in beta,” Shiro says, typing on the admin screen. “I think it’ll eventually be part of the year three or four flight curriculum, but it’s still just bare bones. No missions or courses set yet.” He glances sidelong at Keith, mildly shifty. “Want to see?”

“Sure?” says Keith warily. “What is it?”

The screens come up, an icy twilit landscape and a black, black sky. Keith can see the curvature of two other planet-like bodies hanging low over the horizon, limned in distant sunlight. He’s leaning forward before he’s even thought about it, reaching for the controls to pan the view.

It’s beautiful.

“Kerberos,” says Shiro softly.

Keith glances at him, his heart jumping with a funny twist of recognition, and turns to look back at the screens. “Wow,” he says finally. He’s not sure what else to say.

Shiro’s glowing, almost shy in a way Keith’s never seen. “It’s not-- um…” He trails off and gestures at the screen. “The topography is pretty accurate for this hemisphere from Fearless’s scans but it’s not very detailed yet. It won’t be complete until we can land and send back some clearer images. We’ve been using this to plan our approach.”
Keith eases the simulated ship forward as Shiro speaks, gliding smoothly over the terrain. He can see it now, the slight blockiness of some of the landscape details, the way some structures won’t quite come into focus, like a vintage AR game.

“How long will you be there?” he asks.

“About two weeks,” Shiro answers. “Sixteen days--Earth days--with a couple extra budgeted in just in case.”

Keith nods. There’s a complicated tangle of emotions fighting for space in his chest: wonder, resentment, longing, fear. Eleven months, they’ll be gone. Keith has known this somewhere in the back of his head. He’s known it since the assembly and presentation where he first met Shiro, all those months ago. But it wasn’t important then, and he’s sort of put off acknowledging it since.

Now here it is, bright and bleak and lovely and inevitable.

“Want to see our landing site?” Shiro asks, and Keith finds himself nodding.

Shiro takes the controls, flies them gently over a range of low mountains to where the icy surface abruptly dips to a long narrow plateau. He pauses the simulation there and taps rapidly on the admin screen until the view on the screens shifts to a lower perspective--one, Keith realizes, that seems to mimic the view of somebody standing on the surface.

“Here you go,” Shiro murmurs, and returns control to Keith. “You can use the steering to walk around.”

Keith takes the controls hesitantly and turns them in a slow circle, tilting the view up to get a better look at the outcroppings of ice surrounding them. They’re higher than they looked from the ship’s view, stark blue-white against the black sky, and Keith gets a strange prickling feeling of awe that Shiro will stand here for real in a couple years, looking up at the same mountains.

“Wow,” he whispers again.

“Turn about sixty-five degrees to your right,” says Shiro, and Keith complies. “A little further--okay, go forward about a mile and a half.”

Keith watches the distance indicator on the bottom of the screen as the view shifts and tilts. Shiro's instructions take them up and up to where a plateau rises above the landing site.

“Okay,” says Shiro, watching the screen. “Right here, stop.”

Keith stops.

“This is one of the sample sites Matt and Commander Sam picked,” Shiro says. “It's my favorite. Turn us around, check out the view. No, wait, actually! Hang on, I'm gonna make it sunrise first.”

Keith watches, fascinated. The shadows lengthen and shift as Shiro dials the time back, transforming the landscape on the screens.

“Okay,” says Shiro. He looks immensely pleased with himself. “Okay, okay, now turn us.”

It takes a moment. Shiro's broad grin is infectious, and Keith can feel the corners of his own mouth lifting to match it. The pod brightens as the screens turn to face the Kerberos dawn.

It's not quite as good as a real sunrise. The screens aren't capable of producing the same brilliance,
the same contrast. But Keith looks out over an alien horizon, and he feels the hairs lifting on his arms because this--

This isn't like the other simulations. This is real in a way he can comprehend. This is where Shiro is going. This is where Shiro will stand.

The sky is black, deeply black, even as the brilliant, searing white of the unfiltered sunrise spills across the horizon. There are still stars visible, sharp and clear, and Keith tilts the view a few degrees so that he can look at another moon in the system. It's too large and close to see all at once, and he wonders for a moment what it would look like if there were people there, with lights and a ship, if they'd be able to see each other. “What’s that one?” he asks.

“Nix,” Shiro answers, and gestures to the larger, brighter body behind it. “Pluto, there. And--let me see, I think--yeah, Hydra is that little tiny one.”

Keith nods. He shifts the view back and forth over the horizon, studying the stark contrast of shadow and light, staring at the sun. It makes him uneasy in a way he can't pin down for a moment.

“There’s no sky,” he realizes. “It’s just...”

“There’s not much of an atmosphere, you’re right,” Shiro says quietly. “You can see out into space even when it’s daytime.”

Keith tugs the controls back to look up vertical from the surface. Another moon swims into the screen’s view, larger than Nix and Hydra--“Charon,” Shiro murmurs--and beyond it, nothing but the void of space, broken by stars.

“What do you think?” Shiro asks.

For a moment, Keith doesn’t know how to answer. But Shiro is waiting with bright eyes, excited; he’s shown Keith something special, and so Keith swallows down the unsettled feeling churning in his gut, the dread of a year without his best friend. “It’s cool,” he says, and nods a couple times. “It’s really-- it's really cool.”

And it is, it really is. By all measurements this is the single coolest thing Keith's ever been shown. He focuses on that and pushes the other things away for later.

“Yes?” asks Shiro, and the big delighted grin he's wearing comes through in his voice.

“Yes,” says Keith. It's hard to look directly at Shiro just now, but he turns and forces himself to grin back. There's a funny breathless feeling to the way his heart is beating, too light and rapid. “It's--wow.”

Shiro glows at him and faces toward the front screen. “Three and a half years,” he says, soft and wistful. “I can't wait to see it clear.” He taps his armrest with his right thumb and says, glancing at Keith again, “I'll add this simulation to your permissions before we launch so you can log in and see the upgraded version as soon as the new scans come back. We're doing this site on ...ahh, the third day, I think? The simulation should be updated by then.”

“So,” says Keith slowly. “If you're-- here, the real here, on that day, and I'm in the simulator at the same time, it'll be kinda like we're-- like we can see the same thing?”

Shiro looks at him again, and something in Keith's face must give him away because Shiro's eyes go soft. He reaches out to lay his hand over Keith's shoulder, and Keith bows his head and tucks his hands under his knees as the warmth and comfort of the touch sweeps over him like a heavy blanket.
“Yeah, bud,” Shiro says. “We should do that. Three years and five months from now.”

That's a long time. Keith finds himself relaxing under the weight of Shiro's hand and the weeks and months and years still ahead of them. But he closes his eyes as Shiro reaches to end the simulation, and he doesn't look again at the endless black yawning above the Kerberos sample site.

They walk out together onto the simulator stage. It's a little disorienting: the passage of time is obvious in the slanting of golden sunlight through the floor-to-ceiling windows on the west wall. The solid unmoving floor feels strange after the swaying simulator pod.

“I’m really hungry,” Keith realizes.

“Yeah, me too,” says Shiro. “Hey, let’s order pizza tonight. We worked hard, we deserve it.”

Keith's hardly going to argue with that. Still: “As long as you keep the pineapple on your half,” he warns.

Shiro tips his head back and laughs, loud and delighted, and hauls Keith close in an affectionate headlock. “Have you ever even tried it?”

“I don’t need to try it,” says Keith with a huff, struggling. “I already know it’s gross. You’re gross.”

Shiro tweaks his side in retribution until he squeaks. “Fine. No pineapple on your half. You’re gonna want the boring stuff like pepperoni, I guess.”

“Pepperoni’s not boring,” Keith says, deeply offended. “I want it with extra cheese and ham and bacon and chicken—”

Shiro's stopped walking. Keith can feel him tensing up where his arm is still looped around Keith's shoulders and their sides are pressed together. There's just the slightest tightening of his hand on Keith's opposite shoulder, possessive, protective.

Commander Iverson is coming out of the instructor’s booth, the one with all the screens where teachers sit and supervise cadet simulator runs. His eyes sweep over them both, lingering on Keith in a speculative, thoughtful way that makes him want to bristle up and fight and run, all at once. Iverson looks at Shiro next, and his face is impossible for Keith to read.

Shiro taps Keith's shoulder twice with one finger and drops his arm from around Keith to salute, standing tall and straight. Keith does the same after a half-second’s uncertainty, and holds the position.

“Commander,” Shiro says politely.

“Captain,” says Iverson. “Cadet.”

Keith swallows.

Iverson gives Keith another assessing look, then shifts his eyes back to Shiro. He nods once, brusquely, and it must mean something because Shiro’s perfect posture sort of wavers for a moment, like he’s shaken, or relieved. Then Iverson’s lifting his hand and straightening to return the salute, turning away with a gruff, “As you were,” and Keith can breathe again.

They’re moving again almost immediately, Shiro’s hand light between Keith’s shoulder blades as he ushers him toward the door. “What was that?” Keith whispers urgently as soon as it’s snicked shut behind them, daring a quick glance back through the glass toward Iverson. “Shiro, what just
“Not sure,” says Shiro a little absently. There’s a frown on his face, but it smooths away as he glances at Keith. “Here, let’s order our pizza now so we don’t have so long to wait when we get home.”

It’s a distraction tactic and Keith knows it immediately, but it’s a damn good one. He lets himself be steered toward the nearest bench and spends a very satisfying ten minutes alternately choosing his own pizza toppings and roasting Shiro for his. Then they’re walking again, down icy blue-lit halls and out into brilliant golden heat, and Keith’s clambering up into his spot on the front of the hoverbike, Shiro solid and warm behind him.

He shuts his eyes for a moment as the bike takes off, floating heavy and content on the warmth of the desert and the security of Shiro’s arms on either side of him and the pleasant weight of a long day well spent. Shiro seems to know: the route he takes is easy and smooth with none of his usual showy mischief.

But then, before the town is even in view, Shiro selects a smooth stretch of ground and gently lowers the bike to rest. Keith twists to look at him, confused, his mouth already open in question, and Shiro gives him a grin full of secrets.

“Want to fly?” he asks, and Keith nearly falls off the bike.

“Am I,” he stutters. “Is that-- allowed?”

Shiro lifts his shoulders, a little bit shifty. “They tend to turn a blind eye for supervised Garrison cadets,” he says, which isn’t really an answer, but also is.

“Um,” says Keith, almost breathless with warring apprehension and longing. “I’m too-- I can’t reach the pedals--”

“I’ll work the pedals,” Shiro assures him. “You just steer us, okay?”

Keith gulps. “I might-- what if I-- Shiro what if I crash us.”

“You won’t,” Shiro says. “I won’t let you, I promise, I’ll take over again if I think we’re in trouble.”

Keith stares at the handlebars, his heart racing. He can’t think of another reason to object.

Behind him, Shiro shifts, and Keith realizes he’s let the silence stretch too long. “You don’t have to,” Shiro says. “It’s okay, bud, you don’t have to--”

“No,” interrupts Keith, and grabs the handlebars before Shiro can change his mind. “No, give me-- how do I… This one first, right?”

Shiro’s laughing. He reaches up past Keith to gesture at the different controls. “Yeah,” he says, “but also no, that’s the starter and the motor’s already running. This one’s how you shift from park, neutral, reverse, and this one here is the one you’re gonna want to be in to fly us forward.”

“There’s… gears, right?” Keith asks, trying to sound knowledgeable.

“Yeah,” says Shiro, and points down at the pedals. “I’ll be working those this time though. We’ll go over that when you’re taller. For today: throttle there, hand brake here. That’s an emergency brake for if the pedal isn’t working for some reason. You’re only going to be steering with the handlebars today, we’ll go over how to use body weight and manipulate the thrusters later on. And we’re gonna
Thirty miles per hour is our top speed today, got it?"

Thirty miles per hour sounds like nothing, but Keith knows better than to complain. He nods and adjusts his grip on the handlebar. It’s already slick with nervous sweat.

“Okay,” says Shiro, and reaches forward to grip beneath the steering where Keith normally holds on. “Okay, so what happens first when we take off?"

“Um,” says Keith, and immediately blanks, trying to combine what he knows about aircraft and what he knows about cars, because the bike seems to be a weird combination of both. “Thrus...ters-- no, no, um--” He points at the shift selector questioningly.

“Good,” says Shiro. “So. I’m gonna depress the brake pedal, you’re gonna make the shift, and as you do that I’m going to release the brake and use this other pedal on the other side to engage the thrusters. We’ll be airborne at that point, got it?”

“Yeah,” says Keith, staring at his hands.

“Once we’ve done that,” says Shiro, and points at the throttle under Keith’s right hand, “you’re going to roll this forward, just a little, just enough to get us moving forward. Okay?"

“Okay,” Keith agrees. He’s trembling, anxious and eager all at once, and he pulls his bottom lip between his teeth.

“Since we’re gonna be going slow, there’s only gonna be one gear shift,” Shiro says. “I’ll warn you about it, but you won’t need to do anything besides hold us steady.” He pauses. “What do you think, are you ready?”


“Okay,” says Shiro, and Keith can hear the proud smile in his voice. “Keith, at any point if you’re not comfortable, I want you to tell me, okay? I’m here, I can take over, I don’t want you to ever be uncomfortable. Just let me know.”

And then they’re in motion, Shiro prompting him patiently through each step. Keith holds his breath as the bike lifts--and then they’re moving forward, the bike responding to Keith’s direction, and he’s giggling breathlessly, disbelievingly, a helpless sort of terrified joy bubbling up in his belly because this is nothing like a simulator. There’s wind in his face, a smell of desert and distant rain, and he’s flying.

Thirty miles per hour, it turns out, is plenty for now.

Shiro gives him fifteen minutes that feel like an hour, then murmurs, “Okay, bud, we’d better get home if we’re gonna beat the pizza there.”

Keith cedes the controls reluctantly, but Shiro sets them down again and kills the engine instead of flying them straight toward town.

“How you doing?” he asks, and rubs Keith’s upper arms briskly. “Doing okay?”

There’s concern in his voice that Keith doesn’t entirely understand--until he tries to answer and finds that his teeth are chattering too hard for coherence. “I’m good,” he manages finally, and then can’t stop once he’s started. “I’m really really good no yeah I’m just that was awesome Shiro!”

“Okay,” Shiro chuckles, and then makes a startled noise when Keith unbuckles and twists around in
his seat so he can lurch into a clumsy, enthusiastic hug. “Okay, okay,” he murmurs, his arms wrapping tight and secure around Keith in return, hauling him up again when he starts to slip off the seat. “I got you. I got you.”

“That was really, really awesome,” Keith tells him again, muffled. He’s still quivering, a little overwhelmed, something resonating through him like music. “That was really…”

“We’ll do it again,” Shiro promises. His hand is warm on Keith’s back. “We’ll do it again, okay?”

“Thanks,” Keith whispers. It doesn’t seem like enough, somehow; it’s not big enough. But it’s all he has, so he says it again.

Shiro’s hand sweeps over Keith’s head in answer, settling to cup the back of his neck; there’s the familiar pressure of Shiro’s cheek against the top of his head; there’s the weight and warmth of being held like something treasured, something loved.

So maybe it’s enough after all.

They stay there for a little while, their shadows stretching out long in the sunset glow. Then Keith shifts a little, and Shiro murmurs, “Ready?” And Keith nods, and squirms around to face the right direction and buckle in again, and the roar of the engine sounds like a friend.

The sun dips below the horizon, and they soar out of the desert, toward home.

Chapter End Notes

that’s all she wrote

Guys. GUYS. oooomg guys.

Thank you, so much. Everybody who left kudos, everybody who took time to tell me in the comments that you’re here and reading and with me on this crazy fluffy trip, everybody who made art and sent headcanons and helped me work through tricky bits and listened to me whining about how tricky the tricky bits were, guys. I can’t begin to tell you how much it helped and how much it means to me. I would not have made it through without you guys.

I started writing this almost a year ago because I was in a sad bad & lonely place: it was my first holiday season where I couldn’t go home, it was ALSO my first winter after moving north and let me tell you a thing 7 longitudinal degrees makes a LOT of difference with how long and dark your winters are. Anyway writing fluff? therapeutic af. I started writing this for me.

I finished it for you guys. Thank you so much for giving me a reason.

NO CLUE what’s gonna come out next! I do have more in this universe I kinda want to explore, but I kind of want to take a break from Big Long Projects, but alsooo I’m not ready to put this down SO. If there’s a scene or a situation in this story or following this
story that you'd like to see that didn't make it into the fic, shoot me an ask over here and I will absolutely try to give you the thing, either in shortfic format or as a meta.

guys i finished it holy shit

guys :D

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